

ONE

THE BOND BETWEEN THE BROTHERS commenced in the bunk bed of their mother's womb. Now an ominous future loomed, destined to rip them apart in a world of prophecies, horror, and death.

"Still plan on getting your fortune read tonight?" Kevin asked, reaching for his coffee.

"Hell, yes," Warren exclaimed. Returning the credit card to his wallet, he added, "A woman at the wedding party told me the best place to go."

"I see USC in your future," Kevin said, waving his hands over an imaginary crystal ball.

"Make fun of me all you want," Warren replied. "But the chance of finding someone credible is a lot better here in New Orleans than back home in L.A. Mysticism permeates this city. Stories of voodoo and magic are woven into its history. How could I not seek that out?"

Kevin stared at him, his blue eyes twinkling in apparent amusement. "It's unusual how we were born minutes apart, but in certain ways remain miles apart. Your belief in that psychic nonsense is another example of how different we are."

"There will always be con artists, I know that," Warren admitted. "But that doesn't mean clairvoyance isn't real." Placing his arms on the table, he leaned forward and gazed into the disbelieving eyes of his brother. His face, like Kevin's, was square jawed, with a slightly sloping nose that extended to

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a narrow tip bordered by long, thin nostrils. Their sandy brown hair hadn't yet shown any signs of receding, with the one difference being the shorter style preferred by Warren contrasted to the medium length curls that Kevin favored. Jutting his chin slightly upward, Warren continued his argument. "There are two friends of mine, neither of whom know each other, who both recently told me about a sudden feeling they got that something was wrong with one of their parents. One called home and was told that her father had just died. My other friend found out his mother was on her way to the hospital. She'd had a stroke. How could they have known that?"

"Lack of sleep and too much imagination," Kevin shot back. "The perfect recipe for delirium."

"These friends aren't flakes," Warren countered, annoyed over his brother's sarcasm. "We're still just scratching the surface of what our brains are capable of. Having inner visions and prophesying things is like an extra sense, that's all. True psychics are able to cultivate it."

Kevin looked at Warren with one of those "that's nice, are you finished now?" expressions that had pissed Warren off for years. "Truly mesmerizing, Professor Palmer," he said. "But your course in *Bullshit 101* will have to continue another day. I've got a plane to catch."

Rising simultaneously from the seats, their six-foot two-inch frames stood at least a half foot taller than a passing waitress who slowed her walk, angled her head upwards, and looked back and forth at the both of them before smiling and moving on.

"Even after thirty-five years, I sometimes forget you're almost Carbon to my Copy," Kevin remarked.

Warren nodded. "A dated analogy, but no less accurate." Approaching the exit, he placed his arm around Kevin's shoulders and said, "*I looked upon my future felicity as secured.*"

"What?"

"It's a line from Edgar Allan Poe," he answered. "*The Black Cat.*"

Kevin closed his eyes and nodded. "Poe, of course. Silly of me to ask."

"A line of optimism, Kevin, as my fortune tonight will affirm."

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Omnipresent Bourbon Street jazz provided the soundtrack as Warren advanced towards a man operating a mobile souvenir stand on the corner of Bourbon and Orleans. “Excuse me,” he said, “I need directions to Jackson Square Park.”

The vendor pointed his finger toward Orleans Street. “Keep heading that way,” he said. “Go past Royale ‘til you see the back of St. Louis Cathedral. There’s an alley on either side that’ll take you there.”

As Warren approached the cathedral, he spotted a cardboard figure of a serious looking woman in a pink dress near the front of the alley on the left. A beige-colored sign covering the lower half of the dress read, “Madame Genevieve, spiritual reader.” Behind the cutout was a street level window framed by lighted figures of moons and stars. Warren reached for the knob...and stopped. A feeling in his gut told him Madame Genevieve wasn’t the one for him. He couldn’t pinpoint the reason for his hesitation, but he knew that bypassing her was the correct thing to do.

Warren turned around and walked toward the alley on the opposite side. When he arrived at the narrow, semi-darkened entrance, he looked up at the side of the building and saw a black and white street sign that read, “Pirate’s Alley.” He looked at his watch and saw that almost forty minutes had passed. He hadn’t expected to take that long finding a reader, but his instincts told him he’d soon come across the right one. As he exited the alley he stood facing the park at Jackson Square. Bright lights offered a view of several colorfully garbed individuals sitting at separate tables.

