

Soldiers Of Our Demise

BOOK ONE

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“Fear has its use but cowardice has none.”

Mahatma Gandhi

“The greatest enemy will hide in the last place you would ever look.”

Julius Caesar

“You can have the best intentions in the world, but if you do nothing then you are nothing.”

Corey Taylor

1

They came from beneath us, like tremors with teeth and claws. Horrible breath and worse voices, if such sounds could be called that. They had faces of children's nightmares and their intentions were no sweeter. I don't know what wise-ass came up with the appellation 'Kigula,' sounded like some made-up shit first time I heard it on the airwaves. They were saying it was Sumerian for 'demon of destruction.' I suppose if one were to give the creatures a name, nothing would be more apt than that. So in waves they rose from the earthly catacombs beneath our cities, more prominent in wooded regions, and had no business of amity. They wielded primitive weapons like magazine-capable crossbows and simplistic firearms, but their will was as relentless as it had been bloodthirsty.

What their weapons didn't finish, their claws and teeth took care of. Worse yet, the Kigula wielding the weapons—soldiers, for lack of a better word—weren't alone in their species. They ranged in size and shape, ferocity and intellect. The upright, bipedal, vaguely humanoid but lanky and eyeless soldiers were the only traditionally sentient of the Kigula. Despite their savage forms, they wielded weapons while others did not; others, I say, though we did eventually find names for them.

Leave it to the U.S. military to label anything for ease of recognition in the field.

In this case, militaries across the world were being belittled by the Kigula's impressive forces. Mankind became a chaotic ocean of panic, confusion, and fear. All at the same time these emotions, these psychological reactions, struck the common human being and drove them in mad circles. Riots amongst themselves, for and against law enforcement, like mice in a maze doped up on PCP experiencing the worst trip imaginable.

It seemed like the United States and Asia were being hit the hardest. Unlike previous conflicts, primarily World War I and II, no other countries came to the aid of another. Every nation was busy fending for itself against these malicious creatures of seemingly no relent.

So, the U.S. military had its hands full, alright.

Local police in certain states eventually merged with the less anarchistic and keener-minded civilians wanting to help, especially those with service records. I shit you not, geezers in wheelchairs were rolling around with M1911's and Thompsons like some sort of funeral parody. The law, and the military, needed all the help they could get.

Nazism had nothing on the Kigula.

Regardless, they weren't infinite. And they sure as hell weren't immortal.

With help from civilians, strategies were formed and information on the creatures was collected. Field reports deluged FOB's like blood from an arterial wound. The forward operating bases were under joint command from USMC and Army alike, with USAF providing support when their bases weren't being blitzed by Kigula. Coast Guard adhered to the west and east coast, while local brass in major U.S. cities suffered critical losses. Hundreds of precincts folded and imploded within the first few months of the Kigula conflict.

Nonetheless, the airwaves bustled.

Kigula this, Kigula that.

ONE

The conflict alone severely stunted economic growth when the creatures first emerged in 1946. World War II had already struck a deep chord in America and its people, then this.

When the Kigula's initial waves of soldiers swept our nation's homefront, they did so without reluctance or mercy. These thousands of deaths in the first few weeks were the quickest and least painful, since their firearms acted as a frontline to their assault. Bottlecap-sized, and shaped, ammunition of heated zinc riddled the bodies of helpless people worldwide. Impact from a single cap, as they became known, was enough to pass through the torso of an adult man from twenty yards away. And their weapons, these carbines, held forty per magazine.

It was a fucking massacre.

I wish that my mother and father had died so quick and painlessly, although that statement in itself is invalid. Even so, the memory in its rawest form has branded a tombstone into my retention. Neither tobacco nor booze has managed to sear it away, but every Kigula I kill drops a rose or two on that gravesite. I guess that's some form of comfort I should be thankful for; also, to know that they aren't alive in this hellhole.

Maybe that's a bit harsh, but...

I look around me and spit for the sake of spitting. The taste on my lips writhes its way into my mouth, past the gates of my teeth and onto my tongue. Hello bile, my old friend, I've come to talk with you again—and so the rancid stench works into my throat. Makes my stomach turn, plays a game of pins-and-needles with my trachea, my sinuses, my every goddamn sense. And not the good kind of prickly feeling, either.

The good kind...yeah, not much of that anymore.

The smells of what the Kigula have managed to reduce our civilization to remind us of who we are as people. Animals, most of us, boorish and uncouth. Not all, mind you, but the lot of us suffer from these poor 'qualities.'

Now there's a paradox for you.

Regardless, filth may cake every surface and smoke-raked air might decay both the lungs and eyes, but many of us still fight for the better side of things. At least to sustain the memory of such a life, when the world wasn't so despicable. Belly-up and eviscerated, only to play with its own entrails.

I know, I'm a cynic. I'd call myself a realist, but who isn't these days? And let's be honest—there is little to look forward to around here. It used to be that a visit to the brothel could temporarily cure your melancholy, but now even those have become few and far between. Most dames are concerning themselves with their own safety and the security of their families, should they have any—left—to worry about a few bucks pleasuring some boor.

If you aren't a Lawman or Enforcer these days, you're a boor—an unruly civilian typically drunk all the time or dying of starvation. Often both, not to mention the thieves and occasional posses of reckless assholes thinking they can rule the streets.

Yeah, the 'war' with the Kigula is over.

It 'ended' two years ago, in 1951. Four consecutive *years* of constant Kigula assault brought humanity to its knees. And despite this, we still fought back with everything we had. So many died taking out their strongholds and rendering them to nothing but shuffling vermin. The Kigula carbine became a thing of the recent past, a relic of sorts, as they resorted to their more primitive and brutish forms of hostility to defend themselves. Many went berserk without direction from their sentient 'superiors,' and their caste of authority was reduced to a game of Parkinson's Janga.

In spite of this, the Kigula remain a serious threat today. It's 1953, early September with a dash of summer humidity, and most of the world is living in a new era of Depression. While the production of practically anything from cigarettes to cars has been severely crippled by the Kigula conflict of '48, upper class citizens are still a plague of society. They're snobbier than ever before, typically with high military ties, affording Cuban cigars and MG TC Roadsters. You seldom see them outside of their

ONE

big-city territories, where Kigula presence has just about evaporated, and are so well-protected that even vagrants cannot penetrate their defenses.

Then there are cities like Rockford, Illinois.

Welcome home, Bartholomew Sharpe, it said to me as I returned in 1951, following the Kigulan closure. I was leaving my hometown in the rearview when I came back to Rockford, where I'd originally moved to live on my own in July of 1944. My parents remained where I'd been born and raised in Springfield, Illinois. Two years later the Kigula rose, and I had returned to Springfield in hopes of helping protect my parents, especially since my father was a WWI veteran with a bum leg. Two years under the Kigulan boot we survived.

Two godforsaken years as a Lawman.

Following the Kigulan conflict, civilians serious about helping local brass enlisted as Lawmen. Nothing fancy, just a star patch and basic uniform, complete with service revolver and on certain occasions heavier equipment.

Early 1948 we were facing denser waves of the enemy. And so Lawmen were backed by Enforcers, typically healthy war vets and current soldiers of the USMC and Army given better hardware for tougher responsibilities. Though fewer than Lawmen, Enforcers became the key force in small cities fending off the Kigulan threat, although many of them suffered haughty power-trips that led to a lot of losses amid their ranks.

I won't unfurl my laundry list of complaints about human nature and power-hungry assholes, but I will say that they're responsible for a lot of civilians' deaths.

The guilt of not being there when a batch of Kigula raided our shelter remains mine to carry, however. I had been returning from a USAF food drop two miles away, the nearest in the area, with one other Lawman from our shelter. We heard the air raid sirens, that godforsaken sound, minutes from the district we called home.

So much blood. Not a single breath left to breathe when we arrived.

What few Kigula didn't manage to escape were equally butchered by the other Lawman and myself. He swallowed the barrel of his revolver two weeks later, dying in a puddle of his own brains and two bottles' worth of cheap Whiskey. I walked down that road several times myself throughout the following month, but eventually returned to Rockford with a backpack and unstitched star patch.

I resigned as a Lawman, enlisted as an Enforcer.

Welcome back, Bartholomew, Rockford repeated to me with a putrid grin of rotting teeth and disease-ridden gums. Welcome back!

Fuck you, Rockford, I said with an elevated middle finger and lowered spirit. *Call me Barry*.

Few people took my seriously with that name, until I wafted back my coat and fingered the trigger. M1911 or Thompson, both beckoned the same stammering reaction. I've even gotten a few pissed trousers, though usually from drunkards.

The shitty thing about small cities like Rockford these days is that the Kigula are only the icing on the proverbial cake. The layers beneath their grim presence are teeming with arrogant thieves and miscreants, the vermin of our society, belittled to sentient cockroaches.

Most of them litter the streets at night like tumbleweed conventions but during the day they hibernate, or at least pretend to. With fewer and fewer active streetwalkers, the night belongs to aimless civvies with nothing better to do than adhere to their bottom-feeding stereotypes.

Unfortunately, as an Enforcer, I'm encouraged to do the same—walk these streets, occupy the congested sidewalks and alleys, keeping a keen eye out for trouble.

Human and Kigulan alike.

Nowadays the Kigula try to be as surreptitious as us Enforcers. Lawmen are more overt, often drawing attention to themselves, usually out of inadvertence but nonetheless helping

ONE

Enforcers with reduced heat. We blend in the best we can, like remora in shark-infested waters, seeking out said predators.

As aforementioned, the Kigula aren't simplified to their soldier ranks. While these humanoid creatures—typically between six and seven feet tall—are the only kind disguisable in human clothing, which some occasionally do, they aren't entirely alone. During the Kigulan conflict, the humanoids wielded weapons while their more animalistic kin fought with greater barbarism. Since creativity went out the window after the Kigula were named as a species, field reports were being stamped with laughable nicknames.

'Lumberjack' was the name they called the Kigula brutes, basically humanoid but not like their soldier brethren. These guys—not PC, I know, since they're sexless—are huge, like linebackers on steroids. Eight to nine feet tall with gargantuan shoulders and practically no neck, their hide thick and damn near bulletproof, textured like bare musculature. The humanoid Kigula, Lumberjacks included, are a dark gray color with some glistening contours. Lumberjacks have pinkish streaks in the crevasses of their muscled skin as well as around the mouth and eyes. With a fairly humanoid mouth, unlike the soldiers, they wouldn't be too terrifying if it weren't for their size and eyes. The strength of five bodybuilders is one thing in itself, but those eyes—a configuration of four, two below each brow, side-by-side and the size of golf balls. They are a dense gray, slightly darker than their skin, but motionless like a shark's. Their teeth could be compared to a human's incisors, only ten times bigger and sharper-edged.

Ever seen something lobotomize a grown man with its incisors? Probably not. During the Kigulan conflict, you would have. The Lumberjacks were set loose like maniacs on the Kigulan frontline, clawed fists cracking skulls and crashing through concrete wherever they roamed. It usually took explosives to neutralize them, or a whole lot of ammunition.

Fortunately they weren't a very common sighting.

Prowlers, on the other hand, were and are probably the most feared breed of Kigula to the human soul. They have the top-heavy physique of a bulldog with broad shoulders and a tapered abdomen, except the size of a Ford Tudor. Spines jut from its shoulders and hocked joints, although its claws are smaller and curled the way a gorilla would walk. Despite this they run fast and pounce harder, often using their blunt skulls to ram doors or vehicles with devastating effects. What their sheer size and brute strength didn't finish, their nasty jaws would take care of.

A lighter gray with ruddy blemishes and flesh-colored glands exposed along its wide neck, Prowlers share enough similarities with the other Kigula to be considered the same species. Whatever the creatures' origins are, most people have stopped trying to figure it out and just focus on killing them.

Then we can sit down and write the history books.

With Prowlers acting as the soldiers' attack dogs, most of the ravaging of civilians took place under their jaws. They can take a lot of damage before keeling over, although the exposed glands along their neck have been noted as key weaknesses.

Raptors, on the other hand, have puzzled both civilian and military intelligence since their introduction. The creatures have become most rare since the Kigulan conflict faded in '51, but they had been a steady threat from 1947 to '49. As odd as it was, they were nowhere to be seen during the first year of conflict, as if still hibernating.

What triggered the Kigula to rise and unleash hell upon humanity is among the many other empty question marks surviving today.

Regardless, the Raptors were probably the most simple and obviously-named Kigulan breed. Their underbelly, head, arms and legs are all a light brownish-gray, but their backs and long stiff tails possess the contrast of Kigulan skin. Dark gray, like weathered steel, sometimes with off-white markings. They bear the same avian shape and form of the extinct *Oviraptor philoceratops*, with some prominent differences. Obviously their

ONE

skin shares a similar toughness to their kin, although the least durable. They have protruding sternums and two sets of arms that tuck closely to their chests whenever they aren't attacking. These arms are lean and two-clawed, although it is only their fingers that could be seen as claws—long, stiff digits with curved tips.

A rather intriguing yet disturbing sight.

They look more like mutations than the other Kigula, if it were to make any sense. And yet their skulls originally presented man with the most fear.

A strong underbite with fierce looking canines that overlapped their upper 'lip,' and smaller but equally sharp fangs along the top jaw. Their visual configuration might baffle some to this day, since the eyes—small green beads with tiny black pupils—array the length of their bottom jaws, on both sides. Six per side, giving them extraordinary sight and earholes in a similar configuration along the sides of their neck.

The only Kigula with nasal cavities are Prowlers, and they're known for their incredible olfactory senses. Their ears are tiny holes in the sides of their head, with green black-pupil eyes like the Raptor's, only bigger and one per brow.

Unlike the other creatures, the Kigula soldiers have featureless faces with high foreheads. Half of the front of their skulls are jaws, lined with multiple rows of teeth similar to that of a tiger shark's, and pinkish gums exposed by a lipless mouth. Despite this obvious lack of eyes, they function perfectly well with ear slits in the backs of their heads and what we've learned are infrared sensors in their cheeks. These ribbed contours are barely visible when facing the creature head-on, but can detect heat signatures up to fifty yards away.

A very hot world, indeed.

The Kigula as a whole seemed hardly fazed under the Earth's seasons. Harsh winters came and sweltering summers, still they fought just as hard. Whenever the soldiers withdrew, Prowlers and Lumberjacks advanced. Raptors took to the field with bounding strides and cheetah speed out in the open; unlike

Prowlers, they typically attacked to maim, not kill. They are seen as the most animalistic of the species, feral creatures somehow surviving beneath the earth all this time and now bent on enjoying themselves in the open.

Reproductively, as much as the thought makes knots of my stomach, I have to say...is quite a terrible miracle. The humanoid Kigula are sexless, which suggests that the creatures are prone to imminent extinction. Prowlers, on the other hand, are hermaphroditic and grow at an alarming rate. Raptors are quite the opposite; they have males and females, with eggless offspring that take months to reach adulthood whereas Prowlers take mere weeks with enough food.

In other words, human flesh.

Although domestic and wild animals alike have become practically extinct so far as city-goers are concerned. The Kigula are indiscriminate in their warfare, killing anything and everything that doesn't share their same blood.

How they communicate so well is beyond me, even when I'm told that it's through a series of squawks. Then again, look at us when man first invented the wheel.

Due to the creatures' physical variables amid themselves, it's been theorized that they don't all belong to the same species. Perhaps they are an ancient race of a mixed bag, exiled to the catacombs beneath our earth's surface, somehow living there, with technology all their own. Or perhaps they are aliens, somehow injected into the planet's foundation, if not so long ago.

Perhaps they are what killed off the dinosaurs?

The theories are endless, and make my head hurt the more I think about them. So, I try not to think on the matter. I have enough on my plate as is.

And I haven't even mentioned their digestive systems.

But that's enough talk. The streets of Rockford suffice when it comes to rankness in the air and that thick humidity that isn't just heat from the sewers. Whirling tobacco smoke, steam

ONE

from spilt innards, inebriated breath, disease-ridden genitalia, or the curling wisps from a freshly fired gun.

Crime in cities like this are like water in a sink.

It's so common that it's natural to the area, and therefore isn't necessarily even seen as illegal. As if we really need to discuss or defend the fact that taking another's life is immoral. Although injustice isn't exactly a term I can attack, either; Enforcers these days are seen as their own law, and many remain as much a threat to ordinary civilians as the Kigula themselves.

Fortunately I am not among them.

I've had my mean streaks, sure, and my moments of indifference toward my fellow man. But all within the realms of reason. You treat a civilian with disrespect where it isn't warranted, and I'll draw my M1911's. One per hand, if need be, eight-round magazine with a .45 ACP punch. Pearl grips on both, one a stainless steel finish and the other matte black.

Enforcers are paid at the end of every week, in cash, and it's like a bad joke with no punchline. Knowing that Lawmen get even worse doesn't make me feel any better, afterall I'd been one not so long ago.

So, naturally, most Enforcers take on second jobs. Loan sharking. Larceny. Pimping. Pickpocket management. A cut here and a cut there, no harm done.

Bullshit.

I see these people and think to myself, *you don't deserve that badge*. Yeah, Enforcers get an actual aluminum badge while Lawmen get patches. A twisted world, indeed. Enforcers can choose to wear theirs however they see fit—obviously, covertness is encouraged for the highest efficacy. But, naturally, there are those high on their pedestals of arrogance that adhere them to the breasts of their coats or on beaded chains around their neck, like a crucifix pendant.

I keep mine deeply pocketed.

Hell, my M1911's are more overt than my badge. And they're all the more effective, too. A pair of M1911 Nobilities, one per holster in my X-harness torso rig. Good for quick-

drawing from the side, hovering by my ribs. I only have one weapon hipped, a service revolver from my Lawman days, because I don't believe in overkill. It's an SI Colt Commando .38 Special, not as unique as its cartridge suggests, not these days at least.

I usually wield it against petty thieves and two-man 'posses.' Any higher manpower and a Nobility is drawn, both if I feel it's necessary or worth the intimidation. If it's a Kigulan issue, both come out if not my Thompson. Illegal carriers tote theirs around in beat-up violin cases, as if they're hiding anything.

Nobody fucking plays music anymore these days.

Not in cities like this, unless it's a vagrant belting out a painful jazz experience. Although sometimes I'll even pay for that. A lot better than the eldritch silence that plagues this city most nights, whenever there isn't screaming in the distance or a clatter of curt gunfire.

Enforcers' attire is typically the same, although quality varies. I spend most of my cash on equipment beyond the Enforcer standard, chipping in a few bucks for better threads while most of the guys do the opposite. Ultimately it's what you're carrying in your hands and your eye that intimidates a boor rather than what's on your back.

Idiots, the lot of them.

Don't get me wrong, I'm thankful for what few 'good guys' still exist these days. Lawmen and Enforcers with kind hearts, sometimes families back home or at the local cemetery. Or even those that weren't able to bury anything.

They do their best to adhere to the law.

Serve justice, even when it means doing things that normal coppers would never do.

But these aren't normal times.

And the Kigula aren't a normal enemy.

"Spare some change, man?" some vagrant drunk off his ass begs me as I pass him by. His rump is buried in the sidewalk and he waves his decrepit hat at me. I stroll as if carried by fog,

ONE

not wind, because I move with a lumbering gait both graceful and clumsy. The perfect combination to fit in without fading in. I want to float through, not sink or swim.

The man's voice becomes a wisp of tobacco-violated breath over my shoulder as I keep walking. I barely lift my chin. The upper half of my pale face is veiled in the shadow cast by my hat, a high crown pinched fedora. The beaver felt is comfortable on my forehead and well-greased scalp. I try to maintain some level of respectable fashion without standing out like a sore thumb or Al Capone wannabe.

My wool Melton longcoat is as black as the asphalt road to my left, quilted in shadows whenever a rickety car doesn't drive by. Vehicular traffic at this time of night is rare; it's the pedestrian coagulation of the sidewalks that bustles under the moonless sky. I have to jostle through a crowd of them here and there, especially where the occasional streetwalker flaunts her damaged goods for equally unstable men. The longcoat hovers above the sidewalk with but a foot's worth of clearance; it's lengthy enough to sufficiently hide my Thompson sub-machinegun. It's on a shoulder sling and drapes down my left side like a third arm. A ten-inch-barrel variant of the Thompson M1D1, fifty-round Type C drum magazine locked 'n' loaded.

I hope I don't have to use it tonight.

Although the other part of me hopes otherwise.

Life here can get a damn bit of boring sometimes. It's hell enough to live like this, faring day in and night out like a curse on the human race. I'm treated like a necessary tapeworm on the inside of mankind's gut. As if there were such a thing, a benign tumor with good incentives.

Most boors treat us like soldier rejects, worthless vets of either WWII or being on the force before the Kigula showed their faces and bore their teeth.

As if *we're* the enemy.

I shake my head at the thought and spit for the sake of spitting onto the curb. It misses a drunkard's shoeless wool-socked feet and he waves a middle finger at me, expletives

drooling from his mouth. I shake my head again—it's an automatic reaction to everything around me. Disgust, disappointment, displeasure.

Every now and then I see a pretty face amid the crowd, usually being harassed if not sheltered by her significant other or family member, often disguised as a man. At least for the walk to the store, and back home.

