

**TEPUI**  
**John Oehler**

PROLOGUE

I, Friar Sylvestre de Palma, the least faithful of the Order of Our Blessed Father Saint Dominic, am charged to document the events of the voyage of Captain Alejandro de Baza, a nobleman of Spain, and to declare the truth of everything about it, from the day said Captain and forty-eight of his companions entered the mouth of the Orinoco River in search of gold, cinnamon and diamonds, to the day only six of us returned.

*Relación del Descubrimiento*  
(Account of Discovery)

Seville, A.D. 1561

CHAPTER 1

The storm came out of nowhere. Thunder rolled. Lightning forked across the night sky like incandescent snake tongues.

Cradling his guitar, Jerry Pace peered up through the trees. A sudden gust rattled their branches. “Think it’ll rain?”

Northern Yellowstone hadn’t felt a sprinkle in four years, which was why he and Bob were here — drought research for the USDA. Behind him, the fruit of their first week’s labor — Jerry’s plant specimens, Bob’s soil samples — lay bagged and tagged, ready to haul out to the Forest Service Bronco they’d parked two miles up the hill.

“I don’t smell rain.” Bob Spiller, a bearded troll who would have looked at home astride a chopped Harley, sat cross-legged in front of the tent, swabbing out his flute. “Let’s do another line, then play the Adagio from ‘Aranjuez.’”

Beautifully mournful, it was Bob’s wife’s favorite piece of music.

“Homesick already?” Jerry asked.

“It wouldn’t be so bad if she weren’t pregnant.”

Jerry flinched inside. Even unintentionally, Bob’s words bit hard. As first-year professors at UCLA, they’d applied for this summer project together. But two months ago, when Bob got the good news and wanted to stay home and build a nursery, it was Jerry who argued they shouldn’t relinquish the project.

More thunder. The wind picked up, pelting them with twigs and pinecones from the forest canopy overhead. Unable to see beyond the light cast by their Coleman lantern, Jerry listened for rain.

Nothing, not even crickets. Strange.

Straightening his back, Bob played a few notes, adjusted the flute’s mouthpiece, and

played a few more. “Okay, let’s beam up.”

Jerry didn’t need any more. Already feeling like Superman on steroids, he leaned forward to pass the mirror and plastic straw. He was sliding them across the top of their ice chest when an explosion knocked him flat.

Stunned, Jerry twisted around, ears ringing. Forty feet away, a fountain of fire shot skyward, a towering conifer struck by lightning. “Holy Christ.”

Flying debris ignited the parched undergrowth. Dry saplings erupted like Roman candles. Another crack of lightning shattered the air behind them.

Bob staggered to his feet, rubbing his eyes. “We gotta get out of here. Grab the blow.”

“No time.” Driven by wind, the flames fanned out at frightening speed, racing through the treetops. “It’s turning into a firestorm. We’ll suffocate.”

“I’ll get it,” Bob growled, tramping toward the tent.

Leaping up, Jerry yanked Bob’s arm as a shower of embers cascaded around them. He slapped some off Bob’s shoulder. “We’ve got to get to the river. Open air.”

“Screw the river. We’re taking the truck.”

“It’s too far away.”

“We can make it.”

Jerry thought a second. Was it the coke talking, or could they really do it? Only two miles.

An enormous cracking noise made them both look up.

Wrapped in fire, half a tree snapped off, plummeting to the ground and striking another tree, which toppled into a third. Jerry shielded his eyes against the blast of scorching air.

“Outta my way.” Bob shouldered him aside, and headed for the tent.

Jerry spun him around. “Forget the blow, dammit!”

“That’s five hundred dollars worth.”

*Shit.* Jerry was no match for Bob’s strength or stubbornness, but his legs were longer than Bob’s and a hell of a lot faster. “Go! I’ll get it, and catch up with you.”

With a stern look, Bob grunted and took off. Uphill, toward the Bronco.

Jerry turned to their tent. Flames streamed up one side from a fallen limb. Melting nylon shriveled a gaping hole, exposing their sleeping bags inside. He inched forward. They kept the coke in the right front corner. Stooping, he reached through the door flap, and instantly pulled back, the hair of his arm singed. Hell with it. Jerry lit out in a sprint.

Arms pumping, ponytail flapping, he pounded up the trail. Fire roared all around him. Blistering heat, cinders swirling. But his muscles felt strong.

