



LEGENDS UNIVERSE™ Presents:

THE SLUG

THE MYSTERIOUS LUCHADOR OF FINNSKA NATION

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There is an old saying among professional Mexican wrestlers:
Un luchador no se hace, se nace. (A fighter is not made, he is born.)

PROLOGUE

Arena México in México City

THE DULL ROAR of the Friday night crowd in a sold-out arena vibrated into the back corner of La Babosa's locker room. He had one foot up on the wooden bench as he tied the laces on his boots extra tight. His mouth was dry, and the smell of sweat lingered as if it was held captive inside his mask. He sprang up and almost fell over. He quickly reached out and grabbed the open door on the locker to stabilize himself.

The only time he'd ever felt this way before a match was his first triple-A fight at this very stadium: Arena México. He had been one of the youngest to ever step foot in the sacred ring of the cathedral of Lucha Libre. Five years later, and once again, he felt light-headed, nauseous. He had eaten nothing all day, not a single calorie consumed. When he passed street food vendors on his way to the arena, he felt like he was going to throw up, but he had nothing in his stomach to satisfy the urge.

The locker room door burst open behind him and slammed against the wall. The loud howl from screaming fans flooded the small room. "You're up next, champ." It was his coach, Onix Ramirez. He'd been with him all the way. Spotted him wrestling friends as a kid on a dirt field in the slums of Ciudad Neza. Brought him up through the amateur ranks while crafting his wrestling identity. Ultimately paved the way for him to enter triple-A, the professional world of Lucha Libre. He wouldn't be where he was today without Onix.

“Give me a minute.” La Babosa took a deep breath as he straightened his back. He reached into his locker and grabbed his purple cape. He opened the cape and stared at the slug emblem embroidered at the center.

“I remember when we came up with that symbol.” Onix closed the locker room door. “La Babosa: so slippery he’s impossible to pin down.”

But what about tonight, luchador? La Babosa thought.

Onix moved over so he was standing behind him. “Please, let me do the honors.”

“Of course.”

La Babosa handed him the cape and positioned himself in front of the locker room mirror. His lucky golden cross hung from the chain resting on his barreled chest. The cross sparkled as the florescent lights overhead shone down on it.

“It’s going to be okay.” Onix was much taller than him. With little effort, he draped the cape over La Babosa’s head and carefully positioned it around his neck and shoulders. “Just play the part of the Rudo, the villain that lives inside us all. At the end of the match, take the fall and let him de-mask you.”

La Babosa started to grind his teeth. The cape’s fabric was smooth, like satin, and felt like a second skin. It matched his mask, arm cuffs, pants, and boots. Purple was his primary color, with bright shades of green and orange for accents. The clothes melted across his body and clung to him. His mask had green accents that circled his mouth, nose, and eyes. The green accents flared up at the eyes, as if he held an eternal smile behind the mask. *As it should be*, he thought. *Because it represents who I am. I’m the Técnico, the hero. I fight for the underserved, for the common people.*

“All your money problems and outstanding debts will be paid,” Onix continued. “Then you can get back to focusing on wrestling. No more gambling, being in anyone’s pocket, just wrestling.”

Wrestling without my true identity would be like death to me. He couldn’t say his feelings out loud because he knew Onix was in their pocket as well. La Babosa locked eyes with Onix. “You’re sure both organizations will be satisfied if I throw this match and let him remove my mask?”

Onix nodded his head confidently. “It’s all been arranged. Let El Lobo win the match, de-mask you, and all your debts will be paid to both groups. No need to look over your shoulder ever again.”

La Babosa reached down and brought his necklace to his mouth. He whispered a quick prayer to his late abuela as he kissed the cross. “All right, let’s go.”

“Vaya con Dias.”

“Same to you, coach.”

“What?”

“Never mind.” La Babosa ripped the locker room door open and marched down the hallway. With each step, the crowd’s noise intensified. He felt his breathing increase as he continued down the hallway. The smell of beer suds and popcorn lingered in the air.

“I’ll be in the front row, right next to the men who will clear all your debts,” Onix called out behind him. “Make it a good show and do as instructed. All will be forgiven!”

La Babosa waved a hand without looking back and continued to march toward the introduction platform. The announcer was introducing his opponent, El Lobo. He saw El Lobo moving into the main part of the arena. El Lobo was much taller and bigger than him. He wore black and silver

attire with a matching silver mohawk that spiked up from the top of his mask. He looked the part of the villain but was introduced to sixteen thousand screaming fans as the hero. He was the latest shiny toy belonging to the people to whom La Babosa owed money. Those same people wanted El Lobo to raise his status at the detriment of La Babosa's career.

Will I be able to live with myself after this? La Babosa reached up and ran his hand across his mask. He glanced at the wall and saw a painting of El Santo, the legendary luchador he idolized more than any other. *El Santo kept his identity hidden for over five decades of fighting. And I could only make it five years?*

"Next up!" The announcer's voice bellowed over the speakers. "For the first time in his fighting career, you've only known him as Técnico, but tonight he is the Rudo in our main event! Let's hear it for México's newest villain, La Babosa!"

As La Babosa came around the wall to the platform there was a loud collective gasp from the crowd. He stood and flexed his muscles under the spotlights and was met with a mixture of cheers and boos from the crowd. As he descended the stairs toward the arena floor, fireworks erupted overhead.

At the bottom of the stairs, he jogged down the final ramp toward the ring. That's when he heard someone call out: "How could you?!" Followed by another person who screamed out: "Traitor!"

He tried to filter out the crowd by shifting his focus to El Lobo. His opponent was waving him down with his extended middle fingers from the center of the ring. *Just focus on your moves and nothing else.* He sprinted ahead and dove between the ropes, executing a front flip into the ring. He

ran past El Lobo and jumped up on the corner ropes to look out at the crowd. The boos intensified. He scanned the front row and saw Onix. He was sitting right between the leaders of the two groups La Babosa was indebted to. The leaders had their henchmen all around them. Some guards hid their hands inside their jacket flaps, like elite security guards might do while protecting the president.

Onix gave him a thumbs-up but then his eyes flickered down. La Babosa heard loud footsteps approaching behind him but couldn't turn around in time. He felt El Lobo's body slam into his back, throwing him up and over the ring. He landed awkwardly on the side of his head on the ground directly in front of Onix.

"Get back up there, Babosa!" Onix called out.

La Babosa propped himself up on one knee, trying to shake the kaleidoscope of stars that swirled around his head.

"Is that all you got, you little poser?" El Lobo wagged his finger at him, the upper part of his body stretched over the ropes.

La Babosa shot up and flew into the ring. His shoulder hit El Lobo's shins and forced him to stagger backward. Before he could capitalize on this move, a referee swooped in and pulled La Babosa away from El Lobo.

"The match hasn't officially begun." The referee pushed him toward his corner. "Back to your corners!"

They locked hands around each other's heads. El Lobo snuck in a quick elbow to La Babosa's face and then pulled him to the ropes. La Babosa sprang off the ropes and, as he turned, El Lobo clotheslines him with an extended forearm. He hit the mat with a loud *whack*.

The crowd cheered as El Lobo slammed La Babosa's body to the floor again and again. The crowd screamed: "Uno! Dos! Tre—" El Lobo

tried to pin him, but La Babosa broke free before the referee could pound the mat a third time. He was The Slug, after all: slippery and impossible to pin down.

Lack of food was making La Babosa feel fatigued. As the match raged on, he felt his technique slipping. At one point, he missed an open opportunity to reverse one of El Lobo's moves and was slammed face first into the corner of the ring. The crowd was going crazy; they could feel the climax of the fight approaching. El Lobo crowded up against his body in the ring's corner and slid him up on the top of the ropes.

Is he going to try my signature move? La Babosa tried to break free, but his head felt heavy. His muscles burned and his energy was completely depleted. El Lobo raised himself up so the two wrestlers stood face to face at the top corner of the ring.

El Lobo leaned down and spoke directly in his ear. "This is where the career of La Babosa comes to a crashing end." He wrapped his arms around La Babosa, one under his crotch and the other over his shoulder. "With your very own Fallaway Moonsault Slam!"

"No!" La Babosa called out. He felt his body fly upward, over El Lobo's body. His face hit the mat, then the entire weight of El Lobo came crashing down on him from above. All he could see was darkness. When he opened his eyes, the arena was spinning.

El Lobo was right behind him now. He wrapped a flexed bicep around La Babosa's neck, securing a headlock. The crowd's cheers soon turned to silence. La Babosa looked out at their faces. He knew they were silent with fear, knowing this was the last moments of their hero's career.

La Babosa tried to pull El Lobo's arm away, but he didn't have the energy. He felt El Lobo reach around with his other hand and grip the

bottom of La Babosa's mask. Photographers appeared outside the ring. A dazzling flash of lights blinded La Babosa as El Lobo pulled up on his mask. His heart was beating like a snare drum. *Is this the end? Everything I worked for, is this it? From the slums to the stadium, and now it's over?*

"Get ready!" El Lobo screamed to the crowd.

La Babosa looked down and saw Onix on his feet, leaning over the railing. The two leaders next to him were doing the same. They had sinister grins spread across their faces.

El Lobo gripped tighter on La Babosa's mask and called out. "Uno! Dos! Tre—"

Suddenly, La Babosa mustered every ounce of energy in his body and whipped his head backward. The top part of his mask connected with the bridge of El Lobo's nose. He felt something give in El Lobo's nose. El Lobo released his grip. La Babosa spun and delivered a flying-elbow drop on El Lobo's throat screaming, "Nacho Mama!" He heard a loud snap and knew he'd crushed the fighter's windpipe.

"What are you doing?!" The referee charged at him and La Babosa kicked the referee in the solar plexus. He dropped to the mat.

La Babosa sprinted out of the ring but reversed course when he realized he was heading toward Onix. His old coach was wide-eyed, his hand covering his mouth. Some henchmen were coming over the railing with their handguns out. La Babosa spun and raced out of the ring in the opposite direction.

He ran up the ramp toward the stairs. The crowd was stunned; people held their hands up in disbelief. The sound of a gunshot broke the silence and everyone screamed, turning the crowd into a frenzy. A bullet hit the railing on the stairs next to him. He made his way around the platform

and down the hallway past the locker rooms toward the players' door. Another shot was fired behind him; it ricocheted off the walls and brushed past his cape.

He slammed both forearms into the exit-door bar and sprinted out into the hustle and bustle of the México City night. He looked back over his shoulder at the arena he had worked his whole life to get to. It would be the last time he would ever see the cathedral of Lucha Libre.

CHAPTER 1

Quadrant 3 in Finnska

A MAKESHIFT PLATFORM was assembled and placed in front of the broken water fountain at the center of the public square. The platform was elevated with a podium in the middle and chairs stretched out on all sides. Large speakers were propped up on the front corners of the platform. All able-bodied men and women of Finnska's Quadrant 3 between the age of eighteen and thirty-six were lined up in perfect rows that extended straight out from the platform. Pedro was standing in the middle of one of the back rows. He had a hard time seeing over the giants in front of him.

Pedro. He shook his head as he pulled his baseball cap down lower on his forehead. That's what his construction manager had called him on his first day on the job so he had gone with it. If he was asked who he was by someone in Finnska, he would say he was Pedro, a construction worker from Panama City. They hardly ever asked though. *It's like I'm invisible here, like one of the broken flower pots.*

He looked around the square and noticed trees of different heights and varieties, many of them cracked in half or missing branches. Ducks splashed in ponds that had formed in the middle of the adjacent fields. At the edge of the square was a bare flagpole, bent and barely upright. He heard kids laughing and yelling in the distance on a decrepit playground structure that looked even worse than the one he had played on as a child.

There were people scattered about the square, fanning out in all directions. People were gazing toward the platform, waiting in anticipation.

