

PRELUDE

In Deis Speramus

I

It was a dark and stormy night in a land of smoke and violence. The Edge, a gutter-town named by men without imagination for a place that didn't require it, stood against the wind and the blinding sand coming east over The Waste like an odd collection of gravestones found neglected along some old wagon trail. The sallow glow of the gas lamps threw just enough light to silhouette the hulks of steel Crystlers sleeping curbside or suggest the specter of the hat and overcoat of the odd man determined enough to be out in a sand-squall. And, it illuminated the river of sand that swam along the asphalt like a swarm of vaporous moccasins. Grit raked and tittered at the dark glass of closed shops. And it raked and tittered at the rare front with a light behind it. The sands show no partiality for what kind of concern lies behind one of man's walls or another. But, the men do. So the liquor joints were open.

The girl sat at the end of the bar. Her elbow on the polished mesquite, raising an arm so thin it could pass for bare bone and worked as a prop for her small, but apparently heavy head. The long black hair that masked her face reached down from her head beyond the rim of her whisky glass, ready to drink even if she wasn't.

A tough named Kent was cleaning glassware on the service side of the long bar. In a land where water is scarcer than the smell of carrion, cleaning means nothing more than a good polish with a dry rag. There hadn't been much business that day, and every glass had already been wiped out at least once. But, Kent was a man of standards. They made him better than everyone he met— a status that was only as lasting as his patience to maintain it.

His clothes on any other man, in any other place, would look sharp; The ubiquitous uniform of a publican that harkens back to the age of stage coaches and ambitions. But, Kent appeared more likely to be the bar's brawler than its tender, his threadbare clothes stretched to bursting and seeming to resent their station to constrain a man so brutishly built. He minded the glasses and allowed the girl to mind herself. Kent liked the world that way— everyone keeping their own damn business.

The piano stopped playing abruptly. When he was done with the glass, he would go and wind it up again. He hated when a place was silent. It made him nervous that someone might be able to hear his thoughts. Not that they were particularly interesting, even to himself, but they were about the only thing he had left anymore.

As if on cue with the cut in the ambience, the front door swung open and brought in with it the kind of man Kent wanted to toss down a long flight of stairs. Anymore, though, that's all the door seemed to open up for, and Kent had to accept that some standards were beyond his ability to control.

This man was clean cut and clean shaven, save for a proud mustache which he'd had waxed to clownish curls. This meant that he had just gotten toileted up at Benny's, which, in turn, meant that he had just arrived in town and was likely looking for a little release and some entertainment; two things that pent-up frontier towns like The Edge were simultaneously short on and expected to provide. He was duded-out in a brilliantly dyed cornflower shirt with an intricately woven yoke and jasper buttons, and took his entrance like a one-man coming attraction. His demeanor deflated a notch when he saw the place was as empty and quiet as The Waste he'd just come off of.

"This a water hole?" He asked.

"It's the library." Kent said, choosing to turn his back to show he wasn't worried about some waste-runner.

"Looks like a damn fun'ral house."

The man sauntered to the piano and plunked at a couple of the keys on the low end. Chopin's funeral march—

dum dum da'dum,

dum da'dum da'dum

da duummm

He thought his joke very funny, and cackled, showing a mouth full of desperate teeth. He looked around the room for applause. The lonely figure at the dark corner of the bar didn't move. The bar man kept his back turned.

"It's the death tune." He said.

No reaction.

He grimaced in the way that said *'can't help the helpless'*, and moseyed to the bar. The high chair rocked on its joints. He shuffled his hips so that it wiggled beneath him, creaking.

"Stool's fixin' to bust."

Kent finally turned.

"You don't need to help it."

The man stopped rocking. He squared his jaw, and spoke with tight lips. "I'm sorry, friend. Looks like we got a hard start."

Kent set a glass on the bar. The man looked at it expectantly, though Kent wasn't sure what he expected.

"You got choices?" The man finally said.

"Whisky's five marks. Beer is two."

"You got the white shine?"

"Nope."

"Where I grew up we got the white-shine. Man oh man, take the hair off a polecat! They throw in flavorings, too, like bush berries and pine needles. That suits me."

Kent just watched him talk. The smell of Benny's rose water radiated from the man. Kent didn't hate rose water. It took him to a time dead and buried now. But, he also found it odd that a man would coat himself in perfume when all he really meant to do was start some violence in the hope of letting out his juice with a little legal murder. The cemetery on Cypress street was a testament to that, filled mostly with the rotting vestiges of out-of-towners like this dude.

"I get it," the stranger sighed. "I know where I am and where I ain't."

