

Cowboy Cleric

Of all the places Nik Nevarro had visited as a bountyyman, the Marais was the place he liked the least.

It wasn't just the stifling humidity. Nor the fetid stink of decaying plant matter that worked its way into every room, no matter how tightly sealed. What he detested most were the people. The Marshers were singularly the most untrustworthy, resilient, perplexing folk he'd ever met.

The saloon had all of these things: the humidity, the stink, the people. He'd sat there for over an hour already, secreted into a dim corner behind a table that gave him line-of-sight to the entire room. Nik slumped down into his chair, a thick woolen serape wrapped around his body like a blanket and a brero hat tipped over his head. His booted feet were kicked up onto the table, beside a mug of barely-touched marshbrew. To any passers-by, he would appear as either a pile of rags or a passed-out drunk.

Nik took a swig of the marshbrew. It had a peaty flavor that Nik did not associate with good beer. He grimaced and set the mug back down. He settled back into his rags and turned his attention back to the saloon door.

They arrived ten minutes later. Two men in coverall jumpsuits and red bandannas tied around their necks. The first fellow was large and obviously armed. The moment he entered through the saloon's swinging doors, he scanned the room with wide anxious eyes. The second man was short and slight. He appeared at ease and carried no visible weapons. Together, the two members of the Hoodoo Gang crossed the floor of warped, creaking floorboards and took their seat at a table. They ordered a drink and sat there, waiting.

Nik took another swig of his drink and waited as well.

"Pardon me, is this seat taken?"

Nik tipped up his brero and beheld a tall thin man gazing down at him. The newcomer had pale skin that clocked him as a Marshher. His black hair came down across his face in long dirty strands and he was grinning as wide as a cocodrie. A black case of something was tucked under one arm.

"You best not be a preacher," Nik said, pulling up his sleeve to show the pendant of Selena wrapped around his wrist. Most Marshers knew better than to try converting a follower of La Bendita.

"A Parcher," the man said, then seeing Nik's grimace. "Sorry, rude of me. I meant to say that you're from Vaquero." He pulled out the seat across from Nik and sat down without being prompted, plopping the black case onto the table, where it rattled with the sound of many hard tiles. "No sir, I'm no preacher. But I don't suppose La Bendita would object to having your fortune told?" He undid the latches on the case and opened it to reveal a gleaming set of bone

white tiles, each with a different number of black dots carved onto its surface. A domino-diviner. "What do you say, my Parcher friend? Allow me to forecast your fate? On the house."

Nik shot a quick glance at the Hoodoo men, who had just gotten their drinks. He wanted this fellow to get lost, but telling him off might backfire. By the sound of it, the man was a talker, and if he left to solicit another table, he'd probably start telling them about Nik. At which point, everyone in the saloon would know there was a Vaqueran in their midst.

"Fine then," Nik said, swinging his legs off the table. Best to keep him busy, and harmless. "Tell me what my fate holds."

The diviner flashed his cocodrie-grin then lifted the case and upended the tiles, which he began to swish around—quite loudly—across the table. Several patrons glanced over in annoyance, including the two members of the Hoodoo Gang.

"Mind making a bit more noise?" Nik growled. "I'm hankering for a headache, and this hangover just isn't doing the job."

The diviner ignored him. He stretched out his hand with exaggerated elegance and delicately plucked a tile at random from the boneyard. He turned it over and placed it on the table's surface, pip-side faced up.

"One-over-Five." He said. "You've come here to find someone. Or something."

Nik snorted. Given the context, it wasn't a particularly hard guess to make. He *had* followed the Hoodoo Gang all the way here to the Marais with the aim of finding out who their contact was. He nodded, urging the diviner along.

The man drew another ivory from the pile and placed it beneath the first so the ends touched. "Double-sixes. You've met with some misfortune in the past and are dealing with the consequences."