Unless you're an Enforcer in these kinds of pigsty cities, you live at a shelter. A home for the recently homeless, in other words mostly anybody except the pre-conflict vagrants, who keep to the sidewalks and alleys. Or condemned buildings where they squat, which has unfortunately become half of Rockford. Only families or validated pairs are allowed in shelters, where mediocre food is served from collected military air-drops when the stores run low. If you aren't blood related or legally married, you better find a cardboard box or dumpster to live in.

Enforcers, with what little extra they're paid, get actual homes if they so choose. Those few Enforcers with families typically can't afford homes unless they live on the bare minimum, limiting their use of utilities. The more Enforcers and Lawmen to a shelter, the better treatment they get—more food of a slightly higher quality, better clothes and bedding.

The lone wolves of the Enforcer ranks, such as myself, get cottages or apartment rooms. I have the latter, since I cannot afford the prior because I don't have an illegal side-job. I also don't steal from anyone I happen to kill; not for myself, that is. I raid their bodies if I kill them in a secluded area, then apportion the funds to different shelters, or sometimes the FOB if I suspect the superiors are in a good mood, they might even award me. It isn't much profit, but it's better than giving to a beggar who'll spend it on booze or worse.

Nonetheless, the apartment room is fine.

It suffices, which is a shit thing to say since I'm practically never there. I'm on-duty at night, sleep during the day. Most Enforcers work that way, but not all. The smart ones

ONE

do the opposite, knowing their chances of survival in broad daylight are far greater.

What? I never said I was a sage.

“Five dollars, man, I’ll give you *five* bills for a leg!”

The voice is coherent but ragged from more things than age. I spot a man in his fifties begging a pair of guys in dilapidated longcoats and elliptical fedoras at the mouth of an apartment driveway. As I near, the apartment building itself becomes clearer—abandoned, chalk graffiti-plastered, boarded-up windows and squatters on the stoop.

The man waves five George Washington’s at the pair’s faces, the bills previously rumpled and presently stained. Nonetheless valid, but the pair of young men were intent on twisting this guy’s arm to get the most out of him.

What are they selling, though?

“It’s a rather *meaty* leg, mister,” says one of the boys, and I call them that as I near because I realize they’re in their twenties. I’m thirty-two myself, no veteran but no damn fool, either.

“Eight bucks and we’ll call it even,” says the other boy.

“B-But I...I-I don’t *have* that k-kind o’ money. Ya hear m-m-me? I...I...”

The older man is barely wearing any clothes at all. They’re in shreds, and his lips curtain with inebriated drool. He has a distant kindness to his eyes, vague and worn out, like a rusted and seatless Raleigh.

A nearby streetlamp casts a yellowish glow down upon them, and they stand out more and more as the shouting heightens. I approach with a redefined gait, bare hands at my sides, ready to draw if need be. My black wingtips make a prominent click-clacking sound on the sidewalk as I fortify my stride, drawing the boys’ eyes, although the older man has a slower response time.

“This is none o’ yer business, now, mister,” says the nearest boy, raising a black gloved palm. The other one slowly

reaches behind him, beneath the free-flowing longcoat, draped in shadows at the edge of the lamp's glow.

"It'll *become* my business if your partner doesn't show me his hands," I say in as firm a voice as I can muster. No problem there.

"Oh, I'll show you my hand, asshole," says the other boy, clearly the older and yet brasher one among them.

"Dammit, Clyde, don't!" says his younger friend. Or are they brothers? A lot of resemblance on that nose and those light blue eyes.

"Yeah, Clyde, don't test me." Despite my words, I stand still with hands at my sides, not even near the lolling hems of my longcoat. I take a step further, just enough to douse my body in the glow of the lamplight.

Clyde pauses as he and his cohort wash their gazes over me. The old man takes a staggering step back, stammering under his breath.

My attire is a little sharper than most 'mister assholes' these boys are used to running into out here at night. Under my black six-button wool vest is a white Brookway collar shirt and burgundy necktie, just the top half visible. Black wool pinstripe pants below that, a bit faded but worth their wear all the same. My black wingtips don't shimmer in the light, but they and my high crown pinched fedora are about as luxurious as I can afford to be.

That is, when I'm spending so much on my arsenal.

From this quick scrutiny and perhaps a glimpse of glinting M1911 Nobility they figure I might as well be an Enforcer, because they suddenly book off down the sidewalk. In the opposite direction they flee, pushing past bystanders that pay them little attention. Their longcoats tail them closely, vanishing with their bodies into the night.

I sigh and step out of the streetlamp's glow to approach the old man. Although a bit apprehensive himself, he's either too drunk or too clumsy to hit the road. He backs into the rear bumper of a 1940 Hudson, his trembling arthritic fingers

ONE

clutching the trunk. His jaw chatters briefly as he searches for words, a look of both anger and relief in his ambivalent eyes.

“Mind me asking just what the hell you were trying to buy off those guys?” I ask him with a wave of my hand.

He starts stammering some word that begins with an ‘r.’ Then an ‘a,’ and I know what he’s getting at. I sigh and shake my head, then brandish the Enforcer badge from an inside pocket to the longcoat.

He takes a deep breath and tries to find his voice.

“That’s enough,” I say, and return the badge to its hiding place. “Just tell me where they were keeping it.”

The man’s eyes widen and his head tilts like a dog.

“The Raptor leg,” I sigh. “C’mon, they gotta be halfway there by now.”

He heatedly shakes his head and starts pointing at something behind me, over my shoulder. I pirouette to take in the sight of the abandoned apartment building, a tower of brick and wood. Most of the windows are either barred or boarded up, the front entrance slatted with two-by-fours. I nod to myself and turn to see the man scrambling out into the street.

“Goddammit,” I mumble and head after him.

Flashlights illuminate the center of the road, washing up my left side and blinding me temporarily. A horn blares and some asshole shouts out of the window to his Tudor. It swerves around me and continues down the street. Through fading light spots I glimpse the man reach the other side of the four-lane road, jostling through a crowd to barge into a low-end convenience store.

Yeah, go spend your five bucks on booze instead.

I straighten out my longcoat with a jerk of my arms and return to the sidewalk. I deflect the bitter stares of boors surrounding me as I approach the apartment, gutting the throng and striding up the driveway. After about ten feet of uneven asphalt my soles crunch on gravel and I’m within a few strides of the concrete stoop.

So he said, more or less, that the two guys trying to sell him a Raptor leg ripe for consumption at \$8 a pop were storing it here. I guess the basement, or the roof. One of these two extremes, to keep out of reach of the squatters. Places like these, unfortunately, are popular for Kigula soldiers to lurk, with popped-collar longcoats and lowered fedoras. In the shadows they needn't worry about their feet or the gleam of teeth to be spotted by a passerby. No, in places like these they're a chameleon to the grimy abyss.

And it is this same abyss which I am used to.

Now I'm returning to it, a deeper layer of the hell-hole Rockford has become.

2

Since I made the two gangster-wannabes scamper off into the night, the squatters on the stoop of the apartment had likewise fled. Perhaps they went inside, or just around the corner? Regardless, they aren't anywhere in sight but their residual stench is. One of them had defecated on the corner of the stoop itself, with sloppy aim. Half of it now rolls off the edge like a partially melted brownie. My nose wrinkles in disgust as the slimy fetor stifles my senses. It's an olfactory rape that I'm used to but could never adjust without discomfort.

The single doorway set before me has been replaced by eight two-by-fours nailed to the jambs in horizontal positions. They're fairly straight, except for the one that cuts obliquely across them, as if making the barricade any sounder.

I could whip out the Thompson and mow through it but I'd rather not announce my presence. There is an opening beneath the last board nearest the threshold, but only a child or teenager could fit; certainly not me, especially with my armaments.

A ragged sigh escapes my lips. I look around.

There are a pair of cellar doors about ten feet to the right of the stoop, only visible from up here. They are mostly shrouded by underbrush from surrounding trees; there is this overgrown problem in a lot of cities across the world. Neglect

from the conflict, and even afterwards, including some climatic changes theorized to have been caused by the Kigula's emergence.

I nod to myself and depart from the stoop, hasty feet down the steps, then circle around. I dip the brim of my hat as I shuffle through the brush and hunker down in front of the cellar doors. They're practically flush with the ground, at a slight angle, faded barn-red paint with steel handles. To my surprise there aren't any locks on it. Although, those boys were no professionals, and unless their business had Enforcer ties then such security measures wouldn't cross their minds.

I give them a tug and they come open with groaning hinges. The Cutts compensator on my Thompson knocks against the steel doorframe as I lean in, causing a small ringing sound. It echoes briefly in the basement, probably—hopefully—no more than a faint clang. I hold my breath as I ease the doors into a gaping position and clamber through. The abyss of the murky basement swallows me up as I descend with careful footing, soles finding level concrete with ease. I stand up once clear of the entrance, and am thankful for a high ceiling. The apartment is a good three stories high, with a subterranean basement.

Colder than above, especially in September and without any kind of heat management.

Perfect for the storage of perishables.

Primarily, in this case, Raptor limbs. Prowler meat has become rarer and thus pricier a consumable, but neither of the humanoids have ever been looked upon as edible. Some nutcases have led themselves to believe that eating a Kigula's brain or heart gives them superhuman strength, but .45 cartridges tend to immediately disprove that.

This won't be the first stash of Kigula flesh kept by civilians I've crashed in Rockford, but hopefully it would be close to the last.

I've had me a bite or two in the past. Tastes like chicken? Yeah, if the chicken was rabid and then died to rot away in a dumpster for two days.

T W O

Stuff is downright repulsive. How anyone can eat it without a hitch is beyond me, although it is known for its incredible satiation. Just a couple of sizable bites could last a grown man twenty-four hours. He'd have the shits afterward, but it was better than starving.

This is how the vagrants see it, at least.

Good for them, but bad for business—that is, the well-being of civilian life. Because anywhere there is Kigula flesh, no matter how contained it is, it will attract the living kind.

Sooner or later.

And I cannot have that.

I look around, immediately discontent about the lighting situation down here. Or lack thereof. Too many dense shadows, seemingly twisting about and clinging to the walls, too many supportive concrete pillars with chalked graffiti. Too many distractions to the eye, and the stench here is ruthless. Despite this, I don't smell any Kigula—dead or alive, they have a peculiar reek to them—suggesting to me that their stash is on the roof.

All the harder to reach.

Maybe I have borrowed time since the two kids probably assumed I went after them and they're busy trying to lose said tail. Or, they've since fled and are circling around to return here. Maybe even relocate their stash, if it's small enough to move. Who knows in a case like this? The variables are infinite, not unlike the threats, which are currently making me a little edgy.

Now I just need to find the stairs, and make the climb.

I reach into the bowels of my longcoat and draw a small flashlight in my left fist, then unholster my matte black M1911 Nobility. The pearl grip is smooth against my callused palm and fingers, but the front and back are textured for purchase. I thumb off the safety and press the base of my right hand on top of my left wrist. The barrel is parallel with the flashlight, which now sweeps the interior of the basement.

Shadows scatter, running from themselves.

I see nothing of any threat, except for a few emaciated

and half-naked squatters that suddenly withdraw into the corners. Then one of them turns his back, and I can see his studded spine pressing against taut pale skin, bare feet smacking the cold concrete floor. He scurries and whimpers until he collides with a door, pushing it open and leaving echoes of his footfalls for the basement. The door he'd barged through is heavy and on a sluggish pneumatic pump, so it closes slowly.

I advance, sweeping my flashlight and keeping the other harmless squatters at bay, then lay my right shoulder into the door. I push it open and bend my knees, pitching the flashlight's beam upward. It guts the stairwell, which is home to fading footfalls from the squatter that now gets off at the second floor. Another door opens and closes, this one heavier and faster, with a raucous slam.

"Dammit," I mutter under my breath, and leave behind the basement. I begin my cautious but avid ascent up the concrete stairs. Chalk graffiti splashes the wall every now and then, obscenities and poor anatomical representations from shaky hands. Kigula glyphs here and there, usually coupled with expletives.

However the creatures communicate is beyond our understanding, much less their form of hierarchy. Do they speak, write, etcetera.

More to the point, who the fuck cares?

Show me its face and I'll show the business end of my Nobility or Thompson.

Kigula all bleed the same blood, this much is for sure. It's a viscous ruddy substance—not quite the same hue or consistency as a human's, closer to black. And the smell is just awful.

Men, on the other hand...

I've killed some terrible men in my days as an Enforcer. Cannibals, rapists, murderers, one in the same. Monsters, more or less, with few dissimilarities from the Kigula.

Makes living like this a little tougher.

A sudden clamor of muttering catches my ear as I reach

T W O

the second floor, passing the first's exit from the stairwell without a second glance. I plant my back to the wall left of the doorway, which is wedged ajar by a single brick. I spot sputtering light through the crack between the jamb and door, probably just enough so that I can holster my flashlight. I deactivate and pocket it, one-handing the Nobility while my ears tune in to the growing voices. Must be that squatter is raising quite a ruckus in lieu of my interloping.

As if they own the place.

Though they might as well these days, I'm not about to leave on that principle alone. I don't like shooting vagrants, but if they're armed then I have no choice. Usually I'll just kneecap them or shoot the weapon out of their hands, rendering them a future cripple. Better than the alternative, although others would argue just the opposite.

That death is better than living in this place.

Sometimes I'd have to agree, but as an Enforcer and believer of human subsistence, I can't succumb to that notion.

Hell, most Enforcers would empty their guns into anyone who so much as looked at them wrong, but then again I'm not 'most enforcers.'

My lips begin to part so that I may give them a warning, and then the voices fall silent all of a sudden. My lips seal and my breath cuts off. I wait, I listen, I anticipate.

Rarely do vagrants wield weapons, let alone use them without direct provocation, but gunfire is gunfire. It batters the door to my left with unrelenting persistence, but I'm thankful for its thick metallic composition. The wall is white-painted brick on this side, probably drywall on the other. I hear bullets smacking into it, chipping through the worn layers.

The stainless steel Nobility graces my other palm.

I disarm the safety and raise both up to either side of my face. I nod, as if agreeing with their voices like shoulder angels—or devils—and take a deep breath. The gunfire beyond the door on the second floor pauses, perhaps incorporeally agreeing with my plan. I slip my foot into the crack of the

doorway and kick it open, swirling through the gap with elbows locked and pistols extended. Under the brim of my fedora and down a poorly-lit hallway I spot three figures—

And they aren't vagrants or squatters.

Their attire reminds me of the young men out on the street moments earlier, whose sale I interrupted. Their faces are doused in shadows, but their reloading weapons are not. One holds a standard M1911, the other two Thompson M1D1's. Unlike myself, they carry stick magazines, not drums. So instead of fifty, they're limited to thirty rounds.

Still, they reload faster.

My scrutiny lasts but a couple of transient seconds. The M1911 wielder reloads first, but never gets a shot off. My Nobilities bark in the stillness of the decrepit hallway, barely illuminated by lamps set up every ten feet against the walls. Two precise shots take out both of the man's hands, and his pistol hits the floor. He screams shrilly, dropping to his knees as blood engulfs both hands. One of the others throws his wounded cohort a panicked look, interrupting his reloading process. I blow out his left kneecap, and after he's fallen I hit him in the shoulder with another shot. The third guy has finished reloading but is retreating. I fire at him, no longer with the intent to injure.

He slips through an empty doorway behind him, vanishing into a room. I look behind me and spot a few other doors, including one entrance with nothing in it. Doors are often stolen from their frames in abandoned buildings to be salvaged as barriers in someone's own home, or be improvised as something else for vagrants.

In this case, cover is cover.

I backpedal and swing myself into a room, spotting a bare bed frame and disemboweled dresser opposite it. No clothes remain, just broken drawers. There is dried blood on the wall above the headboard, but hardly any stench fills the room. It belongs to a human, or once did, not that it matters now.

In the quietude of the building I hear crunching drywall and heavy breathing, perhaps even heated murmuring. Then I

T W O

swivel to stare at the wall left of the dresser, studying cracks that spread across its surface. The wall is weak there. I've been to places like this before; I picture the other walls separating the next few rooms weakened to the point of gaping holes. I then picture the survivor of the three gunmen—that is, the unwounded one—charging this wall through the holes of the others.

My Nobilities raise, fingers on respective triggers.

The wall is perforated by gunfire from the other side, .45-caliber rounds slugging it to pieces. Several penetrate and sear the air around me. I back up, watching my step around the drawers, and begin firing after two heartbeats. The wall burst into this room, giving way to the crazed man behind it. He emerges firing the Thompson wildly, holding the foregrip but not bothering to aim. Drywall dust hazes his face and he screams in a frenzy.

I drop him with a few shots to his chest.

Blood mists the air briefly, mixing with the dust.

His body falls in a heap, Thompson too. I shake my head and jerk my shoulders, shaking any dust off the longcoat. I then step forward to wave through the rest of the falling particles, and stoop to investigate.

The man can't be a day older than twenty-five.

I shake my head and holster one of my pistols, then check for credentials. Nothing, except a beat-up wallet and a full billfold. I count the cash, totaling \$117. I whistle under my breath, pocket it, and return to the hallway outside. The other two are in the middle of trying to get up, the disarmed one on the left managing to just as I show my face again. He whimpers and dives into a room, but clearly I'm in no hurry or fit of anger.

I stop to tower over the other fellow, Nobility at my right side. I click my tongue and squat to look down at him, more closely now.

Light greets the both of ours faces.

He's pale, skinny-nosed, hazel-eyed, and thin-lipped. His fedora had come off and now I stare into a messy head of poorly

parted fawn hair.

“Why’d you shoot?” I ask, voice low. “Huh? Why’d you shoot at a stranger?”

“You’s trespassing,” he said, his voice broken.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t see ya name on it. Now, tell me this—where’s your stash?”

“Fuck you, pig.” The boy, no older than twenty, spits on my wingtips. I sigh and shake my head, then stand up. I wipe my shoe on his longcoat, the wool taking most of the saliva off. He scowls and starts to say something else, grimacing from the pain of a shattered kneecap, then I kick him with the heel of my shoe. He goes out cold, liable to wake up after a solid half-hour siesta. I police his body, finding a measly fifty-five bucks in a billfold. Then I stand and make my way into the room where an essentially handless young man has tried to flee, or hide.

I enter with less vigilance than I should’ve, and nearly get my head blown off. It isn’t the handless guy, but the vagrant. He’s wielding a Colt Commando, the muzzle smoking. Both hands are on it and he doesn’t look too happy to be brandishing it, limbs trembling and teeth—what few remain—chattering. Down and to his left cowers the guy whose hands I’d previously shot, bleeding onto the tattered comforter of a bed, behind which he hides.

Fortunately the vagrant can’t shoot worth shit.

The .38 round lodged into the door jamb behind me. I slowly enter, pistol since raised, a Mexican standoff of sorts. I shake my head and using my empty hand gesture him to drop the weapon.

Then I use my voice.

“C’mon, now, you don’t want this. Lower the gun, at least, if you’re not gonna drop it.”

“Why!?” exclaims the young man behind the bed. “So you can kill us too?”

“I only killed one of your buddies, mister. He damn near tore through me with that Tommy gun o’ his. The other, though, I only took out his knee. And you, your hands. Now...I’d say

T W O

that's a damn fair trade, considering how you nearly shredded me for no reason at all."

"No reason?" the guy chuckles, a look of disbelief paling his face. "You're an Enforcer, ain't ya? Come here to wipe us out and take the profit for yourself."

"I'm not *that* kind of Enforcer," I sigh. "If I was, I'd have come in here guns blazing. I'd have been using *my* Tommy gun this whole time." I tilt my body to expose part of the draping Thompson under my longcoat, and the kid's eyes light up. My voice solidifies. "So why don't you tell me where I can find your stash, and I won't kill ya."

Since the Kigula conflict, arrests are no longer made.

We just can't spare the hassle, or space.

So killing is what it comes down to. Wonderful world.

"I have yer word?" the kid says, his voice weaker with every passing second.

"You do. If you can just get butterfingers here to drop the revolver."

The kid nods, swallows, and tells the vagrant to toss the piece onto the bed. He does so without hesitation, then begins unleashing a tirade upon the kid. On how he's grown sick of being used by little assholes like him, when he's the one starving.

"That's enough, buddy," I say, motioning him away with the Nobility. "Maybe you oughtta be smarter next time. Now go, find someplace else to squat or clean yourself up, for Chrissakes."

The vagrant eventually leaves, shuffling past me with a craven head held low, avoiding eye contact. I peer out into the hallway and watch him spit on the unconscious guy on the floor before vanishing into the stairwell.

Then I return to stare at this kid, who hasn't even tried to make a go for the revolver. It rests there, forming its own little place in the comforter, awaiting his hands. His bloodied, practically useless hands.

Yeah, he isn't going to be using a gun for a while.

I demand him to tell me where his Kigula stash is, which he confesses to with ease, unlike his other cohorts. On the roof as I suspected, in a refrigerator that's on its back. He says it blocks the roof access door and can only be gotten to by a removable panel in the wall, used as a makeshift secret entrance.

Not so secret anymore, eh?

I then pat him down, finding no other weapons and about twenty bucks in a billfold, which I pocket to his discontent. Before leaving the room, I say something that maddens him all the more.

“Oh, and might I suggest you use that fedora from now on for begging. Thank you for your cooperation.”