A minute later he had to stop. He couldn’t get enough oxygen. The firestorm sucked it up like a voracious beast. Hands on knees, Jerry tried to catch his breath.

“Come on!” Bob hollered.

Jerry lifted his head to see Bob beckoning from a rise, silhouetted against shimmering orange and yellow. No, this was wrong. They’d never make two miles. They had to go the other way, to the river.

Bob turned and disappeared.

“Wait!” Jerry chugged up the rise. Another cracking noise made him pour on the power. Gasping, he reached the top just in time to see a huge conifer keel over. He watched Bob look up in mid-stride, trip, and tumble to the ground, raising his arms as the conifer crashed on top of him in a storm of sparks.

Bob's screams launched Jerry into a dead run.

Flames leapt from the fallen tree. Its branches glowed like a neon skeleton.

*Fierce heat.*

Jerry tore off his shirt to cover his face. He found Bob thrashing under a foot-thick section of upper trunk. Their eyes met. Bob opened his mouth, but no sounds came out.

Dropping his shirt, Jerry dived in with both hands. He could do it. He could lift the tree. Pull Bob out to safety.

Knocking aside branches, squinting against the flying embers, he grasped the trunk.  
*Searing pain. The stench of incinerating flesh.*

With a massive heave, he hoisted the trunk. Waves of fire washed over him like billowing silk.

## CHAPTER 2

*Four years later*

Jerry barely heard her the first time. His eyes were glued to the microscope, his mind focused on microsurgically inserting an altered chromosome into the germ cell of a coca plant.

"Dr. Pace," Denise repeated from behind him, "you have a letter from the District Attorney's office."

"Open it." He punctured the nuclear membrane.

Now came the hard part, implanting just one chromosome. He flexed his webbed fingers, and felt for the dial that operated the syringe. Turning it ever so slowly, he watched through the oculars as a dark thread of genetic material migrated down the hair-thin tube.

"They convicted that guy—"

"Hang on, Denise." A second chromosome, unwanted, was advancing behind the first. Cautiously, he rotated the dial another quarter turn. Just a touch more. Got it.

Feeling for the knurled knob that retracted the syringe, he gave it a twist. "Okay."

"It's a thank-you note for your evidence and testimony."

Jerry straightened on the metal stool and swiveled to face her. All around them, glassware and stainless steel glistened in the UCLA botany lab he'd spent two years putting together with DEA money. "Anyone could have done it. The guy had pollen in his hair that could only have come from the murder scene."

"Anyone?"

"Certainly *you* could have." He saw an appreciative smile spread over her face, and smiled back. As well as being his part-time assistant, Denise Thompson was Jerry Pace's best grad student, one of the bright lights who made the teaching part of his job a pleasure. An attractive black woman with perfect skin and radiant eyes, she always struck him as remarkably nimble for someone weighing in at two hundred and thirty pounds.

He knew her weight because a graph of its erratic decline hung from the reagent shelf above her lab bench.

"There's a check, too," she said, holding it up.

“That’s better. Maybe I can pay the rent this month.” He took it from her outstretched hand. “Ahhh. Two months’ rent. Plus enough left over for dog food. Bentley will like that.”

Denise’s smile brightened at the name of his dog, then faded. “You talk that way, but it isn’t true, is it? The money, I mean.”

“Believe me, Assistant Professors do it for love.” That wasn’t quite correct. But he had no intention of telling her about the anonymous payments to Bob Spiller’s widow that halved his paycheck every month. “Nothing from the National Science Foundation?”

Fidgeting with the buttons of her lab coat, Denise shook her head. “You want me to call the mail room? It could come by special delivery.”

“No. They’ll call us. Or maybe NSF will call.”

“It’s after five in Washington.”

“Don’t worry.” He had two grant applications outstanding, but this one with the National Science Foundation would not only allow him to pursue a fresh approach to wiping out coca crops, it would also fund Denise’s thesis research and provide her a stipend for the next three years. NSF had promised a decision by the end of April. “They still have one more day.”

The phone rang in his office.

“Maybe that’s them now.” Standing, Jerry strode into his office and caught it on the fourth ring.

“*Amigo*, my book just arrived. You must come and see it.” The voice belonged to Hector Cevallos, a history professor and Jerry’s best friend.

