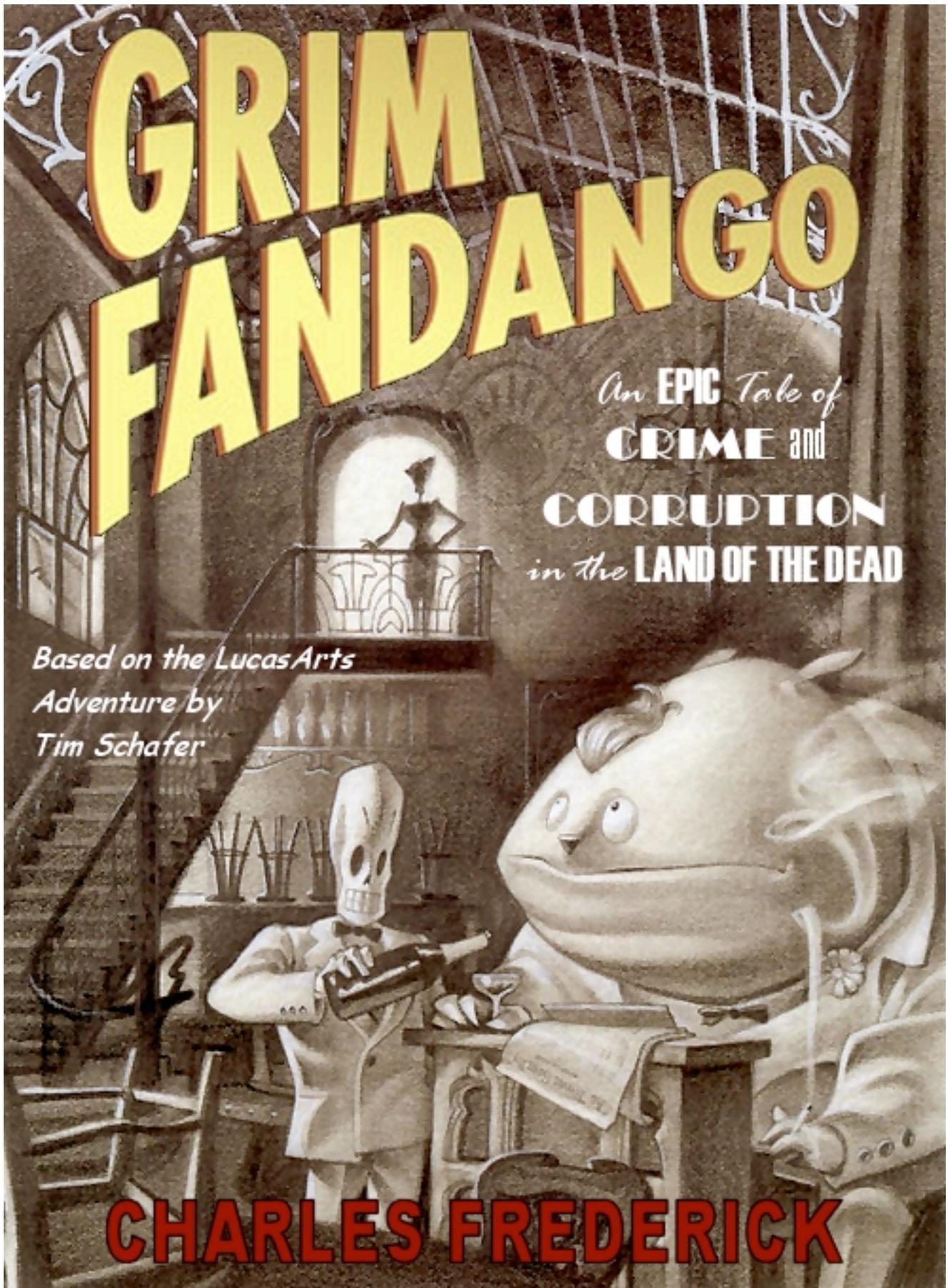


GRIM FANDANGO

An **EPIC** Tale of
CRIME and
CORRUPTION
in the **LAND OF THE DEAD**

*Based on the LucasArts
Adventure by
Tim Schafer*

CHARLES FREDERICK



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GRIM FANDANGO

ENTER DYING

Everything began when I died. Life doesn't count. I fouled that up good but death gave me a second chance I never expected, so this is where I'm beginning: Judgment Day.

I got one hell of a shock after I died. When the reaper handling my case brought me in, he told me that I had to remain in the Land of the Dead indefinitely. Since I hadn't expected there to even *be* a Land of the Dead, I needed an explanation for what was happening and why. But I didn't get one, not really. Not one that made much sense at first. He told me that I had a debt to work off, a moral debt. I asked him what *that* meant.

"Mr. Calavera..." the reaper began.

"Call me Manny," I said.

The reaper didn't smile, of course, not with an inflexible bone face; but I sensed, somehow, that he would have been smiling if he could. "Manny," he said. "With a record like yours, you won't be allowed to continue on to the Ninth Underworld for some time. You're debt will have to be paid off."

I noticed he hadn't really answered the question. "Suppose I walk or hitch a lift? Forget the train or bus or whatever."

"Manny, listen to me: do *not* try to leave town. Not ever. That would be the absolute worst thing you could ever hope do."

I fumbled with my fifth cigarette since I was brought it in, in a pointless attempt to cover up the shaking of my fleshless hands. "So, are you telling me there are worse things than being stuck in a world of the walking dead?"

"Yes, Manny," he assured me. "Much worse."

I took a deep drag on the cigarette. Then another. "So...about this debt, whatever it is...*how* do I pay it off?"

"You will work for the DOD. As a reaper."

"*Hijole!*"

I don't have any trouble admitting that they scared the hell out of me: the reaper who handled my case, the trainers, *everybody* involved in the whole situation. I was shit-my-pants *terrified*. Once the reaper was finished with me I was taken to the DOD training facility and locked down. They put me in this tiny, windowless room (maybe even doorless, too, after it had been shut) and left me for I don't know how long. It seemed like years but it was probably less than an hour. Then a trainer came in and outlined just what my fate was to be in the most brutal terms possible—for the state of mind I was in, anyway. Maybe she was just being factual, I don't know. She told me stories about souls that remained in the Land of the Dead for centuries, even millennia. And about those who never left. I was already feeling restless, ready to move on; the thought of staying was torture all by itself, never mind the horror stories. By the time the practical part of the training began, I was most definitely ready to be a good boy.

So I started training to be a reaper. They issued me a scythe, a hooded black robe and abject humiliation. A reaper is supposed to be imposing. Sometimes a soul has to be overawed, almost spiritually bullied, before it will follow you out of the Land of the Living; but with these stumpy legs of mine I don't make much of an impression, so the DOD gave me these things to wear that added almost a foot to my height. It took about half an hour of falling on my coccyx before I could even cross

the room. I wouldn't have minded so much except it was part of my official training and I did those thirty minutes of pratfalls in front of more than a dozen other trainees. But I put up with it, making out like they were laughing with me rather than at me. Having decided it was finally time to play by the rules, I found I could accept being humiliated. After the training was finished they assigned me an office in the Bureau of Acquisitions and a driver.

"Why do I need a driver?" I had asked the trainer.

"If the company let *you* guys drive," he said, "you'd all be AWOL in ten minutes."

"Got me there," one of the other trainees cracked.

My driver turned out to be a large demon with fuzzy blue skin that was about five sizes too big for him. He looked like nothing so much as a six-foot-tall Shar-Pei. For some reason his name was Endive. And didn't the demon part take some getting used to.

"There are two basic kinds of demons," our trainer told us. "Those who help souls and those who want to rip you apart."

"And how do you tell the difference?" one guy asked. "*Before* the chiropractic begins, I mean."

The trainer went 'hmpf' and said, "You won't have to worry about *that* for a long time. All of the demons here in El Marrow are the friendly sort. But if any of you step even one *inch* beyond the city limits you will, I guarantee, shortly become a nest for an acid-spewing bat. Or maybe something unpleasant will happen to you."

Endive was definitely the friendly sort. Quiet, very respectful, and thoroughly unhelpful.

"Hey, *carnal*, let's go for a ride," I'd say.

"Sorry, sir," Endive would reply, "but the car's having it's tires rotated."

And he kept on like that. If I didn't want the car for official purposes it was getting a lube job or the timing belt was being adjusted, or something. Eventually, I caught on. "You're just making excuses, aren't you?" I accused him one day after he fed me another slice of bullshit.

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir; but the company won't let me drive you anywhere except to and from the Land of the Living. If I break the rules I could lose my job." He said that like it was the worst thing in the world.

"Why didn't you just say so at the beginning?"

"I don't like to disobey, sir."

"But you *can* lie, apparently."

"Yes, sir, but please don't tell anyone."

I hid my phantom smile by taking a puff on my cigarette. "Still, you can drive whenever you feel like it if I'm not in the car, right?" I'd seen Endive tearing around the streets of El Marrow and he knew it.

"Oh, yes, sir. I have to drive."

"*Have to?*"

"I'm an elemental, sir, a spirit of the land. It's what I was made for."

"So let me get this straight," I said. "You're saying you were created just to drive cars? You have a purpose in being and you *know* what it is?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" Endive answered enthusiastically.

That piece of news didn't exactly make my day. By the time this conversation took place I was past fear and into bitter. Finding out that demons knew what their purpose in life was...this was not something I wanted to know. 'If only I could have known that kind of thing when *I* was alive,' I kept thinking, 'I wouldn't be in this mess now.' But, eventually, I got over it and I settled into the job of picking up souls in the Land of the Living and trying to sell them the best travel packages they qualified for.

"Why do some clients qualify for better travel packages?" I had asked our trainer in the beginning.

“They led good lives,” he snapped back at me.

“*¡Que traes!* How do you define a ‘good life’?”

“Better than yours and mine.”

But eventually I accepted the rules of the DOD and the restrictions the company placed on its agents. At first, I went along with the rules because I had been scared into line. Later on, because I became fatalistic. But, eventually, when things started to make some sense, I started following the rules because I became convinced they were right. I never understood completely why the DOD did things the way it did, but I got enough to see there must be a reason for it all. As I read the records of my clients’ lives I started to understand why the agent who handled my case wouldn’t tell me what was in my file. A soul’s life is very complex, not to mention delicate. The files reapers get contain not just a client’s actions but also their thoughts and motivations; whether they are remembered, repressed, or conveniently edited and justified after the fact. These things interact in interesting ways in affecting a person’s destiny and it’s not always healthy—for the reaper as well as for the client—to go into the details.

A mass murderer is obviously not going to be issued a ticket on the Number Nine train, but a seemingly good person could be just as bad off. One of my early clients was a philanthropist. He was incredibly wealthy and put most of his money into good causes that helped thousands of people. But he also bullied and humiliated virtually everyone who personally came into contact with him. He loved making employees crawl and as for his wife...that woman deserved a ticket on the Number Nine train if only for what she had put up with. The best that man qualified for was a girl’s three-speed bicycle.

I remember my first Double-N sale. I was beyond envious. When I made to hand the ticket to my admittedly well-deserving client, the little golden slip started to twitch. I was so startled that I let go...but instead of falling, the ticket leapt straight into his hand. I wouldn’t take bets on who was more surprised. I saw a lot of Double-Ns after that and got used to their antics but I never really got over the envy. Every day I’d come into the building, see that big picture of the Number Nine train hanging in the lobby and say to myself, ‘One of these days, I’m going to ride her right on out of here!’ A second thought would always say, ‘Yeah, right.’

I became a good sales agent after a slow start; after I got over the fear and bitterness, that is. I may have ruined my life but, dead, I started doing OK. My job got to be rewarding. I made friends in the office, settled into a nice apartment, found a cozy little brew-pub where I spent a lot of my off time, and I began to think that life was good.

That’s when I started to have *serious* problems.

On the surface things were just fine. My job and everything else were fantastic, but I was in the Land of the Dead and having the time of my life. At first that was just ironic, but the contradictions started to get to me. I began to obsess about little things. Like cigarettes. Where did the tobacco come from when no plants grew in the Land of the Dead? And what of the patties in those greasy, half-pound, bacon-and-cheese hamburgers I had almost every day for lunch? *Dios mio*, did I love those things, especially now that I had no arteries to clog. And why did I go to bed every night when I had entered the big sleep? The Land of the Dead was so normal on the surface but so deeply perverse underneath. My existence in it became a torment, a cruel shadow of Life. I realized I was trapped in a limbo state halfway between the Land of the Living and the Land of Eternal Rest: an awful mixture of both and neither. For most souls the Land of the Dead was just a place to cross on the way to a better place, but I was condemned to stop in it for I didn’t know how long. It was much, much worse than the fear I had experienced in the beginning.

My office manager, a tragic soul named Yehuda, sent me to the company shrink. She didn’t make much progress with me at first, though. She tried to help me to simply accept the contradictions, but at first I seemed too far gone to listen. I resisted, as if I *wanted* to be tormented.

Then one day I was sitting in my office and staring at the street below. I decided to jump. ‘Dead Man Kills Self’ was the tabloid headline I envisioned. I started to laugh and couldn’t stop. Our secretary had the shrink to the office within twenty minutes. I was still hysterical when she got there. It was my way of touching bottom. After that, she made progress with me. I learned much later that there were people who really did try to commit suicide. What people could do to themselves in such futile acts is one of the saddest things I’ve ever heard. After a while existence became bearable but never again truly, *unreservedly* enjoyable. And that, in the Land of the Dead, is a good thing.

EVA, DON, AND DOM

The years crawled by. I got a promotion and a fancy new office almost at the top of the building. I became a senior sales agent and the commissions started just rolling in. I got my clients personal cars, luxury cruises, and Double-N tickets. It seemed like bus packages were the worst I did for anyone but I suppose I did have my share of bicycles, packing crates, and walking sticks.

I hadn’t been in my new office long when the secretary for that division got promoted out. The new one was fresh from the Land of the Living. I decided to give her a hand of one kind or another, so around noon her first day I perched myself on the edge of her desk and said, “So, are you interested in lunch, kid?”

“Would there be any point?” she asked, sounding bitter. I knew that tone well enough not to take it too seriously.

“Not as such,” I answered, “but do you really want to work straight through to five?”

She didn’t have to give that much thought. “Can’t say I do, honey. Got a place in mind?”

“Sure do.” I told her about my little brew-pub and we were on our way.

After we had ordered, Eva leaned toward me and said, “Am I supposed to guess your name, or what?”

I laughed. “Calavera,” I said. “Manny Calavera.”

“OK, Cal. I’m Eva Capizzi.”

“I know. It’s on the nameplate on your desk.”

It was Eva’s turn to laugh. “You a sales agent or a detective?”

“Both, maybe. I gotta find the best packages for my clients, you know. Cigarette? It’ll help you relax.”

Eva stopped tearing little pieces from her napkin and said, “Sure. You a mind reader, too?”

“No,” I said as I gave her a cigarette and lit it. “Just an old hand. I think I went through half a pack while the agent that picked up told me I was stuck here.”

Eva took a long drag. “Thanks, sweetheart.” A puzzled look parked itself in front of her skull. “Can you tell me what I’m inhaling this smoke with?”

I shook my head. “You’re better off not thinking too much about that.”

“I don’t just accept things, darling.”

“I’m an old hand, remember?” Eva cocked her skull like a dog hearing an unfamiliar word. Not that Eva was a dog; far from it. “Things are pretty strange in the Land of the Dead. They seem like the way they are back home, but they’re not. You can really mess yourself up if you get too concerned about it.”

Eva fixed her empty but strangely, beautifully alive eye sockets on me for a few seconds. She took another puff on her coffin nail. “OK, Cal,” she said. “I guess you probably know what you’re talking about.”

“The Land of the Dead gets to you, eventually,” I went on. I didn’t normally preach, but it seemed important that I somehow keep Eva away from what I had gone through. “This isn’t a good

place to be stuck in. It looks so much like life, but it just isn't. It's like having a dull ache and not being able to tell where it is. If you try to concentrate on it, try to find it out, you'll go nuts. Trust me... find something to distract yourself with. Focus on working off your time and getting out of this nowhere place."

Eva didn't say anything right away. "I will, Cal," she said softly.

I shook myself. "Sorry. I don't usually do that. It's just—"

"I get you. Really."

Fortunately, our food arrived just then.

Eva looked wryly at the enormous, cheese-drenched hamburger the waitress put down in front of me. "I could say something about heart attacks, but I'd be a little late." She started in on her salad.

"You definitely are the *late* Eva," I chuckled, nodding to her low-fat plate, "and weight loss is guaranteed from now on."

She gave me an ethereal grimace. "You had to bring that up while I'm eating, didn't you." She shook her head. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

"What with?" I asked. Eva kicked my shin as hard as she could.

And we went hopping on from there. Our relationship didn't go exactly where I had thought it might, but it was fun anyway. I might come into the office in the morning and ask, "Any messages for me?"

"Your undertaker called," Eva might answer.

"Yeah? What'd he say?"

"Encore!"

But I gave as good as I got, not that Eva would ever admit it.

A few years after Eva's arrival, our boss was promoted out. I can't say I was thrilled about the new one, Don Copal, but I didn't have much against him either. Not at first. He was certainly different, though. Stan Segall had been tough; he demanded premium sales, but he'd also break every bone he had to help you get them. Don stopped at being demanding. It wasn't long after he came into our little world that someone, I don't know who exactly, christened him the Amazing Vanishing Dictator. He'd be seen entering his office in the morning and usually, soon after, Eva would be saying he wasn't in. Not that anyone ever saw him leave. Eva was not happy with the situation. She was supposed to be the office manager's liaison with the sales agents, not his blocker.

"I wouldn't mind his vanishing so much, Cal," Eva said over lunch one day, "except the fucking SOB keeps reappearing."

And without warning. He would suddenly be there behind you shouting about what a lousy sales agent you were. It was pure bullshit, but he kept on dumping it. For example, Lana O'Malley was about the hottest agent our office had. When she made four Double-N sales in one week—a record—Copal chewed her out the following week for not managing it again. The office had a meeting that evening at Lana's favorite 'speak' (not that there ever was Prohibition in the Lane of the Dead, but 'Peeps'—the owner—had his own ideas about décor, apparently) to try to figure out what to do about the situation.

"Just what the *fuck*," Lana hissed, glaring deep into a cocktail—I think Una Merkel mixed something like it in a movie once, but with less absinthe—in the biggest glass I'd ever seen, "is the problem with this guy? Doesn't he know a goddamned miracle when he sees it?"

"I'd *kill* to make four Double-N sales a week," I grouched, "if I could find anyone who wasn't already dead, that is."

"Cute," José Angel said as he twirled a hunk of ice in his drink, "but is there *anything* we can do about Copal?"

"Ha!" Eva said. "Believe me, there's no such thing as a DOD complaint form."

“To work off our time, we have to do what we’re told,” I put in.

“Thank you, professor,” Lana snarled. “I’ve been working off my time even faster than *you*. Should *I* take even more abuse for my effort?”

“Looks that way,” Apollo Schafer said. “Man, I can’t figure that dude out!”

“Well, that’s helpful,” Eva said with all the irony she had in her.

Apollo threw up his hands. “I can’t say *anything*!”

Eva twisted the knife. “You never do.”

José’s hand clacked on the table we were huddled around. “This isn’t helping!”

“Does anything?” I asked. “No, wait,” I said when José made to pop off again, “I’m serious. Eva’s right. There’s just no procedure for this.”

“I’ve been at the DOD almost seventy fucking years, golden boy,” Lana said. “There’s no goddamned ‘procedure’ because this kind of thing hasn’t happened before! We’re supposed to be pulling together. We’re all in the same boat, for Christ’s sake!”

‘The *Titanic*’ was what the look Eva shot at me seemed to say.

“OK,” José snapped, “so Copal’s standing up in the boat and doing jumping jacks. So just what the fuck do we *do* about it?”

“Hope we’ve got most of our time made up?” Apollo suggested.

Instead of a scathing retort, Eva just said, “Lana’s been at it seventy years.”

“Oh, man!” Apollo muttered. “I did *not* need to be reminded of that.”

“Oh, for...” José exclaimed in exasperation. “Can’t we come to some sort of decision!?”

“So suggest something,” Eva snapped. “I think we’ve all said we don’t know what can be done, so enlighten us, O wise and wonderful man.”

José just glared at Eva. Somehow.

Lana pushed herself away from the table. “This is going nowhere. Maybe I can find someplace where I can get tight in peace.”

“I’ll second that,” I said and followed her to the door which I opened for her because she was old enough to expect it. “Pig,” Eva whispered as she slipped through after Lana. “Oink,” I shot back.

“Lana,” I said to her when I had caught up, “I actually do have an idea.”

“So why the hell didn’t you say so before, dammit?”

“Hey!” I held up my hands. “Friend!”

Lana actually stopped and faced me. “OK. So what’s the idea, Cal?”

“Maybe *we* can’t do jack about Copal. We just don’t know either way. But my first boss is still with the company. I can see if he has any ideas.”

“Not bad, Manny.” Lana started walking again, more slowly than before. “He’s been with the DOD forever, the poor bastard. Yeah, see what Yehuda knows. But don’t talk to him at the office. Don’t let Copal get wise to you.”

“Don’t worry about that. Funny. I don’t know where he stops.”

“I’ll find out from his secretary,” Eva chimed in.

“Good,” Lana said, “Sounds like we’ve got a conspiracy.”

The next day I met Eva for lunch. “Will he be expecting me?” I asked when she gave me the address. He’d moved in the years since I’d worked under him.

“Are you out of your ever-loving mind, sweetheart? Do you have *any* idea how close my desk is to Copal’s door?”

“Just asking,” I said.

Eva pushed her food around her plate. “Manny,” she finally said, “do you think Copal’s up to something?”

“Like what? Gunning for the Loud-Mouthed Bastard of the Year award?”

“I don’t know,” she said, staring at her plate. “Maybe there’s a reason why he’s tearing everyone down.”

I shrugged. “Does he need a reason to be an asshole? *I* never did.”

“You’re *not* an asshole, darling.”

“You didn’t know me when I was alive.”

Eva sighed and dropped her fork on her plate. “What do we know about Copal? What’s his background? How did he get this job?”

“We don’t ask those questions,” I answered. One of the unwritten rules in the DOD: everybody’s a bum so don’t delve into anybody’s past.

“I don’t just accept things, remember?”

“So why are you so bothered? He hasn’t been tearing *you* down, has he?”

“And why not?”

I shrugged again. “Because you’re not a sales agent, I guess. He can’t lay into you for not making enough premium sales.”

“Exactly!” Eva said like she was making a big point. “I’m not an agent, so I get slightly better treatment. But why should that make any difference to a guy who’s *just* an asshole? So he’s not an equal-opportunity prick?”

“Sonofabitch, Eva! How the hell should I know?”

“Maybe you should find out.”

“There are some questions we simply do not ask.”

“OK, Cal. OK. But if certain questions *don’t* get asked, how in this sick world will Yehuda be any help to you?”

Maybe Eva was the mind reader. I went to his home that evening. He fixed me a drink and then settled into his easy chair while I told about our problem. When I’d finished, the tired old man said, “I don’t know what I can do to help, Manny. Office managers *are* rather autonomous, you know.”

“Yeah, but there are people above him, right? He’s gotta answer to somebody.”

“We all answer to *somebody*, Manny,” Yehuda sighed and shook his head slowly, “but the big boys downtown have larger things to concern themselves with than our piffling office politics.”

“So what are you telling me? That all we can do is to wait until he or we are promoted out? That could take a while, you know.”

“Yes,” Yehuda grimaced, “I know.”

I had put my foot in it, and didn’t I know it. “Sorry, *mano*, I didn’t...”

Yehuda impatiently waved the apology away. “Never mind. I made the biggest mistake any man could. I accept my fate,” he said almost defiantly, “and so should you.”

“I don’t think Copal is fate exactly.”

“We don’t get to choose who we work with. I believe I recall getting a few complaints about you in those first few months. But you improved. Remarkably so. I suspect Copal simply hasn’t had any management experience. And he may still be bitter that he isn’t allowed to go on to his rest. You must make allowances.”

“I’ll try. I don’t now about Lana, though.”

We found out about Lana soon enough. When I told her what Yehuda had said, she didn’t make any response except to shake her head and walk away.

I was filing my recent cases a couple of days later when Eva quietly slipped into my office. She looked shaken. I took out the bottle of scotch I kept in my premium clients cabinet and gave it to her. When she had taken a big swallow she told me what was up.

“It’s Lana,” she said hoarsely but not because of the low quality of the scotch. “She left town.” I could only stare. “Her driver tried to stop her. She made it as far as the edge of the forest, but then she walked straight into a web. The spiders had her in pieces in seconds.” Eva shuddered. “Bab is pretty shaken up.”

“Yeah,” I said pointlessly. “She’d been here so long. I was really pulling for her. Damn Copal!”

Eva took another slug of scotch. “If this can happen to someone like Lana, Cal, what chance do we have?”

I let out a slow sigh and lit a cigarette to give myself time to think of a decent answer. There wasn’t one. “Lana didn’t have to leave town, Eva,” I finally said.

“I think she did. I think she knew she had to try. There’s something in this office that gave her no choice.”

She was so earnest I almost believed her. But I shook my head. “No. She just didn’t think things through.”

Eva opened her mouth to argue but Copal chose that moment to burst in. “So there you are!” he roared. “Just what the hell are you doing away from your desk!?”

“Lana left town,” Eva said in a low voice.

“Glad to hear it!” Copal snapped. “Maybe now I can get one decent agent in this office.” I ground my teeth but said nothing. Copal must’ve seen my jaw working because he paused and said, “Smart boy.” Then, to Eva, “So get back to work, you!” With that he spun around and stamped out of my office.

Eva hefted the bottle. I grabbed her wrist and pried the bottle away from her. “That’d be a waste of perfectly good rotgut,” I said.

“Are you just going to accept this?” she hissed.

“Give me an option.”

She just shook her head sharply and went. I glared at the bottle in my hand. “She could’ve at least left me enough to get drunk on,” I groused.

An agent to replace Lana arrived the next day. If I had been under oath, I suppose I would have admitted that this was a good thing. The Bureau of Acquisitions simply cannot be short handed. But, down in the guts I no longer have, I thought it stunk. We should have had a mourning period. Lana was truly gone...gone in a way beyond what death means to the living. Lana was still there but balkanized, rendered impotent, voiceless, totally incapable of leaving the Land of the Dead. That’s something people need to come to terms with. Instead, Copal thrust a new agent into the space of a soul he had—deliberately or not—driven into hell.

There are no words for how we hated Copal.

And we didn’t much care for the new guy. His name was Domino Hurley. We would have disliked him because he replaced Lana, but that wouldn’t have lasted except he gave us other reasons. Offensively self-confident, he oozed insincere charm and friendliness. He had no experience as a reaper, which was strange since our division was made up of veterans (the DOD liked to group agents by experience). Hurley just didn’t belong with us.

Apollo was so out of joint because of the situation that he actually complained to Copal’s superiors. That gave Copal an excuse to railroad him out of the company on an insubordination rap. Apollo wasn’t going to let that keep him in the Land of the Dead, though, so he headed off for the Ninth Underworld. But, unlike Lana, he thought ahead. He persuaded his driver to come along. A few months later we got a postcard from Puerto Zapato. Since he made it that far I like to think that he actually made it to the end of the line, although his driver never did return to El Marrow. And the punch line is that while Copal couldn’t replace Lana fast enough, Apollo’s office was converted into a supply room. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

When I came into the office the morning after Lana left town, I found Eva in a pretty agitated state. Domino was the first agent in and he had kept Eva hopping as he started making Lana's office his own. When I stepped out of the elevator Eva was just hanging up the phone. She then picked up the office's appointment book and slammed it down on her desk as hard as she could.

"Any messages for me?" I asked.

"I'm in no mood for jokes, Cal," she barked. I actually took a step back. I don't think I'd ever seen Eva like that before. Sure, she'd been angry plenty of times, but never so thoroughly enraged.

I must have just stood there for about five seconds before inanely saying, "Really?" That got me the whole story on Hurley. It was Copal (who wasn't in the office yet) she had been talking to on the phone. Hurley wanted her to get a new computer for his office and she balked at that. She wanted Copal's support in reining in Hurley and didn't get it. In fact, Copal told her to give Hurley whatever he wanted. To Eva's mind, the office was her domain. The office manager's only concern was 'the little stuff,' by which she meant us agents. Well, she had a point. Of sorts. In any case, she was being jerked around on two tethers. I wouldn't have liked it if I had been in her place.

But at first I thought Eva was overreacting. That is, until I had my first Domino experience a couple of minutes later. I went to Lana's office to introduce myself. Hurley was busy unpacking one box and tossing Lana's stuff into another. When I figured out that he didn't really know about Lana, I told him the story and warned him that he was likely to get some resentment from the others in the office. His only response was, "Hey, that's a shame!" Then he made some remark about Lana's computer being a piece of crap. I was irked by the fact that he wasn't genuinely listening. As we talked—or as I talked and he babbled—I riffled through Domino's box. "Look at all the diplomas!" I said half to myself.

"You have to have the proper attitude to get diplomas like those, Manny."

"Really?" I said in mock astonishment. "I thought you just had to have the proper postage." Domino was not happy with that crack, but I was. Having got my lick in, I made my excuses and went to my office to start on the day's cases.

That evening Eva and I met at this new nightclub she wanted to try out. It wasn't exactly my style. I imagined it would have been full of ferns if there were any to be had. The orchestra wasn't half bad, especially if you liked the Kay Kyser sound, which I didn't. Eva was still in a foul mood but was trying to relax. We tried to stay off shop talk, but the shop intruded.

I was doing my best to take her mind off the workday we had just got done with. I asked her, "So what are you gonna do this weekend?"

She said "Fuck!" and my jaw dropped. She didn't seem to notice my reaction but hissed, "He's here!"

"Huh?"

"Domino! *Don't look!*!" she snapped when I started to look around.

Maybe he was aware of us the whole time, or maybe I had moved in the right direction. Whichever it was, Domino got up from his table just then, drink in hand, and sat down at ours. "Hey, kids! How's it goin'?"

"I've been better," Eva growled.

"Something's been eating her all day," he said brightly. "Must be that time of the month."

I winced. Eva was actually speechless.

"Well," Domino went on obliviously, "I've had quite a day myself. Man! I can't believe what a mess that Laura left in my office!"

"Lana!" Eva snapped.

“Oh?” he said. “I guess I heard it wrong, then.” Domino then leaned back in his chair and looked over at the band. He hefted his ridiculous drink with an umbrella in it and said to me, “This is the life, ain’t it, Cally?”

“Last time I checked,” I said, “we were all dead.”

“Oh, Manny!” Domino exclaimed. “Where’s your optimism?”

I opened my mouth to ask something about what the hell difference could optimism make when Domino turned to Eva and said, “I guess you guys are some kind of an item, huh?”

“Sure, Dom,” Eva said tiredly. “Whatever.”

“Say, that’s terrific. Tell me, Cally,” Domino switched tracks again, “how many Double-N tickets can a guy expect to sell around here?”

I thought of saying something like, ‘I don’t know, Dommy. How many Double-Ns came with your Monopoly set?’ Instead, I just shrugged and said, “Depends. If you’re lucky, maybe five or six a month. Two is more likely, though.”

“Now is that the winning attitude?” he chided me

“Saints don’t grow on trees, Hurley,” I said.

He just waved that aside and sipped his drink.

I’d had enough of the guy. “What did you do to get this job?” I asked. Eva started.

“You mean, what’s my secret to success?” he asked smugly.

“No,” I said, “I mean, how did you screw up and get stuck at the DOD?” Domino slowly put his drink down. ‘Good,’ I thought, ‘I’m getting to him.’ “What sin did you commit and how long are you going to have to work here to pay it off?”

“I could easily ask the same question of you,” he said coldly.

I should have expected that, but I was thrown. “But I don’t know the answer,” I admitted. “I still don’t know what I’ve done.”

“Well, how convenient!” he sneered. “Then neither do I.” And having got in the last jab, he finally left us.

“Oh, good going, Manny,” Eva said with only mild sarcasm. “What made you ask such an asinine question? Who’s always saying there are questions we don’t ask, anyway?”

That made me defensive. “Look, I wanted to get rid of him, OK? I really can’t stand that guy!”

“And you think *I’m* in love with him?” Eva shook her head. “Listen, darling—I wanted to get rid of him, too, but don’t you think there was a more grown-up way of doing it?”

“Well, you were pretty quiet back there. Didn’t you have anything to contribute? Just how would *you* have gotten rid of him?”

Eva opened her mouth and then closed it. She looked down at the table and said, “I don’t know, I guess.” She shrugged and looked back up at me. “I just wish you weren’t so nasty about it, that’s all. I shouldn’t criticize when I don’t have any better ideas, should I?” she asked wryly.

“Who else cares enough to keep me on the straight and narrow?”

Eva patted my hand and said, “Now don’t get mushy on me, sweetie.”

We got off Domino after that. But he didn’t just disappear, unfortunately.

MANNY’S MOJO COPS A BREEZE

Over the next couple of weeks Domino kept getting on everyone’s nerves until Apollo popped off with that complaint and ended up leaving town. Just before he left, though, he had an idiotic physical confrontation with Domino. Apollo was definitely taken to the cleaners. Hurley was a big guy. He could have been a linebacker or something. He was a jock of some kind, anyway. It seemed that whenever he wasn’t on a case he was stripped down to his undershirt shadowboxing or skipping rope

or whatever in his office, like he couldn't take sitting still. 'The Sweatiest Man in the Office' I dubbed him. "You gotta sweat to sell, Cally, and you know it," he'd say to me even though I had a couple of decades selling on him. He *really* started to get to me. What made it worse was the fact that he *was* selling.

It isn't that easy to be a sales agent. It's not as simple as 'good life=premium sale'. An agent has to put all the pieces of a life together and search out the absolute best a soul deserves, and then convince the client to buy. It takes experience to do that well. Hurley claimed it was all a matter of 'the winning attitude'. A load of crap, I thought, but he *was* selling a lot of premium packages for a beginner. Actually, he was selling a lot for a veteran.

Hurley got to me for another reason: I started to have a slump. There's always an ebb and flow in cases. You can't pick and choose your clients. Sometimes there's a nice mix, sometimes you get a parade of SS officers and child molesters...or if you're very lucky, two Double-Ns in a single week. For some reason I didn't understand, my clients started to slide toward the telemarketer end of the scale. And this was while Hurley was raking in premium sales. I became as green as Eva's lunches.

Copal suddenly became 'helpful'. He gave me these little pep-talks and motivational sales books with titles like *They Bought the Farm...Now Sell Them the Cows*. For a little while I actually thought Copal and changed, but then he suggested I get tips from Hurley. From that moment Domino Hurley became my arch enemy. At that year's Christmas party I got a little stiffer than I should and really told Hurley off. I guess I made something of a scene because the next day Eva asked me what the hell was I thinking. I was too hazy on the details to have a good answer.

Then came the terrible week when I made no premium sales of any kind. 'OK,' I thought, 'that's as bad as it can get.' But the next week was worse. I couldn't even sell anything as good as a bus package. Copal started shouting again and this time he seemed justified. I felt so low I actually started reading the books he had given me. The following week I was able to put someone on a bus and I thought the slump was ending, but I was wrong.

"What the hell's wrong with me?" I asked Eva over lunch when the nightmare was in its second month. "How can I get a lead on a good client?"

"Sweetie," she said, "I may send out the work orders but I don't pick who gets them. I just drop them in the tube and the dispatcher sorts them out."

"Can't you walk a good case over to me?"

"I don't look inside, Cal. They all look the same to me." She gave me an arch look. "Kind of like you guys. And besides, you read that memo Copal sent out, didn't you?"

"Yeah, yeah." I did my best Copal impression: "'Swapping, selling, and especially *stealing* work orders will result in *severe* disciplinary action!' I almost think that was aimed at me."

"Well, maybe it was."

"Don't you think I'm paranoid enough?"

"It's not paranoia if they really *are* out to get you, darling."

I thought Eva was nuts and told her so, but after we got back I decided she was a prophet when I walked into my office and found Hurley moving in. "*What the hell are you doing!?!*" I exclaimed even though it was pretty damn obvious what he was doing.

"Oh, Cally," Domino said in a tone usually reserved by parents with a slow child. "Do I really have to connect the dots for you?"

I looked around. None of my stuff was in sight and Hurley already had his punching bag fixed to one wall. "This used to be *my* office!" I said, still in painfully-obvious mode.

"Yeah, I know." He made a show of making sure his diplomas were hung square. "I found some comic books in the desk with your name on them."

For the record, I never had *any* comic books. Not in my desk, anyway.

I thrust my face into Hurley's... sort of... and tried to be as menacing as I could. "I want my office back!"

"Don't worry," he said in a soothing tone that only made me angrier. "You'll have years and years to enjoy it after I've been promoted out and you're still here."

"I wanna punch you in the mouth."

"Oh, no! Not the Christmas party all over again." He shook his head as if very disappointed in me.

"What... happened at the Christmas party?" I was genuinely baffled.

"Blacked out on the whole thing, huh? Maybe you should switch to lemonade, kid."

I went to the door, then turned back. "Is it hard to kiss up to the boss when you've got no lips?" I sneered.

Domino's voice was soft and cold. "I got all the lip I need. I get it from you."

I left. Eva was standing just outside. "Manny..." she said quietly and beckoned me to follow. She led me to the store room, Apollo's old office. My name was on the door. "There's a Dinh Nam in Domino's old office. Copal says you're in here now."

"Did you know about this?"

She shook her head.

I sighed. "I feel like dirt."

"Me, too, sweetheart."

"Well, there's one good thing about all this."

"Yeah?"

"I can't sink any lower."

YEAR 1

EXCELSIOR

Hitting bottom doesn't mean you'll start rising again, I found. Months went by and still I had no premium sales. Which meant, of course, that I was working but not working off my time. I began to hate going into the office. It was hard to face my clients, to go through my spiel knowing it wouldn't lead to anything. I'd send them into my crummy little office and make any kind of excuse so I could close the door behind them and take time to get my nerve up. And the time I made my clients wait kept getting longer. One of my last clients, Celso Flores, had to wait for me almost half an hour. Eva stared sadly at me from her desk by Copal's office as I paced outside my door screwing up my courage. Finally I opened the door to face him. Celso was huddled in the chair by the cheap table I used as a desk, chain smoking.

"Sorry for the wait, Mr. Flores," I said, sweeping into the office in my robes, surreptitiously using my scythe to keep my balance. "I'm ready to take you now."

That was the wrong way to put it. Celso's foot started tapping the floor while he tried to become one with his chair. "Take me? Take me where?" he squeaked.

"Now, now," I tried to soothe him, "there's no need to be nervous."

Celso made an effort to get the compulsive tapping under control as he said, "Nervous. N-no. It's just your appearance. It's... well, it's a little intimidating."

I almost laughed. "Intimidating? Me? But I'm your friend. My name's Manny Calavera. I'm your new travel agent."

"I just want to go home." Celso said in a small voice.

I'm sorry to say I did chuckle then. "You can't go home. You're dead." Celso's tapping stopped and he sagged as if his strings had been cut. "But you're not alone," I said. "Everybody here is as dead as you. That's why we call it the Land of the Dead." I put my scythe aside and carefully sat down. Even after all this time with my height extenders, I still had trouble judging how far it was to the chair. "Are you ready for your big journey?"

"No!" Celso practically jumped out of his chair with the intensity of his denial. But just as quickly he slumped back again. "What journey?" he asked helplessly.

"The four-year journey of the soul!" I tried to say enthusiastically. "It's quite a trip. And I can't lie to you, Celso: it can be very, very dangerous." Celso looked ready to bolt. "Unless...you take that money you were buried with and buy a better travel package from us!" I spread some brochures out on the table even though I knew it was pointless. "Wouldn't you rather travel the Land of the Dead in your own sports car? Or try a luxury cruise? Or, if you've lived a very good life," I said through gritted teeth, "you may even be eligible for a ticket on the Number Nine itself."

A little voice in my mind started going 'No-no-no-no!' as Celso picked up the last brochure. "The Number Nine?" he asked hopefully.

I sighed a little. "That's our top-of-the-line express train. It shoots straight to the Ninth Underworld—the Land of Eternal Rest—in four days instead of four years. But," I continued emphatically, "very few people qualify. Let's take a look at your record." I turned toward my computer and brought up Celso's file. No surprises. He wasn't a bad man in the typical living-person's sense, but he had missed almost every opportunity for true virtue. I turned back to find Celso engrossed in the Number Nine brochure.

"Well," I said gently, "it looks like the train is a little out of your reach. But," I said as I turned back to the computer, "I still have a few tricks up my sleeve." I worked a few minutes with Celso not-

breathing down my neck as I stretched every point in his favor to breaking point. “Ah-ha!” I said eventually. “That’s the ticket: the Excelsior line!”

I collected my scythe and took Celso down to the street level. I made him wait outside while I had a demon fetch an Excelsior. Then I gathered myself and went out to Celso where he waited on the massive steps that led to the main doors. I held out the walking stick to him and said, “Isn’t she a beauty!” Celso took it numbly while I went on. “That compass in the handle will sure come in handy, too.” He looked open jawed at the compass set into the knob of the stick. “Oh, you’re going to have a great trip, Mr. Flores. Wish I was going!” At least *that* part was truthful.

“Why don’t you?” Celso asked a little forlornly. “You could give me a lift.”

I couldn’t make ‘eye’ contact. “Oh, I can’t leave here until I pay off a little debt to the powers that be.”

“Community service, eh? Well,” he said almost brightly, “I guess there are some folks worse off than me.” With that he turned away and started down the steps.

“Oh, I’ll be leaving here soon enough,” I called out after him. Then, under my breath as I turned to go back inside, “No thanks to dead-end, no-commission, low-life cases like yours, *menso*.” I rode the elevator back to my floor and started trudging to my office.

“Manny,” Eva called out to me, “Copal told me to tell you not to leave early today. He wants to talk to you about something.”

“Tell him not to worry,” I said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Back in my office I took off my robe and kicked the high-lift things off my feet. “Especially not with clients like that!” I extracted my bottle of scotch from my now-empty premium-clients file cabinet and took a swig. “Where do they get these guys? They don’t qualify for anything good so I can’t sell anything good.” I took another long drink from the bottle. “Can’t work of my time and I’m stuck!” I cracked my hand on my so-called desk. “Stuck selling walking sticks to a bunch of burros for eternity!”

I shakily went to the window to peer through the blinds at the busy street far below. “I need better clients,” I said hoarsely. “I need a real saint. I need a lead on a rich, dead saint.” I sighed and leaned against the window, waiting for Copal to come in and chew me out again.

**DAY OF THE DEAD MENU: GAZPACHO
BOTULISM
PACKING FOAM**

Needing and getting are two different things, particularly when everything seemed to be against me. The system was supposed to work in such a way that that I’d earn off my time eventually. Client assignments were completely random. Statistically, one agent was just as likely as another to make premium sales. This was the system I had been working in and, up until now, it had been working great. I decided to go by the rules when I first began working for the DOD and I stuck to the rules even when the DOD stopped holding up its end. Eventually, though, I started breaking the rules. And once I started, I broke a lot of them very quickly.

I came into the office late one morning. I had been getting into that habit lately. This morning, though, the place seemed deserted. Even Eva wasn’t at her desk; but I did see Copal’s door open a crack so I figured she must have been in there. When I got to my office I saw that the flag was up on my message tube. I was surprised, and a little hopeful, when I saw it wasn’t the standard work order.

To: All agents
From: Office Manager Don Copal

All right you boneheads, thank your lucky stars and get to your frigging cars! We have a MASS POISONING on our hands! Too many dead to assign specific cases, so all clients are FIRST COME, FIRST SERVE! So let's see some hustle out there!

I don't think Copal knew what a period was.

I sighed and put the memo in my pocket. 'Well, *jefe*,' I thought, 'if I do badly on this one at least I'll know who's to blame.' I got my cloak and the things for my shoes and headed out. My scythe I always kept collapsed next to where my heart used to be. Eva was back at her desk when I left my office.

"*Buenos Días*," I said.

"Manny," she said, a little puzzled. She hadn't seen me come in, of course. "Why aren't you at the poisoning?"

I decided to have a little fun. "What poisoning?"

I imagined that Eva would have rolled her eyes if she had any. "Yeah! The code-three gazpacho poisoning that everybody's at but you! Why do I send out memos if no one reads them?"

I had a little chuckle in me for that. I perched myself on the edge of her desk for the rest of our game. "Any messages for me?"

"Besides the one about the poisoning?" Eva asked slyly.

"Yeah!" I wondered if there really was one.

"I only have one other message for you, Manny: *I'm not your secretary! I don't take your messages! So get it through your thick skull and stop forwarding your phone to me!!*"

It was so funny I fell off the desk.

"In my heart, though," I said as I lay on the floor, "you're still my secretary."

She looked down at me. "Manny, what are you talking about? I was *never* your secretary, even when you were on top. I got one boss, same as you: Don Copal." She mimed spitting the taste of his name out of her mouth. Quite a trick, really, when you've got no tongue or lips.

"Come on," I teased, getting up, "I know you work for another man besides Don."

Eva seemed thrown. "Wha... what are you talking about?"

"I know you take memos for Hurley sometimes."

She bounced a pencil off my skull. "Ah, Manny, just beat it, will ya?"

I sat back down on the desk, making a show of dusting off the edge first. "So," I said, lighting a cigarette, "you going to the Christmas party?"

"After the spectacle you made of yourself *last* year?" Eva asked incredulously. "I wouldn't miss it for the world!"

"Spectacle?" I asked. Eva just laughed. I gave up. "So where is everybody?" I asked.

Eva gave me the patented 'Are you nuts?' look. "Did you forget what day it is today?"

I jumped up. "Oh, man! Did I come in on Saturday again?"

"It's the Day of the Dead!" Eva exclaimed. "Everybody's back in the Land of the Living, visiting their families like we should be."

I probably knew that. Maybe. I never really cared much about the Day of the Dead, though. More of a living-person's holiday, I thought. "So why aren't you visiting your family today?"

Eva shrugged. "The boss is here so I gotta be here. How about you, Cal?"

"No one back there I want to see."

Eva looked slyly at me. "And you don't want Domino here alone, getting all the good leads."

“Domino’s *here!*?”

“He’s at the poisoning,” she cooed sweetly, “stealing your commission.”

“Well,” I said, quickly stubbing out my cigarette, “I gotta go hit the bricks.”

“OK,” came Eva’s parting shot as I ran to the elevator, “you show those bricks a lesson.”

When I got down to the garage and couldn’t find Endive. He usually had the car waiting for me. Actually, he *always* had the car waiting for me. I looked every place I could think of, then went back to the elevator to use the phone that hung beside it. I called up Eva. “I can’t find my driver.”

“Do you want me to page him?” I was too agitated about the poisoning, Hurley, and my missing driver to notice the tone of her voice.

“Yes!” I said.

“Then get Don to stop being such a cheapskate and install a paging system.” Yeah, I walked right into that one. I knew we didn’t have a paging system. “You’ll just have to troll the garage until you find a demon with a driver’s license. Sorry.”

“OK, Eva,” I said and hung up. So I started prowling around some more, ending up in a far corner I’d never been to before. I found a shack surrounded by spare tires, automotive parts and tool cabinets. I could see movement through the single dirty window. I knocked on the door and got no answer. I whacked the door with my open hand and shouted, “Hey! Service!”

“Who the...?” a rough voice barked as the door crashed open. The biggest, most orange demon in blue overalls I’d ever seen squeezed his bulk through the door. The look on his face made me think that a wild demon had somehow gotten into the city. But then his snarl was suddenly replaced by a kind of sheepish, puppy-dog look. “Sorry, sir,” he said. “I didn’t...” he stopped and put his massive hands on his hips. “Sales agents don’t usually come over to *this* part of the garage!” he exclaimed.

“I’m Calavera,” I said, craning my neck up at the monster. He had to be at least ten feet from his toes to the tips of the little ears perched on the top of his head. “Manny Calavera.”

“My name’s Glottis,” he said. I could have jumped through his smile with a clear foot on any side. “I don’t get many visitors.” He suddenly jerked even taller and I nearly bolted. “Hey! I got a message for a Mr. Calavera!” Glottis scratched his head. “Uh...your driver said...that Mr. Hurley said...that he could take the rest of the day off.”

I was floored. “Domino sent my driver *home*?” What the hell was going on?

“Yeah,” Glottis beamed, completely blind to my agitation, “wasn’t that nice?”

I shook my head. “Looks like I need a new driver.”

For a second I thought Glottis was going to bounce off the ceiling. “*Oh!*” he blurted in a kind of bass squeal. “I...uh...I,” he got some kind of control over himself and went on in an exaggerated nonchalant tone. “Uh...I would agree with that. Yes,” he nodded solemnly, “you do.”

Well, it was pretty easy to guess what Glottis was so excited about. “You want to be my replacement driver?”

“*Me!*?” he said in that weird squeal. “No, no, no. Sorry. Can’t. Rules,” he said bitterly.

“Come on, Glottis,” I urged. “I need you to be my driver.”

“No, I can’t,” he whined. “I’m...I’m...” he turned away from me and looked at his massive hands. “I’m...too big.”

It was so ludicrous it was hysterical, but Glottis was obviously pained by what he was saying. I didn’t have to try very hard to keep the laugh down. “You’re not too big,” I tried to sound sincere. “You’re just right!”

“No,” he said miserably, “they told me again and *again*. I’m too big to drive.” He sounded like he was about to cry.

“Well,” I said helplessly, “isn’t there anything here big enough for you?”

“No,” Glottis sniffed, “only those *dang* compact cars.” But then he suddenly perked up. “Hey! That gives me an idea!” His face scrunched up as if his brain hurt to work. “I could alter your car just a

bit...with just a quick torch job to let out the seams, you know?" But as quickly as his spirits rose, they fell again. "Oh, but I'm not allowed to modify the cars without a work order from upstairs!"

"A work order, huh?"

"Yeah," Glottis said miserably. He pulled a scrap of paper from one of his pockets and showed it to me. "I can't torch anything bigger than a cigarette without one of these signed by your boss."

I snatched the form from Glottis before he could stuff it back into his pocket. "Hey, that's my line, getting people to sign. Back in a snap."

Glottis beamed that huge smile of his as I trotted to the elevator. "Yeah, too small!" I heard him say. "I'm not too big...everything around here is just too small!" I laughed quietly then.

I raced back up to the office and headed for Copal's door. Another pencil bounced off my skull. "Big mister boss man doesn't want to be disturbed today," Eva said.

"Eva, I really need Copal to sign this work order!" I pleaded.

She shrugged, "I'll give it a shot." She turned to the intercom. "Mr. Copal? Mr. Calavera has something out here he says he needs your signature on...?"

"Ah, Christ, Eva!" Copal shouted. His voice was just as clear through his office door as it was from the speaker. "Just sign it yourself, will ya? I'm busy!"

"You'll have to excuse him, Manny," Eva said tiredly as I handed her the work order. "It's probably a really hard crossword puzzle he's got in there today."

"Eva, I'm impressed. I had no idea you had this kind of power!"

"Well, we all have our secrets. What's it about, anyway?"

"Domino sent my driver home, and the only demon I can find is a mountain. I think the only the way he's going to fit in my car is to do a chop job."

"How is he going to do that?" Eva asked skeptically.

I shrugged. "I guess he's a mechanic. He's dressed like one."

"Sweetie," Eva said earnestly, "if he's a mechanic he *won't* have a company driver's license. You know the rules."

"Screw the rules!" I growled and left Eva staring after me as I stomped back to the elevator.

I got the work order back to Glottis and he started working on my car. I wasn't sure that Glottis was up to the job even if he was obviously the guy who kept our cars running. He seemed kind of dizzy. But I started to relax once he got going. Glottis may have had hands like sides of beef and a brain the size of a pea, but he was nimble, quick, and efficient. I hung around, waiting for him to finish. I didn't have anywhere else to be and he was moving pretty fast. I made a tour of Glottis' domain.

"Nice hut," I remarked, looking into the little shack where I had found him.

"Yeah?" Glottis asked as he cut through my car's roof with a blowtorch. "I wonder how nice it would seem to you if you were trapped in it all day like me."

"If you hate your job, why don't you quit?"

"It's not just a job, Manny. It's what I was created to do." He put the blowtorch down and ripped the top off the car. "If I get any farther away from cars than this," he went on, "I'll get sick and die. It's like...I'm not happy unless I'm breathing in the thick, black, nauseating fumes."

I blew a smoke ring while I thought about that. "Can't imagine," I finally said.

"Hey, Manny," Glottis said as he started filing the edges of the hole he had made, "I don't want to butt into your affairs, you being a big-shot sales agent and all, but that *is* a gasoline pump you're leaning on."

"*¡Ay Chihuahua!*" I exclaimed as I quickly stamped out the cigarette.

Glottis finished up on the car and started to wedge himself into the hole while I got my gear on. When I was done I turned to see Glottis looking at himself in the side mirror.

"Hey, I look good in this, don't I?"

I thought he looked idiotic, like a Shriner in a parade, but I said, “Yeah, well, they say black is slimming.”

I got in the car as Glottis reached in through the driver’s-side window and started the engine. The car lurched forward while I had one foot still on the ground. I fell back in the seat as the car jerked toward the exit to the Limbo Highway. ‘Oh, great!’ I thought. ‘He’s never driven before!’

“I’m drivin’!” Glottis crowed, as if I needed the confirmation. “Yeah! I’m drivin’!”

“*¡Por favor!*” I muttered as we made our halting way along the dark, misty road. “I could’ve walked faster than this!”

Eventually we got to our destination in some city. I never bothered to know where these places were. I shuddered a little when we entered the Land of the Living. It always gave me the creeps. As we pulled up to the diner where I hoped to pick up a client, another DOD car pulled away. Two souls sat in the back. One waved to me. “Domino!” I hissed through clenched teeth.

Glottis brought the car to a lurching stop. I waited a few seconds for any more sudden movements before getting out. I slipped into the diner and felt a woman near the door shudder. “I know you can’t hear me,” I whispered in her ear, “but try to feel what I’m about to say deep down in your soul: *Don’t eat the gazpacho!*”

Fun’s fun, but I had work to do. I found one last soul left in the diner, lying on the floor swathed completely in thick cords—the ‘mortal coil’. With a practiced flick of my wrist I let my scythe unfold and lock open. I sliced through the cords and the soul sat up. “Nice bathrobe,” the man, a midget, sneered.

“Name?” I sighed.

“You first,” the man snapped as he stood up.

“Manny Calavera.”

“OK, Calavera, I’m Bruno. Bruno Martinez.”

“Well, Bruno, I’ve got a car outside, so if—”

“Where the hell are we going?” he demanded.

“Mr. Martinez,” I said gently, “you’re dead.”

“Yeah,” he snapped, “I kinda figured that what with the cramps, bloody vomit, plague of locusts...”

I felt my shoulders sag. “So you *didn’t* have the salmon mousse?”

“No, wise guy, the gazpacho.”

“Well, since you *are* dead, Bruno, it’s time to leave this world.”

“And if I don’t wanna?”

“Look at your hands, Bruno,” I said very softly.

He did, and jumped when he realized he could see through them. “What’s happenin’!?” he yelped.

“Your time in this world is over,” I said. “It’s time to move one...or face oblivion.”

Bruno started moving toward the door. “So why can’t I see through you?” he demanded.

“I’ve already left this world for good, even if I do make return trips. I couldn’t do my job if I was liable to fade away.”

I ushered Bruno into the back of the car as he asked, “So what is your job?”

“To take you from this world and start you on your journey through to the next,” I said as I got in after him. I explained everything to him on the trip back which, thankfully, was much smoother. And quicker. I finished my spiel just as we pulled back into the garage.

“...but we offer several package upgrades if you’d care to...” I was saying as we got out of the car.

“Cut the yap!” Bruno interrupted. “I just want something cheap where I can get some rest, and that’s it!”

“Ay ay ay,” I said under my breath as Bruno trotted to the elevator.

“You know, Manny,” Glottis was saying, “I could make this car a little faster, if you wanted...”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said absently as I followed Bruno, “whatever.”

Glottis started to say something else, but since he sounded happy and apparently wasn't speaking to me, I just tuned him out.

I had Bruno in my office just long enough to determine what package he deserved. Then I led him down to the shipping room and got him into a coffin. “You'll get plenty of rest this way, Mr. Martinez, and you'll be safely padded by the foam created when these two chemicals mix, like this.” I took the two hoses dangling from the ceiling and sent a double-stream into the coffin.

“Uh, on second thought,” Bruno said, a little panicked, “I wanna upgrade my package.”

I released the hoses. “Sorry, Bruno, but you didn't qualify for anything better.” Bad-tempered or not, he did come out better than Celso Flores. The coffin wasn't comfortable, but it was safe. “But here,” I went on, “have this complementary mug!” I held up one that said ‘Today is the first day of the end of your life’.

“No, wait!” he said, fighting to keep me from putting the mug into the coffin. “Can't you find me something where I can at least move my legs?”

“You know I'd like to, Bruno, but my boss is a real hard-ass.”

I had closed the door when Bruno and I entered the room, and it's hinges squeaked loudly, and yet I didn't realize Copal had entered until he started shouting. “I gotta be hard-ass when I got lazy sickle wavers like *this* jolly boy working for me! Manny,” he continued, “you couldn't find a sale at a yacht club!”

“I got a sale right here!” I said, as if that would have stopped Copal.

“I'm talking *premium* sales, Calavera! Like the kind Domino makes!”

And I knew now just what kind of a back-stabbing judas Hurley was. I was too angry at having Domino thrown into my face to think before shouting, “How the *hell* am I supposed to make premium sales with the scumbag clients you're sending me!?”

I don't think I knew what I said until I heard Bruno's indignant “Hey!!”

Copal overrode whatever Bruno might have said next. “Now you're blaming it on the *clients*? I've had it with you, Manny! If you haven't bagged a premium before the next sales report comes in, you're *out*! Out on the streets! No job, no way to work off your time! Just your fancy suit and your big smile,” he sneered, “and a whole lot of time to kill!” He slammed the door behind him.

I turned slowly to see Bruno sitting up in the coffin. “Who're *you* callin' a scumbag?” he asked dangerously. “Why, I oughta—”

I sent the chemical streams straight into his mouth. He fell gurgling back into the coffin as I filled it with foam, pausing just long enough to throw the mug in. Then I slammed the lid shut and bolted it down.

MR. FRUSTRATION MAN

I paced back and forth in the elevator during the ride back to the office, trying to calm down. “I'm sick of waiting around for a good lead,” I muttered, “like it's gonna fly in here tied to a brick. It's time to *take* one!” A larcenous idea started forming in my mind.

“How'd it go,” Eva asked when I got out of the elevator.

“*Hijole!* I got a tiny little man with a mean temper and no commission.”

“Well,” Eva said with a glance toward Copal's door, “at least you don't work for one.”

I did the best approximation of a snort I could manage.

Eva glanced a second time at Copal's door before saying, "You're not going to like this, but Don just gave Domino a raise."

"*¡Por favor!*" I exclaimed, thinking the timing smelled of something more than coincidence. "Tell me some good news, why don't you?"

"I still love you," Eva said sweetly and, I dared to think, sincerely.

"You're all I really need, *Belleza*. Is Domino in his office?"

"Yeah." She sounded wary. "What are you planning to do?"

"Nothing physical," I said, moving off to stalk my prey.

"Same old story," Eva sighed.

I looked into my old office to see Domino down to his undershirt working with his punching bag. "Well," I said, "at least you're not hitting the bottle anymore."

"Hey, Cally!" Domino said without breaking rhythm. "How ya doin'?"

"What's the big idea, sending my driver home?"

Domino's attention remained on the bag. "What can I say? It's a holiday. You weren't here. I thought you were taking the day off like most everyone else. Honest mistake." Yeah, right.

No need to tell him I forgot it *was* a holiday. Instead I said, "And have to make up the time this weekend? No thanks."

"Yeah," Domino said, still punching away, "that policy sucks, doesn't it?"

I shrugged even though Domino's back was toward me. "So how'd you make out at the poisoning?"

Domino gave the bag a roundhouse punch and turned to face me. "Well," he said, "let's just say that Sister Calabaza has a secret passion...for trains."

"You got a nun?" I said incredulously. That should have been *my* client, dammit.

"Hail Mary!"

"And you sold her a ticket on the Number Nine train."

"Choo-choo, little buddy!" Domino turned back to his boxing. "Say, how'd you score?"

"I got a nun, too."

Domino laughed. "Bruno's a pretty strange name for a nun, wouldn't you say?"

I don't know how he knew. "Well," I said feebly, "you know how cruel sisters can be about nicknames."

I sighed to myself. I just couldn't get under his skin, not that he had any. I looked around the office. I hadn't been in there since Hurley took it over. The wall next to the door was covered with photos of Domino shaking hands with dead celebs, and a tiny bar had been installed under his paper-mill diplomas. 'Some salesman,' I thought. 'He doesn't even hide his booze.' Out loud I said, "That's some premium-looking scotch!"

"Have some, Manny," Domino said. As I poured a shot he continued, "...just so you don't forget what 'premium' tastes like."

I didn't say anything to that. I just continued my survey. Domino had had his message tube painted red. Strange. The file cabinets were gone and there wasn't a scrap of paper on his desk. There was, however, a little trophy or something made of a weird-looking rock.

"Why do you get all the good clients?" I asked.

"You're asking the wrong guy," Domino said. "You should be taking a good, long look at the man in the mirror."

"No thanks. I don't enjoy that the same way you do." Domino just went 'hmpf.' I gave the message tube a second look. There was a little padlock on it. Very strange. "I think we should team up," I said, "be partners."

"Oh, Manny, I would but I'm too intimidated. I could never be partners with someone who was so much more of a man than me."

“Oh, come on,” I needled, “I’ve seen your wife.” I’m pretty sure Domino’s rhythm faltered a little just then. Before he could say anything I went on. “Hey, I see you finally got that new computer.”

“Yeah. All that red tape was a real bitch.”

“What’s your screen-saver password?”

Domino’s voice suddenly turned hard. “Get away from my computer, Manny!” Then, in a lighter tone. “My mother’s brownie recipe is on that.”

“And you don’t want me finding out what the ‘secret ingredient’ is, is that it?”

Domino laughed. “Hey, that’s pretty good, Cally,” he said. He then stopped boxing and pulled off his gloves. “But I’ve got a lot of paperwork to catch up on. It looks like this’ll be a slow day, so…”

I’d seen everything I could, anyway. “Well, you sound pretty out of breath, so I’m going to blow,” I said.

“Always a pleasure, Cal,” Domino said as I left. He closed the door behind me.

I went back to my office, sat down, and put my feet up on the desk. I stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. Obviously, the idea I came up with in the elevator wasn’t going to work. I needed something… sneakier.

If I couldn’t lift a case from Domino’s office, then I’d have to intercept one before it got to him. That could be tricky. When a person died in the Land of the Living the case was opened by the Bureau of Records downtown. A work order was issued to the Bureau of Acquisitions where it was routed to an office manager, who then routed it to an agent. Unfortunately, I had no contacts in Records. There was nothing I could do as far as Copal was concerned, not without getting Eva involved, and I wasn’t prepared to do that. That just left the time when work orders were in transit between Copal and Hurley.

I shook my head. I couldn’t get over Domino’s office. No paper, no files. A *lock* on the message tube! And why was it red? I lit a cigarette and blew rings at the ceiling. He was up to something. But what? I knocked ash off the cigarette. He had no files, nothing connected to his job, except maybe on that computer. I noticed it had a scanner. He clearly didn’t want to leave a paper trail and I figured it was pretty safe to assume it wasn’t just because of a cleanliness fetish. What was he up to?

I sighed. I was just going in circles, and getting suspicious about Domino wouldn’t get me a good case. I stubbed out my cigarette and stood to leave. Suddenly my attention was grabbed by my own message tube. There was nothing special about it. A little idea snuck into my mind. I went down to the room where the tube switcher was. ‘Well, well,’ I thought. Another red tube. Interesting, if baffling. Domino may be the highest flier in the company right now, but why did his message tube need to be distinctive? The only possible answer was to ensure that nothing meant for Domino could accidentally be dropped into the wrong tube. Could Domino be subverting the system? It would explain my endless slump if he was.

Well, two could play that game, but it turned out not to be that simple. Brennis, the demon in charge of the tube switcher, wasn’t any help. He was kind of bitter about his existence. Created to run the elevators, the company put him out of that job by installing motion detectors. Brennis would thwart you when you had legitimate reasons for something just to spite the company, never mind *my* reasons for wanting his help. But I found that resentment could work in my favor.

There had been no tube system when I first went to work for the DOD. Work orders had been routed through the mail room. The demons who worked there weren’t happy about the tubes any more than Brennis was about the elevators. The tube switcher wasn’t totally reliable, of course; machines break down even in the Land of the Dead, and when the switcher goes down, the mail room demons carry work orders until it’s fixed. So I made a deal with the little purple guys: I’d sabotage the switcher big time and they would let me have a look at the work orders meant for Domino.

Meanwhile, Glottis was busy working on my car. I remembered that I’d absently told him to make it faster. I didn’t want to use Endive for this scheme since he was such a stickler for rules, so I

told Glottis he needed to make my car as fast as he could and be ready to drive me to the Land of the Living himself. He was the most ecstatic demon in the Land of the Dead.

While Glottis worked, I stashed beer bottles in my office. The demons in the mail room liked beer and they started liking it even more after the tube system went in. They also liked stuffing their empties down the tubes. They were responsible for more than a few ‘unscheduled systems improvement opportunities’. Well, I wasn’t content to use empties. I was after the biggest mess I could make. So when Glottis told me the car was finished, I sent two dozen open bottles of stout down my tube. About fifteen minutes later a happy little demon brought me some work orders. Some were actually for me, others for Domino. None of them seemed promising, especially mine. Half an hour after that another demon came. I scanned the work orders he had for Domino. One jumped out at me.

“Mercedes Colomar,” I read off, “Client number 9308—blah blah blah...time of death, yadda yadda yadda...Ah-ha! ‘Positive Attributes: Volunteered time reading stories to dying children’! That’s good!” I said, giving the work order back to the demon, “That’s *really* good!” I picked up the phone to call Glottis, “I think you’re it, Mercedes Colomar!” I said as I dialed. “I think you’re the one for me!”

After I finished telling Glottis to meet me with the car, I grabbed my gear and rushed out of my office but was forced to wait for the garage elevator. Domino had got the work orders while I was on the phone with Glottis. I should have told the mail room demon to wait. I put my gear on in the elevator after it finally got back to my floor. When the doors opened at the garage level I ran out to my car and stopped dead in my tracks. There in front of me was the biggest, baddest hot rod I’d ever seen. I used to have dreams about cars like this one all through adolescence. I gawked for ten critical seconds.

“Glottis!” I exclaimed finally. “Are you loco? That was a company car!”

“Oh, yeah!” Glottis crowed. “And it’s even better company now! Hop in!”

Glottis had so radically rebuilt the car that ‘hopping in’ meant climbing onto a kind of throne affair perched in the back of the car behind a half-bubble windscreen. “Are you sure about this, *mano*? I don’t want to be blown off!”

“Don’t worry, Manny,” Glottis said, “I tested it out in a wind tunnel! You won’t even feel a breeze.”

“All right,” I said doubtfully. As I climbed up the rear of the car I saw the words *Bone Wagon* painted on the side. I got into my seat and strapped myself in tightly. “Have you seen Domino?”

“Yeah. Mr. Hurley drove off a few minutes ago.”

“Damn!” I said. “I wish I got to the elevator first! OK, *carnal*, we’re going where Domino is going, only we’ve got to get there first! And we’ve got to get there and get away before he arrives. Got it?”

“Got it!” Glottis said. The car’s new engine roared to life and Glottis must’ve laid an inch of rubber on the cement as we tore out onto the Limbo Highway.

This trip was completely different from the first with Glottis—fast, smooth, cool. And he was right about the windshield. I peered through the gloom ahead. It wasn’t long before I saw twin red lights. Glottis raced closer and for a few seconds I thought he might ram Domino’s car. But he did a quick swerve at the last second and we were past. I twisted around to see Domino’s car go into the ditch beside the road and roll onto its side. I hoped the driver would be all right, but that spill bought me all the time I needed. I hoped.

Soon enough we got to where we were going. Glottis never seemed to slow down as we tore through the streets. I was afraid we’d roll over, too, on some corners; but the *Bone Wagon* rode low and did everything Glottis asked of it. In just a few minutes we were gliding up to a hospital. I hopped down and said to Glottis, “Keep ’er running. I’ll be quick as I can.”

I ran into the hospital and made myself slow down. I didn't want to get into a rush and lose my way. I had no way of knowing how close Domino might be. I found my client soon enough and sliced apart the cords that bound her to the Land of the Living. "*Buenos Días*," I said.

Mercedes Colomar looked at me calmly for a second or two before saying, "You're not the nurse."

"No," I said.

"You're not here to give me my medication?"

"No. But I am here to ease your pain."

She glanced away from me. "I guess they couldn't save me, huh?"

"No, but there's still a chance *you* could save *me*." Mercedes looked up quizzically at me, and I held out my hand to help her up. "It's time to go," I said.

"I guess it is," She said, walking out into the corridor. That was a good sign. Saints are always ready and fearless.

When we got out to the car she took a step backwards. She looked over at me and said wryly, "Not exactly the fiery chariot I was expecting." Before I could say anything to that she started to climb up to the passenger seat. "I think I'm gonna like this," I heard her say.

I went over to Glottis. "Head back to the Limbo Highway by a different route," I told him. "We don't want to meet up with Domino." He nodded.

I climbed up to my seat and said to Mercedes, "We won't be able to talk on the ride back," not over the roar of the engine and the rush of wind, "but we'll have plenty to discuss back at my office."

"OK," she said. "Can I at least know your name now?"

"I'm Manny Calavera. And he's Glottis."

"Hi, Glottis!" Mercedes waved down to him.

He turned back with his big grin and said, "You ready back there, Miss Colomar?"

"And waiting to see what this machine can do!" Mercedes called back. Glottis' smile got bigger and we tore away from the hospital at top speed. There was no sign of Domino on the trip back to El Marrow.

COAXING MECHE

When we pulled into the garage Mercedes jumped down and moved to make an inspection of the *Bone Wagon* but I gently ushered her to the elevator. I directed her to my office and then said quietly to Eva, "Domino back yet?"

"Uh, no."

"OK," I said. "Keep him away from my office if he does get back."

"Sure, Cal," she said, giving me a questioning look.

I quickly went to my office. I was sure I didn't have much time and I had to explain the situation to Mercedes first. "OK," I said when I had got her seated by my desk, "I ought to start by telling you that things aren't exactly on the level here. What I mean is," I said when I saw that my opening was making her a little agitated, "I'm not really supposed to be handling your case. But it's very important that I handle it anyway."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, Mr. Calavera," she said.

"Well, you see," I said uncomfortably, "I'm doing this job because I messed up my life. I've got a moral debt to work off. Putting it simply, my job is to help souls get across the Land of the Dead—where we are right now—to the Land of Eternal Rest. How I do that is by selling souls the best travel packages they deserve. The better a person lived their life, the easier their passage will be."

"For example?" she asked.

“Well,” I said, “it’s kind of complicated. But at one extreme is the worse sort of person who is left on their own, who has to cross the Land of the Dead on foot, facing all the dangers on their own. At the other is the saint, who gets a ticket on the Number Nine train. That person just skips right over the dangers.”

“I see,” she said. “So why did you steal *my* case?” That was good, I thought. A genuine saint was never really conscious of what they were.

“I can’t leave the Land of the Dead until I work off that moral debt I mentioned, and I can only do that by earning commissions on premium sales to good souls. But I haven’t sold a single premium package for nearly a year. Maybe it’s just a granddaddy of a slump, but I found out that Domino Hurley—the guy who was assigned to your case—stole a case from me. Maybe more than one. I can’t let him get away with it. Too much is at stake.”

“How will stealing *my* case help you? Isn’t that wrong in the Land of the Dead?”

“Of course it’s wrong. I’ll be disciplined for this but once I authorize the transfer of a ticket to you, it’s on my record for good. I know, I know,” I said to the disapproval I was sensing from her, “what Hurley did doesn’t justify what I’m doing. But one Double-N ticket can wipe *months* off my time.”

“I guess you’re getting kind of desperate, huh?” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I was doing premium sales all the time before Hurley turned up. Then he appears, and blip! Look, if you’re uncomfortable with this, you can walk out that door and wait for Hurley. But you can help me, if you want. If you let me handle your case I can make up a lot of what this past year has cost me.”

Mercedes thought about it for a while, then said, “You’re putting a lot of responsibility on me, Mr. Calavera. What makes you think I’ve been all that good?”

“Miss Colomar—” I began.

“Meche,” she said. “Please.”

“Meche. I can see it in your face.” Which was true. There is just something about a saint. I turned to my computer. “And in your file,” I said as I pulled it up, “where it says you’re entitled a first-class ticket to...” My voice trailed off as I leaned closer to the screen. “...nowhere?” I finished limply.

“Did I do something wrong?” Meche asked anxiously.

“Not according to your bio. It was spotless.” Then, half to myself, “At least the part I read was.”

“I’m not sure I like the implication, Mr. Calavera,” she said, a little coldly this time.

I couldn’t believe this was happening. I break every rule in the book to steal the case of a saint who turns out to be anything but. “The only implication here is that I’m fired,” I sighed.

“Is it something I did?” I completely missed the tone in her voice.

Maybe I picked up the wrong person. “Are you *sure* you’re Mercedes Colomar?” I asked hopefully.

“Yes!” she declared. “Or is your organization that inefficient?”

I sighed. The company never made a mistake on a work order. And I knew that I went to the right place. I must have missed something.

“Is there anything about your past you haven’t told me about?” I asked.

“Quite a bit, considering I’ve told you nothing.”

What was I overlooking? “Did you kill much when you were alive?”

“Very little,” she said dryly.

“Never killed anybody?”

She hung her head and twisted her hands in her lap. “I have to confess...” she said quietly, then looked up and said firmly, “I never killed *anybody!*”

“Did you ever cheat on your taxes?”

She sighed. "I've never paid taxes in my life," she admitted. But before I could say anything to that she continued with, "I've never made enough money to be taxed. You know, it's mostly been all volunteer work."

"Uh-huh," I groused and Meche looked away. "Were you mean to animals?" I then asked.

"Oh, *no!*" she protested. "I love animals! Once, when I was volunteering at an animal shelter, I ___"

"Just stop right there!" I said. "I give up."

She leaned forward, grabbed hold of my sleeve and said, "Don't say that, Manny!"

I pulled away and stood up. "You know what I have to do? I just have to go and straighten this whole mess out."

I only half-noticed that Meche pulled her legs under her chair and folded her hands in her lap.

"Sorry to be so much trouble, Mr. Calavera," she said softly.

"It's no trouble," I said as I left the office, "but please, call me Manny."

I closed the door and walked quickly over to Eva. "I need help," I said.

"With that woman you brought in?"

"Yeah. From the work order she's supposed to be a saint, but you wouldn't know it from her file."

"That's pretty strange, Cal."

"Tell me about it. Look, maybe Records fouled up somewhere. I can't—" I heard a sound and turned to see Copal's door flying open. The first time I ever saw him coming.

"Hey, Funny Bones," he shouted, "in my office! *Now!*"

I went with a glance back toward Eva. She was picking up her phone.

Hurley was standing in front of Copal's desk. A smirk radiated out from his face.

"Domino's just told me a story," Copal said. "Let me see if I've got it straight. You," he thrust a finger at me, "*vandalized* company property in order to obtain *confidential information* so you could take your *illegally-modified* company car and your *unlicensed driver* and run Domino here off the road! And *all* in order to steal a client from her *legitimate agent!* Did I leave anything out?" he asked Domino who shook his head.

"There's nothing legitimate about this place," I protested. If I was going to be canned, I might as well go down fighting. "You give all the good cases to Domino."

"Oh, Manny!" Domino exclaimed. "Now I'm embarrassed for you."

"You've embarrassed the whole office," Copal snapped. "I'm going to call the woman in here so you can apologize to her yourself." He punched the intercom button. "Eva! Send in Miss Colomar!"

"She already left, sir," Eva replied. "She said she had a long walk ahead of her and she wanted to get started."

"*Walking!*" Copal nearly shrieked, jerking his finger off the intercom button as if it were red hot, sounding more panicked than angry. "She had a ticket on the Number Nine!" he shouted at me. "Why does she think she has to *walk!*!"

"That's the best package I could find for her," I admitted weakly. Domino started to laugh.

Copal rubbed his temples. "That woman was a saint and a shoe-in for a Double-N ticket that she's not going to get because *you* just couldn't find it! And now," he said, boring in on me, "because of your little stunt, she's out *there*, on her own, walking by herself through the Petrified Forest, facing the demons of the underworld alone and unprotected!" Copal's face was about an inch from my own as he went out shouting. "*This* is her reward after a lifetime of hardship and public service!?" For a second I thought he was going to slug me. Instead he turned to Domino and said, "It makes you sick, doesn't it? Her destiny stolen by this overreaching, has-been salesman looking for a fat commission he doesn't deserve!" Copal sighed heavily and rubbed his face. "You've got a phone call to make," he said to Domino who nodded and left.

