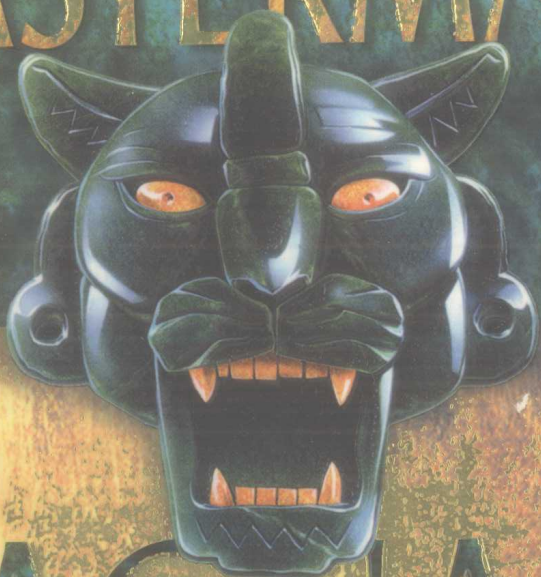


DANIEL
EASTERMAN



JAGUAR
THE
MASK

THE JAGUAR MASK

DANIEL EASTERMAN



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THE JAGUAR MASK

Daniel Easterman was born in Ireland in 1949. He is the author of eleven critically-acclaimed novels.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Fiction

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The Seventh Sanctuary

The Ninth Buddha

Brotherhood of the Tomb

Night of the Seventh Darkness

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K

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fundamentalism and the Rushdie affair*

AS JONATHAN AYCLIFFE

Naomi's Room

Whispers in the Dark

The Vanishment

The Matrix

The Lost

A Shadow on the Wall

The Talisman

To Beth, in the year of our silver wedding.
'It was always you.'

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Lacandón Forest

Chiapas State

Southern Mexico

12 November

Noon

The pyramid seemed to rock in the sunlight. Leo squinted his eyes and watched it regain balance. It was like a giant cardboard cutout, as fragile as glass, protected from the world by the dense rainforest that hemmed it in on every side. High up on its east flank, a sapodilla tree grew at an angle. On its flat top, a long rectangular temple seemed to teeter.

His pace quickened as he neared it, as it had quickened three times every day since his arrival. He still couldn't get over the thrill of having an untouched ruin of this quality under his own direction. He'd led the dig since day one, and for most of that time he'd been inside the pyramid itself, working with his hands. He'd been the one to find the tunnel that led from top to bottom of the structure, his hands had cleared away more rubble than anyone's.

The great stone edifice was high at two hundred and twenty feet, almost as high as the tallest pyramid at Tikal. The steps on each of its four sides were vertiginously steep and potentially dangerous. Centuries ago, the whole

thing would have been painted bright red, but the rains and sunlight of all the years since then had washed it clean of pigment, leaving the original stone to crumble and crack at its own slow pace.

Leo looked up at the steeply-rising flank of the pyramid and pondered – as he did two or three times a day – on whether to take the stairs or the lift. There were one hundred and fifty-six steps in all, shallow steps that rose without interruption to the flat platform on which the temple was built. Some of the team couldn't cope with them, either because they were too steep and dangerous, or because they were just too damned punishing. A handful of the younger set made it their religious duty to take the stairs on every occasion.

The lift was a wonder. Built entirely from wood and ropes, it rose to the top, propped against the pyramid by elaborate scaffolding. A light cage was powered by an electric generator at the bottom. On reaching the top, there was a short walkway to get you to the platform. Anybody who couldn't handle the lift or the stairs stayed at ground level, clearing paths to the other buildings, still hidden behind thick curtains of trees.

Leo sighed and stepped into the lift. He was doing it more often now. At thirty-five, he was a geriatric to most of the expedition, but he liked to think he was still capable of making the climb, and resented every occasion he decided against it. He pressed the button that started the generator. The entire structure began to vibrate, then to quiver as the cage began its mad ascent.

