

The Sax

Pascal Kulcsar

Prologue : The Angel, the Sax, and the Morning Cockroach

My name is Rudolph Calagland, and that morning I had the face of a trombone that had slept in an ashtray.

The light was pissing onto the carpet like a poorly filtered blessing, the cockroaches marched in cadence, and my brain was trying to improvise a refrain without a score.

On the table, an old sax was still creaking from having talked too much. It was looking at me, or maybe it was the other way around.

Some mornings are like that objects have eyes, reproaches, and better breath than you.

I poured myself a black coffee with three spoons of resentment, a drop of despair, and stared at my reflection in the coffee pot.

A guy of about thirty, hair styled by dynamite, with the dark circles of a man who's been negotiating with the night for far too long.

I told myself, "Old Rudolph, if God exists, he must have the sense of humor of a drunk pianist."

Then I heard the noise.

Not the percolator, nor the neighbor beating his wife in rhythm. No.

A real noise, a whisper of brass.

The sax on the table started breathing.

I swear to you breathing. Like a kid waking up from a nightmare.

I stepped back.

"Don't... don't you dare play without me, pal," I whispered.

And the bastard squeaked. An E-flat that smelled like nostalgia and fried food.

At that exact moment, I understood two things:

One, I was definitely screwed;
and two, I had found the only voice capable of speaking for me.

The phone rang.

I picked up. A hoarse voice said:

“This is destiny. You’ve got five minutes to choose between glory and eternal bad luck.”

I answered:

“Too late, I already signed with bad luck.”

And the voice laughed.

A warm, deep laugh, the kind that shakes windows and promises.
The laugh of a jazzman dead far too long.

Since that morning, every time I blow into that damn sax, I feel like a drunk angel is walking on my tongue.

And you know what?

It swings like hell.

Chapter 1 : The Devil's Crate

The night clung to my skin like a wet shirt.
A real bayou humidity, thick, sticky, almost alive.

Above the Shreveport docks, the moon was playing hide-and-seek behind the clouds, a real tease, that bitch. Looked like she was making fun of us.

I was sweating in the shadow of a van parked a couple of steps from customs. We were loading crates in silence, the kind you prefer not to shake too much: bootleg whiskey, more-or-less-stolen antiques... and, if my nose was right, one or two chunks of human bone to complete the décor.

It wasn't an operation; it was a fairground of trouble.

And then, bam a siren.
Not a soft one, no. A real one, slicing your eardrum like a razor blade.

Everyone froze.

Six guys in black, stiff as poles, eyes wide. They looked like a choir of panicked penguins caught under a strobe light.

The tallest, an old Italian with trembling hands, pulled up his hood.
His white mustache gave him the face of a worn-out godfather.

He growled, cursed, pulled out a pen, and scribbled something on a long crate, the veins on his forehead ready to explode.

“Merde! Safe travels, sweetheart... and above all, arrive where you're supposed to, or ciao bella for all of us.”

One shove, and the crate disappeared into the customs room.

He vanished the very next second.

Right when the blue lights began licking the walls.

Tires screamed. The van was surrounded.
Cops everywhere, flashlights flying in all directions.

And in the middle, a chief built like a buffet table, puffing out his chest as if he'd just arrested Al Capone.

“Party’s over! Surrender nicely and everything will be fine. Congratulations, gentlemen, you’ve just won your golden ticket to Lang County Prison!”

The six guys raised their hands in unison.

Under their lifted hoods, I saw six tired, worn-out faces, defeated sixty-year-olds. Museum gangsters.

“Lang Prison?” one muttered.

“He watches too many theme parks,” another answered, bitter.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be out before Christmas,” grumbled a third.

“Getting old ain’t fair,” sighed a fourth.

“In the good old days, we’d have jumped the wall without losing a hip,” said the fifth.

“Now it’s our teeth that jump first,” concluded the last.

They looked at each other, old lions, exhausted, fully aware that their roar made people laugh more than tremble.

And me, hidden behind a stack of crates, I thought: if this is the elite of crime, the world is heading straight for oblivion.

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On the roof across the way, I spotted a shadow.

A black colossus, skin shining like polished copper.

Bolos. A mountain with a gold ring in his right nostril, the kind of man even mirrors hesitate to reflect.

He was smiling.

“Well... Papa Tcho-Tchot is going to be pleased,” he murmured.

His eyes settled on the crate left in the customs room, the famous one, the one we had forgotten.

He smirked.

“A little oversight from those old Italians from Chicago... those idiots will never learn.”

His laugh rolled through the night, deep and mocking, before he vanished into the shadows.

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In the customs room, the flashing lights painted red and blue reflections across the wood of the crate.

On top, a rushed inscription:

Recipient: Mr. Broloks – Chicago, Illinois.

And I can assure you of one thing:
if anyone had known what was inside that damn crate...
no one, and I mean no one, would have slept easy that night.

Chapter 2 : Chicago on Vacuum

A few days later. Downtown Chicago.

The autumn wind was having fun slapping my face with greasy newspapers and dead leaves. Charming atmosphere: it felt like even the weather wanted my resignation.

I dragged my shoes along the sidewalk, headphones glued to my ears, one hand in my pocket and the other on my briefcase symbol of my pathetic success. My grey suit carried the family business logo: Chicago-Aspirtout. Just the name made you want to change careers.

Three generations of Calaglands making vacuum cleaners... and I still hadn't found the "escape" button.

I stopped in front of the shop window. My reflection stared back at me, pale, with the dark circles of a panda at the end of its career.

Every letter of the word "Aspirtout" seemed to siphon a little more of my will to live.

I sighed. For a long time. A very long time.

And that's when I heard the sound.

Fffft... fffft... fffft...

Antoinette's infernal broom.

There she was, faithful as ever. Curlers screwed to her head, bent back, straw broom in hand, sweeping dead leaves with the grace of a dictator in the middle of an authority crisis.

"Good morning, Antoinette!" I called, just to maintain appearances.

She jumped, chin trembling, then looked at me as if I were a rat that had just spoken to her. Her dentures clacked like a mousetrap.

And out came the accusing finger.

"Ah! There you are, you little weakling! So, planning to vegetate in your corner again?"

"Pardon?" I tried, sheepish.

I resumed my walk toward the automatic door, hoping to escape her.

"I do with my life as I please, all right? And I'll run this shop if I want to!"

Antoinette rolled her eyes while shaking her broom.

"You look like him, that's true... but you're not worthy of your grandfather Marcel Calagland! He had guts! Not like you, hiding behind a fan!"

“What?”

“You heard me, my boy!”

I closed my eyes. Counted to three. Failed.

My temples were pounding like a jazz drummer on amphetamines.

“It’s complicated enough as it is, so please avoid comparisons, okay? Thank you, and have a nice day!”

But Antoinette never stops. She’s a model with no “off” button.

She stepped forward, broom raised, eyes possessed.

“Guts! That’s what you need! Guts, damn it!”

I lifted my briefcase to protect myself.

“Leave me alone, you crazy old bat!”

She froze, panting, then inhaled loudly.

“Mo...”

“Please,” I sighed.

“...lla...”

“Shut up!”

“...sson!”

“SHUT UP!”

I turned around, ready to flee, and rushed toward the automatic door.

It didn’t open. Of course it didn’t.

I stood there, fist clenched, glaring at the camera above the door.
Then... chhhhhht... it opened, slowly, triumphantly.

I slipped inside, grumbling:
“At least this thing obeys.”

Behind me, Antoinette stuck her tongue out, put her dentures back in place, and resumed sweeping while mumbling:
“Little weakling, ha! Marcel, he wouldn’t have talked to me like that!”

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Two days later. Chicago, morning.

Frank, the most asthmatic colleague in the entire history of industrial cleaning, jogged between the skyscrapers. His suit slapped against his calves like a sail in distress. Under his hat, his grey hair stuck out in rebellious tufts.

He climbed the steps of an old downtown building, panting like a seal on amphetamines.

A rug set a trap for him.

“Son of a !”

Bam. He crashed through the office door with his own carcass.

On the door: a graffiti.

“Long live prohibition, long live the Broloks.”

Classy.

Frank rolled to the desk, wood splinters in his jacket, and lifted his head toward two silhouettes.

Salvatore, short, stocky, mustache carved to perfection, was twirling his glass of whiskey. John, tall, thin, face hewn like stone, puffed calmly on his cigar.

A duo halfway between a cabaret and a funeral.

Salvatore stood abruptly.

“Ma Frank! What the hell is that entrance?!”

John blew a cloud of smoke, unbothered.

“And the merchandise?” he asked, not raising an eyebrow.

Frank lowered his eyes.

“The whole crew... got intercepted, Salvatore.”

“And the crates?”

Silence.

Frank shook his head.

“Sorry, John. Everything was seized.”

Salvatore’s ice clinked in his empty glass.

John crushed his cigar.

In an instant, the whiskey had lost all its flavor.

Chapter 3 : The Sax, the Mafia and the Jackals

The air in the office was so thick you could have cut it with a butter knife. The Broloks smoked, drank and fumed like three broken locomotives. I sat across from them, witness to this mafia mass where every word smelled of gunpowder and stale sweat.

Salvatore, his mustache trembling, kept spinning his glass of whiskey between his plump fingers. Frank, still drenched in sweat, wiped his forehead with a handkerchief as dirty as his conscience.

John stayed impassive, cigar stuck between his lips, a real sphinx on morphine.

“Ma... The cops are really merciless,” said Salvatore, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling as if asking God for a refund.

“We’ve lost a lot,” admitted Frank, voice shaking.

“Indeed,” added John without emotion. “And that’s an understatement.”

Salvatore popped open another bottle, poured whiskey with the gestures of a tragic actor, and winced.

“Ma... The saxophone was the most precious of all! We won’t recover from this... what a loss, what a mess!”

I remember the silence that followed. Then Frank’s smile. That smile always scares me: too rare, too dangerous.

“It wasn’t among the seized goods,” he said, almost triumphant.

“Ma...!” choked Salvatore. “It wasn’t seized?”

John, usually as expressive as a tombstone, choked on his smoke.

“Where is it, then?” he stammered.

Frank pulled a crumpled sheet from his pocket.

“A customs agent from Shreveport sent me a receipt this morning. The crate was received and is waiting for identification.”

Salvatore put his glass down so hard the ice cube screamed.

“Ma... We must recover it at all costs!”

Frank nodded.

“We jump on a plane, go down there, grab it, and basta.”

John slowly rolled his eyes upward, as if counting the angels.

“You nuts, Frank? Cops are still crawling over that place! Our faces are on the walls!”

Salvatore, regaining the calm of an old strategist, tapped the rim of his glass.

“Ma... We don’t act like amateurs. First, we get the gang released. Then we think of a gentler solution. And above all, we avoid suicidal heroes.”

A long silence followed.

The three of them exchanged looks with that expression only sharks know: the scent of blood, but the patience of the current.

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Night fell over Chicago.

Same office, dirtier, greasier. Pizza crumbs littered the desk, the radio spat an old raspy Italian song.

Salvatore, in his role of tired godfather, filled three glasses to the brim.

“Ma... So we stick to this plan,” he declared.

Frank pursed his lips.

“And if it fails?”

Salvatore gave a twisted smile.

“He won’t be alone. An old acquaintance over there owes me a favor. And a favor... must be repaid.”

John nodded slowly.

“This treasure... in the hands of a stranger, it’s risky.”

Salvatore walked toward the big window. Below, the lights of Chicago-Aspirtout were blinking.

I swear he was smiling.

“Ma... That’s perfect, actually. No one knows him. No one will suspect him.”

Frank raised his glass, excited to finally have a clear mission.

“So, to the Broloks gang!”

Salvatore turned, eyes gleaming.

“To the Broloks gang!”

The three glasses clinked, and the sound vibrated like an oath you regret even before saying it.

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The next day.

The midday sun heated the sidewalks of a Chicago park.

A sharply dressed guy was biting into a dripping hot dog.

I didn't yet know he was about to screw up my whole life.

Toni. Thirty, predatory smile, hair slicked back like a crooner on the run. He chewed slowly, savoring each bite as if he were tasting a state secret.

"Hey, Toni! Da! I've got info you'll like!"

Kovak had just appeared between two joggers. Tall, broad, unshaven, with a Russian accent you could cut with an ax.

"Hey, Kovak," answered Toni. "Go ahead, spill."

Kovak looked around, breath short.

"I spied on the old Broloks last night. And you won't believe it: they want to recover a saxophone!"

Toni burst into laughter, mouth full.

"What? They're starting an orchestra now?"

"Da! And the worst thing is half their gang is in jail, in Louisiana."

Toni straightened up.

"In Louisiana, you say?"

"Da. And the only thing they haven't lost is that damn sax. It's still at Shreveport customs."

Toni chewed his lip, eyes narrowed.

"A saxophone that gets the Broloks nervous... must be worth a fortune."

"Da. And Salvatore is sending someone to get it."

"Someone? Who?"

"An unknown guy. A novice."

Toni smiled like a predator.

"Then we'll send him experts."

Kovak frowned.

“Which ones?”

“The French.”

“What? Those three clowns?”

Toni shrugged, delighted.

“Exactly. Three clowns, yes... but starving ones. And perfect for a botched job.”

Kovak let out a thick laugh.

“Da... The French.”

Toni tossed his hot dog wrapper into the trash without looking.

“Exactly. The French.”

Chapter 4 : Perfect Day, My Ass

The highway vibrated like a bass string stretched to the breaking point. Between Arkansas and Louisiana, my blue Ford Mustang was screaming for dear life. The engine spat its anger at every acceleration, the tires bit into the asphalt like they wanted to eat it.

I sped on, the wind whipping my tie, when a big sign appeared:

“Welcome to Louisiana”

I could have raised my arm, struck a victorious pose... but I just clenched my teeth.

The road rippled under the heat, swallowed in long gulps. The hood blazed under the sun like a four-wheeled alarm signal.

I gripped the wheel until my knuckles turned white, my long light coat barely floating the costume of a tired actor in a movie no one wanted to shoot the sequel to.

The radio sputtered out a drippy pop hit: *The Perfect Day*.
I smirked.

“Yeah... a perfect day, my ass.”

I shut it off. And, as always, a memory jumped at my throat.

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Flashback: Chicago, humid evening

The park glistened under the streetlights, gravel sticking to my soles.

A hooded man was tossing seeds to the pigeons, calm as a priest on retreat.

I approached, tense as a wire.

“Rudolph? Rudolph Calagland?”

The pigeons flew off in an explosion of feathers.

The voice answered, steady, almost tired:

“Yes, that’s me.”

When he lowered his hood, I saw a clean face. Too clean. The kind that still smells like hotel soap.

Frank, the old contact, observed me for a long moment before saying:

“You’ve got your grandfather’s mug, you know.”

I shrugged.

“I get that a lot.”

I wanted to look detached, but my heart was beating faster than the drums of a marching band.

“What’s my mission?” I asked, hoping to cut the theatrics short.

Frank smiled which, on him, always looked like a threat.

“A crate to retrieve. A saxophone. Louisiana.”

“A saxophone? You’re sending me to fetch an instrument?”

“It’s not an instrument. It’s more than that. And it’s your trial.”

I went quiet. The word *trial* froze my spine.

“Just a round trip,” I said.

“Perfect. Married? Kids?”

“No.”

“Even better,” he whispered. “Fewer complications.”

His slap on my shoulder told me I was hired willing or not.

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End of flashback: back on the road
The Mustang’s engine vibrated right into my bones.
I shook my head, trying to chase the memory.

“Not prohibition... just my little revolution,” I muttered.

I started imitating my last customer:

“A powerful one with a big nozzle? No, rather multifunction I hope it sucks everything!”

I burst out laughing alone, a kind of hollow laugh.

“No more vacuum cleaners. Time for action.”

My hand slipped into my coat.
I ran my fingers along the grip of the Colt cold, reassuring.

“Finally a leading role.”

A centipede crawled across the dashboard, insolent.
I shot it off with a flick of the barrel.

“Filthy crawler.”

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Shreveport, Louisiana – Noon

The air in the customs office smelled like sweat and moldy paper.

Flickering neon lights blinked like tired eyelids. It looked like the waiting room of a dispensary for lost souls.

I had been waiting twenty minutes, collar up, toothpick in the corner of my mouth, nerves in minor jazz.

In front of me, an old lady cuddled a box as if it contained her deceased poodle.

On the bench beside, two black men in dark suits and church hats sat motionless, black sunglasses on crooked noses. Sixty years old, looking like voodoo priests straight out of a blues music video.

The shorter one was smiling. A smile too wide, too calm.

“What are they, Louisiana’s ZZ Top?” I murmured.

The little one tilted his head, as if he’d heard. His smile widened.

“What does he want from me, Ray Charles?”

The old lady turned, threw me a compassionate smile, and slipped away, her box clutched to her chest.

My turn came.

The agent at the counter thirty, starched shirt, badge reading “Service Above All” looked at me like I was gum stuck to his shoe.

I reached into my inner pocket. My fingers brushed the Colt’s grip. Bad idea.
I froze. He raised an eyebrow.

Nervous laugh. Wrong pocket. Different hand.

I pulled out the receipt and my ID.

“Quickly, please. I’m in a hurry.”

He nodded, scanned the papers, then disappeared through a swinging door that groaned like an exhausted whale.

While waiting, I tapped a rhythm on the counter, a little swing to keep my sanity.

On the bench, the two dark silhouettes hadn't moved.
The short one the smiling one was still smiling.

A smile that said: *We'll meet again, buddy.*

Chapter 5 – Uncle Bens, Curses and Grease

The customs agent came back wearing the face of someone who just swallowed bad news. His hands were empty, his eyes as warm as forgotten coffee.

“Sorry, Mr. Calagland... your package has already been picked up.”

I froze, mouth slightly open, like a fish discovering drought.

“You... you what?”

A gravelly voice burst behind me:

“Shit! The package bailed!”

I turned around.
And I saw the guy.

An old African American man with dark glasses, dark suit, hat screwed onto his head, and a smile far too wide to be honest. He leaned on his cane like a fallen king on his scepter.

“Don’t mention it, Armstrong...” I muttered toward the counter, annoyed.

The old man exploded into a raspy, almost contagious laugh.

“Your mama in shorts! It’s gone, kid!”

I turned again, frowning.

“You sure about that, old-timer?”

“Yeah, at least two hours ago,” he said, shrugging. “Two hours! On the dot!”

He pointed a trembling finger toward the exit, still laughing.

I sighed, grabbed my papers, and strode across the room.
But as soon as I reached the door, a rough hand grabbed my arm.

It was him.

“Who took my parcel?” I asked, nerves fraying.

The old man burst into such a loud laugh that two secretaries looked up.

“Christ, who do I look like this time?”

“Excuse me?”

“Ray Charles? Armstrong? Who knows! People confuse me with somebody every damn day, cracks me up!”

“Certainly not Beethoven,” I shot back automatically. “He was deaf as a post.”

The old man nearly choked laughing.

“Go to hell, white boy! You’ve got a smart mouth, Calagland!”

I froze.

“You... you know my name?”

His smile vanished instantly.

“God damn... Let’s get out of here, artist.”

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Outside in the parking lot, the sun hit so hard the asphalt smelled like melting tires. I walked behind him, feeling dumb, until we reached an old rusty red van that looked ready to collapse under the weight of its own memories.

The old man opened the passenger door creaking like a grave lid and barked:

“Get in, Calagland. Move it.”

“You’re not seriously asking me to”

“God almighty, get in! I ain’t got all day!”

I obeyed. Bad reflex from being an ex-model employee.

The door slammed, and the van began to tremble like an asthmatic in a riot. The engine coughed, protested, but eventually roared.

“God of God of God damn!” shouted the old man, proud as a submarine captain.

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On the road, the van rattled along the highway, filled with clanking metal, burnt oil smell and the stench of cold cigar.

I felt like I was traveling inside a tin can driven by a demon in slippers.

“How do you know my name?” I asked, throat dry. “And who beat me to the sax?”

The old man didn’t answer right away.

He switched gears, checked the rearview mirror, frowned.

Then he calmly lit a cigar calmly, yes, except he nearly set his hat on fire.

“God of god damn... no one tailing us, at least,” he muttered.

“But... who are you?”

He sighed, a long locomotive sigh, then lowered the window.
A monumental spit sliced through the air.

“Ugh!” I cried.

“My name’s Bens. First name’s enough,” he said with a greasy smile.

