

## Lawyers, Guns and Money

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Roused by the sound of marching boots, the people of Celo Raro tossed and turned in their sleep, like children who fear their parents. The American boy saw nothing of the pueblo's twenty-some huts. Men dressed in faded camouflage hustled him along, his feet barely scuffing the ground. At the far end of the only street stood the town's only modern building. An iron door creaked open, and the boy was thrown inside, landing mostly on his chest and left shoulder.

The soldiers locked the door behind him and marched away in ragged cadence. The boy lay semi-conscious on the smooth concrete floor, idly wondering if his collarbone was broken. As his senses slowly brightened, he remembered a hundred small bruises inflicted along the bumpy jungle road from Agua Verde. Tight leather bindings furrowed his wrists, numbing his fingers from lack of blood. A blindfold that had once been a private's sleeve burned his eyes with sweat and tears.

Eventually, he began working his hands up and down behind his back, imitating tv-heroes tied up by badguys. After maybe an hour of this, the bindings came free and he climbed to his feet. His collarbone seemed okay, but a couple of ribs burned and grated if he moved just so. He snatched off the blindfold, but total darkness continued.

"Am I blind?" he asked the night.

"Probably not," the night replied. "It gets pretty dim after sunset in these parts, when there's no lights or windows."

"Damn, you scared me! Who are you? Where are you?"

"Stretched out comfortably enough, enjoying my sleep on a nearly lice-free cot set against the back wall of this fine little calabozo. Until your inexcusable racket woke me." An old man's voice, shaky and phlegmatic with a touch of permanent-sounding despair.

The boy sat back down on the floor and crossed his legs. The concrete felt clammy through the seat of his jeans. Mud-clotted jungle boots were iron lumps beneath his knees. "Where is this place?"

"We're in the Celo Raro jail," the old man said, his voice more steady now. "Town's nothing but a couple dozen subsistence farm families, more or less cut off from the rest of the world. El Piloto's militia blows in once or twice a year to strip the fields of anything edible. They rape any women who don't hide in the jungle, hang or shoot a few men they don't like the looks of. After a few days of such fun they move on to the next pueblo and repeat the process. We are temporarily guests of their Lieutenant Luis Morales, if there's been no change in leadership since they arrested me this afternoon."

"You sound like an American."

"I was a Yanqui, sí. Until I learned better."

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"My name's Pierce Sturdivant. I grew up in DC, but my mom and I live in Bel Air now. That's near L.A., if you don't know."

"Or even if I do know."

"Right. Anyway, what did you mean we're `temporarily' the militia's guests?"

"Depends what you're in for. This jail's not exactly spacious, and these boys will be moving on soon. One way or the other, our cases will be disposed of in the morning. I'm to be shot, which is at least preferable to hanging, though perhaps less cushy than morphine overdose or a heart attack while climaxing."

"Shot? You can't be serious."

"Not a big deal, really. Damned miracle El Piloto hasn't caught me for a million things before this. I haven't decided yet what to do about it. If anything. Maybe you can help me decide. What did you say your own crime was?"

"I'm not really sure. I'm down here for a month with the Third World Sympathy Volunteers. Figured it would look sweet on my college applications someday. We were clearing weeds and dredging roadside trenches along the Via Del Cadre, near Rio Verde. I went into the jungle to take a load off, and couldn't find my way back. Next thing I know, I've wandered into what looked like some kind of missile site: rockets on truckbeds, Quonset huts, lots of pissed-off guys in khaki. They dragged me into a hut, asked questions I could hardly answer, and said some other things in Spanish which I only understood a little of. They held me awhile there, then came a really long jeep ride, blindfolded, to this place."

"Espionage." The old man sounded wheezy again, and very tired. "You'll be shot in the morning, too. They must have brought you here so your group wouldn't get wind of it. The TWSV does a lot of good work around here. Frees up the government's local thugs to man military sites and monitor anyone who might be a threat to the regime."

"You really think so?" Pierce felt suddenly as if all his blood had run out onto the concrete.

"Sorry. You sound like a nice kid. How old are you?"

"Fifteen. I had my mom tell the group I was eighteen, so I could come down here. She's really good about letting me do things."

"Yeah? She did you a real favor this time. Tell me, Pierce, what do you look like? There won't be much time for noticing in the morning."

"Tell me your name first. And what your crime is."

"It doesn't matter," the old man said. "Call me Croesus, if you like."

"I remember that name from Ancient History class. Roman or something, wasn't he?"

"King of Lydia. When Cyrus the Persian king conquered him at Sardis, he had Croesus chained to a pyre to be burned alive, along with fourteen Lydian boys, as a sacrifice to Cyrus' god. Croesus had been the most powerful ruler in the world, and suddenly he was finished."

"I'm hoping it didn't end that way."

The old man's answer was a drawn-out groan shaped into words. "Croesus talked his way out of it, with some help from the gods—or good luck, if you prefer."

"What about the boys?"

"History doesn't say. Only the king's fate was important enough to record. Doesn't matter. They're all dead now."

For a while there was silence. From outside came the measured footsteps of a sentry and the far-off screaming of a woman. Pierce told himself it had been a scream of joy—until a moment later, when it came again. "How long until dawn?"

