

Deadly Contest

Deadly Contest

Charles R Sterbakov

Copyright © 2012 by Charles R Sterbakov.

ISBN:	Softcover	978-1-4771-4686-6
	Ebook	978-1-4771-4687-3

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

This book was printed in the United States of America.

To order additional copies of this book, contact:

Xlibris Corporation

1-888-795-4274

www.Xlibris.com

Orders@Xlibris.com

119001

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	7
CHAPTER 1 MARTIN	9
CHAPTER 2 STEFAN	17
CHAPTER 3 THE ROCK	23
CHAPTER 4 ALAINE PALENTE	33
CHAPTER 5 “FATHER” JACQUE MASSOULT	39
CHAPTER 6 THE SCHOOL.....	46
CHAPTER 7 ALICIA PALENTE.....	56
CHAPTER 8 WHO’S SAMMY DAVIS?.....	62
CHAPTER 9 THE HOSPITAL	73
CHAPTER 10 THE REUNION.....	84
CHAPTER 11 NEW YORK, NEW YORK.....	92
CHAPTER 12 THE NURSERY.....	106
CHAPTER 13 THE DAWN	114
CHAPTER 14 THE FIREMAN.....	124
CHAPTER 15 LEADERSHIP.....	130

CHAPTER 16	WHO ONCE WAS LOST	140
CHAPTER 17	BASIC TRAINING	149
CHAPTER 18	ONE STEP CLOSER.....	157
CHAPTER 19	THE FIRST SHOT	164
CHAPTER 20	SEARCH AND DESTROY.....	170
CHAPTER 21	THE TIME IS NOW	175
CHAPTER 22	PROMISES KEPT	183

PROLOGUE

The man sitting beside his bed was an impostor. It was a good impersonation, nearly perfect. The straight black hair with just a trace of gray scattered randomly, the sharp nose almost Semitic in shape, the faint shadow of a beard that even the sharpest razor could not erase, even the faint scar on the right cheekbone created a likeness that could have been an exact replica of Stefan's father. Except the eyes. They had the exact color (contact lenses?), a perfect shape, but a softness, an unexpected gentleness out of place on the face of Alain Palente.

Stefan tried to sit up, but in confirmation of his suspicions there were straps fixed around his chest, wrapped so tightly that he had to gasp for each painful breath. He must have been drugged; he had no feeling or movement in his arms or legs.

The impostor placed his hand on Stefan's shoulder, speaking with his father's voice, but quieter, almost with a trace of affection.

"Stefan, don't try to move. You have been very sick; we almost lost you. You have polio. Your body is temporarily paralyzed, but the doctors believe that you have a good chance of recovery. It will take a long time and, I won't sugarcoat this for you, a lot of painful therapy, but some day you will be able to walk again. In the meantime, we have sent for an iron lung from the United States that will help you breathe until you get stronger."

Stefan began to panic, almost believing that the impostor was indeed his father and that he had contracted the dreaded disease, but the next words convinced him that it was a trick, a ruse, and that somehow his real father would find him and rescue him from this nightmare.

"Stefan, remember this. I love you and I will always be there to help you."

CHAPTER 1

MARTIN

The seventh full moon of the year 1937, on the Caribbean island of Barrita.

The priest used moonlight and a mirror nailed to a tree to put on his makeup. First, he covered the pure black skin of his face with a white cosmetic, then he brushed purple patches under his eyes. Next, a dark gray cream applied to his cheeks give him a grave skeletal appearance, and a series of red lines dripping down his face looked like blood. Finally, he covered his nude body from the waist up with light gray greasepaint.

Before dressing, he peeked through the bushes to the ceremonial site. A large, waist-high boulder with a smoothed down, flat top sat in the center of an open area. Next to the boulder, a black kettle hung over an open fire, supported by a framework of thick tree branches. On the other side, several smaller rocks, shaped like loaves of bread, were stacked on top of one another, creating an unstable-looking stone pillar that stood man high. Small fist-sized stones, half buried in the ground, enclosed the three structures in a circle roughly twenty feet in diameter.

Outside the circle, almost fifty men and women milled about, looking very much like a group of theatergoers waiting during intermission for the second act to start. Instead of drinking colored water in cardboard containers, they were drinking a potent moonshine brew from glass bottles. On the edge of the clearing, a drummer sat on the ground with a set of three small drums between his legs, tapping out a muted rhythm.

The priest slipped on an old pair of Levi jeans, with a hole in the knee of the left leg and the pants roughly ripped off below the calf of the right leg.

A pair of worn American sneakers, toes exposed through the cut-off front section, completed his wardrobe. He tied a small skull, missing the lower jaw, to the top of his head with a leather strap knotted under his chin in a schoolgirl type of bow. He then picked up a spear-sized rod with his left hand. The end of the pole connected to the hand of a human skeleton. Invisible black wires running down the shaft enabled him to control the hand and give it life.

He looked out at the clearing again, scanning the crowd for this evening's stars. He saw Rika and her husband, Barri, standing by the opposite edge of the clearing. Unlike the rest of the group, they stood very still. Rika held a baby, not cradled in her arms or nestled against her shoulder in the typical posture of a mother, but with her hands under the child's armpits, holding the baby away from her body. The infant was screaming loudly, and Rika made no effort to try to comfort or quiet the child. The priest knew that the mother did not want the child to be quiet but instead to be as unsettled as possible.

