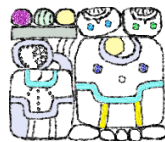




Chapter 3: Pitzl Player from the Ballcourt of Xibalba



July 13, 2004, Distrito Federal

Frank Guillemont

Afternoon rains are splashing hard onto the city's heavy traffic. Pedestrians under door-well awnings are waiting for the quick summer storm to pass. Some chilangos are braving the downpour with umbrellas and challenging the onrush of traffic to hail yellow Volkswagen taxis.

From my apartment balcony off Paseo de la Reforma, I gaze at the Monument to the Revolution commemorating heroes Poncho Villa and Zapata, rebels I admire. I'm sitting on a cushioned wrought-iron chair smoking a Camel nonfilter. In Paris, I smoke Gauloises. A laptop, two cellphones, a notepad, and a few pens are on the table beside me. I'm reading an article in "Arquelogia Mexicana" by a Fulbright scholar who has recently arrived at the Anthropology Museum. She is planning an expedition next spring, starting in Todos Santos de Cuchumatán, Guatemala. I'm intrigued and underline Todos Santos and archaeoastronomer. I Google the

author's name, Hillary Jacobs, and read her website mymesoamericanblog.edu. I find no pictures of her and conclude she must be a brilliant woman.

For thirty years I've lived in Mexico City. These days I reside with a beautiful twenty-year-old mestiza. Anita has just left to buy me a lunch of tacos al pastor, elotes, tamales, and tostadas, my favorites. Lately, my woman agitates me. If I'm not preoccupied with a periodical, a phone call, or typing on my laptop, Anita complains. My long absences make her lonely. "Ay Papi. Estoy caliente." Anita wants a baby, she tells me, something I can't give her. Untreated childhood diseases have made me sterile. But Anita doesn't know this because I'm careful and concise in my dealings and never tell anyone what I don't wish to reveal. Besides, I'm not a family man and have no intention of committing myself to one person, man or woman.

I never take Anita seriously, anyway. If she grows overly anxious, she knows I'll send her away. She is, after all, nothing but a prostitute from a poor Oaxacan village. Sometimes I even pimp her out to my colleagues. Why not? My mother worked the streets of Paris during WWII. Pimping and being pimped out is the name of the game in the great ballcourt of life. Yes, at times Anita bothers me but she is my petite amie pour le present. I've had many before and hope to have many more to come. And I prefer a woman to a man. Women are easier to mark and manage. I understand how they operate, what they want, and why they annoy me. Anita is no exception.

The Distrito Federal is my second favorite city in the world. Paris owns my heart, "la ville est mon coeur." I have apartments in Paris, DF, and Antigua, Guatemala. Each contains a closet of clothes, personal effects, and liquor. Versace colognes. Cartons of cigarettes. When traveling the globe, as I often do, I stay at five-star or one-star hotels, depending on the state of my finances. I travel with nothing but a carry-on attaché and buy whatever I need wherever I

happen to be. In DF, I attend operas at the Palace de Belas Arts, take daily walks in Chapultepec Park, and often visit the Frida Kahlo Museum and the Murals of Diego Rivera. I appreciate historic art as much as I do antiquities.

It has been a while since my last significant haul and recently I've grown restless and ready to resume my trade. My situation isn't dire. I have money in different offshore accounts. However, I'm a big spender with refined tastes. My investments merely support me during my down-time when I take pleasure trips to the Riviera of France, Acapulco, Cancun, or Cozumel. Wherever I go I take my phones, laptop, and a lady friend, or I find a local whore.

Of my many business ventures I prefer the lucrative worldwide market for antiquities, especially to customers in Europe, Dubai, Asia, and the US. Even El Chapo's Sinaloa Cartel swap drugs for my antiquities. These days my business is stable but the heyday of antiquities smuggling occurred before the internet, cell phones, and laptop computers. Those were remarkable times. Talk about lucrative. During the Guatemalan civil war in the 1980s, I often helped myself to the loot at archaeological sites arm in arm with the Guatemalan Army.

I really don't consider myself a huechero, that is, a crook who takes advantage of poor villagers. In fact, to better interact with the local population I have learned to speak different Mayan tongues and I became an apprentice to a shaman in Oaxaca. Over the years I've developed a profound interest in Aztec and Maya spirituality, both ancient and modern. It's as if the antiquities I loot have crept into my being and a greater force now guides me toward my ultimate goal in life. I want to achieve power and wholeness as both male and female and have revenge on a world that stole my childhood. I was born in 1950 during the Fourth Republic of France. Even today dreams about my mother's brutal death haunt my bruised and tarnished boyhood soul.

