

Chapter 20



Roland.

"That looks like them," Sasha whispered into his ear.

The three of them were stationed on the third floor of an old office building that overlooked the Kingdom's vehicle pool. Based on the posters and decorations inside, the people in this office had once helped coordinate for a string of restaurant supply stores. Roland suspected the coming of the war might've been a relief to the people who'd been stuck working here.

He was positioned by the window, sitting down so only the edge of his face would've been visible to anyone looking in from the outside. Manny had elected to take a nap out of view, behind one of the desks. His ability to fall asleep anytime, anywhere marked him out as a true expert in warzone survival. Sasha had situated herself on the other side of the window frame. Roland had warned her to keep her head out of view until he saw new arrivals to the vehicle depot. He'd called for her eyes six times already, and gotten six negatives. Now it seemed their target had arrived.

"Are you sure?" He asked.

"Pretty sure," she said, and nodded. "The driver walks with a limp, one of his legs is shorter than the other. I think it's a birth defect. He must come from some part of the continent where those still happen."

"Good eye!" Roland was genuinely impressed. The girl had potential.

"So what do we do now?" she asked.

"You rouse Manny. I'll keep an eye on things. When they depart I'll carjack them into unconsciousness and bring back the uniforms."

And that's more or less how it went. The guard and driver departed in a jeep five minutes later. Roland bounded down from one of the rear windows and landed on the hood as they took a right hand turn out of view of the vehicle depot. The "guard" did not do his job title proud. Roland slammed his face into the dashboard and knocked him out. He also knocked out most of the man's teeth, but his hindbrain told him the guy's odds of a fatal brain hemorrhage were only about 6%. *Acceptable*. He broke the driver's jaw with a right cross, took the wheel and steered the vehicle to a stop while he was still hanging outside it.

Roland tossed both men in the back of the jeep and pulled into the office building's underground parking lot. He stripped them both and cursed when he realized the guard's bleeding face had stained the neck of his uniform shirt. He found some bottled water in the trunk and managed to wash out the worst of it, but the stain would still be visible to anyone who really took the time to look. Still, it'd probably be enough to get them through the door of the jail.

He stashed both men in a janitorial closet and dragged an old metal dumpster in front of it to wedge the door shut. Someone would probably find them before they starved to death. He felt a pang of guilt for how little he cared about what happened to those men. *I should feel worse about this.* Roland knew the battle drugs had suppressed his conscience. He knew that the longer they stayed in this dangerous place, and the more fighting he did, the more tempted he'd be to kill outright.

Roland leaned against the dumpster and closed his eyes. He tried to force himself to take long, slow breaths and meditate on the flow of air in and out of his lungs. He hoped taking a breather would prompt his system to reduce the drip. Instead, he found himself flashing back to more violence-

Red siren lights screeched and blinked on walls of institutional white. Men and women in lab coats ran and screamed and died, died, died as he squeezed the trigger of his Sig Sauer. Roland kicked at a locked door and the metal buckled inwards, revealing a room filled with giant glass organ-filled vats-

He shook his head and tried to banish the memories. He'd started flashing back to this place when they'd rescued Manny. But the memories had kept coming, even once the violence had subsided-

"Please Roland!" the old woman begged through blood-stained teeth. He looked down at the hole in her gut, the red blood on her white lab coat. She slid backwards on the tile floor until her shoulders hit one of the racks of vat-grown organs.

"Please don't do this!"

Roland shook his head. He didn't know why this was happening, exactly. It was likely just a glitch, some unforeseen interaction between the wetware of his hindbrain, the proceduralmemories stored in his DNA and the battle drugs that flowed through his system. He questioned, again, whether he really wanted his memories back.

This wasn't the time to ponder that question though. Roland headed back upstairs to grab Manny and Sasha. He led them down to the garage and handed Manny the un-bloodied uniform.

"Dude, that's really obvious." Manny pointed to the bloodstains on Roland's own uniform. "They're going to notice that."

