

# HERO OF THE PEOPLE

An Earthborn Story



STEVEN BISSETT

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# CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

# CHAPTER 1

**M**y friend, how can you even speak this way?" Antonin Gromyko asked his second in command Vitaly Andropov. "After we've been through so much together, how can you consider bailing on the organization now?"

"I have to think of myself, Antonin," he answered in a sullen voice, not wishing to be raked over the moral coals. "The Underground will never get anywhere and you know it. I have to get off this ice cube while I've got a chance."

"But, my friend—," Gromyko began again, before a sharp gesture of the hand stopped him.

"No, Antonin, there's nothing you can say that'll change my mind. I've decided to go to Quarlac and make a better life for myself."

"But you'll never make it back!"

"Look, I've told you my mind is made up," Andropov insisted. "There's nothing you can say or do that will make me stay. I didn't even want to drop by because I knew you were going to make a fuss. But I felt I owed you that much."

"You owe me a great deal more than that," Gromyko snapped. "You know as well as I do, you would have died in these snows long ago if I hadn't pulled you into the organization. And this is how you thank me?! Turning your back on me and heading out to Quarlac with a bunch of pirates!?"

"You know me better than that," Andropov said. "I wouldn't leave if there was any real hope for the Underground."

No, I *thought* I knew you," Gromyko shot back. "But clearly you're just as ungrateful as the rest." Gromyko stormed across his

small office and jerked the door open, stabbing a finger out the opening for Andropov to leave. "Get out before I throw you out."

"I'm sorry it had to be like this, Antonin," Andropov said, walking slowly through the door. Expecting Gromyko to slam it on him when he was only halfway through, he hastened a little once he was beside his former friend. But the smuggler boss waited until he was clear into the next room before closing it so hard that it nearly shook the hinges from their nails.

Going to his large, wooden desk, he dropped onto it and let out a self-pitying sigh.

"They're all against me," he grumbled, gently pounding his fist on his knee. "Every last one of them. I can't trust any of them." Walking to the boarded up window of his office, he peeked out through a tiny sliver between two boards and watched Andropov force his thin legs through the gathering drifts of snow. Another blizzard was upon Midway, and it was going to be a nasty one. "Can't trust anyone," Gromyko said under his breath.

He scowled as he heard his subordinates on the other side of the door quietly talking among themselves. It was much too thin for them not to have heard everything that had just been said and he worried what effect it would have on his image and his authority over the organization.

"The Underground just can't catch a break," muttered, wondering how he was going to maintain the organization with Andropov's defection to the Black Fangs. Walking back to his desk once Andropov had disappeared from sight, he fell into the chair behind it and contemplated his options.

The Underground was a fairly new organization, and as of then it hadn't managed to find its feet. Its main competition for exporting artifacts off Delta-13 was the Black Fang pirates, with whom they maintained surprisingly friendly relations. In truth, this was because the Fangs didn't consider the Underground any kind of threat, and in fact welcomed their activity, as it brought to market low value artifacts that wouldn't have been worth the pirates' trouble. This served to bolster the artifact trade, which indirectly boosted the Fangs' own business. It also drew in low quality scavengers who, in time, might develop into quite good relic hunters. The Fangs had no

interest in training greenhorns. But it was more than willing to poach those that the Underground had spent its blood and sweat maturing.

A painful additional fact was that the Black Fangs, with their enormous, galaxy-wide network of contacts, could command a much higher price than their purely local competition. Aware of this fact, Gromyko rested an elbow on the armrest of his chair and ground his index knuckle against his temple, trying to crank a solution out of his brain.

Andropov had been a very Important figure, both for the practical day-to-day running of the Underground, and also for the reputation he brought to it as a level-headed problem solver. Many saw him as a necessary counter-balance to the flamboyant, histrionic chief which he served.

“Formerly served,” Gromyko grumbled, cranking his knuckle harder against his head.

He knew that something drastic would have to be done if the organization was going to survive. It simply couldn't draw enough money in through artifact trading alone. And its various activities, all of which were directed towards undermining imperial authority on Delta, cost a great deal of money.

There was, however, one avenue that he'd previously rejected.

There were a number of covert, illegal liquor producers which the organization had considered taking over in the past. The main problem the distillers faced was that they had neither eyes nor ears within the police, and subsequently very little warning about looming raids. Additionally, they had difficulty getting their wares distributed, as they were generally ramshackle affairs with neither the resources nor the talent required to move any real quantity of their product around Midway. This often forced them to accept customers right at the same location in which they produced their rather poor-quality moonshine. This made the work of finding them much too easy for the police.

As he thought about this, his door received a trio of knocks. Opened before he could respond, an attractive blonde woman, around twenty-five, entered.

"I just heard what happened with Andropov," she said sympathetically, twisting and half sitting on the front of his desk. Many in the organization considered her Gromyko's girlfriend, though in reality he refused to get deeply involved with any one woman. He preferred to have a host of admirers for the sake of his image.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about him," Gromyko lied with an easy motion of his hand, trying to disguise how violently betrayed he felt. "It'll be easy enough to find someone to replace him."

Frowning at him for his obvious deception, she leaned back a little.

"There's nobody in the Underground today who can replace Andropov," she said with some firmness, though she knew better than to put any real pressure on him when he was overwrought. "With him gone—"

"Andropov is in the rearview mirror, Lena," he suddenly snapped, the heat of his emotions spilling out at once. "If he's gonna jump ship, I say good luck to the sharks! May they chew him down into bits so tiny that no one can ever find them!"

"You know you don't mean that," Lena said with a disapproving shake of her head. "Everyone serves their time with the Underground before moving on to something else," she continued, her words earning her an angry scoff. "It's an unfortunate fact, Antonin. But for the most part we're an entry-level organization. We've been losing members to the Black Fangs for a long time. It's just the way things are."

"Yes, I know that," he said quietly, trying to hold in his emotions as he looked towards the boarded up window, making as though he could see out the tiny crack in the boards to buy himself a moment to think. "That's what makes it all the worse," he added, turning to her again.

"We only barely stand in their shadow, and they know it," she continued, causing him to scowl and look away again. "You have to face that fact, Antonin," she insisted. "You have to face it, and make some changes. Or we're just going to be a recruiting ground until we finally go broke and collapse."



She uttered this with as much conviction as she could muster. But the truth was she didn't really believe Delta-13 had a big enough artifact trade to support two organizations at once. At least so long as one of them was the Black Fang pirates.

"Perhaps, another approach is required," the smuggler boss uttered, resting his elbow on the desk and his chin upon the palm of his hand.

"You don't mean the distilleries," she responded dubiously, thoroughly against the idea since it would draw much more attention from the police towards both the organization's operatives and hideouts.

"Why not? They need our distribution network, and we need their money. They've been pestering us to take over for a while."

"Yes, and they would also like our protection from the police," she pointed out. "They want to have our noses in the air sniffing for trouble because they can't hardly help handing themselves over to them on a silver platter. They're incompetent, Antonin. It's a miracle they've lasted this long."

"All the more reason for us to take over," he countered, though without much energy.

"If the Underground gets involved with people like that, we're asking for trouble," she argued, crossing her thin arms over her chest. "Their lips are so loose from their own product that they'll rat us out without even meaning to. It would expose our entire network to another angle of attack."

"It's not as if this is my first choice, you know," he replied, standing up and going to the window again, peering out at the last vestiges of light that somehow managed to fight their way through the storm. "But as you said, something must be done, or we'll go broke."

"I've always wanted to search deeper for artifacts, moving farther into the countryside," Lena reminded him. "You've heard the stories of those old alien buildings."

"Yes, but where are they?" he asked, turning around and leaning against the boards. "It's easy enough to tell stories, especially when you've got a few drinks under your belt. But that doesn't mean any of them are *actionable*. And assuming someone

actually *has* managed to find such a building, he'd never spill the location to us unless we broke half the bones in his body. And even then, he probably still wouldn't talk."

"Fine, then let's send out our own scavengers."

"And who will you get to take off on such a mission?" he countered, crossing his own arms. "Who would willingly undertake such a harsh, dangerous task? Who would freeze his rear off day and night for weeks searching the countryside merely in the *hope* of finding an old structure filled with relics? Besides, who could afford to be out of Midway that long?"

"There are a few scavengers who've been presumed dead," she pointed out. "We could get in touch with one of them and pay him off."

"Probably just keep the cash and disappear into another part of town for a while," Gromyko uttered with a shake of his head. "

"Well, we've got to do something soon," Lena shrugged, unsure what else to say. "Otherwise we've had it." Slipping off the desk, she turned and made for the door.

"Wait a moment," Gromyko said, crossing the short room and laying his hands on the backs of her shoulders. Turning her around, he searched her eyes for a moment. "I don't mean to fight with you, Lena," he said quietly, not wanting the eavesdroppers on the other side of the door to hear. "I know this is personal for you, and not merely practical," he added, causing her to look away for a moment before bringing her gaze back to his. "Besides, you know the reports we get from the countryside," he added in an even lower voice. "They say that strange creatures have been spotted prowling through the forests. Creatures so dark and monstrous that even night seems like day when compared against them."

"Oh, those are just stories, Antonin," she said in a faintly critical tone. "People have been making up stories about Delta-13 for years. They're just bored and looking for something to talk about."

"But we've both seen things that can't be explained, Lena," he persisted. "Dark shapes; shadows that seem to move all by themselves; an unexplainable sense that someone else is present, even when tucked into bed all alone. No, Lena: there's something at work on this old ball of snow and ice. You can't deny that."

“The fact is Delta-13 is unfit for human life,” she responded, as his hands slid off her shoulders and tucked themselves into his pants pockets. “People were never meant to live in conditions like these for any length of time. It drives us batty, makes us imagine things that don’t exist and never could. It’s all just superstition and nonsense, Antonin. And you can’t even think of cutting off the only meaningful option for the Underground because of superstition.”

“It’s either moonshine, or defeat, Lena,” Gromyko said more firmly, signaling his unwillingness to argue further. His heart sank when he saw her shoulders droop. “I wish it were possible to find a horde of relics,” he added, trying to soften the blow. “But it just isn’t practical. We’d be pinning the organization’s future on a fantasy.”

“Then it’s moonshine,” she said quietly, turning for the door again. Laying her hand upon the knob, she paused a moment and looked back. “You know I’ll support you, no matter what you choose to do,” she assured him. “But it’ll be hard for me.”

“Yes, I know,” he assented quietly, as she opened the door and left.

Though most of the Underground didn’t know this, Lena’s family had been destroyed by the very moonshine that Gromyko now wished to buttress the organization’s bottom line with. Unlike most of Midway’s drinking population, her parents had degenerated into such violent alcoholics that they lost their way coming home from a distillery one night and froze to death. It pained the smuggler to argue the benefits of moonshine right to her face. But he knew it was a more respectful way to treat her feelings than to allow her to find out indirectly, once the step had already been taken.

But what pained him more than that, was the knowledge that Lena would eventually break with the Underground if he chose that course. There was no way she would be able to serve an organization which subsisted in large part on booze.

Brooding on this problem, he chewed over the practical difficulties of taking over the distilleries for another couple hours, until the streets were good and quiet. Then he left the relative warmth of his ramshackle headquarters, and began to work his way towards the little shack he almost laughingly called home.

The night felt alive, energized as he placed one foot in front of the other, crunching across the icy, garbage-strewn path. Part of him felt it was just because he'd been talking to Lena about dark figures and sentient shadows. But the rest of him found a kind of comfort in the idea that spirits were walking him home. With the authorities thoroughly against the residents of Midway, and with the residents themselves frequently at odds with each other, he was more than willing to accept the companionship of beings who were purely neutral.

At least, he *hoped* they were neutral. He hadn't the least idea how to fight a shadow.

He was over halfway home before he saw his first pair of flashlights trudging towards him in the darkness. The curfew had long since been passed into, so he knew they could only be policemen. Quickly ducking into an alley which stood off to his right, he peeked around the corner and watched. They drew inexorably closer, and he was about to dart down the alley when they suddenly stopped and began talking. He watched as their lights moved up and down the street, searching the buildings lazily. Satisfied, they turned and crunched away from him.

Waiting until they were out of earshot, he moved as quietly as he could into the street and followed them from a safe distance. As soon as he could, he went into another alley and then found another, somewhat less direct, street to go home by.

When at last he did reach his shack, he dropped to his stomach and pulled a pair of loosely nailed boards out of a basement window. Crawling through, he put the boards back and moved carefully to a small bathroom in the center of the shack. Closing the door, he lit a candle and sat down on an overturned bucket. Reaching into his jacket's pocket, he drew out a can of very cold beans and worked the lid off with a knife. Raising the candle to the beans, he carefully picked the metal shavings out of them, and then proceeded to pour them into his mouth. Shivering as the cold fare went down his throat and chilled his insides, he hunched himself together and rocked back and forth atop the bucket.

"Got to keep the money coming in," he said to himself, trying to quiet his conscience, which was burning just then because of

Lena. "They're gonna get the booze, anyhow. Might as well put the proceeds towards something worthwhile," he added disingenuously, scorning himself the moment the words had left his mouth. "No, there's no way to justify this," he shook his head, downing some more of the beans. "But it's not like we've got any choice. Either we do it--."

Instantly he stopped, for he'd heard one of the floorboards outside the room creak.

Someone was inside his house.

Quietly setting down the beans, he picked up his knife and blew out the candle. Waiting a few seconds for his eyes to adjust, he rose from the bucket and noiselessly opened the bathroom door. Listening carefully, he heard absolutely nothing. Fervently he hoped he'd been mistaken, not wishing to engage in a knife fight in the dark. But then he heard the creak again, and it was right around the bathroom's corner. Gripping the knife tightly, he closed his useless eyes and tried to home in on the intruder with his ears.

But then a boot lashed out and kicked him in the face, knocking him over backwards into the bathroom. He dropped his knife as his head struck the toilet bowl. Barely retaining consciousness as someone dropped on top of him and began trying to choke the life out of him, he blindly reached up and seized his assailant's face. Pressing his thumbs into his attacker's eyes, he heard a gruff male voice growl as the vice grip around his neck was slackened. Coughing furiously as his windpipe opened up, Gromyko did his best to kick at his attacker, landing several good hits on his upper legs and stomach. As the man moved back to protect himself, Gromyko's foot connected with his hand and evidently broke several of its bones, for the attacker screamed in pain. Propping himself up on his arms, the smuggler launched himself at his injured assailant, knocking him onto his back and falling on top of.

"Just who are you, who thinks he can attack Gromyko in his own home?"

Receiving no answer as he straddled the man's chest and fought to restrain his arms, he suddenly caught a blow in the stomach which knocked the wind clear out of him. Two more quickly followed, and it was all Gromyko could do to keep from being thrown

off his perch. A moment later a fist to the face knocked the smuggler off the man and onto his side. Feeling the knife he had dropped underneath him as he hit the floor, he shifted where he lay and seized it just as the man landed on top of him, grabbed the hair on the back of his head, and began smashing his face against the floor. Jerking the knife blindly upwards behind him, he managed to stick the man in the shoulder. Screaming once more in pain, his assailant stumbled to his feet and shot out of the bathroom with Gromyko's knife still stuck in his body.

"Hey, I'm not done with you!" Gromyko called after him, though his voice was weak from lack of air.

Fighting his way upright, the smuggler likewise bolted from the bathroom. Knowing better than his attacker did where the front door was in the dark, Gromyko darted for it, reaching it just as the intruder managed to find his way there.

"Get out of my way, or I'll cut you to ribbons!" the man threatened, having jerked Gromyko's knife out of his own shoulder, holding it in his one good hand.

"The only way you're going to get out of this house is through me!" The smuggler said grandly, his shack hardly deserving to be called a house.

"It's not worth it, friend," the man insisted, his voice menacing but shaken.

Knowing the shack better than anyone, Gromyko knew that there was a small vase sitting on a shelf that he'd nailed into the wall beside the door. Quietly he grabbed.

"And just what did you expect to find in Gromyko's home?" he asked so that the man would speak and reveal his location.

"I'm not telling you a thing, you miserable--."

Suddenly the vase exploded against the man's head, Gromyko's ability to aim instinctively being all but perfect. Without so much as a groan the man fell onto his back and lay still.

"That vase was thicker than I thought," the smuggler remarked, as he approached the unconscious man in the dark. Crouching down, he found the knife still clutched in his good hand, pried it out of his fingers, and went to retrieve a candle from the bathroom. "I don't envy you the headache you're going to have when

you wake up—," the smuggler began, lighting the candle with a match and turning just in time to see a massive fist coming at his face.

Hours later he awoke shivering in his own bathroom, the candle having been extinguished by his attacker.

"What in the world..." he mumbled, putting his hands underneath him and pressing himself upright. Gasping as his head began to throb with pain, he rose to one knee and rested an elbow on the bathroom sink. "Who were those characters?" he asked himself, being rather in the habit of narrating what he was thinking. "What on earth could they have wanted here?" he continued, having previously thought that the first man who had attacked him was an assassin.

But as soon as he managed to get another candle lit he had his answer. His entire shack had been completely turned upside down. Not a single cupboard, nor a single drawer had been left unsearched. Surveying the damage, he could only scoff.

"Do those turkeys imagine that I keep valuables hidden in this miserable place?!" he asked with a laugh. "What an idea!"

More curious than anything, Gromyko proceeded to put his house back together. Though he maintained a very small establishment, it nevertheless took him several hours to clean up. This was because he had to pause every few minutes to allow the pounding in his head to subside a little. Having slept more than a few hours on his bathroom floor, the sun was already coming up by the time he was finished.

"I could have saved them a great deal of trouble if they'd only asked me if there was anything here worth stealing!" he joked to himself, as he dropped backwards onto his bed. Groaning as his brain smacked the inside of the skull, he put a hand to his eyes and mumbled a mild oath which was directed towards himself. Though he wished only to sleep off his headache, he found it impossible to rest as he was much too preoccupied with his own curiosity. "What on earth could have brought them here?" he asked himself again, massaging his scalp in an attempt to ease his pain. "Nobody with half a brain would think I'd hide anything valuable here..." he murmured, at once dismissing any of his usual enemies. For while a man in his position naturally had a great many of them, the fact was

they all knew him too well to think he would be keeping merchandise at home. Whoever the two men were, they had reason to believe that his home was worth breaking into, yet without knowing him well enough to realize that that wasn't the case.

Chewing the matter over from every possible direction, all Gromyko managed to do was make his headache even worse. Luckily for him he eventually fell back asleep. And by the time he awoke the pain was all but gone. Daylight had likewise diminished while he was unconscious. And it was with a jolt that he realized the Underground would be worried by his unexplained absence. Leaping impulsively out of bed, he paused for a moment to see if his headache would punish him for being so rash. When it failed to flare up again, he grinned to himself, cracked his front door open just enough to see if anyone was in the street, and quickly departed.

"Where have you been?" Lena asked urgently, as he breezed casually into headquarters. "Who hit you?" she immediately followed up, seeing the bruises on his face.

"Nice to see you, too," he said in a jocular voice, making for his office with her hot on his heels.

"Did you hear what I said?" she asked pointedly, closing the door behind her as he peeked out of his boarded-up window.

"Antonin!" she insisted when he stood there looking out into the snow.

"Somebody is keeping an eye on us," the smuggler told her, watching through the crack in the boards a moment longer before turning around and giving her one of his thousand watt smiles.

"Someone paid me a visit last night," he said grandly. "But it will take more than a few well-placed punches to stop Gromyko!"

"Looks like they landed more than just a few well-placed punches," she pointed out, drawing closer and reaching up to touch his nose before he seized her wrist.

"Careful," he uttered, lowering her hand and releasing it. "It still hurts a little bit."

"I should think it would," she nodded. "I'm surprised he didn't break your nose."

"Not half as surprised as I am," he replied in a lower voice, gently touching it.



So? Are you going to spill the beans or keep me in suspense?" she queried.

"Honestly Lena, I don't know who they were," he admitted, his voice a bit quieter. "All I know is that I was having a quiet meal at home when suddenly one of them attacked me. We fought it out in the bathroom, and I ended up chasing him to the front door. As a matter of fact I laid him out with an old vase someone or other had given me. I was just about to see who it was when his buddy slugged me in the face. I was out cold after that."

"You're lucky they didn't finish you when they had the chance," she observed.

"Yeah, well, it's not like they were assassins," he said. "They were looking for something. Turned my place upside down for it."

"Did they find it?" she asked, curious as to what he'd been hiding at home.

"There is nothing for them to find, Lena!" he insisted. "Do you seriously think I'd start embezzling from the underground at a time like this?"

"No, I didn't mean it like that," she said quickly, though at times she had in fact wondered if he did keep a little something for himself. "I just meant--."

"There's nothing of value in that little shack of mine," he reiterated. "I don't know what they'd hoped to find there."

"And you think they're watching us now?" she asked, nodding towards the window.

"Oh, I know that for a fact," he said with a flare of his eyebrows, gesturing for her to approach as he turned back to the window. "See that fellow over there?" he queried, looking through the blowing snow at a partially concealed man standing in a long dark coat. "He's been watching this building for over an hour now," Gromyko explained. "I watched him and his friends for a while before coming in," he added. Then he laughed. "Didn't have the least idea I was even there! Whoever these guys are, they're not real sharp."

"That, or they think we aren't," Lena suggested, seeing at once that the man had an intelligent face. "Probably some off-worlder who figures us for a bunch of rustics."

"Well, how sharp can they be if they've underestimated Gromyko?" he asked with a grin. "Although I believe you're right," he added when she rolled her eyes. "He doesn't look like anybody I've ever seen around here. He eats too well. And he has a confidence to his bearing which indicates he hasn't spent the last 30 years of his life looking over his shoulder for the police."

"Yes, you can see that at once," she agreed quietly. "What are we going to do about him?"

"Oh, it's not just him," Gromyko said casually, leaving the window and returning to his desk. "There's two more of them out there right now. The timing is such that they've got to be tied up with those two thugs who worked me over last night, so it can't be the police. They would have just arrested me then and there."

"Okay, what are we going to do about them?" she queried.

"Well, it's not as if we can kill them," the smuggler said, leaning back in his seat and resting his feet up on his desk. Knitting his fingers in his thick, dark hair, he thought for a moment as Lena eyed him curiously. "They want something," he mumbled, more to himself than to her. "And if they keep just standing out there in the snow, they're gonna draw the cops onto us." Clicking his tongue, he suddenly stood up. "Guess the only thing to do is go out there and ask what's on their minds."

"Are you crazy?" she asked, following him to the door as he drew it open and turned around. "You can't just waltz out there. They'll club you and drag you off!"

"In broad daylight? Hardly!" he replied, shutting the door briefly, his hand remaining on the knob. "Besides, it will do the organization good to see that their leader is brave and unphased in the aftermath of Andropov's defection. It will give them courage."

"And what'll happen to their courage when their leader is lying bloody in the snow somewhere?" she shot back. "That's assuming we find your body, of course."

"You worry too much," he said with a smile, kissing her forehead and opening the door again. "Besides, this is not the way that Gromyko shall meet his end!" he said grandly. "Gromyko shall be like a comet, which only expires once it has burned brilliantly through the sky!"

With this he whipped around, and in a combined motion dashed through the doorway and closed the door behind him. Certain that it was hopeless to try and stop him, Lena went to the window and watched the man in the coat. Her heart nearly stopped when Gromyko came into view, boldly striding through the snow wearing a jacket he'd merely thrown around his shoulders. Biting her index knuckle, she watched through the crack in the boards as the unknown man took a step back, shaken by the unblinking confidence of the smuggler. When the latter began to speak, he seemed to relax a little. Several minutes of conversation saw him hunch his shoulders and tuck his chin against his chest, apparently more concerned with the cold than with anything Gromyko might do.

"Not used to our weather, are you?" Lena quietly asked, still trying to work out where he was from despite her fear for Gromyko's safety. "No!" she exclaimed, when the smuggler suddenly turned towards the building, gave her a wave, and then disappeared around the corner that the man had been standing behind. "You're *not* gonna go off with him!" she insisted, bolting out of the office and gathering up several of the men who happened to be hanging around just then. Leading them out into the snow, they hurried to where the two-man conference had taken place, followed the participants' tracks a short distance, and then utterly lost them in a street that had been trodden until the snow was practically ice. "What are you *thinking*, Antonin!?" she exclaimed.

"He's on his own now, Lena," one of the men said, the lack of concern in his voice infuriating her.

"He could get killed, you know!" she snapped, looking up into his face. "Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Sure, but so could any of the rest of us, on any given day," another man chimed in. "This is a dangerous game we're playing, Lena. Worrying about it will just give you an ulcer. Besides, he just went off to talk. He'll probably be back an hour after nightfall, full of stories."

"And if he isn't?" she shot back, as the men moved back towards headquarters, their combined gravity pulling her along.

"What then?"

“Then I guess we’ll be looking for a new boss,” the first man shrugged.

## CHAPTER 2

Silas Burnside was sitting inside his small house when a knock startled him out of his large, cushioned chair and sent him darting to his front door. In a flash he'd seized a wooden bat from the mantel above his weak, smoldering fireplace and held it at the ready.

"Who's there?" he asked in a gruff voice, though the tension in it betrayed more than a few frayed nerves. He suspected it was the police, and though he'd had a couple of successful fights with them, he was pushing sixty, and was increasingly eager to avoid any such encounters. He was relieved, and confused, when a feminine voice made its way through his door.

"It's Lena Barker, Silas."

Frowning at this, he slid the bolt open and pulled on the door. Half expecting a trick, he searched the darkness behind the lovely girl for a few moments before ushering her inside.

"Well, come in," he said, his voice pure gruff now, trying to compensate for the fear he thought she might have heard in it.

"What's on your mind?" he queried, as he slid the bolt shut again and laid his bat across the small mantel. Dropping back into his chair, he reached for a pipe which likewise lay upon the mantel, lighting it with a small stick from the fireplace. Flicking the twig back into the flames with a snap of his wrist, he looked at the silent girl questioningly. "I'm not a mindreader, girl. You'll have to speak up."

