

Author's Note

What you'll find enclosed—unless sabotage has replaced it with a sheaf of Marxist propaganda, in which case I apologize in advance—is the edited form of a now-concluded serial. I would describe the plot as, “like *The Brothers Karamazov*,” because that sounds impressive and I'm relatively certain nobody's ever read it.

Why did I write this pseudo-novel, which is hypothetically reminiscent of the works of Dostoevsky? Perhaps the most important reason, one that's practically a cliché of author origin stories, is that it was a condition of my parole. In fact, the rough draft for the first few chapters are etched into my upper thigh in rather dubious ink--along with a few symbols Grimy Gerald claimed were prison shorthand for, “tough and murderous,” but look suspiciously like ducks and rainbows.

The second reason, and this is equally common among beginning writers, is that I wanted to prove to myself I could write something longer than 7 pages without my frontal lobe hemorrhaging. This is a bit longer than that, so mission accomplished! It's everything I dreamed it'd be, or dared to dream.

Thirdly, I wanted somebody to read something that I wrote. It's very possible that there are people out there who can churn out heaping mountains of scrupulously-edited, painstakingly-constructed prose, and then smile over a job well done before chucking it in a folder with everything else and getting some ice cream. That's not me. As rewarding as storytelling is, it's kind of pointless if there's nobody for the story to be told *to*. Creating fiction is most rewarding when there's an audience. That's where you come in, possibly—but not necessarily—because I've bribed you.

If you're reading this, I've already got your money—thanks for that, by the way—so I'm assuming you're planning to read at least, say, the first chapter. If you like it, keep reading, and maybe kick a link to a similarly-inclined friend or two. If you don't like it, send me a blistering e-mail demanding your twenty minutes back, and I'll have it sent to you by express mail within 4-7 business days.

That just about takes care of introductions. *Vatsy and Bruno* awaits.

-Adam “Rutskarn” DeCamp
Internet Author, Squirrel Merchant

“Yeah, I should think he’ll be angry. This is literally the exact opposite of what you were paid to do. This isn’t like you, Bruno.”

Bruno shrugged, tossing a few wads of cash and his shotgun into the satchel.

“Where are you even going?”

“Haven’t decided,” said Bruno. “I expect we’ll just drift along. Could be someone will start publishing him.”

“Yeah, and it could be you get hired to entertain at children’s birthday parties. He’s completely helpless, Bruno, and he’s an idiot besides. He’ll just get killed sooner or later anyway, and if you’re not careful, he could take you with him.”

“Could be.”

There was a long pause.

“I can get you a train ride. A secure one.”

“Appreciated.”

“It’ll take you up north through the sticks. Of course, at that point you start worrying less about your angry boss and more about getting strung up by a bunch of hillbillies. They take an interesting approach to civic responsibility out there.”

“Like I said: we’ll drift along.”

“You’re not...you’re not thinking of going back to the city, are you? I know you can handle it, but he’d be dead meat in there. I mean, maybe not with you protecting him, but...”

“We’ll stay clear of the city unless we run through our other options.”

“Smart. It’s only getting worse there, you know.”

“I know.”

“Well, I guess this is goodbye. Take care of yourself, Bruno.”

“Managed it so far.”

“I don’t suppose you know why you’re doing this?”

“Can’t say I do. I expect I’ll figure it out before too long.”

Part One

First Ink

To whom it may concern:

We do not regret to inform you that this submission is unusable, unintelligent, and frequently entirely illegible. We do not regret that your mental seepage, poured in such an ungainly fashion on your half-cent-per-thousand-sheet paper, will not be gracing this or any future publication of the Writer's Guild World Newsletter. We do not regret that you will—most probably—die alone, unloved, penniless, and foul-smelling.

We do, however, regret that we were exposed—even through this protective screen of incomprehensibility—to your unspeakable body of work. We regret that our sanity and our lives can never be whole again after even a brief perusal of your first page. We regret that the stink of hideous purple prose and suspiciously fecal ink will forever saturate our desk space. Most of all, we regret that you slithered, like a diseased rat infiltrating an unsuspecting granary, into this world on whatever dark day you were born (from the art inherent in your prose, we would estimate about a year ago).

If we ever see the name "Vatsy"—or that name spelled differently, or any name with a superficial resemblance, or anything that even reminds us of you—on any volume, essay, poem, or bill that ever crosses our threshold, we will ensure that you will not survive the night that follows.

Wishing you well,

The Writer's Guild

Bruno had brought the letter in a few minutes ago. It sat there on the desk, and no matter how many times Vatsy hopefully reread it, its contents refused to change.

It was nestled in a drift of papers that covered the entire office, but managed to distinguish itself by being legible, clean, devoid of crude doodles, and made of wood pulp that was to Vatsy's typist paper what a high society mingler was to an alcoholic street beggar.

In fact, the letter from the Writer's Guild might have been the only clean thing in the entire room. Vatsy's desk was grubby and scratched, at least partially burned by some fire the third or fourth owner had survived; the documents that rested upon it were, if anything, more ill-used and unkempt than their floorbound brethren. Even his typewriter was horribly maintained, rust and spilled ink leaving its original color inestimable to anyone but a prepared antiquarian. The two chairs, which by necessity doubled as beds, were rotted, moth-eaten, and saturated with dust. An array of garbage was strewn on the floor—broken pocketwatches, pieces of scrap iron, leaky fountain pens, and all manner of shiny trash on the cusp of total worthlessness. The wood-paneled floor and miserably stained rug, both of which were barely visible under the debris, looked as if they'd been left to rot for centuries. The wallpapered walls were stained, torn, and mildewed, and the ceiling was a rough and gouged expanse of cheap plaster. The whole room was the color of rubbed-in filth, an aesthetic that Vatsy and Bruno fit into perfectly.

Vatsy, for his part, looked like an overgrown cat that had been left to fester in a POW camp. His fur was mangy and patchy, soiled in some places, scarred hairless in others. His legs were long and spindly, ending in claws that looked like human fingers gone nightmarish and feral. Even his eyes were sick and wrong, both of them a solid jaundiced off-white color. On his head he wore a tattered, slightly overlarge top hat in which was stuck a tattered white *Press* tag.

Bruno appeared a little more well-kempt, insofar as a chimpanzee can ever be considered well-kempt. Although he had not bathed recently, his fur had probably been combed within the last week or so, and his battered face and hands looked relatively clean. What effort he spared in cleaning himself appeared to have been reserved for the maintenance of a sawn-off double-barreled shotgun, which he polished contentedly as he waited for Vatsy to finish.

“Drat it all!”

“Didn't accept it, boss?” Bruno asked without looking up.

“I just can't understand what went wrong! It was the proper length and format, I'm sure of it, and I really did try to minimize the typographical errors this time. I even slipped an almost perfectly fresh slice of ham into the envelope to seal the deal!”

“Suppose it just wasn’t what they were looking for, boss. You can never properly tell.”

“Well, if *pure craftsmanship* isn’t what they’re looking for, then I’m afraid I don’t know what it is! To think—all those days spent cooped up in the office constructing the grisliest murders, the most improbable accidents, the grandest diorama of human folly and triumph and heartbreak that the mind is capable of devising...and all of that time and effort, wasted! Have they no respect for my integrity?”

Vatsy swept off of his chair. He began to pace, throwing up drifts of paper with his animated strides.

“I tell you, it says a lot about our society when struggling talent isn’t able to get off the ground because some hoity-toity agency of fat cats who were born with silver spoons up their noses can put down a hard-working writer trying to make it into the big time! They wouldn’t know good journalism if it ambushed them in an alley with a garden rake! I mean, you proofread my drafts—they were brilliance!”

Bruno shrugged. “I’m sure they were, boss. I didn’t get but the gist of it, on account of not actually being literate, but it was spaced quite nicely.”

“The spacing was *flawless*. It was *seraphic*. It was, in fact, the finest manipulation of typeface upon pulp that the world has ever seen—and what’s more, the finest I’ve ever produced!” Vatsy collapsed sideways onto a drift of papers, letting out a groan of frustration. “I must say, Bruno, this getting published business is proving much more difficult than I had anticipated!”

“At least they gave you a letter this time, boss.”

“Yes, I’m choosing to take the death threat as a positive sign, but honestly? I just don’t know how much more I can give! Did you see how many interviews I had in that piece? There were five or six per page, Bruno! There were interviews that actually took place *within* interviews in which the friend of the first interviewee asked a second person about their fungus conditions, related by interviewee one and then commented on—and this was the master stroke, if I say so myself—by a *third* interviewee with absolutely no connection to any of the involved parties!”

“You think they’d want to know all that, boss?”

Vatsy rubbed at his eyes and sighed. “Bruno, journalism is not about what the reader *wants* to know, it’s about what they *need* to know.”

“Right.”

Vatsy lingered on the floor for a moment—and then, with only the barest flicker of an attitudinal change, he pulled himself smartly up and climbed onto his chair. “Well, there’s nothing for it, is there? I’ve just got to get back on the horse. I’ll begin my next submission immediately, do my damndest, and see where things end up. In the end, Bruno, it all boils down to submission volume. If I send them enough quality stories, eventually they’ll find *something* that catches their eye. Perhaps this time I’ll hit that perfective creative groove and engineer just the sort of story they’re looking for.”

“Bound to happen eventually, boss.”

He loaded a piece of doodle-ridden paper into his typewriter, and after a few reflective moments began picking at the keys like a man playing a waltz piano. Bruno settled back into his polishing.

Several minutes passed, and the only noises were the swishing of the rag and the clicking of the keys blending into an industrious fugue. Then Bruno’s rag began to slow its pace; eventually, Bruno set it aside, took a hesitant breath, and said:

“Boss?”

“Just a moment, Bruno.” Vatsy tapped out the last of a sentence, mouthing the words “justified kidney harassment,” as he did so. “Sorry, needed to get that thought out while it was fresh. Did you need something?”

“Well.” Bruno straightened in his chair. “You know I don’t consider myself the creative type, boss. I’m more than willing to let you handle the journalistic parts while I take care of everything else that needs doing.”

Vatsy nodded absently. “Yes, we’ve each got our roles to play. That’s the foundation of our working relationship, Bruno.”

“Suits me fine. I suppose I did have...well, call it a thought. Just something you might want to try.”

“Hm.” Vatsy reached up to stroke his chin with a few long, ink-stained claws. “Yes...yes, I suppose it’s possible that—as an outsider to the world of journalism—you

might see some path or technique that I haven't considered. Very well, Bruno, suggest away."

"Have you ever considered using real stories?"

"Beg pardon?"

Bruno cleared his throat. "I just...well, again it was just a thought. Have you tried writing about real things?"

Vatsy stared at Bruno a few more seconds. His expression of polite attention faded, and was gradually replaced by an expression of polite bafflement.

"Real things, you say?"

"Things that happen in the city, for example. Give it a sort of grounding in reality. Could be that's what they're looking for."

"Hm." Vatsy tapped a claw against the desk, moving his lips slightly as he turned the idea over. "Interesting approach...sounds a bit shady, though, doesn't it? That's practically plagiarism. If word got out I was stealing stories from real events, think of the damage to my reputation!"

Bruno shrugged. "Shouldn't think there's too much risk in it boss. Matter of fact, I'd guess other journalists do it from time to time."

Vatsy started as if struck with righteous thunder, then slapped the desk with a claw. "Bruno, I believe you've put your finger right on it! You know, I always wondered what advantage those other bastards had over me? They've probably been doing this sort of thing all along, the unscrupulous clogs! You know, you have to give them credit—it's foolproof. They rush out, nick the details from something happening on the streets, write it all up, pass it off as journalism...and nobody's the wiser! Well, if that's their game..."

He snatched up a battered pen and a scrap of paper. The sheet in question already contained a soup stain, a list of synonyms for the word "inferno", and a small drawing of a large man with a big hat that had been labeled, "Mister Fraesinburg". It was, however, the freshest sheet on the desk, and so he began writing in a clean space.

"Right, if I'm going to be going to be venturing out of the office, I'm going to need...a notepad, a new set of pens, and a map of the city. Bruno, will you be needing anything?"

Bruno shrugged. "I'm a person of simple needs, boss."

Vatsy handed Bruno the list, which Bruno patiently folded up to throw away as soon as he left the room. Vatsy had an encyclopedic memory of his own journalistic endeavors and his last meal, but little else—perhaps that’s why he had difficulty understanding that Bruno had a photographic memory. Come to that, he seemed to have difficulty understanding that most people couldn’t read his writing, and that Bruno couldn’t read, period.

Bruno headed for the door with a tip of his hat. “Very well, boss, I’ll run out and get those for you. We can start tomorrow.”

“I do believe it’s closing time, Bruno. Do you know of a shop open this late?”

Bruno shrugged, pulling his crowbar out of the umbrella stand. “I can think of a few off the top of my head, boss.”

The next morning arrived, and the pair made an early start of it. The streets were not yet crowded, and they became substantially less so as Vatsy and Bruno approached—it was strange how crowds would tend to drift away from them into alleys, side streets, shops, traffic, and open manholes. Vatsy walked very slightly in the lead, while Bruno followed just behind, giving anyone who stared for too long a meaningful look. Vatsy, for his part, looked completely oblivious to everything and anything around him.

After a few minutes of wandering, Vatsy spoke up.

“You know, Bruno, I’m rather glad we’re out here. All the time spent locked up in that office was making me more restless than I knew.”

“It’s always good to get some fresh air, boss.”

“That it is, that it is. More than we already get through the massive holes in our wall, anyway. You know, I’m almost certain the landlord said he was going to fix that.”

“Believe his exact words were, ‘Sure, I’ll fix the damn wall. When you pay your damn rent, the hoodlums outside stop vandalizing my damn building, the blind get their damn vision back, and I grow a pair of damn fairy wings.’”

“Ah, yes. The vandals did stop, though.”

“Well, if you don’t mind me sayin’, that caused as many problems as it solved.”

“I really don’t know what the parents were so mad about. You only grazed them.”

“Some people, boss.”

They turned a corner, and both stopped short—by default, at first, as they walked into the backs of a few transfixed spectators. A few gentle pushes from Bruno, and the ripple of panicked scrambling that followed immediately after, afforded the pair a good view of what was going on.

Three men were fistfighting in an alleyway. The first two were sturdy, bald men dressed in excessively shabby clothes. The combined weight of their rings and tattoo ink was probably close to that of a small child, but they made up for the surplus pounds with a deficit of teeth, hair, and soap. Their aesthetic suggested Thug, although it is usually unwise to judge based on appearances; especially so in this case, because they looked very much like they'd murder you if you did.

They were, however, getting the machismo beaten out of them by the third man. He was tall and sturdy, with a square jaw and beard stubble you could sand a floor with. He wore a black leather jacket that was probably uncomfortably warm in this weather, and had a noxious cigar clenched between his teeth. He was probably not as strong as the other two fighters, but he was far quicker, and seemed to have more fighting experience.

He was also, Vatsy and Bruno noticed as they drew closer, talking nonstop.

He didn't seem to be speaking to anyone in particular, and his words were level and monotone, almost as if he were orally reciting a grocery list. His words were difficult to hear over the sounds of the violence and through the cigar, but Vatsy concentrated and was able to make them out.

"...pair ohf shtreet vehrmin, muhder in their eyes. Eht wash two to one. Tat almost made it a fair fight. The shcum were fasht, and shtrong, but they were..." He paused for an instant to deliver a haymaker that laid one flat. "...no match fer a proffessional...and then, there wash one..." He ducked under the fist of the other, swinging his arm up beneath the second man's jaw. "Adrenaline rushin' frough me, I fin'shed the fight."

The man paused over the unconscious bodies, removing his cigar and taking a breath. His voice came out a little clearer now.

"These rats were barely worth the time it took to put them down. Interrogation would've been a waste of time. I knew they wouldn't know anything I didn't already—they were just there to slow me down." The man replaced the cigar, turning and heading

down the alleyway. “I promised myself I wouldn’ giff him the shatishfaction. It would on’ly be a’ matter of time.”

As he vanished down a side alley, Vatsy turned to Bruno, excitement beginning to crackle in the air around him. “Bruno...I do believe we’ve found Inspiration.”

The two of them jogged the remaining distance to the alleyway, just as one of the thugs was beginning to pull himself up. The other continued lying facedown, groaning softly and incoherently.

“Pardon me, good sirs!” Vatsy began.

The thug getting up stabilized himself against the alley wall, squinting at the pair. His angry, bruised expression indicated that he wasn’t terribly impressed.

“Shove off.”

Bruno subtly adjusted his stance. Vatsy continued, still grinning.

“Point of fact, I’m looking for volunteers to participate in a noble journalistic venture of mine, and you fellows seem like exactly what I need. Would you consent?”

The thug paused, mouth open for a moment. One could almost see his thought processes lurching down the rails of Comprehension, hitting the penny of Ignorance, being thrown free into the mercifully soft lake of Not Caring and returning bemusedly back to the station of origin.

“Shove off,” he repeated, a little more slowly and deliberately this time.

Vatsy clapped his front claws together eagerly.

“Right! Glad you’re cooperating,” he declared, as Bruno began to fidget with his satchel. “So, would you care to comment on the beating you just received, if you were otherwise going to be shot?”

“Look, freak, I told you to...”

The thug’s gaze was dragged, slowly, to the sawn-off double-barreled shotgun that was now pointed in his general direction. Judging by the size of it, “general direction” would suffice.

“Uh. Is that...a hypothetical question?” the thug asked after a moment.

“I don’t know. Is it?”

The thug swallowed.

“So. Uh. About that beating...”

It took the thugs a minute to get to a point where both of them were comfortable speaking. The less beaten leaned against the wall, anxiously eyeing Bruno’s impassive expression. The other sat down against the opposite wall, clutching his jaw and moaning quietly.

Vatsy held his pen above the notepad, settling down so he faced both of the pair.

“So,” he began, “why don’t you tell us about the shamefully one-sided drubbing you just received?”

“S’not shameful,” murmured the one with the wounded jaw. “We were just doin’ our jobs.”

“Ah, that explains it, then. Your job is mopping up alleyways with your internal organs?”

The leaning man snorted darkly. “At the rate that git set up, yes, yes it was. Cheap bastard.”

Catching Vatsy’s expression, he continued. “Yeah, look, ‘slike this. We’re professionals, alright? Businessmen. My friend and me, we’re employees at the Lasting Impressions Thug Emporium.”

Bruno nodded. “Heard good things about them. Mostly because people who said bad things about them ended up in an alley covered in bruises.”

“Point o’ order, there. Handbook says we’re to call those Seals of Quality.”

Vatsy tapped his pen impatiently on the paper. “Look here, mister...I’m sorry, I don’t believe I got a name.”

“Ain’t about to talk about business using my real name, am I? Just call me doctor.”

“Doctor?”

“Got a Ph. D. in blunt objects few years back. Helped my career to no end.”

“Well then. Doctor, would you kindly progress to the part where you were being thrashed by a man in an overcoat?”

“I’m getting there, I’m getting there. Well, some git comes in and rents the first two thugs that were on call—me an’ my associate here. Says we’re to go to some alley and wait for a guy in a trenchcoat, then leverage our natural resources in a drill-down

repurposing of his skeletal structure. Only, this guy, the one who hired us? This guy can only afford the goon rate. That's about a minute or two of really bad fisticuffs, which can be overpowered by anyone except civilians and goons from competitors. Weren't any goon-level employees on hand, and we weren't about to give a specialist-level beating out for unskilled labor prices, so we were just given strict orders to go down like a couple sick grannies. So we came here, fetched ourselves a drubbing, and was about to call it a day, as it were. Nothing else to it, really."

Vatsy scribbled furiously. "Yes, yes, I see. Interesting. Very interesting. Yes, I think there's a story here."

Bruno hesitated, then coughed. "Uh, boss? You think you should maybe ask who hired them?"

Vatsy waved a claw. "Yes, yes, right. Who did the hiring?"

The thug shrugged casually. Perhaps it was all the shop talk, but he seemed to have forgotten about the existence of the shotgun in Bruno's hands.

"Didn't catch his name. Sickly looking guy, not great body odor, had one of those..." Despite himself, he shuddered a little. "Chinbeards. And he said...well, he mentioned something about needing to pay up front. Yeah, I remember now: apparently the bastard had a train to catch."

Vatsy whipped around so fast that the thugs instinctively started backwards. He threw his materials into Bruno's satchel, securing his top hat.

"Come on, there, Bruno! If we hurry, we can beat the trenchcoat man to the trainyard!"

Vatsy took off down the street, gangly limbs windmilling with speed. Bruno followed behind him, one hand on the satchel, one hand on his bowler.

Vatsy glanced back to make sure Bruno was keeping up. "It's imperative that we make it to the target before trenchcoat does. We need to interview him ourselves!"

Bruno shrugged his shoulders. "No worries, boss. I happen to know a shortcut."

Putting on a new turn of speed, he darted into the alley, Vatsy following directly behind.

The trainyard was sprawling, stark, grey, and filthy. Much of it consisted of a thin band of metal walkway, winding around with a train track on one side and the alleyways and ticket booths on the other. Most of the waiting platforms were covered by a corrugated iron roof, creating sheltered spots for prospective passengers to stand by and savor the carbon-rich fumes. There were benches, trash, and abandoned luggage scattered all throughout the shady expanse.

Vatsy and Bruno hurtled down a mostly empty stretch, dodging rubbish and benches as they raced towards the first platform.

Bruno glanced over at Vatsy, checking to see how well he was holding up after the past few minutes of sprinting. Somewhat surprisingly, given his sedentary nature, Vatsy was keeping up without even breathing hard. Bruno suspected that Vatsy had some sort of unspeakable power source within his emaciated ribcage, some internal generator that granted him endless surpluses of energy. If such a generator existed, it probably fueled itself with sanity or restraint.

Vatsy pulled up alongside Bruno, expression fanatically cheerful. "Oho, Bruno, this is a good story, I can tell you that much." He vaulted over a low bench, wiry legs windmilling to land properly. "It's got intrigue to it, plain and simple. We don't know who this man is. We don't know who's following him. We don't know why he's being followed. We don't know where the man's trying to go. It's an enigma wrapped in a mystery!"

Bruno shrugged. "If you say so, boss."

"Now we just have to, you know. Actually find out a few of those things, and the story's ready for print."

The two of them approached the first platform at breakneck speeds. A handful of people in worn, greasy clothes were idling on it, some sitting on crates. Vatsy was about to move towards it, but Bruno threw a hand over Vatsy's shoulder, pulling him along past it towards the next platform.

Vatsy looked at Bruno as they ran, expression puzzled. "Bruno, why didn't you stop to check that platform for our target?"

Bruno shook his head. "First platform in this station is used for loading supplies, not people. People on that platform were probably just workers."

“I see. How did you know that?”

Bruno glanced back ahead, more or less expressionless. “Oh, these things are handy to know, boss. Never know when we’d need to get on a train. For far away. On the quick side.”

Vatsy nodded again. On some level, even he could appreciate the wisdom in that.

They had almost arrived at the next platform. It was fairly small, a floor of broad metal planks stretching just beyond the trainyard roof. There was a signpost just before it, a slate on which *Passengers 2:30 Train* was scrawled in chalk.

The platform was empty, save for one man standing in the middle of it, a huddled figure wearing a filthy overcoat.

Vatsy stopped abruptly in front of the platform, claws skidding on the planks. “Right!” he declared, and the figure spun around instantly.

He was thin, pale, and bony, with a complexion that indicated that health and vigor happened to other people. He had dark circles under his watery, bleary eyes, and drawn lips that were crooked with fatigue. His hair was lanky and greasy, a short red mop that was distinctly unkempt, and he had a chin-strap beard going from sideburn to sideburn that was singularly dreadful. Overall, the person gave the impression of a rural hobo in a plague ward.

Seeing the two approaching figures, his pale eyes widened. This wasn’t exactly an uncommon reaction to people seeing the duo for the first time, but somehow his expression radiated more than unpleasant surprise or polite horror. He looked genuinely afraid.

Turning wildly, he pulled a revolver out of his coat pocket. He pointed it at Vatsy for a moment, but his aim quickly wavered. This was largely because aiming a firearm at Vatsy required one to look directly at him, a task for someone with more far more courage than the fugitive in question. Instead, it was pointed at the floor in a way that was less an outright threat and more a very emphatic suggestion.

Vatsy beamed broadly, oblivious to the firearm pointed at the ground before him. In a quick motion, Bruno validated his friend’s unconditional bravery.

Operating on instinct, chinbeard began to shift his aim towards Bruno. Operating on somewhat more sensible instinct, the revolver wielder instead let go of his gun, never taking his eyes off the twin barrels that were very suddenly the apex of his universe.

“Wh-what do you want?” he asked, voice shrill and wavering.

Vatsy retrieved his pad and pen once more. “Right, no need to worry there, my good man, we’re not here to bring you to justice for your unspeakable crimes.”

Chinbeard swallowed, expression contorted in mad panic. “Crimes? I didn’t do nothing!”

Vatsy nodded slowly, raising his pen hand. “Oh, of *course* you didn’t do anything. Completely innocent. Wink wink.”

“Yeah, I *am* completely innocent!”

“Right, blameless as a blind lamb in an empty room. We all believe you, mister...?”

Chinbeard looked uncertainly at Vatsy, then glanced nervously behind him to see if anyone was approaching. “Look,” he said after a moment, voice hesitant, “I don’t know what you want from me, but I swear it’s true. I haven’t done anything wrong at all, but for some reason, my last boss...”

The man’s ears almost seemed to perk. His expression started to resemble a frightened herd animal hearing the faroff sound of claws.

In the temporary quiet, a voice could be heard from further down the train platforms.

“...trainyard, where the thugs are thick as rats. I didn’t see any sign of my prey, but I had to find him before it was...”

The last droplets of color drained from chinbeard’s face. “Oh god, oh god, he’s here!”

The trenchcoat man was marching purposefully down the platforms, burning gaze sweeping left and right as he searched for his quarry. On his shoulder rested an improbably huge lead pipe, the kind that couldn’t possibly have been designed with anything as idyllic and peaceful as carrying water in mind. Something about its shape suggested dark alleys and crushed skulls.

Chinbeard tore his eyes from the approaching figure and shot the pair a pleading look.

“Oh man, I gotta get out of here! Come on, please, just let me go!”

Vatsy scrawled something on his notebook, mouth moving slowly.

“Let...me...go...” He then glanced up at the chinbeard man. “Oh, of course. Just as soon as you finish answering a few questions.”

Chinbeard looked past Vatsy, eyes wide. The trenchcoat was coming closer. More importantly, so was the lead pipe.

He turned back to Vatsy, an avenue reserved only for the truly desperate. “Okay,” he hissed, “I’ll answer all your damn questions, just get me out of here first!”

Vatsy grinned. “Right! Let’s go, then...ah, Bruno?” He turned towards his companion. “Bruno, be so kind as to delay our pursuer, will you?”

Bruno tipped his hat dutifully, slipping his shotgun back into his satchel. “Delay him. Got it, boss.”

Chinbeard sprinted off without waiting for any further conversation. Vatsy shoved his notepad under his hat and bounded after.

The sudden movement on the platform ahead caught the eye of the trenchcoat man. He seemed to focus, like an owl who’s spotted a field mouse with a crutch and a vest made of bread crumbs. He broke into a run.

“On da one hand,” he began, “I almosht had to ahdmire hish tenashity. He knew he had no chancesh, and yet he pershisted in evading me, in delaying me with his goonsh...”

Bruno stepped out from behind the support beam, bringing the nearby crate into his kneecaps with the force of a sledgehammer. The trenchcoat man flew facefirst into the floor, breaking his nose and nearly swallowing his cigar.

The lead pipe rolled out of his grasp, and Bruno scooped it up, regarding it thoughtfully.

“You know,” he remarked in an even tone, “A bit fussy, I suppose, but I prefer the term ‘handyman’. If it’s all the same to you.”

Bruno got to work.

Chinbeard collapsed in a side alley about half a mile from the trainyard. Panting heavily, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a grimy watch. He groaned.

“Oh, god, still another half-hour before the next train boards. I’m never going to make it out of the city at this rate.” He wiped some of the sweat off of his forehead. “Oh god. Oh god, I’m going to die. I know I’m going to die.”

Vatsy retrieved his notepad, attending cheerfully. “Inevitable demise, you say? Splendid! Please, could you elaborate?”

Chinbeard stared at Vatsy.

Vatsy began to scrawl on his notepad, mouthing the words “slow...thinker” and “not...terribly...bright” as he did so. After finishing, he glanced back up at chinbeard.

“Well?”

Chinbeard sighed. “Yeah, okay, why not. It all started when I got fired from my last employer.”

“Last employer?”

“Yeah, I’ve...I’ve held a lot of jobs, lately. Anyway, some scientist type needed a lab assistant, so I applied.” His voice became more strained. “I’d been working there for about a week when out of nowhere, the guy just up and *fires* me. No good reason, never tells me why. Oh, there was some fine-print crap about ‘disrespect for proper lab procedures’ and ‘gross mismanagement of hazardous and potent substances’, but that happened like once.” Chinbeard thought about it for a moment. “Maybe...*maybe*...five times. Total.”

Vatsy looked at him thoughtfully. “Right, right. Say, what’s your name, anyhow? I can’t keep thinking of you as ‘hideous facial hair’, now can I?”

Chinbeard nodded, seeming relieved. “I’m...”

“No...no, come to think of it, I *can* keep thinking of you as ‘hideous facial hair.’ Actually, that’s probably the most likely scenario. Forget I asked.”

Chinbeard’s face fell. “It’s not like I don’t have a name, or anything. I’m a person just like anyone else.”

“Oh yes, I suppose I’m aware of that, but you know, I can’t help thinking of you as walking hair-and-journalism transportation vehicle first and thinking, feeling being second. It’s uncanny.”

“You want the story, or what?” Chinbeard muttered.

Vatsy nodded patiently, putting pen back to paper.

Chinbeard’s mouth opened, and then shut again. “Uh, well, actually, I guess that’s it. I get fired, and the next thing I know, that guy is coming after me. I just friggin’ know the doctor’s the one that hired him, but I have no idea why, and I’m sure as hell not stopping to find out. That guy? I’ve heard of him. He’s one of the best bounty hunters in the area. Can kill a man with his thumb.”

Vatsy grinned. “You don’t say. How’s he against trained assault chimps?”

Chinbeard glanced nervously down the alley...and he froze, color once again draining from his face.

“Apparently? Good enough.”

Silhouetted against the grimy sunlight of the fading afternoon, clothes ruffled, stood the trenchcoat man. For the first time since Vatsy had first seen him, he was quiet, which did surprising things to his intimidation factor. Even from five yards away he seemed to loom, muscles tensed and eyes widened maddeningly with something like fury. He was badly bruised, and blood trickled from his nose in alarming quantities.

Silently, swiftly, he took a step towards chinbeard.

Chinbeard scrambled to his feet, glancing pleadingly at Vatsy before giving up and hurtling down the alleyway. Trenchcoat wrenched into gear, sprinting past Vatsy and after the fleeing figure.

Vatsy watched them disappear down the alleyways, swallowed up by shadow, fog and dust. He shrugged, then turned back to his notes.

After a moment, Bruno ambled silently into the alley entrance. Bruno looked as if he’d leapt off of a five-story building onto a pavement made of brass knuckles, bricks, lead pipes, and grievous bodily harm. His fur was matted with blood, his face looked slightly lopsided, and his bowler hat was torn in several places.

Quietly, he plopped down in the alley opposite Vatsy.

“Well, that was. Um. Bracing,” Bruno began, voice slurred slightly.

Vatsy glanced up at him, eyes widening suddenly as he noticed Bruno’s condition. “Dear lord, Bruno, what happened?”

Bruno shrugged, then winced. “Better man won, as it were. I was a bit surprised when he wrestled the pipe away from me, m’not afraid to admit. That was class work, there.”

Vatsy shook his head. “Drat it all, Bruno. People never shut up about standards falling in the service industry, but it would seem professionalism is alive and well.”

Bruno felt around in his mouth, paused thoughtfully, then retrieved a bloodstained tooth. He eyed it for a moment before flicking it towards the gutter at the end of the alley. “I did manage to delay him, though. Did what I set out to do.” Bruno coughed, glancing downwards at the alley floor. “So I suppose that’s a win.”

“I suppose so, yes.”

“Right.” Bruno coughed again, and managed to suppress a slightly embarrassed expression. “So. I take it you got the story, boss?”

Vatsy nodded, mood swinging upwards instantly. “Ah, yes, Bruno!” He grinned excitedly, lifting his notebook and showing his companion the notes scrawled within. “Quite enlightening. Apparently, our unfortunately groomed acquaintance is being sought at the behest of a former employer. Our man in the trenchcoat is a private investigator, or a bounty hunter, or something of the sort. Quite straightforward, really.”

Bruno nodded slowly, eyes unfocused. “Right.”

Vatsy beamed, flipping shut his notebook. “Exactly.”

Bruno’s nodding slowed even further, and he spoke carefully. “Was that all?”

“Hrm?”

Bruno placed his palms together, leaning back patiently. “Was that all you learned from the interview, boss?”

Vatsy reopened his notebook. “That does seem to be all, yes.”

There was a moment’s silence.

It was Vatsy’s turn to cough.

“Um.”

After a moment, he began again.

“It, um. It occurs to me that this story would have somewhat more intrigue if we actually knew why he was being followed. Of course, they, um...they’ve...by now...”

There was another moment’s silence.

Vatsy sprang to his feet, shoved the notebook back under his hat, and dashed madly down the alley.

Bruno slumped, rose carefully, and limped dutifully after.

Chinbeard scrambled to climb the grimy drainpipe, its rusty surface scraping the skin off of his hands. Securing his feet against a particularly knobby section, he risked a glance downwards.

The trenchcoat man was about six feet down, while the alleyway was about twenty. From the rush of fresh panic on chinbeard's features, it was unclear which one he'd be less eager to become quickly, and definitively, familiar with.

He turned back to his climbing. Ten more feet to the rooftop. Was the pipe shaking?

He'd just managed to gain a helpful foothold in a rotted part of the brick wall when he heard, from below, a voice cry out after him:

"Excuse me, but would this be a bad time for a second interview?"

His heart skipped a beat.

"Only there's actually a few details I need clarification on..."

Groaning in panic, he struggled to increase his speed. The roof was almost in range, but the trenchcoat man beneath him was going hand-over-hand like a bloodied, berserk koala. Chinbeard braced his feet, pulled at the pipe to give him the momentum for the last pull to the top...

There was an altogether unhealthy sound, which proved to be that of copper tearing free from brick.

Gracefully, the pipe began to swing downwards.

On instinct, the trenchcoat man let his grip go slack, and he sped rather undignifiedly down the copper length. The pipe slammed into the wall behind, and he dropped, hurtling fifteen feet straight down. He hit the alley floor like a discarded marionette, almost bouncing as he smacked straight into the grime and scattered papers, and the pipe clanged sideways to the alley floor a moment later.

Chinbeard, in his moment of panic, had managed to latch his hands onto the lip of the roof. He hung there, legs windmilling, until he managed to get a skinned elbow up and pull himself up and over.

Panting heavily, he collapsed out of sight for a moment.

Bruno, who had just arrived by now, ambled over and investigated the fallen trenchcoat man. He wasn't moving much, only twitching and squirming slightly. He was muttering hoarsely under his breath, but whether this was narration or just swearing was difficult to guess. Bruno turned back to Vatsy, who was peering up at the roof with interest.

"Half his bones are broken, boss. He's not going to be moving for a while." Bruno thought for a moment, then set to rifling through his jacket.

Chinbeard leaned over the roof edge, peering down at the fallen figure in the alley. He threw his arms up in triumph.

"HAH! Real nice job hunting me down there, five-o'clock! Yeah, how you like that! Hey, here's a narration for you..." His voice grew mock-serious. "As I fell down the drainpipe like a jackass, I realized that a hard-boiled demeanor and an overused fashion statement were pretty damn worthless against *gravity*."

The trenchcoat figure shook his head a few degrees, moaning incoherently. Chinbeard disappeared for an instant, then reappeared at the roof's edge, hurtling a tiny piece of rubble ineffectually downwards.

"Seriously, bro, I hate to just leave you there to get your organs harvested by street thugs, but then again, I *don't*. Actually, I'd put in the call myself, but I don't really know the protocol for that kind of deal. Would I get a finders fee, or something? Probably not. I dunno."

The trenchcoat man's voice grew slightly more coherent. Bruno could just pick out the words "before" and "late".

"I gotta say, though? I haven't got that much sympathy for you. You did this thing that kinda put me off...it sounds silly to mention it, but there was this thing where you *hunted me like an animal*." Another piece of rubble was flung down. "That kind of grated my cheese, if you know what I'm saying."

Vatsy scribbled in his notebook, muttering “grated...my...cheese” under his breath as he finished up the transcription. Bruno lit up one of the trenchcoat man’s cigars, taking a long drag...before glancing up at chinbeard and stopping, transfixed.

Chinbeard laughed, waving down at the group.

“Alright, I gotta catch a train, hopefully one bound as far away from all of you freaks as possible. I swear, sometimes I think I’m the only normal person in this...” He stopped, wiping sweat off of his forehead. “This whole...”

He glanced down at his sweat-streaked hand, which was beginning to shake uncontrollably.

The pale skin had a faint, sickly orange tinge to it.

He could only stare in horror as it began to swell uncontrollably, skin stretching unnaturally as muscles knitted themselves into massive, yarn-like balls. He collapsed out of sight, his panting voice rising up into a scream.

Bruno quietly removed the cigar, stared at it for a moment, glanced at Vatsy’s bemused expression, then shrugged and replaced it.

After a few seconds of listening to the screams, Vatsy glanced over at him.

“Well. That was unexpected.”

The anguished howling from the rooftops continued, unabated, for a bracingly long period of time. After a minute, they disappeared briefly, then reappeared at twice the volume.

Vatsy clucked his tongue, eying the rooftop appraisingly.

“I...hm. That’s going to be difficult to work into the story. Bruno, did you...see what happened, up there?”

Bruno squinted upwards, lowering the brim of his bowler hat to cut out the glare. Finally, he shrugged apologetically. “He’s out of sight. No idea, boss.” Bruno bent down and scooped up the rest of trenchcoat’s cigars, tossing them into his satchel. “Might be best if we were on our way.”

Vatsy glanced upwards, then shrugged, scribbling contemplatively in his notebook. “I’ll just say that his facial hair finally turned on him after years of abuse. Wraps it up tidily.”

Abruptly, the screaming shot up in tone and volume, resembling less a scream of pain and more a primal, animalistic shriek. Vatsy, intent on his writing, merely muttered “screamed...like...girl...” under his breath as he finished up his notes. Bruno, on the other hand, took a slow step back, gaze transfixed on the ledge.

Vatsy scribbled down the final sentence, turning to Bruno.

“...Bruno? Bruno, is there something wrong?”

Bruno swallowed cautiously, expression carefully blank.

“Uh, yes, boss. Yes. I think a tentacle does, in fact, count as ‘wrong’ under a classical definition of the word.”

Vatsy didn’t respond immediately. He looked up, leaning his head back slowly and deliberately as if it was a fishbowl he was afraid of dropping.

The two of them watched the unnatural silhouettes flail against the sky as the screams grew less and less natural, more and more like the product of a being with too many tongues and far too many teeth. With an edge in his voice not unlike urgency, Bruno spoke next.

“So. Uh, boss. Would you happen to have some journalistic insight into this...development?”

Vatsy seemed to think about this, then gently shook his head.

“Not...not in so many words, Bruno. Not in so many words.”

The tentacle lashed into view again.

Vatsy coughed. “Actually, Bruno, I do have one insight of note.”

Bruno nodded. “Suspected as much, boss.”

“I was thinking, Bruno, that it would be in our best interests to fall back on one of our most time-honored strategies.”

“Right, right. Keeping our heads down and moving on?”

“Huh?” Vatsy blinked. “Oh, no, I was actually referring to writing up stories while safe and sound in the office.” Vatsy paused, then hastily added, “This is not to say this strategy in any way *precludes* running like hell, understand.”

Bruno nodded quickly. “Of course. First things first, and all.”

There was a sharp sound of cracking mortar, the whispering of rushing air, and a sudden orange blur as what was left of chinbeard landed between them and the alley exit.

He didn't much resemble his former self. The creature that had taken its place was almost simian, an ape-like monstrosity with bright orange fur and an extra arm jutting from his stomach. Tentacles sprouted like weeds from his shoulders and back, waving like seaweed caught in a current. He had two massive and gnarled heads, like toothy chestnuts stuck onto two barrel-like necks. The only point of comparison, besides a certain familiarly ghastly aroma, lay in the jutting orange beards encircling his twisted chins.

Vatsy and Bruno had just enough time to realize they had no idea what the hell they were looking at before the creature howled, turned, and galloped down the alleyway using his third arm as an ersatz extra leg. He was out of sight in less than a minute.

Vatsy was the first one to speak. "Bruno? Bruno, let's get back to the apartment, eh? It's probably on public streets now. Means it's the city's problem, not ours. Put our...put the people who pay taxes' money to work. Let's just go type everything up and send it off, eh? Bruno?"

Out of nowhere, a fierce blue glow heralded a tearing in the air itself, a shimmering hole that imposed itself upon the landscape.

A figure stumbled through, a balding, skeletal man in a white lab coat. He glanced at the wreckage, caught a glimpse of trenchcoat, and wailed, "We're too late! We're all too late! Oh god, what has science created?"

It was at that point he noticed Vatsy and Bruno. He jumped away.

"Oh dear lord!"

Vatsy waved. "Pardon me, sir, but do you have a moment? Only I'm doing a spot of journalism, and I thought you'd be able to comment?"

The man in the lab coat hesitated. "Writer's Guild?"

"Freelance."

The lab-coated man's already-distraught expression melted, rather subtly, into one of cold terror. "I, uh, I should be..."

He turned back towards the portal, which was beginning to crackle shut.

Vatsy flipped his notepad open. "Bruno, be so kind as to detain our friend the scientist."

Dutifully, Bruno leveled his shotgun at lab-coat, who squeaked like a goosed mouse before raising his trembling hands into the air.

Vatsy readied his pen, thinking for a moment. “Now,” he began, voice cheerful, “kindly illuminate the situation once and for all, yes?”

Lab-coat gulped. “Well...I had this lab assistant, right, and *he* made a mistake—let me just go ahead and make that real clear, that it’s...”

