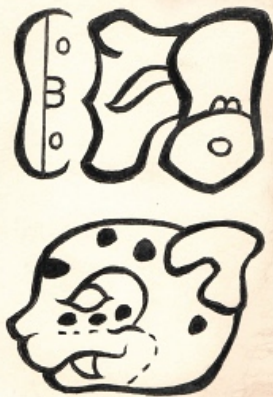


# The Jaguar's Heart

a novel by  
Donald  
Huffman  
Graff



*Shipwrecked in Yucatan in 1511, Gonzalo Guerrero must somehow either escape to Spanish soil or survive among the Maya. A world to come is shaped as Guerrero, caught between cultures and conflicting loyalties, makes his fateful choice.*

## **The Jaguar's Heart**

By Donald Huffman Graff

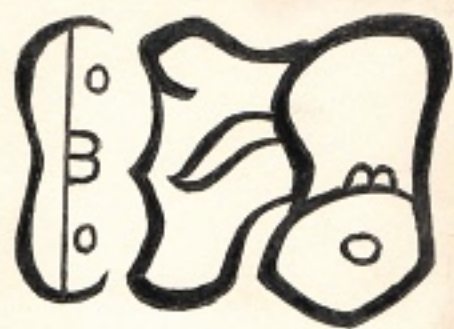
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Print ISBN: 978-1-958878-36-1

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-396-4

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia, U.S.A.

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Printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Graff, Donald Huffman

The Jaguar's Heart by Donald Huffman Graff

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022922813

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2023

## CHAPTER 1

The pre-dawn light crept up in the east, making the horizon between sea and sky discernible to the people huddled in the tiny open boat. If any were aware, they did not stir. The boat kept bobbing on the waves, drifting. To the west, something more slowly became visible: a long, dark strip along the horizon.

In the boat one man began to move. He raised his head from the jumble of bodies and gripped the wooden boat's side to prop himself up. From a haggard face beneath unkempt, wind-blown brown curly hair, blue eyes stared westward at that dark strip. Then he slid back and began trying to rouse his companions. They lay as they had all night, and for many days now, days of thirst and starvation that had brought them to the verge of death, since their ship had struck the shoals and sunk. They had been sailing from the strife-torn colony at Darien for Hispaniola, bearing urgent news to its governor, Diego Colón, and 20,000 ducats in gold for King Ferdinand. Both the ship and gold lay at the bottom of the sea, along with eight of their companions who had died during the long, hot days of drifting in the lifeboat. Only twelve people remained now, ten men and two women.

"Captain," the man croaked hoarsely, shaking one of the nearer bodies. "Captain Valdivia! Land — I see land to the west!" The captain and some of the others began to stir. The rest remained torpid.

"Land," Valdivia whispered. "Guerrero, is it Hispaniola? Or Jamaica?"

"No," the first man, Guerrero, said scratching at his stiff, salt-encrusted and sun-dried beard to limber his jaws for the now-unaccustomed effort of

speaking. "Not the way we've drifted. Maybe an island, maybe Tierra Firme. Impossible to tell. But land may mean fresh water."

Valdivia, now as roused as his weakened condition allowed him to be, helped Guerrero to get the oars lying in the bottom of the boat. They gave them to those of their fellows still able to use them.

"Water," one gasped anxiously, through parched lips, as Guerrero handed him an oar. "There's water there!" The word animated them to a degree that would have seemed unimaginable only minutes before. But all remained weary, hungry, and thirsty, and not all could row. Also, there were not enough oars to go around. Valdivia and Guerrero gave them to those who seemed the hardiest.

"Here you are, Aguilar," said Guerrero, handing the last oar to a lean, black-haired, ascetic-looking man. "If you're strong enough to row."

"I am," Aguilar replied, taking the oar. "If it means saving our lives."

They began working together in earnest, paddling the tiny craft toward the shore as best they could. Guerrero pulled at his oar with all his remaining strength. Though the effort cost him pangs of agony shooting through his tired joints and sinews, up the length of his arms to his shoulders and across his back, he kept at it. The other rowers' groans and curses showed them equally pained, and their uncoordinated strokes made progress slow. Whenever any of them faltered, Guerrero and Valdivia exhorted them to further efforts, and, though it seemed forever, eventually the shore grew more distinct. By the light of dawn they could see a long pale gray strand, extending all the way along the western horizon, with the dark line of a forest beyond.

As they continued to strain at the oars, the shore grew ever closer. Stubbornly gripping the wooden handle in stiffly clenched fingers, Guerrero worked his oar steadily, with the ingrained habit of a sailor. Before long they were among the waves curling and starting to break on the beach, less than a hundred yards away.

"Keep at it, men!" Valdivia croaked. "We're almost there!"

As if to belie his words, a crunching impact suddenly jolted the boat, and it stopped, stuck and askew, as water poured gurgling in through a hole in the bottom.

## *The Jaguar's Heart*

"A rock!" Guerrero said. "We must be in shallow water. Overboard, everyone!"

"I can't swim," called a woman's voice from among those crowded in the filling boat.

"Then learn now or drown!" Guerrero shot back. Others were already jumping into the surf. Aguilar joined them, after quickly slipping an oilskin rucksack onto his back.

"It's not deep," said Aguilar, a man of average height, after dropping into the water with his pack. "I can keep my head above water with my feet on the sand."

"Then into the water you go, Doña Teresa," Guerrero told the woman who couldn't swim. They both clambered into the cold sea, followed by another straggler and last Valdivia.

The dozen figures struggled through the surf. Chilly water engulfed and covered them whenever a wave passed over, and they emerged sputtering and blinking their brine-stung eyes. The sea was not rough nor the tide strong that morning, but in their weakness they could barely manage to fight their way to the shore, where they lay as helpless as infants, gasping and exhausted on the pale sand.

