

## MAX

“Maxuel Tomas! You get in here at once!”

Max felt the blood rush into his ears at the anger in Aunt Pruneela’s shrill voice. From his hiding place in his uncle’s study on the first floor, he could hear the loud clanging of pots and pans as she prepared dinner.

Uncle John was out of town on a business trip and Max knew no-one would dare come looking for him here. It was the one place that even old prune-face, as Max secretly called his aunt, would never enter for fear of driving his normally mealy-mouthed uncle into a rage.

He had gone to the study to look for something, anything, that would help him find his father. His eyes fell on an antique cupboard in the corner. It belonged to his father who had once filled it with all kinds of mysterious documents and books about magical people and places. It was empty now.

Andrew Tomas had packed up and left two years ago, soon after Max’s mother died. He remembered the image of his father bent over in grief, hands lingering over every photograph of his mother as he leafed through the family album. Max hadn’t heard from him in months despite his promise to come back for him as soon as he found a good place for them both to live. Where was he?

“Maxuel Aryan Tomas, did you hear me?” His aunt’s rising temper showed in the way she screamed his name - in full, with bold and underlined capitals and the T firmly crossed, thank you. She never called him Maxuel, and definitely not Max. Usually though, she referred to him as “that useless good-for-nothing” or “filthy cockroach,” which made it obvious what she felt about him. Aunt Pruneela loathed cockroaches. She smashed them to pulp.

He had to get out of this house and away from his aunt. He needed his father.

“Maxuel Aryan Tomas, if you don’t get yourself here in three seconds, you will be in Big Trouble.” His aunt’s voice was reaching hysterical proportions.

He crept silently out of the room and down the stairs. Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the kitchen.

“How many times do I have to call you, you useless good-for-nothing!” His aunt flung him an irritated glance, her tall, angular body taut with anger, face reddened as she stirred something in a pot over the fire. Her stringy, greying hair was tied back with a greasy looking hairband. He stepped warily around Daisy, his aunt’s pampered, overfed Pekingese, who sprawled on the floor, bulging eyes looking balefully at him.

“Sorry Aunt Pruneela. I didn’t hear you earlier. I was out in the garden,” he lied.

"You didn't *want* to hear me, you mean. And what were you doing in the garden anyway? You know you're not allowed out there." There was a tall, mysterious tree at the bottom of the garden. He was forbidden to go anywhere near it.

"I was looking for an interesting plant to sketch. It's part of my homework. We're supposed to..."

"Homework, homework, homework! That's always your excuse." She picked up a wok and slammed it on the cook-top, making sparks fly. "You were probably smoking out there. That's why you sneaked out without telling me," she sneered.

"I don't smoke," Max muttered. He was on the point of blurting out that it was her son Kevin who smoked but bit the words back. She would never believe him. It would only enrage her more. She might even hit him with that smoking ladle in her hand.

"Don't you dare raise your voice to me you filthy cockroach. Go lay the table. Kevin and Leila will be back soon, and I don't want them kept waiting for their dinner while you dawdle aimlessly around the place." She waved him away with the kitchen cloth as she dumped a pile of vegetables in the wok.

Poor Kevin and Leila. What a tough life to have to wait around watching TV while everything was done for them, Max thought bitterly as he carried the plates out to the dining room. Aunty Pruneela always chuntered on about how important it was for children to do things around the house - tidy their rooms, do the dishes, take out the trash. But "children" usually meant Max.

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Max was silent as the family sat down to dinner. He was almost always silent at mealtimes. It took very little for his aunt to fly into a rage and send him to his room without a meal. She was an excellent cook and really outdid herself with things like her beef pies with their tender chunks of meat and vegetables simmered in a delicious spicy gravy and topped with crisp, buttery, melt-in-the-mouth pastry. Today, her lamb biryani with its secret blend of spices filled the house with its mouth-watering aroma. Max scooped up a generous spoonful.

Kevin chose exactly that moment to ask the question that would change Max's life forever. A tall athletic fifteen-year-old, he had perfected The Art of Bullying Max.

"Hey Max, did Ma tell you your father is never coming back?"