He remembered being called to their hut the previous month, immediately after Rika had given birth. There were looks of panic and disgust on the faces of the crowd standing outside and he knew that something had gone horribly wrong. Inside, when he saw the newborn, he understood. It was a boy, in good health, perfectly formed, but with one damning abnormality, a terrible sign that Rika had offended the gods. The child had light, almost white skin.

Rika and her husband were black, like all the villagers, like most of the inhabitants of the island. Not brown, not chocolate, no trace of the forbidden intermingling with the white devils, but a pure beautiful smooth black. There was no doubt of Rika's fidelity. Any contact with the few whites on Barrita, or with the rare tourists that sometimes came to the island, would have been noticed at once by others. Also, the child was too light. Even if the mother had been with a white man, the child would still have been much darker.

"You must take this devil from me, mister holy man," Rika had pleaded with him. "He cannot be made to be allowed to live. It is an evil thing and must be sacrificed to the gods. Please, I cannot look on him no more."

The priest considered her request, but instead saw an opportunity to increase his standing in the village. He formed a plan in his mind to use this child to prove the strength of the voodoo gods.

“It is the gods who delivered this being to us and the gods who must decide his fate. You must care for him, feed him and protect him, until the next full moon ceremony. Then, we shall see if the child shall be allowed to live.”

“Oh, please—I beg to you, I do anything what you want to be rid of this thing.”

“It is decided—you must keep him safe until we meet in the clearing. Now, you must give this child a name.”

Barri spoke for the first time. “Then, if we must be keeping him, we give to him a white man’s name, a name not from our ancestors. We shall be calling him Martin, after the captain of the accursed slave ship what stranded our people here.”

“Then so be it. The child named Martin shall be judged at the next full moon ceremony.”

Tonight, the baby’s fate would be decided. The drummer stopped playing the previous rhythm and began playing a loud simple pattern of two notes, resembling a heartbeat. The crowd ceased their milling and formed a human circle, just outside the stone one. They stood there without moving, chanting to the tune of the heartbeat drum. After ten minutes the drum silenced, the chanting stopped, and an opening formed in the circle. The priest, still holding the shaft with his left hand, removed a skinny, very ugly black fox from a cage on the ground with his right hand and entered the clearing, dancing to his own rhythm, moving to the center. The fox was yelping ferociously, trying to swing its body to take a bite out of the priest’s side.

As he entered the circle, the drummer resumed the two note beat, with another, more complex rhythm superimposed on it. The priest moved towards the fire, dancing to the music and chanting a prayer in a language long since forgotten, so only the meaningless words remained. He pushed

the pole hard into the ground and removed his hands from the control wires. Reaching into his belt, he pulled out a large carving knife, held the fox over the kettle and, with one swift chop, beheaded the animal. The head of the fox fell into the kettle, and the priest remained motionless as the blood drained into the pot.

After the bleeding stopped, the priest, screaming his chant now, grabbed the fox's hind legs in both hands and started spinning around rapidly, swinging the headless animal in front of him. Like a discus thrower, he let go of the fox, its body sent flying, seemingly straight for the full moon that hung in the sky. It was too dark to see the animal land, adding to the illusion of the body soaring to the heavens.

The human circle then began joining the priest in the chant, quietly at first, then louder. The drummer picked up the tempo of the music and they began dancing. The dance was a simple step repeated over and over—down on the left knee, hands up to the sky, head down, rise up, sway left, sway right, then down on the knee again. As they danced, the circle started moving in a counterclockwise direction, slowly at first, then more rapidly.

The priest grabbed the pole and pointed it to the circle, the skeletal forefinger extended. The crowd stopped singing, and stood without moving. The hand was aiming at Rika. The priest again stood the rod up and danced very slowly toward her. He took the child from the mother's arms, held it high above his head, then danced frantically around the circle, screaming his chants to be heard over the cries of the infant. He danced around the circle three times, each time moving closer to the center, finally stopping next to the stone pillar. Singing very quietly now, he placed the child on top of the stones, where there was barely enough room for the child to rest.

“Thus begins the test for this beings life!” he shouted, “We call to *Gran Maître* the creator, *Eshu* the child god and *Yemalla* the goddess of mothers, to pass judgment. If he is to live, they must watch over him and see that he does not fall from this stack of stones. If he should fall or the tower to collapse, then this child is not worthy of life and shall be sacrificed, his body thrown in the kettle. If he is still well in the morning, the gods have smiled on him, and Rika and Barri must nourish him until he can take

care of himself. No one is to come near or interfere with the work of the gods.”

The priest knew that Rika was praying, as she had never prayed before, for the baby to resume its crying, to fall to the ground, to be rid of him forever. But the infant, as if he understood, immediately stopped crying and lay still, his eyes open, staring out into the clearing.

He went to the kettle, picked up a large ladle, and tasted the vile smelling liquid that had been simmering. He filled the ladle again and moved to the circle, offering it to Rika. She took a drink and passed it to the person next to her. Each person in turn then sipped from the serving spoon, the priest refilling it when empty.

