



Rompecabezas

William King

"A beautiful surreal journey filled with love and passion."

Rompecabezas,

by William King.

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Chapter 1 - Truck stop.

I was about to disappear in the shadow of the building. My back was hard against the wall while I was staring at the washed-out colours on the billboard opposite. The number of the long-awaited truck, or at least its hazy silhouette, reads "Land Fall 49." It was difficult to think; the infernal heat pressed down on me.

Aramberri was deserted. A desolate spot, vile and corrupt. The landscape is barren: haze and dust when you leave the truck, and dust and sweat accompanies you into the bathroom. The dirt and heat are inescapable. It keeps you in a permanent state of fatigue.

The door to the building was open, I could have sworn that the place had been abandoned for ten years, the facade was way beyond worn and faded. A large man of about fifty, with white hair and yellow teeth, stood just inside the entrance. He scratched his belly, then scratched his balls, mumbled something unintelligible to the guy behind the counter, then walked out. I turned watching him leave, blinking my eyes against the sunlight. A half starved dog creeped slowly past the doorway, stopping to lift it's head and smell the stale odour emanating from inside, before moving on uninterested.

A handful of people were gathered inside, most sitting on the dirty wooden plank that served as a seat next to the entrance. They looked lifeless, like ghosts merging into the faded sepia tone that enveloped everything inside. I stared out through the grey window at a parasol with writing that once proclaimed some brand of soft drink. Beneath the meagre shade sat a young boy selling candy or some local fruit, the child was called Jabez (the native Mayan name means grief), but they all said his name was John.

Another boy with long straight black hair opened the cooler across from the counter and lifted a can, quickly re-closing the lid as a mist of coolness evaporated without leaving a trace. He wore faded red shorts, a washed out T shirt and blue plastic sandals, he had a scab on one knee, the left.

"What do you want?" The fat man asked from behind the counter. He had wiry black hair, a thin moustache and small beady eyes that darted about. He wore a dirty white shirt, half open, the top buttons were missing, the lower half was stretched taught around his ample stomach. The same black wiry hair curled around his chest disappearing behind his shirt. I watched, my view fixed on a tiny bead of sweat that was about to fall as he leaned forward on the counter. The globule of body fluid teetered

precariously then dropped only to be caught on the edge of one bushy eyebrow before falling off and splattering a dirty droplet onto the discoloured newspaper he had on the counter in front of him.

"You got any tamarind?" He asked the man.

He shifted his head to the left, it was the least possible movement necessary to indicate to the boy where to look. "Over there," he said.

As if every word, every gesture or movement required an enormous expense of energy, practically nothing was said, nothing moved. Only the boy seemed possessed with enough force to move and gather the tamarind.

I followed the sign indicating the bathroom and exited through a back door out into the searing heat. Two women in their twenties cut across the street at the end of the ally. I could picture the heads of the men sitting inside, turning instinctively to follow the women, devouring their bodies. Dressed in exotic colours their mini-skirts were so short as to barely cover them, their legs appeared longer with so much skin exposed. They were gone as quickly as they had appeared, a splash of colour leaving nothing behind, an exotic touch amidst the desolation.

I entered the stinking bathroom, the smell was enough to make you wretch, but after the journey here I needed to relieve myself. The toilet was a brown splattered porcelain tray which I stood as far away from as possible attempting to hold my breath, which was impossible. I unzipped myself and arched my back letting out a long hot stream of yellow liquid that cascaded onto the filthy porcelain. I wondered how many disease laboured microbes lurked inches from my feet, I concentrated my aim to try to avoid splashes, the relief of emptying my bladder gave a satisfying feeling of well being.

Back inside I walked past the fat man at the counter who had his head down reading the newspaper. The boy in the faded red shorts had left with his drink and the tamarind. The bench by the window was unchanged, the people sitting there had not moved, it was almost surreal.

Through a curtain was a room with chairs and tables, the bar, occupied by a few people with the money to buy a drink. At the table next to where I had entered a man in a crumpled beige coloured suit with slicked back hair was talking to the person opposite him.

"She wants drugs," he was saying. "They will do anything here for a little cash. I've been through here before and stopped in a hundred other places just the same. She'll

suck you in a little room out back or if you have the energy in all this heat, you can fuck her, but wear a condom, that's my advice." The man opposite nodded with a sort of complicity, but he had an air of total disinterest, as if sex was just another item on the menu as unappetising as the bland food they served for lunch.

"One time, further down south, I had two together, a blond and a brunette. I'd picked up a commission from a business client and he directed me to a bar next to the truck stop. I spent the whole afternoon and fell asleep on the journey overnight. Well..." he continued recounting his adventure to his companion opposite. "You have to get it when you can." Again the other person barely nodded an acknowledgement.

I moved away and sat down at a table far enough away so as not to be able to hear anymore of that man's histories. After I sat down a thin man who had been seated behind the bar came over and asked if I wanted a beer, I think it was the only drink available. "Una cerveza fría, sí (a cold beer, yes)," I replied, making sure to tell him I wanted it cold. I looked around the room, my gaze rested for a moment on the two colourful ladies I'd seen earlier who were chatting across the far side from me with two more men in suits. The rest of the room and tables were empty, the window onto the street looked out at nothingness, it was almost midday.

The thin man returned with my beer and I paid him. As he was pocketing the coins into his old waist coat, he leaned forward over the table. "Would you like some company Señor?" He asked. "We have very nice private rooms. You can spend an agreeable time whilst you have to wait." He deftly removed a bottle opener from his other pocket and flipped open the bottle top.

"No thank you," I replied. "I would just like to drink my beer." The thought had entered my head, he had placed it there, and now maybe I did want some sex, but not with either of the two colourful ladies.

This barman was a magician, a mind reader, that was his real occupation, tending a bar in this god forsaken hole in the middle of nowhere had only come about because he was obliged by circumstances to leave his previous situation and disappear from view. It was a well worn route, everyone knew that those who ended up here were, as they called it, 'on vacation.'

He could read people this magician come barman, and he was persistent, everyone 'on vacation' needed to earn any amount they could, everybody was a winner from these sordid little transactions that sold sex in a back room of the truck stop. Best of all the clients would be gone by nightfall and the people who stayed behind knew everything and cared about nothing. "If you want you can have a boy, Señor, no problem here."

I couldn't get the idea to go away, I thought of the boy buying the tamarind and then my mind rested on John, the young candy seller. Was John the boy whose other occupation was to satisfy the sexual desires of passing strangers. Would he be called from his place under the parasol to have sex with who ever paid the barman for his company, and what would he have to do for these degenerates, suck their hot sweaty cocks, allow them to screw him? "No, no, it's kind of you, but no thank you," I repeated, so he was obliged to retreat back behind his bar. I wasn't certain that it was the end of things, but I sipped my cold beer and enjoyed the transitory coolness.

Time seemed to almost stand still, nothing moved, nothing happened. I made up my mind that I needed to lie down, to get some sleep if that was possible. I needed some rest before taking the truck tonight. As these thoughts formed in my brain it occurred to me the barman would be happy to rent a room for the afternoon, he had no other customers for his rooms. He would not make as much as if he sold a room for sex, but he would still make money.

After I had finished my beer, which I did not hurry, I concluded the transaction with the barman. He didn't even argue, but took the money and gave me a key, indicating the way to the rooms which were up a flight of stairs on the first floor. For once he had not been mean and had given me a room which faced north. Of course it was stiflingly hot, but at least the sun was not blazing through the window.

The room was as empty as everything else in this town, there was a bed, a dressing table with chair and an old curtain that hung lopsided from the pole that had fallen half off the wall above the window. I shut the door, put my bag in one corner and sat down on the bed. The mattress sagged and the springs beneath complained, making strange clanging noises, the only sound you could hear.

I removed my shoes then took the little dressing table chair and wedged it under the door handle. I had been in enough of these places to know not to leave easy access or you wake up with nothing, no bag, no shoes, no money. If you're unlucky enough to wake up before you've been relieved of everything you possessed you could end up in a back alley with your throat cut. Worse, I heard one history of a young man who relied only on the key in the lock on his door, who woke to find two assailants in his room. He was unlucky, because his waking drew their attention and they easily over powered him, then they stripped off his clothes and took turns to rape him, but they didn't kill him.

There was not much anyone could do about the intense heat, I took off my clothes, as I was doing so I looked through the grimy window, my eyes following a ball of tumble weed that some tiny breeze out of nowhere barely managed to move. I let myself relax

on the bed and allowed my eyes to close, the only thing keeping me awake was the heat, but tiredness eventual overcame everything else.

Chapter 2 - El Palacio de los Sueños (The Palace of Dreams).

It was no less hot when I woke up, but the sun had moved further west and a few hours had passed. I had noticed a bathroom at the end of the hall when I arrived so I decided to go freshen up but taking my bag with me just to be safe. After all, I had everything I owned in that little bag, it wasn't much, but still I didn't want to lose it. Worse, and it had already happened, is to lose your passport, then you pretty much have no alternative other than to head to the capital to do what's required to get a replacement.

I looked around the room as I got up to put my clothes on, it was not the same. The walls and floor were shiny white, a brilliant polished marble veined with thin dark lines. It was a much larger room. I blinked to clear my sleepy eyes, was I awake? I ignored my clothes and walked over to the window, there was no grubby curtain or lopsided pole hanging there, but a white lace with a delicate, very intricate symmetrical design. The window framed by the white lace was an opening, there was no dirty glass. This was not the room in the upstairs of the bar at Aramberri.

Leaning on the window sill with both arms stretched I looked down on a large courtyard with green shrubs and a fountain. Speckled shade was occasionally pierced by beams of bright sunlight. A faint scent drifted upwards and I noticed the little white clusters of frangipani. The only sound came from the cascading water overflowing a small basin and falling down in sparkling droplets to the pool below.

I turned at the sound of a door and looking back into the room I saw the large ornately carved heavy wooden door. It opened slowly, and standing in the doorway was a dark skinned boy carrying something in both arms. He smiled, a beautiful smile, he wore a sort of white toga tied with a golden cord around his tiny waste, on his feet were thongs. I stared, watching him enter the room. It was Jabez, I recognised the candy seller, the boy everyone called John.

He stood just inside the door and extended his arms, he averted his eyes from my gaze and looked down at his feet. Now I remembered I was completely naked, I hadn't got dressed, suddenly I felt embarrassed. "Señor," Jabez spoke to me, but kept his head bowed and his eyes fixed on the floor. "I am to take you to wash, I have clothes."

I moved to find my pants in the dirty, dusty clothing I had left on the chair next to the

little dresser in the room in Aramberri. They were still there, on the chair, but it wasn't the same chair. I put them on so as to cover my modesty although I really felt no need to do so.

"Where are we?" I asked the boy.

"Will you follow me please?" He looked up, directly into my eyes.

I took the bundle of clothes he held out and followed him out into a long corridor. Walking behind him I glanced to each side seeing only occasional doors, similar carved wooden doors to the one on my bedroom. He opened a door on our right and a spiral staircase appeared, it was quite narrow, you could not walk two abreast. At the bottom we went through an archway into a room with a large square basin which was filled with water.

Jabez indicated by a gracious movement of his slender arm that I was to enter the basin. I discarded my pants and climbed over the small wall, there were two shelves running completely around on all sides. The light was dim, spots of sunlight bounced on the water as I entered, it was cool. I immersed my whole body just to my head, crouching down under the water, enjoying the sensation. Jabez had fetched some soap, a bottle containing some red liquid and a sponge. He handed me the soap and I got down to cleaning off the days of accumulated dirt. This was the first time I had washed in maybe four days, I must not have smelt too good.

I couldn't understand how I had got here and Jabez had not answered my question. Still I decided to relax and enjoy the moment, to get clean, it felt great. Jabez got me to sit on the highest shelf, half in half out of the water. He filled a jug with water and poured it over my head, he took the bottle of red liquid and dropped a little trickle into the palms of his hands. Gently he massaged the liquid into my scalp, working his hands across my head, it was blissful.

I had closed my eyes to avoid getting any soap in them, but was jogged out of my revelry when he poured a jug of water over my head to wash away the soap. When I looked at Jabez he was telling me to get out of the water and he had fetched a large white towel. Everything in this place was white, the floors, the walls, our clothes and even the frangipani I had seen in the courtyard from my room. The only colour was the green leaves of the bushes.

As I stepped out of the water he was looking at me with a huge smile whilst he wrapped the towel around me with both his arms. I realised at that moment that I was hard and of course he must have seen that too, was that why he was smiling. Perhaps, because as he

finished wrapping me in the towel and I took hold of it, his body pressed closer and I felt my manhood touching him through the thick material of the soft white towel. I quickly turned away from him because I was getting harder with that touch and it was I felt not appropriate.

He left the room after telling me to get dressed and wait for him to come back, he told me he had somewhere to take me, something for me to see, he disappeared taking with him my pants. What was it he wanted to show me? I could very easily have believed I was in a dream, it was so beautifully unreal. Had I been the victim of some dreadful attempt to steal my belongings, something that had gone badly wrong? Had I been killed because I woke up when the assailants were in my room? Am I dead? The only link with reality was Jabez, the boy everyone called John.

I dressed in the white toga and put on the thongs to resemble exactly an older version of Jabez. What was the difference in our ages I wondered, he was small, with delicate slender limbs, but I don't think his physique gave many clues to how old he was. No I guessed he was fifteen, he may look like twelve or thirteen, but there were hundreds of boys like him, malnourished, always hungry, poor children from poor families, if he even had a family. It was the food, or lack of it, the living conditions, it all affected their growth.

I followed Jabez along another long white marbled corridor through an entrance to a similar spiral staircase. The only difference was that along one side of this corridor there were tall narrow openings through which I glimpsed another inner courtyard, darker than the one I looked out on from my bedroom, less sunlight penetrated here. There were no plants, no fountain, but what appeared to be a raised platform across one end, a bit like a stage, but it was hard to see clearly, there was no time to stop and look.