Leo had lost count of how many times he'd watched a scene like this unfold before his eyes: green trees, flowers of every colour, birds with painted feathers, moss-covered ruins hidden deep among the foliage. Apart from teenage visits to the best-known tourist sites – Chichén Itzá, Tikal,

Palenque, Copán, and the rest – he'd taken part in an expedition every season since he was twenty. Yet however many times he came here, to one forest or another, to a half-reconstructed site or a freshly-discovered site like this one, he never lost the sense of wonder and excitement that had urged him to study Mayan archaeology in the first place.

The cage came to a shuddering halt and he stepped nimbly on to the walkway. Above him, the narrow structure called Temple 3 blocked off the sun. The pyramid below it was structured like a Russian doll. It had been built on top of an earlier pyramid, which had itself been constructed on top of a much older temple. Not long after starting to excavate the main pyramid, they'd found a secret entrance giving access to a network of passages and staircases. Treacherous, unlit steps led steeply down through the superstructure. They hadn't quite reached the bottom yet, but they expected to find a burial chamber of some sort when they did.

Leo stepped through the open entrance to the temple. Once inside, the thick stone walls blotted out the sounds of the forest. He was in another world here, a man-made world of shadows and mysteries, where nothing natural or bright belonged. They had run strings of electric lights from here right through to the temple at the foot of the stairs. A separate oil-fired generator powered the lights, chugging away contentedly in a corner of the temple.

In the artificial light, the brightly-coloured frescoes that covered the walls stood out almost jarringly against their stuccoed background. They were as familiar to him as the walls in any computer game he'd ever got stuck in. The cosy domesticity suggested by the proportions was belied by the painted images. This was a house, but not any

house: its builders had called it *u y-atoch k'uh*, the house of the gods.

All about him, now in shadow, now in light danced representations of men – never women – who had once lived and died in this city without a name. A king named Balam Ahau Chaan sat on his jaguar throne, dispensing justice. On another panel, men in huge *quetzal*-feathered headdresses fought a raging battle against their enemies from a nearby city. Some of the warriors wore costumes of jaguar skin, and their lances were wrapped in the same material. A third scene showed prisoners being condemned to death, and the acts of sacrifice that followed, each condemned man led in turn to have his chest torn open and his heart ripped out.

Catching sight of a lifted hand clutching a still-beating organ, Leo gave a little shudder and walked on. As he reached the top of the staircase that would take him down into the heart of the pyramid, he paused. A red light had gone on, showing that someone was coming up. The stairway was too narrow to allow two people to pass. After a week or so of arguments about who had right of way, up-goers or down-comers, they'd given in and asked Barney Kavanagh, the party's boffin, to rig up this advance-warning system.

Moments later, Diane Krauss's head appeared in the stairhead.

'Doctor Mallory. Great. I was just coming to fetch you.'

'Is anything wrong?'

He noticed she was wearing yet another fetching outfit, a cerise designer T-shirt over jeans so tight he was amazed her legs hadn't succumbed to oxygen starvation long ago. It would all be filthy by evening, but tomorrow morning she'd be wearing something completely different.

'Wrong? No, sir. We just broke through. There's a wall right ahead of us. Professor Jessop thinks it could be the chamber.'

'No sign of a door?'

'Not yet, but we're looking.'

'I'll come down. Are you staying up here, or . . . ?'

'Hell, no. I don't want to miss this. It's like Tutankhamen. Kinda.'

He pressed the button that would alert anyone at the bottom that they were on their way down. Diane led the way into the stairwell. She was a senior sophomore from Chicago, one of the two universities participating in the dig. The other was Cambridge, to which Leo was attached as a Senior Fellow at the newly-established Centre for Mesoamerican Studies. He caught sight of Diane's beautifully-rounded posterior preceding him down the narrow stairs, and decided he'd been cooped up in the forest for too long.