The sky was overcast and the air felt humid. His clothes were sticking to his body. He wore oversized sunglasses under his cap; the limited outdoor light made it difficult to see. There were a few older gentlemen sitting on chairs on the side of the platform, but Pedro had no clue who they were. He noticed one person on the stage, a man named Ruxton who was Quadrant 3's acting mayor. He was tall like everyone else but built like a tank. Young and good-looking, he had a commanding presence. Pedro remembered him from a visit he had paid to the construction site in lower Quadrant 3 where Pedro had worked when he first arrived in the country. Ruxton had come by, given a quick speech, then took some pictures and was gone.

The crowd suddenly cheered for someone who made their way up the platform steps. Pedro got up on his tiptoes to see over the shoulder of the person in front of him. All he could see was that the person on the platform had shaggy blonde hair like a rockstar. He was certainly receiving a rockstar's welcome. The rockstar was carrying something that looked like a large golden belt. Security guards gathered in front of the platform and around the assembled rows.

When the crowd finally settled down, the man spoke into the microphone on the podium. "Hello, men and women of Quadrant 3. Thank you for that great welcome. For those of you who might not know me, my name is Mack Sawyer and I'm The Lute of Arrowhead nation."

The Lute? Pedro ran his fingers through the mustache he had grown when he arrived in Finnska nine months earlier. He was still getting used to it.

“And you may also know me as the captain of our National Scooterball League championship team, the Hawks!” Mack pumped his fist in the air and the crowd let out an enormous cheer.

Pedro knew what scooterball was but had never watched a game. He knew it was a big deal in this part of the world, though, as people around the construction site would talk about it frequently. He was still getting used to living on the small, isolated city/state nation known as Finnska. About the same size as Singapore, Pedro learned Finnska counted for one of only three islands in the remote Hackensack Sea. Finnska was split up into four roughly equal quadrants that surrounded City Center where the central government resided and ruled. Mack’s Arrowhead nation was the much larger and more established island nation to the west of Finnska.

“Thank you, you’re too kind.” Mack put his hands up to quiet the crowd. “Now, I know our two countries have had some differences in the past. Like the war Shawkon started last year. But I’m here on behalf of Gabby Oaks, the twenty-first Supreme Leader of Arrowhead, to tell you that is all behind us now. Our capital, Zenith City, was hit hard by the earthquake and tsunami, and we’ve spent the last year re-building it. I’m happy to report it’s better than ever. I know you were hit even harder by those natural disasters, and it pains me to see what has happened to your country.”

Pedro looked out at the buildings surrounding the square; many were still in shambles. Some had been abandoned, or taken over by squatters who used them as their personal canvases to cover with graffiti.

“For those of you who don’t know, I used to live right here in Quadrant 3,” Mack continued. “I was here for an exchange program back in high school. On the way to school, I used to walk through this very square.

The square used to be the pride of the community. A cherished public space to relax with loved ones and friends after a long day. I want to help you restore this whole quadrant, and the nation of Finnska, to its former glory. Not like the military-focused build-up of Finnska Fighters under Shawkon's reign, but the one I experienced as a young adult."

"Sounds pretty weak, Mack Attack!" someone called out from the audience.

Mack raised his arms in mock defense. "I'm not telling you to lose your identity as a nation of fighters, but I want to help you channel that energy for good. Shawkon envisioned using you for his own personal gains. I want you to use your fighting spirit to make Finnska a great nation that contributes positively to our world."

People didn't really talk to Pedro around the construction site. They assumed he only spoke basic English, even though he was nearly fluent. He let them think that in order to stay in the background, and to listen in on their conversations. He'd overheard some of them talking about Shawkon and the battle with Arrowhead. Shawkon sounded like a dictator who ruled Finnska with an iron fist. He had been defeated in battle and lost all of his fighters in some vast pit in Arrowhead. It had left a gap in leadership that hadn't been filled, even one year later. The battle had come right on the heels of the natural disasters Mack spoke of. These two events had left Finnska in a state of ruin. There was a notice sent out worldwide for anyone with carpentry and construction skills to come help repair Finnska. Workers were promised a small dorm and steady work for as long as they would stay. Pedro had jumped at the chance.

"I know you've all experienced a lot of pain this last year." Mack lowered his voice. "Loss of loved ones, decimated homes, a nation in

shambles, constant fights with neighboring quadrants. A continual stress, worrying about what will happen next. I'm here to share some good news with you. I recently met with the acting mayors of all four quadrants in Center City, including your very own, Ruxton."

Pedro checked his watch while the crowd cheered for Ruxton. *How much longer will this go on? I'm losing valuable work time here ...*

"All four acting mayors have agreed to stop the violence and fighting between the quadrants, and proclaim a new governor as only Finnska knows how." Mack held up the belt over his head.

Pedro's eyes grew wide. The belt was made of gold and had bright sequins on it. It looked like a championship wrestling belt.

"There will be a tournament held in Center City starting in two days. It will be a three-day tournament featuring two fighters from each of the four quadrants." Mack continued to hold the belt high so everyone could see it. "The eight fighters will be placed in a single elimination round-robin. I proposed the matches resemble the brawler platform fights of Arrowhead, but the mayors have agreed on the classic Finnska Fight rules instead. The winner of the tournament will serve as governor of Finnska nation, and his or her quadrant will be in charge of running Finnska's central government from Center City for the next year."

Finnska Fight rules to become the next governor? Pedro chuckled to himself. *This is getting interesting.*

"Are you serious?!" someone from the crowd yelled out.

"Absolutely. Ruxton has already volunteered as one of your fighters." Mack turned and saluted Ruxton, and Ruxton waved to the crowd. Mack continued, "It won't be easy. Sledge from Quadrant 1 will be one of the fighters. As the current self-proclaimed governor and acting mayor of

Quadrant 1, Sledge has assured me he will honor the rules of the tournament and the ultimate winner.”

Someone made a huffing sound behind Pedro. He looked over his shoulder and saw someone roll their eyes and whisper to the person standing next to them, “Yeah, right. Screw this.”

“Sledge is going to destroy everyone, including Ruxton.” The person behind Pedro whispered in response. “Ruxton is so blinded by ambition, he doesn’t care if his head gets ripped off.”

“Whoever wins the tournament gets the official belt of Finnska nation.” Mack draped the belt over his shoulder. “Think of it as the country’s championship belt. Everyone will know that whoever wears this belt is Finnska’s new governor, and they will have the full political and military backing of the nation of Arrowhead. They will be in charge of keeping the peace with the other quadrants, and overseeing an accelerated effort to restore Finnska’s infrastructure and communities. Now, we need one more volunteer from your quadrant to join Ruxton. And we have little time to decide. Who’s it going to be?”

Pedro watched Mack leap off the platform and land in front of the first row. Everyone straightened their backs and looked dead ahead like it was military inspection and Mack was the general. *This may be a fighting nation, but it seems like no one wants to fight against this Sledge guy.* The crowd around Pedro had fallen silent. Birds chirped as they flew overhead toward the water fountain.

Pedro looked up at the darkening clouds and felt the first droplets of rain kiss his cheeks. He could hear Mack talking to prospective fighters as he walked up and down the assembled rows. Mack’s voice grew louder as

he came closer. He stopped at the person in front of Pedro and patted him on his wide shoulders.

“You’re built like an ox,” Mack said. “What’s your name?”

“Big D,” the man replied in a deep voice.

“Big D, a fitting name. Will you be the second volunteer?”

“Ahh, maybe ...”

Mack shook his head and started walking past Big D—then halted. He cocked his head at Pedro. He moved right in front of him. Mack was staring at Pedro as though he recognized him from somewhere. He was so close Pedro could smell his cologne. Mack had an athletic build, and was taller than him, although not nearly as tall as the citizens of Finnska.

Mack leaned in closer. “What’s your name?”

Pedro cleared his throat. “Pedro, sir.”

“Pedro from where? What are you doing in Finnska?”

Pedro took a slight step back and realized Mack was trying to listen to his voice. He distorted his voice by making it sound deeper before replying. “I’m a construction worker from Panama City.”

“Take off those glasses, so I can get a good look at you.”

Pedro held up a hand. “I can’t, sir,” he said, reverting to his normal voice. “I have an eye condition.”

Mack leaned in even further so his face was right next to Pedro’s ear. “Okay, Pedro from Panama.” He whispered, “After this lineup is over, I want you to meet me at the far side of the square behind the playground. There’s a rundown dog park there, do you know it?”

What the hell? Pedro’s heart raced. “Yes, but why—”

“Hablar pronto,” Mack whispered and then stood up and continued down the line.

Talk soon? Pedro eyed Mack as he continued down the line. *Does he think he knows who I am? There's no way ... Should I go?* The rain was intensifying and he realized any hope of work was doomed for the day. *I bet I could still sneak out with the crowd.*

Mack finished walking down the last line and let out a loud whistle. "All right, everyone. That's it. Get home before you get soaked, and make sure we have a second name on the board before the start of the tournament."

The crowd dispersed quickly. Pedro moved out with the crowd but paused. He saw Mack talking to one of the security guards. Mack pointed over his shoulder at Pedro. The guard touched his ear and spoke something into a radio. Pedro locked eyes with Mack as he headed toward the direction of the playground. Mack gave him an ever-so-subtle head nod. Pedro didn't know what to do other than to nod his head back. The security guards spread out so they formed a bubble around Pedro. Just close enough for their presence to be felt.

I guess there's no chance of sneaking away now. Pedro used his shirt collar to wipe away the condensation forming on his glasses. He found the direction of the playground and put his head down as he marched over. *This can't be good ...*

CHAPTER 2

Quadrant 3 in Finnska

THE RAIN HAD now increased to a steady flow, not quite a downpour, but enough to feel like there was a shower head streaming directly over his head. Pedro's clothes were soaked through. His glasses were fogged up, but he knew he couldn't take them off. Not now, never. Mack was standing ten feet in front of him in the middle of the dog park. Large puddles of water were forming around them. Pedro saw the remnants of a chewed up tennis ball.

Mack unzipped the leather jacket he was wearing. "What part of Panama City are you from?"

Oh, great. The interrogation has begun. "Are you very familiar with the area?" Pedro finally asked.

"Yes, I've traveled there before." Mack threw his jacket to the side and it landed on a broken bench.

Pedro cleared his throat, trying to think of an area. "I'm from Old Town, right next to the water. Say, do you want to take this conversation indoors so we don't get completely soaked through to our boxers?" He looked around the dog park and saw Mack's security guards stationed around the perimeter. "I'm sure your men would like to get out of the rain, too."

Mack eyed his men and made a swirling motion with an extended index finger high above his head. They dispersed. Pedro turned to walk

away. “No, not you. We can stay and talk. My grandpa Joe used to tell me I was a sweet kid, but not so sweet a fit of rain could melt me away. And he owned a candy shop, so that’s saying something. You can take off those glasses of yours if that’s more comfortable for you.”

“I’m not really sure why you want to talk to me.” Pedro tried to wipe his glasses clean, but fog came back as soon as it was cleared.

“I asked you to stay behind because I want to tell you a story.” Mack started rolling up one of his sleeves. “I have a knockout phrase I use when playing scooterball and ...” Mack paused. “For other things. Do you know what it is?”

Pedro shook his head. “No clue. I don’t really follow scooterball.”

“It’s Loo-cha Slam.” Mack shot his eyes up at Pedro’s face. “It comes from my love for Lucha Libre wrestling down in México.”

Mierra ...

“You want to know who my favorite wrestler of all time is?”

Pedro shrugged his shoulders. “Sure. I mean, I guess I don’t really follow that sport—”

“La Babosa.” Mack let the name hang in the air.

Pedro’s heart beat faster when he heard the name. “Never heard of him.”

Mack grinned. “You haven’t heard of La Babosa, The Slug? That’s strange. I thought he was popular down in Latin America, as well. You know, La Babosa hasn’t been seen in over nine months. He was about to get de-masked at Arena México by a wrestler called El Lobo, but right before his mask could get pulled, he beat everyone up and high-tailed it out of there. Then he vanished, out of México and out of sight.” Mack finished rolling up his other sleeve and cracked his knuckles.

“Bad luck for him, but hopefully he’s in a better place now.” Pedro inched backward but stepped in a puddle, soaking his shoe.