This time we climbed the stairs, turning around and around, following the spiral as it twisted upwards. Finally we arrived at a small landing with a wooden door, quite narrow and small, it was like an entrance to a belfry, not that I can remember visiting a belfry, but that's how I imagined it to be. Jabez reached into his pocket and withdrew a large old silver metal key which he inserted into the keyhole. He turned the key and pushed the door which creaked and groaned, but opened revealing a light circular room with domed ceiling.

There were no windows, but three very narrow openings in the wall on the left, opposite was another tiny door and most significant, in the middle was a chair not unlike those you find at the dentist. I say that because the chair formed a wide V pointing up to the

centre of the domed ceiling, if you sat in it your legs would be raised at roughly the same angle as your back, you would in fact be lying more than sitting and looking upwards. More than the position in the chair, it was the mechanism hanging down from the ceiling that reminded me of the dentist. This device though, rather than being the light the dentist positioned by moving the articulated arm, was more reminiscent of a periscope. I think it was, now that I looked more closely, it was a long tube ending with two handles and what looked like an eye piece that you would look into.

Before Jabez got me into the seat I walked over to look through one of the openings. We were very high and the view was extremely restricted, but way down below was the inner courtyard I had seen from the corridor.

Once installed in the chair Jabez fussed around demonstrating how the thing worked, it was what I believe is known as a camera obscura. You rested your hands on the grip bars each side and could turn left or right to view the courtyard below. With the right hand you could twist the grip to zoom in and with the left you could twist to focus. It was genial, you could view everything down below, but from the perspective of an aerial view, looking down on the scene.

I was startled by a drumming which sounded as if it was in the room next to me, but I was still looking in the periscope and I saw a boy had walked on to the stage banging a drum that hung down in front of him. I zoomed in to see and could clearly see his arm moving up and down holding the drum stick. There must be some unique acoustics that made it sound as if the drummer was in this little room next to you.

I watched fascinated as the scene below began to unfold. Another boy was lighting torches that project from the wall at the back of the stage and two men were being led into the courtyard. I might not have noticed that had not the boy pointed when he had finished lighting the final torch. Pointed is not exactly correct, he gestured a sort of welcome opening wide both his arms.

The two men had black hair and white togas they were led to two chairs in front of the stage where they took their seats, presumably to watch and be entertained. I found three buttons on the right hand of the periscope and these allowed the view point to back up in three tiny steps. So instead of being directly overhead it was like taking one, two, three tiny steps backwards. Focusing on the stage, whilst the view was of course still from above, the angle was better, it was like looking at a theatre stage from way up in the gods.

The rhythm of the drum beat changed and two small boys and two taller, older boys walked onto the stage from each side. These were not native boys, they had fair blond

hair and pale skin, but more importantly they were all completely naked. My thoughts returned to the barman in Aramberri selling sex to his degenerate customers, but even whilst thinking about that, the scene unfolding was somehow compelling.

The boys formed a line along the front of the stage, the older boys outside, the younger in the middle, in between. As the drum beats became faster the boys moved their hips, they changed positions and turned, continuing their hip thrusting in time with the drumming, but now the older boy on the end was thrusting his hips towards the back of the boy in front, who in turn was thrusting towards one of the younger boys, and so on. It was strangely hypnotic and also exciting.

The drumming stopped, the boys ran off each side of the stage. A prop resembling a sort of double bench was rolled out on to centre stage. Upholstered in thick gold coloured material the bench or double seat was divided in two by a tall back, you could imagine two people seated back to back, facing away from each other, but that is not at all what happened.

The drum was replaced by a flute, a beautiful melody played as two of the younger boys came on stage, one from each side. One boy lay down on the rightside of the double seat, his legs dangling over the edge, he was looking up to the ceiling. The other boy knelt on the leftside seat his head looking over the back, looking down into the face of the first boy. As the flute played on, a soft drum beat started to accompany it in the background. Two of the older boys danced onto the stage and hopped around the seat in the centre, circling the younger boys. They stopped dancing and stood one at either end of the seat, each facing the young boy in front. The tempo of the drumming picked up as the older boy on the right took hold of the younger boy's ankles and raised his legs up and back. At the same time the older boy on the left moved behind the other boy to take hold of his hips and pull him backwards.

The scene being portrayed needs no further description, it was sensual and erotic, but there was no actual sex. When it was over, the music had stopped I was only too aware that I had a hard on.

The boys carried on with more set pieces, each one intensely erotic, I doubt anyone could have watched those performances without being excited. It made me consider two things, was I just as degenerate as the passing customers in Aramberri and did the stage performance end there or would the two men who made up the audience have their sexual appetites satisfied after the show.

Jabez entered the room and took hold of my hand to pull me out of the chair and lead me through the other door into another room. Once inside I had no time to look around

before Jabez started to untie my toga. "What are you doing?" I asked, even though it was obvious he was undressing me.

"Don't think," he replied. "I have to do this. Just enjoy it."

He took hold of the bottom of my toga and pulled it up over my head. I could easily have resisted, but I didn't, I raised my arms and let it slide off. I kept his words in my head 'I have to do this' it was as exciting as it had been watching the boys on stage. For some reason I can't explain I had made up my mind to let this happen.

I stood there in the middle of the room, naked with an erection, I didn't object, I didn't move. I watched Jabez untie and remove his toga, now he too was naked, and he also had an erection. I couldn't help thinking he must enjoy his work, at least he was now, here with me.

He moved around to stand behind me, his skin touched mine, his hard on brushed the inside of my thigh just below my balls. He reached around with his right hand and gripped my penis, he touched the very tip with his finger which he moved around spreading the seeping juice. He started to rhythmically pump my hard cock, gliding his hand up and down, he brought his left hand between my legs from behind and lightly touched my balls, they were tight.

I hadn't had sex in more than a week of being on the road, the pleasure was intense, I could feel myself building to a climax, but suddenly he stopped. I had to catch my breath, I was on the edge and he stopped. "What's wrong?" I said, watching him open a cupboard drawer.

He was back in an instant holding a large cylindrical object. "You will like this," he smiled, and he pushed the object over my penis. It was well lubricated, I felt my cock gripped gently by a soft material, I pushed forward with my hips until I was completely inside. He did something and the cylinder hummed and squeezed, vibrating around my cock, it increased slowly in speed and pressure. What a great sex toy, I thought, but at the same time it was driving me crazy, because however good it was, and however degenerate it would be, I had the overwhelming desire in that instant, to grab hold of Jabez and fuck him.

Instead he must have turned the toy up a notch, he was playing with my balls again, touching them, squeezing them. He rubbed my chest, touched my nipples, I couldn't stop it now, I murmured quietly, then louder, I thrust out my hips, he leaned around and kissed me, looking up into my eyes. His tongue pushed into my mouth, his hand tapped and held my balls, I ejaculated, jet after jet, he held his hand tight around my balls. The

sex toy didn't stop, or he didn't stop it, until I had spent myself completely.

"What is this place?" I asked him.

"El Palacio de los Sueños (The Palace of Dreams)," he replied.

Chapter 3 - Waiting.

It was no less hot when I woke up, but the sun had moved further west and a few hours had passed. I had noticed a bathroom at the end of the hall when I arrived so I decided to go freshen up, but taking my bag with me just to be safe. After all, I had everything I owned in that little bag, it wasn't much, but still I didn't want to lose it. Worse, and it had already happened, is to lose your passport, then you pretty much have no alternative other than to head to the capital to do what's required to get a replacement.

I hated this place, the dirt and the intense heat. I stumbled along the corridor feeling groggy, it was difficult to sleep and hard to wake up, I was in a permanent state of semi-conscious drowsiness. As I approached the bathroom and opened the door I heard running water, someone was already in the shower. There was no privacy in the small bathroom, a wall was all that separated the shower from the dirty cracked washbasin. I looked at myself in what remained of the old mirror, somebody stared back at me, but I wasn't certain who that person was.

The water stopped and the boy they called John, Jabez, appeared from behind the wall. I looked at him standing there, tiny drops of water trickling down his brown skin and evaporating fast. He was thin, you could easily see the outline of his ribs, his short black hair curled over his forehead, he looked back at me and grinned. He was very cute, this boy.

He turned around, looking back over his shoulder at me, he wanted me to follow him, and I was unable to resist. I discarded my pants and joined him in the shower, leaning across him I turned the water on. Our bodies touched, skin against skin, the cool water washed over us, I let all the dirt wash away. He took a bar of soap, his touch was very gentle as he began to lather the soap over my shoulders, my chest and back. Of course I saw he was hard, he had not invited me into the shower without wanting me, which was kind of nice.

His soapy hands finally glided down to my own erection and just as gently he soaped my manhood which responded to his touch. After a moment I took the bar of soap out of his hands and I in turn lathered soap all over his body. I let my hands touch his penis and slide around and underneath to cup his balls. Then my hands went around his back, gripping his buttocks and sliding into the crack between, I inserted a soapy finger into his ass, he moved and looked up at me, he sighed as I twisted my finger around, his eyes

said everything, there was no need for words.

I had been on the road for what seemed like a very long time, days merged together until all sense of time passing evaporated, just as everything evaporated in the searing heat. During all that time I had had no sex and now I gave myself to it completely. With both hands resting on his tiny shoulders, I turned him to face away from me, I took hold of my manhood and placed it at the spot where my finger had been. I guided my penis to that secret entrance and pushed it into him. The boy leaned forward and groaned, I pushed deeper, he pressed his hands against the wall, palms spread upwards, and I covered his hands with mine. His small hands disappeared entirely beneath my own.

I started to move my hips to glide in and out of his ass as I listened to his little groans and whimpers. My hands went to his hips as I rhythmically pumped my cock into him, then around his thin waist to play with his erection and to cup and fondle his testicles, all the time I was pushing in and out, never ceasing as I caressed his body and played with him. The tension from those past days began to build until I had no control and thrust and thrust, burying my cock in him as my balls bounced off his ass. He moaned a long humming like sound as I exploded inside him, remaining there, pushing gently, I felt his ass contract several times, squeezing my cock and draining every last drop of semen as he shot a milky white trail into the wall of the shower.

I hugged him very tightly, I turned him to face me and I kissed his lips, my tongue probing deep into his mouth.

It was time to see if the truck I was to take had arrived, I went down the stairs and crossed the bar. There were a few more people than earlier, maybe seven or so, I didn't pay too much attention, but went straight over to the barman to ask if the truck for Chiapas had arrived.

I had to find El Cuervo de Plata, Chiapas would be the last truck stop, I had been travelling far too long, it was becoming more and more difficult. I sensed the changes that happened when I slept were becoming more frequent and impossible to control. I needed to hurry, because if I switched again during my sleep I wasn't certain I would find myself back here.

Things could however conspire to keep you in one place, I was not surprised when the barman told me the truck would arrive very late and would not leave until the morning. He asked me if I wanted to keep my room for the night, I said I did and that I would eat later, then he surprised me again. I should not really have been surprised, I already knew

he was a magician, a man who could read people. I suppose being a barman he had a lot of time to practice and hone his skills, especially with different people passing through here every day. He asked me if he should send John to my room, I hesitated a moment, then nodded. He grinned and I paid him.

It occurred to me that I didn't know the barman's name, which normally wouldn't matter, except when the barman was a magician and he was in your circle, I would ask John tonight. I sat down at an empty table and looked around at the others in the room. As I was doing this I also thought about the boy they called John, but whose name was Jabez, I realised he was probably a helper and that he could aid me in my search.

The colourful ladies were nowhere to be seen, the other occupants in the room mostly looked like drab travellers, the two men I had overheard earlier were still there. Two new men that were in fact looking very similar to the first two, sat together at a table, they both wore crumpled worn suits, one had a small brown case standing on the floor next to his seat.

Between these tables was an interesting group of two men in black suits and a well dressed lady. She wore elegant clothes of a mostly pale blue colour, she had a rather flamboyant hat with a peacock feather and one of her gloved hands held a silk fan with which she attempted to cool herself. It was not at all usual to see a group of well-dressed people in a truck stop bar room, it was totally incongruous, there had to be something significant here. When a part of the scene you were looking at didn't seem to fit it could mean there was a breach, a leaking from one structure to another. There were many signs to watch for and nothing should ever be taken for granted.

The barman brought me a cool beer, you see he already knew me, after less than a day. He asked if I would eat now or later and I said that now would be fine. Before he left I beckoned him closer with a wave of the hand and he leaned forward over the table. I smelt the odour of cigarette smoke mixed with some cheap scented perfume, I saw the trace of an old stain on the sleeve of his jacket, something that had never been quite washed clean. "Make sure you give John a meal," I whispered to him. "He is way to thin and that can be unattractive."

He smiled his crooked yellow toothed smile, I knew he was thinking that what I said was true and I was sure he would make sure the boy was fed. I knew how his mind worked, this barman could read people, but so could I. A healthier looking boy was easier to sell to his customers than a thin underfed wretch. It occurred to me as the barman left that I would have to take Jabez with me, I could see no other choice, he was a helper and a messenger, I was bound to free him, he had already attached himself to me.

The meal was a dismal affair consisting of a bowl of soup, the colour of which matched the dirty yellow walls of the room. It tasted of nothing, of water with no flavour and an occasional bean or piece of vegetable. There was a main dish that was not much better, but was at least filling and consistent, the bread I didn't touch, it was so hard you could break your teeth on it.

I thought about staying to drink another beer and watch the table with the elegant people, but I didn't, I went upstairs to my room. It was still light outside, still unbelievably hot, I took off my clothes and lay down naked on the bed. I hadn't propped the chair under the door handle because I knew Jabez would arrive.

Despite my intention to stay awake and despite the heat I still managed to unintentionally drift into sleep to be woken by a quiet tapping at the door. I hauled myself up off the bed, turned the key in the lock and opened the door just enough to look out. It was of course the boy I saw standing there. I opened the door, let him in, then closed it behind him, turned the key and fetched the chair to wedge the door shut.

All the time he must have been watching me, he stood with his back against the window. Now it was dark outside. I realised at that moment I was naked, but I paid no attention to the fact. "I fell asleep," I told him. "Come to bed with me. I'll talk to you in the morning."