Max froze. He saw the smirk on his cousin's face and turned to look at his aunt. He felt he was going to be sick.

"Aunty Pruneela?" he gulped. "It's not true is it? Father promised he would come back and fetch me as soon as he found a good place. He said he would write. Who told you.... Have you heard...."

"Enough! Calm down boy. I knew you would overreact. I was waiting for your uncle to come back and tell you." His aunt glared at him across the table.

“Tell me what, Aunty Pruneela? Tell me what?” He glared back at her wide-eyed, breathless panic in his voice. The faintest glint of green glowed in his normally brown eyes.

“Your father has disappeared. Vanished. No-one has heard from him for quite a while. They say he could be dead. We always warned him he would come to a bad end if he stuck around your mother. She was .... well never mind that now. You have to be sensible about this and make the best of things.” She was calm, matter-of-fact even.

Max stared at her, dumbfounded. A chill crept up his spine. He shook his head, rising slowly to his feet. His eyes flashed an intense silvery green.

“NO,” he shouted. He slammed clenched fists on the table. “It’s not true. My father is not dead. He will come get me. He promised. He will.”

He felt a strong hand grab him by his t-shirt at the back of his neck and shake him violently.

“Look at his creepy eyes Ma. And those ugly bumps on his back...I told you he’s a demon,” Kevin said between gritted teeth. “Your dad is dead weirdo. Gone. Nada. Got it?”

“Leave him alone Kev. Can’t you see he’s upset?” cried Leila.

“Upset? I’ll give him upset! Put him down Kevin dear. He’ll puke all over the table in a minute,” said Aunt Pruneela. Kevin let go and Max collapsed onto the chair as his knees gave way. He dropped his head into his hands and drew in deep breaths, willing himself to calm down.

“Your behaviour is unacceptable Maxuel Tomas. Your mother was the same. Wild. Untamed. It’s all in the blood. Bad blood. I suggest...”

“Don’t. Talk. About. My. Mother.” Max got to his feet. He didn’t need to hear the rest to know what his aunt was going to suggest. He heard Kevin snigger as he dashed upstairs to his room, the tears starting. *Why did you leave me here Father? They hate me.* He didn’t think he could bear it longer.

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As he tossed and turned, struggling to sleep on a stomach growling and rumbling with hunger, Max heard a soft knock on his door — just when he thought everyone had gone to bed. He opened the door, eyes widening. It was Leila, with a plate of food. She squeezed past him, turning on the switch. The light felt headachy after all the crying he’d done.

“I sneaked some biryani up for you. You must be starving,” she whispered. She put the plate on the desk and sat on his bed. She was a pretty nine-year-old with freckles all over a pale face crowned with a mop of dark curls. Although she was a little spoilt and often whinged her way into getting whatever she wanted out of her mother, Max suspected she had a kind heart. Unlike her brother.

As he stuffed the last spoonful of food into his mouth, he noticed the small brown-paper parcel in Leila's hands.

"What's that?"

"It came last month, on your birthday. Mother hid it away - like she's been hiding away all your letters. It's from your father." She held out the parcel.

His hands began shaking as he recognised his father's sprawling handwriting on the name and address. He sat down on the bed beside Leila and peeled open the paper taking care to keep his father's handwriting intact. Inside was a rectangular wooden box, its surface intricately carved.

"Open it, open it," Leila whispered, suppressing her excitement with difficulty.

Max turned it around, looking all over for a hinge or clasp, anything that would indicate where the lid was joined to the box.

"I can't see where it opens," he muttered, trying to twist the carvings to see if they hid any joints or buttons. "There must be a puzzle to it or something. Father knows I like figuring things out."

It didn't take Max long to open the box. It was one of those old Asian puzzles hiding a secret compartment. Inside lay a curious pair of spectacles. They were like no other spectacles he had ever seen. The lenses were delicate frameless sheets of thin, clear, transparent cellophane-like material. When Max put them on, they fitted snugly and lightly round his face.

"Wow! You don't look like you have any glasses on at all," Leila exclaimed. "They make your eyes look awesome... like green fire, just like when you get angry. Cool!"