"Few hours, I expect. They won't shoot us until later, though. Morales always sleeps in on Sundays, then goes straight to Mass. Here, it's held in a consecrated shack up the street. Then he'll force whatever woman in town cooks the best to make him a big breakfast, and take his time about eating it."

"How do you know?"

"I know lots of things. Too many, I think. It's time I forgot some of them. Maybe the firing squad can

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help me do that. Is there anything you'd like to forget, Pierce? Or are you too young for regrets?"

"Is that why they're gonna kill you? Because you know too much? Or because you hate yourself, and they're tired of hearing you whine? To answer your stupid question, I'm about six foot tall. Slender build, my mom calls it. I call it bone-skinny. I'm wearing some really messed-up blue jeans and a t-shirt. I forget what's printed on the shirt. Right now I wish it said 'El Piloto Blows.' My eyes are hazel and almost closed. Hair is blond, full of twigs, and tied in a ponytail for working the roadside. Now tell me your real name, or I'm gonna get more pissed off than I already am."

"What shade of blond?"

What in hell did this old fool want? But Pierce saw no reason not to answer. Nothing really mattered anymore but the time of night. He began to ask the old man's name again, before wondering why he even cared with death so near.

"A little darker than...." he searched for a name the old man might recognize. "A couple shades darker than Marilyn Monroe's hair." The more he thought about it, the more he felt the old man must be right. The bits he'd understood of the earlier proceedings in the Quonset hut seemed to confirm he was sentenced to die. He got to his feet and slowly felt his way to the right-hand wall. Concrete block, apparently well-constructed. He began groping his way along it, feeling for cracks between blocks.

Tramp went the sentry, passing by in the other direction. Again the distant scream, more like a wail now. Probably the TWSV leadership had already listed him as missing. Maybe his mother had been informed by now. Within a few days the State Department might be persuaded to contact the local embassy about a vanished American student. Possibly sooner, if Mom called in some of the favors she'd saved for an emergency.

When it came out that he was underaged there would be a stir in the U.S. media. His name would grace the evening news and the talk show circuit. He might even end up another Amelia Earhart. Someone he'd never met might get rich writing the story of his life. A short story, at that. "It just isn't fair!" he told the room.

"Who's Marilyn Monroe?" the old man asked.

"You've never heard of....? For shit's sake! A movie star of the Fifties and early Sixties. A real babe, with a look way ahead of her time."

"Whatever happened to her?"

"She died. A long time ago." When the sleeping pills kicked in, had she been afraid? Likely she'd never felt a thing. Lucky her!

"I'm sorry for being so quizzical," the old man said. "But we don't get much of anything around here in the way of news or entertainment."

"Haven't been to the States in a while, huh?"

"Almost seventy years. Found I liked it better here. Even after El Piloto took over, this country just seemed more my kind of people. More of them believing in the things I do."

"Like what?" Pierce kept fingering his way along the walls, moving steadily to his right, trying to ignore the agony in his shoulder and ribs and too many other places to count. Seventy years! How old was this guy, anyway?

Naturally, the old man ignored the question. "Tell me, Pierce Fifteen, are you afraid to die?"

"No. Yes. Of course I'm afraid. Isn't everyone? Aren't you scared to death of being shot in the morning?" Suddenly the old man's wandering questions seemed really annoying. Blatant stupidity often had that effect on him.

"No, I'm not afraid," the old man said.

Pierce waited for qualifications, but none came. Soon the old man's breathing indicated he was asleep, and Pierce's own eyes began to drag themselves shut. It had been a very long day. He gave up on feeling the walls, slumped down in the middle of the floor and tried to pillow his head on his hands. "You're lying," was the last thing he remembered saying before drifting off into maybe the last sleep of his life.

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When Pierce opened his eyes to dim light, his first thought was that he must have rolled out of his bunk at the Heroes of the Revolution guest barracks. Eventually, he climbed to his feet and realized most of his pain was gone. The bruises he'd sustained bouncing around in the soldiers' jeep had disappeared, and even the ones he'd gotten hitting the concrete floor looked well on their way to healing. Best of all, his ribs no longer grated when he twisted into certain positions. On the downside, he felt incredibly tired—much more so than he should have been, even under the circumstances. In fact, he couldn't remember ever feeling so weak in the morning, as though he'd aged a century overnight.

The man on the cot was snoring gently into the puce-green wall, his tattered robe of faded blue rising and falling with each breath. Below the hem, his feet were bare and brown, gnarled like the roots of an upturned palmetto. A faceful of finger-deep wrinkles indicated he must be at least in his eighties.

There was little else to see in the room. The lack of a sink or toilet confirmed they were not to be confined there long. Pierce methodically eyeballed the walls for cracks for a while. Tired of that, he walked to the iron door and tried his shoulder against it. As expected, it didn't yield an inch. Then he got down on all fours and crawled back and forth across the floor, searching for any flaws in the concrete he might expand by digging. When his knees began to get sore, he gave that up as well and sat down next to the cot.

