

Chapter One

Bronx, New York City

October 18, 1992

The gypsy sat in the dark and smoked. The back room of the fate shop gloomily lit by a few candles and the flickering 10-inch screen of a Farnsworth television. It was older than she was and still cost two-hundred dollars; about what the shop made in a good month.

She crushed out the cigarette and cursed. Not an ancient Romani curse she learned from her grandmother, but one she picked up from her father.

"Fucking, Cleveland," she hissed under her breath. Draining her glass, she refilled it from the bottle of Black Label, and then reached for the Lucky Strikes. She tapped another smoke out of the pack and lit it. Her father had taken her to see her first Giants game at the Polo Grounds when she was thirteen. He died later that year.

New York was favored by a point and a half and was getting their ass kicked by the Rams up at League Park. Down by three touchdowns early in the fourth quarter, it was over. She got up and switch off the Farnsworth.

The shop shared common walls on either side, so there were no exterior windows in the back room where the gypsy lived. Without the harsh flicker of the black and white, only candlelight remained. Electricity was expensive.

She had every reason to fear the dark, but the spirits that lurked here were familiar, almost comforting. Slowly, her gaze was drawn to the cards on the table next to the scotch. Tarot readings were mainstay of the fate shop. The Etteilla deck was very old. Handed down for generations from mother to daughter, the ancient Egyptian themes in keeping with the misplaced belief that such cards were derived from the *Book of Thoth*.

She took a long slow drag off the cigarette and leaned forward. A three-card spread lay on the table. Most believed you could read Tarot for yourself. That was crap and anyone who believed it was a charlatan. The psychic intuition needed for a true reading simply couldn't be untangled from oneself enough to get true clarity. Regardless, with no customers and bored, she had laid out the cards right before the game started. Old as the cards were, she always put them away when a reading was finished. Today, she had left them on the table.

The cigarette forgotten, she examined them again.

The first card, the past, was the Eight of Cups. It represented someone returning home or learning from the past. Gunari was never coming home. Based on the money she had on the game, the scotch and the smokes, she hadn't learned anything about bad habits from her past.

The second card, the present, was The Fool. It represented fresh hope, new beginnings or even travel. She had lived her entire life in the Bronx, but she wasn't her mother or grandmother. Things had changed for her, doors opened. At first, this card had made her wonder what the day might hold, but then she turned over the third card.

The final card, the future, was Death. A skeletal figure in a tattered brown robe, holding a scythe, with a pyramid in the background. A black bird overhead.

In truth, its meanings were not particularly grim. Often it represented significant change, moving on or rebirth. Even when the interpretation was an ending, it offered many possibilities.

Remembering the cigarette, she leaned back and took a drag. The smoke dangling from her lips, she slowly reached out and picked up the card. She could see the card trembling slightly in her hand. When she had first turned it over hours ago, an overwhelming sense of dread had washed over her, more powerful than any reading she had ever done. Except one.

It was over a decade ago now, another three card spread. The very same card. She had started crying. An hour later two

ConFed soldiers in Class A uniforms had knocked on her door.

It hadn't changed her mind about interpreting the cards for yourself. Instead, it instilled a deep sense in her that a greater power was at hand.

A log ash, from the again forgotten cigarette, fell to the table. She quickly snuffed out the smoke and wiped the ash off the table away from the cards with her free hand. Slowly, she returned the card to the deck followed by the others. Too quickly, as if it would matter, she shuffled the cards before returning them to the handmade wooden box where the deck was kept. The original cardboard box was long gone. This one had been made by her great grandfather. The lid was intricately carved depicting an angel with a trumpet above supplicants kneeling below, their arms raised. She slid the lid closed.

The gypsy drained the scotch picking up the bottle of Black Label and the glass in one hand and the handmade box in the other. It was only three steps, after rounding the couch, to the sink where she deposited the glass. The Johnnie Walker went back in the cabinet above the sink next to a few of its friends, Aztecali and Beluga.

Not leaving the bottle out made her feel better about starting to drink at noon on Sunday.

She grabbed her coat off the hook near the doorway to the front of the shop and put it on. The heavy leather Commonwealth coat came down almost to her knees. Since it was Commonwealth-

made, it wasn't really surplus. Its original owner, some kraut, was likely dead. She just liked the coat. It was heavy and wide through the shoulders with a stiff collar that stayed up. Too big for her, she still liked the way it fit.

She pushed through the beaded curtain that led to the fate shop. The front room had dark wooden walls and oriental carpets on the floor. It smelled of incense, but it was faint, not overpowering. There was a small round table with two high-backed chairs, covered in deep red velvet, with wooden arms. The table was covered with a velvet cloth. There were just enough candles to be able to see easily, but leave the room close and intimate. In the bookshelves set into the wall by the beaded curtain were a dozen books and various oddities.

She placed the box on one of the bookshelves, grabbed her umbrella and went outside. The shop was across the street from a Hispanic grocery and a Baptist church.

