

The
Archivist

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Published by Evil GirlfriendMedia

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Cover art by J. M. Martin

Design by Shawn T. King

ISBN: 978-1-940154-07-7

To my mother —

YOU NEVER STOPPED

BELIEVING

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CHAPTER ONE

Even before the heavy oak door shuts behind me with a dull thud, I sense a setup hanging heavy in the smoky air of The Broken Mast. I cannot say precisely what the game is, but I have been on too many retrievals to miss the signs, and usually I am right. Not that I ever let being right stop me.

At least the tavern is warmer than the brisk autumn evening outside.

I am merely cautious as I stand at the entrance, and take my time, loosening my dark brown oilskin duster while I survey the room. Dim, primitive, handmade electric bulbs dangle over the bar, and harsh yellow light from the incandescent bulbs randomly flickers.

The unsteady light means they only have a crude, rebuilt generator; I recall seeing a watermill when the ship that brought me into town sailed into the small port. The mill is probably multitasking as a generator; nowadays taverns tend to be social centers, which explains why this one warrants the luxury of electric lighting.

The lights are such a luxury that they only hang over the bar. The rest of the place is lit with candles on wooden chandeliers that illuminate lively sailors and weather-beaten fishermen, gathered in sturdy if rustic chairs around a dozen roughly-hewn tables in the center of the tavern.

A handful of jovial farmers sits in a group off to one side. There is a comfortable camaraderie in the air, and I see why Wally chose this place for a clandestine rendezvous.

This port town sits on what was called the Pacific Canadian coast a few decades ago. This is my first time here. I am placing it at a late 1800s

tech level. In the thirty years since the Demon Days—following the collapse of the Intelligent Internet—I have seen a lot of towns far worse off than Port Sadelow, so they have not done too badly here. No one takes particular notice of my entrance except for the two goons at the table in the shadows by the door.

I struggle not to laugh as a short, pudgy man and his taller, stick-thin companion make a show of not looking at me while they fiddle with their cups and glance at each other nervously. These amateurs—dressed in sewn-leather rather than the homespun garments worn by the rest of the patrons—are my clue that something is afoot.

I survey the rest of the candlelit room and sure enough, I see him sitting at the bar, bracketed by empty stools: a Disciple wearing the long black cape and black hat with a wide, flat brim, reminiscent of the Amish style typical of the brethren. He blends in about as well as a raven in a flock of pigeons.

The Disciples of the Earth are what you would get if the Amish and the Taliban mated. For all I know, they did; I was preoccupied with helping to establish the Archives when the first Disciples appeared about thirty years ago, right after the Crash. Throughout my travels, there are few things in this broken world that I have found to be as utterly devoid of redeeming value as this bunch. Not that I have anything against nature-loving activists, but these guys are filled with far more hate than love.

I have not seen this particular acolyte before, and I have seen more than my fair share. But he is fairly young, so this might be his first assignment. He avoids glancing in my direction, but I know why he is here. Few things short of an Archivist would induce a Disciple to enter a tavern that has electric lights.

My contact, Walecki, is nowhere to be seen, so I decide to play along and head over to the counter that runs the length of the room. I snag an empty stool at the opposite end from the Disciple. After a long sea journey, I could use something to take off the edge—but not too much edge, not yet.

The spot I settle into faces toward the entrance, so I can keep an eye on my nemesis, and at the same time watch the privy behind me, reflected

in the mirror on the wall behind the bar. Who knows, maybe Wally had to take a piss.

The seat is near a corner, where I lean my heavy walking stick, and shrug off my pack so I can set it down and hang my duster on the knobby handle of the staff.

The barmaid comes over—an uncommonly winsome wench, and I do not think so just because I spent two months on three vessels in close quarters with unwashed sailors. Her thick, fire-red locks cascade over her shoulders, which are covered by a loose cotton shift that flashes hints of ample womanhood, while still concealing more than it reveals.

Her skin is fair, and light freckles cover her face like a faint mask, complementing her green eyes. She looks to be in her twenties, old enough to know herself while still retaining youthful playfulness. As she approaches, I notice her waist is bound with a thin leather belt that sports a small leather medallion.

She pulls a rag from under the counter, sweeps the area in front of me clean in one swift movement, and opens up a broad, warm smile. Not a turn-up-the corners-of-your-mouth smile, but a mouth-and-eyes-and-every-muscle-in-your-face smile, with which her whole being greets me.

I am as human as any other man, and due to the nature of my work, lonelier than most. The genuine warmth of human sociability can be hard to find anywhere, these distrustful days, so I hope Wally takes his time getting here.

“I’ll bet you just floated in on some cargo ship.” Her voice is deep, yet not husky, and utterly feminine.

“What gave me away?” I am sure I was not followed here from the *Bridget’s Secret*.

“This is a small port town. Half of my customers are here every night, and the other half are sailors or traders that drop in when they come to town to buy wool and sheep.” She sets an empty earthen mug in front of me, then pauses to look at me with narrowed eyes. “You’re obviously a traveler, but you don’t look like a butcher or weaver.”

“What do I look like, then?”

She winks and flashes me a wistful smile. "Someone waiting for a friend to show up." The sureness of her voice conveys that she knows more than she is revealing, but I am more curious than concerned. She has an authenticity that makes it hard to be wary. Behind me a patron calls out for Danae, and the woman's glance dances back and forth before it settles on me once again. "So what'll you have?"