I blinked.

“Bens...”

He took a puff of cigar, then stared at me straight in the eyes.

“Salvatore filled me in about you. He asked me to supervise the sax pickup and help you if shit hit the fan.”

“Sorry? You work for the Broloks?”

His face closed like a bank vault door.

“God damn hell no! I don’t work for anybody. And certainly not for those old crusty fossils!”

He smacked the steering wheel.

“I ain’t you, you little suit-wearing idiot trying to play gangster! Had a miserable childhood or what?!”

I stared at him, speechless.

“Your mouth... that’s disgusting.”

“Damn old age!” he snapped, wiping his lip.

“Why do you swear so much?”

He grumbled:

“My balls I swear! It’s my punctuation!”

Then he calmed down, suddenly gentler.

“Listen, Calagland. Once the sax is in your hands, you can get the hell out of here. Everything will fall back in place.”

I sighed.

“Fine... but why help me?”

Bens took a long drag, smoke drawing a halo around him like an old repentant demon.

“I’m wiping an old debt, kid. And when that’s done, God of god damn, I’ll finally be able to breathe free.”

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Elsewhere on the same road, a black SUV devoured the miles without a sound.

Behind the wheel, Lupin thirty, elegant, fitted suit, smile of a soul salesman.
To his right, Bonapart short, stocky, clenched jaw, chewing gum like he was chewing his past.
In the back, Beaudelaire tall, bearded, sunglasses on, arms spread as if posing for a perfume ad: The Scent of Crime.

Three Frenchmen. Three mercenaries. Three rolling disasters.

The SUV sped straight toward Louisiana.

And me, in Bens’ van, I had a gnawing feeling:

The day was only beginning,
and it already stank of grease, curses,
and jazz-flavored trouble.

Chapter 6 : The Three Frenchmen

The black SUV sped straight toward Lafayette, devouring the road like a starving dog. Outside, the burning air made the horizon ripple; inside, the tension smelled of sweat and new leather.

The engine purred steadily, almost hypnotic, and the only human sound came from the stubborn popping of Bonapart's chewing gum.

"You're gonna end up jamming the transmission," muttered Lupin without taking his eyes off the road.

"The transmission, the transmission..." grumbled Bonapart. "You always talk like a damn driver's manual."

In the back, Beaudelaire stretched lazily, a satisfied smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He slowly removed the lollipop from his lips, turning it between his fingers like a tiny cigar.

"My friends, let us remain calm," he said. "We are on a mission."

"A mission!" snorted Bonapart. "A saxophone! You call that a mission?"

Lupin, impassive, straightened the collar of his immaculate shirt with the rehearsed gesture of an actor who knows where the spotlight is.

"The object itself is irrelevant," he declared in a lecturing tone. "What matters is what it represents: a contract, a reward, and the promise that Toni will finally open the doors of the gang to us."

Beaudelaire raised his lollipop in a toast.

"And if, along the way, we find time for a little bourbon, I won't say no."

Lupin sighed.

"You'd still be thinking about drinking in the middle of an apocalypse."

"That's French class, my friend," replied Beaudelaire, tucking the lollipop back between his teeth. "Even in chaos, a touch of elegance."

Bonapart snorted, jaw twitching, gum popping.

"Elegance isn't having a pink lollipop in your mouth."

"I remind you, dear sergeant major, that this lollipop gives me the breath of a winner," retorted Beaudelaire. "You smell like a barracks and failure."

Lupin raised a hand, slicing the argument in half.

“Gentlemen. In Louisiana, you don’t fool around. This land swallows tourists and spits out the reckless.”

Silence fell again, broken only by the drone of insects splattering against the windshield.

The swamps stretched on both sides of the road: green-gray expanses, motionless, with their moss-bearded trees and mercury reflections. The air vibrated, saturated with heat and diesel fumes.

Bonapart wiped his forehead, voice softer:

“Don’t worry, boss. As long as the sax is still breathing, we’ll bring it back to Toni.”

Beaudelaire burst into laughter.

“And if it isn’t breathing anymore?”

Lupin allowed himself a rare, sharp smile.

“Then we’ll give it mouth-to-mouth. French style.”

They all laughed. A short, nervous laugh halfway between camaraderie and gentle insanity.

The SUV sank deeper into the bayous, swallowed by the sun and the fumes of diesel.

Three Frenchmen, three overheated egos, chasing a lost saxophone.

And somewhere ahead of them, on the same strip of melting road, a vacuum-cleaner salesman in a light suit was driving toward his destiny, alongside an old man who swore more than he breathed.

Chapter 7 : Bayous, Curses and Misunderstandings

The black SUV was glued to my rearview mirror like a bad idea that refuses to leave. In the back seat, Bonapart chewed his gum with the energy of an industrial worker out of inspiration; the sound snapped in the cabin like a nervous metronome.

“Lupin! We found him!” he barked, voice raspy. “Cut off that crappy van, then we beat them until they sing where the instrument is!”

I wanted to lean over the hood and shout “breathe a little,” just to spice things up, but I stayed quiet, hidden behind my off-white modesty.

Beaudelaire, in the back, raised his hand with the nonchalance of a dandy who’s just heard a joke he already knew. Lollipop stuck to his lips, smirk in place.

“Looks like our dear Calagland found himself a little boyfriend,” he said, half-mocking, half-delighted.

Bonapart snorted, dry as old bread.

“Planned or not, I’m killing both of them for the same price, no racial distinction.”

Lupin, impeccable at the wheel, hadn’t changed expression; he said softly:

“Hush. That is not the right method.”

He emphasized each word, as if the syllables themselves carried strategic principles.

“I said, that is not the right method. We keep our distance, we observe, we locate the saxophone. Then we act... my way. With finesse, sensitivity.”

Then, yielding to a flicker of human impulse:

“After that, do whatever you want.”

Beaudelaire made an invisible bow.

“Then let us follow the road and admire the scenery... while it still lives.”

The SUV devoured the road, sinking into the humidity. Outside, the bayous unfurled their carpet of moss-bearded trees, still waters, mosquitoes and secrets. The smell of diesel mixed with swamp odors; everything felt like the slow danger of an animal lurking.

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In the rusty van, I was fidgeting like an overwound spring.

“And that man, the other one who beat me to it... where does he come from?” I blurted, voice tight.

Bens, cigar planted like a trophy, eyes narrowed on the horizon, sighed like an old tractor. He flicked on the radio; dusty old jazz filled the cabin and stroked my nerves.

“Shit... I’ve got a damn good idea where that crook holes up. And that’s where things can really go to hell.”

“Come again?” I asked, clinging to every syllable.

“Yeah. All I hope is he ain’t working for Papa Tcho-Tchot.”

Papa Tcho-Tchot. The name made my eyebrows climb.

“Papa... what?”

Bens clenched his jaw, the wrinkle at his eye sinking like a valley.

“A gang leader. And a voodoo priest. A real one. Better avoid him, kid.”

The word “sorcerer” jumped on me like a starving cat.

“A sorcerer!?” I cried, springing upright. “We’re going back to my Mustang, we’re getting my weapons!”

Bens erupted in laughter, a metallic scrape of a laugh.

“Your ride? By now your slut of a Mustang is probably being stripped down to parts by guys treating it like a Lego set.”

“What!? But I’m still paying for it!” I stammered, outraged and wounded in my mechanical pride.

I pulled out my old Colt, brandishing it as if it would impress anyone. The little toy stood like a solemn inheritance.

“We’re not letting them rob us for nothing!”

Bens raised his hands, calm:

“Hey, easy with your antique. Guns and me, we’re like oil and water.”

I defended it, proud:

“It’s not an antique. It belonged to my grandfather, once feared in the business.”

He looked at me with a face half-disgusted, half-in love with chaos.

“God damn it! Put that away right now. And stop acting like some suit-wearing mob boss.”

He went back to smoking, flicked his cheek to chase an imaginary ash, and turned up the radio.

Jazz drowned our voices, and I felt tiny, yet strangely reassured. I slipped the Colt into my pocket, head against the window, watching a land drift by that seemed to have forgotten clocks.

•

The sun began to set. The bayous exhaled a golden mist, the Spanish-moss-draped trees forming shifting curtains. The van coughed and stopped in front of a house standing only out of stubbornness: greyed wood, crooked porch, windows with closed eyelids. Two gnarled oaks guarded it like tired sentinels.

“The bayous,” I whispered, reading a battered sign.

I climbed out dragging my feet, hair messy, jaw loose. Bens, grinning like an old fox, grabbed the screen door like he owned the place.

“Shit! You planning to take root or what?”

“But... what is this place?” I asked, unsure whether to be worried or awestruck.

“My home, damn it!” he replied, proud as if it were a castle.

I almost choked.

“According to statistics, there are more murders here than in the whole state,” I stammered.

He laughed.

“Then don’t worry, you’ll be robbed, gangster, and probably dried out soon after!” he cackled, pointing at the swamps.

“Not to mention the local wildlife... gators love you: tender flesh, vacuum-cleaner flavor.”

I stared at him like he’d lost a bolt.

“Come again!?”

“Move,” he grunted. “And don’t believe everything you read in tourist guides.”

I stepped toward the door, glancing nervously at the shadows.

“All we need now are vampires,” I muttered.

“Your mother in shorts!” boomed Bens. “A connoisseur, huh.”

“Leave my mother alone,” I growled.

The house swallowed us. The door creaked, then shut behind us into a night filled with insects and old jazz floating from somewhere far inside.

•

Meanwhile, in the SUV, the three Frenchmen cut the engine. The headlights died like voices lowering before saying something forbidden.

“We now know where he lives,” Lupin declared in a soft, clean voice.

There was a silence, then Bonapart pounded the door panel, impatient as an ungreased spring.

“What’s he doing in this rat hole? Tomorrow I’m attacking!”

Beaudelaire leaned forward, eyes gleaming.

“First the sax,” he whispered.

They crouched in the shadows, three silhouettes melting into the bayou night.
I felt it that gut-deep certainty that the night was going to swallow the day whole.

I slid onto a wobbly chair, listening to jazz leaking from old radios, and felt the machinery start turning: the schemes, the small betrayals, the misunderstandings, the curses, and that sweet taste of grease that sticks to your fingers when you touch the mechanics of fate.

The day had barely started.
It already stank of metal, curses, and a magnificent French-style mess.

Chapter 8 : Jo-Black and the Devil's Bathtub

Bens's house smelled of cold cigar, dust, and a couch that had listened to too many drunk confessions.

I slowly turned on myself, inspecting the yellowed walls, the empty frames, the humidity halos like maps of another world.

My eyes landed on a rotary phone sitting on a dresser still standing only out of habit.

"May I use your... means of communication?" I asked, polite as at a funeral.

Bens collapsed into an armchair, exhausted, groaning like a boiler.

"Shit! Don't you have one of those fancy cell phones, gangster?"

"It... it stayed in my car, unfortunately."

He burst into a greasy laugh and raised the TV volume.

"Make yourself at home, Calagland."

The phone crackled with age. I lifted the receiver with the tips of my fingers, slowly dialed Frank's number and let the dial spin like an old vinyl.

"Hello... Frank? It's Rudolph."

Bens discreetly lowered the TV volume to eavesdrop better.

A few seconds later, I hung up abruptly. My heart was pounding like a bass drum.

I turned to Bens, pale; he raised his head with a fake innocent look.

"Bens..." I said gravely.

He tossed his remote onto the table.

"What now, Calagland?"

"My time is limited. I have until the end of the week to bring the saxophone to the Broloks, or my parents risk being killed."

Bens rolled his eyes.

"Pff! What did you expect, gangster? You really surprise me."

"That wasn't in the contract!"

“A nice load of bullshit, your contract.”

I paced, my head full of drums.

“You have a bathtub? I need a good bath.”

“Second door on the left. Towels in the cabinet, right across from the damn barge.”

“You said... the barge?”

“Where you park your ass, artist.”

I nodded, defeated, and dragged myself upstairs like a condemned man in slippers.

•

The bathroom smelled of stale laundry and ancient humidity.
Steam clung to the ceiling in hesitant clouds.

I slid into the tub full of foam, plastic cap on my head, body drowned in warmth.
My Colt rested on a chair beside my clothes, folded like a soldier’s uniform still believing in discipline.

I didn’t move. The silence vibrated, then bam! a sharp blow sounded under the bathtub.
The water rippled. I jumped.

“What the hell is that!?”

Second blow, harder. The water trembled up to my chin.

“Hey! Bens!” I yelled.

•

Downstairs, he was watching a wrestling match, cigar planted in his mouth.

“What?” he shouted without looking up.

“Your bathtub!”

He shrugged.

“Must be Jo-Black,” he answered casually, puffing a cloud of smoke.

•

I turned pale.

“Jo-what!?”

The bathtub vibrated. A bubble popped.
Then a black snout emerged, followed by a scaled, shiny, gigantic body.

An alligator.

I froze, eyes wide, mouth ready to explode.

The beast slowly turned its head toward me and opened its jaws wide.

No teeth. Just a pink, humid abyss.

“Oh... Lord.”

I screamed, grabbed the Colt... and dropped it in the water.
I fumbled in the foam frantically, hands shaking.

The alligator snapped its toothless jaws, a dry, mocking click.

Then it turned toward the door and slipped out, calm as a well-fed cat.

I stayed there, panting, water up to my chin.
I retrieved my dripping weapon and muttered, voice cracked:

“Filthy crawler.”

•

I stormed downstairs, towel around my waist, dripping like a fish just hauled from a net.

“Mmm! Mmm! Mmmm!”

Bens turned around, delighted.

“God of god damn, you smell like fear, kid.”

“What is that alligator!?” I stammered.

“You’ll get used to it, Calagland. He’s like a house dog.”

“You what!?”

“I’ve rocked him since he was a baby, scrawnier than now. Rejected by his parents. Nothing to fear, he’s got no teeth left.”

“What!?”

“Yeah, because of my friend Rose. A real orthodontic tragedy.”

I didn’t get time to respond. A rumble rolled down the hallway.
Jo-Black burst into the room at full speed, reptilian mass sliding across the floor.

His tail hit me like a swinging bell clapper.
I literally flew and crashed into a wardrobe that hadn't asked for any of this.

Bens jumped up, shaking his head:

“Go to hell, Jo-Black! You could at least be careful with my guests!”

The alligator, unbothered, settled into the armchair, mouth half open, eyes glued to the screen.

Silence fell. Then the wrestling commentator shouted: “It’s a knockout!”

I looked up at the ceiling.

“Perfect summary of my evening,” I whispered.

Chapter 9 : Family Ghosts and the Africa Club Jazz

Morning rose biting the road with a humid sun.

The old red van was a pot on wheels still singing a tired blues. Bens drove like a man who knew every road and every sin lining them: cigar in his teeth, sideways glance, tapping the wheel to the rhythm of a crackling soul tune on the radio.

I was sitting in the back, ice pack pressed against my head, every bump sending me a reminder that dignity is paid in pain.

“I need to find that sax as soon as possible,” I grumbled, mood short as a badly played solo.

“God damn... don’t forget I’m here to help you,” Bens groaned, in a tone that could be paternal or toxic depending on the angle.

“It’s about time,” I muttered.

The old man raised an eyebrow the way one lifts the corner of a tragedy waiting to happen.

“What’s your problem exactly?”

“You could have warned me about the sudden arrival of your... mutt,” I snapped, still bitter about my bathtub-turned-aquatic-horror-scene.

He gave that raspy laugh that sometimes makes me want to insult him, sometimes applaud him.

“Go to hell, artist. Don’t start whining again.”

“As soon as I get the sax in my hands, I’m out of here,” I swore. “My parents have a deadline and I’m not planning to be the bandage that delays the funeral clock.”

“I agree,” he said simply.

Then, tossing a jab without thinking:

“But tell me, why such a radical life change? You a loser or what?”

I pulled the old photo from my pocket, the one that weighs more than lead: Marcel Calagland, thirty, straight-cut suit, hard stare, the face of someone who doesn’t beg for respect.

“That’s who I want to be,” I murmured.

Bens pinched it between two fingers, looking at it as if someone had served him an exotic dish.

“Your grandfather?”

“Yeah. To be accepted by the gang, they asked me to retrieve the saxophone.”

He narrowed his eyes.

“Shit... you’re not telling me everything, huh?”

“No,” I admitted, quieter.

He snorted, dry as a match.

“What a mess! Just like your grandfather, you’d rather end up hunted or unexpectedly dried out?”

The sentence hit me like a sentimental uppercut.

I put the photo away, pressed the ice pack onto his head out of theatrical revenge he cursed I turned up the radio to drown out his complaints, and life resumed its false rhythm.

•

We stopped on a bridge because Bens had business to handle, and because bridges are the kind of places where stories tie themselves into knots.

Four loud, heavysset women in floral dresses laughed by the water and threw me looks filled with a sort of moral support voucher.

Bens was talking to an old man with a snowy chin; when he returned, his face looked like someone who just realized he’d eaten spicy stew without noticing.

“You found the sax?” I asked, hoping for a miracle in a can.

He slammed the door, grotesque in his nervousness.

“Damn it, look at my face! It’s at the Africa Club Jazz.”

The words hit me like a badly tuned cymbal: Africa Club Jazz. The name sounded like a trap wrapped in consonants and promises.

“Who runs it?”

“Papa Tcho-Tchot,” Bens said flatly.

The name grabbed my throat. Papa Tcho-Tchot gang leader and voodoo priest: a combination that smells like unease and unanswered questions.

“Papa what?”

“Papa Tcho-Tchot,” he repeated. “A guy you’d better avoid if you still have dreams of waking up alive.”

I sat up straighter, ice pack sliding down my cheek. My Colt slipped nervously out of my pocket.

“Come again!?” I blurted, heart sprinting.

Bens raised his hands, an old sage in a tiny theater scene:

“For God’s sake, put that gun away, you little idiot. If you show up at his place with that antique pistol, he’ll blow your face off poetry included.”

My fingers tightened around the metal as if the decision could be forged in its coldness.

“Don’t forget time is ticking for my parents,” I reminded him, voice cracking.

He looked at me, serious as a goat solving a riddle.

“My balls,” he said simply. “If you walk into a priest-sorcerer’s place with a family heirloom peashooter, you’re done for.”

I felt rage warming the back of my neck: anger, misplaced pride, the urge to make a movie in which I’d be the clumsy hero.

“We’ll see about that,” I muttered, more to myself than to him.

The van started up like a pardoned sinner who never asked the world’s opinion.

The engine gulped down the bridge, swallowing us into a noon sun that glued skin to leather.

I had Bens beside me, jaded and proud, and me a vacuum cleaner salesman with gangster dreams.

The road ahead smelled of hot oil and bad ideas.

Chapter 10 : The Sorcerer's Stronghold

The parking lot of the Africa Club Jazz shimmered like a steel plate under a white sun. The heat clung to the skin, and the air vibrated with an invisible rumble, as if the place breathed in its own way.

Bens and I crossed the asphalt slowly, two soldiers without plan or glory. I had lifted my collar, convinced it could serve as moral armor.

"This will be quick," I murmured, wiping sweat from my forehead.

"Calm down," Bens replied. "This is his turf. You let me lead the talking, got it? And above all, no aggressive moves toward Papa Tcho-Tchot."

"What's the point of being a gangster if I can't even express myself?" I said, hands spread like wings.

He stopped dead, sniffing the air like a dog before a storm.

"We need a cover. And never, ever tell him you work for the Broloks."

"Come again!?"

But he was already pushing the door.

•

Inside, the coolness swallowed us in one gulp, like badly digested whiskey. The Africa Club Jazz was vast, silent, full of echoes. A wide stage stood at the back, bathed in mauve light. And at the center, a tiny table, set like a cheap altar.

A tall, thin man in a dark robe shot with metallic reflections was speaking to the air in a low, winding voice. When he turned, four silhouettes emerged from the shadows: three gorillas in black suits, and Bolos, the mountain with the golden nose ring.

Papa Tcho-Tchot.
The bayou sorcerer.

Skin covered in symbols, heavy ear rings, nose decorated like a colonial gate. His smile looked like a polished wolf trap.

"Well, well... the jazzman himself," he hissed. "Still breathing?"

Bens grimaced.

“God of god damn... it’s been a while.”

“What brings you here?” asked the sorcerer, voice dragging like a sax solo that goes on too long.

I leaned toward Bens, in a whisper:

“You’re a musician!?”