Copal grabbed an arm and pushed me toward his office door after Domino. “Someone’s gonna to take the fall for this, Calavera, and it ain’t gonna be me!” He propelled me past Eva’s desk and into the elevator. We went down a lot of floors while Copal just glared at me. He was still furious, but he seemed oddly twitchy. I wondered what he meant by me taking a fall and not him. He took me to a storage closet and shoved me inside. “Get in there and stay put.” He slammed the door shut and locked it. Then I heard him say, “Hey, you! Make sure he doesn’t get out of there!”

COME THE REVOLUTION

I picked myself up and listened at the door. After Copal’s stomping faded I could hear someone moving around. “Hey,” I called out, “is anyone out there?”

A soft, low voice answered me, “How’s my little Count of Monte Cristo?”

Oh, great. “Who’s out there?” I demanded.

“I’m you,” the voice said. This was getting too weird. The voice went on. “Or, rather, I was you...years ago.”

So that was it—I was being toyed with. “Yeah?” I sneered. “Well, I’m me now so get lost!”

The voice didn’t respond immediately. When it did, it sounded thoughtful. “I see you still have some anger issues, my friend. I’ll come back when your head is clearer.”

I felt a little panic. I didn’t want to be left alone. “Wait,” I said quickly. “What do you think they’re going to do to me?”

“I don’t want to alarm you, Agent Calavera,” which was exactly the wrong thing to say, “but have you ever seen a man sprouted?”

“What do you mean, ‘sprouted’?”

“Then you don’t know?” the voice asked, sounding surprised. “There’s nothing more horrible than the bite of the sprouter. It’s deadly stinger spreads a green disease through every calcified pore of you body, leaving you veined with roots and flocked with grass,” I started to shiver, “steadily growing thicker and thicker until you crash and bloom out in a horrifying bouquet of pain and fragrant suffering, screaming until your mouth fills with petals and your nostrils shoot out thorny stems, and the bulbs sprout in your eyes,” sonofabitch, “leaving you nothing but a patch of wildflowers on the ground, swarming with butterflies.”

This guy must’ve been great around a campfire. “Are you done?”

“Yes,” the voice said.

“Then get me *out of here!*”

“The only way out, Manuel, is to be taken back in. If you are truly still loyal to this company —”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, “lay down, roll over and bark the company fight song. Well, get cracked, flunky. The DOD runs a crooked game and I intend to prove it.” If I weren’t stuck in this closet, that is.

“You would do that?” The voice sounded surprised. “That could cause this agency a lot of trouble.”

“I’m gonna blow the lid off this place!” I growled.

“Young man,” the voice said sharply, “you are an enemy of the Department of Death!” The door opened suddenly. A very tall man dressed in green fatigues stood outside. “Welcome to the club!” he said with an air of satisfaction. He gestured to me to come out as he looked around. “Hurry, Manuel,” he said. “We must move quickly.”

I walked out of the closet a little unsteadily. Things were changing too fast. Who was this guy? But I asked instead, “Where are you taking me?”

“To the headquarters of the LSA,” he said quietly but with an air of authority, then pulled me down the corridor and through a door into the service stairwell.

“LSA?” I asked as we trotted down the steps.

“The Lost Souls’ Alliance,” he answered as he led me out through the garage and across the loading dock. We ducked into the alley between the Acquisitions building and the next one. “We’re a small group, Manuel, and we’re always on the lookout for new soldiers.”

We came to a stop and my rescuer addressed a particular brick on one wall. “Salvador Limones and guest,” he said.

There was an underground rattle and a lift platform rose up behind us.

“To do what, exactly,” I asked as we stepped onto the lift which then lowered us into the delivery area beneath the alley. The hatch closed over us with a clang.

“We need help in our intelligence unit.” We reached the bottom and Salvador led me down a short tunnel and into a small, poorly lit room. “You know Eva, of course,” he said, gesturing to her. I shook my head, wondering if I was seeing things.

“Manny,” she said in greeting.

“So, you’re not really a secretary?” I asked, feeling completely lost.

“I’m a spy, Manny,” she answered.

“Well, that’s the last time we use *that* temp agency,” I said.

Salvador had moved to stand beside Eva. “I was once a reaper like yourself, Manuel,” he said, “but I discovered a web of corruption in our beloved Department of Death. I have reason to believe that the Bureau of Acquisitions is cheating the very souls it was chartered to serve.” That got my attention. “I think someone is robbing these poor, naïve souls of their rightful destinies, leaving them no option but to march on a treacherous trail of tears, unprotected and alone. Like babies, Manuel,” his voice came close to cracking, “like babies.”

He was good. He didn’t rant, he just spoke calmly and with no more emotion than needed. He was either totally sincere or the best con man in the Land of the Dead. I was almost persuaded he had something. What he said would explain a lot...but it was also exactly what I wanted to hear—that my long slump wasn’t my fault. It was one thing to suspect Hurley, and maybe Copal, too; but Salvador was bringing the whole company into it. It was more than a little fantastic. I was determined to be skeptical.

“What’s your evidence?” I asked.

Salvador surprised me by saying, “That’s where you come in, Manuel. Or should I call you Agent Calavera?”

“Manny suits me fine,” I said. If Salvador had only guesswork, I didn’t think I was interested. “I’m not looking to join any militant organization, Sal. I just want to work off my time and get out of this dump.” I thought I saw Eva shake her head slightly.

“Well,” Salvador sounded amused, “you won’t even be able to get out of this city without my help. Which means, of course, you won’t be able to find that woman and you’ll never get your job back.” I nearly jumped out of my suit. How did he know I was thinking of tracking down Mercedes and using her to expose Hurley’s racket? I wasn’t even sure that’s what I intended until Salvador said what he did. “I think we might be of some use to each other,” he finished.

I wasn’t the smartest guy who ever died, but I was thinking as fast as I could. Salvador...well, there was *something* about him. I just didn’t know what. He was calm yet passionate, not dogmatic but still very sure of himself. He wasn’t the sort you usually run into in the Land of the Dead. There was just something about him I couldn’t place. And then there was Eva...stubborn, skeptical, and definitely hard-boiled. What was *she* doing with this guy?

I folded my arms and tried to project a ‘you have to convince me’ look. “Do you know something *I* don’t know?” I asked.

“Haven’t you ever wondered,” Salvador asked, “why your clients never seem to qualify for the packages you know they deserve?”

I shrugged. “Yes. My last client in particular, Meche—”

“Well,” he said, “many did qualify, Manuel. Especially *her*. But, somehow, somebody with access to the files has stolen their just rewards, their sweet hereafters.”

“Their tickets on the Number Nine?” I asked, incredulous.

“*Precisamente, amigo*,” Salvador answered.

“What would they do with the tickets?” As far as I knew, a Double-N ticket was as individual as the person it was issued to.

“A ticket on the Number Nine is like a leaf of gold, Manuel, especially to one who has died with a less-than-perfect record. Someone here is profiting from those who would buy their way into heaven.”

I shook my head. What Salvador was saying made no sense. “But money’s not important here. We all just want out!”

Salvador seemed amused. “*You* want to get out, Manuel, and so do *I*...someday. But for some people, this world is all there is.” I thought of Domino. He seemed to be enjoying himself in the Land of the Dead, confusing his existence here with life. Salvador continued. “They have decided to seek pleasure and happiness here in the Eighth Underworld; and for that, you need money.”

Maybe Sal has a case after all, I thought. I glanced at Eva, wondering when she started to come to Salvador’s point of view.

I looked back at Salvador and asked, “So who’s in on this deal?”

“Don Copal has the access,” he pointed out. “He can open any account and transfer the ticket voucher to another. We believe he would then pass the case on to Domino Hurley, who would cover their tracks.”

“So that *menso* was getting all the good clients!” I exclaimed despite my resolution to be skeptical.

“You got some, too, Manuel,” Salvador said. “You just didn’t know it. Domino only got a case if the character of the client was obviously so deserving.”

“Like Meche!” I said. The discrepancy between the work order and her file was starting to make sense. “Do you know who’s behind it all?”

Salvador shrugged. “Copal and Hurley couldn’t have done it all on their own without help from downtown.” He sighed and said, “But who is ultimately in charge, how many are involved, and how far up in the company the corruption spreads...that is something I don’t know. Not yet.”

I sighed, too. Salvador was making a good case. It made sense even if he didn’t have all the answers. In a way, that made it much more convincing. A con man would probably have an answer for everything.

“What do you want from me?” I asked.

“I am going to build an underground army of souls to fight the injustice I have seen in El Marrow,” Salvador answered. Then he became thoughtful and distant. “Communication will become vital as the Lost Souls’ Alliance spreads out. We’ll need messengers we can trust.”

“You want me to be your messenger?!” I exclaimed.

Salvador started and looked a little confused. “No, Manuel! Our numbers are small and our agents are too valuable to risk in that sort of work. History shows only one messenger to be of use to a cause like ours: carrier pigeons!”

I was getting confused, too. Eva seemed amused. “Should I grab some pigeons off the roof?” I asked.

“No!” Salvador snapped. “I need to raise them from birth, Agent Calavera. I need their eggs.”

I almost laughed. “You spirited me away from Copal because you need pigeon eggs? Have you thought about using messages tied to balloons? I can get you plenty of balloons.”

“Manuel,” Salvador seemed bewildered, “what are you talking about?”

Eva started laughing. “Salvador sometimes gets a little distracted,” she said to me. She then said to Salvador, “You were going to tell Manny what we need from him.”

“Yes, of course. Forgive me, Manuel. One thing suggests another, and I am always planning for the future. But tonight we need you for a very special assignment.” Salvador led me to one corner of the room where a DOD computer sat.

“We salvaged this unit when the company threw it away,” he said, “but we have yet to get it working.”

“This looks like the computer that used to be in my old office,” I said, “but I don’t know anything about fixing computers, Sal.”

“Fortunately I know enough, Manuel, and what I don’t know, Eva does. After this unit was removed from Hurley’s office the company removed certain parts, presumably for spares. I have managed to find replacements for all the missing components except for two: the power supply and the network card. Without those the machine is worthless.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Copal isn’t in any hurry to replace me,” I said. He still hadn’t replaced Apollo. “We could probably take what you need from my computer without it being noticed any time soon.”

“My thinking exactly, Manuel,” Salvador said. “You and Eva will steal what we need tonight in addition to doing final reconnaissance. With your recruitment Eva’s job in that office is finished. When you return, your most important task will begin.”

“Which is?”

“First, we need access to the DOD network. Only an active agent can give us the access we require.”

“They’re going to cancel my account sooner or later, Sal,” I pointed out. “I can’t help you out there forever.”

“Don’t worry, Cal,” Eva said. “We’ve got that part figured out. You just need to get us in the door.”

“OK,” I said. “So what do we do until the office shuts down?”

Salvador answered. “I will tell you in detail the facts and theories I have collected and developed so far, and we will then discuss the future. I must get the projector. Excuse me.”

“Just so long as I don’t have to look at your last vacation,” I called out after him. Then I said to Eva. “Won’t Copal wonder where you are?”

“Don and Domino are locked up in Don’s office with some bigwig from downtown, some fatty in a fez. What they think when they come out doesn’t interest me.”

“Hmm,” Salvador said mostly to himself as he set up his projector. “Who is the fat man, I wonder, and how does he fit into this sinister puzzle?”

Salvador walked me through everything he had learned and had come to suspect over the years. It was quite a story but a lot of the pieces didn’t fit, and Salvador admitted it. He hoped that the missing pieces could somehow be dug up from the DOD network. However well these people were covering their tracks, he thought, there had to be traces of their activities, something that would identify them. Beyond that, Salvador hoped to build a network of people who could ferret out and destroy the corruption. He believed the DOD was unable or unwilling to do the job itself. So, as Salvador saw it, the situation demanded a revolution.

Eventually it was time to get moving. It was well past midnight and El Marrow was quiet. Big as it was, the city just didn’t have much of a night life. Eva got us into the building with her pass key

and we got to our floor using the service elevator. We saw no one but were cautious, not even speaking until we got into my office. It looked like a war zone.

“Look at this!” I said, kicking aside papers that had been dumped out of my file cabinets.

“They wanted to know what you knew,” Eva said. “I’m sure they didn’t find much.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I’ve been in the dark about a lot of things.” Eva started work on the computer.

“So how long have you been a spy?” I asked.

“Salvador recruited me about a year ago. I couldn’t resist him. He’s just so... noble.”

“Noble, huh? Well, that explains why I never got anywhere.”

“Don’t kick yourself around, Manny. You know I’m very fond of you.”

I shrugged, then thought of something. “A year ago? Then I guess all that stuff about asking questions about Copal...”

“Sal knew we needed an active agent for the cause. I thought you were the best candidate...but cripes on toast, darling, were you ever dense!”

“Yeah, well, I screwed up my life and decided to be a good little boy in death.”

“Not a bad resolution, Cal. Only *they* stopped playing by the rules. They used you to make the scam work, but you wouldn’t see it.”

“Yeah,” I growled, “I was a Grade A chump. I just couldn’t put the pieces together. Am I that stupid?”

“You bet, sweetie. But, seriously, how were you to know? You’ve had slumps before. I tried to make you see this wasn’t one of them but I couldn’t just tell you without blowing my cover. If it makes you feel any better, Cal, when Salvador wanted to find a new boy, I stuck with you. And you paid off. They started getting greedy and you got angry. You struck back and they got worried, worried enough to want to take you for a ride.”

“And now they’ll pay.”

“Sure they will, but first we’ve got to get the goods on them.” Eva removed the network card, put it in a little anti-static bag, and then tucked it into a pocket.

“Why did you take up with Salvador, anyway? And don’t say it’s because he’s noble. Getting mixed up with him is pretty dangerous. Why not just work off your time?”

“There’s more at stake here than my own fate, darling. If Sal’s right, a lot of good people are being cheated out of the destinies they’ve earned. You believe in the system, Cal. Do you think that’s right?”

“Like hell I do!” I said. “I’m pretty burned up about this whole thing. OK, so I admit that up ’til now it’s been because *I’ve* been jerked around, but the thought of Double-N tickets being stolen from people who deserve them makes me sick.”

“Me, too, sweetie; and that’s why I’m with Sal. The system has to work for everybody or it doesn’t work at all. But,” she went on, “it’s kind of your doing that I’m involved in this.”

“Really?” I asked. “How’s that?”

“Remember that first day, Cal? When you told me that the Land of the Dead could make you nuts? Well, I don’t usually listen to people when they shoot off their faces like that, but I did then. There was something about *how* you said it that made me see you knew what you were talking about. You’d gone through something awful, I thought, something I didn’t want to get anywhere near. I couldn’t sleep that night, so I went for a walk and took a really good look at El Marrow. I saw buildings and cars and people, just like back home. But the people were dead, and I was dead, and things just didn’t fit that way.” She had gotten the power supply out and gave it to me to carry, then she started to close up the computer. “It’s funny, you know, but just when I was thinking how the *appearance* of normality in the Land of the Dead could trip some people up, I saw someone trying to steal a car. It was so ludicrous. So when I met Salvador, his suspicions and my attitude kind of dovetailed.” Eva paused and then said, “Come on, we’re done here. Let’s check out Domino’s office.”

“OK, but we won’t find much,” I said. Eva got us in with her key. “You won’t find any paper in here,” I added.

“I know,” Eva said. “I want to take a look at his computer.”

“Do you know his screen-saver password?” I asked, making for the mini-bar and pouring some of Domino’s scotch.

“I have a few ideas,” Eva said.

“Try ‘Arrogant Fraud’,” I suggested. Eva just gave me a dirty look and started trying passwords. I shrugged and looked around the office, sipping my drink. I scratched my skull. There was something odd about the room but I couldn’t make out just what. I watched Eva run through her guesses at the computer and slowly realized what was bothering me. It was the rock-thing trophy or whatever on Domino’s desk. It was glowing. Pretty brightly, too. I picked it up to get a closer look at it.

“Try ‘Hector’,” I said.

“What?” Eva asked.

“Look at this,” I held out the rock-thing. “The inscription says ‘*Congratulations, Domino, on your new job! —Hector*’.”

“Now you’re using your noodle, sweetheart,” she said and then shook her head. “It’s not ‘Hector’, though.” She sighed. “Any more ideas?”

“Eva?”

“Already tried it.”

“Maybe we’d have better luck in Copal’s office.”

“OK,” she said.

We moved to the door but Eva suddenly stiffened and grabbed my arm. “Listen!” she whispered. I could hear movement in the corridor. It seemed to be coming nearer. “C’mon!” she hissed and pulled me toward the windows. She quickly opened one and climbed out onto the ledge. “Quick!” she hissed again. I sighed and joined her. ‘Maybe I’ll make that jump after all,’ I thought. Eva closed the window and we hugged the wall as we edged our way toward the alley side of the building.

As we passed Copal’s office the lights went on. Fortunately the drapes were drawn and when there was no sign that they were going to open, we continued on. When we got past and turned into the alley, I wondered out loud, “Copal putting in a late night?”

“Don’t ask me, Cal,” Eva answered. “I only worked there. Come on...the fire escape’s just a little further.”

“Yeah,” I said, but stopped to look closer at something. I chuckled softly and pocketed my find, then caught up with Eva. We went down a couple of floors and re-entered the building, then took the service elevator back down to ground level. We quickly returned to LSA headquarters.

“Sal, we’re back,” Eva called out softly. “We’ve got the power supply and the network card.”

“We’ll done, my friends!” he said.

I handed Eva the power supply and then reached into my pocket and held what I had found out to Sal. “Check these babies out,” I said.

Eva started to laugh while Salvador just stared. Finally he took the two pigeon eggs and said, “Excellent, Manuel! With these I can breed an entire army of winged messengers! Our revolution can spread now across the land, carried on the shimmering wings of justice thanks to you, Agent Calavera!” Salvador pulled himself back to the present and said to Eva, “But first, the computer.”

“Right, Sal,” she said and went to work.

Salvador turned on his projector and placed the eggs near its lamp fan. He then turned to watch Eva, standing still but clenching and relaxing his hands as he waited.

Eva finished quickly enough and turned on the computer. Soon she said, “OK, Cal. We’re ready. Just log on like you normally do.”

When I did, Eva then said, “OK, Sal, time for you to do your part.” Sal took over at the computer and Eva commented darkly, “If this doesn’t work, somebody will have a lot to answer for.”

Most of what happened next was done in silence and I didn’t understand any of it. When Sal was finished with whatever he was doing, he moved away from the computer and asked me to log out. I did so and Eva said, “Well, Sal, let’s give it a try.” Eva worked the machine. She logged into the DOD network but the device under the monitor that scans the user’s teeth didn’t flash. After a minute or two or more work she announced, “Looks like we’ve got the run of the joint. Unless they know what they’re looking for, or we do something stupid and tip our hand, we’ll always have a way in.”

“Well done!” Salvador said. Then he turned to me. “You are a true friend of the revolution; and now, let me be of service to you.”

“Unmarked, non-sequential bills will do just fine, Sal,” I said.

He projected a tiny smile. “You must go to the town of Rubacava immediately, Manuel, if you wish to find your lost soul.”

“How do you know where she is?” I asked.

“I don’t,” Salvador admitted, “but everyone who wants to get to the Ninth Underworld must cross the Sea of Lament, and therefore must go to Rubacava to get passage on a ship. As long as you get there before she does, you’ll find her. But it may be quite a wait.”

“I’ll wait as long as it takes,” I said firmly.

Salvador gave me an appraising look. “Manuel, are you...in love with her?”

“Love?” I asked incredulously. “Love is for the living, Sal. I’m only after her for one reason—she’s my ticket out of here!”

“Well,” Eva said, “we’d better get you kitted out.” She moved a couple of steps but turned back to say, “Sal, someone went into Copal’s office while we were leaving. I don’t know what that means, but I think we should look into it. Don Copal is *not* a night owl.”

“I agree,” Salvador said, “we must find out who was in Copal’s office at this hour and why. But, please, get Agent Calavera what he needs right away.”

“OK, Sal,” Eva said and left the room.

“You are starting on a perilous journey, my friend,” Salvador said while we waited for Eva to get back, “but more is at stake than your own well being. I believe that Mercedes Colomar will be the key to unraveling this mystery and that our enemy knows this. She must be found at all costs before *they* can find her...and eliminate her. But remember, my friend: you are an agent of the LSA and will remain so in Rubacava and wherever else you may go. You must remain in contact whenever feasible.”

“Right,” I said, “but before the pigeons are ready...?”

“Ordinary letters will suffice. Fortunately, the mail service is staffed by demons and I have no reason to think they have been corrupted as well. However, please be discreet in your communications.”

Eva returned with fatigues and some survival gear—compass, knife, heavy walking stick, backpack, and other things. “Here,” she said, “change into these.” When I hesitated she said. “Do you think you’ve got any bones I haven’t seen before?” I shrugged and started changing. “Hey, Sal...” she said. Salvador nodded and went to check on the eggs.

“So, sweetheart, I guess this is goodbye,” she said quietly.

“I’ll be in touch,” I said. “You know I have to.”

“Yeah, I know, Cal. But it won’t be the same. I’ll miss our lunch dates and everything.”

“Sure, Eva. Me, too.” I finished changing and shrugged on the pack. I picked up the stick and said, “Well, I guess I’m ready.”

“Excellent, Manuel,” Salvador said, turning back to me. “I will lead you through a secret tunnel outside of the city.”

I nodded and followed Salvador, but turned back at the door. “Any messages for me?” I asked Eva.

“Yeah,” she said a little hoarsely. “Take care of yourself.”

**THE PETRIFIED FOREST
(NO BETTE OR BOGIE...JUST MANNY)**

As Salvador and I walked along the tunnel, I said, “So tell me, Sal, what do you *really* think of your chances of raising an army for revolution?”

“Poor, at present,” he admitted, “but I foresee a time when the task may become easier. The activities of this unholy conspiracy that you have witnessed are far more overt than those which first awakened my suspicions. I believe that their past success in keeping their doings secret has emboldened them. If their activities become more open, as I believe they will, they will disgust many souls. When that happens, the LSA will be ready to make use of their outrage and turn it against our enemies.”

“That could take a while,” I said.

“It has already taken a great while, my friend,” Salvador said, “but now we are able to truly take our first step, thanks to you.”

I laughed a little. “Don’t build me up too much, Sal. I only helped steal some computer gear and two pigeon eggs.”

“Don’t be deceived by scale of your actions, Manuel, but envision the consequences. As a reaper you must have learned how small actions may have greater consequences. Yes, you committed petty thievery, but by that act you opened a door to knowledge. Knowledge is power; power sufficient, I hope, to destroy the corruption at work in the Department of Death. With such an end in view, why then should I not build you up?”

“OK, Sal,” I said, “You’re a bigger thinker than I am.”

Salvador shrugged. “Perhaps,” he said, “but not much of a doer. Eva’s focus will make action possible.”

“Yin and yang, huh?”

“*Precisamente*,” he said. “Only in this case it is the female which is the active principle.”

“Are you in love with *her*?” I asked.

Salvador said nothing except, “We are here.” The tunnel came to an end with a ladder running up the wall into the gloom. “At the top you will find yourself at the edge of the Petrified Forest. If you strike out northwest you will find a road to Rubacava. You must send word when you arrive.”

“OK, Sal,” I said. “You’ll hear from me as soon as I get there. And as soon as I find Meche.”

“Good luck, Manuel,” he said, shaking my hand, “and *viva la Revolución!*” With that he turned and quickly disappeared back down the tunnel.

I climbed the ladder and out a hollow tree trunk. I dropped to the ground, turned and saw El Marrow glowing on the horizon. “Some tunnel,” I said to myself. I checked my compass and headed northwest.

After a few yards I heard something. I stopped to listen. It was very faint, whatever it was. I went on again. The sound got louder. Some kind of unearthly wailing. I stopped again, then pulled out the large knife I found in my pack, and resumed walking. I came to an enormous, fallen trunk. I edged around it and saw a tire. I shook my head and moved a little farther forward to where I could clearly make out the rear of the *Bone Wagon*. I went a little further and saw a familiar orange mountain lying on the ground near the car.

“Glottis, my friend!” I called out over the sound of his weeping. “Why are you crying?” Glottis sat up a little. “Manny?” he said in surprise. Then he started wailing again. “Oh, Manny...they fired me!”

“Me, too, buddy,” I said, even though that hardly did it justice.

“You don’t understand, Manny!” he wailed. “I was created just to do that job! It was the *only* thing that made me happy! It’s like they reached into my chest,” suddenly Glottis thrust his hand into his own chest, “and pulled out my heart,” I went “*Gahh!*” as Glottis ripped his heart out of his chest, “and threw it into the woods to...” Glottis threw his heart over his shoulder and slowly toppled over.

“Glottis!” I yelled. “What have you done!” Naturally he didn’t answer. “Oh, Glottis,” I said with a sad sigh. Then I jumped when he suddenly snored.

I took a closer look at him. He was still breathing, but there was a big hole in his chest and I could see severed arteries and veins writhing around. “They’re not supposed to do that...are they?” I asked myself. But then, Glottis was a demon. I didn’t know what was normal with him. He snored again. “How long he can live without a heart?” I decided not to find out.

I trotted in the direction Glottis threw his heart and then quickly stopped. “Oh, ick!” I exclaimed at the sight of several demon spiders fighting over the still-beating heart. “*Shoo!*” I shouted. I grabbed something off the ground to throw at them but froze when I saw it was a human bone. ‘Could this be Lana’s?’ I thought. I shook my head and threw the bone at the eight-legged demons.

One of the spiders launched itself at me. I beat it off with my walking stick. Some of the others turned toward me. “*Yaaaaah!*” I screamed and rushed them, wildly swinging the stick. I grabbed the heart and ran away. They didn’t follow.

“Man!” I exclaimed. I looked at the throbbing heart in my hand, then at the hole in Glottis’ chest. I shrugged helplessly and dropped the heart in the hole. The arteries reattached themselves, the wound closed, and Glottis jerked upright.

“...eeeEEEEAH...*heart!*” he gasped. “Heart is good! Be good to heart!” he babbled. “Don’t tear out heart! Heart is good! Strong, beating, *good* heart!” He surged to his feet, breathing heavily. “Hey, is that my car?” he asked.

“Sure is, buddy,” I said, a little shaken. “Wanna go for a ride?”

“I thought you’d never ask!” he exclaimed. “But where are we going, Manny?”

“To Rubacava,” I answered. “We’ve got to find Meche.”

“Miss Colomar?” Glottis asked, ears quivering. “What happened?”

“Everything’s gone wrong, *carnal*. I don’t have time to explain right now. Just head northwest and we’ll find the road to Rubacava.”

“But Manny,” Glottis protested, “this is a low-riding street rod, not a four-by-four! We should go back a ways, swing ’round the edge of the forest, and get on the main highway.”

“She’s got most of a day on us,” I said. I kicked the ground. “The ground seems pretty level and there’s lots of space between the trunks. Let’s give it a shot and see how we do.”

“OK, Manny,” Glottis sighed. “Hop in.”

I climbed up to my seat and Glottis got behind the wheel. He started out cautiously but gradually gained confidence. But the ‘road’ got rougher as we went on, if still passable. Close to dawn we came to the oddest thing I had ever seen.

It was some kind of industrial park, but the trees around it had weird pieces of machinery attached to them. Everything was still, probably because it was Saturday. I yelled at Glottis to stop the car.

“What kind of unholy Christmas tree farm is this, Glottis?” I asked over the *Bone Wagon*’s powerfully throbbing idle.

“Oh, city boy!” Glottis snorted. “You work all day in a sixty-story skyscraper, but didn’t you ever wonder what it was made of? The marrow of these trees, Manny! They suck it out! It’s like cement!”

“Is that why the town’s called El Marrow?” I asked.

“Huh?” Glottis said. “Never thought of that.” His face scrunched up while he thought of it then. “Maybe so!” he finally exclaimed with a vigorous nod of his head.

I looked over at the buildings and asked Glottis, “How’s our fuel situation?”

Glottis checked the gauge. “Not so good, Manny. Hey! I see some trucks over there. We could siphon off some gas!”

“You’re right,” I said, “but wouldn’t it be easier just to use those pumps?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, finally seeing what I was pointing at. “Good point.”

Glottis drove over to the pumps and started filling up the main tank and the auxiliary. I climbed down and looked over at some of the trees.

“Those pumps along the trunks draw the marrow into that piping,” Glottis explained. “And that spinning thing keeps the trunk balanced so it the pumps won’t bring it down.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, fascinated. Really.

“*Oh!*” Glottis suddenly exclaimed. “But if we shook a tree down, those pumps would dislodge and I could make high-lift shocks out of them for the *Bone Wagon!*”

“Maybe we could find some spare pumps or whatever in one of these buildings,” I said.

“Oh, yeah,” Glottis said. “Why be a vandal when you can just be a thief.” Was he being sarcastic? Whichever it was, we went off to look for what Glottis needed for his ‘high-lift shocks’ once he had finished filling up the *Bone Wagon*’s tanks. The ground was getting rougher and I figured we’d lose more time turning around, especially after having come this far, than it would take Glottis to modify the car. We found the gear he wanted in some kind of machinists’ shop and Glottis had four shocks ready by mid-morning.

“Manny,” he said when he had finished, “until now we scraped along the ground like rats. But from now on, we soar! Like eagles! Yeah, like *eagles...on pogo sticks!!!* I’ll go get the car,” he said as he lumbered off.

I shook my head, wondering what went on in that massive skull of his.

It was early afternoon before Glottis had the shocks fitted to the car, tested out, and ready to go. “What a relief,” I said as Glottis demonstrated how the shocks lifted the body of the car three feet up and back down again. “I was getting concerned that our transportation wasn’t ostentatious enough.”

“Get in,” he said with a crooked grin, “or are you afraid of heights?”

“Watch how scared I am,” I said defiantly as I climbed up to my seat in that wailing, demonic taco wagon. “Let’s see how far we can get before nightfall, *carnal!*”

“I think we can make that road you were talking about, anyway,” Glottis said as he got into his seat. He looked up uncertainly back at me. “Which way’s northwest again?”

I checked my compass and pointed. The engine roared to life and we headed out.

We made better time with our new clearance, but the ground continued to get rougher. It also tended to slope downwards. The *Bone Wagon* came to a stop and Glottis turned to face me. “Hey, Manny,” he said, “there’s a river that runs through the forest. I think we’re gonna hit that before we find the road.”

“Well, if we do,” I said, “we can follow it up to the road.”

“The ground’s only going to get rougher, Manny—we’re getting close to the bottoms.”

“Let’s just go a little farther,” I said, “and see what we find.”

“OK, Manny,” Glottis sighed.

It was getting toward evening when Glottis suddenly slammed on the brakes.

“What is it now?” I demanded.

“I’m scared of that sign!” Glottis said, pointing.

“Oh, for...” I said as I climbed down and walked over to the sign. It was pretty creepy looking, I had to admit: rusty, with unnecessary jagged pieces sticking out. It read:

They’ll tear you apart bone from bone
And build from you a human throne
Their buck-toothed king will sit upon
What once was you but now is gone

“*Hijole!*” I exclaimed. “What does *that* mean?”

“Demon beavers, Manny!” Glottis said with a tremor in his voice. “They’ll make you into a dam!”

“Relax, Geppetto,” I said as I climbed back into the car, “I’m not made of wood.”

“But, Manny,” Glottis protested, “they don’t use wood!”

“That’s their problem,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“Manny!” Glottis exclaimed.

“C’mon!” I ordered.

Glottis sighed and we rolled forward again. After a few minutes we came to a narrow track. We followed it and crested a small rise, beyond which and below was an immense black river. The light was getting a little dim but I thought I saw something good.

“Is that a bridge?” I asked, pointing.

“Uh...not exactly, Manny,” Glottis said.

“Well, let’s get a little closer,” I said and Glottis carefully drove down the slope. We got closer and I got a better look at my ‘bridge’. I felt a little sick. “Those monsters have built a dam out of human bones!” I exclaimed.

“I tried to tell you, Manny,” Glottis said in a scolding tone, telling me without saying so that a demon knows demons.

“It’s pretty wide, though,” I went on. “Think we could drive across?”

“Those things are mean!” Glottis protested. “They bite, they claw...and if one of them wrapped around my drive shaft, I’d be picking flaming hunks of fur outta my U-joint for months!”

“OK,” I said, “but the alternative is to turn around. Just raise us up on those new shocks and go as fast as you can.”

Glottis squirmed. “Manny, I don’t know if I like the idea of driving over people.”

“They won’t feel it,” I said, “they’re dead!”

“*You’re* dead,” he pointed out. “I wouldn’t want to drive over you!”

“That’s because you and I are friends.”

“Aw, Manny!” Glottis said, a little embarrassed. “You really want to do this?” he asked.

“If that dam can hold up across a big river of tar like that, it can support the *Bone Wagon*,” I said. “And, mean or not, no demon would want to take on a bad-ass car like this!”

“Yeah!” Glottis said, now properly motivated. “Let’s go!” He gunned the engine and drove to the edge of the dam. It was huge. I shuddered. Several burning shapes scurried around the dam. Close up, the many skulls embedded in the dam seemed to glare accusingly up at us.

“Run for your lives, you buck-toothed glow-balls!” Glottis screamed as he raised the *Bone Wagon* up to its full height. The car surged forward. Several beavers jumped out of the way. One, braver or dumber than the rest, lunged at the car. Glottis swerved into the beast and it disappeared

under the car. There was a lurch as a rear wheel ran over it. The beaver burst in a bright shower of sparks. “Plenty more where that came from!” I shouted back toward the smoking remains.

No other beavers challenged us after that. We got across in two or three minutes and the *Bone Wagon* climbed the rising ground on the other side. About an hour later we found the road to Rubacava. Glottis lowered us down and floored the accelerator.

RUBACAVA OR BUST

I woke up to someone nudging me, surprised to discover that I had fallen asleep. I looked over the side of the *Bone Wagon* and saw Glottis standing beside me. It was still dark but there were some lights nearby. “What is it, *mano*?” I asked.

“It’s two in the morning, Manny,” Glottis said. “I’m tired and I’m hungry.”

“Where are we?” I asked as I stretched out of pointless habit.

“Some road stop,” he answered. “A café, motel, gas station, some houses.” He shrugged.

I fished in the backpack for my wallet. I found some money in the pack from Sal and Eva, but that added to what I already had on me didn’t amount to much. Virtually all I had was in my bank account in El Marrow. “The café open?” I asked.

“Yeah. It’s a twenty-four hour joint. Souls come through all the time.”

I climbed down from my seat. “Well, I hope it’s a cheap joint ’cause I don’t have much on me.”

“I’ve got a little, too, Manny,” Glottis said as we walked over to the café, “but it’s a long way to Rubacava.”

“Once we get there I’ll have to get my bank account transferred. It could be a long wait for Meche. I doubt Sal and Eva are gonna bankroll us, so we might need to get jobs.”

“Who’re Sal and Eva?” Glottis asked, cocking his head at the unfamiliar names as I pulled the door open and we went in.

The café was mostly empty, only two or three other souls besides the waitress and the short-order cook behind the grill. We took a booth as far away from the others as possible. The waitress—a girl with very asymmetrical features—came over and Glottis asked for hashed potatoes and eggs, and a pitcher of orange juice, while I just ordered coffee. When the waitress had gone I answered Glottis.

“Eva was the secretary in my office,” I said as I lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. I sighed and readjusted a couple of neck vertebrae. “Sal...well...” I leaned closer to Glottis and spoke lower. “Sal’s the leader of something called the Lost Souls’ Alliance. Something’s rotten in the DOD and the LSA is fighting it. Eva’s part of it and so am I, now.”

Glottis’ face scrunched up with the effort of thinking. “This has something to do with Miss Colomar?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I sighed. “Meche was supposed to get a Double-N ticket, only somebody messed with her file and stole the ticket. We’ve got to find her to expose the racket. Then I can get my job back and work off my time.”

“We’ve got to help Miss Colomar, too, Manny,” Glottis said. “She’s in trouble!”

“I know, buddy, I know. But she’s just one part of this whole mess. If Sal’s right, then hundreds of Double-Ns have been stolen from good souls over the years.”

“Jeez,” Glottis breathed, “that’s real bad. Hey!” he exclaimed. “Is that why we were fired? For getting in the way of the scam? We could be in big trouble, Manny!”

“Relax, Glottis,” I said. “We’re getting farther away from El Marrow all the time. No one knows where we are or what we’re doing except the LSA.”

“Can we trust them?”

“Well,” I said, “I trust Eva and Eva trusts Salvador. That’s good enough for me.”

“OK, Manny,” Glottis said. “I’ll trust *you*.”

The waitress brought Glottis’ food and my coffee. After I got some in me and Glottis was still stuffing his face I got up and walked over to the waitress as she fiddled with ketchup bottles and salt shakers behind the counter. “Slow night, huh?”

She shrugged. “About usual.”

“What’s a nice girl like you doing in a dump like this?”

She gave me an annoyed look and said, “Trying to earn some money to get me across the Land of the Dead. The DOD wouldn’t do nothin’ for me.”

The hash-slinger came around and said to the waitress, “This guy buggin’ you, Lola?”

“Nah, Eddie,” she said. “He’s OK.”

Eddie glowered at me as he went back to his grill.

“I’m looking for a woman who’s kind of in your fix,” I said to Lola, “named Mercedes Colomar.”

Lola shook her head. “Never met anyone by that name,” she said.

“She goes by Meche,” I said. “Might’ve come though in the last day or so.” If she caught any breaks, that is.

Lola shook her head again. I sighed. “Well, thanks anyway,” I said and made to return to Glottis.

“Wait,” Lola said. “What’s your name, mister?”

“Calavera,” I answered. “Manny Calavera.”

“OK, Manny,” she said. “If I see this Meche woman I’ll tell her you’re looking for her. Maybe I can even send word to you.”

“I’ll be stopping in Rubacava if I don’t find her first.”

“Then stop first at the Rub-a-Mat when you get there,” Lola said. “That’s a diner, the first joint you’ll come across when you get into Rubacava. I sort of know the owner. If I see your Meche I’ll send word there.”

“That’d be great, Lola. Thanks,” I said.

“Sure thing, Manny,” Lola said.

“Are you nuts, Lola? That guy’s troubles ain’t yours,” I heard the cook say as I went back to my booth.

“Oh, shut up, Eddie,” Lola grumbled.

“Any luck?” Glottis asked when I sat back down across from him.

“No,” I said. “Maybe she’s ahead of us.”

“She’s gotta be behind us. I was doing 80 once we got on that road.”

“It took us a while to get through the forest,” I reminded him.

“Manny, we averaged about 15 in the forest. Just how fast do you think Miss Colomar can walk, anyway?”

“Just think positively,” I said.

“OK, Manny,” he sighed. Then he yawned.

“C’mon buddy,” I said. “Let’s check out that motel.”

“Sure,” he said, getting up.

We spent the rest of the night in the *Bone Wagon*. All the motels we came across between El Marrow and Rubacava were just mercenary, it seemed, and Glottis needed food more than he needed a soft bed; although his back wasn’t convinced of that.

I asked about Meche wherever we stopped. Glottis thought it was crazy, but I knew that sometimes walkers get lucky and hitch a ride with car owners or sympathetic demon bus drivers. More

importantly (since Meche's post-mortem luck wasn't looking bankable so far) I made contacts and maybe one of them might let me know later on if they ever came across Meche.

I got an unpleasant surprise at one of the last stops before Rubacava. It was just a gas station and lunch counter. The guy running it said he hadn't seen any Mercedes Colomar, but then he said, "You know, you're not the first to ask me about this twist."

I quickly put my cup of coffee down before I could drop it. "You're kidding me, right?" I asked hopefully.

"Nope," the guy said. "It was just the other day. I remember because I've never heard of anyone being named 'Mercedes' before. Thought that was just cars."

"Depends on where you're from," I said. "So who was asking about her?"

The guy shrugged. "Never got his name," he said. "He was a big guy, built like a football player or something." An icy feeling seeped into my marrow. "Supposed he was the boyfriend or something. People hunt for wives and girlfriends all the time after they come over. Never understood that, myself. A while back this little rat of a man was hunting for his wife. I told him to forget the old bird and be glad he got away without having to pay alimony. Didn't listen, the jackass."

Doesn't this guy ever shut up? I said, "Yeah, well, what happened to the guy that was looking for Meche?"

"Oh, he went back down the road. Guess he was giving up. Good for him if he was."

I shivered a little. I would have been cooked if I had met up with Domino. I wondered how he missed us, though. The *Bone Wagon* wasn't exactly the standard DOD-issue bathtub.

I paid the guy for the coffee, the gas, and the hotdog I took to Glottis. He was poking around the *Bone Wagon's* engine. I handed him the hotdog and said, "Bad news, *carnal*."

"No Miss Colomar," he said. "Surprise."

"Worse," I said. "Domino was here."

"Mr. Hurley?" Glottis asked, his eyes going wide. "D'ya think he was looking for Miss Colomar, too?"

"I *know* he was. She's a loose thread."

"Yeah," Glottis said, "and you're a loose cannon. What do you suppose will happen if you two meet up in Rubacava?"

I shook my head. "Domino turned back."

"He's got the right idea," Glottis said. "Miss Colomar *can't* be ahead of us."

"I think we're on the right track," I countered, "if Domino hasn't found Meche on the way here. It's a sign he's getting desperate that he's doubling back."

"But, Manny—" Glottis began.

"Don't say it," I said. "I *know* how fast we're going. But we stop every night so you can sleep. A soul in its own car won't necessarily stop. Remember that guy we met up with twice? And buses just make brief stops. At least five have passed us."

"Yeah," Glottis said. "Miss Colomar could've hitched a ride, I suppose."

"That's right," I said. "Anyway, we don't even know what route she's taking. There are a lot of ways to get to Rubacava so we might be up against a long search, especially if she does end up walking the whole distance. We need a base to operate from, *carnal*, and that's Rubacava. Sal and Eva aren't sitting on their thumbs in El Marrow, so let Domino run around in between like a headless chicken."

"OK, Manny. I guess that makes sense," he said. "Mostly," he added under his breath.

We only had one more stop that night before reaching Rubacava at the crack of dawn the next day. We roared into the parking lot beside a building with a two-story tower at one end shaped like a cactus: the Rub-a-Mat according to what I'd been told along the way.

"Hello!" Glottis hollered as he raced the *Bone Wagon's* engine. "Miss Colomar!" I climbed down from my seat and walked up to Glottis. "We're here to save you!"

"Hey, lay off the racket, will you?" I shouted over the engine. "The whole town's asleep!"

"But I wanna drag race!" He protested, finally letting the engine idle. "When they get a load of my car, we're gonna be the talk of the town!"

"You're right," I said. "We're going to have to find a good place to hide this road show." Glottis sighed and switched the engine off. Sometimes he just lost perspective when he was behind the wheel. "Speaking of hiding," I went on, "I wonder if Meche's here already?" I started walking up to the Rub-a-Mat. "I'm going to see what I can stir up," I called back to Glottis. Then to myself, "Not a bad piece of real estate, actually. It's got potential."

The entrance to the Rub-a-Mat was under the cactus part of the building. Inside I finally understood the 'mat' part. "An automat!" I said quietly to myself. "Man, I haven't been in one of these places since I was a kid!"

It seemed empty except for a guy mopping at the other end of the building. The dining area was brightly lit and colorful in a sterilized kind of way. Currently-empty food slots lined the walls, each labeled with a numbered plastic card. I scanned them as I walked past. There was everything from simple sandwiches and salads to full dinners, just like the old-time automats I remembered. The guy with the mop turned partly toward me as I approached. He looked familiar. I walked closer to get a better look. 'Small world,' I thought.

"Mr. Flores," I said in a low voice. Celso jumped. "I'm ready to take you now."

"Manny Calavera?" Celso sounded as surprised as he looked. "Is that you?" He looked me up and down. "Didn't you use to be taller?"

There was no point in explaining, so I just went on with what had become my opening line. "I'm looking for a woman named Mercedes Colomar."

"Well," Celso said, returning to his mopping, "no one's come through town by that name, and you can take it from me for I, too, am looking for someone; so I watch the comings and goings around here very carefully."

"Who are you looking for?" I asked.

"Well," Celso said, stopping to lean on his mop, "if you must know, it's about my wife. She passed away not long before I, and I've heard that she, too, is crossing the Land of the Dead on foot. It is said that all lost souls come to Rubacava, so I came here to wait for her."

"Don't you think she might have gone ahead of you?"

"Oh, Manny! If she had arrived here first, surely she would have waited for me."

I thought that was unlikely but I kept that to myself. "I don't suppose anyone named Lola has called with a message for me?"

Celso shook his head and said, "Not that I know of, but maybe you should ask the boss when he gets in. The only phone we've got is in his office upstairs."

"OK. Know a good place to stay in town?" I asked.

"What's your price range?"

"Somewhere around the high end of nothing."

"Then maybe it's time you started thinking about getting a job."

"Can you get me a job here?"

"Have any skills?" Celso asked.

I shrugged. "Sales."

"Well, we do need someone to close; but you'll have to talk to the boss about that, too. He'll be in after noon."

"Why so late?" I asked.

"Because we don't have anyone to close," Celso said shortly. "I'm sorry, Manuel, but I've got to get this place ready to open."

"OK," I said, "but I'll be back to talk to your boss. And maybe I can help you find your wife."

"She'll be the one asking for her beloved Celso," he said.

"Right," I said on my way out.

When I got back outside I saw someone by the *Bone Wagon* talking to Glottis. The guy wore a seaman's jacket and looked kind of official. And, for some reason, he was wearing an eye-patch.

"Well, actually," I heard Glottis saying, "it's mostly stock with a few mods here and there."

"So would those be glass packs I'm hearing," the stranger asked in a raspy voice, "or turbos?"

"*Hola*," I said.

"Hey, Manny!" Glottis exclaimed. "Dockmaster Velasco here says he's got a place we can dry dock the *Bone Wagon* for a while."

"Oh, yeah," Velasco said. "We can't leave a beauty like this out in the fog or her chrome will get pitted."

"Pitted?" Glottis asked with a quaver in his voice. "Did you hear that, Manny?"

"You folks gonna stay in Rubacava for a spell?" Velasco asked.

"We might be here a while, yeah," I answered. "We're looking for a woman named Mercedes Colomar."

"Hmm..." Velasco considered a moment. "Well, I'm not too good with names," he eventually said. "Did she have any distinguishing marks? A tattoo?"

"Not that she showed me. Is there any work in this town?" I asked, switching tracks. I wasn't sure I wanted to work with Celso.

"Well, there's plenty of work down by the docks, but it's all union work and I just don't see *you* in that union." Velasco laughed at whatever he thought was funny about me in the union.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"Maybe," he said. "I wouldn't know, son. It's a big town and I don't memorize the want ads. You'll just have to hunt around like everyone else."

"Sorry," I said. "We're getting kind of low on cash and—"

Velasco waved that away. "Oh, don't apologize. I know how folks are when they come into town. Hell, I was the same way m'self."

"Actually, I think I have a prospect already."

"Then take it," Velasco said. "Don't be too proud to accept what's offered."

"Manny," Glottis suddenly said, "could I have an eye-patch?"

Velasco laughed.

"Can I just ask," I said, "what *is* under the eye-patch? 'Cause I know it's not an eye."

"Oh, well," Velasco said, still chuckling, "when I was alive I had an eye-patch like this. This'n's just for the phantom pain. That one eye socket used to scream like a banshee when the trade winds blew, so I plugged 'er. Don't affect my sight none." Velasco looked over at the Rub-a-Mat. "Looks like that idiot Celso's finally openin' up," he said, starting to walk to the door.

"Hey," Glottis said, getting out of the car, "I'm hungry, too."

"Am I supposed to guard the *Bone Wagon*?" I protested.

"Oh, just put 'er where I told you, Glottis," Velasco said. "You shouldn't have any trouble finding it."

"OK, Mr. Velasco," Glottis said as he got back into the car and tore off.

“There’s a big shed at the end of the docks,” Velasco explained. “The doors are too heavy for me to open. Haven’t been able to get in since Aitor went to work for that damn cat track. You comin’ in for breakfast?”

“We’re pretty strapped,” I said, “and Glottis needs to eat more than I do. I’m just gonna look around town.”

“Suit yourself,” Velasco said, “and watch your step. Rubacava ain’t the quaint little port town she used to be.” He gave a kind of lazy wave and disappeared inside the Rub-a-Mat.

Rubacava was situated along a cliff over the Sea of Lament. The Rub-a-Mat and a few other buildings were alongside the road at the top with the airport further inland. The rest of the town was along the base and on the cluster of rocky islands offshore. Except for the docks there wasn’t much activity at this early hour. Unlike El Marrow, Rubacava was supposed to have quite a night life. Most of the town wouldn’t really get moving until the morning was pretty old.

I went looking for a post office and found it fairly quickly, but it was still closed. There was a telegraph office nearby. That was open so I went in there to send my first ‘report’ to Salvador.

SALVADOR

ARRIVED SAFELY IN RUBACAVA STOP NO SIGN OF MUTUAL
FRIEND STOP HAVE LEARNED DH WAS ON TRAIL BUT WENT
BACK STOP HOPE CHILDREN ARE WELL
MANUEL

I figured that was discreet enough.

I asked for a phone book to see what banks there were in town. It turned out that the bank I used in El Marrow had a branch in Rubacava. That would make getting my money much simpler. I went down to the branch to see when it would open, then checked out the rest of the town until after noon. I looked in on Glottis, who was tinkering with the *Bone Wagon* in Velasco’s shed. Then I went to the bank to arrange the transfer of my account. After that it was time to see about that job.

The Rub-a-Mat was much busier than when I was last there. I came in at the tail end of the lunch rush. Celso was pretty busy but he sent me to the office which was up in the cactus tower. There was definitely no message from Lola but the job was mine for the asking. The boss was kind of desperate. Apparently not having someone to close was interfering with his social life and just knowing Celso put me over the top. So I got the job, which basically just involved taking over Celso’s mop and shutting the place up at 10 PM.

I had a couple of hours before I had to start working, so I found a cheap residential hotel and checked in. I told Glottis where I was stopping, let my new bank know, and arranged with the telegraph office to have any reply I got sent to the Rub-a-Mat. With that all settled I began my new job.

Celso showed me the ropes, which boiled down to keeping the place clean, making sure the food slots were all full and fresh, and getting on the cook’s ass if they weren’t. Not exactly demanding work. Very dull compared to reaping. At least there were people, but Celso pretty much ignored them since he didn’t actually have to wait on them. You wouldn’t think a guy without bowels could be so constipated, but there you are. I was going to be more personable.

The first guy I talked to was drenched in local color. Literally. He looked like he had fallen asleep in an alley and a drunken street artist doodled on him. I greeted him but he just muttered something in an unintelligible language and got a tongue sandwich from slot 22.

“Sweet guy,” I said under my breath to Celso.

Celso only shrugged.

“Who is he?” I persisted.

“Toto Santos,” Celso said. “Scrimshaw artist. He has a filthy little parlor down on the docks. As you can see, he practices on himself.”

I wasn’t sure I heard that right. “You mean he *carves* those designs on *himself*?”

“And on anyone else who will pay him.”

“But who in their right mind...?” I began to ask, and then answered my own question. “Oh. Sailors.”

“Who are usually stinking drunk when they call on Mr. Santos,” Celso said.

I shook my head. “Is he a regular?”

“Yes,” Celso said. “A lot of the wharf rats are. Laborers and transient souls are our customers.”

“Transient souls are the staff, too,” I said. “What happened to that walking stick, anyway?”

“I broke it over the heads of some hideous monsters in the forest.”

“Did they look like little fireballs with big teeth?” I asked.

“Yes, but they weren’t little,” Celso said, “and they definitely were *not* in your brochures.”

“Hey, don’t blame me,” I said. “I didn’t write them.”

Celso looked at the clock and said, “Well, that’s the end of my day. I’ll see you tomorrow, Manuel.” And then he left.

Santos said something loudly in what seemed like a different language than before. It sounded vile.

“I don’t know what you said, brother,” I remarked, “but I agree with it.”

Santos went ‘hmpfl’ and said, “Where’s Jesus?”

He meant Jesus Lopez, the owner of the Rub-a-Mat, but I said, “Seated at the right hand of the Father, I guess.”

That startled Santos enough that he actually looked at me. “Seriously,” I said, “he took the rest of the day off now that I’m here to close.”

Santos went ‘hmpfl’ again and turned back to his sandwich.

Just then a boy from the telegraph office came in with a reply to my message to Salvador.

AGENT CALAVERA

HAVE RECEIVED WORD OF YOUR SAFE ARRIVAL IN
RUBACAVA STOP THIS IS EXCELLENT NEWS AS YOUR
SERVICE TO THE LSA MAY NOW CONTINUE STOP I AM
PLEASED TO REPORT THE SUCCESSFUL HATCHING OF THE
EGGS YOU LIBERATED STOP THE HATCHLINGS WHICH EVA
HAS NAMED MANNY AND MECHE ARE QUITE HEALTHY AND
EAGER TO SERVE OUR CAUSE STOP I WILL COMMUNICATE
NEWS CONCERNING DOMINO HURLEY STOP FOR THE
REVOLUTION
SALVADOR LIMONES

What the hell had happened to ‘discreet’? I shook my head and put the telegram in my pocket.

Just as I was getting ready to close up that night a very nice-looking young lady ran into the Rub-a-Mat. “Won’t be a sec,” she said as she got a couple of sandwiches. “Hey!” she said in surprise when she saw I wasn’t Jesus. “You’re new!”

“Brand spanking,” I said.

“My guy,” she cooed.

“Nice uniform,” I returned.

“All in the line of duty.”

“Yeah? Even the heels?”

“No, those were my idea.”

“You know,” I said, “I think you’ll do.”

“You bet I do,” she said archly, “mop boy.”

I laughed. “I’m Calavera. Manny Calavera.”

“Carla Ashburn,” she said as she ran out again. “Come and see me sometime.” Then she poked her head back in the door. “LOL security gate. Feline Meadows.” She disappeared again.

I finished closing up the Rub-a-Mat and looked in again on Glottis. He was doing OK, and had been helping Velasco out around the docks. He thought he might keep doing that for awhile until anything better came up. Then I wandered the streets and bridges of Rubacava for a time, just taking things in. The place had changed. What had been a quiet, drab little port town during the day was now bright, colorful, and full of people. In parts. It was kind of a cross between Vegas and Venice leavened by North River waterfront.

A lot of activity was centered on one of the smaller islands, one mostly taken up by a huge, coliseum-like structure. Banks of flood lights ringed the open top. The roar of the crowd inside could be heard from far off. Souls streamed to and from the island. Those going to the island were excited. Those coming away were mostly down. If I had any doubts this was Feline Meadows, the monumental race cats carved in relief around the top of the building erased them. Most of the Vegas smell was coming off that joint.

I let myself get pulled along with the ingoing crowd and into the base of the track. There, the crowd divided. Many went straight to find seats, many others went to place bets. A much, much smaller group split off to trickle down an out-of-the-way corridor. I followed those guys far enough to take a look. It was just a short passage leading to an elevator, but it was quite a spread. Gilt cats paced the walls while white paw prints ran all over the deep, purple carpet. One of the little band I was following flashed something at the bruiser guarding the elevator. I quickly turned away before the guy could do more than glare in my direction.

I checked out some other nooks and crannies of the place and finally ran across some posters of airships. Beyond those I found signs leading me to the LOL terminals. And there, at the security gate, was Carla and her nail-me heels. She was getting a few travelers through. I waited until they were gone and she had sat back down at her desk before approaching.

“Well, well,” she said when she saw me, “if it isn’t Manny Calavera! What brings you here?”

“I just couldn’t resist your invitation,” I said, sitting on the edge of her desk.

“Well,” she said, leaning closer and presenting a full view of her sternum, “like they say, resistance is futile.”

“Yeah? Who says that?”

Carla just shook her head slightly. “So, you new in town?” she asked.

“Got in this morning,” I answered. “Been working in El Marrow the last few years.”

“Doing what?”

“I was with the DOD as a reaper.”

Carla sat back in her chair, withdrawing the invitation. “A reaper, huh? I can’t say I like you guys much.” Her tone gave my ear holes frostbite.

I was taken back a little. I never got that reaction in El Marrow. “Why not?”

“Because you guys decide who goes on and who gets stuck here, that’s why. Who the hell made *you* judge and jury?”

“It’s not like that,” I protested with a shake of my head. “Do you know how a soul gets to be a reaper in the first place? You have to foul up your life so badly that you’re not even allowed to hoof it. Reapers and everyone else at the DOD are working there to pay off a debt.”

“And that justifies making me work my way across the Land of the Dead, and maybe never making it?” she demanded.

“Of course not. That’s not what I mean. Look, I handled thousands of cases, and I did everything I could to give my clients the best packages they deserved.”

“But what gives you the right to say who deserves what?”

“I didn’t have that right,” I insisted. “No reaper does. The DOD gives us the rules we go by and we just follow them.”

“Just following orders, huh?” The sarcasm cut deep but didn’t hit anything vital.

“I’m sorry if you don’t feel you were given a fair shake,” I said, starting to feel angry but trying to tamp it down. “I was pretty burned up about it, too, when I was told *my* fate.”

“It’s not fair,” Carla protested. “I didn’t kill anyone, you know.”

I shrugged. “Neither did I, but that’s not the point. It’s not about what’s fair, it’s about justice. It’s cold and it’s hard, but it *is* right. I don’t know...maybe you have to carry a scythe to understand that.” I sighed. I stood up. “I guess there’s nothing I can say that will make you change your attitude.” I left and went back to my hotel.

MANNY FINDS HIS GROOVE

The next day I got a road map of the Land of the Dead for the El Marrow-to-Rubacava region. Just because I came to Rubacava by a particular route didn’t mean that Meche would. I worked out with Glottis a kind of system for searching for Meche, checking every stop on the way to Rubacava. But all that would have to wait for my days off.

When I went into the Rub-a-Mat that second day, Celso said to me, “Were you serious about helping me find my wife?”

“Sure,” I said. I didn’t really care one way or the other whether Celso found his wife, but you reap what you sow.

Celso handed me a photo. “Here. I got this from the DOD and made copies to hand out. Isn’t she something?”

“She must have been beautiful with skin,” I said, but I doubted that skin would have helped any.

“Weren’t we all,” Celso sighed.

That day went pretty much like the first one. I tried to draw out Toto Santos when he came in, but still no soap. I did better with other customers but they all seemed a little unsure of any of the help interacting with them. That night, as I was doing the closing-up routine, Carla came in for her sandwiches. This time she walked instead of ran.

“Hi,” she said quietly.

“Hey,” I answered enthusiastically, although inwardly I was a little wary. “It’s great to see you again.”

“Really?” she asked, sounding surprised and hopeful. “I thought you might be steamed at me, the way you walked out...”

“Forget about it,” I said. “I felt a fight coming on. I decided to get away while we were still being polite to each other.”

“You sure? No other reason?”

“Nope,” I assured her. “I want to be your friend, and an argument isn’t the best way to start.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I’m sorry. I’m just...” she shrugged. “Well, the night shift gives you a lot of time to think. I’m still not sure about reapers, but I like you.” She got her two sandwiches. “If you’re

really not steamed with me, why don't you meet me at the Blue Casket day after tomorrow after you close?"

"I'd like that," I said. "See you then." She waved, did a little pirouette and skipped out.

The next day Toto Santos actually nodded to me when I greeted him. That was progress. Jesus was coming down from his office while I was making my effort with Santos. He nodded to me himself as he walked by and murmured, "Keep it up, Calavera, and you might just get a civil word out of him someday."

"That's something to look forward to," I said.

Jesus chuckled and then said to Celso, "Why don't you knock off." The lunch crowd had tapered off early that day.

Celso went wordlessly.

"Such a sourpuss," Jesus sighed. I sensed a grimace. "Forget I said that," he said.

"Well," I said. "Celso's got a lot on his mind."

"Don't we all," Jesus said. "I was talking with Etienne last night," he went on, clearly changing the subject. "You know...the little guy who's always humming show tunes out of key?" I nodded. "Anyway, he was saying to me that he likes coming into the place more since you got here. He's not alone. The customers seem to like the way you greet them."

"Well," I said, "I got to be kind of a people person at the DOD. And once you get a client in your office, it's a good idea to be as friendly as possible with them, especially if you have bad news."

Jesus gave a wry chuckle. "Like telling them they have to be a reaper?"

"Yeah," I said, "but...I gotta tell you...it's considered bad taste at the DOD to talk about things like *that*."

"Really?" Jesus said. "Well, I guess I can see why." He shrugged. "But what I really wanted to tell you was that the customers appreciate what you're doing. Keep it up." He patted me on the shoulder before returning to his office.

"The funny thing is," I was telling Glottis that night, "I'm actually missing the DOD."

"I don't," Glottis said. "I didn't like being stuck in that garage all those years."

"Well, who would?" I said, "Point is, though, they seem to go by a different set of rules outside of El Marrow. I mean, Carla doesn't like reapers—she was pretty up front about that—and I'm pretty sure that diner waitress, Lola, had something against the DOD."

"Can you blame 'em?" Glottis asked, ears twitching sharply. "I mean, look at it from their point of view: you show them all these fancy brochures about trains and cars, and *then* you tell 'em they hafta walk."

"I never jerked anyone around, Glottis," I protested.

"And I'm not sayin' you did. It's just you can't expect people to know the inside dope the way you do, Manny."

"Maybe you're right," I said. I didn't like to admit it, but the demon had a very good point.

"And I bet it's that kind of resentment Copal's and Hurley's gang is making a profit on."

"Sure," Glottis said. "Justice is for the other guy."

"Everyone wants to be the exception," I grumbled. I sighed. "So what are you doing with your time?"

"Drivin'!"

"Where?"

"Everywhere! And when I stop I ask about Miss Colomar."

"Hey! We were supposed to do that together!"

“And we will, Manny. A lot. But I might as well ask while I’m out. And besides,” he went on, “you only talk to people. I’ve been talking to demons, too. Bus drivers and whatnot.”

“Yeah?” I was impressed. He’d thought of an angle I hadn’t. “That’s good thinking, Glottis.”

“I know it!” he said. “If Miss Colomar hitches a ride, the drivers will stop at the Rub-a-Mat.”

“Assuming she hitches a ride on a bus, and the driver is one you talked to. But that improves our odds.”

“Yeah. And I’ve even been looking through Mr. Velasco’s port log. I haven’t seen Miss Colomar’s name but I did see a Flores.”

“Are you kidding me?!” I exclaimed. “Man or woman?”

“Woman. Maybe it’s Mr. Flores’ wife.”

“Where’s Velasco?” I asked.

“Probably napping in his office,” Glottis answered with a short, bark of a laugh.

“Well, I’d better talk to him. I’ll see you later, *mano*.”

“Check,” he said.

Glottis was right about Velasco. When I got him awake he said, “Well, hell, Manuel! What’re you doin’ here?”

“I gotta ask you a question,” I said. I showed him the picture of Celso’s wife. “Ever seen this woman?”

Velasco took the picture. “Oh, if this is the woman you’re lookin’ for, take my advice and forget about ’er.” He sounded amused. “She sailed out of here weeks ago in a cozy port-side cabin built for two, and she *wasn’t* alone.”

“Actually, that’s Celso’s wife.”

“Ah. Now it all makes sense. Didn’t think she looked like your type.” I didn’t know I had one.

“You’ve got all the details in your log?” I asked. “Can I show it to Celso?”

“If you bring ’im down here, you can. That log ain’t leavin’ this here desk.” Velasco thumped the worm-eaten, salt-limned mass of petrified wood with his fist for emphasis.

“Fair enough,” I said. “How come you haven’t told Celso yourself?”

“I told you before, Manny, I ain’t good with names. I just write ’em down in my log and forget ’em. Ain’t no business of mine what people do with themselves.”

“Makes sense,” I said, sensing another rebuke about my having been a reaper. “I’ll bring Celso down here sometime, if that’s OK with you.”

“You do that, son,” he said and waved me off.

I left the docks went back to my hotel. I collected my mail from the front desk and, quickly fanning through it, found a letter from Salvador. I went to my room and locked the door before opening the envelope.

Manuel,

We have intriguing news for you. It appears that Domino Hurley has been made office manager in Don Copal’s place. What has become of Copal is unknown. As far as we can determine, he has not been seen since his meeting with Hurley and the fat man. Our attempts to trace his whereabouts have so far been unsuccessful. Things go better on other fronts.

We continue to be able to access the DOD computer network and have taken further steps to ensure that we may continue to do so. Curiously, it seems that the IT department of the DOD has not detected

our activities. The fact that there are so few computers in the Land of the Dead in private hands may explain this lax security. Although we have not made much progress in unraveling the secrets of our enemies, we have identified a number of disaffected agents and other employees of the DOD who may be eager to join our ranks.

We have heard nothing of Mercedes Colomar here in El Marrow. We are certain that Domino Hurley continues to search for her, and may be employing his agents in the search. You must be careful, Manuel, and pray you do not come to Hurley's attention.

It is desirable that the LSA expand in Rubacava. Be in no hurry, but keep watch for suitable recruits. A mere handful—three or four—would be enough to strengthen your position immeasurably. Please report any news you may have as soon as possible.

For the revolution,
Salvador Limones

Another slip of paper contained a note from Eva.

Manny,

I hope you're keeping well. Sal and I have been working hard at the computer trying to find some trace of these creeps. Sal doesn't say so, but I know he's frustrated. I think he was hoping to find something quickly. But it's going to take a while. They haven't gotten away with it this long by being sloppy.

The pigeons are doing just fine. I hope you're OK with them being called Manny and Meche. I think it's symbolic of the whole struggle. Did you ever think I'd write a sentence like that? Anyway, we've lined up a trainer for them and soon we'll have our airmail service. Maybe our next message will come on these 'gossamer wings of truth' as Sal calls them. He's such a scream.

Well, sweetheart, you just find that Meche woman and we'll expose these SOBs. And if you see Domino, kick him in the tuchis for me.

Love,
Eva

You wouldn't think two people that different would be mixed up together, but there you are.

Salvador's news about Domino rattled me and I wasn't so sure any more it would be such a good idea to go out looking for Meche myself with him still on the prowl. I couldn't afford to have him find her first, so Glottis' going out on his own was starting to look a lot more attractive. It was *my* job to find Meche but, on the other hand, Glottis could cover more ground without me since didn't have a regular job to hold down. Maybe I should just fork over some money and have Glottis go all the way to El Marrow and back. I could keep tabs on people already contacted by phone.

I'd have to discuss that with Glottis in the morning. In the meantime, I went out for a couple of hours and then, having seen no one interesting lined up for Paar in the TV listings, got some sleep when I returned to my rooms. Writing to Sal and Eva could wait until I had something to write.

“Oh, yeah!” Glottis crowed the next morning when I told him what I had in mind. “Gonna tear up them roads!”

“That’s great, *carnal*, but don’t forget to ask about Meche while you’re at it. And watch out for Domino, for Christ’s sake, will you?”

“Don’t worry, Manny,” he said. “I’ll only talk to demons and the people who live at the road stops.”

“And get me the phone numbers of these places, too. I wanna keep tabs on them from here.”

“Check. When do you want me to go?”

“Tomorrow, just like we planned. I’ll get some money for you before you leave. Go back the way we came, touch base with all the people we talked to on the way here, but come back by a different route. I want you to make new contacts.”

“Got it. Anything else?”

“Not that I can think of right now, except maybe stay out of El Marrow if you can help it. The *Bone Wagon*’s one car Domino will know on sight.”

“Yeah, good point.”

“OK. I’m going to get you some money now, then I gotta get to work, *carnal*.”

When I got in to the Rub-a-Mat, I pulled Celso aside and said, “Tomorrow I’d like you to go down to the docks with me.”

“I’m not into that kind of thing, Manuel,” he said.

“Swell,” I said, “but I want you to look at something in Velasco’s port log. It’s about your wife.”

“My wife? What are you saying?”

“I’m saying she sailed before you got here, Celso. I don’t expect you to believe me, so we’ll go see Velasco tomorrow.”

“Why shouldn’t I see him this afternoon?” he demanded to know.

“Because Velasco doesn’t like you, that’s why.” That wasn’t something I wanted to say, but the blunter I was, the more likely Celso wasn’t going to visit Velasco on his own and maybe not be shown the log book. I still couldn’t see any reason to be concerned about the Flores couple, but I also couldn’t shake the feeling that I needed to play in their court.

“He doesn’t?” Celso sounded genuinely surprised. “Why not?”

I shook my head. “I’m never down on a client, Celso. And it’s not my place to talk about Velasco’s feelings.” I didn’t exactly like Celso, but I also didn’t dislike him the way Velasco apparently did. “I can only tell you that you’ll never get very far without me to smooth the way.”

“All right, Manuel. Velasco never has been pleasant. I’d be grateful for your help.”

“Great,” I said. “Then it’s a date.”

“If you must call it that,” he said with a sniff.

Some people are just born difficult, I guess.

When Jock—the cook—came in to restock the food after the lunch crowd finally petered out I told him to empty #22. He looked at me like I had sprouted hair. “Are you trying to get me fired?” he growled.

“Of course not,” I said. “I’m just trying to get Toto Santos to speak to me.”

“Cursing at you is more likely,” Jock said, “and he does that already.”

“Maybe,” I said, “but I want to try this anyway.”

Jock shrugged and took the sandwiches out of #22.

“Keep ’em fresh,” I said. “I’ll be calling for them in a hurry after Toto gets here.”

“Yeah, and maybe I can restock them before he kills you,” Jock said with a fair-sounding snort. “He’d find a way, Cal,” he said to cut off my objection.

“OK, OK,” I said impatiently and waved him away.

“Sometimes I think you’re crazy, Manuel,” Celso said. “Why do you want that Santos character to talk to you, anyway?”

I shrugged. “Mainly because he won’t.”

“Why make him talk if he doesn’t want to?”

“Don’t be too sure he doesn’t,” I said. “Sometimes it’s the guys who don’t say much who *really* want people to talk to them.”

“And sometimes they just want people to keep their distance,” Celso said with plain good sense on his side.

“And I intend to find out which kind of person he is.”

“Suit yourself, Manuel,” Celso said with an unconcerned shrug.

When Toto came in some time later, he dropped his coins in the slot, opened #22’s door, grabbed a handful of air and exclaimed, “Hey! What the...?”

“Is there something wrong?” I asked, trying to sound innocent.

“Yeah,” Toto said. “Where the hell’s my *lengua*?”

“What?” I said and looked into #22 as if I didn’t know what I’d find. “Oh, for the love of...!” I went over to the doors to the kitchen, kicked them open and shouted, “Hey, Jock! Number 22’s empty!” I went back to Toto. “I’m sorry. I guess I was sleeping on the job.” Jock came in with the stack of sandwiches from #22. I took one and handed it to Toto. “Here you are. I apologize for the inconvenience.” Jock restocked the sandwiches and shook his head as he walked back to the kitchen.

“It’s just a sandwich,” Toto said, sounding a little bewildered. He looked at me, then at the kitchen door, over at Celso, and then back to me. He shrugged and instead of sitting in his usual spot he left the Rub-a-Mat.

“Well done,” Celso said.

“Hey, he’ll be back. I guarantee it. This was just the ice breaker.”

“If you say so, Manny,” Celso said skeptically. “Well, I’ll be going. I like to sleep late on my day off. How about I come to your hotel around 10 o’clock and we’ll go see Velasco’s log?”

“Fine with me,” I said. “But meet me at Velasco’s office instead. I’ll be on the docks tomorrow morning. I’ve got some business with Glottis.”

“All right,” Celso said. “See you in the morning.” He waved vaguely and left.

When I closed that night I went down to the Blue Casket. It was in a building at the base of the cliff almost directly below the Rub-a-Mat. It was supposed to be a pretty hip place—or maybe it was hep—in a beatnik sort of way. I wouldn’t have thought it was Carla’s sort of dive. She was waiting for me outside the Rub-a-Mat when I closed the automat. “Whoa!” I exclaimed in surprise when I reached the parking lot and she suddenly appeared under a lamp post. “I thought we were going to meet down at the Blue Casket.”

“Well,” she seemed embarrassed. “I didn’t want to go in there by myself. It’s kinda got this reputation...” She took my arm as we started walking together.

“Yeah?” I asked. “So why do you want to go there, then?”

She shrugged. “I feel like slumming. How ’bout you?”

“I slummed my whole life away. One more night won’t make much of a difference. I’ve been kind of curious about the joint, anyway.”

We rode the elevator down the cliff, walked to the Blue Casket’s building, and went down the steps to the entrance. It was shaped like a casket.

“Extra-thick doors to seal in the hipness,” Carla quipped as I struggled to get them open. The hinges weren’t set very well, I swear.

“After you,” I said when I finally got them open.

Carla took a deep breath and went in.

It was dark inside and very, very blue. It was almost like being deep underwater—very disorienting. The music was loud and so was the crowd. Thick smoke, tobacco and otherwise, hung everywhere. There were black turtlenecks as far as the eye could see.

“Hey, look!” I said into Carla’s ear hole. “Dead Beats!” She laughed. I started looking for an empty table.

A very petite woman approached us. “New souls!” she said in a satiny, sexy voice. The small woman took a drag on a cigarette in a holder in a way that would have gotten her arrested in Franco’s Spain. “What can I get you hepsters?” she asked on the exhale in a somewhat sarcastic tone.

“A table and a waiter, if you got ’em,” I said.

“I’ve got everything you need, daddy-o,” she said in a low, throaty purr.

“Oh,” I practically moaned. I could see Carla giving me a strange look.

“This way,” the woman said. She led the way, her pelvis twitching in an inviting manner.

“Kind of dark in here,” Carla said.

“Dark and cold,” the woman said, “like the hearts of men.”

“Uh...” I said.

“Here you are,” the woman said when we came to an empty table. “You sit down and I’ll get you that waiter.” She turned and walked away. I enjoyed the view.

Carla punched me in the arm. “Are you out of your mind?!” she demanded. “That’s Olivia Ofrenda... Maximino’s girl!”

“Yeah?” I said. “The cat track guy?”

“Yeah! And the owner of the LOL shuttles. So watch yourself.”

“Tough customer, huh?”

“Just an old-time racketeer, Manny. They say he was in Capone’s gang.”

“I heard it was Bandello’s.”

“Whatever,” Carla said dismissively, missing the joke. “The point is, noticing Olivia too much is bad for your health.” Maybe she had a point.

I looked around. The joint was definitely packed, and not just with the expected Beat crowd. They made up a clear majority, sure, but there were laboring types mixed in along with a few squares with the word ‘tourist’ practically stamped on their foreheads. Ofrenda’s dive really pulled them in. I scanned the faces, more than idly wondering if this was the sort of place Meche would be drawn to.

“Looking for someone?” Carla asked.

I started. I’d forgotten she was there. Not a good way to begin the evening. Carla, I thought, was good stuff; she deserved my full attention. “Sorry,” I said. “I was wondering if someone I know might be here.” I stopped for a moment, thinking of the least offensive way to broach the subject. “I don’t suppose you’d remember if anyone named Mercedes Colomar came through your security gate any time recently.”

Carla gave me a hard-to-read look. It could have been offended; it could just have been arch. “I must be doing well if you’re thinking about old girlfriends,” she said. Arch, I decided.

I laughed. “She’s an old client.” Carla visibly relaxed. “I was curious whether she’d made it this far. She thought she had to walk, but it was a mistake. The paperwork was screwed up and she cleared out before it was caught.”

Carla frowned, but not really at me. “I didn’t know the DOD made mistakes.”

“Usually they don’t,” I said. “It’s really no concern of mine,” I lied, “but you have to wonder how she’s getting on.”

“If you met her again, maybe things could be straightened out,” Carla said. “You still got any pull with the DOD?”

That was an awkward question. Before I could think of a safe, meaningless answer, the music stopped and suddenly we could hear the guys at the next table.

“But don’t ya see,” one of them was saying loudly, “when the government fades away, so will our troubles!”

“Ah, nonsense,” another replied. “We’ll always need some armed force to fight off the return of capitalism.”

Carla shot me a questioning look. I was too busy trying not to laugh, partly in relief.

“That sort of fascist thinking is as dead as you are, comrade,” the third snapped. “When we get rid of—” Just then the music started up again and the doctrinal argument at the next table vanished beneath it.

“Are those guys for real?” Carla asked me.

“Yes, they are,” I said. “And so was I.”

A waiter approached then and we ordered drinks. I lit a couple of cigarettes and passed one to Carla.

“What do you mean, ‘so was I?’” Carla asked.

I shrugged. “There are a lot of ways of dealing with the world when you’re alienated. Sitting around a table, getting drunk and plotting revolution is one of them. Not, of course, that you look at it that way when you’re sitting at the table.”

“I don’t get you,” Carla said.

“I’m just getting cynical in my old age, that’s all.”

