

Dogs Eating Dogs

Part 1

MEEP MEEP MEEP MEEP!

The alarm on Bernard's phone rang and the sound ricocheted around his skull painfully. He craned open his tired eyes and caught sight of the time. 6:30 am. He slammed the snooze button as hard as the thin glass screen would allow, and screwed his eyes shut again. *Five more minutes. Please, god, just five more minutes*, he groaned mentally. In what seemed like five seconds rather than five minutes, the alarm sounded again. This time, it was drowned out by Bernard's own groaning wail. After finally ending his whining, Bernard raised himself like a vampire from his coffin, and began preparing for the day ahead, mentally and physically.

Bernard trudged to his bathroom, little more than a single step away from his bed in the single flat he called home. Outside, the city of Hollando was waking up alongside him. The bustling sounds of the city were now only a hushed murmur as the few taxis and busses that were running chugged along their morning routes.

After a shower, Bernard prepped his breakfast. Before doing so, however, it was time for his brief moment of morning joy: turning on his DVD player and picking a movie to accompany his morning routine. The choices were many, but he made his decision quickly. It was the only thing on his mind that morning, or to be more precise, the only thing on his mind besides the dread of that day's work. But work came later, for now he could make breakfast and do his morning chores to the sounds of *Dogs of War*, the seminal crime drama from acclaimed director Charles Lombardi. The screen flickered to life and for a moment, Bernard stood in his apartment, watching dreamily.

Dogs of War followed a group in the crime syndicate known as the War Dogs, a brutal gang of crooks making their way in an unfair world. The plot involves the gang planning a meticulous bank heist, only for things to go haywire on the day of the heist due to information leaking out, leaving the gang to discover who among them is the mole that set the events in motion. It combines the thrilling action of a heist film with the slow burning tension of a detective drama. It was a favorite among film buffs but it was a personal favorite of Bernard's. He could quote every line, marvel at every scene, and laugh at every vulgar joke. This film was a cozy place for him. Granted, one where dirty people used racial slurs and abused women, but one that felt cozy nonetheless. After all, this dirty fake world was still a hell of a lot more enjoyable than the dirty real world he lived in.

After quoting the opening lines of the character David (played by Stephen Zoroft, in his iconic midnight blue suit, of course), Bernard returned to his breakfast. Toast, some yogurt, and coffee. It wasn't much but it was all he could afford, in terms of money and time. A short while later, just as David was about to give his impassioned speech about the honor of the criminal life, Bernard paused the movie. He eyed his nearby clock and groaned mentally. It was time to finish the rest of his routine. Time to brush his teeth, dress for work, and hurry off to the office. Bernard dressed in the usual office attire: clean shirt, a muted gray color, basic brown slacks, a plain black tie, and loafers he hated walking in. Not much choice in the matter when one doesn't own a car. His final preparation was tying up his long brown hair, a compromise he begrudgingly made every day.

A short but nonetheless foot-aching walk later, Bernard entered the building of his office,

the headquarters of Kreegal & Lewissons, Inc. What the business actually did, Bernard was never quite sure of, but such is the life of someone needing a job and not being all that picky when an offer arises. The day to day of the average employee seemed to be all about the righteous task of sitting in a cubicle and pretending to work until it was time to go home. For Bernard, however, it was a bit different. Somehow, he had inaction-upward into a position of being Howard Kreegal's assistant. A job that involved sitting at his cubicle pretending to work until it was time to go home, only occasionally having to listen to Howard, and when he's finished talking, nod and say 'yes sir'.

Bernard marched his way down the winding corridor of the building; probably the only thing about the building that resembled anything interesting, as the halls were unusually labyrinthine. Bernard only briefly noted that casinos use a similar layout in order to confuse and trap patrons inside, though he did his best to push that thought away. The building itself, inside and out was as dull gray as the shirt he was wearing. The florescent lighting, the dull wallpaper, the near dead silence save for the rustling of papers and murmurs of office chat at the water cooler, it all felt to Bernard more like some bizarre sensory deprivation experiment turned into a place of business. Perhaps that was the real nature of K&L, Bernard mused. It wouldn't be surprising. Not that the office seemed to do much else besides take up space and bore him and his coworkers to death.

Bernard found the little cubicle he was forced to call home and sat in the only-kind-of-comfortable chair he had. Momentarily he stared at the blank screen of his powered off computer. Something about the pure black void seemed to relax him, allowing him to ignore the bustle of the rest of his coworkers. His sudden trance was interrupted by a knocking against his cubicle wall. Bernard shook himself awake and looked up to see William, Bernard's cubicle neighbor and good friend, standing lazily against his wall and waving hello.

"Morning, Bern." he said with a nod.

"I can't do this anymore." Bernard grumbled, not looking away from his void.

William patted him gently on the shoulder. "Yes, you can."

"I *really* can't do this anymore." Bernard said again, and once again, William patted his shoulder.

"Yes, you can. You know how I know? Cause you've said the same thing to me every day for the past six years. To the point where I'm kinda getting tired of it, but here I am." William rolled his eyes as Bernard didn't so much as blink. "You and your pre-work trance. I could say anything I want right now and you wouldn't even hear me, would you? Hey, Bernard, Carol finally lost her marbles and is streaking through the Accounting office, you better come see!"

"I can't do this anymore."

William looked down at his watch. "Yep, three times. Three times a day you say that to me. Every day, before 9 am. And you know what happens, every day?"

Bernard shook his head, eyes still fixed on his blank screen.

"You get through it. You get through the day, every day." William said, reassuringly.

Bernard finally turned to William and opened his mouth to speak, but before any sound could form his cubicle phone rang, causing him to jump. His eyes bulged as he watched the blinking light and heard the ringing, as he knew full well who was going to be on the other end of the line. Bernard turned back to William, who already had his back to him, on his way back to his own cubicle. "I can't do this anymore!" he shouted out to him.

William, in response, simply raised four fingers without turning around. "There's always a fourth if your phone rings this early!"

Bernard stared at his still ringing telephone. It wouldn't stop ringing, he knew that. Even if he let it ring all day, it still wouldn't stop. The person on the other end would not, under any circumstances, understand that maybe if a phone rings 50 times with no answer, the person you're trying to reach might not be there or might not want to talk to you, or anything else of that nature. No, the person on the other end of this phone will sit there and wait for an answer, because they've never not had an answer. They've never been told 'no' before, and today won't be the day either.

After some mental shadowboxing, Bernard finally picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

The voice on the other end spoke quickly and concisely. "Ah, yes, Bernard, please begin a memo." It was the voice of Howard Kreegal of course, all 300-some pounds of it. By the sounds of it, he hadn't even noticed Bernard picked up on the 54th ring.

"Yes, Mr. Kreegal, just let me boot up my-"

"Memo to all staff," began Howard, ignoring Bernard.

Bernard rolled his eyes and booted up his machine. As his machine whirled to life, far too slowly for Bernard's liking, he only passively listened to Howard, occasionally responding with a "Yes, Mr. Kreegal," or "Yes, I'm writing that down now," or something else to that effect.

His pre-work trance was becoming the in-work trance, the slow, monotonous stupor he put himself in to forget the fact that he was, currently, working, and therefore, miserable. On an average day, Bernard's in-work trance was almost like a heavy sleep. It was hard to shake oneself from it, as it weighed on him like a heavy blanket, warming his entire body into numbness. On an average day, the only thing that could shake Bernard out of his trance was the afternoon lunch break, and lastly, the end of the work day, when it was time to power off the pc and strode on home (painfully, of course) to finish watching a nice crime movie. But on this day, that feeling went away sooner than Bernard expected. His mind wavered in and out of attention as the numbness crept in, and crept out. He half heard Howard, "Blah blah blah, maximize our strategized mission statement, blah blah blah", until the numbness returned again. But, again it subsided and Bernard found himself focusing on nothing else but one thought: he was unhappy.