I went back to lie on the bed and listened as he got undressed, he joined me laying naked next to me, side by side on the bed. "Would you like me to do something?" He asked, sounding uncertain about the situation.

"No Jabez, just sleep please."

He curled into a ball on his side facing away from me towards the edge of the bed. I turned to face him and cuddled up next to him, I let my hand stroke his hair then I wrapped my arm over him and we fell asleep like that.

Chapter 4 - The Message.

I dreamed about Demitri and this was very odd because usually I could understand my dreams, well not completely. What I mean is, that I could put them in context, they would be about recent events that had happened or that I thought might happen. If not concerning things that were happening now, then they would be one of those recurring dreams that came to me from time to time.

I could never work out the exact significance of these recurring dreams, except they were always frustrating, always more or less the same theme, travelling. I would have to get somewhere, I knew I needed to arrive at my destination, but my journey was interrupted by wrong turns and bad directions, I never arrived or even managed to be going in the right direction. Insurmountable objects blocked my path and should I ever manage to find transport going the right way, it wouldn't stop where I wanted it to, but took me on past my destination.

I had never dreamed about Demitri before, I don't think I had even remembered him, a boy I knew when we were 9 years old, one of my best friends. Why would he come into my head now, why dream about him? We used to play together, I liked him a lot, but I only knew him for three years before we grew older and moved apart. He was best friends with Georgio, they had the same religion and were from the same country, but Demitri was different to Georgio. Now, looking back, I think Demitri was like me, although I can't be certain, because at the time, when I was 9 years old, I didn't know who I was.

I kept the thought of Demitri in my head, somehow it was comforting to think of him. I pictured him in my mind as he was at 9 years old and it made me smile. The more I thought about him, the stronger his image became, his curly black hair, tanned skin, little round cheeks on a small round face with perfect tiny lips. He was a small boy, smaller than me and Georgio, but he was strong, energetic and skilful. We shared secrets together without words, we did things I would not have done with other boys, thinking about him still makes me smile.

The sunlight piercing through the window woke us up. I stood up getting out of bed and looking at Jabez who at that instant opened his eyes. He smiled, a beautiful smile, white

teeth accentuated by his brown skin, tanned by the sun. You know, one of the things I found particularly attractive about this boy was that his whole body was tanned, except his ass.

I followed his gaze and realised he was staring at my hard on which I had not paid any attention to, until now. I needed to relieve myself and grabbed my shorts to exit the bedroom, even in this seedy hotel or perhaps because it was a seedy hotel, you wouldn't want to walk naked down the hall.

I was thinking to myself about how I would manage to take the boy with me. The barman I was sure let nothing go unnoticed and would never want to give up his little side line and the money it brought in. It was ridiculously simple, but the idea popped right into my head to hide Jabez in one of the shipment crates. I could let him out once we were well away from Aramberri and whilst it might get some odd reactions from other passengers, nobody is likely to do anything.

I explained everything to Jabez and although he looked worried and not at all convinced about my plan, he said nothing. Essentially Jabez was strong, he was no ordinary boy, he was, I was sure, a messenger. Where was his true reality, here or in the Palacio de los Sueños, I couldn't say for sure, because I didn't know.

The sun was already blistering the dry earth and it was still early. Even the wind that was blowing clouds of dust everywhere in billowing gusts, gave no relief, it was as hot as the baked dirt. Just as the barman had told me the truck that arrived late last night was ready to leave and it seemed like there were no passengers for Chiapas except me. The driver helped me load the crate into the back, it crashed down, but remained intact, I only hoped Jabez was OK inside.

I jumped in the back after the crate. My head scarf was wrapped around my face trying to keep the dust out, it was difficult to keep your eyes open, it really was blowing up a storm. The driver climbed in the cab and started up the motor, a loud roar and the smell of diesel signalled our imminent departure.

Suddenly the barman came rushing out, running waving to attract the driver's attention, my heart was beating fast, I was sweating, I think I was trembling. 'That's it,' I thought. Game over! I imagined the driver getting down from his cab and dragging off the crate as the barman smashed it open and hauled out John. What could I do alone?

I peeked out through the dust, but could see nothing only hear voices, but I didn't know

what they were saying. Instinctively, without even thinking about what I was doing I sat down on the crate facing the back of the truck. It was as if I was ready to take on the world or anyone who was about to climb in the back to remove the crate.

Nothing happened, I turned to try to see what was going on. The barman had moved halfway back to the building he'd emerged from and was helping a hunched figure in a hooded cape. The cabin door on the other side to the driver opened and slammed shut, the engine revved and with a jolt as the gears were engaged, we pulled away.

The figure of the barman bent with his arm over his head, fighting the dust storm into the hotel, faded into the gloom and disappeared from view. I sighed with relief, grabbed a hammer and wrenched open the crate. I peered inside, ready to drag Jabez out. It was empty!

What could I do now? The plan had worked, Jabez was inside the crate, it got loaded on the truck. The dust storm had helped by hiding everything, it was perfect. What the hell happened?

The journey was endless, the dust storm finally subsided only to let the sun beat down more intensely. There was little protection from the heat, just an old tarpaulin attached to the back of the cab, which I crawled under to get out of the dust and sun.

I went over and over everything that had happened, my head was hurting with trying to figure things out. Around midday we pulled up at a tiny truck stop, it was really just a hut and shed with a pump and barrels of fuel stock piled under a huge open tent. Next to the barrels was the only shade and the three of us made our way over there. For the first time I got a good look at the figure in the cape who had caught the truck at the last minute and was travelling in the cab with the driver.

Usually the price to ride in the cab of the truck was double that of a place in the back. The passenger introduced himself as Absolam and he was, like me on his way to Chiapas, he said no more, polite, but not forthcoming. The driver was a rugged, unshaven, well built guy of I guessed about 30 years of age. He had a small scar on the left side of his chin and a broken front tooth.

We didn't stay long under the shade of the tent, just the time to fuel up the truck. Anyway, with no wind now the air was filled with the stink of diesel, the ground was stained black in places where fuel had been spilled. When the guy pumping fuel into the truck signalled it was full, we got up and made our way back to the truck. The driver

went into the shack to pay for the fuel and I climbed up into the back of the truck.

To my surprise Absolam came to the back of the truck and handed me a tiny scrap of paper. I leant over to take it from his outstretched hand and at the same time looked him straight in the eyes. He had amazing deep blue eyes that appeared like deep pools in a rugged weathered visage. He smiled a tiny gesture of his mouth as if he was reluctant to use any energy, reluctant to waste his force. He was gone the very instant I had the paper.

I climbed back under the tarpaulin as the driver climbed into the cab. The motor roared into life and the truck jarred into movement complaining with odd metallic noises as it bounced over the rough ground.

It was light enough under the tarpaulin to read what was written on the paper. I unfolded it and read the message, 'Will meet you in Chiapas, J.' I still had no idea what had gone wrong back in Aramberri, or who Absolam was, how he had been given the note from Jabez, but I was at least reassured.

That night was spent under the stars at a sort of oasis in the midst of the desert landscape. There were no buildings, just one tent, three trees that looked old and wizened, their trunks twisted into weird shapes, they would give little shade in the day. There was a round wall built out of dried mud bricks and a pump attached to a rusty looking machine with a belt. The driver assured me the well water was clean and the pump worked, but the water was for drinking and for the truck, no washing here.

He gave Absolam and I a blanket each and the dried earth on the back of the truck was our choice for a bed. I preferred the back of the truck, somehow it felt safer, but sleep was a long time coming. I would have liked to talk to Absolam, to find out what he knew, but this was neither the time nor the place for such a conversation.

Chapter 5. El Jardín Perfumado (The Scented Garden).

I woke to the sound of bird song and that was very odd, although it didn't register as being odd immediately. I suppose that was because I still felt tired and had aches all over from the journey, I just wasn't sure I was awake. When I heard the sound of water cascading I was sure I was dreaming.

Sitting up, I threw off the dirty old blanket and looked around, wiping the sleep from my eyes, but more than the sight of the wonderful greenery that surrounded me, more than that, I was bathed in the sweet scents of the flowering shrubs. Their different odours mixing together like some expert perfume maker was concocting his greatest work.

As I stood up I saw the water cascade which fell off a flat moss covered rock into a pool that was irresistibly inviting. I didn't care if it was a dream, I couldn't think about things anymore, I removed my clothes and shoes and walked naked towards the pool. The water was cool as it lapped around my feet, the shallow shelf at the edge belied the deepness a step further in. I fell down into the pool, swimming now to keep my head above water.

I ducked under, swam a few strokes towards the cascade, then pushed back off a rock, lying now on my back looking at the blue sky. That was when I noticed the white wall surrounding the pool and the round tower that seemed to disappear upwards to meet the sky.

After travelling all day across a barren sun baked wasteland this was paradise. Finally, tired of splashing in the pool I made my way back to the edge and pulled myself out. When I was out of the water, as I raised my head to get up, I was confronted by someone standing over me. Confronted is perhaps not quite the right word, I was shocked, startled. I stood up almost falling backwards into the water, but two arms reached out and held me, pulling me back and stopping my fall.

It would seem impossible, but there standing in front of me, holding me by both arms was Jabez. I embarrassed him, I hugged him and pulled him close to me, I kissed his lips and a tiny tear fell from the corner of my eye. I was about to speak, I had a hundred questions for him to answer, but he looked straight into my eyes and touched his finger to my lips.

He whispered, his warm breath on my ear. "We must go."

He led me by the hand towards a gate or door in the wall I had glimpsed from the pool. I bent down to pick up my clothes, but he indicated to leave them. At that moment I noticed he was dressed exactly the same as the last time I had met him in the Palacio de los Sueños. We hurried through the gate, turned right and entered a white walled corridor through an archway. Jabez had let go of my hand, but he looked back over his shoulder to be certain I was keeping up.

The corridor was narrow and completely closed, but small holes in the ceiling let through enough sunlight to lighten the passage. We moved along over these little spots of light that made circles on the floor. Finally, we stopped facing what looked like a strong oak door with diamond shaped metal studs encrusted into it. Jabez reached into the pocket of his robe and withdrew a large silver key. He quickly inserted the key into the door, turned it and pushed open the door, which slowly revealed a spiral stone staircase no wider than the corridor.

This must be the tower I had seen, I wasn't sure, but somehow I thought it must be. Jabez moved ahead of me quickly climbing the stairs, there was only room for one person, I followed behind. Round and round, the climbing was tiring and I was starting to feel dizzy.

"Come on," he said, stopping briefly and turning back to face me. "There is no time to lose."

'No time to lose.' The words rang in my head, 'No time to lose.'

We reached a small platform and I followed Jabez out through an opening onto a sort of parapet. When I looked down, I had to reach out and grip the stone wall, the height and the climb left me feeling light headed.

"There!" Jabez pointed to a courtyard way below where I could just make out some figures, the tiny shadows of people moving. "We have to get there now." I heard the urgency in his voice.

Back down the staircase, it was not too far below when we slipped through an opening I hadn't noticed on the way up. Completely out of breath now, we had reached a view point just slightly above the courtyard. Even Jabez was breathing heavily.

"What's happening?" I asked, but he gave no reply.

I looked at the scene below, it seemed familiar. The figures I had seen as little shadows from the tower I could now see were the boys from the Palacio de los Sueños. There was a man standing next to a sort of bench and two men in dark suits sitting in chairs opposite. I wasn't sure, but I think these were the same two men who were being entertained the other night.

I studied the scene and when doing so I suddenly realised a boy was bent over the bench, there were only three other boys standing in a row, like silent witnesses to something that was about to take place. I felt uneasy, a sick feeling in my stomach.

"What's going on?" I demanded to know now and Jabez replied this time.

"The boy is being punished," he replied.

"Why, punished for what, how?"

He didn't need to explain further, I saw the man who was next to the bench walk over to the three boys and he was brandishing a whip. 'No, no!' I screamed inside my head, this can't happen.

In an instant I was out through the way we had come and down the staircase. I came up against a thick wooden door and pushed it, but it didn't move. I leaned my shoulder into the door and with all my weight I pushed again. It protested, but opened.

I ran out across the courtyard, blinded by the bright sunlight, I reached the boy who was tied to the bench as the man with the whip approached. There was no time to think, no time to do anything, just one thing was possible. I covered the boy with my body, leaning over him, it was not difficult, he was much smaller than me. I felt his skin against mine, I felt his body trembling.

'Crack!' The whiplash broke the silence, cutting through the air like a knife and slashing a diagonal line across my back.

I woke with the noise and commotion, people were running around in the still semi-darkness, it was not yet dawn. For some reason I couldn't move, I was frozen in the back of the truck. Lightning lit the sky with electric streaks, the sound of thunder crashed through the silent air. I realised why I couldn't move, the branch of one of the only trees for miles around had broken and was laying halfway across the truck trapping

me under the tarpaulin.

I could smell the burnt wood from the tree the lightning must have hit. Another bolt of thunder startled me with the light and noise. It was then I briefly glimpsed the driver scrambling into the cab. The motor roared into life, the headlights shot two bright rays of light into the distance. The truck jolted forward with the sound of wood against metal, I stayed as low as possible to the floor of the truck and listened as the branch slid back off the truck, freeing the truck and me, but taking the old tarpaulin with it.

In the early morning light of the day, just as the sun was about to peek over the horizon, it was obvious that no real damage had been done. That is to say, the truck had a few more knocks and scratches, nothing much new there.

The storm had disappeared as quickly as it had come. Absolam asked me how I was and I guess I was fine. There was a large scratch on my forehead which I looked at in the broken mirror of the truck, nothing serious. My body ached, but that was probably from travelling all day in the back of the truck. Worse was the pain I had across my back and I couldn't see what it was.

I asked Absolam to take a look and he lifted my shirt. "You have a large red stripe across your back," he said. "It looks like a whiplash from a branch, but the skin is not cut."

It hurt like hell, but I would just have to bear it for the rest of the day, there was nothing else to do. The driver had cut half the tarpaulin free of the tree branch so at least I would still have shade in the back of the truck.

