

QUANTUM MARLOWE

by

Glenn Lazar Roberts

CHAPTER 1

'Dinero or die.' The words echoed in my brain like drops of tequila on the floor of a Tijuana bar. The smirk on the face of the jailhouse guard as he imagined fifty grand wired from my Ex in Idaho as ransom might still be glued in place. I didn't know. And didn't give a damn. I stepped through the wall and the molecules that formed the gypsum and paint on the building that was the pride of Ciudad Juarez again became impenetrable. Outside, I re-attached my finger and turned and snorted. Pinky—I smiled at the nickname. *'Pinky' this, moronista!* I told you last night no jail could hold me.

How many times would I have to play this game? I could have cut another notch in my belt, if I bothered to keep count, and if that jailhouse jerk had not taken my new Italian belt along with my new Italian tie. Squinting in the blazing sun of late afternoon, I clutched my pants and strode casually up the deserted alley behind the jailhouse, past soiled clothing and discarded plastic bags. I looked up at the mayor's office where a light shined brighter in a lone window from the third floor as darkness slowly crept. Yeah, keep it up, José. You'll learn soon enough. Once your pals find out, they'll be jerking your chain—and a lot more besides. Welcome to the Club of Sudden Bad News.

At the only exit not blocked by barbed wire, the alley gave onto a parking lot cratered with potholes. The *moronista's* twin had propped his taco-eating bulk in a sagging chair that wondered what it had ever done to deserve a daily crushing by Godzilla. One eye peered. Detecting no car lurching from pothole to pothole to make a break for the street without *El Generalissimo de Tacos'* permission, the eye settled on me. Hand over face to block the sun, I stared back with one of my own. I upended an imaginary bottle, stumbled to a halt for his reply. The gate-guard frowned and jerked a silent thumb. *Salir de aqui,*

borracho. As his baggy eye shut, I dragged my feet to the street as if to beg for booze elsewhere. Silently smirked. Civil servant exams are the same everywhere.

Across the four-lane road and around the corner I glimpsed a pair of young boys offering younger girls to Escalades and BMW's as the vehicles paused at a street light. Another time I might have donated some pesos. Today was different. Keeping alert for a pair of Land Rovers, I halted in front of the nearest taquería and snapped my fingers. The pair turned their dirt-smudged faces to the short earnest stranger even more unwashed than they. They hesitated at first. But with no more suits in cars filled with mountain-cold air rushing for the International Bridge to get the hell out of Juarez before dark, *los jovenes* took a gamble with their precious time and sauntered near.

They stared. I stared back, one hand holding up my chalk-dusted ivory Canali's. I fixed my gaze half-way down the nearest boy. If this were Bangkok, a fat over-aged Madame would have leapt from the shadows to close the deal with a grin. But this was Shitty Juarez and the punk handed me his belt, his hand upturned for dollars in exchange. Snatching it, I belted my pants, hooked the buckle, and reached for my wallet. Being Napoleonic in size sometimes has its advantages. As I made the usual moves to fling out a bill, the boys' eyes lit up—and froze as I crossed my arms.

I raked a finger across my neck and frowned (my wallet was with my tie and belt).

The punks bolted. Tie or no tie, I knew they would not harass a gringo in a suit. My ears alert for signs of angry pursuit by City Hall and Co., I turned and slouched through Jerusalem—or what was as close to the Heavenly City as Shitty Juarez could become.

Blocks from the Bridge, I turned down a familiar street, hugging the deepening shadows. Too familiar. The same green Oldsmobile was still double-parked in front of the same grey-steel plated shop, the ramshackle building cased in metal and plastered with full-color photos of girls engaged in acts that could have taught that Bangkok Madame a thing or two. As I stared, the last cars faded into night along with the posters. The street did have streetlights. And during the day they were impressive. But this was night and the City was descending into darkness more complete than London during the Blitz, not a single streetlight working. Night in the City of Juarez, named after a Mexican

who hated gringos so much that he shot every Frenchie he captured during some War against the Frogs, which made his pals so happy they married his name to Shit.

