
XIBALBÁ

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STANLEY STRUBLE

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Title Xibalbá
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This book is dedicated to
the indigenous Maya of Chiapas, Mexico
and their representatives,
the Zapatista National Liberation Army, or EZLN.

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Prologue

Heart-rending cries and desolate moans–sounds of the hopeless and forsaken–fell on callus, uncaring ears. Muted by the forest, the voices couldn't compete with chattering birds, whistling parrots and a horde of shrieking, rancorous monkeys that rattled the limbs of the jungle canopy.

"He won't talk," said the helmeted, mustachioed Spanish soldier, standing in the shade of the encroaching jungle. Bone-deep fatigue hung on him like wet clothes. Dirt traced the wrinkles on his face and beads of sweat left clear trails down his grimy cheeks.

"Did you try the boiling oil, captain?" asked Bishop Landa, standing in the late afternoon shadow of a faltering Yucatan sun.

"Yes, Eminence. We vexed him greatly. Did you not hear him call out to his wives?"

"Wife?"

"Wives, Eminence. The filthy pagan had three, but one died on the return from the dead jungle city."

Oblivious to the shrieks of those being tortured, the bishop reached for a sandalwood rosary that hung from his belt. A gift from his Franciscan abbot in Grenada, it had been

made in the Holy Land in the 12th century and brought to Spain by returning Crusaders. Bishop Landa grasped the cross and stroked it lightly with his thumb while ruminating on the problem of Red Snail.

The bishop remembered Red Snail from ten years ago. They had argued many times, and Red Snail had been one of few who dared speak against Landa, who was then only a young Franciscan priest. The old Mayan had had in his possession folding, accordion-shaped books made from the fiber of the maguey cactus. Landa saw them as the work of the devil and the main impediment to proselytizing the Indians. He had already destroyed many of the books ten years earlier before being chastised and returned to Spain in disgrace by the old bishop. But in Spain Fr. Landa's New World activities had found approval. In fact, when his nemesis, the previous bishop, had died, Fr. Landa had been appointed the new Bishop of the Yucatan. Vindicated by his superiors, he had returned in triumph, eager to resume his quest. With a fervor born of the Inquisition, he believed that his was God's work, and that any writings inspired by the Dark Angel must be destroyed.

When Red Snail learned that Landa had come ashore in Veracruz, the old priest had fled Chichen Itza in the Yucatan with the last remaining books. Red Snail had taken along his family and followers, many of them from this town of Mani, into the uncharted Lacandon Jungle. But Landa knew that he was God's Hand on Earth and the bishop was not to be thwarted so easily, and so he mustered a small army and sent them in search of the fleeing Indians. The southern jungles and mountains were unmapped and nearly impenetrable. An army of fifty Conquistadors had chased Red Snail and his flock for nearly three months. Pursuing with a righteous vengeance, the soldiers had tracked the fugitives south through coastal Tabasco, then southwest, deep into the Lacandon jungle, very near to the ruins of an old Mayan city.

When the soldiers arrived, the treacherous priest had already disposed of the books. Where the trove of literature had been hidden, the captain had been unable to ascertain. Beatings and torture had loosened no tongues. But rather than fail utterly, the captain had returned the Indians to the Yucatan and its fanatical bishop.

"Tell me, Captain... what was Jade Snail doing when you caught up to him?"

"Looked like some sort of ceremony, padre." The Conquistador frowned, then sighed, tired of this day's work and anxious to be done. The bishop ignored his indiscretion and listened patiently as the soldier explained again.

"Someone had carved one of those stinkin' stones that no one can read. You know...like those near the pyramid town where Red Snail lived. They were settin' it up in front of a cave."

"What did you do with it?"

"The stone? Had to throw it away, Eminence. We carried it two days, but it was too heavy, and the men complained greatly.

"You transported it two days?"

"Yes, Bishop Landa, much to the disgust of..."

"Is the young wife pretty?" interrupted Landa.

"Pretty?" The captain's face went blank. "She's an Indian, padre. All Indians are ugly."

"Kill the old one, then put the pretty one to the fire," said the bishop. "Slowly, mind you, and take care that she doesn't die too soon. Red Snail must be able to see her and hear her cries."

"What if she dies early, Eminence. Some of 'em die for no reason. They just..." the captain hesitated, scowling, "...they just die. They give up."

