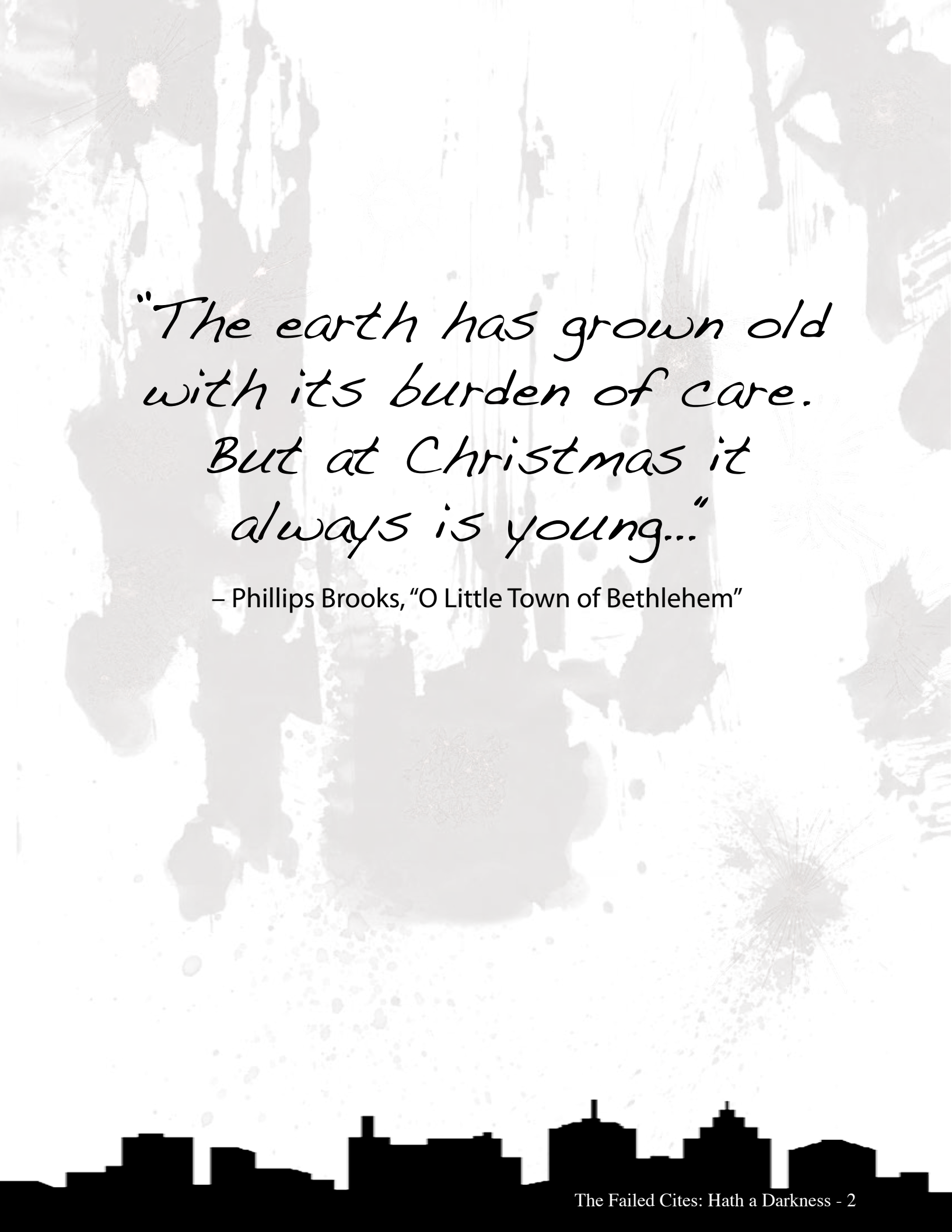


A
Variant Frequencies
Production



*The
Failed Cities:
Hath a Darkness*

*By
Matt Wallace*



*"The earth has grown old
with its burden of care.
But at Christmas it
always is young..."*

– Phillips Brooks, "O Little Town of Bethlehem"



Ethan

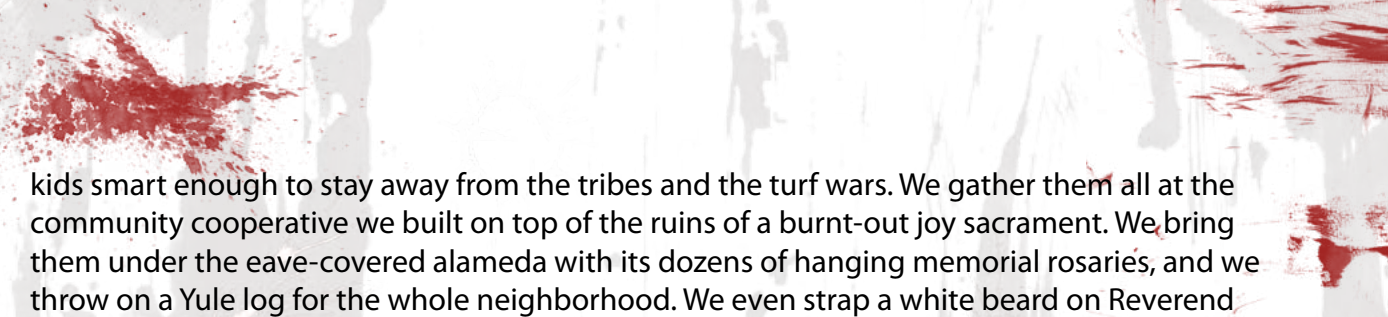
Christmastime 'round the Failed Cities is all in what you make it.

The snow turned black ten years past, and now all good mommas shine their babies up with molecular-purifying salve before sending them out into the cold. Up and down the avenue the kids wear black market blast masks instead of winter hoods and mittens dipped three times in neoprene when they make their demon snowmen on the sidewalks. They even bust up ruby-stained bottles and give them bright red eyes, dig half-rotten carrots from ash cans in alleys to make horns. We watch the ankle-biters while we're out on night walk, dancing like little heathens around Frosty the Fallen Angel, whooping and hollering and maybe Moses will come down from Mt. Sinai any minute with two stone tablets to spoil the party.

But at least they're having fun.

And while across the river they throw their fancy shindigs with golden candelabras and crystal eggnog fountains, while the rich folk are busy bucking over real-live reindeer from places like Norway and Mother Russia for their don't-never-know-how-lucky kids to pet on Christmas Eve, the street preachers are trying to stop other kinds of parties from spilling into the streets. We busy ourselves with the tribes here on the poor side, with keeping them on their own corners, keeping them from throwing down with bricks and bullets over the tiny piece of turf we've backed them on into. Then there's the twelve families, the map of Old Asia that run The Dynasties section of our bloody little berg. They tend to ring in the new year with a good ol' fashioned palace coup. And there's us in the middle, holding back the Mongol hordes (not to mention Chinese, Japanese, Taiwanese, Korean, and a whole host of others) with our bata sticks.

But it's not all blood and guts. Matter of fact, sometimes it's toys and tots. Every year we set some aside from the collection plates and make sure Santa Claus don't forget the city



kids smart enough to stay away from the tribes and the turf wars. We gather them all at the community cooperative we built on top of the ruins of a burnt-out joy sacrament. We bring them under the eave-covered alameda with its dozens of hanging memorial rosaries, and we throw on a Yule log for the whole neighborhood. We even strap a white beard on Reverend Mallet, and with that grizzly bear shape of his the red suit is a damn perfect fit.

