



Earth



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It was the fifth night of his sweat-soaked dreams. Jacinto Indigo was running through rows of stalks in his maize fields, flailing his blood-streaked forearms to save his face from the long, sharp-edged, green leaves. The pungent smoke from the burning field to the north flared his flat, broad, ring-pierced nostrils.

From the north, he heard the pounding hooves of the conquistador's stallion. It was as frightened by the smoke as the Mayan, whom it would soon shoulder to the ground and knock senseless. Then his flamboyant rider could ritually slash Jacinto to death with his sun-glinted Spanish sword.

Provided, that was, that the two new Mexica warriors also chasing Indigo, while evading the same mounted European, did not get to the Mayan first with their clubs or spears. They first entered his dreams last night.

Jacinto kept circling to his right and away from the skyscraping conquistador. He hoped with his ever-widening flight to confuse the snorting horse by dispersing his scent in the acrid smoke. He curled his way to the edge of a burnt section of the field and crouched down to catch his breath. He sucked in two short gulps of air, keeping out the smoke. He half-rose, ready to bound across the smoldering, mounded rows that lay beyond this last cover of green.

Just as he leaned into his first step, Indigo heard a long inhale that was not his own. He snapped a glance back over his left shoulder. Towering above his now instinctively raised arm was the regal battle headdress of green and turquoise quetzal feathers and a gilded winged serpent. It framed the snarling face of a third club-wielding Mexica warrior, the lethal pack hunter hidden in plain sight by tassels of maize silk. The attacker was reliving the glories of his people from the shores of Lake Texcoco as he brought the club down in a long murderous arc.

Just then, before the death blow could land, Jacinto Indigo sat bolt upright on his sleeping mat, awakened abruptly from his violent dream from centuries ago. He arose into the dark to confront the brutality of a new day in the twentieth century.

For most of his life in the corner house, there had been no violence. There were his wife and three children. There was his elevated plot of topsoil shored up by railroad ties where he grew some corn and beans and squash. His work as a librarian/curator for the small collection of Mayan artifacts in Museo de Yucatan on a side street in the downtown Los Angeles area sustained the family as it grew. The two grown sons moved to Belize and the Yucatan, propelled by their father's reminiscences and storytelling, in their youthful days, of their Mayan heritage. Neither was yet married. His daughter was, though, and lived in Oregon with her husband and their two children, who visited "granpapa" about four times a year.

Most people guessed his grandkids were the reason Indigo stayed. Some knew it might be financial. Jacinto had lost his pension savings in the investment scheme he joined to expand the museum and relocate it— to a more suitable place for most members of the Latin community to frequent. From there it would have been more reasonable to conduct

guest lectures at the grade schools attended by the Spanish-speaking children of East LA. But the all the hopeful investors were bilked and the museum stayed right where it was. So did Jacinto.

No one knew of his secret and solemn vow to his dying wife: he would never abandon the land upon which they had built their lives, their love, their family. Never. The land was theirs. Sacred earth because it was theirs. Neither Jacinto nor his beloved Cualli could have imagined five years earlier, though, the pressures that the evolution of gang violence in urban America would bring to bear in keeping this spot of land.

Sitting bolt upright. Sweating profusely. Trembling. This was where Jacinto was this particular pre-dawn morning. Widowed. Alone. And scared. With dream images of Aztec serpents and jaguars still swirling in his head, Jacinto put the leftover cocoa in his pot, heated it on the old gas stove, poured it in his mug, unlocked the three dead bolts on the front door, and walked out through his screen door to his porch. Here the ancestral murals from his nightly dreams were replaced by the scrawled "taggings" on his house by one of the two local rival gangs: his broad daylightmare.

Were it not so threatening, Jacinto might have thought of the tagging as art. With curling shapes and whipping tail ends, the melded letters might have been related to the feathered serpents and jaguars of the old Nahuatl glyphs. But these replaced the fierce logograms with the black and vermillion anglo letters: C o n q u i s t a d o r s that now wrapped their way from the side windows right up and around onto the porch and across the full face of the house to end at the far corner. The extended tail of the bottom of the large capital letter C underlined the entire gang's name. It was difficult for Jacinto to equate the gang spray painters with the legendary *tolteca* artists.

