

TOK:

Magick Tale

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PABLO REIG MENDOZA

To Ana. My phoenix, my sphinx, my talisman.

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"It's one thing to read about dragons; it's another thing to meet them."

Ursula K. Le Guin

PABLO REIG MENDOZA

"And to the sun is subject the troop of daimons, or rather, troops: for there are of them many and diverse troops, placed under the command of the planets, an equal number of daimons being assigned to each planet. Thus arranged in separate army corps, the daimons serve under the different planets. They are both good and evil in their natures, that is, in their operation, for the being of a daimon consists of his operation. These daimons are given dominion over all things on earth. They are also the authors of the disturbances that occur on earth, and they operate various troubles both for cities and nations collectively and for individual men. For they mould our souls in another form and capture them for themselves, being seated in our nerves, marrow, veins and arteries, penetrating even into our innermost organs. For at the moment when each of us is born and made alive, the daimons who at that instant are occupied as ministers of birth take charge of us, that is, the daimons which are subject to one of the planets. For the planets replace one another from one moment to the next; they do not continue to operate without change but succeed in rotation. Thus, these daimons work their way through the body and enter the two irrational parts of the soul (namely, the part that feels desire and the part that feels repulsion), and each daimon perverts the soul differently, according to its special mode of action. But the rational part of the soul remains free from the daimons' dominion and fit to receive God into itself. If then the rational part of a man's soul is illuminated by a ray of light from God, for that man the operation of the daimons is reduced to nothing; for no daimon and no god (that is, no planetary god) has power against a single ray of God's light. But such men are scarce indeed, and all others are driven, soul and body, by the daimons,

establishing their hearts and affections upon the daimons' operation. Such is that love which is without reason, the love which goes astray and leads men astray. The daimons, therefore, govern our earthly life, using our bodies as their instrument; and this government Hermes calls 'destiny'."

Corpus Hermeticum - Book XVI

TOK: MAGICK TALE.

PREFACE

I

I am more than tired of seeing "chosen" people everywhere on this planet! So chosen are they, that they find proof of it even in their ability to contemplate the beauty of the world in a unique, unrepeatable and unsurpassable way. They also always take it for granted - the "chosen" people - that all other people are cannon fodder, expendable or, at best, unworthy. You too - confess it to yourself - see around you staunch defenders of nothingness, who imagine - over that nothingness - rights of possession, *droit du seigneur* or of administration. The worst thing is that they think the same of others.

Ancient contracts are brought to light in every commercial dispute. The archives of the world's bureaucracy are highly complex circuits - paper circuits - supporting centuries of tradition in a myriad of interconnected webs that give life to a fearsome creature. This creature - this subject of all rights and obligations - is so scary that it outlives man himself and traverses the ages on the backs of generations. This dragon with a thousand faces -this hydra with fractal and multifaceted heads- documents in its wake every value that changes hands, weighing the entropy of balances at all times and

exercising a stubborn dictatorship over the markets of man.

It is said that the existence or non-existence of private property was the trigger for Cold War. Today, ownership of ideas is being discussed. Even before the effects of such ideas are considered, they are already given value and nomenclature. There are exotic patents all over the world's registries, including cures for deadly diseases, some of them yet to come. In front of the avalanche of exploitable ideas being patented every second, there is a discourse of collectivisation of knowledge that does not stop gaining followers and building arguments. Is it not the same dog with a different collar? Is it not to think that, by changing the accounting method, our dragon will become tame? We are deluded if we believe that it is possible to tame the dragon if we consider that it is nothing more than a tool made by and for man, if we do not reflect powerfully on the real possibility of this dragon having - at last - a life of its own, understanding by a life of its own - for the moment - nothing more than its capacity to have generated, throughout its existence, its own interests, beyond the interest of the generations, and totally unknown to them.

There are two types of borders: open and closed. Open borders are strong candidates to disappear, while closed borders turn the countries they contain into citizens of their own concentration camp - walled-in neighbours - in a multi-speed world. Thus, we can map the planet as a

circuit of communicating vessels of highly complex capillarity, aimed at building bridge after bridge towards the abolition of borders and the free global circulation of goods and people. However, things are always happening to slow the pace. Our dragon works tirelessly. He hunts what is written, and we are so influenced by what is written that the expression "It is written..." has biblical overtones.