“Now I can see why I was told to come here,” he said to himself.

Warren chose the closest open table, sitting across from a woman who called herself Madame Irene, a sultry, raven-haired woman with wild eyes and a piercing, laser beam gaze. As he settled in his chair preparing to begin, he encountered that same sense of doubt he experienced about Madame Genevieve. “I’m sorry,” he told her, rising from his chair. “Maybe another time.”

Warren walked past the six other psychics without stopping. He couldn’t understand the reason for his sudden selectivity, feeling like a kid who couldn’t decide which flavored ice cream he wanted. He crossed the street and returned to Pirate’s Alley. “Maybe I should just forget the whole thing,” he said out

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loud. A few steps in, the sight of another alley branching off to the left startled him. “*How did I miss that?*” he whispered.

Warren stopped at the entrance, peering down a passageway that appeared devoid of anything other than an unusual looking structure about halfway down. “*I can’t stop now,*” he told himself. “*This might be the way.*” As he drew closer, he observed the strange shape and realized it was a large awning tilting so far down it almost touched the ground. He sidestepped the fallen canopy to get a closer look. “*The High Seas,*” he said quietly, peering at the sign above the door. “*I wonder what kind of place this was?*”

Warren continued walking, sensing he was now on the right path. The distant sound of jazz music had morphed into an eerie silence that seemed a strange contrast to the festive atmosphere a few blocks away. As he looked around, he realized he stood in complete isolation. Now that he thought about it, there hadn’t been anyone in sight for a while.

Within the shadows, concealed by leafy trees in man-sized terra cotta pots, a small entranceway appeared. He turned and moved towards it, feeling *drawn* there, like those stories of lost animals that somehow find their way home. He saw an open door leading to a garden courtyard no more than twenty feet away. And there, in the window of what appeared to be part of someone’s home, shone a bright blue neon sign in an upstairs window that read, “Madame Sibilila - Psychic.”

He clutched the cold wrought-iron railing and ascended the narrow stairs. A solitary gas lamp illuminated the checkerboard stonework and abundance of potted plants. Warren tugged at the creases on his jacket, took a deep breath, and discovered that the door stood slightly ajar. He looked for a doorbell and when he didn’t locate one, knocked twice before peeking inside.

“Hello?” he called out. “Hello? Anyone here?” Standing with a foot inside the doorway, Warren scanned the tiny room. Yellow pillar candles placed in tall, antique holders provided a dull light. A small glass table with two chairs was situated near the center of a drawn, shiny gold curtain. “Hello?” he repeated, knocking again.

The curtain moved as someone entered the room. He readied himself to explain why he was there, but found himself staring into the chocolate eyes of a beautiful, silk-skinned black woman. She appeared to be in her mid thirties, tall and shapely, and she wore a maroon-colored floor-length caftan with a matching headdress that exposed her face like a jeweled amulet.

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“Are you Madame Sibilialia?” he asked.

“You have come for a reading.”

The intonation of her French-hued accent seemed unusual, as if she was telling him about his visit rather than asking him.

“Is it all right?”

“We will begin in a few moments,” she said. “Please, sit down. I would like to talk with you before we proceed to the other room.”

The subtle aroma of incense created a pleasant addition to Warren’s anticipation. He took his seat and noticed a single business card in a plastic holder at the edge of the desk.

“Mind if I take your last card?” he asked, grasping it in his fingers. “A souvenir for my brother.”

He studied the bland design of several stars and moons against the white background. He turned the card over, revealing the same white setting with black letters across the center reading, “Madame Sibilialia, Psychic.” She had her phone number in smaller type at the bottom, but no address listed. He contemplated the different turns and alleyways required to find her. *Why no address?* he wondered, unzipping his jacket pocket and depositing the card inside.

“You are prepared to seek the truth?” she asked.

“I’m eager to find something out,” he replied, “about a teaching job I’m hoping to get.”

“Let me see your palm.”

Warren reached out and rested his right forearm across her desk. Placing his hand in hers, Madame Sibilialia remained silent as her head moved in inconspicuous nods.

