

THE SACERDOTAL OWL

by Michael Bishop

Illustrated by George Barr

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Lace Kurlansky rode ashore with twelve others from the passenger ship *Novia Rosa*. She had worked before in Mexico and Honduras with her archaeologist fiance Cabot Chessman, but she had never before visited the guerilla-besieged Central American country of Guacamayo, and her anxiety level soared as the tender neared the shabby coastal settlement of Dos Perros, entryway to the jungle in which Cabot directed a team excavating the ruins of the ancient Maya city of Chibal.

Owing to its befuddling civil war, few foreigners landed in Guacamayo, and those who did pretty much clung to the government-controlled eastern coast and its hot white beaches. Dos Perros and the green jungle strangling its terrace-set adobe shops and homes, all with tin, thatch, or terracotta-tile roofs, intensified Lace's foreboding.

A town called Two Dogs, she thought, shaking her head.

Like all her fellow passengers, she had come by sea because, a year ago, a rebel with a shoulder-braced missile launcher had nearly downed an air-liner landing outside the Ciudad de Guacamayo air-port, the only one in the country with runways long enough for passenger jets. And Cabot wanted her to marry him here — not in the capital, or even in Dos Perros, but in the holy sanctum of a temple atop the highest pyramid in Chibal, as if they were latter-clay avatars of long-dead Maya nobles imploring Xaman Ek, god of the North Star, to sanctify their union.

Pressing her hands between her knees, Lace chuckled bleakly. Her folks thought her both daft and unfilial, while her sisters regarded Cabot as an egomaniacal Svengali. Most of her friends called her a self-destructive romantic but wished her well, as did her closest colleagues at Vanderbilt.

Now, with the jungle advancing like an un-appeasably voracious monster, Lace marveled that she had consented to Cabot's ill-advised program and feared that perhaps her family had astutely pegged the whole wonky arrangement.

"Business or pleasure?" said a gray-haired lounge-singer type sitting next to her in the jouncing tender.

"I'm not sure," Lace said.

"Anyone meeting you?"

“My fiance.” If that news failed to discourage further talk, she could always show him her silver tongue stud.

The man arched his eyebrows. “Then you should *get* sure as soon as you can.” And smiled to soften the rebuke.

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Disembarking with the others, Lace wobbled down the pier toward a bald baggy-suited official checking passports. He peremptorily waved her on, but halted a passenger as pot-bellied and swarthy as himself. Cabot was not visible among the family members, business associates, and natives crowd-ing the esplanade, and Lace’s uneasiness mounted toward a mild unfocused panic.



“Cabot!” she yelled. “*Cabot!*”

Many people looked, but a slender young Guacamayan man carrying a strap-on bamboo tray of hand-carved mahogany idols and rain-forest animals stalked along the cordon separating arrivals from locals, never releasing her gaze. She tried glancing aside, but the certainty that *he* had not looked away compelled her to check out his relentless tracking stride. When they met at the end of the pier, he lifted for her approval a small wooden owl. In less than a minute, he had bridged to her — psychically, anyway — and his classic Indian features and thin sweat-glazed arms impressed themselves indelibly on her awareness.

“You want this,” he said. “Only ten dollars, American.” He had a musical voice and spoke Spanish with a queer but touching formality.

She shook her head. She wanted Cabot and surcease from worry. Around them, other vendors — importunate peasants, although she did not begrudge them their efforts to earn a living — accosted the arrivals, showed their goods, and in some cases haggled over prices.

Lace, still searching, pushed on. The thin bronze man paced her steps, not with a crude aggression but with a dogged cheerfulness that, despite her anxiety, began to have its effect. She liked his pygmy owl of slick mahogany. One of its wings seemed to hold a shield with a quasi-human face, and a splinterlike dart pierced its body diagonally from ear-horn to claw.

“Lord of the Night,” the fellow said, turning the owl in his fist. “Messenger to the spirit world. Eight dollars, U.S. — a marvelous deal.”

“Two-fifty,” Lace offered. You never paid what the natives first asked, a custom acknowledged in this one’s impromptu price cut. When he seized her hand and wrapped her fingers around the owl, she remarked him more closely.

He swayed a little, as if expecting her to run. The top of his head rose only to her chin. His lack of height, along with his back-slanting brow and full berry lips, identified him as a Maya of the regional Tunkuluchu. He was neither mestizo nor pardo, but a full-blooded Mesoamerican of ancient stock. Here in the sun, he exuded no special mystery or nobility (in every society, most citizens are commoners), just a mild desperation in the raw capitalist pursuit of his daily bread. At his throat he wore a frayed string from which dangled an obsidian pendant showing an aged paddler god with a stingray spine through his nose. (Body piercing had long historical roots.)

Lace recognized this fetish as one of the two canoe-paddling gods who carried dead kings to the spirit world. The Old Stingray God symbolized day, while

his partner, the Old Jaguar God, represented night — polar opposites framing a fundamental unity. Between the collars of the huckster’s well-made but grubby white shirt, this ebony icon shone against his yam-brown skin.

“Five dollars,” he said after a moment. “No less.”

“What do you want for the pendant?” With the head of his mahogany owl, Lace tapped the stingray-god fetish.

“I don’t sell the pendant, ever,” he said. “Five dol-lars for the owl.”

“Three,” Lace countered.

“Look at the craftsmanship, the delicacy. I im-plore you, seriorita, five dollars, or you will stab me to my heart.”

This phrasing stabbed her to her own. The owl anointed her palm with a sweet-smelling arboreal oil, and it did have delicacy — as well as intricacy and the intercessory agency of a faultless eye. But she had no need for a carven owl, no matter how fine, and Cabot still hadn’t showed.

“How do you call yourself?” Lace asked the man.

“Chac,” he said.

“Ah, like the rain god.”

“Yes. But many visitors mishear and call me Jack.”

“And your last name?”

Chac squinted — less in suspicion, Lace thought, than in wonder that she cared to pursue the matter, given her agitation, which she knew he had already noted. At length, though, he said, “Sanudo, senorita.”

“Ah.” Lace did not say aloud that his surname meant “furious.” He did not seem furious, only anx-ious to complete a sale. Clearly, he needed the money. Trawling Dos Perros for sympathetic tour-ists had no doubt proved harder and harder with the worsening guerrilla conflict.

“Four dollars,” Chac Sanudo said. “Four is noth-ing. Four is mere pennies for hours of tender labor.”

But she would not budge. Cabot may have suckered her, but this Maya boy — he was barely a man, if a man at all — would *not* do so.

Shrugging, Chac took her three grimy bills, stuffed them into his khaki pants, and moved along to an elderly gringa who might prove more biddable.

Lace looked after him almost regretfully before turning her gaze on the port.

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It was bigger than a village, smaller than a city, climbing in ragged terraces away from the miracle of the sea and sprawling at its peripheries toward a jungle that cramped it into a bright isolate bowl. Lace shook a cellular phone from her bag, to call the village near Chibal where Cabot and his team bought supplies and collected mail. The Nokia did not even activate. It showed no power bars and no inclination to trump the technological gap rendering it useless. Only an idiot would have hauled it all the way from Nashville to Guacamayo . . .

“Cabot!” she yelled. “You didn’t check your calendar, did you? You went gaga in some stinking tomb and never came up for air!”

Jamming the phone back into her bag, she ignored the glances of passersby — and attuned her ear to the egregious jumpy snarl issuing from a nearby store, a noise like a leaf blower and a lawn-mower engine jockeying for supremacy. Lace crossed the street and entered the shop, where the snarl almost deafened her. The men inside, all with rolled-up shirt-sleeves and sweaty faces, turned to her, one grasping a chainsaw as if about to rip the shop’s counter in two.

Other chainsaws hung from the walls or rested on makeshift shelves like so many transmogrified bi-cycle parts. The emporium specialized in this item, and Lace figured that its owner legally outfitted rogue settlers who would travel inland and illegally attack the rainforest to clear *milpas* — maize fields — both for the timber and the hope of growing crops that would keep their families, and their ambitions, alive. And so they achieved the needful at the expense of tomorrow, a Faustian self-annihilation.

The man holding the chainsaw swung it toward Lace — mock-threateningly, she realized, but she had already reached the street when its snarling ceased and he cried, “*Forgive me, pretty one, come back!*” while the others guffawed.

A pox on you all, Lace thought, and then she remembered Honduran stelae — monuments that the Maya called “tree-stones” — showing death figures with black spots, signifying decomposition, on their two-dimensional faces and bodies. Guacamayo belonged to Guacamayans, and if they wanted to risk government fines or even slaughter by guerillas, or to denude the countryside of mahogany and other precious hardwoods, who was she to gainsay this wish or to lambaste it as selfish or shortsighted? Let Cabot do those things.

And as far as “shortsighted” went, what about Cabot’s failure to foresee

today's boondoggle? He had his faults, including arrogance, overwork, and bouts of irritating intellectual distraction, but Lace could always count on him to do what he said. Cabot was reliable. He took pride in his reliability.

So why hadn't he shown? And what was she supposed to do, now that he hadn't? His team had no auxiliary personnel or contacts in Dos Perros, and the two of them had not even agreed on a hotel lobby or a bar to meet in if a mix-up derailed their rendez-vous. Stupid — unforgivably so.