I can't do this anymore... Bernard thought to himself. If William were here, and able to read his thoughts, he would probably say something like "you always say that when Howard gives you a big complicated memo to write.", but today Bernard only heard one voice, his own. And what it said did something that Bernard thought was no longer possible. It made him happy. *You don't have to.*

Bernard cleared his throat, causing Howard to pause. Before he could start again, Bernard spoke. "Hey, uh, Mr. Howard Kreegal sir, I uh... don't think I can do this anymore." There was silence on the other end of the phone and with the first bandage ripped off, Bernard found it easier to continue. "I'm gonna be honest with you, Mr. Kreegal, I haven't been happy here for a long time. I think having to write your memos, the ones you're clearly too lazy to write yourself, is a waste of my time and I would rather not do it. More specifically, I think if I have to type one more goddamn letter on this stupid keyboard, I'm going to blow my brains out. So, uh... thanks for the opportunity and all that but... I quit." Bernard moved to hang up the phone, but quickly brought it back to his ear. "Oh- and before I forget. Someone needs to give Carol a raise or something. That poor thing works harder than anyone else here and she doesn't get anything for

it. If you don't cut her some slack she's going to shoot up the place, or something.” And before Howard could get in another word, Bernard hung up the receiver.

The heavy blanket of his morning haze lifted from him and Bernard felt himself rise. He rose to his full height, practically levitating, and dazed dreamily at the exit door on the far side of the mess of cubicles. He took one cautious step out of his cubicle, and upon noticing he wasn't tackled to the ground, took another, then another, until he found himself practically strutting out of the offices of Kreegal & Lewissons, Inc. When he was about halfway to the exit, Bernard paused. He suddenly became aware of the dozens of eyeballs currently fixed on him. He scanned the horizon and saw nearly every head had popped up from its space in the cubicle to gawk at his breakdown. His completely passive and minimalist breakdown, sure, but a breakdown nonetheless. “Erm...” he said, to no one in particular. “Seriously, someone go check on Carol.”, to which no one replied, and Bernard continued his stroll.

He continued until he reached the glass door of the main entrance, which he pushed open and closed behind him. For a moment he stood in the early morning sun, letting its warmth wash over him. While it was early in the morning, the heat was noticeable, as it was the middle of the summer, and beads of sweat were already forming on Bernard's forehead. The heat this time was not the searing summer blaze that Bernard usually detested, but instead a warm, enveloping hug. He inhaled deeply and let out a long, relaxed breath. Following this, he let out a sharp yell as a hand came slamming down on the back of his head.

“What the hell is wrong with you?!” shouted William, suddenly filling the space behind him. “Get back in there and call Howard back and he might just forgive you. *Might.*”

Bernard turned to him and shook his now aching head. “No. No, no, no! I've told you, Will, I've told you a hundred times, I can't do this anymore!”

William sighed. “That's, what, five times now? You usually stop at four. This must be really serious.”

Bernard nodded. “I am. I am very serious. Will, you and I have wasted our lives at that stupid job. Every day we went in, accomplished nothing but wasted time we'll never get back and gotten a few dozen headaches, and then we soldier on home too exhausted to function. I've had it. No more! Today is the day we do something else, find better work, find more fulfilling work. What do you say?” And he put his hand out for a shake.

William's eyes slanted from Bernard's hand to Bernard's face, lips curled in a frown. “What do I say?” he muttered, “I say I should hit you again,” and brought his hand up to do so, causing Bernard to flinch. “But...” he continued with a sigh and lowering his hand, “I have to admit you do make one good point.”

Bernard, still in his recoiled position, asked, “Which is?”

William locked eyes with him. “That that job sucked and it was stealing our goddamn souls.” William grabbed his necktie and gave it a sharp tug, yanking it loose and throwing it to the ground in one quick motion. “Okay, Bernard. I'm with you. I wasn't ready for it, but now we're in the deep end.” He shoved his hand forward, awaiting Bernard's shake.

Bernard, who was still recoiling, finally relaxed. In a similar manner to William's tie, Bernard reached up and pulled the band from his hair, throwing it to the ground in a defiant fling. As his locks fell to the sides of his head, he pulled his own hand back up and stuck it out to William, who shook it greatly.

“I hope you have a plan.” William muttered.

“I do.” said Bernard, gazing dreamily into the morning sun. “We're going to become gangsters.”

William blinked. “No, seriously, what is your plan?”

Part 2

“You're an idiot!” said William.

“Will you stop saying that!” snapped Bernard.

The two had found themselves at an impasse. Or, more accurately, William had found himself going along with Bernard's plan before hearing all the details, and was now at the mercy of his well meaning, but clearly very stupid, friend. The two used their sudden free time to regroup at a local fast food joint, Burger Bombs. They sat at the back of this greasy establishment with a burger and fries each, barely eaten as William's temper had flared almost immediately as their asses had touched the seats.

“I will stop saying it when you stop acting like one!” William snapped again. He hung his head over his burger, practically face planting in it. “Maybe if we go back and ask Mr. Kreegal for our jobs back, *really politely*, he'll hear us out.”

At this, Bernard jabbed a french fry at him. “No! Absolutely not! You said it yourself, that job sucked.”

William's face shot up. “Yes, Bernard, that job did suck. But you know what job is worse? Not having one!”

Bernard shook his head. “That's not true. Plus, I told you, we have jobs. We're gangsters now!”

“Bernard, you can't just *become* a gangster.”

“Yes you can! How else do you become one? You don't go to school to become a criminal... unless you major in economics, I suppose.”

William opened his mouth to speak but found he didn't have an answer. So instead, he defaulted to: “You're an idiot.”

“Look,” said Bernard, rolling his eyes. “How hard could it really be? Like I said, no one goes to school to become a criminal. They all have to start somewhere. Charles Lombardi had to make short films before features.”

William stared daggers at him. “Bernard. Charles Lombardi makes crime *movies*. This isn't a movie.”

“Not the point, see in War Dogs, David-”

“I know what happens in War Dogs, Bernard! I showed it to you! And to be perfectly honest I'm starting to regret that I did. Is that where you got this idea? From a movie?”

“Well... maybe the spirit of the idea.” mumbled Bernard. He absentmindedly stirred a french fry in a pool of ketchup. “You do make a point though that this isn't a movie... perhaps our problem is that we only know about crime from cinema. We need real criminals to show us the ropes.”

William snorted. “Yeah, brilliant! We'll get Mr. Joey to teach us.”

Bernard bolted into William's personal space. “That's a good idea! I wonder if he would take apprentices.”

William shoved Bernard back into his chair. “Bernard, I was obviously joking. Mr. Joey isn't real, he's a myth.”

“But the myth is based on a real person, right? Joseph Steccotti? The legendary mobster? He really existed, right?”

William rolled his eyes. “I mean, yeah, he existed... historically, I think. Like how your great great great great grandparents existed. He sure did exist and do all that stuff, but I guess I

wasn't *personally* there to see it. Joseph was around in the days when crime used to be a bit more entrenched in everything. Like, getting your groceries used to involve criminal dealings because the mob literally owned a chain of grocery stores at one point. He existed, but then he died, like how lots of history happens."

"Oh," said Bernard. "I didn't know any of that."

William's hands slapped his face, "Cripes, Bernard you didn't know any of that? You want to be a gangster but don't know any of the basic history of the mob of your own town?"

Bernard shrugged. "I never watch the more historical crime dramas, I always found them kinda dry- wait!"

William had already risen from his chair and was slinking towards the restaurant door. His face was frozen in a dazed stupor, muttering to himself. Bernard caught up with him and clasped him on the shoulders. He whirled him around. "Will! William. Buddy. I'm gonna say something to you that you said to me every day for the last six years."

William contorted his face and tried to look away, but Bernard persisted. "You think we can't do this? Well I'm here to tell you that we can. We will get through this day, and the next, and the next."

William had been guided back to his chair by Bernard and now sat slumped in it, defeated. "Urgh," he groaned, "Bernard... look, I know you mean well... but that's just it! You're too nice! How do you expect to be a criminal when you're saying things like 'cheer up, old buddy!'?"