Shoving NSF out of his mind, Jerry struggled to recall what book Hector might have been waiting for. “The journal?”

“What else? You must come immediately.”

Jerry glanced at his wrist, a habit that wouldn’t die. “Damn,” he mumbled, reminded yet again that his skin was still too sensitive for a wristband. Digging the pocket watch out of his jeans, he saw three-thirty. “Uh... how about half an hour?”

There was a moment of silence. Then, “Is something wrong?”

“No. I just need to put away some things.”

“*Madre!* Do you know what I’ve been through to get this? My phone bill would pay the Chancellor’s salary.”

It’s just a book, Jerry wanted to say, but didn’t. “Okay, I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Hanging up, Jerry pulled his tweed sport coat off the door hook and stepped back into his lab. “Denise, I’m going up to the History Department. Could you transfer that coca cell to a vial with five percent B-six nutrient and incubate it for me?”

She rose from her stool. “Any news?”

“Not yet.” He saw her lips purse, and sympathized with her anxiety. At age thirty-one, he was only five years removed from being a graduate student himself, as dependent on his own advisor as Denise was on him. “Keep the faith. I have a good feeling about this one. And if they do call, you know where to reach me.”

Outside it was a glorious spring afternoon on the UCLA campus. Jerry slipped on his sunglasses, which, together with the reddish-brown toupee, concealed the worst of the scar tissue covering his head and face. But at six-three, he still tended to stand out. During the trek from south campus to north campus, he noticed several double takes, in addition to outright stares. Too bad he couldn’t grow a beard.

Bob Spiller had had a beard. Jerry had seen it ignite as he hoisted the fallen trunk from Bob's chest. He could see it now, just as clearly as in his nightmares.

Knock it off, he told himself. It wasn't your fault. But that mantra, drummed into him by a shrink who looked like Lenin, had never rung completely true. If it hadn't been for the coke...

What *was* true, was that the blaze that consumed five thousand acres of Yellowstone, and one good friend, had turned Jerry off permanently to cocaine and changed the course of his research — his mission — to destroying the drug at its source.

On that single positive note, he walked on to Bunche Hall.

Better known to students as “the waffle,” Bunche Hall was a narrow, eleven-story building pockmarked by a grid of square, brown-shaded windows. Avoiding its undependable elevators, Jerry climbed six flights, turned down the hallway, and poked his head into the office marked: Hector Cevallos Vera, Associate Professor.

“What took you, *hombre*?”

“I came as fast as I could.”

“Poor form. You should try foreplay.” Hector grinned, and rose to shake hands.

As usual, the Ecuadorian was impeccably dressed — French cuffs, designer tie — his badge of disdain for what he termed “the uniform of academic sloth.” Reared in privilege and darkly handsome, he was stockier than Jerry, two years older, and a head shorter, with a small paunch that his wife, Mikio, was trying to reduce with traditional Japanese cooking. “Sit down,” he said. “Sit down.”

Jerry tossed his jacket on one of the leather chairs facing Hector's desk and plopped himself into the other. He always felt relaxed here — floor-to-ceiling bookcases, a huge globe, the smell of old paper and of the Cuban cigars Hector smoked against university regulations. It was like an enclave of Old World graciousness, about as opposite as Jerry could imagine from his own, clinically sterile lab. “Is that it?”

In the middle of Hector's desk lay a volume the size of a student notebook. It was bound in plain, cream-colored vellum that looked stained and a little warped.

“Yes.” Hector closed his office door. “You won't believe what a treasure it is. Acquiring that journal is the best thing this department has ever done.”

“Better than hiring you?”

“Equal, perhaps,” Hector said with a twinkle. “Without me, we never would have got it. Do you know I competed against the Prado and the Smithsonian?”

“No, I didn't.” Jerry did know — because Hector had told him — that the book chronicled an ill-fated, 16th-Century Spanish expedition up the Orinoco River in Venezuela. There'd been a furor when it came up for auction, and Hector somehow had secured financial backing from a Spanish philanthropist for the department's bid. “So let's see it.”

“A moment, please. Do you not wish to savor the drama?”

“What drama?”

“My friend, we possess a piece of history that was thought to be lost for four hundred years.” He moved Jerry's jacket aside, and sat next to him. “It's at least as important as the chronicle of Orellana's discovery of the Amazon. And the mystery surrounding it is fascinating.”

“Is this a long story?”