A surprising amount of sunlight streamed in through the crack beneath the door. Obviously it was well past dawn, and already the room was feeling like a steam bath. Trying to think, Pierce squinted down at his once-white t-shirt. "Good guys always win!" was printed on the front in lurid red. A slogan for some brand of pizza sauce, if he remembered right.

The old man stirred, yawned, and turned his face to the room. His eyes were blue as a bottomless lake, and his deeply tanned and liver-spotted pug nose seemed to quiver slightly, as though searching the air for some familiar odor.

"Will they be coming soon, do you think?"

"And good morning to you too, Pierce! They'll come when they come. Better to be shot than to die of thirst. By the way, since you asked, my name is Charles Colvin, formerly of Ohio and points west."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm sorry if I said anything too offensive last night. My mother always taught me to be nice to old people. I mean, 'older' people."

"Actually, I have to admit you were right about my whining. I'm over that now. Thank you for not shading the truth."

More smoothly than Pierce would have predicted, Colvin climbed to his feet. As he did, the robe fell open. It now appeared less tattered than before, and tinted a richer shade of blue. Beneath it, Colvin wore new-looking jeans and a plain white cotton shirt. His snowy, untamed hair reminded Pierce of the classic Einstein poster in his room at home in Bel Air.

"Why are you—supposedly—not worried about dying?" There I go again, still cracking on him! Pierce thought. Well, the old bastard deserved it. They should have been thinking up some plan to escape, instead of just sitting around babbling like idiots. Obviously he'd been trying to impress the wide-eyed kid with his superhuman courage. Pierce figured him to piss his pretty robe when the firing squad aimed their weapons.

"There you go again, trying and failing to insult me," Colvin said. "Don't you see? It's not important if I'm afraid. Old men either get used to the idea of death or they go even crazier than I am. What's more interesting is how young people face their mortality. Some say a boy really becomes a man when he accepts he's going to die. Congratulations. You're almost a man, I think."

Pierce realized that even the worst situation had an upside. If he wanted, he could enjoy wringing the old liar's throat and it would make no difference. They could only shoot him once, and he'd just be saving them a bullet anyway.

Of course that would mean Colvin might be waiting for him in Hell, with a head start and an attitude. And he was doubtful he could force his hands to close around anyone's throat, especially in his present state of

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exhaustion. Colvin began a series of slow stretching exercises, then moved into a rehearsed-looking set of martial arts moves. From the corner of his eye, Pierce found himself reevaluating the old man's condition as he slap-boxed the air and launched creaky spin-kicks at the cot.

"Chuck Norris you ain't." Pierce marveled that he was still sounding calm. Brave, even macho. Like a real man. Had anyone even missed him yet at the barracks? Had his mother been told? Maybe if he tried sending her a mental message....

"Who?" Colvin asked.

"Never mind. What I mean is, I hope you don't think you can fight your way out of this."

"Let me tell you, Mister Bel Air Snotnose, that I was facing down death before your granddaddy wet his first dydees. Up to now, you had just about convinced me I should bother facing it down again. Mostly for the sake of not seeing your empty little head blown apart just because I deserve the same. So now I advise you not to spoil my most optimistic mood in some time with any further uninformed blathering about what I can and can't do."

Colvin's sudden anger washed Pierce like glowing lava. Unaccountable weakness shivered his knees, gnawed the back of his neck, and put his mouth in gear. "I never met my real father. Mom remarried when I was one, divorced again when I was five, and married twice more by the time I turned twelve. My whole life's been a pile of crap, and now...."

Before he knew it, Pierce was weeping. Fat, juice-laden sobs racked from his lungs, and he found himself face-down on the cot, thoroughly wetting a wadded-up towel the old man had been using for a pillow.

"I'm glad you're doing that," Colvin said. "This poor, sad little country needs all the tears it can get. There's no shame in being afraid. Until you came in that door, I wasn't scared, because I didn't give a hot damn anymore. Now ... well, the fact is the same, but the reason may have changed."

Whatever that meant! Pierce put the question from his mind, and just cried himself dry.

When the boy was again under control, Colvin asked, "Would you tell me about the movies? Especially action and adventure ones? It seems I've missed a few things in my years down here."

"Why not?" Pierce sat up and backhanded a stragglng droplet from his cheek. "Might as well spend my last minutes on Earth amusing you with lies invented for profit by a lot of people I've never met, most of which I only saw as ancient reruns on tv. I always liked the old stuff more than most kids my age, though. They had as much to say back then as today, and a lot less technology to get in the way. Maybe I'll major in cinematography or something when I ... when I would have gotten to college. Just remember, you'll owe me a favor when we get to Hell."

I really am facing all this better! Pierce congratulated himself. Crying had helped, somehow. Or was it something about this old weirdo, Colvin? The man looked to be gaining strength, and a thin but growing stream of confidence seemed to flow from him like tears from a blubbering boy.

Anyway, Mom would want him to help someone in Colvin's situation any way he could. So Pierce Sturdivant, nice-guy volunteer to the end, sat on the cot, his booted feet resting on the concrete floor, and related to Charles Colvin's apparent gratification the highlights he knew of the last five or six decades of Hollywood action films. The old man sat beside him, icy blue eyes intent and sparkling, as the boy told of Bogart and Bacall, Rocky and Adrienne, Skywalker and Obi Wan.

