

Baker's Dozen

A Fantasy eBook by David J. Thompson

A Partial Dramatis Personae

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“Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9)

“Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” (Lord Acton)

“No. There was no luck anywhere. Every decision was made both ways. For every wise choice you bled your heart out over, you had made all the other choices, too. And so it went, all through history.” (Larry Niven, from his short story, “All the Myriad Ways”.)

Prologue: Goin' Over Town

Paul Baker Colson (1):

I was heading down Cedric Street, “goin’ over town” as my late mother would have put it, and stopped on the bridge. It was a hot, almost-soggy afternoon and I was surprised to see a large number of people (mostly men and boys) fishing from the bridge and the shores of the river. This was strange: the Clark River is not a clean stream; its dark waters are polluted by a paper-mill upstream. “Town” water was taken from Lake Ontario, not the river.

I quit counting the catches at 30. Most of the fish seemed to be bass. I looked west, down-river, and something caught my eye. Amid the coloured T-shirts and shorts, a spot of black-on-white showed: a figure sitting on one of the benches by the river. It appeared to be an old man, black from broad-brimmed hat, severe suit and pants, white from shirt and skin.

I felt drawn to this figure . . . I can’t explain why to this day. I took the stairs to the shore at the south end of the bridge. I walked down the boardwalk to where the man was sitting, dodging excited fishermen as I went.

The oldster sat quite still, a large, dark green book on his lap. He looked, I remember now, just like the evil preacher from “Poltergeist 2”, only not as healthy. His shirt was bright white and the wrinkled skin on his hands was hardly a shade darker. Looking at him, I felt a slight unease, unwarranted (I thought) at the time. His hat’s brim shielded his eyes from mine as I stood before him.

To his left sat a teenager in a Jays’ baseball cap, white shirt, blue jeans, and black high-tops. I couldn’t see his eyes, either. He sat very still, his dark hair forming a duck-tail at the back of his cap. He sat so still I wasn’t even sure he was **breathing**.

The elder of the two tilted his head back, gazed at me with pale blue eyes, and croaked: “Have you read from **the Book?**” (**His** emphasis.)

I figured he meant the Bible; probably **that** was what he was holding on his lap.

“I’ve cracked it open from time-to-time,” I answered glibly.

His eyes hardened at that.

“Not this **Book!** This is that which you can’t handle lightly!” he hissed loudly.

His breath stank of decayed fish. The young man flinched at the outburst. Then he looked up at me.

Bad drugs, I thought. His skin was paler than the old man’s . . . if that was possible. His eyes were brown, dilated, blank, and staring.

“Darrel, here,” said the senior in a more-normal tone, “has read from the **Book**. He is one with **us!**”

“Darrel” flinched again.

“My name is Ezra Marsh, out of Innsmouth, Massachusetts.”

“Paul Colson.”

Okay, I thought, *Introductions made*. Still, I felt I was getting out-of-my-depth with this conversation . . . so I had to ask: “Okay. So **what** is this book?”

“The Hymns of Dagon!” he answered, triumphantly.

“Dagon,” I repeated. “Who’s he?”

The wasted face brightened.

“He is the Render of the Seas! The Bringer of the Bounty! The Father of the multitude, **the Deep Ones!**” (His emphasis, again; he almost fell flat on his face as he snarled the last sentence out).

I grabbed his slender shoulders to steady him. His suit was damp with sweat. I looked around but the anglers hadn’t seemed to notice his outburst. He had staggered up off the bench; I steadied him back down. Darrel had jerked several times during the man’s rant.

“I apologize for my zeal . . . but if you **knew** . . . if you **knew** . . .,” he spoke, thickly; he sounded like he was losing his voice. For a moment I thought the old guy would have a stroke right there, what with the heat. After a moment, though, he seemed to calm down and his breathing normalized. Marsh looked up at me, a sly look on his emaciated face.

He asked, “Would you like to hear one?”

I looked at my watch: almost 4:00 pm.

I replied, “Well. Okay. You’ve made me kinda curious.”

I sat down on the bench beside him, to his right. The smell of fish increased incredibly: it was like he should be covered in scales, flopping by the feet of one of the nearby fishermen. He opened the book on his lap. There were no musical notes that I could see, just script which I took to be Arabic or close to it.

He began to “sing.” His voice hissed, moaned and gobbled. It made no sense to me (although I **did** hear the name “Dagon” in his sighing and sputtering tune). He went on like that for a few minutes, never raising his voice. From the other side of him, I could hear Darrel humming atonally.

When Marsh was done, he turned to me square and asked, “What do you think?”

“I think . . . I hafta go!” I replied. I stood up and added, “Good luck spreading the word! Bye, Darrel!”

His “song” and Darrel’s moaning undertone had really bothered me. The sun had seemed to dim and the cooling air had given me goose flesh. I hurried away, back up to Cedric Street. I heard Ezra Marsh call after me. I made out the word “again” over the noise of the crowd.

“Dagon,” I mumbled that night as Andy, my 16-year-old brother and I cleaned up the supper dishes. They didn’t amount to much as we had ordered out for pizza, a habit we were indulging probably more often than was good for us. Andy looked at me.

“‘Dagon’? Have you been into the Old Testament or lookin’ through my library?” he asked. He looked puzzled but amused.

We’d been getting along well recently, so I replied mildly, “Neither. Just some weird old guy I saw today.”

I set the last washed plate in the right sink for him to dry.

“He used that word or name,” I finished.

