

CHAPTER FIVE: CARE PACKAGE
by Chad Underkoffler [chadu@yahoo.com]

"A clown is a warrior who fights gloom." -- Red Skelton

The mailman handed her the package, smiled, and walked away with a cheery "Good afternoon!" Puzzled, Lenora Washington looked at it before going back into her motel room. The size of a shoebox and wrapped in stained brown paper, the box boldly bore the words "Lenora Washington, General Delivery" across its top in black magic marker. In the upper right corner, where the stamp should go, was a twisty little rune, a bugle with a knot tied in its middle. Then she noticed the package stank of magick and blood. She felt it thrumming under her fingertips with an unfamiliar shiver to it that sparked her curiosity.

Who knew where she was? Who would be sending her a magick box? *I'm too old for these shenanigans.* It might be a bomb from the Executioner—but that would be far too impersonal. Her type liked to be up close for the kill. She shuddered. *Maybe it's from the Executioner's bosses, the ones who the Man Who Walked Through Walls works for? Or maybe the kidnapper is clued-in and feels me walking in her footprints, and wants to scare me off?*

She shuffled back inside and nervously set the box down on the motel desk next to the ceramic bust of the King that she took everywhere. Immediately, Elvis began crying. She picked up the bust and the tears ceased flowing. She wiped its face with her hank, and set it on the chest of drawers.

She drew the curtains shut, and rooted through her bags for the gourd that contained her sacred white flour. Working quickly, she sketched protective *vevers* around the strange package. A tiny trickle of her mojo flowed with pleasurable release into the floured lines as she closed the magick circle. As soon as she did it, she felt guilty: wards were never a sure thing, and with that little boy still lost, she shouldn't be wasting her juice on junk mail. *Still, it might stop the box from biting like a mean dog when I open it. I'm no good to anyone crippled or dead.* She **had** to open that package: it itched her something fierce.

She lit candles around the four corners of the box, then went into the bathroom to get the tongs from the ice bucket. Holding the package down with her gourd, she used the tongs to rip off the brown paper and revealed a battered shoebox. She carefully removed the lid with the tongs.

The shoebox was full of junk and crumpled balls of newspaper. The edge of one of the sheets read "the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette." A sealed envelope sat on top with "Ms. Washington" scrawled across its face. She tweezed the envelope with the tongs and shuffled over to the bust of the King, shoving the envelope right under his nose. Elvis did not react.

She put down her tongs and opened the letter.

Dear Ms. Washington,

Fourteen years ago, you saved my life. I was eight. I can never thank you enough or repay you for that debt. I know you're in trouble now: gossip flies, and in the Underground, it's supersonic. Five days ago, I found a vision in a deck of cards, and I knew what I had to do, where I had to go, and who I had to meet...

* * *

Horns were blaring as Jack King placed his booted foot onto the curb, finishing his jaywalk through the rushing traffic. He felt the tingling buzz in the back of his skull subside. The buzz was the way the universe let him know that it had just handed him more strings of luck to pull and twist and twine however he desired. He smiled easily and let his joy dance upon his face. *What a wonderful world to be alive in!* He was twenty-two, idealistic, and too damn confident.

His quick stride made the swallowtails of his coat swing back and forth as he crossed the sidewalk to Harry's Magic Shop. A customer came out, and Jack walked on through the opened door into the shop

without stopping. He had a song in his heart, a black eye on his face, and queasy feeling in his stomach. All were due to his previous night's activities.

Last night, Jack had broken into a hospital. *Well, that wasn't exactly true. Jack King hadn't broken in to San Rafael General. More precisely, Quixote the Clown had broken into it.* Quixote was Jack when his inner face of joy and laughter shone out through greasepaint. Uncle Ernie—Boingo to the crowd sitting in the big-top stands—had always said to him, “Remember, Jacky, your greasepaint isn't a mask, it's a window. Your soul has to shine out through it. People will see it, and some of their soul will leak out through their eyes to meet you. That's how you can make 'em laugh that good laugh, all the way down in the belly.” It was good advice.

Last night: Jack/Quixote had completed his latest Quest: one hundred children's ward performances at midnight without official sanction. Charm had been his Weapon. Over the past three years, he had flattered, cajoled, grifted, or blustered his way into wards past security guards, floor nurses, and desk nurses. When that failed, he sneaked in. He learned to awaken children quietly and without alarm. His fifteen-minute performance was polished, complete with jokes, pantomime, balloon animals, pratfalls, and magic tricks. He heard their muffled laughter in the dim light and felt their joy wrap around him. It flavored the charges he gleaned as Quixote with delight. Perhaps it had something to do with the greasepaint. And he had discovered how to slip in and out of hospitals quietly.

Last night: there had been a little trouble. Not as much trouble as St. Louis, where he had spent three days in jail before he gathered sufficient mojo and pulled enough threads of luck to unravel his arrest (a lost file, a speedy transfer, and an opened door), but still trouble. Security had caught him leaving the ward, and he had been forced to lead them a merry chase through the hospital hallways. The chase ended with a short fistfight on the hospital roof (where he got the shiner). But the climax of the evening had been the running leap across five feet of San Rafael urban chasm, with seven stories down to the cold, hard, unforgiving pavement. *Piece of cake. Nothing compared to wire and trapeze-work with the Flying Kaznewskis under the big top.* Busting through the roof access door and getting down to street level while dodging **that** building's security had been almost an afterthought. During the pursuit, he had lost his satchel full of balloons and make-up.

Last night: Jack had racked up a sizable amount of mojo. He had used a lot of it to tug order out of chaos, and the universe **still** owed him big-time for the risks he had run. But no matter how big a load of juice he was carrying, it'd be better if he got out of San Rafael, maybe out of California entirely, before the heat came down. So he dusted off his black swallowtail coat, traded his floppy shoes and baggy pants for Timberlines and blue jeans, then hit the road.

His Quest achieved, Jack needed to find another one—soon, before the Emptiness came and gnawed at his heart. The queasy feelings of aimlessness, disorientation, and helplessness he was feeling now indicated his treacherous footing on the sword-bridge: one slip and life became a long cutting fall into the maw of oblivion.

And it couldn't just be **any** Quest: it had to be one that he could believe in. Jack honestly liked helping people, putting himself on the line for other folks. His risk-loving behaviors seemed a hell of a lot less self-indulgent when he kept other peoples' welfare in mind. He needed goals, tasks, Quests to give his madness some method. *Making children laugh amidst the terrors of isolation, sickness, and the dark had been a good one, but it was over now. Complete. Fin. I need something new.*

Harry's Magic Shop was dim, dusty, and narrow. The air smelled of greasepaint, latex, and cigarette smoke. A milkshake voice rolled to the front of the shop from the back, singing “Mountain Greenery.” The man behind the back counter—Harry, one would presume—was tall, bespectacled, needle-nosed, and balding. He was talking to a customer and shuffling a deck of cards. “You'll like this one. Corky Withers himself taught it to me back in '71.” Jack strolled to the back to watch. He did a little prestidigitation in his clowning routine, and it was always good to pick up a new card trick or two: they played well with the under-12 set.

