

THE NATHANIEL STARBUCK CHRONICLES: PILOT

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Sample

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Midmorning on a warm spring day, April. A crowd has gathered in the top end of Shocke Slip on Carry Street. Nathaniel Starbuck tries to avoid the crowd by ducking into an alleyway behind Kerr's Tobacco Warehouse, but a chained guard dog lunges at him, driving him back to the steep cobbled slip where the crowd engulfs him.

TANNER

You going somewhere, mister?

Starbuck nods, but says nothing. In one hand he carries a stack of books tied with hemp rope, while in his other is a carpetbag with a broken handle. His clothes are of good quality, but frayed and dirty.

TANNER (CONT'D)

You heard the news, mister?

Starbuck says nothing.

TANNER (CONT'D)

Shots fired in Charleston. The Confederates took Fort Sumter.

Starbuck betrays no apprehension.

TANNER (CONT'D)

So where are you from?

The bald man seizes Starbuck sleeve as though to force an answer.

STARBUCK

Take your hands off me!

TANNER

I asked you civil.

Tanner lets go of Starbuck's sleeve. Starbuck tries to turn away, but the crowd presses around him too thickly and forces him back across the street toward the Columbian Hotel where an older man dressed in respectable though disheveled clothes has been tied to the cast-iron palings that protect the hotel's lower windows. Starbuck is still not the crowd's prisoner, but neither is he free.

SMITH

You got papers?

TANNER

Lost your voice, son?

Starbuck makes another effort to push against his persecutors, but there are too many of them and he is unable to prevent them from trapping him against a hitching post on the hotel's sidewalk. A black teamster, driving an empty wagon, watches expressionless from atop his wagon box. The crowd has stopped the carter from turning his horses out of Shockoe Slip, but the man is too wise to make any protests.

TANNER (CONT'D)

Where are you from, boy?

The bald tanner thrusts his face close to Starbuck's.

TANNER (CONT'D)

What's your name?

STARBUCK

None of your business.

TANNER

So we'll find out!

Tanner seizes the bundle of books and tries to pull them away. For a moment there is a fruitless tug of war, then the frayed rope holding the books part and the volumes spill across the cobbles. Tanner laughs at the accident and Starbuck hits him. It's a good hard blow. It catches Tanner off his balance so that he rocks backwards and almost falls.

Someone from the crowd cheers Starbuck. There are about two hundred people in the crowd with some fifty more onlookers who half hang back from the proceedings and half encourage them. Most of them are in working clothes. They want excitement.

Tanner rubs his face.

TANNER (CONT'D)

I asked you a question, boy.

STARBUCK

And I said it was not your business.

Starbuck tries to pick up his books, though two or three have already been snatched away. The prisoner already tied to the hotel's window bars watches in silence.

DON

So where are you from, boy?

STARBUCK
Faulconer Court House.

DON
Faulconer Court House?

STARBUCK
Yes.

DON
Your name?

STARBUCK
Baskerville. Nathaniel Baskerville.

DON
You don't sound like a Viginian,
Baskerville.

STARBUCK
Only by adoption.

PROCTOR
So what do you do in Faulconer
County, boy?

STARBUCK
I work for Washington Faulconer.

MINISTER
Best let him go, Don!

NURSE
Let him be!

DON
You're a Yankee, boy, aren't you?

STARBUCK
Not any longer.

TANNER
So how long have you been in
Faulconer County?

STARBUCK
Long enough.

TANNER
So what town lies halfway between
here and Faulconer Court House?

DON
Answer him!

Nathaniel is silent, betraying his ignorance.

MAID

He's a spy!

TANNER

Bastard!

Tanner moves in fast, trying to kick Starbuck, but Starbuck sees the kick coming and steps to one side. He slaps a fist at Tanner, clipping his ear, then drives his other hand at the man's ribs. Then a dozen hands begin to maul and hit Starbuck. A fist smacks his eye and another bloodies his nose to hurl him back hard against the hotel's wall. His carpetbag is stolen, his books are finally gone, and now a man tears open his coat and rips his pocket book free. Starbuck tries to stop the theft, but is overwhelmed and helpless. His nose is bleeding and his eye swelling. The black teamster watches expressionless and does not even betray any reaction when a dozen men commandeer his wagon.

DON

Off the wagon, Nigger!

The men clambered aboard the vehicle.