Jacinto stood erect with his back to the graffiti, looking out at the intersection. He was only five feet four, bulky across the chest, squat, with closely cropped black hair. The proud lines of his heritage formed his broad nose and almondine eyes. His bronze skin and nose ring reflected the rising sun. He tossed the rest of his cocoa on to the grass in front of his house. Walking across to the side of the porch, he stepped down to the gravel drive and into the backyard. His strides plied to the depressed basketball court that formed the end of his driveway. Adjacent to the ball court, where his boys had learned to play hard, was the garden, where they had learned to work well.

Newly hovering above it all for the last year was a massive twelve-foot chain link fence, with its curled razor wire crown. This was the dividing line erected by the auto salvage dealer who had doggedly bought up all the homes and leveled them on Jacinto's street and around the corner. It was this avaricious dealer who for thirty-six passings of the moon had been paying the Conquistadors to intimidate homeowners into moving away, so he could acquire the whole square block for his junk pile empire. He had set Thanksgiving as his target for total acquisition. He fancied himself an alchemist in his boastful slogan imprinted on the gates to his yard: "Turning scrap metal into gold." And heaven knew, Los Angeles had enough junk cars to keep his empire growing for years.

Jacinto Indigo knew it was not the first time a Mayan's land was threatened by those seeking gold, and by Conquistadors. Everything he had hoped to escape at the sunrise of his

marriage when he was forced into political exile from their homeland in Guatemala seemed to be catching up with him in the sunset of his life, without his wife by his side to help.

The nightmare of gangs was not new to Indigo's neighborhood. But in the last week, since they tagged his home, Jacinto had used the sacred peyote to discern a way out of his troubles. Only during those nights had the Spanish specter on horseback from centuries ago pursued him in the ancient fields, where Jacinto was practicing the venerable slash and burn techniques to yield a new crop from the earth. But last night for the first time his dreams brought a new enemy—the fearsome Mexica from Tenochtitlan. Coincidental to that dream, a new set of vying gang tags appeared overnight across the back of his house. From the corner of the house nearest the ballcourt and facing the garden the large, bold blue and purple letters— E I M e x —emblazoned a dual challenge.

Jacinto knew that his troubles had just increased, even as the threats populating his dreams did. For now, not only would he have a second gang after his home. His land, his sacred earth, was now marked as a battleground for the two gangs warring for supremacy of the corner lot. Whoever controlled the corner ruled the entry across the boulevard that divided their mutually coveted turf. Jacinto Indigo trusted the instincts aroused in these nights of troubled sleep. He stood amid his corn and looked to the morning sun. He looked at his home. He looked down at the way his foot was moving back and forth in the earth of his garden. He looked at his ballcourt. He looked at the tall menacing fence, crowned with razor wire.

He spoke his wife's name. He spoke the names of his children. He spoke the names of his grandchildren. He spoke the names of his parents and of their parents and of their parents before them. He bent down and took a handful of earth. He ground it into his palm with his thumb and let most of it fall back onto his toes and instep, both exposed beneath the leather strap of his sandal. He took his soiled palm and used it to mark each of his flat elliptical cheeks. His ritual over, he set out to prepare for their coming.

He was not the only one getting ready for the confrontation to come. Within the hidden confines of the junkyard the Conquistadors were engrossed in their own preparations. Ironically, the young woman instrumental to those plans was Quintella Ramirez. She had previously been entrusted by Jacinto Indigo to babysit for his grandchildren on their last visit. But this was the second time she had told what she knew. And this time she did so unwillingly. Just two days before she felt so important and knew for the first time that she mattered and that she "belonged." Her boyfriend brought her to his El Mex leaders to speak about the Indigo's household. But now, after a daring daylight drive-by shooting and abduction had snatched her from the dying arms of that same boyfriend, she stood—humiliated, frightened, and equally important, though not nearly "belonging" to anything or anybody.

The Conquistadors made her stand, stripped of her clothing except for her undergarments. They wanted to make sure she could not be brave. But they did not want to incur El Mex retaliation for rape. The leopard skin pattern of her lingerie ensured little transparency and made her look like an attendant of the Meso-American priests in the reference books in Jacinto Indigo's museum. Nevertheless, this age-old tactic of interrogation was humiliating, spirit-breaking and effective.