I turn my back and cross the hallway to the stairwell, which I enter with renewed vigor. I ascend to what would be the fourth floor, stopping at a heavy metal door and a faded plaque that once read ‘roof access.’ I feel around the wall, fingers crossing a groove around a pipe that's mounted there. It is just a veneer for the trapdoor, which I open with little exertion, and am impressed by their craftsmanship as I hunker through the secret passage. It curves around a sharp corner, the brim of my fedora catching a cobweb which I brush off, then my feet miss the tail of a scurrying rat. It squeaks on by and within seconds I've emerged onto the flat rooftop of the apartment building, Nobility in hand.

If only I had my Thompson shouldered when I emerged.

The same two guys from earlier, trying to sell a Raptor leg for eight bucks, now stand by the overturned refrigerator in front of the roof access door. It is flush with the entrance, making for a substantial barricade. So, the kid was right; I imagine he couldn't have known that these guys were already here—how the hell did they beat me to it?

Then again, I did just endure some interference...

“So, we meet again, *asshole*,” the boy, whose name Clyde rings a bell from earlier, sneers. He's holding an Ithaca 37 Riot shotgun in his right hand; it must've been slung onto his back earlier, unless it's a new addition. Although compacter than

T W O

the more common Win12 shotgun, the thing is still about the size of the boy himself.

“That we do, *Clyde*,” I say, Nobility lowered.

This makes him twitch, which means he’s more unstable than I thought. And his cohort has grown some balls, because he’s now the one training a gun on me. Just a measly .38 Commando, but a weapon of killing nonetheless.

So I stand, and contemplate how this will turn out.

The stench from the Kigula meat in the fridge isn’t thunderous, but it’s appalling and detectable just the same. The door is shut, but nothing can perfectly stifle that odor. I don’t know how long it’s been up here, but I imagine that every time they open it up some Kigula in the distance gets a little bit closer...

“I heard gunfire downstairs,” the nameless revolver-wielding boy says. His lips quiver. “You kill ‘em all?”

“Just one,” I say plainly. “He was a bit of a cowboy.”

I know this is a risky game I play, toying with the guy’s feelings like a mentally challenged fat kid with leftover cake. But I do it nonetheless, watching the tics sweep his young face and the hand holding the revolver tighten, but not his trigger finger. It remains somehow relaxed, though still prone to jerky reactions.

I know, too, that he doesn’t want to kill anyone.

No matter how big his balls are, the kid’s got a fine enough heart—or so I’d like to believe—to not go around whacking people. His brother, and now I’m sure of it, is just the opposite. He has a mean streak and too much energy to keep a leash on. Whatever happened to their parents, I can’t say, but I can imagine. It pains me too, brings back memories from the grave like zombified pets nipping at my heels.

Everyone makes a decision, though, in this life.

In the past few years, I understand that decision is harder than it had ever been. But it’s still a decision of the heart and conscience. Live with a guilty one for what you’re doing or change your course and try something that’ll leave you with

lighter shoulders. Or, worst case scenario, opt for Plan C—swallow a gun and hope to God or whatever it is you pray to, if anything, that you don't end up in a worse place than this.

Is there such a place?

Every passing day I believe less and less that there is, but when I go to sleep—if it can be called that—I try not to think about it.

“And the other two?” the boy with the .38 practically growls. I admire his compassion, but I strongly believe it's misplaced. I understand, a brother is a brother, but the others down there...couldn't be more than cohorts. Friends at best.

“Incapacitated, but alive.”

“And we're supposed to believe you, *Enforcer?*” Clyde seethes. “Don't trust this asshole, Floyd, put one between his eyes.”

I shake my head. “Save the bullets. I imagine, as strong as that stuff is smellin', you'll be needing it for bigger things.”

“Like...what?” Floyd's voice shrinks.

“The same thing that's in that fridge,” I say. “Only, well...breathing.”

“He's bluffing, Floyd, he don't know *shit!*” Clyde's nose wrinkles and his forehead creases. He practically spits the words, and then draws his Ithaca, racking the slide and planting the curved grip against his waist.

“No, Clyde, I think he's—”

A sputtering wail catches our attention as something skitters up brick, and a foul stench crashes our senses like a gaseous tsunami. The three of us turn our attention to the far end of the flat rooftop, dimly lit under a star-studded sky, where massive four-fingered hands latch onto the parapet like grappling hooks. Claws dig into wood and biceps flex to haul the rest of the creature up. A humanoid Kigula soldier, for lack of a better term, vaults over the parapet and alights perfectly. Its body erects without any hunch in its tall stance, two-toed feet flat on the floor. Its humanoid chest heaves with breath, which spews out from between close-knitted fangs.

T W O

The Kigula's arms are so long that its fingertips reach past its shins if held flat against its sides. With hocked legs for greater support and stability when running, the creature could reach our position in a matter of seconds.

Fortunately, the eight friends in my Nobility can run a whole lot faster.

The creature throws its arms open wide and roars shrilly. It's a garbled sound, like a banshee choking on jelly. In the time that it takes to do this, the three of us have tacitly become comrades. Brothers-in-arms, for the sake of our survival. Our guns rise to aim, triggers are squeezed, barrels swept.

Fifty feet away, Clyde's buckshot is fruitless.

My Nobility and Floyd's Commando suffice. By the time I empty a magazine, so has Floyd spent the revolver's cylindrical contents. Gunsmoke wafts in front of our faces and the odor is pleasantly bitter in comparison to the dead Kigula's.

That's right—dead.

The only good Kigula is a dead Kigula.

But the biggest mistake over the years has been falsely assuming a bullet-riddled Kigula is dead. They're prone to surprises and quick resurrections despite immobilization. In this case the creature is on its back, neck propping its head up against the parapet, dormant in a pool of its own blood.

We can only hope permanently dormant.

I reload quicker than Floyd can even eject his spent shells from the cylinder, an empty magazine clattering at my feet. I turn to face them but Clyde's Ithaca is trained on me and his eyes blaze with distrust.

"We oughtta confirm the kill," I suggest with a nod.

"Yeah, I agree," Clyde replies, forcing his voice to sound raspier than it really is. He gestures with the barrel of his shotgun for me to get going. "So get to it, Enforcer."

"Right, right," I smirk, and begin to gingerly approach the presumably dead creature. Its chest doesn't heave with breath, nor does any billow forth from its jaws. The only thing exiting its body right now is its own blood, from the jagged air-

holes we've perforated it with to the infrared sensors in its cheeks and the narrow spaces between its teeth. My smirk fades almost instantly once I've put my back to the guys, and now I glower at the creature with every step closer...

They, as in Clyde, could plug me right now if it so pleased him. So why the calm obedience from Yours Truly? I don't believe he would, not because he doesn't have the gall but simply because he wants confirmation of the creature's death...and would rather have me do it than himself or Floyd.

I can play that game.

The toes of my wingtips stop a few inches from the edge of the Kigula blood puddle. The smell of the creature is intolerable, yet still do I tower over its body and bear it. My skin weeps perspiration not out of fear but sheer discomfort.

Goddamn, this stinks.

Used to it or not, like I said, never adjusted.

I angle my right arm, elbow locked, to aim the Nobility down at the creature's head. Partially propped up against the parapet, it sits awkwardly so that its jaws are level with my knees. Not very reassuring, especially with that incredibly long reach and talons—

"Well!?" Clyde's voice rings out forty-five feet behind me, arcing through the night air. I feel as if I could bounce and claw my fingers into the underbelly of a cloud. Instead I just look up and shake my head, emphatically enough for Clyde to notice, and am returned at least a hundred gazes from the stars above me. Then I return my gaze to the creature at my feet, and spot a twitch in its skin, around that featureless face.

"Shit," I mutter, and readjust my aim. A puff of breath spews from between its teeth and I put two successive rounds into its forehead. The back of its skull fuses with the parapet in a gory manner, and the Kigula's corpse slackens.

Great, I think, now Clyde's free to get rid of me.

But I know better than this—and clearly they don't, though they should. Since when does a Kigula soldier travel alone, especially so overtly?

T W O

Since never.

Now they know its buddy failed. It won't be long before—

“I've never killed me an Enforcer before!” Clyde cackles. In the loud silence I hear the *snap* of an M1911's slide racking. I swallow and flare my nostrils at an invading fetor that presses through the air. I hear the skittering of claws on rough surfaces and heavy, hoarse panting.

“Good!” I reply, the stench strengthening. “Then you won't have to!”

I abruptly veer left, diving across the rooftop for cover. I slide over the floor and tuck my feet in, back to a ventilation unit, while .45-caliber bullets sear the air where I'd just been. I hear only the M1911, so I imagine it's just Clyde in his fury that's trying so hard to kill me, and with such excitement.

I can't help but pull for Floyd's survival in this.

But I'm not putting my money on it.

In the ensuing seconds, two Kigula soldiers vault over the parapet, alighting on either side of their slain friend, hunched forward and grinning fiercely toothed grins.

I hear Clyde's M1911 empty, its slide locking back.

Voices exchange between them in a frenzy and the two Kigula charge the boys on the other side of the roof. Their heels are undoubtedly set against the base of the flipped refrigerator, which is to the door. The only way off the roof is that secret passage, as small as it is—or over the edge.

Quite a drop, that is.

The Kigula screech with an inimitable, animalistic rage. Firecracker gunfire follows, from Floyd's .38 no doubt. I rise up from behind the cubic ventilation unit with not one but two Nobilities drawn, elbows locked and eyes peering down the iron sights. Floyd is emptying his revolver into the encroaching creatures, just about upon them as Clyde clumsily—botchily—reloads his pistol. The creatures have taken a few torso-shots by the time they reach the boys, but .38 Special won't pass through Kigula flesh. My .45's, however...

I unload into their lower backs, hoping to avoid exit wounds for passing bullets that might hit Floyd or Clyde. The creatures suddenly reel forward in a wreck, one of them colliding with Clyde while Floyd dives out of the way and the other crashes into the roof access door. It groans and budes on its hinges, but stands firm. The creatures are bleeding around their pelvises and midriiffs, able to stand but not without substantial pain.

I rush toward them, deciding to reload later. I holster the pistols and scoop up Clyde's dropped shotgun as I reach them. The Kigula that had crashed into the wall appears brain-damaged, part of its skull staved in. The other, which had barreled into Clyde, is presently chewing his face off.

I fire a round into its upper back, square between the shoulder blades. Its massive trapezius muscle erupts in a plume of blood, buckshot at this range blowing out its chest. Clyde gets a punch of it, unfortunately still alive. The Kigula on top of him dies in a quicker manner, slumping its dead weight full onto his body. I start to kick it off when the other Kigula lumbers toward me, swiping a clawed hand at my face. I evade with a nimble step back, swinging the shotgun and hip-firing it in about the same motion. A load of 12-gauge buckshot eviscerates the creature, chewing through its lower back and strewing innards across the rooftop. Its hocked legs buckle beneath it and it crumbles in a heap of long limbs, with a wet splash of blood until the deathly life of it has fully departed.

It deserves no prayer, no eulogy.

I drop the shotgun on the ground, with more spite than fatigue. Then I kick the other creature's corpse off of the dying Clyde, whose face looks like a block of cheese after a fresh grating. I can't help but grimace at the sight, and with every struggling breath he takes blood bubbles from deep wounds around his nose and mouth.

"You're brothers?" I ask without turning to Floyd.

"No," his voice comes weakly behind me. Then I hear footfalls, scuffing shoes, and something like an empty revolver

T W O

hitting the floor. Then a sniffle, and a few more words. “No, just...friends.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, and draw a Nobility in my right hand. “To the both of ya.”

I leave after a merciful execution, putting my back to a weeping Floyd and four corpses, one human.

In time, perhaps two.

Welcome to Rockford.

3

The streets seem to cry out my name, as if they know who I was and who I've become. They pull me out of that godforsaken apartment building and plant my wingtips to the sidewalk yet again. This time I cross the empty street, towering lamps at distant intervals casting askew glares of light across my path. My peripherals are blinding for one instant, stygian the next. A cacophony of sounds reminds me of where I am, the city I'd decided to call home so many years ago—before the Kigula even existed to our knowledge. People talking boisterously, incoherently, including distant sobbing and the occasional gunshot.

I push myself through a thick crowd of boors trying to barter with a pair of streetwalkers. On my left are the slack-jawed men with faces bearing five curses of the ugly virus and one dose of bad breath reminiscent of the Bubonic Plague. I swivel my head to avoid direct eye contact and then some, but to my right are the two broads. Their attire screams prostitution, their bodies displaying two extremes of the physical spectrum. One is gaunt like an underage girl yet nearly as tall as myself, insect-bite breasts somehow poking through a fishnet brassiere that might as well not even exist. Her hair and makeup is an explosion of gaudiness, lipstick poorly drawn and tongue swiveling out like an earthworm pretending it's a cobra. The

T H R E E

other is corpulent, one sundae away from being called obese, with breasts larger than my head that practically spill over the top of her mauve corset. And yet still do men reach for them, bargaining amongst themselves and between the two women, who probably carry more diseases than a Kigula soldier.

My mind wanders, as do I, pressing past them.

I temporarily feel sick to my stomach, and reach into the bowels of my longcoat. In a pocket below the one storing my flashlight and opposite a Nobility is a carton of smokes. Blindly, yet as if with eyes on my fingertips, I pop the lid and work a cancer stick out into my hand. Pinched between thumb and forefinger, I transfer it to my lips while the other hand fishes out my lighter. I stroll as if walking my dog on a careless leash, not paying attention to my path but somehow managing to avoid collisions. My right thumb pops open the steel Zippo then strikes the wheel. A flash of flame licks the air under the end of my Lucky Strike. In as swift a motion as I'd retrieved the butane lighter, I return it to its rightful pocket.

A drag later and I breathe out smoke from a corner of my mouth. I stride lackadaisically, but with enough care so as to separate me from the vagrants.

As if the threads don't suffice.

I reach the corner of the street, Willow Road and Chinook Avenue. I pause at the curb, feeling like I'm on this sort of island secluded from the cockroach pedestrians scurrying along the sidewalks. A car passes, its engine whirring like the struggle of a hundred children, as it'll probably break down soon. The chassis rattles and it backfires as it turns the corner. I turn my head away from the spurting black smoke, only to inhale some of my own then blow it out. The end of my Lucky burns bright and the streetlamp above me shuts down.

Talk about a twisted fortune.

The car's long since passed but I still hear a faint screeching sound. It takes me less than a moment's notice to realize it's a voice, and by the sound of it effeminate.

Moreover, endangered.

I shift the cigarette over to the right corner of my mouth and breathe out the other. I accelerate with haste my progression down Willow Road, hugging the left sidewalk. Unlike Chinook, Willow is practically deserted. There are only a few shops and small restaurants down this way, as opposed to Chinook's slew of liquor spots and convenience stores. Less streetlamps and parked cars, too, although I do spot a few broken down ones. There's even a tow truck on the other side of the road, except that its missing front axle has made it useless.

There it is again—a scream.

It isn't hair-raisingly loud or shrill, but clearly a woman's and clearly in peril. Streetwalker or not, I'm obliged to end those screams—and not in the manner that her attacker might.

They get louder but more intermittent as I near what I believe to be the source. An alley between two buildings—a pizzeria on the left and three-story butcher shop on the right, both brick structures. I reach the alley's mouth and peer around the corner of the pizzeria, spotting shadows thrown up against the wall above a dumpster. Their human sources I cannot see, just the shadows frenzying across brick, backlit by a flashlight lying on the ground. The screams persist, still sporadic but nonetheless panicked. I spot another shadow move just then, only in the form of a man with hands in his pockets; he shifts past the flashlight, kicking it midstride, making an echoing clatter in the alley.

I withdraw as its beam washes over my position.

The screams stop, stifling all of a sudden, as if a hand is pressed over the woman's mouth—or something stuffed into it. I hear muttering voices, then silence, and I put out my Lucky. I look around and see not a soul in sight. Figures. I catch my breath with ease, clearing the smoke out of my lungs, and draw my matte black Nobility in an eager right hand.

Silence ends. Muffled yelps resume.

Patience is a virtue. And while I do have many—

I spin around the corner and hug the butcher shop's wall, hiding my advancement behind this side of the dumpster. I

THREE

imagine they're still on the other side, as it sounds, but the flashlight's been knocked away. I can only glimpse the edge of its beam against the dead end of the alley, where a single metal door stands between the two buildings. I imagine it leads into the butcher's shop. Ironically where these perpetrators are bound to end up if they keep assaulting that woman and push their luck under my sights...

I slink along, back to brick, intermittently glancing above me. Steam from a nearby sewer has risen up to permeate the night air, wafting around and through the fire escapes scaling the butcher's shop. In the density of nightfall and the intensity of the moment, my eyes play tricks with my mind and I picture gossamer dragons taking form in the steam—they're serpentine and graceful, fleeing to the sky.

I certainly wouldn't mind joining them.

At the moment, however, I need to focus and stay right where I am. Transgressions in murky alleys are a dime a dozen in Rockford, so as an Enforcer here for several years I'm more than accompanied with the scenario. I'm mindful that one situation varies from the next, so I try to prepare for the worst.

I reach my side of the dumpster, which bears its own brand of repulsion, and peer around the front corner. I spot erratic shadows splashing the far wall where the door is, but the verbal sounds of struggle have significantly been reduced.

I pray she hasn't suffered a fatal injury.

There, the flashlight on the ground. But where is the third figure? I've slinked around to the front of the dumpster when the idea lights up in my head like a shattered light bulb—the dumpster! Somehow, in the time between when I'd spotted the figure and when I withdrew earlier to arm myself, he'd entered the dumpster. One of its lids suddenly springs open as if to punctually confirm my notion and a pair of hands latch onto my neck. My fedora is disheveled but firm on my pate for now, even as the man leans halfway out of the dumpster to strangle me. His hands feel large, fingers strong like miniature arms, and his vigor doubles mine.

Not for long.

My Nobility raises and spits out a round over my right shoulder. The strangling stops abruptly, something heavy slumping over metal, and now a genuine scream erupts on the other side of the dumpster. I spin around it with pistol aimed in both hands, hammer cocked for effect. Effect now, especially, since I cannot use it as eagerly as I'd been wanting to.

A man with a huge bald head and dark green eyes glares at me with malicious intent. He's wide-shouldered and heavy-framed, but keeps himself close to the woman he holds hostage, a body shield for all intents and purposes. She looks fearful for her life, makeup smeared and brassiere torn. One of her breasts lolls out into view and her pink lace panties are around her ankles. My hand tightens on the Nobility; theoretically, I could splash this asshole's brains all over the brick behind him, but I'm apprehensive of any jerky movements that might get the woman hurt.

I'm almost positive she's a streetwalker, by way of attire. This doesn't change anything about my current dilemma, of course. My eyes give her the best look of reassurance I can muster at the moment, only to become more malevolent for the man's sake. More importantly, I eyeball the piece he's holding to her head. It's an M1911 Nobility, which makes my stomach turn slightly.

How did he get an Enforcer pistol?

A good connection was possible, but unlikely. Another explanation was that he'd killed an Enforcer for it.

"Alright, alright," I say with falsely heavy breathing. I raise my hands, reaching for the stars, my pistol dangling from my right hand. My forefinger has threaded the trigger guard so that it hangs harmlessly. "Just let the lady go, mister."

"Lady?" the man laughs, bearing sallow teeth. Christ, I think I can smell his breath from here. "Heh, you have no idea, Enforcer."

When he releases the woman and she staggers to the side, his arm extends forward, M1911 trained on me. In this same

T H R E E

instant I slide backward as if on a skateboard, Nobility spinning on my finger to return the grip to my palm. I fire a quick round that wings his left shoulder, spraying blood onto the brick behind him. He grunts and fires two panic shots, both missing me too-close-for-comfort. My back hits the wall and my fedora floats off. He turns around and scrambles for the big door, flashlight illuminating his back. He's wearing a black wool vest and dark red collar shirt with the cuffs rolled up halfway to his elbows. His boots are deteriorating, the kind you'd see on a Lawman, except with loose laces slapping the sides.

I fire after him, missing as he disappears into the butcher's shop, I presume. I curse under my breath and go to scoop up my fedora, intent on comforting the woman briefly before I pursue.

One of her knees fills my vision and collides with my forehead. I stagger backward, a bruise swelling beneath the skin. My head swims but I'm grateful to have not released the Nobility. For a second time my back smacks the pizzeria wall, head inches from doing the same. Fedora in left hand and Nobility in right, I stare absentmindedly at my new aggressor.

Fucking broads.

I've encountered this once or twice before but must be slipping, as it didn't cross my mind tonight.

Scammers of the assault sort, lure Lawmen and Enforcers into alleys at night with sounds of a struggle. Use the woman as bait, most often, or even sometimes a child. Occasionally against their will, even, but that isn't the case here—obviously.

Her shoulder-length, permed black hair nearly glimmers on the right side from the flashlight glow. Everything was bullshit—from the smeared makeup, torn brassiere, even downed panties. They really sowed it, down to every detail and emotion.

"You should be a goddamn actress," I mutter under my breath. She cocks an eyebrow and reaches into the crevasse between her breasts and corset. I glimpse a blur of silver and duck, swiping an extended leg into her left knee. She topples, I

catch her with my right arm, then pin her on the ground. I hear a man's voice reverberate from inside the butcher's shop, then spot his bald head poke out of a window by the fire escape. A gunshot rings out above me, ricocheting off one of the catwalks. I curse and he curses, and the broad below me curses.

