

THE SECRET OF IGUANDO

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CHAPTER ONE

BANDITS AND CHOCOLATE

Dad came home from work unusually excited.

Claire and Ben were at the kitchen table reluctantly ploughing through their homework. The moment he walked in the door they looked up, glad of the distraction.

It was obvious that something was up. He had a kind of suppressed smirk on his face, and his beard was bristling like a lavatory brush.

“Evening everyone!” he said, plonking his briefcase in the corner with a flourish.

Mum had already deftly exchanged the magazine she was reading for a tea towel. She liked to look busy. She advanced to peck his cheek and recoiled as if she’d been stung.

“Phew! Elephant!”

“Yes, sorry about that. Minnie has a sore trunk.”

Ben chuckled. “Remember when she stood on your foot that time!”

This was a vivid and pleasant memory for Ben, but not his father, who winced.

“I certainly do.”

Dad was a zoo vet. Extracting a bad tooth from a crocodile, mending a stork’s leg, or attending to an elephant’s trunk were all in a day’s work for him. Ben was nine, and the envy of all the boys in his class because of his tales of the zoo. According to him, he was frequently allowed into the lion’s enclosure, and was on head-patting terms with the cheetah.

Claire, who was nearly thirteen and prided herself on being able to read an adult like an open book, went straight to the point.

“You look pleased with yourself Dad.”

Mum looked up from her bogus bustling near the cooker and chipped in. “I was just thinking that as well.”

“What amazing creatures you females are!” Dad grinned. “I walk in the room. I don’t say anything. But you know I’m in a good mood. How do you do that?”

“We just know things,” Claire said, closing her maths book in a way that she hoped suggested a job well done. “We’re better than boys in most ways, actually.”

Ben made a noise like a small motorcycle stalling underwater, to which nobody paid any attention.

“Is it news about the trip Mike?” Mum asked.

“What trip?” Claire butted in crossly. She didn’t like the way Mum and Dad sometimes had secrets.

“Yes, it is,” Dad said, scraping a chair up to the kitchen table. He winked at Claire. “Didn’t know I might be going on a trip, did you?”

“Where to?”

“To Mexico.” He sat down and smirked like a conjuror who has just produced a particularly plump rabbit out of his hat.

“Mexico! What are you going to Mexico for?” Ben said.

“Well.... there’s an expedition to collect new specimens for European zoos. Our zoo has asked me to go. We’ll be in a remote area of forests and mountains in the state of Mochaca in Mexico.”

“Motchacker?”

“That’s right. Mochaca. My job will be to help select healthy animals, and to look after them, and to sort out details of transporting them safely and humanely back to the European zoos.”

“Wow!” Ben took advantage of the new topic to close his own homework book. “Cool! Collecting wild animals in the jungle! Will there be tigers?”

“Er - not tigers, no. Not in Mexico. But there might be jaguars.”

Mum came to sit at the table as well, with cups of tea for her and Dad. Tea was always required when important or unusual topics were under discussion.

“So how long is it till you go?” Mum said.

Dad hid behind a big slurp of tea for a few seconds.

“Well, it’s not ideal in that respect. It’ll be in late July. For three weeks.”

Mum looked as if she’d found a toad in her tea.

“In the school holidays! You’re joking!”

Dad wished he was. He spread his hands to show that he was a helpless victim of a cruel fate.

“I know. Believe me, it’s not when I would have chosen.” There was a short silence while Mum and Dad sipped tea in the company of their own thoughts.

“Why can’t we all go to Mexico?” Claire suddenly said.

“Fantastic idea!” Ben agreed. He didn’t know where Mexico was, but he could picture himself riding a mule through a cactus-strewn desert. Wearing a sombrero and capturing rattlesnakes in a sack.

Unfortunately, a chorus of adult problem-finding broke the spell.

"I can't get away from work in July..." Mum was saying.

"It's not a holiday, it's a working trip..." Dad was saying.

"And anyway, think of the cost..." Mum was adding.

"Very expensive..." Dad was agreeing.

And so on.

So that was that. Fun for Dad, but not much fun for anyone else.

Claire and Ben shared a look. Cheated again.