"You think so?" Roland was so used to normal humans not noticing much of anything, he sometimes underestimated their senses.

"I've got an idea!" Sasha said. "Pop the hood."

Roland and Manny were both a little surprised. But he popped it for her. The girl stared at the engine, reached for the dip stick and pulled it free from its slot. She rubbed her hand down the shaft and it came away covered in sticky black grease. She rubbed the grease into Roland's collar, coated the dip stick again and repeated the process two more times. When she was done, he looked like he'd been working on an engine rather than beating a man half to death.

"Fucking brilliant," Roland said.

Manny nodded his agreement. Then he said, "Alright, let's go abduct a doctor."

The abduction itself was easy. Dr. Brandt lived in an undamaged mansion about two miles away from downtown. As one of the Kingdom's few medical professionals Dr. Brandt had apparently earned himself some luxury. Sasha hid in the trunk so the doctor wouldn't notice anything was off until he entered the vehicle.

"Where's Jerry, and Samuel?" Dr. Brandt asked as he opened the door and sat down inside the jeep.

Manny gunned the engine and peeled away. Roland put a hand on Dr. Brandt's thigh and squeezed just hard enough for the man to feel like his thigh bone might shatter.

"I stuffed them into a closet somewhere," he explained with a smile.

"My name is Manny," the fixer said. "The guy who's about to break your leg is named Roland. We're kidnapping you."

"Ah," said Dr. Brandt. Roland had to give credit where credit was due. The doctor endured the pain with a stony face, and without any signs of panic.

"We need you to help us get into the jail," Manny continued, "where those negotiators from Rolling Fuck are being held."

Dr. Brandt grimaced, either from the obscenity or just due to the continued pain of Roland's iron grip.

"And what makes you think I'll give you any aid?" There was a bit of strain in his voice now, but the doctor's features stayed decidedly neutral. "I may be a doctor, but I'm no less prepared to die for my Kingdom than anyone else here. You might as well just go ahead and kill me."

Roland relaxed his grip. The doctor sighed in relief.

"Yeah, we thought you might say something like that," said Manny. "That's why Roland and I prepared an alternate proposal."

Roland drew the guard's stolen sidearm from its holster. He gripped the pistol in one hand and then crushed it in his grip like he was balling up a piece of paper. The doctor's eyes widened in shock and horror.

"So," Manny said, "My friend's just fulla chrome. High grade stuff. He could walk right through a tank if he wanted. You're an educated man. You know what people like him can do."

The doctor nodded, but didn't say anything.

"Our offer is simple. You help us out and we'll leave with our people. You refuse to help, and we'll get our people anyway. Only Roland here will take a little detour to burn half this city to the ground."

"I see." Roland could smell the fear wafting off Dr. Brandt now, but the man's expression didn't change.

"You wouldn't be a doctor if you didn't see value in human lives," Manny's voice was soft, his reasonable tone wouldn't have been out of place in a boardroom.

"If you refuse to help us we won't hurt you, won't harm a hair on your head. But my friend here will break this city, and a few thousand of the people in it. You'll be hale and healthy so you can pick up the pieces. And you'll know that every ounce of that suffering could've been prevented if you'd just helped us out."

"It's true, sir," Sasha spoke up. Dr. Brandt stiffened. She sat up from her hidden position in the back. The doctor was a smart man; he put together that she was not being held as a prisoner. His eyes narrowed in contempt.

"Sasha." Dr. Brandt's voice was cold, "I'm sorry to see you in such poor company."

"Sir, I'm really sorry but-"

"But nothing," he snapped, and now the anger showed on his face. "Have you been a traitor this whole time, or did your will simply fail?"

"Sasha," Manny spoke up, "we really don't have time for this..."

Roland disagreed. His hindbrain estimated Sasha and the doctor could afford a solid eight minutes of emotional closure before they got too close to the jail.

