

# *Tatterdemalion and the Eysenckian Supermodel*

*Or: How I Failed to Ever Worry and Suffered the Bomb*

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## Helpless

I am Avith Rockford. I was a killer.

Typically, in lengthy books and novels such as the one I am writing right now, I would write up a billion page apology for my crimes, along with an explanation. But fuck that. You see, I was bored. Yes, the million dollar 'scarecrow' of the *Chikao* Family was simply bored. Even so, I feel a new air. A new air which, to be frank, repulses me not in a way akin to seeing rot, but more in how you see a face which isn't inhuman, but not natural. The 'uncanny valley'. In a term I wish wasn't the only one available, I am currently feeling 'sorry'.

*Sorry.*

It's a confusing word. First of all - where did it come from? Etymological study shows it derives from the Old English term *sāriġ* and the modern English term sorrow. But it isn't confusing in that way (at least, if we judge 'sorrow' - I have no idea what the hell *sāriġ* is supposed to mean). To be sorry, you have to acknowledge that your actions were immature; in the wrong or morally depraved. To be sorry, you have to genuinely be affected by your

actions, and willing to make amends. But - even now - I do not feel 'sorry'. Unfortunately, as the previous lines had been written in pen, my prior memoir cannot be erased. So, the new statement is that I do not wish to make amends.

Truly a predicament. Truly. So, if not sorry, what am I? At first, I believed it to be the ailment of psychopathy. The psychological disorder pertaining to those who feel little to no empathy. But in my studies, in my paranoid attempts to escape federal persecution, I finally realised the depravity of my actions. But it did not hinder me. It was simply a realisation of a truth. So, it isn't sorrow, and it isn't psychopathy. If so, what is my condition?

I see it now as I write this manuscript. It is a term not easily pinned down into a single English word, so it shall be provided in its native language - Japanese. Cherlyn would have liked that. It is *wabi-sabi*. Simply put, *wabi-sabi* is the acceptance of one's own imperfections, without acting on them. It is not maturity, as that involves changing yourself for the better. Instead, I finally am realising who I am. The text you see before you was not written by a changed man. In fact, as I take my pen to paper, I wish to commit more depravities onto my

fellow man, for the sake of depravity. But I now know the extent of my actions, and what it inflicts onto the people who humour my antics. As many have put before me, self awareness may act as a stepping stone for improvement, but it is not a catalyst to do so.

You see, I was a Skyline Academy graduate, and halfway through my applied sciences PhD at Henley University. In my line of work, though, there can be many who have the ability to bring about ruin with a single word. I don't know who ratted out the *Chikao* Family, but they fucked over my life, and that's all I've been given. The university I had taken up study in, which I'd dedicated 2 years of my life to, cast me aside like a cur for the police to chase me. Over the past few months, I've been evading Redcliff's PD and angered vigilantes and I've been granted the honours of many near-death run-ins with both factions.

So, what exactly did I do in the court of the notorious criminal mastermind simply dubbed as *Chikao*? Other than contract killing of course. I was a cook. No, not a chef (although I wouldn't exactly complain about a job as useful yet as peaceful as that). I cooked *drugs*.

Drugs. They're a novel thing, aren't they? Pop one, and all the mental struggles go away. If you're lucky enough, you can scare the physical struggles away too, by becoming abhorrent enough of a person! Frankly, I never got the theme. After all, the option of alcohol is much more legal and can be much less life-destroying than drugs (in moderation of course).

Now, it's a common stereotype that the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* would appeal for their crimes with the fact that they were 'just following orders'. As if they were 'just following orders' when they had the ability and resources to easily defect. I bet I'd kick ass if I was in 1943, Germany. I digress, however. What the *Chikao* Family gave me were not 'orders'. It was volunteer work. And it was fun, thrilling volunteer work. I swear, if I had to burn my skin off just to be able to get in a *Chikao* Family lab, I swear that I'd already be filling my bathtub with gasoline and grabbing the lighters.

It was so fun. I was able to do the tests which the idiots at Henley and Skyline prohibited from me, with their own gear, and it was all such a thrilling experience. I loved it. I

cherished it. Ah, to be 18 again. But you can't travel back in time. You really can't. See - this is why I don't consider myself to be 'maturing' - I'm outright saying that I wish to linger in the past, out of selfish desire. I do not know many children or generally immature people after my expulsion from most public facilities in Redcliff City, but I can guarantee you that this is how Cherlyn would act - she wishes she were younger again, she wishes she didn't have to deal with the aftermath. But she's in jail now. All she can do now is lament. *All I can do now is lament.*

As I mature now, I see my 'love' for Cherlyn was probably the only love I ever felt in life beyond my passion for crime. It was not like the corrupt depravity and lust I usually suppressed, however. It was respect, curiosity, intrigue and a passion to investigate this anomaly. You see, Cherlyn was - and I acknowledge the presence of better terms - 'not like other girls'. While others, from my attendance at Skyline Academy until my exile from Henley University for my less-than-savoury record, most of the girls at the school doted on me. Of course, there were anomalies, but I couldn't care less.

But Cherlyn, she didn't. And she had the ability to do so, while not having the misandry which kept anomalous women from that. She would dote on Red, a male associate of mine, you see, and she was not a stranger to queer tendencies, also holding love for a female mercenary which *Chikao* hired later into my career for the Family. Cherlyn was picky, weird. She didn't love me. Not yet. I think that's what made me catch feelings I held.

Have you ever heard the English version of *The Girl From Ipanema*, lyrics written by Norman Gimbel? Cherlyn held two traits of the titular Girl - youthfulness and loveliness. She was a fine young woman, she. But she didn't care for people how I cared for her. At least how most saw her, she cared for the book, the pencil, and the paintbrush. However, beneath all those layers of normalcy, there laid a freak of a woman. A freak of a woman much like I, who was passionate. You see, Cherlyn also had a bizarre affinity. A bizarre affinity for blood - specifically its consumption.

It was a habit of hers she relished in. According to the psychologists I encountered in my service of the *Chikao* Family, it was colloquially referred to as 'being batshit crazy'.

Well, it sure must be sexy as hell (or contribute to one's charisma a little well) being 'batshit crazy' because my dear Cherlyn definitely didn't strike me as the sort prone to lunacy beyond the antics I saw her perform at Skyline Academy...

Until I saw her in action.

Cherlyn fought like a rabid dog once she saw, sometimes even smelt, that sickly iron scent of crimson nectar. She'd brutally lunge at the target with her knife and keep at it until the poor sod fell, or elegantly dance through spurts of live rounds seamlessly and fearlessly as though they were slow-moving missiles lobbed by a bored, dullard student towards a teacher's head in a sub-optimal classroom before jamming a blood-draining syringe into the gunman's neck before using a flurry of physical attacks to kill them.

She didn't love me. So I had to make her. I contacted Red, the associate of mine who she rather frequently doted on, and asked him to make love to his lover, while she searched for him in the *Chikao* Family brothel, so she'd see them in the act and get demoralised. It'd get



Cherlyn off his tracks. You see, it'd make her realise I was available.

*And it worked.*

It felt wrong. Of course it would - after all, my plan was, to put it in layman's terms, cuckqueaning her into loving me. But it seemed like it worked. Genuinely, she would begin to lighten up before me, and speak to me much more, before things just took off from there, it seems. Instead of the cold young woman who could care less about me, Cherlyn warmed up, and warmed up, and warmed up, until our relationship bloomed into something larger, something warm both of us could smile back at and relish in

But as I look back, I see how I could have used other methods to gain Cherlyn's affection, her acceptance. I could have stopped lying to myself and others. Instead of acting as the paragon of romance that the students of Skyline saw me as, the untouchable perfection, I could have humbled myself. Showed her that I was willing to step down from my pedestal of condescension for someone as small in the hierarchy of school as her. But it's a little too late to do so, isn't it?

I was 2 years into my degree when it happened. The mayor had commissioned the services of mercenaries to aid in the tracking of Cherlyn. One year later, while she was out on a job, Cherlyn was arrested by them. I haven't seen her since. It's been another 2 years since then, and I'm 23, wasting away in an apartment building with shoddy gas. It won't be long until these better-trained cops will catch up to me, I'm betting, so I'm thinking that I should just get to writing this up for someone. Anyone, really.

Perhaps I am sorry. But sorry doesn't constitute the selfish desire of getting out with as few bells and whistles attached as possible. As I said before, you need to really feel like you're two-foot tall, to be as affected by your actions as you can be. But I don't. I don't feel miserable about corrupting the teen girl dreams of Cherlyn. I don't feel miserable about letting her maim men in front of their families. I don't feel miserable when I personally supply the families with drugs to help them dissociate from the trauma of witnessing the maiming. So how can I truly feel sorry?

I am not the semantic or philosophical type, that much is true, but I know of my sins. I

know of their effects. So, in this text, I shall simply summarise and confess. Nothing more, nothing less. After all, what am I supposed to do? My sins aren't exactly the type one can just apologise for anyways, so I'm not going to use this book to testify my innocence. It's not like I can.

Try as I might, I may never see the safety of a day sky again. I can never walk the streets unarmed, without fatal gear for the sake of self defence. I can never turn to law enforcement to help me - I'm the person they're assigned to hunt. But even so - I dream for a past or future where I can simply relax. Where I can hold these human liberties once again, But thanks to the crimes which I committed, I cannot. I know I deserve it. I know that instead of jail or death, this is the best punishment for a coward like me. But it feels wrong. Reprehensible. Simply incorrect. I want better. I know I shouldn't, and I won't get it, but still I long for my undeserved forgiveness as any other person would.

## **Private Life**

Summer in Redcliff always averaged a sweltering 22 degrees Celsius, maybe higher on an especially warmer day, but made worse by the cars and other combustion-powered vehicles. However, as 15 year old me walked to Skyline Academy that day, it felt more tolerable in a way. Pleasantly warm. Typically, schools are a den of testosterone and hormone, no matter how many suits and ties you can afford to have the mobs of hormonal students wear. But Skyline Academy never really got that bad beyond the occasional tussle outside the gates. Instead, it was warmer socially. Perhaps the students were simply more amicable that day. Not like I'd ever know. Not anymore.

I believe the lesson which stuck out to me that day was Film, under Miss Gilberto. She was an especially mousy brown-haired, bespectacled woman who had a teaching ability roughly equivalent to a goldfish out of water with students of seaweed. She was in her late 20s, probably a few years out of university with a degree she detested. If it weren't for the severe age difference, the illogicality of such a relationship, and my wishes to pursue a field in

the sciences, I would definitely hold romantic interest in her, or perhaps a vested desire to socialise.

However, even with her indubitably stunning looks, her teaching ability was lacking. Just as I was about to slip into dreamland, however, I heard her call.

"Avith!" Miss Gilberto said, her voice smooth like honey, "In the film *Underworld U.S.A.*, who is the 'good guy'?"

I was not astounded. It was rather easy, actually. The film she discussed was a crime drama. The answer she wanted to have was easy to identify. So, adjusting my necktie, I began my response.

After a cough, I replied "Cliff Robertson's character, Tolly Devlin, but-"

"Wrong, Avith, there's-"

"But he is more of a protagonist, than an outright 'good guy'." I added. "You see, one of the characters with the most moral causes in the film is Tolly Devlin - he is motivated by avenging his father. But the many homicides he commits in pursuit of this vengeance is morally bankrupt. So. As I stated prior, there is no definitive 'good guy' in *Underworld U.S.A.*"

The arts were never my strongest suit - I was a man of science, not of simple pleasantries like film. However, as the course was deemed mandatory enough by Skyline Academy's curriculum, I have had no choice but to gain some knowledge in the topics. Now, the teacher, after my little explanation, stood there with a quaint, prideful smile on her face. Some of the boys in my class called it cute. I can testify to that - there was indeed a quality which was rather attractively small to that grin she donned. And so, Miss Gilberto continued her lesson with the full knowledge that yes, I wasn't an idiot who sat around.

I don't remember the other periods, other than chemistry, but there are no stories to weave from that. So, I began my walk around the city. You see, it isn't exactly easy to get limousines across to the Academy campus, no matter wherever they come from (it's a big city, and the only road leading to Skyline goes through the main city) so most of the student body's carers trust them with just walking back home. It sure as hell was a convenient system, that's for true.

So, bag on my back, I was walking through the streets. That's when it happened. I was grabbed by the scruff of my neck and

dragged into an alleyway, a knife's sharp end being pressed against my throat. The hands responsible for gripping me were sweaty and shaky.

"I- I'm sorry..." said the person holding me, "I- I don't want anything to happen, j- just please fork your cash over..."

Someone from inside the alleyway, veiled in shadow, would step out, revealing themselves to me and the mugger. The person who had been veiled in shadow wore a white doctor's lab coat, goggles, and a facemask decorated with a toothy grin as they paced towards me and the mugger who held me, who was currently hyperventilating.

"D- Don't come any closer!" barked my mugger as he attempted to seem imposing, holding his blade closer to my neck, "Or... Or else this poshie gets it!"

It was scary, but thrilling. This person, this doctor, was simply walking as if they'd calculated one-hundred ways to kill the mugger with just their bare hands. And it was sick as hell. The doctor would silently raise their bony hand, before pointing behind the mugger. The mugger turned around, but as he did so, his grip

on me weakened. It weakened just enough to let me free.

You see, being the child of a rich family told to walk back home through the large city where anything could happen, it was only natural that I picked up on martial arts. Self defence is a valuable tool, after all. I believe what I did was a shin-kick - the specific art evades my memory at this time, but the mugger went down nonetheless, squealing in pain. It sounded *delectable*.

There was no time to savour my thrilling victory, however, since I was obligated to thank this doctor. As I turned to them with a thankful smile, they weren't the good few feet away that they'd been prior to their assistance, but they were inches in front of me, holding an envelope. As though they were headlights, those goggles on their face were illuminated by the sun, causing them to emanate an almost malicious red glow.

The doctor nodded slightly, before raising their hands a little higher. In the kindly doctor's grip was an envelope. They were signalling me to take it. I nonverbally verified this, and then verbally verified (just in case), both being met with acceptance. Grabbing the



envelope, it felt elegant even to the touch. Gold trimming was first and foremost, embroidered into the paper with the finest handiwork this side of the Americas.

Before I had opened the envelope, however, the doctor ordered in a high-pitched, smooth voice "Save it for home, Avith Rockford."

I attempted to ask the doctor questions, how they knew my name (my family were fairly well off, but nobody knew exact members), or even something as basic as what the envelope even held. However, the doctor had begun scrambling up a ladder on the side of a building, before disappearing off to who-knows-where.

Once I reached home, I bolted back into its doors, not even bothering with greeting the neighbours or attending to the dullards' homework provided by Skyline Academy. This was an escape from those schedules and frivolities I detested which would let me finally have independence. Dashing into my room, I tenaciously tore into the envelope, extracting what had been revealed to be a letter from within, and scouring the text.

It was a fine ink used, likely *Sumi* or some other Eastern ink, and the paper had a

trace of Acqui Di Parma's *Yuzu* perfume, the bittersweet notes of the advertised fruit dancing with notes of sweet scents. The text itself was finely written in a half-print cursive font.

*To whom it may concern,*

*Whatever they may be, an agent of Our Little Thing has taken note of you, an associate, and/or the talents you hold. Please, do not be concerned. If this letter has accidentally found you, or you do not wish to join up with the above organisation.*

*Do not say anything about this letter to anyone, or anything. And trust me, we will know.*

*If you wish to accept our offer, please arrive at the Redcliff City seaport at 10PM. If you do not arrive within a timeframe of 30 minutes, it will be assumed that our offer has been declined and you will be persecuted if you reach out.*

*Your obedient servant,  
C. Kumori*

See, this is the type of thing that is intriguing! You prove yourself to someone, and move up in the world! You're not just given every benefit, you have to work for it, before you reap the rewards! It's just something I never got about the rich life - why sacrifice so much of the human experience just for a part which is so dull and nonessential? See, that is why I did what I did. Just what the hell is so fun with sitting in an office clacking away at a keyboard, or doing some dullard's experiments, instead of the ones I wish to?

Well, this fate isn't so different. You know, with the keyboard thing. But still! At least I had my fun, and I'm using my free will to create even now, with this project.

Of course, I accepted it. Skulking out in the dead of Redcliff's night was easy, of course. As long as you didn't draw too much attention to yourself with extravagant clothes (I had taken the effort of switching into a tracksuit), then you were basically free to do anything (unless there were security cameras, or patrolling officers, of course). Arriving at the docks, I awaited the arrival of my host.

A multitude of other boys and girls that were my age at the time also stood there around

me. They seemed the type to easily become aggravated by petty matters, not too different to the nature of neanderthals. Nonetheless, they seemed complacent enough for me to stand aside and wait for our benefactor to arrive, to greet us.

When the congregation had fully gathered at the scene, a muscle-bound man donning a navy-blue suit and a surgical facemask then arrived at the scene. "You all here for... *the little thing?*" he asked, judgements already forming behind that little head of his. The congregation nodded, and in response, the man began walking, with a gesture signalling us to follow.

As I walked, I saw as all of the other people socialised. I had no qualms with this, and it seemed as though our host thought the same, simply walking on instead of giving us orders to shut up. How nice. However, my thoughts were not focused on that, at the time. You see, the seaport was a very populated place in the daytime - the fact that whatever this '*little thing*' was had been able to escape police identification for so long astonished me.

While our host was rather liberal in how he handled discussion amongst his

congregation, any questions about *'our little thing'* would be swiftly put down. In result, it was easy to deduce that there was most likely a novelty in finding out for ourselves. After two or three minutes of sustained walking, we arrived at a large warehouse. This warehouse was vast in size, and compliant with it being a late hour of the night, it seemed to be completely empty. Nonetheless, the man guiding us walked in. Some muttered questions, but were primarily compliant.

The warehouse's interior was much akin to its exterior - derelict, but still there were signs of life. Old cargo sat on shelves far taller than many of us could ever reach without the usage of a ladder, and there was a trace note of cigarette ash. Basic forensic investigation showed me that there were trace footsteps, however, none of my contemporary applicants seemed to notice, being much more enamoured by the trinkets left in this warehouse's heyday. After some wandering in the halls, we then stopped in an office on the ground floor, presumably that of the manager or an administrative officer of this warehouse. An old computer sat there, ready for usage, but deactivated for what I could only assume to be

years, its cheap plastic frame turned a beige hue. While some took to looting the office for trinkets, or clamouring with their friends about said trinkets and looters taking prior trinkets, our host had taken a blade from his breast pocket and began carving a hole into the carpet. Once a rectangle had been formed, he kicked the carpet off, revealing a valve attached to some kind of pressurised door.

Our host would take his hands to the valve and twist, before pulling, steam filling into the room and causing some to stammer out confused curses. Once the smog had cleared, however, we saw it. A ladder which was definitely leading to our new life. The hellish life.

"Down." ordered the man.

Although it seemed as though some would hold the wishes to vocalise protest, none were voiced, thanks to the man's considerable size. Instead, all of us began to descend the ladder, gruellingly slow. On average, I believe that each climber descended 3 rungs of the ladder per second. Little issue, however - *this ladder was definitely 40 feet tall*. I've done the maths, too. The climb averaged to just over 13 and a third of a second long.

***3 bars/second\*13 1/3 seconds = 40ft***

It's basic maths, but sweet Jesus. I've ascended and descended this ladder multiple times after my induction, and I definitely must have gotten adjusted to it since in future endeavours, it definitely didn't feel as comically tall. Maybe my cardio just got better in my years of service to *Chikao*. Still, though. Forty feet tall. God, I'm a beast.

Nonetheless, we safely descended the ladder and were greeted to quite a fantastical scene. At the base of the ladder, I do not attempt to toy with your imagination when I say that it was comparable to a secret society beneath Redcliff City. On the 'streets', crowds of masked men, women and the technicolor rainbow in-between all ambled, as though they weren't violent criminals, but instead, dandies. That's the best way I can put them - dandies. You could smell the scent of foods from across the world, perfumes that had gone off of the market, and barely visible between the mobs of people were the newest models of luxury cars from countries across the *atlas*. So, we stood there, awaiting our next guidance. After all, the



man who'd ordered us down hadn't descended the ladder. I slinked further away once I'd seen the fact that tensions were rising between my fellow 'trainees' (of sorts).

