

12. Random Acts

The freight elevator plummeted down the shaft, rusted rollers screeching against guiderail. The transom light flickered as the elevator jerked to a stop. Sub-Level 16. The hoist cables were visible through a fist-sized puncture hole in the suspended ceiling above Taz's head. He leaped, driving his fist upwards with a sharp karate shout, and landed with a thump, knuckles bleeding. The floor of the elevator vibrated under his boots. He left only a dent in the quilted plastic.

When he was Petie's age, Taz committed a kind of suicide. He let his father kill his spirit. The domestic storms that shuttered the windows of his house left Taz brooding in darkness. Now his feud with Yawtu over control of the Razors had turned Taz into his father. He'd become the enemy.

Taz was nine when his father discovered the boy's first self-inflicted tattoo—a caduceus on the back of his left calf. He'd successfully hidden this small adornment until one summer day when Taz ripped open his knee jumping his dirt bike up at Oxbow. Ivan flew into a rage. It wasn't so much the tattoo that made his father mad as the disrespect. Taz had not asked for permission. Then Taz backtalked and Ivan backhanded him, sending shockwaves up the boy's jaw into his brain that must've re-wired him because after that Taz didn't hide the tattoos and knew absolutely no fear. No matter how often his dad beat him up, or how many times his mouth was slapped or the top of his head thunked with knuckles or thick hair yanked from the roots, Taz never cried. He complied outwardly to save his mother the suffering of being caught in the middle but inwardly nothing ever touched him again.

Taz loved his mother, but it sickened him the way she tried to hide her bruises with makeup and high-necked sweaters. He couldn't forgive her for the daily finger-wagging and sad refrain, "You know better than to make him mad." After that, what else could he do? He made it his mission in life to piss off Ivan at least once a day. His disrespect took the heat off his mother. Each time Taz survived he grew stronger, retreating further into himself, beyond the hurt, where he could be free. SubZero was a state of mind long before Taz ever set foot underground. Once in the tunnels, his reckless stunts attracted a new breed of thrillseeker and their litmus test was the Flirting Gig.

Looking back, Taz thanked Ivan. The sonuvabitch taught him only a thin line

existed between love and hate, dream and reality, and Taz ran that thin line like a squirrel on a high wire.

He punched the button on the service panel, leaving a perfect bloodprint of his knuckles. The metal doors slid open, retreating into a black sheath of thick rubber padding. His scowl said it all. Taz the Razz had a bad day topside and came down to blow off steam.

Taking orders at the Cajun Gator from a petite, pony-tailed girl three years his junior made his scrotum shrink. She rode his ass all day. Took her job too seriously. Made him wanna shank that Gretel, acquaint her with some *real* authority. But it *was* payday so he had something to blow. Time for serious jammin', buddo. A little *Bliss* for the blast then it's Random Acts to do some 'tooting for Papa Art.

Stumbling over the toeguard, he exited the elevator with a curse.

Kao Sanchez shuffled out, hitchin' up his fattygeews. Kao stopped in the low light to admire the new glowing tattoo on his forearm: a flaming skeleton with exaggerated grin, bony arm held out thumbs down as if hitching a ride to hell. "This 'too kicks ass, sensei." Kao ran a finger along the bold lines, trying not to wince. "Doesn't even hurt," he lied.

It wasn't Taz's best work, but Kao was easily impressed.

They swung from the concrete platform onto a steel ladder. Whatever Taz decided to do to Mercury Blue when he found her would take some creative thinking. Her betrayal burned him. He'd taken a lot of attitude from that bitch after they broke it off, but he'd always believed she was tight with the Razors. Hoffman's goons were looking for her. He intended to find her first.

"Hey man," Kao cajoled, "Looks like you got your dick stuck in a shredder."

Kao was Cambodian, adopted by a respectable Native American family who lived in a half million dollar house overlooking the Bridge of the Gods. Couple more 'toos and Kao wouldn't be able to hide in the dark. At fifteen, Kao was a weekend warrior moving up in the ranks.

"You get pussy-whupped at work?" Kao prodded.

They dropped onto a narrow walkway at the edge of the terminal line. Even in the dim light of Taz's 'toos, a dangerous scowl flared to the surface of his deathly pall. Kao clamped his jaw.