She shook her head. “C’mon, Manny. Do people really take all that ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ stuff seriously?”

“Sure,” I said. “Haven’t you ever been committed to anything?”

“I was an army brat,” she said. “The only thing I cared about was keeping my distance from people so I wouldn’t get hurt when we moved on.”

“Oh,” I said. “Then I can see why you don’t get it. Isn’t ‘Marx’ just an expletive in the military?”

“Something like that. That’s kind of the way daddy looked at it.”

“Yeah, well, it’s something else to other people. Underneath all the ideological posturing, Marxism is just about social justice.” I shrugged. “Not that it ever works out that way. If the posturing doesn’t foul it up, human nature will. But that never stopped anyone from believing. Sometimes you just have to, no matter what.”

“Well, I still don’t understand,” Carla said. “They way I figure it, the only thing you can do is to look out for yourself.”

That attitude was probably the root of why Carla had to work her way across the Land of the Dead. But I kept that thought to myself.

The music died away again. This time our neighbors were silent. They were looking toward the little stage that was against one wall. Olivia was standing in the spot. A guy with bongos sat to one side. Olivia began reciting in a low, sultry voice:

“With bony hands I hold my partner.
On soulless feet we cross the floor.
The music stops as if to answer
an empty knocking at the door.
It seems his skin was sweet as mango
when last I held him to my breast.
But now, we dance this grim fandango
and will four years before we rest.”

The audience clicked its fingers in approval. Scattered, uncertain polite clapping drew disapproving glares.

“What the hell did *that* mean?” Carla whispered to me. “And what’s the deal with the bongos?”

“Just experience it,” I whispered back. “Don’t analyze.”

“This place is too weird,” she said.

“You wanna go?” I asked.

“Do you mind?”

“No. We can go somewhere else.”

“Now you’re talking,” she said.

I picked up the check and we were on our way.

“Whew!” she breathed once we were back on the street. She shook her head.

“Not exactly your style, was it?” I said as we started walking.

“No kidding,” Carla said. “Have you ever seen anything like that in your life?”

“Sure,” I said. “I’ve been in a few beatnik joints in my time. The first time on a fake ID.”

“Whoever heard of getting up in a nightclub and reciting *poetry*!” Carla exclaimed.

I laughed. “That’s kind of the point,” I said. “Oh, well. Before your time, I guess. So where do you want to go now?”

“I thought you’d never ask!” she said.

The next morning I dragged myself down to the docks to meet with Glottis before he set out.

“What happened to you?” he asked.

“Late night,” I said. I massaged my temples. “New girl.”

“What’d she do?” Glottis asked. “Use a bungee cord?”

“Just dragged me to every bar in town. You’d think Prohibition was coming back the way she packed it away.”

“Might not be a bad idea, Manny,” he said.

“So are you all set?” I asked. “Got the money and everything?”

“Sure,” he said. “And I got a pad and pen to write down phone numbers.”

“OK,” I said, “I’ll see you in a few days.”

“OK, Manny,” Glottis said as he got into the *Bone Wagon*. “Bye!” He peeled away from the docks in a squeal that split my head open.

Around 10 o’clock Celso turned up and we went into Velasco’s office. Velasco wordlessly handed me his port log. He seemed perversely pleased. I turned to the entry Glottis had told me about and showed it to Celso.

“Your wife sailed out of here two months ago with another man,” I said as gently as I could.

Celso shook his head slowly as he read the entry. “Oh, Manny,” he said, “is there a greater constant in nature than the treachery of women?”

“It’s a tough break junior,” Velasco said happily, “but you gotta face it.”

“Forget about her, Celso,” I advised.

“Have you forgotten yours?” he asked as he closed the log. “I’m going after her.”

“There’s a ship sailing for Puerto Zapato day after tomorrow,” Velasco said. “Why don’t you go down to the steamship offices and get a ticket?”

“I’ll do that,” Celso said as he handed the log back to Velasco. “I guess tomorrow is the last day we’ll be working together, Manny,” he said to me. “Jesus won’t be happy to be losing me so soon, but that can’t be helped. Goodbye, Velasco.”

When Celso had gone Velasco slapped his knee and cackled gleefully. “Finally got rid of that sonofabitch!” He said. “Wish I’d known I had what’d make him go all this time, though.”

“I think he’s pretty broken up,” I said.

“Oh, who cares!” Velasco said. “He’s goin’, that’s the important thing.”

“Well,” I said, “I’ll see you around.” I let myself out and kicked around town for a while.

Celso was right about Jesus not being happy. When I went in to work the next day he took me into his office.

“I almost wish you hadn’t told him about his wife,” he said. “The kind of turnover I’ve been having lately has been murder.” He sighed. “Oh, well. Can’t be helped. I’d like you to take over the opening spot, Manny,” he went on, “if you’ll do it. It’ll mean getting up at an ungodly hour, but there’s a raise in it for you.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said.

“Not right away, though,” Jesus said. “I’d rather open for a while myself rather than close again any time soon.” He shook his head. “Just when I was getting caught up on the books, too.”

“Can I help?” I asked.

“Got a head for figures?”

“Depends on whose,” I said.

Jesus opened his jaw and then quickly closed it. “OK, Manuel,” he finally said, “shoo!”

That afternoon Toto Santos actually said hello to me without any prompting. And soon after that, Celso left. He didn’t say much more than ‘bye’ except to thank me for my help. That night Carla showed up about half an hour before close and we chatted while I did what needed to be done. I walked her over to her job, then blew 20 bucks on a couple of races. I went over to the Blue Casket for an hour or so. Olivia didn’t recite anything that night. I was obviously getting into a rut, but a little idea was starting to grow in the back of my mind.

THE LOST SOULS ALLIANCE TAKES ROOT

Glottis returned after a few days, having had a great time. He brought me a list of phone numbers from his various stops and said that Lola said “Hi.” He didn’t see anything of Domino or his agents, but he did hear from a few people that he wasn’t the first to ask about Meche. I was going to give my contacts a few days before phoning them. Glottis went back to doing odd jobs for Velasco and tinkering with the *Bone Wagon*.

A couple of days after Glottis got back there was a message at my hotel that Lola had phoned while I was at work. After we exchanged pleasantries she said, “I got some bad news for you, Manny.”

“Uh-oh,” I said. “What is it?”

“Yesterday some guy in a DOD car drove up asking about Mercedes Colomar. I didn’t tell him nothin’, but Eddie told him about you and Glottis. The guy paid Eddie to let *him* know if she turned up.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. “How much money?” I asked.

“It was a big wad, Manny. Big bills, too. And he had a lot left over.”

“So Domino’s goons are going up and down the line bribing people,” I said with a sigh. “Great.”

“What’s really goin’ on here, Manny?” Lola asked.

“I wish I knew, baby. But I need to find Meche first. I let her down once already.”

“You’ll find her,” Lola said, “but I gotta go. If I hear anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks, Lola,” I said. “I hope there are more people like you out there than are like Eddie.”
 “Me, too,” she said. “Bye.”

Well, that was pretty lousy news but I wasn't sure just how bad it was. On the one hand, Domino must be getting desperate if he was paying people for information they *might* give him someday. He wasn't having any better luck finding Meche than I was but, on the other hand, he had the edge. There was no way I could match his tactic, even if my long 'slump' hadn't just about tapped me out. I was willing to bet that wad of dough didn't come out of Domino's pocket, though. Whoever was behind him must be providing it, and that was a significant piece of news.

I went back to my room. It was time to make a report.

Salvador,

I sent Glottis out to make another search for Meche. He went back to El Marrow by the way we came to reconnect with the people we encountered before, and he came back by a different route to make new contacts. No one admits to having seen Meche, but several say that they've talked to others who are looking for her and I've just been told that Domino or his agents are paying some people large bribes to let them know if they see her. This lets us know a few things.

First, Domino knows he has competition. If people are telling me others are looking for Meche, we can be sure they're doing the same for Domino. Second, whoever is behind all this must have access to DOD funds. One of my contacts described the bribes as large wads of large bills. I suppose the bribes could be coming from the sales of stolen Double-N tickets, but I bet these guys would embezzle if they could rather than dip into their own kitty. Third, Domino's search is being conducted like a legitimate DOD operation, the same contact having described a car with DOD markings. Domino's position must be very secure if he can divert agents for this. I wonder if Meche's gotten wind of this somehow and is lying low.

As for recruiting LSA agents in Rubacava...I've got a few ideas but I'm going to watch and wait before making any moves. For right now, me and Glottis are going to have to carry the ball by ourselves.

Manny

I got a reply from Salvador a few days later.

Manuel,

I am sorry to hear that you have not heard from your Meche. You must be patient, and let your heart remain open. If it is meant to be, you will some day be reunited.

Having studied your latest report carefully I must congratulate you. Your idea of using your driver to conduct your search is inspired. Not only is he impervious to anything our enemies could inflict upon you, he also is known to Miss Colomar.

Eva and I agree it is probable that our enemies are able to divert DOD funds for their operations. This insight gives us a possible means of identifying the persons we seek. We have expanded our search of the DOD network to include financial transactions. Since we need only look

for tampering within the last few weeks to locate the source of these bribes, the task may be relatively simple...although Eva remains convinced that seeking discrepancies between work orders and client records will produce more certain results. But naturally we continue to work on all fronts.

It is unfortunate that we cannot match the tactics of our enemies, but the LSA lacks their financial resources.

Remain cautious in seeking out new agents. We trust your judgment, but keep in mind what you have learned, for our enemies may have subverted potential recruits. Look for genuine revolutionary instincts.

For the revolution,
Salvador Limones

I was amused to see that Salvador still thought I was in love with Meche despite my denial. Otherwise, his letter actually made me feel pretty good. Not about the lousy situation, of course, but for making a contribution to the LSA. In the back of my mind I had begun to feel like I was just playing at secret agent. But here I had learned something and Sal was taking it into his calculations.

OK, so what next for danger man? The LSA had a few problems, mainly lack of manpower and lack of money. There wasn't much I could do about the latter, although I still had that vague little notion germinating somewhere in my head. Sal and Eva were looking for new recruits, and I was supposed to be doing the same. But what the hell were 'genuine revolutionary instincts'?

I had told Carla about my youthful flirtation with Marx. I had been pretty serious about it at the time, but now I looked at it as just a stage. 'Who *was* that kid?' I would think to myself later in life. I got so detached I just couldn't relate to that earlier, more passionate version of myself. What I still didn't know was whether I had been a revolutionary or just a punk thumbing his nose at a world he didn't like. So how the hell could I tell the difference in anyone else?

On the other hand, I had also told Carla that Marxism was basically just about justice. I still cared about that. Maybe I cared more now than when I was alive. Maybe that's all I needed to look for. Salvador never quizzed me on ideology, yet he seemed to be taking *me* as a genuine revolutionary. I didn't think I was. I was just burned up about what was done to Meche. And to all the others, whoever they were. I wanted the LSA to find the bastards responsible and take care of them. But no matter how hard I thought about these things, I wasn't any closer to understanding what Sal really wanted from me. That just left me with whatever I could manage to work out on my own.

I was hanging around the Blue Casket regularly. Without Carla, of course, since she swore she'd never go back. I went there mainly because I wanted to hear Olivia recite her poetry, but after that first night she mostly kept off the stage. I was also keeping watch on the three guys Carla and I overheard that first night. Not exactly deliberately, not at first. I just had revolution on my mind. They were usually in the club. Sometimes they were by themselves, sometimes there were others with them, but those three were always together. Whenever I could manage it I got a table next to theirs and listened as well as I could.

Jesus quickly tired of opening the automat, so I moved to that spot and he did the close. That meant I saw less of night-owl Carla and more of Velasco and had to weather the full brunt of the lunch crowd. I also had to take delivery of supplies first thing in the morning. I was very interested to see that the delivery guy was one of the three from the Blue Casket. His name was Alexi and he was an interesting study. He was the most purely ideological of the three and tended to rein in the other two when they were in disagreement.

I learned from Velasco that Alexi and his friends were trying to organize the dock workers, which struck me as a little strange. “Isn’t there a union already?” I asked him, feeling certain I remembered him mentioning the union the day I’d arrived in town.

Velasco laughed. “Sure,” he said, “and it’s as crooked as that cat track.”

“I get it,” I said. “The union bosses do all right for themselves, don’t they?”

“That’s about the size of it, son. I keep away from ’em as much as I can, but Alexi’s little gang wants to take ’em on.”

That was interesting. Did they do more than talk about revolution? “Yeah? What exactly are they doing?”

“Shouting a lot, mostly. ‘Lay down your tools’ and that sort of thing. The union’s muscle keep kicking them off the docks but they keep coming back.”

“Are they getting anywhere?” I wanted to know.

“No, not really,” Velasco said. “Oh, well, some of the Sea Bees listen now and again but the union has the dock area pretty well under control. They even shut down the bar that used to be down there, the Rusty Anchor it was called, so they wouldn’t have a place to congregate or whatever the hell it was they called it.”

“So what do you think about it all?”

“I think they’re a bunch of damn fools! That’s what I think. Just tilting at windmills. And they keep coming back for more. Idiots!”

Velasco may have thought Alexi and his friends were idiots, but what I had learned was giving me ideas. I started to actively look for Alexi’s group in the Blue Casket. I even kept an eye out for them on the docks whenever I’d meet with Glottis. I didn’t talk much to Alexi, though, when he came to the Rub-a-Mat in the morning. I just kept things on business. Partly because I didn’t want to spook him by tipping my hand too early, and partly because I felt the need to brush up on Marx, Lenin and Trotsky since that seemed to pretty much define the doctrinal stream they were swimming in. But eventually I’d seen and heard enough. One morning I tried to break the ice with him.

“So are you getting anywhere with the dock workers?” I tried to ask casually.

Alexi just looked at me coldly. “I know you’ve been spying on us,” he said. “Are you trying to freak on our plans for organizing labor and rat us out to your pal, Chief Bogen?”

That was Rubacava’s chief of police. “I don’t think I’ve ever even *seen* Bogen,” I said, “and I’m not spying on you.”

“Then what are you up to, cube?” he asked. “You’re always in the club, you hang around the docks...and don’t try to jive me it’s only about that Glottis cat...and now you’re quizzing me. You expect me to believe that *isn’t* spying?”

“Maybe I’m just interested in revolution,” I said. “Maybe I didn’t know the best way to get in with you guys. I’m on your side, not Bogen’s.”

“You look like a tool of the Man to me, Calavera,” Alexi said. “What do you know about the revolution?”

“I believe in justice,” I said. “If that isn’t enough for you, then *you’re* the tool here.”

That only made him angry. He got up close and looked down at me although he wasn’t that much taller. “You just keep your distance, Clyde,” he said and left.

“Well,” I said to myself after he’d gone, “I didn’t handle *that* too well.”

“I dunno why you’re so interested in these guys,” Glottis said to me when I told him the story that afternoon. “Everybody in town knows ’em. You keep telling me to be discreet, Manny, so what the hell’s so damn discreet about hollerin’ up and down the docks all day long?” His ears twitched in annoyance.

“Nothing, and that’s kind of the point,” I said. “No one’s going to suspect them of working for the LSA if they keep on making the same old noise.”

“Does anybody even know the LSA even exists ’cept you and me?” Glottis asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. People will, eventually.”

“OK,” Glottis said. “People might overlook these guys if they’re *too* obvious. But besides that...?”

“They’ve got convictions,” I said. “They’re trying to change things. That’s pretty rare. Most people just want to get out of the Land of the Dead as quick as they can. Alexi and his friends are about the only bunch I’ve seen in Rubacava who are different.”

“I dunno, Manny,” Glottis said with a shake of his head. “I’ve heard their speeches. I don’t think fixin’ the DOD is what these guys are after.”

I shrugged. “I don’t really care what they’re after. If they care at all about justice, then maybe they can be useful to the cause.”

“But you can’t even talk to ’em!” Glottis pointed out.

I sighed. “Yeah. I know. I don’t know what to do about that.”

“Then maybe you should forget about ’em,” Glottis said. “Maybe Miss Ofrenda would work out better.”

“Olivia?” I asked in surprise. “What do you know about her?” I didn’t think I’d ever mentioned her name to Glottis.

“I’ve met her,” he answered. “Max heard about the *Bone Wagon* from someone,” he explained. “Every Monday morning I go racing ’round the kitty track. There are a few other demons in town with fast cars and we keep Max’s employees entertained. The winner gets paid extra.”

“So how long has this been going on?” I asked.

“About a month,” he answered. “That’s where I’ve met Miss Ofrenda, at the track. She’s a nice lady. I think she’d be good for the LSA.”

“Maybe you’re right,” I said, but I had been thinking she might be useful for other reasons, such as a fixer for that little idea slowly growing in my mind. “Do you think you could arrange to introduce me?” It didn’t seem likely that I could have the discussion I wanted at her club.

“Sure,” he said, “if you can be at the track at 9 AM any Monday.”

“Oh, sure,” I said. “How do I manage that and hold down my job? We *still* don’t have anyone to close. I can’t get away.”

“Well, when you get someone to close, maybe you can take a Monday off sometime.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Maybe.”

That evening I went to the Blue Casket and decided to make my presence felt by the whole gang of ‘commies’, figuring I’d have better luck with all three together in a public place. Less chance of a big scene. Or, if nothing else, I’d let Alexi know his reaction earlier wasn’t going to deter me. The three had a table to themselves near the stage. I went straight over to them and said, loud enough to be heard over the music at least two tables away, “*Buenos Noches*, comrades!”

Alexi gave me a poisonous glare while Slisko snarled “Oh, fade out!” and turned his back on me.

Not a great start.

Gunnar looked a little embarrassed for his two friends. “Hey, Manny, no offense,” he said, and he sounded like he meant it, “but we don’t have time for Establishment types like yourself.”

I thought that was pretty funny. “What makes you guys think I’m so Establishment?”

Slisko turned toward me only long enough to snap “You smell like bacon and oppression, man!”

“¿*Qué?*” I asked. I thought I remembered the old Beat slang pretty well; but even so, sometimes Slisko didn’t make an ounce of sense. I took an empty chair from the next table and sat down.

Alexi didn’t like that at all. “Beat it, dinner jacket!” he snapped, banging his fist on the table.

“You’d get more attention if you used your shoe,” I said, “and what’s this ‘dinner jacket’ shit? Does this look like a tuxedo to you?” I asked, tugging at the lapel of my cheap sport jacket.

Slisko shared a sneering look with Alexi and said, “I hear the driver of a station wagon, the owner of a pasta maker,” Alexi started chuckling softly, “the hollowed-out husk of a cat who remembers to button down his collar but forgets his brother in the street.”

“Sorry, Manny,” Gunnar said without Slisko’s rancor. “There’s no room for the bourgeois in *our* revolution.” He stood up and said to the others, “I’m gonna get a foamer.” He started threading his way through the tables.

“Not a bad idea,” I said and stood to follow him.

“We don’t care *why* you’re going,” Slisko spat after me, “just go, man, go!”

I ignored him and trailed after Gunnar. When he reached the bar he got the attention of the tall, slightly stooped bartender (who, despite the darkness of the club, wore sunglasses) and ordered a beer. I ordered the same.

After taking a long pull from his glass Gunnar glared at me without malice and asked, “Just what are you after, cube?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I asked, curious to know just what would seem obvious to him.

“Alexi told us how you buttonholed him this morning,” he said. He shook his head and added, “Talk about four bars past obvious! Why not just flash a buzzer?”

“So you think I want to rap on you to the heat. Is that your own brilliant idea or did Alexi think of it for you?”

Gunnar bristled. “Listen, Clyde,” he thumped me, but lightly, in the chest with one hand, “I *listen* to Alexi but I do my *own* thinking.”

“That’s close!” I said. “I’ve listened to you cats long enough to know that Alexi does all the real thinking. OK, sure,” I conceded before Gunnar could interrupt, “you have a *few* ideas of your own. But when Alexi lays down the law...”

He didn’t let me finish. “Alexi knows the dialectic like no one. Get it?” He took an almost defiant pull from his glass.

“Yeah, I get it,” I said in a hard tone. “I get that the dialectic is a process, not a doctrine,” Gunnar projected a frown, “that it’s a give and take among ideas, among tactics, all tending toward one goal: justice.”

“Justice for who?” Gunnar asked with a bitter laugh.

“*Everyone*,” I said. A slight frown seemed to appear over Gunnar’s rigid features. “Well,” I sighed, “maybe you *don’t* have the revolutionary instinct Salvador is looking for.” Gunnar looked both angry and puzzled. Before he could make any reply I took my beer and went in search of an empty table. Olivia, sitting at the end of the bar with a man looking out of place in a sharp suit, gave me a curious stare as I stomped past.

LOLA

The next morning Alexi arrived as usual. He was pretty sullen and I kept strictly to business. As I was taking delivery I was distracted by a tapping at a window. I looked over but only saw a pigeon on the sill outside. I checked over what Alexi had brought to make sure nothing was missing. When I

glanced at the window again the pigeon was still out there. It seemed to be looking at me. I signed for the stuff and Alexi went on his way. I went outside and the pigeon kept on staring directly at me.

I slowly reached out and the bird held it's ground. It let me pick it up. There was a little tube attached to one leg. I took the pigeon inside and pulled the tiny slip of paper from the tube.

Manuel, it is indeed a great day for the revolution! Say *hola* to little Manny, the first enlisted messenger to serve the LSA! Please feed him some bread crumbs and send him back quickly, so we may know that our maiden flight was a success.

“Well, how about that?” I said. “*Hola*, little Manny.” I tore a corner off of Alexi’s invoice and wrote a short note: ‘Congrats, Sal. Manny did his job beautifully.’ I put it into the tube, fed the bird, carried him outside and released him. I watched him fly in the direction of El Marrow until he was out of sight.

When he was gone I turned to go back into the automat but stopped when I saw a woman standing a few yards away also looking after the pigeon. Her back was to me, but she seemed familiar. In fact, I was convinced I knew who she was.

“Meche...” I said when I got close to her. She turned around and let me see her lopsided face.

“Sorry, Manny,” Lola said, “it’s only me.”

“Oh,” I said, embarrassed and deeply disappointed. “Well, it’s good to see you, too. Why don’t we go inside.” I led Lola inside the Rub-a-Mat and said, “We’re not officially open yet, but what the hell, huh?”

Lola perched herself on a stool and asked, “What’s the story on the bird?”

“Oh, a friend of mine in El Marrow raises pigeons. Kind of a hobby. I get notes from him every now and then. What about you? How’d you get here?”

Lola opened her purse and pulled out a wad of money. “It’s a little smaller now, but this is what the guy in the DOD car gave to Eddie. I took it.”

“You shouldn’t have done that,” I said as I brought her a cup of coffee.

“I don’t care, Manny,” she said defiantly. “I *had* to get out of that dump! This won’t get me on a ship, but it gets me closer.”

“Well,” I said, “I’m sure that little road stop wasn’t the most exciting place in the world, but was it really that bad?”

Lola shrugged, “I got tired of Eddie treating me like his kid sister.”

“What was up with that anyway?” I asked as I got my own cup and a couple of bagels. I gave one to Lola.

“I don’t know. Men are always treating me like their kid sister or daughter or something. It was like that when I was alive, too. Even when I was old. I was 97 when I died, you know.”

“Really?” I asked. “I barely made it past 60.” I did a little calculating. “Were you ever a flapper?”

Lola laughed. “I couldn’t even get as far as a Brooks bob! Mother wouldn’t allow it. I went through the ’20s with long hair and long dresses.”

As I had always understood things, the last thing a flapper *ever* did was ask for permission. “So have you just gotten into town?” I asked.

“Yeah. I was walking up from the bus terminal when you came out with the pigeon.”

“Well, if you need a job we’ve got an opening here. You’ll have to talk to Jesus this afternoon, but I think you’d be perfect. I think you said you know him, right?”

“I don’t know, Manny,” she said. “I don’t think I want to do any more waitressing.”

“You wouldn’t be,” I assured her. “This is an automat, after all. The customers serve themselves. We just have to keep the joint clean and stocked. You don’t even have to talk to the customers most of the time, but it gets pretty boring if you don’t.”

“Would we work together?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said, “for a couple of hours, anyway.”

“That’s jake with me,” she said. “Where do you stop?”

“A place called the Normandie,” I said. “Whatever you do, stay away from the so-called Grand Plaza.”

“Not so good, huh? Well, I’m set for a while, so the Normandie it is. Eddie’s wad will last me even if I don’t get this job.”

“You’ll get it,” I said. “I’ll put in a good word for you with Jesus if that’s even needed. He’s sick of doing the close, anyway, so you’re as good as in.”

“Where do I hang my hat?” she asked.

I laughed and said, “I don’t want to be rude, but I got to finish up getting this place ready to open. No, no,” I said when Lola started to get off her stool, “you stay put, if you want. I’m not trying to kick you out. I just gotta dance with this mop for a while.”

“Once a wallflower, always a wallflower, I guess,” she said.

“You?” I said. “I doubt it.”

Lola just shook her head.

“Oh, man!” I exclaimed. I had forgotten to take the food into the kitchen. I got that taken care of before Jock came in and blew a gasket. When I got done and back to my mop, Lola was trying to hide her laughter behind her hands. “Yeah, yeah,” I said, “I’m sure I’m very entertaining.”

“You have no idea,” she said. “How you scurried!”

“Hmpf!” I said and scurried some more to make up the time I had spent talking to Lola.

Jesus remembered Lola from years back and hired her on the spot, then promptly announced he’d be taking the next couple of days off. The guy was getting very frazzled and I didn’t think it was just the staffing problems he’d been having. I showed Lola the ropes.

“There’s a guy who comes in here mid-afternoon every day,” I said. “Sometimes mid-mornings, too, depending on what kind of a night he’s had. Anyway, he’s a grump and a special project of mine. I make a point of trying to draw him out. I don’t make myself a nuisance, just sort of make an effort to connect with him.”

“Any luck?” she asked.

“Not a lot,” I admitted. “I’ve mainly got him to the point of saying hello without prompting. You have no idea what an accomplishment *that* is. Anyway, if you don’t mind, I’d like you to work on him, too. Just say hello, ask him how he is, that sort of thing. Maybe someday he’ll volunteer two consecutive sentences.”

“So what’s his name? What does he look like?”

“His name is Toto Santos and, believe me, you won’t have any trouble picking him out.”

When Toto did arrive, Lola nudged me and whispered, “That’s *not* him...is it?”

“Got it in one, sweetheart,” I said. “Let me see what you can do with him.”

“OK, Manny,” she said and took a deep breath. She marched over to Toto as he was getting his *lengua* and said brightly, “Hi there, Mr. Santos.”

Toto jumped slightly and said, “Just Toto.”

“OK, Toto. My name’s Lola.” She stuck out her hand.

Toto slowly took her hand and Lola shook it. Toto’s arm just flapped around in Lola’s grip. “I’m working here now, so you’ll be seeing a lot of me,” she said.

“Sure. Excuse me,” he said and left.

“Did I do all right, Manny?” she asked a little worriedly.
 “Baby,” I said, “you were perfect!”

And I wasn't kidding. After a few days Lola was getting Toto into actual—if short—conversations. Meanwhile, Jesus got back to managing the Rub-a-Mat. I gave him a few days more before asking for a Monday morning off. He was a little cranky about it. He quickly apologized for being so testy, of course.

I told him not to worry about it and then asked, “Are you all right, *mano*? I mean, this is a pretty sedate little business even when understaffed. I hope I'm not being too personal.”

“No, you're not,” Jesus said. “And to tell you the truth, I don't know what's the matter with me. I used to enjoy this place. I liked meeting new people as they passed through. But now... I don't know.”

“Maybe you're ready to move on,” I suggested.

“Is that your professional opinion?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Not really. I only saw people at the start of their journeys. Except for DOD people, that is. But it sounds to me like you're restless.”

“Maybe I am,” he admitted. “I've been in Rubacava a long time. I stopped to earn money for passage over the sea and got to like the place.”

“Rubacava's quite a town,” I said. “Do you think you've got the money you need?”

“Oh,” Jesus laughed, “more than enough! I've done well with my little automat. But maybe you're right. Maybe it is time to move on. I'd hate to just abandon the place, though.”

“Actually,” I admitted, “I'm kind of interested in it. I thought it was a nice piece of property ever since I first saw it.”

“Really?” he said. “You'd be interested in taking the Rub-a-Mat over?”

“Sure. I mean, if you *are* moving on. If not, I'm fine just working here.” The soft sell.

“You know,” Jesus said thoughtfully, “I don't think I'd mind leaving the place so much if you took it over. You've got drive, a strong sense of responsibility, and you're good with people. Maybe I should give it some serious thought.”

“Great,” I said. “So about that day off...?”

“OK, Calavera,” he said with a laugh. “Take next Monday off. It might be your last vacation for a long time.”

SOWING SEEDS

Glottis said he'd let the guys at the gate know to let me in since Feline Meadows wasn't open to the public on Mondays. I got in before 9 and talked with Glottis a little while as he was getting the *Bone Wagon* ready. There were about a dozen other demons with hot rods there. They had some pretty nice cars, but the *Bone Wagon* stood out. Feline Meadows employees were trickling into the seats and Glottis pointed Olivia out when she arrived.

I went to the section she was in. She was in a seat down toward the bottom. I just walked past and leaned against the railing. The demons' exhibition started with drag racing. They did four races and Glottis won three of them. Then they did a ten-lap race. When they started, Glottis fell behind.

“Glottis! What the hell are you doing?!” I screamed. At the end of the first lap he was dead last. “C'mon, *mano*, floor it! What's wrong with you?!” He kept behind for a while then crept up to second place. “You can do better than that! Glottis! *Glottis!*” In the final lap the *Bone Wagon* suddenly leapt forward. “*Glottis! Go! Punch it, goddammit!*” The *Bone Wagon* finished first. I realized then that Glottis had been showing off.

When I was done yelling I became aware that Olivia was standing at the railing next to me.

“Ye hornèd beast a friend of yours, man?” she asked dryly.

“Yeah,” I said. “He’s—was—my driver.”

“That’s a wailing chariot he’s got there,” she said.

“It’s what Glottis was made to do.”

“You’ve become quite a regular in the club, Calavera,” she said, changing the subject. “What happened to the frill in the heels you were with the first time?”

“Carla? Oh, your club’s just not her scene.”

“I can imagine,” Olivia said. “The Blue Casket is from the wrong side of the Man. Not the place for nice little bourgeois girls.”

“Your poem really threw her.” Olivia laughed. “How come you haven’t gone up much since then?”

“Oh, Manny! That would be like the whole place was just a big temple set up to worship me! I have to pace myself.”

“Not into the personality cult thing, huh?”

“You got it, daddy. I like to bring in fresh talent.”

“Yeah? Why don’t you have an open mic night? I remember a couple of clubs I went to when I was alive that did that. Of course, some of the readings were pretty bad, but those joints were more than just places to hang out and *talk* revolution.”

“That might not be a bad idea, actually.”

“Of course,” I said, “sometimes people can be a little timid. You might have to help get the ball rolling.”

“You’re shameless,” she said with a laugh. “Still, it might help business.” She gave me an appraising look. “Somehow you don’t really seem like the type that’d be into the Beat scene.”

“All my black turtlenecks are at the dry cleaners,” I said and Olivia chuckled. “I gotta admit, though, the Blue Casket is more of a nostalgia trip for me. There really isn’t the kind of place in town I could really go for. I may have to start it up myself.”

“Really?” she asked, a little interested. “What kind of joint do you have in mind?”

“Oh,” I said with a shrug, “it’s all a little vague still, but it’d be a nightclub, of course. A restaurant, bar, small casino. Very upscale.”

“Sinking into the bourgeoisie, aren’t you, man?”

“That’s where the money is,” I said. “I can think of better uses for it.”

She laughed. “I hear you, daddy.” Then she sobered. “But a casino...you’d be horning in on Maximino’s racket.”

Which was my concern exactly. The straightforward approach wasn’t likely to work, so I affected breezy unconcern and said, “I don’t think a roulette wheel or two is gonna put much of a dent in *this* place.”

It was Olivia’s turn to shrug. “You don’t know Maxie,” she said. She paused to light a cigarette. Outside of her club, she didn’t bother with the holder. “He might suddenly decide he’s been thinking about going into the casino racket for years.”

“Maybe you could help me get Max’s good side.”

“He might want a little consideration.” Olivia said, getting to the heart of things I thought.

“How much?”

“It’s not that simple, man. Max might stick with the protection scam, or he could demand a straight cut of the take, or maybe he’d just want a favor for one of his associates.” She shrugged again.

“Well,” I said, “it’s still early. I’m not even sure yet whether I can get the property I have my eye on.”

“Which property are you talking about?”

“The Rub-a-Mat. Jesus might be moving on. Maybe.”

“That’s pretty close to the Blue Casket,” Olivia said warily.

“Yeah, but we wouldn’t be competing for the same customers,” I said.

“So you say,” she said. “But unless you want serious trouble, you’d better swear to stay off my turf and mean it.”

“No problem,” I said, crossing my sternum. “And besides, you might get some spillover from my place from people who want to slum it a little.”

“I suppose I could find a better use for their money, too. Tell you what, Calavera. If you can convince *me* you’re straight, maybe I can persuade Max to go easy on you. Deal?”

“Deal,” I said.

“Remember, that’s ‘if,’” she said. “You’ve gotta work *hard* to get into bed with me, daddy.” She took a long drag on her cigarette, blew smoke toward me, and walked gracefully away.

When she’d disappeared down a tunnel toward an exit I shook myself out of it and turned toward a different tunnel as if to prove I didn’t have to follow her.

Since I had the whole day off, I spent the time wandering around town, taking in some of the sights I hadn’t seen yet, and finished up down at the docks intending to drop in on Glottis. I got distracted by the sight of Gunnar sitting on a pile of discarded machinery behind a warehouse. He was reading a small book.

He looked up, made a show of sighing, and went back to his reading when I approached. “I hope that’s not Barbara Cartland,” I said when I got close.

He tried to give me a stern look of Bolshevik disapproval but gave it up and laughed. “No,” he said. “Marx’s Amsterdam speech.”

I perched myself on some rusting iron ruin with a flywheel and asked, “Aren’t you worried about being labeled a Revisionist?”

“Not likely,” he said. “I think you have the wrong idea about us, Clyde.”

I laughed. “I show I know what you’re reading from a three-word description and you *still* take me for a cube.” I shook my head. “What does it take, *mano!*?”

“More than what you’ve got,” Gunnar said. “A lot more.”

“Oh, really?” I asked. “I think if you’re digging that speech then I must have made quite an impression the other night, otherwise you wouldn’t be reading something that argued a position Lenin declared invalid.”

“All right,” he confessed with a self-conscious laugh, “you got me. I was reminding myself of the unexpected directions the dialectic can lead us. I suggested to Alexi and Slisko they do the same but they just quoted Lenin at me.” He laughed again.

“Ah, so *that’s* why Alexi was so grumpy that morning.”

Gunnar’s chuckle died away as something drew his attention. I looked over in the direction of his gaze and saw Slisko about fifteen feet away looking sour. Gunnar stood and without a word walked over to Slisko who said something to him. Gunnar, louder than he needed to, replied with, “He’s not *that* bad, Sly.” Slisko said something else, obviously more pungent than his first remark. Gunnar shrugged and walked away. Slisko glared at me and then followed his friend.

Jesus seemed distracted when I went back to work the next day. I gave him his space. He had a lot of thinking to do and he took his time. Days passed. I sent Glottis out again to search for Meche but there was still no news and he found it harder to talk to people than before. They were becoming more reluctant to open up, either from being repeatedly questioned or having had their silence bought by Domino. I had similar trouble with my follow-up calls.

On the home front, my relationship with Carla was evolving from just friends into a little bit more, but there was a small hitch: Meche. Not that Carla could be in any way jealous, I thought. I

mean, how could she be jealous of a woman whose whereabouts were unknown and for whom I had only a professional interest? But by this time everyone in Rubacava knew I wanted to locate someone called Mercedes Colomar and I think, for Carla, Meche was almost the Other Woman. It didn't help that as time kept on passing, I kept getting more and more down about having no news about Meche.

One evening I took Carla to a quiet little restaurant in Rubacava's old quarter—a dense cluster of Plateresque buildings tucked into a little notch in the cliffs near the docks. It was one of those neighborhoods where time had done its damage and moved on only to be followed by chic entrepreneurs who renovated the buildings into ironic shops and sardonic bistros, all having a kind of shabby elegance like an aging starlet in a débutante's gown. Carla ate it up. I picked that particular restaurant because it didn't have a bar and served nothing stronger than wine.

We were seated at a small table near a wall, tucked between two suits of armor from the wrong period. A Gypsy violinist meandered among the tables. The owners were confused about geography, too. We got our drinks, ordered, and I settled into a quiet funk because it was nearly two months since I'd arrived in Rubacava; Carla clicked her fingertips on the table top, waiting for me to say something.

"Bad day?" she asked eventually, sounding idly concerned.

I shifted to sit up a little straighter in my chair and reached for my wine glass, filled with something white and a little too sweet for my tastes, possibly Riesling although God only knows how when not even grapes grow in the Land of the Dead. "No," I answered, "about average. I've been thinking and it's getting me down a little. I'm sorry." I elaborated with some moody silence.

Carla picked up her purse and opened it. She took out a penny and pushed it across the table toward me. It was a cute gesture. I picked up the coin and turned it over in my fingers.

"These don't buy as much as they used to," I pointed out.

Carla shrugged lightly and projected a small smile. "It's still the going rate."

"All right," I said and put the penny down. "I've been thinking about unfinished business. *Old* unfinished business. And I think the older it gets, the harder it's going to be to finish at all." She took a sip from her glass but didn't say anything. Nice to see she knew how to sip. "You know what the Petrified Forest is like. After all this time, you have to wonder." I didn't have to specify what unfinished business I was talking about or why I should be thinking about that damn forest.

Carla began to set her glass down quickly, then stopped, then lowered it so it didn't even click against the table. "Yeah, Manny, I remember the forest," she said, "but it's not all that bad if you just keep your head." She paused for a few moments. "Are you *sure* that Colomar dame is just old business to you?" she asked. The question seemed a little more insistent than it's sisters had been in the past. "I'm starting to think she's your secret wife."

"No, nothing like that," I came close to snapping. First Salvador, now Carla. "She was only a client." Which wasn't exactly true even if there was no romantic attachment but I couldn't explain that to Carla, not if I wanted to keep my cover. "I've told you that before. I only met her that one time, you know."

"Yeah, I remember; but, if she is just an old client, why are you making your demon buddy Glottis look for her?" Carla asked, sounding reasonable. "I mean, like, isn't your responsibility over once someone's on their way? It's not like you're even a reaper any more; and, anyway, even if her paperwork was messed up, like you always say, that wasn't *your* fault."

"No," I said, "maybe it's not, but you're only partly right. Sure, when someone walked out of my office, usually the only thing left to do was close the case and file the paperwork." I stopped and got a pack of cigarettes out of my breast pocket. I took my time taking one out and lighting it, giving myself more time to think over my next words. "But you're also partly wrong about it not being my fault. Some of it was. I mean, I should've been able to pick up on what was happening," like from the day Domino turned up, "but I didn't, and Meche got the wrong idea about her situation."

“Is that why you’re carrying a torch for her,” Carla asked, “because you feel guilty for making a mistake?”

“I am *not* carrying a torch,” I said with some heat. “And I’m not exactly guilty. Call it a sense of responsibility. I owe it to her to fix things. I’d feel the same way if it had been, I don’t know, let’s say Velasco.”

“You’re very conscientious,” she said a little coolly, either simply because of what I was saying to justify my concern for Meche or maybe just because I had used Velasco as an example.

I reached out to her hand that rested on the table. She didn’t withdraw it but she didn’t turn it over to clasp mine back. “Don’t be that way,” I said. “She might be lost...or worse. What kind of person would I be if that thought didn’t bother me?”

After a moment’s consideration she admitted, “Probably a pretty sorry excuse for one,” with a reluctant sigh, “but I *don’t* like being taken out by men who talk about other women.”

I shrugged and picked up the penny. “Want a refund?” I asked.

She pushed it and my hand back down, but gently. “Forget it,” she said. “I accepted delivery without checking the invoice, didn’t I?”

“*Caveat emptor.*” I knocked the ash from my cigarette and took my first real drag on it. “So what *do* you want to talk about?”

“You’ve had your turn,” she said, reaching over to take the cigarette out of my hand, “so *I* get to talk about old boyfriends.”

Conversations like that just aren’t conducive to a completely harmonious relationship. On the other hand, I’m not sure there has ever been such a thing as a completely harmonious relationship. Everyone has a past and you just have to get along with that as best you can. At least, that was my take on it.

MR. CALAVERA BUILDS HIS DREAM CASINO

One afternoon, shortly after Lola started her shift, I heard a tapping at a window. There was another pigeon I didn’t recognize as Little Manny. I took the message from it’s tube, scribbled a reply saying there were no developments on my end, and sent the bird on its way. I read the message before going inside.

Manuel, we have found the head of the serpent! Using the computer access you provided us, we picked up a thread that led us to the man who corrupted the Department of Death! His name is Hector LeMans. Once a small-time racketeer, he has grown fat and powerful by robbing the newly dead. Watch out for the name Hector LeMans, my friend, and be careful. Salvador.

That was something. And to think, we had part of the answer when I picked up that glowing trophy in Domino’s office. But who was this Hector LeMans, I wondered. Could he be Eva’s ‘fatty in a fez’? I thought of wiring Sal back to suggest that, but it seemed too remotely coincidental to be possible. ‘LeMans’ wasn’t a name I remembered from my time with the DOD, but it was a big organization. I shook my head, defeated in my solitary mental battle, and went back into the automat where I knew what was what. So I thought at the time.

“What’s up?” Lola asked. “Bad news?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. An honest, if worthless, answer.

Before Lola could say anything else, Jesus came down from his office and asked me to come up.

“I’ve decided to leave,” he said when we were both seated. “Staying seems...pointless. I’ve already got a ticket. I sail for Puerto Zapato in a couple of weeks.”

“Congratulations.” I almost said ‘mazel tov’, but I remembered the temporal dimension in time.

“So, that just leaves this place to take care of. I had thought of just giving the Rub-a-Mat to you outright, but...well, suffice it to say the dead can’t will property and my lawyer says just transferring the deed would only raise suspicions. Unwarranted, sure, but this is Rubacava and the public prosecutor sees Maximino’s hand in everything.”

There was nothing I needed to say to that, especially since I wanted to get into Max’s good graces through Olivia.

“All the same,” Jesus said, “I won’t be needing any money where I’m going. I’ve put aside what I need to get me from Puerto Zapato to the end of the line, and there’s quite a bit left over.” He took some papers from his desk. He handed one to me. “This shows the market value on this place.”

I looked it over. It matched what I had already learned. “Looks fair,” I said. “I think my bank will loan me what I need.” In fact, I already knew it would, having already talked to them while Jesus had been making up his mind. I actually only needed to get a loan for about half of it. The rest was coming from Glottis. His DOD salary had been small, but he’d been there a very long time and he’d led a simple life. He wanted to go in with me on the nightclub, so I promised to make him half-owner.

“Good,” Jesus said and then he shook his skull. “It makes the whole transaction absurd, but before I go, I’m going to transfer to you my surplus. That will include what you’re paying me for the automat.”

I was floored. “You’re kidding me, right?” I asked.

“No,” he said, “I’m not. I won’t need money any more, and I’m sure you can find some use for it.” That was an understatement. “Come on,” he said, standing up, “let’s get this taken care of now. I’m sure you’ve already got that loan worked out.”

I laughed as I got up. “Am I *that* transparent?”

“You’re no fool,” he answered. “You’ve got a head for business, Calavera, and only a fool wouldn’t be prepared for my decision.”

So we took care of it. In a short time I was the new owner of the Rub-a-Mat and a few days later Jesus took a cruise ship bound for the end of the line.

I already had an architect lined up. After I took over the Rub-a-Mat I dug up the original drawings and we talked about remodeling the place. Jesus had given me his money, as he promised, and I paid off my loan. The remainder of Jesus’ money would go into the Rub-a-Mat’s conversion, along with Glottis’ money and another loan from my bank (who weren’t much happy with how fast I’d paid off the first but were ecstatic with the idea of yet another, bigger loan). Jesus hadn’t been kidding when he said he’d done well with the place, but I needed to get a second loan to cover the full costs. After Jesus sailed I was almost ready to bring my plans to Olivia. But first I had to take care of Lola.

I came into the Rub-a-Mat while Lola was doing the close to talk to her about what I was planning.

“It’ll take a while to get this place made over into a nightclub,” I said, “and I’d like you to keep working for me. How long can you get by on Eddie’s bribe?”

“A long time,” she said. “I haven’t had to touch it since getting this job, and I’ve actually been able to save some of what I’ve been making.” Lola laughed. “Strange to think I’m solvent for the first time since Daddy lost everything in the crash in ’29.”

“Well, if you stick with me, baby, your savings will grow pretty fast. The house has the advantage, after all. I’d like you to help me supervise the construction work.”

"I don't know nothin' about architecture or contractors or anything like that!" Lola protested.

"Neither do I," I shrugged. "But I'll need help keeping an eye on things and I don't think Glottis is up to it." I tapped my skull. "If you can get by on what you've got, great. But if you don't want to dip into your stash, I'll understand."

"I'll help out, Manny," Lola said earnestly. "When do we start?"

"Not sure. Before we do anything, I've got to make sure we're square with Olivia Ofrenda, so that's the first thing we've got to take care of."

"What does Olivia have to do with anything?"

"According to gossip—and the woman herself, by the way—she's in tight with Maximino. She's more or less promised that if she doesn't like my club, she'll get Max to throw his muscle around."

"Such a *sweet* little girl," Lola said.

"She's just protecting herself," I said. "Not that she has anything to worry about. Her customers are riff-raff while we're going after the elite. Or maybe it's the other way 'round."

"So what do we do about her?"

"Well, I'll just show her my plans. That ought to convince her she's got nothing to worry about."

That Sunday Lola and I went down to the Blue Casket while it was still closed. I figured that if Lola was going to help me keep an eye on things, she might as well be in on everything from the beginning. I spread out my plans on a table and Olivia looked them over.

"So we've got the restaurant and the bar here," I said, pointing them out, "and the casino back here. We've got three roulette wheels, blackjack, poker, and craps."

"No slot machines?" Olivia asked.

"No!" I said emphatically. "That crowd I *don't* need."

"And no video gambling," Lola added, "and not even public phones."

"There's nothing here that gets on Max's turf," I said.

"Maybe," Olivia said, taking a long drag from the cigarette in its holder. "I'm not really all that concerned about Max. The real question is, do *I* need to worry about *you*?"

"Look at the plans," I said. "I don't see anything here that would appeal to your customers. Do you?"

Olivia puffed on her cigarette for a while. "No," she eventually said. "What else have you got?"

"What more do you want?" I asked. "Our two clubs might as well be on different planets, for Christ's sake!"

"What I want, Clyde, is for you to stay in your own back yard. Stick to fleecing the bourgeoisie and keep out of *my* part of town. Don't get ideas about expanding and *don't* advertise around the docks or in the radical papers. You get me?"

"Got," I said. "I don't mess with your stuff...and *you* don't mess with *mine*."

Olivia fixed her eye sockets on me for a few seconds. "OK," she finally said. "I can live with that." She jabbed a skeletal finger at me. "But don't you *ever* cross me, man."

"No problem," I said.

It took a little while to get the plans finalized and the contractors lined up. Then I shut down the Rub-a-Mat and we got started. The first step, of course, was getting the insides of the place ripped out. That was tough, emotionally. I liked the old place a lot but you can't fund a revolution with an automat, no matter how well it's been doing. Once the building was reduced to a shell, the reconstruction began.

One afternoon we got a visitor. I became aware of a few men standing at the edge of the property. One of them caught my eye. I went over to them and held out my hand to the one that stood out.

“You must be Maximino,” I said. Olivia had sent word through Glottis (she was making a show of not speaking to me) to expect him sometime. “I’m Calavera. Manny Calavera.”

Max took off his hat and did his best to grind my hand into a fine powder. “Pleased ta meet ya, Calavera,” he growled. “I would’a been at the ground breaking, but the track keeps me very busy.”

“No problem,” I said. “Would you gentlemen like to look the place over?”

Max turned slightly to his companions but I sensed his attention remained on me. “Why don’t you boys beat it, huh? Me and Mr. Calavera have business to discuss.” The others took a couple of slow steps and then stopped. Max turned his suddenly-baleful gaze full on them. “I said scram!” he snapped. The little gang quickly melted away.

“They worry about me,” Max said as I led him over to the building. “They’re afraid they won’t get their cut if I make money and they’re not around.”

“I guess it’s good not to have an entourage,” I said, risking a somewhat critical response.

“You’re smart, Calavera,” Max said, rewarding the chance I’d taken, “very smart.” He gave me a manly thump on the shoulder. “You’ll go far. So what’ve you got goin’ here?”

“Just a little club. Nothing big.” I took Max into the contractor’s hut and showed Max the plans. “Got a restaurant here, and a bar...”

“Got a mirror behind the bar?”

“Well...”

“Better put one in, Manny. A bartender needs to know what’s goin’ on when his back is turned. One of the speaks I had in Chi didn’t happen to have one. ‘Pimple’ Orwell got the drop on my boy ’cause there wasn’t a mirror an’ suddenly I didn’t have that place no more—so put a mirror *in*.”

“I’ll do that, Max.” He beamed at the familiarity. “Thanks. Let me tell you about the casino.”

“You puttin’ a casino in, too?” Max asked. Like he didn’t already know.

“Sure. It’s back through here.” I showed him on the plans. “We’ve got roulette, poker, craps, and blackjack.”

“Hey, that’s fuckin’ *great!*” Max clapped me on the shoulder. “I’ve always said this burg needs casino gambling.”

“Yeah?”

“Sure. People keep sayin’ to me, ‘Hey, Maxie! Put a wheel in that lounge of yours!’” Max shook his head. “That ain’t for me. I’m in the kitty business. This’ll take some of the heat off. But where the hell are the phones?”

“Well, there’ll be one in my office, and one in the cloak-room...”

“No, no, *no*,” Max said with an impatient shake of his skull. “Where the *customers* can get at ’em.”

“Oh, well, if someone wants to bet on a race, they can go to your track, Max.”

“That’s a mistake, Calavera,” Max scolded. “Let ’em call their bookies.” Max clicked his fingers. “Hell, what am I sayin’? I’ll arrange it so’s they can call the track direct.” I saw dollar signs spin in Max’s eye sockets as he started figuring the kickback into his betting revenue. “We’ve gotta work together to make this a first-class burg ’cause I tell ya, Manny, those punch boards just don’t cut it.”

I nodded. “You’re right, Max.”

“Well,” Max said as he put his hat back on, “I guess you’ve got a good little club here, Manny. Not as nice as my girlfriend’s, of course, but...” Max shrugged.

“Did you say...your girlfriend?”

“Hey, Manny! Don’t pretend you don’t hear the gossip. It’s not a secret any more. Olivia and I are officially an item.” He clapped my shoulder again. “Don’t forget to invite me to the grand opening.”

“I won’t, Max,” I said.

Max left the hut after giving my hand another crushing. After taking a few steps, he turned halfway toward me. “By the way,” he said over his shoulder, “Chief Bogen is a pal of mine. Be sure ’n’ show him a good time if he turns up in your club.” He nodded and walked away.

“Oh, man!” I breathed.

CROSSED WIRES

“The police chief?” Glottis asked when I told him the story. “Why in the underworld does Max care if *he* has a good time?”

“My guess is it’s Max’s price for not stomping on me. I make Bogen happy...Max is happy.”

“I dunno, Manny,” Glottis said in a cautious tone, “I don’t think I like this crowd.”

“Don’t worry, *mano*,” I said. “As long as we make money,” and Max had reputation for treating his associates well, “I don’t care *how* sleazy our company is.”

“But what about Miss Colomar?” Glottis asked pointedly.

“That’s what this is all about, buddy.”

“Huh?” His ears twitched a couple of times.

“Look, we haven’t had any luck finding Meche, yeah? My guess is she’s hiding out. We’re looking for her, Domino’s looking for her. I don’t know about *you*, but that’d make *me* nervous as hell. So I put my name up in lights, make a big splash, and maybe *that*’ll draw her out.”

“Maybe,” Glottis said doubtfully.

“And, as a bonus, any profit the club makes I can funnel to the LSA.”

“That’s a pretty good idea,” Glottis admitted. “Hey!” he suddenly exclaimed, pulling a newspaper out of his pocket. “Did you see this?”

“I haven’t had much time for the papers lately,” I said.

“That’s too bad, Manny, ’cause you’re missing some interesting stuff. Take a look at this,” he pointed out an article.

“*Hijole!*” I said as I read it. “I had no idea the LSA was getting so busy.” Hell, I hadn’t even known we were making the papers at all.

“That’s nothin’, Manny,” Glottis said. “A couple’a weeks ago, they raided this warehouse, took a lot of chemicals, broke into some DOD offices, and *then* ransacked ’em good.”

“Yeah?” I hadn’t heard about any of this from Sal. Not too surprising, considering how far from the main action I was. “Whose offices?”

“Dunno, Manny. Papers didn’t say.”

“So the DOD decides to arm its security agents and the LSA knocks over the shipment. Sal’s on top of things, all right,” I said admiringly.

“If you say so, Manny,” Glottis said, less so, “but I don’t like it. People are gonna get hurt.”

“I know, buddy,” I agreed, “but, somehow, I don’t think Hector’s gang will give up without a fight. The right tools for the job, you know?”

Glottis shrugged. “Yeah, well, I *still* don’t like it.”

It was my turn to shrug. “So what can you do about it?”

“Hey, I almost forgot!” Glottis exclaimed. “This came for you while you were away.” He held out a telegram.

“What’s it say?” I asked.

“Dunno, Manny. I didn’t open it.”

So I opened it myself. It was from Salvador, and it was a pip.

MANUEL

I AM TROUBLED BY REPORTS OF YOU BUYING THE AUTOMAT
AND CONVERTING IT INTO A NIGHTCLUB STOP ITS FINE FOR
YOU TO BE COMFORTABLE IN RUBACAVA FOR YOUR LONG
STAY BUT I PRAY YOU HAVENT LOST SIGHT OF THE LARGER
GOALS STOP IT IS NOT IN THIS WORLD BUT THE NEXT IN
WHICH OUR TRUE GLORY LIES
SALVADOR LIMONES

“Well, isn’t that just ducky,” I growled. I grabbed my jacket and put it on. “Keep an eye on those building supplies, *carnal*...just until Lola gets here.” It was time to get a few things settled.

I went down to the Blue Casket. Olivia had been a little inhospitable when work started on my club but I think it was an act to telegraph the proper attitude to her customers. She reverted to normal once she saw that her customers were not only uninterested, some were openly hostile. Like Alexi and Slisko.

Gunnar was a somewhat different story. We had started to bump into each other from time to time intentionally by accident; sometimes around the dockyards, sometimes at the bar of the Blue Casket, wherever, and talked. When word spread around town I was going to open a nightclub, Gunnar dropped by the night I closed the Rub-a-Mat for good. Lola and I had cleaned out the kitchen and all the food slots and loaded it into a truck Jock had rented to haul the stuff down to the demon quarter of Rubacava. I’d heard that some of the Sea Bees had been laid off and I figured they could use the food. After Jock had taken off and Lola had gone home, I went back into the Rub-a-Mat to sort of say good-bye to the old place as it was before I started transforming it. When I was done moping around I went up to the office to collect the few papers I hadn’t yet moved to my hotel room, stuffed them into my briefcase, and went down to the front doors. Before I reached them there was a tapping at the glass and I saw a shadowy figure outside. It was Gunnar. Something about his body language made me let him in.

“Fraid I can’t offer you anything, *mano*,” I said as I closed the doors behind him. “I just sent what’s left of the food down to the out-of-work Sea Bees.”

“I don’t need anything to eat, Clyde,” Gunnar said. He gave me a searching look. “What I need is an explanation.” He paused to take a deep breath. “A *casino!*?” He shook his head. “I was really starting to think you were one of us.”

I sighed, walking into the dining area and turning on the lights. “There are a lot of ways to fight a revolution,” I said, “and most of them need money.”

Gunnar followed me in and remained standing while I sat down at a table. “You truly are a disappointment,” he said. “You really had me with all that jive about justice...and it was all just smoke and mirrors.”

“No. Don’t say that,” I said, almost pleading. “And sit down. Let’s talk like the comrades you *know* we are.”

He sat down but said, “I don’t know that at all. Give me a reason to believe in you. Like join us on the docks. Help us organize the workers.”

“You know I’d like to.” Gunnar gave me a look of bitter disappointment. “I really would,” I insisted, “but believe me when I say I’ve got a bigger job to do. There are people in El Marrow who

need the kind of money a casino can pull in. There's another revolution, Gunnar, one fighting corruption and oppression much worse than that of the maritime union."

Gunnar looked at me, a calculating look in his eye sockets. "Supposing I wanted to believe you," he said, "why haven't you said anything about this before?"

"I can't talk openly about my underground gig, man, or I'd put the whole scene in dangerville."

"Maybe so," he allowed. "Maybe not. I don't know. But I *do* know that a man with a cause doesn't keep quiet about it...not around his comrades." He was twisting the knife and he knew it. I'm sure he wanted to see how I'd react.

"You know," I said after a few moments, "you remind me of my friend, Salvador Limones."

Gunnar just stared for several seconds. The eyes he no longer had seemed to go wide and he took the bait. "*You* know Salvador Limones?" he breathed. I had never spoke of Salvador to Gunnar apart from mentioning his name that one time, but I knew that word of the LSA was starting to get around the radical grapevine. Gunnar leaned forward, eager for news. He was hooked. "What's he like?"

"He's not a man you can know from a description," I said. "You have to meet him." I shook my head. "But I'm not sure you or your two friends ever will."

Gunnar looked confused and maybe a little hurt. "I don't get you."

"I'm talking about genuine revolutionary instincts, *carnal*. That's what Sal is looking for, not just cats who can spout Marx and Engels and Lenin chapter and verse. The revolution isn't stock answers to a catechism." I stood up and moved toward the doors. "I don't know if you three will ever get it."

Gunnar knew a dismissal when he heard one. He got up, followed me out, and walked slowly away as I locked up. From that night on, whenever we crossed paths, Gunnar was even more polite than before. We spoke alone several times after that meeting in the old Rub-a-Mat and he said he was trying to get Alexi to see I wasn't a class enemy, but he didn't seem to be having a lot of luck. He was having even less, if that were possible, with Slisko.

So when I walked into the Blue Casket after getting Sal's telegram, Gunnar gave me a friendly nod while Alexi tried to pretend I wasn't there.

Slisko wasn't the quiet type. "Hey, look who's making the scene!" he exclaimed. "It's Manny Calavera, the up, the down, the backside of the *nouveau riche*!"

"Hey, trust funder," I needled him in return, sitting down uninvited (the only way I ever sat at their table in those days). I turned my attention to Gunnar. "So, do you think you're ready to meet Salvador Limones?" I was speaking for the others' benefit, mostly, and Gunnar seemed to understand because he kept quiet.

"Salvador Limones?" Slisko asked incredulously as if on cue. "Salvador Limones is a fairy tale, a spook story the Man tells the masses as he puts them to sleep."

Alexi couldn't ignore that. "Idiot!" he bit off. "Salvador Limones is a very real and a very great, great man." He turned to glare at me. "And it's a sure thing he'd have nothing whatsoever to do with *you*."

"A sure thing?" I said, standing up. "You're forgetting? that the odds are *always* in the house's favor." Alexi glared. "I can have Salvador here within a week." Slisko laughed and Alexi just looked angry. Gunnar looked hopeful. I turned and walked toward the exit.

Olivia stopped me before I got there. "*Who* is Salvador Limones?" she asked.

"Olivia!" I chided. "What kind of revolutionary are you?"

"Who said I was a revolutionary?" she asked with what I took to be mock innocence. "Still, maybe I should study up. It could impress the customers."

I laughed and started for the door again. "I gotta go. Catch you later, hep chick."

"Keep practicing that lingo, man," she called out after me, "you'll get it."

The truth was, despite the certainty I displayed to Alexi's gang, I wasn't sure whether I could get Salvador to Rubacava at all, much less inside a week. If I couldn't, then the LSA would never get any traction there. I had little credit with Alexi and none with Slisko and while I had practically landed Gunnar, his friends weren't exactly holding on to his coat tails. There was no one else I knew in Rubacava who would have been as suitable. Maybe Olivia, but her connections to Maximino bothered me a little and I wasn't sure how to approach her without giving too much away. I contacted Salvador the next morning but I only had to say I needed him to come to Rubacava. He didn't want me saying anything over the phone. He said he'd come if I sent Glottis for him, so I did.

GARDEN PARTY

Glottis had been gone a couple of days when something very disturbing happened. Carla and I were at a quiet little restaurant in an upscale part of town on the largest island. The *maitre d'* told me I had a phone call. It was Lola and she was very agitated.

"Manny," she exclaimed when I got on the wire, "you gotta get over here right away!"

"Lola? What's up?"

"Something *terrible* has happened! I've already called the cops. Please, Manny...hurry!"

"The cops?! What's going on?"

"I don't know! I don't know what to call it! Stop asking questions and get over here!"

"OK, Lola. I'm on my way." I hung up and went back to Carla.

"I gotta go," I said to her. "Something's up. Waiter! Check!" I took a long drag on my cigarette before stubbing it out

Carla folded her arms. "Is it about that Mercedes Colomar?" she asked coldly.

"No," I answered. "Lola was too upset to say what it's about, but it's serious enough for the cops to be involved. Thanks." I glanced at the check and peeled off a few bills. "Forget the change." I headed for the door but glanced back to see Carla following me. "Why don't you finish your dinner?"

Carla pushed me forward. "You're killing me."

We got to the construction site. It was full of flashing lights and cops. Fortunately, being at the top of the cliff, the activity hadn't attracted too big a crowd.

"Manny!" Lola cried out when she saw me.

"What's all this about?" I demanded when she had rushed up to me.

She pointed over to a pile of supplies beyond the contractor's hut. "It's over there." She shuddered.

"What is?"

"Why don't you just go and look," Carla snapped. She took Lola by the shoulders and led her aside. "It'll be all right," she soothed, the younger woman taking the role of the elder.

I went over to where Lola had indicated but was stopped by an officious-looking cop. "Are you Calavera?" he asked.

"Yes, I am. What's going on here?"

"That's what we're trying to find out. Come and look at this." He led me around to the far side of the pile and pointed.

"*¡Dios mio!*" I exclaimed. "Irisés!" I felt sick and turned away. "Any idea who he was?" I asked the cop.

He shook his head and said, "I'm wondering what you might know about this."

"Me?" I exclaimed. "I just got here. Didn't Lola see or hear anything?"

The cop looked hard at me, then shrugged. "Most likely he was sprouted elsewhere and just dumped here. Unfortunately."

A long car pulled up just then and a slow-moving, tall but stooped-over man got out. The cop waved him over. “Over here, Membrillo,” he called out.

“Bogen,” the man said by way of greeting. He glanced at me and then back at the police chief. “What have you got?” he asked Bogen.

“Another sprouting,” Bogen answered. “Seems like the others.”

Membrillo knelt beside the man-shaped vegetation and started spreading apart leaves and stems. “Hmm,” he said. “No clothes. Anything found around here?”

“No,” Bogen said. “Nothing yet.”

Membrillo turned the sprouted soul partly over and felt around. “There’s a nick at the back of the skull,” he said. He looked up at Bogen. “This was an execution.” I shuddered. “See if you can find the dart, this time. Maybe it can be traced.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know,” Bogen said angrily. He made himself calm down. “OK, let’s get him into the wagon. I want an ID as soon as possible.” Membrillo took a notebook out of a pocket and began writing.

Bogen directed a couple other cops to get a body bag out of Membrillo’s car. They waited until Membrillo stopped writing. He tore off a sheet and handed it to Bogen. Then they put the sprouted soul into the bag and carried it to the car.

“I’ll finish the preliminaries tonight,” Membrillo said to Bogen. “Send me in the morning whoever you think I should see.” With that he went back to his car and drove off.

“OK, Calavera,” Bogen said, “I want you to go down to the morgue tomorrow morning. Maybe you can identify the victim.”

“Lola, too?” I asked.

“Yes,” Bogen said. “And that girl you arrived with. I’m going to leave a man here. You go home. Sergeant! Let’s clear these people off!” He moved away to direct his men in driving away the small group of spectators.

I collected Lola and Carla. “C’mon,” I said, “let’s get out of here.”

Lola hesitated. “What about—”

“Bogen’s leaving someone on guard. Let’s go somewhere and take our minds off things for a while.”

Later that night, after parting company with Carla and Lola (who had accepted Carla’s invitation to spend the night at her place), I went back to my hotel and was letting myself into my room when a shadow detached itself from near the fire exit down the hall.

“Sorry I startled you,” Gunnar said after I climbed down from the ceiling. “Got a minute?”

“Sure, *mano*,” I said. “Come in.” I pushed the door open and Gunnar followed me in. “Drink?” I asked.

Gunnar just shook his head and jerked his thumb back toward the door as he walked over to the curtained windows. I shut the door and turned to see him carefully opening a tiny gap in the curtains to peer down toward the street.

“You’re very secret agent tonight,” I said with a laugh.

Gunnar turned toward me and said, “I heard about what happened.”

“Yeah?” I sat down on the edge of the bed and kicked off my shoes. The tie came off next and was tossed somewhere on the sheets behind me. “What have you heard?”

Gunnar moved over to the small table near the door and leaned back against it, folding his arms. “A sprout was left at the construction site. Maybe it doesn’t mean anything, but there are rumors.”

I sighed. “I’ve had a long day, so...”

“Sometimes cats from El Marrow make the scene,” Gunnar said. “Some hear things there about a rogue DOD agent making trouble in Rubacava.” That was interesting. “The stories aren’t very specific,” Gunnar said with a shrug, “other than to say that the Man isn’t very happy. Could be he’s unhappy enough to send the troublemaker a message.”

“Or maybe,” I said, “bad things just happen and shit has to land somewhere.”

Gunnar nodded slowly. “You can’t escape gravity.” He stood away from the table. “Like you said, it’s been a long day and it’s time for me to scat.”

“Thanks for dropping by,” I said as Gunnar went out and shut the door behind him. It wasn’t until he was gone that I realized his gravity remark wasn’t really meant as agreement.

The next morning I went to the morgue with Lola. Carla had already gone on her own. Lola was still pretty upset and wasn’t looking forward to having to take a close look at the sprouted soul. Neither was I, truth be told. Seeing it in near darkness was enough for me and Membrillo’s digging around in the foliage had given me nightmares.

When we got to police headquarters we met Maximino coming out of the corridor we were directed to go down. “What are you doing here?” I asked in surprise.

“Same thing you are, Calavera,” he growled. “Takin’ a look at that corsage they found on your property.”

“Yeah? Anyone you know?”

Max shook his head. “No. And I didn’t recognize the last five either.”

“Five more sproutings?!” I exclaimed.

“Yeah. All in the last three months, ta boot. I’m tellin’ ya, Calavera...if this keeps up, business ain’t gonna be so hot. People’ll stay away from here if they get it in their heads they’ll be sprouted, I’ll tell ya that twice.”

“This isn’t good,” I said, but was perversely relieved. All those sproutings punched a giant hole in Gunnar’s theory that someone was sending me a message. Then I noticed Max staring at Lola.

“Oops,” I said. “Manners. Max, this is my friend Lola. She’s the one who found the body.”

“Pleased ta meet ya, Lola,” Max said. He took her hand and kissed it. “Not the kind of thing a nice girl like you should hafta see.”

“Even worse for the guy that got shot,” Lola said weakly.

“She’s got heart,” Max said to me. He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a little card. He handed it to Lola and said, “Here ya go. A temporary pass to the High Rollers’ Lounge at the track. Come see the kitties, knock back a few, forget about your troubles for a while, OK?”

“Sure...Max,” Lola said, taking the card.

“Hey, Max,” I cut in, “just why is Bogen dragging *you* down here to see these sproutings? I can’t imagine you being connected to something like this.”

“You’re smart, Calavera. I already told ya that, right? Bogen, he’s not that smart. He sees a hit, he thinks of me, the rat.” Max put his hand over his sternum. “Me, I’m a legitimate businessman. I don’t have time for the rough stuff and I make sure my boys don’t, either.”

“Then maybe some new outfit is moving into town,” I said, suddenly thinking of Hector and Domino.

Max gave me a surprised look. “You might have something there. I hadn’t thought of that. It’s a cinch Bogen won’t.” I sensed his frown. “I’ll hafta look into this.” He started to walk away. “If someone *is* muscling in on my territory, I’ll give ’em what for!”

I took Lola’s elbow and steered her down the corridor to the morgue. “C’mon, let’s get this over with.”

“He doesn’t seem all that bad,” Lola said.

“Max?” I shrugged. “I guess not. But you heard what he said. He’s a ‘legitimate businessman’ and you know what that means.”

Lola did her own shrug. “We’re all stuck in the Land of the Dead. You know what *that* means.”

“Not a bad point, actually,” I said. We came to the morgue. “You ready?”

“Are you?” she asked.

“Are you kidding?”

We went in. Membrillo was waiting for us. “I’ll make this quick,” he said. “Look at this face and tell me if you recognize it.”

Membrillo had cleared the vegetation from the skull. It was covered by green stubble, but the face was clear enough.

“I’ve never seen him before,” Lola said. “Manny...” she ran out.

I took a step toward the door.

“She’ll be all right,” Membrillo said, “eventually. First things first.”

I sighed and made myself look closely at the sprouted man’s face. “No,” I said. “Never saw him before.”

“No one ever does,” Membrillo said, “but thank you for your time.” He turned back to the body and started feeling among the leaves and flowers.

I was glad I no longer had a gag reflex. “What exactly are you looking for?” I asked.

He glanced back at me. “I’m digging for a treasure part of me does not wish to find. When I uncover that sad doubloon that tells me who this poor soul is, my reward is not riches, but the chance to make a phone call and break someone’s heart.”

“Doesn’t anyone ever come to claim them?” I asked. Membrillo shook his head. “What a sad story.”

“Death makes sad stories of us all.”

I wondered if he was always this cheerful. “How do you do this job?”

“Without becoming jaded, you mean? My secret to happiness is that I have the heart of a twelve-year-old boy.” He pointed toward a counter. “I keep it over here in a jar. Would you like to see it?”

“No!”

“Sorry.” He sounded amused rather than sorry. “Old coroner joke.”

“Well,” I said, turning to go, “don’t let me bother you.”

“Always nice to have visitors,” Membrillo said as I left.

I found Lola out in the lobby. She was sitting hunched over with her face in her hands. I patted her shoulders. “You OK?”

She looked up. “I feel sick and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“You and me both. Let’s get out of here.”

When we got back out on the street, Lola tugged my sleeve. “I don’t know if I can go back, Manny.”

“Hey, it’s not like you to be a quitter,” I chided.

“I’m not,” she said. “It’s just... I mean, I...” she trailed off. “Maybe we’re in danger,” she finally got out.

“We’re not,” I insisted. “That body was just dumped there. It’s got nothing to do with us.”

“But what if more show up?”

I shook my head. “That won’t happen. Having a pattern would be the surest way of getting caught. Whoever did this thought our mess would make a good hiding place, that’s all. Next time—if there is a next time—they’ll find a new spot. We’re free and clear now, I promise.”

“Well, OK, Manny. If you say so.” Lola took my arm and we started walking. “Maybe I’ll go to the track tonight.”

“Sure,” I said. “You could use a little distraction.”

IMPRESSING COMMIES

Things were a little strained that day at the construction site. The workers were badly rattled when they learned there had been a sprouting, but the foreman got them going after a while. The next day they were back up to speed. In the afternoon of that second day the *Bone Wagon* came roaring into the parking lot. Salvador climbed down from the back and Glottis peeled away to the docks. I was relieved to see Salvador in a gray suit and not his fatigues. I walked over to him where he stood looking things over.

“Welcome to Rubacava, Sal,” I said.

“Thank you, Manuel.” He clasped my hand.

I gestured over to the far edge of the lot and we started walking there. “We’ve got to get together on a couple of things,” I said. “But first, how’s Eva?”

“She is well, and sends her love.”

I sat down on the curb and, after a brief hesitation, Salvador dropped his small grip and joined me.

“I hear you’ve been busy in El Marrow.”

“Yes,” Salvador said as he got out two cigarettes, passing one to me. “The movement now has true momentum. Thank you,” he said as I gave him a light. “Our numbers are rapidly growing. Much of this is due to our communications and intelligence systems, both of which we owe to you.”

“Money’s a problem, though, isn’t it?”

Salvador shrugged. “We are not seeking profit, my friend, but I will admit we are having trouble financing our operations. This is something I did not anticipate.”

“I bet it’s especially tough when you’re up against guys who can break into the DOD’s piggy bank.”

“This is true. Our agents are committed, but we must often deal with those who do not share our convictions. And we must equip ourselves for the struggle.” Salvador puffed on his cigarette. “Forgive me, Manuel, but may I ask you where you are going with this?”

“Do you know what a successful casino can bring in?” Salvador shook his head. “It can be a lot, and the people in this town are begging for new places where they can throw away their money. See what I’m getting at?”

“I believe I do. But this may be a dangerous game, assuming you can become profitable. What about debt?” he gestured at the construction work.

I shrugged. “It’s pretty light, actually. The guy I bought this place from left for the Ninth Underworld. He did all right with the automat. He kind of liked me and gave me everything over and above what he needed to get him to the end of the line. And Glottis has chipped in some of his own savings. There’s quite a night life in Rubacava. It shouldn’t take too long to start turning a profit.”

“Perhaps,” Salvador said thoughtfully. “I won’t deny that this might ease our financial problems, but channeling funds to us may be dangerous.”

“I agree and that brings us to the second issue, the one I need help with.” I took a final drag on my cigarette and flicked it away. “Sal, I’m stymied. I don’t have a computer and there aren’t any disaffected DOD employees to work with here. Most of the people in this town are trying to get on a boat, or they’re just out for the ride, or something. Getting involved with *any* cause is the last thing on their minds.”

Salvador nodded. “We face such difficulties in El Marrow as well, but I do recognize your lack of adequate intelligence. This is why I have not been pressuring you despite our urgent need to acquire other agents in Rubacava.”

“Well, there are some guys that might work out—”

“Excellent!”

“...except most of them won’t give me the time of day. They’re a bunch of old-fashioned commie beatniks.” Salvador seemed amused. “Pretty hard-core but they’re the only people I’ve met here who want to change things.”

“And you think they would be suitable for the LSA?”

“They’re all primed for revolution. And no one takes them seriously. It’s a great cover. They could work for us and no one would pay any attention. Trouble is, I’ve only managed to convince one of them that I’m not a tool and he’s not the leader of the bunch.” I gestured over to the construction.

“The club doesn’t help much.”

“I would imagine not,” Sal said.

“But the leader of the group, Alexi, has heard of you. You’re more than OK with him. I’m thinking that if you meet him, and I’m with you, some of that nobility of yours will rub off and I can finally get somewhere.”

“Perhaps, Manuel. But this meeting must be properly staged, and there is no reason to expect him to believe I am who I say I am.”

“Well,” I said, “you can be pretty persuasive. I’m not worried about that. But how to arrange this meeting...that could be tricky. I doubt he’d accept an invitation from me.”

“Leave matters in my hands, my friend.”

We waited until that night. I told Salvador where he could find Alexi and his gang. While I waited in the contractor’s hut at the construction site, Salvador went down to the Blue Casket after changing back into his fatigues. He found Alexi with his friends and told them to follow. When Alexi asked why, Salvador answered, “For the revolution...and for justice.” Alexi and Gunnar followed. Slisko elected to stay behind. Alexi hesitated when he saw where they were going. Salvador got him moving again. I was behind the door of the hut when they came in.

“LSA headquarters in Rubacava?” Alexi was asking skeptically. “Calavera may be a tool, but I seriously doubt you could operate under his nose.”

“Do you think this is game?” Salvador asked sharply. “We are not playing at revolution, my friend. There is no prize for the most radical act.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Just this: we are *not* operating under Manuel’s nose.” Salvador sat down behind the small table that passed for a desk and glared up at Alexi.

“I’ve been trying to tell you—” Gunnar tried to interject.

Alexi spoke over him to Salvador. “I suppose that fat cat is charging you rent, right?”

Salvador shook his head. “You really are very stupid.” Alexi stiffened and Gunnar laughed. He had already spotted me, probably expected me, having been between me and Alexi as they had entered. Salvador looked over to where I stood in the shadows. “I don’t know what you see in this fool.”

“Sometimes,” I began and Alexi jumped and spun around, “I don’t know, myself.”

“*Calavera?!?*” Alexi exclaimed as I stepped forward into the little circle of light cast by the lamp on the desk. I was wearing the clothes I had worn during the trip to Rubacava. Alexi looked back and forth between Salvador and myself, each of us wearing identical outfits (except mine being a little more stained despite the best laundering Rubacava had to offer). “What the *hell* is going on here?”

