

BATTLE ROYALE

They had all been waiting and praying for this moment for a long, long time. Mr. Bank was not a man to let such moments pass. He was a man to seize the golden ring at all costs, whenever it presented itself, even now his when his time had long passed in the eyes of some. He would be damned if he would let this opportunity pass! What he needed was a scheme...

The Era of the Ghosts of New Orleans had arrived with a hurricane, a storm of epic proportion. The city was completely under water. Paste earrings long buried now shone again beneath the dusty, delicate boucles of prostitutes murdered centuries ago. Rising from the invading kelp foam, shards of glass long shattered reformed into the glorious arcade of the American Theater where Mr. Bank did business, a place so large the train stopped in the lobby and Mr. Bank's big office bay windows looked down on it all. The scurrying of couriers both base and mean was a glorious ball to him. He was not bothered by the chicken bones on the four corners of his block. He had big plans.

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Across town, down the trolley lines, past the canal, in the old town, Sazernac had his mansion. He no longer went by de Sazernac, pained by the way the invaders always mispronounced it. Nor did anyone call him Marquis anymore except his faithful old slave Algiers, still a giant of a man even past his prime, useful still. Sazernac had generously kept him on.

Sazernac was Creole which meant of European parents but born in the colonies. Only later would the term come to refer to the slaves they kept. Creoles were more interested in history than in destiny. An eternity could not dull their pride, they promised, and time was now proving them correct. Even as ghosts, they still had a score to settle with the upstart outsiders...

"Look here! I picked up this flier in the town, sir." Algiers handed over the notice printed on Bank Corporation letterhead. "It's from the Americans."

Sazernac took it with his fingertips and held it up to the chandelier, his monogrammed cufflinks catching the light. "Read it to me," he commanded.

Algiers read the notice. Sazernac had magnanimously had him educated. Most members of the elite households were, in the city at least, no matter how menial. Truth be told le Marquis did not read so well himself, having spent much of his time abroad in old wine, women, and song- as the saying goes- and neglecting his studies as best he could. He did

however have an eye for art, an ear for a bon mot, and a discerning palate, as well as a mean smile for calumny which is what he hoped this notice was. No such luck. It read:

“Here Ye, Here Ye...”

“Those Yanks are so pretentious!” Sazernac objected.

“Come one, come all, to a Battle Royale! Now the city belongs to We the Ghosts, let us settle once and for all which leader of which group among us shall rule. All are invited to present themselves at the Plaza de Armas at noon tomorrow, all who wish to risk and compete for total honor and power that is. Those absent will be disqualified. The Fight is to the Death. Apart from that there ain’t no rules!”

“Les absents ont toujours tort,” Sazerac quipped. “Sharpen my cane sword, Algiers, for tomorrow I claim my right by blood!”

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The whole market was abuzz with news of the upcoming Battle. The Irishman they called Crowbar was saying as how he planned to present himself, and why not, for a tickle?! There was a cash prize associated -as he saw it- and that he owed to mother church. He was strict with his tithe and though he worked hard and slept but little, still the wages were not always what he wanted, working honest he was, as a man ought.

Choupiqueitoula the Indian was in the market trading furs and heard this news silently and quickly made his way to his canoe and slipped quietly away downstream to the cypress forest where he wisely hid away with his family while all the hubbub raged.

Haas was in town too to purchase livestock and he took the news back to his village across the Lake and all the family heads conferred and decided that Haas as the one who heard about it would have the task of going to represent the village and their interests. Haas was a good German and a man of duty so he resolved to go fulfill this dubious honor though his wife and many children depending on him cried and begged him not to. They had a large meal of Boudin that night. Haas was up by cock’s crow as usual and set off on the long, hard road to New Orleans...

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On the road Haas met a scary character dressed in a motley of skins with a big, dirty knife on his rope belt. Hoe on his shoulder, Haas greeted him from afar.

“Where you headed yourself, stranger?” the Wildman asked.

Haas explained the affair and the Cajun decided to go tempt his fate too. Life in the Bayou had made him tough as chaw root he figured and lookin' at this fat red-faced farmer and what with the little he knew of city folk and their ways, Carion Delencot did not figure on having too much trouble winnin' that thar contest. True he did not cotton to stayin' on in the city. Still he figure there must be some prize there worth takin' back to the swamp, hopefully one in a skirt... Ah hell, truth be told, he was half doin' it just for the joy of stickin' those fancies sumthin' fierce!

So the two traveled on together, Hass with a wary eye and a heavy heart, the Cajun playin' on his whistle.

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Bank of course was bringing in his man, the one they called the "Italiano" *tout court*. He was a hired duelist. Wives who had reason to get rid of their generally rich philandering husbands hired this man to insult the doomed hubby publicly until the poor fool was forced into challenging the Italiano to a duel, which Italiano, a quick and sharp shooter and swordsman, never lost obviously. He got a good fee for such services.