"This isn't worth our time, babe..." said one especially peevish-looking young woman as she cradled the arm of her lover.

Said lover, a young man who definitely stood a few inches taller than me, donning a baseball cap, a tee, and look in his eyes which just seethed with 'give me your lunch money' energy shouted back "Shut the hell up."

"Ok, let's not get too pissy..." negotiated another, scrawnier young man. The eloquent response courtesy of the first young man was a punch to the face of the second young man. Caring not for these frivolities, I continued reading my favourite book, squatting down off to the side. If I were to strike, I would likely suffer similar consequences unless I were to play it off as a joke. To be frank, however, the young man was probably enough of an idiot to fall for any lies I'd attempt to give him.

In my youth, I enjoyed the book *No Longer Human* (**Osamu Dazai, English 1958 release**). I found Yozo's struggles with his perception of himself was especially compelling

to take notes on and read into. It helped me familiarise with what I should and shouldn't do to seem like an approachable human being. Compared to Yozo, this young man was failing, drawing the attention of everyone without giving anything positive back to them. However, I learned another concept. In this world, there is never the peace to do what you please unless you try to forge it yourself. A young woman no older than I, wearing jeans and a dirty grey tee, had walked next to my spot, and had taken the liberty of squatting down next to me. She had a lanky frame, and it was clear to me that she was taking this job not because of novelty, but out of need. Nonetheless, however, she tried to be amicable towards me, if her positioning wasn't making it clear.

"What are you reading?" politely asked the young woman, "Looks cool..."

Luckily for me, nobody present seemed to be from Skyline Academy. My initial thoughts were that it wouldn't harm me to say.

"Avith Rockford." I replied. "And it's a book you probably wouldn't know."

"Aw, c'mon! Let me see a name..."

I continued my reading as she attempted to grab at the book to steer the cover towards her, so she could steal a glance at the title. Seeing resistance as a futile waste of energy, I let her gaze, before snatching it back once she'd read it, continuing my note taking on the novel.

"*No Longer Human...*" she muttered to herself. "Sounds cool! I'm Sunny Ortega, by the way!"

She put her hand out for a shake. Common human etiquette was to shake back, and I enjoy putting the concept forward, that I am indeed a human being. Once our prompt handshake finished, a woman made her presence known, with an exaggerated clearing of the throat. Turning to the origin of the voice, I saw a blonde woman, likely the age of 30, in a beige jumpsuit, unzipped, revealing a barely effective black crop top beneath. Goggles covered the woman's eyes, along with a black bandana which covered the lower region of her face.

"Alright!" she ordered, attracting the attention of the group, "I'm Archimedes, and I'll be your guide for the subterranean regions of the Down-Under!"

Some immediately took to clamouring, attempting to ask 'Archimedes' what exactly she meant by the 'Down-Under' (even though basic logic would make anyone deduce that the subterranean facility which currently hosted us was the titular 'Down-Under'). I continued my reading as Archimedes continued her tangent explaining the base, but there was a pest to my side, making dedicated focus impossible.

"Pssst. Avith!" whispered Sunny, attempting to snag my attention, "What does she mean when she says 'Down-Under'? I- I'm sorry if it's a dumb question, it-"

"It's probably a nickname for this... 'base'."

I didn't like Sunny.

With a cheery whispered tone, she replied "Okay!"

Sustaining my reading, I halted my taking of notes as Archimedes drew her tangent to its closing words. "-And so, that's the basic summary on the history of the Chikao Family! I'll be guiding you lot to the Summit Room for the loyalty pact. Don't worry! It's nothing to be afraid of! And don't worry about having to do any... jobs, as soon as you get initiated! You'll have to train first!"

Yet again, Archimedes said another ambiguous statement which would get the masses clamouring. As I barely began to put my pen to paper, Sunny then turned to me once more with a scared look on her face.

"Wh- What does she mean 'It's nothing to be afraid of?!'" she stammered as we began walking, "If we- If they say there's nothing to be afraid of, that means our initiation is gonna be bad-"

"Why are you asking me? I'm also new to this."

"I- I'm just- I don't want to kill anyone!"

"You say, as you enter the criminal underworld."

"I- I'll just take lifting jobs!"

"And what'll happen if there's none?"

"Well... I'll just work a normal job until opportunities arrive!"

Sunny was one of the most reprehensible, illogical entities I have ever had the anti-liberty of talking to. Genuinely, if I had to pick between getting maimed in an explosion, getting my testes kicked in by ten jiu-jitsu experts or going through a lesson trying to teach Sunny entry-level mathematics, I'd be calling up the DeGroots and go to Sussex

myself to fail at mugging Tom Hardy. Seriously, I have never seen an entity so physically similar to me, yet so lacking in common sense.

"Whatever you say." I replied, attempting to finish the conversation.

I failed. "Okay! So, why are you writing in the-

"Notes. I'm taking notes, Sonya. In the book. I'm putting my notes in the book."

"My real name's- I'm Susannah... And doesn't that ruin the book?"

"No."

After continued minutes of pestering and walking, we finally arrived at a stop. Double doors stood imposing and tall over us, their frames adorned with fine quartz engravings, in a dual colour scheme of black and white which split down the middle. A multitude of open-carry mobsters holding submachine guns stood outside the door, with fitting suits to match the colour scheme of the doors.

"Woah... it's so cool..." Sunny muttered, in awe of the spectacle. Others murmured too, clamouring between each other about the armed guards, the refined architecture, and other such concepts. After another tangent from Archimedes, she then began ordering initials

out, one person from the crowd entering at a time. I believe that those entering the room would have spent an hour within the room before leaving. In and out. Simple as.

"S.O. Your turn." ordered Archimedes. I celebrated mentally as that idiot of a young woman entered the black and white double doors, and waited the hour. As those precious 60 minutes of peace, reading and relative isolation drew to a close, I dreaded the minute that Sunny exited the room not in a body bag. Unfortunately, my wishes were unfounded as she waltzed out, a cheerful grin on her face.

"Avith!" she cheered, jovially, "I made it in!"

I put aside her celebrations with "Fabulous."

"Aw, you really think so? I'm flattered! Also, what page are you on? What's going on in the story?"

Yet again, she'd attempt to steal glances at my book, getting a little physically close to me, grabbing me by the arm, her hand inching ever closer to mine. Blech.

I ordered "Stop that."

"Oh..."

Finally. And I got approximately thirty seconds of relatively peaceful, uninterrupted reading when I heard Archimedes order for 'A.R.'. Me. Entering the room, I saw what was comparable to a council sitting at a long, ornate table with silver trimmings and a middle of quartz, splitting down the middle into black and white, the room taking after the design of the table with a contrasting colour scheme. Lining the seats of the sides of the table were people in masks, wearing suits with colours which contrasted against the tones of the room. Matching quartz pillars held up the ceiling, and filling the entire room were also trace notes of that same yuzu scent which emanated from the letter I'd been given by 'Kumori', sweet, with a note of bitterness. Sitting opposite of where I stood, in the most venerated chair with four guards standing to his flanks, a woman standing to his right wearing a black dress, was a man, who I believe was about 35 in my first meeting with him. He donned a Greek performance mask and a turtleneck sweater with hues which matched up with the room, splitting seamlessly down the middle into black and white. Leaning in, he cleared his throat, before finally speaking.



"Hello. I am C. Kumori." stated the man, somewhat playful in tone with trace notes of gravel and experience in his voice. "But you, Avith Rockford, can call me... *Chikao*."

*Chikao*, in his life, was just another man who was working up the ladder of work. I can respect that. Much like Yozo from *No Longer Human*, he often masked his true emotion as often as he could, so he could bear the payload of others' sentience.

"So," he began, leaning onto the table and tenting his fingers, "it seems you were recommended by... Fauchard, I believe?"

"No idea. Never said any names. Didn't even know about their gender."

"That's fair. They aren't the speaking type anyways. Big guy, steampunk lab coat?"

"That sounds about right."

"Splendid." *Chikao* replied. "Just splendid. Well, why have you come here?"

*Chikao* muttered something between his court, who nodded in agreement and solidarity, some guffawing loudly at what the man had whispered. Turning back to me, *Chikao* explained "My apologies. It's just that some

people's reasons to join the family are, to be frank, quite, quite pathetic. Fire away.

"Well, I was bored."

"Ah, I told you- wait, what?" *Chikao* chortled, cutting himself off as he seemed to realise something.

"Should I state it again?"

"No, no..." *Chikao* stated, curiosity seeping into his voice. "君は面白いね、アヴィス..."

He'd turn to his guards and whisper something among them, and then the woman, before turning back to me, sliding a revolver and a pistol across the table, both losing momentum as they approached my side of the table.

"Just say 'SÌ' after each statement, mkay?" *Chikao* explained "And don't worry about the gun and the knife, won't be an issue. Unless you're squeamish with blood."

"SÌ."

"Heh. You catch on fast." *Chikao* began. "Alright... Chi fa appello alla legge contro il suo prossimo o è uno stolto o è un codardo. Chi non riesce a prendersi cura di se stesso senza la protezione della polizia è entrambe le cose."

"SÌ."

"E sotto la Famiglia, prometti di non far mai conoscere il tuo servizio a coloro che non sono coinvolti in... La Nostra Piccola Cosa."

"SÌ."

"壮大." *Chikao* said. "Now, just prick yourself with that blade..."

Upon pricking myself, *Chikao* explained. "Quel sangue simboleggia la tua lealtà alla famiglia, incrollabile e pura. You'll do great in this organisation, Avith, I can just tell. Now, feel free to leave."

As I bid my farewell from the room, I cradled the bridge of my nose with my index and thumb, as I knew my misery was bound to be there, waiting. I was right. Sure enough, as I left the room, Sunny Ortega jumped onto me like a rabid dog, attempting to make her affections known. While I wrestled her off, she giddily asked "How'd it go?!"

"I was accepted-"

"Yay! Good job, Avith!"

I hated Sunny. Maybe it was because she was what some would call my 'polar opposite' - an idiot and dullard by nature, whose whole family were riddled with debts wrought on by their own idiocy. It is now, however, that I see maybe she wasn't so bad. Maybe a little more

healthy for me than Cherlyn ever could have been. As interviews drew to a close, Archimedes closed off, saying "Alright! Those of you who have been declined, follow me. The accepted members are free to leave. A.R, come to the summit room this time tomorrow!"

Navigating through the mobs of career criminals, there was a slight oddity. Were there always this many armed guards? And did this quantity past the guards of the summit room wear kevlar vests openly? I entered one of the many structures built into the facility's walls and observed one of these suspicious guards. Gunshots. Almost immediately, the facility began to break into chaos as a heavily geared squad of four men descended the ladder and unloaded their weapons into unsuspecting inhabitants of the Down-Under. It was clear that the guards of this facility weren't exactly well-gearred thanks to their only gear being suits and small arms, while these kindly gentlemen were armed with grenades, rifles and other such weapons. Some mafiosi attempted to return fire, but this resistance was futile due to how undergeared for attack they had been. Now, I believe it may have been my luck (or the lack thereof) but as I beheld the spectacle from what

I thought to be the safety of one of the many 'apartments' built into this subterranean facility's walls, I failed to notice that one of these mercenaries assaulting the base had sneaked up behind me. Pistol drawn, he tapped it against the back of my head.

"Hands behind your head!" shouted the mercenary. Turning around revealed a leviathan of a man, 6'4" at least. While our difference was only 3 inches, I could tell I was under no position to resist, and did as he ordered. It wasn't my proudest moment as he kneed me to the ground, overpowering me as he slid zip ties around my wrist. I was too busy reeling in pain to focus on logical options out of the situation. The apartment which held me itself was brutalist - save for the windows, all of it was concrete - and hanging in the air akin to a deathly miasma was the abhorrent scent of old, dried blood. Only a single bulb illuminated the room. Oddly enough, however, there was an odd smell in the room beginning to spawn from elsewhere, not of the mercenary that had subdued me and was (presumably) holding me as a hostage. That scent which filled the room was an odd mix between sunflower oil, fresh cigar ash, gunpowder, and fresh sex. It seemed

the man hadn't caught on as a red glint from the darkness inched towards him, a lit cigar illuminating a clean-shaven, young head of what was then 25, with a devious grin plastered onto it.

With a blow of air which killed the flame on the cigar and a shot from a suppressed pistol which took out the sole light illuminating the apartment, all I could hear were the screams of the man as many blunt impacts had been made to him, likely punching, or stock-bashing of some sort. Lighting his cigar with a sparkwheel lighter, a little illumination which revealed the man's face in further clarity. Ghastly, even vampirically so, my saviour was of a deathly pale complexion. His brown hair was also phantasmal in nature, only revealing his human aspects thanks to it being slicked back via a comb. As he undid my cuffs, I could gauge his height, and good lord, was this man tall. Standing just under a foot taller than I, it was clear just from standing up that this man could absolutely fold me up like I was a chair. Dusting my clothes off, I finally attained the nerve to ask "Who... who are you?"

"A normal man." responded my saviour. He had a trace Irish accent.

"What..."

"Don't think about it too much, lad."

"Okay... Who are these guys, then?"

"The Binmen. Trained mercs who work with the criminal underworld. Chikao's been going through the motions of a peace treaty with their leader, I'm betting it's a stroppy gang wanting some glory, nothing more."

"But-"

Before I could ask further questions, the 'normal man' I had seen disappeared back to where he'd come from. I took the subdued mercenary's gun before stopping at the exit to the apartment building. Although my ability of observation was hindered by distance, I could still hear the movements of many of the mercenaries who'd laid siege to the base, patrolling for stragglers. You see, there was a slight issue. At this time, I was untrained in firearms handling, and because of this, my ability to resist consistently was unlikely. However, there were still applications I could use. Grabbing a glass flask, I began to pour powder from the rounds of the gun I'd looted into it. Tearing a rag from a nearby body, I stuck it into the powder-filled flask before lighting it. Tossing it towards the general vicinity of one of

the mercenaries, I covered my ears as the bang confirming his death.

Yes. This is science.

I was grinning. In some bizarre, surreal way, this was cathartic in ways beyond simple outright description. Even now, as I recollect my first experience with field combat, I can't help but cackle a little to myself, even if it feels a little weird. I saw as he was covered in soot, groaning for escape, and I grinned. Apathetic, I continued on, crawling amongst bodies as I reviewed my next target - one of the heavily armed gunmen that had descended the ladder. At this point, I'd run out of glass flasks, so I'd have to loot bodies. I believe that what I used at this time was a flask of alcohol. This would be easy - I wouldn't even have to waste any gunpowder. Tearing another rag from a body, I put it into the flask, tossing it towards the mercenary. Hearing the detonation, I began to sprint past, but as the mercenary shouted, it was where I'd seen my fault - he wore an EOD suit, allowing him to survive the explosion relatively unscathed. With the surviving mercenary barking out my presence to other mercenaries, I



barely scampered behind cover in order to evade his squad's fire.

Now, at this time, I was completely encircled, but there was one last trump card I had up my sleeve. Within my duffel, I'd kept a knife, just in case anything went south. I don't know why I did it, or how I survived, but it was fucking fun. Lunging at the closest mercenary, the blade I held sank past his EOD suit and into his heart. Once I'd pinned him to the ground, my weapon managed to penetrate deep into his heart. My second kill. And I'd do anything to live even that again. His squadmates, naturally, returned fire, but it seemed as though their aim had been distracted by a platoon of shouting men. The only damage they made to me was a cut caused by an errant bullet. But as I sat in the afterglow, an abhorrent feeling hit me. A deep fatigue, which made my muscles ache. Perhaps the adrenaline of sprinting at armed mercenaries had hidden the feeling of the lactic acid which would come out as a result. So, tired, I let the feeling of rest consume me.

## **We Close Our Eyes**

I woke up in my bed at what I believe was 6AM, Friday. Was that all a dream?

No.

My index finger had been kindly bandaged up, and my duffel bag sat in the corner of my room. Analysing my knife, I'd seen that all blood had been washed off. Even in my youth, I was distinctly known for placing my items in the most efficient places, and to me, this was about as efficient as an electrically powered generator. I thought nothing of this convenience at the time. After all, I already had the issue of school to deal with, so I took to getting into uniform. Once in my clothes, headed downstairs. Now, as I said, while my family's trust fund was rather expansive, it wasn't enough to cover the fees of Skyline Academy. At that time, I was only staying in based on my merit and performance in STEM fields at the school, the pay discounted thanks to that prior term. At this time, my parents were off, so I was alone. Come to think of it, are we ever truly alone? After all, no matter what we

do, we're always surrounded by the presence of people, or at least have our actions affected by theirs. How much of what a single man does is truly original, and of his own volition? Where does humanity stop, and programs begin? My breakfast that day was probably a hash brown - my commute to Skyline was a good hour or so anyways, so my meal had to be something quick, for my convenience. The route I took was perpetually grimy, with many catcallers reaching out to anyone they can, and drug deals taking place in open daylight. Just yesterday, I was victim to these catcalls, thanks to my somewhat effeminate face and frame, but now, as I strode through the streets, many of the faces who I'd gotten familiar with for their antics simply stayed silent, and a whole lot more amicable. At least halfway my route through leads to the upper class area. Snobs, the lot of them. At least the people kept to themselves a lot more.

With my arrival at Skyline, I mentally sighed as I heard a bevy of young women and men clamoured around me. I had much better things to focus on than these dullards. The school I attended itself (Skyline Academy) was, and still is, the scholar's premium choice. With

its many facilities, there was support everywhere for those who needed it, and enough money for the rich to get off well. Arriving in my form room, I began discussion with a good friend of mine, Lincoln. Lincoln was a scrawny young man, who was average in most aspects. Nonetheless, he was enjoyable to chat with and generally of great character.

"You see her?" Lincoln began, "Cherlyn Fox, the chick with the tomato juice."

A beautiful woman, she was, despite her oddity. Even in her youth, where she was a lot less mature than the woman I loved, she still had a deathly prettiness to her. If I were to be colloquial, she was the closest thing to what many of my fellow humans simply called a 'crush'. Don't call it cute. It was exactly how I felt.

"Yeah?" I replied.

"She's weird." Lincoln observed. "And not in a cute way, she's... she just seems *off*."

"Can you blame her? She transferred in from a public school just a couple weeks ago, of course she's gonna feel weird."

I'm not a stalker. This is common information. Cherlyn's third family (and by extension, her families) were all notorious for

something. The first were a popular heart surgeon and a professional haematologist who'd died in a car crash, the next was a family whose patriarch ran in with street gangs, paying the price for the involvement with his life, and the current, third family was the Watsons. Cherlyn Fox-Franklin-Watson. What an overly convoluted name. I'm guessing she'd prefer anything else over it. How I'd say it at a less mature age, I'd say she'd 'prefer the name Rockford'. But now, I know that if I never stepped in as I did, she wouldn't.

"Hm. Yeah, guess I'd be a little freaky if things got like that. Well, Vito," Lincoln responded, "you wanna- Vito? Vito?!"

I don't know why I walked towards her. I guess I just wanted to speak to the new kid. It definitely wouldn't affect the image I depicted of myself that the student body perceived in any way, so it wasn't a strategic sleight of hand. She intrigued me, and I wanted to speak to her. Simple as.

"Hello-"

"Go away." she interrupted. She didn't exactly sound as if she was in a bad mood, she simply did not want to speak to *me* in particular.

I didn't follow that desire. "Why~?"

"Don't wanna talk." She didn't turn over to face me at all, nor did she attempt to put the notes in her voice which most others did when facing me. She was *queer*. Yes, Cherlyn was bisexual, as I'd discovered in a couple cute discussions later on in life, when I was with her, but I didn't mean my statement to be interpreted in that way. She was an anomaly compared to the others. She didn't have a reserved interest in me, like most, nor was her interest because of her attraction to the selfsame gender. No, she simply didn't like me for what I was currently.

"Alright." I'd said. And I left to my own seat, just like that. But this queer little example was a curious little one. Someone I'd have to investigate. Returning to my seat, I felt resolve build up in me. A resolve to know this bizarre young woman, to explore her mind and familiarise myself with those inevitable, dark recesses which formed inside any person's own realm of thought.

