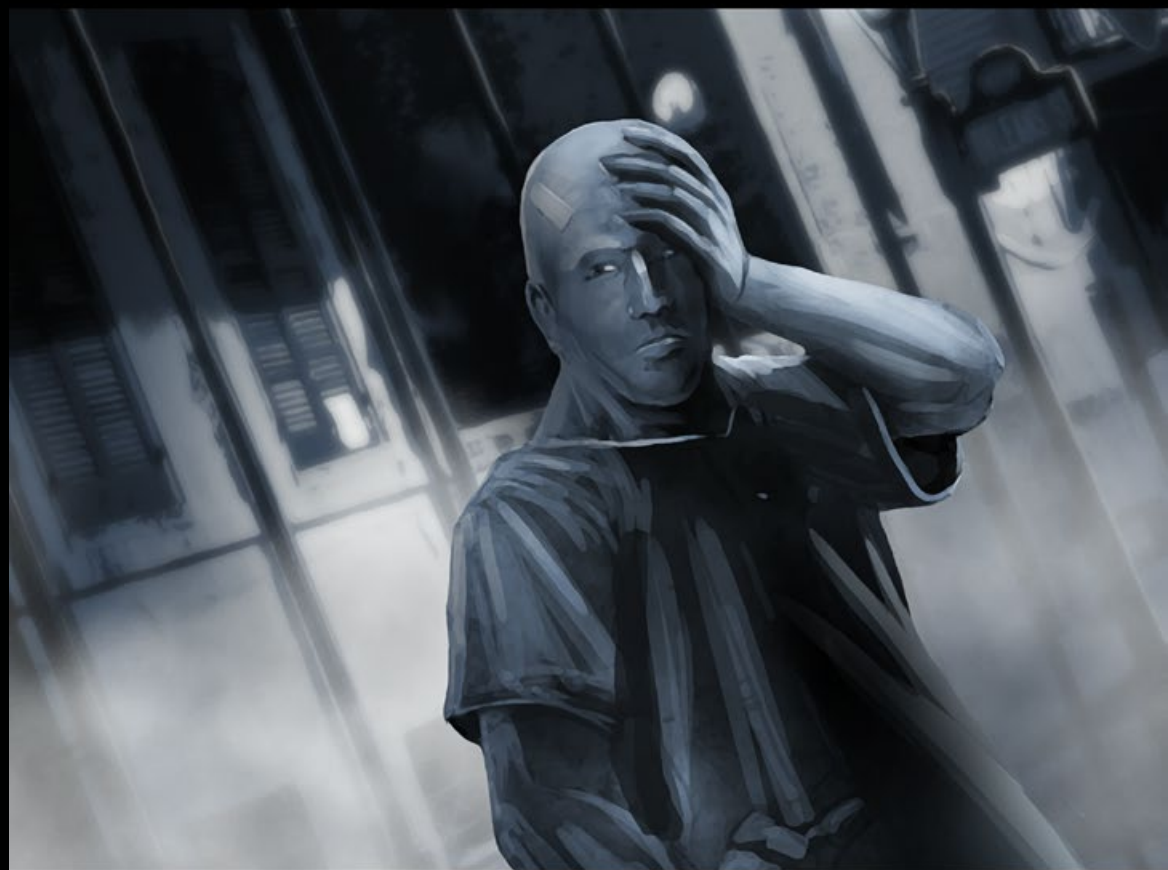


# DEAD LANDS NOIR



## MEMORIES OF YESTERDAY

BY JOHN GOFF





# MEMORIES OF YESTERDAY

A Night Stalker Dime Novel for Deadlands Noir

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## TERRY'S DEDICATION

For the Thursday Night Crew, a select group of gamers and hobbyists who allowed me the honor to be part of their group. The Dons, Capos, Stalkers, and staff at Gen Con who allowed me to play and go out in a blaze of glory in a *Deadlands* game. Finally, to the best GMs a guy could ever hope for, either in the basement or at a convention....here's to surviving many more games.



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When you get down to it, all we are is our memories. We actually experience life in the tick of seconds. It's the memory of each particular second that counts. The feel of your first kiss, the taste of your first beer, or the look on the face of the first man you killed. If you don't remember it, did it really happen, I mean as far as you're concerned?

Take it from a guy who knows. It didn't.

That's why I'm writing this down. Because it's very possible in a minute, an hour, or—if I'm really lucky—in a day or so I won't even remember my own name. Again. Come to think of it, it probably won't matter if I write it down or not. I've got my name pressed into the metal of a pair of I.D. tags I wear around on a cord around my neck, and for all I know I won't remember to even look at them.

But the other option is that I just accept the fact that for all intents and purposes I might cease to exist as anything but a walking suit rack. The days will pass, but I'll be living a new, meaningless life one second at a time, never knowing what the last one held. So, here I am, sitting in a diner on Claiborne Avenue putting pen to paper.

I'm going to start at the beginning, or at least the beginning as I know it, which honestly is only a couple of days ago. Short span for a lifetime, right?

*The smell of popcorn, mustard-covered hot dogs, and freshly-cut grass pulled me out of a haze. I was sitting in the stands of Shibe Park watching the Philadelphia Athletics battle it out with the New York Giants in the 1913 World Series. Chief Bender had almost blown the early lead the Athletics' had run up to let the Giants tie the series in the fourth game, but so far, Philly was holding on to a one-run advantage late in the ninth. The boys had put two batters down, but Grant was in for Marquard.*

A pair of voices pulled me into the present.