Lace explored the settlement, eventually hiking up a dirt alley to a terrace given over to ferns, flowers, lopsided shanties, and a five-peseta pension. At this motel-like structure, the Hotel Llama del Bosque ("Call of the Wild"), with cinder-block walls, thatched porticoes, and a rusted tin roof, she rented a room from a mestizo woman whose thirteen-year-old son carried her bag to her threshold. He flirted with big liquid eyes but succeeded only in cracking her up. Indignantly, then, he stashed away her tip and strode barefoot back to his mama's office-cum-boudoir.

There was nothing to bind Lace to her room — no TV, no mini fridge, no reading material but match-books and a Gideon Bible. The electricity fueling the lights leaked a diluted mustard glow, and the heat was so brain-broiling that even a lobotomized guest would have wanted her skull heaped to the brim with ice cubes.

Lace freshened up with a washcloth and a lipstick re-do and walked back down to the esplanade. At a bar called Macanudo ("magnificent," "the best"), happy hour began at seven, and you could buy beer and Cuba Libres for sixty cents U.S. Even these prices limited the clientele to civil servants, army officers, a few brash tourists, and rain-forest impresarios who had slashed and burned enough of the besieged jungle, through bribery and guile, to bribe and beguile again.

Did any of these people know Cabot? Could any of them tell her how to reach Chibal? Or did her fiancée lie wounded, if not dead, somewhere between the domain of the insurgent Tunkuluchuob and the out-skirts of Dos Perros?

Lace sat at a table under a groaning ceiling fan nursing a rum and no-name cola — she knew it wasn't Coke — fretting these matters as if fret would fix them.



A barmaid scuttled over to check on her, and Lace dug into her bag for money. “When you’re done,” the barmaid said and scurried away. Lace’s fingers closed not on coins, but on Chac Sanudo’s mysterious owl.

As soon as she had it, Chac Sanudo himself appeared at the bar, moving with his goods tray as he had moved along the dock. He showed the patrons clay jaguars, onyx chess pieces, and a figure of Ixtab, goddess of suicide, a noose about her throat and her knotty wooden skin spotted black.

A customer with purple sweat circles under his arms tried to slap this figure from Chac’s hand, but Chac pulled it back and edged around a table toward some less irritable patrons. An army officer bought a laughing wide-hipped woman a necklace, but this sale seemed the summit of Chac’s luck.

Shoulders slumped, he continued scanning the crowd for buyers. Inevitably, his gaze fell on Lace. She beckoned him over, as if hailing an irksome cousin, and he placed his tray on her table before sitting down.

“Hello, seriorita. Are you here alone?”

“Why are you still working?” Lace rejoined. “Don’t you have family?”

“I’m still working *because* I have family — my mother, a young sister, two little brothers. We all must eat.”

“A family of five?” She could not nerve up to ask about Chac’s father.

“A family of *eight*. I also have a twin and two older brothers, who were drafted seven years ago. They’ve never returned.”

After that, he answered no more questions. Nor did he try to sell her anything

from his tray. Instead, he asked questions — about her solitary presence in the Macanudo, her reasons for coming to Gua-camayo, her plans to reunite with her no-show American fiancée, and what she'd do if something terrible had befallen Senor-Doctor Chessman, the archaeologist. Lace retorted that *nothing* terrible had befallen Cabot, who would surely arrive in the morning to check the guest lists of the hotels and to bring their nightmarish accidental separation to an end.

Chac fingered the stingray-god pendant on his dirty string. Even in this nocturnal temple to booze, dance, and piped-in music (a mind-fucking mix of flamenco and hip-hop), the figure symbolized day. It did not quite hypnotize Lace, but it obsessed her as a talisman of her anxiety and of Chac's allegiance to a strangeness at odds with his daytime normality. She wanted to buy the fetish, but he didn't want to sell it, and she had no right to badger him. After all, he had many other curios there in his tray from which to choose an alternative.

"Don't you have a pendant of the Old Jaguar God?" Lace asked, thinking that the stingray god's partner would do if she could not buy *this* figure; both meant bloodletting, spirit voyage, and death.

"My twin wears it," Chac said.

"And where is he?"

"Among the Tunkuluchu rebels." Chac offered this perilous declaration without lowering his voice or looking about for eavesdroppers. (Lace thought, If Chac's twin has joined the guerillas, why hasn't Chac?) He laid his small hand on her wrist. "If you want to go to Chibal, I will escort you — for a nominal sum."

He actually, quite confidently, said "nominal."

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Fifty dollars. Talk about nominal. Lace converted her U.S. money into pesetas and remitted the absurdly low fee in advance.

The next morning, however, in the dining room where the Llama del Bosque's proprietress served breakfast, Lace learned from a CNN broadcast that a regiment of the Tunkuluchuob had captured Chibal. They had taken the archaeologists working there hostage and packed the main pyramid's temple and underground tombs with explosives. They threatened to blow up the whole complex if President Leopoldo Fuentes did not release a notorious guerilla leader now in custody in Ciudad de Gua-camayo. They also demanded an accounting of the country's "disappeared" — priests, anthropologists, social workers, labor leaders, journalists, and the family members of known rebel combatants, including many children.

Such a blast would destroy irreplaceable Maya treasures — a major chunk of

the Tunkuluchuob's own heritage — but it would also rob Fuentes of tourist revenues and political face. The rebels conceded their desperation, but stressed that the President's ruthlessness had eclipsed every reasonable peaceful option. They could not possibly lay down their arms before the implementation of even one reform, and they had exhausted all tolerance for Fuentes' intransigent arrogance and cruelty.

Chac picked up Lace on a battered motorcycle, with a jury-rigged sidecar, that looked as if it might have last seen action in Italy during the First World War. He did not say how he had come by this vehicle, but Lace felt sure that he had borrowed it from a local outfitter. At her feet in the sidecar, three gaso-line tins (which Chac had filled at her expense) confirmed her in this view. They climbed the hill behind Dos Perros, clattering like a chorus of ill-repaired chainsaws, and raced for hours along a jungle-pent two-rut road that jiggled her eyes, bruised her butt, and squeezed her kidneys like acid-drenched sponges. They passed some peasants walking single file, several coffee plantations, and a rattletrap truck hauling raw new furniture. They could not talk. Lace could scarcely even signal her need to stop.

Finally, Chac pulled over and helped her from the sidecar. After vanishing into the jungle, ruing her folly in undertaking this trip, she clutched her knees to keep from toppling backward as she peed. When she wobbled back to the road, Chac handed her a warm beer and a banana leaf wrapping a bean-filled tortilla. Squatting like natives, they ate and drank. Lace peppered Chac with questions, many of which she had already asked and a few that had occurred to her during their precipitous ride.

How long would the trip to Chibal take? Would government troops or guerillas try to stop them? Would the Tunkuluchu rebels kill them? Could they hope to approach the temple complex if insurgents had indeed captured it? Would news reporters reach the site before them? Could they buy gasoline if they—?

Chac touched her face with a cool fingertip and let it linger on her skin. "You worry too much, Seriorita Kurlansky. Peace."

"I've just realized that I have no idea what I'm doing — what *we're* doing. How does a person sum-mon peace from chaos?"

After setting his beer between his sandaled feet and wiping his hands, Chac took a folded sheet of paper from his shirt pocket and carefully opened it. "I would like to read you something. Will you hear?"

"What is it?"

Chac ignored this question. He faced her, the paper at chest level, too close to his body for him to read. Even so, he declared, " 'The Sacerdotal Owl' by Chac-Xib-Chac Sanudo," and began to recite what Lace soon recognized as a poem

of heavy strange-ness and heat:

“A white girl in a white waterspout of a blouse whirled across my sight in a hurricane of longings, the reddest of which — like a marlin’s gills, or a Mayan sunset, or a harlot’s midnight lips, if not vein-true love — I packed into my heart with the invisible hands of my poverty. How, lovely girl, may I long for you?”

“As the owl longs — in his fierce nocturnal melan-choly — for his most elusive prey, applying the lustful clairvoyant mirrors of cold orange eyes, the calipers of remorseless legs and talons, the heartfelt focus of untiring wing-borne hunger, and a sense of hearing so acute that the toenails of a vole mincing through a bale of virgin cotton are to him the oceanic bellows of a cyclone.”

“Did *a* famous relative of yours write that?” Lace broke in. “It seems to make an oblique reference to our meeting on the pier.”

Chac stared at her briefly, unhelpfully, before resuming:

“You bought a fist-sized wooden owl, or, rather, stole it — just as you clawed from me the scarlet chambers of my Tunkuluchu heart, the tempests of longing laved in my hot blood, and all my foolish dread of death.

“Now, I swear, our messenger to his spirit twin, flown from my threshold heart to yours, will bind us in grief-imbued mahogany, pinion and polish us in his sap-fed flesh, and we will melt, my storm-tormented girl, to be cherished forever by all the reddest gods of Mayadom, immortal slayers of the little mice of envy — gods together, you and I, in the indignant memory of the sacerdotal owl.”

Chac, who had never once glanced at the poem in his hands, folded it back up and returned it to his shirt pocket. “*Selah,*” he said, like a Hebrew priest marking the end of a transgressive psalm.