"Don't fucking kill me, too!" she shouts. I get to my feet, pinning her under my right foot while I shoot skyward. Two bullets smack brick as I underestimate my aim, and the man withdraws back through the window. I reload my Nobility and the empty magazine clatters to the ground right next to her face. She whimpers and begs for me to let her go, it was all his idea. I've heard the same words, different voice, and same tone so many times before. I shake my head and holster the Nobility, then scoop her up like a knight saving his princess.

Instead, I aptly dump her into the dumpster, along with the man I'd previously shot—apparently in the face—after he tried to strangle me. She screams something incoherent and I slam the lid shut, muffling the sounds. I secure the padlock dangling on the rim, and try to open the other lid but it's stuck shut.

Perfect.

I fire a single shot into the dumpster, near the corner where I know only trash is. She shrieks and then it fades into more cries for help and mercy. Now she can at least breathe, although in there that isn't much of a good thing.

I'll try not to forget about her later.

The door into the butcher's shop was left ajar by my target perpetrator, whom I proceed to pursue. I barge in with my left shoulder, pushing it wide open. I'm plunged into a brand new darkness, somehow ranker than the one I'm used to. The stench of decomposed carcasses and coagulated blood violates my every sense. Despite the artificial night inside the back of the butcher's shop, I feel like I can even *see* the odors swimming through the air. Particles like mutated dust and ruddy with a hunger all their own drift past my eyes.

I move through it and feel cold brush across my skin.

T H R E E

I'm in a damn meat locker. The butcher's shop freezer is very spacious, and apparently not as empty as I'd hoped. Carcasses still hang from hooks along a ceiling tram system probably out of order. I bump into one carcass and it sways with a creak, though for a moment I thought I might've broken something. The dead animals are massive and heavy, the purest definition of dead weight.

I'm surprised the Kigula aren't razing this place.

Then again, the door's been closed and it's pretty big. I glance behind me and see the flashlight from the alley washing a curtain of light across the threshold. The *open* doorway. I swallow and taste death in the back of my throat, but think to myself that I should hurry things up unless I want to join these carcasses.

I snake my way through the huge freezer before finding a pair of flap doors with small circular windows. I peer through and see the murky interior of the shop itself, not even an eighth of the building's entire space. No sign of the man, and I'm about to go through them when I hear his voice...

It's seemingly distant and faint, but somehow nearby.

To my right is a weathered burgundy door practically the same color as the brick wall there. I inch closer and gently push the wooden door open, looking up into a narrow stairwell on the other side. The masculine voice drips down the stairwell like a liquid in mist form. It's relieving, to say the least. I enter and begin climbing the stairs, my wingtips making hollow claps of every footfall. A blatant opposite of the stealth I was hoping for, but I knew I couldn't hold onto it all the way.

Just when it counts is enough for me.

I reach the second floor and peer through an empty doorway. This building must have once been a townhouse or small apartment complex. Regardless, the level above the shop itself appears completely abandoned. A few doors on either side of a narrow hallway with sallow tiles, what few remain, but no sign of Mr. Asshole—although he could be hiding in any of these rooms. I decide to skip it and head to the third floor. There

is a door here, wedged open with a cinderblock. I cock an eyebrow and start to move it when all of a sudden gunfire batters the other side.

One, two, three, four shots in quick succession.

Half of them penetrate the wooden door, but fortunately my reaction was quick. I squatted when they came, and still do, only now backing up with a head hung low. Fortunately the shooter is concentrating on waist-height, so about halfway up the door. His .45 ACP bullets make ragged holes in the door above my head, but luckily nothing follows the first four. I decide to risk more than I might usually and kick the door open, toppling the cinderblock over. I rush through with quick feet, hunched over and firing without looking up. I glimpse the man at the end of the hallway, firing without cover, fortunately missing me as I reach the first door on my right. With even greater luck, there is no actual door here, just a vacant threshold which I pass through rather eagerly.

One can only imagine why.

The room is empty, bare-boned, bleak and dying like a tombstone to no grave. The walls seem surprisingly sound, so hopefully I won't have to worry about the man busting through one of them. I can only take one of those in one night.

In the prickly silence that has come over us, I hear every sound that the man makes. A creaking floorboard, an under-the-breath cough, a *click* in his stolen Nobility. I expect to hear an empty magazine hit the floor, but instead nothing—just small metallic *clicks* at two-second intervals. Then something does drop to the floor, but it's tiny in size and makes a lighter sound than an empty mag.

He's loading the rounds individually!

The asshole must have already gone through whatever fully-loaded individual magazines he'd stolen from the Enforcer he'd killed for the pistol itself. His luck has run out, and mine's surged back like an exploding thunderhead.

I emerge firing the Nobility at him, but keeping my aim low. Both of his kneecaps go out in a mess. He collapses

T H R E E

backward, releasing the stolen Nobility and half-loaded magazine. A few .45 cartridges clatter to the floor as I'd heard them earlier. He wails and flails, but any movement of his legs brings him inimitable pain.

"Killing a Lawman or Enforcer, as I imagine you already know, is punishable by death," I say imperiously as I approach. I nudge the front of my fedora up a bit to fully expose my face, using the Nobility's muzzle under the front brim. My eyebrows flare up and my gaze kindles. "*Stealing* from a Lawman or Enforcer, is punishable by death. And, as if not obvious enough by now, *assaulting* a Lawman or Enforcer is—you guessed it—punishable by death. How do you plead?"

He opens his mouth to speak, probably sling a disparaging remark at me if not beg for mercy, but I fill it with lead. The back of his skull spreads across the floorboards and I holster the Nobility like a cowboy in the ol' west.

Sometimes I like to have fun.

But in all reality, I'm tired as shit. This hasn't been fun, really. This has been a royal pain-in-the-ass nightmare. I reek more than usual, I've encountered three Kigula soldiers, seen a young man's face eaten off by one, had to mercy kill him in front of his friend, then get strangled, kneed in the face by a scamming broad, wandered in a dark meat freezer, nearly get shot through a fucking door...

Yeah, I think it's about time I call it a night.

I police the man's body first, finding a billfold so full of money that it nearly gives me a heart attack. I pocket it for later appropriation and take the stolen Nobility too. I find a place for it inside my longcoat, knowing I'll probably forget to turn it in at the precinct for a couple of days.

Upon leaving, I depart the way I had come. I praise that I didn't run into any Kigula along the way, and am sure to shut that freezer door the best I can. I start to pass the dumpster, which is very quiet, then turn and draw my Nobility. I fire a round into the padlock, shattering it. The broad inside yelps, but doesn't give the lid a push until after I've left, I imagine.

I take a hard left out of the alley, down Willow Road until I reach Franklin Street. It's an eleven minute walk through thinning crowds and none at all until I reach my place. Most people, especially vagrants, know better than to clog the sidewalks in front of occupied homes.

Simply because the majority of residents are Enforcers.

My apartment building is hardly any different from others in the area. Tall, long, faded red brick with ashen shingles. I climb the wrought iron steps to the second floor, which is the highest. Over the balcony is a twelve foot drop; last month one of my neighbors, a Lawman living by himself, tried jumping with the notion of suicide. It was later deduced that he was drunk, which I guessed because his depth perception was shot—he landed on his own Plymouth, dimpling the roof and shattering the side windows upon impact.

Worst of all, the poor dumbass lived.

He lives now on the first floor in a wheelchair. Not too sure how well that's going to work out for him, though I wish him the best. I'm not very knowledgeable about my neighbors, never really cared enough to find out the gritty details. Especially when I'm living two doors down from a suicidal.

I card my door, room 36, and enter the air-conditioned murkiness. It's heaven on earth compared to the streets of Rockford, but it's no Drake Hotel.

My fedora and longcoat are hung on the rack between my dresser and door. I remove my lighter and Luckies, setting them on the small ovoid table by the front window. The door gets locked three different ways along the jamb, and I remove my weapons accordingly. Nobilities stay in their holsters of my X-harness rig, which I hang on a hook under my fedora. The Thompson gets leaned against my nightstand, muzzle down.

The Westminster mantle clock on my nightstand reads 4:50 in the morning. Dawn should be creeping up real soon, as well it ought to be.

Let the monsters rest while the people infest.

4

Every now and then life hands you lemons. Whenever I'm handed them, it's more of a pelting action. They either hit me as they are, unpeeled, like balls of solid rind. Hurts on impact, but is fleeting, nonetheless an annoyance. And then there's the other instance—they're handed to someone else whose mitts are a pair of vise grips; they proceed to squeeze them on my many wounds, 'til they've run dry. It's an incredibly tormenting experience, and it lasts for what feels like half a decade, but in reality is but five or ten minutes.

This is about as much sense as my dreams make.

Often I'll get the prior instance, enduring sporadic moments of peaceful rest and intervals of bad memories. These trips down memory lane leave me shoeless so by the time I've woken my mental feet are bleeding to the bone. Oh, but I just walk it off.

And that's when I sleep 'well.'

On the other occasion, I suffer visions of both my past and not mine at all. I'll have twistedly lucid nightmares about civilians being butchered by a pack of Prowlers or children's corpses shared by a pair of Raptors. Then, of course, are the grander nightmares—memories turned into atom bombs of heartfelt pain and barbed guilt.

My parents back in Springfield.

Screams raspier than I'd ever care to remember, like bleeding throats and punctured lungs. My father's wedding band still on his hand but ten feet away from the rest of him. My mother's cerulean eyes staring blankly on a pallid palette of a face, in the corner of the room on the floor. I recall in spurts of static how we'd arrived and she was still on her feet...in the center of the room...

Sometimes I awake with a sudden tremor.

A jetstream of vomit, hopefully I reach the bathroom in time. Often I don't. Or I stir awake in a bath of my own sweat and just dry-heave until I pass out, or my physical cramps cease.

Yeah, I'm a fucking mess.

I'm a valid Enforcer, however, because as long as I'm awake and on my feet there is an innate concentration in me. It practically controls me, whereas others' bad sleep and visions or nightmares will trouble them while they're awake too. Being quite the opposite, I tolerate it.

I tolerate it because I have to.

Today, I wake up a few minutes after noon. Now that's solid sleep, considering the erratically dreadful nightmares blemishing my subconscious. I can only remember fragments, and forgive me but I refuse to resurrect them. So I discard those to my mental dumpster and rise from my bed like a restless corpse. I'm groggy, and sweating like a pig in July. The back of my Brookway shirt adheres to the skin under my shoulder blades, and I have to peel it off with pinching fingers over my vest to get release.

Air conditioning only works so far.

Especially the shit quality we've got here.

Speaking of which, I attend the bathroom for some personal business. Afterward I wash my face and decide on a shower, then a fresh change of clothes. I don't have many, so I'll have to go downstairs to the laundromat in a day or two for one cycle. In the meantime, after my shower, I put on some basics—white collar shirt, sleeves rolled up to elbows, and a four-button wool vest over it. No tie, not even my longcoat today.

FOUR

I don't resume night duty for another six hours, at dusk.

Right now I simply intend on hitting the diner on the corner of Franklin and Mortar Parkway. It's but a six, seven minute walk from here. I don my suede X-harness holsters, both Nobilities visible to everybody as they dangle close to my sides, and head for the door. I pass on the fedora but never on my Luckies, which come as a marriage with the Zippo. They find homes in my pants pockets and I swing out the door, keycard stowed away on me, shutting it in a motion of departure.

It is technically the afternoon but it's my morning.

In spite of the nightmares and sluggish awakening, I treat my walk to the diner as if we got word of Kigulan extermination. In other words, damn near the happiest day of my life, proud to be a fucking human being.

Given, this is a distant lie and even if it were so not much of Rockford would change because of it. Many people's outlooks on life would skyrocket, the jobs of Lawmen and Enforcers would lighten only to eventually evaporate for the better, and crime would see a fat drop. *But*—it remains a factual claim that the quality or lack thereof in living here wouldn't immediately improve. That would take longer than weeks and heavier than months to see any significant change.

And thus we are, human beings.

All of this cynical negativity aside, I embrace the mile-wide lie to myself and stroll down the midday sidewalk toward my diner of choice. Pedestrian traffic consists of docile civilians while exhausted-from-a-night-of-begging-and-drinking vagrants litter the sides of buildings, out of the sun and anyone's way. Part of me is reminding why I can't help but envy daytime Enforcers, but the other part is stronger and wiser for realizing why I don't.

I'm simply bred to be sharper at night.

Or so I like to believe.

I reach said diner in six minutes and twenty-four seconds' time, the analog clock ticking away inside my skull. It is a quaint place with cardboard-tasting food and bitter coffee,

but their scrambled eggs aren't too terrible. I enter through the glass chrome-framed double-doors, wingtips clapping softly on the blandly multicolored tile. Red-cushioned stools array the edge of the bar and booths are situated alongside the windows. It's a small place one-part restaurant and one-part kitchen. I enter the prior area and am bombarded with a myriad of smells.

No matter how dull the food might taste, the odors are ambrosial. Especially after the shit I endured last night, this place was made to make a man feel at home.

And when I say home, I mean pre-1946.

Before the word '*kigula*' leapt out of a Sumerian textbook and infected global airwaves. Before the letters took form across varied breeds with different claws and sharper teeth. Before the syllables incited no less than trepidation and severe bouts of anxiety to whomever was listening.

Before a time of domestic terror and 'war.'

I take a seat at a booth since the place isn't entirely packed and most people don't like seeing candid guns at the bar. The others, outside of the 'most' demographic, are comforted by it because this isn't exactly the old west. Although some Enforcers do believe they're gunslingers in no different an atmosphere, but usually they're flashier in dress and easy to distinguish.

I'm here like many other men, dressed hardly any different, except for the holsters. A morsel of oddity stands out with me being hatless and coatless on a September morning. Well, closer to one o'clock.

Even so, it isn't made a big deal. I occupy a booth on the far left side of the diner, hugged by vacant seats. I spot a pair of Lawmen across the diner, about forty feet away, occupying a booth and throwing sporadic glances my way. It isn't long before they informally salute me as a sign of casual acknowledgement. I feign tipping my hat with a nod, then we resume our meals.

They've already got theirs.

I get a petite waitress with a large nose and bigger eyes.

FOUR

Her dirty-blonde hair's up in a bun and she struts like a model reject. She's her own brand of cute, and her voice's like liquid fire. I fall in love with it and would like to imagine that it tastes as sweet as the syrup they're serving.

In other words, not really. But sufficient.

"Hi, how are you today?" she says with a Southern accent that briefly throws me.

"Oh, I'm about as fine as the day allows," I reply, thankful that the sun's not as shy as the moon had been last night. I drop sixty cents for pecan waffles and fifty for some scrambled eggs, topped with fifteen-cent ice cold milk. I thank the waitress, whose name is Susanne, and she smiles before taking my menu on leave.

I gaze out the window to my left as time passes. My stomach makes noises but I keep quiet and patient, watching men in longcoats shuffle about on the street. A few vagrants wake for some early panhandling. Yeah, they wear a similar face as I did this 'morning,' treating midday as the break of dawn for them. Some cars pass, mostly beat-up Plymouths and tarnished Chevy pickups. The unveiled sun traces its rays across the asphalt and sidewalks without relent; it's going to be a warm September day.

I only hope the night will be as calm.

My food arrives a few minutes later and I've scarfed down everything but the second half of my waffle when I'm proved that 'calm' isn't quite the right word. A clamor of screams, men becoming children with shriveled hearts and rattled spines, erupts down the street. The source is out of my view, although I've suddenly bolted up, nearly out of my seat. My thighs knock the edge of the table and I stifle a grunt, gaze sweeping the road outside.

A sallow Bel Air fishtails down the road with a Kigulan soldier latched onto its trunk. The creature is slashing at the back window, shattering it one instant and clawing through the cloth top in the next. I slap a dime on the table for gratuity and slide off that booth like a snake rubbed down with butter. Fortunately

my footwork is sounder, and I bolt for the entrance.

About this time two other things happen that catch my notice. One, the pair of Lawmen to my left are scrambling less nimbly from their seats. Two, the Chevy Bel Air isn't alone in this crisis—a black Hudson sedan follows it, but nor is it by itself. A Prowler is in close pursuit, its swiping hands influencing the driver. Within seconds the Hudson veers hard right, its left wheels acting as sudden brakes, hurling the car into a barrel-roll. It tumbles down the middle of the street, slinging twisted metal and shattered glass through the air. The Prowler snarls shrilly and gets an arm caught in the mess, ripping it clean off. The creature's stout body rolls off to the side, its left arm reduced to a gory stump below the armpit.

By this time I've reached the sidewalk and spot another Prowler terrorizing pedestrians up the road. In the same direction along Franklin Street where I live. Its short but fierce jaws are snapping after the tails of longcoats on men fleeing, others helping up their fallen female companions. Some of the vagrants scatter maniacally, thoughtlessly, while others adhere their backs to the wall as well they should.

To my left and up the road a bit is the Bel Air, which has wrecked on its side. The Kigulan soldier is currently on its upturned right side, and I spot it rip the driver's door clean off its hinges. The slab of metal hits the asphalt and skitters across it. I've drawn one of my Nobilities and am in pursuit, right hand already clammy on its pearl grip.

Behind me I hear incoherent shouting from the Lawmen. Whether they're addressing each other or me, I can't be sure. But I'm not about to stop right now.

I focus on the Bel Air. Virile shouting comes from inside. The driver must be a lone man; I cannot detect any other sounds from it, such as potential passengers, supposing they might've survived the crash.

The Kigula's torso disappears inside the cabin of the Bel Air. I shake my head and mumble vehement words even I cannot define. My stainless Nobility raises in my right hand, gleaming

FOUR

under the sun. My eyes narrow on the Kigula's legs and I fire two quick rounds into either of its thighs. I'm about thirty feet away when I fire, and my aim is nothing shy of impeccable. The result, no less marvelous. The creature howls and withdraws from the cabin, recoiling backward, falling off of the Bel Air. It hits the asphalt and rolls around, erecting quickly but with a severe limp.

I put two more rounds into its chest, .45 bullets punching through flesh and muscle to exit its back. They patter the underside of the Bel Air and the creature droops forward, but doesn't quite collapse.

It appears blinded by the pain, crippled.

I imagine it sees me as a humanoid pulse of heat against cooler urban terrain, so I decide to end its visual altogether. I stop about ten feet away from it and slap my heels together. The Nobility barks in front of the Kigula and its forehead opens up in a spray of blood. Now it slumps, dead as dead could be, and I swivel to look behind me.

The two Lawmen are firing their borderline-worthless .38 Commando's at the armless Prowler opposite the diner. Between them and me, about fifty feet from where I stand, is the beat-up Hudson sedan. A middle-aged man is crawling out from the shattered driver's window, glass crunching under his sleeved arms. He's bleeding from a gash in his brow and I imagine his sight's a little fucked.

I wave my arms at the Lawmen and start shouting.

The Prowler they're firing upon is slinking back and forth, regaining its balance. Because of its top-heavy form, the missing arm has severely crippled it, but still it manages to stay afoot. Meanwhile, uphill and in the direction of my residence, the other Prowler has seized a vagrant in its jaws. Most of the other pedestrians have fled the scene by now, scattering up the hill and around corners, others barging into a shop whose doors lock shut behind them. I spot two civilian bodies on the street, probably slashed at by the Prowler before it acquired the vagrant, whose head it now crushes in ruthless jaws.

The homeless man's garbled screaming stops abruptly.

I've got half a clip left in this Nobility, so I don't reload it quite yet. The revolver-wielding Lawmen, however, are forced to with theirs. During this odd silence one of them turns to look my way.

"Focus fire on the Prowler uphill, I'll get that one!" I shout at the top of my lungs.

They don't seem to object, although turning their backs on the armless Prowler isn't very comforting to their souls.

I return to the Bel Air real quick, mounting it and peering into the cabin. The driver is in his thirties, paler than usual I imagine, with a busted lip and two long gashes along his left forearm. Must have been from the Kigula. I ask if he's alright, he mumbles something on the side of 'yes' and I inform him the creature's been killed.

He thanks me but I follow with a quick notice that I have to attend to the Prowlers. He doesn't object to me leaving him, he can get out just fine, since the Bel Air isn't on fire and the Kigula's dead. So I withdraw from the cabin and my soles alight on asphalt. I draw my second Nobility and regret not bringing my longcoat and Thompson when I left the apartment.

Shitfire, I suppose this'll have to do.

I sprint up the middle of Franklin Street, strands of dark hair flapping against the wind in stiff arcs over my head. I reach the armless Prowler just as it began to head for the flipped Hudson, where the driver is weakly getting to his feet. I help him up with my left arm, then he hobbles toward the curb, assisted by some men from the diner.

Like I said, Rockford's hell-bound but that doesn't mean good souls are absent here.

I lock both elbows and use the Hudson's left side as a temporary form of cover. My fingers squeeze at the triggers as I keep a steady bead on the ungainly and crippled Prowler. The guns bark accordingly and bullets pelt its broad shoulders. Divots of flesh chip free and it roars with a kindled vehemence as it charges me. The gait is sloppy because of its missing arm,

FOUR

my only saving grace. I throw a quick look over my shoulder and see that the man from the Hudson has been dragged into the diner, so he's in the clear. When I return my attention back to the Prowler, it's nearly upon me.

Gunfire from the Nobilities pauses as I backpedal with haste. I stop when my heels touch the curb, which I use as an anchor. My knees bend and I converge the two Nobilities to nearly Siamese twin-proximity. The Prowler is but ten feet from me when I resume fire, focusing on the creature's low-hung head. The guns' slides snap and muzzles spit fire in rapid succession until the magazines go dry. By the end of it the Prowler's eyes have been blasted through and chunks of its face are on the asphalt. It lies on the road, its bloody snout within arm's reach of my wingtips.

