

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 sorcerous full moon sliced through the black rainforest canopy, casting sharp, skeletal shadows across the Mayan ruins of Edzná. Deep within the acropolis plaza, a fire raged atop the main temple structure. Its erratic, blood-orange flames licked the night air, painting the ancient limestone in a bruised, flickering glow.

Around the altar, three figures moved in a frenzied, rhythmic circle. Their low, guttural chanting accelerated, matching the frantic, humid pulse of the surrounding jungle.

The first, known only as Jaguar Man, wore a snarling black mask. Its ivory fangs gleamed under the moonlight while a heavy crest of iridescent Quetzal feathers bounced against the dark pelts draped over his torso. Opposite him moved Serpent Man, his intricate reptile headpiece framed by a radiating breastplate of golden scales that caught the firelight with every step. Weaving through the rising smoke was Skeleton Man. His body was painted in stark, bone-white lines, and he aggressively shook a carved skeletal scepter as he dance-stepped through the ash.

High above, the moon locked into position directly behind a weathered stone statue of the Maya queen, Izta. A sharp beam of silver light crawled across the altar like a living thing.

Jaguar Man stepped forward and flung a vial of liquid compound into the heart of the fire.

The flames flared aggressively. The sudden orange glare exposed the treetops, momentarily illuminating a pair of glowing golden eyes. A black jaguar watched them from the high canopy.

Without hesitating, Jaguar Man threw the remainder of the mixture into the blaze. The fire surged toward the sky, suffocating the moonlight for one brilliant, terrifying second—then snapped completely out.

An absolute, vacuum-like silence dropped over the jungle. The crickets, the birds, the wind—everything died.

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

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

The words had barely left his lips when the wind returned, howling violently across the stone plaza. The shaft of moonlight pierced directly through the carved eye of the Izta statue, focusing into a laser-sharp point on the dead altar.

Serpent Man looked down at his own wrist. His digital watch blinked a stark, silent 12:00 AM.

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

Dense, unnatural smoke swirled upward from the altar, defying the wind. It coiled and thickened, coalescing into the translucent, winged silhouette of Queen Izta.

She stretched her shimmering hands toward Jaguar Man. His eyes widened in sheer terror as the vaporous entity flowed forward, invading his senses and filling his lungs.

“Find my king to release me,” her voice echoed, ethereally resonant, vibrating inside his mind. *“Follow.”*

With a fluid motion, she rose toward the heavens. A streak of white mist shot like an arrow toward the North Star. The men tracked her ascent, their jaws slack as the smoke finally dissipated into the vast night sky, leaving nothing but dead, cold ash on the altar. Gasping for air, they ripped off their suffocating masks. They were drenched in sweat, their hearts hammering.

Jaguar Man stared blankly 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 thick Mexican Spanish accent.

Serpent Man rubbed his face, his Argentinian accent cutting through the sudden quiet. “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 quickly pulled up a satellite grid on his phone. His fingers scrolled rapidly down the glowing terminal screen, calculating the exact trajectory of the mist. “The trajectory from the North Star... due north of Edzná is...” He lowered the phone, meeting Jaguar Man's cold, expectant stare. “New Orleans.”

Chapter Two

New Orleans, Louisiana

A Few Days Later

A chrome Jaguar hood ornament leaped to a sudden stop, its sleek reflection mirrored in the black sports car's polished bonnet.

Dr. Seronjo stepped out of the convertible. Behind him, the stately Romanesque arches of Gibbons Hall towered over the Orleans University campus. In his late fifties, tall and silver-haired, Seronjo possessed cold, glacier-blue eyes and a personality to match. Dressed in a bespoke Caraceni suit, he looked more like a ruthless Wall Street banker than the head of a history department—the human equivalent of a peacock.

Seronjo glanced toward St. Charles Avenue.

A vintage streetcar rumbled and swayed down the tracks. The conductor clanged the heavy bell to notify passengers of the stop as the iron wheels ground to a halt directly in front of the university.

Iztali "Izy" Smith stepped off the metal stairs. A history professor in his late thirties, Izy was tall with flowing black hair and a naturally muscular build—the legacy of his South American Indian and Creole heritage. He deliberately hid his natural good looks behind a vanilla, unassuming facade. He wasn't naive, but he firmly believed that academics was about the pursuit of knowledge, not capital.

Izy pushed his unstylish glasses up the bridge of his nose. His pants and shirt were deeply wrinkled from the oppressive Louisiana humidity. He wasn't entirely styleless, just utterly unpretentious. He tried pressing the worst wrinkles out of his shirt with a flat hand,

wiped a bead of sweat from his brow, and frantically stuffed loose papers into a cheap, overflowing attaché case.

Looking up, he spotted his boss. “Dr. Seronjo,” Izy called out, his mild New Orleans accent bleeding through.

Izy raced across the street, darting between oncoming traffic. Seronjo rolled his eyes in disgust and immediately turned, walking briskly toward Gibbons Hall. Izy caught up, trailing a step behind while still trying to force rogue papers back into his briefcase.

“Good morning,” Izy panted.

Seronjo merely grunted, shrugging his shoulders 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 over his shoulder, deliberately picking up his pace. “No.”

“Yes, I think there’s—”

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

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

Seronjo stopped short. Izy nearly collided with his back. Pivoting sharply, Seronjo turned to face his subordinate, his blue eyes icy.

“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 in absolute disgust. Izy kept pace, tracking his footsteps closely.

“This could be the biggest disc—”

Seronjo cut him off, spinning around with a velocity that made his silver hair catch the morning light. His glacier-blue eyes glared with absolute, venomous hostility.

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

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

Seronjo shrugged his heavy shoulders, shook his head, and let out a soft, mocking laugh. He looked at Izy with pure pity, as if examining a hopelessly naive child.

“Silly you.”

With that, Seronjo turned on his heel and walked away.

Izy watched the tailored back of the Caraceni suit retreat up the steps. He stared at the ground for a second, his mind racing as he calculated his leverage. Arguments about historical preservation or cultural impact were useless. The bureaucrat needed an incentive he simply could not ignore.

Izy looked up, raising his voice to track the retreating figure. “The clues lead to gold.”

Seronjo froze mid-stride. He stopped, slowly pivoted, and marched all the way back down the steps to Izy. He stood inches away, glaring in complete, menacing silence.

“The clues mention gold and spells, they—”

“My office, three o’clock,” Seronjo snapped. He turned sharply, walking away for good this time.

Izy pushed his unstylish glasses up his nose, watching him go. The hook was set. A slow smile spread across his face.

The history department office was a claustrophobic maze. Cluttered and cramped, ancient Maya documents and photocopied glyphs covered every available surface from the floor to the ceiling. A heavy, dark wood library table sat dead center in the room, acting as the island in a sea of paper.

Izy stood by the glass, looking out the window toward the sun-drenched oaks of Audubon Park. “Jeevan, please bring coffee—with chicory.”

His assistant, Jeevan, entered before the request could even echo in the small space. A graduate student from India, Jeevan was thin, with large, observant dark eyes and short black hair. He had the sharp, calculating look of a man who assessed probabilities for a living, always hunting for the hidden humor in a bad situation. He was already carrying two steaming ceramic mugs.

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

“Yeah,” Izy sighed, turning from the window. “I have an audience with his highness today.”

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

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

“How did you manage that?” Jeevan asked, leaning against the edge of the table. “How did you get him to agree?”

“I told him about the gold.”

Jeevan’s eyes opened wide. He threw his head back in sudden, dramatic surprise. “What gold?”

Izy looked up from the historical mess, a cold, knowing 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.”

“Man, speaking of native—you have got to get cooler glasses,” Jeevan joked, gesturing toward Izy’s face. “Modern frames. Something with a bit of 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. Because the undergrads keep asking me questions.”

Izy paused, looking over the dark, unstylish rims of his lenses. “Questions like what?”

“Is he... or Izy?”

They both laughed, the familiar banter breaking the tension of the morning. Izy turned his attention back to the primary Maya codex resting in the center of the table. Jeevan walked around to the other side, looking down at the ancient symbols.

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

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

Izy dropped his shoulders and leaned forward, his voice suddenly dropping an octave into a pompous, tight-jawed 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 let out a skeptical snort. “And he actually fell for that?”

“Not yet,” Izy admitted, setting his mug down. “But he will. Because to a guy like Seronjo, academics is *only* about money.” Izy slapped the palm of his hand flat against the wooden library table. “I need to get to the Yucatán, Jeevan.”

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

“Can’t. I really can’t. I promised my aunt I’d be home.” Izy peered up over the dark rim of his lenses, his tone shifting from casual banter to something a bit more guarded. “She had the dream. And now she says it’s time to give me the box.”

Jeevan brow furrowed in genuine confusion. “What box?”

“The box my family has been carting around for over two hundred years,” Izy explained. “They brought it with them 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 deeply into the whole weird, spiritual side of things. Then this morning, she calls me up out of nowhere. She told me she finally had *the* dream last night.”

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

Izy laughed, waving off the dramatic display. “Nah. But my family has literally waited two centuries for one of us to have this specific 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 only three. My aunt swears up and down that there’s a Maya gene somewhere in the bloodline.”

Izy waved a hand through the air as if shooing away a swarm of flies, eager to get back to the text. He leaned over the table, tapping a calloused finger directly onto the fragile parchment of the codex.

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

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

“I’m not entirely sure yet,” Izy said, his voice tightening with academic fervor. “But if you read the glyphs diagonally, it distinctly 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 twenty-first, twenty-twelve. It has to be broken by someone who is...” Izy trailed off, sighing. “That part of the page is completely missing. But right after the blank space, it says *then a new queen will arise*.”

Izy looked up, his eyes alive with a sudden, electric excitement. "I'm telling you, Jeevan. The planetary alignment with the center of the Milky Way back in twenty-twelve wasn't just a calendar milestone. It seems to have been a literal cosmic door for spirits." He pushed his slipping glasses back up the bridge of his nose, downed the remaining dregs of his coffee, and nodded firmly. "They knew things, Jeevan... the ancients knew things."

Jeevan stared at him for a long, 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, replaced by genuine concern. He stepped closer to his friend. "Izy, come on. You don't actually believe this stuff about spells, ancient gods, and cosmic doors, do you? Please tell me you aren't planning to pitch this version to Seronjo."

Oblivious to the warning, Izy pushed himself even deeper into the text. His elbow flared out as he reached across the table, accidentally knocking his empty ceramic mug right off the edge.

Without missing a single beat, Jeevan deftly caught it with one hand and smoothly 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 strongly hints that pages seventy-seven and seventy-eight of this exact codex are hidden in Lamanai. That's modern-day Belize."

Excitement boiling over, Izy looked up at Jeevan, slammed his fist down onto the heavy wooden manuscript table, and violently yanked his glasses off his face. In his triumph, he tossed the frames blindly onto the table.

They skidded across the smooth, paper-slick wood and slid right off the far edge.

"This codex only goes up to page seventy-four," Izy continued, his voice rising with a frantic, obsessive energy. "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 actually destroy the books of knowledge?"

Izy turned sharply, leaning his weight against the heavy bookshelf beneath the window. He stared out blankly at the sprawling green lawns of the park, lost in the historical mystery.

"I'll bet the Vatican vaults are filled to the brim with lost Maya codices," he murmured, almost to himself. "But we'll never know."

Below him, Jeevan stooped down near the desk legs. He sighed, carefully picking up Izy's mangled 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 priceless antiques, resembling a plush, five-star hotel suite.

Seronjo sat back behind his massive mahogany desk, radiating impatience. Across from him sat Izy, uncomfortably squinting through the blur of the room.

"I have to meet the Blackwells in twenty minutes to discuss their upcoming endowment," Seronjo said, adjusting his cuffs. "So get straight to the part about the gold."

Izy cleared his throat, leaning in. "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 pristine watch. "Let's be realistic, Professor. Nothing exciting has happened in Mayaland in fifty years. Two thousand twelve was a complete commercial bust. It is a very hard sell to donors when you use the word *hidden*."

"But if I had just three months—"

"This could be the biggest breakthrough in Maya history," Izy pressed, his voice tightening with passion. "The knowledge that the world—"

Seronjo shook his head sharply, holding up a manicured, silencing 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 silently stammered, his jaw dropping. He shook his head in absolute, visceral 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 up at the ceiling, rubbed his tired eyes, and let out a long, heavy sigh. He realized logic wouldn't work here. Slowly, he lowered his head, leaning directly across the polished 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...”

Seronjo’s silver eyebrows raised. He pursed his lips, the word *gold* hanging in the air. A steady, rhythmic *tap, tap, tap* of his finger echoed against the mahogany. He slowly swiveled his chair away, staring out the window into the quad for a long moment, before letting out a sharp breath.

“One month.”

“Two,” Izy countered immediately.

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

The second Izy exited the office and closed the door behind him, Seronjo’s professional demeanor vanished. He immediately grabbed his desk phone and rapidly dialed a private number.

The line *rang* twice.

“*Hola, hablar,*” a deep, masked voice answered over the line.

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

Over the receiver, a cold, low chuckle rippled through the static. “*Send him to me.*”

Chapter Three

The French Quarters, New Orleans That Same Night

A warm Louisiana breeze blew through the open louvered shutters, covering the French doors of the quiet Creole cottage. The sheer white curtains swayed lazily in the dark. Above, a vintage ceiling fan spun hypnotically, slicing through the heavy, humid night air.

Izy lounged flat on the sofa, staring blankly up at the wooden blades of the fan, his mind still spinning with glyphs and maps.

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

Izy sat up straight, clearing a spot on the cushions. Cocco sat down beside him, her presence carrying the weight of someone who knew ancient secrets. Because she did.

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

She smiled widely, her green eyes flashing with an excited, childlike energy as she affectionately patted Izy’s knee.

“Two hundred years, baby. I can’t believe it’s happening. You and me.”

Cocco shook her head, gently wiping away a few joyful tears from the corners of her eyes. Izy couldn’t help but smile back at her, 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, her expression a mix of shock and 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 smooth, ancient wood before setting it firmly down on Izy's lap. He looked down at it, then back up at her, his brow furrowing. "What dream is so incredibly 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 with intense anticipation. Feeling a sudden wave of apprehension, Izy pushed the heavy 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 brook 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 picked it up, set it firmly back into his lap, and pressed a sharp 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 ancient, hardened tar seal. He sliced through the brittle compound and tried to pry the lid up, but it was completely stuck. Bracing his forearm, he levered the knife hard.

Crack.

The lid flew open.

A sudden, sharp sound escaped from the hollow interior of the wood—like a deep, chilling human exhale. *Haaaaa.*

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

Reaching inside, Izy brushed away layers of old, brittle straw packing. His fingers wrapped around something smooth and heavy.

He lifted out a brilliant jade necklace featuring a tiger-eye pendant. The detailed carving depicted two clenched fists clutching a royal crown.

Izy held it up to the light. A silk-like, shimmering chatoyancy danced across the surface of the tiger-eye stone. Astonished by the craftsmanship, he handed it to Cocco so she could look closer.

He reached back into the dark depths of the box, his fingers finding a ragged, fragile piece of ancient papyrus. Very gently, treating it like spun glass, he unrolled it across his knees.

His breath hitched. It was the missing center portion of two distinct text pages, completely marked with detailed glyphic inscriptions and unmistakable Maya numbers running along the bottom edges.

Izy murmured in utter, breathless astonishment. “Seventy-seven and seventy-eight.”

He looked up at Cocco, his mind reeling. Without a word, she leaned forward and smoothly slipped the heavy jade necklace over his head. The cool stone medallion hit his chest with a soft thud.

Whoosh.

Instantly, a violent, unnatural breeze surged through the room, blowing the long, white transparent curtains straight outward. They undulated wildly in the night air like towering, restless ghosts.