“Yes, yes, we’re up to the bit where the lab assistant got fired. Let’s proceed *directly* to the part where he’s a gnarled pseudosimian paragon of un-nature, shall we?”

“Oh.” The scientist swallowed again. “Well...I mean. I find out that he’d b-been exposed to some chemicals, so I fired him—and then, yesterday, I found out that the chemicals in question just happened to be the ones that could mutate him into an unspeakable creature. I didn’t think to check! I had no idea where he was by then, so I hired the best bounty hunter I could afford to bring him b-back in time to administer the antidote, but now...he’s failed! It’s too late!”

As Vatsy transcribed this, Bruno raised a weathered hand. “Question. Why didn’t you just have the bounty hunter tell him that he was going to turn into a monster?”

The scientist shook his head exasperatedly, throwing his arms up into the air. “I told him to do that! He said it was ‘against his standards’, or something!”

From the crumpled wreckage of trenchcoat came a barely intelligible, “M’not...m’ss’nger b’y. M’ h’rd b’iled.”

The scientist ignored this, wringing his hands. “Now a freakish, murderous creature of chaos has been unleashed on the city, and I...oh, god. I just can’t shake the feeling that this is all my fault.”

Vatsy’s head bobbed up and down in agreement. “Oh, yes, one hundred percent. Say, what did you say your name was?”

The scientist paused, mouth half-open. Finally, slowly, he said, “It’s...John...Smith. Dr. John Smith.”

Vatsy wrote this down.

“Well, Dr. Smith, thank you. In addition to providing a valuable piece of the story, through your bold perversions of science you have *furnished* the story. Have an excellent day.”

Vatsy motioned to Bruno to follow, walking towards the side exit of the alley.

Dr. Smith paused for a second, uncertain, then began to follow after them.

“Hey! Wait! Did you happen to see where the creature--!”

They stopped as soon as they came to the edge of the alleyway—transfixed.

The creature had come out of the alleyway about fifty yards down, and was busying himself rampaging through the afternoon crowds. Fruit vendors, tinkers, and glass-and-china-merchandise salesman scattered like panicked roaches as Chinbeard Mk. 2 thundered through the market lane, splintering the stands and spilling the merchandise with swipes of his massive fists. The crowds of consumers streamed away from the beast, screaming in terror.

Lab-coat staggered, nearly dropping to his knees. “Oh, oh god...we have to stop him!”

Bruno shrugged. “Seems the constabulary might be what you’re looking for, there.”

“Who knows how long they’ll take getting here! Please--we have to do something, or there’s no telling how many people will die!”

Vatsy snapped a finger eagerly, returning to his notebook. “Ooh, that’ll make a good concluding note for the story. ‘There’s no telling how many people died as a result of the feckless incompetence of the worst scientist ever and the worst hair-and-journalism-transportation vehicle ever...’”

The scientist whimpered, glancing back at the rampage not far enough away. “Please, I can’t do this alone!”

Vatsy sighed in exasperation, finishing up his notes and then flipping shut the notebook. “Well, it’s on our way anyway, and he somehow loses his intimidation factor when you realize his transformation was a product of gross incompetence. With any luck, he’ll drop dead of cancer in a few minutes anyway. Now, what did you have in mind?”

Lab-coat perked up, scrambling gratefully to his feet. “Oh god, thank you! Well, I do have a ...it’s a long shot, but I think maybe—just maybe—it could work. You see, his molecules are altered through a binding charge—a charge of negative energy.” Lab-coat pulled a schematic out of his shirt, detailing some molecular component sequence, and looked down at it. “We could recharge his molecular structure--revert him back to

normal—by somehow flooding his body with positive energy. If we could somehow put a strong enough electrical current through him, we could turn him back into an ordinary human being!”

Lab-coat looked up at them, hopeful.

Vatsy and Bruno glanced at each other.

Bruno picked up his satchel and walked quietly forward, pushing past lab-coat.

A little stunned, lab-coat watched him go, speechless. Turning back to Vatsy, he managed, “Did...what’s your friend doing? Does...”

There was the sound of a gunshot, and the howling and smashing noises stopped abruptly.

Lab-coat froze, mouth still half-open.

Bruno ambled back, casually blowing the smoke away from both barrels. He and Vatsy exchanged looks of satisfaction, and they set off past the shell-shocked scientist, through the splintered wreckage, and into the dwindling light of the sinking sun.

It was time to go home.

A week later, the air in the apartment was still as death.

Vatsy had barely moved since the manuscript had gone into the mail. He sat stock still, but even in what for him was an idle state his limbs twitched with ragged anticipation. Bruno began to watch him cautiously, regarding him with the air of a time bomb whose clock hands seemed to twitch more rapidly when nobody was looking. For long, empty days, they waited silently in the office...until one morning, when Bruno went out to get some food, he found a battered crate lying on their doorstep.

Bruno glanced back over his shoulder. Vatsy was still sitting in his chair, thinking whatever his unfathomable mind thought at such times. Bruno turned back to the box...then, as quietly as possible, closed the door behind himself.

Bruno knelt down by the crate, examining it. On the top was pinned a scrap of paper—he couldn’t read most of the very florid writing on it, but he did recognize the words *Writer’s Guild* and *Vatsy*.

Bruno hesitated, then reached inside to retrieve his crowbar from the umbrella stand.

Vatsy heard the sound of freeing nails, then a quick exhalation of breath and the sound of frantic movements. He shook himself.

“Bruno?”

Bruno opened the door a crack, adjusting his hat. “Package from the Guild of Writers, boss.”

Vatsy sprang up. He went from doldrums to hyperventilating in a matter of instants, and could barely choke out—in between gasping breaths—the words, “Yes? What did they say? What did they say?!”

Bruno coughed uncomfortably. He shrugged as sympathetically as he could.

“Appears to be a ‘no’, boss.”

“What do you mean, “appears”? Read it to me!”

Bruno glanced down at the dead cobra in his hands. “It, um. It wasn’t exactly a letter.”

Vatsy’s claws clenched.

“Another rejection! What was wrong? I had it this time! I know I did!”

Bruno stepped inside, taking a seat and watching appraisingly. He nodded and spoke at all the right times. He watched as Vatsy’s dejection bled into rage, and then as the rage bled into shock. Almost unconsciously, he began to count...one minute, Vatsy was murmuring quietly to himself... a minute and thirty seconds, two minutes...Vatsy was sitting, silently...two and a half minutes...two minutes, fifty-nine seconds...

Vatsy pulled himself up. Silently, he replaced his hat...

...and then turned to Bruno, shrugging.

“Eh well, back to it. Any eating on that cobra? I’m peckish.”

As Vatsy settled into his chair and began typing industriously, Bruno got to work with his skinning knife.

He considered, silently, that there was something to be said for the comforts of routine.

Part Two

From Breakfast to Hell

Writer's Guild World Newsletter, Issue 14, Volume 52

Important Announcement

It has come to the attention of the Writer's Guild World Newsletter that a certain individual, known by the distasteful appellation Vatsy, has seen fit to perpetuate a remorseless spree of crimes against literature, language, sanity, and public health. This individual is not so much a sentient being as a fetid bouquet of anti-talent, shameless irreverence for the written word, and malevolent persistence. He has mailed to us several typewritten parcels, which have been mockingly labeled as "news stories", with the apparent understanding that we would publish them. This is, needless to say, a complete insult to our integrity, our scruples, and our positions as arbiters of the written word.

This individual (our crimes against language would rival his, should we refer to him as a "writer" or "journalist") has persisted in these insults despite rejections, fair warnings, and mercy-driven attempts on his life. He has demonstrated himself to be an enemy of all who use words as tools for the construction of a working society, using them instead as weapons for the destruction of clear thought and reason. In his insults to ourselves, his crimes against humanity, and his unwillingness to demonstrate remorse, he has forced us to take action.

Acting upon the Mercantile Powers Act of 4921, Stipulation 34, Clause 5, Corollary 2, Sub-Corollary 4, and in accordance with the Fair Action Agreement of 4923, we now exercise our rights as a mercantile organization to order this individual murdered in a way that looks like an accident.

According to anonymous sources, the subject is a greasy felinoid creature with an emaciated frame, a set of pupil-less white eyes, and a filthy top hat (in the brim of which he has impudently placed a tag reading "Press"). He is unarmed, but is often accompanied by an equally vile bodyguard known as Bruno. Bruno, a chimpanzee-like creature, is characterized by manky fur, a worn bowler hat, a well-used sawn-off shotgun, and a disgusting level of loyalty to his associate. According to rumor, he is not to be underestimated.

Freelance contractors will be accepted for a price of 100 dollars up front, 5,000 upon completion, with a deadline of one week before replacement. Offer is available to any

individuals who can bring themselves to venture near the pair of them. There will be a 500 dollar bonus for the eradication of his associate.

Let us see a few blots of filth scrubbed away from this already soiled world.

The Writer's Guild Staff

Addendum: If the creature known as Vatsy should happen to view this announcement (much as we suspect that civilized journalism is anathema to such a person), we would like to remind you that you were warned. Persistence, a golden virtue in many, is to you your most fatal flaw. If you'd an ounce of sense, you'd have desisted. If you'd an ounce of foresight, you'd have never begun. If you've an ounce of decency, you'll terminate your own wretched existence for us—by drowning, perhaps, that you might (in addition to cleansing the world around you) cleanse yourself for the first time in your unspeakable life. Alas, you've demonstrated none of the above traits, and so our only advice to you now that you have a chance of taking is that you should accept your fate with whatever dignity you can muster.

It was barely morning. Only a faint light poured into the office, as if the sun itself was reluctant to enter.

It was enough light to awaken Bruno for his morning rounds.

He pulled himself off of his armchair, stretching his limbs as he slid onto the cluttered floor. A quick glance around the room affirmed that the situation was normal. The door was still securely locked; that the lock was made of pewter and the doorway was in any case kept in the doorframe only by friction and habit were not details of consequence. Some of the food wrappers and scraps on the floor were starting to fall behind their acceptable sanitation threshold, which was roughly defined as any item that needed thick gloves or fire to properly deal with. Vatsy was still asleep, bony feline body curled up in the pit of his armchair, worn top hat fallen over his eyes. He murmured softly in his sleep, occasionally twitching one of his claws in a groggy pantomime of typing. In general, the room looked something like an early, defective bomb-shelter prototype, currently occupied by a family of landfills and their pet freak of nature. Bruno

took a deep breath, unconsciously filtering out the stench of garbage, horrible hygiene, and cheap ink. Home sweet hellhole.

Idly, Bruno approached the typewriter. A half-finished page sat nestled in its crevice, while a few completed ones sat to the side. If the sketches that were scattered around the typewriter were any indication, it could be inferred that the story was about a short man with two heads and a submachine gun. Bruno felt a quiet rush of reassurance. Vatsy seemed to have entirely abandoned the idea of writing stories inspired by reality, which, somehow, seemed to be for the best.

As quietly as possible, not wanting to disturb his companion, Bruno padded over to the cratered wall. He glanced down at the streets below, breathing in the (comparatively) fresh air. A handful of drifters, curled up beneath torn rags, settled into whatever alcoves they could find to avoid the worst of the wind. Scraps of garbage fluttered and danced in the breeze, sticking against the crumbling alcoves and splintered benches lined up on the sidewalk. Most of it was food wrappers, or torn advertisements—however, a few copies of the last Writer’s Guild World Newsletter were present, delicate illustrations and fine serified text flitting regally about the squalor.

Bruno probably would have lingered for a few minutes, enjoying the divine serenity of the tranquil morning air, if the door hadn’t then been blasted onto the floor with hurricane force.

He launched himself against the wall, every cell in his body jolting forcefully awake. He could see the light coming through the shattered doorway, could see the shadow of the intruder, braced from having battered the door down, preparing to charge in. One thought broke through the chaos and made itself heard:

Weapon. Needed a weapon.

Umbrella stand.

His leg shot out like a piston, foot grasping the nearby umbrella stand just as the black-shrouded figure stumbled through the entryway.

With a grunt of exertion, Bruno spun, lifting himself into the air and swinging the stand with his leg. It crashed into the figure’s face with the stopping power of a sledgehammer, sweeping the figure backwards off of his feet and skull-first into the floor.

The figure hit hard, stunned, muscles going slack. Bruno lunged down for the shattered remnants of the umbrella stand, scooping up the crowbar he'd kept inside it. Just as the figure snapped to and went for his dagger, Bruno leapt onto the figure's ribs.

Bruno chopped down hard with the crowbar. The blade blocked the crowbar's iron crook, forces meeting together with a sickening clang, muscles buckling from the impact. Bruno, scrambling on his foe's fallen body, locked his legs into a woodcutter's stance as he forced the crowbar downwards. The figure, squirming beneath Bruno's feet, could only watch as the steel of the dagger inched closer and closer to his face...

And then, sudden recognition dawned in the figure's eyes.

"Brrnggh?"

Bruno checked his assault slightly, uncertain. "Pardon?"

The figure mumbled something from beneath his face cover. "Cn trgggh, frrs cvvr. 'un srrggrgh."

The figure inched his off hand closer to his mouth covering, pulling it down. He had a sallow, stubble-covered face that had had a front-row seat to a lot of quality violence.

"Bruno? That's you, isn't it?"

Bruno nodded, impassive. He didn't let up any further on the crowbar.

The figure, suddenly remembering his situation, slowly released the tension from the bladelock. Very deliberately, he shifted the dagger aside, letting it drop to the floor beside them.

Bruno raised the crowbar, but didn't get off the figure. "Can't say I recognize you, to be honest."

The figure shook his head. "No, no, I expect you wouldn't. Remember the crime lord, eight years ago? I was his mysterious right-hand man."

Bruno nodded, recognition dawning on his face. "Right. With the golden dragon mask."

"Yeah. Good gig, while it lasted."

"What happened?"

"Don't even bloody get me started. Let's just say it's a good thing blond-haired tank-topped muscle boys can't be bothered to take a pulse."

Bruno nodded, letting the end of the crowbar drop into his free hand. He eyed it reflectively.

“Lot of things have changed since then, of course.”

“Yeah, you bet they have. Now we just give the bosses yearly salaries and pretend it’s all legitimate. They don’t have enforcers, they have security guards.” The man sighed deeper, shaking his head. “God, I miss the old days.”

“Actually, I was really more referring to the part where you weren’t trying to kill me eight years ago. That’s a fairly recent development, to be fair.”

The assassin laughed nervously. “Oh, heh, no, man, if I’d known it was you I never would have tried anything. I didn’t get a description of my targets, you see. My new bosses, they’re...” the man mouthed wordlessly, as if trying to verbally remove some vexing splinter from his mind. He gave up, finishing, “They treat me like a damn gopher, is the long and short of it. All I got was an address.”

Bruno hefted the crowbar. “Don’t s’ppose you know anything we can use?”

The man shook his head, something between disgust and helplessness on his features. “I don’t know anything. I get the jobs from a guy who gets the jobs from clients. The business is different, these days. Everything’s so...impersonal.”

Bruno nodded, sympathetically. “Shame, is what it is.”

The man nodded back.

There was an awkward silence that lasted about fifteen seconds.

Finally, Bruno stepped carefully off of the assassin.

“So, you’ll be reporting back, then?”

The assassin stood up, expression darkening. “I have to fill out a damn form.” He rubbed at his ribs, wincing a little. “Self-criticize, talk about what parts of the assassination could have gone better...what I need to improve on...yeah, it’s a nightmare.”

Bruno picked the dagger off of the floor, tossing it to the figure. “If it’s no bother, could you tell them you had the wrong address? Help us to no end.”

The assassin shrugged. “Don’t see why not, but don’t be surprised if they don’t trust me.” The figure gave a single wave, turning to leave. “Well, I hope to hell I don’t see you, Bruno.”

Bruno nodded politely. "Likewise."

The figure paused briefly, pointing to the floor. "Looks like you've got a bit of mail."

Bruno glanced down. On the worn-out welcome mat in front of the door, there lay a large, neat envelope. It wasn't marked with an address, return or otherwise.

"Looks like," he murmured.

Bruno had just finished reassembling and resetting the shattered door when Vatsy yawned loudly, signaling that he was ready to attack the day with malice aforethought.

"Morning, Bruno," he began, toppling unsteadily off of the seat and rolling onto the floor. "Anyone try to kill us overnight?"

Bruno hesitated. "ppears so, boss."

Vatsy froze. In a flash, he scrambled to his feet, resetting his top hat.

"Assassins? Thickset brutes, breaking into our home to murder us while we slept?"

Bruno nodded. "More or less, boss."

"And you didn't wake me up to meet them? It would have been the most interesting thing that's happened this week!"

Bruno considered this, dropping his crowbar into his satchel for safekeeping. "It was just the one, in any case. Wasn't cause for alarm."

Vatsy shook his head, disappointment registering on his features. "Still. I hope you at least waited to dispose of the body until I've had a look. I need some inspiration for this quintuple homicide on the next page..."

Bruno shook his head. "M'fraid he's still alive, boss."

Vatsy paused, then shrugged. "Well, everyone slips up now and then I suppose."

"Actually, I left him alive on purpose. He's to report we weren't here."

Vatsy considered this. "Ah," he said, giving Bruno a knowing wink and climbing back up into his chair. "I see. Excellent foresight there, Bruno. We don't want to have to find new accommodations—it'd be a terrible hassle to go through all the trouble of breaking another landlord's optimistic spirit, wouldn't it?"

Bruno dropped the envelope on Vatsy's desk. "Oh, and there's some mail, boss."

Vatsy eyed it curiously, opening it with one of his claws. "Hm."

Vatsy pulled out a creased, neat sheet of paper. On it, in a fine copperplate rendered in scarlet ink, was the following:

To the entity known as Vatsy:

We've acquired a copy of your work, submitted most recently to the Writer's Guild World Newsletter. Our sources confirm this to be a work of truth, something certain people have great need of.

You need not know who has sent this. You need not know who you are working for. All you need know is this: should you encounter any other occurrences of this sort, and should you assemble a report of said occurrences, you will gain a powerful ally and a substantial salary all at once.

Your advance payment can be found enclosed in the envelope. All future reports are to be placed in an envelope under the statue of the Unknown Bureaucrat in the dock courtyards, between the hours of six-o'clock and seven-o'clock. Come alone—and we do mean alone.

Speak of this to no one.

At the bottom of the envelope was a folded ten-dollar bill. On it was written, “*A small taste of what's to come.*”

There was silence.

Bruno coughed. “Boss? What does the letter say?”

Vatsy rose, adjusting his hat once more. “I’ll explain in a bit. Right now, let’s go get some breakfast, shall we?” Vatsy paused, sliding the bill into his hatband next to the Press tag. “My treat.”

The café was a little bit nicer than the roadside stand where Vatsy and Bruno usually ate, but that wasn’t a difficult thing to accomplish. The café’s roof may have been riddled with holes, the floor might have been grimy and sticky, and the lighting levels might have been hovering just above “root cellar,” but at least one could identify the meat in the dish—or, at the very least, suppose that it had come from a source besides an alley or a rat trap.

The two of them tucked in with gusto, and it was a few minutes before Vatsy’s mouth was empty enough for him to speak.

“I have to say, Bruno, this is a tremendously pleasing development. Finally, at long last, my work is appreciated!” Vatsy shuddered happily, forking another mouthful into his jaws. “And if this sort of salary keeps up, well, that would be an excellent side effect. Really, now, with the exception of the assassination attempt, this has been one of the most pleasant mornings in recent memory!” Vatsy glanced at the change resting on his tray, counting it out mentally. “Why, we’ve barely put a dent in the money they gave us, and we’ve had it for almost half an hour!” Vatsy shoveled in another mouthful, chewing it as he eyed the cash contemplatively. “Do you think we should pay our rent, Bruno? For old time’s sake?”

Bruno didn’t say anything for a moment, gnawing thoughtfully at a bone. Finally, he shrugged. “Don’t see the point, boss. We’ll probably have to move on before too long.”

Vatsy sighed a bit, letting his fork droop onto his empty plate. “Yes, yes, I suppose you’re right. Still.” He scooped up the cash, flipping through it idly. “Yes, we can afford some upgrades with this. I’ve been wanting a new typewriter for a while now.”

“Keys sticking?”

“Well, yes, but the major problem is that I’ve just about worn all the journalism out of it.” Vatsy folded the cash carefully into his hatband, rising. “Almost ready to leave, Bruno?”

Bruno shook his head, lifting a fresh meat-laden bone. “Few more minutes, if you don’t mind.”

Vatsy glanced around the café, looking for a spot where his hummingbird of an attention span could land. On the table next to theirs, which had been quickly vacated by its previous owners when the pair sat down, was an empty coffee mug and a slightly battered periodical. Curious, Vatsy retrieved the periodical, settling down into his chair to read it.

When he read the title, he clicked his tongue in surprise.

“Huh. So this is what the *Writer’s Guild World Newsletter* looks like.”

Bruno leaned over to get a better look, chewing thoughtfully. “You’ve never seen one?”

“Well, no, not as such. I’ve never had the means, actually.”

Bruno shrugged, turning back to his meal as Vatsy digested the first few articles. When he got to page two, he did a double-take.

Bruno watched as he began reading the story again, scanning each word closely and muttering to himself. After a minute, he looked up at Bruno, shaking his head.

“By god, Bruno, this is inspired by the same story we wrote ours on!”

Bruno tore the last bit of meat off of his last bone, leaning back in his chair.

“Oh?”

Vatsy nodded emphatically. “Yes, yes, it must be! Here, let me read it aloud.”

Clearing his throat, he read the story:

A local member of CESA (the Creatively Ethical Sciences Association, an organization dedicated to testing the limits of nature) has lent substantial aid to the renovation of a local market street.

Clueberry Lane, as it was called, was notorious in the community for its congested streets and overabundance of decrepit, unsightly stalls. To help the free flow of market traffic and beautify the city, this scientist (who wished to remain anonymous) and his lab assistant participated in an impromptu renovation. Many of the older, more unsightly stalls were removed, and an effort was made to reduce the volume of persons occupying the street—thus creating a more accessible, aesthetically pleasing market.

“It was my civic duty,” the scientist insisted.

The assistant could not be reached for comment.

The next sentence was blurry, as if the type used to print it was well-worn:

Truly, our organizations and government-subsidized committees will stop at nothing to serve the community.

Vatsy shook his head, tapping the page with a claw. “See? Turns out, the journalists do steal real stories after all!”

Bruno chewed the last morsel very, very slowly.

Vatsy let his forehead sink into his hands. “The only difference is I was closer to the source...drat!” He bolted upright, slapping the table. “That’s why they didn’t accept me! It’s clear that I just wasn’t creative enough for their standards!”

Bruno considered this for a second, then nodded. “So it’d seem, boss.”

Vatsy sunk for a few moments, expression taking on the familiar droop of rejection—then he paused, sliding seamlessly into blank reflection. Abruptly, a saw-toothed grin split his face, and there was almost an audible click as his mood shifted without a clutch.

“Well, it doesn’t matter, does it?” Vatsy tapped the roll of money in his hat. “Someone who *appreciates* my journalistic endeavors is willing to do business with me! What am I obsessing over the Writer’s Guild for?”

“Well said, boss.”

“I mean, once I’ve built up a reputation with these gentlemen, the Writer’s Guild is bound to come after me sooner or later.”

With a smug flourish, he flipped the page away from the story. Glancing down at the next page, he commented; “Hm, they have an open letter to the public in here. Probably something about...about...”

Bruno watched the edges of the grin drop down like sandbags. Slowly, what blotches of sickly color remained on Vatsy’s face drained away into white.

Bruno leaned over, tapping the table. “Boss?”

Vatsy didn’t respond for a moment. Then he raised his head, eyes staring straight ahead, slightly unfocused.

“Bruno, I think we might have...a slight problem.”

Bruno shifted in his chair. “This problem have anything to do with the people who tried to kill us last night?”

Vatsy nodded.

“There’s going to be more, aren’t there.”

Vatsy nodded again.

Bruno bent down, undoing the clasp on his satchel before reaching into it. He drew out the double-barreled shotgun, checked to make sure it was loaded, then placed it calmly in his lap.

Vatsy's face was still shifting as it tried on different reactions.

"This. This is certainly...a new development. Unfamiliar territory, you know?" He closed up the newsletter and shook his head, drawing in a steady breath. "Well, this has certainly put a damper on the whole morning, now, hasn't it?"

"To be fair, we did know that somebody was trying to off us already."

Vatsy gestured vaguely with one hand, rubbing his forehead with the other. "Yes, but people have certainly tried to kill us before. I mean, deflecting assailants is practically a spectator sport in this city. Amateur efforts are one thing, but finding out that someone's formed a professional league is a bit much, I should think!" Anxiously, he flipped back to the article, scanning it with the air of someone hoping it might have magically rearranged itself in the past minute. Finding that the laws of causality had not been so gracious, he groaned. "Bruno, what are we supposed to do?"

Bruno leaned back in his chair again, toying with the shotgun in his lap. After a moment, he cleared his throat and said, "I s'ppose the first step would be changing our location."

"What, and leave the city? Impossible! My life's dream is to be published, Bruno, and though I admit the whole posting an assassination attempt business is a *bit* discouraging, it's not as if I embarked on this quest without knowing there'd be setbacks!"

"Was actually referring to finding new lodgings, boss."

Vatsy paused, relaxed, then nodded. "Right, right, first things first. We'll have to find somewhere else to hole up—somewhere safer than our current establishment. Like, for example, somewhere where an assassin needs at the very least a set of rudimentary doorknob-operating skills to get at us. Maybe somewhere where the windows are a design feature, as opposed to being naturally occurring."

"Right. I think I know a place." Bruno paused, glancing at the sheaf of money with an expression tinged faintly with unease. "We'll need a bit of cash on hand, though. The proprietors aren't what you'd call optimists."

Vatsy snatched up the money, thumbing through it. "Right. I take it our savings, combined with...47 dollars should be enough?"

"M'fraid not, boss."

Vatsy stopped dead, looking up at Bruno in bewilderment. "I say, Bruno!"

Bruno shrugged again. "It's safe, boss. Very safe."

Vatsy tutted, folding the money back up. "How safe is this magical diamond jewel fortress, then?"

"I did hear that a group of high-priced assassins tried to break in a few months back. They failed."

"Well, I suppose that's something, but—"

"It's worth mentioning that they failed breaking in through the window."

"Secure bars—"

"They were using a cannon, in point of fact."

Vatsy paused, then nodded, a little grudgingly. "Well. There's still the matter of finances."

Bruno shrugged. "I s'ppose we'll just have to leave something off for your employers, then. Maybe they'll pay us right quick."

Vatsy considered this. He began drumming his claws on the table, eyes staring off into space as he fought to keep all of his focus on the issue. After a moment, his muscles tensed, and he swung himself energetically off of his chair.

"Well, Bruno, that's it, then. I'll have to get right to work."

"Back to the office, then?"

Vatsy shook his head. "No, I'm afraid we haven't the time, Bruno. It'd take far too long for me to weave a creative opus of the kind their patronage demands from scratch."

"Weren't you working on something?"

Vatsy waved a hand dismissively. "Oh, that? Bruno, old friend, that was the sort of garbage I pawn off to my regular readership."

Bruno blinked hard. "...you have a regular readership?"

Vatsy nodded eagerly. "Oh, yes, Bruno. The fine gentlemen in the alley next to ours. They pay me a nearly perfectly good bit of fruit every week for a little newsletter I write, or an early draft of whatever I most recently submitted to the Guild. Brightens up their whole day."

"...and they can read it, then?"

“Not as such, with the possible exception of that one chap who thinks he’s the moon, but they enjoy it nonetheless. To get back on topic, Bruno, it seems we’ll have to rustle something up from the streets again.”

Bruno unconsciously checked his shotgun again. “Fair enough, boss. Any ideas?” Vatsy grinned.

“Bruno, I’ve always felt that if one walks these colorful streets long enough, one is bound to find anything one seeks.” He paused, then added, “And a wealth of things one does not. And would, perhaps, be content never to encounter at all. Point is, something will turn up in the course of time.”

Bruno opened the door, careful to go out in front of Vatsy. He eyed the milling, gritty streets with an air of well-cultivated suspicion, then motioned for Vatsy to follow. “Thing is,” he commented, keeping his eye on the crowd, “we haven’t got terribly long.”

Abruptly, there was a sensation in the crowd—one of general, minor, incidental out-of-sync-ness, as if a herd of deer had heard the soft scrape of a claw on leaves. Bruno motioned to Vatsy to move, but before either of them could say or do anything further, there was a violent thundering that seemed loud enough to crack the air itself.

The earth shook, then—a shuddering quake that buckled their knees and nearly threw them to the ground. Screams erupted on the street as walls shook, fruit and ornaments leapt off of stands, people stumbled and tumbled and fell onto one another. Far off in the distance from where the roar had sounded, a thick plume of smoke soared almost instantaneously upwards, staining the clouds like ink poured into water.

Vatsy and Bruno both paused, staring slightly agape at the plume of smoke as the crowd came to its bearings. After a moment, Vatsy coughed.

“I think, Bruno, that inspiration has found us once again.”

Without a word, he set through the crowd, ducking into an alley towards the distant calamity.

For several minutes, they raced in silence, feet scraping against the clutter, waste, and occasional drunkard that lay underfoot. The distant smoke grew closer only by degrees, the unseen source from which it billowed deceptively far away. Finally, when it became clear to Bruno that he would run out of sprinting reserve before they ran out of

distance to cover, he gently downshifted his sprint into a sort of dignified jog. Vatsy followed suit, almost absently slowing to a gangly trot.

“Seems like it came from the city edge,” Bruno remarked, once he’d gotten a bit of breath back. “Near Broventree.”

Vatsy shrugged, reaching up to slide his hat back into position. “I don’t believe I’ve been.”

“Mostly slums, factories. Bit less pleasant than our neighborhood.”

Vatsy nodded, a little smugly. “I always said we lived in one of the finest burgs in the East City. Hardly any violent crime, there.”

“There are the mugging rings, boss.”

“Well, yes, there’s muggings everywhere, but that’s not really *violent* crime as long as you don’t make any sudden moves. Anyway, we haven’t been bothered by muggers.”

Bruno allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction. “Not after the first time, no.”

“I don’t think the city council ever got to cleaning that alleyway up, come to think of it. Or putting in a new mailbox.”

“You know how it is, boss.”

They rounded a corner, emptying into a wider alley. The buildings rose around them like the walls of a labyrinth, leaving only a bleak bar of sunlight overhead to mitigate the unbroken shadow below. Still they moved towards the barely-visible black plume, maintaining stride in almost a straight line towards their target.

Bruno squinted up at the plume, considering something. “Seems we’re less than ten minutes out.”

Vatsy bore down, picking up his speed a little, hurtling into a shadowy crossroads...

It was at that exact moment that it occurred to Bruno that they had been charging blindly through unfamiliar alleys, in an unfamiliar part of town, while being sought out by hordes of assassins.

And in that moment, exactly as he slipped the shotgun out of the satchel and brought it to bear, two burly figures stepped out of the alley in front of them.

What resulted was an impressive gear shift on the part of the lead figure.

“Alright, mates, put your hands in the air aaaaand okay, okay, I’m just gonna go ahead and step right back into this side alley here, pleasure doing business and all...” He squinted. “Wait a second...hold on, it’s you two again!” He nudged his companion on the shoulder. “Oy, it’s those two, what gave us the interview.”

There stood the thugs from the week before, slightly sheepish, still sporting the bruises of their encounter with the trenchcoat man. They hadn’t changed much—a fresh scar or two, a few less bruises, but otherwise identical in appearance. Even the clothing was unchanged; it was extremely possible that it had not been removed or washed in the intervening period. They held a pair of chair legs with nails through them, which they instinctively dropped when the shotgun did not lower itself.

Vatsy blinked. “Hold it...” His brow furrowed with the effort of recollection. “Yes, I do have a vague memory of...aha!” His face brightening. “Ah, yes, the walking journalism transportation devices with the tattoos! Say, how’ve you been?”

The lead one shrugged, scratching himself self-consciously. “Eh, can’t complain. Staying afloat, and all that. Can’t say the degree’s been of much good as of late, but you do what you can.”

“The Writer’s Guild didn’t hire you, did they?” asked Bruno.

The two thugs glanced at one other, then shook their heads. “Nah,” said the lead one, “We’re independent now.

“Us, and half the old firm,” the other added.

Bruno grunted. “What for?”

The lead one sighed, giving the universal hand-wave for “You know how the world sucks? Yeah, that pretty much sums it up.”

What he said was, “Well, it’s like this. Muscle McGee’s Thug Emporium got bought out by Rudy Rampage’s Brute Squad, which is now the managing head of the Beatdown Coalition, which is state-funded. Point is, it’s been going downhill as of late. Business with the chinbeard bloke was just the start of it.” He spat. “Lately, it felt like the whole business was about the bottom line. Can’t swing a club these days without approval from fifteen bloody layers of middle management. So me and Charlie, we’re like, sod this, they don’t treat us professionals with the respect we deserve, we’re cutting out. So we did.”

Vatsy paused, then pulled his battered notepad and pen from Bruno's satchel. He flipped it open, jotting down a few brief notes. "Hm. So, you've been doing freelance thuggery?"

The lead thug shrugged again. "Well, we've been doing some light mugging, but nothing serious. You know: keeping our hand in, getting to know the locals, establishing ourselves, all that." He spat again. "Course, any business with more than three people in it these days needs to answer to some thugs or another, whether they're competitors or just the bleedin' government. Regulations are killing us."

The other nodded with contempt. "Me, I'd just as rather stay under the radar."

Vatsy wrote this down, then gestured towards the smoke plume. "Say, don't suppose you know what that is?"

"Not in so many words. We wasn't too far off when it went up. Whole bloody place shook. Whatever it was, it did some damage to that area."

Vatsy scribbled this last part down. "Lovely. Well, I'd love to stay and chat, but, well, that's my livelihood to attend to. Good luck!"

Vatsy started to push past them, but the lead thug coughed, a little embarrassed. "Er. I hate to trouble you, but might you have a bit of dosh on you? Only business has been slow lately, and we're not quite on our feet yet."

Vatsy thumbed a bill out of his hatband, flicking it over. "Oh, yes, quite. Got to support you local industries, after all."

"Cheers. Well, good luck, then."

The thugs watched as the two took off, continuing towards the smoke plume.

"You know," the lead thug commented, scratching an armpit, "Those two ain't bad, all considered."

The other grunted. "Yeah. Not too bright, course."

"D'you hear the Guild's after them?"

"Cripes. Not a lot of future in that sort of thing."

"Yeah."

There was a pause.

"What'd you give 'em?"

"Eh? Oh. A week."

“Sounds about right to me.”

Shaking their heads, they retreated into the shadows.

Bruno estimated that the plume was about a half a mile away, and its effects were fast becoming apparent.

Bruno'd spent enough time in that half of the city to know that something had gone wrong—wronger, anyway. The air had a bitter and unfamiliar bouquet of brimstone to it--distinct from the usual smell of coal pollutant and the unwashed--that was carried by a stiff breeze with the warmth and stench of burnt cotton. The garbage-strewn streets had hairline cracks, even noticeable fractures, running in jagged paths across them. The squat brick-and-mortar buildings groaned and shifted, as if nauseous, and some looked on the brink of collapse. Even the bleak sunlight was touched with hues of unnatural earth-brown, discolored by the dust in the air.

Vatsy didn't seem to notice the entropy around him, wearing only his default expression of determined cheerfulness.

“Nearly there!” He hummed a little, tunelessly, then tilted his head back to Bruno. “Certainly was nice to see those two again, eh, Bruno?”

“Was nice they weren't trying to kill us, boss.”

Vatsy shrugged a little—a complicated gesture for one with four legs in mid-stride. “Eh, well, hopefully they'll set an inspiring example. Really, though, Bruno, I have a distinct feeling this whole business is soon to blow over.”

Bruno gestured towards a side alley, motioning Vatsy to duck into it. “That's probably the case, boss. Shouldn't think you've annoyed the Writer's Guild enough that they'd renew the bounty, and those expire within a month or two.”

Vatsy bounded into a side alley, sliding along the grimy paving to come to a halt under a torn awning. “One moment, Bruno, let me get my pad and pen out.” Bruno padded over to him, opening his satchel and passing Vatsy the desired materials.

Vatsy took them, flipping the notebook open to the last-used page. He paused, glancing over his fleeting interview with the thugs. “Hm. I'm not entirely sure what I'm going to do with this.” He shrugged, flipping the page to a blank one. “Eh. One for the alley crowd, if nothing else.”

Bruno sat down against the wall, checking his shotgun for the third or fourth time that day. “How often do you write for them, exactly?”

“Oh, every week or so.” Vatsy knocked the pen against the wall to dislodge the dried ink in the tip. “Usually just fill it with whatever sensationalist garbage I can make up off the top of my head, or just random things I see outside the office...window, ventilation, whatever you want to call it.” Vatsy flipped the notebook shut, rolled it into his top hat, then slipped the pen into the hatband. “Daily incidents. Like, for example, the time that constable beat a street punk so hard that he changed his accent and gained two new senses.”

Bruno nodded. “Yeah, bit of bad business there. Course, that sort of thing never happens anymore.”

“Oh, no, not since they stopped sending constables to our street.” They turned a corner.

“For the best, I suppose—oh, my.”

The area ahead looked as if it had been attacked by a bomb with a bad temper. Chaos and destruction streaked the narrow lanes of Broventree in all directions, giving the place the impression of being the most low-rent battlefield in history. The street ahead of them was a twisted, unrecognizable mess of broken streets, crumbled brickwork, collapsed edifices and scattered rubble. In the middle lay a massive crater that reached down into the street, issuing a slowly dwindling stream of black smoke that reached up into the plume above.

Vatsy blinked. “Say, Bruno, I don’t suppose it was like this last time you were in the area?”

Bruno thought about it for a moment, then shook his head. “I do seem to recall that a few more buildings were standing last time, boss.” He thought about it a moment more, then added, “Also, I believe the haze hanging over the place before was a bit more metaphorical.”

“Hm. Well, if the safehouse falls through, I imagine property values here are at an all-time--”

A crackling of electricity erupted from thin air, spreading out from the space adjacent to the pit before splitting into a portal the size of a small building. It hung a foot above the air, glowing intensely and occasionally spitting out white sparks.

A man in a plain suit stumbled out of it. He was balding, with a shiny scalp and the half-hearted pretense of a combover, and had the haggard appearance of someone who's become numb to the many unreasonable stresses of his career. He rubbed the smoke out of his eyes, then stepped away from the portal and waited with his hands folded.

After a few moments, a large group stepped out onto the pavement. With the exception of a short, wirier version of the man with the combover, they were substantially more impressive. There were four of them, and they were geared up in a way that suggested a cross between a cross-country hiker and the more glamorous breed of highwayman. All of them looked confident, yet detached, as if a sense of self-evident superiority was an essential tool of their profession.

"Greetings, heroes." said the man with the combover. He scratched his scalp.

The helmeted man nodded to him, smiling with the warmth of reheated leftovers. "You called us? Don't tell me—great peril, eh? Eh?"

The combover man nodded. "Yes. The city's safety depends on you."

The helmeted man approached the pit, then leaned over it—a little too far. He drew back, coughing the smoke out of his lungs as majestically as possible.

"Right, looks dire. I assume some foul creature has come out of this, and you need our services to handle it?"

Combover shook his head. "No, we've got no idea what's down there. We need you to go..." He paused, bit his lip, and began again in a louder voice: "You must descend to the depths of the pit, delving deep into the earth to uncover its nefarious source."

The helmeted man nodded understandingly. "Right, never fear. The Magnificent Five are on the job!" He turned to combover, clapping a gloved hand on his shoulder. "Your city is in good hands. We'll find out what spawned this blasted pit, and bring the information back to you at any cost!"

Combover took a step back from the pit, rubbing his hands. "Right, yes. I mean. Of course."

The helmeted man reached onto his back for his rope, then paused as he caught the glance of combover. "Nothing to fear!" he said. "Really. We're famous heroes."

"So I've heard," said combover.

The helmet man wound the rope around a crag, then spooled it out into the abyss, watching it vanish into the thinning smoke. After only a moment's hesitation, he dropped onto it. After he'd slid down, his team followed.

Combover bent down by the lip of the crater. "Good luck!" he called down. "Remember: you are the last hope of our city!"

He watched them disappear from sight. Humming tunelessly, he began to pace back and forth at the lip of the pit, bobbing his head as if counting. Finally, he shrugged, turned to the wiry man, and said, "Alright, that's enough time. Bring in the next group."

The wiry man retreated into the portal. After a few seconds, he remerged, a new group at his back.

Superficially, this group was startlingly like the last one. One simply had to flip a few genders, weapons, and articles of clothing around and you had a very similar aesthetic going on. And yet, there was a major difference, and that lay entirely in their attitude. Gone was the impression of a group of famous musicians, on their way to accept some oddly-shaped but significant award. In its place was a professional, reserved countenance, like a group of plumbers whose dispatch had consisted of a sudden hiss and three minutes of screaming.

Their leader was a different species entirely from the helmeted man. He was noticeably older than his counterpart, with odd scars and wrinkles creasing his face at various angles, but this didn't make him look infirm—it put a sort of hardness on his features, a blooded look. He had a pistol at his belt—a dull, well-maintained one—and a case strapped to his back that suggested some exotic instrument of music or violence.

Combover walked over to him, pulling a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. "Morning."

The leader nodded to him, absently, as he surveyed the pit. "Morning. We going in there?"

“Of course. We heard you’d be a few minutes, so we sent another group ahead to soften things up.”

“Rookies?”

“Rookies.” He glanced down again, sighing gently. “Almost hate to do it. They defeat a group of amateur bandits out in the sticks, then get it into their heads they can take on any threat that pops up. I doubt they even trained—train, I should say.”

“We all go through that phase.” The leader smiled a little. “I mean, to go into this line of work, you kind of *have* to start out thinking you’re indestructible. After that, well, you either learn a very quick lesson or learn a very brief one. And hey; if any of them survive, well, they’ll probably be more careful next time. It all works out.”

Combover shrugged. “I suppose so. Were you briefed?”

“They told us where that pit empties out, not that I had to guess. Seems like we end up there every few months, although we usually use the service entrance. You guys doing some remodeling or what?”

Combover unfolded his piece of paper, then handed it to the leader. “The details are on that.”

The leader took the paper, surveyed it, and groaned expansively. “Business as usual, I see.”

“It was a pretty disastrous mistake, from the sound of it.”