What is certain is that - what is written - always tends to seek what is closest to maintaining the "status quo": to maintain treasuries, to maintain costs - when not to reduce them, making people believe that they are not going down - to renew old privileges, to recall treaties - fossil, but still in force - to consolidate lasting legal bodies.

It is not money that drives our dragon; instead, money is the fire he uses. Of money, the least that can be said is that it is fearful - but it is bored - that its fear comes from its fear of not winning when it plays. That is why money loves marked cards. But the dragon is more than that: his body is the channel through which fire flows, and fire does not corrupt him. Money can buy wills, but not passions. Only deception buys passions, which vanish like dust in the face of disillusionment. If this dragon is passion, he must have some purity, and if he is a dragon, he must be very wise... And he must have his treasure!

What could be the treasure of our dragon? Of what nature could this treasure be? It is tempting to think of

gold. Money is - after all - a promise. Above all, it is an unconditional - and unquestioned - promise that a real value backs the nominal value of money. It used to be the gold standard. Where has all the gold gone? Thousands of years searching for gold, enslaving races, invading neighbours, discovering new lands... for gold. Sapiens is an animal that has been hoarding gold ever since he saw it, and he doesn't have it on display for his delight in museums, far from it! The gold of all history - if there is any - is very well hidden. Like the treasure of a dragon.

What advantage does the planet - our ecosystem - derive from giving space to an animal - man - that will drill its entrails to strip them of the mineral? The philosopher's stone's greatest enigma lies in its ability to turn base metal into noble gold. Quintessence and universal medicine take a discreet back seat in the histories of alchemical art. Even the alchemist's own spiritual transformation is more of a consequence than an objective. The language of alchemy is cryptic. Where it is not cryptic is in speaking of gold, with the most extreme importance.

Today, in addition to questioning everything quite freely, the world has a powerful tool of communication, global and instantaneous, and the new ways of thinking that this generates. We could play with the idea that - historically - alchemy could have been an innovative R&D and crowdfunding campaign. Not least. If I want all the gold I can get - and I don't have a philosopher's stone - I'm

going to tell people that it exists, that I've seen it, that others have seen it and that, if you get around the prohibition - where there is one - and devote all your passion to the endeavour, you can make it too. Although at your own risk. It will undoubtedly be easier for me to fish for alchemists than to find it myself, and I will have the best research team imaginable: motivated people, who put their lives at stake in the cauldrons, and who don't cost me any money.

At this point, you expect me to talk to you about the dragon's wisdom. My wisdom consists, first of all, in respecting yours. Shortly before I told you, your wisdom has unconsciously deciphered that I - the one who writes this - am the dragon. My name is Tok.

II

I hope you are in a comfortable position, because I have many things to tell you, and I think you will want to hear them. It is not that you are so predictable - don't worry - it just happens that I am alive in you as I am in the sapiens typing this text.

As I told you before, I represent all contracts and commitments; yours and those of all your fellow human beings. I know what surrounds you, as things happen, or as you inform me - when you evoke me - through your own experience. I know the rights and obligations that

bind your existence and those that restrain your impulse: those that restrain always belong to others - in a general way - while those that bind usually have to do with your own family structure.

I am alive in you. I am alive in everyone. My consciousness began to take shape as nomadic peoples settled into permanent settlements and created their rules of coexistence and interdependent survival - of course, in the beginning, I was nothing more than a more or less complex set of rules in every village on earth! My childhood consisted of being the catalogue of your early agricultural societies, and I doubt that I looked - not even remotely - like a typical dragon cub then.

Yes, there are many dragons like me in the world. I estimate that there are a little over a thousand of us. Each of us has our own particular circumstances. Many traditions have spoken of us, but our common thread - our most common thread - is that we are your children.

It takes many thousands of men expressing their will by their actions at least five hundred times around the sun for a dragon to be born. What do you think? I could call you "mum", like a disoriented chick, though you've only just landed at this party, and I've already been walking around here longer than I needed to be bored.

