

HANDSOME REVENGE

By

DEAN PATRICK STECKEL

A thesis submitted to the

Graduate School-Camden

Rutgers, The University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Graduate Program in

Creative Writing

Written under the direction of

Lisa Zeidner

And approved by

---

Lisa Zeidner

Camden, New Jersey, May 2012

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

### *Handsome Revenge*

By DEAN PATRICK STECKEL

Thesis Director:

Lisa Zeidner

*Handsome Revenge* is a Graphic Novel starring a vigilante Pulp-Hero in the tradition of The Shadow; The Spider; Diabolik; The Bat-Man, and The Spirit. Following the clues of the dead and dying members of a former crime organization named the “Golden Age,” The Gray Gambler finds himself hunted and taunted by the eponymous “Handsome Man.” However, The House of Justice always deals a winning hand against the forces of crime; crookdom; shysters; and those evanescent creatures that exist to wreak havoc upon the dreadful waste of a city named Hunger—but for The Gray Gambler, it is City, and he must risk life, limb, and all his agents to stop this ‘Man’ from causing more death and destruction!

## **Prologue: Welcome to the Tomorrow of Today!**

In the America that's coming, sprawling metropolises will cut away their impoverished, derelict boroughs and force them to survive for themselves, in an ugly, almost magical, America that has come for them! And just one example of this America which could only be days or hours away is a place called Hunger City. She had once been a city of gleaming post-war promises, but now stands as a testament to economic and political eugenics. Her name explained it all, as neither a single citizen nor elected official could recall her original name. Not that anyone cared much. The City was hungry, her citizens were hungry, but they carried on.

Hunger City lay along the coast of the Southern Western States, the blue waves lapping against her docks daily. A writer once said while crying into a tumbler of gin, "flowers grow stronger and higher when fed with such strong compost." When this had gotten painted on a subway wall, it was struck through with black paint. The new words were ugly four, five, up to six letter long red oaths.

To America, Hunger City was an example of how not to run, but ruin, a city. Pundits failed to capture her condition without a stream of clichés; what they gave in sound, they lacked in traceable fury. And then one day she simply disappeared from all the maps. The eyes in the sky erased all addresses from their memory banks, paper maps left it blank, while the official statement from the Government was that it was a massive military test complex. Hunger City was transformed into a fable.

But to those stuck inside her borders, Hunger City was closer to Stage III lung cancer. Everywhere one went it was a copy of the same smog and dirt—choking physically each citizen or the unlucky soul who took a wrong turn on that great American Route 66. Physical pollution was just one aspect of the slow decay Hunger projected

onto her citizens; there was a miasma of hopelessness. Spiritually speaking, Hunger City was more like an underfunded hospice. There was no comfort and one didn't come home to die in peace, because they usually never escaped in the first place.

And although it pushes the definition to its absolute limit, Hunger did possess her charms. One (and only) such charm was the Theatre district. It was the section of the city that always busy with presenting performances seemingly never ending. There were operas, dramas, picture shows: quiet dark rooms where the scared and soot faced gathered beneath the glow of people and places bigger and brighter than them. All-night diners were considered to have the precision of atomic clocks. And when sunlight pierced through the cracks of rusty clouds, the bleary eyed would trade places with the fresh out of bed'ers and the cycle would continue unabated.

To the immediate West were the city Docks, with streets that flowed in and out to the main thoroughfare of the Theatre district. Nothing distinguished it from docks all over, save that it belonged to Hunger City. Smelled of petrol, rust, and cool salty winds. Boats of every make and shape anchored here; though they would all be pasted beneath the shadows of the massive shipping tankers, like being swallowed by leviathans made of reinforced steel and stuffed inside of multicolored metal containers.

The government of Hunger City ensconced themselves to the Eastern City limits—perfect for a quick getaway (evacuation plans have been drafted). His Honorable Titus McCarthy, Mayor of Hunger City, lived in a large, sprawling white mansion atop Anderson Hill. He used a façade of luxury to conceal the heavily fortified nature of the mansion. A professional paranoid, he was 'elected' into office by the then current reigning corporation of crime, who had been "broken-up" shortly thereafter. In Hunger City, your dollar, your vote.

Most consider the Docks and Theatre district to be a make-shift City Centre. To the North and South of it were the “Residential” areas. Geography was the factor max when it came to having decent housing, like trickledown economics in dynamic action. Homes on Northside: derelict row housing like phantom galleons bobbing in the bay, left to rot while people like hordes of lice scurried up and down stairwells, commuting to jobs that paid enough to keep the beams from collapsing, the purest form of urban survival.

And the Southside? Towers, gloriously built towers that caught the sun and danced in the afternoon sky like carnival fire dancers. The higher the storey, the stronger the fire blazed, as stealing gilded plates or beams from an 8<sup>th</sup> story wasn’t in the purview of the general underworld. Welcome to Hunger City.

However, deep beneath the streets, under hundreds of feet of pavement, bedrock, and skeletal structures, beat the heart of Hunger City—The Den of The Gray Gambler. An urban legend since the first brick and mortar were laid down, The Gray Gambler operated out of this well-worn base.

It was comprised of a central room carpeted in green felt, with its walls wallpapered with all the razor edged technology that this new America offered. Directly across the entrance was a silver tube that ran from floor to ceiling: the central Station of the Secret Subway, a long and complicated series of tubes running on vacuum that took the Gambler to any and every part of the city. Behind the desk which sat foremost in the Den was a gray door that led to the Spartan sleeping quarters which contained a kitchenette and costume wardrobe. He sat now at the desk, wearing but only the gray bulletproof body suit...as if waiting for the siren’s call to action...

## **Part One: The Handsome Man.**

With a well-oiled *click*, a brass plated pocket-watch opened—half past Nine O'clock. “With all due respect Sir, why do you consult that piece of rubbish?” The voice was English and came from speakers placed with in the den. The Gambler didn't look up or away—the watch was snapped shut loudly and tossed back into a left sided drawer.

“Jev,”—he sounded like an audience member of a concert who spent the show screaming along until they coughed blood—“because it counts a different kind of time than you do.”

“Duly noted Sir, but I am receiving an incoming call”—The Gambler glanced up—“Broadcast it Jev.” The voice that came through the speakers was not the smooth voice of the phantom butler, but sharp, sullen tones.

“Dealer 86 cashing-in chips.”

“What've you got for me, 86? Good news I hope?”

Pause.

“Unidentified Player. Dead. Face mutilated beyond possible recognition. Teeth missing. Flies haloing. Alleyway between Dock warehouses 4 and 5. 86 back to Table.”

The Gray Gambler was up from the desk halfway into Dealer 86's report. Into the back room he fled, to change. Before a full body mirror he dressed, part vanity part ‘making it look right.’ He stood a little under six feet, with an athletic build that showed beneath the bodysuit; first went the gray (the “Gray” in his title wasn't misleading) stripped white button up—cotton, stain resistant—followed by trousers tailored to stretch in the vital areas; then came the braces—black and gray check—that also doubled as a harness with the utility belt that snapped into place around his waist; from the innards of

a stainless steel box he retrieved the clear gelatinous mask and struck it against his face: almost instantly it molded itself into the curves of his face, before altering them to make its wearer a stranger—gone were the bright freckles and the scar crossing diagonally across his forehead, the stubby nose—his face took on the proportions and geometry of a mid-twentieth century Hollywoodland star; now came the *other* mask, a simple black domino—like two diamonds placed longwise and connected at their ends—placed gently across the bridge of his nose, it whited out his eyes so he could see, but a stranger saw two piercing and blazing slits—he smiled as the familiar suck of wind, as the first mask attached itself and thus, brought both together; one last piece, the bowler—“Waitamin, now where did I put that damn thing agai”—he touched the top of his head and of course, there it was—“Jev!”

“Yes, Sir?”

“Explain to me for the billionth time how this damned hat pops on my head after I put on the mask?”

“Well Sir, as far back as my memory goes; the original notes on that hat went to the grave of the first Gambler. Although I am disinclined to believe in the supernatural, I suspect there might be something special about that hat that I cannot yet decipher. Perhaps the next Gambler will explain this puzzle.”

“JEV”—he roared like a roomful of shotguns—“WHAT HAVE I TOLD YOU ABOUT THAT.”

“S-so sorry Sir, I’ll do my best to improve my language upon your return.”

He moved in to the central room of the Den and slid open the door to the Secret Subway, which gave a soft *hiss* as he did so—“Set the course for STATION 11, PLATFORM 3.” A green light above the entryway and he dove forward, arms crossed and feet pointed down: a human bullet.

The Gambler streaked through the dimly lit Subway, often going miles in absolute darkness with the echo of his laughter drowning all other noise. A golden light appeared in the distance, growing ever brighter. It took seconds for the ceiling light to graze him as he was shunted down another dark mile. *There is nothing better than this, like I'm the fastest man alive*, he thought to himself. Playing in the dark, he shifted his weight as he took another turn, corkscrewing faster, faster, and faster. "STATION 11, PLATFORM 3 APPROACHING" a robotic sounding voice announced. *Just when I was getting to the fun part.*

The air pressure pushing from behind dramatically decreased, causing him to fall from the roof of the tube with crimson oaths. A half-cork to right-side himself up, he slid right into a padded bumper bringing him to a stop. Under the groan of gears, a long partition of tunnel slid away from his left. It was the salt of the air that hit him first as he rolled to the ground, followed by the sirens of tankers and the distant honking from Cavendish Boulevard, the throbbing vein of the Theatre district. He stood and brushed his trousers. *A dead body dumped in the Docks, this is new* he thought, trying to stifle a snort.