Harry smiled as Jack approached, but continued his patter with the other customer. "He was a great one. Did the prettiest five-lift you ever saw. I watched him do the Rising Aces in Vegas once, and nobody did it better. He wasn't a half-bad ventriloquist, either..." Harry's delivery reminded Jack of California Sam, the midway manager for his family's circus. Half-listening, Jack kept his eye on the cards as they riffled through Harry's nail-bitten fingers. *The Hindu Shuffle*. Harry was showing off. Snap, riffle! *The In the Hands Shuffle*. *Very pretty*. The blue Bicycle backs winked in the dim light. Riffle-Snap! Harry started flipping cards over and throwing them down on the glass counter top into a number of piles. That's when the threads of chance and chaos twisted tight around Jack King's head and opened his eyes to See.

In a dreamlike fog, the cards swirled. The Queen of Clubs had a familiar-looking black woman's face. She jumped out of Harry's fingers and ran from pile to pile, grabbing a deuce of Hearts here and dragging it to a pile of Hearts over there. The Queen of Clubs did the same thing with a Four of Diamonds, a Queen of Spades, a Four of Hearts—dragging each to return them to their proper suits. And then she lifted the Jack of Spades from the pile, and looking at that card, Jack saw his own face, and suddenly he **was** the card.

Her name came to his mind: Lenora Washington. The psychic that Aunt Maude knew from Memphis. The one who had found him fourteen years ago, when the Hotdog Man had stolen him away from the circus. The woman who had carried him through fire as he whimpered in fear, and who had neatly snipped the six weeks between his abduction and the fire from his mind, leaving only a vague, cottony gray haze. That's when the weird stuff started happening to him all the time.

Lenora left him, the Jack of Spades, standing alone as she rushed back to her card sorting. She brought a few other cards to stand next to him, but he couldn't see who they were. They stood together, saying nothing, and watched the Queen/Lenora rescue cards and return them to their families.

Out of nowhere, The Ace of Spades appeared, flying down upon Lenora. Behind the giant spade lurked a thin, white, woman's face. She wore sunglasses and had blonde hair. The Ace grabbed Lenora, shook her, and cast her down flat; she drew a gun and held it to Lenora's head. The tableau froze.

The Jack of Spades/Jack made for the Ace of Spades, to stop her, but the cards that had been standing beside him jumped in front and blocked his way. The Seven of Diamonds, the Eight of Clubs, the Deuce of Spades, and the Queen of Diamonds all stood against him.

He moved to the Seven of Diamonds, who had the face of a sixteen-year-old white boy. Jack/Jack looked into his eyes, and pleaded wordlessly: *Let me help her. Can you help her?* The Seven ripped off one of his diamonds and handed it to Jack. *Give it to her*, the Seven thought to him. *I will*, he responded. The Seven stepped aside.

One by one, he walked up to them, held out his hand, and accepted a spot from each. The Queen of Diamonds was the last. The card bore the face of a young girl who had bright eyes and skin the color of *café au lait*. As she handed over one of her diamonds and stepped aside, she pointed at his right shoulder, then shrugge her shoulders. He reached to tear free one of his spades—and stopped. The tiny spades under the "A" of the Ace were winking at him. His path now unimpeded, Jack ran at the Ace of Spades, which turned away from Lenora to start firing at him and--

Harry's reedy voice melted the vision abruptly, as hot breath on a snowflake. "Are you all right, mac?" Harry, looking concerned. His cards sat idle, his trick was over, the other customer gone. Face up across a sea of blue card backs, the Ace of Spades lay across the Queen of Clubs. The Jack of Spades stood to the side, surrounded by the Seven of Diamonds, the Eight of Clubs, the Two of Spades, and the Queen of Diamonds.

Jack's thoughts moved like lightning. His stomach spun, feeling hollow, sour, and cold. This was it. *I must aid Lenora Washington against her foe, this Ace of Spades woman*. His blood ran cold, and he swallowed hard. *The Ace of Spades is the Executioner*. It would be suicide, going up against a mystical killer.

A hell of a risk. Jack smiled. *My latest Quest, it seems, has found me. It'll probably be my last.* There was an uncoiling sensation deep in Jack's soul; he had a new purpose. *A new Quest demands a new Weapon. Something tells me I will require something more than a charming disposition to challenge an Executioner with any hope of victory. I could choose fighting prowess, but the Executioner is Death Walking. How can I compete with that? I have my magick and synchronicity on my side. I still need an edge. I'll need keen sight to find these once-lost children, keep my wits about me, she the Executioner before she sees me, and give me a chance to piece things together. My perception must be my Sword.* The selection was made.

As he chose his Weapon, Jack felt an instant of dizziness. The world blurred and swam and suddenly **snapped** into sharper focus. The queasy sensation in his stomach melted away, leaving him feeling solid, focused, and razor-fine.

Jack blinked his eyes to try to adjust to the new level of detail he was taking in. *So much; so much.* This always happened when the Weapon was first drawn from its sheath in his soul. It would pass soon enough, and only express itself when needed. "Yeah, I'm okay. I was watching your manipulation and got lost in my own thoughts." He **looked** at Harry, his mind took it all in. A thousand little clues and sensory impressions rolled into Jack's head through his senses and knitted themselves together into wholes. His nails cut half-moons into his palms as he sought to control the new overwhelming power of perception of his Weapon. Jack began to sweat.

"You a professional prestidigitator? We have International Brotherhood of Magicians and Society of American Magicians discounts." The stained fingers, the stale smells of tobacco, the bulge in the shirt pocket. Harry was left-handed and had recently switched cigarette brands from Camel to Winston.

Jack shook his head no while he chuckled to himself. *If he only knew.* "No. I'm a joey, you know, a clown. Do a few card and coin manipulations in my act, that's all. The Rub-A-Dub Vanish, a selection of forces, knuckle-walking quarters, the Miser's Dream, you know."

"No problem, we offer Clowns of America International and World Clown Association discounts too, sonny. What's your pleasure?" The organization and layout of the shop. The timbre of his voice. The assured authority. The Georgetown ring. Harry had definitely gone to law school.

"You have Apple White?" The flood of sensory impressions into his head was receding. *Good.*

"Nah. We have Ben Nye in stock, mostly. It's popular here. Still interested?" The way he stood. Harry had been in prison, or juvenile hall, before law school. He still held himself a little like a punk. The voice again. Harry was born in Newport, raised in New York, but visits people in LA regularly.

Christ, I feel like Sherlock Holmes, Auguste Dupin, and Batman, all in one. "Ben Nye is fine. I need a big pot of Clown White, a tub of Super White Powder, and a tub of Neutral Set Powder, a little pot of red, and two little pots of black. Oh, and pack of Bicycles and throw in a bag of those balloons." Jack smiled at the paradox of a punk lawyer. *Wait...*

Harry started rooting around on the back shelves. "So, you're a whiteface. Neat or Grotesque?" The vocabulary. The pitch. The fluid twist and twitch of the fingers. Not just a punk, a carny, a grifter. A con man.