Izy whipped his head around to look at the curtains, thoroughly startled. Cocco just watched them, completely unfazed by the sudden tempest.

She turned back to Izy, cupping his face tenderly in her warm hands. “Nephew, your life just changed.” She smiled, her eyes crinkling. “Guess what else?”

Izy’s eyes widened, his heart still hammering from the wind. “There’s more?”

Instead of reaching back into the ancient box, Cocco reached into her sweater pocket. She slowly pulled out a brand-new, modern glasses case, popped the spring hinge open, and lifted out a pair of very sleek, stylish designer frames. Before he could protest, she slipped them gently onto his face.

“I got you some cool glasses,” she said.

She leaned back on the sofa cushions, inspecting her handiwork, and nodded her head in deep approval. “Um-huh. You are some kind of handsome now. Maybe these will finally help you get a girlfriend.

She lovingly kisses Izy on the cheek.

Chapter Four

Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport Two Days Later

The morning sun beat down through the high glass windows of the New Orleans airport terminal. Travelers bustled past carrying luggage, but Izy and Cocco stood quietly near the security gates, waiting.

A familiar voice called out, and Jeevan came jogging up through the crowd, clutching a small duffel bag. The moment he caught sight of Izy, he stopped dead in his tracks, deliberately dropping his bag to the linoleum floor in mock, wide-eyed amazement.

“Cocco,” Jeevan gasped, clapping his hands together. “What on earth have you done to him?”

He walked over and patted Izy’s shoulder, circling him like a prized asset. “Man, look at you. You actually look cool.”

“Thanks,” Izy mumbled, shifting uncomfortably. “I thi—”

“Please tell me you brought the pendant and a high-res copy of that papyrus,” Jeevan interrupted, cutting him off. He shook an open hand rapidly near his face, his dark eyes wide with academic hunger. “The stuff from the box?”

Cocco playfully cut her eyes at Jeevan, warning him to keep his voice down in the public terminal.

In response, Izy held up a protective cardboard document tube, patted the hidden jade emblem resting beneath his shirt, and gave a sharp, confident nod.

“I still can’t believe Seronjo fell for the fool’s gold,” Jeevan muttered as they shuffled 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 ever lets on.”

Jeevan shrugged, hoisted his duffel bag onto his shoulder, and began to drift toward the boarding gates. “He’s still a butt-head. Let’s roll.”

Cocco stepped in and wrapped Izy in a tight, protective hug. As he pulled away and turned to follow Jeevan, she reached out, her fingers catching his shoulder. Izy pivoted back. Cocco’s blazing green eyes searched his face with a sudden, heavy intensity.

“Baby boy,” she whispered, her voice dropping low against the airport chatter. “You be careful of any black cats that cross your path.”

She planted one last kiss on his cheek, turned on her heel, and walked away into the crowd. Izy watched her go for a second before catching up to Jeevan.

“Your Aunt Cocco gives me the absolute willies sometimes,” Jeevan said, glancing over his shoulder. “Are you entirely sure there’s no voodoo in her family history?”

Izy rolled his eyes, shook his head, and offered a noncommittal shrug. Together, they handed over their boarding passes and disappeared through the threshold of the jetway doors.

Chapter Five

Philip S.W. Goldson International Airport
Ladyville, Belize

The thick, tropical humidity hit them like a physical wall the moment they stepped out of the small, sun-baked Belize terminal.

Izy and Jeevan dropped their heavy bags onto the dusty concrete curb, immediately wiping beads of sweat from their foreheads. They looked around the unfamiliar landscape, waiting. Ten minutes passed, then twenty. Soon, they were reduced to sitting flat on their luggage, repeatedly checking their watches as the midday sun beat down.

Screeech!

An ancient, battered Volkswagen Beetle careened around the corner and slammed to a violent halt right in front of them. The passenger side door flew open from the inside. The driver leaned across the empty space, squinting out at them. Izy and Jeevan exchanged a bewildered look.

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

Izy gave a slow, cautious nod. The driver jerked his head, motioning frantically for them to climb inside.

“Get in, brother! Throw your bags up front.”

Izy stepped into the cramped vehicle first, only to realize there was no front passenger seat at all—just a gaping hole where the chair used to be. The driver gestured impatiently toward the back.

“In the back, in the back!” He was looking around nervously, checking his mirrors as if he were piloting a getaway car.

The man behind the wheel looked to be in his late twenties—short, muscular, and visibly high-strung. He possessed an abrupt,

fast-moving, and strangely humorous personality. Sharp Mestizo features were topped by a head of short, heavily gelled hair, and a collection of cryptic, dark tattoos peeked out from the edges of his shirt.

The moment Jeevan squeezed his legs into the rear, before their butts could even fully hit the vinyl seat, the driver slammed his foot on the gas. The car rocketed forward. Both academics flew backward, their heads nearly cracking against the rear glass.

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

“Sorry I’m late!” the driver yelled over the engine roar. He turned completely around in his seat, ignoring the road entirely to look Izy up and down. At the last possible second, he swerved wildly to avoid an old man riding a bicycle on the shoulder. “You Indian too? Or Creole? Yeah, yeah—I see it in the face, man!”

He flashed a brilliant smile, glancing back at the tarmac for a fraction of a second. Izy shot a panicked look at Jeevan.

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

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, casually jerking the steering wheel to miss a whole family walking along the dirt roadside. “Welcome home, brother.”

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

The driver rolled his eyes, furrowing his brow and pursing his lips in utter disbelief. He gave a mocking nod, yanked the wheel to barely miss another cyclist, and looked right back at Izy.

“If you say so, man. Anyway, sorry again. I had an errand to run. I’ve actually met your jerk boss a few times when he came down here to see *my* jerk boss.”

Izy and Jeevan exchanged a tense, bewildered look. Suddenly, the Beetle swung hard into the oncoming lane. The driver floor-boarded it, attempting to pass a massive, sputtering cargo truck. Horns blared instantly. A massive colorful chicken bus was barreling directly toward them from the opposite direction. The driver laughed, cutting back into his lane at the absolute last second. Izy and Jeevan were violently tossed across the backseat like crash dummies.

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

“Businessman. Sells antiques,” the driver replied. He glanced at the rearview mirror, rolled his eyes, and gave a knowing nod. “Or antiquities, you know? He funds a lot of illegal digs at the Maya sites—or so he claims. Big buddies with all the fancy university crowd. People down here call him Jaguar Man. Like the cat.”

To emphasize the name, the driver took both hands entirely off the steering wheel, flashing sudden, mocking street signs in the air while tilting his head with an exaggerated, low-rider lean.

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

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

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

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” Al said, dodging a massive 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 completely tanked after twenty-twelve, so now I work for Jaguar.”

He turned entirely around in his seat, ignoring the oncoming traffic to pat Izy's knee with a wide, confident smile before casually swerving back into his lane.

"I'll be coming along with you two on this little trip. Jaguar wants me to keep a close 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 dark eyebrows and nodding his head in a silent proposition. Izy and Jeevan exchanged a deeply nervous glance. The Beetle pushed on toward the heart of the city, aggressively cutting in and out of the midday traffic.

Izy stared out the open window at the sparkling, turquoise expanse of the Caribbean Sea. The warm wind whipped his long black hair across his face, but with his new designer frames, he looked undeniably cool.

He leaned his head back, idly gazing up at the massive white clouds drifting across the blue sky. Suddenly, one specific formation caught his eye. He froze, staring at it. His breath caught in his throat. He reached forward, repeatedly and violently hitting the back of Al's driver's seat.

"Pull over! Stop the car! Pull over right now!"

Al slammed his foot on the brakes. The Beetle skidded, bumped roughly over the concrete curb, and came to a halt on the sandy shoulder of the coastal road. Izy scrambled out of the car door before the car had even fully stopped shaking. Jeevan and Al tumbled out right behind him.

Izy stood on the sand, his finger pointing frantically up at the sky. But even as they looked, the cloud formation began to break apart, dissipating into the blue. Jeevan stared at his friend as if he had completely lost his mind. Al just silently studied the empty sky.

"It looked exactly like the medallion," Izy panted, his chest heaving. "Just like it."

To prove his point, Izy reached under his collar and pulled the heavy jade medallion out from his shirt, letting it dangle in the sunlight. Jeevan looked at the stone, shook his head in absolute exasperation, and immediately climbed back into the safety of the car.

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

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

Al dropped his hand. The heavy jade piece hit Izy’s chest with a dull thud as a sharp, sudden gust of wind kicked up from the ocean. Al turned, stepped back through the missing seat of the car, and cranked the engine. Izy slowly climbed back inside, and they tore off 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 completely blank look.

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

Still, nothing but a pair of blank academic stares. Al shook his head in mock 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 quick smile, turned back to the steering wheel, and fell completely silent. Jeevan slowly turned his head to look at Izy, his eyes wide.

“Now *you’re* giving me the absolute willies,” Jeevan muttered.

Chapter Six

Belize City

A few minutes later, they reached the bustling streets of Belize City. The vibrant, colorful pier houses and the beautifully diverse, English-speaking residents gave the coastal city a striking, unmistakable resemblance to the neighborhoods of New Orleans.

Al pulled the Beetle up in front of Jaguar Man's main office building—a massive, imposing Spanish Colonial structure. They parked, hauled their bags out of the vehicle, and stepped through the grand front entrance.

The three men walked briskly across a beautifully tiled mosaic floor. Passing the front desk, Al blew a dramatic kiss to the receptionist. She blushed deeply, quickly motioning with her hand for them to head directly into the back office. They walked up to the heavy wooden door and entered.

The office interior was shockingly similar to Dr. Seronjo's plush academic suite, with one terrifying exception: the walls were covered in an extensive, museum-grade collection of authentic Mayan ceremonial masks and traditional costumes. One particular artifact immediately caught Izy's eye—a snarling, pitch-black jaguar mask with gleaming ivory fangs.

The side door clicked open and Jaguar Man walked in. He was in his early fifties, tall, with sharp Spanish features, dressed in an impeccably tailored designer suit and adorned in far too much heavy gold jewelry. He glanced down at a brilliant, bejeweled watch on his wrist, then looked up 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 strangely fast lately."

He tapped the glass of the timepiece, then walked right past Izy to close the heavy office door behind them. As the man brushed by, a sudden, unnatural chill swept over Izy. He shivered involuntarily. Jaguar Man looped back around, extending a hand to shake Izy's.

"Nice to meet you, Professor Smith. People around here call me Jaguar Man." He gestured with a gold-ringed hand toward the black mask and the thick pelts mounted behind his massive desk. "Like the cat."

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

Jaguar Man moved past Izy again to warmly greet Jeevan. As the man crossed his path a second time, Izy felt that same icy shiver ripple down his spine. He rubbed his arms, trying to warm his skin, his eyes locked onto the businessman. In the silence of his mind, his aunt's parting words echoed with sudden, deafening clarity:

Baby boy, be careful of black cats that cross your path.

Izy stared intently at Jaguar Man, then looked back at the snarling black mask on the wall. The two academics finally settled into the leather chairs across from the desk.

"So, Professor..." Jaguar Man began, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the polished wood. "I hear you've uncovered some very specific structural clues that lead directly to gold?"

Jaguar Man let out a loud, booming laugh that echoed off the high colonial ceiling. It was entirely forced. Nobody else in the room joined in.

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

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

Izy looked across the space at Al. Al immediately looked back at Jaguar Man. The businessman delivered a sudden, chilling, razor-sharp look directly to his driver. Al instantly shrank back. A heavy,

dark veil of complete distrust settled over Izy's face. He knew a lie when he heard one.

"I may have found structural clues," Izy said cautiously, guarding his words.

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

Izy glanced over at Jeevan, who was watching the exchange with bated breath, then focused his gaze entirely back on the dangerous man across the desk.

"It's far too early to say that definitively."

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

He stared intently at Izy, slowly raising his dark eyebrows. Without breaking eye contact, he reached down, plucked a heavy gold pen from its executive marble holder, and began to write. He scrawled a tight series of geographical coordinates onto a small slip of paper. He slid the note directly across the desk to Al, before slowly shifting his predatory gaze back to Izy.

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

The men rose from their leather seats to depart. As they headed toward the heavy exit doors, Jaguar Man leaned far back in his executive desk chair, interlocking his gold-ringed fingers behind his head.

"Professor Iztali."

Izy stopped, pivoting back around.

"Do you find it entirely coincidental," Jaguar Man asked, his eyes locking onto Izy's new designer frames, "that the final sovereign queen of the Maya was named Izta—the eternal one?"

He picked up a large, black-and-white photograph from his sprawling desk layout, tilting it toward the two academics.

“Examine this archival layout of her physical likeness from the acropolis temple at Edzná.”

Curiosity overriding his suspicion, Izy stepped back to the executive desk, Jeevan trailing close behind. They studied the photograph. As they bent over the image, Jaguar Man carefully scanned Izy’s distinct facial structure and profile. A slow, unsettling smile broke across the businessman’s features.

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

He delivered a cold, piercing smile.

The men moved back toward the threshold. Before stepping through, Jaguar Man and Izy exchanged one final, measuring look—a silent acknowledgment of the chess match that had just begun. Jeevan tracked the interaction in total silence.

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

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

Chapter Seven

Belize Countryside

The stripped-down Volkswagen navigated away from the coastal city, passing low, sun-baked residential shacks hastily constructed from sticks and river stones.

Al suddenly cut the wheel, swinging the car off the main road and into the dirt yard of a spartan residence. In the yard, a thin, Hispanic man dressed in tattered work clothes was manually assembling a stone foundation addition to his home. The poor man set down his trowel tool, looking visibly nervous as the battered Beetle jolted to a halt.

Al parked right beside a large pile of excavated stone pieces, and the three of them exited the vehicle. The team walked across the dry dirt toward the unfinished structure. Al waved his arm casually, trying to diffuse the tension.

“Hey, how’s it going?” Al called out. “Jaguar Man sent our team down regarding an item you uncovered inside the stone coordinates.”

The man gave a tight, nervous nod. He held up a flat hand, asking them to wait, before disappearing inside the dark threshold of his home.

He returned a moment later carrying a small, weathered wooden box. Inside the doorway frame, his pregnant wife and four young children stood silently, watching the interaction with wide eyes. The man handed the enclosure over to Al.

Izy and Jeevan watched with intense anticipation, their breath hitched. Al immediately handed the container over to Izy, who set it flat onto the sun-baked hood of the car and flipped open the brass latch.

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

“Where exactly did this come from?” Izy asked, his voice trembling with excitement.

The man cut a quick, nervous glance toward Al, then looked down at the excavated stone pile before looking back at his family in the doorway.

“They said I would not be arrested if I give you the paper,” the poor man said, his voice shaking. “That we trade and I keep my rocks.”

Al stepped forward, his tone firm but curious. “Who said that? Tell us about the rocks and we’ll go.”

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

“My friend... he takes them from Lamanai. He sells them.” He pointed a trembling finger toward his wife, looking up at Al pleadingly. “I need room, my welfare... my wife is with child. My friend, he has more paper.”

He pointed down toward the wooden box container on the hood. Izy’s entire expression lit up with academic euphoria.

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

The man looked back toward his family one last time, then dropped his gaze to the dirt, clearly torn. Sensing the deadlock, Jeevan reached into his pocket and smoothly pulled out a clean, thick stack of cash. He stretched his hand out, offering it. The poor man’s eyes widened, and he took the currency securely, stuffing it away.

“He resides on Holy Emmanuel Road,” the poor man said quickly. “You will recognize the property layout.”

“Gracias,” Al nodded.

“I guess academics really is strictly about the money,” Jeevan muttered dryly.

They slid back inside the cramped Volkswagen, the engine roaring to life as Al accelerated back onto the chaotic roadway grid. Through the rear window, they could see the poor man eagerly counting the thick stack of cash. He excitedly showed the currency to his wife before she drew him into a tight, relieved embrace, finally securing the money away.