School was boring, but this new life which I'd managed to find myself in, it was much more compelling. I believe it is why I favoured it, why I found it so much more compelling than how I'd lived as the ordinary Avith Rockford. So, as I'd remembered from the

prior day, I set my mind to head to the docks at 10PM. As I'd stepped out of the Skyline Academy gates, however, my heart sank. It was a familiar face. The familiar face of the young woman who'd caught my ire at the facility, Sunny Ortega. However, she wore a pair of glasses, and instead of the scruffy way her hair had been done when I saw her, it was in a neat bun. Even so, her eyes, those contours, everything about her was visible to me. However, as I stared at her between the crowds of students, my spine chilled as her gaze fell upon me. Turning away, I began my walk home.

Seven hours later, at 10PM, I began my trek to the docks. I arrived at 10:30, entered the warehouse, and descended that forty foot tall ladder. Although there had been an attack just yesterday, it seemed like all population and liveliness had returned to the Down-Under, as though the many deaths simply didn't happen. In fact, all of the damages made by both my two improvised explosives and the firearms of the mercenaries had been filled in. I continued onto the conference room or the 'summit room', as Chikao called it. Once more, despite the attack which had happened just yesterday, it had been unscathed by the attack. When the guards

allowed me in, I saw that the room itself was in a similar state. The only new thing in the room was a gun, which sat on *Chikao's* side of the table. All else was exactly the same, from the abstract paint job, and even the positions of each member of his council on the table.

"So." *Chikao* began, sounding inquisitive, "Just what are you?"

I stammered "E- Excuse me, sir?"

"Single-handedly, you take down two heavily armed mercenaries, when you were only provided with one improvised explosive and a knife. That isn't exactly the most common thing you see 15 year old boys from posh families do." he explained, curious, "So, what are you?"

"As you said, I'm just a 15 year old boy..."

From behind *Chikao*, I heard a second voice concur "Aye. The lad has potential. His style may be rough, but with the right training, he's going to make a perfect assassin."

The man who spoke was the same one who'd saved me from that mercenary yesterday. Their discussion about contracting me as an assassin did not concern me, however. In fact, it was one of the most thrilling ideas ever planted



in my mind. Nonetheless, I awaited further explanation - perhaps it was a codename for a simpler job, used as an inside joke among *Chikao's* ranks.

"Well, you are one of my most trusted men, Red..." *Chikao* noted, taking up a contemplative gesture, his chin cradled between the nook between his index and thumb. "Very well."

Dusting off his sleeve, *Chikao* slid the gun sitting at his side down the table and towards me. I did not grab it.

"You're a smart bugger, aren't you? Very well. Once you grab that gun, you shall officially be deemed an assassin for me. And don't worry about storing it anywhere."

"Thank you, sir."

Without a hint of doubt or hesitation, I swiped the gun from the table and held it up. *Chikao* seemed shocked by my swiftness, but he chuckled as he gestured for something, and one of his councillors procured a holster, slowly passing it down to me. Drawing a shoebox and placing it on the table, the criminal slid it down to me.

"Store the gun in the shoebox. Trust me. Always works." he advised.

"I'll keep it in mind." I replied. "So, anything I should do?"

"Yes, actually." Chikao said. "Valdez! Hit the projector!"

One of *Chikao's* staff hit an old, dusty projector. Its image flickered on the canvas behind *Chikao* (which he'd pulled from the ceiling) before a proper image finally rendered. It depicted a woman of about 30, a sultry smile on her face, wearing a blue dress with furry ruffs, a grey matador hat, and black aviators. That same woman who stood behind *Chikao* in our first meeting, who appeared to be phased out for a different subordinate in all concurrent meetings.

"This is Yukii, a friend of mine who's retired from the criminal life, but is still picking up favours for me. I need you to reconvene with her at her lab, and I need you to help her with an investment of mine." he elaborated. "You do science, いゝゝゝえ?"

"I do."

"Splendid. You have to arrive at her cooking site in the countryside. You'll know where it is." he briefed. "You can clock in at any time, clock out at any time. Think of it as..."

open hour work experience. Now, you're free to go."

Upon being dismissed, I returned back home, falling asleep at 11:30.

Waking at 9AM on Saturday, I already had conviction. Grabbing my things, I took to the area I was directed to by *Chikao*. I had taken the gun which had been kindly given to me, concealing it under a puffy jacket. While I had no ammunition, it was best to have a tool of intimidation on my person, just in case a situation may have demanded it. The area was in the outskirts of the city, where it was mainly just fields for miles. Seeing the city from afar was beautiful in a weird way, now that I think about it. However, that was not what I needed. Turning to my destination, I saw that a camper van sat in the middle of the field. I hadn't been told what exactly it was that I would have to be making with Yukii, but many of the conditions led to me believing it was going to be a rather compelling contract. That day was a sunny day. No clouds in the sky, no residual puddles from prior rainfall, absolutely nothing. Approaching the van, it was easy to note the scent of luxury perfume and high-quality tobacco. Lounging just outside of the van was the woman I'd been

told of - Yukii. She was smoking, seeming not to do anything related. And as I approached her, she finally spoke.

"Get in there and help me make it." she ordered, sultry.

"Make what, ma'am?" I asked. "I wasn't exactly told..."

"I've been contracted by Chikao to make ammunition that subdues its targets."

"What about tranquiliser darts?"

"Their velocity is too low and the effects are too slow. We'll need something powerful enough to get a payload into the body's circulation quickly, but not powerful enough to blow up someone's head. Plus, having a separate form of gear which you'll have to maintain is going to be a lot more expensive."

I believe I contemplated the options for a good few seconds, before replying "Could you just decrease the amount of powder in a round? So the shot firing out is still strong enough to exit the barrel and pierce flesh, while maintaining the ability to use it in a gun?"

For a couple silent seconds, Yukii contemplated the options, and behind those sunglasses, I saw as her gaze softened and a playful, curious glint entered her eyes, seeming

as though the idea entered her eyes. Charging into the camper van, I heard as she dashed what I assumed to be debris off of a flat workspace, likely a table, and began scrawling down notes. Entering the camper van, I saw that, while it was definitely both clean and new, Yukii's presence had already managed to give the clutter which was associated with vehicles which a driver owns for years. Sitting on a shelf were a multitude of chemicals, which I believe were varieties of anaesthetics. Yukii herself was taking apart a round, separating the bullet from its shell, and pouring the excess powder onto a scale. Writing down the resultant weight, she then sighed as she placed the shell into a clench, tightening it.

"Avith, was it? Alright, grab the clay for me, sweetie." she ordered as she continued her notetaking.

Some clay had been stored in a jar. Placing it next to her setup, I awaited my next command. While she was moulding the clay into a shape able to fit into the shell casing, Yukii then ordered "I need some propofol."

Propofol. A powerful anaesthesia which was most effective when entering the body via veins. A favoured tool of mine into my career as

the Tatterdemalion. Grabbing a propofol syringe, I awaited further orders as Yukii procured a tray lined with tin foil.

"Now, inject the clay with the propofol. Full injection."

I did as ordered. Once the syringe had become empty, I drew it from the clay - a sharp shape with a flat bottom, best describable as a cone. Yukii's idea was easy to gauge - the clay bullet would shatter inside the open flesh, the propofol injected inside the round getting into the bloodstream through the newly created open wound and the blood flooding to it. An ingenious idea, albeit risky thanks to infection. Placing the clay bullet into the shell casing, Yukii explained "It's air dry clay. Pick it up tomorrow. I'll have someone drive you to the base to test the round at the gallery. Don't worry about paying them. Take your gun with you, though."

Once a day had passed, Yukii handed me the bullet as expected, and referred me to a driver - a middle-aged man of what seemed like 42 called Quincey Bickle - sat in his cab, waiting for me to enter. I did, and our drive through the city back to the docks began. The drive itself was a rather silent one, albeit what I

saw within the cab spoke more words than my driver himself. Hanging off of his rear-view mirror was a photo of him, a young girl no older than seven, maybe eight years of age, and a beautiful woman. Quincey himself, however, seemed much more rugged than his clean-shaven counterpart in the photo. Even his car showed physical deterioration, with the corners of seats worn off with time, and the miasmatic scent of cheap tobacco lingering in the cabin of the car.

"When was that photo taken?" I asked.

In a gruff voice, Quincey responded "2064."

"Two years ago?"

"Mhm."

"What's your daughter's name?"

"Mina."

"Sounds nice."

"Cheers. I chose it."

"And your wife?"

After some silence, Quincey stated "Alicja."

Since it didn't seem like he was much of the speaking type, I kept any further questions to myself. Seemed like he wanted to choke me out and rip me in half for even thinking of

asking about his wife. Thanks to this silence, my arrival at the docks had not much else to note or journal. As it was daytime, the docks were much more populated. Nearing the warehouse, however, the population of people clamouring decreased. How convenient. Entering the office and descending the ladder, I found myself once more in the Down-Under. After asking around for its location, I eventually arrived at the firing range. Although I had passed it in my first tour of the facility as hosted by Archimedes, I never entered. After all, I had no reason to. Now, though? I did. As I inched into the room, my breathing ragged as I felt the chill of the cold room escape into the wider facility.

Once I had entered, I turned around to witness a brutal image. Bound to poles were multiple men, seemingly maimed by multiple shots from guns. Other than that, though, it operated as a normal shooting range, with separate kiosks, where the distance of the kiosk's respective pole could be managed by a console to the side. Other than those men bound to the poles, I was alone in the gallery. Taking extra delicacy to load the modified round into my pistol due to the fragility of the clay, I



cocked the hammer and tapped the console to move the target to close range. Bound to the pole was a raggedy man, who seemed as though he was unwashed for a good two or three days. Upon seeing my face, however, it lit up as though he'd seen me before.

"You! Kid!" he barked between layers of unkempt facial hair, "I- I'm sorry for threatening you back in the city, I swear! I was set up! They told me they'd pay off all my debt if I did!"

Then, I realised who this man was. It was the selfsame man who'd threatened me on my commute from Skyline Academy, whose presence had indirectly led to my induction to the family. Turning around, however, there was a sign which stated 'Please do not release the targets'. I may be a violent criminal and an undeniable psychopath, but right now, I'm no hack, and even all those years ago, 15 year old me was an honest man who did not con his employers. I tapped the console. The screams of the bound man rang out in the range as he began moving to a distance, which I believe was 12 yards away from my position. Although I was no professional gunman at this point in my life, I'd like to believe my improvisation at this point was capable enough. Zeroing in on the mugger's

head (so as to not brutalise him as much as it normally would if the round made impact with his gut), I relaxed my breathing, finger weaving in and out of the trigger as I attempted to find that perfect spot where sway would absolutely not affect where my shot would hit.

"Look, I- I'll do anything!" pleaded the man as the pole was still moving, "I- I can... I'll do what you want, I swear!"

Once the pole had halted all movement, I slotted my finger into the trigger guard of the gun for the first time, and held my breath.

**And then I squeezed the trigger.**

Along with my wrist probably gaining the most arthritis it ever would thanks to the recoil, a resounding bang filled the firing range, echoing, and causing all of the bound 'targets' to immediately start panicking. Tapping the button, cold mechanisms whirred, silencing all of the screaming 'targets' and drawing the mugger towards me. The mugger's eyes, although not completely losing the spark which came with life, seemed to be dripping away from his body. Whether this was because of the propofol, or if it was because I hit his gut was

unclear to me. Reaching over, I checked his pulse. Slow. And I didn't need to check if the round had blown the mugger's brains out, since his head was clearly still intact, with only the indent formed by the clay bullet visible.

*It worked.*

The next steps in the process were a blur. Yukii and I ran more tests to verify if any victims were passing out thanks to shock or any other anomalies, but after lowering the amount of powder in a shell to make sure that any shot victims wouldn't go through shock, we had attained a consistent equilibrium between being able to shoot out without damaging the gun (my symbolic gun had attained quite the damages, which *Chikao* had kindly replaced when needed), and we eventually managed to form the final version of the prototype round. Of course, we also had to account for different matters. To account for the weakness of clay and the amount of force needed to have clay pierce skin without being broken, I devised that the rounds be tipped with metal to help with penetrating. And so, we had managed to create the nonfatal round in the span of a month, with only experimentation and hard work. After

some final tests, there I stood, back in the *Chikao* Family summit room. I stood there as 'paparazzi' took photos of Yukii and I (the former holding a box full of the rounds we designed). She looked rather pretty in the dress she wore, now that I think about it. It was white with black as a secondary colour, and blue highlights I believe. A symbol of purity, highlighted with power and innovation. Also, to put it simply, she was 'hot as hell'.

"So," *Chikao* said, immediately silencing all of the 'paparazzi', "I trust that the project has been finished?"

Yukii rubbed my head, gloating "Absolutely! And it's all thanks to this lil' kid that I've been able to actually form most of the ideas on the design. Frankly, it's more of his concept than mine."

With Yukii handing *Chikao* the box of bullets, I saw as he took out his own revolver, loaded the round and shot a paparazzo. As was planned, the target slumped down immediately, not out of shock, but thanks to the propofol circulating through their system. *Chikao* then had his subordinates verify the status of the target and beamed with pride as he tossed me and Yukii two duffel bags, both filled to the

zipper with \$10 bills. Yukii had already begun to meander back out of the summit room, so I followed suit.

However, as I began to leave, *Chikao* cleared his throat before ordering "Avith, stay here."

So I did.

After gesturing for the paparazzi to disperse, just like last time, it was me, *Chikao*, and his council in that summit room of quartz. The air was tense, cold, as I sat there with bated breaths, while Chikao procured a dossier from a drawer nearby. Handing it to me, he tapped me on my forehead, making my head face down towards the dossier.

"Why'd you do that?"

"Read the dossier."

So I took to reading. Both the paper and cardboard felt cheap to the touch. Probably recyclable. On it, there was a face, and a name. 'Rae Adamson'. Rae herself looked unkempt, her black hair raggedy after what could only be assumed to be years of ignoring most maintenance procedures, eyes bloodshot as though she'd consumed many narcotics in the span of an hour before her photo had been taken.

"She hasn't paid out her debts for a year now." *Chikao* elaborated, facing away from me, "I want her *dead*."

As the mastermind said 'dead', he clenched his fist so tightly that the thin muscle around it seemed to begin shaking out of tensile resistance.

The Irishman who'd saved me a month ago then interjected, saying "No. Bring the lass in alive. She'll do numbers in the brothel. I can see it now! Rae, the world's depththroat-"

"*Red*." shot back *Chikao*.

"You're no fun, Big Man."

"Shut up."

Interrupting this little quarrel, I then asked "Are there any specific strategies or approaches you would wish for me to use, sir?"

"Yes." *Chikao* responded. "As you would expect, this should be a no witness operation, though. It's open if you want to kill her or not."

And so, with a brisk salute, I left the summit room and began to wander the Down-Under facility. All of them carried themselves elegantly, as though they were not vile, violent criminals. Once I had safely left the docks, I then began to review the file. There

was an address, likely a house number, and some data on the people who'd be nearby, and available to help her. Although it was low risk, I always like to be cautious. Unfortunately, I couldn't do the hit immediately. Friday, I had school, meaning I'd have to attend my studies at Skyline Academy. But even in my month, the spectre of Sunny Ortega haunted me still. Just who exactly was that student who looked like the bane of my induction? She still pestered me in my wandering of the Down-Under when I was on break from my work on the month-long endeavour of the non-fatal rounds. So, with all of the fun of those past days over, I was ready to clock full-time into school again. However, with each step I took in the halls of my school, it felt as though someone was staring, watching my moves. Nonetheless, I attended my form session. After going through the motions (such as registration), we went through the notices. Bored, the hosting teacher was listing out the awards and merits given to students for this week. Lincoln sat next to me, sleeping through the time.

"Avith Rockford, for exemplary performance in Chemistry... Avith Rockford, for smashing the Maths exam," idly noted the

teacher, "*Sonya Ortigosa* for getting maximum marks in last week's English assessment... and that's it. Chat away now, I'll be having a word with Oscar."

As the room burst into chatter, I couldn't help but brood on the fact I'd lost to someone. Sonya Ortigosa? Who was that? Turning to Lincoln, I asked "You know that kid who aced her English exam?"

"Sonya?" he replied, somewhat startled as I'd awoken him, "Uh, yeah? She's been acing everything the school's been throwing at her that wasn't STEM."

"But... how?"

"I dunno. Go ask her."

Once lunch struck, I began scouring the campus for Sonya. However, wandering, I still felt the chills of an unwanted, discomfoting feeling. It seemed to spike as I was alone, when not even those seemingly omniscient young women and men which spent their free times devoted to me, tracking my position, even knew where I was. The skies were cloudy, and one couldn't help but be suspicious. Being cautious, I ambled to a rarely visited area of the campus. Even then, the feeling lingered. Sighing, I asked into the silence "Who's there?"



"Avith!" cheered a group of girls from behind me. All of them attempted to get reprehensibly close to me. Panicking, I hastily put on the playboy persona I always put on for dullards like them.

"Hey girls~ Whaddya need?"

I've always hated putting on that playboy facade. It just always felt wrong. Moving like that. Talking like that. *Being* like that. But I was cursed with the charisma and the looks to make it work. And that disgusted me. At least Yozo's dilemma was logical and based on his personality, these girls swarmed me like flies for no reason other than my cosmetic appeal.

"Well..." one of the girls said in a high-pitched voice - if this was an attempt to be endearing, they were failing to a high degree - and said "My friend, Selina, wanted to confess to you!"

The girl handed me an embroidered envelope with pink highlights. It smelled like a cheap perfume. I pocketed it, and attempted to catch the ire of the girl by cradling her chin with my finger and moving her head up, so I could make eye contact with her. "So? Anything else you need to say?" I added.

I had made the wrong choice. Instead, the girl went flushed, and started grinning as though she'd been touched by an angel, experiencing rapture. She and her entourage then skipped off, presumably clamouring about me. Despite the girls' departure and even *during* that whole interaction, though, that damned abhorrent feeling lingered. I studied the area for the presence, crumpled up the ornate envelope, and squatted down to read as I had seen no threats (even if that feeling lingered). The book which I had been studying was **Crime and Punishment (Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1866)** and it was much more compelling than these social parasites. Reading is nice. I liked reading. Generally, it was a much more thrilling pastime than the field of sport. With sport, and many other hobbies? You're limited to what you have at hand, and simply just that. You only get more if creators higher up than you agree to it. Reading, however? That is consistent, pure. As long as nobody else is present to dictate your interpretation, you are free to interpret a work in any fashion you wish, as long as you can believe in it. And once you escape the boundaries of a work's own continuum, you can create your own, either branching directly off of

the original work or being inspired to make something original.

Once Saturday had arrived, however, I was ready to crunch some bones, instead of numbers in a trite mathematics class. Having purchased three full cylinders of ammunition for my revolver, I promptly began my adventure towards the house of Rae Adamson, my victim. The house which Rae lived in was an unclean, improvised structure in the slums of the poor South of Redcliff City. Knocking on the door, I waited for it to open.

Rae opened it.

I shot.

She screamed.

*I missed.*

Just because I had hit my target on one trial, I had assumed I was a master shooter. But the rounds I used were of weaker power, meaning the recoil would naturally be weaker. Dropping the gun out of my hands in shock, I pursued the fleeing Rae into the kitchen. But she drew a knife on me. Situated nearby was a bong, still smoking and filled with the narcotics used to operate it. There was also a vacuum

cleaner. Observation showed it had a blowing mode too.

"Please surrender quietly." I barked at the woman.

"Hell no!" Rae slurred back, her speech sluggish but aggressive. "I know what you pricks do!"

Grabbing the bong, I took the nozzle of the vacuum cleaner (set to blowing mode) and put it into her eyes. As she scrambled to attempt to move out of the blast's way so she could have eyes on me consistently, I charged at her and shoved the bong's mouthpiece into Rae's mouth. I let her breathe, and it seems as though her ability of prolonged consumption of her precious drugs was not something she'd trained in. Hands squirming at her mouth, I watched as Rae's motions, her attempts at resistance such as kicking me, failed as she began to go limp.