“Shut your mouth,” he muttered.

But Papa Tcho-Tchot had already lifted his head, his eye suddenly red, burning like a neon sign in the night. He extended a hand toward me, and Bolos stepped forward, obedient, massive, breath hot and slow.

“I... I’m here for information,” Bens attempted, hands joined like a scout in confession.

The sorcerer rose, let his gaze slide over me.

“And that guy there? That simpleton in a suit? Does he think he’s Al Capone or what?”

“You... you what?” I stammered, more insulted than scared.

Papa Tcho-Tchot frowned. His finger twitched, he murmured a string of sounds that smelled of ash and pepper.

A sharp grimace cut across his face, and suddenly Bens clutched his throat, eyes bulging.

“Wh... wh... what the hell did you do!?”

“A little courtesy spell,” the sorcerer said with a cruel child’s smile. “Your curses tire out my spirits.”

Bens panted, lips trembling.

“I’m here to help Calagland,” he managed.

The red pupils locked onto me.

“You. You really know this clown?”

Bens improvised like a chess player in free fall.

“The son of an old friend from Chicago. His saxophone was stolen in Shreveport.”

The sorcerer raised an eyebrow, mocking.

“Distant friends? How new.”

I boiled over. The mystical theater, the superior aura, the red glow... too much for me.

“That’s enough with your magician tricks,” I snapped. “And your vacationer-with-piercings look!”

I took a step. My hand slid into my coat.

“No!” Bens shouted.

Papa Tcho-Tchot opened his eyes wide. The air vibrated.

An invisible pressure gripped my chest. My arms dropped instantly. My whole body froze, trapped in a warm, sluggish force.

“Here, I rule alone,” the sorcerer whispered. “And no one moves without my blessing.”

I had no more will, just ironic awareness that of a guy realizing he really should have stayed a vacuum-cleaner salesman.

“What did you do?” Bens gasped.

“A little spell,” answered Papa Tcho-Tchot. “To avoid unnecessary drama.”

He continued calmly:

“The saxophone... I have it. Bolos recovered it during the arrest of your clumsy Chicago friends. At customs, I control everything. I wanted to examine it.”

Bens clenched his fists.

“And?”

The sorcerer sat down, pulled out a crooked cigar and lit it. A greenish smoke drifted out, snaked toward Bolos, who inhaled it first through his mouth, then his ears, then his nose ring. He shuddered, scratched his backside, and assumed a fighting stance.

Papa Tcho-Tchot sighed.

“No jewels, no drugs, not even gold. And the sound it makes is... atrocious. You’re hiding something, Bens.”

“I just want to get the instrument back,” insisted the old man.

“Every lie will cost you a hit. Mike-Tyson style,” the sorcerer added with predatory politeness.

Bolos lunged.

His right fist smashed into my cheek, the world flipped. I saw the ceiling dance before I hit the floor with the sound of offended carpet.

“Stop!” Bens shouted. “You’re gonna break him, damn it!”

Papa Tcho-Tchot raised a lazy hand.

“Pick him up. We’ll try again.”

I got back on my feet, two hematomas shaped like continents on my face, and I stood straight, because there was nothing else left to do.

At the back of the club, a neon flickered three times like a ghost laughing.

The sorcerer smiled, satisfied.

And I, frozen, beaten but standing, realized that in that world, being a gangster meant mostly knowing how to take punches magical or not.

Chapter 11 : Notes From the Past

The SUV purred like a big alley cat that had swallowed a saucepan.
Lupin drove silently, chewing his toothpick like a discreet metronome.
Bonapart, meanwhile, twisted his fists until his anger cracked audibly, a dry sound like knuckles begging for a violent snack.
In the back, Beaudelaire sprawled out, lollipop wedged between his lips, making small friction noises that, for some obscure reason, made me nauseous.

“I swear I’m gonna skin them alive,” Bonapart growled, voice dripping with bile.

Lupin barely raised an eyebrow.

“Patience is gold,” he said slowly. “Save your energy.”

He repeated, louder this time, hands resting like a conductor’s on the leather:

“I said, save your energy.”

Beaudelaire smiled, half-mocking, half-dreamy.

“Why didn’t that little wasp nest settle in the French Quarter?” he laughed. “I could’ve wandered in the streetcars, nibbled oysters, and cooked him after dessert.”

The SUV slid along the road like a note held too long: heavy, tense, dangerous.
Three Frenchmen with wildly different looks, yet aligned on one thing they wanted that sax the way one wants a doorway to a better world.

•

Meanwhile, the Africa Club Jazz had recovered a glacial calm, the kind that is never sincere in places like this.

Bens paced, hands trembling from a mix of anger and apprehension.

I stood there, face still burning where Bolos had served me his fist like a stained postcard.

“Stop! It’s the truth!” Bens shouted again, voice hoarse like an old lighthouse.

Bolos stiffened, hatred at arm’s reach. He cocked his fist, but stopped a hair away from my cheek when Papa Tcho-Tchot lifted a finger.

The air vibrated. I felt an invisible pressure, like a gloved hand stopping me mid-breath.

The sorcerer blinked, and something in his gaze shifted to red.

He studied me like one reads a complicated musical score.

“Mmm... I’m certain this version is pure nonsense,” he murmured thoughtfully.

Bens, already breathless, attempted once more:

“But—”

The sorcerer cut him off with a smile that held nothing warm.

“I’ll give you one chance,” he said, “only because we were friends once. If you want to get that piece of tin and wood for your friend, you must win the contest I’m hosting tomorrow night. Here. In my house.”

Bens turned as pale as a sheet spun too fast in the wash.

“Hypocrite!” he spat. “You know damn well I don’t play anymore.”

“Indeed,” sighed Papa Tcho-Tchot, almost tender. “Not for lack of knowing your past.” He placed a hand on his heart with theatrical affection. “Bonnie, your wife, will forever leave a void in me, my friend.”

The wound was open, scrubbed with vinegar: Bens bowed his head, and for a moment I saw the fragility under the crude shell.

The sorcerer murmured again, made a gesture, and I shivered like a puppet whose strings had just been cut.

“Tomorrow night, Bens. Take it or leave it.”

Then he turned his back, his robe brushing the floor like a note sliding out of tempo. The neon in the back flickered three times, like a greasy laugh.

•

The sun dipped over the marshes as we returned.

In Bens’s living room, the blinds cast zebra stripes across the couch.

I was sprawled out, ice pack on my forehead and cream on my bruises, swollen with a dull anger.

Jo-Black, curled up like a beastly lapdog, dozed beside an armchair he had chosen as his throne.

Bens smoked.

He patted the alligator like one consoles an old, stupid friend.

“God of god damn, Calagland!” he barked. “What doesn’t kill you... makes you even dumber, or what?”

I touched my face, its edges still on fire.

“I heard... you were a musician, right?” I mumbled. “And then...”

“Damn it!” he exploded. “You noticed, huh? I tried to play the big brother to save a buddy. And the shit came back like a boomerang.”

“Boomerang?” I replied, a bit ironic.

“Boomerang my ass!” Bens growled. “We’ve got an urgent mess: Papa Tcho-Tchot has the sax. And he wants me to join his contest to get it back. Tomorrow night. Damn it.”

I jolted upright, the ice pack falling.
My fingers searched for the Colt’s grip proud and useless symbol.

“I’ve got the necessary instrument too,” I announced, more bold than wise.

Bens raised his hands, horrified.

“Oh no. You didn’t learn a thing, huh? I swore never to play again. And I’m not ready to break that promise, damn it.”

“You what?”

I twirled my Colt like a western puppet.
I needed to do something anything.
Action, even ridiculous action, chased fear away.

“Then I’ll go get it myself,” I spat.

Jo-Black lifted his head.
A deep rumble rose from his throat, an animal warning that silenced the room for a second.

Bens frowned not angry, but serious.
Something was coming.
Not a bar client, not a passerby: someone was approaching.
And when someone comes in the night of a bayou, they often come for violence.

Chapter 12 ; The Jackals in the Bayou's Jaws

The late-afternoon light poured like burning honey over the twisted bayou trees. Mosquitoes danced in squadrons, and the frogs tuned themselves to set the tone: that day, Louisiana was preparing a symphony of chaos.

And in the middle of this swampy score, three silhouettes cut through the dusty road.

Lupin, Bonapart, and Beaudelaire.

The Jackals.

Three stains of elegance and vice in the southern humidity.

They stopped in front of Bens's house, a tired shack with a crooked porch and a silence too heavy to be honest.

The sticky air clung to their jackets.

Lupin, always impeccable, knelt by the lock with the concentration of a surgeon operating on a patient allergic to anesthesia.

Behind him, Bonapart kept watch, jaw clenched, slamming his fist into his palm as if rehearsing the punishment to come.

On the side, Beaudelaire bent over a trapdoor half-hidden by an old flowerpot. He sniffed, wrinkled his nose.

"Good God, it smells like death and fish," he murmured, lollipop at the corner of his mouth.

A sharp click sounded. Lupin smiled, satisfied.

"And there you go, gentlemen."

They entered without a sound three ghosts confident in their effect, three dandies on a mission in the belly of the bayou.

•

In the living room, Bens and I had been facing each other for a good ten seconds. Not a word, just that thick silence where every look is worth a duel.

And suddenly, a dull noise.

We turned at the same time.

"What the...?" we said in unison.

Jo-Black, until then curled in his corner, had sprung up in a flash, tail beating the floor like a war drum.

His growl made the windows vibrate and my stomach with them.

“What’s gotten into him?” I asked, tense.

“Maybe goddamn colic,” Bens replied, cigar trembling between his fingers.

But he didn’t believe it. His eyes were already searching the hallway.

Soft footsteps approached.

Bens paled.

“God of god damn... who the hell could that be?”

I raised my Colt, palms sweaty.

“Judging by your face, I’d say: not the mailman.”

“Put that away!” he barked. “No stupid gun tricks in my house!”

Too late.

Three silhouettes appeared in the doorway.

Lupin, straight as a preacher.

Bonapart, stocky and twitchy.

Beaudelaire, handsome as sin in a light suit.

Jo-Black slapped his tail and placed himself between them and us.

“Who are you?” Bens growled.

Lupin flashed that polite smile of people who kill cleanly.

“And please tell us, what are you looking for? I said: what are you looking for?”

“And what’s with that accent?” I muttered, suspicious.

Bonapart snorted.

“So that’s our apprentice gangster the guy with the manners of an old Sears catalog.”

He spat on the floor.

“The worthy representative of the obsolete Broloks gang.”

My jaw tightened.

“You what?”

“We simply want to retrieve the saxophone,” Lupin said, calm but sharp. “I said, the saxophone.”

Beaudelaire stepped forward, syrupy smile in place.

“Drop your antique toy, Rudolph Calagland, and we promise no bloodshed.”

Bonapart raised his gun.

“Or you get to discover the rebirth of the Jackals gang Made in France!”

I couldn’t help but smile.

“Apparently not modern enough to stop a bunch of retirees.”

Silence.

Three frozen faces.

“What?” they said in unison.

My Colt gave off a strange click the sound of a tired spring.

Bens raised his arms, horrified.

“God of god damn, what are you doing!?”

“Pff... the trigger must be slipping,” I said weakly.

Bonapart didn’t let me finish.

He lunged and hit me with a right hook.

I flew backward and crashed onto the couch, stiff as a corpse in a silent film.

Bens tried to interfere, but Bonapart shoved him aside with a swipe.

Then Jo-Black roared.

And chaos suddenly had a name.

The alligator charged like a freight train.

He slammed into Beaudelaire, sending him flying onto his two companions.

Screams, gunshots, dust and me in the middle, dazed but alive.

Bonapart fired twice into the ceiling, then aimed at Jo-Black.

“Don’t move, you damned lizard!”

“No!” screamed Bens. “Not Jo-Black!”

But the floor had something else to say.

Sharp cracks echoed. Then another. Then several.

Under our feet, trapdoors opened.

And from below...

heavy noises, viscous breathing, slimy footsteps.

Beaudelaire, livid, glanced down the hall.

“Alligators!” he screamed. “Dozens!”

The three Frenchmen bolted, shooting in every direction.
Bullets ricocheted off walls, trinkets, family portraits.

Behind them, a green tide rose reptiles of all sizes, jaws wide, a symphony of clacks and growls.

They smashed through the back door and plunged into the swamp, chased by screams, water, and reptilian fury.

Silence returned, little by little, broken only by the bayou’s gentle splashing.

Bens, furious, grabbed me by the collar and shook me like an old dusty rug.

“Go to hell, Calagland! I saw my life flash in two seconds!”

“Hey! Hey!” I protested, arms limp.

“And who the hell were those assholes, Rudolph!?”

I pulled away, breathless.

“Probably a rival gang. They knew my name.”

“God of god damn!” he sighed. “The biggest secret of the century, huh?”

I tried to regain some composure, like a man pretending he still had dignity left.

“We need to work in tandem,” I said.

“Tandem my ass! We only get along because we’re forced to, got it?”

He turned to Jo-Black, who was watching the scene with a bovine stare.

“You. Guard the house. And keep an eye on your cousins, understood?”

The alligator blinked, then comfortably settled on the couch.

I looked at him, sympathetic. Even he seemed wiser than me.

Bens sighed, exhausted.

“God knows what else is coming our way from Chicago.”

I grabbed my coat, feeling sweat drying on my neck.

“You’re right. I’m heading to the club to settle this.”

“No!” Bens shouted.

But I was already outside.

And in my eyes burned that stupid heroic gleam that men get when they confuse courage with despair.

Mosquitoes parted at my passage.

Night, meanwhile, approached in long, hungry strides.

Chapter 13 ; Rose Fée La Mambo

The red van, all dented and tattooed with rust, jolted between the bald cypress trees of the bayou.

Mosquitoes flew military patrols around the windshield, and every turn felt like the metal was about to peel open like a can of corn.

I was half alive.

Cheeks covered in white cream, two tufts of cotton stuck in my nostrils, I looked like a flu-ridden seal.

And I gritted my teeth at every pothole.

“Where are we going?” I asked, my voice somewhere between pain and cotton.

Bens, focused behind the wheel, chewed his cigar with the gravity of an atheist priest.

“To a friend’s,” he said. “Rose. Rose Fée La Mambo. She’s dear to me.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“She knows where the sax is?”

“Hell no! But she’ll help you win it.”

“You said... win?”

“Tomorrow night. Papa Tcho-Tchot’s music contest at the Africa Club Jazz. With her help, you take my place, you win, you get the sax, and you save your parents. It’s that or nothing.”

“I’m not a musician.”

“Shit! Would’ve surprised me if you were,” he grumbled.

“And your friend, she’s gonna teach me music theory in two sessions?”

“Don’t you see we’re swimming in deep crap?” he snapped. “But she’s the best life raft we’ve got.”

I sighed, lifted my head, and bluffed:

“If this goes wrong, I’m taking my Colt and getting it back by force.”

“I warned you,” Bens said, tired. “And don’t poke around in my business with Papa Tcho-Tchot.”

I looked at him sideways.

“Why are you so nervous about facing him?”

“Not your problem, Calagland.”

The van took a few more turns before stopping dead in front of a house that looked straight out of a folkloric nightmare: dark beams, walls bristling with gris-gris, strings, and blue bottles clinking in the wind.

In the hall, a straw mannequin as tall as a Western scarecrow stood stabbed with blades and knives, spiked like a knightly hedgehog.

“Very welcoming,” I muttered. “Your friend into decoration?”

Bens cupped his hands around his mouth.

“You there, Rose Fée?” he yelled.

A warm voice answered, singing, rolling the words like beads:

“Y’can go an’ y’sit, Bens! I’s comin’ right away!”

I grabbed his sleeve, worried.

“And don’t tell her who I am. I’m incognito.”

“Trust me.”

•

The living room looked like an acid-drenched museum.

Jars, skulls, stuffed birds, feathers, horns, seashells, snake skins... and in the center, a stuffed alligator holding between its teeth a green pot sealed with a lid.

“She has strange tastes, your friend,” I said.

“It’s her livelihood,” Bens replied.

“You what?”

“Voodoo priestess,” he added, as calmly as someone who just swallowed a battery.

I jumped.

“Like Papa Tcho-Tchot!”

“God damn, no! More human, obviously.”

“If that’s your plan, I’m out!”

But before I could stand, the door opened.

And light walked in.

Rose Fée La Mambo.

Flamboyant thirty-something, ebony skin, eyes blue like another world, a flowery dress that looked like it giggled, and a large black hat like a bayou Louise Brooks. She radiated like a Bengal fire in Louisiana's humidity.

I sat back down instantly, removed my cotton plugs, tried to look civilized.

"What y'brings y'here today, Bens?" she sang, each word dancing.

"Good to see you, Rose," Bens said. "This is Rudolph Calagland, the son of an old friend from Chicago."

She gave me a smile that stole my breath.

"G'day, Rudolph."

"G... good morning," I stammered. Then, whispering:
"What on earth is she saying?"

Without answering, Rose grabbed the green pot from the stuffed gator's mouth. She shook it, murmured in a language that smelled of soot, salt, and cinnamon, lifted the lid... and a steaming chicken leg burst out.

She swallowed it in one gulp, unfazed.

Bens and I stared, eyes wide.

"God of god damn," he breathed. "I need your powerful services, Rose."

She frowned.

"No blaspheming in my place, Bens! And for the heavenly services, that was Marie Laveau."

"Marie Laveau?" I asked. "A friend of yours?"

"No," Bens groaned. "A former priestess. Feared, formidable... and well dried-up by now."

"OK, OK," said Rose. "Let's see y'problem."

She pulled from under the table a clay pot, tossed in raw chicken feet and tiny bones, closed it, shook it, and placed it inside the stuffed alligator's gaping jaws. Then she began to sing.

Her voice rose, fell, rolled, stretched like a wave.
The walls seemed to shiver.
A swift gesture: Pop the lid flew off.

"My balls..." whispered Bens.

“What is it?” I murmured.

“Shh,” Rose said, pinky on her lips. “The magic y’done worked.”

A smell filled the room indescribable, a mix of earth, burnt sugar, and mystery. Rose poured two vials into the clay pot. Green smoke, then white, then violet swirled upward, circling us like the skirt of a storm.

“All right,” she said calmly.

And then the pot... sneezed.

Yes, sneezed.

Chicken feet shot out like rockets.
One of them flew straight into my mouth.

I didn’t even have time to scream.
It went in.

I choked.

“God of god damn!” Bens shouted, ducking for cover.

I felt my body jolt, arms flailing, head vibrating. I convulsed like a spring-loaded puppet.

“What’s happenin’ to him!?” Bens yelled.

“Nothin’ serious... I think,” Rose replied, less and less convinced.

Panicking, Bens grabbed a bowler hat off a shelf.
Without thinking, he slammed it onto my head.

And then... everything changed.

My face transformed slowly: elongated chin, too-wide smile, naïve eyes, a tender, bewildered expression.

A familiar face but impossible to name.

Bens blinked, torn between fright and wonder.

“What the hell... but it’s... huge. Looks like...”

He didn’t finish.

The hat tilted on its own, as if bowing to the room.

Rose froze, mouth slightly open.

And I or whatever I had become looked around with the softness of a child and the awkwardness of a lost clown.

Outside, the wind cracked the branches.
The night, complice, seemed to applaud.

Chapter 14 : The Paw, the Bowler... and the Revelation

Rose Fée La Mambo raised her pinky, thin and imperious, as if she were locking down silence itself.

“Hush... Rudolph’s relaxin’. Might be he’s gon’ tell us somethin’.”

I felt myself drift.

My eyelids opened and closed on their own, as if someone else were pulling the strings.

My mouth quivered, then stretched into a timid, fragile smile.

And then... an unfamiliar voice, rolled in an improbable accent, slipped out of me:

“Yes, mister! When I start cryin’, it’s because I’m afraid I’m gonna get scolded.”

The words escaped before I could stop them.

I grimaced, scratched my temple... and burst into tears. Real tears. Round, childish, foolish tears that streamed down in tight rows like notes on a musical staff.

Bens jolted upright.

“Holy shit of hell! That damn English actor... It’s Stan Laurel!”

I blinked, dazed.

Stan Laurel? The Laurel from Laurel and Hardy? The one of grimaces and blunders?

Rose took a step back, mouth half open.

“Don’ know this c’ty pe, but it’s a very bad sign,” she said, removing her great hat.