"I am not too nice!" snapped Bernard.

"Bernard, you just had a really polite office breakdown."

Bernard frowned. "I don't like raising my voice at people."

William chuckled and began pantomiming with finger guns. "Alright, everyone, please put your money in this bag, when it's convenient! Please and thank you!"

Bernard turned red. "That's not funny, shut up." Bernard let his gaze travel around the restaurant, lost in thought. "Though... you do make a good point. We're not criminals, by nature. We need a bit of help."

"If you mention Joseph again I swear to-"

"No, no, no, we need help from real criminals. People who have done this before." His eyes landed on a group of three men, nonchalantly eating burgers on the far side of the restaurant. "Hey, how about those guys?" He said, pointing.

William turned in his chair and eyed the men Bernard was pointing at. There were three of them, but their combined muscle mass must have been totaled up to six or seven men. They each wore loose, baggy clothing, and sleeveless shirts exposing their thick muscles and multiple tattoos. They had dower expressions and wild, buggy eyes. They looked ready to pounce and all they needed was a reason.

"Erm..." began William. "I mean... I guess they could be criminals? They kind of look like really edgy gym guys- Bernard?!"

Bernard was already out of his chair and halfway between William and the other men. At William's shout, he spun on his heels and said "Huh?"

"What the hell are you doing?!"

Bernard jerked a thumb behind him. "I'm going to ask if they want to join our gang."

William balked. "You can't just ask someone to do that!"

“Well, what should I do, have them submit an application?”
William narrowed his eyes. “Was that sarcasm?”
Bernard blinked. “Why? Did it sound like it?” And he continued his stride toward the men.
William jumped out of his chair and raced to Bernard, but it was too late, he was already talking.
“So, would you guys be interested in joining our crew?” he concluded as William arrived. The three men looked at each other, puzzled.
William clasped Bernard on the shoulders and began pedaling him away. “I’m sorry about him, he just quit his job he’s not thinking-”
“Yeah, sure, why not.” said the largest of the three men.
“Huh?” said William.
“I said, ‘yeah, sure, why not’.” the large man continued. “We were just looking for work ourselves. Our previous boss wasn’t working out so we took our leave. Your friend there seems like a newbie to The Business. That’s what we were looking for. It would be nice to work for someone who isn’t an aging hardass for a change.”
“Huh?” said William again.
“Great!” said Bernard, still facing the direction William had pulled him in. “Why don’t we meet up at my place in an hour and we’ll go from there. I’ll grab us some drinks from the corner store.”
The second largest of the men hooted. “I like this guy already!”
The third largest man said nothing, but nodded in agreement.
The three large men cleaned their table and left the restaurant, leaving Bernard and William to their own devices. One grinning with delight, the other stuck in a confused trance.
“Huh?” William said again.
Bernard slapped him on the back. “See? You worry too much.”

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It was about an hour later when the newly established criminal organization, currently unnamed, gathered in Bernard’s flat. The group sat in a circle, with the three new hires sitting on Bernard’s couch while William and Bernard sat on the floor. Bernard of course, lacking any other chairs and not foreseeing company. The drinks Bernard had provided were cracked open and gulped down gratefully, yet silently.

The silence grew uncomfortable until finally, Bernard had had enough and clapped his hands together. “Ok!” he declared. “Uh, welcome to the first meeting of... our gang!” And again, the silence filled the space. “Erm... why don’t we start with introducing ourselves? I’m Bernard, I guess I’m your new boss?” Bernard shuffled awkwardly. “Hmm, don’t know if I like that. Sounds too authoritative. Just call me Bernard, I guess.” He ignored the sounds of William palming his own face, and gestured to him. “That’s William, he’s my best friend and second in command. Treat him like you would treat me.” William raised his head and awkwardly waved at the three. “What about you guys?”

The first large man raised a hand, “My name is Stefan.”  
Then the second large man followed, “I’m Zeke.”



And lastly, the third man spoke up, "Al."

Bernard nodded gratefully. "Great! Great. Stefan, Zeke, and Al. I'll try and remember that, I can be bad with names."

"So, what's the deal with you guys?" Cut in William. "Why were you so gung ho about joining... us?"

"Well," began Stefan, "Like I said, our previous boss wasn't working out. See, a lot of guys in the business are aging out pretty hard. They don't understand technology or even just how people talk and act these days. It got harder and harder to communicate with these guys over the simplest things. Like one time I get orders to shake down this guy across town cause he owes my ol' boss a bunch of cash, right? So I ask what he looks like and stuff, but the old man says 'I'll send you a fax'. A fax! Can you believe that? So of course, since none of us have a fax machine we're just cruising around town hustlin' random chumps trying to figure out what this guy looks like."

Bernard was on the edge of his seat listening to this tale as Zeke continued, "Yeah so we end up calling our boss back going 'boss, we couldn't get your fax' and then he starts saying things like 'well if you don't get me my money I'm gonna break your legs' and we just hung up cause there ain't no dealing with him when he's like that. So we just ended up shaking down anyone we could until we got the money and then drove back."

Al said nothing, but nodded in agreement.

"Cool." Bernard gushed.

"Not cool." William muttered in Bernard's ear. "Did you not hear them? They beat up a bunch of random guys for money!"

"Well yeah," hissed back Bernard. "But that was only because their boss was incompetent."

William turned to the three. "So why did you leave your boss anyway? Sounded like he was already a pain. What was the turning point?"

"Oh," Stefan said plainly, "We didn't *leave*, exactly. That's not something you can really do in this business."

"Our boss got shot by some rival," explained Zeke, "And the whole gang fell apart pretty quickly after that. We were kinda glad it happened, honestly. Gave us a chance to explore new opportunities. Actually, did I say he got shot? I meant he got shot up. Like a lot. Like a dozen or more times. They really did a number on him. And that number was really high."

"Bernard!" moaned William.

"Here's a better question," said Bernard, "Why didn't you guys form your own gang, instead? You guys seem like qualified criminal types."

At this, Stefan shrugged. "We're not managerial types. We've always been more comfortable with the gooning business. Some people are better at managing, other people are better at shaking down chumps. We're the former."

"You mean the latter." corrected Bernard.

"Who said anything about ladders?"

"Erm...never mind."

"So anyways," Stefan said, placing down his drink and folding his arms. "Let's get down to brass tacks. What kind of business are we running here, boss?"

All eyes turned to Bernard, who was halfway through a sip of his drink. He swallowed

and coughed awkwardly. "Erm... to be honest I hadn't gotten that far yet."

Stefan raised an eyebrow. "How long have you boys been doing this?"

Bernard paused before asking, "What time is it?"

Stefan's eyes bulged out. He clasped a meaty hand to his large head and bellowed a hearty laugh. Zeke followed suit while Al grinned, silently. "You gotta be shittin' me!" he called out through gasping breaths. "You two idiots just woke up today and decided you wanted this life?"

Bernard and William avoided their eyes as best they could, both turning redder than tomatoes. "It was better than being an office drone for the rest of my life." muttered Bernard.

At this, Stefan ceased his laughing, snapping to silence in the blink of an eye. Zeke was silent just as quickly, with Al quietly resuming his muted existence. Stefan nodded, "I can respect that. I hate office work too. Never could get in to it. But the fact remains," at this, he pointed at Bernard. "You're still pretty green at this. If you want to be in this business, I'll help you, but we gotta work together. For the good of not working in an office."

Bernard clapped his hands together and pumped a fist in the air. "Damn right!"

"So," Stefan began. "Let's put it this way. What kind of business do you *want* to run here, boss?"

At this, Bernard stared up at the ceiling and thought hard, stroking an imaginary beard. "Hmm... I truly don't know, there's far too many options. We need to start small..." He splayed his hands to the group. "I'm opening up the floor, let's have a brain storming session. Any ideas are good ideas."

William rubbed the back of his head. "I dunno... arms dealing?"

"Ehh... too violent." said Bernard, shaking his head.

"Not to mention that arms dealing is complicated and very dangerous." Added Stefan.

