

Thistle

(the first three chapters of a novel. Contact Arkady if you'd like to read more).

CHAPTER ONE

She didn't know how old she was. Perhaps eleven, perhaps twelve. She didn't know where she came from. Her earliest memory was running down a road with hundreds of ragged people while the sky burned and the ground shook. Threading between mounds of blackened corpses, her throat drier than the desert that stretched on in all directions, she had been driven blindly forward for many days. Of her parents she knew nothing. If they lived they were forever lost to her now. A great war had left a vast horde of children in such desperate conditions. Like a filthy wave they had washed against the ancient stone city of Fornanze along the western shore of Zhamyl. Orphans and thieves, they lived under the Great Dock along the Cassquieen Sea. A year after arriving at her dismal new home, the girl had fought off an older, larger boy who fancied her dinner of spoiled clams. She defended her meager fare with such ferocity her assailant backed off, declaring her tougher than chewing on a cotton thistle. She was known thereafter as Thistle.

The summers were the worst. By mid morning the heat and humidity reached down under the Dock and the normally cool sanctuary began a slow simmer. The urchins would be driven out - up into the sunlit world where the tall masted cargo ships strained at their moorings while an endless stream of turbaned banji men hauled cargo on and off. This was a dangerous time for the dock orphans. Hiding atop piles of rickety boxes, or lurking in the shadows of the tall ships, the slavers waited like fat black spiders for a child to be separated from his pack. Then it was snip, snap, into a burlap bag and off to the charnel houses where life was actually worse than on the Dock, but mercifully short.

To survive meant staying together, for even the slavers and banji men would steer clear of a dozen or so feral wharf rats, as the children were called. Thistle was fast and skinny and tough as boiled leather, so the others stayed close by. Like her pack mates, She wore whatever she could steal until it rotted off her frame, usually a disheveled mix of fish netting, leather straps and dangling metal fetishes crudely fashioned in the shape of stars or crescents. On a good day the group might distract a bored guard while Thistle snuck into the hold of some foreign schooner and made off with bread fruit or plantains. Sometimes a crate would slip from its rigging and come crashing down on the great wide avenue of the East Dock, splitting open and revealing enormous mounds of exotic fare from some distant shore. Before the stevedores could shoo them away, the rat children would pick the crate clean. But those were the good days. More often they would eat bitter seaweed or nothing at all. Life might have gone on like this for Thistle until she simply laid

down in the mud and the foam and starved. The children were fireflies on the wind, doomed to a brutish ephemeral existence. Most citizens of the ancient port city tried to pretend Thistle and her brethren didn't even exist. In this regard the children obliged them by dying out of sight of the general population. Where the orphans went after was a topic of idle speculation in the long summer afternoons.

"I heard when you stop breathing, your soul slips out of your ear and heads down into the wrecks under the harbor," Paulo said. "The pickings are better down there." Paulo was the runt of the litter, and saddled with enormous ears as well.

"That's just stupid talk," Thistle said and shook her head. "It's all slimy and cold under the Casquieen. And besides, the sharks would eat your soul." Many children nodded in agreement because Thistle always sounded like she knew what she was talking about and she stole more food than any of them.

"They wouldn't even want Paulo's smelly stringy soul!" shouted Okiam and everyone laughed. The children sat atop a barrier wall where they could view the wide curve of the harbor and remain hidden. From here intricate fingers and branching of the Dock were revealed. But these massive granite flourishes and ornamentations were on an inhuman scale, and seemed to have been built with little regard for the ships that must berth alongside them. Even the children could see that. They were the Obsidian Pack, feared by all other wharf rats and even the banji men. Their mark was a horizontal slash supported by three legs for the dock, and a triangle with glowing red eyes looming over, for the Obsidian Wolf. They ruled a kingdom of mud and garbage, and were despised by the grey stone city of Fornanze, which sprawled across the five hills above the harbor.

Thistle threw a stone high across the sparkling waves. "When you die, you get to meet your father," she whispered. "Your father and mother can find you easily when you're a ghost and they take you up the five to a house full of sesame bread and fresh water and they tell you how much they missed you." The pack was silent for a while, absorbing this idea. Thistle laughed and smiled her crooked smile. "I'm just larking you, wolves. When you die your stinking carcass rots until the gulls pick you're bones clean and that's the end of it." The children jeered at her but offered no counter argument. Thistle nodded and threw more stones. Under the dirt and scowl she was probably quite pretty, jet black hair and deep green eyes set above fine cheekbones. But in her world these were not assets but dangers. So she hacked off her tresses, rubbed charcoal in her hair and dirt on her face and always looked over her shoulder for the slavers. Young girls were prized above all on the auction block. But she wasn't afraid, not ever. This was her mantra, repeated each night: not afraid - not ever.

"So you're not scared of ghosts, then? Okiam asked. He had followed her over to the old stone tower away from the rest of the group where she sat drawing in the dust.

"No such thing as ghosts."

Okiam nodded and squatted down beside her. He wore little more than a loin cloth in the summer heat and smelled of musk and sweat. On his sunburned face was a perpetual scowl, as if the effort of making sense of the world was annoying. If they lived to see the next summer he planned to make her his bed warmer. Thistle had a clear enough understanding of the details and was not entirely receptive to the idea. "Right," he said. "No such thing. Probably. Anyway, I been down to the bone flats and no ghost ate me. There is stuff to be taken down there, though."

Thistle looked up from her noodling. "'What sort of stuff?'"

Okiam shrugged. "Knick knacks and the like. Stuff that Obsidian Wolves found and then took to their grave. Maybe pearls or gold coins, eh?"

"Your larking me, you ass. No Obsidian Wolf ever had no gold coins."

"You think you know everything, Thistle. I've seen plenty you can't wrap your mind around." Okiam was broad shouldered and in the first throws of puberty, which made him moody and somewhat of a prick, but Thistle tolerated him because he sang her nasty sea chanteys that made her laugh. "There's old bones stretched out for three miles past Coventry. I've found a sword and a lock box out there so far."

"Where's the sword?"

"Rusted and broke."

"Where's the lock box?"

I gave it to a girl so she would....oh never mind, you're too young and stupid anyway."

Thistle came to a decision quickly. "Show me."

"Nah." Okiam had entered a mood.

Thistle kicked him in the shin. "Show me."

"You little sea cow, I've gutted bastards for less than that."

"Try it."

Okiam was quick to anger but needed Thistle to manage the troop. "Okay." he laughed, "We'll see who's scared and whose not. Tonight, then. We'll go pick the bones."

The Dock stretched on for miles. Bleached white in the glaring equatorial sun like old bones, and for a fact, the harbor of Fornanze was ancient beyond the memory of man. Languid and dreaming, the vast structure dwarfed the stream of humanity between the sea and the city, so that from the looming parapets, one could scarcely tell a princess of high lineage from a dirty guttersnipe. The Old Builders had laid out

the Dock in a half circle some forty miles in diameter, conforming to the natural harbor. Underneath was a twilight world, quiet save for the crashing surf towards the ribbon of blue that was the Casqueen, which could be glimpsed through the massive pillars. Underneath was a damp cruel cathedral that ran on without end. But from above...

It had amused The Builders to arrange for the various slips and fingers to form a design which could be seen in its entirety only by those on the slopes of the Five Hills. From their ironwood and granite manses the citizens looked down on an immense hieroglyph that meant "Never Forget". Unfortunately, down through the long march of centuries, not one citizen was left in Fornanze who remembered what exactly it was they should not forget. So it goes.

Laid over the vast structure, as if successive waves had left a detritus or plaque, the buildings of latter day humanity seemed more insubstantial. Rough shingled merchant shops leaned alarmingly towards disreputable pubs and streets that seemed to follow no plan or justification. Stray dogs and children scurried to avoid spoke wheeled drays harnessed to querulous scarlet lizards. Cart vendors shouted in sing song cadence the supremacy of their wares. Sailors in uniforms of varying splendor or disrepair sought out the warehouses identified by garish statues of Yling, goddess of fornication. Spaced haphazardly within these twisting overhung streets were cobblestoned central squares where unfortunate debtors or prisoners were sold at slave auctions. From the city above they looked down and called this place Dogtown.

Sometime just after noon, the Obsidian Wolves encountered the Merciless Scimitars along the Temple Road connecting Dogtown to Fornanze. The Scimitars were an older rival gang of no small standing and things might have gone badly if not for the diplomacy that Thistle excelled in.

"Ho! The Scimitars look as hungry as the excellent Obsidian Wolves," cried out Thistle. Okiam stood back and let her speak, though he was the nominal head of the Wolves.

"So?" answered their lump nosed leader. "Be thankful it's too hot to wipe that smirk off your face, Weed Girl." The boy wore a huge wire through his cheek to detract from the unfortunate nose. "So...nothing worth chasing on your end?"

"The banji men are in a foul mood, every last one. Something bad is going to happen. The Dock is sewed up tight today."

"That's why we're going up the five," a skinny kid in the rear of the Scimitars shouted.

"Shut up," Lump nose said. "That's why we're going up the five hills," he informed Thistle gravely. Like most boys along the harbor he was a little smitten with and little scared of the girl. "Want to call a truce today?"