Finally.

Pulse check. Rae was still alive. So, I deactivated the vacuum and called Quincey. In the meantime, I looked around. Multiple syringes littered the floor. Syringes are useful. I took the syringes. Once the notification telling me Quincey was nearby came, I then began

briskly walking to where he'd been parked after a short fiasco where I attempted to hide the body of Rae from passersby. Arriving at Quincey's car, the lingering stench of cigarette smoke was beginning to become comforting to me as I hopped into the cabin.

"Already got a punk like you killing?" observed the driver. "Also, where are you headed?"

"For both of those questions, I think my answer is obvious."

"Sweet lord..." he'd muttered, before asking "Is she-"

"She isn't dead, by the way."

"So you couldn't have just put her in the back seat? Said she was drunk?"

"Who gets drunk at this hour? Plus, what if she gets woken up?"

"You think the cops care enough to check?"

"Little late to switch now."

"Don't blame me when you bring a dead body in."

And so, Quincey drove me to the Down-Under, accompanied with lively discussion on the topic that was Rae's body. As we discussed, however, I contemplated my

failure. That operation, it may have been smoother and quicker, but it is indubitable that it would have been more efficient had I used a tool which I was proficient in using instead of a firearm. Back in the summit room, many of *Chikao's* council recoiled in shock and disgust as I laid Rae's body onto the table. *Chikao* himself, however, rose and tested the body's vitals casually.

"Alive?" inquired the mastermind of the operation

"Mhm."

"Goddamnit."

Red (the rather promiscuous Irishman that had provided the offer of Rae's 'mandatory employment' in the brothel of the facility) cheered in delight as he heard opened the large, black cloak around him, jumping down from the shadowed ceiling and onto the table, much to *Chikao's* chagrin. Nonetheless, *Chikao* replied "Fine. Take her away."

And so, Rae was taken away, *Chikao* placing a duffel bag of cash onto the table before returning to discussion amongst his council. However, with the many supplies I had procured and ideas which had formed in my detainment of the indebted woman, I had an

idea. An idea which would let me master sleep itself. A weapon which could spray a dermally absorbed chemical onto the skin and enter the blood, causing those hit to go under the effects of the substance, be it anaesthesia, poison, or whatever else I may devise. This idea, unfortunately, it would take months to even contemplate getting the funds to procure fitting materials for my weapon. I would have to do a good amount of assassin work to attain the needed funds, and over these months of killing, I gradually began to improvise a sort of martial art from the ground up to aid me in my efforts thanks to . Although difficult thanks to my status in the current year as a criminal to be prosecuted, research has shown to me that my style was primarily a hybrid between *Systema*, *Defendu*, *Krav Maga*, *Aikido* and *Judo*. For convenience's sake, I shall dub it *Attaque*.

As I rose up the ranks of the Family thanks to my killings, my meetings with Sunny unfortunately increased. Still the slow person she was, she had managed to find a good job hauling crates of illegals to her employer's establishment in the black market. Even worse, her workplace was also the prime supplier of cheap .357 Magnum, martial arts books

(although these only helped form baseline areas of Attaque), and many of the chemicals which would provide useful to an assassin's line of work. One time, I had the pleasure of trying to read *House of Leaves* (**Mark Z. Danielewski, 2000**) in the abhorrently idiotic young woman's presence.

"What are you reading now, Avith?"

"A book." I sighed, as I realised what she'd do if her curiosity wasn't sated, before adding "House of Leaves. Mark Z.

Danielewski."

"Ooh! That's the one with... the film about the big house, and the long notes!"

"A simple observation, but an observation nonetheless." I faux-chuckled, as I continued decrypting the enigmatic words... before Sunny spoke again.

"Who wrote it?"

"Mark Z. Danielewski."

"What's the Z mean?"

"He never said. He was going to reveal it when he married, but he never did. Danielewski unfortunately died alone despite how influential his work was."

"That's a shame..."

"Truly."



Crime is fun, but they never tell you about how abhorrently simply most of the associates you can make are. Nonetheless, I continued on walking as Sunny attempted to drum up chat about another menial topic, ignoring those curious, piercing eyes of hers'.

"I'm headed up now." I said as I stopped in front of the ladder. However, I heard Sunny stammering as I heard shuffling and breathing from behind me. Turning around, I saw that young man who'd been berating his girlfriend on that first day in the *Chikao* Family's employment scouting.

"Avith, eh?" asked the large boy as he cracked his knuckles, "Well, Avith, how have you been doing, sucking off the boss?"

"What?"

"You're in his office for so long so many times this month, and your contour looks good..." observed the young man, "there's no way you can just get three bags of cash in just a month with this 'family' shit!"

"Are you, perchance, attempting to project your desires on me?"

"Fuck you mean, wanker?"

The young man glared upon me for a few silent seconds before sending a low jab towards

my gut. With the techniques and training I had attained from my assassination work (which allowed me to refine Attaque), however, I took his forearm and threaded it in the direction it was initially going, maintaining that it would not hit me while I was moving to the young man's behind. Once I was at the suitable position, I angled my right leg in a fitting manner before raising my knee, hitting him in the crotch. Once he recoiled in shock, I let go, giving him an option to bugger off.

"You itching for a fucking fight?"

Alright, nevermind then. While a small crowd was beginning to form around our scuffle, I charged at him, shoving him with a flurry of taps, before striking him in the shins, causing him to stagger back. Once we had reached the wall, I took him by the head and slammed him into it. Once the young man had stopped squirming, I drew him from the wall and threw his limp body down.

*I didn't even know his name.*

Beginning to climb up the ladder, I contemplated how exactly I should make the weapon which accompanied my martial art of

Attaque. Something like a squirt gun would definitely be useful, but a tool which would prove detrimental, as it could take up my right arm in combat, and I am not much of an ambidextrous man. Checking my phone, I saw that I had an alert from my parents about school, specifically, on the subject of film.

Miss Gilberto - my film teacher - was hosting a school trip to see a variety of Christopher Nolan films. One of them was ***Batman Begins.***

## **Weird Science**

The film itself was not mediocre, but not exactly noteworthy (although I found Batman's arm blades, derived from the League of Assassins' own arm blades, to be an interesting idea for gear). However, it was with the villain of Jonathan Crane, or the Scarecrow, which gave me an idea. To use an aerosol form of anaesthetic against enemies and foes, via a sort of spraying function allowing me to spray the aerosol at hostiles for my purposes. Initially, I brainstormed a propofol-based chemical, but its intravenous method entering the system made it difficult to implement. Sevoflurane may be somewhat pricier than propofol, but the investment would be worth it. Still, though, propofol would absolutely prove useful in later compounds of mine. So with the money I'd gotten from some of my recent contracts, I bought the needed supplies. I didn't even have to buy any clothes to mutilate - I had been kindly provided a suit by The Family for my work, which, save for large damage, would all have the finances for repairs handled by them and them alone. The suit itself was a turtleneck

sweater with a white overcoat reaching to my ankles.

However, what was more notable was the mask they provided. An antique of times long past, the mask of the plague doctors of the 16th century. Attached was a note, which ordered that I was to 'wear this mask to conceal my identity on contracts.' Although interesting (and seeming to be the gimmick of this society, if the mobs of people in the Down-Under facility all wearing masks was something to be noted), something as easy to identify as the notable bird mask would absolutely get me spotted amongst a crowd. Nonetheless, any method of identity concealment in my line of work is nice, or at least better than attempting to come up with a Jekyll & Hyde-esque persona.

Even so, the provided coat would act as the perfect base for my weapon - subtle, and usable in tandem with Attaque. It'd allow me to mentally slow my opponents, lulling them to sleep, before I could unleash a flurry of physical strikes upon them. If anything went wrong, I could use a different compound. The work I'd done on the outfitted suit was long and strenuous on both my mind and body, but after a few more months of contracts, I'd eventually

managed to form the suit. It operated off of a pressurised air container stored in a backpack leading to a pipeline which would stop at my sleeves. Within the backpack was also a container of 12 litres filled with sevoflurane, which would be pushed up the pipeline under my suit to my sleeves, before spraying it out in aerosol form. Filtering the air, so that I couldn't breath the sevoflurane, was the mask which had been kindly provided by the Family. However, while it had been tested in tandem with Attaque thanks to the kind (but not volunteered) services of Sunny Ortega, the backpack was much too bulky, and the design I had made wasn't field tested as of yet. Luckily, *Chikao* had managed to snag a contract for me. A contract which would not only consolidate and form the legend of the Tatterdemalion, but also rake in enough money, being the perfect trial for the suit which I'd created.

The hit itself had been called on a politician (and funnily enough, the headmaster of Skyline Academy) called 'Nick Braithwaite', whose campaigns against organised crime in the city proved rather detrimental to the Family's operations. The orders I'd been given were simple - make a message out of him. In two

days from when I'd been initially notified of the contract by *Chikao*, he'd be attending a press conference, the perfect time to get on live TV, and threaten others who'd wish to move with the presence of an assassin. Of course, there were guards, but it's unlikely they would be elite.

So, as it always did, the day of the interview came. The site where the interview was taking place had been in an open air environment, a park, and many witnesses scurried around, naturally being fortified by a police presence due to the nature of the man. And in an apartment, armed with nothing but my suit and *Attaque*, I watched through the window at the site reviewing every move of each man. Everywhere around the venue had been guarded heavily, patrols scurrying each inch of the park and acting on any suspicious sites, save for a site to the rear of where Braithwaite was to enter the stage and stand at his podium. Before descending the staircase, I checked the time. 1PM. Braithwaite's speech was to begin at 1:20, meaning I had a rather small timeframe to skulk around the area, eliminate guards, and kill Braithwaite himself. Nonetheless, I continued on. As I wandered the

crowds of civilians, my plague doctor's mask in my hand, I held my backpack close while I reached the backstage region of the area. Sparse crates littered the area. Taking cover behind one of these crates, I eavesdropped on the discussion of the two guards patrolling the rear as I took the mask to my face. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. This was life, and life was absolutely great.

"You hear about what Braithwaite's doing with the crime in this city?" stated the guard, "He's managed to choke out the entire PD like it's nothing."

"I heard. It was a real incident. By the way, did you see those deaths this morning in the briefing?"

"The ones where people are just... dying on the street?"

"Yeah, believe so. Doctors say it's all just overdoses, but records show they're clean."

"Overdose on what, though?"

"Some blend of drugs. All the boys in forensics say that it's propofol and some opioid."

"Huh. Well, there's nothing we can do about it."

"Guess so."



Killing these two would be easy but as compelling as a brick wall, so I ignored them. Once they had turned away from my general area, I vaulted the crates which I'd taken cover behind and began my infiltration of the backstage region. Guards being much more numerous, I was forced into being alert, almost being spotted by guards thrice. All of these guards were armed, but only with pistols of semiautomatic variety, meaning it wouldn't be much of an issue if I'd just bolted it.

As I rolled between cover, avoiding patrols, I kept one wary eye on the time. 1:15PM. 5 more minutes until Braithwaite was to enter live TV, and I was to kill the portly politician on live TV under the name of the *Chikao* Family, establishing the Tatterdemalion as something to be feared amongst the city. Not yet, however. Squatting down behind some crates stored in an unremarkable alcove, I kept my ears focused on movements for those 5 minutes. And then I heard the man himself speaking.

"So, is that what you want, Helios?" muttered the politician into what I assumed to be a phone. "You want Avith Rockford to be expelled from Skyline Academy?"

There was silence as I processed what he was saying. It meant me, Avith Rockford, wouldn't be able to live as I wanted any more. It meant that I would be unable to supply my trials beyond what the Family could provide, and while they *were* powerful, they weren't omnipotent back then. Nonetheless, I'd still have to wait.

"Very well. Just wait 10 minutes, Helios, and this little favour of yours shall be done."

Braithwaite pocketed his phone and walked out to the podium. Many cheered. Soon, those cheers would be turned into delectable squeals. The campaign song for Braithwaite, *Weird Science* by Oingo Boingo began to play as he showed his face on live TV. Slowing my nerves by popping a pill of *Diazepam*, I listened through the walls to review the positions of the two guards that would indubitably be guarding his flanks then bolted through the door, kicking it down, spraying the guard to my left with anaesthetic spray.

Charging at me, a guard's fist was clenched as they attempted to knock me down, but I had made distance before kicking the downed guard's body at them, causing them to trip. Disarming both, I then began walking over

to Braithwaite. Once he attempted to break into a frenzied sprint, I used a switch on the backpack to change what liquid my suit sprayed. Lighting a match in front of the nozzle where it was to spray out, I then pulled my finger, tensing the string and towards Braithwaite.

Already the site had been evacuated, but the cameras kept rolling. Even as Braithwaite screamed and begged while being lit aflame. After a few minutes, the fire still raged, no doubt fuelled by the lard contents held within the politician. Clearly dead (as verified by two kicks), I picked up the body and held it to the camera before walking offstage, the guards' response in gunfire minimal. Escaping the scene rather efficiently (thanks to the slow response time of police), I began to get changed inside of an alleyway. This alleyway was cold. But as I changed into a white button-up (after all, masks can only conceal so much identity), that undesirable feeling which struck me back at Skyline Academy returned. Holding the sleeve with the sprayer to both ends of the alleyway in an attempt to clear it, I hastened my changing, packed up the clothes of the Tatterdemalion and

escaped the scene before that bizarre feeling could fester into something worse.

Since the Braithwaite incident, I have innovated in the design of the Tatterdemalion suit. I have minimised the size of the storage containers used to hold chemicals and pressurised air, building them both into my suit and into the pockets, mandating the habit of me having to check said breast pocket if I wished to read my liquid levels. I had also packed quite the amount of improvised grenade-esque weapons (which were really just glass flasks filled with a volatile propofol-soap mixture) for many contracts. All of this culminated into a year of work, and before I knew it, I was 16.

I had also managed to gain a seat of power amongst my students, no matter how temporary. Having been sworn in as student president, it meant that I had the power to influence the school's politics. Plus, with more practical chemistry setups all across the school, it meant I could embezzle those supplies for my own usages in contracts working with the *Chikao* Family. However, even with fame doubling down on me and forcing me to hold that same pestilent playboy persona, there still was a diamond in the rough.

Cherlyn Fox, my mind just couldn't get off of her. She was beautifully unobtainable and starting to gain notoriety in the school for her antics. In my mind, there was a yearning for her vested in me which my brain called for me to sate. So, I did. I left an anonymous note in her locker asking for her to meet me behind the school.

But nobody came. And I still felt that weird, despicable feeling.

Disheartened (but not exactly scarred), I reported back to duty in the Down-Under facility. I had picked up a side job in manufacturing a selection of chemically-manufactured narcotics to act as a secondary source of income in my crime. However, as I stepped into *Chikao's* office, I heard him already procuring a dossier from behind those large doors. Entering, I saw as the dossier had already been placed at the opposite end of him. *Chikao* gestured for me to grab it.

"Read it." ordered the mastermind as he tented his fingers.

My eyes glanced over the dossier. Unlike the previous ones, which were all dyed black, it was made of beige paper. It also seemed to be a lot more thin. So, being the good man that I

was, I grabbed it and opened it. Greeting me behind the beige folder's cover was a portrait of the young woman I loved so, so, dearly, along with her vital information. Her black hair flowed down to her neck, brown eyes seeming as though they pierced their paper prison to stare directly at me.

"That is Cherlyn Fox." *Chikao* stated.

"She is a young woman of 16-"

"I'm not killing her." I interrupted.

"Correct. You're *procuring* her."

"What?"

"By my contacts in the faculty of Skyline Academy, Cherlyn has

proven to be a rather... queer character, with a set of skills that..." *Chikao* pondered his next set of words, before continuing "my faculty and I find to be rather curious. Do not kill her. Do not tranquillise her. Simply notify her of my interest."

"I have no reason to plan on harming her," I responded, "I *love* her as the penguin loves its mate, I will not-."

"Duly noted." finished the mastermind, dusting off his turtleneck sweater and adjusting his mask, "Now, you're dismissed, Tatterdemalion."

And so, I'd been left to plot how exactly I'd call Cherlyn to arms. I'd have to remain hidden in a place such as an alleyway since the Tatterdemalion character that had killed many politicians and criminals over the span of one year isn't exactly the best sort to confront you in public about an underground criminal empire.

Skip a week, and there I was after school, sitting in an alleyway donning my plague doctor mask and the latest revision of the Tatterdemalion suit. Nearby, the songs, banter and rough play of a local pub - the 'Vallestrecho' - echoed throughout. However, Cherlyn's sweet breathing, those footsteps, were never easy to miss to ears like mine. So once she neared the mouth of the alleyway, I snuck up from behind and dragged her into the alleyway. Of course, Cherlyn flailed about. After all, who wouldn't? I kept a hand over her mouth so she wouldn't scream. However, I didn't have a hand to cover my mouth as her flailing eventually hit me in the groin. I barely held in my pained squeals of delight and kept her in my hold as she kept at the task of kicking me, before she eventually gave up. "Who I am is not important." I stated as she squirmed her arms, attempting to break

loose. "I am simply a messenger of a larger force, which is offering you a job."

Her squirming stopped, and she turned around, trying to face me, curious. Now seemingly docile, I let Cherlyn go. "I'm... It's sweet that your boss is so interested in me~! But who- Hell, what are you even with?" asked my beloved.

"Someone who wishes to make a deal. Come to the docks tomorrow." I stated. Before Cherlyn could ask any further questions, I swiftly ascended a ladder in the alleyway and began bolting atop the rooftops, escaping the scene.

Back at the Down-Under, I had retreated to a lab kindly provided to me by *Chikao* when I felt the air shift. Someone had entered. Turning to the presence, I saw the kindly doctor who'd invited me into the Family, currently flanked by two guards. Sprinting out of the lab and to the good doctor, I tried to shake their hand. A guard pointed to the handcuffs which bound them, however. I tried to ask what the good doctor had done, but the doctor shook their head with a smile. Astonished, I watched as he'd been taken off to behind an 'alleyway' in the facility, the only sign that I'd never see them



again being a flash of light and flesh falling on concrete. I rarely ever cried in my career as the Tatterdemalion, but I couldn't help but tear up slightly as I saw the doctor's body being dragged out of that alleyway. I hardly ever knew them, but if it wasn't for their help in my career, I would have never fallen into this life. Perhaps that would be for the better, though. Perhaps. Nonetheless, I'd seen my phone and a notification that had come to it. I had an order to enter the summit room, for Cherlyn's induction was to start soon.

As the hour for Cherlyn's arrival drew closer, I entered the summit room, as had been ordered by him, and stood at his flank, replacing the position of one of those armed guards. I saw Cherlyn, beautiful as she'd always been, donning a subtle black tee. Those hazel eyes of hers' first glared at me, probably for my questionable means of sending a message, before turning to *Chikao*. In a way, it reminded me of how I'd first entered the room, those rows of senior criminals staring down at you. I saw as Cherlyn then turned around, seeming scared, before recoiling in shock as she saw the leviathan Red standing over her. *Chikao* turned to me, whispering "Creeps, eh?" before turning

back and gesturing Red away, which he promptly did, retreating back into the shadows which he came from. And so, the induction ceremony began. It was much like mine, although it didn't finish with Cherlyn pricking her finger.

"Red." he ordered, fingers tented, "A little over the head?"

The Irishman then emerged from the shadows and struck Cherlyn unconscious with an efficient strike. Once she laid there, *Chikao* ordered "Splendid. Avith, grab the knife." I did as such, before pricking Cherlyn's index finger. Her warm hand in mine was a feeling which I adored, but Red slapped it out with a gentleman's glare and a playful chuckle afterwards. As if he could tell me about it, when he ran a brothel. Nonetheless, the blood had been drawn, and Cherlyn lay there, spectrally beautiful and mysterious.

Dulling your attention for the sake of it is not my job, so I shall skip the wait. Cherlyn awoke 3 minutes later, naturally coming to lucidity with a great shock. "What the hell happened?" she shouted, before seeing her bandaged index finger. Sighing, *Chikao* explained "The blood that we took had

meaning. It means we are now family. You shall live by the gun and the blade, and if it ever comes to it, you will die by the gun and the blade."