“You’ve been drafted, soldier,” Salvador said. “You and your two friends.”

“Not me,” Gunnar insisted. “Since you’re here, Manny must be everything he said he was. I’m a volunteer.”

Alexi looked at Gunnar as if he had suddenly grown a suit of skin. “What is this all about?” he asked warily.

“It’s about justice!” Salvador snapped. “What else?” He stood and moved around the desk to stand against the door. “I believe we can consider this *your* headquarters, Manuel,” he said.

I edged past Gunnar and sat down behind the table. “Are you ready to be reasonable now?” I demanded of Alexi.

“Define ‘reasonable’,” he demanded himself in a snide tone.

“Are you with the cause or not?”

“*What* cause?” he asked. He turned toward Salvador. “I know who you are. I know what you stand for. He,” Alexi thrust a skeletal finger in my direction, “*he* is a class enemy. *He—*”

This time Gunnar did the interrupting. “Oh, get with it, man!” he snapped. “I’ve talked to the cat. I know where he’s coming from.”

Alexi waved his hand at Gunnar, as if brushing away a fly. “I want it from Limones,” he said. “I want *him* to tell me where Calavera is coming from.”

Salvador shook his head. “No, my friend. Manuel, he will tell you himself. He is in charge here in Rubacava. I am only his guest; and you will do very well not to presume to know what I stand for in the here and now.”

“All right,” Alexi said. He turned toward me. “So tell me, *are* you LSA cats for the revolution or not?”

“Which revolution?” I asked. “The one demanded by Marx’s historical dialectic?”

“Of course!” Alexi exclaimed impatiently.

“OK, but his dialectic is materialist, right?” I spread my hands. “Yet here we are. Dead.” I thumped my fist lightly on the table top. “Despite appearances, there’s no matter here. Where does the Land of the Dead fit into that dialectic?”

Alexi didn’t say anything.

“It doesn’t,” Gunnar said. “What we need is a *spiritualist* dialectic but I don’t think that’s what you’re talking about, are you, man?”

It took me a second but I realized that Gunnar was trying to advance the argument, not trip me up.

“No,” I agreed, “I’m not. You want to organize the dock workers against the union?” I aimed a forefinger at Alexi. “Great. I’m with you all the way. Do you want to know why? Because the union is crooked and the workers are getting a raw deal and I want justice for them, same as for anyone else. But this is the Land of the Dead, comrade. Marx was dealing with the Land of the Living. His dialectic’s out. It doesn’t apply here, except maybe as an abstraction. Without Gunnar’s spiritualist dialectic,” whatever that was, “we’re just left with justice, and that applies even here. Are you following me?”

“I’m not sure. What do you mean by that? Justice for whom and how? Marx gives us the tools for answering those questions. If those tools don’t work in the Land of the Dead—and I’m not convinced of that—then just what *are* we working with here?”

“If you want an all-embracing ideology, I can’t give you one,” I admitted. I didn’t honestly think I wanted one. Having all the answers, or at least thinking you had, was just trouble. “But I *can* spell out the situation we’ve got here.” I paused. Not even Gunnar was going to like what I was about to say. “Do you know what Sal and I were doing before the LSA was formed?”

Alexi shrugged. “Marking time like everyone else.”

“Hardly,” I said. “We were reapers.”

“Salvador Limones!?” Gunnar exclaimed at the same time Alexi angrily asked “You expect me to believe that Salvador Limones was a tool of the Man?”

I laughed. “You really have no clue how this world works, do you? Oh, well. Let’s try this. Can you agree that some people lived their lives better than others?”

“By whose rules?” Alexi demanded.

“By the powers that be,” I snapped, getting a little angry. “By whomever or whatever pulls the strings. A power that we can’t see, hear, or touch.” And a power that doesn’t seem to give a damn about what’s happening within the DOD, I thought bitterly. “So tell me something. The Land of the Dead is pretty dangerous, right? Well, suppose you could make the journey across it easier for some. So who then gets safe passage? The fat cat who can pay for it, or the person who deserves it?”

“Leaving aside the question of *whose* rules—and I’d like to hear some day about why you’re so uptight about that question—it’d be fairer to make everyone equal,” Alexi answered.

“He’s talking about justice, brother, not fairness,” Gunnar said. “Make a choice.”

Alexi glared at Gunnar but was quiet for a few moments. “Then it goes to the one who deserves it,” he finally said. Unwilling to give any ground, he demanded, “But how do you determine who that is, man?”

“Well, people have been dying for a long time,” I pointed out. “The DOD’s got a lot of experience and they train agents pretty well. Just about everyone I ever met did their best to see that people got what they deserved. And if what they deserved wasn’t all that good, we didn’t bend the rules just because the client was loaded. Unfortunately, there’s an outfit with other ideas.”

“What outfit is this?” Gunnar asked. “That’s something you haven’t explained to me yet, either.” He glanced over at Alexi. “Now that we’re both up to speed, what are we rebelling against?”

I resisted the urge to say ‘What have you got’ and instead said “Sal?” We had agreed beforehand that this part of making the ‘sale’ was his.

“The Department of Death is no longer serving the people as it has in the past,” Salvador said. “No longer are good deeds rewarded and the innocent gently conveyed to the next world. The greedy and corrupt are stealing the destinies of the sainted dead and are thereby making a mockery of justice. The corruption is spreading, reaching out to poison all of the Land of the Dead. If it is not dealt with quickly and decisively then nothing—not even something as small as a band of dock workers organizing against a corrupt union—will escape undefiled.”

“Right,” I said and then brought Salvador’s soaring rhetoric down to earth. “They’ve been stealing Double-N tickets and selling them to the undeserving rich. That leaves the people who earned the tickets on their own, walking across the Land of the Dead without hope.” Like Meche. “And that’s only the part we’ve discovered so far. You see,” I said, trying to bring the point home, “our struggle here isn’t a materialist one; it’s spiritual, like Gunner said.” Or, if he didn’t mean exactly that, he didn’t interrupt to argue with me. “But it boils down to much the same thing: do we take people as they are, and treat them according to their deeds and their needs, or do we bow to the fat cats and walk over everyone else? So I’ll ask you again, *mano*, are you with the cause or not?”

“You’re asking more than that, Calavera,” Alexi insisted. “You’re asking me to put aside everything I’ve learned from Marx’s painstaking, scientific work and embrace vague ideals. I don’t know if I can do that. Not even for Salvador Limones.”

“Am I really asking you to give up anything? Remember, I’m all for you agitating among the dock workers. It needs to be done and you’re the one to do it.” Salvador shifted a little. Something like the ghost of a frown flickered over his face. “I think it’s more a matter of asking you to expand your horizons. I’ll admit the LSA is kind of a vague cause—no offense, Sal—but think about it: who has *ever* tried to form a dialectic for the Land of the Dead? I can tell you for a fact that Marx himself hopped into a coach and rode out of here as quick as he could.” When your first manager is someone like Yehuda, you hear a lot from agents in other divisions about the famous dead.

“Is that a fact?” Alexi asked, interested. “Well, I guess you’re making a little sense.” He paused in thought. “Maybe Marx isn’t a *completely* perfect fit for the Land of the Dead. Maybe that’s why we’re not having a lot of success with the dock workers. Marx didn’t concern himself with demons any more than he did the dead. Maybe I can adapt the dialectic for this world.”

“Sure,” I said. “So, are you on board?”

“Yes,” Alexi said at last. “There are many forms of oppression in the world. If I do not fight them all, then I am no revolutionary.” He gave me a sideways look. “And to think I gained this insight from *you*.”

I shrugged. “That’ll teach you to judge by appearances, I guess.”

“So, what now?” Gunnar asked.

“Well,” I said, “perhaps the most important thing I need you guys to do is to keep on doing what you’re already doing. I don’t want anyone outside the organization to see any difference in how you act or what your priorities seem to be.”

“And keep riding you in public, I suppose,” Alexi said.

“Should be easy,” I said, “especially for Slisko.”

“Possibly too easy,” Salvador remarked. “Going by first impressions, that one has difficulty controlling his mouth.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Alexi said to Salvador. “Where the revolution is concerned, no daylight shows between his jaws.”

“Provided he can be convinced to join up,” Gunnar said. “He wouldn’t even *get* up from the table.”

Alexi waived his hand at Gunnar again. “His favorite chick’s reciting tonight.”

“The one who can’t hold her liquor?” Gunnar asked.

“OK,” I said, cutting off that subject. “Slisko’s another draftee. As for what we do next, getting ourselves organized is the main thing. Then we deal with things as they happen. The most important thing is to keep our ear holes to the ground.” I addressed myself to Gunnar, “Maybe you were on to something when you told me about rumors of the DOD being unhappy with a rogue agent. Maybe not. Point is, we’ve all got to pay attention to things like that in case there ever is something to them. You’ve got contacts among the workers. I’m making contacts among the movers and shakers. There’s bound to be something useful in all that chatter if we just pay attention. Another thing—and this is potentially dangerous—when the club starts turning a profit, we’ve got to get the money to El Marrow. That’s where the main action is and, sad to say, we can’t fight a revolution without cash and lots of it.”

“Why not just send your demon friend, Glottis?” Alexi asked, probably not relishing the idea of being a mere courier.

I shook my head. “That’s out.”

“You send him out on plenty of errands,” he protested. “Why not this?”

“Simple. I send him out on plenty of errands. You know it and everyone else in town knows it.” Alexi could only nod. “Besides which, this particular errand needs to be done quietly. Glottis and the *Bone Wagon* aren’t quiet, and they’re too well known to...to someone who has good reason to pay close attention when the *Bone Wagon* is in town.”

“Makes sense,” Gunnar said. “Besides, it’s not as if Alexi, me and Slisko are always in the same place at the same time. Harder for the Man to tell when one of us isn’t around than a giant orange demon who lays an inch of rubber just parallel parking.”

“I guess so,” Alexi sort of agreed.

“One last thing,” I said, “look out for the names Mercedes Colomar and Hector LeMans.”

“Colomar’s that chick you’ve been looking for ever since you blew into town, isn’t it?” Alexi asked. “What does she have to do with the revolution?”

“She’s the most tangible link we have to the gang we’re fighting, the only victim we know by name. Finding her would go a long way to blowing their cover. And Hector LeMans is behind it all. We don’t know any more about him than that, do we Sal?” I asked him in case there was something he hadn’t told me yet.

“Regrettably, no,” Salvador answered, “so any rumor or gossip about Hector LeMans could be extremely valuable. And,” he added, “Manuel is quite correct about the importance of Mercedes Colomar.”

No one spoke for a while. “Well,” I finally said, “I guess that’s it for now. I think you two should break the news to Slisko.”

“I’ll hold him down,” Gunnar said.

Salvador took a step away from the door. “Gentleman.” He solemnly shook Alexi’s hand, then Gunnar’s. “You have joined a noble cause. With unwavering diligence, we cannot but prevail in our just struggle. *¡Viva la Revolución!*”

Alexi and Gunnar echoed Salvador and left. Salvador gave off a soft sigh I wasn’t sure I heard and I leaned back heavily in my chair. I rubbed my face with both hands. “I wasn’t so sure we’d pull that off,” I said. I lit a cigarette to settle my nerves.

“Nor I, my friend,” Salvador admitted. He paced a few steps in the cramped shack. “Were it not for Gunnar’s assistance...” he trailed off. “Nor am I sure of Alexi’s worth.”

That surprised me. If he did have reservations about any of the three, I would have thought it would have been Slisko.

“Why Alexi?” I asked.

“You appealed to his vanity,” he answered grimly. “Consider his statement that he could adapt the Marxist dialectic to the Land of the Dead. He, Alexi,” he thumped his rib cage, “is the man to do it.”

I could see Salvador’s point. “I guess he *would* like to be this world’s Lenin,” I admitted. Although, myself, I would have worried more about the Stalin who might be waiting in the wings.

“Yes, and that dream could be a problem if it becomes too real for him. He will have to be watched. In the meantime, I have your new cell’s first assignment. Now that we are fully operational here in Rubacava, we must work toward Puerto Zapato. Your men must consider another recruit, one who can become our agent in that distant port.”

“That’s pretty far from the action, Sal. What’s Zapato got to do with the ticket scam?”

Salvador stopped pacing looked at me projecting an unhappy expression. “Although our enemies are based in El Marrow, I am becoming convinced that their operations extend far beyond the city limits. Consider that the sole victim of the LeMans gang that we can identify is Mercedes Colomar. All the rest—and there must be hundreds—remain anonymous. What becomes of them? Where do they go?”

I shrugged. “I suppose like Meche they’re left to cross the Land of the Dead on foot. That’s what you said when we first met and it still makes sense to me.”

“But can we so sure, my friend?” Salvador asked. His pacing resumed. “Only your Meche is positively known to have set out on foot and she has not been heard from since. As for all the others, if they are also on foot, why is there also no rumor of them? Surely, were genuine saints walking without hope across the Land of the Dead, such a thing would become known.”

I blew a few smoke rings while I thought about that and about what Sal had left unsaid: that there was no news of Meche, either. Finally I said, “But that’s assuming that these saints are known to be saints. They’re usually pretty humble and unassuming, you know.”

“This is true,” Salvador said, “but even so, it seems incredible that *hundreds* of saints could have been robbed of their destinies and left to their own resources without some whisper of this being spread abroad.”

“I guess I’m not sure what your point is, Sal,” I admitted.

“It is just this, Manuel: I am coming to the belief that the victims are being put out of the way by the LeMans organization. The silence surrounding their fate is far too complete.”

“Do you think they’re being sprouted?” I asked, chilled by the implications.

“I do not know. I am inclined to think not as disposing of the remains would be difficult and their eventual discovery would alert the authorities that something was amiss.”

“And yet there *are* sproutings going on, more than there have been.”

“This also is true, but in many cases they are fallen LSA agents. Others are established residents of the Land of the Dead, not new arrivals. I have been making careful inquiries and I know of no instances of the newly-deceased having been sprouted.” Salvador sighed. “No, Manuel, something else must be happening to the souls we are concerned with. Therefore we must have agents spread out across the Land of the Dead, for I believe that our enemies have already done so.”

“And Puerto Zapato is the biggest city after Rubacava. I get you.”

“Excellent,” Salvador said. “Your cell must recruit another who will then be sent to Zapato. First, however, the new recruit must be sent to El Marrow for training. Alexi should accompany him. Afterward, Gunnar and Slisko.” He looked at his watch. “I must go now. I have already made arrangements with Glottis to take me back to El Marrow immediately. He is waiting for me where your car is kept.” He held out his hand. “Farewell, my friend. You have done well.”

“Thanks, Sal.” I stubbed out my cigarette and stood. “Do you need me to show you the way?”

“There is no need. Glottis himself showed me the way earlier today while you were occupied with other matters.”

“Don’t want to be seen with me, huh?” I was kidding.

Sal was serious. “As you have brought the subject up, yes, I think it best that we are not seen in each other’s company more than we have been. Even Eva and I are seldom seen together in public.”

“Security,” I said.

“Regrettably true.” He gave me his hand to shake. “*¡Viva la Revolución!*” He quickly slipped out the door and was gone.

I used Glottis as a go-between in my dealings with Alexi until the club was completed, taking to heart Salvador’s concerns about appearing in public with other LSA agents (but once the club had been finished, Alexi again was delivering supplies for the restaurant so he had a natural reason to be there every day). After making the choice of agent for Puerto Zapato, Alexi and the new guy were off to El Marrow for formal LSA training (something I had never done). Soon after they returned, Gunnar and Alexi went to El Marrow. I passed on to Alexi through Glottis enough money to get the new recruit to Puerto Zapato. After that the Rubacava branch of the LSA settled into a quiet routine.

Alexi and his gang continued to agitate on the docks while they kept their ear holes to the ground for me. Occasionally they passed along interesting bits of news and gossip... mostly gossip. Anything that seemed worth passing on went to Salvador. I kept in touch with Membrillo, the coroner, out of ‘concern’ over the sproutings that had been going on and got plugged into police chatter. A few more sprouted souls were being found every now and then around town and Max was getting madder and madder, according to both Lola (who was spending a lot of her off time at the track) and Membrillo. And Max told me himself that he was sure some outside gang was responsible, but he wouldn’t go into details. After a few weeks the sproutings slowed, returning to the once-in-a-blue-moon rate they had been since before I arrived in Rubacava. Max seemed proud of that, as if he’d had a hand in the change.

As the work on the club neared completion, we started hearing stories of the Petrified Forest being ‘haunted’. Pretty strange, considering we were all dead. But travelers sometimes told tales of hearing odd sounds or seeing movement that didn’t seem like any known forest demon. Some of the

stories were pretty wild and I didn't think there was anything to them. I didn't see any point in passing ghost stories on to Salvador.

CALAVERA CAFE

I became increasingly concerned about putting the final touches on the club. The construction junk was finally cleared off the property and we were down to the interior-decorating stage. We were just about ready for the grand opening when there was another little surprise, but a pleasant one this time. Lola and I were in the casino having the hundredth argument about whether the craps table should be near the door or in a far corner when I heard something unexpected from the restaurant.

"Lola," I asked, a little puzzled, "is that a piano I hear?"

"Yeah," she said. "What were you expecting?"

I hadn't been expecting anything. "Did someone turn the canned music on for some reason?"

Lola cocked her head. "It's Tuesday."

I shrugged. "So?"

"So, Tuesday was the day the piano was supposed to be delivered."

Now I was really confused. "Delivered? Who ordered a piano? I didn't. Did you?"

"It was Glottis' idea. Didn't you know? He thought the restaurant needed live entertainment."

"No, I didn't know." I was getting a little steamed. "Why didn't anyone say something about this to me before?"

"Sorry, Manny," Lola said quietly. "I was sure you knew. Glottis *is* half owner."

"Yeah, he is," I sighed. "I just don't like the idea of hiring a piano player, too. We've got enough staff as it is."

Lola laughed. "*Hire* a piano player? You've got one already!"

The penny dropped. "You mean that was *Glottis* playing!"

"Yeah. He must've been giving it a spin."

I shook my head and walked out into the restaurant. There in the middle was an ivory-colored upright piano and Glottis polishing it with a rag. I went over and leaned against the piano and said, "Nice set of keys you've got here."

"Yeah," Glottis beamed. "Sounds sweet, too."

"Too bad you forgot to say anything to *me* about it."

Glottis stopped his polishing. "Huh?"

"It seems that the left hand" I pointed to Glottis "didn't let the right hand" I pointed at myself "know what it was doing."

A sheepish, contrite expression seeped over Glottis' face. "Geez, sorry Manny. I guess I kinda forgot."

"Kinda..." I shook my head. "What did this set us back?"

"I got it for a song," Glottis said. Lola went 'phew' and waved her hand in front of her nose hole. "Sorry. The lady who owned it is moving on. I promised to give it a good home." He started polishing again.

"Give us a sample," I said.

"Sure, Manny!" Glottis said. He sat down on the bench and played something that sounded like Gershwin. Whatever it was, it sounded pretty good. When he was done, Glottis said, "Well? What do you think?"

"I thought you were created just to drive."

"Well, you know, over the years even a demon dabbles here and there."

"I can see that," I said. "But you forgot something."

Worry creased Glottis' face. "What's that, Manny?"

I went over to the bar and got a brandy snifter. I put it on top of the piano and said, "The customers need a place to drop their requests."

"Oh. Didn't think about that."

I patted him on the arm. "Yeah, but you got most of it right." I gave the piano a pat, too. "Good thinking, *carnal*."

"Thanks, boss!" Glottis beamed.

"And you were worried about hiring a piano player," Lola chided as we went back to the casino to settle our argument.

I shrugged. "So what was I to think? I've got a lot of bill worries on me."

"Yeah, but you just assumed Glottis had fouled up."

"Well, sometimes Glottis doesn't think."

Lola shook her head sharply. "He can be a little...enthusiastic. But you've got this idea in your head that he's dumb. You see everything he does through that. Sometimes you get so wrapped up in what you think about things that you don't really see them."

I thought Lola was getting pretty worked up, but I just said, "You finished?"

She gave a quick nod.

"OK. So what am I not seeing about the craps table?"

"Roulette's classier."

I laughed. "OK. You win."

Finally, after weeks of feverish work, we were done. Everything was in place, the joint was stocked, the ads were in the papers, and the invitations to the grand opening had been sent out. On the evening we opened a squadron of butterflies were holding an air show underneath my rib cage. It was down to just a few minutes before the doors were opened and I was still in my office trying to get into my new tux. I just couldn't get the tie knotted right. I gave up and went downstairs.

"Where's Lola?" I asked Lupe, the hat-check girl.

"I think she's in the kitchen," she answered. "What's up, boss?"

"I can't get this stupid tie done."

"I'll take care of it!" Lupe said, vaulting over her counter instead of going through the door to her little room. She pounced on my tie and started wrestling it into submission.

"Careful!" I said desperately. "It's not a noose."

"Sheesh!" Lupe exclaimed. "Men are just little boys in long pants! There!"

I stuck a couple of fingers into my collar just to see if I could. "How's it look?"

"Perfect! You're gonna wow 'em, Manny."

"Well, I hope there's plenty of 'them' to wow."

"Are you kidding? You'll have to beat 'em off with a stick!"

"That could only help business," I said dryly. "You'd better get into position. We'll be opening soon and I wouldn't want the crowd to trample you." Lupe laughed loudly and jumped back into her room. "Some day I'll have to arrange an introduction between you and that door." I said, turning to go into the restaurant.

Lola was coming out of the kitchen. "Everything OK?" I asked.

She saluted and said, "Everything's ship-shape, captain."

"Great," I said, "and all this time I thought I was building a nightclub. Well," I took a deep, pointless breath, "I guess this it."

"It sure is," she said. Something seemed funny in her voice.

"Everything *is* OK, right?" I asked.

"Uh-huh," she said. I dropped it. If she had something to say, she'd say it when she was ready.

“Did we ever get an RSVP from Toto?” I asked to change the subject.

Lola gave a little laugh. “He didn’t know what ‘RSVP’ meant. But he said he won’t be coming. He said he would feel out of place.”

I shrugged. “I kinda figured that. Had to try. What about Olivia?”

“Yeah, she RSVP’d. At least, I guess that envelope full of ashes was from her.”

It was my turn to laugh. “It probably was from her, then. Well, I’ll make sure everyone knows what her answer was. That should make her customers feel good.”

Glottis came in from the casino and sat down at his piano. He ran through a couple of quick scales to warm up. I looked around. “Are we all in position? OK, let’s get this started.”

Glottis started playing a jazzy little number while I went to open the doors. I took a step back when I saw the big crowd standing outside with Max in front. There was a well-rehearsed cheer from Max’s ‘boys’ and the crowd surged inside.

“Hey, Manny!” Max exclaimed as he ground the bones in my hand together. “I brought a few friends along. Should put you over big, huh?”

“Couldn’t hurt, Max,” I said. I turned to greet a few of my other invited guests as they came in.

Max gave me a nudge. “I got a couple of presents for ya.”

“You didn’t have to do that, Max,” I said.

He spread his hands. “I’m a big-hearted kinda guy.” He snapped his fingers and one of his entourage handed him a paper package. Max tore it open and pulled out a magnum bottle of Champagne. “Here ya go,” handing it to me. If the label was to be believed, it was the genuine article from the Land of the Living. Sometimes reapers bring back more than just new souls, unmatched socks being very popular as a gag. “When you get a couple a minutes we’ll drink a toast to your new enterprise. And here,” he reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a little black and gold laminated card, “your very own pass to the High Rollers’ Lounge. You’re one of the in crowd now, Calavera. Don’t be a stranger.” He nearly flattened me with a hearty slap on the back and went into the restaurant.

“You OK, boss?” Lupe asked when I regained my balance.

“Sure,” I said. “Nothing a week in traction can’t fix.”

Things went pretty well that night. Even without Max’s gang the place would have been packed, especially the casino. If I could keep that up things were going to be all right. Of the invited guests, only Olivia and Toto were no-shows. Glottis was pretty amazing. Lola and Max started a little ‘stump the demon’ contest. No one ever did. And then there was a funny sing-along led by, I was surprised to see, the dour Membrillo. It was pretty off-color, but we were all big boys and girls. A different kind of craziness reigned in the casino. A lot of Max’s gang were huddled around the craps table bleeding from their wallets and downing whiskey like it was water; come to think of it, the whiskey *was* mostly water. Velasco was holding court at a poker table (I gave instructions that he should come out ahead), and several well-heeled, probability-challenged souls were busy losing big at roulette. Things were looking good. Real good.

The evening was wearing on a little when Lola edged up to me at the bar where I was listening to a tight-as-a-drum customer lecture the bartender on the correct way to shake a martini (something to do with the rhythm). “Hey, Manny,” she said to get my attention.

“Yeah?”

“I think we might have a problem.”

“You think?”

“Well,” she said, “there’s this guy in the casino...”

“What’s he doing?”

“Nothing.”

“Passed out?”

“If it was *that* kind of problem I wouldn’t have to bother you. No, this guy is just standing there, staring at everyone else.”

“Show me,” I said. We went to the doorway to the casino and looked in. I sighed. “OK, I want to see that guy in my office.”

“Manny?”

“Tell him the boss wants to see him. Now.” Lola looked mystified but turned to do as I said. I went to my office upstairs.

Less than a minute later Lola’s problem knocked on my office door. “Come in!” I said, and he did. This time he wore a dark suit but still carried himself like a soldier. “Well, Sal, mind telling me why you’re trying to queer my racket?”

“Manuel?” Salvador asked, puzzled.

I sighed. “I’m playing a dangerous game here, Sal. You know that perfectly well. Now, downstairs I’ve got Maximino and half his gang, several city big shots including the chief of police, plus an assortment of other high-fliers, legitimate or otherwise...and in this town it’s hard to tell the difference. What I *don’t* need is the head of the LSA coming in and making a show of checking out the joint.” I shaded my eye sockets with one hand and did an exaggerated impression of scanning the horizon.

“Surely it is not that bad, my friend,” Salvador tried to say placatingly. I wasn’t having any of it.

“Yeah, it’s that bad.” I ticked the problems off on my fingers. “You’re in a crowded casino and you’re the only one who’s not at a table or sitting in a booth, the only one without a drink in his hands, the only one not getting chummy with anyone...do I have to go on? People are starting to talk.” So it was just Lola, so far. I wanted to keep it that way.

“I apologize,” Salvador said, sounding genuinely contrite. “I did not realize how out of place I must look.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sorry I’m getting so bothered.” I rubbed my temples. “The pressure has been really something these last few weeks. It’s no picnic getting a place like this ready to open. If you wanted to check the club out, why didn’t you send Eva or anyone else who could blend in better? No offense, Sal, but you’re a little too intense for Rubacava’s nightclub scene.”

“Perhaps you are right, Manuel, but I wished to see what you had accomplished for myself. And besides, Eva coordinates our day-to-day operations. She wishes she could have come, but...” he shrugged. “It may be better if I were to leave now.”

“That’d look even more wrong.” I unlocked one of my desk drawers. “Hold out your hands,” I said. Salvador did and I dumped some chips into them. “Go play blackjack. Order a drink. Act like a customer.”

Salvador looked uncomfortable. “I do not know how to play blackjack.”

Somehow I wasn’t surprised. “It’s simple,” I said, and spelled out the rules. “Remember, you’re only competing against the dealer, but pay attention to what’s been dealt to the other players. And try to look like you’re having fun.”

“I will do my best, Manuel.” Salvador went to the door but hesitated. “Would you happen to have a liqueur called *Marillo de Oro* on hand?”

“Yeah, I think so. Why?”

“I had a glass the night—” he broke off and finished with “Well, I will go try to blend in.” He nodded and left.

When I came down from my office I found Membrillo collecting his hat and coat from Lupe. “Leaving already?” I asked. “Well, I hope you had a good time.”

Membrillo shrugged slightly and said, "The time passed rather pleasantly."

"That's all?" I asked. I turned to Lupe and said, "I gotta try harder."

Membrillo put his hand on my arm and gently said, "Don't take it personally, Manuel. You can only hope for so much in a world such as this."

"Then why do you stay here? Why not head off for the Ninth Underworld?"

"Manny," he said with a shake of his head, "you can search for something only so many years before you stop believing in it altogether."

Now that took me by surprise. "You don't believe in the Ninth Underworld?" I asked incredulously.

"Why do you think we're all here in Rubacava?" he asked.

"Cause you're waiting to work off your time," I said with a shrug, "or you can't afford passage, or..."

"Manny," he interrupted, sounding tired, like he was explaining things to a slow child, "we've given up. All of us. When you've been here long enough, you will too." He patted my arm gently.

"Maybe you've given up, but what about the DOD? What are we here for if this world is all there is?"

"We're in hell. The myth of Sisyphus tells more truth than many realize." He put on his hat and nodded. "Good night, Manny," he said and left.

There was only one other piece of excitement that evening. Carla was packing it away as usual and got it into her head that Meche had to be in the club. She tried to form all the women in the joint into a line for my inspection. Lola grabbed Carla before she could cause too much trouble and marched her to my office where she promptly passed out for the rest of the evening.

It was very, very early in the morning when I was in my office looking over the receipt from our first night. I should have gotten some sleep first, but I was too eager to see how we did. Carla's shoes were on the floor by the couch, left behind when Glottis had picked her up to take her home and pour into bed. There was a soft knock on the door and Lola came in. "Hey," I said, "I thought you left with Glottis."

"No, I've been straightening things up a little." She sat down on the edge of a chair.

"Plenty of time for that after we all get a little rest."

"What about that?" she asked, pointing at the papers on my desk.

I laughed. "OK, you got me. I wanted to see what our take was."

"Any good?"

"We're in the money, angel. We could be out of debt in a matter of weeks if tonight isn't a fluke."

"That's great, Manny. I'm happy things are working out for you."

"Things are working out great for *all* of us." I got up to go to my private bar. "In fact, let's drink to our success!"

"Manny," Lola said, "there's something I gotta talk to you about."

"Well, talk away. I'm in a very receptive mood tonight."

There was a kind of long pause before Lola quietly said, "I won't be working here any more."

I put down the shaker and turned to face her. "*What?* Why?" I thought quickly. "Is this anything like when you ran out of that road stop?"

"No," she said firmly. "It's nothing like that. Just the opposite."

"Well, I'm a little confused."

Lola stood up and paced around a little. "I'm not sure how to explain this." She paced a little more, then stopped. "Well, you know how I've told you people always treat me like their kid sister or something?"

“Sure.”

“Well, you’ve been different. When you needed someone to help you keep an eye on this place when it was being remodeled, you picked me of all people. I’ve never had responsibility like that before. You listened to me when I had something to say—usually—and sometimes you backed down when I got up the nerve to argue with you.”

“Sounds like you had a pretty good experience here.”

“Yeah, I have. It’s been great working for you.”

“So why leave? This place won’t run itself, you know. I still need your help.”

“Glottis can give you all the help you need, if you let him.”

“That’s not an answer. Why leave if things have been so great?”

“Because...well, because I’ve had to take responsibility for things. Stand up for myself. I found out I can do it. Now I want to do it for myself, on my own.”

“What’d you have in mind?”

“Photographer. People come through town, see the sights, and want their pictures taken. I had a camera when I was alive. I was pretty good. Still am. So I’ve set myself up to do souvenir photos.”

“You’re all ready to start?” I asked.

“Actually, I already have...using whatever spare time I could find. Now the club’s finished, I’m done here. Tomorrow I start making a go at being a full-time shutterbug.”

“Well,” I said, turning back to the drinks I was mixing, “I guess we’ll be drinking to something else, then.” I finished up and gave Lola hers. I held up my glass, “To your new endeavor. All the best.”

“To Calavera Café,” Lola said. “Ditto.”

YEAR 2

FELINE MEADOWS

The club did all right. In fact, it did great. It was a little hard at first doing without Lola. I had really gotten to depend on her and I missed her. But she turned out to be right: Glottis could help out running the place, even if he did need more supervision. That was a little more work for me, but that was OK. We were raking in the dough, and I soon had to make a decision about whether I should try to pay off my debts early or stick to my self-imposed schedule and funnel profits to the LSA as soon as there were any. Well, it wasn't *that* tough a decision. As much as I would have liked to be free and clear, the LSA needed money right away. So within about a month of opening, money from the club was going to Salvador through my LSA cell.

For a long time I was bothered by what Membrillo had said on the club's opening night. I had worked at the DOD long enough to know that he was wrong. The Land of the Dead wasn't a great place to be in, he was right about that, but what got to me was the fact that Membrillo's belief was keeping him in the Land of the Dead when he could buy a steamship ticket at any time. But he wouldn't because he thought that was part of the torment. I told myself it was no business of mine what Membrillo believed. He was only hurting himself. But it didn't work.

Even though I knew he was wrong, there was this little voice in my head that kept asking if maybe he wasn't and if I was so sure I was right. That kind of doubt I didn't need. So Membrillo wasn't really hurting just himself. Who knows how many people he had convinced he was right. And besides, I thought of Membrillo as a friend. He wasn't just a client, someone I could simply send on his way and forget about. But there was nothing I could do about it. Membrillo was sure he was right and that was that. It just really, really bothered me.

Even though Lola didn't work at the club any more, she was still around. She worked most of the night spots in town, including Calavera Café, and we still both stopped at the Normandie. She wasn't making as much money as would have with me, but she said she was making enough and was happy with what she was doing, so that was fine with me.

She also worked Feline Meadows, not that she did much business there. People were too busy with the cats. She did most of the little business she did there in the High Rollers' Lounge whenever Max had a party, but not really enough to justify hanging around there. Truth be told, I think she only did it because she had a thing for Max. I suppose that must have started when we ran into Max at police headquarters after the sprouting, but it took me a while to notice it. She would have been better off just working the more profitable spots, but I supposed she knew her business. When I talked to her about Max she insisted she knew what was what.

In the middle of the club's third week open I decided it was time to pay my respects at the track. I was sure my staff could handle things and they knew where I was going to be. So I went down to the track, picking up Carla along the way, and flashed my card to the goon at the elevator. After a quick, smooth ride up, the doors opened to opulence that made my club look like a rat hole.

"Wow!" Carla said as we got a good look around. She stumbled a little on the deep carpet.

"Should've worn your flats," I said.

"Uh-huh," she said absently, craning her neck to take in the giant, golden cat statue that dominated the place.

I snagged a passing waiter. "Hey, where's Max's office?"

"Are you expected?" the guy asked.

"I'm Calavera," I said, wondering if that would get a reaction. It got enough of one but not what I was hoping for.

"I see," the waiter sniffed. "Well, Maximino's office is right over there." He pointed to a recessed doorway off the main part of the lounge.

"Thanks," I said, and we went toward the door. "Suppose they're paid to act like that?" I asked Carla.

"Dunno," she said, "but I'm feeling a little above it all just being here."

"Yeah, and I got a kick just outta flashing that card. Maybe I need something like that for the club, something to make the regulars feel special."

"What could be more special than just being in Calavera Café?" Carla asked just to be silly.

"Well, this joint for one thing." We got to Max's door then so I knocked. After a little pause it opened. One of Max's 'boys' looked us over. "I'm Manny Calavera," I said. "I'd like to see Max, if that's OK with you."

The guy shrugged. "Sure, Calavera. The boss says you get the red carpet." He let us into the outer office, a kind of small, smoky lounge where a handful of guys sat around looking sharp but dangerous. Some were playing poker.

"Weren't you at my club's opening?" I asked, taking the chance that I really did recognize the guy.

"Yeah," he said. "Dropped a bundle at your craps table, too."

"Sorry to hear that," I said, not the least bit sorry, "but when you gamble, sometimes you lose."

"Oh, I ain't kickin'," he said. "Max says you run honest tables. That's good enough for me." Suddenly he jammed a forefinger into my ribs. "I'd be sore if I ever found out it wasn't true."

"You don't have to worry about that. Max knows what he's talking about. Come by the club, maybe you'll get your money back."

"Already have," he said.

"Yeah," one of the other guys said. "Then he let it ride."

"Fingers don't know when to quit," a third said with a laugh.

"Shut your holes," the one who let us in snapped. "Go on in," he said to Carla and me, jerking a thumb toward the inner door. "The boss's been waitin' for you to pay him a visit." He rapped in a peculiar way on the door and opened it for us.

Max's office had an even fancier layout than the lounge. Between the door and the huge desk at the far side of the room lay a marble floor inlaid with a rosette with a cat-race motif, like everything else in the place. The far wall held floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the track. Max was staring out of them when we came in.

"Hello, Maximino." I said as we came in.

"Why, if it ain't Manny Calavera!" Max said when he had turned around. He came toward me with his hand out. "Come to see how the big boys play, eh, Manny?"

I put my hand in his and let him crush it. "From what I can tell, they play with kitties."

Max laughed and said, "Kitties, roulette wheels...what's the difference? They go 'round and 'round all day and they're both more reliable when they're fixed, am I right?"

"Well, I wouldn't say so publicly," I said.

"Me neither," Max said with a laugh. "So, who's your lovely companion, huh?"

"Oh, this is Carla." Max took her hand and did a little bow over it. "She actually works for you, Max."

"Yeah, over at the LOL security gate," Carla said. "But I've never been up here before."

"Well, don't ply your trade around here, young lady." He waggled a finger in a mock scold. "My boys might take it the wrong way. On the other hand..."

"Max..." I said in a joking scold.

"Just kiddin'" he said. "Come on over here," he gestured toward the windows, "I wanna show ya somethin'."

We crossed the office and I said, “Very impressive trophy collection,” as we passed the cabinet holding it.

“Paws of fire, every one of my babies.”

“You know,” Carla said, “I get the feeling you’re not much of a dog guy, Max.”

“You know me better than I thought. Now just look at that view,” he said, pointing down at the track.

“Wow,” Carla said. “You can see everything.”

“Nothing in the way from up here, no sir!” Max said. “Hey, Manny,” he said pointing at a drinks trolley beside the desk, “why don’t you...oh, hell.”

Max broke off and turned toward the door where a man dressed in about the sharpest suite I’d ever seen was coming in. “Sorry, Maximino,” he said, “but...” he held up a sheaf of papers.

“Yeah, yeah,” Max said. “Just put ’em on the desk. I’ll look at ’em later.” He sighed. “Manny, this is my lawyer, Nick Virago. Nick, Manny Calavera.”

“Oh, yes,” Virago said with a slight nod. “You’re shorter than I expected.”

“I don’t mean to be,” I said.

Virago made a quiet ‘hmpf’ and said to Max, “They’ll need an answer by tomorrow. I’m told they don’t like waiting.”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll get to it tonight.”

Virago nodded and left.

“Nick handles all my headaches,” Max said, “and, brother, do I ever have one right now.”

“Trouble?” I asked as I went over to the trolley to mix some drinks.

“Just tryin’ to close a business deal with some boys who aren’t making it easy.” Max shrugged. “But I won’t bore you with that.”

Max didn’t bore us with anything that evening. I’ll say this for him: Max knew how to entertain his guests and I certainly learned a few things about playing host. We stayed a lot longer than I had intended but a couple of phone calls to the club reassured me that everything was OK, but eventually I made my excuses and Carla and I left for the club.

When we got away from the track I took a deep breath. The air was getting cooler and, no lungs or whatever, it still felt good, especially after all that cigar smoke I’d eaten.

“Max sure throws a swell party, huh?” I said.

Carla laughed too loudly. “You said ‘swell!’”

“What of it?”

“Nothing, I guess. You’re just cute when you show your age. *Ooop!*” she exclaimed as she stumbled.

“You really should have worn your flats,” I said when I caught her.

“I should’ve gone easier on the booze. Oh, well,” She sighed. “Die and learn.”

I chuckled. “That’s a good one.” I sighed myself and tugged at Carla’s arm to try to get her to pick up the pace. “C’mon. Maybe Meche’s at the club.”

“Oh,” Carla grumbled, “why are you so interested in that woman, anyway?”

“I’ve told you before. I let her down and I gotta make up for it. That’s all.”

“Yeah, and I bet you’ve let a lot of women down, Manny. I bet that’s why she ran out on you. Maybe you just don’t know how to hold on to a woman, you ever think of that?”

“You’re drunk,” I said.

“So am I,” she said. I gave up.

DISAPPOINTMENT

Meche wasn't at the club that night. Or the next. Or any other. It got to me, the one black mark on the club. My name was up there in lights on the hottest new night spot in Rubacava, and the one person it was meant to draw in was a no-show. Each night I was sure that this was the night. And then...the big letdown. The club itself was a blast. A lot of work, but a blast. And yet it was such a failure in the most important reason for being there. Oh, sure, I sent a lot of money to the LSA. That was good. I was proud of that; but failing to lure Meche, it was a kind of hollow pride. It was just a case of wanting to find Meche but finding instead only disappointment. Yet despite the disappointment, I'd take Calavera Café at its worst over the DOD's best any day. Besides which, Glottis was the real party animal so I don't think anyone really missed me when I scoped out the night's suckers and then went back to my office to sulk and teach my scotch who was the boss.

There was just one other blemish beside the absence of Meche: Police Chief Bogen. The guy was a problem. He wanted to win at the wheels all the time. He wouldn't pick blackjack where he had some realistic chance. No, it had to be roulette. Maybe he was really into watching that shiny little ball spin around, I don't know, but I had to keep him happy to keep my deal with Max (on top of the 'fee' he got for the bets my customers phoned in to the track). It wasn't easy. Bogen's 'luck' was so unreal that it started to tarnish my reputation for honest tables. The regulars knew the score and were sympathetic, but there were a few loud-mouths who spread their gripes around. I'm sure that hurt me a little. Once, on a visit to the track, I got up the nerve to talk to Max about it. I was getting the feeling that Max actually did like me, in a cold professional way, so I was pretty up front about the problem.

"You know, Max," I said, "I don't mind showing people a good time—that's why I opened a club in the first place—but Bogen is kind of abusing my hospitality."

Max just stared at the ash at the end of his cigar for a couple of seconds before saying, "Yeah." He then took a deep breath and turned to face me. "I'm sorry, Manny. I really am. I was tryin' to solve a problem when I steered Bogen your way, not make a bigger one."

I was a little surprised to hear Max apologize. He seemed sincere, but I just said, "I'm not sure I understand, Max. What problem were you trying to solve?"

"Well...let's just say you're not the first operator that bastard has put the screws on." He gave an angry shake of his head. "The guy's corrupt, but he's a prig. Do you have any idea what a tough combination that is? Of course you don't. I'll tell ya. He wants a piece of my dough—of our dough—but ya can't buy him off, give him a cut. Goddam' hypocrite! I don't mind crooked cops, Manny, but they gotta be straight about it. You get me? I try to bring Bogen into the organization...and he threatens to enforce the blue laws against me! I can't control him. So," he shrugged helplessly, "I hear about your little club and I think maybe I can get the heat off. The cats don't always run the way he wants. I can't help that. They don't always run the way *I* want. This joint is too big to make the races *that* crooked. But a casino...I had a gambling joint once when I was alive. It's easy. Not my racket now, I learned that the hard way, but I thought maybe Bogen would ease off if he got his way a little more often."

"Only it hasn't worked out that way," I finished for him.

"Tell me about it," Max growled. "The guy's gettin' outta control. He can win all the time at your club, and he wants even more. He's like a dope fiend, Manny. The more he gets..." he shrugged.

"It just feeds his habit." I said.

"Yeah. Dammit. I wish I'd thought of that first." He shook his head. "I hear some of the things the complainers are saying about your joint. You're a straight shooter, Manny, and I've been letting people know that, but..." he shrugged again. He poured himself a glass of straight rye but just swirled it around his glass, staring at the light glinting in the amber liquid.

“Well, I appreciate that, Max. Truth be told, all my regulars know I run honest tables—mostly—but I think Bogen’s making it hard for me to get some new customers.”

“Yeah, and that son of a bitch is queering my rackets a little, too.”

“I hadn’t heard that.” Max—the big boy, the high roller—had the town in his vest pocket, I always thought. What he was saying was news.

“Well, it’s true. Maybe I’m not hurt as much as you are, but I don’t like the situation any better. Now, you’ve always been on the level with me, Manny, so I’ll be on the level with you: I’m seriously thinking of whacking the bum.”

“What about ‘no rough stuff?’” I asked.

“I meant it. I learned my lessons, I’ll tell ya that twice. I’m just thinkin’, that’s all. Something’s gotta be done. I’m just not sure what, yet.”

“Well,” I said, “I guess I feel a little better. Misery loves company.”

“Ain’t *that* the truth.” Max downed his drink in one swallow. “When I make up my mind, I’ll give you a piece of the action, OK?”

When I got back to the club that night I went up to my office to go over the accounts and see how much damage Bogen was really doing. I was a little surprised to find Glottis there.

“Takin’ a break, *carnal*?” I asked.

“No,” he answered. “Lookin’ for some sheet music. I *know* I left it in here somewhere.”

“You should have sent Lupe up. It’s a tight squeeze for you up here.” I tried to edge past him to get to my desk. “It’s a tight squeeze for me, too, right now.”

“Sorry, Manny,” Glottis said, trying to suck in his gut, “but I kinda think you wouldn’t have much of an office left after she got done looking.”

“You might have something there,” I said, finally getting around him. Lupe had the enthusiasm of a tornado. “Is this new or old music you’re looking for?”

“New.”

“Well, there’s a little package for you over there.” I pointed over to the small, mostly decorative writing desk that sat in a corner of the office. “Is that what you’re after?”

“Oh, yeah. Thanks.” Glottis tore open the paper and took out his music. He thumbed through it and then looked over at me getting down to the books. “So how much damage *is* the police chief doing this month?” Sometimes the demon was a mind reader.

“Could be worse.”

“Yeah, but every time he’s in here, it costs the LSA another round of sproutella, huh?”

I gave him a sour look. “C’mon, buddy. The way you talk sometimes, you’d think the *LSA* were the bad guys.”

He just shrugged. “It’s my nature, Manny. I don’t like to see people get hurt.”

“Yeah, but just remember that we’re trying to *stop* people from being hurt—and if Hector’s gang wants to get tough about it, that’s *their* problem. Just remember what this is all about, OK?”

“Yeah, sure, Manny. OK.”

I looked over the numbers for a while and said, “Well, this doesn’t look too bad so far. You know, when we leave I’m actually going to miss this place.”

“Aw, Manny, why can’t we just stay here?” Glottis said, sounding a little petulant. “We got our fancy club, we got three squares a day, plus we look good in these clothes.” He hooked his thumbs on his lapels and puffed himself up like a rooster.

“Glottis, I can’t stay in this world forever! It’s not where I belong. I’ve got to find Meche and help her, because if I’d been more on the ball she’d’ve been on that train a year ago.”

“OK, Manny,” Glottis sighed.

“Well, you’d better get back to your keys before we have a riot.”

“Yeah, they might have to call out the National Guard. Heh.”

SHE SAILED AWAY

The next night I went up to the club a little after it opened. “Evening, Lupe,” I said as I came in.

“Hi, Manny!” she exclaimed, jumping up from whatever she was doing behind the counter. “I *have* to tell you about my new organizational system for the coats!”

I winced inside. She had a new system every other night, it seemed, each more bizarre and pointlessly complicated than the last, when anything along the lines of ‘old man with glasses’ had always seemed good enough to me. I changed the subject. “Think she’ll come in tonight?”

“Manny,” Lupe said earnestly, “you ask me that every night. What am I supposed to say?” she pleaded.

“You’re supposed to say, ‘Yes, I think tonight’s the night.’”

“Yes,” she said firmly, “I think tonight’s the night...” she paused to take a deep breath and finished with, “that you finally go *nuts* from waiting for the grand entrance of Miss Mercedes Colomar!!”

“I’m *not* giving up on her,” I insisted, mainly for my benefit.

“Hey,” Lupe exclaimed, “I don’t want you to give up on Mercedes! Just have more realistic expectations, that’s all. I hate seeing you get your hopes up like this night after night.” Lupe may have been loopy, but she had a soft heart.

Still, I was her employer, so I kept things...not exactly hard. “Well, you could be a little more encouraging. Let’s try it again, shall we? Think she’ll come in tonight?”

“Could be, Manny,” she answered gamely, “just...hang in there.”

“Thanks.” The kid was a trooper. “It’s my fault she’s out in the woods alone, you know.”

“If you say so, Manny,” she said with a sigh.

I shrugged out of my coat and passed it and my hat over to Lupe. “So how’s the flow tonight?”

“We’re dead tonight, Manny,” she answered without a trace of irony. “Everybody’s back home for the Day of the Dead, I guess. Except for the casino. The casino’s hopping. Why is it that the people who don’t go home are the same people who just love to gamble?”

“Well, I guess when you’ve got nothing to go home to, you’ve got nothing to lose.”

“Hey!” she exclaimed. “We should put that over the door!”

Was she kidding? I didn’t bother finding out. I just turned to go check out the restaurant but turned back to ask, “Bogen come in yet?”

“Yeah,” Lupe grumbled, “he’s down in the casino, probably enjoying is usual ‘lucky’ streak.”

“You know, I wish he’d...*aw!*” I turned and stomped into the restaurant.

The restaurant was pretty much deserted just as Lupe said, only two or three tables occupied, and no one at the bar (apart from the bored bartender polishing perfectly clean glassware). Glottis was extemporizing at his piano, the brandy snifter empty. “Quiet night, huh *carnal?*” I asked in a low voice.

“Day of the Dead ain’t good for business, chief. But last night...! Remember last night, Manny? *Hoo-wee!*” The demon was in his element when the joint was jumping. A big party was as much his meat as a throbbing engine, it had turned out.

“You think she’ll come in tonight?” I asked.

“You know what, Manny? I think she will! I got a feeling tonight’s the night!”

“Thanks, *mano.*” Glottis always gave the right answer without prompting.

I went into the casino. Lupe was right again: it was packed. Unfortunately, Bogen *was* part of the scene. I looked at the large stacks of chips in front of him. It was still early. *Way* too early.

I went over to him, clapping a hypocritically-friendly hand to his shoulder. “You know,” I said to him, “some people say you should always walk away from the table when you’re on a winning streak.”

“Oh, yes,” he said, faking agreement but fingering his badge so it would glitter in the lights, “but I’m feeling *extra* lucky tonight.” From him, that was practically a threat.

“Great,” I said, catching the gaze of the croupier who shrugged hopelessly. I looked around but didn’t see any of Max’s boys. Well, I doubted I could’ve bought them off, anyway; there was no way they’d make a move without Max’s say-so, not for any amount of money.

Turning away from the roulette tables, I saw there was another unwelcome presence in the casino—‘Chowchilla’ Charlie in his regular booth. He was my least-favorite customer after Bogen. I could never remember when he first started coming in. He was kind of like a kick in the head: amnesia followed by a sudden and mysterious pain.

I slid into the seat across from him and asked, “Mind if I sit down, Charlie?”

“Of course not, Manny,” the little weasel said. “I mean, it is your club, right?”

“Right,” I said in as hard a tone as I could. “So what are *you* doing in it? Didn’t I tell you not to come back until you could pay your bar tab?”

“Oh,” he laughed as if I had told a joke, “they threw me out of that cat track for printing fake betting stubs. So now I have to come here,” he stopped, realized how that sounded, and then quickly added, “... which I love. Which I *love!*” He gave a little nod, like he was agreeing with himself.

“How did you print fake betting stubs?” I asked, almost curious. Charlie always had some kind of scam going. The law of averages said he’d pull one off, eventually.

“With this,” he said, taking a little machine out of his breast pocket. “Isn’t she beautiful?” he asked. I kept a close watch on it as he turned it over in his hands, hoping he’d put it down. “The last time I was incarcerated I shared a cell with the most dishonest con man I ever met. He was strictly small time,” he said with a sniff, fancying himself a big-time operator, “and I managed to steal this from him quite easily.” Charlie put the machine on the table, patted it, then reached for his cigarette resting in the ashtray.

I quickly snatched the machine and pocketed it. “Thanks,” I said as Charlie lunged for me. I leaned back in my seat to evade him. He was even shorter than me, and not just in the legs. “You never know when something like this might come in handy.” Like as a paperweight. Or a doorstep.

Charlie reached across the table to make another grab at me. “Hey, give that back to me, Manny!” he begged. Heads at a nearby poker table turned toward us, saw who I was tormenting, and turned back to their cards with knowing laughs.

I grabbed his shoulders and shoved him hard back into his seat. “Maybe once you settle your bar tab, eh, Charlie?” I said in a low growl.

“Oh, Manny...” he said with a sad shake of his head, staring morosely at the ashtray.

“What else can you counterfeit?” I asked, a little curious despite myself.

“Nothing,” he answered, sullen, then looked up at me slyly. “*Anything.*”

“Can you make, say, passports?”

“Oh, Manny,” he exclaimed, “you still think like a living man in so many ways!” Right. “No soul needs a *passport*. We are all citizens of the same nation, and our king rides a pale horse.”

“So,” I said, lighting a cigarette, “no passports.”

“No. No, that little hologram is so tricky, you know?”

“Hmm,” I said. “So why aren’t you over at the roulette tables or something?”

“Ah,” Charlie growled, “roulette is for lonely widows and Frenchmen. Why don’t you get some slot machines, Manny? Everybody—old women, little children—they *all* love slot machines. And I have a system,” he continued in a conspiratorial tone, “an infallible system for beating them.”

“I think slot machines attract an undesirable element.”

“Oh, well, we’re all undesirable, Manny.”

“Yeah, only your credit’s no good, to boot.” I stubbed out my cigarette. Talking to Charlie was leaving a bad taste in my mouth. “Well, I’ve got a club to run, so...”

“Oh yes, please, Manny...get on with your *glamorous* life.”

I got up and was walking to the door when Lupe burst in. “Hey, boss,” she said, “I’ve got a customer asking for you!”

I looked back at Charlie. “I think I’ve done enough mingling with the customers for one evening.”

“Well,” she said slyly, “you may wanna ‘mingle’ with this one. She sounds like your type.”

I shrugged. “OK. Let’s see her.” Might as well find out what my ‘type’ is.

Lupe giggled and led me through the restaurant to her counter. No one was there.

“Huh!” she exclaimed. “She was right here! Seemed kinda anxious, too.”

“Did you get her name?”

“No, but she said she had to see you right away. Why’d she leave?”

There was a noise from the doors as a breeze outside pulled them open briefly. Lupe shoved one open and stuck her head out. “Maybe she’s waiting outside,” she said.

“Well, I’ll check it out,” I said. “You’d better get back to your new system.”

“OK!” She threw herself back over her counter like a soldier saving his buddies from a grenade.

I went outside and blew out my breath. It was getting pretty chilly these days. I looked around. There was no one in the parking lot. I went over to the observation platform I put in after one of Lola’s customers had nearly backed over the edge. It was dark, but I thought I saw someone by the railing. My shoe scuffed on some gravel and the figure turned partly toward me.

“Manny?” a woman’s voice said, a voice I heard in my dreams and nightmares for nearly a year.

“Meche?” I asked. God, I was certain it *was* her!

“Manny, help me,” she pleaded, “I’ve been lost for so long! Why didn’t you look for me?”

“I did,” I said helplessly. “You ran off. Why?”

Her shoulders heaved up and down in a huge sigh. “Because you said I was no good.” I felt a chill in my marrow. I had replayed that interview in my office over and over in my mind. There was so much in her body language that I had missed. I didn’t realize then what effect I was having on her. All the guilt I had felt seemed confirmed. “I’ve been all alone in the world for a whole year,” she continued, tears in her voice. I came closer and the figure turned fully toward me. “*And it’s all because of you!*” the voice shrieked.

I jumped back as the demon raven launched itself from the coin-operated binoculars. I ducked as it swooped over me. It wheeled and dove over the cliff. I ran and looked over the edge. I saw a little speck moving toward the docks used by the *Nada Mañana* cruise line. I fumbled in my pockets for a coin and dropped it into the binoculars. I swept the docks and picked up the raven. I followed it as it glided past a steamship loading passengers. I gasped and forgot about the bird as I turned back to the people still on the dock. There was Domino...with Meche.

I sprinted away from the club and got down to the base of the cliff as fast as I could. Unfortunately, I was fighting the night crowds as I ran to the docks. By the time I got there the ship was already pulling away, the last gangway being drawn up. I leapt across the gap and managed to grab the edge. Meche appeared in the hatchway as I struggled to get my legs up. “Hey,” I began to say as she hefted a champagne bottle and hurled it at me. I seemed to go blind when it hit me in the head. I lost my grip and dropped into the sea. The next thing I remember was Velasco pulling me out.

He took me back to his office and got me into some dry clothes. Then he poured me a drink of rum and asked, “Is this how you celebrate the Day of the Dead, Manny? You toss your bones into the drink and I fish ’em out?” He laughed at his own joke.

“I don’t plan on making a tradition out of it, Velasco,” I said, gulping the dark rum down. “As soon as I find out where that liner’s going, I’m after it.”

Velasco laughed again. “That ship’s going to Puerto Zapato! And it’ll be the last one for a while. Why, there ain’t no ships going out that way now but the ol’ *Limbo* here, but...”

“But nothing!” I said. “If the *Limbo*’s my only hope, then I’m already on board!”

Velasco snatched the glass away from me like I’d already had too much. “Manny, Manny, Manny,” he said with a shake of his skull, “the *Limbo*’s not a passenger ship! She’s small cargo, son, and every hand on board *works!*”

“I’ll work,” I said.

“I told you, she’s not a passenger ship. They don’t need a baccarat dealer.”

“What? You think I’ve only got one talent? C’mon, Velasco, I’ve *got* to get on that ship. I can’t let Meche get away from me!”

“Look,” Velasco said sympathetically, “I know how you feel son. Once I lost a very special lady m’self. I waved to her from the docks as she sailed out of port...and I never saw her again.”

I’d never heard Velasco talk about his past this way before. “What was her name?” I asked.

“The SS *La Mancha* was her name. But don’t make me talk about her ’cause I...I just can’t do it.”

Figures ‘she’ would be a ship.

“Well, I’m sorry for *your* big loss, but I gotta get on that ship! Don’t you have some kind of authority around here?”

“I can’t make a captain to take on crew he don’t need!” Velasco snapped. Then he sighed. “The *Limbo*’s gonna be around for a couple more days. Crew’s takin’ shore leave while we do some work on ’er engines. Something might open up. I’ll let you know.”

“OK,” I said. “I guess that’ll have to do.”

“You said it, son. Now go get some of your own damn clothes on. I’m gonna need those overalls sometime.”

TALKING LIMBO

I went back to my hotel and changed into my other tux. I still had a club to run even if suddenly my ‘heart’ wasn’t in it. I arranged to have Velasco’s overalls sent back to him.

Lupe did a double take when I walked in wearing different clothes. “Hey...!” she exclaimed.

“Had a little accident,” I said and left it at that.

She shrugged and said, “I’ve got a telegram for you.”

“Yeah? OK.” I tore it open and read the good news.

BEWARE MANUEL FOR YOU ARE IN GRAVE DANGER STOP
SOMEHOW RUMOR HAS SPREAD ON THE STREETS OF EL
MALLOW OF YOUR PRESENCE IN RUBACAVA STOP IF THIS
INFORMATION REACHES HECTOR LEMANS HE SURELY WILL
SEND HIS EVIL OPERATIVES AFTER YOU STOP YOU MUST
GIVE UP YOUR SEARCH FOR MERCEDES FOR THE TIME BEING
AND PLEASE BE OUT OF RUBACAVA ON THE NEXT SHIP
SALVADOR LIMONES

He was probably exaggerating the danger, but I suddenly felt like an idiot for putting my name up on the big sign. On the other hand... was it coincidence that Domino made sure I saw him with Meche just when Salvador got wind of trouble? I didn't think so.

I looked in on the restaurant. It was empty now except for Glottis, who was still at the piano working on a song he'd been writing for a while. I got straight to the point.

"I just had a run-in with Domino and Meche," I said. "We're leaving town as soon as we can."

"Wha'?" Glottis exclaimed. "How?"

"Domino's got Meche. We're going after them."

"But what happened?"

"I saw Domino dragging Meche onto a cruise ship. He had her around the waist and was trying to pin her free arm. She didn't have a chance to get away."

"Sure they weren't dancing?" Glottis asked.

"What?" I exclaimed in surprise. "Why would they be dancing?"

"Cause they were happy? Maybe she *wanted* to go with him."

I felt mad enough to bust something. "*They weren't dancing, OK!?*"

Glottis blinked a couple of times before saying, "Sure, Manny. OK."

I took a deep breath to calm down. "Look, Velasco might be able to get us jobs on a cargo ship. We've got a couple of days. Get your affairs in order and be ready to go."

"Sure, Manny."

"Good."

One of my regulars suddenly came boiling out of the casino. "Bogen!" he snarled as he stomped past.

I felt my temper rising again. "OK, that's it!" I turned to go to my office.

"What're you gonna do?" Glottis asked worriedly. I just kept going.

I had, hidden in my office, a little gadget that let me monitor the casino and, shall we say, influence events. It was also the tool that Bogen took advantage of. I switched off his luck and listened to the fireworks.

"This is an outrage!" Bogen's tinny voice said when the ball fell its own way. "I bet on number two! Why didn't it come up number two?" There was some laughter in the background. I chuckled, too, at Bogen's childish complaint.

"*Ah Monsieur, je suis vraiment désolé*, I do not pick the winners," the croupier said. "These things are all controlled by the man upstairs." I winced at his poor and unfortunately far-too-accurate choice of words.

"Well," Bogen said huffily, knowing full well who had queered his luck, "please tell the 'man upstairs' that Police Chief Bogen was very upset when he left, and when he returns he would prefer to have better luck!"

"*Oui, Monsieur. Bon soir*," the croupier said. "I will definitely tell him."

That was a mistake, making Bogen angry. It seemed like a good idea at the time. But then, I was angry. I wasn't thinking. And it made things harder for me later on. But I'm getting ahead of myself again. For the rest of that night and most of the next day I felt pretty good for sticking it to Bogen. I was still feeling positive about things when my office phone rang a little before noon.

"Yeah?" I said.

"Manny? Velasco. You still interested in the *Limbo*?"

"You know I am."

"Well, there's an opening on the crew now. There was a little accident this morning. The *Limbo*'s chief engineer got pretty badly hurt. Most of the important pieces are still sticking together,

but he's no good for manual labor any more. I was thinking your buddy Glottis'd be perfect for the job. 'Course, he'd have to get his own tools."

Now that was good news. Not for the engineer, of course, but I couldn't help that. "So," I said, "if I get Glottis some tools, we can board?"

"Uh, *he* can, yes. No offense, Manny, but there's still no room for you on board the *Limbo*. She's fully manned already and most of the crew's accounted for."

"*Most?*" I asked.

"Well, it probably doesn't mean anything," Velasco hedged.

"C'mon, Velasco. Spill it or you'll have a one-man riot on your hands."

"Oh, well, no one's seen seaman Naranja lately...but he'll be here before they sail."

Not good news, exactly, but promising. "What job did Naranja have?"

"He runs the galley."

"Ah-ha!" I exclaimed, triumphant. "Restaurant management!"

"Yeah," Velasco laughed, "it's similar to what you're doin' now, 'cept the fish is fresher on board the *Limbo*."

"What if Naranja doesn't show? I can fill his spot, right?"

"Manny," Velasco exclaimed, "you're not even in the maritime union!"

"You know that and I know that, but we're two guys who can keep secrets, right?"

"Glottis is exempt," he pointed out, "but the captain'll ask to see your card. And if you don't have one, they'll feed you to the sharks like chum. And what's worse, *I'll* get fined."

"You're all heart, *mano*."

"Hey, it's a tough union, boy, and I don't mess with 'em."

"OK, suppose I get a card..."

"Which you'll never get."

"And Naranja doesn't show up..."

"He will."

"*Then* will I get on the *Limbo*?"

"Oh," Velasco grouched, "I guess so! If Naranja's not on board when they're ready to sail, I guess they'll have to take any cold body I can find. If you've got a card that'll pass muster...but you're on your own there, son. How you get one is your business."

"OK. So what kind of tools does Glottis need?"

"Authentic Sea Bee equipment only."

"And where do I get that?"

"Why don't'cha try askin' a Sea Bee? 'Fraid of gettin' stung?" Velasco laughed and hung up.

I put the receiver back and drummed my fingers on my desk. I was a little irritated with Velasco. It wasn't good enough that Glottis get on that ship. I wasn't just trying to get him a new job: we *both* needed to get after Meche. But I wasn't being fair. Velasco was doing what he could and maybe more than could be expected. So I needed to find Glottis the right tools and track down this Naranja if I could and try to fix it so I could take his place. And then there was the matter of the union card.

HIGH ROLLER

Deciding to keep the club open, I sent word to Salvador that I was probably leaving town soon and that he should send someone to Rubacava to manage the club while I was away. I didn't have much luck getting Glottis any CB tools. You just couldn't buy that sort of thing off the shelf. On top of that, I didn't know how to go about finding a sailor on liberty.

Bogen never showed up that evening. I took that as a good thing. But Charlie did show. Not good, exactly. Useful, maybe. “Can you make reasonable union cards?” I asked softly when I sat down across from him.

“Manny!” he exclaimed. “Are you going to start moonlighting, or are you just looking to hang out with the sailors?”

“Can you do it or not?” I asked shortly.

“I have a deal for you,” he said slowly. “If you can retrieve my money from Maximino, I can make you *president* of that crooked union.”

“I don’t need to be president,” I said, “and why does Max have your money?”

“I put a whole suitcase of it up for collateral on a rather large wager last month.” He shook his head angrily. “The race was fixed, Manny. They stole my money like common thieves.” I didn’t make a sound or even twitch. It was a pretty strange story. I mean, where would *Charlie*, of all people, get a suitcase full of money? And why should Max even bother robbing him? A suitcase of money was just loose change to Max. It didn’t add up. “There should be a safe somewhere in the wine cellar,” he was saying, “and my suitcase should be in it.”

“And you can get me a card tonight?”

“If you make it back, Manny, the card will be on the table.”

It sounded like a wild goose chase, but it needed to be looked into anyway. I went over to the High-Rollers’ Lounge. When I got out of the elevator one of Max’s gang—I think it was that ‘Fingers’ guy—spotted me and waved me over.

“The boss was just calling your joint,” he said. “He wants to talk to you.”

“What about?” I asked, wondering whether Charlie had set me up.

‘Fingers’, or whoever he was, only shrugged.

“Well,” I said, “Max probably knows. I’ll ask him.”

“Good idea.”

When I got to Max’s office I found him sitting behind his desk chewing on a cigar. There were several butts in the ashtray, all of them torn up on one end and nearly pulverized on the other after having been violently stubbed out. I guessed he was having a bad day. He got right down to business, not even offering me a drink. A bad sign.

“I’ve been hearing what you did to Bogen last night,” he said in a low growl. He remained seated in his blood-red, leather-upholstered executive chair. Another bad sign, Max not getting up to play host nor asking me to sit myself. “Not smart, Calavera.” He shook his head slowly, sadly. “Not smart.”

It was harder trying to keep my ‘expression’ blank than it had been with Charlie. Max, I knew full well, had the power to make me disappear. “In what way?” I asked as evenly as I could.

“He’s mad. I hear there might be a raid on your joint.”

“You’re kidding!” I exclaimed. There hadn’t been a raid on anything bigger than a drug store slot machine since before I had arrived in Rubacava.

“Do I look jolly in any way to you, Calavera?” There was a dangerous edge to his voice that Max had never aimed in my direction before.

“No,” I said firmly.

A little sigh escaped Max. Some of the tension seemed to leave the room. “In other circumstances, this would just be *your* problem, Manny, but we’re close associates... maybe even partners once your operation gets big enough. Unfortunately, that’s not a secret.” He waived the hand holding his cigar in a broad, meaningless gesture. “You see my problem?”

I nodded. “I do, Max. If *I* get in trouble, *you’re* in trouble.”

“You got it. I guess you haven’t lost *all* your marbles.” He crushed what remained of his cigar in the ashtray. “Well, on the plus side, I’ve made up my mind about Police Chief Bogen. I don’t have any choices now. If he moves against us,” he shrugged, “well, I gotta protect my side businesses.”

“Side businesses?”

Max chuckled. “Manny,” he chided. “Let’s just say our El Marrow associates appreciate our... out-of-town perspective. That’s not something I can afford to jeopardize, especially if both of us want to stay chlorophyll-free.”

I felt a chill. Could Max be talking about Hector LeMans? How close had I come to working both sides?

“Anyway,” Max went on, biting the end off another cigar and lighting it, “this is what I really wanted to talk to you about—I’m gonna take care of Bogen, and I know I promised you a taste, but you’re not gonna get it, not after the gag *you* just pulled.”

“Well, I understand, Max, and I’d do the same thing in your place,” I said, feeling relieved in more than one way. “You know, I would’ve asked to be let out if you hadn’t already insisted. I know enough to admit when I’ve fucked up.”

“That’s mighty white of you, Manny,” Max said, suddenly relaxing. “I was hoping you’d say something like that.” He waved over to the drinks trolley. “Pour us a couple, huh?” He leaned back in his chair, clearly pleased with his underworldly business acumen, and blew a smoke ring at the ceiling.

“You got it, Max,” I said. As I poured a shot of rye for Max and a scotch and soda for myself, I felt Max staring at me. I turned and asked, “Got anything else on your mind, Max?”

He chewed on his cigar a little before saying, “I don’t think my message couldn’t have gotten you here *this* quick. I’m thinking maybe there’s something on *yours*.”

“Oh,” I said, suddenly remembering why I had come over, “I wanted to talk to you about Charlie’s money.” Max started to laugh. “No, seriously,” I said, “he says you have a lot of it.”

“Oh, I got a lot of it,” he said, laughing harder, “but none of it’s his. What’s he been feedin’ you, anyway?”

“Just fish stories,” I said. Max roared and pounded his desk. Phantom tears appeared at the corners of his eye sockets. I finished the drinks and gave Max his. “He was saying something about a suitcase full of money.”

Max’s laughter stopped like someone switching off a radio. “You don’t wanna be askin’ about that,” he warned.

“Probably not,” I said, “but I need something from him. Do you at least have the suitcase? Or one like it?”

“You wanna cross him up?” Max asked. I got an impression of raised eyebrows.

“Something like that.”

Max shook his head. “I don’t know, Calavera. He may be all by himself, but he can be *very* dangerous.”

“Well, if I get what I need, I’ll be leaving town for a while.”

“Hey, that’s great, Manuel,” Max said. “No one deserves a vacation more than you. You know, that might make it easier to deal with Bogen, too.” He paused to throw back his rye. “OK, I’ll play along. I’ll get you that suitcase.” Max chuckled. “In fact, he can have the money back. That’ll make everything perfect!” Max seemed to be almost talking to himself, so I kept quiet. “OK, you go into the lounge for a while. Wait ten minutes and you’ll find the suitcase by the elevator. I know I can trust you to keep your mitts out of the sugar.” That last was part faith and part warning. It was almost enough to make me feel guilty about using him.

“Sure, Max,” I said, downing my drink.

Ten minutes later I went back to the elevator and picked up the suitcase. On the way down I got an itch that had to be scratched. “I wonder what’s really in here,” I said to myself as I popped it open.

“*¡Dios mío!*” I exclaimed. “It’s full of Double-N tickets! This could get a hundred souls on the Number Nine train!” I quickly shut the case. “Something’s not right about this,” I grumbled to the air around me. Maybe Max was setting me up. He was a gangster, after all. I had screwed up and it would make sense if he wasn’t as forgiving as he had seemed. Well, I was kind of committed. It was either keep going down or take the car back up to the lounge and find a window to jump out of. Bad as things might be, that wouldn’t have done the trick.

When the doors opened, there was no one in sight but the guy you had to show your pass card to. He made no move to stop me. When I came out of the little corridor into the main concourse, however, there was Charlie holding a gun. “All right, Manny,” he said, “give me the case.”

“Charles!” I said. “I thought we had a bargain!”

“Oh, we do,” he said, “but I thought I’d bring a little muscle along just in case you wanted to get cute.” He wagged the gun in a way he probably thought was menacing.

“What’s the matter, Chuck?” I needed. “Can’t afford to hire goons to do this sort of work for you?”

“I’m all the goon I need!” he snapped. “Now drop it!”

“You said it, boss.” I put the suitcase down between us and took a step back, holding up my hands. Even if Charlie wasn’t all the goon he thought he was, a daisy maker was a daisy maker no matter whose finger was on the trigger. “Got a card for me?”

“Here.” Charlie took a card out of his breast pocket and dropped it at his feet. He picked up the suitcase and started to back away. “Welcome to the union, Manny. Meetings first Tuesday of every month. Don’t forget to pay your dues.” He turned and trotted off.

“Don’t forget to pay my dues...hmpf!” I said as I picked up the card. It looked OK. As far as I knew.

TROUBLE WITH CARLA

I felt a little wobbly. A delayed reaction from having a sproutella gun pointed at me, I guess. I decided to leave through the LOL terminal. Since it was still the Day of the Dead, it should be pretty quiet over there and I didn’t want to be seen shaking like a leaf, not when it would be known that I had just been visiting Max. Metaphorical tongues would wag.

I had intended to just pass by the security gate, but when I came into view Carla exclaimed, “Wow! Manny Calavera! You *never* come up here anymore.” It hadn’t even occurred to me that she might be working that night.

“Well,” I said, coming over to her desk, hoping I hadn’t flinched too obviously, “I thought you could use the company what with everyone gone for the Day of the Dead.”

“In that case, Manny,” she said, sounding very pleased, “why don’t you stick around until six? That’s when I get off,” she purred. I could sense a wink emphasizing the propositional double entendre.

“Busy night?” I asked, sitting on the edge of her desk.

“Hardly,” she scoffed. “Everybody’s home for the holiday. This place is *dead* and I’m bored, Manny...*bored*.”

“So, how’d you get stuck working tonight?”

“Believe it or not, it was my own bright idea. Last year, there was this huge fight between my sister and her husband. For all I know they’re divorced...or worse. I kinda don’t want to know, you know? Working gives me an excuse to stay away. How about you?”

I shrugged. “There’s no one back home I want to see. Haven’t been there for years, ’cept on business, and I know you don’t want to hear about that.”

Carla cocked her head at me. “You never talk much about your life, do you.”

“Well, you get to be closed-mouthed about your past at the DOD. When everybody you know is up shit creek, too...” I shrugged and pulled out a couple of cigarettes, offering one to Carla.

“Thanks,” she said, “but not when I’m on duty.”

I lit mine and said, “So, why haven’t you been around the club lately?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, Manny, it’s your little coat-check girl. All that bubbly energy... I just want to strangle her!”

“I’ve tried that. It doesn’t stop her. Tell you what, though—I can hop over to the club, grab a bottle, and we can slip into the back and—”

“That back room is all business, Manny, and so am I.”

“What kind of ‘business’ goes on back there, Carla?” I teased.

“Strip searches,” she said, but before I could say anything to that opening, she added with a sigh, “and you don’t qualify.”

“Now why don’t I qualify for a strip search?” I asked, leaning close, kind of enjoying myself.

“Manny,” Carla said seriously, drawing back, “I agree it would help pass the time, but we have procedures and rules here.” She leaned very slightly closer, adding in a lower voice, “And you never know when *they’re* watching.” I glanced up at the CCTV camera. “I can only strip search people when a regular search turns up nothing. And you’re not even traveling.”

“That’s a point,” I said. “Well, you can’t blame a guy for trying to liven things up a little.”

“And I appreciate that. But I got myself into this. I’ll survive, even if I do hate every minute of it.”

“You don’t mind if I stick around for a while, do you?”

“Of course not,” she answered.

“Good. ’Cause I probably won’t be around for much longer.”

Carla stiffened in her chair. “You’re leaving, Manny?” She asked, almost panicky. “For good?”

“I haven’t worked off my time yet. I can’t *leave* leave. You know that.”

She relaxed a little. “A vacation? You could take me along. I’d like that. We could take a cozy little cabin and never set foot—”

“No, I’ve got some serious business to take care of down the line. I’m not sure how long it’ll take, and it won’t be much fun.”

I sensed Carla go a little cold, and there was anger in her voice when she asked, “It’s *her*, isn’t it? You’ve heard something about that Mercedes Colomar bitch at last, haven’t you?”

I sighed.

“*Haven’t you!?*” she demanded.

“Look...Carla,” I began.

“‘Carla’...*what?*” she snapped. “Which fucking *lie* are you gonna feed me this time, ‘*carnal?*’” she asked venomously. “First, it was just a snafu. Then, *you* made the mistake. After that it was your saintly moral duty. And let’s not forget the line about ‘it’s business, not personal’. *I’m sick of it, Manny!*” she almost screamed. “How long are you gonna *toy* with me?” She pressed her hand to her sternum. “I’m *here*. I’m *available*,” she protested, almost in tears. She took my hand with her other. “What’s wrong with *me?*” I was speechless. She let go. She shook her head. “No. The *only* woman you care about is that Colomar dame. Every time I try to get close, you throw that goddamned ‘saintly’ woman in my face! Well, get this through your stupid thick skull, Calavera: *she split on you!*” She took a shaky, deep breath. “I don’t know *what* she did to you, but I’m *done trying to figure it out, pal!*”

“Carla...” I began again.