"Anyway, you two haven't finished your homework yet, have you?"

Mum said.

Later that evening, when Ben and Claire had gone to bed, Alice and Mike Swift were settled in the cosy habitat of the sitting room. Mike was drinking tea, and looking at a library book about Mexico. Alice was drinking red wine, and appeared to be reading a women's magazine. Her thoughts however were focused on the summer holidays, when the children usually spent several mornings a week at the zoo with Mike.

But not if he was in Mexico.

She looked resentfully over the top of her magazine, and saw that her husband had put his fingers and thumbs into a kind of ring shape in front of his face. He was peering at her through the gap. This strange gesture usually preceded the announcement of some crackpot scheme or other.

"Well?" she said.

"You know..." he said slowly, "... I wonder if it *would* be possible for them to come to Mexico for part of the time - the two weeks after school's broken up."

"What?"

Mike narrowed the gap in his fingers, so that he couldn't see Alice quite so clearly.

"Yes. They could fly out for the last two weeks. I'm sure that would be all right with the rest of the party. I could ring Professor Svensson and talk to him. What an adventure it would be for them! They'd learn so much about life in another country. Broaden their horizons."

Alice goggled at him. "I don't believe this! They're just going to make their way to you, are they? In the Mexican jungle somewhere? On their own. Asking the way from locals, that sort of thing?"

"No, no. They could fly out to Mexico City as 'unaccompanied minors'. It's a direct flight from Heathrow. You'd hand them over to the airline to be looked after, and they'd hand them over to me at the airport at the other end. Then I'd take them to the camp myself."

Alice sat for a few moments, stunned. Was this the father of her children talking? Hand them over! Fly them half way around the world on their own? Her babies!

"Over my dead body!" she said, and took a good gulp of wine.

But later, when she was loafing in the bath, another aspect of the situation occurred to her. Two weeks with the house to herself. No-one to cook for and clean up after. No whingeing about how boring the holidays were turning out to be. Trips to the cinema and shops with her rarely-seen girl friends. Or even to that salsa club Anna was always going on about. Slovenly afternoons in front of the telly with wine and chocolates...

Later, in her sleep, images of Mexican bandits feeding her children to wild animals alternated with visions of unrestrained salsa dancing, chocolate

eating, and shopping. She woke up at dawn, and poked the slumbering body beside her.

"Mike..." she said.

CHAPTER TWO

INTO THE CAULDRON

Mum was fussing around them at the airport.

"Claire - did you remember to put the Factor 40 sunscreen in the hand luggage like I said?"

"You put it there Mum. Remember? Wrapped up in four plastic bags in case it leaks."

"That's right. I did, didn't I. Did I put the anti-snake bite sucker thing in there as well?"

"I don't think so. But there aren't going to be snakes on the plane, are there?"

Their Mum looked as if she wasn't too sure.

"I suppose not. But look where you put your feet once you get off at the other end."

Claire, in spite of the butterflies crashing around in her tummy, felt that she was much calmer than her mother.

"Mum! Stop worrying!"

A young woman in a bizarre yellow and green uniform loomed up out of nowhere. She smiled at them.

"Hello! Are these the children for Mexico City?"

Their Mum looked her up and down as if she might be a kidnapper. She babbled a reply.

“Er - yes. These are... er... they. Them, I mean. This is Ben and this is Claire.”

“Hello!” The air hostess turned the smile on to full power, proudly revealing the kind of teeth rarely seen outside toothpaste commercials. Her words tinkled like ice cubes. “I’m Susie, and I’m going to be looking after you until you’re met at the other end. Are you ready to go?”

Go! Ben suddenly felt as if he were in a lift, dropping down a huge building at great speed and leaving his stomach behind. That little word brought it home to him that he was actually leaving his Mum. Up until now, he’d been completely focussed on the trip itself. But now his eyes filled up with tears, and he turned quickly to give her a big hug.

“Bye Mum!” he said. She was hugging him hard in return. He looked up, and her eyes were watery too.

“Bye bye darling! Have a wonderful time!”

Claire felt a pang of unhappiness as well, but she kept a cheerful face as she embraced her Mum.