I hear an animalistic howl up Franklin Street and the gunfire reaches cessation. My Nobilities get holstered after I've released the slide lock; they're empty but so am I—I'll need to restock on ammunition when I return home. For the time being I jog up the road to meet with the two Lawmen, who had just finished neutralizing the other Prowler. They're en route to me, too, so we meet halfway.

"Good work, gentlemen," I say, extending my hand. One of them is busy reloading his .38 but the other is at the ready with his hand. We shake, and introduce ourselves. His name is Gerald Wilbur. "Good shooting, Gerald. I'm Barry Sharpe, Sixth Precinct Enforcer. Where do you two hail from?"

"Fourth," Gerald sighs. They both look distraught.

"Goddamn service revolvers," the other Lawman says with a vexed grunt. He snaps his cylinder shut and holsters it on his hip rig, not unlike the policemen of old.

"Yeah, really wish they'd up our budget so we could get 1911's, too," Gerald says. He shrugs. "And I mean just standard .45's, Nobilities or not."

"Served a couple of years as a Lawmen myself, not too long ago," I say, and the truth sparks embers of memories in my eyes. "I can definitely relate, though not in present tense of

course. Nonetheless...you two certainly made it work out.”

“Yeah, I suppose we did,” Gerald sighs, and glances over his shoulder. The road is clear for the most part, although small groups of people who had previously fled around the corner are now slinking back like curious cats.

“I’d take one of them Peacemakers or Schofield’s over this heap o’ shit.”

I extend my hand to the other Lawmen who spoke so eloquently of his revolver preference. He finally looks up through a thick ruffled mustache with dark brown eyes and bushy brows. He shakes my hand with an Enforcer’s grip, calloused and etched with experience. My guess is early forties.

“Harold Warrington,” he says, voice hoarse.

“Gerald and Harold, eh?” I say with half a smirk. “I bet y’all get that a lot.”

“More than you could imagine,” Gerald says solemnly. He then nods at me. “And imagine if you were with us in Fourth. They’d be having themselves a goddamn riot. ‘Look, there goes Harry, Gerry, and Barry!’”

We share a minuscule laugh.

“To that extent, I go by Warrington,” Harold says.

“Well, Warrington, I’d agree with what you said but you know them Peacemakers and Schofield’s, even some of the ol’ Walkers, are only for wealthy Enforcers. Things sure are beautiful, though.”

“Yeah, the sad truth,” Warrington sighs. “Sure would beat these .38 *pellets*, though.”

“Might as well be,” Harold says. “But at least we got the bastard down. Fucking Prowlers...out in broad daylight too.”

Yeah. Shit happens. They don’t usually attack during the day without provocation, but with the reference as vermin comes the shared qualities. They appear haphazardly, acting no different, and are extremely capricious. But usually when they start attacking civilians during the day and it involves more than a soldier or two, it’s an omen of worse comings.

“Better stay sharp, then,” I say. “Or sharper, in my

FOUR

case—just ran out of ammo, got more at home.”

“Didn’t think to take your Thompson to lunch, eh?”

“Breakfast, Gerald, breakfast,” I force a smirk. “And no, I didn’t. We all made do, though. I guess I’ll leave you two to the survivors, then.”

Procedures are procedures. Lawmen tend to the civilians after an attack, whether they survived or not. Enforcers are here to do the shooting and are expected to make a detailed report to their precinct following the incident, if it happens to involve Kigula during the day. So I’ll return home and load up on my gear, then book it to the precinct for a report.

Oh yes, the fun stuff.

I inform the two Lawmen of the survivor in the Bel Air as well as the man from the Hudson who’d been temporarily relieved in the diner. Then I bid them farewell with courteous nods, and begin my trek up Franklin Street.

My room welcomes me back with comforting hands and a wet kiss on the cheek. I wash my face, load fresh magazines with fresh .45-caliber cartridges, and then wash my hands. Nobilities fit in their holsters, X-harness is secure. My longcoat goes on only after the Thompson has been slung over my shoulder and dangles safely at my side. I forego the fedora today, at least until I return later in the day.

Before leaving, I phone the precinct for a head’s up.

It rings for what feels like half the day, luring me into idle hours of sleep. When it’s finally retrieved, I hear a grumpy voice on the other end of the line that sounds as tinny as most these days.

“Sixth Precinct, Rockford District, Illinois, this is the field reports desk speaking,” says the voice. God, he sounds like he’s on the losing end of boredom’s noose.

“Enforcer Bartholomew Sharpe speaking, I have a Kigulan daytime report to file. Will be in an hour from now.”

“Authentication code?”

I read him the series of seven numbers exclusive to my Enforcer identification. He reads it back, takes note, and

approves.

“When you come in, head to room 6B-2 in the east wing. A FIERR will be available in forty-five minutes for the next twenty minutes.”

I thank him and hung up the receiver.

There’s you another acronym of the seemingly superior intelligent government that is the U.S. military. FIERR stands for Field Report Receptionist, but is pronounced ‘fear.’ Said so-called receptionist is usually a woman with a typewriter who enters the room in which a Lawman or Enforcer, usually the latter, is filing the report in. She therein types up everything that the man says, sometimes abridging or formalizing it, and files it with the Chief Enforcer, who is more paper-pusher than his title suggests, and from there the report is distributed to the appropriate powers-that-be as he sees fit.

So many possibilities.

More often than not the report goes nowhere but thin air, where it floats around like an empty plastic bag, before landing on some child’s head and suffocating them to death. Something like that.

Regardless, procedure is procedure.

So I leave the apartment behind and, unlike most days, drive instead of walk. If I do the latter to the precinct, it’ll be well over an hour when I arrive. That is, supposing I don’t encounter any more engagements, in which case my time might be doubled.

Or reset back to zero, if my fortune runs so low.

Whatever the case, I stick to four wheels by preference of time and haste. It’s parked in one of many empty spaces just opposite those directly below the second-story balcony. I never use it at night...well, seldom...and I’d truly hate for some unhappy neighbor to use it as their own personal landing pad.

It’s a two-door 1943 Chevy Fleetline, black as the early night with its fading corners but sleek contours. Stainless steel composes the grille, front and rear bumpers, running board, windows, hood ornament and a single trim down the sides. It

FOUR

isn't anything overly flashy, didn't cost me more than a month's paycheck, but like most Enforcers' vehicles what's under the hood draws the value.

I unlock the car and duck in, Thompson removed to occupy a place on the compact backseat, under a cloth. I slam the door shut and roll down the windows, then sit for a moment. The view set before me is, likewise, nothing special. A greenbelt of weakly verdant trees on the verge of discoloring for autumn, gutted by a surprisingly lively creek. Sometimes in the stillness, as I can presently, the sound it makes when the water courses over taller-than-the-rest stones actually reaches my ears. It's a subtle sound, and just the same a subtle comfort that rubs my mind's body.

That pat on the back you need when the chips are down.

And let's be honest, here in Rockford they're always down. More so than the rest.

Even when the sun is up.

I key the engine on, a honed V6. The original engine was but a ninety-horsepower 216-ci powertrain production, but after some well-paid work it kicks out 125 horses and occupies 250 cubic inches. It rumbles to life, raw and domesticated, not quite as feral as the car I'd like to one day drive.

But that blank won't yet be filled in.

I back up and peel out of the driveway, nearly rolling over the curb to reach the street. As patient as I *can* be in an engagement, driving is an altogether different story. I like my cars fast, my guns loud, and my women wild. One could say the latter applies to the prior two, although the circumstances change immensely. Regardless, I drive like a machinegun and tend to take advantage of some malleable rules of the road.

Fortunately, Rockford's extensive criminality on the streets and behind closed doors has attracted utmost attention from the law. This allows many drivers some leeway when it comes to speeding and aggressive maneuvers, as long as it doesn't become endangering to the point where another might report your license plate to the authorities.

And, being part of the authority, that wouldn't blow over so well at the precinct.

Nonetheless, in all these years I've yet to suffer such a penalty. So, I drive twenty over the limit and make some 'reckless' turns here and there. Reckless. That term has never quite stuck to me. I prefer...fun.

However, be reckless while on duty and I'll shoot you myself. The difference between driving during your 'free time' and doing anything 'in the field' is not only huge, but critical. And irrevocably dangerous, to cohorts and civilians alike, most of all—of course—to yourself.

And that's not how I work.

Certainly isn't how I live...not in a long time.

I arrive at the precinct in about forty minutes. I'm still inside Rockford's city limits, though hardly. I tend to do my nightly patrols further downtown than out, which is where—believe it or not—there's less peril involved. Although it really is a matter of the peril's source that strikes an Enforcer's interest, or lack thereof. Downtown the danger lies heavily on human shoulders. In Rockford's outer limits, closer to the city's boundaries, Kigulan activity is a lot more common.

One of these days I'm not going to have a choice on where I get to patrol. One of these days the Chief will wake up grumpier than usual, with a bad hair day on his head and in his pants to the point where he'll double that Enforcer reconnaissance in the outer limits, nearer our precinct.

All I have to say for that day is...fuck me.

The Fleetline's V6 whinnies into hibernation as I key it off, then withdraw it into my pants pocket. I roll the windows up and exit the car, leaving my Thompson in the backseat, covered. Nobilities and holster harness remain, as per procedure anytime an Enforcer comes onto precinct property. Bring your guns—one of your highest levels of identification, certainly the most instant—or don't come at all.

Unless you've lost them, or they've been stolen.

But that's what the phones are for—a head's up.

FOUR

I've parked in the employee lot, a rectangle of marked asphalt adjacent to the building's stubby west wing, bordered by a nine-foot concrete wall. Gotta love the way the sun glints over the razorwire lining its parapet. I catch a ray that lashes over my eye, and I wish I hadn't stared for the nanosecond longer than I did. I blink away the spots and nod at the gate security, who'd let me in earlier, upon approach of the side-entrance.

And in I walk, badge dangling from my neck.

It's about as busy as it normally is. The hallways are fairly narrow, fairly congested. Mostly secretaries and your occasional Lawman, who sometimes have their own assistants—like deputies—to help with basic duties. A phone rings shrilly here and there, its pitch almost too much to bear at close range. I pass by both open and closed doors, whose glass windows are opaque to prohibit visual eavesdropping.

More often than not it feels like these people take their jobs too seriously. Lawmen, that is, and their in-office procedures. Most of them are mindless regulations that are broken on a weekly basis, bent to be worked around daily even. They get too caught up in their formality bullshit to remember where the true trouble is. I feel like they either don't care anymore, or pretend not to so long as they can spend more time behind these four walls than out there protecting the lesser defended.

Yeah, Rockford's on the lip of the gutter.

But the more and more we pretend like it's halfway down the drain already, chances are it will be soon enough.

Every fifth face or so there's someone I recognize, and we nod with a weak smirk for acknowledgment. Even the women are as somber, if not more so than the men. I can't imagine why, so speaks the sarcasm as I glimpse rooms packed with typewriters and dames with fingers machinegun-fast, or ears adhered to receivers, hands full with pencils and paper and the other end of the phone. Some of them walk around looking for something specific, as far as the cord will let them, probably having an internal panic attack, at least those not psychologically

fortified by now.

As most of them have to be around here.

I find my way to the west wing, which is rather vast, of 6th Precinct. There's only one big turn I have to make, and a fleet of stairs to second level. I find room 6B-2 with a fresh memory, although it isn't too difficult to locate. The only trouble for rookies is that damn near everything in these precincts are about as drab as possible, bleakly identical to everything else. The door is a big metal one, dark gray with a few layers of neglected blemishes. There's a slot in it above the 6B-2 plaque, with tiny metallic bars. I peer in and spot the FIERR waiting for me in there; her eyes are on the typewriter between her arms on the table. Her hair is dirty-blonde with brown roots and curls like a raging thundercloud.

I knock with the base of my fist three times, pause, and then enter. Just a head's up, really. I shut the door behind me and take a seat, her eyes scrutinizing me as if I've done something wrong. Damn FIERRs, male or female, almost always the same.

As if I'm about to report something that *I* caused.

I take a seat at the rectangular table that looks and feels like a poor mold from tinfoil. Welcome to one of many Rockford precincts, where more money is spent on telephones and seemingly useless staff than on the furniture, or Lawmen's pay for that matter.

My chair is wooden, and creaky as hell.

I've yet to have one break beneath me in all these years, though I've never really expected it. Six-one, two-hundred pounds—nothing to really worry about. Some of the heftier Lawmen would, defensively, say otherwise.

She prepares the typewriter, and quickly introduces herself. Her name is Fay Quinn, I guess in her upper twenties. I put my name out there, confirming my call earlier. Then I lay down what I experienced just outside the diner, around one in the afternoon, which brought on a few forced corrections when I called it 'morning.' In return I got a lot of rolled eyes and sighs from Fay, but by its end the information was transferred from

FOUR

my mind and lips to the paper in her typewriter.

Almost mechanically, she thanked me and said I could leave. Likewise, I thanked her and left with a courteous nod.

Just like that. As much as I detest this place, every now and then they'll prove more efficient than expected. I just happened to experience one of those rare moments. Now I head back downstairs to the parking lot, but do well in remembering the stolen Enforcer's gun I'd gathered last night.

With a rugged sigh I carry myself to Lost & Found, comically called the 'desk of laughs,' as per the associated acronym. If only more Enforcers shared a similar sense of humor. Although perhaps the greatest wish is 'if only a sense of humor truly existed these days.' It really doesn't, and has to rely on intermittent in-office jokes, typically roused by boors of Lawmen or the occasional secretary bordering on insanity.

I don't blame her. I'm right there, too.

The LAF desk is as plain and mundane as a teacher's, faded oak construction with mahogany drawers and a corner lamp for added illumination. Above the receptionist's head and arraying the wall which you cannot see from the hallway, are a series of spacious cubbies.

I put my hands on the outside lip of the desk and lean forward slightly, cocking my eyebrows.

Barbara Messner looks up at me without adjusting her head. Her gaze is heavy and thorough, effective especially on the younger girls here. Barb's been working at the LAF desk for the past two years, a Chicago transfer with a hard-as-nails attitude. Would explain the Chicago tenure, although most people are baffled as to why she left that smug safe-haven.

Hell, I still don't get it. I know why, but...

It'll never quite make sense to me. I respect her decision, though. Allegedly, she couldn't put up with them anymore. The haughtiness, the over-indulgence, the indifference toward lesser-off cities and their denizens. Even the mayor there, as most big cities still have one in office, was too self-righteous for her to handle. So she transferred to a place that most people would sell

their souls to leave behind, and although she complains the most out of us all she's one heart that 6th Precinct truly needs.

The respect between us is mutual.

Nonetheless, we have a satirical relationship.

The fifty-something Barb asks with a grumpy huff what I've done wrong this time. I laugh it off and tell her "everything, as usual."

She smirks and shakes her head.

"In all seriousness, though," I say, withdrawing the stolen Enforcer gun from my longcoat. "I'm turning in a stolen M1911 Nobility. Enforcer-grade."

"Stolen?" she cocks an eyebrow. "Elaborate."

I tell her about the scam I encountered last night, and the outcome, in more or less words. She acts as impressed as a schoolgirl, melodramatically nailing the performance.

I try, failingly, not to smile.

The Nobility is handed from me to her as if it's no more than a spatula and we're cooking lunch. She racks and locks back the slide, operating it with dexterity. She inspects the empty grip, where the magazine ought to be loaded. She sniffs it and her nose wrinkles.

"He spent the whole thing?"

"Had a pre-loaded magazine or two before having to do it bullet-by-bullet. I didn't happen to pick up the empty mag, though."

"A damn shame."

"Which part?"

"All of it." She shrugs, setting it down and starting to pencil the serial number on a piece of paper. Her voice lowers as she writes, adding, "Well, except for the asshole you killed. He deserved that."

"Glad you agree, Barb. So, we set here?"

"Sure thing."

I slap the edge of the desk and click my tongue as I peel away to leave.

"Oh, and Bart—"

FOUR

“Yeah?” I say gruffly. She knows I *hate* that name.

“Try not to die out there, will ya?”

“My best,” I reply with a half-smile and turn around on my heel. I pass a bunch of people I’ve never seen before, or at least faces not worth recognizing, then reach the exit door that leads into the parking lot. I slip out, longcoat gliding behind me and escaping the hold of a closing door. I duck into the Fleetline and power on that Chevy engine.

I recline briefly, stretching my body in the car.

Where to, now?

Then it hits me. The word ‘fuck’ slams against my teeth as they grind and my hands grab the steering wheel. I can’t believe I let it slip my mind, my mental fingers. I pull out of my parking space and roar out of the lot, thanks to lenient gate security, hitting the road with smoke tailing my tires.

The late Clyde and his friend Floyd.

With a refrigerator full of Kigula body parts.

Two options were presented to me—report it to the precinct, or dispose of it myself. I choose the latter for a pair of taut reasons. Mostly, that I don’t fully trust a lot of my fellow Enforcers with information like that; who’s to say they won’t just try to use the stuff for their own profit? It’s happened before. The other reason?

Fuck it.

Something to do on my off day, sure.

I just hate that I’ve let it slip for so long now. Hopefully Floyd didn’t act a fool and try to relocate the stash. Although now with big-boy Clyde out of the picture, it’s possible some of the vagrant ‘locals’ could have gotten to it. Now that’s a worse sight than cannibals having a hitchhiker for breakfast.

Daytime with a clear sky.

This ought to be interesting.

I pull up into the driveway set in front of the condemned apartment building. The sidewalks are bustling with basic activity, nothing crazy, and the beggars are all getting their good day’s sleep. Calm-faced, bleak-minded civilian pedestrians

shuffle about pretending their city isn't an urban septic tank. I shake my head and kill the engine, then step out with the Thompson in tow. I keep its strap looped around my right shoulder, concealed under my longcoat.

Dammit...I don't have my hat.

I feel the sunlight beating down my nape, smacking my scalp and forehead. It feels warmer than it ought to for this time of the year. I am wearing quite a few layers, but then again I'm just too used to the chills of nighttime. And the chills of being *on-duty* at night.

Regardless, this shouldn't take too long.

I decide to take the same way inside and up the levels that I did previously, trusting my memory. The cellar doors are shut, as I'd left them. I open them up again and slip inside. Leaving them alone for now lets a wave of sunlight to filter into the basement, softly illuminating it. I can see the billions of dust and soot particles dancing quietly, benevolently, in the air. It makes me feel all the more repulsed to take a breath; my nostrils flare, I'm at more ease using them than my mouth.

The stairwell welcomes my climb stagnantly.

I rise hastily but as quietly as I can, just in case anyone is waiting for me up here. Given, it'd be quite the stakeout and I'd almost want to revere their virtuous patience, but I'm not going to discard the possibility.

I reach the top floor where the roof access door is, without stopping on any previous levels. Déjà vu isn't my strong suit, especially ones regarding near-death experiences—something common for me in Rockford. Hell, for most people. So, I reach for the door handle and then stop.

No, I'll keep playing the stealth game.

With clandestine footing I sneak into that side route to the right of the door, which is uncovered. I remember having shut it on my way out after that catastrophic night, so this immediately tickles me anxious. I quietly draw a Nobility in my right hand, and slink through the structural passage with a slight forward hunch.

FOUR

Daylight floods it as I reach the roof.

A shadow extends onto the flat floor not far behind the door, which I come to see is still blocked by the overturned fridge. The shadow's source is a man with shoulder-length blonde hair, straight and well-maintained. He's doubled over the open fridge, rifling through its contents. The stench is sudden and heavy. That smell of rotten waste and vomit from inside the building must've camouflaged it until now. This young man appears completely unfazed by it, although I cannot see his face.

He has yet to notice my presence.

Then I straighten my body as I fully emerge from the secret shortcut. My wingtips crunch the malleable flooring ever so slightly in the easy stillness of the air, and the man pirouettes with surprising agility. Moreover, he's armed and quick with it. The gun is an old Smith & Wesson Schofield, refurbished and covetous. Nothing fancy, just a mahogany grip, but goddamn powerful.

"Looks like we got ourselves a Mexican standoff, here," I say with raised eyebrows.

"Do I look fuckin' Mexican to you, pal?" he replies sternly. A dry sense of humor, this one.

"It's a figure of speech."

"How about I figure you hit the floor when I squeeze this trigger?"

I eyeball the Schofield. The hammer's cocked, alright—this guy's good. Two inches shorter than me, about twenty pounds lighter, too. He doesn't look a day over twenty-five, although the wear on his cheeks is more than just fatigue. Lady-killer green eyes and a blonde goatee an inch off his chin, coupled with his hair, makes me not want to trust him. As if the Schofield aimed at my head isn't enough to go on. Simultaneously, I don't take him for a stone-cold killer.

Just a disgruntled young man.

But why this?

"What're you doing up here?" I ask. "And why the fridge? I can't imagine your appetite's that bad."

“You’re an Enforcer, eh—you make the call.”

Shit. I forgot my badge is dangling from my neck since I entered the precinct. Might as well be a goddamn target painted on my chest.

“Where’re the bodies?” I ask upon realizing neither Clyde’s corpse nor are the Kigula’s present.

“What fuckin’ bodies?”

He looks genuinely clueless. I shake my head and disregard the subject, figuring Floyd mustered the strength to take Clyde’s body while the Kigulan corpses...well, that stumps me, since the fridge remains and apparently its contents, too. The dried blood, however, cannot be missed.