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Half an hour passed. Now the early morning sun illuminated the scene on the beach more clearly. As soon as he could, Guerrero propped himself up and looked around. He noticed, first of all, the stark, almost pure white of the fine sand, and the intense blue of both the sky and sea. His head ached, but with an effort he concentrated, trying to get his bearings. In him the urge to survive that is in every man manifested in a search for some immediate way to put what energy he had left into saving himself and his companions. The shore ran roughly north-south, by his reckoning. Not much more than fifty yards from where he lay the forest began, and seemed to continue inland as far as he could guess.

Nearby, Valdivia managed to sit up too. The captain's hair and beard framed his drawn face with a dark, tangled mass.

"What do you see?" he asked Guerrero.

"Not much," Guerrero replied. "No rivers or streams flowing into the sea." Now he stood up, with great difficulty, for he felt exhausted. His sodden clothes, from his linen shirt and the woolen doublet over it down to the hose on his legs, felt heavy and constraining. He gazed north, south, and west, into the dark jungle. "No, none. And no hills or mountains inland. That doesn't bode well for finding any fresh water."

"There must be a spring or stream somewhere," Valdivia said.

"Yes, probably," Guerrero said. "But how far?"

"Let's find out," Valdivia said. He looked at the group, lying scattered like flotsam on the beach. Half lay torpid, seemingly only barely alive, the rest had slowly begun sitting up and looking around, examining their surroundings. Valdivia singled out one of these. "Fulano Morales," he said. "You go with Guerrero and look for water. And food. I'll stay here with the others."

Guerrero looked at Morales, who sat rubbing his face, his head down, so Guerrero saw just a shock of black hair. A large, strong man, and a hidalgo — a gentleman, like Valdivia — he had a reputation as a valiant swordsman. He wore no sword now, for it had gone down with the ship, along with all their belongings except for Aguilar's rucksack and what little they carried on their persons. But Guerrero saw a dagger hanging in a sheath from Morales' belt. He wished that he still had his own knife, for the unknown Indies held many perils. Now Morales looked up, revealing a visage as gaunt and scraggly-bearded as the captain's, but after those many days in the lifeboat, Guerrero supposed that he himself must look much the same.

"Are you ready, Don Fulano?" Guerrero asked him.

"I suppose so, Gonzalo," Morales replied. "Let's go." Morales slowly struggled to his feet and together the two men staggered up the shore to the forest.

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Guerrero and Morales reached the trees with the sailor ahead and the gentleman already lagging behind, treading unsteadily and breathing heavily from the exertion. They passed into the shade of and stopped, looking around and listening cautiously. But there was nothing to be seen but the forest itself,

## *The Jaguar's Heart*

and nothing to be heard but the calls of birds, the hum of insects and the occasional rustle of some small creature in the undergrowth below or the branches above. After a moment Guerrero went a little further into the green woods.

"What is it?" Morales asked, hobbling after him.

"Water!" Guerrero replied, seizing a large flower and then pouring the beads of moisture collected within it into his mouth.

"Not much water," Morales said.

"No, but better than nothing," Guerrero said, taking another blossom and drinking its contents. "They're filled with dew in the morning, especially after a rain. I saw this in Darien."

"I'll have some too," Morales said, imitating him. "It'll take a lot to slake this thirst," he added, swallowing with difficulty. "But ah, that's sweet."

They kept sipping for several minutes without speaking, until they had consumed all the water they easily could in that spot.

"We'd better call the others," Guerrero said, after pouring a last few beads of dew off a broad green leaf into his mouth. "The dew will rise as the day gets warm."

"Yes," Morales said. "Good idea. Let's go."

As they walked back Guerrero again soon got ahead, with Morales trailing behind, an unexpected thing for a common sailor twenty years of age in the company of a hidalgo ten years his senior. But he did not reflect on this, not being reflective by nature and moreover still suffering from a bad headache and countless pains throughout his body. If he noticed it he probably guessed that the older man had had a harder time of it in the lifeboat. He would have been partly right in this, but of whatever makes one person falter while another seizes on anything present that may help him survive, he remained unconscious.

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Returning to the open beach they found that the morning had begun growing warmer. Most of their companions lay in the sun, on the sand, moving little. A few sat with Valdivia and saw the two coming back, among them Aguilar.



"What news?" Valdivia rasped, as Morales and Guerrero approached. The sailor realized how much good the few sips of water had done him, for although he still felt very thirsty, he could now speak much more easily.

"We should all go into the woods," he said. "There's still some dew on the leaves, which we can drink."

"There's no sign of danger from Indians or wild beasts," added Morales. "At least on the edge of the forest. We didn't go very far in. But I think it's safe."

"We'll go," said Valdivia. "We need whatever water there is. But we must find a river or spring soon."

"And food," Morales added. "Unless Aguilar has some in that bag of his."

"I don't," Aguilar said. "Let's get going. I think Teresa and Isabel may need some help."

Both women lay on the sand. But Isabel, the younger woman, had already begun to stir, having gotten herself ashore despite the encumbrance of her long dress. Teresa sprawled with her husband, Mateo, where they had collapsed after he had gotten her ashore. With the aid of their companions, Mateo and Isabel stood, and she managed to stagger with the rest up the gently sloping beach to its rocky edge where the woods began. Teresa had to be carried by her husband and Guerrero.

When the group reached the trees they fell at once upon every leaf and flower that held any drops of precious water. Guerrero gave some to the listless Teresa while her husband sipped, though himself desperately wanting more. Finally Mateo came to her side and, letting Guerrero go, offered her a blossom to drink from, bringing his black-bearded face close to her sunburned one and stroking her auburn hair.

The others had spread out in pursuit of more dew drops. Guerrero had to go further into the forest than before to find a spot that hadn't been gone over yet. Shortly after he found one, Valdivia called out. Guerrero stumbled over toward him and saw that a puddle had been found. It apparently had rained overnight, and, in a shallow concavity on a pale buff-colored limestone outcrop, some water had pooled. Everyone crowded around and

## *The Jaguar's Heart*

drank. With cupped hands Guerrero scooped up and swallowed a whole mouthful.