The day dragged on, the sun scorched arid ground gave up only a cloud of dust which swirled in spirals behind the truck obscuring the desert behind us in hazy mist that disguised everything, nothing was clear.

Nothing was clear in the landscape just exactly as nothing was clear in my head, I could not stop thinking about Jabez, all my hopes were somehow fixed on the idea that everything would be resolved when we reached Chiapas. In reality this was crazy, thinking that reaching a destination would magically bring things right, I knew deep down inside me that this was not true, but I had to fix my mind onto a tangible point or I risked getting lost and losing myself completely.

I just couldn't remember anything before the journey started, I didn't know how or even why I was travelling, I had only very few points of reference, I needed to get to Chiapas and I needed to find El Cuervo de Plata. The other things I knew were like the desert

that stretched out in all directions, it's there before you, it's evident and dominating, you don't ask yourself what it is, because you know.

Chapter 6 - The Arrival.

When you arrive somewhere at night you cannot have a true idea about where you are. Tired, dirty, and with an aching body, my only desire was to find a place to sleep, somewhere safe, and the rest could wait.

It was well after midnight when the truck finally stopped at what seemed like a large parking surround by a few single story buildings, one of which being the inevitable truck stop bar. They would have rooms, but that really was the last place I wanted to stay. Absolam pointed down hill, waving towards a broad road that went in the direction of some buildings and a very faint light, perhaps the beginning of the town.

There was a slight freshness in the air and just the tiniest hint of salt, it was a faint sea breeze bringing a welcome coolness, however limited, it was a pleasant change. It seemed almost to stop at the parking, as if it's strength could take it no further into the desert.

I said goodbye to Absolam, turned and made my way towards the distant glow. Once standing under the light I could see I was in a street with buildings on both sides stretching gently down hill, presumably towards the coast. A square red sign above one of these buildings announced 'Pensión Gaia', and there was a light on inside the large wooden front door.

A tall thin man with greasy black hair, moustache and white shirt greeted me with a broad smile revealing a shiny gold tooth. For some reason, without explanation, he managed to convey an air of gentleness and trust, and that is something I had rarely come across. After announcing the price of a room he took a large key hanging on a board behind him, the key had a short chain with a gold coloured or maybe brass ball hanging at the end. I saw later the room number on the key, 13. Now often, I know, hotels would skip that number for obvious superstitious reasons, but not here, the hostel had 22 rooms, I noticed when he took the key from the board, and number 13 was not skipped.

He handed me the key and asked if I would like some soup, that sounded good, I hadn't eaten in a long time, it's chicken he told me, Caldo tlalpeño, he smiled and left. I looked around the room, saw there was a large metal framed bed as well as a smaller one in one corner. The ceiling had delicate embossed plaster work, a centre rose and going two thirds of the way around the room, framing the window. I laid my bag aside and sat

down on the bed, which twanged metallically like the plucked strings of some bizarre instrument.

A knock at the door announced the return of the man, he entered and placed a hot bowl of soup on a little table next to the wardrobe, he laid a spoon beside the bowl, turned, smiled and left closing the door behind him. I wondered for an instant that it might be drugged, should I eat it? But my impression when I arrived here was that this place and the man at the desk were safe, I think first impressions count, although you can never be certain of anything, I decided to trust my instincts.

When I'd finished the soup, and it was good, not like the last truck stop in Aramberri, I was so tired I didn't even bother to undress, just kicked off my shoes and crashed out on the bed. A bed that seemed to complain at my lying on it, but I paid no attention to the squeaks or even the odd springs that prodded me in awkward places. I fell into a deep sleep almost immediately.

I recognised the house straightaway, the street, the little front gardens with their neat walls and privet hedges. I saw my arm reach out and glide towards a hedge, I deftly picked a tiny green and yellow leaf, pinched it between my thumb and forefinger, glided my arm through the air holding the leaf flat out in front, moving up and down, gliding, banking left, then right, as I walked to school.

It was a plane, a space ship or a racing car, taking whatever form my imagination wanted it to be. It was kind of aimless, but I was in no hurry to arrive back at school. Not because I disliked school, although sometimes it scared me, no there was just plenty of time and that allowed my thoughts and imagination to invade my head.

It allowed me to think about Demitri, we would be in class together all afternoon and maybe I could sit with him. No, that wouldn't happen, he and Georgio always sat together, but I could sit nearby. I wanted to ask him if I could see him over the weekend, maybe Saturday after football, we were both in the school team. I needed to see him, I had things I needed to know.

That's all I remember, I had things I needed to know. I was nearly at the road to turn down for school, I'd crashed the plane and watched it as the tiny leaf fluttered to the ground. I don't know why, but I couldn't turn to go to school, I was trapped, the only choice was to go on past the turning and try to get back. I knew that would never happen and I was right. I walked on past the turning and there was no way to get back, I just kept going, getting further and further away. I was starting to panic, I would be late

for class, I wouldn't see Demitri. Things always happened like this, I would never arrive.

I woke up with a jolt, just like emerging from underwater and gulping for air, I sat up in bed and felt the sweat on my body. I was exhausted, I couldn't remember falling asleep, suddenly a feeling of panic swept over me, 'had I locked and blocked the door?' I asked myself. I turned to look at the tall double white doors with their wood panels and peeling paint. Nothing was blocking the handle, then I realised it was a round door knob, you can't secure a door which doesn't have a proper handle to wedge a chair underneath.

I touched myself, bringing my hands one to each side, I was in a strange state of mind, but I was here, awake, I must have slept badly.

Light was trying to pierce the darkness of the room, it crept around and through the tiny slits in the old wooden shutters that were closed outside the window, the type of shutters that you could vary the closure by manoeuvring the lames up and down. This must have been a very elegant building at some point to have such features and fine decoration, but now everything was a mere shadow of that past and the shutters no longer functioned.

I opened the window to see if I might let some air and light into the room which had become, if it hadn't always been, choked by a stale atmosphere. I pushed open the shutters, securing them back against the outside wall, the room became illuminated in a broad beam of light and dainty swirling patterns of dust. I smelt that same faint salty odour that I had noticed when I first arrived, and there was an almost imperceptible breeze only capable of swirling the dust in the sunlight.

I was tired and my body ached, I felt dirty and badly in need of a shower, I thought that would at least wake me up and make it possible to pursue my quest to find El Cuervo de Plata, somebody had to know something, this was after all journey's end.

The shower was old and worn just like everything else, but it was clean. I allowed the cool water to do it's best to revive my body and my mind, I washed away the grime and dirt that had glued itself to every part of my body.

It must have been nearly midday when I left the hostel and made my way further down the hill, inevitably towards the sea. Any breeze that there was could not do much against the intensity of the sun which beat down from a totally clear blue sky.

Before me was obviously the old city, the large reddish stones of the buildings formed

an impenetrable wall broken only by a round archway, the entrance. Once inside the scene was completely different, people moved about their business on the narrow streets and it was noticeably cooler, the sun could not find its way here.

A stranger is always obvious, you can never be invisible when you are newly arrived, so it was no surprise when a young boy grabbed at my shirt sleeve. "You looking for something Señor?" He looked up at me as he posed the question, his little brown hand still holding my arm. It's the sort of question that leaves open a vast panorama of responses, indeed I wanted something, but was it the same thing as this boy had in mind?

There was a silence between us, an odd moment where I turned to face him and looking at him, somehow trying to pierce the cloud of not knowing how to respond, seeking any clue that his appearance or expression might offer. The buzz of sound from the other people in the little street flowed around us like water around an island.

"You come with me Señor," his eyes were bright green lanterns beckoning to some unknown place.

He led me away down the street gently pulling on my arm, looking at me occasionally, steering us through the hustle and bustle. Normally I would pay close attention to where we were heading, but either due to my weariness or because this boy was just a child, I don't know which, or why I surrendered any resistance.

The old town was a maze of passageways and streets, some large, some very narrow, all interconnecting like some giant jigsaw. What a thought, how odd, just as I surrendered my destiny to this child, my mind suddenly divulged the secret, it was a jigsaw, a jigsaw of a thousand pieces, an immense task to complete. It begged the question as to whether it was possible to complete such a task, whether all the pieces would ever come together to reveal the whole.

The door to the restaurant was tiny I had to bend my head as he led us in off the street, but once inside it gave way to a spacious, if dim, room with tables and chairs around a middle part which was empty. Empty, just as were all the tables and even the long curving bar counter to the left.

We went straight through towards an equally large open terrace, also empty, broken up by twisted olive trees whose tiny dark green fruits were scattered on the ground surrounding them. These trees gave no shade of any consequence, but nearly the entire

outside area was covered with a lattice work of some climbing plant which offered large orange flowers and protection from the sun.

It was here that I noticed two things, first we were high above the coast over which the terrace offered a magnificent view. A low whitewashed wall delimited the boundary with the smooth enormous gently curving grey rocks that dropped away slightly, then must have descended in an abrupt precipice which gave the view of the sea below.

There were four figures seated at a table off to the right, this was the next thing I noticed as the child led me across the empty terrace. I recognised immediately Absolam, who turned his head and nodded a greeting as we approached. Then I was shocked, because the boy I'd seen seated opposite Absolam, looked up, our eyes met, I stopped dead in my tracks, my arm followed the child who still had hold of it, but my body refused to move.

It was Jabez, how, I don't know, it's impossible, but there was no denying the boy seated opposite Absolam was Jabez. Questions vied for attention in my head: how did he get here, that was a mystery, it all comes back to nothing being how you think it is. Jabez was after all a helper, Absolam was a messenger, or was it the other way around?

Who are these other two men sitting at the table? I couldn't think anymore, my brain was about to explode, all I could do was to stumble towards the table and I had to sit down, the boy helped me.

Chapter 7. La Terraza Sobre el Mar (The Terrace Over the Sea).

The sea stretched beyond the horizon where it touched the sky, silent waves followed each other disappearing from view beneath the grey stone cliffs. Tiny speckles of white rode along the tops of the waves, mirrored by fluffy balls of motionless clouds in an otherwise clear blue sky. A scent of salt mingling with the perfume of the flowers pervaded the terrace, hanging in the air which was almost imperceptibly cooler in the late afternoon.

I must have been sitting here on this terrace, staring at the sea, for hours, because I remember it was around midday when I had arrived. It had a strange appearance as if in that time something had changed, then I remembered, the two men and Absolam who were here when I arrived, were gone. Only the young boy and Jabez remained. I watched the boy who was sitting on the rocks the other side of the little whitewashed wall, idly sweeping his arm in broad circles, dragging his hand through the sand which had accumulated in the crevice between the round boulders. Tiny puffs of sand momentarily erupted in the air only to drift back to the ground that had been disturbed.

For some unexplained reason the scene reminded me of something from my childhood, but I had difficulty trying to drag the memory from my mind. It's frustrating when you have a recollection that you want to remember, but which you cannot quite manage to do. I would always either dismiss the scene from my thoughts or try to think around it to etch out clues that would prompt me to place the memory.

Time for whatever reason, did not seem pressing, the terrace was empty apart from the three of us, the only limit imposed on my reflections was the eventual sunset and darkness as day would become night. The boy turned to look back at us from the rocks, pausing in his imaginary world to smile. It was then I saw quite clearly Demitri and myself playing in the sand, although where that was I could not recall, only Demitri's smile and a certain feeling it provoked in me. An emotion that a young boy could barely comprehend, a stirring of something, some sort of longing deep within me.

I was satisfied and enveloped by a sense of well being, I smiled when Jabez started to

talk, the only disquieting feeling was that Jabez had a certain sort of urgency in his voice. "We have lost a lot of time," he said, "and that is not a good thing. The danger..." he paused. I wondered what danger there could possibly be, I felt so contented, I was happy to rest in the moment and let time drift by.

"You can't, you mustn't do that!" Jabez continued as if reading my very thoughts, but surely even a helper could not do that. Although I wasn't certain. If a barman could be a magician, perhaps a helper like Jabez could be more than just that?

"Too much time is disappearing," he startled me with that statement. "You must find El Cuervo de Plata, and you must do it soon. Absolam and the others will be here tomorrow to help." I thought that allows me the evening and night here to rest, because I knew he was right, I would have to move on.

We spent the night together, as the light faded the young boy joined us at the table where Jabez had prepared a delicious meal. I had lots of questions, so many things were puzzling, too much simply didn't add up. I couldn't make sense of things, I could only cling on to the goal of finding El Cuervo de Plata and the hope for answers.

I thought that at least I should know the young boy's name and who the two men were. I looked at the boy sitting between me and Jabez, I guessed he must be 10 or 11 years old, olive brown skin and jet black hair, he smiled.

"What's your name?" I returned his smile.

"Chin," he replied, then turned his attention elsewhere, moving around on his seat to face away from me. He was watching the sun descend into the sea.

Jabez took up the conversation, "It's the name of a Mayan god."

That seemed appropriate, because he was beautiful and radiated a certain aura of brightness, as if he could light up the darkness, or bring happiness to the world. Whether that came from the young boy, or perhaps I simply projected my own feelings, or maybe it came from my past, I couldn't say.

"Do you know any Mayan legends?" It was the turn of Jabez to pose a question.

"No, not really," I replied and smiled. "Perhaps you would tell me one?" It was a request more than a question. I felt I would like to know more, the name for one thing, fuelled my curiosity.

"According to legend it was the god Chin who had sex with another male, a deity or a 'demon', and it was he who introduced homosexuality to man. Homosexuality was part of Mayan culture and civilisation, it was allowed by law that unmarried young men could have sex with boys, and adolescents who were educated in the temples might also have relationships." He looked at me directly making eye to eye contact, seeking perhaps to know if his revelation shocked me.

I held his gaze and stretched my hand across the table to take hold of his hand which I gently squeezed. Surely he already knew that I loved him!

That night after the sun had set and Chin was soundly asleep in his bed, Jabez and I lay down together in a little room with an opening that looked out towards the sea, and had uneven whitewashed walls that matched the little wall around the terrace.

"So who are these other two men who were with Absolam today?" Time for one more question I thought before anything else. One more question that I simply needed to know the answer to. The many other questions and my own inquietitudes could wait, and need not spoil a magical night together.