I see Maman lying on the bed of a dingy hotel room. She has no place to keep me, her little son. In a corner of the room I'm playing with green toy soldiers and reenacting the battles of my war hero father. Maman tells me Papa was a Pied-Noir Frenchman killed in the Guerre d'Indochine.

In my shirt pocket I keep Maman's picture. "Mon petite," she tells me. "You must always carry my photo in case you get lost." Pauvre Maman, she is but a castaway whore of the Germans, the Americans, and the French. In my pants pocket I carry the beads she instructs me to use when praying to the Virgin. Maman knows our time together is short.

The micheton has been with Maman many times before. He calls me "mon beau garçon," pats my head, and brings me gifts like the toy soldiers. From where she lies in bed, Maman requests two hundred francs. The micheton grows angry. He's drunk and high on smack when he takes the bottle of Chartreuse that he brought Maman and hits her over the head. Again, again, and again. Blood splatters across the room onto the walls, my face, and my little blue shirt.

I scream, "Maman! Maman!" but the micheton continues to pummel her head.

Suddenly, the man stops, looks around the room, and then at me. He grabs me by the collar of my little blue shirt and pulls me onto the street. Then he disappears and leaves me completely alone and without anywhere to go.

Paris, 1955--1975

During the war with Algeria, under President Charles de Gaulle, I spent my childhood in Paris with "les amis de Place Blanche." They were beautiful, lustful ladies who wore costume jewelry, makeup, heels, and elegant dresses. Their perfumes--Soir de Paris, Rive Gauche, and Tabu--exuded their femininity although they really were men.

Every day of my childhood I hustled to survive. I was a thief, a pick-pocket, and on occasion I sold myself to men and to women. From other street hustlers I learned to cheat tourists with the shell game *bonneteau*. With the money I made I bought food, clothes, and pleasurable things like cigarettes, candy, and intoxicants. I quickly spent my money then resurrected my hustle. Survival became an art to me and the enduring times made me durable.

By the time I was fifteen I was entertaining rich American women who traveled to Paris looking for romance. They found my amber eyes, square jaw, and the cleft in my chin irresistible when I approached them at sidewalk cafes or at the tourist sites. In 1975 I met Madeline Steward and escorted her on a cruise to Mexico. Madeline was sixty-two and knew what she wanted like a cougar of the night. At the port of Cozumel, I stole her money and jewelry and made my way to DF where I learned my present trade. Now I live by the motto Success is the sweetest revenge. My charisma and good looks have propelled me from the streets of Paris to the man I am today, “*un homme du monde, un bon escroc*,” a world-class crook with finesse.

The downpour continues to ease the city’s smog but nothing subdues the noise of traffic and blaring horns. On the museum’s website I find an interview with the newly arrived Fulbright scholar. “Dr. Hillary Jacobs is in Mexico City to research her Maya heritage.” On my notepad I jot down “heritage” with a question mark and then read a quote from Dr. Jacobs. I believe fate brought me to Mesoamerica. “My great-great-grandfather was an early Mayanist who hinted at discovering an ancient Maya codex.”

I leap from my chair and shout above the traffic noise below, “*Mon dieu. C’est incroyable. C’est fantastique.*” My mind dances quicksteps as I imagine an ancient book that could prophesize the end of this world or hold revelations about transforming into the god of duality. The god who is both a man and a woman.

“To be and to become,” I sing aloud as I sit back down and continue scanning the site. I see that tomorrow night at the museum, Dr. Hillary Jacobs is giving a public lecture titled Highlights of Mesoamerica. I must attend that lecture because this woman, this Hillary Jacobs, may be the nagual guide to my transformation. Or to my next fortune. A Maya codex would be a treasure worth millions of dollars to the right buyer.

I retreat into my office and shuffle through my desk for business cards and curriculum vitae of my various personas as an art dealer, a linguist, an archaeologist, a professor, and a diplomat. After finding the papers I need, I remove from a lacquer folk-art box my only picture of Maman, her prayer beads, and a stone Aztec figurine of a squatting god with a broad nose, slanted eyes, a flattened forehead, and a Milky Way star dragon headdress. Ten years earlier, I found this idol of Omēteotl near Teotihuacan. He is the god of duality in the form of Lord Fate and the god I hope to become.