"Grotesque. Late of King & King Circus, now an itinerant zany. *Who the hell is this guy? He's a real weirdo... or maybe my new Weapon is feeding me bullshit? Maybe I'm reading too much into these things I notice. Maybe I'm noticing stuff that isn't there. Damn. Going to have to watch that.* He consciously reined in his Sword. "Jack King aka Quixote the Clown, at your service."

To get his mind off of Harry, he did a comedy bow with plenty of flourish that led to a sweeping pratfall. The floorboards sagged under his back, and dust flew up in a cloud. Groucho noses, exploding

cigars, and plastic vomit fell off of the wall and onto his chest. Jack sneezed repeatedly as he stood up, and coughed as he put the novelties back on their hooks.

"Don't wreck the place, sonny," laughed Harry as he kept piling the make-up on the counter. *Christ, he's slow. No, that ain't it. He doesn't trust me. He can see I've grifted once or twice myself.* "I've never seen you in here before. You settling down in Newport then, or just passing through? We got a great local Clown Alley if you're planning to stick around. I play poker with one of the guys every Thursday."

Poker. The word sent a pleasurable shiver up Jack's spine. Harry would scratch his cheek when he had a bad hand, and grit his teeth when he had a good one. With this keenness of perception, Jack realized, all of his opponents' tells would be clear as crystal. He could make a killing in Vegas. Unfortunately, making a mint in a casino (one of the ones he was still allowed into, anyway) wasn't part of his Quest. Anyway, all the risk of playing cards would be gone, and therefore not worth doing at all.

"I just go where my feet take me, and if I weren't on my way to a gig I'd hang around for the game. I love poker..." His words trailed off as he realized something. *Poker. Ante. Money. Dammit! My grouch bag was in the satchel. All I've got is the emergency fund, and that won't cover this!* "Excuse me, Mr...."

"Stone. But you can call me Harry." The balding older man smiled roguishly.

There's more to this guy than I can weasel out using my Weapon. It obviously has its limitations. Garbage In, Garbage Out. "Harry, then. Is there someplace I can get a soda? My throat's awful parched, and the dust isn't helping."

Still laboriously collecting Jack's order, Harry told him about the Quik Stop around the corner. Jack quickly excused himself. "I'll be right back, Harry."

A quick jog down the street, a scratch-off ticket, a little bit of saved luck burned, and Jack came back into Harry's Magic Shop \$98 and a Coke richer. All of the clown supplies he wanted sat on the glass counter. "Sorry, Harry. The clerk there was giving me a hard time. What's the damage?"

"Fifty-five, with tax." Harry still didn't trust him.

So what? I don't trust this guy either. He's either a grifter or a lawyer, and I wouldn't turn my back on either. Jack laid down three crisp twenties.

While he put away his change, Harry bagged the purchases. "To be honest, buddy, I was afraid you were gonna walk off. This is a nice load of stuff and you're looking a little dusty and beat up. But I figured to give you the benefit of the doubt and wait to see if you came back from the Quik Stop."

"Thanks. You've got to take a chance on people now and then. And I think most of the time you come up aces."

* * *

This collection of odds and ends is the result of my vision. I let my feet follow Synchronicity, and I spoke to a number of people whose lives you have touched. We all hope that these items can help you in your hour of need as you helped us in ours.

Good luck.

Quixote & the League of Lost Children.

Lenora Washington folded the note and put it to one side. She sat without moving or speaking for a short time. From outside came the groan of a large truck as it rolled down the street, then her room filled with cottony silence again.

With a sigh, Lenora dragged the shoebox closer to her, and began gingerly picking out items from it. The first thing her questing fingers fished up was a thick roll of ten-dollar bills, held with a dirty rubber band. There was maybe \$500 dollars there... and a playing card.

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The Seven of Diamonds. Monday. Tampa, FL.

They were chasing the white kid. Jack wasn't sure exactly why, not at this distance, at least. What he was sure about was that the white kid was the Seven of Diamonds.

Jack walked down the puddled alley, turned left, walked some more, turned right, stepped into a doorway, and waited. And waited. He stifled a yawn.

He heard the splashing of feet approach his doorway. *Three. Two. One.* He spun out of the door and grabbed the kid's shoulder with one hand and covered his mouth with the other, then yanked him into the doorway. The kid struggled wildly until Jack slammed his head up against the doorjamb one good time. "Shh! I'm saving your ass. Just be quiet."

A torrent of splashing and cursing and catcalls, and suddenly the leather-jacketed pursuit streamed past the shadowed doorway. About fifteen kids, none more than eighteen years old, armed with chains, knives, and pistols. They never even looked to the sides, they just ran on, hooting and yelling. In moments, they were gone, and the noise of their passage faded to nothing. He took his hand away from the boy's mouth.

"Oh Jesus, thanks man! You saved my ass there! Anything you want, man, you can have one on the house. Just come down to Beaufort Drive and ask for Jimmy. I got pot, crack, acid, even smack. This Bud's for you." The kid tried to step out of the doorway, but Jack's hand held him firmly against the wall. "Hey, what's this shit?"

"This isn't the first time you've been saved, is it, Jimmy?" He **looked** at Jimmy. Jack saw the walls go up inside, felt the tensing of the boy's muscles, heard the tremor in his voice.

"I don't know what you're talking about." He did. Jimmy was a punk and a pusher. Worse than that, he cut his wares with baking soda. It got him into trouble. Often. It was written in everything he was.

"Think back. You were... eight or nine. Someone... a woman... took you away against your will. You didn't like where she took you or what she made you do. A black woman from Tennessee saved you from her. Do you remember the black woman from Tennessee?"

"Y-yeah." Fear. Trying to stamp down on dark memories. False bravado rallying down deep, to cover the weakness.

"She's in trouble. She needs your help. Can you help her?"

Jimmy looked at him, and a sneer broke out on his lips, masking his uncertainty. "This is bullshit, man. Who told you about her? Did Miguel, 'cause he said he wouldn't, and if he did, I'm gonna kick his ass—"

Jack slammed Jimmy up against the doorjamb again. "I see how far your gratitude goes, Jimmy. You're a waste of skin. But the cards said you could help her." His hazel eyes seemed to burn, to bore into Jimmy's skull through the punk's light blue eyes. *Walk with me*, thought Jack, pushing it out through his eyes. He heard birdsong and smelled road dust and let it roll into Jimmy.

Jimmy's body relaxed slightly and his blue eyes glazed. The pusher inhaled deeply and evenly.

“Again: can you help her?”

“Sure.” The pusher’s voice was mellow and he had a dopey look upon his face. “I can help her.” He pulled a roll of bills out of his pocket. “I’ve got plenty of money. Have her buy something nice.”

“Fine.” Jack released the kid and took the money. Turning away, he put it in his new green satchel. “Out of charity, I’m going to give you a little advice. Stop cutting your product before you kill somebody or get killed because of it.” He stepped out of the doorway and started walking down the alley.