“I had a pretty shitty night yesterday, stranger,” I sigh, slowly lowering the Nobility. “So I’m not looking for any more bloodshed...at least not ‘til tonight, when I go on duty.”

“Huh...so you’re off duty, but you’re up here?” the man smirks diabolically. He doesn’t lower his gun, however. “I bet you’ve come up here to collect some o’ this shit for your own profit. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You are. I was up here last night, so were a pair of youngsters by the names of Clyde and Floyd. Clyde didn’t make it, thanks to some Kigula that crashed the party. Ring a bell?”

“Sounds like the names of any two clowns that dance around the streets these days trying to run shit.”

I’m usually spot-on with detecting sarcasm, but this guy is taking me in circles.

“Alright, I’ll take your word for it. Would you mind aiming at something other than my face, please?”

The man sighs hoarsely and lowers the Schofield, but only so that he aims at my knees now.

“Better?” he says with a crooked smirk.

“So very comforting,” I say.

“You’re pretty wise-cracking for an allegedly ‘straight’ Enforcer.”

“My breakfast was interrupted by a Kigulan attack on some cars ‘n’ pedestrians along Franklin Street,” I say, “so

FOUR

pardon my grumpiness.”

The man suddenly lowers his gun all the way and his muscles appear to slacken over his entire body. He takes a step forward, even, but it isn't malicious. Concern fills his eyes, along with a droplet of shock.

“Really?” he says, conveying this sense of surprise. It's genuine, far as I can tell. His voice even shakes the slightest. “Was anyone killed? How many were there?”

“None of the drivers were killed, but a couple of pedestrians were.” I shake my head as I recall the incident, and it's more than obvious that not only am I telling the truth but I also am not a corrupt Enforcer. I notice his skepticism fade as I speak, Nobility hanging innocuously at my side. He finally mirrors this same gesture of tacit trust. “Two Prowlers and a Kigulan soldier. Fortunately there were two Lawmen inside the diner when it all went down. Not much firepower, but they helped damn well.”

“Jesus, man, I'm tellin' ya, shit's hitting the fan lately—and it ain't slowing down! Not for *nobody!*”

Now he throws a fit. Hands up in the air, waving the Schofield around. Spittle glistening across his bottom lip. Fury churning in his sea-green irises. Heavy is his brow, with both concern and resentment.

Not toward me, though.

He appears to have been heftily reminded of a common enemy more worthy his spite than myself.

The Kigula.

“You know something I don't?” I ask. “I mean, yeah, shit hits the fan 'round here every hour. Rockford is no Chicago, it's normal in cities like this.”

“Nah, man, not like *this*. I don't know details, I can't really say, but word's streaming along the grapevine that more and more Kigula sightings are occurring lately. Even during the day. And now full-on attacks of that scale? Fuck!”

His last word bites the air and I hear his teeth gnash.

“Hey, I'm putting this away, now, alright?” I say,

holstering the Nobility. “In all honesty, I came back here now to dispose of those body parts in that fridge. Truth is, I forgot about it that night up until about an hour ago. I could’ve reported it, yeah. But, and I’m sure you can back me up on this, my skepticism of other Enforcers’ loyalty to procedure is a little...shaky.”

The man finally expresses an apologetic nature, although it’s a bit ragged around the edges. He’s probably been conned like this before, it wouldn’t be the first time from a corrupt Enforcer to an innocent civilian.

Now, I’m not about to slap an ‘innocent’ sticker to this man’s forehead, but I’ve come far enough to say he’s trustworthy. At least for now.

I’m usually pretty good at reading people.

Around here you kind of have to be, especially as an Enforcer. Otherwise, you’re fucked.

“Sorry ‘bout that, I’ve had...well, you could say I’ve had bad run-ins with Enforcers before. Most not quite as straightforward and believable as you.” The man tucks his Schofield into the tail of his wool slacks, fastened by a black belt. He’s wearing an untucked black collar shirt with the top button loosened. When he extends his hand, which I take to feel a firm and callused grip, he introduces himself. “The name’s Jackson Dunham. And who might you be, Enforcer?”

“Barry Sharpe,” I reply, then withdraw my hand. “Hopeful we can still solve this like men. Mind if I ask what exactly you were planning to do with the contents of that refrigerator?”

“Well, to be *frank*, Barry,” he replied with a twisted smirk I’ve come to trademark with him, “I’m kind of behind on some payments...to some people...so I was hoping to settle it.”

“Right...the *wrong* kind of people, I assume?”

“If by ‘wrong’ you mean gun-toting gangster-wannabes with enough firepower and coercion to convince people they’re legit...then yeah, the *wrong* kind of people.”

“And you,” I say after a moment of deliberation. “What

FOUR

kind of person are you? How do you fit into this mess?"

"Hey, man," Jackson says, lifting his hands palms-out, "I'm just a guy trying to make ends meet in this hellhole."

"I can understand that, but...why are you mixed up with these alleged assholes?"

"Alleged? Are you serious?"

"Fill in the blanks for me and I'll be a lil' more receptive. What're their names?"

"Roberto Paulson, a.k.a. Big Paulie, and Jeremiah Saint."

"I know of 'em."

"No surprise there. They're big-time sons o' bitches, yin-and-yang."

I know what he meant by that—opposites.

Paulie is tall and wide, with a really big head and a surprisingly small cap of black curly hair. He's half-Italian and half-German if my memory serves correctly. Raised here, he has hardly no accent except for when he wishes to sound superior. He has a very palpable arrogance to him and an overall untrustworthy air, not unlike most of the well-organized criminals these days. He has Enforcer connections, this much I'm sure, which makes me hate him even more.

Then there's his partner, a stick-figure in comparison.

Jeremiah is a couple inches shorter and very lean, thinner than Jackson or myself, but he's still considered 'muscle.' A man with a gun in his hand isn't necessarily strong, but with Paulie at his side and a following of goons Jeremiah suffices. He's nimble, intelligent, and deceptive.

Triple threat.

Jeremiah's abundant spiky blonde hair and disproportional facial features are an eyesore. He's always wearing gray suspenders over a white collar shirt, unbuttoned during the summer. He's the kind of guy I'd really just like to backhand if I had the chance, and kill if the opportunity was offered.

Paulie and Jeremiah are more than petty crooks. Paulie pimps as a side business, which is despicable by itself but even

more so because that route is disease-riddled and abusive. Speaking of which, Jeremiah's all about the force. Rape and sexual assault are his strong suit, which pains me to say.

Yeah, I'd kill 'em both if the chance presented itself.

With their Enforcer connections they've proven to be most slippery subjects, so except for a few fruitless run-ins with them I've hardly had the option at my hands.

"Why do you owe them?" I ask next, all of these thoughts bustling through my head in a matter of seconds. Jackson could probably tell that I was considering the truth of his words, and then some.

"I, uh...I took a girl off their hands."

I cock an eyebrow. "A broad?"

"She's my *girlfriend!*" he snaps.

I raise my hands. "Didn't mean anything by it."

Jackson runs his fingers through his hair. He shakes his head and clears his throat.

"Look," he says firmly, "they reeled her into their business with threats as usual after she tried helping one of their girls, a friend of hers, out of their hold. Girl was all beat up 'n' shit, no doubt by Jeremiah. So when I did the same thing to get her out, they demanded I give 'er back but I wasn't gonna have it."

"Where is she now?"

"She's safe," he sighs, then shrugs. "As safe as she's gonna be around here. Works as a waitress."

"Okay, good. So they threatened you, I imagine?"

"And then some. Finally I decided to take the option of paying them back as opposed to the alternative."

Six feet under.

"How much do you owe?"

"Eight-hundred. They gave me three days. Can you believe that shit?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"So, now that you know the details...?"

I fill him in on my resentment for Paulie and Jeremiah,

FOUR

then propose a plan. It involves killing and the risk of being on the business end of a gun.

“If it involves killing,” he replies, “then that’s just to be expected.”

I agree with him, then lay out the plan. It’s frayed at the edges and full of creases that won’t come out with a good ironing. It’s like a really decrepit map with pieces missing. But it suffices for Jackson, who appears rather eager for it. I try to reassure myself that I’m not wrong about trusting the man.

“Meet with ‘em tonight, say you’ve got his money and then some, at this address. Let’s plan for seven o’clock, right after dusk. I’ll be here to camp out in that wall passage there. It’ll be sealed when you take the stairs, as I imagine they’ll probably insist on you leading them here in case they don’t trust you.”

“And that’s a given.”

“Yeah, pretty much.” I sigh. “So, that said, it’s pretty simple. You guys come in through the door, fridge is by the far ledge—we’ll move it here in a minute—and they’ll go to it.”

“This sounds well and all, but my gut says they’ll take me to the ledge with them. Think about it—they won’t want someone like me behind them, especially on a goddamn rooftop.”

I nod, agreeing.

“Alright, then, carry on. The three of you, and probably some of his goons, too, will proceed. How ‘bout this? Once there, you wait ‘til I shoot in the air to drop a lit match in the fridge. Kigula flesh is like kindling, in case you didn’t know—that stuff will light up in an instant. Then, get outta there...see those A/C units and ventilation exhausts over there—” I point to the left of the far ledge “—dive that way, grab some cover. I imagine you won’t be carrying at the time, so I’d hide your Schofield over there for later. I’ll make sure it’s still there when I come back tonight.”

“Are you kidding me!?” he exclaims. “You really expect me to believe it won’t be jacked before then!?”

“Hey!” I snap, jabbing my forefinger at him. “You need to be a little more trusting, otherwise this plan will really hit the fan and you won’t have an umbrella to save your life.”

“Alright, alright!”

“Good. So...while they’re freaking out, and probably trying to either put out the fire and-or shooting at you, I’ll get at them with my Thompson. Now keep in mind, that stuff on fire’s gonna attract a lot of Kigula attention. So if Paulie and Jeremiah bring their goons, we’ll have some third-party help, but that also means a second enemy. So be prepared.”

Jackson nods, taking all of this in.

“You done this before?” he asks, looking impressed.

“Something like it, more than once.”

“Right...and...ever conspired with a civilian before?”

“Once or twice.”

“Ever regretted it?”

“No,” I shake my head. “So don’t make me start.”

Jackson nods. “So, that’s that?”

“Yeah, that’s that.” I move to the refrigerator, whose door I close with a slam. The rubberized seal suction shut. “Now gimme a hand, here.”

Jackson mutely agrees and helps me push the fridge across the rooftop to the edge, where its back goes to the parapet. Now the roof access door is at last unblocked.

We pant and stretch, taking a brief respite.

“How do we know...it’ll still be full tonight?” Jackson asks, suggesting that the fridge might be raided before then.

“I’ll check back periodically,” I lie for assurance. Simply put, I can’t risk being seen going to-and-from this place, especially if the beef between Jackson and the two assholes is as genuine as I believe it to be. In addition, I have other things I should attend to.

I try to get him to relax, and ultimately help him stash the Schofield. I take the time to compliment the piece, saying I’ve always wanted one of those or a Colt Walker. He says that he could, hypothetically, sell the Schofield for half of what he owes

FOUR

if not more. But he refuses to; he's had it for two years and it's never let him down. I ask if he has another gun, and he says matter-of-factly "of course."

It's a standard Colt M1911, not a Nobility model, and he purportedly has it in his car. I ask if he's considered selling his ride, to which he gives me the look of a maniac.

He must have parked at the curb or around back.

I'm curious to know what it is, but don't ask at the moment. Right now I just want to go home for some transient shuteye, then late lunch.

We shake hands once more before departing.

Can I trust this Jackson Dunham?

My gut says yes. My gut seldom ever disappoints. I decide to wage tonight on it, knowing that it could mean death against life if he betrays me. Otherwise, it should go over fairly well.

The Kigula pose the only true problem.

Then again, when don't they?

5

Naps aren't usually my cup of tea, per se. I'm not too fond of sleep these days unless it comes thick and uninterrupted. But I can't risk having shook up nerves and senses tonight, if this improvised plan is going to work well. No, work *perfectly*—anything shy of that probably means being shot, or worse. I've only been clawed by a Kigula on three occasions since their 'invasion,' as some fanatics are calling it, and shot twice. One winged my shoulder during a close-quarters firefight with a man wielding a pistol; yeah, we both had handguns. How he didn't pump my chest full of lead is still beyond me—that was some miraculous shit. As for the second time, it dug into my left shoulder; that arm's never been quite as strong since.

I hope this particular Jackson Dunham is getting his rest, too. Given, he has to go notify the two assholes—or at least their representatives—whom he owes money to.

Supposing that whole sap story was legitimate.

I'm banking on it.

My nap is short-lived and pocked with memories I would've rather not experienced again. Flashes of my childhood, draped in swing sets and entrails, a mish-mash of the past and present, with terrible premonitions of a possible future in ruination. It was the vilest mental montage I've ever had. The

FIVE

manual carousel rattled with human skulls, some split down the middle while others were missing jaws or fragments of the cranium. Some still had flesh caking their surfaces, an eyeball dangling from a socket here and there. I recalled my birthday, probably ten years old, and my cake looked delicious for a change. It would have been perfect if the candles hadn't been human finger bones, although in my dream I seemed oblivious; it is only now that I recall the serrated images and I recoil.

I remember blowing out the candles and hearing a thousand souls wail while wisps of smoke rose to the ceiling.

I woke on the spur of hugging my mother, the transition from her healthy form when I was eight years old to when I'd found her a few years ago...her body crumbled in my eight-year-old arms, dismembered and decapitated.

Tears stung my eyes, a distant pain.

I sprung from bed to wash my face, then lit a Lucky as I streamed out the room. I hadn't even taken my longcoat as I left the apartment complex to descend the stairs and duck into my Fleetline. I just drove, fingers curled around the steering wheel, foot like an anvil on the accelerator.

The sky is clouding over, more intensely with each passing minute. I'm sitting at a diner now—no, not the same one as earlier—gazing out the window. I drink my coffee and trace the gliding rainclouds across the earth's ceiling. I have erratic haphazard thoughts.

My Thompson in the backseat. The smell of my Lucky burning in the ashtray at the center of the table. The seemingly miles-away aroma of delectable food cooking in the kitchen fifteen feet behind me. The memories that formed my nightmares during the two-hour nap I took.

It is these that I give the most distance.

I focus on the present, and the imminent future.

Especially the events that will encompass my own tonight. I play out the event in my head, toy with it like a patron at a theatre with a roll of film. Except here in my head I can do more than fondle the case and distort the reel. Here, I am the

director and producer and actor. I redesign the storyboards as I see fit. I picture Jackson and myself pulling off this plan without any problems. Then I picture it crashing like a pile-up on the freeway. I try to decipher the flaws of the plan, in which there are more than I'd rather admit to Jackson or anyone else, as well as make some tweaks.

"Here ya go, sir," comes my waitress's perky voice. I swivel my attention from the less-than-clean window to the plate in her hand. She sets it down on the table, wearing what I can only describe as the world's fakest smile. "One 'Mighty Fine' with an extra iced tea."

"Thanks, darling," I say, beaming right back at her. She nods politely and asks if I'd like anything else. My thoughts run wild—a complimentary gun, complete with the little white flag that says 'bang' on it. People need to lighten up these days, or get dragged down under the weight of the soot. Instead I just click my tongue and shake my head, thanking her again. Her smile carries her voice away as she retreats into the bowels of the diner's kitchen. Probably to pinch off a cigarette or earn an extra 'tip' from her sleazy manager.

I shake my head and sigh gutturally.

The double-decker sandwich on my plate is called a Mighty Fine according to the menu. Dense layers of roast beef slathered in American cheese and embraced by plain white bread, hold the mayonnaise. The included lettuce and tomato have been applied with a sloppy hand, I only pray they were clean.

Don't know about Mighty Fine, but it'll do.

I chow down, complementing the sandwich with swigs from my iced tea. Bland and cold, just like this world. Except in this case I'm swallowing it, not the other way around.

Roughly fifteen minutes later I dip out, gesturing a tipped hat to my waitress as I exit. No matter how blatant her charade of happiness and courtesy was, it served its purpose; I tipped liberally, as I tend to these days. Afterall, diner employees reside at shelters, and that's just one societal injustice they have to live

FIVE

with. Then there's the fact that they work in the food industry.

My Nobilities sway at my sides, secure in their holsters, as I amble to the Fleetline. I duck in and am glad that no other daytime Kigula attack has occurred since earlier. At least, not on my watch...I can only hope that it's true across town.

The day has progressed like an intoxicated slug.

I feel like it should be dusk now, but it's still an hour and a half away. Although, as my drive leads me up Franklin Street, I realize that it's probably for the best. I need to pack my gear and hit up that condemned building on Chinook Avenue *before* sundown. That way I'm fully prepared and fresh at the waiting game for when Jackson shows up with the two notorious assholes. Chances are they won't be alone, instead followed by a posse of reckless sons o' bitches like remora to a shark. Except in this case it's not one but two sharks, and their parasitic minions are equally as dangerous.

Quite an ocean we have to survive in these days.

With these thoughts rampaging through my skull, I won't lie—a feel a bit excited. Fearful? Not really, but let's be honest—you'd have to be a complete maniac to not feel any kind of doubt for this plan. I do my best to shove these negative notions to the back of my subconscious, bury them in a necropolis with their friends. I have neither the time nor the luxury to entertain such thoughts.

So, first, I swing by my place.

I load up accordingly—three magazines for each Nobility, in addition to those already loaded, and two C-type drums for my Thompson, not including what's currently loaded. It's quite a load to carry for one man, namely those drum magazines. They're about the size and shape of a dinner plate with fifty-round capacities each. Due to their diametrical slimness, however, they slip in nicely to compartmental pockets in the longcoat. I cannot carry more than two, though, but I seldom need more than that—especially with my Nobilities well-supplied.

Readiness. I suppose this term fits me now.

I head out, a walking killing machine, armed to the teeth some might say. I enter the Fleetline and tear out of the lot, setting my itinerary to the target location on Chinook. When I arrive it's about thirty minutes to dusk, and the sky's solar wound is beginning to open up. I find a back road that circles around to the rear of the condemned building, a route that Clyde and Floyd must've used that night to beat me here. I park at the curb, half a block from the nearest building that isn't the one which holds my interest. I slip out, lock the Fleetline behind me, and head for the back of the condemned building. It looks surprisingly 'cleaner' than the front, sporting less graffiti and wear. I nonetheless recognize the decrepit brick structure, and find an entrance that hasn't been completely sealed.

Either that or recently breached.

I imagine the latter, figuring that Clyde and Floyd had used it as well as others, probably. Jackson among them, most likely. Now *I* use it, ducking through the gap between askew two-by-fours until I'm inside.

Ah, yes, this place. That foul reek of grime and shit.

Literally.

I find the stairwell, which I feel that I've grown accustomed to. It's bland and bleak, yes, but somehow or another it's peaceful. Probably the cleanest area in this entire building, if it's possible such a place exists. Given, this doesn't go to say that the building has a safe haven or something ridiculous like that; I believe it's already been established that it magnetizes bad things. I currently head for the roof, which should be the safest spot in this place, but of course seems to be the worst.

Fortunately I come across nobody that gives me any static en route. In fact, as I reach the top floor and shuffle toward the door, it's a little too good to be true—still nothing. Not a soul, however corrupt, since I entered.

Again, cynical thoughts worm their way into my head.

I banish them and proceed with heightened vigilance. I make my way into the secret passage that by now probably isn't

FIVE

very secret, but I hold onto the hope that Jackson is trustworthy. I gingerly emerge through the other side, stepping foot onto the roof and sweeping my gaze over every spot that the dim evening light offers me.

Nothing. This is good.

I go to confirm that Jackson's Schofield is still in place behind an A/C unit, and it is. The thing still looks pretty nice, and I'm tempted to handle it for shits and giggles, but decide for the better. I check up on the refrigerator, only peering inside to glimpse its full contents, not wanting to ingest the full blow of its stink—much less let it out into the air.

Now to play the waiting game.

This, I'm used to. So I set up where I told Jackson I'd be, lurking and ready. The secret passage that snakes through the structural wall opposite the access door is darker and muggier than I would've liked. I make do, first confirming the secureness of the entrance hatch. Would hate to leave that sucker wide open for when they arrive.

Surprise, asshole.

Unfortunately for my enemies—cohorts of crime and immorality—I'm neither sloppy nor weary. I'm well-rested, invigorated, and hungry for their blood to hit the floor.

My greatest concern for the night is the Kigula.

I let that thought drift around my head like rising smoke from a fire. I try not to choke on it and the possibilities it brings to the table.

I just focus on the present, and I stay awake.

The prior proves to be the easy part. As time passes, the latter presents a challenge. I hang onto the last droplets of light that seem to etch their place in the shadows of this secret passage. Dusk has made the sky arterial and it's likely to reach nightfall within half an hour.

Unlike most Enforcers and the occasional Lawman, I never wear watches. They can cripple a man's covertness when he least expects it, as well as offering just another item for the muggers to take.

Armed or not, I still see this as a problem.

I guess it to be on approach of seven o'clock, probably ten 'til, when I hear voices echo from behind me. They're rising up through the stairwell, carrying down the top level hallway. I hear a door shut, ringing through the structure—these guys really have no concept, or care, for stealth.

All the better for me.