When, after every available drop was consumed, they began considering whether to go to search for food and more water, Guerrero felt better — less parched — but still thirsty, and his head still ached almost as much as it had during the final days of drifting in the lifeboat. After some discussion, mostly between Valdivia and Morales, they arbitrarily decided to head south.

Staying just within the edge of the trees, they hobbled along for some time, as the sun rose higher in the sky. Mateo and Isabel helped Teresa, who remained the weakest. It grew much hotter, even in the shade, and mist rose from the ground and lush vegetation.

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After perhaps an hour, during which little was said, Guerrero spoke suddenly to Morales and Valdivia, who were with him in front.

"Look there," he said, pointing to a large tree that bore some scaly fruits, more of which lay on the ground beneath. "I think on Hispaniola I saw trees like that with fruit you can eat."

"There's a tree like that on the islands with good fruit, but they're big and ruddy like a bull's heart. Those look more like pine cones," said a thickset sailor named Pedro Hernandez, who had been in the Indies longer than Guerrero.

"But that isn't a pine tree," said another sailor, brushing his lank dun-colored hair from his eyes. "I say we try them."

"I do too, José," said Valdivia. "Let's eat those!"

He and Morales called to the others, who made their way as quickly as they could to the tree and began devouring the fruit. These proved edible, seedy and a bit sour but juicy.

Afterwards, his hunger somewhat assuaged, and his thirst partly slaked by the juice, Guerrero sat with the others and rested. After removing his shoes and shaking some sand out of them, he noticed that Aguilar had produced a large book from his rucksack.

"What's that?" he asked him.

"A breviary," Aguilar answered. "I'm trying to figure out what day it is. I think it's May seventeenth, for we struck the reefs on the third and spent fourteen days in the lifeboat."

"Yes, fourteen days, though it seemed an eternity in Hell," muttered Morales. "Anyhow what good does it do us to know that it's May seventeenth in the year of our Lord 1511, here in some unknown and forsaken part of the Indies?" he continued, raising his voice.

"We can still hope to get back to Hispaniola somehow," Aguilar answered, undaunted. He was of good family and had taken holy orders, and so acted near the equal of any hidalgo. "And we will tell the story of our shipwreck and journey home. So we should try to remember all we can, even if for now we can't write it down."

"He's right," Valdivia said, getting to his feet. "We'll get back, and we should keep track of time in the meanwhile. Now let's keep looking for some water."

With some difficulty, but a bit less than before, the rest of them struggled to their feet again also. Aguilar put the book in his rucksack, which he shouldered as he rose. Together they resumed moving slowly southward, keeping under cover of the edge of the forest. The mid-morning sun, now high in the sky, beat down on them with a merciless heat even through the leaves. The pangs of thirst soon returned, worse than before. Some of the Spaniards had begun to falter when Guerrero, again in front, suddenly stopped.

"I see someone — there, on the beach!" he hissed, pointing. Valdivia came up beside him immediately. "It looks like an Indian — a woman," Guerrero told him.

"I see her," the captain said. Now the others joined them and watched the figure, some hundred yards away, cross the sand. She walked perpendicularly to their path, heading up the slope of the beach toward the forest. She wore a calf-length white cloth skirt and another embroidered cloth draped over her shoulders like a shawl, and carried something in a bulging net bag. She gave no sign that she had seen them, and after a moment vanished into the gloom of the forest up ahead.

## *The Jaguar's Heart*

"Where there are Indians, there's bound to be food and water," Valdivia said. "We'll follow her to her hut, and see if we can barter for something."

"With what?" Morales asked. "Do we have any beads?"

"With the brass buttons on my coat — and yours — if need be," Valdivia replied. "Who's got some beads?" he added after a moment's reflection. Aguilar turned out to have a spare rosary in his rucksack, and Isabel an inexpensive necklace. "Let's hurry after her now," Valdivia said.

The Spaniards made their way with as much speed as they could. Reaching the spot where the Indian had vanished they found a path running into the forest. Agreeing that a homestead, or even a village, stood nearby, they followed the path.

The Indian woman had gotten too far ahead of them to be seen; nevertheless, before long, they saw someone running down the path toward them. An Indian boy approached: brown-skinned, black-haired, barefoot and clad in a white loincloth wrapped around his waist, with the ends trailing down in front and back. He saw them too, at the same time they saw him, and stopped thirty yards away. He stared at them for a moment, and then turned and ran back the way he had come.

"Better get those beads ready," Valdivia said. "They'll be expecting us."

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The group stumbled down the path, which became well-trodden and ample after being joined by several smaller side paths. In front they went two abreast, first Valdivia and Morales, then Guerrero and Hernandez. Behind them Aguilar, Isabel, and the rest straggled in single file, except Teresa, who needed Mateo's help to keep moving along.

They came to an area where the trees thinned out; only a few leafless, charred trunks stood amid thick undergrowth. Beyond, the thatched roofs of a village could be seen about a hundred yards away. It seemed larger than any they had seen in Darien, though it was hard to guess how far it extended. From it came the sounds of agitated voices shouting and dogs barking.

"As I thought, we're expected," Valdivia said.

Up ahead, a band of perhaps a dozen men emerged from the village onto the path. All short, beardless men, they wore loincloths like the boy's,

sandals, and several also wore sleeveless vests. Some had painted their bodies black. All carried shields and what looked like clubs or axes. They strode down the path toward the Spaniards. Behind them, at the outskirts of the village, more Indians had gathered, watching — men, women and children, dressed like the woman and boy the Spaniards had seen earlier.

"I don't like the look of those things they've got," said Guerrero.