The contents of the kettle would have delighted a chemist, with an analysis identifying at least five different mind altering drugs, along with blood from three species of animals, a crude grain alcohol, and a host of other ingredients not normally considered edible. To increase the effect, the priest kept feeding the fire from a stack of hashish plants next to the stone table.

After everyone in the circle drank from the ladle, the priest recovered the pole and resumed the chanting and dancing, the circle joining him again, louder and faster. Soon they were running around the circle, their arms and legs flying in all directions to the beat of the music, the priest leading them from the middle. Then the music stopped again, the priest motionless in the center with the bony forefinger again pointing to the circle, aimed at a young girl, no more than seventeen years old. This was her wedding night.

The drummer resumed playing again, this time a different tune, but with the same two-beat background. While the priest stood still, the girl began dancing, her arms and legs moving frantically, her body moving very slowly towards the center of the circle. Halfway to the priest, without losing a single beat, she lifted the light dress over her body and threw it to the ground. She was nude.

At that moment, a young man on the opposite end of the circle danced toward the center. As he moved, he undid his belt, his pants falling to the ground. He, too, wore nothing else. The two of them began dancing around

the fire, moving clockwise and maintaining the distance between them, while the others resumed dancing in the opposite direction. Gradually, the man started to catch up to the girl, until he was only a few strides behind her.

She turned around and saw him behind her, his penis half erect. She screamed and started running fast in the same circular direction. He caught her, turned her around, grabbed her by the waist, and held her high in the air. She shrieked again and tried to struggle free, but he was too strong for her. He carried her over to the stone table and placed her roughly down on the smooth surface, her legs hanging over the sides. He jumped on top of her and tried to mount her.

The groom bit his lip, trying to clear his head from the effects of the drugs and alcohol. To him, this would be the most important part of the ceremony, possibly the most important moment of his life. He had to perform perfectly, make no mistakes, or there would be no wedding, no wife to care for him the rest of his life. His penis was hard and full, the girl's vagina wide open and moist, but he had to push in only part way, pretending that she was too tight, that he could not enter her fully. Meanwhile the girl kept screaming, hitting him with her fists.

The priest stood over the couple like a judge. Voodoo law required that all brides be virgins, go into the marriage pure. But in Barrita, few made it to their fourteenth birthday without sexual experience. In such a poverty-ridden society, they had no other source of real pleasure. So the bride and groom had to create the illusion of rape in the marriage ceremony, to convince the priest of the purity of the girl. If they did not perform perfectly, if either made a mistake, the girl would be judged tainted and relegated to the role of whore for the rest of her life, and the groom would be prohibited from marrying.

The groom, his whole body aching for release, wanting desperately to finish the act, kept pushing on the imaginary barrier, kept entering part way, pulling out, and trying again. Finally, just as he had rehearsed it every day for a month in front of the watchful eye of the bride's mother (she had not raised her daughter to be a whore), he pulled out completely and lunged all the way in. The bride screamed as if in pain, and collapsed back

on the stone surface. Now she took center stage, having to lie there, as if unconscious, while every muscle of her body wanted to respond.

As they performed their roles, the circle commenced dancing again, with different motions, more sensual, removing their clothing as they danced. The priest raised the pole high in the air, the middle finger of the skeleton pointing obscenely at the sky, declaring the bride a virgin. The groom collapsed in orgasmic delight on the bride, who, free now to respond to his movements, grabbed him tightly.

The priest then pointed the shaft to another girl in the circle, the middle finger still pointing out. Too drunk or high to think of ceremony, she ran to him and jumped, her legs encircling his waist. As they fell to the ground and began their own little rite, the circle broke up into a mass of bodies, copulating in all of the known, and some very original, positions. They did not consider the sex act during the full moon ceremony an act of love, and fidelity or adultery played no part in the choice of partners. Before the evening ended, most of the participants would have at least four or five different partners, not all of the same sex.

Even Rika and Barri, who had taken more than usual of the mixture from the kettle, were caught up in the emotions of the night and almost forgot the little figure on top of the stones. Through all of the drama that had played out in front of him, the child stayed on his perch, not crying, not moving, as if he understood his precarious position. He just rested there, his eyes open, staring at the adults in front of him.

By sunup, all of the participants in the ceremony were either unconscious from the effects of the drugs and alcohol, or sleeping soundly. Only the priest, whose name was Pierre Lafevre, remained awake, sitting on the edge of the stone table. Unknown to the villagers, the priest was the nephew of the President of Barrita and had a degree in Theology from Villanova University.

When Jacque Massoult seized control of the country three years earlier, he knew that his chances of success were slim. There had been twelve different rulers of the tiny country in less than fifteen years, and the plotting to replace him had started as soon as he assumed the role of President. Jacque dealt brutally with all possible enemies, his firing squads working night

and day, but so had his predecessors. He knew that brutality wasn't enough. He needed some other way to stifle opposition.