“I see something that must be explained,” she said, her voice a loud whisper. “The Tarot is a source of enlightenment and self-knowledge, and you will hear much about your life. Not just the past and the present, but also what lies ahead.”

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“Great,” he said, “the future. That’s the reason I came.”

“Please understand,” she replied, her tone a bit too serious for his liking, “you will be told all that is revealed. Nothing shall remain a secret.”

“That’s fine...fine, no problem,” he replied, anxious to get started. She gazed into his eyes and nodded. Placing her hands flat on the desk, she rose from her chair. “The reading room is through the curtain,” she told him. “Please go inside.”

Warren entered a larger room filled with a continuance of similar candles. To his right stood a table with two wooden chairs placed across from each other, each facing a bulky gray handkerchief covering something in the center of the table. In the middle of the room, an old-fashioned avocado green couch with matching chairs brought back memories of early photos of his parents in their younger days. Long strands of hippy beads dangled from an open doorway and a dark blue lava lamp glowed from the opposite corner. He walked over to watch the hypnotic spectacle of the lamp, perplexed by the unplugged cord lying on the floor.

“Let us begin,” she said, standing near the curtain. He followed her to the table and settled in the closest chair. Madame Sibia slid the handkerchief off the unknown object, exposing a pack of Tarot cards. Raising her eyes to Warren’s she said, “There are seventy-eight cards in the Tarot. We will use ten.”

She eased the cards over to Warren and asked him to shuffle them, making sure to keep the pictures of each card face down. “By shuffling the cards, your conscious and subconscious mind will be made one with the Tarot,” she explained. “Now divide the cards into three piles. These will represent your past, present, and future.”

“Which pile is which?” he asked.

“Your own intuition will determine that answer,” she told him.

Enjoying the sense of mystery, Warren brought the cards together and shuffled them one more time upon her request.

“The cards are ready to be revealed,” she announced.

“Let’s do it,” he told her, rubbing his hands on his knees.

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“There will be ten cards chosen, each representing a life force. I will place them in a spread called, ‘The Celtic Cross.’ They will explain what is behind you, show your present position, and reveal your future. The final card will determine the outcome. Its meaning will be communicated to us by the influences of the other nine cards.”

Madame Sibia placed the first six cards, face up, on the table. With the exception of a single card lying horizontally across another, the other five were separated from each other and placed in vertical positions. Warren couldn't help noticing how her eyes started blinking and her eyebrows narrow with each card she set on the table. She reminded him of someone playing a high stakes game in Vegas and showing distress over the hand they'd been dealt. He also perceived the increased time she took with each successive card, as if she didn't want to see what came next. All the silence and solemnity made him uncomfortable.

“That bad, huh?” Warren said, hoping to lighten the mood.

Madame Sibia held up her hand in an unspoken request for quiet and selected the final four cards from the deck. These were placed face down, in contrast to the others whose identity was exposed. Taking her fingers and grasping the left side of each one, she turned the last four cards over from left to right. When the final card revealed itself, Warren was sure he heard a groan.

He didn't want to believe that her mannerisms were just part of an act, and that he was the audience watching a performance, yet he wasn't sure what to make of her reactions. There was something about her expression that made him feel uneasy and fidget in his seat.

“Why are some of the cards backwards?” he asked.

“Those cards are reversed,” she answered. “Their direction affects how they're interpreted.”

“Six of the cards are black and four are red. Does that mean anything?”

“Everything has meaning.”

As Warren lifted his gaze from the cards she unnerved him by her intense stare.

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“Something wrong?” he asked.

“Your future disturbs me greatly.”

Warren’s stomach tightened. “What...what do you mean?”

“The answers are coming,” she said. “We’ll begin with the first card.”

Card number one, a red one, was called a Ten of Cups.

“This is your present position,” she said. “You have contentment in your life. You are surrounded by an aura of love.”

“That sounds good, doesn’t it? Why were you so troubled before?”

“My concern begins with the next card,” she replied, a strange edge to her voice.

“Go on,” he muttered. “I’m listening.”

Madame Sibia placed her hand on the one horizontal card, an Eight of Swords, lying across the Ten of Cups.

“The second card shows an immediate influence of something that exists in your near future,” she said. “By crossing the Ten of Cups, it will affect your life’s path.”

