

CHAPTER 4:

THE KINGDOM OF RUNAWAY JUSTICE

"Vick is evil."—Maricopa County Board of Supervisors, Don Stapleton.

The suspected graverobber of Childs's tomb was hanged in front of a crowd of hundreds near Taos for sundry crimes against nature, property, humanity, and bestia. But he stubbornly refused to die. He just sat there calmly hanging at the end of a noose, until the sheriff and his deputies settled that they could shoot him where he dangled or use him as a festive piñata for the ongoing Dio de los Muertes celebration.

At least, that is what the impresario of the curio house had told Alberto. Then he had shown him the

scrapbook his father Juan had passed down to him, with the clippings from the 1896 newspaper.

Alberto gasped. He recognized the face of this mysterious graverobber! (Though it had certainly changed and aged with time! But the resemblance was undeniable.)

The people had then cut down the criminal to throw him onto a lit pyre, but he had escaped and bounded off into the pinons like a cosmically misplaced gazelle.

Alberto was reading through de Niza's later diaries contained within the safety deposit box. They had been entitled, "Codex Nicien," by their author, and this was volume xviii, the last one de Niza had written before he had been killed by the errant hoof of an unruly burro.

He'd sensed his death approaching and accepted it with grim consanguinity. Almost anticipation. The portrait which emerged of de Niza in his sloping French/Castilian pastiche script was of a repentant man of the cloth, wracked with guilt burrowing into his soul over centuries arising from his murder of the guide, Esteban, and the concessions he was forced to make to the mask he wore--to feed, and satisfy its lust for human sacrifice.

The last entries were in a distinctively less legible screeed, almost as if the old priest were writing it blind.

Alberto understood. As if he couldn't trust himself to write with open eyes. *Curious*, thought Alberto, *as if he didn't want the mask he was wearing to see.*

A week before the death date on Child's tombstone, in one of the very last entries, in this crazy-trending script, de Niza was detailing a device, a system, a contraption which kind of looked like Ezekiel's wheel. This was de Niza's stab at redemption, his final plan for absolution, atonement, grace. Above the abstruse sketches was the legend in graceful bold font. "How to Destroy the Mask of Quetzalcoatl."

Alberto tore the pages from the center of the codex, crumpled them up, and burnt them in the wastebasket.

Let the mask decide its own fate, thought Alberto.
Let it decide who was worthy.

Mateo was nodding off in the luxuriant leather folds of Lesdents's plane's executive cabin.

A man at temporary repose, catching his first snatches of uninterrupted sleep in many days. But it was not to be. His hand clutched at the turquoise dreamcatcher gifted to him by the Zuni fortuneteller.

His brother Alberto was featured in Mateo's dream, wearing a dark hooded sweatshirt. His sweaty brown

familiar face glistened from within the aperture of cotton fabric, his prominent teeth espousing insolent good mule-faced humor.

He was walking down the side of the street, hands in pockets. A dark car, inhabited by many dark hunched forms slowed at his side and stopped.

Three such dark hunched forms poured out of the car and surrounded Alberto.

One of the figures now clubbed Alberto over the head with what looked like a horn or flute. Alberto crumpled and the squat figures hoisted him up and tumbled him ass over teakettle into the trunk. Then they all sped away. It occurred to Mateo to dial 911 but then he decided against it.

All these dream hunchbacks had had the same clear slender breathing tubes as had the old Zuni fortuneteller.

Mateo woke then with a start as the landing gear cranked down prior to their landing in Phoenix.

Back at the apartment, Alberto's couches had been torn apart down to the stuffing, his lamps overturned, his books slit open and his plants dug up. Of Alberto there was no sign, however. In the trash bin, Mateo noticed a new addition, though.

It was called, "The Codex Nicien: vol xviii." Mateo plucked up the book, fanned downwards in coffee grounds, and looked inside. The script was familiar. He recognized it quickly as belonging to the old Fray de Niza. The book was yellowed and crinkly but in serviceable shape. Diary entries spanning from the year 1799 to 1834. Towards the end, he noticed many pages had been torn out.

He tucked the book in the crook of his arm and made up his mind to check out the Talking Stick Casino. He had a hunch his brother might have gone there, and he had a few of his brother's green chips to blow. He wondered then if Alberto had escaped whoever had trashed his place. He was also now bothered exceedingly by his dream on the plane. He had never known himself to be all that prophetic, but now the dream and the ransacking and the disappearance all seemed eerily connected.

In the casino, Mateo found his way to the high stakes poker table where a reporter from the Arizona Republic was entering day 2 of a white-hot heater. Alberto could tell who the man was because he still wore his press credentials. Right now they dangled into a yellowed gin and tonic tumbler on the wooden border of the felt green table.

The reporter's face was scruffy and bagged around the eyes. He'd worn out several straight shifts of croupiers with his wild unintelligible eyes and offensive odor. Mateo felt drawn to his glassed-over countenance and expression of fatigued despair. Mateo made the natural assumption that this guy might have been paying attention the day before.