This year he's just passing out the first present when the Bowery boys crash the party. Time was we'd ring the church bells and circle the wagons at the first sight of our brother street preachers from the Bowery charging down the avenue. But then, time was the muscle collars from the Bowery and my own congregation on Industrial Row were ready to raze the city with holy civil war. Lately we've been working together for the common good and keeping the Devil and big business out of our backyard. And tonight they're keeping with the truce. More than that, they're here to call us in like the cavalry.

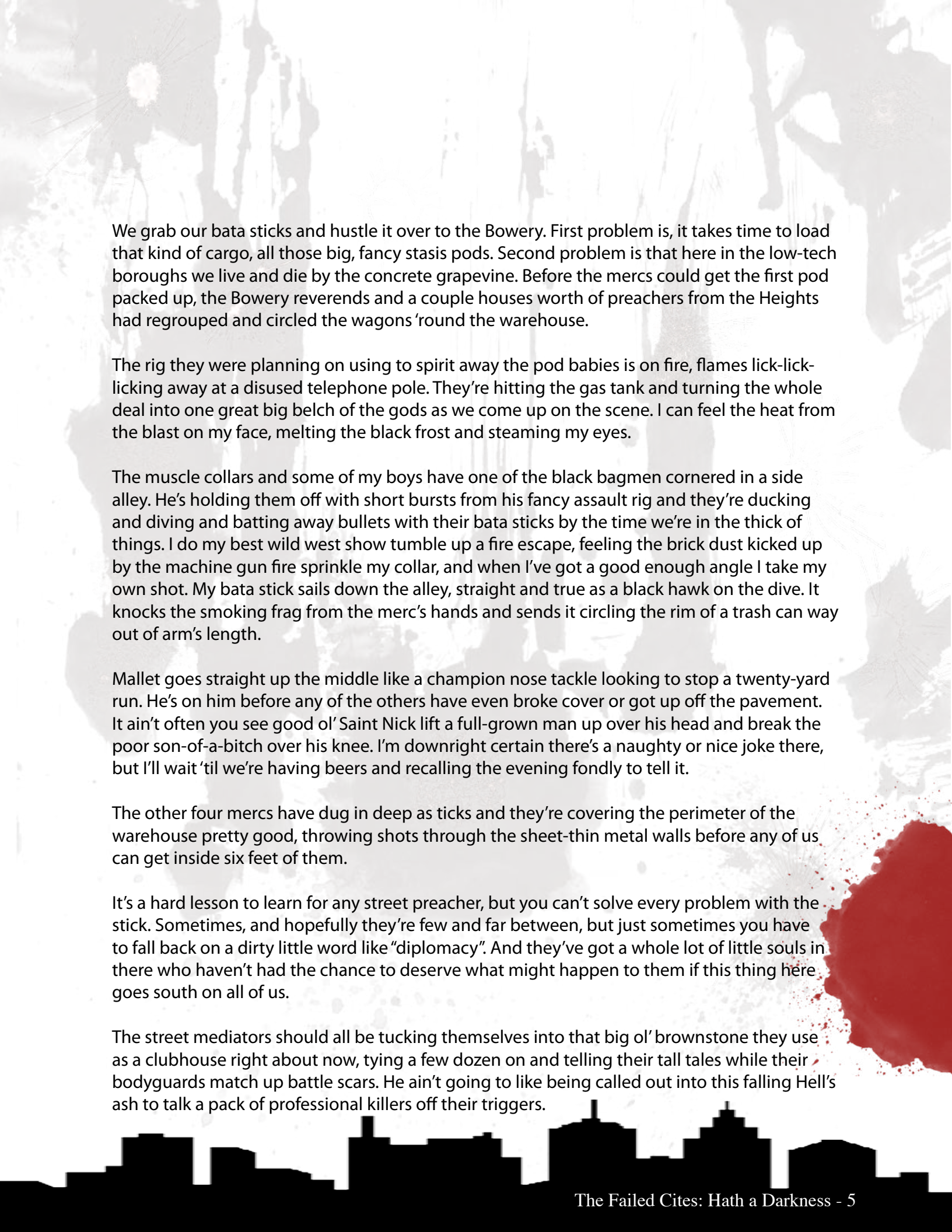
The Bowery boys may've seen a new light and returned themselves to the Steel Gospel we all preach with collar and stick, but their brains damn sure haven't gotten any bigger. Turns out Reverend Cuff, the new sheriff pope over in the Bowery, has been giving his papal sanction to bridge hijackings. It appears the night before last they snatched themselves a load of outer space-looking steel pods. Near a hundred of the things. Thought they might be some kind of next generation engines. To drive what, who can say? But worth a bundle, that's for sure.

They were all real impressed with their badass selves 'til a team of badder asses showed up in black knight armor, packing military spec assault frags and looking for, you guessed it, a big bunch of pretty metal pods. Five of them took down the Bowery boys' warehouse and burned up most of the muscle collars they found inside with all the goods. Only a couple of them made it out, including some of the ones who ran here for reinforcements.

But that's not the whole campfire tale. Seems during the raid, a stray shot cracked open one of the pods. The bullet broke open a lock on a lid with no seams. Way the muscle collars are telling it, smoke that smelled of cold air and bitter medicine came pouring out. When it cleared they saw tubes and wires and jelly-filled sacks dangling all around.

And damned if it wasn't a perfect, bouncing baby boy all swaddled there inside.

Doesn't take the brains my pop always said I got from ma's side of the family to figure out those "engines" are actually stasis chambers. The clone black market's a great big underground goldmine if you've got what it takes to grow and maintain the little things, which is a lot. What's in that warehouse is worth more than this whole city and everyone in it put together to somebody, I'll tell you that much.



We grab our bata sticks and hustle it over to the Bowery. First problem is, it takes time to load that kind of cargo, all those big, fancy stasis pods. Second problem is that here in the low-tech boroughs we live and die by the concrete grapevine. Before the mercs could get the first pod packed up, the Bowery reverends and a couple houses worth of preachers from the Heights had regrouped and circled the wagons 'round the warehouse.

The rig they were planning on using to spirit away the pod babies is on fire, flames lick-lick-licking away at a disused telephone pole. They're hitting the gas tank and turning the whole deal into one great big belch of the gods as we come up on the scene. I can feel the heat from the blast on my face, melting the black frost and steaming my eyes.

The muscle collars and some of my boys have one of the black bagmen cornered in a side alley. He's holding them off with short bursts from his fancy assault rig and they're ducking and diving and batting away bullets with their bata sticks by the time we're in the thick of things. I do my best wild west show tumble up a fire escape, feeling the brick dust kicked up by the machine gun fire sprinkle my collar, and when I've got a good enough angle I take my own shot. My bata stick sails down the alley, straight and true as a black hawk on the dive. It knocks the smoking frag from the merc's hands and sends it circling the rim of a trash can way out of arm's length.

Mallet goes straight up the middle like a champion nose tackle looking to stop a twenty-yard run. He's on him before any of the others have even broke cover or got up off the pavement. It ain't often you see good ol' Saint Nick lift a full-grown man up over his head and break the poor son-of-a-bitch over his knee. I'm downright certain there's a naughty or nice joke there, but I'll wait 'til we're having beers and recalling the evening fondly to tell it.

The other four mercs have dug in deep as ticks and they're covering the perimeter of the warehouse pretty good, throwing shots through the sheet-thin metal walls before any of us can get inside six feet of them.