“I don’t think he is.” Mack sprinted right at Pedro and launched his body through the air. He led with his shoulder, aiming to spear Pedro in the chest.

Without thinking, Pedro ducked and hooked his arm behind Mack, driving him into the puddle. “What are you doing?!”

Mack was back on his feet in a flash. He went low and scooped the back of Pedro’s ankle. He swung Pedro’s ankle up, smashing Pedro down onto his back. Mack jumped on top of him and wrapped an arm tightly around Pedro’s leg, pinning him to the ground. “Uno. Dos. Tre—”

Pedro whipped his body out to the side, escaping the pin, then launched forward and met Mack in a crouched position. They locked hands around each other’s heads.

“I knew it!” Mack had a huge smile on his face as he let go.

Pedro realized what was happening and let go, too.

“You’re La Babosa! This is where you’ve been hiding.” Mack smacked his forehead with his hand. “I should’ve known! I’m your biggest fan, I think I’ve read everything about you. I remember reading that story about your volunteer work building homes in the slums of México City. You came here to hide out and help re-build Finnska. Smart play.”

Pedro couldn’t respond. How could he find this out? Where will I run to next? He looked up and saw the joy spread across Mack’s face. It reminded him of how he used to feel when he met rabid fans before a match back in México. He stretched out his hand. “You’re right. I’m La Babosa, and it’s a pleasure to meet you Mack Sawyer. How did you know it was me?”

Mack shook his hand hard. “I recognized your voice. I’ve listened to all your interviews and watched all your matches, even the ones before you made it to triple-A. That, plus the hat, glasses, and mustache to hide your appearance. You know, I’ve sort of thought about creating a team of investigators to go out in the world to search for you. No need for that now. I can’t believe you were right in our own backyard this whole time!”

“I don’t know what to say.” La Babosa’s mind raced. Where can I go to next? I could try to hide out in the wild west city of Chokecherry, North Dakota, back in the States, or head down to some remote part of South America. Where does it end, though? He looked back at Mack. “You’re really that big of a fan?”

“Yes, of course. And, you know what? This tournament could give you a chance to fight again.”

La Babosa held his hands up. “My fighting days are over.”

“What?” Mack exclaimed. “Clearly something happened down in México at that match, but you can’t be serious. You’re going to give up fighting? Are you going to just hide in the shadows the rest of your life? Float into obscurity?”

La Babosa sighed as he reached inside his shirt and grabbed the golden cross around his neck. What should I do my dear abuela? Can you ask Jesus up there beyond the clouds what he thinks I should do? He looked back at Mack. “It’s just too dangerous. There are men back in México that want me dead. It’s safer if I keep my head down and continue working on construction projects.”

“Nonsense.” Mack placed a hand on his shoulder. “You’re La Babosa. One of the greatest luchadors of all time. You need to continue to fight, and I need your help here in Finnska. That Sledge guy in Quadrant 1 is bad

news. I don't know if you know anything about Shawkon, but Sledge could essentially become the next Shawkon if left unchecked. He would turn Finnska into a wasteland of tyranny and war."

"I've heard about Shawkon around the construction site, but I just don't know. I think it'll be too dangerous. Both to fight Sledge and for those groups back in México to discover where I am."

"What are we talking—the cartel? The government? What?" Mack crossed his arms.

The rain subsided and La Babosa could see a rainbow forming in the distance. "Let's just say if certain people found out my location, they would send killers after me. I can never go back to México because of it."

"So, fight under a different name and outfit." Mack stopped himself and shook his head. "I shouldn't have said that ..."

"You're right, I can't. Given you know a bit about Lucha Libre, you know if I ever fight again, it'll only be as La Babosa. That's my identity, even this far from home."

"I understand." Mack rubbed his chin and paced. "I can promise you protection, as good as I receive. Besides my security guards, we have some tough guys back in Arrowhead that could protect you. But the chances of someone in México finding out about you during the tournament this weekend are slim to none." Mack paused and then slapped his hands together. "I have an idea. Just use the English version of your name."

La Babosa raised an eyebrow. "You mean, like, The Slug?"

"Exactly. None of the fights will be televised, and the chances of The Slug being discovered outside of Finnska is very unlikely." Mack tried to hide a grin. "I can't believe I'm talking to you right now. It's been a dream of

mine to meet you. Will you lace up your boots again and help us restore Finnska?”

It felt good to hear from a fan, especially someone in an important political position like Mack. It made La Babosa think of his time in the ring and all of the fans that had supported him during his run as a Técnico, a hero. Do I really want to work in construction for the rest of my days? I have limited money, I can't go back to México, and wrestling is the only other skill I have. He looked back at Mack who was awaiting his response. Is the risk worth the reward? Could he really keep me safe? “Give me a day to think about it.”

“Deal. Just write your name down on the list in Center City if you're up for it.”

“I had a question, though. You mentioned Finnska Fight rules. What does that mean?”

Mack nodded. “That's right. So, it's a standard wrestling ring with the ropes and everything you're used to with Lucha Libre. You can win by knockout, pin, or surrender. The kicker is, there are no rounds. Once the match starts it goes until it finishes. The other big element is that fighters may keep one blunt-instrument weapon in a bin in their corner of the ring.”

“What do you mean, blunt instrument?”

“Anything that doesn't shoot projectiles or have sharp edges. So, no guns or knives. Think weapons like baseball bats, clubs, and ... Wait a minute.” Mack's eyes lit up. “I'm going to bring you something to use.”

“I haven't agreed to fight yet,” La Babosa protested.

“Either way, I'll still bring it for you.” Mack winked at him. “Anyway, there is a buzzer that sounds during the match. It could be five seconds in

or five minutes. It's all random. Once that buzzer sounds, fighters may use their weapons against each other."

La Babosa rubbed his hands together. "I've never heard of such rules, but it's an intriguing element. Like I said, give me a day to think on it."

"Of course, but just remember: the tournament starts in two days. If you're in, sign up and I will ensure your safety throughout the tournament." He looked over and saw his security guards returning. "I better run, but it was a pleasure to meet you, La Babosa."

"You mean, The Slug." He permitted himself a smile and realized it was the first time he had smiled in months.

"Yes, The Slug." Mack flashed him the shaka sign, his thumb and little finger extended with his middle fingers down. He wiggled his hand back and forth. "¡Hasta luego!" He grabbed his jacket from the bench and headed out.

"¡Hasta luego!" Pedro watched Mack walk away and looked up at the dazzling array of colors in the sky. The storm clouds had completely passed and a rainbow was now stretched over the entire horizon. He grabbed his cross again. Abuela, is that supposed to be your way of telling me to bring The Slug back?

CHAPTER 3

Quadrant 3 in Finnska

THE SLUG LOCKED the door on his dorm room and pulled the handle to make sure it was secure. His room was just one of many in an old university. Most of the campus had been destroyed by the tsunami, so the building was now used for migrant construction workers. The room had stained walls, a narrow bed, and a small desk. Standing in the middle of the room, he could reach out and touch both walls. *This must be what a prison cell feels like*, he thought.

There was a small window with empty Coke bottles lining the ledge. He had a half-finished bottle of Coke on the desk. He reached for the bottle and finished it with a single gulp. The constant drone of a fan in the top corner of the room sent a shiver through his body. He peeled off his wet clothes and hung them on hangers beneath the fan.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and felt the springs flex beneath his body. Reaching under the bed, he grabbed a leather duffel bag. It was all he'd had time to grab at his home in México City before he fled the country. There was a combination lock that connected the zippers of the bag. He twisted the dials to the correct code, and the lock popped open. Unzipping the bag, his nose was hit by the familiar smell of sweaty leather and satin.

The long purple cape was on top and he pulled it out first. Right next to the emblem of the slug was a hole. He pushed an index finger through

the hole, and remembered how close the cartel's henchmen came to shooting him at the arena. He took out his arm cuffs, pants, boots, and then his mask. He heard someone walk by in the hallway outside and then, a few seconds later, a door opened and closed. He took off his wet hat and glasses and tossed them aside. He grabbed his mask and pulled it over his head for the first time since leaving México. He felt a jolt of energy fill him, like he was whole again.

Keeping his mask on, The Slug looked into his duffel bag. There were three items left. He gently placed them on his desk and clicked on the desk light. The first item he picked up was his prayer beads. He reflexively started running his fingers over the beads in his right hand. With his other hand, he picked up a picture of his late abuela, Guadalupe. The edges of the picture were worn and the photo itself creme in color. It showed a young and confident Guadalupe posing under an umbrella. *Where is the confidence of your kin now?*

He was very young when his parents had been killed in a car crash. They had come from nothing, and had saved up every penny for years to buy a car. They were excited to take their new vehicle out on a date night, their first in years. The Slug stayed with his abuela in the small cracker-jack box his family and abuela called home. They lived on the edge of México City in the poorest part of Ciudad Neza. It wasn't much, but they made it their home. He remembered Guadalupe crying late into the night when she heard the news of the crash. He was too young to process it but he was scared to see his abuela crying.

After the death of his parents, Guadalupe stepped in and raised him. She leaned on the Catholic Church to fill in where she couldn't. She encouraged The Slug to follow his dreams. Every time he told her he

couldn't do something, she would slap him hard on the wrist. *You have a warrior's spirit within you, mi nieto.* He remembered her telling him that almost every day of his life. Then she would add: *You can do anything you set your mind to.*

He gently set down her photo and picked up the last item. It was a wrinkled poster that Guadalupe had grabbed off a lamppost in the street after his first triple-A match. She had brought it home and hung it prominently on the living room wall. It featured a picture of him in full La Babosa attire, ready to take on his competitors. Ready to take on the world. *Where is that fire now?* He touched his mask. *Are you going to face your fears, or hide forever?*

CHAPTER 4

Quadrant 4 in Finnska

THE CHALKY SCENT of cut drywall and spackle lingered in the air. The drum of a gyrating jackhammer on the pavement outside became the metronome for the bustling construction site in Quadrant 4. The Slug was hanging sheetrock with one of his fellow construction workers on the third story of the building. He was helping build a new residential apartment building in the southwest corner of Finnska. It was the area of the city that had been hit hardest by the earthquake and tsunami.

The Slug used his electric drill to twist a drywall screw through the sheetrock and secure it to the wooden frame. He looked over at the other worker to see if he was ready for the next sheet.

“Hey, I forgot to mention,” the worker said when the jackhammer paused for a moment, “Cutter wants to see you.”

“Why me?” The Slug asked.

“No clue, he just told me to tell you.”

“I better go check in. I’ll be right back.” The Slug re-positioned his hard hat and slid his glasses up the brim of his nose. He put his drill through a loop on his belt and walked over to the service elevator. *What does he want? Did he catch me arriving late again?*

The Slug had walked by the arena in Center City on his way to work, which made him late. He had peeked up at the board at the front gate of the arena when he passed and noticed the empty slot on the board for

Quadrant 3. The rest of the quadrants had their two fighters already. To his chagrin, his construction manager's name was listed on the board for Quadrant 4. It almost made him want to sign up for a chance to fight the man that called him Pedro. Almost.

The Slug shook his head. He remembered when he had become famous as a wrestler, he'd received some real money for the first time in his life. He used most of the money to build homes for poor people around México City. The money he didn't spend on gambling, that is. He didn't want people less fortunate than him to experience what he had experienced growing up. He oversaw many of the projects personally, spending long hours at the construction sites. That's how he'd learned to build, and that's why Finnska became a logical place to flee to. Finnska was a great place to hide with its limited government oversight, plus it allowed him to help others through these construction projects. But, just like in México, he watched Cutter take shortcuts to save on construction costs. Cutter's shortcuts padded his own wallet but would cost the future tenants. This was one of the main reasons La Babosa started showing up on site at his own projects in México. He noticed when he was there people wouldn't cut corners or skim off the top. It irritated him to no end to see Cutter doing the same things in Finnska with no one to hold him in check.