“Like I said. Business as usual.”

Combover chuckled, a little sheepishly. “Anyway, your main job is the retrieval of the item in the second figure. Reward is 750 dollars.”

“Sounds about right.” The leader took a step back from the pit, crossing his arms. “What can we expect?”

Combover hesitated. One could see the gears in his mind turning as he worked through a sort of linguistic calculation, adding and subtracting syllables to balance speculation, helpfulness, prudence, spin, and pure horse pockey. Eventually, he settled on, “Expect mild environmental hazards, standard tactical conditions, and...not entirely natural threats.”

“Are bullets gonna work?”

“Define ‘work’.”

Leader narrowed his eyes. "Let's go ahead and assume I'm referring to the traditional function of the bullet."

"It'll give them something to think about, for sure."

"I can work with that." Unconsciously, his hand slipped back over his shoulder, fondling the clasp of his case. "I'll just have to provide a lot of topics for consideration."

Combover gave a hand signal to his wiry cohort, who nodded and ducked back into the portal. He then cleared his throat and gestured towards the pit. "Well. I'd say the rookies have cleared the air a bit down there, so it's time you were off. I must take care of a few matters, but I'll return in a half-hour to await you in person."

Leader motioned for his group to form up, climbing carefully onto the rope. "Go ahead and have the fee delivered to the agency in advance, will you? Only we don't get a salary if the contractor defaults."

Combover chuckled. "The government pays its debts, don't you worry."

Leader secured his grip, turning to combover with an expression that radiated toxic levels of cynicism. "You concern yourself with paying us, I'll concern myself with my concerns."

Letting combover parse this, he slid down the rope.

One by one, his group followed, silent except for a few murmurs between group members. None of them glanced at combover. Within less than a minute, all of them had vanished from sight.

Combover stood there for a moment, a little awkwardly, then walked back into the portal. It dissolved in a shower of sparks, and once again, the courtyard was silent.

Vatsy trotted out of his hiding spot. "Well. This seems to be...promising."

Bruno stepped towards the pit, squinting down at it. "We going in there, boss?"

"Really, Bruno, do your instincts some credit. Do you really have to ask?"

With an eagerness usually reserved for toddlers going to the seaside, Vatsy jogged towards the blasted crater, Bruno following cautiously behind. They paused at the lip, gazing down appraisingly.

At this point, there was almost no smoke wafting upwards from the abyss, but it was nonetheless impenetrably dark. Less than five meters down, the tunnel faded into murky blackness—all he could see was the worn rope, swaying gently from recent use.

Vatsy nodded, apparently satisfied. “Yes, Bruno, this is promising indeed. A tunnel of shadow and mist, reaching out into the forgotten depths of the world. Who knows where it could lead?”

Bruno leaned over the pit, rubbing the smoke from his eyes. “Hm. The sewers, one would expect.”

“Well. Yes, I suppose.” Vatsy fell silent. After a moment’s pause, he added, “It occurs to me, Bruno, that modern civilization is the enemy of romance.”

Bruno shrugged. “If it’s any consolation, I don’t think the city maintains the sewers much these days.”

“I suppose that’s true. Unplumbed depths, as it were.”

“Right.”

“Hm.” A little mollified, he padded over to the rope. “Well, enough stalling. Let’s descend!”

Vatsy clambered onto the rope in a complicated motion, vanishing in the smoke. Bruno secured the shotgun in his satchel, placed a hand on his hat, and leapt down afterwards.

For several seconds, they plummeted through the pitch-black depths, with only the hiss of rope on fur and the cubic meters of smoke billowing up their nostrils to distract them. Then, abruptly, Vatsy hit bottom—bony form hitting the still-warm stone like a bag of coathangers. A moment later, Bruno landed beside him, falling into a relatively composed crouch.

Gingerly, Vatsy picked himself up, glancing around. “Well, that went well. Say, Bruno, you’re not injured, are you? Only I, uh, I don’t seem to be able to see anything.”

Bruno straightened up, adjusting his hat. “Seem to be alright, boss.”

“Well, that’s all well and good.” There was a brief silence. “I think I may have broken something.”

“You do?”

“Yes...drat it, I have. The spine of my notebook is irreparably damaged. Puts me right out, I don't mind saying.”

“Shame, boss.”

“Oh, and I think I cracked a few ribs.”

Bruno pulled a match out of his satchel, lighting it against his palm. The scene was thrown into some sort of relief.

They were not, in fact, in the sewers. It was probable that they were far below the sewers. They stood in the middle of a tunnel hewn of rough stone, its contours bearing only the faintest signs of human intervention—with the exception of a substantial cave-in blocking the expanse to their right, one which was, admittedly, very indicative of human activity.

Overall, the tunnel gave the impression of being built by people with a goal, a schedule, no imagination, and a decidedly imperfect grasp of what they were doing.

“I say, this appears to have been constructed by the government,” Vatsy murmured, whipping out his notepad and pen. “Well, that makes things a bit more interesting, hm?”

Bruno nodded, holding up the match with one hand while fishing around for his lantern with the other. “And dangerous, of course. We might want to keep a low profile.”

Vatsy shook his head, jotting down a few notes. “Nonsense! I'm sure the city wouldn't put restraints on the power of the free press.”

Bruno paused, match halfway to the lantern wick.

“...you are?”

“Oh, yes, quite. They've always been quite supportive of journalistic endeavors.”

Bruno remained silent for another few moments, thinking this statement over. “...they have?”

“Oh, yes! Didn't you see the foreword in that Writer's Guild World Newsletter? Little note at the bottom states that they receive substantial donations from the city coffers every year.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Exactly.” Vatsy replaced his notebook. “Not to mention, government aides were cited as sources for almost all of the articles. Help the creative process to no end, I should think.”

Bruno finished lighting the lantern, then blew out the match. “Right. Shall we?”
“Let’s.”

They set off down the tunnel at a deliberate pace, measuring their steps as if afraid of overtaking their own lantern light. Their footsteps echoed like furtive coughs in a theater, their muted nature making them seem much louder than they actually were. For almost a minute, they saw nothing of note besides the occasional cigarette butt or old scrap of paper crushed into the ground. Then, out of nowhere, Bruno froze—he gestured to Vatsy to remain still, then flicked off his lantern and lowered it to the ground. He crept forward, keeping to the tunnel walls, and as he edged forward the almost inaudible sound of voices up ahead grew more distinct.

“Cor,” breathed one, a man around middle age, “I think I get it now.”

“Get what?” said a voice recognizable as the cautious leader from before.

“Well, y’hear the word ‘bleeder’ bandied around a lot, and it never really seemed to mean nothing, but...now I think I see it.”

“Technically, ‘bleeder’ means someone who bleeds easily,” said a detached female voice. “Given the circumstances, I don’t think bleeding this much was terribly tricky to pull off. Don’t get me wrong, though, they clearly put in a game effort.”

There was a sigh from the leader. “This is...disquieting.”

“Any idea what did this?” asked the woman.

“Not really. I’m not even sure if it was a sword, or claws, or what. Something hacked them up good, though.”

“Well,” said the middle-aged man, “this is going to be interesting.”

“Briefly so, if this scene is any indication.”

There was a snort. “Not hardly. These greens couldn’t have fought their way out of a playground during naptime. I mean, dual pistols? Smoked goggles? Look, this one’s got some kind of curvy sword. What the hell was he planning to do with that thing? Bunch of amateurs. We just have to keep an eye out, is all.”

There was a sound like someone wearing a lot of gear straightening up very fast, and then a returning chorus of similar noises.

“Right. Number Two, brush the trail. Three, Four, I want you on the oars. I’ll take point. Lock and key. Execute.”

There was another chorus of adjusted gear, as well as a cacophony of murmured acknowledgments. Vatsy trotted up to Bruno, giving him a quizzical look—Bruno gently placed his finger on his lips, then motioned Vatsy to remain still. Up the tunnel, the noises of movement grew fainter and fainter.

Finally, Bruno spoke. “Sorry, boss, can’t be too careful. I’m all but certain these people are from the Tactical Heroics Deployment Agency.”

Vatsy cocked his head, glancing from Bruno to the tunnel. “I don’t believe I’ve heard of them.”

“They’re trained to take down or retrieve specific targets, as well as deal with problems regular constables aren’t suited for. Bit like daytime assassins mixed with errand boys.” Bruno flicked the lantern back on, then checked his shotgun for the fifth time. “Not really in the scope of public knowledge.”

Vatsy clicked his tongue, beginning to scribble down notes. “Huh. Fascinating.”

“Anyway,” Bruno continued, “there’s a good chance they’re...well, they’re aware of inquiries regarding us being dead.”

Vatsy paused, glancing back up at Bruno. “You mean, they might try to kill us if they see us.”

“More or less, boss. Technically, they’re not really supposed to go after open contracts, but you know how it is. Most everyone has two jobs these days.”

Vatsy thought about this, then shrugged, stowing his notes and trotting off down the tunnel. “Eh. Any luck, whatever massacred those poor blighters up there will come back for them. Be an exciting turn, wouldn’t it?”

Bruno sextuple-checked his shotgun. “That’d be the word for it, boss.”

They smelled the area ahead before the lantern light reached it, and continued to smell it right up until their noses threw up their hands, gave up, and broke out the classified ads. The tunnel was spaciously, impressively, overwhelmingly gory, to a degree that was frankly impressive. Human components were alternately splattered, hacked,

splashed, smashed, and shredded all over the tunnel floor in patterns and spreads that seemed distinctly improbable. It became impossible to tell which parts and items belonged to who—there was a female lower body, propped awkwardly against a rock, that seemed to lead to the positively demolished torso of a bulky male fighter, which led, in turn, to chunks from at least two different brains. Perhaps half of the fluids could be readily identified by anyone without a degree. Twisted scraps of armor, scattered like discarded receipts, lay crumpled in pools of blood—clearly having not served their owners very well. Overall, the scene looked as if a battlefield had been fed into a meat grinder, then added as filling to a sort of stone sausage roll.

For a moment, there was absolute silence.

“Fascinating,” Vatsy repeated, tone indicating the curiosity with which a child regards a shiny beetle.

Bruno carefully set down his lantern in one of the less-bloody patches of stone. “Certainly is...original.”

“Right, right. I mean, professionally engineered corpses, I’ve seen, but...my, this is beyond craftsmanlike. This, Bruno, is downright *artistic*.”

Bruno began moving from body to body, glancing over the wounds and equipment. “I don’t believe I’ve seen anything like this, boss.”

Vatsy nodded. “Certainly is strange.”

Bruno hesitated, then turned to face Vatsy. “No, boss, I mean it. I’ve really never seen anything like this.”

Vatsy began to say something, then paused. For a moment, he stared at Bruno, expression fading from one of fascination to one of abject horror.

“*Never?*”

Bruno shrugged helplessly, gesturing towards the bodies. “Heck of a job, boss. Sawn clear through in most areas. Haven’t seen anything like it.”

Vatsy gaped at him, eyes wide with horror. “Ye gods, man! Surely, in all your years, you must have seen something approximating this?”

Bruno considered this, eying the wounds critically. After a moment, he said, “Hm. Come to think of it, one thing, yes.”

Vatsy exhaled, letting his breath out in a long, relieved shudder. "Right. I knew you must have."

Bruno nodded, a little hesitant. "Well, yeah, see, it reminds me of the time an associate got a new shotgun. One of the fancy models." He coughed. "He, well, he tested it out on a frog."

There was a moment of silence.

"That's it?"

"M'fraid so, boss."

"Dear god!" Vatsy began to pace to and fro, weaving unconsciously around the puddles of gore. "I must say, Bruno, this gives one pause."

Bruno pulled a cigar out of his satchel. He lit it against the lantern, then leaned against the wall and began to smoke. "They have, a bit. To be fair, the mercenaries were the first sign things were going off the rails."

Vatsy waved a claw irritably, shaking his head. "Bah! The mercenaries we can handle. You've really never dealt with anything like this before?"

Bruno shrugged again, a little apologetically. "Sorry, boss. I mean, that's not to say we couldn't handle it."

Vatsy stopped pacing, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I suppose, it's just..." He sagged, glancing down the tunnel. "Well, I suppose I'm used to you...knowing how to deal with these things."

Vatsy fell silent, staring dejectedly into the darkness of the tunnel. Bruno paused, not sure what to say.

Finally, he began, "Well..."

Vatsy turned back at him, rapt with attention. "Yes?"

Bruno let a mouthful of smoke drift out from under the handkerchief. "Hm. Only, we do know one thing. Guns do work on whatever this is. Remember what the combover man said?"

Vatsy nodded, thoughtful. "Well, yes, that's true."

Bruno straightened up, picking up the lantern with his left hand and hefting his shotgun with his right. "So it is. And person'ly, I tend to find that two barrels are

appropriate for most situations. So, if he's to be believed, we're equipped for this after all."

Vatsy shot up, dejection vaporizing in a flash. "Just so! Well, that's a relief, isn't it? Honestly, I don't know why I was worried."

Bruno took a glance around. "Right," he said.

Vatsy grinned, took a few final notes, then stowed his gear. "Well, that's settled, then. We proceed with the story!"

Bruno nodded, slowly, with the expression of a soldier who'd captured a rocky hill, only to find a smoky hole at the top marked *Virgin Sacrifices Go Here*. "So...what do we do, then?"

"We follow the mercenaries, see what they're, get back to my typewriter and render it in glorious ink. Then we get our money, stow up, redecorate a bit, and I set to work on a masterpiece the Writer's Guild World Newsletter can't ignore. Then I'll become famous and respected, and I'll hire a small army of domesticated—"

"Think I've got it, boss."

"Oh. Let's get to it, then."

It was the work of a few minutes to catch up to the mercenaries—a few long, silent minutes, thankfully devoid of severed limbs and other surprises. Finally, their ears caught the sound of heavy footsteps and shifting gear, and they saw a faint glow emanating from around the tunnel bend. Gently, the pair crept closer to the distant torchlight, pointing their own light towards the tunnel floor—Bruno had hooded the lantern, but found himself suddenly unwilling to shut it off.

Abruptly, the voice of the leader sounded from around the corner.

"Here we go. Right down this ladder."

The older man grunted. "Yeah, we know. We've been here often enough."

"Too true." The leader sighed. "One of these days, CESA is going to have to learn to clean up their own messes."

The female laughed bitterly. "Yeah, sure. And the Writer's Guild will start publishing the real statistics, and the Law Offices will eliminate corruption and extend habeas corpus to all, and Watch Brutality will become a thing of the past, and the poor shall have food, and there'll be free beer for all, and..."

“Shut it,” said the leader.

“All I’m saying is…”

“No. Quiet!”

There was instant silence. All of the sounds of movement, conversation, and breathing vanished instantly.

“Night.”

The lantern light vanished.

“Eyes.”

There was a rustling of gear.

“File one.” There was the sound of leather on leather and the shuffling of combat boots.

“Keep the file. We’re close.” There was the sound of a gun cocking. “And we’re not alone.”

Bruno hesitated, then quietly shuttered his own lantern. Darkness washed over the pair of them like the tide, and in an instant, they had only their shallow breaths and thudding heartbeats to keep them company. Carefully, gently, Bruno brought the lantern to rest against the rocky tunnel floor.

“Bruno?” Vatsy whispered.

Bruno placed one foot on the lantern’s shutter, letting it wrap tightly around the release catch.

“Bruno, does it seem abnormally quiet to you?”

Bruno leveled his shotgun.

There was a slight rustling sound, and the scene…exploded.

Bruno slammed the shutter of the lantern down, and a blast of light struck the armed mercenaries directly ahead. They staggered, throwing their hands up towards their eyes—wrenching away strange, wrought goggles that glowed fiercely as they were hit by the light.

In this unbalanced moment, Bruno flashed forward, sweeping up under the leader as random gunfire struck the walls of the tunnel. The leader stumbled back a step, but it was too late—Bruno was there, staring impassively up at him, and both barrels of the shotgun were jammed under his chin.

The others, off balance, fumbled to bring their firearms to bear.

“Drop the weapons.” Bruno said it loudly, but didn’t shout.

The others looked uncertainly towards the leader, who was staring as steadily as could be expected down at Bruno.

The leader swallowed. “If we drop the guns, you’re in as much danger as we are.”

Bruno gave a slight shrug. “One thing at a time.”

“Damn it.”

He glanced at the waiting gunmen. In a reluctant tone, he muttered, “Okay, drop them.”

There was a clatter as firearms hit the stone floor. Bruno nodded with a certain professional satisfaction.

“Well!” said Vatsy, smiling brightly. “Glad we could resolve that situation like civilized people.”

The female scowled, grinding her teeth. “You call this civilized?”

“Well, obviously. Savages don’t even have shotguns.” Vatsy began to get his writing materials ready. “Hold him for just a minute, there, Bruno, this seems like a good opportunity for an interview.”

Something seemed to click behind the leader’s eyes; some of the tension left his body. Not taking his gaze off Bruno, he said, “You’re those two, aren’t you. The journalist. The other one. You tried to get that article on CESA published with the Writer’s Guild.”

Vatsy beamed, scribbling down in his notebook. “Wonderful! You have heard of us!”

“So it seems,” said Bruno quietly, staring the leader in the eyes.

There was a moment of silence.

“Uh, look,” said the leader. “Obviously, okay, I’m *aware* of the bounty on your heads, but I wouldn’t have tried to collect or anything. We’re on the clock, and besides, I kind of got out of the freelance assassinations. Seriously, I wasn’t going to try to take you down.”

“That’s plausible,” Bruno said, scratching his neck with his off hand. “There’s also the fact that you’ve got a shotgun under your chin.”

“Well, of course, but what I’m saying is—like, let’s assume, hypothetically, there wasn’t one—“

“No thanks,” said Bruno firmly. “I’m good.”

The leader glanced around again. “Okay, listen, please. There’s something out here, right? So maybe we shouldn’t have just one guy holding a gun right now. You can get that right? Come on.”

Bruno shook the shotgun a little—not much, just enough to remind the leader that it was there. “You’ll forgive us for not wanting to put guns in the hands of people hired to kill us.”

“Okay, but if you’re planning on…” He trailed off. Some of the intense concentration slipped from his face. “Hang on. Just what the hell are you doing down here, anyway?”

Vatsy waved the notebook. “Journalism! Well, that’ll come later. Right now, I’m just writing down stuff that happens.”

“We saw the smoke,” said Bruno. “Thought we’d take a look.”

The leader looked at Bruno. Then he looked at Vatsy. Then his gaze slipped back down to the shotgun, and it lingered there for a good moment as something like inspiration spread across his face. He cleared his throat, the motion making the flesh brush against the shotgun barrels.

“Okay,” said the leader, “I’m about to say something stupid.”

Vatsy eagerly put pen to paper.

“Look,” the leader continued. “I did…look into you guys. Just a little, just because I was curious. And if I’m being honest, I’d heard a little about you, Bruno. A few guys around the headquarters talked about you sometimes.”

“About me.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure. Like this one guy—uh, can’t remember his name. He had a tattoo of an X on his forehead, all gold teeth, had an eyepatch.”

“Eyepatch?” Bruno grunted. “Figured I’d managed to wing him.”

“Point is, I mean, you’re obviously pretty good with that thing. And we’re going into a situation that’s probably, I don’t know—you saw the bodies back there.”

“Yeah.”

“Point is...we’re going the same way. What do you say you put your gun down, we pick ours up, and we just do business together?”

Bruno opened his mouth, but the leader cut him off.

“Because there’s something out here. And if you’re going in alone, you’re probably going to end up like those assholes back there. Let’s just work out a gentleman’s deal, here. You don’t shoot us, we help you, and neither of us has to die a horrible death, weeping and alone. Okay? Alternately, I guess you can just go home, but something tells me you’re not going to. You do your, I don’t know, your journalism or whatever. Meanwhile, we’ll just do our job. Both of us get to keep our extremities.”

Bruno remained silent. After a moment, he asked, “Boss? What do you think?”

Vatsy shrugged amiably. “Oh, bring them along, Bruno. It’ll make for a far more interesting report if we can observe the four of them directly.”

There was another brief pause.

The leader coughed, glancing at Vatsy. “Uh, no. There’s five of us.”

Vatsy hesitated, brow furrowing slightly as he began counting on his claws. Then he glanced back up.

“Er. Wait. Is this one of those trick math questions?”

The leader stared at him, expression blank. “...what?”

“Ah-ha!” Vatsy snapped his fingers, grinning triumphantly. “I forgot to count myself! Oh, that’s a clever one.” Vatsy chuckled, jotting something down in his notebook. “Have to remember to share that with the next landlord. Maybe we can get a discount if he thinks there’s only two of us.”

The leader glanced towards Bruno.

Quietly, Bruno said, “I count four.”

The leader turned, glancing around at his baffled-looking colleagues. “I’m sure this was a five-man...wait.”

The color drained from his face. He glanced all around the tunnel, eyes widening.

“Where’s Four?”

There was a long, silent pause.

Bruno hoisted his lantern, lowering his shotgun into a ready position. “Get your guns.”

Hurriedly, the mercenaries began to collect their firearms.

The leader pulled out his pistol, glancing around at the situation. “Right. He was the last one to move away from the ladder. They must have grabbed him there.” He thought for a second, staring into the darkness ahead. “We’ve probably got a few seconds, then, and I should at least tell you what we’re up against. Uh, probably.” He reached into his front pouch, pulling out a folded piece of paper and tossing it to Bruno.

“Ever seen one of these before?”

Bruno unfolded it, lowering it towards the lantern. The scrap appeared to have been torn from some larger document, and torn rather roughly and hastily at that. It was faintly gridded in pencil, and had an ink sketch of a finely crafted, incredibly intricate and massive-looking engine on it.

Bruno shrugged. “Can’t say I have.”

Vatsy leaned over the schematic, sketching something that kind of looked a bit like the engine, as described secondhand by someone who’d gotten a brief glance at it while intoxicated. “Can’t say I’ve seen it before, but if someone asked me to describe what science looked like, that’s just about what I’d come up with.”

Bruno passed the note back, causing Vatsy to crane his neck awkwardly as he finished up his sketch. “That’s what you were asked to bring back?”

The leader sighed deeply. “Yeah.” He motioned for them to follow him, held his pistol at the ready, then paced around the bend in the tunnel.

The tunnel rolled to a rough dead end, as if the tunnelers had given up and decided to try a different hobby. The tunnel floor here was carpeted in scraps of filthy cardboard, save for a three-foot diameter hole in the center. A rusted iron ladder poked up through the gap, leading down a dark shaft to an unknown destination.

The leader gestured towards the ladder. “Creatively Ethical Sciences Association. Lobbyists finally convinced them to set up underground a few years back. We’ve been there more than a few times to deal with lab accidents and...” He paused. “Yeah, just lab accidents, pretty much. Every other friggin’ week. I don’t know why they didn’t have us on standby at all times, frankly.”

Bruno nodded. “So, you know the layout.”

The leader shrugged. “Yes and no. I couldn’t tell you where the bathrooms or the cafeteria are, but I could find the Anomalous Analysis Chambers in my sleep. And I do. Every single goddamned night.”

“Any idea what to expect down there?”

The leader shrugged again. “No. They were working on something different every time I went down there. I swear, it seemed like they’d toy with something until the point it tried to kill them all, then they’d back off saying, ‘Huh, fascinating,’ and move on to something else.” He shook his head. “I just can’t fathom that sort of person. Who’d put their life on the line time and time again with ugly freaks of nature, just so they could watch and take a few notes?”

Vatsy clicked his tongue triumphantly, adding something to the bottom of his notes. “Ooh, that’d make a good introduction to the story.”

Bruno pointed to the leader’s goggles. “Can you function with those if we have a light going?”

“No, but don’t worry about it.” The leader unclasped a pouch on the front of his gear. It fell open, revealing a mirrored and intricate lantern. “We got these. You can leave yours back here.”

“Not while you still have the goggles, no.”

The leader paused for a second. Then he laughed, nudging Bruno in the shoulder. “Yeah, that makes sense. Just put it in your satchel, then.”

He glanced back around the bend, motioning to his team. “Stack up on the deep. All measures.” The rest of the mercenaries gathered around the ladder, weapons drawn and ready.

“Guess it’s time to roll.”

The mercenaries began to descend—in contrast to Vatsy, they were as enthusiastic as schoolchildren on a field trip to the textile factory. The leader stood aside, watching as they filed down, then gave Bruno a knowing look.

“I take it you’ll want to go down next? So we’re not all down there waiting for you?”

Bruno nodded, putting the lantern in his satchel. “Thinking so, yes.”

“I figured.” The leader stepped back, chuckling. “Paranoia’s an important job skill for you, isn’t it?”

Bruno peered cautiously down into the gloom, then clambered onto the ladder. “Not so much a job skill as a job description, really.”

Bruno slid down, landing in a cautious half-crouch.

He needn’t have worried. Already the mercenaries were beginning to fan out, playing their lights anxiously over their shady surroundings. This appeared to be a lobby of some sort—there were grungy rugs laid out on the ground, leading up to a heavily padlocked door up ahead.

On it was a sign reading:

CESA Labs: Working Hard to Create an Exciting Tomorrow!

Dimensional Labs: Hall A

Biomechanics Research: Hall B

Weapons Design: Hall C

Live Subject Experimentation: Hall D

Medical Assistance: Halls E-K

Supervisor’s Office: Hall L

Below that was added, in neat black penwork:

Tactical squads are asked to please wipe their feet before entering, and keep down the gunfire during rest periods when operating near live subjects (unless firing at said subjects).

Bruno dropped his satchel against the ladder, pulling out his shotgun, his lantern, and a small cloth-wrapped bundle about the size of a pack of playing cards. He casually slipped the bundle under his arm as he re-prepped the lantern.

A moment later, Vatsy tumbled down next to him, awkward limbs navigating the ladder with the grace of a caffeinated wildcat flung down a flight of stairs. He sprang up again, smiling brightly.

“Right, right, no harm done. I say, these ribs *do* sting a bit, don’t they?” He jogged out from under the ladder, flicking his rib experimentally and wincing.

The leader stepped down after, fumbling for his keyring. He turned to the door, contemplated the sign for a moment, then sighed. “Here we are again,” he muttered, approaching the door, “CESA: official sponsor of my drinking problem.”

The mercenaries began to drift together near the door, letting him through to the lock. Vatsy began to trot after them, but Bruno motioned him to the side.

“Er, boss, think you can take the lantern?”

Vatsy shrugged, threading a limb through the top loop. “Don’t see why not. Wedge it over the shoulder blade, fits in quite naturally. That’s the advantage of being naturally bony, you know. You could hang a cut of meat off of these clavicles.”

Quietly, Bruno passed Vatsy the second cloth-wrapped bundle. “Carry this too. Keep it with your notebook. Careful with it.”

Vatsy peeled away a fold with his claw. Nestled inside the cloth was a minute snub-nosed pistol. It looked strange, somehow—its minute nature made it seem toylike, but paradoxically lethal, a sort of Baby’s First Murder Weapon aesthetic.

Bruno coughed, lowering his voice. “Fully loaded. Got to throw back the hammer before firing each round. Trigger’s a bit stiff.”

Vatsy glanced at the gun, then at Bruno. “Er, right. Shouldn’t be necessary, of course.”

“Right. Just want to be prepared, is all.”

There was a sudden grunt from the leader. “Well, no wonder the mechanism wasn’t catching. Door’s unlocked already. You know, I don’t think that’s a good sign, somehow.” He stepped to the side, clearing his throat. “Right. The device for retrieval is supposed to be located in Hall C. After we breach, we do not stop unless I specifically instruct otherwise. We get in, get the device, get out as fast as we can. You got it?”

The mercenaries endeavored to show, with their nodding, that they weren’t exactly planning to savor the experience.

“Good. Breach on my command. I’ll take the point.”

The front mercenary leaned against the door, letting his right hand fall on the knob and his left shoulder rest against the wood.

The leader turned to Bruno. “You two just keep up. I don’t care what the cat-thing does as long as long as you’re covering us with that sawn-off cannon of yours. You ready?”

Bruno raised his shotgun. “I’m ready.”

The leader cocked his pistol. “On my command, then.”

The mercenaries tensed, raising their weapons.

“Three.”

The front merc tightened his grip until his knuckles whitened.

“Two.”

The only sound was that of held breaths and settling gear.

“One.”

Then, peacefully, Vatsy began to whistle.

“Breach.”

It was like a dam bursting. The door seemed to blow outwards into the darkness, and the mercenaries poured through in a seamless unit. Vatsy and Bruno sprinted at their booted heels, following the dancing lanterns of the silhouettes, flashing willo-wisps in the echoing dark. All they could hear was the sound of footsteps and jostled gear, and, occasionally, the voice of the leader yelling “Left!” or “Turn right here!”—at which points, the ghost train would bank sharply, and the two of them would be left scrambling not to run into an unseen bend.

Here and there, though, they would see things illuminated in the corner of their eye—the lantern light catching things as they sprinted past. A door, cracked in a dozen places and mended with metal plates. A sign reading *Employee of the Month: Harlowe Mackentire (Summer 15, 4924–Spring 34, 4952)*. A suspiciously-colored puddle, over which a *Caution, Wet Floor* sign had been placed. But just as soon as they’d been registered, they’d blurred away into the blackness behind.

Finally, after what seemed like an hour of frantic scrambling—less than sixty seconds, in actuality--the leader shouted, “Labs up here! Get ready to regroup!”

The mercenaries came to an instant stop, panting, swinging their weapons wildly about into the shadowy corners and forming a sort of circle with the leader in the center. Vatsy took a moment to come to a full stop, skidding through the circle and tumbling

onto the floor. Bruno was by his side in a moment, calmly pointing his shotgun into the hallway behind them.

Vatsy's lantern swung into equilibrium, and their surroundings became entirely clear for the first time in minutes—they stood in a small, sterile anteroom that led through an open arch, into a hall lined with dozens and dozens of doors. Everything about the place was white as soap, and even the walls were strangely glossy—the yellow of the lantern was reflected on all sides so that the place took on a strange and vaguely sulfurous cast. There were no landmarks here, no points of interest, only smooth surfaces and identical doorways as far as the eye could see.

The leader managed to catch his breath, then lowered his pistol. “Right, stay alert. We’re going to need to sweep some of these rooms. Stick close, because you don’t want to get lost in here. It forks off in all directions . Remember: if anything goes wrong, just...”

There was a very quiet noise, like tearing tissue paper, and all of their lights...blinked.

The leader closed his mouth, glanced over his shoulder, and started to say something else. It was somewhere around that very moment that things went horribly wrong.

An indeterminate amount of time later, Vatsy stretched his limbs and opened his eyes. This did not open him up to experience any new sensations.

Something had happened. He was pretty sure about that part; causality wasn't his strong suit, but even he had to acknowledge that there had to be some sequence of events bridging circumstance a.), him being in a hallway standing up, and circumstance b.), him lying on the floor in total darkness. And then there were his memories, which were a little hazy. It had involved a lurid fireworks display of gunfire and terrified screams, and at some point he'd seen something, but before he could get a closer look...

It was a blur. The fact that he had a skull-splitting headache might have had something to do with that.

He cleared his throat.

“I say, Bruno, I’m sure that would have been quite exciting if I’d had the foggiest what had actually happened. I don’t suppose you had a better handle on the situation?”

He waited for a response. There was none.

“Bruno? Where are we?”

There was no answer.

It suddenly occurred to him that it was very, very dark and very, very quiet.

“...Bruno? Er, if it’s not too much trouble, would you be so good as to not be somewhere else?”

Silence.

“...please?”

For a moment, Vatsy stood completely rigid. And then, very quietly, he began to curl up into a ball onto the cold stone floor.

His tail brushed against a familiar shape—the chill metal of the lantern.

Slowly, carefully, he uncurled a limb and righted the toppled lantern. Then he withdrew the spare match from his headband and set the lantern alight.

His surroundings were immediately, and completely, illuminated. He appeared to be inside a broom closet, submerged in all of the mankiness and uneasy odors such a place carries with it. A ragged, well-used mop rested in the corner, mophead stained with dark fluids. A broom sat nearby, as well as a small shelf of cleaning supplies and, at shoulder level on a grown man, a glass emergency box containing a pistol and a combat knife.

Vatsy removed the cloth bundle from his hat, pulling away the wrapping to reveal the toylike pistol beneath.

He stared at it for about a minute.

With difficulty, he drew back the hammer. Then he curled up into a tight ball in the far corner, staring at the door unblinkingly.

He waited for about five minutes.

Then he shifted.

Then he waited for another five minutes.

Then he stared at the pistol for another minute.

Then he got up, eased the lantern over his shoulder, gripped the pistol as tightly as possible in one of his front claws, put his hand on the door, and stared at the door for about three more minutes.

There was a distant, indistinct echo. Vatsy froze for about thirty seconds, ears perked up like those of a dog who'd heard the words "fix" and "garden shears" used in the same sentence.

There was silence.

He pulled down the door handle and eased it open a crack.

Then he stared out the crack for about half a minute.

Then, moving as if each muscle was administrated by committee, he began to crawl out of the broom closet.

The lantern illuminated a corridor. It looked like the one he'd gotten a glimpse of earlier, before...*whatever* had happened. It was difficult to tell; partially, this is because the corridor was so nondescript its own parents would be unable to recognize it. In addition, he hadn't really gotten a good look at it through the mass of twitching mercenaries, and he'd had other things on his mind very shortly afterwards. He could see doors on either side of the corridor, doors with the slim, rectangular glass windows usually associated with the more thorough sort of prison, the kind where you put people called "Roof-Nails" Mike and Lou "The Grillmaster" Burkley. They said, without any sort of signage or label required, that whatever was behind that door should probably stay there indefinitely.

There were a lot of them.

What's more, they went off in both directions, as far as his lantern's light could reach. Just rows of reflected light, stretching out towards the vanishing point, ultimately consumed by shadow.

There was exactly one difference, in fact, between his left and his right. The corridor to his left was completely empty. The corridor to his right had irregular splashes of still-wet, reddish liquid on the ground, leading off down the hallway.

There was, Vatsy noted, a definite dilemma here.

On the one hand, moving *towards* a bleeding, injured creature in a building filled with unspeakable horrors seemed on every instinctual level to be terminally stupid plan.

On the other hand, if there was anyone alive...well...he'd be able to interview him, of course. Right. *Interview*. That's *journalism*. He'd be able to ask him all kinds of important questions, like, what hurt you, and how do we get out of here, and why don't you come with me, and why don't you go first. It'd be the responsible thing to do. And it seemed a bit more desirable than walking back down an empty corridor...alone.

Or, option three, he could go back into the closet and stare at the door for a while longer and wait for Bruno to come back. He liked that plan. The closet was so nice and...*closeted*. It had a door. He liked the door. If pressed, at that very moment, he would probably say that was one of his all-time favorite doors.

What to do?

Damn it, why couldn't Bruno be here? It was always so much easier to figure out what to do when Bruno was nearby.

Finally, he shuddered, tightened his grip on the pistol until his claws gouged the handle, and set off down the blood-spattered hallway.

For what seemed to be hours, he crept along, each step deliberate. The hallway yawned ahead, seemingly endless expanses waiting to be uncovered by his lantern's feeble light. Finally, he saw the trail of blood come to an end.

Up ahead, the hallway emptied into an identical, perpendicular hallway. The trail of blood led straight to the door opposite the hallway—a door which was open just a crack.

Vatsy glanced left and right down the hallway, poised uncertainly in the silent gloom. He realized that he didn't want to open that door.

He stood there, staring at it, torn between the desire to see what was inside and the urgent need not to be standing here, right now, in this open hallway, facing down an unknown being who dripped with blood...

And he was about to turn around and head quietly back to the closet when he heard the groan.

In a flash, Vatsy dropped the gun, broke into a sliding sprint, and threw open the door. He took in the gurgling, sprawled figure in an instant.

"Bruno?" he whispered.

There was a *lot* of blood.

Bruno was leaned against the low counter, hat resting at an odd angle, eyes glassy and unfocused. He was propped up only halfway, as if he had begun to straighten himself up and hadn't had the will to finish. He held a palm over the side of his chest, clenching it tightly to his ribs as blood oozed up and over the fingers, absorbed by his fur and dripping to the ground.

Partially because it was so badly bloodied, it took Vatsy a moment to realize that the palm Bruno was staunching the bleeding with was not, in fact, in own.

He was using a human hand. And if Vatsy had to guess where it came from, he probably would have suspected the handless, exquisitely mangled corpse on top of the counter.

Bruno didn't notice Vatsy for a moment, focused intensely inwards as if carefully counting each second. Then he glanced up, blinked at Vatsy, and gave a quiet, polite cough.

"Think we might need to reevaluate the plan, boss."

Vatsy nodded, still a little stunned. "Yes. This, um. Isn't where I really wanted to go with this."

Bruno straightened up an inch or so, wincing gently. He tightened his grip on the hand. "Any idea what our next move is?"

Vatsy shook his head, staring at the hand. "Er. No. My journalistic account of events following our arrival in the hallway is... a bit sketchy. In fact."

Bruno nodded, clenching his teeth in pain. Finally, he gave an awkward one-shouldered wincing shrug. "You want the short version or the long version?"

Vatsy tore his eyes off of the dismembered hand. "Hm? Oh. I suppose given the circumstances we should stick to the short version, yes?"

Bruno nodded. "Right. Something attacked, half the people are probably dead, the other half are probably dead too, and we're more or less lost."

There was a brief silence.

"You know," Vatsy began, "now that I think of it, we should probably have the long version."

Bruno blinked heavily, shrugging again. “Actually, long version’s pretty much that as well, to be honest. Except there’s a bit where you get knocked out, we all scatter, and I hide you in a broom closet.”

“Right, about that.”

“It got a bit chaotic, boss. Bullets flying everywhere. I figured I’d stow you away until we’d gotten things sorted out a bit.”

Vatsy chuckled anxiously, his gaze dragging back to Bruno’s ersatz bandage.

Bruno glanced down, then waved a hand—one of his—dismissively. “Oh. I ended up with one of the mercs. He went into this room first. Didn’t work out too well for him. It...whatever was waiting for us...got a piece of me on its way out, but I think I might have driven it off. Anyway, his hand’s a bit bigger than mine, so I figured it’d work better to staunch the bleeding.”

Vatsy nodded. “Ah. Excellent thinking, there, Bruno. Erm. Did you...”

“Nah. It was already detached by the time I got in here. Hanging off the doorknob, actually...”

“No, actually, I meant to ask...did you get a look at...it?”

Bruno paused, his face falling into a grimace.

“Yeah. A bit.”

He volunteered no further information.

For a long moment, they sat together in the cryptlike silence, kept company only by the sound of Bruno’s shallow breathing.

Finally, Vatsy began to speak.

“Bruno...I confess, things haven’t really gone the way I expected.”

Bruno nodded once. “Yeah.”

“For example, at this stage of the plan, we were eating...dinner? That sound about right?”

Bruno shrugged. “Yeah, probably about that time. Too late for lunch.”

“Right. I was banging up the manuscript, you were oiling the shotgun, and we were about half an hour away from having something we could work with.” Vatsy shrugged. “Eh, call it forty-five minutes.”

Bruno reflected on this. “What’d we be eating?”

“In theory, meat sandwiches.”

“Meat sandwiches.”

“Just kind of felt like them.” Vatsy tapped his claws against the floor, glancing about the room.

“Er. Point is, point is...anyway. Bruno, I was...I was starting to think that maybe we should call this one a wash.”

Bruno removed the severed hand from his torso, tossing it distractedly aside.

“Works for me.”

“Well then.” Vatsy glanced at his wound, hesitating. “You can move around on that, then, can’t you?”

“Oh, yeah, boss, I expect so. Looks worse than it is. This isn’t all my blood, in point of fact.”

“Oh, good.”

Bruno grabbed at the counter and pulled himself onto his feet. A little absent-mindedly, he adjusted his bowler cap, plucked his shotgun up from the ground, and reloaded it with shells from the dead merc’s bandolier. “Ready as ever, boss.”

“Think we can find our way out?”

Bruno shrugged, wincing again. “Probably. Bound to be at the end of one of these hallways, eh? Just have to hope we don’t bump into anything.”

Vatsy nodded emphatically. “Right. Just nip right out and get ourselves back home, then. We’ll sort things out from there.” He grinned, a little too widely. “Well, there we have it, Bruno! Brand new plan. Shouldn’t have any problems with this one.”

Three gunshots sounded from the hallway.

Vatsy blinked, staring at the open doorway.

“Er. Did those shots sound like they came from...nearby, at all?”

Bruno shook his head, inching towards the door. “Hard to say.”

Vatsy began to speak, but Bruno gestured with his off hand. Vatsy shrank into silence.

With the coiled, dormant energy of a caged animal, Bruno crept towards the doorframe, gun pointed at the darkness beyond. He paused at the threshold, ears pricked, muscles taut.

Another shot rang out. It was unmistakably close.

Bruno dove through the doorway.

He landed outside in a sort of skid, feet sliding across the floor with enough friction to pivot him around midway across. His arms windmilled, gun arcing from one direction to the other as he frantically checked his surroundings.

Down the right fork, highlighted in the ghostly illumination of his own chest-mounted lantern, was the older mercenary. He was facing away from Bruno, clutching a smoking pistol and staring off into the murk.

Bruno hesitated, then cleared his throat loudly.

The mercenary whipped around, eyes gleaming wide in the lamplight, pistol quivering with nervous energy. He twitched the light onto Bruno, stared at him for a moment, then lowered the gun an inch.

“Almost shot you there, you sneaky bastard!”

Bruno shrugged, walking up to the merc with gun ready. “Got a right to be twitchy. Look, were you shooting at anything just there?”

The mercenary considered this, then grunted. “Dunno. I mean, I thought for sure I saw something move up near the doors, but...” He shook his head.

“Twitchy,” Bruno finished.

“Yeah.” He let out a long, shuddering breath. “Goddamn, I hate this place.”

Bruno glanced back down the hallway. “Right, we’re on our way out. Know where any of the others are?”

The mercenary shook his head. “Not ‘cept Number Three. She’s in Hall D.” He shuddered again. “And E. And a few feet into F, poor sod. Anyway. Don’t know where Number Two or the boss are.”

“Number Two have a large mole on his right hand?”

“Yeah, think he might.”

“Number Two is not in the picture.”

The mercenary gritted his teeth, staring at Bruno. “And you’re still alive, eh?”

“Just by a bit.”

“You know, the boss ain’t the only one who’s ‘eard of you. You have a habit of surviving...”