"Antonin has gone missing," she said at once. "I want you to go find him."

"I cut my ties with the organization quite a while ago," he said smugly, drawing on his pipe and letting out a puff. "Or rather

Gromyko cut them for me.” He snorted. “Doesn’t surprise me that he’d get himself in a jam with me gone.”

“He’s only been gone a few hours,” she explained, not wishing to get into an argument if she could help it. “He went off with a stranger who’d been watching headquarters.”

“And why’d he do that?” he asked, drawing on his pipe again. “Get bored around HQ? Looking for someone else to soak up his stories?”

“No. This man, or his associates, broke into his house last night and rifled it. Knocked him unconscious, too. So, naturally, he had to pay them a social call,” she explained, the aggravation in her voice unmistakable.

“That’s Gromyko, girl,” he said in a self-satisfied fashion, leaning back in his seat. “He was bound to get himself killed sooner or later.”

“Don’t say that!” she barked, making him jump. At once she recovered her balance. “There’s no reason to assume he’s dead,” she added, her tone controlled.

“No, of course not,” he agreed, seeing at once that her interest in the smuggler was more than purely professional. “Well, there’s not much I can do about it, is there? It’s not like I can just start randomly beating the bushes for him. Your guess is as good as mine as to where he’s likely to be.”

“You’ve got contacts,” she replied seriously. “You keep your eyes open.”

“Girl, I haven’t seen or heard *anything* about your boss in weeks,” he said unconvincingly, standing up and heading for the door. Thinking he’d heard something, he pressed his ear against it for a moment. “Were you followed?” he queried, receiving only a disapproving look for his question. “Well, it never hurts to ask,” he said defensively, crossing his arms over his broad chest and leaning against the wall. Formerly handsome, his tall frame, wide shoulders, and lean hips had won the attention of many a female when he was younger. But the harsh conditions of Delta-13, to say nothing of excessive smoking and drinking, had aged him much faster than the simple passage of time would have. He was beginning to look like a seriously old man.

“You know that Antonin didn’t merely cut ties with you, Silas,” she said in a formal tone. “He kicked you out because you were embezzling artifacts. A less generous man would have had you killed for all you made off with. Probably should have, considering the fix the organization is in now.”

“I’d hoped that Gromyko would keep private matters *private*,” he sniffed, aware that he didn’t have a leg to stand on, but far too vain to keep from trying to defend himself. “After all—.”

“If you’d pulled that stunt with the Black Fangs, they’d have cut you in fifty pieces and thrown you out to feed the *birds!*” she snapped, making him jump again. “I’m not here to negotiate, Silas: I’m *telling* you that you’re going to look for Antonin. And you’re gonna do it *right now!*”

“When you’ve been around as long as I have—,” he began sanctimoniously.

“You’re not going to be around a whole lot longer if you don’t get moving,” she shot back.

At this his face darkened. Laying aside his pipe, he seized her arm in his powerful grip and dragged her to the door. Slapping the lock open, he jerked the door open just in time for a huge fist to connect with his nose and dump him over backwards. Dragging Lena down on top of him, he struggled to shove her off and rise as a man in a long gray coat stood over him.

“She asked you nicely, Silas,” the man said, instantly revealing himself to be an Underground man. Nearly seven feet tall, he towered over the aging rogue. “Are you gonna play ball? Or do you need a little more convincing?” he asked, slamming his gloved right fist into his left palm.

Too proud for sense, Burnside ducked his head and tackled the giant, barely managing to knock him off his feet and landing atop him. Reaching for his neck, his hands only got halfway to it before the giant clamped his massive fingers around his wrists and started to wrench them off to either side. Groaning as his arms began to bend, Silas was suddenly jerked over the giant’s head. Crashing into the wall as Lena rushed to shut the door and lock it, Burnside actually saw stars as he arose. Then he felt two huge hands seize his middle. Instantly he was jerked off his feet and slammed against

the floor. With all the air knocked out of him, he struggled to rise as a size seventeen boot planted itself on his chest.

“Believe me, I can keep this up all night long,” the man said with relish, hoping Burnside would continue his vain struggle. “It’d be a pleasure to pay you back for your services to the organization,” he added acidly.

“I don’t want him broken,” Lena said. “Well, not *too badly*,” she qualified. “He still has to find Antonin.”

“I’m not gonna go looking for that turkey,” Burnside wheezed.

“Wrong answer,” the giant said with a shake of his head, reaching down and grasping his belt as he slid his boot off his chest. Jerking him upright with a single arm, he slugged him again, sending him stumbling across the house to the mantel. Seizing the bat from atop it as blood dribbled out of his mouth, he wiped his lips with the back of his hand and held the piece of wood out before him.

“You want some of this?” he asked, though the giant was unphased.

Viciously swinging it as though to knock his head from his shoulders, he missed when the huge man ducked with surprising speed. Seizing it as it sailed past, the giant ripped it from his fingers and smashed him over the head with it. Dropping onto his stomach, he lay there only long enough for his attacker to grasp the back of his long-sleeved shirt and drag him upright. Though too battered to have even the slightest chance, he nevertheless threw a punch which the giant didn’t bother to dodge. Weakly it struck his chest.

“Are you starting to get the message now, Burnside?” his deep voice rumbled, seeing the confusion on his face. “You’d be better off playing ball with us than play-fighting.”

Angered by this, Burnside nevertheless had nothing left in the tank to throw at his assailant. Stumbling backwards, he reflexively ran his tongue across his teeth to make sure they were all still there.

“I haven’t deprived you of those yet, Burnside,” the man said with a broad smile. “But they’ll be next, if you don’t help us find the boss,” he added, slowly advancing towards him.

“Call your pet off, Lena,” Burnside snapped, though inwardly afraid of round two.



His words, however, were poorly chosen, earning him a devastating backhand which all but tore him from his feet. Sliding along the wall and only barely catching himself, the whole side of his face felt numb. Eyeing the fighting machine which stood before him, the most Burnside could manage was a nod that he would go along with Lena's wishes. Nodding himself, the giant took a step back and withdrew from the conversation.

"The men Antonin went off with weren't from around here," Lena informed him, as though nothing had just happened. "They didn't look like either locals or cops, and they weren't used to our weather. Naturally, this raises the question as to what they could want with Antonin. The only plausible answer to that is an artifact, especially considering they searched his home first."

"That doesn't explain why they surrounded your HQ," he replied, moving to his small, connected kitchen and grabbing a rag to dab the blood from his mouth. "If they were just thieves they wouldn't have done that."

"Well, how do you explain it, then?" she asked.

"I'd say they actually knew him pretty well, and they were laying bait," he said frowningly, finding a tooth that the giant had loosened. "Most likely they weren't looking for anything at his place, and they were just messing it up to make him curious. That was part one of their trap. The second part was stationing men around your HQ so that Gromyko couldn't help but see them. It was probably even the man's idea for Gromyko to go back with him to meet his friends. Though he would have made it *seem* like Gromyko's idea, of course."

"But why?" Lena asked pleadingly, the dark picture he'd painted robbing her poise for a moment. "Why would anyone lure Antonin in like that?"

"Can't imagine," he shrugged, laying aside the blood stained rag and scowling at his two visitors. "But it looks like I'm gonna have to find out."

"You're right about that," the giant chimed in, smiling faintly. "And you'll do so at once."

"I'm going to, you big gorilla!" he shot back, causing the Underground man to approach. But Lena stopped him part way to

Burnside.

“He’s learned his lesson,” she told the giant. “He just needs a little time to get used to it.”

“Well, anytime he needs a refresher course...” his voice trailed, once more slamming his right fist into his left palm.

“I’ll get in touch with a few people I know,” Burnside said, grabbing a coat and painfully making for the door. “It’ll take a little time.”

“Be quick,” Lena said, as she and the giant joined him. “There’s no telling what they might be doing to him right this minute to loosen his tongue.”



“No, my friend, I truly could not swallow another drop!” Gromyko insisted, pushing away a glass of the highest quality moonshine that Midway was capable of producing, which wasn’t saying much. “You know, I half think you want to make me drunk so that I’ll agree to take you fellows on!” he said with a laugh, though in fact he meant it.

Sitting with him around a small, square table were three other men. Two in their fifties, and one in his twenties. The older men didn’t say a whole lot, being the patriarchs of two of the best distilleries in town. The young man represented the third best, though his product was vastly inferior to theirs, and they only allowed him to come along in the hope that Gromyko would find him more relatable. The scent of booze and bad breath filled the small, dimly-lit basement in which they sat.

“We just want you to see what peace and contentment we can bring to the poor citizens of our little metropolis if you agree to work with us,” the young man said, who refused to go by any name other than Lightning. Fancying himself to be something of a copy of Gromyko, he tried to mimic his style and image, to the annoyance of the jaded older men who sat with them.

“It’s important to everyone involved that we seal this deal, Gromyko,” the oldest man said, his large white mustache concealing the frown he perpetually wore. “You need the money, and we need your distribution network.”

“Oh, I know all of that already,” the smuggler said with a wave of his hand. Shifting a little where he sat, he was disconcerted to find his balance off. Certain that his hosts were carefully watching his every move, he tried to look as sober as possible. “The fact is this,” he began to say, pausing for a burp. “Taking you on will add to the risk that the organization already endures on a daily basis. Moving your wares, no matter how careful we try to be, will increase the chance of our boys getting picked up. Which, in turn, increases the number of mouths that could be compelled to rat us out.”

“You don’t have much faith in your boys, do you?” the second-oldest man asked pointedly, a smirk on his scarred lips. Truly the least attractive of the three of his hosts, he looked as if someone had gone to work on him with a knife ten or twenty years earlier. A sharp gash ran diagonally across his mouth. But another marred his left cheek, and a third had taken a chunk out of his right eyebrow, leaving it partially hairless. “You think they’ll squeal?”

“It’s hardly a lack of faith in my boys,” Gromyko replied somewhat warmly. “The fact is, the police have very effective methods for making people talk. And even if only a fraction of those captured talked, it could be enough to bring us down eventually.”

“Sounds like you’re trying to talk us out of using your organization,” the mustached man commented.

“Hardly,” laughed the smuggler. “It’s not as if you’ve got anyone else you can go to,” he added, when the oldest man smugly snorted. “The Black Fangs aren’t gonna do your dirty work for you. And you monkeys haven’t figured out an effective distribution scheme on your own. No, you’re stuck with us, my friends. It simply remains to be seen if the Underground will take you on.”

“This ain’t charity,” the scarred man snapped. “We’re offering to pay for your network.”

“I never said it was,” the smuggler replied with a breezy smile. “But we might as well be frank, gentlemen: you need us far more than we need you.”

“We’ve been doing just fine,” the youngest man said, though his voice was a little deflated as he began to fear the negotiation was spiraling towards failure.

“I’d say we’ve heard about enough,” the scarred man said, standing up and looking down at Gromyko. “Anything more you want to add, smuggler?”

“Just this,” he began quietly, the tone of his voice capturing their attention at once. “And sit down,” he said first, pointing to his seat. “I’m not going to talk to someone who’s halfway out the door.” He waited a moment for him to sit again. “First off, your sales are down and they’ll only continue to fall lower. The police are putting the squeeze on you, and you anticipate that it will get worse unless you do something to change it. That’s why you put those men around my headquarters: that was an attention-seeking move in a town that lives on anonymity. You meant it to be a power play, an act of intimidation. You wanted to force *me* to come to *you*, as though *I* was the supplicant. But only desperate men would stick their necks out like that. You’re afraid, gentlemen. So let’s not talk about walking out when your only actual option is to remain here and hash out a deal.”

“I thought you didn’t want a deal,” the scarred man said in a surly voice. “You’ve been downing our booze and shooting the breeze for hours now.”

“I did that so I could have a chance to feel you out,” the smuggler grinned. “The way a man holds himself over a number of hours tells you more than mere words can. You gain insight into his inner world, because he can’t disguise his body language the way he can camouflage his words.”

“Why?” Lightning asked simply.

“Because I must have an idea what sort of men I’m considering working with,” he answered, the hopeful tone of his words causing all three of his hosts to lean forwards with anticipation. “Good faith can’t simply be assumed in a town such as ours. A dystopian shantytown is not conducive to a good business climate. You must meet each person you’re going to work with and study him intensively. Then you must form a judgment about his character, and use that judgment to inform whether or not you go into business with him.”

“And?” the mustached man queried brusquely. “Have you made up your mind to work with us, or not?”

“You’re in such a hurry!” the smuggler laughed, glad to see the older man scoff and roll his eyes but remain at the table, reinforcing just how desperate he was for a deal. “You pressure and pressure Gromyko, when he must have time to put together a plan that serves all parties,” he added, slipping into the third person to see if that would annoy them further. He barely stifled a grin when it visibly did.

“You mean you want to see just how badly you can gouge us,” the scarred man opined.

“It’s not in my nature to swindle anyone who comes to me with his hand extended in the hope of making an honest deal,” Gromyko uttered majestically. “But in order to take on a risk of this size, there must be considerable compensation.”

“And here comes the squeeze!” the scarred man said, smacking his hand on the table. “This is what we’ve been waiting to hear for hours: just how badly you intend to clean us out.”

“Gentlemen, it is the *police* who are putting the squeeze on,” he pointed out. “And I, as a sane, sensible businessman, must respond to that pressure by increasing my price. Otherwise the risk is untenable, and I must simply bow out.”

“Well, what kind of price are we talking about?” Lightning asked, causing the older men to tighten up with dread.

“My friends – and that is precisely what you’ll be, if you enter business with Gromyko; not merely customers or colleagues, but friends – the price, I’m afraid, will be very high. I must have complete control of all distribution from the moment we ink the deal onwards. Moreover, my people must have access to your books, so that–.”

“We don’t keep books,” the scarred man snapped. “We’re just moonshiners, not accountants.”

“My friend, *everyone* keeps books,” the smuggler grinned. “There’s no other way to ensure that a profit is being made when the margins are tight.”

“And, given our margins *are* tight, just how do you intend to gouge us without putting us right out of business?” the scarred man

countered.

“First, by lowering the price of the supplies you require for your distilleries by negotiating better terms with your suppliers,” he answered, raising a finger. “Second, by getting your products into the hands of more buyers via our distribution network,” he raised a second finger. “Third, by replacing inefficient workers with good ones,” he said, raising a third finger. Gripping them with his other hand, he shook them both. “By lowering the cost of production, making the process more efficient, and increasing your presence in the market, you’ll make enough money to stay in business and pay the Underground’s fees.”

“What you’re talking about is nothing less than a complete takeover,” the oldest man observed. “I’ve been distilling since before you were even born. Do you really expect me to accept this?”

“If you intend to remain in business, I do,” Gromyko replied, leaning back in his chair.

“Is that a threat?” the scarred man growled.

“Merely a statement of fact,” the smuggler said with a shake of his head. “It is not in the Underground’s DNA to threaten and cudgel, gentlemen. I wouldn’t think of bludgeoning you into submission. But it is *equally* outside our genome to allow amateurs such as yourselves—.”

“*Amateurs!*” exploded the scarred man, rising from the table and slamming his fists against it. “We built the entire moonshine business from *scratch* on this planet. That’s why we’re the best. All of these Johnny-come-latelies can’t come *close* to our product because they don’t have any real experience with it. But we knew how before we ever came to Delta-13.”

“Which reminds me of another point I forgot to mention,” Gromyko said calmly. “I have no doubt that the other distilleries will want to come onboard once they see the great success of our consortium. It will be necessary to spread your recipes and your production processes around to them so that we can establish a standard level of quality. This will also—.”

“I’m done listening to this idiot,” the scarred man said, knocking his chair over as he stepped away from the table. “You two can deal with him if you want. But count me out.”

“The terms will only worsen if you walk out now,” the mustached man said grimly, causing his associate to pause as he walked across the basement towards the stairs which led to the main floor. “None of us can afford pride any longer,” he added. “Either we work with the Underground, or we go belly up.”

“I think I’d rather go belly up than be humiliated by this turkey,” the scarred man said, stabbing a finger towards Gromyko. “Besides, you heard what he said: he intends to take us over and start monkeying with our manufacturing process. It’s a sure thing that he’ll replace our boys with his own lackeys. He’ll take the process that we’ve spent years refining and cheapen it down until it’s barely rain water. He might not have said that, but that’s another one of the ways in which he intends to increase our profits.”

“I haven’t the least intention of altering your product,” Gromyko uttered. “I wish to see this succeed just as much as you do. Lowering our standard of quality wouldn’t help either of us.”

“Sure it would,” the scarred man said nastily. “Once you get the other distilleries locked down the people of Midway won’t have a choice but to buy whatever swill you put out. You’ll see to it that all the competition is absorbed in your consortium. You might keep us on for a few years until you’re sure you’ve got everyone over a barrel. But it’ll only be a matter of time before you finally squeeze us out.”

“If that’s the way you feel, my friend, then perhaps it’s best if you *do* go.”

“Oh, I’m going,” he assured the smuggler, as he resumed walking towards the stairs. “I’m not going to put up with this for another second.”

The three remaining men watched as he disappeared upstairs. Lightning uttered a mild oath under his breath.

“What do we do now?” the young man asked the other distiller.

“We make a deal with the Underground ourselves,” he shrugged, concerned that the loss of the scarred man would weaken their bargaining position with Gromyko. Sensing this at once, the smuggler immediately put them at ease.

“You needn't worry what kind of a deal you'll get from the Underground after this,” he assured them. “I intend to proceed exactly as if there were still four of us sitting at this table.”

“Alright,” the mustached man said. “Let's start hashing out the details.”



The sun had long since risen and fallen once more by the time Gromyko breezed into his office. Seeing Lena sitting behind his desk with her arms upon it and her face nestled against them, he walked to her quietly and planted a kiss on the back of her head.

“What?” she asked in a startled voice, sitting up sharply. A look of shock covered her face the instant her eyes fell upon the smuggler. “Antonin!” she exclaimed, practically jumping over the desk and throwing her arms around his neck. “I thought we'd never see you again,” she said somewhat self-consciously, drawing back a little and trying to regain her composure since the door was still open and they were in full view of anyone outside the office.

“*We* thought, or *you* thought?” he teased, giving the door a push that mostly closed it.

“How did you make it back?” she asked, ignoring his question. “I thought those men had kidnapped you.”

“*Them?* No, of course not. Those men work for a handful of the distillers. They finally got tired of me dodging them and decided to pull me in for a little chat.”

“A little *chat?*” she repeated with angry confusion. “You mean you've been sitting around chewing the fat with a bunch of moonshiners while we've been beating the bushes looking for you?” she asked in a voice that grew louder with every syllable.

“Why would you do that?” he asked with a puzzled look on his face. “You saw me when I went out to talk to that man,” he continued, pointing towards the boarded up window. “I waved back to show that everything was alright. It's not as if I would have gone off with him if I thought there was any danger. Well, *excessive* danger.”



“I've been worried sick about you this entire time, and the moonshiners have been wining and dining you!?” she demanded, backing him towards the rear of his office. “Teddy and I even dug Burnside out of retirement so he could help us look for you.”

“Lena, you can hardly blame me if you chose to overreact!” the smuggler objected. “Like I said, I waved back to show you everything was okay.”

“Oh, sure, You can communicate a lot with a simple wave!” she shot back.

“Lena, you're being ridiculous,” he said frowningly. “And you had no reason to go bringing Burnside into this,” he added with a shake of his head. “Even if I was in trouble, the last thing I'd want is to have that old skunk looking around for me. I'd sooner push up daisies.”

“That goes for me too!” she snapped, turning from him and heading for the door.

“Lena, will you knock this off?” he asked, following her and putting his hands on her shoulders as she gripped the doorknob.

“Don't touch me!” she barked, shaking off his touch and jerking the door open. “The next time you decide to head off like that, don't expect to find me waiting here when you come back!” she shouted, drawing the eyes of everyone outside the office. Slamming the door before he could reply, she was halfway to the building's exit when he opened the door and took off after her.

“Lena, wait!” he pleaded, though she wouldn't listen. Grabbing her coat off a hook by the door, she shoved one arm into it as she strode out into the snow. Watching her hunch her shoulders against the wind, all he could do was shrug and close the door.

He was concerned when he didn't find her at home that night, though he was certain she was simply staying with friends. Heading back to headquarters the following day, it was with considerable misgivings that he saw her waiting for him in his office.

“I shouldn't have exploded yesterday in front of everyone, and I'm sorry,” she said in a flat, business-like tone. “Whatever disagreements we have ought to be discussed in private.”

“I should hope that we will never have such disagreements again,” he said. “To be honest, I'm still not quite sure why we had

that one yesterday.”

“Antonin,” she said with a disapproving shake of her head. “Do I have to spell it out for you?”

“No, I understand that you have affection for Gromyko,” he replied, slipping into the third person to distance himself from her just a bit. “What I don't understand is why you overreacted so strongly to me going off with that man. It's hardly the first time that I've had to go off and talk with someone in private.”

“Are you forgetting what they did to your house?” she asked incredulously. “How they attacked you? I thought these were a bunch of thugs! Even Burnside said that they were probably just luring you out.”

“Oh, what does he know?” he replied with a dismissive wave of his hand, sitting down on his desk. “The fact is the men I went and talked to had nothing to do with those two who were inside my house that night. It turns out our little exercise in deductive reasoning was off by a mile. They were showing themselves because they were desperate, and they were trying to make a point in order to get on my radar. They wanted to show me that they weren't going to leave me alone until I at least talked to them. They also realized, as we did, that their presence would draw the police sooner or later. They were just forcing a meeting.”

“But do you at least understand why I ‘overreacted’?” Lena queried, making finger quotes. “I thought these were the men who attacked you!”

“Yes, of course you did,” he assented, rising and going to where she stood. Putting his hands on her shoulders, he dropped his voice. “I didn't mean to put you through that, Lena, and I'm sorry.”

“I appreciate that,” she quietly uttered with a nod. “Just don't do that again,” she added. “Not if you can help it.”

“I'll do my very best,” he assured her, flashing one of his famous smiles.

“So, how did you make out with the moonshiners?” she asked as he drew his hands away and went back to his desk.

“We made a deal,” he said somewhat reluctantly, concerned by the effect it would have on her. “The Underground has agreed to

take over a pair of distilleries. Hopefully others will come into the fold when they see how successfully we work together.”

“Yes, hopefully,” Lena agreed without enthusiasm.

“We need the money, Lena,” he reminded her, as her face clouded over.

“Yes, I know,” she replied, walking to the window and looking out through the crack in the boards for a few moments. “Wait,” she said, turning around suddenly. “If those men who beat you up had nothing to do with the distillers, then who were they?”

“I was wondering that also.”

“You mean you haven't the least idea?”

“I mean, I still figure that they were looking for an artifact of some kind,” he shrugged. “And I still don't think they were from Delta-13. But beyond that I'd only be guessing.”

“Then they could be out there watching us right now,” she said in a quietly fearful voice, moving her eye to the crack in the boards once more and searching the blowing snow. “They might even be tailing you when you move between here and home.”

“Could be,” he allowed. “But they didn't kill me when they had the chance, so they don't want me dead.”

“No, they simply beat you unconscious,” Lena said pointedly, feeling he wasn't taking the threat seriously enough. “What are we going to do about them?”

“Well, maybe your friend Burnside has turned something up by now,” he suggested.

“He's no friend of mine,” she insisted, not appreciating his remark.

“Well, he was the first one you went to when you thought I was missing,” the smuggler pointed out.

“I needed someone outside of the organization,” she protested. “Someone with contacts other than the ones we have. Anyone who had so much as an inkling of their plan would have told us at once if they were in any way connected to us, so I knew our usual network wouldn't do us any good. It was necessary to get outside of it.”

“Smart girl,” Gromyko said with a smile.

"I try to be," she replied, still not appreciating how he'd bundled her together with Burnside.

With no other leads to go on, the duo decided to swing by Burnside's that night to see if he'd managed to find anything out.

"Where's your friend, the gorilla?" he asked sourly as he let them into his humble abode. "Sounded like he was all set for round two."

"He's waiting outside, watching our backtrail," Gromyko lied, wanting to put the rogue on the backfoot. "But he'll be more than willing to come in out of the cold and get his blood pumping with a little exercise."

Sharply Burnside shut the door and locked it.

"That won't be enough to stop him," the smuggler laughed, pointing at the lock. "He'd snap that off just as a warmup."

"Good to know," Burnside replied grumpily, still aching from the giant's blows. Moving back to his fireplace, he took his pipe from the mantel and reached for a small twig that was smoldering in the fire. Carefully he lit the pipe. "What's on your mind, Gromyko?"

"I think you already know what we're here for," Lena responded, noticing a curious reserve in Burnside's manner.

"Why don't you spell it out for me?" he replied, flicking the twig back into the flames and taking a couple of irritated draws on his pipe.

"There's no need to be surly," Gromyko said. "Though I suppose it comes naturally enough to you. Tell me, does your conscience still burn from the way you abused the Underground's trust? Or have you made your peace with your own wrongdoings?"

"I was just looking out for myself, like anyone else," he shrugged. His mind seemed distant, as though it was somewhere else. Or focused on *someone* else. "I don't really have the time to sit around and talk about it," he said unconvincingly.

"It seems to me you have all the time in the world," Lena pointed out, nodding towards his cozy setup by the fireplace.

"Fine, I just lack the inclination," he said with annoyance, though he still seemed distracted. Noticing this, Lena looked to Gromyko, who nodded slightly. "I'll answer whatever questions I can," Burnside continued somewhat formally, noticing the exchange

between the two Undergrounders, but pretending not to notice. "But I didn't learn much about those guys who roughed you up."

"Well, just what *did* you learn?" Gromyko asked, reaching into his jacket for his knife. Looking at Lena, he nodded towards Burnside, indicating she should continue talking no matter what he did.