Now and again, Colvin would interrupt with a question: the precise set of Kirk Douglas's chin, the exact amount of swagger in Captain Kirk's walk as he mounted the Enterprise bridge, the rasp-content of Brando's voice as he offered a deal no one could refuse.

By the time Pierce got down to Indiana Jones, Sharon Stone and Wesley Snipes, sunshine blazed through the threshold-crack like a laser beam and the room shimmered with heat. Pierce felt himself greatly wearied by the telling, much worse even than when he woke up. He could only put it down to stress, injuries, heat and a terrible night's sleep. They were going to kill him! Just for barely glimpsing an incomprehensible mass of metal in a jungle clearing.

The old man seemed greatly enlivened. He urged the boy on, into tales of Bruce Willis, Mel Gibson,

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and tv heroes from the Cartwrights to Xena Warrior Princess and Farscape. By the time a key rattled in the iron door's lock, Pierce had nearly depleted his knowledge of the action genre and felt barely able to stagger from the calabozo into a searing equatorial pre-noon.

Outside, the soldiers retied Pierce's hands, twisting them hard behind his back until he nearly cried out. He held the scream in his throat, telling himself he should be brave and die well. Whatever that meant. Turning his head from one soldier's putrid breath, Pierce saw Colvin bound in a similar manner. The old man seemed to have suddenly sagged in on himself again, as though most of the gas had blown out of his balloon.

After a few desultory kicks and shoves, the prisoners were led to a grass-deprived field behind the jail where a tiny Quonset hut faced a row of sawed-off, bullet-riddled telephone poles set in poured concrete.

Pierce considered breaking for the jungle, but his legs were leaden to the point of collapse and the nearest trees were at least a hundred yards off. All the way to the posts, one of the soldiers kept an AK-47 pressed into the small of his back. Colvin was dragged between two soldiers, his thin arms draped in crucifix position over their shoulders.

When both prisoners were securely roped to the posts, a squat, brutish man emerged from the Quonset hut. Pierce figured him for thirty-five, but guessed he might be off by ten years in either direction. His uniform of plain olive-drab almost matched his complexion, but his sad brown eyes contrasted with a smooth crewcut of midnight-black and thick jowls wrapped in bluish stubble.

The squat man slowly walked a full circle around Pierce before bracing to attention in front of him. Past his shoulder, Pierce could see the firing squad getting ready. Six men in matching dust-caked camos, armed with well-polished AKs.

He spoke softly, in nearly unaccented English. "Pierce Sturdivant, I am Teniente Luis Morales of the People's Glorious Militia. I regret we didn't meet last night. I was occupied with other affairs when they brought you in. You've been sentenced to death by a People's Tribunal, for espionage and resisting arrest. Do you have anything to say before sentence is carried out? Some little last request, perhaps?"

Pierce wanted to beg, but knew it would be pointless. Morales' eyes looked oddly remorseful of the evil they must have done, but the rest of his face hung hard and cruel against the blazing sky. The boy turned his head to Colvin. The old man looked asleep, slumped into his bonds, eyes screwed tight against the sun. Still, there seemed almost a radiance about his gnarled face, a pink-cheeked glow that, in a younger man, might have passed for robust health.

"Colvin, do you want anything?" Pierce asked himself why he cared. Maybe because Colvin was all right for a wrinkled old asshole, his last friend in this world and his first one in the next.

Colvin made no sign he'd heard. Pierce wondered if he'd died already of stress or heatstroke. Or had he just passed out from fear?

The boy flashed on an old western movie, where the cowboy hero so impressed the Apaches with his courage that they decided not to leave him staked to an anthill. The ropes held him tight, but maybe there was still a chance. He steadied his voice.

"I regret, Teniente, that I die a virgin. So many times I passed up girls I could have had! Because I was afraid of AIDS or getting them pregnant, and of what my mother would say. Guess it was a big mistake. I wonder if that last request covers...?"

Morales smiled and looked vaguely sympathetic. "Blindfold?" From his pants pocket he produced a paisley-patterned blue handkerchief.

Obviously Morales was no Apache. The last of Pierce's hope collapsed into a bitter pool of anger. For almost the first time in his ordered life, he didn't give a rat what he said or what anyone might think. Words came flooding out, as if scripted for someone far more adventurous to say. "Quite a traditionalist, aren't you? I don't want your snotrag. What next? A cigarette? My mom says I'm too young to smoke."

"A blindfold would cover the tears I see in your eyes," the entiente grinned. "As you're trying to hide them with misplaced sarcasm." Morales folded the handkerchief back into his pocket. "Ah, such vulnerable eyes you have, young one! I sincerely regret we meet under such circumstances."

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"Piss off, Monkey Face." Pierce gave up containing the tears. They dribbled down his cheeks again, leaving an itchy trail he wanted so to scratch. Morales swung on one heel and strode smartly to the firing squad's side.