It's a hard lesson to learn for any street preacher, but you can't solve every problem with the stick. Sometimes, and hopefully they're few and far between, but just sometimes you have to fall back on a dirty little word like "diplomacy". And they've got a whole lot of little souls in there who haven't had the chance to deserve what might happen to them if this thing here goes south on all of us.

The street mediators should all be tucking themselves into that big ol' brownstone they use as a clubhouse right about now, tying a few dozen on and telling their tall tales while their bodyguards match up battle scars. He ain't going to like being called out into this falling Hell's ash to talk a pack of professional killers off their triggers.

But that's our cross, all us field hands tending to this great big brick and gravel plantation. And we don't bear it so much as we carry it out in front of us like a shield. Sometimes you got to take a few dents.

While we wait on The Maven, I send one of the acolytes for Mallet's Santa sack. With the gas tank on the merc's rig already gone, instead of wasting time trying to douse the damn thing, we break out the marshmallows and chestnuts and start roasting them on the bonfire. Santa Mallet hands out his presents to all the kids who have flocked to the sound of gun shots and shit blowing up every which way. Pretty soon they're rolling up snowballs that look like cannon load and somebody strikes up a carol with an old six-string guitar. And we sing and horse around in the snow and we wait for some kind of peaceful end to the hostage crisis ten yards away.

Because Christmastime 'round the Failed Cities is all in what you make it.





The Maven

Optimal ways to spend Christmas Eve, plans on file:

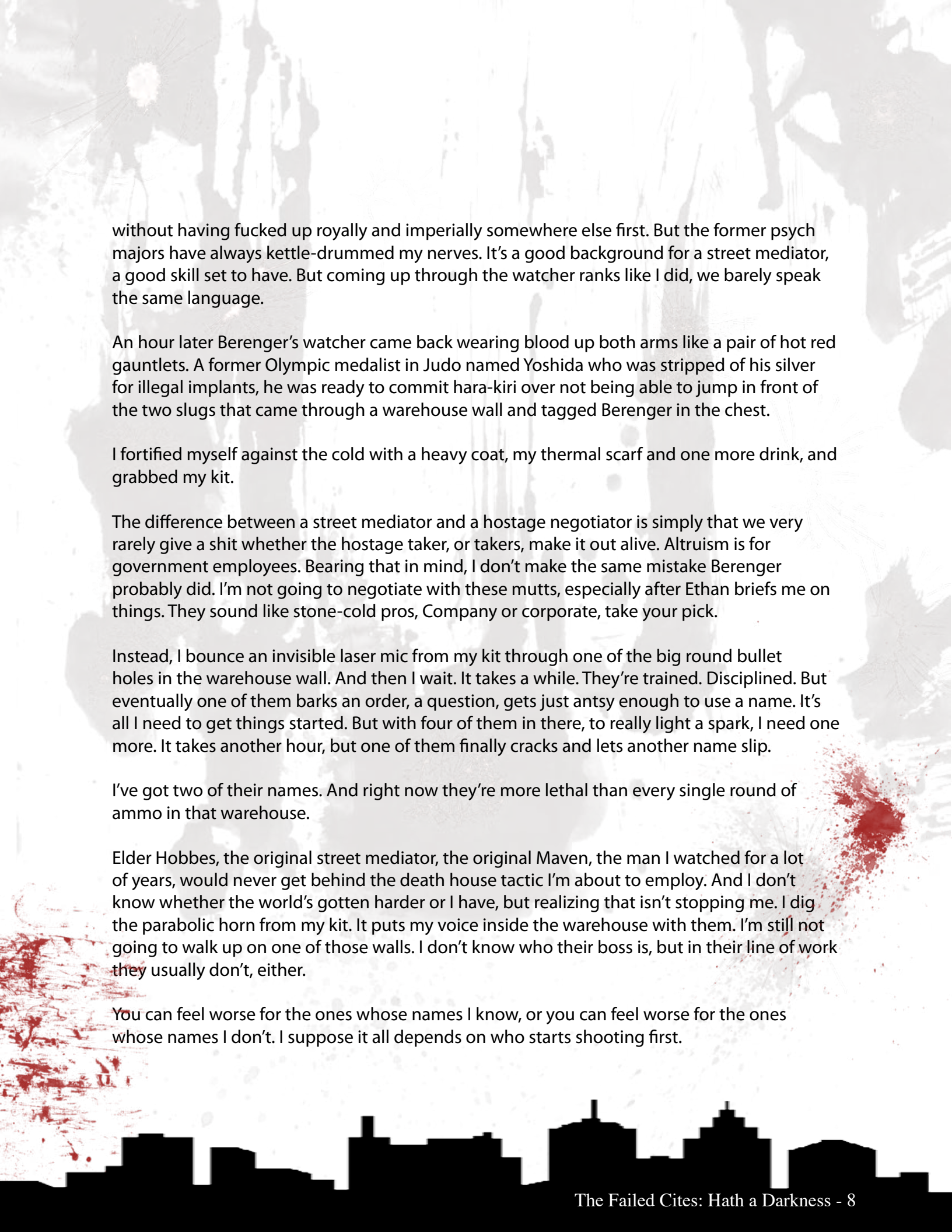
- A) Surrounded by naïve serving girls under the spell of a thousand-times-retread war story and with an alluring sprig of mistletoe glued to your belt buckle.
- B) Six parts eggnog, several dozen parts brandy. Napoleon, if at all possible.
- C) Nursing a pixel-degraded hologram of a daughter who's fifteen years older now and who only knows you exist because the sperm had to come from somewhere.

Optimal ways to spend Christmas Eve, plans not on file:

- A) Anywhere in the vicinity of a child under the age of twelve.
- B) Transferring the yearly memorial funds to families of watchers who fell covering your ass on a gig. Post-script: Remembering with every keystroke the bullets, blades, and bombs that filled your world with fire and blood in that moment, and how the Universe had every intention of it being your last.
- C) Seducing four frag-toting mercenaries out of a warehouse in the freezing cold while a hundred tiny lives hang in the balance.

The night began decently enough; decent by an old soldier's standards, anyway. If that old soldier is me. The fire was stoked at The MC Union, sole sanctuary of street mediators and their watchers. They'd hired a new waitress far too young to recognize a future regret when it orders a Double Dickel and a roast beef sandwich with steak fries from her. And I'd just guillotined the end of a cigar rolled by hand and moistened shut with the lips of a nubile African goddess somewhere in the Canary Islands.

The evening had promise. Or enough promise, at least, to keep my ass warmly and firmly sunken into my chair with no desire to dislodge itself. So when the SOS went up from the street preachers, I hid behind my glass in a cloud of sugary smoke and let Berenger brave the ten-below acid-fall outside. He was an asshole, anyway. Two Ph.D.'s in comparative and criminal psychology and two million dollars in malpractice law suits before he came to us. I don't mind the latter so much; no one ends up on this side of the river that wasn't born here



without having fucked up royally and imperially somewhere else first. But the former psych majors have always kettle-drummed my nerves. It's a good background for a street mediator, a good skill set to have. But coming up through the watcher ranks like I did, we barely speak the same language.

An hour later Berenger's watcher came back wearing blood up both arms like a pair of hot red gauntlets. A former Olympic medalist in Judo named Yoshida who was stripped of his silver for illegal implants, he was ready to commit hara-kiri over not being able to jump in front of the two slugs that came through a warehouse wall and tagged Berenger in the chest.

I fortified myself against the cold with a heavy coat, my thermal scarf and one more drink, and grabbed my kit.