"Well, Stefan has experience doing shakedowns. Maybe loansharking is what we should do."

"Loan sharks have money to loan... shark." Muttered William.

"Not to mention," added Stefan, "Loansharking isn't as popular as it used to be, now that banks basically do the same thing."

"True, true..." murmured Bernard. "I know!" he exclaimed, slamming a fist into his palm. "Drug dealing! We'll sell weed! I know a few guys who could hook us up, maybe they'll let us talk to their suppliers and... why is everyone looking at me like that?"

The pairs of eyes darted from Bernard to William, to each other and back. "Bernard," said William. "Weed is legal here, now. It has been for years. That's not a criminal business anymore, that's just a business."

"Oh..." Bernard said with a slump.

"Ahem." said a tiny voice. They turned their heads to see Al, sitting with his hand raised on the far end of the couch. Once the eyes were on him, he spoke again. "What about theft? That's pretty low stakes, but steal the right things and you can make a killing."

The rest nodded in agreement. "Yes!" said Bernard, brightly. "Perfect! Thieving. A great starting point. What should we steal? Money? From a bank?"

Stefan shook his head. "Too large, scale it down, man."

Before Bernard could speak again, Al spoke up. "How about cybertheft? It's pretty easy nowadays to scam someone on the internet. Don't even have to be in the same place. Don't even have to be in the same continent, actually."

“Ok... cybertheft. That's not... glamorous, but it's a start.”

“Yeah, listen to Al on this one, he's a smart guy.” Agreed Stefan.

“In fact.” Al raised his smart phone, which had been sitting on his lap. “While we were talking I downloaded an app that let's me steal any cybergood from a random person in the world. It just finished doing its thing.”

“Oh... oh!” said Bernard, somehow finding his confidence. “That's... that's good! We did it! We stole something! We stole... what did we steal?”

Al looked at his phone and spoke without looking up. “We stole a cybergood called an MT. It's basically a jpeg, not all that remarkable, but people pay out the ass for some of them.”

Bernard nodded, listening intently but not fully understanding. “I see, I understand. OK so, we stole an MT... which is worth... what?”

Al continued looking at his phone. “It's worth... ten Scrape Coins.”

“Ten Scrape Coins!” repeated Bernard. “Ten Scrape Coins... are?”

“Some fake currency invented by some jackass, I don't know. I barely understand the cybergoods market, if I'm being honest. I just know you can trade the coins for real money, hence why I even bothered with this in the first place.”

“Aha!” continued Bernard, still pretending to understand. “I see! So what we actually stole was worth?”

“Let's see...” Al rapidly tapped at his phone, switching apps to collect data before diving into his calculator to run some numbers. After a short while, he finally looked up and addressed the room. “Okay, so it will take time to withdraw the money, and the price of the coin is constantly in flux so this isn't the final amount, but based on the current price, minus taxes and fees from withdrawal, we just stole approximately 1.2 million USD.”

### **Part 3**

For moment, in Bernard's tiny apartment, there was silence. The five members of this newly formed criminal organization found themselves confused and stunned. It was like a computer being given a monumental task, its cursor turning into an endlessly spinning circle as it struggled to process the information it was given. 1.2 million? That can't be right. Surely there was a mistake. Surely this was in Canadian dollars, or Yen, or some other currency that would result in that massive, impossibly high number, dropping to something a tad more believable. These were the thoughts that drifted between the group. Between, of course, everyone but Al, who sat there, sure as he's ever been in his calculations.

It was Al and Bernard locking eyes for the last time that caused the emotional bubble in the room to burst. They erupted in hooting and hollering, a cacophony of triumphant noise. Stefan found himself jumping so heavily he shook the walls of Bernard's flat while Bernard and William joined him in a gleeful prance. When the shock of success had finally calmed down Bernard puffed out his chest and did his best to maintain a composure of stoicism, declaring that this is the first of many brilliant criminal activities, and thus deserves a reward. Their newfound wealth not being currently tangible, Bernard settled on the one thing he could afford: more drinks from the corner store. And so, William and Bernard found themselves walking back to Bernard's flat, case of beer in each hand. Bernard had stopped briefly to open a small cardboard pack of cigarettes. He put one in his mouth, unlit, and continued walking.

"You smoke, now?" William snorted.

"Well yeah, gotta smoke if you're a gangster." Declared Bernard through his teeth.

"It's unlit." William pointed out. "And I know *why* it's unlit. It's because you think smoking is gross and unhealthy."

"Look," Bernard said, struggling to talk with the cigarette in his mouth. "Gangsters do it, and I'm a gangster now so there! You're talking to someone who just stole 1.2 million USD!"

"You're an idiot who managed to fleece a bigger idiot out of 1.2 million USD." William said. He walked a few more paces before noticing that Bernard had fallen behind. He turned to him and saw that he was staring out across the bridge they were crossing, Bernard's gaze aimed at the setting summer sun over Molando River. "What's the problem, now?" William called out.

"Nothing..." said Bernard. "Just..." he shook his head and rejoined William. "I just can't stop thinking about what Stefan said. 'What kind of criminal do you *want* to be?' I realized that I never really thought about it before."

"Well, yeah, that's because you're an idiot who doesn't think ahead." said William with a shrug.

"No... I mean, yeah, ok, but I mean, it's more than that. What you do with your resources as a criminal is pretty important. It impacts how people see you. How the law sees you, how other criminals see you, how a civilian sees you. Perhaps we should think about using our resources for something good."

William rolled his eyes. "Bernard if you wanted to do something good you wouldn't have stolen 1.2 million from someone to do it."

Bernard frowned. "I guess not... to be honest I do feel a little bad, stealing from someone."

William rolled his eyes twice as hard. "Bernard, do you not hear yourself? Why should you feel bad about theft when you're supposed to be a gangster? Not to mention we're talking

about some fake computer thing that only rich losers are interested in. Even if you were entitled to feeling bad right now, you shouldn't because you probably stole it from someone who won't even notice it's gone."

"Hmm..." murmured Bernard. "Perhaps you're right. In any case, these funds will lay the groundwork for our criminal empire. We've got to plan and spend it wisely."

"Sure, sure... so Bernard?"

"Yeah?"

"What kind of criminal do you want to be, then? If not one that steals things?"

Bernard contorted his face as he thought it over. "I don't know... I don't have an answer." He turned to his friend and grinned. "Let's be Triads!"

William laughed. "Do I even need to explain why that's not possible?"

Bernard balked. "What, do you have to be Italian to join the mob?"

"Nooo, but I'm sure it helps! You watch too many movies, Bernard."

Bernard snorted. "I still think Tomorrow is the Future is better than Heavy Hands."

"Yeah and I still think you're wrong!" replied William swinging his case of beer at Bernard.

They eventually reached Bernard's flat and opened the door, carefully of course, as to not further shake the cases of beer, and entered. "Heyyy fellow crooks!" Bernard called out.

William entered behind him and closed the door, snorting, "Who says that?"

Bernard turned to respond with his usual remark ("I do!"), but couldn't get it out on account of the sudden blow to the head from behind. Bernard fell to the floor, his vision blurring and his ears failing him. He heard muffled shouts and screams as William was attempting to fight off the assailant, but it was ultimately futile. There was a loud *thwack* and William crumbled to the floor next to Bernard, his form hitting the floor being the last thing Bernard could see before his consciousness had had enough and the world went black.

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Bernard awoke, groggy and with a massive headache. He moved his hands to hold his head, only to have them catch and be pulled sharply back into his lap. He shook his head more, letting his vision return to him. As the world cleared up he took in his situation. He realized he was sitting on his couch, with William to his side, just rising from his own unconsciousness. His hands were restrained, bound with zip ties, as were William's. To his left, Stefan, Zeke, and Al were equally restrained, hands behind their backs and knees on the ground. They stared at the floor, quietly.

Bernard, throat suddenly very dry, choked out, "Guys..." Stefan raised his head, locking eyes with Bernard. He shook his head left and right, sharply. Bernard, slow on the uptake, spoke again. "What-" and that's as far as he got before another blow to the head cracked him from behind. He let out a yelp as his assailants strode out from behind the couch.