Her hair erupted like an explosion of dark, shining, almost electric curls. The air around her vibrated.

I shook my head so hard the invisible mask seemed to peel off my skin.

Stan Laurel’s face melted, dissolved, slid away from me like sugar in hot coffee.

Bens, with the reflex of a retired boxer, grabbed the bowler hat, yanked it off my skull, and threw it onto the table.

It landed with a dull, almost living thud.

He took another puff of his cigar and blew the smoke toward the ceiling.

“Well I’ll be damned,” he muttered.

I panted, sweating, throat dry.

“I... I feel weird... that was horrible...”

My voice wasn't entirely my own anymore. It still vibrated with a lingering English accent, like a badly stored echo.

Rose, suddenly gentle, placed a hand on my forehead.

“There's strength in there,” she murmured. “A strength lookin' at y' through y'self.”

“Translation?” grumbled Bens, tense.

She closed her eyes, lids trembling, then snapped them open again. Her blue irises shone like twin flames.

“You're tied to someone very strong, Rudolph Calagland. Very strong... and very dark in the soul.”

Bens flicked his cigar into an ashtray, fingers shaking.

“Holy hell, speak plain, Rose. It's Papa Tcho-Tchot.”

A colossal silence fell.
You could've heard the smoke settle.

Rose inhaled deeply.

“Nothin' less than that, yes... Papa Tcho-Tchot,” she said slowly, her voice suddenly low, grave, almost cracked.

Her eyes hardened.

“He marked y', artist. Like carvin' a name on a drum.”

A prickling ran across my neck, a shiver climbed my spine.

“Marked? You mean... he... cursed me?”

“Not only that,” she replied. “He be watchin' y' through y' fear, Rudolph. And if y' wanna win tomorrow night, y' ain't just gonna play the sax... y' gonna play against him.”

I stood there, mouth open, goosebumps down to my ankles.

Bens lowered his head, tugged at his collar, his eyes heavy.

“Goddamn... I knew it. That bastard's already started his little chess match.”

Rose slowly put her hat back onto her curls, stepped toward the door, and whispered:

“The night's fallin', Bens. And in the bayou, when the moon rises, the spirits wake.”

She turned to me.

“Don’ sleep alone, Rudolph. And if y’ dream... of clowns or men in hats... don’t follow
'em.”

The house creaked. A candle flickered.
And far off, in the humid dusk, a laugh rose.

A deep, hoarse, mocking laugh.

Papa Tcho-Tchot’s laugh, carried by the wind like a threat whispered under the breath.

Chapter 15 : The Sorcerer and His Catches

In his office, Papa Tcho-Tchot was meditating.
Sitting cross-legged on a worn-out rug, he looked like a voodoo idol plugged into an alternating-current outlet.
His ritual tattoos pulsed beneath the skin, phosphorescent, drawing an alphabet no one would ever want to decipher.
His hair, braided into black cords, vibrated softly, like antennas searching for an invisible signal.
A dull drumbeat throbbed somewhere in the room maybe a heart, maybe a spell.
Candles bent toward his breath.

The sorcerer inhaled slowly, closed his eyes, then snapped them open again his pupils red, like two embers remembering the fire.

Someone knocked.
Three sharp taps.

“Come in,” he said, without raising his voice.

The door creaked.
Bolos poked his head in.
Still that same golden ring lodged in his nostril, a luxury doorbell on a bull in a suit.

“We fished out three guys, boss,” he said, satisfied. “Fellows with a weird accent. They’re babbling in French, I think. Found near Bens’s place.”

Papa Tcho-Tchot’s lips stretched slowly into a reptilian smile.

“Well, well...”

He rose without a sound.
His ceremonial robe unfurled around him like a sheet of night.
A faint hiss slipped between his teeth.

The candles bent further, as if clearing his path.

“Three fellows with a weird accent...” he repeated, thoughtful.
He pinched his chin.

“I smell Chicago under that... and cheap rum.”

Bolos shrugged, amused.

“They tried to fight back, but the gators did half the job.”

Papa Tcho-Tchot laid his fingers on the desk, slowly, as if he were playing an invisible note.

“Perfect,” he whispered. “Prepare them for me... I want to hear them sing.”

“Yes, master.”

The sorcerer took a few steps, crossed in front of an old mirror, and contemplated his own reflection, satisfied.

“Northern whites have fragile skin... but fear, fear always speaks the same language.”

Bolos grimaced nervously.

“And what if they’re just lost tourists?”

Papa Tcho-Tchot skewered him with a look.

“In the bayou, no one gets lost. One is always guided.”

He snapped his fingers.

A plume of blue smoke rose from the floor, briefly shaping three trembling silhouettes.

Lupin, Bonapart, and Beaudelaire
the Chacals suspended between two worlds.

“Ah... my new guests,” murmured the sorcerer.

He laughed a long, damp laugh, oozing like a badly tuned flute.

Then, in a voice not entirely human:

“Sic transit gloria mundi, gentlemen of France...”

He cracked his knuckles.

“And now... let the confession begin.”

Chapter 16 : The Pot, the Spit, and the Red Beans

I was still wobbling, head heavy and soul crumpled.

The world was swaying, and Rose and Bens were staring at me like two asylum nurses waiting for the next crisis.

“What... what happened?” I groaned.

Rose lifted her little finger like a conductor’s baton.

“We couldn’t ’ave known y’were gonna swallow a chicken foot by accident,” she said, sheepish.

“You WHAT!?” I choked, my voice higher than a nervous clarinet.

Bens burst into a thunderous laugh.

“Holy shit! You made my day, Calagland! Even Nostradamus, with his farsighted granny glasses, wouldn’t have predicted that! It went to hell so hard I nearly broke my jaw laughing!”

“You senile relic,” I muttered, wounded.

Rose, unfazed, pulled three squat vials from a pouch at her waist and set them on the table, each one sloshing with a different liquid:

red like blood,
green like jealousy,
blue like a lying vein.

“Hush! Quiet now, my lil’ Creole,” she said, focused. “I think I got the solution. An old recipe. But first...”

She pulled out a fourth vial, uncorked it, and downed the whole thing in one gulp.

I watched her, suspicious.

“Bens promised me a solution,” I said. “If you can’t help me, I’m leaving right now.”

Rose didn’t respond.

She slid a blackened pot beneath the jaws of the stuffed alligator, lifted the lid with a sharp gesture, and *plop plop plop* tossed the vials inside.

A harsh vapor rose instantly a mix of pepper, lightning, and sawmill.

“Now,” she said calmly, “y’have to spit in it. Both of you. At the same time. Before I close it.”

Bens’s mouth dropped open, outraged.

“Holy God! My spit mixed with this... this Calagland?!”

“You two’re closely and strangely linked,” Rose replied firmly. “It’s this or nothing.”

I stared at her, confused.

“And that weird accent of yours... it’s back?”

“I’m experimentin’,” she said with a laugh. “Little potions, big languages. But now I’m sober, don’t worry.”

“No... well, yes. I don’t doubt your abilities,” I said, uncomfortable.

She clapped her hands.

“Come on, both of y’! Now ain’t the time to act like sissies.”

We stood, hesitant, facing the bubbling pot.

A last shared look that of condemned men at the gong and *plaf*, we each let a glob of spit fall into the magic brew.

Rose slammed the lid shut.

The pot began to tremble.

A tiny lightning bolt streaked through the room.

The seams spat little blue sparks.

The light flickered like a night-light at the end of its shift.

Thunder real thunder answered outside.

The floor vibrated, knick-knacks danced on the shelves.

Rose’s hair lifted, pulled by an invisible storm. Her eyes widened, two golden coins in the night.

She chanted, faster, louder, slicing the air with sharp, luminous gestures.

A breath, then... BANG.

Silence.

A final, sharp crack.

And suddenly, the pot expelled something.

Red beans.

Big ones.

Huge ones.

Swollen, furious, shiny like belligerent prunes.

They rolled across the floor, knocking into furniture with a ridiculous clatter.

Bens blinked, dumbfounded.

“Holy shit! Your pot just crapped out beans!”

I raised my hands.

“I think I’ll just continue my quest solo...”

“Wait,” said Bens. “Look at ’em... the beans are moving!”

Rose calmly smoothed her curls, then stepped forward on silent feet.
The room now smelled of swamp, cinnamon, and the old cabinet of a grandmother hiding a secret.

“This is really strange,” I whispered.

“Christ, it stinks,” Bens added.

“Smells like your bathroom,” I shot back too fast.

“Go to hell and go again Calagland,” he replied, true to form.

“Hush!” Rose snapped. “Quiet, both o’ you! The beans... they’ve disappeared!”

We froze, scanning the floor.

The smoke slowly lifted, pulled by an invisible hand.

And then...

A note.

Just one, at first.

The breath of a trumpet, timid.
Then another, warmer.
Then the velvet of a saxophone.

A slow, elegant, insolent swing rose from the floor.
The walls vibrated.
The furniture shivered.

And I swear I heard a laugh deep, distant, joyful and sad all at once.

“Holy God...” whispered Bens. “Where’s that coming from?”

But the answer was already forming.

The air trembled, the music thickened.

Two shapes were materializing, right there, above the floor, exactly where the beans had vanished.

Two human silhouettes.
Floating.
Lit in trembling gold.

A saxophone gleamed between them.

And suddenly, the room was no longer a living room...
but the stage of a warm, moaning, magnificent jazz dream.

Chapter 17 : The Sorcerer, Three Frenchmen, and Not a Baby Tooth Left

In the basement of the Africa Club Jazz, the air smelled of damp earth, molasses, and cheap rum.

A pipe dripped in a corner, drop by drop, like a nervous metronome.

The candles set directly on the ground burned halfway down, their flames flickering as if they breathed.

Papa Tcho-Tchot stood there, motionless, thoughtful, hands clasped behind his back. In front of him, three silhouettes tied to metal chairs:

Lupin, his suit still impeccable despite the bloodstains, his gaze too clean for this place.

Bonapart, jaw clenched, fists twitching under the ropes like rabid dogs;

Beaudelaire, without his lollipop, but with the same dandy smile nailed to his face the one that says: *I mock everything, even death.*

Their gagged mouths swallowed frustrated silences.

Papa Tcho-Tchot inhaled deeply.

“Mmm... that’s it,” he finally said, soft and deep, the voice of a priest who swallowed a thunderstorm.

He approached slowly, robe brushing the floor, his luminous tattoos drawing dancing shadows across the walls.

His pupils turned red not a human red, but the red of metal heated before forging.

“Three strangers fallen from the sky into my bayou,” he went on.

He walked slowly behind them, his hand sliding over their shoulders like a curious serpent.

“Three intruders, three chatterers, three charming idiots... or three envoys?”

Bonapart tried to growl.

The sorcerer placed two fingers on his temple.

Silence.

Not a breath.

Papa Tcho-Tchot closed his eyes, placed his palms one by one on the skulls of the three Frenchmen, murmuring a soft chant so terrifying it became beautiful.

A rolled language, between velvet and poison, full of consonants one would never dare repeat aloud.

The floor vibrated beneath his feet.

Red symbols appeared on the foreheads of the three prisoners, then vanished at once.

He reopened his eyes.

“Ahhh...” he sighed. “There are our travelers. Come for a saxophone that does not belong to them...”

He began to laugh—a clear, long laugh that bounced against the walls like a mad rubber ball.

“There is competition, yes,” he murmured. “And coming from far.”

He slowly turned his head toward Bolos, standing by the door, impassive.

“Nothing very interesting about that instrument, but these three... oh, they know more than they think.”

He placed a hand on Beaudelaire’s forehead. The latter shuddered.

“This one hides his fear beneath his coquetry.”

Then Lupin:

“This one wants to understand everything, but he will understand too late.”

And finally Bonapart:

“And this one... ah, the war dog! No faith, no master, but still the smell of blood in his veins.”

Bolos gave a small chuckle.

“What do we do with them, boss?”

“We listen,” replied Papa Tcho-Tchot. “They will sing.”

He stepped back and flicked his wrist.

The gags detached themselves and fell to the floor.

Lupin gasped, Beaudelaire sighed like a tired actor, and Bonapart spat an insult in rugged French.

“Silence, little featherless rooster,” the sorcerer said calmly.

He raised a finger, and the air changed.

Music rose from the floor a muffled double-bass riff, coming from nowhere.

Papa Tcho-Tchot smiled, eyes half-closed.

“You will help me... *sic*.”

The three Frenchmen looked at each other, stunned, then their heads began to nod by themselves, in rhythm, as docile as performing dogs who had read Voltaire and sniffed voodoo.

“Very good, my little musicians,” concluded the sorcerer, satisfied.

“Tonight, you will sing for me... and tomorrow, you will bring me the other one.
The one they call Rudolph Calagland.”

Chapter 18 : Beans, Swing, and Hair-Pulling Panic

Inside Rose Fée La Mambo's house, the living room was still vibrating, saturated with electricity and swing.

The air smelled of spirit-frying, storm-dust, and old wood that couldn't believe what it had just seen.

Rudolph, Bens, and Rose had instinctively drawn closer together, pressed like three cats that just saw a spectral dog walk by.

A long breath trembled through the windows.
Then, a face literally emerged from the wall.

A smile so wide you could almost hear destiny's chalk screech across the slate of the world.

A man appeared African-American, polished skull, greying temples, a trumpet grafted to his hand.

He played one note, just one, clear as a thunderclap that swings.

Then he stopped, rubbed his nose with comic seriousness.

"Look at that... that's giant," breathed Bens, voice cracked.

His cigar dropped from his mouth.

"Looks like Louis Armstrong!"

"Louis Armstrong!" repeated Rudolph and Rose one panicked, the other delighted.

And immediately, the opposite wall refused to be outdone: it gave birth to a second ghost.

White hat, clarinet in hand, smile full of absolute elegance.

He smoothed his felt hat, winked at no one, because that's the privilege of immortals.

"Holy God almighty! Sidney Bechet!" screamed Bens, eyes on the verge of exploding.

But the ceiling, jealous, joined the fête.

It cracked, opened, and poured out its own parade: Buddy Bolden, Roy Brown, Mahalia Jackson, Lonnie Johnson and many more

the whole crew floating, in rhythm, ready to repaint the room in major key.

The floor vibrated.

The jars clinked together.

"These are their ghosts," whispered Rose, trembling. "Their spectres!"

"What kind of madness is this!?" squeaked Rudolph, pale as his Colt.

"It comes from your problem," said Rose unsure which of their problems she was referring to.

The spirits swirled, happy like musicians reunited with their stage.

Armstrong crossed the room with his trumpet, stopped right in front of Bens, stared, pretended to reload his instrument... and delivered a kick to Bens's backside with metronomic precision.

"Damn! Does he have it in for me or what!?" cried Bens, launched forward in a posture not worthy of any former musician.

"Watch out, Bens!" yelled Rose.

Too late.

Bechet, faithful to his clarinetist temperament, punched him in the stomach fast and sharp.

"Good God of all gods!" groaned Bens, doubled over. "His reputation as a hitter ain't stolen!"

"What did they eat!?" sputtered Bens.

"No idea!" answered Rose out of her depth about her own spell.

Rudolph, in full dignity crisis, clenched his fists and tried two solid hooks. His arms passed through the ghosts like mist.

The spectres, offended, gently lifted him and tossed him against the opposite wall. He slid down slowly, like a painting refusing to be removed.

"Hey, Calagland! Try staying alive, huh!" called Bens, pretending to be concerned.

"I'll remember your damn séance!" muttered Rudolph, spine in pieces.

"When does this end, damn it!?" barked Bens.

"More or less in ten minutes," estimated Rose, sounding like an engineer of disaster.

"Ten minutes!?" both men screamed together.

The ghosts made two more rounds of the living room, then froze all at once. Silence. You could have heard a soul sneeze.

They descended, placed their luminous feet on the carpet, and stared at the three mortals with a strangely... capillary expression.

"Why are they staring at us like that?" whispered Rose.

Armstrong and Bechet exchanged a mischievous glance, then burst into laughter. And like two celestial schoolchildren at recess, they approached, leaned their glowing heads over the three humans and... pulled their hair.

Not hard.
Just enough to annihilate all dignity.

Rudolph let out a short scream.
Bens cursed in every language available.
Rose screamed with a mixture of laughter and panic.

The three of them dove under the round table the last bastion of the tangible world.

“You control nothing, do you?” gasped Rudolph, eyes wide.

“They’re insane!” diagnosed Bens, surprisingly lucid.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen!” protested Rose, pushing aside a still-warm bean.

“Great! And tomorrow night I’m supposed to win the club contest thanks to you?” groaned Rudolph, tragic like a tenor with a cold.

“What!?” Rose shrieked.

“I should’ve told you, but...” began Bens.

“He has to participate in Papa Tcho-Tchot’s contest!?” she cried.

“That’s the deal,” muttered Bens. “I swore I’d never play again. So it’s him or nothing.”

“For a saxophone!?”

“A sentimental one,” mumbled Rudolph, ashamed.

“Chu-ut!” said Rose, suddenly serious. “Tomorrow... is October 31st.”

“And so?” said Bens.

“That’s why the ghosts are here! The formula crossed paths with Samhain magic.”

“That another voodoo priest?” asked Rudolph, one inch away from breaking into hives.

“No, Rudolph. Samhain is an interval between worlds. A rift. Basically: Halloween.”

Bens buried his head in his hands.

“Good God in heaven... three days of spectral chaos.”

The ghosts, delighted by the news, resumed their wild parade laughing, playing, swirling.
The tablecloth shivered, the table trembled, and our three heroes curled beneath it like kids caught in a metaphysical fireworks show.

The room vibrated, the walls sang, and outside, the Halloween wind was already rising.

The night promised to be long.
And it was only the eve of the great concert.

Chapter 19 : Beans, Ectoplasm, and the Smell of Burnt Swing

Under the round table, Rudolph, Bens, and Rose Fée La Mambo formed a human canned stew made of three ingredients:
fear, sweat, and incomprehension.

The ghosts, launched at full speed, dove toward them like a free-falling brass band. But one meter from the tablecloth, the ectoplasms disintegrated pffft into a dense white cloud, scented halfway between boiled cabbage and burned brass.

The room froze.
The silence, still vibrating with swing, reclaimed its throne.

Rudolph emerged first, hair a mess, cheeks red, gaze dazed.
“You... you saw that?” he stammered, the voice of a man who has just been visited by the History of Jazz itself.

Bens slowly straightened up as well. He sniffed the air, wrinkled his nose.
“Shit... still stinks,” he said, sincerely disgusted.

“A smell of cooked brass,” noted Rose, waving the air with her hand.

“Or burnt swing,” added Rudolph, philosophical despite himself.

They exchanged a look, still trembling, then their features finally loosened.
The wrinkles on their foreheads folded into a collective sigh.

“Well, at least they’re gone,” concluded Rose with a relieved smile. “And with them, the problem.”

“Not sure,” muttered Bens. “With your cooking, the problem likes to come back in servings.”

Rudolph, regaining composure, brushed off his imaginary jacket and straightened his collar.
“So it’s all finally over, then,” he said, optimistic like a vacuum-cleaner salesman who just survived a tornado.

Rose tilted her head, scholarly.
“The formula had its limits, which the ghosts ignored,” she confirmed, satisfied with herself... by about twenty percent.

Bens was rubbing his temples.
“May their mothers wear shorts, I’m out. I’ve had enough emotions for one damn day.”

He grabbed his cigar, relit it, but the flame refused.
He sighed, resigned. Even fire seemed to want a break.

Rose stepped closer to Rudolph, her eyes shining with a slightly enchanted kindness. “Tomorrow, I’ll stop by to see you. I’ll try to bring a... controlled solution,” she said, with the tone of someone who only half believes it herself.

“With pleasure,” replied Rudolph, already willing to believe anyway. “But please... no uncontrolled magic.”

Bens rolled his eyes.

“Good God, controlled magic doesn’t exist, Calagland. Are you dense or what!”

He blew out one last tired puff of air and concluded:

“Alright, I’m going home. If another musician pops out of the floor, I’ll make him swallow his trumpet.”

The door closed softly behind him.

Rose, thoughtful, picked up a scorched red bean and rolled it between her fingers. A tiny spark of light still flickered from the grain, like a ghost’s laugh refusing to leave.

She smiled without saying a word.
And for a brief moment, the silence seemed to hum.