Inside the car, Izy sat in absolute, stunned silence, holding the protective document container securely against his chest. Al wove aggressively in and out of the traffic lanes, talking continuously over the engine whine as he drove.

“His friend probably takes stones directly from the Maya sites and sells them,” Al said, gesturing out the window. “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 usually goes straight through Jaguar Man.”

They soon approached a sprawling, messy property. Large, jagged piles of ancient structural debris were scattered across the dirt yard. Strangely, a heavy iron chain secured a large guard dog to each distinct pile of stone.

Al swung the Beetle into the drive, parking right beside a man who was manually unloading a truckbed layout of heavy 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 incessantly, straining against their chains with vicious snaps. The construction man stopped his work and removed his sweat-stained hat, wiping his brow as he cautiously studied the arriving team.

Izy fixed his eyes on the snarling animals. Without thinking, he let out a low, commanding mumble.

"Shut up."

Instantly, the barking cut out. The dogs dropped into absolute silence, lowering their heads onto the dirt and whimpering quietly as if terrified.

Shocked by the sudden, eerie shift, everyone locked their eyes directly on Izy. The construction man stepped forward, his posture noticeably apprehensive.

"Can I help you?" he asked warily.

"Want to talk to you about some rocks," Al said, stepping up and pointing to the stacked debris fields. "The ones from Lamanai."

The construction man shook his head quickly, 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 nervously over to the silent, whimpering dogs, then over to Izy's cold stare. He waved an arm broadly around the surrounding junk. "I only have what you see here."

Al gave a short nod, throwing a hand into the air in a dismissive, casual gesture. "*Mea culpa, amigo*. I'll just tell my boss to come see you himself. I'll let him know he was mistaken."

Al turned sharply to leave, pulling open his car door as the others followed his lead. The threat worked instantly. The man looked frantically around the yard, glanced at his cowering dogs, and shook his head in defeat. He marched straight over to the vehicle.

"Who is your boss?" the man demanded.

Al leaned his elbows against the open car door frame, looking closely at the contractor. "Jaguar Man."

Al raised his eyebrows in a slow, measuring look. The construction man let out a deep, heavy exhale, his resistance crumbling.

“Wait. Perhaps I misunderstood,” the man stammered, looking down. “I... I may have what you’re looking for. Wait a minute, please.”

He disappeared inside the residential structure, returning a moment later carrying a long, thin wooden box. Izy’s jaw dropped in absolute shock—the container was identical in its ancient craftsmanship to the one Cocco had given him in New Orleans.

The man handed the box directly 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, *sz?*”

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

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

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

He pointed a finger back toward the wooden box container, backing away slowly into his yard. “Please... you go.” He waved his hand through the air, frantically shoos them away from his property, though his wide eyes remained locked entirely onto Izy. “Go! I say nothing!”

Al quickly handed Izy the wooden box, nodding his head sharply toward the car. They slid back onto the vinyl seats and accelerated away from the curb. Behind them, the construction man made the sign of the cross one final time as the guard dogs suddenly found their voices, barking incessantly into the dust cloud.

Al exited the front entrance of a roadside souvenir shop holding a cheap, replica codex document. He walked quickly toward the parked Volkswagen.

On the hood of the car, Izy and Jeevan were already deep in study. The fragments of the authentic codex pages were spread out across the hot metal. Izy looked up from the glyphs, running both hands through his hair before punching his fist excitedly into the air.

“Yes! I knew it!” Izy shouted. “More missing pages—seventy-six and seventy-seven! 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 completely freaked out he won’t be saying nothing to no one.”

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

Jeevan looked down at the authentic codex fragments, then tracked his eyes back over to Al’s exposed forearm tattoo. “That man was right, Al. Your tattoo is exactly like this symbol right here in the text. What is it?”

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

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

“This story...” Izy murmured, his eyes scanning the ancient ink. “It’s explicitly 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 specific number of seconds... this is—”

Jeevan snapped his head up from his page, looking directly at Izy with an expression of pure realization.

“Coordinates,” Jeevan gasped, his eyes darting across the numbers. “They’re coordinates—longitudes and latitudes.”

Izy nodded his head in absolute agreement, the pieces finally clicking together. Al looked entirely confused, glancing between the two academics.

"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 locked on the text. "Longitude is entirely about time, and the Maya knew absolutely everything about time."

Leaning closer to the metal hood, Izy read aloud from the ancient text line:

"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 rapidly on a notepad, nodding his head in a steady, frantic rhythm. He pulled out his cell phone, inputting the hidden data values straight into his tracking system.

"Twenty degrees, twelve minutes, and fifty-three seconds north by eighty-seven degrees, twenty-five minutes, forty-four seconds west..." Izy's voice trailed off in awe. "Cozumel. The coastal ruins of Tulum."

Al's jaw dropped. "That's one of the last true Maya cities—this is getting crazy, bro."

Jeevan didn't answer. He picked up his specific codex fragment, looking back and forth between the ink and Al's forearm. He walked over, flattening the fragile parchment layout directly over the dark skin markings on Al's arm, then looked up at Izy.

"Not as crazy as this," Jeevan said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "It's the calendar."

"Yeah... overlays," Izy said, nodding. "The calendar is just a series of overlapping cycles. Everyone thought it ended in twenty-twelve."

Jeevan shook his head sharply, tapping his finger hard against the ancient codex page. "This specific one *starts* at twenty-thirteen."

Izy walked over to join him, his eyes widening as he studied the overlapping data rings. A massive, victorious smile broke across his face.

“We’re going to Cozumel.”

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

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

Chapter Eight

Tulum, Cozumel

The three men stood atop the high, sun-baked temple ruins, looking out across the vast, breathtaking expanse of the sparkling Caribbean Sea.

A powerful, unnatural wind gusted violently across the ancient stone structures. High above, the white clouds overhead began to shift and converge at a rapid, impossible pace. Jeevan shielded his eyes, staring straight up 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 a finger toward a dark, gathering formation. “Look at that one over there. It looks just like a turtle.”

Izy took off his new designer glasses, rubbing his dust-filled eyes. “Man, this wind is incredibly strong.”

Al shook his head, moving squarely between Izy and Jeevan to drop a heavy, tattooed 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 own art.”

Jeevan stared up at the rapidly shifting vapor formations, shaking his head in disbelief. “That’s completely crazy, Al.”

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

Jeevan and Izy looked over at him in total, stunned silence. Al simply shrugged his shoulders. Needing breathing room, Jeevan took a deliberate, uncomfortable step away from Al’s personal space.

Al blinked, faking offense. “What, bro? I stink?”

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

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

“That you’re a very free thinker.”

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

Jeevan shrugged his shoulders, extending his palm. “The shoe seems to fit.”

They laughed together, the tension breaking under the Caribbean sun. Nearby, Izy started shaking his index finger, nodding his head rapidly as a massive academic realization hit him.

“Cozumel... Cozumel, I remember now,” Izy muttered, his eyes lighting up. “Ancient women came here specifically to make offerings to Ixchel, the fertility goddess—she was a jaguar goddess. And the sylphs supposedly protected the virgins. Wasn’t this specific temple —”

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

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

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

Jeevan suddenly slapped his own forehead, his eyes widening excitedly. “The end of time! Twenty-twelve! The solar alignment, the portal for ancient spirits, the start of the new calendar, these modern spells... it all makes perfect sense! We’re onto something incredibly deep here.”

He shook his head up and down rapidly, shifting his intense focus between the other two.

“The spell can finally be broken now,” Jeevan whispered in awe. “She can actually be freed.” He tracked his gaze back to lock onto his boss. “Whew. And I thought Al and India were weird.”

The three of them dropped back into an absolute, breathless silence, their eyes collectively drifting back up to the unfolding sky.

High above the ruins, several individual vapor trails gathered together, shifting into the distinct, massive shape of two clenched fists holding an imperial crown. They all looked over at Izy. Moving on instinct, Izy pulled the heavy jade medallion out from his shirt, holding the artifact high against the open sky to match the image.

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

Suddenly, dark, heavy storm clouds began to bleed into the horizon. They rapidly coalesced into the explicit, terrifying shape of a pouncing jaguar. The visual creature shifted its weight, moving aggressively through the sky toward the cloud formation of the fists and the crown.

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

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

BOOM.

The wind blasted back to life with the force of a physical blow, instantly dissipating the fighting animal shapes. High above, several clouds began to swirl into a rapid, violent vortex, pulling stray vapor into the structural silhouette of a woman. Jeevan pointed an excited, trembling finger toward the sky.

“Look, look, look!”

Adjacent cloud vapor rushed into the formation, adding intricate, sharp detail to the frozen mist. The entire sky explicitly became the ethereal, towering face of Queen Izta, looking down on

the ruins with ancient sorrow. The three men stared up in absolute, paralyzed awe.

They looked at each other, completely speechless. Breaking the silence, Al threw his hands high into the air. “And you two think I make this stuff up!”

The wind shifted direction in a sharp, ice-cold gust, howling through the hollow stone arches of the ruins. Dark, dense clouds rapidly gathered, blotting out the sun and turning the afternoon into a bruised twilight—but a single, piercing ray of bright sunshine cut through the gloom, falling squarely and exclusively 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 completely over Cozumel. The three men sat in a tight circle around a crackling campfire they had built atop the historic, towering pyramid structure of El Castillo.

Al reached into his tactical pack and pulled out a specialized metal flask container, carefully pouring a dark, thick, opaque liquid into a battered tin cup. He took a tiny, tentative sip, instantly twisting his features into a violent 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'aiṣalah okox*,” Al said with a sharp 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 hesitantly reached out his hand for the tin cup, but Jeevan swiftly snatched it right out of Al's grip. Before anyone could stop

him, Jeevan drank the entire contents down in a single, aggressive gulp.

Instantly, Jeevan began choking. He coughed violently, his face turning bright red as the fiery fluid hit the back of his throat. Al leaned over and slapped Jeevan hard across the back.

“Oh man!” Al laughed. “That single cup was supposed to be enough for all three of us. Good luck, bro. You really should’ve called a travel agent before you took that trip—made some prior arrangements, you know?” He patted Jeevan’s tensed shoulder reassuringly. “Don’t worry, we’ll be right here for you, bro.”

Al chuckled, pouring another precisely measured amount of the dark liquid into the tin cup before offering it right back to Izy. “Drink up, bro. All natural.”

Izy hesitated, then downed the liquid. He immediately stuck his tongue out, gagging and shaking his head in absolute disgust as he gripped his throat against the chemical burn.

Al grinned. “Good stuff, right?”

“It’s absolutely awful,” Izy panted.

“No, it’s good stuff. You’ll see.”

They leaned their heads back against the ancient stone blocks, staring up at the sprawling, infinite blanket of stars. The campfire crackled softly, sending thin ribbons of smoke into the night, when a sudden, freezing wind blew violently over the summit. The men shivered, the temperature plunging in a matter of seconds.

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

POP.

The fire exploded loudly. A sudden vortex of burning embers and ash swirled through the air. Before he could dodge, several red-hot fragments landed directly on Izy’s bare skin. He jumped up instantly, hopping frantically around the stone platform as he rubbed at his forearm, screaming against the sudden pain.

“Hot! Hot! That’s hot! That’s gonna leave a mark!”

Suddenly, Izy stopped moving. He looked down at his arm, his silver-framed glasses slipping down his nose. His eyebrows raised, his jaw dropping in absolute, paralyzed shock.

Slowly, Izy held his wrist out to show the others. Burned cleanly and perfectly into his skin—without a single blister—was a glowing, pulsing brand depicting the exact image from the family artifact: two clenched fists holding an imperial crown.

The wind increased to a deafening roar, threatening to blow their tents right off the pyramid. The dense campfire smoke and glowing red embers swirled together into a tight, spinning column, rapidly manifesting into the translucent, winged figure of Queen Izta.

The three men stared up at the supernatural sight, the fluid from the flask kicking in. The vaporous entity swiveled and swirled directly around Izy's body. As she passed through him, her mystical presence visibly inflated his posture, his spine straightening as raw, electric energy flooded his veins.

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

With a fluid snap, she moved backward into the dark sky. The moment she untangled from his spirit, Izy's posture deflated instantly, his muscles going slack.

In unison, the three men dropped heavily onto the stone floor into a deep, trancelike state. Their eyes were wide, glazed, and staring blankly into the empty space ahead of them. Their mouths hung open, their physical bodies completely frozen like statues.

The dense column of white campfire smoke expanded, rising to engulf the entire summit and trapping them inside a cloud of ash. Deep within their minds, they began to see the exact same vision in perfect unison.

1560

The stone altar of El Castillo stood bathed in a harsh, flickering light. Queen Izta lay bound flat against the limestone blocks while the surrounding

Maya priests offered up frantic, rhythmic chants to the dark sky. Great ceremonial fires roared inside massive ceramic pots positioned at the exact four corners of the pyramid summit, casting long, erratic shadows across the stone. Far below the platform, the local citizens watched the proceedings in sheer horror. The crowd parted as Chimbelu advanced toward the altar.

Chimbelu was a massive, towering Maya warrior, his entire muscular body painted a vivid ceremonial blue. His traditional woven loincloth draped nearly down to the stone floor. Atop his head sat a heavy, menacing hawk mask featuring long, stiff feathers that extended straight upward into the night air, giving him the imposing visual presence of a nine-foot giant. He glared down at the restrained queen with absolute, unbridled rage. Drawing his heavy stone sword, he swirled the weapon in a slow, threatening circle over her exposed body.

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

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

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

He glanced sharply to the side of the altar layout. Standing in the shadows was a contingent of heavily armed Spanish conquistadors, their metal breastplates gleaming. They held King Chac securely in their iron grip. King Chac was a tall, majestic, godlike Maya monarch, sporting an intricate beaded loincloth and a sweeping crest of iridescent Quetzal feathers.

Chimbelu turned his burning, jealous rage back onto the queen. "No man will ever possess you. I'll suspend you in the open 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 Izta spat back.

The surrounding priests looked at each other with intense, panicked hesitation. Chimbelu's anger flared violently; he lifted his heavy stone sword high into the air, ready to strike. One priest quickly grabbed his corded forearm to stall the fatal blow. Chimbelu delivered a slow nod to the priest, pulling his weapon back as he stepped away from the altar to let the ritual proceed.

The priests resumed their collective, low chanting, pouring thick, aromatic ceremonial ointments directly over Izta's skin. One elder stepped forward, lighting a long wooden torch from the corner fire pots. He walked purposefully back toward the center of the platform. He stood directly over Izta, her bound body glistening under the shifting firelight. Izta locked her eyes onto Chac, completely

ignoring the torch. A single tear rolled sideways down the curve of her cheek. In that moment, the entire pyramid summit dropped into an absolute, dead silence.

Chac attempted to violently break free from his capture, throwing his weight against the guards, but the conquistadors immediately forced a weapon to his head, locking him in place. Chimbetu glared down at Izta, delivering a final, chilling nod to the lead priest. The priest touched the blazing torch directly to her body.

WOOSH.

Instantaneously, Izta was entirely engulfed in massive, roaring flames. The brilliant flash illuminated the vast layout of the surrounding jungle canopy for miles. From a high, dark treetop lair, a wild black jaguar let out a deafening roar, pawing wildly at the air in anguish. On the summit, the priests collectively dropped their heads in shame, while the crowd below continued the low, mourning chant.

Chac glared fiercely through the heat waves at Chimbetu. Chimbetu simply smiled back, cold and victorious. Thick, unnatural smoke began to swirl over the charred, dark silhouette of Izta's body. The ash rapidly manifested into a translucent, winged specter. She stretched her open, ghostly arms out wide toward the gathering crowd below, fanning the embers with the slow, powerful motion of her wings.