“You wrote that,” Lace said.

A wistful shadow crossed Chac’s lips. Lace experienced alternating strokes of terror and tenderness, but finished eating and climbed back into the side-car with a sense that Chac Sanudo knew what he was doing, and that she did not.

By evening they had reached Las Orquideas de la Virgen (The Orchids of the Virgin), the village near-est Chibal and so by necessity every tourist’s head-quarters.

This hamlet made Dos Perros look cosmo-politan, but it did have cobblestone streets, a pair of cheap hotels, and a modern plaza with a concrete fountain memorializing the ascension of Leopoldo Fuentes to the presidency. Soldiers wearing shiny patent-leather tricorones and carrying submachine guns patrolled the town, and journalists from dozens of news outlets had arrived, although not in the numbers that Lace had expected and feared. More-over, because most tourists had left, you could get a room without bumping elbows with the news hawks. So, to save time and money, she and Chac took only one room in the Hotel Llovedizo on Xibalba Boulevard.



Privately, Lace acknowledged that she no longer much cared what happened to either Cabot or Chibal. This was shameful. But she had fallen in love with Chac Sanudo. He powered her pulse beats, filled her eyes, and nettled her loins. He had cloaked her in the diaphanous mantilla of his passion and thus ensorcelled her. He had won her with a mahog-any owl, a dignified solicitude, and a love poem — no, a *sex* poem — disguised as a paean to the Sacer-dotal Owl of Chibal. In short, he had seduced her to a state of sensual dependency, and she had fallen.

In the lounge of the Hotel Llovedizo, they heard that government troops were negotiating with a rebel commander, and that journalists and curiosity seekers alike had no sanction to visit Chibal. They ate roast beef, black beans, salsa-smothered rice, and fried plantains, knocking back — at Chac's bid-ding, at Chac's expense — shot after shot of a fer-mented *balche* made from local honeys and philodendron bark. Chac assured Lace, who had grown indifferent, that he would get her to Chibal anyway; indeed, no one could stop him from doing so.

The lounge seemed to fill with clear oxygenated water, a breathable medium that supported quiet-zals, jaguars, emerald tree boas, spider monkeys, electric-green butterflies, and both human diners and apelike Guacamayan troops. Everyone moved as if impeded by a ubiquitous translucent gel.

But I'm not drunk, Lace thought. I'm . . . *lucidly inebriated*.

The food, the balche, and the aphrodisiac peril of the hostage situation at

Chibal worked both to lull and to arouse Lace. She made Chac recite his poem again, which he did from memory, then asked him to take her to their second-floor room and rock her to sleep. She hoped for a climax that undercut neither her sense of erotic drowning nor her allegiance to this new reality.

“Very well,” Chac said. “Come.”

They departed the lounge in a series of slow-motion steps that Lace observed as if from overhead. When they climbed the narrow carpeted stairs, they resembled salmon leaping dreamily from one water-fall level to another. And when they entered their room, with its rippled aqua linoleum and its green water-lily-patterned wallpaper, she swam to Chac and pulled off his shirt like a rescuer divesting a drowning man of his waterlogged garments. Chac returned the favor, and they rolled onto the bed so that his stingray-god fetish slapped her between the breasts as he rowed them on and on, without pre-dictability or relent. His tongue probed her mouth, caressing the silver stud that she had inserted in it after having it pierced both as a gift to Cabot and as another show of independence for her bewildered parents.

At length, Lace slept. Once, she opened her eyes and felt the empty spot beside her, but, after seeing Chac silhouetted naked at the aquarium-like room’s one seaweed-draped window, dove into sleep again, releasing the ballast of her anxiousness until she hovered bodilessly in the rich sustaining amnion of her dreams. The stamped-tin ceiling had no dimension, only a horizontal transparency through which the Mesoamerican stars glinted like sunfish scales.

The next time she awoke, this same ceiling eclipsed those stars and she could not move or clearly see. Her body had the weight of limestone. A male figure — Chac, she presumed — knelt above her, stretching the foreskin of his penis out over her belly and repeatedly perforating it with a pin-like instrument. Drops of blood fell from this self-mutilation, scalding her flesh like candle wax. She could neither wipe the drops aside nor cry out in protest.

To be cherished forever by all the reddest gods of Mayadom, she thought.

Finally, Chac thrust the stingray spine — now she recognized the object — into the mattress and leaned forward, still dripping from his figlike member, to gaze at her less like a lover than a surgeon. The coldness of his look half-panicked her. Then he touched her cheek and placed his moist lips on her fretful mouth. Her panic dissolved.

Mama, Daddy, she imagined saying, let me introduce you to the Tunkuluchu poet, Chac Sanudo, my beloved, my betrothed ...

As her betrothed leaned back, the obsidian pendant at his throat caught a ricochet of light, and her fear flooded back. The pendant depicted a paddling figure wearing a jaguar helmet and a jaguar ear — the Old Jaguar God, a night symbol, a

ferryman of kings to the death realm of Xibalba.

Unwisely, Lace reached for it. What had happened to the Old Stingray God? Or had Chac changed it from mere ornament to bloodletting tool? Her lover seized her hand and rotated it back to the mattress. “Shhh,” he told her. “Sleep.”

Helplessly, she obeyed.

As a member of the Vanderbilt swimming team, Cabot Chessman had specialized in the butterfly stroke. With long golden arms and the torso of an obsessive ex-asthmatic (in other words, of a health-freak weightlifter), he had won prizes as a solo swimmer and as a participant in four-part medley relays.

Lace, accompanied by a girlfriend smitten with a teammate of Cabot's, went to a meet in the natatorium and gawked at this youthful blond Abe Lincoln clone. She spent the afternoon ogling his every movement, from his dolphin kick in the events that he so clearly dominated to his towel-flipping shenanigans during the long waits between the echoing-gunshot starts. Afterward, she met him, and he was older than his teammates, a graduate student who still had athletic eligibility, and who had decided to use it despite the rigor of his class work.

What a catch — like a gold-medal Olympian and a Nobel Prize-winning scientist incarnate in the same lanky frame. Lace admired him. She liked that monetary gain figured less prominently in his career aims than did uncovering facts about humanity that would enrich its self-knowledge. Indeed, he had an idealistic naivete akin to hers, for Lace had committed to a social-work major. But Cabot's idealism, along with a single-mindedness bordering on vainglory, did not endear him to the Kurlanskys, who still could not figure out Lace's refusal to go into computer engineering or business administration, much less the idiot defiance implicit in her tongue piercing. What would the newlywed Chessmans use for money? Purloined Mayan artifacts? Huge all-you-can-eat helpings of academic prestige?

But they had dated anyway. After Cabot earned his doctorate and accepted an assistant professorship of Mesoamerican Studies at Southern Methodist University, Lace paid her own way to join him on two archaeological expeditions on which he had served as chief lieutenant, the first in the limestone hills of Yucatan, the Puuc, and the second in Honduras at Copan. Cabot always exuded a quasi-distracted air, as if only the past and its artifacts held any reality for him, but Lace liked even this crotchet in him.

At a cenote (a limestone sinkhole fed by the water table, into which the Maya threw sacrifices ranging from jade ear-flares to stoic royal captives) in the northwestern Yucatan, Lace and Cabot shed their bush clothes and went skinny-dipping like skylark-ing teenagers. In the crystalline pool, with its inky cobalt bottom, Cabot wrapped Lace in his eel-like arms and pledged eternal fealty.

Eternal, Lace murmurs, lying abed in the Hotel Llovedizo. What does that mean? That you won't abandon me until my first gray hair?

No, Cabot replies, smiling. That you'll *never* be shut of me.

Never?

Cabot says: Like the faithful husband in that Miskito Indian myth, 'The Dead Wife,' I'll cling to you until you die and then escort your soul to Mother Scorpion. Even in a wasteland of ghosts, I'll protect you.

Wait a minute, Lace says. Who the hell is this Mother Scorpion?

The spirit of the afterlife. For some tribes it was Ah Puch, god of death. For the Maya who lived around Chibal in Guacamayo, that spirit was Tun-kuluchu, the Sacerdotal Owl. One day I hope to lead an expedition there.

All the glyphs of Ah Puch I've ever seen, Lace says, depict him as a skeletal old coot with plague spots. And if Mother *Scorpion* presides over death, nobody would ever bother to ask, Death, where is thy sting?

I guess not, Cabot says, holding her tighter in the uncanny blue water.

So if you plan to escort my soul to the afterlife, take me to the Sacerdotal Owl — he sounds like a pussycat in comparison to Ah Puch and Mother Scorpion.

Owls are predators, Lace. Their beaks and talons can ravage.

I don't care, Lace says. Take me to the owl. (After all, she thinks, what can such a silly promise really cost you?)

I promise, Cabot obliges her.

Now ravage — ravish — me yourself, you ruins-fixated galoot.

Now?

Sure. Before Davis and Lundquist show up to wash their sweaty clothes.

Cabot obliges her again, there in the cobalt-blue stillness of both the cenote and her room in the Hotel Llovedizo ...