Jimmy shook his head to clear out the cobwebs. “Hey, wait, man! Don’t you give me any of that sanctimonious—” Jimmy stepped out of the doorway to follow him, but Jack was already too far away to hear the rest.

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Lenora reached into the box and pulled a small magenta keychain Maglite out from the crumpled bits of stained newspaper. She clicked the button and a spot of light tickled the motel room wall. She clicked it back off. The attached keyring passed through a punched hole in the corner of another playing card

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The Eight of Clubs. Tuesday. Tucson, AZ.

Eddie loved the Church Street Winter Fair. There were rides and games and candy and popcorn and music and clowns! Mom had said she was big enough to walk around herself, and had given her ten whole dollars to spend! Eddie decided to go to the ring-toss and try to win a goldfish. She was looking for her friend Tina when she saw the clown looking at her.

He was tall, and he looked kinda young under all that make-up—probably not any older than her sister Annie’s boyfriend Joe. Maybe it **was** Joe! His face was all white, with black diamonds over his eyes, a thin black pencil mustache, and a beard like an upside-down spade. His smile was red, and he had a red clown nose on. His hair was hidden under a black skullcap. He wore black and white checkerboard baggy pants, a funny tailed coat, with a spotted white shirt and a fat black tie. He had big, red floppy shoes, carried a green shoulder bag, and was holding a big bunch of black and white balloons. The clown was looking at her and smiling, and now he was walking over to her!

“Hail and well met, young maiden. Have no fear, I am Quixote, a gentle knight.” It didn’t sound like Joe. He squatted down gracefully, making himself even shorter than she was. She smiled.

“Hi, Mr. Clown! I like your pants. How much are the balloons?” If they were cheap, she’d buy a couple. “I’m gonna go to the ring-toss, and I don’t want to spend too much!” Maybe she could tie them to the little plastic baggie her goldfish would be in, and let him fly away. That could be fun.

“For a kind word, free!” He handed her the balloons. Without thinking, she grabbed the strings, and he touched her wrist, lightly. She looked at him, confused, and his hazel eyes seemed to flash. It sounded like he had asked her to trust him, and that sounded all right, she guessed.

“Maiden,” said the clown, “when you were younger, did you lose your path in some caves?”

“Yeah, for two whole days.” The worlds just seemed to bubble out of her. “I got awful hungry. They made it into a State Park— Kartchner Caverns State Park.” Eddie liked telling people about her ordeal. “It was dark, but I had this flashlight my sister gave me for my birthday.” She took the light out of her pocket and showed it to him. “And I sang songs when it got real scary.”

“Do you recall the Lady who succored you—who found you in the damp darkness?”

“Yeah. She was nice. She looked like Tina’s grammy, but with more hair. She helped me sing a

few songs. Then she sang a couple songs I never heard before. She lit a candle, put a candy bar in front of it, and talked to some people who weren't there. Then the policemen came."

"Listen very closely, young maiden fair. The Lady Lenora—the Lady that found you in the dark—is in trouble. Can you aid her now as she aided you then?"

"Is she in the dark?" The dark didn't scare Edie anymore. Not much. Edie was a big girl. "Is she trapped in the dark and can't find the way out, like I was?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

Edie held out her flashlight. "You think she could use this? I put in fresh batteries and everything last month, and haven't hardly used it at all."

"I'm sure she could. My thanks to you." He stood up, still touching her lightly. "Enjoy the balloons, fair maiden, and allow this knight to gift you a little good luck for the ring-toss." His fingers felt warm, then he took them away from her wrist. "Farewell." He turned away and walked into the crowd, leaving her holding a bunch of white and black balloons.

Edie felt like she was waking up. She yawned, stretched, and blinked. The clown was gone. She shook her head and ran over to the ring-toss. She felt lucky for sure.

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A gold-plated over-and-under derringer, with a pearl-inlaid bird's head grip, sat in the palm of Lenora's hand. She broke open the chamber and saw the two .38 Special rounds loaded within. The gun dripped with sadness and despair. She stood up, walked over to her bag, and stuffed the gun in the bottom near her unmentionables. The playing card that had been attached to it fluttered to the green carpet.

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The Deuce of Spades. Wednesday. Atlantic City, NJ.

The weight of grief squeezed silent tears out of Niko Karabatsos' eyes as he sat hunched over his whiskey in the casino lounge. Outside the cafe, the voices of the crowd melted along with the spinning tumblers of the one-armed bandits and the barks of the pit bosses into a single rhythmic pulse. Inside the bar, the jukebox had Sinatra crooning as a rampart against the droning noise.

*That's life, I can't deny it,
I thought of quitting,
But my heart just won't buy it.
If I didn't think it was worth a try,
I'd roll myself up in a big ball and die.*

He sat in his booth, facing the bar rather than the casino so he wouldn't have to look at the people. *You're a liar, Frank. It's not worth a try. Not after the abduction. Allen's my only hope.* A metal attaché case sat on the table. It was one minute past midnight. It was his son Damon's birthday.

The Sinatra song ended, replaced by Roger Miller.

*Trailer for sale or rent,
Rooms to let, fifty cents,
No phone, no pool, no pets—
I ain't got no cigarettes,
Ah but two hours of pushin' broom
Buys an eight by twelve four-bit room;
I'm a man of means by no means,
King of the road...*

Someone slid into the seat across from him in his booth. "Excuse me, sir?" Niko looked up, and found himself staring into the face of a young man. He was in his early twenties, clean-shaven, dark spiky hair, hazel eyes behind silver wire rim glasses. His left eye was puffy and discolored. The glasses had no glass in them. "What's wrong?"

"Everything is wrong." Niko passed his meaty hand down his tanned and craggy cheeks and pushed his tears down into his beard. *Everything's been wrong since my boy was taken from me.* One of his hands rested protectively on the metal case. With the other, he picked up his whiskey and drank off the last half-inch. "Do I know you?"

"No, you don't." The cocktail waitress came over to their table. The young man pulled out a fifty and handed it to her. "Get another of whatever my friend is having here, and I'd like a scotch and soda." She took the money, smiled and walked over to the bar. "I'd like to ask you something, but that can wait a minute. You look like hell. Maybe I can help."

"Why would you?" *Just go away. Let me have my (last?) drink in peace.*

The young man smiled. "Because one person at the right place and at the right time can make a difference. A kind word, a smile, a helping hand. Just a little bit of that can save a person's life."

Niko stiffened, and thought about the derringer in his pocket. *He's nuts.* "Who are you? Who sent you? Allen? I'm not handing over this case to anybody but him."

The kid nodded, as if he had been proved right about something. The waitress brought their drinks just as he said, "You can call me Jack King. And nobody sent me, except maybe Fate."

When the waitress heard King's name, her eyes went wide, she turned to the bar, and nodded once at the bartender. King didn't seem to notice. He was too busy staring into Niko's eyes. "I can tell this: you've suffered a great loss that haunts you. You're driven by it. You've done terrible things because of it."

Dead. Cut up like a lamb in the butcher shop. Niko pushed the images away. "Leave me alone."