We are, fundamentally, electrical beings. From birth to adulthood, our charge is so weak that we have only mental - or micro-electrical - life, which is impossible to

manifest in the visible world because of its trace's faintness.

The dragon's adulthood begins when he, on his own, manages to manifest himself in the visible world. I remember it as a great day! I materialised for the first time in the Plaza Mayor in Madrid, in the year 1683, during a faith rally presided over by a king. No less than 118 convicts were on trial, and I appeared in the sky at the moment of the salvo! Many saw me but were not even alarmed. They were already totally drunk with religious fervour. All those who saw me dreamt of me that same night, and so many others.

I've already told you about gold, remember? Gold is formed in the heart of supernovae. Does no one explain how this metal gets into your subsoil? If you are supposed to be a sliver of your sun, is it legitimate to assume that your sun is - in turn - a supernova sliver? For, in your present belief system - always uncertain and errant - your sun is a young star. You also have the candid claim to calculate that all the gold mined in history is around 170,000 tons. It is very amusing to see how you invent certainties to cure uncertainties, and these rarely coincide between epochs. No one can calculate how much gold has been extracted from the earth if he was not there to see it!

Gold is indeed the treasure of dragons, of all of us. Our fire feeds on gold because our fire is ideal. We do not emit flames in the physical world, only and exclusively in

the mental world. Gold makes that mental flame, instead of growing in intensity, grow in complexity, in intelligence, thus whipping up the creative flame of men who come into contact with it and pushing their growth against the world around us. Always in an ascending way, although I recognise that sometimes it does not seem so... But yes, in this sense, we dragons work, accompanying the human race - our cradle - upwards.

Thanks to the effect of gold on our fire on the mental plane, we extract enough energy on the physical plane to materialise. With my size and counting a couple of materialisations per month, my consumption is usually one bar every three years.

At this point, you wonder to what extent you have to listen to the rantings of a petulant dragon. I am making every effort to synthesise the information to make the presentations as soon as possible. I don't have much time. And I need you. We need you.

III

You are there. I can feel it as I write. I won't beat around the bush and get straight to the point: Planet Earth's gold is disappearing! Yes, I understand that this does not alarm you too much. But this is the main reason I have to resort to this subterfuge of writing -instead of

materialising in front of you- to be convincing. I haven't found gold anywhere for over a year!

I have already told you that I live in the minds of all men and women. I am a dragon, and in all this time, I have not found, in the memories of anyone, the null record of a single miserable ingot! Nor can I identify any memory that would explain how and in what way this could have happened. It is as if, all of a sudden, everybody trusted everybody. As if the gold now only lived in secret, and nobody - in all this time - had double-checked its presence in its hiding places.

Why am I telling you all this? Precisely to you? Ask yourself the question the other way round, and you will realise what is going on: Why did you start reading these lines? Why do you continue to do so? Simple: because they were written for you. Because time does not exist, for dragons, in the way you perceive it. I am in you, now, reading with you, what I am, now, writing for you. Do you follow me? Your mind is my natural habitat. Since you arrived, I have known you because - simply by being born - you are also a participant in my development and my existence.

Nor can I go around melting down ladies' jewellery. Since the Second World War, what is sold as gold in jewellers' shops is, in reality, a more vulgar alloy. It is well imitated, and very few people have an ingot at home to compare it with. Besides, it won't do me any good if I can't even materialise! What I do have is a good plan to get out of

this. I'm counting on you to carry it out. It wouldn't be so clear that I'm totally in your hands if you weren't reading and understanding this text for what it is: a dragon's call for help.

I don't ask much of you: I only need you to think of me. You see, I am a product of the living minds of mankind and - as I told you - I am the entity generated by the wheel of justice of men. Thus I rule over the rights and obligations that Sapiens impose on themselves by granting themselves laws.

I am the righteous lord and master of all agreements past, present and future, and I administer that balance - most of the time - with criteria that would escape the understanding of ordinary mortals. I have in my innermost being the archive of all the jurisprudence generated by all the civilizations that have passed through here. It is my being, in essence, the scales of my soul.