“*Get out!*” she shrieked. When I didn’t move—I couldn’t move, I was so stunned by the scene—she surged up from her chair and slugged me. “*Get the fuck out of here!*” I backed off. “*I never wanna see you again!*” She came at me again, caught a corner of her desk with her hip and fell. I moved to try to help her up...and she tried to kick my legs out from under me! I took off.

As I ran out of the terminal, I could hear Carla screaming and sobbing, “*Yeah, just leave me alone, why don’t cha?! Maybe I’m lying here with two broken legs!! You don’t care, do you, you miserable, tiny prick!?! Maybe you’d like to come back here and finish me off...asshole!!*”

“Oh, God!” I exclaimed when I got outside. I fell back against the wall and took a lot of deep breaths, waiting for the shaking to go away. No doubt about it...I just couldn’t read women. Carla had groused about Meche before, but I never saw *this* eruption coming. First I drive Meche into the woods; then Carla to hysterical, jealous rage. I sighed and started walking. I wondered what trauma I had inflicted on Eva. No, Eva was iron. I hoped. ‘Well, I’d better get on the *Limbo*,’ I thought, ‘cause bridges are burning behind me.’

LOLA’S LAST PHOTO

I was halfway back to the club when I stopped in my tracks and exclaimed, “*Bogen!!*” Several passersby looked at me curiously. I changed direction. If Bogen was thinking of a raid, he could make it tough for me to leave town. I had to take care of that possibility right away. I went to the Blue Casket to find my cell. I spotted them, but I also saw something that distracted me.

I went to the back of the club, near the doors to the kitchen and the door to Olivia’s ‘office’ or whatever she called it. Parked just outside Olivia’s door was Lola in her working clothes, fiddling with her camera.

“Lola!” I said when I got close enough for my voice to carry over the music. “What are you doing *here*? This crowd doesn’t go much for souvenir pictures...’cept maybe of Lenin.”

“Manny!” Lola exclaimed, making shushing motions with her free hand. “I’m on a stakeout here! I’m gonna prove to Maximino once and for all that Olivia’s no good for him.”

“Still hung up on Max, huh?” I sighed. My failed flapper never knew when to throw in the towel. “Take my advice, angel: forget about him. He’s a gambling racketeer.”

“Like you?” she asked slyly.

“Oh, that hurts, baby.”

Lola sniggered.

“Well,” she said, “tonight’s the night I get the goods on sweet, innocent little Miss Ofrenda. When Max knows what *I* know...*sssh!*” She yanked me back into the shadows. “Here they come,” she hissed. She readied her camera as Olivia’s door opened.

Olivia stepped out, followed by...Nick Virago? I shook my head, not believing what I was seeing. Lola had actually been on to something big.

“Come on, sugar,” Nick cooed, “how about a kiss for the road.”

“Oh, *ick*,” Olivia exclaimed. “Don’t let me down, Nick.” I smiled inside. I was appalled by what I was seeing, of course, but Olivia always did have style. “You’re a lawyer,” she went on. “You’re not supposed to have feelings.”

“I don’t,” Nick said, “but I know a good tort when I see one.” I suppressed a groan. Nick had excellent dress sense, but no style at all.

When they went into their clinch, Lola snapped a picture and then vaulted toward the exit.

“*Hey!*” Nick exclaimed when the flash went off. He sprang after Lola. Olivia grabbed his arm and jerked him back. Nick pulled away from her again and said, “If Maximino sees that photo we’ll be in matching terra cotta pots!”

“Don’t be silly,” Olivia said sweetly. “Max wouldn’t hurt *me*. He *loves* me!”

Nick growled and jogged out of the club.

I stepped forward. No point in hiding.

“Manny!” Olivia exclaimed happily, throwing her arms around my neck and grinding her pelvis into mine. “At last... we’re alone!” Not counting the gross of souls in the Blue Casket. “Tell me, how *are* the bourgeoisie?”

“Fine,” I said. “How’s Max?”

“Oh, gramps!” she pouted, pulling away—making me both relieved and frustrated—and lighting a cigarette. “Don’t start.”

I got up close to her so I wouldn’t have to speak too loudly. She looked up quizzically at me.

“What are you doing with a snake like Nick?” I asked.

“I’d lay it on ya, Manny, but,” she laughed, “I don’t think you’d get it.”

I shook my head. “Messing around with your boyfriend’s lawyer is pretty dangerous.”

“*Ooo!*” she exclaimed. “Maybe I was wrong. You *do* get it!”

I sighed. “I’m worried about Lola.”

Olivia blew smoke in my face. “That’s because she’s doomed, Manny. She fell in love with Maximino! That’s the one mistake *I* never made.”

“Do you think Nick would hurt her?”

“Only if he finds her and, take it from me,” she said with a wink in her voice, “he’s not good at finding things. But,” she added brightly, “don’t let me keep you from your *camaradas*.”

“Huh?”

“Hey, man,” she said, suddenly serious, “I know the reason you’re here.”

I felt a little cold. “You do?”

She laughed. “You may swing with the Man, daddy, but you get your action here.” She gave me a caressing pat on the rump. “Have fun.” She went into the kitchen, still laughing.

I shook my head slowly. “Whatever you’re having, kitten,” I said toward the doors, “save some for the customers, huh?”

I went back onto the floor and went to Alexi’s table. I sat down and Slisko started to say, “Hey —!”

“Can it,” I said. “We’ve got work to do.”

“This isn’t smart, Manny,” Alexi said. Of course it wasn’t. A civil sit-down with these hipsters wasn’t something that should ever happen in public.

“Smart or not,” I replied, “We’re on a tight deadline here.”

“What’s up, brother?” Gunnar asked, picking up on the seriousness of the scene.

“Bogen.”

“Bogen?” Slisko asked, surprised.

Alexi nodded knowingly.

“Yeah. I pissed the cube off,” I answered. “Now I hear the heat’s gonna raid the club.”

“I heard something about this from Glottis this morning,” Alexi said. “So what?” He leaned a little closer in order to speak lower. “I don’t see how this justifies breaking cover.”

“If Bogen’s gonna raid, that might make it tough for me to leave town,” I said, “and it’s time for me to leave.”

Alexi leaned forward again, this time in excitement. “You’ve made contact?”

“Sort of. I saw Meche... with Domino Hurley.” Slisko whistled through his teeth. “He was dragging her onto a cruise ship.”

“*That’s* a problem,” Gunnar said. “I think that was the last float until spring.”

“I know it was,” I grumbled, “but I’ve got one chance—a cargo ship. It’ll be tricky to swing it and I don’t need trouble from Bogen. Some interference would help.”

“OK,” Alexi said, “we’ve got the scene. What’s our part?”

“Well, just how close are the Sea Bees to striking?”

“They’re an oily rag, man,” Slisko said, “and we’re the open flame!”

“Can they go up before tomorrow night?” I asked.

“Tomorrow!” Gunnar exclaimed, ever the practical, cautious one.

“What’s the problem? You’ve been telling me they’re just waiting for the word.”

“Yeah, man,” Slisko said, “but not from *us*, man.”

“The thing is, Manny,” Gunnar said, “we started flying under the Man’s radar, educating the more progressive workers...”

“...building a vanguard,” I supplied.

“Right,” Gunnar replied. “Problem is, the cat they really take directions from—a Sea Bee named Terry—got himself in trouble. He got a little excited, made one of our kind of speeches in public, and Bogen got wind of it.”

“That truncheon with legs doesn’t pay attention to *us* any more,” Slisko said, “no more than the union does. But Terry!” he exclaimed in admiration, “he stirred up the Man something fierce, and Terry was juggled.”

“How long ago was this?” I wanted to know.

“Two weeks,” Gunnar answered.

“Two *weeks*?!?” I exclaimed. “What was the charge? Inciting a riot?” You’d think I would have noticed if there had been a riot.

“Brother,” Gunnar answered, “the charge was disturbing the peace.”

I was floored. I knew Bogen was corrupt—I even had Max’s word for it—but this was too much. “That’s overnight and a fine! And Bogen’s getting away with this?”

“*Hey*,” Slisko exclaimed with a snarl, “does the *Man* care!? Like I’ve been tellin’ ya—”

Alexi cut him off with a sharp rap on the table. He needn’t have bothered. Skulls turned toward the noise, saw it was only Slisko shooting his face off, and turned away again.

“Well,” I said with a sigh, “I guess we gotta spring Terry.”

“How?” Alexi asked. “The brother hasn’t been before a judge yet, so he can’t even post bail. He can’t afford a lawyer ’cause he was laid off months ago, and our shit-house public defender is just sitting on his can.”

“I think maybe I can put a sharp lawyer on the case,” I said. “If I play it right, I might even be able to get Terry out tonight. If.” I paused to think. “Can you guys prime the Sea Bees for Terry’s release? Get ’em ready to strike the moment the cat gives the word?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Alexi said cautiously. “But Terry’d *have* to give the word himself, brother. What kind of action are you looking for?”

“Big. Spectacular. But focused,” I said. “And keep it far away from the *Limbo*.”

“The *Limbo*?” Alexi asked, momentarily puzzled. “Oh. Right. Your transport.”

“Well, I hope so. I’ve got a few things to work out first. For one thing, I need to get Glottis some Sea Bee tools.”

“Hell,” Slisko said, “if you can spring Terry, he’d give you his whoring *mother*. He’s goin’ stir crazy, man.”

“Good. I guess.” I shook my head. “Any of you guys hear of a sailor named Naranja?”

“Yeah,” Gunnar said. “He’s on a major bender. Try Toto’s place. He usually ends up there.”

“If he’s not passed out under a dog someplace,” Alexi added.

“I’ll try Toto first,” I said. “OK, is there anything else we need to cover?”

“Manny,” Slisko said after a moment, “are you sure about this? I mean, staging a strike just so you can duck Bogen?”

“You guys have been working toward this for a long time,” I said. “Does the timing matter all that much?”

“I dunno, man,” Slisko said. “Maybe it doesn’t. I dunno.”

“Look,” I said, “I think maybe I know what the problem is. You’ve been organizing the dock workers out of principle, and now I’m asking you to goad them to strike right now because it’s expedient for *me*. Am I right?”

“Could be,” was all that Alexi said.

“OK, I guess I can’t give you a reason for liking it any better. I could make a lot of nice-sounding excuses, like Bogen’s distracted right now and now’s as good a time as any. But I won’t try and pretty it up. I’m gonna tell you men the truth. I *need* to get after Meche and I don’t care what it takes. You know how important she is to the cause, so the question I have for you is: are you willing to take a step you’ve been dreaming about even if *my* motives aren’t pure red?”

There was a long pause while the three looked at each other, then Alexi said, “You get Terry released, and we’ll take care of the rest.”

“OK. I’m depending on you cats. *Viva la Revolución*,” I added quietly. They echoed me as I got up and left.

When I finally got back to the club, I was heading up to my office when Lupe hollered my name. I went over to her counter and she said, “I have a note for you from Lola.”

“Lola?” I asked in surprise. I had forgotten all about her.

“Yes,” she said, “now where is it?” Lupe ducked under her counter to look. “Where, where, where?” I heard her muttering. “*A-ha!*” she cried out after a few moments. “*Here it is!*” She sprang up and handed me a rumpled envelope. I opened it read the note. Lola said she thought she was being followed and that she wanted me to meet her at the lighthouse. The writing was a hurriedly-sloppy scrawl, but it was definitely Lola’s.

“Did you speak with her?” I asked Lupe. “Is Lola all right?” I knew I sounded panicky.

Lupe gave me a questioning look. “She was a little mussed, like she was in a big hurry. I guess she’s OK, but I didn’t have time to ask her. She just gave me that note and vaulted. What’s wrong, Manny? Is Lola in some kind of a jam?”

“I’m not sure,” I said, “but I hope not. If Lola comes back while I’m gone, get her up into my office and keep her there. If she makes fuss call...” I hesitated. My first instinct was to say Carla, but I had to rule that out. Olivia? She was too boxed or blasted right now to be much help. The cops were out of the question since Bogen was on the warpath, so I settled on, “...Glottis over and have him sit on her, if necessary.”

“Sure thing, Manny,” Lupe said as I rushed out.

I got to the lighthouse as fast as I could, which wasn’t too fast. It was out beyond the opposite end of town and I had to go against the night crowds to get there. When I finally got there, there was no sign of Lola outside. I looked up at the top of the lighthouse but couldn’t really make anything out. I could sort of hear the sound of the lantern turning and I thought that maybe I could hear something else, so I went inside and climbed the spiral stairs to the top. I came out in the little glass room that held the lantern. There was nothing there so I went out onto the catwalk than ran around outside. The lantern was unbearably bright and it was pitch black wherever it wasn’t pointing. The sound of the motor was much louder up there, but I heard something before I saw anything.

There was a vegetable rustle and a low, raspy voice said, “Manny...”

“Lola?” I called out. My foot bumped into something yielding.

“Careful, Manny,” Lola gasped. Then, after a short pause, she said, “You may not want to see me like this.”

Just then the lantern made a pass across the spot where I was standing. The light was nearly as blinding as the dark, but as it flashed by I could make out Lola crumpled by the railing, the outline of her body blurred by spreading green.

“Lola!” I exclaimed, kneeling down next to her. “Did Nick do this to you?”

“Yeah,” she answered in a near whisper. “He must’ve wanted that picture real bad, but he’s never gonna find it, that fink.” She gasped and curled into a ball. I held her tight while the pain took her, feeling the spreading vines brush against my bones and buds burst open and bloom. After a while she relaxed, slightly.

“I’ll get him, Lola,” I promised, sounding dangerous even to myself. “I’ll show Max the picture for you and fix Nick for good.” I gave her a gentle shake when she seemed to relax too much. “Just tell me where you hid it.”

She stiffened again. I thought I must have hurt her, but then I saw feathery bluegrass growing between the joints in her skull. “Oh, Manny,” she said, “it’s all my fault,” she was beginning to slur her words, “always falling for the wrong guy. You know, I even had a thing for you once?” I went cold, almost numb. “But you were so hung up on that Meche woman, I...” she gagged on the green twigs coming through her jaws, “I figured I didn’t have a chance,” she got out finally.

“Oh, Lola...” I said in a near-whimper. Just then I fell hatefully in love with her off-center face.

She turned moss-rimmed eye sockets toward me. “Tell me, Manny,” she asked, almost clearly, “would I have had a chance?” I turned away. I couldn’t help it. The guilt was too strong. “Never mind,” she sighed. “Just warn Olivia for me. Tell her to improve her taste in men or she’ll end up just like me.” Her limbs began to twitch, but she didn’t seem to know it. “Tell her to find a nice guy, Manny... like you.” She went tetanus-stiff before suddenly going limp, then daisies bloomed in her eye sockets.

“Lola!” I shook her hard, not caring if I hurt her. I wanted any kind of reaction. “*Lola!?!?*” She didn’t respond. I fell back against the railing, letting her slip back onto the catwalk. “Oh, Lola...” Something clattered onto the metal catwalk, but I didn’t pay any attention to it. I just stared at the bush that had been Lola, feeling something I couldn’t define dying inside me.

I don’t know how long I sat hunched up over there in the lighthouse. I sat looking at what was left of Lola, thinking that I never knew what she thought of me. It had never occurred to me that I was anything more than just some guy she had met at a road stop one day and then went to work for. Just like I never noticed that Carla cared too much and was maybe a little unstable. Or that I was telling Meche...I don’t know what exactly. And what effect did I have on Eva? I shied away from going back to when I was alive. I’d been at the DOD too long for that kind of introspection.

“Is *this* what I am?” I wondered. Was there something dark inside of me that made me destroy every woman I came across? I liked women, and not just for the obvious reasons. So why couldn’t I see what I was doing to them? Why didn’t I go after Lola right away? My business at the Blue Casket could have waited. What had I been thinking? Just of myself, apparently. I shifted position and my foot kicked the thing that had fallen when Lola had gone limp. I picked it up, grateful for the distraction. As the lighthouse lamp swung around, I saw it was a small plastic card, one that we had used at the Rub-a-Mat to label the food slots. It had the number 22 on it and a picture of a tongue sticking out between two slices of bread.

“*Lengua,*” I said to myself. “*Lengua? Toto!!*”

It didn’t take long to get to Toto’s scrimshaw parlor. He was working on someone I didn’t know on sight. I was a little numb. I just walked in and started flipping through his binders. “*Hola, Toto,*” I heard myself say. “*¿Cómo estás?*”

Toto growled something in one of the languages he liked to swear in and said, “Not now, Manny. I’m in the middle of something with Naranja here.”

Funny. I should have been elated. I had found my missing sailor without even trying. Somehow, I didn’t much care.

Naranja took a swig from a bottle that had been resting on the counter beside him. I walked over to take a look at the design Toto was working on, and at the ones Naranja already sported. Naranja

lowered the bottle and hit me in the chest with it when he tried to set it back on the counter. I took it from him.

“Strong stuff,” I said, looking at the label and seeing it was absinthe spiked with a tiny amount of sproutella, a mixture that had recently been made legal despite the obvious danger. “That oughta kill the pain.”

“Should, but it don’t,” Naranja said, slurring the sentence into one long word. He was probably tanked when he came in. He wasn’t going to get any more numb. I, on the other hand...

Toto interrupted my chain of thought. “I kill pain,” he said in a sneering tone, “turn off drill, stop working, how ’bout that?”

“No, no, no,” Naranja protested, “I can take it! Bring it on, pops!”

“I ‘pop’ you, sailor boy,” Toto grumbled.

“I’m thinking about heading out for donuts,” I suddenly said, my mouth on autopilot. “Want anything?” What the fuck was my problem?

“Don’t you have some fancy club to run someplace?” Toto snapped.

Naranja took his bottle from me and took another gulp. He gave it back to me. Apparently I was the new drinks holder, and suddenly two surprisingly clear thoughts entered my skull. The first was that I’d never get anything out of Toto so long as he was working. The second was that I could get Naranja out of the way without drawing any suspicion.

Sometimes a customer was too much trouble for the bouncer, or maybe we just didn’t want a scene. Either way, there were quieter ways to get rid of a problem than grabbing it by the pants and flinging it out the door. I fished around my pockets and found a mickey. Naranja was watching Toto and Toto was watching his work. Without either noticing, I broke the little capsule over the mouth of the bottle. A minute or two later Naranja took another gulp. Then he got very relaxed, quickly turning into a limp sack of bones.

Toto put his tools down and swore. He rapped sharply on Naranja’s skull and shouted “Wake up!” into an ear hole. It didn’t do any good. My customers always got the best, even when they didn’t expect it. Or want it.

I helped Toto drag Naranja over to the cot Toto kept at the back of his shop. Then he stomped away to straighten up his work area. “Some sailor,” he muttered, “can’t handle booze, huh?”

“Doesn’t look like you’ll be showing up for work any time soon,” I said quietly to the unconscious Naranja. I made sure Toto’s back was toward me before patting Naranja down for anything interesting. All he had on him was a wallet with a few bills and his union card, and a set of dog tags. I slipped them from around his neck and looked them over. Just his name, rank, and pay number. I absently put the tags in my pocket as I fished out the plastic automat card and turned back to Toto.

“This mean anything to you,” I asked as I held out the *lengua* card.

Toto looked at it blankly for a couple of seconds before exclaiming, “Oh! Oh, yeah. Lola was here. She left something for you. Sweet girl. Like daughter to me.” Toto felt around his counter and finally located a small envelope. “She don’t come around here so often anymore,” he said as he handed it to me. “Tell her Papa Toto is very cross.” He wagged his finger in a mock scold.

“Right,” I said, pocketing the envelope with the dog tags. “Well, I’ll be seeing you.”

When I got back outside, I found a lamp post where I could see what I was doing. I pulled out the envelope, snagging Naranja’s dog tags with it. I stuffed them back into my pocket and opened the envelope. Inside was a juicy photo of Nick and Olivia kissing. I returned the picture to the envelope and put it into my breast pocket. I started walking, hands in trouser pockets, fingering the dog tags. Suddenly I stopped, took out the tags, jammed them back into my pocket, and swore at myself. I thought of throwing the tags into the sea, but I couldn’t. I had to keep them.

HABEAS CORPUS DELECTI

I returned to the lighthouse. I climbed back up to the catwalk and sat down again beside Lola. I took out the tags again, fingering them. "I don't know if you can hear me," I said slowly, "but I gotta tell you about what I have to do. You're gonna hate me, I think. I know *I* hate me. I told my gang I'd do anything to find Meche. And I'm going to, even if it *is* the worst thing I've ever done. Even if you are my friend and I never knew..." I broke off, unable to finish that thought. I put the dog tags back into my pocket and started undressing Lola. "I wish I could ask for your help, angel. Maybe you'd *want* to help me. You were always a trooper." The leaves and flowers rustled as I gently got her clothes off.

"You know, I really wish I could justify what I'm doing," I said. "But this is wrong. You deserve better from me, especially after what I've already done to you." I shook my head slowly. "But I'm going through with it anyway, 'cause I don't have the nerve to...to find some other way." I sighed deeply. "Slisko would stick to his principles, I think. I don't think I ever had any. I should have introduced you. He's a little impulsive, has a big mouth, but he's an OK guy. You'd like him." I made myself stop babbling.

I took a deep breath and took out the dog tags one last time. "I guess I'd better just go through with it." I slipped the tags over her skull and settled them among the foliage. "Forgive me, Lola," I said and gave her a kiss. I went down to the shore, found a nice big rock and wrapped it up in her clothes, using her stockings to tie the package together. Then I heaved it all out into the sea as far as I could.

There was just one more thing to do. I found a pay phone and called the police. I left an anonymous tip that there was something suspicious going on at the lighthouse. I hung up and quickly walked away. I wandered around town for a while and eventually found myself outside police headquarters. That was probably a stupid place to be, but it was unlikely that Bogen would be around at that hour. I went in and the officer on duty just nodded to me. I'd been in often enough to talk to Membrillo over the last few months that I didn't have to explain myself.

I went to the morgue and found Membrillo working on two sprouted souls. One was Lola. I only recognized her because I knew what flowers had sprouted on her. "Late night at the morgue, isn't it Membrillo?" I asked, although I knew perfectly well he didn't keep 'office hours'.

He looked up at me tiredly. "You know I can't sleep with John Does on the slab, Manny." Yeah, I did. The man was dedicated to the point of compulsiveness. He turned back to his work. "If I don't ID these rose gardens tonight, I won't be ready for the two that come in tomorrow, and before you know it I'll be up to my ass in azaleas."

"Do you ever worry that your job is getting to you, Membrillo?" I asked. It always got to me, seeing him paw through foliage that way. And now that he was feeling up Lola...

"Well," he said, "forensic botany is a trying job, Manny, but have you ever spent much time here with a florist? In life they became florists because they loved flowers, but here," he plucked a blossom off my friend and sniffed it, "a flower is a symbol of pain, of death within death." Could he have known how much he was torturing me? "Their conflicted feelings build and build until, eventually, they become quite mad." He crushed the flower and let it fall to the floor.

"Thanks for the tip." I made myself sound as normal as I possibly could. "I guess I'll send balloon bouquets from now on." I wondered whether Lola had felt what Membrillo had just done. He sighed, burdened only by his own thoughts, and turned away from Lola to begin feeling around the vegetation of the other soul. "Isn't there something shiny on that one?" I pointed to Lola.

Membrillo looked and shook his head. "I must be too tired." He freed the dog tags from the entangling leaves and twigs. "Seaman Anselmo Naranja," he read out. He put the dog tags down on the slab, picked up his clipboard and started filling out a form. "All day long," he said dully as he wrote, "I

sort through pure sadness. I find evidence, and I piece together stories.” The man felt pain. It wasn’t the same as mine, but it was still pain. “But none of my stories end well. They all end here and the moral of every story is the same: we may have years, we may have hours, but sooner or later, we push up flowers.”

Membrillo could really use a nice tropical vacation, I thought, and so could I. “Shouldn’t you tell Velasco?” I asked, forcing myself to play the game to its end.

“In the morning,” he answered.

“I think I heard him say this guy was missing.”

“Don’t worry. He won’t get away.” Membrillo looked up at me, suddenly curious. “Did you come here for any special reason, Manny?”

“No. Just passing by.”

“I see.”

“Well, I’ll let you get back to work.” Membrillo nodded as I left.

I started to head back to the club. Then I stopped and swore to myself again. I still had something to take care of. I looked up toward the top of the cliff. I could just make out the ‘cactus’ part of the club peeking up over the edge. I turned around and started walking to Feline Meadows. It was getting late, but I had to find Virago if I could. I wanted nothing more than to put this day behind me, but Terry the Sea Bee had to come first. I put my hand into the pocket containing Lola’s last picture, just to reassure myself it was still there.

I went back to the High Rollers’ Lounge. I didn’t know if Virago would be there, but that’s where Max’s office was and Virago was Max’s lawyer. It was the best place to start. Funny thing, I found him right away, sitting at a table in the lounge with a careless spread of papers over by the plate windows overlooking the track. Luck is a strange, cruel thing.

He looked neat and relaxed, not at all like he had just chased down and sprouted a soul who had been dear to me. I’m not sure just how I expected him to look when I found him; maybe I wanted him to look as awful as I felt. But, no, he just looked like Nick Virago. Same as ever. Except now I had a better idea of what he really was.

“Nick Virago!” I exclaimed in mock surprise as I came up to him. “What are *you* doing working in the High Rollers’ Lounge? I would think that Maximino’s private lawyer would have his own office.”

“I do,” he answered, barely looking up at me, “but they don’t serve drinks there.”

I sat down at the table across from him. “Got a little lipstick on ya, Loverboy,” I needed.

“I already took care of *that*,” he said, then looked steadily across the table at me, “and I can do the same for you, Calavera.”

I didn’t doubt it. But not here, not in front of the staff and all the customers in the lounge. I picked up Virago’s drink and leaned back in my chair. He got a funny, ready-to-pop look, but I was feeling invulnerable. Or maybe I was past caring.

“Nick,” I said, taking a sip, “I need a lawyer. Friend of mine’s in the slammer.”

“Well,” he answered tartly, “my dance card is full.”

“You’ll make time for this. Oh, I think you will,” I said when he went ‘hmpf’. “Otherwise I might tell Max about you and Olivia.”

“That kind of claim could send a man like Max into quite a rage,” Virago said softly in a cold voice, “especially when the messenger has no proof.”

I reached into my pocket and removed the envelope. I slid the photo out just enough so Virago could see the subject. When he went rigid I quickly put it back into my pocket.

“What do you want?” he demanded, sounding angry and worried at the same time.

“I wanna tell you a sad story about a young man unjustly imprisoned merely for speaking his mind. And then we’re going down to spring him. And you can do it, Nick, ’cause you’re the best.”

“When?”

“Now.”

He shook his head. “Impossible. What I’m working on now won’t wait...and neither will Max.”

I sent a smile toward Virago. “Then Max must still be here. The photo is here. It’d be easy to arrange an introduction, dontcha think?” I pushed back my chair.

“Wait!” he blurted before I could stand up, sounding more than a little panicked. “OK, I’ll go with you. But I’ll have to tell Max where I’ll be.” He got up and I followed close behind.

“You can tell Max afterwards,” I said, grabbing an arm and pushing him toward the elevator. “I’m not letting you out of my sight until our business is done.”

Virago growled softly but he went with me. When we were in the elevator I quickly turned and pinned him to the wall. I had his gun out of his shoulder holster before he could react. “Thanks,” I said. “I’ve always wanted one.” He glared at me but only straightened his clothes.

As we crossed a particularly long bridge between two islands on our way to the police station, when there were no people around and we were midway between two lamp posts, I threw the daisy maker out into the water. Virago heard the splash and turned to me in surprise.

“Well,” he said, “you *are* smart. You hide it well.”

“Thanks,” I said. “So do you.”

When we got to the station, Virago went to work and in almost no time he got Terry out on a writ of *habeas corpus*. While Virago worked, I had a few words with Terry. He was a little confused by the goings on.

“I don’t get it, man,” he said through the wire mesh that separated us. “What gives? What’s a’ upstandin’ racketeer like Manny Calavera doin’ bustin’ a workin’-class slob like *me* outta the can?”

“I hear you’re ready to strike against that crooked union,” I said. “I’d like to see you get a fair shake. In fact, I’ve got Alexi and the other cats preppin’ the Sea Bees for your release. Bogen knows you were about to strike,” I lied, at least I think I did. “That’s why he put you away on a bogus charge.”

Terry buzzed a little and said, “No, I still don’t get it, Calavera. The union’s run by the coppers, sure, and you—of all people—should know that the cops are in bed with the gamblin’ joints. Help us against the union and you’re only hurtin’ yerself.”

That made sense only if I really were a racketeer...in the sense everyone thought I was, that is. I couldn’t really tell Terry the truth so I said, “Hey, man, I run an honest joint. We ain’t in bed with *nobody*.” Except for the kickbacks to Max, I wouldn’t be.

“Yeah, an’ what about the protection money?” Terry demanded to know.

That, too.

“We pay every week—on the nose, through the nose—like an honest place should.”

“See what I mean?” he said. “This town’s jus’ a big conga line of hustlers, all laughin’ and dancin’ and scratchin’ each other’s backs.” Except that Max’s boys liked my craps tables so much they probably returned what Max skimmed with interest, so the line was probably a circle.

“So,” I said, “if the cops own the union, and gambling’s in bed with the cops...?”

“Yeah, yeah, so who really runs the gamblin’, right? Well, no offense, but Maximino is really the big boy in town, obviously. But word is he gets his orders from some hard-core gangsters in El Marrow. Yeah, that fancy cat track is just a big laundromat...if you get my drift.”

He might have had something there, just not very much.

“You know what, Terry?” I said. “You’re right. And I think it stinks. I put a lot of work into that club of mine and I don’t like seeing the money I’ve worked for dribble away into the pockets of these

crooks.” Or I would if, like I said, it didn’t have the habit of dribbling right back again. “So if you can hurt ’em, I’m all for it because, in the long run, what helps *you* helps small-time operators like *me*.”

“Yeah?” Terry buzzed in surprise. “I guess that *does* make sense.”

“There’s only one thing I want from you. A little favor.”

“Yeah?” he asked a little suspiciously.

“My buddy Glottis wants a job on the *Limbo*, but there’s a rush and he can’t find the tools he needs. Since you boys are gonna strike...?”

Terry snapped his fingers, six of them at least. “Done. I’ll send some tools over to the *Limbo* in Glottis’ name first thing. Glad to do it.”

“Thanks, *carnal*. I owe you one.”

“*Bzzzt!*” he exclaimed. “It’s little enough for what you’re doin’ fer *me*.”

When Virago got the writ we left the station with Terry who flew off toward the docks.

“I guess our business is settled,” he said, putting Terry’s paperwork into his breast pocket.

“Almost,” I said and flattened him with a right, giving him yet another surprise.

“What?” he said as he picked himself up. “Was that for the photo girl?” He massaged his jaw.

“No,” I said airily. “That was just for being you. I don’t have time to get you for Lola, but I’m sure somebody will.”

“You didn’t have time to *save* her, either,” he said, a ‘punch’ much harder than the one I had just landed on him, “but I wouldn’t worry about that, Manny. I hear saving women isn’t your forté.” When I didn’t say anything—I was too busy fuming—he ‘grinned’ and turned to walk away. He turned back to ask, “I presume that photo will be deposited in a safe place?”

“I’ll give it to Glottis,” I answered as menacingly as I could. “You can’t hurt him, and the hornèd beast,” I added, making homage to Olivia’s phrase, “wouldn’t like it if anything were to happen to me.” Glottis was quite gentle, but I didn’t think Virago had much experience with demons. Proving my assumption, he quickly walked away without another word.

I hurried back to the club. The sooner I got that photo to Glottis, the safer I’d feel.

TOP TO MOP

I didn’t sleep at all well that night. I spent half the night tossing and the other half dozing only to be woken by dreams about Lola. But I must have fallen into a deep sleep eventually, because I slept right through my alarm and was woken up by the phone. I fumbled with the receiver, dropping it on the floor before getting it right and mumbling, “lo?”

“Manny?” a gruff voice asked. “Velasco.”

The phone woke me up so fast I wasn’t sure who or where I was, but Velasco’s voice brought it all back. I sat up and rubbed my eye sockets, bracing myself to play it out. “Y’a’?” I asked blearily. “Wha’s’a’?”

There was a slight pause before Velasco asked, “Are you all right, son?”

“I had kind of a late night,” I answered, managing clear English.

“Did I wake you up?”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry, Manny, but this is kinda urgent.”

I knew it was, but I still asked, “What is it?”

“I got a call from the city morgue,” Velasco said. “It seems like Naranja’s sprouted.”

“*Sprouted!*” I made myself exclaim. “What’s happening to this town?”

“Big city crime, Manny,” Velasco said with a sigh, giving it a double meaning or so I imagined. “We’re getting more and more of it every day.” There was a longish pause. “I know you probably hate getting it this way, but Naranja’s job is yours now.”

“I don’t know if I’m comfortable taking that...”

“You’ll take his job because there’s no one I can get on such short notice!” Velasco snapped. “The *Limbo*’s loading up now an’ she’ll be ready to sail just after noon. Glottis’ tools are all stowed already, so you get that piano player of yours an’ your head cleared an’ yer bony ass down here before they shove off...and you’d better have a union card on you.”

“I’ll have one.”

“Yeah, I figured you would. You’ve taken care of everything else.” His voice sounded unusually harsh.

“Did you identify Naranja for Membrillo?” I asked.

There was another short but noticeable pause before Velasco said simply, “Yes.”

“Well,” I said, feeling like I belonged under a rock, “we’ll be there before the *Limbo* sails.”

“Yeah, I know you will,” Velasco said with a snarl. Then he hung up.

It was already past ten when Velasco called. I got word to Glottis to meet me at the *Limbo* before noon. The man Salvador was sending to Rubacava to take over the club hadn’t arrived yet, of course, but I didn’t much care. Calavera Café was no longer any concern of mine. In fact, I no longer felt at home in Rubacava. I packed what little I thought I needed and sent it to the *Limbo*. Then I went to my bank and made sure I could get at my money further down the line. I almost decided to just turn it all over to Salvador, but I figured I might still need it. Chasing after Domino and Meche could get expensive.

It was well past eleven when I started to head for the *Limbo*. I had just gotten to the docks, and spotted Glottis waiting for me ahead, when I heard a siren behind me and the screech of a car braking suddenly. I turned to see Bogen getting out of a squad car. Perfect timing. I turned back toward the *Limbo*’s berth and managed to take a step before Bogen called out, “Stay put, Calavera!”

I turned around again to watch Bogen and his driver approach me. Then there was a sharp whistle off behind me and, a couple of seconds later, an explosion. The concussion made us all stumble. I looked toward the sound of the blast and saw a fiery mushroom rising up from the dry docks, its underside brightly lit by flames rising from the hulks of incomplete ships. Bogen stared open-jawed while his driver rushed back to the car to shout into the radio.

Before Bogen could do anything, a group of Sea Bees suddenly flew up and started pelting him and the car with rocks, all the while loudly buzzing “*Sea Bees! Free Bees!*”

I spun around and sprinted toward the *Limbo*.

“Manny...” Glottis began as I approached.

“Ignore it,” I said and yanked his sleeve to get him moving toward the ship.

Velasco was planted in front of the *Limbo*’s gangway, staring toward the dry docks. He let Glottis pass but moved to bar my way. Glottis trotted up the gangway, making it buckle and groan with each step. Up above, the *Limbo*’s deck was crowded with sailors all looking and pointing.

“The Sea Bees are striking,” I said to Velasco.

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“Maybe the *Limbo* oughta shove off while we still can,” I said, hoping Velasco would get the ‘we’ part.

“The captain’s getting ’er underway now,” he said, “but first...let’s see that union card.”

I showed Charlie’s work to Velasco and he shook his head, disappointed. “One of Charlie’s rush jobs,” he observed and handed it back to me. “Lucky for you, your new captain’s far-sighted. Get on board.”

“Thanks for the gig,” I said, shoving the card back into my breast pocket, “and for not asking too many questions.”

“Hell,” he said, “after what happened to...Naranja,” the pause was too long for comfort, “I can see why you’d leave town. Let’s just hope I don’t have to go fishin’ you out of the drink again.”

“I’ll stay under next time, I promise.”

Velasco looked away, then thumped me on the shoulder. “Get aboard, son, or you’ll be left behind.”

“Right,” I said and ran up the gangway.

A few minutes later the *Limbo* cast off and was pulling away from the dock. The police car, now with a cracked windshield, raced up and Bogen jumped out. Bogen kept gesturing to the *Limbo* while Velasco made helpless gestures. I took one last look at Rubacava and then went below to report to the captain and start my new job.

MOP TO TOP

I found that the *Limbo* took some getting used to. Part of it was that I was no longer the boss. I didn’t realize how accustomed I had gotten to being in charge. I mean, one day I was the owner of a swanky nightclub with over a dozen people working for me; and then, literally the next day, I’m at the bottom, the one taking the orders. It was quite an adjustment to make.

Well, I wasn’t *exactly* at the bottom. I had one guy to boss around. At least I didn’t have to peel the potatoes myself. But Glottis...Glottis was the chief engineer with a whole staff to give orders to. That took some getting used to as well. And some of the guys had a real problem with a high-ranking demon. At least, until the first mate observed—with sharply-pointed words—that ‘that demon’ was the one keeping us all afloat. That put things in perspective for even the biggest malcontent.

Yet another big adjustment for me was just being on a ship. Most of it was cargo. There wasn’t a lot of space left over for moving around. Being aboard ship was a lot like being in prison: confined and no realistic way out. No wonder sailors went wild when they were on leave.

I got friendly with the radio operator. He had worked Vegas when he was alive, so we kind of connected. And we sort of cornered the gambling on the boat. Some smart asses started calling the galley ‘Calavera Café’ until they were persuaded to cut it out. Being dangled over the side by a huge, orange demon can change one’s mind about what’s funny in quite a hurry. It was just a game to Glottis because he would never let go, but the guys didn’t need to know that.

Anyway, the radio operator and I were pals and so I was able to hear news that otherwise I might not have. The CB strike got to be pretty serious and spread to other dock workers. I wondered if maybe Alexi had lost control because wanton destruction wasn’t what he was about. An explosion to distract Bogen was one thing, but what happened afterwards—if the reactionary Hearst newsreels I saw in port were to be believed—was something else. Newspapers I bought when the *Limbo* docked carried pictures of burnt-out warehouses and sunken cargo ships still moored and I was reminded unwillingly of photos of the USS *Arizona* I had seen as a child...but I recognized anti-union propaganda when I saw it. Another thing I heard, not so easily dismissed, was that my club had been burned to the ground; but that couldn’t be linked to the strike. Even with me gone, Bogen had gone ahead with the raid and shut the place down. It was empty when it caught fire. It was supposed to have started because the fryer in the kitchen wasn’t shut off...but we never had a fryer. High-class joints don’t do chips. I didn’t care so much for of the club, but it cost the LSA a prime source of cash.

It wasn’t too long before everyone on board learned that Naranja hadn’t been sprouted. It was an inexplicable mistake to everyone but me, and I wasn’t going to say a word. The last news I heard from Rubacava was that, after the torching of the club, Bogen had disappeared. He didn’t leave town

the normal way, and he wasn't found sprouted. He just wasn't there one day. I guess Max had finally made his move. Too bad he didn't make it before the club burned down.

Every shore leave I wanted to just get tight as a drum at the first bar I could find, but I always had work to do. The first thing I always did was to check at the *Nada Mañana* offices to see if Meche had still been on board when the *Lambada* sailed after it's stop. She always was. Then I had to send a wire to Salvador about where I was and where I was heading, and what little I had learned. I rarely had enough time to get even mildly drunk before having to get back on board.

The *Limbo* crawled along from port to port, unloading and taking on cargo. We weren't moving very fast. Neither was the *Lambada*, but she was making better time than we were. It wasn't long before she was two ports ahead, then three. I was able to learn a few things during our longer stops, mostly that Meche never seemed to come ashore. That meant Domino was keeping her on a short leash. What I couldn't figure out was why he was taking her on a luxury cruise in the first place. Salvador didn't know either. Our agent in Puerto Zapato was made aware that the ship carrying Meche was heading his way and that he should be on the alert; but the *Lambada* was months away from Zapato and the Sea of Lament is huge.

There's not much to tell about the journey. One day on board the *Limbo* was a lot like any other and shore leave was much the same everywhere: check up on the *Lambada* and Meche, send and receive cables, get drunk and be carried back aboard ship by Glottis. Once I wired Carla but I never got a reply. Just as well, I supposed. The further I got from Rubacava, the more she began to seem like a mistake; but I still cared for her.

Glottis slowly remade the *Limbo* in his image. After rebuilding the old diesel engines into something special, his crew started giving the rest of the ship a makeover. Each port saw the ship looking newer and newer; and apart from mechanical changes, there was usually some crew turnover at each port. Some souls made careers in the Land of the Dead. Others just worked their way across as fast as they could, picking up and dropping one job after another as it suited them. After a while I was one of the older hands on board. In time I got out of the galley and was moved around the ship as different talents were uncovered. About halfway to Puerto Zapato I was posted to the bridge. I learned how to plot a course and even how to pilot the ship. Then I spent time in the engine room, actually taking orders from Glottis. That was fun. Then I was the radio operator for a while. Then back on the bridge.

I got a little puzzled, after a while, about why I was bouncing all over the ship. The captain was a little mysterious about it. Then, at one port about two-thirds of the way to Zapato, the first mate left to take command of another cargo ship. Imagine my surprise when the captain took me into his quarters and told me I was to be his first mate. That explained why my assignment kept changing: he'd come to think I'd make a good replacement and he wanted me to learn the ship from stem to stern. Did I ever. But as first mate I got to know it even better.

And then there was the storm.

It was hurricane season by this time and we'd been lucky so far, but not that one day. We were between ports with nowhere to run and we were tossed around like a toy in a bathtub. When it was over we were listing heavily to starboard with all but one engine out and the captain missing. Nobody saw it happen, but he must have been swept overboard. He was probably all right; just a little shaken up somewhere on the seabed. We sent down divers but he was nowhere in sight, not that anyone could go or see very far. The dead can't swim—no buoyancy at all—and the divers, all equipped with air bladders, had to remain tethered to the ship or risk being lost themselves. Searching was a useless, if necessary, gesture; but with a little luck the captain should find his way to shore sometime. In the end, the *Limbo* had to limp on to the next port with me in command.

There was an investigation, of course, but the company's panel of inquiry could only conclude that it had been a regrettable accident. They left me in command but for a while my ship was little more than a heap of scrap metal with propellers. The holds were unloaded and she was put in dry dock for repairs. Those repairs were so extensive that the company gave me the option of rechristening the ship if I wanted. I did, and so when she was relaunched she hit the water as the SS *Lola*.

YEAR 3

Pow

The *Lambada* was nearly to Puerto Zapato when the *Lola* was relaunched; but Glottis and his crew had really done a number on the engines and we flew, in a manner of speaking. We started making ports ahead of schedule, which pleased the line no end. We had to extend our stops occasionally because our cargo wasn't ready to be loaded, but even so we began to gain on the *Lambada*. It wasn't too long before she was just three ports ahead of us again.

As captain I had the ability to find out things more easily than I could as chef, but I had to be even more circumspect. The line would not have been happy to find that they had a member of the LSA in command of one of their ships, and I couldn't risk them finding out and finding myself stripped of command and put ashore, not in those days. The LSA were getting a reputation as being terrorists. Our own propaganda was being drowned out in the press by official DOD statements and surrogates, especially in the Hearst media and on Mayer News TV—probably inspired by Hector himself, in my opinion. The situation eventually cut me off from the LSA. It seemed too risky to continue to communicate through telegrams or any other conventional means available to me. I had to assume everything—mail, telegrams, radiograms, whatever—was being screened, and even though I'd always operated on the fringes of LSA activities, it was possible I myself was on DOD watchlists.

So we sailed on from port to port, taking on and putting off cargo, and getting closer to the *Lambada*. She was always ahead of us. When the *Lola* was two ports from Puerto Zapato, the *Lambada* was already there. That was the end of the line as far as ocean travel was concerned. The *Lambada* would have an extended stopover before heading back to Rubacava and it would make the return trip with very few passengers. Either Domino took Meche off at Zapato, or they both would be coming back my way.

I still didn't know why Domino had taken her on board the *Lambada* in the first place. If he wanted to sprout her, I assumed he would have done so when he found her. And since he and Don Copal had stolen her ticket, I didn't think he would bother taking her to the end of the line. I also couldn't see any point to making a round trip. And I still didn't know why Domino had made sure I saw him with Meche.

At the port just before Puerto Zapato we crossed the *Lambada's* path. In fact, she was docked when we arrived. Meche was not on the passenger list. Nor was Domino. So they got off at Zapato. But why? Where would they go from there? Though I tried not to, I began to wonder if maybe Glottis had been right. Maybe Domino *hadn't* dragged her on board. Maybe they really had been dancing, a couple of lovebirds celebrating their making the next stage of the journey. The idea was absurd, given everything I thought I knew about Domino, but I couldn't help but have doubts.

Finally, nearly a year after leaving Rubacava, we reached Puerto Zapato. We sailed into the harbor and a tug nudged us into our berth. I was forward the bridge, shouting orders and watching the crew scurrying around on deck. When we were in position to tie up, Ensign Arnold scrambled up to me. He was pretty new to the ship and was still falling all over himself trying to please. "Captain?" he said anxiously. "Captain Calavera?"

I just puffed on my pipe a second (diesel fuel and cigarette butts don't mix, I'd found) before exclaiming, "Puerto Zapato, sailor! We're here at last!" I shook my head in mute appreciation. "Beautiful port, isn't she?"

"Yes, sir!" Arnold said, enthused. Of course, he'd agree with just about anything I said, raw as he was. "Uh, Captain, there are some customs officials down below, sir. They want to search the ship."

That was a little strange, but not unheard of. They usually waited until a ship was securely berthed before coming aboard, but sometimes they boarded from the tug just to keep you on your toes.

“Fine, fine,” I said. “We’ve got nothing to hide.” I nudged Arnold with my elbow. “No skeletons in *our* closets, eh?” No doubt about it. All this time away from Eva had definitely taken away my edge.

“Yes, *sir!*” Arnold said gamely, then turned to go back below.

I turned my attention to the deck. “Secure the bow, boys!” I called out. “Like a rock this time!” Like I said, there was a lot of turnover on these tramp steamers, and you might be surprised how attracted new hands were to deck furniture when it came to tying up.

I jumped slightly when there came a rustle of wings right past my head. I looked down and saw a pigeon settling itself on the railing next to me. Its head drooped and the bird swayed a little as it perched. It was obviously exhausted. There was a message tube attached to one leg. I took the message out of the tube and then the bird heaved itself back into the air, apparently knowing no reply was needed. I unrolled the little piece of paper and read the cramped writing.

I hope this very urgent message gets to you in time. Our man in Zapato says Miss Colomar never made it to port. It’s said she threw herself overboard at the Pearl. I don’t know if you believe that, but whatever you do, do not land at Puerto Zapato! It’s a trap. Assassins will attempt to board your ship disguised as customs agents. Beware, Manuel, and *viva la Revolución!*

I crumpled up the message and stuffed it into a pocket. I leaned over the railing and shouted to the crew on deck. “OK, boys, listen up!” Skulls turned toward me as I continued, “We’ve got some uninvited guests: LSA terrorists!” They started exchanging worried looks. “I said *listen!* Preston, you get your ass over to the port authorities and tell them what’s going on.” Preston took off. “The rest of you, grab whatever you can use as a weapon and get searching! They’re disguised as customs officials! Be careful, but *get* them!” They all shot off in different directions.

When they were gone from sight I went back onto the bridge. Once inside I took one step and went sprawling. I twisted around to see what tripped me... and there was a nautical-looking shrubbery. I scrambled over and pushed aside the vines and leaves around the skull. It was Ensign Arnold. I stood up and then saw Deck Officer Glenn next to him.

I shook my head in shock. “This can’t be happening!” I said in a tight voice. I couldn’t understand why I was still unspouted since I had been just outside, unless maybe the assassins didn’t want to show themselves when the bulk of the crew had been on deck.

I clambered below and saw still more sprouted crew. First Lola, now this...

“Hey!” an unfamiliar voice called out. “He’s back here!”

“Sack ’im!” another shouted.

I turned and ran forward. They were unfamiliar with the ship and fell behind, but there were more than those two. When I switched corridors and returned to the aft section, I surprised one of the assassins in the crew quarters. He raised his daisy maker fast but I pulled the hatch shut even faster. The sproutella round pinged off the metal and I scrambled down to the next deck.

When I dropped down I found three more of them. One chuckled as they casually cocked their guns. Suddenly something powerful grabbed me and jerked me backwards. Glottis dropped me, kicked the hatch shut, spun and jammed the wheel. I was in the engine room.

The assassins hammered at the door for a while. Glottis said, “Don’t worry, Cap’n. We’re safe in here!” The hammering stopped and one of the bastards outside said something I couldn’t catch.

“Could you make that out?” I asked.

Glottis turned a wide-eyed stare at me. “Something about explosives!”

“We’ve gotta get out of here!” I exclaimed.

“Those guys have guns, Manny!” Glottis exclaimed, sounding panicky. “I don’t know if I can keep you from getting hit.”

“If they’re planting explosives, that means they’re leaving. Do you know what’ll happen when they go off?”

“Yeah. It’ll hurt.”

I shook my head. “Those guys are berserk. I saw only sprouted crew on the way here. If this ship goes up while we’re still berthed, we won’t be the only ones hurting.”

“So what’ll we do?”

I thought a second. “OK, *you* can’t be sprouted, so I want you to go up on deck and cut us loose. Then get to the bridge as fast as you can. If the tug’s still around, get them to help; but either way, we’re heading back out.”

“Manny, if the tug’s gone...”

“Yeah, I know, it’ll be a messy departure; but not as messy as staying, so *go!*”

Glottis opened the hatch and went. I secured it behind him and waited. It wasn’t long before the intercom crackled.

“OK, Cap,” Glottis said, “I’m on the bridge and I’ve cut the lines. The tug’s here and they’re ready to help us get outta here.”

“OK, *mano*,” I said. “I’m starting the engines.”

“Manny!” Glottis exclaimed. “Raise the anchors, will ya?”

“I’m on it,” I said. I worked the anchor controls and looked out a porthole to see one of them swinging and banging against the hull (there no longer being anyone to make them fast) as we started moving away from the dock. “You know,” I said, “they must be the only things on board you haven’t chromed.”

“Hey, that reminds me of a song!”

“Later,” I said.

“Cap’n,” Glottis said after a moment, “Mr. Preston is on the tug. He wants to board.”

That was a relief. At least one of my boys survived.

“No way,” I answered. “He doesn’t need to risk himself.”

“I told him about the bomb, Manny,” Glottis said. “If he can find it while we’re busy getting out of here, maybe we can chuck it overboard.”

“Maybe,” I said. “OK, he can come aboard, but you tell him not to take any unnecessary risks! I’m not losing anyone else today, got it?”

“Got it, Cap!” Glottis said.

A seeming eternity passed as we maneuvered out of the harbor. At any second I expected the explosives to go off. Finally, we were in the open sea.

“Manny,” Glottis said, “the tug’s goin’ back. What do we do now?”

“Hang on,” I said. I switched the intercom to general broadcast. “Preston! Are you there? Answer me, *mano!*”

“I’m here, Captain,” he answered.

“Where are you?”

“Aft cargo hold. I figure they’d put the explosives somewhere near the bottom.”

“Makes sense. Carry on.” I switched back to the bridge. “Glottis, point us directly away from the port and tie off the wheel. Then get to the forward hold and start looking. Preston’s aft and I’m going amidships.”

“I’m on it!” Glottis said.

I grabbed a big wrench from the tool locker in case any of those thugs were still on board and left the engine room.

It wasn't too long before Glottis' voice came over the intercom. "I've found it!" he shouted. "Two charges in the forward hold!"

I jumped to an intercom. "Glottis, if you can pick them up, throw 'em overboard!"

"Can do!"

"Be careful, *carnal!* Preston, you and me are gonna keep looking."

Less than a minute later the *Lola* got a giant kick in the starboard side. I was thrown to the deck as we rolled sharply to port. The ship slowly righted itself as I picked myself up and ran topside. Once on deck I found Glottis leaning over the starboard rail, looking down at the hull.

"That was pretty close, buddy," I said when I came alongside him.

He looked down at me and said, "Yeah, maybe too close, Manny." He turned again to peer down over the side. "I threw 'em out as far as I could, but they went off right after they hit the water."

"See any damage?"

"No, but that doesn't mean a damn thing."

"Well," I said, "at least we're still floating. Let's get to the bridge."

Before we got there we could hear Preston's voice over the intercom. "Glottis? Captain? Anyone there? Glottis..."

"Yeah," I said, punching the call button, "we're here. You OK?"

"Yes, sir, but the ship isn't."

"Gimme a report," I ordered.

"The concussion from the blast must've hit us near an expansion joint. I can't find any obvious damage, but we're taking on water. I've closed the flood control doors around the affected section, but I can't get the pumps working."

Glottis went below and I said, "Understood. Glottis is on his way. Help him get the pumps working and then look for any additional leaks."

While Glottis and Preston worked, I plotted a course and turned the *Lola* toward the Pearl. The ship started to list further and further to starboard. I had a tense twenty minutes before Glottis reported that the pumps were working. We stabilized a little, but didn't lose that list.

THE PEARL

After a while Preston came to the bridge. "Sir," he said, "I've made an inspection of the rest of the hull. There aren't any other leaks that I can find."

"Good," I said, double-checking our heading.

Preston scanned the horizon and said, "Uh, sir...I can't see land."

"That's right, sailor. We're headed for the Pearl."

"The Pearl!" he exclaimed in surprise. "Sir, with all due respect, we need to get back to port. That blast overstressed the hull. That's why we're taking on water. Going into deeper water with heavier swells isn't going to help us any."

"We won't be heading back to port any time soon, sailor," I said. "The Pearl is where we need to be."

"Sir," Preston said, trying to sound calm and reasonable, "that expansion joint is cracking apart. It's only going to get worse. It won't be long before the ship splits in two. Remember the *Titanic*."

I looked at him steadily for a moment before saying anything, recognizing that Preston had been on that ship. "The *Lola* doesn't matter any more," I said, hating the words. "Getting to the Pearl *does*."

Preston hesitated before speaking again. “Sir...I saw the rest of the crew. I understand. But that’s no reason—”

“No, you *don’t* understand,” I countered. “I’m not out of my mind with guilt or anything. I don’t *want* to sink the ship, but it’s vital we get to the Pearl. Hector’s goons are still in Zapato, so there’s no reason to turn back.”

“Who’s Hector?” he asked, baffled. “And what’s at the Pearl?”

“Hector’s a long story. Let’s just say that everything that happened today was directed straight at me. They used Meche to lure me to Zapato, but Meche is supposed to have gone overboard at the Pearl. I don’t know what that means, either, but I have to check it out.”

Preston didn’t respond right away. Then, apparently deciding on a new tactic, he said, “The company’s going to take a hell of a beating if the *Lola* goes down with her cargo.”

“I know, son, but I stopped working for the line when those DOD cockyx lickers boarded us.”

“*DOD?*” Preston exclaimed, stunned. “Who *do* you work for?” he asked slowly.

“The Lost Souls’ Alliance.” Preston took a step backwards. “Don’t worry. We’re not terrorists.”

“What about Rubacava?” he asked pointedly.

I shook my head. “*That* was a simple labor dispute,” I said. “If it got way out of hand, it was only because of how corrupt the maritime union is.” At least, I assumed it wasn’t anything Alexi had intended. “The only thing the LSA is concerned with is clearing out the corruption in the Department of Death. I know that goes against everything you’ve heard, but you can’t go around believing everything you hear. I’m in a better position to know. Here,” I reached into my pocket and pulled out the crumpled message I got from the pigeon, “check this.”

Preston smoothed out the paper and read it. “Now, that’s Salvador Limones’ handwriting. I got that right *after* the ‘customs officials’ boarded the ship. Just a few minutes earlier...” I shrugged helplessly.

“So they weren’t LSA terrorists at all.”

“No. The truth was too complicated, but it got everyone motivated.”

“And sprouted.”

Talk about kicking a man when he’s down. “I know it. First *Lola*...” I trailed off in a sigh.

“So now what?” Preston asked. “Sir,” he remembered to add.

I shrugged. “Now I go to the Pearl. Try to pick up Meche’s trail.”

“And then?”

“Then I try to save her,” I said.

It was well into evening and I thought we must be getting near the Pearl. I had Preston scanning the sea for the light of the Pearl and Glottis was working in the engine room, trying to keep us afloat. I don’t think Preston fully believed what I had told him, but he seemed resigned to his situation.

We were listing badly by then and were riding pretty low. The pumps couldn’t keep up any more and, making matters worse, waves were breaking over the bow and spilling into the hold. We would have done better if we could have gotten rid of the cargo, but we didn’t have that luxury. The only one who could be spared from what he was doing was Preston, and there’s nothing he could have done alone. In fact, it needed more than three to unload.

It was getting dark when Glottis came to the bridge. “Hey, I need you below,” I said.

“Sorry, Cap, but you haven’t heard how the hull is groaning and I don’t want to be trapped down there when it goes.”

I wouldn’t have wanted that, either. “OK, *carnal*,” I said. “I guess you’ve done all you can.”

“Captain...” Preston said, handing me the binoculars and pointing.

I looked and thought I saw a glow in the ocean ahead. “A little farther...” I said, just as the *Lola* came apart in a deafening screech of tearing metal. She went down pretty fast.

I trailed the aft section as it went down. Glottis was beside me. I lost sight of Preston after the first few fathoms. After a long time, I don't know how long, the aft section hit the seabed and a huge cloud of sediment erupted around it. Glottis and I settled down near the hulk. There was no sign of the forward section nor of Preston. I never saw him again.

By some miracle the generators must've been inside an air pocket because the *Lola's* running lights were still on, casting a feeble light around the wreck of the aft section. I picked myself up and tried to take stock of the situation. Glottis was next to me on his hands and knees, making gagging noises.

"Manny!" he got out. "Choking!"

"*Mira!*" I said. "Snap out of it, sailor!"

The demon got to his feet and said in a peeved tone, "Easy for you to say. *You* don't have lungs."

"You lived without your heart once," I pointed out, "so you can do without air for a little while."

"I'm a spirit of the land, Manny," he countered, "not of the sea!"

"Well, just hang on while I try to figure out what we're gonna do."

I looked up at the wreck of the *Lola* and was suddenly seized with an overwhelming black feeling. "Oh, *Lola*," I said thickly, "looks like I let you down again."

"I told you that name was bad luck," Glottis said.

"*Hey!*" I snapped.

"Sorry," he said, but he had a wry grin on his face. Yeah, the demon knew what he was doing. That tactless remark got me back on even keel.

It didn't take me long to take stock of the situation. We were at the bottom of the sea next to the torn and half-crushed remains of our ship. Kind of bleak, but there was a little bit of light...specifically, one off in the distance.

"If the chart was right," I said, "that's *gotta* be the Pearl...but there's a lot of dark water between here and there." I took a step forward, wanting to get a better look.

"Beware, brave Captain!" Glottis suddenly said in a strange, Delphic voice. "Here in the darkest depths of the Sea of Lament dwell the most *horrible* monsters of all! The fearsome, murky *demons of the deep* will *swallow you whole* the instant you leave this *pool of light*! Heed my warning, or take *one step forward* and *learn for yourself!*"

"All right, all *right*," I snapped impatiently, "I believe you! Just quit it with the creepy spirit-of-the-land voice, huh?" I looked back at the ship. "You know," I said, "if we're gonna get to the Pearl, we'll need some light. Monsters or no, it's pretty dark down here. I wonder if we can salvage anything? Even an underwater welding kit would help."

"Maybe so," Glottis said in his normal voice, "but I don't see any light coming from the portholes...just the running lights outside."

"Yeah, it's so dark we ought to be able to see the emergency lights from here, if they were on."

"So how do we find any flashlights or welding kits or whatever?"

"It's kinda funny, you know...needing light to find light."

"Heh," Glottis said, definitely sarcastic. "I'll tell you an even funnier one....Eventually that generator is gonna die and there'll be nothing keeping the sea monsters away."

Something made me turn around as he was speaking and I saw a little light swaying around, apparently attached to some scuttling form underneath.

Glottis saw it, too. "Here comes one now!" he exclaimed.

The figure came closer. As it did, it's outline became clearer and it looked more like a soul than a monster. A very strange-looking soul, but still a soul.

“OK,” Glottis said, “that may not be a sea monster but it’s still pretty spooky.”

“*Hijole!*” I exclaimed. “He looks like he’s been down here a long time. *Amigo!*” I called out when the soul got near enough.

“Huh?” he said, straightening up some. Even more or less erect, he was still one weird customer. His bones were a blue-gray color, and strangely velvety-looking. He wore a backpack and the remains of a wet suit. There were strange knobs over his eye sockets and his light was attached to a flexible pole that seemed to be growing out of his spine.

“Aw, geez,” he exclaimed, “another shipwreck! You see? That’s why I never travel by boat!” He turned and started to move away.

“Hey!” I said. “We’ve had a little, um, accident. Think you could help us out?”

He faced us again. “Depends on what kind of help you’re lookin’ fer.”

“Could we tag along with you?”

“Well, it’s a long walk you’re talkin’ about.”

“We don’t have any other choice,” I said with a shrug.

“Oh, all right then,” he said. “Lift those knees, stick close to my light, and try to sing in key!”

“I’m Manny Calavera,” I said as we moved away from the *Lola*’s light, “and he’s Glottis. Who’re you?”

“The name’s Chepito,” he answered.

“That’s it? Just ‘Chepito’?”

“Not much use for even one name down here, much less two.”

“I see your point,” I said. I looked over at what I thought must be the Pearl. We didn’t seem to be getting any closer. “Do you think you could take us to the Pearl?”

Chepito stopped and looked at me suspiciously. “The *Pearl*?” he exclaimed with an artificial-sounding laugh. “You don’t believe them old stories, do ya?” He shook his head. “You think somewhere in this ocean there’s a gigantic pearl that shines so brightly it can be seen from passing ships? And that sometimes sailors, so allured by its luster, actually fling themselves overboard to dive for it... and are never heard from again?”

“Yeah,” I said, “and I think it’s right over—”

“*Bah!*” Chepito exclaimed. “I’ve been walking this ocean for years an’ I ain’t *never* seen it!”

“No, really,” Glottis said, “the Pearl is right over there.” He pointed.

“You poor sucker,” Chepito said with another sad shake of his head, “that’s the *moon!* Tell me you didn’t come all this way to pearl dive the moon?” He laughed and started walking again.

“So what *are* you doing down here?” I asked.

“Tryin’ to get out of the Land of the Dead, same as everybody else.”

“But why are you walking?”

He shrugged. “Got sick of waitin’ around Rubacava for a boat. Figured I’d make better time on foot.”

I looked around at the dark water. I couldn’t see more than a few yards, and not very clearly at that. “How do you know where you’re going?” I asked.

“See the moon over there?” he asked. Glottis and I exchanged looks. “I just keep it on my right. That way I know I’m headin’ in a straight line.”

“Uh...” I said. Not only was it not the moon, it was on our left.

“Oldest trick in the book,” Chepito said smugly.

“How long have you been down here?” I asked, not sure I wanted to know.

“Well, let me put it to you this way,” he said after a moment’s thought. “I wasn’t always this color.”

I jumped when little red feathery things suddenly flicked out of the knobs over Chepito’s eye sockets and just as suddenly disappeared.

“Is everything OK with your...eyebrows?” I asked worriedly.

Chepito chuckled. “Them’s barnacles, genius. I don’t move fast enough to shake ’em so they tend to pile up. I don’t mind, though. They’re the only company I got.” He tickled the barnacles. “Ain’t cha, boys?”

Glottis shot me a sideways look, twirling a forefinger by the side of his head.

“Shouldn’t you have hit dry land by now?” I asked.

“I’m tryin’ to cross a big ocean here, sonny,” Chepito snapped irritably. “What do *you* know about it?”

“I’ve already done it,” I said. “In a boat.”

“We had such a nice boat!” Glottis added.

“*Don’t talk to me about boats!?*” Chepito snarled angrily.

“Let me guess,” I said. “You died in a shipwreck.”

“A shipwreck would’ve been better than what happened to us!” he declared, his stride turning into a stomp. “Led off-course by bad equipment, lost for weeks, no food, no shelter from the sun. We started throwing the dead overboard...but then the sharks began following the boat.”

“What happened then?” Glottis asked.

“What happened was I learned three valuable lessons.” He ticked them off on his fingers. “Stay away from boats. When it comes to navigation, trust only the moon and the stars. And when there’s only two of you left, never *ever* go to sleep.”

No one said anything after that for a couple of minutes. Just to break the silence, I asked, “How have you kept that light going?”

“Well,” Chepito answered, “I found this coral...this weird, glow-in-the-dark coral. Damnedest thing! Shines like a lightning bug and never seems to wear out.”

I suddenly remembered the glowing trophy on Domino’s desk. “I saw some of that once.”

“I don’t think so, ’cause I don’t think you’ve been to the place I got it.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“Edge of the world, boy. Only place it grows.”

“You know,” I said after another pause, “I’m pretty sure that’s not the moon.”

“*Bah!*” Chepito said.

“Does it every set?” I asked. “When’s the last time you saw the sun?”

“The sea plays tricks on your mind, sonny. Get used to it.”

I sighed and motioned to Glottis, who grabbed Chepito by his pole and lifted him up.

“Hey, lay off!” Chepito exclaimed, thrashing his limbs. “Get yer own damn lamp! Leggo, leggo, leggo!”

“C’mon, Glottis,” I said, turning toward the Pearl.

“Where are you taking me?” Chepito demanded to know.

“To the moon,” I answered.

It took a lot longer to get there than I had expected. Maybe the sea didn’t play the kind of tricks Chepito thought it did, but it was hard to judge distances. Still, the Pearl slowly grew bigger and eventually we topped a rise overlooking the deep hollow it sat in. Across from where we stood was a large half-shell with the Pearl resting inside. I couldn’t be sure, but it looked kind of fake. I mean, how could a pearl—however big it was—shine like that? And yet...the Land of the Dead was a very strange place.

“*The Pearl!*” Chepito exclaimed. “I *knew* I’d find ’er some day! I’m rich! Rich, *riii*—”

I clamped Chepito’s jaw shut with my hand. “*Shhh!*” I hissed. “Something’s wrong! Listen!” We did and heard a faint, warbling cry. It grew louder, turning into watery screams. We looked up,

where the noise was coming from, and saw several shapes falling toward the Pearl, all souls flailing their limbs in a futile attempt to swim.

“Manny,” Glottis said, sounding very worried, “what’s going on?”

I had no answer and just shook my head.

When the souls got close enough to the Pearl that they were brightly lit, a shape suddenly darted out from beneath the shelf that held the Pearl. It rocketed toward the falling souls, reaching out eight giant arms to scoop them up. The demon octopus turned and went back into the hollow. Back in the shadow under the Pearl, the octopus thrust the souls into what looked like a submarine. But it was hard to judge just what lay there in that shadow.

“Manny,” Glottis said, peering intently into the hollow, “I think that octopus is looking right at us.”

I couldn’t see anything but a sub-like blur. “How can you tell?”

“Maybe I have better eyesight than you.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Do you suppose this is what happened to Meche?”

Glottis shrugged but didn’t say anything.

Chepito leaned forward like a dog straining at its leash. “Oh, if only that thing would just go away, I could get that Pearl!”

When Chepito moved, I thought I saw the shadow under the Pearl shift.

“It’s attracted to light,” I said to Glottis.

“Uh-huh,” he agreed.

“Take a swim, Cheppie,” I said. “You’re attracting too much attention to us.”

“Too bad,” he sneered. “That Pearl is *mine*.”

“OK,” I said. “Glottis...” I gestured for him to follow as I started walking around the rim of the hollow.

“You know,” I said, “if we can find out where that monster takes those people, we might find Meche there.”

“Yeah,” he said, “but how does this figure into stolen Double-N tickets and everything?”

“You’ve been thinking about that, too, huh? I don’t know, *carnal*. I’ve got a feeling there’s more to the scam than anyone’s suspected.”

“Hey, Manny...” Glottis said urgently. He pointed behind us.

I turned around and there was Chepito. “Don’t even *think* about sneaking off with my Pearl!” he declared.

I sighed wearily. “Look, *mano*,” I said, “if you can fit that cue ball into your pocket, it’s all yours. I’ve got bigger things to worry about, so give us space.”

“*Hah!*” was all he said.

“Maybe we should just throw him in,” Glottis said.

I looked at him in surprise. “Hey! We don’t know what really happens to those people!”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, sheepish. “Good point.”

I turned back to Chepito. “I’m trying to be reasonable,” I said, “but you’re not making it easy.” I took a step forward. “You’ve got to listen—”

Chepito took a step back, then suddenly cried out and fell backwards...but didn’t go down all the way. He thrashed his arms and jerked his body but seemed strangely rooted to that one spot. “I’m stuck!” he exclaimed. I looked down and saw he had one foot wedged into a little crevice.

“Manny!” Glottis said just as I saw movement down in the hollow. The octopus was on the move.

Glottis and I looked at each other, then we both threw ourselves over the edge.

“Hey!” Chepito screamed as we tumbled down. “You can’t leave me here all alone!”

We got to the bottom as the octopus was shooting past overhead. Glottis picked me up and quickly swam under the overhang. It *was* a submarine under there.

The octopus returned with a screaming Chepito held in one arm. It thrust him into the sub and then got inside itself.

“I guess it didn’t notice us,” Glottis said.

We climbed onto the sub and held on tight as the screws started to spin silently. The sub rose up and sailed out of the hollow and made a slow turn.

“Look like we’re heading south,” I shouted through the rushing water.

“But there’s nothing on that edge of the world,” Glottis shouted back, “except...”

“...the edge!” we finished together.

THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

The sub traveled quickly through dark waters for several hours before we came to a rising shelf. The water became brighter, with sunlight penetrating the shallower water and another kind of light coming from ahead of us. The other light grew in strength and showed itself to be a huge, fluorescing coral reef. The sub threaded its way past and into the water beyond. On the other side of the reef the seabed rose higher, up to a series of ‘foothills’ leading to an island.

As the sub rushed past the reef we looked down and saw, near particularly bright regions, clusters of souls apparently mining the glowing coral.

“Well,” I said to Glottis, “at least the octopus doesn’t eat them.”

“Yeah,” he said, “but maybe we should get off now before we become part of the chain gang.”

“Good idea,” I said and we pushed away from the sub.

We settled to the bottom as the sub continued on its way. We approached the base of the island, near some industrial-looking structures rooted in the seabed.

“Manny...” Glottis began.

“Don’t ask, *carnal*,” I said, “’cause I don’t know.”

I looked around and started walking toward the structures.

“Is this a good idea, Manny?” Glottis asked.

“We’ve come this far,” I answered. “Besides, we don’t really know where we are. The only way we’re going to get out is to go through.”

Glottis looked around apprehensively.

I looked, too, but couldn’t see anything. “Any sign of that octopus?” I asked.

“No, but I can smell ’im.”

We got to the structures, mostly huge supports for something that showed indistinctly above water’s surface. One thing that stood out, on the sea floor, was an elevator shaft.

I pointed to it and said, “I’m going to go up and see what I can find. Do you think you could watch my exit down here?”

“I think so, Manny.”

“You gonna be OK, *mano*? Or do you need to get some air?”

Glottis shrugged. “Maybe I’ve got gills somewhere.”

“OK. I’m gonna go see if I can find Meche.”

I took the elevator up to a platform that extended from the island over the sea. Nice view, if a little bleak. I followed a catwalk to a complex of buildings on the island which looked like some kind of factory compound. It seemed deserted and second impressions didn’t contradict my first. The buildings were badly weathered and garbage—such as crumpled-up papers and styrofoam cups—was scattered everywhere. There was also a lot of broken windows. As I got closer to the largest building I

could see signs of repair. This must be the actual factory, I thought. It sat right at the edge of the island, almost opposite from where Glottis and I had dropped off the sub, and I could see conveyor belts lifting hunks of coral out of the sea and into the building.

I found an unlocked door and quietly entered. There was no one in sight. I followed noises and discovered the place where the conveyor belts took the coral. A large number of haggard-looking souls was collecting the coral into things that looked like mining carts and pushing them to some other place. I wasn't interested in the coral and I wasn't ready to be seen, so I ducked out and went looking for a way to get to the upper floors.

After a little searching I found offices at the very top overlooking the sea. Most were either deserted or locked. I found a deck of cards in one. I swiped it because you never know when there might be a solitaire emergency. The main office suite looked like it was still occupied even though there was no one in the outer office when I entered. But there were unyellowed papers on the secretary's desk and a smoldering butt in an elaborate bronze ashtray.

I went into the inner office. Very impressive. Lots of space, a massive desk, and big windows looking out over the sea. No one was sitting behind the desk, but a woman was putting some papers on it. She turned to stare out a window. I got just enough profile to know I'd finally found her.

"Meche," I said softly as I came up to her.

She jumped and spun around. "Manny!" she exclaimed. One hand came up to her open jaw. "What...what are you *doing* here?"

"I wanted to see how your trip was going, angel," I answered, feeling a little giddy. "I *am* your travel agent, you know." I was floating, emotionally, as though sleeping or stone drunk. "By the way, thanks for that bottle of champagne you sent me," I tapped the little crack it had made in my skull. "It really hit the spot."

I was making a joke, but Meche was serious when she said, "You were headed for a trap. I was trying to warn you. Domino was using me like bait." She tossed the papers she still had in her hands onto the desk in a careless heap. She turned away and took a step or two away from me before saying, "I didn't want you to end up a prisoner here like me."

I was confused, and I felt a flash of anger. She had knocked my lights out as a *warning*? The bait part sort of made sense, but... "Prisoner?" I asked incredulously, grabbing her arm and pulling her toward me. "Where's your cell?" I asked, thrusting my face toward hers, almost snarling the words as I realized afterwards. "Or are you just sharing a bunk with the warden?"

That was a mistake, letting my mouth get ahead of me like that, and I knew it the instant Meche's hand cracked across my face. "If that's what you think of me," she asked hotly, yanking herself out of my grasp, "then why did you come here?"

Meche didn't wait for an answer. She turned away and quickly stalked toward the door. Before she could get there, Domino strode through big as death wearing a burnt-orange leisure suit and a gaudy tie like something from Jackson Pollock's garbage. Big, mirrored sunglasses hid the empty black pits of his eye sockets.

"Because this is where he belongs," Domino answered. "Here. Working for me." I don't know what startled me more—that I was actually face-to-face with my nemesis again, or that he was strolling around a half-deserted factory island on the edge of the world looking like a Miami Beach lounge lizard. "I knew you'd come around eventually," he said to me, peering down at me over his shades, "because right or wrong," he said to Meche, "Manuel Calavera is *always* on the winning team." Meche just stood silently by the door, her hands clasped in front of her. "Right, Manny? That's why you're here now."

I shook my head slowly. I didn't know what his act was about, but I wasn't going to play along. "I'm getting off this rock," I said, "and I'm taking all of these people with me."

Domino laughed. “Manny, there’s no way off this island. I’m afraid you’re stuck here in my little executive training program.” He took off his shades, tossing them onto the top of his desk as he sat down in his black-leather executive chair, putting his feet up and his hands behind his skull. “See, I need you to take my place here, kid. I’ve got to get back to the city where the action is.” He projected a big, satisfied grin.

Before I could say anything to that, Glottis came blundering in. I made discreet shooing motions, but instead of turning around and running like hell, he said, “Sorry, Manny, but I had to come in. My skin was getting all pruneey.”

“Him I *don’t* need,” Domino said, pressing something under his desk.

Glottis made it one more step forward before the floor beneath him dropped away. He fell with a scream. There was a splash, and a few seconds later I could see him—still screaming—being carried by the current over the edge.

If I still had eyes and blood, I would have seen red. “I’m gonna grind you to powder for that, *cabrón*,” I snarled as I advanced toward Domino.

“Maybe later,” he said as he sprang to his feet and everything went black.

LOS ANGELITOS

I came to sitting slumped forward at a small desk. I pulled myself more or less upright in the chair and massaged my skull. I shook my head to try to clear it.

“Careful, Bibi,” a high-pitched voice said. “The new boss is waking up.”

I turned toward the voice and saw just about the saddest thing I’d ever seen...alive or dead. There, in the middle of the office I found myself in, was a large cage, probably meant for birds, which held two small children. Inside the cage with them were small chunks of coral in a bowl, tools, and some other things I couldn’t make sense of right away. A little sweatshop.

I stood up and managed to walk over to the cage. The kids sat on two perches, focusing on their work, their little wings drooping.

“*Hola, angelitos*,” I said with a trace of a slur. Domino packed quite a wallop.

“I’ll bite ya,” one of the kids, a boy, announced fiercely, “I swear to God!”