I was here and I was stuck and it wasn't my god damn fault.

But I knew whose fault it was.

I laid my glance up and down *la calle*. Night in Juarez was not a place anyone wanted to be, and the street was already clear of the usual parade of two-legged fleshpots. A pop reverberated in the distance as if celebrating the death of the sun—another source of ecstasy to members of the Bad News Club. I knew better than to remain for long. Just as I knew better than to do the tango where laymen could see, or make a strange appearance that might trigger lots of gab.

A glance inside the Oldsmobile showed nothing had been touched—which was all the proof of guilt I needed, since otherwise not even the car doors would remain intact. Reaching under the back fender I felt for a belt of thick tape. Stripped it off. My palm closed on a cylinder of steel. I tossed the tape in the gutter and perched the barrel in the small of my back behind my new kid-sized belt.

Shuffling drunkenly next door like I had sighted a half-empty bottle—to ward off any curious eyes—I leaned against the only door on the block that lacked a Chinese Wall of steel reinforcement. Not that the type of molecule mattered. I pretended to inspect the ground, my eyes again scanning the horizon for eyes and ears, especially those peering *jovenes*, sharp beyond their years. Barely taller than them, I could generally count on being mistaken for a *joven* myself, and the growing dirt on my Italian custom suit and the scuff marks on my Italian shoes were beginning to make me one of the crowd, only the absence of a Pancho Villa broom on my upper lip to match my gringo Elvis hair giving me away.

Without a sound, I slid off the tip of my jack-leg finger. My hitch digit punched the red button implanted in the stump and a change in the color of the rusty wood of the door told me the tango was working. One last look at the deepening shadows of *la calle* and I faced the wall. My ears rang with the high-pitched whine I had learned to expect each time I fucked with nature's giblets, and again I wondered why the hell *they* had done this

to me. Who the hell fucks over his worst enemy, gives him the keys to the Universe, then fucks him over again? Well, who gives a fuck. That's their hard luck. I stroked the barrel behind my back. It was just about to get harder.

*Istanbul was Constantinople
Now it's Istanbul, not Constantinople
Been a long time gone, Constantinople
Now it's Turkish delight on a moonlit night.*

With that, I stepped forward and the tango was done, and round lights stabbing the darkness morphed into a single night-lamp. Behind me was the nether edge of the joint's double-jointed triple-locked door, the molecules back in place, not necessarily where they should be, but back where they had been.

The room turned out to be barely larger than a Greyhound restroom stall and I gave one quick rubber-necked turn to make sure no stray Garcia or Gonzalez was camped inside—or, worse, Montez and Muck. An absence of chainsaw snoring signaled clear. I slid the fingertip back on. Gave it the usual twist. Felt it contact the tiny O-ring that ensured silence in use. My smirk turned into a smile. When Pinky gives them the finger, they stay fingered.

I paused to catch my breath.

Crossing to the stall's side wall that stretched ocher under the night-lamp, I again plucked it off. My pinky was getting a lot of action—more than usual. My thumb squeezed the red button. Bubbling spumed on the wall, the ocher transforming into a miniature version of that volcanic pit on Mount Kea that never fucking heals. The tango had different moves on different dance floors.

*Istanbul was Constantinople
Now it's Istanbul, not Constantinople. . .*

I stepped through. I emerged on the far side, the high whine of pained giblets again receding in my ears. In front, videocams and back-light frames and sound booms littered the place. I smiled again at the irony. The most secretive operation on the planet brought in spare cash by making video shoots for *los pescas grandes*, the Big Fishes, the operation sucking up *el dinero* from the very same *los Jefes* who 'offered' it protection—and not only of the shiny steel type that covered the joint's windows after dark.