On command, the six raised their weapons. Pierce's body shuddered with convulsive sobs, but a core of him remained detached, observing the scene as if it were just another action movie. He tried to focus past the riflemen's heads so as not to see it coming. His attention was caught by a dark, indistinct shape hovering above the jungle greenery, moving rapidly toward the village. Suddenly the air was filled with similar shapes, wheeling and bobbing like wasps around a dead animal. The wind of their passing raised myriad dust-devils and sent a tumbleweed wobbling toward the jungle.

The firing squad lowered their arms and turned to face the hovering shapes. Pierce squinted until his tears subsided and he could clearly see Morales' face filled with rage and fear. Then he noticed the old man was awake, unblinking eyes focused on Morales. Only then did Pierce lift his gaze again to the sky.

The nearest attack-helicopter halted its descent about twenty feet above the ground. Its barn-sized door slid open, revealing a heavily muscled black man squatting on his heels. He was shirtless above camo pants, and a gold tooth glinted from his wide grin. He was peering down the sights of a .50 caliber machine gun, tripod-mounted, with an ammunition belt strung through it side to-side. His grin was focused on Morales and the firing squad, who themselves looked nowhere near that happy.

The other copters—maybe a dozen in all—circled the field at about a hundred feet. Some bore the Stars and Stripes, others the Union Jack. At least two were painted with a white, blue and red tricolor Pierce thought symbolized the Russian Federation. Beneath some of their underbellies, long, cylindrical shapes he thought might be missiles hung in neat rows of three or four.

Now above the jungle rose another helicopter, larger than the rest and lacking flags or any obvious armament. Pierce recognized it as a type often used by VIPs and government officials. One of the firing squad dropped his AK and sprinted into the Quonset hut, emerging with a foot-wide metal tube taller than himself. He knelt on the ground and pivoted it toward the unadorned copter.

Morales shouted, "No!", followed by a string of Spanish that Pierce understood as, "something something, blow us all to something something." The tube was immediately lowered.

Pierce finally found his voice. "Isn't this great, Colvin! The embassy must have really gone ballistic about my disappearance." Colvin didn't answer. His eyes remained intently on Morales, following the entente as he paced back and forth in front of his men, waiting for the unmarked chopper to land.

Land it finally did, in a choking swirl of dust and a clatter of rotor blades Pierce would have found intolerable if it weren't saving his life. The rotors slowed to idle speed and a metal ramp clanged down from the side-door, which swung open to disgorge a truly gigantic white man and a good-sized woman. They wore full combat fatigues with no visible insignia and carried oversized assault rifles with barrels thick as Colvin's arms. Both their faces were generously smeared with blacking grease. They double-timed down the ramp, took up positions flanking either side of it, and braced to alert attention.

Pierce thought the big guy looked way too much like Arnold Schwarzenegger, and he silently begged God not to let him wake up back in the calabozo with Morales' key turning in the lock. More disturbing still, the woman appeared to be Sigourney Weaver, dressed to slaughter aliens, militiamen or anything else that pissed her off. Before Pierce could wonder more than ten or twelve times whether he'd gone insane, another figure appeared in the chopper door: a medium-sized black man, well into middle age.

Morgan Freeman—or whoever he really was—wore the most expensive-looking gray suit Pierce had ever seen. His medium-sized briefcase looked of similar quality. He ambled down the ramp to the ground and stood quietly, his short, gray hair and goatee ruffling in the rotors' breeze.

The shirtless gunner's craft continued to hover low, while the other helicopters circled high. A number of militiamen had left various buildings of the town and stood looking on from the execution field's edge. Several townspeople had also come out to watch, their expressions considerably less grim than the soldiers'. The hot, damp air smelled of aviation fuel, gun grease and dust, overlaying fainter background odors of

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woodsmoke, sweat and fear.

Morales took the hint and stepped forward to confront his visitor.

"I'm the attorney for these two defendants," the Freeman figure said. "I see I've arrived just in time for their arraignment. The defense is ready to post bail. We waive the reading of the complaint."

Now that Pierce had recovered from his initial shock, he took a closer look at the all-star cast in front of him. The twinkle in "Freeman's" eyes looked totally authentic. Whoever the guy was, he did a great impersonation! "Weaver" seemed about right, too. But "Schwarznegger" didn't. He was at least a head taller than the real Arnold, and Pierce got the distinct impression this version used no stunt doubles. Something about the way he cradled his weapon in those huge arms. The big guy caught Pierce staring and threw him a conspiratorial wink. For just a moment, Pierce wondered if he might be the real Arnold after all!

"This is a sovereign nation," Morales shouted in English at the Freeman figure. "You can't just come in here and...."

"It would seem we can," "Freeman" gestured to the phalanx of circling copters. "Want to see what else we can do?" Again the mahogany-toned bass, the deliciously wicked half-smile. This Freeman clone was certainly enjoying his work, though not a bit more than Pierce was.

"No sir, obviously I do not," the enteniente answered with his eyes focused on the attorney's shoetops. "What are your terms?"

"As I was saying before you so rudely interrupted me, I am prepared to post bail." The Freeman figure snapped open his briefcase and extended it at arm's length for the enteniente's inspection. "One million American dollars, in exchange for the prisoners' release and a vehicle to carry them back to civilization."