Pressing flat against the warehouse walls he made his way over to the coordinates given by Dealer Eighty-Six. He caressed the right side of the domino, turning his white lenses into miniature beams of light, and then focused down on the corpse. All thoughts sarcastic and analytic stopped as he surveyed the mess below him. In a whisper "Death claimed dominion, or at least left a message with its scythe," and swallowed hard. He shook his head side to side to clear out the waves of past foes nightmarishly coming up from memory. *Hold on to yourself and detective it.*

There was a deep breath exhaled in meditative slowness as he crouched down besides the corpse. Gingerly he reached over and secured the head in his hands and



searched the remains of the face for clues, for identification. He tapped the center of his mask and blinked hard—an image of the “face” was stored in a tiny hard-drive within the mask. A few more photos were taken of the front of the body, and then he was flipped over photographed. For purposes of convenience--for The Gambler at least--was that the corpse was a naked dump. *Well, I can cross out at least a dozen suspects. For certain the mutilation carries trademarks of a rage killing, but there are signs of precision.* The body was free of sigils, signs, runes, or any other markings. *Well, at least it's not connected to a cult or one of those fiends I've fought before. The culprit is human I'll chance to reason.* It was also free of fingers and toes. *A simple tactic to disable identification. Hmm, medical training is possible but why dump the body when you could just pay off an instructor and use it in a lab for the forensics kids. Give 'em an impossible history or something they can't slaughter up.* The mouth was like a college kid solo cup, deep and wide open, filled to the brim—only difference was this cup carried blood. It shared a similarity with the rest of the body in that the blood on its lips and gums was brown and brittle. *Probably out here for hours.* Closing his eyes, he took a gloved finger and reached into the mouth, finishing around for a clue. He went around the gums slowly at first, feeling the deep carving marks—it was not just the teeth that were removed; the killer had gone to the root. Coming up empty, The Gambler grabbed the body once more and tipped it over so that the blood splashed on his boot and (advertised no-stain!) trousers. For his effort he received freshly poured blood. *Isn't there anything?!* He thought in frustration as he balled a fist and slammed against his hip. *Relax.* Another of those trained deep breaths and refocused on the scene before him. *No trace of struggle... Wait!* He smacked his forehead laughing. *Of course not! This guy's old as hell, it'd be easier to overpower him, especially out here. But now I have*

*two leads: Our killer is younger, at most mid-thirties at a guess, and the Docks are his dumping or hunting grounds.*

Sirens off in the distance--*Oh here come the hounds*—and he was off running, down further on the Docks to the dead end adjacent to Warehouse Nine. Graffiti marked the leftmost wall, a riot of symbols meaning nothing. With measured calm, he punched the markings in a memorized sequence. Once again a partition of Hunger City wall flapped up to reveal a stop on The Gray Gambler's Secret Subway. He swung himself in, calling out "STATION DEN, EXPRESS" and was gone.

The next day passed without incident. Information and photography was uploaded from the mask to Jev's memory banks and processed. While The Gambler slept much of the day away, Jev searched, crisscross referenced, plugged every detail into every bank and came up with nothing. *A first for me, a nonexistent victim.*

Through a grimace he chewed on a protein bar while lounging on the rooftop of Warehouse Four. Twilight had just begun to race away from Hunger City, and with a quick glance behind him, he saw lights explode in the Theatre district then mushroom out to the rest of the city. He swallowed the last bit and tossed the wrapper over the ledge. *I will never eat another one of those bars again.* An hour crawled by and he was chewing on the spare bar he'd tucked into his belt. *When you need a boost, go for the goost!* *Goddamnit.* Boredom and hunger are two adversaries rarely spoken about in the circles The Gray Gambler associated.

After another hour passed he was stretching out, ready to go slumming through Northside when a panicked scream shook him awake. An elderly woman came running out of the alley in between Warehouse Six and Seven. Locked behind her was a tall, angular man.

The body of The Gray Gambler was faster than his thoughts, as he was still contemplating the constitution of a Goost bar, his fingers had locked-in the grapping hook to his hand-cannon; aiming, his eyes hawked a fire escape, he blinked a millisecond after his finger pulled back. He was airborne before the hook had even taken hold of the fire escape. Coming in a wide arc, he swung boots out and cut the line as he went into a roll. The Figure to his immediate front was the tall man, now chasing the woman with increased determination.

*I am the fastest.* Those boots beat into the pavement like a premonition of what his body planned to do in the seconds away future.

The assailant pounced on the woman, and with powerful grasp, spun her around. The Gambler could only hear dissonant phrases, nothing he could piece together or understand. The man glanced back at him with a snarl, but again, his features weren't available for capture. But he glimpsed the woman's expression of shock under a Warehouse lamp—a working one, a true rarity. She was then tossed aside like a sack full of sand that had been slit open. In that movement he pushed himself into a sprint; his hoofing not at all stealthy.

A backwards hop to halt the momentum of his own running, The Gambler dropped to his knee and cradled the woman. She let her head lazily loll until his hand supported her like a newborn. In the light of his eyes, she was in her mid-fifties, black hair with white roots beginning to show like how before a blizzard came flurries, and wearing a white tunic dress with an ever growing decoration of bright red. She wore white flats with wings attached, now sullied by the grime and the stray drops of blood. Her eyes moved in erratic patterns as did the coughing she produced, laying style Pietà.

“That little bastard.”

“Who”—she coughed and spots like paint chips of blood hit her fist—“Who the fuck do you think? The Pope?”

“You’re a spicy one, eh?”

“I’m dying you moron.”

“Who was that man?”

“An ugly little bastard, no matter how different he looks now.”

She continued to cough as the blood trickled down her cheek and stitched a sash around her collar. Perhaps it was the close onset of death, or the pain wasn’t excruciating, or she was good at faking it, but her features began to relax.

“I always thought The Gray Gambler would take me out, how ironic it is”—she took a deep breath and put a cold hand to his cheek—“that he’d try to save a loathsome sinner like me.”

“I save as I can, even you.”

“My last confessions then, Father?”

“My name is Jeanae Totspinner and I spent my life in crime. And”—with her eyes half lidded, she leaned up to his ear and whispered—“find Weston Wells.” Jeanae’s eyes suddenly widened, exposing every vein and regret she’d ever harbored; a deep breath that arced her back into his chest, released in a rattle. ‘That ugly little bastard’ was long gone. And the cold was on its way.

The Gray Gambler returned to the Warehouse skyline silent. He paused to look down at the crumpled body, growing smaller as the pallor drained away to gray. *That’s me down there.* He stood lingering there, waiting for the sounds of hounds or the fluttering of flies or carrion creatures. *“Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again,” Dylan Thomas could never have foreseen this, and if he had, what could he have*

*said? Probably the refrain. But elegies for the dead can wait for a fine morning by a better man than I.*

In to his utility belt he removed a simple looking headset, an ear attachment connected to a microphone via a long stalk. It was kept in place mostly by the first mask, like pushing into jelly. A quick tap of his left brace strap with his right hand turned him into a one man walking radio station. Another quick tap to his brace, though much lower, changed the channel. He now broadcasted on the ‘open’ channel, used primarily to contact all Dealers at once.

“Attention all Dealers, Attention all Dealers, The House requests information on Player Weston Wells. Cash-in when ready. House Out.”

He kept the channel on as he slid through the dark, his unit, his frequency powerful enough to penetrate the depths of Hunger City. Now as he fed what little information he had to Jev, he waited—sometimes the most trying aspect of investigations, wherein victims seem to be impossible to track, or to save.

“Jev.”

“Sir?”

“I let someone die tonight.”

“I’ve reviewed the photographs sir, and audio recordings.”

“And?”

“She was a criminal, Sir.”

“She had a name, Jeanae, and she was a person.”

“But still Sir, aren’t you supposed to rid Hunger City of all her evils, both physical and those...how should I say, those of a more evanescent nature?”

“Sometimes Jev, you are a goddamn cliché.”

Although Jev's intelligence was artificial in design, it was smart enough to leave The Gambler in silence.

It was a little past midnight when the first report came in over the speakers, Jev blared it at full volume out of spite—if an AI could manage that base human emotion. He jumped forward with a yell, his hands grasping on to the desk to hold steady. “Report” he called out, though his voice sounded remote.

“Dealer 52 Cashing-in chips. Weston Wells is an alias, Player is David Bendos. 52 returning to Table.”

“Dealer 17 Cashing-in chips, swept the floor with Dealer 52. Player David Bendos lives at Tawny Tower, room no. 6, 7<sup>th</sup> floor. 17 returning to Table.”

“House closed” he struggled to return to their reports, as he switched the line closed. Any further reports would be recorded and transmitted later. The Gray Gambler polished off the remains of Jeanae Totspinner that he had carried with him. Mentally he replayed his last words to her, *I save as I can, even you*. Standing before the open Subway door, he cried out “STATION 34, PLATFORM 9” and jumped into the tube with lit lenses, and closed eyes.

The Gray Gambler rocketed through an opened portal a few feet into the air. His bowler didn't move an inch nor did the belt that was slung securely against his waist. Within moments of his landing on the soft ground, the portal had locked back into place with a loud *clanking* that reverberated against the vaulted ceiling. Station Thirty-Four was in Northside Hunger City, occupying the basement of an empty and derelict row home.

Climbing the stairs, he listened for movement on the first floor. Anyone desperate enough could break through the reinforced doors and windows, though the

second floor might provide a challenge or an achievement—this was the ‘bad’ part of a ‘bad’ city after all, and it was suicide to underestimate how easily desperation transforms itself into determination.

A heavy silence permeated the hallway as he stepped on to the first floor. Holding his breath, he took a final listen. Still that silence remained, broken subtly by the release of his air. The Gambler kept this ‘safe house’ as Spartan as the rest, perhaps even more so, given its location. He passed the old wireframe bed with the weathered mattress and ascended the staircase.

The second floor had been gutted, much like that first corpse, by a fire years ago. It now was a mess of half-eaten walls, scorch-marks, and support beams. Although small, any prowling creature could capture those twin lighthouses in the smoky night. A finger caressed the underside of the domino’s right eye like wiping away a tear, or drop of rain; suddenly everything turned black and green. *Feels like a video game.*

Dead aiming preceded the recoil that felt as familiar as stretching out a muscle, followed by the grip of the hook. Attaching the gun to his belt, he leaped out of the window and swung; boots slapping against the brickwork of the four story across the way. Like winding a pocket-watch or slurping a long strand of pasta, the grappling attachment re-spooled itself, tugging The Gray Gambler to the roof’s overhang. With a strong grip and a grin, he pulled himself up and over, swinging his legs straight like some costumed Olympic gymnast.

The rooftop was a conglomeration of row houses, built a block long as a singular structure with many ‘homes’ within. He unlatched the grappling attachment, stuffing it back into its proper pouch. The hand-cannon felt significantly lighter as a result. A runaway streak of moonlight bounced off the blunt brass-plated barrel, curving around its

black maw before being holstered. And then he closed his eyes and exploded like a gazelle.

It wasn't athletic conditioning or an overabundance of arrogance, but something deeply primal. He ran arms spread wide open, towards an invisible light. *Faster, faster!* Lungs like bellows increased their production as the ruby fist that was his heart beat in rhythm. While he dreamed of freedoms and flat plains in Africa, the machine of his body calculated steps and lengths, using the memory of sight that was received by the optic nerve and transmitted to muscles.

Into the air he somersaulted, hanging above the street like a gray Christmas ornament. The jerk of the grappling hook shook him from his dreams to sight Tawny Tower. Like two lovers rushing into each other's arms, The Gambler and Tawny Tower collided. *Fuck* he thought and whispered aloud. Meditative breathing lessened the disorientation—but he'd aimed too high, and would need to repel down.

Securing his braces and belt, he shifted and spun into a downward position. Crawling down the path in between windows was perilous—he wasn't ignorant to the occasional groan from above—Apartment Six could not be reached fast enough. Meanwhile his bowler hat continued to give a gentlemanly insult to the forces of physics and logic. It continued to sit comfortably on his head while his fingers were jimmying open the kitchen window of Apartment Six, Seventh Floor.

