

Prelude to Okolona

February, 1864: the twilight of the American Civil War. Two men, desperate in their search for survival and hope, take two very different paths. In the swamps of North Mississippi, they encounter something from Beyond.

February 20, 1864

“Now that shite’s too thin’ta spread, Odell.” The tall, rawboned man’s voice was quiet and calm, but there was something that glittered and gleamed out of his deep-set eyes that drove the words like ten-penny nails into one’s ears. He leaned back against the towering trunk of a towering tulip popular and tossed another piece of split oak into the fire.

Odell Ard pitched up his long-fingered hands as if he was giving up to the Yanks. His short-shrift sleeves betrayed the fact that his hand-me-down shirt was nearly two sizes too small, but this was outdone by the rakish, cocksure angle of his hat. “I’ma just tellin’ th’ tale, Cawlyer. It’s up ta yawl to believe it or not.” Odell glanced around at his fellow Confederates, hazel eyes searching their beleaguered, fire-lit faces to see who was still enraptured by his spell, before continuing. “But my Pa Waldon swore ta seven Sundays ‘at it was true.”

Another man, his ears like filthy fans on either side of his head, spat a brown wad into the small wine-colored creek by which he and his companions had made their rudimentary camp. “So wha’zis Meziker supposed ta look like ag’in?”

Odell fiddled with the bandage across the palm of his left hand—a bad bite from a surly, stubborn mule before he’d answered the call to assemble just outside of Westpoint, Mississippi—and then he answered Stennis, the big-eared fellow.

“Bear in mind now, ‘at my Pa didn’t see it hisself. But he was there when th’ Pale Man-”

“The Pale Man?” Cawlyer blurted, his eyes widening. Every child in the

South had heard tales of the mysterious Pale Man and his capricious nature. Sometimes, he would aid a traveler beset by deadly will-o-wisps in the swamp, while at other times he appeared to strike down wayward preachers and drag them, screaming from their pulpits, down to Hell.

Odell nodded. "Yup. Pa was there when he drove off a whole mess of these Mezikers outta them thick-as-night cedar swamps down th' way from our home place...but one got away."

Stennis spat another brown wad. "You ain't telled me what dey looks like yet."

A bandaged hand tweaked the edge of a rakish hat, and Odell continued. "They're taller than a man, but only 'cause of th' horns. They got two of 'em, backwards curvin' like a ram's, but their head looks like th' biggest, meanest rooster you've ever clapped eyes on. They've got th' body an' arms of a man, but their legs are like a goat's, right down to th' cloven hooves. Th' whole of their bodies is black as a walnut bucket o' pitch at th' bottom of a well, right down to their eyes and beaks, but those...those shine like polished brass. Th' Pale Man told my Pa that th' brass was to remind th' Mezikers, so's that ever'time they seen themselves, their own eyes an' faces would remind 'em of what they had betrayed and left behind'n Heaven."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Cawlyer, scratching the stubble on his sharp chin with hands perfectly molded to the handle of a plow or the haft of a Kaiser blade. "Sounds like the Devil to me. Plain as plain kin be."

Odell shook his head, stabbing at the sparking fire with a long stick. He was quiet for several long moments, letting images of the Ol' Nick prance through the minds of his gathered comrades-in-arms. None of them knew what

lay ahead with tomorrow's battle, but they knew that they were pitching in with Colonel Jeffrey Forrest against General William Sooy Smith and his boys-in-blue. They knew about the initial skirmish that had happened earlier that day outside of Prairie Station and Aberdeen, Mississippi; they well knew that only first blood had been drawn. They knew what Sooy's Yankee marauders had done, all the way down the long, dusty road from Vicksburg, burning houses and farms as they came. Worse yet, they all had heard what Sherman had done in Meridian, twisting railroad beds into knots, killing livestock, burning everything in his path—including hospitals and churches—looting, and far worse.

The war, already awful beyond words, was taking a powerful turn toward something...darker and more sinister.

Finally, Odell stood. He was not a tall man—fully two heads shorter than the long, lanky Cawlyer—but there was a fire in his belly and an undeniable swagger in his step. There was a confidence behind his hazel eyes and tied up within his words that would not easily be dismissed. “No, not th’ Accuser of th’ Brethren, Cawlyer, but probably jist as bad, I reckon. But I do know this, he ain’t been killin’ our neighbors and burnin’ our fields or wagin’ war ‘pon us.”

And there it was.