“Bye Mum! Speak to you on the phone soon!”

The ice maiden air hostess, who had taken a few steps back from this fire of family warmth, now flashed her teeth again as a signal that it was time to move, and marched off at a good pace. They scurried to keep up with her. At the entrance to International Departures they had a moment to look back. Their Mum stood in the distance, waving, a tiny forlorn figure with a brave smile. Already they felt very alone.

It was four in the afternoon when the plane began to descend like a huge gliding bird of prey over Mexico City. Claire had the window seat and marvelled as the snow-covered volcano towering above the city came into view, the afternoon sun burning like red fire on its rim.

“Look Ben!” She nudged him, and he looked up from his computer game magazine.

“What?”

“That must be the volcano that Dad told us about. Poppo.”

“It had a much longer name than that... Poppo-catta-something.”

“Yes, but he said it was just called ‘Poppo’ for short.”

Ben leaned across her as the volcano slid by below, and he saw a vast sea of mist lapping up against its sides.

“What’s all that fog?” he said.

Claire, who could see further ahead, noticed tall buildings poking out of the murk, catching the sunlight on their windows.

“It’s pollution. Smog. Remember? Mexico City is the smog capital of the world, Dad said.”

“Oh, right. Gas masks at the ready, then?”

“Mmm...” Claire gazed in awe at the vast smoky landscape unrolling below the plane. Could a single city be so big? It seemed to go on forever in all directions, like a bubbling, steaming soup which had spilt out of its bowl and was going to cover the whole world.

Their stewardess came by to check that their seat-belts were fastened for landing.

“Nearly there!” She gave them the full benefit of her teeth. “You’ll soon be with your Dad!”

Claire smiled back, and looked again out of the window. It was hard to believe that their own familiar Dad was down there, in that cauldron of strangeness.

The Mexico City airport terminal building was a sea of noise and swirling movement. Thousands of people jostled their way backwards and forwards, and around and around. Ben instinctively took hold of Claire's arm. He could imagine himself swept away in this crowd of brown-skinned strangers like a piece of driftwood bobbing in the froth of a deep ocean. Who knew where he might end up!

"Ow! You're pinching!" Claire objected, and he loosened his grip just a fraction.

The stewardess led them to the queue for passport control, and then to the luggage conveyor belt where they waited forever to see their green backpacks appear. Finally they turned up and the children shouldered them and pushed onwards like two tortoises in the wake of their guide.

"This way!" she said brightly for about the hundredth time, wagging an arm in the air to show them where she was heading. "You'll be met at the airline office, which is along here on the right."

The airline office had a small seating area around a rather scrawny potted yucca plant. There was no sign of their Dad, but when they arrived, a tall slender Mexican woman with long dark hair jumped up from her chair and came forward with a smile.

"You are Ben and Claire? Yes?"

Claire nodded uncertainly. Who was this?

Ben was thinking that the woman looked like a witch, with her long black hair and black clothing. A young and strikingly beautiful witch, but still a witch. Her lips were painted blood red.

"Your father, he could not come. I am Zarina. I have come instead. To take you!"

CHAPTER THREE

A COFFIN AND ITS CONTENTS

"Why couldn't Dad come?" Ben demanded. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing is wrong."

Zarina's voice was silky and hypnotic. It reminded Claire of one of the big cats at the zoo, purring contentedly over a hunk of raw meat.

"Your father - he was needed at the camp. Me - I had to come to Mexico City anyway, to make the fixing up for permits and other things. My job is to help the expedition."

The air hostess interrupted.

"I'm afraid I can't release these children into your care, Madam, without proper documents. We have very strict rules about unaccompanied minors."

Zarina fished in a woven shoulder bag. Strange devilish little faces were intermingled in its intricate pattern with pyramids and lines and squares.

"I have what you need, I think. Ah... here."

She handed over a small dark red passport. The stewardess opened it and read out.

“Michael Swift. Veterinary Surgeon.”

She showed the photograph to the children.

“Is this your Dad?”

Claire looked at the bug-eyed lavatory-brush bearded fellow in the picture. She felt relieved.