King plunged on, heedless of Niko's protest. "You've heard of an old drunk named Dirk Allen who's said to have certain talents that could return to you what you've lost. You brought something very valuable in this case to offer him for doing that service for you. You've paid for whatever it is with all you have and all you are. If Allen refuses, or can't do what you want him to do, you're going to use the gun in your pocket to blow out your brains in your room upstairs."

Whatthehell? "H-how do you know all this?" stammered Niko. He made the sign against the Eye under the table, but King didn't seem to react. Indeed, now he felt the kid's stare pinning him like a butterfly to a board. "What do you care?" Over the boy's shoulder he saw the bartender and the waitress whispering at each other and shooting glances at them. The waitress suddenly turned and walked out the door, making for the casino manager's office.

"I have the eyes to See. I care because I must, or the world means nothing; I care because I want to, because I can make a difference; and I care because I have to, because I need something from you. Walk with me."

Niko felt the wind blowing across his face and heard the river's rush in his ears. He took a deep breath, and felt very relaxed. His pain and sadness over Damon were still there, but it was as if someone had covered them with a heavy flannel blanket. *Like Nana used to when I was small.* Niko sighed.

"Do you remembering hiring a psychic named Lenora Washington to help you find your child?"

Niko nodded. “Damon.” *Poor little black-haired and barefooted boy. Never to grow more. Never to sing, or cry, or laugh again.* “She found him, but he... didn’t make it.” Tears spilled out of his eyes, but it was as if it was far away.

The kid leaned forward and put his hand on top of Niko’s burly forearm. “Give me the gun.”

Niko pulled out the loaded derringer and handed it to King. It was like he couldn’t resist at all, save to mumble “No.”

“Yes.” King made the gun disappear somehow—up his sleeve or something. “Listen to me. I don’t care what the old man said. Dirk Allen can’t bring Damon back. Not the way you want him to.”

“Then I want to die, and be with my son. In Heaven. Give me back my gun, so I can end it.”

“No!” Command rippled through King’s voice. He reached out and placed his hand on Niko’s shoulder. “Not the way you are now. If you die obsessed like this, you’ll **never** find Damon on the other side. Trust me. I’ve spoken to the dead, I **know**. You’ll be too spurred on by your desolation to see him. You have to heal the pain or you’ll never find him on the other side. Learn to live again before you learn to—“

A deep voice interrupted King’s admonition. “Mr. King. You were told what you would get if you ever came into my casino again.” A short and broad man with a luxurious head of hair stood before the booth, hands folded at his waist. Two big bouncers stood at either side of him. All three were scowling at the young man.

Niko recognized the short man as the casino manager. As King turned to talk to him, he took his hand from Niko’s shoulder. Immediately, Niko blinked several times and felt more alert. *What the hell was going on here? He hypnotized me?*

“Mr. Bernadini, in point of fact, I’m in the lounge and not the casino.”

The casino manager sneered. “Shut up, punk.” He turned to his gorillas. “Rough him up and throw him out.”

The taller of the two bouncers grabbed King by his black T-shirt and yanked him out of the booth. The kid didn’t try to get away, or even struggle in the big ape’s grip. *Actually, he looks almost eager to get beat up.*

That’s when Niko thought of the derringer that he had given the kid. The serial number pointed right back at Niko Karabatsos. His stomach sank. *The kid was going to shoot those bouncers! That’s why he wanted the gun!*

The tall bouncer took his ham-sized fist and walloped King in the stomach once, twice, thrice, and then yanked him upright so the other bouncer could backhand the kid a good one. Or five. King was bleeding profusely from the mouth and nose. The only thing keeping him standing was the bouncer’s hand holding him up. He was still grinning like a loon when the next punch to the face finally knocked him unconscious. Then, each of the bouncers grabbed an arm and dragged King out through the lounge’s back door.

Bernadini glared at Niko. “I’ll be keeping an eye on you, buddy. We run a straight house here. You try and scam any games like Jacky-boy there did last time, and you’ll wish you were dead.”

Oddly enough, Niko didn’t seem to wish for that anymore.

* * *

Poking blindly around in the crumpled balls of newspaper—many of them covered in rusty-brown smears—Lenora felt the tingle of magic before she felt the bill itself. It had been twisted and folded into a loop, like a ring. The vibrations flowing around the ring were welcoming. She considered sliding it on her own finger... but decided to wait a bit longer. She looked at the card that the ring had been Scotch-taped to.

* * *

The Queen of Diamonds. Thursday. Portland, OR.

On a green park bench, a little girl in a denim jacket sat sorting Pokemon cards. Holographic Charizards and Pikachu flashed between her fingers; one of those fingers wore a ring made of a folded dollar bill. Her eyes were a cold, malachite green and her skin, the color of *café au lait*. Even at her young age, it was easy to tell she'd grow up to be, if not pretty, then certainly exotic. Despite the piles of collectible card wealth before her, her nose was wrinkled in dissatisfaction. An open bookbag and a Thermos sat next to her on the bench.

Jack crossed the lawn towards her, cheerfully grinning at the “Do Not Walk on the Grass” sign posted. The tightrope of synchronicity he was walking along led straight towards the girl; and something more than blind luck was tugging at his heart, leading him to her. Something strong. Something magick.

He released a thin shard of mojo from his store. *Show me the magick*. He felt the universe twist a little, and his already-enhanced perception clicked up another notch. He saw the lines of force and chance and luck and entropy that ran between everyone and everything, pulsing in all the colors of the rainbow. A web of money-green lines radiated from the dollar bill ring the little girl wore. Only the deep emerald green aura flame spouting wildly from deep inside her skull matched it.

Shocked, Jack nearly tripped and fell over the low wrought iron fence that bounded the park's paths. *That little girl is a Plutomancer—and a strong one. And an uncontrolled one, if I'm reading this right. This might be tricky...* He stepped over the fence and walked to stop in front of her.

She had paused in her card sorting to sip Kool Aid from her Thermos. “What?” Her haughty green eyes held no fear, but she covered her cards with her hands as if she thought he would try to take them from her. The tag on her bookbag read “Paula Goodwin.”

“You look like you want a friend. Indeed, you're calling out for one, aren't you, Paula?”

A quick look at her ring and momentarily joy masked quickly with wariness. “I don't know what you're talking about.” Hope peeking out of her face, though. Jack had seen it in a hundred kiddie wards, and knew it well. She visibly gripped her Pokemon cards tighter.

“My name's Jack. Your ring is for acquiring friends, isn't it?”

“How did you know?”

“Magick.” He pulled his hand out of his pocket and showed her. It was full of change. “Call it.” And he threw the coins into the air.

“Heads!”

A little more risk mojo melted away, a sharp tug on chance, and every single coin lay with their faces to the sky. “I need to talk to you.” He tapped his heel on the ground and snapped another tiny thread of chaos. The coins all flipped up on end and rolled to rest at his feet. He knelt to gather them back up. Paula eyed the coins greedily, like a starving girl.