"Then kill Red Snail," replied the bishop. "He's not going to tell us anything. He hid the books. The record was

on the stone and you threw it away. The books will never survive that steaming hell in the south, anyway."

The captain departed and the bishop turned to a trio of coarse-robed Franciscan Friars who had witnessed the conversation.

"Well..." Landa shrugged, "there's nothing more here. It's unlikely the old heathen will tell us anything. He'll roast in hell before talking. We might as well return to Merida."

"Yes," agreed a gray-eyed, longhaired friar, rising from his chair. He stood and faced the bishop. The friar's wide smile revealed gaps and yellow, crooked teeth. "It's unfortunate that the methods of Torquemada are now in disrepute, Eminence. We could have made quick work of it. But the Holy Father knows best...be assured of that." The friar bowed and stood aside to allow the bishop to pass."

"Yes… of course," smiled Bishop Landa. "Let's finish here and go quickly to Merida. It will soon be dinner time, and the smell of burning flesh is bad for the appetite."

1

Karen Dumas, archaeologist, tossed a manila folder onto her desk, then slumped into the chair of her Smithsonian office. Placing her elbows on the desk and resting her head in her hands, a sigh escaped her lips. Lord, she needed rest. About two weeks worth, she figured. This project had quickly turned into an obsession, and now her exhausted brain was in full revolt. If she quit moving, even for a few minutes, an overwhelming urge to close her eyes besieged her. But not yet. She must still meet with Dr. Depp, her supervisor, before taking a taxi to American University. Thank God for coffee.

She glanced at the folder. Inside lay her opus, maybe her future; a translation of the Gould Stelae covered with Mayan script. Stelae were tall, flat stones that had been erected throughout the cities of meso-America over one thousand years ago to commemorate important historical events; wars, ceremonies, marriages, conquest, and alliances. The Gould Stelae, like many others, had been plundered and removed from its original site. Where this was, she didn't know. The previously unknown artifact had come to the Smithsonian as part of the Roy Gould estate year earlier. It was chipped, broken, and had critical parts missing. Dr. Depp (Dr. Death

to the Assistant Curators) believed the collection to be of no value and had assigned the job of researching and classifying the mismatched odds and ends to her.

After months of study, including weekends and many sleepless nights, Karen, a student of Maya writing, had struck gold. The stelae's previously undeciphered message made reference to Maya books hidden somewhere in the Lacandon Jungle of Chiapas State in southern Mexico. If true and if the books could be found, her discovery was of incalculable importance. Only a handful of the pictographic books had survived the zealous fury and hot fires of the Conquest. The Spanish friars had relentlessly destroyed any reference to native religions. Unfortunately for the Indians, this had included all forms of writing, and since the Catholic friars couldn't read any of the pictographic glyphs, everything had been consigned to the fires. Only a few of the folding, Maguey-fiber books had survived.

Her discovery was of such importance that it ranked a presentation at American University today. Quite a coup for a young assistant curator with no credentials. But first, before her moment of glory, she had to meet with Depp. His secretary had called and insisted. What did the pompous bastard want now? She sighed, unable to find the energy to go and meet with one of her least favorite people. Her shoulders sagged and she closed her eyes momentarily. Might as well get it over with. She grasped the folder that contained the stelae data, photographs and her translation and exited her office, pausing only to lock the door.

She never left the translation unattended now after an incident one week ago when she believed that her office had been burglarized. Well… maybe not burglarized. Nothing was missing as far as she could tell, but her stelae data had been removed from the folder and lay scattered about when she returned from lunch. She cradled the folder against her chest and unconsciously patted it as she turned to walk down the hall.

"Oh… here you are," said an unfamiliar voice.

Surprised, she turned to see who addressed her.

"I've been looking for you." A tall, fiftyish, deeply tanned man with dark hair smiled at her. "When I saw that you had been dropped from today's agenda, I thought I'd look for you here. Name's David Wolf." He extended a hand. "I'm an archaeologist from the National University in Mexico City."

"What? Who?" Her mouth hung slack. Tired, mind working slowly, she stared at his proffered hand. "Dropped from what agenda? What are you talking about, Mr. Wolf?"

"Call me David...please," he answered. "I see your talk on the Gould Stelae was canceled," he held out a pamphlet. "I wondered why. You see, I knew Roy Gould from the old days. We... er...had some dealings twenty or thirty years ago and I was curious about some things. I remember seeing some of his..."