A glance at my pants reminded me of the jailhouse dust and dirt and I brushed off what I could until my new Canali suit regained a semblance of its former glory. Ain't no point in shuffling onstage looking like a bum. After all, when you're four-foot-eleven, you gotta do something to get noticed. Shining each shoe on the back of a pant leg and rubbing my nails on the inner side of each underarm till they gleamed, I walked. Halfway across the room I climbed the step that divided the room in two, steps always more of an effort for me than most, but hell if I would ever tell. I had just learned what it meant to give a clue to M&M. And they were about to learn that not everything melts in one's mouth.

A soft glow betrayed itself from a back room.

Inching closer, I fancied I was back in the Vatican, my new shoes stroking luxury carpet beneath the silent gaze of ancient statues of long-dead hot-shit big-shots. As distant as those frozen gazes were, mine was up-front, in the here and now.

This was personal.

My eyes focused on two figures whose backs were turned. In a dark warehouse, they sat on four-legged stools before a wooden bar strewn with scribbled papers while they stared into wide computer screens reviewing a project. On the left a full head of white hair ended in a long white ponytail. On the right a bald head reflected colored lights from the rows of monitors as if in a discotheque.

My smile broadened to a grin. This was better than I expected. Withdrawing the pistol from the small of my back, I leveled the business end at the pair.

“*Plomo—o plata?*” My voice echoed through the otherwise quiet room.

The two heads stiffened. Slowly the bar stools swiveled till both faced me. My innards melted with joy at the panic that crossed their faces as recognition dawned.

“That's the preferred language, *mis amigos*. Not '*dinero or die*'!” I sniffed scornfully. “I mean, who talks like that this side of the Big Ditch? Next time you stab a friend in the back, you should learn the lingo, then you could coach your *compadres* better before sending them to do your dirty work. If you have any questions about how things work hereabouts, ask *me* first! After all, I've had lots of spare time to learn since you dumped me here.”

Baldy and Ponytail exchanged nervous glances but said nothing. Only their eyes moved.

I turned to Ponytail. “What's the matter, *Bob*? When the hell has the great Bob Montez ever been short on words? *Gato* got your tongue?” My eyebrows rose in mock seriousness. Baldy, also silent, shot a panicked glance at his white-haired comrade. My heart swelled with satisfaction to see his eyes round with terror.

“And what about you, *Jack*? Nothing left for you to muck around with?” I turned the pistol horizontal gangsta-style, unable to resist a little intimidation in his direction too. A nervous tic took hold of Baldy's chin. Slaver drooled as he struggled to speak, too terrified to utter a word. I watched his eyes flick imploringly at Ponytail, then back to the gun that I weaved evilly in his smooth hairless face. I continued to stare into Jack's eyes, upward despite the fact that he sat while I stood. Sometimes being Napoleonic in size is merely napoleonic.

“That's right, Muck. It's *Pinky*—Pinky as ever was. Say Hi to my newest finger, Jack—only this one is blue-steel Colt.” I laughed, unable to contain my joy. “How do you like that? Jack Muck as speechless as Bob Montez! *Gato* got your tongue, too? Or should I say *perro*?” I threw my face to the ceiling and howled like a dog. Danced a jig on my hind legs. “Awooo! The great Jack Muck, Founder of Sirius Enterprises, helpless as one of his prize poodles.” I stepped closer—thrust the barrel of the Colt in Jack's flabby face. “What do you think of this, Jack? How does this fit into your little scheme? Why, I oughta. . .”

But I calmed. Breathing deeper to regain control—another little thing I learned in the Vatican—I stepped back. Double-checked the cylinder of the old-fashioned piece that I had picked up for a few pesos when M&M first dropped me in Shitty Juarez with hardly a doubloon. “After all I've done for you. And after what you've done to me. With that kind of history, you throw me away like a piece of meat, give me up like day-old coffee, and let that Nazi José. . .” An angry look emanated from Jack's hairless face. “Oh, *scuza mia*—that *Peronista* Mayor José.” The look relaxed a trifle. I thrust the barrel in Jack's face till he relaxed no more. “That *jerk* Mayor who is still a fucking Nazi to me so don't cry to me Argentina!”