Pierre suggested that Massoult use the peoples' strong obsession with voodoo to his own advantage. The priest oversaw the elimination of the current religious chiefs, replacing them with men that he had personally trained. He then created new cults that had as their basic premise the idea that Jacque was a reincarnation of a voodoo god. He appeared to be indestructible, immortal, so no opposition to him could succeed. It worked. "Father" Jacque Massoult would complete his term as President for Life of Barrita.

Pierre looked over and saw the baby still lying on top of the stone pillar. He had decided beforehand that the child would live, partially because the child's life would prove the power of the voodoo gods, and partly out of a curiosity about how the boy would handle growing up in an unfriendly world. He had cemented the stones together, and fed the baby a mild sedative before placing him on the pillar.

The baby was awake, and Pierre noticed the child's eyes. They were black, pitch black, as black as the skin that his mother wished that he had. The pupils looked like tiny round pieces of coal. The infant appeared to be staring at him, right through him. If he didn't know better, he would have sworn that the baby's expression contained a trace of triumph, mixed with a glare of pure hatred. As the priest went to retrieve Martin from the top of the stones, he began to wonder if he hadn't made a mistake in letting him live.

CHAPTER 2

STEFAN

September 2, 1960

Stefan Palente, sitting in a first class aisle seat of the turbo-prop hurtling from Miami to Philadelphia, wanted nothing more than to remove his trousers. Under his slacks, there were steel and leather braces covering both legs. They enabled him to walk without crutches but, when seated, they were just dead weights and extremely uncomfortable. He struggled to stand, hoping to walk off some of the stiffness, but the “Fasten Seatbelts” sign started flashing and he had to sit again. He pressed the call button on the side of the armrest.

Marcia Cooper saw the call light and smiled. *He doesn't give up easy*, the stewardess thought. The boy had hit on her even before taking his seat and appeared genuinely surprised when she didn't respond positively.

A good looking young man in an unusual sort of way, the passenger had salt and pepper hair combed straight back from his forehead in waves, shining from a heavy dose of cream. He was tall, with unusual eyes, either gray or green depending on the angle at which you looked at them. He had a nose slightly too large for his face, but thin and angular, and his mouth, seemingly locked in a perpetual grin, had a sensual character that was almost irresistible. “It's a shame,” she thought, “that he's not a few years older. I wouldn't have to be alone in a hotel room tonight.”

“Ok, young man, what can I do for you?”

“Oh, I can think of a lot of things, but I guess I'll have to settle for a Martini with extra olives.”

“You twenty-one yet?”

He appeared puzzled. “What’s my age got to do with it?”

“I can’t serve alcohol to anyone under 21.”

“In Barrita we have no age limit. Ok, so now I’m 21,” he answered grinning.

“You’re from Barrita? You don’t look like a, ah, um,” she hesitated, realizing that she was about to say something inappropriate.

Stefan laughed. “There are a few of us whities in Barrita. Our family comes from the French colonists. My Dad runs the petroleum plant there.”

“You on vacation?”

“No, I’m on my way to school.”

“What grade are you in?” she asked, with a twinkle in her eye.

“Ouch. I’m not that young. I’m starting Drexel Tech.”

“Oh, so you’re eighteen.”

“Yeh. Oh, no, no. Shit—you got me.”

Marcia laughed. “Tell you what—I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that and get your drink”.

After bringing him the cocktail, she sat in the empty seat across the aisle from him.

“So, what are you going to major in?”

“It’s a special degree called Commerce and Engineering. A combination of business and engineering courses that’s supposed to prepare me to work at the plant. My Dad thinks that I’ll take over his job when he retires.”

“Is that what you want?”

The vehemence of his reply surprised Marcia.

“No—absolutely not! As far as I’m concerned, this is a one way trip. I have no intention of ever going back to that stink hole of a rock. I was supposed to go to a fun school like Miami or Penn State. Now everything is fu . . . , messed up.”

“What happened to change things?”

“It’s all my older brother Phillip’s fault. He’s the one my father trained to take over. He went to MIT, graduated with honors and actually wanted Dad’s job. Papa always thought I wasn’t serious enough to do anything like that and, you know what, he was right. I want to enjoy life, not be tied down to a smelly oil company in the middle of the ugliest Island in the world.”

“So why isn’t he taking over?”

“Cause he got drunk the night before graduation and wrapped his car around a tree.”

“Oh my! I’m sorry. Isn’t there anyone else that could do the job?”

“The oldest of us is my sister Dianna, but she married a lawyer from the US and now lives in New York. She’s too smart to ever go back there. Besides, she’s pregnant now and thinks it may be twins. I also have a baby sister, Alicia. I love her more than anyone else in the world but I have to say that she, uh, well let’s just say that she’s not the brightest candle in the chandelier.”

“Well, surely there’s someone else in the company to take over?”

“You know who “Father” Jacque Massoult is?”

“Isn’t he the President of Barrita?”

“Yeh. President, tyrant, dictator—choose your title. He lets my Dad run the company because he’s afraid of any black person in a position of power that isn’t a relative of his. He knows a white person could never try to take over from him. None of the other white people on the island have the background to run the place and Massoult won’t bring in anyone from the outside.”

“Sounds like the plant is pretty important to the President.”

“It’s the main income for the country. Dad and Massoult don’t like each other much and the bastard likes to bother my Dad with all kinds of petty shit. He can’t do too much to him, however, because he knows that he needs him.”