One was a messy looking man with a bandanna. He wore a t-shirt, at least one size too large with a band logo that was too illegible to recognize. His hands were shoved deeply into the pockets of his camouflage pants, and his foot steps were heavy from his thick black boots. His eyes were wiry and fierce. Accommodating his eyes was the vindictive grin he wore, toothy and filled with malice. He made sure to glare at every one in the room before centering himself

before them. The second man was more properly dressed, with a clean white shirt, black tie, and black slacks. His black hair was as tidy and neat as the rest of him. He wore thick rimmed glasses, and his expression was much more reserved than the first man. He took position just beside the first man, one half step behind him. Something shined in Bernard's eyes and he noticed that this man had his arms behind his back in a ready pose, but the sun was reflecting off of him. The only thing Bernard could think of that would cause that he didn't want to entertain. It could have only been a pair of brass knuckles.

"Who the hell are you?!" Bernard shrieked.

"Who the hell am I?" Mocked the man in the bandanna. "Who the hell am I?" he repeated. "You steal shit from me and you don't even know who I am?!"

Bernard's eyes bulged. "We-" The man's leg flew out from underneath him and a blow landed square in Bernard's face, ending his sentence with a yelp.

"Yeah, *you*" emphasized the man, jamming a finger in Bernard's wheezing face. "Stole from *me*! And what happens to people that steal from me, Wesley?" At this he snapped his fingers, and the person to his side spoke up.

"They get stepped." he said, flatly.

"Daaat's right!" Bandanna Man said, swinging his head around to his captives like a serpent. "So let's get to steppin'. Imma make this clear for you fools. My name, which you will remember for the rest of your short lives, is Muggy. Mad Man Muggy, they call me. And right now I ain't mad. I'm fuckin' pissed! Now no more talk, from now on I want honest answers, and honest answers only. Which one of you bastards stole my MT?!"

Stefan raised his head and did his best to raise the rest of him. Standing on one knee he shouted, "It was me, I did it!"

In a swift motion, faster than Bernard could process, Muggy's foot swung up sharply and was suddenly brought down over Stefan's head in a sharp axe kick. Stefan crumbled to the floor with a heavy *thump*. Muggy squatted down next to the crumbled heap that was once Stefan without moving his hands from his pockets and hissed in his ear. "Do you stupid bastards think this is my first gig? You think I haven't seen this holier-than-thou honorable hero shit before? I know it wasn't you, big man." he stood up and gave a sharp kick to Stefan's head. If he wasn't unconscious previously, he must have been now, as he was quiet and still. Muggy moved to the right and looked down upon Zeke and Al, who were still on their knees. "Which means..." Muggy said, eyeing them both. "It was one of you little shits."

Zeke finally raised his head. "Go to hell!" he shouted, glaring at Muggy.

"Hmm..." mused Muggy. "It could have been you, I guess." He took one step to the side and stood over Al. "But perhaps it was you. You've been pretty quiet this whole time. What are you, slow or something?"

Al finally raised his head and locked eyes with Muggy. From his seat on the couch, Bernard could make out the white hot fire behind his eyes. Instead of shouting or struggling or cursing, however, Al jerked his head, urging Muggy to come closer. Muggy lowered himself, sarcastically, allowing Zeke the best position to throw a massive wad of spit on his forehead. Muggy responded by grinning wide, causing Al and Zeke's confidence to plummet. It's not every day you see a smile brimming with that much malice and spite.

Muggy stood up and wiped the spit from his forehead, nonchalantly letting it land on William and Bernard on the couch. He chuckled lightly, glowering down at Zeke. "Man... I

dunno if you did it or not... but I don't care anymore. Just for that I'm killing you first.”

It happened before anyone could react. Muggy's leg flew out from under him as if it wasn't there to begin with. His leg was instantly sideways, his boot hitting Zeke square in the face, sending him flying backwards. Zeke landed on his back, his face and head aching painfully. Both from the impact of Muggy's foot, and his head landing against the hard floor of Bernard's flat. He forced his eyes open and saw Muggy was now on top of him, his form becoming nothing but a shadow as the light behind him obscured him. The form suddenly shifted sharply as another foot was brought down hard on his head. The light was there again, as the foot was lifted but already Zeke's vision was fading away, the shadow he saw was no longer a trick of the light but rather it was all his eyes could muster. Another quick change to the figure and his vision went dark. This time, for good.

Muggy repeatedly stomped on Zeke's head until his steps made only ugly squishing sounds. He gave his foot one final thrust and then stretched himself, letting out a long, relaxed sigh. He finally turned to the group, basking in the horrified looks of the two on the couch. “Anybody else wanna try somethin’?” he dared.

“You- you- monster!” cried Bernard. William, meanwhile, turned pale and held back the urge to vomit.

Muggy cackled. “Hehehe. Monster? That's a new one. Usually people try and call me a slur before they throw something like 'monster' at me.” He stuck his hands in his pockets and swaggered over to the couch. He jabbed his knee at William, who was still shaking from the shock. “What's the matter wid im?”

“We're...he...” Bernard began, but the words refused to come to him.

It was William who spoke up, speaking carefully through hushed breaths. “I'm not... used to seeing... that much violence.”

Muggy threw his head back in a vicious, ugly laugh. “Not used to it? That's dumb. How long have you idiots been stealing from people?”

Bernard squeaked but went unheard.

“Huh?!” shouted Muggy. “Speak up, dumbass!”

“About...about 4 hours.” muttered Bernard.

Muggy paused and glared down at him. Bernard did his best to avoid his gaze but it was so strong it might as well have physically penetrated him. Bernard dared not look but for some reason, he could tell Muggy's eye was twitching.

“Come again?” he uttered.

“4 hours.” Blurted Bernard. “We didn't know we stole from you we just started-” Muggy's foot snapped into position and caught him in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him. Bernard gasped and shook but tensed up for another blow, screwing his eyes shut and awaiting the strike. When it never came, Bernard peaked and saw Muggy was hunched over on the other side of his flat, muttering to himself. His partner Wesley was standing by his side, idly rubbing his back and glancing around the room.

“Ahem.” Wesley coughed. “You'll have to forgive him.” He said, dryly. “Muggy can be a bit sensitive about his place in the criminal underworld so hearing he was the victim of theft from someone just starting out has made him-”

In a flash Muggy was standing upright, grabbing Wesley by his lapels. Bernard could only just barely see his face at the angle he was sitting at, but he could see that Muggy's face was

beet red. "Shut up!" he snarled. "I'm not sensitive about anything! I'm Mad Man Muggy, god damn it!"

Wesley was unamused, and gently brushed Muggy's hands off his collar. He opened his mouth to say something but was interrupted by a murmur on the couch. The two turned to see William, who had suddenly regained his composure and was holding back laughter. Furious, Muggy marched over to him and hunched over him.

Their faces at eye level he asked, "Something, funny, newbie?"

William grinned. "Newbie. That's rich! Sounds like you aren't as high on the totem pole as you want to be and then some guys who just started doing this for fun got one over on you. You're not mad at us, you're mad at yourself! You call us newbies but you might as well be one of us!"

Muggy growled with rage and yanked William by the hair. He yelped painfully and rose to his feet. "Fuck this! I don't have to take any of this shit from you!" Muggy yelled in his face. "You say all that shit and expect me to, what? Apologize? Come to my senses? Nah, you just pissed me off even more, son! You're next, shithead!" And with a heavy thrust he threw William to the ground. In a flash, Muggy began his stomping, hurling his heavy boots onto William's head while laughing with glee over his pained shrieks.

"Stop! Stop it!" balled Bernard. "Leave William alone! Please!"

Strong, steel hands clasped around Bernard's throat. He hadn't seen him move, but in an instant Wesley had him in a choke hold from behind. He spoke in Bernard's ear with that frighteningly dry voice of his, "No talking while Muggy is working."

