

The Legacy of Black Beach

Anchor chains clanging and footsteps pounding above yanked me from sleep. My watch read 5:30 in the morning. I stood carefully, expecting a bucking floor ride, and went to the head. The ship was still. After ten days at sea, we arrived at Floreana Island early. To celebrate, I splashed water on my face and peered from my cabin's porthole into the dawn. The dreamscape stole my breath.

In the west, beyond a turquoise bay, the horizon gently bobbed. A cloud-veiled mountain rose from the shallow white beach a few hundred yards south. Large expanses of black volcanic stones and boulders randomly disrupted the sand, reaching out to break the waves. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and grabbed my binoculars. At least fifty iguanas piled up on the rocks for a sunbathing ritual. Some were almost five feet long. Bizarre brown and white birds with large blue feet waddled amongst them. Blue footed boobies? Those birdwatchers had a sense of humor after all.

It was almost eighty years after Darwin's 1859 *The Origin of the Species*. More impressed with the repeal of prohibition, I couldn't have cared less about theories of evolution, but I *was* a fan of the survival of the fittest. I was also a damn good private eye with one demon left to slay, and this assignment was my best chance for redemption.

The shore was empty except for a large wooden barrel mounted on a crude driftwood frame. A sign by the barrel declared the place *Post Office Bay*. This once served as a mailbox for occasional whalers but was now used by a hand full of isolated settlers to connect with friends and family they'd left behind. Mail pick-up by passing ships was erratic at best.

I climbed to the deck expecting the fragrance of tropical flowers, but all the hot, arid breeze offered was a hint of salt. The wind vibrated the taught rigging lines, and for a minute I thought I heard a woman screaming on the beach. I scanned the shore. Not a soul in sight. Behind the beach stretched a hundred yards of black mangroves, three-foot-high cacti, and various scroungy shrubs. The first officer sounded the ship's horn to announce our presence.

The echoing blast took me back three months to Chicago Harbor, where there was no escaping the simple fact that I fucked up. No amount of booze could erase the pain. Believe me, I tried. My fall from the wagon could have been my end if not for this desolate island on the other side of the world. Yet, something about this place made me uneasy.

Back on the island, two settlers dressed in tatters emerged from a path between the trees, waving like castaways to welcome our 200-foot vessel. I stood next to Captain Hancock, the millionaire oil-tycoon owner, who nodded and waved back. He sent a mahogany-trimmed tender to fetch our guests for a tour of the *Velero III*, Hancock's pride and joy.

As they boarded, the man introduced himself as Dr. Friedrich Ritter and his lady companion as Dore Strauch. His German accent was slight but unmistakable. We knew who they were but went along with the introductions to be polite. Ritter was short and wiry with earth-stained,

calloused hands and a dead-serious demeanor. The lady had sad eyes, and bruises on her arms and legs. Her melancholy weighed on my already heavy heart.

I knew they were in their mid-thirties, but their sun-ravaged skin added at least another ten years to their gaunt faces. They would have been attractive with a little more meat on their bones—until they smiled. The toothless pair greeted us but kept their distance as if to shield us from some kind of vermin. Their jaws dropped as they toured the gleaming white ship, fitted with state-of-the-art labs for marine biology research, connected to a luxury living area by a wide brass circular staircase.

Over dinner, our guests told the strange story of swapping their marriage partners in Berlin to prepare for a bold new life together. I had read that Dore was Ritter's dental patient. Then, he began drilling more than her teeth. They skipped that part. Eventually, to avoid complications from dental infections, he removed their pearly whites with crude make-shift tools.

"Our goal was simple; to survive extreme isolation and discover our true selves. I never expected fame from our little experiment." Friedrich raked his hand through his shock of sandy hair. "Then came a string of young adventurers wanting to lay down roots in a place they believed was destined to become famous. Some were treasure hunters who came to explore caves where sixteenth century pirates hid from the Spanish Armada who'd plundered silver and gold from the Aztecs. Between the island's sharp lava rock, waist-high thickets, and thousands of miserable insect species, many newcomers returned home within the first few months. Some just seemed to vanish." The couple exchanged quick glances that said there was more to be told.

We learned that our now famous guests were frustrated by their growing popularity back home. Many wild stories were being published about their increasingly erratic behavior. Most were exaggerated. Yet they were determined to stay and live their dream on the island. They worked their asses off for over two years on the inaccessible slope of the mountain to build a crude jungle-embedded house by a spring, with just enough garden to be self-sufficient. They took turns describing in great detail how they hand-carried materials from the beach, an hour each way. Combining their names, they proudly christened their new home, *Frieda*.

Friedrich squeezed Dore's hand and grimaced. "We could deal with occasional visitors until the Baroness arrived."

I knew that sooner or later the conversation would lead us to Baroness Eloisa van Wagner, self-proclaimed Empress of Floreana.

Dore dropped her head and silently shook until she could no longer keep from laughing. When she finally gained control, she said, "I'm sure you've heard some of the stories. Her whips, her guns, her two sex-slaves."