The rising black smoke explicitly shifted, forming the geometric symbol of the two clenched fists clutching the imperial crown. Izta drew the smoke symbol completely inside her own translucent chest, the dark vapor swirling within her ghostly silhouette like a storm. With a final flash of light, Izta vanished into the night sky. A final cloud of white smoke rose high above the pyramid before dissipating entirely into the stars.

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

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

Pad, pad, pad.

A sleek, massive black jaguar walked smoothly out of the jungle darkness, its paws making no sound on the ancient stone. It navigated the tight space atop the pyramid, weaving directly between their frozen, tranced bodies. The predator moved to stand face-to-face with Izy.

Their eyes locked into a long, silent, supernatural stare.

The jaguar let out a sharp, guttural snarl, baring its white fangs, then leaped away into the blackness of the night.

The raucous sounds of tropical wildlife and crashing surf filled the morning air. The passed-out bodies of the three men were sprawled haphazardly across the stone platform surrounding the smoldering, cold ash of the campfire. They began to stir under the hot morning sun.

Slowly, Izy pulled his torso up onto his elbows, rubbing at his head in pure exhaustion. He inspected his bare forearm. The burned mark of the crown was red, raw, and heavily swollen against his skin.

Nearby, Jeevan crawled frantically on his hands and knees to the extreme edge of the stone pyramid. Leaning over the stone ledger, he began to puke violently into the brush below.

Al sat completely upright, staring out at the open, sparkling Caribbean Sea as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

“Did you both see that too?” Al asked, his voice raspy.

Jeevan remained bent over the stone ledger, letting out a heavy, miserable groan. “I saw conquistadors,” he wheezed. “Did you see conquistadors?”

Izy looked around the layout of the ruins, rubbing his eyes and face to clear the lingering effects of the vision from his mind. He focused his gaze over at his assistant.

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

Jeevan instantly snapped into full consciousness, his head whipping around, his eyes turning wide with dread.

“Now,” Jeevan groaned, wiping his mouth, “things are going to get *really* weird.”

CHAPTER NINE

Chiapas, Mexico
Two Days Later

The vehicle traveled smoothly down the center lane, where parallel rows of whitewashed stucco houses turned into a continuous blur through the taxi window frames.

Izy occupied the front passenger seat alongside a middle-aged Chinese driver. Outside, a heavy, uniform police presence was ubiquitous along the street coordinates, with officers stationed at almost every intersection.

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

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

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

The driver looked inquisitively back 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, clicking his eyes over toward Jeevan's reflection in the mirror as a knowing look passed across his face. "He much older than that, my friend. Much older than that."

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

"Ancestors come to Mexico in eighteen-hundreds to work the coffee plantations," the driver explained. "And my grandfather practice medicine—" He locked a sudden, suspicious, measuring look directly onto Izy. "Same kind as shaman."

The taxi came to a sudden stop at a red traffic light. On the corner, two police officers hunched their shoulders down, glancing

intently through the glass into the car cab. The driver looked over at Izy nervously.

“You no have drugs?” the driver whispered.

“No,” Izy said firmly. He looked back at Al, who shook his head in absolute, wide-eyed negative. The light turned green, and the car continued forward.

They meandered deep through the city streets, executing a complex series of turns before finally pulling up to a large, white stucco residence draped heavily in vibrant lavender bougainvillea vines.

The men exited the vehicle frame. Before Izy could even finish extending his hand to offer the currency, the driver hit the gas, immediately accelerating away from the curb in a cloud of exhaust.

Turning toward the property, they crossed the dirt yard over to the main structure. Izy knocked firmly on the heavy wooden door.

A stunning young Hispanic woman named Maria answered the call. In her early twenties, Maria featured long, full brown hair and a flawless model’s build, beautifully complemented by a simple lavender sundress. She smiled warmly at them, appearing pleasantly surprised by the visitors.

“*¿Sí, puedo ayudarle?*” she asked.

Izy stared at her, completely dumbstruck; a searching look in his eyes. She let out a soft, musical giggle, tilting her head questioningly under his intense gaze. Sensing the awkward silence, Al delivered a sharp nudge directly into Izy’s ribs.

“Ah...” Izy stammered.

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

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

“Yes,” Izy blurted out, shaking his head to clear it. “Um, we’re here to see the shaman.”

Maria’s smile widened. “You want to see my grandfather? Come on in.”

Izy looked at her closely, the pieces finally coming together in his mind. His face lit up. “Maria? Little Maria?”

Maria blushed deeply, nodding her head as she stepped aside. “You remember me. I didn’t want to say anything first.”

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

“I was old enough to have a massive crush on you,” she countered playfully.

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

They laughed together. Izy looked her up and down in disbelief before wrapping her in a tight, warm hug. Behind him, Al and Jeevan grinned broadly at each other. They all stepped through the threshold, entering the house.

Maria led the group through the sprawling interior of the residence, which was beautifully built around a bright, open-air central courtyard. The perimeter was planted heavily with various traditional medicinal herbs and flora. Izy followed closely behind Maria, his eyes completely locked onto her.

“You sure grew up to be beautiful,” Izy mumbled under his breath.

“Thank you,” Maria replied smoothly.

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

Al nodded firmly with a smirk. Walking ahead, Maria looked back over her bare shoulder, a beautiful, knowing smile playing on her lips.

“*Si*,” she whispered.

They stepped through the threshold and into a secluded, sun-dappled cabana. The ancient shaman sat in a deep trance, hunched over a heavy ceramic pot that bubbled softly. Coils of thick, blue smoke swayed like a striking cobra around his weathered face, rising

in time with his quiet, melodic chanting. The men took their places, sitting in absolute, reverent silence.

Maria gestured quietly to the group, offering them a drink. They all nodded in unison. As she turned to leave, she caught Izy's eye and smiled warmly, a soft blush creeping up her neck.

The shaman suddenly went quiet, his head snapping up. His clouded, milky eyes locked directly onto Izy. A wide smile stretched across his beef-jerky-complected face, wrinkling the skin beneath his cropped, feathered ceremonial hat. Heavily layered necklaces of colorful river shells and polished stones rattled against his chest.

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

Izy immediately stumbled for words, his face flushing hot. "No, I—ah, I haven't exactly fall—"

The shaman smiled and shook his head, raising a weathered hand. "It wasn't a question. I can see exactly how Maria looks at you."

Behind Izy, Al and Jeevan stared in stupefied silence.

Maria re-entered the cabana, balancing a tray of fresh refreshments. Actively reverting to the behavior of an awkward schoolboy, Izy nervously fumbled with his hands as he accepted the glass from her.

"Shaman," Izy said quickly, desperate to change the subject. "My friends here are—"

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

"No," Izy admitted, leaning in. "I had... well, we all shared a terrifying vision the other night at—"

"Tulum," the shaman finished for him. "I too saw the vision. Come, sit right here with me." He patted the packed dirt floor directly in front of his smoldering pot. Izy crawled forward and sat down. "I will show you another, and then you will finally understand."

"The vision?" Izy asked.

The shaman offered a knowing smile. "There is but one true understanding."

Without warning, the shaman reached across the pot and grasped Izy's arm. He shoved Izy's sleeve up past the elbow, exposing the raw, swollen burn mark.

Pulling back his own sleeve, the shaman revealed a thick, silver scar tissue layout on his own forearm—the distinct shape of two ancient Maya swords, their tips touching, but each missing the center of its handle. The shaman wet the old tissue with his finger, then laid his scar flat across Izy's glowing brand.

He held it there for a few seconds, then pulled his arm back.

Izy gasped, staring down at his skin. The two clenched fists of his original brand were no longer empty; they now held the handles of the two ancestral swords, thrusting them triumphantly above the imperial crown. The shaman's eyes moved rapidly from side to side, scanning every line of Izy's face.

"We are the chosen protectors of the crown," the shaman whispered.

Jeevan leaned over to Al's ear, keeping his voice incredibly low. "I told you things would get weird."

The shaman clutched Izy's forearms tightly, ensuring their matching scars locked together. With surprising strength, he pulled Izy forward until his face hung directly over the bubbling, smoldering 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 heavy, sweet blue smoke. Together, their bodies began to slowly rock back and forth. Al and Jeevan sat intrepidly on the dirt floor, watching the display. Within seconds, both Izy and the shaman slipped into a deep, heavy trance.

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

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

— **TULUM - PYRAMID - IZTA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT:** *Ixta 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 Ixta 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 pitch-black jungle.*

— **TULUM - PYRAMID - NIGHT:** *The timeline fractures back to the execution. Chimbetu flares with hatred, glaring at Ixta. He delivers a cold nod to the head priest, who touches her skin with the blazing torch. She is instantly engulfed in roaring, massive 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 Chimbetu while keeping a chained Chac under guard. Nearby, a line of Maya slaves load massive wooden chests and sleek Paso Fino horses onto a sprawling Spanish galleon ship layout. "Take him far away," Chimbetu 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 massive, 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 massive, 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 abruptly ended, causing the men to gasp; their eyes remained wide and unblinking throughout the immediate aftermath.

The shaman suddenly let go of Izy's arms, breaking the connection. Izy snapped backward, looking up completely drained and utterly speechless, his breathing shallow. Breaking the tense quiet, Al excitedly rolled his hands in the air.

"Well?" Al demanded. "What did you see, bro?"

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

The others looked completely puzzled, glancing between the two men.

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

Everyone leaned in closer to the smoldering pot, wearing their own look of intense surprise.

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

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

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

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 gently tapped his finger against the freshly transformed scar on Izy's forearm, looking deep into his eyes.

"You are the last heir, Iztali."

Izy sat completely stunned, the weight of a forgotten civilization crashing down on his shoulders. The shaman took his trembling hand, locking his grip.

"You must follow the vision."

Izy just sat staring, entirely numb. “How?”

“Go to the island.”

Izy looked at the shaman, thoroughly 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 with words. Instead, he motioned for Maria to step forward. She walked over quietly, her eyes downcast. Reaching out, the shaman gently pulled the strap of her lavender sundress down, exposing her smooth shoulder blade. He pointed a steady finger at a dark birthmark on her skin.

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

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

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

Izy leaned close to Maria's skin, studying the mark. He looked back up at the shaman, completely astonished by the mathematical precision of it.

“Four hundred miles out in the Pacific Ocean?” Izy breathed. “The only place in the entire world where you can see the planetary alignment with the Milky Way center.”

The shaman nodded slowly. “But more importantly, it is the only place where you can finally free Izta and recover the lost medical secrets of the Maya.” He looked up at Maria, stretching his hand toward her. She dropped her head sadly, knowing what this meant. The old man then looked across the room at Jeevan and Al. “I must talk to Iztali and Maria alone now. A cab is already waiting for you outside.”

Jeevan looked at Al. They both shrugged, got up from the dirt floor, and respectfully shook the shaman and Maria's hands.

"Honestly," Jeevan sighed, "I can use a lot more sleep."

The shaman walked over to a wall lined with rows of glass jars. He pulled out a small handmade tea bag, handed it over to Jeevan, and offered a wide, near toothless grin.

"Make a tea for you both with this," the shaman instructed. "You will feel entirely well again."

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

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

Izy's expression turned concerned. "What? What do you need? Tell me what I can do."

The shaman smiled warmly. He pulled Maria close to Izy, took their hand, and joined them firmly together.

"Take Maria for a long walk on the beach."

CHAPTER TEN

On The Beach

The sun was dipping below the horizon, painting the sky in brilliant layers of orange and purple. Izy and Maria walked barefoot along the wet sand of the Pacific coast in Tapachula, the cool surf lapping at their ankles. Izy kept stealing glances at her, a quiet smile breaking across his face.

“I can’t believe—” Izy started.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Time has changed things,” she said softly.

Izy looked up, meeting her gaze. “It has.”

They walked along the edge of the water in a comfortable silence, occasionally 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 single piece of this puzzle has fallen into place... it feels significant.”

Maria stopped walking. She turned to face him, looking up at him with a sudden sadness as she gently touched his arm. "Be careful, Izy. Please come back."

He gave a reassuring nod, studying her face. "What about you, Maria? What do you want?"

She looked out toward the endless expanse of the dark ocean, taking a deep breath as she fought to hold her composure. Sensing her distress, Izy reached up and gently turned her face back 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 for a second before Maria pulled back, looking down at the sand.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I didn't mean to be so bold."

Izy gently lifted her head back up. He offered a soft, tender smile. "It's alright, Maria." He held her by the shoulders. "Tell me. Tell me what you wanted... before what?"

Maria's eyes welled with tears. Izy held her closely as she finally looked up at him, the 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 back out at the vast ocean, holding Maria close as they swayed together in the sea breeze.

"I don't even know what to say, Maria," he murmured.

She looked back up into his eyes. "I love you, Izy. I've felt this way for a long time."

Izy looked at her pensively for a long moment, the weight of his mission taking on a new, personal urgency.

"I love you too, Maria."

They shared a long kiss as the tide rolled softly across their feet.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MÁS AFUERA ISLAND—JAN FERNÁNDEZ, CHILE

Three Days Later

The relentless waves of the Pacific rolled violently across Izy's boots.

The men stood in the crashing surf, gripping the straps of their heavy backpacks. High above them, the sheer cliffs of Las Casas towered into the gray sky, their pinnacles hidden entirely within a dense ceiling of clouds.

Suddenly, a herd of wild 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 middle of the Pacific?"

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

Turning away from the water, they began setting up their base camp. Near the edge of the thick underbrush, the wild horses gathered to drink from a hidden stream. Izy wiped his brow, pointing toward the animals.

"Well," Izy noted. "At least we found fresh water."

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

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

Jeevan jumped up, clapping his hands together.

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

The three men walked down the rocky beach line. Arriving at the bank of the running stream, they stopped, looking at each other while grimacing and wrinkling their noses.

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

Jeevan knelt down in the dark sand, fanning the humid air just above the water's surface. He dipped a single finger into the current, tasted the fluid, and smiled. He scooped up a large handful to drink.

“The water's perfectly 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 all drank from the cold stream, then continued their trek into the interior.

Past the beach line, the vegetation grew impossibly thick, clinging randomly to the steep mountain side. The men stopped, looking around the dense, wall-like terrain. Al shook his head in defeat.

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

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

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

They grinned at each other, drew their blades, and began to aggressively hack through the thick vegetation.

They finally reached the summit of the muddy knoll. A large, vine-encased object sat dead center atop the high ground.

They shrugged, stepped forward, and began to tear the heavy vines away, exposing a weathered basalt figure. It was the distinct silhouette of a man with a single raised arm. They shared an enthusiastic high-five.

Visually, they followed the exact direction the basalt figure was pointing, looking through the remaining underbrush toward a massive, ancient tree.

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

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

Izy led them through the dense undergrowth, aligning their path perfectly with the statue's trajectory toward the sheer edge of the cliff. They stopped at the base, gazing straight up at the vertical rock face.

“If there’s a cave all the way 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 back down toward the beach line. “Let’s go. We’ll be able to see the higher elevation better from the open beach. Diagonally, it seems to be located right above our base camp.”

The men walked back up the beach. The wild horses followed them from a safe distance, their hooves clicking against the stones.

Reaching the mouth of the stream, they held their breath and plunged their entire heads into the rushing water to cool off from the brutal hike.

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

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

They began methodically scoping the massive cliff face with their binoculars. As the heavy clouds temporarily cleared from the high pinnacle, Jeevan spotted a break in the stone.

“Now that’s odd,” Jeevan muttered. He pointed high onto the rock face. “Look at that drape of green vines.”

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

“See the deep 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 thick, heavy shelf of clouds rolled over the pinnacle, obscuring the viewpoint entirely and plunging the mountain back into shadow.

They sat on the sand, staring up at the impenetrable rock face. Al pulled a collection of snacks and his specialized metal flask container from his pack, offering the supplies to the others.