The enteniente's expression changed in rapid sequence from fear to greed to surprise and suspicion. "Why wouldn't you want to take them in your helicopter? And why do you look so strangely familiar?"

"Freeman" nodded to the Sigourney Weaver figure. Instantly the barrel of her weapon tickled the end of Morales' nose. "Do you really want to waste my time with irrelevant questions?" the Freeman figure said. "Or do we have a deal?"

"Can you drive a stick?" Colvin asked as they trotted along the street toward what had been Morales' personal jeep. It was the first time the old man had spoken since leaving the calabozo. Overhead, the copters still buzzed in angry-sounding loops. From the village's every doorway townspeople and militiamen stared in various mixtures of wonder, amusement and anger at the passing Yanquis.

Pierce thought he saw a little girl flash him a thumbs-up, but he couldn't be certain. His weariness was now so great that walking required his entire attention. When he spoke, it was like shouting in a dream from the bottom of a well, and he couldn't be sure the words even came out. "I'm fifteen; I can't drive at all. What in hell is the matter with my legs? And how come you're moving so well all of a sudden?"

"No wonder America's gone to the shits," Colvin muttered as he arranged his robe beneath the steering wheel and turned Morales' key in the ignition. "When I was your age...."

"Can it. And get us out of here. I still don't understand why that lawyer wouldn't let us onto his helicopter. If my mom sent them to rescue me...."

Colvin gunned the motor to life, and the jeep careened off down a perilous-looking jungle footpath, lurching and shuddering like a broken roller coaster and snapping Pierce's head backward over the seatback. "Your mommy didn't send anyone. What do you think she is? A woman Secretary of State or something?"

"She was a fashion model." Pierce had to shout over the jeep's incredible racket. He death-gripped the dash with both hands but still felt his liver kissing his ribs with every jolt. Colvin was driving like a madman, which came as no real surprise. They crashed through brittle stands of lush vegetation and jounced over outrageous boulders. Fortunately for Pierce's skull, the jeep was roofless.

"After I came along, she moved to DC and got a job as a high-priced specialty masseuse. When her

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second husband the lawyer wasn't around, of cour..." A low-hanging branch nearly ended the conversation right then.

When Pierce could breathe again, he screamed, "Slow down, you maniac! When's the last time you drove anything at all?" His limbs still felt like concrete blocks, but the ride was proving there was nothing wrong with his adrenal glands.

"Back in Ohio. My old '24 Ford. I loved that car." Both ducked as they hurtled beneath another low branch, then Colvin's elbows blurred as he somehow avoided a massive fallen tree wound with a fantastic mosaic of multicolored vines and creepers.

"Even I know you're not supposed to start out in third gear."

"Shut up and let me drive. And let me know if you see a dust cloud coming up behind us."

Suddenly they left the jungle behind, emerging onto a flat, dusty plain. Though roadless, it was easier going than the jungle path. A gust of wind carried the smell of sea-salt, and Pierce thought he glimpsed some sort of big cat slinking through tall grass. The old man's robe looked brighter blue than ever as it flapped like a torn sail in a hurricane and billowed up around his elbows. He stuffed it beneath him with one hand while never letting up on the accelerator. It was about then that Pierce realized the copters were no longer in sight.

After a time that to Pierce seemed eternal, they joined a dirt road that appeared to have actually been designed for motor vehicles and to have seen a grader sometime in the last decade. They settled onto it with a sigh of stressed-out metal sagging back into more-sustainable alignments.

With the last reserves of his saliva glands, Pierce managed to wet his dustcaked lips enough to open them. "If Mom didn't send them...?"

"Illusion," Colvin said, swinging the jeep around a shell crater that occupied half the roadway. "I created the illusion of a rescue, and they bought it. At least long enough for us to make tracks. If you weren't so dull from all that tv, you'd have figured it out right away. How about that dust cloud, by the way?"

Pierce managed to turn his head and squint back the way they'd come. "There's a huge one, right behind us."

"If we weren't in such a hurry, I'd stop and turn you over my knee for that. What about dust other than our own?"

"Sorry, Batman. I left my x-ray vision at home, along with my powers of illusion and delusion. If I could see past our own dust, you'd be first to know what I espy there."

"Espy?" Colvin snorted. "Well, I suppose that's your idea of sarcasm again. It's all right with me if you drop that crap any time now. At best, the illusion lasted maybe a quarter-hour. Morales is probably not far behind us. I just hope he doesn't have air support closer than I know about."

An intersection loomed, and Colvin swung the jeep into a right turn that headed them sharply uphill. Within moments they were jolting along a bumpy cliffside road, rapidly gaining altitude as a series of small farms and villages marched by far below.

"You're claiming to be ... what, then? A witch or some shit? And here I'd figured you were CIA. Or was it SOL? Anyway, while we're on the subject, where in hell are we going?"

"The locals call me el nigromante—necromancer, sort of. I prefer 'wizard,' because it's easier to say. We're heading for the border, of course. Where else would it make any sense to go?"