"I agree," said Valdivia. "But we've got to try to barter with them, unless you can think of another way to get us food and water. Let's have those beads." Aguilar took the spare rosary from his rucksack, which he promptly re-shouldered, and Isabel removed the necklace from beneath her tangled blond tresses. Both were passed along to Valdivia.

The Indians drew closer. Now they halted, blocking the trail some twenty yards ahead of the Spaniards, shouting at them in a strange tongue, and brandishing their weapons. In forefront stood several men, whom the Spaniards could now see wore red body paint which ended at the elbows, exposing tattooed forearms. Among them another red-painted man stood who looked older than the rest, for his hair showed traces of gray. He wore an elaborately embroidered mantle draped across his shoulders, covering his torso, and carried no club.

"There's the *cacique*," Valdivia said, using the Arawakan word for chief. "I'll see if I can talk to him."

"I've a dagger in case you can't," said Morales.

"I still have mine, too," said Valdivia. "But let's hope we don't have to use them. We can't put up much of a fight right now." The captain raised his hands, holding up the beads and rosary. He then stepped forward and held his hands out before him, in a gesture of offering toward the mantled man. Valdivia then tried, using first what little he knew of Arawakan, then the Cuna language of Darien, to tell the man that he and his companions came in friendship and wished to barter for food and water and a place to rest.

But the mantled Indian leader gave no sign that he understood. Instead he called out to his followers in his own tongue and they began advancing, waving their weapons. Now he cried out again, and seemed to be addressing Valdivia, though he remained incomprehensible.

## *The Jaguar's Heart*

Valdivia began to take a step backward, then stopped himself, and tried again to speak to the mantled man. But now Morales had drawn his dagger.

The mantled man cried out again and suddenly the Indians charged. They ran at the Spaniards, holding their clubs high and shouting fierce war-cries.

Most of the Spaniards began to flee. Valdivia dropped the beads and drew his dagger. Meanwhile Morales had raised his, preparing to fight. Guerrero and Hernandez looked desperately for some way to defend themselves. Moving as fast as the threat demanded, Hernandez reached out and broke a branch off of the nearest burnt tree trunk. Guerrero tried to do the same but the branch wouldn't break.

Now the Indian warriors were upon them. A savage melee erupted. Valdivia and Morales both tried to keep their attackers at bay with daggers held at arm's length. But despite the shortness of the Indians, now even more apparent as they swarmed around the Spaniards, the greater reach of their clubs proved devastating. They bludgeoned and cut the Spaniards — for the flat clubs' narrow edges held razor-sharp bits of what looked like dark glass. Soon both hidalgos lay bruised and bleeding on the ground.

Now surrounded, Hernandez parried and tried to strike back with his cudgel, but he too rapidly got struck down as well. The broad side of a club hit him hard on the side of his forehead, just above the temple, and he fell to the ground stunned.

Guerrero in desperation tried to climb the tree by hoisting himself up by the branch he had been trying to break off, but now his full weight finally did break it. He fell to the stony ground on his back. He vaguely saw in the periphery of his vision Indians pursuing fleeing Spaniards into the thickets. As the latter stumbled and fell in exhaustion they were easily caught and subdued by their nimble pursuers.

Only three remaining Spaniards, Guerrero's fellow sailors, seemed to be putting up a fight. All had drawn their knives and defended themselves as best they could before their attackers overwhelmed them.

Now Guerrero saw a razor-edged club being brandished in his face. He lay as flat as he could, pressing his back to the ground, holding his hands open, palm up, and fingers spread. By this he hoped to show that he

surrendered — it was clear that they had no common tongue with the Spaniards. Nevertheless he found himself babbling "I surrender, I surrender, please don't kill me!" over and over, uncontrollably.

Finally the Indian withdrew his weapon, and seized Guerrero, pulling him up and pushing him into a mass with the other Spaniards, many now badly beaten and bleeding. The Indian warriors then herded them into the village, using their clubs as goads, while dragging the unconscious Hernandez behind. A crowd of Indians — men, women, and children — now hemmed in all around them, gawking at the Spaniards and gabbling. The warriors finally shoved their captives into a wooden enclosure, like a stockade, and then with clack and a rasp shut and barred its gate behind them.

## CHAPTER 2

The Spaniards lay huddled inside the stockade, in a small crude shelter standing within it. It had no walls, only posts supporting a thatched roof, but it gave shade from the fierce midday sun. Guerrero sprawled alongside the others, half-conscious: unable to take note of his surroundings though he could hear the sound of voices and activity in the village, and too relieved to be alive to think about what might happen next. If he had he would have been worried, for the cruelty of some Indians — particularly the island Caribs — was legendary.

The first sign of their captors' attitude toward them seemed not too ominous, however. After an hour or two, the pen's gate opened and an unpainted Indian placed a large, round, brown gourd on the ground just inside. His forehead receded markedly and seemed flattened, obvious because his hairline had been shaved back several inches. Eyes that crossed somewhat when not focused on anything in particular made his appearance even stranger. He said something to the Spaniards, then left. A second, red-painted Indian, standing just outside holding one of the razor-edged clubs, shut and barred the gate behind him. His eyes and forehead resembled the other's, but he wore his hair short in front and in a ponytail behind. His loincloth had embroidered ends, and a pair of large, flaring ornaments projected from his earlobes. A yellow, glassy bead adorned his pierced nose.

Aguilar crawled over to the gourd. Guerrero followed, also on his hands and knees. Through a circular hole in the top of the gourd he saw a milky white liquid. Aguilar sniffed it, then dipped his finger in and tasted it.



"Not milk," he said. "But I think we can drink it." He lifted the heavy gourd with difficulty and drank deeply before passing it to Guerrero. He sipped it, tasting a bland, lukewarm gruel, but it seemed like nectar to him. He swallowed a great gulp, then another, before handing the gourd to the only other uninjured sailor, who had crawled up next to him.

"Drink up, José," Guerrero told him.