The council sitting at the seats curtly applauded my beloved's induction, before *Chikao* took out a selection of Minor Arcana cards from his pocket, before shuffling them and placing them face down on his longtable. With a flick of his wrist, *Chikao* sent the topmost card hurtling down the table before landing an inch in front of Cherlyn, face down.

"Pick it up." he ordered.

Cherlyn did as ordered, those glossy chocolate eyes scanning the face of the card. Slowly reading the card, she asked "The... Ten of Swords?"

"A beautiful but deadly draw." *Chikao* observed, a curious glint in his eyes visible under the mask he wore, "Either you'll be crushed by hopelessness, or you'll rise up and learn to level your opposition. Now, you are free to go-"

"No. I wish to see what happens in the field."

"Very well then." *Chikao* stated, before turning to me. "So, Tatterdemalion. I have another contract for you."

In my hubris, I asked "Is it a big hit on some politician?"

"No." *Chikao* stated, a grin of deviance audible in his voice. "I need you to aid the Ten of Swords."

In my mind, this was the perfect opportunity to bond with Cherlyn. But I couldn't make it obvious. So, putting on the facade of an exasperated teen, I muttered faux-curses. Sliding a black dossier down a table, *Chikao* continued explaining "Thanks to your... timing, we've had to make this hit small. Going on a pub crawl across the city is one Daniel Skinner. He's a former veteran in a mercenary company, who took out some loans to pay for alcohol (which he doesn't intend on paying back to us). Kill him. That is all. You and Tatterdemalion can exchange information as is needed. Dismissed."

Leaving the room, I felt as Cherlyn tugged on my sleeve. Had it not been for the mask, it felt as though the shade of pink my face flushed would expose not only my identity, but also what feelings I truly held for my

sweetheart long before I intended on confessing them. Even so, I put on a cold facade.

"What?" I asked.

Cherlyn asked "Do you have any advice, Mr..."

"Tatterdemalion." I stated, cold. "And procure your own gear."

My beloved put on a rather endearing pouting face, before observing "You're no fun."

"It's better than nothing."

And so, I continued walking on. Once out of sight, I blended into the crowd, before following and guarding her as she began her exit from the Down-Under facility. No matter their garb, these dandies were violent criminals after all, you could never tell with the sort, what they'd do and how they'd do it. Back at school, however, my life had been dull. Thanks to Braithwaite's death, the vice principal, a woman in her late 40s called Pauling, took charge while the board hunted down a new one. The threat of my expulsion (as was ordered by this enigmatic 'Helios' character) didn't linger, although there was a chance that the substitute may be working in league with Helios, or at least plotting against me. Even so, I continued my charismatic

facade, and in my contracts, when *Chikao* contacted me once more.

In the downtime, while Cherlyn prepared herself and the Family geared her as was necessary, Chikao gave me a contract. It wasn't any murders, or larceny, but rather a chemistry job. 50kg of what I believe was methamphetamine via phenyl-2-propanone. The lab was naturally a place of cleanliness and science, but I hadn't yet used it in a contract. Naturally, it was this sort of thing I'd find thrilling. Plus, I was told I'd be cooking alone. Much to my chagrin, however, as I'd entered the lab, I saw Sunny there, pulling herself into a yellow contamination suit thrice her size.

"Hi, Avith!" she exclaimed upon seeing my entry.

Naturally, I walked back out. After all, if she was in there, it must have meant that I was intruding on business which I'd abhor, I deduced. But just as I opened the door and stepped out, the burly guard which stood there, guarding the lab, stopped me from leaving.

"What is this nonsense?" I requested.

In a deep, Russian accent (which bordered the caricature rather than that of an actual accent), the guard explained "You are to

work with little woman and cook 50 pounds of product as requested by *Chikao*."

"But I wasn't told of this-"

"Cook." stated the Russian, emphasising his point with cracking of the knuckles and a sneer to match. At this time, I had already removed my modified coat and hung it upon a rack too far to simply pick it back up again, so I'd simply have to go along as requested. Plus, it isn't exactly the most courteous thing to assault a coworker. So, cutting my losses, I closed the door on the Russian, before turning to Sunny.

"You said you wouldn't be taking jobs detrimental to society." I stated. "Synthesising methamphetamine is somewhat detrimental."

Exasperated, Sunny replied "Jim told me I wouldn't be killing anyone!"

"Did you ask for specifics?"

There was a beat of silence as the machinery in the laboratory hummed, before Sunny sombrely responded "No..."

"Just follow my orders, then." I said as I began scouring the laboratory for the needed supplies, "But don't you *dare* try cooking at home by yourself."

"Why? Are you... concerned for me, Vito~?"

"In a way, yes. But I have no reason to care for *you*. You as an individual, you as a human being. I'm-" I said, cutting myself off. "*What did you just call me?*"

Sonya paused, her gaze steering off to the side slightly, before responding "I... it sounded like a logical thing..."

"Only... good friends of mine call me Vito." I said, getting in her face and staring at her through the visor of the respirator she wore, "Got that?"

I couldn't see her face behind that respirator since it was clouded out by black, but she stammered thrice on her words before stepping to the side and out of my glare. After a slight pause when she'd finished her stammering, she finally said in a low, hushed whisper "Okay..."

After that slight kerfuffle, I returned to my search for usable tools soon after I'd begun to wear my own protective equipment. The process I'd be using required round-bottom flasks, Bunsen burners and an assortment of other glassware. For my own sake and the fact that the Family still has small branching operations surviving which maintain some of the culture that its parent family had (along with



some of the trade recipes), I shall not transcribe my exact efforts and recipes, but as I'd said above, phenylacetone was part of the synthesis process I used to create my product. In my time with the *Chikao* Family I'd been assigned the glory of delivering drugs and other such illicit products to those who'd seen it, but I hadn't exactly been given the honours of creating it myself. Hell, I'd say Sunny proved to be a rather good partner in the process. She followed orders. Of course, there were lows for the first ten or so minutes, but she proved rather efficient in the synthesis.

Once we set the first 30 pound batch of our creation to settle in cool, low-light conditions, Sunny asked "So where is this... going to?"

"I myself am likely to be personally handing it out to some low-income southern region neighbourhoods." I replied, cracking my knuckles and tending to the Bunsen burners, "However I'm not doubting that it'll be resold in the northern regions of the city."

"Vi- Avith?"

"Fire away. And thanks."

With a solemn look on her face, Sonya replied "D- Don't peddle in Little Havana... Please?"

I paused. After all, *Chikao* could give me orders to prioritise it. Nonetheless, I finally caved, turning to her and replying "No promises."

"Good. That- That's good." Sonya said, turning away from me and attempting to make it look as though she was busying herself with a nearby clipboard, which she did horrendously, but I didn't comment on it, however. We began our work on the final 20 pounds soon after. Swiftly finishing efficiently without much else to note, Sunny and I split from the lab soon after, the Russian reviewing our work.

At a later date and a different area, I stood at the city in an alleyway, Cherlyn arriving in a grey dress with black garter belt stockings beneath and a white ski mask, her sable, twin-tailed hair causing it to peak at the top of the head as though she were a fox. Not exactly the best for combat but over time, it'd develop to fit just like my own gear did.

"You look like crap." I faux-observed. My beloved was radiantly beautiful on this day, but I couldn't let my feelings be known.

"Says you."

"I get good money for this."

"Yeah, yeah. Sure you do."

"Hmph. Where are we searching, then?"

"Map says that he's on a pub crawl across the city... I'm betting his next place is the Vallestrecho."

"That bar? Alright, I'll get in there and sweep the place, you just-"

Not following my orders, Cherlyn immediately bolted back out of the alleyway, making her way into the noisy establishment. Even outside, the noises of its inhabitants were playing through the city. Not long after her, I entered myself. Much like the exterior, the interior had an air of antiquated eloquence, the scent of wood varnish overpowering most scents. *Fairytale of New York* by The Pogues played over a loudspeaker. The carpet had a bizarre pattern of hexagonal, half-complete shapes, not dissimilar to that from the one seen in Kubrick's *The Shining*. Among the crowds was Cherlyn herself, weaving through them with precision, as though she had past experience with the deed. Once we reached a quieter place in the establishment, we finally spoke of where our hit, an alcoholic

ex-mercenary, either traumatised or simply uncaring of his tenure. After a minor dispute over where exactly we were to search, it was settled. Cherlyn would track the lower floor while I was to track the upper floor.

It didn't take long to find Skinner, for he was an alcoholic dullard, ranting about his time in deployment, neurotic and dazed. Some sober friends stood guard, however. Possibly men from Skinner's own time in deployment, trained soldiers who would prove rather vital to my testing of Attaque. The story which Skinner rambled on about, from what I remember, seemed to be his lamenting over the death of his lieutenant, and the resulting disbandment of his unit. A failed arms deal with the millionaire philanthropist Slade Walker. I stood among the crowd which had gathered to hear the ex-mercenary's tale, awaiting the time to strike, but unfortunately, donning a mask is apparently a good way to identify someone as Skinner's pupils contracted, the alcoholic raising his bony finger and stammering "W- What do you want from me? I- I swear I'll pay you guys back soon, I swear!"

Tossing a flask of muscle-numbing inhalation anaesthesia down while rolling out of

the way to not get caught in its effects, I heard the party below me enter a deep silence (save for the music track). As she ascended the flight of stairs and bursted into the billiards room, I pushed Cherlyn out as the potent anaesthesia cloud.

"Wh- What's going on, Tatters?!" she squealed as she recovered from my shove.

"Don't call me *Tatters*, I have a better name! And I-"

Before I could finish, the booming sound of magazines unloading and lead pelting filled the hallway we stood in, forcing me and Cherlyn to dive behind cover. Once safe, I then tossed another flask, a potent intravenous anaesthesia (the name escaping me as of late) at the general direction of the fire. My heart was beating as it had with the mercenaries in the Down-Under - this was the thrilling part, the truly exhilarating bit I'd never forget. However trained that people can be, I doubt that people could avoid shards of broken glass hurtling in a radius. Some shins were hit, some of the mercenaries being knocked down by the pain, blood spraying where it could. I could see a

glint in Cherlyn's eye from behind that ski mask of her's.

"Somebody get that scarecrow-looking cunt!" shouted one of them, a pair of slow, predictable footsteps making their way through the mist created by the anaesthesia.

Once they reached my end of the hallway, I vaulted the cover and began overloading the mercenary with a flurry of taps to the chest before disarming them as their dazed arms flailed about, trying to get my hands away, and knocked him to the ground. After checking the sevoflurane levels of my suit, I began walking down the hall once the propofol mist had left. Almost immediately, a barrage of pistol shots were sent my way. Since the version of the sprayers I was using for this version of my suit only worked in close range, I'd have to get in close to be able to subdue the mercenaries with minimal loss, impossible because of the whole 'gun' thing. Once I'd ducked behind cover, however, I saw as Cherlyn began bolting down.

"Stop!" I ordered, almost poking my head out of the cover, "Ten of Swords, you're going to get yourself-"

*My beloved had been shot.*

I couldn't believe my eyes. As blood sprayed the hallways, I began to tear up slightly. A mercenary began to approach the body, checking it, but I began to note some oddities. Had the chest always risen and fallen in such an erratic manner when shot? The pain of being shot in the head was likely enough of a shock to force an untrained victim down.

In a flash of motion, Cherlyn seemingly rose as if not even affected by even having a bullet (as I'd seen now) graze her head. How elegantly brutal, it was, as she sent her knee hurtling to the unfortunate mercenary's groin before repeatedly sending the knife she had stored in her handbag deep into his chest while he recoiled in the pain, screaming. As spraying blood painted her face, you could see as she grinned as though possessed by a grotesque ghoul, all the while licking her lips, relishing in the taste of the blood, and salivating at the mouth like a rabid hound. Before long, the mercenary fell to the ground. This was not the quiet, eloquently spoken Cherlyn I had spoken to in my time at Skyline Academy, the cold, uncaring woman who wouldn't give two shits about me. Instead, it was a different entity entirely. An entity that could crush me beneath

her boot as though I were a bug, retaining only the face of the refined Cherlyn Fox. With my courage and hope restored, I attempted to pat Cherlyn on the back, but with a strength unfitting of her atrophied, short frame, she grabbed me by the wrist before taking her knee against my elbow, pushing down at my wrist and either cracking it or dislocating it in a swift motion. Naturally, I reeled in pain, before Cherlyn began bolting into the hallway, the little young woman taking them down. From my end of the carnage, I saw as she levelled them, her fighting style erratic as she twirled her blade between foes.

And it ended.

Sirens began to ring in the distance - the sound of police coming in to persecute me and the fallen mercenaries. Feeling as humiliated as I'd first felt when I failed to kill Rae Adamson, I fell to my knees as the shock and pain of my elbow's dislocation began to be the only sense available to me, the sound of Cherlyn slurping and the visceral sounds of needles being stabbed into flesh being the only thing before silence and pitch blackness consumed me.



I awoke not long after in the back of the stagnant air of Quincey's cab, a rather soft, smooth pillow beneath my head, my arm still throbbing like crazy, although seemingly popped back into its joint and most motor function for that specific area lost. Still in my suit, I noted this as an oddity, putting my good hand to my face and feeling it. Instead of the plastic of my mask, however, I felt *bare skin*. Instinctively, I then tapped around with my good hand to feel around where I actually had been. After that, I heard the voice of Cherlyn squealing in shock.

"Wha- Tatters- Avith, you're awake?!" she shouted, still shocked "And why'd you touch me *there*?! Pervert!"

I could barely groan out "What the fu-"

Ah.

I drew the culprit hand away from Cherlyn's upper body and then cradled the bridge of my nose between my index and thumb. Once I'd composed myself, I rose from the pillow, instinctively looking to where I'd been resting for the past what I'd been assuming to be minutes. And I was greeted with the sight

of Cherlyn's thighs, donning her black stockings.

A weaker man would have immediately gone wild with this revelation. I may have been strong in body, and able to put out the illusion of being strong in mind, but if that statement I said prior applied, I was absolutely a weak man beneath all of that. However, there was another matter in my mind. Cherlyn had unmasked me. As stated prior, in the *Chikao* Family, there is a bizarre custom shared amongst every member in the ranks. Everyone truly inducted wore a mask provided by the Family, whether it be provided by them as a reward for actions deemed worthy of it, a punishment and a mark of shame for prior misdeeds against *Chikao*, or simply a surplus item for uniform and aesthetic value.

"Cherlyn." I stated, "Where is it?"

Removing her white, bloodstained ski mask to match my stare with a badly feigned incredulous tone, Cherlyn asked "What- Where is what?"

"Where is my mask?"

Cherlyn was silent for a second, before taking to searching the cabin of the car with a panic which I'd never seen in her before.

Quincey attempted to get the erratic young woman to calm down, but she was much too hasty, much too noisy in her searching to take note of his panicked hushing. Now, I loved her, that much I could say. But how easy is it to love her when she could easily ruin my prospects by ratting me out? But I'd have to calm her.

"Cherlyn, *why?*"

"I just- I had the-" Cherlyn stammered, then finished "You... You aren't mad?"

"I'm not mad." I stated, "I am simply going to put the reason as to why you unmasked me in your report card."

"Oh."

"I wasn't assigned to kill the- wait, you *did* kill the target, right?"

"Yeah."

"Great."

"V- Very well." I said, adjusting myself to sit in the seat of the car properly, "Your pay shall be given when we arrive at the- wait, Quincey, we are headed to the Down-Under, no?"

Responding to my question, the driver put his large hand out, extruding his thumb from it in an affirmative gesture before drawing his hand back to the stick shift, for the vehicle

was a manual and as such, demanded that he maintain consistent control of the automaton unless he drives it into something such as a family of four. After a good few minutes of the drive in Cherlyn's presence, I then procured a simple shopping bag from the back of Quincey's taxi. My thought process at the time was that it would act as a good substitute to one which Cherlyn's actions caused me to lose.

"Knife." I ordered, holding my hand out for it. In response, Cherlyn handed her blade to me, and I attempted to visualise where the eyeholes should have gone in the bag. Unfortunately, I seemed to find great difficulty in this simple task. Instead, I placed the bag upon my head, tied the plastic handles together to secure the mask around my neck, and handed the blade back to Cherlyn. I gestured to where my eyes were.

Instead of following through with my orders however, Cherlyn said "But... what if it *hurts* you?"

"You... took down a hallway of armed, trained soldiers with only a knife." I observed, my fingers trailing to my neck so they could loosen the tightness of the bag which masked

me, "I don't think I should worry about being hurt."

"I just... I get like that when I see or smell blood..." she explained, looking wistfully out of the window. "I don't like to talk about why..."

Naturally, I kept silent. Being blinded by a shopping bag does not prove to be a good conversation piece. Once she'd gained the gall to, however, Cherlyn took to cutting out the eyeholes for the mask, finally letting me see once more. While this physical closeness to my soon-to-be beloved could be considered one of many highlights of my life, it wouldn't be smart to act as though it was. So taking out a pen and a *Dostoevsky* novel, I began reading and notetaking. After a few more minutes of driving, the car was silent. The hum of the engine and the occasional muttered curse of Quincey targeted towards some errant driver was all I could hear as the drive continued on.

And to break this pact of silence was Cherlyn, who said "Tatter- Vito."

"What is it you need?"

Cherlyn, adjusting her position, leaned in closer to me, saying "You know, you're cuter when you're quiet."

"N- Nuh uh."

"Why are you stuttering?"

"I'm not."

"Suit yourself." giggled Cherlyn.

And we continued sitting there in our quiet solace as the drive continued on. We arrived at the Down-Under, signed in, reported our kill to *Chikao* and left just as quickly as we'd entered. But still, I felt a new bond, separate from the bond I had with Cherlyn, but instead, with that rabid, feral entity which seemed to invade the body and mind of the real Cherlyn as she saw blood. However, air in the facility seemed to be off. Many more of the mafiosi seemed to be armed. Chikao was planning something. Something large. Something which would indubitably change Redcliff City as all of us would know it. Not yet, though. I still had some business to attend to. Back then it was stranger information to me, nothing but conspiracy which would form in the mind of dullards within my age range who had nothing better to form other than rumours which would amount to nothing in the culture of the base other than unnecessary panic. And one fateful day, I got a notification while wandering the metropolitan region of the Down-Under. A

notification which confirmed the suspicion of all who would subscribe to such theories.

*C: Tatters. Enter the summit room, 10PM, and guard my flank. I have a meeting with the Binmen to-morrow. Further orders shall be given by the meeting's end.*

And he'd even taken to using that annoying nickname devised by Cherlyn.

## You Really Got Me

The day itself was unremarkable until the 10PM mark. Other than school and a lesson with Cherlyn, there wasn't much to say about it. Once I'd notified her of the meeting, other information from that specific day escaped my mind. After all, with each piece in motion and based on what *Chikao* himself said on the matter of who exactly we were meeting - the Binmen, those mercenaries which had been attacking us. According to him, we were to have a meeting, which would settle the score between the two factions once and for all, ending the gang war apparently being fought by our respective factions' subsidiaries.

While I waited for *Chikao* to procure another mask, he'd ordered for me to keep on using Quincey's plastic bag as a substitute in the meantime. Cherlyn had also arrived, standing to our benefactor's left flank while I stood to his right. Then the median of the peace discussion showed up. A rather wellbuilt gentleman nearing the end of his 60s, he looked rather young for his age, his hair only greying slightly, crows' feet adorning his cheeks, his amber eyes glowing in the faux-sunlight and highlighted by



quaint spectacles and a black fedora sitting atop his head. To his hip was a white gas mask and an assortment of tools attached to his waist via a utility belt. The gentleman carried himself much like the dandies of the Down-Under, although as was shown by the many well-gear'd mercenaries which marched into the room, taking up positions at all of his flanks. Behind them all was a rather unremarkable (presumably) Filipino boy no older than I, donning a black bandana with a decal of rows of sharp, grinning teeth which covered his mouth and nose alongside a coat with orange highlights, his eyes so sable and dark they could be considered black, and his glare so chilling it even sent me a little wayward.