“Let’s go to the Old Gods Temple. Sometimes people leave offerings to them,” Thistle suggested. The two bands of thieves merged and flowed through the brush that ran alongside the Temple Road. Presently they came upon the Old Gods Temple. As its name suggested, the building was in disrepair. Great cracks ran up the fluted marble columns and leaves covered over the inlaid tiles that told stories to the pilgrims paying tribute. Precious few now. The old stone gods stared blankly from faces worn smooth through the eons and silence filled the antechamber. In another age a band of children in such a setting might have whooped and hollered, but not the wharf rats. Quite as mice they stole between the columns, over the vestibules and through the sepulchres. In the end all they found were two shriveled apples and a bouquet of colander. A boy from the Scimitars and a tiny girl with the Wolves began fighting over the scraps but the others just stared apathetically. One particularly hungry Scimitar suggested they should go raid the Temple of Odeko but no one even bothered to reply. That would be suicide on a day when the banji were in turmoil. And even the hungriest among them never once thought of despoiling the Temple of Shia J’n Ran. Eventually the troops went their separate ways, hurling vague insults and dire promises as they parted.

Before they saw it, the children heard the trouble. Screams and curses and a thudding sound like sacks of melons being spilled off a pallet. The Wolves crept beside the road through brambles until they came to a crumbling stone fence. From here they could view the commotion ahead. A platform had been erected in the middle of the Temple Road just outside the city proper. It had not been there that morning, which was a bad sign in itself. Nothing happened quickly in Dogtown except death. However, the possibility of stealing some food outweighed the children’s fear. It was already late afternoon, and no more cargo was likely to be unloaded back at the Dock. The prospect of another night without supper loomed. And so the pack advanced another hundred yards. A stand of dry rushes lay between the road and the canal that ran alongside. The Obsidian Wolves by unanimous decree instructed Thistle to continue the investigation. Okiam prodded her silently and scowled for good measure. But she was already padding through the underbrush and grinning fiercely; this was what she lived for.

A wild mob of banji dockworkers were being restrained by a troop of Fornanzian soldiers, who made a sport of clubbing and beating the unarmed workers. On the makeshift pedestal, an old banji had been nailed to a post. The sounds were not melons splitting but the old man himself. His paper thin skin was inadequate protection from the hail of stones pelting him. This was clear from the amount of innards that had spilled onto the platform and the sharp white bones emerging from his mangled limbs. Thistle told herself he must surely be long dead, but then he coughed and spit up more blood. A low terrible sound escaped from the onlookers. The dying man looked into her eyes for a moment and Thistle shuddered. She neither loved nor hated banji men; they were as ubiquitous as grains of sand. But this was madness. Everyone knew you didn’t provoke the Banjir Haz, no more than you would tease a scorpion. The soldiers, sweating in their leather girdles and leggings, tried to affect a swagger, but Thistle could smell their fear. As for the old priests who flung the stones, all their fine silk robes and fancy

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skull caps could not hide the animal fury, the spittle falling from quivering, lipless mouths. Thistle looked away. This was the traditional method of execution for heretics, but how could a banji be a heretic when they took no oath to the Teshe J'n Wor?

Thistle retreated into the rushes and rejoined her pack. The Obsidian Wolves made a wide detour around the public stoning. There would be no dinner tonight.

CHAPTER TWO

The sun hung low in the west, a giant red fireball. From the southern desert the siroccos blew hot dry wind that burned the throat but drove back the sea mist. Fornanze dreamed in the balance. Thistle made the usual excuses and slipped away from the others. Her secret hiding place was a small alley choked in discarded fishing net. She hopped up and then under the netting, where she dug up a stash of dried figs. Sitting on her haunches she gulped down her dinner warily, her eyes darting left and right. Her stomach still growled as she carefully rewrapped half of her meager supper. From there it was only a small sneak through a courtyard filled with clotheslines then behind a set of makeshift tents filled with all manner of fabrics and dye vats. Here was a barrel of fresh water kept out for the drayage horses. If properly timed, the barrel could serve as Thistle's bath. Although she kept a disguise of char and dirt on her face and clothes, underneath her rags she tried to keep as clean as possible. This was not information she shared with the other Obsidian Wolves. Finished with her toilet, the princess of mud emerged from the alley into the cool evening.

This was her favorite time, when the prayer bells would ring from the towers and the smell of food roasting on skewers wafted along the teeming boardwalks. Small fires sprang to life and cups of wine were poured to celebrate the passage of another week. The palm trees were silhouetted against the deep cobalt sky. All along the canal street, families emerged from squat, thick walled sandstone dwellings to sip tea and enjoy the cooling desert air on their meager porches. Thistle strolled along as if she had just enjoyed a fine dinner of quail and endive. Cats and carriage lizards recognized her as a kind soul, and followed at a discrete distance, though she seldom had a treat for them. She paused to watch a group of street performers acting out a farce in which a maiden searched everywhere for her lost virginity.

"Can you help me, darling," The pretty actress called out. "I'm sure I had my virginity last night at the fair, but when I woke up this morning it was nowhere to be found!"

Thistle allowed herself a half smile while other onlookers howled with laughter. She enjoyed the juggling and mock swordplay but could not stay; it would soon be time to meet with Okiam and go pick bones. But she had one appointment first.

Two years ago Thistle had met him; the old man. He was so poor he owned only one eye and it was doubtful how much he saw out of that. But in some distant past he had possessed its twin. In his wonderings, so he had informed Thistle, he had seen more than twenty men might in a lifetime. When he first caught her trying to steal from his cart, he had seemed more intent on impressing her than punishing. He was one of a few dozen merchants allowed to park his weathered old conveyance along the desirable south esplanade when all others were driven away.

A Ween by the look of him; he was tall and black skinned. Thistle assumed he paid off the banji men who jabbered and poked their hooked poles at other merchants of identical stature; threadbare raggedy men like him. The less favored cursed and retreated to unprofitable locations. Thinking to take advantage of just such a ruckus, Thistle had been caught with her hand in the old man's till when he spun about with surprising speed and gripped her wrist like vise. "Go ahead then," he had whispered from under his hooded robe. "Might as well satisfy your curiosity." She peeked into the battered tin box and saw not one coin.

"So now you have the audacity to scowl at me when you discover I'm too poor to rob? You are a most disagreeable young girl."

Thistle had tried to shake loose but he held her fast. She considered yelling rape but quickly abandoned that idea. The banji men had no love for her kind. But she feared being confined above all other things, so Thistle hissed and bit at her white bearded captor till she began to turn blue. He merely held her at arms length and let her exhaust herself. Then he calmly resumed his narrative. In the end she had little choice but to stand and listen to the senile old fool as he told his tale. He had not always been in such dire straits, selling candles along the dock. Once he had traveled the seas, first as a slave to the Juorin, then as a free man. He spoke of the great wonders of the world; the Geytun Stairway, the Sphinx and much else. He fondly remembered his days among the Canch, where the rivers flowed with honey and nutmeg. After a while he let loose of Thistle but instead of fleeing she rubbed her wrist and glared. Radiating her disapproval she sat down to hear more. While telling a particularly enthralling tale involving a mermaid and an enchanted suit of armor, the candle maker drew forth what was clearly his last bit of bread and split it in half, handing the food to Thistle without apparent thought. No one had ever done this in Thistle's short life. From that day on the old merchant had been so unrelentingly kind to Thistle that she gave up all notions of stealing his precious candles or nonexistent coins and, in fact, came to think of herself as the man's protector. She came back three days later to hear more, and then again the next night. After a year or so the old candle maker, whose name was Saliquin, told Thistle that he could not spend every night telling her tales. Thistle was heartbroken but would not show it, telling Saliquin his stories were boring anyway. But the old man only laughed and pulled something from the folds of his robe. Thistle tried not to look fascinated. It was a book, she knew that much. She had seen books before, though she could not remember when.

"Here are more stories than you can imagine, Thistle. Wonderful stories, which, as it happens, contain very important information for you." Saliquin stroked the parchment pages and the leather binding. "Of course, you would have to learn to read, which most citizens believe a wharf rat cannot do."

"I can so!" Thistle declared, not too young to see how she was being maneuvered. She was a clever wharf rat, and she loved the old man as far as it was in her nature to love. So began her education; every third night she would break away from her pack mates to seek out the old man and his book, and always she would bring a herring or a skewer of stolen meat, or at least some seaweed; for in all these years

she had seen him sell very few candles. On this particular evening though, she found Saliquun talking to a group of fellow Weens from the Isle of Birds, black as coal and towering above the banji, who gave them a wide berth. Thistle loved their fantastic headdresses and bright red robes. Not for the first time she wondered about the various peoples that walked Dogtown. Her own skin was darker than most of her pack mates, but nowhere near as dark as Saliquun. Okiam said she probably came from all the way on the other side of the Weeping Desert, which might as well been the hidden face of the divided moon for all she knew of it. She approached warily, moving from shadow to shadow.

“Ah, gentlemen, here is my young friend come to cheer me,” Said her mentor, who perceived the world quite well for a frail one eyed man. “Often I have tried to convince her to be my apprentice but the craft of candle making holds no appeal for her.” The Weens smiled and bowed with no apparent irony. After an exchange of small talk they purchased two tallow candles and went their way.

“You don’t want me to be your apprentice, not really,” Thistle gravelly offered Saliquun her package of figs when they were gone.

“Let us say rather, that I am not so old and foolish as to try to push a boulder up the Five Hills. You are meant for other things, young lady. Already you read better than anyone in Dogtown and that includes the tax collectors. We can only speculate on who your parents were, but surely they were educated folk.”

The girl shrugged. “More likely pig farmers, that’s what Okiam says.”