"Leave some for the others," Aguilar reminded them, as José drank.

"Save some for the women," Mateo said, joining them. José passed the gourd to him and he carried it over to where Isabel knelt over the moaning Teresa.

"How is she?" Guerrero called to Mateo and Isabel.

"Bad," Mateo replied, as Isabel held up Teresa's head and he poured a little gruel into her mouth. "She swallowed a lot of seawater this morning, wading to shore, then coughed it up on the beach. I couldn't make her drink much water, or eat more than a bite of fruit. We must get her to drink this. There, my dear, swallow." He continued speaking gently to her, and got her to take a few sips. Then she turned her head, wanting no more. He gave the gourd to Isabel, and after she had drunk, he took it and sated himself.

"What of the others?" Aguilar said, moving over to Valdivia and Morales. Guerrero took the gourd from Mateo and crept after him. The hidalgos lay with Hernandez and the sailors who had fought when the Indians attacked. All were wounded, with many cuts and bruises, but conscious. Valdivia raised his head as Aguilar and Guerrero approached.

"What is it?" he said groggily.

"Food," said Aguilar. Guerrero handed the gourd to Valdivia. The captain drank, then passed it to Morales, who also partook of the gruel. Having finished, he gave the gourd to one of the wounded sailors.

"Drink up," Morales said. "It's savory." After he had his fill the gourd went to another sailor. Then they helped a more badly injured sailor, in about the same condition as Teresa, to drink.

Finally they came to Hernandez. He had lain stunned since they had been forced into the pen. A huge welt, clotted with dried blood, swelled on his forehead where the club had struck him. Now the others roused him and gave him the gourd. He seemed dazed. He began drinking deeply, in great

*The Jaguar's Heart*

gulps, and consumed all the remaining gruel. When Guerrero and Aguilar took the gourd from him he made incoherent complaints, and then settled down in a corner of the pen.

"Is there any left?" Guerrero asked.

"Haven't you had enough?" Aguilar responded.

"I was thinking of Doña Teresa," Guerrero replied sheepishly, for the cowardice he felt he had shown earlier still stung him. "She could use more."

"Only a few drops," Aguilar said. "Not enough to do her any good."

"Anyhow, that did us all a lot of good," Mateo said. "So don't worry, Gonzalo. Still, I wonder what's next."

"Have faith, Don Mateo," Aguilar said.

Guerrero indeed felt better, enough so that he became curious about his surroundings and captors. He went over to the stockade and peered through the narrow gaps between the stout vertical poles. The pen stood in an open space, surrounded by low stone walls lined with shade trees. A thatch-roofed hut of vertical wooden wattles stood nearby. In a corner of the open area sat a small, unroofed stone enclosure with walls perhaps three feet high. Opposite, a large, one-story stone house with whitewashed walls and a peaked thatched roof stood on a low platform. From a narrow rectangular doorway steps descended to well-trodden paths led to each of the other buildings, including the pen, and around the side of the house.

There, beyond the house, another, taller stone building loomed. Guerrero had glimpsed it while being dragged through the village. It stood facing the house on the opposite side of a plaza-like open space. Now he studied it more closely. It had red stuccoed walls and rose about thirty feet in two steep, narrowing tiers, like a pyramid. A stairway ran up the front to a small, square, thatch-roofed stone house atop. Between the top of the stairs and the entrance to the penthouse lay a carved stone slab. Dark, ugly stains covered its sides, which seemed to have once been painted blue.

No one could be seen atop the red pyramid, in the yard where their cage stood, or in the area beyond the hut. There, a short distance beyond the wall, stood another smaller stone house, which also had by it a wattled, thatch-roofed hut. Further away, he could see more thatched roofs amid the leaves of the trees dotting the village, which indeed looked larger than any Indian

village in Darien, and he had never seen, or heard of, stone houses elsewhere in the Indies.

The lack of people was not odd, it being midday, and these Indians, like Spaniards, apparently avoided the noonday sun now beating down upon their village. As little as Guerrero liked the afternoon heat, ordinarily, he thought it might be possible to make an escape at such a time. Cautiously he tested the door to the pen. Barred with a heavy round wooden beam across the outside, it wouldn't budge. In his weakened state he couldn't possibly force it. Perhaps if he and his companions worked together, after resting. . . . But no, the noise would bring Indians, unless the village really was deserted.

Guerrero studied the stockade. The construction all looked sturdy, from the sharp tops of the poles, fourteen or fifteen feet above, down to where they stuck firmly into the ground. He couldn't break through without an axe, or saw, or a shovel to tunnel out. Maybe they could climb onto the roof of the shelter, and from there to one of the trees. But the roof looked too flimsy to support anyone's weight, and likewise the overhanging branches. Guerrero sat down in the rude shelter, lay back, and fell asleep, lying amongst his equally torpid companions.

A small commotion awakened him. He sat up and saw Aguilar first.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Some Indians went into that hut — two women and the men who were here before," Aguilar said.

"Good news, I hope," Guerrero said. "We may get fed again."

After some minutes the Indians emerged, accompanied by a third woman. Each woman carried a big gourd; the men followed. At the door the unarmed man came forward and opened it. The women set the gourds down just inside the entrance. They wore skirts and shawls like the woman on the beach, and cloths tied over their breasts. They went sandaled like the men, but without body paint. Like both men they had flat, receding foreheads and slightly crossed eyes.

Once again the club-wielding man stood back, watching. A woman took the empty gruel gourd, the door was barred again and the Indians left. The healthier Spaniards inspected the gourds. One held water, another beans, and the last leaf-wrapped lumps of warm dough.

## *The Jaguar's Heart*

They now ate their first real meal in a fortnight, remembering to feed the wounded and weary their share. Teresa drank water but ate only a few mouthfuls of beans and dough.