"A draw of your house favorite, Danae, and whatever food you sell the most of." In the course of executing countless retrievals, I have learned that the safest fare is whatever the locals find popular. Except in Reyeston, where the only safe option is to bring your own food.

She fills the mug from a tap before she turns away to serve some other patrons. I quench my thirst with a pint of thick brown ale that looks like the muddy river we came up, but the cool brew has a nicely rich and smooth taste.

Danae brings me a refill along with something that smells heavily of garlic and rosemary, and looks like a thick bratwurst skewered on a stick with some roasted vegetables. I do not ask what kind of meat it is; I have found it is better that way.

Instead I turn around to survey the room as I eat. At the other end of the bar, the Disciple is getting antsy. I struggle to contain my mirth as small rivulets of sweat bead and then roll off his shaven head into his splayed whiskers. The rigid believer refuses to loosen his robe or look my way.

Time and again, like a child that cannot keep his eyes off a sweet, he glances at the pair of hoods seated in the shadows near the door. I am not worried; he will not do anything before Wally comes, because he is not nearly as interested in me as he is in what I am here to collect. Unlike me, he wants to destroy it.

The distant toll of a town bell marks that another hour has passed. Partly to kill the time, partly to blend in, but mostly to annoy my watchers, I head over to the area by the privy and join in a game of wall-bully.

The dart game uses three targets which resemble traditional dartboards, except that one of them swings like a clockwork pendulum. The object of the game is to score the same number of points on both fixed

boards without exceeding the score on the moving board, which is called the bully.

The four farmers are wrapping up a round when I approach, and eagerly, they let me go first when they start a new game. First I toss three darts at the bully and set the mark at a total of twenty-three points. I want to start out easy on these guys. Then, a gangly farmhand gives me a roguish smirk while he gives the bully a shove, and the pendulum swings back and forth.

He would not be smiling if he knew that I introduced wall-bully to this region seventeen years ago. It was invented by an engineer friend of mine back at the Mars colony, but I rarely play, because it reminds me of a home that I have not seen in more than three decades.

My first two darts on the left wall target add up to nineteen, and I let the bully hit the third dart as it flies. Then my third dart on the right target takes my second total to twenty-eight, and I am busted for this round. The evening wears on as the game stakes build up, but Wally does not show.

By the time I clean the unwitting farmers out of their share of the local currency, the candles have burned low and half the pub has cleared out. The losing players take their losses in good stride and begin to disperse, so I let the poorest of the farmers win my gains. I do not plan on hanging around this town long enough to spend them.

The Disciple closes his tab and retrieves his staff. The thick wood is almost a post, and is topped with a snarling wolf head forged out of pewter. Over the past few years, an increasing number of the brethren have started using these ornamental staves as walking sticks. I suspect the metal decoration can pack a nasty punch. He must have come to the same conclusion I arrived at an hour ago: my contact is not showing up.

I pause in the middle of a dart throw to observe Danae, who stands behind the counter.

The Disciple waves her over, but she deliberately serves a table across the room before she slowly walks behind the bar, and places her rag on the counter between herself and the Disciple like a symbolic shield. He leans forward to make a hushed comment and then takes his deepening scowl outside, trailed by the hired thugs.

As he passes through the door, Danae's shoulders drop visibly, as if the Disciple pulls the tension out of her when he exits the tavern. She is clearly glad to see him leave, and anyone who is not a friend of a Disciple could be a friend of mine.

I head back to the bar for a refill, and as she takes my mug, Danae murmurs to me, "You know what they say, K' Marr. Whenever you see a Disciple, an Archivist is not far away."

The smile on my face barely twitches, while a shiver dances on the nape of my neck and then wriggles down my spine. I never mentioned my name to the barmaid. "Yes," I reply, "but would you know one if you saw him?"

Danae lifts an eyebrow as she whispers back, "Well, I heard about an Archivist who was about a hand's breadth taller than me, in his mid-thirties, with short black hair and a nasty scar over his left eye. Oh yeah, and I was told that his hat was so ugly some towns considered it a deadly weapon. Based on that description, I dsay I'm looking at one right now."

The reference to my headwear persuades me that she has some connection to my contact. Wally has never appreciated a genuine *akubra*, and every time we meet, his first comment is how obnoxious my hat is. Okay, she knows who I am, so I toss a challenge back to her. "Then I suppose you can tell me where Walecki is?"

"I'm sorry to tell you, the one who called himself Wally is dead."

The words hit me like a freight train, something Danae has certainly never seen; nor have I, for several decades. I sit back on my stool and turn away for a minute. I will not shed any tears for Wally; this harsh new world wrung those out of me years ago, but this is as close as I have been in a long, long time. It takes about a dozen slow, deliberate breaths to wrestle my emotions back down until eventually I turn back.

Danae's voice is somber. "I'm sorry, I can tell you knew him well. But if you have what he promised to provide, you can still find what you came for."

"And just what do you think that might be?"

She chuckles. "Something Intellinet left behind, of course."

"Really?" I blurt out. I am not sure which surprises me more: that she knows exactly why I am here, or her reference to the Intellinet. Aside from

Disciples and Archivists, few know or even care anymore that the machines left anything behind other than collapse and chaos. It is definitely not something the average barmaid chats about. "Maybe we do have something to discuss, but first I need to know what happened to Wally."

"You can ask my associate when you meet him, after I close up."

"If Wally's dead, just how much can you trust this associate?"

"With my life," she replies, banging down my refilled mug. "He's my father."