Chapter 20 : Touchdown, Jaws, and Confidences

Bens's TV room had returned to its usual peace rituals: two worn-out armchairs facing an overly bright screen, an American football game screaming its sacred war, and, on the couch, Jo-Black, the pet alligator, sprawled like a king of the swamps, gnawing on a mammoth bone with biblical slowness.

The walls vibrated to the rhythm of the commentator's hysterical shrieking. "And here we go for the final drive, ladies and gentlemen!"

His voice was so loud one would think he was trying to tow the moon with his vocal cords.

Bens handed a beer to Rudolph without a word. They clinked them together, loudly. Silent cheers.

A sharp crack of bone sliced the air, followed by a wet crunch. Rudolph jumped.

"How can he break that!? He doesn't even have teeth anymore!"

"Jo-Black doesn't like being messed with when the Green Wave are playing," replied Bens with the solemn tone of a pope of reptiles.

"Damn crawler..." muttered Rudolph, pulling his head into his shoulders like a man praying not to be added to the menu.

A beat.

The game continued, saturated with energy. The crowd's screams blended with the steady sound of the reptile's jaws.

Rudolph lifted his beer, thoughtful. "You think he understands the game?"

"Hell no, better than you," said Bens. "Him, he bites when he needs to."

They laughed together, tiredly.

Later, the night had swallowed two more fingers of whiskey. The screen cast its pale light on their faces. Jo-Black slept, snoring like a diesel engine dying.

Bens, bottle in hand, stood up, staggering. "Go Green Wave!" he slurred, raising his arm toward the screen. "Score that touchdown and it's won!"

Rudolph blinked.

“You’re talking to the TV.”

“I’m encouraging the universe,” corrected Bens, an improvised poet.

Suddenly the commentator screamed:

“Touchdown! Incredible!”

The image shook. Jo-Black jerked upright and snapped his jaws like a piano lid slamming shut on a symphony.

“That’s the goal! Damn it, we won this freaking game!” exulted Bens, raising his glass to a victory that wasn’t his.

He stood there a moment, eyes moist with absurd pride.

Then, without warning, he sighed, set the bottle down, and added in a lower voice:

“Now I’m heading outside. Bayou air puts your thoughts back in a straight line...”

He moved toward the door, barely stumbling, and threw over his shoulder:

“Stay there, Calagland. Won’t be long. And let Jo-Black keep an eye on you, eh.”

Rudolph, alone in the blue glow of the screen, stared at the image of a player celebrating. He murmured, a bit moved despite himself:

“If only winning a game were enough to save your skin...”

On the couch, Jo-Black emitted an approving grunt, heavy-jawed, eyes half-closed. The reptile, faithful companion of chaos, had just agreed.

Chapter 21 : Moonlight, Debt, and Polite Ghosts

Outside, the moon was turning the mosquitoes red.

The bayou breathed slowly, like an old monster dozing.

Rudolph, standing near the bench, kept his hands in his pockets, looking calmer than he had ever been.

Bens slumped down, sighing with the satisfaction of a man who thinks he's safe from memories.

Jo-Black, faithful and placid, settled at an angle, like a living cushion dreaming of being a sofa.

A moment passed.

Then Rudolph, in a measured tone, said:

"Alcohol sometimes loosens tongues, Bens. I'd like to take the chance to understand your debt to the Broloks."

Bens grunted.

"Damn it."

He scratched Jo-Black's head before going on:

"Salvatore got me out of jail back when I was a musician. Drug possession."

Rudolph leaned in, intrigued.

"You were using?"

"Hell no!" barked Bens.

"Then surely you could've paid your dues by now, no?"

"Would've been easier, yeah... but," he murmured, his eyes suddenly misted.

A silence.

A gulp.

A grimace.

Then the past rose up like an old song.

"The youngest in the group was doing it. Selling too. And I was the bandleader. So I sold myself to the cops in his place."

A brief pause.

"To this day, I'm paying for that stupidity."

Rudolph nodded, face serious.

"Tomorrow we'll get that damn sax. And your freedom."

Bens let out a laugh with no joy in it.

“You think your pretty little face can take on Papa Tcho-Tchot?”

“I didn’t see it coming the first time. This time I’ll be ready.”

“Shit,” muttered Bens. “Always that sideways kind of luck... the kind that makes and unmakes men.”

Rudolph studied him, sensing there was a shadow behind it all.

“My guess? There’s something else, right?”

Bens lit a cigar. The flame flickered in the night, a tiny lighthouse over the swamp.

He stroked Jo-Black absentmindedly, eyes far away.

“As Clint Eastwood says: opinions are like assholes, everybody’s got one! This damn life ain’t simple. Shit and obstacles. Not just the desire to be someone or belong somewhere.”

“Sorry,” whispered Rudolph.

Bens inhaled deeply.

“During the start of my sentence, Bonnie my wife was waiting here. She was about to give birth to our first baby.”

He paused.

“Fate decided it would happen right after the big Chicago concert. As soon as she learned the cops had locked me up, she took the road alone to come visit me in jail... They told me she died on the way.”

Silence fell, heavy as stone.

The cigar went out.

Even the mosquitoes stopped circling, as if the moon itself was holding its breath.

Rudolph placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Really sorry. With all my heart.”

He lifted his eyes to the moon then froze.

His finger shot out, his mouth opened without a sound.

On the bench, one on each side of Bens, two silhouettes had materialized:

Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet.

Heads bowed.

Hands clasped.

Silent like two uncles keeping vigil over a brother’s sorrow.

Jo-Black snapped his jaws, visibly interested.

Bens wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, grabbed his bottle, and sighed.

“This... this isn’t possible,” whispered Rudolph.

“Your mother in shorts!” grumbled Bens. “Leave me alone, big nose. I’m staying with Jo-Black and my bottle.”

The two ghosts raised their heads at the exact same time.
Same look, same weary politeness of well-bred revenants.
They made a few polite gestures: *move along, this is a private moment.*

Rudolph hesitated, then dared:
“What are you doing here?”

Armstrong answered in a deep, warm, round voice:
“We mourn the sadness of our beloved brother.”

Bechet raised an eyebrow, offended.
“Is that forbidden?”

Bens jumped, mouth open.
“Holy damn hell... they talk too!”

“Perfectly,” said Armstrong.
“And with manners,” added Bechet, readjusting his hat.

They turned toward Rudolph.
“First you pull us out of our world...”
“...and then you leave us here, dependent on you,” added Bechet.
“While all our friends returned politely,” concluded Armstrong.

“We’ve got nothing to do with that,” protested Bens, bottle in hand.

Armstrong burst out laughing.
“You’re kidding, brother. I ain’t the one who spit in the casserole with that idiot.”

Rudolph lifted his hands, ashamed.

Bechet sighed:
“And now we’re stuck until the last day of Samain.”

“What can we do?” asked Rudolph.

“Nothing,” they answered in perfect unison.

Bens got up, wobbling, the bottle empty.
“Damn damn damn. I’m crashing with my companion. I’ve had my damn quota of emotion.”

He went inside, Jo-Black on his heels, walking like an old drunk captain who still stays upright.

The two ghosts remained seated a moment, staring into the moonlight.
Then Armstrong murmured, sad:
“Even the dead have debts, you know.”

Bechet nodded silently.

And the two apparitions dissolved like notes held too long.

Rudolph stayed alone, motionless, counting his heartbeats.
Silence settled in warm and full of omens.

Tomorrow was Halloween.

And the competition.

And Papa Tcho-Tchot.

And a saxophone that maybe meant more than memory itself.

Chapter 22 : Floating Wake-Up and Cajun Breakfast

Morning slipped in on tiptoe through the tired mosquito screens.
A golden light, thick as warm honey, seeped all the way to Rudolph's bed.
He slept peacefully, wrapped in his blanket like an elegant mummy, his clothes neatly folded on a chair, the old Colt placed on top a true sentimental paperweight from another age.

The silence was broken only by an aerial purr.
On the ceiling, Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet were floating weightlessly, lying twenty centimeters below the plaster.
Their cheeks rose with every snore, and their instruments, suspended as well, swayed gently like vacationing pendulums.
Two jazz kittens lost in the eternal dream of an endless blues.

Everything was calm.
Until a sharp knock echoed at the front door.
BAM BAM BAM.
Footsteps creaked across the floorboards, precise, then stopped right in front of the bedroom.
Someone knocked even harder.

Rudolph surfaced, disheveled, mouth pasty.
"Who... who is it?"
"It's me, Rose Fée!" replied the cheerful voice. "Came just like I promised!"
"But... it's still early!" he groaned, half stuck in his dream.
"Hurry up, Rudolph! I'm making a Cajun-style breakfast."
"A... what style?"
"The 'morning spice wakes the dead and the living' kind," she clarified through the door.

Rudolph, brain bubbling, jumped out of bed.
He put on his shirt backwards, his pants forward (almost), then solemnly placed his Colt back on the table.
Finally ready, he glanced instinctively up at the ceiling and froze.

Armstrong was floating right above him, arms crossed, amused gaze.
Bechet, tilted sideways, was reading an imaginary newspaper, mouth twisted with irony.
"What are... you doing up there?" Rudolph stammered.

Bechet cracked one eyelid open, as offended as a rooster woken before dawn.
"So we're not allowed to sleep in this world anymore?"
"But... you're dead!" insisted Rudolph, clinging to his living-man logic.

Armstrong crossed his arms, impassive.
"And what's the problem?"
"None, none," surrendered Rudolph, hands raised. "Make yourselves at home. Well... at Bens' place."

Armstrong laughed that round, warm laugh that made the air vibrate like an invisible trumpet.
“We never knew how to behave otherwise, my boy.”

Bechet twirled his clarinet in the air.

“And tell your priestess her little spell last night gave me the astral seasickness.”

Rudolph shook his head, resigned.

“I’m gonna end up putting up ‘No Ghosts Allowed’ signs in this shack.”

*

Rose Fée La Mambo floral dress, loose hair and bare feet on the planks drummed first on a door where one could still read, carved with a knife:

“Bonnie & Bens.”

Inside, her hero snored sideways across the blanket, mouth open, cigar extinguished at the edge of the bed.

Jo-Black, meanwhile, slept on his back, paws in the air, tongue out.

A monument to lost dignity.

“Jo-Black sleeps with him... my little darling reptile! Breakfast is served!” Rose called, loud enough to wake a lead coffin.

*

In Rudolph’s room, Rose’s voice rose from the kitchen, wrapped in an intoxicating scent of black coffee, sautéed shrimp, and spices.

“Rudolph! If y’don’t come down, I’ll fry your boots with the rest!”

Armstrong turned to Bechet.

“You hear that? Even the living cook like legends now.”

“Yeah,” Bechet grumbled. “But if she pulls out another magic casserole, I’m heading straight to purgatory.”

Rudolph sighed, smoothed his shirt, and opened the door.

A ray of light crossed the room, brushing the two suspended musicians who, for a brief instant, seemed to regain flesh and smile.

Then they drifted back toward the ceiling, eyes closed, humming a quiet old New Orleans theme.

Rudolph walked down the stairs, drawn by the smell of Cajun breakfast and the danger that smelled like hot pepper.

Outside, the birds sang off-key.

And in the kitchen, Rose Fée La Mambo was whistling a voodoo tune while beating eggs, as if the whole world were a four-beat improvisation.

Chapter 23 : Raised Skillet, Crackling Hair

In the kitchen, she hummed as she twirled between pots and dried herbs.
The table, covered with a floral cloth, trembled under the dishes: corn fritters, scrambled eggs, spiced rice, smoked ham, and black coffee.
A scent of sweet and peppery dawn filled the house.

She set the plates right next to the plastic-patched door, adding a little mambo step to punctuate the morning melody.

Footsteps on the staircase made her turn around.
Her smile widened then froze.

Two musicians in spectral attire were slowly descending the stairs.
Ties, gentlemanly demeanor... but transparent like alcohol vapor.
Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet wore the crumpled faces of revenants who had slept poorly.

“How is that possible?!” cried Rose, one hand on her heart.
She grabbed a cast-iron skillet and raised it like a sword.
“Stand back, Rudolph! I’ll take care of them!”

On the middle step, Rudolph lifted his arms high.
“Everybody stay calm! First... you look stunning, Miss Rose.”

Armstrong, floating a meter above the floor, winked.
“Indeed... lovely lady.”
“Reminds me of old memories,” added Bechet, tenderly.

The skillet slowly lowered.
“Let’s have breakfast,” said Rose firmly. “And you’ll explain this metaphysical improbability to me.”

Around the table, the strange company gathered:
Rose, straight and elegant, Rudolph nervous, Bens barely awake, Jo-Black asleep under the table, Armstrong and Bechet floating just above the chairs, unable to actually sit.

Rudolph told everything.
The casserole. The catapulted red beans. The lightning. The smoke. The apparition. The non-disappearance.

Rose wrinkled her nose, her fingers tapping the table as if counting the errors to erase.
“There was interference,” she concluded.

“Inter... what?” asked Bens, mouth full.

“A breach between worlds,” said Rose. “These two got stuck when the tide went back. They have to stay here until the end of Samhain.”

“Three days?!” choked Rudolph.

“Three before and three after October 31st,” corrected Rose gravely.

Bens let out a dramatic groan.

“Goddammit... hide their faces or we end up with a penitentiary marching band.”

At the far end, Armstrong and Bechet attempted a spoonful of rice.

It passed through their immaterial palates and fell back onto the tablecloth.

The two ghosts exchanged a look, then gave an outraged middle finger to the physical world.

Rudolph leaned toward Rose.

“For the contest... isn’t there a secret door? A magical exit? An instant-escape spell?”

“I know the club well,” she replied. “The place is wild. We can spot ways out, yes.”

“And don’t think I’ve lost my touch,” Rudolph added toward Bens. “I’ve got resources.”

“Shut your mouth and come back to earth,” cut Bens. “Papa Tcho-Tchot is powerful, and not stupid.”

Under the table, Rudolph pinched three fingers toward Bens.

The “family” sign.

Bens answered with an exasperated, yet complicit sigh.

“You know that sorcerer, don’t you?” Rudolph asked Rose.

The two ghosts drifted closer, curious, grabbed a slice of bread, and immediately spat it out in disappointment.

Rose took a deep breath, set her elbows on the table, and let her memory rise.

She spoke softly.

About the orphanage after her parents died.

About visits from a man too charming, too patient, too attentive.

About a crystal ball shattered at age four and animals disappearing in a puff.

About potions that made frogs explode at ten.

About a terrified face in the water mirror at eighteen.

About tarot at twenty-one, the pin in the straw effigy at twenty-six, and the blood that burst exactly onto the client.

About Jo-Black, at thirty-two, to whom she removed every tooth “for safer cuddles.”

Then her voice trembled:

“Papa Tcho-Tchot saw a gift in me. He wanted me to work for him. He trained me. And then... I understood.”

“That he was a bastard,” said Rudolph, fists tightening.

“That he was dangerous,” corrected Rose. “A gang leader of darkness.”

Rudolph leaned closer, tender and awkward.
Their faces brushed.
A shower of sparks burst bzzz a tiny spark leapt through their hair.

Bens widened his eyes, halfway between terror and fascination.
“Holy shit! Looks like a sentimental short circuit!”

Rudolph pulled back, embarrassed.
“Sorry, it’s... electric.”

“And you, what do you do for a living?” Rose asked, slightly flustered.

“I sell vacuum cleaners,” he answered too quickly. “With my father.”

They both leaned again to pick up a fallen knife.
BZZZZT!
Another capillary crackle.

Bens shot to his feet.
“Father to son, my ass! You’re gonna burn down my damn house, you pair of lightbulbs! I’m going to see my friends at the dock.”

“He seems really drunk,” said Rudolph, worried.
“I’ve never seen him like this,” admitted Rose, thoughtful.

“How did you meet him?”
“When I was little,” she said with a smile, “he’d take me to visit and explore the Mississippi. He’d say the river wind carries the secrets of the world. I loved when my hair flew in the breeze.”

Armstrong raised a knowing eyebrow.
Bechet straightened his invisible hat and murmured:
“Well, my friends... there’s swing in the air.”

Chapter 24 : Phantom Plan and Countdown

Later in the day, the coffee had cooled, the beignets were losing their crunch, but the plan itself was gaining flesh, muscle, and audacity.

Around the breakfast table still warm from the morning feast, the whole team living and revenant was preparing what looked suspiciously like a dress rehearsal for pure madness.

They needed three things, no less:

1. A full scouting of the club.
2. A technique to hide Armstrong and Bechet whenever they started giving commentary like two sports analysts from the Great Beyond.
3. And a way for Rudolph to captivate the audience, despite not knowing a single saxophone scale nor being able to tell a C note from a weeping willow.

Rose spoke first, her hands flat against the table.

“I’ll take care of the club. Walkways, backstage, service doors... I know it. And I’ll prepare you a more stable kind of help.”

Rudolph raised an anxious finger.

“Help without beans?”

“Without beans,” she promised with a small smile. “Just good old finger magic and faith.”

Bens, slumped in his chair, slammed his fist on the table.

“And as for you two,” he growled at Armstrong and Bechet, “low profile tonight. If you mess things up, it’s the attic for you.”

Armstrong straightened up, trumpet resting on his shoulder.

“Count on us, old brother. Not offended for a dollar.”

Bechet raised his clarinet in allegiance.

“Until the last night of Samhain, we remain your guardian angels. A little cumbersome, but effective.”

A soft silence followed, punctuated by the buzz of a mosquito and a sigh from Jo-Black under the table.

Rudolph inhaled slowly, feeling under his ribs a new engine: a blend of fear, courage, and leftover capillary sparks.

Tonight, he’d need guts.

At nightfall, flair.

And on stage... a miracle.

Rose stood, put her hat back on, her gaze fixed beyond the window where the bayou stretched under the rising heat.

“See you tonight, at Papa Tcho-Tchot’s,” she said. “We’re going to scout. Not to provoke.”

“Not to provoke,” repeated Rudolph, with the conviction of a child caught guilty before even starting.

“Not to provoke,” confirmed Bens, without believing it for a second.

The door slammed.

A mosquito flew in, accidental witness to the conspiracy.

Jo-Black yawned loudly, like a philosophical crocodile issuing a warning.

The old Colt on the chair seemed heavier than ever.

Left alone for a moment, Rudolph caught his reflection in the window.

He saw more than the same awkward face: a shadow of resolve, a hint of stage-light still invisible but already present.

This time, he wanted no magic.

He wanted to be worthy of Rose, of Bens, of his ghosts... and maybe, just maybe, of himself.

Up in a corner of the ceiling, Armstrong spun his trumpet with a knowing grin.

Bechet, beside him, nodded and murmured:

“It’s gonna swing, brother. Oh yes... it’s gonna swing.”

Chapter 25 : The Bayous of Silence

I climbed down from the van behind Bens. The air was sticky, saturated with heat and memories. In front of us, a shack patched together from tired planks swayed at the edge of a swamp where everything seemed both alive and rotten. Three elderly men, ebony-skinned with precise gestures, were repairing a skiff while whistling an ageless tune.

Bens, proud as a slightly drunk peacock, puffed out his chest.
“Come here, big nose, I’m gonna introduce you to the guys who put up with my damn days.”

“No dirty tricks, okay?” I said, nervous.

He snorted.
“Relax. We’re just gonna scrub the conscience a bit.”

I glanced at the boat: a coffin with paddles, more or less.
“You take that thing out on the Mississippi?”

“Yeah, and through the marshes too. More lively than your damn Natchez.”

“Natchez? What is that... a croissant?”

He burst out laughing, beard shaking.
“No, you little idiot! A paddleboat.”

I stopped him mid-stride.
“What exactly are you afraid of?”

“My balls,” he muttered. “Don’t start preaching again.”

“Finish with your past,” I said, tone grave. “It’s eating you alive.”

He froze, suddenly distant, before letting out:
“Mind your damn business, idiot.”

He sighed deeply, then nodded. Without another word, we approached the three elders.

“Rudolph, meet Truman, Stuart and Tom.”

The men shook my hand with wooden fingers and pirate-old smiles.

“We’re going out on a little ride,” Bens announced. “And tonight—fried coconut in the pan.”

“And some baralousa!” Tom added with a wink.

“Some what?”

“He’s messing with you,” Bens murmured. “Although... there’s big stuff in these waters.”

He put an arm around my shoulders.

“This afternoon, we breathe a little. But tonight, big nose, you face Papa Tcho-Tchot. And without your damn Colt, got it?”