"That should do it," the first voice said. It

was deep and carried the weight of a man who was used to being in charge.

"What do you mean?" It was another man's voice, that of a guy who'd always looked to others for direction and assurance. "I mean are we talking he can fetch the paper or is he gonna need help wiping his behind?"

Their accents told me they weren't from Philly. There was a hint of an Irish brogue, but underneath there was a distinct Southern drawl to them.

"I can't say," said the first man. "All I know is that Cisek shyster told me it was the real deal, but I got him to admit he bought it off some dock rat who found it washed up near one of the drainage outlets. Still, if it's supposed to work on a dead guy, it ought to work on a dummy."

I faded back into the past before I could drag my eyes open.

*I signed the induction papers without hesitation. "Any chance of getting stationed in Denver? I'd like to get the chance to take a crack at the Legion, if it comes down to it."*

*The sergeant didn't even look up as he said, "Son, every able body is likely headed overseas. The Germans are giving the Frenchies a hard time, and we're gonna teach 'em how to fight."*

"Are you sure this is going to work?" It was the second voice again.

"Of course I'm not sure. What do I know from hoodoo?" I felt some time had passed, but how long I had no idea. This time things were getting clearer in my head, but I still couldn't focus enough to see anything.

"Seems like a big risk to me, boss." I started to get the feeling this guy was a whiner, always looking for the easy score.

"What risk? If it works, great. If not, this guy stays a vegetable and we're no worse off than when we started."

"I don't see what good he's gonna do us anyway. We've got plenty of manpower,

but we'd be crazy to go up against those voodoo guys. We're truck drivers not fighters. Why don't we just pay protection to the Hand and let them take care of it? That's what the other locals do."

"I'm not knuckling under to those Sicilian vampires!" The leader's voice rose in anger. "We'd just be trading one monster for another—one we'd never get off our backs. Anyway, we get this guy on our side, he'll be our arsenal." He punctuated his words by pointing at me with the cigar butt. "We don't need a mob. We need a soldier. We're going to war."

*"Over the top, boys! Give 'em Hell!" I pulled myself up to the top of the trench, careful to avoid Wilson. He'd been there for a few weeks, ever since an artillery shell had collapsed part of the wall onto him. Only his boot was still sticking out, but it seemed disrespectful to use it for a literal leg up.*

*Our own arty had been softening up the Huns for a few hours before the order to attack came down, but like us they'd gotten pretty good at hunkering down and dodging the worst of it.*

*Machinegun fire raked back and forth across no man's land as we surged across.*

*Then the ironclads hit us.*

My vision cleared a little and patterns began to form in the haze, curves and angles decorating a rug on the floor of a small, well-lit room. I was sitting in a chair near the center, staring at the floor. It was a nice chair, probably an antique, but expensive even if it wasn't. The carpet under the mahogany legs was just as nice.

The boots sitting on the carpet weren't nice. They were covered in grime that looked like it was occupying space on a multi-year lease. The seams were cracking and I bet from the right angle I could probably catch sight of a sock through some of the gaps. It took me a moment to figure out the boots were on my feet. It wasn't a pleasant realization.

The rest of my outfit wasn't any better. There were so many patches on my pants that it was hard to guess what the original color of the fabric was. The shirt was of a coarse fabric that had seen better decades.





In some spots, I was pretty sure the stains were what was holding it together. On my chest rested a rough leather bag with some interesting stains all its own.

"I'm telling you, O'Leary, back when I was running that transportation company after the War, we made regular runs to an army base in Georgia." It was the voice of the man I was guessing was in charge of whatever was going on here. "They were playing everything there close to their vests. Real secret stuff. Anyway, they had a platoon of troops that looked just like this guy—bald as a cue ball. Scuttlebutt was they were some kind of super soldier."

"Wouldn't the army be looking for him then if he was so special?"

"Maybe, if he was Confederate Army. Looking at this guy's ID tag, I'd bet you dollars to dimes he's a Northerner. You can be sure if we were working on something like that, so were they."

"Well, he's a long way from home then."

*I stood in a downpour, surrounded by a ring of sandbags. Dead German soldiers littered the ground around my feet and steam rolled off the barrel of a nearby machinegun. My uniform was covered in bullet holes, but I wasn't bleeding as far as I could tell. My chest hurt like someone had been pounding on it with a hammer though.*

*Over the sandbags came more doughboys from my unit. Lieutenant Morris picked his way through the carnage to me.*

*"Sergeant McGregor, I've never seen anything like that." His eyes scanned up and down me, and he pulled my uniform jacket out to look through pattern of the bullet holes. "You probably saved the platoon. You can bet I'm putting you in for a commendation as soon as we get back to the rear."*

I looked up, still a little foggy. Around me swam a room decorated with a tasteful amount of furniture that matched the chair I was sitting in. It wasn't exactly a deductive leap for me to compare my attire to the

surrounding décor and conclude I was not in my home. Or if I was, I needed to fire my valet.

There were two men in the room. One of them was wearing a pea coat, watch cap, and a well-worn pair of khaki work pants. His boots were scuffed and bore more than one oil-colored stain. Obviously, that guy worked for a living. I also got the feeling his was the second voice I'd heard.

The other man was wearing nicely-pressed pants, a tailored vest that matched them, and a shirt and tie to round it all out. The stub of a cigar rested in one corner of his mouth. There was no sign of the jacket the vest and pants had obviously been sewn to match, so I felt pretty safe assuming this was his joint. Regardless, he was obviously in charge here as the other man looked at him with the kind of deference I used to see privates show officers.

