

I might be dead by the time this book finds you.

If it ever finds you.

Seven months ago, I sent out a secret message to any god-borns, hoping some might still be alive. I haven't heard back from anyone, which could mean (a) you're not out there, or (b) the magic hasn't found you. Or—and I don't even want to think about this alternative—(c) you exist and the magic has found you, but you've decided to ignore it. If that's the case, you've got muchos problemas.

Optimistic me wonders if I didn't write down *enough* for my message to have any power. Maybe it's like buying a lottery ticket—the more you try, the better your chances. Except my uncle Hondo has bought probably hundreds of tickets and all he ever won was a buck twenty-five.

So consider this my last-ditch effort, just in case something happens to me on the quest I'm about to take. I didn't want to leave you in the dark all alone.

I'm using magic ink that only godborns can see, the same kind I used for my last secret message, which was tacked on to the story I had to write for the Maya gods. They wanted me to bare my soul, for a couple of reasons. First, because they're mitoterros who can't keep their noses out of anything. Second,

because they wanted to use my misadventure as a warning so no one else would ever defy them again. To make sure I didn't lie (I totally would have), they forced me to use special paper that would be able to tell if I wasn't writing the truth.

Knowing my story is in the gods' hands still keeps me up at night. There were some pretty embarrassing things in it that I would have preferred to keep private—like what I really think of Brooks.

The best thing about her? She's still willing to go along for the ride. She gets that I have to find my dad, Hurakan. He's a big jefe—a creator god, for gods' sake! He doesn't deserve to be crammed into some teeny tiny dark prison, choking on dust and memories just because he broke the Sacred Oath and claimed me as his son in front of the whole god council.

I owe him. Big-time. A favor for a favor.

Uno por otro.

And no matter how long it takes, and no matter what I have to do, I'm going to rescue him. Because if it weren't for him, I wouldn't be a godborn. I wouldn't have the blood of a creator *and* a destroyer.

I wouldn't be the Storm Runner.

So, do me a favor. If you find this and you hear that I died, could you punch the gods in their stupid faces for me?

Thanks,

Zane Obispo

P.S. I wrote this letter before everything happened. Before hell, before the Red Queen and the death magician and the

evil bats. Before the end. I almost burned this note, but a certain someone said it marked the beginning and all stories need true beginnings. So here it is. The beginning of the end.

1



Killing one's enemies during Lent is probably
a mortal sin.

But what choice did I have? I didn't pick the timing of all this. Maybe I'd get lucky and rescuing my dad wouldn't involve meeting any evil forces of utter darkness. Or blood spilling.

Knowing the Maya gods? Fat chance.

"Paddle harder!" I shouted.

Brooks sat in the front of the double kayak as rain pelted both of us. We were paddling through a mangrove on the remote island in Mexico where Ixtab, the queen of the underworld, had stashed me and my peeps a few months ago. She did it to keep us safe from the Maya gods, who thought I was dead—a fate they felt I deserved for being the offspring of a human and a god. Holbox was a pretty sweet place to live, unless you needed to get anywhere quickly, like we did just then.

The island's mangrove was a winding, lush channel where crocodiles and snakes hung out. Not my favorite kayaking spot, to be honest, but it was the only way to reach the west inlet.

That's where our "drop point" was. Jazz, our friend the giant, was risking his life by supplying us with sensitive inside information. He had to send it in secret, the old-fashioned

(epically slow) way so there'd be no trail leading back to him. I know what you're thinking—why not just send a text? Good idea, except that Ixtab's shadow magic was surrounding the island, to protect us from prying eyes, and it made things like smartphones and Wi-Fi go haywire. Plus, Jazz was under constant god surveillance. Any suspicious communication and the giant would buy himself a one-way ticket to Xib'alb'a. I felt for the guy.

We'd gotten the date and time of the drop from Old Man Pedro, who, on most days, you can find either painting a mural on the side of a building or sitting in the shade with a cerveza. When he's not doing those things, he's apparently coordinating these sorts of "messages."

"We could've just flown!" I hollered, trying to make a solid point.

"You know I don't fly in the rain!" Brooks shouted.

Right. We just kayak in it! I didn't know what her hang-up with water was. She'd gotten so much stronger as a shape-shifter, and get this: she could not only shift into a hawk, but a seriously grande hawk. I wished I had managed to master my powers like that. We both needed to be at our peak if we were going to succeed in this crazy quest.

"We only have two minutes," I called, my voice coming out in a strangled panic. "We're not going to make it!"

And we'd probably never get this chance again. Pedro had made that clear in his grouchy way. *You miss the drop, don't come crying to me.*

We were about to get the last piece of the puzzle—the exact location of my dad's prison. Supposedly, the gods had

upped security and they moved him every month or two. He was due to be relocated again soon, and I had to bust him out before we lost track of him.

Too bad Fuego couldn't grow wings. That's what I'd named my combination walking cane/deadly spear, because it was as fast as fire. Back in the Old World, the Sparkstriker had pounded it with lightning, bound it with old magic, and infused it with my dad's blood. As a result, it was indestructible and had perfect aim. It also helped me walk without my usual limp, the result of one leg being shorter than the other. I usually only relied on that feature when I was running from a demon or something. My limp doesn't bother me like it used to—it's part of who I am.