CARPENTER

We're going to Franklin Street
there's a gang mending the road!

The crowd parts to let the wagon turn while the teamster, unregarded, edges his way to the crowd's fringes before running free.

Starbuck is thrust against the window bars. His hands are jerked down hard across the bar's spiked tops and tied with rope to the iron cage. He watches as one of his books is kicked into the gutter, its spine broken and its pages fluttering free. The crowd tears apart his carpetbag, but finds little of value except a razor and two more books.

BURROUGHS

Where are you from?

Burroughs is Starbuck's fellow prisoner. A middle-age, portly man, balding, and wearing an expensive broadcloth coat.

STARBUCK

I come from Boston.

Starbuck tries to ignore a drunken woman who prances mockingly in front of him, brandishing her bottle.

STARBUCK

And you, sir?

BURROUGHS

Philadelphia. I only planned to be here for a few hours. I left my traps at the railroad depot and thought I'd look around the city.

Burroughs shakes his head sorrowfully, then flinches as he looks at Starbuck again.

BURROUGHS (CONT'D)

Is your nose broken?

STARBUCK

I don't think so.

BURROUGHS

You'll have a rare black eye, son. But I enjoyed seeing you fight. Might I ask your profession?

STARBUCK

I'm a student, sir. At Yale College. Or I was.

BURROUGHS

My name is Doctor Morley Burroughs. I'm a dentist.

STARBUCK

Starbuck, Nathaniel Starbuck.

BURROUGHS

Starbuck!

STARBUCK

Yes.

BURROUGHS

Then I pray they don't discover it.

STARBUCK

What are they going to do to us?

The dentist pulls at his bonds, relaxes, pulls again.

BURROUGHS

From what they're saying about road menders, son, my guess is tar and feathers, but if they find out you're a Starbuck?

The drunken woman's bottle smashes on the roadway. Two other women are dividing Starbuck's grimy shirts between them while a small bespectacled man leafs through the papers in Starbuck's pocket book. The small man finds a letter in the pocket book, which he opens, reads, turns over, then reads again. He looks up at Starbuck, then back to the the letter, then up at Starbuck yet again.

GROSSMAN

Is your name Starbuck?

Starbuck says nothing. The crowd smells excitement and turns back to the prisoners. Sam Pearce, a bearded, red-faced, burly man and even taller than Starbuck, takes up the interrogation.

PEARCE

Is your name Starbuck?

Starbuck looks around, but there is no help in sight.

PEARCE (CONT'D)

You're being asked a question, boy!

The red-faced man takes hold of Starbuck's tie and twists it so that the double loop around Starbuck's throat tightens.

PEARCE (CONT'D)

Is your name Starbuck?

STARBUCK

Yes.

PEARCE

And are you any relation?

The man's face is broken veined. He has milky eyes and no front teeth. A dribble of tobacco juice runs down his chin and into his brown beard. He tightens the grip on Starbuck's neck.

PEARCE (CONT'D)

Any relation, cuffee?

Starbuck nods.

STARBUCK

I'm his son.

The man lets go of Starbuck's tie and yelps like a stage red Indian.

PEARCE

It's Starbuck's son! We got ourselves Starbuck's son!

BURROUGHS

Oh, Christ in his holy heaven, but
you are in trouble.

SMITH

String him up!

PROCTOR

He's a spy!

PORTER

Nigger lover!

A hunk of horse dung sails toward the prisoners, missing
Starbuck, but hitting the dentist on the shoulder.

BURROUGHS

Why couldn't you have stayed in
Boston?

The crowd surges toward the prisoners, then checked, uncertain
exactly what they wanted of their captives.

GROSSMAN

Patience! The wagon's gone to fetch
the road mender's tar!

A sack of feathers has been fetched from a mattress factory
in nearby Virginia Street.

PEARCE

We're going to teach you gentlemen
a lesson! You Yankees think you're
better than us Southerners, isn't
that what you think?

He takes a handful of feathers and scatters them in the
dentist's face.

PEARCE (CONT'D)

All high and mighty, are you?

BURROUGHS

I am a mere dentist, sir, who has
been practicing my trade in
Petersburg.

PEARCE

He's a dentist!

PORTER

Pull his teeth out!

Another cheer announces the return of the borrowed wagon, which now bears on its bed a great black steaming vat of tar.