"Hey! He's comin' around, Mr. Halloran."

Halloran, the well-dressed fellow stepped over to me and bent down to meet me eye-to-eye. He snapped his fingers left and right in front of my face. I flinched involuntarily, blinking my eyes to focus.

"Mr. McGregor, can you hear me?" he asked.

"Yeah. Where am I—and who are you people?"

"Well, you're in my house and my name's Brian Halloran. This lad behind me is Tommy O'Leary."

"No," I shook my head almost groggily as I tried to clear the fog still clogging my mind. "Where am I? This isn't Philadelphia, is it?"

"No son, you're in New Orleans. Do you know how you got here, by any chance?"

I had no idea what I was doing south of the border. Or how I happened to have found my way into this man's house. I told him as much.

"Well, I can't explain how you found your way to the Confederacy or New Orleans, laddie," Halloran said, "but I can answer as to how you happen to be seated in my parlor. That would be my doing, you see. You've been wandering the streets of the Crescent City for a while now, at least a few months. I brought you here to help you get your legs back under you, so to speak."

"That was kind of you, I suppose." I felt like there was something else coming.

"While you're...recuperating, I was hoping you could help me with a little problem." And there it was. I saw a look pass between Halloran and O'Leary, but I couldn't read the meaning.

"I don't see why not." And I didn't. Halloran was doing me a favor. The least I could do was reciprocate.

"I run a teamster's union local here among other things. It seems there are a group of gentlemen—and I use the term loosely—of the opinion they can put the muscle on my boys. Extort us, if you will."

"Like the Mob, you mean?"

"Not *unlike* the Mafia, but a different organization, one more indigenous to New Orleans." Indigenous seemed like a big word for a teamster boss, but then again, Halloran had some pretty fancy digs. I had the feeling he was one of those fellows who started out a few rungs higher up the ladder to success than everybody else.

"They're called the Red Sect," O'Leary butted in. "I don't know if you've heard of voodoo up North, but these guys are supposed to be able to put curses on you, raise the dead for slaves, and all sorts of unholy workings."

"My protégé tends to exaggerate—and has a tendency to lend too much credence to the more outlandish rumors," Halloran said. "They're no more than your typical thugs who've found a way to take advantage of local superstition. They mostly

run protection rackets, banking largely on superstition, but they also hawk dope to the folks too poor to pay for the premium stuff from the Black Hand."

"Either way, what do you need?" I asked.

"Convey our wishes that they cease and desist," Halloran said. "Clearly and with as much force as necessary."

"Okay. I'll need some weapons. What have you got?" Even I was pretty surprised how quickly I agreed with Halloran's request. Sure, I was a soldier, but I hadn't ever thought of myself as muscle for hire—even as a courtesy to a friend. Make that a *very* new friend.

O'Leary said, "Give me a little time and I can get you pretty much anything you want: pistols, shotgun, maybe even a Tommy gun."

"I mean now. Here." I felt a peculiar urgency to settle up with these Red Sect mugs. Waiting around, even for a few hours, seemed like a luxury I couldn't afford.

"I'm afraid I have precious few arms on hand, Mr. McGregor," Halloran said.

"Call me Mac."

"Mac it is then. As I was saying, I don't have much on hand. I'm not a man given to much violence myself." No, I thought he seemed the type more prone to delegate his beatings. I immediately felt remorse for that thought. After all, hadn't he helped me out of a tough spot? I owed this guy.

Halloran continued. "I have my own revolver which I'd be loath to give up. I'm a man with a few enemies, like most in authority these days. Oh, there was this." He picked up a double-edged dagger with a set of brass knuckles built into the grip from an end table. It looked familiar.

"You had this on you. I took the liberty of setting it aside in case there were any, uhm, complications with your recovery." He handed it to me. I looked it over and then



pulled my jacket aside to reveal a scabbard on a harness under my left arm. The knife slid into it like a child nestling under the covers at bedtime.

"I have a bat in my truck," O'Leary volunteered. "You know, for checking my tires. Or bustin' a road block."

"Bats are good, I guess. Not as good as a heater, but better than harsh language," I said. "I probably ought to grab a notebook and pencil. My mind's a little foggy and I probably ought to jot down any particulars that come up."

The teamster boss found both in a roll-up desk nearby.

"One last thing—you have any whiskey? The stronger, the better."

He did and I found a place for it in a coat pocket. O'Leary led me out of the house. Halloran must have spent a fortune furnishing the place. It looked like a museum for rich people's stuff.

"So where to?" O'Leary asked as we walked to a car parked in front of Halloran's place. Calling it a nice joint sold it way short.

The teamster boss lived in a mansion nestled into a veritable flower garden that was protected from the outside world by wrought iron and stone. Over the impressive fencing I could see the place was surrounded by other residences of similar—or even greater—opulence.

"Where do these Red Sect guys hole up? Sharpen their knives and so on."

"I ain't got a clue. I hear tell some of them hang out at Deacon's Groceries over in Trémé, but I don't think it's their headquarters or nothin'."

"Well, if you can't find the rats' nest, find the rats. By the way, nice ride," I said. "I've never seen anything quite like it. What make is it?"

"It's a Model B," he answered. When the bewilderment on my face didn't pass,

he added almost tentatively, "You know, a Ford?"

"Huh. Never heard of it."

"Man how long have you been out of it? They started making these three years ago, back in '32."