La Babosa made his way down the service elevator to the ground floor. When the doors opened, he saw Cutter standing over the shoulder of one of the younger workers who was operating the jackhammer. Cutter was leaning on the giant sledgehammer he always kept with him. The Slug walked toward them and when Cutter spotted him, he peeled away from the jackhammer and approached him.

“You wanted to see me?” The Slug called out as the jackhammer started up again.

Cutter brought the sledgehammer up and over his shoulder and motioned for The Slug to follow him. He was tall and thick, like a giant vanilla milkshake, without the cherry on top. He stopped on the far side of the construction site and turned toward The Slug. “Look, Pedro, I noticed you were late again this morning.”

“Sorry, I was—”

“I don’t wanna hear it,” Cutter interrupted. “I know you’re from some Latin American shithole country, and your culture loves to be tardy and take siestas all day long.”

The Slug ground his teeth, trying not to engage Cutter in his rhetoric. He fantasized about ripping that sledgehammer away from him and smacking him right between the eyes.

“That’s not all. I noticed you’ve been using way more than your allotted quota for materials. You’re wasting screws and spacing the frames too close together,” Cutter continued. “I’m gonna dock your pay today, and any time in the future you don’t arrive on time or use too many materials, you work for free those days.” Cutter leaned forward. “That means no *dinero*.” He spoke in a deliberately slow pace, like how parents speak to their babies. “Do you understand-o?”

“No seas gilipollas,” The Slug muttered under his breath.

“What’d you say?” Cutter towered over him. “I don’t speak Spic, but I know a slander when I hear one.”

Since his meeting with Mack, The Slug had been imagining he was holding his finger on a light switch, and had the switch flipped halfway up. Not enough to turn the light on, but with just a little more pressure, it would

turn on. Cutter gave him the last bit of pressure he needed. The light was on now. The Slug unclipped his construction belt and turned it upside down. Tools and screws fell on the ground in front of Cutter's boots. "Here, you can have the rest of my materials. I quit."

Cutter snarled and his face burned red. He looked like he was about to take a swing at him. Instead, he pointed his finger. "Fine, get the hell out of here and go back to whatever backwater cesspool you crawled out of."

The Slug ignored Cutter as he walked off the construction site. He marched straight to Center City without slowing. A group of people were standing around the tournament board as he approached the front gate of the arena. He heard them discussing fighters by name. One person mentioned Cutter's name; another raved about Sledge. The Slug marched right through them and grabbed the marker that hung below the board. He found the remaining empty slot for Quadrant 3 and wrote in all caps: *THE SLUG*.

CHAPTER 5

Center City in Finnska

THE SLUG STOOD across the street from the arena in a dark alley. He watched the citizens of Finnska pour through the arena gates from every quadrant. There was a sense of excitement in the air, and it reminded him of when he used to watch fans fill the arenas for his triple-A matches back home. Tickets out, metal turnstiles twisting, the first round of cervezas ordered.

Finnska's arena in Center City reminded La Babosa of pictures he had seen of ancient Roman gladiator stadiums. It was shaped in a perfect circle and built with concrete. The arena wasn't long or wide, but it was tall. It reminded him of the five-gallon buckets he used at construction sites. There were some cracks in the exterior walls, but the structure looked like it had held up pretty well against the natural disasters.

After he'd signed his name on the board the day before, he had gone to his dorm room and hung up his wrestling outfit. He was tempted to stitch the hole in his cape but left it. He'd had a restless night of sleep thinking about his first fight back from living in the shadows for nine months. He laid in his bed trying to visualize what the ring and crowd would be like. He knew the fighters he would face would be huge, as everyone in Finnska was oversized. He thought about the special fight rules and wondered what sort of weapons people would bring. *What weapon will I bring?* He kept asking himself that question late into the night.

As the sun came up, he had fallen asleep. The sound of citizens chanting on their way to the arena woke him up late in the afternoon. He had carefully put on his wrestling outfit, piece by piece, leaving the cape for last. Placing the cape over his head, he thought of his old coach, Onix. He wondered what had happened to Onix after the match with El Lobo. *Maybe he's El Lobo's coach now.*

The Slug looked at himself in the tiny oval mirror that hung over his desk in his dorm room. He peered at the curled green edges rising up the side of the mask's purple face. The eternal smile made him feel good, like he was whole again. He kissed the picture of his abuela and left.

On his way to the arena, he grabbed a piece of 2x4 stud lumber at one of the vacant construction sites. He stopped in an alley across from the arena and leaned on the stud like it was a walking stick. His foot tapped in time with the music blaring from the arena. He watched a group of men zip by on electric scooters. The group seemed out of place given he had seen no scooters around Finnska until now. He looked closer and saw the person leading the scooter gang had shaggy blonde hair flapping in the wind.

Mack? The Slug laughed. *I guess he takes that scooter everywhere he goes.* He realized Mack's security guards were on scooters right behind him. Mack had some sort of large silver object attached to the front of his scooter, but La Babosa couldn't tell what it was.

The Slug headed across the street toward Mack to see if he could catch him before he went inside the arena. Mack stopped his scooter at a side entrance to the arena. A tall, thin man wearing a cowboy hat opened the side entrance. The man's face beamed when he saw Mack and they shook each other's hands with the enthusiasm of old friends. As The Slug

approached them, he met eyes with one of Mack's security guards. The guard tapped Mack's shoulder and pointed at La Babosa.

Mack turned around and threw his hands up in the air. "There's the man of the hour!"

The Slug waved his stud in the air. "Hello, sir."

"Enough of these 'sir' shenanigans. Call me Mack. And what's with the lumber?"

"You said we needed a blunt instrument."

"No, no, no." Mack shook his head as he took the stud from him. "We can do better than that. I've got something for you. But first, I'd like to introduce you to someone." He turned toward the man in the cowboy hat. "This is Chip Wanamaker, he's a sports journalist with Finnska Sports Network."

Oh no, a journalist? Chip had a small notepad and pen in his left hand. A camera was draped around his neck.

Chip stretched out his right hand. "You must be La Babo—"

"Woah, Chipper." Mack pointed the stud at Chip's chest. "The Slug, remember?"

"That's right, The Slug." Chip nodded his head.

They shook hands. "Pleasure to meet you, Chip. And Mack's right. I would appreciate you keeping my Spanish name out of any of your articles."

"I'll try my best." Chip winked at him.

Before The Slug could speak anymore, Chip continued.

"Welcome to Finnska. I heard you're living down in Quadrant 3. I live up in 2."

“Thank you,” The Slug said. “I have spent little time up in 2, I’ve mostly been in my quadrant or over in 4 working on a construction site.”

“Your first pairing is with someone from Chip’s quadrant that goes by the name ‘Cueball’,” Mack said, turning to Chip. “Can you give my man here the inside scoop on him?”

“Hey, now.” Chip eyed Mack. “I want my quadrant to win ...” His voice trailed off. “But I wouldn’t mind seeing Cueball getting pummeled by someone ...” Chip looked The Slug up and down. “... half his size wearing purple spandex.”

“Easy, cowboy!” Mack lifted the stud up like he was going to take a swing at Chip. “This is an authentic Lucha Libre wrestling outfit you’re talking about.”

The Slug laughed. “It’s okay, I’ve heard it all. I wouldn’t mind knowing more about Cueball though.”

Chip put his hands up in mock defense. “I grew up going to school with Cueball, and he was the classic school bully. He was always bigger and tougher than the rest of us, and he made our lives miserable. While he is big and has a killer grip, he is slower in the speed category and can get impatient. I also know he has a bum right knee from when he thought he could kick through a brick wall behind one of the billiards clubs. Someone dared him to do it and even put money down saying he couldn’t. I watched as Cueball kicked through that wall for what felt like hours until he finally broke through. He may have won the bet, but he ended up destroying the cartilage in his knee.”

“Thanks for the tip about the knee.” The Slug nodded his head. “It also gives me a sense of what type of person he is. Why does he go by the name ‘Cueball’?”

“You’ll see. I better get in position. Going to get some good shots of the fight.” Chip held up his camera as he turned away and then stopped. “I just thought of something: Mack, why don’t you bring The Slug over with you later to my place? My son is still dying to meet you and we can look at the pictures from the fight together.”

The Slug gazed down at the camera. “I don’t want to impose—”

“Thanks Chipper!” Mack jumped in. “For the intel on Cueball and for the invite to come over. We’ll both be there. I might bring someone else as well, if that’s cool with you.”

“Sounds good, swing over after the match.” Chipper tipped the brim of his hat and entered the arena.

“I always get a little nervous around journalists.” The Slug looked up at Mack. “I hope he doesn’t put too much out there about me.”

“Don’t worry, I called him earlier and had a talk with him about it. Plus no one outside of Finnska even knows FSN exists.” Mack threw the stud down on the ground. “Now, I have something for you.”

“What is it?” The Slug could hear the chatter of the crowd swell.

Mack grabbed the silver object from the front of his scooter. It was a metal folding chair, the type they used as props in Lucha Libre. Mack held it up with a smile. On the center of the chair’s seat, his slug emblem was painted in all his colors.

The Slug placed a hand over his heart. “Mack, you didn’t have to do that.”

“This baby isn’t just any old chair,” Mack began. “I had my mad scientist back in Arrowhead make it. Guy goes by the name of Dr. Huckleberry. He’s a wizard with making weapons.” Mack held the chair by its legs. “He made this work of art out of a special tungsten metal, his own

proprietary blend he calls 'Tung-Tied'. The chair weighs about twelve pounds and packs a punch." Mack handed it to him. "I call it the Goober. Just like a slug leaves a trail of goo when it moves, you're going to leave a pile of goo when you smash your opponents over the head with this sucker. What do you think?"

The Slug took the chair in his hands; it instantly felt like an extension of his body. He had used countless folding chairs in his triple-A days, but they were always flimsy and light. He swung the chair by the legs in the air to see how it performed. It felt sturdy and heavy but not too heavy. A perfect balance. "The Goober." He looked back at Mack. "I love it. Muchas gracias."

"De nada." Mack winked at him and opened the arena door. "Come on, it's time for you to whoop Cueball's ass!"

CHAPTER 6

Center City in Finnska

CUEBALL'S PALE WHITE bald head sparkled under the stadium's lights. His neck was stacked like a keg of beer and he looked equally thick in the chest and arms. The Slug tucked the ends of his cape behind his back and stretched his arms on the top ropes of the ring. He smelled sweaty bodies fueled by alcohol. He glanced out at the crowd. He could see money changing hands for wagers on the match. He heard people laughing as they lifted their index finger and thumb up in front of their faces. They left a small gap between the index and thumb, as if comparing him to the size of an actual slug.

"You got this, Slug!" Mack called out from the front row.

At least I have one person cheering for me. The Slug saw a stranger standing next to Mack chatting with him. He was sporting a dark mustache and had a large crooked nose. He had an athletic build similar to Mack, but was perhaps larger. The stranger called out, "Let's go, Slug!"

Make that two supporters. The Slug gave them a two-finger salute. He saw a flash from a camera at ringside, and spotted Chip below him. The Slug turned away quickly. He looked down at the metal bin in his corner and checked to make sure his Goober was ready. He positioned the Goober so the legs were sticking up. He glanced back at Cueball and saw he had what appeared to be a billiards cue stick in his bin. Except it was

made of some sort of metal instead of wood. It resembled a spear or javelin without the point at the end.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” the announcer’s voice came over the loud speaker. “Welcome to the first match of the tournament, the round of eight. The winner will move on as they seek the coveted championship belt of Finnska.”

A stunning woman dressed in skimpy skin-tight attire walked around the ring, holding up the championship belt. It reminded him of his old triple-A days when beautiful women would walk around the arena with signs informing the audience of what round it was.

“In the red corner,” the announcer continued, “hailing from Quadrant 2, we have the rough-and-tumble pool shark, Cueball!”

The crowd let out a loud cheer as Cueball raised his billiards cue up and twirled it around his head with such ease it made it seem like it was his third arm.

“And, in the blue corner—” The announcer paused for effect. “—hailing from Quadrant 3, we have the mysterious wrestling luchador known as The Slug!”