When Fuego wasn't in cane or spear mode, it took the form of a letter opener (that was Ixtab's idea—why couldn't it change into something cool, like a dagger?), which I wore in my sock. That made things easier when I needed both hands. Like now.

Brooks gave me a murderous glare over her shoulder. "You so owe me, Obispo." The air glimmered blue, then green, and in an instant, she transformed into her giant-hawk self. She circled overhead with a loud cry (which I interpreted as *I really hate you right now*) and dropped low enough for me to be able to reach one of her thick talons.

Okay, so no piggyback ride today. I hesitated until she gave me her killer *take-it-or-leave-it* look. With a grunt, I grabbed hold of her slippery claw with both hands, and she took off. I must've looked like an idiot, dangling from her like a piece of soggy string cheese.

Whatever.

Brooks struggled against the hostile headwinds. The rain lashed us, and the sky darkened. She was seriously going to kill me when this was all over. But who could've forecast the stupid storm? I'm the *Storm Runner*, not the *Storm Predictor*.

You got this, I told her telepathically, trying to sound as cheerful and supportive as I could under the circumstances. (Note to godborns: Cheery optimism can be a butt saver when used just right.) Plus, there were a few crocodiles in the vicinity that looked hungry, and I didn't want to give Brooks any reason to drop me into their open mouths. Let's face it—she does sort of have a temper.

Maybe the storm will slow down the delivery, too, I said.

Stop talking. You're distracting me.

A minute later, Brooks swooped down to the inlet shore and dumped me like an old melon. I rolled across the packed white sand, missing a pointy piece of driftwood by a couple inches.

Brooks shifted back to her human form just as the storm raced away and the sky settled into a grayish calm. I wiped the sand off my arms. "Ha! We made it. Great flying . . . but, uh"—I lowered my voice—"not so good landing."

"It was a *brilliant* landing. You're alive, aren't you?" Brooks twisted her brown hair over her shoulder. It had gotten a shade lighter over the last few months with all the time we spent at the playa. "Let's see you do any better."

I should probably tell you the hard truth now, because you need to know in case it happens to you. After my dad, Hurakan, claimed me, and after I took down the god of death

with my mad fire skills, something happened to me. I couldn't control my power again the way I had that day. I could only make lemon-size fireballs that fizzled faster than Pop Rocks on your tongue. So, being claimed by a godly parent doesn't necessarily equal auto-awesome.

"The package is late." Brooks tapped her foot and looked around. "Didn't Pedro say six thirty-two p.m. sharp?"

"What's that?" I asked, pointing up at the sky. A massive red-feathered thing emerged from a thick cloud bank. "Could that be the delivery dude?" I asked.

The bird (if you could call it that) had tiny chicken wings, gangly long legs, an anvil-shaped head, and a beak that looked more like a meat tenderizer. To say the thing was ugly would be a huge understatement. I wondered how the poor bird had gotten roped into this job.

Brooks squinted. "Is that a coconut in its claws?"

The bird zoomed toward the beach, then suddenly stopped in midair and shuddered. I followed the bird's gaze behind me. A wall of black mist rose up from the beach, slowly taking the form of my hellhound, Rosie. For some people, it could be pretty unnerving to have a dog twice the size of a lion that could appear out of thin air. When I'd found her as a boxer-dalmatian mutt wandering the New Mexico desert years ago, she was just skin and bones barely weighing thirty pounds. Ever since she went to the underworld and was "modified" by Ixtab, Rosie's snout reached the top of my ribs, which says a lot, because I'm practically six feet tall.

No wonder the chicken-winged bird was terrified. The

way Rosie was looking at it, you'd think she wanted the bird for a pre-dinner snack. She probably did.

"Rosie, back!" I commanded.

Ignoring me, the hellhound growled and bolted toward the ocean. She seriously needed to go to obedience school!

The bird's eyes went wide. *Eep!* it cried as it spun around and flew away.

"Hey, wait!" I shouted. "The coconut!"

For some reason, Jazz liked to send messages inside produce items. Last time it was a rotting avocado wishing us a Merry Christmas.

Eep! Eep! The bird was clearly too spooked to come back.

Brooks grunted. "Looks like we're going to have to go get the coconut ourselves."

I grabbed hold of her shoulders from behind, and she shifted into a hawk. A second later, we were airborne and whizzing toward the bird, which kept glancing over its shoulder with pure terror in its eyes.

Rosie leaped through the waves, howling and shooting streams of fire twenty feet into the air.

"STEAK!" I yelled.

That's the command to make her stop. Ha. She acted like she didn't even hear me. Faker.

It's her nature to hunt, Brooks said.

But could she not hunt the delivery bird?

The clouds thickened, masking the red creature. All I saw was its tail streaking through the gloom.

Rosie was keeping pace. "She won't hurt you!" I yelled to

the bird just as my dog hurled a torrent of fire epic enough to rival a dragon. "Just wait until we get home!" I shouted to Rosie.

Brooks was fast, though, and we were gaining. Thirty feet.

Twenty.

Fifteen.

And then something changed. I blinked to be sure. Up ahead, the ashy horizon had a long, ragged tear in it, just like in the Old World, when I'd thought the sky was going to rip open.

By the time I realized the seam was there, it was too late. The bird had disappeared through it.

The coconut tumbled into the sea.

And Brooks slammed against an invisible wall.