Their footfalls are sloppy but plentiful, and on approach. I unsling my Thompson M1D1 and quietly fit it into my hands, wooden buttstock pressed firmly against my left shoulder. I pop the safety off just before the men whom I cannot see reach the roof access door. I hear Jackson's voice resonate through the structure.

"Just through here, guys, I swear." He sighs gutturally. Spite kindles his tone. "Man, you guys don't believe me...what the fuck? I told ya! You ain't gotta bury your guns in my back."

"Shut your trap and move along, buddy."

I recognize this voice, alright. Shit.

"I said *move it*," Roberto Paulson, notoriously Big Paulie, growls. I picture him pushing Jackson forward using the business end of his revolver like a police baton. The roof access door rattles before it opens, and I can hear Jackson louder than ever as he passes over the threshold.

"Dammit, man, I'm movin', I'm movin'!" He mutters something else as his shoes crunch along the rooftop's coarse flooring. Then, louder and coherent: "See, I told you guys! Right over there, by the ledge!"

Following this come the other guys, probably Paulie and Jeremiah Saint. Tailing them, and I make the deduction based on the scuffing steps, are at least six men. Their goons, the remora members of their criminal posse. Undoubtedly well-armed, too—Thompsons and shotguns and maybe even an M2 Carbine here and there. I try not to think too much on that note.

Jackson and I are only two men, with three handguns and one sub-machinegun between us.

We're banking on the element of surprise, here.

FIVE

A bushwhacking coup.

“Why the hell’s it against the ledge?” Jeremiah asks, his nasally voice unmistakable. “You tryna push us over or somethin’?”

“You, maybe,” Jackson replies and I can only hope to Christ he’s smirking but not too heavily. “But Paulie? Right...I’d do more harm to myself than good.”

My guess is confirmed when Jeremiah barks back with biting resentment. Then Paulie cools him down and they walk out onto the roof; I hear their footsteps trace their positions into view. Then their figures become visible, but only through the metallic slats in the panel which I hide behind. I inch forward without relocating my feet, practically holding my breath in the dense shadows here, and stare out.

The sun and sky are ending their foreplay.

In a matter of minutes I won’t be able to see jackshit through these slats. But I can’t risk removing it until the posse is past me and our main two targets are beside the fridge. Fortunately this last bit I needn’t worry about—bait hooked. The men reach the refrigerator only after Jackson stops beside it, to its left. Behind him is the mess of ventilation exhausts and A/C units where his Schofield is hidden. It awaits his hands, calls for his fingers, his eager touch.

As does my Thompson’s trigger...

I hear muffled voices and then the opening of the fridge’s door. It comes open like a freezer’s lid, spewing stench so strong it’s visible in the air. The unit obviously isn’t hooked up, but it was packed with slowly-melting ice last time I checked.

It won’t have anyone coming to refill it anymore.

Finally, the age-scattered goons of Paulie and Jeremiah’s pass by my panel. Their eyes are scanning the parameters of the rooftop, but not once does a lazy gaze focus on my wall panel. I let out my breath in suspenseful streams, nostrils flaring.

I can feel, taste, the air thick with tension.

“Good, right?” Jackson says, nodding briskly. I can’t make out his facial features from here. I hope he isn’t grinning—

they'll get way too damn suspicious.

"What the fuck are you so happy about, kitty?" Jeremiah says with a chip in his tooth.

Ah, shit.

"Happy that you're not gonna *kill* me," Jackson stands his ground. "What the hell do you think, man?"

"Christ, that shit stinks!" one of the goons says.

They all look the same from my angle. Dark clothes, half of them wearing longcoats and the others bare vests pretending to be gunslingers from the ol' west. Every single one of them dons a fedora of some kind, a few of them tilted.

I shake my head.

Paulie turns on his heel to snap at the goon for speaking up, but shortly thereafter starts cursing at himself in the wake of such a violating stench.

Seven. I count seven goons.

And I imagine it's about seven o'clock by now.

Coincidence? Call it whatever you'd like.

I put the sole of my right shoe into the panel, kicking it out. It clangs and clatters across the rooftop, gathering every present soul's attention. In this same instant I protrude the barrel of my Thompson and fire two shots into the air. Most of the goons jump in their skins, startled. I glimpse Jackson past the crowd of them flee from the refrigerator, diving toward a certain A/C unit. Paulie and Jeremiah consult each other in a panicked fashion, which is a keyword at the moment.

The seven goons are all fumbling with their weapons, facing my direction as I emerge half-standing out of the secret passage. My right shoulder braces the wall and I begin firing into the crowd of guys. Mid to late twenties, thirties, even a few middle-aged faces. Two of which are cut down immediately, previously stragglers but now right on the frontline. Their blood mists the crisp night air and spatters the vests of their cohorts.

My Thompson is making quite the racket.

Over the sputtering muzzle flashes I spot movement behind the remaining goons. I cannot make any precise

FIVE

observations, only to assume that the two POI's are trying to take cover behind the fridge.

That's when the first enemy bullet sears past me. Then another, smacking the wall to my right. These are handgun shots, coming from the tall Paulie's gun. He risks shooting over the shoulders, but not heads, of his own henchmen. Because of this, I figure, his aim is pure shit—worse than usual.

And his gun ain't a revolver.

It's an M1911 Nobility, glistening stainless steel with pearl grips. Fucking cheat bastard. Either got it from his connections or stole it from a dead Enforcer's corpse. Both scenarios are highly, and thus disturbingly, possible

I withdraw back into the massage.

Bullets start hitting a lot closer to home. With this interruption, I've been shoveled back into hiding. I curse under my breath and hope that Jackson's not only found safe cover but also his Schofield. I'm given confirmation of this thought when I hear that revolver bark like a rabid grizzly at whatever its target is. A couple of unintelligible shouts rise into the night, followed by spurts of profanity and the obvious acts of reloading. However, some of those capacious Thompsons are still at the ready.

They're just waiting for me to play groundhog.

Not today, assholes.

I contemplate sticking my head out again when I hear a spine-tingling scream, like a man being castrated with a pair of blunt scissors. What comes next is a terrible ripping sound, then an abundance of panicked shouts and rapid gunfire.

A trademarked Kigulan entrance.

"Fire in the sky!" Jackson's voice scratches the air as he raises it above normal yelling volume. I make out every word and understand what he means seconds before the stench of ablaze Kigulan flesh reaches my nostrils. And boy is it a horrendous odor. Then I see a man's decapitated head bounce past me on the roof like a runaway soccer ball.

I take a deep breath and emerge with Thompson

shouldered. The rooftop has become a bloodbath. A couple of Kigula soldiers are on the ground, bleeding out from multiple gunshot wounds. Twice as many men are splayed about, most of them in more than one piece. The scent of both human and Kigulan blood rapes the once tolerable atmosphere. My brow furrows and my nose wrinkles at its detection, its forcible taste on my lips.

One of three remaining goons turns to me, ten feet away, missing his left arm but still wielding a sawed-off shotgun in his left. He raises it to fire at me and I put a cluster in his forehead a moment before a Kigula soldier latches onto him from behind. Its claws sink into his shoulders and its jaws take out fatal chunks from his neck. He feels nothing thanks to me, aside from the former pain from his severed arm. Now the corpse collapses forward, along with the Kigula, which I kill with twice as many bullets to its ovoid skull.

The other two men are killed before I have time to answer two-plus-two. One's midsection opens up in a clean slit to spill out a mess of entrails. He falls in a crumpled heap and the Kigula soldier having caused the evisceration now bounds at me. I dodge its first swipe, nearly losing my footing on the corpse of a fallen henchman, then turn to lash out again. The Thompson spits fire, cutting an array of .45-caliber bullets up its left leg. Muscle and bone get punched through and it tumbles forward, letting out a shrill growl.

"Behind ya!" Jackson shouts.

I pirouette to see the weaponless Jeremiah charging me. Either his gun went empty or, more likely, was swiped away by a Kigula. I settle with the latter upon seeing a pair of bleeding stumps on his right hand, where his index and middle finger ought to be. Spittle slings from his gaping mouth as he charges me like the madman I've always seen him as.

The crippled Kigula behind me now hobbles toward the both of us. Jeremiah wrestles with me, both on our feet, trying to force the Thompson into his possession. He manages to elbow me in my left forearm, throwing that hand off the weapon and

FIVE

gaining a brief advantage.

Keyword: brief.

With that left hand, I unholster my Nobility on that side and fire an instinctive shot into Jeremiah's right foot. Blood ruptures up out of his shoe, laces and flesh sticking to his pantleg. He howls in pain and during this same instant I swing the Nobility around to blind-fire behind me. The scrambling Kigula soldier drops in a heap, liquid warmth spreading to meet my left heel on the floor.

Disgusting.

I push forward, then drop my left heel into Jeremiah's wounded foot. Another scream of pain, this time unbearable and he's forced backward. The stagger offsets his balance, giving me another critical moment to take advantage of. I drive my right leg up between his, connecting my shin with his groin. His scream cuts short and becomes a miserable whimper.

"Jackson!?" I call out, seeing nothing but stillness before me. Behind the doubled-over Jeremiah, all I spot are corpses both Kigulan and human, including a rather sizeable subject I identify as Roberto Paulson. But no Jackson.

"I'm here!" comes that familiar voice, relieving me.

"Where?" I call out. "Come on, man, we need to get the hell outta here."

He pops up from behind an A/C unit like a jack-in-the-box, wearing a look of mixed emotions. I calculate one count of bewilderment, one of anger, and possibly two of victory. He hurdles over a ventilation duct and scampers over to where I stand, in front of the now kneeling Jeremiah. Less than ten feet behind him is his deceased partner, Paulie.

Meanwhile, flames lick at the night sky from the bowels of the refrigerator. The stench seems to be decaying the very air around this place. If I stay here for any longer than five minutes I'm sure to regurgitate my Mighty Fine, and it'll be far from it.

"Now what?" I ask, taking a deep breath.

Jackson towers over Jeremiah. He shakes his head, wielding a look of pure aggression. And it falls upon none other

than Jeremiah Saint.

“You’re really gonna let me handle this?” Jackson asks without looking at me, and hardly without even moving his lips.

“Assuming you aren’t lying about your girlfriend...yeah.” I clear my throat. “Just hurry up before I do something myself.”

I turn my back on the two and approach the supine corpse of a late Roberto Paulson. The top of his fat head has been blown off, scalp and calvarium joining a mess of brain matter on the floor above him. His eyes are upturned white marbles against a pallid set of features.

I nod to myself and a feeling of satisfaction settles over my being.

When the Schofield goes off to my right, I don’t flinch. My head just bows and I think good thoughts. Thoughts of vengeance, thoughts of justice, thoughts of death in just the right places.

“You ready?” he asks a few seconds later, approaching me. I look up at him and his face is glistening with sweat. He shakes a few strands of blonde hair from his brow.

“Eagerly so,” I reply. Then I look around at all the corpses and nod to him. “What about the cash? The loot?”

Jackson shrugs. “I dunno, figured you’d confiscate it. Do what you gotta do with it.”

“No,” I shake my head, patting him on the shoulder. “It’s yours. This here...this is your debt paid to them. And who knows...maybe even enough to get his girls off the hook he put ‘em on.”

Jackson nods. Sincerity fills his eyes.

“I appreciate it, Enforcer.”

“Hey,” I say with a forced smirk, “look around you. I’m not really an Enforcer tonight. Just a man doing his civil duty.”

“Right...well, thanks, anyway. Barry.”

We shake hands. It’s quick, it’s curt. We don’t bear-hug or high-five. We get things moving along, quicker the better. Quite possible some law-abiding citizen below will phone a

FIVE

precinct in regards to the commotion on this rooftop. Don't wanna be here when they arrive—not a fan of that much paperwork.

Or attention.

While Jackson loots the bodies of their fat wallets, I attend to the fridge—shutting the door, extinguishing the flame and odor. Regardless, the contents have been destroyed for good.

“‘Til next time,” we promise each other, and depart.

6

Tonight I aim for heavy sleep. The kind where the Z's wage wars with any thoughts keeping you awake, subduing your cramps and palpitations to render your body at peace. Your mind, too, for that matter—my most troubled facet. Especially after that rooftop bloodbath earlier...it's been a few weeks since I've seen something that grisly, that abundant. Do I think they all deserved such terrible fates? Paulie got off light, that's for damn sure. Jeremiah went down for what he was worth, if that doesn't explain it right there. The others, I don't know the details of their transgressions, but most of them conformed to their bosses' ways like sentient ticks.

So sure, they had it coming.

I've seen and dealt with enough crime for the night, sufficient to last the week if possible. I know that mulling over this won't change the fact that I'll be thrust into another shitty situation before the week's terminus.

And as if on cue, I hear a scream.

I'm stopped at a traffic light, a four-way intersection downtown. Naturally there's practically nobody occupying the sidewalks on this block, except for a few indolent beggars. My windows are rolled down, letting in the putridity of Rockford's air filter into the cabin. Fortunately I'm dragging on a Lucky and

SIX

the crisp smoke has a stronger scent. It isn't exactly ambrosial but in comparison it might as well be Au Sauvage. Through the billowing smoke that rolls out the driver's side window and into the night air, I hear this scream. It's not too distant, and rises before falling only to rise again and then cut out.

A pause of silence settles in.

It returns five seconds later. Sounds planned.

I don't call it a fallacy without investigating, though. Could be some muggers assaulting a poor woman. Could be three muggers—two men, one woman playing the act. Or...it could be Kigula.

My hands spin the wheel and I lurch through the intersection. That damned red light like a ruby suspended above the road still glows. There's nobody around! Fucking town is rickety on its hinges. I veer left, taking a road marked Callahan Street. I slow to a steady fifteen and cruise down the right-side lane, thinking I'm on a good sound-trail.

The screams have become less common, now.

Not a good sign if this is a legitimate issue.

I find myself in pursuit of their source for some time now, and it isn't the least bit comforting. The night grows denser and longer, as if possible. Darker, certainly, with less and less functioning street lamps over me. It is ingesting this fact that the realization hits me—I'm being led to the outskirts of town. The perimeter of Rockford while still inside city limits means that I've been led into thicker 'Kigulan country.'

The threats skyrocket out here.

Likewise, the casualties.

I want to kick myself but instead for the time being I just sit forward and heighten my vigilance. Tell myself to focus, keep acute senses especially acute. The screams are intermittent still but just the same getting louder—no, clearer. Not so much louder though—if anything they're becoming dimmer to my ears.

Their sources are growing tired.

And that's when it really hits me, as I cruise these empty

outer-city streets: there are two people. Man and woman, their screams unfiltered and gutturally exhausted as well as terrified. I've heard cries like it before, and on the run too.

I picture them, whether I want to or not, and cringe.

I would've rather not.

Instinct slaps me in the face like an aristocrat you mistook for a streetwalker at a bar and I nearly lurch out of my seat. In the same instant, one with the other, my hand spins the wheel right and the leather coarsely rubs my callused palms. My upper body tilts to the right, angled over the center console, gaze askew through the sooty windshield.

Reminder—carwash.

The present takes over again. I spot two silhouettes sprinting across the street I've just turned onto. Whether overwhelmed with fear and shock or simply not paying attention, they do not spot my Fleetline. My headlights are on alright; their at-the-end-of-the-Tunnel glow is impossible to miss at night. But this pair sure enough does, instead beelining into the nearest alley.

My eyes readjust. Fuck.

Not an alley so much as the narrow space between two residential houses. And not townhouses, either—these are picket-fence homes wearing bland monotony like a brown floral shower curtain. If they weren't dull enough before World War II, they sure as hell are now.

Most of these places are abandoned or used for squatters. Which means that when things get really unruly or an attack occurs outside of a house, not a damn thing will happen. Nobody will come out to help, for sure—but that's a given all across town. However, unlike downtown not a soul out here will bother phoning a precinct.

Soul. Now there's a word for debate.

I tear down the road, not even thinking about the possibility that I could hit whatever's chasing them with my car. When I do acknowledge that possibility, it's replaced by another notion—that *it* could be the one hitting my car. I've got less than

SIX

three car lengths to reach the houses between which they had run when a blur of movement crosses the street in front of me.

Distance—a cut between thirty and twenty feet as my car approaches. I stomp the brakes and Goodyear's scream against the asphalt louder than the people have been. Smoke clouds my rearview and my Lucky falls into my lap.

I look down to wince and pat the lit end out before it burns through my trousers. When I look up the Fleetline is askew in the middle of the street and the blur of movement has reached the other side. I swivel my gaze hard right and stare down between the two small houses with weathered white walls and bleak maroon roofs.

The Kigulan Prowler is smaller than the usual, and fast. Nimble. Hungry and pissed off, as is the damn thing's nature.

"Shit!" I punch the steering wheel with the bases of my palms. Disregard reverse and fishtail down the road, veering right and taking a circulatory route, hoping to cut it off at the next road. That is, hoping it doesn't catch up to them before then. Fortunately I can rely on the standard neighborhood layout, as predictable as they come.

I catch the next road, going too fast and with too much on my mind to read the corner sign. The Fleetline blurs past it and my gaze pours down the road between two rows of more banal homes. This time I miss the couple by more than a few seconds, spotting only their heels as they reach the next alley between houses. The Prowler, on the other hand, emerges into full view out in front of me. It's too close for comfort, that's for damn sure—my front bumper misses its hindquarters by no more than a foot. It throws its head over its shoulder to snarl at me but continues after the people nonetheless.

Another exclamation bursts from my lips.

I hit the brakes and the car abruptly stops in the middle of the road, parallel with the rows of dark-windowed houses. My gaze bolts left, through my open driver's side window, and finds the Prowler's rump beginning its disappearance into the night. It runs with a lumbering gallop, clumsier than its older brethren

and clearly a lot more reckless. This says a lot considering how goddamn crazy all of them are.

My left hand draws a Nobility up and my elbow locks, extending the pistol through the window. I squint and fire two successive shots, fast. Both hit my target, slowing the Prowler but a few seconds at most. It isn't severely wounded, if even trivially, just agitated.

The Nobility returns to its holster.

I return to the steering wheel and the car hits the road, Jack, with fire behind the tires. I have to beat it to the next neighborhood divider, which I think will be the last in this district before we reach the edge of Rockford.

And I wouldn't chase Ava Gardner out there.

The Fleetline whips around the corner, hopping the curb and skittering tires across asphalt. I peel onto the next road just in time to glimpse the fleeing couple reach the other side. Again, too slow for the roundabout versus their feet. They're fueled by terror and I can only imagine myself in their situation—no Caddy could catch me.

My issue—and theirs—still persists, though.

The Prowler should be emerging at any moment. I reach the spot of the road between the rows of houses just in time. I barely have a chance to hit the brakes when the Kigulan beast lunges out into the road. It leaps up to bound over the Fleetline, front talons shredding the hood as its burly arms launch it airborne. Its feet collide with the left fender and the vehicle briefly tilts right. I nearly fall into the passenger's seat but it all lasts less than a breath.

The car's chassis rolls to a stop but by then I've already slid out of the car, Thompson in my hands. The Prowler's been significantly slowed now, but still in pursuit. A home's lone backdoor lamp is glowing a faded yellow precisely where the couple have stopped running.

But why stop?

I see it—a tall wire fence, encasing a generator. So much for a straight shot out of here. I hadn't imagined that open terrain

SIX

would've been much better for the two people against a Prowler, but a dead end might as well match its name.

I hurriedly rush after the Prowler, unable to fire now due to its proximity to the people. Besides, the Thompson I carry isn't too accurate after short range.

My legs pump blood and adrenaline like battery acid. I feel the burn, I ignore the burn, I long to force the burn down this Prowler's throat. My longcoat trails out behind me and I imagine it looks no different than a silhouette bleeding a shadow out its ass. I reach the in-between route of the homes and feel like I can extend my arm and touch the Prowler's rump with the Thompson's muzzle.

Then it is damn near upon them.

The woman is cowering in a corner behind an aluminum trashcan while the man makes headway up the fence. His stomach lolls over the edge when the Prowler makes an angular leap.

My Thompson elevates. I hold my breath and squeeze the trigger in a controlled burst. A cluster of .45-caliber bullets sputters out of the Cutts compensator and climbs up the creature's lower back. Blood spits out of small wounds but its momentum is too strong. It tackles the man before he can clear the top of the fence, canines sinking into his upper back. In the glow of the house lamp against a backdrop of seemingly infinite night, crimson blood erupts from his mouth. He groans out with a hollow croak before the creature pulls him back down. Together it and the man's dying body hit the turf, his lower back being crushed by its right paw. Bony, clawed knuckles pancake bone and muscle as the beast applies its full weight into that one paw.

I glimpse the frozen-speechless woman in the corner—not eight feet away from the Prowler's left leg—and then her partner's face. His jaws are open farther than humanly possible, lower jaw dislocated, blood pumping through nostrils and past teeth. His eyes have upturned so that only the whites stare out blankly.

All of this in seconds.

If I could've I'd mercy kill him from here.

But now all I can do is fire upon the creature's hindquarters, because anything higher than that poses a fatal threat to the immobile woman.

Fortunately—and I can only say this out of empathy for the poor man—the Prowler doesn't take its time. No more than it already has, that is. It lowers its jaws to the man's skull, clamping them around both temples, jagged incisors doing their gruesome work with speed. If it had known any better, as perhaps its older kin might've, it probably would have been more patient with the kill. Maim, dismember, eviscerate.

Fucking animals.

No, correction—men can be animals.

These are goddamned monsters.