As if on cue, the entire arena broke out in laughter. Everyone was holding up their index fingers and thumbs, mocking his size. The Slug ignored them and cracked his neck and knuckles. He swung his arms in front of him, trying to keep loose. He peered down at Cueball’s bum knee and saw he was wearing a brace. *Just work on the knee and the giant will crumble.*

“Remember, we’re using Finnska Fight rules,” the announcer said. “Once the horn goes off and the red light starts swirling, the fighters are

free to use their weapons. First one to pin, knock out, or get their opponent to surrender, wins. Let's get ready to RUMMMMMMM-BLE!"

A referee surfaced and came to the center of the ring. He extended his arm. The two fighters came forward. Cueball had a smirk on his face.

"I'm going to squash you like the little insect you are," Cueball snickered.

"You should've seen what I did to the last un-original fighter who used that weak line." The Slug curled the palm of his hand up and waved his fingers back and forth, motioning for Cueball to come closer. "Vamos."

Cueball's smirk turned into a snarl. The referee lifted his arm. "Fight!"

Cueball stretched out his long arms and lunged at The Slug. Before he could wrap him, The Slug sent a kick to Cueball's knee, hitting him square on the brace. Cueball twisted away in visible pain but came back fast with a backhand across The Slug's face. The Slug twisted away. Before he could turn back, Cueball hooked his arms under The Slug's armpits and ripped him up and over his body, slamming him hard into the mat.

The crowd screamed. The Slug's vision went black for a moment and then he blinked his eyes open. He saw Cueball pandering to the crowd, cupping a hand behind his ear. The crowd let out a loud cheer. Cueball flexed his biceps and The Slug went in low. He hit Cueball with a shoulder to the back of the knee. Cueball arched his back and fell to the mat. The Slug tried to put Cueball's leg in a lock, but Cueball started throwing elbows down on his head and The Slug had to spin out.

Both back up on their feet, they glared at each other as they jockeyed for position. The Slug was about to reach out for him when Cueball suddenly turned and sprinted back to his corner. *Where's he going?*

The Slug started after him but slowed up when he realized he heard a horn blowing. He spotted the spinning red light on the side of the ring. Cueball was holding the end of the billiards cue like it was a baseball bat. The Slug spun back to his corner and heard someone scream out “Goober!” as the billiards cue hit him square across the back. He fell face-first into the mat. He felt like he’d been hit by a metal whip. A severe sting shot up and down his spine.

He instinctively rolled from his stomach to his back. Cueball’s cue came smashing down on the mat right where The Slug had been. The Slug kicked the back of Cueball’s ankle; Cueball stumbled to the side of the ring. The Slug to sprinted to his bin. The adrenaline coursing through his body kept the pain in his back at bay. He grabbed the Goober by the chair legs. Turning back to the center of the mat, The Slug watched as Cueball wound up and swung his billiards cue like a baseball bat right at his head.

The Slug ducked under Cueball’s attack and a whoosh of air rushed right over his head. Cueball was caught off balance, catching himself by putting all of his weight on his front leg. Before he could recover, The Slug jabbed the rounded tip of the Goober into Cueball’s knee. He heard the nasty crunch of Cueball’s kneecap shattering.

“No!” Cueball screamed as he collapsed to the mat, clutching his knee with both hands.

The Slug kicked Cueball’s billiards cue out of the ring. The crowd rose to its feet in anticipation.

“Finish him!” Mack called out from the front row.

The Slug looked down at the emblem on his Goober, a slug with a smug look on its face. As if the slug was saying, *Don’t underestimate me or you’ll pay*. He lifted the chair above his head. He ran at Cueball, who had

slunk himself into the corner of the ring. Cueball tried to put his hands up in front of his face but couldn't get them up in time.

The Slug jumped and smashed down on the crown of Cueball's head. *Whack!* "Nacho Mama!" The Slug called out.

Cueball's body fell to the mat. The referee held up one of Cueball's arms, then let go of it. The arm crashed back to the mat with a thud. "Winner, by knockout," the referee shouted, pointing at The Slug.

The Slug lifted his Goober above his head in victory. The crowd let out indistinct murmurs and The Slug watched as angry patrons passed money to bookies. *That's why I swore off gambling right there*, he thought. *The underdog wins sometimes*. He saw Mack and the stranger next to him pumping their fists in celebration. The Slug flexed a bicep at them and winked. Just as he did, there was a flash of light from a camera at ringside. Chip lowered his camera and gave The Slug a thumbs-up.

Glancing between Cueball's body on the mat and Chip with his camera, The Slug felt a chill run through his body. *Why am I more afraid of the reporter?*

CHAPTER 7

Quadrant 2 in Finnska

CHIP'S ROOFTOP PATIO provided a commanding view of the Finnska skyline. The Slug had a large ice pack on his back, held in place by athletic wrap that hugged his core. He was sitting on the edge of a cushioned chair. He tried sitting back, but the sting was still too intense. Mack sat next to him, and Chip and his son sat across from them on a sofa littered with pillows. They were situated under a pergola that had a string of outdoor lights that made the cool evening feel warm and cozy.

"The look on their faces!" Mack slapped a knee.

"I know," Chip said. "A lot of angry gamblers in the arena today."

"Man, when you used that Goober on Cueball's knee." Mack whistled. "I swear I heard the cartilage twist from the front row."

"That chair saved me big time." The Slug re-adjusted himself on his seat trying to get comfortable. "Even though I didn't hear the horn or see the red light right away. I almost forgot about it until Cueball was attacking me with his weapon."

"How's your back feeling?" Chip was scrolling through the pictures in his camera, only partially paying attention to the conversation. "Need some more Tylenol?"

"I'm good, thanks," The Slug said. "I appreciate your hospitality, too. Lovely view of the city from here."

“It used to be better.” Chip’s ten-year-old son, Tucker, chimed in. “Before the earthquake, tsunami, and war.”

The Slug noticed Tucker was wearing a green jersey that had the Hawks’ team name and logo on it with the number eight. “That’s a pretty cool jersey you have on there,” The Slug said to Tucker. “What sport is that from?”

Tucker’s eyes widened and he looked over at Mack, who smiled back at him. The Slug picked up on it. “So, that must be scooterball, and I’m guessing that’s Mack’s jersey?”

Tucker nodded. “Yes, and Mack Attack even signed it for me! Check out scooterball sometime, Mr. Slug. It’s the best sport in the world with the greatest athletes.”

“Woah there, Tucker.” Mack leaned forward. “As a scooterball athlete and long-time fan of Lucha Libre, I would argue that the luchadors and luchadores of México’s triple-A wrestling circuit are the greatest athletes in the world.”

Tucker furrowed his brow and looked at The Slug again, like he was different now, his status elevated. “No kidding? Well, that means something coming from the best scooterball player of all—”

The patio door from the house suddenly opened and a man walked onto the rooftop. The Slug noticed it was the same man who was sitting next to Mack at the arena.

“Were you just talking about me?” the man asked with a smile.

“No, the boy said the best scooterball player.” Mack motioned for the man to come over. “Not the second best player. Huey, I want to introduce you to The Slug.” Mack turned toward The Slug. “This is Huey Bombay, the

current sheriff of Capital East in Arrowhead Nation, and the former second best scooterball player in the NSL.”

Huey laughed as he shook The Slug’s hand. The Slug looked closely at Huey’s nose. It was twisted to the side and looked like it had been broken many times. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Huey plopped down next to The Slug. “And don’t let Mack’s head get any bigger by feeding into his bullshit about being the ‘best’ player. He knows pound-for-pound I could take him in the arena or out on the streets.”

“As your boss, I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.” Mack cracked his knuckles. “Huey here is one of my knuckle-draggers back in Arrowhead. If you ever need some extra muscle, he’s one guy that can cover you. He’s from Finnska and used to be the warden of Quadrant 2. He knows this place inside and out.”

“Good to know,” The Slug said. “But you’re living over in Arrowhead now?”

Huey nodded. “I switched sides and helped Mack and the crew take down Shawkon, because he was an evil bastard and I didn’t agree with him on anything. Moved my wife and son over permanently when I was elected sheriff of Capital East.”

“How are Amanda and Aiden settling into Arrowhead?” Mack asked.

“I asked if they wanted me to fight in this tournament and move back. They both said ‘hell, no!’” Huey looked down at the string of row houses that lined the street. “That’s why I was late coming over here. I stopped in front of my old place at the end of the block to reminisce a bit.”

The Slug felt a slight breeze and heard windchimes ringing at the edge of the pergola. “I know what it’s like to leave my home country, too.

Except I can't go back and visit mine." The Slug glanced up and noticed Tucker was studying him, looking right at his mask.

"How come?" Huey asked.

"It's a long story," The Slug replied. "Maybe I'll share it with you another time."

"I have a question, though," Mack jumped in. "I think I know almost everything about your wrestling career. Except I don't know the story behind why you use 'Nacho Mama' as your knockout phrase. What's that from?"

The Slug sat up in his chair. "In one of my matches early in my career, I did my signature move—the Moonsault Fallaway Slam—on an opponent. He hit his head so hard on the mat he said, 'Mama?'. I yelled back at him, 'I'm not your mama!' And he said, 'Nacho Mama?' So, I thought, what the hell, and I've used 'Nacho Mama!' as my knockout phrase ever since."

"Hot damn," Mack spoke up with excitement. "That's a story right there."

"Tell me about it." Chip scribbled something on a notepad.

"Pretty cool, Mr. Slug," Tucker said, "but I have a question. Why do you have to wear your mask all the time? Why are you trying to hide who you really are?"

"Luchadors do not wear masks to conceal our identities but to reveal them." The Slug paused for a moment so Tucker could process this. "I don't wear my mask to hide who I am, but to show the world I am The Slug. I could never fight under another identity."

Tucker scratched the side of his face. "But what about the name you were born with? Why not use that name?"

“There is an old saying among professional Mexican wrestlers.” The Slug leaned closer to Tucker. “Un luchador no se hace, se nace. Which means, a fighter is not made, he is born. I feel like I was born to be The Slug, I just didn’t know it until later in life.”

“Does that mean you’ve been a great fighter your whole life?” Tucker asked. “Like how you beat up Cueball today?”

The Slug laughed. “Even though luchadors are born, we have to train very hard to become great. And we must all go through an initiation phase called a baptism.”

“A baptism?” Huey asked.

“It’s where trainers and experienced luchadors put junior wrestlers through hell to make sure they have what it takes.” The Slug thought of his Onix and how he had been extra tough on him. He remembered when Onix and the other trainers would tie him to the ring and slap him on the chest until he bled. Then they would slam him again and again into the mat. Like a body-slam factory, one after the next. They said it was to toughen him up—and it did. “Baptism. The rite of getting your face pushed into the mat.”

“That’s awesome.” Tucker looked over at his father. “Did you hear that, Dad?”

“I assure you it didn’t feel awesome.” The Slug readjusted the ice pack on his back.

Chip looked up from his camera. “Yes, I caught most of it. Sorry, I’m just looking through these photos. I need to get an article off to my editor tonight.”

“Say no more, Chipper.” Mack bounced to his feet. “We will get out of your hair. Did you get any good shots?”

“I got a few decent ones, but this one’s my favorite.” Chip turned the display screen on his camera so the group could see.

The Slug looked closely at the picture. Chip had shot the picture right behind Cueball’s body, as if the picture was taken by Cueball himself. It showed The Slug flying with the Goober stretched over his head about to smack Cueball.

“Dang, look at that picture!” Mack tapped on the display screen. “Send me a digital copy of that—I want to hang it in my office back in Zenith City.”

“Sweet picture, Dad.”

“Not bad,” Huey added.

The Slug didn’t respond right away. He was thinking about the picture running in newspapers across the world. What will happen when the Cartel catches wind of it? “It’s a pretty cool picture, I admit. Use the English spelling of my name and not too many details that could give me away.”

“Of course, don’t worry about a thing.” Chip swatted the concern away like it was a fly buzzing around his head.

Mack clapped his hands together. “This has been the best day. Ever.”

“I thought marrying Gabby was your best day ever.” Huey stood up and playfully punched Mack.