“Why?” She quickly gathered up her cards and shoved them into her jacket pockets. She kept her hands inside with them.

His eyes were level with hers. “I saw you in a vision. Do you remember a woman named Lenora Washington?”

Pain, anger, loss writhed across her face before she regained control. “Yeah.”

“She’s in trouble. I’m putting together a little care package from the kids she found; little gifts from us to say ‘thank you.’ Can you help her with a gift of some sort? A gift of importance and meaning?”

The girl thought about this, her eyes hooded. “Why should I?” she finally asked.

Jack blinked. “Because she helped you. You owe her at least a token for that, don’t you?”

“I don’t **owe** her anything!” Jack had never heard such fury in a little girl’s voice. “My Grampy paid for her help, twice over. He zeroed himself to pay her fee. With his magick gone, his enemies got him. Now he just sits looking out the window all day long. He doesn’t talk, or feed himself, or **anything** anymore. Worst, he can’t teach me about magick now, and he was gonna teach me the **good** spells before... before they took me. Now I’ll **never** know how to do them. And it’s all her fault.”

Rumors, memories, and tidbits from the Occult Underground he’d heard over the past few years came together. He’d heard of Paul Goodwin, one of the original West Coast warbucks. Mean customer. Must have made a lot of enemies. He’d heard a story that the old bastard was working on something big; it looked like it must have been indoctrinating his own granddaughter into Plutomancy. *Probably part of some kind of master plan to gather major juice. Crazy. What kind of man would do that his own flesh and blood? What did it do to her, growing up like that? Is that what made her such a mean, selfish little girl?*

He thought of Edie, the Eight of Clubs. *Night and day, the two of them.* “I don’t think so, Paula. She did find you, after all. Don’t you care, at least, that another person is in trouble?”

“If you care for somebody, you get can hurt. Just look at what happened to my Grampy. I don’t want to be hurt.”

Christ, it’s worse than I thought. “Caring is the most important thing in the world. No matter what the consequences, no matter what comes, you have to care. Otherwise, the world turns to shit. Look around you—you can see it happening. We’ve really got to pitch in and help one another, it’s what ties us together, keeps us healthy. Lenora cared enough to risk the Sleeper to find you.”

"She didn't really care; she was just doing it for the money."

Jack shook his head. He felt sorry for the little warbucks, but enough was enough. “Walk with me.” He locked eyes with her, pushing the driving power of his Quest at her.

Unfortunately, the road-song and swallow-flight splashed and skittered off of Paula’s burning aura. *Oh, no. She’s no rube, no First of May; no easy mark—she’s a trouper, and a potent one.* “Dammit.” He reached again for the power, but she’d already jumped off of the bench and averted her eyes. He stood up.

From one of her jacket pockets, Paula whipped out a toy pistol, a Zebra Gun, the kind that shoots little colorful plastic discs. Strange runes and sigils covered the golden plastic and it had flanges made from Pokemon cards. Jack could see that it was loaded with pennies instead of discs. Potency throbbled from it—magick. Her other hand held Pokemon cards, spread in a fan, lifted in front of her like a shield. Lines of force snapped and whirred around the cards—more magick. She snarled at him. “I don’t know what you were trying to do to me, but if you try it again or come closer, I’ll fill you full of pennies.”

Shit. I screwed this one up. Play it cool. God only knows what those pennies might be able to do. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again.” He sat on the bench, trying seem non-threatening and stuck his hands in his pockets. *There’s got to be another way. Let’s see if we can appeal to her greedy Plutomantic impulses.*

“Listen, my vision **told** me I’m gonna get something for Lenora from you. Maybe it’s not a gift, but something I pay you for.”

Paula’s ears visibly perked up. "Transaction." She drew the word out, obviously savoring it. "But Grampy always said not to take money for doing magick. 'You can't put the magick in the service of the money,' he said. It's wrong."

Jack nodded. *The Reflexivity Principle. Can't use mojo gained from a risk to obviate that same risk.* "It doesn't have to be something magick, though I'm sure something like that would help. How about a box of Pokemon cards? Or information. Or we could trade magick for magick? I can whip up a handy Luck Charm for you, *tout suite*." He took his hands out of his pockets. He had a quarter, and began walking it across his knuckles.

"I can acquire luck on my own, thank you." She lowered the gun a little—but she didn't put it away—and a sly look came over her young face. "You could teach me a lot about magick, couldn't you, Jack?"

He shook his head as he made a second quarter appear and start dancing across the knuckles of his other hand. "No, I can't. If I tried to, it either wouldn't make sense to you, or you'd go nuts. You're too far down your Grampy's path already. You were shaped for it. I can't teach you about my style of magick, but I can give you a couple hints about getting along in the Occult Underground, and believe me, you're gonna need them. Weird shit attracts weird shit, and kid, you are some **major** weird shit. The Pokemancer." He chuckled.

Her voice was cold. "You're lying." The Zebra Gun nosed up.

Jack began half-juggling the quarters. "I'm not. Ask anybody. But I do know a warbucks in San Francisco who might be in the market for an apprentice." The coins multiplied between his hands. They vanished and reappeared, plucked from midair and left to fall to the ground but disappearing before they hit the pavement.

The coins pulled at her attention hypnotically. They danced between his fingers, glittering in the afternoon light. "That's pretty cool, but tell me more about buying me a couple boxes of cards."

"Well, I could—" he dropped a quarter—"oops" The coin tinkled when it hit the pavement, and was soon followed by a ringing silver rain of its brothers. "Shucks, I'm losing all of them..."

Paula leaned forward, her eyes on the falling quarters, totally distracted. *Now!* Jack's hand whipped out and snatched the Zebra Gun away from her. Her head snapped up, and he saw anger and fear on her face. He held the gun by the top of the barrel.

"Hey!" she shouted.

"Hint One about getting along in the Occult Underground: 'Friends don't point guns at friends.' We're friends, aren't we?" He handed the gun back to her.

She scowled as she took the gun and stuffed it back in her pocket, and said nothing.

Jack smiled. "What do you say to a trade of the name and address of Yao Chan, Plutomancer, for some trifling item for Lenora? Like that dollar bill ring of yours." A ruffle and snap, and a dirty, bent, tattered business card appeared in his fingers.

"How do I know you won't cheat me, Jack?" She toyed with her ring.

"I assure you that I'm an honorable man, Paula. Otherwise, I could have shot you with your own magick gun, right?"

"I guess so. It's a deal." She took off the ring and traded him for the business card. "Why are you doing this?"

"Lenora Washington put herself on the line for me once, so I figure it's the least I can do for others. She saved my life from **both** the Hotdog Man and a burning fire." He put the ring into his green satchel and then rubbed his forehead. "You have to pay forward. I can never repay God for the life He gave me, I can never repay my parents for all they've sacrificed for me, and I can never repay that lady for saving my life twice-over. So I have to pay forward."

"I'm not sure I understand that." Paula put her Thermos into her bookbag. "So, what are **you** going to give Lenora, Jack?"