“So, what happens if you don’t go back?”

“You know what? That’s not my problem. Maybe my Dad’ll get smart and move here with the rest of the family and leave that miserable place forever.”

“I guess you’re looking forward to dorm life away from Barrita.”

“Actually, I won’t be staying in a dorm. Drexel’s pretty much a city school. They only have one dorm and it’s for girls only. Out-of-town freshmen are assigned to one of the fraternity houses and they have to put us up for the first year. After that, we’re on our own for housing—we either join a frat or stay in one of the rooming houses on campus. You know, I don’t have to be there ’til tomorrow. Maybe you and I can go somewhere and have some fun.”

Marcia laughed. “I don’t think you’ll have any trouble finding girls to have fun with! Anyway, I wish you luck. I have to start serving dinner now. Enjoy your flight.”

After she left, the seatbelt light turned off and Stefan got up and walked off some of the stiffness. He started to feel a little better, knowing that each minute took him further away from Barrita. He wondered what life living in a fraternity would be like.

After the plane landed, Stefan began to feel the excitement building as his cab headed towards the school. When the taxi neared the campus, the neighborhood surprised him. Expecting a college campus like those he had seen in movies, he looked for green spaces and ivy covered buildings. Instead, he found himself in a somewhat rundown section of the city.

Drexel Institute of Technology was located west of downtown Philadelphia, sandwiched between the University of Pennsylvania and the Thirtieth Street Railway Station. Most of the school's fraternity houses were west of the school, on or near Powelton Avenue. In another age, the homes on that street had been stately mansions that housed Philadelphia's society elite. Now, many of those buildings had been converted to rundown apartment buildings, with Drexel's Greek societies occupying many of the rest.

At the same time that Stefan was nearing the school, he was the topic of a meeting at the Sigma Mu Eta fraternity. His name or, to be more exact, the fact that he was a Barritian native, had caused quite a stir there.

"Well, looks like we're fucked!" Rich Borderberg, president of the fraternity said. "I spoke to Dean Karp, tried to get this Stefan character transferred to the Delta Deltas. They already have two colored brothers—they wouldn't mind having him there. Karp said they don't have any more room there and he seemed pissed that we asked."

"Well, you know, I think we're overreacting," replied Terry Stein. "Just because he's from Barrita doesn't mean he's colored. And even if he is, some of the other SMU chapters have shvatzas—look at Tom Douglass at Penn State."

"Yeh, if Stefan can play football like Douglass, I'll welcome him here, too," Dave Shienfeld answered.

Terry stood up, obviously a bit upset. "Hey, we're a Jewish fraternity and this is the kind of shit our people have always had to put up with. We shouldn't do that to anyone else. I say we take him in and make him feel welcome."

"Shit," Rick responded, "you want to go double dating with him, go ahead. Just see how many girls go out with you after that!"

At that moment, Dickie Berman came bursting into the room. “That Stefan guy’s here! You want the good news or the bad?”

“Crap! Tell us!” said Rick.

“Well, the good news—he’s white!”

“Great! And the bad news?”

Dickie didn’t answer but put his arms in front of him and flapped his hands up and down from the wrist.

Terry, who was still standing, shouted “He’s a fag?”

They all raced to the stairway landing between the first and second floor, looked into the living room and saw Stefan. Because of his brace, Stefan walked with a bouncing movement, his hands held slightly out to help him keep balance. That, combined with his unusual hairstyle and French mannerisms, created a highly effeminate image.

They assigned Stefan to a room on the first floor next to the kitchen that used to be a pantry, well away from the other residents. For a while, they made a point of avoiding him as much as possible. It didn’t take long, however, to find out that they were completely wrong about him. Because of the wealth of his family and his good looks, Stefan had never lacked for feminine companionship and had more experience than most of the other students at the school. That, and his continental aura, made him a big hit with the school’s coeds, and he always seemed to have a good looking girl at his elbow.

Two months later, they moved him to a room on the second floor and gave him an invitation to pledge for the fraternity. For Stefan, the first year at Drexel was like a fantasy come true. He became a member of the SME fraternity, breezed through the courses that were a lot less demanding than the schedule of his private tutor on Barrita, and had all the girls, and more, than he could handle. The troubles of the Palente plant were a thousand miles, and at least four years away.

CHAPTER 3

THE ROCK

Barrita, September 1950

Inside the plywood and corrugated tin shack that served as their house, Martin watched quietly as his mother Rika entered, carrying two large packages. He did not greet her or make an effort to help her. There was no love or affection in this home, only an unspoken understanding that she hated the light-skinned boy whose birth had caused her to become a friendless outcast, and that he should be as invisible as possible. Voodoo law forced her to endure his presence and she provided only the barest necessities needed to sustain life; a pile of straw to sleep on and any garbage left over from her own meals. For anything else, the boy had to rely on his own abilities.

Martin had no memory of his father, Barri. On the night of his second birthday, the man had come to the sleeping child and, for the first time, the only time, picked him up and held him for a moment. Barri then slipped out of the hut and walked through the woods to the clearing where the voodoo ceremonies were held. At the spot where once stood a pillar of stones, he cut his hand with a fishing knife and drew a circle in the ground with his blood. Inside the circle, he created a stick figure representing a sleeping baby.