“Please don’t bite anyone else, Pugsy,” the other, a girl, pleaded. “That’s why they put us in the cage in the first place!”

The first one, Pugsy, just glared at me. The other, who had to be Bibi, looked scared. A great couple of days I was having. First my crew gets sprouted, my ship sinks, Glottis is killed (by a goddamned cliché, of all things), Domino knocks my lights out, and *now* a little boy wants to bite me. I would have laughed if it wasn’t all so sad.

“Why do you want to bite me?” I asked Pugsy.

“You’re the mean new boss,” he answered.

“Mr. Hurley said you were meaner than him!” Bibi added.

“He said you had a bone saw,” Pugsy said with a tremor in his voice.

“Well,” I said, “you shouldn’t believe everything Domino tells you. My name’s Manny Calavera, by the way. You’re Pugsy and...Bibi. Right?”

“Mr. Hurley told us about you,” Pugsy said. I sighed a little. “You’re the one who tricked Meche.”

“Poor Meche,” Bibi said sadly.

“I never tricked anybody,” I said. “Meche is my friend.”

“She talked about you before,” Pugsy said. At least they don’t get all their information from Domino.

“Every time she says your name,” Bibi said, “she looks so sad.”

“I don’t know what you did to her,” Pugsy said angrily, “but you’re gonna be sorry!”

I sighed again, more heavily than before. “I’ve been sorry for almost thirty years.” The two kids exchanged glances. “I didn’t *trick* Meche, but I *did* hurt her...and I’m trying to make up for it.”

“You’re a bad man!” Bibi declared with the absolute righteousness of a child.

“I’m not gonna argue with you about that.” The little girl looked confused. “Do you kids know why you’re here?”

“Making light bulbs,” Bibi said. “What does it look like?”

“No,” I said, “I mean why are you *here*, in *this* place?”

“We’re dead,” Pugsy answered.

“Mr. Hurley said this is where people go when they die,” Bibi added.

“OK,” I said, “but has Meche ever said anything different? Then I guess she has,” I said when they didn’t answer; the *angelitos* flinched, “and Domino doesn’t want you talking about it.” They looked to the office’s open door, making sure no one was there, then nodded. “So maybe you can’t trust everything Domino says. I can’t give you a solid reason to trust me straight away, but you *can* trust me. This place isn’t where you’re supposed to be and I’m going to do my level best to get you out of here.”

“What?” Bibi exclaimed.

“You can’t do that!” Pugsy insisted. “We have to stay here and take care of Meche.”

“She’d be so sad here all alone,” Bibi said. “Sometimes we hear her crying, you know.”

“I’m going to get us *all* out of here. You, Meche, *everyone*.”

“How’re you gonna do that?” Pugsy demanded. “Mr. Hurley says there’s no way off the island.”

“Look,” I snapped, “will you stop throwing Domino in my face? I got enough of that from Copal!”

The *angelitos* looked scared. “I’m sorry. Domino’s kind of a sore subject with me.” I rubbed my head again. “You carry on with your light bulbs while I go find out a few things.”

I made my way back to Domino’s office suite. This time Meche was working in the outer office.

“Oh, look,” she exclaimed sarcastically as I walked in, “it’s my Prince Charming! Did you come back just to insult me some more, or do you just want some ice for your head?”

Well, I deserved that. I still don’t know why I made that crack about sharing a bunk. I couldn’t explain it to myself, so there was no point trying to explain it away to Meche. Instead of being apologetic, I angrily asked, “Why are those children locked up in a cage?”

She looked off balance. I guessed that was that last thing she expected me to say, but she answered matter-of-factly: “With the wings those *angelitos* have, they’re the only things on this island Domino can’t control.”

“Hey,” I said excitedly, “if the kids can fly—”

“They can’t fly *that* far, Manny,” she cut me off, “but they *can* fly circles around Domino...and they can bite pretty hard.” She clamped her hands over her jaw to muffle her laughter, casting a worried glance at the inner door.

It was a funny picture, but I suddenly felt dizzy. I quickly found a chair and sat down, massaging my skull. “You know,” I said, “I think Domino might’ve hit me right where *you* clobbered me,” Meche got a lip-bitingly guilty look, “so while were on the subject of true confessions, just why *did* you take me out with that champagne bottle, anyway?”

“I told you,” she said, “to stop you from falling into Domino’s trap. If you had made it on that ship, you would have ended up—”

“—here?” I finished her sentenced.

“Yes,” she said quietly.

“Worked like a charm,” I said dryly. She looked away. In case shame was involved, I asked, “Has Domino... *hurt* you in any way?”

“Not as much as I’ve hurt him,” she answered, thankfully sounding as if she hadn’t experienced what I had been aiming at. “Boy, can that guy take a punch!”

I sighed again, thankfully; supposing I was reading her correctly. Either way, it was time to get to the point. “Look... Meche,” I started, taking a deep breath. “I think we need to talk.”

“Start talking.” She sounded sarcastic. “You’re the salesman.”

Where to start? “I have a lot of explaining to do,” I said, trying to give myself time to get my head together.

“Save your breath,” Meche snapped. “Domino’s explained it all to me already.”

I shook my head, angry. “Yeah, and Domino’s ‘explained’ everything to those kids. What gives? Is Domino the only trustworthy guy in the world?” I didn’t expect an answer and didn’t get one. “Well, whatever. We’re getting out of here.” I stood up.

“*Still* trying to steal my commission from Domino?” Meche asked, sounding amazed. “Manny, don’t you *ever* give up?”

“I’m not after any commission!” I protested, annoyed. “I just want to get us both out of here.”

“Then why don’t you just ask your boss for the day off?” she needed.

“Can’t believe you think he’s my boss,” I said sadly. “He’s my arch-enemy!”

“I think he’s your boss—you think he’s my boyfriend,” she said harshly. “We don’t seem to have a good foundation of trust in our relationship, do we?”

I guess we didn’t at that. “Look, I’m sorry I implied he was your boyfriend. I *do* trust you.”

“Well, I’m not sure I trust *you* about anything. But I’ll tell you one thing that would convince me...”

That seemed more like it. “Name it.”

“Give me your gun.”

“*What?!*” I exclaimed in surprise. “What makes you think I have a gun?”

“You work for the most heavily-armed organization in the Land of the Dead!” Meche snapped angrily.

This was unbelievable. Where did she get this crap? Of course: from Domino.

“I *don’t* work for the most heavily-armed organization *anywhere!*” I protested.

“You know,” she said sarcastically, “you’re right. There are those rumors of a revolutionary army stockpiling weapons.”

I sagged in defeat. “Actually,” I admitted, “them I work for.” A split second later I wanted to take that back. If that little piece of intel ever got back to Domino, I’d be sunk.

“Manny,” she said dismissively, relieving me of that worry, “why don’t you come back when you’re willing to deal straight with me, OK?”

Maybe not a bad idea. I turned to go into Domino’s office.

“Sir,” she called out in a prim secretary voice, “do you have an appointment?”

I just gave her a look and went in.

DOMINO TALKS

Domino was sitting behind his desk with his feet up, smoking a cigar and nodding his head in an autistic-looking way. I almost started laughing, but then I saw he had on one of those little portable stereos punk kids started wearing toward the end of my life. I thought they were just wrapped up in their own sad little worlds. Just the thing for Domino.

“Domino,” I called out.

Nod, nod, nod.

I stuck my face into his and shouted, “*Domino!*”

He didn’t jump. He must have known I was there from the first. He took his headset off and drawled, “Takin’ your first coffee break, Calavera?”

“We’ve got a score to settle, *ese*,” I snapped.

He sighed. “You know, if I ever spoke to *my* boss, Hector, that way...” he trailed off with a slow shake of his head.

I wasn’t going to play that game. “You killed my best friend,” I accused.

“The demon?” he asked, incredulous. “Manny,” he said in an exaggerated ‘let’s-be-reasonable’ tone, “you can use a demon as a driver, let him carry your messages, let him serve you food, but you can’t *ever* start thinking of them as friends. It’s just not natural.”

So he wasn’t going to play that game, either. Fine. I wanted some answers about the setup. I figured they’d be easier to get by playing dumb, the way Domino was trying to play me.

“What are you doing out here on the edge of the world?” I asked.

“Oh, I know,” he said, projecting a wry smile, “I ask myself that every day. But I’m going to train you, Manny, to take my place here running this two-bit light-bulb factory.”

I wasn’t sure I heard that right; it was too small time. “You and Hector set up a secret hideout to make...light bulbs?”

“Oh, no, that’s just a side benefit,” he answered with a chuckle. “No, the real purpose is to have a place we can lock up all these old clients of mine. Can’t have ‘good’ people wandering loose in the Land of the Dead telling everybody how we stole their Double-N tickets, now can we?” He ‘smiled’ broadly.

I was so surprised to hear that admission I blurted, “You stole *all* these people’s tickets?” Well, there was the answer to why Salvador never heard any rumors of saints walking through the Land of the Dead. They were all on this island. Too bad I couldn’t make a report about it.

Domino seemed to mistake my surprised reaction for confusion. “OK, Calavera,” he sighed, “how much of this haven’t you figured out?” If he was going to make a full confession, I’d play along. I gave him a baffled look. He shook his head and said, patiently, “Copal would route all the good clients to me after he switched over their tickets to a secret holding fund. I’d cover up the paper trail, and we’d make sure that the pigeon ‘jumped overboard’ at the Pearl.” He laughed. It was just a good scam to him.

Well, that was pretty much what Salvador had figured out, except for the part about the Pearl... and that was no longer news to me. There had to be more to justify such an elaborate operation. “I knew it!” I exclaimed. “I *knew* you were getting all the good clients!”

“I handled them all,” he admitted smugly, “except for Mercedes, who *you* hijacked away from me in that ridiculous hot rod. I tell you Manny,” he said with another slow shake of his head, “hot rods like that just don’t look safe to me.”

He clearly didn’t know what he was talking about, especially since ‘hot rod’ is hep rather than hip; although hearing that Domino was nowhere in the stormer scene wasn’t exactly the latest word from the bird, dad.

“So, it *wasn’t* my fault Meche didn’t get a ticket,” I said as indignantly as I could. “You stole it!” But it *was* my fault she was in this fix.

“Well, it’s *your* fault she ended up in the forest,” Domino retorted, as if he was reading my mind, “instead of coming here right away. But...I fixed that.”

“I’m taking Meche out of this dungeon,” I said.

“Manny,” he said, very seriously, “before I found her, she spent a *year* out there in the Petrified Forest *alone* because of you!” That was bad. Very bad. But not exactly news. “By comparison,” he went on, “I’d say I’m keeping her pretty comfortable here in my ‘dungeon,’ wouldn’t you?”

I’d say he was rationalizing. But I needed information more than I needed to take pot shots. I folded my arms and asked, “One ticket for you. One for Hector. How many more do you need?”

“Oh, Manny!” Domino said, sounding a little exasperated. “We never touch the product *ourselves*! We sell the tickets to unfortunate souls, unable to lead ‘moral’ lives because of the crippling amounts of cash they were born into.”

I could almost see the quotes he put around *moral*. It was nice to have it straight from the jackass’ mouth, but I still wasn’t hearing anything new.

“But you could just take the tickets and leave today,” I pointed out.

“We found a way to make the Land of the Dead *livable*!” Was he kidding? I didn’t think so. “Why would we want to leave?” he asked. That was definitely a ‘baby, if you have to ask’ kind of question.

Domino was talking pretty freely but there had to be more to the game than what he was saying and, maybe, more than he even knew about. That suitcase Max and Charlie had been playing games with just didn’t fit, not in Domino’s version of things. I decided he wasn’t exactly the big boy he thought he was. Domino probably only knew enough to play his part.

“Well,” I said, backing toward the door, “I gotta get back to trying to escape.”

Domino laughed and said, “Hey, you do that kid. Knock yourself out!” He put his little stereo headset back on as I left.

After a few wrong turns, I made my way back to the office where I had woken up after Domino had tucked me in.

“Hello, Mr. Mean Boss Guy,” Pugsy said.

“Would one of you children happen to have a gun?” No harm in asking and maybe they had a convincing toy gun. Giving that to Meche might make her see how ridiculous she was being.

“Yeah, we do,” Pugsy said, “so stick ’em up.”

I put my hands up.

“He doesn’t have one,” Bibi whispered to me, being too young to know playful sarcasm when she met it. “He’s such a liar.”

“Oh, yeah?” Pugsy said, turning to her. “Well, you’re stupid!”

“Your light bulbs don’t work!” Bibi retorted.

“*Your* light bulbs all smell like boogers,” Pugsy shot back.

“Ha, ha!” Bibi taunted. “No one thinks you’re funny anymore.”

“Oh yeah?” Pugsy returned, floundering slightly. “Well, everybody in this cage is smarter than you.”

“Everybody except for *you*.”

Man, was this taking me back.

“That’s because I’m *especially* smarter than you!”

“In your dreams!” Bibi said with a toss of her head.

“In your baby bed that’s wet ’cause you wet in it?”

Score.

“*Shut up!*” Bibi shouted.

“Bed wetter!”

“*I said, shut up!*”

Well, time to put a stop to this. “*Hey!*” I said sharply. “No fighting, no biting!”

That got them arguing over who started it.

“Don’t make me come in there,” I warned.

They started laughing. That was good. Maybe I could turn it up a notch.

“You’re two *bad* little children,” I said. They roared. “I’m *glad* you’re in a cage.” Bibi fell off her perch but didn’t stop laughing.

After they wore themselves out and settled down I asked, “Maybe one of you little *diablos* has a toy gun?”

“We’re not allowed to have toys,” Pugsy said.

“You’re kidding me!” I said.

“We have to work *all day long*,” Bibi said with a sniff.

“Well,” I said, “since I’m the new boss, I say you can play for a while.” I held out the deck of cards I’d found. “Know any card games?”

“Old Maid!” Pugsy shouted.

“Poker!” Bibi countered.

Poker!?

“Well, you two can figure it out. I’ve got an escape plan to work on. Back in a little while.”

I went for a walk. I needed to know the layout of the place better if I was going to get out of it. I didn’t have an actual escape plan but I was hoping inspiration would strike if I could find something useful. I’d pretty much covered the main factory compound and was about to head out to look over the offshore stuff I’d ignored on the way in when I ran into Domino.

“Takin’ the nickel tour, Manny?” he asked.

“Something like that, Dommy,” I answered.

“Looks like you’re heading for the crane.”

“Is that what it is?”

“Sure is. Come on. I think you’d benefit from a guide.”

I shrugged. “If you say so.”

He lead me up to the catwalk and we started for the crane.

I looked back inland and said, “Nice island you’ve got here.” For a godforsaken, barren lump of rock.

“Yeah, the previous owners didn’t know what they had here. Let us pick it up for a song.” I winced, thinking of Glottis and his piano—and both of them gone. “They scooped out all the coral they could reach with this crane and then abandoned the plant. But we knew we had what it would take to go the extra distance to the big reef.”

“Are you about to lecture me about the ‘winning attitude’ again?” I growled.

“No!” he exclaimed. “Slave labor, Manny! That’s the *real* ticket to success.”

“And you expect me to go along with this?” I asked. Was he that delusional?

Domino stopped walking to face me directly. “Manny,” he said in a low, solemn tone, “I have all the guns, I have all the transportation, and I have all the brains. What are *you* gonna do?”

“I’m *not* going to work for you.”

He shrugged. “Well, there’s not much to do on this island if you don’t work. Take it from me. And think about it...once I’m gone, it’ll just be you and Meche alone on this deserted island. Don’t tell me that prospect doesn’t appeal to you.”

“Why don’t you just sprout me like you tried to at Puerto Zapato?” I was letting my anger get the better of me. For all I knew, he was looking for any excuse to do just that.

“That wasn’t *me*,” he protested, sounding almost sincerely earnest, “that was Hector. He’s so unimaginative. Just wants to tie up the loose ends, you know? But I believe, however, that you can be rehabilitated through honest work.”

“What do you know about *honest* anything?” I sneered.

“You just don’t want to get it, do you, Manny?” He shrugged. “Well, this is what I really brought you out here for.” He reached into his breast pocket. I held my ground, bracing myself to be sprouted despite what he had just said. But instead of a gun, he pulled out the deck of cards I had given to the children. He tossed it over the railing, into the sea. “*I’m* the boss here, Manny. Don’t you ever forget that.” He turned and walked back to shore.

ANOTHER SHIPWRECK

I stayed on the catwalk for a while, fuming. I’m not sure what bothered me more—Domino’s need to act like a big man, or that he had to spoil the kids’ fun to do it. I guess he was the sort that had to dominate; no wonder I hated the man. I was stewing up there for a long time. Dusk came and I saw souls emerge from the sea and trudge toward the compound.

“Let the ruling classes tremble at a communistic revolution,” I muttered to myself, as if intoning a spell. “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains.” I kicked the catwalk hard and snarled, “If only Alexi were here, I could *really* start some trouble.”

I spotted someone familiar moving on the beach and leaned forward. Actually, from where I was, they all looked alike...but how many souls in the Land of the Dead glow in the dark? I ran down to the beach and lost sight of him, but it was getting darker and that only made it easier to pick him up again.

“Chepito!” I called out.

“Huh?” he exclaimed, looking around. “Who?” He spotted me. “Oh, it’s *you!* Why, I oughta... Look at this!” he said, sticking out one foot. Half of it was gone, probably still wedged in that crevice by the Pearl.

I winced inside, but shrugged and said, “Well, you should have beaten it when I said. That wasn’t a very safe place you were in.”

“Well, neither is *this*, ‘amigo!’” He took a step forward, shaking a fist at me.

“Relax,” I said, “we’re busting out of here.”

“*We?*” he exclaimed, incredulous. “*We* are *done* traveling together! I work solo, my friend, and I walk *alone*.” He turned and started for the compound again.

He moved pretty fast for a guy who had just recently lost part of his foot; for a while, anyway, that is. He stumbled after a couple of yards, dropping his tool. I was right behind him and helped him up. He jerked himself away and started brushing himself off. I picked up the tool. He snatched it away from me and started walking again, a little slower this time.

“Nice drill,” I remarked.

“Drill!?” he snapped. “This here’s a cordless, high-speed, reciprocating *chisel*. And look,” he showed it to me, “it’s a *Bust-All!* They don’t usually give these to the new guys.”

“So how’d you get one?”

“I had booty to trade. Trade’s the name of the game out here.”

“Booty?” I asked with a laugh. “Where’d you get booty, Blondebeard?”

“It’s all over the ocean floor,” he said. “Jewelry, precious coins...you people in your fancy boats never know about it ’cause you just never stop and look.”

“So,” I said slowly, “you traded jewelry and precious coins...for a power tool?”

“It’s a *Bust-All*,” he insisted. “Besides, what else am I gonna blow my jack on out here? Race cats?”

He had a point. “Maybe you can help me get something I need.”

“Whatcha be needin’?” he asked.

“A gun.”

“Oooo, that’s gonna cost some,” he said. “Whatcha got on ya?”

“First, *can* you get me a gun?”

Chepito nodded. “You’re cautious. I like that. Well, I’m pretty sure I can get you a gun. Don’t know about bullets, though.”

“That’s fine. I don’t need bullets.”

Chepito gave me a sideways look. “Mebbe yer more in the market for a hammer.”

“I don’t want to sprout anyone,” I said, a little testy, “I just need to make a point.”

“You’d make yer point better with a few rounds.” He shrugged. “But...bullets are real hard to come by. If you don’t want ’em, I think we can make a deal, but it still won’t be cheap.”

“Well,” I said, “you find that gun, I’ll take stock of what I’ve got, and we’ll talk again tomorrow.”

“Fine by me,” he said. “Chalk head,” I heard him add in a mutter as he walked away.

I kept on going back to the compound myself, but slowly. I fell behind most of the other souls. I almost didn’t notice when some of them split away from the rest. They looked furtive. I hurried to follow them. Anyone who had a reason to sneak around, I figured, was someone I needed to keep tabs on. They skirted around the main factory area and up over a ridge. I followed them down into a huge pit with crumbling walls but with a lot of peculiar right angles. Probably an old quarry. Then it was up a steep, winding track over another ridge and down toward a beach on a remote corner of the island near the edge.

I paused at the top of the ridge, watching the small group as they ran down to the beach. Once they had gotten into the pit they stopped being so sneaky. Now they were just loping along and jabbering to each other. They obviously assumed there’d be no one to see them and this part of the island did look pretty empty. Except for some faint lights down on the beach, that is.

I followed after them, moving as quickly and as quietly as I could. When I got to the beach, what I had taken to be a large building from the ridge turned out to be a ship in a crudely-improvised dry dock. I tried to whistle through my teeth like Slisko, but only managed a ‘*pfff*’ like a tire going flat. I craned my neck when I got to the hulk, trying to see up on deck; but it was getting pretty dark by then, it was a big ship, and I couldn’t make out much except it looked like a tanker. I found a rope ladder dangling over the cliff-like side and slowly, quietly, climbed up.

There were a few chunks of coral scattered around the deck providing some light. I found an open hatch and, after crouching beside it while listening for any movement inside, I went inside. I moved softly through the corridors, finding no one. They had to be around somewhere, I thought. I got near to what I supposed must be the engine room when my foot caught on something and I went down in a loud clatter.

“Hey!” a voice shouted. “Who’s out there?”

I knew that voice!

Glottis poked his head out of the hatch in front of me.

“Manny!” he exclaimed.

“*Glottis!*” I exclaimed back, more overjoyed than I’d ever been since coming to the Land of the Dead. “You’re OK!”

“Well,” he said, pulling me to my feet, “it hurt a little when I hit.”

“I gotta tell you, *carnal*,” I said, grasping one of his massive hands in a two-fisted shake, “I thought you were dead!”

“I’ve been havin’ a *great* time. C’mon.”

He led me into the engine room where there was gathered the little gang I had followed along with a few other souls. Quick introductions were gotten out of the way and I was able to ask the question that was making me feel like popping.

“How’d you survive, *mano*?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Glottis answered. He gestured to the coral miners. “They’d lost a few people, working so close to the edge, so they strung up some chain-link fencing a while back. It managed to hold me while Albert here got a rope to me.” He shrugged. “It was just simple hand-over-hand after that.”

“Well, you have no idea what a relief this is,” Glottis grinned broadly, “but what are you guys doing out here?”

“This ship got too close to the edge,” one of the souls, named Anton, answered. “The crew dropped anchor and it held...but they didn’t do it soon enough. The ship went over, hanging by the anchor over the edge like a Christmas tree ornament. A few of the crew that weren’t flung away or smashed to bits managed to crawl up the chain and get to the island. You can imagine what a ship would mean to us.”

“Easily,” I said, “but how’d you get the ship up here?”

“Hard work,” Anton said smugly. “Lots of cable, winches, pulleys...there’s a lot of industrial hardware on this island, most of which Domino Hurley doesn’t know about.”

“Not surprising,” I said, considering how sure of himself he was, “but why are you still here?”

“The accident wrecked the engines,” Anton answered. “We haven’t been able to repair them.”

“Yeah,” Glottis said, “but listen...” He turned to fiddle with the machinery and the hulking diesel engine roared to life briefly before spluttering into silence. “I ask you,” he said, all teeth, “is there an engine that can resist the love that’s in these hands?”

“Apparently not,” I answered in amazement. “I think this baby’s our ticket out of here!”

“Oh, yeah, good point,” Glottis said, full of sarcasm. “I was wrenchin’ ’er just for fun, but your idea’s good, too.”

“OK, OK,” I laughed, “so I’m stating the obvious. How long before you’ve got ’er working?”

Glottis shrugged. “Not sure. A few days. Weeks.” He shrugged again.

“I see.” Not great, but it would have to do. “Does anyone have a gun?” I asked.

I got a lot of confused looks. Glottis laughed. “Manny, what are you gonna do? Take hostages and sprout ’em one by one until the engines start workin’?”

“No,” I exclaimed, “I just need one for Meche. She thinks the DOD arms its agents—don’t ask me why—and she won’t trust me until I hand over my rod.”

Glottis shook his head. “What *is* it with you and the ladies?”

“Don’t start,” I warned.

“Sorry, Manny, but I don’t think anyone here has a gun.”

“Domino wouldn’t still be here if *I* had one,” one guy said.

“I wouldn’t mind sprouting him, myself,” I said, “but I think we need to go easy on any revenge ideas. Domino’s got Meche and those two *angelitos* under his thumb and he’s just given me a lesson about how on the ball he is. Anyone who makes a stupid play...” I didn’t have to finish.

“Maybe we’ll have to leave them behind,” someone said, “if we’re ever going to make a clean getaway.”

“Forget it,” I said firmly. “If Meche and the *angelitos* doesn’t get out, then no one does. Got me?”

“Hey, man,” another said, “who elected *you* dictator?”

I ignored the question and looked around. “Now, I know none of you like the situation you’re in. I sure as hell don’t, I’ll tell ya that twice.” Glottis’ ears twitched sharply and I realized I had just used one of Maximino’s favorite phrases. I didn’t let it throw me. “But what you may not know is that this isn’t the way things were supposed to be for any of you. What Domino and his boss are up to is hardly approved DOD procedure. I don’t know why the DOD is putting up with it, but the outfit Glottis and I belong to called the Lost Souls’ Alliance is fighting them. Meche’s the only solid link we have to

these bastards and I owe it to her—*personally*—to get her out of here. So if Glottis can get this ship working, it's gonna carry everybody away from here. Including and especially Meche. No arguments. Clear?"

I got mostly nods.

"That's good," I said. "Now we can all be friends."

"Question..." Anton said.

"Shoot."

"I don't know how accurate the rumors we've been hearing from recent arrivals are, but the LSA is supposed to be a huge, well-armed organization. If they're fighting Domino's gang, why are we still here?"

"*Mano*, before today, no one in the LSA even suspected this island existed," the miners exchanged glances, "and Glottis and I are the only LSA agents who *do* know of it now. The bulk of the LSA is trying to strike at the heart of this gang, and that's all the way back in El Marrow. These guys were operating for years before anyone started getting wise. Get the idea? It's a big puzzle we're working on here, and most of the pieces have been well hidden."

"It's OK, Manny," Glottis said, "you don't have to scare them."

"I'm just trying to make them understand what we're up against, *carnal*."

"I think we're beginning to," Anton said. "So what are your plans, exactly?"

"Well, obviously," I said, "Glottis has to work his magic on these engines. Then we have to get everyone on this ship and get away. It'd be nice to sprout Domino first, but I think a quiet getaway is our best chance. I think I can distract him enough."

"How?"

"Well, Domino has this crazy idea about 'training' me to take his place when he leaves. I don't know why he thinks I'd be his trusty, but I'll play along. Domino's overconfident, which I think is his biggest weakness. So if he thinks he's getting his way, he won't be on his guard as much as he should and maybe we can sneak away without too much trouble." But I thought about the cards. He picked up on that pretty quickly. I wondered if he already knew about the ship. "If we do, we head for Puerto Zapato, then overland to the end of the line and to the next world where you all belong."

"But what about Domino and the rest of the people who brought us here?" Albert asked.

"Leave that to those who deserve to be stuck in this world," I answered. "It's our problem, so we'll take care of it." I sighed, suddenly feeling old and tired. "Look, I'd love to explain everything to you—answer all your questions—but that'd take forever. We've all got a lot of work to do and not a lot of time, but once we're free and clear I'll talk until my jaw drops off. Until then..."

There were a few nodding skulls. "I think you've made your point," Anton said. "It's imperative we get away and we *must* rescue everyone. I think you're right that answers can wait, but I think we'll all hold you to your promise."

"I expect you to," I said. "OK, one last thing...if no one's got a gun, I'm gonna need something to trade with."

LIL' SPROUTER

The next morning I was on the beach near the crane waiting for Chepito. I waved him over when he came into sight.

"I've got some stuff you might be interested in. Any line on what I want?" I asked.

"Not yet," he answered.

"What?" I exclaimed. "Hey, you said—"

“I never said nothin’ about gettin’ no rod right away, so don’t go given’ me a hard time about it! You think I can just hop over to Colorado for a gun show? It’ll take some doing. Knowing what *you* had might make it a mite easier.”

“OK, OK,” I grumbled. I held open the sack I was carrying.

“Hey!” Chepito said, peering into the bag. “That’s not bad.” He reached in. “Is that real silk? Where’d you get these?”

“I’ve been wearing them the whole time,” I lied. It was simpler and safer than telling the truth.

“You, too?” he asked. That was more than I needed to know. “I think we can do business, after all. You’ve got some OK swag there, sonny-boy, but them stockings put you over the top. Yessiree, this makes it a *whole* lot easier. I’ll be in touch.” He turned and went on into the sea.

I spent some of that morning after talking to Chepito with the *angelitos*. They were a little upset about the cards but, on the other hand, it put Domino in a new light for them. I found a whiteboard and a few markers that weren’t dried up and we played hangman for a while. We got a scare when we heard footsteps out in the hall, but it turned out to be only Meche. She didn’t say much of anything. She was acting a little strange. She said that the kids needed to be working, not playing. I tried to be funny by holding my pipe like a gun and said, “*Bang!* You’re dead!”

The kids laughed but Meche just said “Who isn’t?” and left. The kids were a little subdued after that and went back to work. The incident worried me, but when I ran into Domino that afternoon he didn’t say anything about it. He just took me and started my ‘training’. He explained to me how the place worked, from the slaves digging out the glowing variety of coral to the shipping of the finished light bulbs. The shipping part interested me until I was told it was the demon octopus that took care of that.

“Hey, Hurl,” I asked, “what makes you think you can trust me to run this place when you go scampering back to Hector?”

“Oh, I don’t have to *trust* you, Manny,” he said with a laugh. “I only need to *control* you. Meche, those kids, everyone else on this island—they’re the strings. If you don’t do your job, you can be sure I’ll hear about it...and then someone will get hurt. I think that’s plain enough.”

There was something I wanted to know, whether he had any scruples. “How can you keep little children in a cage?”

“Trust me, it’s easier than keeping *big* kids in a cage.”

So, no scruples.

“Then I guess if I don’t cooperate,” I’ll said, “you’ll just send someone else over the edge. Is that it?”

“Well, I was thinking of just sprouting someone every time you give me trouble,” he said, sending me a smile, “but, hey...if the way your demon buddy bought it is what really gets to you, that’s just fine with me.”

“Why are you doing all this?” I asked. I was supposed to be playing along to keep Domino from getting suspicious, but I was getting a little worked up. I wasn’t being smart, as Max would say. “Don’t you have a conscience? This is wrong.”

Domino laughed. “You kill me, Manny. Really.” He laughed some more. “You sound like those goody-goody DOD trainers. I bet you were their star pupil.” He finally stopped laughing. “But, I’ll tell ya, Manny...right or wrong has got nothing to do with it. It’s survival. The guy who’s a winner goes to the top of the heap. The rest,” he pointed his thumb down in the classic Roman emperor gesture. “Right and wrong, morality and ethics, religion and law...just excuses for poor losers.”

“Might makes right, huh?”

He shrugged. “The end justifies the means or whatever cliché works for you, kid.”

“*None* of it works for me! People have to be treated fairly and justly—no exceptions.”

“Now, don’t get all messianic on me,” he chided.

“Or Marxist?” I snarled.

“Jesus, Marx...all those Jews are just fucking bleeding hearts.”

I shut up. Anything else Domino had to say on that or any other subject wasn’t something I needed to hear.

Domino kept me with him most of the day. After finishing his lecture on how things worked, he took me around the operation. It was pretty educational, if not always in the way he intended. Domino may have been convinced there was no right or wrong, but my conviction of the opposite grew a little stronger. I was stuck in the Land of the Dead just the same as he was, so I can’t claim to have been a better person; but as I listened to him and watched how he treated his ‘pigeons’, I realized there *was* a difference between us. As badly as I had lived my life, I wasn’t the sort who would knock a little guy down and then ride him for falling. Small as it was, that difference was important to me.

There wasn’t much else I could take comfort in, in those days; I’ll tell you *that* as many times as you can stand. But one thing I found hard to stand was that it took Chepito a long time to get me a gun. The man swore up and down he was working on it and I took him at his word since I could trust his greed for what I had in that sack, but Meche was...difficult. For one thing, she made it hard to talk to her. She kept her distance and she kept bringing up that damned gun.

“Ready to turn over your heater?” she’d ask, or something like that, whenever I showed my face in her office.

“I would if I had one, baby,” I said, not that she ever believed me. I can’t say I blamed her, considering how our first meeting had turned out.

Once, when Domino was nowhere around, I tried to break her reserve with the news that was making me want to pop.

“I found a vessel!” I said.

“How?” she asked, icily disinterested. “Did you pull an inner tube out of the big crane wheels?”

“No, Glottis found it when he—”

For an instant, Meche was what I thought of as her normal self. “Glottis is *alive!*?” she interrupted excitedly.

“Yeah! He—inner tube?”

But the moment passed. She told me not to make ‘jokes’ about escaping. The kids might believe me. Which was sort of a good point, actually, not that I intended to even mention the ship to those *diablos*. I didn’t want to get them all worked up before it was time to go. They’d have been bouncing off the bars of their cage, which was a sure thing to get Domino suspicious.

For similar reasons I kept away from the ship after that first visit. For the most part, I stayed where there wouldn’t be a problem if Domino found me. I also wanted to be sure he wouldn’t have any trouble finding me. I didn’t want him to have any reason to exert himself or his suspicions. There wasn’t anything I could do to help the work, anyway. Glottis was the master, and any help he needed he could get from the mechanically-skilled prisoners and the remnants of the ship’s crew. I would only blow the whole scam if I was found anywhere other than where I was ‘supposed’ to be.

One evening, as he marched out of the sea with the others, Chepito gave me the good news. He pulled me into deeper shadows beside a shed on the fringes of the compound—kind of pointless since he dispelled the shadows—and said, “Here’s your new best friend,” as he pulled a wicked-looking semi-automatic from his tattered clothing. I handed over the swag. “Nice doin’ business with you, Cap’n,” he said and went on his way. He started laughing before he got out of earshot. He probably figured he suckered me.

I checked over the gun. It was a little different from what I was used to. Since it fired chemical darts, it used a gas cylinder which made it feel more like a toy than a real weapon, but it was free of rust and it worked. I made sure it wasn't loaded and that the chamber was empty, then tried cocking it and pulling the trigger a few times. It popped in a reassuring way. I didn't want to hand Meche an obvious dud. If she took it as a sign of trust, then it was worth what I paid Chepito.

I went to find Meche. It was early enough that she should still have been in her office. She was, putting away the day's busywork.

"Here," I said, handing her Chepito's gun butt first. "What good's a relationship without trust?"

"True," she said, taking the gun with one hand while seeming to make some kind of adjustment to her hat with the other. "A relationship without trust is like a gun without bullets."

I was in a car wreck once. It happened in an instant, but once I saw it coming time slowed to a crawl. The same thing happened when Meche took a sproutella dart from her hat and loaded it into the gun. It must have taken just a fraction of a second, but it seemed like five minutes as I stood there, unable to believe what I was seeing.

Meche kicked her chair away as she stood up, pointing the gun at my face. "Guess you didn't realize a smart girl always keeps an extra round in her hat for mad days," she snarled. She waved the gun minutely toward the inner door. "Get moving!"

"Meche," I said desperately, "you don't know wha—"

"I know exactly what I'm doing," she snapped. "*Move!*"

"Meche, if you'd just lis—"

"Enough, Manny!" She gave me a hard shove toward the door with her free hand.

"If you'd just listen to *my* escape plan first..." I said as she drove me into Domino's office.

When we came in, me with my hands in the air and Meche pushing me along with the muzzle of the gun, Domino seemed more amused than alarmed. "Trouble in paradise, kiddos?" he drawled with a hint of a chuckle.

"You're letting us go right now," Meche said, jabbing the back of my skull with her new cannon, "or your boy Friday here gets it!"

Domino got up from behind his desk. He moved around the perimeter of the room, seeming to keep away from us while actually getting closer. Meche didn't seem to notice. "Well, I hate to see you go, Manny," he said insincerely, "but the 'lady' does seem to have made up her mind."

"I'm *serious*," Meche insisted. "I'll shoot him!" She again jabbed the muzzle of the gun, hard, into the back of my skull for emphasis.

"So go ahead and shoot him, you sainted bitch!" Domino snapped. I felt the gun drop away from my skull. "The pinko bastard doesn't really work for me, anyway."

"But, I thought..." Meche stammered, confused. She stepped uncertainly forward, coming between me and Domino. She looked at me, the light seeming to dawn, then back at Domino. "I'll shoot *you*, then."

But as she brought the gun up, Domino grabbed her wrist and wrenched her arm behind her back. "No, you won't," he said softly, as to a lover, into her ear hole, "you're too good, remember?" He gave her arm a savage twist—Meche gasped in pain—grabbing the gat as it fell and pocketing it. He propelled her toward the door.

"I'm not," Meche yelled as he pushed her along, "I'm *not* good anymore!"

I just stood there, a little numb, as Domino took her away.

"You've taken that away from me," Meche went on, her voice fading a little with distance, "keeping me a prisoner here! I'm gonna crack you open like a fake Ming vase! I'm gonna..." They got further away and I couldn't make out what she was shouting.

Then there was a sharp, muffled clang and I flinched at the sound.

A few moments later Domino came back looking very pleased in a sadistic, almost sexually-satisfied way. “The kid’s all right,” he said with a chuckle. “She’s a firecracker, but a night in the cooler usually dampens her fuse.” He sat down behind his desk and looked up happily at me.

“What did you do to her?” I demanded, finally finding my voice.

“She’s in a safe place,” Domino answered with a laugh. “She just needs a little time out, that’s all.”

I made a guess. “You think you can break her will just by locking her up?”

“No,” Domino said, as if admitting something secret, “but the lack of fresh oxygen slows her down just enough so I can open the door,” he ‘grinned’, “free of fear.” He put his feet up on his desk and cradled his skull in his hands. “By the way, Manny, how’s the, uh, escape plan coming along?”

“This is strictly confidential, Dom,” I said with barely-repressed sarcasm, “but we’ll be test-firing the rocket any day now.”

“Hey, sounds good,” he said with a laugh. “Keep me posted, huh?”

“Sure thing, *mano*,” I said with a suppressed snarl, backing out of the office. He let me go.

THE GREAT ESCAPE

I went looking for Meche. Domino had locked her up. There was a clang. And from what Domino had said, it must be somewhere airtight. It must have been close to Domino’s office, or else he wouldn’t have gotten there and back so quickly. That narrowed it down to the big safe. When I got there, I pressed my skull up against the door. I was sure I could hear Meche’s voice. I couldn’t understand what she was saying, but she seemed to be shouting. The sound was very faint. It was a thick door, and a big key sat in the middle of it. I couldn’t believe my eye sockets. I reached out to unlock the safe, but then my hand dropped back to my side. I couldn’t turn the key. Domino left it in the lock for a reason, I was certain, to prove that he did control me. I had to be sure of things, so I took the key and went to the ship.

“I gotta know, *carnal*,” I said when I got to the engine room, “how soon?”

Glottis was half-buried in the guts of one of the massive engines, his back end and legs the only parts of him visible. He was too busy to stop working even to talk. “I was about to send word, Manny,” he said in a muffled voice. “It looks like we can launch maybe sometime tomorrow.”

“Really?” I exclaimed. “I thought you said it would take weeks.”

“Change of strategy,” he said. He paused to make some loud clanging noises in the bowels of the machinery. “We figured getting outta here quick was more important than making top speed, so we concentrated on the number one engine, using parts from the other two.”

“Is that a good idea?” I asked worriedly. “I mean, this tub has three engines for a reason.”

“No kidding,” he retorted, “but we’re kinda desperate here, you know? Anyway, we’re pretty sure we can fix up number two once we get under way.”

“I’m not sure I like that ‘pretty sure’.”

“Hey, Manny,” Glottis exclaimed, sounding a little angry, “this boat’s been through a lot! This ain’t a shipyard and we’re makin’ do with scrap and good intentions here! Cut me some slack, OK?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, meaning it. “I know this is your element, but we’ve got a little problem.”

“*Another* one?” he exclaimed in a bitterly sarcastic tone this time. I sympathized. I knew I was piling a lot of weight on his shoulders.

“Meche got Domino mad. He locked her up.” Glottis said something I couldn’t make out but it sounded very pungent. “I can get her out, but I don’t dare unless we can get away quickly.”

“OK, Manny,” Glottis said, “that’s a real *big* problem; but if you can get Miss Colomar free, go ahead and do it. I guarantee we can be under way by no later than noon tomorrow.”

“Are you absolutely sure, *carnal*?”

There was more clanging. Maybe it was my imagination, but it sounded a little more frantic than before. “We just won’t wait for daylight to launch, that’s all. We were about to fuel up, anyway. It’ll take a while—the stuff’s been stashed all over the island for safety, you know? It’ll be a little risky to launch at night, especially when we’re all tired, but we can do it.”

“OK,” I said. “I’m know I can trust you about that. You have Albert spread the word to get everyone down here pronto, and I’ll get Meche and the kids out of the factory tonight.”

“Will do, boss,” Glottis said and the clanging resumed.

I went back to the safe. I put my head up to the door but couldn’t hear anything. I put the key back in the hole and turned it. I pulled. The door didn’t budge. Then I noticed I couldn’t see the hinges. So I pushed. It moved slightly. I bore down and managed to push it open. It was a massive door. It was very dark inside, just one tiny bulb in the ceiling.

“Meche?” I called out softly. “You in there?” I stepped into the safe. “Time to come out, honey...no time for hide and seek.”

I let go of the door as I moved further in. The corners of the safe were in shadow. I turned around, trying to see as much as I could. Maybe Meche had fallen asleep in the time I’d been away. Going to and from the ship took well over an hour. As I scanned the semi-darkness, I saw the massive door falling shut behind me. I lunged at it and tried to stop it, but there weren’t any good handholds on the inside and it kept on closing. I only managed to slow it down a little. I snatched my fingers away at the last second to avoid getting them crushed. The door fell shut with just a bang, not the crash it had made before. I doubted Domino could have heard it and half an hour later I was sure of it, just as I was sure Meche wasn’t there. I began to wonder if maybe I had made a mistake. Maybe Domino *hadn’t* put Meche in the safe. He could have put her in one of the locked offices and then slammed the safe door shut and left the key to trick me into locking myself in—except that made no sense, even for Domino. On top of which, I was certain I *had* heard Meche’s voice through the door. So I looked around some more. I didn’t find any other doors, but I started rapping on the walls, listening for a hollow sound. I got one, and found a seam, but couldn’t find a way to open it. I banged on the hollow spot. Quietly at first, but more loudly when nothing happened.

Suddenly I was swinging my fist into thin air. “Manny!” Meche exclaimed. She looked over my shoulder. “*Why is that door closed!?*”

“...the wind?” I suggested feebly.

Meche groaned and went back into the other room. I followed. There was more light and I could see the recessed latch in the door. All that wear and tear on my knuckles for nothing. Meche went to the far side of the room and crouched down against the wall, putting her face in her hands. I went over to her and said quietly, “Thanks for not sprouting me.”

“I’m sorry,” she said into her hands. She took them away and looked up not quite in my direction. “I should have trusted you. It’s just,” she clenched and unclenched her hands, “the last two years have been pretty tough, you know?” Her voice rose a little too high at the end of that sentence.

“Yeah,” I said, sitting down beside her. “Can I ask you just one question?”

She shrugged.

“What were you doing that whole year I was in Rubacava?”

She was silent for a moment, then said, “I was lost,” in a hollow voice.

“What did—”

She surged to her feet and strode toward the door. “*I don’t want to talk about that year!*” She stopped and turned back. “Please,” she said weakly.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll lay off the questions.”

“Great,” she said with forced brightness. “Now if we could only get you to lay off the cologne.”

“Hey, I’m a sailor now. We *have* to wear this stuff.”

She ‘smiled’ weakly and sat down on a short stack of suitcases.

“What this safe needs is a couple of nice easy chairs,” I said.

“Vault,” Meche said.

“Huh?”

“If you can walk inside it, Manny, it’s a vault.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

Meche looked pensive for a moment. “Did you mean what you said the other day? About a ship, I mean?”

“Every word.”

“And Glottis *is* alive?”

“Definitely.”

She went silent again and I didn’t interrupt. “That wasn’t your gun, was it,” she said eventually, sounding miserable.

“Well, I traded good junk for it. But,” I shrugged, “two hours ago it wasn’t mine.”

She shook her head slowly. “I’ve made a mess of everything.”

“Don’t kick yourself around. You did what you thought you had to...although I can’t understand why you’d believe what Domino said about DOD agents being armed.”

“Stockholm syndrome,” she said sadly, shaking her head again.

“Uh, what?” I stammered, baffled.

“It’s the tendency of people in hostage situations to identify with their captors.”

“That’s crazy!” I said without thinking.

“In a sense,” Meche said. “If you want to be crude about it. But it’s a real condition. Put a person through enough stress and they’ll believe anything, especially when there’s only one source of information. It’s a coping mechanism, in a way. If you come to believe that the person putting you through hell is somehow on your side, it becomes easier to endure.” I must have looked skeptical because she declared, “I’ve seen it, Manny. Once, when I was volunteering at a mental hospital, I worked with hostage victims. At first, they were more concerned with what was happening to their former captors than about what had happened to themselves.” She shook her head. “I never thought I’d ever fall victim to that... ‘craziness’.”

“If you’re right,” I said carefully, “you didn’t have much of a choice.”

“That doesn’t make it any easier to accept,” she snapped, sounding bitter. “I know,” she sighed after a moment, “you’re only trying to help but...it’ll take time.” She took a deep breath. “Manny,” she said, fixing her eye sockets on me, “why didn’t you look for me?”

I got a creepy feeling of *déjà vu*, except this really was Meche, not some demonic raven perched on binoculars. “I did,” I said, wishing I had something stronger than words to prove it with. “Glottis scoured every road between El Marrow and Rubacava while I hounded every soul in every jerkwater stop along the way. We pestered waitresses and short-order cooks, bus drivers and wrench monkeys...everybody human or demon who worked along every stretch of blacktop we could find.” I laughed bitterly. “It never occurred to *anyone* on our side that you were still in that damned forest. I figured you were hiding out...and God only knows what Salvador, with all his crazy conspiracy theories, had suspected.”

“Well, I wasn’t hiding. When Domino found me,” Meche wrapped her arms around herself and shivered, “I was ready to welcome the devil.” And she wasn’t far off, I thought.

“If only...” I began, then slapped the cold, hard floor. “I suppose Domino sent you into the club to draw me out.” I felt like punching something but managed to hold back. There wasn’t anything I wanted to sock in that vault, anyway. “Why didn’t you tell Lupe what was going on?”

“Domino was outside the door,” she answered, “with a gun.” *That* was chilling. “He told me to say only what he’d instructed me to or he’d shoot the ‘dingbat’.” She looked down, projecting embarrassment. “His word. Sorry.”

“Well,” I said slowly, tamping down my unsettled feelings, “I’m glad you didn’t endanger Lupe.” I didn’t need yet another soul on my conscience; and, irrationally, I suddenly felt guilty because I had never bothered to learn anything personal about my ditzy hat-check girl. I hoped she was doing OK.

Meche was silent for a moment...for reasons of her own, probably. “Well, as soon as she went to find you, Domino burst in and dragged me away. But once we were on the boat, I had a little bit of freedom. I kept watch for you from on deck, and when I saw you running toward the boat...”

“*Bam!*”

“Domino was *not* happy. I spent the trip locked up in the brig, until I was tossed overboard at the Pearl. The captain was on Hector’s payroll. And so,” she said, “here we are, locked in a vault on a deserted factory island on the edge of the world. Pretty bleak, huh?”

I didn’t want to answer that. I would have had to be honest. “So, um,” I looked around, trying to think of anything safe to say. “What’s in those cases?” I finally asked.

Meche got up from the stack of suitcases she had perched on. “Take a look.”

I opened the top one and gaped.

“It’s all the Double-N tickets Hector and Domino have stolen over the years,” she said. “Each one stolen from a good soul, and now they just...sit there.”

Something finally clicked. “That’s it!” I exclaimed, slamming the lid shut.

“What?”

“*That’s* what’s been bothering me!” I said, half to myself. “They just *sit there!* In the days when I was a hot salesman,” I explained to Meche, “I used to see Double-N tickets all the time, and they *move!*”

“What do you mean, ‘they move’?”

“They become agitated around human souls, and the ticket that belongs to you will actually fly into your hands. But these tickets,” I popped the suitcase open again and waved my hand over the little golden slips, “and the tickets in that suitcase of Charlie’s, it’s like they’re *dead.*” I closed the case again. “Why would Hector and Domino be hoarding cases of counterfeit Double-N tickets?” I asked, mostly of myself.

“They’re selling them, right?” Meche asked.

“That’s what Domino says. Salvador thinks that’s what’s happening, too, but I’m not so sure that’s the whole story anymore.”

Meche cocked her head.

“Think about it,” I said. “We’ve been assuming they’ve been stealing the tickets *and then selling those very same tickets.* Get it?”

“I think so,” she said slowly. “If they’re stealing tickets only to sell them, why bother making counterfeits?”

“Right. And if they can counterfeit...”

“...*why bother stealing!*” we finished together.

“You’re right, Manny,” she said, nodding. “There *has* to be something more to it than what Domino’s been saying.”

“And maybe more than he knows. When Don Copal brought him into our division, Domino was bright green. He wouldn’t know a genuine Double-N ticket from a three-dollar bill.”

“Any more than most people in the Land of the Dead would,” Meche added. “So is Domino being duped, too?”

“I don’t think so, not in the way you mean,” I answered. “But Hector...Hector must have an angle that doesn’t include Domino or anybody else.”

“Then he must be hoarding the genuine tickets for himself,” Meche said, “but why?”

“I don’t know, angel, but it’s something big, so big he needs help. He must be buying that help with the counterfeiting scam.”

“You’re probably right,” Meche said, “but that doesn’t help us get out of this vault.”

“I know it,” I groused. “There’s a ship waiting for us but no one knows where we are.” I looked around. “There’s gotta be—hey, what’s that up there?”

Meche looked where I was pointing. “What? The vent?”

“Looks pretty wide,” I said, “but high up. I don’t think I could reach it even if I stood on your shoulders.”

“Wouldn’t it make more sense for me to stand on *your* shoulders, anyway?”

“Are you kidding? Look at your heels!”

She kicked off her shoes and planted her hands on her hips.

“Oh, all right,” I said with a laugh. “Let’s get these cases under the vent.”

We moved the stack and I climbed on top. “OK,” I said, “try not to tip us over, yeah? This pile isn’t very steady.”

“Right,” she said, getting onto the cases with me.

I helped her climb onto my shoulders. The cases wobbled.

“Can you reach the vent?” I asked.

“Just,” she answered. “There are screws. Got a Swiss Army knife or something on you?”

“Yeah,” I said and handed it up.

The screws were pretty tight, but Meche eventually got them off. She removed the grill from the vent and lowered it, almost whacking me in the head.

“Do you think you can get in?” I asked after I took the grill and dropped it onto the floor.

“If you give me a boost,” she said.

I pushed and she scrambled into the vent. Meche went to find her way to the outside of the vault to let me out, but half an hour later she poked her head back through the vent. “The key’s gone!” she announced.

“Great,” I said. “I guess Domino wanted me in here after all.”

“Or maybe he really did forget about it and only came back to collect it.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Question is, can I fit through that?”

“It’s pretty roomy for me,” she answered, “and you’re not that big.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Well, it’s true. Here.” She leaned out of the vent as far as she could and reached out her hand. I stood on the cases and reached up, but missed by a few inches.

“Hang on,” I said, unbuckling my belt, “we can use my pants like a rope.”

“Manny...” she began.

“I don’t have any bones *you* don’t have.”

“Well...OK.”

I got my pants off and tossed the waist end up to her. She scooted back into the vent and helped me climb up.

“*Gaah!*” I exclaimed when my bare legs touched the metal of the vent, involuntarily jerking upwards and banging my head.

“Cold?” Meche asked, a sly grin in her voice.

“Meche!” I said through gritted teeth.

“That’ll teach you to jump to conclusions,” she said merrily. “Maybe I *am* a saint, but that doesn’t mean I’m an innocent.”

"I'll try to remember that," I said.
She laughed and started creeping backwards.

DEMON OF LE MANCHA

Meche led me, backwards all the way, to where she had dropped out before. When we got out of the ducts we made our careful way to Meche's office. Her idea. Domino's office was dark and there was no sign of him. Meche collected a few children's books and put them into a bag. Then we went to my office to get the *angelitos*. They were asleep. We gently woke them and told them to be absolutely quiet. They looked a little scared as we opened the cage and lifted them out. I grabbed some coral to light our way. Meche carried Bibi and I had Pugsy.

We left the factory. It felt truly deserted now. I led Meche through the quarry and down to the beach. The ship was still in its dry dock but there was a large crowd around it. They kept well back, nervous but quiet, watching Glottis and his crew work.

I went up to the ship and called out, "Hey! *Mano!*"

Glottis looked down from on deck, a black shadow against the stars. "Oh, *there* you are!" he hollered back. "What kept you guys?"

"Got locked in a sa—" I glanced over toward Meche, "vault. How're we doing?"

"Well, we're all fueled up and we're getting ready to launch."

"Everybody here?"

"Should be."

"Any idea how long it'll be?"

Glottis seemed to shrug. Hard to tell in the darkness and given the distance between us. "An hour or so. We want to be sure we do this right. There won't be a second chance."

"Take all the time you need...but no more than you need."

"Check," he said at the top of his lungs and disappeared.

I walked back to Meche. She was sitting in the coarse, faintly glowing coral sand. Bibi was curled up on her lap. I sat down next to her and Pugsy slipped out of my arms and sprawled between me and Meche.

"It's cold," Meche said.

"Yeah," I said, "but not as cold as where we're going."

"So where *are* we going, Manny?"

"End of the line," I answered. "Once we get to Puerto Zapato, we go overland across an arctic waste and up a mountain. According to the brochures, anyway."

"Lovely," she said in a small voice.

"The final challenges," I said. "Of course, *you* were supposed to go right by them. I'm afraid we'll have to go through, instead."

"It'll be hard on the children," Meche said.

"Well, we'll get 'em through. Everyone is gonna make it. I promise."

"OK, Manny."

I just wished I was as sure as I sounded.

It was about two hours before Glottis was satisfied the ship was ready to launch. Glottis climbed down from the deck of the ship, walked over to me and said, "OK, Manny, we want everyone further back just in case it all goes horribly wrong."

"It won't," I said. "You've got the magic touch."

"Right now, I don't believe in magic. So, back all you guys go."

There were enough people carrying coral around us that I got my first really good look at Glottis in several days. He looked terrible. His skin was tilting more toward yellow, and there were deep red circles under his eyes. Maybe it was a trick of the dim coral light, but maybe not. “Are you OK, *carnal*?” I asked, concerned.

“Sure,” he said. “I just haven’t had a lot of sleep lately.”

“Once we’re away, *you* are taking some time off.”

“No kiddin’,” he grumbled mostly to himself as he turned back toward the ship.

“By the way,” I said, and Glottis turned back to me, “do we know what this ship’s called?”

“*La Mancha*,” he answered, turning again to trudge back to the ship.

“Well,” I said to Meche, “let’s hope *we’re* not tilting at windmills.” I took a deep breath and hollered, “OK, everybody! They’re gonna launch! Back! Back!”

Well, even if Glottis didn’t believe in magic, I did, and *La Mancha* slid into the water as nice as you please. And she stayed on top, which was more important. The ship moved out a ways then dropped anchor fore and aft to hold her steady. Then we began the long process of ferrying everyone across on rafts. There was a hint of gray in the north as the last of the prisoners boarded and we got under way.

“Well,” I said happily to Meche, coming down from the bridge with Glottis after having set our course (we had to depart in a wide arc in order to find a channel deep enough to get through the reef and into the open sea), “how do you like our boat?”

“She’ll be something, once you slam some headers on her and lower her to the waterline,” she answered.

“Are you flirtin’ with me?” Glottis asked.

“*You* are tired,” I said. “Get some rest.”

“Not until we’re free and clear,” he said, going below.

“Once we are,” I said to Meche, “he’s going to bed even if I have to tie him down.”

“Are you sure he’s just tired, Manny? He doesn’t look well.”

“He did in a few days a job that should’ve taken weeks. Of course he’s tired.”

Meche tried to get a better grip on the kids, but they were asleep and limp. “Take Pugsy, will you?”

“Sure,” I said. “We should take them below.”

“No,” she said, “not yet. I’ve been cooped up in that factory for months, a brig for a year before that. The *angelitos* have been in a cage for I don’t know how long. I want to stay in the open air for a while.” She started walking around the deck among the other souls, some standing or walking or lying down, trying to sleep. I followed after her.

La Mancha was a lot bigger than the *Lola*. Plenty of space to move around in.

We paused when we came to a small group being led in prayer by a nun. Meche stood quietly, then crossed herself when they finished. “Sister Calabaza,” Meche said quietly as we moved away.

“Yeah?” I asked, surprised. “That’s the case Domino stole from me.”

“And you stole my case from him,” Meche said with a twinkle in her voice, “and that’s how this whole thing started.”

“No,” I countered, “it started when Hector LeMans died.”

“True,” she said, “but how will it end?”

“I don’t know, angel, but it won’t be a happy ending for Hector, not if Sal and Eva have their way.”

HOW TO SHRED A CON MAN WITHOUT REALLY TRYING

Meche and I walked around the deck for a while, finishing up at the railing by the port bow. Pugsy and Bibi were still asleep, curled up in a blanket on the deck nearby.

“...and,” I was saying, “it seemed that as soon as I had turned around, my whole crew was sprouted. If it hadn’t been for Glottis...” I shrugged. I looked back the way we had come. We had made our way past the reef and there was no trace of the island except for a few low clouds. The sun was almost clear of the northern horizon and things were looking more hopeful, but my story was bringing me down.

“I guess I haven’t been fair to you, huh?” Meche said after I had trailed off. “You’ve had a rough couple of years, too.”

“Well, *I* wasn’t the one lost in the forest,” I said.

“But I didn’t have to watch a close friend sprout, and have the same thing happen to a crew I was responsible for. That’s a lot to have to go through.”

“But I wasn’t the one sprouted. Bad things happen to everyone around me, but I come through without a scratch.”

“Are you sure?” Meche asked. “Look at how you’re punishing yourself! *You* didn’t shoot Lola, but you hold yourself more responsible than the one who did.”

“I could have gone after her right away, you know, just like I could have sent my crew ashore as soon as I got Salvador’s message.”

“But you didn’t,” Meche said in an aggravated tone, “not because you’re evil, or because you’re fated to destroy everyone around you...Manny, you are *not* a special case. I hate to pop your balloon, but we’re all in the same boat.” She made a sharp, bitter laugh. “We’re *all* victims of Hector, you included. The only difference is, you didn’t fall into the trap so easily. They’re shooting blind and hitting innocent bystanders trying to bring you down...but you’re not responsible for that.”

“I can’t help thinking that I could have done things different and no one would have gotten hurt.”

“Well, you’d be worse than Domino if you didn’t have regrets. I can’t make your burden easier to bear, Manny. I’d carry it for you if I could. But...I can’t. No more than you can carry mine. But, most important, you mustn’t compare burdens. And don’t beat yourself up because you think yours isn’t heavy enough.”

“Is that what I’m doing?” I wondered out loud, doubting but afraid that Meche was right.

“I don’t know,” she answered with a shrug. “I think so.” She sighed. “I don’t think there’s anyone on this ship who would want to trade places with you. I’d rather spend another year in that forest than,” she shuddered, “than to have watched a friend like Lola sprout. In a way, you know, she was lucky.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

Meche shook her head. “She could have sprouted up in that lighthouse alone, Manny. I don’t know what it’s like to sprout, but I do know what it means to die alone.”

I remembered how I had found her, in a hospital bed by herself, with nothing—not a nurse nor even a bunch of grapes—in the room with her. “Why do things have to be this way?” I asked toward the fiery north.

“People have been asking that question for thousands of years, Manny,” Meche said dryly. “I don’t know the answer. I only know that the world is bigger than I can understand, so I just try to cope with my own small part of it and make it a little more bearable.”

“Like reading stories to small children locked in a cage?”

“Like reading stories to small children locked in a cage,” she agreed. “It’s either that, or get into a funk when I can’t set them free.”

“Harsh,” I said, feeling the implied rebuke.

“Well,” Meche said with a careless shrug, “you started this conversation.”

“And I should just take my medicine?”

“I can only be honest with you, Manny.”

“I think,” I said, not totally certain about what I was saying, “I think I’m gonna need that.” I looked out over the sea. “We’ve got a long journey ahead and somebody’s got to keep me on track.”

We lapsed into silence. Meche broke it first. “So, are you really gonna take me to El Marrow and try to get your old job back?” she asked slowly.

“There’s no job for me now,” I answered with the ghost of a laugh, “except to bring you and everyone else on this tub to the end of the road.”

“But if you aren’t going to use me to get your job back,” Meche asked as she moved, somewhat hesitantly, closer to me, “why did you spend all this time trying to find me?” She looked intently slightly down into my face.

“Meche, I...” I wasn’t sure how to answer. I’d had a lot of time to think it over, ever since Salvador had shipped me off to Rubacava. There were LSA objectives, personal obligations, but... “I needed to find you.”

Everything else was just details.

Meche flew into my arms when the deck lurched suddenly. I stumbled backwards and managed to keep us both on our feet. The hull rang like a bell from the impact. Souls rushed to the port side to look down over the side. Surfacing below us was the same submarine Glottis and I had hitched a ride on. A hatch popped open and Domino emerged. “I gave you one job, Manny,” he shouted right at me, as if he knew just where I would be standing, “and look at you...already screwing it up!”

Well, this was bad. *La Mancha* was limping along on one engine, the sub could run rings around us, and I had to assume it was armed. For all I knew, we could have sprung any number of leaks when the sub rammed us; but, at the moment, Domino was focusing on me. That was an advantage for everyone on the tanker...I hoped. Before anyone could stop me, I leapt over the side and dropped down to the deck of the sub.

Domino had his scythe out by the time I landed, just the kind of guy to practice Oxford-regulation boxing and then pull out a blade when it actually came time to fight. “I suppose you realize,” he crowed, “that this is gonna go down on your permanent record!”

I snapped my own scythe open. I had often wondered why I had kept it, the last couple of years. Now, I was simply glad I had it. “Look, Dom,” I snarled, “I’m *not* gonna work for you!”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, Manny,” he sneered. “You’re fired. Just consider this,” his scythe whooshed past my head, “your severance.”

We locked blades. Domino twisted his around and I went down. “This doesn’t look good for the kid!” he laughed, bringing the butt of his scythe down with a clang right where my head had been a second before.

I jumped up and swung, but only managed to slice his coat sleeve. He looked more angry than worried. I’d probably ruined an expensive suit for all its cheap appearance. “Smart strategy,” he said, jabbing a forefinger at me, “*always* let your boss win.” He swung. I went down again. My skull bounced hard against the sub’s deck. “At least at the Christmas party you passed out before you really got hurt!” he jeered.

“Manny,” I heard Meche shout from far above, “the octopus!”

At first I didn’t understand. The octopus was inside the sub. It wasn’t a threat. But then I got it. The thing’s ‘head’ was jammed up in a tower toward the front of the sub, it’s eyes staring out of two half-globes of glass on either side. I realized that *I* was was the threat; so I spun around and buried my scythe in one of the demon’s monstrous eyes.

The sub rocked violently as the octopus jerked its ‘head’ out of the tower. Domino almost went over, but ‘almost’ doesn’t count. The giant hatch amidship crashed open and the octopus jetted away, trailing pink blood.

Domino stared after it. He turned toward me and shouted, sounding incredulous, “I don’t *believe* you, Calavera!” He smashed the butt of his scythe into the deck in anger. “You’re losing a fight so you pick on one of my *pets*?” His voice rose shrilly to the question. He seemed to move only slightly, but the next thing I knew I was flat on my back, skull ringing and vision swimming, looking up as Domino continued to rage over me.

“Why aren’t you more like me, Manny?” he demanded, sounding absurdly hurt. “I’ve been trying to show you how, but you *just—don’t—listen!*” He emphasized his point by waving his scythe in my face, coming near to popping my skull off. “If you’d just adopt the proper attitude, look what could happen to you!” He spread his arms wide, as if that would give me a better view of what he was.

Just then a heavy rope snaked down and knocked him to the deck. I staggered to my feet and grabbed the rope. I started climbing while Glottis, up on *La Mancha*’s deck, began hauling up the rope. I looked down when he got a panicked look on his face and saw Domino following me up. I tried to climb faster but I was having problems seeing where I was putting my hands. Glottis stopped pulling, his face creased in thought. Then he started yanking the rope up faster than before.

When I got even with the deck, Glottis reached down and practically flung me back onto the ship. Meche ran over to me when I landed and I saw Domino climbing over the rail. Glottis grabbed him by the neck and hoisted him up. Domino reached into his coat and pulled out a gun. Glottis grabbed the hand holding the gat...and yanked it off.

Domino screamed.

Glottis went on to systematically tear Domino to pieces, tossing each bone over the side. Domino’s screams got more and more shrill until he was just a skull. Then Glottis tore away his jaw and threw it and the now-silent skull overboard.

No one on deck moved or even made a sound.

Glottis turned to me, to where I half-lay on the deck with Meche frozen beside me in the act of helping me up. “You were right, Manny,” he said, sounding perfectly normal. “Sometimes you gotta hurt somebody to save people.”

“Are you...OK, Glottis?” I asked slowly.

“Yeah, sure,” he said.

“OK,” was all I could say.

“Well,” he said, walking away from the port side of the ship, “I guess I’d better go and see if that sub did any damage. ’Scuse me,” Glottis said to the astonished Sister Calabaza as he pushed past her toward the nearest hatch and went below.

“¡*Dios mío!*” Meche exclaimed softly.

PUERTO ZAPATO AND THE END OF THE LINE

I don’t think there was anyone sorry that Domino got what he deserved, although many were uncomfortable with how it happened. None of the former prisoners had any real experience with demons, apart from Domino’s ‘pets’. Some were afraid that Glottis might suddenly turn on them. I did my best to keep imaginations from running wild, but I understood the fear. It might have been easier for them to take if Glottis hadn’t been so calmly methodical about pulling Domino apart. Near as I could discover, when that daisy maker came out some unsuspected instinct kicked in and Glottis acted on it. He wasn’t angry, nor out of control; it was just what he had to do. That, to me, was pretty creepy.

Meche tried putting a Sergeant York spin on it, but that only worked on the souls who had seen the movie.

Once Glottis made sure we weren't taking on water I made him go to bed and made sure he stayed there. After three days he was so restless I let him go back to work. His color was a lot better and his nose was cold and wet, so I figured he was OK. He, along with Albert and the others who had helped repair the ship, went to work on the number two engine.

The journey to Puerto Zapato was slow and difficult. There weren't many real sailors on board besides me and Glottis. The survivors of *La Mancha's* wreck were very few, not even half a dozen, and most of them were needed in the engine room. I had one guy to help keep the ship on course and that was it. That meant I had to run the ship using complete neophytes. That was tough on everyone. There was a lot of frustration, tedium and confusion all wrapped up in a nearly derelict ship.

It wasn't pleasant.

Once we had settled into some kind of routine, I gave the promised answers to the questions people had about Hector, Domino, the LSA, and the Land of the Dead in general. That wore me down as much as anything else. And there were some questions I didn't know the answers to, like what they would find in the Ninth Underworld once we finally got there.

So it was a hard, slow trip; but, eventually, we limped into Puerto Zapato. We made something of a stir when we sailed into the harbor. *La Mancha* was obviously not in good shape, and it was equally obvious there wasn't even a real crew on board. I gave the port authorities a story about being shipwreck survivors. We were bedraggled enough the story went mostly unchallenged. There were questions arising from the fact there were so many of us and that most weren't sailors. It would take a cruise ship to explain us and none had been reported missing recently, but our story was that we had been stranded for many years before finding a derelict ship. That was close enough to the truth that it was eventually accepted. Since we could claim the ship as salvage, I had Albert try to find a buyer for it. Even as scrap, *La Mancha* was worth enough to allow us to equip for the next stage of the journey.

While Albert was making the necessary deals, I worked on finding Paddy Yeats, Puerto Zapato's lone LSA agent. He was making himself scarce, I discovered, but I eventually tracked him down to a filthy tenement near the warehouse district. He was pretty cautious when he opened his flimsy door a crack to see who was knocking, but he swung it wide open once he recognized me. Next to his pal Slisko, I was probably the one from the old Rubacava days he trusted most.

"Calavera!" he exclaimed, then looked up and down the narrow stairwell behind me. "Come in, quickly," he said, giving me space. He shut and bolted the door behind me. "Where the hell did *you* spring from, man?" he asked. "When the *Lola* headed back out to sea and we heard the explosion..."

"Well," I said, sitting down at his rickety kitchenette table, "things got interesting after that... but first, what have you heard from Salvador lately?"

"Nada," he said. "I sent along my report about the *Lola* but I haven't gotten word back yet."

"What about Alexi and the gang?" I asked, figuring he'd at least heard from them.

Paddy shook his head. "Rubacava's gone dark, man. You should know that."

"I've been out of the loop since I made captain," I explained. "Too risky. I was hoping to reconnect once the *Lola* docked here."

"I'm mostly out of the loop myself," Paddy said. "Things are getting very hot for the LSA in El Marrow, and I'm pretty sure the DOD here in Zapato know about me, too, so I've been laying low."

"Yeah, I almost couldn't find you." The newsies and derelicts I'd traced him through had seemed right enough, but still I'd had Glottis and others follow them up before I showed my face in Paddy's part of town. "So how long've you been in this rat hole, *carnal*?"

"Only the last few months," he said. "But what about you? What happened to the *Lola* after you steamed out of port?"

“Well, she went down. I don’t want to go into details, but I found out what happened to all those souls Hector stole Double-N tickets from. I have them with me and I’m going to try to get them to the end of the line.”

Paddy stared open-jawed at me for a couple of seconds. “Wow,” he said finally. “How’d you manage all that?”

I shook my head. “There’s no time to explain, and I wouldn’t even if there was. I want you to keep the little I’ve told you to yourself for as long as you can—I don’t want it getting back to Hector, somehow. It’s not that I don’t trust you, man...”

Paddy held up his hand when I trailed off. “You don’t have to spell it out. Hector’s intelligence is good, I know. So how long should I hold back? I’ll have to make a report eventually, if I can.”

I nodded. “If all goes right, it should take about a year to get to the end of the line on foot. I’ve got too many people to do better than that.” I gave the answer some more thought. “Give us two, maybe three months before you pass the news on to El Marrow. Once we’re out in the wilderness, it doesn’t matter what Hector knows. He won’t be able to find us, much less stop us,” I assured him, “even if he’s got Captain Scott on his payroll. When you make your report, tell Salvador that the Pearl is the key. People don’t jump overboard there—they’re *thrown* overboard and every one of them is a saint. The Pearl is the pickup point. From there, they’re taken to a forgotten island on the southern edge of the world. I’ve done a lot of damage to the operation, but there’s nothing to stop Hector from getting the system going again once he finds out what’s happened.”

“Now that we know about the Pearl,” Paddy said, ever optimistic, “maybe we can intercept Hector’s victims before they get that far.”

“Maybe,” I said, “but there’s not much you can do on your own.” I hesitated, not wanting to imply I didn’t trust the man. “Are you *sure* there’s nothing new from El Marrow?” I finally asked.

“The most recent news I sent to you by carrier pigeon when the *Lola* docked,” Paddy answered, either not picking up on my worries or not caring. “Everything else is so stale it isn’t worth telling any more. Basically, the LSA is working hard in El Marrow but can’t get any traction. Hector’s just too powerful.”

“Yeah, well,” I said, getting up from his tiny, Gay Nineties-era table, “Hector *can* be hurt. When you tell Salvador about the Pearl and the island, you can also tell him that Domino Hurley is out of the picture...for good.”

Albert found a buyer for *La Mancha*. The amount looked pretty impressive, until we worked out what it came to per person. What we could afford to equip ourselves for the next stage was barely adequate, but we couldn’t afford the time needed to raise more money. I figured we needed to be out of town before any of the local DOD on Hector’s payroll got wise to what we really were, so we got the minimum of what we needed and set out; and I thought the trip on *La Mancha* was rough.

Once we got away from the coast the land became a flat plain, rising imperceptibly toward the mountains at the far distant western edge of the world. The landscape became unbearably uniform. Frozen gray dust lay everywhere under the dull gray sky. Terrain like this would have been tundra in the Land of the Living; but here, there were of course no plants. We trudged forward, mostly silent, watching our own feet march forward...the only entertainment. We went numb after the first few weeks, and not only from the cold. There were occasional encounters with the demons native to the plain, savage parodies of moose and bear. But after a while, evading and escaping these beasts became routine and we never lost anyone. Everyone watched out for everyone else, and Glottis kept watch on us all.

Then we came to the ice and snow and the demons became equally polar...although demon penguins were nothing compared with demon beavers, in my opinion anyway. The ground rose up, forming low, broad hills at first. In time, mountains began to show purple on the horizon, seeming not

to grow any larger for weeks. But we did eventually come to the foothills, struggling up into the mountains themselves. We were about a year out of Puerto Zapato by this time, nearing the end of the journey; but it seemed as if we had always been traveling and always would be. Some people gave up and had to be carried.

One day we looked up and saw we were approaching massive pillars, marching in endless pairs toward the tallest peak. Between the pillars stretched shining rails. We stopped and stared for a while. As we stood there, we saw the Number Nine shoot along. We looked back down at our feet and moved on. When we reached the pillars we followed them up into the mountains, up to the massive Babylonian/Mayan/Aztec-style temple that sprawled up the largest of them. The end of the line.

YEAR 4

TEMPLE STATION

We climbed the mountain, walking beside the pillars supporting the Number Nine's tracks. We came to the steps of the temple and we climbed those, wearily, to the platform just outside the arch near the summit through which the train passed. There we encountered the Gatekeeper, a nameless soul who—for whatever reason—was condemned to remain at the entrance to the temple, ushering others through to the next world but never able to cross over himself.

One by one the former prisoners filed up to the Gatekeeper and gave their names. The Gatekeeper looked over his scrolls and directed each to waiting area two. After an hour of that I got bored and looked around. Something seemed wrong, but it was a while before I realized that it was because Glottis was nowhere in sight. I asked Meche if she'd seen him. She said she hadn't, so we handed Pugsy and Bibi over to others and went to look for him. We backtracked and found a place where we could make out Glottis' footprints; then we saw the impression of his body in the snow, many little feet, and a track apparently made of him being dragged away. We exchanged worried looks and followed.

We followed the track to a building built on a shelf below the temple platform. Weird chanting came from within. A system of suspended cables running up the side of the mountain led inside, as did the track in the snow. We went cautiously inside and my attention was drawn to several bright-red objects.

"Gondolas!?" I exclaimed. "I *knew* we should have checked this side of the mountain before we walked up!"

"Oh, Glottis!" Meche cried, pushing past me to rush forward. She knelt beside him and struggled to take one of his hands in hers.

"Hear the name of the great one!" one of the little demons surrounding Glottis warbled. "Glottis!"

"Glottis," the others began to chant. The strange thing—apart from the chanting—was that they all looked like Glottis, but in miniature.

"What's happening?" I demanded. Meche gave up on trying to pick up Glottis' hand and settled on stroking his forehead instead.

"How many days has this grand demon gone without driving?" one of the little demons asked.

"Well," I answered, "we've been hiking for months."

"*Months!?*" another exclaimed in horror.

"Oh," yet another said, shaking his head sadly, "then the noble one will surely die."

I didn't want to believe that. But I had to admit to myself that Glottis looked bad, lying there on the floor, with ashen skin and unfocused eyes staring up at nothing. Meche continued to stroke his broad forehead but he didn't respond.

"I don't understand," I said to the demons. "What's wrong with him?"

"Do you not know the one purpose, the one skill, the one desire of this humble spirit?" one asked in return.

"Yes, but we've been so far away from cars and civilization for so long."

"Why," one wailed, "oh, why did he ever leave his home?"

That was no mystery. "I...got him fired," I said, "and then....Oh, Glottis! What have I done to you?" I wondered if Meche would blame me; I did. I went to take a better look at Glottis. "How could I not notice this was happening?" I asked myself.

“Don’t punish yourself *again*, Manny,” Meche complained, looking up at me. “You weren’t to know. *No* one saw this coming.”

Glottis turned his head slightly toward us, his eyes struggling to focus. “Manny...” he croaked. One giant paw reached out toward me.

I took it in my relatively small, skeletal hand. “Are you in much pain, my friend?” I asked him gently.

“Only because I let you down, Manny.” He started to cough. His eyes lost focus again. “Can’t stop,” he said in a slurred voice. “Must save...everyone.”

“What can we do?” Meche asked helplessly. “Won’t anything help?”

“I need to race,” Glottis said, “to fly, like,” more coughing, “like in the old days...in the *Bone Wagon*.”