"I don't know yet." He zipped up his satchel. "Nothing's struck me yet. Here—" another ruffle-snap, and another business card, less worn, popped between his fingers—"is my card. It has my cell number and voice-mail. Call if you ever need help or advice."

"Why?"

He smiled. "What are friends for?"

* * *

There wasn't much left in the shoebox that Lenora could see. Just a few crumples of newspaper and—something stuck to the bottom. She lifted out another playing card. It didn't seem to be tied to anything. That's when she noticed the face of the card was one covered in familiar rusty stains. Blood stains. She shifted some of the newspapers and saw where the blood had glued the card to the box bottom.

* * *

The Jack of Spades. Friday. Pittsburgh, PA.

Jack dreamed: He was eight and standing on the midway. He had been walking from the flat store California Sam ran—milk bottles, three pitches for a dollar—back to the pie-cart for some of Mrs. Brown's chocolate chip cookies. A couple roustabouts waved at him as they drove the gilly wagon over to the backyard, loaded with hay for the elephants. He passed some talkers grinding away from their bally stages, trying to turn the tip and get the circus patrons to enter their attractions. He skipped past Aunt Maude's mitt camp (or Gypsy Fortuneteller Booth, to the rubes) without stopping, for the bead curtain was closed, which meant she was with a customer. Up ahead, he saw the Hula show—Mom, as the ringmaster and major partner of King & King Circus, wouldn't allow the racier hootchie-kootchie shows—and the Office Wagon, where Dad pored over the account books, trying to make sure that the circus made its nut. And right behind the office wagon sat the pie-cart, with those delicious cookies! He could taste them already!

A big man stepped into Jack's path. He was tall, with black, greasy hair and steel gray five o' clock shadow. He wore blue mechanics coveralls, and smelled of gasoline. One of his grimy hands held out a hotdog, obviously from one of the grab joints on the midway. "Here, have one!"

Mom and Dad always said to be nice to the rubes, because you never knew what kind of heat they could bring. "Um, no thank you! I just ate." Jack tried to step around the Hotdog Man.

The Hotdog Man dropped his hotdog and grabbed Jack's arm and jumped back, yanking the boy in to the alley between the office wagon and the Hula show. As he opened his mouth to scream "Dad!" the Hotdog Man stuffed a sickly-sweet smelling rag in his mouth. The smell and taste made Jack dizzy. Everything went gray.

He was vaguely aware of the passage of time. Of feeling uncomfortable. Of feeling helpless. Of being touched in bad ways. His perspective changed from the eight-year-old he had been, to the twenty-two

year old he was. *This is the gray haze, the hollow place, the memories that Lenora took away. This is the Emptiness that gnaws me between Quests.*

Patches of memory shone through the gray clouds. Images really. A grungy toolshed. Handcuffs. The Hotdog Man's face, too close. A dirty mattress. The smell of gasoline. Gunshots. Fire. The wall of the toolshed, engulfed in flames. A middle-aged black woman—Lenora!-- jumping through the fire, to scoop him up and jump back out while holding him in her arms. *She saved me.*

Lenora's face flattened as she became a card, the Queen of Clubs. Her face became rough, woven of a thousand tiny strands of yarn. Now Jack was riding on her—she had transformed into a magic carpet. They slowly floated in midair with the lights of a city below them. He heard Paula Goodwin's voice ring in his ears again: “So, what are **you** going to give Lenora, Jack?”

He looked at himself—he had become a card, the Jack of Spades. He reached for the small Spade under his "J," but stopped, remembering his vision in Harry's Magic Shop. *What did I do in the vision?*

He looked down over Lenora's edge. The lights of the city had shaped themselves into the outline of the Ace of Spades, and behind the outline, he could sense something. His eyes did the flip-flop that happened when he looked at optical illusions, and then it was clear: the face of a woman wearing sunglasses. The sunglasses glowed with blue light. The tiny Spade under the "A" in her top left corner was also blue, and blinking. *That's it.*

Without hesitation, he leapt from Lenora's floating form, arrowing down through the misty clouds, aimed straight at the blinking lights of the tiny Spade. They were the lights of the motel he was staying in. The motel he was asleep in even now. The motel where he saw the avatar of the Executioner unlocking the door of the room right above his own. The light flashed from the lenses of her sunglasses, and expanded to fill his entire mind.

He woke with the total realization of what his gift—what he and he alone could give to Lenora—must be.

The eyes of the Executioner.

* * *

The cards told him: she had checked into the room above him. The dice whispered to him: she was in town on a hit for her masters. The coins winked at him: she'd be back at ten.

Jack pulled the drapes closed over the picture window that dominated the front wall of the room so that he could work in privacy. He wrote Lenora's name on the front of the box and added the mystic sigil. All the gifts, save his, were inside it along with some crumpled newspaper used for packing. All he had to do was jam in his playing card token and the sunglasses, fold over the brown paper flap, peel the sticky tape, seal the wrapper, and drop it in the nearest mailbox.

That's if he survived the risk he was about to take: charging into the face of the Executioner, to snatch away her very eyes, and send them off to her erstwhile victim. Jack could think of at least five **interesting** things he could do with an enemy's possessions; how much more could Lenora do, with her years of experience and as the symbolic victim wielding the symbols of her foe? The magick and the Quest sang a duet in Jack King's soul: here was risk aplenty and aid for Lenora running in harness together.

He put on his good luck bracelet-- made of braided elephant hair: all circus performers knew of the potency of the hairs plucked from an elephant's tail before a performance-- then sat down at the desk. *I wish I had spent more time learning to throw knives from Ilya than learning to juggle from Uncle Ernie. Oh well; it can't be helped.* His make-up lay arrayed on the desktop, around the travel mirror. He picked up the clown white, and looked into the mirror.

"Come on out, Quixote," he laughed to his reflection. "Have I got a windmill for you..."

* * *

Bone-tired, Agnes entered her motel room. She let the door shut behind her and hit the lights. Turning slowly, she looked into the mirror hung on the back of the door. The wan light of the 60 watt bulb made the scabbing cut on her chin look almost as black as the lenses of her sunglasses. *I hate those bloody clockworkers with their bloody magick toys. You waste too much ammunition on those damned things.* She turned away from the mirror and walked towards the WC, shrugging out of her leather coat and throwing it on the bed. *A shower, a quick kip, breakfast, and back on the road to the next job. It's a living.* She reached to unbuckle the complicated rig of her shoulder holsters.

Without warning the door behind her crashed open. Agnes reacted without thought, drawing her AMT and spinning, just in time to get it knocked out of her hand by... a juggling club?

A clown stood in her doorway, juggling another club and three sloshing balls—no, balloons. Just standing there. Posing almost. *What the hell?*

He was tall, young, and in whiteface and black skullcap. Black diamonds highlighted his hazel eyes; a thin black pencil mustache and a spade-shaped beard framed his red smile. A red rubber ball hung from the end of his nose. He wore a swallowtail coat, a black T-shirt, checkerboard baggy pants, and combat boots. He was smiling like a loon. "Have at you!" he cried, and flipped the club and balloons at her.