“Yes, that’s Dad’s passport.”

“Also... ” Zarina was fishing deeper in the bag. As her hand moved about inside it, the devils on the outside seemed to bulge and wink at Ben.

“ ...here we are.”

Zarina held out a handwritten note. The stewardess took it and read it aloud.

“Please allow Ben and Claire Swift to accompany the bearer of this note, Miss Zarina Aguila. It’s signed Mike Swift.”

She waved the note under the children’s noses.

“Is this your father’s writing?”

Claire glanced at the paper, which looked as if a spider had crawled across it with a biro strapped to one leg.

“Yes,” she said, nodding.

“Well, that seems to be all right then,” said the stewardess, looking at Claire with rather dull eyes. Claire realised for the first time how tired the stewardess was. Now she seemed anxious to wash her hands of responsibility for the children. Claire looked at Zarina, who smiled, putting the passport back into her bag.

“Okay,” she said. “We’ll come with you.”

The stewardess held out a form to Zarina.

“Just sign this, will you? And I’ll keep the letter... thanks. Bye bye! Have a lovely time in Mexico you two!”

And she was off. Although she hadn’t even bothered to learn their names, Ben felt sorry to see her go. He had felt protected by her, and wasn’t sure he’d feel the same way with Zarina. She was looking at him now, quite intently, as if examining some zoological specimen.

“So - you are Mike’s boy! Yes, I can see you are looking the same. Your ears, for example.”

Ben put a hand up to one ear. No one else had ever said he’d got his Dad’s ears. Zarina turned to Claire.

“And you are having his nose, I think.”

Claire tried to picture her father’s nose and couldn’t.

Zarina smiled again, showing teeth that were beautifully white, but a little pointed. Her dark eyebrows lay like graceful reclining cats on the smooth couch of her forehead, curtained by long black shining hair. Half concealed among its strands, tiny silver claws clutching beads of amber dangled from her ears.

“Come this way. I have a car who is waiting for us.”

They embarked from the calm island of the airline office back into the sea of people charging this way and that around the terminal building. Claire and Ben clung tightly to each other’s hands - something they wouldn’t have dreamed of doing at home.

When they went out through the door of the terminal building, Ben felt a sudden rush of sensations. Warmth flooded over him, and he realised that the inside must have been air-conditioned. Dazzling light made him screw

up his eyes. A thousand suns were glinting from car windscreens and the windows of buildings. His ears were assaulted by a great background roar of motor engines and honking car horns while the foreground was a tangle of foreign voices and tinny pulsing music from a nearby flower stall. There was a tang of acid on his tongue, of flowers and petrol in his nose. He felt bewildered, yet excited, as if he were waking from a long grey sleep into a new vivid reality.

“Wow! Look at all these cars!”

A great landscape of gleaming multi-coloured metal lay ahead - the airport car park. They followed Zarina as she picked her way through the lines of cars until they reached a big black four wheel drive vehicle.

“Here we are! This is the expeditions vehicle of the Mochaca Zoological Team. Her name is called La Caja.”

“What does that mean in English?” Ben asked.

“Well - that word might mean 'the box'. But in this case it means 'the coffin!'”

Zarina tapped on the darkly tinted driver's window with a bare knuckle. Most of the others were adorned with silver rings.

“We Mexicans, we like - what you call it? - the black jokes!” She looked sideways at them.

The window slid downwards, and the children were startled to see an incredibly wrinkled old man grinning toothlessly out at them. Claire felt Ben's clutch on her hand tighten in alarm. Was this a living man or a corpse?

“Ola! Que tal?” croaked a voice made of sandpaper and old sticks rubbing together. The old man's misty brown eyes moved, and searched their faces.

“Me llama Ramon!” he added, then put a thin claw out of the window for shaking.

Claire and Ben shook his hand. Ben felt it was like touching a bundle of dry twigs that had come to life.

Zarina looked amused by the children’s consternation.

“This is Ramon. He is our driver. For you it is riding on the back seat with another companion!” Zarina swished her long mane back over her shoulders and opened the back door. Who was going to be lurking in there, Ben wondered.