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They passed the night peacefully, all sleeping well after their meal, which had seemed a feast after the long days of starvation. The next morning Guerrero awoke at dawn, and saw women already active in the other hut, from which the smoke of a wood fire drifted over to the cold, dew-dampened Spaniards. The women carried clay pots into the house, and shortly one returned with a club-toting man, evidently a guard. The woman went into the hut, apparently a kitchen, and came out with a gourd. She brought it to the prisoners' pen, opened the gate, and set it down inside while the man watched, just like the day before. It held warm gruel, which the Spaniards consumed eagerly.

Teresa drank her full share of gruel now, and spoke softly with Mateo, though she remained too weak to move. Hernandez acted the same as he had been the day before — witless and babbling incoherently to himself and anyone who would listen. Valdivia, Morales, and the wounded sailors had all gotten worse, their cuts swollen and inflamed.

Much activity went on during the morning. Voices could be heard, and dogs barking. Men passed through the plaza in front of the red pyramid, and along paths beyond the low walls of the compound where the pen stood. The voices receded: the men seemed to be leaving town. Women could still be heard talking and laughing, and occasionally seen in the yard and those nearby, and children's voices could be heard too.

For the prisoners the day resembled the one before. They sat restlessly but mostly quietly. Guerrero continued to study the pen for any possible route of escape. After some time and thought, he noticed that tied cords joined the wooden poles. He wondered if he could cut them somehow. He crept over to Aguilar, who still had the rucksack, which had remained slung on his back through their capture, and who now sat reading his breviary.

"Don Jeronimo," Guerrero said quietly. "Do you have a knife or razor in that rucksack?"

"No," Aguilar said, looking up at Guerrero. "Do you want to shave?"

"No," Guerrero said, stroking his beard and glancing back at Aguilar, who had sprouted a few delicate black whiskers over the last two weeks but seemed unable to grow a full beard, despite being a year or so his elder. "I just wondered if we have anything that can cut."

"I don't," Aguilar said. "Are you thinking of attacking the Indians when they come to feed us?"

"No," Guerrero said. "But I am thinking of how to escape. Did anyone manage to keep their knives?"

"I doubt it. But you might ask around."

Aguilar resumed studying his book, while Guerrero quietly spoke to the others in the pen to no avail. All the knives and daggers had been taken, and Morales and Valdivia lamented the loss of their swords which had sunk with the ship. Mateo, a lawyer and no swordsman, had been unarmed. Thwarted, Guerrero sat down again and lapsed into silence.

At midday the Indians came with a gourd full of the warm, leaf-wrapped dumplings and another of water, and fed the prisoners in the usual manner. Teresa now ate as well as the others did.

The Spaniards passed the afternoon quietly, but in the village there came a late burst of activity. They heard men shouting, and the sound of chopping and breaking wood. Something was apparently being built in the space between the nearest house and the red pyramid. As the sun began to set the work ended; a cage-like structure of wooden poles could be glimpsed around the corner of the house.

The evening meal was the same as before, but tonight the graying-haired, mantled man accompanied the women and two guards, one of whom had tattooed forearms. Like the guards, the leader wore flaring ear ornaments and a yellow bead in his nose, and his forehead sloped like those of all the Indians here. He stood by, scrutinizing the prisoners as they ate. He spoke to one of the guards, and then addressed the prisoners loudly and slowly. The words sounded like *awolesh wa maya tan*, the last word spoken with unusual force. He waited for a response from his prisoners, who all just stared at him passively. Valdivia evidently now felt too weak and ill to try to renew his attempts to parley, for he sat resignedly like the others.

## *The Jaguar's Heart*

The Indian leader now resumed conversing with the guards. They seemed to be discussing the prisoners, for they often indicated one using their puckered lips to point at them. Examining each Spaniard in turn, they grew more animated when they came to the lighter-eyed and haired ones and the heavier-bearded men. When the leader stared momentarily at him, Guerrero felt a disturbing cold intensity in that gaze. The Indians soon went on to others, particularly Hernandez, but ultimately focused on the other injured sailors and the hidalgos. Finally the leader seemed to make a decision. He spoke a few final words to the guards, and returned to the house.

The guard disappeared around the corner of the house, returning shortly with half a dozen other club-armed men. They opened the pen, and five of them entered and seized Valdivia, Morales, and the three wounded sailors. Barring the pen's gate behind them, they then dragged the five hapless Spaniards around the corner of the house into the plaza. Here they forced them into the cage the Indians had built there.

In the gathering gloom, the Spaniards remaining in the pen sat wondering what would become of their sundered companions, and of themselves. They conversed in great but powerless agitation until full darkness fell. With it came silence in the pen, and sleep to the troubled Spaniards.

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The next day the people in the pen passed the time in nervous speculation about what this separation might forebode. Otherwise the morning passed much as on the previous day. Indian women worked in the kitchen and brought the prisoners gruel; men left the village, dogs barked, and children played.

At one point Mateo drew Guerrero, José, and Aguilar aside and spoke with them.

"I'm concerned about the women," he said. "If the Indians take them away too, I'll try to go with them. If I can't, and any of you are taken with them, I must ask you to care for my wife, and to take responsibility for Doña Isabel, as I did when I accepted her father's charge to bring her safely back to Hispaniola."

"We will surely do so," Aguilar said, glancing at the two sailors for confirmation. Both nodded dutifully, although Guerrero suspected that they would all be hard pressed just to keep themselves alive. Still, he felt bound to do what he could to help all of his companions get out of this alive, if possible, as he had since the ship went down. That included Hernandez, who though more mobile than Teresa was less sensible and would be as hard to protect as a child.

Aguilar now questioned Mateo in detail about Isabel's family connections in Hispaniola and Spain, and those of Mateo and Teresa. But Hernandez, Guerrero reflected, had no wealthy or influential relatives, nor did he or José — common sailors all.