There was a shifty movement in his jaw. Kent knew the man was feeling a bit sideways with the situation, and that mostly accounted

for it. But, the movement also spoke of conspiracy and Kent figured him for a man who schemed.

"You got the Cactus Crazy, though, don't you?"

Kent sighed wearily. Every day it's the same script; ask for the menu, then ask for everything that's not on it. It's not their fault, he tells himself, it's natural for the type of man fool enough to run the waste route to only want what he can't have. Eventually, that exact foolishness became what made them natural for the Edge, too. Twenty years past, all Kent really wanted was to get the hell out of the Edge. His dying wish now would be to go back and die in The Edge as it was then, coaxed to sleep by the song of those times.

He did have the Cactus, but it made for murder in the wrong gullet, almost guaranteed. He wasn't a man for moralizing, but, he figured death was a service easily procured and he didn't have to contribute to the supply.

"Only for people I know." he said.

The waster cocked his head. Kent thought he looked like a bird trying to figure out a man. He imagined the sound his long neck would make if Kent were to grab his head like a chicken's and twist it.

The stranger shrugged up his shoulders and spread his hands. "Whisky, then. Haven't got the patience for beer."

By the proud look that came with it, Kent wagered this was a regular joke, probably one he thought original. Kent only laughed at jokes he found funny. Other bartenders might snicker or say some rat-fink thing like *'don't you know it'* to keep the mood light. That was them. The stranger's mouth dropped to a scowl.

"You know, another thing about where I come from," his voice had grown quieter and developed a slight growl. "I'm not used to no surly manners from barkeeps. You got something against me, partner?"

Kent responded evenly. He'd learned when a man was heating up. Speaking slow let the bastard know you were ready for him. "I don't know you, friend. I gather you're from the High Timber, and you liked it there. I got no problem with that."

A flash of danger ran across the man's eyes. He grew a funny smile, and chortled. "Good, good." He said. "See, we're all strangers, but friends just the same."

He looked down the bar. "How 'bout you, sweet thing? Looks like we're the only party we got tonight. Must be we arrived too early. Or too late."

She didn't move. Neither did Kent. The man looked to his glass and then to the bar tender.

"I ax'd about some whisky, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well?"

"Whisky's five marks."

"Pay upfront?" The man was still working his jaw. It reminded Kent of the way a porch swing sways Side-to-side when the storm winds get started. "Is that the way for everyone in this town? Or am I a special occasion? Hell, I git you cain't trust no stranger. But, if you don't give a buck a little lead, now and then, how'll you learn his nature?"

Kent breathed steadily. He was worn out waiting for this scab to make up his mind if he wanted to try a fight or not. Men who started fights over embarrassment were fools, and Kent pitied them. Worse were those who felt the urge, but debated the matter. They were cowards, and he despised a coward more than anything else in this filth infested world.

"That's for everyone," Kent said, "in my place."

A long moment passed in which the two just held each other's stare. Then, there was a glint in the eye of the stranger, followed by a glint of metal coming from his hip. Kent's right hand jerked for the billy club. He always kept it within reach. In the flash of his mind he already saw this pecker's brains driven into the wood grain of the bar. His left was half-way to a flor-d'lis embroidered collar when-

He heard a hard *click*.

But, not the bright snap of gunmetal. Rather it was a warm and flat note that rang of a time before the piano played itself.

Kent let his gaze drift to the bar where, straddled by two spidery fingers, lay what he knew he'd see but would not believe until he did.

A freshly minted gold buck.

His heart swam with cool water. He had not seen that color in more years than his grizzled mind could remember. But, that cool water quickly turned cold as the grave and emptied down into his gut.

"How do like me now?" the mustache breathed.

Kent took once last, long look at a time forgotten, then stepped back and looked away from that coin forever. "I like my life more. Put that up and never let it flash in this town again."

He let his brows fall to mark how straight he meant the next words, "Unless you like dying."

The man smirked. His body, though, shifted uncomfortably beneath it. He'd won the hand, alright, but seemed to know he'd played a fool card. He eased the coin into his pocket, rattled his hand around for a second more, and came up with a well-worn 25 silver marker.

Kent uncorked a bottle.

"And," the man said, suddenly slapping the coin against the wood with conviction. His voice returned to the flamboyant showman. "pour one for yourself, too!"

Kent gave a nod and set another glass next to the first.

"Aaand..." the man continued, reaching his long arm down the bar. "One for my compañera. And you keep the difference... *friend*."

Kent poured two fingers worth into each of the two glasses, then corked the bottle. His hand slid the quarter-buck off the bar and just a snappy dropped it into a mason jar with the others.

