

CHAPTER TWO: SINFONEE MCKENZIE-RODRIGUEZ-YUN

The afternoon sun moved a notch higher, casting the beginnings of shadows onto the street. The tired town didn't wake up so much as roll over and fluff its pillow. A couple of buckboards full of men trundled in, also a buggy carrying two respectable-looking ladies in high collars and long, street sweeper dresses. Three riders joined them, two boy-faced wranglers and a handsome woman in her later years.

These met at the mercantile and came out later with Harry Dern, the shopkeeper. The menfolk carried ladders, tool boxes and a spool of range wire. The ladies struggled under the bulk of a rolled up canvas.

For the next few hours, the townsfolk stretched banners across the street, one on the westward limit of Keystone, and one in the east. The banners read "HAPPY BIRTHDAY KEYSTONE" and "20TH ANNIVERSARY SHINDIG!" The workers hammered posts into the road at either limit of the town, and hung signs on the posts. The signs read

Keystone 20th Anniversary Celebration
Today, sunset till the sheriff says go home
Board horses at Chawin Chucks livery Stable
No fighting, no cussing, no spitting
No guns. Check them here.
No pigs or goats!

They hoisted up plenty of red, white, and blue bunting and hung paper lanterns from every post and porch cover. In the middle of the street, two long planks on sawhorses served as a table where the ladies loaded up fried chickens, taters, corn, bread, and pies. The men set up a dunking booth where celebrants would get to dip the preacher, two throws for a penny. The sheriff came out of his office to introduce Hostetter to Chawin' Chuck and secure the marshal a horse maybe, and tack. But Chawin' Chuck was too busy arranging the horse race event and couldn't possibly see to the marshal till morning. That was all right, as the marshal needed gear and weapons before he could ride, not to mention a direction to ride to.

STEPHAN MICHAEL LOY

After the meeting with Chuck, Hostetter leaned against the porch post outside the sheriff's office and took in the sights. Sheriff Madson went to supervise construction of a shooting range made of hay bales and tin cans. The solicitor complained that his office was situated down range and he didn't believe a hay bale would stop a .45 caliber bullet fired by a drunk cowboy. The sheriff agreed, so they turned the whole to-do around so it faced the barber's instead.

Through all this, more and more people arrived until the setup itself looked much like the celebration would. The sheriff deputized four men, two to stand at each end of town to collect guns and deny entrance to pigs and goats. He checked the firearms for the shooting competition to ensure they were loaded, chambered and cocked, for convenience's sake. Keystone was looking for a real good time.

Round about six by the railroad clock, folks started to arrive who weren't there for the setup. Sodbuster families of six and eight brats, stinking cowhands, and genteel honored citizens all wandered into town on foot, on horseback, or in buggies or wagons. One fella, who had recently taken payment on stock in the Holy Terror Mine, entered town in a brand new Benz automobile to the consternation of the horses and the gentler ladies. But by far the greater number of arrivals could only be classified as miners. Black with soot or gray with mud, they tromped into the celebration streaming with sweat and bent from exhaustion. They came right off the shift, fresh paid and long-time stupid. The dunk booth men, the shooting range captain, the betting agent, the whorehouse madam, and Howard Johnson all cracked their knuckles and rubbed their hands together at the sight of so many suckers. Keystone was good and roused as the sun dipped low in the sky.

Nothing was officially open, of course. Sunset wasn't for another few hours. But the townsfolk gathered and talked, and went about visiting. In a hard land requiring hard work to survive, the good people of Keystone rarely came together to take their ease.

"Try this, Marshal," Howard Johnson said when he sauntered over to the porch post Hostetter had taken to holding up. He held out a tin cup mounded with ice cream speared with an iron spoon. The ancient prospector loitering alongside Hostetter widened his bloodshot, rheumy eyes and licked his cracked lips.

"You ain't got that out here in this heat, do you?" Hostetter chewed on a sprig of straw and stared at the cup.

"Just the samples." Johnson pushed the cup toward Hostetter again. "This here's a special concoction, held back in my private reserve. Ordered it particularly for this grand celebration. As you know, all the way from New York City."

BAD LANDS

"New York City!" exclaimed the prospector, spitting tobacco juice in his astonishment.

"That's right," Johnson said, winking. "New York City!"