"Is eight minutes a lot of time for you people?"

Everyone stared at him, their individual disagreements forgotten for a moment. Roland realized, late, that he'd spoken out loud.

"Sorry," he said. "That was just supposed to be in my head."

They still stared.

"Well now you only have like, seven minutes and forty seconds."

"Ignore that," said Manny, "He's a maniac. That's why you don't want us to let him loose in your city."

"Doctor Brandt," Sasha added, "I know you're a good man. The Lord put you on this earth to save lives. This is your chance to do that."

The doctor kneaded the bridge of his nose with his hand. He did an admirable job of not giving too much away with his body language, but Roland could smell the truth. The scent of stress wafting off the doctor faded. It was a sign the man had made a decision: there was something about choosing that calmed the human soul.

"You are correct of course, Sasha. I never approved of us holding those women in the first place. It was foolish, to antagonize things like him," he nodded towards Roland, "...if I can avert a massacre, I will. But I sincerely hope you plan to escape with them, Sasha. I won't hide or protect a traitor."

"I'll leave," Sasha said.

The doctor gave a somber nod.

"I won't be able to get you out of the jail with those prisoners, you know." He said to Roland. "I can get you inside, and I can probably get them to send the prisoners into an examination room. But the guards won't let them leave the building."

"I'll take care of that part," Roland promised. "I'm real good at making doors."

Roland was aware of the old saying, 'No plan survives contact with the enemy'. For some reason his hindbrain remembered the original version of the quote, from an old Prussian General named Moltke: "No plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond first contact with the main hostile force".

People who observed Roland in battle tended to think he just sorta winged it and ballsed his way through on sheer violent potential alone. But Roland was, at his core, a planner.

Having a plan was essential to take maximum advantage of the way his hindbrain worked. A plan was nothing more than a clear set of tactics meant to accomplish a concrete goal. In this case the goal was "free the prisoners and take his new friends to safety". The plan he constructed to achieve that goal was based mainly on Sasha's recollections and his own espionage on the jail. He knew it would change once the shooting started. But the fact that he had a rubric would give his hindbrain something to focus on while it zeroed in on the best tactics for the evolving situation.

At any rate, the plan Manny and Sasha had cooked up actually did survive first contact with the enemy. Roland and Manny had posed as guards and followed Dr. Brandt and Sasha right through the door. The Martyrs inside were all used to seeing the doctor and his assistant, and they didn't pay a different set of armed guards any mind. When Dr. Brandt requested they send all the prisoners in to the examination room the officer in charge didn't even blink at the request.

The only thing that had seemed off to Roland was an odd scent of anxiety in the air. It wafted off the guards and hung in a thick cloud above the entrance room. The odor reminded Roland of countless hours spent sitting with nervous men in the cramped belly of an APC or drop aircraft. He assumed this had something to do with the giant explosion he'd caused earlier, or his escape from the training facility. *Of course these guys are on high alert*, he thought, *some nutfuck monster-man blew up a factory this morning*.

Doctor Brandt led them into a large waiting room and closed the door. He let out a long, nervous sigh and slumped back against the wall.

"Ok. You'll have your prisoners soon enough, and no one else will need to die. Right?" He looked straight at Roland.

"Right," Roland said, and then added, "Up until you fucks invaded Dallas I'd gone years without killing anyone. I'm actually pretty good at it."

The doctor did not seem comforted by this fact. Roland opened his mouth again, but Manny put a hand on his shoulder.

"No." he said. And Roland nodded. *I could have avoided so many violent misunderstandings with this kid's help.* Roland mulled this over and wondered if Manny might be interested in an adjoining mountaintop shack. Just then the door opened.

A guard entered. He was followed by the three prisoners and then two more guards. Rolling Fuck's negotiators were all handcuffed to each other. Roland had been shown pictures of all three captives before they'd departed the city of wheels, so it wasn't hard to recognize Marigold, Tule and Rick. But they all looked different. Marigold's bright purple hair was limp and greasy. The sockets on her augmented arm had been filled in with some sort of resinous substance.