I didn't know what to say. These were not proper topics for mixed company, but she started it. I cleaned things up a bit. "There are lots of articles about her, each one more absurd than the last. It's amazing what you can do with enough money."

The captain winked at me. "The islanders needed something to talk about. And tax collectors from Ecuador were willing to humor her as long as she'd planned to build her luxury resort here."

Dore blushed. "She did have lots of money and a habit of riding a donkey to the beach, nearly nude, in search of new lovers. Her temporary home, barbaric by French standards, was by default the most opulent place on the island, and her reputation attracted a few more visitors as she expanded *The Hacienda* into a guest house."

Friedrick added, "As she found out, building a full resort would be no easy matter. Just moving materials onto the island was a nearly impossible job. Then, last month, she vanished."

Captain Hancock poured four glasses of wine and made a toast. "To the Baroness. Her mysterious disappearance has already become famous." He turned to me. "Alex Stryker is here to find her."

I sipped the sweet Reisling, a nod to our company, and added, "That's if she's even alive. Her brother Jacques seems to think so. He hired me to find out." A brother who cared enough about his sister to save her. When he called me, his desperation sliced through my soul. My hand shook as I lowered my glass.

The ghost of my sister floated above the table. In the silence, she whispered, "That old girl and I had something in common, you know." Despite my goosebumps, I did my best to appear calm and continued, "Jaques introduced me to Captain Hancock, who brought me here as a favor. When I accepted the job, Jacques sent me a package of his sister's letters from Post Office Bay and a healthy advance." So, here I was with lots of money, in a thorny red ant-infested paradise, to find a sex-crazed Baroness. A good news, bad news situation.

After dinner, I interviewed Friedrich and Dore in a side parlor. I learned that the Baroness had a sweet tooth for Dore yet never acted on it for fear of angering Friedrich. He was too valuable when it came to advice on this god-forsaken place. But they did become friends. As Dore put it, "I was the only one allowed to call her Eloisa. To everyone else, she was The Empress. We'd swim together and talk about our lives before the island. She'd always bring extra wine and cheese just in case a handsome prospect happened ashore from a visiting yacht." Friedrich raised his eyebrows, and she quickly added, "Luckily for me, that never happened during our swims."

I prodded for more details. "Was she always that way?"

Dore's eyes closed as if she was considering her answer. "In Paris, she had too much time and money on her hands. She said after finishing school, she made a lot of friends with the same problem. She'd soon been to all the opium dens on the city's fringes. That's how her spiral began. Even here, her rich visitors kept her supplied."

The air closed in around me, and wavy black lines zig-zagged before my eyes. It wasn't the wine. I ended the interview with an apology, a wide yawn, and a promise to continue in the morning at their homestead. My gossamer sister Margret winked at me from the corner of the ceiling.

I didn't sleep that night, revisiting my failure over and over. I was shooting pool and watching the fights with my buddies in some smokey southside bar, while unbeknownst to me, my sister cried for my help. My gut already knew when I called in the morning, and she didn't answer. Then I got a call from my cop friend. The punk I'd just helped him arrest arranged to have

Margret kidnapped, delivered to a filthy crash pad, and forced to OD on opium. The asshole threatened my whole family as they hauled him away. I should have paid attention. Some detective I was.

During the pre-dawn hours, my thoughts bounced from Margret to the Baroness. I wasn't going to fail twice. I could have sworn I heard their echoed laughs as if they shared a cosmic secret. I skipped breakfast and suited up for the ball-busting trip to Frieda. Luckily, the path from the beach was well-worn with donkey tracks, avoiding the painful climb over lava boulders.

I arrived in less than an hour, breathing hard and soaked in sweat. Under a canvas awning, Dore sat with a frail blonde guy in his thirties who looked too manicured for this place. I wondered where old Friedrick was and what he thought of this fop.

Dore handed me a cup of sugar cane juice and introduced her friend. "Lorenz, this is detective Stryker." When he gracefully extended a limp hand, I didn't know whether to shake or kiss it.

His eyes darted between Dore and me as if waiting for one of us to speak. I gave his nerves a break. "So, you are *the* Lorenz, best friend of the Baroness." *This was one of her lovers?*

His pale face reddened, and he cleared his throat. "Second best friend, as it turns out. You must have also heard of Philippon, the real love of her life."

Dore served two plates of salty fried plantain slices. "Don't be so modest. Depending on her mood, the Empress would choose between you two. She bragged of your tenderness and willingness to please."

This brought a smirk to Lorenz's rouged lips. "Yes, well, it no longer matters. God has dealt with Philippon accordingly. You must have heard."

I had read that a month ago, her favorite lover tried to escape the island on a small craft, only to crash onto the ancient lava folds of Marchena Island. His broken remains were found washed up on the rocks. "Rumor was that the Baroness had left with him, but he was found with another one of his friends."

Lorenz swatted at something almost invisible flying around his cup and pulled a folded sheet of paper from his pocket. "She told me that a group of her yachting friends were taking her on an adventure to Tahiti, where building her hotel would be much easier. She drew up this contract, leaving me the Hacienda and all her possessions."