“What does the Eight of Swords mean?”

Madame Sibia’s demeanor remained somber. “When a black Eight of Swords reveals itself in this manner, there is serious difficulty ahead. Perhaps an accident of some kind.” She appeared ready to say something else, then her shoulders sagged and she fell silent.

Warren sat up in his chair. “What kind of accident?”

“Let us continue,” she said, “so that we may understand.”

When Madame Sibia pointed in the direction of another black- suited card, he recognized the character immediately.

“The third card is called The Devil. It represents your destiny.”

Warren swallowed hard.

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“You seem like a nice man, Mr. Palmer. But I see violence in your future. And evil. A strong attraction to evil.”

Warren shook his head, flustered, unable to recall when he had told her his name.

“That’s ridiculous!” he cried. He took a deep breath to regain his composure. “I didn’t come here to listen to this doom and gloom nonsense, all right? The person you’re talking about sure as hell isn’t me.”

“I told you before, Mr. Palmer, I was going to tell you all that I see,” she said.

“And you see evil and violence, for me, huh? Do you scare everybody like this? I came here to see about a job opening I hope to get. But this has been very depressing and I’m damn upset about it.”

“Do you wish to continue?” she asked.

“Let’s hurry through the remaining cards, all right?”

Madame Sibia proceeded to the fourth card, a red-suited Six of Cups.

“This card represents past influences that affect present events,” she said. “You grew up in a home with strict morals. You’ve taken on those same characteristics in your own life and in your family. You resent what you see as a moral breakdown in society. You long for what’s referred to as ‘the good old days.’”

“Now that’s more like it,” Warren exclaimed. He looked down at the black-suited card that came next. “Please continue.”

“The fifth card is a reversed Four of Wands. In this situation, it stands for recent past events. There’s a dark cloud here, sadness of some kind, over someone very close to you. A health problem, perhaps, or a disappointment with someone in your family.”

“My wife, Michelle, died of cancer last October,” he replied.

Madame Sibia closed her eyes for a few moments, nodding her head. She advanced to the next black-suited card. “The sixth card is a reversed Nine of Swords,” she said. Pausing, she glanced at Warren with an expression that seemed almost sorrowful, reminding him of her earlier warning about

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his future. "I see isolation. Wandering and despair in the after-life. An angry restlessness."

"Here we go again," he complained. "Wandering and despair in the after-life? What the hell does that mean, anyway? That I'm destined to become some sort of ghost? A restless, wandering ghost? Is that what you're saying?"

Madame Sibia gazed into Warren's eyes. "Death doesn't always bring a peaceful conclusion, Mr. Palmer." Her voice was calm, yet her message, terrifying. "There are some who believe when a person dies they are given a choice of two pathways into the next world. They take the form of separate lights, and they are quite different from each other."

Warren remained silent, too numb to respond.

Madame Sibia continued. "When someone's soul is disturbed, when it's unsettled, there is another light that veers away from Heaven, a darker entrance, that one may choose to take."

"And where does that lead?" he asked. "Hell?"

"Not Hell," she answered. "But a place where one may wander forever. If these spirits finally achieve serenity, they can find their way back to the light of eternal peace."

"Is that what a ghost is?" he asked.

"Some of these restless spirits, or ghosts as you call them, remain in one place where their souls are secure, like a house, or an area of land. They are often harmless. Others...others may attempt to violate. These are the dangerous ones."

Warren didn't understand. "What do you mean, 'violate'?"

"Invade the sanctity of someone's mind and body," she replied. "Poison their emotions. Control what they see, and hear...and think. Some even have the power to kill."

"For what purpose?" he asked.

Madame Sibia's expression was calm, but her eyes blazed with an unnerving power.

"Revenge."

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He stared in silence, wondering, again, what he had to do with any of this.

“Even good people are familiar with evil deeds, Mr. Palmer. Our lives present many opportunities to learn of such things and use this awareness on others from the after-world I’ve described. These acts of evil can be nurtured from knowledge that is real or imagined. It doesn’t matter.”

Warren leaned back in his chair. Edgar Allan Poe had written about such evil. “You said before there are some who believe in different pathways to the next world. Are you one of them?”

Madame Sibilia’s hardened visage displayed a trace of a smile. “I’m quite sure of it.”