Tule, bald in her pictures, now had a head full of peach fuzz. Her necklaces and amulets and rings were all gone, of course. She looked pale and deflated. Roland could see the ghost of an old black eye, likely earned during the initial capture. She walked with a limp, but otherwise looked healthy enough.

And then there was Rick. His wounds were fresh, and extensive. He was covered in bruises and it looked like his guards had cut into him, 'writing' over several of his scarified tattoos with a combat knife. His left eye was broken and looked dead. Roland could tell the man's orbital bone had been shattered. And with the slow, juddering way his good eye looked around the room, it was likely he'd suffered at least one concussion.

Dr. Brandt sighed and went right to the injured young man. "Have the others sit down," he told the guards. He started to examine Rick. His jaw clenched, his eyes narrowed. Roland felt the doctor's heartrate accelerate in anger.

"You've been at him again, haven't you?" Dr. Brandt sounded angry. "I told you all this had to stop. He's clearly concussed. You could have killed him."

The lead guard shrugged and rolled his eyes. One of the other guards snickered. Roland could tell by the look of fury on the doctor's face that he was not used to being treated this way.

"Soldier, I am the senior medical doctor of this entire Kingdom. I will bring your superior into this, and I will..."

Roland heard, and then smelled, six new men enter the jail. His mind rocketed downstairs, away from the petty argument, and started to analyze the new arrivals. They were soldiers, he could tell by the sound of their footfalls and the strong smell of gunoil and powder that wafted off of them. One of them smelled familiar, he'd been present when Manny had been abducted to the factory. Roland guessed this was the guy Sasha had told him about during their impromptu rescue mission.

"Huh." Roland said out loud. Manny was the only one who seemed to notice.

"What?" Manny asked in a voice low enough that the guards wouldn't hear it over the sound of Dr. Brandt dressing them down.

"That guy, Alexander. He just entered the building with a squad of armed men."

"What does that mean?"

"I dunno," Roland shrugged, "probably an ambush."

Roland was a bit embarrassed that it had taken him this long to piece it together. That's why the guards had been so accomodating of Dr. Brandt's unusual request. It's why they'd smelled so nervous. Somehow, the rescue attempt had been spotted before it had gone down. The soldiers of the Heavenly Kingdom must have assumed the doctor was a traitor too.

Roland stood up.

He knew that violence would need to happen here. There were too many decent people's lives at stake for anything else. The instant his forebrain made that decision, his hindbrain started pouring adrenaline and battle drugs into his synapses. He felt the electric crackle of chemical glee start deep in the back of his neck. It spread out to his shoulders, down his arms, to the tip of his fingers. Roland fought back against the building euphoria while he analyzed the situation.

The world slowed down around him. He had plenty of time to watch as the guards started to reach for their sidearms. The word 'ambush' had keyed them in. But it didn't matter: they still moved too slow to effect anything. His hindbrain calculated that Manny and Sasha were relatively safe. No one had a gun on them, just now. The prisoners were his priority, then. They were exposed, both to the door that enemy reinforcements would soon rush through, and to the guards already in the room. Dr. Brandt was a tertiary responsibility: he seemed like a decent enough guy, in spite of it all.

Alexander and his men are two-point-oh-four seconds from the door. Maybe faster, if they dropped into a dead sprint.

Roland stepped forward, into the lead guard. He grabbed the man by the hair, lifted him into the air, and slammed his skull hard into the second guard's face. Bone cracked. *16.3% and 28.7% chances of a fatal hemmorage, respectively.* Roland dropped the first man and plunged his fingers into the third guard's eyes. He gouged deep, stopped just short of the man's brain, and then pulled his hand free.