If all of the wind had been instantly sucked out of each man's mouth and lungs, it could not have made a bigger sound. Then, all at once, the God-fearing-men began bellowing their disbelief and surprise.

Stennis nearly swallowed his chaw. “Wha...whadya...mean-,” he choked.

Cawlyer's eyes glittered, and his angled jaw set and locked. It made Odell think about his own stubborn mule; the beast often decided that it was done

with work for the day, and it would just sit down, determined to move no more. Try as he might, Odell could not get that blasted mule to move once it sat down on him. Cawlyer was determined to stand his ground.

The small group of Confederates simmered down quickly, sensing that two clear champions had emerged in this strange debate. Odell pitched his hazel orbs into the ring against Cawlyer's keen chips of obsidian, and the two men locked wills.

"You know it needs to be done," Odell said.

"I'll not make a deal with the Devil," Cawlyer replied.

"A Meziker ain't th' Devil!" Odell barked.

"Might as well be," Cawlyer drawled.

"You'd rather side with th' damned Yankees, then?" Odell snapped.

Cawlyer's heavy brow came down, level and even, like a judge's gavel.

"No. I'd rather side with God."

Odell licked his thin lips and dabbed his brow with his bandaged hand.

"Ain't you payin' attention, Cawlyer? God don't look like He's thrown in for us slavin' Southern boys!"

Cawlyer spat. "We ain't all slavers, Odell. I don't own slaves and I never have. My people don't own slaves, and we never have."

A chorus of "Amen's" and "Me too's" echoed around the fire. In truth, many of these Southern men were simple farmers, barely scratching enough life out of the dark Southern dirt to feed their families. These men, who had heeded their nation's call to find and possibly die for their liberty, were not grandiose plantation owners - far from it.

The tall, rawboned man continued. "This war ain't jist about slavery,

Odell. It's about bein' able to make yer own choices...about bein' able to live free and protect you and yourn."

The smaller man crossed his arms over his chest, his narrow brows diving. "Don't matter. We're still on th' losin' side, and e'er'one of you good church-goin' hymn-singers knows it!"

Cawlyer nodded, and his bottom lip came out a bit and then vanished again. The realization came on like a spring thaw: inexorable, gradual, and steady. "Maybe so, Odell, but my God can overcome all."

Odell looked from the tall, angular face of the farmer before him to the other men around the fire. For all the differences in their features, there was a startling sameness in their eyes. "You're all damned fools, an' you'll be dead by sundown tomorrow!"

Cawlyer's eyes glittered again. "Maybe so, but then we'll jist eat supper with Jesus tomorrow night."

Odell spun on a heel and stalked into the darkness.



Odell was no stranger to the swamp. He'd grown up near Bog Hollow, after all, and had spent many nights treeing coons or setting beaver traps in a swamp so dense and so dark that most grown men would not venture near it – much less into it.

But there was something about this place—with its close, fetid air that kept you from breathing in deeply and made you dream about walking in an open pasture under a blue sky—that was just wrong. Unnatural.

Odell wished he'd brought more than a quickly improvised pine knot torch with him for light. Despite the night's full moon, there was no chance of

him benefiting from its silvery light. The sickly trees grew crookedly together here, and they were thick with moss-draped vines thicker than his bicep. All about him was a tangled, confusing maze of dripping darkness and deadly dank. Unnatural.

Cold muck sucked at his calves, and his bare toes clenched and unclenched in the slippery mud with every step. By the time Odell had walked sixty paces, he was as worn as if he'd worked an entire day in his Pa's corn and cotton fields under the summer sun. Unnatural.

When he'd first entered, the entire swamp had been alive with sound: the foundational burbling slops and sloshes of water backed by the steady deep-throated ratchets of frog calls; the occasional, piercing flutes of owl hoots interwoven with the swirling and swelling string-like buzz of a million insects; and the rip-saw song of the cicada piercing through it all. But as soon as he'd placed his first bare foot into the slimy murk, the entire swamp had fallen silent. Unnatural.

Odell flicked the sweat from the tip of his nose and licked his thin lips. He scrambled up a small, sodden hillock that was grown over with scraggly blackjack oaks and wisteria vines and jammed the end of his torch into the mossy ground. Odell wondered if this is what Jonah felt like, trapped in the cramped, wet belly of a fish.