Then he took his glass with him around the bar and over to the player piano. He wound the crank. The keys moved along with the hammers, undulating under invisible hands. And the silence was consumed by a tinny, mechanical music hinting at words almost forgotten—

*Que será será, whatever will be, will be, the
future is always uncertain, que será, será...*

He took a sip of the whisky, let his eyes close, and drank in the melody. That cool water moved inside his chest, swirling like the mist above a nighted bog. Those times had been hard, same as all the

others before and since, but they were the only times that were any good at all.

He returned to his place behind the bar. Another nip of whisky chased out the last revenant of the past. He set the glass down and began wiping bottles.

"Hey, there, friend." The stranger said. But his voice was drowned out by the music. He raised it, "*Hey, there, friend.*"

Kent cut his eyes.

"You forgotten the lady."

The girl hadn't moved through the whole exchange. Except for the moment that coin hit the bar. Her black eyes had followed its radiance from behind the curtain of her hair so well that if a man had stared into them at that moment they'd've been able to read the letters *in deis speramus*. But, neither of the men had noticed. And, now she was back to reflecting her own vestige onto a dram of rusty liquor.

"I'd say she wants to be."

The man twisted up and leaned across the bar. "I ordered her a whisky."

Kent refused to rise to the wasters urgency. He said, without affect, "She has one already."

"Well maybe she wants two."

"I doubt that."

"What makes you the knower of what she wants?"

The hilt of a long Bowie knife peered out from a sheath behind the breast of the man's shirt. Kent wagered it would show its blade before long. Honed tools desire to be used, and they rarely suppress their want any better than a man with spirits in his gut.

"She never does." He took a long sip from his glass and stared into the stranger's face until the dude sat back on his stool. Kent returned to polishing. "If she comes back, she gets the credit."

The mustache danced. "If the lady don't want it, I guess I'll take it back, then. Refund me ten marks. Reckon I'll spend 'em again before the night is through." He sipped his whisky and licked his mustache to be sure none went to waste.

"Not for the sake of the good company, mind you," he continued, "but for lack of anywhere else in this hole to rid myself of them.

Ain't there no other diversions 'round 'bout for a man who's just come off a rough ride?"

"Can't do that." Kent said. Then added, "There are other towns off The Waste."

Kent knew what the man was fishing around for. The Cottonwood was just around the next block and sure to be open, waste winds or no. But, he liked those girls, and desperate as they may be for any coin in the desert, Kent wouldn't wish this prick on any of them. The man had menace on his mind.

"No other towns out this far!" argued the dude in the loud cornflower shirt and perfume oiled hair. "Hell, this is a veritable oh-a-sees. A town with any smart to it would see the opportunity in taking advantage of runners like me. If I was mayor, I'd have a goddam neon sign bigger'an the sky issself with a big blinking arrow pointing clear the way to a boulevard of fine enticements."

The man got busy grinning as way of patting himself on the back for his little campaign speech and forgot his main quarrel. But, with the next drink of whiskey, it came back to him. Probably because no one else joined in the congratulations.

"And what do you mean you can't get my money back. I think you mean you *won't*. I didn't come out tonight with a mood for trouble."

"No one wants to see you come to trouble," Kent said.

"Well give me my money." The man complained. Then, before Kent could answer he said, "Was that a threat?"

"Can't give you what's not yours. You gave the drink to her, and the rest to me. Neither of us has offered it back."

The man retreated to something of a hunch.

"Thievin' sonofabitch," he muttered.

Kent gave him an eye to say that he had registered this remark, but then pushed on with cleaning. A coward needs to have the last word to feed the lie that they won something. It had been a meaningless insult, and a bloodless one— as good a place as any to let the man have his pride. The stranger did fall silent after that and seemed to roam to other things within his own mind.

Kent turned away, but not fully. He'd learned not to give his back to a coward.

With the lull in talk, the flat plunking of the piano came forward again. Had it been the good times, it would have been lacquered and tuned, with an ebony bombshell, fresh from The Swelter, leaning against the side. She would have brought an equally handsome man with her to play the keys without a crank. And her voice, deep and muddy as a river bend, would sing the words—

*Why does the sun go on shining, why does the sea
rush to shore, don't they know it's the end of
the world, cause you don't love me anymore...*

Just as well the piano played itself now, Kent reasoned. The sun hadn't shown on The Edge in years. The only sea he knew, a day's ride south, was choked in tar. There was no one left who'd doubt that the end of the world had already come... and gone.

And what the fuck is love?