Bruno didn't react.

The mercenary spat, giving Bruno a strange, hard-eyed look. "Surviving when your compatriots die, anyway."

"That so?"

The mercenary grinned suddenly, thatched teeth glistening in the light. "Heard a *lot* of things about you..."

There was a faint *thump* from up ahead. Bruno swung his shotgun up, stepping past the mercenary to get a better angle...

There was a *click* from behind him.

He could almost hear the grin widening.

"Frinstance, I hear you're deadly with or without that sawn-off there. Which is why I'm not going to ask you to give it to me. It's why I'm going to shoot you instead. Because you're quick, but I can pull a trigger faster than you can turn around."

Bruno took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "This doesn't seem like the moment to be collecting bounties."

The mercenary chuckled. "Bounty? There's already arrangements in place there. I don't want the bloody bounty, I want your shotgun. Whatever...that, those things, whatever...shrugged off Three's pistols like they was nothing. Pattern seems to be that people with pistols get killed, their companions with shotguns? Don't. Only since I ain't giving you a pistol after I just took your shotgun, I think I'm gonna cut out the middlefreakofnature and just blast your tiny—"

There was an ear-splitting bang, the sort a weaponized schnauzer would make. A piece of plaster leapt off the wall nearest to the mercenary.

He flinched. His eyes flicked back towards the source...

And Bruno, not even turning around, unloaded a barrel through his stomach.

For a moment, the gun retorts echoed down the hallway. Then they faded away, leaving only a heavy, wet thwack and a feeble groan.

From the doorway, Vatsy shivered, staring down at the gun in his claws. "Oh. My. That's what firing a gun feels like."

Bruno glanced reflectively at the curl of smoke rising from his shotgun barrel, then down at the gaping wound in the mercenary's stomach. "Yeah. Something like that."

Vatsy stared at the gun for a moment. "Right. Somewhat...more intense than I'd imagined. A bit like holding back a weasel that's leapt for your eyes. A big weasel." He trotted down the hallway, stopping alongside the downed mercenary with Bruno. "Well. That's...sorted out, anyway."

Bruno reached over, gently taking the pistol from Vatsy. "Not quite."

The merc groaned a little.

Bruno shrugged impassively. "Better than leaving you down here to bleed out."

He fired.

Bruno handed the pistol back to Vatsy, then shook his head. "Waste of ammo."

Vatsy took the pistol, bracing it against his chest and using two claws to force the hammer back into position. "Right. ...Now, that's sorted out. Let's get of here, shall we?"

Bruno took a deep breath. "Er. Still don't know which way is out, boss."

Vatsy paused. "Oh."

There was a moment of silence, in which both of their gazes were dragged back down to the mercenary.

"You think he might have..." Vatsy began.

"Yeah. Probably."

"Hm."

The silence continued for a second.

"Then again, maybe not, boss. Wasn't terribly bright, was he?" Bruno bent over, fishing through the merc's pouches. "Should've just shot me, instead of telling me why he was going to shoot me first."

"Yes, I wondered about that."

"You get that, sometimes." Bruno found a shell, broke his shotgun, and replaced the spent one. "Shows they're not really prepared to kill you just like that, cold blood and all. They have to explain it out loud before they can justify it to themselves. Surprising how often you find that, even in people whose business is killing things."

Vatsy shook his head. "Nasty business, Bruno, being a mercenary. You get to the point where lives don't matter as long as you get paid."

"Yeah." Bruno glanced down at the body. "You get there."

After a moment, Vatsy perked up. “Still,” he added, “this incident should make an exciting addition to the story, shouldn’t it?”

Bruno started to say something, then froze. He raised a hand.

“Heard it again.”

They paused.

And suddenly, just like that, they remembered where they were.

Bruno readied his shotgun, pacing silently down the hallway. He paused outside a row of doors, waiting.

From one of the doors was a faint rustling noise—very much like someone had been holding as still as possible in a very awkward position, and was a little tired besides, and was holding his breath and waiting and suddenly his weight was shifting and he had to straighten up or slide onto the floor...

Bruno leaned over, seized the handle, and threw the door open.

A short man stumbled out of room, tumbling to a clumsy heap on the floor.

Upon viewing the man, the words “in control” did not present themselves. He wore a white lab coat that looked as if it had just been dragged through a grain thresher that had gone off its meds, and his hair was slick with sweat and blood in various shades of dryness. He had a certain weathered, haunted look to his face that suggested the past few hours had been a particularly unkind highlight in a generally unpleasant life. He was extremely terrified, but this might be credited to the twin barrels hovering an inch away from his nose.

He threw up his hands, gasping pitifully. “I’m sorry! It wasn’t my fault! It wasn’t my department! We weren’t funded well enough! They kept shifting around the lab days! I’m not even supposed to be here today! *It wasn’t my fault!*”

Bruno blinked. “You want to handle this one, boss?”

Vatsy had pulled out his notebook, by force of habit as much as anything else, and jotted a few notes down. “Right, I think I’ve got all that. Now, who are you, what do you do, and what’s going on?”

The scientist glanced at Vatsy for the first time, which didn’t seem to improve his disposition. “Nyaggh! You’re not...one of the research projects, are you?”

Vatsy shook his head, grinning widely. “As a matter of fact, no. I’m a freelance journalist.”

“Freelance? Like...underground? Not the Writer’s Guild?”

“Not at the moment, no.”

The scientist whimpered.

Vatsy clicked his tongue. “I say, Bruno, why is it that scientists always seem to do that when I tell them I’m a newsman?”

“Couldn’t tell you, boss.”

The scientist bit his lip. “Look, it’s like I said. It wasn’t my department. I work in *biomechanics*! I just did stuff like, you know, stitch pieces of animals to other pieces and see what happened. This is all *DimLab*’s fault. Those guys are *weird*, man!”

Vatsy copied this dutifully down. “Weird...man. Right. Care to start from the beginning?”

The scientist spread his palms helplessly. “I told you, I don’t know what’s going on! All I know is...some things started attacking, and I think they wiped out most of the Dimensional Labs, and I hid in a closet...” He shuddered. “Look, I’m sorry, I’m a nervous wreck. It’s been a long day. I’m just glad it’s over.” He glanced between them again, eyes wide. “...you guys did come in with the rescue team, right?”

Bruno glanced back down the hallway. “Rescue team?”

The scientist nodded, a little desperately. “Yeah! The guys from Weapons grabbed the rock-splitting device and a teleport gateway and legged it. Said they’d send someone down for us.” He hesitated. “That, uh. That was kind of a while ago.” He wiped some sweat from his brow. “Uh. And they didn’t really so much say they’d send someone down as much as...yell it back to us...as they slammed the exit door on us. And...locked...it.”

“Rock-splitting device?”

“Yeah. Makes tunnels in rock. They said it’d be faster than taking the tunnels out.” He hesitated again, that little moment of silence to mourn the passing of another ounce of idealistic illusionment. “Uh. I thought it was... they used to say it was kind of...unstable, though. Like. That it caused nasty. Aftershocks.”

He stared at Bruno, then at Vatsy. Then at Bruno. Then at Vatsy.

“There’s no rescue team, right.”

Vatsy nodded chipperly. “Not as such, no. They did hire some people to fetch an engine, though.”

The scientist looked like he was about to cry. “An engine?”

“Right. Quite an intricate device, from the looks of it.”

The scientist considered this, expression twisting.

“You know...now that I think of it...Weapons had an engine prototype, but...were always saying that our team used up too much of the budget, and they wouldn’t be able to...”

There was another pause.

“You know,” the scientist said, “it’s enough to make you hate science. It really is.”

There was a pause in the conversation. It was just long enough to remind everyone, once again, exactly where they were.

“Say,” Vatsy began, “you wouldn’t happen to know the way out of...”

The scientist bobbed his head, scrambling to his feet. “Right, yeah, this way.”

He began to jog at an awkward pace, limbs fighting over whether they should be getting out as fast as possible or ensuring they stay close to people with the guns. Vatsy and Bruno kept up as best as they could.

After a few minutes, Vatsy tucked his pistol into the lantern, brought out his notebook, and began to move at a sort of three-legged lope as he reviewed its contents.

“You know,” he commented, “not a bad piece, all considered. Not quite the story of adventure I was hoping for, and there’s a few holes in the narrative, but nothing I can’t patch up as I work along.”

Bruno nodded, wincing as he ran. His side was beginning to irk him. “Not bad at all, boss. Intrigue. Mad science. Gross disregard for natural law and the safety of the civilian populace. Probably around fifty people dead, all considered.”

Vatsy stuffed the notebook back into his hat. “Right-o. Hardly needs embellishing, really. Just need to re-copy the notes and take them to the drop-off.”

Bruno began to nod, then hesitated. His pace flagged a bit.

Vatsy skidded, trying to slow down with him. “I say, Bruno, is there a problem?”

Bruno paused, shook his head slowly, and picked his pace back up. “Shouldn’t think so, boss. Shouldn’t think so.”

The scientist rounded a corner, and there it was—the most wonderful door in existence, still hanging open from when they’d entered. They pushed through, letting the lantern light fall over the room.

It was the same lobby they’d entered through. More or less, anyway. The stained rugs, Bruno’s satchel, the hole in the ceiling—all those were still there.

In fact, there was only one thing missing.

Vatsy opened his mouth, left it open for another three seconds, then said, “Bruno?”

Bruno didn’t take his eyes off the empty space in the room. “Boss?”

There was another second of silence.

“There’s no ladder, Bruno.”

There was *another* second of silence.

“No. There’s not.”

That was when the scientist began to sob quietly.

Vatsy stumbled distractedly over to the wall, pulling out his notebook. He flipped back a few pages, read what he’d written, then looked back up at Bruno.

“I’m...fairly certain that’s how we came in. A ladder. Wasn’t that how we came in?”

“Yes. It was.”

Vatsy turned his gaze to his companion, arching his eyebrows. “Bruno?”

Bruno stared up at the ceiling, thinking it over. Finally, he shook his head.

“You’re going to have to give me a few minutes, boss.”

The scientist stumbled over to the opposite wall, sobbing a little less quietly. Bruno started rooting through his satchel, pulling out and discarding various odds and ends. Vatsy flipped his notebook to a blank page, shrugged expansively, and began to write.

“Seems like as good a time as any to get the outline written up.”

Bruno gave up on his satchel. A little absently, he picked up the lantern, examining the spot where the ladder had most recently rested.

He didn't know what he was expecting to find, really. There it was, large as life. Empty space. Empty space where their only exit should have been. A void, currently populated only by atmospheric gasses, light, and raw, naked dread.

Crouched as he was, with a strong light source at hand, he noticed a glint on the opposite wall of the lobby. He approached it with guarded emotions.

Against the opposite wall lay dozens of bent iron pieces. Things that might once have been a ladder but were now, at best, modern art. Bruno was in a position to make an educated guess as to what could have done it.

He turned around. He walked over to Vatsy, set down the lantern, readied his shotgun, and sat against the wall.

"Looks like we're...stopping here for a bit."

Vatsy nodded, engrossed in his outlining. "Yes, so it seems. What do you suppose is our next move?"

Bruno stared at the doorway for a moment. Beyond it, he could hear distant, persistent echoes.

"Nothing for it but to wait, boss. See what happens."

Vatsy nodded, engrossed in his outlining. "Well, I'm sure you've got a hold of things. Do keep me apprised of the situation, Bruno."

Bruno just nodded, gripping the shotgun until his knuckles hurt, listening to distant footfalls that grew louder with every passing moment.

Bruno wasn't one to care about the particulars of things like this, but it occurred to him that there were far, far better places to have one's last stand.

Bruno trained both barrels on the door, breathing steady as a metronome.

He could hear the gentle scratching of pen on paper, the thoughtful breathing of Vatsy, the choked silence of the scientist. He could hear echoes, rattling through the darkness, rebounding off of stone and plaster until their sharp clarity was worn dull and enigmatic.

And like white-hot skewers plunging through the icy waters of his senses, he heard the figure moving down the hallway, stalking towards the iron door.

Bruno focused all of his nerve, all of his attention, into the fingers that clenched the shotgun. He blocked out the pain from his wound, the flutterings of anxiety, the shadows and the silence...

Footfall.

Vatsy paused in his scribbling, glancing towards the door. "Huh. Did you hear that, Bruno?"

Footfall.

Footfall.

Creak.

Bruno saw the door twitch. The footfalls resonated in his skull, forcing their way past his iron wall of concentration—sparking, for an instant, a moment of doubt...

Which was why, when the door slammed open, Bruno didn't open fire.

From the archway, the mercenary leader stared at Bruno. He blinked, opened his mouth, and crashed heavily to the floor.

He was in bad shape. His head looked like a melon that had been thrown into an alley for a week, left to be kicked along by passing drifters until it was bruised and misshapen beyond recognition. His piecemeal armor had been devastated, elements torn, dented, scraped, and missing entirely. His lantern was shattered, his gloves were split, his pistols were missing. And then there was the matter of the long, dark gash over the stomach that streamed with blood.

Bruno dropped his shotgun, bound over, and dragged him the rest of the way inside.

After a moment, the leader coughed, trying to roll onto his back. Bruno lifted him up by his torso, resting him in a sitting position against the wall.

Vatsy trotted over, eyeing the leader with interest and sketching into his notebook. "Huh. That's quite an impressive wound you've got there."

The leader rolled his head weakly towards Vatsy. He opened his mouth as if auditing a dozen suitable responses, then gave up.

Bruno slammed the door shut, turning back to the injured leader. "Close by?"

The leader shrugged limply, "Dunno," he slurred. "Pro'lly not. Think. Think I got one."

Bruno nodded, glancing back at the door. "Should give them pause, then. Least a moment's."

The leader chuckled, rolling his head towards the ladder-shaped vacuum. He hesitated, brow furrowing.

"Was'n there a ladd'r there?"

Bruno shrugged. "Don't know what to tell you."

"I liked tha' ladder." His head fell slack; his eyes dropped to his wound, and he blinked from mild surprise.

"Y'know," he said, a little detachedly, "This...this, right here...this really hurts?"

"Makes sense."

"I mean. A lot."

Bruno's eyes fell down towards the wound. It did, in fact, look like it hurt. He'd bandaged it up with gauze from his pack, but that didn't seem to...

Bruno froze.

In a quiet, controlled voice, Bruno asked, "What do you have in your pack?"

The leader licked his lips, shaking his head as if just coming back awake. "My pack? Which...which one?"

Bruno grabbed him by the collar, not *quite* threateningly. "*Either. Both.*"

The leader nodded, pointing unsteadily to the leather case he kept on his back. "Right...this. Right here. This is where I keep Lucy."

"One of your guns?"

"No, see, s'not. It's actually a tiny woman, Lucy, who I carry 'round in my pack to give me an, an edge in fights."

Bruno hesitated.

"Yeah," the leader croaked, "It's one of my guns."

Vatsy took this down, clearly disappointed. "Hm. Interesting all the same, I suppose...say, does your shotgun have a name, Bruno?"

Bruno shook his head. "Never saw the point, really. First thing I did after meeting her was hack off her extremities with a rusted saw, so I didn't really feel we were on familiar terms after that."

The leader stroked the leather case with a bloodied finger. “She’s a real treasure, Lucy. Mini gatling. Hell of a kick, so you need to set ‘er up somewhere solid, but...”

There was a faint, distant echo.

Bruno jabbed a finger at his other pack. “The second case.”

The leader blinked, then shrugged the pack off. “Bandages. Spare ammo. Knuckles. A light lunch. Some money. Some rope an’ grapnel...”

There was a microscopic pause.

Bruno lunged for the pack and upended it. A pile of junk toppled out, including a few glass items which shattered against the rug. Bruno paid them no attention, tossing knickknacks aside and seizing the rope.

Bruno dashed to the hole, eyeing the rope and grapnel critically. “Right. Just enough rope. I’ll throw. Boss, you go first, then the scientist. I’ll follow up.” He pointed at the leader. “You?”

The leader chuckled a little. “Eh...I didn’t think I’d be able to handle the ladder, t’ be honest. No way I’m climbin’ up a rope.”

Bruno nodded. “Fair enough.” He hesitated again, but only for an instant. “Cover us?”

The leader grinned a bloodied grin. “Why the hell not.”

Bruno leaned back and pitched up the grapnel. He managed to land it on the first try, pulling it taut against the lip of the trapdoor. The scientist squealed anxiously, hopping onto it as soon as it was up and scrambling up it with the kind of speed he wouldn’t have been able to pull off back in gym class.

Outside, there was another echo—not quite as distant as Bruno would have liked. Bruno nodded urgently to Vatsy.

“Right. Boss, you go on ahead. I’ll help him get the gatling set up to cover us.”

Vatsy nodded, a little uncertainly. “Oh...alright. Er. You’ll be right along, then?”

“Won’t be but a second, boss.”

Vatsy clambered onto the rope, struggling spider-like up its length. Bruno jogged over to the leather case, unclasping it to reveal the folded steel turbine of death that lay within.

The leader pulled it out, unfolding the tripod with practiced motions. “I really didn’t need your help, you know.”

Bruno glanced at Vatsy, making sure he was out of earshot. “I know. Just had to ask a question.”

The leader locked the gun in place, plugging in the ammo drum. “Yeah? Ask away.”

Bruno took a deep breath. “We got a letter from someone. Saying they want more stories from Vatsy. Asking him to come to a certain place at a certain time.”

The leader paused in mid-motion, hand resting on the crank lock.

“And then one of your men mentioned...arrangements.”

The leader threw the catch, then leaned back against the wall, staring blankly at Bruno.

Bruno took another breath. “It’s a trap. Isn’t it.”

The leader shifted, rolling onto his stomach so he could fire the gun from the ground. “Don’t know what to tell you, Bruno. I mean, *besides* ‘Yeah, it’s a trap, alright.’ That, I do know to tell you.”

Bruno shook his head, sighing. “I just about knew it. Doesn’t make much sense, though. Why tip their hand with the bounty notice if they were just going to set up a sting?”

The leader chuckled, resting his hand on the crank, not looking at Bruno. “That was the Writer’s Guild. The assassination attempts are from them, they’re just trying to clean things up on their own. The sting, it’s...it’s bigger than that. I don’t know nothing, I was just tol’ not to bother going after you.” He glanced back at Bruno. “Anyway, you should...”

There was a very, very close *crack* of something hard hitting stone.

Bruno turned, springing to the rope and clambering onto it, feet and hands alike, satchel forgotten. He paused a foot from the surface, then called back to the leader; “I’ll tell them you’re down here, then. If you survive the next few minutes, they’ll nip round and extricate you.”

The leader didn’t say anything at first. Gradually, he began to convulse, shaking and rolling around on his stomach—it was pained laughter.

“Something...hehe...to look forward to, then, eh?”

From just out of Bruno’s field of vision, there was an ear-splitting *bang*, like iron tearing from stone. Bruno vaulted up without glancing back.

The scientist was nowhere to be seen. Vatsy opened his mouth to speak, but Bruno couldn’t hear him.

From behind, the stench of gunsmoke and the rattling, fiery *thack-thack-thack* of the gatling filled the air. Bruno seized Vatsy, threw him over his shoulder, and raced off down the tunnel.

Bruno threw his last sparks of energy into the sprint, mastering his muscles as a mechanic administrates a machine—powering through the urgent pain in his gut. He ran without looking backwards—indeed, barely looking forwards. He didn’t need to do either. At that point, he knew the situation. He knew that the tunnel’s end was two hundred feet away, then he knew it was one hundred feet away, then...

A sickly knot formed in his stomach as he *felt* the change in the air.

Then he knew the tunnel’s end was fifty feet away, and the thing bearing down on them was seventy-five feet away.

Vatsy didn’t know these things *a priori*, but he was being carried facing backwards, so for the latter he didn’t need to.

Twenty-five feet away. And fifty feet away.

Vatsy coughed again. “Er, Bruno, I do believe I see a...”

There was the rope, dangling down, a faint silver line reaching up to a pinprick of distant light. Wordlessly, Bruno flung the protesting Vatsy after it, watching as he latched onto the rope halfway up and began to scramble away from there.

“Well,” Bruno had time to mutter, “that’s sorted out, then.”

He whipped around, heard the hot breath—close enough for him to feel on his chest--and emptied both barrels.

The thing was briefly illuminated in the gunfire, and Bruno felt again the distant throbbing of fear.

This was partially because he saw how low to the ground it had been running.

He’d missed—

Crack.

Vatsy scrambled into the blaring sunlight, moving with enough momentum that he didn't pull himself out so much as tumble. He came to a rest on his back, staring up into the shapeless white and slowly began to blink his vision back.

The silhouette of the scientist was sprawled on the ground a few feet away, panting heavily.

"Oh god, oh god, I didn't..." He sucked in a deep, long breath. "I didn't think I was going to make it."

Vatsy idly brushed his fur. Things were beginning to come into focus. "Yes, that was...bracing. Does that sort of thing happen often down there?"

The scientist rubbed his eyes. "I think I'm gonna become a fry cook. Deal with food. Food that doesn't try to kill you when you work with it."

"Oh, I don't know about that. If you've seen the kitchen area of the stand Bruno and I usually..."

Vatsy froze. Gradually, as the area came into focus, he sensed the vitally important element that was missing entirely.

"Bruno?"

Bruno's body was thrown against the cave-in at the other side of the tunnel, smashing into the jagged rock with the force of a derailed freight train. His brain exploded into a shower of unfocused sparks, unresponsive to commands or fear—he groped for control with little result. After a desperate moment, he managed to seize enough muscle control to throw himself against the wall...

He felt the lunge beside him. He felt the air being forced out of the way as the thing smashed into the piled rocks, trying to complete the one-two punch that would have crushed Bruno's spine if it had connected. And in that moment, he felt the thing's rage and bloodlust rise until the air sizzled.

Bruno stumbled back towards the rope, but before he could take three steps the thing recovered. In the darkness he felt the blur of a claw raking out towards his gut, tearing away a strip of flesh and flinging him against the other wall.

Bruno tried to lunge away again, but this time it was too close. The claw pinned him bodily against the wall, jagged fingers boring holes in his chest. The creature brought its other arm back, muscles tensing as it prepared to slash his throat away...

Through the haze of pain, disorientation, and adrenaline, Bruno felt the shotgun in his hand.

Gritting his teeth, he lashed his arm up and brought the gun down where the thing's neck should be.

It didn't howl, or hiss, or roar, but the striking arm wavered and the clamping hand tightened.

Twisting wildly, Bruno clamped the other hand onto the shotgun's handle, bringing it down again like a man splitting wood.

The creature lost a fraction of its spine-snapping grip...

Bruno's knee plunged upwards, smashing into the thing's elbow. When it pulled away, just for an instant, Bruno dropped under its half-forgotten slashing strike. The creature reared, apparently confused, trying to reorient itself for a killing blow...

Bruno struck again.

Every muscle went into the blow. His legs drove up like pistons, sending his body hurtling forward. The force pulsed from his legs to his sides, twisting into the iron-muscled arms that brought the shotgun against the thing's throat with the force of a keg of dynamite.

The air split. Bruno's muscles screamed. The shotgun splintered into a hundred pieces, the barrels shattering loose and crashing into the walls with metallic squeals. And from the thing, there was a fleshy, bone-chilling *crunch*.

Bruno didn't stop to see what had happened. He leapt into the air, seized the rope, and flexed his burning muscles to pull himself up towards the light. For what seemed like hours, he climbed, until the point of sunlight grew brighter and wider. The bleak sunlight hit him like a blow to the head, forcing him to shut his eyes. Blindly, he reached up, seized the lip of the crevasse, and pulled himself over the side...

Gasping, he rolled away onto solid ground.

His eyes twitched open a crack. Through the glare he saw Vatsy, eyes wide, mouth moving in a way that suggested he was talking very quickly. Unfortunately, Bruno

had no idea what he was saying. Actually, at that point, there weren't many senses that were running at peak capacity. That list was more or less exclusive to those senses needed to feel excruciating pain.

At that point, as respectfully as he could, Bruno passed out.

Thankfully, he woke up again.

He was exactly where he'd fallen. It was nearing evening now—the sun had fallen somewhere beneath the shattered rooftops, leaving a stale and dingy light over the broken streets. Vatsy stood nearby, scratching distractedly away at his notebook, before he looked over at Bruno and beamed.

“Ah, I knew you'd come around before long! Don't blame you for resting, myself. It's been quite a full day. I think we've hit a new record for people trying to kill us.”

Bruno glanced over at the crevasse. “Any sign of...”

Vatsy shook his head. “Nothing of the sort, no. All quiet.”

Bruno sat up, looking down at his wounds. They were bandaged, if very crudely.

Vatsy beamed wider, pointing at the bandages. “I did do something about those wounds, though. That scientist chap quite graciously gave me his lab coat for spare materials after I threatened to gouge his eyes out.”

Bruno blinked heavily. He was in that stage of waking up where you have to find out exactly what's happened while you were out and still aren't quite awake enough to deal with the answers.

“Oh, and I also told him that the mercenary was down there, and that they should send someone to see if he made it out. He said that he was sure they'd get right on that.”

Bruno stood up, a little unsteadily. They began to set off down the alleyway, wandering vaguely back towards home.

Vatsy raised his notebook. “Anyway, I finished my rough draft while you were unconscious. I'll have to spice up a few of the details later, but I can do that while I type it up tomorrow. What say we eat some of the leftovers at the office and turn in early, eh?”

Bruno stared off into space for a moment, lost in thought.

Vatsy glanced at him. “Bruno? Bruno, is something the matter?”

Bruno walked in silence for another moment. Finally, he looked back towards Vatsy, watching him carefully.

“M’fraid there’s bad news there, boss. The leader told me the group that was going to buy your stories...well, they were killed by bounty hunters.”

Vatsy blinked, stopping dead in his tracks. “By god, Bruno!”

Bruno shrugged. “Yeah. Apparently, they were the leaders of this powerful cult what wanted all sorts of information so they could overthrow the time stream and suchlike. Meg’lomani’cal types.”

Vatsy shook his head, resuming his walk down the alleyway. “Bah. Drat the luck, Bruno—my reports were just too damned incisive for their own good. Attracted the wrong crowd.”

Bruno nodded. “Those are the breaks, I s’ppose.”

“Still...that does mean that hiding in the impenetrable super-safehouse is no longer on the menu.”

They remained silent for a few minutes, walking quietly past the toppled buildings. Finally, Vatsy grinned.

“Saves me the trouble of writing up the report, though.”

Bruno clutched at his wound. “Right. And far as lodging goes, well, we’ll just have to improvise. Keep moving, and all that.”

“Exactly. As long as we’ve got ink and shotgun shells, we’ll find some sort of opportunity, eh, Bruno?”

Bruno bit his lip. “Er. About my shotgun...”

Vatsy glanced over at him, then stopped again. “Say, Bruno, where *is* your shotgun? And your satchel full of shells?”

Bruno gestured vaguely back down the alley. “Sorry to say that neither item is in the picture at the moment.”

Vatsy waved a hand chipperly. “Oh, never mind that! I’ll just make a note to pick up some more when we get the chance.” He began to write something down on the next page of his notebook, then frowned, shaking his pen. “Hm. Could have sworn I had fresh ink for this thing not long ago.”

Bruno glanced up at the darkening skies. “We should be going, boss. Probably best if we’re up and out early tomorrow, eh?”

Vatsy nodded, setting off alongside him. “Well, Bruno, admittedly things could be aligned a bit better.”

“We’ll muddle through, boss. We’ve always done.”

“Right. We might not have weapons, or the means to support ourselves, or lodgings, or, you know, the ability to walk down the street without getting shot at. But we’ve got ourselves, eh?”

Bruno’s face stretched taut, and the lips parted--a little smile. “Right.”

They walked together, Bruno settling into peaceful contemplation. Vatsy proceeded along at his usual pace, humming to himself. After a while, though, his pace slowed, and he stopped humming. His face grew hazy, almost preoccupied, and he suddenly gave the impression of a fast eater who found himself preoccupied with an unexpected chunk of gristle.

Finally, he cleared his throat.

“Erm. Bruno. Do I...”

“Yes, boss?”

“Well, it just sort of, you know, occurred to me. I can’t recall...do I pay you, or anything to that effect? You know. Some sort of salary?”

Bruno shook his head. “Nothing of the sort, boss. We’ve got what you call a symbiotic relationship. Works to both of our benefit.”

“Oh.” His expression eased, but not entirely. “I see.”

The pair of them walked off into the settling city, leaving a trail of dried blood and tracked grime in their wake—passing on from today’s bittersweet victory into tomorrow’s uncertain challenges.

Tomorrow—tomorrow, should things continue at this rate, there could be an artillery battery outside their front door. But right now, even tired and bloodied as they were, that didn’t seem to matter. There might not be much of today left, but they’d been there to see it from start to finish, and considering the odds, that meant something.

Maybe not as much as, say, a guarantee that they'd still be vertical and in possession of most of their blood this time tomorrow, but sometimes you have to take what you can get from life. In some cases, the entirety of this package was life itself.

Baron Motto undertook the usual midnight patrol of his barony. This usually took eight seconds. Today, since he found a hardly-decayed rat in the gutter, it took about twelve.

Baron giggled gleefully, sticking the rat on a skewer before racing back to his flaming barrel. This was turning out to be his lucky night. Not only did he get meat for dinner, those two lunatics what lived in the building to the right dropped off another one of their newsletters today. It wasn't typewritten, but Baron figured that wouldn't matter.

That guy in the hood should be here any minute now.

Baron finished off the last bite of the rat, licking his fingers with gusto, just as the man stepped into the alleyway.

As usual, he wore a long, hooded coat that shaded his face. Baron wasn't exactly up on the latest fashion trends, at least those that didn't pertain to skinned vermin, but he was pretty sure that wasn't usual. When he stepped forward, he was careful not to move too much into the light

"Are we being watched?"

Baron shook his head. "Not by nobody 'ceptin my officers."

The man hesitated. "Officers?"

Baron gestured towards a few cockroaches clinging to the side of the barrel.

The man relaxed visibly. "Of course," he said. "Anyway. Any more newsletters?"

Baron nodded. "Yeah. The usual two, plus they just dropped this 'un off. Hand-written, don't know why."

He reached out, and Baron pulled the sheafs of paper out of his coat and handed them over. "Enjoy," he said. "Can't read, myself, but they look interesting. Nice margins, and all that."

He glanced over them. "Hm...yes. These seem to be satisfactory." He reached over to his belt, pulled loose a small coin pouch, and tossed it to Baron. Baron snatched it eagerly out of the air, rubbing the pouch and smelling it.

“Look, there would be another ten in it for you if you could tell us where they live.”

“Aha,” said Baron, “I weren’t born yesterday. I tell you where they is, and then you just go straight to them, yeah? And then where am I? No deal, sir, no deal. Don’t worry, I shouldn’t think they is going noplac.

“Pleasure doing business,” he called after the man, but he was already leaving.

Baron shook his head. “Bunch of wackos,” he confided to Officer Lowry.

Lowry twitched an antennae.

“Heh. You said it.’

A half-hour later, the documents were tossed onto a candlelit table in a shuttered apartment. Those gathered at the table leaned in, examining them, passing them around, reading certain passages aloud. Once digested, the newsletters were thrown into the fireplace.

“Do you think the rumors are true?”

“I know they are. You saw the announcement.”

“Well...yes, but that’s just the Writer’s Guild. That doesn’t mean that...”

“What would make the Writer’s Guild pay for a contract? They’re scared. They think the government is going to come down on them unless they resolve this issue, and they’re absolutely right. ”

There was a brief silence. “Alright,” one finally said, “so what do we do?”

“What we have to.”

“He’s a great inspiration. We can’t let him die.”

“I know. I’m not like that smiling asshole, I know how important he is.. We’ll find them, and then we’ll do what we can for them. But be assured, no matter what happens, it will drive our cause forward. If he lives, he lives, and it is for the best. But even if he should fall, he will rally us. It would be an honor, really.”

This quieted the table. After a moment, one of them nodded and said:

“First martyr of the revolution. There are worse legacies.”

Part Three

Crossfire Tango

The sun strutted over the horizon on Rosewater Lane, painting the scrubbed windowpanes and scarce marble a glassy gold--the shade you'd find on a wristwatch bought in an alleyway. A few individuals were already on the streets, frayed hats soaking in the morning dust, but there were many who thought themselves too important to get up this early.

While this assumption didn't have much to do with reality, it was probably for the best, given what would happen in about fifty seconds.

A newsboy sat on the street corner, struggling to open the first crate with his grubby fingers. Finally--explosively, predictably--the lid burst off and sent a few newsletters flying into the street.

The newsboy sighed, beginning to scoop the newsletters back into the box. He skimmed them as he did so, but without any real interest. A sausage salesman loses interest in his product once he's handled enough of it, and prefers to eschew direct contact as soon as he figures out what it's made out of.

Writer's Guild World Newsletter, Issue 15, Volume 52

CESA Works to Eliminate Slums

A courageous team of scientists from the Creatively Ethical Sciences Association worked last week to renovate Broventree, one of the most downtrodden slums in the city. Miserable slum tenements and abandoned warehouses alike were taken down in a widespread and cleverly instituted campaign of demolitions, all improvised from pre-existing devices.

The effects of this campaign have already been felt. Crime has fallen 90%, unemployment has fallen approximately 90%, and homelessness has fallen almost 90% in the area.

A member of the CESA weapon's division, who wishes to remain anonymous, has praised the work of the scientists, calling it a "Major blow for a safer, more functional city."

When asked to confirm or deny rumors that the project was badly managed, even unintentional, he was adamant. "These rumors are absurd," he stated. "The scientists in question knew exactly what they were doing. These mutterings—that the project was related to the perfectly natural tremor that day, that it resulted from a misused and unstable prototype, that 91% of the Broventree population was killed—have absolutely no testimonial to support them.

The rumor-mongers talk a good fight, but have found absolutely no eyewitnesses to support their claims.”

Indeed, our sources within CESA have revealed that the campaign was well-managed, beneficial, and entirely without drawback. Those rumors amount to little more than poisonous slander against one of our most cherished, proactive associations.

Truly, our organizations and government-subsidized committees will stop at nothing to serve the community.

His gaze was drawn to the second crate, which was substantially more intriguing. These days, there were about enough people who read the newsletter out of a sense of guilty obligation to sell one crate's worth. He'd never been given a second before.

He looked at it for a moment, a little bit suspicious.

Thirty-five seconds.

He shrugged, pushed the first box aside, and began to crack open the second.

He noticed, even as he was prying at the lid, that this crate was a bit different. It didn't have the evenly distributed weight of stacks of paper—it contained a fairly weighty object that seemed to roll and shift as he worked at the lid. For a wild moment, he allowed himself to think it was his salary from the past six weeks.

Fifteen seconds.

Finally, the lid jerked free. The newsboy peered into the box.

On top was a note, which he read. If he'd understood it, he probably would have reacted a little faster, but it didn't really make any sense to him at first. He put it aside at twelve seconds.

He looked at what was below the note.

He stared.

Ten seconds.

The boy screamed, leapt to his feet, and kicked the box awkwardly towards the alleyway. Its contents spilled, and a faint ticking echoed through the streets. He began to run.

Heads peered out of windows to see what was the matter.

Three seconds.

Two seconds.

A cloud passed over the sun, and the street was dim for the meanest shaving of a moment.

Three minutes later, the sun hacked its way through the smoky, acrid haze. To the surprise of everyone involved, there was something left for it to fall upon. A crate that wasn't properly shattered, for example. A partially unruptured fascicle of red cylinders. A row of buildings that appeared not only entirely unharmed, but more than a little smug.

And—and this could, for certain *particularly* surprised people, be considered the only silver lining to the affair—an undamaged note.

It was slightly charred. Had the crate properly gone off, it would have been blown into the sort of confetti a pyromaniac would order for his parole celebration, making its intended purpose slightly unclear. As it stands, it could be recorded for posterity.

Expect us, pigs.

Not far away, five men sat in a café, each turned towards his own thoughts and habits. Each was openly carrying weapons—one was cleaning a pistol, another toying with a switchblade, a third adjusting a scope. The other two were reading, one from a holy book, the other from a grubby cardboard folder. A dog nosed around under the table, eating—with some reservations—the scraps.

“I did check in with our contact,” said the man with the gun, not looking up. “He said he'd keep an eye out. Same terms if he gets his hands on them first.”

“Whatever,” said the one with the knife. He laid his hand on the table, then began tapping the point of the switchblade between his outstretched fingers.

“I told you, this might be trickier than you think. If they were stupid, they would have taken the last bait you offered them, and if they were otherwise pushovers, this job would have been called on account of them already being dead.”

“Oh, gee, they managed not to get killed by some contract assassin. I think you can buy those at the grocer's now. We can handle this job, we're professionals—ow! Dammit!”

A few cigar ashes fell onto the face of the cardboard folder. There was the sound of a deep breath being taken; the others immediately looked up, turning their attentions towards the fifth member of their party.

“I shaid to them, ‘They’re expecting ush at the train shtation. Let’sh not dishappoint them.”

He rose. The rest followed suit, then waited for him to brush out the door before following after.

In a third place, not more than an artillery shell’s drop away, it was the time of day where in which the local food stall threw out those bits of meat and fish that failed to meet their rather generous standards of edibility. This simple act could be viewed through several lenses. Some saw it as a beacon of pride in an ocean of culinary apathy and ill-will. Some looked upon it, with some accuracy, as a severely improper handling of biohazardous waste. To the maggot species, it represented a brave and exciting change of scenery.

Today, to Vatsy and Bruno, it constituted brunch.

Vatsy reached down into the pile and grasped a sliver of meat between his claws, letting it writhe animatedly in his grasp. After an instant's hesitation, he slurped it down. “Hm. Not half bad, actually.”

Bruno nodded, tossing the green remains of a skeletal fish from hand to hand. After the second throw, it burst. “We’ve had worse, boss.”

They began picking through the heap, dining in dignified silence. After finishing off a few hunks of meat that glowed faintly in the dark, Vatsy licked his lips and stepped away.

“Yes, I think that does it for me, Bruno. Might I say that this really was a capital idea?”

Bruno parted some of the rubbish, hefting up a scabbed-looking sheep’s head. “Cheaper than dining out, at any rate.”

“Oh, yes. Anyway, we need to be saving up for new supplies—I really would like to set up shop as soon as possible, once this silly assassination attempt business blows over.”

Bruno leaned in to sniff the sheep's head. It attempted to bite him. He tossed it back into the pile.

"Right, I think I'm done as well. What's next on the itinerary, then?"

Vatsy doffed his hat, whipping out the notepad and from under it and plucking the charcoal stick from its brim.

"Right, let's see where we are. Tuesday. 5:30, wake up. 5:31, fight off drug-crazed homeless men. 5:32, go back to bed. 6:30, wake up again. 6:31 through 9:00, search for new lodgings/fight off muggers. 9:01 through 11:00, odd jobs."

Bruno massaged his knuckles. "Is that what you called it?"

"Yes, 'secondhand mugging/stealing odds and ends' didn't fit on the line. 11:01, brunch at Caullie's. And—aha, here we are—11:30 through 9:00, wander about and re-appraise the situation."

"Sounds like a plan, boss." Bruno wiped his hands off on his fur, then reached down—hand scooping empty air. He paused, glancing down at the empty space by his feet, then let his hand drop awkwardly back to his side.

They began to stride down the alleyway at a leisurely pace, basking in the blistering noonday sun, letting the cocktail of deathsmells and harsh noises wash over their souls. After a mere two left turns, they returned to the alley between Wainsrow Warehouses and Shifty's Candleworks—in other words, to their home away from homelessness.

It wasn't much. A neglected park bench, earth and dead grass still clinging to its legs. Vatsy's typewriter, its ink stains and rust camouflaging it perfectly among the rubbish of the alley. A few scraps of paper, some rotted food, a crowbar.

And, at the moment, a few gnarled rats fighting over a greasy scrap of paper. Vatsy coiled up on the park bench, watching in quiet fascination as they scabbled and gnashed at one another.

"See, Bruno, this really is the best thing for us. Cramped up in that wretched apartment, we'd hardly be privy to such free entertainment as this, now, would we? Or to such fine local dining establishments?"

Bruno shrugged, watching detachedly. "Suppose not, boss."

"Of course not. Frankly, vagabondism has a lot to offer."

The rats suddenly stopped, sniffing the air cautiously. Both turned their heads, looked directly at Vatsy, and instantly began to sprint in the other direction.

Vatsy straightened, blinking. “Huh.”

Bruno turned away, slumping against the wall and sliding his bowler hat over his eyes. “Suppose that means you won, boss.”

“Oh. Just as well, I suppose—the scratch paper pile I salvaged from the office was running low.” Vatsy slid off the bench, trotting over to the paper. He picked it up, glanced at it, and tossed it into the scratch paper pile.

Then he got back onto the bench and curled up again.

He began to hum.

A minute passed.

Vatsy lifted his head, stopped humming, and blinked a few times.

Then he leapt off the chair, dashed to the scrap pile, and snatched the page back up.

“Deuces *alive*, Bruno, *I wrote this!*”

Bruno sat up, re-adjusting his hat. “Pardon, boss?”

“By god, Bruno, I’d recognize this prose anywhere! It’s that outline I wrote on the whole CESA affair! Except, this looks like it’s been...typeset!”

Bruno shut his eyes for a moment, then snapped them back open. “Pardon, boss?”

“Someone’s actually printed one of my stories!” Vatsy paused, catching his breath, then smacked the paper with the back of his claw. “I don’t know who, and I don’t know why, but it’s actually been printed! Admittedly, the paper quality isn’t quite up to Writer’s Guild standards...actually, this is the kind I use...”

Bruno stood up, walked over to Vatsy, and stared blankly down at the paper in Vatsy's hand. Vatsy continued, babbling excitedly.

"And, and...dear lord, there’s this epilogue here! Here, listen to this, Bruno...”

Vatsy read:

Thanks to the courage and grit of Vatsy, Hero of the People, yet another lie from the fat cats has been exposed for the propaganda it is. For too long, the sheep-people of this city have blindly swallowed up anything the government pushed at them. The sort of morons who believe

that CESA isn't run by lunatics with blood on their hands; that the constables are there to keep the peace, not to keep us down; that there are no black-ops hit squads; that our organs aren't being harvested and used as food for the pets of bureaucrats; that the news is news, not advertising for our oppressors.

For the rest of us, whose eyes are open, there will be a meeting. The time and place are listed below. Be there.