'Sir, are you eyeing my butt?'

'I'm sorry?'

'You heard me. Butt is plain English.'

'Not where I come from, Diane. And I'm not eyeing it. I'm admiring it. From where I'm looking, I don't have much choice. It's right ahead of me.'

'There's more to me than my butt.'

'There is, indeed, Diane, and I'm very well aware of it.'

'Why don't you close your eyes?'

'If I close my eyes, I'll fall. If I fall, I'll hit you and send you crashing to a well-deserved death at the foot of this staircase. You have a choice: death or admiration.'

They continued their mock bickering to the foot of the stairs. It was only as they came near the end that Leo realized why Diane had kept the banter going so long

– she was frightened to be alone in that sombre, claustrophobic passage, squeezed in underneath thousands of tons of rock.

He couldn't blame her: the pyramid scared the hell out of him as well. Breathless, he tried to imagine what it must have been like down there centuries ago, when the staircase had first been created, without electricity, in the presence of dark gods.

Maddox was there, wearing his battered panama for God knows what reason. The Filbert twins stood a few yards away, dressed in identical clothes, swaying imperceptibly to left and right, as if moving to music only they could hear. The Ramírez girl was just by the stairway, hand in hand with her newly-acquired American boyfriend, Leroy Lamont. She turned as he came to the foot of the stairs and smiled at him. That smile, he thought, as others had thought before him, wondering how he might burn it from his memory when they packed up here and he went home to a cold and frosty England.

Bill Jessop came shuffling out from behind the corner of the little temple next to which they were all standing. Leo sometimes wondered how Bill, with his outsize belly, ever managed to work his way down the stairs, much less get up them again. Bill was his deputy, fifteen years his senior, a full professor at Chicago, who had never built any sort of reputation in the field. That didn't stop him thinking he was the Messiah of Mexican archaeology. As a result, he resented Leo, and all the more so since it had begun to look as though this could be the start of the most important excavation in Central America since Lhuillier opened the burial chamber at Palenque.

'How are things down here, Bill?'

'Fucking awful. We should have gone in from outside, like I said.'

'We came in from above. If it goes wrong, let me take the blame. Now, what's the problem?'

'OK, you work it out. We just found a false wall. In the temple.'

'Like we expected.'

'Not me. I never expect anything on a dig.'

Leo took care not to point out that Bill had only ever participated in five or six digs in a career spanning thirty years. He wouldn't have been here now if it hadn't been that Leo required a counterpart from the Chicago side.

He looked up to see Diane smiling teasingly at him from further down. A narrow corridor separated the inner wall of the pyramid from the little temple it enclosed. The light was poor this far down, as though the generator was unable to push the waves hard enough along the wires. A musty smell pervaded everything. It was hard to work down here for long stretches. He smiled back weakly, telling himself that he mustn't let her get to him.

He stepped into the temple and walked across the rough floor. It scared him sometimes to think of other feet walking here centuries ago, performing God knows what ceremonies in the dark. All about him, the dimly-lit figures of gods and priests, warriors and ceremonial dancers stood frozen in time or out of it, their colours as fresh as they had been when the temple had been sealed up.

The false wall had already been breached, leaving a sizeable gap in the west side of the temple. A video camera had already been set up next to it, attached to a flexible endoscope that would permit visual access to most parts of whatever room or chamber lay beyond. Leo glanced at the extent of wall that had been torn down already and bit his lip, swearing silently. He'd have a word with Jessop later on, maybe more than a word.

'Anything visible through there?'

One of the twins appeared beside him. He genuinely couldn't tell one from the other. They claimed their extreme thinness made them an asset down here, but Leo was more impressed by their knowledge of Mayan archaeology. Leo understood that they came from Duluth, Minnesota, a city whose most celebrated sons were Bob Dylan and Ernie Nevers. On account of the baseball caps they sometimes sported, they were nicknamed the Minnesota Twins. They wore black at all times, and kept their hair short and flat against their skulls. Rumour had it that Bill was screwing one or both of them. Leo wished him luck.