"Naum, the smaller well built man, is our father and Ahua is our uncle." Jabez was propped on one elbow looking at me.

"I never figured we were with your family and Chin is your little brother." I pulled Jabez into a warm embrace and kissed him on those beautiful moist lips, my tongue pushed through to wrestle with his.

There was no more talking, the only sounds that disturbed that night were the gentle sighs occasioned by our love making. Oh how I had missed this boy and how much worry he had caused me by not being there in the crate when we should have escaped together. All that was forgotten now as we stripped off our clothes, embraced, kissed and rolled together, skin against skin. Jabez gave himself to me and I fell asleep holding him, a deep contented sleep untroubled by any dreams.

The sun was bearly above the restaurant building behind the terrace, but even so the heat was intense, in half an hour or so you would burn your feet on the stone floor if you were foolish enough to go bare foot. Even with the inevitable prospect of another scorchingly hot day, I felt rejuvenated, the aches and pains of the journey had passed.

Absolam looked across at me, "Naum and Ahua," he indicated Jabez's father and uncle

with a sweeping gesture of his arm, "will take you and Jabez by boat around the coast."

I didn't question at all what he was saying, rather my thoughts rested on what Jabez's father and uncle might think about the two of us, or if they even knew, but I suspected they did.

"You should arrive in the evening, before dark, at Los Acantilados Verdes (The Green Cliffs). You can't take the path after dark, it's too dangerous, but Jabez knows the way."

So Jabez and I would finish the journey together. "He will lead you to the top," Absolam continued, "once you surmount the cliffs it's about a day's march into the desert and..." He paused, took a hold of a fine gold chain he wore around his neck, brought the small medallion fixed to the end up to his lips and kissed it. Of course I was very curious about his gesture, I had no idea what the medallion was or what it represented.

"You should find El Cuervo de Plata there." He carefully replaced the medallion beneath his clothing, hidden from view. I hoped he was right, I didn't question how he came by this information.

I followed Jabez, his father and uncle as we made our way through the gate at the side of the terrace next to the restaurant, I briefly glanced back before closing the gate behind me. Absolam was seated and saying something to Chin which I couldn't quite hear, I had the odd feeling that I might never see either of them again.

We made our way down the rocky cliff path in single file because it was steep and narrow, the only good thing was that we were in the shade. Even so I was perspiring when we reached the little cove at the bottom. A tiny wooden boat with a single folded cloth sail was tethered to the shore by a rope weighed down by a rock to keep it from drifting free.

Once on board and out of the cove Ahua raised the sail, Naum took the helm, and as the sail caught the little sea breeze we set off towards Los Acantilados Verdes. The land looked different from here with the jagged cliffs towering over us, the sunlight glinted off the water and despite being surrounded by the sea, there was no escaping the sun's heat that beat down on us. The blue of the sea became darker as we moved further out away from the rocks and around the coast, dark green seaweed drifted by in tangled swirls like giant spaghetti.

It was slow progress and tiring in the heat, even with nothing to do. There was little room to move about and when I needed to attend to a call of nature the only way was to

lie perched half over the side of the boat, it moved about way too much for me to stand. Jabez however niftly balanced and stood in the middle of the boat arching his body, I guess he was more used to being on a little boat than I was.

It was early evening when we arrived and disembarked, much too close to nightfall to attempt the perilous climb up the cliffs. There was a tiny patch of sand before large boulders and a deep cutting in the cliff face which looked almost like the entrance to a cave. We dragged the boat onto the sand and secured it, climbed the smooth boulders up rough steps and set out blankets on the smooth stone shelf about 10 meters above the little beach.

From here you could see the tiny path that climbed up from just inside the opening in the cliff. Looking up you could see a wall of vegetation, but not the path. If it was as steep and rough as the beginning it would not be an easy ascent.

Chapter 8 - Los Acantilados Verdes (The Green Cliffs).

There was silence apart from the repetitive background sound of crashing waves on the rocks below. I looked up because I dare not look back down, Jabez was ahead of me, if he fell I would surely be dislodged and fall too. It was not so much a path, it was a climb, trying to find a place to step, gripping the rock and vegetation for uncertain support.

Above Jabez the sky was a radiant blue, the sun was a ball of fire, the top of the cliffs was invisible from here, I could not imagine going back down.

I was startled by a movement glimpsed above to my right, a dark green shape scooted over the rocks, merging back into the thick green plants from which it had come, a lizard, just a lizard!

I was overcome by a sudden desire to let go, a strange feeling that came upon me like in a dream just before waking, when you give up because you've had enough of fighting an impossible current. You surrender, it's the moment you wake up, and usually you recall your dream at that instant.

Would it be like that if I let go of reality? Would I plunge backwards onto the rocks below? Jabez would be safe above me. But then what? Would it be like waking up from a dream, just like this climb was a struggle against an impossible current. Wasn't the whole journey an impossible quest, that if it wasn't so real would be just like a dream?

Jabez had disappeared, a momentary feeling of panic ran through my whole body, I couldn't do this alone. I climbed quicker, my foot slipped on some loose stones, I grabbed a long hanging string of greenery, it gave way under the force of my grip, but my other foot found firm ground. I propelled myself upwards, hugging the side of the cliff and a hand reached out, I grabbed hold.

We entered a virtual tunnel, the path cut through the cliff face in a narrow crevice

obscured by overhanging plants. There was a scream, no more a high pitched screech and I saw the black shadow of some kind of bird pass across the sky. The going was easier now.

A broad expanse of scrub land spread out before us, interspersed with a few wizened olive trees and dried up bushes that hugged the ground. Behind us was the sea, barely audible from the cliff top. It had taken hours to climb the so called path, I was exhausted from the effort, both physical and the mental concentration. We collapsed together onto the ground, backs against one of the smooth grey boulders, with an olive tree for shade, although it only served to give partial shade.

"How did you get here?" I voiced the question that had been in my head since Chin found me and led me to the cliff top terrace.

"It's the wrong question," Jabez replied.

"What do you mean, the wrong question?"

"It's not how I got here, or what you mean is how I was waiting for you at the restaurant in Chiapas." He was staring at me with a faint hint of a grin. "Because I simply walked out of the the building, down the stairs and across the gardens."

That made no sense at all, it was a two day journey to Chiapas, but I let it drop. If he didn't want to say, I wouldn't force him. I didn't have any energy to get into an argument with him. I just hoped he wouldn't insist on carrying on the trek today, because Absolam had said it was a whole day's journey from here, or at least I think that's what he said.

Jabez fixed a blanket over the olive tree and laid the other blanket on the ground. We now had proper shade and I stretched out on the ground. I paid no attention to the hard surface and drifted into a peaceful unconsciousness.

I loved the rough and tumble mock fights me and Demitri had. I loved the secret games we played, away from any adults. One time when we'd been scrapping I had ended up astride his waist, pinning him down, his eyes sparkled like jewels. I let him push me off and roll over me. Then I had him beneath me face down and I was lying on top of him again, stretched out. My hands covered his, my body covered his. It was then I felt a strange emotion, an electric wave passed through my body, spreading up to my head and down to my toes.

Of course he rolled over again and prized himself out from under me, but I was sure when I looked in his eyes that he felt something too, something unknown. It was exciting and enjoyable even if it was undefinable. The only thing we both knew was it was something we shared together, in secret.

Why was I day dreaming about Demitri again? I have no idea about my dreams except some repeat themselves in different versions of the same theme. This wasn't a dream though, Demitri was real, it's a memory stuck in my head. I think, but I'm not yet certain it's linked to how I'm feeling emotionally.

"In the morning," Jabez was saying, but I hadn't been paying attention, I didn't hear the beginning of what he said.

"Urgh what?" I asked, looking up at him. He was pacing around me, which only made me feel nervous. "Can you keep still?" That was a demand more than a request.

"You weren't listening to me," I don't think he stood still because I asked him to, but because he was annoyed.

I smiled at him, reached out to get him to take my hand and lie down next to me. He relented, he couldn't resist my smile. No, more likely he realised I was tired and he forgave me for not listening. Whatever he really thought he did lie down next to me and before he could say anything I pulled him in close and kissed his lips.

"Sorry," I said with a hint of mischief in my eyes.

"I was saying," I saw a little smile, "that we'll stay here tonight and start out tomorrow. We only need to find and follow the track, but it'll take all day.

I wondered just when our roles had changed. In Aramberri it was Jabez following me, doing what I told him to do. Now it was the other way around, he was leading, I was following, but I didn't mind, I didn't mind at all.

There were animal sounds that woke me in the night. One time I half sat up and was looking at two points of light reflected in the moonlight, it was some wild half starved creature that was staring back at me.

I felt safe enough next to Jabez, but when I fell back to sleep, if I did actually fall back to sleep, I don't know. I was in the palace of dreams where Jabez had taken me to the room in the tower. I relived how he had excited me for the first time only to deny me the final pleasure of giving himself to me.

It was a vivid dream, I recalled the sex toy he had made me ejaculate into, but now I saw more than I had then. It was as if I was looking down on the whole scene, although the scene itself was subtly different. The viewing chair for watching what was happening on the stage below was no longer a chair, but a table I was laid out on.

I saw for the first time a man dressed in the same white toga that we wore, enter the room and remove the sex toy, holding it carefully between his two hands. He gave me the distinct impression that the contents were precious.

For the first time I understood something, how I can't say, no one told me, I didn't see it, but all the same I knew that my seed was being taken, was being collected. With what purpose? I recalled watching the boys on stage, they were not native boys, that thought somehow tied things together.

Whilst things were making sense in one direction, in another way there was only more mystery. I woke up with a jolt, the dramatic exit from an intense dream. So it was only a dream, but I remembered it. I woke up though when a voice screamed "He's dying!"

It was still dark, quiet, there were no more animal noises. I shivered, was that the cold? The sky was full of stars, and there, there all of a sudden, a light shot across the sky, a shooting star.

There was an orange glow far away over the horizon, what was it, a fire? No, sunrise. I'd slept the whole night through, but I didn't feel refreshed, I felt a dread about what lay ahead, a terrible foreboding.

I looked at Jabez still sleeping peacefully, he reminded me now of the boy I'd met in Aramberri, the boy they all called John.

Chapter 9 - The Silver Crow.

We found the trail that led away from the cliffs over the dusty scrub land, it was a full day's trek across a sparse landscape dotted here and there with low trees, acacia (Palo Blanco) mostly, distinguishable by their white trunks. When we stopped we found what shade we could under one of these trees, we were careful with the water, and we walked in virtual silence. All our energy was reserved for the journey.

Looking up into the distance the vast plain stretched to the horizon and shimmered in the intense heat offering the prospect of a lake or mountains, something welcoming in the distance that you would never reach because it was an illusion. By the end of the afternoon I was putting one foot in front of the other willing myself on. It was will power only that brought the little white building into view.

It was difficult not to believe that too was an illusion, I had to wipe the sweat from my eyes, and the saltiness stung. Incongruous in the middle of such a vast empty space, the single story whitewashed building with flat roof, surrounded on each side by a handful of trees, and stretching away to the left a barren looking patch of ploughed earth.

I gazed at the little troughs of earth that lined up next to each other in perfect order, I wondered what anyone could possibly grow here. As we got closer I saw there was a well, it was behind a couple of trees, had a metal arch with pulley and rope. I looked over the wall of the well, but it was too dark to see into it.

Jabez called me as he pushed open the wooden door, "What are you doing?" He asked and rather irritated added, "Get inside."

I followed him in and threw my bag on the floor, then plonked my weary body on one of the wooden chairs around the table. It seemed it was a single room, table and chairs, sink in one corner, small bed against the back wall. Actually I think it was probably a straw mattress, not even a bed. Looked like there was only one small window by the sink, it had an old cloth covering the space.

Jabez had found an oil lamp, without the yellow glow I would not have seen further than arm's length. The place looked uninhabited to me.

"No one's here," Jabez stated, which just made me burst out laughing and earned me a scornful look.

"Really," I said in between bouts of laughter, and now he had joined in.

Laughter is contagious and when we each started to reflect on what we just said, well it was imbecilic comedy drawn out of total fatigue and, I guess, the relief at getting here. That feeling of 'having made it' was however tinged with the nervous uncertainty of finding no one at home.

Never mind we were much too tired to think about anything, it was beginning to get dark outside. Jabez closed the door and looking at the straw mattress, seeing it was actually two mattresses, one stacked on top of the other, he called me over.

He was still smiling when he said, "Help put this down next to the other one, it'll give us more room to sleep."

That really was the last effort of the day and I sat down on the mattress almost on the dirt floor. I watched as Jabez undressed, even tired as I was, I could still enjoy looking at him. It made me hard and obviously my watching him had not escaped his attention, I distinctly saw a bulge in his pants before he turned away.

He walked back to the table then turned his head towards me. "You better stop looking at me and get undressed before I turn out the light." I'm sure he was grinning as he said it.

I striped off, put my clothes in a pile and lay down on the farthest mattress. Jabez got the blankets and brought them over, just in case it got a bit fresh in the night, but I doubted it would cool down much. He hadn't yet turned off the oil lamp and I watched him standing there, slim smooth brown skin, my eyes followed those tanned legs up to his skimpy briefs and I delighted in the barely concealed promise of his wonderful manhood.

I know he in turn was looking at me, my own hard on was equally obvious to see. He turned around, then paused, 'what a tease' I thought to myself, but at the same time I could not take my eyes off his cute little ass. The beautiful curve of his buttocks covered by the flimsiest material. Despite being completely wiped out by the day's trek, my cock

stood up pointing at the ceiling and making a little damp patch on my pants.

The light went out and then I felt him lie down on the mattress next to me. I rolled on my side to face him, grabbed him and pulled him across. We lay side by side then, skin to skin, my cock pushed against his groin and I felt his hard on strong against me. We kissed, lip to lip, my tongue pushed gently into his mouth.

"We need to sleep," he whispered softly as if he didn't quite believe it.