She revealed once more the layout of the rooms: Where the furniture was placed. Of the chess set on the front parlor table. Of the other Mayan artifacts in his study that might be worth something at pawn. Where Indigo slept and spent his time when awake. Of the location of the electrical circuit breaker box in the basement. How to get into the cellar from the back of the house. They demanded to know. She told them. As she did, Quintella began to realize some hard truths. First, that her Luis was dead. Second that El Mex would punish her for telling the Conquistadors of their plans, even if she never gave in and did so; because they would presume she did, anyway. And if they lost the street corner to the hated Conquistadors, and thus the portal to their turf; they would stop sheltering her to show their respect for Luis, and instead, sacrifice her in his memory. Hard though they were, Quintella had spent enough time around gang members to know these were truths, nonetheless. So, she made up her mind, and took her arms away from covering her partially clad body and stood taller with her arms at her sides as she answered this inquisition. It was then she knew she would speak of these things a third time, for one last time. Then she would pause a moment and ask Jacinto Indigo for bus fare and leave the city of fallen angels for the first and last time in her life.

Their meeting involved the unexpected for each of them. Jacinto Indigo never imagined his grandchildren's babysitter was gang-involved. Quintella Ramirez was surprised the Conquistadors let her go before they attacked his place. But there had been something that changed in her inquisitor's face when she dropped her arms and struck what he mistook for a resigned, though proud, stance. Now Jacinto was shocked at the details each of the gangs asked her about, paying close attention to the differences. Quintella was amazed she asked for bus fare so unashamedly—and stunned when he gave her three times as much as she requested. They sat for two hours, the parlor table chess board in between them, and the sounds of a crane and old automobile bodies being stacked atop each other in the background. One set of figures on the board was carved from jade and capped in gold; their opponents were made from obsidian and filigreed with cinnabar.

Quintella looked at the floor as she spoke softly to the curator. "I can't stay here anymore. I have to get away. My lover is dead. I have to go where his memory is not so strong in my heart."

"And for my part, little one, I too have lost my loved one. But, you see, I must stay here because it is here where we made our life together. Here that her memory lives for me."

The girl looked up into his eyes. "But you don't think she would want you to leave? To be away from this danger? No woman would want her man to be in such danger."

"We took a vow." He picked up a portrait of his wife in a small gold oval frame and looked at it, without turning it to Quintella's sight. "Together. Before she died. I have to honor it, or I will dishonor her and our love." Indigo's voice was as quiet.

The quiet ceased. "Honor. What is this honor?" She was angry. She stood. He put his wife's picture down so he would not drop it. "The same thing El Mex spoke of to my lover. It was against their *honor* to let the Conquistadors take this corner. And those pigs who killed him and took me. How dare they speak the same word. Their *honor* was at stake to claim

this land for their junkyard lord by Thanksgiving. How could all three of you claim this as a matter of *honor*? Only one can be right. Two must be wrong. And how am I to tell which is which and who is who?"

"I can only speak for myself, little one ..."

"My *name* is Quintella. *That* is my *honor*. That I am a *person*. That you know me as a *person*, who has a *name*." She pointed at herself, and when she said *person* and *name* she jabbed her finger to her chest, hard, right between her breasts. "*Honor* is my standing unafraid before those pig Conquistadors when they wanted to take away my pride and humiliate me. Mr. Indigo, all they took away from me were my clothes. I kept my *honor*." She turned and looked out the window. He waited. Said nothing.

She continued talking while looking outside, her voice quieter again, but firm and clear enough for him to hear over the noise outside. "Maybe this land of honor is *machismo*. For me, I am like your little pawns there. I stand in a row, in front of the tall and the powerful. They make the rules of where I can go and how little I can move each time I do. I must only move straight ahead the rules tell me. And one day they make the mistake of thinking I must believe those rules. That I must follow them. But even they must know that someday I will move on the diagonal, and attack when they least expect it. And they will fall. Not because of myself, but because of what my choice to move out of line starts. A little ripple that rises into a tsunami to destroy them if they stand in the way. A small breeze that whips to a typhoon in whose face they will not prevail."

She turned to him and sat again. She placed her hands on her lap and looked up at him and spoke quietly, as at first. "That is why I have come to you. And that is why I am leaving right away. To keep my honor. To start a life elsewhere. Away from these gangs. Beyond where they can reach me. And I will forget them. For me, honor is what I carry within, not the land I stand upon."