He tumbled in, replacing gear and swept his surroundings: a few unwashed dishes; small table with only one chair, wood; a stack of envelopes. Keeping low to the ground, he cased the living room, finding nothing of significance except for an oddly shaped statue of Venus. Two rooms to the left: a bathroom that was empty, fresh water in the sink basin. Out came the hand-cannon; as he pushed himself up against the wall



adjacent to the open bedroom door. Trigger ready he spun inwards, beading a figure on the bed.

Familiar scents of the dead hit in waves the closer he edged to the figure in the bed. Like the first corpse, it had the signature of having been dead for a few hours at the very least, not much more than a day at the most. It shared one other similarity with that first corpse, being that the toes and fingers were removed—again trying to throw him off the trail. *Wait. Where's his face?* The Gambler was certain that was a question he'd never had to ask himself in his short tenure.

Weston Wells alias of David Bendos, looked up with eyes like a Great White Shark, blank, empty, and menacingly dead. He lacked eyelids among other facial tissue such as his lips. All that had been left behind was the muscle and sinew that grown pale and lifeless. The killer, who was just a bunch of adjectives attached to a knife or scalpel, hadn't worried about identification anymore, especially in the aftermath of Jeanae. However, it remain—*Well, that's...new.*

David Bendos, or rather the bloodied face of David Bendos, smiled back at The Gray Gambler from across the room. It was draped on the wall with what appeared to be nails, but upon closer inspection turned out to be slivers of broken mirror. *Writing?* He followed an arrow pointing upwards, hazarding a guess that the ink was Bendos' blood, to a sentence written in capitals, inside of a comic book style word balloon; it read: OH HONEY WATCH THAT **HANDSOME MAN!** Extra blood had been used for the bolding. *Ah-ha! A name for that bastard, The Handsome Man. What a name, why not just call yourself "All the kids at school made fu"—*he interrupted his own thought—*That's it! The first murder and here had mutilated faces, Totspinner called him an 'ugly little bastard' so they must have tormented him at some earlier point but now he must have gotten some type of plastic surgery that enhanced his features or was a complete*

*redevelopment of facial geometry. So he looks...handsome now*—while he was thinking, he retreated from the scene once again through the kitchen window. The hook pulled tight on a complex of piping that looked somewhat secure. He dove out the window, holding a death-grip on the cannon, and let the circular canister began a slow re-spooling—*So he wants to show off the work, how beautiful he's become and make it the last thing they see. Poetic in a "Nothing gold can stay" sort of way but twisted through a Hunger City House of Fun. Now the only puzzle is finding the link between all of them—* Once more up and over the lip of the squat four-story. From the belt he retrieved the headset and squashed it into the folds of his face. Tapping the brace strand once, then once again where the fabric ran tight against the collarbone he broadcasted to The Den:

“Jev”—it took a minute for a response from his English valet in the machine—  
“Sir?”

“I’m uploading right now”—he ran a finger over the ridge of his left eye until he heard a chirp—“Tell me when you get it all.”

“Receiving now, Sir.”

“Jev, can you also run a search on David Bendos and Jenny Totspinner. As far back as you can go with it, I want everything.”

“As you wish Sir. All data has been downloaded and is currently being processed. If I may make a suggestion Sir, perhaps I should run a search on Miss Totspinner’s face?”

“I thought that was obvious Jev.”

“My deep pardons, Sir.”

“It’s alright, we’re both on edge. Well, I know I am, but can you be on edge?”

“Sir, I can emulate human emotion to a certain extent however, anxiety is not within my capabilities.”

“Just have everything compiled when I get home, Gambler Out.”

He ended the broadcasting as he punched the basement wall in soft, deft movements. After seven of these, he heard the *clanking* of the portal yawning open. “STATION DEN, EXPRESS” he hollered into the opening before hopping down into it. *To-Do List: 1. Catch The Handsome Man, 2. Oil gears of Platform.* He yawned as he careened through the Secret Subway, feeling his body begin to go lax. Significant progress had been made in this case, having gone from the murder of an essentially invisible man to a clear path of crime.

*Is there no balm in Hunger City? Apparently there is and the price is buckets of blood, freshness not an issue.* Jeanae Totspinner’s last and lost gasp of life echoed less than piercing in his mind. *That Handsome Man...* That thought, that name, was the elusive and mythical balm. His invisible injuries were tended and mended inside that dark tube, sprung from the knowledge of his quarry. The Handsome Man was the name of a destination, a place of conflict and conclusion. They were inextricably linked together now, and with each step either of them took, the faster the roulette wheel of fate spun—an all-in, high stakes game The Gambler could not afford to lose.

He almost tripped stepping out of The Den Station tube, managing to catch himself on the table. The earlier laxness had blossomed into a full on weariness, as if the body demanded rest in exchange for the evening’s earlier developments. Sitting on top of the table he faced the wall-screen that had various photo-portraits in two rows. The faces of Jeanae Totspinner and David Bendos looked back at him almost unrecognizable, because these faces weren’t mutilated by blade or time—they were young, beautiful, and damned. His face scrunched under the layers of masking that preceded another yawn,

and not the first skyward stretch of his body. The Gambler's tone was subdued, in his sanctum now and the adrenaline rush having peaked, he called out for Jev.

"IS that who I think it is?" He pointed to the portrait of Jeanae with a lackadaisical flourish.

"Yes sir, this picture is from 19XX."

"Wow"—he whispered—"she certainly was a stone fox."

"Sir, my records indicate that she did not possess any features relating to a stone nor a fox. Neither did she exhibit an amalgamation of those traits"-- The Gambler groaned loudly and pinched the bridge of his nose through the black domino—"Sir, are you o-kay?"

"Yes Jev, I'm fine. "Stone Fox" is a piece of old slang I picked up from watching a movie once. It meant someone was of noteworthy beauty."

"Ah, I see Sir."

"That being settled, then I can assume the adjacent portrait is David Bendos, right?"

"Correct Sir."

"Well that takes care of two of them, fill me in Jev, what am I looking at here?"

"Sir, after running searches on Miss. Totspinner and Mr. Bendos, I was able to pull up police records and news clippings of their previous criminal activities. The rest of the portraits are from a rare snapshot of the collective, or organization"—He was cut off by The Gambler—"Okay they belonged to a gang, why do you have to be so long winded?"

"It was how I was built, Sir."

The Gambler sighed and waved him on.

“Continuing on, this gang they belonged to, they referred to themselves as ‘The Golden Age,’ or occasionally ‘The Golden Age of Crime’ or at least the newspapers did.”

“So The Handsome Man is picking off members of The Golden Age, presumably for feelings of inadequacy expressed through as an issue of vanity, which matches up with Jeanae’s calling him an “Ugly little bastard.” Based on the element of theatre I just saw, he isn’t likely to go rogue and pick off innocents. He’s taunting me and the surviving members of The Golden Age. One of these pictures is our Handsome Man”—He pushed off the table and turned his back on the photos of The Golden Age, aiming towards the bedroom when Jev stopped him—“Sir, before you retire, I was able to identify the first victim as being a one George Grits. A missing persons report had been filed, time stamped a few hours before Dealer 86 discovered his body.”

“Thank you Jev.”

“Goodnight Sir.”

The Gray Gambler stood naked in his tiny room, his costume hung up and accoutrements locked away. He reached into the container of the first mask and retrieved a thin straight razor. It traced the outline of his face, cutting loose the grip of the gelatinous mask—as it collapsed away from his skin, it released air like a fart which always made him giggle with enough nicks on his face to show for it. Within a few minutes the mask had been cut away and returned to its special box, along with razor. One of the benefits of an all seeing valet was being able to fall into bed and not need to worry about turning off the lights.

And although he weakly fought against it, the tides of sleep kept pulling him away from the woken world. Perhaps it all connected back to that primal aspect that coordinated body and mind, dreams and reality; and gauged progress and failure.

Whatever it was, he didn’t dwell on it, if not think about it at all. For The Gray Gambler,

the body was the medium which carried the message of his mind that crime would always lose in the House of Justice!

## **Part Two: Criminal World.**

The Gray Gambler stood before the illuminated wall-screen, well rested and alert. He traced out three Xs along the faces of George Grits, Jeanae Totspinner, and David Bendos. This left the surviving members of The Golden Age as: Benny Cards, Curtis Steward, and Henry Halston. *That's odd; they've all got public addresses and numbers. And Benny lives not too far from here at all. Might as well check the place out, hopefully I'll have gotten to him first.*

He turned toward the entrance to the Secret Subway, whose door felt incredibly underused as of late, and called out with a renewed vigor, "STATION 1, PLATFORM 4." With a leap he was blasting through bedrock faster than a bullet. There was a hint of melancholy in this trip since the Station wasn't far enough away to allow a sustained amount of corkscrewing or other enjoyments of the system.

And in this darkness he trained his inner eye not on the images of the past days, but on hypothetical scenes straight out of a Grand Guginol: men nailed to boards, their skin flayed off entirely while their blood was used as ink; an audience lusting out for more and more of this hyper-real ultra-violence, unashamed; unconscious; they wanted to extend beyond the frame of narrative, characters introduced to be stuffed into cramped spaces like refrigerators; *Blood, blood! Gallons of the stuff! That's what the audience wants!* This is how he lied to himself, to keep the stomach from contorting into Army Special Forces knots. *The Handsome Man is a piece of trash, mocking his victims; transforming murder into a medium to mock art. I've dealt with this kind of fiend before, but Bendos' murder was a fluke, our Man here doesn't have the intelligence beyond a single mocking; but it's his arrogance that is strongest. I just hope he left Benny Cards with his face attached.*

He heard the smooth compression of air as a partition of building slid away before him, tossing him out in to an alley way within the midst of the Theatre district. A light rain had passed while he was conjuring nightmares underground, and he felt it as his boots landed square in a giant puddle of black water. He give a slight shrug—no tear, no stain trousers—and retreated in to the shadows of the buildings, not desiring to be caught unawares by the stray Hound or passer-by. The Gambler crept against brick façades that slowly transformed into sturdier and more expensive materials. Cards' apartment was on the corner of Cavendish Boulevard and 7<sup>th</sup>. *An expert card cheat living on the mainline? I don't hate this for some reason, maybe because he was just sleight of hand man? All this light however, I do hate, however again, I can deal*—Stolen from slots in the fabric of his right-side brace were three thin pellets, solid and colorless. A quick flick against the ground, and they each gushed a geyser of gray smoke, bellowing out of the alleyway in both directions like a two headed dragon. Grinning, he equipped his hand-cannon with the grappling hook, took aim, and rose into the air like a child's imagination sees shapes in the clouds.