“And if it were true, would that be so bad?”

“They must have been weaklings. ‘Cause they let themselves get burned up and couldn’t save me. That’s what –“

“That’s what Okiam says, I know. He is a rash young man, Thistle, I can tell you that. He forgets to hold to the shadows like you do. His name becomes known along the causeway. Still, he may have the truth of it. Mmm. Of course, they might have been very heroic and tried –“

“I told you I don’t like to talk about it! Why do old people always talk about the past? If families are so great why aren’t you with yours?” Thistle glared at Saliquun.

“Forgive me, little one. You teach the teacher a good lesson.” Saliquun reached for the dog eared book but Thistle was distracted, her mood uncertain. She told the old man what had occurred on the Temple Road in her most off hand tone, as if such things happened every day.

“Why did they stone the banji man like that, Teacher?”

Saliquun pulled at his beard. “The City Fathers, up on the five. They sometimes agree to look the other way. But today they sent the city watch soldiers to help the priests; to help in their foolishness. Killing a prophet. Bad business. The banji men swear revenge.”

“What’s a prophet?”

When Saliquon smiled his face wrinkled into a ruin of cracks. “Well, a true prophet tells of things to come.”

“Why did they stone the man? The banji have their own god, don’t they?”

“He told them things they did not wish to hear, child.” Saliquon hesitated. “You have heard talk of the coming tide?”

Thistle nodded. The banji men whispered about it at their meals, and the sailors made warding signs when the subject arose. “The banji believe we’re all to be washed away soon for our misdeeds.”

“So they claim. The banji were here long before the Geytunese found the Dock and conquered the stone city, you know. They plied these waters in their feluccas for thousands of years, Thistle. So, although I am but a foolish old man, I listen intently when they say Odeko the Water God will swallow the world. Admittedly, there is some debate whether the wave will be actual seawater or more of a metaphysical nature.”

“Metafistual..?”

“Aha! It seems you have a word or two left unread. Shall we begin?”

Thistle bowed before Saliquon, which she had never done before. “I cannot, Teacher. I must work tonight, down among the fallen Wolves.”

Saliquon looked at her intently. “What? Tonight? This is the night? Then...it’s already begun.” He suddenly seemed as old and feeble as Thistle had first believed. But the tremor passed and he recovered his composure. “Fine. May you’re night be profitable.”

“What’s already begun, Teacher? What’s wrong?”

“Will you hear one story before you go, Thistle? I will read to you as I once did.”

If she were a cat, her tail would have twitched in indecision. But sat she sat back down at his feet, and listened.

“Teshe J’n Wor lived nine thousand years ago, Thistle,” Saliquon began, and Thistle made an ambiguous gesture that might signify reverence or skepticism. “She was a princess of Geytun and a very beloved one. People traveled from even the divided moon just to be in her presence, for it was believed healing rays emanated from her fingertips. What does that curled lip signify, girl? Oh, yes, men traveled between earth and moon easily and even further. Man was at the height of his powers. I might add that Teshe was very polite and respectful to her elders even at a young age. Put your tongue back in your mouth, Thistle. Where was I? Oh yes, the princess. You see, Teshe was actually the goddess of compassion, and she was very concerned about all men and the children of all men. She climbed to the top of Taj Amyl and asked the Old Builders for help, entreating them with songs so beautiful

they melted the snowcaps and brought forth blooms in the dead of winter. The Old Builders were strange and unknowable but they were moved by Teshe's plea. Five Wonders they created and left to the children of men, and, of course we call one of them home; the Great Dock which is also the Great Word. And what are the other four?"

Thistle needed no prompting. "The Sphinx, the Geytun Stairway, the Telling Arena, and the Deepness."

Saliquon nodded. "All these things they left to us, though we have forgotten how to use them properly. If a flood is coming, perhaps these structures are meant to save us, but we don't really know. In any event, Teshe was charged with a terrible price for these creations, though she paid gladly."

"What did they ask of her, Teacher?" Thistle, usually rapt with attention when listening to her mentor, was distracted.

"They asked of her something she could hardly bear, Thistle; they asked her to wait."

"Wait? I don't understand, Teacher."

"Neither did she. But Teshe was steadfast and true to her word; she sat down on the summit of Taj Amyl and waited. Some say she is up there still looking down on Geytun."

Thistle was dubious. "She can't sit on a mountaintop for nine thousand years, Teacher."

"Mmmmm, probably not. Most believe that Shia J'n Ran is the living incarnation of the goddess-

"The Great Mother!" Thistle's ears perked up. "She would fix things, if she knew how bad it was here."

"Perhaps, perhaps. Other versions of the story say Teshe must wait among lesser humanity, perhaps in the guise of a gutter urchin."

"What's a 'guise'?"

"The point is that waiting is sometimes it is necessary. Thistle. I am asking you to wait a while before you meet with your accomplice."

She jumped to her feet, blood pounding in her temples, coursing through her veins. Perhaps it was the desert winds, which were believed to introduce fey moods. "I will remember to wait, but now I must go, Teacher."

Saliquon assayed a sad smile. "Just be careful," he whispered. "I have grown very fond of you."

Thistle was adverse to displays of affection; she turned to leave but Saliqun gripped her wrist just as he had the night they had met. Thistle recoiled in puzzlement. "It can't save you, Thistle," He said in a strange voice. "What you find down there; it can't replace what's been taken from you."

Thistle actually growled. She had a deep fear of being held, Saliqun knew that. Why did he bait her? She pushed without thinking, tripping backwards as he released her and scrambling around the barrier wall like a frightened wolfing. But shame replaced fear just as quickly. Thistle ran back and rounded the corner to find - nothing...no one. Saliqun was gone, along with his cart, brazier, rug, candles, and stool. Thistle looked up and down the Dock, but there was only a phosphorescent spray of waves over the breakwater, nothing more. "Teacher..." she called, once loudly and then again very quietly.

The divided moon was rising in the east.

CHAPTER THREE

“Have you taken leave of your senses?” Captain Justuf Parma spoke with theatrical exuberance, and the outburst was further magnified by the high dome of the council chambers. Arranged in a semi circle around the arguing council, statues of the founding elders stood in frozen marble disapproval. “You flay a madman to satisfy your bloodlust and upend a city in the process!” Parma gestured his contempt to a barrage of insults and threats.

A red faced councilman shouted, “Perhaps the Captain would like to kiss the bloody ass of the Water God, but we will fight this heresy to our last -”

“Don’t make me laugh, Sir,” Parma replied with exquisite contempt. “You’re about as pious as a dockside hooker, Over-Citizen Halq.” Several council members and servants leapt up to restrain the two men. Clearly Parma would have prevailed in combat, whether mental, physical or rhetorical. Where Over-Citizen Halq had spent too many years on his backside indulging in various wines and potatoes, Parma was a wiry unpredictable swordfighter. A sea captain by trade and a smuggler by reputation, he faced the world with an arrogant swagger and an unruly mane of chestnut hair only just starting to grey. A hundred men leaned forward in morbid anticipation.

“That will be quite enough, Captain,” Over-Speaker Thammias said in a dry voice. The Speaker coughed and shook his skeletal head in rueful disappointment. “Once again you have stated your argument in such a way as to turn a prominent Over-Citizen against you. Congratulations.”

“Bah. His mind is set in limestone. But I know others here agree with me though they fear to say it. You cannot stop the banji from believing in this cult and by trying you only drive them to it. Gentlemen, let the end of the world come and go and then they will be on to the next bit of foolishness.” Parma clasped his hands behind his head and sunk into a well appointed velvet chair. “If you keep this up you will compel the banji to burn the Dock.”

“Ridiculous!”

“Nonsense!”

Thammias employed his massive gavel to quiet the council members. “The Dock is impervious to fire as the captain well knows. When the First Men built the Wonders they intended them to outlast humanity.”

Parma looked incredulous. “So that’s your reasoning? The Dock will stand? Over-Speaker, my ship is not stone but Juorin cedar. It will burn well enough, like every other ship down in the harbor. Here the rub, Speaker, The Dock isn’t worth a fart in

the wind without ships coming to port with grain to unload!" The captain flung his arms skyward in a show of theatrical disgust.

The Over-Speaker replied with only a hint of menace under his breath. "Indeed. Just as a captain sitting in a dungeon is of little use."

Parma was not a man to be intimidated. "Now that would be an unfortunate situation. If such a prisoner were a popular fellow among his fellow captains, Fornanze and half of Zhamyl might find itself without any grain at all. Your Dock would be as empty as your wife's private parts, I would imagine." Parma twiddled his long waxed mustache as he spoke. Such was his way; when becoming truly vexed the captain assumed an air of nonchalant bravado. This behavior only served to infuriate his opponents, a fact which amused Parma. The Captain could reasonably be described as a grandee, even a martinet, if truth be told. His long nose and expressive mouth set in a thin goateed face gave him a somewhat droll appearance, which enhanced the rakish pose he desired to project. He clothed himself in silk and crinoline, his puffed leather sleeves split to reveal an embroidered blouse beneath. Precious jewels were set into the extravagant black belt holding his scabbard, and a single Fantalico plume from the Isle of Birds decorated his wide brimmed felt hat. He had spent his life not so much against the law as outside of it, and was cowed by no man. Despite his foppish demeanor he had proved to many an opponent just how deadly a swordfighter he was.