I set the idol on my desk and hold the prayer beads and my mother’s picture against my heart. “Our Lady of the Rosary,” I pray aloud. “In the name of pauvre Maman, bring me the bounty that is rightfully mine. Lead me to the source of all being. Lead me to this codex. Give me back what the devil took away.” I carefully replace my treasures in the lacquer box and lock it inside my desk. I feel revived. The gods have reinstated me on my destined course.

Hillary Jacobs

In the museum’s auditorium a crowd of chilangos and tourists are sitting before me. I’m dressed in a brown tweed blazer, black slacks, and flat shoes. I have pinned a microphone to the lapel of my floral blouse. “Welcome to the world of Mesoamerica,” I say. “Step back in time

while stepping up and down stone mountain pyramids.” I click through my PowerPoint presentation to the solar eclipse from the Pyramid of the Sun that I took thirteen years before.

“Thirty-thousand years ago,” I say to the audience, “hunters and gatherers from Siberia crossed the frozen Bering Strait into the Americas. Between 6500 and 1500 BC, early Mesoamericans developed settlements near rivers and fresh water sources and they cultivated maize, beans, squash, cotton, chilis, and avocados, and domesticated turkeys, dogs, and bees. They created trade networks that transformed villages into city-state kingdoms. They worshipped their kings as gods. Over the span of 3,000 years, Mesoamericans built stone plazas, terraced pyramids, and enormous ballcourts. The ball game was an important part of their religious and social life. The winners became great epic heroes called pitzl in Mayan and the losers became sacrificial victims for their gods who demanded human blood. Atop pyramids, priests stretched the victims over stone altars and cut out their beating hearts. They tossed the corpses down the steps where priests flayed the victims and wore their skin in a worship dance to Xipe Totec, the god of fertility.”

“Today we know the sun rises because of Earth’s orbit and that this rotation occurs due to the force of gravity. We know the Earth is not flat. We know about the atom and DNA. Because of the internet, information explodes in a moment of time. We live in a world my great-great-granddad could never have imagined. So why do people still perpetuate the existence of a god? The supernatural? The unreal? Is it the mystique of magic? The allure of setting things right, justifying our existence? The ancient Mesoamericans already answered these questions in their collective mind.”

I turn on the auditorium lights, stand beside the projected image of the Aztec calendar, adjust my eyes, and ask the audience if they have any questions.

“We are citizens of the Fifth Sun,” I hear the deep voice of a man with a French accent. I scan the crowd but don’t see him. The voice returns, “Today’s sun first appeared on the morning of August 13, 3114 BC.”

I am always hoping my audience will ask scientific questions but I’m never surprised to hear New Age opinions, especially from tourists confusing astrology with astronomy. “Yes,” I say, matter-of-factly. “That’s the Day of Creation on the Maya Long Count calendar.”

“Mademoiselle Professor,” the Frenchman’s voice declares. “In less than ten years, the cycle will end. Ometeotl will destroy this world with an earthquake ten billion times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb.”

I squint to see who’s speaking and spot a fairly tall man in a green pullover standing at an aisle seat among Mexicans and gringos. He looks to be in his fifties and is ruggedly attractive with high cheek bones, broad, full lips, a square jaw, and a dark, slightly graying ponytail. He looks like Bradley Nolan must have looked, I’m thinking and remain silent a second too long. Then I remind myself This man’s a New Ager. He’s not Bradley Nolan and he’s not interested in my scientific facts. “Yes,” I finally say. “Winter solstice 2012 is nine years away. But I’m more interested in June 6, 2012 when Venus makes its last solar transit this century.” The participants chuckle. Some clap. I have brought them back to science, the archaeology and astronomy of Mesoamerica.

“Professor,” the man continues his banter. “Ometeotl’s spiritual transformation will unfold at the center of the Milky Way in a blackhole called Ek’ way-nal, the portal to the next world.”

I stare at the man, thinking he's toying with me. But his stunning looks strike me more than his folly. "Very poetic, Señor," I find myself saying. "But the date is an end to a recorded cycle. No more. No less. The Maya had many calendars just as the universe has more than one orbiting planet."

The man smiles, gives me a two-finger salute, and exits the hall. The audience asks a few more questions and I do my best to answer but I'm eager to call it a night.

