

18

By Matteo Leva

Dave stared down at the “18” that appeared on his pager. The usually dim green light seemed to have a resolving bright neon to it in the darkness of the alleyway. He stared at the numbers until the meaning of them sank in and he began to tremble. The frequency of the vibration he was applying to the pager made the number unreadable. The lasting effect of the last batch dried up inside him, he couldn’t be sober for this. He padded his coat frantically searching. He felt the stump barrel of the weapon concealed in the right pocket of his coat and his anxiousness rose to a panic. He searched more frantically running his hands up and down his body. He dropped to his knees searching the ground around him. This is when he made eye contact with the large yellow bin right behind him. The large black letters on the side spelling out **DODP**. The Department of Drug Purge provided large containers such as these for people to discreetly dump the bodies of their loved ones that had indulged, and fallen victim to, the alcha-demic. This only served to throw Dave into delirium. He began to heave, and turning away from the intimidatingly large bin he fell onto the brickwall of the alleyway. This is when he heard a satisfying crunch from his back pocket. Like a starving dog stumbling upon a fresh carcass he ravaged his pants, trying to find what he craved most. He took out the brand new pouch where he would store his alchemical reserve. He lost the grey one he had stolen as a

youngling from a smoke shop a few blocks away from his house in Southwark. That store had closed down 3 years ago along with the rest of the smoke shops in London during the alcha-demic. He reached down almost spilling the brown herbs all over the cool grey cement. Once he got hold of the most sizeable bushel he could find he held it up to his nose. He rubbed the herbs between his index finger and his thumb painfully reopening the blisters he had there. The tenderness of the wounds served to distract him from the terrible choice he would have to make tonight and he rubbed with renewed determination. The herbs ignited and he inhaled the thick smoke deeply. He felt it slowly billowing into his lungs.

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“A Tree. Just a Tree.”

“What do you mean just a tree?”

“Yes, I don’t mean to offend brother, of course, but the boy turned into a tree.”

“You’re fuckin telling me that you lost the boy because he turned into a tree?”

“Ye-es”

“Well you must be mentally challenged Dave because last time I checked little boys can’t turn into trees.”

“I know brother I-” Dave stuttered and cringed at the infuriated glare Ron was shooting at him

“I tried looking around it, seeing if there was some kind of hole or hatch or something. I searched the whole area for the boy, thinking my eyes must’ve pulled a trick on me. But when I came back to the alleyway the tree was gone...”

“Dave you absolute moron, you were supposed to catch the boy so we could bring him back to the Boss. Now we are empty handed and with no excuse”

“I-I’m sorry brother” Dave said with a crack in his voice

Ron’s gaze seemed to soften and his brow unfurrowed “Unless of course you want to tell him a little stick-legged boy turned into a fuckin tree!” Ron regained his furious look, “And let’s say the Boss was high on the biggest load of the most powerful alchemical batch all the city has to offer and he believes your story.” Ron thrust a lanky finger into Dave’s fat tit. “He would still strangle you until your eyes popped out of your sockets when he hears you lost a goddamn tree!” Dave looked down at his feet meekly.

“I-I” his lips started to quiver and he began fidgeting inside his pockets.

“I’m sorry brother” his eyes started to water and his gaze was so far lowered that one more inch would probably cause his neck to snap. A single tear rolled down his lumpy cheek and dissolved into the dirt of the dark alleyway.

Ron looked down at Dave “Tears?!” He whacked Dave on the top of the head once which got a whimper out of him. “Spare those for when the Boss strings us both up by our ankles and cuts us open like pigs Dave!”

“So what do we do now, brother?” Dave said raising his head by an inch.

“Well now *we* have to go back out there and look again.”

“But, the curfew, the **DODP**’s yellowjackets will beat us to a pulp!”

“You have forced us to risk that since we’ll get worse if we show up to the Boss empty handed.”

Dave gazed downwards again swallowing hard as Ron began towards the exit of the unlit alleyway. He regained his senses and went after his lanky step-brother.

“Bu-but brother!” Dave reached towards Ron as he struggled to keep up next to him. Ron turned on his heels and grabbed Dave by the front of his coat. Dave reached into his pockets and a metallic click came from the right side of his coat unnoticed by Ron.

“If I hear one more **brother** out of your puffy mouth I’m going to pull your tongue out and feed it to the dogs”

Dave quickly nodded trying to break out of Ron’s boney grasp. That’s when he noticed the yellow uniformed man that was slowly approaching from the entrance of the alley way. The polished buttons from the jacket seemed to gleam in the moonlight like the eyes of a cat stalking prey. The details of his face were masked by the darkness of the night.

“Look what we have here,” said the yellowjacket in a gravelly voice.

Ron spun around a look of panic spreading across his face. Dave looking stupefied said ,“brother a guard!” The two thugs turned towards the other side of the alleyway only to find themselves trapped by the backside of a brick house and some dumpsters. Dave let out a short choked fart and the hand holding the revolver in his pocket began to shake. Ron spun again and took on a pleading tone,

“Please don’t hurt us we swear we have good reason to be here good sir”.

“Oh shut up Ron, you twit.”

Ron stood puzzled by the response. He peered into the darkness to try and make out the features of the yellow jacket. By the light of the moon one oversized scar starting from the middle of the forehead that ended at the cleft of the chin became visible. He was undoubtedly Scarr their Boss.

“Boss...what are you doing here?”

“Ron when I honored you with the task of protecting my son, what did I say?”

Dave was overcome with the severity of the situation. When Ron had given him a description of a boy and told him to keep an eye on him, he failed to mention that the boy was the son of *the* Boss. This could turn out to be fatal if his step brother decided to rat him out for his mistake.