The last date I remembered was 1926. I'd lost a decade of my life. It was just gone, and there wasn't even a hole where the memories should be. Worse, I had no idea how or why.

As I settled into the passenger's seat, lost in my thoughts, O'Leary asked, "The boss is pretty sold on you pullin' our asses out of the wringer here, but I don't see what the big deal is. What are you supposed to be able to do anyway?"

*I was standing in a platoon formation with about 30 other men, all dressed in khaki uniforms completely devoid of any patches, badges, or even name tags. None of us was wearing a hat, and I could tell we all had stricter-than-regulation buzz cuts. Most of the men around me had patches where their hair was completely gone or thinning on top of that.*

*"You're not here in recognition for your deeds or bravery," the drill sergeant said. "Each of you was selected based on a potential displayed in combat and the opinion of men in white suits being paid a whole lot more than you or me. You're not 'special'—but you might be if you make it through the training ahead of you.*

*"For those who don't, the luckiest ones will just die."*

O'Leary was poking me. He had taken off his watch cap and was trying to pass it to me. I didn't know how long we'd been in the car. It could have been a minute or it could have been an hour. We were in a more developed, less moneyed neighborhood. Businesses lined a wide street that had a large median down the middle.

"You alive in there? You might want to wear this," he said, nodding at the cap. "That bald head of yours is going to stick

out like a sore thumb for sure."

It was a good point, but I thought he was overlooking one thing. Underneath the cap, O'Leary had a mop of red hair so bright I was worried it might set low-hanging branches on fire. I thought for a moment, then took the hat. I figured if anyone was going to get fingered, better him than me.

"What did your boss do to me back there?" I asked.

"The boss don't know much about that hoodoo stuff, but this broker sold him something supposed to clear your head."

I kept quiet, figuring he'd keep talking if I let him. He did.

"That bag around your neck, it's supposed to be some sort of powerful voodoo of some sort. Kinda like what they use to make zombies, but more powerful."

"But I wasn't dead," I said. At least I didn't think I was. There were still some big gaps in my memory. Maybe one of them included me ending up on the wrong side of a coffin lid.

"No, but something was wrong in your head. The boss figured if that bag was supposed to be able to make a dead man's brain work, it oughta do the trick on you. "Plus, it..." He stopped himself.

"What?"

"Nothin'." He squirmed a little in the driver's seat. "I was thinkin' about something else."

Deacon's Groceries turned out to be a little corner store in a neighborhood that made South Philly look like a step up. O'Leary said it was called Tremé. I had him pull up to the curb down the block a piece. We weren't the only white people on the street, but the Irishman's mop was likely to blind any casual onlooker, so subtly was out the window.

It was well after dark, but the store looked like it was still open. We walked in, our

arrival announced by a miniature cowbell hanging from the door. The shopkeeper and the only patrons in the store—two tough looking men seated on stools near the counter—looked up as we entered. Their expressions made it pretty obvious we were as out of place as I felt we looked.

"Are you gentlemen lost?" the shopkeeper asked before I even had both feet through the door.

"No, sir," I said. The two other men in the store shifted uncomfortably on their stools, turning to face us as they did. "I was hoping to get a box of matches from you and maybe a handkerchief if you got one."

He huffed, rummaged around behind the counter and dropped a box of strike-anywhere matches next to the register. "Ain't got no kerchiefs."

One of the men pulled a filthy rag out of his pocket, blew his nose on it, and set it beside the matches. "No charge," he added. His friend snickered.

I fished around in my pockets without success. Nothing like finding out you're flat broke to take the wind out of your sails when you're trying to play the tough guy. I looked at O'Leary. "Pay the man, would you?"

He did, but he made damn sure everyone knew he wasn't happy about it. I scooped up the matches and grabbed the cleanest corner of the rag. I nodded my thanks to the previous owner. He and his friend got another chuckle out of that.

"Oh, I have one more question. I'm trying to get in touch with someone from the Red Sect. I heard you folks might be able to help."

The laughter stopped. The store turned as quiet as a crypt. The two customers stood up, one moved his hand slowly behind his back. I figured he was feeling for a knife, maybe a gun.

The storekeeper said, "Mister, I think you



need to leave now." His hands were out of sight below the counter.

"It does seem like that time, doesn't it?" I motioned O'Leary toward the door with a nod of my head. I turned and left. They didn't strike me as the type to shoot us in the back. A couple of dead white men wasn't the sort of attention they'd want to bring on themselves.

"That was your plan?" O'Leary asked after we got back out to the street.

"No," I said. "This is."

I pulled the whiskey out of my coat pocket and poured a healthy dose onto the rag, then pushed it partway into the bottle. I fished a match out of the box and lit the rag, then hurled the flaming bottle through the store window. The bottle hit the floor, broke, and the alcohol went up almost as quickly as if it had been pure gasoline. In no time, Deacon's had the makings of a nice blaze in the works.

"You Irish don't mess around with your liquor, do you?" I said. I hustled O'Leary back to the car.

The owner was more concerned with his burning store than us, but the two toughs wasted no time spotting us standing beside O'Leary's Model B. The men broke into a trot. O'Leary backed up, about two steps from breaking into a full retreat.

I stepped around him, my back to the goons, and reached into the car. I pulled the bat as the faster of the two reached us, careful to shield it from his view as I started the swing. It caught him hard in the breadbasket, knocking the wind out of him. Probably most of his immediate family as well and maybe even a distant cousin or two. He went down fast, the momentum sliding him a couple of feet past me on the sidewalk. The man was gasping for breath like a catfish stuck on the riverbank during a hot day in July.