"Well, I learned that they're dangerous, for one," Burnside said, his voice a little more emphatic as the smuggler began to quietly move away from him to search the house. "I wouldn't invite a fight with them if I could help it."

"I'd say the boss did just fine the last time he ran into them," Lena was quick to say, taking the smuggler's place in the conversation. "If that second one hadn't ambushed him he would have taken him out, too."

"Yes, well, you *would* feel that way, wouldn't you?" Burnside said tartly, though a wink told Lena it was only for effect. "But this conversation really isn't about him, is it?"

"Just tell us what you found so we can be on our way," Lena replied impatiently, crossing her arms and shifting her feet as Gromyko moved around a wall and out of sight. "Were those guys local to Delta or not?"

"Absolutely not," Burnside said at once. "Sounds like they represent some off-worlders who are trying to get their hands on an artifact of immense value. I couldn't find out just what it is. But they think it's in Midway."

Suddenly they heard a surprised shout from the back of the house. Bolting towards it as a scream began and was cut off halfway through, they reached Gromyko in time to see a strongly-built man fall out of a closet onto the floor in front of him. A knife wound in his chest caused blood to gush all over his shirt as he writhed briefly and then ceased to move.

"Looks like you've got rats, Burnside," Gromyko said grimly, gesturing with his bloody knife towards the corpse. "Where's his pal?"

"You mean this is one of the men who broke into your place?" Lena asked.

Gromyko nodded, and then eyed Burnside.

“He ought to be back any minute,” the rogue said with scarcely-concealed anxiety. “Said he had to go out for a little while. But I guess he’ll stay away as long as your guard dog is outside.”

“Teddy isn’t out there,” Gromyko informed him, quickly seizing the body and stuffing it back into the closet. “Just said that to mess with your head,” he added.

At that moment they heard a knock at the door.

“Right on time,” the smuggler muttered.

“What are we going to do?” Lena queried in an urgent whisper.

“Let him in,” Gromyko shrugged. “Wouldn’t want him to catch a cold out there.”

“This is serious!” she insisted.

“So am I,” the smuggler said with a frown, gesturing for Lena to hide inside the closet with the dead man.

“I’m not hiding in there!” she said with horror.

“No time to be squeamish,” Burnside said, opening the closet door with one hand and grabbing her arm with the other. “At least you’ve got someone to keep you company,” he added, closing the door as she was about to object.

They heard the other man knocking on the front door again. Gesturing for Gromyko to follow, Burnside went to the door and put his hand on the lock as the smuggler hid behind it. Sliding the bolt open, he barely had time to put his hand on the knob and turn it before the door was shoved open right into his face. Knocked away from it, he fell backwards and nearly landed in the fireplace as the other man rushed inside and slammed the door behind him. Instantly his eyes fell upon Gromyko, and seeing the knife in the smuggler’s hand, he reached for his own. The blade had barely cleared his jacket’s pocket when Gromyko slashed at his face. Jerking back, he raised his blade and did likewise to the smuggler. For half a minute they picked and sliced at each other while Burnside got his bearings.

Grabbing his bat off the mantle, the rogue swung it at the intruder, smashing the knife from his hand and breaking several of his fingers. With a shout the burly attacker grasped his wrist and recoiled, retreating across the room as the two men followed.

"You'd better get talkative real quick, if you want to last longer than your friend did," Burnside threatened, smacking the bat a few times against his left palm.

Quickly the man's eyes darted across the small space, trying to find his associate.

"Nah, we've gotten rid of him already," Gromyko lied. "He made too much of a fuss. And, well, with the police situation like it is, we just couldn't afford the noise. So why don't you see about keeping your voice down in the future," he said in a lightly lecturesome tone, indicating the man's smashed hand with a flick of his knife.

"You won't get anything out of me," he told them. "I'll die first."

"That can be very easily arranged," the smuggler assured him, wiping blood from his knife onto the tips of his fingers and holding them up for him to see. "Now, are you sure you're ready to check out like your pal did?"

Seeing that he was backed into a corner, the man dove for Burnside. Instantly the rogue swung down his bat as the man tackled his midsection. Collapsing as soon as the bat connected with his head, the man fell atop Burnside and lay still.

"Get off of me," Burnside growled, shoving the limp body off to the side and standing up.

"Think you might have hit him a little too hard," the smuggler said, rolling the burly man over and checking his vitals. After a moment he shook his head. "Yep."

"What, he's dead?" asked Lena with surprise, having left the closet just as the man had tackled Burnside. Reflexively a hand went to her mouth.

"Can't always tell how much a body can take," Gromyko replied philosophically. "At least he won't be pestering us now."

"The man is dead, Antonin!" exclaimed Lena. "I should think you could at least avoid being glib!"

"It was him or us," the smuggler replied with a shrug. "Because we weren't going to let him get out of here without answering our questions. And he wasn't going to let us ask them unless we beat him into submission first. It's just the way it goes sometimes."

"I've seen enough of this," Lena said with disgust, heading for the door but stopped when Burnside grabbed her arm. "Let me go," she said sharply.

"You'd better not leave here alone," he told her. "There's no telling how many more of them are watching the streets right now."

"Well, I'm not going to stay here with these two bodies," she shot back.

"I'll take care of the bodies," Burnside said gravely. "You two had better get out of here before any of their friends show up looking for them."

"You're going to need help ditching these two," Gromyko said.

"I can get help," the older man replied. "But it isn't going to be from you. You two are deep enough in this as it is. Whoever these fellows are, it's a cinch they've got both of you marked. It's best that they don't tie you to these two disappearing."

"Don't tell me you're getting noble on us all of a sudden," Gromyko said with a grin.

"Don't push it," Burnside said pointedly. "I just don't like these two coming in here and trying to put the squeeze on me. I'd have killed him myself if I'd had the chance."

"Uh huh," Gromyko replied, still grinning.

"We'd better get going," Lena said urgently, wrapping her hands around the smuggler's left arm.

"It would be best if you two stuck together tonight," Burnside added as they made for the door. "They might tie you in with these two, and they might not. But even if they don't, they'll probably get more direct after this."

"What do you mean?" Lena queried.

"I mean they might get physical. maybe even kidnap one of you," he explained, nodding towards her as he mentioned the latter possibility. "I suggest you both keep your heads down for the next few weeks. They can't be on the prowl all the time, or the police will notice something is up and start closing in. Whatever they plan to do, it's going to have to be quick. The empire doesn't like strangers messing around inside Midway."



"Well, anytime the empire feels like stepping in to get rid of these guys, it'll be fine with me," Lena said with a shiver, hoping that she wouldn't have to see any more bloodshed.

"Come on, we'd better get going," the smuggler said, opening the door and disappearing into the night with her.

"So, just what am I going to do with you two jerks?" Burnside asked the corpses once he'd bolted the door again. "I must be getting soft," he said with a scowl, wondering why he was making Gromyko's problems his own.

While Burnside was busy mulling over what he was going to do, the smuggler skillfully escorted Lena through the frozen streets of Midway towards the house she shared with her family. Or rather what was left of it after her mother and father destroyed themselves through alcoholism. Her uncle was up the hill at the prison serving a life sentence. His wife, Lena's aunt Barbara, along with their son and daughter, did their best to live as good of lives as they could manage, given the circumstances.

"I'll see you at headquarters tomorrow," Gromyko said to Lena when they were just short of her house and hidden in a shadow.

"You'd better come inside," she said. "These streets aren't safe for either of us right now. And it's not like you can go home after what happened tonight. Not unless you take Teddy with you."

"Oh, I'll be alright," he said with a wave of his hand that was invisible in the dark. "This isn't the first time I've had a target on my back," he added with a laugh. "And I know for a fact it won't be the last."

"You'll be safe with us," she insisted.

"No, I wouldn't think of putting your family in danger just so I can spend the night out of the cold," he said with a shake of his head. "Gromyko does not endanger innocent people in order to protect himself."

"Well, then where is Gromyko going to stay tonight?" she asked somewhat critically.

"Oh, there's a thousand hiding places that I can disappear into," he said easily, putting his hands on her shoulders and giving her a little squeeze. "Now, stop arguing and go inside where it's

warm. I'll just wait long enough to make sure nobody is hanging around," he added in a somewhat quieter voice.

"Okay," she relented unwillingly. "But if something happens to you tonight, I'll never forgive you."

"Neither will I," the smuggler grinned.

In a flash she planted a kiss on his lips and made for the door. Surprised by this, he could only watch as her slim form slipped into the house.

As he said he would, he floated around the area for a little while to make sure nobody was watching them. When at last he was satisfied, he shoved his hands deep into his coat pockets and stole away.

## CHAPTER 3

The next few days were uneventful, at least with regards to the mysterious group who'd taken such a marked interest in Gromyko. For the Underground there was more activity, several distillers having heard of the deal that had been made with Lightning and his older friend. Putting out feelers that were instantly received, agreements were made with another three operators. To say this strained Gromyko's relationship with Lena would be an understatement, though he had a hard time knowing how much of her quiet aloofness was caused by the strange men who'd sneaked into Midway. Hoping that she wouldn't blame him for making the only deal the Underground could, given the circumstances, he projected his typical buoyancy to conceal his concerns.

A couple of nights after this, the smuggler was making his way to another out-of-the-way little nook when he felt eyes watching him from the other side of the narrow street. Much too practiced to give this away, he walked with casual ease as the wind pelted his back with snow. Turning down a side street, he felt free of the eyes for several moments. Then, as he'd expected, he felt them again.

Moving a little quicker down this street, he turned down another and promptly tucked himself in a dark little corner of a building. Just barely hearing the rapid footfalls of his pursuer in the soft snow, he pressed himself back as far as he could. Suddenly a small fellow popped around the corner, and Gromyko seized him with both hands.

"Hey! Let go of me!" the urchin demanded, a scruffy, dirty-faced little boy of ten or twelve. "You'd better let go of me, or I'll bite

your hand off!" he threatened, jerking around and trying to sink his teeth into the smuggler's gloves.

"Calm down, Wayne," Gromyko said with quiet firmness, glancing around in the darkness, hoping nobody could hear them. "It's me."

"And what's that to me?" the little brat shot back, still wrestling. "What have you done for Wayne lately?!"

"I'll give *Wayne* a candy bar if he'll shut his mouth long enough to eat it," the smuggler replied.

Instantly the boy stopped struggling.

"How big?" he promptly asked, turning his dirty little face towards him, his large, round eyes searching his. "This had better not be a trick!"

"It's no trick, Wayne," the smuggler told him, reluctantly letting go with one hand and reaching into his jacket pocket. "It's a little cold—," he began, drawing a candy bar that was suddenly snatched from his hand. In a flash the wrapper was torn off, and the urchin sank his teeth into it with a muffled yelp. "I told you it was cold," Gromyko said. "Come on," he added, pulling on his jacket to lead him away.

"Where are we going?" he asked suspiciously, though his words were muffled by his attempts to gnaw through the all but frozen chocolate.

"Somewhere that you can warm up that bar enough to eat it," the smuggler replied, looking down at him and grimacing. "Stop chewing on it. You'll break your teeth."

"You ain't my mother," he shot back, relentlessly grinding away at it.

Shrugging, Gromyko kept one hand on his jacket to keep him from bolting.

"Best to get off the streets," the kid told him after a few minutes of walking. "Something's up with the police. They're getting noseey, anxious. Seems like something's got 'em on edge."

"*Something*, Wayne?" queried Gromyko, certain that the urchin knew more than he was saying. Glancing down as he said this, he saw his round eyes dart up and find his for a fraction of a

moment. Instantly they returned to the candy bar. “Well, we’ll be under cover in a minute or two.”

“Ain’t nowheres to hide around here,” Wayne responded, grabbing his pant leg and pulling on it. “Got to turn around,” he continued, looking back and nodding, the chocolate bar gripped firmly between his teeth.

“Nowhere that *you* know of,” Gromyko said with a smirk, earning a scoff for his remark. “You’re not the only one who knows these streets, Wayne.”

“Know ‘em better than you do!” he insisted, his volume jumping high enough for the smuggler to shush him. “Ain’t my mother!” he shot back.

“I don’t much care if *you* get caught, Wayne,” Gromyko said, stopping and glaring down at him to show his lack of maternal feeling. “I’m telling you to shut up so you don’t get *my* neck in the noose.”

“Don’t hang folks for breaking curfew,” Wayne rejoined pettily, though he’d taken his point.

“Just keep quiet,” the smuggler insisted. “I’m not the only one who knows about this little hideaway.”

Reaching a dilapidated shop, Gromyko led the ragamuffin around the side of it down a narrow path that separated it from another structure. He paused halfway along its side at a door with a small, broken window at the top. Instantly Wayne tried the knob and found it locked.

“What now?” he asked pointedly, finally giving up on the candy bar and shoving it into his pocket.

“What do you think?” Gromyko asked in return, grabbing the urchin and lifting him into the air. Wayne fought and complained. But his voice suddenly dropped off when the smuggler passed him through the window and he dropped to the other side with a thud. Moments later the knob clicked as the lock was opened. The knob was frozen stiff, and it took both the smuggler’s hands to wrench it open. Pressing the door inward, Gromyko saw Wayne scowling at him.

“Maybe next time you’d like *me* to jam *you* through the window!” he exclaimed, unconcerned with how loud his voice was.

“Wouldn’t fit,” the smuggler said offhandedly, closing the door and locking it again. Moving past the boy, he felt his way along the door’s wall towards the back, carefully putting one foot forward at a time. Soon finding a staircase, he slowly moved down the steps, reached a wall, turned ninety degrees to the left, and continued downward. Silently Wayne followed, aware, as Gromyko had said, that others might have found the very same building before them.

Pausing when he’d reached the basement floor, he struck a match and raised it a little over his head, searching for eyes that reflected its light in the darkness. Seeing none, he moved around the basement’s one room just to make sure.

“Could’ve just talked to me in the street,” Wayne grumbled, fishing out his candy bar and working at it with his teeth again. “Didn’t need to drag me in here.”

“We’ve got a lot to talk about,” Gromyko replied, sitting on an old wooden crate, one of the few things that remained in the otherwise empty basement. Whoever the proprietor of the shop had been, he hadn’t left anything of value behind when he’d closed up for good. “Bring that bar over here,” he added, lighting a candle he carried with him just as his match was about to burn out. “You can warm it up over this.”

Frowning, the urchin approached and took the candle from him. Settling on a small box a few feet from Gromyko’s, he glanced at him a time or two, but otherwise kept his attention on the slowly warming chocolate bar.

“So? What do you want to know?” he asked grumpily.

“You know exactly what I want to talk about,” the smuggler said seriously. “What do you know about those men who disappeared a few nights ago?”

“Men?” Wayne asked, though his tone betrayed him.

“Quit playing dumb,” Gromyko shot back, causing the urchin to start a little and look at him. “Not much passes along these streets without you noticing, Wayne. Especially visitors who stick out as badly as they did.”

“*Nothing* passes these streets without Wayne noticing!” he insisted, his pride leading him into a full confession. “I—I mean,” he stammered, his cheeks flushing.

“Out with it,” the smuggler ordered.

“Well, what’s there to tell?” he asked disingenuously, earning a frown from Gromyko. “So a bunch of guys have come to Delta from somewheres else. What’s that to me?”

“They broke into my house and beat me up, Wayne,” the smuggler pointed out. “And they’ve been sniffing around, watching the Underground day and night. I want to know why.”

“So ask ‘em,” he shrugged, shrinking back the instant Gromyko started to rise from his box. “Okay! Okay! So maybe I’ve heard a thing or two about ‘em. Nothing much, though.”

“I told you once before to spill what you know,” the smuggler reminded him as darkly as he could. “If you leave something out–.”

“You don’t need to *threaten me*,” Wayne said with a roll of his big round eyes, though his body remained stiff. “I’m gonna tell ya what I know.”

“You’d better.”

“So these guys are looking for something,” he said with a shrug, as though it was the most natural thing for anyone visiting Delta-13 to do. Pausing to chew away at the small bit of the chocolate bar which had defrosted, he held the rest over the flame again. “An artifact.”

“I know that part,” Gromyko said, annoyed with his foot-dragging. “I want to know what it is, and who these guys are. And, while you’re at it, you can tell me who they’re working for.”

“What am I, psychic?” he asked tartly.

“You’ve got a talent for learning more than you’ve got a right to,” the smuggler uttered heavily. “Don’t disappoint me.”

“Fine,” he replied sarcastically. “Turns out the two you and Burnside killed were just pointmen. There’s others, and there’ll be still more arriving until they get what they’re after. That’s why the police are stirred up like a hive of angry bees: they’ve been given orders to stamp down on our unwelcome guests.”

“*What* are they looking for, Wayne?” he asked pointedly.

“I’m getting to that,” he said with an impatient wave of his little hand. Opening his mouth to speak, he thought better of it and nibbled some more of the candy bar instead, just to make him wait.

“Mm, okay, okay!” he said urgently, chocolate in his mouth as Gromyko began to rise again.

“You’re taking your sweet time, Wayne,” Gromyko said, slowly resuming his seat. “That’s making me curious, too.”

“No reason it should,” the urchin said with a phony shake of his head. “I just don’t like being squeezed, is all.”

“Uh huh.”

“Look, do you want to talk about *me*, or these guys coming into Midway?” he queried.

“Go ahead.”

“Well, like I said, the police have been ordered to put a stop to it. The imperials don’t know why they’re sniffing around. They just assume they’re here to mess things up in Midway. Like smuggling people out who can manage to buy passage through trading artifacts or other valuables.”

“There aren’t any other valuables in Midway,” Gromyko uttered.

“Sometimes people steal police equipment to sell,” Wayne pointed out, his expression indicating that he’d done so himself at times. “But that’s beside the point,” he added quickly. “The cops don’t want these guys stirring up trouble. So they’re beating the bushes and rounding ‘em up. They’ve grabbed a few. But their mouths are screwed tighter than a drum. They haven’t been able to get a thing out of them.”

“They’ll loosen up their tongues in time.”

“These guys don’t figure to be here all that long,” Wayne replied. “They figure to grab the artifact and vamoose before the police can learn anything. Once they’re gone, it won’t matter who spills and who doesn’t. Just so long as they don’t do it before they’ve got that relic.”

“And just what is the relic?” Gromyko inquired. “I’ve seen some neat trinkets since I’ve been here. But nothing has ever produced a search like this. Somebody must’ve stumbled onto something *big*.”

“Stands to reason,” the urchin agreed philosophically, eating a bit more of the candy bar. “Well what? Do you expect me to know



everything?" he protested, when Gromyko viewed him with narrowed eyes.

"I expect you to spit out what you know," he said, pointing an accusatory finger at him. "You've been doing just fine so far. Don't cork it up now."

"Well, this is where it gets a little interesting," the boy began reluctantly, glancing around as though the walls could hear him. "These visitors are working for some rich guy. Got all the money in the galaxy. But he's dying of some disease or other. Never heard the name before, and I've forgotten it now."

"We've had a few healing relics pass through our hands," Gromyko said with a nod as he thought. "But nothing powerful enough to stop a man from dying."

"They're not looking for a *healing relic*," Wayne said tartly. "They're looking for some kind of key."

"A key?"

"Yeah. There's supposed to be some kind of vault or something filled with alien technology hidden in this galaxy. They're looking for the relic that opens it up. Supposed to have a couple of AIs locked away inside of it. They know the way to the vault, and how to open it."

"I've never heard of a relic with more than one AI," Gromyko shook his head. "Sounds like they're chasing shadows."

"Could be someone decided to put two inside of one just for the laughs," the boy said with a dry chuckle. "It'd be like watching chickens go at each other for the same worm." Finding an odd relish in this, the urchin chewed on his chocolate with a smile on his face until his eyes found Gromyko's. "You've got to admit, that would be pretty funny!"

"Try it sometime," he said frowningly. "What else do you know?"

"Just that these guys are in a hurry," he said, warming the bar some more. "The rich guy is in really bad shape, and doesn't have much time. That's why they don't care how many get picked up by the police: the reward for coming through is *huge*, and they're all desperate to get it."

“Don’t see how they’re going to,” he shrugged. “I’ve never heard of an artifact like that. And neither I, nor the Underground, have had one come into our possession. You can tell that to your friends.”

“What friends?” the ragamuffin asked, trying to look normal.

“The ones who put you up to this,” the smuggler answered, standing up and seizing the boy’s coat. Lifting him so that he stood on the box, he glared into his eyes. “Don’t play stupid with me, Wayne. You only get caught when you *want* to be. One of those thugs promised you a ticket off this rock if you’d help him get in touch with me and find that relic.”

“So?” the boy shot back, trying to jerk his jacket out of his hold, but finding his grip too strong. “A fella’s got to look after himself once in a while!”

“You look after yourself all the time, you little creep,” Gromyko rejoined, seizing the half of his candy bar which remained and stomping it flat under his boot. “I deserved better than this, Wayne,” he said sternly, still holding his jacket. “I’ve fed you more times than I can remember. Even gave you this jacket.”

“I don’t owe you no favors!” Wayne countered. “If you wanted to give me stuff, that’s your business. It ain’t charity if there’s a price tag on it!”

“This is *Midway*, you little dummy!” he growled. “You know the rules as well as anyone: you look after yourself first. But if a guy *does* help you out, then you owe him one back. I thought I could trust you, Wayne,” he said with disgust, hauling him off the crate and dropping him onto the floor feet-first. “But you’re just another creep.”

“Takes one to know one!” he exclaimed, kicking him in the shin for his candy bar and then bolting up the stairs.

Following slowly, Gromyko heard him miss a step and crash head-first into one of the higher ones. Letting out a pained yelp, he tried to stand and drag himself upward. But the smuggler got to him first, seized the back of his coat, and hoisted him into the air.

“Put me down!” he said through his tears, as blood gushed from his mouth. “Put me down or I’ll bite your arm off!”

“Be still,” the smuggler said, turning around and moving him back into the light which Wayne had dropped. Picking it out of the

cold dirt, he held it up before Wayne's face and examined it briefly. "Cut your lip against your teeth," was Gromyko's diagnosis. "It'll clear up if you leave it alone to heal."

"Let me go," the urchin insisted, his conscience throbbing a little from the smuggler's kindness.

"There's more, Wayne," Gromyko told him gravely. "I want to meet with the guy who put you up to this. Tonight."

"Can't do it tonight," he responded instantly. "Besides, he doesn't want to meet with you. Wants to keep this secret. If his pals figured out he's talking with you directly, they'd off him in a second. No, no meeting."

"And I want these turkey's off my back, Wayne," he said through gritted teeth, gripping his jacket a little harder. "I don't like them floating around and watching my every move. And I *don't* like them watching the organization."

"Watching Lena Barker, you mean," the ragamuffin blurted out. The flushing of his cheeks right afterward indicated that he was aware of the mistake he'd just made.

"I won't *eat*, and I won't *sleep* if anything happens to her, do you understand?" he growled. "And I'll find the one who lays a hand on her, and I'll tear his intestines out. You read me, Wayne?"

"Yes," he nodded vigorously, seeing the passion burning in his eyes. "I'll pass that along, too."

"No, leave that last part off," Gromyko uttered at once. "I don't want to give them any ideas. But tell the guy you're working for that I want to talk to him."

"Can't be tonight," the urchin reiterated. "I wasn't supposed to meet with him until nearly daybreak. Tomorrow is the earliest. And I can't promise he'll go for it."

"He'll go for it," Gromyko assured him, releasing his jacket.

"And how do you know that?" Wayne asked, some of his tartness returning.

"Because *you're* going to tell him that I said I'd lead him right to the relic he's after, and that I'll do it for twenty-five percent of his cut."

"I'm only getting ten!" the ragamuffin complained.

“The thing doesn’t even exist, Wayne,” the smuggler reminded him.

“As far as you know!” he shot back. “They’ve got reason to think it does, and that the Underground is involved. Maybe one of your boys has it, and hasn’t told you about it. Have you thought of that?”

As a matter of fact, he *hadn’t* considered that rather obvious possibility, and his expression said as much.

“Didn’t think so.”

“Don’t get mouthy, Wayne,” Gromyko retorted. “I’ve had about enough of you as it is.”

“So you’re gonna help him find it, then?” he queried.

“Just tell him what I said,” the smuggler replied, waving him towards the staircase. “I’ll deal with him when the time comes.”

“These guys play rough,” the urchin cautioned. “I wouldn’t get mixed up with ‘em unless I was willing to go all the way to the end of the line.”

“I know that,” Gromyko replied, thinking it best not to share that he’d already killed one of them, given the somewhat loose lips of his interlocutor. “Get the message to your pal and meet tomorrow night.”

“How am I supposed to find you?”

“Just hang around outside headquarters,” the smuggler said offhandedly, blowing out the candle and letting it cool for a moment before sticking it into his pocket. “I won’t be hard to find.”

Feeling their way back up the stairs and to the door, Gromyko locked the knob and pulled it shut. By the time he’d done so, the imp was already long gone, his footprints in the snow being the only testimony of his having been there.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, Gromyko moved with caution towards his chosen resting place for the night. The police, as Wayne had indicated, were out in force. So too, if his sixth sense worked at all, were the visitors, for he could feel strange eyes on him as he moved. He concluded that none of them recognized him, given they didn’t interfere with him at all.

Heading for the edge of town, he could feel the temperature subtly drop as he neared the rolling white hills of snow which

surrounded it. No one who could help it lived this far out, given they got battered by the worst of the storms that blew through almost weekly. That, and the police presence wasn't as strong, since they concentrated most of their forces on the inner two-thirds or so of town. Though universally reviled by the residents of Midway, they *did* keep the streets safe. The ones they regularly patrolled, anyway.