"Your job title sounds more like a racial slur. Can you teach your magic to me, oh great one? I'll do anything to become your apprentice sorcerer!" Pierce wondered how he was managing to say so much half-assed-clever stuff, as weak as he felt, but then he always got agitated when his bullshit-detector was ringing full blast.

"Sarcasm is the last refuge of a microbial mind, Pierce. And what I do can't be taught. Anyone of reasonable intelligence can acquire some of it—I think. But it's mostly trial and error and an incredible amount of

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patience. Most important, it's faith in oneself and in the principle that nearly everything that exists in this vast universe is still unknown to what passes for science these days."

No, Pierce realized, he actually was starting to feel quite a bit better. He could even wiggle his arms and legs without taking a series of deep breaths first. As much as he tried to get serious, though, sarcasm continued flowing from his mouth as if he were a character in some low-budget action-adventure farce. Maybe it was just a product of so much adrenaline on top of a bad night's sleep. Or was Colvin drawing it out of him somehow, to use for his own arcane purposes? "Yeah, yeah. Double yadda on a broomstick. Let's get real here. How far is the border?"

"Too far to make it like this. The militia has copters at Bienfuegos, and there are regular army jets stationed near Corderos that could arrive any minute. Our best chance is to ditch this kidney-smasher and go it on foot. Or..."

"You look like you couldn't walk across the road." Colvin suddenly appeared older to Pierce than at any previous point. His ancient features hung limp as a hemorrhaged jellyfish, and his hair reminded the boy of cotton left too long in the field: matted and off-color, with maybe a trace of mold beginning behind his wrinkled ears.

Colvin nailed the brake, and the jeep swerved sideways to a clod-spraying stop. Pierce craned his neck to the right, and looked down onto the toy-sized red brick roofs of a village far, far below. "Man, you just came within inches of putting us over what must be the tallest cliff in South America!"

"You haven't seen much of South America, kid. Come on. You're about to see a little more of it. That down below is Plaza Bolivar Sancto. If your eyes weren't so weak from watching tv, you'd note that the flag flying over their town hall is not El Piloto's. Their government has a mutual defense treaty with the U.S., and a pile of advanced weaponry not far off. If Morales crosses their border, they'll hand him his johnson in a sack."

"There's a dust cloud coming up fast behind us," Pierce said. "Looks two or three miles back." Gingerly, with care not to rock the jeep any more than necessary, he clambered across the floorshift and followed the old man out the driver's side door. The road's hard dirt surface, heated to near-incandescence by the murderous sun, nearly blistered Pierce right through his boots. He could only imagine how Colvin's bare feet stood it.

Colvin shaded his brow with an arm, and stared in the direction Pierce indicated. "Maybe your peepers are all right, after all. It would appear the enteniente will be joining us shortly. You need to get across the frontier, Pierce. It's an hour away by road, or about halfway down that cliff. Take your choice."

"What about you?" From somewhere beyond sight came a steadily increasing drone of airplanes.

"Your care for me is touching, youngster. As it was in front of the firing squad, when I was saving my energy for the illusion and still deciding if I should even try to save us. Maybe I shouldn't throw you over the cliff, after all. Come here and hold my hand."

"Hey, I'm not that kind of guy!"

"Hey, I have a great-grandson about your age, back home in Ciudad Gorda. He's about a foot shorter than you, and his hair's blacker than El Piloto's heart. Wants to be a shortstop, or maybe a guitar player. This is how the wizard thing works—for me, at least. Do you want to live or not?"

"I know your kind of bullshit artist. I grew up in D.C."

"Do as I say!" Colvin snapped. Pierce was startled. The old man hadn't seemed to have a snap left in him. Tentatively, the boy extended his right hand and clasped Colvin's blue-veined left.

"You're going to feel a little wrung-out again," Colvin said. "Worse than ever, because this thing I'm going to do here isn't exactly recommended by the Child Safety Council. When you get home you'll probably be an inch taller and ready to start shaving. Can't be helped. By close contact with someone of greater vitality, like yourself, I drain some of your life-energy into me. You get temporarily a little weaker and permanently a little older, right down to your cellular structures and all that. In that way I strengthen myself to do my job. Kind of the way old folks have always fed off the young, in every social and economic system from the caves forward. My method is just a little more direct and honest."

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"That's why I had you tell me about the movies back there, and your own looks. Two subjects every teenager will go on about until stopped—by an execution, if necessary. A good excuse to sit beside you and soak up enough energy to heal your injuries and generate our `rescue.' I already knew most of what you told me. My village has a newsstand, a video store, a church and nine bars. Sorry about the deception. Skin contact is more effective, of course, but you weren't ready for that then."

Pierce tried to snatch his hand back, found that he couldn't. He was slipping into a whirling vortex the color of death. His ears rang, his heart pounded and his wind came in short, desperate gasps. "I'm too young for a heart attack!" he sobbed. "Your way isn't honest at all. The firing squad would have been quicker."

Panic peaked, and was suddenly gone. Weakness melded into the breathless golden glow of a long touchdown run or a knee-buckling kiss. Like drifting down a sunbathed river channel in a best friend's canoe, high on the rich, unhurried smells of Indian summer.