I stopped kissing him and placed my forefinger on his lips, as if to tell him not to speak, but he wrapped his lips around my finger and sucked moving up and down. My cock responded instantly and pressed even harder into him, juice seeped out from the tip, my mind was going crazy with passion.

He stopped sucking my finger and rolled over with his back to me, but with one hand holding my hand. He gently squeezed my hand in his, then let go, he pushed his body back towards me. My cock was dancing up and down, I don't think I'd ever been this turned on.

Slowly, carefully, I gripped each side of his briefs, and slid them down off his ass, and with a little help they were gone. I stripped off my own pants and now we were completely naked. He was still for a moment, a moment of intense promise, my heart really did beat like a jack hammer in my chest, I looked at the magnificent curve of his round buttocks, and my cock jumped in anticipation.

I mixed some spit with the juice that was already anointing the head of my cock, then carefully I positioned myself at the right spot. I heard him sigh, a sound of longing, a softly murmured invitation. Slowly, very slowly I pushed forwards and then with just a moment of resistance I slid my cock inside him.

The light was slow to brighten the dim interior of the room, I think it was more the rising temperature that woke me. I carefully retrieved my arm that was wrapped around him and slowly inched away, I did not want to wake him. In fact I could just stay there forever keeping watch over his beautiful naked body, admiring every curve, delighting in his perfection.

I was in love, in love like I'd never known before. It had crept upon me slowly, subtly, I had hardly noticed, and then last night I was treated to a night of bliss unlike any other I had ever known.

We'd brought some coffee, so I went out to see what I could use to light the fire in the kitchen. Soon Jabez was awake and we were sitting together at the wooden table drinking coffee from old metal mugs and smiling at each other.

"Do you think he will show up?" I asked Jabez, wondering what we would do if El Cuervo de Plata never came back, and if he did, how long we might have to wait.

"He'll be here," Jabez answered and reached out to take hold of my hand, "be patient, we just have to wait. If Absolam said we would find him here, then we will." He gently squeezed my hand as if to reassure me.

I looked up into his eyes and saw his love for me, "I think I could stay here forever with you," I told him.

He leaned over the table and kissed me.

The day that followed was hot and empty, we waited. We waited from dawn till dusk. We drew water from the well, scraped together a meal, watched the horizon. Nothing, no one showed. We simply couldn't stay here forever doing nothing, for one thing there wasn't a whole lot left to eat.

That night I had a dream, a strange enchanting and vivid dream. I looked out from the whitewashed little building across the barren arid landscape, past the cliffs and far across the ocean to where the sky touched the sea.

The moon lit the night and glinted off the water which was far below. There was no wind and the only sound was the distant crashing of the rolling waves that climbed up to a crest only to fall back down in an endless motion, pulled across the earth by the force of the moon.

Then I heard another sound, faint at first, but growing louder as it approached. It was the noise made by rapidly beating wings that sliced the air. I saw the shadow on the water and then the moonlight reflected on the creature, a bird whose feathers shimmered an intense blue, a blue that was so dark and deep that it was almost as black as the night.

I felt the air pushed against my face as it flew past without looking, not deviating from its path. I turned my head in the direction it was heading. And then it shone as if lit in a blaze of light, it shone as silver as the moon, and was gone, disappearing towards the

cliffs and over the vast empty land beyond.

Chapter 10 - The Initiation.

I blinked and rubbed the sleep from my eyes, I felt Jabez stir beside me, the first rays of daylight were framing the old cloth that covered the little square opening over the sink. At the table, seated on one of the old wooden chairs was the black shadowy figure of a man covered with a poncho over his shoulders, his face hidden by a large brimmed hat which had a feather sticking out of one side.

I could easily have panicked, and in any other circumstances no doubt I would have, but I knew who it was. We had been waiting for his arrival, I saw him last night in my dream, El Cuervo de Plata (The Silver Crow). Even in the half light of the dim interior I knew he was watching me, I could feel his eyes piercing the darkness.

Jabez was awake now, sitting up in bed, looking, but not daring to move. I felt his skin next to mine, he was shivering, shivering in the rising heat of the day. My arm went around his waist to hold him and calm his fear.

The dark shadow stood up, turned and pulled aside the cloth at the window. There was now enough light to make out his features, silver grey hair tumbled in two tiny wisps down each side of his face, the rest tide into a pony tail. He was rugged, unshaven, dark skinned, his cheeks were hollows on each side of his face. His age? Impossible to tell, old, but how old exactly, I just couldn't determine.

He placed a cloth sack on the table and walked around as if he was contemplating what to say, or perhaps taking account of the two people he saw there in his house. "You need to eat, rest, and then tonight we can begin." He had the accent of a local, a native, someone who spoke English, but not as his first language.

My mind started to play thoughts about what was happening here, 'we can begin' stuck in my head. What exactly would we begin tonight in this god forsaken place in the middle of nowhere. A place I'd travelled to so as to find answers, but which seemed like a destination that made no sense at all.

I decided to let things ride, it was not the moment to pour out questions. He would, I thought, at least make some things clear tonight. Jabez had relaxed a little, but was still rather nervous. Then I realised we were both naked under the blanket. Perhaps he too realised, anyway he opened the door and disappeared outside, the time for us to put some clothes on and light the fire for coffee.

I joined him outside with two tin mugs of coffee and offered him one, which he took, looked at me and nodded. Not a person of many words, I thought to myself, but for some odd undefinable reason he had an air of comfortable ease about him. At least as far as I was concerned, I was not too sure exactly how Jabez felt.

The evening cast long shadows as the sun disappeared and a full moon rose to take its place. A gentle breeze floated in the air arriving from no one particular direction, but moving around and disturbing the heavy air, offering a welcome relief of sorts. In different circumstances this could have been the start of a pleasant change, but something other than the breeze was disturbing the calm.

An atmosphere of dark anticipation loomed, something would happen tonight, something which would change my life forever. I felt it. It was palpable.

The old indian, who had been silent all day, gathered his cloth bag close to him and indicated for us to join him sitting on the bare ground cross legged. The three of us formed a triangle, and we observed as he produced a little sack which he opened and took out some kind of green vegetable or fruit.

He was mumbling something to himself, then he looked up and turned his head, regarding first me then Jabez. "You need to chew the piece I will give you and eat it, but first chew it a lot."

With that he passed a piece to each of us, but did not, I noticed, take any for himself. He must have seen me watching him, "I am here to stand guard, to protect you," he said. "You will feel a sickness come upon you, but that is normal, do not mind the sickness."

I looked at the fruit or vegetable, turned it in my open hand. It looked like a cactus, a desert plant.

As I was contemplating eating the cactus he spoke again. "The world is not what it appears to be," he said. "Tonight you will cross over into a different realm. You must

not be afraid. It is nowhere that you do not already know, only you have been away for so long."

I looked over at Jabez, I gazed at the moon shadows, the light that played on the old bent tree trunks. I felt the breeze on my cheeks, and I decided that this was why I was here. I popped the cactus fruit into my mouth and bit into its flesh.

After some time I felt a sort of sickness, a nausea rising in my stomach, I saw that Jabez must be feeling the same. He was bent over, both arms holding his stomach. I looked away, it only made me feel worse watching him.

El Cuervo de Plata stood up and started to move towards the house. It was then I began to realise that this was no ordinary fruit or vegetable. As he rose and moved my eyes followed him and I was captivated by the traces of light he left behind as he walked. It was like those time lapse films of car lights at night where you see red and white lines from the tail and head lights.

The difference was the colours, they were electric, they followed the curve of his body forming a silhouette, but they were pastel shades of clear blue and pale green with yellow and gold, a line of red to finish, a sort of electric rainbow.

He vanished into the building and I looked down at my hand with the strangest feeling of detachment. It was my hand, but then again it wasn't. I raised my arm up from the ground, above my head in a sweeping arc, and I watched fascinated by the coloured traces that followed my arm through the air.

They were blue and violet, crimson and orange gold. A broad smile crossed my face, I was entranced, any feeling of sickness had evaporated. I looked around at everything with new eyes. I saw the moonlight on the old tree trunk across from me, and as I studied the patterns it made, I saw that the old tree was alive. It was full of the most incredible life, every part of it moved, breathed with life. I could see the sap rising to every branch and leaf, leaves which moved this way and that.

At that moment I realised I had come home, I had been away a long time, but as time no longer existed, all those years were nothing other than the blink of an eye. I was a part of that tree, I was there with Jabez. I held his eyes with mine, and I saw his soul, a thing so pure that tears streamed down my face. In that instant of bliss I was so happy I felt my heart would burst out of my chest.

I heard a boom, boom, boom, an enormous loud noise in my ears and I knew it was my heart beating. For an instant a doubt crossed my mind, like a tiny butterfly landing on

the tip of my nose. What if it stopped? My heart. I felt the hand of the old man on my shoulder, I heard him speak to me, but his lips did not move. "Never doubt yourself," he said. "There is nothing to fear except fear itself."

The butterfly was gone, once again I was looking at the world around me in awe. Smiling and laughing with Jabez, waving my arms, just to see the colours trace patterns through the night. And I watched El Cuervo de Plata take a long stemmed indian pipe from his sack, fill it and light it. I marvelled at the subtle swirls of smoke that rose from the little clay bowl at the end, and made such intricate patterns before disappearing to join the night air.

As night turned to day with the first rays of sunshine rising up over the horizon, the moon disappeared and was gone. The pipe was passed around from one person to the next, each toke boosting me back up an instant as the experience of the night faded with the dawn.

"What was that? What did you give us to eat?" I asked him, looking across as I took the pipe.

"Indian magic," he replied and I was sure I saw the hint of a smile, a glint in his eye. "It took you nowhere you didn't already know. You had just forgotten."

'Nowhere I didn't already know,' I repeated to myself, and I knew what he was telling me was true. I had felt at home, no, more than that, I felt I had returned home.

"People," he was saying as he pulled on his pipe. The little bowl at the tip glowing bright for a second. Then he twisted the pipe, blew into it, and the burnt out contents flew out hitting the dry earth. "People live in two dimensions," he had a philosophical reflective air about him, his head raised slightly so we could see his face beneath the broad brimmed hat. It was as if he wanted us to see he was being very serious, he was teaching us, or reminding us, about something important.

"Two dimensions, reality and dreams. They seldom crossover, when they do people dismiss it, pay it no attention." He paused, letting his words float in the air. "I opened a door to the third dimension and you knew it only too well."

I felt the sun on the side of my face, it was heating the day, I felt it's energy. I concentrated on what he was saying, trying to give it meaning and understand.

"Important things cannot be taught, they have to be experienced. You don't learn to ride a bike, you don't learn how to swim, by reading a book or by someone telling you how

to do it. You have to experience it, you experience how to balance on a bicycle and how to float on the water, and then you know how to do it."

In all the time we had been here this was the most talking any of us had done, and he had never said more than a few words.

"People," he continued, "they ignore the third dimension, just as they ignore their dreams. They can live out an entire life in two dimensions, even when that other reality breaks through."

He stood up and began to pace around, we both looked up at him, following his steps with our eyes.

"Even if something happens that is very dramatic in their lives, still they can carry on like it was nothing." He had an expression of being slightly cross now. I could see his entire face as he paced back towards me. "The man who is delayed catching his plane by a phone call that he picks up, who arrives at the checkin desk which is closed, who is angry at the situation, missing his flight. Then he hears that the plane he should have been on has crashed, crashed with no survivors. He traces back the series of events that led to him missing his flight. He asks himself the question, 'What if I never took the call?' The phone call, putting his baggage in the trunk of the taxi, the traffic, the closed checkin desk. All an interconnected series of events, but he thinks, 'That was chance,' 'I'm lucky,' 'Destiny,' he dismisses it and gets on with his life, his life of two dimensions."

This was a lot to absorb, what was this old indian saying, some things like that might change a person's life, but not always. I had to ask him, I needed to know where this was all going. "What do mean?" I asked.

"You will need to navigate through the third dimension and I will help you. Everything is connected, everything has a meaning. Life is not how you think it is, it's not how you see it."

Was he a madman, a lunatic? It would be easy to believe, but I had experienced last night something I had never experienced before, and it was powerful magic, and I kind of trusted this old native indian, but I don't know why.

Chapter 11 - The Devil Within.

"You thought that the barman in Aramberri was some sought of magician," El Cuervo de Plata was saying. "His name is El Ojo Negro (The Black Eye) and he is not of course a barman."

Jabez had made a meal with some supplies the old indian had brought with him. He had a pickup parked around the back of the house, although I'd never heard him drive up when he first arrived. We sat, all three of us, around the little wooden table which we had moved outside to take advantage of the breeze that was moving the air, if not cooling it, it was better than being inside.

"He is responsible for some of the things you experienced back there. He is the enemy." He left those last words on the table like he had just served up a recipe for disaster and a challenge all rolled into one.

It made me think about what had happened back there and it made me wonder what El Cuervo de Plata knew about it.

"You have to prepare for the battle ahead, and I will help you," he said. "I will help both of you, and you will help each other." He took out his long stemmed indian pipe and took his time to fill the little clay bowl from a pouch he produced from a pocket somewhere under his poncho.

Matches followed, and he carefully lit the contents. A puff of smoke mushroomed up into the air. He was talking again. "Tonight you will need, each of you, to start your journey."

He drew on the pipe, I watched the blue grey smoke, and I thought, 'haven't I just completed a journey to get here.'

"You will find your spirit and you will prove your strength," he continued. Then he

turned his pipe and blew out the hot little ball of ash. "I will help, but it is your battle, it is for you to discover, and you will have to face your demon."

Those words hung heavy in the air, I could see that Jabez had a concerned look on his face and a hint of fear in his eyes.

"You will prove yourselves, though it may take a little time. It might not be accomplished in one night," he said.

Then he was standing and walking into the house, leaving us with our thoughts and misgivings.

We sat outside on the earth which was warm, heated by the sun all day long, we formed our little triangle exactly like the night before. El Cuervo de Plata took the pieces of green cactus from a bag in his sack and passed them to us, I had a strong feeling of apprehension, I couldn't help thinking this time it won't be the same.