The difference between a street mediator and a hostage negotiator is simply that we very rarely give a shit whether the hostage taker, or takers, make it out alive. Altruism is for government employees. Bearing that in mind, I don't make the same mistake Berenger probably did. I'm not going to negotiate with these mutts, especially after Ethan briefs me on things. They sound like stone-cold pros, Company or corporate, take your pick.

Instead, I bounce an invisible laser mic from my kit through one of the big round bullet holes in the warehouse wall. And then I wait. It takes a while. They're trained. Disciplined. But eventually one of them barks an order, a question, gets just antsy enough to use a name. It's all I need to get things started. But with four of them in there, to really light a spark, I need one more. It takes another hour, but one of them finally cracks and lets another name slip.

I've got two of their names. And right now they're more lethal than every single round of ammo in that warehouse.

Elder Hobbes, the original street mediator, the original Maven, the man I watched for a lot of years, would never get behind the death house tactic I'm about to employ. And I don't know whether the world's gotten harder or I have, but realizing that isn't stopping me. I dig the parabolic horn from my kit. It puts my voice inside the warehouse with them. I'm still not going to walk up on one of those walls. I don't know who their boss is, but in their line of work they usually don't, either.

You can feel worse for the ones whose names I know, or you can feel worse for the ones whose names I don't. I suppose it all depends on who starts shooting first.

I tell them they fucked up. That two of them fucked up, that is. I tell them I'm their control, and I've made arrangements with all these very angry men out here carrying large phallic sticks and waiting to beat them to death. I name two of them, instruct them to take down their partners and come out. It doesn't matter if they believe me. It doesn't matter if they do what I tell them. I just need one frag-toting pro in that warehouse to start thinking I know something he doesn't. I just need one of them to get paranoid enough to let it touch their trigger finger.

Just one.

The sound of the firefight is more like a trilling than a full chorus. There are no screams or shouts from inside the warehouse when it's over. I guess they were all good marksmen.

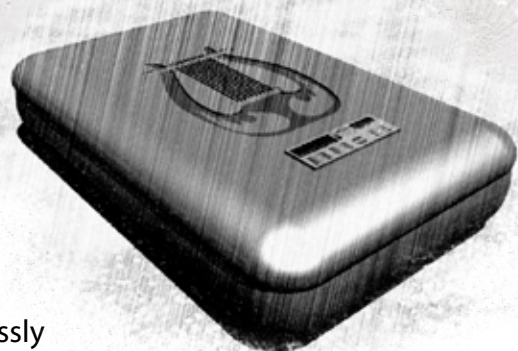
It's a hell of a thing, talking four well-trained, heavily armed corporate spooks into blasting each other to Hell for no reason. You don't feel particularly clever or accomplished. You just feel like you could be using these powers for good instead of evil.

Or maybe I was just pissed off and thought Berenger should've been able to ring in the new year with the rest of us. He may've been an asshole, but he was one of ours.

I got lucky. The mercs kept their spreads tight, even in the heat of the moment, and none of the kids inside got hurt. Their pods are lined up in rows of eleven. The street preachers go about opening them up, letting the newborns breathe fresh air, probably for the first time in their little lab-engineered lives.

None of them notice it until I do. But then I'm supposed to have super human powers of observation. It's how I earn a mythic mediator tag like "The Maven".

The symbol is engraved on each of the stasis pods. It's a logo, a golden lyre. The Nicodemus Consortium. They're the shady conglomerate that built the mega-scrapers across the river before the project went bust, leaving a city-sized crater in the rest of the island. I personally brokered a tentative truce between them and the street preachers not so long ago. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. In this part of the world, I can't think of anyone else that has the money and general indifference toward Human life to trade in cloned flesh this flawlessly rendered.



So we're now standing knee-deep in stolen Consortium merchandise and the blood of their employees. It's what our good Reverend Ethan would probably call, in his quaint transplanted vernacular, a "pickle".

Normally his policy would be to give back what was stolen, do whatever it takes to keep the peace with the Consortium, but he takes a dim view of white slavery. So do I. There's an underground for clones. The Eugenics Railroad, if you will. Not surprising, considering they have no rights as citizens, or even Human beings, in most countries. Including this one.

Remember what I said about altruism? Well. Fuck it. It is Christmas, after all.

So now all we need is someone trustworthy, and I'm talking beyond reproach, to take our new billion-dollar charges to ground while Ethan and I try to stall the Consortium.

Luckily, I know a guy.





Sterne

Christmas stories. Not my bag. If they aren't literary commercials or decorative propaganda films for the gift-giving holiday machine, they take "fanciful" into reaches beyond acid-trips or anything relatable to this world, and especially this city. I don't know about you, but I've never had a magical winter adventure. I've never saved Santa. I've never learned an important lesson about the true meaning of Christmas.

The Real Life Story of Christmas is a tale of having no heat, a girlfriend with permanent post-traumatic sex syndrome who's staging a shadow play about the historical link between Christmas and spousal abuse, and a new book hasn't moved a hundred digital copies. So far interest has flatlined to the point that no hacker has even bothered to pirate the fucking thing, in fact.

Now that's a kick in the metaphorical ball sack.

I'd do something symbolic and angst-infused, like burn old manuscripts to keep warm, but no one uses paper anymore. Besides, that's the holiday season in The Stacks. We're all just dealing with it. The street musicians play in parkas and make their curtain calls two hours earlier. The Rastas are hiding somewhere huddled around warm inherited memories of a tropical ancestral climate. Meanwhile, the Dutch from Li'l Amsterdam steal their weed-sipping client list until spring. Sometimes it pays to come from cold winter countries.

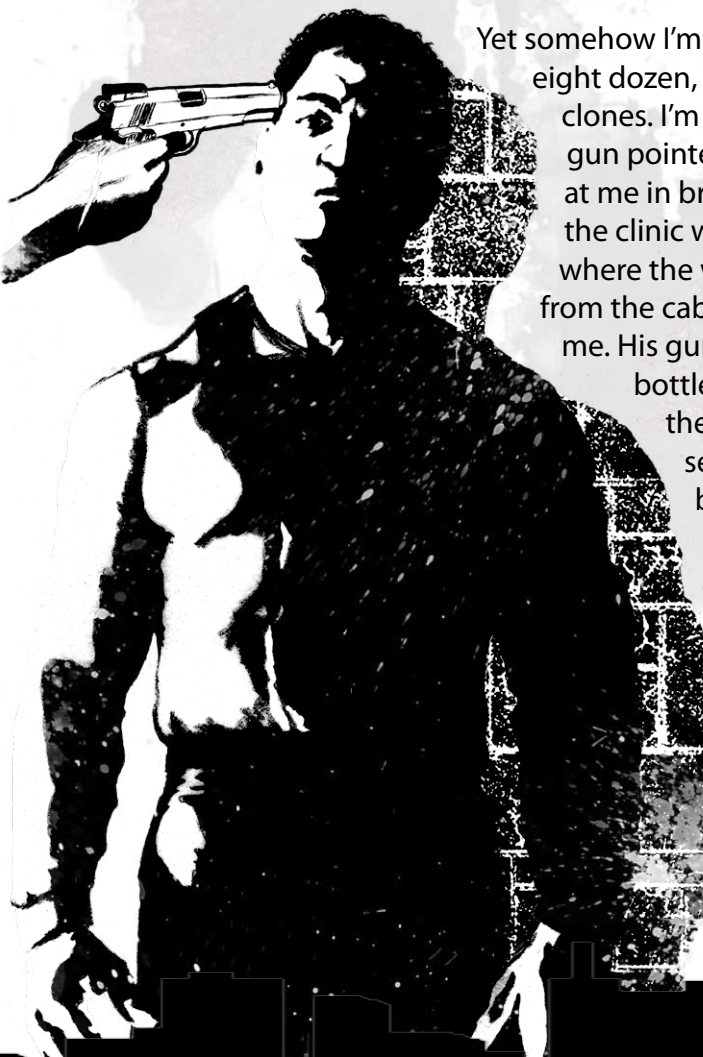
And me, I'm plugging away at my next huge embarrassing failure, each chapter, each page, each paragraph, each sentence, each word, each syllable, each fucking letter seeming more poorly constructed than the last. My new protagon is a friendly neighborhood milkman named Rexell, whose alter-ego, the spiked-collared "Rex", pilots an A-2 MechExo in illegal war machine battles on Saturday nights. Each persona suspects the other of a series of murders that suddenly start cropping up around them, not realizing they're the same man, and their investigations have run parallel through most of the book so far.