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Chibal was still not really a tourist site. Visitors came only at the sufferance of the Fuentes regime



and the university-based archaeologists working there. Chibal had no paved roads in, no visitor center, no camping areas, and no brochures touting its scenic wonders or its historical-cultural import. You reached it by hiking into the rain forest and using the faux-Mayan stelae set out at half-hidden intervals as landmarks. You packed in your own food and water, and you always left word in Las Orquideas that you planned to return on such-and-such a day.

Given the hostage crisis, the defense minister forbade unauthorized treks to Chibal, and *all* treks were unauthorized. Reporters gathered at the police station, in hotel lobbies, and at a fancy bar called the Maya Royal. Theoretically, armed soldiers kept them from sneaking off into the jungle in quest of scoops, but a persistent rumor held that a famous North American television newsman had already slipped the quarantine.

Chac, who had never heard of this newsman, led Lace half a mile into the jungle before she fully awoke. Golden light streamed through the canopy, the palms, and the orchids cascading from giant ferns like flamboyant alien polyps. Bromeliads with two-gallon reservoirs perched on the rungs of monkey ladders and in the crotches of an *arbol de ajo*, or garlic tree, with a base the size of a small-town bandbox.

In this honey-hued light, Lace grabbed Chac's pendant and studied it. Seeing the Old Stingray God both relieved and puzzled her.

"What?" Chac said, touching her bottom lip.

"Did you forsake me last night?"

"Briefly. To scout the soldiers' positions and our best way in."

"I dreamed your twin with the jaguar-god pendant visited me."

Chac's eyes caught fire. "What did he do?"

“He ravished me. Later, he pierced his foreskin.” Lace inhaled. “And dripped blood on my stomach.”

Chac mulled her news dispassionately. “This morning, when you got up, did his blood still mark you?”

No, the blood had vanished. Lace asked if his twin had hoped to open a portal to the spirit world via his bloodletting. Chac, said yes, but added that the absence of blood most likely meant that she had dreamed a harmless dream — not one that would alter her life in the daytime world.

Fear, sharp and cold as an ice-skate blade, slid down Lace’s spine. “Chac,” she said, “let me see your cock.” She had no idea what to do if his foreskin showed signs of piercing, but she could not take another step without knowing if his rebel twin had taken his place, however briefly.

Obligingly, Chac unbuttoned his fly and eased his penis out. It neither shrank from Lace’s touch nor engorged, and she admired this literal show of self-possession in so young a man. She also took heart from the organ’s lack of puncture wounds. Nothing more palpable than a nightmare had violated her last night.

“What’s your brother’s name?”

“Ex-Xib-Chac,” Chac said, pronouncing the first two names *Esh-Sheeb*.

“Yet another Chac?”

“His name means ‘Black Man Chac,’ mine ‘Red Man Chac’ But from our births, everyone called my brother Zafado.”

“ ‘Impudent’? ‘Shameless’?”

“Yes. He has always behaved so.”

“Then you disapprove of his association with the rebel Tunkuluchuob?”

Chac disapproved of the bringers of premature death, whose number included both the Guaca-mayan army and the Indian guerillas. He believed in the sacred old gods — most of them — and in the gospel of Christ as embodied in his self-sacrifice on a dwarf version of the World Tree. The Cross and the World Tree linked the natural and the supernatural dimensions, as did physical love. Immediately, his face turned from yam-brown to reddish mahogany, and he cupped Lace’s chin in his palm as if touching her might restore his equanimity.

“If you like,” he said, “I’ll take you back to Las Orquideas.”

Lace mulled this offer. If she loved Chac rather than Cabot, and if proceeding might deliver both Chac and her to disaster, why proceed? Well, she had pledged her troth — what a ridiculous word — to Cabot, and a situation beyond his influence, not his bastardly fickleness, had kept him from meeting her in Dos Perros. Besides, if Cabot could vow to escort her soul to the afterlife after she died, how could she deny him the solace of her presence while *he* still lived?

“No,” Lace said. “Let’s go on.”

* * * *

A harassing drone came through the ferns, lianas, and stiletto-spiked tree boles along their careful inward march. This drone had an insectile quality, but also a vibrato that heightened its irreality.

“Chainsaws,” Lace said.

“Yes. More bringers of early death.”

“The settlers will burn the trees to grow beans and maize in the soil that the ash has enriched,” Lace recited.

Chac grimaced. Slash-and-burn agriculture de-pleted the soil’s fertility in three or four years, but the settlers would simply creep deeper into the rain forest and make new swathes of destruction. Even the location-revealing buzzing of their saws failed to deter them. They posted guards. They terrorized or killed accidental intruder’s. They bribed or co-opted officials charged with enforcing the law. The army could send them packing, of course, but the army had the rebel Tunkuluchuob to contend with.

“A person could get rich,” Lace said, “by inventing a chainsaw silencer.”

At that moment, a patrol of silent men in camou-flage (government special forces, Lace concluded) stepped forth pointing submachine-guns. Under cover of the chainsaw snarl and probably with the aid of U.S. Ranger training, they had emerged soundlessly. Not even Chac had heard them. De-spite Lace’s fear that the soldiers would question and then kill them, the meeting ended peaceably. They were hunting rebels, and once Chac convinced them that, at the behest of the district governor, he was taking the fiancée of W. Cabot Chessman to Chibal for a negotiating session, the patrol leader scratched a map on the laterite floor with a twig, showing a better way in, and vanished with his team into the tangled understory.

* * * *

Lace and Chac walked on through the jungle corridors and scents, its grotesque growths and beauties, conscious that other creatures —beasts or men — stirred within it and that they must take care not to stumble upon a boa constrictor or a balche-drugged human being with a bad chemical jones for bloodshed. Now and then a helicopter passed overhead, clattering. At length, Chac squatted and pointed through the foliage at Chibal's central complex.

A palace, four temples, two rows of tumbled columns, and the notorious Pyramid of the Owl, whose hieroglyphic staircase rivaled that at Copan, seized Lace's eye like the diorama inside a View Master. A host of stelae thrust up among these structures, as if the city's architects had landscaped it with stones instead of shrubbery.

What a sense of metaphor the ancient Tun-kuluchuob had! Every structure had a real-world counterpart. The pyramids stood for mountains, the temples atop them for caves, the history-engraved stelae for trees, and all the various doors for portals — in the Mayas' minds, *real* ones — to the spirit world. Cabot had promised that if they wed in the bloodletting sanctum of the temple atop the Pyramid of the Owl, under the tree growing up through the pyramid from a limestone sinkhole at the center of the structure's rubble-paved base, both God and the mountain-dwelling deities who had presided over Chibal's daily life would bless their union forever.

Armed guerillas in tattered costumes occupied the plaza, huddling in old looters' trenches, behind gravel piles, or between hastily built walls of dirt and sticks. The walls put Lace in mind of the revetments that the Maya of Dos Pilas, in the Petexbatun forest of northern Guatemala, had thrown up circa A.D. 760, just before Dos Pilas fell to warriors from Tamarindito and the whole loose-jointed empire of Ruler 4 collapsed at his default capital of Aguateca.

Maybe *these* rebels were also doomed. Maybe they paid homage to their doom by threatening to blow up Chibal, whose excavation and development might one day lead Guacamayo to prosperity. Or maybe they realized that if prosperity flirted, it would not court them, but instead the right-wing cronies of Fuentes and all the foreign capitalists underwriting his regime. Here, at least, Lace heard no helicopters, for the guerillas had many nasty weapons, including a portable missile launcher.

"Come," Chac said. "Let's find your fiancée."

Lace clutched his shirt. "Won't they kill us?"

"Zafado's brother? And Zafado's brother's friend? No — at least not at first." Downplaying her fear, he pulled her through the tattered ferns to the edge of the clearing. Her heart hammered. In the heavy jungle mugginess, her whole body

radiated a shameful sweltering terror.

When they stepped into the clearing, brown wraiths with contraband rifles and submachine-guns surrounded them. Instead of prodding them at gunpoint, however, the rebels put them at the center of a protective ring and walked them across the great plaza toward the Pyramid of the Owl.

Because the ruins of Chibal were too dear to obliterate entirely, the rebels had no realistic worry of an assault from gunship's or mortars. But military sharpshooters in the jungle posed a danger (despite Commander Ah Katun's warning that losing even one rebel to sniper fire would trigger the destruction of Chibal), and their guards stayed alert to this threat.

All seven of these rebels had mistaken Chac for his twin Zafado. Nor had Chac tried to disabuse them of the error. Their mistake implied that Chac and Zafado were identical twins, who could lie with Lace without her distinguishing between them, and that Zafado had either left Chibal or hidden himself.

As they neared the Pyramid of the Owl, this puzzle resolved itself. At the top of the broken hieroglyphic stairway, Cabot emerged from a portal in the boxlike limestone temple. Two other men also came out, Commander Ah Katun, whose fatigue hat sported an iridescent blue-green quetzal feather identifying him as the rebels' leader, and Chac's twin, Zafado, who looked so much like Chac that Lace glanced at Chac to make sure that he had not teleported up there.



Like a baroque leafy pagoda, the crown of a huge oak thrust through the temple's roof and spread its canopy, shading the temple, its apron, the men upon it, and the upper third of the stairway. Lace had never seen anything like this lofty growth at any other set of Maya ruins. But, with her lover at her elbow and her fiance on the pyramid's summit, she suffered a frisson of *deja vu*.