Vatsy dropped the paper, drawing a breath with an expression of mixed astonishment and rapture. "And it appears this meeting is tonight, not more than a few miles from here! What do you think of that, eh?"

Bruno slowly leaned back against the wall, putting a hand on his forehead. "I'm thinking that last fish might have been a mistake."

Vatsy glanced at him. "Eh?"

Bruno shook himself. "Nothing, boss."

Vatsy quivered with glee, spasming into a sort of flailing dance. "Somebody published my work! On an actual press of some kind, on something that's quite a bit like actual paper!" He threw back his head, clamped his eyes shut, and let out a squeal like a rusty hinge being goosed at a party.

"Gyeeeeeeeeeeee!"

Bruno stared past him into space, jaw slackening, eyes unfocusing. He stood there in silence as Vatsy jigged arrhythmically, his simian brow knotting thoughtfully.

Finally, Vatsy spun to an ungainly halt in front of Bruno, beaming.

"Well? ...published!"

Bruno's eyes flickered down to the sheet of paper. "Seems like it."

Vatsy licked his lips, excitement slipping a notch. "You don't seem as excited, Bruno." He snapped his claws suddenly, brightening. "Oh! Is it because they didn't mention you? Because there actually is this bit down here I didn't read... 'to all servants of the people, the chimp-man demonstrates that brute labor is needed to carry forth the vision of the destined leaders...'" Vatsy's nose wrinkled. "Hm. That's a bit off, isn't it? I mean, you're really just a straight *chimp*. Suppose the bowler hat threw them off?"

Bruno shook his head, raising a hand to stroke his chin. "I'm actually more wondering...just who these people are, exactly."

Vatsy whipped the paper back up, scanning the bottom lines. "Oh, bother, forgot to read that part too. Sorry, sorry, the 'hero of the people' part just sort of..." He shivered blissfully. "Right! Uh, says here...yes, it's from the Revolutionary Front!"

Bruno swallowed.

Vatsy grinned, glancing back up at Bruno. "My! Just imagine: we, Vatsy and Bruno, have been historically, indelibly, *publicly* associated with the Revolutionary Front!"

Bruno took a deep breath, then began to pace down the alley.

Vatsy hugged the paper. And then, in a pleasant voice, he asked:

"Say, Bruno?"

"Yes, boss?"

"What's a revolutionary front?"

Bruno paused, glancing over his shoulder down the alley. "Well, your basic revolutionary front has to do with..." He lowered his voice slightly. "Toppling the government."

"Oh." Vatsy considered this. "Huh."

He stared at the paper for a moment, re-reading a few parts.

"...and then what?"

Bruno shrugged. "Couldn't say. Doubtless they've got some sort of plan."

"Bah, politics! You and I, we're above that sort thing. I myself haven't followed an election in years."

"Can't say I remember hearing about any elections, boss."

Vatsy waved his hand animatedly. "Elections, appointments, re-appointments—who has time to follow the intricacies of the autocratic process? Well, as long as it keeps these fine gents busy, and motivates them to print my work—well, more power to them, I say!" He began to fold the paper up. "Anyway, important thing is, they appear to be having a meeting at that soap factory that burned down a few years ago. I'd say we're damn near obligated to go, considering..." He sighed happily. "We appear to be their official scribes and guardians!"

Bruno nodded slowly. “I suppose we should, at that. We should be discreet, mind.”

“Really now, Bruno, what’s the harm?”

Bruno hesitated, seeming to pick his words deliberately out of the air. “Just...you know. Might be best to avoid the attention of certain authorities as much as possible.”

Vatsy scoffed warmly, tucking the paper into his hat. “Well now, Bruno, if we cooped ourselves up every time we feared reprisal from authority figures—why, we’d never leave the house.”

Bruno glanced around.

“Well, the gutter. Same principle.”

“S’ppose you’re right, boss.”

“Well, then, let’s go... Ooh! Just let me get some of my notes together! They should get a kick out of the story I’m working on now. It’s got a mummy in it!

Vatsy began to pick through his papers, rambling to himself and, occasionally, squealing with glee. Bruno quietly dug into his corner, retrieving the old, weathered, slightly smeared six-month train schedule from the office.

He couldn’t read it, of course, but he’d memorized it all the same. Vatsy had read it to him once or twice, and he’d managed to keep track of which jumbles correspond with which days, and of course the little clocks were easy enough to understand.

There was one departure that was circled in black ink. It was about two weeks from now, and suddenly, Bruno wasn’t sure that was early enough.

Vatsy trotted eagerly after Bruno, humming what was, in its elemental form, probably a jaunty tune. Bruno’s pace was far more deliberate—partially because he was leading the way, partially not.

You knew you were within two miles of the factory block when you entered a ring of slums that, by comparison, elevated roach motels to the status of luxury mansion. You knew you were within one mile of the factories when there was so much coal-black smoke in the air that the rain could be used as ink and the birds had to learn basic swimming techniques.

By the time they reached the burnt soap factory, a blackened citadel nestled between industrious smoke-belching neighbors, it was reaching late afternoon. The sun was beginning to dip past the worst of the air pollution, peeking out and glowing a vibrant and unsettling shade that somehow seemed as much mocking as cheerful.

Vatsy's energy was unabated. He strutted cheerfully up to the charred facade, and was just about to rap on the doors when Bruno opened them unceremoniously.

Vatsy hesitated, claw held out in mid-knock, then shrugged. "Right, no sense in calling them to the door, is there? Not like they're going to deny entrance to the hero of the people, after all."

Bruno paused in the entryway, eyes peering off into the darkness, hand still resting upon the knob. Vatsy coughed politely.

"Erm, Bruno?"

Bruno stepped inside, letting Vatsy in after him. "Just...listening, boss. Place seems awfully quiet, is all."

Vatsy shrugged. "Perhaps they're renting out part of their meeting spot to another government-overthrowing group, and are keeping it down so they don't get any complaints."

Bruno shook his head, glancing around the empty factory floor that lay within. "Place seems just about empty, boss."

Vatsy licked his lips, deflating slightly. "Hm. So it does, at that. You'd think a mass of enraged proletariat would be a bit more noticeable, really."

"Perhaps we got the wrong place?"

Vatsy shook his head, pacing past Bruno. "Dash it all, Bruno, the newsletter said to go to the great destroyed soap factory on this particular avenue. How many massive heavily-staffed factories have burned down on this street?"

Bruno moved his lips. "About four."

"Well, yes, but how many of these factories produced soap?"

"Well, technically, this was the only one that was in that *business*. Although I heard rumors that with the chemical factory down the street, the lye potash mixed with the melted huma--"

This particular line of conversation was terminated when Vatsy disappeared through the floor.

There was just the barest hint of a pause—enough time for light to bounce off of Vatsy’s rapidly descending body and lodge itself somewhere in Bruno’s retina. And then, as if they were tethered together by chains, Bruno dove after Vatsy.

As far as uncontrolled plunges go, it was one of their better ones. They dropped less than ten feet onto a carpet that was forgiving, if only grudgingly so, and even managed to land adjacent to one another so as to prevent their bones from experimenting with jazz percussion.

Vatsy blinked dazedly, stumbling upright. “Well, that was almost refreshing, really. Could have been quite a bit worse.” He paused, glanced contemplatively at his side, then clicked his tongue. “Hm. Oh, well, I’ll just have to start knitting that rib all over again.”

Bruno stood up, glancing around at his surroundings. Vatsy tapped one of his jutting cheese-grater ribs with a claw.

“Yes, that’s definitely another crack. Same rib, too. Honestly, Bruno, sometimes I don’t know why we leave the gutter...”

“Boss?”

“Yes, Bruno?”

Bruno cleared his throat, gesturing meaningfully. Vatsy glanced up. Into about a hundred very stunned expressions.

The five men were a good distance from the café now, only a few blasted-out warehouse blocks away from the train station’s edge. Their display of weaponry was keeping the vagrants at bay, and when one started to edge out of the shadows, the gun man would give them a look that moved them to retool their morning shakedown schedule.

“Waste of space,” said the knife man after one of them disappeared from view. “What they should do is, they should just send some of us down here to take ‘em all out.”

“The muggers?” asked the gun man.

“Yeah, whatever, man. This whole place stinks.”

“Let’s assume that was a viable strategy,” said the gun man, “Although honestly, there’s just too many blind corners in a place like this for it to be all that feasible.”

The knife man snorted.

“As if we’d have any difficulty with these brutes,” said the rifle man. “Really, as long as I had access to a high building and a decent scope, I’d have the populace killed and cleaned for you in no time at all. And might I say, the people here could *use* a cleaning!”

He began to giggle, throwing in a snort every other breath. The gun man and the knife man glanced at each other; the gun man mouthed the word, “spotter,” then continued in an ordinary tone.

“Yeah, I don’t know about you, but I’m not seeing any clock towers around here. You could maybe hit a *really tall* guy on the next street over.”

“Well, as long as I could—“

“*And if even it were possible*, the point is, most of those guys are actually warehouse or trainyard workers who engage in violence as a means of supplementing their income. If you killed them all, new workers would move in and take their place...or else there’d just be a labor vacuum. At best, you’d just be out the cost of your bullets. At worst, you’d cripple the entire economic district...”

“Okay,” said the knife man, “whatever. I was just saying that this place is—“

The fifth man stopped dead in his tracks, and the entire group stopped as if they shared one pair of legs.

The fifth man then bent down, shifted aside a few scraps of paper with one shingle-like hand, and pulled up a worn and bootprinted piece of paper. He began to skim it, then stopped, eyes focusing on the bottom.

“Could thish be true? Could fate itsself be reaching out to guide me?”

The gun man cautiously trotted to the fifth man’s side, then began to read the sheet over his shoulder. “Wow,” he said. “That’s...hold on.” He reached the bottom. “That’s today. That’s...that’s right now.”

The fifth man’s jaw clenched, shearing the base of the cigar and sending it tumbling to the ground. He grimaced.

“I shaid to them, ‘There’s sh been a change of plans.’”

There was a massive throng standing there, staring like puzzled deepfish presented with a jazz revue. They stood in a thick ring-like mob, crowded around a crude central podium on which stood the most flabbergasted individual of all.

He looked a bit like an alert, emaciated rabbit. He had pale, freckled skin, wide eyes, and a lip that looked perpetually on the verge of trembling righteously. His nostrils flared cavernously with every intake of breath, and he anxiously straightened his too-large cloak every half-second.

It was he who broke the silence, in a stuttering, shrill way.

“What--how did—is that—“

He gasped, or tried to gasp. It came out as a bit of a squeak.

“Could you be...”

Vatsy opened his mouth to speak. The man at the podium cut in again, voice reaching a fever pitch.

“It is! This is him! The voice of the people! It’s him, it’s him, it’s him!”

The people shifted, nodding and murmuring in generalized agreement. The podium man stepped down, and gestured eagerly towards Vatsy.

“Don’t...don’t you get it, brave comrades! Standing here before you is the man who made our movement possible!” The people gave a slightly anemic cheer, not really taking their eyes off of Vatsy. When he waved cheerfully, a few flinched.

The podium man wasn’t finished.

“The seer! The prophet of justice, who wrote those words that shook the foundations of the city! That heroic dissenter who cried out, who reached up to tear down the ill-erected façade of the pig-like oligarchs that run this city with an iron hand!”

The amassed people nodded hastily. A few of them were beginning to edge away from him, as well.

The podium man raced over to Vatsy and seized him by the claw, shaking it exultantly with only the barest tremor of unease. “Make no mistake, ladies and gentlemen--this man before us is the architect of the revolution!”

Vatsy nodded, beaming cheerfully. “Yes, yes, architect, revolution! I’m the journalist you published!”

The podium man got onto one knee, bringing his face directly level with Vatsy’s. He managed to recover almost immediately.

“Mr. Vatsy, this is the greatest honor of my life.”

Vatsy nodded. “Yes, well, that’s understandable.”

“I’ve read every single one of your essays—they’re the only voice of truth in this city, the only bastion of sanity to be found amidst the liars and bureaucrats.” He reached under his cloak, pulling out a sheaf of cheap and well-worn papers.

Vatsy blinked, reaching out and grasping one of the papers. “Ah. Aha, yes, this is my report about the giant spiders the city was releasing to eat beggars.”

The man closed his eyes, breathing in rapturously. “It’s a personal favorite.”

“Oh, yes, one of mine too! Took me the better part of a week!”

Bruno cleared his throat. The man turned to him, as if seeing him for the first time.

“Oh,” he said, politely enough. “Yes, of course. You must be Bruno.”

“Right.” Bruno stepped forward. “Just a few things we need to sort out, here.”

The man glanced at Vatsy, who graciously waved a hand. He then turned back to Bruno.

“So,” said Bruno. “This is a meeting of a revolutionary front, then.”

“Indeed! We are the amassed fist of the...masses! We will gain the rights and freedoms that the people of this city deserve!”

The crowd cheered.

“We are committed. We are mighty. There is not a man, woman, or child here who would not die for the revolution!”

There was another, quieter cheer.

“Anyway, we circulate the newsletters where we can. Those of them who receive the newsletters read them...or find someone who can read them, in any case...and find the location of the next meeting. So far, we’ve amassed thousands of dedicated supporters. We have footholds in every part of the city!”

Vatsy started to say something. This time it was Bruno that cut him off.

“Right, good, about that.”

The podium man gave Bruno a glance, a rather more dismissive one than is usually directed towards battle-scarred combat chimps, and then regarded Vatsy.

“Perhaps I should speak to your employer instead...?”

Vatsy waved a claw. “Oh, no, you two feel free to get to know each other. I’ll just mingle with my loyal readership!” The loyal readership nearly choked.

The podium man sighed, then knelt down to face Bruno.

“Alright, what was it you wanted?”

“Am I to take it you’ve got safehouses somewhere in the city?”

“Of course!”

“Are they good ones?”

“They are held fast by the unwavering dedication of...”

“Bars,” Bruno cut in firmly. “Bars. Locks. Out of the way. Fast as it can be furnished. We’re in a bit of a hurry, actually.”

Vatsy paused in mid-handshake with a crowd member, who instantly took a smart step backwards. “Are we?”

“I believe so, boss.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound right. We were actually quite--”

“Trust me on this one.”

Vatsy shut his mouth. Silently, he padded back to Bruno.

The podium man sighed. “Well, I was hoping Mr. Vatsy could give a dissertation on human rights and the atrocities of the tyrants, but if you must go...” He gestured to a boy in the crowd, who—after a moment—took a shaky step forward. “I’ll have this boy escort you to...”

“No,” said Bruno. “We’ll go alone.”

The podium man looked at Bruno as if he’d just broken wind into a bassinet, then pulled out a scrap of paper and a pen. He walked over to place the paper on his podium, then began scratching something out onto it.

“I’ll draw you a map. Keep moving into the slums until you find the abandoned jail. The squatters won’t bother you. There’ll be a staircase down into maximum

security—you'll find our operators there." Finishing with a flourish, he swept the paper into the air and offered it to Bruno.

Bruno took the map. "Right. We'll be going now." He tipped his hat, giving the man a respectful nod. "Thanks for your help."

A ladder was rolled out, and the pair departed.

"Well," said Vatsy as they jogged down the back alley, "that was lovely, wasn't it?"

Bruno shrugged. "They seemed nice enough." He came to a corner, glanced around it, then motioned Vatsy to follow.

"Yes, yes, quite nice," said Vatsy as he tumbled after. "Pity we're in such a terrible rush, or we might have stayed and chatted a little further."

Bruno stopped, causing Vatsy to skid into a tangled halt. He glanced up at the rooftops, sniffed the air, then launched into movement again.

"Only," Vatsy began again, scrambling after, "actually, see, I was sort of curious about that particular state of affairs, namely, us...being in a hurry?"

"I just think that..." Bruno glanced backwards.

There was something wrong in Vatsy's expression—not the boldfaced wrong of, say, a nineteen-legged chicken, the sort of wrong that seizes the attention with a pair of electric tongs. Instead, it was a subtle wrong, and all the scarier for it because there was no way of knowing how long it had been that way and just escaped your notice.

Bruno hesitated, glanced at the rooftops again, then stopped.

"See, it's like this, boss. You remember all the towns before this one?"

Vatsy's brow wrinkled with effort. "Hm...only hazily. Frightfully dull, for the most part. Only real excitement was on the day we'd leave."

"Lynch mobs do have that effect, yes." Bruno took a deep breath.

"Point is, we've seen the back of more than a few places. Usually, not more'n a week after seeing the front of it. Collecting enemies is a habit of ours. See, eventually, you develop a sort of..." Bruno paused, searching for the words. Vatsy waited silently.

Finally, he said, "It's an instinct. You sort of get this tension in your neck, this restlessness in your bones. Like you were getting along fine, but maybe pushing it in a few areas, and things kind of built up to the breaking point, then one person's had

enough of you, and then everyone else sort of wonders..." He started over. "It means...if I'm right, understand."

Vatsy nodded.

"It means our welcome in this city is more or less over. I was thinking..." He hesitated again, and then added, "If you agreed, I mean. I was thinking we'd lie low for a bit, then work on getting out of the city for good."

Bruno took a step back. He studied Vatsy's expression carefully; it remained blank. Even that was somewhat alien to Vatsy.

"When?" Vatsy asked.

"I was thinking, well, two weeks from now. That was before I knew the revolution was...well, I mean, you have to realize this puts us at a greater risk, being heroes and all..." His voice trailed off as he watched Vatsy's still-unchanging expression.

"I suppose that..."

Vatsy cleared his throat, fidgeting as if there was a fly buzzing nearby that he was too timid to swat at. "Well, no, I suppose you might be right. Bruno?"

"Yes, boss?"

"This hasn't happened before, has it?"

Bruno blinked, nonplussed. "Boss?"

"You sometimes remember things that I don't. What happened in there, with all of those people...has anything like that ever happened to us before?"

"Well...we've never been hailed as "heroic dissenters," before, if that's what you're asking."

"No, no, it's not that. Not all that, anyway. I mean...has anyone ever...how can I put it..." Vatsy snapped his fingers impatiently. "What do you call it? When someone comes up...and talks to you, but, you know...of their own volition?"

Bruno considered this.

"Friendliness?"

"Yes, I think that's it. Have we ever gotten any of that before today?"

"On occasion," Bruno said, shrugging. "Remember those muggers? They were pretty cordial last time we crossed paths."

“Muggers? Ah, yes, journalism, transportation, etcetera.” Vatsy scratched his chin. “I suppose that’s true, but somehow it’s different when...there was some minor difference this time, and I can’t put my finger on...” He snapped his fingers. “Aha! New question: has someone ever before been friendly to us when you were *not* holding a shotgun?”

Bruno opened his mouth, then closed it. “Not so much.”

“No, I thought not. I thought I would have remembered something like that.” Vatsy slid into a sitting position. “I don’t know, Bruno. I can’t help but feel that...near people like that. That’s where we should be?”

“Look, boss, that’s all well and good. Could be it pans out. I’d like that as much as anyone. But whatever we decide, we do have to get moving.” Bruno gestured down the alleyway. “Come on, boss. Plenty of time to chart a course later, once we’ve got a roof over our heads and two feet of granite between us and the nearest pitchfork.”

Vatsy reversed the slide, picking himself up muscle by muscle. “Yes, I suppose. Lead on, then.”

They continued at a more subdued pace. Gradually, the alleys became narrower, the garbage underfoot grew thicker, and the stench of civilized garbage began to assert itself. The last of the rusted company signs and badly-painted corporate logos faded away—and then, they were moving from the abandoned and the underused factories district into the surrounding network of slums. And still, there was not a soul to be seen.

Bruno led them out onto a street, which was no less empty and rubbish-strewn than the alley. The primary difference was the dozens of locked, bolted, heavily secured doors that stretched as far as the eye can see. Not one of them lay open. The words “block party” did not present themselves.

“Bit of a dead street,” Vatsy remarked. “Nice day like this, you’d think they’d all be out in the comparably fresh air.”

“Very quiet.” Bruno sniffed the air, glanced up, then locked his eyes straight ahead at nothing in particular.

“Perhaps a nice game of croquet on the...” He eyed a nearby refuse pile, covered in mold. “...lawn. You know, I don’t know that I’ve once seen a game of croquet in progress. Is that the one that’s played with large, blunt instruments?”

“Believe so.” Bruno slowly turned his back to the buildings ahead.

“Huh. You’d think it’d be our national pastime.”

Bruno bent down and began sifting through the garbage. Vatsy shook himself.

“Right, well, enough dawdling, then. Bruno? Say, Bruno, is there a problem?”

Bruno hefted a large brick.

“Maybe not.”

He whipped around and hurled it at the rooftops.

There was a choked scream of pain.

“Run,” said Bruno.

A gunshot smacked into the pavement. Bruno seized Vatsy by the scruff of his neck, half-carrying half-throwing him forward towards the shooter’s vantage point. They were across the street in an instant; together they collapsed against the wall, Bruno’s eyes locked on the rooftop three stories above.

There was a brief moment of silence. A silhouette flickered, and Bruno made a motion as if to throw something at it.

The silhouette vanished instantly.

Bruno’s lips bent up in something that could, if viewed under a certain light and by a particularly discerning individual, be called a smile. It was about as mirthful as a raven dead of tuberculosis, but it was a smile nonetheless.

“Well, seems you were right about one thing, Bruno.” Vatsy squinted up at the roof. “Poor shot, luckily.”

“Think it might have been a panic shot. Otherwise he might have taken it sooner.” Bruno edged over to the door of the building, testing its handle. “Might mean that he was just there to get our location and report it to...”

There was a sudden, ear-drubbing note from the rooftop, like a horn the size of a small cart being blown.

Vatsy snapped his fingers. “I say, Bruno, you’re on fire today!”

“I try, boss.” The handle rattled unresponsively in Bruno’s hand for half a second. Then Bruno planted a shoulder and tore it out.

“Might want to wait there,” said Bruno, stepping into the threshold.

Vatsy shook his head, trotting after. “Nonsense! If he keeps up with shots like that, all we have to do is lob rocks at him until he blows his own foot off.”

Bruno hesitated, then shrugged briefly. "Fair enough. Stay back when I get to the doors, though, boss."

They plunged into the building. It had been an apartment building, the kind where the vermin infestations and in-house dining plans are one and the same and the walls collapse at a spider's kiss. Each staircase they ran up rattled like a box of matchsticks, and the door to the 2nd floor stairwell sheared off its hinges when thrown open.

Bruno paused as they neared the 3rd floor. He reached into a gutted wall, yanked out a pipe, and hefted it experimentally. "Hm. Good plumbing in this place, actually."

Vatsy nodded, glancing around. "Place has got character. Makes me homesick, I don't mind telling you."

Bruno put his hand on the top floor doorknob, flattened himself against the wall, and twisted it experimentally. A bullet smashed through the wood and whizzed past.

Bruno kicked the door off of its hinges, hurling the pipe down the hallway like a tomahawk. It smacked into the face of a kneeling shooter ten feet away, causing his second shot to crack into the ceiling.

Bruno was already tearing down the hallway when the figure began to right itself. A hand threw back the bolt, and the gun swung back down just as Bruno reached it.

Bruno caught the gun, tore it from the man's hands, and swung it back around like a club in one smooth motion. One instant, the man was poised to fire. The next, a handful of his teeth were seceding from his mouth. He sort of gracefully arced face-first into the adjacent wall, slamming into it; limp, he collapsed to the floor.

Bruno barely broke stride, seizing the man by the collar and dragging him down the hallway. The assassin had the sense to go slack.

He was young and wiry, with a starched dress shirt and a pair of dust-worn slacks. If one ignored the blood bubbling from his mouth, he looked a bit like an aristocrat's son out hunting some small, suitably docile animal.

Vatsy hummed brightly, pacing after the would-be assassin as Bruno lugged him up the penthouse stairs. "Quality work as always, Bruno. Wouldn't mind interviewing this fine fellow, if we have the time."

Bruno grunted, reaching the door to the roof. “Thinking the same thing.” He threw it open.

On the roof was what looked like a small, makeshift campsite. There was a cushion, a book, a telescope—even a small packed lunch containing a sandwich and an apple. A little more out of place was a massive brass horn; quite a bit more out of place was a bandolier of rifle rounds. Bruno dragged the gurgling figure to the roof’s ledge, then laid him down gently.

“Now, you might want to just start talking now, and then we can all get back to our lives. Note that in this equation, ‘all’ might mean you.”

The figure rolled a little, spitting the blood out of his mouth. “At...’at ’urt.”

“Yep,” Bruno said, with the faintest note of professional satisfaction. “Imagine it did.”

“Jus’...gihmee a segon’.”

Vatsy pulled out his notepad and pen, shaking the pen to get the ink flowing. “I’ll take it from here, Bruno. So, Mr. Potshot McMushface—if that is your real name—what made you decide to pick a glamorous profession in the field of missing shots and being bludgeoned?”

The figure whimpered, leaning back. “Firs’ misshin. Bounty...bounty team. I warsh a shcout. Shupposed to give your locayshun when I shaw you. I washn’ shupposh a be hit in the fash...”

Bruno leaned in. “How many?”

The figure hesitated, then figured it out. “Four.”

“How long?”

“unno.”

Bruno reached down, took a hold of the man’s shirt, and lifted him up a few inches.

“Right, one last thing. Why now?”

The man shrugged desperately. “I ‘unno! We wash going for the train shation firsht...nobody tellsh me nuffing!”

“The train station?”

“Shomething about the train shtation! I dunno!”

“Thanks for your cooperation.”

The figure nodded gratefully. That’s when Bruno rolled him off of the roof.

Vatsy leaned over the edge, watching the descent with mild interest. “And...ooh, he’ll feel that one tomorrow.”

“Will he?”

“Actually, yes.” Vatsy stepped away, then took a moment to gather up the lunch. “Either that or he’s an exceptionally whiny corpse.”

Bruno turned around, heading back downstairs. “No matter. Long as he won’t be coming back after us right now...we’ve got four other problems.” When they came back to the rifle, he paused, hefted it, grunted, and tossed it back down. “Bit unwieldy for my tastes. Think I’ll stick with the pipe.”

“Good thinking. After all, there’s only four of them.” Vatsy paused. “Say, Bruno?”

“Yes, boss?”

“This doesn’t...change our plans, does it?”

Bruno shrugged.

“So...we just keep moving for now, then.”

“Sounds like a plan to me, boss.”

“Well, it *is* the only one we’ve got.”

Codename Foxhunter had had better times. A hunting trip in which he depopulated a small forest of any life form bigger than a bulimic shrew. A camping excursion where he lived off the land for a week (the land, in this case, being the farm of one of his father’s peasant families). A recent fancy dress party, at which he won the award for most dead animals involved in the creation of a pair of spectacles.

Actually, now that he really got down to it, just about any time in which he had a few intact bones to rub together was probably better than this one.

In other words, it wasn’t quite the amusing romp he’d signed on for. He still felt cheated—all previous experience had taught him that chimps do not know how to equalize a close-range gunbattle, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that someone, somewhere, had cheated. Probably science, he reflected. Damned scientists.

He tried to roll onto his side, an endeavor that did more to amuse passing vermin than it did to measurably shift his position. After a few moments, he decided impotent whimpering was more his style, and set into it with renewed vigor.

He had reached quite a clip when the shadows fell over him.

He tried to turn his head, which was a bad idea. Then he tried to say hello, which released a gargled grunt and a bucketful of red drool and did little else.

One of the figures cleared his throat—it was the knife man.

“So, uh. How did it go, then?”

There was an exasperated sigh from one of the others, the gun man. “Really, man? Really?”

“Well, come on, we don’t know! He might have shot them all and then, you know...tripped. Get off my back!”

“Well, alright, let’s settle it, then.” The shadow grew darker as the second man bent down. “Oy...what was this guy? Foxhunter. Can you hear me? Gargle once for yes.”

Foxhunter gargled.

“Ow. Okay, good, good. So...they got away, then.”

Gargle.

“After they, and I realize I’m making some *wild assumptions* here, beat you soundly.”

“Just saying,” the knife man muttered. Foxhunter gargled meekly.

“What a surprise. Anyway, thanks for the info.” The gun man stood up. “There you have it, then. Turns out, finding one of our operatives in a crater full of his own blood is not a sign that we’ve won forever.”

“Yeah, yeah. So, that could have gone better.”

“Eh. It could have, but it wasn’t gonna.” There was the sound of a weapon being cocked. “I’m telling you, they’re dangerous people. They’re not the lackwit moron criminals that get taken in after they try to use their fame to get a free beer. They’re actually *pretty damn good* at fighting things...well, at least one of them is, I guess. Point is, this, right here? This was to be expected.”

Foxhunter reflected on this for a moment, then gurgled darkly.

“Anyway, so they know we’re coming. They probably already did. No, trust me on this, we’re still in the game.”

“Come what may,” said the voice of the book man—deeper than the other two-- “we need not fear failure. The death of the one called Vatsy is necessary retribution for his crimes. So says the Seven-Layered Writ of Toros, as it was handed down to the race of men.”

There was a pause.

“Uh, yeah,” said the gun man. “Sure. Anyway, come on, we’ve wasted enough time. They’re probably nearing Checkpoint 2 by now.”

“Yeah, right, let’s move.”

“In the name of Toros, we shall proceed.”

“Right.”

“Yrgghellpme?” Foxhunter managed finally.

The shadows disappeared. There was the sound of retreating footsteps, and then silence.

“Fuullgh.”

A minute later, the three hunters stepped into an intersection that had seen better decades. Their road forked off into three separate and equally dismal streets; each vanished into its own claustrophobic honeycomb of properties that weren’t worth the expense of tearing down.

The gun man shook his head. “God. Sometimes, I swear this city seems more like an overgrown jungle than something laid out by human beings.”

He bent down on one knee and began adjusting his gear. He wore thick, interlocking plates of some tough material, painted urban grey and complete with full-face protective mask. He had a pair of revolvers settled firmly on his hips, and another pistol—possibly a flaregun—in a box holster on his thigh.

The knife man scowled. “Hey, Core, any damn minute now. Not like our jobs are riding on this!”

Core—the gun man--sighed, pulling a strap tight. “Okay, four...no, five things. First, you’re an idiot. That was the new thing. Second, maybe *your* job’s riding on this. I’ve screwed up worse, and I’m still around. Third, you let your gear get slack and it’ll go

bad on you. Fourth, we're not trying to outrace them, we're just trying to follow the trail while it's warm and keep them from finding another hiding spot. Fifth, and this is important, *we can't start off yet because we have no idea which way they went.*"

The knife man glanced down at his gear, which consisted of some street clothes and an assortment of blades and firearms. "My gear's just fine."

Core straightened up, stretching experimentally. "Right up until you get shot or stabbed, yeah, I bet it does."

"Hasn't happened yet."

"Stick around." He stepped into the middle of the intersection, glancing down the three routes. "Alright...we know they're either going for the safehouse or the train station. We know from the map Spearhead gave us back at the factory that the safehouse is somewhere in the direction of the Bailey district, so that's following," he gestured, "the middle road. We turn right to get to the train station."

The first man eased a switchblade out of a holster on his back, flicking it in and out reflectively. "What about the other road?"

"Leads towards a higher rent district. Nothing there but cops and aristocrats—the former are on our side and the latter are too rich and pretty to deal with a couple of freaks. No, they wouldn't have gone left...question is, which way did they go?"

"Didn't you say you thought they'd head for the trains?"

"Yeah, but I ain't *sure*. They've been living in a gutter lately, there's a chance they haven't even heard the announcement. Plus, why ask for a safehouse location if they weren't going to take advantage of it?" He shook his head. "Still. From what I know of these guys, they aren't likely to gamble their safety on some random group of sledge boys who think they're starting a revolution. My gut tells me they're smart enough to head for the train station. And put that switchblade away already, the noise is driving me crazy."

The knife man put it back in its holster, muttering darkly.

"Perhaps," said the book man, a narrow figure in a long black coat, "we should follow the teachings of the Third Passage of Torosian Codex. Divide, and ye shall wash over your adversaries like the tide washes away the garbage from the shore."

There was a moment's pause.

“Yeah,” said Core, “actually, let’s do that. I’ll scout out towards the train station. Worship, you head towards the safehouse. Striker, wait here until one of us sends a signal. When Spearhead gets here, bring him up to speed and then split off.”

The book man nodded, tipping his wide-brimmed hat. “Toros guide you. I will make haste.”

“You do that.”

The knife man, identified now as Striker, paced over to a boarded-up tenement to watch as they departed. “And who put him in charge, huh?” he grumbled once they were out of earshot. “You go stand on the damn corner, I’ll go off and have all the fun. You can trust me, I’ve got all sorts of fancy special tactical training. It makes me shiny and awesome, and if you’ll just listen while I tell you how to do your job, you’ll end up so much better for it.”

He chuckled bitterly, reaching for his switchblade pouch. “It’s not like the last time I saw any real action, my entire crew ended up...hang on a second.” He dug around inside the pouch. “Hey, what the hell happened to my...”

There was a soft clicking. Had it not been right next to his ear, he wouldn’t have been able to hear it.

And then a calm voice said: “Don’t move anything below your neck.”

Striker froze, allowing his brain to parse this as carefully as possible. Then he craned his neck back a few inches.

Bruno hung off the drainpipe, either foot wrapped around its rusted length. With his left hand, he clamped his hat firmly to his head. With his right, he held Striker’s switchblade about an inch from his temple. He was entirely, terrifyingly impassive.

“You know,” said Bruno, “it’s none of my affair, and we need to be moving soon anyway. But I can’t help giving just a few pointers, one professional to another.” Bruno gestured vaguely with the switchblade without moving the pointy end away from stabbing position. “Firstly, when tracking someone, check to make sure they haven’t stopped to set up shop in your surroundings. Secondly, don’t talk out loud about what you think the target’s going to do, just in case they’re listening and think you’ve got a few good ideas. Thirdly, and this is important, carrying more than one knife is what we call a liability. Actually, any weapon you can’t keep track of falls under that category.”

“Got it,” Striker said hoarsely.

“Good. Now, I’m going to ask you questions. You’re going to answer them.”

Striker nodded once.

“The train station. Why would we be going there?”

Striker blinked bemusedly, then let out a groan. “Goddammit, he was right! You didn’t even know about the damn trains!”

“I am about to know about the trains,” said Bruno firmly.

There was an ear-curdling grind of metal on metal from up above. Vatsy rattled down the building’s drainpipe, beaming at Striker as he dropped down to the ground.

“I say, Bruno, excellent work on that one! Got a nice switchblade in the process, even.”

Bruno squinted at it, then shook his head. “Nah. Showy piece of rubbish, really. If one was to drive it through anything as thick as an arterial wall, I’d lay even odds the catch would jam up.”

“And we don’t want that,” Striker said, not quite calmly. “So, you know...we won’t be doing that, right?”

Bruno gave an awkward upside-down shrug. “Shouldn’t be necessary, long as you explain a few things. Now, you were going to go ahead and tell me about the trains.”

Striker bit his lip. “Yeah. Yeah, okay. Well...they’re closing, tomorrow.”

He sagged, a little defeated. It was only after a few moments silence that he glanced around and saw Bruno’s expectant expression.

“They’re closing up,” he said, a little slower. “Tomorrow. Indefinitely. News just got out, and, well, we figured maybe you’d make a break for it. So we put a few guys on the platform, and we were all going to go there, but then on our way over, our leader found a piece of paper that said there was some sort of jackass convention or something going on and figured you’d be there.”

“I see.” Bruno tapped the switchblade against Striker’s skull contemplatively; Striker whimpered quietly. Then Bruno said:

“I’ve just got a few quick questions, and I’m going to need these answered as quickly as possible. Then I’m going to knock you out and hide your body inside one of

these buildings, where you'll wake up probably an hour or so after we've gone. Can't say exactly, might be a few."

"Fair," Striker croaked.

"First, why are they shutting the trains down?"

He bit his lip. "Uh, god, I don't know. Because there's riots out on Wick Street and Southerly, I guess. Isn't that what you do when there's unrest? Start shutting things down?"

"It's what they'd do, most like. How long?"

"I don't know! That's what indefinitely means!"

"You're trying to capture us, not kill us, right?"

"That's the idea," Striker said. "I mean, see, what they *told* us to do was just to track you inconspicuously and set up an ambush, but Spearhead, he wanted to take you down as quickly as possible, and I didn't want to..."

"Moving on. Who's Spearhead?"

"Leader! He's our leader."

"His name. Do you have a name?"

Striker began to hyperventilate, eyes flickering to and fro with the effort of frantic recollection. "Uh, I, uh...didn't get his name. He's a big guy, wears a trenchcoat. Smokes cigars. Talks to himself...like, I mean, talks *about* himself, to himself."

Bruno turned to Vatsy, waiting patiently. Vatsy returned a politely interested expression, which stuck around for a full three seconds before drifting into one of hazy recollection.

"Say," said Vatsy, "wasn't he that individual from the whole Writer's Guild submission-getting debacle?"

"Right," said Bruno. "He was."

"Can't say I recall much about him..." Vatsy waved a hand. "Oh, no matter. If memory serves, we defeated him rather handily, didn't we?"

Bruno hesitated only for a moment. "Yes, we did defeat him. Rather thoroughly."

"Well, then, there shouldn't be any trouble." Vatsy beamed. "I really don't know why we were worried, Bruno. Given the current evidence, I shouldn't think we're in any danger at all."

“We’ll just have to keep that up, boss.” Bruno flicked away the blade. “Thanks again for your cooperation.”

Striker bit his lip again. “Er, sorry, but can I have the knife back? After you knock me out.”

“Don’t see why not. Wouldn’t recommend it for combat, though.”

“Well, no, I get that,” Striker said quickly. “See, it’s just that it’s you know, sort of a good luck...um...” He coughed sheepishly. “Actually, I guess just keep it.”

Bruno coiled his arms under Striker’s barely-protesting chin, wriggled into an advantageous grip, and squeezed. Striker dropped inside of a few seconds.

“Good work once again, Bruno!” Vatsy trotted over to Striker’s limp form, then set about rifling through pouches. “Looks like we’ve got...knives? He has a pouch full of knives? What an odd person.”

Bruno cleared his throat gently. “Boss?”

“And this one...my god, it’s full of stars. He’s got an impractical edged weapon for every range, hasn’t he?”

“You did hear what he said about the trains. They’re closing up for good.”

Vatsy shook his head. “I see where you’re going with this, Bruno, but it’s simply not a priority. Even if we had the time to cover the story, it’s dreadfully dull. I shouldn’t think there’d be any unspeakable perversions of science involved in the process at all—no more than one or two, certainly.”

“I was actually referring to the fact that...well. If we’re going to escape, that’d be the time.”

“Escape?” Vatsy’s brow wrinkled. “I don’t follow.”

Bruno bent down, hoisted up Striker’s unconscious body, and started feeding him ungracefully through an unboarded window in the adjacent building. “See, boss...this does confirm it. The government wants our heads. Could you get his leg, please?” Vatsy obligingly reached up to lift Striker’s leg; Bruno shoved him in another foot or so. “This isn’t some Writer’s Guild bounty that we can evade for a bit, this is a mandate straight from the top. And if you can say one thing about the government, well, they don’t give up too easily.” With a final push, Bruno sent Striker flopping into the building, then

dusted off his hands. “So...might be worth considering, seeing as we’re not going to have the opportunity for much longer, getting out of the city and all.”

Vatsy balked audibly. “Nonsense! Bruno, I appreciate your input, I really do, but I believe we’ve been over this already. I’m going to continue writing for the...what do you call it?”

“Revolutionary front?”

“Yes, yes, that’s the one. In return, they’ll protect me from assassination—not that I need their help, with you around—and we’ll be safe as houses. My work will be published and respected, I’ll be part of a glorious movement, and we’ll be heroes that are remembered for centuries to come.”

“That’s one possibility, boss, but...”

“It’s really not an issue, Bruno!” Vatsy began jogging off. “Don’t worry, Bruno, I know what I’m doing.”

“Right,” said Bruno, putting his hat back on. “It’s the other way, in point of fact.”

“Is it? Oh, so it is. Well spotted, Bruno.”

Bruno started to move, then stopped, glancing back at the window. “Hang on a moment, boss. I nearly forgot something.”

The next half-hour was refreshingly free of ambush by either party. Bruno steered them down side streets and back alleys, careful to avoid the paths Worship might have taken while making comparable time. A few minutes in, Bruno paused to scoop up a brick; a few minutes later, he picked up another, weighed them in either hand, tossed both experimentally, then traded the old brick for the newer one.

“One thing we can’t get around, boss, is that they may find the safehouse eventually. I’m thinking the specific information is what they left their leader, the trenchcoat man, to get. I say we make it there, meet up with the revolutionaries, and then find somewhere else to hide, just to be on the safe side.”

“Aha, reconnoiter and run, eh? Good thinking.”

“Right. The safehouse isn’t far from here, either. We have to pass through a shanty town just on the other side of here, and then it’s a straight shot to the old pen.”

As they cut their way through the residential alleys, the sounds of muted shouting and activity began to fill the air. Bruno led the way towards the sound, nodding in satisfaction. “See, even if they’re waiting on the outskirts here, it’s a heavily-populated area—lots of people at this time of the day. We should be able to slip through without any trouble.”

The two of them rounded the corner.

Bruno threw himself backwards instantly, seizing Vatsy by the scruff of his neck and pulling him to the ground with him. Together, they collapsed back behind the corner, Vatsy sprawled on the ground in disorientation, Bruno scrambling back to his feet.

Vatsy blinked, then raised a finger, speaking a little unsteadily. “Er...didn’t get much of a look there before you reversed my trajectory, but...wait a minute. Was that...”

“Yes.”

“And they’re...”

“Most likely.”

“Hm.” Vatsy sat there for a moment, processing this. “Tell me, Bruno. Have we ever found anything *good* at the end of an alleyway?”

Bruno shook his head. “Can’t think of anything at the moment, boss. Can’t think of one thing.”

As carefully as possible, he crept up to the edge of the wall, then leaned outwards just enough to see the street beyond.

And, more importantly, to see the squad after squad of constables marching past in full uniform, weapons locked and loaded.

Bruno considered himself a connoisseur of law enforcement personnel. There were the street constables, who didn’t have a thirst for justice so much as a thirst for getting paid to stand around outside and wave at people. In the unlikely event that one of these was in your way, just about *anything* would work to get them out of it, from bribes to lazy threats to polite enough requests. Then there was the slightly rarer, cagier breed, the patrolmen. These could be counted on to enforce the law, or at least those parts of it that let them beat people with sticks. It’s often hard to talk around one of those, but luckily, they’re almost all poor fighters. Finally, there’s the special units, who have

undergone the training required to hold a gun and open a door. If those were your problem, fighting was by default your only option.