“And this might happen to me?” he asked. “An angry ghost entering someone’s soul? Intent on doom and destruction?”

She waited several moments before answering. “Yes,” she whispered.

Warren stared down at the cards. “Let’s go to the next one,” he said, looking at another black-suited card.

“The seventh card is a reversed Wheel of Fortune. It describes your present position with personal things like job and family.”

“I’ve applied for a teaching job at U.S.C. Can you tell me anything about that?”

“I’m sorry, but in this card I see bad luck.”

Warren’s shoulders sagged. Without a punch being thrown, he felt beat up. He knew he shouldn’t believe her frightening scenarios, but the constant barrage of troubling news was upsetting nonetheless. He stared with a feeling of emptiness at the red-suited card that came next.

“The eighth card is the Sun card,” she said. “This can be interpreted as a symbol of love, devotion, contentment from others.”

“Thank you, Sun card,” he said. “I welcome you like a long, lost friend.”

“It also shows you to have a positive influence on other people.” Madame Sibilia raised her head and looked at him. “People like...Bill and Joanne.”

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Warren's eyes widened at the mention of Michelle's parents, who he'd be meeting tomorrow in Phoenix before returning home. A frightening realization occurred to him, transcending any lingering doubt. *She's for real.*

"How do you know about them? Are they all right?"

"Yes, Mr. Palmer," she answered. "They're fine."

Warren looked at the next black-suited card, and, still wary, wondered what this female purveyor of darkness would say next.

"The ninth card is a reversed Star. This represents your troubled emotions, like bad dreams, or anxiety in situations you have yet to face."

Warren bolted out of his chair. "Enough!" he shouted. "I'm out of here!"

"Please wait, Mr. Palmer," she said, her expression maddeningly calm. "The tenth card is vital to understand."

Warren looked at Madame Sibilica for several seconds before glancing downward. His eyes grew wide and he had difficulty pulling them away. A red-suited card, entitled "Judgment," contained an image of an angel blowing a horn over a man, a woman, and a child-like figure in an open tomb. The picture felt like a dagger to the heart. The woman and child reminded him of Michelle, and their son, Seth, and seeing them in a tomb with a man, who he feared was himself, gave Warren a sickening feeling of claustrophobia.

"I don't want to know about that card!" he roared, backing towards the door. "I don't want to know!"

Madame Sibilica following him to the open doorway as he hurried down the stairs.

"A new beginning, Mr. Palmer!" she cried. "The Judgment card shows a new beginning! You were directed here to learn this!"

At the bottom of the steps, Warren looked back and saw Madame Sibilica standing just inside the doorway, looking down at him. For a brief moment he thought about asking her what she meant by "a new beginning," but he was too upset. *Directed here to learn this?* The woman was a nut-case.

Warren rushed past the open gate into the obscurity of the darkened, soundless alley. He hesitated, unsure which direction to take, then turned

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left and broke into a jog through the unfamiliar landscape. He wanted to reattach himself to civilization again, to see a face and hear a voice. As he ran from one alleyway into another, the welcome sound of a spirited saxophone seemed to appear out of nowhere, causing him to stop in his tracks and close his eyes in gratitude. Turning his face upwards, he inhaled the air as if he'd been a drowning swimmer rescued from an unforgiving sea. His throat felt devoid of any moisture and his damp shirt clung to his body. His head ached, throbbing to a steady rhythm of pain. He wasn't sure what street he was on or how he got there, but he knew what he needed; a good, stiff, drink. He resumed running, heading towards the music.



“A Hurricane,” he managed to say, his voice rendered weak and raspy.

Warren's eyes never left the hotel bartender until she placed the magical rum concoction within reach of his unsteady hands.

“If you don't mind me asking sir,” she said, “are you all right?”

Warren closed his eyes and guzzled the drink for several moments, relishing the cool rush of liquid salvation sliding down his throat in search of a direct route to his brain.

“Now that I'm here, I'll be okay,” he replied, continuing to clutch his drink. “Why do you ask?”

She looked at him, offering a slight, hesitant smile. “I was wondering if you had the flu or something,” she said. “You're as white as a ghost.”

TWO

HE HAD NEVER SEEN a forest, but in the neighborhood where he was from, his imagination was no less inspired by the wonder of those telephone poles.