Muggy finally relented and William caught his breath. He took in heavy, labored gasps. Muggy's face swung over to Bernard, his eyes wild with rage. He grinned at Bernard, the same evil grin that Zeke and Al must have seen. "Oooh!" cooed Muggy. "I recognize that begging. This guy is someone important to you, huh?"

Wesley released Bernard, only enough to allow him to speak. Bernard in turn, bit his lip and held back his tears. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know what he *could* say.

"Tell you what..." sneered Muggy. "How about you little greenhorns show me that you learned your lesson about being in his life." He reached over and grabbed Bernard's hair. He yanked his face close to his own. "Go ahead and tell me what you think about stealing from people better than you!"

"I- I- we-" Bernard sputtered, but it did him no good, the words would not come.

Muggy slammed his forehead into Bernard's, painfully. He drew back and yelled. "You ain't gonna steal from me anymore is that right?"

"We ain't gonna steal from you anymore!" wailed Bernard.

"That's right!" Muggy barked through gritted teeth. "You ain't gonna be in this life anymore cause you're weak! You're weak and useless!"

"I'm weak and useless!" Bernard cried. "I can't do this! I never could do this! I-"

"Yes... you... can!" said a voice.

Bernard gasped in shock at the recognition. Muggy threw Bernard back onto the couch and stared down at the source of the noise. "The hell you want, now, Willy?!" he roared. "Speak up, unless you can't!"

"Bernard..." choked William. Bernard tried his best not to look, he knew he couldn't bare the sight of his friend's current state. He resolved to only peak, but upon catching sight of him,

Bernard felt his heart sink. William's face was badly wounded from Muggy's assault. His face was contorted and cut. Blood covered his face and mouth. His eyes were bruised and swollen. But nonetheless, he was speaking. Perhaps more struggling than speaking, but still. "Bernard..." he forced out. "Bernard... you tell me that... every day... and every day..."

Bernard's eyes welled up. "And every day... I get through it."

"That's right..." William grinned, ignoring his missing teeth and the taste of his own blood. "You can do this, Bernard. You can be bigger... and better... than anything this lowlife will ever be."

At that final remark, Muggy had had enough. The rage in his eyes practically made him blind. William was merely a vague illusion, an obstacle given form by his own anger. That obstacle was no longer needed. Muggy brought his foot up again and brought it down over the vision, splitting it into nothing as if it was but a shadow in the mist. He turned his attention to the one on the couch, who was making an awful racket. He ignored the sickly squishing sounds his shoes now made and basked in the horrified screams, forming a delightful symphony. It always got this way when he did his stompin'. They scream and they cry and they wail, but in the end they're always silent. Silent and still. Muggy took one final look at Bernard and ground his teeth. He readied his foot and-

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! Came a noise.

Muggy paused, mid stance, and returned to a standing position. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a smartphone. He checked the notification and his eyes sprang open. "Ahhh shit!" he cried, and hurled his phone to the ground, shattering it to pieces.

"What's the problem?" Wesley said dryly.

"The problem," Muggy whined "Is that the price of Scrape Coin just fucking tanked. It's fucking worthless now! Do you know what this means?!"

"I most certainly do not."

"It means, that even if I kill every single one of these fools and steal all my shit back that it won't matter!" Muggy approached the nearest wall and put his foot through it, punching straight through the drywall and scattering debris.

"I see..." mused Wesley. He eyed the remaining targets of Muggy's hostility, now quiet in shock. "What shall we do with them then?"

Muggy threw his hands up. He already had his back to the rest of them, and was making his way towards the door. "I don't care! Doesn't matter anymore! I'm too pissed off about losing my MT. Let's go scam some old bitch out of her credit card number or something."

Wesley mused over the stunned group one last time before shrugging. "Very well." He declared, and followed Muggy out of the apartment. The door closed behind them leaving behind only a violent silence.

Part 4

Bernard wasn't sure how much time had passed after Muggy left. It was hard to concentrate when your brain couldn't get into gear. Every time it tried to form a thought it stalled out, flooded with thoughts of William. He did his best to ignore the rushing of blood in his ears, and avoid the sight of his friend's still and battered body on the ground in front of him. The world progressed around him for who knows how long until finally a voice wormed into his ear.

"Yo! Bernard! Bernie! We gotta go!" It was Stefan. In the world outside of Bernard's cluttered head, Al had managed to shake Stefan into consciousness. He and Al were moving quickly. They headed to Bernard's kitchen and managed to find a knife sharp enough to cut their bindings. They freed themselves, then rushed to the living room to do the same to Bernard, who, even after Stefan had started shaking and berating him, hadn't noticed at all. "C'mon! Up, up, up! We gotta get out of here!" Stefan pulled Bernard to his feet as quickly as he could while still being gentle.

The sudden rush of blood to his feet caused Bernard to feel dizzy. While it was now spinning, the world was slowly coming back to him. "Huh? Wha?" he managed.

"We're leaving!" stated Stefan, tugging at his shirt sleeve.

Al was behind him, nodding furiously in agreement. "Yeah! We gotta get goin' before the cops show up!"

"Wha? Huh? Wait!" Bernard pushed Stefan away. "We're just going to leave?!"

Stefan and Al nodded quickly in unison. "Yep, gotta leave before the pigs show up and start pushing their snouts in this shit."

Bernard was in disbelief. "You- you can't. We can't just leave! What about Zeke and William?"

Stefan urged Bernard toward the door. Al had already wrenched it open and was gesturing theatrically at the doorway. "They're dead, Bernard. You have to get over that and get a move on, we can mourn later."

Bernard shook his head. His eyes began to water. "How can you say that? Zeke was your friend. William was my friend! And you're just gonna leave him here? Like he didn't matter?"

At this, Stefan stiffened. In a swift motion he approached Bernard and grabbed him by the collar. He pulled his face in close, letting Bernard see, just a glimpse, of his eyes, which were moistening ever so slightly. "You think I don't know that?! Huh?!"

Bernard remained silent.

Stefan raised his voice in a brutal shout and shook Bernard as he spoke. "You think I'm not upset?! Huh?! You think I'm not fucking traumatized over all the shit that just happened?" He jerked a finger at Zeke's corpse, not taking his eyes off of Bernard. "That little man over there was one of the toughest guys I've ever seen. We had each others backs for years. When this fucking world chewed us up and spat us out, all we had was each other. Our asses were busted and bruised but I didn't care because I had him and Al at my side. You wanted to know what being a criminal is like, Bernard? Well there it is! Right over there! Splattered all over your fucking floor. This is the risk you take. Zeke knew that. Al knows that. I know that! We don't fucking work a nine to five because we wanted safety and security. We did it because we didn't know any other way to live. We did it because we thought, just maybe, if we had each other's backs maybe this world wouldn't scare the shit out of us so much!"

Stefan finally relented and let go of Bernard's collar. Bernard stood there, holding back

tears and shaking uncontrollably. "I... I can't move." He said. "I can't move because I'm so scared... but I also can't move because I can't just leave them here. We have to do something!"

Stefan shook his head. "Nothing we can do. Nothing we can do but get out of here. Once we're someplace safe, we're going our separate ways. Maybe skip town, find some place to lay low."

Bernard stiffened. "What so that's it?! We're leaving our dead friends here and you're just abandoning our gang?"

Stefan stared at him. "Yeah, Bernard, that's exactly what I'm doing. In case you haven't noticed we've got no money and two corpses on our hands. Your little empire died before it even began. Too bad, you lost, end of story."

Bernard stared back. The stare became a glare. "You... you don't think I can do this, can you?"

Stefan threw his arms in the air. "For god's sake, man! Look around! Are you stupid?! Yeah, no shit I don't think you're cut out for this!"

Bernard frowned. "You might not believe in me but William did."

Stefan narrowed his eyes. "Yeah... and look where that got him."

Bernard's body reacted before he even understood what was happening. His arm wrenched back and surged forward, his fist flying towards Stefan's face as fast as he could manage. However, his hand was halted, easily. Stefan's meaty hand caught his fist like a butterfly in a catcher's mitt. No matter how hard Bernard pushed, his hand refused to move any further.

