BLOG ENTRY: IN A FOREIGN PLACE

Something was bothering me, but I couldn't think what.

I'd get this vibe. I might be standing in the lane, looking down towards the plaza while market stalls are still being set out. Staring at the flowers that crawl out of balconies, scatter like Christmas decorations over the streets. Or maybe I'd look up towards the blurry sky – the wire-mesh ceiling of an underground, "invisible" city.

Ek Naab.

I'd watch the people wandering by. I've lived in the city for three months, so they didn't bother to look twice at me. Instead I finally saw their normal, everyday faces. The way they moved sluggishly, as if through smoke.

It's the *air*. In the city. *It doesn't move*.

Finally, I understood.

There's no weather in Ek Naab. No rain, no wind. I can barely remember what it feels like to close my eyes against a breeze.

Then this morning I woke up with a memory of England. I remembered a cold day in Oxford, a day full of harsh, icy wind. I was playing football in the park with some friends. Tyler, Emmy; they were there. I was in goal, as always. Getting cold, really cold, from the wind.

Not a particularly memorable day. But for some reason it is all I can think about. I can even feel the ache of cold in my ears. Thought I'd forgotten what that felt like, living in a windless city. But no. A flash of memory and there it is again. Amazing.

Why can't I shake the memory? It's an ordinary day of a life I've left behind. I miss my friends a bit, just like you'd expect. . . It really shouldn't be that big of a deal.

Comment (1) from Saint_Emmy

Yo, Joshy, JOSH? What's this, what's this? Thought you said you were going to close your blog down. After the shenanigans with the postcards from Mexico and all. What about all your *sekrits*, huh? What a drama queen. Sometimes, you know, I think that if I hadn't seen you all beat up that morning on Port Meadow, I wouldn't have believed anything you told me.

You're so lame, it kills me. Course you miss me! Go on, admit it.

You don't reply to texts, you don't go on Facebook. It's the twenty-first century. You gotta INTER-ACT.

Reply from Josh

Hey! I didn't expect to see any comments here, Emmy – if you really are Emmy, that is, and not someone, oh, I don't know, from the Sect or the National Reconnaissance Office spying on me. AGAIN.

Comment (2) from Saint_Emmy

National Reconnaissance Office?! Just for fun, I looked them up.

You're either mental or you think I'm Miss Gullible if you think I believe the NRO ever spied on you.

There's my good ol' paranoid Josh. Course it's really Emmy. This isn't like that time with Mikey's sister turning out to be your blog stalker, TopShopPrincess, and not that girl you fancied – what was her name, Ollie?

I was in the mood to read your blog and it turns out my password still works. You're the one who said you were gonna close it down. Don't get weird with me.

I wish you were still in Oxford. I miss you. (There I've said it.) School is such a nightmare now you have no idea. Coursework, exams, gah. It never ends. Then I get to thinking of you swanning around in Mexico, in some fancy international school going to the beach at weekends.

You've been thinking about me too. Dreaming about me, even!

So why don't you write, hey? It's possible to be friends with someone on the other side of the world now, didn't you know?

I'm still mad at you for just going off to Mexico, by the way, and no farewell party or anything.

Ohhhh, Josh. It's been a long time since we played footy in the park. Those days, they're gone.

Reply from Josh

This is pretty strange, Emmy. I know for a fact I didn't tell you about this blog. And you didn't see me all beat up on Port Meadow. Did you? Unless my memory is playing tricks.

I'm gonna take a little while to think this over. Don't get mad if I don't respond for a bit.

Comment (3) from Saint_Emmy

Whatever, dude. You sound a bit out of it. Btw, you're not the only one whose memory is getting dodgy. I don't remember any Tyler playing footy with us. Do you mean Tyler Marks from your capoeira?

"Another day in the upside-down world of Josh Garcia?" a voice says, very casual.

I'm standing on my hands on the edge of the cavernous sinkhole in the middle of Ek Naab. A face comes into my field of view.

Benicio.

I lower myself as slowly as possible. So slowly that it hurts. Total control at the edge of the abyss.

Benicio looks me up and down for a second. He seems vaguely embarrassed.

"Am I disturbing you?"

You know you are.

I was trying to figure out how come Emmy knows things she shouldn't, couldn't know. Until he broke my concentration. Yet I pause, shake my head, wipe hands on my vest. "Nope."

He flashes that bashful grin, the one that girls love so

much, the grin that makes me want to punch him in the face.

"Seems like it's some kinda meditation for you, Josh. A ritual, you know? Every morning, standing on your hands at the edge of the *cenote*. Daring yourself to fall in?"

I take a breath. "It's just a capoeira exercise. Best done every day." Our eyes meet. "I could teach you."

Oh yeah. I'd love to see what you're made of, cousin.