“Like rifles to the sky,” he whispered to himself. *“Ready to shoot down some motherfucker’s ass.”*

“Who ya talkin’ at, Face?” Hawk asked, sitting on the ground to his left. “Weed got you seein’ shit, homie?”

Alejandro Torres, born twenty-one years earlier in East L.A., acquired the gang name ‘2Face’, because his natural angelic expression turned into a vicious snarl during those early fights arranged to test his manhood. As the years passed, and his boyish appearance matured into a dark, rugged handsomeness, the “2” was dropped in favor of just “Face.” His eyes, however, highlighted the most memorable aspect of his appearance, resembling a pair of mysterious black coins that portrayed a different side to each gender. For the foxy women, *las mamacitas*, his gaze caused them to turn their heads a second and third time, searing them with his animalistic sexuality. For men, his penetrating stare instilled an uneasy intimidation, a sense that those two dark searchlights could see right through you.

Face kept his attention on the overhead view. “Just chillin’, Hawk,” he answered, after a long moment of silence. “Look at that sky up there. It’s beautiful, man. Ain’t seen a friendly sky for a long time.”

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Hawk laughed as he reached into his shirt pocket. “What the fuck you talkin’ ’bout, ‘a friendly sky?’” he asked, striking a match to another joint. “Have some more of Hawk’s *kick-ass mota, vato*. You’ll be flyin’ the friendly skies, man!” After a few minutes Hawk rose to his feet. “I need a fuckin’ beer. You comin’?”

Face took another deep, satisfying drag. After exhaling, he watched the smoke drift away before answering. “Be there soon.”

Face returned his attention to the sky. Through the lens of his marijuana haze, he no longer visualized the telephone poles as rifles, but as giant stiff-armed stick figures lined up and down the street. Tilting his head at another angle, he imagined them to be dark wooden pillars supporting the weight of the city sky. The beautiful *L.A.* sky. From May to March he’d spent ten long months at a detention camp somewhere in the mountains. He had missed those telephone poles, and the cable wires, too, criss-crossing above his head like Etch-a Sketch designs.

Etch-a-Sketch. He remembered that little red toy. Fuck, yeah, he remembered. The way he grew up, it was easy to recall the few things he got when getting nothing was a way of life. The only thing he got regular was his old man’s fist. He was real good at giving when it came to that. Face took another deep hit, hoping to block out any thoughts of his father. Instead, a distant memory resurfaced as he fingered an old scar, reminding him of the day he paid a painful price for the discovery of a distinctive power he inherited, his gift, that he wouldn’t come to understand until later.

Glancing back at the deepening purple sky, Face approached the comforting sound of broken glass echoing through the abandoned, outdoor parking lot as another empty beer bottle shattered against the graffiti-tagged wall. All that was left of the old structure were numerous areas of chipped blacktop and an assortment of straw-colored weeds jutting from the cracks. Without any nearby streetlights, this darkened, out-of-the-way section of the neighborhood acted as a favorite hangout for the Diablos to plan war strategy or just get high. Tonight was a cause for both.

“Got more beer, Kush?” Face asked, joining the others.

“Got your gold mama’s milk right there, *vato*,” he said, pointing to a large cooler on the ground. “All that time away, you forget who’s got your back?” Kush adjusted the angle on his baseball cap, pushed his hands down

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low into his deep, baggy pockets, and swaggered his way over to the cooler.

“Tonight’s the night, man,” Cat remarked, loud enough for the other six to hear.

“What other way to show respect for our *comarada*?” Cherry said. “Apache was killed a year ago, man. We gonna honor him right.”

“Payback!” Kush shouted, handing Face his beer.

“Payback!” Player repeated.

“Payback gonna be a *bitch*!” Swat added, pretending to fire an assault rifle.

“To Apache!” Face yelled, raising his beer bottle high.

“To Apache!” everyone shouted back.

“We ain’t through gettin’ our heads right,” Hawk said, removing a folded paper from his pocket. “Get your motherfuckin’ asses over here.”

“You got what I think you got?” Face asked, smiling.

Hawk chuckled. “Hell, yeah, Face,” he answered. “Gonna speed you to those friendly skies you was talkin’ ’bout.”

