

Time to Settle Up

By David Price

He sat hunched over, looking sleepy as he nursed his beer at a corner table near the bar. He didn't look like anyone. He was a part of the furniture like an old coat rack. If you bothered a second glance, you'd have noticed a big frame under the old army fatigue jacket. His neck was like a bull's, thick with a prominent jugular vein pulsing noticeably.

He had a weathered face reminiscent of a dry Arizona riverbed in mid-summer, with just as many lines and crags. It was the scar that drew your attention, slicing down from his forehead across the bridge of his nose, down his cheek and ending at the missing tip of his right earlobe. His friends simply called him Sarge.

His hands spoke volumes about his life. A pair of old baseball gloves with fingers like gnarled tree roots, thick, scarred and enlarged from countless fractures. When clenched into fists, they were as hard as the knots of a ship's mooring rope.

He had been an athlete; that much was apparent. What kind? Who knew? Boxer, wrestler, football player? Actually all three. Mostly in a semi-pro football league in New Jersey and as a bare knuckle specialist in underground fights bet on by society folks out for a slice of the city's underbelly. He was just a man who had a need to compete against other men for a few bucks and a chance to measure himself against their grit. Was it a thinly veiled death wish or just a meanness born of a thankless war that he couldn't shake?

His body was his weapon. He relied on it, always had. It had never failed him. Lately, he knew his edge was worn down from age and so many battles. He could hold his own with anyone and that meant "anyone." But sometimes it wasn't *mano e mano*, and then he needed a little help from a small deadly friend, his Guardian Angel.

She was a custom job, a six inch cold steel blade, sharp enough to shave with but tapering to a tanto point for strength. She was built to stab and slash with equal proficiency. He had picked her up in a card game in Saigon. The previous owner had been with a black ops unit. He was real sorry to part with her. Sarge still remembered the pain in her owners' eyes when he lay down the aces and eights and raked in the pot. She came with a flat parachute-cord wrapped handle, so her thinness allowed her to disappear in the custom leather rig that rested between his shoulder blades against the thoracic spine. She could be freed with a quick move of either hand as if to scratch the back of his neck. Once freed, she seemed to have a mind of her own, guiding the hand that held her to the soft spots she craved. When unleashed, her fury was frightening and difficult to control.

He had only released her twice, once on a jungle sentry when silence was critical and devastation imperative. The other time was in an alley in southside Chicago when some frisky Egyptian Kings gang members were looking for an easy mark. Both times, she had done her work like a cornered wolverine. Her victims were either left where they lay or limped away with her mark forever with them.

He lived on his meager VA check and the money he made from his bare knuckle exploits. Together they couldn't cover the ER bills for the broken bones and gashes that always followed each contest. Instead, what he couldn't patch up with tape and butterfly bandages, he took to his buddy from Nam, his former unit medic. But he loved it all and needed it to feel alive. His buddy fought too - but it wasn't other men, just his own demons and his never-slacking thirst for the genie in a bottle.

He waited patiently for the bully boy Rico and his partners. They had recently used his buddy for a punching bag in the alley behind the bar before relieving him of his monthly SSI benefits. This was the third night he had been waiting, and he would be there until his buddy was squared. They had no idea that they were soon to pay for every misdeed they had ever committed.

He was nursing his third beer when he heard the commotion. The bar door burst open as three men barged in, talking and laughing as if they owned the joint. Above the din of the throbbing music, a voice could be heard.

“Shut the fuck up, asshole.”

Rico smiled as he spoke to his cousin, Head. They called him Head because his was about twice the size of normal. Everyone swore it had been that big since grade school. He took a lot of grief for his abnormality until he was in junior high school. It was there he realized he was carrying a lethal weapon above his neck. All he needed to do was grab an adversary by the back of his neck and yank him forward as he brought his forehead down with a snap to meet the bridge of his opponent's nose. The result was always the same, a knockout blow with an accompanying broken nose and a torrent of blood.

Head responded, “Don't do me like that, cuz.”

The third man, Rooster added, “Can't you guys ever stop?”

Sarge recognized Rico by his bass voice and the pomaded black hair combed straight back with a sheen that reflected the neon beer lights behind the bar.

The men pushed through the crowd and forced themselves around a single open stool, wedging open the space until the ripple effect allowed an opening big enough for all three. To the only patron to glare at the boisterous three, Head stared and menacingly said, “What?” When the bespectacled office worker didn't immediately turn away, Head spoke again, “What, motherfucker?”

At this, Rico and Rooster turned to face “spectacles” who turned away only seconds before Head could deliver his trademark nose breaker.