That man staggered back, opened his mouth and started to scream. A surge of battle drugs hit Roland's synapses at just that moment and, in a fit of gleeful pique, he grabbed the man by the jaw and pulled. His intent had been to yank the man's head into his knee. But he pulled a little too hard and ripped the whole jaw free. The man fell back, gurgled, bled.

"Huh. My bad," Roland said to no one in particular.

He shoved the jaw into his front pocket, figuring it might make a useful weapon when the reinforcements showed up. In the meantime, he set to work ripping the prisoner's manacle chains apart. It'd have taken too long to remove the manacles. But at least with the chains free they'd all be able to move with-

"What are you, oh my GOD!

"Roland wh-"

"AHHHHHHH!"

Dr. Brandt, Manny and Sasha finally reacted. Roland had to remind himself that their brains wouldn't have been able to properly process what he'd done while it was happening. The whole altercation had lasted barely a quarter-second. To Manny, Sasha and Dr. Brandt the violence had been disorienting and almost unintelligible.

The three negotiators from Rolling Fuck were not stock sapien. They'd reacted faster and gone to ground almost as soon as he'd rushed the first man. At least, the women had. The young man was too dazed and battered to react to much at all, so his friends pulled him down and shielded him with their bodies.

Of the other three Manny was the first to react. He grabbed Sasha by the shoulder and shoved her down below the window line. Roland was proud. He would have said something about that, but everything went disastrously wrong a fraction of a second later.

Roland had known Alexander and his men were rushing the door. He'd estimated a solid one-point-four seconds before they breached the entry way. That's why he'd occupied himself by checking on everyone. He'd trusted his senses and trusted that the Heavenly Kingdom didn't have any gear he hadn't already seen. That proved to be a mistake, because unbeknownst to Roland two men in powered armor hung off the outside wall of the building, directly underneath the window.

Their suits were bleeding-edge stealth technology utterly absent from Roland's petabytes of memory. His passive sensors had missed them entirely. Roland first realized they were there, and that he'd erred terribly, when they opened fire.

Close to a hundred .30 caliber slugs tore through the wall of the jail at roughly forty-two hundred feet per second. They were fired at such close range, and with such total surprise, that Roland was unable to dodge or prep his subdermal armor for impact. Nineteen rounds hit him: fifteen in his center of mass, one in his left thigh, and three in his right shoulder. Two hit Manny, ripping a hole through his left hand and another through his kidney. Dr. Brandt, who'd only half-turned to face Roland at this point, was torn apart in a fusillade of steel. Roland also registered hits on their not-yet-rescued captives: one in Tule's left butt cheek, one that severed Rick's index finger, and another in the young man's shoulder.

Roland staggered back from the impact of the rounds just as Alexander's point man burst through the door. The coordination between the two teams was impressive, as was the

fact that the suited men hadn't hit their allies on the other side of the door. On a normal day Roland would've ripped the shotgun out of the point-man's hands and castrated him with it. But this was not a normal day and Roland's brain was occupied with the damage to his body. The point man fired twice and sent one-ounce tungsten slugs through both of Roland's knees.

He dropped, rolled, moaned. And then the rest of the team was in the room. They moved well. Not like vets, but like men who'd trained a lot for entries like this. They all wore heavy body armor. It wasn't powered, but it provided solid protection against small arms fire. They mostly packed auto-shotguns. *Smart choice*, Roland thought. *When fighting post-humans, go for tissue damage.*

He was hurt. Nothing fatal, yet. But the loss of momentum and control had cost him dearly. Now six men had a bead on him with weaponry powerful enough to do some real damage. Roland listened as one of the stealth suits smashed the remainder of the window in and crawled inside the room.

This armor was much more subtle than the standard Ares pattern armor. Aside from plating at the chest and shins it didn't look like it added a substantial amount of protection. But the suit was covered in high-definition display panels. The man was hard for Roland to see. He would've been nigh-invisible to a normal human.