His eyes, dazzled by the sunlight outside, could just make out a flash of red and green in the gloom. It moved towards him along the back seat in a curious sidelong way. He was panic stricken - it looked like some sort of living puppet. Then a voice even more dry and croaking than the driver’s said:

“Buenos dias amigos!”

It was Claire who first laughed with relief and understanding. It was a parrot! A great big friendly green parrot with a red face and tail feathers, and a huge curving grey beak. He nodded his head up and down at them, and repeated his greeting.

“Buenos dias amigos!”

“He’s saying ‘hello’,” Zarina explained, reaching into the vehicle and tickling the parrot under his beak. “Don’t be afraid of him, he’s very gentle, and he likes children.”

Ben had instinctively backed away a little from the car door, but Claire detached her hand from his and went forward. She was used to the parrots at the zoo at home, and this one didn’t look too frightening.

“He’s a military macaw. What’s his name?” she asked, putting her head into the car.

“Uva Seca,” Zarina replied. “It means ‘dried grape’ - I think you call it ‘raisin’. We gave to him that name because he loves to eat raisins.”

“Uva seca! Uva seca!” the bird said excitedly, and Zarina gave the children a few raisins each from a little paper bag in the glove compartment.

“Feed him these, and he is becoming friend for life!” she said.

It took a long time to get out of the city. The streets were choked with wild flocks of cars, all honking like geese. The vehicles moved in a series of mad dashes, and their own little old driver kept pace, peering ferociously at the road under the rim of his steering wheel.

By the time they came out into open country, the sun was sinking in the west, and the fields and distant mountains took on a rich smouldering hue, as if an inferno burned just beneath the surface of the landscape.

“How far is it to the camp, Zarina?” Claire asked, leaning forward. Uva Seca, who had been perching half asleep on her lap, made a little protesting caw.

Zarina looked back over her shoulder.

“We will come there tomorrow, in the afternoon.”

“Tomorrow!”

“Yes. It is a far way. We must drive many hundred miles. Many miles also through jungle. There has been raining, and so a lot of mud and water. Slow to travel.”

“Where are we staying tonight?”

“Tonight we are coming to my mother in the village who is named Tepestloatan. He is my home village. That place is famous in Mexico for its brujos and brujas. Do you know what that is meaning?”

Zarina had turned slightly more in her seat, and was fixing Claire with her dark eyes. Claire shook her head.

Zarina smiled broadly. All her pointed teeth glinted.

“Wizards and witches, you would call them in English. People who know magic.”

Zarina was staring at her. Claire felt that she was being willed to ask a question, a particular question. Zarina’s eyebrows arched upwards, waiting. Claire couldn’t help speaking.

“Er... are you...do *you*... know magic?”

Zarina laughed, and turned back to face the front again, breaking the spell.

“Perhaps. A little.”

Claire sat back. She wished Mum or Dad was with her. She wasn’t comfortable travelling in a coffin with a witch, a talking corpse and a parrot. With a sense of watching an approaching nightmare, she observed the darkness gathering over the strange landscape as they sped along the highway to Mochaca.

CHAPTER FOUR

VILLAGE OF DARKNESS

When night had fallen, the journey seemed endless. But drowsiness crept up on the children, and they were both asleep when a jolt of the car woke them to find that they had stopped at last. They were in a small square surrounded by low white buildings. Burning torches flared in brackets on the walls of the house where they had pulled up, casting a flickering eerie light on all of them as they unloaded their bags. A silhouetted figure appeared in the doorway, and its wavering shadow danced out towards them in the torchlight.

“Ola, Zarina! Ola Ramon!”

It was a woman’s voice, old but powerful. She stepped aside for them to enter the house. She was much older than Zarina, but also tall, with long hair in which vivid streaks of white zig-zagged like lightning through the predominant strands of jet black. Her face was channelled with deep wrinkles, like sand when the sea has retreated.

“This is my mother. You can call her Marisol - her Spanish name.” Zarina introduced them. Ben and Claire shook her thin hand, and she smiled and nodded at them.

“Do you speak English?” Claire asked, but Marisol shrugged and looked towards her daughter. Zarina explained.

