

CHAPTER I

EL HACHA CUARTO CARVES into his flesh until the tip of the razor blade nicks his skull. The dirty wrestling canvas beneath him swiftly resembles a monochromatic Jackson Pollock as a geyser spews out his severed artery. The mist forms a red cloud that looms over the ring. It rains, and the audience, solely his family and friends, collects the gore in their mugs. Light beer turns into dark sludge as the blood-thirsty brood chant for more.

Atsushi Kasai, covered head to toe in thick scars and fresh wounds, dangles a barbed wire-wrapped baseball bat next to Cuarto's face. Kasai screams in Japanese and stomps his head into a pile of thumbtacks. Pretending the tacks hurt more than they actually do, Cuarto shows off the hundreds of spikes sticking out of his face to the audience. The stereotypical villain holds the bat high and demands approval from the witnesses.

The masses boo the horror show.

Blood trickles out of the many holes in Cuarto's face, stinging his eyes and blurring his vision. He can still make out his little brother, Xavier, in the front row. The boy's tears, mixed with his blood, wash away the poorly made screen-printed image of their father, El Hacha Tercer. The man everyone is there to mourn.

"Get up, Hacha!" Xavier cries as they beat his brother down.

Cuarto pulls himself back up to his feet. Blood loss leaves him dizzy, and he doesn't see Kasai charging him. His vision focuses in time to see an elbow rocketing toward his face. Cuarto almost blacks out as his body goes limp, and falls out of the ring, crashing onto the Church of the Holy Technico's floor.

Kasai rolls out of the ring after his opponent and grips his world-famous mask. The hood, primarily red with black embellishments, has gold interlacing. It swirls around the eye and mouth holes to invoke mirroring hatchets. The El Hacha family has handed this mask down from generation to generation; now, it's Cuarto's.

A wicked smile creeps onto Kasai's face, and he points down the aisle past a dozen rows of pews filled with family and friends. At the end sits a coffin. A glass window on top of it allows all to see El Hacha Tercer as he lies in his final resting place.

Kasai grabs his opponent's hand and Irish whips him into the coffin. Cuarto's sternum crashes into the wooden box, knocking the wind out of him. Bending over, he clutches his chest, and finds himself face to face, and mask to mask, with his deceased father.

Even in death, he looks disappointed.

The son of the corpse can feel fingers as they spider-walk the back of his mask. They dig in, and Kasai yanks Cuarto's head backward. Looking Xavier directly in the eyes, Kasai gives him the middle finger and then shatters the windowpane with Cuarto's head. Glass embeds both El Hacha's faces.

Kasai lets go, and Cuarto crumples to the Church floor. He can hear his namesake's coffin creak as his enemy climbs to the top. The plan is to catch Kasai as he dives onto him with a crossbody block and body slam him down.

Yet, Cuarto is woozy, and Kasai is in the air before he can get his bearings. His abs slam into the luchador's mask, and he falls back, bouncing his bleeding head off the wooden floors.

"Shit, Cuarto! Are you okay?" Cuarto's Japanese opponent whispers to him in perfect English.

The luchador taps his back, letting him know he's okay. "Throw me in, and Topé," Cuarto whispers back.

Kasai obliges, pulls him back to his feet, and shoves him into the ring. He stalls by screaming obscenities in Japanese at the family.

"You suck!" Xavier screams back. "You wouldn't have it this easy with the real El Hacha!"

Hearing this, sadness creeps into Cuarto. Not even in this fantasy world does the El Hacha family believe in him. Clutching his ears, the rhythmic clapping and chanting of the crowd echo through his head. They're not cheering for him; they're cheering *against* Atsushi Kasai.

"I'll show them. I'm not my father, and I don't need to be. He could barely leave his feet," Cuarto tells himself. "I'm going to perform the most beautiful Topé Suicida anyone has ever seen!"

Cuarto takes time planning his next move, punches the mat three times, and yells to psych himself up. He rises to his feet, and Kasai turns around, making eye contact with him. They nod and know it's time.

After a few hops to warm up his knees, Cuarto bounces off the ropes and dashes toward his opponent. Halfway across the ring, his boot slips on a

puddle of blood, and his feet go out from underneath him. His neck collides with the middle rope, which launches the dead man's son back into the middle of the ring. El Hacha Cuarto lies motionless.

The El Hacha family stares in stunned silence.

Atsushi Kasai, the friend Cuarto invited to perform at this funeral, rushes to his side. "Just stay down," he commands.

Kasai rolls Cuarto onto his back and covers his body with his own. The referee drops to his knees and counts, but Cuarto lifts his shoulder at two. "Not here," he replies. "Tubes, then bring it home."

The genuinely lovely man pretending to be evil picks up a bundle of loose light tubes and shatters them over the luchador's back. Each shot opens multiple lacerations and causes his skin to peel off his shoulder.

The Grand Wrestling Champion, Odelia Riot, has an exceptional seat in the front row, surrounded by her bodyguards. Silently, she studies her future contenders as El Hacha Cuarto's family chants, "Holy Shit!" to the massacre unfolding.

As he lies there, he can see the corpse in the corner of his eye. Cuarto grimaces at the sight of his father's mask, the same one he now wears. Memories of his past take over, and he clenches his jaw harder and harder with each shot. Looking past the dead body, he sees Xavier, who has lost interest in the match and is now watching TikTok on his phone.

His jaw clenches harder, cracking a row of teeth in his mouth.

At this moment, he has nothing else to give. Nothing else to prove.

Cuarto breathes in deep, exhaling a cloud of smoke. It billows out of his lungs, floats up, and stings Kasai in his eye. "The fuck!?" Kasai screams in Japanese as he drops his weapon and clutches his face.

His mother, Mama Hacha, runs to ringside, clutching a hatchet. Wearing a customized version of the family mask, hiding all her features behind a black veil. Having not spoken a word since her husband's death, she attempts to yell, "Not the smoke!" at Cuatro with sign language.

The crowd buzzes as their hero's son slowly stands up, but he is no longer doing it for them. This is for himself.

Cuarto mimes smoking an imaginary cigarette and blows out a massive smoke ring. The ring morphs into the shape of a hand and picks up a broken section of a light tube off the mat.

"No, son! The hatchet! The hatchet! Not the smoke!" his mother signs, pleading.

Without warning, the smoke hand stabs the light tube through Kasai's good eye. Blood drips out the other side of the glass tube as his lifeless body topples over. Cuarto steps onto Kasai's chest, and the referee counts to three.

The crowd erupts with applause as Mama Hacha runs crying from ringside.

Cuarto doesn't waste a second soaking in the misplaced admiration or checking on Kasai. Odelia Riot watches him as he rolls out of the ring and charges to the makeshift dressing room.