



Chapter 22

We emerge from the subway tunnel on to a high platform overlooking a deep underground pool. Montoyo says, “This is the *cenote*, the fathomless ‘black water’; a black hole of sacrifice for which Ek Naab became notorious.”

I stare into the depths. The surface of the water is about twenty feet below the opening of the sinkhole. A nasty drop and a pretty impossible climb to safety for the poor human sacrifice. A metal fence and guarded walkway rings the entire body of water, which is roughly the size of the penalty area of a football field. At intervals around the walkway, tall lamps with five globes of yellow light illuminate the nearby shore of the lake. The smooth surface of the pool gleams, mirror-like. Beyond the water, I glimpse the wide expanse of the underground cavern. I can see buildings that appear to be as much as two football fields distant. All kinds of buildings – everything from what look like gleaming office blocks to sombre, stone-faced Mayan temples. There are plazas and alleyways and canals of water, all bundled together. Like a weird fusion of Mexico, ancient and modern, with Venice. And all underground! I can’t get my head around it at first – how come it’s so light?

Then I look up. Over the central part of the city, instead of the rock ceiling, there’s a mesh-like fabric. Sunlight pours through the tiny holes. It’s unnerving, confusing. There’s a sense of vast space . . . then you look up and see that ceiling. I stare back into the city. Colourful murals display the Mayan heritage. The five-globed lamps are dotted around the city. There’s one spacious plaza covered with tables and chairs; open-air cafés. They’re empty, so I guess it’s too early for them to be open.

There are even *trees*. Exactly the kind I’ve seen in the central town *zocalos* of small Mexican towns, canopies neatly clipped. Warm light leaks from windows in the buildings. A background hum carries the faint suggestion of voices and music.

And everywhere I look, flowers. Potted, in hanging baskets or trailing over walls, crawling their way through the narrow alleyways between brick, glass and stone; the entire city blooms with violent pinks, regal purples, jubilant reds. Montoyo watches me with a hint of a smile. “What do you think?”

I spin around, trying to take it all in, my head in my hands. “Amazing! I mean . . . where did this all come from? And how?”

Montoyo’s enjoying watching my reaction, I can tell.

“Centuries ago, Ek Naab was just a shrine, dedicated to Itzamna. He brought us agriculture, writing and time-keeping. The Maya worshipped Itzamna as a god, you know. They came to Ek Naab to placate him with regular sacrifices of the city’s young people, thrown into the *cenote* to drown.”

He gives me a loaded stare.

“But that’s all in the past, right?”

Or am I about to hear that the Maya of Ek Naab were sticklers for tradition, and I’m about to become the latest sacrificial victim?

Montoyo chuckles. “Of course. We’re over all that.”

I’m silent for a long time. “I . . . really dunno what to say.”

“Don’t you want to know about us?”

“Well, yeah. . .”

But where to start? I’m not in the mood for a history lesson. The damp of my clothes has cooled in the underground chill. I begin to shiver. Or maybe it’s the thrill of discovery? I have this sudden urge to call Ollie and Tyler. Then I remember that my mobile phone wouldn’t work underground, even if it wasn’t soaked.

The thought that my father was here gives me a warm feeling. I’m sharing in his final secret. I wonder if it ever crossed his mind that I would? I’d like to think he’d be proud of me. I guess now I’ll never know.

Montoyo finally snaps me out of my trance-like state.

“You look exhausted,” he notes. He’s right; my legs are turning to jelly, and my eyelids keep drooping. “We’re gonna get you to a bed,” he says. “And we’ll talk more in a few hours.”

I nod and follow him around the path, past the *cenote*, through a narrow passageway into a small patio crammed with bright red, potted hibiscus flowers. We cross the patio and take one of four doors, climb stone stairs to a third floor.

We enter a small apartment, minimally furnished, like a room in the IKEA catalogue. Montoyo leads me to a bedroom. There’s a hammock, a reading light suspended from the ceiling and a thick mat of woven sisal on the floor. An indigo-coloured curtain is drawn across a small window. It doesn’t quite blot out the dimmed daylight that floods the city. The sun must be up outside, high above the jungle. From behind a cupboard door, Montoyo removes a fleece blanket.

I hold it for a minute, just looking at the label.

“This comes from Sears,” I say, noticing the mark of the department store.

Montoyo nods. “Most things we use come from outside the city.”

“And nobody knows about you?”

“They don’t know about Ek Naab. Part of the city is above-ground. Doesn’t look like the rest of Ek Naab, that’s for sure. And it’s all private land.”

“Can I see?”

“Tomorrow, my boy.”

I can’t stop myself yawning. “OK. But . . . can I ask one more thing? When you said you had unfinished business with my dad. What did you mean?”

Montoyo’s eyes take on a flinty look. “He took something of ours – or rather, something that once belonged to Itzamna.”

Hearing this jolts me awake. “*Itzamna really existed?*”

“Of course.”

“Not just a myth?”

“Absolutely not.”

“And the Bakabs?”

“His four sons. And *their* sons.”

“The guys who hold up the four corners of the sky, you mean those Bakabs? Bakabs are real?”

Montoyo gives me a stern look. “You’re as bad as your father, you know that?”

“How do you mean?”

“A lifetime of education told your father that everything he studied about the Mayan religion was mythology and superstition. Even with the evidence before him, he could hardly believe it.”

“Maybe that’s why he took this thing of Itzamna’s. To test it.”

Montoyo laughs. “I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“The Bracelet of Itzamna is not exactly the sort of archaeological artefact your dad is used to handling.”

“The Bracelet of Itzamna?”

“That’s what he took.”

“Where is it now?”

“A good question.”

“And . . . *what is* the Bracelet of Itzamna?”

Montoyo smiles thinly. “Ah! Now that really *is* the question.”

For a second, I’m hopeful. Then I notice Montoyo’s lips pressed tightly together.

“Oh. . .” I say, rolling my eyes. “I get it. You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

This time Montoyo gives a wry grin. He pats my shoulder.

“Get some sleep, Josh.”

I climb into the hammock, wrap the blanket around me and snuggle up, trying to find a comfortable position. My

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mind buzzes with everything I've seen and heard. I hear Montoyo moving around in the living room. Piano music plays faintly in the background – it sounds like Bach. This is all too bizarre. I still haven't quite recovered from finding myself sliding into a pyramid. I'd been expecting a cubbyhole, something I could stick my hand into and find a hidden manuscript in. The city of Ek Naab is about a billion light years from anything I'd ever imagined.