One

I'm standing in a stiff wind in front of the Brock Bridge Correctional Facility. I resist the urge to pull the hood of my sweatshirt up over my head. The breeze feels different on this side, freer. I've been locked up for almost five years for one last gram of cocaine. Because I wouldn't give up my connection, they had wanted to give me twenty. I pled to eight. They skipped me after four and a half—a year too late to watch my mother die. I've been in too long.

I turn around to catch the gates click shut behind me. It could have been worse, I think. It could have been like all the movies and television shows: a den of iniquity and violence, overflowing with criminals teaching each other how to be better criminals. It can be, if what you want is to be a criminal.

I just wanted to get out. I don't want to remember going in, but I can't help it. Walking into the cellblock, hearing the inmates hollering.

"¡Look at what we got here, some fresh meat!"

"¡Oh Yeah! I see we's got some tight virgin ass up in he'e."

"I got dibs on the little Indian."

The first night was the roughest. The few days I had spent in lockup before making bail were bad enough. But this was a whole new monster. When you get to The Pen everyone is eyeing you up, checking you out. Some look at you with hungry eyes, as if you were meant to be their next meal. Some measure you up, as if deciding how much of a challenge it would be to take you out. It was the ones that didn't look at you, the ones walking around with cold, dead stares that scared me.

It seemed I knew what I could expect from the rest. With the zombies, as I referred to them, anything seemed possible. Make a mistake, hit their trigger and I was sure I'd find myself in the hospital ward way too quickly, if not just plain dead.

The worst was that first dinner call. I always feel lost my first time in any cafeteria. The Pen was no different, except I was lost in the most inhospitable of environments. No time to stand still and get my bearings, I was shoved aside like some branch hanging in between predators and their prey. Even when I got in line, I kept getting grabbed and pushed back until I realized I was in the rear with the rest of the group I had come in with that day.

My plan, after my conviction, had been to pass the time by finishing my high school diploma, catching up with my reading and ingratiating myself to a few of the prisoners. I was no idiot, but my senior year had been all about getting high and trying to get laid. I realized at the end of third quarter that I had missed more days than not and decided to just stop going altogether. When I was sentenced, I figured I would at least have the time to finish what I had started. I'm not very good at that. I owed it to myself to at least finish high school.

I went to a few of the classes The Pen offered, and gave up. I couldn't stand sitting in a classroom full of remedials. Anytime I heard someone trying to read at anything higher than a third grade level, stuttering and stammering through each word, I gritted my teeth until my jaws ached. I barely had the patience to sit through class in a normal school. Doing it in prison was unbearable. I think I went three times before dropping out. Again. I did spend plenty of time reading. And I managed to make a few friends by trying to be funny and useful.

My cellmate was going on trial for stabbing a panhandler who he felt got too aggressive. The state wanted Ricky to cop to six years. Ricky claimed that because he only stabbed the bum in the leg, that he wouldn't cop to more than three. He would end up pleading out for five years, three suspended.

Ricky was seventeen, two years younger than I was. He didn't say much the first of couple days, except to run down some things I should know. "Don't step on nobody's kicks!" By kicks, he meant tennis shoes. "That's instant beef. Watch where you walk, cuz you so much as nudge some of these fools, they'll shank yo' ass without lookin' at you. Get to the food line as fast as you can. Some folks are friends with the servers, or they pay 'em fugs..."

"Fugs?" I interrupted.

"¡Fugs! Cigarettes. Where you from man?"

"I thought we couldn't smoke here anymore."

"There's a lot you ain't supposed to do in jail, man. That don't stop people from doing it! As a matter of fact, the ban just made cigarettes worth more. You can get, like, a dime bag of weed for one cigarette.

"Anyway, they pay 'em fugs so they can get what you might say is healthy servings. So if you late, you might be going to bed hungry. And if you ain't looking to get fucked, don't be nowhere where you by yo'self. They figure, if you there, you want some. And if you ain't want some, you shouldn' a been there."

After a few days, once he realized I read a lot, he asked if I could write.

"I'm no writer, but I know how to write."

"Can you help me throw some shit together for my girl? She sent me some nekkid pictures, and I wanna say something nice."

"Did you try thank you?" I asked, realizing after I said it that I might have come across as belittling.

The sucking noise he made through his teeth told me I did, but forgivably so. "¡Yeah man! But I wanna do something nice for her. Like write a rap. You freestyle? You write rhymes?"

"You can probably freestyle a whole hell of a lot better than me," I admitted, "but I can maybe help you write a decent poem."