"Ain't got no means to pay," Hostetter reminded the barkeep.

"Free sample! It's a new flavor. Rocky Road, it's called, and never a more delicious confection might you find this side of the O-hio Valley."

Hostetter grunted. It was impossible to tell what he meant by that. But he leaned his stick up against the post and took the cup.

"Ain't you givin' out no more 'o that?" the prospector asked, dribbling brown juice down his tangled beard.

"Free for everyone! Sinfonee! More Rocky Road!"

A slim Negro girl in a gingham dress separated from the ladies at the food table and hurried to Johnson holding two tin cups of ice cream. She looked odd in that company, and not just because of her darkie hide. She carried herself with quick, almost birdlike movements, emphasized by her straight, tall posture. She was comely for a Negro, with big, round, wavering eyes, an angular face, and ample curves everywhere else. Her black hair was straight but untamed and coarse, hanging past her shoulders and alive in the evening breeze. There was no doubt at all that she had neglected the usual undergarments that should have accompanied her dress. The material flapped before her kicking stride and the shape of those legs became evident with each step. She carried a leather satchel against one hip, its wide leather strap crossing over her chest, emphasizing her breasts as it hung from one shoulder. She could have made good money in the whorehouse.

That was about what the town ladies thought, evident in their haughty stares of disapproval.

Johnson took the ice cream from the colored girl and handed one to the prospector, who dove into it like a parched man attacks water.

"This ice cream is of the highest quality," Johnson bragged. "It's what you call arTEESH-ee-Anne."

"I don't call it no such thing." Hostetter poked at the mound of frozen stuff. "Looks funny."

"The finest Swiss chocolate, vanilla--"

"Not vanilla bean, I hope."

"No, pure vanilla! Plus, special flavoring and additions."

Hostetter lifted a spoonful into his mouth. His jaws worked and his eyes narrowed.

"This here's good stuff," the prospector said when he wasn't slurping or smacking his lips.

Hostetter spit a great gob of half-chewed dairy product into the street.

"Marshal!" Johnson exclaimed, his big face widening with shock.

"That's dirt in there!" Hostetter shoved the cup back at Johnson.

STEPHAN MICHAEL LOY

"Of course there is. That's why they call it Rocky Road." The barkeep took the cup, but his face had taken on a look of sullen disapproval. "The finest additions from revolutionary Valley Forge, from Gettysburg, and from San Juan Hill. It's history, Marshal!"

Hostetter spat out a rock.

"Perhaps such rich taste isn't suited for all palettes," Johnson said.

"Anybody gonna eat that?" The prospector held out his hand and Johnson placed the cup in it. The grizzled old timer was wolfing the remains in no time.

"Sinfonee!" Johnson called over his shoulder. "Cleanup on Gutter One!" He tapped two fingers to his forehead and made a slight bow toward Hostetter, who stood bent over, gagging and spitting. "Marshal, good night." Then he walked into the party, presumably to offer another lucky celebrant his cup of ice cream, dirt, and rocks.

"Better stop that spittin', Marshal," the prospector said, chuckling. "It's against the rules, you know."

The Negro girl returned with a pail and a spade in one hand and a cup of water in the other. She dropped the spade and bucket and handed the water to Hostetter. The drink was good, healthy well water, golden brown and not too many bugs. Hostetter took a deep swig, rolled it around in his mouth, and ejected it into the dirt.

Some of it splattered onto the darkie's hands and forearms as she shoveled up the expelled, masticated ice cream blob. She froze a moment, a load of crud in her spade, then sighed and finished her scoop.

"Disease vector probabilities high," she muttered. "Typhoid fever, typhus, polio, measles, AIDS. Wash. Disinfect. Gonna need lye." She plopped the shovelful of mess into her bucket and scurried away, leaving Hostetter holding the water cup.

"What?" Supporting himself against the porch post, the marshal stared after her.

The prospector nodded and stroked his rat's nest of beard. "Yep. You keep spittin', you're gonna git fined."

Hostetter threw the cup into the street, then snatched up his stick and stalked off toward the bar.

He might have been curious about the Negro girl if he had noticed what she did as he passed. Her behavior was strange for an almost invisible darkie engaged in menial labor. She stopped washing her hands, reached into her leather bag, fiddled with something, then held the bag up toward the marshal as he tromped along in front of her.