Benicio grins yet again. Does he want to DIE? "*No manches, guey,*" he drawls, with a little jab at my shoulder. *Stop messing, dude*. "I've seen you in action, man. You'd kill me."

I look down so he won't see the glint in my eye. I'm as tall as Benicio now, but my arms and shoulders are bigger than his. Skinny student. Nerdy geek-boy.

"You could always work out," I suggest. I hope he doesn't. How can Ixchel like him that way? He's skin and bone.

Benicio nods. "I should. Some of the guys have been talking about that. Ever since you got here, and all the girls started admiring the muscled look."

I suppress a smile. *Not quite all of the girls.* "Yeah, well. It takes work."

"Sure, I know it. Well, here I guess we've been a little obsessed by our studies. But since the whole Ix Codex thing . . . and you moving to Ek Naab . . . well . . . the mood has changed."

Something jars for a second. Why mention the Ix Codex? Seems funny to bring up the book that details a plan to save the world from disaster in 2012 in a conversation about impressing girls. I brush it off, for now.

"Now you want to train?" I say. "Learn capoeira?"

He nods again. "All of us in Ek Naab, we hit the books pretty hard," he says. "And for what?" He sighs deeply. "Maybe we should have some fun now, while we still can. Concentrate on the physical, not the intellectual."

While we still can? He's really not making sense now.

But before I can ask Benicio what he's talking about, Ixchel arrives. She's wearing a short, black-and-white tartan skirt. They've become insanely fashionable in Ek Naab, ever since my mum brought a few over from Oxford. It makes Ixchel look like a cute girl from a manga comic. Fantastic.

Every sense in my body turns its focus on her. I'm like a sunflower rotating towards the sun.

It's the only way I can survive. OK, she's with him; she's chosen the scrawny, brainy fly-boy. So I'm left only with impossible dreams, dreams that I can't bear to give up.

One day Ixchel will be with me.

That's what I've decided. No idea when or how but . . . one day. In the meantime I take every opportunity to breathe her in. The way she looks, her voice, the way she smells. If I ever get a chance to touch her, I remember that especially.

Like some freakish stalker. Obsessed. I gave up trying to

fight it about a month ago, when I realized that over two months had gone by during which my every waking moment was filled with thoughts of Ixchel.

I thought I'd been obsessed before. About my dad's disappearance, about travelling back in time to change things.

By comparison, they were just hobbies.

Is it like this for everyone? Because I feel as if I've gone insane. I don't even want to get better.

Is she thinking about me? She has to be. There's something between us, I know I'm not imagining it. But for some reason . . . she's with Benicio.

Jeez. It *can't* be like this for everyone else. We'd all be walking around like dozy zombies if this were normal. Is it something the Sect has done to me, when they genetically engineered something into me? I can't stop wondering.

What's me, what's normal, and what have they changed?

"Hey, Ixchel," Benicio says before I can speak. He gives her an affectionate smile, obviously appealing for her attention. Ixchel swings away slightly, looking at me.

"So this is where you hang out in the mornings?"

"Yeah, that's right. It's today's big news story."

Ixchel pulls a face. "You don't have to get sarcastic."

"I'm not being sarcastic," I growl. "British understatement. We're famous for it, right, Benicio?"

"Well, it's a nice country," Benicio admits. "But I never really got that whole Britishness thing."

You liked it at the time, I want to say. *You liked all the attention from those Oxford University students, too.* But I don't; instead, I bite my lip.

"I just saw Carlos Montoyo," Ixchel says, smiling first at me, then Benicio. "He was looking for you at your apartment, Josh. He wants you to go see him right away."

"Better hop to it, buddy," Benicio grins. "Be a good boy now."

I wrench my attention away from Ixchel. (I wasn't actually looking at her, of course, but I've learned how to look without staring. It's kind of the same way you look-but-don't-look at the sun.)

"A 'good boy'? Huh. Funny, coming from you."

"Don't you know what Montoyo wants? Maybe you saw it in a dream."

I can sense myself bristling. "Leave it out."

"Hey!" Benicio shrugs. "You're the one who talks to the dead. Maybe they told you what Montoyo wants? Like when your dead sister came to you in a dream and showed you the secret hideout of the Sect of Huracan at Lake Bacalar. . . Who am I to argue with your mystical powers?"

I summon all my self-control and force a grin. "Can't blame you."

Only Ixchel remains serious. "What amazes me," she says,

"is that you still question it. After everything that's happened! You must have something weird going on with your mind, Josh. Some kind of extrasensory power."

I turn to Ixchel. In a low voice I say, "That must be it."

Extrasensory power, hey? I love you. Read my mind, Ixchel. Did you hear that?

I watch closely, but she doesn't react. Of course not.

Benicio smiles, trying to flirt with Ixchel again. It turns my stomach, so I start to walk.

"I'm gonna go and . . . write my blog," I tell them.