“Okay,” I said, not proud.

He nodded. And we boarded.

•

The boat engine coughed, then purred like a sick cat. A trail of blue smoke twisted behind us, warping in the heat. The water, green and heavy, wrinkled lazily under the hull. Giant, gaunt cypresses plunged their roots into the muck like fingers searching for their dead.

The bayou had the silence of cemeteries where even ghosts get bored.

Truman chewed a toothpick. Stuart tapped his foot against an old barrel, creating a lazy rhythm. Tom stared at the horizon, unmoving, as if listening to a voice we couldn’t hear.

Me? I was white as a sheet. Fingers clenched on the bench, heart beating off-tempo.

“Is it always this calm here?”

“Calm?” Bens scoffed without turning around. “When the bayous are calm, it’s because they’re watching you.”

The word lingered. Then a cry split the air. High-pitched, inhuman.

“Ah! A heron!” I blurted, too hastily. “Charming bird, the heron...”

Truman slowly turned his head.

“That wasn’t a heron, kid.”

Stuart laughed. His laugh died instantly.

Tom stared at the water.

“Papa Tcho-Tchot,” he said. “He’s awake.”

A glacial breath swept past. The mosquitoes flew away in a single invisible motion. The engine coughed. I shivered.

“You heard that?”

“Yeah,” Bens said. “And that ain’t jazz.”

Behind us, a splash. We turned. Nothing. Just a greasy ripple drifting away.

“A giant baralousa?” Stuart tried.

Truman shook his head.

“Or something hungry.”

Bens growled.

“Push on, Stuart. We don’t have all day to get eaten.”

The engine roared, and the mist opened like a curtain. Ahead, a silhouette took shape: a twisted cabin, tin roof, rotten planks, a sagging porch. Candles burned on the railing, their flames still as eyes.

“That’s his place?” I whispered.

“Yeah,” Bens replied darkly. “Papa Tcho-Tchot. The most dangerous sorcerer in the bayous. He grew up here, at the end of the world, in a shack leaking misery and hunger. The kid cursed his own skin, his place, his time. He dreamed of a future that didn’t want him not in this damned society where the marshes swallow dreams before they breathe.”

He spat into the water, eyes lost in the mist.

“In love, same thing. He coveted Bonnie my Bonnie. Wanted her like a talisman to survive. But she, without knowing, chose me. And that day, buddy... that day, I saw his gaze change. His friendship cracked in two, and underneath, there was nothing but a pit. Since then, he’s thrown himself into it headfirst, and every spell he casts is another stone in his grave.”

I swallowed.

“And I’m going there without a Colt?”

He turned, his eyes full of tired tenderness.

“Yeah, big nose. Just your courage... and your breath.”

The boat drifted toward the cabin. The candles flickered as if they recognized us. Then, through the mist, an old blues rose. An invisible trumpet cried somewhere—pure, warm—enough to make the water tremble.

I closed my eyes. I could’ve sworn Armstrong himself whispered in my ear:

“Don’t step back, kid. The swing’s waiting.”

The mist closed over our wake.

And everything vanished, swallowed by the silence of the cypresses.

Only one direction remained:

straight toward the sorcerer’s last dwelling.

Chapter 26 : The Marx Brothers of the Africa Club Jazz

Night had swallowed the city, devouring its noises and its souls.
The damp air vibrated beneath the streetlamps of the old parking lot where neon lights crackled like electric cicadas on amphetamines.

Rudolph adjusted the collar of his coat, a gesture of a tired hero but one he found effective in movies.

Beside him, Bens walked slowly, dark glasses screwed onto his nose, his thin silhouette draped in mystery and a slight backache.

Behind them, the red van, stitched with rust, smoked like an old animal after a sprint.

They crossed the parking lot in silence.

Above their heads, the sign of the Africa Club Jazz flickered in shaky red letters:

a neon saxophone blew a pink flame that died with each flicker.

A warning more than an invitation.

In front of the door, a doorman waited or rather, watched them.

Tall, thin, wearing an immaculate black suit and a pristine white top hat.

But his face... his face had something profoundly abnormal: pallid makeup, black glasses with one cracked lens, and two bits of cotton sticking out of his nostrils.

Add to that an overly wide smile and a slow, swaying hip movement lascivious, unsettling, and unrelated to any music.

Rudolph stopped dead.

“What... what is that?”

Bens clenched his jaw.

“Damn it, don’t start, big nose. Must be the theme of the night.”

The doorman bowed with a creak of vertebrae.

“Very well! And under what designation shall I invite you tonight?”

“You say?” said Rudolph, defensive.

“I am Baron Samedi, spirit of death and resurrection,” he replied with grandiloquence.

His whitened hands stretched toward them.

His nails, long and painted bright red, gleamed like blades.

Rudolph stepped back.

Bens lifted his glasses with a practiced motion, assessed the creature, and declared:

“Good God almighty... Tonight, the two of us are coming under the designation of the Marx Brothers!”

Rudolph jumped.

“But... they were three!”

“No, five,” Bens corrected placidly.

“Oh.”

The doorman burst into a hollow, theatrical laugh.

“No matter! Come in, Marx Brothers!”

They crossed the threshold.

Rudolph, struck by a bad feeling, turned for one last look.

The doorman was rubbing his hands together, swaying in a grotesque trance, miming an invisible mating act, his smile split to his ears.

Rudolph paled, pulled up his glasses, and hurried inside.

•

Inside the club, a blast of incense and whiskey washed over them.

The air vibrated with heavy warmth, saturated with perfume and brass.

Lights danced on the walls, casting shadows that looked like faces.

And far at the back, on the stage, the disco ball turned lazily, throwing silver shards across a sea of sweating bodies.

“Papa Was a Rolling Stone” rolled in deep basses.

Rudolph and Bens removed their glasses at the same time.

Their eyes widened.

The room was packed:

masked women and women painted and costumed, waving their arms like serpents to the rhythm of funk.

Witches kissed clowns, zombies slow-danced with pirates, maracas shook spirits.

Bens, seized by sudden enthusiasm, nodded along.

“Good Lord almighty! Been a long damn time since I’ve seen so many people at a musical gathering!”

Rudolph, tense:

“That’s luck all right... but it’s worse than clearance day at Chicago-Vacuum-All!”

He leaned toward Bens:

“Where’s Rose Fée la Mambo?”

“She wouldn’t miss this for the world,” Bens replied.

A man appeared then tall, very thin, wearing a green-glinting voodoo suit, face painted black and white.

Without a word, he motioned for them to follow.

They crossed the crowd, climbed a narrow staircase, and emerged onto an honor balcony drenched in blood-red light.

•

On the balcony, the atmosphere shifted brutally.
No more funk, no more screams: only the deep whisper of candles and the murmur of the supernatural.
Improvised altars, walls covered with voodoo symbols, and at the center, a round table on which rested a crystal ball pulsing like a heart.
Sitting behind it, draped in his dark robe, smiling calmly:

Papa Tcho-Tchot.

At his side, three gorgeous women laughed softly.
Further away, Bolos and a second masked guard waited, impassive.

When Rudolph and Bens removed their glasses, the sorcerer raised his eyes, his smile widening.
“Still nothing on that instrument that might interest me...”

He tilted his head.
“The Marx Brothers, is that right?”

Bens swallowed.
“Chico, Harpo and Groucho... not counting the other two brothers, damn it. But we’re the discount duo.”

Papa Tcho-Tchot let out a small laugh.
“And you, the apprentice gangster from Chicago... sic.”

Rudolph went pale.
“How do you know my name?”

The sorcerer stood slowly.
“I know the wind, the rumors, and those who walk without a shadow.”

He let his fingers glide across the crystal ball.
The light grew, then receded.

“You want your saxophone, don’t you?”

Rudolph lifted his chin.
“You may have caught me off guard once, but this time I’m ready to settle things. Give it back or I”

“Shut up,” Bens hissed, grabbing his arm. “You wanna die here?”

Papa Tcho-Tchot snapped his fingers.
The three young women froze.
Their eyes turned white, their bodies perfectly still.

“No more secrets,” he said. “Tell me everything, and perhaps I shall be merciful.”

Bens sighed, exhausted.

“I just had to help him get the sax. Old debt to the Broloks of Chicago. They got me out of prison back then.”

The sorcerer laughed a throatless laugh, as if blown through a flute.

“Ah, Bens... always that taste for lost causes.”

He caressed the surface of the crystal ball.

“The time of your recklessness the one that cost you your wife, your band, your freedom, and your child.”

He smiled, cold.

“You want protection, perhaps? A fresh chance?”

“No,” Bens answered in a hoarse voice. “Let free will do its work.”

Papa Tcho-Tchot leaned close, their faces almost touching.

His red eyes glowed like embers in the shadows.

“Free will? What a delicious mistake.”

A silence. Then the sorcerer placed his fingers on the crystal ball.

An image appeared: Rose, walking through the crowd below, wearing her black hat, followed by two shadows in pale suits.

Papa Tcho-Tchot’s smile turned predatory.

“And now the angels of jazz invite themselves to the party...”

Chapter 27 : The Challenge

The crystal ball vibrated at the center of the table, spilling a milky light that seeped into the walls.

The air clung to my skin. It felt as if the ground breathed beneath my feet. Every movement cost me, as if the whole room wanted to hold me back.

I took two steps toward Papa Tcho-Tchot. Sweat slid down my back and my knuckles whitened under the heat. I clenched my fists.

“Now that the sax has no value to you anymore, you’re going to give it back to us,” I said. My voice sounded braver than I was.

The sorcerer lifted his eyes toward me, his smile tracing the slowness of beasts just before they bite.

“Indeed, that piece of scrap metal no longer fulfills my conditions. But...”

“But?” I repeated, jaw tight.

“I stand by my proposal,” he resumed. “If, of course, Bens deigns to participate in the contest.”

Bens stepped forward, heavy silhouette, shoulders ready to snap.

“You’ll never change. There’s nothing but evil running through your veins.”

Tcho-Tchot chuckled softly that low, almost caressing sound that makes you want to run.

“And seeing you stuck in your debts delights me, my old friend.”

“Enjoy it while you can,” Bens muttered.

A metallic flash crossed the sorcerer’s eyes.

“Watch what you say, Bens. I can be less talkative.”

I stepped between them.

“All right, you win. Tonight, I’ll enter the contest in his place.”

A silence fell on the room, heavy as molten lead. Then he laughed a short, dry laugh that sawed through my nerves.

“I truly doubt you’re up to the task. But since Bens refuses, I shall... play fair. On one condition.”

“Another one of your five-dollar schemes, perhaps?”

“If you win, you leave with the sax,” he said, his voice as sharp as a blade.

“If you lose... say goodbye to your future. You will belong to me. Forever.”

“No!” Bens shouted.

I didn’t look away.

“Fine. Deal. Prepare your tears: they’ll be all you have left to console yourself, you bargain-bin magician.”

Bens grabbed me by the arm.

“What the hell are you doing!?”

“I’ve got more than one trick up my sleeve too,” I whispered.

He dragged me out of the balcony.

Behind us, I heard Tcho-Tchot snap his fingers; time resumed flowing, the girls moved again, their gestures waving like obedient tides.

•

We plunged into the chaos.

The crowd rumbled hot, electric.

The mute man with puppeteer gestures beckoned us; I followed, pressed against Bens, to a shaky table on the right side of the stage.

Two chairs, an ashtray full of dead sparks.

The man vanished into the smoke as if swallowed by the club.

I dropped onto the chair, my heart pounding hard enough to crack my ribs.

That’s when I saw it.

The sax.

It stood on a pedestal at the center of the stage, sanctified by a golden spotlight, like a god imprisoned.

My throat tightened.

“Look, Bens... the sax! It’s here!”

He slumped into the seat across from me, cigar already wedged between his lips.

“God almighty, what got into you? Can’t you see he’s trying to reach me through you?”

“I’ll never fall under his power,” I said. “Not like my parents. I’m taking control of my own destiny.”

“Your destiny’s a joke,” he muttered. “You want to challenge his musicians? You, who can’t even play a recorder!”

“It was just a distraction. I needed time. Rose Fée la Mambo will tell us where the hidden exits are. And luck is on our side.”

“Luck, my ass,” he grumbled again. “You think he hasn’t thought of that?”

That’s when she appeared.

Rose.

Her hair still beaded with moisture, breath short.

She seemed to glow with a light only she understood.

“You haven’t ordered anything yet,” she said.

We jumped.

She sat between us, laying a hand on each of our shoulders, as if anchoring us to the floor.

“I was looking for you everywhere. So? With the sorcerer?”

“He’s nowhere near surrendering,” Bens growled.

I looked at her.

Even here—even in this chaos she remained unshakable.

“Strangely, in his presence, Bens doesn’t blaspheme anymore,” I noted.

“Not surprising,” she replied. “He hates vulgarity. And I’m still waiting for one of his tricks.”

She hailed a waitress weaving between four costumed women, one with a skull painted on her head.

“A bottle of whiskey, three glasses, and some peanuts. Thanks.”

“I’m not hungry,” Bens grumbled, “but I’ll take a double whiskey.”

I turned to Rose.

“It seems his grip fades when he’s away, right?”

“Away from him, yes. Use it to breathe,” she whispered.

•

On stage, the musicians left their instruments.

The light made them shine as if they were sweating animal grease.

Then the master of ceremony burst forth. Snooks Brite.
Seventies sequin suit, predatory smile, microphone in hand.
A man who smelled of sweat, success, and the devil.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” he shouted. “Snooks Brite here! Tonight, the Africa Club Jazz opens its Halloween contest! Let the masks hold and the hearts break!”

The room exploded.
Screams, whistles, feathers, wobbling pumpkins.
I thought the walls would melt.

Then Snooks raised his hand—silence fell, clean and sharp.

“First round in three minutes! The sax awaits its master!”

His sentence pierced me.
I felt it sink into my chest, screw itself in like a key in a lock.

I placed my hand on the table to steady the tremor.

Rose leaned toward my ear.

“Listen carefully. There are two exits behind the stage. One is real, the other sends you back to the balcony. Choose the one that smells like rain, not incense.”

“And if I choose wrong?”

“Then you’ll play here with him in the room. And trust me, that’s not the same game.”

Bens filled the glasses with a mechanical gesture.

“To luck we build,” he said.

“To luck we build,” I repeated.

The whiskey rushed down my throat like liquid fire.
My spine straightened instantly.

I fixed my eyes on the sax, hypnotized.
Around me, the sounds dissolved: the crowd, the music, the laughter everything drowned in a single breath.

An ancient breath, deep, vibrating through my bones.

And in that murmur, I thought I heard a voice.

Step forward.

Chapter 28 : The Fate of the Sax

I had never seen a room breathe like this.

The Africa Club Jazz was vibrating literally. It felt as if the walls were sweating, the floor beating to the pulse of some invisible monster. Incense mixed with sweat, laughter, and rum. Feathers, masks, painted eyes. Everything moved, everything gleamed, everything smelled like celebration and danger.

And I, standing between Bens and Rose Fée la Mambo, was trying to look calm. Spoiler: I wasn't.

Rose, on the other hand, seemed to float above the chaos. She picked peanuts with the tips of her fingers and tossed them into her mouth with the annoying grace of people who control everything, even crumbs.

"And here comes the brilliant Snooks Brite," she said with a small smile. "The emcee of the contest."

Bens exhaled a cloud of smoke that could have drowned an elephant.

"God almighty... it's starting," he growled.

I emptied my glass. The whisky burned my throat, kicking my body into gear like a beaten-up engine someone restarts with both feet.

"I'm shaking with impatience," I said, setting the glass down a little too hard.

Rose lifted her pinky like a priestess mid-ritual.

"Hush. Focus, Rudolph. Trust me."

I smiled at her. A smile of a man who appears calm, but is panicking inside.

"I'm calm as a monk. But where are the hidden exits? If I need to bolt, I'd rather know which way."

"Patience," she replied. "Snooks will announce the rules. After that... the real game begins."

•

Onstage, someone stepped out of the shadows. Snooks Brite.

Bottle-green suit, carnivorous smile, mid-length hair the color of tin. He held the microphone like a tacky scepter. His voice rolled through the room deep, thick, full of that fake warmth that bends crowds to their knees.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the grand Halloween contest organized by the revered and feared Papa Tcho-Tchot!”

The crowd erupted. Screams, applause, spilled drinks. The floor shook. Up on the balcony, the sorcerer slowly raised his hand. His face glowed with terrifying calm.

Dancers burst forward, glittery bellies, maracas at their wrists. The air pulsed. I could’ve sworn each note hit perfectly in time with my heartbeat.

Snooks continued, his voice sliding like velvet dipped in gin:

“Each contestant will draw their instrument and theme at random. None will know what awaits before the spotlight hits. And may the best blow us away!”

The room roared.
People stomped, whistled, called out names.
It was a sabbath.
A carnival in trance.

•

Bens squinted at the glowing board hanging above the stage. He narrowed his eyes like an owl nearing retirement.

“Holy shit... I can’t read that. Rose Fée, read that damn thing for me.”

I leaned in, heart hammering.

“What does it say?”

Rose lifted her head. The panel’s light flickered in her eyes like neon signs blinking over the truth.

“You’re last,” she whispered. “And your theme is... Maceo Parker.”

I nearly choked on my own fear.

“Maceo Parker? Who the hell is that?”

Bens let out a nervous laugh.

“He’s Papa Tcho-Tchot’s trademark, you big-nosed idiot! He wants to shred you.”

I clenched my teeth.

“Good. That’ll give me a motivated audience.”

Rose placed her hand on my arm.

“Calm down. We’ll get through this.”

“Get through this? With that monster watching us like a tasting menu?”

Bens shrugged, defeated.

“And how the hell are you planning to do that?”

Rose, serene, crunched three peanuts as if considering the weather. Then she finished her drink.

“First, no more alcohol for you, Rudolph. What I’m about to do requires a minimum of clarity.”

I stared at her, stunned.

“Not another potion, I hope?”

She pulled two vials from her pocket, filled with a deep green liquid. The reflections of the room danced on the glass.

“This one,” she said, “is different. An infusion of pure inspiration. No beans, no feathers. Just breath.”

“Come again?”

“Wait until the color lightens. When it does... you’ll drink.”

I stood up, hand trembling.

“You won’t ruin me this time!”

“Rudolph, wait!”

I froze.

“Where are the hidden exits?” I asked, voice lower but firm.

Rose stepped close. Her eyes were calm, almost tender.

“There are none,” she murmured. “And you can’t take the sax. It’s protected.”

“Protected?”

“Yes. By him. By his breath, by his dark magic. But I can help you fight it... if you trust me.”

She stepped closer. Our faces brushed. And suddenly a spark jumped between our foreheads. A real spark, with a tiny snapping sound.

Bens shot to his feet.

“Holy mother of! Even your brains are sparking now!”

I stepped back, cheeks burning. Rose smiled softly.

“Drink, Rudolph. And breathe.”

“And what if I turn into that British comedy actor again?”

“I promise you’ll stay yourself. Just... with rhythm in your veins.”

I looked at her for a long moment. And I knew she was telling the truth.

So I took the glass.

The liquid quivered, moon-colored and murky.

I inhaled deeply.

A warmth crossed through me.

A pulse.

The world slowed; the music began to breathe through me.

I felt like I was the trumpet, the drum, and the silence between the notes all at once.

Rose closed her eyes and whispered something I didn’t understand.

Onstage, Snooks was announcing the first contestant.

Spotlights spun.

Drums rolled.

And I knew everything was beginning.

The contest.

The bet.

The fate of the sax.

And this time, it would be my breath against the sorcerer’s.

Chapter 29 : The First Voice

Snooks Brite came back to the center of the stage like a well-mannered revenant. The microphone trembled just a little in his hand, but his voice sliced cleanly through the room.

“And now, here is our first contestant!” he announced. “Straight from the Vieux Carré! An Acadian singer who will deliver Bessie Smith, the Empress of the Blues!”

The young woman slid to the mic under a wave of cheers.

The music rose warm and slow, full of swell and memory. Her voice rolled like a restrained storm: the Mississippi water, the fatigue, the faith. Every note sounded like it came off a rain-drenched porch in New Orleans.

•

At our table, I tapped my fingers on the wood, unable to sit still. The whisky didn’t do anything anymore, except remind me I was alive.

I looked at Bens.

He was already swaying, pulled in by the singer’s voice, his eyes shining with a memory I didn’t know.