"*On my own now,*" the smuggler reflected, just as he caught a shadow moving off to the left. Pausing and looking that way, he saw nothing at all which could have moved. Just the flat wall of an old shop. A light was flickering a short distance away from it. He decided that the flickering must have played a trick on his mind, and that he'd imagined something had moved. Still, it made him uneasy. "*Not that I really want the police coming to my rescue, anyhow,*" he added internally, trying to leave behind him the goosebumps he felt on the back of his neck. "*Their help is the kind I can do without.*"

Pressing on, he was right on the literal edge of town when he reached his destination. A nasty storm some months before had torn the upper half of a badly constructed house clean off its foundation. Walking carefully through the remains of the first floor, he found the board-strewn staircase which led down into the basement. Moving the boards as little as he could, he descended and then replaced them, hoping no one would notice they'd been disturbed.

Feeling his way downward, he worked along the outer wall until he was good and deep. Then he lit a match. When he saw a pair of human eyes lit up right before him, he shouted and jumped back, accidentally blowing out the match.

"Who are you?" he demanded, standing perfectly still to hear any movement. "I'll pummel you into pudding if you start something."

His only reply was the sound of feet shuffling away from him. Curious despite his fear, he managed to light another match. Carefully searching the darkness, he saw the eyes had retreated behind a pile of rubbish. Watching them so as not to lose them, he slowly drew the candle from his pocket and lit it without looking at it. Tossing aside the match, he drew closer.

It was then that he saw the eyes belonged to a young woman of twenty. Her mouth and head were concealed by a scarf

and a hood, and the heavy jacket and pants she wore concealed her figure. But he could tell from her eyes and delicate nose that she was a female. Though she shrank back from him, there was a curious lack of fear. She seemed averse to his presence rather than afraid of it.

“You look familiar,” the smuggler said, moving closer as she drew the scarf a little higher up her face, revealing only her eyes. Sitting down on a low mound of rags, she turned her head away. Approaching, he squatted down and reached out a hand, turning her face back towards him again. Tugging on the scarf, he revealed her pretty face. “Marsha?” he asked in disbelief. “What are you doing out here? This isn’t any place for a decent girl like you. Only scum and desperados come this far at night.”

“You’re out here,” she said quietly, pulling the scarf back over her mouth to keep the cold out.

“And you’re mighty lucky that I am!” he said with quiet urgency, watching her shake subtly from the cold. “Look, you’re shivering already! What on Earth brought you out here, Marsha?”

“That’s my own business,” she said without conviction.

“Well, I’m making it my business,” the smuggler replied, half-sitting and half-leaning on the pile of rubbish beside him. “You’re not built for this sort of thing, Marsha. You’re an indoor animal.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said, her voice growing thick with emotion.

“I’m not leaving until you do,” he said frankly, settling in against the rubbish. “You can keep me up all night, Marsha. But sooner or later, I’m gonna figure out what’s eating away at you.”

Receiving no response, the smuggler crossed his arms and watched her, careful not to burn himself with the candle. With the passage of a few minutes he began to fear she would make him carry out his threat. In truth he was tired, and wanted above all else to settle in and get some sleep. Despite the cold, he was able to do this because of an ancient relic he’d found which made his body much more resistant to the cold than it otherwise would have been.

“I just can’t take it anymore,” the girl admitted, startling him with the suddenness of her words. “There isn’t any hope in Midway,

Antonin. There's no point in going on any longer. I might as well wander into the countryside and see how far I make it."

"It's no good talking that way," the smuggler replied. "Sure, life is hard. But we still manage to survive, don't we?"

"I don't want to just *survive*," she sniffed, rubbing her nose on her scarf and finally looking at him again. "I want to *thrive*. But there's no way to do that here."

"I agree," Gromyko said honestly. "Not even those government types up the hill prosper here. Delta-13 just isn't made for happy endings. The empire chose its prison well."

"I don't want to be a prisoner anymore, Antonin," she confessed. "I've had enough."

"And your family?" he queried quietly. "What will your parents do when their little girl doesn't come home? Their lives will crumble with despair, Marsha. They'll be beside themselves."

"Oh, Antonin," she uttered in protest. "Don't you think I know how hard this will be on them? It's not like I *want* to torture them. I just can't handle this anymore."

"There's always hope," he told her, eliciting a scoff. "Whether or not you believe that, it's completely true."

"Then what are you doing out here?" she shot back. "You put yourself out there as some great big hope for us all to be inspired by. If that's true, and there really is hope, then why are you skulking out here right alongside me? What could have chased the great Gromyko out of his home at this time of night?"

"I'm being watched," he admitted. "I've made some enemies lately who I don't want to have an easy time following me. Moreover, I want to steal a couple hours' rest for myself without wondering if I'll awaken with a knife pressed against my throat."

"Then you're on the run," she summarized. "You don't have so much as a place to rest your head."

"I am *temporarily* under threat," he differed. "But it will soon pass, and Gromyko will be able to return home once more."

"Good, then you can tell my parents where I went when you see them," she said bitterly.

"No, because you're not going anywhere, Marsha. Not so long as I draw breath."

“You can drag me back to them,” she allowed. “But you can’t watch me all the time. I’m going to escape Midway if it kills me, Antonin. In fact, I don’t care if it *does*, just so long as I’m outside the city.”

“You can’t allow these desperate feelings to run you, Marsha,” Gromyko objected. “You’re in the grip of despair. I can tell you, I know exactly what that’s like. So does any resident of Midway, if he’s being honest. But you can’t give in to them; you can’t let the government win. They *want* to break you, don’t you see that?”

“What’s it matter who wins and who loses when your life is over before it’s even begun!?” she exclaimed. “None of that matters to me, anymore. Oh, my parents talk day and night about how we’re being abused out here, and how we’ve got to keep our chins up and not let them crush us. But they didn’t grow up here. They don’t know what it’s like to never taste the air of freedom, or to have never felt the least prosperity. It’s soul-crushing, Antonin. It’s miserable, cruel, desperate hopelessness. It’s crying yourself to sleep because you’re hollow and beaten. It’s lacking the will to go on because you’ve never experienced so much as a single happy day that wasn’t marred by something bad. I just can’t bear it anymore.”

“You’re stronger than this, Marsha,” he insisted, causing her to shake her head vigorously in the negative. “You may not believe that. But it’s true. You’re just low right now. But you’ll rebound soon enough. You’ve just got to hold on until that happens.”

“I don’t want to *rebound!*” she said sharply, as tears collected in her eyes. “I want to leave this nightmare behind forever! I’m weary absolutely to *death!*”

At this she began to sob uncontrollably. Moving to her, he put his arms around her and drew her close. Resting her forehead against his shoulder, she hid her face in his jacket and cried a good, long while. When she’d finished she was exhausted, but clear-headed.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, wiping her nose once more with her scarf. “This isn’t your problem. I should go.”

“Anything which hurts even a single resident of Midway automatically becomes Gromyko’s problem,” he said grandly, helping



her rise and moving with her towards the staircase. "You needn't ever be ashamed to lean on me when you need to."

"I am ashamed," she confessed. "Because I should have kept my head."

"We all lose it once in a while," he said with a charming smile. "Now, come on: let's get you home."

"I don't want you to have to walk me all the way back," she protested weakly. "Besides, I made it this far."

"That was luck," he said with complete certainty. "By rights you never should have made it half this far. Either the police, or the rodents which prowl the streets, should've gotten you. Those two factors only worsen as the night wears on, and the last few decent people who are out after curfew call it a night. Then it's nearly a cinch that you'll run into trouble."

"Then I'll stay the night here with you," she suggested, pained at the thought of putting him through so much trouble.

"No, you'd better get back to your family at once," he said with finality, not wishing to stay up all night in case she had a change of heart a couple of hours later and tried to slip away. "They'll be worried to death about you," he added to strengthen his case. "A couple hours of lost sleep is worth it to spare them that kind of torture. Now, come on."

Climbing the stairs ahead of her, he put out his candle and moved the boards aside. Once she was topside, he put them back and carefully slid the candle into his pocket. Taking her hand so as not to lose her in the darkness, he guided her back towards the city's center. To his chagrin, her family's home was all but smack in the middle of it, guaranteeing them close contact with the police. How she'd managed to slip out of that hornet's nest of cops puzzled him for as long as he had the headspace to think about it. Once the patrols began to multiply, however, it required all of his attention and copious skills to keep them out of handcuffs.

"Under here!" he urgently whispered, when they'd seen just such a patrol a short distance away. Quickly he pulled her under the steps of an external metal stairway which led part way to the top of an abandoned building before abruptly snapping off. Only partially concealed, the smuggler was gambling that the lights of the police

wouldn't draw close enough to identify them. If they did, they'd get on the radio at once to request backup. Within minutes the entire area would be flooded with them, and their chance of escape would shrink to nil.

Anxiously they both listened as the booted feet of the police crunched closer upon the ice and snow. Once Marsha had tried to look up. But Gromyko quickly covered her face with his hand and drew it away again. Realizing that they must keep their eyes concealed, she subtly nodded her understanding, and he slowly removed his hand.

Watching as the light bounced along the buildings in front of the stairway, Gromyko decided he would have to attack the officers if they were discovered. With the element of surprise on his side, there was a faint chance he could overpower them both before either managed to radio for help. Once they came to, or were found by their comrades, an aggressive search would ensue; one which would imperil his own chances of slipping away. But he had to give Marsha the best chance he could of getting home. It was no good to restore her hope just so she could get arrested and have her spirit broken once and for all.

As the officers neared they could hear them quietly talking to each other over the sound of the ground crunching beneath their boots. Just as they were certain they would be discovered, the men stopped.

"Yeah, go ahead," he said into his radio, waiting a moment. "Come on!" he said urgently to his partner, bolting right past Marsha and Gromyko and disappearing down a side street.

"Wonder what got into them," the young woman uttered, glad to stand up straight after being crunched underneath the stairway.

"We'd best get moving," the smuggler opined seriously, taking her hand again and moving quickly in the opposite direction from the police.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Either the cops found something, or one of their own has been attacked," he explained. "The city *ought* to be dead quiet this time of night. If they're running off on a call, that's bad news for us.

The rest will be on heightened alert. Could even call in reinforcements from up the hill.”

“They wouldn’t do that,” she replied, though uncertainly.

“It’s happened before,” he said. “Now quit talking and keep your head on a swivel. I don’t want us to run right into them.”

As he’d predicted, the police were in a flurry of activity. Barely dodging them again, they were once more rescued by the fact that their minds were elsewhere. Negotiating the narrow streets of Midway was already a tough job. Doing it with someone who hadn’t any experience doing so was doubly tough.

“Don’t worry, we’re almost there,” he told her with a smile, though his heart was pounding at the thought of working his way any deeper into Midway. Hiding behind some trash cans near an intersection with her, he looked up one street and then another. Deciding on the less-direct route, he took her hand and bolted down it. Rounding a building, he just barely jumped backwards as a flashlight shone towards him. Knocking her down and landing atop her, he quickly got up and drew her upright. “Come on!” he said in a whisper, pulling her towards the other street.

“Are we...going to...make it?” she asked between breaths, long since exhausted.

“I wouldn’t be sticking my neck *this far* into the noose if I didn’t think so!” he answered emphatically. “Now stop talking and keep moving!”

Uncertain if the cop with the light had seen him, he ran with her down the street and ducked into an alley. Pausing to look back, his heart jumped into his throat when he saw the light come around the corner with a pair of officers behind it. Grabbing Marsha’s hand, he tore off down the alley with her, emerging on another street and all but dragging her down it.

“You’ve got to keep moving!” he said urgently, whispering loud enough to be heard over their combined footfalls. “Or we’ll both end up in handcuffs!”

“I’ve...had it,” she wheezed, doubling over as her stomach tied itself in knots. “Forget about me, Antonin,” she pleaded, barely managing to put one foot in front of the other. “I’ll just get you captured.”

Slipping into another alley as the cops came into view, Gromyko noticed a boarded up basement window and slid to a stop. Gripping the largest board, he dashed up an instantaneous prayer and jerked on it. Lucky for both of them, it gave way at once. Practically shoving her into the opening, he slipped in after her and did his best to pull the board back into place, holding one of the nails with his hand as he stood on tiptoe to reach it. The fit wasn't very good, so if the police stopped long enough to cast even a cursory glance around the alley, they'd notice at once that it was out of place. Especially with the disturbed snow that lay right beneath it. But he was gambling that they'd shoot right past, afraid to lose sight of their quarry.

Marsha gasped when the crunching of their boots became audible. Both held their breath as the officers entered the alley, their pace slowing a little. Jogging right up to where the two were hiding, they slowed to a walk and muttered something unintelligible for a few moments. Cursing quietly, they took off again, evidently unhappy to be getting so much exercise.

"We're safe now," the smuggler whispered, reaching up and pulling the board hard enough to sink the nails into the wood just a bit.

"What are we going to do?" she queried from the darkness, as he dropped to his rear and leaned his back against the wall.

"Take a load off and catch our breath," he answered, reaching out blindly and finding her knee. When he touched it she yelped, not expecting his touch. "It's just me," he said. "Come on: take a seat. The night isn't over yet, and we've got some more running to do."

"Can't we just stay here?" she asked, settling down beside him and wrapping her arms around her legs, drawing her knees against her chin. "We can just pop out when the rest of the city wakes up and get lost in the crowd."

"Could," he allowed. "But it won't take those cops long to double back and search this area when they don't find us. And that board up there isn't placed well enough for them to miss it a second time."

“But they’re closing in all around,” she objected. “They’ll have us trapped.”

“Gromyko has never yet been backed into a corner that he couldn’t climb out of,” the smuggler assured her. “And I don’t intend to break that habit tonight.”

Waiting as long as he felt they could, Gromyko stood up and pressed his ear against the boards. Hearing nothing at all, he pushed the board back out into the snow and clambered out. Turning around, he helped Marsha through the opening and kicked the board back into place as quietly as he could. Taking her hand again, he continued down the alley and peeked out, looking for the cops who’d chased them. But the street was dead quiet.

“Could be they’re waiting for us,” Marsha whispered in his ear.

“Not really their style,” he replied, carefully sliding around the corner of a building and entering the street. Pulling her unwilling form along, he gave her a little jerk to get her moving faster. Taking the hint, she quit hesitating.

Sneaking down the street, they suddenly froze when they heard crunching from the other side. It sounded like a huge man with giant feet was heedlessly moving along the ice and snow, completely unconcerned with the racket he was making.

“Who is it?” she asked urgently, afraid it was a cop but unable to see anyone.

“I’m not sure,” he replied. “But I’m certain it isn’t the police. The gait is all wrong. He walks like a giant. And nobody that big is presently working with the police.”

“Maybe they hired him just to get us,” she joked darkly, unconvinced and wrapping her fingers around his arm in fear. “Let’s get out of here. Even if he isn’t with them, he’ll draw them this way with all the noise he’s making.”

“Fair enough,” he assented, beginning to move just as two cops came into view from a side street on the far side of the road they were on. Halting instantly, they shrank back against some buildings and watched as the officers shone their light to and fro on the other side of the street, trying to find the giant man with the huge

feet. Seeing their chance, Gromyko gripped her hand tighter and led her away.

“Antonin?” she queried once they’d put a couple of streets behind them. “What was that?”

“Someone was walking,” he answered simply.

“You know what I mean.”

“I don’t have an answer for you, Marsha,” he admitted.

“Sometimes you see weird things out here at night. I don’t know if it was a ghost or if we’re all getting loopy in the same way, at the same time. Talk to any of the old folks around here, and they’ll tell you some creepy stories, that’s for sure. But the only thing I really care about right now is that it, whatever it was, helped us give those two the slip.”

“You mean it was helping us on purpose?”

“I just mean it came along at the right time,” he shrugged.

“More than that, I can’t say.”

Moving swiftly, they said nothing more until the smuggler deposited her on her family’s doorstep.

“Thank you, Antonin,” she said softly, hugging him for getting her home. With a sigh she drew her arms from around him and looked at the ramshackle house. “I don’t know what I’m going to tell them. They must be out of their minds with worry by now.”

“Then don’t torture them a moment longer by standing out here,” Gromyko urged her.

“I know,” she nodded. “But what should I say? I can’t think of an excuse that could possibly explain why I’d been gone so long. Not one they’d believe, anyhow.”

“Then tell them the truth,” he told her. “You’re not the first person to get a little screwy on Delta-13. And I’m dead certain you won’t be the last.” Hearing a crunch down the street to his right, the smuggler’s head jerked sharply in that direction. “Get inside. And don’t worry: they love you too much to hold this against you.”

“Thank you,” she repeated, hastening to the door and knocking with quiet urgency, her face turned down the street. “Hurry up,” she mumbled, hearing people talking and moving around hesitantly inside, unsure if they should open the door.

“I’ll buy you a little time,” the smuggler said, moving a short distance from her and then bolting down an alley. As he’d suspected, the first crunch was followed by several more in rapid succession, and they were following him. “I ought to get a medal for this!” he grumbled, astonished that one girl should have given him so much trouble without even intending to.

Shooting down the alley, he ducked around a building and kept running. Whoever was chasing him wasn’t a cop, and he was *fast*. Even Gromyko’s quick feet couldn’t lose him. As his mysterious pursuer gained on him, he moved across the street and darted into another alley. Perfectly aware of his surroundings, he ran down the alley, took a right, and slid to a stop under the awning of an old shop that had been hollowed out by the ravages of time. Ducking through a hole in the wall, he squatted down and balanced himself with his hands. Waiting until his pursuer was just short of him, he suddenly stuck out his leg and tripped the unsuspecting runner. With a shout he lost his balance and plowed the ice and snow with his face.

Instantly bolting out of the hole in the wall, Gromyko was atop him in a flash. Grabbing his head, he ground it into the ice.

“When are you boys gonna have enough?” the smuggler demanded through gritted teeth, sick of being chased up and down Midway by a bunch of homicidal strangers. “I’ve got half a mind to fix you so that you’ll never get up again.”

“I’d think twice about that if I were you,” the man growled, his voice remarkably self-possessed and cool despite his predicament.

“And why’s that?” he queried, sensing that the man wasn’t bluffing.

“Because if you do, you’ll never see your little girlfriend again.”

## CHAPTER 4

**W***here is she?!*" he demanded, backhanding the man, whom he'd long since taken to headquarters and roped into a chair with Teddy's help. "I swear to you—."

"Save your breath, smuggler," the man cut him off.

Handsome, with thick brown hair and cool gray eyes that didn't frighten easily, he looked about forty. "There's nothing you can say that'll make a lick of difference. I already told you the score: a couple of my friends have your girl under lock and key. If you kill me, you'll never see her again. Ditto if I don't get back to them by sunup."

"Can't be far away, boss," Teddy inserted.

"That doesn't help you any," the man replied. "This place is a labyrinth of old buildings. There's no way for you to figure out which one we've hidden her in."

"He's right," Gromyko assented, as they heard a knock on the building's front door. Leaving his prisoner in Teddy's care, the smuggler quietly moved through the darkened outer room and went to the door. Hearing a slight knock again, he opened it just wide enough to see Wayne. "What do you want?"

"Came to talk to you," he said, glancing over his shoulder before turning back and pointing inside. "Look, I don't want to get caught out here. Let me in."

Doing so, Gromyko had barely closed the door before the urchin was halfway to his office.

"Where are you going?" he asked, receiving no answer.

Following the ragamuffin inside, he watched him approach the tied up man and slap his cheek with his small hand.



"I told you I'd help only if you didn't hurt any of them!" he exclaimed, his voice much too loud for comfort. "Especially Lena. I told you to leave her alone."

"*This* is your contact?" Gromyko queried incredulously. "What kind of deal did you expect to get out of *him*? You can see he's a snake just by looking at him."

"Get off my case," Wayne said petulantly.

"Wait a minute," the smuggler said suspiciously, making the urchin's eyes grow wider. "You told him what I said about Lena, didn't you?"

"What if I did?" he shot back.

"Wayne, if you put this idea into their heads..." he said menacingly, his voice beginning to shake with rage.

"Look, all we can think about now is how to get her back," he countered.

"The only way you'll get her back is through me," the man said.

"No, I've been following you guys ever since you got to Midway," Wayne said with a casual wave of his small hand. "How do you think you 'caught' me, anyhow? That only happened 'cause I let you."

"You little rascal!" growled the man, wrestling with his ropes and shaking his chair.

"Now, just settle down," Teddy said in his deep, calm voice, placing a massive hand on his shoulder.

"Where are they hiding, Wayne?" Gromyko asked, approaching the urchin and causing him to retreat a few feet towards the boarded up window. "Where do they have Lena?"

"I'll show you," he said at once, his eyes large and fearful because of what the enraged smuggler might do. "I'll take you right to 'em. But we've got to be quiet about this. If they catch a whiff that we're onto 'em, they'll kill her without a second thought."

"How many are there?" Teddy asked.

"Just two," the imp replied. "But they're plenty tough, and plenty *mean*. And smart, too." He paused and nodded towards Teddy. "If they hear that gorilla coming, they'll cut her throat. We

need a couple of men who are good fighters, but they need to be agile and *quiet*.”

“What do you mean *agile*?” Teddy asked, his feathers ruffled.

“I mean if we walk through the front door, Lena is dead. But I know an old window they haven’t noticed in the back of the building. If we can slip a few good men through it, we can jump ‘em before they have a chance to lay a finger on Lena.”

“It’ll never work,” the tied up man assured them. “They’ll hear you coming and finish her before you even lay eyes on them. Your only chance is to cooperate with us. Help us find the artifact, and we’ll let her go and leave this planet for good.”

“Very likely,” Teddy retorted.

“We don’t have an interest in this ice cube,” the man laughed scornfully. “And that goes for the people on it, too. All we want is that relic. Once we have it, we’ll vamoose, and never return. But *until* we have it, we’ll tear through this town like a tornado. There’s too much money riding on this for any of us to quit. And just think about this: if you *do* manage to take me and my friends out, that still leaves all the others who think you’ve got the inside track on this relic. You and that girl have gone on too many midnight walks for the others to have helped noticing. They’ll scoop her up again even if you do manage to rescue her.”

“And your point is?” Gromyko asked, though he knew what he was driving at.

“Help *us* get the relic, and there won’t be any reason for the others to touch her. They’ll just pack it up and go home to lick their wounds.”

“Could just say that it’s been picked up already,” Teddy said.

“No, because they’re all in touch with the prospective buyer,” the man said pointedly. “Only when he’s got the relic physically in his hands will the job be called off. Until then, they’ll search this town from top to bottom.”

“Here’s another possibility,” Gromyko said, drawing the knife from his jacket and stomping his heel down on the man’s foot to hold it in place. In a flash the tip of the blade was stuck in the top of his thigh, making him shout in pain. “Maybe Midway will just chew

you maggots up and spit you out,” he said in a low, menacing voice that made Wayne step back. “Press on us too hard, and you’ll feel like a house fell on you,” he added, pulling the blade out and wiping the man’s blood onto his pants. “Put a kerchief around that,” the smuggler said to Teddy, as the man grimaced and looked at the reddening hole in his pants. “Wayne and I have a little work to do.”

Scarcely two hours later Gromyko and Wayne stood across the street from the house Lena was being kept in. Like many buildings in Midway, it was abandoned and all but ruined. Hidden from a flickering street light by an overhang that stretched out from the second floor, the smuggler and the urchin had company: a trio of roughnecks who sometimes did work for the Underground.

“It’ll be light in an hour or two,” Wayne observed, poking his small head out from under the overhang and looking up at the sky. “We don’t have a lot of time,” he added, wondering why the smuggler was hesitating.

“I know that,” Gromyko answered quietly, unblinkingly watching the house opposite them.

“So...” the boy’s voice trailed.

But the smuggler didn’t answer. His active brain was busy climbing all over the problem, trying to find a better way than an assault through the rear. The men inside were bound to be sitting nice and quiet, so almost any sound would alert them. And while he had faith in the men with him, he knew the artifact hunters wouldn’t hesitate to kill Lena. But after a quarter of an hour, he could only think of one thing that might distract them long enough to give his men a chance to infiltrate the building.

“I’m gonna bang on the front door and get their attention,” he announced suddenly.

“They’re not expecting you,” one of the men pointed out. “They might off the girl if anyone but their pal shows.”

“No, I’m as good as he is,” the smuggler disagreed. “They want the relic more than anything. And they think I’ve got it, or at least know where it is. They’ll hesitate when they learn it’s me. And *that* will be your cue to get inside and save Lena.”

“And what about the guy with her?” one of the other roughnecks asked. “Want him for questioning?”

“Do I look curious to you?” he asked coldly.

“Fair enough,” the man shrugged.

“We’d best get a move on,” the third man uttered. “It’s gonna take us a little while to work around this light,” he elaborated, pulling a thumb towards it. “And those boys are just gonna get more antsy for every minute their friend is gone. Right around daylight they’ll be expecting trouble.”

“Go ahead,” Gromyko replied, nodding off away from the light.

Wayne watched them move off into the darkness, and then moved a little closer to the smuggler.

“Ain’t you coming along?”

“I don’t have any reason to hide,” he answered, shoving his gloved hands into his jacket pockets and leaning against the building. “Besides, if they hear me crunching up to them, it’ll put ‘em at ease. They’ll figure I’ve got nothing to hide because they’ve got me over a barrel.” He paused and looked towards the darkness into which the trio had disappeared. “I just hope they time it right. If they take too long to get inside, we’ll lose the shock of my sudden appearance.” He looked at Wayne. “Better get along after them. They’ll need you to guide ‘em inside.”

“I know,” the urchin replied, shoving his small hands into his own pockets and swiftly disappearing. Being half their weight, he could move just as quietly as the men, but twice as fast. He could have waited another couple of minutes and still beaten them to the house.

Settling in to wait, Gromyko promised himself for the hundredth time that if he managed to rescue Lena, he’d get her out of harm’s way that very night. He wasn’t going to leave her in the open for the next bunch of renegades who wanted to gain some leverage over him. He’d tuck her away somewhere until the whole business with the relic was over. Of course, he knew she’d object to being sidelined. But there wasn’t anything for it. He couldn’t let anything happen to her.