I hitched the bat up to my shoulder like

Stuffy McInnis and smiled at his slower friend. He stumbled and caught himself just out of the reach of any follow-up swing. A twitch of the bat on my shoulder turned him on his heels and sent him back down the street with a bit more zip in his stride than he had a minute ago.

"Now, we follow the rat to the nest." I motioned O'Leary into the driver's seat.

Normally, tailing a pedestrian in a car is pretty hard to pull off. Luckily, our quarry was too shaken up to pay much attention. Finding yourself on the wrong side of a bit or arson and a baseball bat wielded with malicious intent over the course of a minute or so rattles a man's thoughts.

I had O'Leary leapfrog the man as he walked down the sidewalk, alternately letting him get a block ahead and passing him to wait a block ahead. He glanced over his shoulder once or twice, but he was looking for a pair of men, one with fire-red hair and the other with a baseball bat, not a car.

"Halloran seems pretty well set for a guy running a local truck drivers' union." I said, more making conversation than out of any real interest.

"Oh, he's got more than one iron in the fire," O'Leary said with more than a little pride. "Mr. Halloran started out with a little bit of family money for sure, but he played his cards right. He made some good investments and greased the right palms. Now, he runs an interstate trucking company, handles the union, and even pulled down a gig as a city commissioner."

The goon from the store led us nearly a dozen blocks, slowing to a stumbling trot long before he reached his destination. The man eventually ducked into a brick tenement not far from the river. Another tough-looking customer sat on the low stoop outside, chewing on a straw. Even a blind man could see the man was a guard. Whether he was packing a heater was

another matter.

"Okay, you've found them," O'Leary said. "What now, go back and round up some muscle? We could probably scrounge up a few guys from the local who wouldn't mind bustin' a few heads, but..."

"What?" I wasn't planning on relying on a bunch of teamsters who may or may not know their way around a serious fight, but I was interested in hearing O'Leary finish his sentence.

He leaned over and almost whispered. "They say those voodoo priests can raise zombies and stuff. Bad mojo. You seem to be a pretty tough guy, but how do you fight somethin's already dead?"

"Look at it this way, if they're already dead, it saves us the trouble of having to kill them, won't it?" I winked at him. "We're going to take it one step at a time, and the first step is getting past that lookout. Now listen up, here's the plan."

A minute or so later, I walked down the block toward the guard on the stoop. I counted the cracks in the sidewalk as I did to keep from looking directly at the man on the stoop. I raised my eyes as I reached the guard just long enough to nod disinterestedly. He was staring a hole into my forehead.

The sound of a car horn from up the block drew his attention away from me for just a moment. A moment was all I needed to pull the trench knife. The man looked back at me and realization dawned in his eyes.

"Now don't you feel silly?" I said as I whipped the brass knuckles into his temple. The lookout slumped and slid off his perch, catching himself in a kneeling position with one hand on the sidewalk. A second blow to the back of the head—right at that sweet spot where the spine meets the skull—put him out for the count.

I dragged the fella around to the side of the front steps while I waited for O'Leary

to catch up. I stashed his unconscious body behind a pair of trashcans that held slightly more trash than the surrounding street. It was doubtful anyone would look twice at a body frozen in the middle of the Charleston in that neighborhood, but no sense in taking any chances.

Giving him a quick pat-down, I found a rattletrap .38 revolver stuck in his waistband. The gun looked slightly more likely to push bullets out the muzzle than blow up in my hand, so I stashed it in a coat pocket. He had a handful of rounds in his pants pocket, but nothing else.

O'Leary met me at the base of the steps, carrying the bat. He was obviously uncomfortable with the entire situation and seemed almost relieved to turn over the bat when I reached for it.

"You sure we're up to this?" he asked.

There wasn't much point in relying on O'Leary, I could tell. He had that scared light in his eyes. I'd seen it many a time in the trenches on the Somme and in Verdun. When the time came to go over the top, he'd freeze up and huddle in the mud at the bottom—if I was lucky. But leaving him behind on the street was not an option. Like as not he'd cut bait and run, leaving me alone and in the middle of enemy territory.

Since I could fit all I knew about New Orleans on the edges of a cocktail napkin with a martini glass already sitting on it, that seemed like a losing proposition.

"Just stay behind me and do what I say," I said. "If I tell you to jump, you jump as high as you can and pray to God it's high enough. Got it?"

He nodded uncertainly, but stuck close as I mounted the steps. The door was unlocked. I was tempted to kick it in anyway. A hard wind would probably have pushed the latch to near its breaking point, and there is something to be said for starting things off with a bang. On the other hand, if we were



careful, we could probably do a fair amount of damage before this Red Sect gang even knew we had arrived.

I eased the door open. The entrance opened into a short hall with a few doors opening off it and a stairway leading up. It looked like the building might once have been a fairly nice townhouse. Now, it was a nest for rats.

Right next to the front door was a man in a chair leaning onto its back legs as he read a newspaper. He'd put all his trust in the lookout and was caught completely off-guard by our entrance. I put my foot on the front of the chair and kicked it over backward. His head bounced off the wall and his eyes went glassy, then dull.

"Leroy?" came a man's voice from an open door near the base of the stairs. *Ten years gone. What had happened between that day in 1926 and today?*

"You all right out there?" The voice had an edge of concern to it this time. I grunted unintelligibly. There was a door between where I stood and the open one, so I waved O'Leary back and moved toward the closer doorway. My partner looked confused, which would work just as well as if he'd understood my intent.