“But the *Bone Wagon*’s not here, *carnal*,” I said.

“Maybe I’ll see her...on the other side.”

“You are *not* going to die,” I insisted.

“The Land calls back its children,” he said. “Who am I to say no?”

“Can’t we make a new hot rod?”

“Those days are done, Manny.” He turned away and lost consciousness.

Meche and I looked at each other. “What can we do?” I asked.

“Maybe,” she said, “maybe we can only make him comfortable.”

The demons stood around in silence.

“I’m going to boil water,” Meche suddenly declared.

“¿*Que?*”

“He needs to be clean and warm.” She clenched her fists and pounded her thighs. “I can’t think of anything other than keeping him comfortable, Manny,” Meche exclaimed in frustration. She stood after taking a deep breath. “I’ll need a tub or basin or something,” she said to the demons.

“Outside,” one said. He made a move to fetch it for her but Meche waved him away and ran out herself.

After she had left I got an idea. “Are there any vehicles here that we could use to revive him?” I asked.

“Only the trucks that deliver the souls,” one of the little demons answered sadly, “but they are slow.”

“So slow!” all the others repeated in unison.

There was a loud clang from outside. “Manny!” Meche shouted.

I spun around toward the exit. “What is it?” I called out.

“Come and see!” I joined her and she pointed up at the top of the temple. “Do you see anyone up there?” she asked.

I looked as hard as I could through the snowy glare and finally shook my head. “No, I don’t,” I admitted.

“They knew we went looking for Glottis,” she said, sounding very worried. “You’d think at least a few would have waited. What do you think happened?”

“They’re probably all in the next world by now,” I said, not even convincing myself.

“Even Albert and Anton? And what about all that waiting room stuff? I’ve got a bad feeling about this, Manny,” Meche said. “You’d better go up and see.” I hesitated. “I’ll look after Glottis. *Manny...!*” she exclaimed when I didn’t move.

“OK,” I said, finally moving toward the stairs, “but see if you can’t find anything to help Glottis. We *can’t* let him die.” That would be one tragedy more than I could take. I began climbing up toward the temple again.

When I got back to the Gatekeeper's platform, it was empty except for the Gatekeeper himself. I'm not sure why but that didn't feel right, even discounting Meche's uncertain worries. "Where is everybody?" I asked.

"Waiting area two," the Gatekeeper intoned solemnly.

I expected him to say more. When he didn't, I asked, "How long do they have to wait in there?"

"Until they have tickets," he stated. "They were issued tickets on the Number Nine train and they don't have them now. The punishment for selling Double-N tickets is *very* severe."

"But they didn't sell their tickets," I protested. "Their tickets were stolen!"

"By whom?"

"Hector LeMans stole them to sell to rich people who don't deserve them."

There was a long, low whistle in the distance behind me. The Number Nine again.

"That might be them now," the Gatekeeper said. "Let's see just what they deserve."

The train was still a long way off. I looked down the track, seeing only a speck, then back at the Gatekeeper. He gazed steadily at the distant train, content to just watch and wait. So we did. As the train got closer, the switch at the platform crossing began to flash and ring. I didn't notice right away, but the sound changed with each ring. It started out a hollow clanging before turning into something more...portentous. As soon as I noticed, I turned to see the switch quivering, changing shape. It became a gnarled red arrow pointing down.

And then there was an unholy scream.

I spun back toward the train and saw its smooth metal skin peel away and vanish, leaving behind a blood-red metal skeleton rippling with flame and smoke. There seemed to be a leering face on the front of the train with a vandyck in place of a cow catcher. In the air beside the track, below the platform, a bright spot appeared, growing into huge disk of flame. The train began to rock left and right, finally coming off the rails to dive into the disk which curled in upon itself and vanished with a shrieking inhale.

In the sudden silence I turned to the Gatekeeper and asked, "What happened to that train!?"

"Your destiny cannot be purchased," he answered tonelessly.

I started laughing, although I wasn't sure what was so funny.

"I don't understand," I asked, returning to the original subject after I had gotten myself under control, "why has everyone been detained?"

"Given a ticket, a soul may not sell it," the Gatekeeper answered.

"But *they* didn't sell them!" I protested. "Someone else has...or is selling counterfeits, anyway. I'm not sure what happened to the tickets after they were stolen, but they *were* stolen. You can't hold that against these people!"

"Bring the tickets," the Gatekeeper said. "That is all."

"The tickets must be in El Marrow!" I exclaimed helplessly. "I can't get there and back quickly."

"These rails are already there," he said.

"Thanks," I said with biting sarcasm. "That helps a lot."

"The gate opens," the Gatekeeper said, "the gate closes. It does not 'help'."

I couldn't argue with that, so I didn't bother trying. I just went through the arch, intending to find the ominous-sounding waiting area two.

Through the arch was a train station; which made sense since the Number Nine passed under the arch on its way to the next world, but I still didn't expect it. I suppose natural stupidity explains my surprise. The walls were full of giant murals depicting the Land of the Dead, including the stuff we didn't put in the brochures. Too bad we didn't have this in El Marrow, I thought. It even had a depiction of the Number Nine jumping its tracks. That'd put a crimp on Hector's scam if people could see in advance what they were really getting with his phony tickets.

I found a door marked with an arrow saying ‘Waiting Area Two’. I tried to go through but I couldn’t make my feet move across the threshold. Something wouldn’t let me go in.

That is I, a voice echoed in my skull, the keeper of the gate.

“I need to get my friends,” I said aloud.

You need to get your friends their tickets.

I grumbled and turned away. I walked further into the station, thinking maybe there was another way; although, even if there was, the Gatekeeper would probably stop me again. As I looked around, I spotted movement. There was another soul in the station, marching clockwise in a fountain. Weird.

I went closer and found a familiar figure.

“Chepito!” I exclaimed. “How’d you get free?”

“I was born free, boatnik,” he answered. “Nobody gave me no ticket, so nobody can take it away.” I should have remembered that.

“So what are you pacing around here for?”

“Trying to unwind a little bit. All those years, circling in one direction, gotta even out my life in this world before I go on to the next, you know. Well,” he suddenly said, climbing out of the fountain, “that oughta do ’er.” He started to amble toward the dark archway opposite the one leading outside.

“Goodbye, Chepito,” I called out after him.

“Happy trails, cap’n,” he returned. As he got to the arch, he turned back to me and said, “And thanks for settin’ me straight back there in the drink.” He waved and went through.

It was an amazing moment. All those years as a reaper, sending people on to this place, encouraging Jesus and others to move on, and this was the first time I’d ever seen anyone complete the journey. If only Membrillo could have seen it. If only Lola...but I pushed that thought away.

I found myself standing by the arch, staring into the blackness—seemingly solid as a wall—that stretched beyond. There was no sign nor sound of Chepito. Or of anything else. What was really through there? I only had to take one step forward to find out. Just one step, and it’d all be over. No more malevolent demons, no Hector threatening everything, no Lola haunting me. To finally find peace. I simply had to put one foot in front of the other.

I couldn’t do it.

I turned around and marched toward the other arch. I wasn’t leaving without the people I promised to save.

RUBACAVA OR BUST

I barely glanced at the Gatekeeper as I strode past.

“Recently,” he said before I got to the steps, “I was visited by a bird with a human head.” I shivered at the image. “Do you know such a bird, Manuel Calavera?”

“No,” I said, startled by the sound of my own name. “How did you—”

“He knew you,” he answered before I could finish the question, “and for you he left this note.” The Gatekeeper opened his hand and let a scrap of paper drift down to the platform. I picked it up.

I know what you’re up to. I’ve been watching. Stay there. I’m coming to sprout you myself.

Yours truly,
Hector LeMans

“¡Hijole!” I exclaimed to myself. I stuffed the note into my pocket and continued down to the gondola platform. When I got there, I was surprised and relieved to see Glottis half sitting up, scribbling on a piece of paper on a clipboard.

“He’s had an idea,” Meche whispered to me, “something inspired by the gondolas. If it works...” she sighed. “What did you find out?”

“Your feelings were on the money,” I whispered back. “Everyone’s being held until their tickets get here. The Gatekeeper thinks they sold their tickets. I tried to explain, but he wants the tickets before he releases anyone.” I shook my head.

“What are we going to do?” Meche hissed, sounding frustrated.

“Get the tickets, I guess. Somehow.”

“Manny,” she said urgently, “it took us a *year* to walk here from Puerto Zapato, and it’s *another* year to Rubacava. On top of that, we don’t really know what happened to those tickets. These people are our responsibility.” Talk about hitting a man when he’s down. “We can’t leave them in limbo, no matter what that Gatekeeper says.”

“I’m wide open to suggestions,” I said, shrugging helplessly.

Anger gathered in Meche’s immobile features before turning into frustration. “Haven’t we been through enough?!”

I couldn’t think of an answer that would help.

A few minutes later Glottis lay back down, dropping his clipboard and pencil in a clatter. “There it is,” he wheezed, “my final work. It could save me...” he trailed off and went to sleep.

One of the little demons picked up the clipboard while the others gathered around. I peered over their tiny shoulders to get a look.

“What is it?” Meche asked.

“It looks like plans for some kind of rocket sled,” I answered. “They’re brilliant. Hey, gremlins,” I said, “can you build this thing?”

“Perhaps,” one answered.

“We have never attempted anything this powerful before,” another added.

“But could it save Glottis?” Meche asked.

“Yes,” they all said at once.

“But we must have time,” another said. “We have much to do.”

“OK,” I said to Meche. “Let’s give them space.” I tugged on her sleeve to get her to follow me to the kitchen.

“We should stay with Glottis,” she said.

“He’s resting,” I said, “and we’re not going far.”

She sighed and followed.

In the kitchen Meche made herself busy making coffee. I’d noticed that on the long trip here—the busier her hands were, the better she coped.

“Do you really think this rocket sled can save Glottis?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said. “He thrives on speed.”

“But...how can speed keep him from dying?”

“Don’t try to understand it. Remember what I told you about the time he ripped his heart out? And staying underwater for hours? A demon body isn’t like a human body.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“We’ve got nothing if we don’t have hope,” I said.

Meche shot a surprised look at me. “Since when do *you* talk like that?” she asked.

I didn’t realize I was out of character. “I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe it has something to do with the past year.”

“Maybe,” she said. She shook her head. “There were days when I was sure I couldn’t put one foot in front of the other. But I did. It took faith to keep going.”

“I think your right,” I said. “Funny. That doesn’t sound so stupid.”

She just ‘smiled’ and said, “Hand me a couple of mugs.”

“Yeah,” I said, picking two off the rack. Suddenly I got silly. “It’s the mug rack at the end of the world!” I said in my best *Twilight Zone* voice.

Meche laughed, then choked back a sob.

“Hey!” I said, taking her by the shoulders and giving her a little shake. “It’s OK.”

She moved closer and I folded my arms around her.

After a minute or two she gently pulled away and rubbed her face. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“Don’t be.”

“I’m not sure where that came from.”

“We’ve been under a lot of stress for a long time,” I pointed out.

“I guess so,” she said, getting back to the coffee.

When we were finished, we felt warmer and ready to face...whatever it was we were facing.

The little demons were busy trying to make Glottis’ idea a reality while Glottis himself seemed to fade away. Meche sat beside him and I felt useless.

“Go for a walk,” Meche finally said.

“I’m staying right here.”

“You’re not doing any good by pacing around,” she countered. “Work off some of that nervous energy. Talk to the Gatekeeper again, build a damn snow fort, but *do* something.”

“Yeah, all right,” I said, and marched out in a huff; but once outside I slowed down. Meche was right. I couldn’t just sit around patiently and I wasn’t doing Glottis any good. I didn’t want to lock horns with the Gatekeeper’s stubborn calm again, so I went down instead of up and eventually came to a circular space at the end of a road. As I was coming down, a couple of DOD trucks pulled in. I hesitated, but the drivers barely glanced at me as they hopped out of their cabs and started unloading caskets.

I wandered over and watched them open them one at a time to let out the souls inside. Each looked around, dazed, then started climbing the steps up to the top. One casket caught my attention. I recognized the handwriting on the label. It was mine. The drivers ignored me as I opened the casket. The midget inside sat up and glared at me.

“*You!*” he exclaimed in anger and surprise.

“*Bruno!?*” I blurted out. “*Bruno Martinez??*” Well, goddammit...sonofabitch!

“*You* were the one who packed me in there!” he accused, jumping out of the casket. “*You* could at least have given me a magazine. Four years with nothing to read but *this damn mug!*” He flung it at me and I caught it. “What are you doin’ here?” he demanded. “And if you were headed this way, why didn’t you offer me a lift? *Bah!*” He didn’t wait for answers. He started trotting up the stairs. “I’m gettin’ outta here!” he growled, “this world’s for suckers!”

I noticed the drivers staring at me. I just shrugged and walked away.

The little demons worked all through the night on the rocket sled. By morning they were setting it up on the tracks by the Gatekeeper’s platform. Glottis was looking old and withered as they loaded him on top. He seemed to be in a coma. I expected the Gatekeeper to raise some kind of objection to what was going on but he just sat there, staring off at nothing. When the demons had the sled in place, they brought up a gondola car and slung it underneath for Meche and me to ride in.

A couple of demons helped us into the gondola as the others readied the sled and chanted, “We shoot you now like an arrow in the wind. May you pierce the heart of the wind itself and drink the

blood of flight.” Once we were in the gondola and the door was secured, our helpers rejoined the others. “Speed is the food of the great Glottis,” they all chanted. “Speed brings you life.” The demons jumped back onto the platform and one picked up the remote control that would start the rocket. “Come back to us one day,” the little demons warbled.

Meche and I braced ourselves. The rocket fired but we moved forward slowly to begin with, only gradually building up speed. It wasn’t long before the landscape became a blur. We sped along, faster and faster. The gondola shook and the wind screamed past. Meche and I had to shout to hear each other. Late that same day we whipped past Puerto Zapato. I felt strangely angry, at what I wasn’t sure. We were over the ocean all through the next day. The gondola started to bounce and rattle even though the rails looked perfectly even and smooth. Night fell and things got rougher.

“You sure this thing’s going to hold together?” Meche shouted.

“Uh...” Of course I wasn’t sure. “At least most of the way,” I said. We were drawing near land. I could just make out familiar cliffs and a skyline. “Hey, look!” I pointed. “We’re already to Rubacava!”

Meche seemed a little conflicted as she looked toward the city where Domino used her to lure me into his trap. Before she could say anything, the gondola began to sway violently. There was a new noise among all the creaking and clanking and the rush of the wind. It sounded like a voice. I couldn’t make anything out until the scream, “*Manny!? I’m frightened!*” Glottis. Before I could feel relieved, the rocket sled jumped off the rails and into the sea.

Meche and I were thrown out of the gondola and drifted downward. “Oh, no,” I heard her groan as we sank, “not again.”

The water was dark but I could make out an even darker shape moving towards us. We couldn’t swim, skeletons in clothes having no buoyancy, so we waited for whatever it was. It reached out and grabbed Meche first, then me. Instead of being torn apart, we were both tucked under one arm as the shape propelled us upwards.

“You’re lucky I’ve got such good eyesight,” Glottis said once we’d broken the surface.

HOT ROD BOP

Glottis swam toward the nearest of Rubacava’s islands and set us down once we got to shore. “Ah, Rubacava!” he exclaimed as Meche and I wrung out our clothes as best we could. “What a town! Remember the glory days, Manny?”

“Long gone, my friend,” I answered. “There’s nothing here for us now.”

“Cept maybe our old car,” Glottis said.

“You may be right,” I said. “I hope so. It’ll make the trip to El Marrow a lot easier.”

“Not to mention the trip back,” Meche said.

“Well, once we get the tickets,” I said, “you can take the train.”

Meche didn’t say anything to that.

When we were more or less dry, we headed into town, finding ourselves near the docks. From the look of things, we were in the area furthest from where the *Bone Wagon* had been stored.

As we walked along the street, a rough but quiet voice said, “Calavera...”

I jumped and spun toward the voice. “You guys go on,” I said when I saw who it was deep in the shadows of a dark storefront. “I’ll catch up in a little while.”

“Manny...” Meche began.

“It’s all right,” I said. “It’s an old friend.” I hoped.

Meche and Glottis reluctantly went on while I walked over to where Toto stood in front of his shop.

“So you came back,” he said, almost as an accusation.

“Just passing through,” I said. “I’ve got some business in El Marrow.”

“*Hmpf*,” Toto said quietly. He turned to go into his shop, shooting a glance over his shoulder that told me to follow.

“Never thought I would see you again,” Toto said once we were inside. I didn’t say anything. There was something about the way he was acting. His shop was even more of a mess than I remembered it. “Imagine my surprise when I hear Naranja had been sprouted, and him passed out on my cot all the time.”

“Well,” I said, thinking that following Toto had been a dumb thing to do, “mistakes happen.”

“Funny mistake,” he said. “You come into my shop, Naranja goes into deep sleep. Next day, they say he be sprouted and you gone away on *Limbo*. Very funny.”

I kept quiet.

“Membrillo had his ID,” Toto said. “Very, very funny.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Guess so.”

Toto turned away and walked over to the counter. He picked up a dark bottle and took a long swallow. I noticed his right arm. There was a huge chunk missing from the humerus. I could see marrow. “Toto...” I began.

“I don’t see Lola for days,” he interrupted. “No one see her. I ask questions. Put pieces together.”

“Toto,” I said, “your arm...what happened to your arm?”

“Nick Virago,” he said.

“You confronted him...about Lola?”

He nodded.

“What’d he do? Attack you with a meat cleaver?”

“He shoot me,” he answered.

I felt cold and angry. “How did you survive?” I demanded to know.

Toto opened a cabinet and tossed me a small canister. “Liquid nitrogen,” he said. “Nick laugh and say I see Lola soon. Leave me to sprout. I pour this on wound, dig out sproutella.”

I shivered. I made to hand the canister back but he said, “Keep it. Maybe you need it.” He took another long belt from his bottle. “Go now before I regret doing you this favor.”

I nodded, understanding. I went to the door, but stopped before I opened it and said, “You know, I didn’t want any of that shit to happen.”

“I know it,” he said, “but still I hate you.”

“Not as much as I hate myself,” I said, stepping through and closing the door behind me.

I walked away, looking back occasionally. Just in case.

I caught up with Meche and Glottis. They were dawdling.

“What happened?” Meche asked.

“Oh, Toto just wanted to...talk over old times,” I answered.

“I can tell when you’re lying, Manny,” she scolded.

“I don’t want to talk about it, all right?” I snapped, instantly regretting my bad temper.

“Well, just say so.” Meche managed to sound acerbic and sympathetic at the same time.

“OK, OK,” I groused.

We walked on in silence for a while.

“There’s the lighthouse,” I said. Meche shot me an understanding look.

We got to where the *Bone Wagon* was stored, unless Velasco or someone had moved it. Glottis heaved on the doors but they didn’t budge.

“I think they’re stuck,” he said sheepishly.

Before I could think of a wise-ass remark, Glottis pulled again and the doors moved with a metallic shriek.

“Rusty,” I said.

“Yeah,” Glottis said. “I guess no one’s been in here for a while.”

He yanked the doors fully open and we all went in.

“I’d better check the engine,” Glottis said. “It’ll probably take a little work to get ’er runnin’ good again.”

“If she’s just been sitting here for the past two years, yeah,” I agreed.

“I’ve *always* wanted another ride in this car,” Meche said, stroking the *Bone Wagon*’s single headlight as Glottis started his tinkering.

“It kind of funny,” I said, “this thing you have for hot rods.”

“Then I guess you don’t know everything about me yet,” she said, shooting me a wicked ‘grin’.

“Hey, Manny,” Glottis exclaimed, “c’mere! I don’t think these wires belong here.”

I looked where he was pointing, then sprawled to look under the car. “There’s a nasty-looking bulge down here.” I sat up and looked around. “Let’s see if that flashlight still works.” Meche looked toward where I pointed, grabbed the flash and tossed it toward me. I snagged it out of the air and found it did still work. I shined it underneath the *Bone Wagon* and got a good look at the lump under the engine. “Fiendish,” I said, almost admiring the filthy thing. “Well,” I added as I stood up, “there’s a mercury switch, too. If we start the engine, boom, and if we shift this beast any, still boom.” Glottis went pale. To him, the *Bone Wagon* was more a lover than a car. “Looks like Domino left his calling card.”

“But...*how*? I saw him torn to shreds!” Meche exclaimed. She glanced over at Glottis, who showed no reaction.

“He must have done this on his last trip through town,” I said. “Now I know what he meant by the *Bone Wagon* looking ‘dangerous’.” I shook my head. “That guy takes the prize.”

“I guess it’s lucky you guys didn’t go for a drive after he did this,” Meche said.

“Not luck,” I said, “more like bad timing on his part.”

“Yeah,” Glottis said. “I usually took the *Bone Wagon* out on Mondays.”

“And the *Lambada* sailed Wednesday,” I added.

“And you left on the *Limbo* on Friday,” Meche finished. “Well,” she said, “maybe he was just hedging his bet. If you didn’t take the bait, he’d take you out of circulation this way.”

“That’s probably it, sweetheart,” I said. “Trouble is...”

“...that doesn’t solve our problem,” Glottis said, finishing my thought.

“No kidding,” I said, exasperated. Not with Glottis or Meche, but with the whole damn situation. “We don’t dare fiddle with those wires while the switch is there. The *Bone Wagon*’s too close to the ground for any of us to crawl under and remove the switch...and we can’t jack up the car or raise it on the shocks with the switch still there.”

“Great,” Meche said. “So now what? Do we take a bus?”

“We can’t leave things like this, Manny!” Glottis protested.

“I agree,” I said. “If we don’t take care of this somehow, we’ll be responsible for whatever happens down the line.”

“So...*how do* we take care of it?” Meche asked after a pause.

“How did Mr. Hurley ever fit this thing in the first place?” Glottis wondered out loud.

“The switch was probably useless until the wires were attached,” I said. “My guess is they don’t just set off the bomb if the engine is started—they also complete the circuit the switch needs to work.” I saw the questioning look Meche was giving me. “Carla,” I said. “She learned about bombs as part of her job.” I shrugged. “She liked to talk shop.” When she wasn’t griping about Meche, that is.

“So maybe Miss Ashburn could help,” Glottis suggested, in his usual formal way. “She’s smaller than Miss Colomar, you know.”

“We didn’t part on good terms, you know,” I said, in my usual sarcastic way.

“Neither will our arms and legs if we don’t take care of this thing,” he retorted.

“I’ll try the Blue Casket first,” I said.

Meche stopped me before I got to the doors. “Why there?” she asked.

“Well, if my old cell is still around, that’s the best place to start looking for them. If they can’t cope with this, they’ll know someone who can. And if I can’t find them,” I shrugged, “well, I always got the feeling there was more to Olivia than she let on.”

“She was probably just putting on an act,” Meche said.

“Yeah, well, so was I. Be back soon. Don’t sneeze,” I said to Glottis.

“Heh.”

I started walking to the Blue Casket. Assuming it was still there. I kept looking around and especially behind me. Not for Toto; but for what I didn’t know. Something seemed a little off. It took a while but I finally figured it out. There weren’t enough people. It wasn’t that late. There should have been quite a crowd but there wasn’t. I could see the lights of the cat track and could hear the roar. Max was still in business, at least. The Day of the Dead was over, so everyone who had visited their families ought to be back by now. The town should have been jumping, but wasn’t. It was damned weird.

My route to the Blue Casket took me past Velasco’s office. The old buzzard was lounging outside his door, smoking his pipe and staring up at the moon. He did a Cagney double-take when I came into view.

“Manuel Calavera!?” he exclaimed. He started to laugh. “Well...what happened to the *Limbo*?”

“Oh, hate to tell you, Velasco, but she went down at the Pearl.” I didn’t feel up to telling him about the name change.

“Sorry to hear that, son. She was a good boat.”

“Things are kinda quiet around here,” I said, walking over to his grubby perch.

Velasco shifted position. “Yeah,” was all he said.

“The Blue Casket still in business?”

“Sure,” Velasco answered. “That Ofrenda dame’s part of the furnishings, you know?”

“So, does Alexi’s little gang still hang out there?” I tried to ask casually.

There was a pause before Velasco answered. “Well, I ain’t heard much about ’em since the strike,” he finally said. “Some folks say they lit out for El Marrow to stir up trouble there. Can’t say for sure, though.”

“Yeah, I heard a little about that strike aboard ship. It got pretty nasty, going by what the papers said.”

“Worst trouble I’d ever seen in my time, son. They clamped down *hard*.” Velasco looked around in a cautious-seeming way. “A mite *too* hard, you could say,” he then said in a softer tone.

I sat down on a barrel near Velasco. Even though the *Bone Wagon* was a crisis, I needed to know the scene and I didn’t much like what I was hearing so far. “I ran into Toto on the way over,” I said. “He didn’t look so good.”

“He never was very pretty,” Velasco said with a laugh, then sighed, “but I know what you mean, son. He’s had a rough time of it since you blew outta town. He found out about Lola and...” he shrugged, “...well, I guess he had some real feelings under that ‘Papa Toto’ act of his. He’s been hiding out from Virago, so his business has slid a little; but he’s really gone downhill the last few days.”

“Yeah? Why’s that?”

“Oh, well, Virago left town for El Marrow. Rumor has it he bought himself a Double-N ticket and cruised on out of this shit-house of a world.”

I started laughing. Velasco looked at me like he thought I'd gone nuts. I didn't care. Maybe I *was* nuts. "That's fucking *perfect*," I said with more laughter, "the best damn news yet! You can tell Toto the next time you see him...I have it on the best authority that money can't change your destiny."

"Yeah? What kind of authority?" Velasco asked, sounding merely curious.

"I've been to the end of the line," I said, "and I've even seen what happens to people who're stupid enough to *buy* Double-N tickets."

"So, why'd you come back here for?" Velasco asked with a short, sharp laugh. "Did'ja leave the gas on, or somethin'?"

"I'm trying to help some people out," I said. "I found them after the *Limbo* went down. They were kind of stranded. Still are, in a way."

"Stranded? As in *shipwrecked*?!" Velasco snapped. "How'd you get 'em out with the *Limbo* sunk?"

"We found a new ship, the SS *La Mancha*, and managed to—"

Velasco suddenly got very animated. "*La Mancha*?" he asked excitedly. "My old rusty bucket!? Where is she?"

"Oh, well, we sold her in Puerto Zapato and—"

"That does it!" Velasco exclaimed, knocking out his pipe and stuffing it in a pocket. "I'm out of this stinkin' mob town!" He strode away before I could react.

"But," I stammered, "I...*mob* town?" I stood up, shook my skull, and continued on my way to the Blue Casket.

The joint didn't look any different from the outside than I remembered. And yet, it did. I couldn't put my finger on it, but each minute I was getting more and more uncomfortable with Rubacava. I didn't much like the feeling.

I hauled the heavy doors open. I'd had enough practice that they no longer gave me trouble. I went into the Blue Casket and was nearly knocked down by the silence. No band, no poets, no customers. Just dark and blue and much too empty.

"Silent as the grave," I said out loud, to myself as I thought.

"Calavera!?" a voice nearby exclaimed. I jumped.

I looked around and saw Olivia sitting at a table, papers and an adding machine spread out in front of her. "What *are* you doing here?" she asked, sounding almost as surprised as I felt. "I heard you went *pow* in Zapato, daddy-o."

"Well," I said, climbing down from the ceiling, "Hector LeMans tried and missed so now it's my turn. I'm headed to El Marrow to put him out of business."

"That place has *changed*, man." Olivia shook her skull sadly. "You don't know what you're getting into."

I sat down at the table opposite her. "*This* town has changed, too. What the hell happened?"

"Well, it started with that strike, Cal. The Man hummered the Sea Bees, your boys bugged out, and the whole town got trimmed."

"*My* boys?" I asked, trying to fake her.

"Hey," she chided, "don't be coy."

I shrugged, giving up the old pretense. "So what happened to the 'boys'?"

"No idea. Skipped town. Taken for a ride, for all I know." She shrugged herself.

"So why's it so quiet around here?"

"Past curfew, daddy."

"*Curfew*?" I shook my skull. "Who's in charge of this place now?"

Olivia threw back hers and laughed. "Take a guess."

"Hector?"

“Well,” she said, “Maximino runs the town, but he’s Hector’s tool all right.”

“Which explains why the track seems to be hopping when nothing else seems to be,” I said, “but what about you? I would have thought *you’d* be exempt from anything the Man laid down.”

“I gave Max the air,” Olivia said with a throaty, dark growl. “He’s not the big boy he used to be. Not that it really matters. Most of the nightlife has gone to El Marrow anyway.”

“El Marrow? Are you kidding me?” I laughed. “*That* stuffy government town?”

“Hey, man,” she snapped, “I told you—things have changed.”

“So why are you still here?” I asked. “Why not follow the crowd to El Marrow?”

“All my best customers are here, man. I’ve got...responsibilities, if that’s the right word. I’ve still got a decent business here, even if I do have to close early.” Olivia shrugged again. “Or maybe I’m just in a rut.”

“So how long *have* you been here, anyway?”

She took a drag on her cigarette. Still used the holder. “A woman never tells her age, Manny.”

“You’re dead,” I pointed out. “That’s as old as anyone ever gets.”

She shrugged. “It’s tradition. Deal with it.” She knocked ash of the tip of her cigarette. “Tell me, why are you looking for Alexi, anyway?”

“Car trouble,” I said.

Olivia laughed. “*Social* engineering was his bag. What’s happened to Glottis?”

“It’s not his kind of problem. There’s a bomb under the engine and the *Bone Wagon’s* too low to the ground for any of us to squeeze under. It’s wired to the starter and it’s got a mercury switch for good measure.”

“Well,” she said after a second or two of silence. “Who thinks enough of you to do that?”

“Ever met a guy called Domino Hurley?”

“Hmm,” she said, thinking. “Yeah, I think so. A big guy. Community-college type with ivy-league airs?”

I laughed. “That’s him.”

“Yeah, he was in here once or twice asking questions,” Olivia said, “years ago. He wasn’t welcome.”

“I always said you had style.”

She ‘smiled’. “I’ve got it all, daddy,” she said, “including a tight little body that can get into *any* position.”

“Well, this is a pretty dangerous ‘position’.”

“You haven’t met some of my boyfriends. Anyway, if the scene is what you say it is, you just need that switch snipped off without any jostling and then Glottis can deal with the rest.”

“That’s about the size of it. Unless there are other surprises I didn’t see. But...I can’t really ask you to risk yourself. I was hoping Alexi or someone he knows could help out. Or maybe Carla—”

“Believe me, you *don’t* want to see *her* again. And don’t worry about me, Manny. I can handle bombs. I’ve had plenty on my stage. But I have a price.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Take me with you.”

“Why would you want to go to El Marrow?” I wondered. “You just said—”

“You’re not the only one with a score to settle in El Marrow, man. And I meant what I said about that place changing. You don’t know the setup there. I do. You need me.”

I supposed I did. She was probably right about Carla, and she was telling me the same thing about Alexi that Velasco had. If he had to skip town, things would be getting hot for me once word got out I was back.

“Yeah, OK,” I said. “You can come along if you want to.”

I took Olivia with me back to the *Bone Wagon*. There were introductions and Olivia said to Meche, “So *you’re* that ghost chick Manny’s been chasing after.”

“I guess I am,” Meche said coolly.

“Olivia thinks she can take care of that switch,” I said to Glottis. “Alexi isn’t around any more.”

“He had some sense, after all,” Olivia said. “I’ll need something to cut out that switch, Glottis. And that flashlight.” Glottis tossed her the flashlight and a pair of wire clippers. Olivia crouched down and shined the light under the car. “Hmm,” she said. “Tight squeeze. Fortunately, I’ve lost some weight.” She lay on her back and started, gingerly, to scoot under. “OK,” she said after a couple of minutes, “I can reach the switch. Looks like a simple piece of work. Anybody who wants to had better scat....Ready? Here we go...” There were two quiet snicks and then the mercury switch came rolling out from under the car.

“Good work,” I said. Glottis blew out his breath and wiped his forehead.

“Glottis,” Olivia said, “you can take care of those wires now.”

“I think you should come out first, Miss Ofrenda,” he said.

“Actually,” she said, sounding embarrassed, “I’m stuck.”

Meche started to laugh.

Glottis removed the wires from the starter and yanked them out. Then he made the *Bone Wagon* rise up on its shocks and Olivia crawled out.

“One of you brave boys can get that nasty thing out of there. I’m *done* being a hero, cats.” She stood and started to brush herself off. “Yuck. Grease everywhere.”

“And all over your best turtleneck, too,” Meche said.

“This old thing? Don’t be silly.” Olivia gave up using her hands. “Well, I’d better change. Don’t leave without me,” she said as she walked to the doors.

“Without...you?” Meche asked, sounding more than a little suspicious.

“If you’re going after Hector LeMans,” Olivia said, “then I’m coming along. Call it...my fee for services rendered.” She laughed and skipped away.

Meche glared at me.

THE ROAD TO EL MARROW

Glottis got the *Bone Wagon* ready to roll, changing the oil and doing the other things he needed to do. Most of them, anyway. He was a little worried about the condition of the tires, for one thing, but there was nothing he could do about them at this time of night and we had to get rolling right away. There was a garage at a road stop half an hour out of Rubacava on the main highway and Glottis planned to do a more thorough job on the car there.

Olivia returned before Glottis had finished. Meche looked annoyed as Olivia walked in again, dropping a small case next to the car, then making a production out of sticking a cigarette into her holder and lighting it. She blew the first puff toward Meche and shot a sly ‘grin’ in my direction.

When Glottis started putting away his tools, Olivia said, “These long trips can be *so* dull. Well, at least we’ll have plenty of time to catch up, won’t we, Manny?” She moved up close and nudged me with her hip.

“You can share a seat with me,” Meche said quickly, picking up Olivia’s case and tossing it into the passenger seat.

“Thanks,” Olivia said, walking over to the *Bone Wagon* again. As she brushed past Meche, I thought I heard her say ‘meow’ very softly.

“Are we about ready to go, *carnal*?” I asked Glottis, trying to change the subject. Whatever it was.

“In a minute. I can’t find my socket wrench.”

“The one in your hand?”

He turned a little purple. “Oh, yeah.” He put it in his toolbox and stowed it in the car. “Well, I guess we’re as ready as we’re gonna be.” He got behind the wheel.

I climbed up to my seat, the absurd ‘throne’ at the rear of the car, and Meche held up our coats.

“Here,” she said. “Keep these with you.” She kept her eye sockets fixed on Olivia until she got into the passenger seat and tucked her case under her feet. Meche followed, wedging herself in beside Olivia.

Glottis made sure we were all settled, then fired up the engine. “All right,” he crowed, “time to suck up some road!”

‘Gonna be a long trip,’ I thought as the *Bone Wagon* peeled out and sped through the streets of Rubacava.

Glottis kept to a moderate speed once we got on the highway. Moderate for him, that is. As we rolled along I could see him occasionally peer around at the wheels. That worried me a little, but I knew Glottis was a perfectionist. If he actually thought that the tires would lose their treads or blow out we wouldn’t have been on the road at all.

When we got to the stop we were aiming for it was just a little after three in the morning. The garage was still closed, of course, so we all trooped into the diner. It was the first real meal Meche and I had for nearly a year, even counting the coffee and donuts we had at the temple. What food we had on the journey from Puerto Zapato was for Glottis since he was the only one who actually needed to eat, and there hadn’t been much of that. He pretty much pigged out in that diner. When he finally finished, he leaned back in the booth with a sigh, a stupid grin on his face, and both hands on his newly-bulging belly.

I sank into a deep funk. This was how the trip *from* El Marrow had started all those years ago—an early morning stop in a greasy spoon, served by a tired and sullen waitress, with grim conversation about our situation. It was like going back in time. I wished I could. I’d tell Lola to stay the hell away from Rubacava. Meche saw the way I stared at the waitress doing busy work around the counter; she sighed quietly and gently patted my hand but I pulled away. Olivia must have made the connection because she kept quiet for a while.

When I finally came out of it, I distracted myself by getting Glottis to go into the details of what he needed done to the *Bone Wagon*. He was only too happy.

Shortly before daylight came, the owner of the garage arrived and greeted Glottis with an enthusiastic “Dude!” I guessed they knew each other, probably from when Glottis had been cruising between El Marrow and Rubacava looking for Meche. Glottis told the grease monkey what we needed and they got to work on the *Bone Wagon*. Olivia wandered off for a while, saying she wanted to take a long walk, while Meche and I spent the time lounging around the garage and the diner. I got to watching the traffic speed up and down the twin ribbons of asphalt.

“Hey, Meche,” I said after a while, “do you see anything funny about those cars going by?”

Meche looked over at the highway for a time, possibly just to be polite. “Not especially,” she finally said, turning a questioning look at me. “Why?”

“Well, where are they going?” I asked. “Most of them, I mean.”

She looked again. She shrugged. “El Marrow, I guess.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Kind of strange.”

“If you say so, Manny.”

I guessed I wasn't being all that clear. "Most people who are in El Marrow are there because they have no other choice," I pointed out. "When I was there, most of the traffic was *away* from the city. Usually only people traveling on DOD business ever went the other way."

Meche nodded. "I see your point," she said. "So what's different now, do you think?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

"But you've got suspicions, huh?" Meche shrugged. "Well, let's go hang out near the pumps. When someone stops, we can ask them."

"Why didn't I think of that?"

"It's too straightforward for you," she said wickedly.

"Ouch," I said. There was too much truth in her joke.

"Hey, what's this?" she asked, pointing to something on my jacket.

"What?" I said, looking down. Her hand flew up and she poked me in the nose hole.

She jumped away as I made a grab for her. She ran, laughing, toward the pumps when I chased after. She jumped between them and suddenly stopped running. She shook her head sadly, kicked the dusty ground, and slowly walked toward the garage. She wasn't playing anymore.

"What's wrong?" I asked, trailing in her sad wake.

"It doesn't seem right, having fun, when all our friends are prisoners in that waiting room."

"We'll get 'em out," I assured her.

"How can you be so sure?" she asked.

"Well, I can't," I admitted. "I'm just determined."

"So's that Salvador Limones you keep talking about. Tell me, how long has *he* been trying to fix things? And what makes you think *you* can just breeze into town and straighten everything out?" She sighed. "Your friend Paddy was in hiding; Alexi, Gunnar, and Slisko seem to have disappeared. Maybe there *is* no LSA any more."

"I don't want to believe that," I said.

"No one ever fed Cæsar to the lions," she said softly.

"Well," I grumbled, "aren't you cheerful today?"

"I'm tired, Manny; tired of running and hiding, fighting and giving up on fighting, and..." She trailed off.

"Yeah?" I snarled, but not really at her. "Well, I'm angry! I'm fed up with the whole damned mess, so Hector had better just watch out!" Meche looked at me for a moment in silence. I sensed some of her despair turn into something grim and hard.

A car slowed and turned off into the road stop. It pulled up to the pumps and the soul driving got out. Meche walked over as he started filling his tank. I followed.

"Where're you headed?" Meche asked.

The soul looked up. "You folks having car trouble?" he asked. "I can give you a lift."

"It's in the shop here," I said. "Should be done soon. We're just curious."

"We're *bored*," Meche contradicted.

The guy chuckled. "This does look like a pretty dull spot at that. Well, I'm going to El Marrow, myself. And you?"

"Isn't that the wrong direction?" I asked. The car he was driving looked like one of the models the DOD used for the car package, which fit with his open helpfulness.

"Well," he said, "it'd take months to get to the Ninth Underworld by car. I've heard it's possible now to buy Double-N tickets, so why spend months when I can make the trip in days?"

"*Buy* a Double-N ticket?" Meche asked, affecting puzzlement. She was learning to be sneaky; my bad influence, I hoped. "That can't be right."

The guy shrugged. "I've heard it from several sources, some I know I can trust. Believe me, I've heard right." He had missed Meche's subtle point.

“So,” I asked, “how does that work? Buying a ticket, I mean.”

The guy put the hose back on pump and screwed the cap back on his tank. “I’m not sure exactly. There’s some official somebody-or-other you have to go through. I’m sure I’ll learn more once I get back to the city. Pardon me.” He stepped past us and went into the garage to pay.

Meche and I walked slowly toward the diner.

“That guy got the car package,” I said.

“That’s one of the premium packages, right?” Meche asked.

“Second only to the train,” I answered.

“No fooling?” she asked and I nodded. “Hector’s *really* getting his message out, huh?”

“You said it, angel,” I grumbled. “That guy had it *made*. I wonder how far he got before he fell for it?”

“If he gets on the train,” Meche asked slowly, “do you think he’ll end up like those others you saw?”

“Probably,” I answered. That was fine for the likes of Nick Virago, I thought, but not for the man we’d just met.

“A few months,” Meche said. “He could be there in a few months.” She shook her head. “Is that so bad?”

“Sounds like a good deal to me,” I said.

“But what can we do?” Meche asked, sounding anxious. “If he gets on that train, he’ll never—”

“What *can* we do? Tie him up?” I retorted. “Sit on him? He’s just one person, and only a potential victim at that. Maybe he doesn’t have enough money. Maybe he won’t make the right connections. Anyway, there’s no point trying to stop one guy, not unless it’s Hector.”

“When the *Bone Wagon*’s fixed,” Meche said thoughtfully, “we can probably get to El Marrow first. Maybe we can deal with Hector before any more people can be victimized.”

“You sure we can do that?” I asked.

“No,” she answered firmly, “but I’m determined.”

It was late afternoon before the *Bone Wagon* was ready. Glottis and his pal had changed the tires and lubed, cleaned, repaired, and replaced whatever needed it. I couldn’t see much of a difference but Glottis said the car was perfect again. Olivia had turned up before this time, so when Glottis rolled the *Bone Wagon* out of the garage we were ready to pile in and hit the road again.

“OK, *mano*,” I said as I got into my seat, “open ’er up wide. Let’s not waste any time.”

“Check,” he said. “Everyone strapped in?” We were. “*Yeaaaaa-haawwww!*” he hollered as we tore out of the road stop and back onto the highway.

We made good time, but not the best. There was too much traffic for Glottis to really give the *Bone Wagon* its head.

“This is weird, Manny,” he said when we stopped for gas once. “It wasn’t like this the last time I was out this way.”

“Last time,” I said, “Hector wasn’t openly selling Double-N tickets.”

Olivia had gone into the station to buy cigarettes and some beef jerky. She’d come back out in time to hear what I said to Glottis. “There not all going to El Marrow to buy tickets,” she said, tossing me and Meche a couple of strips of jerky and then lighting up.

“How do you know?” I asked, passing my piece of jerky to Glottis and holding out a hand for a coffin nail.

“El Marrow’s the *in* place to be, man,” she said, handing me the fag she’d already lighted and getting herself another out of the pack.

“That’s hard to believe,” after taking a puff.

“I keep telling you, Manny,” she said in a sharp tone, “that burg has *changed*.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “It’s not that I don’t believe you, chick, but I was there a long time. ‘The in place’ isn’t how I think of it.”

“I hear you, daddy,” Olivia said with a laugh. “It’s not where the action is for cats like you and me.” She took a long drag, smoke swirling up and down the empty space in front of her neck vertebrae before she exhaled through her jaws.

“But it sounds like you’ve been there enough to know what it’s like,” Meche said after having given her jerky a few nibbles. Glottis had already swallowed what I’d given him in one gulp.

“Well,” Olivia said, “I’ve got a few friends there and sometimes Rubacava’s new stuffiness gets to me. Sometimes I need to get away and see what I’m not missing.”

“So what is it you’re not missing?” I asked.

“You’ll see,” she said, sounding sly. She pocketed several jerky strips and gave the rest to Glottis.

We hit the road again, keeping on the move as long as possible, stopping only for gas or when Glottis was too tired to go on. He was still a little weak from his brush with death so he needed to rest more often than I would have liked. When we finally came to the Petrified Forest, Meche kept her head down as the highway carried us through. Night fell as we came to the edge of the forest and Glottis pulled off the highway onto a road that ran along the edge and then into the city. We wanted to be as inconspicuous as possible. When El Marrow was clearly visible, Glottis brought the car to a stop. We sat looking at the city as it glowed garishly ahead and I understood then why Olivia had been so mysterious about how El Marrow had changed. No words could have done justice to it. The city was a sea of neon that dwarfed the Las Vegas strip.

“Looks like Hector’s taken over the whole town,” I said, amazed and appalled.

“He hasn’t had much resistance,” Olivia said. “There’s only one small group who oppose him, and they hide out on the fringes of the city.”

“In places like this, you mean?”

“Yeah...” she began, then stopped when she saw what I saw.

A ring of armed men surrounded the car. They were all were masked. We put our hands up. One of the men stepped forward. I took him to be the leader.

“I’m Calavera,” I said.

“Prove it,” the man ordered.

“OK,” I said. “How?”

The man thought for a couple of seconds and then stepped closer, tugging down the bandanna that covered the lower half of his face. “Who am I?” he asked.

It was pretty dark, but... “Gunnar!” I exclaimed. “Were you toying with me, man?”

“Well,” he said, “I had to be sure. I recognized the *Bone Wagon*, of course. Hello, Glottis.”

Glottis shook his head. “Scared me to death,” I heard him say under his breath.

I jumped down to the ground. “So *this* is where you got to.”

“Rubacava got a little too hot, but I expect you know all about that by know. What about you, bro? What happened after Zapato?”

“Long story,” I answered, “but I need to see Salvador first.”

“No doubt,” Gunnar said. He waved one of his men over. “I’m going to take Calavera back to base,” he told him. “You cats carry on.” The man nodded and he led the others away.

“OK,” he said, “we’re going to have to go into the sewers. There’s a main line that opens up not far from here. We can take the *Bone Wagon* in most of the way, then we continue on foot.”

Gunnar explained to Glottis in detail where to go and then he joined me in the main seat. Glottis cautiously drove off in the direction Gunnar had indicated. Meche looked anxious and Olivia seemed amused. We came to a broad, shallow gully leading up into a large concrete tunnel emerging

from the side of a hill. Glottis followed Gunnar's directions until, about half an hour later, we entered a large chamber with several smaller tunnels branching off. Glottis stopped the car and Gunnar jumped down to meet the two souls approaching us. After speaking to them, one ran off down a tunnel while the other moved to a position in the tunnel behind the *Bone Wagon*.

"It's only a short way now," Gunnar said, "but Glottis will have to stay here—the passages get too small for him past this point."

THE LOST SOUL'S ALLIANCE

As Gunnar led us to LSA headquarters, Meche said anxiously, "I hope they won't hurt Glottis."

"*Ha!*" Olivia scoffed. "Shows what *you* know about this group. Their leader is a great man who —"

We came then into another chamber, full of tables, electronic gear, and a pigeon coop. Standing around the large table in the middle of the room was the soul who ran on ahead of us, several other LSA agents, plus Eva and Salvador.

"Manuel Calavera," Salvador said in greeting, walking toward me with hand outstretched. I clasped it and he said, "I see you have found what you were looking for. How fortunate for you to arrive now just as we, too, are about to achieve success. Our army has grown, and right now our top agents are in Hector's weapons lab, about to close in on the enemy in his own den. I couldn't have done it without you, Manuel." The handshake apparently inadequate, Salvador's reserve melted and he pulled me into a back-thumping embrace.

Before anything more could be said, a ragged voice from behind us shouted, "*Trap!!*" We all spun around toward the entrance to see an agent lurching through, tendrils of glistening green pushing through his pants' legs, spreading upwards. "It was a trap!" he repeated, collapsing on the floor.

"Stand back!" Salvador commanded, snatching a fire ax from its place on the wall. "There's only one thing to do!"

He swung the ax down on the fallen agent. Meche gasped and turned away. The blade splintered the soul's spine and ribcage, separating the left-hand side from the rest of him. Salvador seemed pleased. Meche looked sick. Olivia, curious. The separated, still-unsprouted part of the soul pushed itself up by his left arm—the only remaining limb—and said, sounding perfectly normal, "Thank you, *sir!*"

"What did you say about a trap?" Salvador demanded.

"Hector uncovered our agent in his weapons lab," the soul answered.

"*No!*" Salvador exclaimed, dropping the ax. He rushed over to a bank of electronic equipment along one wall and turned on a monitor.

It flickered to life, the grainy image showing a dingy little room where a small man dressed like a hippie gardener cowered before an enormously fat man wearing a fez.

"—iot, Bowsley!" the fat man was saying. "You're new lab assistant is a *spy!*" He thrust an accusing finger toward the camera. "Haven't you ever heard of a background check?" he asked, sounding incredulous. Then he pulled out a gun and fired toward the camera. It rocked and fell sideways. Leaves and stems quickly grew to partly obscure the image as the fat man walked off screen.

"*What!?*" I exclaimed.

"No time to explain," Salvador said grimly. "Now I'll have to take matters into my own hands." He turned and found himself toe-to-toe with Olivia.

"Take me with you," she purred throatily. "I've *longed* to be of service to your cause for *years.*"

"Can you vouch for this woman, Manuel?" Salvador asked, staring down at the small package in black in front of him.

I considered my answer carefully. “Well, I’ve known her a while. Not very well, but I used her club as the contact point for my cell. I think she knew about it all along.” Olivia nodded slightly. “I always thought she had potential, but there was her connection with Maximino...”

“Who is a known associate of Hector LeMans,” Salvador finished coldly. He moved away from Olivia, who grabbed his uniform lapels with both her elfin fists. Sal could have pulled away easily, but didn’t.

“I gave Max the fuller when I found *that* out,” Olivia said earnestly. “I could’ve betrayed Manny at any time, but I didn’t.”

Salvador looked down at her intently and then nodded, appearing satisfied. “We have lost many agents recently. Any help would be appreciated. Very well.” He took Olivia’s hands and gently disengaged them from his jacket. He began walking swiftly toward the door. To Eva he said, “I must try to salvage this operation. Contact what agents you can and have them rendezvous in gallery four. The rest of you will follow me.” He left, Olivia and the other agents following, including the one nearly sprouted who hopped out on his remaining limb. Eva, Meche, and I stayed behind.

“So,” I said to Eva when they all had gone, “any messages for me?”

“No,” she answered, “calls stopped coming for you the day you left.” She cast a sideways glance at Meche. “They’re *still* sending you that lingerie catalog, though.”

I shook my head and Meche laughed.

“So how’re you doing, honey?” Eva asked her.

Meche shrugged slightly. “I’m OK, I guess. A little overwhelmed. What is this ‘operation’ Salvador was talking about?”

“Sorry, sweetie,” Eva said, “but I can’t talk about that. It’s not that we don’t trust you, but you’re someone Hector would *love* to get his hands on. The less you know, the better for all of us. Same goes for you, Cal.”

I nodded, understanding. “I wish Salvador hadn’t run off so fast,” I said, changing the subject. “I’ve got some information that I haven’t been able to pass on to you guys yet.”

“Oh, don’t worry...we’ll debrief you guys *plenty* later on!” Eva considered a moment, then said, “I suppose one thing I *can* tell you is that we’ve given up on trying to bring Hector to justice. He’s grown far too powerful. We heard how you freed all the souls he cheated, so we only need to eliminate him.”

“It’s not that simple,” I said.

“We’ve *still* got to help all the people from the island,” Meche added.

“What?” Eva asked, surprised. “What do you mean?” She looked back and forth between Meche and me.

“We got them all to the end of the line,” I explained, “but the Gatekeeper won’t let them cross over, not without their tickets.”

“Oh, that’s great, Cal,” Eva said sarcastically. “Hector’s already sold their tickets. We can’t hope to *ever* get them back.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry, but all we can do is make sure that Hector can’t cheat anyone else of their destiny.”

“We don’t think Hector *did* sell the tickets,” I countered.

“Sweetie,” Eva said patiently, “everyone knows that Hector LeMans will sell a Double-N ticket to whoever can pay.”

“Did you ever see any of those tickets?” Meche asked.

“Well, no,” Eva admitted, “but what does that matter?”

“If you had seen one, you’d know,” I said. “We found cases of them on that factory island, all counterfeit.”

For once, Eva didn't have a ready comeback. "Well," she said thoughtfully after a few seconds, "we wondered how Hector could keep up with the demand. We suspected counterfeiting might be involved, but we couldn't be sure."

"Couldn't you have tried buying a ticket yourselves?" Meche asked.

"Well, of course we did, sweetie," Eva answered shortly. "More than once. The main idea was to get close to Hector and sprout him, but the agents tasked for that never succeeded, nor even came back."

"Maybe they took the tickets and—" I began.

"One of them was your friend Alexi," Eva snapped.

"Oh." And I'd recruited the man. Another sprouted soul on my conscience.

"And the rest were just as committed. Somehow, Hector must have found them out." Eva shook her head and growled softly. "I admit, what you say complicates things a little, but...I'm sorry, Cal. We have to go ahead with this as planned, if we can. Now, you'll have to give me space so I can round up the agents Salvador needs."

I gave Eva her space as she worked the radio. She seemed to need it, apparently having a lot of trouble raising agents. While Eva was barking call signs into a microphone, Meche gestured for me to come over to her.

"Look at this," she said, showing a piece of paper to me. It was a memo from Salvador. 'In light of the recent disappearances,' it read, 'all agents are ordered to avoid traveling alone until further notice.' "If they're all that cautious, why would Salvador take on Olivia so quickly?" Meche asked.

"I get the feeling you don't like her much," I said.

"I'm not so sure she's reliable."

"Well, she took care of that mercury switch," I said, "but you're right: Sal's pretty careful. He usually screens potential recruits." I looked over at Eva, still working the radio. "Eva's not having much luck. I guess they've lost a lot of agents recently."

"*Hector!*" Meche said the name like a curse, savagely crumpling the memo into a tight ball. "What's wrong with people? How can they put up with what he's doing? How can he get away with robbing good people, and sprouting others left and right?"

"You saw the city," I pointed out. "Hector's throwing a good time."

"So what you're saying," Meche said acidly, "is that people are being distracted by a shiny object." She shook her head. "Well, I don't buy it, Manny. What makes Eva different from that man who turned his car around? Supposedly *she's* the worst of the two. Or what's separates you from Domino? You were both bad enough to be made reapers."

"I don't know," I admitted.

"Me neither," she said with a sigh. "Maybe you're right. Maybe glamour and glitz are all it takes to make people look the other way."

"Maybe," I said with a shrug. It wasn't worth arguing about, especially since I was afraid I couldn't be proven wrong.

THE ENLIGHTENED FLORIST

After a while I found myself looking over the LSA's surveillance equipment. Apparently they had bugs all over the city. And there was that fallen agent with some kind of camera. The picture was still on the monitor. The image was the right way up now and apparently on a table or a workbench of some kind. It was hard to tell, since there were leaves obscuring parts of the image, but right in front of the camera was that same little man who had cowered before Hector. He was fiddling with the foliage

that grew from the now-dismembered soul. He seemed to be...pruning? I'd seen too many sproutings to be sickened by them any more but *this* guy was way beyond sick.

"So who's the plant nut?" I asked myself, but out loud.

"That 'nut'," Eva said, putting down the radio's mic and coming over to me, "is Hector LeMans' personal munitions expert, Bowsley—AKA, the Florist. That was his job in the old world, but here he's a botanical weapons expert. This has left him fairly...conflicted."

Meche had come over and looked at the screen, too. "I'd call that 'disturbed'," she said.

"He looks like a hippie," I said. "I wouldn't expect a guy like that to be involved in weapons at all. But since he is, why is he making sproutella for Hector and not for our side?"

"We would *love* to recruit him," Eva said. "He's developed a special kind of sproutella just for Hector. It's almost instantaneous. But his lab is in Hector's tower. He's untouchable."

"Maybe I could get him out," I said.

"Darling," Eva said, "how do you expect to do that? No offense—you've accomplished some amazing things—but you have no real field experience. Anyway," she said with a sniff, "it's been tried."

"Maybe I'm no James Bond," I said, "but I do have this." I pulled the note the Gatekeeper gave me out of my pocket. "Bowsley looks to me like a nervous guy. If we can get this to him, he might bolt. Maybe he'll even take his special formula with him."

Eva took the note and read it. "This is Hector's handwriting!" she exclaimed. "Where'd you ever get this?"

"It was waiting for me at the end of the line." Eva shook her head in amazement. "No doubt about it," I said, "Hector's on the ball."

"You're telling me," Eva said. "There's no salutation on this thing, so maybe Bowsley will think it was meant for him. We hear that he's been getting progressively more unstable. He might just take off if he sees this. Question is, how do we get it to him?"

"Carrier pigeon?" Meche suggested.

Eva shook her head. "These birds are trained to deliver messages only to our agents."

"Well," I said, "you've got an agent lying right in front of Bowsley, you know."

Eva looked at me, impressed. "Now *that's* thinking, sweetheart. This note's kind of large, but it's worth a try."

Eva picked a bird and managed to get Hector's threat into the tube. Then she took the pigeon and carried it out. A few minutes later she came back.

"Well," she said, "Lola's airborne." I winced and Meche jumped slightly. "We'll just have to wait and see."

"What about Salvador?" I asked after a while. "Did you get enough agents for him?"

"It seemed like you couldn't get in touch with a lot," Meche said. "Is Hector's gang hurting you that much?"

"Don't worry about it, honey," Eva said. "We can take care of ourselves. We've lost plenty of agents, sure, but so has Hector. We're still plenty strong. I got a hold of enough, and they'll contact others. The ones I couldn't raise," she shrugged, "they're probably in public places and have their radios off. When they feel it's safe to turn them back on, they'll check in."

We waited many long minutes, staring at the monitor with the sprouted agent. There was a window visible behind Bowsley. He had finished pruning and was arranging some of the agent's long bones in a flower box.

"That guy's just plain sick," I said. Eva only went 'hmpf'.

Eventually there was movement in the window and we saw Lola the pigeon settle down. It looked straight at the camera and hopped forward.

After a few seconds Meche asked, "Isn't it going to *do* anything?"

"They're trained to wait," Eva said.

"If Bowsley doesn't turn around..." I began to ask.

"Then the pigeon will come back," Eva said.

"I guess this isn't gonna work," Meche said.

"Give it time," Eva said.

There was a sudden flurry of movement in the window. The pigeon seemed to disappear, as if magically replaced by a raven. One more Lola down. Bowsley turned toward the movement.

"Oh, sure," Meche grouched, "*now* he turns around."

"Well, it was worth a shot," Eva said with a sigh and turned away.

"One of Hector's messengers," we heard Bowsley say. There seemed to be a quaver in the florist's voice, or maybe it was just the lousy sound. I was about to say something about rotten timing when the raven hacked. Something seemed to fly out of its mouth. Bowsley stepped forward and bent down. "A m-message for m-*me*?" he said, straightening up. Eva's head snapped back around toward the monitor. He unfolded the note.

"Jesus!" Eva breathed, sounding impressed. Meche scowled.

Bowsley got very agitated as he read the note. "I knew it!" he exclaimed, crumpling the note and throwing it away. "I *knew* he was out to get me the whole time!" Bowsley went off camera. "He's going to have to find himself another florist!" There were some rattling and banging noises, and then silence.

"Lucky break," I said.

"Hey, don't knock it," Eva said. "Unless Hector has a large stash of Bowsley's special sproutella—and Bowsley didn't leave the formula behind—maybe we just did some good work. If we can't take care of Hector tonight, this might even things up a little for the next attempt."

"Eva," I said after a moment, "I know you don't want to talk details, but if Salvador wants as many agents as possible to rendezvous with him, he must be planning something like a raid or even a battle. Right?"

"I'm not going to argue with you, sweetheart," she said. I chose to take that as an affirmative.

"Hector must have a lot of protection," I said.

"He wouldn't still be here if he didn't."

"Does he ever see anybody? I mean, when someone wants to buy a Double-N ticket, do they deal with Hector or with one of his gang?"

"As far as we've been able to find out," Eva answered, "anyone who wants to buy a Double-N ticket, buys it from Hector himself." She folded her arms and gave me the 'paperclips-are-not-toys' glare. "Where are you going with this, Cal?"

"Well, it just seems to me that an attack by a bunch of LSA toughs is exactly the kind of thing Hector would be ready for, but anyone in the market for a ticket can get to him without all that shooting, right?"

"We've sent agents to try to buy tickets before, darling. You already know what happened."

"Yeah, but those were *agents*. I'm not exactly your average LSA man, am I? And besides, I'm still on top of that mountain so far as Hector knows, unless he figured his note would make me bolt into the next world the second I read it. Either way, I don't think the man's staying up nights worrying about me."

Eva shrugged. "Maybe you've got a point, Cal, but I don't see what you're aiming at."

"I *gotta* find out what happened to those tickets and try to get them back. If I can get to Hector, maybe I can do something about it."

"Maybe you can...but you'd be taking an awfully big risk, sweetheart. Even supposing you manage to get in to see him, you might not get back out."

It was my turn to shrug. “Yeah, but I’m probably not getting out of this world anyway. If I can do a little good while I meet my destiny, I can take it.” Eva projected an unhappy frown but said nothing. “So here’s the plan,” I said. I looked down at myself. Not a pretty sight even in the best of times. “First, I’m gonna need new clothes, something that doesn’t reek of sled dog. A really sharp suit would be good. I need to look loaded if Hector’s going to take me seriously.” Eva nodded. “Trouble is, I’m tapped out. Glottis and I emptied our accounts in Zapato to help finance the trip to the end of the line. Olivia footed the bills since we left Rubacava but she didn’t give me her bank card. Can the LSA help out?”

“Are you kidding me?” Eva asked, incredulous. My spirits started to sink but then she said, “If the price of a new suit will help bring down Hector, you’ve got it. But what about Mercedes?”

“Well...” I began.

“You’d *better* include me,” Meche said. “You’d be more convincing as a couple, you know.”

“That’s good,” Eva said, “*really* good! A lot of Hector’s customers are old marrieds.” She shook her head. “Why the *hell* didn’t we think of that before?”

“Search me,” I said. “So, once we get dressed up, I try to get in to see Hector. I’ll need a gun so we’ll have something to talk about when I get there.”

“I can fix you up, no problem,” Eva said. “Have you ever fired a sproutella gun?”

“No, but I’ve handled guns.” One of the perks of having been drafted in peacetime was playing with things that go bang without the wartime drag of somebody else banging back.

“Well, these things have a different kind of kick. And the aim is a little tricky. You should practice. But first you need to get your new clothes before the shops close.”

“Yeah, good idea,” I said.

“I’ll get you guys some money,” Eva said and left the room.

“I haven’t been shopping in *ages*,” Meche said.

“Just remember we’re in a hurry here,” I said. “We go in, get new outfits, and right back out again.”

Meche shook her head and muttered, “Men!”

NUEVO MARROW

We went topside and got our new clothes. We weren’t as quick about it as I had wanted to be, but...well, I’m a man and Meche’s a woman and I’ll leave it at that. When we got back to LSA headquarters, Eva was waiting for me with a gun and good news.

“Take a look at this,” she said, holding out a green canister, “but be careful.”

“What is it?” I asked as I took it.

“Glottis had it sent to me,” Eva said. “It seems a little man in overalls ran past him a while ago and dropped this.”

“Bowlsley!” I exclaimed.

“Looks that way. We did a test. This is the fast-acting sproutella.” I quickly handed the canister back, deciding I’d be happier not knowing how they tested it. “We might be able to duplicate it. If we can, it might shift the balance of power *our* way. Anyone hit with this stuff doesn’t have time to shoot back.” I shivered. Eva noticed and said, “I know, Cal, but they shoot us so we have to shoot back.”

“Last one standing wins.” I sighed. “I understand. It’s just a little chilling to hear *you* talk like that.”

“It’s been a long time since I was a meek little secretary.”

“I never thought of you as ‘meek’.”

“If you say so, Cal. Come on, let’s get you on the firing range.”

“While you’re doing that,” Meche said, “maybe I should try to find out where Hector is.”

“His casino tower is directly above these headquarters,” Eva said. “That’s the best place to start.”

“All right,” Meche said. “Meet me there, Manny.”

“Volunteers quickly for dangerous work,” Eva said approvingly after Meche had gone. “She could be very useful to the cause.”

“As far as I’m concerned, she *is* the cause.”

Eva gave me an appraising look. “C’mon, Cal. Let’s see what you can do with that gun.”

It turned out Eva had been right. The sproutella gun did recoil different from a normal gun. Although similar to a gas-powered BB gun, it had a lot more kick, and aiming was a lot harder than I had expected.

“These darts don’t have the range of a lead bullet, sweetheart,” Eva said when I couldn’t hit the target anywhere near the bull’s-eye with the water-filled ‘blanks’ used on the firing range. “They’re bigger and heavier so they drop pretty quickly. You have to aim *high*. The further away you are, the higher you have to aim.”

“I’m planning to be very close to Hector when I shoot him, you know.”

“You still have to know how to handle that thing and you’re not going anywhere until I’m convinced you do.”

That took a while, but eventually I was able to hit what I was aiming at. The breakthrough came when I figured out I needed to feel like I was overcompensating for distance. When Eva was satisfied, I put on a shoulder holster under my coat and got ready to go.

“Good luck, Manny,” Eva said.

“Thanks,” I said. I buttoned my coat and checked that my tie was straight and went to the door. But I hesitated and turned back to Eva.

“Look,” I began, “I might not come back from this, so...I think I should apologize now.”

She cocked her skull. “What for, Cal?”

“Well, I’m not sure exactly. It’s just that,” I took a deep breath and let it out, “I know I was kind of an asshole all those years ago, so I think I should try to make things right before—”

“Manny,” she said earnestly, “I’m not sure what the problem here is.”

“I’ve been getting wise to myself the last couple of years,” I said, “and I don’t like what I see. People have gotten hurt because I just wasn’t paying attention to anything besides me. I’ve been worried maybe you were one of them. Somehow. I don’t know. I hope not. But I can’t walk out this door without—”

“Don’t worry about it, darling,” she said. “If you *had* done anything, you’d have known, believe me. You were always aces with me. If things had been different...” She trailed off wistfully.

I didn’t care about what might have been, so I said, “Well, that’s good to know. I couldn’t take it if I’d done anything to hurt you. Not on top of everything else. You know.”

“Sure, Cal. I know. Well, you’d better take off. Mercedes is probably getting worried.”

“Right,” I said, turning to go out the door. “Hold my calls.”

“Asshole!” she called out after me with a laugh.

I came out of the sewers in an alley near the intersection of 42nd and Corley. It wasn’t hard to spot Hector’s casino. It was labeled plain enough in bright neon equaling Times Square multiplied by Las Vegas cubed. I felt a little exposed on the street, but I dismissed that. I was in the big city. I hadn’t been here in years. No one should recognize me. No one even *looked* at me as I emerged from the alley and walked to the casino. I went in and was ignored by the sullen-looking hat-check girl, too. That suited me, but I recognized then what a good asset I’d had in Lupe and I hoped the overeager kid was somewhere safe and jacked on sugar. If I could go back to my club as it had been, I might even have

begged her to give me every last detail of her latest coat-check scheme just to have gotten another taste of those good old days. But of course that wasn't possible. Emphasizing that fact, Hector's casino was even more garish inside than on the outside. I guess he didn't have anyone like Lola to help coordinate the colors. I shoved aside the reflexive guilt I felt and focused on trying to find Meche. I followed the loudest noises and found myself in a huge room filled with slot machines. Figures. Might as well have been a big neon sign out front saying *We Got No Class*. I scanned the room, trying to spot the green-checked outfit Meche had on. I expected it to stand out against all the red and gold in the room, and it did. I saw her toting a bucket of coins.

"Meche," I said as quietly as I could as I came up beside her.

"Manny," whispered back, "what kept you?"

"I needed more practice than I thought. What've you found out?"

Meche stopped walking and looked quickly around. "Hector's here," she answered. "He has an office in the penthouse suite. There's an express elevator in the rear of the casino but it's guarded by a big red demon. You can get through only with a password."

I was impressed. "Hey, you've really been putting your time to good use."

"My new boyfriend likes to talk," she said.

"You're new... what?" I stammered.

"Jealous?" she asked, 'grinning' wickedly.

"Uh..."

She let me off the hook. "It's that little guy way over there." She pointed. "He knows the password. He's even got it written down. So he says, anyway."

"OK, so what *is* the password?" I asked when she didn't spill it.

Meche shook her head. "I don't know. He won't tell me and I don't dare press him any more than I have. But I've got an idea. While I was getting more change for Mr. High Roller I heard some people talking about a toga party at the Hotel Romano next door. Maybe I can get him there. You can follow and go through his suit after he changes."

"You're trickier than I thought," I said.

"Well, I've been watching *you* operate."

I winced. "Wicked left," I said.

Meche shrugged. "I'd better get back before he runs out of coins. Again." She shook her head. I followed, but when we got nearer to her 'boyfriend' I went "*Whoa!*" and quickly turned around.

"What is it?" Meche asked.

"That's Chowchilla Charlie," I answered. "If he recognizes me we're sunk."

"*Chowchilla* Charlie?" Meche asked, startled. "So *he's* the guy— Do you think he's in with Hector?"

"He must be... if he really knows that password," I said. "I *knew* that suitcase full of counterfeit tickets wasn't his." But I was still confused by the kabuki he and Max had played with it.

"You'll just have to try to keep out of sight while I get him to the Romano."

"I know this guy, Meche," I said. "He can play the slots for days."

"Well, I still have to try," she countered.

She went to Charlie, putting the bucket of change beside the one he already had. Charlie dug into the new bucket, feeding coins into the machine with one hand and pawing Meche with the other. I turned away.

After a few minutes, it was clear that Meche wasn't going to get Charlie out of the casino any time soon. She pouted and pleaded and used just about every female tool of persuasion there is to get him away from the bandit, but none of it worked. Charlie wasn't going to budge until he hit the

jackpot, which seemed increasingly unlikely as time passed. So much for Charlie's 'infallible system'. In fact, no one around me seemed to be having any luck with the machines.

Except for one guy, that is. Whenever someone gave up on a bandit, he'd go up to it and clean it out. Consistently. And he was pretty remarkable for another reason: he rode a unicycle and wore a trench coat and big hat. The unicycle wasn't all that strange. He might have lost his legs in some kind of accident, maybe even a run-in with a wild demon. But when he went up to a machine, he seemed to snuggle against it, then go rigid. And I could almost swear I could see something like an animal going into the slot the money came out of shortly before the machine paid off. But the light was very dim in the casino, just like it had been in mine. Easier to rip people off that way.

When he turned toward me briefly once I got a quick glimpse of his face. Suddenly it started to become clear. I went over to him and quietly asked, "What's going on under that raincoat?"

He didn't flinch or jump. "I don't know," he said. "What's going on under that pinstripe?"

"Didn't Salvador chop you in half earlier this evening?"

The agent didn't look at me. He just pretended to play the bandit with his one arm and said, "Yes, which has given me this glorious opportunity to continue to serve the cause by gathering funds for the LSA while stealing from our arch-enemy at the same time."

I figured out what the 'animal' must be. He had to be wriggling out of his coat and up the slot and tripping the coin box. "I guess it's my fault that when Salvador thinks fund-raising, he thinks casino," I said. "Can you crack any machine?"

"None of these unholy temples is safe from the LSA," he exclaimed softly.

"How about that one over there?" I indicated the one Charlie was feeding.

"The one with the sucker planted in front? Tell me when he gives up and I'll make it cough cold change."

"I can't wait that long," I said. "Are you willing to take instructions from me?"

"Depends."

"If I can distract that guy, I want you to do your thing but leave the change. My mission requires me to get him to the Hotel Romano...and he won't leave unless he wins."

"Can do," the agent said.

"OK, give me a second."

I tried to discreetly get Meche's attention. It took a little while but fortunately she spotted me waving before I had to resort to fake sneezes. When she was looking at me I curled up one hand to mime Charlie's bucket of coins, placing it on top of the slot machine nearest me. Then I shoved it off with my other hand. I pointed at the bucket and made a pushing motion, just to be sure she got the point. She nodded. When Charlie pulled the lever next and was focused on watching the dials spin around, she shoved the bucket off the machine.

Charlie jumped when the bucket crashed to the floor and swore when he saw his coins scattering everywhere. "I'm sorry," I heard Meche say. "I guess I got a little excited."

Charlie grumbled something and he and Meche got down on their hands and knees to pick up his coins. The agent quietly rolled over and worked his magic. Charlie's bandit started spilling coins and the agent quickly moved over to the nearest free machine.

Charlie looked up from the floor to see the coin slot overflowing. "I did it!" he crowed. "My system worked! I knew it! I told you!" He started stuffing his pockets.

"That's *great*," Meche said, sounding more relieved than glad. "Now let's go so you can buy me a drink at the Romano."

Charlie finished picking up his 'winnings' and took Meche's arm. "Come, my lovely," he said. "I have another infallible system I'd like to demonstrate." He went 'grrr' and they started walking toward the exit.

SMOOTH HECTOR

I followed at a discreet distance. Inside the Romano they went to the convention room where the toga party was being held. They got sheets from the organizers and went into separate restrooms to change. Meche was quick and came out first. From the Bride of Frankenstein way she had the sheet wrapped, I guessed she still had her clothes on underneath.

“Stick with Charlie for at least fifteen minutes,” I said to her, “then try to ditch him without his noticing. I’ll meet you at the train station with the tickets.”

“Right,” she said. “Do you have any idea how long you’ll be?”

I shook my head. “For all I know, there’s a waiting room full of suckers to see Hector. I’ll try to make it quick, but you’ll have to be patient and try not to worry if I don’t show up right away.”

“OK, Manny,” she said, “but when you do...?”

“Well, there won’t be a ticket for me, so you’ll have to go back by yourself.”

Meche nodded, a little sadly it seemed, but she said, “I’ll tell that Gatekeeper *everything*. He has to help us! But what will you do?”

I shrugged. “Stick around here, I guess. Give the LSA a hand. Even if I do take care of Hector, there’s still his gang.”

The men’s room door opened and Meche and I quickly separated. She and Charlie went to the party. I went into the men’s room and found Charlie’s suit and fished out the slip of paper he had written the password on.

I went back to Hector’s casino and made my way to the rear and found the express elevator. I stopped and muttered, “Oh, great.” The demon in charge of the elevator was Brennis, the tube switcher maintenance demon from my reaper days. It was getting to be like old home week. Well, maybe he wouldn’t recognize me.

I marched up to him and said, “I have business with Hector. I’ve just spoken to him on the phone and he’s expecting me.”

“You know Hector LeMans, eh?” Brennis asked. Apparently he didn’t recognize me. Or he didn’t care. “Hokie-dokie! Then answer me this one simple question...who wrote *Little Women*?”

“Lonely little men,” I answered.

“Best two out of three?”

“Don’t mess with me. I know Hector LeMans.”

Satisfied, Brennis open the elevator door and let me in. I shook my head as I rode up. What smart guy thought up *that* password?

The elevator stopped in a very elegant lobby...spoiled by a large HL monogram on the floor. Straight across from the elevator was a huge pair of engraved bronze doors. The portal to Hector’s lair and the Double-Ns. I walked over and rapped on the door, reaching into my coat, getting ready to draw.

One door swung inward, revealing the obese obscenity that was Hector. He was cackling gleefully. “I knew you could change her m—” he began. “*What!?*” he exclaimed. “Who are *you!*?”

“I’m the grim—”

“*Bah!!*” he said and slammed the door in my face.

“Oh, I wouldn’t try talking to him right now,” a voice said from a corner of the lobby. I really, *really* should have checked for potential witnesses first. I turned to face the mousy couple I hadn’t noticed before now. “He’s mad at us because we won’t buy his tickets.”

The man looked familiar. “Celso Flores!?” I asked, amazed. The woman beside him must have been his wife. I guess he caught up with her after all. “What are *you* doing in Hector LeMans’ waiting room?”

“Oh,” Celso said, “he sent us out here to make up our minds about his offer. Who are you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

I couldn’t believe he didn’t recognize me.

“I’m your travel agent,” I said.

“Oh, I have a travel agent already,” Celso said, “but he’s miles away mopping floors in an automat, so I suppose the position is open.”

“I work for Hector,” I said. “He sent me here to answer your questions.”

“I’ll handle this, my sweet one,” Celso said when his wife opened her jaw to speak. “What can you tell me about these Double-N tickets? This price seems much more than ‘double’.”

I wanted to tell them to run away as fast as they could but I doubted that would have done any good. I could sense that Celso wanted to be persuaded to buy the tickets, so I said, “The real question is, don’t you feel that you’re worth it?”

“I know *we’re* worth it,” Celso said, “but are the *tickets* worth it?”

That was a good comeback.

“What exactly are you saving your money for, anyway? A rainy day?” I asked. “Cause let me tell you...you’re *dead*. Every day is rainy from now on.”

That usually worked with penny-pinchers who balked at getting the best package they qualified for. Not with Celso, though. “Yes,” he said, “but that’s no reason not to be careful with your money.”

“Then tell me,” I asked, “what *are* you here to see Hector for, anyway?” I answered for Celso before he could speak. “It’s because you’ve heard he can make your journey across the Land of the Dead easier, am I right? Now, I’ve been to the edge of the world and back and I can tell you there’s plenty of things and creatures worth avoiding.”