Guerrero lost interest in the conversation. He renewed studying their prison's surroundings. He noticed that, as on the day before, much traffic passed through the yard to and from the small stone enclosure. There Indians would periodically squat for a short time and then depart. Apparently it served as a latrine. Guerrero wished that the Indians would let them out to use it, for the pen was becoming fouled.

He watched the animals roam about the yard. As well as small dogs, he saw a number of birds, like big, fat chickens, but with long, wattled necks. They strode around the yard, pecking at seeds and litter. The dogs also roamed the yard, fighting among themselves, occasionally chasing one of the birds, and scavenging for scraps of food.

One dog found a bone lying near the kitchen and, pursued by several others, ran over beside the stockade. Snarling, it drove them off and began gnawing the bone, crouching with its side against the base of the poles. The bone cracked open and the dog greedily ate the marrow within. Then it ran off, leaving several sharp splinters of bone.

Guerrero saw the possibility immediately. He went over to the fence and, peeking through, tried to get his fingers through to grab the nearest splinter. He struggled, but could not force his way between the poles, tightly spaced at that point, with no more than half an inch of space between them at the base. He finally gave up and sat down, defeated.

Guerrero passed the rest of the day in quiet discouragement. He lay in the shade of the small thatched shelter with the others through the hot

## *The Jaguar's Heart*

afternoon, and took his midday and evening meals in silence. But not being prone to sullen moods for any length of time, after he finished supper his thoughts returned to escape.

In the twilight he examined the construction of the pen's gate. Made of many poles bound tightly together, it was reinforced both by crossbeams and by the wooden bar. This passed through thick, heavy loops of wound cord on the jamb-posts on either side, and on both sides of the door itself. It looked too sturdy to be easily broken through, but one detail struck Guerrero. It lacked hinges. Instead, it was tied with wraps of taut cord to the wooden jamb-post on one side, both above and below the cross-bar. The knots faced the outside, but if only he could get at the bone sliver! Still, finding a possible escape route raised his spirits. It now became a question of getting the sliver, or something equivalent.

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Now, though full darkness had fallen, Guerrero's mood brightened. Then he noticed that a crowd of people had gathered by torchlight in the plaza. He went up to the stockade and peered through. Aguilar and José joined him.

"What's going on?" Aguilar asked.

"I don't know," Guerrero said. "Let's see."

Though they could see only a small part of the plaza, the crowd seemed large, perhaps comprising the entire village. Indians thronged closely around the small cage where Valdivia, Morales, and the three sailors were imprisoned. Some entered the cage; a small scuffle followed briefly and then subsided. Shortly after, wafts of a fragrant incense drifted through the village back to Guerrero and the others in the pen. An eerie music commenced, with the sound of flutes and rattles and an oddly melodic hammering.

The sound brought Mateo and Isabel out from the shelter, where Teresa still lay and Hernandez sat oblivious, to join Guerrero and the others. They all watched as two figures emerged from the crowd and ascended the steps of the red pyramid. One was the old leader, now wearing an elaborate green feathered headdress along with his mantle. The other man wore a similar but less elaborate headdress and mantle, and carried some small object in his



hands. Reaching the summit, they entered the penthouse, lit within by flickering torchlight. Guerrero noticed that the great slab in front of the hut had been freshly painted bright blue.

The music reached a crescendo and stopped. A bustle of activity at the cage followed. Four men, naked except for loincloths and painted blue like the stone slab, hustled a fifth man up the stairs. He was naked but for an odd peaked headdress, also painted blue, and bearded. Guerrero suddenly recognized him as Valdivia. The captain struggled feebly but seemed bewildered.

A hush fell over the crowd as the four men dragged Valdivia to the slab. Each seized a limb and they stretched him spread-eagled over the blue stone. They held him down thus as the leader and his companion emerged from the penthouse. The second man carried a dark knife in his hand.

He stood before Valdivia and raised the knife on high, holding it there for a long moment, and then suddenly plunged it down into the captain's chest. After making some quick cuts to the side he withdrew the knife. Blood erupted from the wound. The killer stuck his other hand deep into Valdivia's breast and removed it, holding a fist-sized red thing that spurted blood spasmodically onto himself, the captain, and the four other Indians. These last now lifted the corpse and flung it down the stairs into the crowd, which remained in hushed awe.

The wielder of the knife now took the bloody red thing, which Guerrero with a sudden shock realized was Valdivia's still-beating heart, and handed it to the leader. He took it into the penthouse, apparently the temple of some bloodthirsty demon. The leader performed some unseen acts within, and then reemerged, his face and hair now smeared with blood.

Guerrero heard a choking sob beside him, as Isabel turned and fled, weeping and moaning back to the prisoner's shelter. Meanwhile he, José, Mateo, and Aguilar, who crossed himself and muttered a prayer, all kept watching the scene in the plaza in horrified fascination.

There was some activity among the Indians at the foot of the stairs, though the crowd stayed eerily silent. The four blue-painted men pushed through the throng to the cage and seized another Spaniard, also painted blue

## *The Jaguar's Heart*

and wearing a peaked headdress. As they dragged him struggling up the stairs Guerrero recognized Morales.

The same bloody deed was repeated with Morales, and after his chest had been slashed open and his heart torn out the leader again took it into the temple. The four men tumbled the body down to the spectators below, then followed it down and returned to the cage, from which they pulled another prisoner.

The terrible scene repeated itself thrice more, until all the men caged in the plaza had been cruelly slain. But a new element of horror was added, for a faint but unmistakable smell of meat cooking now mingled with the incense.

Finally the leader, drenched with drying blood, descended the steps and disappeared momentarily into the crowd. After some minutes the music began anew, the crowd parted, and the leader stepped forth, wearing a suit of thin, blue, bloodstained hide that covered him from head to foot. Glove-like flaps dangled from his wrists. Sickened, Guerrero realized that it was the flayed skin of one of the victims. The leader began to perform a slow, stately dance to the strange music.