Over-Speaker Thammas appeared ready to unleash a barrage of invective but thought better of it and presently sat down, carefully smoothing his immaculate white robes without further comment. The council chamber consisted of a series of concentric rows of seats facing a sunken central dais where the Over-Speaker dispensed his rulings. Today no consensus would be reached. In the end the meeting devolved into knots of arguing council men and Parma, seeing nothing could be accomplished signaled his servants and slipped out of the hall. As they marched down the wide marble steps Parma was alternately hailed and reviled by various citizens. He was a man who elicited passions.

"That was a waste of time," grumbled the enormous man who strode beside Parma. He was bald as an egg and had no apparent neck, but only a fool was likely to make sport of him.

Parma sighed deeply. "The effort had to be made. But of course you're right, Octillo. These false lords have become fat and complacent. Well, let them stew in their own pot, I say. We sail on the morning tide."

"Not a minute too soon," said Octillo. "I dislike this place."

The Captain and his entourage boarded an open carriage drawn by four swayback nags which conveyed them down the Temple Road towards the Dock. As they passed the Old Gods Temple, with its cracked pillars and steps covered by encroaching ragweed, Parma was inclined to the philosophic. "There you see a testament to man's foolishness, Octillo. For three thousand years the followers of opposing gods battled each other without mercy or respite. But in the end, the

exhausted gods inhabit the same temple, and only old ladies and dock urchins ever visit.”

The swollen red sun hung low over the foothills, the air heavy and still.

“Sadness pervades this valley,” declared Octillo. “The old gods have departed, and the Incarnation is more a reflection of man’s base nature than a higher power.”

“Why, Octillo. That may be the longest sentence I’ve ever heard you utter. And certainly the most profound.”

Octillo grunted and spat off the side of the carriage. “I have benefited from being the first mate of so eloquent a captain.”

Parma looked from the side of his eyes and tried to determine if he was being mocked. No matter. “Still, it does not pay to offend a god whether he exists or not. Personally I practice obeisance towards all the gods each night - even the far eastern pantheon. In this way I sleep like a warm swaddled baby.”

Octillo looked skeptical. “Might it not be the liquor you consume so feely prior to retiring?”

Captain Parma was in the middle of a detailed speech instructing his first mate on the finer points of respect for one’s superiors when the carriage lurched to a halt. The horses reared and snorted but would not take one step further. In the road ahead, just under an old oak tree, stood an elderly black man in a woolen robe. He supported himself on a stout pine staff and seemed little inclined to move out of the way. The Captain peered through the shadows and decided good fellowship was called for. “Good morrow to you, Ser. My driver is perhaps a trifle negligent when rounding the corners.”

The old man stepped forward and Parma saw he had but one good eye. “You’re right to hurry, Captain,” he said. “The wind freshens, and time runs short.”

“Just so, Grandfather. If you would kindly step to the side we will race on our way.”

“You’re about to receive a precious gift, Captain. You would not be my choice to receive it, as you are only a shadow of what you could be. To my one good eye you look more buffoon than hero. No matter, I only serve, my judgments count for little. But I say this as my own man - Do not mistreat her!” the stranger stepped to the side and bowed to the sailors. “Try to see through her mask, just as my masters apparently see through yours.”

Parma stepped off the carriage running board, gripping the pommel of his glass sword. “It’s late for riddles, Grandfather, insulting or otherwise.” But he immediately regretted his temper and relaxed his sword hand. Somehow the gloom deepened noticeably. In a way he could not later explain, Parma lost sight of the man, though he stood mere feet away. He looked back and every one of his crewmembers was

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making warding signs. For once his wit failed him. “Let’s get back to the ship, driver. This is no place to tarry.”

NADINE

(the first three chapters of a novel – contact Arkady if you'd like to see more)

CHAPTER ONE

One of my formative experiences occurred when a naked redhead holding a shotgun chased me into a frog pond.

She got off a round of salt rock before her old man wrestled that shotgun away from her. The young woman had made the mistake of waking up on a fine spring morning and taking it into her head to ride bareback (as in stark raving nude) in the South Carolina dawn. Her idyll was spoiled when an unappreciative horse threw her ass backward into a thorn bush.

I'd made the mistake of laughing.

Naturally I was where I should not have been. My friend Eddie Reardon told me we could make off with as many frogs as we could bag if we snuck on to old man Tucker's property early enough. Being the ninth son of a family so dirt poor we stood out in a county full of poverty stricken knuckleheads, frog legs sounded pretty good to me. As an added bonus, it was rumored that despite being well over sixty years of age, Mr. Tucker had acquired a spirited young wife of no more than nineteen. Eddie was bragging about the lengths to which he'd go to catch a glimpse of this fabled bride before he ran off at the first sound of her mare galloping our way. Being ten years old, I was at an age where such ideas were mysterious and compelling. Running was not an option. I got way more than I bargained for.

She picked herself up out of an inconveniently placed thorn bush, shook her magnificent head of red hair, gave one murderous glance at the horse and marched into the nearby cabin. When she emerged it was clear modesty wasn't upper most on her mind. Still naked as the day she entered this world (and I might add here that every worst fear woman have about the male sex is true. Even as I ran in terror, certain primitive parts of me were appreciating that young bride enthusiastically), she began to unloading that shotgun in my direction.

The interesting part is that the rock salt didn't scare me near as much as the frogs. There was nothing much to them individually. Just your basic green pond frog and not on the big side, either. But that redhead chased me right into the middle of the biggest damn clusterfuck of frogs that ever was. There were millions of the bastards. I couldn't help but squish 'em underfoot as I made a hasty retreat from that slighted woman. So even though she was clearly disappointed at her load of rock salt going awry, she gained some satisfaction out of seeing me barreling

down a veritable frogslide of amphibian guts right into that pond. We won't talk about the begging or crying for my mommy.

I learned a valuable lesson that day and not the obvious one, neither. Now, clearly I wouldn't be laughing at redheads again in this life, but more to the point, I learned to respect a fool's errand. It's probably what led me to my current profession.

My name is Dansworth Fell. I am the Police Chief of Beaufort, South Carolina. I like to think of it as a job that entails lying down with frogs and getting back up with dignity. Well, most of the time. Come hurricane season, dignity is the least of your worries. We're down in the lowlands and that means flooding. In 1893 over two thousand souls got washed away from the islands, most from Hilton Head. Sometimes I think it's the price for living in such a place. It's the hurricanes that get the press and are talked over for years. But it's the sunrises that are the true measure of the Sea Islands.

My two deputies and I sat hunched over and miserable in a tackle boat that drew no more than three inches above the Sound. Each of us clutching a cup of coffee and thinking our dire thoughts, but then black turned to purple and that to mauve and damned if it didn't look like sweet sad lipstick smeared over that orange sky. As if the whole world was feeling like a seventeen year old blond gal from Charleston who just woke up and wondered what the hell she'd done last night, and what about the consequences?

"I never get tired of looking at that," Deputy Galstrap said, gazing over the swaying channel grass turning gold as the mist rose off the bog.

"Hell, Gator, you'd rather be looking at just about any scenery first thing in the morning rather than that woman of yours," Pierce, my other deputy, called back from the bow.

"Well, I won't deny she is a sight prettier in the PM." Galstrap chose to take no offence that morning, most likely because it was just too hard an argument to make. His wife was beyond plain. They say beauty is only skin deep, and that may be true, but ugly is to the bone. Still, Galstrap, known as Gator to friends and enemies alike, had stood by his woman for well on twenty years, so that said something. Galstrap was a balding, paunchy, spectacle wearing philosopher of sorts. He sported a grandfatherly white mustache and his demeanor had fooled more than a few back county boys who took deliberate to mean slow. Galstrap could move real quick when he had to, and I guess that where the nickname came in. I always felt a little more at ease with Gator riding shotgun in the patrol vehicle, be it the Black Mariah or the skiff.

That particular morning in the summer of 1932 we were heading over to a tiny speck of dirt off the lee side of Sullivan Island. Not in my jurisdiction. Not by about forty nautical miles. But out of the thousand or so rocks strung along the South

Carolina coast, none but a few could properly be said to be under any kinda jurisdiction at all. And since some near hysterical woman had sent her boy rowing through the silt and grass before dawn to wake the sheriff at Beaufort, going on about a body washing up on her beach, well, somebody had to go look.

Might as well send the entire Beaufort police force. This being the off season for hurricanes, bodies turning up like confused pilot whales was not a normal occurrence for our little department. We tended more to picking the local drunks off the sidewalks and locking up the occasional miscreant who could still stand and throw a punch. Maybe rescue a shrimp boat every blue moon. In fact, not since returning from France had I dealt with a dead body, and since the crash of '29, there just was flat out nothing worth stealing in our worn out county, so I was plenty content to watch the sunrise and drink my coffee. But then we were around a rocky outcropping and pulling up to a sad looking old dock that seemed to sway more than the water beneath us. Pierce jumped out and cursed at slipping a bit on some fish guts. I took a deep breath and followed; it was time to live up to the title they had pinned on me.

Things were grim all over the Carolinas since '29. Most folks, including yours truly, had lost just about everything. I counted myself lucky to have a job, miserable as it was. Folks out here on the Sea Islands, mostly colored, mostly Gullah, were even worse off, if that was possible. But they came from a long tradition of having nothing, so, actually, they were less shocked about the whole turn of events and made due just fine. That's called irony.