“*Sounds like somebody’s in love,*” an inner voice uttered, one which made him shift uncomfortably.

“*Gromyko doesn’t get attached,*” he fired back at the inner commentator, though it was a lie.

A long interval ensued, before at last a tiny flicker of light appeared across the street behind the building. At once pushing off the structure he leaned against, he watched for a second flicker, which promptly manifested. That was the signal that all was ready. Nodding to himself, he looked up and down the street to ensure no police were nearby, and then started across it.

With his heart pounding in his ears, Gromyko reached the house, walked up a couple of steps, and knocked on the old, weatherbeaten door. Waiting a few moments, he knocked a little louder. Closing his eyes, he turned his head and strained his ear against the sound of the wind blowing down the street. Snapping his eyes open and jerking his head forward when he heard old floorboards creaking, he took a step back, drew his hands from his pockets, and waited.

Like an old crypt the door creaked slowly open, revealing the barely-visible form of a large man.

“What do you want?” he asked gruffly, though his voice was tight with anxiety.

“I am Gromyko,” the smuggler announced self-evidently. “I’ve come to trade the relic you seek for the girl you’ve kidnapped.”

“Where’s Norman?” he countered. “The deal was that *he* comes back, or the girl gets it.”

“We made a separate arrangement,” the smuggler replied. “He’s keeping some of my friends company as we speak, to ensure your good behavior. For my part, I personally came to show my good faith.”

The man said nothing, taking a moment to process what he was hearing.

“Look, friend, there’s nobody behind me,” Gromyko uttered, sticking his arms out and back, gesturing into the street. “If I was going to assault this place, I would have done so by now. But this girl is very precious to me, and I don’t want to risk her getting hurt.”

“I know that,” he said suspiciously, still expecting a trick.

“Look, if it makes you feel any better, you can keep me and the girl as hostages until daylight. Once the sun is up, wait until the

workers fill the streets and vanish into thin air. Nobody will assault you in the light of day. It would be too obvious.”

“What about Norman?” he queried, though his tone indicated he wasn’t too concerned about his associate.

“That’s up to you,” Gromyko shrugged. “If you treat me and the girl well, then I’m willing to hold onto him for a few days so you can escape and collect the reward yourselves. Cutting him out of the equation will do plenty to fatten your payday.”

Again the man fell silent, though now the cause was greedy anticipation rather than suspicion.

“Reckon you can come ahead,” he said after a long moment, moving aside and admitting the smuggler. “But remember,” he added once he was inside and the door was shut, drawing a knife. “I’ve got a blade with your name on it.”

“I wouldn’t dream of forgetting,” Gromyko remarked blandly, as though the weapon didn’t interest him.

Grabbing ahold of the smuggler’s jacket, the man shoved him through the house to a thick door. Opening it, Gromyko could just see a staircase that led down into the basement thanks to light cast from the flickering street lamp. Still holding his jacket, the man pushed him onto the staircase and began to follow him down. Halfway to the bottom a small candle came into view, along with a chair covered in ropes.

Its occupant was missing.

“Why you dirty—,” the man began, about to shave Gromyko’s ribs with his knife when the smuggler spun on the staircase and pulled him down after him. Falling with a shriek, the man landed on his shoulder and tumbled down while Gromyko somehow managed to partially shift on top of him and ride him to the floor. Seizing the man’s wrist, he battered his hand against the hard floor and beat the knife from his grasp. Picking it up, he held it against his throat.

“You should’ve thought twice before you came to Midway,” he said through gritted teeth, as his companions came into view with Lena sandwiched protectively between them.

“If you’re gonna kill me, then kill me!” the man growled. “Don’t talk me to death.”

“I should,” he uttered, shaking his head with an angry grin on his face. “For what you put me and this girl through, I absolutely should.” Drawing the knife from his throat, he threw it towards a post which supported the first floor, sinking the tip about an inch into it. “But I’m not quite that cold-blooded,” he added, pushing on the man’s chest to stand up and dragging him to his feet. Unsteadily he stood, barely able to keep his balance after the beating his skull had taken on the stairs. Shoved aside by the smuggler, who considered him too broken to be a threat, he went to Lena.

“Antonin!” she exclaimed, as the man suddenly righted himself and raised a small throwing knife that had been concealed in his sleeve.

In a flash the smuggler whipped around, drawing the knife from his pocket and throwing it hard into the man’s chest in one smooth motion. Grunting in shock, the man looked down to see a red patch rapidly forming on the thick white sweater he wore under his open jacket. Dropping the throwing knife as his fingers went numb, he collapsed to his knees and then fell face-first against the basement floor. Held up a little by the knife that was still lodged in his chest, he didn’t rest flat until Gromyko used the toe of his boot to flip him onto his back. His legs were twisted together, one arm was thrown wide, and his dead eyes gazed uncomprehendingly into the ceiling as Gromyko drew the knife from his body.

“I never knew you could throw like that!” Wayne enthused, temporarily forgetting his typically surly attitude. “I still don’t believe it! You were like a blur!”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about Gromyko,” the smuggler replied for the benefit of the trio, though in truth he hadn’t the least idea how he’d managed it, either. It just sort of came to him like an instinct. “You alright?” he asked Lena, approaching and grasping her hands. “Did they hurt you?”

“No,” she answered, still shocked by what she’d seen. Looking around the smuggler, she gazed at the dead man.

“Forget about him,” Gromyko said, seeing that she was disturbed by the bloodshed. “I gather the other one has been similarly dealt with?” he asked the trio, all of which nodded. “Good. Fewer loose ends.”

“That’s exactly what they said,” she uttered dully, watching the dead man for another moment. “Said that it would be easier to kill me so there wouldn’t be any loose ends when they tried to get off the planet. Didn’t want you to try and pay them back for kidnapping me.”

“Then it’s just as well that we’ve done for them,” the smuggler opined, though he was aware of the link she seemed to be drawing between the actions of her kidnappers and those of her rescuers.

“Vermin like them are born to die,” Wayne declared. “Everybody’s better off without ‘em.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Gromyko uttered conclusively, guiding Lena towards the staircase. “I want to be off the streets long before sunup.”

“Don’t forget what you promised us,” one of the roughnecks reminded him as they all ascended the stairs. “We didn’t do this for free.”

“Gromyko is good for all debts that he undertakes,” the smuggler replied without interest, his attention solely focused on getting Lena to safety. “You’ll get your reward.”

“And what about me?” Wayne asked, as they reached the first floor.

Suddenly releasing Lena’s arm, he twisted around and gripped the urchin’s coat with both hands. Hoisting him into the air as he writhed and fought, he pressed him against the wall.

“You’re lucky you came around headquarters when you did,” he growled. “Cause if I’d found out that you’d tipped them off to Lena without that being in your favor...” his voice trailed.

“I get it! I get it!” the ragamuffin pleaded. “I told you I never wanted anything bad to happen to Lena! She’s always been nice to me.”

With a scowl Gromyko dropped the imp onto his feet.

“Don’t ever cross me again,” he warned him. “Not even accidentally.”

Turning before he could respond, he guided Lena out the door and into the darkness.



“What did you promise those men?” Lena queried, as the trio melted into the night and went their separate ways.

“Free booze,” he said dismissively, still fuming at Wayne. “What did they do to the guy they had watching you?” he asked, wishing to avoid the subject of alcohol, given her feelings on the matter.

“I’d rather not relive it,” she said with a shudder, closing her eyes and shaking her head as they reached the other side of the street and moved as quickly as noise would permit. “I suppose you’re right, and that they had it coming,” she added. “But those men didn’t even hesitate. They just chopped him to bits.”

“That’s why I wanted them,” he replied, turning suddenly into an alley when he saw a faint glimmer of a flashlight beam reflecting on the ice ahead. “Our only chance was total surprise, and that would’ve been lost if these guys had been anything less than killers.”

“I wish we didn’t work with men like that,” she remarked.

“Tough times, tough measures,” he responded simply, sticking his head out of the alley and searching the street it connected to. Finding it empty, he drew her into it and continued walking.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked, aware they weren’t heading to either her house or headquarters.

“Somewhere I can stash you for a while,” he answered. “Those guys aren’t the last ones who’ll try and twist my arm through you. And I’m not gonna make it easy for ‘em to find you.”

“They’ll just go to work on you if I’m out of the picture,” she observed.

“After a little argument,” he uttered coldly.

“Don’t be like them, Antonin,” she pleaded, pulling him to a halt and nodding off towards the men they’d left behind. “You’re not a killer.”

“I’ll be what I have to be,” he replied, pulling her into motion again.

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“You’re being dramatic,” he said, though he too noticed a subtle hardening to his voice that he couldn’t seem to shake.

“Is that what I’m being?” she asked quietly, relinquishing the point.

Gromyko didn’t want to be hard, especially with Lena. But instinctively he knew that things were going to get a lot rougher before they improved. The tactics of the relic hunters would only grow more desperate as the police clamped down on Midway. They’d be forced to go for the jugular if they wanted to get ahold of the artifact they sought. And that meant the Underground was going to face a squeeze unlike any it had gone through before. Given the ruthlessness of the men he’d already dealt with, he knew more killings were unavoidable if he was going to protect those who were under him. Inwardly he ached from the effect he knew that would have on Lena, for he could already sense she was pulling away from him because of what she’d seen in the basement. But there was no helping that. The best he could do was see the Underground through the present crisis, and hope Lena came around once the dust had settled.

Pausing after an interval, he looked across the street as though searching for some kind of landmark. Following his eyes, Lena didn’t see anything unusual. Shaking his head, he pulled her back into a slow walk, moving another block or so before stopping again. Looking as before, this time he nodded. Leading her a little further on, they turned into an alley, walked a dozen feet along it, and then stopped at a door.

“There’s some friends waiting for you inside,” he informed her quietly, casting a glance along the alley just to ensure they were alone. “They’ll take care of you. Stay here for a while and keep out of sight. Don’t try to come to headquarters unless I send you word.”

“I can’t just wait this out, Antonin,” she objected weakly, certain he wouldn’t pay her any heed but forced by her conscience to speak anyway. Deep down she was afraid for him, and for what he may become, if he began to adopt the ruthless tactics of Midway’s underbelly. He had already made his peace with selling moonshine to desperate people, contributing to their woes at least as much as he briefly relieved them. But what truly frightened her was the men he’d begun to associate with. If they began to rub off on him...

“I’m not going to let them catch you a second time, Lena,” he replied firmly, his mind made up. “Now, I’ve made arrangements for the people here to keep an eye on you. They know the score and they’re willing to protect you as long as necessary.”

“What did you offer them in exchange?” she asked quietly, though she already knew.

“What else could I offer them?” he queried in response, shrugging his shoulders. “I know it’s gonna be hard for you to live with them, watching them drink the payment day after day. But you’ve got to understand that I had no other choice.”

“Then don’t cut me out of the picture,” she countered. “Don’t put me under lock and key.”

“You’re target number one, Lena,” he said with a shake of his head. “Tonight proved that. I’m too slick to get caught. But you’ve never been half so stealthy as I am on the streets. It’s this, or put a half dozen Underground men around you as bodyguards. And we can’t afford to do that.”

“Why? Do you have plans for them?” she asked, afraid that he was going to convert the entire organization into a camp of killers.

“You seem to forget that they brought this fight to Midway, not us,” he said with a frown. “When someone comes into your house and threatens your family, there’s only one course of action. Both practically and morally, you must act with lethal swiftness. You must seize the opportunity to wipe a cancerous cell from the communal body.”

“Just don’t wear yourself out playing the immune system, Antonin,” she uttered in a defeated voice, turning away and knocking gently on the door. “Remember, we’re barely holding on as it is.”

The door opened before he could respond, and a broad, square-faced man looked out at them. The gentle, warm light of a couple of flickering candles was behind him, along with the sound of whispered conversation.

“Remember our deal,” Gromyko said to him, receiving only a nod in reply as Lena disappeared inside and the door was shut.

Frowningly he shoved his hands into his pockets and departed.

Not bothering to sleep, given the sun would be up soon, he made straight for headquarters.

"About time you came back," the prisoner said nastily, jerking against his ropes.

Gromyko noticed some fresh bruises on his face, but said nothing as he walked to the window and peeked out through the boards. As he'd expected, there was a new shadow standing some distance away. He felt at least three pairs of eyes were on him as he'd entered. The shadow's made it four.

"Is Lena okay, boss?" Teddy asked, leaning against Gromyko's large desk with his arms crossed over his protruding stomach.

"She's fine," he answered quietly.

"Then how about letting me out of here?" the man queried pointedly. "I'm no further use to you. Unless you intend to keep me on as a punching bag for this thug of yours."

"He got mouthy," Teddy said in defense of the new bruises he'd given him. "Said Lena was as good as dead unless we played things his way. Just wanted to knock a little sense into his skull, that's all."

"That's alright, Teddy," Gromyko uttered, still looking out the window as he thought. Turning around, he leaned against the boards and nodded towards the man's wounded leg. "How's it feel?"

"Like someone *stabbed me*," the man shot back acidly. "How do you think it feels? I'll probably get an infection if you just leave me here with a bandana around it. It needs to be doctored."

"You're right," the smuggler assented, crossing his arms and raising his eyes to Teddy. "Fix it up as well as you can."

"Aw, boss, he ain't worth it," the big man objected.

"No, he isn't," he agreed. "But a one-legged man isn't worth anything in Quarlac. He'll need both."

"Huh?" the man asked, dumbfounded.

"What do you mean?" Teddy asked.

"We've got to get rid of these leeches somehow," the smuggler explained. "It's a bit far to kill 'em in cold blood. But there are outfits headed for Quarlac that need all the fresh, willing hands they can get."

“You know how long anyone lasts out there?” the man shot back. “I’ll be just as dead as if you stabbed me in the heart instead of in the leg.”

“Did that once already tonight,” the smuggler replied, drawing his knife from his pocket and twisting it in the air for a moment. “Threw this, oh, about as far as you are from me now. Caught your chum right in the heart.”

“Which one?” he asked.

“Had a mustache.”

“They *both* had mustaches, you dummy,” he retorted, earning himself a hard slap from Teddy’s huge left hand.

“I didn’t see the other one,” Gromyko explained evenly, putting the knife away. “This one wore a white sweater.”

“Johnson,” the man said sourly, before laughing dryly. “Swore he’d do that to me some day. Had a little trick knife up his sleeve that he liked to nail men in the back with. Pretty funny that he bought it the same way.”

“Yeah, left me in stitches,” the smuggler said, before looking at the giant again. “Go ahead, Teddy.”

“Alright, boss,” he replied dubiously, heading out of the room for the first aid kit.

“You seriously intend to sell me into slavery?” Norman asked incredulously. “What kind of man does that? At least kill me outright.”

“I don’t intend to shed any more blood than I have to,” he responded. “Besides, you and your boys forfeited any claim to decent treatment when you kidnapped Lena and threatened to kill her over a trinket. Just consider this a prison sentence. One that’s being carried out in the midst of very hostile conditions.”

“Quarlac will *kill me*, just as surely as anything will,” he reiterated.

“Then you won’t have to plan for retirement,” the smuggler said coldly, watching as Teddy returned. Taking a small knife from the first aid kit, the big man untied the kerchief and cut a bigger hole in Norman’s pants. Pouring antiseptic into the wound, he clapped a meaty hand over the prisoner’s mouth when he let out a scream.

“Keep quiet,” Teddy ordered, removing his hand.

“Try it sometime,” Norman ground out from between gritted teeth.

“He’s getting mouthy again, boss,” the giant said with a grin, looking at Gromyko.

“Just finish patching him up,” the smuggler replied, nodding towards his wounded leg. “The pirates won’t take him unless he’s got two good legs.”

“You’re gonna hand me off to the Black Fangs?” he asked, before shouting again as Teddy poured on some more antiseptic. “Enough! You’ve used plenty!”

“Just want to be sure,” he said with an impish smile, pouring some onto a clean cloth and screwing the cap back on the bottle. Dabbing it around the wound to the visible agony of the prisoner, Teddy leaned back and waited for it to dry out.

“Bind up that wound tight when you bandage him,” Gromyko instructed, pushing off the window and making for the door. “I don’t want it coming open again when he puts weight on it.”

“You can’t give me to the pirates,” Norman said, causing him to stop in the doorway.

“Why not?” he asked without turning around.

“We’ve had a few dealings in the past,” he admitted in a lower voice. “They’ll off me on sight.”

“Pity,” Gromyko replied, leaving the office.

Hours later the sun was up, though it was hard to tell. Another large storm had blown in from the countryside, threatening to bury the shantytown in snow. It wasn’t bad enough for the authorities to shut down the greenhouses and other places of employment, so the workers were forced to trudge in large groups to their jobs to avoid getting lost and frozen in the snow. Taking advantage of this, Gromyko disappeared into just such a group as it passed the Underground’s HQ. It may have been overkill, given the relic hunters were already preoccupied by trying not to freeze to death in the bitter cold, to say nothing of the drop in visibility due to the storm. But he wanted to be sure they couldn’t track his movements over the next few hours. For it was during this time that he began to put together the pieces necessary for their destruction.

After a number of stops, he dropped in at the Underground's first tavern. It was nothing more than a rundown boardinghouse. But it had a decent basement which could be used to dispense the organization's liquid gold, and a built-in excuse for people to be coming and going on a regular basis. It was also easy to win over the proprietor, given he was a notorious boozier. A more sober man would have required alternative payment, and that could prove difficult to secure.

Stopped at a thick wooden door, a tiny peephole allowed the man behind to verify the smuggler's identity. Cleared at once, Gromyko moved to the back of the dimly lit space and sat down at a table for four. Taking one of the seats next to the wall, he leaned against it and rested a leg on the chair next to him. Over an hour passed before a man in his forties approached. Wearing a dark jacket which was covered in snow, he beat it a few times with his hands and then hung it on the back of the seat opposite the smuggler. Sitting down, he drew the seat close against the table.

"Heard you wanted to talk," he said quietly, glancing around the space at the handful of patrons that sat just out of earshot.

"What's on your mind?"

"Midway has some new guests."

"I've noticed."

"Not very nice folks."

"I heard about that," he nodded subtly. "Heard they took your girl."

"News gets around quick," Gromyko uttered, curious if it was Wayne or the trio he'd hired to help him.

"You know what gossip is like around here," he said almost idly, though his voice was still tense. "What's on your mind?" he repeated.

"I need a way to get rid of these scum," he said seriously.

"The Black Fangs don't kill just anyone," the man replied, somewhat surprised by the brutal ruthlessness he saw in the smuggler's eyes. "The payout isn't good enough just to knock off regular punks."

"I don't want to *kill them*, I want to *sell them*," he explained.

"Oh," the man replied, leaning back a little.

“They’re a threat to my entire organization,” Gromyko elaborated. “They’ve got it into their heads that we’ve got some kind of artifact, and they’re about to start pulling this place apart to get it.”

“I heard that, too,” the man agreed, picking up a dried old bit of bread and twisting it around in his fingers. “Any truth to it?” he queried, not looking up as he asked.

“Are you asking personally, or on behalf of the organization?”

“Both. We don’t see this relic as enough to justify an open conflict between you and us. But we’re mighty curious, all the same.”

“The Underground is not, nor has it ever been, in possession of such an artifact,” he said firmly.

“Some of the Fangs might not buy that,” he pointed out, not indicating if he was among them or not. “They might decide to go into business for themselves. Assuming they could do it without the rest of the organization knowing. You know how Girnius frowns on private enterprise.”

“Then send them to me, and I’ll tell them the same thing,” the smuggler replied gravely, aware that this wasn’t much of a guarantee.

“I’m just letting you know,” the man said, raising one hand to indicate innocence. “For my part, I’ve always figured you for an honest man. At least as honest as a man can be while running a smuggling operation.”

“There is no such relic on Delta-13,” Gromyko reiterated, watching as the man continued to thoughtfully rotate the piece of bread between his fingers. “Whoever’s after it, he’s looking in the wrong place. And that’s assuming it exists at all.”

“So what’s your plan, then?” he asked, putting down the crumb. “Just gather them up and ship them out to Omicron base on the other side of the planet?”

“The specific logistics are up to you,” he shrugged. “I just want to know that I’ve got a steady pipeline that can carry them out of Midway.”

“That can be arranged,” he nodded, before tilting his head a little. “This seems a little dark for you guys.”



“They’re thieves and killers – simply the worst thugs possible. And if the authorities aren’t gonna clamp down fast enough to clean them out, then the Underground will.”

“Glad to see you guys have the nerve to get something like this done,” he said approvingly. “The Fangs don’t care too much about this sort of thing. But personally, I’ll appreciate knowing that someone is minding the store on the local level. At least so long as the police are more concerned with keeping Midway quiet instead of keeping it safe.”

“We’ll take care of Midway,” the smuggler assured him. “Just give me a channel to route these maggots out through.”

“Consider it done,” he replied, standing up and shaking hands with him. “Watch yourself, Gromyko. Once these guys figure out what’s up, they’ll be gunning for you.”

“I’m counting on it,” the smuggler murmured, as the Black Fang made for the door. “I’m gonna draw ‘em in like flies to honey.”

Slipping out of the boarding house a few minutes after the pirate did, Gromyko knew there were at least a half dozen pairs of eyes watching him. After the events of the night before, they didn’t try very hard to conceal themselves. Several, in fact, moved along the opposite side of the street, matching pace with him in full view of anyone who cared to look. Certain that they couldn’t have followed him, he concluded that they’d learned of the tavern and had decided to stake it out in the hope of seeing him.

“Looks like it paid off for them,” he muttered, pulling his collar up and his stocking cap down.

Disappearing into a shop, he snuck out the back and into a small group that had stopped briefly behind the building to break the wind. Watching for relic hunters, he saw a couple of them scanning the crowd from a short distance away. Lowering his head, he kept it down until the group resumed movement and had put a few hundred feet between themselves and the shop. Looking up again, he saw the hunters still watching the building.

With the exception of very brief stretches of road, his entire trip back to headquarters was like this.

“Started to worry about you, boss,” Teddy said, echoing the feelings of several other Undergrounders who’d dropped in while he

was gone.

“Not me!” Norman shouted from his office, still tied up.

“Don’t worry,” Gromyko said, leaning against his doorway and looking at the prisoner. “I’ll be here long after you head out to Quarlac. I’ve just made a deal with the Black Fangs to transport you out of Midway.”

“What?!” Norman exclaimed.

“When?” Teddy queried, ready to be rid of the surly prisoner.

“We’ll gather up a few more before the first shipment is made,” the smuggler answered, crossing his arms and watching Norman. “Don’t worry: he’ll be headed to his new home before you know it.”

“You’re killing me!” shouted Norman, as Gromyko turned back into the main office and saw the disapproving faces of a number of his subordinates.

“Is there a problem?” he asked one of the women who kept track of the paperwork the organization maintained.

“Considering we’ve been carted out here away from everyone we love,” she began hesitantly, unable to continue.

“Go ahead,” he urged her wearily, the utter lack of sleep the night before finally starting to tell on him. Taking a chair, he turned it around and faced the half dozen or so people before him. “Speak your minds,” he further urged.

“Well, it seems like a pretty low thing to do,” one of the men elaborated. “Especially with the imperials already shipping prisoners out to Quarlac. We’re kind of doing their work for them.”

“Tell me, is that the sort of man you want prowling around your community?” Gromyko asked hotly, stabbing a finger back towards his office. “Would any of you willingly have him, or the men who kidnapped Lena, for neighbors? Would you even so much as wish for them to walk the same street as your wives or children? Of course not! With such maggots, the only answer is to eliminate them at once. They each have a long litany of crimes to their names. They are not mere adventurers. They’re desperados who live and breathe without conscience. When faced with animals in human form, the only option is to get rid of them!”

“But to sell them off like this...” the man remonstrated.

“What would you have me do?” the smuggler demanded. “Just kill them outright? Would that be more just? Or perhaps I should just let them go, so they can prey upon and abuse the residents of Midway yet more.”

“Nobody wants them to hurt anyone else,” the man replied. “But you’ve got to remember what we are: we’re *smugglers!* We’re not hitmen or slavers or a kind of private police force. We’re not suited to this sort of thing.”

“Then give Gromyko your answer,” the smuggler instructed him. “What are we to do, when our friends are kidnapped off the streets; when they are threatened with *death* if they don’t turn over an imaginary artifact?”

Met with silence, the smuggler nodded.

“That’s what I thought,” he uttered, rising from his seat and moving it aside. “I am perfectly willing to listen to alternative courses to the one I’ve chosen for us. But I won’t stand aside and do nothing because of a few aching consciences. Sometimes choosing the lesser of two evils requires us to do evil ourselves so as to avoid a far worse crime. Inaction would be far more wicked than almost any other course we could choose to take.” Buttoning up his jacket, he pulled on his cap and made for the door. Pausing before it in thought, he turned and looked at them again. “It will take a willing organization to pull this off. It would truly pain me to see any of you go. But if you will undermine this project, either directly or through a lack of zeal for the citizens of Midway, then I ask you to leave the Underground at once. I need people around me who I can depend on.”

“You can always depend on us, boss,” another one of the men said. “None of us want to bail. We just needed to have our voices heard.”

“And I’ve heard them,” he assured them. “Believe me, I’ve heard them. I haven’t undertaken this course lightly. But it’s simply the only one available to me. The people of Midway must have deliverance from this evil. And I intend to secure it for them.”

With this he left them.

All throughout the day he dodged the relic hunters as he went about laying the groundwork for their removal. Originally intending to keep his actions confined to the Underground, he quickly realized that he would need more men on the streets than the organization could provide. So he began to leave word around town that he would handsomely pay anyone who captured the ruffians and brought them to him. By nightfall the town was rife with small fights that were suddenly breaking out in every quarter. The police tried to control it. But for the most part their work was confined to collection duty. For upon seeing the cops approaching, the residents of Midway would leave their bludgeoned quarries behind and vanish into the city.