When the music finally ceased, so did the unearthly hush among the gathered Indians. Even more bizarrely a festive air ensued, with feasting and drinking. The latter lasted far into the night, and many of the Indian men became very drunk, some eventually passing out on the ground. Guerrero for his part could not sleep that night, as the surviving prisoners huddled in shock and fear in their little shelter.

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As dawn came over the now-quiet village, Guerrero worked. He had been digging for more than an hour, scratching with his fingernails at the dirt between the posts beyond which lay the sharp bone sliver he had seen the day before. The posts curved slightly farther apart where they went into the earth, suggesting a slightly wider gap between them just below the surface. Here he had been able to slowly and painstakingly scrape the soil down, until he had created a space almost big enough to get his fingers through to reach the sliver.

Guerrero knew he must hurry, for despite the drunken orgy following the bloody horror of last night, some Indians might be awake and active — and alert — at their accustomed hour. Sure enough, as the sun rose and he scratched at the dirt, a dog yelped in the neighboring yard, and shortly thereafter came the scent of a wood fire being kindled. The women might come to the kitchen in their yard at any moment now.

Guerrero stopped digging and thrust a finger into the tiny opening. Straining his utmost, he forced it into the gap and through, far enough to touch the sliver. For a moment he feared that he would push it further away. Then he got another finger into the gap and then one finger above and one below the sliver. Pinching it between them, he pulled it back into the pen. He clutched it in his hand and lay back on the ground, exhausted.

He lay there still, having nearly fallen asleep, when the morning gruel arrived. He hid the sliver and joined the others to break his fast. Only Hernandez had much of an appetite, and there was no conversation. Finally Aguilar spoke.

"You know why they feed us so well?" He looked at each of the others for a long while. No one replied. "Because they're fattening us up! To eat us too!"

Teresa, now recovered enough to sit up and eat with the others, and Isabel both looked stricken but said nothing. Mateo opened his mouth as if to speak, and then shut up. José looked downcast. Guerrero studied each of them, and then looked at Aguilar.

"So it seems," he said. "We must escape."

"Yes, but how!" Aguilar demanded angrily. Guerrero looked about furtively for a moment. Then, realizing that even if Indians had been next to them, they understood the Spaniards no better than the Spaniards did them, he told the others of his plan. They listened quietly. All agreed that they must escape, and that no better way presented itself.

"It must be done in the dead of night, just before dawn," Guerrero said.

"Pedro's going to be a problem," José said. Hernandez stood on the opposite side of the pen, babbling to himself and kicking at the dirt.

"We can't leave him," Aguilar retorted.

"No, we can't," Guerrero said. "We'll get him out somehow."

## *The Jaguar's Heart*

They passed the day idly, resting and sleeping as best they could in the shelter's shade through the afternoon heat. They took their meals quietly and spoke little between. Teresa still appeared to be on the mend, but remained weak and far from healthy. She, like Hernandez, caused Guerrero some worry, for they would have to make haste once out of the pen. But Mateo tended her patiently, with Isabel's help; both, and Teresa herself, said she would be able to flee with the others when the time came.

Guerrero got some sleep during the day, so that when night fell he could stay awake. He lay listening to the subdued sounds of activity in the village, and watching the fires dim and go out one by one. Then he lay for many hours, watching the stars wheel slowly across the night sky.

Finally, he decided that the time had come. He got up and slipped quietly over to the gate, with the sharp sliver in his hand. He began to cut, sawing back and forth against the tightly-wound cord that served as the hinge. First above, for what seemed forever, as his nerves were tuned to a fever pitch from fear of discovery. Eventually he sliced through the fiber and into the wood of the jamb. Shaking his hand to relax his tired muscles, he knelt to cut the cords below. Again he sawed, sweating in the cool pre-dawn darkness, until he had sliced through again.

Guerrero rested a moment. The gate now hung loosely on the bar across the outside. Quickly he turned and slipped back to the shelter, where he woke his companions as quietly as possible.

Soon the seven Spaniards stood by the gate. Guerrero seized it by both sides and pushed outward, trying to pivot it up and out from below on the bar across the outside. But it wouldn't move easily after the first few inches. Guerrero pushed harder, but the gate would barely budge.

"What's wrong?" Mateo whispered anxiously. "Can't you get it open?"

"I think I can, but it's not easy," Guerrero said. "Help me, José." The other sailor joined him, and together they managed to force the gate up and out another foot. It gave a high-pitched creak as they did so, making Guerrero wince with fear that they might wake the Indians. But now they had enough room to crawl beneath the gate.

Looking around cautiously, Guerrero saw nobody, and listening, heard nothing but the sighing wind.

"Alright, José," he whispered. "You go first."

José slid through the small opening. Guerrero motioned to the others, and they slipped out one by one, Aguilar dragging his pack. Soon all except Hernandez were out of the pen. Guerrero took him by the shoulder and led him to the gate. Aguilar and José held it open from the outside, while Guerrero drew Hernandez down and whispered to him to crawl through the gap. Hernandez cried out in protest, causing the others to freeze in terror, sure that the Indians would awaken and catch them. Clenching his teeth and suppressing the urge to abandon him, Guerrero looked Hernandez in the eye as calmly as he could and gestured to him to hush. He seemed to understand, finally, and crawled through. Guerrero followed, last of all.

The group now stood together in the yard. They went quickly and quietly to the back, away from the house, and through a small opening in the stone fence, where they came onto a path running among the dark, silent houses of the village. They followed it to the edge of town and passed into the jungle.

# The Jaguar's Heart

a novel by  
Donald  
Huffman  
Graff



*Shipwrecked in Yucatan in 1511, Gonzalo Guerrero must somehow either escape to Spanish soil or survive among the Maya. A world to come is shaped as Guerrero, caught between cultures and conflicting loyalties, makes his fateful choice.*

## **The Jaguar's Heart**

By Donald Huffman Graff

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