Jeevan gladly accepted a snack bar but shook his hands dismissively at the container. “No way. I’m never drinking from your thermos again.”

They shared a brief laugh, the memory of the pyramid vision lingering between them.

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

“I wish you were Pegasus,” Izy whispered softly. “I’d fly us right up there.” He looked up the sheer, vertical cliff, patting the horse’s thick neck. “Because I honestly don’t know how we’ll ever reach that cave. How did Chac get up there?”

They all looked up at the daunting mountain, collectively shaking their heads in silence.

The men constructed a campfire using dry driftwood, their eyes constantly drifting up 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 shook a finger up toward the distant pinnacle.

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

Izy and Al looked over at him simultaneously, their expressions clear indicators that they thought he had completely lost his mind. With no helicopter in sight, they fell back into silence as the sun sank beneath the horizon, plunging the island into night.

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

Jeevan stood up, scanning their immediate 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 a bit thick from the alcohol. “I’ll go get it—nothing like a midnight stroll on the beach.”

Izy stared blankly into the embers. “Yeah.”

Al staggered to his feet, pulling a long, dry 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 back down and patted Izy’s back reassuringly. “It sucks, man. I know you’re thinking about Maria. But what can you do?”

Izy looked up at the towering, 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, shaking his head. He dropped his gaze, using a loose stick to draw abstract, meaningless shapes in the sand. “Never mind.”

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

Down the shoreline, Al stumbled over to the edge of the stream. He leaped awkwardly across the rushing current, bending down to gather several large pieces of weathered driftwood.

With his arms completely full, he loosely gripped the glowing torch and turned back toward the campsite. Attempting to re-cross the stream, his boot caught on a jagged rock. He tripped violently.

The collected wood tumbled from his arms, and the torch flew from his hand, both rolling rapidly toward the water. He lunged forward on his knees to recover the light, but the torch rolled directly into the running current.

FROOSH.

Suddenly, a brilliant flash of blue chemical fire ignited, floating dynamically on the surface of the moving water. Al leaned his torso forward, drunkenly curious as he stared at the neon glow.

“What the—”

Instantly, the blue flame expanded exponentially, igniting the escaping pockets of natural methane gas fields. A wall of bright blue fire raced directly up the vertical cliffside, tracing the exact path of the stream’s hidden mountain gully overhead.

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

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

The fire consuming the hidden stream path drew a perfectly straight, luminous blue line directly up the mountain, completely illuminating the dark cavern opening in bright firelight.

They stared in absolute disbelief. Tracking the burning neon line up to the cave, the sheer absurdity of the moment broke the tension,

and they erupted into ecstatic laughter. Al punched the others' arms excitedly, a massive 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 their way through the dense underbrush. At the very base of the sheer cliff wall, the stream current turned sharply behind a massive rock structure. Following the line of the water, they dropped to a sudden halt. Absolute shock and relief washed over their features.

“Can you believe this?” Izy breathed.

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

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

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

They gripped their packs and began their ascent.

Hours passed as they climbed higher into the clouds. Pausing for a quick break, they sat flat on an outer rock ledge to catch their breath and look out at the stunning panoramic view. The vast Pacific Ocean glittered beneath the sun until the deep blue water completely faded into a hazy, seamless blur along the distant horizon line.

Far below, unnoticed, a small boat bobbed silently offshore, completely unmoving.

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

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

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

Izy shook his head. "Still... no way."

Suddenly, the sharp sound of an echo hit the rock pathway, vibrating through the narrow gully. The men stopped dead in their tracks. The noise instantly vanished, leaving only the rushing sound of the low stream. They shrugged, assuming it was just shifting stone, and continued their march upward.

Al glanced back over his shoulder, his eyes wide. "Tell me you both heard that."

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

They stopped a second time.

A rhythmic, distinct *clip-clop* sound echoed from right around the upcoming bend, getting steadily closer to their position. The men's eyes widened in absolute surprise. The sheer impossibility of the sound broke the tension, and they broke into incredulous laughter. Al pointed a shaking finger forward.

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

The massive black stallion emerged from around the rock bend. He stopped, shaking his majestic head up and down, throwing his long mane like an unyielding force of nature against the stone.

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

Without a moment's hesitation, Izy tied their heavy backpacks securely together, easing the load across the horse's strong back. The stallion stood perfectly still, offering absolutely no resistance. Smiling, Izy reached into his pack and gave the animal a fresh apple. Together, the team continued their climb, disappearing entirely into a thick, swirling cloud bank.

They emerged from the other side of the cloud bank, and a massive cave entrance expanded before them, carved deep into the pinnacle

of Las Casas cliff. A pulsating, eerie blue firelight glowed from deep inside the darkness. They stepped across the threshold.

The men stood completely awed by the sheer environment of the towering cavern. Every stone surface caught the natural, shifting firelight, glowing in hues of sapphire and neon orange. Intricate, colorful drawings executed by King Chac centuries ago covered the smooth stone walls like a sprawling historical tapestry. Jagged, ancient stalagmites and stalactites littered the entire room layout.

The low stream flowed out from behind a series of impassable, massive boulders, splitting into separate, crystal-clear channels that weaved through the cavern floor. Flammable, methane-rich water pooled inside hand-carved stone bowls along the walls, spilling over gently to rejoin the current.

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

The men walked over to investigate what had drawn the horse's attention.

Brushing away layers of dust, they discovered the ancient skeletal remains of a horse buried in the floor. Its extended front leg bone was encased completely beneath the thick accumulation of the stalagmite. The black stallion continued to paw gently at the base of the formation.

"That's strange," Izy murmured, kneeling down 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 sudden, massive fluttering sound echoed from the dark shadows above.

The men looked up toward the ceiling. The entire darkness seemed to drop out as thousands of bats fell from the rafters, flying aggressively past the men to exit the cavern mouth. They waved their

arms wildly, ducking low to shield themselves from the cloud of leather wings.

Thousands of bats poured out of the cave entrance, completely darkening the afternoon sky like a localized storm.

A pair of high-powered binoculars tracked the black cloud of bats pouring from the high cliff cavern opening.

The binoculars lowered to reveal the smug face of Jaguar Man, a wry, victorious 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 up at the peak. “Should we go in after them?”

“No,” Jaguar Man replied smoothly, leaning back against the yacht's railing. “Let them do all the heavy lifting. Then we’ll simply make a trade.”

He turned around, his smile fading into a cold sneer. Behind him, Burly Man One and Burly Man Two stood rigidly, holding Maria and the ancient shaman captive against the ship's bulkhead.

Maria glared fiercely at Jaguar Man, her green eyes flashing with hatred. He reached out, running a manicured hand softly across her cheek with a smirk. “I can certainly 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, low phrase to him in the ancient Mayan tongue. Maria looked startled by the words, her breath hitching.

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

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

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

The others ignored the noise, scanning the vast expanse of the cave. Izy walked toward the back, peeking into a narrow structural crack between the massive boulders where the primary stream flowed out. Surprised by his discovery, he waved his hand to motion to the others.

“Check this out,” Izy called out.

Jeevan and Al crossed the floor to peer through the narrow stone seam. A hidden, massive subterranean lake expanded inside the deep cavern. Across the black water, a low, mesmerizing blue chemical flame danced elegantly across the entire surface.

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

Jeevan turned his head to look back at Al, his brow furrowing. “And you would manage to get it in there how exactly?”

Al frowned, shaking his head at the academic’s literal mind. “Bro, after all we’ve seen on this trip, and you still doubt a little something like that?”

Izy and Al nodded their heads in perfect, silent unison.

Behind them, the black stallion ignored the lake entirely. He continued to paw aggressively at the thick guano accumulation directly beside the old horse skeleton. The three men looked back at the animal, simultaneously rolled their eyes at the distraction, and then turned back toward the glowing subterranean waters.

Jeevan, however, hesitated. He walked over to the hardened mound, studying the modern horse, then looked up at the exceptionally high ceiling where the bats nested. The stallion kicked off another large chunk of the calcified pile. Jeevan focused his gaze back onto the others, the wheels in his mind turning fast.

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

They both turned to look at him. Jeevan raised his eyebrows in a silent, sudden realization, pointing his finger straight down at the guano mound. The pieces fell into place. Izy and Al smiled, nodding instantly.

Izy grabbed the stallion’s mane, gently pulling the animal away from the site. Jeevan didn’t waste a second. He stepped up and immediately started chipping away at the hardened, calcified mound with his heavy pickaxe. With every sharp strike, large chunks of the casing shattered and slid across the cave floor.

He delivered one final, heavy blow. The metal tip landed with a dull, hollow thud. An ancient, dark wooden chest was exposed.

Together, they manually hauled the heavy artifact out from the crumbling mound, using their tools to easily break the brittle metal latch. Jeevan pried the wooden lid open.

Izy reached carefully inside the dark interior to lift out a fragile, ancient bark papyrus, slowly unrolling two distinct codex pages. The center portion of each sheet was completely missing, torn away centuries ago.

Moving with practiced academic precision, Izy carefully extracted the matching manuscript pieces Aunt Cocco had given him in New Orleans, placing them cleanly between the ancient sheets.

It was a perfect, seamless fit.

SKREEECH.

Suddenly, a violent, piercing wind shrieked through the cavern arches. The black stallion reared up high onto his hind legs, pawing frantically at the empty air. The dancing blue flames across the subterranean lake flickered violently, popped loudly in unison, and went completely out.

The last rays of the sun sank beneath the horizon, visible through the wide cave opening.

Al looked into the sudden 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 back down the steep stone pathway. The black stallion navigated the narrow gully ahead of them, carefully carrying the heavy wooden chest across his back.

Together, they emerged from the low-hanging cloud bank, the beach layout stretching out below.

Burly Man One slowly lowered his binoculars, looking down from his high vantage point on the upper deck to the rear lounge area.

Jaguar Man and Dr. Seronjo sat comfortably at a glass table, casually having a catered lunch. The guard called down 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 heavy gold rings. “I told you, Jonathan. Let them do all the heavy lifting.”

He took another bite of his food, chewing slowly as he mockingly shook his silver fork at Seronjo.

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

The three men emerged from the dense tropical underbrush, stepping out onto the hot sand toward their campsite coordinates.

Suddenly, Burly Man One stepped out from the foliage directly ahead of their path, effectively blocking the walkway.

The team dropped to a sudden, tense halt. The massive guard continued his steady, intimidating advance toward them.

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

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

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

They spun around sharply. Jaguar Man and Dr. Seronjo walked out from the opposing tree line, advancing across the white sand. The two academics stood completely shocked, entirely unsure of their position.

“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, unblinking glare, completely unmoved by the threat.

“There isn’t any gold, Seronjo,” Izy said levelly. “Only torn papers and a bat cave.” He reached down, casually patting the side of the wooden chest strapped to the horse.

Dr. Seronjo looked over at Jaguar Man, his expression completely confused. Annoyed, Jaguar Man stepped forward, violently yanking open the wooden lid of the chest.

It was completely empty.

They both turned their glares back onto the three men, their professional facades hardening into pure malice.

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

Al—

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

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

“No,” Izy said levelly.

Jaguar Man nodded slowly, a cold, dangerous smile breaking across his sharp 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 right to this beach.”

Al let out a sarcastic snicker. “Obviously.”

Despite the tension, the others shared a brief, mocking laugh at the failed deception.

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

Jaguar Man delivered a sharp nod to Burly Man One. The massive guard raised his fingers to his lips and let out a loud, piercing whistle that echoed off the cliff face.

The tropical foliage rustled violently. Maria and the ancient shaman stumbled out from the dense underbrush near their campsite coordinates. Walking right behind them was Burly Man Two, brandishing an automatic weapon.

Izy and Maria immediately locked eyes, staring longingly across the sandy expanse.

“Now that’s highly amusing, don’t you think, Professor?” Jaguar Man smirked, gesturing with his gun. “You have exactly what I want, and I have what you want.”

He motioned with his hand toward the open center of the camp layout, forcing the prisoners forward. The moment she was close enough, Maria broke into a run, heading directly toward Izy.

But Burly Man One stepped in to intercept. He shoved Izy backward with a heavy hand, grabbing Maria roughly by her bare arm.

Izy snapped. Years of repressed academic restraint vanished as he threw a hard, lightning-fast punch that connected cleanly with the guard’s jaw. *CRACK*. The burly man stumbled back, his eyes flashing with rage as he lined up to brutally attack Izy.

Before he could strike, Dr. Seronjo shook his head sharply, gesturing for the guard to stand down.

“There is absolutely no need to conduct ourselves in this primitive manner, Professor,” Dr. Seronjo said, adjusting his pristine sleeves. “We are educated men. As the good book states—let us

reason together.” He gestured with a flat hand for Izy and Maria to move back into their defensive positions. “By the way, Jeevan was right. Getting those cool designer glasses really helped your aesthetic. It’s good to see you in love.”

Izy and Jeevan exchanged a completely puzzled, unnerved look. Dr. Seronjo simply shrugged his shoulders.

“I bugged your office weeks ago,” Seronjo revealed casually. He gestured toward the armed, burly guards, shifting his own weapon slightly. “You won’t win a power struggle here, Smith. So 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 a deep, 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 over his shoulders toward Jeevan and Al. They returned a slow, subtle nod of agreement. There was no other choice.

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

“You are a man of absolute truth, Professor,” Jaguar Man purred, looking up. “Merely torn pages... containing the exact spell structure required to recall Queen Izta. She will reveal the coordinates to the lost gold.”

“Or die forever,” Dr. Seronjo added coldly.

“There are still sections missing from the layout,” Izy countered, trying to buy time. “The text is incomplete.”

Jaguar Man flashed a wide, predatory grin. “Cocco indicated you possess them.”

Anger flaring like wildfire, Izy lunged forward toward the businessman, but Burly Man One instantly stepped in, slamming a forearm against Izy's chest to restrain him.

“You better not have touched her—” Izy roared.

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

He let out a disgusting smirk, throwing a heavy, gold-clad arm across Maria's shoulders. She flinched away violently from his touch, her green eyes wide with terror. Jaguar Man ignored her, looking back at Izy while tapping his fingers against the ancient codex sheets.

"Make this simple, Professor."

Defeated, Izy reached down and handed the protective cardboard document tube directly to Jaguar Man. The businessman popped the cap, extracted the copies of the matching codex fragments Aunt Cocco had preserved, and aligned the pieces together seamlessly on a flat rock. He looked up at Izy, triumphant.

"It appears we will encounter our associate Izta once more," Jaguar Man said. "And you, Professor, may have the distinct honor of releasing her from the spell."

Jaguar Man smiled over at Dr. Seronjo, who nodded in satisfaction. Nearby, the shaman cast a measuring, ancient look across the entire group, his clouded eyes unreadable. Breaking the heavy silence, Al suddenly raised his hand high into the air like a schoolboy.

"Quick question on that spellcasting protocol," Al called out. "We're not going to require any—" He wiggles his fingertips in the air, flashing a mock-evil smile before adopting a craggy, stereotypical witch voice. "*'Eye of newt, toe of frog, wool of bat, or tongue of dog'* are we?"

He scanned their immediate, desolate 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 dryly.

Al and Jeevan shared a brief, defiant laugh, exchanging a fast 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 physical motion of stirring a massive 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 absolute, visceral disgust. Without a word of warning, he swung the heavy butt of his automatic weapon sharply into the back of Al's head. *THUD.*

The blow knocked Al completely unconscious, his body crashing limp onto the hard sand. Jaguar Man looked down at the unconscious driver, adjusting his grip on the gun.

“I knew there was an off button,” Jaguar Man muttered.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Next Morning

The first pale light of dawn began to bleed across the Pacific horizon, casting long, sharp shadows over the mountain.

Izy stood rigidly beside King Chac's basalt statue. His hands were steady as he lifted the heavy jade medallion high into the air, aligning the artifact directly toward the glowing horizon line.