"What do you mean I'm not on it?" she interrupted. "Let me see that!"

"Uh... sure." He handed her the conference agenda. "Actually, one of the reasons I came all this way was to talk to you about Roy."

"Damn... must be a mistake," she muttered, ignoring him, searching the list for her name. Karen gripped the pamphlet tightly, her mouth a tight, thin line.

"A mistake?" He seemed perplexed by her answer.

"Are you sure this is today's?"

"Got it this morning and decided to come right over. Roy had a couple of things he picked up from some people–grave robbers really–that he wouldn't part with. I think one of them was your stelae. I argued with him...wanted to do a little work on it myself, but he shipped it to the states with a bunch of other stuff. I used to hear of him buying things... you know... but then I guess he died and no one in his family wanted…". The archaeologist's voice trailed off when he realized she wasn't listening.

Karen stood mute, her eyes wide, staring at the paper. Another name had replaced her's: Dr. Jonathan Depp, Master Curator, Smithsonian Institute.

"Is everything okay, Miss... er... Dr. Dumas?" David seemed to realize that he had stumbled into an awkward situation. "Like I said...I tried to call first but you weren't..."

"Yes... I mean no..." she hesitated. "I didn't know that I had been removed from the list. Can't imagine why... must be an oversight. I must call immediately...and...and I have an appointment right now." Her face turned pale and she slumped against her door.

"Miss Dumas!" cried the archaeologist. "Are you ill?"

She shook her head. "Just tired." She looked at the agenda once more to verify her name's absence. This was not an accident, and the reason had been inserted in her time slot–Dr. Jonathan Depp. This is what Dr. Death wanted to talk with her about. The bastard! The sneaky, calculating jerk had done this to embarrass her, she decided.

"Miss Dumas," said the Mexican archaeologist, "I'm sorry if this is a bad time. I wrote you two months ago, remember?"

Karen looked at him, puzzled. "Oh...yes...yes. I believe I do remember. I'd forgotten. Please excuse me...I wasn't expecting..."

"If this is a bad time, perhaps later?"

"Yes... please... if you don't mind." She looked at her watch. "I have an appointment." She breathed deeply to gain her composure. "I don't think it will take too long. Say fifteen minutes?"

"Of course. Is there anything I can do? You seem distressed."

"No." Her face turned hard. "No... but thanks anyway. I should have done this a long time ago."

"Is there somewhere I can get a cup of coffee?"

"Downstairs," she pointed, "to the left."

The archaeologist took his leave and Karen turned to walk to Depp's office. Disappointment magnified her fatigue as she contemplated her dilemma. Why? Why would Depp do such a thing without first consulting her? Was it just a mistake? Professional jealousy? Spite? An attempt to put her in her place? Who could ever understand why a man did anything? It just didn't make sense. But what the heck? She would just go and get it over with. There was no excuse for what he had done, but she would listen–just for a minute–then she would give him a piece of her mind.

2

Gray-haired Mrs. Dinty, Dr. Death's secretary, frowned upon seeing Karen enter the office. A long-time employee of the Smithsonian, the priggish Mrs. Dinty had witnessed numerous directors come and go over the decades. When Karen approached the secretary's desk, the old woman's face colored and her head dipped momentarily, as if embarrassed. She must already know what Depp had done! Without a word, Karen bypassed her and headed for her supervisor's office.

"Please… Miss Dumas," the secretary stood and held up an arm, "I must inform Dr. Depp that you are..."

Sleeplessness and anger overcame Karen's good sense. She ignored the flustered secretary and opened her boss' door without knocking. "Miss Dumas, please... Miss Dumas..." called Mrs. Dinty.

Karen shut the door on the old woman's protests and turned to confront the enemy. Dr. Jonathan Depp, a small man, sat unmoving in a large over-stuffed leather chair. He stared blandly, his thin face unreadable. In his late fifties, nearly bald except for dark bushy eyebrows and a toilet-seat pattern of hair on his head, he appeared calm but alert. He studied her, as though seeing her for the first time. Suddenly

she didn't feel so confident. Until now she had never realized how unattractive and reptilian he seemed. His small, soft hands twirled a pen. Why was he looking at her like that? She glanced away, unnerved, unable to meet his eyes.

"They don't teach social skills where you come from?" he asked.

The sarcasm fanned the embers of her anger. Grasping her file folder with one hand, she waved the conference agenda at him with her other. "Dr. Depp, I just learned that I've been taken off..."