Easing into the room, I saw there was a door between it and the one where the other man was. I moved as fast as I could across the floor while still testing for loose boards with each step before putting my weight down.

"Leroy, what you doing out there?" A quick glance through the adjoining door told me the man had lost patience with Leroy's lack of response. He was just about to step out into the hall to see what was up. I slipped into the room behind him and pulled the cheap revolver I'd taken off the hood out front.

My target looked into the hall and spotted O'Leary staring at him like a deer in a car's

headlamps.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked.

"He's with me," I said as I brought the barrel of the revolver down hard on the back of his skull.

Few things hurt like being pistol whipped. Even getting shot doesn't always hurt as bad as getting popped on the head with a gun. Most of the time the bullet is moving so fast shock keeps a fella from really feeling it, at least right away. Not so a pistol whipping. The gun is moving slow enough to make sure you feel every little bump and angle on it. And most have lots of both.

And that's when just about anyone is swinging a gun. I've been told I've got a knack for it. What I'm getting at is it only took one lick from it to drive the man into the floor like a nail into a board. He groaned once, twitched, then lay still.

"Is he dead?" O'Leary whispered.

"Dead doesn't do us much good," I said. "Kill a man and his friends come looking for vengeance. But if you beat him so bad his nightmares have bad dreams about you, he'll stay out of your way."

A search of him and the door guard turned up a Colt .45 with a spare magazine. I didn't much care for most things that came out of Deseret, but Browning made a good gun—good enough that both the US and Confederacy armies used the design for their sidearms.

I thought about turning the revolver over to O'Leary, then stuck it back in my coat pocket. I wasn't sure I could trust the teamster to be careful about where he was throwing bullets if he got rattled enough. There was enough on my plate without having to worry about taking lead in the back. I gave him the bat instead and slipped the gun into the back of my waistband.

A pass through the rest of the first floor turned up no more occupants. Under the stairs leading to the upper level, I found a

door I was pretty sure led to a cellar. I wasn't comfortable being caught between two possible groups of hostiles, but I figured we could give the basement a pass for now.

Near the rear of the building, I also found several odd, chalk drawings on the floor, bowls of powder, incense, herbs, and some crudely crafted dolls scattered throughout the rooms. There were even a few bones—human from the look of them—with strange drawings on them in one room.

"So you weren't kidding," I said to O'Leary, keeping my voice low. "These guys are pushing a hard sell on this witchcraft angle, aren't they?"

"I'm telling you this voodoo stuff is the real deal," he said. "We're gonna get in over our heads if we keep poking around here."

"You're already over your heads." The voice came from the front hall. Looking in that direction, I saw a tall, ebony-skinned man in a coachman's hat and long black coat. I felt he was a little overdressed, but it was his house, so it probably wasn't my place to criticize. Our rat was standing slightly behind him.

"That's the guy that set fire to Deacon's! They must have followed me." That was our runner rat. He was standing behind the tall man and seemed to realize that maybe he'd just stepped in something with his last statement because he quickly added, "I didn't know it. I'd never have come here if I'd have known."

"They are fools for coming here—as they will learn." The tall man pulled something from one coat pocket and tossed some dust into the air. As it drifted down toward the floor, I heard movement behind the door leading to the cellar. Thumping, thudding, and dragging. As if something was coming up the stairs, something that didn't quite remember how to climb steps.

The door burst open. Behind came a small press of bodies. I'd seen enough death in

the war to recognize a corpse when I saw one, and at that moment I was seeing some clamber up from the cellar. O'Leary let out a yelp and stumbled back over a chair. He landed hard on his backside.

It probably does make it easier to sell the whole superstitious angle when you really can raise the dead. But what the conjurer in the hall didn't realize was that I'd probably seen more of walking corpses than he had. Soldiers on both sides had a disquieting habit of getting back up and causing all sorts of unpleasantness in the trenches.

The difference was over there, they usually had knives, spades, or even—if you were really unlucky—a gun. The poor bastards he pointed in our direction were stuck with bare hands. I figured I could handle two or three if I was careful.

The first came in a plodding charge with its arms stretched out to grab my throat. I ducked under its reach and rolled it over my shoulder, flipping it onto a table hard enough to break the wood. The wreckage would keep the thing tangled up for a moment. I dropped lower and thrust my lead foot out to take the second one off its legs.

I came back to a standing position just as the third one reached me. Rather than fend it off, I let it pull me in toward its open mouth and clacking teeth. When we were less than a foot apart, I brought the trench knife out of its sheath and swept it upward, pinning the monster's lower jaw shut. As the blade pierced the brain pan, I twisted it, turning off the unholy light in the thing's eyes.

Reanimated dead were able to take a lot more punishment than a living man. I'd seen the things take bullet after bullet and only be slowed down a step or two. Fortunately, we figured out pretty quickly that a good lick to the head was all it took to put them down for good. Or bullet, or in this case, a knife thrust.



Bone tends to bind on a blade and hold it fast. I'd seen more than one man get his throat torn out trying to pull his knife out instead of just switching weapons. I didn't waste time trying to retrieve the knife.

Instead, I stepped on the second creature's neck. It wasn't the most stable position and in a moment the thing would either rake my leg or just pull me off balance. But a moment was all I needed to pull the Colt out of my coat pocket and put two .45 slugs into the abomination's forehead. It stopped struggling and its arms dropped limply to the floor.