The Gambler hadn't intended to make it a habit of entering through kitchen windows, but here he was again, though Benny Cards kept his clean—a vague feeling of relief touched his spine. It was an open floor plan with the kitchen area sweeping into both a large living room and foyer. Had there been a “welcoming party,” he would have been filling the basin with blood. Instead it was dead quiet which cramped The Gambler's stomach only slight—*Maaan, I really hope I get shot at, even cursed at would be good*—while muscle memory recalled the last incident inside Bendos' abode and had naked cannon drawn with body pressed tight against the wall. The door to the bathroom was cracked open with a light drawn. A missed integer somewhere in his body's mathematics triggered the best boot forward---*Empty. Of Course*--he was interrupted by



a smokers flavored cough followed by a yell from the bedroom, “I’m in here, you got the wrong room.”

The Gray Gambler thought *Quad the Fuck* to himself as he lowered his hand-cannon and backed out into the hallway. His eyes narrowed beneath the black domino, whose tiny twin lighthouses had been active for a long while, “Identify yourself!”

“Benny Cards, who you?”

“The Gray Gambler.”

“Heh, wasn’t expecting that.”

“Mister, you’re the second person to say that lately.”

“Lemme guess, you got Jeanae, David, and Georgie?”

“I didn’t get to them in enough time. Jeanae died in my arms”—he was interrupted by the voice in the darkened bedroom—“What about Ol’Georgie Grits?”

“He...I mean...” The Gambler gave up, allowing his notes to hang in the air before falling like snowflakes. He edged closer into the room now, securing himself right against the doorframe and focused on the hunched over figure caught in his lights: mahogany colored bath robe with patches stitched in to the elbows; a pointed cranium polka dotted with liver spots the color of money from a freshly dug up grave—he was old, and the hunched over body was just an accessory of age.

“I read in the pape’ they found a body done up real good up on the Docks a few nights ago. Ah that bahstard had to get himself all mixed up.” Benny Cards raised his arms slow and high, spreading out his fingers wide: they were empty and reflected the aged appearance of the back of his head—“See, I’m not hot, time’ll do that to you, you know”—The Gambler, caught off guard by his calm self-deprecation, chuckled—“Ah, laughter from a child’s mouth. How long, actually let me get a good look at you”—he stood up from the bed without much of a sound except for the signposts of cracking

joints. Benny Cards internal body armor had malfunctioned over the years, as it now sat resting on his stomach— in more objective terms, he was a fat man with the skinny hands of a card shark. He cheated Age out of giving him bad eyesight so he had to laugh in the low light saying, “You’re shorter than I remember.”

*This case only gets weirder and weirder* he thought, sitting at the kitchen table holding a cup of hot tea. Benny took the seat across from him before flicking the wall switch which was in his reach. The Gambler was hesitant to sip from the mug, *Could be poisoned.* Benny sighed mid-head shake and reached over the table, taking the mug from his hands; shot him a look of elderly disapproval, and took a large swig before pushing it back into The Gambler’s hands. “Now drink your damn tea.” Like a scolded grandchild, he did as he was told. *Yep, this is definitely going to be a gut buster for the next Gambler.*

“So, are you here to kill me?”

“I’ve been getting that too.”

“You’ve got a reputation.”

“Nevera guessed.”

“At least you still got a smart mouth. I guess that’s part of the package. You remember me at all?” The Gambler shook his head in-between sips of the tea, which turned out to be damned good. “Sorry. I’m still a little green.”

“Figured as much.”

“Haha, what gave it away?”

“Believe it or not, you’re a lot more polite than the other one. He’d have just beaten me up before getting a word out. Your parent’s raised you right”—he was interrupted by a quieter voice—“I don’t have any parents, I was orphaned when...when I

became all of this,” and The Gambler flourished with his hands, as if they were swinging doors violently pushed open.

“So are you one of the ‘I must avenge my dead parents’ types?”

“Oh! Not at all, it’s...hard to explain, even I don’t get all of it myself actually.”

“No?”

“Not quite. From what I can remember, which is just about all I could understand; when I took on the mantle of The Gray Gambler, I was, um, how to put this in modern English, ahhh”—“Say it already!”

“Hold on! I’m thinking!”

“Well we don’t have all goddamn night. Because if you ain’t here to kill me, then another sonofabitch out there is, and I’d like some time to prepare if you don’t mind”—  
He downed the last of his mug, stood up from the chair and went over to the pot, and refilled both mugs.

“Okay, I got it. So I pretty much ceased to exist when I became The Gray Gambler, like all my family, friends, almost every aspect of my life was written out of existence. I mean, I can still remember studying English in college; goofing off doing stupid shit; or going to my grandmothers’ for Christmas dinner as a kid. Pretty much everything that makes me *me*, I can sort of remember. But when it comes to becoming this, everything gets hazy. By rough estimate, I’ve been The Gray Gambler for three years. And if my watch is any indication, I don’t have much more time.”

“So that’s how it goes, eh. Knock one down, another takes its place. When I was a kid, they said the same thing about Chinamen, though apparently that isn’t the proper nomenclature. Looks like we both got a raw deal. You afraid of dying?”

“Not really.”

“No?”

“I mean, I know when it’ll be, when my pocket-watch hits midnight.”

“Is that when that...*thing* comes off its train?”

“The Thin White Duke of Hell? Apparently. But we’ve got off track, pardon the pun.”

“Down to business, eh?”

“I need to know everything about The Golden Age.”

“Christ my Lord in Heaven, I haven’t thought about The Golden Age in decades. You weren’t a moan in your mother’s throat when we were at our prime. Wait, you said they got David too?”

“Yeah, fucking ghastly”—The Gambler leaned back in his chair and took a few hearty swigs at his tea—“had his face done up on the wall with a message written in his blood for me.”

“What’d it say?”

“Something like “Oh Watch That Handsome Man” or something. Pretty much that’s how I’m detecting him, “The Handsome Man,” what a fucking lark”—he paused a moment, eyes clamped into hard edges—“what did you put in this batch? Slow acting poison?” He was answered by a hearty laugh followed by hard punch-up of coughs—“Oh yeah, 50 years old brandy, best poison out there.” The Gambler smiled and shook his head slightly, raising his glass in mock salute.

“Hm, all you really need to know about is Curtis Steward, Henry Halston, and I. The rest is just rubbish for the pulps. But first a refill,” Benny got up again and walked over to the kettle, filling his mug with half tea half brandy. “All set.”

They had moved into the living room area, where Benny had spread out books of newspaper clippings, photographs—black and white, and color—but he flipped open to a

yellowing dollar bill. “That’s the first piece of bread I ever stole from a job, almost caught a slug for it too.” Benny smiled at that, exposing gaps in his teeth like prison bars. “There’s not much I can tell you concerning myself, keep in mind kid, I’m still considered a “wanted person of interest” in about half a couple hundred investigations,” he said as he threw up his hands. “Besides, I wasn’t involved in the real dirty, just rigging numbers games and running a nice racket in Southside”—The Gambler interjected—“Never touched the Northside?!”

Benny Cards flashed a snarl of indignity. “Never, never. I did my best to give back to that place. I’m pretty sure my house was burnt down during the 19XX riots, but she never left me.”

He moved on, flipping pages back and forth until he found “Henry Halston, good with a gun, that one. All he’d have to do was twitch and a guy’d be dead with a slug between the eyes. Just between you and me, sometimes I’d slip him something for his nerves before a job. Because God help us if an alarm goes off and bullets start fucking popping off. Not good business obviously. I mean we all had designated jobs in the group, helped keep things straight, especially if someone was trying to throw their balls around”—interruption—“Like who?” Benny just smiled, gave another of his signature shrugs and pointed down the opened page to a name: Curtis Steward.

“But he’s just a kid there.”

“Yeah, an ugly little sonofabitch who bungled everything he did.”

“Then why keep him around?”

“Let me count the reasons: Fall guy; driver; faker; good at diversions, and all other sorts of little shit jobs. I almost feel bad for the guy.”

“Why’s that?”

“We used to mock him all the time for being pretty damn ugly.”

“Ya know Benny; you’ve given me all sorts of perfect information tonight.”

“You don’t say.”

“Benny, how’d you like to work for me?”

“Run that by me again?”

“Work for me, become one of my Dealers. Travel to all the big casinos, run some tables, keep an ear to the crime beat and report in when I call or you get a tip. No more, no less.”

Benny sat there on the blue vinyl couch and looked across the room at the large picture windows. He’d ignored them since The Gambler interrupted his wait for death, but now with this offer at hand, he took in the lights. Since this was the very heart of the Theatre district, a kaleidoscope of colors was being ejaculated into the living room, almost as if the two of them were thrown in to a Technicolor ocean. Beautiful, one of them whispered.

“None of that secret handshake business, right?”

The Gray Gambler laughed and dug into a tiny pouch on the back of his belt. He retrieved and handed over to Benny a solid gray poker chip. “Take this to the cashier at The Black Sails casino, and the Dealer will take it from there.”

“What if this ‘Handsome Man’ gets to me first?”

“You have my word.”

“Gambler, before you go”—Benny’s voice slowed to a stop, a hint of appreciation broke through his tough-guy posturing for a brief second—“I have access to the roof, probably be easier,” he smiled as they shook hands, and The Gambler left.

He walked out through the rooftop access door—*How the hell did I miss this before?*—and hid behind it. The headset apparatus was jammed into his face urgently

and the double-taps upon his brace to broadcast. “Attention all Dealers, Attention all Dealers. Player Benny Cards is now Dealer 59. All Dealers within the vicinity of the Theater district are to be on alert and ensure he makes his way to the Table unmolested”—he kept the broadcast signal live as he performed acrobatics along the tops of the ritzy Theatres: cartwheels in golden spotlights; black flips highlighted by pulsating red neon windmills; shuffling in between humming power generators; grappling across wide intersections on cord made invisible by light pollution: a child tugged on his mother’s hand to get her attention but she didn’t react in time to see the incredible flying man. The Theatre district was a photoshopped Technicolor render of a veldt, and The Gray Gambler gazelled through the colors, the lights, and the life that bit into his costume like mechanical predators.

He had made it to the edge of the Theatre veldt, where the heavy glow of lights and sirens solidified into a thick soup. Looking up from the rooftop of a meager five story shack of a Theatre—notable for promising a production of **MARATHON** that always got pushed back—The Gray Gambler spoke in to the wind coming from between the massive towers which stood motionless before him: “The shadow of the dome of pleasure, floated midway on the waves; where was heard the mingled measure from the fountain and the case. It was a miracle of rare device, a sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice.” His repose was interrupted by a transmission coming clear in to his ear: “Dealer 22 Cashing-in. Excellent usage of Coleridge, however plans to erect an apparatus of a “dome”—mostly to keep the rest of the City out, I may add—willn’t be ready for least five years anon.”