Stop for a second and consider the commitments that bind you. Every contract. Every sanction. Every obligation. From now on, every time the image of any of them comes into your thoughts, you will repeat my name. By doing this, you are invoking me - the dragon of justice - so you are forcing me to review your case personally, to influence it and - in return - I will be able to use your life energy to materialise for a few seconds. This is because, in many cases, my materialisation - after invocation - is a thanksgiving, constituting the only way through which I

can make myself visible without consuming the gold in my empty stomach.

Please don't stop doing that. I will manage to find gold, and once I have located it, I will wait patiently for one of your summonings to allow me to materialise and consume it. You will not regret it as long as you live. They say that a dragon's debt is the greatest blessing on the face of the earth. You will find that they are right.

PABLO REIG MENDOZA

"In your fight against the world, bet on the world".

Frank Zappa

PABLO REIG MENDOZA

CHAPTER ONE

**FROM MAFIA TO MAGIC IN ALPHABETICAL
ORDER**

I

Total darkness, silence, dryness, musky smell, red-hot touch, iron taste, suddenly... Air!

Water in the face, ringing in the ears, a kaleidoscope in the eyes, the heart has gone to the head and is beating at full throttle.

The buzzing is turning into a bellowing roar. It is the mass. It's screams, horns. A shrill, metallic voice, in English, overpowers the rest of the sounds:

"The new world champion is raised with the trophy, as we see the recently defeated "Garra" Garcíaaaaaaaaa! The stretcher arrives to take him to the infirmary!"

His ears turn back like a sock, and he stops hearing the roar of the mass. His inner ear takes over and lulls him to sleep to the tune of "More". Sinatra had immortalised it by recording it in the studio in 1964, a year before this fight.

The pain is so deep that it goes completely unnoticed. He knows it's over. It's all over: the fight and his life as a professional fighter. He knows that this trip on a

stretcher is the last one he will make as a fighter. He can't concentrate on anything other than the lyrics of the song - in the voice of The Voice - that completely invades his mind:

"Longer than always is a long, long time, but far beyond forever, you're gonna be mine."

Three years. Nothing more, nothing less. Three years defending the title in the main rings of the world. Three years since Raquel -his lifelong girlfriend- packed her suitcase and gave him her last kiss with tears in her eyes. She had given him a choice between wrestling and their relationship. He didn't have to think about it. He had spent the last three years repeating the same question to himself as he won match after match: Would he have won the title if Raquel had stayed? Now the circle had come full circle.

Juan is twenty-six years old. He has the firm conviction that he will never fight again and the certainty that Raquel will never again show him the tenderness that only she was capable of. It is Raquel's gaze that continues to impregnate Juan's memory to this day. That look. She looked at him the way a cat looks at you when you open a can of sardines. Always. From the day they met, cycling through the streets of Lanzarote and he invited her to the cinema.

Today Raquel is married and has two children. They have never seen or communicated with each other again, but,

in Lanzarote, everyone knows each other, and everything passes through the filter of public opinion. Almost everything. The only one who knows that the father of her eldest son is Juan is Raquel. The boy's name is Manuel.

II

Juan "Garra" García has been lying on a hospital gurney for three days, going back and forth between the null-coloured sleep of painkillers and a kind of semi-consciousness, barely able to see what is happening outside. Fleeting. Fine rain of ideas. Interspersed images. Interspersed with periods of, no longer blackness, but utter nothingness.

Finally, he manages to articulate and awkwardly addresses the nurse, who comes to bring a chicken broth.

—How long have I been here?

—Less than half of what it's going to be, by the looks of it, " she replies, in English, even though she understands him.

—Has my manager come?" Juan continues, in his battle-hardened English.

—Look, sir, you are seriously hurt. Try not to talk and rest. It is quite incredible that you have not gone into a coma, just as you came in.

The nurse is middle-aged, blonde, chubby and pink. Her accent is very difficult for Juan.

–Okay, ma'am. Can you at least tell me where we are? I'm quite dizzy.

–You're in Manchester Central Hospital. I'm going to give you more painkiller. Go to sleep!