“If you tell her I said that, I’ll send an assassin after you.” Mack rubbed the sleeve of his leather jacket. “Maybe even The Sizzler.”

“Whatever, tough guy.” Huey turned to The Slug. “I saw Sledge from the first quadrant won and so did Ruxton from three. Looks like they’ll face off first tomorrow. That means you’re up against Cutter from four. You ready?”

The Slug stood up at the sound of Cutter's name. Hearing his pairing with Cutter gave him a burst of energy. "If I'd known I would fight Cutter in this tournament, I would've been the first one to sign up. Hell yeah, I'm ready."

"That's what I like to hear." Mack patted The Slug on his shoulder.

"All right, let's call it." Chip whisked them toward the door. "Tucker needs to get to bed and I need to finish that article."

"Lame," Tucker responded.

"Do you want to go to the arena tomorrow?" Chip's voice was stern.

"Off to bed, right away, Dad!"

The Slug looked out at the skyline one more time. I never imagined fighting for a country like Finnska, but if it means I can take down people like Cueball and Cutter, I'm all in.

The Slug turned toward the door and watched Tucker swing his head away, like he'd been watching The Slug. Tucker tugged on his dad's sleeve and they stopped at the top of the stairs. Chip leaned down toward his son and Tucker whispered something in his ear. The Slug thought he heard him say, "Do you think I could get one of those Luchador masks?"

CHAPTER 8

Center City in Finnska

THE SLUG WAS surprised by the audience's reaction when the announcer introduced him. Most of the packed arena cheered for him as they waved bandanas in the air, some of them purple in color. He jumped on the ropes in the ring's corner and pumped his fists to the crowd. They cheered louder in response. He looked down and saw Chip's son, Tucker, standing between Mack and Huey in the front row. Tucker was holding a poster with a slug drawn on it. Mack and Huey whistled loudly in support. The Slug placed his hand over his heart in acknowledgement. Chip popped up ringside and snapped a picture.

The announcer's voice filled the arena. "And in the blue corner, from Quadrant 4, we have the master builder himself: Cutter!"

The Slug jumped to the mat and turned to face his opponent. The crowd cheered for Cutter as he held his massive sledgehammer in one hand. He was holding his weapon like it was a common handheld hammer and not a twenty-pound double-faced steel mallet. The Slug had seen Cutter use the hammer and remembered he could drive an entire spike into a plank with one swing. The Slug reached for his Goober and wondered if the Tung-Tied metal was strong enough to block a swing from Cutter's hammer.

Cutter tossed his hammer nonchalantly in his bin and ripped off his shirt. The crowd cheered louder. He had so much thick brown hair on his

chest The Slug wondered if he descended from a family of grizzly bears. He certainly looked as large as a grown grizzly.

The referee came to the center of the ring and held his hand forward like it was an exit bar in a parking garage.

Cutter approached the center of the ring, grabbing his crotch and curling his lip at The Slug. "Get ready to suck it, you grease ball."

"Hijo de puta!" The Slug leaned over and spat at Cutter's boots.

Cutter glared at him, wagging a finger in The Slug's face over the outstretched arm of the referee. "This is the last time you'll ever speak Spic to me again." Saliva flew from the corners of Cutter's mouth. "I'm not just going to hurt you, I'm going to make an example of you. So Sledge and the rest of Finnska knows I will rule with authority when I win this tournament."

The referee, feeling the pressure of Cutter's body, raised his arm suddenly. "Fight!"

Cutter came in high with a right-handed hook. The Slug ducked and tried to scoop the back of his legs for a take-down, but Cutter was too strong. Cutter brought his fists down on The Slug's back and The Slug fell to the mat. Cutter threw an elbow down at The Slug, but he rolled out of the way just in time and Cutter's elbow landed on the mat. The Slug kicked him in the face and jumped on top of him. Cutter shot his hips up and reversed the hold so The Slug was on the bottom.

The Slug held his forearms in front of his face, trying to protect himself from the Cutter's gorilla punches. The Slug tried to launch his hips up, but Cutter was too strong. Cutter was straddling The Slug with his body, pushing his weight down on his stomach. Cutter was so sweaty, it was hard for The Slug to get a tighter hold on him. He tried twisting to the side and

one of Cutter's punches connected with his ear. He heard a loud ringing in his ear and twisted so he was on his back again.

The horn suddenly went off and the red light started spinning. The Slug looked at the light and then back at Cutter on top of him. Cutter looked up at his bin but stayed straddled on top of The Slug. He leaned back with his fist in the air, poised to send a powerful punch down at The Slug. His body raised a sliver off of The Slug and it was all the room he needed. The Slug planted his feet on the mat and kicked backwards. He slid out just as Cutter was throwing his punch. Cutter tried to lunge at him, but The Slug avoided it and sprinted to his bin.

He grabbed his Goober by the chair legs and turned back to the center of the mat. Cutter had his hammer out and was rotating it in his hands. He shot forward and swung the hammer at The Slug's head. The Slug ducked and plunged the tip of the chair into Cutter's chin. Cutter flew backward, grabbing his chin. A trickle of blood flowed onto the mat.

The crowd was screaming; the noise was deafening in the arena.

Cutter wiped the blood off on his hairy chest and glared at The Slug. "I'm going to kill you!" He ran at The Slug, hammer cocked over his head.

The Slug brought his Goober up to block the swing, but just before Cutter swung his hammer, he planted his left leg and kicked with his right and sent a boot into The Slug's chest. The Slug felt the air shoot out of his lungs. He fell to the mat and tried to block Cutter's next hammer swing. He could only glance the blow with the side of his Goober. The head of the hammer struck his ribs and he felt several of them crack. A sharp pain spiked through his body. Cutter came down with another swing and The Slug got his Goober up to block it. He felt the force of the blow in his hands, and he wrapped them tighter around his Goober.

Cutter swung his hammer all the way up and over his head and used his shoulders and hips to whip it straight down at The Slug's head. At the last possible moment, The Slug lunged to the side, right as the mallet hit the mat. Cutter stumbled onto one knee and caught himself on the handle of his hammer after the miss. The Slug swung his Goober down on the back of Cutter's head and watched his face whiplash into the butt of his hammer's handle. He screamed out in pain after the tip of his handle went into his eye socket.

Before Cutter could move, The Slug jumped up on his back and wrapped his bicep around Cutter's neck. He clutched his wrist with the opposite hand and squeezed. Cutter tried to stand up with The Slug on his back, but he tripped on his hammer and fell to the mat. The Slug rode him down to the mat and held the grip like his life depended on it. "Tap out!" The Slug screamed as he ratcheted back on Cutter's neck.

Blood was pouring onto the mat below Cutter's face. The Slug kept squeezing as he watched Cutter raise a shaky, bloody hand. The referee was right on top of them now.

"Tap out and I'll stop!" The Slug screamed.

Cutter strained against The Slug's grip one last time then tapped The Slug on his arm three times.

"That's it!" the referee called out. "The Slug wins on surrender!"

Music started playing over the loud speakers and The Slug let go of Cutter when the referee pulled at his arms. He jumped up and looked out at the crowd. This time they were cheering for him. He thought he saw more people waving purple bandanas as they screamed his name. It reminded him of his glory days back at the cathedral of Lucha Libre in México. He fought off the pain in his ribs and held his fist up high in the air as he

embraced the moment under the stadium's bright lights. *Out of the shadows and into the arena. The Slug is back.*

CHAPTER 9

Quadrant 3 in Finnska

THE DOOR OF his bedroom burst open and The Slug felt a thunderbolt of pain when he tried to sit up on his bed.

“Stay down. Relax.” Mack closed the door behind him.

The Slug sunk back into the fetal position. One of his arms clutched his ribs like a brace.

Mack looked around the room. “Cozy little room you have here.”

“Sometimes it reminds me of the slums back in México,” said The Slug. “Not in terms of the smell or furniture, but just the tiny nature of the room.” The Slug winced when another shot of pain went through him.

“How bad is it?” Mack sat on the edge of the table in his room, his legs dangling. “Did you break some ribs?”

The Slug dragged away his hand and looked down at his ribs. There was a purple and black bruise that stretched from his armpit down to his waist. “Definitely broken. Once my adrenaline wore off from the match, it got more painful by the minute. Now it hurts when I move and breathe in too quickly. I can’t imagine what would happen if I laughed or sneezed.” He shot his eyes up at Mack. “So, please don’t tell me any jokes.”

Mack gave him a casual smile. “Looks like the citizens of Finnska are liking you. I saw a lot of purple around the arena today and more cheers than boos for you this time.”

The Slug looked down at the purple outfit he was still wearing. The sweat from the match had finally dried and now his whole body felt sticky. His ribs hurt too much to think about showering. “That was pretty cool to see, I have to admit.” The Slug looked up at the window sill and saw the empty coke bottles. “Shoot, can I get you something to drink? I might have a Coke around here somewhere.”

“Don’t worry about me.” Mack pulled something out of his pocket and extended it out toward him. “Want a piece of Pez candy?”

Mack had a Mickey Mouse Pez dispenser. He pulled back on Mickey’s head and a piece of candy popped up. “No thanks, unless you plan to toss it directly in my mouth.”

Mack laughed. “For you, I would.” He put a candy in his own mouth and slid the dispenser back in his pocket. “I’m not sure if you heard, but Ruxton lost to Sledge.” Mack shook his head. “I just can’t stand Sledge, and I know this country will fall right back to its old ways if he wins this tournament. You think you’ll be able to fight him tomorrow?”

The Slug hung his head and sighed. “Right now, I don’t even think I’ll be able to get out of bed in the morning.”

“I may get something for you.” Mack rubbed his chin. “There’s this sports doctor back in Arrowhead who used to give some of us injections of lidocaine before our NSL games. He didn’t do it a lot, but when one of us was hurt really bad it helped numb the pain for the game. It won’t prevent you from further damaging your ribs in a match against Sledge, but it would eliminate the pain you’re feeling right now.”

“I’ll try anything at this point.” The Slug rested his hand on his ribs. “And I really want to fight Sledge tomorrow because I’m ...” His voice trailed off.

“What?”

“I don’t know ...” The Slug paused. “When I first came to Finnska I sort of wrote the country off. I viewed it as a good place to hide out and bide my time. I’m thinking differently about it now. Not everyone here is a big jerk like Cueball and Cutter. There are some good people, like Huey, Tucker—and even Chip seems nice, despite being a reporter.”

“I feel the same way.” Mack reached his hand inside his leather jacket. “That reminds me, I grabbed a copy of Chip’s article for you. Mack pulled out a folded newspaper. He opened it and placed it in front of The Slug on the bed.

The headline read: The Mysterious Luchador of Finnska Nation. Under the headline was the picture Chip had showed them last night on his rooftop. The one of The Slug flying at Cueball with the outstretched Goober above his head. The Slug looked up at Mack. “Where did this article run?”

“Don’t worry; it just ran here in Finnska. I mean, sometimes larger news outlets will pick up their stories elsewhere, but that rarely happens.”

“Hmm ...” The Slug scanned the article. Chip used “The Slug” as he had asked. His eyes stopped when he saw “Nacho Mama!” written in the article. He continued reading and saw Chip had told the story about the origins of his knockout phrase. He looked back up at Mack.

“What is it?” Mack asked. “I thought it was a pretty good article, myself.”

“It is good, and I’m glad he didn’t use La Babosa in it.” The Slug handed it back to Mack. “But the picture of me and the story about ‘Nacho Mama!’ worries me a bit. Those are two pretty big identifiers. If someone back home catches wind of this article, they will know it’s me right away.”

Mack took the article back and placed it on his table. “You can keep the article, but I need you to level with me. Tell me more about what happened back there so I can make sure I know what we’re up against if anyone comes after us.”

What we’re up against? The Slug let his eyes drop to the floor. “It’s kind of embarrassing, and I would never want to involve you or anyone else here with my issues.”

“It’s okay,” Mack said with a soft voice. “Anything you say to me won’t leave this room, and rest assured, we are in this thing together now.”