It'll be called *How to Solve the Rex/ell Paradox* when it's done. It's high-concept bullshit, and it feels like I'm trying to bash it into the hardboiled mold with a crowbar. I should probably just accept that the detective tale has gone the way of the epic poem and call it a night. I guess I have a hard time letting go of things.

Normally I'd consider the call that saves me from this monster-in-my-flash-drive for a while to be a handjob from God, but the last time The Maven hit me up around the hour of the wolf, I was maimed and almost killed. Twice. And as it is my leg hosts raging orgies of pain and suffering every time I go out in the cold.

Of course, that doesn't stop me from picking up. The truth is I miss the old guy. I haven't watched for him since all of that went down. He heard I haven't pit fighting since I sold my book. I think he's been trying to keep me out of the life, keep me from turning into a slightly thinner, obviously more handsome version of him. So the fact the call is about work means something. It means the job isn't just a job. It's something important. Something that requires trust.

And it's just a driving gig. A favor. It's just picking up a few kids and taking them over to a floating free clinic the street preachers sponsor. Christ knows I could use the extra cash. It sounds like cake. It sounds like a good deed, even.



Yet somehow I'm not surprised when a few kids turns out to be eight dozen, and those eight dozen turn out to be black market clones. I'm even less surprised when I end up with a loaded gun pointed at my crown and a scowling Russian cop barking at me in broken English. He was waiting when I pulled up to the clinic with the kids. He must've staked out the old factory where the whole thing is set up. As soon as I jumped down from the cab of the truck he stepped from the shadows behind me. His gun was already out. All I heard were a couple of bottle cap clacks as the heels of his cheap loafers crossed the pavement. I turned into the bore of a muzzle that seemed as wide and deep as coal shaft and stank of bitter carbon in the same way.

I could've written this scene. And I could've created this guy. He's a hardboiled cover shot waiting to happen. Straight-razor scar down his face, prison shank pock marks on his hand. Hard eyes. The kind of expression that's scabbed over, that's replaced whatever wound the world made of the innocent mask we all start out life wearing. The voice as harsh as a shot of rotgut whiskey when it orders me, "Do not move!"

Contractions are a tough concept to wrap the mind and tongue around when English isn't your first language.

I should probably remind myself of the "fiction vs. fact" dialogue I was internalizing earlier. That's another thing I have a problem with, especially in these situations. What I definitely shouldn't do is let this truck door I'm holding onto fly and send that gun of his into the gutter. And spearing him to the ground? That was an even worse idea. A guy could get killed doing shit like this. If he was carrying a back-up piece I'd already be dead, standing up and squaring off with him like I'm doing.

Either I've been out of the pit too long, or my iron curtain friend is also a student of the game. He's got good hand speed. Doesn't throw big wear-out arm punches. And he takes a punch like someone who knows exactly what it's going to feel like. After a few seconds and a few thousand drops of adrenaline we're both showing red and neither of us has scored a knock down yet. Every time I try to sweep his ankle or bend his knee the wrong way with my boot he raises his shin at just the right angle.

And after following a body hook with an elbow to the jaw, it happens. The oddest, most unexpected thing. We both realize, at exactly the same time, that neither of us is trying to kill the other. We're just swinging because we're being swung on, old phantom instincts hardwired by the day-to-day, by misspent youths filled with pit fights and street fights and bar fights. But our active impulses, the pops and sparks that make our cerebrums sing, none of them are screaming, "Go for the throat."

That's what the Feral Twins taught me, aside from just how much blood a person really socks away in their body. I'm a decent fighter, a good fighter, but I'm not a killer. As much scrap as I might possess, when the moment came I didn't have a coup de grâce in me. My reptile brain lies too dormant, I guess.

Or fuck it. Maybe it really is just a Christmas miracle. Like in all those stories I'd never write.

Either way, we end up planting our asses down on the curb, a sad sight I'm sure with our busted noses and bruised cheeks and bleeding lips. We find out we were both laboring under our own misapprehensions. He's not a hardboiled cop; in point of fact, he's not a cop at all. I should've known by the old gun he was packing. He's just an ex-detective named Klimenko who insists he's not on a case, chasing after my charges. And those tech-swaddled babes in my carriage aren't kidnapped orphans, as Klimenko was apparently led to believe.

He doesn't seem shocked. I get the feeling he's been lied to a lot. And if he was a cop, especially across the river, add that to the list of things tonight that have failed to surprise me.

Here's the rub. If he found the boys and girls from Brazil I ferried over here, then so can this mystery-shrouded Consortium everyone is all hushed tones and crossing themselves about. And they will, whether he reports back or not. They will come looking. What's in the back of that truck is worth money you don't turn your back on. The reason The Maven came to me to begin with was because I'm probably the one guy with a valid driver's license in this city who he could be sure wouldn't jerk the wheel and ride those kids off to the highest bidder.

The only thing to do is get these magic tikes blazing a trail out of town, and fast.

I'm the guy who's supposed to know plot twists, but it's Klimenko who comes up with the wild idea. But that's a drive I'm not riding shotgun on. If I have learned a lesson this Christmas, it's . . . shit, who am I kidding? I haven't learned anything.

But my face hurts, my ribs hurt, my leg is burning, and I want to live to see Cairo's godawful feminazi play, after all.





Klimenko

This I will make clear before even we begin: I will NOT take case.

When you have been man who everyone believes catches two famous serial killer, even if first time was accident and second time there was no such person to begin with, to you they sometimes will come with these things. But I will not take case.

For one thing, I should be home now. Whole Klimenko family will soon gather for Sviata Vechera, Holy Supper, and for first time since leaving Ukraine, I am welcome. I talk with mother often these days. Not with father, but she tells me of him. She tells me when walking through hall of Klimenko house in Kiev, he will sometimes stop before great glass display case filled with medals. Most are Hero of Ukraine, won by my brothers and sister and uncles. But these he does not open case and reach for.

Instead, she tells me, he takes from case Medal of Valor given me by city. He holds it for long time before placing it inside once more. I do not know if is true. Mother wishes us to be father and son again. Maybe she tells hopeful lies to feel better, to make me feel better. But I hope they are true, just the same.

But even if I will not be home to feast with my family, to wait and watch for first star to shine in eastern sky, star symbolizing journey of three wise men long ago, I still will not take case. Stolen babies or no. This is what they tell me. Stolen babies. Little ones without mother and father. Many of them.