Stefan sighed and batted away Bernard's hand. "Look, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. But look, Bernard, you couldn't even land a punch on me. You're not a fighter, you're not a strategist, you're not even really a bad guy. You're not a criminal, man."

Bernard grit his teeth. "You're... you're..." He finally relaxed and let out a long sigh. "You're right." He sat down on his couch and put his head in his hands. He stared at William's corpse through his fingers, unwilling to ignore it any longer. "I'm not a criminal... but I *want* to be. I didn't want William or Zeke to die but I wanted... something. I wanted to escape my own personal hell and make something of myself. I wanted to do something besides wish I wasn't at work all day. I wanted to be happy. And William wanted that too." He raised his head and eyed Stefan. "But I'm done saying 'I can't do this'. I'm tired of thinking everything I do is hopeless. I can do this. I will do this! I just need..." Bernard blinked. The realization was building up. There it was, plain as day, his one last chance. "I just need help."

The sounds of sirens were in the distance. They were growing steadily louder, causing Stefan to dart his eyes from the door to Bernard. "Last chance!" he said. "We're leaving with or without you."

Bernard bolted from his seat and clasped his hands on Stefan's shoulders. "Stefan!" He declared, "You, Zeke, and Al all took a chance on me and I'm grateful for that. I let you down, and the consequences were inconceivable. I get that. I get that you're mad but I have one last request for you both. One last gamble on a half baked criminal drop out like me! If it doesn't work than you two can skip town and rat me out to the cops, I don't care. It's a long shot but you've got to trust me, one last time."

Stefan's wiry eyes darted to the door again. Al called out to them. "We gotta go, now, guys!"

"Shit." muttered Stefan. "Fine! Fine! Whatever! One last chance, Bernard. But for now

we gotta go!”

Bernard clapped his hands together. “Excellent! Here's the plan. You two find somewhere to lay low. I'm taking a cab across town. If you don't hear from me within a few days then...” he smiled and made his way for the door. “Then it was nice being your boss for a time.”

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The taxi rolled to a stop and the driver made a grunt signaling Bernard to get out. For a moment he sat there, eyeing the doorway to a building with a brightly lit sign reading “Arman's Dry Cleaning”. It was raining, harder than it had been in a while, and this formed a symphony of white noise as the droplets pelted the taxi from tail to tip. Bernard balled his fists on his knees and took in a deep breath. He held it for a moment, exhaled, and finally opened the taxi door. Without an umbrella his clothes were immediately soaked, though it hardly mattered to him now. He walked slowly to the dry cleaners. Slower than he normally walked, for sure, but considering the stakes of the situation, anything to put off this next encounter seemed like a good idea. When he was at the door he took one last deep breath before opening it.

The door opened without so much as a squeak, save for the jingling of a bell hanging just above the entryway. To Bernard's left there were a few chairs, for the customers to have a seat while they wait. These seats had only two occupants on either end. One, a large gentleman in a cap, fast asleep, and the other, a black gentleman reading a magazine about hunting. The man reading the magazine glanced up at him momentarily, his eyes heavy and tired, and then immediately settled back to his magazine. In front of Bernard was the counter for the dry cleaners, currently unoccupied. Beyond that was the rest of the building, currently stuffed full of clothes in plastic sheathes, as well as equipment Bernard couldn't recognize.

For a moment, Bernard stood there, his soaked form already causing water to puddle at the entrance. He finally spotted a silver bell on the counter and approached it. Before his hand could settle on the ringer, a Serbian man came bursting out of the menagerie of clothes, causing Bernard to jump back.

The Serbian man brushed some kind of debris off of his ill fitting white suit before raising his face to Bernard and grinning. “Hey there! Didn't mean to scare ya! Welcome to Speedy Dry Clean, I'm Arman, do you have a ticket?”

Bernard straightened but suddenly found it hard to speak. “Erm... uhm... no.” he manged to cough out.

Arman looked at Bernard up and down. Still grinning he spoke again, “Well normally when we get a new customer he doesn't have the clothes he needs cleaned *on!*” and he let out a hardy laugh.

Bernard said nothing.

“Ahh I'm just playing around, kid. What can I do for you, if you're not here for cleaning?”

“I...” Bernard stopped again. He balled his fists again and soldiered on. “I'm- I'm here to see Joseph.”

Arman's grin didn't waver. “Ha! Bit of a stretch there. Lotta people named Joseph in this town, kid. None of them here. Maybe you're thinking of Joe's Pizza, that's just a block down-”

“I'm here to see Joseph Steccotti!” Bernard blurted out.

Arman's eyes widened and with a sigh he threw his plam into his face. “Oh for the love

of- not this crap again.” Arman splayed his hands. “Kid, look. Enough with this Joseph nonsense. I know you think this is some kind of hideout, but it's not! It was just a rumor that one of my unhappy customers started.”

“Let me see Joseph!” Bernard said again.

“Kid, you're not listening to me! If you say that again, I'm getting Alan over there to escort you out. I don't want to. I don't even want to pay the guy, but when little punks like you keep showing up in my place of business and asking to see someone who died before I was even born, well, I make do!”

“I'm not leaving until I see Joseph!” Bernard said.

Arman rolled his eyes and looked past Bernard. He spoke to the man reading the magazine. “Alan! Get this kid out of here, will ya?”

From behind him, Bernard heard the footsteps of a man approach him. A fat, heavy hand landed on his shoulder. There was no malice in his grip, it was the gentle touch of a concerned, yet still agitated parent. “C'mon kid.” said the voice behind him. “Just leave, no need to cause a fuss.”

Bernard bit his lip and blurted out his last line of defense.

It was barely audible, only loud enough for Arman to hear, but this made Arman's grin falter. In an instant, his previously warm demeanor was replaced with one of cold, mechanical, bluntness. His leisurely posture was replaced with one of stern hostility. He stared at Bernard coldly, and muttered “Where did you hear that?”

Bernard felt the hand on his shoulder clench tightly. He dared not look behind him. “Doesn't matter.” he said. “It's the right passphrase, isn't it? Now let me see Joseph.”

Arman stared at him, flatter and colder than Bernard could comprehend. “Get. Out.”

“N- No!” stammered Bernard. “I- I came a long way to see him and-”

“Get out. Last warning.” said Arman, pointing towards the door.

“No!” Shouted Bernard, his voice raising with no control of his own. “I know he's here! I know Joseph Steccotti is here and I'm not leaving until-”

In Bernard's heightened state he hadn't noticed a few things. Namely that the one man still sitting in the nearby chair had long since gotten up. He hadn't noticed that he had moved incredibly quickly to lock the door behind him. He hadn't noticed that the man with a hand on his shoulder had already drawn a pistol with his free hand. He hadn't noticed the butt of that same pistol was already being brought down on his head before it was slamming into his skull. He hadn't noticed any of this, and as the world turned black it didn't seem to matter, in the long run.



Cold water splashed in Bernard's face, causing him to bolt. Before he could utter a single word he noticed a few things. One, his arms and legs were tied tightly. Most likely they were tied to a chair, since he was now in a sitting position. Two, his head hurt like crazy. Partly from the blow that knocked him out, partly from his new “friends” not taking too much care with his unconscious form. Thirdly, the room he was in was dark, save for a single light bulb, dangling from the ceiling just above his head. Silently, he wondered how many more times he would be knocked unconscious and tied up before the day was out.

“Where-” and that was all that he managed to get out before a fist surged out of the

darkness and cracked him squarely in the jaw. Pain burst across his face like a pie in the face from some cruel clown. In his mouth, Bernard tasted blood. He wiggled his jaw and felt a tooth was already loose.

A voice from the dark spoke. Bernard recognized it as Arman from the dry cleaners, but of course, it was not his warm, friendly voice. This voice was dry, cold, and monotone. "You will speak when we ask you to, and not before. Nod if you understand."