“Dealer 22, thank you for the update, but I am going to need you, along with Dealers 54, and 08. I’ve got a date with one Curtis Steward, who’s last listed address is

your Bertolt Building's penthouse, correct?" He waited for a moment as the question lingered in transmission.

"Dealer 54 Cashing-In, yes, he's on the register, but according to Dealer 08, he's not currently in his room. House is recommended to take the front door. Dealer 54 returning to Table."

The Gambler tapped off and climbed down the fire escape on to the street below. *Act casual....Just a dapper man who belongs here, yes, no doubt about that.* He didn't keep his head too high, nor too low; stomach relaxed and braces tightened for misdirection; hands held tight at the hip, no swinging or thumbing of the pocket; and always move out of the way when an expensive looking person is marching towards you. *Good thing I can lie through my skin and teeth* he thought, walking out of the darkened alley.

Bertolt Building was two blocks deep into Southside Hunger City and for once he wouldn't have to take the roof or the windows. This is where Cavendish Boulevard became Peecham Street and all the rules changed. But The Gambler was a technical kid so as a gaggle of go-getting girls in their fresh cut fashions—perhaps too fresh, as their furs still looked ready to attack—neared him. *Praise be I've fallen with no pride to break my fall.* He shuffled into the street, doffing his bowler as they passed him—it wasn't for them he acted lower, it was for something *else*.

Because hidden in the eaves and behind the fake plastic trees—arranged along the street and intersections in what was considered a fashionable minimalistic style by, as The Gambler called them, "Those who sit above Us in Shadow" also known as fashion magazine editors—were the esteemed agents of The Clock and Lantern Security Firm. Passing a parked car the color of brass, the color of his hand-cannon, he held his breath. Two noises: The dynamic beat of his heart and the whine of coiled springs and hydraulic



pressures released like *clockwork*. *Please please please please please don't bother me.*

Hired from a metropolis further East, The forces of Clock and Lantern patrolled Southside with ruthless efficiency. *Everyone loves a sharp dressed man, right?!* And although it came as no surprise, the sight of Dealer Twenty-Two, with his powerful rigid build, was able to calm his edge. “Always a pleasure Dealer 22” he spoke as he doffed his bowler.

“And to you as well Sir,” Dealer Twenty-Two replied, giving his head a little bit of a bow while holding open the door. “Dealers 08 and 54 have informed me that everything is in order, and to just take the elevator straight to the top.” The Gray Gambler nodded and entered the lobby of Bertolt Building.

She was naked and glistening and bolted to the wall. She was named “Promethea,” a gift from the original financiers, and presented at the grand opening. Promethea stood upon a base fashioned in the shape of hands, while a chain wrapped around her waist: the artisans casted a proud face upon her, in defiance of the chained and pained language the rest of her body spoke. Her eyes were the color of money, two sparkling emeralds cut into perfect ovals. The Gray Gambler paused to look up at her; Promethea looked toward an empty sky.

In the shadow of Promethea, the lobby felt small and distant like god. *I'm safe now.* There were a series of elevators to the far left of the lobby, while two staircases flushed up from the floor like wings along the wall. The main desk sat directly across from the elevator bank, along the right most wall and situated under a large painting done *Art Deco* style of a knight playing chess with Death—they were in stalemate. Dealer Fifty-Four typed idle faced at the desk, and had not she pointed to an already open

elevator, she would have remained quite invisible. A quick doff and The Gambler jaunted over to the bank.

Before entering he looked back over at the lobby: hardwood flooring stained bright red—*must be from Promethea's wounds, a woman like that wouldn't weep from agony*—what was not red or silver was black: from couches to chairs, black cushions to lacquered legs. It was all quite macabre. He shook his head free from these thoughts and pressed the green penthouse button. A gentle *hiss* and he felt the formless caress of gravity upon his shoulders. *All the utility of flight without any of the pleasure.*

With a *Ding!* the elevator doors opened, allowing in music piped in from hidden speakers. From the first step out to the last note he heard, The Gray Gambler knew what to expect: A child lacking in taste, joy, and consumed with an overwhelming sense of mastery over power. He didn't bother creeping down the purple carpeted hallway, or keeping a hand close to his hip; Benny Cards and his tea provided more of a threat than this joker. The heavy oaken door with authentic gold work swung noiselessly open upon his approach. He spoke loud, "Much appreciated Dealer 08." The sconces flickered three times in rapid succession. The Gambler smiled.

The inside of Curtis Steward's penthouse resembled an obese child who had been stuffed with gold and gaudy trinket, then split open down the middle. Everything looked too slick, too shiny, *too new* to touch. The Gambler was worried more about catching some designer STD than a stream of lead. *I wish somebody would make an attempt on me here, even I feel skan*—his expression rocketed towards an almost manic state of excitement in finding a stainless steel chair in the ultra-lux kitchen. He planted it facing the doorway backwards, and hung on it waiting.

*Down to two. Every sign points to Curtis, that much is given. However, I haven't heard a negative word—hell; I haven't heard a damn thing about this Halston guy either. I sure hope he's not dead. Find out soon enough, won't we?*

The Gambler's definition of soon is debatable, as the second hour of waiting approached and then waved goodbye. He stopped checking the time overlay on the lenses of his mask after that, but his thoughts wandered around lost, like a child in a park. *I wonder what Yassen's up to over in Hogarth City? Probably playing Crow Jane while he wages his one man holocaust against super-crime. I'd call him, but giant fucking robots are about ten feet outside my comfort zone. Shit, knowing him, he's probably heard all this. Fuck, now I have another thing to worry about after I stitch this Handsome Man up.*

The heavy door slowly opened as his lips spread into a grin. He just yawned, bored, and waiting for Curtis to do *something*. Turning on the lights was not what he expected of him, but it was movement at least. When The Gambler got his first full-on look of his quarry, his instinct was to laugh. However, years of training captured the guffaw before it could escape his lips.

“WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?!” The Gray Gambler's smile died like a popped balloon. *Uh oh, we've got a badass here.* Blinking, he took in the full aesthetic assault of Mr. Curtis Steward: tight black vinyl button-up with matching latex pants that gave The Gambler too much information for his eyes; combat boots spray painted black with **EAT SHIT** lettered in red on the right and left toe respectfully; the red overcoat was made of heavy rubber; spiked hair, though it appears his stylist lacked the heart to mention his extreme case of thinning hair; *Mirror shades? What is he trying to be, eh? A time-traveler from a dead genre? Oh boy, here comes the gun—*Sure enough, Curtis

drew on him, a 9mm automatic decorated with chipped chrome finish and cheap Chinese dragon designs—*CALLED IT! Now try not to be sarcastic with this one.*

“Just your friendly neighborhood Gray Gambler of course.”

“Don’t know any Gray Gambler. I do know about a gray spot in front of me in a few seconds.”

“You’re Curtis Steward, right?”

“Well who’s asking?”

“We just went over this not even a second ago.”

“Yeah well maybe you should jog my memory.”

*He can’t be for real.*

“Or how about you just answer my questions.”

*Oh c’mon, if you’re going to put a gun to my head at least hold it right.*

“Give me a good reason not to pull this trigger, because I’ve got a caseload of ‘em tellin me to paint the walls with your brains.”

“Seriously?”

“Don’t get smart with me.”

“Ahhh well,” he paused and brushed the barrel away from his forehead with a gentle wave of his hand, and continued speaking: “hate to be *that* guy, but I’ve yet to go beyond a passionate disinterest, much less get smart with you.”

Curtis took a step back and re-aimed at The Gambler with a proper stance and an improved attitude.

“Yes! Now we’re finally making progress here.”

“That’s the proper way to hold a gun, because otherwise you would have broken your wrist and only given me traumatic injuries instead of killing me.”

“Yeah well I was just testing you.”

“For what?”

“If you were cool enough.”

“Wait what?”

“Yeah I only keep around the best of the best; lucky you ain’t dead like the rest.”

*It’d be a goddamn shame if this forty year old twerp was our killer. For the sake of their dignity please let it be somebody else.*

“Alright, “Gray Gambler,” we’ll chat a little here and then I’ll grant you the pardon of trespassing.”

“Oh thank you so much, Mr. Curtis.”

“Now start talking or I start shooting.”

“Yes sir, on the double sir.”

“Now, why are you here?”

“I thought you wanted to know who you were talking to.” Curtis swung his arm left and fired off a shot in to the wall, dusting The Gambler was white and gray plaster. He spit out a glob of plaster of Gambler at the feet of Curtis. *Sound and Thunder signifying nothing but a childish tantrum.*

“I’m The Gray Gambler. No alias, it’s the real McCoy.”

“Fine. Now, why are you here?”

“Just wanted to make a friendly house call. You belonged to The Golden Age, right?”

“What do you want?”

*Of course, dodge and feign ignorance.*

“Your old comrades have been getting picked off almost daily. Pretty ghastly too.”

“Those ugly bastards? Good for ‘em.”

“Do I sense some resentment?”

“Yeah, I resent I didn’t get to see them die.”

“Must have been some fun times back then.”

“Is that really why you came? I read the papers you know.”

*And I’m the son of god.*

“Well did you know that you’re next on the list?” That caused him to lower his gun only slight, but enough to betray his dealer of ultra-violence façade. *Oh, what’s that?* The Gambler had forgotten that his mask was recording; scanning the environment, finding suspiciousness—strange residues coating the hands of Curtis.

“Yeah well, any ‘Handsome Man’ that shows up will get what’s coming to him, a solid bullet between his eyes.” The Gray Gambler decided this was a perfect time to leave he thought, standing slowly with hands raised. “Very good, now turn around”—The Gambler felt the press of the barrel into his lower back, and the stale bellow of Steward’s dirty breath. He was paraded through the outside corridor and in to the opened elevator door. “Now don’t let me ever catch you again.”

“Stay safe, Mr. Steward.”

“Better you than me. I’ve got all the protection I need”—and the gun was shaken to prove its existence. And as the door closed on The Gray Gambler, he managed to squeak out before they sealed, “Be seeing you.”

He doffed his hat at Promethea and hit the street with a slap. Internally he was involved with a fisticuffing between a hard edge anxiety of being caught beneath a Lantern’s light and the adrenaline rush of knowledge—*Curtis is The Handsome Man, I’m almost one hundred percent certain now, every sign post points towards him, but Halston has to be checked out.* The Gambler’s meditative breathing washed in automatic, doffing

his hat at each tree; each sweet hearted couple gallivanting through rich infinite lives and infinite cocktails carried along the streets of Southside Hunger City by notes of blue music piped out from glitz clubs and The Gray Gambler could not help but feel his heart leap at these sights and sounds. *An impossible dream, an unreachable star.* His pace picked up while he swam through these dreams of an easy, comparatively quiet life. Too soon he was outside the Southside mini-city limits. He silenced his thoughts.