"Shit," Roland spat blood and looked up just as a very satisfied looking young man stepped into the room. He was tall, handsome and well-built. He wore the same armor as his men but lacked a helmet. Instead, he had a red beret with a lacquered gold cross pinned to the front. Roland took one look at the boy's prominent jaw-line and well-tanned skin. He grudgingly agreed that it would've been a crime to cover up that face.

"How new are those fucking suits?" he asked the fancy-man.

"The Republic had some very choice gear in its armory," the youth replied. "My superiors will be happy to hear how well it worked against you."

He sauntered into the room like a conquering king, waving his pistol lazily at the captives.

"Hello, Sasha!" he said with a smile and a cheery wave of his free hand.

"Alexander," she replied in a tone as cold as ice.

The young man, Alexander, stopped in front of Roland, peered down and grinned the shit-eatingest grin in the history of eating shit.

"You know," he said, "it was rather easy drawing you into this trap. Once you played your hand at the training camp we knew you'd come here sooner or later. I was rather surprised to see you involved, Sasha." He looked up at her. "I wonder: was this your plan all along, or are you merely an opportunist, clutching to these men because my proposition injured your ego?"

He laughed prickishly. Roland wanted to hit him, but the situation merited further analysis before action. Much of the damage done to him in the ambush had already healed, and none of it was substantial enough to impede his deadliness. But his position was rather tenuous. The second armored soldier crouched at the window, adhered to the outside wall. The first stealth suited soldier had one gun trained on Manny and another aimed at Roland.

Alexander's men all had him dead to rights, shotguns leveled and fingers on triggers. He could, perhaps, move fast enough to take out one or two of them. But the others would do a significant amount of damage in the meantime. And, more to the point, Roland could do nothing to ensure Sasha and Manny's safety. He considered their deaths unacceptable.

"I really am a bit disappointed in how easy this all was," the young fuck continued. "I thought we'd be in for more of a fight here. I guess the storie about your kind were exaggerated after all. I suspected so. No amount of scientific tinkering can replace the blessing of God behind righteous men."

Roland sensed movement. Not from Manny: he was frozen still, next to Sasha, under the gun of one of the power armored troopers. It didn't come from any of Alexander's men, either. It was Marigold. The woman had gritted her teeth and inched her hand towards the body of the guard Roland had de-jawed. He watched as she wrapped her hand around the grip of his sidearm.

Alexander stepped around him and headed towards Sasha. The other soldiers still had their weapons trained on Roland. They didn't seem to have noticed Marigold.

"I warned you, didn't I Sasha?" Alexander asked as a smile played across his lips. "I warned you what came of defying God's will. And then you allied yourself with a beast whose very existence is a sin against our Heavenly Father. If Christ had intended-"

Roland never got to hear the rest of that sentence, because Alexander never got to say it. He was interrupted by Marigold pulling the pistol free of its holster and swinging it up towards the groin of the squad's point man. She fired twice, switched targets, and pumped two more rounds into the unarmored belly of a second man.

Roland was up and off the ground between the second and third shot. He swung his fist hard into the face plate of the nearest soldier's helmet. The plexiglass shattered, and Roland's knuckles pushed shards into the man's cheeks and eyes. The Martyr screamed and fired a shot that went wide, because Roland dove to the left as he retracted his fist and pivoted to rush the power-armored man holding a gun on Manny and Sasha.

There were no good options here. Marigold's intervention had given them all a chance. But Roland had been forced to make a choice between going after the armored men and saving his friends, or taking out the entry team and saving Marigold and her friends. He heard her fire two more shots, and heard them impact. But then his attention was consumed by the two men in powered armor.

They'd recovered first, and both men opened up on Roland as he charged. There was no dodging at this distance. It was barely possible to mitigate the damage in any way. Roland took thirty high-velocity rounds to the face, neck, shoulders and upper chest. Some of them were stopped by his subdermal armor. Most weren't. He felt (*holy shit!*) real pain for the first time in what felt like years. Roland's wired nervous system rewarded this with a flood of chemical bliss. As he charged he smiled and 'whooped' like a sixteen-year-old railing his first line of blow.