“You're incorrigible. Plants aren't—”

“—the only important things in this world. Yes, I know.” Jerry feigned a contrite

expression. “Okay, I’m listening.”

Hector drew the volume toward them. “First, you must realize that Friar Sylvestre recorded three journals during the expedition of Alejandro de Baza, and a summary two years later. The first and second volumes survived, but the third one disappeared. We only knew about it because Sylvestre noted it in his summary.” He placed his palms on the book as if it were a holy relic. “And now, here it is.”

“That’s the mystery? It was lost, and now it’s found?”

Hector gave him a pitying look. “Have you no patience? That’s only the preamble. The mystery, the real mystery, was twofold. Where did Baza go, and what did he find? We know they left the Orinoco and traveled up one of the tributaries, but Volume Two ends before they did this. As to what they found, the summary mentions gold, diamonds, and Amazons...”

*Oh, yeah. Definitely more important than plants.*

“... which scholars would have written off as fairy tales, except for one thing — Friar Sylvestre wrote very soberly. His first two volumes contain maps, drawings, and descriptions we can verify today.”

“So the real mystery is why he strayed into fantasy at the end.”

“You’re hopeless. I don’t know why I put up with you.”

“Because I’m so good-looking?”

Hector threw up his hands.

“Actually, I was serious,” Jerry told him. “Gold and Amazons sound like wishful thinking, to use a kinder term than fantasy.”

“Ha! That’s where you’re wrong.” Hector opened the book to a page near the back, then made a sheepish grin. “As with detective novels, I started at the end.”

Leaning forward, Jerry saw a page of finely penned script. “If it’s so valuable, shouldn’t you be wearing gloves?”

Hector blew out a disdainful puff. “That’s for curators. You can’t feel history through gloves. Do you read Latin?”

“Only enough to understand genus and species names.”

“Then I’ll translate for you.” He lowered the glasses perched in his hair, and read:

“‘Holy Mother, protect us.

‘We have today encountered the Amazons, which heretofore we had regarded as pagan myths. Few of us, if any, I fear, may survive.

‘Our party was preparing to ascend a high mesa, which the natives call Tepui Zupay, when they appeared upon a ridge above us, as naked and shameless as the other wild creatures of the forest. All were female, much taller than the natives of this region, with golden skin and golden hair. As the morning sun was at our backs, they presented a phalanx of blinding brilliance.

‘Our natives fled immediately. Had we done the same, there might now be enough of us to counterattack. But General Baza is dead, and only one of his officers and a handful of his men are safely in camp tonight.

‘The Amazons each carried what appeared to be a staff but in actuality was a terrible weapon. These, when lifted to their mouths like trumpets, let fly a hail of tiny sticks which struck our men like a swarm of wasps, piercing

their skin and causing horrible agony. Some fell immediately, some a few paces later. None so struck survived an hour, even if pierced on an extremity where the ball from a harquebus would not be fatal.”

Hector paused. “A harquebus is an early version of a matchlock rifle. Very heavy, and usually fired from a support.” Continuing, he read:

“A party of us who escaped and returned in the afternoon found a tableau of ungodly carnage, for the heads had been severed from our fallen companions, and insects of all descriptions infested their bodies to a degree that scarcely flesh showed.

‘Such blood had flowed that it stained the stream below, proving the truth of yet another myth, that the rivers of this region owe their red color to the savagery of the Amazons and the multitudes of their victims.

‘What shall become of us now only God can know.’”

Hector glanced up over the top of his glasses. “That was the last entry.”

“I hate to say it,” Jerry told him, leaning back in his chair, “but your mystery sounds like a simple case of psilocybin intoxication. Golden women, rivers of blood. I think your man was eating mushrooms.”

“He was a friar, for Christ’s sake.”

“You think friars live on wine and wafers? Surely they were eating what the locals ate. How do you suppose Europeans learned about potatoes and corn? Or coca, for that matter?”

Hector stabbed the page with his finger. “This doesn’t read like the writing of a drug-crazed monk. Besides, Orellana ran into Amazons also, in fifteen forty-two. He named the river after them.”

“Golden women?”

“Not golden. But ferocious female warriors. They nearly destroyed his expedition.”

Jerry sat up straighter, recalling a bit of South American history. “Maybe your friar was thinking about Incas. Didn’t they cover themselves with gold?”