Well, why not? Chibal reminded her of Palenque, Yaxchilan, and Copan, all of which she had visited within the past few years. But *Cabot* looked different. He towered over the Indians with him, as she would have expected, but he wore a bamboo breast-plate with an obsidian medallion at its center, a loin-cloth, and calf-bands with braided tassels. His body was both tawny and leprous — brown at arms and throat, white everywhere else. He clutched a stave, or spear, and a small circular shield.

"Lace!" he cried. *"Come up! Come up!"*

Their guards peeled away, leaving Lace and Chac exposed at the bottom of the pyramid. The guards split into two groups, advanced to the stairway's outer edges, and began to climb, leaving the middle section open for Chac and Lace's ascent. Both balked at this opportunity.

"Cabot's never dressed ancient-native before," Lace said. "What's going on?"

Chac nodded her upward. "Let's go see."

They mounted the tall steps, each so copiously chiseled with costumed warriors and Maya dates that Lace felt as if she were climbing another *katun*, or twenty-year cycle, into the Chibalec past. Her vulnerability seemed total. She would either lose her balance or a sniper would pick her and Chac off (along with the Tunkuluchuob on either side of them) like a patron in a shooting gallery potting rusty metal ducks. Her folks had warned her this might happen . . . sort of.

The jungle and other nearby pyramids seemed to rise too, as did dark but silver-threaded clouds on the horizon. Near the summit, shade from the oak spiraling up from the city's pyramid-pent cenote began to fringe her shoulders. A breeze cooled her sweat-damp clothing.

Cabot reached down and pulled her up the last two steps. Chac followed, without help, and nodded at Zafado, who mirrored him like a bookend. Com-mander Ah Katun, whose name derived from one of the Maya gods of war, bowed like a courtier — but his squat body, bristly nose hairs, and rank philodendron-leaf fatigues sabotaged the godly image that he hoped to project. Also, he had painted raccoon-like circles around his eyes and black lightning bolts on his cheeks.

Lace held Cabot off, resisting his efforts to embrace her until he could no longer assume that she wanted to regard him lovingly after their separation.

“Lace, I *couldn't* come to Dos Perros. These guys wouldn't let me.”

“Where's Lundquist?” Lace said. “And the rest of your team?”

Cabot gestured at the limestone temple behind them. “I guess they didn't like my throwing in with the rebels. Commander Ah Katun had them bound and marched up here as captives.”

Before Lace could internalize the enormity of this news, Chac stepped toward Zafado and said, “Let the hostages go. Disarm the explosives with which you've mined Chibal.”

Zafado glanced at Commander Ah Katun, who nodded. Then, swiftly, Zafado seized the fetish at Chac's throat, broke it loose, and shoved Chac down the hieroglyphic stairs.

Chac screamed and fell. He tumbled from step to step, lacerating or bruising his flesh, plunging toward the bottom of the pyramid as if in slow motion — a nightmarish reversal of the dreamy leaping that he had performed with Lace on the stairs in the Hotel Llovedizo.

Lace's mouth opened, and she stepped back from the precipice. Cain and Abel in Guacamayo. The twin with the Old Jaguar God pendant had slain the twin with the Old Stingray God fetish.

Now she, too, would die. She had experienced this gut-scouring certainty twice before — in a Hyundai rolling on a slick Tennessee road, and later in a confrontation with a coked-up mugger in an Atlanta parking lot. She had survived those close calls, but this one — murder just having had its bloody template manufactured before her eyes — she would not escape, and the wisdom of Lane and Melba Kurlansky struck her now with all its prophetic admonitory power.

Lace wet her jeans and fell to her knees, devastated by her disobedience and folly. Aloud, she pled for mercy.

“Be quiet!” Commander Ah Katun barked. “Silence yourself!”

Cabot helped her rise. “It's all right,” he told her. “Saving the city demands both ritual and sacrifice.”

“Fuck the city,” Lace whispered. “A man's just died.”

Lightning flashed. Thunder walked. The clouds amassing in every compass quarter fused into a broad slate vault. A cargo of rain cracked this vault and poured out on Chibal. It pelted the temple, the pyramids, the stelae, and the rebels' frail make-shift barricades. It washed down the stairs in leap-ing crimson-brown combers. It baptized her lover's corpse and rattled the forest. It mocked Lace's tears.

"Now you must wed," Zafado told Cabot. He said other stuff, but Lace, clad in bridal rain and drenched to the marrow, could deduce only that he and Commander Ah Katun believed that her and Cabot's union — the marriage of two gringos! — would open a portal to the spirit world and impel an irresistible outpouring of Tunkuluchu allies. These zombie warriors would rout the soldiers of Leopoldo Fuentes and restore to Guacamayo the long-forgotten reign of the Sacerdotal Owl.

It was crazy. It reminded Lace of the self-deluding program of the Ghost Dance warriors of the North American Great Plains, who believed that their mad dances would summon vast herds of white buffalo from the Rocky Mountains and stop the juggernaut of European settlement. But Guacamayo had existed as a state for a century and three quarters, and the civilization that the commander proposed to revive had collapsed eleven hundred years ago. Madness.

The rain slackened, but its runoff still plunged from step to step.

"Come with me," Cabot said. He looked stupid in his Maya getup, his blond hair plastered to his brow. He held his shield and his spear in one hand so that his other could draw her into the temple, upon whose sides Death Serpent bas-reliefs and Spirit Monster masks glowered poisonously.

Zafado sidled into their path.

Lace looked into his face — the face of one recently beloved — and said, "You murdered your brother, you treacherous little shit."

"I killed a worthless poet. Chac loved a tyrant more than his own people."

"Not true," Lace said. "And you've slain a part of yourself."

Zafado laughed, as if she were a lobotomy candi-date, and turned to Commander Ah Katun, who said, "Bring out the archaeologists."

Under rebel guard, Hap Lundquist and other members of the team limped from the temple, their lips or eyebrows pierced, their bare chests and rag-ged pants stained a candid reddish-brown. All had scarlet markings — colored ink — on their left breasts, as if a guerilla had prepared them, symboli-cally, for the surgical removal of their hearts. In fact, Cabot's team had received exactly the sort of treatment, short

of heart extraction and beheading, that royal captives could expect in the old Maya wars.

“Hap!” Lace said, reaching toward Lundquist.

Lundquist’s gaze flicked over her, but he kept his chin down and trudged to the edge of the high court-yard. He was stifled and demoralized, an enervated husk. The others — Newman, Tapscott, Balcavage, and Villaurrutia, the “rat man” who wriggled through tunnels into the tombs, of Maya kings — had fared no better. Lundquist could not even sum-mon the will to spit in Cabot’s face, and his hopeless-ness meant that he knew as well as Lace that Com-mander Ah Katun planned to kill them. If anything, her arrival at Chibal had hastened this outcome.

“Let them go!” Lace cried. “Don’t hurt them!”

But drizzle continued to slant, and Cabot maneu-tered her into the temple much like a cop manhan-dling a suspect into a patrol car.

Helplessly, Lace glanced back and saw Zafado hurl Hap Lundquist down the stairway of the Pyra-mid of the Owl. Then Zafado yanked Newman forward. No one screamed, but the sound of Lund-quist’s body bumping from step to step resonated even in the echo-muffling drizzle . . .

* * * *

The inside of the temple astonished Lace. It loomed larger in every direction than she figured possible. The Tunkuluchu oak reaching down through its floor to the hidden cenote, and up through the wide-cloven roof, shivered in place, fill-ing the temple with ceaseless leaf music. Even so, a four-sided altar featuring high-relief sculptures of every Chibalec king also bulked inside this sanctu-ary, enclosing the oak’s trunk. There were also cen-sers, benches, flower stands, door panels, priestly implements (including stingray spines and blood-collecting basins), and figure-bearing columns of frangible dirty-saffron plaster — history in hiero-glyphs.

Dried blood freckled the paving and the lower por-tions of the walls. Fresh blood glistened almost everywhere, sickeningly.

Knowing who had shed it, Lace took Cabot’s arm.

Zafado entered and said, “You, too, must let blood.” He approached her with one of the clay offer-ing bowls, which brimmed with strips of beaten-bark paper, like outsized confetti from a manila packet. He thrust this bowl into her arms. Cabot pushed down on her shoulders until she had knelt in front of the western altar, the towering liana-wrapped oak behind her. Then he, too, knelt.

“You don’t need to puncture her tongue,” he told Zafado. “Lace, show him.”

But Zafado seized Lace's chin, forced her jaw down, and yanked her tongue into view. The silver stud at its center glowed like a tiny Christmas-tree bulb. Chac's brother unscrewed and pocketed this stud.

"I told you she was the one," Cabot said.

Shut up, Lace thought. *Just shut up*. There in the Guacamayan tropics she felt as cold and brittle as an icicle dagger.

Zafado took off his jaguar-god fetish, paired it with Chac's stingray-god fetish, and swung them crisscrossing before her eyes. Lace's consciousness split and swung, just like the obsidian canoe-paddlers, so that she leapt to a psychic terrace high above her own nerve tips.

