

CHAPTER 6:

TORTILLA FLAT

Katy, the immovable technocrat, squirrel-kicker, had spartanly accommodated lodgings. In fact, her apartment only seemed slightly more inviting, softer, cozier than did the prison cell William Hurt's pederast character did a job of decorating in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*.

There were takeout containers strewn about the coffee-table and in between the couch cushions, all rimmed with sauces in various stages of congealment--running the gamut from crusted to gelatinous.

"Nice lair," said Mateo.

Katy grimaced.

"What? Still not talking to me?"

"You lied to me," she seethed.

"I know and I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"Because Alberto always got all the ladies and I just wanted one for once."

"You're thirty-five years old and you're worried I wouldn't like you as much as your brother? You're not kids anymore!"

She was looking deep into his eyes. Hers shone like the sheen of an apple. He saw in them an aloof and haughty beauty.

Mateo nodded sheepishly.

She relaxed. "Well, I feel very violated."

"Where's that leave us? Are you going to kick me out the door into the arms of a thousand waiting deputies? Speaking of which, we better get the hell out of here."

"Where do we go, Mateo?"

"I know a place. It'll at least be safer than here."

They drove to the Guadalupe Cemetery, Mateo tucked back between the rows of seats. Katy wore a hat and sunglasses, and drove slowly.

Aisle after aisle of graves jumbled together in haphazard mounds and clumps. Syncretic flavors of Roman Catholic and American Indian religiosity all at once. Plastic madonnas, candles, rosaries, plastic gems, and beer cans strewn in the sacred interstices, the silent ground.

Unhallowed, cheapened by trinkets and gaudy junk festooning the graves. A humble thrifty yet extravagant and piquant place.

Once they had plodded around, and were both thoroughly depressed and odded out, Katy spoke, and she didn't mince words.

"There's nowhere to go, is there?"

"Not unless you have a rocket ship."

"I'm cold. Let's get a drink."

Mateo smiled. Maybe she wasn't such a bad girl after all.

Lesdents flipped on the TV. He gasped. On every channel, there were camera graphics of Positsoc security footage, images of Mateo and his niece. The crawl bar across the bottom of the screen referred to the two as fugitives from justice. Imposters. A massive manhunt was in progress.

Lesdents called to Reggie.

The Una Luna was desolate. The raspy vespers of cicadas sounded in the gloaming. Mateo was relieved not to see Consuela there.

"What'll you have?" asked the bartender.

They saw themselves on the bar TV.

The bartender's face seemed set in stone, as if their mugshots would be at home above the back shelf.

"I don't know. Couple of shots."

"You guys looking for trouble?" the barkeep asked, now comparing them to the images constantly being zoomed in and out and rotated around the TV screen, as he stooped to take a shotgun up from behind the bar.

"No, sir."

"What's Vick want with you two, anyway?" he asked setting the gunstock and barrel before him on the varnished bar top. "As you can see, we deal with him when he comes out here, but we try not to invite him." He smiled crookedly.

"Look, no one knows we're here."

At that moment a bright blaring spotlight shone through the window, highlighting Mateo and Katy in its shadow-splaying beam.

The barkeep leveled his shotgun at the closed door, daring it to open.

"Is there any way out?" screamed Katy.

"Too late for that honey," shouted the barkeep with the handlebar moustache.

"This is Vick's Dio de los Muertes."

"All the same."

"Go to the bathroom if you're scared and tuck your head between your knees. Here's your shots," he said unloading a round into the ceiling. "Hot lead. Whoo."

On the bar TV they saw a ring of blue and red flashing patrol cars form around the perimeter of the old saloon, growing denser by the second.

Then the door tossed open as if thrust by a fell black breeze and slammed against the far wall. A smoke grenade rolled into the middle of the bar floor spewing a toxic cloud.

The Una Luna's barkeep started blasting at the door. A voice shouted in Mateo's mind. The dreamcatcher glowed gold effulgently in his pocket.

"To the roof!" shouted Mateo.

They rushed out the back door into the alley amid gunshots blasting behind them, around them. They scaled an iron ladder, rung by cold rusty rung, in a mad panic to the flat roof.

Lesdents and Reggie were waiting outside the parked chopper.

"How'd you guys know we were here?" asked Mateo, as he and Katy filed in. Shots whistled past the rotors as they lifted off.

"Well, I was just sitting there watching some TV when this little voice in my head told me to come down here... Plus I just followed all the lights and sirens."

Katy sat at the bench before the baby grand piano while the rest of them stood around her. She wouldn't respond to any threat to play.

"So you have added to your store of relics, then?" asked Lesdents.

"And we've learned that they have some quite unique properties."

"Yes, they do, so you see I wasn't lying to you then. Hell, I could have told you that. I fear we won't be safe here for long."

The TV was on and they happened to look over.