Burroughs is the first to be cut free and dragged towards the wagon. He struggles, but he is no match for the sinewy men who pull him onto the wagon bed that would now serve as a makeshift stage.

GROSSMAN

Your turn next, Yankee. So what are you doing here?

STARBUCK

I escorted a lady here.

GROSSMAN

A lady! What kind of lady?

Starbuck says nothing.

GROSSMAN (CONT'D)

I asked you a question?

STARBUCK

A lady from Louisiana who wanted to be escorted from the North.

GROSSMAN

You better pray she comes and saves you quick! Before Sam Pearce gets his hands on you.

Sam Pearce, who has become the master of ceremonies, supervises the stripping away of the dentist's coat leaving Burroughs wearing only his socks and a pair of long drawers. Pearce dips a long-handled ladle into the vat and brings it up dripping with hot treacly tar. The crowd cheers.

PORTER

Give it him good!

SMITH

Teach the Yankee a lesson, Sam!

Pearce plunges the ladle back in the vat and gives the tar a slow stir before lifting the ladle out with its deep bowl heaped high with the smoking, black tar. Burroughs tries to pull away, but two men drag him toward the vat and bend him over its steaming mouth so that his naked back is exposed to the grinning Pearce, who moves the hot mass of tar over his victim.

The expectant crowd falls silent. The tar hesitates, then flows off the ladle to strike the back of the dentist's head. The dentist screams. He jerks away but is pulled back, and the crowd cheers.

Starbuck watches. The dentist is crying.

Pearce scoops another heavy lump of tar from the vat. The crowd screams for it to be poured on. The dentist's knees buckle.

TANNER

You're next, boy. You're next.

He suddenly swings his fist, burying it in Starbuck's belly.

TANNER (CONT'D)

You'll suffer, cuffee, you'll suffer.

The dentist screams again. Carpenter leaps onto the wagon to help Pearce apply the tar. He uses a short-handled spade to heave a mass of thick black tar out of the vat.

TANNER (CONT'D)

Save some for Starbuck.

CARPENTER

There's plenty more here, boys!

The new tormentor slathers his spadeful of tar onto the dentist's back. The dentist twitches and howls, then is dragged up from his knees as yet more tar is poured down his chest so that it drips off his belly onto his clean white drawers. Trickles of the viscous substance are dribbling down the sides of his head, down his face and down his back and thighs. His mouth is open and distorted, as though he is crying, but no sound come from him now. The crowd is ribald at the sight of him. A woman doubles over, helpless with mirth.

DOLLY

Where are the feathers?

CARPENTER

Make him a chicken, Sam!

More tar is poured on till the whole of the dentist's upper body is smothered in the gleaming black substance. His captors release him, but he is too stricken to try to escape now. His feet are stuck in puddles of tar, as he tries to paw the filthy mess away from his eyes while his tormentors finish their work.

Dolly fills her apron with feathers and climbs up to the wagon's bed where, to huge cheers, the feathers are sprinkled over the humiliated dentist. He stands there feathered, mouth agape, pathetic, as around him the mob howls, and hoots. Some black men on the far sidewalk are convulsed in laughter, while even the Minister finds it hard not to smile at the ridiculous spectacle. Sam Pearce releases one last handful of feathers to stick in the congealing, cooling tar. The crowd cheers again.

SMITH

Make him cluck, Sam!

PROCTOR

Make him cluck like a hen!

PEARCE

Cluck like chicken, Yankee!

The dentist is prodded with the short-handled spade until he produces a pathetic imitation of chicken's cluck.

PEARCE (CONT'D)

Louder! Louder!

Burroughs is prodded again, and this time he manages to make the miserable noise loud enough for the crowd's satisfaction.

PORTER

Bring on the spy, Sam!

MAID

Give it him good!

CARPENTER

Show us Starbuck's bastard!

Men seize Starbuck, release his bonds and hurry him toward the wagon. Tanner helps, still striking and kicking at the helpless Starbuck, spitting his hatred and taunting him. Pearce crams the dentist's top hat onto its owner's head. The dentist shakes, sobbing silently. Starbuck pushes hard against the wagon's wheel. Hands reach down from above, grab his collar and heave up. He is sprawled out on the wagon bed, where his hand is smeared by a patch of split tar. Sam Pearce hauls Starbuck upright and displays his bloody face to the crowd.

PEARCE

Here he is! Starbuck's bastard!

SMITH

Fillet him, Sam!