A faint glow peeked from the bag, shining out through open spaces at the flap and squeezing past the most worn of the stitching. A body had to be looking right at the bag to see the light. Though the shadows in the street were long, it was still full day.

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"Ion scattering. Neutrino count optimal," the girl said, probably to herself. "Probable target source. Now where's that lye?"

She lowered the bag but kept her eyes on the marshal. She looked to be ready to follow him, but one of the town ladies intervened with brusque orders to scrub up some puke the miners had left at the apple bobbing stall.



The marshal showed a mighty desire to get himself good and drunk, but such a want is difficult to fulfill without the expediting silver. He settled for hanging around the saloon and partaking of the free tastes from Howard Johnson's exotic stock of microbrews. He wasn't the only leech fastened onto Johnson. From just before sundown to deep in the night, the saloon put up with every variety of moocher, cheapskate, drunk and rapsCALLION, all on the hunt for free beer. They crowded the bar, shoving and punching over the limited number of two-finger pulls of Johnson's varied, if suspect, stock. Hostetter got his fair share or more. By the wee hours of midnight, one, or two, depending on whose watch was consulted, the marshal had managed a slight buzz and an ill stomach on such inviting specialty brews as Rebel's Corpse, Wild Indian, Holy Terror, and Gangrene Teat. He stepped out of the bar, stick in hand, when Johnson announced closing time.

The darkie girl waited on the porch.

While the saloon emptied, its occupants departing for impromptu late night fights and gutter pisses, Hostetter remained on the porch. He stretched his back and laid the stick along his shoulders. He extended his arms along the shaft and rotated far at the waist, both directions. The trail tightens a man, fills him full of knots and kinks. Besides, the marshal had no place to go, not having coin for a room.

After he stretched a few times, Hostetter noticed the darkie girl, or at least let on that he had.

"What're you loiterin' for?" he asked. "Don't you got nowhere to be?"

"Yes. Do you?"

Hostetter stopped stretching. He peered at the girl, looked her up and down. "Is that a invitation? My purse is empty, and even if it weren't, I don't lay with niggers."

The darkie girl jumped a little, as if she hiccupped. "Pejorative colloquialism," she said. "Commonplace among the ruling class. Dismissible." She darted forward two steps, enough to come within arm's reach of the marshal. "I'm Sinfonee McKenzie-Rodriguez-Yun. Not a nigger."

Hostetter's bushy gray brows lowered and his mustache twitched. He brought the stick down and rested its tip on the boards between his feet. "Uppity nigger, too. South Dakota ain't so different from Alabama, girl. Show some respect."

STEPHAN MICHAEL LOY

The girl's lips twitched, up, down, up again. "Don't know what to make of you," she said, then snatched the stick from Hostetter's hand.

The marshal stood there a good second, staring at where his stick had been. Then he dropped his hands to his sides, and turned on her. "Why you little--"

"Charged atomic core. Trans-universal nugget. How to manage containment field?" She spun the stick a few times, looking at it from all directions, then tossed it back to the marshal. "You come with me. The president's order."

Hostetter caught the stick two-handed. As the girl turned to walk away, he extended the staff to touch her shoulder. "What the tarnation-- Get back here, girl. Answer some questions. You work for Colonel Roosevelt?"

She stopped and flitted her big eyes to the end of the stick on her shoulder. "No. Franklin Delano."

"Who?"

"The staff. Biometrically activated?"

"What?"

The girl turned back to him. For all her crazy talk, she seemed bland, as if she'd been in the medicinals and wasn't quite in her head. "Sorry. Nineteenth century western colloquial speech isn't my first language."

"It's the twentieth century, dumbass."

She nodded. "I see the problem." She cocked her head. "Two hours from now. Boehm-Schumacher event. Level two. I know where it is. Come with me."

"What? A balmy shoemaker? Two of 'em? What?"

Her lips flicked upward. "Not too bright." She turned away again and started up the boards with that quick, sure, kicking stride she had shown on the street earlier.

Hostetter stared after her. He put his hands on his hips, behind his neck, then intertwined on the end of his stick. He glowered, huffed, and rolled his eyes.

But, in the end, he followed her.