“Here nobody speaks the English, I’m sorry. Just me. In fact many people here don’t talk even the Spanish very much - the local language is called Ixuatal.”

Zarina showed the children into a small room with two beds covered in Mexican blankets with colourful patterns. Ben noticed that his blanket was home to some little devils like those woven into Zarina’s bag.

“It’s small, but you stay only during one night. Now, my mother prepares the supper. Would you like if I take you for a little walk around the village? Have you too much tiredness?”

In spite of their weariness, Ben and Claire were curious to look around. They went back downstairs, and waited in the main room while Zarina talked briefly with her mother in the kitchen.

“What do you think of Zarina?” Ben whispered to Claire. This was their first moment alone since they had met her.

“I don’t know,” Claire whispered back. “She’s been very friendly, but...”

“I think she’s scary,” Ben said.

Claire nodded. Just then, Zarina returned from the kitchen.

“This is very lucky,” she said. “There is a ceremony tonight - a dance for Mother Nacahue, the mother of the gods. Come quick with me - it may have started by now.”

They followed Zarina out into the night. Immediately they could hear the sound of drumming, and, as they hurried along the street with her, a thin reedy fluting noise came to their ears as well. The houses here had no lights in their windows, and the only sources of illumination were flickering torches fastened to the walls. As they walked, they were accompanied by jerky leaping shadows, like great black puppets let out of their boxes for a night of mad dancing.

Zarina turned sharply into a little alleyway which led steeply downhill, and turned to say something to Claire. Ben was following a few steps behind when a sudden movement at a dark window beside him caught his eye. He turned to look, and for a fleeting moment he saw a face in the

darkness within the house. It made him stare, for its eyes were like saucers, and instead of a human nose, it seemed to have a curved beak, like a vulture. It whisked out of sight immediately into the black interior, and it must have brushed against something, for there was a little tinkling of bells as it vanished.

Ben stopped, unsure of what he had seen. He felt a shiver running like a mouse with cold feet along his spine. Then he turned to continue along the dark alleyway. Zarina and Claire were nowhere to be seen!

How could that have happened in two seconds? They must be just a few metres ahead in the blackness. He hurried on.

Soon, the alleyway divided. There was a torch fixed on the wall at the junction. On the right was a set of wide cobbled steps going uphill, and on the left was an archway. Water trickled from a pipe down its slimy stones. Where had they gone? The drumming and fluting sound seemed loudest through the archway, so Ben moved gingerly forward.

Something whisked past him with a swishing robe and hurried on ahead. Something with a beak. Ben stopped, breathless with fear. He felt like hiding somewhere, in some safe corner until daylight came. Could he find his way back alone to the house? Or should he go on, hoping that Zarina and Claire were just ahead of him? He decided to go on a little further, carefully, keeping close to the wall. If he didn't find them in a couple of minutes, he'd go back.

The drumming grew louder and louder, and now he could hear voices ahead also. Chanting voices, and a frantic reedy piping sound. The alleyway turned a corner, where firelit puppet shadows wrestled on a blank wall. He peered cautiously around the corner.

It was an open space at the edge of the village. Here there were many torches burning on tall poles, and a bonfire. Beyond was a dark backdrop of rustling trees. Beside the walls of the last houses, the villagers were gathered.

Near to the fire, two lines of strange characters were facing the onlookers and dancing towards them in little hopping steps, like birds. The figures were enveloped from head to toe in curtains of what looked like moss, which flailed around them as they jiggled from side to side and up and down. Only their arms protruded - their legs and feet were invisible. They wore wooden masks carved into frightening staring expressions. With wild gestures they shook big round rattles decorated with bright red and yellow feathers.

The figures got nearer and nearer, their movements becoming more frenzied. The monstrous masks loomed closer and closer, their great hollowed-out eyes staring at Ben. Their mouths gaped, bristling with crooked pointed wooden teeth. He felt panic rising and got ready to run. They were almost upon him! Just as he took her first backward step, one of them shouted something which the others repeated, and they all whirled around and started to dance off in the other direction. Ben became aware that he had been holding his breath, and exhaled a long low sigh of relief.