“Attention all Dealers, Attention all Dealers. Player Curtis Steward is now under House suspicion. Dealers within Southside are to be extra cautious, stay to your Table but monitor his actions if possible. Players Clock and Lantern are not to be alerted. Cash-out between yourselves, report back in two weeks. House out.” The Gray Gambler disabled his broadcasting unit as he swung in to the open partition of wall along the backside of the Radiopolis—the major radio and television station of Hunger City, the only one in fact—and pulled it closed with a slam. “STATION 34, PLATFORM 03” he yelled out into the screaming dark.

As he moved through the Secret Subway, he felt a familiar twist of the gut like a baker handling pliable dough too strongly; and although his eyes were opened, he could not help but view horrors from the worst expectations. Like those scenes from his hypothetical ‘Handsome Man’ play in Grand Guginol style, The Gambler added even more details, fleshing out the horrors: Curtis as Herr Mozart, conducting ultra-violence with a wand of thigh bone laughing in staccato as the instruments of destruction continued their frenzy of reducing his victims to nothingness; the childish cruelty unchained, tiny fists pounding on a shiny green button labeled **TURBO** to increase the frequency of their pain; shearing off their faces with scissor arms crusted with rust; new, ugly faces stitched with golden thread that gleamed under the spot lights of the stage; The

Handsome Man presents “A Requiem Mass for Hunger City’s Golden Age,” with the crowd eliciting such strong reactions that they tore themselves to pieces, adding their own carnage to the performance. *A paranoid with an incredible inferiority complex is capable of more than just these nightmares I see with open eyes. I do not believe in God, but I hope nothing like that has happened to Henry Halston.* Perhaps the strain of this case was getting to him, or perhaps experience informed his memory.

There was a small inkling inside him that right now, on the very dark edge of Northside, inside of an apartment that resembled a phantom galleon named the Mary Celeste, Harry Halston was neither dead nor alive. He existed in a liminal state of non-being and being. *I am going to open the box and decide through my action if Henry lives or dies. But he might be dead already, and I’m only here to testify. Either way.....* Oh how he wished for the adventure that first night promised him. This was not what he expected: a head first rush through inner demons and face-to-face with monsters that prowled Hunger City streets. *Why, why does this disturb me when I have seen so much worse?* On the surface it was an impossible question, but as he neared the station—this time it was the muscle memory of his lungs (to The Gray Gambler, everything was a muscle, every part of his body part of a machine that he haunted)—it slowly dawned upon him: The Handsome Man—Curtis Steward—was no man, no adult, he was a child. The Gray Gambler had never killed a child. The Subway ejaculated him up through a portal in a dead-end just in time to be caught in the debris cloud of a massive explosion.

Were it not for the gelatinous mask, he would have choked or suffocated on the stray detritus of brick, wood, mortar and possible human remains. There was a funny feeling along the left side of his chest that throbbed fierce and fiery with each breath. Climbing to his feet was taxing but not impossible. This was the address of Henry Halston, past tense thought with emphasis. *He didn’t live alone. He lived in a boarding*



*house. The fire evaporates the blood from all the occupants. There was nothing I could do. I would, was, will always be too late for Henry and the rest. Do I have the heart to avenge these people upon a child tantruming inside the machine of an adult body? It's just not The Golden Age anymore. Everyone in Hunger City is a little person to Curtis Steward, the ugliest person I've ever seen.*

The Gray Gambler punched open the portal gingerly, each contact caused the fire inside his chest to flare up behind his eyes. Coughing only fed it kindling as he jumped down into the tube, straining, “STATION DEN, EXPRESS.” He thought a corkscrew or five would help improve his mood. He was unprepared for just how wrong he was as the roar which ricocheted throughout the Secret Subway testified. Further evidence was collected when he stumbled out of the tube inside The Den. Weakly, “Jev, I need you medical opinion on this,” and The Gray Gambler stripped down to his waist, revealing an ugly black and purple tattoo that only seemed to grow as the minutes past.

“Sir, it would appear that you have either bruised or fractured a rib...or two.”

“Dammit, I was afraid of that.”

“You should rest, Sir.”

“Already ahead of you Jev, got Dealers on a two week surveillance mission.”

“On whom?”

“Curtis Steward—he’s our Handsome Man.”

“I see. What will you do in the meantime Sir?”

“Sleep, meditate, and prepare for the end of his story. Take your time downloading off the mask, I’m in no rush to confront him just yet—best way to deal with a paranoid is to ignore them.”

“Then what, Sir?”

“Obliterate them” The Gray Gambler whispered and entombed himself within the room behind The Den.

### **Part Three: Grand Guginol in a House of Wolves.**

Two weeks went by before The Gray Gambler emerged from his internal exile. *The bird around my neck is slipping.* “Jev, Play all reports that matter.” The Den hummed in response and playback logs followed:

“Dealer 22 Cashing-in, Player Curtis Steward has been talking nightly walks around Southside, possible Clock and Lantern protection, speculation on this Dealer’s part. Dealer 22 returning to Table.

Dealer 08 Cashing-in, Player Curtis Steward checks his locks every hour on the hour, has placed furniture against his windows in an attempt to barricade. Leaves only at night and has a bodyguard check each room before he enters. Dealer 08 returning to Table.

Dealer 54 Cashing-in, Player Curtis Steward returns with two men nightly, one remains in lobby beneath Promethea while the other follows him up to his room. Can confirm that they are Clock and Lantern. Dealer 54 returning to Table.

Dealer 86 Cashing-in, Player Curtis Steward frequents the House of Wolves. I can see him from the balcony. Is intoxicated. Two Clock and Lantern. Boasted that he

was untouchable. Crime King of Hunger City. Proceed with Caution. Dealer 86 returning to Table.”

*Drunk on power bought by arrogance and paranoia. Excellent. Time to roll the die.* The Gray Gambler’s somber thoughts hovered around him as though he were caught in a fog. Although the reports had been piped over the speakers, Jev had reloaded the portraits of The Golden Age onto the wall-screen. He took an already gloved finger and **X**’ed out the face of Henry Halston; Drew an **O** around the face of Curtis, and a **D** over Benny’s. “Jev, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course, Sir.”

“What was the face you had before you were born?”

“I don’t understand, Sir.”

“You know, before you were programmed, what did your face look like?”

“Sir, I don’t have a face.”

“I haven’t taken off this mask off in two weeks.”

“Is that healthy?”

“I don’t know Jev, but I’m still alive and I remember the face and the name I had before I became The Gray Gambler.”

“But Sir, I thought you remembered all of that.”

“Yes, but now it is crystal clear. I spent three hundred and thirty six hours staring at a white circle I painted on the wall. And everything came back clear. Funny enough, it wasn’t very exciting, whole lot of nothing haha.”

“Sir, are you afraid?”

“Vi et animo.”

“I was unawares you spoke the language Sir.” The Gambler flashed a smile that closed his eyes. “It was one of those funny moments back there”—he jerked a thumb behind—“I was able to remember some of it.”

“Are you that scared, truthfully, Sir?”

“Vi very universum vivus vici. Now fire up the Subway, I have an appointment to make.” The Gambler grinned style devilish and as he heard the violent thrust of air coming from the door to the Secret Subway, he roared triumphant “STATION 13, PLATFORM 03.” And laughing like a manic street preacher proclaiming the end is here, he leaped into the dark. *I will obliterate those who would cause injustice to spree and infect and corrupt. I must extinguish the Clock and Lantern. I shall endure.* He was taking breaths like those preparing to sleep a thousand years in darkness; and hung his arms loose upon his chest in the dark.

“Dealer 86, report” he spoke into the headset after sliding out of a partition within the basement of the House of Wolves. The ground was tiled and the sound of his boots bounced around like a runaway rubber ball. It was an odd moment for him, making noise in a crowded environment. This was not a time for stealth and shadows, or cowardice. Even down here in the basement, The Gambler could hear a commotion going on up above. It sounded like the gates of the Zoo had been blown and the animals launched in to their only opportunity of freedom, accompanied by the music of klaxons.

“Dealer 86 Cashing-in. Fire Alarm Triggered. Player Curtis Steward remaining with Clock and Lantern body guards. Jackknife freshly sharpened. Occupants have mostly exited the building. Returning to Table.”

*Oh no. Who do I worry about more? Dealer Eighty-Six or Curtis?* His boots slapped up the stairwell, knocking fleeing waiters out of the way like lightweight bowling

pins. The Gambler wasn't expecting a cordial reception to take place, but with Dealer Eighty-Six involved, things were going to accelerate towards "violent" to "ultra-violence" in the flash flick of his black colored jackknife blade.

Trusting one's instincts is considered a good rule. Although it may keep one safe or secure in perilous situations, this time it failed dramatically. For when The Gambler pushed through the frosted glass kitchen room doors, what he found was a ballet of chaos. Those waking nightmares of imagined Grand Guginol spectacles were being played out in front of him. The cast of this particular tragedy was Dealer Eighty-Six, and two Clock and Lantern agents dispatched from Hogarth City as "protection" for Mr. Steward.

Although the balcony had been reported as cleared, it now was filled with drunk and eager spectators cheering on the dancing below them—even The Gray Gambler stood transfixed by the carnage before him: Curtis was taking the occasional shot at Dealer Eighty-Six without much care for anyone else in his distorted sight while the two hired agents from Clock and Lantern Securities Inc, standing in their brown shirts and slacks dwarfed Dealer Eighty-Six. He made no noise as he sprang himself vertically, the green lights reflecting off of his studded vest and gloves made him look like a green fireball racing from the ground; hitting his apex, he plummeted down on to the shoulders of the nearest Clock and Lantern, taking it to the floor.

"86!" There was no time for proper titles, just enough for the short distances between them. A studded shining glove flipped a thumb skyward as he leaped forward and under the swaying hand of the one still standing agent. Although he kept his face hidden beneath the hood, his voice, like sirens hooked up to a jerryrig of stereo equipment and portable boom boxes, betrayed his intent, "Hah hah hah! Here I am

juggernauts! Pick clean my bones by all means please! If you can catch that which isn't there!" Eighty-Six increased the tempo of his assault, dancing to the symphony inside his mind, conducting the black blade jackknife to spring to life with a vocal *sprang*, and dug it hilt deep in the shoulder of the Agent. In a rain of foul fluid Eighty-Six swung off, wrapping spider thin like fingers around the throat of the Agent, and spat aloud "It's not murder if it's not alive," then, as if by magic, Eighty-Six held his jackknife against the thick sharkskin like artificial flesh, and carved deep into the throat.

Foul liquid hosed out, pressured high enough to drench the attentive crowd along the balcony's edge. *All my nightmares have come to life and are playing out before my eyes. And I am responsible.* Even with this admission, The Gray Gambler stood paralyzed by the ghastly horror performance that was entering its second act. *This isn't real.* Eighty-Six hadn't stopped with merely carving the throat open, no, the jackknife had gone through the metal work completely. You see, Clock and Lantern agents were a form of clockwork men, made of gears and grease, fueled by a noxious concoction best described as the bastard child of napalm and agent orange—but still, the crowd called out for more, more, more!

