



THE LOST CHILD

Not much had changed in Brazz anyway, Doc thought as they walked in. He started towards a table, then saw Primo lagging, staring around him. So he took him on a quick tour. There were still a lot of big green and white and blue parrots in cages, talking trash in several languages. Primo admired the way the live parrots and bird of paradise flowers set off their imitations in the huge stained glass windows. The calfskin chairs and small tables of dark rosewood with blonde streaks were sprinkled with tourists from several countries, dressed in resort wear like so many bright tropical flowers. And on the low stage, the best, flashiest-dressed, mariachis he'd ever heard. He followed Doc to a table near the stage.

"Perfect timing, huh, kid?" Doc said to Primo as the waiter went to fetch them a brandy and a mineral water, "That's Memo's mariachi on now."

Primo shrugged. They could sit here all night for all he cared. He fell into the sway of the familiar, skirling flourishes, watching the men's fingers. They were very, very good. Especially the trumpet players.

"That's Memo with the silver trumpet, " Doc told him. "And his kid Marco Tulio on the gold one. Looks like his apprenticeship is over and he's a full fledged member now."

Primo couldn't see why not; the kid had perfect pitch and timing, a feather touch, and all the chops in the world. Memo was better yet, with a brash, slapdash slide off true pitch that was always perfect, always strong and male, always a sad sort of swagger. And he could use sour notes like a chef uses sour cream. The kid had a more delicate, classical style; a Spanish sound of flamenco bodegas. You could close your eyes and see the bulls tossing their horns. Together the two would slip up behind the violins, then romp out front like a swirl of skirts and lassos. He looked around at the clean, well-dressed, tourists and smirked. You hear that, *pendejos*? That's Mexican. Too bad you're not.

Memo had seen Doc come in and nodded to him. Now he spoke to the boy, who tucked his horn under his arm and walked out the side door. Doc sighed and settled lower in his chair. He glanced at Primo, who smiled back and nodded. Before the opening note, they both knew they were about to hear the most gorgeous song in the mariachi repertoire, "*Niño Perdido*." Memo had put the group on its mettle and they played their butts off; violinists reaching, guitarists fretting over each note, the singer putting his heart on the line. They were all trying to live up to what was coming, knowing they couldn't hope to. This was the song of the Lost Child and the trumpets had it all to themselves. Some of the tourists caught the intensity behind the sweet, sad verses, some kept on drinking and chattering obliviously. The waiters stood still, listening for the same thing Doc and Primo were.

When it came, it was almost silent, heard only by the ones who knew it was coming. Down the street, out in the darkness, a golden trumpet became a little lost boy. The small cry was lost in the night; the band played right on. Again Memo fingered a cry into the darkness, fingers feathery on the valves. Again the reply from the street; closer this time, a little less lost. Some tourists heard it and turned to glance at the door.

The third time Memo called the answer came quick and breathless through the big main door in back. Even the rowdies were quiet now, looking for the source of that clear, boyish note. The band was knocking themselves out now, the singer almost sobbing the words, knowing that nobody would hear anything but the next exultant call from Memo's silver horn, then the leaping harmony as Marco Tulio stepped in the back door and joined his exultant voice to his father's. Pale, slender, and as finely made as a girl, the boy walked forward through the tables playing as his father stepped out to the stage edge blowing clean, wild sounds of love.

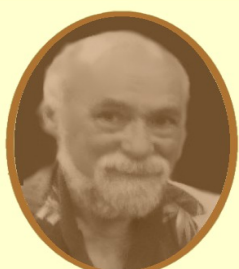
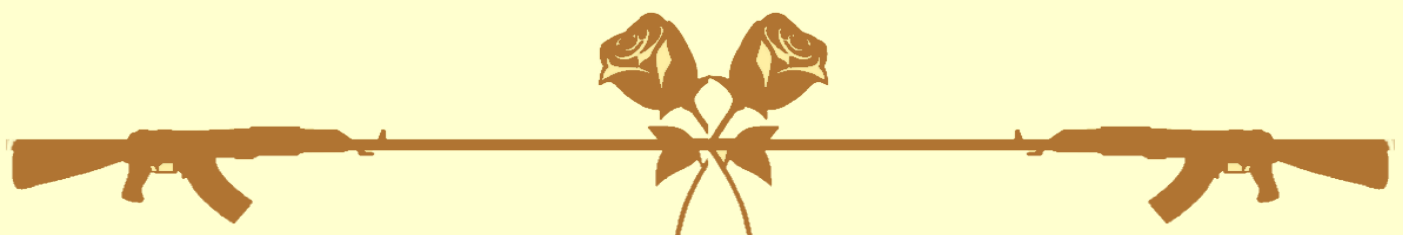
Nobody needed to understand the words, it was all in front of them, the trumpets stroking their emotions. There were some tears in the eyes of women who couldn't have told you why; down underneath everyone in the place knew the libretto--the lost boy was found, the prodigal had returned. The harmony soared to the peaked ceiling and spilled into the streets, simple, primary emotions ransacked people's breasts. Marco Tulio climbed the stage steps, calm and delicate as he kept blowing the love of the found.

The applause started as soon as he lowered his horn, raced louder as his father clapped his arm around the boy's shoulders, exploded as the two bowed together each with an arm around the other, then straightened and held their trumpets high with their other hands. Then they left the stage, letting the rest of the band take the fevered applause. Primo and Doc caught eyes and grinned. Doc leaned over and said, "Why do they play so damn loud?"

Primo said, "So you can hear them over all these imbecile gringos."

Another mariachi took the stage, all in maroon suits with gold gamecocks chained down the legs and jacket fronts. They looked ready to play and rather doggedly determined to follow a tough act. They started out with just the bass thump of the *guitarrón* and a violin flirting as the guitarist launched into the traditional bragging introduction. They were Mariachi Madrugadores de Huanacaxtle and they took nothing from nobody. They were borne by fast horses, loved by beautiful women, enriched by game cocks. They had fingers of silver, balls of brass, hearts of gold; they ate raw bulls and boars, drank bandoliers and bayonets; inspired revolutions, spawned affairs and marriages, restored sight to the blind and virginity to the careless. They made strong men cry, fickle maidens sigh, deaf men dance and dead men stand straight up on end. They could play for two weeks straight on nothing but love, tequila, and green chiles. When few of the tourists laughed at this, the guitarist shrugged, strummed up the beat, and they all bounced into "*Pajarillo Barranquero*"

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