

## CHAPTER 2

# Duke the Barbarian

I'd lived in this old house in North Beach for a long time now. It was small and quite the dump but suited my basic needs. The landlord charged me cheap rent because he never had to fix anything on this wreck. I took care of it. Most importantly – it had a small garage with everything I needed to work on bikes – including my beer fridge. But there was no dependable power now to run the fridge and booze of any kind was hard to come by. I got what little I had by trading with the Guardians. I got used to drinking warm beer again. That was too reminiscent of Nam.

There was a large box in the corner of the garage where everyone would throw their empty beer cans. With all the bikers who spent time here tweaking on their machines I was able to throw a party every year with the money from the recycled cans. It became known as “JC’s Annual Beer Can Recycling Party.” Those were the good ole days that would never be seen again as long as I stayed in the City.

While I thought about my plans I started work on the Super Glide. First I checked the fluids and all the seals. I found some used but low mileage plugs in the garage that would work. Unlike the newer Harleys this ole girl had a kick start. That would be important as I knew the old battery wouldn’t have any life in it. It would be too dangerous to try and take it outside to push start. These old glides would kick start even with a weak battery. But it would be better to have a good battery – if possible.

I had a biker babe calendar on the wall I bought myself for Christmas – just before the shit hit the fan here with the Regional Wars. I was marking off the days since then and it was mid April. Over five months in hell now! If I was going to try an escape I wanted to be on the road by sometime in May. That was still in the wet months along the coast so the

nights would probably be cool and foggy. The fog could be good or bad news – depending on who was looking for who. I was also tracking the full moons on the calendar as best I could. Patrols were always different in a full moon.

I was working on the bike late at night when I heard someone moving outside the garage. I reached for my shotgun and closely watched the door. If it was the Guardians they were gonna want to know why I was working on the bike. Then I heard a familiar deep voice, “JC – you in there?”

“Who’s there?” I asked wanting to be sure.

“Who do you think it is you long haired hippie biker freak – Captain Midnight? Do you want me to slide my decoder ring under the door?” It was Duke. I lowered the shotgun.

“Come on in you smelly old psychotic hunk of scooter trash.”

Duke was my closest biker bro but I hadn’t seen him in over a week. He’d been a Ranger in Nam in the seventies and was a really big boy. Well over six foot and 300 pounds. In the biker crowd he was known as Duke the Barbarian. He was famous for his short temper and lust for a good fight. I don’t think he lost very many unless he was greatly outnumbered. Before I met him he’d been an outlaw but left the club to work on his own. Didn’t like taking orders – from anyone.

We were a strange pair to be such good friends. Me being only five ten and about 180 pounds – in better times. We looked like Mutt and Jeff when we rode together. He was known for his rough ways and I preferred to be a lover rather than a fighter. So maybe opposites really do attract?

I first met him at a biker bar in the City called Stinky Dicks. I was playing a friendly game of pool with Big Jim and Nasty Pete – in what Stinky Dick liked to call his Ball Room – when Duke challenged the winner. He smelled like whiskey – matter of fact – he just smelled. I already knew his reputation but had never run into him. So when Jim and Pete quickly threw the game I had no option but to take him on. Even though he dwarfed me I never back down from anyone. Something Dad had taught me from his coal mining days in Morgantown. Maybe a touch of the Marine now to boot.

Dad was a small man but had the reputation for being one

of the toughest fighters in the mines. He told me many times, “When you’re the smallest guy everyone will pick on you. But if you fight back they’ll eventually leave you alone cause the bullies don’t want to get their asses kicked by someone smaller than them. It’s bad for their reputation.” Mom liked to call me her “bantam rooster” because I never backed away from a fight. But Duke the Barbarian was really big!

So we played our game of eight ball. Everyone thought I would just let him win to avoid the consequences of confronting the Barbarian. But that made me even more determined to whip his butt. When I was a young stud my uncle Zeke owned the little general store back in Mount Pisgah. He had an old pool table in the back room where the local boys met to shoot the shit and sip their moonshine. So I got to play a lot as a kid. Made some good side money in the Marines hustling pool with the newbies.

Duke was drunk and I was determined to beat his sorry ass at the game—even if it meant getting mine kicked. So when I sunk the eight ball the bar went silent. I guess not too many bikers had ever been foolish enough to beat the Duke. He came over and stared at me with his dark eyes that were sunk into a large head of long black hair and scraggly beard. “So the little man is feeling cocky today. Maybe I should just kick your fuckin’ ass and teach you a lesson.” I grabbed onto my pool stick tightly and prepared for the worst. I wasn’t going to start the fight but intended to hold my own as long as I could against this big man.