"Just a moment," he interrupted and reached for his phone. He pressed four numbers, then waited. He stared at her again.

Flustered, she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and began again. "Dr. Depp can you tell me why I've been removed from the agenda at today's meeting?"

Depp held up his hand, then spoke into the phone. "Bill? Yeah, go ahead. Tell me how it goes, okay?"

"Miss Dumas," he said, hanging up the phone and leaning back into his chair. "Have a seat." He pointed with the pen.

"I prefer to stand."

"Suit yourself." He shrugged. "I've been wanting to talk with you. I've left memos in your mailbox, left phone messages, and Mrs. Dinty put a note on your office door last Friday."

"I've... er, been busy, and I've been working at home a lot lately."

"I see." The pen began to tap the desk. "Tell me...did you notify Mrs. Dinty or anyone else that you were working at home?"

"Dr. Depp, I've been working night and day on the Gould Stelae," she protested. "Like I told you last month, I think I might have deciphered..."

"Yes...that's the problem isn't it? The Gould Stelae. Let's talk about the stelae, Miss Dumas." Dr. Depp leaned forward.

"Why have you not shared the results of your research with me? Why are you avoiding me? Why, Miss Dumas, are you behaving like a prima donna who doesn't have a supervisor, like someone who doesn't have to come to work like the rest of us?"

She swallowed a lump in her throat. "I didn't know that you were interested."

His tiny fist slammed the desktop. "I'm your boss! Of course I'm interested! It's my responsibility to supervise your research and measure your progress. You must share your results with me. You're an employee of the Smithsonian, remember?"

"Yes, but…"

"No but's. Quit interrupting."

"But I think that someone entered my office and went through my data."

"Preposterous!" Depp waved off her complaint. "Look, Karen, you share with me and the Smithsonian, or you're out on your fanny. Got it?"

"Yes... of course... and I will... I mean..." Karen began to dissemble. Her anger fled and her face felt flushed. "But why did you cancel my presentation today? I have valuable data...I've made a remarkable discovery... I..."

"You have nothing, Mrs. Dumas; certainly nothing worth wasting the time of the most premier researchers in the country. I've seen your notes. Your work is worthless."

"What? When did you see..."

"I have my ways. I know what you're doing, and I'm sure it will lead to nothing. Effective immediately, organize your data and notes and deliver them to my office. I'm taking you off the Gould Stelae."

"No," she choked, gripping the folder. The agenda shook in her hand. Good Lord! she thought. The information he intended to steal was in the folder she held at this moment!

"What do you mean 'no,' Miss Dumas? You're an intelligent woman. Must I remind you that you have no say in the

matter? I can assign you any task I wish…and you're done with the Gould project!"

Karen stood speechless. Her eyes felt hot, as if she might burst into tears of exhausted frustration. How had this happened? Why? What had she done to deserve this kind of treatment? She had put all her energy, dedicated her life to the Gould bequest. This project could make her career, and this bald-headed creep was taking it from her. Anger rose within, only this time hard and cold as ice. She wanted to scratch-out his eyes.

"No," she said again, firmer this time. "I can't...won't, I mean... I…"

"You don't have any choice. Get it done, today." He looked at his wristwatch and smiled. "I have to run over to American University and bail out the Smithsonian's reputation."

"You had no right to cancel my presentation without permission. You have no real reason to take me off the Gould Stelae. I'd be happy to show you my results. I can..."

"Too late, Miss Dumas. And I took you off the agenda because no one," he pointed the pen at himself, "has had a chance to referee your work. Any presentation of data out of this department must go through a peer review process. It's the same at any university, any academic environment, Miss Dumas. You know that." He glanced at his watch again, then frowned. "I must be off. Be sure and have the Gould materials on my desk by late afternoon. You may go." He pointed the pen at the door.

"Please... I wish you would give me another chance, Dr. Depp. The Gould Stelae means a lot to me. I may have made a fantastic..."

"You have made a mess, Miss Dumas. The answer is no, and our conversation is ended." He ignored her and bent to retrieve materials from a bottom desk drawer.

She could barely move. Her jaw clenched. Had she screwed up? Did he have a grievance? No. He'd done a hatchet job on her. Resentment seethed and held her resolve firm. She would have to force herself to leave. Finally, unable to control herself, she said, "Dr. Depp?"