Al, sporting a massive, dark bruise on the back of his head, stood weakly by his side, carefully holding up the unified, complete codex layout. Just a few feet away, Jaguar Man maintained a steady, unblinking line of sight with his weapon trained on Izy's chest.

"Align it directly east," Jaguar Man commanded.

Izy consulted the vibrating compass needle in his hand, keeping his focus locked on the true coordinates. Nearby, Jaguar Man repeatedly monitored the digital face of his watch, his breathing tight.

"Three minutes until sunrise," Jaguar Man barked, tightening his grip on the weapon.

Everyone watched the open space with tense, nervous anticipation. The ancient shaman fell into a rhythm, silently chanting under his breath as the shadows began to stretch. Izy initiated the final translation, reading the complex spell text aloud from the unified parchment layout.

"Hear me, Kinich Abau," Izy chanted, his voice carrying an ancient, deep weight in the Mayan tongue. *"As you took the sun into the dark space and the first father has been reborn..."*

Izy hesitated for a fraction of a second, the raw energy of the words vibrating in his throat. The others locked their eyes onto him, the tension peaking. He pushed forward through the remaining text.

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

The sun slowly broke past the ocean horizon, casting a blinding, golden glare across the water. The internal anticipation reached its absolute limit across the summit.

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

The morning sun suddenly blurred intensely through the quivering atmospheric air. The very geometry of the horizon appeared to warp and bend before their eyes.

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

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

"Return the spirits to their bodies!"

The wind howled into a deafening roar, splitting the air. Nearby trees blew completely over, their roots tearing from the earth. Izy had to yell over the acoustic violence of the tempest.

"Return them reborn to this new age! Return them to their thrones now!"

Massive clouds shaped explicitly like sharp swords arched around the wavering sun. Thousands of translucent sylphs swarmed out from the horizon toward the island coordinates. The winds rose to a terrifying hurricane force.

The shaman threw his open arms high toward the sun, welcoming the storm. Panicking, the two burly men broke into a run, but a pair of massive falling trees crashed down squarely onto them. Maria ran directly into Izy's arms, clinging to his shirt. Everyone looked up at the sky.

The glowing sun flattened to a single, pitch-black line.

The glowing band of the Milky Way arched across the vast, silent expanse of space. Suddenly, the cosmic center quivered and blurred. A deep, absolute blackness grew from the core, completely blotting out the light of the stellar cluster.

A sudden blast of fire shot out from the blackness, rushing toward Earth. The flame rapidly shifted into the translucent, towering figure of King Chac, glowing with an intense heat as it entered the earth's upper atmosphere.

The black line collapsed, and the sun returned to a blurred, blinding orb. The sword-shaped clouds raised their tips, and the thousands of

swarming sylphs aligned themselves in a grand cosmic corridor. Chac's translucent figure moved fluidly down through the sky toward the island.

The phantom king stopped. From the opposing horizon, Queen Izta's spirit appeared, moving directly toward him. He reached out to her, and the two ghostlike figures moved hand-in-hand through the arched swords of the sylphs, descending toward the mountain.

The howling winds settled down to a gale force. The spirits moved directly toward the basalt statue. As they neared, the ancient stone violently cracked, and heavy pieces fell away, shattering on the ground. The entities moved within touching distance of the group.

Unable to process the reality, Dr. Seronjo passed out cold on the dirt. Jaguar Man dropped his automatic weapon to the sand, staring in absolute, paralyzed disbelief. Jeevan stood completely frozen, his jaw slack, while Al just stood by his side, a massive smile spreading across his face. Izy held Maria tight against his chest. The shaman fell heavily to his knees.

The translucent figures moved around the circle and then directly through Izy's physical body, a wave of electric heat washing over him.

The basalt statue crumbled completely into a pile of gray dust. In its place stood King Chac and Queen Izta, the vapor transforming fluidly into the resurrected flesh and bone of the ancients.

Queen Izta appeared in her thirties—tall, graceful, and lissom. Her waist-length, flowing black hair gave her a goddess-like visual presence. She looked exactly like the sovereign queen she was. Instantly, the gale-force winds died down to a gentle breeze, and the dark clouds disappeared from the blue sky.

Izta and Chac extended their hands to Izy. They clasped hands, the physical touch solid and warm. Izta lovingly studied the sharp contours of Izy's face.

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

Izy stared at her, his academic mind struggling to comprehend. “You’re real. You’re flesh and—”

“Your blood,” she repeated softly.

They stepped forward and embraced. Beside them, King Chac stood proud, his majestic gaze sweeping over the landscape. He looked down at the jade necklace resting against Izy’s chest, gently lifting the stone piece between his fingers, and smiled.

“I thought I lost this,” King Chac said.

Speechless, Izy unclasped the heavy necklace and handed it directly to Chac. Everyone stood in silent, breathless amazement until the quiet was 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 the driver, entirely 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 looked on inquisitively, the historical timeline blurring. Maria looked at the shaman, her face full of confusion and sudden doubt. Nearby, Jaguar Man continued to stare at the resurrected royals in pure, unadulterated awe.

“You’re really here,” Jaguar Man whispered, his voice trembling. “Alive.”

Queen Izta turned her head, her goddess-like gaze locking directly onto Jaguar Man and the unconscious Dr. Seronjo.

“Yes,” King Chac said, his deep, resonant voice easily cutting through the remaining tension. “And I know exactly what you seek.”

Chac stepped forward, sternly confronting the two men.

“Only I know where the lost gold is hidden,” the ancient monarch continued, his eyes flashing with authority. “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 muscular arm in a formal proposition. Jaguar Man and Dr. Seronjo looked at him nervously, the sheer presence of the resurrected king making them hesitate. Finally, Jaguar Man extended his own arm, and the two men firmly clasped forearms, staring deep and unblinking into each other's eyes.

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

Chac gave a single, majestic nod of agreement. Nearby, the ancient shaman looked over at the department head, a tight, chilling grin on his face.

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

Dr. Seronjo's face paled. He whipped his head around to look at Jaguar Man, his expression deeply concerned and thoroughly frightened.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Next Day

The lonely, echoing sound of breaking surf crashed against the shoreline. A dense, cold mist completely covered the beach, while heavy, low-hanging clouds completely obscured the high pinnacle of Las Casas cliff face.

Clap, clap, clap.

Dr. Seronjo clapped his hands together loudly, nudging the others roughly with the toe of his expensive leather shoe. The camp stirred, and the travelers slowly awakened on the cold sand, groaning.

Chac and Izta sat twenty feet away from the group, their backs turned to everyone as they stared out at the gray ocean. Jaguar Man stood up, shaking the sand from his clothes, and called out to them.

“Well, Chac,” Jaguar Man yelled greedily. “Time to make me a very rich man.”

Chac slowly turned his head to look back at them, and everyone in the camp let out an immediate, horrified gasp.

Over the course of a single night, both Chac and Izta had visibly aged over ten full years. Their hair was streaked with silver, and deep lines of wisdom and exhaustion carved their faces. They stood up together, leaning on each other as they walked toward the stunned group. The modern men could only stare in a paralyzed, stunned silence.

“It is part of the final cost of the spell,” King Chac explained, his voice noticeably deeper, rougher. “We could be resurrected into this world, yes. But for us, each passing day is over a decade of mortal life.”

Chac held Izta’s fragile hand tightly, their fingers interlocked. Together, they turned and began to walk down toward the crashing

ocean waves. Before leaving the perimeter, Chac turned back to address the captors one last time.

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

They continued their slow walk down the shoreline. Out of the dense tropical underbrush, the herd of wild Paso Fino horses emerged, silently following a few paces behind the aging royals like a royal guard. Watching them walk away, Jaguar Man looked thoroughly frustrated, his patience wearing thin.

“What about the gold?” Jaguar Man snapped.

Panic and greed overriding his caution, Jaguar Man broke into a run, racing down the wet sand toward them. Seeing him approach, Chac subtly motioned with his hand for Izta to return to the safety of the camp. Jaguar Man angrily approached the old king, stepping directly into his path to cut him off.

“I don’t have time for your games or your chances, old man,” Jaguar Man snarled, baring his teeth. “Bring me to the gold. Right now.”

King Chac looked at him with profound pity. “Your impatience far surpasses your greed.”

Chac turned his back to walk away from him, heading back toward the tents.

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

Reaching out, Jaguar Man grabbed Chac roughly by the shoulder, spinning him around and punching him hard across the face. The old king stumbled back, but the warrior blood within him surged. They began a brutal, clumsy fight on the sand. Despite his sudden age, Chac threw a massive, heavy counter-punch that sent Jaguar Man crashing down to the ground.

Jaguar Man growled, wiping blood from his lip as he got up slowly. He reached into his jacket and pulled his heavy weapon.

Nearby, the sharp, panicked sound of the horses neighing echoed off the dunes.

“Enough of this,” Jaguar Man hissed, his hands trembling with rage. “Bring me to the gold!”

He aimed the weapon directly at Chac’s chest.

Thump-thump, thump-thump.

The thunderous, ground-shaking sound of hoofbeats and angry snorting suddenly filled the air. Before anyone could scream, a violent blur of muscle and flying manes exploded from the mist. Jaguar Man was completely and brutally trampled beneath the charging hooves of the wild herd.

The rest of the camp watched the impact in absolute, horrified shock. As the horses thundered away into the brush, leaving a limp form on the sand, the shaman turned his head. He offered a wide, knowing smile directly to Dr. Seronjo.

Completely panicking, his mind snapping under the pressure, Dr. Seronjo lunged forward. He grabbed Izy from behind, wrapping an arm around his throat and holding his own weapon tightly against Izy’s temple.

“Enough of this voodoo hoodoo!” Seronjo screamed hysterically, 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 frantically through the air, his breathing shallow as he motioned the group through the dense brush toward the cavern entrance.

One by one, they all entered the dark threshold.

The interior of the cave was pitch-black. Dr. Seronjo clicked his flashlight repeatedly, but the bulb remained completely dead. Cursing, he hit the side of the plastic casing against his palm, then threw the useless tool violently against the stone wall, where it shattered.

Seeing the deadlock, Chac turned to Al and Jeevan, nodding firmly for them to ignite their makeshift driftwood torches. The orange fire crackled to life, casting long, dancing shadows across the ancient 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, calloused hand firmly against the massive boulders that blocked the rear channel. He looked back over his shoulder at the desperate academic.

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

Dr. Seronjo stepped forward, peeking nervously through the narrow structural crack between the massive rocks, staring down into the subterranean darkness where the blue chemical flames still flickered across the water. He turned back 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, mocking 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 aggressively toward Izy and Maria.

Chac gave a slow, measured nod. Without another word, the old king knelt by the water channel, beginning to gather handfuls of damp moss and thick river mud. He moved methodically, carefully packing the wet sludge around the narrow structural cracks and seams of the massive boulders.

Dr. Seronjo stood just a few feet away, watching the bizarre preparation with a completely confused, anxious expression.

“The boulders need to be blown backward,” King Chac explained, his voice rough and heavy with sudden age. “We will seal

the chamber completely and let the gas build underneath. Then, I'll light the stream."

Chac stood still, waiting patiently for the subterranean pressure to rise. Standing just a few feet away, Dr. Seronjo grew increasingly impatient and nervous, his eyes darting frantically around the dark cavern walls.

"What now?" Seronjo demanded, waving his gun. "What on earth are you doing?"

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

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

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

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

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

The entire party quickly retreated, diving behind the thick, protective structure of a natural rock wall. Moving on instinct, Chac tossed his burning torch directly into the running stream. The water ignited instantly.

BOOM.

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

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

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

Suddenly, the lake of fire rushed violently outward. The others watched from the absolute safety of the rock recess as Dr. Seronjo

was completely swept away by the burning, chemical current. He let out one final, agonizing scream as the flames took him, dragging him down into the subterranean abyss.

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

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

Low growl.

From a pitch-black recess of the deep cavern, three massive black jaguars smoothly emerged into the firelight. Snarling quietly but showing no aggression, the magnificent cats walked directly across the sea of gold toward Izy, Izta, and Chac.

The predators sat calmly at their feet, purring like domestic cats. The royals knelt to gently pet the soft black pelts, and a moment later, the jaguars turned, disappearing seamlessly back into the dark depths of the cave.

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

The wild Paso Fino horses walked calmly into the cave chamber, their hooves clicking against the gold coins. Smiling through his exhaustion, Izy and Maria reached out to pet the massive black stallion and the beautiful palomino mare.

The group slowly descended the steep, rocky trail coordinates of Las Casas cliff. The resilient horses carried the packed wooden chests carefully down the mountain side, the weight of the treasure balanced across their backs.

Reaching the open beach, the men quickly began unloading the heavy gear packs from the horses. A steady, glittering stream of ancient gold coins accidentally spilled out of a loose canvas pack, tumbling onto the dark sand. Al dropped to his knees, excitedly running his hands through the massive gold cache.

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

Al looked up, a handful of pristine gold coins clutched in his fist, smiling widely. “Yeah... gosh. That is just so tough.”

Nearby, the ancient shaman watched the two younger men play inside the gold cache, his expression turning solemn. He turned his head to address the old king.

“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 directly before the majestic king. “Tell me what?”

“About the New City,” King Chac revealed, his silver hair catching the ocean breeze. “And the real treasure of our people.” He pointed a weathered 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. Chimbela never knew about the existence of the New City, or the true treasures hidden away there.”

Queen Izta walked over, a soft smile on her lined face as she held Chac’s corded arm. “We built the New City ourselves,” she said softly. “And we hid the entire spiritual and intellectual riches of our culture inside its walls. We were going to move our entire population there, far away from the encroaching, destructive world.”

“There is still much to share with you, Iztali,” King Chac pressed. “But our time grows short. We must leave this island tomorrow.”

The group sat in a tight circle around a roaring campfire. The bright orange flames crackled and danced in the shifting wind, mirroring the steady, rhythmic sound of the breaking Pacific surf.

“We can reach the hidden entrance of the New City in two days,” King Chac said, staring into the embers. “Once inside, you will

see that the true treasures and sacred secrets of our people have absolutely nothing to do with gold or currency.”

Maria shivered slightly, looking cold and visibly tired against the ocean breeze. Noticing her fatigue, Queen Izta stepped forward and wrapped a thick, warm blanket carefully around the young woman’s shoulders.

“And very soon, you will be entirely healthy again, my dear,” Queen Izta promised softly. She ran her hand gently through Maria’s hair, while Chac reached out to hold her small hand.

“In the New City are preserved the lost medicines from the old growth forest,” King Chac revealed. “Nature has a perfect cure for every ailment. So much of this vital knowledge has been brutally lost to time.” Chac looked across the faces of everyone sitting in the circle, nodding his head with absolute gravity. “I have many profound 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 deep, oppressive terrain of the Campeche region, accompanied by a loyal team of local tribesmen who manually hacked a path through the dense, tangled forest with machetes.

The resilient Paso Fino horses they had recovered from the island carried Maria, Izta, and their heavy gear supplies through the mud. Over the course of the journey, Izta and Chac had visibly aged even further, their movements slowing but their dignity remaining absolute.

As they traversed the endless wilderness, Chac frequently stopped to gather specific wild plants along the way, carefully explaining their exact medicinal properties and biological lineages to Izy and Jeevan. After hours of marching, they stopped to take a brief rest.

Chac looked over at Maria; she appeared dangerously weak, her face pale and in visible physical pain from her illness. He handed her a selection of freshly gathered green leaves.

“Chew on these leaves, Maria,” King Chac instructed gently. “It will quickly remove the pain from your body.”

Chac drew the fragile Izta close to his side, holding her tightly. Together, the ancient monarchs looked out at the sprawling canopy of the surrounding Mexican forest.

“It is so good to be back in the forest,” King Chac murmured, a sudden 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 her king, tenderly rubbing his weathered arm in silent comfort.