After a second, the unshaven reporter returned Mateo's stare. His eyes bulged even wider, if that were possible.

"You're back?" he croaked.

Mateo thought quickly. "Couldn't say away," he replied companionably.

"Where'd you go?"

"Oh, you know."

"Here you can have some of your chips back. When I saw those little gremlins taking you away, I thought I'd hang on to them for you. Turns out I needed them. But here, look, I don't need them anymore."

"Gremlins?"

"Yeah. I don't know, little guys, kind of bent over. Like gremlins or something--spooks. Spooks, you know. Like those little singing midgets from Star Wars. You know, that one with John Candy?"

"Did they tell you where they were taking me?"

The reporter perched his head in semi-obliterated puzzlement. "No, did they not tell you?"

"They did but I forgot."

"Well, you might want to ask them then," he said bending back to the table in subdued hysterics. He threw an orange chip on the table. "They're right over there, you crazy nut."

The dark hooded hunchbacked forms noticed Mateo at the same time he noticed them. They proceeded to chase him out into the parking lot, but while fleet of foot, they couldn't catch him.

Mateo stayed close to the casino on his scooter. He had noticed Alberto's jeep in the parking lot while flying by. The hunchbacks had followed him to the verge of the interstate but retreated in the wake of his sputtering smoke plumes.

They then all walked south along the road for a mile or so where they appeared to then dematerialize into the thin air. Mateo cautiously returned to the parking lot.

Alberto's jeep was open. On the passenger seat was a little velvet Crown Royal pouch. Inside was a vial with a fluorescent green liquid inside, and a tag with the words, "Pulque 231" written in Sharpie.

Under the mat amongst all the cigarette butts and beer cans was what Mateo was looking for. The dented silver key. He started up the Jeep.

Mateo decided to drive back to Mini-Mexico. The streets were deserted. A little morose for a city once known for its vibrant booming Latino populace.

He pulled into the dirt lot near the *Una Luna* and strolled in. The bar was red-lit, and the low-hanging heavy yellow moon sagged on the horizon, visible through a narrow window slit behind the bar. His attention was drawn to the near corner in the direction he'd just entered from.

A figure in a polka-dot red dress, slunk against the wall, with a shiny jet bouffant and enormous familiar breasts, sat waiting in preoccupied contentment. He walked over to her.

"Hello, Consuela," he said.

"Well, well," she said, starting at the sight of him. "They say a criminal always returns to the scene of his crime."

"Just arsonists and serial killers, and besides who are you talking about? Me or you?"

"I don't know," she said laughing. She pushed the chair out for him to sit down with her long fishnet-stocking clad leg.

Mateo sat down.

"Expecting someone?" he asked.

She didn't answer.

"Who?"

"Let's just say not my husband."

"Who's your husband?"

"He's a cop."

"So who were you waiting for?"

"Well, let's also just say I thought you were him when you walked through the door."

"Well, sorry to disappoint you."

"I can still tell the two of you apart a mile away."

"Really? Alberto? Still?"

"What?" she said. "You know we always got along."

"What's your husband the cop think about all this?"

"He's always working."

"Lucky guy."

"Shut your mouth. Where is your brother?"

"I don't know. He's gone missing."

"Since last night?"

"Is that when he called you?"

"Yes."

"Then yeah, he's gone missing since then."

"What are you guys involved in?"

"I don't know. Same shit, just different."

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for him."

"No, I mean what are you doing HERE tonight?"

"Looking for trouble I guess."

"Well, you shouldn't have any. Trouble, that is.

Finding trouble. At any rate."

She was already a little drunk.

Six or seven beers later, he found out she had reserved a room at his motel, down the stairs from him and across from the ice machine. Her husband, Salmon, called her phone many times throughout the course of the night's long stretches, an especially long and poignant night for Mateo who managed to hardly sleep or likewise think. Instead he felt a whole lot of the presence of life—concentrated—what life could offer at random times in the guise of one of its small kernels of mystery, laid out before him like a gift. Never once did Consuela answer, or stir, or even appear to notice the ringing phone at all.

Mateo felt the strange sensation that he could love this woman, or one like her, just for the very fact that she seemed not to love, or care, or have emotions at all, seemed incapable of having them or feeling them--or at least she did not love as she should, as she was expected

to. She had a diffuse love, unconcentrated, formless, a love she might share of but never wholly. Never enough to possess or be possessed. In the end she would keep her love for her own needs. Her own life. And fuck the rest of them.

The next morning Mateo went up the stairs and dug the helmet out of the heap of crumpled clothes in the bottom of the wardrobe. He realized now he had to verify the authenticity of these relics. Finally he had to start evaluating this situation for the facts, and not be gripped along by the fates with their selfish agendas.

He owed that to his brother and to himself. Now here had been the second woman his brother had sent his way. Scary. And definitely not unwelcome.

End Fourth Installment...