Frank Guillemont

The next day I find my little Fulbright scholar in a research laboratory at the back of the museum's Maya exhibit. She wears a white lab coat and jeans. She ties back her shoulder length hair with a Guatemalan scrunchy. At a desktop computer, amid piles of books and floppy disks, it appears she is transcribing glyphs. Her work is consuming her and she fails to notice me standing at the door, casually dressed in jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, and a colorful, diagonally striped serape tie that I selected just for this meeting. The old leather attaché that I'm carrying resembles the one beside her desk. For a moment, I inhale her essence. I consider myself an expert at judging people, especially women. It is easy, really, if you know how to do it.

Last night, I noticed that her only jewelry was a set of amethyst ear studs. She has no need for adornment. Her plainness gives her scholarly acceptance in a man's world. I don't believe any man has ever touched her. And from what I sensed last night, she's highly disposed to me. She has a controlled warmth hidden from ordinary view. She is *une fleur* delicate.

"Le bonjour," I say. "¿Usted es Dr. Jacobs?"

She turns and holds the rim of her tortoiseshell glasses. “Si, soy Dr. Jacobs, pero yo no hablo mucho español,” she says and then quickly closes the file of glyphs on the screen, presumably to keep me from seeing her work.

“Bien,” I smile, hoping my Versace cologne reaches her. “Do you have a moment, Mademoiselle Professor? The head guard Señor Sanchez directed me here.” This isn’t completely true. I work closely with one of the guards at the museum and have easy access to the offices as a small tit for tat exchange.

She smiles. An invite. Women cannot resist my dimples and amber brown eyes. “May I sit down?” I know my accent captivates her. But she says nothing. I pull a chair beside her desk, hold out my hand, and introduce myself. She offers her hand and knocks a stack of floppies onto the floor.

“I’m sorry.” She reaches for the disks. I pick them up and place them on her desk. “Merci. Or is it gracias?” she asks. “But I . . . what can I do for you? I am rather busy, Mr. Guillemont. Why didn’t Señor Carrillo send you to the front office? People don’t usually drop by unannounced.”

“I’m here on my own reconnaissance, I admit. You see, I’ve been closely following your career. I have read your articles on archeoastronomie and saw your presentation last night.”

“Por supuesto,” she stammers. “I remember you. A bit passionate, aren’t we? About doomsday.”

“Si. I like to, how do you say, ruffle feathers. Je m’amuse.” I open my briefcase, pull out a folder, and hand her a curriculum vitae and copies of diplomas.

She glances over my impressive papers which include graduate work in archaeology at Mexico City University. All the while, I am sensing that my presence is in her peripheral vision.

“Dr. Jacobs,” I say authoritatively. “I am fluent in English, French, Spanish, and five indigenous tongues, Yucatec-Lacandon and Quiché-Mam among them. I know the Maya region like the tips of my fingers. I would be the perfect man to guide you on your expedition in the spring.” I pause to assess her mannerisms. She looks interested, but cautious. At that moment, I know I will fully possess her one day if I am careful about what I say and how I say it.

“I see,” she utters, hesitating to hand back the CV. “You’re originally from France?”

“Paris,” I say.

“I was recently there to see the Venus transit.”

“C’est merveilleux, Mademoiselle Professor.”

She looks at my CV for a moment then says, “It is impressive but the museum provides me with translators and guides. And you see, Mr. Guillemont, Guatemala requires these people for my permit to work in their country. I’m sorry. I have no choice in the matter. Nor any means to pay you.” She hands back my papers.

“Mais non,” I say and gently touch her hand, refusing the documents. “You keep them. Maybe you’ll reconsider,” I pause, “if circumstances change.” I smile and coyly wink.

My little Fulbright scholar sighs, as if she forgets to breathe. “Well, okay, Monsieur Guillemont.” She places my CV on her desk. “But there’s little I can do at this time.”

I don't get up to leave and for a moment I hold her in a trance until she looks to her desktop screensaver of butterflies and the Tree of Life. She avoids my eyes when she says, "Please excuse me, Mr. Guillemont. I've much work to do."

I remain seated. Her embarrassment thoroughly entices me. "Ah, but you must be quite alone in this big city, Professor." I sense how she is feeling in my presence. A woman as preoccupied as this little sparrow could not have much of a social life. And every woman I've ever known has a side aching to blossom. Meme, avec mes amis de la rue.

"What?" She looks at me, blushing.