“It awaits our return, Iztali,” Queen Izta whispered, her voice fragile but steady. “I can feel it in the very air.”

Izy matched his pace to hers, helping her navigate a thick 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,” King Chac answered. He shook his silver-maned head, dropping his gaze to the damp forest floor. “Too little, too late.”

They resumed the march in silence, the humidity pressing down on them.

The dense jungle layout slowly transitioned into beautiful, rolling terrain, thick and vibrantly alive with ancient foliage. Suddenly, Chac and Izta halted their pace. They stared straight ahead as wide, tearful smiles broke across their weathered faces. Turning to one another, they shared a deep, emotional embrace.

“We’re home,” Queen Izta breathed.

Chac pointed a trembling finger directly forward. The others strained their eyes, scanning the tree line, but they saw absolutely nothing out of the ordinary—just unbroken forest sitting atop a series of small, green hills. Izy pushed his glasses up his nose, looking completely confused.

“Is it gone?” Izy asked, his heart sinking. “Did we miss it?”

“It’s right there, directly in front of you,” King Chac smiled.

Al looked around the empty, sun-dappled clearing, then fixed his eyes on the old monarch. “King daddy, I’m definitely missing something here.”

Chac let out a soft chuckle, nodding his head. “That is the true beauty of our city, Al. You cannot see it. And what the world cannot see, it cannot harm.”

The others stared at the empty landscape, completely bewildered by the riddle. Chac motioned with his arm for them to follow his exact lead.

“Magicians in your modern world have long used mirrored surfaces to create the simple illusion that something has disappeared,” Chac explained.

The group peered intently into the trees, trying to catch a reflection. Chac gestured with his hand for them to halt. He took three steps straight forward into the brush and vanished completely from sight right before their eyes.

His deep voice echoed out from the empty air. “Follow my exact path, and you will see.”

Nervously, Izy stepped forward along the king's precise trajectory, Maria clutching his arm. The moment they crossed the invisible threshold, the illusion shattered. Suddenly, Chac was standing twenty feet directly before them in a wide, paved corridor.

He tapped his hand against a smooth, seamless wall surface to his side, stepped behind it, and disappeared a second time. A moment later, he reemerged. The entire group stood completely mesmerized.

“Polished stones sheathed in a thin layer of gold,” Chac revealed, patting the wall. “They mirror the surrounding forest perfectly, rendering the perimeter nearly invisible from the outside.”

He walked back behind the brilliant optical wall. The others followed his movement through the hidden threshold. It was the secret portal leading into the heart of the New City. Together, they emerged into the breathtaking expanse of the grand central plaza.

The perfectly maintained city glimmered brilliantly under the midday sun.

A majestic limestone temple sat squarely at the far end of the sprawling plaza expanse. Its high, tiered peak rose far above the city walls, fading unseen into the bright sky.

“Descendants of our trusted people have maintained this city for generations, awaiting our return,” King Chac said, his eyes misting over. “The temple has been sealed for hundreds of years. Come.”

The others, alongside the local tribesmen who carried long structural wooden poles, followed Chac toward the massive temple steps. The temple base was constructed from colossal, precisely interlocking stones that fit together without mortar. Elaborate,

beautifully carved statues of gods and beasts were positioned around the perimeter layout.

Three of the tribesmen crossed over to a large, snarling jaguar statue near the entrance. They inserted their thick wooden poles deep into the hidden structural seams to manually turn the heavy artifact.

GRIND.

The heavy, echoing sound of stone grinding on stone emanated from deep within the temple structure. The massive interlocking blocks began to separate, parting slowly across the front facade. Izta and Chac held hands tightly, stepping forward together.

The stone walls opened wide, exposing the temple's main interior chamber. Moving with reverence, the group stepped inside the illuminated space.

The main chamber towered high above them, the air cool and crisp. Elaborate, colorful historical drawings and sacred glyphs were carved directly into the smooth stone walls.

Diffused sunlight streamed down from hidden skylights to illuminate the polished temple floor. A series of private, arched antechambers ran off the main chamber layout. Chac and Izta looked around the ancient space, smiling, while the modern academics gazed around in absolute, breathless astonishment. Chac turned to face his descendants.

"Welcome to our home," King Chac said.

Izy shook his head, tears gathering behind his lenses. "This is beautiful... this is incredible."

"Untouched by time and man," Queen Izta whispered proudly. "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 spacious side antechamber, using their wooden poles to manually unlock the heavy, reinforced doors. Elaborate personal quarters were revealed, lined with soft furs

and woven tapestries. Izy carefully assisted Maria, gently helping her lay down onto a comfortable bed.

Nearby, a head servant accompanied Izta and Chac to their private chamber entrance. The servant turned a specific wall relief, placing his wooden pole into the structural opening.

The rhythmic, musical sounds of complex internal unlocking mechanisms echoed behind the stone wall. He pushed the heavy doors open, bowing low to the floor.

“Welcome home, my king and queen,” the servant said, his voice trembling with emotion. “Your chamber has awaited your presence.”

Chac looked down at his wife, his eyes full of eternal devotion. He scooped Izta up into his arms, carrying her through the threshold into their private sanctuary. The heavy stone doors closed shut behind them with a soft, final thud.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Next Morning

Izy, Maria, and Jeevan sat eating a rich, flavorful meal inside the elaborate dining hall, the ambient light soft and warm.

The heavy drapes parted, and Izta and Chac entered the room. The toll of the spell was visible; over the course of just a few hours, they had both aged drastically into their late seventies, their posture slightly stooped but their spirits unbroken.

“Good, you eat,” Queen Izta said, walking to the table. “You will need your strength for what comes next. Maria, please, drink plenty of fluid.”

King Chac nodded in agreement, leaning against the stone table. “When you finish your meal, Iztali, I will finally show you the greatest treasure of the New City—our medicines.”

Chac and Izta took their seats at the head of the long 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 with excitement.

“This place is absolutely incredible, bro,” Al said, pulling out a heavy stone chair. “There’s technological stuff engineered into the architecture that our modern world doesn’t even have yet.”

Jeevan sat down beside him, shaking his head in awe. “If the world only knew what they missed out on when your civilization vanished.”

“Soon, they will,” King 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 began to load their plates, Chac stood up, motioning with a firm hand for Izy and Maria to follow him. They exited the grand dining hall, following a complex network of narrow

stone corridors that wove deep through the ancient temple structure. Chac finally came to a halt in front of a massive, seamless wall, delivering a slow, respectful nod to the waiting temple servants.

The servants stepped forward in perfect synchronization. They turned the intricate stone wall reliefs, inserting their heavy wooden poles into the hidden cavities and turning the internal locking mechanisms in a precise, rhythmic sequence.

THUD. GRIND.

The massive stone blocks opened wide, separating to expose a sprawling, pristine medical room filled with hundreds of alcoves containing ancient dried herbs, ground powders, and crystalline vials. Together, they entered the sacred space.

“In here,” King Chac said, his deep voice echoing off the high stone rafters, “is a natural cure for every ailment known to man.”

He placed a warm, reassuring hand onto Maria’s fragile shoulder, gently leading her over to a contoured stone lounge built into the center of the room. She sat down, her breathing shallow from the lingering pain of her illness. Chac looked down and smiled warmly at her.

“Including the terrible disease currently resting within your body,” the king promised. “Let me prepare the ancient botanical potions that will make you completely whole again.”

Chac and the shaman moved swiftly through the alcoves, gathering specific roots, leaves, and ground powders, expertly mixing them into a thick, dark liquid potion. Maria accepted the ceramic cup and drank the bitter fluid down without hesitation, then lay flat back onto the stone lounge.

Moving to her side, Queen Izta carefully applied a fragrant, emerald-green herbal salve across Maria’s upper torso, chanting softly and rhythmically under her breath. Chac stepped up to light several small stone bowls positioned around the lounge; they immediately emitted thick waves of dense, sweet blue smoke that filled the air. The shaman slowly circled Maria’s position, his low voice joining Izta’s in the ancient chant.

Suddenly, Maria gripped her stomach, her muscles tensing violently as she let out a sharp, agonizing moan of pain. A second later, her eyes rolled back and she passed out completely.

Izy stepped forward, his heart in his throat, but Chac held up a silencing hand. The old king took two perfectly smooth, translucent crystal stones from a velvet tray, moving them slowly and deliberately just inches above Maria's exposed upper torso.

To Izy's absolute horror and amazement, Maria's skin began to ripple dynamically. Beneath the surface, the hardened internal tissue lumps visibly shifted, converging together and moving down toward her stomach cavity.

The shaman immediately raised her head by the chin, pouring a sparkling, clear liquid into her mouth. Maria gasped, awakening instantly as the fluids hit her throat.

Chac deftly held a deep stone bowl beneath her just as Maria leaned over and vomited a dark, viscous liquid into the vessel. Queen Izta stepped in with a soft damp cloth, tenderly wiping the sweat and fluid from Maria's face.

"How do you feel, my child?" King Chac asked gently.

Maria slowly rubbed her flat stomach and her sides, testing her body. She looked up at the gathered royals, the gray pallor completely gone from her skin, replaced by a radiant, healthy glow.

"I feel... pure," Maria whispered, a look of profound wonder on her face. "Aligned. Better than I have in years."

"By tomorrow morning, you will be entirely healed," King Chac smiled. He turned his sharp gaze back to face Izy, gesturing with his hand toward the exact same stone lounge. "Now, it is your turn."

Izy looked visibly hesitant, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

"As your friend Al says, you look very cool," King Chac chuckled, pointing a finger at his face. "But you must remove those glasses."

Izy sighed, pulled off his new designer frames, and sat down on the contoured stone lounge, the world turning into a soft, near-

sighted blur. Chac quickly prepared a fresh liquid potion and a thick, heavy topical salve.

Izy drank the dark liquid down, grimacing at the grit, before Chac applied the heavy herbal salve directly 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," King Chac replied firmly. "Now, wait."

After a few tense minutes, Chac used a clean cloth to wipe away the remaining salve. He then held two flat, cool stones firmly against each side of Izy's head. Izy's eyes widened behind his eyelids in the dark; he was clearly nervous as the energy shifted.

"Okay," Izy stammered. "I'm feeling a very weird, intense pressure moving straight through the center of my head." He tried to turn his face away from the stones to break the contact.

"Be still," King Chac commanded, his voice brooking no argument. "Be quiet. Be a man, Iztali."

Chac gently massaged the muscles around Izy's temples and eyes, letting the pressure dissipate naturally. He slowly pulled his hands back.

"Open your eyes," King Chac said softly. "Tell me, what do you see?"

Izy opened his eyes, blinking rapidly a few times as the initial blur cleared. The sharp lines of the stone walls, the vibrant colors of the herb jars, the microscopic details of the carvings—everything snapped into a hyper-clear, perfect focus. He didn't need lenses anymore. His eyes swept across the room and stopped completely on Maria. A wide, breathless smile broke across his face.

"The love of my life," Izy murmured, his voice thick with emotion. "I can clearly see the love of my life."

Chac looked over at Maria, a knowing glint in his old eyes. "Do you believe his words, Maria?"

She smiled beautifully, tears of joy spilling over her lashes as she nodded her head in absolute assent. "Yes. Yes, I do."

“And how do you truly feel about Izтали?” Chac pressed.

Maria stepped closer to the lounge and took hold of Izy’s hand, lifting her other hand to run her fingers gently across the clear curve of his cheek. “I’ve loved him since the very first day we met years ago.”

Chac smiled broadly, laying a heavy, reassuring hand across both of their shoulders, anchoring them together.

“To be truly whole, *Ch’ulel* is entirely necessary,” King Chac explained with deep gravity. “Your soul and your physical body are intrinsically connected, and they must always remain balanced. To complete this sacred balance... the two of you should marry tomorrow.”

Both Izy and Maria looked up at him, pleasantly and completely shocked by the decree. Maria didn’t say a word; she simply took a tighter, unyielding hold of Izy’s hand.

“It’s not too soon?” Maria whispered, her green eyes searching his face.

Izy shook his head instantly, 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,” King Chac declared, his voice carrying the heavy weight of a prophecy finally realized.

Maria and Izy looked directly into each other’s eyes. Moving on a deep instinct, Izy dropped down onto one knee on the cool stone floor, holding her hand securely in his.

“Will you marry me, Maria?”

She smiled beautifully, her eyes filling with tears as she happily nodded her head. Izy stood back up, and they shared a deep, breathless kiss. Breaking away, Izy looked back toward the others, a nervous flush on his face.

“I had to do it that way,” he mumbled. “I’m old-fashioned.”

Queen Izta smiled gently. She slipped a smooth green ring off her own finger and handed it directly to him, nodding encouragingly toward Maria. Izy took the artifact and smoothly slid the green jade

ring onto Maria's finger. They kissed a second time as everyone in the room smiled.

"Tomorrow at the sun's zenith, the shaman will perform the ceremony," King Chac announced. He looked over at his wife, his wrinkled eyes crinkling with a fond memory. "He's quite good at weddings."

Maria looked at the shaman with a sudden flash of suspicion. She walked over to his side, gently holding his weathered, calloused hand as she looked sadly into his cloudy, unblinking eyes.

"You're not actually my grandfather, are you?" she asked softly.

"No," the shaman answered honestly. "Your family was killed long ago because you held the true secrets—your birthmark. After your parents died, I took care of you. I protected you from the world just to bring us all here to this moment."

Maria didn't hesitate. She drew the old man into a tight, fierce hug. "I love you... grandfather."

Chac and Izta turned to depart the medical room, their slow footsteps echoing. Watching them go, Maria looked visibly disappointed.

"What about grandfather's eyes?" she called out. "Aren't you going to heal his sight too?"

Izta and Chac stopped, sharing a knowing smile before turning back.

"He sees much more clearly than all of us," Queen Izta said.

"But—" Izy started.

"I use my sight differently than you do, Iztali," the shaman interrupted gently. "I see in many different dimensions."

Izy shook his head, his academic mind reeling. "I need to start writing all of things down right—"

Chac raised a hand sharply, shaking his head to cut 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 pure, unadulterated academic excitement. "A library?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Next Day

The first pale light of morning filtered through the high stone slits of the royal quarters. Chac and Izta awoke in their grand bed. Over the course of the night, they had visibly aged deep into their eighties, their skin fragile and paper-thin, though their eyes remained completely vivid and unaged.

“It’s a big day,” King Chac murmured, his voice a raspy whisper. “I will get properly dressed up for the wedding.”

“After the wedding, we must show them everything,” Queen Izta said, her breathing shallow. “There is so little time left.”

Chac nodded slowly. He reached out with a trembling, spotted hand to tenderly caress Izta’s face, looking longingly into her eyes.

“So many centuries,” Chac whispered, a deep sorrow in his voice. “So few days.”

A single tear rolled down the curve of Izta’s wrinkled cheek. Moving closer, they drew each other into a tight, silent hug, holding onto the remnants of their mortal time.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Later That Day

Al and Jeevan stood atop the majestic stone temple under the brilliant afternoon sun, both dressed in elaborate, full Maya ceremonial clothing. Izy stood proudly beside them, wearing a custom woven loincloth brightly decorated with vibrant parrot feathers that caught the breeze.

The heavy inner doors parted, and King Chac walked out onto the stone platform. He was wearing his full, magnificent king's regalia, the gold and feathers gleaming. Seeing him, Jeevan delivered a sharp, frantic nudge to Izy's arm.

"A god will get dressed up," Jeevan whispered, his eyes wide.

The shaman stood waiting patiently before the grand stone altar, the blue smoke from the pots swirling around him.

Down below, Maria stepped out onto the open plaza. The intense morning sun reflected brilliantly off her long white skirt and intricate, brocaded blouse, creating a glowing, radiant halo around her entire form. Queen Izta walked slowly and gracefully beside her, guiding her up the steps.