An interminable instant flowed over Pierce, thrusting him beyond the grasp of ordinary time, rinsing his mind in the intense coolness of desert starshine, heightening perceptions as it dulled the last of his pain and weariness. The sound of planes was brighter now, and he smelled the dust of Morales' approach.

"Hold tight," Colvin said. "A minute or so more." Without looking, Pierce realized the old man appeared younger again, and that his robe might now have been taken for brand new.

"This feels good, but it's still bull!" Pierce said. Did his voice sound deeper than usual? "When I get home I'll find out the U.N. sent in that helicopter force to rescue me."

"Maybe," Colvin agreed. "If so, it's because I sent for them. Effective illusions often borrow a lot from reality. But would the U.N. have sent Clint Eastwood with a valise of gold? I thought that was a nice touch."

"I saw Morgan Freeman. With a briefcase of cash."

"You saw, heard and smelled your own version of what I projected. Morales might have seen Our Lady of Socialist Pride with a purseful of Spanish doubloons, for all I know. To each his own.

"Oh, so you know, I also put a bit of extra courage in your mind, so you'd face the firing squad well and not distract from my plan with a lot of useless begging and screaming. But you did even better than I'd expected. You really are a brave kid, you know. Too bad, though, that a mix of adrenaline and magic so often breeds uncontrolled mouthiness. I'll have to work on a cure for that someday."

The reek of Morales' coming was overwhelming now, and Pierce could taste aircraft thundering nearly overheard. In his mind the boy saw Colvin middle-aged, with streaks of brown lacing his iron-gray hair.

"Almost ready," Colvin said. "Be tough, kid. This may sting a little. And you'll be shocked at the upshot."

Pierce felt a lightning bolt cleave him from tongue to sphincter and back again. Quivering with pain and nausea, he sagged heavily to his knees and had to catch himself with his hands to avoid toppling nose-first into the sidewalk.

Sidewalk?

Pierce realized he was kneeling on a wide walkway of smoothly finished concrete. In front of him, a sharply designed three-story building of black granite and plexiglass. To his rear, a bustling outdoor mercado thronged with shoppers clad in a variety of traditional and modern clothing. A good many of them were staring in his direction.

"No es una problema," Pierce declared to the world at large. To himself he muttered: "Exit, stage right." He gathered himself together and was soon lost among the crowded backstreets of what he knew must be a town much larger than it had looked from the cliff top.

So Old Wrinklebutt really was a...! Pierce broke off the thought. Where was Colvin?

"I'm here," came a stressed-sounding voice in Pierce's mind. The boy told himself he should be more shocked than he felt, but by this time such things were becoming disturbingly routine. It had been another very long day.

"Where are you?" Pierce subvocalized in the direction of a round young woman fashionably dressed. She shot him her best evil eye and clutched her handbag tight as she hurried away up the sidewalk.

Colvin's "voice" came again, sounding weaker and so very old. "Still at the jeep. Resting. And this

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somewhat unnecessary communication is pulling down the last of my resources."

Pierce replied silently: "What about...?"

"For some reason, Morales' convoy had a little problem seeing which way the road turned. For a while they were making good headway in their new direction, progressing pretty rapidly down toward where you are now. Until they came to a sudden stop at the bottom. Likely they won't be moving much from there. The planes? Well, I'm not sure where I sent them, but I don't think they'll be coming back, either."

"Christ!" Pierce nearly said it aloud. "How was I lucky enough to be thrown in with you? Why don't you just topple El Piloto? Conquer the world and run it as you please? And aren't you afraid I'll tell someone?"

"Not my style. And if I tried, there'd be other wizards to oppose me. As I'd obstruct any such moves on their part. Balance of power, and all that. Self-defense? The occasional personal charity? Well, that's different. As for your telling anyone, feel free. The National Enquirer's always looking for good stories."

Colvin's voice in his head was breaking up now, fading to the point where Pierce could barely be sure it wasn't his imagination. "Besides, the energy drain is too much for me to do that complicated sort of illusion more than a few times a year anymore. How do you think I got in this mess in the first place? Morales' gang picked me up in Ensalada Poquita, after a two-week healing spell for a little girl with heart problems, when I was weak as a politician's morals and thoroughly soused on palm wine. Charged me with practicing witchcraft, of all things! I was so pissed-off at my carelessness and weakness, I was glad they were going to shoot me."

"The little girl died, didn't she? That's why you were so depressed."

"Until they brought you in. There's just something about saving young innocents that I can't resist. But I wanted you to accept that you might die, because I don't always get it right these days. I can draw in vitality from kids like you, but it doesn't last. Wizards get old too. As for your luck in finding me, I'd say it about balances your misfortune at finding that missile site. Things often even themselves out like that, if you let them."

"Will you be all right?" Pierce realized he was speaking aloud now, and that anyone who challenged him about it was going to be very sorry. His strength was rapidly returning, and he couldn't recall ever feeling bigger and badder than now.

"If you'll let me get back to resting. Oh, and don't forget to tell someone back home about those missiles. El Piloto wants to take at least as much of the world as old Cyrus did, and he's nowhere near as noble about it."

"One last question. I thought wizards were ... extinct."

"The universe keeps a few of us around for emergencies."

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