An argument can easily be provoked around here by claiming to know where the word "Gullah" came from. Freed slaves, eking out a living on the barrier islands, most of them rarely saw a white face. They both spoke Gullah and were the Gullah. My dad was old enough to remember watching them come off the ships in Charleston. Some walked in chains; many were simply dumped over the railing, not having the fortitude to survive the trip. They came from places like Sierra Leone and Senegal and they brought their vodun with them. I guess in most of the South the old ways were rubbed out by the white man, but not around here. Slave trade was so spectacularly successful that soon there were a whole lot more colored than whites. Don't get me wrong: the Gullah were under the thumb of the most evil, wrong headed and un-Christian system ever devised by man - they just had slightly more wiggle room. In New Orleans they used to shoot the coloreds when they would gather in Congo Square and play their drums. But that was a long time ago.

Somebody forgot to tell the inhabitants of Stubbin Island we were in the twentieth century, though. A few small fishing boats that were more patching than hull were tied to the old tar blackened pier. Here and there along the beach a lean to clutched at the hard lime and gravel. I suspected eyes watched from within those dark openings but no one felt obligated to greet the white men from the mainland. Hell, I probably would have steered clear of the three of us. I stand six-foot-three when I'm slouching, and I'm not exactly lean. I try to smile a lot to reassure grandmas and the like, but I was once told I'm intimidating despite my ears sticking out like jug handles and regardless of what dopy look I have plastered on my face.

"Y'all come on out now," Pierce shouted down the beach. "Don't make me come knocking." Pierce was dark haired and intense, always fidgeting and looking sideways at you. Reminded me of a barn hawk. I used him to scare the hell out of folks we dealt with. That's called management skills.

Sure enough, down a pathway through the scrub along the low bluff came an old black woman, seventy-five years if she was a day. She looked spry enough and only slightly cowed by John Pierce's incredulous stare. "You're not Sheriff Coulson," she snapped in a tone that fell short of respect.

"No, Ma'am, that's right," I began, before Pierce could get started. "I'm Chief Fell. Sheriff Coulson is probably enjoying life a whole lot more than any of us this morning, so let's see what you got for us and get this over with." I try to throw folks off balance by not rising to the bait. It works enough of the time to make it good policy.

The old gal shook her head and looked at me askance, the folds of her big white Gullah headdress hiding her expression. "Every day breathing is a good day, even when a colored woman finds a dead white man." Somewhere off over the bluff a hunting beagle was stirring up a ruckus. A flock of egrets exploded out of the bush at the sound of his baying. It was a mighty lonesome sound.

"Alright, Ma'am. Let's go see." I motioned to Gator to stay by the boat. "I'd like to wrap this up before the mercury hits ninety." We started off down the shore, letting the old Gullah mammy lead by a few paces.

"There's a fair sized nigger hiding in that clump of deadwood," Pierce said calmly. "I believe he's studying on shooting our legs off."

"Yeah, I spotted him right off. But that's a stick he's holding, not a gun, and he's probably just watching out for his grandma."

"You take a very cavalier attitude, Chief Fell. You're like to get me killed someday." Pierce was always trying to increase his word power. I admired the practice in theory.

"That's a good one, Pierce. But I got another. Sangfroid. Look it up when we get back."

Pierce looked disgusted. "That's another one of those krout words, ain't it? Why the hell would I want to learn something like that?" I just shrugged. I knew it would bug him all day till he could get to the Island Gazette office and find out the meaning.

The trail led up and over the headland, giving a decent view of the old plantation; mostly gone to seed but dotted over with leveled fields surrounded by wood berms. Rice paddies; and lush ones too, by the look of it. The Gullahs were dirt poor but not for lack of farming skills. In my experience they surpassed any white man when it came to farming rice or cotton.

“I say we take that Gullah bastard into town and loosen up his tongue” Pierce muttered darkly.

“One, he’s so damn big he would most likely sink the boat and we’d all be tramping through bottom sludge to get home,” I replied. “And two, we don’t even know if this is a wrongful death, do we?” On the far side of the beach, up against a crumbling limestone embankment, a cloud of flies hung stubbornly over our destination. When we got closer they commenced to stinging. Long as it wasn’t frogs I could handle it. My deputy and I circled the body. I felt reasonably professional about it but Pierce did look a little like a vulture. I gestured at the unfortunate departed; whatever charms or talents he or she possessed in life were moot now. I hoped a loved one somewhere had some nice photos, ‘cause the blackened, bloated, waterlogged mess in front of us lacked personality. I was thinking a closed casket service. The crabs had beat us by a couple of hours, and it was gonna be tough to figure what was their handiwork and what was less...natural.

Pierce knelt down and considered a corpse so degraded a laymen might have thought it was a dime store fake. “Look here,” he said. “There’s no adipocere; no lime soap bubbles under the skin. This fella was dead before he hit the water.”

I nodded and looked out across the sound. “Current would have to drag him north. So...where? Darfouski Island? Sullivan?”

“Not from the mainland, that’s for sure.”

The old woman was making little hand signs to ward off evil; whether she considered the dead body or the police the greater evil I didn’t want to speculate on. “Now tell the truth, Grandmother. Did you find this body or did your boy back behind the trees there find him?”

She glared and drew herself up, all ready to defend her offspring like a Perris Island hen. But again, colored folk out on the barrier islands got a whole different view of life than their less fortunate cousins inland. Due to the remoteness and general lack of white people to torment them in these parts, they just never learned to grin and shuffle with any sort of enthusiasm. I’ve studied on how it came about. Some of these huge island plantations never did have white overseers, just blacks running the whole show, entrusted by landowners a hundred miles away to meet the cotton quotas. Course, after the south got beat down, nobody was overseeing nothing, and that’s the way it’s stayed for the better part of a fifty years. That’s another reason I landed this job. On account of my views being broadened while overseas. It turns out that shooting first and asking questions later is not actually the best way to go, when the coloreds outnumber whites three to one.

But this woman didn’t live so long by being a fool. Whatever she intended to say died on her lips and with a sigh of resignation she whistled for the kid to come out. “Isaiah found him but that’s all.” She whispered. “This is white folk affairs.”

“Oh, really?” Pierce asked, looking like an annoyed turkey vulture. “What makes you say these are the remains of a white man? Or even a man?” And for a fact, I’d

been thinking it would be damn hard to identify sex, race, age, or just about anything from the mess at our feet. But the old Gullah woman just pointed. I knelt down and looked more closely, knowing that my deputy wouldn't take his eye off the black man trudging towards us through the salt crust. "If you're gonna shoot somebody, Pierce, kindly don't hold your gun right next to my ear."

Pierce just grunted. The tide was coming in, and I would dearly have liked to pull the body up the beach a few yards. But then I saw what she was pointing at. Gold fillings. Not many, but more than any Negro I had ever met possessed. Except possibly Miss Josephine Baker of Le Hot Club in Paris, who once smiled at me so big I could pretty much inspect her molars. Amazingly, I was not concentrating on her dental work.

In any event, I was pretty sure this particular stiff was not her. I pointed out the fillings to Pierce and we discussed arrangements for a work crew to come pick up the remains. I turned to the big fella standing behind Mama Gullah. "You know anything other than what I see right here, boy?" The big black kid didn't appear to be anything but protective of the old gal.

"No sir," He said, "Don't know nothing. 'Cept that the tide was out when these bones landed, and that means a northwest current."

I had to chuckle. I've had deputies who wouldn't have figured that out. Another reason I'm chief; I don't underestimate the Gullahs. I rolled the body over on its side. A few rags were all that was left of what coulda been a wool suit or dress. But then something popped out that settled the gender issue. At first, going by size and girth, I ruled out a colored man. But then I reconsidered. There had probably been considerable shrinkage, after all. I spied something a little lighter in color protruding from under what I took to be an armpit. I reached down and plucked it out carefully. "This looks like silk, see here, silk's tough, not quite as worn. I turned it over and straightened it as best I could on the sand. "Oh yes, I believe that's a monogram. Hmmm...what's that say, Pierce. Put those eagle eyes to use." (Which was more polite than saying; put those vulture eyes to use.)

Pierce squinted and pursed his lips. 'Looks like C IV. Maybe Roman numerals, you know?

"Yeah I see that. We're sleuthing good, Pierce."

"Well, I believe you're right about the tide, Isaiah." I brushed off my uniform and nodded, important like. "You take care of your grandma here, alright?"

Whatever reply he had to that I didn't hear, Deputy Pierce and I having set out back the way we came, arguing over why cavalier was any less foreign a word than sangfroid.

CHAPTER TWO

It was afternoon by the time we pulled back into Beaufort Harbor. I left the boys at the dock with instructions to wait for the body to arrive and take it on to the morgue. I set out on foot across the waterfront to the harbormaster's office, such as it was. If not for the sign identifying the structure, most folks might presume it to be an outhouse perched over the water for easier disposal of waste. They wouldn't be too far wrong.

Hanley Page had been the harbormaster since before I set off to win the Great War. In all that time he hadn't learned a damn thing about working a harbor, much less mastering it. I found him dozing in his usual spot, making a peculiar high pitched wheezing sound with every breath and seemingly in the thrall of a particularly vivid dream. His pasty jowls hung slack, revealing yellow teeth and a lolling tongue, and every few moments he seized up and simply stopped breathing altogether. I watched this display for a while, wondering if he was about to give up the ghost, but to my genuinely mixed emotions he opened one rheumy eye and regarded me unenthusiastically.

"Morning, Chief Fell."

"Well, it's just about three in the afternoon, Hanley."