"Mister, you're gonna have to do a whole lot better than this if you're trying to rattle me," I said as I turned to finish off the last one. "Over in France, I had to kill every third German twice just to..."

That's when the train hit me. The only warning I got was the sound of thundering footsteps. For a second, I thought the Red Sect had gotten its hands on one of the German battlesuits. Then I was lifted off my feet and thrown ten feet across the room. I hit a wall hard, cracking the plaster.

Standing in the middle of the room was the biggest man I had ever seen. His skin was so dark he seemed to almost be made of shadow. Like me he was completely bald, but his eyes were tiny, yellow circles with black dots at the center. In his right hand was a machete.

The man in the hat stepped into the doorway. "You were not impressed by the walkin' dead. Perhaps you like the *tonton macout* better?" He looked at the goliath. "Kill him. Much."

The giant lumbered forward, the floor shaking with each step. Malicious glee all but glowed in its piggish eyes.

*The egghead was wearing a long, white lab coat and pacing back and forth in front of our class. On the wall behind him was a blackboard bracketed by various anatomical diagrams.*

*Much of our initial training had been on hand-to-hand fighting. A lot of that included some fancy stuff from the Orient, but a decent bit had included studies of the various vital systems of the body, and more importantly, how to break them. This class was different.*

*"Every single one of you has exhibited abilities outside the normal human range at some point in the past—usually under severe duress—or you would not be here," the scientist said. "We've determined each of you has an innate talent to tap into an energy source we don't fully understand. However, we believe we can train you to control these talents and manifest them at will.*

*"The first such manifestation we are going to develop is the capability to better defend yourselves from physical assault."*

I struggled to my feet, took a breath, and focused my thoughts. As I exhaled, I felt the power rush in. I channeled it, letting it flow around me. Although it was invisible and did not hinder my own movements, the aura would absorb much of the energy from an incoming attack.

At that moment, I was just hoping it was going to be enough to blunt the *tonton macout's* huge blade. Of course, that was Plan B. Plan A was to not get hit by it in the first place.

I raised the Colt, but between getting thrown against the wall and then manifesting the defensive aura, the monster had closed the gap between us. It swatted my gun hand and even through the shield I'd called up I felt my fingers tingle and nearly go numb. The pistol flew across the room. After it ricocheted off the first wall, I lost track of it.

The creature raised the machete. It bared its teeth in a rictus grin, anticipating cleaving me in two. The blade started downward. I stepped forward inside its swing and tried to pull the thing forward, hoping to drive the blade into the wall behind me.

The *tonton macout* easily weighed a few hundred pounds. I, on the other hand, did not. I might as well have tried to pull the wall toward it. The brute didn't budge.

While the blade didn't connect, the giant's arm did, and it drove me to my knees. If it weren't for the aura I'd called up it would have broken my collar bone and maybe some ribs. Possibly my back.

Since I was down there, I tucked and rolled past the thing into the debris of the table I'd broken with the first walkin' dead. In the aftermath of the *tonton macout*'s entrance, I'd almost forgotten about it. It, however, had not forgotten about me.

The reanimated corpse had also regained its feet and was determined to go another round. One walker wasn't a problem, but I didn't think my oversized dance partner was in the mood to sit out a song either. I scrambled to a standing position and moved so at least I wasn't standing between the two.

The dead man kept with its original tactic of reaching for me with its ragged claws. The *tonton macout* was farther away, but it also moved a good bit faster than the shambling cemetery reject to my left. It came forward swinging the machete in a diagonal arc.

I shifted a step toward the walkin' dead and grabbed its left arm with both hands. Using its own momentum, I twisted my hips and pulled the undead thing right into the line of the goliath's swing. The machete sank most of the way into the corpse's skull.

It sagged toward the floor, kinking the machete. The *tonton macout* tried to pull it out, but the dead weight of the recently re-dead body kept the blade locked in the skull. Like I said, bone binds up tight. I doubted even it was strong enough to swing its weapon with another hundred and fifty pounds on it.

Or rather I hoped it wasn't.

I stepped forward with a couple of jabs to the throat and a right cross to the chin. Its head might have twitched an inch or so. I changed my approach, throwing shin into the inside of the monster's knee. Once again, I was glad for the armor surrounding me because it felt like I'd kicked a steel post.

The giant grunted and dropped its useless blade. Its other hand lashed out as fast as a rattlesnake's strike and caught me by the throat. With one hand, it raised me off the floor until I was staring it in the eyes. The psychic armor was keeping it from crushing my windpipe completely, but the thing's grip was cutting my breath down to irregular gasps. Regardless, a quick twist, snap, and my neck would probably break anyway.





It realized this pretty quickly, and already savoring my upcoming death throes, cracked its mouth open in an evil smile. I stuck the .38 revolver I'd just pulled from behind my back into its mouth and pulled the trigger until it clicked empty.

The monster was tough, I'll give it that. The look of surprise in its tiny eyes lasted two bullets longer than I thought it would take to kill it. Luckily, the *tonton macout's* hand relaxed, and I kept my feet when it fell backward. Choked to death by a cadaver, however impressive, is not what I wanted as an epitaph.

"So, now that that's out of the way..." I said as I walked toward the suddenly deflated Red Sect voodoo priest. I cracked my neck to one side. The thug we'd followed had already cut and run, leaving his boss holding the bag.

"By myself," I continued, "I just wrecked your little operation here. From here on out, you keep your goons, dead things, giants, or whatever else you've got in your bag of tricks away from Halloran's trucks. If you don't, I'll be back—and next time, I'll bring help. Are we clear, friend?"