She locked the door to the shop. The front of this row of buildings was faced with dark wood, but the upper floors were brick. There were large glass windows looking into each of the shops. Against the otherwise endless grey landscape of Melrose, a neon sign hung over the door of the fate shop and the window advertised palm and tarot card readings in white letters that stood out against the heavy dark interior curtains.

It was raining. Tiny drops that seemed to hiss when it came down hard. The gypsy put up her umbrella and started walking up Courtlandt Avenue.

The world was dying. As the war dragged on, after a generation, everything had gone to shit. In the Bronx, no one seemed to notice. People dragged themselves through the endless grey decaying landscape of their lives like ghosts. The gypsy could feel it in her bones.

She turned down East 151st Street, walking with the traffic. Not that there was much traffic. A few cabs and delivery trucks, but with the war, most people didn't have a car. No one in her family had ever owned one.

The rain made the street smell like decay or a wet dog; a dead one. It wouldn't be right to say nothing changed. Nothing got better or newer. It was the same, like seeing a whore on the same street corner, but ten years later and worse for the wear.

The war had sucked the life out of everything, the economy, the country, and finally, when United States lost California, the people. The gypsy was still a kid when the Japs took California, but she could still remember, a little, what it was like before. A generation of war had sucked the wealth of the nation, the world really, until there was nothing left to give. People still cared. Not anymore. The Commonwealth propaganda posters someone stuck up on the stained gray brick wall around the corner from the fate shop said it all.

"THE WAR IS OVER! YOU LOST!"

A black and white abstract of the Fuehrer when he was young and his father was still in power. One hand clenched defiantly in a fist and the other hand beckoning. The message was lost on her and it was bullshit besides; the war was far from over. It might never end.

Before California, the posters would not have lasted for fifteen minutes before someone pulled them down. If whoever put them up were caught, they would not have done it again. These had been here for months.

The gypsy turned onto Melrose Avenue and got out of the rain under the awning outside Warburg's deli. Shaking the rain off her umbrella, she wiped her feet on the mat going inside. It was a kosher place, meticulously clean, and brightly lit inside in sharp contrast to the endless gray streets outside.

It was Sunday and near closing, so the place was empty except for the deli-man and his daughter. There were half a dozen of those tall round tables. The ones with round chairs that look sort of like stools with tall backs. The girl was sitting at one of the tables with a textbook and papers neatly in front of her. Her old man did not like what PS 31 had to offer, so she worked in the deli and he homeschooled her. That meant homework, even on Sunday.

"Good evening, Mrs. Smith," she said, smiling as she moved behind the counter. "The usual?"

"If it's not too late, Gracie?"

"Not for about another half an hour," she said, pushing up on her toes to get a little taller behind the counter. She was a good kid.

"The usual then," the gypsy said. "And you can call me Jaelle."

"She may not," said the deli-man as he emerged from the backroom. "She knows that and so do you, Mrs. Smith. Children must respect their elders."

"How long have I been coming here, Saul?" Being called "Mrs. Smith" brought up painful memories and made her feel old.

"Grace, get Mrs. Smith her coffee please," the deli-man said, before turning to the deli case to finish the rest of the order. "And you, Mrs. Smith, have been coming here long enough to know better than try to tempt my daughter into bad manners."

The girl rolled her eyes and then smiled as she moved behind the deli-man to pour the coffee. She was a skinny kid with dark hair and eyes.

"A kid could do worse than bad manners," the gypsy said, stuffing her hand in the pocket of the coat to fish out the crumpled dollar.

The deli-man put the Rueben with extra sauerkraut, wrapped in brown paper, up on the counter. "Habits, both good and bad, all start somewhere," he countered and moved to the register as



his daughter put the coffee next to the sandwich. "Thirty-five cents, please, Mrs. Smith."

"Keep the change," she said, handing over the dollar. Even broke, she wasn't tight with a buck. The brightly lit deli lifted her spirits, so she decided to eat here, taking off the storm coat and hanging it on the back of one of the tall chairs.

Grace had always be fascinated by the gypsy. Her father would have chastised her for staring, but after putting the dollar in the register, he had started cleaning up to get ready to close and wasn't paying attention. Moving slowly back to her homework, she watched as the gypsy collected her sandwich and coffee.

She was wearing what an American would think was typical, a long, colorful, layered dress that was tight at the waist, low-cut and left her shoulders bare. She had a shawl covering her shoulders; she had worn it under the coat. It was loose knit, so it didn't hide the dark bare flesh beneath. A thick wave of hair, so black you could get lost in it, spilled out from under the blue headscarf. It was long and the tails of it hung down on the right side of her face well past her shoulder. From a single hoop in her left ear, on a half dozen chains, an earring of delicate silver rained down.

She was in her late thirties, early forties maybe. She was lean and a little hungry looking, but still had full lips and breasts the dress struggled to restrain.

Sensing the girl watching her, the gypsy favored Grace with a warm smile and sat down. The deli-man's daughter grinned and returned to her schoolwork.