The Slug took a deep breath in and felt a stab of pain. “Back when I was wrestling, I developed a little gambling addiction. It didn’t start as an addiction; it was sort of a fun way for me to bet on other triple-A matches. Then the addiction grew and I had a series of terrible loses. I kept betting on the favored wrestlers and the underdog kept winning. As I lost more money, I began betting on other things, like bull fights, horse races, and cockfights.” The Slug looked up at the fan in the corner of his room for a few moments and then continued. “I finally lost so much money I couldn’t stake my bets. That’s when I got in with some bad people who worked for the cartel. They staked me money and when I couldn’t pay them in time, they threatened to kill me. That’s when my coach—”

“Onix Ramirez?”

“That’s right. That’s when Onix went to a rival cartel and convinced them to pay off my debt, so long as I threw that match to El Lobo.”

“Not only throw it,” Mack said. “But let him de-mask you.”

“They tried to tell me my moral stance and role could change while my character remained fixed. But to me, my character’s role as a good guy became who I was. It was connected hand-in-hand with La Babosa, The

Slug. It would be like your favorite good-guy superhero suddenly switching sides. And now, because I didn't do what they wanted me to do, both cartels want me dead."

"Huh." Mack tapped his fingers on the table. "That's some heavy stuff right there. I've heard and read things about the cartels over the years and I know what they're capable of. But if you beat Sledge tomorrow, you'll be given the championship belt and become the new governor of Finnska. That means you'll have security guards and I will also throw in some protection from people like Huey to make sure nothing happens to you."

The Slug shook his head. "You don't understand. They'll send highly trained sicarios to kill me and it won't matter what title I have. They will want to make an example of me."

"Let me tell you a little secret." Mack lowered his voice. "I used to moonlight as an assassin. Back when Arrowhead had a terrible leader who was in Shawkon's pocket."

"Really?" The Slug let the doubt in his voice come through. "Was that what you and Huey were joking about? Something about The Sizzler?"

Mack nodded his head. "That's right. I can think like an assassin because I was one. I can come up with a security plan that will keep you safe and keep those sicarios out. And, if it ever comes to it, you can always cool off in Arrowhead. I could show you around the country and introduce you to people as Finnska's newest governor. Shoot, I can do that anyway if you win."

"Governor." The Slug whispered the word to himself. "Until this point, I hadn't really thought about that aspect of this tournament. I was fighting just to get back in the arena, to fight again as The Slug, and to take down

some of these thugs. Am I really capable of running an entire country? I don't even have a proper suit."

"Sure you can, it's actually way easier to be a politician than most people think. You just have to pretend you're really busy all the time and make quick, decisive decisions even if you have no clue what you're doing." Mack winked at him. "I made it through my whole first year as The Lute of Arrowhead doing that."

The Slug tried to fight back a laugh but lost and felt a sharp pain in his side.

"Sorry."

"It's okay," The Slug responded through clenched teeth. "What are we even talking about here? I can't get out of bed right now, let alone go fight someone as capable as this Sledge guy sounds like. I think we need to focus on that before we fantasize about governor titles and running countries."

"You'd be a good one, though." Mack tucked a strand of his blonde hair behind his ear.

"A good what? Governor? That's sort of like filling the role of a Rudo back in México. The last time I tried being a Rudo I had to leave my country forever."

"No, I'm saying you'd be a good leader," Mack said. "Forget the titles and all that. I've studied Lucha Libre enough to know Rudos represent politicians and narcos. They're the brawlers, always antagonizing the crowd with their strength and size."

The Slug nodded his head in agreement.

"You'd be an outstanding leader because you've always been, and will always be, a Ténicos, the hero. You represent the common man with

humble upbringings. Known for your technical skills, aerial maneuvers, and likeability. Think about these Finnska brutes like Cueball, Cutter, and Sledge as Rudos.” Mack leaned forward. “You’re the hero this country needs right now, more than ever. And, I’ll make sure nothing bad ever happens to you.” Mack looked down at his ribs. “At least, outside of the ring ...”

Despite his pain, Mack’s words filled The Slug with a sense of peace and reassurance. Like some strange sort of intervention—maybe it was God, or his abuela—had led him to where he was right now. He looked down at the cross hanging from his neck and then back up at Mack. “That’s very kind of you, and I don’t know what will happen tomorrow, but I’ve always had this one fantasy.”

“What’s that?”

“Have you ever seen those pictures of El Santo wearing his Luchador mask with a full-on dress suit, with the tie and pocket square and all?”

Mack’s eyes lit up. “That was my Halloween costume a few years back!”

The Slug grinned. “I always imagined wearing a suit like that with my mask and having it actually mean something. Not that it doesn’t mean something for Halloween, but you know what I’m saying?”

“I know more than anyone else in this part of the world.” Mack slid off the table to his feet. “This has been a great chat, but I have to go make some calls and make sure we are good to go for tomorrow.” He hurried to the door.

“I just don’t know how tomorrow will work with my busted-up ribs, going against an opponent like Sledge,” The Slug called after him.

Mack flashed him a smile. “Leave the ribs to me, and start visualizing your fight against Sledge in the ring.”

“But I know nothing about him; I wasn’t able to watch his matches.”

“A good way to think about him is to imagine combining the best fighting qualities of Cueball and Cutter into one fighter—and then picture that fighter being someone bigger, faster, and stronger than both of those guys.” Mack pounded his chest. “You got this.”

The Slug’s eyes grew wide as Mack described Sledge. He tried to pound his chest in response and was rewarded with another shock of pain. Mack left the room and The Slug curled back into the fetal position. He stared at one of the empty Coke bottles on the window sill. “Yeah, you got this all right ...” His voice was a whimper.

CHAPTER 10

Center City in Finnska

MACK FLEW HIS sports doctor over from Arrowhead first thing in the morning and brought him up to The Slug's room. The Slug had slept little because every time he would dose off, he'd put pressure on his ribs and feel the sharp pain again in his side. After the doctor administered the shots of lidocaine in his ribs, the pain subsided and he asked if he could take a quick nap. Mack told him the fight was about to start and he had to get down to the arena immediately. The doctor further emphasized the shot would wear off in sixty to ninety minutes, if not sooner.

They rushed over to the arena and The Slug sat on a bench in the back part of the arena's locker room by himself. There was discarded athletic tape scrunched up in balls at the corners of the room. It smelled like urine and body odor. A ceiling fan spinning overhead did little except for push the smell around the room. He could hear the distant roar of the crowd out in the arena. His Goober was leaning on the bench next to him. He tapped his knuckles on it for good luck.

He looked up at the locker room mirror across the room and saw the whole right side of his stomach was completely black. It was the worst bruise he'd ever had in his life. He grabbed the cross on his necklace and it reminded him of his moments in the locker room leading up to his last match in México. "Abuela," he said out loud, "if you can tell the big man upstairs to help me through this one I would really appreciate it. Te quiero."

He kissed his cross. The pain in his side was still muted, but he felt a little tingle as he stood up.

The locker room door slammed open and Mack came in the room. He heard the noise of the arena. “You ready, champ?”

“Let’s go before the pain comes back.” The Slug grabbed his Goober and followed Mack out.

“You will not believe the crowd.” Mack was charging down the hallway. “It’s incredible.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll see.” Mack stopped and motioned toward the arena’s introduction platform. “They’re about to call your name. I’m going to head down and take my seat in the front row. Give em’ hell.” Mack extended a fist.

“Thanks, Mack Attack.” The Slug bumped his knuckles and turned away when he heard the announcer introduce Sledge. The crowd let out a mixture of boos and applause. He felt a hand grab his shoulder and turned to see Mack was still there. Mack leaned toward his ear.

“I almost forgot to mention.” Mack had to yell into The Slug’s ear even though he was right next to him. “I asked around and found out Sledge has only been beaten one time in a Finnska Fight. It was early in his career and it was by pin. I guess it’s impossible to knock or tap him out, but the pin worked once. Thought you should know.”

“Thanks for the tip,” The Slug called out. He walked down the hallway to the introduction platform. There was an arena security official listening to his radio. He waved at The Slug when he spotted him.

“And the opponent,” The announcer called out. “Perhaps the smallest fighter to ever step into a Finnska ring. A true underdog story, from Quadrant 3: The Slug!”

The Slug was hit by a blast of noise that he had never experienced, not even during the pinnacle of his career back home. The crowd let out an arena-shaking cheer that sent the decibel levels through the roof. He puffed out his chest and marched to the platform. He was met with a sea of purple. Everyone was wearing the color purple and waving purple bandanas above their heads. They stood shoulder to shoulder, ignoring assigned seats. It was standing room only. He saw four huge half-naked men with the letters S-L-U-G painted on their bellies, a letter a piece.

As he sauntered down the ramp to the ring, he heard the rattle of a large paper sign. The sign had his slug emblem on it with the words *Let's Go Slug!* beneath. He blinked his eyes as cameras flashed in his face. He saw Mack and Huey in their front-row seats. A boy, who he assumed was Tucker, was scrunched between them wearing a luchador mask. *What?! How did he get a mask?* Mack pointed down at the boy's mask, then he and Huey pulled their own matching masks out of their jackets. They slipped them over their heads and Mack gave him the shaka sign.

The Slug returned the shaka sign. He turned his head to see arena attendants using t-shirt guns to launch purple shirts out into the stands. *Amazing*, he thought.

Turning his attention to the ring, he took two quick steps and slid onto the ring's mat under the bottom rope. He held his Goober out in front of him and then stopped. He craned his neck and looked up. It was the first time he could take in his opponent. His jaw dropped as he stared at the man in the ring across from him. Sledge reminded him of the pictures he used to

see of Goliath from children's bibles. He remembered those pictures always portrayed Goliath as three times taller than David, and for once, seeing Sledge in person made The Slug think that depiction was accurate. Sledge wasn't just a tall and massive pile of girth. He had clearly defined muscles, from his tree trunk of a neck to his biceps, which looked to be as large as wooden barrels. He had a resting snarl on his face, with an ungodly unibrow that made him look like the Philistine giant. Without realizing it, The Slug held his Goober in front of his body, like it was a shield.

Sledge peered down at him and after a few moments he let out a laugh. He held his stomach as his chuckle turned into a full belly laugh. Sledge closed one of his eyes and held his index finger and thumb up to his face, taking his time to measure him. Then he let out another laugh.

If only I had some stones and a slingshot, The Slug thought.

"All right, weapons in the bins." A referee stepped in and pointed to the corners.

"Let's go, Slug! Let's go, Slug!" The crowd chanted in unison.

The Slug looked out to the crowd and raised his Goober as he made his way to his corner of the ring. They waved their bandanas even faster and let out a tremendous cheer in response. He looked down and saw a ringside girl carrying the championship belt around the outside of the ring. She raised it over her head, showcasing it to the fans. He slid his Goober in his bin and said a quick prayer. He stared down at the mat for a moment, trying to drown out the crowd. *Mack said Sledge was beaten once, by pin.* The Slug recalled going against large Rudos back in México and stealing wins from them through well-timed pins. *Might be my only chance today ...*

He reached for his side as he turned to the center of the ring. He felt a dull tingle as though the pain was coming back. Glancing up, he saw Sledge flip a long piece of lumber in his bin. The lumber looked almost as tall as Sledge. The Slug peered closer. *It can't be. That's not a 2x4 stud like I was going to use; that's a 4x4 piece of treated wood, and it's eight feet long.* Sledge handled it like he was tossing a broom into the closet.

The referee came to the center of the ring and extended his arm. The two fighters met in the middle. Sledge shook his head and called out to The Slug above the noise with a booming voice. "You're crazy to think you could come to my country and beat me."

"You're right," The Slug screamed. "Maybe I am a little loco."

"Loco?" Sledge furrowed his unibrow.

"Fight!" The referee backed away.

"It means 'crazy!'" The Slug shot down low and hit Sledge in the middle of his shins. It felt like hitting a brick wall.