Ron was a whole six inches taller than Scarr, yet the expression that crossed his face right now reflected nothing of that physical superiority.

“You told me to keep my distance and discreetly make sure that your son kept out of trouble.”

Ron said in a surrendered tone.

“Precisely!” Said the Boss in staged elation.

“So please walk me through your night and do try your best to recollect every detail.” Ron took on a pleading tone, “please sir it wasn’t my fault the boy’s lost, it was my Dave and his useless stubby legs that couldn't keep up with him”.

Dave was looking progressively more terrified, was his brother truly gonna sell him out so easy? Scarr looked at Ron with the disappointed look a parent might give their child after some naive lie.

“Tsk, tsk” he said shaking his head.

“You’re on a streak of not obeying what your superiors are ordering you to do.” In a swift motion that went nearly unseen in the darkness of the night Scarr punched Ron squarely in the stomach. Dave flinched back as Ron doubled over gasping. The Boss grabbed Ron by the neck and pulled him close.

He hissed out “Let’s try that again shall we?” He released his grasp and Ron coughed.

“Th-They were right in front of me sir maybe 20 feet ahead when they turned left into a clothing store.” He took a couple of breaths before continuing “I waited outside and watched the store

from the other side of the street. 15 minutes passed, then 30, then one hour.” Ron and Dave both struggled to keep eye contact with the fiercely scarred face of their superior. “Night was starting to fall and eventually I decided to step in the store to figure out what was going on. However, as soon as I walked in the clerk came up to me and said no one else was allowed in and that they were closing.” He took a pause and the Boss gave him a nod of confirmation. “So I called up my *step* brother Dave here.” The hissed manner in which Ron said *step* struck Dave profoundly and his face hardened reflexively.

“Me and him split up and chased after your son.” Ron took on a disappointed look, “My brother caught onto his trail but when we met here to randevou all he had was some fairy-tale sob story about losing him.”

Scarr’s gaze seemed to soften and he said “See? Not so hard.” Ron tightly-wound posture unraveled and he relaxed. The Boss went on to say “I will say I’m even impressed”

“You’re impressed Boss?” said Ron quizzically.

“Yes Ron, I’m very impressed with how easily you can lie with a straight face.” Another punch struck Ron like an artillery shell. Ron lurched forward and hurled the remains of the day’s meals out of his stomach and onto the Boss’s coat. “Oh wow!” said the Boss. With yet another swift practiced motion the Boss produced a foot long cattle prod out of his sleeve. He switched it on and the torture device started to give off a sharp menacing crackle.

“You were not with my son, Ron!” Ron still looking stupefied, his face in a daze, backed up against the wall as the Boss started to stomp towards him crackling cattle prod in hand.

“You called your pea brained brother Dave here to cover your job!” He thrust the tip of the prod in the same spot Ron had been sucker punched just a few moments ago. The torture device began to crepitate and Ron screeched in pain. He fell to his knees and purged again.

“No, No, No, no more of that!” the Boss ripped the sleeve of Ron’s coat off effortlessly and stuffed it into his mouth. Dave stood by in horror watching his brother as the Boss continued to prod. Everytime the Boss would press into Ron the lanky body convulsed violently on the floor. He went on until Ron laid completely on the floor eyes staring up at Dave pleadingly. The coat sleeve worked as a dam blocking all of the blood saliva and puke that was trying to find its way out of Ron’s mouth. The Boss lowered himself next to Ron’s face.

“You aren’t so loyal to me now are you Ron? You had a very important meeting elsewhere. I wonder what about.” He picked Ron up by the back of his coat and slammed him against the wall. With a brisk blow he used the cattle prong to smack the now drenched coat sleeve out of Ron’s mouth. A splatter of blood and teeth followed. Fury spread through Dave’s veins like lava, steady and incandescent. For the first time during the whole interaction the hand that held the gun in Dave’s pocket steadied.

“Speak!” Dave had never seen Ron, usually a proud man so hopelessly defeated.

“I-I was in Newham”.

“*You traitor pig,*” hissed the Boss. “What did they tell you to do?”

“They told me to murder you.” Tears rolled down Ron’s cheeks clearing a path down the blood drenched skin. “But I would’ve never... you’ve always treated me well” Ron pleaded. “I was planning to tell you first thing to-” the Boss interrupted the sentence by putting the prod in Ron’s mouth finger firmly on the switch.

“You will never leave this alleyway Ro-”

A loud bang interrupted the Scarr’s sentence. An expression of disbelief and pain spread over his face and a spot of red at the center of his chest became visible. He dropped the cattle prod and his body followed as if attracted to it. Dave was revealed to Ron standing revolver in hand pointed forward looking mystified, tears rolling down his face. Ron looked at his step-brother in disbelief. He looked back down at Scarr’s body. He was exhausted but he used the little energy he had left to stomp the Boss in the head breaking his nose. The long white scar that dominated the intimidating man’s face was now crooked and lifeless, the fear it once imposed now reduced to nothing more than a deformity.

Ron looked up at Dave with a partially toothless smile and said,

“Wow brother you might be good for something after all, where did you get the gu-”

click

Dave cocked the revolver once more

“Step brother...” Dave whispered. His hand was now shaking with renewed panic.

“What are you doing Dave?” Ron raised his hand uncertainly.

“I’m sorry.” The tears rolling down his cheeks came with renewed strength, “I-I have to.”

“No, no, you don’t”

“If I don’t they’ll kill me as well, I-I’m sorry.”

“No wai-”

Another loud bang broke the silence of the night and Ron fell to the ground once more.