On that April evening, as darkness settled in, the next order of business pertained to the memorial for Apache on the sidewalk outside the yard.

Cherry’s trembling hands lighted the saint-covered candle. “*Te extraño, Apache*,” he said, his voice a balancing act between solemnity and anger.

“We all miss him, Cherry,” Swat added.

“*Vaya con Dios*,” Kush whispered, placing a beer bottle next to the flickering glass encasing.

Player set a handful of flowers next to the other items. “We ain’t never gonna forget you, Apache,” he said.

In the cool, reflective silence, as the six other Diablos surrounded the candle’s meditative flame, Face turned around to contemplate the ultimate legacy to Apache’s artistic gift. Extending more than half the length of the

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yard, at a height close to seven feet, the old, white cinder block wall had been transformed into a masterpiece: a self-portrait of Apache, set in the time of the Old West. Wearing nothing but a moccasin-colored cloth around his waist, and a green and red-feathered headband encircling his wavy, black hair, the muscular warrior-artist sat atop a mighty stallion charging into battle. As several bloodied cowboys fell victim to his bow and arrow mastery, the smiling, confident face of Carlos “Apache” Diaz represented victory over the enemy.

“We got the Indian warrior in us now, *vato*,” he told Apache at the painting’s completion. “Protectin’ our yard for all the homeboys.”

“You gotta believe it always, Face,” Apache replied. “The wall represents what we’re about. Courage and strength, man.”

“For every goddamn battle we fight, Apache. Courage and strength.”

The passing of a year’s time did nothing to calm Face’s uneasiness over Apache’s death, as he contemplated how that indestructible feeling he inherited over the completion of the painting had eroded into an unsteady footing. None of the others would have believed that Face felt vulnerable, but he did. Tonight, as he gazed upon Apache’s work, the painting not only seemed less protective than before, but an eerie feeling of hostility seemed to have emerged. He wondered if there might be a bigger battle in store, even more significant than the ones fought against their sworn enemy, the North Rampart Lobos. Apache’s soul was forceful and present, but Face didn’t believe that was enough to defend them. He sensed the possibility of another spirit. A different kind of warrior. An uncommon type of war.



A separate gathering, less noble in purpose yet just as meaningful to the different gang members involved, occurred later that evening a mile away.

“Hey, *pendejo*,” King snarled. “Two fuckin’ sixpacks? That’s all you took off with? Hell, that ain’t no party, stupid. You got shit for brains, or somethin’?”

“Gimme a fuckin’ break, man,” T-Moe replied. “That 7/11 asshole didn’t take his eyes off me.”

“This ain’t gonna gimme no goddamn buzz,” King complained. “Bud’s like water to me, man.”

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“You drink more of that shit than anybody I know,” Bone said, laughing as he passed a joint. “That’s why you’re ‘King,’ man. Always drinkin’ The ‘King of Beers.’”

King responded with a loud belch. “God damn right, *vato*.”

Standing near a bench in Lafayette Park with a group of Lobo homeboys, King guzzled the last of another can before squashing it with his foot and hurling the flattened metal towards an overhanging light. The sun had long set, and people who were concerned for their safety had already gone home to hide behind locked doors and barred windows.

King walked over to some nearby bushes to urinate. When he returned looking for another beer, he saw just one can remaining.

“We need more *pinchi* suds, man,” he said. “And we get what we goddamn want, ain’t that right, Ghoul?”

Tall, thin, pockmarked and pale, Ghoul laughed his crazy laugh before taking a hit from the joint. Ghoul laughed his crazy laugh a lot, even when there wasn’t anything to laugh at. Slice was there too, throwing his knife against a tree, showing King’s eleven-year-old kid brother, Luis, the proper release point.

“Sure you don’t want no weed, Slice?” Ghoul said, offering him the joint. “I ain’t never seen you smoke the shit.”

Slice tilted his head, offering Ghoul a serious look. “There’s a reason for that, *cabron*,” he said. “Watch and learn.” Slice approached the tree and proceeded to carve a head-sized circle at the same level of his own. Walking away, he didn’t stop until he passed a lamplight that stood no less than twenty-five from the target. He tucked the handle under his belt, allowing half the blade to be exposed. Standing in trance-like silence for several moments, he reached down for the blade with a sudden motion, clutched both sides of the metal between his fingers, and sent the knife streaking toward the tree.