And yes, perhaps I have idea how to begin. The babies, if they are newly born, they will need doctor. They are worthless to whoever takes them if they are not kept healthy. They will need doctor to see to them, one who does not make reports. Will not be doctor here in cooperative towers on island. There are other doctors, ones without license, who make practice in warehouses and abandoned building, like that.

It would be good place to look, yes, but still I will not take case.

I am saying this to myself, over and over, as I drive to where source tells me such a doctor operates. Over bridge to abandoned city across river. I used to be so fearful of this place. But I have faced worse fears now. Does not bother me, driving through these streets, waiting alone outside building where clinic is said to be, waiting for truck big enough to hold that many small babies to appear.

And as I am brawling with big man who drives truck, who moves quickly for one so big, I remind myself that this is why I do not take case. Already I have enough scars for a lifetime. Now I will have more. His fists are sharp and quick and well-aimed. I will have more scars now. Is what doing that kind of work gets you. Is why I quit such business.

These things and more I tell him after we are done fighting. He is not bad man. I know bad men. I have dealt with many. And because he is not bad man I believe him when he tells me about babies. My father would tell you they are abomination. Unholy. But to look down on them they are just babies. They are innocent. This is rare here, innocence.

I am tired of being lied to by people who run cooperatives. Last time their lies cost me much skin, blood, and almost it cost me my life. So I will help to see that they do not do the same and worse to these little ones. I have idea. Is dangerous, but I believe it will be worth it.

And still, it could have been much worse. I could have taken case.



Operative 853

Operative 8-5-3, status report to The Nicodemus Consortium, Executive Board of Directors. This report is confidential and wave-encoded. Any unauthorized listeners will begin to experience nausea and discomfort, leading to seizure, hemorrhage, and finally death, immediately following this warning.

Report begins.

Sirs, it is my unhappy duty to inform you all that one of the gold ticket items on the Consortium's holiday gift list has been purloined before delivery could be completed. The package in question, our generous tribute to the Maltese Triumvirate in Zabbar, was hijacked en route to the Consortium's private launch pad. It contained ninety-nine flawless Human specimens cloned from a superior genetic strain, suitable for either organ harvesting or, once they've matured, a multitude of personal services.

These eventualities are, of course, tallied among the cost of doing business. Unfortunately our first attempt resolve the issue met with . . . complications. Our advance retrieval team failed to anticipate the level of hostility presented by the landscape. Their mission was a failure.

It's worth noting this hijacking was sanctioned by a sect within the street preachers. Although I've been assured it was unintentional, Reverend Ethan Grant, whom we've dealt with previously, insists the package was transferred to a third party before they became aware of the chain of ownership.

I'm continuing to investigate the validity of his claim.

In an effort to remedy the situation in time to make final delivery, I've contracted the necessary assets, beginning with an outside investigator, Valeri Klimenko, formerly a house detective in our employ who has proved surprisingly resourceful in the past. His intel has the package being transported out-of-state via ground roads by heavy freight truck.

To reacquire the package, I've contracted our usual man, alias "Ferus". While this asset is an expert tracker and retrievalist, he is known to be somewhat unstable. I've taken the precaution of assigning a back-up team from our Shadow Ops Division to ensure safe recovery of the package.

I'm certain with these measures in place, the Consortium's gift list will be fulfilled on schedule and in grand fashion.

On a final note, sirs, I'd like to extend my gratitude for this year's generous holiday bonus. I'm anxious to use it in the field, hopefully on something large enough to merit such an implement.

I look forward to continuing to serve the Consortium's interests in the new year.

Report ends.



Ferus

The man in the red suit reminds me what time of year it is.

It's getting harder these days, remembering that stuff. Tradecraft is all still there. I got that good. And I remember most everything Fera ever told me. But the other stuff, the regular people stuff, it gets mixed up and turned around and pushed into the back of things more and more now. Sometimes I'll hold a newspaper or a fork or something and I'll forget the point of it. It's weird.



The man in the red suit is moaning all in pain and it's making it harder for me to hold onto whatever it is I was remembering. I figure he'll pass out or die soon since I just peeled most of his skin off, but he's holding on. His eyes are all wide. I mean, he doesn't have any choice in that, really. He doesn't have any eyelids. His face was the first thing I took. But they haven't gone glassy yet, his eyes. Must be implants or drugs or something. All the tech is making it harder and harder to kill people these days.

Most of the runny black stuff has slopped from what's left of him onto the floor, and now there's only his red, red muscles. It's the color that got me thinking. About the man in the red suit. Not him, though. Somebody else in a red suit.

Christmas. That's it. It's almost Christmas.

Not surprised I forgot. Fera was always the one who made Christmas for us. When we were kids she scrounged decorations from school and from dumpsters and made the house nice, and when Dad would tear them down or Mom would sell them, Fera taped them back

together or found more. We made each other presents. She carved a knife from a piece of rock for me and I made a bracelet out of mice bones for her. I cleaned them real well. I made them shine for her.

She'd tell me stories, too. Not the reindeer with the red nose, only not because it was broken, and not the snowman who came to life. Fera didn't like silly crap like that. She told me about the history. Mostly about Romans. About the festivals they had in the ancient times. And about the Three Wisemen and the baby in the manger. But the birth story didn't do it for me so much as the death story. I could imagine them driving the spikes through my own wrists and feet, the Roman soldiers. I would've waited 'til they raised the cross, then torn myself free and fallen on them, Eagle strike. Death from above. I wondered how many soldiers could I kill before I bled out from my hanging, cut veins.

Fera would always stroke my head and say, "As many as angels dancing on the head of a pin." That's what she'd say. I never lose that stuff.

Those were good things. But they're gone now. And so's Fera.

I keep busy. That's the main thing. You'd think work would make me sad without her, but it's really the only thing that helps my mind not hack at it, not gnaw on itself the way a wolf gnaws on a hurt leg.

Like peeling this slag. At least I think peeling him was part of the job. Maybe it was my idea. I can't remember just now. But the Consortium wanted him to hurt when I found him. They wanted it big and splashy and front page so everyone would know. And that's what I do best.

I've been working for them exclusive lately. They gave me a handler. It's not about the money. Fera and me had stashes all over the world. More than we ever needed. It's the best way to stay busy, to make sure one piece of work is there as soon as I finish the last one. And I don't have to plan or anything. It's good for right now.

They've got a new job for me. Last minute. And they want to give me a team of their neo-nex-tech horseshit shock troops. That usually means whatever they want me to bring back is important. They worry I'll go too far. They should worry. But I still don't have much use for these toy soldiers they suit up and send out. Fera and me killed hundreds of them. They're nothing.

We're loaded onto a stealth runner and pretty soon all I can see are clouds getting trashed through the jets of the air car. The Consortium's tough guys are talking their tough guy talk

to each other, but I can feel how shit scared they are of me. It doesn't make me feel good, though. Just kind of sick in the pit of my stomach. I think it's from knowing they don't belong on the same hunt with me.

The target turns out to be a big truck going up these twisting mountain roads. Going up them way too fast. Whatever it's pulling, that's what we're supposed to bring back. That's it. That's the whole job.

The sinking in my stomach just gets deeper.

I let the others drop onto the truck first. If there's security, if they're any good, I'll know by watching how they handle the assault. Turns out it's just one guy, though. The driver. At first I'm disappointed. But the guy surprises me. He climbs right out of the truck while it's still barreling around the mountain and goes after them. He knows knife work. I can see that from here. He's real good with edges. And he's not afraid, even though he should be. Fera used to tell me guys like that weren't born fearless, they were born stupid.