"The hole needs enlarging," Zafado said. "Hunab Ku, Itzamna, and Ixchel, bless this new piercing."

He put his own necklace back on, pocketed Chac's pendant, and jabbed a large stingray spine through the slit in her tongue, twisting his wrist as he did so. Blood filled Lace's mouth and dribbled down her chin. But the assault did not hurt, and she raised the bowl in her arms to catch the sacred redness and to stain the brown strips of paper that the Tun-kuluchuob would eventually burn in a censer, to create a lovely odor for the Lords of Xibalba. From the bowl containing this paper, Zafado dragged a two-foot length of rope punctuated at intervals with thorns.

"Take this," he said. "Finish your task."

Already entranced, Lace threaded this rope through the bottom of her tongue and pulled it out the upper side, meanwhile feeding the rope back into the bowl and bleeding into the paper

Cabot, she could tell, regarded her slow disgorgement of the thorny rope with an admiring gratitude.

Resentment welled in Lace, but no hatred. Her fear of dying trotted away like a feisty peccary. I'm a mess, she thought, a doomed and apathetic mess. And this thought released a toxin into the waters of her aplomb. Febrile and swaying, she rose anyway and dropped the now dangling rope all the way into the bowl. Zafado pulled it out again and flipped its ends about his wrists so that it seemed to cuff him. With his foot, he nudged a basket full of paper strips toward the kneeling Cabot.

"Now you, Senor Chessman."

Outside the temple, several of the Maya chanted in Tunkuluchu. They had done so throughout her bloodletting, Lace realized, and this eerie song merely

continued their earlier chant.

Cabot removed his loincloth. Then, much as in her dream in the Hotel Llovedizo, he squatted, spread his thighs above the basket, and jabbed the upper skin of his penis — once, twice, three times. He slipped a strip of paper from the basket through the hole nearest his groin. Then he did two more piercings, laced them with paper, and let these festoons incarnadine the tan strips in the basket.

Lace hardly bothered to watch. In her mind, if nowhere else, she had eloped to Disney World, Nepal, or Callisto, places more solidly real.

Zafado, still rope-cuffed, picked up both bowl and basket and carried them to a censer. He filled it with stained paper, the bloody rope, and a mixture of maize kernels and tree resin. Commander Ah Katun appeared and lit the censer with a foul-smelling stogie. The paper flared and ignited the other fuel. Smoke rose in sweetly acrid curls through the cenote-rooted oak inside the sanctuary altars. Cabot, wobbling, climbed to his feet. Lace tried to steady him.

“Are we married now?” she asked Zafado.

“Have you seen the owl god Tunkuluchu, gringa?”

“No,” Lace confessed.

“Then you’re not married yet. Come, both of you.” And Zafado led them into a deeper temple room — maybe, Lace realized, to have their hearts sliced out and set before the owl god as an offering.

* * * *

In the temple’s innermost sanctum, beyond the northern altar, a knee-high censer resembling a humanoid owl burned red strips from earlier blood-lettings, probably those of Cabot’s team members. Lace and Cabot faced the censer and the upper trunk of the oak whose extruded green crown capped the temple, protecting it from rain but allow-ing leaf-puzzle glimpses of sky.

Brackish smoke curled upward through the tree and diffused in wisps through the sanctum. Fumes from the smoke assaulted Lace’s nostrils and mas-saged the membranes of her lungs.

Twelve of Commander Ah Katun’s soldiers had crowded in, but no longer wore the boots and bando-liers of latter-day guerillas. Along with Zafado and their commander, they wavered on the edges of Lace’s vision wearing white capes pinned at the neck with red spondylus shells, flower-patterned skirts with calf-bands, or merely loincloths and high-backed sandals. Arrayed along the walls, they had no more meat than ghosts; their chants sounded like the mewling of starving jaguar

babies.

Cabot clutched one end of a fresh thorn-embedded rope, and Lace the other. Her consciousness had fragmented, and in one part of it she recalled the funeral of a friend of Cabot's, a swim-team member who had burned to death in a house fire. A priest at that funeral swung a censer whose bitter miasma drifted into the eyes and lungs of everyone present, a foul evangel of the inescapability of death. And she had floated away on those fumes, into a pocket of her mind where marriage to Cabot plucked Mother Scorpion's sting and garlanded their days with concerts, wines, foreign films, jokes, travel, and well-behaved kids.

Now they were *actually* marrying, and Mother Scorpion had scuttled up the great oak to preside at their exchange of vows. Lace gripped her owl pendant in her free hand and wept — for the fumes in her eyes, for the poor immolated swimmer, for the lost Chac Sanudo, for the slain archaeologists, for Cabot, for Guacamayo's destruction, and for the standing peril to Chibal.

She floated away on these fumes, and now she saw — not Mother Scorpion, who did not really belong there, but the Sacerdotal Owl, who did.

A conch-shell trumpet sounded, and the chanting of the guerillas both intensified and faded off into inconsequence.

The Sacerdotal Owl — priest, messenger, and lord — clung to the oak in the guise of a man-sized epiphytic orchid, high above the floor where Lace and Cabot gripped the bloodletting rope and peered up in bemused awe. The orchid owl swayed out over their heads, the wide lavender petals of its wings fastened to the liana behind it, its silver breast emitting a vanilla-like fragrance that cut through the censer-smoke stink, annealing Lace and Cabot to their perplexity.

You are all predators, the orchid owl said, parasitic fungi plundering dead and living alike.

Vines twisting about the vine supporting the owl began to spiral slowly about the World Tree's trunk, without dislodging the god. They moved like barber-pole stripes, or the threads of propeller screws. They hauled into view purple or silver fruits the size of basketballs, the enormous meat-colored blossoms of a plant that Lace knew to grow only in northern Sumatra, and the head of Edwin L. Shay, the television anchorman who had gone missing from Las Orquideas de la Virgen. His head moved on an upward left-to-right slant on a liana snaking along under the unmoving Nike-like body of the imperious orchid owl.

"Edwin L. Shay!" Lace said.

"In their five-year insurgency against the regime of President Leopoldo Fuentes," said Shay's head in its orotund broadcaster's voice, *"the Tunkuluchu*

rebels rarely take a backseat, in either sadistic cunning or applied brutality, to the U.S.-advised troops of the government.” The head spoke fluently in Spanish.



“You lie!” said Commander Ah Katun.

The head lowered its bruised-looking eyelids. *“Do you really think I don’t know who decapitated me?”* And it glided upward, slantwise, on around the trunk of the World Tree. All the other migrat-ing lianas continued to writhe and twine, pulling strange fleshy growths into, and out of, view.

A curse on all your factions, said the orchid owl in a voice like smoke. *Descend, Lace Kurlansky, to the waters of Xibalba.*

In the smoke of the owl-shaped censer, before the swaying body of the orchid owl, the big jawless head of a Maya warrior — perhaps a Maya king — took changing and changeable shape. Scrolls of smoke, symbolizing blood, poured from its mouth, and the vacant whirlpools of its eyes throbbed with the pinks, indigos, and umbers of unnamable rain-forest blossoms.

Go down, said this smoky Maya king.

Descend, Lace Kurlansky, said the owl on the bole of the oak.

Lace pocketed her owl talisman and released her end of the thorny rope. Cabot, wearing only his bloodstained loincloth and tasseled calf bands, looked at her as if he no longer recognized her, which, she realized, he probably did not.

Cabot belonged to a faction that Tunkuluchu, the messenger owl, had cursed, just as Commander Ah Katun and Zafado belonged to another, just as Leopoldo Fuentes and his soldiers belonged to a third, and just as Lace belonged to a fourth. But some quality in Lace, maybe her unaccountable love for Chac Sanudo, had registered in the orchid owl in the ritual of her bloodletting, and so this god, the liv-ing spirit of the Tunkuluchu dead, had set her apart for either ruin or salvation.

Bloody of mouth, throat, breast, and arms, Lace jumped onto the carven altar

of Chibalec kings. Then, like a gecko spread-eagling itself on an adobe wall, she seized the trunk of the great oak. Her fingers found handholds of bark and vine, her sneakers sought their own footholds, and she shinnied down through the flue of the four fitted sides of the altar toward the cenote in the abyss.

Tuning forks of lightning crackled overhead, and a columnar draft of cold air rose from the springs over which the Tunkuluchuob of another age — of several other ages — had built the Pyramid of the Owl. As she shinnied, some of the vines wrapping the oak started to corkscrew again, spiraling down rather than up, but without rotating either the orchid owl or the head of Edwin L. Shay back into her ken.

“Lace!” Cabot called. “Lace, wait for me!”

Apparently the smoke in the wedding sanctum had paralyzed everyone but Lace and Cabot, who emulated Lace’s jumps. Soon he was descending through the epiphytic blossoms after her, the soles of his feet flopping from bough to bough like pink mullets. Below, reflections of rain-forest lightning scribbled the surface of the cenote inside the base of the pyramid — but only at the pool’s far edges, which Lace could barely see while peering down through the blossoms and vines.

“Lace, wait!” A distinct note of desperation ech-oed in this plea.

“Cabot, you signed Hap Lundquist’s death war-rant — his and Chac Sanudo’s and all your unsus-pecting friends’!”