"¡Tight! Maybe I can beatbox over it. ¡Maybe we can tape it!"

We didn't make a soundtrack for it, but I wrote a readable letter with a few verses and only had to think of three rhymes for fuck while he made sound effects with his mouth as he stood over my ear. Soon enough, I was writing for almost half my cellblock. I didn't even smoke, at least not cigarettes. I hoped there was something else they would offer. Not that I asked for anything. Tradition holds that I just do what is in my power for those that ask and deserve it. I'm to ask for nothing in return, but accept anything offered.

They rarely offered cigarettes. They were too valuable. Mostly, they gave me vouchers for the canteen or postage stamps. Stamps are like cash in prison. You can sell them in for slightly less than face value on certain websites. Of course, you have to smuggle them out in order to do that, and smuggling things out can be as hard as smuggling them in.

I ended up helping my new friends sort through paperwork, filling out parole applications, reading the documents from the public defenders whose faces they never saw, writing letters to try to get those same public defenders to visit. I even did a bit of law research for them. I listened to them for hours, telling me about problems I could rarely help with, but I'd try to offer some advice. I'd done the same thing in high school.

The seat on the bus next to mine was always empty for anyone wanting to share their "boy" or "girl" issues. Actually, most of the time Leeza sat there. She couldn't stop sleeping with her brother, or any other boy that asked nice enough, except me. She walked up to me during lunch one day, her only complaint being that she was horny as hell. I offered to help her out if she'd just sneak behind our school's little stadium with me. She thought about it for maybe five seconds before saying no.

I don't think anything I said ever made a difference. My schoolmates would always go back to doing the same things that bothered them—problems they would bother me with sooner or later. After I left high school, I heard Leeza went down on two guys at once in the freezer of a Burger King they all worked in. But I never let that stop me from trying to get in her pants every time I ran into her.

Most of the inmates in my cellblock were young like Ricky. They were awaiting trial, and there was no room left in the Juvenile pre-trial facilities. The rest were juveniles convicted as adults. I supposed the powers-that-be either thought I wasn't particularly dangerous, or they thought a small guy like me might have some trouble in general population.

Not being forced to serve my time in gen pop suited me fine. Here the kids tried to act like adults, but could never shake that childlike demeanor. I never could either, really. Not everyone was friendly. Even in our *Juvie* block, there were some crazies who'd snap your neck just to break the boredom. But my crew—they even had a name: *Dyin' Tryin'*—protected me.

As young as they were many of the kids broke six feet and two hundred pounds. I did mange to get into trouble a few times, but I was always able to talk my way out of it. Those conversations always involved me shoving a fistful of cigarettes into someone's hands, albeit a bit bent and slightly stale.

But that was on the other side of the gate. I need to forget about that—leave it behind. On this side, I have nearly nothing. I gave my small stash of *fugs* and stamps to Ricky. You would've thought he was eight years old and I'd given him a bike for Christmas. All I have now are the clothes on my back, $40 cash and an 8X10 picture of my mother lying dead on a coroner's table in New Jersey. She'd died nearly a year ago. They wouldn't let me see her, wouldn't give me a furlough to go to the funeral because it was out of state. I got the photo last March, five months after she died, and I had to write quite a few letters to get that.

On the bus headed to Baltimore, I pull the picture out of its manila envelope and stare at it. It doesn't even look like her, face bloated like a fish left out in the hot sun too long. I trace the scars on each of her shoulders with a finger. Perhaps it's a trick of the camera, but they seem to glow. Why wouldn't they? The scar on each shoulder, along with the one on each foot, the one on each palm and the one over her heart represent the power she once believed she wielded.

Las Siete Potencias, The Seven African Powers, which her scars represent, are supposed to be our connection to the energy of our ancestors, which anyone is supposed to have access to. *Los Siete Rayos*, *The Seven Slashes*, two of which seem to glow more as I stare at my mother's bare shoulders, mean that she was *Palo Mayombe*, *Keeper of the Mysteries of the Spirits*, a high priestess in using the power of the ancestors to aid those in need. I reach under my shirt collar to feel one of the scars on my own shoulder. It seems inert, dead. Mine never seem to glow.

I slide the picture back into its envelope. I can feel tears starting to well. Inside, I could never cry for my mother. I couldn't afford to. Like in the wild, a sign of weakness is seen as an opportunity to strike. But I'm not inside anymore. As I finally head home, I pull my hood up over my head and let them flow.

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