The squads passing by contained all of these types, and not even grouped together with constables of their own kind. If someone who didn't really understand how law enforcement worked had thrown down the mandate, "I want everyone you have to go *here*," this would be the result.

That's not to say it was an ineffective one. If nothing else, the thick swarms of surly-looking constables had cleared the streets of any people, or at least any conscious ones. A presence was being maintained, and a message had been sent. It wasn't an articulate one, but given the circumstances, that was appropriate.

Bruno edged back behind the corner. He rattled off a few mental sums, then asked, "Boss?"

"Yes, Bruno?"

"Now, I realize this is a bit of a long shot. But I feel like I should ask, just to make sure we have all of our assets accounted for."

"Right, makes sense."

"Did you by any chance happen to see a sawn-off shotgun of some sort on our way here? Lying around, loose-like? Maybe some ammunition?"

Vatsy stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Hm...no, I'm sorry. I don't believe I did."

"Right, no, that's to be expected. Just making sure."

"So..." Vatsy crept past Bruno and snuck a curious peek. "My. That is, in fact, a lot of police officers. More than I've previously seen together in one place." Vatsy bit his lip, glancing upwards in recollection. "Hm...actually, come to think of it, I don't believe I've seen that many constables before, in total. I can't say I've ever felt much of a police presence in our neighborhood."

Bruno shook his head. "From the looks of this place, I wouldn't guess it sees many constables either, most days."

"You don't suppose they're holding some sort of parade? Only I've never actually seen one, and I've been meaning to get around to it. I suppose I could just wait until they throw one in honor of my expertise, but that'll probably be a few more weeks at the very least."

Bruno shook his head, sneaking another glance around the corner. They were still mobilizing. “Shouldn’t think so. I’d say they’re here to quell a riot, actually.”

“How do you figure?”

“Place smells like a riot waiting to happen.” Bruno paused, then leaned against the wall, tossing the brick to himself reflectively. “Hm. If that’s true, they might be associated with the revolutionaries.”

“Really?” Vatsy straightened bolt upright. “Hang on a minute. Are you saying that if they do riot, it could be based on what I wrote?”

“I’d wager so, boss.”

Vatsy squealed in excitement, rubbing his hands together. “Delightful! I’ve never caused a riot before!”

Bruno cleared his throat.

Vatsy waved a claw dismissively. “Oh, well, *obviously*. One that’s not directed at me, I mean. Now...I understand you’re speaking figuratively, as it were, but what would you say a riot smells like?”

Bruno considered this. “Can’t say as I know. Sort of like sweat, I s’ppose.” He paused, then added, “And liquor. The cheap kind, for preference.”

Vatsy fished out his scrap paper and scrawled a few notes onto it. “Good to remember. I was thinking I might want to feature a riot in the next story I give the revolutionary chaps. You know—give them something to connect with, something that really draws on the experience of the working man of the revolution.” Vatsy’s writing flowed more or less seamlessly into equally obtuse doodles. “Yes...they riot, and then the government deploys...mind-controlling zombie plants. Ooh, now we’re cooking.”

Bruno put a hand gently on his shoulder. “All well and good, but let’s maybe get that together later, eh? We’ve got a lot of ground to cover.” He leaned around the corner, scanning the alley. “Right, there can’t be *that* many of them. We’ll wait for a break in the pack and get a move on.”

Vatsy folded the paper up and tucked it into his hat. “Oh, I suppose...so, you don’t think we should stop and reconnoiter with my readership, then?”

Bruno shook his head, not moving his gaze. “Wouldn’t recommend it, boss—stealth’s our best bet here. Only we should hurry, right, because we’ve got a gent in a

trenchcoat behind us and half the city's officers ahead of us, and we're standing in a bit of an explosive situation, here." Bruno pointed vaguely at the buildings across the way. "Brazen graffiti, I'm guessing with a certain anti-establishment bent. Streets empty of civilians. See, they've even boarded up half the windows from the inside. All this place needs in an excuse, and it'll be everyone from sledge boys to grandmothers having it out with the constables. Few more hours, it'll be gen'ral anarchy, leading to a breakdown of order and a good bit of violence all around. Before the end, there won't be sides so much as..." He blinked, as if he'd fallen asleep mid-sentence, then cleared his throat. "We should get through, is what I'm saying."

There was a long, measured pause, which was a little more awkward than it should have been. Vatsy coughed.

"Huh. That's...is that personal experience, is it?"

"I suppose," said Bruno, as if he weren't actually sure. "I've been involved in a few riots. Before."

"Oh. Er, out of curiosity, which side were you..."

"Both. Neither, as the situation warranted."

Vatsy fidgeted with his pen. "I see. Well."

Another pack of constables marched past. Bruno regarded them soberly.

"Say," Vatsy began, conversationally. "You know, I can't actually recall asking you about your career before we joined forces."

Bruno shrugged distractedly. "No, can't say you have, before. Wasn't an issue."

"Hm. I...perhaps I should have done that. You know?"

Bruno didn't say anything.

The awkward pause sauntered back, humming and tapping its watch.

"You know, I don't think we—"

Bruno took hold of Vatsy and started running. They tore free of the alley, flew across the street a second after the last squad passed and a half-second before the next turned the corner, and penetrated the next at a full sprint.

Bruno skidded to a halt in the middle of the alley, bracing himself against the bricks and bringing Vatsy to a stop. "Right, that's one down. Any luck, we'll be out of here before anyone notices us."

He didn't so much hear as feel the door open behind them.

He spun, tensed, clenched his fists...

In that confused half-instant, an eight year old child came within a synapse of being the world's foremost expert on what it's like to be decked by a chimp.

At the last possible instant, Bruno's eyes locked down his pugilism muscles and prevented him from doing something someone else would regret. For a moment thereafter, the air shimmered with unrealized violence, and then the other parties present—Vatsy and the child—managed to catch up to Bruno's reflexes and take action.

"Hi," said the child. A moment passed, and then he added, "Are you that Vatsy dad was talking about? You're a freak."

Vatsy beamed. "You've heard of me? Excellent!"

"scuse me," said Bruno, glancing back down the alleyway. "Don't suppose your father's at home?"

The boy gestured over his shoulder. "Yeah. He told me to go see if the con-sables were still outside." The boy glanced up and down at Bruno for a moment, then said with absolute certainty: "My dad could beat you up."

Bruno opened his mouth, but Vatsy cut him off.

"Nonsense! My good friend Bruno is the undisputed exemplar of fisticuffs. Your father would be a sad sack of bones within an instant!" He paused, then added, "But he has excellent taste in journalism, this I'll grant him."

The boy stared at Vatsy. "...why are you talking like a retard?"

"So, the constables have been here for a while, then?" Bruno asked.

The boy nodded.

"Haven't shown any signs of letting up?"

Head shake.

"All over the area, I take it?"

Shrug.

"Right." Bruno hesitated, glancing at the patrols as they passed by, close enough to hear their footsteps and snatches of conversation. Then he leaned in closer to the boy.

"Your father's heard of us?"

"Yeah."

“Does he ever have...” Bruno lowered his voice automatically. “...meetings that he goes to? Special ones?”

The boy nodded. “Yeah. I’m not supposed to talk about them.” There was a brief pause, and then, “He says they’re about smashing the state and putting power in the hands of the people, where it belongs. He says the gov’mint can’t keep people safe any longer, and the people he meets with can fix everything.”

Bruno nodded. “Suspected as much.”

“What?” said Vatsy. “How did you guess he was a member of the neighborhood watch?”

Bruno coughed. “I’m thinking he’s a member of the resistance, boss. Explains how he got your newsletter.”

The boy folded his arms. “I can’t let you see him. I’m not supposed to let strangers in.”

“Ahem,” said Vatsy, “Point of fact, we’re not strangers, are we? We’re Vatsy and Bruno, dashing adventurers and journalistic dynamos. We’re your father’s heroes, for god’s sake. Surely he would be amenable to seeing us?”

The boy considered this, leaning against the doorframe, clearly in the jaws of a logical dilemma. Finally, stuck between the legal option and the reasonable option, he opted for the practical one.

“What’ll you give me if I let you in?”

Vatsy snapped his fingers, doffing his hat and digging into it. “Let’s see, here! I’ve got some paper, I could fashion you an autograph, perhaps even work you into my article...say, how would you like to fight a giant tarantula?”

Bruno reached into his hat brim and pulled out a cigar.

The boy immediately snatched it, flashing a quick grin. “Thanks, mister!”

The boy’s house was a small, dank, poorly-lit building, but it had a self-conscious dignity to it. It was only two rooms, a main area and a lavatory, but it was largely free of garbage. The wallpaper was old and a little moldy, but it was of a not-unattractive make and had been carefully patched back up where it had torn. The only light came from

small and shuttered windows, but it was nonetheless sufficient to illuminate the half-dozen inhabitants of the room.

On the floor, in a nest of frayed cushions and wrinkled newspapers, three kids huddled around a radio listening to a serial. An old woman was curled up in an armchair, perhaps in perpetuity, mummified under a mainsail's worth of homemade blankets. A younger woman cooked a lean cut of meat on a stove by the window, and a man sat working on something at a small table.

He cursed. "Junior?" he asked in a voice frayed by mustache. "Are those damn fascists still out there, or what?"

Bruno took off his hat, glanced around for a hat rack, and settled for putting it under his arm. "Excuse us, mister. Your boy let us in."

In a smooth motion, the man flung his chair back, snatched up a hammer, and rounded on the door with it. "You bastards can get out of my—"

His voice dropped off as if he'd been punched in the gut. "ere," he said, as the mother and children turned and shared a lingering moment of terror, "You're not the law. You're those two, aren't you? Vatsy, and the other one."

Bruno nodded. "So it'd seem."

Vatsy dashed forward, taking the man's startled and still-grubby hand in his claw. "Yes, hello there, fellow footsoldier of the revolution! Down with whoever's in power, and all that! I'm the one who wrote those articles!"

The man shook, first dazedly, then firmly. His face didn't look accustomed to mirth, but he was starting to grin now.

"Strewth, it is you! What the hell are you doing in this spot 'o judgment, eh?" He gestured to his petrified wife and children. "Ere, you lot, look who Junior let in! It's those journalists, what get published in..." He glanced at the younger children, then at the window. "Daddy's newspapers."

Vatsy nodded eagerly. "Yes, yes, the documents of the revolution! I bring forth the...er, the standard of the truth, enlightening the proletariat!"

The man winced, then leaned over to the window, glancing out the shutters. "Right, right, okay, but you might want to keep it down. We're swamped with the fascist bastards lately. Free-thinkers like us, we'd get dragged into the street and shot." He

gestured towards the table—currently a workbench, although the rickety chairs around it suggested it pulled duty as a kitchen table. “ere, sit down, we’ll talk.”

Vatsy clambered over a chair, curling into it and nearly tipping it over. Bruno crossed the room, taking a seat next to the windows. The man sat down between them; the woman cooking meat set it down, then turned to face the table with a hard look in her eyes.

“Right,” said the man, “like I asked: what brings you two here?”

Bruno cleared his throat, glancing at the window. “Me and the boss have gotten into a spot of trouble as of late. If you’ve got the connections, might be your lot can get us out of it.”

“Assassins, special agents, groups of marauding constables, animate sheep’s heads,” said Vatsy, waving expansively. “We haven’t been able to get a break.”

The man rubbed his large hands together. “Well, it’s been hard to get a word out to the network, but I can imagine something can be done. What’ve you two gotten yourselves into, eh?”

Bruno threw the window a last glance, then leaned over the table. “It’s like this. We got in touch with your boys back near the old factory. We were trying to get to the jail so we could hole up for a bit, but we got hit by a group of government hires, so the situation’s probably a bit too intense for us to anchor down anywhere near here. Right now, we’re just trying to find somewhere to get our bearings.”

The man nodded. “Right, I get it. But, look...” He bit his lip, glancing at his children. “How close are they, anyway? There’s no chance of them hitting right now, is there?”

Bruno shook his head. “Shouldn’t think so. It’s more that they know where we’re going—they don’t actually know where we are. That situation might change if the local law finds us here.”

The man grinned. “Stroke of luck you found us, then, eh?” He leaned away, pointing at the re-entering Junior. “Good work, boy! You helped the lynchpin of the revolution keep his head on his shoulders! Boy, when you’re living in a commune of universal freedom and respect of man for man, you’re going to be pattin’ yourself on the back, you hear me?”

Junior shrugged. “Whatever. He’s a freak.”

The man slammed his fist down on the table. “Freak? Boy, don’t make me tan your hide! Now, granted,” he gestured at Vatsy, “Mr. Vatsy here’s a weird little bastard, and probably a bit of a loon to boot, but he’s the only trustworthy news source in the city! The big journals are all owned by fat cats and pawns ‘o the system—his reports are the only thing we can trust!” He turned back to Vatsy, frowning apologetically. “I’m sorry for my boy. When he gets older, he’ll learn how important a solid source of news is to a man—to any man who ain’t stupid enough to buy the government’s lies, anyway.” He spat.

After a pause, he added in a more conversational tone, “By the way, I thought your article on how the government’s putting mind-control herbs in the water supply was bloody great.”

“Moving on,” said Bruno, “what we need is an alternate safehouse, if you know where we can find one.”

The mother groaned softly, and the children shuffled uneasily away from the table. A storm had come over the father’s face. He looked like someone who had been reminded, in the middle of a fabulous and free banquet, that he’d been forced to eat a pile of dead leaves and a dog dropping for breakfast that morning. He stood up, rather loudly, and growled.

“Blast it! I told that smiling bastard something like this was going to happen, but he didn’t listen, did he, oh no...” The father slammed the table with his fist. “Oh, don’t worry, we’ve got another saferoom. It’s a good distance from here, or *so I’m told*.” The last three words had enough venom to drown a hippopotamus.

“I take it you don’t know where--”

“See, I can’t tell you exactly where it is. Apparently, we common men on the street ain’t high up enough to know where our own damned stronghold is!”

Bruno straightened up. “The man back at the factory didn’t mention that you had a stronghold.”

The father snorted. “Right, he wouldn’t of, because he don’t know where it is either. There’s about ten men in the city what know where our stronghold is, and for all their fancy talk of brotherhood, none of them will tell us honest blokes anything. They

just go on and on about,” he waved a hand mockingly, “safety, and security, and *not being able to trust the men laying their own damn lives on the line for the cause*. All I know is, it’s big, it’s where we’ve got our headquarters, and it’s as safe as a bureaucrat on tax day.”

Bruno began drumming his fingers on the table. “Another safe room...secret, though. If we could get word to one of those ten men, you think we’d be allowed in?”

“I should bloody hope so! S’not like your loyalty’s in question, eh?” He laughed coarsely. “I mean, if it was anyone else, they’d have left the damn city by now, but it sounds to me like you’re going to keep doing research for the bloody resistance!”

Vatsy chuckled. “Well, a man’s got to keep busy, eh?”

“At any rate,” said the father, “if we was to get you in there, we’d have to first get the approval of one of our leaders. Meaning we’d first have to get in touch with them. If I can get out and contact the tower...” He turned, stepping over his transfixed children and reaching a battered wardrobe. “The constables are watching the streets, but they’re not actually stopping anyone from going about their business, so long’s they don’t look at anyone funny or do anything involving bricks or pamphlets. I should be able to get across fine.” He wrenched out a long overcoat, then hesitated. “Just in case, though...” He lifted out a rusty crowbar, sliding it into the overcoat’s inside pocket, then threw the coat over his shoulders and put up the hood. “Alright, I’ll be back soon.” He made for the door, then hesitated, turning around guiltily. “Erm,” he said to his family at large. “I’ll...be back.”

The mother took a deep breath, then sat down with the children. “Just you be careful out there.”

He nodded once.

They paused for a moment, sharing a silent and worn-out conversation with one another. Then the father left without another word.

There was the sound of the door shutting and departing footsteps. Then there was just breathing, a papery breeze, and the muted crackling of the radio.

“Well!” said Vatsy brightly. “Things are rolling along nicely, aren’t they?”

The mother rose with a sharp breath, then returned to her cooking with a fervor. Bruno cracked his knuckles.

“They’re rolling, boss. One way or the other.”

Not far away, in a pitch black room that smelled like wood on a bad day, Striker was waking up by degrees. He didn't know where he was, and the only things that were giving him anything to work with were his nose and his pain receptors. This didn't make for the best cocktail of sensations to wake up to.

He tried to stand up, and didn't have much luck. It wasn't that his legs weren't working, it was more that he couldn't figure out exactly what to do with them. He sort of awkwardly pushed himself up the wall a few feet, thrashed a little with his right leg, and then slid back to the ground, trying dimly to remember what he was supposed to be doing at that very instant.

He became aware that someone was talking, not far from where he was. His splitting headache had drowned out most of it, but as the voice grew closer he could just about make sense of it.

"...couldn't trust any of them. There was just about one associate in this city I could rely on, and he was walking right beside me. As for the others...posers, for the most part. If my employers hadn't forced me to take them along, I would have just done the job myself."

The voice paused. There was a canine bark from his general direction, and then the sound of cracking knuckles.

"I felt a low rage building in me, smoldering like a cheap cigarette. I should have realized those incompetent saps would find a way to screw up the job. All they had to do was leave a man behind to fill me in, but it seems like they hadn't even managed that."

Striker moaned, only partially from his headache.

The dog barked again, and the voice started getting closer. "I heard a groan coming from a nearby building. From the sounds of it, my team had gotten here after all...and the ape was waiting for them."

A boarded-up window near Striker smashed, sending broken glass and splinters flying out in a sudden shaft of light. "It was the kid, Striker. I'd figured it'd be him or the ponce who'd be the first ones to drop. He was your classic loudmouth, a fast-talking merc who used his bravado to mask the fact that he couldn't outfight a priest with leprosy."

Striker groaned again, shuffling awkwardly towards the window. “Hey. Hey, can you just...get me out of here?”

A massive finger-gloved arm reached into the window, waved around until it found Striker, and grabbed his collar. Then he was hauled up to the window, yanked into the light backwards, and nearly slammed to rest on the cobbles.

Blinded by light and pain, Striker covered his eyes with his arm, whimpering to himself.

“He whimpered to himself, covering his eyes. The pathetic display served only to remind me why I work alone.”

Striker pulled himself to a sitting position. His vision started to return, but it wasn't doing him any favors.

If anything, his boss—still wearing that damn trenchcoat, even though it was late afternoon and perfectly warm outside--looked worse than he had three hours ago. Somehow, impossibly, his unkempt stubble had doubled in thickness, and his scars seemed more gnarled and livid. He clenched and unclenched his fists—in his right hand, he held a length of wood with a nail in it, and in his left he held a leash. At the end of the leash was...technically, it was a dog. That's what a trained zoologist would conclude, anyway.

The trenchcoat man kneeled down to Striker's level. Striker opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off.

“He opened his mouth, probably with excuses I didn't want to hear. ‘What the hell happened here?’ I asked.”

Striker rubbed his forehead with his palm. “I don't...look, he got the jump on me, okay? It's not important.”

“...he said, evasively. Funny, that's just what I thought he'd say.”

Striker sighed, grabbed the windowsill, and started pulling himself completely upright. “Not like I had much important to tell you, anyway. They...we don't know which way they went. Probably towards the safehouse.” He remembered something, smirking despite himself. “Oh, yeah, and they *didn't* know about the trains. So, I guess you were wrong.”

The trenchcoat man froze for a second—then his eyes narrowed. “I didn’t believe that for an instant. A trained counter-operative assassin such as the ape would surely keep his escape options open, especially once he’d made an enemy as dangerous and renowned as me. The kid was lying. I didn’t know what he was playing at, so I just nodded, not wanting to let on that I was wise to him.”

The trenchcoat man waited a moment, then nodded. His eyes un-narrowed. “‘Right,’ I said. ‘Where are the others, then?’”

Striker stretched his cramped arms and legs. “The preacher guy went towards the safehouse. The other one went to the train station.”

“So, 50-50 odds, was it?” The trenchcoat man looped the leash around his wrist, then reached into his coat. “It was a good thing I had a backup plan. Working with these jackasses made it necessary.”

“We can hear you!” snapped Striker. “You *understand* that, right? Every damn thing you say!”

The trenchcoat man ignored him, pulling out a small steel case. “At my feet, I had Max, my faithful hound, the best tracking dog in the city. All I had to do was give him something to track, and he’d follow the ape to the ends of the earth. The trick was finding a scent to give the dog. If I was lucky, and I’d judged the ape’s character correctly, then I had just the thing. Anyway, I had nothing to lose if I was wrong.”

Striker paused, blinking. “Wait, you’ve got a tracking dog? Well, that would have come in bloody useful if you’d given us that thing!”

The trenchcoat man undid the clasp on the case, opening it. “The kid looked puzzled. “So, you’re going to use a tracking dog to hunt the ape down?’ he asked. ‘Have you got something that belongs to him?’”

“What? I didn’t ask that.”

The trenchcoat man pulled a cigar out of the case. “‘No,’ I said. ‘He’s got something that belongs to me.’”

The revolutionary’s cottage had gone dark, and nobody had moved to light the lamp. The last bit of fresh air had come when the father had opened the door to leave.

There hadn't been an abundance of noise since then. In the first half-hour, Vatsy had a quite enthusiastic conversation with his adoring fans, whose contributions consisted of blank stares and the occasional squirming. The conversation trailed away, and none followed it. In the next hour after this, the children fidgeted on the floor; then even this stopped, and there was only Vatsy's pacing and the slow, rhythmic tapping of Bruno's finger on the countertop.

Then dinner was served. There was the meat being put onto plates, the clinking of silverware, and the sound of plates being stacked. And then the mother sat down, bleary-eyed and stiff, and silenced reigned once again.

Another hour passed.

And then another.

Vatsy paced, lost in his own cheerful thought processes. The mother stared at him transparently. Her expression was tense and not a little bit ill. The children sniffed, licking their lips and glancing at one another and at their mother.

In the hours after dinner, Bruno had drifted up from his seat to lean against the wall, arms crossed, breathing steady.

"Well," he said finally.

There was another moment of silence. He felt the attentions of the room being sucked towards him, and chose his words carefully.

"Think we might have to go to plan B, boss."

Vatsy blinked. "Erm, yes, could be...what did you have in mind for plan B, then?"

"Well," Bruno began, "I was thinking of doubling back and working our way around. If we took the bridge over by the recruitment office, we could bypass the troubled areas and get to the jail by way of..."

The mother straightened—it was the first animation she'd shown since dinner. Her eyes came visibly into focus. "Are you saying that the two of you are going to leave?"

Bruno shrugged. "He might not be coming back any time soon. I'm just saying, we might need to have a backup—"

"I know where he was going," said the mother. "He should have been back by now. Something must have happened to him."

"That does seem to be the case. In which instance, we..."

The woman swept out of her chair, sending it smashing into the wall.

“In which instance, you go and find him before you finally get him killed!”

She jabbed a finger at them, teeth clenched into a rictus of long-deferred hatred.

The children started to scramble away, scuttling nervously into the corner. Bruno returned her gaze calmly.

“I’m sorry if your husband’s gotten into any trouble, but we really have to--”

“No. Shut up right now.” Her fingertip quivered, sending trembling waves of rage down her entire body. “You shut up! He’s out there because of...because of that rubbish you put in your worthless newsletter! Do you know what it’s like, living with a revolutionary, watching him start to care more about his cause than...” She bit her lip, hot tears welling up. “Than his own life? And now he’s gone, leaving to go off and talk to his fellow idiots about saving your lives, *and you’re going to abandon him?*”

“Your husband knew the risks. I’m sorry, but there’s nothing we can do.”

“You can go find him!”

Bruno sighed. “Wish I could help you, but we can’t do that. If any one of those guards sees us, we’re dead immediately, both of us.”

“Is that a fact?” The woman laughed, then smiled with bitter triumph. “Well, then you might as well leave now, because if you don’t go out there right now and find my husband, I’m going to go out there and call the guards!”

Bruno stiffened. Vatsy glanced between them, then cleared his throat.

“Erm, no, I don’t think you’re getting the gist of it,” he said in a helpful tone of voice. “See, if you called the guards, the two of us would be *captured*.”

“There’s no reason to do that,” Bruno said, tone suddenly extremely even.

The woman laughed. “Oh? I don’t know, I think I’d feel a hell of a lot better!”

Bruno paced over to the worktable, rapping his knuckles against it thoughtfully.

“You’re saying...you’ll turn us in if we don’t do this for you.”

The woman nodded.

“Either go out into a town full of people trying to kill us, thus delaying our escape...or have you call the guards on us. That wouldn’t save your husband—and we’re not even sure anything’s happened to him, I’d like to point out.”

“Take the offer or leave it,” she spat. “If I don’t get my husband back in six hours, I’m reporting you, and I’ll watch myself as they put you in front of a firing squad!”

Bruno took another deep breath. He tuned out the children whimpering in the corner, the woman’s shallow breaths, focusing all of his energy on the three options available to them. His hand began to drift across the worktable.

“Er, Bruno?”

Bruno blinked, his hand freezing. Vatsy was standing beside him, rubbing his hands together anxiously.

“Bruno, do you think you can evade the constables if you go out by yourself?”

Bruno thought about it before answering. He lowered his hand slowly, as if holstering a gun. “By myself? It’s possible. I’d be leaving you here, though, and if the bounty hunters got here or her husband talks...”

“Well, yes, I suppose,” said Vatsy, a little hastily. “I mean, there is a risk involved. Still...” He shrugged. “Well, nothing too extreme for a loyal fan, eh? The bloke was willing to risk himself on our behalf, seems only fair we return the favor a bit.”

“Boss,” said Bruno gently, “I’d have to leave you here. This isn’t exactly a safe mooring. If the constables decide to do a surprise inspection, or the specialists arrive, you’ve got no way of dealing with them.”

Vatsy waved a claw dismissively. “What are the odds of that happening? Besides, I’m sure it won’t take you long to track him down.”

“Even if I track him down, if he’s been captured, I’ll have to spring him. That’ll attract attention we do *not* need.”

“I’ll show you attention,” the mother hissed.

Vatsy hesitated. For a moment, his gaze flickered to Bruno’s hand before darting away uncomfortably. “Bruno...I have complete faith in your ability to handle this swiftly and delicately. When have you ever failed me?”

Nobody moved for a long, long second. Bruno stood there, one hand hovering over the handle of the hammer, the other clenched into a fist. He breathed slowly and steadily, an epicenter of calm in a churning, nauseous morass of tension.

Then he relaxed and fell slack. His hand slid off the hammer, coming to rest gently on the lip of the table.

“Alright, then. I suppose...I’ll see what I can do.”

“Righto!” said Vatsy, who was suddenly quite cheerful. “Just nip out there, rescue the fellow from whatever peril he’s gotten himself into, and bring him back here for us to plan our next move. I don’t know what you’re so worried about.” He leaned back, turning to the stone-faced children. “He’s really quite good at this sort of thing, you know. Trust me, nothing short of a golem made of murder could dispatch our Bruno. He’ll have your father back ‘round for tea in no time!”

“Boss,” Bruno cut in, “if I’m not back before morning, or someone breaks the door down, you start running. Head for the factory, I suppose. Any friendly place.”

“Right, of course, obviously. Wasn’t about to stay here and let the fascist pigs subjugate me, now, was I?” Vatsy paused, as if an idea had not so much struck him as flicked him on the ear. “Hm. You’ll...I suppose you’ll figure out where I’ve gone, then?”

Bruno hesitated. “Sure I can sort it out, boss.”

“Right!” said Vatsy, beaming. “Don’t know what I was worried over. Besides, I have full faith in your ability to get back before anything untoward happens.”

“Sure,” said Bruno. “Back ‘round in no time. Get out, check the area, and get back here, whatever the situation may be.” He began rummaging through the tool table.

“The pawn shop,” she said. “He has allies there who can get in touch with the resistance. I think...no, I’m sure of it. He went there to summon one of the main leaders, one of the bastards who hold the rein of this...insanity.” She pointed towards the door. “Now hurry up and get going. It’s on the other side of the neighborhood, near the clock tower. Start there, and don’t come back until you’ve found him.”

Bruno shrugged. “I’ll do my best.” He plucked up a rusted screwdriver, stuck it between his teeth, and brushed past the children to the back door. With a tip of his hat, he stepped out into the hostile night.

“How long is this goddamn dog going to *take*?”

The trenchcoat man glared at Striker, leaning against the wall of the shadowed alley as the dog sniffed a mound of garbage. “...said the kid. Figures, a rookie like him didn’t know the first thing about tracking. In the filth of the streets, where the vices and decays of the human spirit pollute the air like coal-smoke, a single scent is hard to find.”

Striker groaned. “Oh, great. Now you’re a cynical misanthrope...anti-hero...” He waved a hand. “Thing. It’s good to know you’re not restricting yourself to *one* cliché.”

Trenchcoat gave no indication that he’d heard him. “I told the kid to stay close. If we found them, he’d have no chance of taking them out by himself. He’d probably get dropped again, and then I’d have to mop up after him.”

“I’m twenty-five years old! I’ve been in the business for a decade! I’m not a kid, and he got lucky, okay?”

Suddenly, the dog barked, then began trotting down the length of the alley.

Trenchcoat grinned. “The dog was on to something.”

“Yeah, gee, wouldn’t have guessed they’d *exit* the alley once they’d entered it. This dog’s a friggin moron--”

“The kid shut up instantly--I could tell he felt like a sap for doubting my dog. I couldn’t blame him, myself. You had to see Killer in action before you believed it.”

Striker stood there, staring at trenchcoat open-mouthed. “...are you...didn’t you already say that dog was named...?”

“He turned to me, eyes wide. ‘I guess they don’t call you the Ace Tracker for nothing,’ he said.”

“...you really do hear everything I say, don’t you. On some level.”

“I relented a little--flattery will get you everywhere. ‘All it takes is practice, kid. Work hard, and don’t get yourself killed like an idiot, and someday you’ll be as good as me.’”

Striker turned to the alley ahead and shut his mouth.

Bruno launched across the rooftop like a ninja late for an appointment. He vaulted across the upward slant, launched himself onto the downward slant, and built up enough controlled speed to hurl himself off the lip and across the alleyway.

He caught a windowsill about thirty feet above the alley floor. Moving too quickly to think about what he was doing, he kicked himself up, caught the roof ledge, and pulled himself over in a single smooth motion. Then he dug the balls of his feet and ran, propelled nearly silently across the slumscape.

Surreally, given the state of the area, the tenement building at the end of the road actually had a fire escape. It wasn't well anchored, and if more than a few ill-fed evacuees tried to use it at once it'd do more to amuse the bucket chain than it would to save lives, but it was useful for Bruno's purposes. It didn't quite reach the high tenement roof, but Bruno could handle the last few feet on his own.

He pulled himself over the edge, then glanced down at the city below.

Poets frequently compare dusk to a beautiful woman. Actually, there's not a whole lot they won't compare to a beautiful woman, up to and including one's tax returns. But if the night over the city was a woman, it'd be the kind that compensates for their interestingly placed hairs and novel facial geometry by applying makeup in biohazardous quantities. The evening sky was luridly colored, stained with smoke, and filled with all flavors of noise pollution. It smelled like an animal that's ready to die, but hasn't managed to get there yet.

For a very, very brief moment, old memories dropped by unannounced. Bruno brushed them aside. He wasn't one for nostalgia, and nothing he was reminded of was particularly warm and fuzzy anyway.

The streets below were mostly empty, save for the occasional patrol of constables. Blocks away, he could see the clock tower rising out of the slums, a rusted, long-silent splinter of brick. The pawn shop could presumably be found nearby its base.

Six minutes later, he'd dropped down the fire escape, ducked across a few streets, and arrived at the relevant block. Perhaps one constable had spotted him, but must have concluded he was a child wearing a furry coat or something—Bruno waited in the nearby alley with his screwdriver ready, but after fifteen seconds there was no followup.

He found the pawn shop very shortly afterward. It was not hard to find, and provided a wealth of valuable observations at a glance.

For one thing, despite it being reasonable business hours, a "Closed" sign hung in the window. This suggested that either the constables had scared away traffic, or there had been something going on inside that the owner didn't want random passersby intruding on.

This second explanation was lent credence by the fact that an oil lamp was lit by the window, proudly illuminating the obligatory catgut guitar and set of possibly-legal knives. It'd be a waste to maintain if the shop had already closed down.

These were both important clues, and worth noticing. It was a bit of a shame that they were overshadowed by the third clue, which was that the window was broken outward and the proprietor was bleeding in the street.

The house was once again uncomfortably quiet. The only sounds were the stray dogs howling in the streets, the muffled footfalls of the constables, and the quiet whisperings among the children. The mother hadn't budged from her chair, and Vatsy was lost in his own personal reflections.

There was a sudden creaking. The mother bolted upright, hand flying towards the knife on the counter.

When it became clear it was the house settling, she slinked back down into her chair. The dogs outside began to bark louder, as if in mocking laughter.

Vatsy cleared his throat. "Ahem. I don't suppose you've got a ream of paper on you? Only I've got some dynamite ideas for the next article, and I'd really like to get started on the planning stage."

Slowly, as if taking aim, the mother turned her red-eyed glare towards him.

"Only," Vatsy continued, "I think it will be a real inspiration to the proletariat, such as yourself. You know, bit of motivational material. I was thinking it'd involve the government setting giant leeches on anyone whose name begins with a..."

"If you say one more word about your newsletters," said the mother, "you will not like the consequences."

Vatsy started to speak, then didn't. The street noises once again reasserted themselves. The footfalls grew fainter, and the sound of barking dog suddenly grew quite loud.

"I say," Vatsy began, "it sounds as if that one dog's just outside of our—"

The man lying in the street looked like his epidermis was fighting a civil war, its borders inked in cuts and gashes. Parts of his ear had seceded entirely, and at least a few

teeth had fled to undisclosed locations. The brain could not be reached for comment at that time.

Bruno checked his vitals. He was alive, but blacked out, and probably wouldn't be doing anything as strenuous as twitching for a few hours. Not many answers to be found there.

A sound from the shop caught Bruno's attention. He crept up to the window, glanced inside at the darkness, and crawled silently through.

He dropped inside, glancing around at the dark and dirty shop. The place had been ransacked badly—the items behind the counter had been knocked over onto the floor, all the boxes and cheap jackets and bad art strewn over the ground like the hoard of a skint dragon. The room was empty, but the back door was open a crack. A bright light shone through it.

Bruno inched towards the door, keeping to the thick shadow, ears and eyes focused on the light. His teeth clenched at the screwdriver.

"Bugger this," he heard someone say. "Why didn't we just bring him back to the station along with the others?"

"Because we don't want to go draggin' a man kicking and screaming down the road is why," said another voice. "They're coming back with a bag for him. That's *procedure*. Anyway, what do you care? You get to sit here on your arse smoking a cigarette."

There was a muffled yell, which may or may not have been something like, "fascist pigs."

"Alright, then, I've got a solution. We beat him until the upstart parts of his brain leak out of his ears, then let him loose as an honest citizen. How's that sound for procedure?"

"You moron, the experiments *proved* that doesn't work. Didn't you pay any attention during the training program?"

Bruno crept up to the wall next to the door. He flattened himself against the wall, ears straining, every muscle tense.

“Look, you bastards had the five-year training and operations course, alright? We were given a pamphlet and a bloody mission statement before getting assigned to this place.”

“You serious? No wonder this burg’s so far gone.”

“It’s all crap anyway. I know how to hurt things. I’ve had more than five years training in *that*. Way I see it, you deal with an uprising by hurting the things that rise up. I don’t need any special training to do that, now, do I?”

“Oh, you don’t, eh.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then what’d you do with the shopkeep?”

There was a pause.

“In my defense...”

There was a sigh. “Just go get him back here.”

The constable opened the door and stepped in. He turned, perhaps to say something appropriately scornful of extensive training, when Bruno’s hand launched out of the shadows and caught his uniform.

The raw syllables were wrenched out of his mouth as he was hurled, nose-first, into the solid wall. A shockwave ran through his face, liquefying the cartilage and rattling the brain into submission. The man went limp instantly.

There was a startled cry outside. Bruno grabbed the slack form with both hands and swung it through the doorframe, then leapt after it as it tumbled through the air.

The second constable was reaching for his gun. This is something that stopped happening once the body of his partner sandbagged him at high velocity and with pinpoint accuracy, carrying him to the ground with a massive, unpleasant *crack*. He didn’t even have time to grunt in pain before Bruno’s fist came down on his head like a sledgehammer.

Bruno exhaled, rubbing his knuckles thoughtfully. “Suppose that went well.”

Bruno bent down, checking the constables for wakefulness. The first one, the one he’d introduced to a wall, was still vaguely conscious. Bruno finished him off with an elbow and rolled him aside. The second one was as perfectly unconscious as you got

outside of a lab environment. With his adjustments to the first, he could be reasonably confident that neither would be getting up for a while.

He set aside his screwdriver. Humming a little, he began a quick frisk of their uniforms.

“Grnnf.”

“Be with you in a second,” said Bruno, not looking up. Within a few seconds, he’d located a lighter, a few cigarettes, a baton, a whistle, and (on the specialist) a short-barreled revolver. He broke the cylinder—it was a five-round gun, and only four rounds were loaded. It wasn’t a great model, and the sights seemed questionable to him, but it was clean and more effective than a halfbrick. He tucked it under his armpit.

“Right,” said Bruno, picking up the screwdriver. “Have those off you in a moment.”

The father was lying near the door, overcoat gone, shirt torn, arms cuffed behind his back. He was covered in grime, and looked like he’d tried to break rocks on the left side of his face. His posture screamed defiance, or, as the case may be, gargled it loudly through a gag.

Bruno drove the screwdriver through the catch on his handcuffs, lodging it in place like a wedge. Then he grabbed either side and pulled hard. There was a slightly anticlimactic *kink*, and a few essential components dislocated, turning the handcuffs into loudly unfashionable bracelets.

Before Bruno could remove the gag, the father stumbled up to his feet, tearing it out of his mouth with an angry gasp. “Bastards!” he yelled, pointing a bloody finger at the bodies. “Typical pigs, just looking for an excuse to senseless brutalize the unarmed and helpless! Let me at them, I’m going to cut out their bloody--”

“On a bit of a schedule,” said Bruno, firmly. “We’ve got to get you home. The missus is worrying.”

The father sank a bit, glancing down guiltily. “Oh. Right. Lead the way, then.”

Bruno tossed the screwdriver to him, then the constable’s baton. He took the cigarettes and lighter for himself. He was about to set off through the doorway when he hesitated.

“Actually, point of consideration. When you were on the ground, and the man came flying out, did you see who threw it?”

The father shook his head. “Nah. Should have guessed it were you, but I didn’t actually see anything.”

“So,” Bruno cut in, “you don’t think they saw me, did they?”

The father considered it, glancing at the door and squinting slightly. He shook his head again. “Nah.”

“Right.”

Bruno moved into the shop. He eased up to the broken window, then stuck his head out and glanced in either direction. No lights on the street. Bruno gestured for the father to follow and tore off across the street, vanishing into the alleyways.

“You know where you’re going?” asked the father, uneasily. “I can find my way back by street, but I don’t--”

“Got a good look at the buildings when I was up there,” said Bruno nodding towards the barely-visible rooftop through the fog. “Figured the route out up there.”

The father blinked. “Strewth. I don’t mind saying, you’re my kind of loony, Bruno.”

Bruno shrugged, putting one of the cigarettes in his mouth and lighting it. He winced almost imperceptibly, then plucked out the cigarette and threw it into a pile of garbage. “Right, we’ll be back in a tick. Meantime, how about you tell me where we sit.”

The father smacked his forehead, then grunted in sudden pain. “Argh, think they must have cracked something there. Anyway, forgot to tell you, I’ve got good news there. My friend back there says a friend of his knows a bloke who’s running a cart that’s going to take one of the higher ups to a headquarters nearby, and they’re getting in *tonight*.”

Bruno took a deep breath, holding for them to stop at one pitch-dark street. He glanced down it in either direction, then motioned for them to start again.

“Tonight. And you trust...these persons?”

The father scowled audibly. “Of course I bloody do! They’re my comrades in arms! They’re all trustworthy as a bloody sledge!”

“Right, where’s this--”

A wave of fire-red light washed over the streets and buildings. From the corner of his eye, Bruno saw a flash in the sky, like an exploding star. Then it burned away, and a cold blue cast returned to the filthy cityscape.

There was a half-second of cognition on Bruno's part.

Then he ran.

Bruno tossed aside the lighter and cigarettes. He palmed the pistol, threw back the hammer, and put his finger right by the trigger as he tore down the road like a runaway train. The father fell behind, breathing hard, arms windmilling, unable to keep up. He tore through alleys and streets at a full burn. At one point, the light of a constable's lantern dully registered in his brain, but it faded into the background without a second consideration. He was focused on the endpoint of his mental map, and everything else fell behind like trash discarded from a train.

He tore out of the last alley, onto the street where the revolutionary shanty stood. The house was dark and quiet.

As his legs pumped and his nerves tightened, his brain went through every scenario possible, everything that could be behind the shanty door, every nightmare coming true. The trenchcoat man and his hirelings. A full squad of soldiers. The beast from CESA's headquarters, or some fresh horror devised with death in mind.

Fifteen paces to the door, and there wasn't any sound but his heartbeat.

The trenchcoat man in a chair, pistol in one hand, lead pipe in the other. A row of guns pointed at the doorway, aimed at his throat. Starved dogs, the kind used to clean up vagrants and squatters. Arsonists, constables.

Three paces to the door, and his finger slipped over the trigger.

A perfect scenario, too good to consider, and then something too horrible to contemplate...

His shoulder hit the door like a bomb, and he blasted inside with gun ready.

A breeze swept in after him. It coursed past his legs, swimming into the shack, whispering and hollow. It blew softly over the blankets and hung clothing, causing them to sway in the dim starlight. It blew into the corners drenched in shadow, into the thin pools of dirty light, over the whimpering forms of the children and the stern red-eyed matron by their side.

It blew out the broken door at the back of the house, and through the empty space by the table of tools.

The children huddled closer to one another, peering at the black silhouette that stood in the doorway. The gun was held outstretched, pointing at the vast nothing in the center of the shack, fixated on it like there might be something there at any moment. Then it began to slacken, degree by degree.