“Really!” he responded. “Hmm . . . the only ‘Dagon’ I know of was a god of the sea worshiped by the Philistines in the O.T. They used to sacrifice people to him for more fish. And . . . oh, yeah! He was also a nasty critter from some of those books of mine you refer to as ‘simply horseshit’.”

“**Which** horseshit?!” I demanded of him.

I *hated* it when he knew more about something than I did! He held up his palms in mock-defense.

“Okay, okay! In my collections of H. P. Lovecraft stories, Dagon was a god of the sea, too. He was a deity for some humans on land and for his ‘children’, the Deep Ones, under the water. Was this guy an H.P. nut or sumthin?”

“No... I don’t know!” I growled.

I was angry at myself for feeling strange about the whole business and mad at my brother for making light of it. Should I tell him that Marsh had used some of those strange names, too? I wouldn’t be able to face his knowing smile: *Go on, Bro. Have another rum!*

I drew in a breath and said: “Okay. Maybe he was just a senile, old ‘H.P. nut’. That’s probably how **you’ll** end up, too, if you don’t watch it!”

I smiled at him; this was something we were working on, too: being nice.

We finished the dishes and, as usual, he went to his room in the back of the house to go on-line and I sat down in the living-room to watch the Jays on the 54-inch. The Jays were having a better season than those past, the games were usually good . . . but Ezra Marsh was still on my mind.

As the game progressed, my mind wandered. *A rum and Pepsi would go good right now*, I thought. I shook my head fiercely; I was trying to dry out! Going on the straight-and-narrow! I felt myself getting angry. The Jays scored a run. I inwardly studied my feelings. All my frustrations came from one source: Andrew. My parents had tried to leave it all to him . . . with the proviso that **he** looked after **me**! It turned out that wasn't legal. But Andy's lawyer was trying to set some kind of precedent, so...

So what if I'd alienated my parents by joining the Armed Forces at the fresh-faced age of 16?! So what if the bottle had been holding me instead of the other way around?! So what if they couldn't practice birth-control in their 40s?! I guess I wasn't enough **son** for them! So what if... it was an endless litany that I indulged in often... and it wasn't a good habit. There had been times since I had left the Forces that I had considered seeking medical help, because I felt the feelings I had were unhealthy. I wasn't a strong believer that mental illnesses really existed, so I never acted on that idea.

Mom and Dad **had** been livid when I signed up but I felt at the time my country needed me... that, and I hated school. Plus, about ten years earlier, the Canadian government had decided to beef up the military. The Nazis hadn't made any aggressive moves in almost fifty years but the general consensus was: "Why take a chance?" The Americans were such isolationists and ball-less wonders... at least as far as I was concerned. They couldn't be counted on for protection. The government had passed what had been widely known as "Pierre's Choice": at the age of sixteen, you stayed in school, got a job (there were few of them) or joined the Armed Forces (you weren't thrown into the fray immediately; there was a two-year training period)... so I headed off to learn how to kill people. I had become very good at it over the years. The League of Nations continued to limp along, trying to maintain the peace. They quite often called on Canadians to do the dirty work (I think many of the European delegates considered Canucks quasi-barbarians): clandestine operations that usually occurred in European nations not totally under Nazi control. I took all the courses that could fit into my schedule and moved up the ranks quite quickly. I was a bit of a wunderkind and my superiors were very happy with me. Ironically, during my career, it was pointed out that an education would be a definite asset. I applied myself, put in many long days and came out with college equivalence. Of course, there was also a **slight** drinking problem. My brother had sidestepped the Choice... later governments had liked it a **lot**... by starting university early, on-line. He was now working on his second year of his Bachelor of Science, majoring in physics. He was a genius.

The game ended at ten pm. It had been a slug fest 10-6 that the Blue Jays had finally won in the ninth. The news came on: apparently the princess-in-exile was in trouble with Revenue Canada...again. This bored me. I took a Pepsi out to the front porch (no rum, **dammit!**), looking to cool off on the chaise lounge. The soggy night heat wrapped around me like steam in a sauna. The moon was high in the sky, nearly full. I watched it rise while I drank three cans of cola. Midnight came on and I decided to go to bed. *Might as well*, I thought. *Got a whole day of hanging around to do tomorrow.*

I thought, then, that the scream I heard from the north was wordless. In my dreams, now, it is a pleading negation: "Not me!" or just "**NO!**" I stood straight from the comfortable chair and dropped my half-full pop can. The shriek sounded like it came from the park by the river. A few dogs in the neighbourhood responded to the sound by yelping but all fell quickly

silent.

I was a block down the street, running in my moccasins, before I thought: *What are you doing?!* But I kept on. The park was fronted by the boardwalk where just eight hours earlier I had met that strange man. **And** Darrel. I cut through the park between the wide-spaced trees, moving on the wet grass as quietly as my military training could supply.

When I got to the wooden planks, I noticed this first: one of the benches had been torn off. There was a coppery smell in the air. The moonlight spotlighted a dark object lying on the dewy, trampled grass. It was a black high-top running shoe.

I picked it up and was surprised by the weight. I realized the ugly truth. I'd seen it in Czechoslovakia: the foot was still in it. The ankle bones stuck out, splintered. I threw it from me with a strangled cry. It hit the water with a loud splash. After that sound there came a loud churning of the water's surface. It became apparent that someone or something was swimming toward shore. I crouched down, going into what I call my "war-mode". I was ready to fight, weaponless as I was. I only wished that the lights along the walkway had been lit that night.