I stepped back again. I love gloating. Always have. Almost as much as complaining. This was my chance to do both, topped off by a sweet cherry of revenge. I pressed the barrel against Jack's bald temple.

“Why'd ya do it, Jack?” I hissed. “It wasn't enough to drop me in this hellhole? Couldn't you just be happy raising your poodles? Did you have to go back to the Man in the Moon? You said you were over that phase of your life!”

Still no response from the blubbering bald poodle-lover squatting on the swivel chair before me, the range of busy monitors behind him showing windows on unnameable places, including some that looked like craters. It was starting to get weird.

“And you, *Bob*. . .” I stretched out his foul name like its letters hid an infinitude of secret meanings. “How could you let Jack do it? You've always been Jack's gabby sidekick. Why did you let him turn me over to El Chapo? You know what Chapo does to snitches? It has a lot to do with chop-suey—but not so pleasant. Chapo was already on his way to Mayor José to take me for a 'ride' when I managed to do the tango and *vamoos* the hell out of there. But his appointment was way too close to keep me cool and dry.”

Bob flicked his eyes back to Jack. Still neither spoke. Or moved.

“Ok, so you wanted me to put the finger on Nazi José and El Chapo. I got it. So you said 'Find them' and dropped me in Juarez. Well, I found them. But I never gave permission for you to do what you did to me, and I never wanted any part of this little Enterprise of yours. Still, I did the tango on your promise not to touch my Ex—not that I

give a fuck about that bitch anymore—but old times is old times. I thought you understood that. And what did you do to repay me?”

Lurching forward, I thrust the short-barreled Colt against the side of Bob's head, almost entangling the rod in his thick white ponytail.

“You squealed. You sang like a capro in spring, like a canary in Hackensack, like a Bonanno wearin a wire *at his daughter's weddin!*” I spat a big one on the floor. “Turned me over to the Bad News Club with nary a thought, left me to get sacrificed to their Sun God of Death. You know what that does to one's yoga high?” I pressed the barrel harder. “Huh? One's meditation kinda takes a nose-dive after that. You think it's easy to escape from that kind of bear-trap? Red button or no red button, you can't just walk away and slink out of town after the Club has your number. They'll be hot on my trail soon—if they're not outside already. They may be stupid, but they ain't dumb. They know where you are. And they know I'll be coming after *you* to get even!”

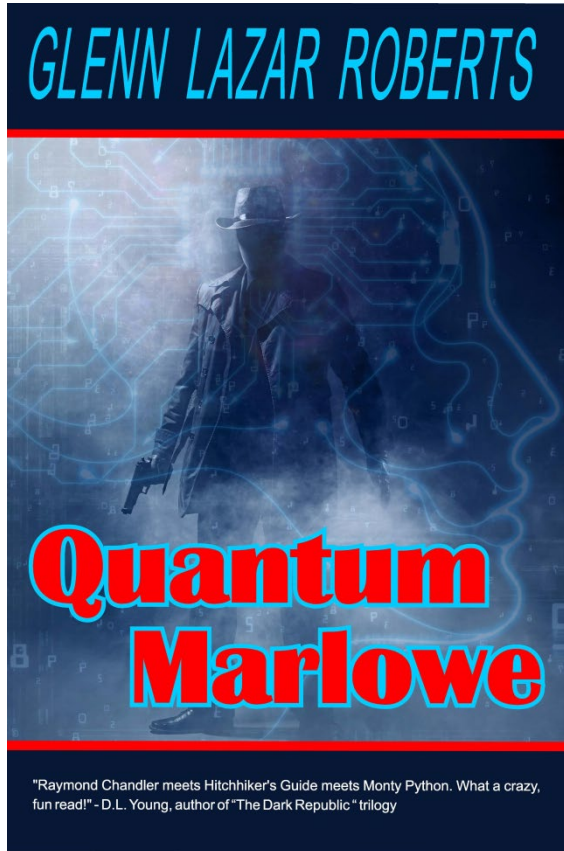
Bob and Jack exchanged those silent glares again, this time their brows showed signs of movement. Unpleasant signs. For some reason they didn't seem happy.