There was perfect silence as the gun was lowered to the shadow's side.

He took a step into the shack, causing the children to draw backwards and the mother to draw herself up. He didn't seem to notice. He carefully set the pistol down on the table, then planted his palms on the edge.

There was more perfect, stone-hard silence.

"I," the mother began, tonelessly. "They were here."

He remained still, his back turned to them, head bowed.

"A man in a trenchcoat. He had a dog, and it...which came here, and he took a cigar off of my son. He looked angry. He...he *said* he was angry, like he was talking to himself. He said he wanted both of you."

The table trembled slightly.

"And then he said, well, he said to himself that he was going to take Vatsy to the clock tower. And that he knew Bruno...that he knew you'd be coming for him. And that it'd be the last time you'd meet. And...when he said that, he was looking right at me."

Silence filled the room once again. The shadowy hand reached down, as if through water, and wrapped itself around the handle of the pistol.

"And..." The mother took a long, unsteady breath. She bit her lip. "And I don't regret it. You were responsible for my husband. You did what you had to."

The shadow turned around, almost as if in a dream.

"I did what I had to," said the mother, gently pushing away the child next to her.

"Darlin'!"

The father came into the room, crossing it at a sprint and wrapping his arms around his wife in a bone-crushing embrace. "Oh, god, darlin' when I saw the door, I thought..." He glanced around, seeing the apelike shadow near the tool table...and nothing else. "Where's...hey, where's Vatsy? What's happened to him?"

The Bruno-shaped shadow stepped over to the doorway, grip tightened on the pistol. His head turned around, and he said:

“You’re going to come with me. You’re going to wait outside. And when I get my boss back, you’re going to arrange the meeting with the higher up and get him to the saferoom.”

The father blinked hard, glancing around the room again. “Did he get...where is he?”

“You’re going to come with me,” the silhouette repeated. “Now.”

The father rose, a little uneasily. “Right, of course, got to rescue him. But...I mean...” He glanced at his wife, who was gripping his arm tightly. “Bruno, mate, I’ve already...my family...”

The shadow raised his hand.

A flash of lightning streaked the sky with violent white. For a moment, his form was edged in light, tensed muscle and gleaming firearm outlined in silver. His eyes glowed.

“His life is her responsibility. I will do what I have to.”

And the thunder rolled like the heartbeat of an angry god, rising, rising...

Worship was on the street when the lightning struck. For a moment, it threw the cracked façade of the clock tower into energized, vibrant brightness; then it passed, and the light and life left its face. Once more, it was dark and dead, a rotted spire of masonry piercing the stained heavens.

The double doors were large and cheap, and were unlocked. He opened them, started to enter, then hesitated, on the verge of shadow thick as smoke. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a match, and struck it...

He was facing down a half-dozen gun barrels.

Worship nearly dropped the match. The soldiers kept him in their sights, slightly gnarly expressions cold and disinterested. Just as he was about to speak, he heard a voice from behind their ranks say:

“No, no, don’t shoot him, he’s one of ours.”

Striker exited the shadow and pushed past the ring of soldiers. Smoothly, and without any embarrassment, they resumed a stance of attention. Striker shook his head, walking over to Worship.

“Glad you could join us there, preaches and cream. Don’t suppose you’ve seen Captain Hardcore Awesome Specialist Man anywhere?”

Worship shook his head. “Indeed not. I was far closer than he.”

“Great.” Striker moved to the door, glanced outside, and then shut it quickly. “You know what, he’s not going to get here before the enraged ape does, so we might as well get into position.” Striker motioned to the soldiers, and they stepped backwards further into the darkness of the clock tower’s lobby. “We’ll just let Spearhead know you’re here, eh? Make sure we know who’s where before the bullets start flying?”

“Indeed. For were not the hordes of the...”

Striker smacked a flare against the wall, drowning Worship out with a loud *ksb*. In the muted red light, he began walking towards the stairwell.

“This is how it is,” he said, pointing up and down the stairs. “We wanted Vatsy alive. Bruno is...not so much. Bosses weren’t really clear, so we’re shooting for dead. Bruno’s going to come in, and there’s going to be men with guns by the doors, on the staircase, upstairs...basically, there won’t be a place in this building where we’re not going to shoot him, a *lot*. One way or the other, when Bruno enters this building...” Striker grinned in long-frustrated anticipation. “He’s going to be a sack of dead meat and hair. Smug monkey bastard's walking into a deathtrap.”

Striker opened the door towards the stairwell. It was open, an unrailed stairway leading upwards around a shaft of black vertigo. Worship followed behind, casting glances at the stairs that disappeared into abyss. “So, do we have Vatsy?”

“Yes. Bossman made sure Bruno’d know he was here.”

“Do you mean to tell me that the one called Vatsy actually is here?”

“Yeah.”

“So if we fail...”

“Oh yeah.”

“...I am but a humble servant of Toros, but even I can see the fault in this...”

Striker rounded on Worship, eyes lit red, voice cracking. “Yes! Because in case you haven’t noticed...” He glanced upwards, then lowered his tone. “In case you haven’t noticed, our leader, the guy calling the shots? He’s *insane*.” He gestured wildly with his free hand. “Completely crazy. And he’s got some issue with them or something, and he’s taken this whole mission personally. I mean, it seems to be working so far, so I dunno, but I’m frankly getting sick and tired of his gritty mercenary slash honorable fighter slash cunning tracker schtick. And if it ends up screwing us all over, I just don’t know if I can take it.”

Worship drew himself up, placing a hand on Striker’s shoulder that was instantly, emphatically, painfully smacked away. Worship lifted the hand, caught the look in Striker’s expression, and lowered it, starting up the staircase again.

“Fear not,” he said, after a moment. “Toros smiles upon our enterprise. The proof is in our most sacred text, the Codex of Toros. Book Eight, Docuse 32: Those who distort the truth are to be put to the flame, the sword, the noose, the rack, the...”

“Tend the chickens carefully,” said Striker, a little distantly.

Worship paused. “Beg pardon, my son?”

“Docuse 30-35. It’s about managing farm animals. I had to memorize that one for a play back when my parents were going through that let’s-not-have-this-kid-damned-to-hell phase.”

Worship licked his lips, blinking slowly. “Well, yes. I suppose that’s the most common interpretation of that section, but I was really paraphrasing the...well, the intent of Docuse 30-35 is a little more allegorical, if you see what I mean. It’s...well...”

Striker shook his head. “Look, man, there’s nobody else here. I know how competitive the mercenary market is, and I know it doesn’t hurt to have...you know. A thing.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Striker raised his voice. “And it wouldn’t bother me, but I’ve been getting doubletalked by that psycho bastard upstairs all day, and it would help if I could talk to someone without feeling like I’m addressing a character in a bad pulp novel.”

“Sinful things,” said Worship solemnly. And then, catching Striker’s expression, he added, “Um. Sorry.”

“That’s better.”

Thunder roared, sending electric tremors through the air. Striker shivered, and murmured without thinking, “Hate to be outside on a night like this.”

The two of them stood there in the dark, reflecting on this for a moment. Then Striker cleared his throat and added in a tone almost too low to be heard:

“Not that I’m thrilled to be in here.”

They took the last few steps, reaching a door. As Striker moved to open it, Worship asked:

“Pardon me, just a small question. Didn’t you used to have more weapons strapped to your...”

“Go to hell.”

The heavens were beginning to leak. Rain fell black and irregular, damping down the grit and the garbage and creating filthy rivulets to run into open gutters. It soaked Bruno’s fur, pulling him down, dragging at his limbs like weights. He ignored it. He pushed through and turned that weight into momentum.

The father followed behind, dead quiet, crowbar tucked under his jacket. He focused on running, stealing only fleeting glances at the charging silhouette before him.

The clock tower was barely visible through the rain and fog. Every step brought it closer.

The meeting was brief, and their orders were simple: wait, then do the best they could. Striker and Worship stood alone in the stairwell, leaning against the walls and failing to find anything to talk about. Muttering anxiously, Striker pulled one of his (remaining) pistols and popped the cylinder. He did a double-take. He crouched down into the flare light, squinting at the cylinder, whispering to himself. Then he tossed the gun aside, pulling out another, breaking it, pulling out another, breaking it...

“That son of a bitch! That cheeky son of a bitch! What the hell did he do with all my ammo?”

Bruno bore down on the intersection. Rain made the cobbles slick, creating treacherous slides of grime and thin mud. His feet began to skid; he slid forward, caught the cobbles in his fingertips, and barreled forward on all fours. A low growl shuddered from his throat.

The father fell further behind. He yelled, "Oy, wait up! I'm coming..."

Lanternlight appeared around a corner. Through the haze, Bruno saw a pair of men dressed in street constable's attire, truncheons drawn and lanterns lit. One of them raised the truncheon as if to point at Bruno, said something, and moved forward...

Bruno came at them at a sprint, pushed back onto his legs, and brought the gun tucked under his thumb to bear.

The constables backed away, disappearing back around the corner. Bruno tore past without a backwards glance.

The father glanced down the corner as he passed it. The lanternlight was disappearing at a rapid rate.

He shook his head, then lowered it as he fumbled for his second wind...

"Calm yourself," said Worship.

"I told you not to give me any of that—"

"Just calm down, alright? Borrow some of my rounds."

"You use a goddamned hand cannon! I don't have access to that kind of hardware!"

"Well, calm down anyway. We've got six rifles pointed at the door downstairs. Anything that walks through them is going to be lit up like the Gates of Hell and sent through them on the express train. How's that for a proverb?"

Bruno tightened his grip on the pistol. He could see the clock tower, its frame hiding behind derelict buildings and rain-slicked rooftops. He could see, at the very end of the street, the steps leading up to the door.

"It's a trap," wheezed the father as Bruno broke away towards the doors, leaving him in the middle of the street. "It's...look, what you said earlier, about my..."

Bruno pointed back. "Wait there for him."

The father stumbled to a wall, breathing heavily. “Look, you *know* it’s a trap! Wait before going in there!”

Bruno froze. The father had to look down to see him, a diminutive silhouette standing drenched in the street. Bruno turned around and looked up at him. His eyes were cold and wet, like flecks of melting ice.

The father started again, trying to catch his breath. “Look. I mean...there are a lot of...do you think that...”

Bruno reached up, grasping the back of his bowler hat. Slowly, as if removing a tooth, he pulled off the soaked hat and held it at arms length.

It took the father a moment to realize he was supposed to take it.

He reached out and took the hat from Bruno’s unprotesting fingers. Bruno took a deep breath, gestured towards the hat with his off hand, and said, “Look after that.”

Then he walked off through the rain, approaching the windowless clock tower at the end of the road.

The doors sat under a weather-worn and jagged gargoyle, a grave simian affair that glowered down at him as he approached. The doors themselves were large and imposing, but even in the dark he could see that the wood was rotted and cheap. Impressive at their face, weak at their core. Flash, but ultimately useless. Commissioned by city planners, made by the people.

Bruno glanced up at the dripping, solemn-eyed face of the gargoyle. He took a final breath, and reached out with his free hand.

The handle creaked audibly. Worship heard soldiers straightening in the darkness, bringing their rifles to bear. The room held its breath.

The doors trembled. It might have been the wind.

There was a long, airless pause. The rustling of guns echoed faintly, then settled into silence.

A few of the riflemen lowered their weapons.

There was a muted retort, and a bullet burst through the doors at head level.

The room was filled with gunfire. Muzzle flashes lit up the air, throwing long and frantic shadows towards Worship's door. The bullets fired out almost in succession, six gunshots tearing through the air and perforating the door.

Splinters flew up into seven weak, newly-opened shafts of light. The riflemen paused, unsteady.

There was silence.

Each soldier reached for a second round.

The doors were blasted inwards. Dim dusklight was thrown into the stunned faces of the riflemen, throwing them off balance as they fumblingly reloaded. The black silhouette of Bruno swung into view, free hand still grasping the gargoyle, body swinging through the door like a pendulum. The muzzle of his pistol flew upwards.

Bam.

Bam.

Five riflemen got a last glimpse of Bruno flying through the air, gnarled face and bared teeth lit up by gunfire. Then he hit the ground foot-first, threw himself towards the shadows, and rolled into the darkness.

The perforated doors swung in the wind as five riflemen chambered their next round, rifle butts flying to their shoulders, eyes tracking the ape as he vanished into the shadow to their right.

It was at that moment that the sixth rifleman hit the ground like a leaking bag of sand.

Wind slammed the doors shut, and there was almost complete darkness. Silence swept in after it. One rifleman dropped his hand to his belt, yanking out a flare and striking it against his rifle.

A gunshot from his right dropped him, and he fell on top of the flare.

The four remaining swung to the source of the gunshot. Two fired wildly, bullets streaking through the air and hitting nothing. The muzzle flash illuminated their panicked, wide-eyed faces, and threw into relief the loaded riflemen on either side.

Bruno's fourth gunshot went through the throat of the closest loaded rifleman.

In the muzzle flash of his last shot, all three could see him, crouching there, body tense from his combat roll and sinking out of a firing stance. The loaded rifleman,

situated so that his companions blocked a clear shot, pushed one aside and swung the rifle towards where he last saw Bruno fire...

He saw the revolver flying into the shallow pool of flare-light. He saw it, and could do nothing but tense up as it caught him on the cheekbone. He fired, but fired wide. The other two riflemen wrestled rounds into their guns...

Bruno leapt into the light like a vengeful ghost.

He caught the rifle closest to him, yanking it out of the man's trembling hands, whipping it around, and bringing it down like a sledgehammer on its owner's throat. The half-loaded cartridge spun into the shadow like a firework. Before either of the other two could respond, Bruno swung it around the other way, hitting the other reloading rifleman in the eye. The third rifleman dropped his rifle, reaching for a pistol he had holstered at his side.

The rifle swung around and broke his arm.

Screaming in pain, clutching his bent arm, he dropped onto the blood-soaked floor. His vision was blinded by agony, but as he rolled, he could see the dying forms of his companions surrounding him on all sides. Then the dripping, fur-covered hand plunged down onto his throat and pinned him to the floor.

"Who else is in this building?"

The rifleman managed to cough out, "Three."

"Who are they?"

"More...specialists...one...preaches...one...young...one..."

"And one talks to himself."

"Yes. And, and there's, there's your friend, he's..."

"Where is he?"

The rifleman croaked, "Upstairs."

Bruno reached down to the rifleman's holster and gunbelt. The rifleman comprehended, somewhat blearily, that Bruno was undoing the clasp and pulling it off. He looped it around his own waist, clasped it, then pulled out the revolver.

He broke the cylinder, checking the type of ammo it used. He glanced down at his belt, checked the ammo levels, and noted that he had at least three extra rounds.

Then he pointed the revolver downwards and shot the three riflemen who were still capable of moving.

Across the room, Worship slammed the door. He didn't need to turn around to know that Striker had already fled downstairs. He dropped his revolver, turned, and ran down after him.

Bruno bashed the stairwell door down. It tumbled into the abyss, falling a long way before hitting bottom hard. He needn't have bothered. Nobody was waiting on the other side.

Adrenaline was running through his veins like hot lead, veins pulsing in time with his heartbeat. His right hand clenched the bloodstained pistol so hard he couldn't feel it anymore. The flare in his left hand threw a cold red light over the stairs, picking out their outline in the darkness. He began to ascend.

From above, he heard a familiar voice echo out.

"I could feel his tread on the staircase. I could feel him drawing closer, closer to the end of his killing spree—the end I craved for him."

The pistol's muzzle flew upwards. He saw only shadow on the stairs above. Crablike, Bruno continued his ascent, eyes fixed on the darkness.

"Somehow, I knew those poor bastards from the force were doomed. They came in cocky, all calm quiet and fancy training, thinking they'd have him caught and caged like an old firefly. They might as well have tried to cage a hurricane."

It was impossible to tell where the voice was coming from, or if it was even in the stairwell at all. In the pitch-blackness, Bruno was a red dot running blind. Every word fired at him could just as easily have been a bullet, and Bruno would have no way to retaliate until the lead was in the air.

Bruno doubled the speed of his ascent. In moments he was 50 feet above the ground, climbing in a narrow pool of red light, darkness before him and darkness behind. And still the voice assaulted him from hiding.

"I'd been tracking for ten years. In that time, I have failed to apprehend exactly three targets. One of them died in a freak glassblowing accident, one of them stepped

into a CESA portal and ended up in the middle of the desert...and one of them was shot to death in the street by two rounds of buckshot.”

Another flight fell behind him, another one came into view.

“There was one...thing...that was responsible for that failure, the truest of my career. One foul street-fighting legendary *speedbump* that blew out my legs and slowed me down, keeping me from getting to my target in time. I was humiliated. But I didn’t go out to find him. Because that wouldn’t be professional, would it? He was nobody. Well, nobody if you didn’t travel in the right circles, and in most of those it pays to keep your mouth shut.” From the direction of the voice came a sound like a bag of bones being dropped to the floor, and the creak of a handle turning. “So I waited. I waited like hell for there to be a contract against his hide, for there to be a chance to take him down and get paid for it. Sure enough, he’d hitched himself to a real lunatic, and now the civilized world wants him and his cohort...alive, for the one, dead for the other.”

There was a clicking sound. Bruno sped his pace as much as he dared—in a moment, the flarelight fell on an end to the stairwell, a shut doorway. He could hear footsteps on the other side.

“Sometimes, my work’s a real blessing.”

Bruno reached for the handle of the doorway, then hesitated. There wasn’t enough room up here to get to a side of the door, and he wasn’t willing to shoot through it blindly anyway. So he took a step backwards, pointed his revolver at the door, and called out,

“I’m here.”

His words echoed in the stairwell for a moment. The footsteps stopped. Then Bruno heard a muffled rustling on the other side of the door, and the voice continued.

“I’m here,’ he said, ‘to finish this once and for all.’ It was exactly like I’d imagined it. Trapped on opposite sides of a door, neither party willing to move for fear of a bullet going through their skulls. It was the dirty, practical truth of it. He wasn’t going to make this a fair fight, not if he could shoot me instead. I’d have to play this perfectly. This *had* to be perfect. Otherwise, it wouldn’t mean a damn thing.”

The rustling ceased. There was a gasping, unsteady cough, and another voice filtered through the door. “Er, say, Bruno, is that you out there?”

Bruno's aim wavered.

The voice coughed again. "Bruno?"

"Yes, boss?" Bruno said, voice almost steady.

"Bruno! Glad you could make it. Are you quite alright, Bruno?"

Bruno forced his aim straight again. "Boss, I'm going to get you out of there."

"Ah, yes, excellent. Don't mean to rush you, understand."

The voice began again. "The stalemate wouldn't last long, anyway. The ape was nothing if not a monster, and like stories tell us...every monster has a weakness."

There was the sound of a shotgun being primed.

"If you do anything besides what I tell you to," said the voice---trenchcoat's voice---
- "I'm going to kill your friend."

The handle of Bruno's revolver cracked.

"Now," said trenchcoat. "The ape waited, gun wavering, unwilling to make a move. I was in complete control of the situation. 'Put down the gun', I said..." His voice grew crisp, stern. "And I could hear it clattering down the stairs."

Bruno ground his teeth, broke the pistol, and dumped the ammo onto the floor. The gun he dropped down the steps, sending it tumbling downwards out of sight.

Trenchcoat resumed. "The cat-thing approached the door, twisted heart pulsing with naked terror. He—"

"That's me!" said Vatsy's voice brightly. "He mentioned me! I say, I appear to be a character as well."

"—he placed his claw on the handle, waiting for my signal. He knew that if he made one false move, I'd blast his brains out of his skull."

"Fascinating!" said Vatsy. "What did I do then?"

"Boss," said Bruno, strained. "Please. Do what he says to do."

The handle clicked obediently.

"As for me, what did I know? I knew that the ape wouldn't have a gun when I opened the door. He wasn't that stupid. He's gotten what he wanted—he'd gotten the life of his associate, whatever happened next. As for me, well, I'd gotten what I'd wanted too. Taking out the cat's bodyguard was something I'd been looking forward to ever since

that scrap at the trainyard. We'd end it, him and me. One man walks out, one freak does not."

Bruno balled his hands up into fists.

"I gave the signal to open the door," said trenchcoat.

After a moment, Vatsy exclaimed, "Oh!", and the door began to swing outwards.

Bruno saw Vatsy, and his stomach knotted. Vatsy's body was scratched and haggard, scratches and filth decorating his body like the brushstrokes of an abstract painter in the jaws of a messy breakup. His hat had been badly served, sporting an assortment of tears as jagged as broken bones and creases deep enough to lose a pig in. Despite all this, he was beaming, he was bright-eyed, and he waved chipperly when he saw Bruno shaking on the staircase.

"There, that's all sorted out, then! Right, I'm about ready to leave when you are."

Bruno's eyes drifted off Vatsy, sliding over his shoulder and straight down the barrel of trenchcoat's shotgun.

Trenchcoat's expression was a portrait of triumph, rendered in the classical medium of stubble and scar tissue. He stood legs splayed, shotgun leveled, eyes wide and fierce with long-anticipated satisfaction. He didn't smile, because those muscles had atrophied to the point of uselessness, but he didn't need to.

Looking Bruno square in the eye, he said, "It was all over."

The shotgun lowered by a slim inch.

"All over...except for the fun part."

There was a moment of silence; then Vatsy cleared his throat.

Bruno's eyes flickered towards Vatsy, standing there wide-eyed, cheerful, expectant. Maybe it was an eccentricity of the flarelight—no, no, it wasn't. Bruno distantly registered a shallowness in Vatsy's breath, a tension in his muscles, a tremble of his frame that was a degree off from the usual. Vatsy was grinning as wide as ever—he was grinning almost wider than ever, actually—but when he spoke, his voice was subtly wrong for the second time in one very long day.

"Bruno, could you please just sort this out? I think perhaps we should be going."

"Should we?" Bruno asked, returning his gaze to the shotgun.

“Yes,” said Vatsy. “Just do something unspeakable to trenchcoat and then we’ll be on our way, smooth sailing. Won’t it be nice to put this thing behind us?”

From behind the muzzle of the gun, trenchcoat’s posture was almost relaxed—he was slack, triumphant. He was waiting. He would wait for a while longer, or even a lot longer, because no matter what was said now it would all end the same for him.

“Boss?”

“Yes, Bruno?”

“I’ll sort this out here. You go on ahead. Someone’s going to take you to the higher ups.”

“Oh! Oh, that’s. Well.” Vatsy beamed up at Bruno, but his eyes slipped off into the shadow, glancing at the glowering trenchcoat. “That’s excellent, but, well, perhaps we should go together? I don’t mind waiting for this to end, really, I don’t. I’m working on a few exceptionally risible limericks, and I could use the time to...”

Bruno hesitated. Then he reached out towards Vatsy, rough hand uncurling from its bloody-palmed fist and lowering itself onto Vatsy’s shoulder as gently as a falling leaf.

“Boss. It’s getting late. The trains are gone, things have been moving quickly for everyone, and I expect the people are out there waiting for you.” He glanced at trenchcoat, who hadn’t moved, and added, “If you’re going to lead them into a better future, well, you’re going to need to get started soon.”

Vatsy blinked hard, still staring at trenchcoat, then nodded, a little distracted. “Oh, er, right. I suppose.” He turned back, licking his lips. Bruno’s stomach knotted as he saw a note of honest desperation in Vatsy’s eyes. “Only, I’m not actually sure I can find where to go from here.”

“I’ve made arrangements. The man outside should see you clear.”

Vatsy shook himself. “Oh. Well.” Slowly, moving one muscle at a time, he began to drift down the steps. Then turned back to Bruno and asked, suddenly, “You’ll, er, be coming along shortly, then?”

“I’ll see you before long, boss.”

Vatsy opened his mouth to speak. Then he closed it. Then he started down the staircase.

Bruno watched as Vatsy spiraled down and away, fading fast beyond his light, sinking into shades of darker and darker shadow until Bruno's light could no longer illuminate him. He thought he saw a moment of hesitation as Vatsy reached the light's edge, a moment where his retreating form halted, perched, stood poised. Then, like a man testing the waters, he stepped past the light into total darkness.

Trenchcoat took a deep breath. "It had to be this way. I had to beat the ape, and beat him fair. I had to finish what I hadn't bothered to, pipe in hand, beating him down into the train station platform like a stubborn nail. There wasn't much joy in tracking him down and making pay if a single shot was going to end the whole thing."

Bruno nodded once.

"Fair's fair, though. I was willing to pay a price for my perfect battle. It wasn't anything I wouldn't have within a week's time, anyway."

"Possibly." Bruno began to crack his knuckles, still staring off into the shadows below. "No way around this, then. I take it you don't want to have it out here on the staircase."

Trenchcoat stepped backwards, into the room from which he'd come. Bruno gave the shadows a final glance, then followed.

The top room of the clock tower was a disused empty shrine, honoring a bank of gears and springs that had long since rusted solid. They sat opposite the door, affixed to a massive clock face that had been torn away in places, letting in the steady percussion of the rain and the cold blue light of the night. Trenchcoat crossed over to the clock, flicking on a lantern he'd hung from one of the frayed, snapped outwardly-spiraling springs.

Bruno tossed aside his flare, rubbing his grimy hands together. Trenchcoat watched with eyes that gleamed yellow.

"And there he was, just like in my dreams, my fantasies--the only man-like thing who can claim that he bested me in any way. This was the closest I've gotten to a fair fight in a long, long time." Trenchcoat raised his shotgun, then pulled it back and rested it on his shoulder. "Then again, maybe not. This wasn't like the last time we met, was it? This is no ambush, he doesn't have a weapon, and even when he had all the advantages I

still managed to hand him his mangy lice-ridden ass.”

Bruno shook his head. “Yeah. I’m not exactly proud of that either.”

“...he said. Somehow, I’d figured that out. I wonder if he was looking forward to this as much as I was. We weren’t all that different, the two of us.” Trenchcoat gnawed at his lip reflectively. “Besides the obvious differences in shape and appearance. And our motives, and our fighting styles. Actually, it’s accurate to say that we’re different in a lot of significant ways, and similar in only a few less-significant ones.”

“There’s the cigars,” said Bruno. “We both like them. Yours are a bit fruity for my tastes, but otherwise of decent quality.”

“He doesn’t work for money, either, and the way he dealt with those men downstairs shows he’s much into honor either. Come to think of it...I don’t know what the hell he works for.”

Bruno shrugged. “Not sure I’d explain it.”

“I guess I’ll never find out.”

Without taking his eyes off of Bruno, trenchcoat slid the shotgun through one of the holes in the clock face, then let it drop. They both waited for the clack of it hitting the pavement—neither really knowing why. Then they were both standing there, barehanded in an almost empty room, only lamplight and cold air between them.

Trenchcoat sniffed, stretching his jaw muscles. Bruno clenched his hands into fists, then let them relax tendon by tendon. Then, like dancers beginning a routine, they began to pace.

They kept distance. They were moving on the outside of a circle, invisible to anyone but them, bound by an intricate geometric formula of range and violence. Neither moved too close. Neither took their eyes off the other for even an instant.

Until Bruno circled close to the clock face—he paused, stole a glance through the slats. He might have caught a glimpse of a small white figure down below, scampering into the rain—but he might not have. It didn’t matter. He didn’t need to see down there to know that Vatsy was getting away. He knew, in his gut, that he had done his job.

“I was going to get the cat,” said trenchcoat. “When we finished here. The ape-man knew that.”

Bruno didn’t answer.

Trenchcoat rushed him.

Vatsy followed the father down the side street, stumbling under the weight of his own soaked fur. Each step brought him through another murky sheet of rainwater, and every movement he made away from the clock tower made his limbs heavier and his vision cloudier.

The father was pulling too far ahead. Vatsy cleared his throat, loud enough to be heard over the rainfall, and called out: "You do know where we're going, then?"

"Yeah, I know. Just follow me."

"Right, of course, no problem." Vatsy glanced backwards. The tower hadn't been visible for a few minutes now.

"Bruno does know where we're going, doesn't he?"

The father kept moving, swearing too quietly to be heard over the rain. "No. I didn't get the chance to tell him."

"He didn't ask?" The father started to pick up the pace, but Vatsy scrambled to his side. "I can understand if you don't remember the exact circumstances, mind, but are you sure he didn't ask you where we were going?"

"I'm sure."

"Only, it doesn't seem like Bruno to overlook a detail like that. He's quite meticulous, you see. He used to say that he had five more shells than he'd need to shoot every individual within fifty yards of our own office. When a grandmother moved in two doors down, he made a point of running out and picking up another one."

The father shook his head. "Look, I don't know what to tell you. But when I saw him, his mood didn't strike me so much as calculated. He..." The father sighed. "Look, let's just get this night over and done with, alright? What with one thing and another, this ain't a night I much fancy spending on the streets."

"He'll find me," said Vatsy. "Nothing to worry about. He'll find me."

He glanced back once more, uselessly, at the grey patch of sky where the clock tower once stood. Rain washed down his face, and he blinked away the wetness from his eyes.

Bruno drove trenchcoat away with an instinctive shove, planting his feet to defend his position in front of the clockwork. Trenchcoat paced back and forth like a hungry animal waiting for a meal.

“The ape wasn’t going to give up. Why should he? He’s strong. He’s fast. He’s probably beaten most things he’s fought, and found a way to take down the others. But I’m faster, I’m bigger, and this...” His face flared. “This is my fight.”

Bruno had never seen anyone move as quickly as trenchcoat did then. He lunged like a serpent, and then Bruno was in the air, slamming backwards against the rusted clock mechanism like a songbird caught in a gale.

He twisted to the side, and trenchcoat’s first punch missed. The second was already in the air, hurtling for Bruno’s forehead too quickly to avoid. The shockwave of bone on metal and the scrape of skin on rust shuddered through Bruno’s brain, and for the skin of a moment, he couldn’t think or move. His arms raised of their own accord, reflexively moving to block the next punch.

Trenchcoat’s hands flew up under them, seizing Bruno hard by the throat.

Fingers like lead bars wrapped around his windpipe, squeezing him to the wall. Bruno bashed at trenchcoat’s wrists with his forearms, but trenchcoat just doubled the pressure, causing Bruno’s muscles to grow slacker by the second. Bruno grasped outwards, trying to seize trenchcoat’s head, but was just out of reach.

Trenchcoat lifted him away from the wall, holding him at arm’s length like a soiled ragdoll. He bared his teeth, and said in something that Bruno could barely hear over the sound of his blood pumping in his ears:

“My fight. My victory.”

Trenchcoat swung him into the wall again, and Bruno felt a bolt of white-hot pain lance through his abdomen. His senses were weak and disjointed, but he knew something hot and wet was pouring down his back...and his front. A chill ran through him, and his vision narrowed, kept from sinking into blackness only by a single, dying spark of will.

Trenchcoat’s eyes grew even wider. The lamplight filled them with hellfire, and in his oxygen-starved tunnel vision they were all Bruno could see.

“I win.”

Bruno's mouth slipped open. His tongue lolled and flexed, but he couldn't make a sound.

Trenchcoat narrowed his eyes. "No. Only my enemies get last words. This was all to prove that you're not my enemy, you're an obstacle I didn't quite overcome. All you get is a forgettable death."

Bruno closed his eyes, then opened them again. He tried to stare directly at trenchcoat, staring into the hell-orbs that shone from the darkness. He knew trenchcoat was staring back; after a moment, he spoke again.

"Then again...maybe I owed him that much. After all, he'd been obliging so far, he was about to die, and his friend would join him inside a few hours. He fought like hell, and fought to the last second. Maybe he deserved one last sentence...before I crushed his windpipe like an eggshell."

Trenchcoat's fingers slackened, opening a channel of air the size of a straw. Bruno whispered hoarsely, words feeble and indistinct.

"You...tah...you..."

Trenchcoat leaned in.

Bruno's fists slammed into his temples.

As trenchcoat's grip went slack, Bruno pushed himself off of the wall—he felt a sickening pain as he slipped off his clockwork skewer, tumbling off into freefall. As he dropped, Bruno reached up and seized one of trenchcoat's lapels in either hand..

Bruno slammed him face-first into the ground. Trenchcoat tried to get up, but Bruno was quicker, clambering over him and seizing his head with a vise-like grip. Bruno took a shuddering, painful breath, filling his lungs with air, and croaked:

"You ta'k...too much."

Trenchcoat opened his mouth. Bruno wrenched his head around until he heard a crack.

He knelt there on trenchcoat's back, blinking to keep his eyes in focus. He could hear the head and shoulders dropping out of his bloodstained hands to smack into the floor, and could feel a warm wetness spreading over his chest. His head swung down until his chin rested between his pectorals.

Dimly, in the lamplight, he could see a bleeding hole on the front of his chest.

He'd seen worse. Usually on other people, and usually after he'd inflicted it on them. Usually before they...

...he blinked. It was hard to keep focus, suddenly. There was quite a bit of pain, but he was moving through it. It would pass.

He felt like smoking.

A little unsteadily, he slipped off of trenchcoat, taking him by the shoulders and rolling him onto his back. Then he pulled the coat open. There were inside pockets—lots of them. It seemed important that he get a cigar.

The first pocket held a set of brass knuckles. The next one was...paper. He couldn't read it, but it looked like a letter. The next one was money. Then a there was a matchbook...getting warmer.

Getting colder, actually. It was cold in here. That was new.

He realized--a little suddenly, but with the clinical certainty of a professional--that he was bleeding out. He knew he should try to do something about that.

He moved on to the next pocket.

This one had a map in it. He thumbed it open, trying to bring it into focus. There were a lot of small buildings, and a red X...that looked like...was that the clock tower? He had seen the area earlier, and it looked like this map. That was the clock tower. Yes. And there was another building not far away, marked with a black X, and that was...what was that? A warehouse? A factory? He couldn't tell from that distance.

He blinked, losing interest. It didn't matter what trenchcoat had on his maps. He was dead; he wouldn't be going to either of those places ever again.

Well, he was already at the clock tower, so he'd gone there. As for the...

The other...

Why would he have gone there?

It didn't matter, did it? The boss was safe. He could rest knowing that. He'd gotten him out, and the boss was safe.

He thought...

Trenchcoat said...

Gently, like a leaf settling to the ground, Bruno dropped onto his side. His thoughts ceased flowing into one another, pooling into a stagnant mass that had no

direction or force. Dark thoughts bubbled up aimlessly before fizzing away, one by one, leaving his mind completely still.

It was the kind of warehouse that looked abandoned to the untrained eye, and was probably thought to be by the locals, but that was, of course, absurd. In this part of town, a warehouse could always find clientele looking to store things like imports, pre-owned goods, or perishables, provided the warehouse didn't look too closely at what was being imported, who had previously owned the goods, and under what grim circumstances the perishables happened to have perished.

As Vatsy was led in out of the rain, it became clear that the warehouse held two other things in abundance: the fire of revolution and the stink of vague unease.

The place was packed to the rafters with men and women, some of their rough jackets soaked with rain, some of them dry and dusty as though they'd been living under the floorboards for months. In clusters they formed, centered around poor-quality lanterns that had been set up on nests of crates. They were whispering, taking drags on cigarettes, eating, and generally acting as if at any moment, The Man might stomp a hole in the roof and skewer them with a barbed fountain pen. When they saw Vatsy enter, one could almost see relief in their eyes, as if they'd finally been sent something concrete to crap their pants over.

"Lovely place," said Vatsy, almost enthusiastically. "You know, I've always thought you can never have too many unmarked boxes. They add a real touch of mystery to a place."

"Right," said the father. "Follow me."

The father headed towards the back of the warehouse, brushing wordlessly past the huddled masses. The people watched in silence as Vatsy followed after, then broke into lower whispers once they were out of earshot.

At the back of the warehouse was a tiny office, smaller than some closets, separated from the warehouse floor by a door thin as cardboard. The father knocked on it twice, and a voice called out:

"Who is it?"

"I've brought him."

There were a few moments of silence, then the sound of a chair being pushed backwards. After a second, the door swung open.

The man on the other side was short, plainly dressed, and slightly older than most of the other people in the building. He glanced at the father, then past him to Vatsy, smiling expansively.

“Finally. Good work on your end, Mr...?”

“Wasn’t a problem. They came to me, it was the least I could do.”

“Well, yes.” The smile slid a little bit. “Say, where’s the other one? Bruno?”

“Oh,” said Vatsy, throwing a dismissive gesture so sudden and emphatic that the father started away from him. “He just had a small detail to tidy up, it’s really nothing, absolutely. Don’t worry, we’ve been separated once or twice, but he always finds his way back in no time. He’ll be here in no time.”

“Right,” said the father.

“Right,” said the man after a moment. “Anyway, excellent work, sir. Feel free to remain here—always room for a true child of the revolution, and all that.”

The father took a deep breath. “Actually...I think I’d like to go home and see my family, if it’s all the same to you. Been a long night.”

The man shrugged. “Right, of course, it’s getting late. Godspeed, sir.”

The father turned, a little dazed, and walked away.

“Good fellow,” said the man, beaming as he stepped out of the doorframe. “He’ll probably survive when it all goes down, you know.”

Vatsy opened his mouth, and for the first time in a while, wasn’t quite sure of what to say. He found that his vision was tugged to the empty space at his side.

“Come in,” said the smiling man, stepping out of the doorway. “We’ve been expecting you.”

The office had seen better days, but not recently. It was dark, choked with dust, and papered with a hideous green geometric pattern that spoke of authority without class or taste. At the back was a clock, which ticked like a bomb in a radio serial, and a desk—behind which were crammed four men in hooded coats. When Vatsy poked his head inside, the men straightened like startled dogs, and the leftward one whispered something to himself.

“Gentlemen,” said the smiling man. “Allow me to introduce you all to Mr. Vatsy, the, what was it you were calling him earlier?” The man snapped his fingers. “Ah, yes. Hero of the revolution, wasn’t it.”

“It is truly him,” murmured the leftward man. The others nodded.

“Oh, yes,” said Vatsy. “Wrote the articles and all that.” He glanced around the room, standing half-in, half-out.

“Come in,” the smiling man repeated. “Relax, Mr. Vatsy. We’re not going to hurt you.”

“Hm? Yes, of course.”

Slowly, he stepped inside. He was now occupying a very small amount of floor space between the desk and the doorway, with the four men directly before him and the smiling man to his left.

“These gentlemen are fans of your work, Mr. Vatsy.” The smiling man paced over to the desk, leaning against the wall next to it. “Read every word, I shouldn’t wonder.”

“And why not!” said the left man. “He alone has the courage to speak up against the government mill of lies!”

“You are correct.” The smiling man reached into his pocket, pulling out a small pipe. “Well, perhaps not the only one. Mr. Vatsy, have you ever met someone who spoke out against the state?”

“Hm?” Vatsy blinked. “Oh. Pardon me, I don’t know where my head was. I wonder if perhaps Bruno has—“

“Please, Mr. Vatsy.” The smiling man lit his pipe. “Indulge my question.”

“This is pointless,” said the left man. “I don’t see why you’re...”

“You’re interrupting Mr. Vatsy,” said the smiling man, and his smile grew taut. “That is quite rude.”

The left man fell silent.

“Now, Mr. Vatsy, you were saying?”

Vatsy rubbed his face. “Well, I can’t recall any specific examples, but...ah, I suppose there was that time I asked a street person to proofread one of my drafts. The subject came up, and as I remember, he had a few strong words to share.”

“Ah. A child of the revolution, was he? Weary of aristocratic oppression? Appalled at police brutality? Disgusted by the state of the press? Enraged at the lackluster state of civil projects in low-rent areas?”

“I believe his specific grievance was that they turned his wife into a cow.”

“A probable scenario!” said the left man, standing up suddenly. “CESA has long been a blight upon—“

The smiling man held up a hand. “Calm yourself, sir. It was an idle question, and nothing was meant by it.”

“You snake,” hissed the left man, pointing a finger at him. “You think I don’t see where you’re going with this?”

“Is it somewhere you are unwilling to go, sir?”

The leftward man drew in a long breath, then lowered his finger. Simmering, he sat down.

“Now then, Mr. Vatsy. You’ll have to pardon the blather, but I admit to being a little...off balance, I suppose, to finally be in your presence. I mean, you’re a living legend, you know that? A veritable avatar of journalism, toiling away without even knowing how many lives you touch with every article. Quite impressive, and not a little humbling.”

This was a scene Vatsy had dreamed of as long as he could remember, and a great while longer than that. He was dimly aware that he should be ecstatic.

“Oh. Thank you.”

“Despite what my colleagues,” he gestured at the hooded men with his pipe, “despite what they might think, I’m actually quite a fan of yours. The business with the spiders? The mind-altering smoke? The bounty hunter who talks to himself? The time-traveling government spies? Wonderful, evocative stuff. Truly, wonderful.”

He took another draw of the pipe, rolled the smoke around in his mouth for a moment, then blew it out slowly.

“Where *do* you get your inspiration from?”

Striker walked as though every step would place his foot into a puddle of cockroaches. Not that he knew otherwise—the flare had burned down to the point where it wouldn’t illuminate anything outside of biting distance. Even the face of Worship was

barely visible, partially because he was walking as far behind Striker as he gracefully could.

Striker tried very hard not to think about what he was doing. He'd figured out, at the *very safe* base of the staircase, that it was essential to his job and sanity that he assess the situation before dashing out and leaving a trail of urine several miles long. He wasn't ruling out that course of action, but he had to make sure he had an excuse for it first.

"Can you hear anything?" whispered Worship.

Striker stopped, straining his hearing further. The only things he could hear were the blood pumping in his ears and his inner voice, which was rather insistently asking for a word with him.

"I said, can you hear anything?"

"No," Striker hissed, turning his head back. "Shut up."

"Do you want my gun?"

"No, I don't want it."

"Oh."

Striker noticed that Worship wasn't prepared to argue the point, but that didn't matter. For reasons he was almost sure didn't make sense, Striker felt like walking in there waving a gun around was even more stupid than going up there unarmed--although possibly both of them existed at such an extreme of idiocy that it was pointless to nitpick over degrees. All of this was assuming that Bruno had won, but seeing as this was literally the worst possible scenario, Striker tended to automatically assume it was the case.

Striker felt the staircase level out—a few more steps brought him to the doorway, lurking menacingly in the dim red light. It was shut, meaning he would have to open it; this was to Striker a concrete argument that there was no god. The thought that he should turn and run didn't occur so much as double in volume.

Very, very slowly, he reached out and began to turn the handle. It creaked.

He could hear Worship taking several steps backwards.

