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April, 1886.

New York.

The RAGNAROK cut across a fast-moving thundercloud and set down in a deserted field on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Thomas Bright, Jr. stomped down the ship's boarding ramp, shining in his usual terrycloth robe and flip-flops.

Flap, flap, flap, flap, echoed his footwear.

"Chicory?" he offered, extending a tin mug of the piping hot coffee to his twin brother, Piotr.

Piro leaned back in his coveralls and boots, propping himself up against the rickety wooden fence. His breath was expressive in the cold morning air, emitting oblique smoke signals between quick bites of scrambled eggs and bacon.

"Negatory," he replied, and turned the page in his leaf.

"Suit yourself," shrugged Thomas, who blew on the mug and then promptly downed a gulp of the steaming black liquid.

Piro laid down his plate and closed his leaf as a customer approached.

2

"Move along now, past the cow, down to the far fencepost to collect your product." Piro's instructions were communicated in tandem by the precise motions of his gloved hands. He nodded affirmative towards a hired assistant, who, in lieu of a receipt, always checked with the boss before dispensing from the barrel.

"Let's get a saddle on that thing," suggested Thomas, staring at the cow.

Gradually, a crowd gathered around the makeshift retail environment.

"Ladies, seniors, and all those other citizens whose sedentary employment causes nervous prostration, irregularities of the stomach, bowels and kidneys; those who require a nerve tonic and a pure, delightful diffusible stimulant; those who experience mild to semi-mild discomfort on a regular basis... Please to enjoy our delicious, refreshing, exhilarating, invigorating, invaluable brain tonic for a limited time only!"

Thomas stepped backward as the stranger elbowed his way onto the team's platform. He carried in his hands a portable device that modulated the amplitude of his voice.

"What the fuck? Where did this guy come from?"

Piro was stoic. Knowing. Exhibiting the easy competence that never failed to irritate Thomas in the midst of a field operation. Of course, he had an answer ready and waiting.

"John Stith Pemberton."

"..."

"Run a search."

Pause.

Click.

Scroll.

"...The Coke guy? Hotlanta? The fuck's he doing in New York?"

"Tone down your language. Think of the customers. We're selling to old people now. And single women with college degrees."

"Okay... But... Why's he trying to bogart our demographic?"

"Should be obvious."

Pause.

Scroll.

"Well, I'm not a fan. I mean, just look at his tie. What if we—"

"Quiet. We're about to watch something happen."

Piro unfolded his instruments and leaned forward, slightly.

Thomas shrugged again and opened another barrel of cocaine.

3

The President didn't much care for opium. Chortled at the very mention of morphine.

Ah, but he lived for cocaine. With its mild physical toll and its myriad curative properties, coke had proven a reliable restorative during the most trying of recent times. Of this, he readily approved.

The sticking point was always supply. It seemed to him that all the problems of his administration could be boiled down to economics. On this point, his campaign had been relentlessly, unadvisedly honest. And yet, post-election analysis revealed that fully eighty percent of the voting public could no better connect his photo with a detailed description of his platform than could a child connect cause with effect. Slight comfort, from his vantage point at the helm of a bankrupt nation.

And so, with rhetoric cast aside, what was to become of policy?

Jerrymander Mold stalked the streets of New York, searching for a fix.

The President cut diagonally across Central Park, marching past the Dakota without so much as a glance in the direction of the men who had financed his

reelection. Straight into a deserted field. Feet cramping, he discarded his stiff, leather shoes and trod through the dirt, his mind flashing on a particular high he had not experienced in what felt like months.

It had been three days since his last hit of the crack rock.

As he traipsed past a fence and into the tall grass, the familiar reverberations of a ghetto blaster thumped through the brush, flagging his awareness.

Jerrymander switched spectrums and immediately staggered backwards as the pink triangular frame of the RAGNAROK populated his visual field.

The President loosened his tie and unbuckled his patent leather belt. Flexed his plastic toes in the dirt.

These were his boys.

4

Piro and Thomas held down the block.

Next in line. This way to egress.

Shadows on the ground admitted to twelve noon. The duo had stacked half a meal ticket in just under half a day's work.

The Presidential motorcade seemed to be missing a few cars.

Jerrymander Mold pushed his way in front of of an elderly woman and stepped on the hand of a child. Later in the week, headlines would reveal that the President had cut in line to the men's room at Radio City Music Hall. Geographical anachronism, to be sure; on balance, he would consider the coverage fair.

"I need a rock."

Thomas remained expressionless. Stared at him.

"I'll suck your dick!" pleaded the President.

"I imagine you will," said Thomas.

5

"What I saw out there today made me reconsider the choices I've made in my life," mused Thomas, as he and Piro tore down the stage and loaded their gear into the RAGNAROK's cargo bay.

"What do you mean?"

"Just the pathetic nature of junkies. Shiftless. No ethical standards. They'd make a poor army. Unfit for recruitment, they can't even pay their bills."

Piro and Thomas headed back down the ramp, folded up their card table. Both men considering the hard realities of their vocation.

"It's that last bit that raises concerns, back at HQ. Luckily, these customers had foodstamps."

"I started that program," said the President, sitting barefoot on the curb.

Thomas tossed him a rock, gratis.

"Can I take a look at those shoes?"

Thomas walked over and bent down, demonstrating the mechanism of the original Reebok PUMP.

Watched Jerrymander examining his footwear. Felt guilty. Started clumsily unlacing his shoes.

"Here, why don't you take these, you look like you could use them more than I ever will. I don't even play basketball. To be honest, I have a closet full of them, back at home. Hardly ever wear them. Reebok keeps sending them to me. For free."

"Remarkable," said the President, querying his database for a method of converting athletic shoes into a crack pipe.

6

"I don't know, Piotr. I'm kind of tired of this shit."

"Don't lose heart," said Piro, squeezing his brother on the shoulder. "We're the best in the business, at the top of our game. We're really making a difference. Who can compete with us, even on their best day?"

Thomas pushed up his visor. Rubbed his eyes.

"I've been thinking about going solo."

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