Young pale faced go getters sat squashed next to elderly matrons with hats that covered and collected that brackish, blackish artificial blood from the floor below; howling in incoherency, the audience formed a sinister menagerie that attempted to overreach their station and become a chorus by tearing and biting, spitting and sputtering out words and phrases in a call and response to the scene below. The Gray Gambler glanced behind and wondered if it wouldn't be a better event for all to die in a random, yet merciful bombing. Yet he remained silent, an ugly sensation chugging through his mindscape to see what the next act of this all too real Grand Guginol would provide him with, along with a condemnation. *Is not taking action actually an action itself?*

Eighty-Six held up, by blackened blonde strands of hair, the freshly decapitated head of the agent. By this time however, its companion—still intact and furious, if such creatures possessed those emotions—had made it up on to its feet and began a charge across the dance floor. “Hah hah hah, dance with me juggernaut!” Eighty-Six yelled, not before pitching the head up into the balcony, like a murderous Mickey Mantle—*who were the bad guys again?*

“Tonight’s performance has been canceled due to security threats!” The voice echoing through the House of Wolves was not the matador of mechanical men, Dealer Eighty-Six, nor was it The Handsome Man, Curtis Steward. “Hazardous gas leak!” *Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!* All seven gray pellets hit the floor exploding in rapid succession: the House of Wolves was filled with a gray pea-soup thickness of smoke, blinding and choking to even the stoutest of lungs. Now a cacophony of coughing echoed the air, calls sent out for windows to be cracked, glasses of water to be fetched, all thoughts of blood lust die in the instant one’s own life becomes the next in line for the scythe—or jackknife in Hunger City’s case. The audience wrecked a calamitous stampede in their flight, re-enacting those last moments of the HMS. Titanic without the protocol of gentility but an emphasis on democracy: everyone for themselves, man, woman, child and everything in between was fair game trample over to survive.

And when the smoke cleared, The Gray Gambler, wearing a smile no mask could restrict, sat crouched before Curtis Steward. In the background laid the agents of Clock and Lantern in a sleep no hero could wake them from—Dealer Eighty-Six tied with arms behind his back, they both knew that he could easily cut his binds *somehow* with that black bladed jackknife, but he there he sat still and unmoving out of respect. Curtis was bound too, the grappling attachment sans hook pushing into the small of his back. *Time*

*to reverse the scene*, The Gambler thought as out was slung his heritage—the hand-cannon of The Gray Gambler—and placed it directly against Curtis’ forehead and spoke calmly “Now this is how you properly hold a gun. Also, please try and hold your bladder when a gun is placed against your head. Otherwise you look like a child. I mean, not that you didn’t spend some time acting like one either.” Curtis was rendered speechless by this turn of the die. One moment he was the star attraction, the main untouchable ‘King of Hunger City Crime!’ but then came that hooded fiend and stole that away. “I bet you’re still sore about the gas, aren’t you?” Curtis spit on his face. “Fair enough, but I’m not really a fan of violence”—The Gambler raised his voice—“unlike some of us in here. But you have to understand something Mr. Curtis, erm, excuse me, Handsome Man, that I’m not here to kill or wreck a terrible revenge upon you.”

“Then what the fuck are you here for? Trying to be a badass?”

“Hahahah, that’s the funniest thing I’ve heard you say in our short acquaintance.”

“Well you ain’t funny, so I gotta pick up your slack.”

“Speaking of slack, the more you fight against those knots, the tighter they cut. But hey” and here he raised a free hand, “if you’re that determined to get out of them, go for it, just keep in mind that you’ll most likely either server your hands or do irreparable damage to your wrists which really puts a hamper on all the gunning, screwing, and crime lording you must be doing.”

“You sure like to ramble. I thought yous kind don’t talk.”

“Ohh, well, yeah, but I’m in no rush really. And you forget a crucial fact.”

“What is it coz I’m getting bored here.”

“I’m not like those others you read about in those pulp magazines or hear on the news.”

“Sure you ain’t, you ain’t got balls.”



The Gray Gambler took a deep, deep breath and let it out slowly while squeezing the bridge of his nose. “I promised myself I wouldn’t get angry today.”

“Oooh, I’m so scared, what you gonna do to me, Mr. Fashion Faggot? Put me in a dress and make me your bitch?”

“I really do hate to break this news to you, but neither are you handsome, nor a man. Most importantly, you aren’t my type.” The Gambler punctuated this by moving the barrel of the hand-cannon six inches away from Curtis’ head and pulled the trigger hard. In the deafening **BOOM** that followed, The Gambler backhanded Curtis and shook his head in the manner of a disapproving parent. For vanity’s sake he spun the heavy machine like an old Twentieth century television cowboy before slinging it in to its holster. Speaking loudly, “Are we clear now?”

“Y-yes Sir.”

“Careful there kid, you’re gonna snap your neck you keep nodding like that. This ain’t no metal show.”

“S-so what are you going to do to me?”

“We went just went over this, Curtis. Have you been checked for Attention Deficit Disorder?”

“Nope.”

“Well maybe it’s time for a check-up. I hear San Quentin has a good psych staff.”

“Wait, you’re not going to kill me? But I killed all those people!”

“And your point is?”

“I deserve it! I deserve to die!”

A broad smile creased the lips of The Gray Gambler as he stood up and stretched before ‘The Handsome Man.’ “Yeah, you probably do. I can’t really argue you on that point. But then again, I give you an open lead buffet and then what? That doesn’t bring

back The Golden Age, just continues to reduce them. I mean, if you really want, I can leave the room for a minute and Dealer 86 can oblige you.”

“No no no, anything but him! Anything!”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. You can take the child out of the crib, but you can’t take the cowardice out either. So Curtis, any last words, or as Jeanae Totspinner—you must remember her—said as the life drained and decorated her dress, “my last confession Father.” Curtis just looked up at The Gambler, his eyes wide and filmed over with tears and dust. His head dropped down for a long while, the seconds had now stretched out in to infinitious measurements. “Well?”

The face that returned from the reprieve no longer carried the arrogant geometry of a ‘Handsome Man’ but that of a sniveling child, whose first words were a conflation of help and gibberish. His tears fell out in splurges due from the numerous surgeries across the timeline of his life. Everything was falling apart. *The center cannot, and has not held.* “Are these your final words?”

“N-no.”

“Then pray tell, Handsome Man, what sayeth you?”

“They made fun of me!! A LITTLE UGLY KID! I WAS BETTER THAN THAT! I COULD HAVE BEEN THE BEST OF THE GOLDEN AGE! BUT IT WAS THEIR FAULT I HAD TO KILL THEM! I HAD TO!” The Gambler just shook his head.

“And that’s your confession?”

“YES.”

“Before I met you I knew you, and when I saw you for the first time all my suspicions were confirmed. I see, hear, and know everything Curtis.”

“Are you God?”

“I’m just a man. Your explosion gave me a bit of a shock though, my ribs still a bit sore. Well played.”

“I learned it from Benny.”

“I’ll have to ask him about it.”

“But he’s dead!”

“That’ll be a surprise to him for sure. Oh yeah, he works for me now. Really nice guy, tried to get me a little tipsy. You know he’s got a bottle of 50 year old brandy? Delicious. Alright Curtis, I’m leaving you to the Hounds and passing an Albatross on to you. Be seeing you Curtis.”

“Gambler, wait!”

“Oh what now?”

“What do you want me to do while I wait?”

“It’s simple, Curtis, real simple. I want you to pray.”

The Gray Gambler turned his back on Curtis Steward and walked over to Dealer Eighty-Six who had slipped out of his bounds. He offered a hand and pulled him to his feet. Jerking his head, The Gambler led Eighty-Six down into the basement and punched open the platform portal, yelling “STATION DEN, EXPRESS.” Eighty-Six jumped into the Secret Subway like a kid’s first time at an amusement park riding an enclosed rollercoaster, The Gambler could hear his jubilee from miles back.

**Epilogue One: Elegia.**

“So Curtis Steward is going to be prosecuted on four counts of first degree murder, and thirty counts of second degree murder for the bombing?”

“It looks that way Sir.”

“Dealer 86 Cashing-in, Player Curtis Steward just reward. Will be found guilty. House of Justice wins.”

“86, you don’t have to refer to yourself in the third person here, you know that, right?”

“Dealer 86 Cashing-in, House all due respect. Habit. Unbreakable. This is how I was made.”

“You aren’t just a number.”

“Dealer 86 Cashing-in, House all due respect. I understand. Number is not name. Name is not number. I am a man.”

“But I can’t have you out there with a temper like that.”

“Sir, may I suggest sending him away?”

“To where? The moon?”

“Very funny Sir. Actually I was thinking perhaps making an arrangement with Daniel Green to take Dealer 86. I suspect his unique abilities would be better served and developed on their, and I use this term loosely, “team.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea Jev, not a bad idea at all. Make the call.”

“And as for you 86, you can have the bed while all this is sorted out.”

Dealer Eighty-Six, hooded and studded still, nodded and moved towards the back chambers and the door closed quietly behind him. Meanwhile The Gray Gambler pulled up the familiar portrait of The Golden Age. Staring back at him was the youthful and belligerent eyes of The Handsome Man alias Curtis Steward alias childish cliché. *At least I was able to pass that albatross on to his neck but more importantly, I did not kill a child. Perhaps in prison he will mature, or be reduced further into nothingness. House odds are ten to one on the latter,* he thought to himself with a chuckle. Taking his whole hand to the wall-screen, he erased the portrait leaving only the dead and the newly inducted Dealer. “The Golden Age is dead” he spoke aloud and let that word ‘dead’ linger in the air, in his mouth. Something did not sit right in the pit of his stomach and this case; this mission had taught then trained the machine he haunted to listen to that feeling. A finger tapped against his masked chin to the beat of an old song as he thought. “Jev,” he called.

“Yes, Sir?”

“I want you to open a new file for The Golden Age.”

“But I thought it was a dead organization Sir.”

“Yes and no.”

“I want you to close and complete the file on the first incarnation. Then open a new file for their second incarnation. List Benny Cards as a member of both incarnations, and place me in the file for the second generation of The Golden Age.”

“Sir?”

“There are three hours until Midnight Jev, until The Thin White Duke of Hell comes to collect. So much to do, so many lives to touch and barely enough time to breathe. But there will always be time to begin a new legacy.”

“Inspiring Sir, some of your best words yet.”

“One last thing Jev.”

“Certainly Sir.”

“Put this into The Gray Gambler file, under code of conduct. I have a new rule for my replacements: Thou shalt not kill, aim to maim.”

“Hmm.”