Luis was the first to hurry over and confirm what everyone could see from a distance. The knife had hit the inside portion of the circle.

“Right in the fuckin’ center!” he shouted.

After the others inspected the result themselves, Slice pulled the knife from the tree, slid the handle back into his pants, and sauntered over to Ghoul.

THE POE CONSEQUENCE

“No booze, no drugs,” he told him. “Just me and my knife. Understand, *cabron?*”

Ghoul cackled as he took several steps backward. “Yeah,” he replied, looking away.

“Your old lady give you beer money, Bone?” King asked.

Bone reached down into the pockets of his sagging pants, pulling out a couple of crumbled bills. “Six dollars,” he said.

“*God damn!*” King spit a large wad of saliva onto the ground. “Is that all you fuckin’ got? That ain’t enough for shit! I thought your old lady worked, asshole! You’re gonna make me lose it, man. *Seme va la onda!*”

“I’ll kick her fuckin’ ass when I get home,” Bone promised.

King turned away. “Don’t fuck with me, man. *No me chinges!* I need to think.”

Seizing the last can of Bud, King walked through the darkness to the other side of the park. From here, he had a better view of the street where he spent so much time. He took a cigarette from his jacket and used the last of the one he was smoking to light another. He inhaled until his lungs were full, letting the smoke seep out like a leak from a tire, drifting up past the nasty scar over his left eye where the brow had been replaced by overhanging skin that resembled chewed, flesh-colored gum. He began to feel *tranquilo*, at peace, scanning the familiar sights of his neighborhood: The *clínica medica* and *farmacia*, where his mother used to take him when he was sick from something other than a hangover. The *lavandería*, where they went to wash what little clothes he had. The auto shop, where his old man used to take his beat up piece-of-shit to get fixed. The *panadería*, where he used to go as a kid so he could smell the fresh bread baking, making him so hungry he’d cross the street to steal food from the fruit and vegetable *mercado*. The place he didn’t want to look at was the *funeraria*. He’d been there enough through the years.

As a kid, his parents started giving him beer to get him drunk when they wanted a good laugh with their other drunken friends. When he danced or sang for them, they’d give him more. When they needed to fuck and scream without being disturbed they supplied him with enough to pass out, but that didn’t always work. He still heard them sometimes.

Keith Steinbaum

His old man ran off with some bitch when his mother was pregnant with Luis, and she started drinking more after that. No one knew where his old man was anymore. His mother's cleaning jobs were just enough to pay the rent and live on canned food and beer. When the rent was due, or a bill had to be paid, his own efforts on the street helped them survive. His mother didn't ask any questions, but he knew she was grateful for whatever he could provide, however he did it. Luis understood the way things worked now and he'd start helping soon.

King had "checked in" the North Rampart Lobos when he was thirteen. His old neighborhood *camarada*, Viper, took him under his wing and showed him the life of a Lobo. He still couldn't bear to think about Viper's death in prison. When he heard that he took a knife in the neck he felt like he'd also been stabbed. Viper had made a lot of enemies through the years, but when King got the news an Alvarado Street Diablo had killed him, he knew the order had come from the outside. From that day, he promised himself he'd find the one responsible and kill him for taking the life of his blood brother and teacher.

From his first day in the gang, two things were made clear: You could die any day, so every moment you're alive, live it as a Lobo. And because you could die any day, if you wanted something bad enough, do whatever the fuck it takes to get it. At twenty-four years old, Miguel "King" Ruiz had learned his lessons well, and tonight he wanted to get drunk and party like a Lobo – no matter what it took.

They'd wait for their chance at the late-night store down the street. The lights weren't too good and he figured they'd find somebody around there to jump. King would make sure the asshole kept his mouth shut before they left. Shoving the barrel of his .38 into his balls while the others stomped on his head worked before and would work again. King couldn't wait to see the look of helplessness in his eyes. The look of *fear*.

And if it was a woman? His heart started pumping faster at the thought. Maybe she'd wanna go inside her car and get a look at a *real* man. King pictured the scene and smiled as his dick stiffened.

Either way, man or woman, somebody was gonna be his bitch tonight.