Using alcohol from a glass bottle that he carried in his pocket, he saturated the circle and set it on fire. Crouching on his haunches, Barri watched the fire until it went out, leaving a dark stain on the ground. Hearing in his mind the sound of a drummer, he danced silently to the round table-like stone and lay flat on the surface. He held his two hands tightly clasping the

knife, reciting the prayer for the dead, and plunged the knife into his chest, the injury ending the pain.

As soon as he could do so unobtrusively, Martin left the shack. A group of younger children who were playing nearby ran when they saw him. He was a tall boy for his thirteen years, with a thin but muscular build covered only by a tattered pair of jeans and a sleeveless tee shirt. His dark curly hair hung in unkempt strands below his shoulders. In a different culture, he would be considered quite handsome, with his unblemished light brown skin, pure black eyes, accentuated cheekbones and sensuously full lips.

He stood still for a moment, scanning his surroundings. The community of makeshift shacks stood on a hill east of Port Atobi, directly opposite Monterey Bay. A petroleum refinery, with high smoke stacks sending its stench directly to the hill, towered north of the city. Next to the plant, a small white enclave that housed the management of the company, overshadowed by the large Palente estate, appeared out of place in contrast to the rest of the city.

From the hill, he could see the details of the Presidential Palace, which stood in the center of the town. A grotesque looking building, it contained a number of sections, each with its own architecture. The base of the Palace was stone gothic, with evil looking gargoyles staring out at the street. The west side of the building contained a clock tower that, for some unknown reason, looked like a duplicate of the tower on Independence Hall in the United States. The center of the building consisted of a six-story structure that duplicated a slice out of the Empire State Building, and a stone edifice that resembled a prison tower from a medieval castle protruded up from the east side of the building. The resemblance was more than coincidental; the tower contained the town prison.

A small development of middle class houses, the only such housing other than in the white ghetto next to the Petroleum plant, occupied the area just south of the Palace. All of the inhabitants of this area were government workers, and most were relatives or close associates of the President. The rest of the city consisted of the warehouses adjacent to the dock, an open-air shopping bazaar east of the Palace, and assorted ramshackle apartment buildings and small shops.

Stefan's goal for the day was the same as any other day—find food. Usually the bazaar area represented the best place to scrounge, but the competition from others desperate for the same thing was fierce there. The quality of nourishment in the trash and garbage cans in the middle class houses north and south of the city was not as good, but easier to come by.

Today, however, the prime area would be around the docks. A tour ship had berthed there the previous night, one of the few that came to Barrita, and would stay for two days. Following the usual pattern, the tourists would leave the ship the first day looking for bargains in the bazaar and small shops in the city. For some reason, they always decided to spend the remaining time on the boat. Begging money or offering guide services to the tourists could be a method of obtaining rare American cash, enough sometimes to live on for weeks. The last time a ship had docked Martin had earned a dollar bill, which enabled him to buy the jeans that he now wore, and provided him with food for a week.

Going to the docks this day could also be especially dangerous—every beggar, thief and cutthroat on the island would be converged there. Martin was not afraid of a fight; he had learned to take care of himself, and could face anyone, man or child, in a one-on-one brawl. However, the gangs that proliferated in the capital city created a real difficulty. Martin couldn't handle four or more kids at the same time. The housing area presented an alternative; pickings would be better there without the normal competition.

But the lure of the riches available from the ship was too tempting. Martin decided to try his luck with the tourists. He climbed down from the hill, heading south to circle around the city and stay as far away from the government building as possible. As he came closer to the bay, he began hiding in doorways as he went, walking only when the streets appeared safe. He made it almost to the dock when his luck ran out.

He had tried to cut through an alley leading directly to the ship. Before he reached the end of the narrow passageway, two figures stepped out in front of him. They had obviously been following him and had raced around the block to confront him. Martin recognized the boy on the right, a tall fat kid who had tried to take away the money Martin had made from the last

tour ship. Martin had left him crying in the street. Next to him, a scared looking skinny boy held a wooden stick like a club.

Martin sized up the situation. He believed he could handle the two of them, but if they had raced around to confront him from the front, the chances were that there would be others behind him. There were no doorways in the alley, no way to escape. He had walked into a trap. Assuming at least two behind him, there were too many to overcome. Since he could not avoid a beating, the only strategy remaining was to avoid serious injury, and to inflict as much pain on his attackers as possible.

He stood still for a second, with a frightened look on his face, then turned around and ran. He ran slowly enough for the two boys to catch up to him, then whirled around kicking with his left foot at the boy with the club, knocking it from his hand. Ducking his head, he rammed hard into the midsection of the fat boy, slamming him against the wall. Hearing the footsteps of two more attackers approaching from his rear, he turned again and jumped with his two legs outstretched like a baseball player sliding into home plate, hitting one of them on the knee. As they both tumbled to the ground, he reached out and grabbed the club that the fourth assailant was aiming at him, swinging it around and throwing him off balance.