"Yes, what is it?" He looked up from his desk drawer and frowned, annoyed.

"This is for you, asshole." She raised her hand and shot him the finger. It felt good, and she finally smiled. Nothing like getting the last word. His mouth gaped with surprise, and she turned and strode from his office, passing a nervous Mrs. Dinty who sat clenching a handkerchief. Karen wadded the agenda and tossed it onto the secretary's desk.

"Mrs. Dinty," Karen said pleasantly, "please give my copy of the agenda to Dr. Death."

Karen navigated the endless, bland white corridors of the Smithsonian to her office. The hallway's fluorescent lights seemed eerie and surreal, and she felt lightheaded. She realized that she had been hyperventilating, and so she made an effort to control her breathing. What a jerk! What an asshole! How dare he talk to her like that! And take her off the Gould Stelae? Not a chance. She wouldn't do it. She wouldn't comply. She wouldn't, she wouldn't...

"Hello, again."

The professor from Mexico stood outside her door. She glared at him. Not now. She really didn't have time for this.

"Get it all straightened out?" he smiled pleasantly. "Took a while to find the snack shop. Big place, the Smithsonian," he offered.

"Mister... er..."

"Wolf. David Wolf. Please call me David."

"Mr. Wolf… I really can't talk right now. I've just had a...well I guess you could say I've just made a mess for myself." Karen visualized herself standing in Depp's office shooting him the finger. How could she have been so stupid?

Now he would probably fire her. "Can we talk later? I need time to sort some things out."

"You look a little flushed. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine... I guess." She pushed recalcitrant locks of hair behind her ear again, then mustered a wan smile.

"I've come a long way, Miss Dumas," he reminded her. "I must return to American University by noon. There are several presentations I want to hear." He smiled again. "You look as if you could use a cup of coffee, too. Want to join me downstairs so that we don't bother your colleague?"

"Huh... what colleague?"

"Oh... I saw a shadow through the window of your door. I assumed that you shared with someone."

Karen whirled to face the office door. She had locked it before going to Depp's office! Who else had a key? She tried the doorknob, and it turned. A large shadow loomed within, then disappeared as she pushed the door wide. "Who's here?" she called out.

"What's going on, Miss Dumas?" asked the professor.

She stepped inside. A window stood open and her desk had been rifled. The outline for her presentation was missing. Some of her data on the Gould stelae was strewn about the desk, chair and floor. Burglarized again! It had been planned. She knew it. But who? Depp? He said her research was worthless. Why would he break in if he thought her data meaningless? Besides, she had just left him in his office. He wouldn't have someone else do it, would he?

"Damn! Damn! Damn!" she stamped her foot, surveying the damage. David joined her inside and together they peered out the window, but saw no one or anything suspicious.

"Gee... archaeology isn't near this exciting in Mexico," he joked. "Shouldn't you call a security guard?"

"Yeah... sure... I guess." She looked at the mess of papers, then placed her folder securely under her arm and began to clean up the mess. Thank God she'd carried her translation

with her! What a perfectly horrible day. She ignored the Mexican professor and took stock of her situation. What were her options? She had just terminated her employment with the Smithsonian by shooting Depp the finger. They would never be able to work together again. Now that she thought about it, she didn't really care if she stayed at the museum or not. Problem was, though, that he might prevent her from finding a job elsewhere. Damn! She sagged with disappointment. What next? What now? Someone touched her shoulder, and she turned to face the Mexican.

"How about that coffee, Miss Dumas? You can tell me all about it."

Karen hesitated, looked at the gaping window, and then at the professor. She remembered that he claimed to have known Roy Gould and, though she had forgotten, that she had invited the Mexican archaeologist to talk with her when he attended the conference.

"Sure... why not," she replied. She paused, and then said, "I'm probably not going to be an employee of the Smithsonian after today. I... ah... had some words with my boss because he wants to take me off the Gould Stelae."

"No! Really?"

"Yes, and even if he doesn't, I'll probably quit."

The professor hesitated, as if measuring his words. "Roy was a grave robber, you know?" he offered enticingly.

"Do you know where he found the stelae?" His bait had fueled her obsession.

"Maybe the general area. Roy was a bit of a scoundrel in the old days before he made a few legitimate dollars and got respectable."

"I'll see you down stairs," she pointed vaguely toward the door, "I'm buying. I'll join you as soon as I report this to security. I want to hear all about Roy Gould."