“But you know what, *muchachos*? It's time for lights out. Yeah, buddies, since it always has to be *all about you*, I see no reason why this shouldn't be about you as well. You gotta pay, my friends. You can't do what you did to me and *not* pay. This lap dance is over. It's time to pay the cat-house Madame.”

I took a deep breath, let my lungs take a walk. Opening the cylinder of the Colt, I inspected the chambers to make sure it still contained *plomos*, and snapped it shut. With the deliberateness of an undertaker, I raised the barrel and aimed. . .



I saw ya sneakin a peak over here, boss. But ya ain't gonna find the rest of the story unless ya buy the book. . . Here's where ya do that:



Pete Marlowe, a tiny but tough private detective, is having a bad day. Two mad scientists abducted him, lopped off his little finger, and installed a red button that enables him to walk through walls. Now they are blackmailing him to do their bidding. Can “Pinky’s” street smarts survive the scientists’ border-jumping between dimensions? Or is Pete destined to be marooned in a parallel universe? Quantum mechanics meets hard-boiled detective in this classic film noir take-off of the famous novels by Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett.

“When Pinky gives them the finger, they stay fingered. I’m just that kinda guy.”

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REVIEWS

of Quantum Marlowe

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“Pete Marlowe isn’t five feet tall, but the hardboiled detective PI can usually take care of himself with his smarts, his mouth, and his favorite Colt 45. This crazy narrative starts out all crime film noir and proceeds into overwhelming fantasy sci-fi, quantifiably unusual and uniquely quirky. At the Vatican, the reader begins to get a glimmer that this isn’t just a simple fantasy sci-fi. It quickly becomes so multi-layered, so complicated and complex that if you weren’t paying attention you’d be lost now. There is a parallel universe (actually universes), however, as otherwise our clever Italian Canali suited detective would never have survived the mobsters who send him deep into Mexico to a hidden Aztec pyramid in the mountains of the Sierra Madre to deal with the cartel, who are actually pretty clever themselves... Roberts notes in his bio that he loves language. No kidding, as this story is chock full of humorous metaphors, similes, twists of well-known clichés, phrases, and all manner of tongue-in-cheek connotations, innuendoes, and insinuations. The well-plotted and fast-moving intricate narrative involves multiple well-developed personalities. Dialogue runs from typical forties film noir to the wacky. Reading this book becomes a quasi-train wreck scenario. You can’t believe where this is going and you have to see for yourself how it is going to conclude. Recommended for die-hard fans of exceptional avant-garde fantasy sci-fi prose.” —Virginia Williams (5 out of 5 stars)

“Glenn Lazar Roberts is one of the finest writers of unconventional prose in contemporary fiction. His wonderfully inventive plots and mastery of the language place him in the company of Calvino, Burges, Gass...” —C. Thorman, author *Holy Orders*



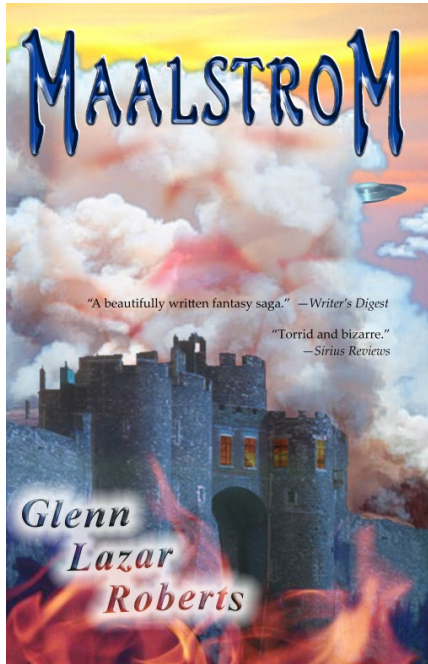
Glenn Lazar Roberts is an attorney and writer of sci-fi, horror, satire, and adventure fantasy novels. Glenn has taught college, professionally translated Arabic and Russian, hosts a writing critique circle, and has edited the work of many aspiring writers. He credits an eclectic group of famous authors for inspiring him to write, including Jack Vance, Robert E. Howard, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Mervyn Peake, H.P. Lovecraft, Arthur C. Clarke, and H.G. Wells, among many other Masters of the Art. "I love language. I am perpetually afloat on a sea of script."

