

Chapter 1 – In Love and War

Because of the shopping bustle and snow-covered streets, news radio cautioned those braving downtown Philadelphia traffic. Nevertheless, in nimble defiance, Nigel Q. Bunnytail sliced through turns on his mountain bike *Intrepid One* just to enjoy higher gravity. His brawny brown physique and the carbon fiber frame under it were perfectly synced in a responsive exchange of power, and that - along with the fleeting thrill of headwinds curling behind his ears - far out-weighed any road and weather hazards.

He tore across the South Street Bridge into University City and side-skidded to a slushy halt outside the Grotto Fandango Café. With his bicycle secured and snow kicked from spurred boots, Nigel whipped off his helmet and donned the custom ball cap that read ‘Casual Bold’.

The radio was tuned to 103.9 FM, playing Live’s “Lightning Crashes” as Nigel entered. He was met with a thunderous cheer from those waiting for the *haiku* open mic to start. He high-fived and shook the hands of his fellow free spirits, many of whom were enjoying ornately prepared beverages and pastries. He swaggered toward the counter through clouds of cigarette fumes breathed by those he called self-concerned, self-consumed, drug-addicted litterbugs.

When Nigel got to Abby, the waifish barista, he bought his usual order of imported *limonado* - a sparkling, pulpy lemonade from the Batalanto Company - and a two-pound serving of Plucky Puckies, a chocolate-coated peanut butter cup set in a thick graham cracker crust.

He carried both to one of the game tables where a squat and swarthy fellow shadowboxed furiously, sporting sunglasses that were as impenetrable as his smile was bright. This man’s Portuguese and American parents gave him the name Xantiago Parkwater, but old beboppers who schooled him in the ways of jazz and the blues called him ‘Styles’.

Facing one another, Nigel and Styles executed a dizzying sequence of handgrips, pinkie locks, fist bumps, and one-armed hugs before sitting.

“Whaddaya say, Styles?” asked Nigel in his low and measured rumble, gesturing towards the hexagonal board between them. “Would ya like a shot at the title?”

Styles tugged his suspenders with convincing bravado, said, “Don’t mind if I do,” and sipped from a cup of steamed milk.

Nigel studied his friend’s drink and was unable to see any hint of green tinting, or smell anything like black licorice coming from it. This meant Styles was probably playing sober and not ‘lifted’ on his preferred absinthe, which were the only times he was unbeatable.

“Dude,” said Styles, “Somehow, someway, you have to let Millicent go, because that’s what this is really about.” He advanced a phalanx of white marbles toward gameboard center, and continued, “Dude, you know Siggie’s got that whole connubial bliss agenda. You’re not wired for settling down. You barely tolerate monogamy.” He persisted as his spherical army began pushing outwards to force Nigel’s troops off the board. “Dude, you’ll be solo in the belly of the void. The closest friendlies’ll be, uh, Archer in Seattle and Stinger in fuckin’ Winnipeg - both of whom are hundreds of clicks away. Other than that, it’s just you and Siggie.”

Hard arguments and tactical aggression battered Nigel, but he held the line. He wanted to go. He needed to go. He answered with a broadsiding counter, exploiting the faintest weakness in the opposing formation.

Styles’ smile dimmed and he raised his sunglasses, blinking in disbelief as many of his once hard-charging marbles were dispersed and ejected from the board.

“Well played, dudeski,” said Styles, finishing his frothy beverage. “Excuse me,” he called to Abby, “Can I get those bitchin’ tunes I was promised? I need my muse.”

The barista exhaled tediously and fiddled with the café's sound system, eliciting a bounce of childlike anticipation from Styles. For soon, the near-operatic cooing of Kate Bush would inspire him. This delight was short lived - sullied, even - by Nigel's roll of the eyes.

Styles Parkwater seared his friend with a glare that burned from behind his shades.

Returning his black marbles to their starting positions, Nigel innocently quipped, "I see they started making fries up in this jawn." This time, his use of the all-purpose Philly colloquialism was meant to indicate the Grotto. "You try 'em?"

"Yeah, dude. They're vile...just like you, ya big Kate-hatin' bast'd."

As if suddenly engrossed in the write-up of Styles' band, Nigel obscured his mouth with the local indie weekly, an act that hid his smirk.

"Y'know, dude," said Styles, "I'd like to tilt at windmills, too. You're livin' the life that should be mine and it makes me sick! *Sick*, I say!" Then he asked in a hush, "Who else knows?"

"Just you, Bas, and mom."

"Well, these guys," said Styles, circling a finger to indicate the regulars around them, "They're gonna lose their shit when they find out. So's everybody at work." Then he added, "Dude...how am I supposed to torment Whitehead by myself?"

The two stared at each other for a long moment, then burst into the usual fit of snickers as they had over a lifetime of shared antics. Nigel giggled and boyishly rolled away from Styles, whose head bobbed rapidly, like a felt puppet on a children's show.

Abby, denims snug and low on her bony hips, swept in to take the cup emptied of milk. As she walked away, Styles muttered menacing lechery about peeling her britches even lower.

"This just in," said Nigel, with his face still half-hidden and deadpan voice conveying authority to no one in particular, "Four out of five doctors agree that fetishizing emaciated tarts is a classic early symptom of deficient masculinity."

Styles bolted upright in his seat, indignantly assessing his good friend. “Well, fucko, it’s obvious we’ll never fight over the same chickie because,” he paused, looking past Nigel, “I don’t much fancy your taste, either. Bogey on your six.”

Nigel spun to see Bogdana Palahnovich. Wearing his letter jacket over a long hemp skirt, she moved silently by their table with an unhurried prowl better suited to a short black party dress. She sat her ample curves in the lounge, unpacking her poetry chapbooks and *kufi* cap, which - to everyone’s relief - signaled that anything she read would be more political than seizure inducing. It was only when she performed her idea of the *avant-garde* - usually covering her spiky blonde crop with a jester’s hat - that listener arteries bulged like her bra.

Nigel watched Bogey’s thin lips move silently. Years ago, she told him she could enter communion with the Universe and beseech It to manifest otherverses through her creative energies. His considered opinion was that it was unmitigated bullshit, and absolutely no deterrent to his indulging a deep visual kneading of her *zaftig* suppleness.

He sank his teeth into one of the decadent tarts while leering at her, and only the abrupt “Dude!” yanked back his focus.

“I want to be on record as saying that I don’t think you should go. But if you must uproot your life, don’t do it to make *that* mistake again,” said Styles, nodding sharply toward the lounge. His pieces set for another skirmish, he leaned back with a renewed beam. “You ready to get your ass kicked, my brother?”