“You’ve set off quite a firestorm,” Burnside said to the smuggler, meeting him a couple of hours after dark near the outskirts of Midway. Receiving no response, he leaned upon the same building that Gromyko was resting against and waited a few seconds. “Something on your mind?”

“We’ve begun to snuff them out of Midway,” he replied, his voice low and purposeful. “But I’ve received word that there’s a bundle of them hiding out in the countryside. They’ve set up tents in the forest.”

“Well, it’s gonna take a lot more than two men to take down a whole camp,” Burnside replied, crossing his arms over his chest. “Though I appreciate your faith in my fighting ability,” he added in an oddly vain way.

“I don’t intend to attack their camp with only you to support me,” Gromyko responded evenly. “There are more on the way.”

“Well, where are they?” he prodded, his feathers ruffled. “I didn’t see anybody else in the streets coming this way.”

“They’ll be here,” he assured him quietly.

Over the next half hour men began to melt out of the darkness and join them. Receiving only a nod or a mumbled acknowledgement from the smuggler, they formed up on either side and likewise leaned against the building. When another half hour of waiting produced no more, Gromyko pushed off the structure and made a beeline for the countryside.

“Eleven men, counting us,” Burnside observed, making out their numbers with difficulty in the darkness. “That gonna be enough?”

“Should be.”

“Well, how many guys are out there waiting for us?” he inquired further.

“Two or three dozen,” he answered. “Wayne couldn’t tell exactly how many.”

“Figures that little brat wouldn’t come along with us,” Burnside remarked. Suddenly a small boot kicked him in the back of the knee, making him stumble and fall face-first into the soft snow. “You little creep!” Burnside exclaimed, pushing his hands down into the snow to rise.

“That’ll teach ya!” Wayne replied, trotting a little further ahead to put a bit of distance between the two of them. “Next time you wanna badmouth Wayne, see to it he’s not walking right behind ya!”

“Why you little—,” Burnside growled, advancing towards him until Gromyko reached out his arm to his side and blocked his way. “He’s had this coming for a long time.”

“You can settle your books with him after this,” the smuggler said. “We’re not out here to fight among ourselves.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. “But don’t think I’m letting you off the hook, Wayne.”

“Have to catch me first!” he shot back. “And you’re too old and slow for that!”

Grinding his teeth, Burnside could only let the matter drop.

Slowly pressing their legs through the soft, freshly fallen snow, the men didn’t make a sound. Nearing the trees, they began to work around them. The relic hunters would be expecting trouble from the side of their camp which faced Midway, so Gromyko intended to hit them from the reverse side. Once Wayne judged the camp was between them and Midway, the group fanned out a little and moved in. Armed with knives, clubs, pipes, and the like, they were depending more than anything on the element of surprise.

Passing through the forest like ghosts, the men could hear voices talking quietly just ahead. Ducking low, they plowed their way

through the drifts with effort. Seeing dim light in a number of tents, they got within a couple hundred feet and stopped.

Briefly Gromyko issued orders to his men, which were passed along in whispers. Breaking into two groups, he led one off to the right while the other went to the left. Hearing a low groan, the smuggler jerked his head towards the other group in time to see a sentry fall who'd been hidden behind a tree. Knocked cold by a piece of pipe, he fell into the snow and lay still.

Afraid that the relic hunters had heard it, too, he rushed the first tent with his men and cudged its occupants, half of whom were drowsily drifting off to sleep. Too shocked to make much of a sound, they were quickly pummeled unconscious. Emerging from the tent, Gromyko raised his head in the air and heard similar activity from the other group.

"We're under attack!" a man shouted from a hundred feet away. "Wake up! Wake up!" he roared, raising something long and dark into the air and rushing the smuggler.

Throwing his knife hard, it fell a little low and caught the man in the stomach. Growling with pain, he pulled it out and threw it aside. Raising a club to brain Gromyko, he was a little too slow and got tackled around the middle by the smuggler. Writhing in the snow, he tried to beat on Gromyko but couldn't get any real momentum with his club. Suddenly he felt fingers around his neck, and with a gasp he dropped his weapon and tried to wrestle them off. Already losing blood through his stomach, the man quickly lost consciousness.

Standing up, Gromyko grabbed the man's club and ran into the battle which had erupted in the middle of the camp. Swinging his club like a bat, he swept one of the rogues right off his feet, smashing his nose flat against his face. Barely able to move, a quick boot to the side of the head rendered him motionless.

"Look out!" he heard Wayne shout, turning just as a knife was thrown at his back. It caught in his jacket at a shallow angle and ripped the material, but otherwise did no harm. Twisting an arm behind his back, he pulled it out as its owner rushed him with a large stick he grabbed off the ground. Blocking this with his club, he

slashed the man's ribs with the blade and then smashed the top of his skull, dropping him to the ground.

"Thanks," Gromyko said to the urchin, who'd already vanished from where he'd spoken. Seeing Burnside in trouble as he fought with two men at once, the smuggler evened up the odds and smacked one in the back of the head with his club, tumbling him forwards so that he fell into Burnside's legs and knocked him down. Seeing his chance, the other man moved in for the kill but was tackled by Gromyko. Landing face down, all the man knew was that someone was on his back beating on his skull with a club. A few good whacks and he was down for the count.

"Reckon I owe you one," Burnside said, standing up as Gromyko did likewise.

"Time for that later," the smuggler responded, rushing off as soon as he was on his feet.

For despite his cunning, Wayne had managed to get himself cut off from the rest of the group, and was surrounded by three of the hunters. Throwing his knife at one and catching him in the arm, Gromyko clubbed the second as he ran past him towards the third. Swinging his club hard, it connected with a piece of pipe that the man raised just in time to block it. The two weapons connected, and the club shattered into splinters. Suddenly defenseless, Gromyko jumped back to dodge a blow to his stomach which would have broken his ribs. Just as the man raised his pipe again, Wayne dove for his legs and knocked him down. Beating on his head with his small fists, the urchin was shoved aside by Gromyko, who sharply kicked the man in the face.

By this time the man who'd been knifed in the arm had pulled it out and grabbed Wayne. Lifting him off the ground by the back of his jacket, he was about to give Gromyko an ultimatum when a rock caught him in the back of the head and all but split his skull in two. Dropping insensibly to his knees, he tottered off to one side and lay still.

"You see that, Burnside!" the urchin exclaimed, his voice cracking. "I'm in this fight just as much as you are!"

"Shut up!" Gromyko ordered, grabbing the fallen pipe and stabbing a finger away from camp. "Get out of here!"

“Don’t count on it!” the boy shot back, picking up the rock that had saved him and running with it towards a small brawling group. Raising it above his head, he threw it a dozen feet and hit one of the relic hunters in the lower back. Screaming in pain, he reached behind him reflexively and lost his balance. Falling into the snow, he grabbed the rock and twisted to throw it at Wayne. Barely ducking it, the urchin decided he’d had enough for the moment and took off.

Gromyko reached the man just as he’d gotten to his feet and stabbed him in the abdomen with the pipe. Doubling over as the wind was knocked out of him, a blow to the back of the head stretched him out on the ground. Quickly the smuggler cleaned the remaining hunters’ clocks, leaving them strewn about the snow.

“Over there!” Burnside called, as a couple of Undergrounders were getting pummeled by three times their numbers.

Rushing alongside him, Gromyko bludgeoned the first two men he saw with his pipe. But when he jerked the weapon up to his shoulder to swing again, it somehow slid from his gloved hands and shot behind him. Turning around to grab it, he caught a club in the side of the skull and fell to the ground. Jarred almost insensible, the world seemed to rattle and shake as he attempted to rise. Catching another blow to the back of the head, he lost consciousness and sank into the snow.



## CHAPTER 5

**Y**ou boys did pretty good back there,” the smuggler heard as he slowly awoke, the speaker’s voice sounding very small and far away. “Fought like lions. But even lions get outnumbered.”

Opening his eyes and raising his gaze, he instantly regretted the motion as his head began to swim and ache. He began to lower his head when a hand roughly seized his hair and jerked it up again.

“No, you’ve slept enough,” one of the relic hunters said, standing behind him as he spoke.

“Leave him alone,” the first speaker ordered, a graying man of fifty or sixty. Gromyko couldn’t quite tell, nor did he care just then.

“He kicked me in the head earlier!” the man asserted, still holding onto the smuggler’s hair. “I reckon that entitles me to a little—.”

“It doesn’t entitle you to *anything!*” the man barked, evidently used to having trouble with this particular roughneck. “Leave him alone,” he repeated, his voice dropping with menace.

“Fine,” he acquiesced, but not before giving Gromyko another jerk. “I’ll deal with you later.”

Moving around the older man, he ascended a staircase that was behind him and disappeared. It was at this time that Gromyko realized he was inside a basement not unlike the one he’d rescued Lena from. Tied to a chair as she’d been, he looked around and saw that Burnside was likewise bound. Behind them was a small room separated from them by a wall with an open doorway.

“Nice of you to join us finally,” Burnside said sourly, his face bloodied and bruised.

“Where are we?” Gromyko asked.

“Pretty close to Underground headquarters,” he replied.

“Makes it easier to negotiate,” the older relic hunter replied. “We’ve been in touch with your people already. They’ve agreed to turn over the artifact.”

“Have they?” Gromyko asked, lowering his head and closing his eyes for a moment to try and collect his thoughts.

“Have you got a name?” Burnside queried.

“Call me Finley,” he replied, leaning against the wall a few feet ahead of his prisoners and crossing his arms. “You boys sure tore up our camp back there,” he continued, jerking a thumb off to his right. “Should’ve known better than to fight against numbers like that.”

“We knocked down your men like bowling pins,” Gromyko retorted. “They mustn’t be used to fighting honestly, in the open.”

“They’re not, believe me,” Finley laughed. “But they’re still good fighters. Your boys were just better, is all. Of course, you’ve got to add on top the fact that you jumped us when our pants were down. It was a pretty good attempt.”

“Glad you approve,” Burnside said acidly.

“I’m not here to gloat,” the man shrugged. “Just wanted to get to know this character a little before we get the artifact,” he elaborated, tossing a careless finger towards Gromyko. “Once we get it, the boys plan to go to work on him. He broke a few too many bones back there to let it slide.”

“So you won’t honor the deal you’ve made with the Underground to trade us back?” the smuggler inquired, wrestling against his ropes a little but finding them perfectly tight.

“It’s not that I *won’t*, it’s that I *can’t*,” Finley said frankly. “Like I said, you broke too many bones back in our camp. Even if I *did* feel like sticking my neck out for you, the boys would just push me aside and pull you apart. Might as well save myself the trouble of getting shoved around.”

“No honor among thieves, I see,” Gromyko responded.

“You’re one to talk!” laughed Finley. “Head of a smuggling operation? You’re dealing in stolen goods all the time.”

“Mostly we confine ourselves to lost artifacts,” the smuggler pointed out. “They don’t belong to anyone, anymore.”

“Be that as it may, you’re more than a little acquainted with breaking the rules,” the man replied. “Boy, you must really be at the end of your tether to throw a line like that at me!” he laughed again.

“It’s been a long week,” Gromyko uttered in a subdued voice, as feet started coming down the stairs. To his chagrin, they belonged to the man who’d left a couple minutes before.

“Lon’s got something to say to you,” he said to Finley.

“What’s on his mind?” the older man asked, not moving an inch.

“Said he’d tell you that when he saw you,” the rogue replied, his scowling eyes on Gromyko.

“Tell him if it’s that important, he can come down here and tell me himself,” he said seriously. “Get going, Burke,” he ordered, when the younger man failed to move. With a grumble the renegade turned around and went back up the stairs. “Thinks I’m stupid,” Finley explained to his prisoners. “Lon never has anything to say to me. Just wanted a couple minutes alone with you guys.”

“I gather that’s why you’re hanging out with us?” Burnside queried, receiving a nod.

“And here I thought it was just the magnetism of our conversation,” Gromyko inserted, eliciting another laugh.

“Don’t get me wrong: you two are better to talk to than that lot,” he explained, jerking a thumb over his shoulder towards the staircase beside him. “But mainly I want you two kept breathing long enough that we can actually get what we came after. I can’t trust any of them to do it, so I’ve got to do it myself.”

“Sorry to be a burden,” Gromyko cracked.

“Believe me, for the payday that’s coming my way, I’d stand down here for a week without so much as moving! After this I plan to retire, maybe set up a little place on one of those nice, lush worlds that nobody’s gotten around to colonizing yet. Pretty good way to live out my days, wouldn’t you say?”

“Anything beats this place,” Burnside shot back.

“Suppose you’re right,” Finley assented. “I guess even just a change of scenery would seem like paradise to your lot.” He

looked between them. “Were you two born here? Or did you come after?”

“After,” they said in unison.

“I figured that for you,” Finley replied, nodding towards Burnside. “But I thought you might have been young enough to have grown up here,” he added, speaking to Gromyko.

“Came here as a kid,” he explained tersely. “Don’t intend to stay here, though.”

“You should’ve just taken the artifact yourself and cashed it in!” Finley laughed again. “Actually, why *haven’t* you done that already?” he queried, his face clouding over as he began to sense a problem.

“There isn’t any—,” he began, before catching himself. “...Any way that I’d leave the people of Midway to their fate. I’ll suffer alongside them for as long as it takes to liberate them.”

“You almost said something there a second ago,” Finley said gravely. “What was it?”

“*Finley!*” a voice shouted from up stairs.

“*What?*” he demanded, his voice sharper than he’d intended. “What’s the matter?” he asked more calmly. Receiving no reply, he grumbled and pushed off the wall. “Be right back,” he uttered, beginning to climb the stairs.

“Now’s our chance!” Burnside said in an acidic whisper, mockingly jerking against his ropes and moving his chair a little. “Oh, that’s right: we’re tied down like a couple of hogs!”

“Relax,” Gromyko said with a frown, watching the stairs. “We’re not dead yet.”

“An excellent choice of words!” the older man shot back in a strained voice. About to say more, he paused when he heard a thud come from the room behind them. “Got rats,” he opined.

“Took your time,” Gromyko remarked.

“What, the rats?” Burnside asked.

It was then that a stiff, shivering Wayne all but stumbled into view with a small knife in his hand.

“Oh, you again,” Burnside said caustically.

“H-had to wait for h-him to l-leave,” the urchin explained, trying to wrap his dull fingers around the knife’s handle so as to work

it against Gromyko's ropes. "N-nearly froze to d-death out there, what with my legs s-sticking out into the cold! I almost got in a while before you woke up. Then that jerk F-Finley came back, and I couldn't move!"

"Just shut up and get the ropes off," Burnside ordered, his eyes anxiously glued to the stairs. "They'll be back any second."

"N-no, they're having a l-little talk upstairs," Wayne said. "T-Teddy and a few others h-have dropped by for a v-v-visit."

Accidentally dropping the knife, he cursed under his breath and stooped to pick it up. As he did so, legs appeared on the steps. Instantly slipping the blade into Gromyko's hands, the urchin ducked back into the small room behind him just as Burke came into view.

"Thought I'd keep you boys company," he said with a wicked smile. "Some of your Undergrounders are upstairs talking to the boss. And, well, I didn't want you two to get lonely down here all by yourselves."

"What's on their minds?" Burnside asked, trying to draw his attention away from Gromyko so the smuggler could work at his ropes with the knife. "They change their minds about trading the relic for this clown?"

"Seems one of your boys snatched the relic and doesn't want to give it back," he explained, his attention on the smuggler. "I guess he's doubting the wisdom of handing away a fortune just to save your skin. Probably trying to figure out how to get offworld with it." He glanced at Burnside and then returned his gaze to Gromyko. "Your friends are just upstairs trying to talk the boss into giving 'em a little more time to get the artifact away from him. He's holed up somewhere near police headquarters, and they can't just storm it. If it were me, I'd give your people twenty-four hours. But I'd start chopping fingers off and send 'em to your HQ every hour until we've got the relic in our hands."

"Two men only have twenty fingers," Burnside countered, still trying to draw his attention from the smuggler.

"You've got four ears between you, haven't you?" he shot back. "That'll bring us up to twenty-four."

"Could always use a few of yours," Gromyko suggested, causing Burnside's eyes to go wide with dismay.

“You talk pretty big, for a man who’s tied to a chair,” retorted Burke, backhanding the smuggler hard. “I already told you what was gonna happen once we got that relic. But maybe I’ll pay back some of the debt I owe you now.” He paused and rubbed a nasty bruise on the side of his face. “I intend to make this good.”

“Too late for that now,” Burnside uttered, noticing that Gromyko’s hands were free of their ropes.

“What do you mean by that?” Burke asked.

But before he could receive an answer, Gromyko stood sharply up and stabbed him in the chest. Reaching his left arm around the rogue’s head, he put his hand over his mouth and muffled him until he dropped limply to the floor. Pulling out the blood-stained blade, he quickly sliced the ropes which bound his feet and made for Burnside.

“You’re becoming a regular killer,” the older man said, noting the utter lack of hesitation on the smuggler’s part. “You’re getting good at it,” he added, as Wayne came back into view, his big round eyes fixed on Burke’s corpse.

“It’s not by choice, let me assure you,” Gromyko replied, freeing him. “You heard what he was planning. What they all were, in fact.”

“Yeah, I know,” Burnside responded, standing up and shaking a little blood into his feet.

“Enough talking!” Wayne insisted in a sharp whisper. “Let’s get out of here before they come back! It’s do or die now!”

Nodding his agreement, Gromyko followed the urchin into the back room.

“Pretty sloppy of ‘em not to watch this window,” Burnside remarked, as he pushed Wayne up and through it, following after. “These guys mustn’t be real familiar with this kind of work.”

“Keep moving,” the smuggler urged, hearing voices from upstairs. “I think they’re coming back.”

Hustling out the window, Burnside quickly turned around and offered Gromyko his hands. Pulling him up and out just as he heard a shout from inside, he bolted off into the night with his companions.

“Wait! What about the others?” Wayne asked, instantly bringing them to a halt. “Those relic hunters will kill our guys if there’s any still around.

“I’ve done my part for this evening,” Burnside replied. “If you guys want to get your heads kicked in for a second time, that’s up to you.”

Gromyko scowled at him in the darkness and immediately doubled back. Stopping across the street from the house they’d just escaped, he searched the darkness carefully but didn’t see anyone.

“Looks clear,” Wayne uttered, seeming to appear right out of thin air beside him. “I think they must have left right before we escaped.”

“Got to make sure,” the smuggler said, before feeling a small hand on his shoulder.

“They went over there to help you escape,” he pointed out. “Wouldn’t be good to get caught again right after the chance they took in heading over. Let me go. I’ll sniff around and be right back.”

“Alright,” Gromyko assented, taking a step back as the urchin quickly moved away. Hearing soft crunching approaching from Burnside’s direction, he recognized the gait at once and didn’t bother to look.

“Anything?” the older man asked, having had second thoughts.

“Wayne’s gonna check it out.”

“If there’s no sign of a fracas, they must have gotten away alright,” he opined.

“We’ll know soon enough.”

It wasn’t long before Wayne was back, chuckling as he rejoined them.

“What’s the joke?” Burnside queried flatly.

“Those turkeys are tearing each other apart in there!” he said a little too loudly, unable to help himself. “It was hard to tell. But I think they must have ganged up on Finley.”

“Why do you say that?” Gromyko queried, looking over the boy’s head towards the house.

“Cause he was laying just inside the front door, his face oozing blood,” the urchin replied matter-of-factly.

“You stuck your *head inside?*” asked Burnside censoriously.

“Hey, I had to make sure none of our guys were getting picked on, alright? Besides, they were too busy bashing each other’s brains out to notice me. I might as well have been invisible.” He paused and pointed off in the direction they’d been running. “Are we gonna go home now? Or is this night gonna go on forever?”

“Go on home, Wayne,” Gromyko instructed wearily, now that the adrenaline was starting to wear off a little. “I’ve still got a few things to take care of.”

“Reckon I’ll hang around for a little while yet,” Wayne replied. “Besides, if you get caught, the Underground will just hunt me down to sniff you out. I might as well save myself the trouble and keep you out of their clutches. For tonight, at least.”

“You two can pal around all you want,” Burnside said. “But I’m beat, literally and otherwise.” He waved in the darkness and turned away. “See you later.”

“Alright,” Gromyko replied, as the older man crunched off into the darkness. “Come on,” he said to Wayne, once Burnside’s footsteps had fallen away.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“Lena will have heard by now about the attack on the camp,” he explained. “I need to let her know I’m alright.”

“She won’t have stayed at that house you put her in,” the ragamuffin pointed out, making him stop. “Not after word got around that you’d been grabbed.”

“You know, you’re right,” he agreed. “Most likely at headquarters.”

“Most likely.”

Directing their steps in that direction, the duo moved as silently through the night as the ice and snow would permit. Reaching HQ, they approached it cautiously, watching for observers. Finding one, they conked him over the head and left him to either freeze or wake up in time to save himself. Heading inside, they found the place dark.

“Anybody home?” Wayne queried in a whisper, once the door was shut. “Hello?”



“Wayne?” a feminine voice asked from Gromyko’s office. They heard a match strike, and a few seconds later Lena came into view. “Antonin!” she all but exploded, tearing across the space and jumping into his arms. “I thought you were dead!”

“You should have more faith in Gromyko,” the smuggler uttered, though his usual cocky enthusiasm was lacking. Hearing this, Lena drew back and tried to look at him. But their sole source of light was expiring on the floor behind her.

“Come on,” she said earnestly, taking his hand and leading him into his office. Striking another match, she held it up to his battered face and gasped. “What happened to you?”

Before answering, he took the match from between her fingers and lit a candle. Setting it on the desk, he likewise sat upon it and let out a sigh.

“Had a big fight, outside town,” he began, pointing off to his left. “We lost, and got kicked around. I didn’t wake up until we were back in Midway, tied up like a couple of turkey’s ready to be roasted. Got knocked around a little more, but nothing too major. Guess they must’ve worked me over when I was unconscious.”

“Animals,” she said bitterly, opening the first aid kit that Teddy had left behind after doctoring Norman. Quickly she applied antiseptic to a cloth and began dabbing it against the cuts on his face. “I hope they suffer for this.”

“Well, I killed one of them when we were escaping,” the smuggler replied. “They didn’t take too well to us slipping away, so they started clobbering each other. Their boss is dead, too.”

“Good,” Lena said sharply. “Maybe that’ll cut the head off the snake.”

“Their group was just one snake among many,” he pointed out.

“Oh, I know that,” she said with a shake of her head, finishing her task and putting down the cloth. “I imagine the Hope Of The People doesn’t want to go around with a lot of bandages on his face?”

“Indeed not,” he confirmed. “Besides, the cuts and bruises will be a testament to them that I’m working on their behalf.”

“You’re gonna be a corpse if you get too many more testaments like these,” she said disapprovingly, gesturing towards his face. “You’re lucky to be alive, Antonin,” she added in a quieter voice.

“I’m gonna find somewhere to sleep,” Wayne informed them abruptly, sensing things were about to get mushy. “Goodnight.”

“Night, Wayne,” Gromyko replied, his eyes searching Lena’s. “What’s wrong?” he asked softly, once they were alone.

“I don’t like where this is taking you, Antonin,” she confessed. “You’ve shed more blood in the last week than you have in your entire life. And now you’re starting to get beaten around,” she said, putting a gentle finger on his face and tracing one of his cuts. “It hurts me to see you like this.”

“I didn’t ask for this situation, Lena.”

“But you did choose to respond to it,” she replied.

“What else could I do?” he asked defensively, sliding off the desk and heading for the window. “Even now they’re watching us,” he continued, looking out the crack and seeing a dark shape a short distance away. “I could have folded my hands in my lap and done nothing. But that would’ve left them free to abuse not just our fellow Undergrounders, but the whole of Midway. And I can’t have that. I *won’t* have that. Not when I’m in a position to do something about it.”

“Antonin, is this about Midway and the Underground, or is it about you?”

“Does it matter which it is?” he asked, still looking out the window.

“It matters to me,” she responded, drawing close and hugging his back. “If you’re really doing this for the people of Midway, I can accept that, at least for the moment. But if this is just a way to—,” she stopped, thinking better of it.

“A way to *what*?” he prodded.

“A way to finally give life to the image you’ve been trying to build,” she resumed meekly. “If this is propaganda, then I can’t go along with it.”

“What kind of man do you figure me for, Lena?” he asked incredulously, drawing out of her embrace and turning to look at her. “Do you think I’d inflame this conflict just to draw attention to myself?”

Do you imagine I'm simply seizing this opportunity to aggrandize myself?"

"Are you?" she asked frankly.

"I'm a vain man, Lena," he said frowningly, moving around her for the door. "But I'm not vain enough to see so many of my friends and neighbors hurt just to fill out my ego." He paused in the doorway and turned back towards her. "I can't imagine what would cause you to even suspect that, given all the time we've spent together. I can only assume that the pressure we're all under is getting to you."

He waited for a response, but all Lena did was return his gaze. Shaking his head, he turned and left the office.

The next evening was an active one for the Underground and the men it had temporarily employed to clean up the streets. Finding relic hunters on almost every street corner, they systematically went about bludgeoning them and carting them off into the night. Midnight had scarcely been reached when Gromyko's original crew of helpers were exhausted, and he had to exchange them for another set.

"How's the rat catching going?" Burnside asked, finally deciding to show up.

Standing under an awning, Gromyko was surrounded by about a half dozen men.

"Could've used your help earlier," the smuggler remarked in a low voice, still bothered by his discussion with Lena.

"You might say I've been attending to some business of my own," the older man replied, cracking the knuckles of his right fist in his left palm. "A couple of these guys decided to drop in on me a couple hours ago. I've still got 'em tied up in my place. Be glad to get 'em off my hands."