“Actually,” Celso said, “I just got back from quite an adventure myself, so—”

“Well, I’m sure you’ve seen flying spiders and flaming beavers but, trust me, it gets worse.” I went on to describe some of the things I’d seen, focusing on the demons we encountered on the journey from Puerto Zapato but built them up to epic proportions.

When I was done, Celso exclaimed, “I had no idea traveling the Land of the Dead was so fraught with peril!”

“Now how much would you pay just to skip the whole thing?” I asked.

“Darling, come,” Celso said, taking his wife’s arm and guiding her toward Hector’s door. “Let us blow our nest egg together.”

Celso knocked and Hector opened the door a little more warily this time. “Mr. LeMans,” Celso said, “we’ve decided to take you up on your generous offer.”

“Excellent! *Excellent!*” Hector gushed, stepping back to give the Floreses space to enter his office. “The little lady changed your mind, eh?”

“No,” Celso said as Hector began to close the door behind them. “Actually it was your agent over there.”

Hector looked over at me, confused, then back at Celso. “Well, of...of course,” he spluttered. “He’s one of my best! Well, let’s chat, shall we?”

The door closed.

“Still got it,” I said with a sigh. I felt bad, though, setting Celso and his wife up for a fall; but that was just added incentive for taking Hector down.

Before I could settle down to wait, the door opened again and Hector poked his head out. “I don’t know who you are, and I don’t know what spell you’ve cast on the Flores couple,” he sounded like he might be angry and I braced myself to start shooting right then, “but stick around. There’s something across town I’d like to show you.” He closed the door again.

Well, that was fine. If he was going to take me someplace private, everything should work out nicely.

A few minutes later both doors opened. Celso and his wife came out followed by a jolly Hector who was congratulating them on their ‘wise purchase’. He propelled them into the elevator without seeming to hurry them too much, then turned toward me.

“So,” he said, hands behind his back and rocking on his heels, sending a big ‘smile’ my way, “you’re the one who cracked the Flores couple, eh? Well done, my boy! Well done! I thought I wasn’t going to close that sale. Do you have any experience, or is it just a knack?”

“Wish you could have seen it,” I said. “It was old school all the way.”

“Ah, a practiced hand!” Hector exclaimed.

“About thirty years,” I said, rounding up. Hector looked even happier. “Plus management and experience in, uh, ‘promotion’.” I figured he’d been around the park often enough to get the racketeering euphemism and draw the intended conclusions.

Hector had and he did. He clacked his hands together happily, showing me he was hooked. “Excellent!”

“Why do you ask?” I asked, letting the line run out a little.

“I just happen to have a job open in my organization,” he answered. “Did I say ‘a job’?” Hector exclaimed theatrically. “Pish! What I’ve got is an *opportunity!* Give me an hour of your time and you won’t regret it.”

“I’m sure I won’t,” I said, pulling the line taut.

Hector took me down to his limo and we went across town to the Bureau of Acquisitions building. Not exactly what I was expecting, but then I wasn’t sure just what to expect. Once we had arrived, I was surprised and a little disturbed when we got into the elevator and Hector punched the button for my old floor.

“We’ve had a lot of openings in this office in the last couple of years,” he was saying as he led me past what used to be Eva’s desk, “and frankly we’ve had trouble filling them. I could really use a closer like you on the team.” We came to my—and Apollo’s—old office and Hector ushered me in. The scene was just too weird.

“This could be *your* office,” he said.

It didn’t look much different from the last time I saw it. Even the books Copal had given me were still there.

“I gotta admit,” I said, “you make a tempting offer...but let’s skip the sales pitch and get down to cases.”

Hector chuckled. “Very good. Let’s.”

“Now, you want my sales experience, my ability to close the hard deals. I’ve never been a big fan of the public sector, though. Not enough money in it. You know it. I know it. So what is this ‘opportunity’ you keep talking about?”

“Well, this isn’t the *usual* sort of public sector job I’m offering,” Hector said slyly. “I assure you, I can offer you a contract that is more than competitive with anything the private sector has to offer. Plus, as an added incentive,” Hector stopped and pulled a suitcase out from behind the filing cabinets and opened it, “two percent of these, Mr., uh...Mr.?”

I could see the tickets twitching. They were the genuine article and Hector was ready to be netted. I pulled my gun and pointed it at his face.

“The name’s Calavera,” I said, “and I want a bigger cut.”

Hector looked thrown, but only for a fraction of a second. He knew how to keep his cool. He laughed with only a trace of nervousness. “Oh, but Mr. Calavera,” he said, “I’m going to need most of these to get *myself* out of this world. You see, I’ve been a *very* bad boy!” He laughed again and closed the case. He glanced toward the windows, which I took to be another sign of nervousness.

I held out my free hand. "I'm going to deliver those to their rightful owners, and I'm going to deliver *you* to the compost pile."

"Are you now?" he asked archly.

There was a crash as a raven flew through a window. I fired and it fell to the carpet as a bouquet.

Hector was out the door and running down the hall. He had the suitcase. I followed. He got to the end of the hall and turned toward the elevator. I took aim and squeezed off another shot. I missed, the dart pinged off the elevator door, and Hector spun around and dashed into Don's old office. He was pretty quick for such a lard bucket.

I chased after him. The office was empty but a window was open. I cautiously went out onto the fire escape. There was no sign of Hector but I heard clattering from below. I leaned out over the railing and saw Hector awkwardly climbing down with the case in one hand. I fired and missed again. Hector tried to descend faster. I started going down myself, then I leaned out and shot again. And missed. I guess I just got lucky with the raven.

It kept going on like that. Hector stumbled his way down while I followed, taking occasional potshots. I had to put a new clip in the gun about a third of the way down. And another two-thirds down. I was really a lousy shot but Hector was getting more and more panicked. He had to be figuring that with all the rounds flying past him, the odds were that one had to hit him eventually. He tried to pick up his pace with each bang I made, but the faster he moved the more he stumbled. Helping me out was the fact that he only had two hands with one reserved for the case and the other needed to help him stay on his feet. So as long as I kept the heat on, whatever gun he had remained salted away.

When Hector got to the bottom of the fire escape—only the ladder remaining—I got a little panicky myself. This looked like my last chance. So as Hector started lowering the ladder, I began to empty my gun, hoping to bring him down by filling the air with a lot of rounds at once. I didn't hit Hector, but I did hit the suitcase and the ladder. He panicked, lost his grip on both, and fell into the alley. The suitcase stayed on the fire escape. Hector took off.

Well, I got part of what I was after. I picked up the suitcase and dropped into the alley myself. I found a pay phone and made two calls: one to get a message to Eva and the second for a cab.

TAKEN FOR A RIDE

Meche and Glottis were waiting for me at the station. I paid the cabbie.

"You got him?" Glottis asked when the cab had driven off.

"No, he got away. But he dropped this." I put the case down at Meche's feet and opened it. The tickets twitched and one leapt up Meche's legs, under her dress, and out one sleeve into her hand. She was pretty startled.

"That one must be yours," I observed dryly, shutting the case again. I stood and held it out for her to take.

"Manny..." she began.

"No, don't say it. You have a train to catch."

"I don't want to leave you," saying it anyway. "Not like this."

"You're the only one who can get on that train," I pointed out. Anyone else who tried would cause the Number Nine to jump into the pit of hell, taking the tickets with them.

"The *Bone Wagon*—" she began.

"That'd take months. Those people have waited too long already."

"Yes," she said, "you're right." She took the case from me and sighed. "Goodbye, Manny. I'm glad you were my travel agent."

“Me, too, angel,” I said. I gave her a quick hug. “Have a good trip.”

She walked away and took the escalator up to the platform.

I turned away.

“You gonna be OK, Manny?” Glottis asked.

“Yeah, sure. I just—” I broke off when Meche screamed.

We looked up and saw Meche at the top of the escalator fighting off a raven that was trying to snatch the case away from her. Glottis ran toward her and I followed. As I went up two steps at a time, Meche heaved the case in my direction. I caught it but fell backwards and rolled down the escalator and across the sidewalk to the curb. When I came to a stop, I got to my feet and shook my head to clear it. I looked up at the platform where Glottis had the raven in both hands, trying to tear it apart while it tried to claw out his eyes.

“*Run!*” I shouted to Meche who was standing helplessly and uselessly near the combatants.

“*Find Salvador!*”

A car came screeching suddenly around the corner and squealed to a stop alongside me. I sprang away, reaching for my gun just in case.

“Get in, quick!” Olivia’s voice said urgently.

I jumped in the back, clutching the suitcase, and the car tore away.

I pounded on the back of the front seat. “We were supposed to have coverage back there! Where are all of Salvador’s men?”

“I don’t know,” Olivia said. “He hasn’t told me yet.”

She tossed something white and round into the back seat with me.

“*Hola, Manuel,*” Salvador’s head said.

That was just the worst.

“Sal—” I began to say.

“No talking,” Olivia ordered. “I have a gun. Which reminds me, unload yours and toss it up here, clip first. And just so you don’t get any cute ideas...” She floored the accelerator and started weaving recklessly around the cars she was passing. “Shoot me and you’ll be smashed into splinters.”

I did what she said.

“Who’s a good boy?” Olivia cooed and slowed the car.

A few minutes later she turned onto a major thoroughfare. I had no idea where we were going and I didn’t dare ask. I looked down at what was left of Salvador. He looked like they’d given him a good working over. His head was cracked and abraded. But what about his body? I looked at Olivia, and figured it out. She had turned Salvador’s trick for saving sprouted agents against him.

Filthy, goddamned whore.

A white spot burned hot inside me, but I wasn’t sure who I was so enraged at: Olivia for betraying my trust, or me for trusting her. So I just glared at the back of her skull as she drove. A couple of minutes later she seemed to fidget in her seat, although maybe that was just my imagination. After a long while of going straight, she turned onto the freeway and headed out of town. Then she turned again onto a two-lane highway, and then again onto a roughly-tarmacked road. After about an hour of winding around, Olivia brought the car to a stop. She got out, pointing her gun at me.

“Time for you to swing, daddy-o,” she said. “Let’s see you walk.” She gestured with the gun for me to get out.

I did, and got a good look around. We were in a meadow.

“These flowers...*all* people Hector has sprouted!?” I exclaimed. I don’t know any words for how I was feeling but it was like a mix of seasickness, vertigo, and something in the ‘have-you-seen-my-mommy’ category.

“Hey,” Olivia rejoined sharply, “when you’re on top like my boyfriend Hector is, you make a lot of enemies.” She sounded totally unconcerned.

“You know,” I growled, “you really have bad taste in men.”

“No,” she contradicted, “I have a taste for really bad men. There’s a difference.”

“Yeah, I guess there is. Can you honestly say that you’re OK with this,” I gestured at the meadow, “with what you’ve done to Salvador?”

“Hey, cube, if you want to blame someone about Sal, try yourself. If you hadn’t blabbed about him in my club...” Olivia shrugged. She raised her gun a little higher. “So scat, man. Time to face the music.” She jerked her free thumb over her shoulder at the greenhouse at the top of a hill.

I guessed it was a choice of being sprouted by Olivia or by Hector. Well, why not? Lola, my crew, Alexi, Salvador... might as well add my name to the ever-growing list now that Hector had the tickets back. Four years of fighting a corrupt system and it all comes to this. Time to put an end to my sorry existence, then, if sprouting was an end. I trudged up the hill to the greenhouse intending to find that out. At the end of the path, I opened the greenhouse doors and went in. Tables full of lush, sprouted souls were everywhere. A sprinkler system suspended over the tables misted the plants, keeping them alive. Were they memorials, or trophies?

Hector stood with his back to me. He held a flower, pulling its petals off one at a time.

“She loves me,” he said, “she loves me not...”

“Well,” I said harshly, “you’re *half* right.”

Hector turned toward me, chuckling. “Oh, Manny! So cynical. What happened to you, Manny, that caused you to lose your sense of hope? Your love of life?”

“I died.”

Hector waited a moment before responding. “I see.” He shrugged. “I guess Domino was right. You don’t have a shred of optimism.”

“Well, when it come to shreds,” I needled, “Dom is the expert.”

“And by that same logic, Manny,” Hector said affably, “*you’re* about to become an expert in botany.” He turned away and began to fiddle with something on the table in front of him.

“Is this where you tell me all about your secret plan, Hector?” I asked, more to provoke him than to get answers. I knew them all already. “How you stole Double-N tickets from innocent souls, pretended to sell them, but really hoarded them all for yourself in a desperate attempt to get out of the Land of the Dead?”

“No,” he said, turning back to face me. Light glinted off the muzzle of the gun the instant before there was a flash and a crack like thunder. A hard kick knocked me back a step, pain rocketing through my chest. “This is where *you* writhe around in excruciating pain for about an hour because that idiot Bowsley ran off with all the fast-acting sproutella.” I pulled the dart from the rib it had struck and fell to my knees. “This slow stuff *will* sprout you, but it’s going to take a long time, I’m sorry to say.”

‘Sure, you’re sorry, Hector,’ I thought but couldn’t get the words out. I struggled back to my feet and stumbled out of the greenhouse, breaking a few panes of glass in the doors on my way through. As I staggered down the hill I heard Hector call out, “Manny? Where are you going? You’ve got some time, you know, before you have to leaf. Get it? *Leaf*?” He giggled and snorted at his lame-ass pun.

I lost my balance, rolling down the hill a few feet before coming to a stop. The pain was... amazing. Even the heart attack hadn’t been anything like this. I could see leaves and stems with little swelling buds pushing through the fabric of my new suit coat. Hector was right. This stuff was *slow*. And I felt another pain, in my side. I was sort of lying on my left, and in the left coat pocket was Toto’s canister of liquid nitrogen. I flopped over on my back and got the canister out. I tugged open my coat, tearing vegetation in the process. That hurt even worse than just sprouting. I could actually feel the damage I was doing to the plants. I braced myself for even more pain and got my shirt open. I nearly passed out. Half blind from agony, I unscrewed the lid and emptied the canister over my chest.

Then I did black out.

When I came to my chest was numb. The vegetation in my chest was still limed with frost, so I must've been out for only a few seconds. I tore out the brittle plants, feeling nothing. I got out my pocket knife and started whittling on the rib the dart had hit. I kept digging and scraping until all the green-tinged bone and marrow was gone.

That done, I fell back in the flowers and grass of all the sprouted souls under me and breathed, "Gracias, Toto Santos." After lying there another couple of minutes, I got unsteadily to my feet. I felt a little weak, but I was OK. I wasn't sure yet if that was a good thing. I went the rest of the way down the hill toward the car. Maybe I could jump Olivia. Or maybe I'd just get sprouted again.

When I got to the car, I saw Olivia behind it, digging through the case of Double-N tickets. "Come on, shake it for me, baby," I heard her say. "One of you must be mine..."

I shook my head sadly.

Since Olivia was distracted, I got into the car to look for my gun. Or any gun.

"Manuel," Salvador said.

"Sal?" I asked quietly.

"Olivia has your gun. There is ammo in the trunk of this car but she has the key to that as well."

"Right," I said. Maybe I would have to jump her, after all. Not a happy thought. She was small but built like a steel spring and I was weak as a newborn.

"And, Manuel...tell Eva that I know she will guide the Alliance wisely when I am gone. For when I bite this explosive tooth, the deadly cloud will sprout not just my target, but me as well."

"You're...target?" I asked.

"Hey!" Olivia snapped from behind me. "Get out of there!"

"Farewell, my friend!" Salvador said as I backed out of the car.

When I was all the way out, Olivia went in, keeping her gun trained on me. "What were you talking about with the 'head' of the LSA in there?" She picked up Salvador's skull with her free hand and scooted back out of the car herself. "Huh, Sal?" she mocked, giving him a shake. "Got something you want to share with the class?"

"Only this," Salvador said. "*¡Viva la Revolución!*" He snapped his jaws shut. There was a pop and a green mist erupted.

Olivia screamed and dropped Salvador. When his head hit the ground, it was already hidden by leaves and flowers. Olivia was able to stagger only a few steps away from the car before falling.

She was still twitching and moaning as I patted her down for the car keys. One of her mossy hands clutched at my lapel. I don't know whether it was meant as an attack or an entreaty. Her head lifted up a little and she made wounded-chimp noises as though trying to speak.

"Lola figured you'd end up this way, and I'd say you deserved it." Olivia went limp and her hand fell away from my coat. "But I feel a little sorry for you anyway," because, dammit, I still sort of liked her.

When I finally found the keys, I picked up the gun she had dropped and went back to the car, intending to close the case first before loading up on ammo. But I was stopped by a rustling sound. There, fluttering among the flowers blooming around Salvador's skull, was a Double-N ticket. It took a few seconds before the significance sunk in. He had a *ticket*. He had a goddamned Double-N ticket and they made him a reaper. I wouldn't have thought I could get any angrier. I picked up the ticket and put it in my pocket.

I closed the case, opened the trunk of the car and put it inside. I loaded my gun with Salvador's ammo and stuffed as many rounds as I could into my pockets. With my lousy aim I was sure I'd need them.

I went back up to the greenhouse. I didn't go inside. I crept around the perimeter looking for a protective position to shoot from where I could cover the entrance in case Hector tried to run for it. There was a little hillock off to one side. It seemed like a good spot. I could duck behind it and I could see most of the interior of the greenhouse from there. Problem was, Hector was over at the far end of the building. I needed him closer.

"Hey, Hector," I muttered to myself, "come over here so I can sprout you. Yeah, that'd work."

I needed a better way, obviously, than a blatant invitation; a way that would get him to move closer without giving myself away. Throwing pebbles or something against the glass ought to do it, I thought. I rooted around, feeling for something small and hard to toss. I came up with somebody's arm. I worked it free from the vegetation and brushed the dirt off. Then I stopped and stared in disbelief. I picked up a little clump and held it up in the light coming from inside the greenhouse. The small, gritty lump was dark and moist. I sniffed it. It *was* dirt. Not the usual sand or dust of the Land of the Dead, but honest-to-goodness *soil*.

"How long has this meadow been here, anyway?" I asked myself in astonishment and disgust.

I tossed away the piece of dirt and picked up the arm again. I was about to pull the hand apart for the finger and wrist bones, but I stopped again for a few seconds. Would the owner of the hand feel what I was going to do? It depended on what really happened to a soul who was sprouted.

"Well, man...or ma'am...if you're here in any way, I'm sorry about this but I need your hand if I'm gonna put Hector out of business." I steeled myself and took the hand apart. When I had all the little bones in a loose jumble, I stood up and threw them at the greenhouse as hard as I could. I ducked down and peeked over the top of the hillock.

Hector was moving toward my side of the greenhouse. He peered through the glass. "Olivia?" he called out, his voice muffled by the glass wall. "Who's out there?"

I raised my gun and took aim. "I'm the grim reaper, lard ass!" I shouted as I squeezed the trigger. Glass shattered and Hector went down. But then he sprang back up, gun in hand. I had missed *again*, dammit.

"Shouldn't you be a patch of posies by now?" he shouted back, incredulous.

I answered by firing again.

"Nice try," he said, shooting back, but I had already flattened myself behind the hillock.

When he stopped firing, I peered over the top. Hector was half hidden behind a table, trying to see into the darkness.

I got off another round. "That's for Salvador," I screamed. I fired again. "That's for the crew of the SS *Lola*!" And again. "And *that's* for Lola herself!"

"Who's Lo—" Hector began as I aimed way above his head and fired once more.

He never finished the question.

Hector screamed and fell and I waited, crouching behind my hillock. The screams continued and he didn't get up again. I cautiously went to the doors and crept inside, staying down behind tables in case he was still able to shoot. Hector's voice rose in pitch until he sounded like a little girl, a little girl being tortured and mutilated. And I was the one who had made him sound like that. When I got to where I could see him clearly again, I found Hector on his back, convulsing violently and hammering his skull against the cement floor. He was rapidly turning in to a large shrub. Flowers bloomed, swelled into fruit, ripened and dropped off in wet splats all in a few seconds. Gradually, Hector grew still and his wailing faded to a frail whimper. Then silence.

I crossed myself for the first time since childhood.

I went back outside, tossing my gun away as I went down the path to the car. I picked up Salvador's head, not sure what to do with it. Not having any better ideas, I took him up to the greenhouse and put him on one of the tables nearest to the doors. Returning to the car, I opened the driver-side door and slid in behind the wheel. I put the key in the ignition and stopped. I hadn't driven in all the years I'd been in the Land of the Dead. I wondered if I still could. Well, it'd be a long walk if I couldn't. I started the engine and slowly backed up until I was clear of the meadow. I turned the car around and carefully got back on the road that eventually took me to the highway. Once back in town I drove to the vicinity of Hector's casino, parked, got the case out of the trunk, and made my way back to LSA headquarters. Pyrrhus returning from the field of battle.

FALLOUT

When I entered headquarters, waiting there were Eva, Meche, Gunnar, and several other agents.

"Manny!" Meche exclaimed as she threw herself at me. I dropped the case and held her tight for a few seconds.

When I let go, I said to Eva and the others, "Hector's gone. You don't have to worry about him any more." I picked up the case and put it on a table. "And here are all the tickets Hector stole. The *real* tickets. All we have to do now is get Meche safely away on the Number Nine."

The people around me didn't seem elated. "That's great," Eva said, "but we have a problem. No one's seen Salvador. He didn't show up at the rendezvous."

"Yeah," I said, "I know all about that. Sal...I'm sorry, Eva. Sal's gone, too."

Meche turned away, her head bowed. The others looked at each other, uncertain and troubled. Eva walked over to me.

"How did that happen?" she asked, sounding dangerous.

"He was betrayed, we all were. Olivia..." I shrugged helplessly. "But Sal took care of her. He had this tooth, and..." I trailed off.

There were a couple of endless seconds of silence.

"*You* brought that woman here, Cal," Eva said, much too quietly for the amount of anger I sensed in her. "We didn't do a proper check because *you* vouched for her. And now, because of *you*, Sal's—" She broke off and turned away, hugging herself, trying to keep her emotions under control.

I gently, hesitantly, put my hands on her shoulders. "She fooled me," I said, but not as an excuse. "She fooled all of us." I could see Gunnar nod slowly. "Including Sal."

"Including me," Eva said thickly. She pulled away and walked from the room.

No one spoke for a while.

"Now what?" Meche asked.

"We wait until Eva comes back," Gunnar said.

"And if she doesn't?" she asked.

Gunnar shook his head, denying the possibility.

As it was, we only had to wait a few minutes before Eva returned. She seemed a little different. Tired, or maybe empty, but no longer angry. She walked up to me again and asked, "Where did this all happen?"

"Hector has this...meadow...outside of town."

Eva nodded. "We know about it."

"There's something else," I said. I took the ticket out of my pocket and held it out to Eva. "That belonged to Sal."

Eva sighed as if nothing could surprise her any more. She took the ticket from me.

"That's impossible!" Gunnar exclaimed.

“Is it?” Eva asked sharply.

“Who knows,” another agent said. “Maybe Salvador was Hector’s first victim. Maybe he stole his ticket and made him a reaper for revenge, hitting back at the system that stranded him here.”

“And then his success at that gave him other ideas?” another suggested.

“Does it matter?” I asked. “Hector’s gone. We have the tickets. So let’s just stop playing guessing games and get Meche on that damned train!”

There were nods from Gunnar and a few others.

“Where is he?” Eva asked.

“What?” I asked, startled. The question seemed to have come out of nowhere.

“Salvador,” she said. “Do you know where he is?”

“He’s in the greenhouse,” I answered, “on a table near the door. But only his head. I don’t know where the rest of him is. I’m sorry.”

Eva shook her head. “Don’t. Don’t blame yourself. I don’t, or I won’t...later. We have to recover him. He has a ticket. When I get out of this world, I’m taking him with me.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Sure, Eva.”

The news about Hector broke the next morning. While it was still night, a band of LSA agents led by Gunnar (who had insisted Eva stay at headquarters, where she could be better protected along with me and Meche) went out to the meadow to collect Salvador and Hector. Hector’s remains were dumped in the alley behind his casino. The LSA issued a statement to all news agencies that Hector was sprouted, saying where he could be found, and that the LSA took responsibility. The strange thing was that the media ran the statement verbatim. Before midday the authorities had confirmed that Hector had been sprouted and the news was everywhere. There was a faint hint of tough talk about Hector’s rackets from various quarters: some journalistic, some political, some DOD. That was only the beginning.

There was still Hector’s outfit to deal with and the LSA had inside help, of a sort. With Hector gone, there were several contenders for his replacement. That was to be expected in a criminal organization, but in this case the competition was intensified by the fact that the outfit had several parts that Hector had kept more or less separate. The gambling racket wasn’t tied to the DOD operations at all, so its big boy tried to go completely independent and might have done OK except that the DOD element didn’t like that at all. But the DOD operations weren’t unified, either. There was Hector’s official position in the DOD, and the corrupted administration element naturally felt it was the obvious heir to Hector’s empire. But the setup in the Bureau of Acquisitions—basically the successors to Don and Domino—felt they were the real heart of the operation, which they sort of were but only so far as Hector personally had been concerned. And, finally, there was the city administration. Hector had been ‘elected’ mayor the previous year; the ballot-stuffing was so blatant that Hector had gotten more votes than there were voters. His deputy naturally took over the city government, but he also wanted to take over the criminal enterprises which had similar plans for the city. Nothing like a divided enemy to help the cause. The outcome of the power struggle was a lot like an old Chicago mob war, which made it far too dangerous for Meche to try again to get on the Number Nine.

Helping things along were some smart moves Eva was making, the first having been to arrange Hector’s removal from the meadow. She wanted it’s existence hidden from those who didn’t already know about the site...until she was ready with her plans for it. As the gang war got going, a small group from the Bureau of Acquisitions installed itself in the greenhouse, probably intending to make use of it in the same way Hector had. The meadow had been kept under observation, so when the gangsters moved in Eva had agents armed with the fast-acting sproutella take the meadow away from them. With enough agents to hold the area secure, she then had reporters brought out to see the

meadow and greenhouse for themselves. That stirred up public opinion plenty, and having cleared the gangsters out ourselves helped correct the LSA's lingering terrorist rep.

Some time after that, when the gambling interest hit the mayor's residence and city hall particularly hard, the LSA immediately followed up with a strike of our own before the mayor's boys could regroup. The LSA occupied both buildings and issued a call for a new mayor and city council and vowed to remain in possession until free elections were held. After the revelation of Hector's meadow and greenhouse, the press not only supported those demands, but screamed for a purge of DOD management as well. That, of course, was the LSA's main objective, but now it was becoming mainstream. Now that Hector's gang was weakened and their atrocities exposed, it was becoming safer for editorial boards and crusading journalists to trumpet an anti-corruption position. Public opinion was getting increasingly angry while the police and prosecutor's office began to rediscover their duties. All this was still just a beginning, but my part in the struggle was coming to an end.

JUDGMENT DAY

One day I was in the chamber where the *Bone Wagon* was parked, reading the papers and talking over with Glottis the stuff that was going on, when Gunnar came up to me with a message. "Hey, Manny," he said, "we just got word from our DOD liaison...about you."

"Me?" I said, surprised. "What about me?"

"Well, it was a little vague. Apparently there's this cat named Yehuda who wants to talk to you at his home. You know him?"

"Hey," Glottis exclaimed, "isn't that the one who—"

"Just drop it!" I said, a little more harshly than I intended.

"OK," Glottis said.

"Yeah, I know him," I said to Gunnar. "He was my first boss at the DOD. Do you know what he wants to talk about?"

Gunnar shook his head. "All the message said is that Yehuda wishes to speak with Agent Calavera."

"Well," I sighed, "I guess I'll just have to get it from him."

Gunnar grabbed my arm when I started to move away. "You're not really going, are you?"

"Sure I am. Haven't you been hearing the news? Hector's not a hero anymore."

"So far that's just opportunism, man. Anyway, you know the streets still aren't all that safe."

"Yeah, but it's a lot safer that it was six weeks ago. Don't worry. I can trust Yehuda."

"You think?" Gunnar asked. "Like you said, he's Acquisitions...and if there's *anyone* in the Land of the Dead more desperate to get out of it than Hector was, it's gotta be *that* guy."

"You're wrong about that, *mano*," I countered. "He's too beaten down to have any fight left in him. And besides, what good would it do him to take me down?"

"If you say so, Manny," Gunnar said. "Just don't let him kiss you, all right?"

"Geez!" I exclaimed. "Lay off the man, all right?" I walked away to find Eva and let her know where I was going.

That Yehuda wanted to meet me at his home reassured me that everything was on the level. But I walked there only apparently alone, just in case things weren't. I didn't see anything on the way that made me worried, though. I knocked when I got to Yehuda's door. He let me in, seeming pleased to see me in his broken-down, tired way.

He asked me to have a seat and mixed me a drink. “I understand we are all greatly indebted to you, Manuel,” he said as he handed the tumbler of scotch and soda to me and sat down in the ancient easy chair I remembered from the old days.

“In what way?” I asked, not seeing how the company could be in *my* debt.

“You eliminated Hector LeMans.”

I tensed. “What makes you say that?” It had been the plan that people not get the idea that Hector had been taken down by any specific individual. Eva’s intention being that, if it was thought that Hector had been sprouted maybe by a whole mob of LSA agents, Hector’s outfit wouldn’t know who to whack.

“Come, Manuel,” Yehuda chided wearily. “We both know I speak the truth. You know because you pulled the trigger. As for myself, I was contacted by those higher up who are, shall we say, incapable of being...what’s the word? ‘Snowed’?” I nodded. “They are very pleased with you, in fact. Hector has been a cancer within the DOD for many years, for far longer than you know.”

“Yeah?” I asked harshly. “So why didn’t the company do anything about him?”

Yehuda sighed. “Because, in a sense, the company is not concerned. We humans have the power and the right...or perhaps it’s the curse...to make the world into whatever we collectively want it to be. We can have justice or injustice. It is our choice, a choice they are unwilling make for us.”

“So we had to take care of Hector if anyone was to, right?” I asked. “They...whoever *they* are...left it to us.”

“Yes,” Yehuda answered. “We could tolerate him, accept him, make him our master, or reject him. However we choose.”

“Harsh, *mano*.”

“I won’t argue the point, Manuel,” he said with a sad sigh. “We took it upon ourselves, this power to choose, and so we must accept the consequences of that original choice. If a man sticks his hand into the fire, who is to blame for his injury? The man or the fire? We can’t have the choice without having the responsibility, too.”

“Well, I won’t argue about it, either.” The old man had been in the Land of the Dead for far too long. He had an answer to everything, even if it didn’t answer anything at all. “It’s just that all those good people didn’t *choose* to have Hector steal their tickets.”

“No,” Yehuda said, “not individually. I don’t expect you to understand it fully, Manuel, because I assure you that neither do I. But I’ve been told this will all work out for the best, eventually.” His fingers absently toyed with the tattered red fringe on the left-hand arm of his chair. “For the near future, at least, those inclined to subvert the system will find themselves severely constrained. With Hector and the power he wielded gone, the apparatus of the DOD will restore discipline. As for the Lost Souls’ Alliance, I suspect they will be tolerated for a while longer as they appear to have a worthwhile task to complete, but they will have to disband eventually.”

“I don’t think Salvador ever expected it to be a permanent fixture,” I said, “and Eva doesn’t plan on being in this world forever.”

“Yes, but Eva still has a long struggle ahead of her. Yours, however, is over.” Before I could ask what he meant, he held out his hand. Twitching in his palm was a Double-N ticket. It leapt toward me and I caught it out of the air without thinking.

“You’re kidding me, right?” I exclaimed. Yehuda shook his head. “You mean, Hector—”

“No, Manuel. Hector never interfered with your fate. I’m afraid you deserved to be a reaper. But you have repaid your debt...over and above what you owed. Congratulations.” The bitterness in his voice was practically venomous.

“I don’t get it. I didn’t live my life any better than...than Domino, for instance. But he’s scattered in pieces on the ocean floor and you’re now giving *me* a Double-N ticket. Why is that?”

“Perhaps, Manuel, it is because within you there was a kernel of decency. It took a while to... grow,” I could almost see him skirt around the word ‘sprout’, “but in the end it bore fruit. Even hidden qualities shape our destinies. Perhaps you were made a reaper so that yours could show forth. Who can say?”

“But what about you, man?”

“Who can say?” he repeated in a hollow voice, no longer able to meet my gaze.

TRACK NUMBER NINE

When I left Yehuda’s house, an armored LSA car quickly pulled up and I was driven back to headquarters in something of a daze. I thought I must be dreaming but the Double-N ticket fluttering inside my breast pocket argued that I wasn’t.

“Well?” Eva demanded when I walked into the room. “What did the miserable traitor want?”

“He wanted to give me this.” I showed her the ticket. “I guess plugging Hector was somebody’s idea of a good deed. He told me my debt’s gone.”

Eva gaped at the ticket. “Cal!” she exclaimed. “That’s...that’s...I don’t know *what* to say!” So she gave me an enthusiastic hug.

“I never thought I’d be dead long enough to see *you* speechless,” I said, “but I know how you feel. I’m a little overwhelmed, too.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Hey, Mercedes has to see this!” She ran out of the chamber and came back a few moments later with Meche in tow.

Eva pointed at me and said, “Look who just got himself a Double-N ticket!”

I showed Meche the ticket and she went wild, giving me a hug even more powerful than Eva’s had been. When she let go of me she said, “Now we can take that train ride together!”

“Nothing could be finer, angel,” I said and Meche laughed.

Events moved quickly after that. There was no reason to delay but precautions had to be taken. It had taken a still-corrupted DOD apparatus to get my ticket to Yehuda and tell him what it was all about, and the news could have leaked out. On the other hand, that the DOD was able to deliver the ticket at all meant that the situation within the company had improved. But there was no sense in getting careless at this stage, not with the fate of so many others riding on mine. So an escort of LSA agents plus thoroughly-screened cops was carefully arranged. That took time, but when Eva was satisfied everything was perfect, Meche and I collected the case full of tickets, said goodbye to Gunnar and the rest, and started on our way.

When we came to the chamber where Glottis and the *Bone Wagon* were, I said to him, “Hey, *carnal*, wanna take a ride on the Number Nine?”

“Me?” he asked in surprise.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ve got my ticket. I’m all packed. Let’s go!”

“Maybe Gunnar can look after the *Bone Wagon* while I’m gone.”

“I’m sure he’d be happy to, Glottis,” Eva said.

“Well,” I said to Eva, suddenly feeling awkward, “I guess this is it.”

“I guess so,” she said, seeming a little awkward herself. “You know, I sort of thought you’d be around a lot longer.”

“Yeah. Me, too.”

“But I’m glad you’re finally getting out of here,” she said. “I’ll miss you, though.”

“You’ll make it, Eva,” I assured her. “We’ll see each other again, I’m sure of it.”

“Don’t wait up. I might be here a while yet,” she said. She gave me a peck on the cheekbone. “Bye, Cal.” Eve turned to Meche and they hugged. “You take care of the miserable fraud, OK?”
 “You can count on it,” Meche said.

Meche and I walked out of the sewers to a dirt road on the outskirts of the city. We got into an armored car and were driven toward the train station. To any disinterested onlooker, it was just one car in heavy traffic, but the ‘traffic’ was a flock of cars full of LSA agents all around us. When we got close to the station, uniformed cops armed with painful but non-sprouting shotguns stood like rows of corn all the way from the curb up to the waiting train. We got out of the car. Meche got a little apprehensive when we rode the escalator up and approached the platform. Glottis, who had been sent ahead, was waiting for us.

“Any ravens around, *carnal*?” I asked him.

“I don’t smell any,” he answered.

We showed our tickets to the conductor and boarded. We had the entire train to ourselves when it pulled out of the station and shot away from El Marrow. We were on our way. Finally. When the city disappeared behind us, I let myself relax for the first time in years.

On the evening of the second day the Number Nine was already well out over the Sea of Lament. We were in the dining car when Meche asked me, “Do you think there’s any hope for Salvador? Even if he does have a ticket, he was sprouted and no one has found his body.”

“I don’t know,” I answered. “I’d like to think there was. I guess it depends on what really happens to a soul when they’re sprouted. If Sal still exists, then maybe there’s hope.”

“I don’t know what to hope for,” Meche said. “I’d like to think that he could still have his rest in the next world, but there’s no hope in that for all the other people who have been sprouted.”

“Yeah, I know. It’d be nice if Hector were stuck here forever so he could suffer, but I don’t want that for Lola.”

Meche shook her head. “What a world we’re leaving behind.”

“No worse than the first one, I guess.”

“I don’t know what to think. I just want to get out of it.”

“We’re on our way,” I assured her. “Nothing can stop us now.”

On the fourth day the Number Nine pulled into the train station on top of the temple at the end of the world. I was a little nervous as we approached, half expecting the train to dive into a fiery pit. Instead, the train rolled to a stop and we got out to confront the Gatekeeper. I opened the suitcase and showed him the tickets.

“You can count them if you want,” Meche said. “They’re all here.”

“How about yours?” the Gatekeeper asked me.

I took my ticket out of my pocket and showed him. “The company gave me one on the other end. Sort of a retirement present. And demons ride free, right?” I asked hopefully.

“Aw, Manny,” Glottis said, sounding embarrassed. “You know I can’t go with ya. I’m a spirit of the land and all that. I can’t ever leave this world.”

I really wasn’t all that surprised. Just bitterly disappointed. “I guess I got so wrapped up in saving people I just assumed I’d be able to save you, too.”

“But I don’t need to be ‘saved’,” he protested. “*I like* it here! I’m not all alone in that basement anymore, thanks to you. I’ve got a new job wrenchin’ for the LSA and all these new friends...I’m a big demon success story!”

He was right, but it hurt to admit it, even just to myself. He had been the only constant in the last few years, the only thing I could depend on. Especially when I couldn’t depend even on myself. Still, there was no appeal against fate. “So,” I said, “I guess this is it, then.” I held out my hand.

Glottis spread his arms wide. “C’ m’ere,” he said, “gimme a hug!” He scooped me up and popped my spine in a dozen places as his massive arms squashed me against his chest. “You were the best boss I ever had,” he mumbled through snuffles.

The train’s whistle sounded and Glottis reluctantly put me down.

“You take care of yourself,” I said.

“Don’t worry, Manny,” he said. “I’ll be fine. And I’ll take care of the *Bone Wagon*, too. Every soul I meet, I’ll have them tell you about the races we’ve won. Promise.”

Meche and I went to get back on the train. While I had been saying goodbye to Glottis, everyone was freed from the waiting room and were surging on board ahead of us. Pugsy and Bibi were swooping and diving over everyone’s heads, laughing and playing. They spotted us and dove around us, pulling Glottis’ ears and stealing my hat before Meche got them settled down a little.

Once everyone had boarded, Meche and I went back to our compartment. I was waving one last time to Glottis through the window when Meche put her hand on my arm and said, “Manny?”

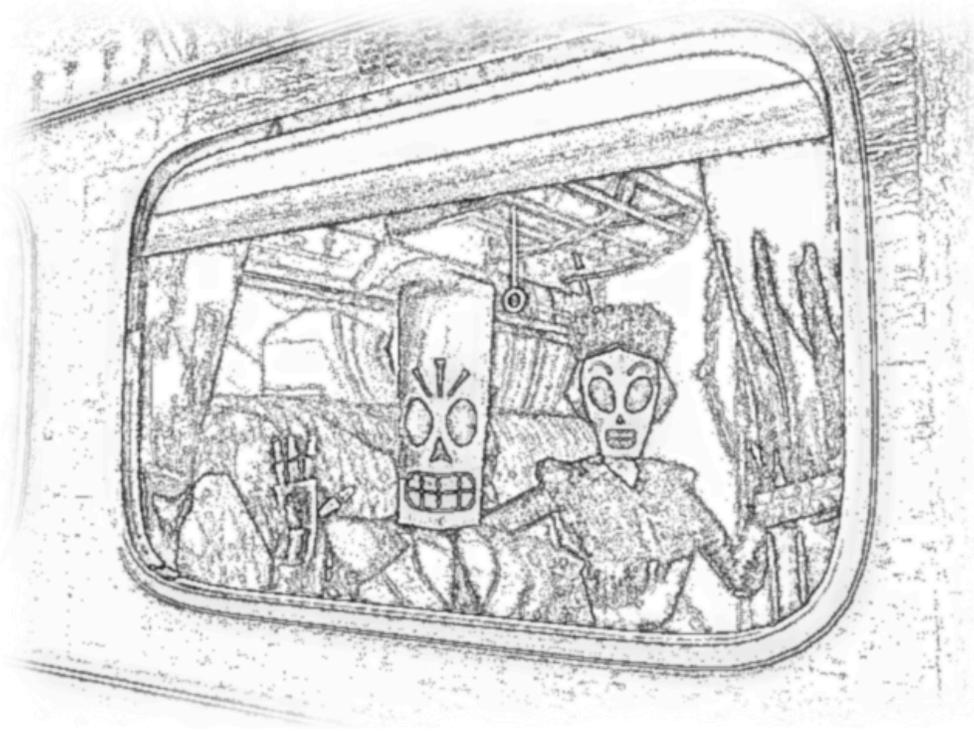
“Yeah?”

“When we get to the next world...” she trailed off.

I took her hands in mine. “What is it, angel?”

“Will we still be together?” she asked anxiously.

There was only one answer to that. “You know, sweetheart,” I said, “if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s this: nobody knows what’s gonna happen at the end of the line, so you might as well enjoy the trip.”



NEW YEAR'S DAY FANDANGO

A nameless port town lay on the edge of the Sea of Lament. It wasn't actually *nameless*; in fact, it's name was the only thing distinguishing it from most of the other ports along the Sea of Lament. It's name is simply unimportant. Like all the others it grew up where souls traveling across the Land of the Dead stopped to gather money or courage for the next stage of the journey.

The name of a particular bar near the docks is also unimportant. It's only claim to distinction on this particular night was the giant, orange demon sitting with one lost soul for company at a rough table in a back corner. The mood at that table also differed from the rest of the bar. Whereas all the others (for the most part sailors and women of questionable—if not indictable—virtue) were drunken, raucous, and exuberant, that one back table was drunken and moody. The soul was moody, at least. The demon appeared more annoyed than anything else.

Both, the soul and the demon, were dressed as sailors. Their clothes were new, but while the demon looked crisp in his uniform, the soul managed to look like a loose sack of bones as he hunched over his beer.

The demon frowned a little as he looked as his friend stare into his mug. He gave a sharp sigh. "Geez, Manny," he grumbled, "what d'ya expect to see in there?"

The soul stirred a little. "I'm contemplating my future," he mumbled, mostly sloshing over the middle part of the longest word.

"I think that only works with tea," Glottis said. "And you have to drink it first."

Manny drained the mug and peered at the bottom.

"Any better?" Glottis asked.

"Nope," Manny said and got up to go to the bar again. He came back with a refilled mug and dropped back in his chair. He looked into the mug for a second or two, then dunked a pretzel into it. He then stared at the damp pretzel as if unsure now what to do with it.

Glottis sighed again and looked at his watch. "About fifteen minutes left," he said, then took a sip from his pitcher of beer.

"Hurrah," Manny said sullenly and decided to change the beer-soaked pretzel for a dry one and eat it.

"What's eating you, Manny?"

Manny paused his chewing to think, then answered, "Pretzel."

"You—" Glottis stopped to shake his head. "C'mon, Manny. It's New Year's Eve! Cheer up, will ya? You're actin' like you've just lost your best friend."

"Cheer up?" Manny asked in a demanding tone. He drained his mug. "Just what the...why should I cheer up about...what?" He pushed back his chair to get a refill.

"Stay put," Glottis said, putting one massive hand on Manny's arm while filling his mug from his pitcher.

"Thanks," Manny said and drained the mug again. He was on his feet again and heading for the bar before Glottis could stop him.

He returned unsteadily, refilled mug in one hand and a bottle in the other. Once seated he took a swallow from the mug and then started working on getting the cap off the bottle.

"What's that?" Glottis asked.

"Dunno," Manny answered. "Picked it up when the bartender's back was turned." He got the cap off and took a drink. "Bourbon," he said. "Probably."

"Too bad," Glottis said. "Beer goes better with scotch."

"Fortunately I'm too tight to care."

“Yeah,” Glottis said. “So are you gonna tell me why you’re drinking for two or what?”

“The other one.”

“What?”

“Yeah, that’s the reason.”

Glottis frowned.

“I’ll tell you what,” Manny said after a moment. “I’m making up for lost time. Kept holding back this past year. Too busy. Needed to keep a clear head and keep Carla from falling into the sea or something.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And I’ll tell you something else. What the *hell* was I doing with that club? I should’ve been out looking for Meche, right?”

“But we *were* looking, Manny.”

“No we weren’t.” Manny took a long drink from the bottle. “We needed to look where Domino found her.”

“OK,” Glottis said gamely, “so where was that?”

“*I don’t know!*” Manny snapped. “See what I mean?”

“Sure,” Glottis nodded slowly. “I see.”

Manny drained his mug and refilled it from the bottle. “Now, you tell me why we’re on that damn bucket.”

“We’re going after Miss Colomar, remember? She’s on that cruise ship. When we catch up we’ll take her to the end of the road.”

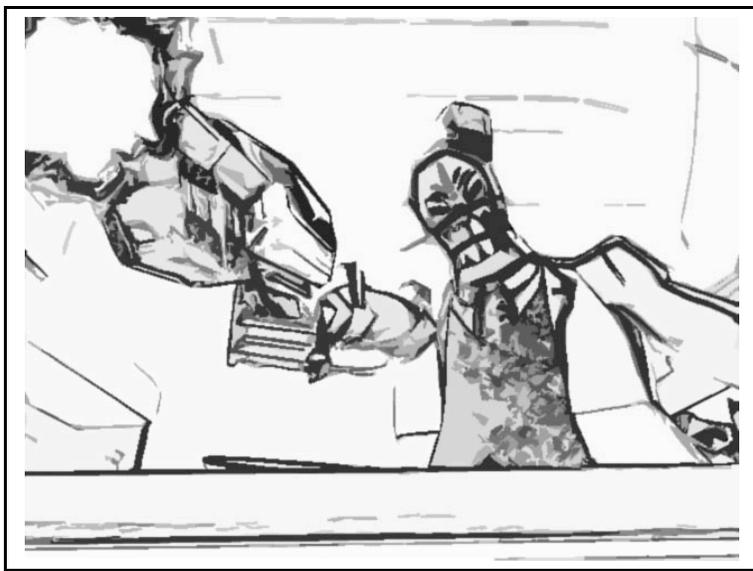
“Sure, we will,” Manny said. “To us!” he said, raising the bottle, thought better of it and switched to the mug. “The three musketeers!”

“There’s only two of us, Manny,” Glottis said, “even if you *are* seeing double.”

“Nah, you’re big enough for two.”

“I resent the understatement,” Glottis said with a grin. He looked at his watch again. “Almost there,” he said. A countdown from ten started somewhere in the bar and Glottis shouted ‘Happy New Year!’ along with the rest. When he looked back at Manny, he saw that he had his head down on the table.

“Hey, Manny,” he said, giving him a nudge. Then a rough shake. Manny just snored. Glottis sighed and drained his pitcher. He went to the bar and paid the tab, including the stolen bottle of bourbon. He returned to the table and gently slung Manny over his shoulder, made his way through the crowd, and out into the cold night air.



THE SPROUTING OF DON COPAL

Life, Domino Hurley liked to think, was good.

He was never struck by the irony of that thought. The fact that he was dead had made very little impression on him, although it wasn't a case of denial. It was simply that he was on the make, doing very well for himself, and that was all that mattered. His death hadn't been a surprise. It had taken long enough in coming. The surprise was that he had survived it. He had expected oblivion but instead found himself in a world not unlike the one he had left behind; it looked a little different, especially the people, but that wasn't anything he couldn't cope with.

There was one thing he did have a problem with, and that was the negative attitude of everybody else. When he was first brought to the Land of the Dead, he was told that he had been a bad little boy and that he had to work off some kind of debt. Work as a reaper, in fact. Domino tried to laugh it off, but the woman handling his case passed him along to the Department of Death's training department anyway. At the first opportunity he went looking for a way out of the building he was being held in but couldn't find any door that led outside. He knew there was an outside because he could see it through the windows. So, he thought, if he couldn't find a door he'd just go out a window. But once he had that idea he couldn't find a single window. He ended up—confused, tired and demoralized—in the training room he'd refused to go to just in time for the first session.

Domino resented the whole thing and refused to cooperate. He wasn't going to be a slave to anyone no matter what he was supposed to have done. That no one would tell him what that something was only convinced him that it was all a scam. He was so intransigent that some higher-up was brought in to talk to him. But once Hector LeMans got Domino alone with him, Domino became very interested in what he had to say. There was a scam going on all right, and it was Hector's.

Hector told Domino that the Department of Death was on the level, but that Hector was in a position to profit from its operations. It was a simple racket: divert tickets for the Number Nine train from ‘good’ souls, get them out of the way, then sell the tickets and split the profits. Hector had made a start but he needed a better organization, and he needed to gain control of a division in the Bureau of Acquisitions to make things a cinch. He already had an office manager on his payroll but he needed a reaper to go with him. He wanted Domino to be that reaper.

It sounded good to Domino. He liked the fact that Hector seemed to be taking a risk in telling him his scheme. If Domino talked...but Domino didn’t want to talk. There were two kinds of people in the world: pigeons and their keepers. He saw himself as the latter. If Hector was inviting him to help rule the roost, he wanted in. But if he wanted in, he had to go through with the training. Domino had to know the ropes if he was to reap for Hector. If Hector was just jerking him around to make him cooperate, well, Domino didn’t know what he could do to a man who was already dead but he’d find something.

So Domino went along with the training. When he was done he had another meeting with Hector. His plant hadn’t yet opened a space for Domino, but that was fine because Hector needed a new place to store his pigeons. They were getting to be a handful and once Domino got to work at reaping there’d be a lot more of them. Domino’s first job, then, was to find that new place. Somewhere out of the way, remote, and escape proof. Hector already a line on a few possibilities but he wanted Domino to check into them and be his contact with their respective owners. It wouldn’t do for an upper-level DOD official to be seen playing in real estate.

Domino did his homework and found the perfect place: a worked-out industrial island at the southern edge of the world. In addition to being thousands of kilometers from the nearest inhabited lands and far off the shipping lanes, the island had one other big attraction for Domino. The island was surrounded by an unusual barrier reef. A lot of the coral, Domino learned, fluoresced brightly and had been made into light bulbs by the current owners; but now that they had dug out all they could reach with their heavy equipment, they didn’t find it practical or economical to expand further from the island, so they were selling out.

Domino made the coral a big point in his pitch to Hector. “Forget the machinery,” he said. “The owners are right. There’s no way to make a profit any more on the coral that way. But who cares about industrial capital when you have slaves?” Don’t just ship the pigeons out of sight, Domino argued. Make a little extra gravy out of them while you’re at it. Hector couldn’t have been more pleased. He bought the island through Domino. And since the owners were convinced their property was virtually worthless, they sold cheap.

Hector had Domino oversee their takeover of the island and the initial stages of transferring his pigeons. A few weeks after the operation was in full swing, he told Domino that his man in Acquisitions, Don Copal, had made an opening in his division. By being such an ogre, Hector said with a chuckle, that one of the agents decided skipping town was better than working for him any more. Hector made that into a lesson for Domino. The whole operation depended on secrecy and subtlety. It was almost impossible to fire agents since that meant they would probably never be able to earn off their time. The company wanted them to move on, after all, so the manager would have to provide a compelling reason for his actions. Better to give the agent, any agent, a reason to skip. Then it’s the agent who was causing trouble. And if the agent ran off because of Copal’s conduct...well, lovability wasn’t a requirement of Copal’s position. Domino didn’t think shouting at agents—Copal’s method for demoralizing his staff—was all that subtle, but then he had never read Poe.

Domino moved out of the downtown office Hector had been renting for him and went to the Bureau of Acquisitions, a large deco building in an older neighborhood of El Marrow. The area looked like a former commercial district halfway through an urban renewal project. Tall, modern buildings (if

Bauhaus and Beaux-Arts structures, however new, could still be called ‘modern’) were mixed in with squat, block-shaped turn-of-the-20th-century architecture.

Domino carried his box of things with him as he rode the elevator up to his floor. He could have handed it off to a demon—the box was large, awkward, and heavy—but he couldn’t risk letting it out of his sight. The box contained too many records of his activities since he started working for Hector. He still needed them, unfortunately, but he also needed a more secure way of keeping them. He had a safe in his old office but as a reaper he wasn’t expected to be holding any documents that required that kind of security. He figured he could just scan them into his computer and destroy the originals. Nothing suspicious or unusual about a screen saver password.

It was still early when Domino arrived, but not too early. None of the other reapers nor Don Copal had gotten in yet. The secretary was already there. She seemed surprised to see Domino, and a little annoyed for some reason. Domino didn’t care. He was probably just interrupting her routine. Nothing important. She wasn’t a bad looker, either. She had a nice shape under her dress, although Domino knew he’d see only a flat ribcage if he took a peek. He also knew enough by now not to take things too literally in the Land of the Dead. So he took his time studying the illusion of her figure, and gave a purely mental shake of his head when she opened her mouth and a grating Brooklyn accent escaped.

Domino introduced himself, got the secretary’s name, and waited a few moments to be shown to his office. When Eva kept on shuffling papers at her desk, he said, “I’m pretty sure they didn’t say anything about me working out of a hallway.”

Eva looked up crossly and said, “You know, we weren’t expecting anyone so soon.” She sighed and stood up. “OK. I’ll take you to Lana’s office.”

“I thought I’d have an office to myself,” Domino said. If he had to share...

“Lana’s...gone,” Eva said. “It’ll be all yours. But all her files and things are still in there. There hasn’t been time—”

“Yeah, yeah,” Domino said. “I can get her junk out of the way if I can get another box.”

“Fine,” Eva said. She stopped at one door and opened it. “Here you go.” She turned to walk back to her desk.

“What about that box, huh?” Domino snapped.

Eva gestured vaguely, “There’s a storeroom—”

“So stop talking about it and go!”

She snapped her jaw closed over whatever she thought to say and stomped off.

“Bitch,” Domino muttered as he maneuvered his box through the door. She needed a few good slaps, he thought.

He slid his box onto the desk, pushing things aside in the process. Something thudded onto the carpet. Domino bent to pick it up. It was a fat book. *The Novels of Sylvia Plath* it said on the spine. Domino wasn’t sure why, but that didn’t seem right. He shrugged and dropped the book on the chair as he pulled it away from the computer. After looking it over he swore. The thing had no scanner, and they weren’t into independent peripherals in the Land of the Dead. Computers were all in one piece like some goddamned Victrola console. He’d need a whole new unit.

There was a cough at the door and Domino turned to see Eva standing there, holding a cardboard box as if it were a dead skunk. Domino pushed a few more things from the desk onto the chair. “Put it right there, sweetheart,” he said.

Eva glared but did as she was told. She turned to leave again but Domino grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to himself. “What’s the hurry, sweetheart? No one’s around yet.” He wasn’t holding her tightly and she quickly slipped out of his arm.

“Never do that again,” she said angrily.

Domino laughed. “Don’t take it so seriously. And get me a trash can.”

“You are...you have one.” She kicked the one beside the desk.

“Yeah, but I’ve got a lot of shit to throw away. Get me another.”

Eva went with a faint growl. Domino watched her dress swish around her hips as she stalked away. He shook his head, with a grin on the face he no longer had, and started dumping whatsername’s crap into the empty box. Eva came back with another trash can and quickly turned to leave again.

“I’m going to need a new computer,” Domino said.

Eva spun around again, planting hands on hips. “I’ll just pull one out of my—”

“Easy, sister,” he laughed. “Don’t get your panties knotted. I don’t mean *now*. I’m just letting you know, you know? But if there’s any paperwork I have to deal with, why don’t you warm it up for me, OK?”

Eva folded her arms. “Anything else?”

“Not right now.” He let her get out the door before adding, “But you could get a demon to take these old files out of here sometime.” She shot him an acid look before disappearing.

Domino went on clearing his new desk. After a few moments he heard Eva’s voice. He strained to hear but couldn’t make out what she was saying. She sounded angry. He shrugged. Probably just bitching to one of her girlfriends. A minute or so later there was a loud bang that made Domino jump. He looked out into the hall but only saw Eva sitting at her desk, talking to some short guy. Domino went back to what he was doing.

Soon the same short guy came into the office. He stuck out his hand. “I hear you’re the new guy,” he said in some sort of spic accent.

“Yeah,” he said, grasping the pip-squeak’s hand. Good grip, though. “Domino Hurley.”

“Calavera,” the other reaper said. “Manny Calavera.” Domino held back a laugh at the James Bond shtick.

“You caught Eva off guard,” Calavera said. “The company doesn’t usually fill openings this quick.”

“Yeah, well, I was available so here I am.”

Calavera looked around. “It’s gonna be tough to get any work done with your files not here yet.”

“I don’t have any files, Cal, so that’s not a problem.”

There was a short pause before Calavera asked, “So is this your *first* gig?”

“Yeah, but don’t worry. I’m a quick learner.”

“Uh, OK.” There was another pause. Calavera picked up the Plath book and leafed through it. “I always meant to borrow this,” he said half to himself.

“You might as well take it. I don’t need it.”

“What do you know about Lana?” Calavera asked.

“I thought it was Sylvia,” Domino said, sorting through the desk drawers.

“No, I mean the woman who used to be in this office.”

“Oh.” Domino shrugged. “Nothing, I guess.”

“Well, she was here a long time.”

“Uh, huh.”

“People liked her. She was a good reaper. She didn’t deserve to be torn apart by demons.”

“Hey, that’s a shame,” Domino said, trying to decide if he could use the half-used day planner he’d found.

“Yeah, sure it’s a shame,” Calavera said, sounding annoyed. “The point is, everybody’s still in shock over what happened. We’re kind of angry. You coming in so soon, well, some of that might rub off on you for a while.”

“Don’t worry, Cal. I’m an easy-going guy. I’ll fit in.”

Calavera shook his head.

“By the way,” Domino said, “does the DOD usually give agents such crappy computers? ’Cause I’m telling you, Manny, this thing is a *joke*.”

Calavera shrugged. “Well, like I said, Lana was here a long time. I think that unit’s been here almost as long.”

“Time for the scrap pile, then.”

“That’s up to you,” Calavera said. Domino stiffened when he started rummaging around in his box. “Look at all the diplomas!” he said.

Domino jerked the box toward him. “You have to have the proper attitude to get diplomas like those, Manny.”

“Really?” Calavera said, tucking his new book under one arm. “I thought you just had to have the proper *postage*.” He turned and left before Domino could make an answer.

He ground his teeth. “I’m surrounded by a bunch of shit-heads,” he said under his breath

Copal didn’t come into the office until nearly midmorning. Not, to Domino’s way of thinking, a good sign. He thought it indicated a lack of drive. Copal’s appearance didn’t inspire confidence, either. His suit, although technically in good condition, seemed to fit like a rag on his illusory frame. Hector had advised Domino to meet with Copal as soon as he arrived, so he kept watch and was in Copal’s office within a couple of minutes.

Copal had already shed his coat and had his sleeves rolled up and his tie loosened, giving him a hard-working look. Sloppy, but driven. His office looked equally messy—three overflowing trash cans, stacked boxes of records, bulging file cabinets, and a small conference table so buried in papers it was obviously no use for meetings. And yet Copal seemed to see a pattern in the chaos. As soon as Domino introduced himself, Copal reached into a sagging in-basket and pulled out three work orders.

“These came in over the last couple of weeks,” he said. “It’s my ass if anyone finds out I’ve been sitting on them for so long, but Hector’s already diverted the Double-Ns. It’ll look too suspicious if you bring in three saints your first day, so take care of ’em the old-fashioned way.”

“And what’s that?” Domino asked.

“Goddammit!” Copal growled, unlocking the middle drawer of his desk. He took out a bulky gun and handed it to Domino butt first. “Here.”

Domino turned the pistol over in his hands. “What good is this on dead people?”

“That’s a sproutella gun, you dumb-ass. Haven’t you been to Hector’s greenhouse outside of town?”

Domino shrugged. “Sure, but what does that—”

“You ever see any plants *outside* of that little building?”

“So this thing—”

“That’s right,” Copal snapped. “So you take those bastards out to the greenhouse and sprout ’em. Got it?”

“They’d be more use on the island.”

“We can’t use the island this time, bonehead. Why?” he asked for Domino before he could himself. “Because you gotta bring them back to the office for us to use the system that *you* set up! And you can’t bring in three fucking saints on your first day! Tomorrow we can start shipping to the island. Today you just get these assholes out of our hair.”

“OK,” Domino said with a small shrug, tucking the gun under his waistband and buttoning his coat to hide it. “Anything else?”

“No.” Domino turned to go but Copal said, “Yeah, wait. There is something. Get a padlock for your message tube.” He pointed at his own to show what he meant. “Some of the ‘competitive’ agents take cases assigned to others when their backs are turned.” Copal ground his teeth and said, “It’s

against policy but the company overlooks it most of the time because it helps keep cases moving. If that happens to you, we're screwed."

"Then maybe you need to take ownership of that policy," Domino suggested. "But I'll pick up a lock on my way back to the office." He remembered something before he could move to leave again. "I wanted to ask you something. Is you're secretary always so pleasant?"

Copal laughed. "Yeah, Eva's got a chip on her shoulder all right. But she does her job OK. Why?"

"No reason, really. I just thought maybe I should try to, uh, cool her down."

"I don't think you'd have much luck. Calavera's more her type."

"That so?" Domino shrugged. "Doesn't matter, I suppose."

Domino took care of the day's business and got back to the office in the middle of the afternoon. He saw that the file cabinets had been emptied while he was gone. He put his special papers in the back of a bottom drawer and shook his head. He wished he could get rid of them or keep them in his apartment, but he needed them close to work. And he needed that new computer if he was going to cover his tracks and still have access to what he needed. He wasn't going to take Copal's slob approach.

He spent the rest of the afternoon getting familiar with the office. Calavera was right in saying that the others would resent him. Or maybe the stunted little half-wit put the idea into everyone's heads. Domino had heard that he was supposed to be one of the company's best agents, but Domino found that hard to believe. Calavera seemed to spend more time orbiting Eva than doing his job. It looked like Copal was right about her taste in men. The way they sniped at each other, they might even be married.

That night Domino went out to a new nightclub Hector had half-interest in. It was a pretty swanky place with a good bar and cocktail waitresses with legs from here to Judgment Day. Domino was starting to really enjoy himself when he thought he heard an all-too-familiar screech. He looked around and saw Manny and Eva at a nearby table. Domino felt his good mood evaporate a little, but he got up and went over to be friendly. Just because they got off badly at the office, he figured, was no reason they couldn't get along now. He was wrong. Eva, although cranky, was reasonably quiet, but Calavera chose to be a complete dick. Domino realized these people were a waste of his time, so he left them to spit their venom at each other.

In the following days the other agents continued to cold-shoulder Domino. He knew for certain then that Calavera had turned them against him. He could have tolerated that, but one of them went too far. He kept getting into Domino's face about Lana, even though she got herself shredded through no fault of his before he'd even heard about her. When he pointed that out to the little prick, he jumped him. Domino came close to turning him into kindling for that, and soon after the kid slunk out of town like a whipped puppy. That was fine with Copal. The fewer agents he had the more cases he could send to Domino, and Hector wanted him to process as many Double-Ns as possible. So Copal didn't bother asking for a replacement.

Copal and Hector were satisfied with the way things were turning out, but Domino wasn't. He'd taken all the shit from Calavera that he was going to. So he pitched an idea to Hector. He said it was too great a risk to have a big shot like Calavera in the same office with him. He had to be gotten rid of. Personally, he said, he'd just as well sprout him as anything else. But maybe Copal's 'subtle' approach would be better. So, instead of Copal diverting cases from here and there evenly, he could take them as much as possible from just Calavera—shunting all 'good' cases (not just Double-Ns) to Domino and giving Calavera all the 'bad' ones. With any luck, he'd soon be running out of town. That

seemed to be the way the agents in that office dealt with their frustrations. The idea sounded good to Hector, and soon Calavera's career began its slide into a bottomless pit.

Domino enjoyed watching Calavera's dawning realization that he wasn't the DOD's golden boy anymore. Calavera also seemed to realize that Domino was behind it. At least, his resentment of Domino seemed to grow. But that was all right. No matter what he suspected he wouldn't be able to pin anything on Domino. At the office Christmas party, Calavera got tight as a drum early on and managed to get even more in the bag as time wore on. Then he started a loud, nearly incoherent rant about Domino's unbelievable luck. Or maybe it was about solar power. There was some debate afterwards about what exactly he had been saying. Eva tried to maneuver him out, but he was nearly liquid by then and easily slipped away from her. He sloshed up to Domino and slurred something incomprehensible. It might have been a question. When Domino didn't respond, other than to look amused, Calavera clearly said "Well?" and sounded very angry. Domino gave an exaggerated, weary sigh and turned to put his drink down. When he turned again, Calavera was drawing back his right arm as if readying for a punch. But instead of taking a swing at Domino, he toppled over backwards... passed out. Eva and a couple other friends carried him away.

Domino loved every second of it. He figured he'd seen the last of Manny Calavera, but the next day he was back in the office with an atomic hangover and no memory of the previous evening. Domino decided he needed a bigger push so he began lobbying Copal for Calavera's office. At first Copal resisted, not wanting to deal with that kind of hassle. And it wasn't as if Domino's office was any worse than Calavera's. But not long after Domino began his campaign for the switch, Copal started to get pressure from downtown to replace the reaper Domino had thrashed. In the end, Domino got what he wanted. The new agent was put in Domino's old office and the storeroom was reconverted into an office for Calavera. But despite this humiliation, one he couldn't black out on, he still showed no sign of skipping town.

However, Domino felt he had come out ahead. With his new office he finally got his new computer. He scanned all his sensitive documents and installed encryption and security software. He decided against destroying the documents—he couldn't destroy the deed to the island in any case—and moved them to a safe deposit box in El Marrow's largest bank. Finally, he could 'breathe' easy.

Months went by and Calavera still gave no indication that he was going to run away from his troubles. Domino resigned himself to the possibility that he never would, telling himself that Calavera was now so demoralized it hardly mattered anymore whether he stayed or went.

One day, the Day of the Dead in fact, Domino was reading the paper in his office. He more than met his sales quotas, so he could have taken the day off like most, but he preferred to stay on top of the game even if it was going to be a slow day. He was reading the obituaries, which had a different meaning for people in the Land of the Dead. Domino hoped someday to spot old associates he thought might be useful in the racket. Next to where his feet rested on his desk lay a half-crumpled memo from Copal about a poisoning. Domino saw no reason to go scrambling for cases when the best were handed to him on a platter.

The morning was getting a little older when his intercom buzzed.

"Yeah?" Domino said as he pushed the button.

"I need to see you in my office," Copal's voice said. "Now."

"OK," Domino said and released the button. He carefully folded his paper, stood up and stretched, then sauntered out into the hall. As he approached Eva's desk he asked, "Any messages?"

"I can't see your tube from here," she answered matter-of-factly as she carried on with her typing.

Domino laughed as if she had made a joke and went into Copal's office after a quick rap on the door.

"About time," Copal grouched as Domino closed the door behind him. "Didja stop for donuts or what?"

"What's the panic?" Domino asked lightly.

"The poisoning," Copal answered in a clipped tone.

"Oh, fuck!" Domino exclaimed. "You dragged me in here for that...that feeding frenzy?"

"Look at what I just got," Copal said, flinging a work order toward Domino.

Domino picked it up. "Son-of-a-bitch!" he said under his breath. Then aloud to Copal, "Don't tell me this whore is at the poisoning."

"She's at the poisoning," Copal snapped. "And guess where her ticket is right now."

"You know," Domino said, "we really need better communication around here."

"Like that's gonna help now." Copal rubbed his eye sockets. "The good news is that all the early birds have already got their cases and none of them brought back this...this..."

"Calabaza," Domino supplied.

"Yeah, Calabaza," Copal repeated. "But there's still Calavera."

"Isn't he taking the day off?"

"How can he? He never makes his quotas."

"Oh, yeah," Domino said, 'grinning' wickedly.

"Yeah," Copal sneered. "So he might wander in any minute now. And the first thing he'll see is that goddamned memo. So you'd better get your ass out there and bring that woman in!"

"Sure," Domino said, putting the work order in his pocket. "No problem."

"There'd better not be, or someone'll be taking *you* out to the greenhouse."

Domino left and, in the elevator, let loose a stream of invective toward Copal. Who did that slug think he was threatening? When he got to the garage his driver was waiting for him with the car. Before getting in he spotted Calavera's driver. He clicked his fingers at him and the demon trotted over.

"Calavera's not coming in today," Domino told him. "Take the rest of the day off. Go enjoy yourself."

"Are you sure, sir?" the demon asked.

"Hey!" Domino spread his arms. "It's a holiday! Why should you be stuck here while your boss whoops it up, huh? C'mon, get out of here, kid. And if anyone gives you trouble, just send 'em to me and I'll fix everything."

"Thank you, sir!" the demon said, then went to put Calavera's car away.

"OK," Domino said to his driver. "Let's go."

Domino soon found himself at a diner in the Land of the Living. He got his pigeon and bundled her into the car. As they pulled away from the diner Domino was surprised to see Calavera's car arriving. He waved happily to him as they passed, idly wondering where that big, orange replacement driver had come from.

Back at the office, Domino got the nun off to his boys in the *Nada Mañana* offices for the drop at the Pearl. Then, out of curiosity, he used his 'special' computer access to find out who the remaining soul in the diner was. He had a good laugh when he read the bio. Even with honest dice for once, Calavera *still* threw snake eyes. Chuckling, Domino stripped down to his undershirt and started working out on his punching bag. He was just getting into a good rhythm when Calavera walked in, asked a lot of strange questions while nosing around the office. When he started poking at the computer Domino warned him off even though the machine was secured. Finally, Domino got the pest out and then got back to the obituaries.

A few days later Domino was busy doing the paperwork on his legitimate cases when his message tube gave a sad hiss. A sure sign that the server had just crapped out again. Domino hated the slowdown that always caused. Eventually, demons from the mail room got around to distributing work orders and other documents. Domino looked over the first batch that came to him and set them aside. Nothing critical there. The second batch had a Double-N case right on top. Domino grabbed his reaper gear and headed out.

Once on the Limbo Highway Domino read over the bio. He always got a laugh out of that, seeing how the idiots denied themselves power, pleasure, and money just so he could take away their 'reward' and sell it to those who had earned it.

He had just finished reading when he spotted headlights in the rearview mirror. He turned to look through the rear window, idly wondering who else was going his way. He kept watching when he noticed the other car was catching up. He got a little concerned when he saw that it wasn't just headlights lighting the other car's way. The car—if that monstrosity *was* a car—seemed to be on fire.

Whatever it was, it was soon right on Domino's rear bumper. His driver was looking worriedly in the rear-view mirror, hardly paying attention to the road in front of him. The nightmare car kept pace with them for a while. Domino saw that Calavera's replacement driver from the poisoning was behind the wheel, and he was sure that was Calavera himself perched up behind him. The driver had a manic look on his face and Calavera already had his scythe out and planted beside him like some evil standard. *Death rides a burning hot rod*, Domino thought, shivering slightly despite himself.

Suddenly the other car surged forward. Domino's driver panicked and they went rolling over into the ditch at the side of the road. When it was over, his driver was the first out and helped Domino crawl through a broken window. He apologized repeatedly for the spill and looked so scared that Domino took the trouble to put him at ease. It wasn't as if he didn't share his driver's reaction to that car, after all.

Fortunately, his car wrecked in such a way that most of the damage was to the upper body. His driver was able to roll the car back onto the road. The engine started fine although it sounded like it was working a little harder than before. The driver thought it should get them there and back again, and Domino had a sick feeling he knew where Calavera was in such a hurry to get to. So they got back on the road. The driver said the steering wasn't right and took it a little more slowly than usual. They didn't see any sign of the hot rod on the way to their destination, and Domino began to hope that Calavera got lost. After all, *Domino* had the work order. But when he got to the hospital room where his pigeon was supposed to be, he found that she was already gone.

That was bad, and Domino felt an unfamiliar sinking feeling where his stomach used to be. He went back out to his car and told his driver to return to El Marrow. He did a lot of thinking on the trip back, and once the car came to a stop in the garage Domino immediately sought out the tube system operator to confirm his suspicions about its breakdown. That done, he went to report to Copal.

Considering the circumstances, Copal was relatively calm and level-headed about it. If they acted quickly enough, maybe they could cover up this little stumble. So he went and got Calavera into his office, giving a good performance as he righteously chewed him out. But Copal nearly lost control when they learned that the woman had already left the building in the belief that she didn't rate any better than the walking package. But he managed to keep up appearances and hustled Calavera out the door while letting Domino know he should call Hector.

That wasn't something Domino really wanted to do. He had no idea how Hector would react. Realistically, it was probably inevitable that someone would discover their scam, especially since Domino insisted on skimming so much from just one agent. But Domino's mind glossed over that fact. He wasn't worried about Calavera. They had him under control and could shut him up permanently at any moment. Domino was more concerned about the Colomar woman. She was loose, totally random,

and could do any amount of damage. But whatever the consequences, Domino had to make that phone call. Trying to keep what had happened from Hector would only make things worse. When Domino got him on the line, he said only that there was a problem and that they needed to talk in person in Copal's office right away.

When Hector arrived, he, Domino, and Copal shut themselves in. Domino quickly outlined what had happened, being careful to place the blame where it belonged. Hector just sat behind Copal's desk perfectly still except for one hand softly drumming on the desktop.

"Mr. LeMans, I assure you," Domino finished, "the missing woman *will* be found. I will personally track her down myself."

Hector's fingers stopped their tapping. "Just like you 'personally' picked her up from the Land of the Living?" he asked ironically.

"That *was* my intention," Domino protested, sounding a little too desperate to his ear holes. "But somehow, agent Calavera got to her first."

Hector's fingers drummed a quick riff. "We gave you the fastest car, Domino," he said, too softly for Domino's comfort. "We gave you all the best clients. You had *all* the advantages. So how was this Calavera able to sneak in there and eat your lunch?" By the end of his speech he was on his feet and towering over Domino.

"Oh, now Hector," Copal said, trying to sound reasonable, "you can't get too mad at Domino! That wasn't his fault." Domino felt a little relief as Copal went to bat for him.

"Oh, I can, Don," Hector said, again too quietly. "You should know I *can* get too mad." There was an almost imperceptible pause. "But not at Domino." As Hector said this, Domino noticed that his other hand—the one that hadn't been tapping on the desk—was holding something. "After all," Hector continued, "*he* wasn't in charge of this operation." The gun started to come up. "At least, not until now."

"Hector! *No!*" Copal shouted as he saw the muzzle point straight at him. Hector squeezed off three quick rounds and Copal dropped with a gurgling scream.

"Marigolds," Hector observed when it was over. "Funny. For some reason I was expecting tulips. Well, maybe Mr. Calavera, eh, Domino?" He chuckled as he sat back down. "Why don't you *personally* go down and escort him up here? The sooner he's sprouted and we can get back to business, the better."

"Right away, Mr. LeMans," Domino said, stepping over Copal's body as he left the office. On his way out he noticed that Eva wasn't at her desk, but thought nothing of it until he got to the storeroom where Copal said he put Calavera. The door was open and Calavera was not inside. He quickly returned to Hector.

"Calavera's gone," he said. "And so's his girlfriend...Copal's secretary."

"Hmm," was all Hector said at first. The one hand was back to drumming on the desk but, Domino was relieved to see, the other was on his enormous belly, patting in counterpoint. The gun remained out of sight wherever Hector had holstered it.

"Not the best news," he finally said, "but I think we can put that on the list of Don's failures as well. In any case," he continued as he hauled himself back to his feet, "I don't think Mr. Calavera is our immediate worry any longer. It sounds as though he and his lady friend have decided to remove themselves from our affairs. And it's not as if he knows anything definite...and he can't reveal what he does know without sticking his *own* head into the noose. That just leaves Mercedes Colomar," he said as he got to the door. "I'm counting on you to straighten this out, Domino." He nodded toward Copal's remains. "Don't forget I expect a great deal."

"You won't be disappointed," Domino said. "I'll find the woman, and I'll deal with Calavera, too."

“Nothing would please me more,” Hector said, “but don’t lose your perspective. Your first priority is that woman.” He opened the door. “I’ll see to your promotion in the morning. I trust you’ll chose a suitable time to clean up in here.” He closed the door behind him.

Naturally, Domino had no intention of hauling Copal out to the greenhouse in broad daylight. He returned to the office some time after midnight, after celebrating his good fortune at a series of nightclubs. He had with him a large, strong plastic bag for carrying the remains. He went into Copal’s...into *his* office...and began working the shrubbery formerly known as Don Copal into the sack. After a minute or so he paused, hearing a soft, scuffling noise from outside the window. When he didn’t hear the sound repeated, still unsure whether he had really heard anything at all, he returned to his task.

Probably just pigeons, he thought.