In no hurry to return to the fate shop, she took her time eating half the Rueben and then wrapped the other half in the brown paper. She finished her coffee and got up, putting the Styrofoam cup in the trash.

"Goodnight, Gracie," she said, putting on her coat. "Tell your father I said thanks." The deli-man had disappeared out back.

"Goodnight," the kid said with a big smile.

Pocketing the remainder of the sandwich and retrieving her umbrella, the gypsy went out into the rain. Grace watched her through the glass door for a moment before flipping the open sign to closed and locking the door. Time for chores, she started flipping the chairs up on the tables. She neatly collected up her schoolwork before taking care of the last table. She was sweeping the floor when the deli-man emerged from the back.

"Papa," she said, her tone carrying a question.

"Yes, my child," he replied as he started to clean the counter.

"She doesn't look like a Smith." It was more of a question than a statement. Grace had seen the gypsy for years. Today, to

Grace, she seemed sadder than usual somehow, giving voice to the child's curiosity.

"A Romani tribe or family chooses a public name," he explained, "that they use with outsiders."

"Romani?"

"The Romani were treated like the Jews by the Reich. On the Eastern Front, they were often killed on sight. They had a word for it, *Porajmos*, I think. Her family fled to America at the beginning of the war like ours."

"Is she married?"

"It is not my place to discuss our customer's business."

"Is she?"

"No, child," the deli-man said with a sigh. "She is a widow."

"What happened?"

"She was married quite young. It is the way of her people. Her husband hated the Germans, joined the army, and was killed in the trenches of Poland."

"Why did he hate the Germans so much?"

"Atrocity stays in the blood," he said somberly. "It is not easily forgotten. Now, I have said more than I should. Finish your chores, please, and go upstairs and get dinner started."

"She seemed sadder than usual, today," Grace said as she put the broom away.

"She is Romani and a woman, my child," the deli-man answered wearily.

"So"

"Both are inscrutable to me."

"Inscrutable?"

"It means," he started.

"I know what it means, papa." She stopped and fixed her father with an indignant stare.

The deli-man walked over to his daughter and put his hands on her shoulders. "Of course you do, my beautiful young lady," he said. With her, at least for now, knowing the right words. "Now, upstairs with you."

As she turned the corner off Melrose, the gypsy could hear a zeppelin droning overhead. She glanced up just long enough against the hissing rain to see it was one of the gray civilian defense airships. Dull against a colorless sky, a washed out message from the ConFed mind-machine big enough on its side to read from the ground.

"DON'T FORGET OUR FIGHTING MEN. DO YOUR PART. CONSERVE."

It was over an hour until sunset, but the rain and cloud cover lent the wet streets of the city a perpetual gloaming. Over a generation, the industrial war machine had consumed places like Jersey City, Hempstead and Yonkers. Tracts of

factories insatiably swallowing coal and diesel belching smoke. The sun rarely shown in Gotham now.

The gypsy turned the corner back onto Courtlandt. A car was parked outside the grocery across the street from her shop. It was a Ford Victoria, painted all black. They came off the line two-tone. Two men, both Hispanic, wearing long leather blood-black coats were getting into the Ford. One into the passenger seat and the other in the back. The driver, who had been waiting, flicked a cigarette into the street and pulled away.

Over the past decade, the Hispanics had moved in. Most, were decent hardworking people who took advantage of the borders opening up when the ConFed was formed. Unfortunately, they weren't the only ones who moved into the neighborhood.

They called themselves Jaguars. It was some kind of reference to Aztec warrior culture. Once the borders opened up, the Hispanics came, and these guys came with them. Just like the Italians brought the mob a hundred years before. Odd to say, but the Jaguars were less subtle with the blood-black long leather coats and all. If you were a Jag, everybody knew it.

They were running a protection racket in Melrose, just like the mob did elsewhere. Protection. From the mob, the cops, petty criminals. Protection from the Jags, mostly.

They would be back to see her.

She stopped, about to unlock the door to the shop, as headlights washed over her in the rainy gloom. A black Mercedes-

Benz 220, on her side of the street, was slowing down. Although no longer than the other ponton-style models of the 220 line, a four-door, it was considered a limousine. Recognizing the car, she tuned and waited under the shelter of her umbrella as the Mercedes slid up along the curb and parked.

The engine still running, the driver, a Chinaman wearing a dark raincoat and a derby, got out unfurling his own umbrella.

"Good evening, madam," he said, stepping up on to the curb. His English was near perfect, unaccented.

"Mr. Cheng, I'm surprised to see you," she said. "You usually call first."

"You did not answer, madam," the Chinaman said by way of apology. "The matter is urgent."

"Please come inside then, Mr. Cheng," the gypsy said, turning to unlock the door.

"No, madam," he said, stopping her. "He wants to see you."

The gypsy hesitated and then turned slowly back around. This was very usual. Cheng always came to her to conduct business. She had never met his boss. "Very well, Mr. Cheng. Do I have time to change into something, well, more appropriate?"

"No, madam," he said, his tone never changing.