"We'll see to that later," Gromyko said without much interest, moving around him and looking into an alley across the street. "Did you notice that?" the smuggler asked the other men, receiving only negatory mumbles in reply.

"I saw it, too," Wayne said from a few feet away.

"Of course," Burnside remarked sourly, sensing he could never really get away from the urchin.

“What was it?” Gromyko asked the boy.

“Looked like a bunch of guys moving in a group,” he replied.

Suddenly a dozen men burst from the alley whooping and shouting. Darting across the street, they were upon the Undergrounders in a flash. With barely enough time to draw their weapons, it was all they could do to keep from being beaten into the ground. They fought savagely, but were on the verge of being overcome when a troop of nearly a dozen police officers came into view, brandishing night sticks and blinding them with flashlights. With one consent the fight evaporated. The Undergrounders seized their wounded and carried them off, while the relic hunters left their own behind to be captured. Fortunately the abandoned hunters fought the police, slowing them down enough for Gromyko’s group to escape.

“Don’t tell me...they’re finally getting...serious,” Burnside said scornfully, huffing and puffing as he helped the smuggler carry one of the men between them. “Where were you guys a week ago!?” he shouted back, earning a shush from Wayne. “Oh, be quiet you brat!” he snapped.

“Wayne’s right,” Gromyko uttered quietly, puffing just as hard. “We need to lay low.”

“I’ve had about enough of laying low!” Burnside growled, his voice still far too loud. “And I’m tired of fighting these turkeys on my own turf! They’ve already attacked my house twice now!”

“We’ll deal with them,” the smuggler assured him, as they set down the wounded man to catch their breath. Resting barely half a minute, they heard the sound of feet crunching up to them. Immediately drawing their weapons, they were prepared to fight to the death rather than be captured again.

“Hey! Don’t attack us!” a familiar voice called out in a harsh whisper. It belonged to the Black Fang Gromyko had spoken to inside the boarding house. “I’ve brought some of your boys with me!”

“Come ahead,” the smuggler instructed, lowering his weapon. “What are you doing here?” he asked, grateful to see another six or eight Undergrounders join them.

“I’ve got to live here, too, you know,” the Fang said with an audible grin. “Just don’t pass that along. My associates wouldn’t like that.”

“Who is this guy?” Burnside asked pointedly.

“Just a friend,” Gromyko replied, respecting his secret.

“Found a few of your guys wandering around looking for you,” he explained, gesturing towards the other men. “Things are only gonna get hotter tonight, so I thought you could use ‘em.”

“Thanks,” Gromyko said.

“What do you mean *hotter*?” Burnside asked.

“I mean that old boy who’s put the reward out for that relic is getting desperate,” he explained, lowering his voice a little. “Guess he can hear the reaper knocking at his door, ‘cause he’s doubled the reward. He’s *also* made it clear that it wouldn’t be available for a whole lot longer.”

“Midway will burn if we don’t get these scum off the streets,” Wayne remarked.

“That’s the way I see it, too,” the Fang assented. “So I figured I’d better throw in while we’ve got a chance to take ‘em out. Gotta warn you, though: they’re not gonna go easy. They want this relic so bad they can taste it. There’ll be killings for sure before this night is over.”

“There’ve already been a few,” Burnside replied.

“We can’t take ‘em all out tonight,” Gromyko uttered, thinking out loud. “It’ll take days to really break ‘em down.”

“I’ve got a few contacts around the city,” the Fang said. “I’m just as rich as you guys,” he continued with a laugh. “So I couldn’t offer to pay them. But I said the Underground would give them something for their trouble if they could hand ‘em off essentially intact. Of course, if they happened to die during collection...” his voice trailed as he shrugged.

“The Underground will repay every loyal citizen of Midway,” Gromyko assured him. “You may give them Gromyko’s personal guarantee on that score.”

“I already did,” he grinned again. “Honestly I think that’s what drew the patrols out in such force. The first few guys I talked to started a ruckus right near police headquarters. They must’ve thought a riot was about to break out, ‘cause they had more boots on the pavement than I’ve seen in years.”

“Terrific,” Burnside grumbled. “That’ll just drive the hunters into hiding until tomorrow night.”

“Yes, but they don’t know the city as well as we do,” Gromyko replied. “Some of them will be caught out in the open.”

“And we can sniff out the ones who do manage to hide,” inserted Wayne, moving a little closer and formally joining the discussion.

“I was thinking about that,” the Fang continued. “We need some big groups moving around to cudgel them. But we’re also gonna need some small teams working the alleys and shadows for the ones who’ve ducked out for the night.”

“Most of ‘em have probably made for the edges of town by now,” Burnside observed.

“I was thinking I’d take Wayne and a couple of your boys out that way, if you didn’t mind,” the Fang said to Gromyko. “Besides, if we start beating the bushes, it’ll drive ‘em into the open again.”

“Go ahead,” he replied with a nod, gesturing off into the darkness.

Selecting a couple of men, the Fang left without another word.

“Interesting character,” Burnside remarked, hoping to draw out the smuggler.

“Yeah,” he assented, refusing to divulge more. “Come on.”

Moving as silently as a large group could, given the frozen ground, they worked their way back towards Underground headquarters, picking up several hunters along the way and dropping them off. They kept this up until the sun’s feeble rays began to pierce the thick covering of clouds that floated overhead.

“Don’t suppose old company men like me get paid for our troubles during all this?” Burnside asked Gromyko, once they’d dropped off their prisoners and the group had dispersed.

“You’re hardly an old company man,” the smuggler replied flatly.

“Still, I deserve something for my trouble,” he persisted, until Gromyko sharply stopped and glared at him. Saying nothing more, he raised his hands in a show of innocence and made for his place.

*"He should talk,"* the smuggler reflected, rolling his eyes as he trod off towards the dilapidated house he'd chosen to haunt for the next few hours. Finding the door locked, as he'd expected, he moved around the back and checked the boards on the windows. *"Good,"* he said inwardly, finding them unmoved since he'd last been there.

Returning to the front, he inserted a key which he'd bought off an acquaintance some time before and entered. It felt odd using the front door, almost like he was coming home after a long night's work. Locking the door again, he shoved the key into his pocket and shuffled upstairs. Finding an old bedroom, he locked its door, too, and dropped onto the bed. Almost instantly he was asleep.

His dreams were strange and grotesque, as though a hundred dead spirits had decided to haunt the room he was sleeping in. He saw human silhouettes floating around his bed. Unable either to rise or to close his eyes, he could only helplessly watch as they paraded themselves around him. Their presence was menacing, though somehow without bearing any personal threat to him. It was like they were trying to send a message of woe, but the woe didn't apply to him.

Awakening towards nightfall, he shook his groggy head and tried to make sense of the figures. Unable to, he slid down to the end of the bed and pulled a can of meat from an inner pocket where he'd left it to stay warm. Working the lid off with his knife, he ate the uninspired contents and then threw the can off to the side. Unlocking the door, he creaked his way down the stairs and peeked out through a tiny gap in the doorframe. It was still a touch too bright to leave, so he sat down on the stairs, took off his stocking cap, and rubbed his greasy hair.

"Need a bath," he remarked idly, just to hear a human voice.

Resting his elbows on the steps behind him, he leaned back and watched as the crack in the doorway grew darker and darker. With the wind audibly growing stronger, he judged that a storm was incoming. Though a somewhat mixed blessing, as it would drive some of the hunters under cover, it nevertheless favored the Undergrounders. Knowing the city so much better, it would

conceal them without hindering their movements hardly at all. It would also make it harder for the police to catch them.

“Of course, that goes for *them*, too,” the smuggler uttered frowningly, pushing off the steps and unlocking the door. Peeking out to make sure nobody close at hand was watching, he slipped out, relocked it, and quickly made tracks.

It was dark by the time he was close to headquarters. With the wind picking up and driving snow into his face, it was hard to pay attention to his surroundings. Glancing casually off to the right, into the street, he saw a short figure walking alongside him.

“Figured you’d show up around now,” the smuggler said to Wayne, his voice calm despite being surprised. “What happened last night?”

“Chased a bunch of those hunters out of hiding,” he said in a low voice, his gaze on his feet. “That friend of yours is pretty brutal.”

“He’s a friend of the Underground, not of me personally,” Gromyko replied. “Why, what did he do?” he asked, pausing just outside headquarters and turning to look at him.

“Seems like he wants to send just as few of these guys to Quarlac as he can,” the urchin answered. “We grabbed a few. But the rest...”

“What did he do?” he repeated.

“I don’t really want to relive it,” the boy said frankly. “Let’s just say he’s awfully good with a claw hammer,” Wayne uttered with a shiver, not wishing to say more.

“I don’t much care what he uses, as long as those maggots are chased out of Midway,” the smuggler said, turning and entering headquarters. “What’s our status?” he asked no one in particular once the door was shut.

“We’re getting reports of attacks taking place across the city,” one of the women informed him.

“Good, I want to keep the pressure up on them,” he replied, making for his office.

“No, I mean attacks on *our* guys,” she clarified, making him stop. “Those relic hunters are hitting back. Even broke into one of the distilleries and smashed it to pieces.”



“Can any of it be salvaged?” he queried, receiving a disapproving look in response. “Well, I assume that everything that can be done is being done for anyone who was wounded.”

“Nobody was wounded,” she said gravely. “They killed everyone who was there.”

“What?” he asked incredulously, as Wayne approached and looked up at him. “What is it?” he asked, noticing his eyes on him.

“I’ll start sniffing around, find out who did this,” he informed him, before turning to leave.

“Be careful,” the smuggler cautioned. “They know you’re in tight with us. They won’t hesitate just ‘cause you’re a kid.”

“I hope not,” Wayne said with a curious grin on his face. “I’d say I’ve earned the right to be treated as badly as the rest of you.”

With this he left them.

“Funny little guy,” Gromyko remarked quietly, shaking his head.

“The deceased have already been moved out,” the woman continued. “Lena has informed their families. Well, the ones who *had* families.”

“We’ll see to it that their killers are punished,” the smuggler assured her, going to his office briefly before heading right back out into the storm.

Several hours later he was crouching half a block away from an old rundown shop. Beside him were Wayne and the Black Fang whose choice of weapon had so disturbed the youth.

“They’ve holed up in there,” the urchin informed them. “Been there for the last few hours.”

“How do you know that?” the Fang queried.

“Because I’m not the only one who watches these streets,” he replied, gesturing off into the darkness towards some shacks with smashed out windows. “A couple friends of mine found ‘em, and tipped me off. They’ve been watching ever since those jerks took up residence.”

“You’ve got quite a network,” the pirate said.

“How many of ‘em are in there, Wayne?” Gromyko asked.

“Only four,” he answered. “But they’ll be expecting trouble.”

“Why?” the Fang inquired.

“Because they walked into this place plain as day,” the boy explained. “They weren’t making a secret of it. In fact, they acted just like they *wanted* to be noticed. That’s why I heard about ‘em so fast.”

“So the attack on the distillery was just to draw us out,” he said frowningly.

“It worked,” Gromyko growled, standing up and taking a step towards the building. But before he could take another, the pirate put a hand on his arm and stopped him.

“I want to take those guys apart just as much as you do,” he began. “But we’ve got to be smart. The kid already said they’re waiting for us.”

“I intend to smoke ‘em out,” he said, his tone indicating he wouldn’t brook any opposition. Striding boldly towards the building with his two companions flanking him, he reached into his jacket and pulled out a grenade.

“Where in the world did you get *that?*!” Wayne asked with shock, the mere possession of such a weapon constituting a straight line to the electric chair.

“I’ve got connections,” he answered sourly, stopping just short of the building and jerking the pin. Throwing it into one of the open windows, his companions threw themselves to the ground while he simply stood in the wind with his feet spread wide in defiance. Seconds later a huge roar and a blinding flash of light erupted from the house, blowing the smuggler’s coat back and showering the street with bits of wood and glass that somehow managed to miss him while tearing bits out of his clothes. “Knock knock,” he uttered gravely, as screaming emanated from the house and four scarred and bloodied men stumbled out and collapsed into the snow. “Shut your mouths and get up!” Gromyko ordered, kicking them to be silent. Angrily he grabbed and jerked them to their feet as Wayne and the Fang approached.

“We’ll kill you!” one of them shouted, all but deaf from the explosion and nearly blind from the damage that had been done to his eyes from flying debris. “You hear me? We’ll—.”

Stabbed sharply in the stomach by a thick wooden bat, he doubled over and dropped to the ground.

“Pick him up!” roared Gromyko, his fury so great that he seemed almost unrecognizable to his companions. “Unless you’re all eager to die now!”

Anxious and half-blind, they pulled the man upright and huddled around him. They, of course, didn’t care in the least what happened to him. But they sensed Gromyko was on the edge, and didn’t want to provoke him into making good on his threat.

“We need to get out of here,” Wayne cautioned, certain the explosion would draw the police in short order.

“Make for headquarters,” the smuggler told him. “And let us know if there’s anybody waiting for us.”

“Alright,” the boy assented, glad to get away from the groaning, savagely injured men.

“By rights I ought to kill you right now,” Gromyko uttered once the boy had departed. “After what you did to those poor distillers, it’s nothing more than you deserve.”

“Not like they’re fit for Quarlac, anymore,” the pirate observed. “Be just as well to get it over with now.”

“No, we’ll play it like we intended to,” the smuggler disagreed. “Besides, I’m sure they can find a use for trash like this. Even if it’s just feeding wild animals.”

“You miserable barbarian!” one of them exclaimed, to the audible shuddering of the others.

Gromyko took a few steps towards them, causing them to stumble backwards in retreat. Suddenly one of them got the idea to run, and the rest took off after him.

“Let ‘em go,” Gromyko said, raising a hand to stop the pirate when he was about to set off after them. “I want it this way.”

“What do you—,” he began, pausing part way and grinning. “Oh, you intended these boys to be a warning to the others,” he said with a knowing nod of his head.

“Yeah,” Gromyko said somewhat more lightly, turning and walking away once the men had turned into an alley and vanished. “It’ll show these scum to leave our people alone.”

“You took quite a gamble, just chucking that grenade in there,” the Fang observed, watching him as he walked beside him. “Could’ve killed ‘em outright.”

“But I didn’t, did I?” he asked with a touch of a smile.

“No, no you didn’t,” he agreed. “But they probably wish you had.”

“That’s the only real way to make the point stick,” he responded. “It’s time these rodents started to fear us. They need to feel that there’s no depth we won’t drop to if it protects our own.”

“Well, if *that* doesn’t make the point, nothing will,” the pirate said with a laugh, jerking a thumb over his shoulder towards the men.

It didn’t take long for Wayne to notice that the prisoners had escaped. Rejoining his companions, they briefly filled him in as they moved to their next target.

“Are we gonna spend the entire night just rambling the streets and beating people up?” the urchin asked, pulling his jacket collar a little higher and ducking his head into it. “This storm is getting nasty,” he added, as a gust blew down the street and choked him.

“We’ll stick at it for as long as it takes,” Gromyko replied with determination.

“Yeah, but we’re running out of *men*,” the boy pointed out. “Or at least we’re having a harder time finding ones willing to stick their necks out night after night. They were already at a pretty low ebb even before all this ruckus started.”

“You got a better idea?” the Fang queried, when Gromyko elected to say nothing.

“I’m just the eyes and ears!” he protested. “I’m not the planning committee!”

“We’ll keep at it until one or both sides can’t stand anymore,” the smuggler declared. “We’ll deplete half of Midway if it’s the only way to save it.”

“Hope it doesn’t come to that,” the boy remarked, flaring his eyebrows and looking down at his feet as he walked.

“That depends on them,” the smuggler concluded.

But despite Gromyko’s intentions, further fighting soon proved impossible. A blizzard unlike Midway had seen in years descended on the town, nearly blowing the trio right off their feet. Moving cautiously towards headquarters, they were finally forced to

stop several blocks short of it and duck into an alley. Led part way along it by Wayne, he showed them into a small basement. The first floor had mostly collapsed, leaving behind only a space big enough for the three of them.

“It’ll help us stay warm,” the urchin argued, when the Black Fang pointed this out.

“Yeah, or we’ll suffocate by morning,” he said with a shiver, shaking off the snow which had caked itself onto his clothes. “Can’t believe how strong the wind is out there,” he added, as it howled almost like an animal down the alley. “You’d think it’s alive.”

“For all we know, it is,” the smuggler remarked, likewise shivering as he settled into a corner. Pulling the small candle out of his pocket, he lit it and placed it in the middle of the floor between them.

“What do you mean by that?” Wayne asked almost brusquely. Having seen more than a few weird things in and about Midway, he didn’t like to hear Gromyko lending them credence. He much preferred to ignore their existence.

“It’s a weird planet,” he replied with a shrug. “Anybody who’s been here any length of time knows that. Shoot, I heard of a warden once who went crazy and had to bail just a couple months after coming here. And they’ve got all the amenities you could want up on the hill,” he elaborated, nodding off towards the prison.”

“What about you?” the boy asked the Black Fang. “Seen anything weird?”

“Plenty,” he nodded, wrapping his arms tightly around himself to try and warm up. “On this planet, and others. But there’s something about Delta that stands alone. It’s got a strange atmosphere to it. I’d almost call it a mood, except...”

“Except what?” Wayne prodded, both curious and wishing to know nothing more.

“Except that’s silly, isn’t it?” the Fang asked, his tone ironic, as if he both believed what he was saying and didn’t. “How can a planet have a mood?”

“Just your imagination,” Wayne concluded, pulling his head a little deeper into his jacket and packing himself into the corner he sat in.

“Thanks, I wasn’t sure if it was or wasn’t,” the man replied sarcastically.

“Best to get some sleep,” Gromyko said with a yawn, the storm and the fighting working together to wear him out.

“I can never sleep when I’m cold,” the Fang replied. “At least not when I’m seriously cold.”

“Then what are you doing on Delta?” the smuggler asked, laying down on his side and drawing his legs against his chest.

“I’ve wondered that, too!” the pirate laughed. “Truth is, something about this place keeps drawing me back. I’ve gotten the chance to transfer to a half dozen different places. I’ve even gone to a few of ‘em. But in the end, I keep coming back to this ice cube because it feels like it knows me somehow. Like we were made for each other.”

“Sound like a candidate for the funny ward,” Wayne grumbled, mimicking Gromyko’s posture. When the pirate gave him a modest kick, he jerked upright. “Hey!” he protested.

“That didn’t even hurt,” the smuggler said. “Now shut your mouth and go to sleep.”

“You’re the ones who keep talking!” he objected.

At that moment they heard something knock against the small wooden window they’d climbed in through. Instantly they stopped breathing, their hearts in their ears.

“Couldn’t have been something bumping against it,” Wayne observed almost inaudibly, before hearing it again. “*Someone’s kicking it!*” he said in a sharp whisper, after it’d stopped jerking against a small latch he’d rigged to it on a previous occasion to keep it shut while he was inside.

“Obviously,” the smuggler said in an almost normal voice, standing up and moving to the window.

“What are you *doing?*” asked the urchin incredulously, as the Black Fang jumped to his feet.

“I’m gonna see who’s outside,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Could be cops,” the pirate pointed out.

“Could be one of our people, too,” he countered, reaching for the latch. “If they don’t get off the street soon, they’ll probably freeze.”

Opening the latch, he pulled the window open and saw a pair of dark, well-made boots in the flickering light of the candle. At once the man they belonged to ducked his head down and looked inside.

“Let me in,” he pleaded, his voice quivering. “Please.”

“Come ahead,” Gromyko urged, standing back to give him room.

Gasping as he dropped to the ground, he put his boots through first and started to slide in. As he did so, his policeman’s uniform made the urchin’s eyes bulge out of their sockets.

“Y-you’re,” he stammered, as the Fang moved behind the officer and shut the window.

“Wounded,” Gromyko finished for him, seeing the man tightly gripping his right arm with his left hand. Sliding down the wall, he sat down on the floor and extended his legs outward with a groan. “And half frozen.”

“I’m almost completely frozen,” the officer corrected, his teeth clattering as he did so. “I’m surprised I made it this far. I can’t feel my hands or feet.”

“You’ll warm up now that you’re out of the cold,” the pirate replied dubiously, doubtful if that was a good thing. “What happened to your arm?” he asked, sitting down in his old place and nodding towards it.

“Thugs,” he answered. “Those guys who’ve been coming to Midway. Ambushed me and two partners of mine.” He groaned as he squeezed the wound a little harder. “Never even saw what they hit me with. But it punched a hole in my jacket,” he continued, pulling his hand away to reveal the gash, which was stained with blood.

“Can’t hold that all night,” Gromyko said, squatting down in front of him. “Got a bandana or something to wrap around it?”

“I do,” Wayne said, pulling a kerchief out of his pocket. “Not real clean,” he added.

“Most important thing is to stop the bleeding,” the smuggler said, taking it. “Get out of that jacket. I want to wrap it tight right at the source.”

“Alright,” the man assented, feeling weak from cold and lost blood, and in no condition to argue. Wrestling painfully out of his

coat, he held up a hand to stop Gromyko while he caught his breath. "Alright," he repeated, lowering his hand and shifting his arm towards the smuggler.

"I've got to crank this down good and tight," he warned him. "It'll hurt."

"I know," he nodded wearily. "Go ahead."

The man took it like a champ, not uttering so much as a sound by the time Gromyko had finished.

"Get your coat back on," the smuggler told him, helping him back into it. "Now just try and warm up a little."

"Thanks," the officer uttered, leaning back into the corner. "Why are you helping me?" he asked after a moment.

"Why'd you come down here, if you didn't expect help?" the pirate countered.

"I don't know," he said with a weak shake of his head. "Just came to me, like some kind of impulse. Never even knew about this place," he said, wearily gesturing towards the space with his left hand. "Just sort of knew I had to kick against the window."

"Interesting," Wayne said ominously, not liking how much this sounded like their prior conversation.

"Have you ever felt anything like that before?" Gromyko asked curiously, moving back to his corner.

"Once or twice, I guess," the officer replied, not having given it any thought until just then. "Have you?"

"I guess we've all had our share of strange happenings," the pirate responded. "Main thing is that it saved your neck."

"I'd say that honor belongs to you three," he said, his teeth still chattering. "What happens now?" he asked, voicing what was really on his mind.

"Well, we're not gonna kick you out into the storm, if that's what you mean," the pirate answered, nodding towards the window. "You wouldn't get halfway back to your boys before you'd frozen to death."

"We're on opposite sides of the tracks," he pointed out needlessly. "And you're all out after curfew," he added, his voice stiffening a little with officialdom.



“I’d say now isn’t the time to stand on ceremony,” Gromyko said frowningly.

“Besides, we ducked in here before curfew,” Wayne lied.

“No, we didn’t,” the smuggler said at once, looking at the urchin. “The storm didn’t hit until after dark. Besides, if this fellow can’t see his way towards turning a blind eye to three people who just saved him, he can go right back into the cold.”

“It’d kill him,” Wayne said.

“He’d be just as dead as if we’d never let him inside,” the smuggler said frigidly, glaring into the man’s eyes.

“I was wrong,” he admitted after a moment, averting his gaze. “I’m sorry.”

“Fair enough,” Gromyko said, as the pirate got up and moved to their visitor. “What are you doing?”

“Making sure he doesn’t have a change of heart and cudgel us in our sleep,” he replied, digging through his pockets and finding only a flashlight. “You’re traveling light,” he observed, confiscating it.

“I dropped my baton and radio back when those thugs jumped us,” he explained, as the Black Fang went back to his corner. “I barely had time to get away with my life.”

Watching as the officer’s teeth continued to clatter, Gromyko instructed him to switch places.

“Now you’re out of the draft,” he explained, though his main purpose was to get him away from the window.

“What happens when this storm is over?” he asked, glancing between his three hosts.

“Quarlac needs every able body it can get its hands on,” Wayne replied.

“No, the Fangs would never ship out a cop,” the pirate said with a shake of his head. “They don’t want to start something with the imperials.”

“Who would know?” the urchin countered. “All anyone would think was that he got lost and froze in the storm. That, or the relic hunters found and killed him. They’d never have any reason to think the Black Fangs took him.”

“We’re not sending him to Quarlac,” Gromyko uttered with finality.

“But he’s seen our faces!” the boy insisted. “You think he won’t come after us once he’s back with his chums? Probably try to nail us for breaking curfew.” He crossed his arms and huffed. “These guys are petty enough for anything.”

“I’d get laughed off the force if I tried to do that,” he answered honestly. “You think we don’t know that you guys are breaking the curfew left and right? Of course we do. But there isn’t much point in doing anything about it. About the only time I really chase you guys is when I’m bored or it looks like an easy catch.”

“So we’re just sport to you!” exclaimed Wayne.

“What on Earth is on your mind?” Gromyko asked skeptically, wondering why the boy was pursuing such an odd line of dialogue.

“Just don’t like huddling with coppers, is all,” the urchin replied flatly, scowling and crunching himself into his corner. “They chase us from one side of Midway to the other. And what have we even done wrong? Sure, we’ve broken some windows on the police station and stolen some government property. But who hasn’t? Besides, you want to tell me *they* haven’t stolen stuff, too? How about every time they break in on the distilleries? They all come away with rotgut on their breath!”

“Guess we know what Wayne’s up to when he isn’t running around with us,” the pirate said to Gromyko with a faint grin.

“Lots of people have done that stuff,” he reiterated, irrationally afraid that he’d indicted himself. “I didn’t just mean me. I mean—.”

“Somehow I doubt it’ll be used against you,” the Fang laughed, shaking his head and settling in to rest. “Best get some sleep. This storm doesn’t show any sign of lightening up, so we’ll have some pretty hefty drifts to shove through come daylight.”

“You’re right,” Gromyko agreed, laying down on his side like before.

“Well, *I* don’t intend to sleep,” Wayne declared, his eyes fixed on the officer. “Not with him around.”