Fluorescent panels with dark, forbidden cavities of interrupted light ran along the ceiling. Their feet crunched in the ballast of the railbed. Then Taz kneeled in crushed red rock, reached back into the black mouth of a sewer drain, unhooked a long bundle and pulled it out. Once assembled, the two-man railrider was positioned on the guideway. Two small boards unfolded back to back and locked. Taz pulled the telescoping handle up and snapped it into place on the headboard. A radial telescoping arm with endrider balanced the boards' electromagnetic stators on the thrust rail. Taz stepped onto the headboard, took hold of the handle, thumb against the accelerator button. Kao got onto the board behind him, reached around his waist and held on as the railrider picked up speed.

As much as Taz fantasized about flaying a death cross out of the backs of Yawtu and Marya, hanging up glistening strips of their skin to dry in front of their own bleary eyes, leaving them for the rats, it was Mercury's betrayal that totally skewered him. She violated a sacred trust. After losing Petie, she'd gone rabbit on him—*sayonara* Gaudalajara. If she hadn't screwed Ames too, he might not have known she snatched Petie's drive deck. That one hot package held the power to transmute shit into gold and she had the nerve to keep it for herself. Fantasy that. Torqued him off bigtime. Broke number one rule, *momma-san—share the spoils*. "Pay me now or pay me later," he muttered under his breath.

Underground air cooled his cheeks. Down the track, Taz spied a red marker on the tunnel wall.

Keep on track to Random Acts.

The temporal neon was visible to headlights or faint florescents, but washed out in the beams of an SLR scanner. The barter fair sprung from darkness every month in different locations. By tomorrow, the markers would be faded and Random Acts evaporated through hundreds of miles of tunnels and serviceways.

A pulsing rhythm, more felt than heard, reached them from a distance.

They rounded the turn into a straight stretch. Taz recognized the rhythmic banging and rapping on pipes, gratings and duct as the sound of the *Tommy Knockers*. The railrider slowed to a stop and they arrived at a platform with a blinking arrow over a temporal golden archway.

The *Tommy Knockers'* droning low chant like monks in a Tibetan temple vibrated through concrete. The smell of pan-fried mushrooms drifted to his nostrils as Taz disassembled the railrider, stuffed it in the bag and stashed it.

Following the scent of tortillas, sopapillas, deep-fried tunnel rabbit and broiled meercats, they joined the crowd fanning out into a large concrete warehouse bound by lines and ducts.

The Gleaners' black market was a rendezvous of fabric booths, holographic displays, flatscreens, pirated interactives, a veritable gallery of stolen technology, drug traffickers and vendors selling their wares. Smoke from burning barrels topped with greasy grills swirled over a throng of crosslegged swaying headtrips as the *Tommy Knockers* whirled in Sufi trance, chanting and banging on pipes, blood-red robes belled-out, turbans streaming in smoke-filled shafts of light.

All those not solid enough for the NuWorld poured into Random Acts down walkways and catwalks, elevators and escalators, looking to escape dull conformity, nowhere jobs and assembly-line schools cranking out next year's models complete with dependable references and resumes.

Kao couldn't wait to fling himself into the mix. There were Joyriders, Gleaners and Questors—those brave untarnished topside youth looking to pop their cherries and smudge their facades for the thrill of descent and the chance to live by the Joyrider motto of "Do not go gently into that good night..."

Taz and Kao navigated narrow avenues between vendor booths. Finally, they spotted The Body Canvas. Papa Art projected new tattoo designs onto the fabric walls of his booth.

"Que pasa," Taz greeted his mentor.

Papa Art glanced up from his notebook. "Que pasa, my assa." The black gap of his broken-toothed grin was as attractive as a sewer drain. He was adding some accents to a design with a light pen. "Took you for a no-show."

Taz looked over the old man's shoulder, "So where's the biz?"

"Waitin' for you. Word's out I could use a steady hand." Papa Art lofted a trembling limb.

Papa Art's misspent youth included an ill-advised stint cleaning up the Hanford site. It funded grad school and set him up in a luminous but short career with the university system. After that system collapsed, there wasn't much use for a teacher with neuro-dysfunction and loss of motor control. His knowledge wasn't worth the healthcare costs. The Hanford contractor didn't exist anymore. Neither did the government. There was no one left to sue. No program to pay for his care. Papa Art accepted the handicap as a natural consequence of youthful folly, not letting his victimization drag him into bitter resentment. There was no getting over it, so he lived with it.