He looked into her eyes. "There is nothing little about you, Quintella. And I did not intend to demean or offend you. My people and my generation did not presume to know enough of a person to speak directly. We needed to know one's people. From whom one came. And of whom one was a part. Only then could we speak using one's name." He waited for that to settle in. "You may be right. Perhaps it is as much a matter of *machismo* as a matter of *honor*. But it is what we have inherited. It is in our blood. It is in our marrow. We protect the place we know as home. We covet the sacred land and defend it to the death. And so much of it has been taken from my people. So much, in fact, that school children in this country are taught that the Mayan people have 'disappeared.' Carried off by aliens in spaceships, some think." He shook his head to clear it and checked himself so as not to raise his voice against her. "We are still here. And we want to have a place to live again. We are no different from the Palestinians, nor the Irish. Our struggle is one of keeping our women and children together—so they can learn of the proud past of our people and build it again in our homeland."

She thought, and asked with pleading respect, "And what do you do when the women and children are gone? When the women and children are widows and orphans standing on a bloodstained land warred over for *honor*? What is the sense in that? There must be a better way. I wanted Luis to hold me in his arms. I wanted to bear his children. Now I bear only grief and anger and I can hardly wait to get away from this place that reminds me he is gone."

"I can only tell you that something in the spirit of a man thrills to search for food and shelter and feed his wife and children at the end of the hunt. And one day, a man or a whole people climbs over a rise and sees the sun hit the land a certain way that tells him in every tired muscle of his body that this is the place they were meant to find. The spot on the earth meant for them to till and protect. And so he does.

"Now some day another man or another whole people comes along and says the spot is theirs. And for some strange reason, sharing it has no appeal. And at that time, a man or a whole people has a choice to make.

"Now some thing in the heart of a man aches when he can only carry his children on his back and drag his wife behind him by her hand, so she does not fall behind as they flee from that place to yet another. And at some time, and in some place, a man or a whole people comes to see that they have been chased to the end of the earth. But the horror is, they still crave the place from which they have been chased; the homeland from which they feel exiled. I know these things as a Mayan. I know these things as a man. For me, for better or worse, this is that place. And I told my wife these things in my heart. And I can not escape this place. It is where my heart is and where the memory of my wife is. *Machismo* or not, *honorable* or not, I do not know for sure. I only know that for now, for me, that is how it is.

He stood. "And now, I have much to do before they come. And you, too, sweet and gentle Quintella; you have much to do. I will always be indebted to you for being so brave to come and see me. And for being such a woman and so good a person to speak to me as you have. I will never forget you. And I will think of what you have said."

They came at first light two days later. A week before the deadline. The past two nights had been filled with colors-against-colors skirmishes in other parts of the city, sparked by each gang's urgent searching for Quintella. To discover if she had betrayed them. (As if she had wanted to—and given away her whereabouts and assumed name in Salt Lake City to one of them).

Jacinto Indigo had used the forty-eight hours well. He was ready. Just in time. He got what he wanted preserved out of his house and safely ensconced at the museum. He smuggled home from the museum what he knew he would need when the time came.

The junkyard crane snorted early on in the conflict. It was difficult for him to tell who began the onslaught. It was difficult for him to tell if it started right at his corner, or if it spilled over there from some other pitched battle. But come it did. From all sides. And all at once. He chose to face them in the open driveway and the ball court.

Three El Mex charged from the dimly lit street and drove him to the backyard, swinging baseball bats over their heads menacingly. At the ballcourt he turned to face them, unarmed and valiant. From behind and above him the chaotic screeching of broken fence and shredding razor wire froze the four of them in place. Two Conquistadors riding in on the wrecking ball of the junkyard crane swung down upon them in a long pendulating arc. They lashed out with long sections of metal pipe.

The first Mex traded a crushed skull for a dying blow that splintered his bat and a Conquistador's fibula. The second Mex ducked the ball and dealt a savage attack with his bat to the side of Indigo's head, knocking him senseless and to the ground. The third was

not as lucky. The wrecking ball caught him in the chest and crushed him against the side of the house, just before it ripped the roof off the rear bedroom.