Bank had used the man before, mainly to set mysterious fires to small businesses in the way of his thoroughfares of commerce. Unfortunately this time found Italiano in prison for debt. Bank hired his lawyer Chase Churchill to take the debtor's place.

Such it was that Italiano was now being poled downstream on a flatboat by an equally unsavory character name of Canetalk. Italiano knew better than to talk about business but Canetalk had heard about the contest in New Orleans and was coming of his own accord...

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Most of the coon-hatted ruffian flatboatmen drank rye whiskey but Canetalk, who never spoke otherwise than when drunk, drank cane liquor and so whenever he had money he was garrulous. This was not one such time. He was somber when sober, so he figured he'd go win him somethin' to drink at this here Battle Royale. No sweat- he was after all the meanest son of a... well, we'd better not talk about his mama- the meanest fella all up and down the River.

City women would scare their naughty children with visions of men such as him that they claimed (he did too!) were half gator. In Canetalk's case it was almost true. He had lost a foot to one once and jumped in after the gator and killed, skinned, and ate it, then made hisself a fake foot from one of the gator's!

They docked.

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Meanwhile Crowbar was in church, confessing himself, just in case.

In Storytown a mysterious woman was putting something in her petticoats for the occasion.

Sazernac in his mansion was practicing strokes with his gloved hand in the air while Algiers polished his thin blade with monogrammed handle. Style was important after all.

Sazernac's neighbor across the courtyard meanwhile was composing an opera.

Lasala read extensively from his private library, mostly poetry. He was rarely seen in society which took him for a bore. He liked to convert verse into musica. His wife however had higher ambitions for him, and herself. She wanted him in politics, though his monetary fortune was already assured. She insisted stridently that he produce himself for the Battle Royale. She strapped a saber on him and pushed him out the door...

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Bank had a mouth trumpet he used to call the crowd to quiet and the contestants to step forward. All were hushed when they saw a woman come out of the crowd and walk up to the ring. She was not just any woman either.

She was Myra, jilted mistress, disinherited daughter of the governor, scorned woman, thrown out of court simply for being a woman and here now with a grudge to settle- with men in general- and a prize to earn that she felt she already deserved: New Orleans with all her drowned wealth and power dripping in sin!

Bank declared he was, as an American, for equal opportunity for all according to merit. This was ironic! He encouraged her surprisingly to participate, in fact all the people of color as well... So it was that Algiers was forced into the lists.

(Choupiqueitoula was of course forgotten.)

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The contestants then were: Haas, Carion, Crowbar, Canetalk, Italiano, Sazernac, and Lasala, plus Myra and Algiers. The constable was to act as a referee, though what for nobody knew, since there were no rules.

"We have nine contestants," the constable objected. "Where's the tenth? Bring him forth!" Someone in the crowd yelled out the name of Lafitte. But even the ghosts knew that the pirate Lafitte was a myth...

“Fight with nine,” Bank commanded from up on a shaded stage with the other dignitaries all in top hats and sashes while a ghost Dixieland band played now dour, now joyous.

Bank’s agents meanwhile circulated in the crowd, taking bets.

“Who do you favor, sir? Madame?”

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The ravens were perched in the trees of Plaza de Armas. The tarot readers had put their cards away in little velvet bags.

The contestants hovered on the spiked wood edges of the circular ring. Myra drew a small two shot purse pistol from beneath her purple silk dress and shot Haas, the fattest, before even the horn blew.

Carion crouched, big knife out in his hand, and assessed which of his opponents was most dangerous. Lasala meanwhile threw his saber down and leapt onto Sazernac’s sword, committing suicide half out of a sense of romantic drama, half to escape his wife...

Italiano drew a shotgun from a sack and shot Myra, then reloaded and shot Sazernac whose sword was stuck in the Spaniard still. He died with a smile, Myra with a scream of rage.

Carion had decided Crowbar was most dangerous and pounced. At that moment though Italiano had turned on Canetalk who blanched and jumped, using Carion as a piston to leap over the wooden fence and run off. His alligator claw however did some damage on the way out and left Carion raked and bleeding, toppling onto Crowbar who brained him with his, well, crow bar, but not before Carion bit him in the leg!

Italiano had reloaded meanwhile and raised his rifle on Crowbar. Haas it turns out was made up of tough fat and hauled himself up and tackled Italiano. They had all forgotten Algiers up until then. Crowbar swung round on him but Algiers danced nimbly away.

Carion used his last gasp to raise up from the muck of his own head and stick Crowbar in the back just then. Crowbar crossed himself, crossed the ring, and died embedding his crowbar -which had until that day only ever been used on crates- into the skull of the hired man they called Italiano who fell over on the body of Haas who had finally breathed his last- “*mirlicht!*” This left only Algiers.

Algiers let out a big laugh.

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The Constable took Algiers by the hand, but not to raise it in victory. The Constable, who was Italiano's brother, manacled and arrested Algiers on Bank's orders. Bank was the real winner, just as he had planned. In one fell swoop he had managed to get rid of all the competition. He was undisputed champ at last-of the ghost town of Crescent City...