"I can't see anything different with them on," Max said, looking around the room. "But I *feel* a bit strange. Like there's something inside me. Like.... like magic."

"Maybe my father left me a message." He examined the box carefully. "Look at the plants and leaves and creepers winding and twining into each other all over this."

Leila stabbed her finger at a carving on the box cover. "This looks like that raintree at the bottom of our garden. You know.... the one that we're not supposed to go near?"

Max looked up at her, startled. His mind was reeling. "You may be right! I'm going down there to find out."

Leila knew there was no stopping him. "I'm coming with you," she said, putting a finger to her lips to silence him when he made to object.

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Max gazed around the garden shrouded in night light. Zilch. Then, from the corner of his eye, he thought he saw something move. He turned to look. The majestic old rain tree towered over the garden, moonlight creating mysterious shadows along its intertwined roots.

"Can you see anything? It looks creepy. Let's go back inside," said Leila, her voice small and strained.

"Shhhhh.... look." He put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. A shadowy shape was shimmering soft and green around the base of the tree. Like a sprouting plant it flowed upwards along the trunk and stopped about three feet above the ground. A strangely beautiful, magical looking creature emerged. Long silvery-green hair flowed over a body covered with translucent leafy scales.

"Here you are at last, Maxxxx." Her voice floated to him through the darkness, like the whisper of leaves in the breeze. Slender fingers beckoned.

Max took a step towards her. Leila grabbed his arm, pulling him back.

"Where are you going Max. It's too dark out there. Let's go inside," she whispered.

"Don't you see her? Right there, in front of the raintree."

"Her? Who? I can't see anyone."

"It's okay. She knows my name. There's nothing to be afraid of. Come on." Max grasped Leila hand and walked towards the creature.

"Who are you? How do you know my name?" he asked.

"Who are you talking to Max? You're scaring me." Leila pulled at him. "Let's go back to the house."

"She cannot see me Maxxxx. Let her look through your eye-piece."

"Here, try these." Max took off the glasses and handed them to his cousin. Leila put them on, her fingers trembling. She tensed. Then a slow smile crept across her face. She nodded wordlessly, as if agreeing to something.

"She says she's a tree spirit. Her name is Kenari. She won't hurt us. She has something important to tell you about your father." Leila almost danced in excitement as she handed the glasses back.

"Yesssss Maxxxx. I am here to take you to your father."

Relief flooded into his heart, taking his breath away.

"I knew he wasn't dead. Where is he? Why didn't he come himself?"

"He is recovering.....from a misadventure." She put out her hand to stop Max's questions.

"Do not worry. He gets stronger every day. He will tell you the full story himself when you see him."

"I want to know now. Please.... just tell me what happened to him."

Kenari sighed. "Very well then. But just a short account. We must go soon."

"When your father left you, he went in search of your mother's homeland and her people. He thought to find a place there to put an end to his grieving; a place where you could grow up knowing who you really are.

"As bad luck would have it, just days before he was to reach his destination, a tribe of people who have great power over the wind, blew up a storm that wrecked

your father's ship on the rocks around their island. They captured him and his companions and put them to work in their village.

"Your father despaired over ever escaping and lost the will to live. He sickened by the day. Fortunately, word eventually got to your mother's people. They sent a rescue party out for him, and in the nick of time too, as your father was close to death. He is now well looked after and making steady progress."

She finished her tale and placed a gentle hand on Max's shoulder. "We must go. The sun will rise soon, and the portal will close."

"But you.... why were you sent to get me?"

"Don't try to understand too much now Maxxxx. Everything will be made clear to you very soon. Come." Kenari held out her hand.

Max turned to look at Leila who was waiting patiently beside him.

"I have to go Leila. Kenari will take me to Father. There's no time to tell you the whole story now. Let me see you safe inside the house first."

He grasped her hand and led her back up the garden to the door. He gave her a hug. "Thank you for.... for all this. I'll come back and tell you everything. I promise."

Max ran back to Kenari. She took his hand and drew him gently into the tree. With a last wave of his hand, he was gone.

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