Jeevan let out a low, awed mumble right next to Izy. *"And a new queen will arise.* Man, the prophecy is being fulfilled right before our eyes."

"This is so way cool, bro," Al grinned, adjusting his ceremonial headpiece.

"Shh," Izy hissed.

Izy 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 gently anointed their foreheads, praying over them in a low, rhythmic, enchanting chant. Together, the newlyweds dropped their heads to silently pray under the open sky.

The ceremony concluded. Breaking the sacred silence, Al quickly raised a modern camera and snapped a photograph. *Click.*

The spell broke, and the entire group turned to enter the cool sanctuary of the temple.

Inside the temple corridor, the local tribesmen stepped forward in unison to swing open the heavy, carved wooden bedchamber doors.

Izy smiled down at his new wife, scooped Maria up into his arms, and carried her across the threshold into their private chamber. The heavy doors closed shut behind them, sealing out the rest of the world.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Later That Evening

The high torches were lit, casting a warm glow through the structure. Izy and Maria hand-in-hand entered the main cavernous chamber, where the rest of the group was engaged in a quiet conversation.

Seeing them approach, Queen Izta rose slowly from her seat to greet them warmly, her silver hair gleaming in the torchlight.

“Ah, the newlyweds,” Queen Izta smiled, her voice full of ancient warmth. “And now, in true Maya tradition, you simply return to everyday life.”

Before they could answer, she took a firm hold of their hands, immediately pulling them along behind her toward a dark corridor.

“But first,” Izta whispered, her eyes flashing with secrets, “we must give the two of you your proper wedding present.”

The group navigated through a complex network of stone corridors, the trusted tribesmen following close behind them.

At the intersection of the corridors, the corner wall transitioned into a single, massive sloped stone. Inlaid lines of dark metal radiated outward across the stone floor like a sunburst.

Moving with practiced agility, the tribesmen scaled stone blocks jutting out from the wall architecture. They inserted their long wooden poles into hidden holes, jumping onto the pole ends to pull them downward with their full body weight.

CLANG.

The inlaid metal floor lines lifted up like physical railroad tracks, mechanically lifting the massive sloped cornerstone. They inserted their poles into adjacent wall reliefs, and the colossal cornerstone slid effortlessly forward to reveal a hidden passage. A steep stone staircase descended down into the pitch blackness. Together, they entered the threshold.

The moment Chac's foot touched the very first step, the entire staircase became illuminated by a sequence of glowing golden bulbs. The others let out an audibly awed gasp, staring at the warm light.

Chac came to a halt, smiling back at them. "They are exactly what you think—light spun from gold, powered by the river current flowing far below the temple structure."

They continued the long descent into a massive, cavernous subterranean chamber. The walls were constructed from thick layers of intricately carved stones. The entire room cast a deep golden hue from the glowing bulbs—and the gold itself.

Immense, towering stacks of gold bricks and silver bars filled the floor space. Expansive shelves packed with hundreds of ancient codices lined the entire rear wall.

Chac led the group through the chamber, stopping in the dead center to extend his arms and turn in a slow 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 true history of the Maya."

Chac motioned directly 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," Queen 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," King Chac pressed. "Knowledge is to be shared."

Izy turned around slowly, taking in the spectacular sight of a library he had spent his life searching for. "That's what I've been saying," he mumbled.

Al stared at a specific geometric symbol carved into the stone wall, his mouth dropping agape. He pointed a finger, looking back over 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,” King Chac revealed. He walked over to Izy, placing a hand firmly onto Izy’s shoulder. “The age where you’ll share the knowledge and prophecies of the codices.”

Izy stood completely speechless, searching for words in the golden light. “This is—”

“Way cool, bro,” Al finished for him.

Chac wrapped an arm securely around Izta, raising his free arm toward the magnificent space. “Come, let us feast.”

Chac looked down at Izta, sharing a smile as he touched her face; their eyes remained completely unaged and vibrant. Watching them, Maria looked over at Izy sadly, the bittersweet reality of time weighing on her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Nest Morning

Izy, Maria, and the Shaman looked on from the open courtyard as Al and Jeevan saddled their horses and the tribesmen loaded their 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 some of what we’ve found.”

“Never speak of the temple,” the shaman warned strictly. “The true treasures must remain here securely.”

“I’ll be back next month,” Izy promised, shaking their hands. “Maria and I have a lot to go through here first.” A heavy look of sadness grew across their faces at the impending farewell.

The heavy temple doors parted, and Izta and Chac slowly walked out into the sunlight. Over the course of the wedding night, they had visibly aged deep into their nineties. Their skin was fragile, and their eyes were now old and cloudy. Jeevan and Al walked over to face the ancient 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 warm knuckle bump with Al.

Jeevan and Al mounted their horses, delivered a final, respectful salute, and rode off into the thick tree line. Chac turned back to face Izy.

“It is our last day with you,” King Chac said, his voice a raspy whisper. “We must show you the final pieces needed to decipher the

knowledge.” He took Maria gently 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, turning back to look 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 sad look with Izta, smiling softly. Chac and Maria entered the temple. Izta took hold of Izy’s hand.

“Come,” Queen Izta said. “I’ll tell you the real Maya history as it was recorded on these walls.”

They walked slowly toward the heavy temple doors, crossing the threshold inside. Behind them, the tribesmen pulled the doors closed; the beautifully 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 triumphantly.

Izta and Chac were seated onto grand thrones, carried across the polished stone floor by four local tribesmen. The ancient monarchs were dressed in ornate, stunning funeral clothing that was heavily beaded, intricately embroidered, and flowing with all varieties of colorful bird feathers. The tribesmen carrying them wore plain black loincloths and smooth masks with absolutely no facial features.

Other tribesmen walked ahead of the thrones, holding beautifully carved masks of Izta and Chac. The procession came to a smooth halt.

Maria held back her tears, her hands trembling. Seeing her grief, King Chac extended his fragile hand to her.

“No sadness in death, my child,” King Chac whispered, his voice thin but resolute. “Only life.”

Chac gently released Maria’s hands, touched her soft cheek, and offered one last, serene smile.

“Men believe time to be real, but it exists only in their imagination,” Chac said, looking between Maria and Izy. “Soon, we will all be rejoined.”

With a slow, deliberate movement, Chac took off the heavy jade medallion from his neck and gave it directly to Izy.

“It will bring true oneness to your mind.”

The procession continued toward the rear wall of codices. The tribesmen stepped forward and pulled a hidden stone column downward.

Rumble.

The massive wall opened, exposing a wide, descending staircase. The loud, echoing sound of running water vibrated from below. Together, they all entered the threshold.

The procession made its way down the long, echoing stairs to a large subterranean plaza of polished stone. The towering black onyx walls features intricate, deep carvings depicting the journey of the soul into eternity.

A roaring, flowing river cut through the plaza's end, and an elaborate wooden barge was moored quietly at the temple's stone dock. The tribesmen carefully carried the thrones aboard the barge. Izta and Chac held hands tightly, looking straight ahead into the darkness of the river tunnel.

The tribesmen boarded the vessel, handing the shaman two golden cups filled with a dark liquid. He raised the cups to Chac and Izta's mouths, and they drank deeply 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 gently over Izta and Chac's faces, handed them their royal scepters, and lit the tall 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 gracefully onto the deck of the barge. They sat directly before the thrones like guardians of the underworld. King Chac raised his scepter.

The tribesmen untied the thick mooring lines. The powerful current immediately caught the vessel, carrying the barge downstream.

Izta and Chac's heads dropped in their final sleep. The barge disappeared deep into the cavernous tunnel, and the flickering torchlight illuminated the stone walls behind them. The jaguars let out a loud, deafening growl that echoed through the mountain, before the torchlights faded completely to black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

New Orleans, Louisiana
Two Years Later

The sweeping branches of live oak trees framed the sprawling, sunny view of Orleans University.

A vintage streetcar's clanging bell echoed through the morning air as the vehicle swayed to a smooth 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 grand Romanesque arches of Gibbons Hall.

The new office was large, beautifully cluttered, and filled from the floor to the high ceiling with authentic, priceless Maya treasures.

Izy worked diligently at his desk, reviewing research notes. Resting prominently on the wood was a brand new brass nameplate that read: *Dr. Iztali Smith, Director of History*.

A framed wedding photograph of Izy, Maria, Chac, Izta, and the shaman sat proudly on the desktop. On a nearby mahogany bureau, guarded by the sunlight, rested the snarling black jaguar mask.

A firm knock chimes at the door. Izy looked up, his perfect, unassisted vision locking onto the door frame.

Maria entered, a radiant smile on her healthy face, holding the hand of an energetic young boy named Chuck. The boy immediately reached his small arms out toward Izy.

“Daddy!” Chuck squealed.

Maria scooped the boy up, walking over to Izy's desk to plant a warm kiss on her husband's lips. She set Chuck down safely on the

rug and sat directly onto 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 sharp knock sounded at the door frame. Jeevan and Al entered the office, both dressed in sharp suits but carrying their same high energy.

"We need to run over 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 morning."

Al grinned, leaning against the door frame. "Say, bro, you need me to bring—"

Before he could finish, Izy's new secretary—a middle-aged, atypical librarian-looking woman—barged directly into the room, cutting between Izy and Al as if they were a complete bother. She dropped a heavy, intimidating stack of papers onto Izy's desk.

"Before you go, Dr. Smith, I absolutely 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 started gathering his loose research papers, delivering a warm, loving nod over 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 up from his desk, grabbing his customized leather briefcase—embossed cleanly with the distinct geometric insignia of the dual swords and the imperial crown.

"That's great," Izy interrupted smoothly. "We're leaving."

He grabbed Maria's hand, and she reached down to grab Chuck's hand. Together, the family headed toward the exit doors while the frantic secretary followed closely behind them down the corridor.

"One more thing, Dr. Smith!" she called out. "*Rolling Stone* needs a lead quote from you—right now."

Izy stopped dead in his tracks. He turned around slowly to face his secretary, a wide, victorious smile spreading across his face.

"Quote," Izy said, his voice echoing clearly down the halls of the university. "*Academics is about gaining and sharing knowledge, not money.* End quote."

He turned, shared a swift, smiling fist bump with Jeevan, took Maria's hand, and they walked out of the building into the bright New Orleans sun.

Izy and Maria strolled lazily along the paved walking path of Audubon Park. Above them, the heavy, hanging Spanish moss draped across the ancient branches of the live oaks, swaying gently in the warm 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 over at her.

Maria punched Izy's shoulder playfully, a bright, radiant 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 main path, walking through the grand, open entrance gates of the Audubon Stables and heading toward the primary barn structure. Together, they entered the cool threshold.

The interior of the stables was breathtaking. It featured beautiful herringbone brick floors and pristine, polished wood panels, resembling the great hall layout of an ancient castle rather than a barn.

A loud, echoing neigh vibrated through the rafters. A massive black stallion poked his majestic head out from a clean, white stall. Izy walked over and handed him a crisp apple, gently rubbing at the horse's broad forehead. The engraved brass nameplate on the latch read: *King Chac*.

Right next door, a beautiful palomino mare's head popped out from the adjacent birthing stall layout. 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 eagerly into the straw-lined stall space. Inside, a small, wonderfully wobbly colt was struggling up onto its newborn feet.

"The first of the new breed," Maria whispered excitedly.

The soft, slow sound of footsteps echoed across the herringbone brick floors from the back of the barn.

"And judging from the absolute amount of phone calls I've been getting, you two best start making some more," a voice called out.

Izy turned around with a smile. Louis, the elderly man who ran the daily operations of the stables, walked up to join them. He greeted Izy warmly before reaching out a weathered hand to affectionately pet Queen Izta's nose.

"You know, Doc," Louis said, shaking his head in wonder. "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 completely isolated on an island for hundreds of years definitely helped keep the genes pure," Maria noted with a grin.

Louis nodded his head in total agreement, patting the palomino's sleek flank. "Yes, sir. The exact minute that newspaper article hit, people started calling from all over. Say, Doc... are you two actually going to start breeding?"

Izy displayed a victorious smile breaking across his face, "Already have."

They all let out a loud laugh. Izy stepped forward, placing a hand flat on Louis' shoulder. "It'll be a few years down the line, Louis, but we're officially taking names of potential buyers now."

"Well, the little one is doing just fine," Louis said, looking back at the foal. "I'll be here working all weekend—"

"Except for the big museum show?" Izy interrupted, raising an eyebrow.

Louis nodded firmly, a warm, proud smile breaking across his face. "Wouldn't miss it for the world, Doc. The world and I have been waiting a very 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 little Chuck exited the cool shade of the stables, stepping back out into the sun as the distant, familiar chime of a streetcar bell echoed through the park trees.

Maria sat quietly by an open window of the streetcar, her long hair blowing loosely in the rushing breeze. Dapples of warm Louisiana sunlight fell across her skin as the heavy vehicle swayed down the avenue, rumbling past the towering, historic mansions of St. Charles.

Izy held her hand tightly, smiling down at her, while Chuck sat comfortably on his lap, looking out the glass. The car rolled to a smooth, grinding stop at a corner intersection.

Maria looked out the window, a bright smile on her face as she waved through the glass frame to the shaman, who was standing on the porch of a beautiful raised cottage. The ancient man returned the wave with a subtle nod. A cleanly painted sign positioned in front of his property read: *Alternative Medicine*.

The conductor pulled the lever, and the streetcar continued its route, rumbling further down the avenue. Izy playfully rubbed Chuck's dark hair, made a goofy face that made the boy giggle, and laughed out loud. He turned his focus completely to Maria, his eyes full of devotion.

“Of all of the incredible, supernatural things that have happened to me,” Izy murmured softly, “I would have never thought I would have you.”

He leaned in to kiss Maria, a long, tender moment, before drawing Chuck into a brief, warm hug and kissing the boy's head.

“And all of this, too.”

The conductor clanged the heavy bell sharply. *Clang, clang.* The streetcar slowed to a complete, smooth stop. Izy stood up from the vinyl seat, extending his hand down to his wife.

“We’re home,” Izy said.

They walked toward the front threshold of the car, exiting the streetcar step and planting their shoes onto the pavement.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Moments Later

In a sudden blur of green and iron, the streetcar pulled away down the track, exposing a grand, historic Greek Revival mansion towering over the avenue.

A beautiful wrought-iron fence framed a perfectly manicured emerald lawn, dappled by the shifting branches of old live oak trees. They entered the yard, walking past lush rows of vibrant lavender azaleas that led up to an expansive, wrap-around front porch structure. A friendly collie raced across the green grass, barking happily to greet them.

The main front door clicked open. Aunt Cocco stepped out onto the porch, smiling broadly as she shook her head at the sight of them.

“Um-um,” Cocco said, her classic Yat dialect filling the afternoon air. “I was just sitting inside thinking about the exact night I told you your life had changed. And I knew it had, baby.”

She stepped forward to take Izy’s heavy leather briefcase, smoothly guiding them through the grand door frame. Her back was turned to Izy and Maria as she walked deeper into the beautifully furnished residence, talking over her shoulder.

“Yep, I knew it had,” Cocco chuckled. “I just knew some cool designer glasses would finally help you get yourself a good woman.”

Izy smiled back at Maria, his eyes dancing with love. Without a word, he smoothly scooped his wife up into his arms. He looked down at her face lovingly, kissing her gently as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Together they crossed the threshold into the house. Izy pushed the heavy wooden door shut with the heel of his foot; it closed slowly against the frame.

“They sure did, Cocco,” Izy said with a soft smile, looking down at Maria in his arms. “They sure did.”

The heavy door clicked completely shut, sealing out the rest of the world. Mounted cleanly against the dark center paneling, the glimmering crystal insignia of the dual swords and the imperial crown captured the final, brilliant ray of the evening light.