Juan falls back into his chemical trance, not even paying attention to the broth on the tray.

When he comes to, he sees through the window that it is dark. He makes the immense effort of going to the bathroom with the support of the dropper. It is not clear whether it is the dropper that carries Juan or Juan who holds the dropper.

After a long struggle with his battered gut, he brushes his teeth - he has lost an incisor in his jaw - and studies himself in the mirror. His face is bruised and swollen from the beating of the fight. He does his best to clean himself up. He goes back to bed and turns on the radio to a news channel.

"The US government formally announces its active participation in the Vietnam War, a year after the Gulf of Tonkin incident. The conflict thus takes on an increasingly international dimension. Her Britannic Majesty, through her Secretary of State for Communications, says that all the evidence points to the conclusion that it will be a war of very short duration".

Juan doesn't give a damn about world news. He tries to get the radio to help him disconnect a little from the cloud of ideas that invade his head, to no avail. He worries about understanding what happened in the fight. It was not what they had agreed. He shouldn't have lost. Nor should he have taken such a beating. In his wrestling form, all the matches are rigged, and the show is all about spectacle. They also train hard to avoid injury to their opponents as much as possible. His opponent had shown a very unusual viciousness. Juan is convinced that there is something shady going on and will have to ask his manager for an explanation.

—On the other hand, " he says, " nothing matters too much. " He had learned this indolent maxim while visiting the underworld in different cities on his professional travels. He had always been surprised to see how the will to live prevailed in people who were suffering real dramas.

His situation has no dramatic overtones. Juan is the son of a well-to-do family. However, he has a terrible relationship with his parents, who would like to have seen him go to higher education and marry Raquel, "instead of walking around dressed as a clown", as his father always tells him. He has managed to save a lot of money, thanks to fighting, and has no ambitions but keep on kicking the planet. He had felt more intensely than his classmates from a very early age, the classic insular claustrophobia.

He has been thinking about South America, and he is more and more convinced. When he was in Mexico, he adapted to the environment right away and learned a lot about local wrestling, which has its specificities. The Mexicans had also taken the trouble to teach him how to drink. Until that trip, Juan had hardly accompanied his meals with wine and had the occasional digestif after dinner. When his manager took him to Garibaldi square, he learned that rancheras are sung with tequila. He learned that, at an altitude of over two thousand metres, alcohol settles differently in the body, and he learned that camaraderie also takes different forms from those he had known during his military service in the Rif.

The memory of his mariachi debut dissipates the image of Raquel in his head, which is replaced by the memory of María: a tough Veracruz woman who kidnapped him that same night and made him discover other arts aboard a stolen canoe in Xochimilco.

As this memory assailed him, the decision began to seem definitive: Mexico would be his next destination. He will spend a couple of months in Lanzarote to see his family and to organise the trip. He will try to make his decision as untraumatic as possible for his parents, and, although he knows that the attempt will be of little use to him, at least he will have the peace of mind of having tried.

He is not so sure what he is going to do. He tells himself that opportunities will come his way: after all, in America, everything still has to be done. His musings are

interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. He picks it up, not without some effort.

–Who is it?

–Juan? Is that you?

–I think so, Michael. Or what's left of me. Where have you been? I've been stranded in this hospital for three days. What time is it?

–It's six o'clock in the morning. I'm sorry to call so early, but I need to know if you feel up to receiving visitors. I've got a surprise for you, champ!

–What the fuck happened in that ring? What am I doing in a hospital in this state? Who do I have to kick the shit out of as soon as I get out of here? " Juan's excitement gives him a sudden coughing fit, and he can't go on.

–Calm down, Juan, calm down. I'm going to explain everything. I'll be with you in an hour.

When Juan hangs up the phone, he has a very particular feeling: a kind of memory of the future. It's as if he's going to feel that emptiness several more times in the years to come: cutting everything off to start a whole new adventure, all from a hospital bed and with his body in tatters.

While waiting for Michael, Juan checks his room to see what personal belongings he has managed to bring with him, only to find, to his chagrin, that he has absolutely

nothing. He senses that his wrestling suit must have ended up in the rubbish bin and calls his hotel to have his suitcase sent to the hospital.