"Good evening, *Chikao*." began the gentleman, "As was discussed in our treaty, shall we be... reviewing each other's best agents?"

*Chikao* adjusted his turtleneck sweater before responding "I believe so, Alfred."

The man dubbed Alfred exhumed a sinister feeling which one could not force to the bottom of their minds. No matter how closely he portrayed himself as an amicable grandfather, those amber eyes which scanned

the room, reviewing the weaknesses of my boss's staff and debating all one-hundred-and-three methods as to how he could simply quash each and every mafioso and mafiosa in the summit room which housed us *alone*.

"Very well. Indulge me."

Most of Alfred's guards, save for that intriguing young Filipino with those black eyes and his grinning bandana, were mainly armed men, pathetic excuses of hitmen, even pathetic excuses of criminals, so naturally, I never listened in on the discussion on them. Once the boy my age had been brought up, however, I listened in.

Alfred began "This is my lad-"

What exactly *Chikao* had said to interrupt escapes me as of late, but I do believe it began with one syllable - 'A'. What exactly this *A* had after it was unknown to me then, and certainly is unknown to me now, but my boss's observation seemed to be correct as Alfred took to loudly guffawing alone, most of his bodyguards laughing awkwardly behind him. Through all of this, the boy I am dubbing *A* was looking around the summit room. *Chikao* laughed too, although (to me at least), that

laughing was indubitably a veil for more sinister emotions.

Once the silence had settled once more, Alfred slowly drew a pistol from his breast pocket before laying it down on the table. He gestured for his boy to take it, which the young man did without hesitation as though it had been drilled into him. Whether it be rigorous training or simple adrenaline was unclear - while not an inch of emotion was visible in any facial muscle of *A's*, the eyes of that young man had a glint in them as he grabbed the pistol.

"Field strip the M1911." Alfred ordered.

And then it began. With a flick of the wrist, *A* first took out the magazine of the pistol, setting it aside with a smooth motion, his digits immediately taking to the slide of the weapon once his hand moved back. Locking the slide back, it was clear his discipline was amazing too, aiming at the ceiling as he went with the first steps of the disassembly. Once he'd finished, he then put the weapon barrel-up on the table, pressing the recoil spring plug down and rotating the bushing at 90° with his other hand in a clockwise motion. Afterwards, *A* delicately eased the recoil spring plug out of its recessed position, before completely

removing it and disengaging the safety. With another swift motion, the slide had been completely clicked back so that *A* could remove both sides of the slidestop notch, setting it aside next to the pistol's magazine. Finally, he then unlatched the slide, setting it aside and placing it on the table, before placing the main frame aside.

I turned to *Chikao*. In his hand (which he held proudly up), there was a silver watch which presumably timed *A*'s field stripping process. Setting it down, the time which had been taken was 18.493 seconds. Analysing the number himself, it seemed as though *Chikao* had been impressed.

“And that’s not the only part. You know that chick you said you wanted to hire?” Alfred added. “Vladimira Godunov?”

*Chikao* said “Ah, yes, her. She is a rather impressive combatant but I find her usage of the *Kodachi* to be rather...”

“Appropriating?” Alfred chuckled.

“Yes, that was the word. But nonetheless, again, I find her worthy of wielding the weapon.”

“Yes. Expect to see her tomorrow. Now, what of your ranks?” Alfred asked.

Chikao leaned in towards the visitors, beginning to speak. "Very well, my friend. Now, in this day and age, perhaps you can consider my own subordinates to be rather..."

"Comical?" Alfred added, with an amicable smirk.

"Maybe." observed my superior, "Maybe. But much like your... *remarkable* specimens, they get the jobs done."

Cherlyn seemed to have lulled herself off, or zoned off while she stood guard behind *Chikao* as the only sign she hadn't somehow bored herself to death amongst the pleasantries exchanged between the two criminal masterminds. Luckily for her, it seemed as though my introduction was first, as *Chikao* tapped me on the thigh. I stepped forward from my position.

"If you excuse him for the choice of mask he'd selected for this event," he began, "this is **Tatterdemalion.**"

Alfred was silent as he leaned in to review me in particular (for while his gaze did fall upon me, it wasn't for any sustained reviewing), before observing "Is this the same one from the Braithwaite incident on live TV?"

"That would be correct, Mr. Nashton."

"What an odd little fellow..." muttered Alfred as he adjusted the glasses perched on his nose, "truly odd indeed. Tell me about how he fights..."

"An eclectic collection of street-fighting techniques, I believe." *Chikao* stated.

"Really?" incredulously asked the senior criminal with a smirk on his face. "That lad's running with an eclectic martial art so fine-tuned you'd expect him to be a genius in such matters."

"And you wouldn't be wrong about him being a genius." chuckled *Chikao*, fingers tented, "Now, are there any volunteers amongst your entourage who wish to duel the Tatterdemalion? If you are alright with that, Mr. Nashton."

For a slight 30 seconds at the minimum, Alfred took to muttering amongst his entourage as to which of their ranks should be sent to confront me. After this discussion, it seemed as though it was unanimously decided that the largest member of their group would be sent to confront me. Already, it seemed as though A had begun taking notes into a book which he kept at his side within a bag which draped down to his hip.

Switching to the nonlethal dosage, I did a testing spray into the air with a pulling motion of my thumb, mist spraying from my wrists and into the air, eventually dispersing into the room. Then aiming my wrist into the face of the mercenary, I let loose the anaesthetic spray into his face, covering it in miasmatic mist. Once he'd dropped to the ground, I then provided an ample example of how potent my compound was. No matter how much the poor mercenary had been tossed around, kicked, punched, or whatever else was available in my arsenal of physical attacks, he simply wouldn't wake.

"The philosophy behind the spray suit can also be applied to other chemicals." I explained further, my gaze steering towards *A* (who seemed to be avidly taking in this information). "Hallucinogens, carcinogens such as asbestos, even something as simple as acid or gasoline can be used with the right preparation."

*Chikao* then ordered for me to finish my demonstration and head back to his right flank, which I naturally did. He tapped Cherlyn on the back, although she didn't seem to awaken from her slumber or even flinch. Taking initiative, I then dashed Cherlyn on the cheek of her mask, waking her with a yelp. Notifying her that she

was needed, she promptly skipped over as *Chikao* began his briefing on her. "This is the Ten of Swords." Some of the mercenaries with Alfred looked confused between each other, muttering queries as to her rather small frame for an assassin. Nonetheless, my boss continued, saying "Do not let her small frame hoodwink you, 紳士 諸君, for she is a potent assassin capable of levelling trained soldiers with only a knife and her wits. Would any of you like a trial of her potential?"

It was rather good for them that my trial on their mercenary had made them rather hesitant for such trials. *Chikao* naturally took note of this, saying "Very well then. Red, get down from the rafters."

With a whooshing sound, I heard as cloth billowed in the air as the senior assassin dropped down from the ceiling and onto the table. Just as he reached the edge of the table, he then jumped down and walked over to the mercenaries who stood opposite of *Chikao*, standing tall over them as he reviewed their weapons and capabilities, all while he madly grinned.

"This is Red. Red shoots people. Red is good at shooting people."



"It must be difficult for him to shoot people when he sticks out like a sore thumb." observed Alfred.

"Red."

With many clicking sounds coming from his joints, Red knelt down, cracking his neck, before beginning to bend his knee further. Once his calves were flush against the back of his thighs, Red then began to twist himself by the spine and compress himself down into a smaller form. "As you can see, Red is also a talented contortionist. Naturally, this allows him to hide himself in, say, a medium-sized cardboard box, a locker, or the small area beneath the floorboards of a building."

Alfred applauded this talent, a genuine look of impression and slight bewilderment present on his face as Red immediately undid his compressed form. Once he'd risen, Red then chuckled slightly to himself while performing a showman's bow, retreating back into the shadow which he'd emerged from. Of course, there were many more trials of our agents, but noting all of them would naturally be inessential to our meeting. So, I shall close off with the finishing dialogue of the pair's discussion. So, once the final agent (Archimedes and her engineering

talent, I believe) had been trialled to Alfred, there were many more minutes of closing notes and then the two had begun bidding farewells.

"Well then, this has been a very enlightening meeting, Mr. Kumori." observed Alfred as he took off the fedora he wore, placing it upon his chest, "And my condolences to your losses."

"Likewise."

And so, all of their ranks had left the summit room.

Upon the Binmen's departure from the summit room, however, *Chikao* seemed to immediately take on a newer, far sinister light. Instead of the open, claspings motions to the air which he usually portrayed himself with, it seemed as though a spectre of completely different composure to him had possessed him and was taking control of his actions from that point onward. Glaring at the door to the summit room, he then took the microphone which sat beneath the long table, wired to who-knows-what, placing it atop the table, flicking a switch and tapping twice on its head, testing it.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and the Technicolor rainbow in between," he began. Save for me

and Cherlyn, everyone in the Down-Under facility seemed to reel in pain as he said this, she and I sharing a confused glance as we saw the other mafiosi reeling in pain. Continuing, *Chikao* said "I want Alfred Nashton *dead*. \$100 billion to the one who gets him dead, \$125 billion if he's alive."

And mere days after, the hunt had begun. With every single member of the Family on the hunt to kill Alfred Nashton, I was among many who were hunting down the criminal, and the chase was fun. Although the confrontation took a rather undesirable amount of time to achieve thanks to the fact I had to attend Skyline Academy, I was nonetheless chuffed once my investigation had paid off. When and where I had identified him, I believe he was in the middle of a kill. The victim was unknown to me, but I believe he was accompanied by that strange bandana-donning boy and his bodyguards for whatever the mercenary had been doing. In addition, my plague doctor's mask had been resupplied. The train itself was currently cruising across the Redcliff countryside - a comfortable steam locomotive which, frankly, was probably still running out of the novelty of it instead of any truly effective

reasons. Although it was a cushy novelty train, there had been at least 3 cars reserved for holding bins of supplies. Nonetheless, if I were to somehow fall off the train, it was likely that I wouldn't die from it, although it had been an indubitable fact that I'd retain at least some injuries, most likely from rolling at high speeds on the land. There was also the risk that a limb got caught under the rails - not exactly the best thing to put aside as some typical school roughhousing, or the postschool shenanigans most boys of my class and age got into.

So, looking out of the window, unmasked, I observed the scenery outside. Already had assassins of the family deployed, searching for Nashton, searching for the grand fortune promised by *Chikao*. They seemed to be middling in terms of their combat ability, very clearly not enough to take on an attentive mercenary force like the one Alfred controlled, the man himself, or the (clearly adopted) child simply dubbed *A*. Mere minutes after the first wave of assassins (a force of 3 members) had managed to mount the train, gunfire rang out as all three mercenaries were immediately sent hurtling off of the rear cars and onto the ground, rolling a little before stopping, bleeding out

onto the prairie below, reeling in pain before succumbing to the bullets which had presumably hit them.

Unperturbed by this scene, I then rose from my seated position in the train car and opened the back door, climbing atop the car it led to by using the ladder. Now atop the car, I began to crawl - the mercenaries working for Alfred would always shoot if disturbed, so it was the best process of thought to decide that I should move subtly, slowly, so as to not catch the attention of undeserving hands. Once I'd reached earshot of the train car which they'd taken up position in - a seemingly average car, I heard the sound of drilling. Luckily, there was a trap door or vent of some sort placed on top of this car (which had been opened), allowing me to peek inside. Doing so, I had seen my guesses as to the present personnel were correct. Standing guard to the two side doors (which had also been opened, presumably by the assassins), were two of Alfred's personal guards, while it seemed as though *A* had taken up the drilling process while the mercenary himself watched the boy's progress. A stepladder sat in the car, presumably so that they could exit via the top for whatever purposes they had in mind.

The breaching and elimination of the two guards itself would be simple. Jump in from the top, spray the two guards with my Sevoflurane solution, then kill Alfred Nashton. But the target himself, I had no information on him which would give me a direct advantage, or notify me of a significant weakness which Attaque held.

Without much else to review visible to me, I tossed a flask of propofol into the car before jumping in myself, shouting "Surrender quietly and you will die at peace." I then turned to Alfred. With a grin on the senior mercenary's face as he inched closer to the side door of the train car opposite of me, he held one of his conscious guards close in his large arms.

Once he'd neared the door, Alfred shouted "**You really got me.** But how long can you *hold* me?"

And then Alfred rolled out of the car. Briefly, I had seen a helicopter sitting in the field at the area in which Alfred had jumped, leaving me with that bizarre boy in his grinning bandana. It seemed my judgement had been misplaced - the vault had already been opened, and the drill had solely been operating, presumably, as a sort of ruse to lure any

would-be assassins (such as me) into the train car.

"Are you sure it is I who should be surrendering?" quipped *A*, who had risen from his drill.

"Naturally so." I said, readying myself into *Attaque's* defensive stance. *A's* right arm was preparing to throw a boxing style jab at my general chest area. An easy thing to block, which I promptly did. However, what I'd failed to see was the boy's left arm had prepared to grab my grabbing arm, before twisting me around by it, using his right arm to strike my breast twice. Placing his leg between my thighs, he then performed a type of suplex, knocking me to the ground.

"Tatterdemalion. You're rather easy to read for an assassin." *A* said, standing over me.

"A mere miscalculation." I responded. Rising to my feet, I checked the stores of anaesthetic which held that which I sprayed, my hand checking my breast pocket. However, instead of the comforting vial which held my stores of liquid, I had taken out my hand. In it were many bloody shards of glass. Furthermore, I was beginning to go numb. "Wh- What is this-"

"Hm." the boy began, before continuing with his observation by saying "You must be thrilling to play Poker against. Every time I saw you spray a target, you checked your breast pocket. I assumed it must be corresponding to the functionality of your suit, Tatterdemalion. Naturally, I concluded that it must be correlated to your sprayers' functionality."

Attempting to put down that numbing feeling which had begun to set in on me, I drew a syringe from my pocket. In it was a lethal dosage of Pavulon, an American compound which would cease muscle function, including ones rather vital to life functions such as the heart. One jab to his neck, and *A* would end up with an unmarked grave or as pig feed.

"Do you still wish to fight?" asked *A*, not seeming to enter any particular combat stance. Shakily, I nodded and held the syringe close to me, akin to a reverse-grip combat knife. None of us attacked as we circled each other, keeping our opposition in gaze. My heart, however, was pumping. This was an indescribable thrill. *A* had proved himself to be a combatant that could not only hold his own against me, but possibly even defeat me. And for the odds were stacked far from favour to me, this was exhilarating.



And so, we engaged in fisticuffs. I went for the lethal strike to *A*'s neck, but he had grabbed my arm, knocking the syringe out of it.

"No." he said. "Your weapons are not compelling. Thrill me with your *skill*, scarecrow."

Our intentions were similar, builds were similar, and even our wishes for thrilling combat were similar. So, nodding in approval and stomping the syringe underfoot, I then readied my stance. *A* did so in turn, grabbing a nearby cane (presumably the one of Alfred Nashton himself), snapping it in half and tossing a half towards me.

"I thought you said no weapons?" I observed.

*A* responded "This is a compelling weapon."

Then we charged at each other. Our halves of the cane clashed with the other, before we began. With a retreating two steps back, I attempted to gain some space, but *A* lunged at me with his own cane, striking me down by the chest. I believe some bones, specifically my ribs, cracked in that attack, but still I rose.

"Rather persistent." observed *A*.

"The job demands it."

"Homicide is a rather numbing trade."

"That much is clear for you."

Engaging once more, *A* and I's halves of the canes clashed as I'd gotten into the rhythm of the style which he used. A form of fighting similar to swordfighting which demanded a range of motion. I believe the art itself was 'FMA', a Filipino martial art style derived from Arnis which demanded a low stance and agile footwork. Jab. Retreat. Parry. Slash. Evade. Repeat. With the pattern I'd managed to adapt to in *A*'s motion, I believed that victory wouldn't be far. Until there was a new variable introduced to our scuffle. With a block keeping him from striking my chest, I had left my shins undefended. My counterpart utilised this to his advantage. With a kick, I had lost my footing, nearly falling out of the cab. My arms saved me from falling out, leaving me hanging against the uppermost part of the door, but if said arms were to be damaged, then nothing else would stop me from falling out of the train.

"Have you anything else you wish to say, Tatterdemalion?" began the ever enigmatic boy, not a hint of emotion in his voice as he drew his cane closer to my arms. Shaking my head, he then nodded. "Good. You were a rather *dull*

combatant anyways." *A* observed, jabbing my arms. My left ulna snapping, it was this motion which had caused me to lose my grip on the top of the train car door as my right arm instinctively clutched the arm with the broken bone, my expulsion from the prior train car making itself clear once I had tumbled out of the car. Tumbling in the grass, I felt a deep shame. A deep shame much akin to the one I had felt when my shot had missed Rae Adamson. My fall was cushioned by the soft grass, but the wider majority of the injuries which I had sustained in my duel had finally come to me. I believe that my ribs had been cracked, one of my fibulae had been cracked, and I believe that 50% of my body had been throbbing in pain. This, coupled with the fact that my entire body had been rolled at a speed equivalent to that of a moving train for a good 15 seconds (causing my snapped ulna to pierce my flesh and poke out of my skin) meant that my injuries were rather severe.

*But not fatal.*

Using my (fortunately intact) right arm to unpocket my phone and speak into it, I contacted Quincey on the matter of the many

injuries which I had sustained. Staying there for a time of about 30 minutes, I clutched my arm for about 20 minutes before the middle-aged driver had arrived, seemingly a little discontent, perhaps peeved, even for a man of his qualities. In his cab was a young woman, although the tinted glass prevented me from seeing her face.

"What the hell happened to you, Avith?" the driver asked incredulously, naturally concerned, "You look like you-"

"I had *fun*."

Quincey sighed, before saying "Whatever suits you, toots." and heaving me into the back of his cab, smelling of cigarettes as it always had. "I need a smoke break anyways. I'll be out for ten minutes. Let the girl deal with it, the pesky little bugger wouldn't shut up about trying to help you out, kid."

Once I'd settled down in the cab, however, laying there and awaiting my aid, my heart sank as I heard *the* petulant young woman query "Are you alright?" Weakly turning my head to the passenger seat, I saw it was a voice I had become acclimated to detest with the caricature of a face I respected. Sunny Ortega. With my begrudging recommendation thanks to the aid she provided in the methamphetamine

cooking process, it appears Sunny had gained enough trust to be entitled to work in the field. Being given a mask depicting a caricature of a grinning doctor with a head mirror and a grinning face mask, it was rather chilling to me, seeing that it was a caricature of the selfsame doctor which had inducted me into the Chikao Family.

No. He was dead, they *killed* him. So why exactly had they given the kind doctor this fate? And why did they give Sunny that mask? Why not I, who had been focusing his efforts solely on the family? Truly, it had been a very disconcerting thought at the time, one which consumed my waking thoughts and pestered me long after this scene.

Snapping me back into reality, Sunny asked "Vi- Avith?"

"Yes, yes. I'm fine, Ortega." I said, the thought of this rather abstract betrayal still at the back of my mind, "What is it you need?"

Instead of wording, she gestured to my arm.

"What of it?"

"I've... I wanted to help..." muttered Sunny, revealing a first aid kit which she had been presumably storing in the glove box.

"Very well then."

Exiting the cab and taking me out of the vehicle, laying me down on the grassy field, I watched curiously as Sunny opened the first aid kit, her eyes straying towards my own instead of the bone piercing my skin. A rather bizarre therapeutic measure, in my opinion. Tearing a piece of cloth from a bandage, I looked on while she unveiled a bottle labelled Iodine. Using my right hand, I grabbed a different vial dubbed 'Chlorhexidine', asking Sunny to use it instead. She was shocked that I had such potent gear, but nonetheless helped me to apply the disinfectant to the bandage. While she disinfected the rag, I did my own maintenance. I knew the process of dealing with compound fractures such as this well - I'd have to try pushing around the wound, which while indubitably less painful than pressing on exposed bone, would still be painful. Rolling up my left sleeve, I grabbed a vial of sevoflurane and poured it upon the wound, letting the numbing feeling seep into my flesh. A pleasant feeling. Much better than purely recreational drugs.