“I did it to save Chibal!”

“Bullshit,” Lace said. “ ‘We had to destroy the vil-lage to save it.’ That’s the sort of idiot thinking that kept the Vietnam War running for so long.” It had a sad but ironic relevance here in Guacamayo, too, Lace realized. Or it could, if she bought into Cabot’s perfidious madness.

Cabot was an athlete, and he could swim like an Olympian, but Lace had more nimbleness out of the water than he, and a sixth sense about tree shinny-ing that allowed her to quickly outdistance him. She passed the second highest level in the pyramid, and then the third, observing that each royal chamber or tomb was filled with stone carvings, priestly para-phernalia, and murals of historic conflicts or the doings of Maya gods. The riprap between strata con-sisted of rubble from earlier versions of the pyramid — so that the shaft surrounding the World Tree gave vivid glimpses into the sequential architec-tural approach of the pyramid’s builders.

“Lace, please slow down!” Cabot’s voice sounded like the cry of man trapped high in a prison tower.

Lace pressed her body against the oak’s trunk, passing through various thick

foliage clusters to keep Cabot from seeing her. Now she glanced up. Twenty feet above her, Cabot hooked his knees over a woody liana and leaned out in the apparent hope of cantilevering a clear view of her. The weight of his own torso yanked his legs from the natural trellis; and — grasping and flailing — he slipped and tumbled through the shaft calling her name: “*Laaaaaaaaaaaaace!*”

His body, white and brown, supple and gangly, flashed past and careened on down to the lightning-scrawled cenote, which it struck with a plop little sharper than that of a ballpoint splashing into a commode.

This echo reverberated, and Lace closed her eyes, having already watched Cabot slice his flesh on the oak’s epiphytic growths as he flailed past. Now it seemed likely that, smacking the water at the base of the tree, he had broken his spine.

My God, Lace thought. (And she could not say whether she was apostrophizing Christ or Tun-kuluchu.) In a mere hour or less, both her Maya lover and her Anglo-Saxon fiancée had fallen to their deaths. It was horrible. It was funny. How often did a gal have a good-looking guy fall head over heels for her? Today, horribly, hilariously, two times too many. Ha-ha.

Lace swallowed a salty clot of her own blood, ground her teeth, and resumed her meticulous descent. She completed it in what she estimated as only twenty-five or thirty minutes and then hung out over the cenote like a kid at a hidden swimming hole reaching for a tire swing.

Now and again, droplets fell into the pool from the bromeliads and liana blossoms scabbed to the World Tree and from the rainy sky miles above, but they dropped without violence or reverberation. As a result, the pool exuded a dim serenity reminiscent of old museums and empty movie theaters.

What now? The vines hugging the great oak had long ago ceased to corkscrew about its trunk, and Tunkuluchu, the orchid-owl god, remained atop the tree, too far away to praise, scold, or instruct her.

Then Lace heard Chac whisper, “ ‘And we *will melt*, my storm-tormented girl, / to be cherished for-ever *by all the reddest gods of Mayadom.*’ ”

She looked about. A peal of thunder, or an explosion, made the cenote tremble, but from so far away — farther away than the orchid owl at the top of the World Tree — that it did not tremble long. However, only twenty feet from the massive base of the oak to which Lace clung, a supine body burst from the waters, arching its back and floating with its arms spread, its legs dangling out of view, and its hair undulating around its head like a spun-gold halo.

Cabot, of course. Kaput. A victim of either impact trauma or drowning. Here

in the Chibalec nether-world, his body thrummed with a mythic import that Lace could not readily decode. Did it mean that excavating Chibal was no longer a profitable enter-prise? That the rebellion of the Tunkuluchuob had failed? That Fuentes' soldiers had called off their operations? That her old life was dead?

Holding to a nublike branch, Lace eased into the water, so illusorily like dark plum gelatin. She dog-paddled to Cabot, seized his arm, and pulled him back to the tree. Three red strips of paper still fes-tooned his penis, which bobbed impotently in the blond nest of his groin. The sight moved Lace to a throat-constricting pity. What had happened to him? How had the antique dead grown to mean more to him than his own persnickety comrades?

"He stole their *lives*," Chac said inside her head, "*just as you clawed from me / the scarlet chambers of my Tunkuluchu heart, / the tempests of longing laved in my hot blood, / and all my foolish dread of death.*"

"Chac?" Clinging to the oak and her dead fiance's arm, Lace searched for her dead lover. She extended her t6es, immersing herself to her chin. The cenote's bottom lay deeper than she could reach. How long' could she tread water beside a drowned man and a tree whose roots might stretch to the planet's very core?

"Here," Chac said. "Look to the east."

Frustration clamped Lace like a shrinking garment. "Which way is east?" Dos Perros lay east of Chibal, of course, but the Tunkuluchu netherworld seemed a demesne without compass points or borders.

"Here, seriorita, here."

From the plum-colored darkness beyond Cabot's body, a canoe glided toward Lace over the dark plum waters of the cenote, which she had thought contained by the lower portions of the pyramid's walls. You could not build a pyramid on water, after all, any more than you could throw a shadow without a light source. Whatever the truth of these supposings, however, the canoe vectored in, and in it sat two figures with paddles, the nearer a humanoid avatar of the orchid owl that she had seen earlier, and the farther her dead lover Chac.

Gazing across Cabot's leprous belly, Lace gawked at this apparition. The orchid-owl paddler was no doubt an Indian in the mask and plumage of an owl, and the paddler whom she had taken for Chac was surely just a man who resembled him. The costumed paddler dipped and pushed with a lovely ritual grace, and the Chac look-alike behind him aped his actions on the canoe's opposite side.

Reflections of lightning drew fleeting wiring-diagram arabesques in the waters around the canoe, and a series of thunderclaps — if not explosions — shuddered

the World Tree, the waters, and the notional inner walls of the pyramid.

Lace feared electrocution, drowning, and being cudgeled to death by dislodged stones.

None of these fates befell her, but strange repercussive tides buffeted her body from side to side, as they did Cabot's, and she felt as she imagined Londoners must have felt in subways and base-ments during the Blitz, if those subways and base-ments had been flooded by the Thames. Her every nerve had gone numb.



Literally abreast of Cabot, the canoe halted, and the man in the orchid-owl getup spoke in a familiar smoky voice: “Kiss him.”

“What?” Lace shook her wet cap of hair. “Who?”

“Your husband. The dead interloper. Kiss him.”

“He’s not my —”

“Don’t quibble with me, gringa. Kiss him.”

The owl god’s eyes looked real, not like costume-jewelry stand-ins. Meanwhile, his plumage appeared more feathery than floral, and hence more lifelike than that of the orchid owl atop the World Tree. Lace looked past him at the Chac look-alike, who gave her a wincing sort of smile. This smile underscored his identity as the Chac with whom she had fallen in love. It soon reshaped itself and remained on his face as an emblem of bashful favor, even encouragement.

Lace hooked Cabot’s neck, pulled him to her, and placed her trembling mouth on his cold one. When he did not respond — and she had not expected him

to — she used her tongue to prise his lips apart. Then she fed her tongue into the breathless cavity, like an intrusive oyster, and let it linger until even his corpse could taste the blood spicing it. She with-drew reluctantly, pulling back to the base of the oak, shivering like a shipwreck victim.

Cabot's body swelled at the chest, thrashing from side to side as it had done after the thunderclaps or explosions. Then it ceased thrashing and floated more or less calmly on the shaken pool. Its sightless eyes twitched and shed their milky glaze. Lace had the giddy sense of having resurrected Cabot with her kiss. This feeling intensified when he pulled himself upright with a few instinctive finning motions of his hands. The swimmer in him automat-ically reactivating.

“Cabot!”

The Sacerdotal Owl spoke over his shoulder to Chac, who eased the canoe about so that he could gaff Cabot harmlessly with his paddle. Cabot lifted a hand in alarm or protest, but did not struggle against this minor indignity — given everything else that had happened — and even seemed to coop-erate when Chac reached down to haul him into the canoe, now tilting perilously near the water.

So when the humanoid owl god, whose wings sheathed arms not unlike Cabot's, flapped up out of the canoe, disclosing feathered pantaloons where Lace had expected to see human legs, and talons where she had expected sandals, she coughed in amazement as the spirit of Tunkuluchu gripped Cabot's shoulders, lifted him bodily out of the cenote, and laid him with Chac's help into the center of the canoe.

Cabot got to his knees by himself and vomited twinkling gouts of blood, bile, and water over the vessel's side. The owl flew disciplined circles over-head until Cabot had purged himself of all earthly nourishment and taint. Then it hovered a moment, fanning the 'cenote with lustrous silver-gray wings, before silently peeling off and rocketing into the dark.

Once the owl had flown, Cabot knee-walked to its place in the canoe and took the abandoned paddle. He had not spoken a word since his resurrection, and Lace intuited from his ten-mile stare and his bruised lips that he would not speak again in this region of the netherworld.

“Come,” Chac said, reaching out to her. “Let us conduct you the rest of the way. I'll help you in.”

“But where would you take me?”

“Someplace better, *mi prometida*.”

“Better than this?” Lace punched the cenote with a tightly clenched fist.