He quickly dismissed all thoughts of Scripture, knowing that it would do nothing but ruin his calling and quickly fished out the small, stinking candle from his flour sack and set it, upright, upon the ground. The candle had been hard to come by and expensive. The old hag—some said witch—had told him that she'd made it from the mingled fat and blood of a hanged thief and the wick

from a stillborn baby's hair. Odell lit it with the pine knot's smoky flame and wrinkled his nose at the stomach-churning smell. If that didn't summon something up from Ol' Beezlebub's Back Forty, then nothing would.

Odell drew his buck knife across his already wounded hand, re-opening the wound and yanking a hiss from behind his teeth. He dribbled his red onto the black, swampy earth and watched in horror as the soil sucked it in like hardpan earth taking in water.

"Meziker, Meziker, Mez-," he began to chant, calling the creature three times, like the old hag had told him. He never made it to the third call.

Brass colored eyes opened.

Odell began to scream...

† † †

February 21, 1864

"Into the swamp!"

Amid the massive volleys of rifle fire, Cawlyer barely heard the command echoed up and down the lines. He squeezed off another round from his newly issued Enfield, taking a charging Yank solidly in the thigh. He grimaced as he saw the wounded man tumble in pain.

Cawlyer wasn't like many of his Southern brethren. He held no personal hatred for or specific issue with the Union or her soldiers. As such, he could not bring himself to kill them. These were not deer to be taken and consumed, nor were they the foxes that took his chickens – mere pests to be slain. These were men. These men were fathers, brothers, husbands, cousins, sons, and uncles. It was not within his power or permission to take their lives. They, too, believed in

the justness of their cause.

The big farmer-turned-solider wasted no time and turned for the edge of the swamp. As he ran, he tried his best to reload his rifle to make ready for the next shot, which was to be a ploy, and a genius one at that. He'd only caught glimpses of the feint's author: their commander, Colonel Jeffrey Forrest, dark eyes flashing and brown hair streaming behind him as he led both the cavalry and the infantry from atop his spirited roan. Younger brother to the well-known General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the thin-faced, goateed commander was much liked by all the men he led, both regular military and the militia, such as himself.

He dove into the swamp, slipping behind an old red cedar with wide, splayed roots. On reflex, Cawlyer fished a piece of charcoal from the previous night's fire from his overall's breast pocket and marked a large 'X' on the swamp-facing side of the tree. His Granddaddy Cole had taught him to always mark where he entered a swamp, forest, or stand of trees, as it might help save your life someday; he did it now out of sheer habit. No sooner had he done so than the Yank's return fire rippled across the Rebel ranks. Trees splintered, stones cracked, and men screamed and fell, but from what Cawlyer could tell, it wasn't many. It sounded like most of them made it out of the open field and into the relative protection of the swamp.

The thundering hooves of the cavalry, covering the infantry's retreat, came next. Like massive winds thick with the scent of sweat and horseflesh, the warhorses and their riders vanished into the dark, tangled bog. Cawlyer could hear the resulting roar from the Union line, though he was inexperienced and unable to tell if it was one of victory or pursuit. A quick antecedent of another, smaller round of fire—this one more focused on the areas where the cavalry had

vanished—cleared up the rawboned man’s confusion.

“They’re a’comin’!” He bellowed, his shaking hands somehow finishing the reload on his Enfield on their own as he kept his dark eyes trained through the screen of briars and vines that stood between him and hundreds of screaming soldiers in blue.

No sooner had he spoken than the reply came, rippling down the line.

“Return Fire!”

They all knew what the command meant.

Terrified cries erupted all around him, and Cawlyer added his deep voice to the din. He could count on one hand the total number of times he’d raised his voice over the whole of his life, and today held the majority of them all. No sooner had Cawlyer screamed than he let off an erratic shot: helping to provide the illusion of panic fire.

Another Union battle roar—closer this time—split the dry February air, and the army charged...right into Col. Forrest’s trap.

The Rebs turned and churned into the swamp, emitting cries of their own. Some of them did not have to pretend. Even the steady-keeled Cawlyer had to admit that the sight of the Union force bearing down upon him, bristling with steel and flinging death-dealing lead, was somewhat disquieting. The farmer militiaman limbered up the makeshift draw he’d fashioned for his lone improvised weapon—an old, broken-hafted Kaiser blade he’d brought from his barn wall—in case his shiny new rifled-musket failed him.

The deeper they fled into the treacherous bog, the quieter the Rebels became. The motley uniforms blended in with the muted colors, mist, and dappled light of the swamp, and soon the Confederate army simply vanished