But still, he's pretty good.

The sinking is gone. Now I feel hot down there. Burning, almost. And I hear Fera, whispering in my ear like she used to, saying demons come from above, not below. They don't crawl out of the ground and nip at ankles, they fall from a red sky, streaking on wings made of fire. They make death rain down in bloody torrents.

So that's just exactly what I do.



Truck

It's times like these, man, when I'm hauling 14-ton ass over mountain blacktop with a trailer full of life without the possibility of parole and a battalion of cyber shadow death ninja commandoes crawling all over my rig, that I wish I'd listened to what Mama Truck told me when I was little. Although who knows what the fuck that is. Because, again, I wasn't listening.

Let me set the scene. It's coming up on Happy Birthday, Jesus, and you happen to be putting an ex-hooker through gene-therapy technician school AND carrying her kid at the same time. All he wants for Christmas is one of those new muscle-adoptive systems so he can actually do all the super human kung fu moves in the fighting game. Fucking things cost more than my first five cars. So when a last-minute gig comes up piloting a big rig for serious cash, you jump its bones like a horny prom date. And we all know how much thinking those guys put into the what they're doing.


Normally it's the policy of Truck Man Enterprises not to ask questions. I mean, ground freight is deceased, my friends. The air car killed it deader than Dillinger. So anybody wanting something moved in a rig is obviously trying to stay off the grid to begin with. And for the cool bundle the street preachers were offering for my services, you'd think that policy would go double. But it's just the opposite. Anything worth that much to transport, you gotta know. I mean, your life might just depend on it before the ride is over, man.

When I saw them, all those perfect little doll faces, I should've walked away. Every time I mix business with humanitarian missions, the results ain't good.

But hey, it's Christmas. And I'm a family man now.

Things were moving along just as easy as pie for the first couple hundred miles. Hot coffee, rig was handling like a wet dream, little classic rock on the radio. Then that wingless stealth bomber dropped into my rearview mirror.

I couldn't try shaking them. Some call it "evasive driving," I call it bumper pool of the gods. Either way, it wasn't happening. Not on this corkscrew mountain, not with cargo this precious. The Truck Man's answer? Speed, man. More speed. Give them a target that doesn't just move, it flies. Damn the snow and the zero visibility. Damn the razor-sharp curves. Speed is always the answer.



But they matched me. That's some toy they've got up there. And I guess it comes with its own action figure set, because pretty soon they were dropping on my rig like plastic army men weighted with rocks.

If they want me, I'm candy sitting up in this cab. If they're heisters looking to Jack Frost my load, then they'll de-polarize the magno-hitch and lift the trailer away like giving it angel wings.

Either way, I ain't got a staying put kind of mentality.

By law you're only supposed to engage these land-nav auto-pilots on straight shots, and only when the computer tells you traffic is slow enough. But since the cloned flesh I'm hauling is close to a hundred cuts of prime federal offense, avoiding a ticket doesn't exactly rank high on my list of priorities just now.

I got my own new toy for Christmas with the up front money, and I'm wearing it around my forearm. It's inlaid with a dozen different blades, all shapes and sizes, and it has digital selector switches attuned to the muscles in my wrist and hand.

I'm about to put on one hell of a magic show for these fucks.

They're not carrying frags or dog days, nothing that goes bang. They know what I'm hauling. Don't want to risk a stray bullet. Two of them are working on uncoupling the magno-hitch. I drop down between them and flick my wrist at just the right angle to call up a nine-inch tracer-hardened spike. The tip does a robot porn star through Mister Black-Op's armor. His lung fills with blood a couple of seconds before his helmet does.

By the time his tag team partner gets hip, the spike's gone and I'm holding a serrated blade. He comes out with a retractable baton, looking to blackjack me. But when it comes to blunt versus sharp, sharp always wins.

The other two are waiting at the end of the trailer, probably to secure it to the air car once it's unhitched. It's fucking freezing on top of this thing, and I know the wind and the snow are destroying my fifty-dollar haircut. The first one charges me head on, the prettiest bayonet you ever did see in his hand. Three-point-five seconds. That's how long he lasts. I know because I count it off in Mississippi's as we go.

I've got a beautifully-weighted thrower ready and waiting for the last one. And yeah, sure, I'm getting cocky. Yeah, sure, it's some serious showboat shit. But come on, man, I am just hot damn good.

I put all the shoulder I've got behind the throw and sink it just below his ear. A headshot at high wind from twenty yards out. On top of a moving trailer doing close to a buck-five, man. Jim Bowie was a fag.

I'm still busy being impressed with myself when I feel it, the roof of the trailer doing a 10-point quake under my feet and damn near knocking me on my ass. I'm turning around and praying like hell my rig just jumped a Redwood trunk or something, and then I see the 900-pound shaved gorilla that just landed ten yards away on my six. Scarred eyes and we've both got the billowing trench coat thing.

When you're standing in the middle of minus-zero winds and it's the guy across from you that's giving you chills, you know you're about to dance with the Devil.



My wrist muscle tangos another thrower into my hand and I send him a titanium Valentine. Kong swats it like a fly and the wind does the rest, whipping it back at me, return to sender. I'm feeling bad about cracking on Jimmy B and my callous use of that derogatory term for those of the man-on-man persuasion, especially with Kong coming at me now.

I curl my fist and the spike shoots back out. No more fancy shit, I'm telling myself. Just lance this demon fucker's eye and pierce his brain. It's a good plan. A no-frills plan. Too bad Kong has a plan of his own, and it involves grabbing my spike with his frying pan hand and twisting it into a fucking balloon animal. It's armor-piercing, and he just bent it in half like a coffee spoon.

What he does next, to my chest, makes me think the spike got off easy.

All I know is halfway to being sucked under the rear wheels, I grabbed onto a piece of the trailer and stopped myself. Kong must've made for the cab. I just hope he knows what he's doing. I hope he knows if he tries to engage the emergency break while the auto-pilot's still on, this whole rig is going to fishtail over the side of the next turn. I get my answer when the trailer jumps onto its right wheels. Somehow I manage to drag my ass into an exterior storage compartment where I stashed the kid's muscle-adoptive gamer and shut the lid. I clutch it tight to my chest while the rig does thirty-thousand-pound cartwheels down the mountain, banking me against the sides of the compartment like a pinball.

Lucky for me the stretch of road about a hundred yards downhill stops it.

Lucky.

I blacked out for a while. I don't crawl out of the storage compartment as much as ooze. I'm one big wound and there's enough twisted steel to start a new industrial revolution. But at least I saved the kid's toy. Merry fuckin' Christmas.

If I'm real lucky the snow will stop most of the bleeding. The cold can't heal broken bones, unfortunately. And there's not much I can do when Kong punches his way out of the cab and starts coming this way. But he just steps over me and keeps on walking. Goddamn, man, do I look that bad?

Out of my good eye I can see Kong tear open the trailer like a can of creamed corn, not that it takes much effort with all the holes the rocks punched in it. I'm trying real hard not to think

about what he's going to find inside. It's almost too much to get my head around, especially when most of the blood in it is still inside that storage bin.

The stasis pods spill out at his gigantic feet. Funny thing is, they look less like stasis pods and more like chemical toilets. In point of fact, shit, they ARE chemical toilets.

Decoys. That's what they rolled out and loaded onto the rig. They had me hauling a drop trailer full of decoys. I'd laugh if I didn't think it'd bring up about two pints of my own juice.