He stood up but, before he could regain his balance, a rock thrown by the fat boy struck the back of his head. Briefly dazed, he fell down again, making sure that he curled his body to protect his genitals and held his hands over his head to prevent further injury there. He relaxed his body completely and opened his mouth and eyes, staring without blinking, while controlling his breathing to avoid any sign of life. There were a couple more blows to his body from the sticks when one of the boys yelled, "Wait! Hold it—He be dead! We done killed him!"

Martin lay motionless. The fat boy kicked him hard in the ribs, and he allowed his body to flop over, his hand smashing into the ground, his eyes now staring at the sky. He felt them watching him as he forced his eyes not to blink, holding his breath. A few minutes later, he heard them running out of the alley.

He got up slowly, still slightly dazed from the blow on his head, his chest hurting from a cracked rib, but otherwise not seriously injured. He knew

the fight was not over yet—as soon as they learned that he was still alive they would come after him again, this time looking for blood. He had to get to them first.

Leaving the alley, he walked away from the dock area toward the Palace, then headed north. Normally, he avoided the government area because of the concentration of police there, but he was too tired to walk around the city and the waterfront had to be avoided. He reached the high steel mesh fence surrounding the petroleum plant and followed it to a small cove by the ocean. Despite the slime from the plant, he dove into the water and swam straight out for fifty yards before stopping.

The water here was dangerous to swim in because of the profusion of sharp coral just under the surface. Last year the coral had caught a swimmer, cutting him open from neck to groin. Martin put his head down and opened his eyes, ignoring the sting from the salt water, and swam under water, carefully avoiding the reef.

An hour later he reached his destination, a small island that was little more than an outcropping of black rock. He came around the back side, away from the shore, and climbed up onto a slippery ledge. He continued climbing until he came to the top of a large boulder with a smooth top. He immediately fell asleep, despite having barely enough room to lie down. For some reason, Martin always felt very secure on the precarious perch, even though almost any movement could cause him to fall.

Martin woke up just as the sun started to set, the sky streaked with red, yellow, and blue streamers, highlighted by white and gray clouds. From where he sat, Barrita was a picturesque tropical island, the distance hiding the ugliness and despair. An artist would have sat enthralled by the sight; Martin didn't notice.

He would be late for dinner; his mother always ate at sundown, and left a plate of leftovers for him when she finished. If he weren't there, she added the food to the other garbage, where he felt it belonged in the first place. He didn't mind missing dinner—most of the time it wasn't worth eating, and he was used to going for days without food. Martin was thinking of the job he had to do this night.

He climbed down the opposite side of the boulder and up to a higher peak from which he could dive cleanly into the water. Despite the lingering pain in his chest, he felt stronger now and swam due south for a while. Turning toward the island, he came out of the ocean just above the dock area, into a small private beach used by government workers. By then the sun had fully set and the beach was deserted. He lay on the sand for a time to allow his clothing to dry, then walked towards into the city.

Martin had recognized another one of his attackers that morning, the tall thin boy who had looked so afraid. He knew his mother was a street whore who lived above a bar between the petroleum plant and the Palace. Moving very carefully to avoid being seen, he made his way to the back of the building. Using an outhouse as a ladder, he climbed up to a ledge between the first and second floor and silently slid his way around the corner to the side of the building with a row of windows.

Inside the first window, Martin saw an obese white man, obviously a tourist, sitting on a filthy cot, with a woman's head buried between his legs. Using her hands and mouth, she was struggling to excite the man into an erection. From the look on the tourist's face, she was not succeeding.

Slipping past that window, he peered into the next. There was no light on in the room, but Martin had exceptional night vision. The object of his search was lying asleep on a cot. Martin crept through the window into the room and looked around. There were two doors in the room; one with a transom opposite the window, and one on a side wall that most likely led to the mother's area. The only furniture consisted of the cot the boy was sleeping on, a chair with a broken back, and a small chest of drawers with an unlit candle and some matches on it. The candle gave him an idea.

He lit the candle, cupping the flame to avoid waking the boy. He went to the cot and, holding the candle in one hand with the flame just below his chin, he grabbed the boy roughly by the neck with his other hand and shook him hard.

The boy woke up to the vision of Martin's candle-lit face floating above him and tried to scream, but couldn't. His eyes opened so wide that for a minute Martin thought they might actually pop out of his head, and his mouth started moving up and down frantically, but no sound came out.

Finally, his eyeballs darted up, almost disappearing under his upper lids, and the boy collapsed in a dead faint. Martin slapped him twice across the face.

The boy woke up again and started shaking violently. Martin could smell the odor of fresh urine coming from the bed.

“What you want? L’me alone! I din’ hurt you! I swear! It was Claude, the fat kid. Oh god—I swear to god! Claude, the fat kid, he threwed the rock, Claude! I swear it! I din’ hurt you! You kicked my hand—I jus’ stood there. I din’ hit you! Please, don’ hurt me, please please please!”

Martin slapped him again, even harder, saying nothing. The boy started crying.

“Please don’ hurt me! Look, I got money—lots of money. We done good today. Please, take it—take it all. Don’ hurt me! Oh god, please don’ kill me!” he cried, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a handful of change and bills, pushing them toward Martin.