"Right. Right, I knew that." He glared at me as if I had laid a well planned trap for him. "I ain't fixing that skiff again, Chief."

"Hanley, when I can't take this world any longer, and pine for a watery grave, that will be the day I ask you to repair my boat."

"Long as we're clear on it, Chief."

I pulled up the least moldy chair in the office and eased down on it, wiping my brow with my cap." Got a body coming in, Hanley. My deputies will handle the whole thing so you won't need to lift a finger."

Hanley pulled on his scraggily beard and began shaking his head. "Not a nigger I hope. You can take your nigger corpse and -"

"It's a white man, Hanley, though the body has been in the water long enough it's hard to tell. That's why I'm telling you now, so just sit back down and shut up."

"You got no call to talk to me like that, Chief."

"Call or not I hope you're listening, Hanley. I will throw you in the lock up if you make a scene like you're prone to do." I got up and dusted off my pants. "The only thing I require of you is a tide table from Thursday to yesterday."

Hanley glared at me. "City council must have been crazy to make you Chief, just out of their minds."

"That may be, Hanley. Certainly I've considered that possibility. But for now we're both gonna have to deal with the situation. That means you pretend you know what the hell you're doing on this dock, and I pretend not to know it's you and your cousins running around with white hoods on acting like damn fools."

"Might be the Klan will pay you a visit some night, Fell."

I leaned over and grabbed Hanley's shirt, picking that piece of human dirt right off his feet. "You're one step away from getting your head cracked, partner. You ever threaten me or mine again and you'll be one sorry member of your Ku Klux Klan. Tell your cousin Cletus that goes for him too. Tell him the nigger loving Chief of Police said that, alright?"

From the way Hanley's eyes were bugging out I could see I'd made an impression on him. I walked out of the Harbor station feeling disgusted with him and myself. Generally I despise bullies who throw their weight around. Especially when it's me. But I had this feeling in the pit of my stomach, and a tingling around the back of my neck, which, when taken together often predicted either big trouble or impending sex. Either way I all I could reasonably ask was to come through with out getting too bruised and battered. I walked back to the police skiff, which was now conveniently in the shade of a tug, lit a smoke and considered my options.

Sure enough when the trawler pulled up a crowd materialized from nowhere and began speculating and jawboning about stuff that was none of their business. And this was before the wind blew the tarpaulin off the hideous corpse.

"That there is the victim of one of those juju rites they hold out on Darfuskie Island," opined one old timer.

"No sir, what you're looking at is shark food," insisted another.

"You're both wrong," said a third. "Everyone knows there are ghosts on the barrier islands just waiting to suck the life out of hobos and hookers."

Now Deputy Pierce was the sort of fellow who went through life with a black cloud just hovering over him. He expected the worst out of just about everything and everybody and didn't mind letting you know it. I loved watching him in situations like these. So as he's wrestling with this bloated corpse he's letting fly with phrases like, "You really are a horse's ass!" and "Y'all don't have ten I.Q points between you."

A group of colored dockworkers caught his ire and he promised he would be checking up on them, checking up on the craps games that happened every night over by the burning oil barrels. In the middle of this dire prediction, without missing a beat, Pierce grabs the collar of a little tow headed kid who is in the

process of falling off the deck backwards and deposits the boy further from the edge, all the while holding the feet of our John Doe tucked under his arm and smoking a cigarette.

One might think allowing Pierce to carry on was counter to my plan of keeping things low key, but as I learned the hard way, leading men is a fine art. The trick is to let a lot of the small stuff slide. When you need somebody to watch your back, that somebody better not have his nose bent out of shape about some dressing down he got for a matter of no consequence. Hard men are all that keeps the wolf from your door, and most hard men have their vices. I'm chief because I'm the exception, of course.

It all seemed like harmless ignorance so I just kept my mouth shut and watched the boys load the body into the Black Mariah. Pierce would take it over to a shed behind the ice house reserved for just such contingencies. Gator made a show of chasing off the looky loos and ambled over to the skiff where I sat skipping rocks across the waves.

"Well, did everybody get a good look?"

Gator doffed his hat and rubbed a hankie over his non-existent hair. "Can't blame 'em, Chief. This is better than when old man Perkins went running down Main Street buck naked and obviously happy."

"I remember Perkins. You handled that situation well, Gator."

He looked askance at me. "You ducked into the grain store, as I recall."

"Had to. There were woman and children needed warning that thing was loose. Besides, you're more of a people person than me."

"Hell, you're the root doctor. Why didn't you just put the whammy on him?"

"Don't mock it, Gator"

Gator shook his head. "I'm just saying..."

"Gator, my mama once said, 'to belittle is to be little.'"

"Your mama said that?"

I saw no reason to reply and so we sat in companionable silence there in the shade watching the freighters unload across the harbor. After a time Gator scratched his neck and asked, "What's your next move?"

"I'm thinking on it. Any idea what C IV stands for?"

"Nope."

I sighed my heavy sigh and skipped another rock out towards the ships. "So we track it backwards. I got the tide tables from Mr. Hanley Page."

Gator spat into the marsh. “That man needs some sense knocked into him. Ruining the local Klan like he is.”

I thought on that. “I didn’t realize the Klan was something you worried over, Gator.”

“I worry about a lot of things, Chief. Both you and me can name family belongs to the Klan.”

“You know my feelings. When Holt and the others offered me this job I was real clear. I learn somebody is involved in a lynching or anything like it, they’re either going to jail or getting gut shot.”

“I’m just saying that Page is damn fool at any job he’s doing, legal or not.” Gator’s usually mild voice showed a trace of irritation.

“Okay, let’s leave it at that, alright partner?” I offered my hand and we shook.

We walked back towards the station in the late afternoon heat, watching dust devils spin off the dried mud flats alongside the docks. Big old anvil head clouds were hanging in the eastern sky. When we reached Temple Street, Gator and I looked at each other. If we turned right we went a little out of our way but ended up at the station in time to have dinner and cuddle with our loved ones or crawl into a bottle, as the case may be. But if we went straight we stood a real good chance of walking into a scene of illegal goings on. It would have been an easy choice for me, since my philosophy ran towards the idea that there would always be more crime tomorrow. We’d put in an honest day’s work. But if there was one thing I simply could not abide it was the game they ran in the warehouse along the rail line. Just thinking about it had me making my sour face and tapping my foot.

Gator nodded resignedly and gestured with his hat for me to lead the way. He knew there was no talking to me when I got obstinate.

“Let’s get this over with.” He said and we walked across the tracks to a weathered old door.

“Sorry, Gator. Never have people gathered together for such a damn foolish sport as...” I kicked the door open to reveal a blood soaked ring of hay and a crowd of cheering drunkards. “Cockfighting!”

Around a bare 60 watt bulb a group of thirty or so stumblebums, miscreants and ner-do-wells were having the time of there lives. A few had brought young kids along to perpetuate the tradition. Directly under the harsh light of that bulb was the object of their frantic cries: a pair of bantam cocks with wicked looking 3 inch metal spurs taped to their dewclaws. Truth was, these particular roosters just didn’t have the heart for it, and were mainly interested in going their separate ways. But the two old coloreds running the show weren’t having any of that. The trick is to hold the birds right in each other’s face till the territorial urge kicks in, and then the spurs do the rest. No cock survives a fight. The bloodletting is the whole point. I

have seen a pile of over a thousand gamecocks bloody and mangled after a single tournament. It turned my stomach.

“Every last one of you is going to jail this time!” I yelled, and held high my root bag. That’s right. My little handkerchief stuffed with graveyard dirt and mandrake root carried a lot more weight than any tin badge around this neighborhood. Chief Dr. Root I was called, and my vodun was strong. I had carried that bag of Gullah magic since I was nine years old and had no reason to doubt its potency. And if you believed, others believed, or at least got nervous enough to blink first. I must have been pretty convincing cause folks got real contrite real fast, even though, if they thought about it, they would have realized we didn’t have room for more than two arrestees at a time in the broom closet we called a holding cell. Gator assisted by banging his sawed off broom handle on the table, the walls, and various people’s knuckles. Well, after all, everyone came to work up a blood lust. Who was I to disappoint them? But after some shouting and knuckle rapping we all simmered down.

Then that damned dwarf had to start up.

He was high yellow, puff cheeked and quivering; every inch of his three and a half foot frame suffused with righteous indignation as he faced me down there in the house of dead chickens. In one hand he held a sawed off chicken claw, which he waved convincingly, and with the other he stroked his root bag, hung by a length of twine from around his neck. Who knows what his root ingredients were. Truth was the whole business was pretty loose. I once knew an old Gullah root doctor who filled his bag with a mixture of Pepto-Bismol and Lanolin. People were terrified of that guy. The trick to it was being intense, and the angry dwarf had that going for him in spades.

“Buckrah fool. Ever time you crack e teet it ent wut nutting.” He yelled to the rafters. When a Gullah takes the notion, no one can understand his patois. But I got the general drift. The crowd leaned in to see how this battle of the root doctors would play out. “By dese bloody fedduhs I curse you. The haants will find ya. The saapunt will sting ya. And you, iggnunt fool will know it not!” He ended with a flourish of his chicken leg.

Thirty faces looked at me. “Yeah, well...you will remain a dwarf the rest of your life.” I know. It seemed weak to me at the time. But from the crowd came a gasp of dread and they all turned to each other and nodded their heads knowingly. Gator poked me with his attitude adjuster. “Nice one,” He whispered. The dwarf hung his head low and walked off, completely deflated.