Sledge took one step back before he planted his trail foot and tried to stomp on The Slug's back. The Slug shot forward between the giant's legs, avoiding the kick. Now behind Sledge, The Slug spun back and hooked his right arm under Sledge's crotch. He put his foot right behind Sledge's ankle and pulled back with all his strength. Sledge fell backwards on the mat and The Slug lifted his leg up for a pin. The referee was late getting over. By the time he pounded once on the mat, Sledge had already thrown The Slug off.

"Dammit!" The Slug glared at the referee.

"You'll have to do better than that." Sledge came right at him with surprising speed and locked his hands around his head. Before The Slug could break the hold, Sledge lifted him into the air and flipped him up and over his shoulders. Sledge held him there by linking his massive arms

around The Slug's armpits. The Slug was dangling from the top of Sledge's shoulders with his back to Sledge, his arms straight out, and his legs down. He looked out at the crowd; they were watching in disbelief and dismay. He felt the same way—he knew Sledge was setting up for a reverse crucifixion slam. The Slug tried to kick backward at Sledge with his heels but only hit the giant's buttock region with little impact.

Sledge started walking around the ring with The Slug propped up on his back, like the Roman guards lifting the cross Jesus was nailed to. Except The Slug wasn't Jesus, and right now he felt more like the helpless criminals on the crosses next to the savior. Sledge arched his back and then drove The Slug up and over his head, slamming him down into the center of the mat. The Slug landed awkwardly on the back of his neck. He felt a nerve pinch and his world went dark for a few moments.

He tried to get up, but Sledge rolled over on top of him, pinning him to the ground. "One! Two! Th—" The referee stopped his count when The Slug mustered enough energy to break free of the pin. He slid backward, looking toward the red light to see if it was spinning, but it was unchanged. He couldn't tell if it was stars he was seeing or flashes of lights from cameras. His neck was throbbing and his ribs were jarred by the impact. It sent shooting pains down his sides.

"Guess I'll have to go a little bit higher on the next one." Sledge moved in on him and grabbed him by the back of the mask. He pushed him into the corner of the ring. The Slug tried to fight back, but Sledge was too big. Sledge lifted him up by the neck and positioned him on the top corner ropes of the ring so he was facing out at the crowd, his legs dangling over the ropes.

What is he going do to me? The Slug tried to focus despite his foggy head. The crowd was all but silent now, their bandanas down and their faces long. It reminded him of the end of his match against El Lobo back in México. *Another arena in a different country, and still the same disappointing end to my fighting career.*

Sledge climbed the ropes. They bent under his weight. He moved up so he was equal with The Slug on the top ropes. The Slug was waiting for him to throw him off the ropes with a match-ending slam. Instead, Sledge wrapped one of his massive hands around The Slug's neck, and with his other one he pulled up on the back of his mask.

"No!" Mack screamed out from below. "You bastard!"

The Slug tried to reach back and grab Sledge's hand, but Sledge was too strong. Sledge was having trouble with the mask's straps and the extra time allowed The Slug to think. He had made his living on the top rope corners back in triple-A. That's where he used to perform his signature Fallaway Moonsault Slam, which normally turned into a pinfall. Except he was usually behind his opponent, not in front.

That's when he had an idea. He leaned back into Sledge and lifted his legs up so they were on the top padding on the corner of the ring. Sledge was still behind him but the movement cause him to slip back a bit. It was all the momentum The Slug needed. He found the last bit of reserve he had in him as he bent down in a squat. Then he propelled himself up and over Sledge's shoulders, hooking his legs around Sledge's neck. He ripped back as hard as he could and felt Sledge's body go airborne, up and over him and onto the mat. The Slug completed his own backflip and landed right on Sledge's chest. He felt Sledge's body go limp. The Slug hooked Sledge's leg in the process and pressed Sledge's back into the

mat, driving his shoulder down as hard as he could with his legs flexed on the mat behind him.

The crowd let out an ear-piercing roar. They screamed along as the referee pounded his hand on the mat. “One! Two! Three!”

“Winner, by pin.” The referee motioned toward him.

The Slug didn’t think the crowd could get any louder, but they somehow escalated to a whole new level. People were screaming at the top of their lungs as they stomped their feet in the stands. Fireworks suddenly went off in the arena and were followed by confetti that rained down from the ceiling. The Slug dropped to his knees in the center of the ring and raised his hands up to the heavens. The confetti hit his face and he looked up and smiled. “Thank you, Abuela. Looks like your good word was just the ticket I needed.”

He had a hard time processing what happened next. His head was still foggy from the match and his body hurt like hell. He later recalled seeing fans pour over the railing and coming into the ring. A mob of fans pushed a stunned Sledge out of the ring and lifted The Slug up on their shoulders. They exited the arena with him propped up on their shoulders. They marched directly to the central government building chanting, “Governor Slug! Governor Slug!”

It was the happiest moment of his life.

EPILOGUE

Center City in Finnska

LARGE FLOOR-TO-ceiling windows provided a commanding view of the city from the office of the governor. It had been two weeks since The Slug had defeated Sledge in the epic fight at the arena. After The Slug took the oath of office, the citizens of Finnska threw him a wild parade that rivaled a Día De Muertos processional back in México City. Local artists started painting a giant mural of The Slug on the side of the arena. Street vendors were selling out of luchador masks faster than they could import them.

The Slug rubbed the back of his neck as he watched the sun set over the city, its orange rays extending along the horizon. He was still working out a kink in his neck from the slam Sledge had delivered during the fight. His ribs were feeling a little better, but still reminded him he was human when he moved too quickly.

He clipped the championship belt off his stomach and draped it on his executive desk. He sat down in his oversized leather chair; it squeaked when he leaned back. He wondered how it had contained Sledge while he was keeping the office warm for him. The room smelled of fresh leather and was lined with various weapons hanging on the walls. The Slug had hung his Goober prominently on the wall across from his desk. He heard footsteps outside his door and stood as it opened.

It was Mack, and with him, a woman The Slug didn't recognize. "El Gobernador!" Mack called out as he moved toward his desk.

The Slug stepped from behind the desk and met him in the center of the office. “Mack, it’s great to see you.”

They clasped hands and Mack took a step back to look him over. “Wow, you clean up nice. Like El Santo reborn. Looks like a perfect fit.”

“A big thanks to you for the gift.” The Slug glanced at a mirror on the wall of his office. He was wearing a tailored black pinstripe suit with a purple pocket square that matched the color of his mask.

“If you weren’t already known as the Slug, I think El Gobernador would be a good name for you,” the woman said.

“Shoot, where are my manners?” Mack hurried over to the woman’s side.

She had attractive features with olive skin and a kind, confident face. She wore a gold-colored outfit with a faded purple cowboy hat.

“This is my beautiful wife,” Mack said. “Gabby Oaks, the Supreme Leader of Arrowhead nation.”

The Slug rushed over to shake her hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Supreme Leader.”

“Please, call me Gabby.” She shook his hand. “I look forward to working with you to help restore the country of Finnska.”

“Likewise.” The Slug smiled at her. “A big thanks goes to your esposo, Mack. It was his idea to have me wrestle in that tournament once he figured out who I was.”

Gabby squeezed Mack’s forearm. “That sounds like my husband, all right. He’s been obsessed with Lucha Libre for a long time.”

“What can I say?” Mack shrugged. “Maybe after I’m done being The Lute I can put on a mask of my own and see what I can do on the triple-A circuit.” He pretended to elbow-smash the top of the chair.

The Slug and Gabby laughed. They looked back at the door when they heard more footsteps. Chip, Tucker, and Huey stopped in the doorway.

“Hey, guys.” The Slug waved them in. “Come on in.”

Tucker walked briskly up to The Slug with a luchador mask and a permanent marker in his hands. “Mr. Governor, sir. Could you please sign my mask for me?”

“Easy, son.” Chip followed close behind. “I’m sure The Slug is busy.”

“Not a problem at all.” The Slug took the mask and pen and signed his name. He handed it back to Tucker, who had a huge smile spread across his face.

The Slug looked up and saw Mack wink at him.

“Congrats again on the big win,” Huey said, reaching out to shake The Slug’s hand. “I’ll never forget that fight with Sledge as long as I live.”

“Thank you very much. I’m still processing it all,” said The Slug. “We have a lot of work to do to restore our country back to where it once was.”

“I love that you’re using ‘we’ and ‘our’ when discussing Finnska,” Chip said. “That means a lot to us, and makes me feel even worse for what I’m about to tell you.”

Everyone turned their heads to look at Chip. He pulled out his phone and held it up. The Slug could see it had words written in Spanish. “Sounds like my article about your tournament run got picked up by some news outlets from other parts of the world.”

The Slug stared at his phone. “Like which news outlets?”

Chip cleared his throat. “Like *México News Daily*. They ran the story, and judging from the comments on their online version, it looks like everyone figured out it was you, La Babosa.”

The Slug felt his blood pressure spike. He put his arms behind his back and moved over to the office windows. He looked out at the sun and watched it retreat beyond the horizon.

“It’s okay,” Mack said, following him. “We will put a plan in place to protect you, starting with having you come back to Arrowhead for a while to lay low.”

“I can be at your side the whole time,” Huey said.

“Any resources you need will be provided,” Gabby added.

The Slug thought about how he had run away from México to Finnska. He had all but come to terms with Finnska being a transition point in life. A stopover on his way to the next hiding place. When the citizens of Finnska had supported him in the match against Sledge, his perspective had changed. This was his new home, and no cartel members or sicarios could change that. He looked up at Mack. “I’m done running. I will stay in Finnska and I will help every quadrant restore their homes and businesses, one board at a time.” He paused and looked around the room at the others. “And, if necessary, I will fight.”

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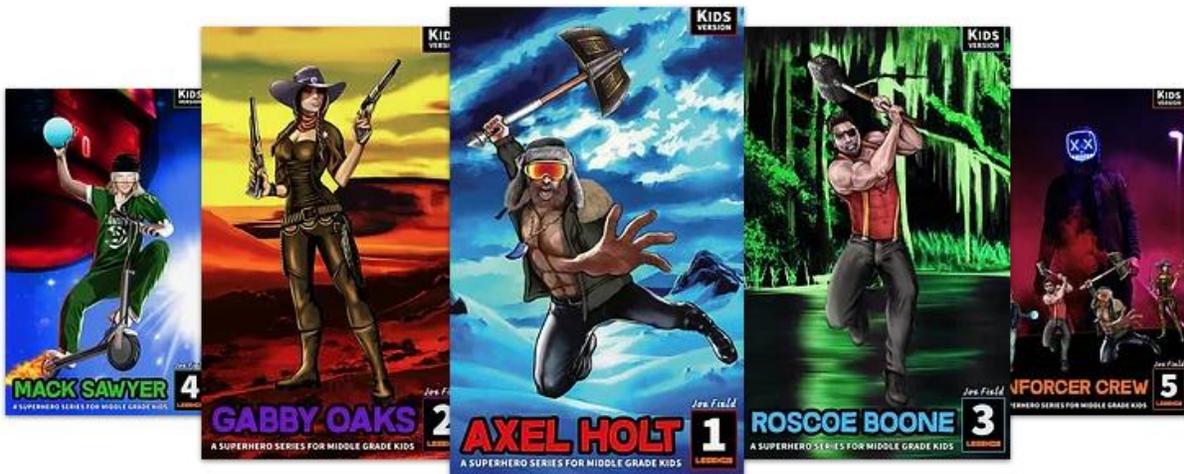
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



If Paul Bunyan became a writer: That's Joe Field.

Field is the creator of the **LEGENDS UNIVERSE™** and author of [Arrowhead Legends](#) and [Skoldrun Legends](#). These book series feature *Axel Holt, Gabby Oaks, Roscoe Boone, Mack Sawyer, Dakota Briggs, Zoë Wind, and The Slug* as they fight for their lives against notorious villains.

Readers of Field's books include middle grade kids, young adults, and the young at heart (aka fun adults).

Field is proud to be a native son of his beloved Minnesota. Follow the **LEGENDS UNIVERSE™** at: legendsuniverse.net

Chop Suey!

JOE FIELD