For a few minutes in the preparation process, things were silent . But as Sunny

wrapped the bandage around, I broke this silence, asking "Sunny, are you planning on being a nurse?"

"I want to be a paramedic." she responded, using scissors to cut off the cloth and finish the bandaging.

"How so-" I uttered, before seething in pain as Sunny pressed on the bone instead of around it. "Sunny, could you- god, press around the wound instead of on it?"

"Ah, crud... sorry, Vi- Avith." she said, fixing this issue immediately. As she pressed the bone into place, I believe that Sunny had observed that I hadn't been wincing as much as most other victims of a compound fracture. This observation was made clear as she asked "How are you... not flinching? This is usually pretty painful..."

"Sevoflurane."

"Okay then." Taking out a crepe bandage, Sunny then began to wrap my left arm up, securing it tightly in folds of cloth. "The cast comes later, when we're back at the Down-Under." she'd explained.

Once Quincey had finished his smoke break, Sunny returned to the front passenger seat while I laid there in the back seats. Little

happened on the journey, and it wasn't as though I could have seen out of the window, but nonetheless, after a good 10 minutes of driving, we'd finally arrived at a closed laundromat. I was too tired to vocalise any queries anyways, so I simply let Sunny carry me into the back room. Within the back room, there had been an elevator. I assume this must have been the paraplegia-friendly method of leading those with motor disabilities into the Down-Under. After all, it is rather inconvenient telling a man in a wheelchair or a man with a broken arm to descend a ladder. As Sunny and I waited in the elevator alone (for Quincey was a man who busied himself with cab fare instead of amicability), I observed the Down-Under's luxurious, almost fantastical size. I had stated that it was comparable to a small city, but from above, it was clear how true my statements were.

Buildings dotted wherever empty space made itself clear, while permanent citizens of the facility scoured about, each going on about their day in ways comparable to how you or I would. The darkest nooks and crannies of the building hadn't gone uninhabited, as small children would take claim to them, taking the



occasional item from food vendors for free, most of the little rascals managing to get away scot-free while the masked vendors laughed off these rather petty criminals and their plots of grand larceny. The elevator ride, however, was rather dull. You see, lying in a young woman's arms is not exactly the most stimulating experience and is about as thrilling as leaving oneself sitting and lazing at a desk for hours on end. As the elevator neared its stop and its mechanical doors had opened, Sunny began to navigate the streets and alleyways of the little city.

"Avi- Tatters?" she asked, looking concerned as she walked, looking down at me, "A- Are you okay?"

*"Don't call me Tatters. And yes. I am."*

Sunny did not respond. That did not matter, though, for we neared our stop. A building with the sign of a red cross loudly emblazoned around it, along with the words '**Hospital**'. Much like all else in the Down-Under, it may have been dug into a brutalist block of concrete, but inside, its facilities were miraculous. Sunny entered the quaint hospital. Wandering the (rather clean) halls, Sunny eventually stopped at a single-bed

room, fitted with the typical decorations you'd expect from one. A solitary white bed in the leftmost corner, spotted bed sheets and a single table with a meek little flower vase, housing lily flowers. It truly was just a simple hospital room that you'd expect to see if you were to enter a hospital and charge into one of its many chambers. Propping me onto the bed, I watched as Sunny left for a few minutes, returned having procured a below-elbow cast, fitting prior cast onto my arm after replacing the bandages which held it in place (wincing somewhat, seeing the bone piercing from my flesh), then finally holding the cast in place, my arm throbbing slightly. Phantom pain, perhaps? After all, the effects of sevoflurane only lasted for a maximum of 20 hours.

"Y- You're free to go in a week, Avith... You'll be walking around with a cast for three more weeks to a month." Sunny stated, coyly bowing. "We'll have any workplaces notified of your leave..."

"Sunny. You know full well I'm 16."

"W- Well, it still applies... we'll tell your school then..."

"Very well."

And so, with another coy bow, Sunny then left the room I was in, leaving me in that solitary room to recover from the injuries I'd sustained in my battle. My entire body throbbing in pain from the bruises which the fight had given me, I began to lull to sleep. As my vision faded, however, as I felt numb and my muscles were unable to move, I felt the air in the room shift as rustling echoed in the blank chambers. Someone had entered. Someone was there. Forcing my eyes open, I'd seen that all lights in the hospital, at least, had been turned out for whatever reason. Possibly just for the lighter of sleepers, or to save power. Once open, I let my dazed, tired eyes scan the room shoddily, going from each blackened corner of the chamber to another. After a full review of the room, I saw it. A feminine frame which stood at a rather unremarkable height, her face veiled by shadow, stalking me from the corner of the room. They appeared to don a mask which was askew, revealing only their mouth. Placing my hands on my own face, I had seen that my mask had been adjusted in similar fashion, trace amounts of that which I believe to be fresh lipstick sticking to my fingers.

"Who- Who are you?" I asked, staring at the spectre as she stood there dreamily. I would have thought she was an apparition of the mind, half real and half illusory, had it not been for the cold mist which came from her mouth as she exhaled.

"Who I am does not matter. What you do need to know is that I love you, Vito." they said. The effeminate spectre's voice was not one I'd known then, and I still do not know what exactly it was now, but it felt *familiar*. It was odd, really. In fact, perhaps this entire scene was but a faltering dream.

Confused, I interrogated further, asking "But... what exactly are you?"

Without any resistance or exclamation from other potential witnesses in the halls of the hospital, I watched as the spectre then excused themselves from the room, falling asleep myself into a deeper slumber mere minutes after this bizarre scenario had ended.

## Perfect System

I believe it was one of these nights when the idea had come to me. You see, as of then, I had deduced from many conversations she and I had in the weeks prior to my hospitalisation that Cherlyn's romantic dedication was focused on Red the Irishman (among many others). So an idea came to me. One which would direct her focus onto me, instead of the Irishman. And I had the connections which would make this plan of mine work. So, on the final day of the final week, calling Red, I sat upright in my bed, staring at the door and awaiting Red's arrival. Eyes reviewing the room for any points of entry which the Irishman could use, I then heard as there had been a great scratching, banging, scrabbling noise in what could only be assumed to be a ventilation system above me. Nearing the grate which sat in the corner of my room, this noise then stopped just near the grate. I heard every acute sound that the character in the vents had been making.

And from inside the vent, I heard Red ask in the same gravelly, hoarse tone "You got a screwdriver in there?"

"Yes. What of it?" I responded.

"The family ain't exactly dumb enough to screw up the inside of a vent, think that ya could do a guy a favour and take out this grate?"

"Gladly, sir."

Removing the screwdriver from my pocket with my right arm, I began to undo the screws on the vent, easing each steel fastening from their initial position in the grate. Humming a tune to myself, it seemed to peeve Red.

"Ugh, lad, ya think that you could soften it out on the... damn humming?" he'd shouted (with a hushed tone that was natural for he who crawled around in ventilation shafts) as he banged on the grate with what I could presume to be a fist. "Can hardly hear myself *think* when you're just fiddling with that screwdriver."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"You better."

And with the last screw nearing its finish, I caught the grate in my hands, rolling out of the way so as to not land under the naturally large weight of a seven foot tall, trained contract killer. Instead of hearing him thud on the ground, however, I watched as he simply didn't. Using this free time, I placed the screws on the table before sitting on my bed, watching the landing zone.

"Come in." I ordered.

"Right behind ya, giobóg."

Turning around and looking up, I stared into the crimson lenses of Red's sunglasses. Just as he had when I'd first met him in the first Binmen invasion of the Down-Under, he smelt of cigar ash, fresh sex, and (oddly enough) fresh hot dog with trace notes of corned beef and sauerkraut. In his hand was the prior-mentioned hot dog, half eaten and seemingly fresh off of the grill. His whole body covered by the large, black cape he wore, I saw as he put the hot dog to his mouth and bit it.

"So what was it you needed, lad?" asked Red over a mouthful of the hot dog he held in his hand, "I'm a busy man..."

"I-"

Drawing a suppressed M1911 on me, his hand protruding from the split in the sable cape which draped his whole body, Red had set his glasses askew just enough so that his own crimson eyes could make unbroken contact with mine. With death in his eyes, he continued "*And I don't take too kindly to it when my business is interrupted.*"

Silence. Then Red holstered his pistol with a swift motion, his hand retreating back into his cloak. "So again, whaddya need?"

"Make love to-"

"You're just a lad, you little freak. And I'm *taken*."

"I know I'm 'just a lad'. I wasn't soliciting your services either - you're the freak here. Make love *to your lover*."

"Okay. So what, you... wanna watch?"

"I'd rather not."

"You sure, Tatters?"

"I am the *Tatterdemalion*, Red. Not 'Tatters'." I affirmed. "And still, I couldn't care less about sex with a harlot."

"What, you'd rather it be Ten of Swords?"

Silence.

"Nuh uh."

"Consider it done, then..." Red said, beginning to crawl back into the ventilation system. "For a price. Meet me at the Brothel in... I dunno, four weeks."

And as he bid his final adieus, he said "Very well then. Fifty dollars for our little... *exchange*."



Midway through climbing into the cramped vent, Red's limbs bending in ways I hadn't known possible for many trained contortionists, the Irishman stopped as he asked "You know, kid, you really ought to soften up. Relax, you get me?"

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, I'm sorry you sound like fucking... I dunno, Dracula every time we speak, lad." Red had explained with a great eloquence in the terms he used. "Learn to just... relax, kid." Once he'd finished, he'd sighed, muttering something to himself, before heading up the vent and into the ventilation system above, crawling out just as subtly as he'd entered. Replacing the screws on the shaft, I awaited the arrival of my next visitor. Arriving in my room via the door, I watched as Cherlyn wandered into the room. In my inactivity, it seemed as though she'd managed to procure, or be provided with some newer, much more professional gear. Instead of the balaclava she'd worn on our first contract, on Cherlyn's face was a white kitsune mask - a caricature of a Japanese fox spirit, with an ear-to-ear grin spanning across the face of the thing. Her garb had changed too - instead of the black cocktail dress with the garter belt, she

now donned a sable, form-fitting full-body catsuit, a belt with many utilities such as grenades around her waist, a single knife holstered on her right thigh.

"What do you need, Avith?" Cherlyn asked, her hand heading down her right thigh to the grip of her blade. "I've got a contract from the boss and I really want that cash."

"There's a rat at the brothel." I explained, instinctively attempting to tent my fingers and failing profusely (broken arm and all that). "They know a good majority of us assassins' real names. Identify them and kill them, for our sake."

Cherlyn considered the options, before coldly asking "Do they know who **I** am?"

"Yes." I responded. I believe there had been a pause, but it didn't seem as though it was something Cherlyn picked up on. "Yes, the rat does know."

"Consider it done, *Tatters*."

"My name isn't-"

And then Cherlyn left the room. My plot had worked - her interest in Red would fade, letting me advance onto her. Just as that happened, however, I saw Sunny had entered my room in the exchange, clipboard and pen in

hand, mask raised, raising her mask, showing her face. It appeared as though she had worn lipstick that day, freshly applied.

"Well, it's been four weeks and your bone seems to have set, so-"

"I'm free to leave this hospital?"

"Mhm!"

"Very well, then." I said, dusting off my medical scrubs (for it was basic practice at that facility to swap out one's clothes so as to prevent infection), rising from my bed and passing Sunny, replying "It has been great working with you, Sunny."

She stammered, before replying "Y- You too, Avi-"

"You know what? Feel free to call me Vito."

"O- Okay... Alright, *Chi*- the boss wants you down at the summit room." she'd explained. "We left y- your coat at reception."

"I'll be there."

And so, readjusting my cast, I had taken my uniform, grabbed my clothes, and bid my adieu from that limiting hospital. Other than some rather odd wet marks along the inside of my lapels, and the streaks of stray blood which had managed to coat it, my clothes had been

relatively unharmed in my 4 week period of inactivity. When I had arrived at the summit room an hour later (oddly enough, with a sombre air and some empty seats), I saw *Chikao* sitting at the head of the table with a spry, relaxed manner as he'd always done, a briefcase in his right hand and a smoking revolver in the other, its barrel coated in some specks of fresh blood.

"I thank you for your aid, Tatterdemalion." *Chikao* began, using the handkerchief in the pocket of his blazer to clean his gun of the blood, "You have managed to save a large majority of the Family from police with your efforts."

Now, this was odd. I did indeed tell Cherlyn that there had been rats in the brothel, but I hadn't known of the validity of my lie. It was only to push her into the facility, you see, get her to watch Red make love to whatever harlot he'd managed to procure for the task I assigned him. The fact I'd managed to guess correctly was rather humorous.

"It wasn't a problem, sir." I replied. "I'm simply doing my own part for the family."

*Chikao* then placed the briefcase upon the table and slid it across, saying "It's a brain like yours which gets you up in the world, 子."

With a hand signal and an affirmative nod from one of *Chikao's* many associates sitting to the side of the longtable, I undid the lock of the briefcase which had been slid over to me and peered within. Inside was a simple lapel pin - a decal of half of a Greek performance mask much like *Chikao's* own mask, black and with its details painted in white, a single droplet of crimson tracing the outside.

Looking among the ranks of *Chikao's* longtable, I saw something of note - each of the seated, masked and venerated peoples all wore the lapel pin somewhere. I even saw those who had tattooed the pattern onto their bare backs or branded onto them as though they were cattle. "As you can see, we are a group which values intelligent men- *people*, and unfortunately, some of those intelligent people..."

He looked between the empty chairs at the longtable, his fingers enclosed in a solemn motion, silent. "They did not value our assistance."

"So are you giving me a promotion?"

"Of course, but some of our ranks have... *issues* with us letting children lead the way, meaning you'll have to continue your career as a killer until eighteen," began *Chikao*, "but I believe my point still stands that you are indeed getting a promotion, Tatterdemalion."

"Thank you, sir."

"No. Thank you." Rising from his seat, *Chikao* walked down the aisle to the side of the longtable, before holding his hand out to me. Shaking it, *Chikao* finally finished this meeting, saying "You're free to go now, Tatterdemalion. I have some distribution work I need you to do. Network our methamphetamine out to our *supported* dealers in Little Havana and *make sure that they pay full price*. \$100 per kilo. You retain 45% of the profits, the 55% goes to different investors."

Once I had ended the formalities, I collected the methamphetamine from our supply depot and began to disperse it across Little Havana as I'd been contracted to. But no matter how much I attempted to keep it to the back of my mind, Sunny's request lingered and festered. Had it not been for how much of an idiot she was, I'd have begun to repent for what I'd been doing. By some string of resilience in

my mind, however, I staved off those odd feelings and continued on. In my peddling, I saw many men and women of unfavourable circumstances, who'd ruined their lives for the sake of this bizarre idol - customers of the dealers which the Family had networked out to that had arrived early to pick up their desired product. With their eyes reddened, clothes dirty, and faces unkempt from years of taking the substance, it was only customary that I swat away each of these disgusting parasites if they got too close to me, begging for their apparent 'lifeline'. Nonetheless, I finished my duties and continued on with my life. I noticed a change in Cherlyn - instead of the apathetic young woman she was, it seemed as though she'd been beginning to warm up to me. *My trial had worked.*

**An extract from 'On  
the Psychology of  
Avith Rockford'**

written by Dr. Werner  
Stahlberg



I was doing work as a teacher and a student counsellor at Henley University when I first saw the young Rockford at about 20. A student prodigy, truly, from what I could tell from the observations made by others in the faculty (for my expertise laid in psychology, not chemistry, and as such, Avith and I never encountered each other in our careers beyond quick glances at one another).

A strange young man, he. A fanciful young dandy who'd never seen conflict beyond whatever he'd seen at his private academy was what most would see. I saw through the young Avith's plots, however. In him, I saw a young man wizened by conflict and a war either internal or external. He covered up this wizened personality with lies of ivory and a silver tongue. A playboy by heart, I believe there wasn't a single person at the Henley campus (whose romantic interests masculine preference) that didn't have any pipe dreams about the young Rockford in the sessions I had with other students. In what I had seen from the few sessions I had managed to procure with him, everything he could even grasp leverage or control over, from how he gesticulated when speaking to how he

postured himself when seating and manipulated his eloquence was elegantly refined, as though for all 20 years of his life, he'd been practising these motions.

With all of Avith Rockford's actions provided in this journal, I can assume that it is undoubted to all that he was a reprehensible psychopath and misogynist. From each step, how he had been raised in the Chikao Family, to the manipulation of a young woman simply to prove to himself that his facade had worked exactly how he desired, to how he detonated Redcliff City's largest hotel just to avoid police persecution and detainment and finally every single soul lost to his and his lover's perverse desire for bloodshed, all can gauge that Rockford is truly the world's most psychopathic criminal of the century.

## **No Spill Blood**

18 years old at last! I had managed to attain my rightful position as caporegime in the Family, and now, business could bloom. And my school life was perfect, too, for I had managed to graduate out of Skyline Academy with flying colours, Grade 9s across all of the subjects I had taken. As I sat upon the edge of an unused overpass bridge, having used the car I had been lent by my father to actually access the structure, it was only obligatory that I smiled warmly. This was life, after all, and right now, it was great. While I had never met the enigmatic Sonya Ortigosa, it hadn't mattered. After all, my adulthood had begun. Staring out upon the city as cars sped along the cluttered underpass below, I was startled as I heard a voice behind me, calling me by the nickname 'Vito'. Turning around with slight panic, I was greeted by the much more comforting image of Lincoln holding an ice box in hand, sitting next to me and setting the box aside.

Upon opening the ice box and taking out a can of Budweiser, asking "Want one, Vito?"

"No, thanks." I responded. As I'd be driving, the consumption of alcohol was not in my best interests. "I've got to drive."

"Fair."

And so, he and I began to drink over the scene (I myself taking sips from a bottle of water), Lincoln and I began to reminisce about the past. Truly, if there was one person I could consider a best friend, it would be Lincoln. He and I reminisced about the past. Our rises and falls, our good days and the bad. I couldn't help but smile - who wouldn't? A good friend, he was. A good friend.

I observed "It's moments like this I like to consider beautiful. How often are things this... serene after all? Quiet, nothing to worry about except the occasional cop patrol and how we'll get home when we finish up."

"I'll drink to that-"

Just as mine had done when Lincoln announced his arrival in the middle of my introspective session, I saw as the young man's own eyes widened, slowly turning around and being greeted by Cherlyn. A grin on her face and Lincoln laughing off his own temporary fright, she and I exchanged a kiss and some pleasantries before she sat down next to us.

"Honestly, man?" Lincoln began, crushing a can and setting it aside, "I'm surprised you managed to bag *her* out of all people."

"Lincoln!" Cherlyn exasperatedly shouted, her face turning somewhat flush, "We-Me and Avith are *not* together!"

"Ah, whatever you say." Lincoln said, sipping on a Budweiser can. "You and Avith-"

"*No.*" I interrupted, shooting my best friend a glare.

"Woah, woah. I hear you, Vito." he responded, downplaying what he'd said "You and her ain't getting it on. Alrighty-oh."

"Good." Cherlyn and I said - shockingly in sync.

So, sitting there on the edge of that bridge, Cherlyn and I shared our water while Lincoln drank the Budweiser he'd procured. And I couldn't help but tear up a little for what I'd managed to do. I worked my family into the elite class with my genius and forethought. I had found love. I had found stimuli. I had everything I could ever want, and everything I deserved. Of course, I had managed to gain a placement at Henley University under an AP chemistry PhD too. Not worth mentioning in

my opinion, for it mainly was just rehashed revision of that which I'm sure an elementary schooler of my capabilities could comprehend with little difficulty, but Henley provided the resources which I'd need to fund my operations. I had made further upgrades to the Tatterdemalion suit too - I had armoured the glass casements for the vials which it used with a nonNewtonian fluid, and attached a small spring-based sort of recoil system that increased the strength of punches, kicks and other such physical attacks. In an idea devised by me to aid in controlling Cherlyn on the field, I also devised another utilisation for the sprayers in my suit - blood.