"Vraiment. I can see you're very involved in your work. Have you had time to visit Teotihuacan and Tula? Have you seen Tenochtitlan? Teocalli, the Aztec twin temples of Quetzalcoatl and his brother Tezcatlipoca? Sons of Omoteotl?"

"Not on this visit. I've been to the university, of course." She looks impressed with my knowledge of the city and the Aztec gods. "Fall semester I'm teaching a course on the SW Native Americans."

"Por supuesto." I lean forward so she can smell the mint Tic Tacs on my breath, so that my cologne possesses her. Then I glance at my watch and say, "I tell you what, Dr. Jacobs. It's 11:30. You must break for lunch. Be my guest at Adonis. It's not far from here and the food is excellent. Do you like Lebanese cuisine?"

"Actually," she leans back and her chair scoots an inch, "I'm having a tuna sandwich and orange juice for my lunch."

“Viens, the walk will stimulate your thoughts. We’ll talk about the city and its ruins. About the Aztecs and the Mayas. What do you say, Professor?”

She hesitates. I know I’m enticing her because her mind seems to wander. Suddenly, she taps her tiny fingers on the desk and says, “Bien, ca marche, Monsieur Guillemont. A Lebanese lunch might be nice.”

“Por favor, call me Frank.”

“Okay, Frank. Give me a moment to back up my files. Can I meet you in the front lobby?”

“No problem.” I stand and firmly shake her hand while wondering if she intends to check my references. It’s a slight risk and I doubt she’ll discover anything terrible in such a short time. I have no criminal record. I’m too crafty for that. And I do have many contacts to support my academic claims. “It’s entirely my pleasure to meet such an esteemed scholar as yourself,” I say, “A Fulbright in archaeoastronomie.”

Pulling her hand from my grip, she nods and says, “In ten minutes, entonces?”

As I head out the door, I sense her watching my gait.

Adonis

Frank Guillemont

Adonis Lebanese Restaurant is on Avenida Homero in Polanco, a neighborhood I know well because of its expensive shops, restaurants, hotels, and the embassies of France, India, Canada, and Spain. Inside the popular restaurant, elite chilangos are dining at nearly every white clothed table and the aroma of cardamom, cumin, and roasted lamb permeates the air.

A formally attired waiter seats us at a corner table on the raised section of the room. Over Turkish iced coffee, I tell Hillary about the many years I've studied Mesoamerican cultures while enjoying the tropical beaches of Mexico. As I speak English, I use French words and idioms because women find that as alluring as my accent, dimples, and dark amber eyes.

Hillary asks me about the Aztec gods and I say, "Ometeotl created himself and the universe. His four sons are the Teczalipocas. White Teczalipoca is Quetzalcoal, God of Light. His nagual is a coyote." I sip my coffee then ask, "Do you know your dream nagual?"

"I doubt I have a nagual," she admits. "But I was born under a solar eclipse."

"Alors! Then I suggest you have many nagual guides into the spirit world. I believe you are a chosen daughter of the present creation."

Hillary smiles, obviously flattered by my comment but instead of saying anything, she nibbles on a spicy carrot from a condiment bowl of olives and hot pickled carrots, chilies, onions, zucchini, and garlic.

"When I read that your expedition will start in Todos Santos," I say, "I knew I was the right person for your team. In 1994, during the civil war, I spent a year in Todos Santos learning Mam while apprenticing under a Mam shaman who taught me to guide others into the spirit world." What I tell her is only half true. I did go to Todos Santos to learn Mam but I apprenticed under a shaman in Oaxaca. I had changed my CV to reflect what I'm telling her now.

"What a coincidence," Hillary says, gazing at me as if wondering whether to hire me. "Todos Santos is where my ancestor started his trek to the cenote cave one hundred years ago."

“I read that you have Maya blood,” I suggest, encouraging her to reveal more about herself. “The truth is, Professor, I too have Maya blood. My paternal grandmother was a Lacandon Mixtec. That’s where I get my complexion.”

“I thought you were French!”

“My grandfather was a French explorer. He went on expeditions with the famous photographer Desire Charnay.”

“I know about Desire Charnay. He lived at the time of my ancestor Bradly Nolan. He wrote the book *Cities et Ruines Americaines* and he documented Yaxchilan, Palenque, Chichen Itza, and Uxmal.”

“I find this extraordinaire,” I smile as brightly as I can. “Here we are, two Mesoamerican archaeologists with Maya blood. M’excuse. You are an astro-astronomer.”