“I should be playing something. Or singing,” I said, nervous. “The anxiety is eating me alive.”

“Know this,” Bens replied, suddenly professorial. “Maceo Parker plays alto. The alto, kid! The instrument of virtuosos. A vibrato that crawls right into your skin.”

I lowered my eyes to my hands as if they belonged to someone else.

“Cacophony incoming,” I muttered.

“Hush,” said Rose Fée la Mambo, pinky on her lips. “Let go of fear. Enter the house of jazz.”

“Idiot,” added Bens, half teasing, half moved. “Jazz in all its forms was born out of chains and grief.”

“All music begins there,” Rose added softly. “It lives in our tears, our laughter, our whole generations.”

I shrank a little in my seat.

“I... I apologize.”

I looked at my glass.
The potion she'd poured in had lightened.
A liquid as clear as a morning after a storm.

"It... it's lightened!"

"Everything is going exactly as it should," Rose said with a serenity that froze me.

•

The singer bowed to a thunder of applause.

Snooks Brite snatched the mic again, triumphant.

"And now, my friends! To separate our artists by the democracy of noise... the applause meter!"

The room exploded.
Shouts, whistles, clinking glasses.
The contestant vanished backstage, crossing paths with another musician on the verge of a meltdown.

•

I saw Rose suddenly grow solemn.
She took the glass, handed it to me.

"It's time, Rudolph. Drink."

I stared at her.
In her eyes, something ancient and unmoving was waiting.
Something that ordered obedience.

I drank.

"Feel anything?" Bens asked, worried.

"Hush," said Rose. "Patience. First the tingling in the hands."

"Holy God," laughed Bens, half serious, half trembling. "We're turning him into a musician!"

My fingers began to tremble.
Then my cheeks.
Then my whole body.

A silent laugh rose in me no sound, just a strange vibration in my chest.
My head spun, the floor tilted, and I collapsed face-first onto the table.

"Rudolph!" cried Rose, her voice shaking. "Answer me!"

“What’s wrong with him?” yelled Bens.

I pushed myself up slowly.

Everything seemed sharper, bigger... and stupider too.
My hair fell any which way, my chin felt longer.
I felt... lighter.

The whole world looked at me sideways.

And in Bens’ eyes, I read amused horror.

“Oh, holy God! There he is again Stan Laurel!”

“That wasn’t supposed to happen,” whispered Rose. “Not like this...”

“We’re screwed,” declared Bens.

I stood up, stiff as a puppet.
My coat slipped off my shoulders.
In my shirt and suspenders, I felt ridiculous and invincible at once.

I spotted a customer wearing a bowler hat, walked up to him, plucked it from his head, and screwed it onto mine, grinning from ear to ear.

The man jumped up, furious.

Bens intervened:

“Calm down, pal! Artist at work!”

I pinched the man’s nose with great care, stuck my tongue out at random, and Rose, panicked, grabbed one arm while Bens seized the other.

We tore through the tables toward the back of the club like three escaped cabaret fugitives.

•

Up above, on the balcony, Papa Tcho-Tchot swayed to the tune, then froze.

I saw him turn his head slowly, as if he smelled something.
His hair began to glow.

“My dear Rose Fée,” he murmured. “I suspected it.”

He placed his hands on the crystal ball.
Its light pulsed like a heart.

Suddenly I felt cold despite the heat of the club.

•

We dove into the restroom.
Door slammed.
Smell of cologne and chlorine.
Four sinks, four mirrors, four refuges.

“The contest is finished,” groaned Bens, forehead damp. “How long does this thing last?”

I paced the room, my face creaking like a puppet searching for its strings.
I snatched the bowler hat off my head, scratched my hair.

“Approximately... an hour,” Rose admitted.

“An hour!” shouted Bens. “Mother in shorts!”

“He had to hold out until his turn, right?” Rose retorted.

Outside the door, Snooks announced the next contestant.
A storm of rhythm and blues flooded the room.

Rose faced me, grabbed my shoulders.

“Listen to me, Rudolph. We’ll turn this setback into luck. Stan Laurel isn’t a musician, but he has one gift: timing. Tonight, that’s your weapon.”

The word bounced inside my skull.

“Timing...?”

“Yes. Let it guide your movements. The music will do the rest.
When the alto calls you, you’ll know where to place your fingers.
Not because you know how to play because you’ll know when.”

Bens ran a hand over his face.

“If we win tonight with half Laurel and a quarter Maceo... I swear I’ll stop blaspheming for the rest of my days.”

“We’ll try to force you into it,” Rose replied with a crooked smile.

Outside, the room roared.
Inside, the neon flickered stubbornly.

Every second vibrated like a string about to snap.

I knew that at the next one it would be my turn.

Chapter 30 : Three Frenchmen in the Restroom

The pale neon above me crackled, drawing trembling shadows across the tiled walls. I held the bowler hat in my hand, then set it back on my head, straight and solemn, as if that alone could turn me into a genius.

Then, without warning, I pinched Bens's nose.

He stared at me, wide-eyed.

"You're some musician, you are," he muttered.

Rose Fée lifted a finger to her lips.

"Hush," she breathed.

A sharp knock echoed at the door.

All three of us froze, stiff as broom handles.

Then, in perfect unison:

"It's taken!"

The handle creaked.

The door opened slowly, and three silhouettes entered the pale yellow light: Lupin, Bonapart, and Baudelaire.

Baudelaire closed the door behind him with theatrical precision, then rubbed his hands together, a hyena grin glued to his face.

"Holy God," Bens whispered. "The gang of idiots."

I turned my head.

"You know them?"

"Yeah. These three clowns messed up my kitchen."

Rose Fée frowned.

"They work for who?"

"For some damn Chicago gang."

“What?!”

The three men stiffened.

Lupin raised a calm hand, the way a lawyer might.

“Not anymore. I said: not anymore.”

Bonapart snorted.

“Papa Tcho-Tchot pays better... and he’s got more style.”

Baudelaire added, smiling like a poet on the brink of collapse:

“And his playground is far more amusing.”

Lupin stepped closer.

“Luck is with you, Bens and Rose Fée. We have strict orders not to injure anyone... except Rudolph, if necessary.”

He paused, fixing his stare on me.

“Until the contest is over.”

I had no idea what to do.

So I made faces. A lot of faces. Ridiculous, useless grimaces, like a silent film star under surveillance.

I trotted from corner to corner, arms swinging like loose ropes.

“What’s wrong with the rookie gangster?” Bonapart barked.

“The rookie gangster?” Rose Fée repeated, insulted.

I tilted my hat, scratched my head and walked toward the first sink.

Lupin frowned.

“What... is that face?!”

“I knew it,” Bens groaned. “Damn it, I knew it.”

I turned the faucet on full blast.

Water shot out cold, splashing everywhere.

I twisted the mixer tap, and a spray hit the three Frenchmen full in the face.

They stumbled back, soaked and furious.

And then, out of nowhere, my lips trembled.

I started crying.

Real tears. Childish ones.

A voice, round and English, echoed in the room:

“Stan! Stan Laurel!”

I lifted my eyes to the mirror.

A round face, thin moustache, a bowler hat identical to mine stared back with affection.

“Damn! Oliver!” I blurted. “So happy to see you again!”

“You’ve gotten us into another fine mess!” Oliver Hardy answered from the mirror.

Bens and Rose stepped closer, stunned.
Their reflections flickered.

“Holy God... it really is him,” Bens whispered. “Oliver Hardy!”

“Who’s that?” Rose Fée asked, bewildered.

“His buddy,” Bens growled. “Together they were the craziest duo of the silent era.”

Rose Fée sighed.

“Damn... bloody potion.”

The three Frenchmen, soaked and confused, exchanged panicked looks.

Bonapart lost his temper and rushed at me, fist raised.

“Look out, Stan!” Oliver shouted.

I slipped at that exact moment; the punch sailed over my head.

Hardy, from the mirror, grabbed Bonapart’s arm as if the glass weren’t there at all.

With a sharp jerk, he pulled him backward and flung him against the wall.

Bonapart collapsed, out cold.

I raised both hands.

“It wasn’t me! It wasn’t me!” I swore.

Baudelaire, furious, lunged at me.

Every punch missed, as if the air itself defended me.
I twisted the faucet; a spray of water hit him straight in the eyes.

Blinded, he stumbled.

I slipped behind him and, without thinking, delivered a monumental kick.

He flew into the mirror.

Oliver Hardy burst from the glass, landed a double slap and a perfect straight punch.

Baudelaire hit the floor.

Lupin, the last one standing, yelled:

“What was that?! I said, what WAS THAT?!”

I calmly set my bowler hat back in place and took a step toward Bens and Rose.

Silence fell.

Only the stubborn drip of a faucet broke it.

Bens wiped his forehead.

“Holy God... Stan and Oliver now. If the contest goes on, we’ll end up with Charlie Chaplin on the judging panel.”

Rose Fée, eyes wide, stared at the mirror.

Oliver gave us one last wink before fading back into the silver surface.

I remained there for a moment, staring at my empty reflection.

And I thought that madness had definitely chosen to dance with us until the end of the tune.

Chapter 31 : The Last Reflection

The air in the restroom vibrated, thick with a strange, almost living tension. Lupin, soaked and trembling, stepped toward the second mirror. His gloved fingers slid across the cold surface.

“Is... is someone there? Show yourself!” he shouted, eyes bulging.

He yelled again, louder:

“I said show yourself!”

I didn’t dare move.

Bens and Rose Fée stood beside me, frozen like two statues waiting for thunder to strike.

Water dripped steadily into the silence, until a faint humming rose, fragile and mocking at once.

Lupin spun around, ready to strike.

The voice slipped away, drifting toward another sink.

“You want to play that game? Fine!” he barked, laughter shaking at the edges.

The voice jumped again, from corner to corner, like an echo delighted by chaos.

Bens muttered:

“Your Frenchman is losing his mind.”

Lupin stopped in front of the third mirror.

His breath came out rough, his shirt clinging to his skin.

“Where is my reflection?!” he roared.

“I SAID, WHERE IS MY REFLECTION?!”

The answer came in a sharp crack.

Oliver Hardy burst out of the surface, massive, grinning, and delivered a monumental slap across Lupin’s face.

Lupin spun around like a top and ended up nose-to-nose with me.

I didn’t think; my fist moved on its own.

The impact jolted up to my shoulder.

Lupin collapsed.

“Well done, Stan!” Oliver’s voice boomed from the mirror.

I rubbed my knuckles, wincing.

“Thanks, Oliver... I guess.”

Bens and Rose Fée bent over the unconscious man.

“Nothing serious,” Rose said. “Nothing stopping us from going back to the contest.”

“Holy God,” Bens grumbled. “With this Stan Laurel? We’re gonna end up in a circus.”

I lifted my eyes to the mirror.

Oliver looked at me with that warm, comical kindness he reserved for hopeless troublemakers.

Our hands touched on the cold glass.

My eyes blurred. More tears.

Rose Fée suddenly raised her head.

“There might be a solution,” she said.

“For God’s sake, Rose Fée... don’t turn witch on us now,” Bens muttered.

She didn’t reply.

She stepped close, placed her hands on my shoulders, and closed her eyes.

I felt her breathing deepen, as if the whole world swelled inside her chest.

Her hair rose, lifted by an invisible breeze, and her lips murmured a language no one had heard for centuries.

On the other side of the mirror, Oliver grabbed my arms.

I could swear I felt his grip solid, real.

Then the light exploded, white and raw, cutting through everything.

When Rose opened her eyes again, the room fell back into silence.

She let me go gently.

I blinked, dazed.

“Good Lord... what happened?”

We walked toward the mirror.

Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy were still there, standing side by side, radiant.

They bowed silently two actors taking their final applause then faded slowly into darkness.

Rose Fée exhaled, drained.

“It’s over.”

“I hope I didn’t do anything wrong,” I whispered.

“Holy God, no,” Bens answered. “But nothing that helps for the contest either.”

Rose laid a hand on my arm.

“Hush. Nothing is decided yet.”

Bens straightened suddenly, hopeful.

“You still have some potion?”

She nodded slowly, grabbed my wrist, and without another word, the three of us hurried out.

Behind us, I heard the mirror shiver one last time.

I turned just in time to catch Oliver’s wink before the glass went dark.

Chapter 32 : Back Into the Furnace

We made our way back to our table like three fugitives slipping through the cracks. The chaos of the club swallowed us instantly, hot and sticky like a tropical tide. Laughter burst everywhere, glasses clinked, saxophones screamed at the ceiling—drunk on echoes and vapors. The air smelled of cold tobacco, sweat, cheap rum, and a hint of heavy perfume—the kind that always announces trouble.

Customers were standing on chairs, clapping frenetically.

Bens, nerves fried, poured himself a triple whiskey without hesitation. Rose let him, then emptied her own glass in one clean, unblinking gulp. Me? I was still dizzy. My cheeks were tingling. I felt like I'd been pushed into a blender full of ghosts and survived only because the "purée" button jammed halfway.

I grabbed the bottle, but Rose shot me a look that would have made the Devil himself take two steps back.

"No."

"Come again?" I groaned, voice thick.

"After what he just lived through, he deserves one!" protested Bens, ever faithful to whiskey.

"Absolutely not before the potion," Rose declared in the tone of a voodoo judge.

I put the bottle down with a sigh.

"I'd love to understand who was hiding behind that... nightmare."

Bens rolled his eyes, a crooked grin forming.

"Good Lord, Rudolph... weren't you rocked to sleep with Laurel and Hardy as a kid?"

I frowned. My tired brain rummaged through the dusty attic of memory.

"My father... yes. He played their films a lot when I was little."

Rose let out a small incredulous laugh.

"Well, there you go. The spell dug into your subconscious. You embodied your hero without even realizing it."

"I became Stan Laurel without meaning to?"

"Better than that," Bens snorted. "You *were* Stan Laurel, damn it!"

I shrugged. At this point, waking up in the body of an owl wouldn't have surprised me.

*

Onstage, the projectors died, then burst back to life like blasts of magnesium. Snooks Brite sprang to the microphone, jacket drenched in sweat, grin sharp enough to slice a watermelon.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen... our second-to-last contestant, a legend of this house: the one and only James Ronnie!"

The crowd exploded.

Musicians tuned frantically. Brass notes floated like drunk bees around the spotlights.

Bens slammed his glass down.

"Hell! Already the second-to-last!"

"Magic has no grip on time," Rose murmured, sounding like a tired oracle.

Bens shot her a look, then nodded toward me.

"So, big nose... it's almost your turn."

I swallowed slowly. Heat waves churned inside my gut—whiskey, fear, the upcoming potion... an explosive cocktail.

Above us, the stage vibrated to a bass-and-brass intro. One phrase circled endlessly in my mind:

Stan or no Stan... tonight, I'll have to play.

*

Snooks strutted across the stage, shoes hammering the floor like a snare solo.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Let's hear James Ronnie perform 'The Payback' by Mister James Brown!"

A shiver ran through the crowd.

James Ronnie—seventy years of legend and chaos walked in slow motion. His cape floated like living smoke. He bowed, flung it aside with imperial flair, revealing a sparkling seventies jumpsuit stretched over a chest tanned by years and excess.

Under the lights, he looked like an old lion about to roar one last time.

The dancers took position.

The rhythm section lit the groove bass first, then brass, then the Hammond organ that vibrated straight into my bones.

And suddenly, James dropped into an improbable split and screamed the opening line.

The club erupted. People shouted, clapped, threw wild glances.

*

At our table, Bens and Rose stood in unison.

“Good Lord!” Bens breathed. “It’s a resurrection!”

“He also sings gospel at church,” Rose added with a smile.

“Gospel, my ass he runs on amphetamines!” Bens shot back, already swaying to the beat.

I stayed seated, hypnotized by the performance.

The old lion screamed like he wanted to wake every dead soul in the bayou.

I grabbed the bottle, filled my glass, drained it in one pull, and refilled.

Around me, the crowd swayed like a warm tide.

The dancers especially the one with the skull-hood rolled their hips with the precision of an infernal clockmaker.

Rose caught my hand just before I grabbed the bottle again.

“No, Rudolph!”

“And what do you expect me to do against *that*?” I muttered, half mesmerized.

“Wait. There is still hope. I can give you another potion.”

I shook my head.

“No. Enough Laurel and Hardy. No more faces and amnesia. But... for you, I’ll go onstage. And I’ll apologize.”

“What?” she choked.

I stood, slowly, glass in hand. I finished it in one burning swallow, then stepped toward the stage.

“No way I hurt her,” I murmured to myself. “I’ll have to be quick... grab the sax and slip away... of all things! My parents depend on it.”

*

James Ronnie, drenched in sweat, dropped to one knee to bow.
Snooks rushed to the mic, hysterical with joy.

An assistant wrapped the cape around the singer, who left the stage under a storm of applause.

I pushed through the crowd, barely breathing.

The air was so thick it felt like swimming through collective fever. Screams, smells, lights... everything blurred.

I slipped between two dancers and crashed head-first into the woman with the skull hood.

The collision was brutal. We hit the floor tangled together.

Her gaze met mine two black holes beneath the silver makeup.

For a second, I thought I saw the frostbitten reflection of Papa Tcho-Tchot in her eyes.

My blood froze.

The furnace had just changed temperature.

Chapter 33 : The Final Contestant

Snooks raised his hand, and with a sharp snap the uproar folded in half.

“Ladies and gentlemen! From Chicago, here comes the one who will close tonight’s prestigious contest! He must perform the great, the unique, the unequalled Maceo Parker and his ‘1970’s Old School Funk!’”

The room burst into flames.

I was already sweating like a double-bass player on acid.

Spotlights sliced the air into scorching beams. Every bulb in the ceiling seemed to aim straight at my conscience.

I climbed the steps slowly.

Docile.

Like a condemned man with a polite smile.

Snooks, grinning at the corner of his mouth, patted my shoulder an encouraging gesture or a farewell, I had no idea then slipped back into the shadows.

In front of me, the crowd stared with that fierce tenderness cats have before they play with a mouse.

A hat flew from the stands. I caught it on reflex, magician’s instinct, and smoothed the felt as if it were sacred.

Then I felt it: a wave of heat rising under my skin. My nose tingled, my lips twitched. Little bumps crawled toward my forehead, as if my face were hesitating between two identities. Then everything settled, swallowed by the breath of jazz.

A dancer approached panther in heels and handed me the sax.

The instrument shone with a golden glow, almost alive: promise and threat in the same gleam.

I slipped the strap over my neck, and a scent of incense and brass flooded my head.

The first riff burst.

My fingers, hesitant at first, searched the air. Then something opened a lock somewhere between my heart and lungs.

The breath left me on its own.

My cheeks swelled, released, swelled again, as if the whole world pulsed with an old groove buried in my chest.

*

Rose looked up at me with enormous eyes.
I saw her cry and smile at once.

Bens, mouth gaping, clenched his fists, then let himself be swallowed by the groove.

“Good Lord above!” he shouted. “Rose Fée, you turned him into a genius!”

She burst out laughing, clapping her hands, stunned.

“The potion... is it still acting?”

But I no longer heard anything.
I was somewhere else, in another body.
My fingers flew across the sax as if they had always known how.
The music wasn’t sound anymore; it was a warm current running through me, a wild, bloody cry.

The floor vibrated under my shoes, the air swollen with smoke and screaming, the lamps panting like tired lungs.

Up on the balcony, I saw Papa Tcho-Tchot rise.

His eyes two red embers opened into slits.
His hair shimmered with a contained, almost liquid light.
I was playing for him, against him, despite him.

A final burst of notes. A storm.

I tore the strap away, dropped the sax, and hurled myself into the crowd.

Hands caught me, lifted me, tore me from the floor.
I floated on a sea of palms, carried, jolted, drunk on it.

Then suddenly they dropped me.
My knees hit the boards.
I stood, stunned, and staggered back to our table, drenched in sweat.

The skull-hood dancer reappeared like a bad memory; she tripped too and slid back among the other dancers, expressionless.

I wiped my forehead, slapped myself to come back to reality, and collapsed onto my chair, gasping.

The room roared.
A living thunder.

Snooks, wide-eyed, leapt to the microphone.

“Incredible! This night is... incredible! And to know who wins this edition: time for the applause meter!”

Silence fell, then the electronic board flashed.

RUDOLPH CALAGLAND — MACEO PARKER

The red letters marched like an angelic fanfare. The crowd exploded. Snooks jumped like a child, clapping so hard he hurt himself.