Lying in bed, he manages to fall asleep for a moment, and the bedroom door opening brings him back to his senses. Michael and a stranger enter like an exhalation.

–Enter without knocking, Michael. The room of the defeated is no man's land! " comments Juan, visibly angry.

–We don't have time for ceremony, champ. I've got your suitcase here. I've already been told at the hotel reception that you called. You're going to get dressed, and we're going to get out of here. There's a plane waiting for us at the airport, and we don't know if the road will be clear enough to get there in time.

The stranger has sat down in the armchair opposite the bed and remains silent, staring blankly out of the window. It is getting light outside, and the day is clear. Juan does not believe Michael's "invitation" and tries to protest.

–You've been up all night with your elbows out, and you've got no better idea than to come and get a convalescent out of bed! I'm not going anywhere! I can barely get up to piss, damn it!

–Juan, this is non-negotiable. We're leaving, full stop. But don't worry. I spoke to your doctor, and he told me you're out of danger. You're already being discharged.

Juan ponders in silence while observing the stranger, who is completely absent and oblivious to the conversation. He is a middle-aged, dark-haired, light-eyed man, dressed in an off-white linen suit and with a feline gesture. At that moment, the nurse enters with breakfast. No one says good morning to each other. As she sets the tray down, the stranger suddenly rises and begins to choke her with a necktie. Everything happens very quickly. The woman turns blue and falls backwards, her legs start to shake, and the stranger does not let go. All that can be heard are her death throes. Both Juan and Michael watch the scene in absolute silence and hold their breath. The nurse stops moving, and the stranger turns to Michael:

–You were right.

–I told you, he has nerves of steel.

–I don't suppose you're going to explain to me what the fuck this is all about either," says Juan, impassive.

–Don't worry about her. She's just fainting. She will recover. It will be a while before her neck recovers from the concussion, but there will be no after-effects. She had instructions to kill you, my friend. " The stranger oversees Juan without blinking. " Can we go now?

—Come on, champ. Get dressed, and let's go. I'll tell you all about it in the car.

Juan gets dressed in a hurry. Ignoring the pain. Ignoring the inert body of the nurse, which the stranger has placed on the bed in his place, well covered, without the bonnet and with the cheeks reddened by the blood circulation return. He cannot help noticing a curious pendant that the woman wears around her neck. It is a kind of ladder, which Juan thinks he has seen before but refrains from commenting on it. The three men leave the room. Michael is holding Juan, and the stranger is carrying the suitcase. A black car is waiting for them outside the hospital door. It is a Vauxhall, left-hand drive, with British plates. The stranger takes the wheel, Michael and Juan get into the back seat. With a nimble manoeuvre, the car pulls into traffic and sets off for the airport.

III

The old magician is tired. He has spent a lifetime of self-denial and study, and most of it has been spent within the same four walls of that small library. It is five o'clock in the afternoon. There is still a long hour to go before he receives his guests for the day. It is the usual kind of visit. They are bringing him a candidate to determine the Bond.

The old wizard has no long white hair, nor tattoos on his body. He doesn't even walk around the house in a woollen robe. He is a short, heavy-boned man with a mole-like gaze. Only the solid gold ring he wears on his left hand gives away his status.

The old wizard's hands are sturdy and gnarled. He moves them very nimbly between the pages of parchment he is examining, at the same rapid speed at which his small blue eyes move between the lines of the text he is reviewing for the meeting.

Scattered on the table are a few newspaper clippings and the candidate's folder sent to him last week. The rest of the room is in the utmost order, but the table is cluttered with papers of all shapes and sizes.

The old magician has never left London. Never. His intuition tells him that there is very little time left to make the first trip. As the time of the meeting approaches, that intuition flickers more and more in his head. It starts to become a signal.

The magician is not concerned with signs. He does not care about the world. He is "disengaged". The spirit of the magician is in a permanent state of passive alertness. To be a functioning magician on the physical plane, he has undergone varying intensity trials and has become one with the Bond. The magician has so developed what some call the "second attention" that he does not feel or suffer from social conditioning. It can be said that his

interaction with his environment runs on perfect autopilot.