“Good, you can make sure we don’t all freeze to death,” the pirate said dryly, secretly glad to have someone watching the cop.

“Wake me up if you get tired,” Gromyko told him.

“I won’t,” he said frowningly, resting his chin on his knees and glaring at their guest.

The next morning the officer awoke, half surprised to find his throat hadn’t been cut and that the others were still there. Evidently he’d overslept them by a couple of hours, for their faces had long since lost the puffiness of recent slumber.

“Nice of you to wake up,” Wayne grumbled impatiently. “Can we go now?”

“We weren’t just waiting for him, Wayne,” Gromyko reminded him, jerking a thumb towards the window. “That wind needs to come down a little more.”

“What makes you think it ever will?” he asked grumpily, evidently having slept very little. “I’m hungry, I’m cold, and I want to get out of here!”

“Be my guest,” the pirate grinned, nodding towards the window.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” the urchin shot back. “I’d get buried in the snow, and nobody would find me until this stuff thaws out. If it *ever* does!”

“Just calm down, Wayne,” the smuggler said.

“I’ll calm down when I’ve got a hot meal in my belly! Not a second sooner!”

Content to give Wayne the final word if it meant no more would be spoken, the adult residents of the small basement waited with varying degrees of patience for the storm to lull. It was hard to tell just when would be a good time to leave, for right when it seemed to be easing off, it would suddenly whip itself up again. Evidently there were little pockets of quiet in the midst of the blizzard, and it was impossible to guess how long one might last.

Several hours into daylight, Gromyko arose and opened the latch on the window. Drawing it inwards a little, he could see only pure white snow piled against the opening. He tried to knock it away with his hand. But it had collected on the roof above and slidden down in a huge clump that proved too thick to clear.

“Figure it’s about time to go?” the Fang asked, likewise standing and looking at the snow.

“Wanted to see how badly we’re buried,” he answered.  
“Wayne?”

“Yeah?” the boy asked sullenly, still resting his chin on his knees as he watched the cop.

“Well, come here!” the pirate uttered.

Sighing loudly, the urchin pushed off the cold floor with a groan and joined them.

“What?” he asked pointedly, following their eyes up to the snow. “So clear it away,” he suggested tartly, turning around to head back to his corner.

“That’s what we had in mind,” Gromyko said, seizing the back of his jacket along with the pirate and lifting Wayne into the air. In a flash they stuffed him into the window and shoved him out, his shouts muffled by the snow.

“At least he got something to eat!” the Fang laughed, as Wayne coughed and spat the snow out of his mouth.

“One of these days!” the boy nearly screamed, sticking his furiously red face back into the window and shaking a gloved fist. “When I’m just a *little* bigger, I’m gonna make you guys sorry!” Suddenly fear filled his round eyes, and he jerked his head out to look. “Coppers!” he warned them. “I’ll lead ‘em off!”

With this he jerked the window shut and bolted out of the alley.

They listened carefully for the sound of boots in the snow, but couldn’t hear anything over the noise of the storm. Then a man shouted right outside the window, calling for Wayne to stop where he stood.

“Help!” the cop inside the basement yelled. “In he—.”

Before he could finish, a sharp kick in the face from the pirate slammed his skull against the hard wall and knocked him unconscious. He was about to kick him again when Gromyko stopped him.

“That’s enough.”

“He deserves it!” insisted the Fang in a sharp whisper, as the smuggler held up a hand for silence. “They’re gone,” the pirate added, making to kick the cop again.

“I said that’s *enough!*” Gromyko barked, grabbing his jacket and jerking him away.

“Have you got a soft spot for these guys, or something?” snapped the Fang. “If that storm hadn’t drowned him out, they’d have boxed us in here!”

“We’re not gonna kick around an unconscious man,” the smuggler said, cooling somewhat.

“Well, what do you want to do with him, then?” he shot back. “Leave him to freeze?”

“He’s not gonna freeze down here,” the smuggler said with a shake of his head. “We’ll leave him just as we found him. If he can’t make it back to his pals, then that’s his tough luck. But we’re not gonna knock him around anymore.” Putting his head by the window, he listened for a moment. Hearing nothing, he carefully opened it and saw dim daylight. “Storm’s picking up again,” he observed, as thick snowflakes fell out of the sky and fluttered through the opening.

“Not like we can stay here.”

“I know that. But we can’t stay on the streets too long, or it’ll chill us to the bone.”

Glancing at the officer one last time, he got the Fang to give him a hand and climbed out into the cold. Pulling the pirate up after him, they closed the window as well as they could from the outside and headed in the opposite direction from Wayne and the cops.

Reaching the end of the alley, they were immediately shocked by the strength of the wind as it blew down the street it joined. Only able to see a few feet in either direction, they shoved their hands into their pockets and strove against the gale.

“I’ve...never seen it...this bad!” the Fang shouted, his voice shoved back down his throat by the wind. “It’s like the storm is angry!”

Gromyko glanced at him curiously, for that’s exactly what it seemed like to him, too. Looking forward again, he turned just in time to see a uniformed man stumbling towards him. It was a police officer. But he walked with such blockish numbness that the duo could see at once that he wasn’t a threat. Parting so he could pass between them, he moved past without even acknowledging them.

Unable to help looking back, they watched him disappear into the swirling white flakes. Shaking their heads at one another, they tucked their chins against their chests and pressed on.

When at last they reached headquarters, they could only beat on the front door with club-like arms and wait to be let in. Glancing around the street, they could see scarcely more than a dozen feet in any direction.

“Come in!” Lena shouted over the storm, when they hadn’t noticed that the door had been opened behind them. “Or do you want to freeze to death?”

“I think we already...have,” the Fang answered, shaking himself off as Gromyko followed him inside and Lena shut the door. “Honestly I’m almost surprised we made it,” he said with wonder in his voice. “I’ve *never* seen a blizzard like this, either on Delta or any other world.”

“I don’t think anyone has,” Lena replied, sliding a big metal lock on the main door. “Come on: let’s get you two warmed up.”

After an interval they sat in Gromyko’s office, each with a hot cup of tea and wrapped in a couple of blankets.

“That’ll teach you to go bouncing around town in this kind of weather,” she said in an almost matronly fashion, leaning against the boarded up window and looking at the two men. Gromyko sat behind his desk, while the Fang partially sat atop it. “What were you thinking, anyway?” she asked, crossing her arms.

“Oh, don’t lecture us,” the pirate said with a wave. “It’s not like we wanted to head out in all that,” he added, stabbing a finger towards the wind which was howling behind her.

“Then why didn’t you hunker down?” she countered. “You must’ve found a place to stay last night, or you would’ve frozen hours ago. You should’ve stayed there until it blew itself out.”

“I have responsibilities to the organization, Lena,” the smuggler pointed out. “I couldn’t merely hide from the storm while they fought on without leadership.”

“The fighting has ground to a halt,” Lena responded. “Even the cops are staying off the streets.”

“Some are, some aren’t,” the pirate differed. “We ran into a few of ‘em. One spent the night with us, actually.”

“You’re joking,” she replied, glancing at Gromyko to confirm his story. “Never thought that would happen in Midway,” she added, when the smuggler nodded.

“I don’t think he did, either,” the Fang continued. “He wasn’t exactly keen on the idea. But he’d run into some of those relic hunters, and they’d wounded him. So he was happy to hide out anywhere he could.” He laughed dryly. “Not that he appreciated that fact. Called out to his pals as soon as a couple passed by our hideout. Had to knock him out.”

“Yes, well, these guys never change,” Lena uttered, her eyes curiously gazing at Gromyko as she spoke. “Are you okay?” she queried after a moment, as he stared at a point on the floor before him.

“I’m fine,” he replied, nodding subtly. “It’s just that there’s been some odd things happening lately.”

“You mean like that cop just *knowing* where to hide with us?” the Fang prodded.

“That, and what you said earlier about the storm being angry,” the smuggler said. “I can’t shake the feeling that there’s something intelligent about all this.”

“More than a few people have had lucky intuitions,” Lena said matter-of-factly. “And as for the storm, well, that’s just imagination.”

“You’re pretty quick to dismiss this,” Gromyko observed, finding her tone harder than usual.

“I’m not in much of a mood for speculation, I guess,” she shrugged, pushing off the window. “And besides—.”

Suddenly an explosion blew the window inwards, blasting the boards everywhere and throwing them each to the floor. With a groan Gromyko pushed himself up and looked at the gaping hole in the wall. Through the blowing snow he could see a man standing in the distance watching him. Somehow, despite the distance, he could make out a sneer on his face. Awkwardly the smuggler struggled upright and was about to stumble after their attacker when he heard the Fang speak.

“Stop,” the pirate uttered weakly, standing up and putting a hand to the small piece of wood that had been lodged in his side.

“Lena,” he added, nodding towards her.

Gromyko’s heart stopped when he saw her face down in the rubble, blood streaming down her back away from a knife-like piece of wood in the middle of her back. Almost tripping over his own feet from disorientation, he fell to his knees beside her and turned her carefully onto her side.

“I—I can’t feel...” she mumbled tearfully, gently squeezing her hands into fists. “Antonin,” she uttered pleadingly, swallowing hard.

“Don’t try to speak,” he told her.

“Don’t...” she struggled to say. “Don’t...destroy Midway. It’s seen enough...violence. Enough *turmoil*. It deserves to rest.”

Then her eyes softened, and her head gently fell to the rubble and lay still.



## CHAPTER 6

They made themselves easy to find,” Wayne said dubiously to the smuggler beside him, watching a house on the edge of town with worried eyes. Darkness had long since fallen, and only a single light was visible in the house. On the other side of him stood the Black Fang, though just barely. The hole in his side had only been bandaged hours earlier, and the urchin was convinced he’d worked it fatally open by laboring through the huge drifts which covered Midway. With concern he looked up at Gromyko. “They’ll be waiting.”

Without acknowledging this, the smuggler turned to the pirate and extended his hand.

“Give me that hammer of yours.”

“I’ll need it,” the Fang said with a shake of his head, immediately followed by an ugly cough.

“No, this is my show,” he said gravely, his voice brooking no opposition.

Eyeing him for a long moment, the pirate relented and drew the claw hammer out of his jacket. Grasping it tightly, Gromyko turned back towards the house and slowly moved through the snow. Three men awaited him. Or at least that was how many Wayne had noticed since he’d seen them enter hours earlier. For all he knew there were a half dozen more who’d been waiting down in the basement. Reaching the door, he knocked via a single strike of his hammer against it. Hearing footsteps approaching from the other side, he tucked the hammer against his side. When it opened, he at once saw the man who’d sneered at him in the snow.

“So, you decided to come alone. That wasn’t very—.”

With a furious cry the smuggler leapt forwards and swung the hammer with all his might. Striking the man in the temple with it, he shattered the bone and threw him to the floor in a single motion. Jumping over him, he was faced by two others, each of them armed with knives.

“You just killed Jed!” one of them exclaimed in shock, having thought his boss invincible. “You’re gonna pay for that, you Delta dog!”

Darting for the speaker, the smuggler knocked his knife aside with the hammer and then struck him a wicked blow in the jaw which broke it. Screaming in agony as he stumbled backwards, he dropped his knife and made to bolt out a window in the back. Snapping up the knife he’d dropped, Gromyko threw it with lethal accuracy, catching the man in the back. With a gasp he straightened up, walked a few more steps, and then fell across the window sill.

“I don’t want any part of this,” the third man insisted, shaking his head side-to-side and dropping his weapon.

Moments later Wayne and the pirate could hear his screams from where they stood in the snow. Then all was silence.

“Do you think he’s alright?” the urchin asked him, afraid that the last scream had belonged to the smuggler.

But before the pirate could respond, Gromyko appeared in the doorway. Walking tremblingly towards them from the adrenaline that was coursing through his veins, he strode past them with but two words.

“Come on.”

That night more blood spilled by a single hand than any other Midway had ever passed through. Savagely Gromyko avenged Lena on every relic hunter he could find. But no matter how many lives he took, he couldn’t wash away the sense of guilt he had over her death. For he knew as well as the pirate did, that the hunters only used the grenade that killed her in retaliation for his own use of one. He’d intended to send them a message, and he had.

But what he hadn’t expected was that they would send a message back.

Fearfully Wayne accompanied him, disappearing occasionally to find more targets. He didn’t say this, but it was also a

chance to get away from the blood-soaked smuggler. Indeed, his clothing was nearly half red by the time dawn had begun to break.

"We need to get indoors," the pirate observed, somehow managing to struggle all through the night beside them. "When the cops learn about all the sausage you've been making, they'll put out a dragnet."

But the smuggler didn't reply. Indeed, he hadn't spoken more than a dozen words to them all night. His every step shook with fatigue, and his clothes were hard and awkward to walk in because of the blood that had frozen to them. But he was driven on by the blind fury that burned inside him.

"You hear me?" the pirate inquired, before suddenly gasping and putting a hand against a nearby house for support. This alone brought the smuggler to a stop.

"Alright?" he asked coldly.

"No," he shook his head. "Much more of this and I'll be finished."

"Then get under cover," he said, turning to walk away.

"Not unless you call it a day," the Fang replied, pushing off the house and struggling after him.

"I won't do that until I'm finished," he replied, continuing to walk.

"Antonin, you've had *enough!*" the pirate said forcibly, putting a hand on his shoulder and turning him around. Furiously the smuggler eyed him, almost as though he was about to raise the hammer against him. "You gonna beat *my* brains out, too?" the Fang asked pointedly. "You can't bring her back through bloodshed."

His face suddenly twisted with rage, and he drew back the hammer to hit him.

"Stop!" shouted Wayne, jumping between them and reaching up with his small hands to grasp his arm. "Are you out of your mind? We're all on the same side here!"

Snorting, the smuggler turned and strode off.

"Get after him," the Fang said wearily, gesturing towards Gromyko. "I've had it."

"You'll have a tough time getting back," the urchin said dubiously.

“I’ll be alright,” the pirate said, lowering his head and taking a breath. “Just make sure he lives long enough to cool down. This town still needs him.”

“Are you sure?” he asked doubtfully, watching the smuggler fade into the falling snow.

“When I say it needs *him*, I mean the *old him*,” he clarified, likewise watching Gromyko. “He’s got to have enough time to snap out of this blind rage he’s in. That’s why I stuck with him all night. Or did you think it was for the exercise? Now quit talking and get after him. I’ll make out alright.”

“Okay,” the boy said, eyeing him a moment longer before hurrying after the smuggler. Carefully falling in beside him, he watched his stony face for several seconds to make sure he’d cooled off enough. Deciding he had, the urchin looked forward again. “Not gonna be too much longer before the cops get after us,” he observed, glancing at his face a couple times, but seeing no change. “They’re gonna want us for spilling all this blood.”

“They won’t know who’s done it,” he replied in a voice so low and dangerous that it made Wayne shiver. “I can keep going.”

“Do you *want* to keep going?” he couldn’t help asking, afraid that the smuggler was degenerating into a simple killer.

“I want justice,” he all but growled. “And if this is the only way to get it, then I won’t stop until Midway is dripping with blood.”

“I think it already is,” the boy mumbled. Suddenly afraid that his words would offend him, he glanced up yet again. But the smuggler seemed to be in a world of his own, and seemingly hadn’t heard him. “Can’t go all night *and* all day,” he uttered after a couple minutes had passed. “Need to take a break sometime.”

“Beat it, if you’re getting tired.”

“I meant—,” he began, before stopping himself. “Well...”

“Either help me or leave me alone, Wayne,” Gromyko said flatly. “I don’t intend to stop until I can’t lift this,” he added, raising the hammer up to chest height before lowering it again.

And he didn’t. Despite the increase in police activity, the smuggler and his young companion managed to evade them and continue his crusade all day and part of the way into the night. It wasn’t until he’d temporarily run out of targets that Gromyko halted.

“I’ll sniff out someone else to hit,” the urchin said wearily, leaving the smuggler leaning underneath an awning and evaporating into the darkness.

Gromyko didn’t respond. Crossing his arms over his chest, he simply brooded until the boy returned nearly two hours later. Silently he stood behind the smuggler.

“Well?” he asked, when the boy hesitated to speak.

“Found ‘em,” he said after another moment.

“Who?” he asked in a low voice.

“The man who ordered the hit on headquarters,” he answered reluctantly.

Slowly Gromyko turned around. Even in the darkness Wayne could feel his eyes boring into him.

“Are you sure?” he asked heavily, his tone indicating that he’d better be.

“Hundred percent,” he replied crisply, afraid to be anything less than immediate. “Some chums of mine have been watching him for days. We got to talking, and it turned out that the man you said was outside HQ right after the blast saw this guy a little while before the attack. He’s been coordinating teams all around Midway for days.”

“Where is he?” he asked coldly.

“I’ll take you to him,” the boy said, too anxiously excited to be tired anymore.

Mutely the boy and the smuggler made their way through the streets. Police activity dropped alongside the fall in temperature, making their journey an easy one. By the time they’d reached the house in question, the streets were all but deserted.

“How many are inside?” Gromyko asked, though he didn’t intend to wait no matter how many were waiting for him.

“Last I knew, there were four,” he replied, looking around for a sign of his chums in the darkness. Then he saw a tiny flicker of light a short distance away. “Hold on: I’ll ask.”

Disappearing for barely a minute, he scarcely made it back before Gromyko started to move.

“Hang on a second,” the urchin insisted, putting a hand on his arm but instantly retracting it when the smuggler’s inflamed face

snapped to him. "I just talked to my friends," he hastened to add, hoping to forestall a violent reaction. "There's six of 'em now. And they all mean business. I guess word's gotten around about what we've been up to today."

Without responding, Gromyko started walking towards the house.

"You *can't* go in there!" the boy said pointedly. "Six on one will just get you killed!"

"You think I care about that anymore!?" he snapped, stopping and glaring at him.

"It's one thing to kill for Lena," the boy replied. "But you don't have a right to die over her. This miserable little town needs you."

Glaring at him a moment longer, the smuggler turned and approached the house.

"Not alone, you're not," a man called from the corner of a building Gromyko was moving past. Jumping at the sound, he raised his hammer to strike, but lowered it when he realized the voice belonged to Burnside. "You've had a rough day," the older man observed, crossing his arms and leaning against the building.

"They've had it worse," the smuggler replied, nodding towards the house ahead to indicate the relic hunters generally. "And they'll keep on getting it."

"Not if you get yourself killed," Burnside said, pushing off the building and joining him. "Thought I'd even your odds a little."

"I don't want any help."

"Well, unless you're gonna go at me with *that*," he said, nodding towards the hammer, "then you'd better get used to the idea. 'Cause I'm going whether you like it or not."

"Where'd you come from, anyway?" Gromyko asked sullenly, contemplating using the hammer on him.

"Heard about it through the grapevine," he answered, nodding off towards Wayne. "Passed me word through some of his little friends."

"The boss is mine," Gromyko said, deciding not to cudgel him. "No matter what else happens, I want him for myself."

“I wouldn’t think of robbing you of that,” Burnside said, turning with him towards the building and approaching.

When they were a dozen feet short of it, the front door opened and a burly man with a large gut and broad shoulders stepped out to meet them. The other five men quickly filed out after him, forming a half circle which faced the two men.

“Heard you’ve been making a mess of Midway,” the burly man said, chewing on the stub of a cigar and eyeing the smuggler and his companion. “Didn’t think you Underground boys had that much grit.”

“We’re full of surprises,” Burnside answered, when Gromyko elected simply to glare his passionate hatred. Then he nodded at his men. “You got enough monkeys with you?”

“I don’t need them,” he said with a scornful snort. “They’re just here to watch.”

“You’re gonna need all the help you can get,” Burnside warned him.

“Funny, I was just about to say the same thing,” he said with a nasty smile. Suddenly he lashed out towards Burnside with his left hand. From his jacket sleeve flew a small metal object which caught him in the nose and shattered it, dropping him to his back in blinding pain. He tried to struggle upwards. But two of the hunters got to him and grabbed his arms, restraining him in the snow. “Now it’s your turn,” he said with a cruel grin to Gromyko.

But when he lashed out with his right hand, he found the smuggler had been just a hair faster. For the knife he’d secretly slipped from his jacket had sailed from his grasp just a moment before, and caught the burly man’s right hand between the fingers and cut his palm in half, causing him to miss his throw. Harmlessly the metal object flew into the darkness and buried itself in the snow.

In a flash Gromyko was upon him. Swinging the hammer at him, he nearly connected it with his skull when the big man moved backwards with surprising speed. Kicking the smuggler in the stomach, he knocked the wind out of him and followed up with a punch in the chest with his powerful left. Stumbling backwards to keep his balance, he realized he’d have to be careful with this one, despite his rage.

“Come and get it,” the boss said tauntingly, gesturing for him to advance with his damaged hand and grinning despite the incredible pain. “Too bad about your girlfriend,” he added. “She was a beautiful woman. It must have made you sick to your stomach to see that piece of wood sticking out of her back.”

Infuriated, Gromyko advanced and swung the hammer back and forth before him, trying to knock his head off. Getting too close, he caught a kick in the knee which felt almost hard enough to crack the cap. Limping back without so much as a peep to show his pain, he began moving in a slow circle with the man.

Suddenly seeing an opening, he leapt forward and raised the hammer. But in a flash the man’s left fist shot out and struck him in the jaw. It hit harder than Gromyko thought was possible, and threw him onto his back. In a flash the man was atop him, wrestling for the hammer in order to beat his brains out. Though limited to only one hand, it was more than enough to keep both of the smuggler’s occupied. Feeling the air squeezed out of him by the large body which sat on his stomach, Gromyko kicked off with both feet and tried to dump him over his head. But the man merely slumped forward, and braced himself by putting his right elbow against the ground. Inspired by this, he drew it back and pushed it against the smuggler’s throat to choke the life out of him.

Instantly shocked by the stranglehold, Gromyko drew his left hand back to pry the man's elbow loose. But as he did so he felt the man’s hand start to grind the hammer from his grasp. In a desperate flash he stabbed his fingers into his eyes, causing him to jerk back in pain and cover his face. With the hammer free, he swung it hard against his head and knocked him from his perch with a single blow. In a daze the man rolled off of him and onto his back.

Dragging deep breaths of frigid air into his burning lungs, he struggled to his knees beside the stunned man and raised the hammer over his head. By the time Gromyko had finished with him, the snow around him was stained red with blood.

Tremblingly the smuggler rose, staggering first to one foot and then the other. When he turned around, he saw that the other five men had vanished, leaving only Burnside behind laying in the snow.



It was then that the red fury which had possessed Gromyko dropped away from him. Turning to look at the battered corpse behind him, he allowed the hammer to slip from his grasp.

“What kind of a savage have I become?” he asked incredulously.

“They got what was coming to ‘em,” Burnside opined, pushing off the ground with effort while holding what was left of his nose with his left hand. “Every last one of ‘em. And don’t doubt it for a second.”

“I don’t doubt that,” the smuggler replied. “But to become... such an agent of death. I was the very Reaper himself!”

“Someone had to do it,” Burnside replied with a shrug, though he understood his point.

“But not me,” he protested, looking at him. “Not Gromyko. He is supposed to be a symbol of hope.” He looked down at the corpse. “No matter how richly they deserved it, Gromyko was never meant to be a butcher.”

“Look, things always get worse before they get better,” Burnside countered with some exasperation, unsure why he was making such a big deal out of it. “Like I said, somebody had to root these maggots out. The police sure weren’t getting it done. And if you hadn’t, then they would’ve just gone on to hurt and kill more of the already abused residents of this town. It was a public service.”

“A service that Gromyko never should have rendered, no matter how necessary,” the smuggler said with a shake of his head.

“You mean you *regret* this?” Burnside asked with surprise. “You *regret* getting justice for Lena?”

Instantly the smuggler turned on him.

“I would never regret such a thing!” he exploded, the force of his words making him take a step back. “You misunderstand me,” he added somewhat more calmly after a few moments. “I wouldn’t change a thing, for there was no one else to do it. But that doesn’t mean I can’t regret what I had to become, even for a short time. Lena could see it; she could see the path I was going on, and she was afraid for me. She was afraid I wouldn’t come *back* from it all. But I will,” he uttered, raising his head in the air. “In fact, I already

have. This is already behind me,” he added, making to move around the corpse when Burnside grasped his arm and stopped him.

“You don’t just *leave* something like this in the rearview,” he said pointedly. “No matter what you become after tonight, *this* will always be a part of you. You can’t spill gallons of blood and then just wash it off. It’s already soaked into your pores. You’ll smell it until the day you die.”

“Is that the way you *want* it?” the smuggler asked, confounded by his assertiveness. “Do you want this to hang around my neck forever?”

“I want you to realize you’re not above your own actions,” Burnside replied. “You’ve long fancied yourself some kind of wonderboy. But that doesn’t mean you get to obliterate the past because you find it distasteful.”

“Again you misunderstand me,” Gromyko said with a shake of his head. “I don’t mean to leave *this* behind forever,” he began, stabbing a finger towards the corpse. “I mean to leave behind the single-minded selfishness which caused me to go blind to every consideration other than personal revenge. I might have served Midway tonight. But I did it for my own reasons. I don’t intend that that will ever again be the case. From now on, Gromyko will belong to Midway. He shall be a public man, and the private man will all but vanish.”

“You can’t *become* a symbol,” Burnside objected, his voice calmer as he picked up the hammer Gromyko had dropped. Together they moved around the corpse. “You can only pretend to be one for a little while at a time.”

“You only say that because you don’t know the true nature of Gromyko,” he replied, pausing to gesture one final time towards the body. “What you saw just now was not my real essence. I am an inspiration. I feel it deep within my bones. And in my actions and in my speech, I will reveal it every day to the poor citizens of this town who look to me for strength and hope. And I won’t disappoint them. From this day on, I will be their champion. I will be their tireless companion. I will be the hero of the people.”

The End



# THANK YOU!

I hope you enjoyed Hero of the People!

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