I gave the paper a brief scan, but it was in French. I glanced at Dore, who said, "I've read it. It's authentic."

I felt a strange relief hearing that the Baroness was okay. Now, it looked like I was going to Tahiti. The thought was quickly replaced by a dark vision of finding her too late. Dore and I watched the lad ride away on his new donkey, courtesy of his ex-girlfriend.

The sun was high, and we walked back under the awning. Dore handed me a paper of her own. "This was the last thing Eloisa gave me before she disappeared. The note read:

Dear Dore,

I've spent nearly two years in this hellhole, but it's getting the best of me. All I wanted to do was leave my insanity behind and start fresh, but I'm only getting worse. All night long, soft voices tell me to stay and build my hotel. Yet this wilderness screams that it's impossible.

I'm over Philippon and Lorenz. And they've had their fill of me. I've heard stories of the pirates who visited this place long ago with their female captives. Some believe their ancestors still roam a network of tunnels within the island. I need a change. Tonight, I'm going to follow those voices.

Love,

Eloisa

She carefully refolded the note and slipped it into her pocket. "I've never told Friedrich about this. He never trusted her and isn't superstitious. He thinks she left the island in the middle of the night with her yachting friends."

I returned to my ship before the ten-minute equatorial sunset caught me walking home in the dark.

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Another sleepless night. Now, it was me who heard the voices, including my sister's. The words were out of reach, mixed with giggles and sobs. I had to find the source. In a trance, I crept up to Velero's main deck. The soft wind was cool, and the full moon revealed the smooth black water of the bay. I slipped on leather sandals, lowered myself overboard, and swam toward Black Beach on the west side of the island—to those ancient caves.

A slight current pulled me in the right direction as if on cue. I'd barely stumpled a half mile, and my sandals were ripped to shreds by the razor-edged pores of the lava stone. I threw them into the waves, biting my lip to ease the pain. The burning flesh peeled from my feet, but I pushed on. The last hundred feet to the sand brought tears to my eyes as the coarse black sand filled the bloody gashes and painfully slowed the bleeding. I hoped this was all a bad dream.

Loud voices came from the caves were mixed with screams of terror and laughter. Hoarse baritones dared me onward with calls of "Here we be."

The cave entrance was separated by a short stretch of water. I dipped under and came up inside of the damp cavern. Traces of moon light reflected through and around the water. As my eyes slowly adjusted to the dim surroundings, I tried to lunge back into the pool but was paralyzed with fear.

Two bearded brutes, each with naked, scar-covered bodies, stood growling, close enough to broadcast a rotting flesh stench. No, it wasn't them who stunk. Each one restrained a six-foot lizard on a rope. The beasts thrashed to get at me. These were not typical island iguanas. Their

rows of dagger-like teeth kept their mouths from closing, creating taunting smiles as they inched closer to me.

With a single yank on the ropes, they snapped the fireless dragons' necks, and the thrashing stopped. I held my breath and winced. This brought a gape-filled grin to my hosts' woolly faces as they tied my hands and pulled me along on a lizard leash. The deeper we went into the cavern, the darker it became. They'd turn to check on me and their eyes shined red. After seeing how they dealt with resistance, I tried my best to keep up.

I stumbled behind them for at least a half hour before they stopped and slammed me to the cold, wet stone floor with a "Time to sleep." Something in my spine crackled, and I saw stars. I lay there, unable to move a muscle or even open my eyes. Yet, my senses still worked.

I was nudged to the left against what felt like a ribcage. A sickeningly sweet odor wrenched my stomach as my head sunk into a mass of cool, slippery gel supported by what could have been bone. I heard the clatter of crabs scrambling on the floor in my direction and desperately wanted to open my eyes, but they might as well have been stitched closed.

Another body fell to my right, announced by a deep growl. "Your Empress, sir." I heard her stir, but she only moaned softly. I whispered, "Jacques sent me to find you." She squeezed my arm. I forced open one eye slit. She'd been mercilessly beaten about the face. Her empty eye sockets were filled with seaweed and her front teeth poked through her upper lip. I heaved a stream of bile that mixed with a liquid oozing from under her skirt. It was warm and sticky, like blood. The horrible image of my sister in the morgue washed over me.

The clamor of a dozen other voices grunted from the other end of the cave. "Feed 'em. Feed 'em. Feed 'em."

Two even larger, unleashed dragons slowly stalked in our direction. One stopped before each of us and studied our faces as if curious. The next instant, air was rushing through my throat in a most unnatural way, and I gagged on my own blood. A warm spray shot from the Baroness' direction.

Together, we gasped for breath. My pulse pounded in my temples, slowing to the rhythm of the distant tide. I felt my sister's presence and a warm glow filled my chest. Memories flooded my heart with joy. Her long blonde hair swayed as I pushed her on a swing in our backyard. The stiff Chicago breeze brought a blush to her cheeks. I tried apologizing for letting her down but could only project a silent sadness. I was overcome with terror as her pale skin darkened. Then she vanished, but I heard her say, "It wasn't your fault. Don't worry. Eloisa will look after me."

The End