“Archeoastronomer,” she corrects then asks me about my childhood in Paris.

“I grew up in Paris but have lived in Mexico for thirty years.” I say nothing more because I never discuss my difficult life on the streets of Paris and besides, I want her to view me as the son of a prominent family, rather like the family she comes from. I was intrigued to read about her distinguished father, Astrophysicist Sheldon Jacobs, and her family’s pawn business and fortune in Philadelphia. She is vulnerable now because her parents have recently died. I see many possibilities with this little American princess.

The waiter places before her a plate of falafel, tabouli, and baba ganoush. “Do you ever go back to Paris?” she asks.

“All the time. Rome and Amsterdam, too. But my home is in La Ciudad.”

“Un homme du monde! And you’ve never settled down?” It seems she’s summoned the courage to ask me this question. My CV doesn’t indicate that I have a family and my only jewelry is a single gold hoop earring with a dangling Aztec eagle.

“I’ve always been too busy for a family,” I say. “My business consumes me.”

“I know exactly what you mean. Other than my coffee breaks with Monte and my private Spanish lessons, I’m mostly alone making phone calls, sending emails, and updating my website.”

“Somehow, Mademoiselle Professor, I can’t picture you always being alone. You’re much too charming for that.”

She smiles, takes a bite of her food, and says, “I’ve been alone most of my life, preoccupied with studies and work, that is. Except for my parents. Daddy was an astrophysicist. When he first took me stargazing, he probably held me in one arm as he pointed out the brightest stars. Sadly, my parents died last year. Did you hear about the plane crash at Sky Harbor Airport?”

“Mon Dieu. Je suis vraiment desole.” I put down my fork, take her hand, and gently squeeze it. “You must be devastated, ma petite fleur.”

“I am. But my work means a lot to me and with the diary and all. . .” She suddenly stops speaking as if she’s disclosed too much.

I sit back to finish my broiled lamb. Momentarily, I say with compassion, “I know what it’s like to be alone in the world. You see, both my parents had died by the time I was ten.”

“Really?” She seems astonished as she dips a pickled zucchini into her babaganoush.

“I don’t like to admit this,” I say. “It’s so unpleasant and we’re having such a lovely conversation. Mais, upon learning about your tragedy, I feel compelled to share mine. But let’s talk about you. You’re so petite and so intelligent. I’m surprised you’re not married.”

She ponders my remark and says, “I’m still young and I have passions, too. Like you, Monsieur. My work means more to me than anything else, including a husband and kids.”

“Naturellement. And this is why you’re so successful. Madame Fulbright.” She grins, encouraging me to continue. “Ma chere enchanteresse, do you know about the Aztec concept of Yolteotl, the mysterious sacredness of everything? It’s like the ancient Maya concept itz k’uh which means the breath of life, the music of the wind, the divine force that makes everything exist. You must balance all sides of your nature. When you let one attribute overrule the others, you lose your balance and Ometeotl will destroy you.”

Hillary looks at me, digesting my words. “Why bother beings so fastidious?” she asks. “According to you last night, the world ends in nine years.” She sits back probably wondering if I will banter with her like I did at her lecture.

I merely smile and allow her to judge my answer.

“My mother and granddad tried to drill religion into my head,” she continues. “But when I turned twelve, I rejected God.” Frank laughs and I ask, “What’s so funny? I’m perfectly serious.”

“Why you, Professor. I find you refreshing and wise.” I take her hand and feel her body tingle as if I’m embarrassing her and filling her with concern. Or maybe she’s thinking about itz k’uh. I run my fingers over her palm and say, “Such soft little hands. I’m searching your life line for a sign that you will find your center.”

“What? Oh, come on, Monsieur.” She tries to pull away.

I firmly keep hold of her hand. “Indulge me. Your fate line is shallow but strong. You have a giant, uncommon destiny.” I release her hand.

“Fascinating. What does yours say?” Hillary sips her water.

“Something I can’t reveal. But I feel very good about today, having met you. You are a very attractive woman with charming blue eyes.”

She flushes. I sense that she’s struggling to accept my compliment. I make her feel pretty and she is happy to be in the elite restaurant with me, an attractive middle-aged Frenchman. But she questions herself and her mood suddenly shifts. “I really must go,” she says and waves for the check but I insist on paying for lunch and walking her back to the museum.

