It has been almost a year now since my good friend Sergio Zambrano, born in 1948, died on November 12, 2016, in a tragic traffic accident while driving to Sotano de las Golondrinas. It is difficult to accept that he is gone. I knew Sergio for nearly thirty-seven years. Most of that time, to his delight, I referred to him as Chotanai, the Devil in Mazatec.

I had heard of Sergio Zambrano García as early as 1979. Rumors had begun to spread of a team of cavers from Mexico City who had explored a deep cave in Queretaro. It was called Sótano de Tilaco. At that time there were not many caves in Mexico that were much deeper than Tilaco. It was an impressive accomplishment, more so because there were not many Mexican cavers at that time. Through Peter Sprouse I began corresponding with the original explorer of the place, Sergio Zambrano.

In the spring of 1980 I had just made the connection between Li Nita and Sótano de San Agustín in Huautla by diving a series of short sumps. It turned out that Sergio was also beginning to pursue cave diving, and he was training with a north-Florida cave diving instructor named Paul Heinerth. By the spring of 1981 we had discovered the Cueva de la Peña Colorada, the fossil resurgence for Sistema Huautla, and I began training in the esoteric art of stage-diving, the practice of carrying additional tanks that were dropped as they were used to increase range. By this time Sergio had also become interested in stage-diving, and we agreed to meet and train together over Thanksgiving of 1981. Sergio and his life-long friend Angel Soto Porrua, along with Paul Heinerth, were at Peacock Springs in north Florida. Paul had never met me, so Sergio instructed him how to introduce himself in Spanish. Thus the first time I met Paul he shook my hand enthusiastically and said "jhola cabrori!" Sergio and Angel were behind him laughing hysterically. Paul was trying to figure what he did wrong.

It is hard to imagine any of the projects I was involved with in the 1980s and 1990s in Huautla happening without Sergio’s help. In 1984 we spent three memorable months together in the jungle of a remote canyon just south of Huautla in an attempt to dive from the Huautla resurgence to Sotano de San Agustín. Sergio had helped with federal permits that allowed us to bring eight tons of cave-diving equipment to Huautla. Our team of eleven, including Sergio and Angel, mapped nearly 10 kilometers of cave that spring. There were seven sumps, and 25 percent of that cave length was underwater. We set the first underground camps beyond sumps on that project. Sergio and Angel filmed the underwater work. It was an extraordinary push to a very remote place. It has been
thirty-four years since anyone has attempted to go farther.

Two anecdotes about Sergio leap out when I think of that expedition. Sergio and I were the first modern humans to explore Altar Cave, a gigantic 40-by-40-meter tunnel high on the 500-meter-high wall of the Peña Colorada canyon. The only way in was to rappel 120 meters over the edge and pendulum inside. We were warned by local Mazatecs not to go in there. When asked why they warned us that Chotanai was in there. The level of spookiness increased when we discovered two huge circular altars inside the entrance. The site must have been fifteen hundred years old, or older. How on earth had they gotten in here and how could they have built these massive altars? This was mysterious and weird. I asked Sergio if this bothered him. He said, "No". I asked why. He said, with a wicked smile, "because I am Chotanai!"

A few weeks later Sergio and I were scouting for cave entrances in a remote side-canyon. We were ascending steeply along a very old trail when we came across a man sitting in the trail. He had a machete, not unusual in these parts. Sergio said quietly to me, in English, "let me handle this." He then said, diplomatically and politely in Spanish, "We are cavers looking for caves. May we pass?" The man said, "Wait!" He disappeared up the trail and returned some time later, saying, "You may pass". We soon hiked up into an opening that had been laboriously cleared from the jungle. It was on an extremely steep slope halfway up the canyon wall. And there were twenty men there working in this field, digging and planting. Sergio explained our quest to the man who was obviously in charge—he had an automatic pistol on his hip, not something you commonly see in the Sierra Mazateca. "There are no caves here," said the man with the pistol. Sergio said, "This is a lot of hard work you are doing to farm in this canyon. What are you growing?" "Beans," said the man with the gun. Then he said, "and who are you?" Without hesitation Sergio responded "Chotanai." The man with the gun laughed and indicated it was time for us to leave, back down into the canyon. To this day I do not think that encounter would have gone as well had Sergio not been there with me.

Some time later Sergio was having coffee one morning in base camp when twenty-six Mazatecs armed with machetes marched into camp. They explained that the Cueva de la Peña Colorada was actually in the Municipio de Mazatlán and they wanted an official letter from the government stating that we had permission to be there. Sergio went back to Mexico City. A few days later a twin-engine plane flew low through the canyon, an extraordinary feat of flying given the narrowness of the walls. A small parachute dropped from the plane. We scrambled to find out what it was. To everyone’s stunned surprise it carried a container of ice cream. For those of us who had been sweating for months in the heat it was like a gift from heaven. Several hours later Sergio and Angel walked down the trail into camp bearing the letter for Mazatlán. "How was the icecream?" Sergio said with a grin. Yes, he was the acrobatic pilot of that barnstorming plane. A true Renaissance man.

We went on to work together on many other projects together: the 1987 cave-diving expedition to Wakulla Springs in Florida, the 1994 Huautla expedition, the 1999 Wakulla Springs expedition, the 2003 Cheve expedition, and the 2009 J2 expedition. Sergio, to me, seemed like the consummate statesman who always knew exactly what phrase, mannerism, and nuance was needed when negotiating with anyone. He was an extraordinary human being. Aside from his caving, diving, and flying, he was also the long-standing president of the Mexican Alpine Association, and he had climbed high-elevation peaks around the world. He had personally saved the lives of fellow mountaineers on Denali following a massive avalanche.

This past spring I asked Sergio’s son Oscar if there was something that he could give us to commemorate Sergio’s significant contributions to exploration. Oscar had a plaque created and sent me one of Sergio’s first Jumar ascenders. Our team at Cueva Cheve in 2017 took these to Camp 3, at a depth of 1,100 meters, and held a small ceremony there in honor of our fallen comrade. It is a remote place, perhaps seen by fewer than fifty people. It is a fitting tribute to a man who lived an amazing, adventurous life. Adios, Chotánai!

—Bill Stone