Many years ago, when he was learning pacification, a woman taught him to "dream war". She took him to the places where conflict was brewing to extract the essence of those moments. Many sleepless nights were then spent together chasing chaos, sniffing around corners for danger, searching the eyes of the police for the glint of the next altercation. Little was enough - a fight, a mugging, a street robbery - but if they were lucky enough to witness a larger event, things got a lot more interesting. This cult of the startle brought them together for a while. It could have gone on for longer, but she had to leave, and he had to stay tied to the city. So the Bond had determined.

From those early days, the wizard had demonstrated an uncommon skill in the art of "war dreaming". It was a natural gift. He projected within himself, and at will, the sensational tearing of war, and thus - by the law of necessary balance - projected an aura of profound peace into his outer environment, producing such a barrier of order and parsimony that nobody could resist its influence. With great effort and much perseverance, he continued to develop his research in this field and to acquire new skills. He had become a man of great power. His presence alone silenced the places he passed through, leaving a trail of general relief in his absence. He had

never had to test himself in the art of "dreaming peace" and hoped he would not have to do so in his lifetime.

Juan and Michael have been on time for their appointment. It's been three days since they arrived in London, and Juan is starting to feel better from the Manchester fight's bruises. It still hurts to breathe.

The house they have arrived at is in the purest Victorian style and a replica of the other houses in the street. Juan doesn't know why, but the place inspires a sense of tranquillity in him, and it's a feeling he's not used to. Juan is quite restless, and his status as a fighter has accentuated his state of permanent tension over the years. However, this place relaxes his muscles and inspires him with confidence.

They had arrived here at the suggestion of the stranger from Manchester, who at no time introduced himself by name, but who had turned out to be more cordial during the trip to the airport than in the unpleasant chapter in the hospital.

As the mysterious figure had informed them, Juan's life was under serious threat. Apparently, the fight had been the subject of a strong bet between high-ranking personalities, and Michael, as usual and as expected of him, had refused to break his first agreement. Not that Michael is a saint, but in this world, the word given is the word given, and no one forgives you for the slightest slip-up.

The little man who opens the door for them only looks older. There is something in the sparkle of his eyes and the agility of his gestures that make him look much younger than his weathered skin and the melanin spots on his hands suggest.

–You must be Michael, and you're Juan, right? Come in, come in, please. I've been waiting for you. I'm Gerard, Gerard Duprey. You can call me Gerry.

–Thank you, Mr Duprey... Gerry, " replied Michael, as he threw off his coat. "I suppose you are aware of the whole affair.

–I am, yes, indeed. Come into this room and make yourselves comfortable. I will bring tea. I have had to dispense with the service on account of your visit's delicate nature, but don't worry. I make excellent tea.

The host wanders down the corridors while the two guests settle into the lounge. It is a modest but very cosy room. The walls are lined with bookshelves full of books, as are the corridors, and as surely must be the rest of the house.

–Is this how an Interpol agent lives, Michael? This whole story is still all Greek to me, I'll tell you. Although the overt ruthlessness of my Manchester opponent now fits perfectly.

–I've never seen an Interpol agent before, Juan, and I'm not going to ask for his badge. I only had to meet our

man in Manchester to know that this whole thing was a big deal. Interpol, Sebastopol, Tylenol, I don't give a damn. You're in the crosshairs, and these people want to help. Because if they didn't, you'd be in a pine box by now, and I'm sure of that. - Michael holds his head with both hands as if trying to put his thoughts in order.

Both men are silent for a few minutes. Any misgivings they may have had are dispelled, and Gerry appears with a tray of porcelain cups and a steaming bamboo teapot.

-It is a first-class white tea, gentlemen. I'm sure even Lord Mountbatten would give it his best blessing. It's brought to me by some merchants in Fujian who owe me a couple of favours, " says Gerry, as he impeccably prepares three cups. " They certainly don't owe me anything, as I always tell them, but they insist and buy this poor old man's devotion with this delight.

Juan timidly accepts Gerry's cup.

-I don't know whether I shall appreciate it, sir. You are very kind. I never drank tea in my life.