"Oh, you're still doing that?" Ixchel sounds interested. Benicio chuckles.

"Blog Boy! I love how there's someone here who's a bigger geek than me."

"That's right," I say, turning to face him. "A bigger geek, bigger and stronger than you, probably almost as good as Tyler at capoeira by now and after two weeks of lessons, already better at handling a motorbike than you. Just wait until I start taking flying lessons, Benicio. You might not be the pilot supremo for ever."

Benicio erupts into peals of laughter. "Better at handling a motorbike? *Caramba*, Josh. Now that is funny."

"I'm better," I say quietly. "And you've seen me ride, so you know it. Want me to prove it?"

My cousin just shakes his head, grinning in amazement. "Prove it? Sure, sure! Why not?"

I don't move. "OK. Where. When?"

"*Pues ahorita, guey, ahorita!* 'Right away' sounds like a good time to me."

I'm a little surprised that he's calling my bluff, but I don't show it. "OK," I repeat. "Let me get my bike gear."

"What about Montoyo?" he says. There's an edge of challenge to his tone.

"Montoyo can wait."

"Oooff." Benicio claps, twice, pretending to be impressed. "Tough guy."

If Ixchel wasn't here, I'd probably thump him right now. But she is, so I just stand there with thunder in my eyes.

"I'll pick you up at your place, cousin," Benicio says with a smirk. He turns away, then stops. "Oh, and by the way, who is that other guy you were talking about, Josh? Who's 'Tyler'?"

Benicio's teasing about Tyler is obviously designed to annoy me. It's like he enjoys reminding me that I don't have any new friend in Ek Naab who's as good as Tyler.

It'll be a pleasure to show him up in front of Ixchel.

I try not to think about Ixchel's reaction to my motorbike challenge. I wasn't really focusing on her during that exchange, but now that I cast my mind back, I can't avoid the memory of her look of astonishment. She didn't *seem* impressed, now I think about it. Mainly stunned, actually.

I grab my new leather jacket and motorbike helmet. I'm gonna be wearing motorbike gear and riding a bike in front of Ixchel. How can that be anything but cool?

Life in Ek Naab might be weird, and it seems sometimes that I can do nothing but stand by and watch myself become a scary stalker-guy around Ixchel, but still. . .

Some of the new stuff I've been doing, learning to drive a car, a motorbike, all this new gear . . . it's pretty great.

Benicio picks me up outside, just as he promised. He's gone for the casual look. He's in blue jeans, cowboy boots and a blue checked shirt with the wristbands turned up once. Suddenly I feel like a little kid getting all dressed up. But it's too late to go back and change now – I'd look like an indecisive, anxious idiot.

My cousin will always have four years on me. I wish I could get used to that. Wish I could stop comparing myself to him.

It's kind of impossible, though. Ixchel likes *him*, not me. And when I'm not busy hating Benicio . . . well, I like him too. He's a cool guy. Funny, because that's why I hate him.

I follow Benicio to the grandest building in Ek Naab, the one that fronts as a deluxe eco-hotel. The elevator in the ornate marble-lined lobby takes us up to the surface level. I've heard that there's a false display that is programmed into all the elevators so that it can look to outsiders as if the lowest floor is S – the *sotano* (basement). When in fact there are three storeys below – into the underground city of Ek Naab. It's "just in case" anyone from the outside world ever has to visit. In which case they'd be shown the exemplary eco-resort with its solar-heated swimming pools and the outdoor blue *cenote*, the lush tropical gardens, the surrounding farms on which all food served in the resort is grown, the pretty white Spanish-style church with its orange grove and the cemetery in which they bury everyone who's ever lived in Ek Naab. My dad, too.

Privately, though, I've heard it muttered that if the Mexican government were to realize there's anything more than fruit-growing and eco-tourism going on in Ek Naab . . . things could get very serious.

Ek Naab's location is utterly secret. It has to be. They guard the secret knowledge of the Erinsi – the "People of Memory". A civilization so ancient that there's almost no record of their existence. A civilization with knowledge of time travel, sophisticated bioengineering and anti-gravity propulsion.

But most of all – the last Earth civilization to be finished off by the galactic superwave. Their computer technology was wrecked overnight by the superwave's electromagnetic energy. Their civilization collapsed. Who knows when it happened to the Erinsi – but they knew when the superwave would be around again: 22 December, AD 2012.

A Mayan god (or was he really a time traveller?) called Itzamna copied the ancient Erinsi writings into the four Books of Itzamna. The books – or codices – have been guarded in Ek Naab since Itzamna's time, around 350 BC. One of the four books – the Ix Codex – went missing for centuries when it was stolen by a king of the Mayan Snake Kingdom, a place we know nowadays as Calakmul. That was back in AD 653.