We didn’t arrest anybody, as usual. After we confiscated the door money, and collected an earful of promises and lies, Gator and I trudged back to the station. Con men like these don’t give a hoot about being locked up overnight, but hit ‘em in the pocket often enough and they will move on to greener pastures. It wasn’t very satisfying but it’s the way things got done back then. Besides, that income was

all that paid our salaries some months. We could have tried to end the fights sooner. Times were hard. Gator and I walked back to the office in silence, me stroking my root bag thoughtfully.

One time at the circuit court in Yamahassee, the judge was contemplating adding an attempted murder charge to a two bit crook who'd taken a pot shot at me while running out of the store he'd just robbed. I got up on the dais and swore under oath that no murder attempt had taken place because it simply wasn't possible to harm me while I carried the root. That got me a few snickers in the courtroom and a bawling out from the judge, but the word spread. My mama didn't raise no fool. Since that day no one in the county had taken a shot at me. I thought about the little Doctor's curse; "the saapunt will sting ya. And you iggnunt fool will know it not!" For just one second the hair on the back of my neck stood up.

CHAPTER THREE

Ocean currents are pretty predictable things. They don't respect police jurisdictions and they sure don't worry about a floater's race, creed or predilections. But they do follow the laws of physics, and a man with just a little horse sense can sit down with a farmer's almanac or a tide table and do some figuring. My figuring has been suspect at times so I had Pierce check my work. Hunched over a yellow pad, licking the lead point of a number 2 pencil, muttering to himself occasionally, Pierce finally looked up at me and bared his teeth in what passed for a smile.

"Yep, it's definite."

"Definitely right?"

"Definitely illegible, Chief. What the hell is this chicken scratching here?"

"Damn it, Pierce, that's the date subtracted from the...no wait. That's the mileage from...is that an 's'?"

"You're asking me?"

I left Peirce to his grumbling and motioned for Gator to step out on the porch with me. "You think the mayor has got wind of this?"

We smoked our precious smokes and eventually Gator replied, "Doubtful. Mayor Popstall calls morning his 'thinking time'. He won't take calls till about eleven. Hell, the whole island could submerge and he wouldn't budge."

"That's just fine by me," I replied. "He can spend his whole day in 'thinkin time' and we'll all be better off for it."

Gator smiled halfway. "Chief, sometimes I think the mayor and you have clashing personalities."

I stubbed my cigarette butt under my boot toe and surveyed Main Street. "Nah, it ain't that. But once the mayor has formed an opinion it's pretty much chiseled in stone. It would be nice to get the jump on this case before he decides he's solved it."

Gator just nodded. He had been working for the city long before Popstall was elected and would probably remain long after the politician was gone. Still, he was a non committal type of guy. We walked back inside.

It seemed like a good time to change the subject. "How about that handkerchief? Any idea what that monogram stands for?"

Gator kept rearranging the piece of cloth on the desk, looking at it from different angles. "C IV...well, the IV could be roman numerals. Maybe... Charles the Fourth?"

I looked over his shoulder at the damn thing. “Okay, sure. Who’s Charles the Fourth?”

Pierce looked up from his calculating.” You’re the one who’s been to Europe, Chief. Don’t you know all those kings and such over there?”

“There’s hundreds of ‘em, Pierce,” I said, annoyed. ”Hell, you couldn’t even name all the United States presidents.”

“Well, I could name all the Confederate presidents and those are the ones that count,” replied Pierce.

Gator and I looked at each other. “Okay, sure. Fire away.”

“Jefferson Davis.” Pierce said, leaned back and crossed his arms, looking satisfied. “Simultaneously the first and the last, n'est-ce pas?”

“You are absolutely correct, Sir.” I said. And then muttered under my breath, “You vyrodok.” I was pretty sure he’d never get that one since it was a Russian insult.

“Now you’re just making stuff up.”

“If you say so.”

“You’re just mad ‘cause you got hexed by a dwarf.”

“You wish you had the status that warranted being hexed by a dwarf.” It was important to never let Pierce have the last word. I studied the paper for a while. “Anyway, I can write in French and actually understand what I’m writing, as opposed to parroting words, so you should be more respectful.” I added.

“Hell, a Frenchman would probably be scratching his head even more at your liberties with the written word”

I was getting riled at this point. “And another thing, Pierce. You should learn to express yourself without every other word being gutter talk. We got an image to uphold, you know.”

I left the room with a barrage of obscenities at my back. My deputies and I had a strange and wonderful relationship. At age thirty two, I was the youngest police chief Beaufort had ever known. Because I was veteran of the Great War, as well as having completed a correspondence course with the Mellman School of Investigation in New York City, the city council had gotten the notion I would make a competent Chief. Fortunately for me, neither of my deputies had desired the job, though both had been with the department longer than I had. Pierce was roughly my age and Gator twenty years my senior. I had worked hard to win their trust.

Also I had an ace in the hole. One of my prized possessions brought back from the Great War was a beat up waffle iron which stamped a fleur-de-lis on the face of said waffle. Peirce was so taken with this device that the mere hint of being denied a royally imprinted breakfast was enough to make him contrite real fast.

So I brought back some fancy waffles from the back room. Eventually, Pierce quit making fun of my handwriting, and I quit irritating him with comments about my continental experience and we got down to business. My arithmetic was sloppy looking but the numbers were sound. If anything, Pierce was even sharper. We had a deep respect for each other which we expressed in an endless string of insults. It wasn't to long before we zeroed in on a starting place for our search.

The station was as cramped and bare boned as any two bit flop house, but without the dirt and the call girls. It consisted of two worn desks facing each other across a floor of grey and green tiles, one broken electric fan, three gun metal file cabinets, a single telephone, an old hat rack from which hung our holsters and jackets, a couple of well populated fly strips, and a waffle iron. That was it. On account of the building formerly being a bank, the one window was an afterthought that provided neither light nor a view. In point of fact, the cell in the back was at least as cheerful as our office and Pierce or I often took a siesta on the cot behind the bars. Gator, on the other hand, never utilized that cot.

"Don't feel right to me, laying there. I'm afraid I might get too comfortable," he said, "Might decide I was on the wrong side of the law."

Pierce snorted. "Hell, I have them thoughts often. "Bout every week when my paycheck comes round."

"Oh, don't start Pierce." I rumbled in my early morning voice. "I need more coffee before hearing this speech again."

Gator threw the morning paper down on Pierce's desk. "I'd be thankful I got any paycheck if I were you, son. Look at this here."

I leaned over my desk and read that headline upside down, "Bonus Army Riot. Troops Fire on Demonstrators." It was the morning edition; July 28th 1932.

"They promised all them veterans bonus pay,' Gator said angrily, "When they marched on President Hoover to collect, he paid 'em off in buckshot."

I had grabbed the paper and was reading. "This is real bad. Says here there were lots of South Carolina boys in among the marchers. Hell, I was thinking of heading up to Washington myself."

Pierce could barely contain himself. "And you'd probably be nursing a gut wound right now, Chief. I'll tell you what, those northerners are animals."

I really couldn't think of any good argument to that. But we had smaller fish to fry. "Well boys, hold off any northern aggression, I've got some detecting to do."

The sky was low and threatening out across Calibogue Sound but the swell was tolerable. Consequently I spent less time than usual cursing the skiff and its persistent leaks. The old Mercury one stroke pattered along, scaring terns and sanderlings into panicky flight but scarcely warranting a glance from the enormous pelicans scattered across the fens. In one hand I held a compass while smoothing a

chart on my lap with the other. That left no hand for the tiller, but I wasn't expecting any cross traffic out here. Truth was, my mind was miles away, out with that bonus army in Washington DC. A huge army of Great War veterans had been camping in Washington for months. Some said as many as fifteen thousand. They had served when Uncle Sam called, and at the conclusion of the war they were promised the princely sum of \$1.25 for each day served overseas and \$1.00 for each day served in the States. It seemed pretty reasonable to me. But President Hoover reneged on the deal congress had made. He called the vets Bolsheviks, which meant they were like the Russian communists. He had no call to say that. The paper reported that the Yankees shot up a crowd of woman and children (including two infants shot dead) along with the vets who'd gathered to ask the government to pay what they'd been promised. A fella named Macarthur lead the cavalry against those poor souls. I vowed to remember that name, along with his lieutenant, Dwight Eisenhower.

I felt guilty not being there because the Great War was what made me a man, and those boys were my brothers, every last one of them.

Neville, France, 1916

At the grand old age of fifteen I enlisted in the US Marine expeditionary force and fought the Kaiser in France. I was big for my age and the enlistment officer over in Beaufort wasn't particularly fussy. "How old do you want to be?" he asked, and stamped my papers with a wink and a handshake.

I didn't have a whole lot of patriotic zeal, nor did I know much about Huns or Prussians, but I sure wanted to get out of Beaufort. I learned a lot in France - opened my eyes to a whole new world, and I was in no hurry to return to the States. I learned to overcome my fear of frogs by eating a lot of frog legs. I overcame my fear of redheads in a similar manner.

I spent some time in a trench with a kid named Arnoud Fournier. Arnoud was of the opinion that the war was being mismanaged and I couldn't offer much argument to that. They had told him it would last fifteen weeks and after that there would be no more wars ever. But after four years and a million dead he was beginning to have his doubts. We were discussing the subject one afternoon while picking lice out of each others hair. It could be a trial when those lice started biting on you but the good thing was that only happened when the temperature rose above freezing, which was seldom. On the other hand, one really cold night I woke up to find a rat the size of an ally cat snuggling under my blanket with me. It shames me to say that rat looked somewhat attractive for a moment before I came fully awake.