More Conquistadors leapt over the fence and dropped into Jacinto's corn field and garden. Two cried out in pain as the sharpened stakes amid the corn rows pierced their feet. One Conquistador missed the stakes when he landed but fell forward and so was impaled so badly the stake strove right through the back of his colors, where his spurting blood ran out all over the black leather and red letters.

Jacinto saw his instincts and the information from Quintella were right and his defenses were correct. Bleeding badly and blurred of sight, he hoped to see a little more before he died. His attacker recovered from dodging the wrecking ball and stepped in to take another swing at his fallen Mayan target. But there was no swing for Jacinto to avoid. The trailing end of the razor wire slicing through the air behind the wrecking ball, which the crane operator misjudged and brought in too low to avoid the fence, whistled and gleamed first white then scarlet as it twirled around the Mex's neck and lifted him off his feet. The squirming teen crashed against the backboard twelve feet above the ground and his body weight tore his torso from his head. Jacinto Indigo did not see where it landed, seeing instead in his mind's eye a surreal reproduction of the frieze of sacrificed players from the ball courts of Chich'en Itza.

The melee grew in intensity with Jacinto wounded and left alone for dead, unarmed and harmless. It was his land they wanted, not him, and armed gang members battled each other to win it as a spoil of war. Jacinto looked across the yard to the artwork of his own that challenged their tagging of his house. He had decorated a bright circle with the markings of the Captain Sun Disk. He lay still and concentrated on the Mayan images he'd copied from the museum and painted within the concrete orb: the ubiquitous leader on his jaguar throne, with spikes of sun rays surrounding him. Jacinto kept his eyes fixed upon it through the noise and the mayhem, knowing it to be the secret portal his spirit would traverse when the time came.

Two opposing gang members, chasing one after the other, ran onto the grass mat Jacinto had stretched over the opening of his well when he removed the lid for his battle disk. They plummeted into the cenote and out of his view.

Above them, the Conquistador who rode the wrecking ball onto the roof of the house leapt down to the ground and was making his way to the wooden door concealing the basement entrance. Jacinto knew they wanted to get the power turned back on in the house to aid their plundering. Both gangs had grilled Quintella about this detail. A total of four poured into the cellar, not all wearing the same colors. He could not imagine the struggle taking place in the dark, for it was only from there that the first gun shots were fired. The outdoor fighting was now hand-to-hand and gruesome, yet quiet to keep the police away. Three more teens rushed down into the dark when they heard the gunfire. What Jacinto *could* imagine though was their curiosity about the inch of water and fuel oil that made the floors so slick. He could imagine their faces in that split second in which one of them threw the circuit breaker and the lights came on. Came on enough for them to see the raw, uninsulated wiring dangling from the 440-volt slot in the breaker box dedicated for the clothes dryer line. Jacinto's tampering the day before left it frayed and submerged into the murky slick water around their feet. Indigo saw the arc flash as the electric current illuminated the basement windows and then went out; just as their hearts and brains raced

for a moment and their bolted eyes flickered. Every combatant still standing seized and collapsed into eternal darkness.

More of their fellows climbed up on the roof to take the high ground and pick off their opponents, now using guns to do so. Conquistadors in black and red colors descended though the upper wall of the house broken by the errant wrecking ball. The remaining lower wall refused to let go its grip on the ball itself, now trapped inside the house. El Mex whose purple and blue coats were punctured by bullets from above fell in the driveway and among the corn rows.

Jacinto faintly heard the shouting voices warning allies not to turn on the lights, that the electricity was a trap with fuel from the basement. Michael Harderly heard his brother's advice just in time as he reached for the kitchen wall switch. He yanked his cigarette lighter from his cargo pants pocket and flicked it on to locate other traps the Mayan had left behind. Traps they never dreamed about when plotting to take what his brother Stephen called "this last little piece of shit house." They knew from "the skank in the leopard skin undies"—as they had come to call her after two unsuccessful nights of searching—that there were pricey artifacts and an invaluable chess set in the front room. Michael had been too quick for the Conquistador following him in through the roof, Roberto Nunoz. Roberto knew the smell of mercaptan from an unlit pilot light. His family did not live with an electric stove like Michael, who thought the eggs had gone bad in the kitchen. The air ignited and the walls blew out before Roberto could grab for Michael's arm. The blast wiped out the back end and the driveway side of the house.