I looked across at Jabez who appeared unconcerned, but in my mind were the words the old indian had said earlier, 'You will have to face your demon.' I took the plant and began chewing, it had a bitter taste and induced a sickly feeling in the stomach, but it was after that you knew the world changed.

El Cuervo de Plata was talking, "Remember the demons you see are only what you create. They are not real, they come from within you. So you can destroy them, just as easily as you created them." Maybe true, but those words were not comforting, they just added to my uneasiness.

It had been getting dark, but now it was pitch black, I wondered where the moon had disappeared to. The day had been clear, no clouds, by my reckoning there should be moonlight tonight. I looked about me and I did not see either of the others. Instead I was standing now, in a courtyard, not unlike that of the Palace with its scented garden. Not unlike it with one important difference, it was black, no gleaming white marble here.

A pillared cloister ran all around the four sides of the courtyard. Dark shapes cast strange forms in the blackness. I looked around and suddenly I felt a twinge of fear as I thought I noticed those dark shapes moving. The hair tingled on the back of my neck, they were moving, jumping around.

I peered into the gloom and despite the darkness I could clearly see the small figures

moving around in the gloom of the cloisters. There in front of me were what appeared to be naked boys, small, young boys, they moved quickly, they darted here and there. I relaxed a little, they didn't seem to pose any threat.

This was perhaps my first lesson, never let your guard down, because now I saw clearly these creatures were chasing one another. I saw one small boy catch another, grab a hold of him from behind, gripping his shoulders and mounting him. Yes, he was taking the boy from behind, I saw his little curved penis, I watched him sink his teeth into the other boy's shoulder and bite him.

Then I saw this apparently impish boy was actually something else, he had two tiny horns, one each side just above his forehead. They all had horns. There were lots of 'boys' chasing, catching, mating with each other. I watched his hips thrust into the little creature he had hold of and I saw then what looked like a tiny tail sticking up from behind.

It became like a scene from one of those huge medieval paintings, a gigantic orgy of impish little devils. Somehow they appeared to glow reddish in the deep black of the night.

I was startled by the hot breath of someone standing next to me, almost touching my right shoulder. I turned to look at him and a shock wave passed right through me, every tiny little hair on my body stood up, a cold sweat chilled my skin.

The man standing next to me was formidable, tall, with a huge broad muscular chest. Horns came out of his head, a long pointed tall swished behind him, his teeth gleamed white and long like the teeth of a carnivore or a vampire. Most impressive of all, a huge cock curved up towards his stomach, hard, thick and long.

Fear was mixed with excitement, I couldn't imagine anyone being fucked with a cock that big, but it was hypnotic and despite myself I was hard. He held a spear with two pointed ends and he gestured with a sweep of his right arm towards the scene in front of me, the orgy of impish 'boys'.

He spoke to me without talking and I heard every word. "All this and whatever you desire can be yours." I could not say that I was not fascinated by the scene before me, that desire was not building up inside me, temptation.

"You only need to swear allegiance to me," he said, as if that was nothing at all. I knew, however, deep down I knew that was not so. I knew what that would mean, I would swear allegiance and my sexual appetite would in some way be satisfied, my base

desires fulfilled, but at what price?

I knew the answer to that question. I would swear myself to the devil and he would take me from behind, just like all the little devils were doing, and I would be helpless as he entered me with his gigantesque penis. I would have to give my body and my soul.

Like the reflection of the moonlight on the rolling ocean waves, the scene before me shimmered and vanished with the wave of his muscular arm.

Demitri was in his bedroom, standing next to his bed, moonlight glimmered through the window. He was 9 years old, he was about to get undressed and into his pyjamas, I was in the room watching, like a shadow on the wall, but I was no longer 9 years old, and that made me feel sad.

He pulled off his T shirt first, leaving it hanging over the back of the chair by his bed. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed and kicked off his sneakers, first one foot, then the other. He leaned forward to remove little white socks with two red lines around the tops. He threw them towards the chair and one landed half on, half off, the other tumbled to the floor.

I was overcome by a mixture of emotions and by an unfulfilled longing for a boy from my past, a boy I had loved completely, with my whole heart. I was glued there watching the scene unfold, watching him.

He stood up and removed his jeans and pants in one go, walking over to leave them on top of his T shirt on the chair. He was naked in the moonlight, dark tanned skin, smooth and beautiful. I could not stop looking, even though I was intruding on his intimacy. My eyes followed the curve of his body, from his jet black hair, down his smooth skin, over his small round buttocks, down the back of his legs.

He walked naked across the room to the window, and I wondered what he was looking at, framed there by the glow of the moon. I wondered what he was thinking. I watched him turn around, I remembered the time he had shown me his willy and in return he got a look at mine. He had asked, 'does it stick out sometimes?' I told him it did and we both laughed at that.

He moved to stand in front of the three drawer dresser which stood against the wall, between the window and his bed. He bent forward over the dresser, resting on his outstretched arms, his palms flat on the surface and he looked at his reflection in the mirror.

I felt a hot breath next to me and I heard the words in my head, "Take him, you can have him, you know you want to."

The words had no effect on me, I had no such depraved lust inside me, just a nostalgic sadness for a childhood friendship from the past and a long forgotten time of innocence.

There I was in the black courtyard, dark as the moon less night. Across from me was the devil himself and behind him a hoard of little monsters. A red glow, like the fire from hell, framed them all.

I felt something or someone standing next to me on my left. I turned to look over my shoulder, a large black head, tiny ears, it growled like an animal, sharp fangs glinted. In that instant it leaped forward over my shoulder, a huge leap, I followed it's arc through the air.

I saw it's tail swing from side to side, maintaining it's balance, keeping it upright, magnificent, powerful, yet also incredibly graceful, like a cat. It landed with a loud thud and a deafening roar.

There before me was the dusty earth outside the little house, the trees, the well, illuminated by the moon light. I watched as the jet black feline padded off into the distance, turning it's head to look back at me. Yellow shining eyes glowing, before it turned back to continue it's journey towards the mountains, mountains I hadn't seen before.

The first rays of day break were chasing away the night, El Cuervo de Plata was smoking his pipe, Jabez was sitting across from me. It was just as if nothing had happened at all.

Chapter 12 - Indian Spirits.

We sat outside around the wooden table which we had now moved next to the trees by the well. Jabez had slung a rope around three trees and attached an old tarpaulin, the table was underneath, in the shade.

I had just finished explaining my adventure of last night to Jabez and El Cuervo de Plata, they had both listened to everything without interrupting. I'd missed out some details, a bit from embarrassment rather than anything else, but all the essential stuff was there.

The old indian lit his pipe which he had filled during the telling of my tale. He looked around and then across to me, then he pointed to the ground beyond the trees where the ploughed field was. I had no idea what, if anything he was growing or would grow there, but that was not the topic of this conversation.

"If you look over the field there," he started explaining, "you will see the paw prints in the soft earth."

What paw prints I wondered, had an animal been sniffing around? Of course not, these were the paw prints of the black beast who chased away the devil, that's what he was saying, and maybe they were.

"You met your spirit animal last night, both of you. Yours was the Black Cougar, that is your indian spirit. He will be with you always." He looked directly at me, then turned to Jabez. "And yours is the Viper, the dessert rattle snake. He will poison your enemies, he will sneak up on them, and bite with his deadly fangs." He paused to smoke and empty his pipe.

"This is better than I thought," he continued. "You have met your indian spirits and the Black Cougar left you a message."

What message I wondered, he only looked at me and headed off towards the mountains. Reading the look of confusion on my face, El Cuervo de Plata grinned and spoke to me as if I was a little child or an idiot for not understanding.

"The Black Cougar told you to follow him to the mountains and his prints point in that direction." He got up, put his pipe away, and retreated inside for his siesta, leaving me to contemplate his words.

We would no doubt be leaving soon, following behind the Black Cougar, a beast I wasn't sure even existed, following it to the mountains. First though I wanted to hear Jabez's tale of the Viper.

"I found myself in the Jardin Perfumado," he told me, "but it was not the same, not at all the same." I wondered what he meant, but I was not going to interrupt. "It was dark as the darkest night and I stumbled about. It had a perfume lingering in the air, but it was a sort of burnt odour, like from a fire." He paused to collect his thoughts, I could see him remembering.

"I stumbled into a rectangular basin, fell over a small wall, but the basin was dry, there was no water in it. A blue glow seemed to appear which allowed me to see shadowy figures, and the figures became men, ugly, fat, drooling men. I knew that they wanted me, that if they found me they would take their pleasure with me and I would be able to do nothing." He must have suffered, I thought, his vision was a conception of his past.

"There was one beautiful man though, but he was so far away as to never be reached. He alone held my attention, but that was a mistake, because I didn't notice how close the others were getting whilst I stared at him. Then they were all over me and groping, pawing, drooling. They transformed into snakes that slithered and turned, and wrapped around my legs and arms. I couldn't move and I imagined one of those snakes would crawl inside me and possess me." It was a nightmare vision, I wondered what would happen.

"I screamed and begged, but nothing would stop them. Nothing until I managed to look once more at the beautiful man in the distance. The light around him was golden, he was at the same time the Madonna and Jesus. Then a bell rang, just like the little bell during Mass. There was a bright glow, an orange, golden glow. The bell became a rattle at the end of his tail, and the man became the Viper. Then he was curled around my leg and climbed up my body, wrapped around my arm with his thin hissing tongue darting in my ear and around my face. The other snakes all slide away and were gone, then he too left, but I knew he was my friend. I know he is my indian spirit."

So that was the test for Jabez, it was not difficult to see his demons dragged up from his past. "I guess we better get some rest too," I said, putting my arm over his shoulder and leaning against him. "I think we've got a journey in front of us."

It was early morning when we set off towards the mountains in the pickup, the three of us squashed together in the front seat, some supplies and a tent thrown in the back. El Cuervo de Plata told us it would be nightfall by the time we arrived, another whole day's journey across this immense barren scrub land.

He also said he couldn't stay with us, he had to leave, so we would be on our own, but he added that he was certain we would make it. 'Certain we would make it,' those words stuck in my mind. Meaning what, I wondered? I thought then about the possibility that we wouldn't make it, or maybe one of us wouldn't make it. Not knowing what that might mean, I decided not to think about it.

I couldn't see that he was following any track, just more or less a straight line towards the distant mountains, that shimmered in the heat and formed a wavering band between earth and sky. What awaited us there?

The light had almost faded and the sun had disappeared, we pulled up under the shadow of the looming mountains on probably the last bit a flat surface before the rocky terrain climbed upwards.

We didn't bother to set up camp, El Cuervo de Plata told us we would have to continue a way on foot in the morning, and everybody was tired from travelling all day in the pickup. He stayed in the cab and Jabez and I made ourselves a bed in the back, between the supplies, for a night under the stars.

I fell asleep quickly that night, but not before thinking about what might face us tomorrow, and how far we would have to go on foot, I was no mountain climber.

Chapter 13 - High Places.

It took the best part of the morning to find and climb the trail that led up into the mountains, to a place that contained the ruins of a quite large building, although there was not much left to see.

We set up camp here on the flat ground inside the remains of the old walls. By late afternoon we had everything in place, the tent was up, we'd even made a fire and had our first hot meal in what seemed like ages.

A little further up and set back into the mountain side was a water cascade which fell off a flat moss covered rock into a small pool. This was the first water I'd seen since the ocean and we both took advantage of it. The water was cool as it lapped around my feet, the shallow shelf at the edge belied the deepness a step further in. I fell down into the pool, swimming to keep my head above water, Jabez joined me, running and jumping into the middle. It felt almost dream like, after days spent on the dried out sun baked land, to be somewhere near flowing water was wonderful.

As day turned to night we were once more sitting cross legged on the ground in a sort of triangle, with me facing Jabez and El Cuervo de Plata in between us. He took the pieces of green cactus from the bag in his sack and passed them to us, just like the last time, which although it seemed ages ago, it was not, and I had not forgotten what might happen.

I supposed that no one experience with chewing his magic cactus would be like the last, and ignoring his warnings to be alert to the dangers that lay ahead, I allowed myself to be lulled into a false sense of security.

As the light disappeared and the stars came out I was captivated by the nature and movement I could see around me. It was very much like the first time, and I looked on

amused at the life force in the rocks, because these inanimate objects were full of moving energy, wonderful patterns and hues played across the surface. I thought maybe even solid objects are not as solid as they seem.

Spending my time like this was great entertainment, but the huge mistake I made was to allow tiredness to creep up on me. Perhaps I should have refused to do this tonight, because there had been no time to recover from the fatigue of travelling, but he had said he could not stay with us very much longer and we would be on our own.

I fell asleep, at least I am almost certain that's what happened, I lay down, stretched out and looked up at the stars. Then quite suddenly things changed, I was stuck on a merry-go-round, just like in a children's playground. It spun around and around and as I looked out it was hard to fix my focus on anything. I realised with a growing dread and creeping fear that I was stuck, that what I saw flashing past my eyes, whenever something became just fleetingly clear, for a tiny instant, what I saw were different realities, past, present, future.

I was panicking, I knew that I had to jump off the merry-go-round or else I would be trapped for eternity, forever spinning around and around. But fear gripped me like a cold vice, if I made the wrong decision, if I jumped at the wrong time, I could end up anywhere, in the past, the future, anywhere!

If that happened I would never be able to get back. Once you jump off there is no way back on, no second chance. It started to speed up, spinning faster and faster, less and less time to make the jump, to choose the split second that would get me back to my reality, to where I'd come from.

I almost blacked out with the dizzying speed, round and round, then I saw it, the spot where I'd entered, the baked earth and ruined building. But it was gone in an instant as I spun and spun. Then back, there it was again. Gone. I prepared myself, my heart beating like it would explode, one chance, a split second. I jumped.

It was eerily quiet, Jabez was sitting across from me, I saw him as I sat up, pulling myself up off the ground. It felt damp, almost wet, I breathed a huge sigh of relief. I was back, I was awake, I'd jumped at the right moment.