Rico shouted, “Barkeep, three tequila shooters and three beers and keep them coming!”

The barkeep was called Tiny, because he wasn't. He went about 350 lbs. on a 6'6" frame. Back in the day, he was one of the best linemen to come out of the Chicago Public High School system. Probably would have been All-Big Ten if he had only made it

through his freshman year at the University of Illinois. Unfortunately, to retain his scholarship and stay eligible, he needed to attend class and that just wasn't a part of Tiny's program.

Tiny knew Rico and his crew. He was never happy to see them, especially since that incident last week when they worked over that old timer in the alley out back.

He could handle them, but he really hated cleaning up the mess that usually followed.

"I'll keep em coming till I close you down, and then I expect you to leave like gentleman," Tiny bellowed.

Gentlemen...what a laugh! Tiny knew he could take care of them with the little sawed off bat he kept behind the bar. But even he knew not to let Head get to close when the action started.

Sarge looked up from his table. He felt the adrenaline rush knowing he was only minutes away from setting his lure. He slowed his breathing to calm down. He needed to project an easy mark for his plan to work.

At that moment, a cute young woman out with friends from the office tried to edge past the trio in the direction of the restroom. Rooster reached out and caught her by the elbow, stopping her dead in her tracks. She turned to see a tall gangly man with an unusually long neck, pimple-covered face and red hair gelled to stand up to a point.

Rooster sprayed her with spittle as he barked, "Hey babe, didn't we go to different high schools together?"

She cried out, "Let go!" as she tried to pull away.

He pulled her between his spread knees as he sat astride his stool. Rico turned and said, "Hey Rooster, introduce me to your girlfriend."

Rooster said, "First she teases me with those bedroom eyes from the end of the bar, and now she wants to play hard to get. Go figure?"

Rico leaned toward her and whispered, "Honey, don't do Rooster like that. He don't like it when his hens get uppity."

She tried to pull away, crying, "Get your hands off of me." Her eyes flashed the fear of an animal with a leg caught in a snare.

Head smiled and leaned over, "Hey Rooster, who's the cutey?"

Sarge watched. Now was not the time to show his hand, but the young women's distress was getting to him. He scowled in displeasure, picked up by Rico but ignored. Who cares what an old man thinks?

Fortunately, Tiny was following the scene. He quickly leaned across the bar and placed a meaty hand down the collar of Rooster's shirt and then yanked back using the tee shirt collar beneath as a garrote.

"Let the little lady go or we're gonna have a problem."

Rooster instinctively released her arm and grabbed for his throat. She burst away and didn't look back.

Rico turned to Tiny and growled, "Let him go big man, he was only saying hi to an old girlfriend." Head was moving toward Tiny as he released Rooster's collar with a stiff push.

Tiny said, "Any more crap out of any of you and you are all out of here."

Good, problem resolved, thought Sarge. I have to play this just right. There can't be any commotion to draw attention to me from bystanders.

Rico ordered another round. This wasn't the first bar they had hit tonight. They were feeling no pain.

Sarge decided it was now or never. He needed to peak their interest and piss them off at the same time. He got up and ambled over to the bar to pay his bill. He purposely pushed into the trio bumping into Rooster with a hard elbow. "Oops, watch where you're going there, Stretch!"

"Hey asshole, back up! An old fart like you shouldn't be drinking if you can't hold your liquor."

Ignoring Rooster's comments, Sarge said to Tiny, "Hey, let me pay up with you."

Tiny tabbed up the three beers. "Nine bucks, old timer." He pulled out a thick wad and peeled off a \$50 bill. Under it sat another \$50. The roll could have been a couple of grand, except all the bills beneath were ones.

The trio eyed the transaction and shared knowing glances. All were thinking the same thought.

Sarge asked, "Hey man, where's the head?"

Tiny replied, "Straight back and to the right, next to the exit sign."

"Can you get out that way?"

"Sure" said Tiny, "But it only leads to the back alley."

"That's ok. My gear is stashed there."

He made his way slowly through the bar, politely weaving in and out of the tightly-packed crowd.

Rico nodded to Rooster and Head who quickly exited the front door. Two stores to the left and they were in the alley.

Rooster said, "Same deal as last week?"

Head replied, "Yeah, but go easy on the kicking will ya? We almost killed that bum last week. After I punch em he won't be any trouble, so just grab the dough."

"I know, I know, but I just love to hear these old rummies squeal when I stomp 'em."

Rico paid the tab and quickly followed the mark to the rest room.

Sarge slipped into the first of two stalls and waited. He adjusted the soccer shin guard he wore on his right forearm. The rigid plastic guard extended from his wrist to his elbow. He could deliver a devastating blow to a man's face or larynx with no fear of injury to himself. Amazing the things you learn in blood-and-guts semi-pro football.