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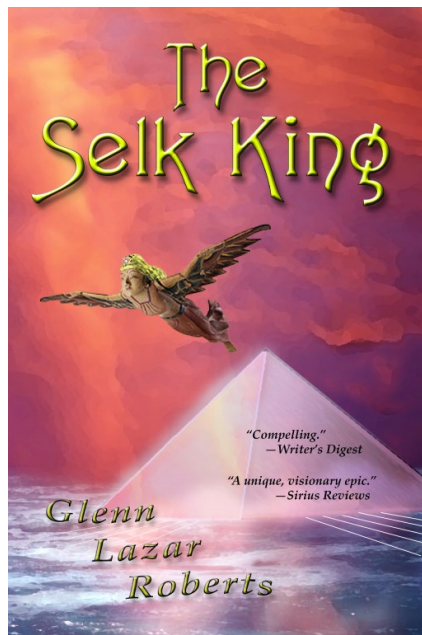
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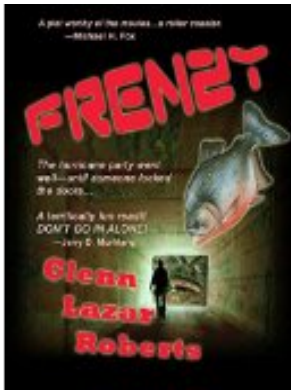
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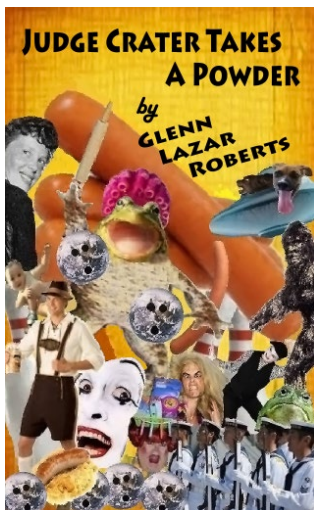


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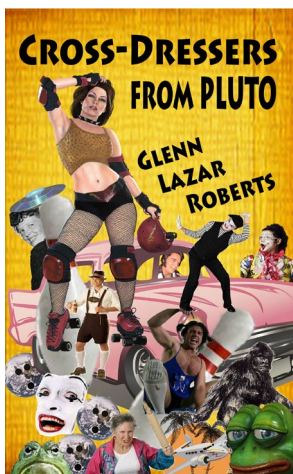


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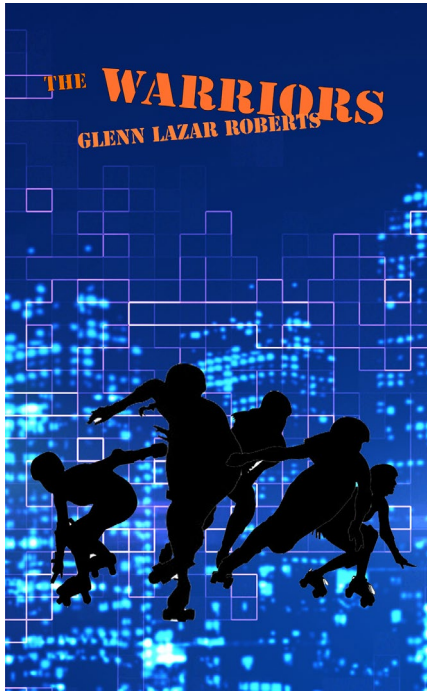
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