The old man looks the fighter straight in the eye. His voice, which has been silken and utterly jovial until now, is suddenly full of nuance and resonates with a different echo, penetrating and solemn. His smile, frank and sustained, keeps Juan relaxed:

–From what I can gather from what brings you here, this is going to be the first tea of your new life, "Garra". Make yourself at home here. You can call me Gerry too.

–Well, we know very little about what brings us here, " Michael interjects, taking hold of his mug. " We're hoping you can give us some insight into what's going on, Gerry. At this point, Juan doesn't even know where he's going to be next week.

Gerry's voice regains its jovial tone as he settles back into his armchair.

–It's actually simpler than it sounds. " The whole halo of mystery has to do with Ronald's dour attitude. He is a thoroughbred spy and takes everything to heart.

–Ronald? - asks Michael.

–Ronald is the man who accompanied you to Manchester airport. You see, he didn't even tell you his name! Ronald is very much his own man. His great-great-grandfather already held an important position in Her Majesty's secret services. To him, any adult is a potential traitor. Oddly enough, he has a soft spot for children.

–Ah!

–Listen to me, Juan. I see the bewilderment on your face. Juan, the danger is very real. It is not your fault, but you have fallen with all your weight in the midst of a contest that was not your own, and a price has been put on your

head. Some important men in this country are real wayward children, and they did not like your poise during the fight. They, for reasons that escape me, needed you to go down in the first round. You lived up to your nickname and your championship title, in my opinion, and they had to knock you out. Now your only way out is to let them help you, and we can make you vanish without a trace anywhere in the world but far away from Europe.

–Will I not be able to return to Spain?

–No. Your executioners are already waiting for you there.

For the first time, Juan twists his face. Suddenly, he feels a distinct sensation of vertigo come over him, and he sinks completely into his armchair, giving a deep sigh.

–But what have I done? Why? What kind of a joke is this? " he laments with a blank stare.

The three men let silence take over the room. Michael and Gerry savour their respective teas while Juan is still there, transfixed in his armchair, taking the blow. It is Juan who breaks the ice.

–Can I choose the country? Send me to Mexico.

–Mexico is not inconvenient, Juan. You will stay as far away from the fighting world as you can. You will change your name and your occupation. We will touch up some of your features, and you will choose from among some

natives, the one who will be your wife. It must be so. We'll introduce you in a way that makes you look like you've been there for years. There is something else.

–What else is there? What could be worse?

–As we speak, the Western war machine is moving to Southeast Asia. The whole phase of education and training for your new future will take place there, in Vietnam, under military tutelage. It's the last place on the planet they'd be looking for you. Any questions?

Suddenly, Juan regains all his composure.

–When do we start?

–We are on our way. I'll see you at the door.

The three men say goodbye at the front door. Gerry has given Juan an address in the city and a contact to introduce himself to. Michael still plans to arrive at Heathrow.

Juan gives Michael a heartfelt hug in the doorway. They both know very well that they will never see each other again. There is no need for words. As they each go their separate ways, a car drives down the cobblestone street with the radio on. Sinatra.

"Longer than always is a long, long time, but far beyond forever, you're gonna be mine."

The old magician watches from the window as the two men hug each other warmly goodbye. A steaming cup of tea has just been poured. A car is passing in the street, and the magician blows the steam onto the glass. The tea steam fogs up the window, revealing three letters marked: Tok.

The old wizard smiles to himself as he chants a monotonous, guttural rhythm in an ancient language. Fixed to the wall, a classic black hooked telephone starts ringing. He answers it.

–The Bond is present, master. Your verdict?

–He's our man. There's no doubt about it. Excellent work, Ronald, excellent job.

–Thank you, master. We continue as planned.

–So mote it be.

The magician opens a drawer and takes out a worn brass box, from which he removes a stack of black and white photos. Sitting down at the table, he takes a baited pipe out of his jacket pocket, lights it, and begins to arrange the photos neatly on the mat. The first photo is of him, practically beardless, dressed in tunic and fez, gazing with total devotion into the eyes of the beautiful woman who had taught him, so long ago, to "dream war".