Rico entered and observed the open door of the empty stall. He smiled and began to comb his hair as he waited. All he needed to do was follow the old man into the alley where he knew Head and Rooster were waiting. Like taking candy from a baby.

As Rico looked in the mirror, comb in hand, he wondered what was taking so long? *Hey*, he thought, *something ain't right*. The shoes in the stall were facing out toward the door but the pants weren't bunched around the ankles. The guy was just standing there waiting. For what? Something's weird.

Seconds passed. No action. No movement. What the fuck? Something's real wrong!

Rico turned to face the stall when the door flew open, knocking him back like a pinball hit by a flipper.

"Hey, asshole," yelled Rico.

As Rico rebounded from the wall, Sarge launched out of the stall in a blur. Before Rico could react, he delivered a forearm strike to Rico's throat just below his chin. The blow collapsed Rico's windpipe, disabling him as he choked convulsively for air. The pain nearly rendered him unconscious. He bent over gasping.

Quick as a jungle cat springs for the kill, Sarge stepped behind him and reached to release his Guardian Angel from her hiding place.

She is free!

Riding the tight pocket of her master's hand, she struck in one perfectly aimed punch entering the thoracic spine at T-5, severing the spinal cord.

Rico screamed as his legs disappeared and the floor came up to meet him.

"That's for my buddy last week," spit Sarge.

Rico would live, alright. If you call life in a wheelchair living.

Sarge stepped over the crumpled figure and opened the restroom door. "Time to settle up."

He made his way to the rear door down the dark hallway past the boxes of cleaning supplies stacked along the wall. The dimly lit exit sign glowed. *Finish the mission* - it was always his credo even when his course of action was getting confused. He always finished the mission.

He held Angel in his right hand and allowed his jacket sleeve to hang down, hiding her from view. With his left hand, he pushed open the door to the alley and stepped out.

Head and Rooster expected this to be an easy score, so they didn't try and hide. They were casually having a smoke just a few feet from the rear door.

Sarge stepped out quickly and looked right and then left to orient himself. He saw his targets immediately and quickly scanned beyond for possible onlookers at the alley entrance. No one. Good. This work would have no witnesses. It was as quiet as a graveyard. How appropriate.

Rooster sneered, "Hey old man, got change for a hundred?" He chortled loudly at his own words. Head stepped forward closing to Sarge's left side. Rooster stepped wide to the right. There was no attempt to disguise their intent. Why should they? This old man was going down. Any second now the exit door would burst open and Rico would come flying out.

They had done this a half dozen times in as many places. Rico would grab the chump from behind in a chokehold, one arm around the neck while he leaned back over his hip, lifting the victim's feet off the ground. At the same time, Head would deliver a full roundhouse right to the groin. Rico would release the hold, and the mark would crumple to the pavement in agony. Rooster would step in with a few well-placed kicks to the head and ribs until the victim fell silent. A quick rifle through the pockets and they would be on their way. Worked like a charm every time, so far.

Sarge froze and looked back and forth at each of them. It was only a moment, two or three seconds at most. His stare wasn't the wide-eyed look of an animal blinded in headlights. In that instant, fear showed on their faces.

Dammit! Where the hell is Rico? The timing is all off. Shit!

Sarge sized up the scene. He knew he needed to neutralize the biggest threat first. As Head stepped forward, he ducked down and punched left with his right hand. Angel found the soft underbelly about an inch above the beltline. She sunk to her hilt and then pulled across and up violently. The incision penetrated six inches, cutting through muscle and fat, releasing the coiled snakes inside as they reached for the new opening.

Head clutched his abdomen in a futile attempt to keep his intestines from falling onto the beer-soaked gravel.

As quickly as her work was done, Angel sprang right and up to meet Rooster just below the sternum, puncturing and deflating his lung and nicking his heart. He gasped, choked and fell to his knees. Sarge kicked just once with his boot. A perfectly placed kick, toe uplifted with follow-through as he broke off Rooster's four front teeth at the gumline and proceeded upward to break his nose. Lou Groza couldn't have done it better.

In the space of seconds, it was over. Sarge walked away, down the alley. Three blocks over, he wiped Angel clean on his jacket sleeve and placed her back in her womb. The jacket went into one of a dozen dumpsters lined up for morning pickup.

The night was still. Winter was coming. He'd need to pick up a new jacket tomorrow at the surplus store. That was tomorrow, but for now he was suddenly very hungry.

There was a little late night diner six blocks over. Coffee and some eggs would be just the ticket.

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