"Halloran?" He seemed almost confused. "I don't..."

His reply was cut short by a sharp crack as O'Leary struck him hard behind the ear with the bat. The man collapsed. He'd be out for hours, assuming he ever woke up at all. I spun on him, barely holding my rage in check.

"Now you lend a hand?" I nearly shouted. "You idiot! The point was made. If he dies, who's going to pass the message on?"

"Sorry, Mac," he said sheepishly. "I guess I was wound up. That was some fight, though. You really showed them, didn't you? I guess Mr. Halloran was right about you."

I suggested it might not be best if we stuck around any longer. My throat was probably

bruised and my shoulder was starting to stiffen up. If the runner came back with enough guns or more of those *tonton macout* things, it might be trouble. O'Leary didn't take much convincing. And by much, I mean any.

When we got back to Halloran's joint, there was a car parked on the street near the gate. It was an older sedan than Halloran's Model B, but I still didn't recognize the make. I felt like it hadn't been there when we left, but I didn't have much faith in my memory anymore.

I was positive the two men standing in Halloran's study hadn't been there when we left. They were both fairly well-dressed, but one was obviously hired muscle. If his size and meat-hook hands hadn't tipped me off, the caveman expression on his face would have. The other fella was smaller and had a look like a cat who'd cornered a mouse. He was probably the brains of the pair—and the most dangerous.

The teamster boss was seated in a chair and looking worse for wear. One of the mugs had been using him as a punching bag. One eye was swollen shut and the other was on its way. He was too battered for me to tell if there was an expression of relief when we arrived or just resignation.

"Ah," said the cat. "The prodigals have returned. Enzo was just finishing up our conversation with Mr. Halloran. Perhaps one of you can talk some sense into him before we have to take drastic measures."

O'Leary surprised me by speaking first. "He ain't gonna give, Giuseppi. I tried everything you said. I told him the Red Sect was behind the attacks. Instead of comin' to you for help though, he found himself this guy." He poked a thumb at me.

"One guy?" Giuseppi said. "What's one guy supposed to do against them voodoo creeps?"

"That's what I thought, but you gotta

see this guy work. He's some sort of super soldier or somethin'. He went through a house full of them like a hurricane."

"He gonna be trouble for us?" Giuseppi eyed me warily. "Enzo here's good and warmed up from Mr. Halloran."

"Naw, not unless Mr. Halloran says. That bag he's wearin' is some kinda mojo that lets Mr. Halloran tell him what to do. Without it, he ain't nothin' but a dummy."

"In that case, we'd better not take any chances," Giuseppi said. "Enzo, shut him up. For good."

The big goon pulled a single-barreled, sawed-off shotgun from inside his overcoat and shot Halloran in the face. The teamster's nice rug got a few new patterns on it, all of them red.

"Maybe the next guy will be more amenable to doing business with the Black Hand then." Giuseppi looked me over carefully. "You ain't much to look at, but if you're as tough as O'Leary says, we got a place for you in the organization. Especially if you're easy to control."

*"Using your talents to erect defenses or even enhance your own natural abilities carries little risk, once you've gotten the knack. Of course, there are...risks during the initial stages of even those manifestations." This was a new egghead. The last one had lost an arm, leg, and one eye when one of the other trainees had lost control of his channeled energy.*

*The trainee himself simply disintegrated as far as we were able to tell. At least it seemed quick.*

*"We feel those of you remaining in the program are ready to progress to the next stage: turning those psychic energies outward to use as offensive weapons. While experimentation indicates there are greater inherent dangers to this sort of manifestation, the potential rewards are likewise greater as well."*

"So, what've I got to do to make him listen to me?" Gisueppi asked.

"Mr. Halloran just told him what to do and he did it," O'Leary said.

I inhaled slowly, drawing my focus onto the men in front of me.

"Bald guy, pour me a drink," the mobster said.

"You didn't hang this bag around my neck. I don't think I have to listen to you. Besides," I said, "you didn't say the magic word."

"What magic word?" he asked, looking at O'Leary.

"Please."

I opened my mind and let the power flow through it and into the room. Everything went white.

I found myself wandering the streets sometime later. I don't have a watch, but the sun is starting to paint the night skies with lighter shades. I'd like to say I saw the blast take out the mobsters and that worm O'Leary, but I can't. Everything after I opened the channel is a blank, empty space. Like the last ten years of my life.

I have figured a thing or two out. First, I think using my brain like a nozzle for all that power fried something in my head. And I don't think it was the first time it happened. I'm pretty sure whatever happened at Halloran's also happened before, only ten years ago.

That energy ravaged my brain and ate my memories. On top of that, it made it so I can't hold any new ones either. I think the bag cleared my head up to the accident all those years ago, but even it couldn't fix the damage that came after. It did shield me from the worst of it this time though.

While I'm not sure exactly what happened once I let go, I'm still among the living. I can't see Gisueppi and Enzo letting me walk out of there if they were any shape to protest.

Second, like O'Leary had said, something



about the bag also let Halloran control me. I think that was tied to my messed-up wiring as well. I wasn't a zombie by any stretch, but whatever he asked, I did. I didn't think just anyone would be able to use it, but it was a lever that might let someone else do it down the road if I keep it.

I'm going to pull this thing off my neck in a minute or two. I don't know what's going to happen, but I'm not going to risk becoming somebody's personal thug down the road.

So I'm sitting here writing all this down in Halloran's cheap notebook, holding onto yesterday for a little while longer.