He just stood there for a while and glared down at me—breathing these long whiskey saturated breaths. I stared back into his dark mysterious eyes. This was a really scary guy who I knew was capable of mayhem without a thought. He studied my vest and saw my faded Marine patch. He leaned over and surprised me when he asked, “You serve in Nam?”

“Yeah—in ‘69. So what?” I thought he was just playing with me waiting for the right time to throw the first punch.

We stood there for a while locked eye to eye. Everyone was waiting for the fight to start. And then Duke surprised the crowd—and most of all me—when he reached over—grabbed

my vest—and said, “Then let’s have a drink to remember the boys we served with in Nam!” And he pulled me toward the bar.

To this day I’m not sure why he changed his mind about taking me on. Maybe it was the determination he saw in my eyes? Maybe he was having his once a decade feeling of melancholy? I never asked. But we drank until we couldn’t stand up and passed out together in the corner. That was after many toasts to the good men we left behind in the war. I had that hangover for a long day. Damn brown bottle flu. That was when Duke and I became regular riding bros.

“You almost got your head blown off,” I teased him.

“You wouldn’t shoot anyone—little man—you’re too much of a fuckin’ paac-i-fist.” He kind of spit the words out as he always liked to make fun of my easy going ways. “Workin’ on the bike. Good to see that. How’s it comin’?”

We moved over to inspect the bike. “She’s been sitting for a long time. Not sure yet if I can make it run.”

“Hell yes you can! It’s a Harley and you’re the best damn mechanic I know. And besides—you got me to help you get the ole gal runnin’. Surely two mechanical geniuses like us can figure this out.” Duke wasn’t the world’s greatest mechanic—he preferred wrecking them to fixing them—but he knew his way around a wrench.

“But first I have a present for you,” he announced as he pulled out a big joint and a whiskey flask. “I borrowed this from a couple of Guardians. The fuckers didn’t want to share so I had to persuade them. Hell—I didn’t even break a sweat!” We both laughed because I knew what that meant. Somewhere in town there were a couple of Guardians who wished they hadn’t said no to the Barbarian. Hope the Guardians had a good medical plan.

We sat on the floor and mellowed out. The weed smelled like pretty good stuff. Didn’t take long before I felt good. It had been a while...

“Did you miss me?” Duke inquired in his deadpan way.

“Hell no—I figured you were dead. How could I miss your sorry ass?” We sat there in silence for a while enjoying the high.

Then he got my major interest with what he said next. “Well

partner—I been thinkin’ about your plan to get out of the City and head north along the coast to the New Society.” Duke was the only one I had told about my plans. “Getting across the bridge is your biggest problem to start—so I figured out a way.” Now he had my full attention. We sat there quiet as I waited to hear the rest.

“So—are you going to tell me or am I going to have to beat it out of you?” He thought that was funny.

As long as Duke and I had been riding together I’d never known him to care about any woman—except once. Not too long ago he’d fallen for a little biker chick we all called Barbie Doll. She looked just like a little Barbie Doll with big boobs and blonde hair. She was a tiny thing but she captured him completely. Kind of like watching Beauty and the Beast when they were together.

I didn’t think he even had a gentle side but he would do anything for Barbie. The crew and I kept trying to figure out what she saw in him. At times it was like watching this really sexy bear trainer with this big hairy beast on a leash. But no one was going to tell Duke he was pussy whipped—at least not to his face.

Shortly after the Guardians took control several of them found Barbie in a biker bar waiting for Duke to show up after a drug run. They tried to rape her but not until she had taken one out with a derringer and kicked another in the nuts. She put up quite the fight but there were too many. They had their way with her and then slit her throat. When Duke found out he went crazy—way beyond anything I’d ever seen him do before!

Duke had fists like steel ingots and a kick like a Missouri mule. Me and several of the boys were at his house when he got the news about Barbie and he went berserk. He punched holes in the walls and took a door off with a kick. I lost track of what all he broke. When we finally cooled him down to a small roar we packed into his van and headed for the bar. It was a mess. Lots of blood. Duke picked up Barbie’s small body in his arms and just drove away in the van. We didn’t see him again for a while. I never brought up the fact later that I saw him crying as he carried her out.

Duke found out the names of the Guardians at the bar that

day. He started a search to find each of them and take his revenge. He made sure that each died slowly – painfully – and that they knew why this angel of death had sought them out. There was still a few he was looking for but they were hiding out. The Guardians knew of his vendetta but considered it good drama. He knew many of them from his drug running days so they didn't interfere. I even heard they were taking odds on how long it would take him to find all the perpetrators. It became the sole focus of his existence.