The men in my family – the Bakabs of Ix – have been hunting for the Ix Codex ever since. We're the only ones who can touch it and survive the blast of bio-toxin that hits

anyone within a five-metre radius of the book's deadly cover. A gene protects us, just as a gene protects every Bakab – the ones who protect the other Books of Itzamna: the Kan, Cuauc and Muluc codices. A bit before my fourteenth birthday, I found the codex buried near the crater lake of Catemaco, in the Mexican state of Veracruz.

Itzamna named his four sons – the Bakabs – with the names of the four corners of the Mayan universe. But I reckon Itzamna wasn't even a Mayan. Were the Bakabs really his sons? Lately, I've been wondering.

The people of Ek Naab are definitely descended from Itzamna, as well as from those Bakabs. And from a bunch of other folk who managed to get into the Cult of Itzamna and live in the hidden community of Ek Naab – which means *dark water.* Including quite a few Spanish and other visitors who discovered the secret city over the years. The famous American explorer who discovered the Mayan ruins, John Lloyd Stephens, for one. I'm descended from John Lloyd Stephens too, as it turns out. On my great-grandmother's side.

It's a small place, Ek Naab. Small and windless.

Stifling.

We stroll through the gardens and pass gardeners trimming the bougainvillea. When I came to live here with my mother I wondered about two things: how come such a small place had so many smart people? I mean, Ixchel finished high

school at fourteen! The ancient languages stuff she's studying now is university level. That's not even unusual here. Benicio is a pilot and an aeronautical engineer. He's only just turned eighteen.

The other thing I wondered was – what do you do if you're not smart enough for that? What if you're happy to be a gardener or a cook?

Well, it seems that gardeners and cooks and cleaners and doctors and aeronautical engineers all get paid more or less the same. Housing is all provided by the city; most people live in similar small apartments. You can get any food or clothes you need in the daily market. There's a kind of money, but it only works in Ek Naab.

Call me old-fashioned, but I don't like it. It's creepy having so many people know who you are and know your business. Carlos Montoyo getting together with my mother, for example. The news of that spread across Ek Naab within one day. Lorena, the chief scientist, saw the way Montoyo held my mother's hand when she was giving us the results of my genetic tests. The next day, everyone knew about what Lorena had seen.

"It's so nice for Carlos," people tell me. They actually stop me in the street to say it.

"Excuse me," I want to say, "but I don't care about Carlos Montoyo's love life. I wish my mother would have respected my dad's memory for a bit longer. A couple of years, at least!"

I don't, of course. Instead I give them this weak smile and nod and try to remember who they are: second cousin, third cousin once removed?

Everyone's interested in Carlos Montoyo. He's the richest guy in Ek Naab – but not with money.

The real privileges of Ek Naab are this: access to secrets and access to the outside world.

Carlos Montoyo isn't the mayor of Ek Naab – that's Chief Sky Mountain. Montoyo's apartment is nothing special. It's the same as the one I share with my mother: two small bedrooms, a lounge and a kitchen. But in terms of secrets and access to the outside world, Montoyo is top dog. Partly because his job allows him to spend much of his time posing as a lecturer at Yucatan University in Merida. I've heard rumours that his apartment in Merida is pretty palatial.

Benicio is one of the Sky Guardians, the Muwan pilots who patrol the airspace near Ek Naab. The way I see it, though, Benicio is more like Montoyo's personal gopher, his fixer.

Benicio hasn't said a word to me since we set off. I'm lost in my own thoughts, so I scarcely notice. But as we pass the open-air blue *cenote*, he sighs. Then he turns to me with a tough-guy glance.

"You've guessed about me and Ixchel, haven't you?"

I stare ahead and keep moving. I realize that I need to come up with a speedy, breezy reply if I'm going to be able to seem convincingly unbothered.

I open my mouth but nothing comes out.

Benicio continues to stare at me for a few seconds. "All right," he says in a low voice. "I knew it."

I find my voice. "You knew what?"

"You're angry with me. Because she's your intended."

"You know as well as me, mate," I tell him, "that Ixchel and me have never agreed to that arranged marriage thing."

If Benicio has anything to add on the matter, the way I closed down the discussion seems to stop him.

We arrive at the garage where all the road vehicles in Ek Naab are stored. Most of them are pickup trucks designed to be used on the ranches. There are about eight motorbikes. Benicio's is the Harley. Gently, he prises it free of the stand and pushes it out. Then he points at a second bike, the 250cc Honda that I've been learning to drive.

"What, and you get the Harley?" I say, annoyed.

"You don't know how to handle the Harley. The Honda can go fast enough. We're racing in a banana plantation, Josh. Bananas! Not exactly the highway to Cancun."

"Just as well," I mutter, grabbing hold of the Honda by the handlebars. "Tyler would never believe I was riding a Harley in the outside world, anyway."

Benicio eases his head into a Shoei motorcycle helmet. "You keep mentioning this guy Tyler," he observes. "Why?"