Ducking and going into a crouch, she went for her back-up piece, the Walther. She reached for the kill chill... and it didn't come. The clown wasn't one of her designated targets. Against him, she was just another killer with a gun, and not the Executioner. *It'll have to be enough,* she thought as she squeezed the trigger.

* * *

The risk-buzz sang in Quixote's ears as the universe tallied up the luck that it owed him. "Have at you!" he shouted, and launched the club and the filled-balloons at the Executioner—who had pulled another gun from somewhere and was unloading it at him. Remarkably at such close range, she missed; he heard the wheet! of them as they sang past his head.

He missed her, too. The club went wide and the balloons hit the wall and carpet behind her, rupturing. The smell of rubbing alcohol perfumed the air. *Oh, well.* He charged her, feeling the thread of chance being reeled up on his spindle for the risks he was taking. He felt truly alive. From behind his back, Quixote pulled out a bottle.

The Executioner ducked and bobbed, firing again, this time at point-blank range, right in Quixote's face. The shot nearly missed him, just clipping his left ear. *Ouch! Christ!* Luckily, the combination of magick, adrenaline, and clown make-up minimized the pain from the powder burns. Blood pulsed from his shredded ear as the universe handed him more threads of mojo to add to his store. He was crackling with juice.

He lifted the bottle and blasted her full in the face. The cold seltzer water made her recoil, and some of it must have went up her nose, because she started coughing and spluttering. She didn't drop the gun, but she wasn't pointing it right at him. Quixote grabbed her sunglasses and tore them off her ears. *Got them!* He stuffed them into his jacket pocket.

For that instant, he wasn't paying attention. That's when the Executioner kicked him in the stomach, hard. Her red-rimmed eyes gleamed with icy wrath. "You're dead!"

Quixote dropped the seltzer bottle and went down on one knee. *Oh shit.* The left side of his head was throbbing in pain. Looking up, he saw the barrel of the gun right in front of his eye. *Time to go.* He tugged hard on a double handful of the threads of chance, yanking things to go his way. He said one word: "Empty." The mirror on the back of the door shattered.

Her finger squeezed the trigger, and was rewarded only with the click of the hammer falling on an empty chamber. “Bloody fuck!” she cried, and pistol-whipped him. The barrel crunched into the left side of his head, already in agony.

Quixote groaned as the world swam in his vision. *No! Not after all this.* He saw her winding up to hit him again. He couldn’t risk taking it on the chin; if he got knocked out, he was dead, and his Quest would be uncompleted. This thought made him burn inside.

She clocked him again with the gun, this time on the other side of his head. “Die!”

His head felt like an over-inflated tire. Fighting past the pain, he smiled up at her. “Have a nice day, bitch.” Gathering up the almost all of the remaining threads of mojo he held, he cracked them at her like a whip.

Several things happened all at once: Bloody smiley faces burst out all over her skin, causing the Executioner to scream in pain and drop her gun. All of the light bulbs in the room exploded, showering glass and sparks down on the room. Some of the sparks landed in the alcohol-soaked carpet, setting it aflame with a dull whumpf! Quixote saw the flames, and remembered the tool-shed. In his mind, he clung to his Quest until the reaching gray mists of fear fell back into his subconscious. *Definitely time to go.*

He felt like an empty toothpaste tube, all squeezed out. He stood up. *Dizzy.* There was almost no buzzing left in his head; he’d cashed in most of the credit the universe had extended to him with that blast. *Can’t twist fate too much more, I guess.* That’s when he noticed that she was still standing. More than that, she was making for the big chrome gun he had knocked out of her hand the first time. *Oh, shit.*

I can’t beat her. She’s too good. Have to get the package to Lenora. Have to help Lenora. Thinking of his Quest pushed the pain and dizziness away.

The flames licked up the wallpaper. The smoke alarm finally went off. The Executioner scooped up the chrome AMT pistol from the carpet.

Quixote’s senses—his Weapon—went into overdrive. Time slowed. The flames flowed like water over the walls. The comforter on the bed smoldered lazily. The Executioner lifted her gun, moving as if she were trapped in Jell-O. He saw the empty Walther and seltzer bottle laying next to each other on the floor. The shards of the mirror twinkled orange. He smelled the burning and the alcohol and the blood. The picture window reflected his image back at him.

That’s it! Time speeded up again. He took two running steps and jumped onto the bed. Using it as a trampoline, he launched himself straight at the picture window across the front wall of the motel room.

Her gun swung to cover him. She fired as he leapt and bullets spanged into the wooden headboard of the bed. “Die!”

He wrapped his arms around his head to shield it as he burst through the window. Glass shattered and sliced at him, but he felt the universe’s approval buzzing noisily in his head again. Then he was on the walkway outside the room. He rolled to his feet and reached into the pocket of his coat.

She appeared in the window, gun aimed at his heart. “Jam!” he cried, spilling bad luck onto the slide mechanism of the chrome AMT. The sprinkler chose that moment to go off inside the motel room, drowning out the Executioner’s curses in a torrent of water. She started climbing out the window after him.

Quixote stood bleeding, shards of glass poking out of his arms, and blood pulsing from his mangled ear. Sirens blared in the distance. *Must be the fire engines. Good.* Out of his coat pocket, he pulled a deck of cards. He twisted threads of chance around the deck. He pointed it at the woman standing before

him on the walkway and said two (or is it four?) words: “Fifty-two pick-up,” then sprayed them at her chest.

* * *

Cards flew everywhere—into the motel room, onto the walkway, down into the parking lot. That’s when Agnes kicked at the clown—but he swung himself over the walkway railing and dropped down onto the hood of a car—her car! her white Mustang!— laughing all the while. CRUNCH! The impact totally crushed in the Mustang’s hood, but somehow did not set off the car alarm. *I’ll kill the bloody bastard.*

The slide of her AMT finally unjammed. *That’s better.* Agnes ran for the stairs to the parking lot—or rather, she intended to run for the stairs, but found herself unable to move. “What the bloody fuck?” It was as if her feet were rooted to the walkway. That’s when she noticed the cards fluttering at her feet. She felt the strangest compulsion to pick it up. To pick **all** of the cards up. *Oh, damn it! The fucker slapped some kind of Travel Bond on me. I can’t follow the little bastard until I pick them all up.* She bent to gather up the cards on the walkway. *I’d better get these gathered up and get out of here before the police get here.*

When I find him again, I’ll kill him slow. She nodded to herself in the flickering firelight as the sirens came closer. *But not before I notify my employers that I’ve found another noisy American stomping about on the eggshells. They’ll add him to my list, and then he and I will dance again, this time with all things right and proper.*

* * *

Lenora dumped the last of the newspapers out of the box and onto the desk. Something else fell out of the shoebox: a blood-smear pair of sunglasses. A **familiar** pair of blood-smear sunglasses. A pair of sunglasses that shivered with cemetery cold. The old woman smiled. One could ask the loa to do many things when you offered an enemy’s eyes. Many things indeed. Lenora put the glasses on.

#