At the museum entrance, I promise to call on her and show her the sights of La Ciudad. She appears relieved that I do not mention her expedition. I’m a perfect fit. She would be thrilled to work with me but she is not ready to jump into a decision because we’ve only just met. First, she will check out my credentials and references because she’s a cautious scholarly woman. Quite unlike most women I’ve ever known. It’s obvious to me that no man has ever penetrated her shell of femininity. But that will all change now that we’ve met. Her very essence is unraveling and she doesn’t know whether I’m a friend, a stranger, a prospective colleague or if I will become her first lover.

Hillary Jacobs

Nearly a week passes before Alfredo the museum guard says that a Frenchman awaits me in the front lobby. My heart pounds as I shuffle through papers on my desk. I’ve already checked

on two of Frank's references, verifying that he had obtained a degree from the University of Mexico, as specified on his *CV*. I wanted to talk to Dr. Vasquez about hiring Frank for the expedition but after Frank failed to immediately contact me, I let the notion slide. I thought about calling him but hesitated because he said he would call me. I felt like he should take the initiative or else I'd come off as seeming too eager. And I didn't want to make a fool of myself because of my strong attraction to him. Now, as I walk down the corridor to the front lobby, my interest in the Frenchman resurfaces. In fact, I am consumed with unfamiliar emotions about him.



In the museum's front lobby, Frank is standing beside the 2.7-meter stone statue of Coatlicue, the Aztec Mother Goddess. Two serpents form her head and she wears a skirt of dangling snakes and a necklace of hands, hearts, and skulls. The statue is a feature of the museum and has an interesting history. In the 1700's, workers uncovered it near the Aztec Sun Stone in the Zocalo but people found it so repulsive that they reburied the statue then later dug it up again.

As I approach the striking man dressed in a suit and tie, his graying hair tied in a pony tail, I can hear Coatlicue saying to me My 400 sons and daughter--who speaks to spiders, centipedes, and snakes--want to kill me but I give birth to the sun Huitzilopochtli and he slays his

brothers and tosses their remains into the sky to become the circumpolar stars. Then he decapitates my daughter and her head becomes the moon.

“Frank, I thought you’d forgotten about me,” I halfheartedly tease.

He firmly grips my hand with both of his and I smell the sharp woody scent of his cologne. His smile fills me with manna as if a sudden warm breeze from Chapultepec Park blows through the museum and enshrouds me. Or is it the aura of Coatlique? Why am I so confounded? Has Coatlique’s spider moon daughter cast a spell over me? Frank makes me forget myself, who I am or what I want.

“Mademoiselle Professor,” Frank says and stirs me from my misty thoughts. “I could never forget our most stimulating time at Adonis. This past week, I’ve been extremely busy with my new job.”

“Job?” I suddenly feel tremendously let down, as if Frank had considered me for a job and then hired someone else.

“Si. Avec the National Institute of Anthropology and History. We leave for Chiapas in a week.”

“Really?” I’m at a loss for words and suddenly feel determined to hire him for my expedition, using my own money if necessary. We have so much in common. He’s a shaman who speaks Mam and he’s so utterly charismatic. But it seems I’m too late. Why didn’t I call him? “Well,” I say at last, after pulling my thoughts together. “I’m glad you stopped by, Monsieur.”

He releases his grip and looks at me. His amber brown eyes glisten. “Ma chere Professor. I had every intention of seeing you before my departure. If nothing else, I knew you’d be interested in our work. Perhaps you can coordinate research with our team leader. Dr. Martinez is comparing inscriptions in Palenque with the glyphs on the Copan stairwell. But for now, I’ve come here to invite you for a walk in the park. Are you free?”

I pause in thought, searching for the right words. I don’t want to seem disappointed that he’s no longer available to work for me. “Yes, I’d love to go for a walk. I’m just sorry that I didn’t catch you sooner. I wanted to hire you for my expedition, after all. I talked it over with my mentor, Dr. Vasquez. He thinks your background and language skills are excellent qualifications,” I lie.

“Comme c’est gentil a toi. Quelle chance je serais. Give me some time to talk with Dr. Martinez” Frank kisses my hand and leads me into the park.

During our stroll Frank offers to tutor me in Spanish and the Mayan languages. Whether or not he eventually joins my expedition team, I want to keep seeing him during my stay in Mexico City and so I quickly agree to his offer.

Later, back at the museum, I tell Monte that I’d like to hire Frank as my aide-de-camp. As expected, Monte is reluctant. “Dr. Morales has already arranged for two graduate students to join our team. We cannot dismiss them, no es possible.”