I saw Truman, Stuart, and Tom at the back by the bar, shaking bottles like kids at Christmas.

Bens and Rose surrounded me, crushed me, kissed me.

“Your mother in shorts!” roared Bens. “You did it!”

He lifted his gaze to the ceiling, eyes blurring.

“Bonnie... I can finally pay my debt to the Broloks.”

“But...” I began.

“No, damn it!” he cut in. “The sax is ours! You’ve got a horseshoe instead of a heart!”

Rose suddenly froze.

“You don’t remember anything, Rudolph?”

I blinked.

“Another blackout? I hate this... When will these memory holes stop?”

And then everything shattered.

The roar died like a blown-out candle.
Laughter, screams, clinking glasses everything stopped.

The musicians, the dancers, even Snooks: frozen.
Sweating statues, half-alive, half-dead.

Time itself kept crawling, slow as syrup, dripping down their motionless faces.

And on the stage, Papa Tcho-Tchot appeared.

His shadow stretched all the way to my feet.

His pupils glowed red, and in his arms he held the sax.
The one everything had started for.

He leaned toward the mic, his voice hard, cold, sharp as a blade:

“I now await, with great impatience, the winner, so that I may bestow upon him his coronation.”

The silence pressed down—humid, heavy, thick.

I stood, legs jelly, and walked toward the stage.

Bens and Rose followed without a word.

We crossed that frozen tide, that gallery of glory petrified in mid-breath.

It looked like a museum of the night, where every breath was paid in full.

And I, the fleeting winner, walked toward the sorcerer and the sax
toward that cursed breath that had chosen me.

Chapter 34 : The Interrupted Coronation

I walked toward Papa Tcho-Tchot like a man approaching his own verdict.
Each step rang across the stage like a low note, my heart wedged deep in my gut.
The sax waited for me in his arms shining, silent, almost alive.

I reached out my hands, gently, the way you cradle a newborn you haven't yet decided to love.

Behind me, I heard the footsteps of Bens and Rose Fée la Mambo. Their hearts were in their throats, their eyes fixed on the instrument as if staring at an unpinned grenade.

Papa Tcho-Tchot smiled, his pupils glowing like burning coals.
“*To be or not to be, that is the question,*” he breathed theatrically.
His voice vibrated with a confidence far too calm.

I blinked, confused, and a wave of nausea hit me.
“Your eyes... they're burning like embers,” I whispered.

The sorcerer slowly turned his head toward Rose. His smile scratched.
“Well played,” he said. “A little unfair to use magic, though.”

Bens exploded.
“Bullshit! What the hell did you shoot your James Ronnie up with?!”

The sorcerer chuckled.
“I admit I... encouraged his performance. But what a performance, wasn't it?”
His pride oozed like sap.

I held the sax tighter. The metal's warmth vibrated into my palms.
“Enough. This instrument doesn't belong to you anymore,” I said.

I handed it to Bens. He took it, trembling.
Papa Tcho-Tchot narrowed his eyes, and his gaze slid to Rose. Her hair lit with a golden halo.

“How could such a clumsy creature enchant a man so deeply?” he hissed.

Rose bent under an invisible pain, a hand to her heart.
“By friendship... Spare me,” she murmured.

The sorcerer sneered.
“A demonstration,” he ordered. “Or I tear you apart.”

I stepped in front of her, arms spread.
“Leave her. Fight me. Without magic.”

“No,” pleaded Rose. “He’s too strong!”

I smiled at her.

“I have to beat him. I don’t want to be saved anymore.”

Papa Tcho-Tchot opened his arms.

“I’ll open the dance,” he said. “Without magic.”

He lunged.

I answered on instinct hook, shoulder, chaos. We crashed into each other like two beasts refusing to back down.

I struck blindly, clumsy but relentless, every blow charged with a fury that came from deeper than myself.

The sorcerer stumbled back, surprised. His features wavered.

Then his gaze darkened, fear swirling in it like black ink. His pupils bled, his tattoos flared, his hair ignited with a dirty light.

He opened his arms and spat words that didn’t exist in any living tongue.

A breath from beyond.

A wind from a crypt.

“Traitor!” shouted Bens.

“No!” cried Rose.

The blast hit me full in the chest. A shock that ripped my breath away, twisted my spine. I fell to my knees, shaking, teeth clenched, unable to scream.

And then a voice cut through the air.

A deep, round voice coming from everywhere at once:

“Stop right now, sorcerer! Come face someone stronger!”

Papa Tcho-Tchot snapped his head around, alarmed.

“Who dares...?”

The girl in the skull-hood began to move. Slowly, sovereign, crossing the frozen crowd.

She climbed onto the stage, tore off her tunic. And from her body erupted two giant silhouettes luminous, still sluggish from their prison:

Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet.

Their presence made the air vibrate.

I stood up, swaying.

“You were supposed to stay at the house...” I stammered.

Bens stood frozen, mouth agape.

“Holy God! This can’t be real!”

Armstrong winked, Bechet smiled like a charming devil.

“A little helping hand is never refused,” said Armstrong.

“And being stuck inside that girl was torture... though what a solo with that genius Maceo, all the same,” added Bechet.

I patted myself, scandalized.

“This is... this is organized possession!”

Papa Tcho-Tchot blanched.

“Armstrong... Bechet... Harmless, then!”

“We ourselves,” replied Armstrong gentle but sharp.

“Harmless?” said Bechet. “I wouldn’t say that so quickly, *sorcerer*.”

Armstrong turned to Rose. His gaze, tender and sad, vibrated like a trumpet fading.

“It’s time for us to leave, my dear. The passage opens before the end of Samhain. And you measure the consequences of your magic.”

“Up there, not everything is friendly,” added Bechet, tipping his hat in farewell.

He turned to me.

“The freedom to choose isn’t always the one we think it is,” Armstrong said with a quiet laugh.

They pivoted toward Papa Tcho-Tchot, ready to leap.

“Stop!” I shouted.

They froze, looking at me.

I straightened, fists clenched.

“I have a favor to ask. A sacrifice. I want to face him with his own weapons.”

Rose grabbed my arm.

“No, Rudolph! He’ll destroy you!”

I shook my head.

“I have to. And before that... I love you,” I said, voice raw.

Her eyes filled with light.

“I love you too.”

“THEN BITE HIS EAR OFF!” roared Bens behind us, sincere to the absurd.

Armstrong and Bechet plunged into my body like two lightning bolts returning home.

The ground trembled under my feet, my muscles swelled, my breath thundered.

My body thickened bull’s neck, anvil jaw, lightning in my eyes.

Papa Tcho-Tchot stumbled back in terror.

“No... not him! NOT MIKE TYSON!”

Too late.

The first hook split the air.

The second slammed like a prison door closing on hell.

The sorcerer staggered, tried to speak, tried to lift his arms.

A glow burst from his hands, doubled but Armstrong and Bechet erupted from my chest, seizing the light, dragging it to themselves like two boxer-angels.

The blaze exploded.

Then vanished, swallowed whole.

Papa Tcho-Tchot collapsed.

I wavered, dropped to one knee. Bens and Rose grabbed me.

The sorcerer rose slowly, dazed. He looked at his fingers: no sigils, no fire. Just bare human skin.

His hair fell, dull, mortal.

And time resumed.

Customers blinked, breathed.

Musicians started playing again, not knowing why.

Dancers, sweating, resumed their movements mechanical, splendid.

The room erupted into applause for no reason except that life, stubborn, wanted to beat again.

Bens pulled me into an embrace, chest open, breath ragged.

“Thanks to you, big nose,” he said, “a new life begins. And you you’re free.”

“We did it,” I whispered, light as after a storm.

I found Rose’s gaze, drowned in it, drank from it.

Then I looked down at the sax on the floor metallic promise, debt paid, heart returned.

“Now,” I said, “I just need to make a call to the Broloks.”

I picked up the instrument, still warm, and turned on my heels.

And in my hand, the metal vibrated softly, as if it were breathing

as if whispering that to be free, you must first pay everything you owe.

Chapter 35 : The Crate and the Letter

End of the week.

Evening light slid through the office blinds, striping the walls in orange and gray. The room smelled of leather, stale sweat, and cold cigar smoke.

Salvatore, John, and Frank were there, sitting behind the massive desk, lining up stacks of cash the way other people sort through old memories: with a mix of tenderness and paranoia. Each bill slid across the wood with that soft, sticky *shhkh* sound dirty things make when they confess how precious they are.

Someone knocked at the door.

Frank grumbled, got up, opened it. A courier stepped in pale carrying a long crate of light wood, heavy as a promise. A letter was pinned to it with a safety pin.

Salvatore removed it with his fingertips, smiling like a cat that already knows the ending of the story.

“Ma... looks like Rudolph doesn’t want to follow in his grandfather’s footsteps anymore.”

His accent sang somewhere between Naples and a threat.

Frank frowned.

“Strange,” he muttered. “He idolized Marcel...”

John lifted his head, his face shut tight like a locked cabinet.

“Mission accomplished?” he asked. “Or do I finish the parents, then the other two?”

Salvatore raised his hand a gesture halfway between pope and godfather.

“Ma... the contract is fulfilled,” he said calmly. “Bring me the blowtorch.”

The drawer opened with a metallic scrape.

Inside lay a small blowtorch, nestled between a revolver and a box of bullets—like a jewel in its velvet case.

John, by reflex, flicked open his gold lighter, the one engraved with a cross and a sin. The flame danced, grazing the body of the sax.

The air filled with the smell of hot brass and rancid oil.

A thick, dark layer began to ooze from the metal. It melted slowly, like a skin giving up its secret.

When the last drop fell, what they saw underneath stole their breath: a chemical formula, laser-engraved clean, cold, surgical.

Salvatore let out a raspy, almost tender laugh.

“Ma... how times change,” he said, placing his hand on the sax as gently as on the head of a child.

The flame died by itself.
Silence followed thick as dried blood.

*

In the hallway, someone was breathing too loudly. Kovak.
His ear pressed to the door, he listened to the silence with the focus of a cat balancing on a wire.

Then he straightened, pulled out his phone, dialed a number.

“Toni... da... it’s blown,” he said. “The French boys failed.”

The voice on the other end rolled like thunder.
“What?!”

“Yeah. The whole thing turned sour. The kid sent the crate back.”

A long silence... then a cold laugh:

“The old geezers won’t get away with this. Warm up the car.”

Kovak hung up, slipped the phone back into his jacket, and walked down the hallway, whistling a Sinatra tune off-key.

*

Outside, the autumn wind swept across Chicago like an old broom soaked in rain.
In front of Chicago-Aspirtout, the grimy shop window shone with a faint tin-like glimmer.

Antoinette was sweeping leaves, head high, eyes hard.
Her gestures were sharp, precise, filled with that stubborn pride you cling to when everything else has gone to hell.

She lifted her gaze, nudged her dentures back into place with an authoritarian flick of her tongue, and yelled toward the window in a shrill voice:

“Lazybones! So, you finally decided to take control of your life?!”

The wind whistled down the street, carrying her cry all the way to the horizon.

And me, right then, miles away, I could’ve sworn I heard that same tone
the one that always drags you back home,
even when “home” is just a damn memory you never managed to put away properly.

Chapter 36 : The Sorcerer Run Dry (Two Days Later)

Harsh noon on the balcony of the Africa Club Jazz.

The sun hit so hard you could've fried eggs on the railing. The air stank of stale rum, cold wax, and the hangover of miracles gone wrong.

Papa Tcho-Tchot was there, slumped in his threadbare velvet armchair, head bowed, eyes drowned in the opaque surface of his crystal ball.

I had never seen a sorcerer look so human, so emptied out.

His palms rubbed the globe nonstop, burning his skin raw, as if he hoped to restart a flooded engine.

But nothing.

Not a spark.

Only silence, with cicadas cracking in the heat and the far-off rippling of the Mississippi, which couldn't care less about his defeat.

I watched him from the back of the room, hidden in the shadow of the blinds.

From where I stood, he looked like an old jazzman deprived of his trumpet: fingers searching for breath, eyes lost in the void of an unfinished solo.

Behind him, the three French stooges Lupin, Bonapart, and Baudelaire were slumped in the red armchairs, playing cards.

The cards slid across the table like dead fish.

They played without desire, without stakes, just to fill the void like undertakers killing time with poker while waiting for the burial.

Lupin wriggled in his chair and let out a drowning man's sigh.

"What's gonna happen to us? I said: this is a shitshow, guys."

Bonapart shrugged, pulled out an ace of spades, and dropped it weakly.

"We're alive. That's a start."

Baudelaire, his under-eye bags in full accordion mode, replied without looking up:

"Alive, but bankrupt. And worse than bankrupt: demythified."

They burst into a sad laugh the kind that gets stuck in your throat and hurts your teeth.

A bit farther, in the shadows, Bolos the giant mute stood watching them.

A massive wall of silence and muscle.

He didn't move, didn't speak, as if guarding a fallen king.

Except this king had no scepter, no kingdom, and even his magic smelled like a damp basement.

Papa Tcho-Tchot finally lifted his eyes toward them.

When his voice came out, it was nothing but a rough thread, a frayed rope.

“What is a sorcerer without spells?” he murmured.

No one answered.

Only the wind played a bar of blues through the shutters.

I took a mental snapshot of the scene, to tell it someday, maybe.

A balcony, three card cheats, a drained sorcerer.

And me, anonymous witness, leaning over the end of a myth, with that bitter taste of silence when the music stops.

Chapter 37 : Departing Gently

It was almost noon, and the sunlight was spreading lazily across the windows like a well-fed cat on a sill.

The air shimmered with that rare calm you only find after storms.

Bens set his instrument case on the table, gently, like an old soldier laying down his rifle after the war. He grabbed his cup of coffee.

The coffee steamed black, strong, and bitter, a bit like the life you share when you've laughed too much, cried too much, and stopped being afraid of tomorrow.

I stirred mine absent-mindedly, hypnotized by the swirls dancing in the light.

Jo-Black, wearing his Green Wave T-shirt, pulled impatiently on his leash, eager to go out.

Rose, leaning against the sideboard, was humming an old blues while rinsing a glass.

And Bens... Bens was watching us all, hat tilted, pipe between his teeth, with the look of a man who has seen too many comedies to be shocked by anything anymore.

I raised my eyes to him.

— Tell me, Bens... what is your last name, anyway?

He sighed, put down his cup, and relit a pipe that wasn't drawing anymore.

— Ah, Calagland... my name? It's a family curse.

— A curse? I repeated, intrigued.

He straightened slowly, wearing the face of a tired storyteller.

— It all started with my father. A straight man, proud, with a perfect mustache. The kind of guy you could've put on a medal... or on a box.

Rose frowned, amused.

— A box?

— Yeah. A box of rice.

He took an imaginary puff on his pipe, as if marking the beat.

— One day, some advertising guys showed up at his grocery store. They were looking for a reassuring face for their new product. And bam! They fell for him. Joseph Benjamin Uncle. My old man.

He lifted a finger, proud and resigned all at once.

— It's his mug they printed on the boxes. I was too young to understand, but I still remember the day the neighbors started calling us "the rice family."

Rose burst out laughing, doubled over.

— No way... the rice family!

I joined her, cracking up.

— Wait—are you saying your father was the real Uncle Ben?

— Exactly, he confirmed, with that weary air legends get when they're tired of being legends. He always said it was "for posterity."
Me? I called it a joke magnet.

Rose was still laughing, wiping a tear.

— And you... you inherited the name, right?

— Yeah, he sighed. My father got the glory, I got the first name and the mockery. Everywhere I go, they call me "Uncle Bens," like I was born inside a quick-cook pouch.

I put on a mock-serious face.

— And you never thought of changing your name?

He shook his head with a sly smile.

— No, kid. I kept it so I could twist it a bit. When someone calls me "Uncle Bens," I always answer: "*Yeah, but I never stick.*"

Rose dropped her glass, laughing so hard she bent over.

— You're hopeless, Uncle Bens. You should trademark that line!

— Already tried, he said proudly. But the brand sent me a lawyer instead of a check. My father fed homes; I'm just trying to feed souls.

The silence that followed vibrated like a last suspended note.

Rose looked at him with amused tenderness.

— Your father must've been proud of you.

Bens shrugged, staring into the steam of his coffee.

— He always said: "Son, as long as you make people laugh, they'll forget to reduce you to an image."

— And you listened, I whispered.

He shot me a wink.

— Hell yeah! Between a bag of rice and a bag of trouble, I chose the right cooking time.

We burst into laughter, a warm, honest one.

Bens finished his coffee, grabbed his hat, picked up his instrument and Jo-Black's leash. On the doorstep, he called out in his worn organ voice:

— Holy Mother! No funny business while I'm gone, and don't forget we're going fishing later, Rudolph!

The door slammed like a promise of the future.

Silence settled again.

On the radio, a low voice flowed like honey:

I see trees of green, red roses too...

Rose Fée and I, tousled, shirts half-open, stood facing each other. Our breaths brushed; our foreheads drew closer.

— Weren't you supposed to stop swearing now that you're free? I said with a smile.

— He may tease, she replied, but he won't blaspheme like a machine anymore.

Our foreheads touched.

Our hair brushed. Tiny sparks lit up in the air.

Rose stepped back, her eyes suddenly serious.

— You fooled me well, she said. You wanted to become a gangster. And your parents?

I lowered my head.

— I lost my way. But they'll understand. I've chosen: freedom, independence, and personal choice.

She gave a half-smile.

— Then we'll move into my place. And we'll work together. At our business.

— You heard Armstrong and Bechet: your voodoo magic...

— I promise I'll go easy. And you no regrets?

I shrugged.

— Regrets are for people who still have time to waste.

A little spider climbed onto her shoulder.
I picked it up with my fingertips and set it on the floor.

— Damn crawler, I muttered, oddly fond of it.

— And the old Colt? she asked, eyes narrowed.

— It belonged to my grandfather. And it doesn't even work anymore...

— Throw it away. Period.

I sighed, shrugged.

— Fine. Perks of being a couple.

— Quiet, she whispered with a smile. Everything will be fine, my love. I promise.

The radio rose a little louder:

And I think to myself... What a wonderful world... by Louis Armstrong.

Our heads moved closer; our hair tangled; we kissed.
The pots and pans rattled on their own, the wind brushed the curtains, and we burst out laughing as we fell onto the tiles.

Outside, the world kept up its comedy.
And I, in the middle of this loving mess, had finally found my swing.

THE END

Coda / Epilogue : Last Breath of Brass

Night had taken back its claim.
One of those moonless nights, lit only by a streetlamp blinking like an old smoker.
In the back of the club, a sax was moaning by itself, forgotten on a chair.
I don't know if it was mine, Tcho-Tchot's, or just an echo from another time, but its breath still lingered in the walls like a memory too stubborn to die.

Rose slept curled against me, her cinnamon scent drifting between our breaths.
Bens was snoring somewhere, probably in his armchair, pipe still wedged between his teeth and Jo-Black sprawled across his lap like a war cushion.
Everything was fine. And yet, I kept thinking nothing ever really ends.

Because a sax doesn't die.
It just goes quiet for a while, that's all.
It waits for the next breath, the next slightly battered heart to give it a voice again.

I thought of Armstrong, of Bechet, of their grins from beyond the grave.
Of that bastard Tcho-Tchot, reduced to his own shadow, and of Bens, the son of rice who refused to stick.
And me, Rudolph Calagland, little idiot who wanted to play gangster and ended up making ghosts swing.

I finally understood: crime, magic, music... it's all the same drug.
It poisons you, it lifts you up, and if you're lucky, it saves you.

A draft of air made the glasses clink.
The old Colt, lying on the shelf, gleamed for a second before darkening for good.
I smiled, softly, like a man who won't be fooled again.

Outside, the first rays of dawn were slicing through the mist.
I stepped out, sax under my arm, and walked to the corner.
The wind smelled of warm bread and promises we haven't betrayed yet.

I lifted the horn, blew into it without thinking.
A note came out clear, golden, alive.
And right then, I swear I heard it in the wind, in the sky, in the heart of the city:

Louis's laugh.
Sidney's whistle.
And Bens's calm voice, somewhere between two worlds:

"Holy Mother of God... You've found your swing, big nose."

So I kept playing, again and again,
until the sun broke over the rooftops.
Because sometimes, the most beautiful ending
is just another way of starting over.