He dove into the first man hands first, grabbed his enemy by the neck and then bum rushed him into the man hanging outside the window. This knocked the top of the second man's body free from the wall and sent him reeling half-back into open air. The man's feet were still attached to the building, but his body flailed free. Roland kept his grip and focus on the first armored man. The Martyr's neck armor had hardened to resist the crushing strength of Roland's grip, so he shook the man's head back and forth and slammed it into the frame of the window as hard as possible.

The soldier pumped another dozen rounds, point blank, into Roland's body. He saw red. He *felt* red. He was numbly aware of the tremendous amount of damage being done to him. But none of it had yet rendered him unable to throttle this motherfucker, so he continued to squeeze until the armor's neck seals failed, cracked and Roland's fingers bit deep into the meat of the man's throat and crushed his windpipe.

Roland tossed the body aside and went for the second man, still flailing outside the window. He was interrupted when Alexander fired a slug into his temple. The round impacted his reinforced skull and ricocheted off. But the impact, the force of the blow itself made him see stars. It hurt. Roland staggered back and to the side.

Then several things happened in very quick succession.

Marigold fired another round, her last. It was followed by the sound of the two remaining guards opening up with their shotguns. Roland heard as she was torn apart. Just as his eyes started to focus again, Alexander fired two more shots directly into his head. The man on the wall finally found his grip again, and Roland felt the power armored soldier steady himself to open fire.

Roland's shaken hind-brain advised him that going for the armored man was probably his best decision. So he surged forward, less steady than before, and hunched his shoulders in anticipation of taking another slug or four to the brainpan. But that didn't happen. For the second time today, Roland was surprised by the actions of a normal human. This time it was Sasha.

She'd gotten up from where she and Manny had taken shelter from the gunfight and crawled over to the body of the first guard Roland had disabled. He'd been dimly aware of this in the semi-conscious way he was aware of the traffic passing outside. His brain had opted to not focus on it since the heavily armed men were a more pressing concern. But then Sasha had removed the unconscious guard's helmet and rushed towards Alexander.

She swung first for his gun-hand. Roland heard her knock the pistol free of his grip. Then she hit him in the face, over and over and over again. Roland felt the urge to thank her but, just then, the power-armored man became a concern again.

The fucker managed to get off three more shots before Roland ripped the weapon free from its forearm mount and used it to cave in the armored faceplate. Blood spurted out and the man fell, limp, back out the window. His feet continued to adhere to the outside wall while his jerking, bleeding body dangled in the breeze.

Roland turned just in time to take another two slugs from another two shotguns. But then the men were empty. They'd pumped most of their rounds into Marigold's body. They fumbled to reload, panicked and clearly unused to carrying out the task in a combat situation. Roland could smell the terror as it wafted off their bodies. Their fear hit his nervous system like an ounce of crystal meth. He loomed towards them, and for a second the only sounds in the room were his footsteps, and the dull 'thwhap' of Sasha pounding her helmet into Alexander's now shattered skull.

Roland whipped his left arm out. A massive blade, not unlike a straight razor, tore through the flesh of his inner forearm and locked into place. The men screamed. One dropped his shotgun and tried to run. Roland tore into him first, using the blade to sever the fucker's arms. Battle drugs and pure, liquid satisfaction flowed into Roland's synapses. His dick went hard and he screamed in wordless joy as he slashed downwards and sliced off the man's face. The poor bastard fell away, burbling, and Roland turned towards the last soldier.

He died an equally terrible death.

And then it was done. The battle was over. Quiet reigned. The only sounds audible to a normal human would've been the blood spouting from dead and dying bodies and the sound of sobbing. Tule sobbed for Marigold. Sasha sobbed for, Roland guessed, her lost innocence.

And then, out in the city beyond, came the sound of a hundred sirens. The Martyrs were coming for them.