When the dancers reached the bonfire, where the drummers and flute player stood, they stopped. The villagers immediately began chattering to each other excitedly, and some of them were looking inquisitively off to his left. He followed their gaze, and spotted Zarina and Claire. Claire saw him at the same moment, and waved at him to come over.

"I thought you'd got lost!" she said.

Zarina was standing just beyond her, and smiled at Ben. Somehow Ben had the feeling she knew that he'd seen something strange.

Then, out of the darkness, a very old man approached them. He had streaks of green paint on his forehead and his cheeks, and wore a big cape of dark green and red cloth which swished along the ground as he walked. The other villagers drew aside as he reached them, and Zarina bowed towards him. They both made a curious movement of their hands, like birds fluttering down to land, then the old man began speaking to Zarina in the high pitched Ixuatal language.

"What do you think they're saying?" Ben whispered to Claire. But her attention had been taken by an old woman, who was pointing towards the fire and trying to make her understand something.

Ben watched Zarina and the old man talking. From their glances, it seemed obvious that they were discussing something about the children. Suddenly the old man jumped up in the air with a shriek that made Ben's heart somersault. For a moment his great cloak billowed about him and he seemed to hover just above the ground. His eyes grew round, like an owl's, and the staring black pupils were directed at Ben. It was only a moment, and then he was back on the earth, as if he had just been standing on tiptoe. He bowed curtly to Zarina, glanced at Ben with a frown, and walked off.

"Did you see that?" Ben said shakily to Claire.

"What?" Claire said.

But Zarina interrupted. "Come on - the ceremony has all finished, and now it is time we are eating."

CHAPTER FIVE

BRUJOS

The next day Ben was woken by the sound of a cockerel crowing in the darkness. He lay for a while trying to get back to sleep. He had been dreaming about flying - swooping and gliding over a vast green forest - and he wanted to do it again. But the cockerel was merciless, and eventually he sat up in bed and twitched aside the curtain to look out of the window. In the grey dimness he saw movement in the sky - a flock of birds circling over the village. Big birds, but he couldn't be sure what sort they were. Eagles didn't fly in flocks. He kept watching intently, but before the light was strong enough to identify them, they had vanished. It was a cloudy day that was dawning, dark banks of vapour hanging low over the rooftops. Ben watched as heavy drops of rain began to make dark blobs on the ground below. He heard Claire stretch and yawn behind him. It was time to get up and go in search of Dad!

They set off about an hour later, after breakfasting on soft round tortillas served with fried eggs and a spicy green sauce. Uva Seca perched watchfully on the back of Zarina's chair, and got some titbits of tortilla. They could hear the rain falling heavily while they ate, but it had stopped by the time they were ready to leave. They went to the doorway with their packs, and immediately Ramon drove up in the coffin as if by magic.

"Buenos dias amigos!" he cackled, the dry parchment of his skin crinkling into a hideous grin.

The children and Zarina stowed their bags in the back and climbed aboard. Uva Seca hopped onto Claire's lap and shuffled his feet around until he was comfortable, leaning back slightly against her shoulder.

Zarina's mother waved them off, and they twisted and turned through the village's narrow, bumpy streets.

"Look!" Ben said, suddenly, nudging Claire's elbow.

"What?" Claire said.

Ben pointed to a huge tree whose twisted trunk loomed like an arthritic giant over the last house in the village. Steam coiled up from its leaves as the rain evaporated in the growing heat. Standing in the shelter of its enormous green canopy was a group of men swathed in red and green cloaks, their faces streaked with green paint. Their heads turned to follow the car as it drove past, their eyes impassive and unblinking. They looked like great buzzards, standing with their wings folded, and Ben thought uneasily of the flock of large birds he had seen returning to roost as the dawn broke.

"What are those men doing?" he asked.

Zarina turned in her seat.

"Those are some of the brujos that I told you. Magicians."

"What do they do, with their magic?" Claire asked.

"They have powers that come out of the forest. They can repair those who have sickness and they give advice. They know the secrets of all creatures. They can speak with the voices of animals."

"Do they always use their powers for good?" Claire asked.