Martin stared; it was a lot of money, two American dollar bills and a fistful of American coins. He took the cash from the boy, stuffed it into his jeans, and grabbed him by the neck again.

Quietly, his voice filled with as much menace as a thirteen-year-old could manage, he said, “The other boys. Who are they? Where is they? Tell me or you be dead!”

The boy looked like he might faint again, but he managed to tell Martin what he wanted to know. Then Martin punched him hard in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him, grabbed his hand and twisted him off the bed. Claspng the boy’s ears in his hands, he slammed his head against the steel post of the cot.

“If you sees me again,” he whispered, “you better find y’self a safe place for hiding, ’cause if I ever sees you again, you won’t beg me for not to kill you, you’ll beg me for *to* kill you!”

He climbed back out the window and down to the ground. One down and three to go.

Martin decided to save Claude, the ringleader, for last. The other two were parentless brothers, and lived in the remains of a burned-out warehouse close to the alley where the attack had taken place. On his way there, Martin once again cut through the alley, taking extra care to avoid being seen. At the location where the attack took place, he saw the sticks lying on the ground and found the rock that had hit him on the head. He carried it with him.

He was about to enter the roofless structure when he spotted one of the brothers standing outside urinating against the wall, swaying back and forth as if drunk. Martin crept along the building until he was behind the boy, raised the rock, and hit him on the back of the head. He didn't hit him hard, tried to strike him with the same force that he himself had experienced, to stun him instead of knocking him unconscious. The boy staggered forward against the wall, the liquid splashing back on himself, then turned and looked at Martin, who had to jump back to avoid the urine.

Martin stood waiting patiently until the dazed boy finally emptied out, then stepped forward and with three quick blows knocked him out. He bent down and calmly bent three of the boys' fingers back until he heard them break. He searched the boys' pockets but, except for a few small Barritian coins, they were empty.

Inside the building, he found the other brother sound asleep in a basement room. Martin stepped out of the room and started hitting a pipe with the rock in a familiar two-beat rhythm. When he heard the boy call out, he stopped pounding the pipe and stepped down the hall and around a corner. Shortly afterwards, he heard the boy walking toward him, calling out to his brother. When he reached the end of the corridor, Martin hit him on the head with the rock, striking harder but still not with full force. The boy collapsed at Martin's feet.

Martin waited, wondering how long the boy would remain unconscious. Ten minutes later, the boy finally came to and lifted himself unsteadily to

his feet. Martin moved fast, punching hard to the midsection and again to the side of the head, using his bare fist this time. The boy went down.

A search of the second brother's pockets yielded a little over two dollars. Martin now had more money than he had ever had before, but his thoughts were not on his riches. He was thinking of fat boy Claude.

Claude had an unusual family for a street kid; he lived with both his parents in a tenement apartment close to the government workers' homes. The door to the apartment was locked, but the wooden frame was old and rotting. Martin forced the door open without waking anyone. Inside, there were two rooms; a combination living room and kitchen, and a bedroom for the parents. He found Claude sleeping on a couch in the front room.

Martin picked up a pitcher of water from the kitchen area and emptied it on the sleeping boy's head. Claude jumped off his makeshift bed, but before he could come fully to his senses, Martin struck with the rock. This time he used his full force, and he could feel the skull shatter under his hand. An examination of the figure lying on the floor told Martin what he already knew; he could wait forever and this boy would not get up.

Martin sat on the couch, looking at the bloody rock in his hand. It was a most useful weapon. With it, he could stun, knock unconscious, or kill—quietly and fast, depending on the force of the blow. He threw the rock on the floor, next to the body. Finding more rocks in Barrita would not be a problem.

He found no money in Claude's pockets, but a search of the room turned up a glass jar stuffed with cash. Martin's hands shook for a second; it contained more money than he had ever seen before—at least four or five times what he already collected that evening. He put the jar in a cloth sack he found in the kitchen area and tied it to a belt loop on his jeans.

The sun was already up when he returned to his mother's shack, the money safely stored in a crevice on his rock island. Rika was sitting on her bed sewing some rags together. She looked up and saw Martin standing in the doorway.

For the first time in his life, Martin spoke directly to his mother.

“Hello, Mother. How you be today, Mother? Beautiful day out, isn’t it, Mother?” he whispered, moving slowly toward her. She said nothing; just sat staring at Martin, a cold fear in her eyes. He went to the cupboard where she kept the small store of food and emptied the contents into a paper bag.

“I’m sorry I missing dinner last night, Mother. Hope nothing go to waste, Mother,” he said, as he went to a chest and removed her only valuables; a wedding ring that had belonged to her mother, and some costume jewelry. He placed the trinkets in the paper bag with the food.

Martin set the bag down on the cupboard and went to his mother. He grabbed her head roughly from both sides, and stared into her eyes, now filled with terror. He then suddenly bent down and kissed her briefly on the forehead, retrieved the paper bag and went out the door.

Rika sat on the bed without moving, staring at the doorway, her eyes wide open. Her hand went to her forehead where her son had kissed her, rubbing it gently. She knew she was free now—free from the terrible curse that had plagued her life for thirteen years—finally free from Martin. She said his name once, softly, and began to cry.