“Better than immersion in the blood of Chibalec kings?”

“Absolutely.” Irony confounded Chac. “Please, Seriorita Lace — take my hand.”

What option did she have? Cabot and Chac, work-ing together, bumped the canoe nearer, pinning her between it and the World Tree. One option, of course, was climbing back up the tree to the temple, but she doubted her strength and resolve. She reached for Chac’s hand, seeing for the first time that a large stingray spine passed through his head on a sharp diagonal. Its points emerged from his throat and the back of his skull, but he disregarded them. Before she could pull back from him, Chac landed her asprawl in the canoe, although not with-out cushioning her entry with his arm. The canoe bucked wildly, but Cabot went on sitting stone still, spaced out and unperturbed.

“Go,” Chac told him. “Paddle.”

Lace righted herself between the two men, •grip-ping the sides of the canoe as if clinging fast would protect her from any assault. Cabot and Chac began to paddle, in rhythmic alternating tandem, and their canoe surged away from the tree on a down-ward slant like that of the stingray spine through Chac’s head.

The canoe submerged. Dark plum water streamed around Lace’s head, shoulders, and back until she had gone totally under, along with the zombie paddlers and the canoe itself. But Lace did not gag on the influx or find her vision either occluded by the purple water or distorted by refrac-tion. Nor, apparently, did Cabot or Chac.

They glided along as if soaring in a crystal vac-uum rather than forging through an impeding liq-uid, and the neon gars and see-through eels finning about them seemed more bird- than fish-like. Water had become air, the cenote an underground cavern, and the pyramid above them an illusion. Water lilies floated at different levels around their canoe, while far below the wraiths of Maya boys and men com-peted in a vast sunken ball court, their bodies etched by ultraviolet shadow and glowing purple pinstripes identifying their actions as long past, his-toric, spent.

Lace looked behind her. “For God’s sake, Chac, what’s going on?”

Chac pointed — not at the water lilies, the air-borne fish, or the ball players, but beyond the play-ers at a gateway arch, like one Lace had seen in the Yucatan, opening into a royal garden. Cabot and Chac paddled over the ball court and the sunken city-scape around it as if planning to steer between the arch’s hieroglyph-rich walls into an honest-to-God Tunkuluchu paradise. Many of the hieroglyphs represented the Sacerdotal Owl in different stances of authority, and the royal garden through the arch, unlike the ultraviolet nightmare of the ball court and its players, glistened with the daylight colors of the living world that Lace had always revered.

Thunder walked, the air in Xibalba shuddered, and huge carved stones began to fall. Every gleaming purple and silver player in the ball court looked up. Every player raised the back of his wrist to his brow and held it there in what Lace recognized as the immemorial Maya death gesture. Even the dead enjoyed flashing this gesture. Even the dead, Shakespeare and Donne notwithstanding, could die again. And the stones plunging from the indistinct firmament seemed guided by some doubtful intelligence to make sure that these helpless dead suffered a redundant annihilation.

Lace covered her head while Cabot and Chac paddled harder toward the gateway on a low gray hill now a hundred meters distant. The falling stones, some as large as residential propane tanks, some no bigger than toaster ovens, clattered down, ricocheting off one another like meteorites, striking the spectral city and its ghostly denizens with dust-raising clouts, and whizzing past the three canoeing fugitives from latter-day Chibal in roentgen-charged torrents.

It's only a matter of time before we're hit, Lace thought, cowering away from the implacable barrage. And, of course, she was right.

* * * *

In the dispensary tent near Las Orquideas de la Virgen, a town too small for a hospital, Delmira Xisto gazed down on her patient with something other than clinical detachment. She had volunteered to track the progress of the wounded and the injured, and this petite but supple American — her body a map of bruises, her face a swollen acorn squash — was finally waking up. Would she first ask, “Where am I?” or “Who are you?” or “When may I go home?” Eventually, she’d ask all these questions, but the *order* in which a patient put them spoke volumes about her state of mind.

“How many people died?” said the American woman, reaching for the hem of her caregiver’s white linen jacket.

Delmira took the patient’s hand and smoothed its back with her own. “Too many, Miss Kurlansky.”

The patient pulled away and scrambled to a sitting position from which to survey the tent and its inhabitants. She squinted at the cots around hers and then into Delmira’s face. Obviously, she was surprised to find herself in this tent of makeshift treatment and problematic recovery.

“Did Cabot Chessman die?” she asked. “Did Chac Sanudo?”

“Yes, the North American archaeologist died, and so did all his friends.” Delmira consulted a clipboard. “And the second person you named — also dead.”

“Thrown down the stairs,” Miss Kurlansky said. “Everybody but Cabot — thrown down the stairs. Cabot fell from the World Tree into Xibalba.”

Delmira mulled this odd assertion. “You should lie down again. You should rest a while and then eat something.”

“How long have you been watching over me?”

“Two and a half days. Rescuers dragged you from the primary Chibalec temple, which had dropped into the plaza.”

Miss Kurlansky stared at Delmira as if she had proclaimed President Fuentes an unparalleled world philanthropist, or an adult male jaguar the ideal family pet. “I don’t understand,” she said.

“When he learned that the Tunkuluchuob were murdering their hostages, Fuentes authorized mor-tar assaults and sent in gunship’s. Government forces reduced the ruins to ruins.” Delmira chuckled ruefully. What a stupid irony, *reduced the ruins to ruins*. Did powerful men like destroying things so much that the devastation of other men’s dreams registered with them as a constructive achievement?

“Chibal is gone?” Miss Kurlansky said.

“Even less extant than before. But its destruction saved you. The guerillas would have killed you had the government’s attacks not stopped them.”

“If the temple of the Pyramid of the Owl dropped into the plaza, *luck* saved me, senora — sheer unadulterated luck.”

“Yes,” Delmira admitted. “And Chibal is gone. The ancient Tunkuluchuob have suffered their second death — probably an incurable one.” (As if you could cure death, or as if anyone of faith would want to.)

Miss Kurlansky swung her feet to the duckboard floor. “Where’s my stuff?”

“You had only your torn clothes, seriorita, and a mahogany charm from one of our native carvers.” Delmira fetched this talisman from a cardboard box and handed it to the patient.

The young American woman squeezed the charm — an owl with a dart through its body and a small man-faced shield on one of its wings — and squeezed and squeezed and squeezed it until her knuckles whitened and a teardrop burst from her eye like a faultless organic diamond.

* * * *

Lace stayed in the dispensary tent another day. Most of those receiving treatment, she learned, were Guacamayan grunts tagged by friendly fire or falling debris within the old city's plaza. All the gue-rillas (a young lieutenant with a raffish pencil-thin mustache" like Zorro's told her) had died — including, presumably, Commander Ah Katun and Chac Sanudo's bloodthirsty twin, Zafado.

* * * *

Fortunately — if you could use that word without incurring the wrath of Yahweh or Hunab Ku — the men in Lace's tent had suffered such serious injuries that they could not even begin to think of ogling, jok-ing with, or propositioning her. In fact, she insisted on helping Delmira Xisto sponge-bathe the hurt soldiers, spoon-feed them banana mash and soft-boiled eggs, and both counsel and encourage them while sitting next to their cots on an upturned ammunition crate.

* * * *

Lace Kurlansky, the Florence Nightingale of Las Orquideas de la Virgen . . . Nearby tents quartered soldiers less severely wounded and even some smock-clad orderlies in an ever-jovial frame of mind. They had set up a flea market of collapsible tables and oaken folding chairs in a clearing on the edge of the jungle. Here, they traded watches, bracelets, dog-tag necklaces, painkillers, fake-silk fans with bamboo struts, cuts of howler-monkey meat, and caged pygmy owls. The number of people patronizing this market sometimes seemed larger than the population of Las Orquideas, and it was always a raucous affront to the dispensary as a quiet haven for battlefield casualties. Lace hiked through it on the morning of her fourth and last day in Guacamayo, desultorily evaluating the junk on display and ineffectually repressing her pain.

At a distance of thirty feet, near a trestle table made of plywood and two battered sawhorses, she caught sight of Chac — except that it couldn't be Chac, it had to be Zafado, wearing a tray of carven doodads and haranguing the crowd in his singsong hawker's patter to buy from him and to keep his family from starving. The sight of him paralyzed Lace. He threaded his way among the shoppers and the tables, selling items at a healthy clip, and moving ever nearer.

Lace could see the Old Jaguar God pendant hanging from a dirty string around his neck and the bruised-looking hollows under his eyes, which she momentarily assumed he had created with grease paint or mascara. No, they were real, but they did almost nothing to counteract the air of dapper non-chalance, that he projected, an attitude that drew people to him and lightened their pockets.

Then Zafado saw Lace. His eyes flashed, like sparkplugs in a dark adobe garage, and he smiled at her. When he smiled, he parted his lips, and when he parted

his lips, a tiny silver beacon lit the surface of his tongue and rayed across the market to dazzle and disorient her.

Lace dropped her gaze and reeled, flailing and half off-balance, toward the haven of her dispensary tent. As she retreated, a familiar growl-and-rattle rose from the jungle, increasing in volume until she could no longer hear the voices of the crowd or the baffled hydraulics of her heart. Q