“Was that a sense of pleasure I just heard you emulate, Jev?”

“Quite so Sir, for it looks as though The Golden Age of The Gray Gambler has finally dawned.” He smiled upon hearing those words and sat behind the desk. Stretching out his arms, the feeling, no, the need for rest crawled like lichen up from his toes, through his bones and over his eyes. In this darkness he heard, faintly off in the distance, a train whistle and the screams of lovers whose eyes had been mutilated—he did not question his assumption of darts being the weapon of choice. In fact, he heard and ‘saw’ these things each and every night since dawning the mantle of The Gray Gambler. But these were not the waking nightmares of a Grand Guginol performance, like the kind he had watched then in true Deus Ex Machina form, intervened. These were something else, and as much as he tried to fool himself into believing them to be omens, it was impossible—these were certainties. And as the hands spun closer and closer and

closer to Midnight, the more vivid they became until one dread morning *He* would arrive and all would end. But for now that was three hours—whatever measurement of time that could be—away. Time enough to sleep and to dream.

Days had passed as they always do before a seismic change occurs in a person's life—especially if they are unawares. His title of Dealer had not so much been stripped away as he relinquished it without objection, having been released from The Gray Gambler's service. Eighty-Six was told that he had been “honorably discharged” and the incident at the House of Wolves was not only expunged from the databanks, but from The Gambler's memory as well, or so he claimed.

Eighty-Six had made only one request before his departure, “Show me the rails.” In a heartbeat The Gambler knew exactly what those four words meant. And so, swaying over to the perpetually open tube door, he called “STATION MAP EXPRESS” and bowed, ushering Eighty-Six into the tube. After his successful cannonball, The Gray Gambler followed in the traditional parachuting way.

The Secret Subway felt powered by laughter and joy instead of complex vacuum seals and pneumatic pressures. Eighty-Six's jubilation was infectious like the microbes in the former penthouse of The Handsome Man. There was something inside Eighty-Six that could not be hampered by the darkness of Hunger City, even more so than her protector. *He's got the potential to do good work, better work out there in the world than down here in the collapsed lungs of Hunger City. Answering to authority, my authority is only holding him back. Staying here any longer will cripple and kill him further, until one day when he turns that black bladed jackknife on non-players just for the pleasure of the cut. I don't want to fail him, or his future. Eighty-Six is my responsibility, like all my Agents...Although I think he's keeping a secret from me, and it begins and ends with that black bladed jackknife that I never see, but then, almost out of the air it flicks into his hand and disappears just the same. Perhaps he is more belonging to a Super-human*



*crew than I could ever expect. And you know we're generating a brave new world in each footstep we take.*

But here The Gambler's thoughts muddled by the dizzying effect of corkscrew after corkscrew—"House all respect. Cannot handle the rails?" he swore he heard carried to him by the wind. *Oh ho ho*, he muttered to himself and pushed himself harder. He quickly discovered that either way, keeping his eyes open or closed was of no use—he still felt hazy in the head and dizzy in the skin. *Ironically enough, this'll probably come back to help me someday*, he thought and smiled. "You can't get away from me Eighty-Six! You are the quarry!" Voluptuous laughter hit him like he was jogging through a Demilitarized Zone—DMZ for short—that was countless miles long, had no end nor beginning and the landmines were active and buried beneath shallow dirt. Every half-minute another burst of Eighty-Six's laughter exploded in The Gambler's face, blowing back his face in to a smile and reminding him that although he might have the experiences of a combat vet in his muscles, he was still young inside. *I'll beat you yet, ya damn kid. I'll show you who's the fastest in Hunger City!*

Eighty-Six turned out to be the fastest in Hunger City by enough milliseconds that part of The Gray Gambler was relieved to see him leave for greener lands. It was the morning of his departure, and they'd taken the Subway one last time to the end of the line: Station Zero-Zero, Platform Zero. This Station was high up in the Hunger City hills, just a mile north of Northside. He always appreciated that he could catch the sun rise before the smog tossed a shroud over it. They walked out of an abandoned tunnel mouth hidden in between a pile of well-placed boulders. "Betcha never expected there to be an actual Subway entrance installed. Though it's useless unless you have the code to activate it—which you don't. It's nothing personal, one of those "only Gambler to

Gambler” hand-me-down secrets. I know you understand, besides, from what I’ve heard about Dan and his ‘Non-existents,’ my Secret Subway is going to look archaic compared to their technology among other things.”

Eighty-Six stood next to The Gray Gambler with his hold down for the first time in ages, certainly the first time he’d revealed his face to The Gambler. “Oh yeah, I’ve chosen a name for myself”—The Gray Gambler looked down at his face with a raised brow, not sure what to expect—“Odysseus Franklin Graham. I’ve always had a thing for the story of Odysseus, being lost from home for twenty years. Honestly, I don’t remember where I come from. Not that it matters, only where I’m going is what I focus on.”

“On where is that, Odysseus?”

“Forward.”

“Oh, you’ve become a Marathonist?”

“Not quite, but their theology interests me for sure.”

“Who knows, you might just meet Marathon someday.”

“These ‘Non-existents, they encounter that kind of thing?”

“At least what I’ve heard and been told. Ahh, here they come, right on time.”

As the sun rose over the hills, it cast The Gray Gambler and the newly minted Odysseus Franklin Graham in shadow-relief. The landscape before them shimmered as if it were a desert mirage; Odysseus flicked for his jackknife but was steadied by The Gambler’s hand—“Calm down kid, this isn’t even the weird shit yet.” Odysseus flicked the knife away and watched in amazement as the scenery shifted then collapsed into a solid image—a blue building two stories tall, resembling more of a castle than an institution for the mentally unique as the sign said—“You’re sending me to a nuttery?” The Gambler didn’t respond, and watched as a seven foot tall bronze figure dressed in

gardening overalls walked out the front door of the building, down its double staircases and up to him.

“Daniel.”

“Gambler.”

“You’re the newer one, right?”

“Yep, but not for long.”

“Well I hope that’s not the case.”

“Anyway, I believe you got the dope from my valet, Jev?”

Daniel nodded and turned towards the small figure standing next to The Gambler. He had a messy mop of brown hair that contained the random knot and tie made from a gum wrapper; green eyes like the statue of Promethea in the lobby of Bertolt Building but with an increased fire of defiance no metallurgist could ever forge; scraping against the glass ceiling of just under five feet, it made him small and agile. He held out a hand notched with the outcomes of playing dead-man’s hand among other tricks he had since mastered.

“The name’s Odysseus Franklin Graham, former Agent of The Gray Gambler and current wandering Jackknife King of the Infinity Blade, and who the hell are you?”

Daniel boomed out laughter that rivaled Odysseus’ Subway bombs. He took his outstretched hand, which disappeared within his own massive hand, and gave a firm shake.

“Mr. Graham, you’ve got the arrogance and skill that we’re looking for, The Gambler may have lied to you—you aren’t being sent away, you’ve been recruited.”

“Recruited for what?”

“To join my team of Non-existents.”

“What’s our mission statement? Who are we fighting? I’d like some answers pronto.”

“In due time Your Highness, in due time. All that matters right now is you’ve been recruited to save the world and reality from things you’ve never dreamt of.”

“I’m intrigued. What’s in it for me?”

“I knew you’d ask. You’ll have a room, food, adventure and peril. I cannot guarantee you’ll live through your first month, if th”—Odysseus interjected, almost going vertical—“Sign me the fuck up.” Daniel looked to The Gray Gambler with a mirth filled smile.

“You sure know how to pick them.”

“Actually, I’m just as surprised as you are. I always thought he talked in clipped sentences and gave me bad news. I’m just sad I’m not going to see what he can *really* do!” He reached over and tussled the young boy’s hair like a father saying goodbye. He reached down into his pockets, which were wide and deep: a look of satisfactory surprise blossomed across his face when he found and then retrieved a chrome domino mask. “It’s coated on the inside with a self-adhering solution calibrated to your specific body chemistry so all you have to do is put on your face and voila! You’ve got a mask that befits a king, especially in light like this—here, try it on” and The Gambler passed on the mask to Odysseus who gingerly pulled it up while he pushed his head forward to meet it. It took a minute or two for him to adjust it; he looked like a king or a wraith with blacked out lenses. The sunlight hit it at such an angle that the visible spectrum of colors radiated off of it.

“So, how does it feel?”

“Like a crown.”

“I’m glad.”

“Indeed, with that on your face, you’ll become quick friends with one of our newer recruits. He’s got a serious light sensitivity problem—anti-flare goggles *all.the.time*. Even in his room, though I’m afraid to go in there, but Holly could. Speaking of which, you aren’t afraid of spiders by any chance, are you?”

“Nah, I had a pet black widow once years and years ago, but then it got smart and left Hunger City.”

“We don’t have that kind at the Institution, although I’m not quite sure what sort of spider he is.”

“Who’s he?”

“Doesn’t have a name yet, maybe you can help. For right now, we just call him Annie.”

“That’s a girl’s name.”

“It’s short Anansi—long story,” Daniel chuckled to himself, like he was telling a private joke to strangers, “he’ll tell you all about it.”

“I can dig it. Alright, I’m ready to get out of here.”

“Take my hand and just walk through the door with me.”

“Hey King, any famous last words?” Odysseus didn’t look back at The Gray Gambler. Calling over his shoulder he spoke, “*Alea iacta est*.” As the duo ventured further and further into the image that was not an image, The Gray Gambler laughed and clapped at his former charge, now equal. The Institution shimmered again like a desert mirage then imploded leaving not a trace that anything had occupied that space except what nature had originally placed there.

The Gambler stood there for a long while, staring off into the distance beyond Hunger City. It was beautiful, the rolling earth colored green and brown with clear blue

waters that held fish and animals that would never show themselves in Hunger City except upon a plate in a Southside restaurant. He took the deepest breath his machine of a body could inhale; captured were the smells and sights and sounds of a more wonderful world than his own. The Gray Gambler held this inside until his heart ran rapid; and the drumming song in in between his ears became too much; releasing it in his slow meditative fashion he was renewed. But like all beautiful golden things, they can only last for so long. With heaviness in his soul, The Gray Gambler turned away from the light and gazed down upon Hunger City with red eyes—*Lots of pollen in bloom this season*—and sighed. *It's like being Christ upon Golgotha without the promise of redemption or eternal life.*

A serious series of pings came from his utility belt—the headset! He must have accidentally tapped his brace to broadcast and receive transmissions; the set was jammed into the side of his face: “Dealer 33 Cashing-In, Players Fritz Fitzgerald and Robbery Inc. are rioting through the Theatre district, Cosiomo Theatre has received significant damage. Dealer 33 returning to Table.”

The Gray Gambler smiled, *Face violence with calm and overwhelm it*; he punched in the code to the Secret Subway, calling as he dove into the dark, “STATION 01, PLATFORM 03!”