



## LIGHTHOUSE SUNSET

Jason Miles, Class of 2016

# NIGHT OF THE LECHUZA

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**O**n a moonless night nearing the cockcrow, a drunken Güicho Gudiel stumbled home on a lonely roughhewn pathway. Three men waited for him, each for his reasons, but all savoring vengeance; Gudiel's death would restore their honor. They pressed their hats firmly on their heads, unsheathed their machetes, clutching handles tightly in clammy hands, cold sweat beading on their temples; no man alive could match Gudiel's machete skills, the 45 notches on his blade's sheath silently attested to his prowess. Whispered rumors claimed sorcery, devilry, loathsome demonic things were credited to Gudiel surviving countless altercations

without a single opponent ever landing a cut or even a nick on his allegedly impious flesh. Determined, the hunters braced their bodies and souls to battle the unknown.

The first assailant fell on Gudiel, but before he could even raise his machete, in a blinding blur of movement, the quarry unsheathed his own blade and landed a deadly blow on the tender flesh of the man's nape, cutting so deep that the jugular immediately spurting blood. With each heartbeat the attacker's life departed from his soon listless body. To the ground he collapsed, limp, his blood mixing with earth. Gudiel's inebriation had fiendishly evaporated; alert, weapon in hand,

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he faced the remaining assailants; three against one, now two versus one, so suddenly had their advantage disappeared that the two assaulters stood immobile, but they could not abandon their task. Gudiel had seen their faces, and they could either risk death now or certainly die that day, evening, night, or whenever Gudiel decided on retribution. Thus, the second attacker swung his machete, but hesitation provided Gudiel with an opening, and before he could finish the stroke, Gudiel had sliced the assailant's abdomen with such deftness that the attacker dropped his machete. Mercilessly, Gudiel decapitated him with one powerful blow that severed head from spine with a supernatural ease that no man should possess. The third assailant abandoned concerns of honor and slashed at Gudiel from behind, a cowardly action, but better to live fully and combat traducers than to live as the 48th notch on the enemy's sheath.

Gudiel turned in time to avoid the full power of the attacker's slash, but nonetheless he suffered a cut to his right arm, the first combat wound ever landed on his immaculate flesh. Gudiel stared at his assailant with the glare that few lived to describe and at that precise instance, spoke the encounter's first words, "Kill me, if you dare." As the attacker lifted his machete to strike the deathblow, exultant in victory, already thinking of the stories he would tell and the fame he would accrue for smiting Gudiel, from the deep inky blackness of the night came the screech of a *lechuza*. Long rumored to be the son of a powerful sorceress who could metamorphose at will into a lechuza, a creature feared for its connections to the underworld, night spirits, and other loathsome things, Gudiel smirked at the attacker, repeating his chilling words, "Kill me, if you dare."

The attacker looked to the starless black sky, the moon hiding from fright; he saw the lechuza fly towards him, and he would later swear that the raptor spoke to him in a mocking feminine voice, "Kill him, if you dare." The lechuza glided towards the attacker and seized his hat in its gnarled claws, flying back to the maw of the sky from whence it had emerged. The would-be murderer dropped his machete and ran, ran faster than he

ever had, ran towards the fields, towards the town, towards the river, anywhere that would distance him from Gudiel and his demonic protector.

Six days later Gudiel stood in a saloon's doorway, three additional notches on his machete's sheath, the wound on his arm completely healed without so much as a light scar where metal had cut flesh. A funeral procession quickly passed in front of him, the dead's family not daring to look at Gudiel for fear they might suffer the same fate as their beloved.

What killed the third attacker remains debated; some claim Gudiel's blade cut so deep and fast that the deceased didn't notice the wound until he arrived home where he died of exsanguination. In frightened tones others describe what truly happened, the man had died of fear. Gudiel's assailant became gruesomely ill immediately after reaching his house; he refused to eat or drink, he resisted medical help. His family sought the assistance of a healer who dabbled in the magical, but the curer abjured when she heard Gudiel's name. As the days went, the assailant's body thinned at a macabre pace, eyes sank into sockets, muscle turned to sinew, and skin tightened on bone. All the while the sickly man murmured indecipherable words, and repeatedly yelled the same curdling phrase, "Give me back my hat! Give me back my hat!" The lechuza had done her work.

The town's educated folks mocked the story as superstitious peasant nonsense, but they surreptitiously prayed never to raise Gudiel's ire. Science and reason rule in the light of day, but at night old beliefs reign.

As the burial procession passed Gudiel, the cadaver's brother, in a nearly inaudible voice, asked the widow, "Why is Güicho Gudiel wearing my brother's hat?"

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