If I had to guess, I'd say the real goods never left the Failed Cities. I'd like to think, spirit of the season and all, they weren't exactly trying to get me killed. But then they weren't exactly trying not to, either.

The stealth car comes to pick up Kong. They don't offer me a lift. But they don't put me out of my misery, either. Don't worry about The Truck Man, though. Santa's sleigh should be along soon. I'll just hitch a ride with him.

All things considered, I've been pretty damn good this year.



Doctor Lady

This time of year we mostly see stab wounds, but closer and closer to New Year's there'll be a sharp spike in gun shot victims. Instead of wrapping presents, I spend the holiday season wrapping fresh GSW's, most of the time with the slug still inside.

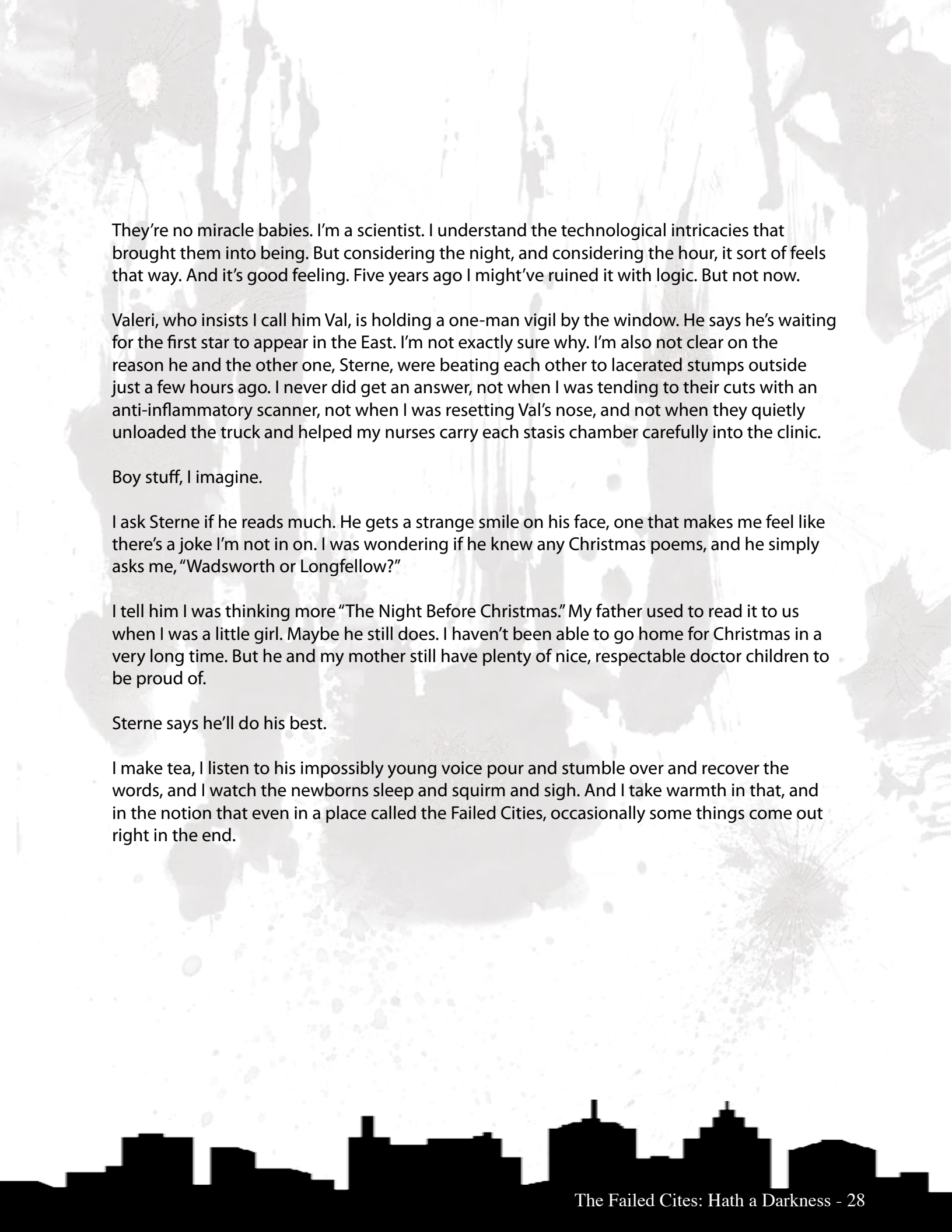
I tell myself it's the "doctor" part that's important. Names have never meant that much on this side of the river. On the island, in the ivory monolith worlds of the mega-skyscrapers, names are everything. They're practically currency. But here, names and identities are no more and no less than what you decide they are. People reinvent themselves as often as they change clothes.

So when they call me "Doctor Lady" I tend to just let it lie. I think it was the Jamaican gangs that started it. "Go see the Doctor Lady, she fix you up," they'd tell people. The rest of the neighborhood seemed to pick it up like bird song, and now the kids shout it in the streets when they see me walk by.

When I left that other world, the world of names, my own was a liability more than anything. I changed it for a while. I tried making a go as a gunshot doctor for the Brigades on Brighton Beach. But it truly is the middle ages there. If I hadn't met Reverend Ethan, if I hadn't found the street preachers, I don't know where I'd be now. But the clinic they helped me build saved my life as much as it's saved anyone else's.

And yes, most of the time it's cleaning up the aftermath of terrible violence and deplorable living conditions. And sometimes it's not even that. But sometimes it's also a pair of bruised, bleeding wisemen coming to your door bearing wonderful gifts. I know a lot about cloned Humans. I was involved in my share of research and development on the subject when I practiced in the cooperatives. It's a big part of the reason I left. It's a big part of the reason I help them now when I can.

So it's Christmas Eve and instead of tribe members with turf war wounds and street preachers with bloody kisses on their white collars, my triage floor is filled with healthy, beautiful baby boys and baby girls. They don't cry. The clones never do. They just stare at everything with bright, curious eyes. Intelligent eyes. They may grow up and do great things. Amazing things. We'll see.



They're no miracle babies. I'm a scientist. I understand the technological intricacies that brought them into being. But considering the night, and considering the hour, it sort of feels that way. And it's good feeling. Five years ago I might've ruined it with logic. But not now.

Valeri, who insists I call him Val, is holding a one-man vigil by the window. He says he's waiting for the first star to appear in the East. I'm not exactly sure why. I'm also not clear on the reason he and the other one, Sterne, were beating each other to lacerated stumps outside just a few hours ago. I never did get an answer, not when I was tending to their cuts with an anti-inflammatory scanner, not when I was resetting Val's nose, and not when they quietly unloaded the truck and helped my nurses carry each stasis chamber carefully into the clinic.


Boy stuff, I imagine.

I ask Sterne if he reads much. He gets a strange smile on his face, one that makes me feel like there's a joke I'm not in on. I was wondering if he knew any Christmas poems, and he simply asks me, "Wadsworth or Longfellow?"

I tell him I was thinking more "The Night Before Christmas." My father used to read it to us when I was a little girl. Maybe he still does. I haven't been able to go home for Christmas in a very long time. But he and my mother still have plenty of nice, respectable doctor children to be proud of.

Sterne says he'll do his best.

I make tea, I listen to his impossibly young voice pour and stumble over and recover the words, and I watch the newborns sleep and squirm and sigh. And I take warmth in that, and in the notion that even in a place called the Failed Cities, occasionally some things come out right in the end.



The Failed Cities: Hath a Darkness

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