'We can't see the back of this wall,' she said. Her voice was softer than the severe cut of clothes and hair suggested. Maybe she was Dorothy. 'But I've not been able to make out any frescoes or carvings ahead or to the side. Apart from . . .' She hesitated. 'Why don't you take a look at it yourself?'

He bent down opposite the little CCTV monitor, while Dorothy – if it was Dorothy – manipulated the camera. Behind them, the others had entered the temple and were standing silently, watching. Dorothy pressed a button, and a bright light came on behind the wall.

Leo watched as the endoscope panned over walls and floor. It revealed a short landing leading on to at least two steps down. His reading of the inscriptions had been right: there *was* a burial chamber underneath the temple.

He looked at Dorothy. Her sister Dorothea had come to stand beside her; or perhaps the other way round.

'Dorothy, you said . . .'

By way of answer, she swung the endoscope up. Over the steps hung a low corbelled vault. Just above its lowest point a skilled mason – probably a scribe belonging to the city's royal family – had carved a single glyph. Leo

strained to make it out, but the endoscope would not stretch far enough. For all that, the outlines of the square, elaborately carved figure awakened echoes at the back of his mind.

'Do we break it down?' Bob Maddox, the expedition's photographer, was standing behind Leo. He'd finished work on the temple interior, and now he was hot for something fresh to shoot. What he was looking forward to were human remains, preferably those of sacrificial victims, their hearts torn out or their heads severed. *National Geographic* would pay a lot for something picturesque and gruesome.

Leo stepped back from the opening. He turned and saw them watching him, waiting with bated breath for the go-ahead. A royal burial, if there was one, might be mere feet away.

He didn't like being pressed, but he knew when it was time to bow to the inevitable. It was unlikely that there were any frescoes behind the wall. The landing ahead was clear of artefacts. If they were going to find anything, it was down the steps, not up here.

'Fine, let's go ahead,' he said. 'But we'll take it easy. Don't just go tearing the wall down. I want every stone labelled and located on a grid. You all know the routine.'

He watched them form themselves into a coherent group, well-organized and extremely skilful. Letting Bill Jessop take charge at such a crucial stage had been a mistake: he wouldn't let it happen again.

They worked for four hours, dismantling the wall slowly and sending the individual sections back up to be stored in case later researchers decided they wanted to look at them. Leo sent Bill up top to supervise that end of the work. Down in the temple, he found himself working

side by side with Diane, whose fingers had discovered a way of coming in contact with his more than was strictly necessary.

When enough of the wall had been removed, Leo picked up a large torch that had been charging nearby.

'What do you think?' he asked. 'Should we break for something to eat, or shall we just see what's down here?'

'We're wasting our time,' said a voice from the back, the Ramírez girl. Funny, he could never remember her first name. 'I mean, all that's down there is a hole in the ground and a piece of paper saying "I got here first, Hernán Cortés".'

'Is that Mexican humour?' he asked.

'Hernán Cortés was an ancestor of mine,' she said. 'He got my great-great-something grandmother pregnant. She was a pretty Spanish girl, she had no choice. It's said that when my great-great-something grandfather married her and wanted to sleep with her, he looked down and there on her belly was a tattoo, saying -'

'Don't worry, we get the idea. Since you're the descendant of such an illustrious man, why don't you keep up the family tradition?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Come over here. It's your turn to go first.'

Nervous, she came over. He handed her the torch. She smiled and he nearly buckled at the knees. Maybe her grungy boyfriend would fall off the pyramid. Or wander into the forest and never be seen again. She had the most seductive smile in the world, but he hadn't known that when he hired her - it was her Ph.D. thesis on the Sun and Moon pyramids at Teotihuacan that had convinced him, that and her first book, published a year earlier, *Interpretación Matemático-Astronómica de la Piedra del Sol*.