Thanks to the *Chikao* Family's connections with many hospitals in the city, it meant I had unrestricted access to blood bags which I could use to spray at Cherlyn, making her enter the 'rabid' state which she'd entered on many of our contracts together. Furthermore, it made itself clear that the 'slurping' noise I'd heard when Cherlyn had subdued me in the Vallestrecho was the noise of her consuming blood directly from the stab wounds which she'd made. Still - she was my beloved, and this ailment of Cherlyn's, how it made the once

quiet and reserved young woman into a rabid beast, it was (and excuse the fact that I am currently at a deficit of terms which would add to my eloquent prose) *so fucking hot*.

How she'd pounce upon the poor unfortunate soul, plunging her blade deep into their carotid artery, blood spraying everywhere, before grabbing them by the neck with those dainty yet strong hands to prop her victim against a wall so she could straddle them and drink her blood directly from the source, or attach suckers into the wound so she could drain it of the blood and pipe it into a blood bag, her catsuit stained with all of the juices made in the exchange of nectar, it was absolutely thrilling. Of course, HIV and other such diseases were a natural concern for Cherlyn, but somehow and some way she managed to avoid the afflictions which plagued those of her sort. Even so, however, I still couldn't help but feel a natural concern for my own health. Plus with the turn of our age into eighteen, it naturally brought about feelings which would bring about unwise actions which could have me catching the viruses she could be carrying. My time at Henley was one which had more time for me interacting with the perverse and reprehensible

sort one would find at Skyline. These were not educated students - people of my calibre who were as contrived as they had been in high school.

Which is what I had thought, until I met Sonya Ortigosa.

Sonya, in this bizarre way, was reminiscent of Sunny. From her face to the slight way she moved, her right leg taking dominance over the left, one would be shocked to find themselves mistaking this educated young woman for an idiotic simpleton like Sunny. Save for that, however, she was just like how I'd imagined her when I'd been confronted by how she managed to excel in liberal arts, beating me. It was on the first lesson of the first day that she and I met. She and I sighed for whatever reason as we exchanged glances, and we simply sat there, awaiting the advancement of our lesson. I'd noticed a few times that she'd go flush (even so, it had been a fairly warm day), but other than that, there had been not a peep out of her for the one and a half hours that lecture had taken. She did not seem to dote over



me, however. She simply sat there. Taking notes.

Surreal. Truly surreal.

Nonetheless, with my promotion to caporegime, it meant I had a new job description - to manage the land I'd been provided with. And I did. With the measly 10 stores under the ring of my predecessor, I managed to secure a deal with many of the other criminals in the area. Grant them the Family's protection if they acted up. Of course, I still dreamt of battle, combat, and general thrill. That boy I had lost to on the train a year ago, he was a thrilling combatant. One which I had already devised many counters and strategies against, and simply couldn't wait to trial. I had 10 men and a small region of the city under my control thanks to this promotion - a travesty for most in the *Chiako* Family's ranks, but a kind gift from the man himself for me. Even so, however, I learned that profits were waning for all of my fellow capos in the family; with many more placing stock into fronts owned and controlled by the Binmen, control was waning somewhat. Even so, I kept up my studies, and assisted my agents in the field if I felt bored.

However, pestering my mind was the thought of who Helios - Braithwaite's benefactor - could have been. They were planning on tearing my life apart, and the reason for this plot is unknown to me. Assuming they were an agent of the Binmen, it was only natural I deploy some criminals to investigate who the enigmatic Helios could have been. But they reported back with null results. Nothing to pull at. But still - my life in the Family was at full swing.

One day, I was called into the summit room. Cherlyn and I had a mission together - a stakeout on what was a compound for the Binmen. Having fortified in an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of the city, our objective was simple. Review the facility, and kill everyone inside if it was indeed a den for the Binmen. Not the hardest, not the easiest. But with my new modifications, it is assured that Cherlyn and I would have become the victors of any scuffles there.

So, a day after, we arrived at the site. A rather imposing building, it stood tall over us and was teeming with guards. But we knew we were unstoppable. Placing our masks upon our faces, we began our infiltration. Cherlyn sliced

the mesh wire fence blocking off the entrance with a knife (a gift courtesy of Archimedes, with a special reinforced blade) and we entered from there. Going flush against the wall in an alcove just as a guard turned a corner, Cherlyn acted as the pointman to the charge as she sent a blade hurtling into the guard's skull. Hiding the body and storing the blood, she and I advanced.

Entering the structure, we navigated hallway upon hallway, clearing rooms. Seeing nothing better to do as the guards were easy to subdue, I began to talk with Cherlyn.

“Ten of Blades?” I said. “Do you remember that swordswoman?”

“Vladimira Godunov?” she asked.

“God rest her soul, yes, but what about her did you find attractive?” I said.

“Well... she just- she was real...”

Cherlyn stammered on her words a little, before finishing “She was... sexy?”

“What?”

“Hey! You have weird tastes too!” retorted Cherlyn, elbowing me in the shoulder as she dragged a guard into a locker. “I dunno, she was... she just was hot... That hair, those thighs, that sword- just... *something*. What about you, Vito?”

Correcting her for using a nickname (while I was comfortable with her using the name ‘Vito’, since we were on a contract, it could get my name exposed), I then responded “Well... I suppose it’s always been you, my love.”

With an affectionate ‘aww’, Cherlyn and I hugged each other, before we split, and nodded before continuing on. We had a job to do, after all. Eventually, Cherlyn and I found a room which held a culprit file showing the base to be Binmen property. Allowing us to kill and maim as we pleased.

Suddenly, a mob of guards burst into the room, aiming rifles at us. But this wouldn’t be an issue. Tossing a propofol flask at the centremost man, Cherlyn and I used the cover of the rising smog of the chemicals to dive behind cover as the guards began to unload.

“Tatters!” barked Cherlyn. “Hit it!”

In a swift motion, I aimed my sleeve sprayer - loaded with blood - at Cherlyn’s face and let it rip, shouting “Don’t call me Tatters!”

Smelling the blood, Cherlyn screeched loudly, this screeching morphing into a laughing fit as she rose from the cover. Taking initiative, I slid behind cover far from Cherlyn, and beheld

the spectacle. Already, had she dove over her own crate, and 3 men were clutching themselves in pain.

The clearing of the facility lasted a day, but those squeals are still fresh in my mind. And so was another thing... Once she and I had finished with the facility's clearing, we sat together in a cramped janitor's closet. Cherlyn sat opposite of me, her utility belt set aside. I knew what would happen, and by god, I would fucking love it. Placing her hands on mine, she guided my hands onto the metal tab keeping her catsuit zipped up, and guided my hand down, parting the teeth one by one, down. The longest unzipping of my life. Once the unzipping was complete, we never even looked into each other's eyes. With a few testing thrusts, Cherlyn laughed coyly, and signalled for me to continue. And so began one of many sessions of lovemaking. It was long. Thrilling. With each passing minute, screams and grunts and release and laughter began to fill the warehouse once more. These sounds were not corrupted by war and bloodshed, however, nor did they start as quickly as they had come. No, it built up over time. At first, all that Cherlyn and I had exchanged were stifled moans, grunts, and

giggles. However, with each step in Cherlyn and mine's carnal waltz, our melody began growing louder and louder as the composition drew on, until eventually, there was a crescendo, and our performance ended. Upon cleaning up, we called for extraction and were evacuated from the facility by Quincey covered in dried blood and sweat.

Once I had clocked back home, however, I learned a shocking revelation. Mother died.

Of course, I was apathetic to this event but I feigned attention at the funeral. Father claimed that her death was apparently my fault, for how I'd been too busy working and studying, instead of caring for her. Damn him. I was bettering myself, and our family even - it was he who should have been him or some caretaker doing that, not me! Naturally, however, I couldn't help but feel some form of solemnity though. After all, this woman was the one that had conceived and birthed me. Cherlyn, that day, then decided it was a perfect time to invite me to a secluded area. I concurred. I needed quiet. So, I arrived in a simple white button-up. After exchanging pleasantries, my beloved led me someplace. The site she and I had occupied was a quiet dump on

the outskirts of Redcliff City. Paved into a mountain of car shells and covered up by an improvised cloth veranda was a small, improvised little hideout. Littering the floor was various papers. Newspapers, as to the lives of various mafiosi in the city and their locations.

"Is this place yours?" I asked.

"Only place I can consider 'mine'." responded Cherlyn, wistfully gazing at one of the papers (one of a gangster dubbed Enzo Gandolfini).

"I see..." As I'd learnt in our discussions, Cherlyn naturally held contempt for her current adoptive parents - the Watsons. Not even until the age of 18 had she been able to make her relationship with me known. Even after that, I could still feel the sharp gaze of her father on my back every time I picked her up. And for a good hour, she and I wallowed in our mutual detest for the dullards and idiots called parents.

"You know, Avith..." Cherlyn said, biting her lip with a cattish glint in her devious eyes, "I *really* feel a little stressed..."

"Excuse me?"

"You know... I could do with some... RnR with you..."

"I don't give out fighting lessons."

"You're no fun..."

Boy, was she wrong. I was a shit ton of fun. I was just reserved. Nonetheless, with a smirk on my own face, and a few sidelong glances at one another from across the room as we tended to our own devices Cherlyn and I eventually exchanged a quick kiss. It couldn't have been any shorter than, say, one or two minutes, but in her mouth, as our tongues duelled for space, it felt like a billion years. I relaxed what felt like a thousand years worth of stress in those minutes.

And then Cherlyn's phone rang.

Turning away, flushed, she curtly asked "H- Hello, boss?"

Silence. And then another response. "I see. At the *Banco Metropolitano S.A.* branch in Little Havana?"

"Copy that." she responded after a few seconds, before the call closed. "Want a quickie?"

I asked "Of course, babe... but why?"

"I've got a job."

The last job I'd ever know she'd do.

She and I cuddled for a few minutes, but as she and I began to play at our depraved waltz once more, even then I felt a niggling feeling in



the deepest pits of my heart, like something grotesque would happen to her, and I would be powerless to stop it. Nonetheless, as she and I exchanged the last intimate serenade of many, I embraced this break from the issues of home life. I wanted to say it, vocalise it, I really did. But Cherlyn, she was her own person. I couldn't just say she couldn't do a job. Plus, my suspicions were just a hunch. What if that hunch was wrong? So, once more, we finished, and she left me alone with my thoughts forever.

Cherlyn, you were a wonderful page of my story. I'm sorry I was a fraud.

you was everything avith  
i cant fprgive you but im sorry i couldnt help you

## No One Lives Forever

2 days later. I learned of Cherlyn's detainment and referral to an unknown prison. It was with that news the strikes began. First, there had been Binmen attacks on minor, unknown branches of the Family, but then law enforcement were beginning to singe vital parts of the operation. Chikao himself ordered an immediate fortification of the Down-Under. Red and I sat in his once-calm summit room as his council yelled between one another. The age of peace was over

"We can't keep going on like this!" one shouted. "Those damn criminals are already-"

Bang. *Chikao* twirled his revolver and holstered it. "Gentlemen. We are no defeatists. We are going to hold out."

Some gulped down any courage they had. We were dying honourably. *Right?*

And then the SWAT arrived. It was a massacre, from what I'd heard. Not only had our entire Family been outmanoeuvred, but we'd also been outgeared and overpowered by the invaders. Nightmarish and militant was the best way to describe those soldiers. Armed with rifles and provided with advanced technology,

our ranks, specialising primarily in subterfuge, were becoming overpowered. They breached the room with a loud bang, but the surviving council aimed their weapons at the police, and vice versa. A standoff. There were some barks between the two factions, ordering for the other to stand down, some panicking, before there was a loud bang that filled the room, before many others joined in this cacophonous volley, my brothers in arms falling. As I scurried into the rafters, I saw as *Chikao* himself joined the dead, falling limp as what I could only assume to be a thousand rounds let fly, making their mark along his abdomen and up to his forehead, where the final round - I believe it to be a 9mm round based on the autopsy reports from the event - hit cleanly in the middle - a third eye which leaked crimson.

I barely escaped the firefight myself. Similarly, I saw Red glide into the rafters above. We exchanged a final nod of brotherhood and solidarity, before the criminal crammed himself through a ventilation shaft to escape. After that, I don't know what happened to him, but I assume he must have taken to hiding like I did. However difficult it may be for a seven foot tall man to hide amongst crowds of people, I never

saw much of him in my hideouts across the city, or with the few connections left in the city.

It was only 3 days after the attack when the first police officers came into Henley. They asked for me, among a few others who'd managed to survive life in the *Chikao* Family. So there I was in that little office that ordinary Saturday, lounging while the interrogation officer prepared a document.

"Do you know the name of *Tatterdemalion*?" asked an officer. Already I had formulated thousands of ways to take him down. Such as with the stapler on his desk, or by bashing him against the desk, or by using his necktie to choke him out. But no. I couldn't.

"No."

"Well, we have reason to believe someone you know may have been involved with the death of the politician... *Nicholas Braithwaite*." replied the officer.

"And who would that be?"

"Lincoln Sears." he responded.

My eyes widened, but nonetheless, I considered my potential words before eventually stammering "Explain."

"Prior to the assassination, there have been multiple conspiracies posted against

Braithwaite on various social media sites." explained the officer. "And the final one threatened to kill him. Exactly as he did on TV and according to autopsy reports."

"You- You're telling me my best friend is-"

"The Tatterdemalion, yes." said the officer. "Has there been any sign of Sears' involvement with dangerous ideologies?"

Lincoln was my best friend, that was correct. And I hadn't consented to this cover-up operation involving him. But the Tatterdemalion was a risky name to hold on your back, considering that the name in question was associated with various contract killings across the entirety of Redcliff City. So, collecting my thoughts as best I could, I finally replied "Yes. Yes he did."

"Very well then. You're free to go, Mr. Rockford."

And then I left a free man for a few more days. A few more sickly days. Vile, vile days.

## Goodbye-Goodbye!

My twenty-first year had come. My final year as a covert runaway. And as my prime left, the police entered. 'Bang, bang, bang!' against the door to my humble apartment, I already knew what to do, but not why they had come for me. So, rags in hand, I threaded them out the window and slid down. All I had was an empty notebook. By then, I hadn't known what happened to Sunny Ortega, but I know she is out there enjoying life, somewhere. I'd hope so. She is the semblance of my normal life after all. Assembling my thoughts, I began a noble crusade, worth 3 years of my life, across the city, hiding from the pigs that wanted my soul for the many murders I'd committed. Whoever tattled was unknown to me, but I wish them a good life.

So, my name is Avith Rockford and I *was* a killer. I never repented, I never bothered with any forms of reformation, and everyone I love has been cut off from me. Perhaps I deserved this. After all, killing thousands is a rather reprehensible deed, and my reason (that being boredom) is similarly abhorrent.

Bloody. Bloody and trite and vile, was my life. I have not known many other violent criminals (they fancied themselves with menial topics, really) but my life - my pitiful, pathetic life was just as bloody and trite and vile and abhorrent and as inconsequential as any other street thug. It seems as though my writing has changed me, however. As I recollect the past, I find the actions which I have done vile. Reprehensible. Disgusting. And disgusting as I always have been, I yearn for *more*. More and more violence. More and more filth like me to claim the earth beneath our feet and consume peace. But still - I find myself beginning to see the fault in my actions and the thoughts I have done.

The police are already closing in. That much I know. As of right now, there should be a SWAT duo of two officers closing on my apartment, ready to shoot me on sight if I dare act up. So, the reformed man I am, I may as well apologise. To any Mrs. Braithwaites, Master or Miss or Mr. Adamsons, or Smirnovs, or Nashtons, or Ortegass, or Sears, or Davidsons or Minias, I'm sorry. And I know it will be ingenuine.

If I ever escape this confrontation undetained or alive for whatever reason, I know that in my heart there is a deep pit. A pit of degeneracy - vile degeneracy - wishing to spread like a fungus or disease or tumour and claim our dear maiden Earth in a cancerous infection.

They are banging at my door. My time is soon. So, my final notes are



**A transcript of the radio  
of a SWAT unit responsible  
for the Trihex raid.**

**SWAT 1:** 10-29f subject wanted for  
felony.

**CENTRAL COMMAND:** Copy that.

**SUSPECT:** Good day-

**SWAT 2:** Put your hands up!

**SUSPECT:** Alright, alright...

**SWAT 1:** We're currently de-

**\*BANG!\***

**SWAT 2:** 10-57, Firearm discharged!

**SUSPECT:** What is this, I-

**CC:** You have permission to fire!

**SWAT 1:** On it!

**\*OFFICERS FIRE\***

**\*BOOM!\***

**CC:** 1120 do you copy?

[ END TRANSCRIPT ]

## Dead Band's Party

Hello. I was Sonya Ortigosa. The only thing you need to know now is that the only thing you need to know is that I'm sorry, my reader, unless your name is not 'Avith Rockford'. If it is? Splendid. If not, however, please feel free to brush this as yet another segment of this book.

Nonetheless, I'm sorry, Vito. I'm sorry about what I did, and what I didn't do. I really am.

You see, my name is not Sonya Ortigosa, Sunny Ortega, or anything else I may have devised. Neither do I hold one. I was not hired by the Binmen, although my loyalties did lie in them. To put it simply, I was a spy. From my birth, I had been ravaged from the womb and taken to an isolated Binmen facility many clicks West of Isla Radcliffe. This facility trained me, nurtured me, into a tool. The tool. The tool of Alfred Nashton himself. I detest my time under that man's organisation. For all his crime and sin, I say that he should rot in hell. I believe that the new CEO of the Binmen, however, was much more brutal, for much less reasons. I shall dub him 'A'. Now, 'A'

was a bizarre man. He arrived to claim his company only a month after Alfred's death at just 24 years old, apparently having been offshore in the states for 6 years, accruing friends. Although his predecessor may have ordered for the joint SENTINEL-SWAT assault on the Down-Under, thanks to the intelligence which I provided and the officers he had under his heel, it was 'A' who had ordered for the SWAT assault on your apartment *himself*.

*The one that **killed** you.*

News outlets say that you did it yourself, carelessly shooting a gas pipe. But you were never one for guns, were you? It wasn't you, I just know. But 'A' didn't kill you either.

*It was me.*

I was the one with the intel, who knew you were hiding out your warrant at the Trihex Tower. And it was me responsible for recommending to him that he should get a SWAT team to assault

your hideout, frame an explosion as an accident. Now, I'm rotting, decaying, just as you always wanted me to, Vito. Just like you, I'm spending the rest of my days in run-down motels in the middle of nowhere, or sleeping in stolen cars I've driven to fields, running from everyone who even sounds suspicious. Anyone could be with the Binmen, and I haven't been able to maintain my combat prowess as well as many other former Napoleon Plan agents have. My days run thin, as I inch closer to the ocean. It is either the bullet, the knife, or the Mexican Gulf which will take me. Crime runs everywhere, and I just know it'll come back to me. So while I have a chance, Vito, I'm sorry. And I know you'll never be able to see this - you died two years ago in that explosion - but I'm sorry. I don't know how much longer I'll be able to write this final letter. Three cars have been tailing my hotwired car since this morning, and the next city is 20 miles from here. Any time, they could easily take out their guns, and unload into my car, and they won't even have to hit me, if any glass shards do. So, while I'm still able to even think about it, let alone write it out in this script (while not

denied from it by being peppered with lead, or cut apart by shards and fragments of tiny glass):

You were like a fine poem or novel to me, Vito. Even with your cloudy subtleties which women and men have spent years trying to decrypt, your story, the one which you have portrayed in your writings and actions, and the meaning you've given to us all will always be shrouded with mystical beauty. Much like a well-composed, eloquently written novel, I want more of you. My mind hosts you, pure and innocent (although outside of my dreamscape, you certainly aren't, but I couldn't care less about that), bathing you in divine light; I opened myself up to you, not caring if you didn't. I longed for you - me, who had any sense of the concept of innocent desire and love dashed from the mind by uncaring men, broiling for years in apathy and neutrality - truly held a longing for you and solely you.

Too long for you, mi pequeño espantapájaros? Thought so. If it wasn't clear enough, *te amaba*, **Tatterdemalion**.

- Sonya Ortigosa circa  
2076, before her death in the M4  
motorway shooting.