It was then I realised the dampness was me, not the earth, not the air, I'd wet myself. I could smell it, that unique odour of urine. I was both embarrassed and comforted, yes I'd pissed my pants, but I made it back.

I stood up gingerly, I felt unsteady on my feet, but slowly my balance came back. It was

not so dark that you couldn't see, the stars were up there and the moon was out, the sky was clear. I made my way towards the water cascade, guided by the sound of the falling water.

When I woke up it was daylight, as I peered out from the tent I saw Jabez sitting drinking coffee next to a little fire.

"Here," he said, putting down his mug and pouring me a coffee, extending his arm. "Come on sleepy head, I've been waiting for you to get up."

I crawled out of the tent and joined him, sitting down next to him and cradling the mug of hot coffee between my hands.

"Where's he gone?" I asked, not seeing El Cuervo de Plata.

"Never mind that, what about you?" He looked concerned.

"What about me?" I replied.

"You look terrible, like you've been... I don't know, something happened to you, I can tell. Tell me what happened."

So I explained everything as I remembered it, without missing out any detail, at least not intentionally. He couldn't help a smile when I told him I wet myself, but it was a serious smile, he wasn't making light of it.

"And El Cuervo de Plata?" I asked again.

"He left... before you woke up. Gave me the sack of magic potion and instructions on what we should do. Left the supplies, said he'd be back in a day or two."

"What instructions?" I asked.

"About the next two nights, I'll tell you later. Drink your coffee."

So I finished my coffee and we decided a dip in the pool would be good, for my part I hoped it would revive me, I felt wasted.

It was refreshing in the water, with the sun now beating down, we simply laid down to dry off, and made our way back to the tent. Jabez fixed it up so that one side of the tent

was held open giving a large area of shade without being confined inside. It kind of worked, at least as far as getting out of direct sunlight, but it was nevertheless terribly hot.

Time seemed to drift past slowly as we languished in the shade. It was hard to find the energy to do anything, even talking felt like it required too much concentration and effort.

Jabez did try his best to layout the plan of action, explaining what El Cuervo de Plata had said we have to do. I was honestly only half listening, but I understood the part about another magical journey tonight. I wasn't sure if I was up for that, but I just listened without commenting. He said something about defeating the darkness and getting through to somewhere. It was all starting to sound like a comic book, heroes versus the dark forces. I thought about just abandoning the whole thing, but I wondered just how I could do that. Seemed like there was no real way out, we were stuck here.

Chapter 14 - Resolution.

That evening I talked with Jabez, I told him that I didn't want to follow whatever El Cuervo de Plata had planned, and I tried to explain how I felt. I had started a journey from somewhere before Aramberri, I'd met and fallen in love with him, Jabez, the boy they called John. I had travelled across the desert to the ocean and into the mountains, things had happened that I couldn't understand, but now I didn't want to continue.

He listened, we didn't argue, he cooked up a nice meal from the supplies El Cuervo de Plata had left behind, and we spent sometime just sitting in silence watching the clouds forming over the tops of the mountain. When Jabez did finally speak, he told me that he felt the same fears as me, although his last experience with the magic cactus was nothing like my own. He persuaded me to eat the cactus, one last time, because, he said El Cuervo de Plata had left one important instruction before leaving, and that was to open the sack at dusk.

I didn't want to do it, but how could I refuse him. It was a long time ago that are roles had inversed, and I had happily accepted that it was now me following Jabez and not the other way around, not like when I first met him.

As the sun disappeared from view we sat together by the tent and Jabez brought out the sack. I was still watching the clouds which were rolling over the mountains like huge fluffy boulders. They seemed like they were forming rain clouds, getting darker, blacker and heavier. I remembered being caught in a storm once before, and it looked to me like tonight promised another one.

"It's empty!" Jabez exclaimed looking over at me, startling me out of my cloud watching.

"What?" I asked, not really following what was happening.

"The sack," he replied, "there's nothing in it... it's empty."

It was then I realised there would be no magic trip tonight and somehow that seemed perfectly right. I didn't say anything, I thought I would let him take account of the situation himself, I didn't want him to turn things against me. It wasn't me who left an empty sack behind.

We sat a while without speaking, until I thought I should try to set things in order. "He never told you to eat the cactus tonight," I said. "He just said to open the sack at nightfall. So perhaps something else happens tonight."

The sky lit up with an electric lightening bolt zig zagging out from the clouds and disappearing behind the mountains. About ten seconds later it was followed by a loud rumble.

"Better put the flap down and secure the tent," I told him.

So the empty sack was forgotten as we tidied up the little encampment, put things away, secured the tent in place. Then we sat inside the tent, peering out through the flap, watching the lightning and listening to the thunder.

It was getting closer, the gap between lightning and thunder was becoming shorter, the wind was picking up. I retreated to the back of the tent to lie down. Jabez stayed a moment longer looking out, until the rain started. Heavy droplets of water thudded into the baked earth, one or two at first, but quickly more where falling, hitting the tent. Jabez closed the flap and we were both still inside as the rain poured down in a torrent.

As quickly as it arrived the storm moved off, the rain became much lighter, it was going westward. I settled down, stretched out and must have fallen asleep.

I was high up in the mountains, roaming around the boulders, alert to anything that might be coming my way. I carefully placed a heavy black paw on the damp ground, then another, finding a passage over the rough terrain. The sky was dark with a black swirling mist rising up over the mountain tops.

El Ojo Negro was approaching, I was ready. The swirling blackness became thousands of flying, swooping bats, their wings spread out, their claws hanging below. The mass of creatures blocked out the moonlight. I looked up and growled, raised a massive front leg and swiped two, three, four, from the sky. They went crashing into the rocks. I was

safe, protected between huge boulders from this aerial assault. They swept past overhead, turning in unison to swing around for a second pass. Once more, at just the right moment I hit, one, two of them. The first crashed down into the ground, the second veered to the right and collided with others, they tumbled from the sky in a small group.

The wave passed over once more and was gone behind the mountains. A screech broke the silence of the night and suddenly I was in close combat with a giant eagle that had silently dropped on me from above. Claws and beak scratched and tore, flesh and feathers were ripped and slashed. We rolled and tumbled in a struggle that kept us locked together.

I felt my strength fading, I knew this was a battle I would not win. I fell, forced backwards, and tumbled down over the rocks and boulders. I came to a rest on my back, too injured to move, I could only watch as the giant bird glided down towards me, its huge talons stretched out in front.

But before ripping me apart it rested on a boulder just above and its eyes gloated over the victory. A mistake, I heard the rattle and saw the head of the viper shoot up from behind the rock, its tongue darted out and its fangs sank into the neck of the eagle from above and behind. A screech tore through the silence and it was gone.

I was standing in the room of the ruined building where we had pitched our tent, only it was no longer a ruin, but a magnificent white marble room, with tall ceiling, and a huge oblong table in the centre. A table so solid I could not imagine how it could have been moved into place, I thought it must have been built on the very spot where it stood.

On the far side of the table I saw a figure, an elderly man, dressed in a white robe, he had silver grey hair and was smiling. "Where am I," I asked, wondering how I was suddenly here when a moment earlier I was fighting for my life high up in the mountains.

"You are in the Palace," he replied, and I looked around at the thinly veined white marble walls, it was indeed familiar. "Where you have always been," he added, looking across the table directly at me.

"Where I have always been?" I repeated as a question.

"Perhaps your view is a little distorted, you don't see the reality, but yes... where you have always been," he confirmed.

"And the journey across the desert, to the ocean and up into the mountains?" I needed some answers and it appeared that he might just be the person to enlighten me.

"Who is to say what is a dream and what is real. Even what is real we might not see as it is."

I wasn't looking for enigmatic answers, I wanted the facts, mine was a search for the truth.

On the table were laid out the pieces of a huge, a gigantesque puzzle. There must have been ten thousand pieces or more. It was not complete, in each corner were a pile of pieces that had not yet found their place.

He watched me looking at the puzzle, the puzzle that was incomplete.

"There are two sides to each piece, two different pieces in one, making two different puzzles," He watched my reaction, but I was still trying to understand what it was I was looking at in the puzzle.

"But it's more complex than you might imagine," he paused allowing his words to have effect. "Many of the pieces are symmetrical, you might fit two pieces together with either side being right. You might make a whole section of the puzzle, perfectly locked together, but you wouldn't know if it was the right side facing up."

I was trying to imagine just what that meant, how was it significant, it meant perhaps that you could never solve the puzzle.

"So you see," he continued. "You could walk out of the palace and arrive at the ocean. Two sections of the puzzle that fit together, but they are not the same picture."

It was hard to take in, but there was a certain logic to what he was explaining.

"But anyway," I interrupted him, "it's not complete, however you put it together."

He gently raised a hand as if to indicate 'be patient, I'm coming to that.'

"People pick up pieces of the puzzle as they go through life. Some people completely ignore them, throw them away. Others try to fit the pieces together, maybe they make one part of the picture, then sometimes they try filling in the missing pieces, or even force pieces together that don't fit. It would take more than a life time to find all the

pieces and then who knows if you would fit them together the right way up, or if there might not be a piece or two missing."

"So you can't give me all the answers to my questions?" I asked him.

"Nobody can do that," he replied, "only you, yourself alone, have all the answers."

"But if it takes more than a life time?" I posed the obvious question.

"That is nothing to worry about, you will see, although you already know the answer to that question."

Chapter 15 - Parting.

They didn't know I could hear them, much less that I was lying back serenely watching events play out to their final conclusion. I think perhaps at the beginning they maybe thought I knew they were there, perhaps my mother and John were more convinced than my sister and dad. They had all been here, on and off, at my bedside. I didn't know that then. I was too busy travelling, pursuing a journey that was probably only in my head.

It's true I mixed things up, I could see that now. John and I set out on this trip together, we were still together, only I was about to leave, and he would be left behind. There was a great sadness in me about that. I loved him, but soon I would never see him again. I think he'd be okay though. Why did I mix him up with Dr Gonzalez? Jabez, Fernandez, Gonzalez.

John was beautiful, Jabez was also beautiful. Today he was here with his family. I suppose it was normally his day off, so today he had his father, uncle and little brother here, his little brother he called Chin, that name made me smile.

Absolam Alquezar, Dr Alquezar, was here of course. He had to be, he was the consultant neurologist. He was talking to my mother and father. I didn't need to listen to what he was saying, I knew everything, I knew what was happening and I accepted it. I had thoughts about how short life could be, about leaving people behind, about how one little event can come out of the blue to change things forever.

I was lucid, but they didn't know it. I had travelled and now I had arrived, at my final destination. I had been here all along. Lying here in this bed, surrounded by machines, white walls and white sheets. A window with a view across the desert plains and the mountains hazy in the distance.

I never saw through that window until today, but I had the feeling that I'd travelled across that desert and up into those distant mountains. I'd even seen the sea. Time is relative you see, all just relative.

I would never come out of the coma Dr Alquezar was certain of it, I was how he

explained things, in his gentle bedside manner, brain dead. There was no detectable neurological activity, which was odd considering how alive I felt, although I have to admit that often things had been confusing and nothing was clear. Today everything was clear, but I couldn't tell them that.

John was holding my hand, he was sitting right next to the top of my bed. My mother brushed my hair back off my forehead, she had tears in her eyes. My sister too, who was holding my mother, looking over her shoulder.

The sun was as white as the moon, and glowed outside the window. Shooting an intense white beam over the mountains and across the desert. Demitri was standing there waving, beckoning me to follow him, and I had to go, it was my destiny. I could see everybody there around me, I could even see myself, more importantly I could feel all their emotions.

Demitri turned and headed towards the distant mountains. He looked back over his shoulder to make sure I was following. I left them all behind and ran towards him into the sunshine and the light. I left behind me distant memories, I was gone.

The End.

Epilogue.

Martin James Connolly died on 2nd April 2004 at the Palace Clinic in Monterey, Mexico. He would have been 22 years old the following day. John Beresford was his best friend and his partner, he was at his bedside (*note: their surnames have been changed to protect their privacy*).

I met John in 2006 at a gay men's health and spirit retreat. During the week long event we became good friends and it was over this period that John talked to me about Martin and the many dreams he had had following the tragic accident that led to Martin's death.

I simply listened and at the same time made some notes about the dreams he described, I never tried to interpret them, only to record what he told me. His dreams were about their vacation together, the trip across the desert, the time they spent together on the coast and in the mountains.

There was also an element concerning his childhood, it was fairly obvious from what John recounted that something happened in his early life. I think that I managed to reflect that in what I wrote, but the essential purpose of our time together was to help him come to terms with his loss.

Like with almost any dreams, things get mixed up or take on different meanings. John told me how often in the dreams he was no longer himself, but became Dr Fernandez, Jabez as he was known by everyone.

He recounted their meeting with an old indian and their mescaline trips in a cabin at the foot of the mountains. I listened without making any judgement, I just thought to myself it's a folly of youth, experimenting with drugs.

He explained how Martin and he had talked about getting married and having a family and that they would donate their sperm to have a child together.

It seemed as if in the telling of everything to someone a huge load was being lifted from his shoulders, a weight he had been carrying around since Martin's death.

He went over the history of Martin's childhood, how he had discovered he was gay with his best friend Demitri when he was around 9 years old, before he even knew what 'gay' was.

He told me how the two of them met and fell in love, their time together, the holiday in Mexico and the tragic accident that ended it all. That was the hardest part to tell. It was getting towards evening when they found themselves lost on a road with a lot of trucks near some mining area. Martin had taken off his seat belt to reach over to get the map from the back seat when they hit or got hit by one of those trucks.

I wrote John's dreams, my interpretation of them, as a personal recording of our conversations together, to give to John as perhaps an aid to surmounting his grief. The story was never intended to be published, that was John's idea.

His recurring dreams ended after that week's retreat, I hope our talks together helped that happen.

If you believe in dreams then you can believe that life goes on even with tragedy and even after death. You have to allow for some 'poetic licence' in the story I wrote, although it is for the most part taken directly from my notes. Only the final chapter is my interpretation of saying goodbye, what John described to me was that he saw Martin in his dream walking away, turning to him and smiling.

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