Stephen Harderly was blown off the roof and landed next to the ballcourt, with his arms burned and jacket afire. He beat out the flame as he stomped over the ball court. He drew his gun and glared at Indigo. "I thought you were dead old man. You're an old fool. This little piece of shit house is nothing. And you killed my brother over it. You die for that, so you bother us no more."

Somewhere between the threat and the gun blast, Jacinto Indigo's immortal Mayan soul glided across the yard and entered the sun disk, to be transported to the faraway lands of his Yucatan ancestors. His spirit stood on the grass ballcourt at Chich'en-Itza; without so much as disturbing the twentieth century guide leading a private group on a breakfast tour.

Back in LA, Stephen hardly recognized the inside of the ghostly house as a place where people could live. Miraculously, the parlor seemed untouched by the kitchen blast. The concussion was so powerful it had freed the wrecking ball. The force of the ignited gas propelled the heavy weight, swinging it back across the yard. It struck and killed the last El Mex hiding in Jacinto Indigo's corn garden. His caved-in torso was not enough to halt the ball's momentum. It smashed through the junkyard fence and lodged within the screeching metal of piled cars behind it.

At the house, the opening in the roof had vented enough of the explosion's power to leave the parlor and the chessmen intact to protect themselves. In the smoke and the light cast from the fire, Harderly's vision of the surreal scene was wavy and obstructed.

All the chessmen were on the board, and he thought those which were fallen had been knocked over by the shockwave. But as he moved closer, he saw they were arranged with purpose. The jade and gold pieces were set out in victory over those of obsidian and cinnabar. The black queen and king were laid face down in the center of the board, with Jacinto Indigo's ancient INS green card underneath. Their heads were separated from their bodies. In a ring around them their rooks and bishops and knights were face down,

prostrate in defeat, each with a corresponding green and gold piece standing over it in conquest. The jade queen and king stood off to the far side of the board, in the company of their arrayed pawns. Turned and trailing off the board in single rank file were the obsidian and cinnabar pawns, routed and turned out into the void.

Two new Conquistadors stepped into the parlor behind Stephen and let him know El Mex were all either dead or fled. But Harderly was paralyzed by a force he couldn't comprehend. He knew he should fear the Mayan no longer. He knew the Mayan could not reach out from the grave to harm him. Yet he ordered the two behind him to collect the chess pieces quickly so they could all leave. No wires or gas or traps felled them as they picked up the warrior avatars by the handfuls. Emboldened, they headed for Indigo's study, where his overnighting grandchildren would sleep. They expected walls filled with shelves adorned with artifacts. It was "some terrible dark" down that narrow corridor one said, the thickness of the compressed smoke now more present than the light from the flames or dawn. The three stepped across the threshold and tripped the electric eye. Four outdoor spotlights shone in their eyes from all over the room and they halted where they stood. But the light was not white. In the black light, Harderly's two henchmen's hands and clothing glowed, as did some pawns that fell from their pockets when they pulled their hands out to block the light.

In the middle of the room, whose shelves were stripped bare and whose artifacts were now proudly displayed in the curator's museum office, there was an eerily luminous ellipse on the floor. In its center a rectangular outline of mysteriously colored Mayan jaguar glyphs framed the scrawled, haunting message: *Tactile Poison on Chess Pieces.*

Two hours to live.

They fled to what they hoped was the safety of the backyard. The smoke rose with small amounts of flame still licking the air where the kitchen had been; next to the crushed roof and bashed in wall of the charred back bedroom. Stunned and wiping their hands on their pants, with police and fire sirens growing closer and louder by the second, the two Conquistadors made their way to the wrecking ball. It was still wedged in the fence and cars they'd helped pile there for two days, in advance of the attack. They hopped on the ball, intent on scaling the chain and making their way back over the fence. But their weight shifted something in the pile, already shaken by the blast in Jacinto Indigo's kitchen.

The grating of flattened cars sliding off the stack and into the cornfield was the last thing Stephen Harderly heard. Under tons of steel, the life was crushed out of him and the two remaining Conquistadors with the dusty hands—the last of the mercenary gang that started less than an hour before to put an end to Jacinto Indigo and to claim his corner of the earth.