Zarina didn't reply straight away. Then she said "Good can mean many things."

She seemed about to say more, but then fell silent.

Ben felt a little foolish, but asked his question anyway. "Can they... er... fly, at all?"

Zarina laughed loudly, and Uva Seca, who was already dozing off, woke and squawked "Que pasa? Que pasa?"

Ben thought that the laugh sounded false.

"What has make you think that, Ben?" Zarina said, turning round in her seat to look at him.

"Well, last night, I thought the old man who spoke to you - he was one of the brujos wasn't he?"

"Yes. The leader of the brujos."

"Well, I thought he... sort of... flew a little off the ground when he finished talking to you."

Zarina smiled.

"I don't think so. It was just a - how do you say - flickering of the torches, perhaps."

Her eyes were on his own, daring him to challenge her assertion.

"Oh" he said, lamely.

"How far is it to the camp, Zarina?" Claire asked, breaking the tension that had grown. Zarina shook a strand of hair from her eyes.

"Only about twenty miles. But, like you can see from the road, it will be taking two hours to arrive there."

The road ahead was like a snake of red mud slithering through the trees. Already, as soon as they left the village behind, the surface had deteriorated into a series of hummocks and potholes, and Ramon was guiding the vehicle between these obstacles with much quiet muttering. In the rear-view mirror they could see his wizened face all bunched up in lines of intense concentration.

Claire looked at the landscape ahead. The trees around them just here were growing quite thinly, but further on the land rose into steep sided hills covered in thick vegetation. Here and there, great pinnacles of rock lifted angrily out of the canopy to point like giants' fingers at the sky. On the distant horizon, blue jagged mountains stood like bared fangs. As the sun was breaking through the clouds now, and heating up the air, water vapour flowed from the tops of the trees, as if a hundred forest fires were starting. It was a mysterious, exciting, frightening scene, quite unlike anything else she had ever come across.

Meanwhile, Ben was trying to engage Uva Seca in conversation.

"Hello!" he kept saying, but the parrot simply cocked his red and green head to one side, and stuck out his dry little tongue.

"Hello!" Ben said, "say 'hello!'"

Zarina passed Ben a little bag of raisins.

"Say the word and hold the bag where he is seeing it. He'll know what he's got to do."

Uva Seca watched the bag intently as Ben took it.

"Hello!" Ben repeated.

Uva Seca made a lunge for the bag, but Ben snatched his hand out of reach.

"Hello!" he said again.

The parrot made a sound like an old man clearing his throat, and then said "Hello!" perfectly. He looked expectantly towards the bag.

Ben was delighted, and gave him three raisins immediately. While the car slid and lurched onwards, Uva Seca learned 'hello', 'Ben', 'Claire', and 'pieces of eight', and finished all the raisins in the bag.

After what seemed an eternity of bouncing and slithering along, their road was joined by a small river which came rushing out of the forest. In front they could see one of the giant's fingers of rock above the trees.

"The camp, he is quite close now, in a place beside this river" Zarina said.

Sure enough, a few minutes later they came to a big clearing in the trees. They could see a single blue tent, and four vehicles parked in a line - pick-up trucks loaded with boxes and empty cages.

"I can't wait to see Dad!" Claire said to Ben. "I can hardly believe he's here, in such a strange hidden-away place."

"No. Just imagine!" Ben replied, scanning the clearing eagerly. He too felt suddenly excited at seeing Dad. He had his speech all prepared - 'Doctor Livingstone I presume?'

"It's strange," Zarina said. "There should be more tents."

Ramon steered the coffin to a halt, and the children jumped out immediately, looking about them.

But no-one came forward to greet them. Ramon tooted the horn, causing Uva Seca to squawk in protest inside the car, and some invisible bird to flap away with a panicky cry in the trees.

"Let's look in the tent!" Ben suggested.

The children ran across the grassy space and unzipped the flap of the tent to look inside. There was nothing there but cardboard boxes filled with tins and packets of food. They came out again and Zarina joined them.

She had a worried frown on her face. Claire thought she looked pale too.

"This is very strange," she said. "I wonder to what place are they disappeared."