“I know, but Mr. Guillemont has an excellent background and would make a great addition to our current team. He knows the area, speaks Lacandon, Mam, Quiche, and Yucatec, and he spent a year in Todos Santos studying to be a shaman.”

“Shaman? A Frenchman? Dr. Jacobs, I think it’s better if we find a real Maya shaman in Todos Santos.”

“He has Maya lineage and I’ll pay his salary.” I hand Monte Frank’s *CV*.

“I’ll check it out mañana,” Monte says as he sets the papers aside.

“But he’s about to leave on an expedition to Palenque.”

“Haste is not a good thing, Dr. Jacobs. I’ll see what I can do. Meanwhile, I suggest you carefully confirm all his credentials. My country, desgraciadamente, has a reputation for scandal and corruption.”

“I’ll be careful,” I assure him in parting, hoping Frank’s background completely checks out.

Frank Guillemont

On our third day together in the park, we are sitting on a bench under the rustling ahuehuete leaves along the main path. Joggers are rushing past us, chickadees are twittering nearby, and Inca doves are cooing along the berm. The air smells of grilled pollo and cob corn elotes.

“I’ve quit my job with INAH and am now available to join your team as a shaman and aide-de-camp, if you’re still interested,” I say before we begin the Spanish lessons.

“That’s wonderful,” Hillary declares, as I expected she would. Then she discusses what I can help her do and how together we can come up with words for the ceremony at the waybil shrine before the team enters the queen’s tomb at Lake Turtle Macaw.

I quietly sit back, absorb her enthusiasm, and inhale the pleasant atmosphere of the park, satisfied that she has so quickly agreed to take me on her expedition.

“I love the Bosque de Chapultepec,” I say as Hillary drinks her lime and aloe juice. “You know the Aztecs originally planted these trees?” She smiles. “Chapultepec is like le Bois de Boulogne in Paris. A place where I can fill my lungs with oxygen and not the smog-filled air of La Ciudad.”

“It reminds me of Central Park in New York City,” Hillary says and then tells me about her fifth birthday trip to New York City with her parents and grandfather.

I lean back and listen to her story and light a cigarette. Giving lessons in the park offers me a time to relax and eat a hot cheese tlacoyo. “Entonces, que ofrece el cielo el proximo mes?” I begin Hillary’s Spanish lesson.

“What does the sky offer next month?” she repeats. “In August?”

“En español.”

“Agosto...”

“Correcto...”

As best she can, Hillary explains in Spanish that the Perseid Meteor Shower peaks on August 12th. “This year,” she switches to English because she’s too enthusiastic about the event to fumble with her Spanish, “the shower will occur during a waning crescent. It’ll be a perfect night sky for counting up to 90 shooting stars each hour.”

“Estrellas fugaces, en español,” I tell her.

“Estrellas fugaces,” she repeats. “My father taught me that the Perseid meteorites are particles from the comet Swift-Tuttle. I remember spending entire nights with Daddy counting estrellas fugaces, ooh-ing and ah-ing at the sight of a burning meteor with a long tail.” Hillary then talks about her trip to the Yucatan and says with emotion, “Seeing the solar eclipse at the Pyramid of the Sun was the pinnacle of my youth. I really loved my father, Sheldon Jacobs. He showed me the world of outer space.” She sets aside her juice. “Wouldn’t it be magnificent to watch the Perseids from the Pyramid of Kulkulkan in Chichen Itza?”

I put out my cigarette and say, “I have a suggestion, dear Professor. Next month, why don’t we tour the Yucatan for the meteor shower. I’m free now to be your guide to the Maya ruins. No need to toil in a back office at the museum until the expedition in May. I’ll help you discover a new way to interpret your glyphs, apart from all your scientific facts.” I touch her hand. “I’ll teach you to let go of your restrictive mind and experience *teotl itz k’uh*, the essence of life and you’ll dance with your spirit companions.”

“I do need to explore the ancient sites as part of my Fulbright research,” Hillary says. “And I would love for you to guide me into the ancient Maya spirit. It’s perfect timing. My classes at UNAM don’t begin until September and I’m already prepared. My lectures are based on my Ph.D. dissertation.”

“Excellent,” I say while feeling like the ancient codex and perhaps many more treasures are now firmly within my grasp. It is just a matter of timing and the whim of *Ometeotl*, the god who is both man and woman.