"Had to put in some overtime," Taz explained.

"Taz the Razz got a Gretel on his ass." Kao taunted, then danced back two steps to avoid a backhand. "Gretel on his ass, Gretel on his ass."

Taz studied Papa Art's new designs. "Where'd you see these?"

"In my head."

Taz laughed.

"What? Don't think I could come up with 'em myself?" Papa Art recoiled as if wounded.

One design in particular was most striking: a bioluminescent green-eyed jaguar moving stealthily through jungle undergrowth. The design was modeled on the naive style of Henri Rousseau. Papa Art's rendition was uncanny. The burning bright jaguar and the yellows, oranges and reds of the flowers contrasted with the subtle shades of green. It would make an arresting 'too for some happy glow-worm. Unfortunately, Papa Art no longer had the skills to execute such a design.

Taz viewed it from different angles with a critical eye. The jaguar eyes seemed to follow him. "Nice effect," he complimented Papa Art. "Too bad you didn't have this for the tiger match. You might've won."

"That there, son, is what you call a work of *Art*," Papa Art snorted at the pun.

"For you, Papa, takin' a shit's a work of *Art*."

Normally Papa Art's designs were ripoffs. This one transformed the merely derivative into personal expression. Only a serious art student like himself would know Rousseau from Shinola.

“So you thought maybe I’d lend you a hand?” Taz held up his hands like a surgeon—steady, confident, controlled. “Which one you want?”

“Don’t be wastin’ those, son.” Papa Art took hold of Taz’s hands and squeezed them, as if passing Buddha-mind to his protégé by touch. “If I had hands like these,” he said, looking hard into Taz’s eyes, “I’d be working the malls instead of hangin’ ‘round Random Acts.”

Taz shook his head. “If I wanted to sell out.”

“What?” the old man slapped Taz behind the head playfully. “Taught ya everything I know and ya still don’t know nothin? You’d be lucky to get a chance to sell out instead of squandering yer talent on tattoos and tossin’ fries at the Cajun’ Gator. You need some benefits, boy.”

“Yeah, if I work real hard I might earn a vacation next year.”

He spread Taz’s fingers against his own. “If you don’t answer the call soon, you’re gonna wither on the threshold.”

Taz leaned over Papa Art in a half-hug and whispered in his ear. “Word’s coming down through the grapevine that it’s a Purge. What do you think?”

“Could be,” Papa Art answered. “If it looks like it, smells like and sounds like it, it probably is.”

Kao displayed his new tattoo. “Take a gander, Gerrymander.” He flexed his forearm and the flaming skeleton pumped his thumb, caption blinking on and off like a neon sign, *Going under, Going under*.

Papa Art took the boy’s arm and inspected the work. “Not too shabby—for a Too-Two.”

Taz laughed. Only Papa Art could get away with calling him a Tattoo Artist Second Class.

The old man wiped his nose on his long sleeve and punched up another design on his notebook. “Ya know,” Papa Art gestured around the mobile tattoo parlor, “You could have a piece of this.”

Taz nodded. “Yeah. Well, hang onto it, old man,” he squeezed Papa Art’s shoulder, “I’m not ready to go into business, quite yet.”

If Taz could corner his naughty little rabbit before she unloaded her package at some hockshop, he could bid it up. Maybe buy Papa Art a new set of hands. Not some clumsy Second Hand prosthesis. Papa Art deserved state of the art.

“You and me.” Papa Art pointed at the projections. “My designs; your hands.”

“You parkin’ here,” Kao’s eyes danced in laser light. “Should I bring ya back a T-Rabbit Gyro or a *Bliss-Strip*? I gotta cruise, man.” His shoulders shimmied in time with the primitive drumming, feet tapping to the beat. He was itching to groove. “You hangin’?” he asked again.

“Yeah,” Taz answered, slipping Kao some Random tokens, “for awhile. Bring back some fry bread and a microbrew.”

“Okay, man.” Kao ducked under an airduct and pressed through a bouncing

mass of humanity to where the *Tommy Knockers* now in hardhats were banging their heads against steel bracings.

Those guys were real originals.