"Barbie had a brother you never met," Duke finally continued. "He's a garbage man known as Gladman. He still makes runs for the Guardians taking crap out to the dump at Stinson Beach. He can get you across the bridge in the back of his garbage truck."

I looked at him carefully to see if he was pulling my leg but he was dead serious. "Are you shittin' me? That sounds pretty bizarre – even for you."

"Trust me bro. I know it'll work. I tried it out a few days ago. Both ways. Pretty fuckin' smelly but it worked." He took another drink and told me the story.

"Gladman hates the Guardians for what they did to Barbie so he wants to help. We rigged up a container at the bottom of the load and I went all the way out to Stinson Beach. I stayed there for two days and did some recon for you. Learned a lot about the Guardian patrols and where I think some of their outposts might be. We just hafta make the container bigger to hold the bike." He paused for a moment to let it all sink in. "So what you think about that little man?"

I was stunned. Off all the schemes I'd imagined I never thought about leaving in a garbage truck. I jokingly replied, "Doesn't sound like a very exciting start to my adventure."

"What do you care – if it works?" He was right about that.

"Why didn't you stay once you were across the bridge?" I remembered Duke had talked about heading north also.

"Well – let's just say I have unfinished business here in the City." I saw that familiar anger in his eyes. "When I go I plan on walking to the north and Gladman will be my way across the bridge when that time comes. As long as you two don't get

caught." He looked at me intently and I understood. "Besides — what fun would it be to get to the New Society if you weren't there? So you get to go first."

As incredible as it sounded — I now had a hope I could at least get out of the City. "What else did you learn?"

"The Guardians mostly run their coast patrols on bikes. Normally two at a time on some hot lookin' rice grinders — possibly with turbos. They're well armed with M16s but they carry them on their backs so it would take a few seconds before they could get them to the ready. It ain't easy to fire an auto from a bike." That sounded like experience talking.

He continued, "They must not be expectin' too many insane enough to try Route 1 as they only make patrols about every four hours but with no regular schedule. They run them through the night too. Their first checkpoint after the bridge is along the ridge before you drop down to Stinson Beach. Some of them are stayin' at a ranch just on the other side of the hill."

"What about in Stinson Beach?"

"There aren't any there. They can't stand the smell from the dump. So Stinson Beach would be your place to stage once you're off the truck." I couldn't believe he had learned so much. It was pretty good recon info. But then — he'd been a Ranger. I was getting excited about the possibility of my plan working after all. At least the first part...

"How about checkpoints further north?" I asked wanting to know more.

"Nobody seemed to know much about that — just hunches. So we'll check your map and see where we'd put checkpoints if it was us. I have some ideas. Sure you do too. Some of the folks left in Stinson thought it might be as far north as Gualala — or Point Arena — to tie up with the New Society." He turned and stared at me with those black eyes. "You think the old jarhead is up to this?" That was a real good question from a friend.

"Don't think I have many options if I want my freedom again." That was easy to say but it was going to take a lot of determination and will power at my age. But there was no other choice I could see. I had to give it my best Marine try.

"There's one other thing you otta know. The Guardian who

commands the coast road is a real nasty dude called Blackie. He's a killer the Guardians released from prison and he's supposed to be one mean son of a bitch. I saw him with a patrol when I was scoping the road from outside Stinson. He looks like a picture of Rasputin the Mad Monk I saw in a book once. Long black hair and dressed all in black. Rides a black bike. I hear he takes pleasure in catching people trying to get north and torturing them. He'll be a tough cookie if you run into him." These were serious words coming from Duke.

"Well—so much for the good news and the bad news," I responded to his somber advice. "As the Romans used to say before a battle—do you want to live forever?" and I took another swig.

We sat there for a while enjoying the high—and the whiskey—and remembering back on life before the Regional Wars. I knew Duke was thinking about Barbie Doll—though he never said a word.

"So JC—let's take a look at this ole hunk of HD metal and figure out what it's gonna take to make her run like a champ. Once we know what parts we need we can contact Rat if he's still alive. He can find anything. He's the best scrounger in the business and he owes me a favor. Besides—he about shits his pants every time he sees me because he's such a timid little man. Kind of like you—you paac-i-fist!" Duke said laughingly as he put me in a head lock and squeezed. Damn that boy was strong!

After a few seconds he finally let go and said, "Let's get to work little man..."