"It kinda looked like Clara Bow in that picture show about the orphan," I explained to Arnoud.

“Who?” Arnoud was trying to dig out a particularly stubborn bug.

“The rat, Arnoud, the rat under my blanket. You’re not paying attention”

“Man, you have finally lost your mind, haven’t you?” he shook his head.

“Wouldn’t be surprised. Why do you suppose those krouts didn’t shoot us last night?”

“They could have. They could have for sure”

“I’ve been having second thoughts about my enlistment.”

“Yes, I too had second thoughts.” Arnoud smiled wryly. “Then on my third thought I recalled that where my mother, father, two sisters and my home had been was now a smoking crater. We must be thankful for whatever breaks we get, my friend.”

“True.” The night before we had been ordered over the top, out on patrol, with the German trenches somewhere nearby in a freezing fog that had me lost after about fifty paces. Arnoud thought it would be a good idea to stop before we fell into the enemy trench so we did. We sat there for about an hour and I could barely see the nose in front of my face. But somebody could see us.

Out of the fog came a voice speaking perfect English in a German accent, “If you don’t go away, we really will be forced to shoot you.”

We took that man’s advice.

Old General Pershing had sent various platoons of the 1st Division to train with French troops right up at the front around Neville. That’s how I came to be in a ditch with Arnoud. Lucky for me he spoke crack English and had a love for all things American. Hell, that Frenchmen knew more about US history than I did, which put a strain on things at first until I hauled off and hit him while he was talking about some fool thing Abraham Lincoln had said. He toned it down after that and we got along just fine.

But I owe that man an eternal debt for telling me about Le Hot Club in Paris, and starting me on a life long love affair with jazz music.

We had found an elevated patch of dirt less muddy than the main walkways of the trench and on a fine November evening we lay on our backs rolling smokes and watching the show above us. Imagine a night sky framed by enormous columns of suppurating purple smoke but frosty and clear directly above and all the Milky Way laid out before you. Now imagine that all that star light is streaming hell bent across the sky and swirling around like a river. Not like fireworks, unless maybe you were inside the exploding powder looking out. The star shells would arc high into the night and hang for half a minute or more, blazing so bright it would seem like morning for a few moments. Huge explosions further off, seen dimly through massive, solid looking clouds, would shake the ground so hard the trench walls

would collapse and even the rats would scream. It was an awesome and unbearable thing.

“Pretty exciting stuff, eh Arnoud?” I said after a particularly terrifying blast.

“What, this? No, this is nothing my friend.” He took a shaky drag off his smoke and pulled out a hip flask. “No, this pales before an evening at Le Hot Club.”

“Yeah, what’s that, a tittie bar in Paris?”

Arnoud drew himself up and looked down his considerable sized nose at me. “It is so sad, Dansworth. All you think about is the tittie. There is a lot more to life you know.” He took another drag and we watched the bombs going off for awhile. “Okay, it is a tittie bar, but a very special one. They play the jazz music, you know, the Negro music.”

“Ah, I can get that back home, Arnoud. We got the local coloreds called the Gullah. They go to carrying on and singing songs they pretend are spirituals, but my daddy told me they ain’t singing ‘bout no Christian God.”

Arnoud propped himself up on an elbow and studied me in the dark. “Really? This is in South Carolina, right? And they play with the trumpets and the saxophones?”

“Nah. They just sing and beat on drums. Maybe sometimes they cobble together a one stringed guitar but that’s about it. Pretty music though, they got the gift and there’s no denying that.”

“Listen, my friend. When we get out of this hole and life returns to normal you must promise you will visit Le Hot Club with me. What do you say?”

I agreed that would be a pretty fine idea and Arnoud sat up to hand me the flask. Whatever else he had to say on the subject I’ll never know, because at that moment the top of his head and most of his face blew clean off, a fair amount landing in my lap. Arnoud had given his final measure in the Great War to end all Wars, so he wouldn’t be making that trip to Paris after all. I’d like to say I took the flask, toasted my friend, and solemnly vowed to keep our rendezvous, but mostly I just screamed.

The war was pretty much over by the time The U.S. joined in. I’ll leave it to the historians to argue over the rightness of that, but it worked just fine for me. The fighting ended at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, 1918. Seriously. Total casualties exceeded thirty seven million souls, so naturally America took some criticism for only contributing the lives of three hundred and twenty thousand of her finest boys. When it was all over, I found I could not return to Beaufort County, South Carolina. I’d seen too much, I guess. Lots of doughboys felt that way, and a sizable fraction of the million that went over there took their time in returning. They had a song about it: How ya gonna keep ‘em down on the farm once they’ve seen Pareeeeeee!!!!

I took my discharge in Fontainebleau and made my way across the French countryside in the spring of nineteen twenty. Now, I had said I saw too much to

return home but that doesn't mean I learned a damn thing from it. I was just as ignorant as I was opinionated and didn't care who knew it. But, fortunately for me, the whole continent was too worn out to fight anymore, or I would have gotten my ass whipped more often than a red haired stepchild.

Everywhere I went that spring there was work – no money – but plenty of work. Fences to be rebuilt, roofs to patch, bodies that needed carting, nothing was too lowly for me, since the Corps had discharged me with a grand total of seven dollars and a less than enthusiastic attitude about my decision to stay behind. I would work for room and board, such as it was, and as the months went by two remarkable things happened; I got healthy and I got sex. My French improved, my skin cleared up and the pounds melted away. I was no longer the big dumb kid from the sticks, I was the big dumb soldier from America. Years went by; how they snuck past me I can't say. I was taken in by a poor family who eked out a living on a barren patch of farmland that reminded me of home. I slept in a barn and came close to breaking my back clearing a field or two, but they became like family to me. That's why it was so unfortunate about the farmer's daughter. However, this time it was the father who chased me with a shotgun while I ran down the road naked. So this was progress from the frog pond incident, I felt.

I stood naked at the crossroads of my life

That's not some literary metaphor – I was buck naked in the middle of the night somewhere north of Orley. I considered returning for my clothing, but thought better of it. The story of how I covered my nudity involves a couple of twin blond milkmaids and a defrocked priest... but I think I'll save that one. Then there was the matter of the promise I had made to Arnoud. So, in 1923, I moved on to the City of Lights. Like a lot of decisions in this life, it was just plain bone headed wrong, and yet somehow things worked out.

I can't say my life really changed, though, until the night I met Bricktop.

BRIBERY

Essigny Le Grand. France, 1919

The MP shook his head and handed the papers back to Dansworth Fell. “You’re not getting in there till everyone else has,” he said absently, already looking to the next grunt in line. Fell briefly considered regaining the soldier’s attention by smashing a fist into his nose, but dropped the idea as unproductive. He was a big man, used to being in charge. But the most he allowed himself was raising both arms, hands upwards and looking around the room incredulously. None of the dozens of GIs waiting in the cramped reception area seemed inclined towards sympathy. Fell sat back on the worn bench and fished a precious cigarette from his pea coat.

“Hey, Sarge, can ya spare a drag?” The kid looked sixteen at the most, and apparently believed they were all comrades or something.

“I nursed this thing all the way across Europe, son. Why the hell would I wanna share it with you?”

“Okay, good point.” The kid was unfazed by Fell’s hostility. This reminded Fell of himself at a younger age and made him all the more irritable. “But we’re gonna be sitting here a long time by the looks of that MP’s mug,” the boy continued. “Unless drastic measures are taken.”

Fell studied the soldier with new interest. “I’ve never been one to shy away from drastic measures,” He said reaching across the aisle and handing the kid his cigarette.

Such unadulterated bliss Fell had seldom seen in his life. Lungs busting, the young GI solemnly handed the smoke back to Fell and indicated he should extinguish it. He paused for effect and slowly exhaled. “That’s the stuff.”

Fell grinned in spite of himself. “This ain’t gonna involve shooting up the place, is it?”

“Nothing so crude, Sarge.” The kid held out his hand. “Name’s Terry.”

“Dansworth Fell. How long you been waiting to see the XO?”

“Two days. Been sleeping right here.”

Fell looked dubious. “So if you know this trick to speed things up why haven’t you used it?”

“Hell, when I get out of here I’m heading back to the front, Sarge. I weren’t in no hurry, although facing enemy fire is looking better by the hour. But now your excellent stogie has fortified me. You pony up three more cigarettes, and I will advance you to the front of the lines.”

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Fell shook his head sadly. "If your plan involves bribing GI's with my pell mells, forget it. I already tried."

The kid grinned. "No Sir. I got a little something here far more irresistible, only I cant enjoy 'em on account of getting a bullet in my neck last year. Can't taste a damn thing anymore."

Fell had reached a point of desperation. He needed tio be mustered out yesterday and arrange transpoet back to Charlston, before his mom left this mortal plane. Sighing, he produced three ciggerettes formn the folds of his jacket and gesturedfor the soldier to proceed. Private Terry slid off the bench and walked out into the Berlin sun.

Not one minute later a GI ran in from the street yelling, there's a kid out there passing out free oreo cookies!

The room cleared in a heartbeat, and two days later Dansworth Fell was on a troop transport headed for the states.

(written for National Oreo Day)