"We know where you are and we know who you are," said Vick from the TV. He had recorded a taunting communiqué and put it on a loop, interspersed with shots of a force massing outside the gates of Lesdents's compound. Amid the scrub brush and tanks, the scene looked more like Fallujah than Phoenix.

"Either come out or we'll come get you," he slithered.

He was standing in front of Alberto's stripped and flayed body, bent over a sawhorse. "Your brother's alive and he's said you'd be in a mind to negotiate."

Lesdents spoke.

"I know where they are. See that peak in the window behind Vick. That's Weaver's Needle. They're at Taylor's Ranch in Tortilla Flat."

This time Vick was ready and waiting for them. Enemy helicopters appeared in the four cardinal directions, surrounding their chopper. After they'd been boxed in, the lead helicopter positioned itself alongside them. A deputy was pointing them in an easterly direction. "Better follow," Lesdents told Reggie, who was piloting.

They flew in an escort formation across the long waste realms of Apache Junction and then north over a swath of the Superstitions and an emerald jagged-armed lake. Here the helicopters paused in a holding pattern.

"Looks like we'll be joining your brother in the torture room. How charming!" said Katy, downtrodden.

A helicopter now broke off and settled into place right above them.

"I think they want us to go down."

Down on the ground they were all handcuffed behind their backs and marched to the ranch.

In the ranch, Vick was somewhat indisposed. He was seated before a vanity bordered by globe lightbulbs, like a setup from a starlet's dressing room. But there the comparison ended, unless this starlet in question was also likewise missing her face. And where her face should have been was a mess of green grasping tentacles undulating from a pit in her face. Like a thick carpet of snaky seaweed swirling in brackish water. Vick's "face" was slung over a white marble bust.

Lesdents immediately recognized the face for what it was. He ejaculated in enraptured awe. "The Mask of Quetzalcoatl!"

"Yes," said a disembodied voice. The mask's lips were moving, draped over the bust's chiseled scalp.

A thick suntanned hand grasped the mask and brought it to Vick's squirming pitted face. The mask seamlessly deformed to cover the tentacles like a false skin. Now, the familiar face of Vick spoke.

"Right you are."

"So you had it all along, Vick," said Lesdents.

"Yes, of course. You were blind not to be able to see it. That was your choice."

Vick eyed himself in the mirror.

"So what have you brought me?" asked Vick, rising to his feet. He started pawing through Mateo's knapsack, filled with priceless relics.

Alberto slumped in the corner, barely aspirating. Sometimes a low moan of pain escaped through his parted lips.

Mateo rushed to his brother's side in aghast horror.

They could hear Vick screech off into the night. "Wonder where he's off to?" said Mateo.

Lesdents choked on some sputum. "He knows where the remaining relics are, but he hasn't got to them yet I don't think. Otherwise, we'd be dead. He still thinks he may need one or all of us."

"For what?" asked Mateo.

"The relics only talk to certain people. They have minds of their own."

"We got to get out of here."

Vick returned later that night. He wanted to speak with Mateo. They went on a walk in the desert in the cool evening. Surrounded by the black silhouettes of cactus and the nearby mountain ridge.

Vick seemed somewhat fatigued and measured yet his face flowed with a subtle luminous intensity.

"Have the relics told you anything about the vault? Tell the truth, now, or you and all your friends will all die I promise. You'll find I'm not squeamish around blood, either. Nor do I often wax sentimental about the Geneva conventions."

Mateo sighed. "I have dreamed of a glowing green door, but it was closed, and I didn't have the key."

Vick smiled. "Ah but you may." Then he sighed. "We are near to discovering the vault. Old friend of yours is actually. But we won't be able to drill into it. We'll have to go in through the front door, and my hunch is--with the Aztecs nothing is ever easy--it's going to be locked tight."

Mateo decided to go fishing.

"Where is it?"

Vick laughed. "You're not as fucking annoying as your brother at least, but dang I'm not fool enough to tell you that. I wasn't born yesterday. Not even close."

Mateo was torn. He knew Vick was pure evil and his brother's tormentor but he could see how Vick's men loved and respected him. Something human inside him yet remained.

Vick sighed again. "The mask is holding out on me. You know you give your life to something with all your heart and you yearn to control it, but it ends up controlling you."

Mateo realized that this devil was trying to use his faculty for sympathy against him. So he said nothing.

Back in the cell, Mateo told Lesdents what Vick told him.

"Drill, huh? I bet this vault is nearby then."

He paused to think for a moment, then he started laughing. "It couldn't be the Lost Dutchman, could it? That would be absurd...but make sense." He chuckled. "Lost treasure of the Aztecs--the richest treasure in the whole planet's history--buried right here in the Superstitions."

The next day they all awoke to a clatter of rushing footsteps and raised voices outside their door, and a rain patter of bullet-fire out the window.

The ranch was under attack!

End Sixth Installment...