“Kigula!” I yell at the top of my lungs, both hands on the Thompson but both lungs spewing between my lips. I feel my face turn pink as the last syllable drawls and the Prowler finally turns to stare my way. My voice runs out and it tilts its head before leaping off the dead man to charge me.

Patience shattered, woman clear—enough—I open fire.

The Prowler's face, similarly, opens up. The chaotic .45 ACP rounds batter its skull without relent. No burst-firing, no precise aiming. Just hip-firing, muzzle-flashing fury. In light of my awe and anger, the Prowler somehow manages to continue on its violent path despite this. My vision is blurred from the muzzle flashes and splashing gunfire-heat but I can still see clearly the beast's devastated face when it nears.

Impossibly, disturbingly near.

Skin ripped from its face, strips of muscle and exposed bullet-battered bone looming toward my own face. I hear an effeminate scream somewhere behind the Prowler as its grotesque visage blackens my world.

Moments later—time, incoherent—my eyelids flutter open. Vision is distorted and dimmed, hearing plagued with a distant whirring. I'm lying on the ground, propped by my own

SIX

elbows, gaze spinning much like the sky above me, its stars almost seeming to laugh at me.

To my left is the Prowler, its face peeled back and half of its white-bone skull missing entirely. Pieces of it with brain matter on the insides like gruesome spoons, litter the grass around its corpse. Corpse. The word, its meaning, resounds through me. The beast is dead, dead as dead.

Had I managed to kill it before it got to me?

Of course I did. The damn thing was dead before I blacked out. It just didn't know it yet, its nerve centers hadn't relayed the message to its brain and heart. Hell, I hadn't even known it 'til now. Now...and that's when my brain swims like a pool of sharks.

No—I hadn't killed it. Not the deathblow, at least.

I lazily, agonizingly, turn on my elbows. Distinguished aches shoot through my body, muscle per muscle and joint per joint. But there is a greater pain left to dwell in the right side of my chest. It wallops with terrible thumps, slow and methodical, as if the feeling itself has the mindset to kill me. My skin is a different kind of numb, prickly but somehow not even mine.

And yet I can feel...warmth, gliding over it.

Warmth on my right arm, as if rolling.

I don't look down. My eyes are elsewhere, tracing a new scent to this scene of postmortem terror. At the edge of the dim yellowish house lamp glow is the marriage of shadow and night. Beyond this, a shape that ambles in my direction.

Gratitude comes when I realize it isn't Kigulan.

Although...nor is it man.

The silhouette reaches the edge of the glow but somehow remains shrouded in an ambiguous murk. It's my eyes, my mind, my throbbing temples and soaring pain. It's because of these static feelings that I cannot perceive things clearly.

I can discern some features, though.

Long, wavy, vibrant maroon hair. It has a shimmer to it, all its own. Face is one vague palette of shadow. The buckles of a corset are visible and glimmering a pristine silver. Everything

else is pure, featureless dark. And then this enigmatic figure is upon me, and my perception for lack of a better word bids farewell.

I stir with a jump and the sound of defibrillators. Life is breathed into my lungs again, for what feels like centuries overdue. My back is sore and my neck screams with no different an ache, however, the sound in my ears had simply been an auditory delusion. I try to stretch without feeling too much pain and realize that the agony has mostly left me for the night. I am only very sore and bruised, but nowhere near death nor on the verge of dangerous unconsciousness.

Nonetheless, I am not outside.

Nor am I in my Fleetline or the place I call home.

This is neither precinct nor shelter.

Honestly, it looks like a well-maintained room in a brothel. This, as much as it ought to, doesn't immediately comfort me. I see beige pink-striped walls and burgundy carpeting that deceives my eyes as velvet. If I didn't have my shoes on, which I thankfully still do, I'd have tested the floor with my toes. As is, I could stoop to run my fingers through it, but I don't want to risk throwing out my back.

What the hell happened out there?

I know that the nearest brothels in correlation to where I was earlier is at least a ten minute drive. Have I been out for that long, and if so, who the hell saved me? A streetwalker, a broad? Somehow that seems unlikely.

My gaze drifts down to my abdomen.

I'm shirtless, but the slightest bit cold. The room is well maintained, and that isn't just aesthetics. I feel comfortable, in spite of the aching and bazillion unanswered questions. I'm slouched in this wooden chair with a mahogany frame and burgundy cushions. I swear, the amount of red in this room is beginning to exacerbate my killer headache.

Speaking of red, there's a faint blotch under a pad of gauze above my right ribcage. My left hand drifts over there,

SIX

fingers gently touching it, and a pain tickles my skin underneath.

“Don’t toy with it,” a woman’s voice says.

How did I miss her?

My eyelids part without relent this time. The lighting in here is thankful to a single ceiling fan and two small lamps at either far corner of the room. Even so, the unlit corners remain as such, cloaked in shadows. This mysterious woman sits in one of these corners, as if banished to that spot alone. She’s sitting in a chair that appears, from here, somewhat similar to this one. Then she uncrosses her legs and glides to her feet, standing to take an observational stroll across the room.

She approaches me in full light now.

My vision elucidates as if by magic, and the details of her features become phenomenally clear. She must be about 5’9” and perhaps 140 pounds. She is curvy and she is beautiful, in more ways than one. Her hair is no different than it had been earlier—wavy, maroon, just past the shoulders. It wields its own innate shimmer, a gleam that carries with it in each stride. She couldn’t be a day older than thirty, with porcelain skin that gives me the impression of metallic infallibility. Her irises flare an impossible emerald around solid black pupils that seem trained on me with an uncertain intent.

Her hips sway with each stride, not too dramatic and yet far from subtle.

The woman’s attire is not flashy like a streetwalker’s. It is classy in its own way and it captivates me as per her features, warranting ‘dangerous curve ahead’ signs at every sinuous point. I’m looking at a white blouse with three buttons undone at the chest, a black bra barely visible beneath. The sleeves end in rolls just past her elbows—again, nothing fancy. Her boned underbust Dupion corset is black with silver buckles down the front. Her pants are black pinstripes in seemingly perfect condition, probably cashmere. I’m enticed to run my hands down their lengths for more than one reason. Her black and white Spectator Mary Jane’s are perhaps the flashiest features to her attire, but are nonetheless peculiar to see in a brothel.

If this really is a brothel.

Regardless, I find myself focusing on her eyes as they bear down upon me and she stops within my reach. Hips slump to her right side and she stands akimbo, gazing down at me.

“Feeling better?” she asks, voice mellifluous yet deeper than I’d expected.

“Uh...better than I had earlier, for sure.” I clear my throat. “Were you the woman by the houses? Did you...did you kill that Prowler?”

“Sure thing,” she replies with ease, not even the slightest smile on her voice. That voice, though, it holds me. “You’re an Enforcer, I know. Maybe you can treat me like one o’ your own, then. It’d be a rare thing.”

I cock an eyebrow at her.

“Wait...y-you’re a...an Enforcer?”

“And the winner is,” she says with a crooked smile, and as subliminal as it is I feel blown out of my chair. Instead I just sit up, albeit with a sting in my chest. Then her voice completes the breath. “Bartholomew Sharpe.”

The way she speaks my name. It has a twang to it, like liquid cherry pie dropping from her lips. Sweet as sugar cane, unadulterated.

I’m out of my fucking mind.

I don’t know this woman.

“An Enforcer,” I repeat, this time with a firmer voice. She nods and clicks her tongue, bee-stung lips sealing and pulling back into a smug simper. “Where’s your badge, then?”

“Oh,” she says, lips funneling to an ‘O.’ Her left hand casually waves at her chest. “Wanna fish it out, cowboy?”

I smirk and shake my head.

“I just want proof. Trust me, I’ve heard that before.”

“And you’ve believed it?” she asks, hand sliding into her blouse. She withdraws an Enforcer’s aluminum badge, a name and number engraved top-and-bottom, respectively. I get to my feet and the pain seems to slip away, as if she breathes morphine into my veins.

SIX

“In my lesser days, yeah,” I admit, jaw clenching. The soreness remains, muscles aching.

“Well, that ain't my fault. But here ya go, cowboy.” She extends the badge so that I can see it more clearly. I read a surname, Beauchamp, and what appears to be a valid set of numbers.

“Beauchamp?” I ask, lips barely parting.

“Who's asking?”

I smirk. “Barry Sharpe,” I say and extend my hand, which she toothily grins at. Her pearly whites are pearly white and her dimples accentuate the perfect smile. Chills rain down my spine.

“Oh, *Barry* is it?” she says, and shakes my hand like the strongest dame I've ever met.

“That's how it is these days.”

“Right, well,” she says, and our hands withdraw. “My name's Victoria, but everyone calls me Vicca. Especially men whom I save from being eaten alive.”

“Oh, is that so?” I ask with a smirk. I shake my head. “Well that's a damn shame, 'cause I killed that sonofabitch.”

“No, no you didn't. Shot it up real good, but it was avid to swallow you whole had I not arrived when I did.”

“Right...” My gaze hits the floor, sharing the peripherals of our facing footwear. “And how'd you find us?”

“Us?” she says with a pause. “Oh, right...you, the woman, and the man. Well, so that you know, the woman fled as I put the final touches on the Prowler. She seemed frozen when I arrived, but sure enough she popped over that fence faster than a bat outta hell afterward. So I threw you in my car, and hauled off home.”

“Right...” My mind starts swimming with fuzzy memories again, and I can't help but continue staring downward. “And where exactly is home?”

“It's a brothel, I figured that would've been obvious by now,” she says, and my eyes bolt up to reconnect with hers. “Now that I have your attention,” she says, “yes it's an active

brothel and no I'm not one of their broads. If you look at me like I am, I'll fucking slap your jaw off."

What if it's already on the ground?

My thoughts run awry, nearly spilling out of my mouth. Instead I keep them caged inside, for now, and try wrapping my head around what's just happened. I believe her, sure, but does my conscience? They need more convincing than my heart.

"Where's my Fleetline?"

"You mean that heap of wreckage back in the road?" she says with a raised eyebrow. "Thing was twisted metal when I arrived. My guess is Prowlers—plural. Not there when I showed up though."

I curse through clamped teeth and turn away from her, pacing. Anger filters through my heart and veins and lips, perspiring from my clammy skin.

"Sorry to say, but it wasn't exactly salvageable," she says. "But you...you were. So I took you."

I take a deep breath, haggard as it may be, surviving nonetheless. I thank her with all of my mustered sincerity.

"Just being human is all," she says. "A good one, I mean."

"Well, as you know, that's something I have to thank for. It was heavy shit, could've easily been flanked. Especially if others got to my car before you did...so...again, thank you."

"My pleasure," she says, bowing her head but an inch. "It's not every day a gal gets to rescue a capable *man* from a life-or-death scenario...and for him to be the gentleman like you."

I'm honored.

"Oh, a *gentleman*," I say instead, walking toward her.

"If I may be so bold," she says.

"Well, thank you, Vicca. I, uh...I trust that you've got my Nobilities somewhere in here?"

"They're in an adjacent room, with your Thompson, too. Your coat, shirt, and vest are being washed in the same room. They'll be done in an hour if you'd like to leave then."

I take all of this in, contemplating a storm of things at

SIX

once. Then I ask if she'd be so kind as to lend me a ride into town.

"I'm a kind woman, Barry," she says. "I figured you'd have guessed that by now."

"Ah, silly me."

"Very much so." She gives me this fierce look, a glimmer in her eyes as she walks back toward the bed. It's a four-poster morsel of mild luxury with, you guessed it, burgundy comforter and white sheets. An Enforcer living in a brothel room—no wonder she's upgraded the place.

"Mind if I transfer myself to something more forgiving?"

She knows I mean the bed, which is what I start to approach.

"Be my guest," she says amicably.

I thank her through a tired mutter and sit myself down on the left side. She circles around to the right, stooping to set something on the bottom shelf of her nightstand. I try not to stare. When she comes back up my gaze is halfway across the room, smooth as sandpaper. I catch a smirk break a steely visage and then it's gone as she circles to my side.

"You took quite a clawing on your chest," she says.

"Apparently," I say with disappointment. I shake my head, glancing down at it and then up to see her standing before me. My voice sputters out in a loud whisper. "Good thing my heart's on the other side."

"Oh yeah?" she asks, eyebrows raising. "You have a heart worth mentioning, that's rare around here."

"I dunno...sometimes I feel like I'm two steps away from sinking into that same hole where everyone else is stuck."

Vicca shrugs. "Then take one step forward and use your heart to do the rest."

I look up into her eyes.

"Is that what you do?" I ask. Her right hand comes down and five fingers spread to course through my hair.

"I try. But sometimes you just gotta sink to swim."

"And how long have you been swimming?"

“I’ll let you know when I stop sinking.”

I stand up, fingertips brushing against her cashmere pants, over her thighs and the Appalachian trail of her hips. They meet behind her corset, hooking into her laces. Her breasts flatten against my chest and our lips meet with no words needed. Noses share a sweeping kiss and tongues collide in shared mouths. I breathe her in, that scent, that perfume of fallen angels. Yet I taste sin dripping from her lips, seeping through her eyes.

The corset comes off easier said than done.

She exhales into me and vice versa. Our bodies embrace one another, falling onto the bed, rolling without clearing the edge. Despite this I feel no pain in my chest, no soreness, no aching. I feel only a throbbing in my temples and a tingling in my loins. She grinds against me and I trace my fingers through her ocean of vibrant hair.

As we undress each other in a frenzy of impulsive passion and fervor, as we join our bodies like carnal puzzle pieces void of inhibitions, I realize something. I realize it as we connect, on both a physical and perhaps spiritual level.

She is the breeze in the trees, the bee’s knees, the thing that could freeze flames on a flea’s back. She is one of the few things a man would fight for. Something I’d die for. More importantly she is a reason to live. She reminds me of the beautiful things that still exist in this ugly shit-show world, the luxury amid the filth, that one sweet chord in the thick of war’s unnerving clamor. She is the spot of cleanliness in the midst of a rust-swallowed and grime-caked world. She is a reminder of why we still and always would fight.

A resuscitation to my heart as we make love.

7

One hour, she had said. Then I can get outta here, she'd give me a ride back into town. So, it's been three hours since those words gushed from her lips. I'm getting dressed now, in the adjacent room. Collar shirt goes on, buttoned up the center, feeling a little rigid. I leave my vest open to mind the tightness of my healing wound. I shrug my longcoat on, Thompson slung over my left shoulder. Nobilities in their holsters, the X-harness proves uncomfortable, but I've dealt with worse.

Vicca walks into the room without a knock.

"Almost ready?" she asks, jazz in her voice.

"Yeah, if you let me get dressed," I say with a bite of sarcasm. She hisses with a smile in her eyes, then leaves the room without closing the door. Broads stroll past and peer in to whistle.

Clothed or not, a man in here is as good as pet food.

When I'm done, I shut the door behind me and proceed through the flamboyant hallway. It's past eleven, the midnight train on approach to take my mind away. Despite the two hours of sleep Vicca and I just accrued, I still feel weary.

Then again, we did make love for an hour.

Vicca's fiery hair and Cadillac hips have proven to be only the tip of her iceberg. I found a pulsing energy in her hours ago that I only believed to reside in the testing facilities of the Manhattan Project. She tested me and broke me and rebuilt me. Now she's giving me a ride back into town. But where from there?

We're both Enforcers, we both have duties.

I follow her outside the brothel, bumping into a boorish customer en route to the lot. He gives me the nastiest look I've ever seen in my life but it lasts for less than a heartbeat. My

badge is worn around my neck, dangling past my collarbone, and he's the first to apologize.

Who knew I'd find respect in a brothel?

Vicca's wearing the same outfit as before, corset and all. I keep my brain and eyes focused on more important matters, that is, whatever else the night might throw at me. Or us, as far as I'm concerned, at least until she drops me off.

Her vehicle impresses me.

A Packard Super 8 180, probably a 1940 model. It's black and in decent condition, but not mint. The chrome trim is beautiful, although the white-wall tires are sallow and a few bars from the grille are missing.

"One helluva fine ride you got here," I admit.

"Thank you," she says. "Got it for quite a steal."

I detect a bit of wordplay on her tongue but don't suggest anything. Which brings me to my next dilemma—it isn't much, but, can I trust this woman? She did save my life, and surely it had been out of her way. About as much as it was out of my way to chase down the Prowler and kill it.

We are Enforcers for a reason.

Then she dressed my wound and made love to me.

Yeah, I can trust her. For now, at least.

"Hop in and I'll have you there faster than you can say 'I'm out of Luckies.'"

I cock an eyebrow, standing on the other side of the Packard. My hands start patting down my longcoat. I can't believe I'd forgotten to check for my cigarettes and Zippo. Sure enough, the lighter is in its pocket. But not my Luckies.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," she says with a lopsided smile, ducking into the car behind the steering wheel.

"No, not quite," I say. "Just nearly got killed by a Prowler and lost my Luckies in the midst of it all."

"Relax. I'm clever, remember? Get in."

I'm on the slightly side of confused. I get into the car and shut the door behind me, by which time the engine's rumbling on and Vicca's about to peel out. The chassis rocks and sways, her hands spinning that wheel like a skipper at the helm, nearly tossing me out of my seat. Once we're on the road she slaps the glovebox between my knees and the compartment pops open.

“You’re welcome,” she says in as many words.

I reach in and withdraw my pack of Luckies, as crappy and pristine as they ever were.

“I couldn’t thank you enough,” I say, and roll down the window to my right.

“Oh, I think you already have.”

I smile and ask if I can light up.

“Go on, cowboy.”

I smile again, head shaking, and light a Lucky between my lips. I take a drag and breathe postmortem fire from my mouth. It slips out the window and wafts through the night sky.

Vicca drives like me, only a little more careless. What few cars are out right now—less than usual, with an increase of Kigula sightings—blare their horns at us, or yell out their windows. As if it will change a damn thing, as if it will get a rise from Vicca. But it doesn’t—nothing seems to. She’s somehow calm and placid, even at peace. But the fire in her eyes and the savory embers from her tongue aren’t to be misjudged.

Part of me wants to see her in action.

The other just wants us to melt into the night. Deal with it in the morning, get some breakfast, maybe do a patrol together.

Or maybe my head’s not on straight. Or too tightly.

Regardless, I just need some damn rest.

We arrive at my place without stopping at a single traffic light. Although, she did run two of them. I don’t recall a single moment where the Packard wasn’t going at least twenty miles an hour, and even then—next to her—it felt fast as hell.

The tires screech and we lurch with the chassis.

“I really appreciate this,” I say, cigarette bouncing between my lips. “Like...everything. Especially saving my life.”

“From one Enforcer to another.”

I flick the Lucky but feel like I’m still hanging onto some of my own.

“No,” I say, and lean over to beckon her face closer to mine. It comes without being asked. My voice carries into a whisper between our lips. “From one human to another. Thank you, Victoria.”

I cup her cheek and taste scarlet, glistening with the dew

of the night.

“You need your rest, Barry,” she says, saying my name for once during the incredibly short yet long while we’ve been together. And then she corrects me with words like a cat o’ nine tails. “So you can be a cowboy all over again.”

I grin and exit the car. She smiles toothlessly and waves out the window. I ponder whether I’ll ever see her again. She drives off into the night, and I can only dream of her until then.

My bed is inviting, albeit far less so than Vicca was.

It will suffice. This time I don’t shed a single article of clothing. My Thompson’s sling slips off my shoulder and falls to the carpet, unhurt. It inadvertently leans against the foot of my bed, which I now collapse onto.

I feel like I’m floating face-down in the murkiest water you’ve ever seen in your life. The kind that hides monsters of the deep and reptilian insects with capabilities beyond a man’s worst nightmare. Despite this feeling, the savory taste of Vicca Beauchamp lingers on my lips and the image of her everything drifts behind my eyes.

So it is in this which I find myself engulfed.

A comforting sensation washes over me. A sensation alien to me for so many years, in the hellhole that has become Rockford. I’m not entirely convinced that the rest of the nation is too dissimilar, although I am reminded what I fight for.

Not Vicca, but the principle she embodies.

Another man, even an Enforcer, might see her and not hesitate to think otherwise. He’d get lost in her body, her hair, her eyes. But she took the time to help me and restore me. Then she gave herself to me, and I’ve never felt fresher...clearer.

Some people might call me deluded, or even feel that I’ve been poisoned by the dame. And so what if I have? Let the poison do its work on me, then. Certainly the best damn toxin I’ve ever welcomed into my body, especially considering everything else this town has to ‘offer.’

I can only hope that Vicca stays safe.

Jackson, whom I also hope to see again sometime, was right when he said something wrong is in the air with the Kigula. They’re more active during the day, and I feel like they’re getting smarter.

Hell, that notion alone gives me the chills.

With everything that has transpired over the past five hours, I focus on the positive. The night's dissected cadaver is under my mind's eye, and thanks to Vicca my heart still beats. Warmly, I might add, in an ever-cold environment. I simply must extract the healthy blood from the tainted thoughts, and inject them into my own.

Rockford isn't lost. It only wears that shade of defeat.

I drift off into a deep slumber, where dreams of conquering the Kigula threat seep into my subconscious. I'm surrounded by Vicca and Jackson, fighting at my side. Floyd and even Clyde are in the mix, fighting the way they always were only now with guns and unadulterated hearts, at our heels.

I won't let mankind be the cause of its own downfall, nor a callous species with less to offer to the world than dust.