“The nobles did. But they were gone by then. Pizarro wiped them out in the fifteen thirties, twenty years before Sylves—” Hector stopped, grabbed up the journal, and reread, “Tepui Zupay. I didn’t catch that before.”

“Teh...?”

“Teh-POO-ee,” Hector said, “is a steep-sided, flat-topped mountain. But Zupay is a Quechua word. It means devil.” He narrowed his eyes. “And it’s totally out of place in Venezuela.”

“What’s Quechua?”

“An indigenous language in the Andes.” Removing his glasses, Hector frowned. “It was the language of the Incas.”

“Maybe,” Jerry offered, “there was some kind of commerce between the Incas and the Indians of Venezuela.”

“If so, it would be news to historians.”

“Then your purchase could be paying off already.” It was the first upbeat comment he’d been able to make, and Hector’s reaction — a thoughtful nod — pleased him.

“Ah!” The thoughtful look vanished as Hector straightened his already-perfect tie. “Speaking of paying off, a representative of Señor Varga, our financial backer, is arriving

tomorrow. A young lady from Holland. You should meet her.”

A red flag went up in Jerry’s brain. Except for the gift of Bentley, Hector’s efforts at match-making had been embarrassing, to say the least. “You *know* I’ve given up blind dates. Unless the girl really is blind.”

“Who said anything about a date? For all I know, she looks like a horse.” Then a smile crept over his face. “But maybe she doesn’t.”

“Hector!”

“Okay, okay.” He stood from his chair, muttering something about gringos, before adding, “You should meet her anyway. The department is giving her a reception at the Faculty Club tomorrow afternoon. And I invite you.”

“We’ll see.” Chances were he’d be hanging around his lab, waiting to hear from NSF. But if he’d heard from them by late afternoon, a few drinks would be a good way to celebrate. A Dutch woman, huh? “I thought your benefactor was Spanish, not Dutch.”

“He is.” Hector pulled a large, leather-bound volume from one of his bookcases, opened it, and selected a cigar from the hollowed-out cavity inside. “But a man of his wealth probably has people of many nationalities working for him.”

“Well, he certainly didn’t waste any time sending someone to inspect the goods.”

Hector clipped the end off the cigar. “It cost him a lot of money. And he’s lucky the Getty heir in England wasn’t allowed to bid, or it would have cost him more.”

“Not allowed to bid?”

“The owner would only accept bids from recognized, scholarly institutions. No individuals or private foundations.”

“That’s strange. Who was the owner?”

“Anonymous.” With a wooden match, Hector lit up. “The rumor is that the journal was in private hands in Venezuela. An old family who’d had it for generations and fell on hard times under the last few governments.”

Jerry inhaled a second-hand lungful of the rich smoke. “So this Dutch woman is coming to look at the journal. Then what? You’re not going to give it to her, are you?”

“No, no. The university had to sign an agreement. We can’t even have it reproduced. But other scholars can study it and take notes. I believe that’s what she plans to do. And you’ll never guess why.” Hector let a trickle of smoke drift out of his nostrils. “It seems that Señor Varga is a direct descendent of Alejandro de Baza, the slain leader of the expedition. Evidently, he wants to establish his family’s rightful place in history.”

Jerry could see that. It reminded him of his own pride in the role his forebears had played in the American Revolution.

“What’s more,” Hector said, installing himself in the chair behind his desk, “I believe he wants to retrace the expedition’s steps. Wouldn’t *that* be exciting?”

The phone interrupted them.

Hector glared at it, then snatched up the handset. “Denise. Certainly, one moment.”

Jerry took the phone. “What’s up?”

“The letter from NSF just arrived.”

“Well, don’t keep me waiting.” Jerry winked at Hector, as he heard paper tear on the other end of the line. Thank God for NSF. With this money, he’d be set. And so would Denise. Three years of funding for a new avenue of research that not only held excellent promise, but also

provided a cushion if his DEA work on creating infertile coca plants didn't pan out.

"Oh, no," she said.

Jerry's fingers went cold. "Dammit, Denise, if this is some kind of joke, it isn't funny."

"Dr. Pace, I'm sorry. They turned you down."

Jerry felt the blood drain out of him.

\*

**This opening chapter of *Tepui* won first place for best novel at the Fort Bend Writers Guild 2004 Conference. Published here by permission of the author, John Oehler.**