Striker pushed the door open a few slow, painstaking inches, squinting as hard as he could into the darkness. "Hello?" he called out, voice tranquil as a snake on a hot stove.

There was no answer, only a faint echo.

Striker swore, shutting the door. "Right, that's it, we're out of here."

"But we still don't know..."

"We know! I consider that jackass keeping his trap shut for ten seconds together incontrovertible proof that he's dead as a post. Bruno must have won, he's waiting in there for us, QE fuggin' D. Let's get out of here."

"But he hasn't..."

"You want to go in there?"

"But..." Worship glanced past at the door, tightening his grip on his pistol, and continued in a lower tone. "Nobody attacked you. We don't know--maybe they finished each other off. We can report that as a win." Worship paused, letting this sink in, and then added: "And either way, we can pick through their stuff. I've got some vestry that trenchcoat would look badass with."

Striker gritted his teeth, then nodded. "Yeah. Okay."

He placed his left hand on the handle, stepping back to hold it at arm's reach. With his right, he hauled back, holding the flare ready to throw.

In one jerky, panicked motion, he threw open the door and hurled the flare inside.

He drew back in a frenzy as the flare struck the floor. It flew end-over-end, tumbling into the darkness on a wave of dim light. It landed on its side and began to roll, pushing before it a spreading halo of light. It threw light first over bare floor, then paper, then an outstretched hand—trenchcoat's. The flare rolled up to his head...

"Oh god," Striker whispered.

And rolled to a stop. For a moment, all Striker could see was the stark red of trenchcoat's body, lying mangled on the ground.

And then his eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he blinked away the initial harshness of the flare. It was then that he saw the second combatant, and his breath was taken away in an instant.

Bruno was slouched half-over trenchcoat, a cigar held loosely in his limp fingers, blood still draining from his abdominal wound. There was a lot of it—it ran over his body, over trenchcoat, and over the floor, covering the scene like light pouring through a

skylight. The flare sputtered, and the light surged for a moment, briefly intensifying the grisly red diorama.

Worship craned around his shoulder, torn between his instincts to run away from or get a better look at whatever Striker was seeing. “Oh,” he said, mouth going slack. For a moment, they just stared at the bodies. Then, in a voice that sounded like it was coming from someone else, Worship said, “They both look very dead.”

“Yeah.”

Trenchcoat was facedown—or almost face down, as more accurately, he was faceup while his body was facing downwards. Bruno had a wound in his stomach that looked like it would kill a hippo. Altogether, “dead” was the adjective that sprung abundantly to mind.

“Do we...” Worship began.

Striker walked into the room, eyes wide with fascination. He looked next to the bodies, seeing the detritus on the ground—he could see one of trenchcoat’s papers directly next to the flare, surface spattered with drying blood to the point where it was almost illegible.

Carefully, not taking his eyes off of Bruno’s carcass, Striker scooped the paper up. He skimmed it, then folded it up and put it in his pocket.

“Right, I remember. He actually told me what we were doing next, here. Once he’d...dealt with Bruno.”

“What?”

Striker shook his head, bending down and searching for something in the near-darkness. “You weren’t there for it, but he went on this kick where he was telling me how to become a feared and mysterious bounty hunter like him. ‘Always have an edge nobody else knows about,’ he said.” Striker spotted the map near Bruno’s hand. Hesitating, he reached for it.

“He was telling me earlier, right before you got here. Constable reports say Bruno was spotted helping a revolutionary tonight. Odds are, they’ve made contact with the revolutionary leaders here—or they will.”

Striker plucked the map away. Bruno didn’t move, and Striker heaved a sigh.

“Come on. Let’s get the wagon ready—with any luck, this whole damn thing will be wrapped up before tonight’s over.”

“I believe I asked Mr. Vatsy a question,” the smiling man said over the erupting chaos. “I also believe this is the *second time* you’ve interrupted me.”

His tone was level enough to rest a cueball on top of, but it was enough to flash-freeze the shouting into silence. He continued; “You are good lieutenants to a man, and loyal, but I really must ask you not to speak until my conversation with Mr. Vatsy is concluded. I am positive that whatever he says will be most enlightening; would you rob yourselves of that? I should think not. Mr. Vatsy?”

Vatsy stared at his claws. “Hm?”

“Mr. Vatsy, please, indulge me. Where do you get your inspiration from?”

Vatsy’s brain turned this over, but he couldn’t find purchase on it. Everything seemed slippery, elusive to him all of the sudden. He felt his gaze once again tugged to the side, to the empty space next to him that would offer no advice or support. He felt like a lame man trying to walk down a flight of stairs without a crutch.

Blinking, he looked up. The seated men were still smoking with outrage, but they were silent—their faces were set, eyes locked on Vatsy, drawing breath very slowly through their nostrils. The smiling man was standing with his hands behind his back and his expression open, inviting.

Vatsy opened his mouth, dragging his foot onto the top step.

“Well,” he said, “You know. Here and there.”

The hooded men continued to stare. The smiling man smiled a little wider, nodding almost imperceptibly. Vatsy licked his lips and pressed on.

“On the streets. Things happening outside the window. Some of the stories are taken right from things that happened outside, you know? Gives it that edge of reality.”

The hooded men kept staring. The smiling man kept nodding. The silence yawned.

“And then...dreams, daydreams, idle fancies...”

Staring. Warm, warm nodding.

“Well, I mean. If you want anecdotes, I believe the one about the robot spider was from when Bruno hit a spider with a rock from ten paces. I may be able to dredge up a few more amusing ones, given a bit of time..”

“No need,” said the smiling man, “that will do.” The hooded men flinched as he spoke, but didn’t take their eyes off of Vatsy. A few of their jaws had gone slack—at least one was set so strongly it trembled.

Vatsy cleared his throat, glancing away from them. “Oh. Oh, good. You know, I’m really no good at stories. They tend to slip my mind, you know? Anything from more than a few weeks ago, well, excepting a few juicy odds and ends—tends to sink into a sort of blur.”

“I know the feeling,” said the smiling man, taking another puff of his pipe. “Like it all ends up water under the bridge, good or ill. You know, there’s a philosophy that says the present’s the only thing that truly exists. What happened in the past doesn’t really make a difference, since it’s already happened. And the present...well, the instant you try to change that, it’s the past.” He blew out a smoke ring, watching idly as it drifted towards the ceiling. “The only thing you can really do—according to this line of thought, mind—is provide for the future to be as good as it can be, then take it as it comes.” He chuckled—the smoke ring hit the ceiling and dissipated. “Probably horse treacle, logically speaking, but an interesting notion to play with—and not the worst principle to act on, for all the good it could cause. I mean, something doesn’t have to be true to have the right effect, does it.”

The last sentence rang like a gavel. The hooded men slouched, gazes dropping away from Vatsy, except for the one with the set jaw—he continued to stare, whole body shaking gently.

“Mr. Vatsy,” the smiling man began after several seconds of silence, “I do not believe you deserve all that the universe has thrust upon you.”

“Oh,” said Vatsy, “well, it’s nothing new. Bruno and I have had our share of trouble before. As I recall, that’s why we ended up in the city. Bruno says it’s easier for us to get by here.”

“Indeed. And you wrote before you came to the city?”

Vatsy's brow furrowed. "I...think. Yes, I seem to remember a few pieces here and there, submissions to local establishments. Just keeping my claw in, you know."

"Were any of them accepted?"

Vatsy stiffened, biting his lip. "Well...hm. You know, I don't think I did have any success, now that I think of it. I did keep at it, though."

"You are persistent. And then you came here, and submitted an article to the Writer's Guild World Newsletter."

The hooded men drew breath, as one. Vatsy just glanced down at his claws.

"I suppose."

"They weren't fond of your work."

"Well...no. Not on the whole."

"I admire your persistence, Mr. Vatsy, but it doesn't seem to have landed you anywhere favorable." The smiling man glanced at the hooded men, then rose, gesturing with his pipe. "Mm. This may surprise you, given my position, but I'm actually acquaintances with several members of the government—one of who has been on the Writer's Guild staff for the past decade."

Vatsy perked up. "Really?"

"Oh, yes. He gives me access to an early copy of each edition, as well as something of an inside scoop on how the operation is run. A few months back, he came to me, not with information—not any he considered pertinent at the time, anyway. No, he had an anecdote about this submission they received by mail. Seems some freelancer—and it's worth noting that they don't accept freelance submissions, and have never indicated otherwise—had mailed them a suite of news stories using counterfeit postage. They skimmed it, concluded it was a prank, and ignored it.

"He didn't think much of it, and neither did I. Next week, though, there was another package—they read a paragraph of it to make sure it was from the same person, then burned it. Then, next week, they received another. Every week they would get a new submission, each more preposterous than the last, and every week they would destroy it. Finally, after weeks of this, they decided they had to stop and actually read one, if only to gain some insight into the mind of this deranged word-vandal. The next time one appeared on their doorstep, they read it more closely, in shifts, stopping to detox with

fine poetry in between sessions. It was something of an illuminating read. To their mild surprise, they discovered that what looked like rubbish was, in fact, *sedition* rubbish. It wasn't high satire, but it did make idle reference to nonexistent government conspiracies and lurid villainy on the part of constables and politicians. Dutifully, my friend's superiors forwarded a copy to the proper authorities...and my friend forwarded a copy to me. I could hardly believe my eyes when I got my hands on it—it was quite nearly exactly the same document as the most recent newsletter of the revolution. The seditious documents we fueled our movement with—sent to the very architects of misinformation, the pawns of the government? To say the least, it was curious.”

The smiling man sighed.

“At that point, I made two predictions. Firstly, I predicted that the author was not about to give up, no matter what action the Writer's Guild or the government took. Secondly, I predicted that the author would be dead within the next month.

“The first prediction seems to have come true. I cannot yet speak as to the second.”

Core was bored—he didn't idle very well. He'd quit smoking, he couldn't whistle, and random passersby don't generally want to have conversations with armed mercs in bloodstained combat gear. It tended to set them on edge, for some reason.

Not that there was anyone in the area to talk to. The platforms were bare, the luggage carts were abandoned at odd and unnatural angles, the tracks were empty, and the air was still as a tombstone. The trainyard had officially died, although Core had to admit that dying had improved its smell by a considerable margin. All of the bustle of the loudest, brightest, angriest stress-ball of a district—gone. Chased away, in point of fact.

He hadn't thought about what it had meant for the government to be closing down their trainyards, even—as they insisted--temporarily. If he were a little busier, he probably still wouldn't bother thinking about it. It was not that he wasn't invested in the subject, given who he worked for—he just didn't follow current events much. The way he saw it, there would always be the bureaucrats, and there would always be the resistance, and the bureaucrats tended to pay better.

Frankly, Core was willing to write the whole day off as a wash. That was a relief, in and of itself. He wasn't looking forward to...

Just then, he saw a white flare scrape the clouds up above. It flashed for a moment, hung uneasily, and then blinked silently into darkness.

Target one dead. Regroup at the tower.

Core picked himself up by degrees. Was that what a white flare meant? Target one dead? He could be mistaken, but...no, of course he wasn't. Oh well, that's that, then.

He brushed himself, took a deep breath, and entered the city at a thoughtful pace.

The smiling man glanced out the small side window, watching the white flare fading into the night. Then he turned to the men in hoods. "I'm sorry, I've rather dominated the conversation. It wasn't my intention—please, was there anything you wanted to add?"

They were silent.

"Splendid. Hope you don't mind if I just bring things to a close, then."

The smiling man turned back to Vatsy, puffing paternally on his pipe. Vatsy was still staring at his claws, blinking slowly and infrequently as the smoke haze began to reach him.

"Mr. Vatsy, I have a very busy schedule for tonight, and I'd like to wrap things up, if possible. This isn't to say our conversation has been unproductive, or unfruitful—quite the contrary. You've given my lieutenants an excellent amount of perspective. Wouldn't you agree, sirs?"

One hooded man nodded, slowly. The others just stared. One stared directly at Vatsy's lowered eyes, and if Vatsy had glanced upwards, they would have shared eye contact. Instead, Vatsy just continued to trace one claw in small circles against the carpet.

"At any rate, I'd like to thank you for the significant contribution you've made towards the formation and galvanization of the revolution. I think you can agree that you've done considerable good." The smiling man shrugged affably. "I don't mean to wax sentimental, but to fight and die for this cause...well, I can't imagine a greater thing in this lifetime. Can you?"

“Well,” said Vatsy, quietly. “I did always rather fancy getting things published. Bit of a dream of mine.”

“I suppose. Well, you’ve done that, haven’t you? Congratulations!” The smiling man reached onto the table, pulling one of the newsletters out from the drift of paperwork. He tossed it to Vatsy, who did not catch it—it drifted down into his field of vision, alighting gently on the carpet. “There you are, black and white—well, dark grey and yellowish, anyway. You’ve achieved your dream already. Fantastic work! And what’s more, you’ve helped the revolution immeasurably.” The smiling man shrugged again. “I don’t know about you, but that sounds like a good run to me. It sounds like your life was just fine.”

There was a feeling in Vatsy’s mind like something was happening, that pieces were falling into some unsettling order just outside his field of vision. No matter how insistent the feeling became, he couldn’t draw things into focus—he could only sit there, wheels spinning away fruitlessly, growing by degrees more and more uneasy.

“And now...” The smiling man paused, puffing away at his pipe. “Well, well, well. Now, you get to help us out some more. There’s just one more thing we need you to do for us. That is, if the gentlemen at the table do not object?”

The hooded men were silent.

“Well, then. Mr. Vatsy?”

Vatsy cleared his throat. “Well, I suppose...did you need another article? I had one, it was sort of banging about in my skull. I would really like to write it.”

“Ah.” For the skin of a moment, the smile grew taut, the corners dipping down a quarter of a centimeter. “No, Mr. Vatsy. I think we have that...well under control now. For the moment, all I need you to do is report to a few of my colleagues outside. They’ll know what to do. How does that sound?”

“Actually...”

“Hm?” The smiling man raised his eyebrows.

“Well.” Vatsy hesitated. “I would like to help, understand, but I really shouldn’t go far. You see, I’m expecting Bruno to arrive at any moment, and I’d really like to speak with him as soon as possible.”

“Is that all? Oh, no matter.” The smiling man turned his back to Vatsy as two men shuffled into the room. “I should think the two of you will be united presently.”

The two men led Vatsy back through the main area, one walking on either side, moving fast, making Vatsy trot to keep up. Revolutionaries stared at him as he went by. He smiled distractedly at them; they took nervous sips of their coffees and liquors and glanced uncertainly at the two men. The men didn’t return their expressions, or indicate that anyone was watching at all. They just crossed the factory floor, reached the doors, and pushed their way outwards into the black storm raging outside.

The rain had grown twice as bitter as before, and the thunder had matched it. The cloud-smothered sky stretched out overhead like a puddle of spilled ink, pouring a torrent of cold rainfall onto the streets and turning them into trash-strewn rivers. Rain cascaded off the men’s raincoats in sheets; Vatsy was soaked anew, and the wind bit straight through his skin and nonexistent fat to scrape the last ounce of heat from his muscles.

The wind blew the rain so that the alleyways were more or less dry, save the overflow dripping from overhead gutters. The men leading Vatsy turned right into the alley by the factory, nudging Vatsy along with them.

Vatsy trotted ahead into the dark dryness, shivering so violently his teeth sounded like a shaken bag of nails. He glanced behind—the men were standing a half-dozen paces away. “So, we just wait here, then?”

Neither man responded.

“A bit nippy, though, isn’t it? Might just as well wait inside with the others. Should we just--”

“Keep quiet,” one said, not looking at him.

Vatsy hesitated, then fell silent. Very slowly, he curled into a ball, shuddering in silence as the rain dripped down off the rooftops onto him. The men stepped an additional pace away from him, and he was left alone in the shadows.

For almost a full minute, there was silence.

“How long are we looking at?” asked one of the men, at length.

“Don’t know. White flare was, what, five minutes ago? And that was dozy, on account of us signaling them as soon as he got here—took them five to send off a response. Don’t know what that trenchcoat bastard thinks he’s doing.”

“White? Does that mean that...”

“Yeah, it does.”

One of the raincoat men glanced back at Vatsy, who was staring at the wall.

“Guess he’s in for a ride, then, ain’t he.”

“I reckon so.”

“Ever read any of his things?”

One of Vatsy’s ears twitched, dashing a single bead of water to the ground.

“Nah. I don’t read, myself. Bloody waste of time.”

The ear drooped again.

“So,” said the one who’d asked the first question. “How long do you give him?”

The other sniffed. “That one depends. How long do you think it takes to put up a gallows?”

“My brother did one of those once. They’re actually prefab, believe it or—“

“Bruno should be along shortly,” Vatsy said. His voice was weak, strained through chattering teeth and muffled by his own shoulder.

The raincoat men looked at one another.

“You know,” said one, “I feel like I should feel wrong about this.”

“Surprisingly hard to.” The other shrugged. “Might be the fact that it’s a bloody freak of nature.”

Over in the shadows, Vatsy unfolded himself muscle by muscle. His thoughts were...vague. Nothing that had happened within the past hour was in focus. Things had happened, and he remembered—bleary memories, even now—people, and rooms, and lots of sentences that might as well have been in a foreign language. He knew that what was going on was important, but he couldn’t *concentrate* on it. Something was missing, something that gave it all traction, something that helped him take things in and figure out what to do. All Vatsy could grasp was that something was terribly, implacably wrong. On some level beyond the conscious, he knew exactly what this was. The guide was absent from Vatsy’s world, and all that was left was the jungle of chaos around him.

Things he didn't understand, consequences he couldn't grasp, implications that were beyond the limits of his reason. He realized, with a suddenness that was like a blow to the head, that he was more lost than he had ever been before in his life.

Fear set in.

It was alien to him. It was not trepidation, which he had experienced before, or unease, which came and went--it was terror, and it was the rawest thing he'd ever felt. It hurt like an electrical shock. It blinded him, and it made the rational pieces fit together even worse than before, but it also gave him a kind of dreadful energy that he hardly knew how to apply. He knew that he had to think, as useless as it seemed. There was no guide, there was no path, and he was going to be adrift forever unless he found a way...

In his mind, Vatsy reached out and took a bold first step into unfamiliar territory. His response was an animal one, and it was to fill himself to bursting with fear, pull himself up, scabble for traction on the slick alley floor, and break out running...

He made it three lightning-quick feet before the men brought him down. One seized him by the neck and tackled him roughly, pinning him to the ground by the throat with one hand and batting away his flailing limbs with the other. The second one scabbled around the claws that raked at his partner, held Vatsy's head steady with a massive palm, and delivered a punch to Vatsy's jaw with the calculated angle of a surgeon.

The energy fled Vatsy's body in an instant, and he fell slack as a coil of rope.

"You know," said the man sitting on top of Vatsy. "Funny thing now that I think of it, but I honestly didn't expect him to try that."

As the man threw Vatsy's unconscious body over his shoulder, the wagon wheeled around the corner.

It was small, but it was packed to bursting with crates, bottles, and other items that rattled and danced across the wet wood. The front stoop was wide enough to accompany two drivers, but Worship sat huddled against the side instead, head bowed, arms crossed. Striker sat bolt upright as if he were sitting on a loose nail. His face was pale and cold from the rain, and he fiddled anxiously with his reins. Both mercenaries were absolutely soaked.

The resistance's men stepped out of alleyway with Vatsy slung across their shoulders. Striker stared at the body, then swallowed hard.

“He’s not dead, is he?” he whispered. His voice sounded hoarse.

The men shook their heads.

“He’s well,” Worship said to himself, louder. “Good. That’s good. He’s in good condition.”

“Where do you want him?” asked one of the men.

Striker gestured vaguely. “Just...put him over in the back. Come on, let’s get this whole thing over with.”

The men carried Vatsy to the back—most of it was occupied by a large ammo crate and a drift of half-empty whiskey bottles. They lowered his legs over the side, then dumped him in after them, sending him tumbling into hit the wagon bed to sprawl like a sack of beans. Vatsy twitched, then curled into himself, groaning softly.

“Is he awake?” asked Worship.

“Looks like,” said one of the men, mildly impressed. “Want us to put him back out? Won’t take but a moment.”

Striker winced. Worship shook his head quickly. “No, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Suit yourself. Right, that’s us, then,” said one man as the two of them backed into the alley again. “That’s our obligation taken care of. Now, are you going to release those political prisoners within the week, or...”

“I don’t know. That’s not my job. Look, we have to get going.”

“You in some sort of hurry?”

“Yeah. I just want this god damn night over as soon as possible.”

“Fair enough. Pleasure doing business with you.”

Striker lashed at the reins.

The cart lurched forward, setting the bottles and crates into motion. Vatsy slid to the back of the cart, reaching out blearily with his claws to try to find a handhold.

“Er...” His voice was weak and strained. “I don’t suppose we could talk about this? I mean, you seem like a reasonable...like reasonable individuals.”

Neither Striker nor Worship spoke.

“Perhaps I could offer you something? I don’t have much of value, I suppose. I think, perhaps, Bruno would have something to offer one of you. I’m afraid I don’t

remember where we hid our emergency cash, although I do know it was either under that cobble stone or inside the rat. Alternately, I could...I mean...have you considered just—“

“Okay,” said Striker as they turned the corner. His voice was calm, on the balance, but covered in a thousand spiderweb cracks of weariness and resignation. “Where do we go now, huh? Where do *you* want to go?”

Vatsy blinked hard. “Oh. I mean, we could...”

“I’m not talking to you.”

The top of the ammo crate slid off. From within rose the barrel of a pistol, followed by...

“Take us to the main gate,” croaked Bruno. “We’re leaving.”

Vatsy froze like a stunned hare, then bounded across the base of the wagon, throwing his arms around Bruno and squeezing with every last ounce of strength in his body. “Bruno!”

Bruno groaned, pistol wavering. “Hello, boss.”

Vatsy buried his face in Bruno’s shoulder. “Oh god, Bruno, I was waiting for you. What took you so long? Decide to make a day of kicking that jacket-garbed miscreant up and down the city?”

“Ran into a bit of trouble,” Bruno said. “Erm, boss, could you please possibly...”

Vatsy slacked his embrace, then glanced down. All of the breath was sucked out of him in an instant.

“Oh, dear.”

Bruno nodded, patting the thick wad of bandages around his thorax gingerly. “Bit...tender, still.” He reclined, leaning back in his crate as if it were a deck chair.

Vatsy swallowed. “Er...you are alright, aren’t you, Bruno?”

Bruno lifted his free hand and waved it, a little drowsily. “Should be. I was impaled there for a bit, and I admit to passing out for a little while, but I got over it. These two were willing to give me a hand with binding it up, once I gave them some motivation.”

Striker spat into the rain.

“Well,” said Vatsy, “that’s alright, then. Oh, Bruno, I never doubted you, not for an instant. It’s just not your style to die to a two-bit talky goon like him.”

“Haven’t made a habit of it.” Bruno smiled weakly. “Yeah. I think I’ll be up within the week, boss. Especially if we stop to recuperate a bit down the road.”

This sentence dropped abruptly into silence. After a few moments, Vatsy cleared his throat.

“Right. So, we’re headed for the main gate, then?”

“Yeah.” Bruno took a deep breath. “Given the circumstances, I figured it was…”

“Oh, no, you’re quite right. Time to move on, I should think.” Vatsy shook his head. “Honestly, Bruno, I have to say that I expected rather more of the whole ‘being published’ business. Thought it’d solve some problems, you know?”

“Can’t say I’ve ever seen an end to those, boss. Some people, we’re just born unlucky.”

“Rather seems that way. Oh, well, just have to keep plugging away and hope for the best.” Vatsy straightened. “Anyway, that’s that. We’re out of the city for good.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem. Guard’s been called off on account of the flare I had them send up, so we can slip through more or less unnoticed. Hit a small town, get our bearings, then…get to traveling. See where the road takes us.”

“There are worse fates, to be sure.” Vatsy smiled. “I don’t mind saying, Bruno, getting out of the city might be the best thing all around. Always move on, that’s what I say. Dwelling on the past never got anyone anywhere.”

“Well spoken, boss.”

Vatsy curled up in the corner of the wagon, humming off-key and scratching his leg. Something occurred to him. Gradually, he rose up again, then turned to Bruno with a thoughtful expression on his face.

“Say, Bruno?”

“Yes, boss?”

“You mailed those packages to the Writer’s Guild, yes? You know their general location?”

“I suppose so.”

“Their headquarters wouldn’t happen to be on the way out, would they?”

Bruno thought about it for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. “Suppose they would be. Shouldn’t think anyone would be in it at this time of night, though.”

“Oh, that’s alright. I just wanted to say goodbye to the place. Just the one last loose end to tie up.”

Bruno glanced about at the empty streets. He shrugged again, then raised his voice and called out to Striker: “Take a left, then. Keep going to the end of the road.”

The cart navigated down more empty streets, winding its way through laneways almost too dark to negotiate. Finally, Bruno called out, “Stop. Here’s the place.”

It looked much like the other buildings. It wasn’t pretty, or ornate, or even larger than its neighbors—in fact, it was a good deal shorter, flanked by brick government offices whose bulk sheltered it from the storm. The only indication that this building was in any way significant was the sign: *Writer’s Guild World Newsletter Headquarters, Bringing You All the News That’s Printed.*

Vatsy gazed up at it, breath made shallow with reverence. “So...that’s it, then?”

“That’s it. That’s where you’ve been submitting everything to.”

Vatsy climbed over the side of the wagon. “Hold on, I’ll just be a moment.”

Vatsy trotted through the inch-deep water, stepping under the building’s rain-slicked awning and into a dry dark patch littered with old news and other garbage. The windows were large and unshuttered, but he couldn’t see very far inside—he could just about make out a desk, and stacks of unsold newspapers, but beyond that the contents of the building were a mystery to him.

He shifted, then took a deep breath and spoke:

“Um. Hello.”

The building was silent.

“My name is Vatsy, and you probably don’t know me. Well, I mean, perhaps you know me as the gentleman that wrote all of those newsletters that you didn’t publish, and actually only read under extreme duress. Sorry about those, by the way. I hadn’t realized how much you’d disliked them. You aren’t sore, are you?”

Silence.

“You ought to be flattered, you know. You’ve really been my only goal up to this point. Oh, my real goal was becoming a revered author, but I suppose I saw you as the natural means to that end. And why not? Your reputation precedes itself; you’re the kings

of journalism. Not the wimpish constitutional ones, either, the really stiff ones that can have anyone murdered if they want to.”

Silence.

“Anyway. While I was on the run from those assassins you sent after me—and please don’t think I’m angry about those, I’m really not--the revolution published some things I wrote. Something of an eye-opener, that. That was the first time I’d considered the possibility of working with someone besides you gentlemen, and I owe them quite a bit for giving me that realization. I mean, they did subsequently sell me out to my worst enemy, but that doesn’t change the fact that they were really the best thing to happen to me since we moved to this city. They gave me...I don’t want to say hope, per se. They gave me context. I think they made my outlook a little healthier. We could all use a change in outlook, every once in a while.”

Silence.

“So...thank you for your time. Please, don’t feel bad about not publishing my work. I feel like I’m ready to move on to newer, better things. Don’t you?”

Silence.

“Right. Oh, please hold on a moment, I’ll be right back.”

Vatsy trotted back into the rain.

“We leaving?” asked Striker, not really looking in his direction.

“Not quite,” said Vatsy. He pulled himself up to the side of the wagon, then reached over the low wall and scooped up a full bottle of whiskey.

“Bruno, do you happen to have a light?”

Bruno pulled trenchcoat’s matchbook out of his hat. “Here you are.”

“Thank you.”

Vatsy returned to the shadow of the Writer’s Guild building. He found a dry newspaper in the doorway, poured a little bit of whiskey onto it, and stuffed it into the bottleneck as a makeshift rag. Then he flipped open the matchbook, fished one out, and struck it against the pavement.

“Now then. If I could take a moment of your time, I did have one last submission for you.”

Epilogue

The New Journalism

The One-Horse Currier

Probably Tuesday, Middle of Spring, Some Dang Year or Another

There was all sorts of fighting going on in the big city yesterday when a bunch of rebels started shooting and burning things all over the place. There haven't been much news lately from there so we don't know what's going on, exactly, but it must be bad. Apparently the big city fancy pants newspaper up there got their presses burnt down by some soul or another, and the government found it harder to tell people to stop rioting once people started rioting.

Apparently they've arrested lots of people but there's still fighting and some people don't know when it's going to stop. Them scientists have had their temporary location stormed by people and once they'd run out of lightning bolts, they started getting real squirrely and apparently CESA's had to go underground (that's underground as in a fancy way of saying hiding).

No word as yet as to how this is going to affect us good honest folk down here, but it just goes to show, if you know what I'm saying.

Vatsy smoothed the newspaper out over his mattress, sitting himself on the flophouse floor. "Right, now, where did we leave off yesterday?"

Bruno straightened himself against the wall, scratching his head. "Vowels, boss. You liked them."

"Ah, yes! They're wonderful little bastards, once you get the hang of them. Got a nice fruity taste to them, if you know what I mean."

"Not yet, boss," said Bruno patiently.

"Anyway, let's take it from the top." Vatsy jabbed a claw at the first word. "Now, you know how to pronounce 'e,' in certain circumstances, and I believe we've already covered these consonants. Just sound it out like you've learned, and you should muddle through. Care to take a crack at it?"

Bruno's brow knotted in intense concentration. He planted his hand on the paper, dragging it closer to him, and moved his lips a little before saying:

"...Teh-huh-ee-er-ee."

"Not even close!" said Vatsy brightly. "I think you're getting the hang of this!"

"Might have the basic theory down. Letters make sounds, figure out what word it is from the sounds corresponding to words. I suppose it's a matter of learning all the fiddly aspects of when letters make what sounds, then."

"Oh, yes, there's a whole lot of bothersome nonsense to cover, but I have the utmost faith that you're up to the task. Never fear, Bruno, I'll have you reading like a professional within the month!"

"Hope so, boss." Bruno pushed himself away from the wall, then rolled onto the flea-ridden mattress that comprised his corner of the Applewood Village sleeping commons. Despite its impressive size and ample accommodations, they were the only two people inside, and had been since a minute after they'd first entered. A lot of otherwise proud people were currently flipping a coin between hayloft and ditch.

"Anything else we need while in town?" asked Bruno. "Seeing as we don't actually have anything in the way of money at the moment, we might want to save the shopping trip until right before we leave. Merge running from the law and running from the mob, as it were."

"No, don't think so."

"Are you sure, boss? No ink? Notebook? Post office would carry them."

"In good time. Honestly, Bruno, I'm thinking perhaps a few days' vacation is in order. Recharge the creative batteries, and all that." He clucked his tongue, poking at the newspaper. "I will say that I have an excellent chance with breaking into the local press. This stuff is pure drivel, it really is. I mean, look at the margins—they look as if they were laid out by a damned *chimp*. No offense."

"None taken."

"Anyway," said Vatsy, folding up the newspaper. "I know you're not exactly doing kickflips at the moment, so I thought I might nip out and pick up something for us to eat. How does that sound?"

Bruno thought about it, then shrugged. “Dumpster next door looked as if it had some good pickings. At least until we get on our feet, seems our only option.”

“It’s settled, then! Be back in a tick. Might be longer if I have to duel some flies for a choice cut.”

Vatsy strode out the door, humming cheerfully. Bruno pulled the blanket up around his abdomen.

For a few moments, he stared up at the ceiling, letters and changes still drifting through his mind in a slightly-fatigued soup. Vatsy had been right. In a way he couldn’t precisely articulate, and for reasons he couldn’t begin to speculate on, he could still taste the mispronounced “e” on his mental tongue. This reading business was something that bore reflection.

The door swung open, and everything told Bruno instantly that it was not Vatsy. He looked up into the mask of Core.

“Hello,” Core said, voice muffled. He hadn’t opened the door all of the way, and closed it an inch on reflex. “Uh, I’m unarmed. Not here to fight.”

“Well enough,” said Bruno. He lifted his right arm, and the blanket fell away from his pistol. “Open the door all the way, if you don’t mind.”

Core nudged the door open with his foot. His right hand was held up, equal parts greeting and bid for peace. His left held the straps of a satchel, and it took Bruno a moment to realize that it was his.

“Again, just want to make it clear that I’m not going to pull anything. It wouldn’t even be legal for me to operate out here.” Core tossed the satchel over to Bruno. “Just, I saw you leaving with my partners, and I wanted to drop this off.”

Bruno didn’t look at the satchel. His eyes were still planted firmly on Core. But he did reach out with his left hand, gently tugging the satchel towards himself.

“Thank you.”

“Yeah. Figured I owed it to you.”

“I left it down in the CESA lobby.”

“You left *me* down there, too. I don’t begrudge you that, mind, and you *did* let people know I needed an evac.” Core chuckled, sitting down on the empty mattress near

Bruno's. "Apparently, I was important enough for them to drag out, and they tell me I dragged this out with me. Enjoy."

Bruno slipped his left hand inside the satchel, exploring its crevices. "There's a few things in here."

"Yeah. Some cash. We found it when we checked your alleyway. Also some shotgun shells, I don't know if you held onto the double-barrel or what."

"Had to break it."

"Damn shame."

"I'll get another."

There was a long moment in which neither spoke. Core stared at the floor. Bruno stared at Core.

"Is that all there is, then?" Bruno asked.

Core stood up, stretching. "I guess. I don't know. I never got the chance to thank you for saving my life down in the hell-pit, so...thought I'd return your property to you. Best of luck."

Core turned to leave. He made it as far as the door before he spun around, sighing in exasperation.

"Okay, you know what? It's none of my damn business, but screw it, I'm just going to ask."

"Think I might know what you're going to ask me," said Bruno. He rolled onto his back. "Your boss asked me the same question. Well, almost asked it. In his way."

"You're pretty good," Core insisted. "I mean, there's better, but you could land a bodyguard position with half of the officials in any decent city, and the underworld, hell, they'd fall over themselves for you. You could name your price. Muscle doesn't *have* to be pretty and normal, and anybody who knows enough to pay top dollar for protection knows that." Core shook his head. "Why him? Why him, of *all people?*"

For almost ten seconds, Bruno stared up at the ceiling in silence. Core had sighed, and had almost gotten up to leave when Bruno said:

"I don't have much use for money. I like the work. And he's my friend."

Core considered this in silence.

A question occurred to Bruno, and in his not-entirely-himself state, he saw no reason not to give it voice. “What’s your name?” he asked.

Core flinched as if struck...then relaxed a little. “Uh. It’s...my name is Theo Westing. Why?”

“No reason,” said Bruno. “No reason I can think of.”

Core—Theo—departed without another word, leaving Bruno to lie back against the mattress and turn the name over in his head. Theo. Theo.

A minute and a half later, Vatsy came in, dragging a bloated rat behind him. “Success! This one’s free range, but rather well fed—should have a nice texture. Still a bit alive, I think, but that’s no obstacle a skilled chef can’t overcome.”

“Right,” said Bruno. “Give it here, I’ll see what I can do.”

As they ate together in the flophouse, chewing and conversing and sharing the newspaper between them—first as an educational aid, then as a blotter, and finally as a napkin—nobody was trying to kill them. Not one organization. Not one solitary person. They were outside the range of the city government, which suddenly found that they had bigger problems to contend with in any case. Trenchcoat was dead, although nobody would get around to burying him for a long while. The revolution’s interests had been seen to. And neither of them had hung around that town long enough to provoke a reaction, or planned to. No assassins beat a path to the door, no bounty hunters broke through the windows, no mobs drove them away with stones. For that space of that meal, Vatsy and Bruno coexisted with the world, and the world coexisted with Vatsy and Bruno.

Maybe it couldn’t last. Maybe things would go sour fast, and they’d have enemies at their heels once again. But there was a whole lot of road they hadn’t been chased down yet, and wherever they went--whatever happened--the ink would flow.

Bonus One

An Excessively Vatsy and Bruno Christmas

The snow fell for the better part of the evening, covering the streets, buildings, and sleeping vagrants in a lovely blanket of white. Freezing winds, collapsing roofs, and particularly festive cases of frostbite were popping up all over the city. It was beginning to look a lot like something or another; theologians couldn't agree on exactly *what*.

Over the course of the evening, Bruno had nipped round and done everything he could to keep the worst of the cold out. The craters in the wall had been patched over with cheerily moth-bitten blankets, and the drift of discarded papers had been stuffed in the wall cavities as insulation. The result was a room that wouldn't actually freeze your kidneys solid. They'd tried to light a fire inside the washtub, but Vatsy hadn't wanted to burn his notes and there wasn't much flammable to be had, so at the moment, there was just a wisp of garbage-scented smoke that—in the face of all physical laws—was beginning to freeze solid.

Bruno huddled near it anyway, shivering under a well-used quilt. Vatsy was curled up attentively in his chair, reading over some ink-stained drafts.

"I must say, Bruno, this is some of my strongest work yet!" He flipped through them excitedly. "12 pages of journalistic fury, containing interviews, an artist's rendition of the nostril concerned, a few edifying charts, and quite an amusing little sonnet, if I do say so myself. The margin quality goes without saying. If the Writer's Guild rejects this one, it's their own folly."

Bruno yawned, pulling the blanket around a little tighter. "Post should be open tomorrow, boss. I'll get it over first thing."

There was a conspicuous pounding on the door. It wasn't quite knocking; if anything, it was knocking's inarticulate drunkard cousin.

Bruno's yawn cut off midway. He swept up from the chair, crossed the room in an instant, and planted his hand firmly on the handle.

Vatsy set aside the pages, weighing them down with a broken stopwatch. "I'll get that, shall I?"

"Open up!" came the voice from the other side. It had a regional accent, and the region in question was Drunkanistan.

"Hm," remarked Vatsy, "that voice sound strangely familiar."

"Think that might be our landlord."

“Land...lord.” Vatsy licked his teeth, tasting the word.

“Land...lord...landlord...aha, I believe I remember! He’s that fellow we’re supposed to give currency in exchange for the office, right?”

“That’s the theory, boss,” said Bruno. He casually leaned into the door.

“What?” came the voice, sound waves somehow managing an intoxicated stagger. “I can hear you in there! Open up before I break the damn door down!”

Vatsy trotted over to the door, clearing his throat. “Ahem. So nice to talk to you, good sir! We haven’t seen you in quite some time.”

There was a bitter, liquor-lined laugh. “Nyyaaahhh, no, you haven’t. You haven’t seen me. Or, or, what was the other thing...paid me. That’s it. You haven’t paid me in soddin’...” There was the sound of labored calculation. “Ever! You’ve never paid me a dime, and now you owe me a half a year of back rent!”

Vatsy glanced at Bruno, who shook his head. He cleared his throat again.

“Erm. Sorry, old chap, it seems we’ve been a bit short on cash lately.” An animalistic growl started to build up from outside the door; Vatsy quickly added, “If you’d just hold on a bit until I become a revered saint of literary grandeur, I’ll get that right to you, though.”

“And how long’s that gonna take, huh?”

Vatsy turned to Bruno. “Bruno, how long will it take for my submission to get delivered?”

Bruno shrugged. “Not long.”

“Right.” He turned back to the door. “Shouldn’t be more than a week or so!”

There was silence. For a few moments, the only noise was that of the wind flapping the torn edges of the blankets. Bruno clenched the door handle a little harder.

Vatsy beamed. “Well, that went well!”

“Worth mention that he’s trying to force the door open, boss.”

“Oh. That would explain it.” Vatsy cleared his throat a third time. “I say, good sir! Couldn’t you just give us a little bit of a reprieve? It is the holidays, after all!” Vatsy glanced at Bruno. “It is near some sort of holiday, isn’t it?”

“At this time of year? Fairly safe bet.”

“Exactly. Bound to be one around here. Anyway, in the spirit of goodwill towards our fellow beings, and peace and charity, perhaps you could give us a week’s grace?”

The door shook, hinges squealing in protest.

“Look, let’s try to be reasonable about this,” Vatsy said, raising his voice over the violence. “We seem to be at a bit of an impasse, aren’t we? *You* think it’s best for us to pay you, we think the opposite...for everyone’s sake, can’t we just agree to disagree?”

A hinge began to rattle unsettlingly. “*That isn’t how it works, you tiny little bastard! Now open this door and GIVE ME MY GOD DAMN MONEY!*”

“Again with this fixation on money,” Vatsy said, shaking his head sadly. “Obsession over debts has ruined many a friendship, you know.”

There was a scratching sound, like someone gnawing on wood.

Vatsy stepped away. “Hm. No reasoning with some people, I suppose. Think you can hold the door, Bruno?”

Bruno nodded. “Should think so, boss. He’s bound to get bored sooner or later.” Bruno stifled a yawn, then added, “And if I’m any judge, he’ll pass out soon enough.”

Vatsy clambered back up onto his chair. “It really is pathetic,” he said, shaking his head. “The man is so deucedly materialistic. Even at a time like this most probably is, when all people should conceivably be extending the hand of kindness towards their neighbor, he torments us with his petty fiscal concerns. Shameful.”

Vatsy jerked open his drawer, pulling out a half-decomposed rat. He nibbled at it thoughtfully. “Honestly, Bruno, this world would be a better place if we could set aside our differences and live peacefully with one another. Don’t you think?”

“Suppose it would be, boss.”

As he said these words, the handle rattled in his grip. Bruno paused, then gave it an experimental turn. “Hm. Might be he’s given up, boss.”

Vatsy beamed. “Aha! Perhaps a splinter of compassion has lodged itself in his miserly heart. A holiday miracle, I’m sure.”

There was the sound of the street exit opening, then slamming shut. A moment later, there was a sloshing noise, the sound of a match striking, and a grunt of exertion.

Bruno was already halfway across the floor. He snatched the washtub and swung it up just as a flaming bottle of sprits tore off the window-blanket and flew into the office.

It smashed into the outstretched bin, filling it almost halfway with blazing liquid. Bruno dropped it as gently as he could, stepping back as the flames roared in frustration.

“Huh,” said Vatsy, who hadn’t moved. “Good reflexes on that one, Bruno.”

“It pays, boss. On the plus side, we’ve got a fire going now.” Bruno moseyed over to the window.

“How’s he doing out there?” Vatsy asked.

“Crying in the snow. He’ll probably come back inside, pass out in bed, and forget the entire evening.”

Vatsy smiled. “That’s the holiday spirit!”

~A Special Thanks To~

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 - KBF
- Frank Clingenpee
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- Shamus Young
- Gabe Diguez

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