Memories flashed in Nik's brain. Echoes of mistakes and regrets. A botched raid. Air thick with the sharp scent of gunpowder. The sensation of holding a friend's hand as he trembled and bled out on the dry, cracked dirt. The desire for revenge that had brought him all the way to this sodden and forsaken place.

Nik scowled. "I thought this was about predicting the future, not dredging up the past."

The diviner flashed that horrible grin again and drew his third tile. "Three-over-eight. Whatever you're searching for, you hope it will restore your good fortune."

Nik was about to respond that the game was stacked, the predictions so horribly vague you could spin them six ways and still have them make some semblance of sense. Before he could, the saloon door swung open again, and *she* walked in.

The girl was small with a slim mousy build. She was a Marshner, with brown straw-colored hair and pale freckled skin that had been sunburnt in several places. A sailor, perhaps. The girl walked over to the table where the Hoodoo Gang was waiting, and took a seat across from them.

Nik adjusted himself, sitting up straighter now. The diviner had started droning on mystic-like about fate and fortune and how all men were connected by sacred lifethreads. His words faded into the background as Nik's attention drifted toward the conversation at the other table.

The girl was upset. It was clear from the rigid way she sat, how she kept her palms folded on the table as if she were hiding a hand of playing cards. Whether it was the men who were the source of her frustrations, or something else, Nik couldn't tell. They bandied back and forth, listening and nodding and shaking their heads. The girl grew more and more agitated the longer the conversation dragged along. Nik leaned forward, eager to hear more. The diviner placed another tile. A clink of ivory, followed by the all-too-familiar click of metal-on-metal. Nik froze.

"You've stuck your head where it don't belong."

Ah. There it was. Nik glanced down and saw the tip of a snub-nosed derringer poking out from under the table, aimed straight at his gut. He leaned back into his seat, nice and slow-like. No sudden movements. No show of weakness either. *Keep your eye on the girl, don't let her out of your sight.*

"Fella," he said. "I've done plenty of domino divinations in my life, so I'm pretty sure 'stuck-your-head-where-it-don't-belong' ain't one of the pieces."

"Who sent you?" the not-diviner demanded. "Was it Boss Truby? Or the Nawlinois?"

"Don't know what you're talking about."

"Nonsense, you've been watching the room for the better part of an hour." The cocodrie-grin reappeared. "It never crossed your mind that we were watching you at the same time."

At the table, the girl threw up her hands in frustration. She stood up, preparing to leave, and with her, any hope Nik had of figuring out the Hoodoo Gang's scheme. He didn't have time to finesse his way out of a slapdash interrogation.

"La Bendita watches over us all," he said, then brought both legs under the table and kicked upward. The table struck the diviner under his chin. His derringer went off, the bullet deflecting off the wards sewn into Nik's serape and ricocheting into the air, where it winged the blade of a ceiling fan and sent it spinning.

Before the diviner could recover, Nik reached into his boot and drew out the bowknife he kept hidden within. The diviner had out a second, larger pistola, but Nik grabbed his hand and wrenched it flat on the table. He brought down the knife, driving the blade through the man's

palm and into the wood. The man screamed and struggled, scattering the tiles loudly onto the ground.

Nik looked around. The saloon had grown quiet, every eye drawn to the commotion that had started by the dimly lit and previously unnoticed table in the corner. The two Hoodoos had stood up. The girl had disappeared completely.

The Hoodoos approached, circling to flank him, but also to assist their wounded friend. The larger man had his pistola out, held low to prevent friendly fire. The smaller one, Nik noticed, had hexes carved into his palms. He was by far the more dangerous of the two. *So much for keeping things quiet.*

Calmly, Nik set his brero onto the table, covering the diviner's ruined hand. The man let out a whimper. Nik stood up and slung the serape across his shoulders to cover his torso. He gripped the bowknife in his left hand, while the iron-tipped whip-lariat appeared in his right. He nodded to his attackers.

"Well then," he said, cracking the whip like thunder. "Let's get to it."