Bernard nodded. He stared into the dark before him, but he couldn't make anything out. Not even a hazy blob hanging out somewhere in the void. The people currently assaulting him might as well have not been there at all.

"Good. First question. Who told you Joseph was here?"

"I can't sa-" POW! Another blow to the face. Bernard spat out blood, a tooth on the left side of his face was hanging by a thread.

"We do not accept 'no' or 'I don't know' or 'I can't remember' or any other garbage like that. Tell us what we want or you will feel pain. That is all. Now, again, who told you Joseph was here?"

"I can't-" The blow came earlier this time, then another. An additional punishment for not complying, figured Bernard. When the blows finally ended Bernard spat out blood, a tooth clattering to the floor alongside it.

"Who told you-"

"You think this hurts?" Another blow to his face. The pain that had, up until now, been exploding across his face, was being dulled by the white hot rage that was building inside of him.

"We told you-"

"You think this hurts?! You think this pain is anything to me?!" Another blow to his head. This time, Bernard took the full force without so much as twitching, stopping the fist in its place on his cheek. He grit what was left of his teeth and spoke through the pain. "I've lost everything. Pain is all I have left! You think pain will stop me?! This pain is nothing compared to what I had to go through to get here! Now let me see Joseph!"

Motion from the darkness. It was too late to react but Bernard nonetheless recognized it, a 2 x 4, being used as a makeshift baseball bat, swinging towards his head. The blunt force hit him square in the forehead, knocking his head back and craning his neck backwards, painfully. His head stayed on, thankfully, Bernard noted. Most likely that was due to the insane amount of control these goons had in their movements and blows. This is what it's like when you're on the receiving end of real criminal legends. Not someone like Muggy who hurl their strength around without restraint. They will not kill you, until they want you dead.

Stars and spots appeared in his vision, what was left of it, anyway. Bernard could feel his left eye swelling shut, blurring his vision even further. But through it all he still continued to shout. "I came here to see Joseph! Tell me where he is!"

"Shut. Up!" grunted Arman. His voice was changing, his composure was cracking, but not breaking. The 2 x 4 shot from the darkness again, this time towards Bernard's legs. The thing cracked against his shin with a loud crunch and Bernard yelped in pain as his bone caved in awkwardly.

His breathing was heavy, his body hurt like hell, but Bernard was not swayed. Through his teeth he barked. "I. Want. To. See. Joseph!" He swayed his head around the room, trying to stare down someone, anyone, letting them know he wasn't phased. "I'm not leaving until I see

him!”

The blows continued, and so did Bernard's resistance. The harder they beat him the harder he screamed. Not in pain, but in rage. In anger and passion he roared back, responding to their questions and blows with a bellow and a demand. This continued for who knows how long. Hours? Days? Either seemed likely. At the end of it all, there was silence, save for the heavy, labored breathing of Bernard and of his captors. Bernard heaved heavy, shuddering breaths in the sudden pause. His voice had long since gone hoarse and the pain his brain had been ignoring was starting to seep in. He could feel each part of his body tingle with pain and agony, and then suddenly stop, as if it had shut down or been removed entirely. His captors breathed heavy as well, apparently not expecting such a vigorous workout.

In the darkness, Arman finally spoke again. “Kid... why do you want to see Joseph so bad?”

It was the first time this question was asked of Bernard. And the sudden asking of it caused him to baulk. Of course he knew the reason. He just didn't expect anyone to ask. His eyes watered and between the swelled lumps on his face, the tears began to flow as Bernard started to weep. His wretched sobs paused only to take in heavy, necessary breaths before he could speak again. “Because... I want... to be... like him. I gave up... everything... to try and change myself... but it didn't work. This world... isn't like the one in the movies. I'm no David. I'm not a War Dog. But Joseph is. Joseph Steccotti is the closest thing there will be to a real movie gangster. He might be a scumbag... but he's a scumbag that doesn't take shit from anyone! I need... his help. I need... his guidance. I want him... to train me.” He stared up at the darkness and shouted, “If you want to kill me, then kill the me that I was! Kill the me that was chewed up and spat out by this horrible world! Kill the me that wasn't strong enough to bite back!”

Silence. Silence only disturbed by Bernard's laborious breathing and sobs. The silence dragged on for a while before the sounds of a heavy lock clicked out of place. In front of Bernard the infinite black void was broken by a thin crack of light. The crack grew and elongated until it formed a monolith of blinding light. Then came a snap as the restraints holding him to the chair were broken, letting his weak arms dangle to his sides.

In the darkness behind him, Arman spoke again. “Joseph wishes to see you.”

## **Part 5**

*Five Years Later...*

Muggy paced left and right across the office he often called home. He was in a foul mood, grunting and gritting his teeth in infantile rage. Wesley, resting on the couch in the back of the room, idly watched him circle the office, rolling his eyes ever so slightly every time Muggy stopped, looked up, and grumbled again before returning to his endless pacing.

Finally, Muggy looked up at Wesley, eyes wiry and tense. Wesley, knowing full well what the question he was about to get, let Muggy speak it anyway. "Are they done yet?!"

Wesley, rolling his eyes yet again, said, "No, Muggy, they aren't done yet."

Muggy balled his fists and flung his leg out in the air, kicking an invisible victim as hard as he could. "Why?!" he barked.

Again, knowing this answer already, Wesley let Muggy relax a bit before answering. "Because, Muggy, I told you, it would take time."

Muggy hurled his foot against the nearby desk, causing it to buckle a bit. "I don't want to wait! I want it done now!" He ran to the large window that overlooked the warehouse of his operations. Below, dozens and dozens of men sat at large cafeteria benches. These men were staring dazed at phones, laptops, tablets, any number of devices with a screen. The task occupying their time was clicking. Clicking incessantly with their fingers, mouses, keyboards, anything that could perform the act of endless clicking. Before them on their screens was a barely animated image of a cat. Its paws were forward and its belly was elongated off screen. As the dazed men clicked ad infinitum, the cat would blink or twitch its ears, and elongate just a bit more. Perhaps only by a few pixels, but more nonetheless.

Muggy hurled open the large window and bellowed to the crowd below, "Hurry up you bastards! Click faster! Click harder, dammit!" he slammed the window shut and resumed his frustrated pacing. Stopping only to check the large monitor on his desk. The number it was projecting read 73,123,589,188. The symbol that proceeded it denouncing the currency was a large C with a slash through it. After staring at the monitor for some time, the number incremented by one. This caused Muggy's eye to twitch and ready another kick. Before it could fling forward and deliver a killing blow to the expensive piece of machinery, his foot was halted by Wesley's grip.

"Muggy..." said Wesley, "Need I remind you that the workers are going as fast as they can and that smashing *another* monitor won't make them work any faster?"

Muggy growled and yanked his foot from Wesley's grasp. "I know that! Shut up!" he barked. "How much longer until I reach one billion?"

Wesley rolled his eyes. This was the third time he'd been asked that question today. "A few days, Muggy. It takes time."

"Why?!" screeched Muggy.

Wesley tutted. "Because, this whole scheme of yours only turns a one unit profit at a rate of about 5 minutes. For a single person it would take years to reach a value that high but at the rate we're going it should only take a few more days. We've got dozens of workers down there working around the clock. All you need to do, is be patient."

"I don't want to be patient!" snarled Muggy. "I want a billion Kat Coins and I want them now!"



“And you will have them. Honestly Muggy, I've never seen you so wound up.” muttered Wesley.

“I'm not wound up! You're wound up! I'm only like this because those idiots won't go faster!”

“They're going as fast as they can. We already cut lunch breaks. They already work for no pay. What more do you want them to do?”

“I want them to go faster!”

“Muggy, go kick your bag. Blow off some steam.”

Muggy huffed and puffed. Gritting his teeth, he turned and started for the door. “Fine! But I'm not doing it because you told me to!”

Muggy slammed the door behind him and left Wesley alone, who finally relaxed and exhaled a long, tired breath. Their relationship had always been tenuous at best but the strain of Muggy's recent operation had weighed on them both. He threw himself against the couch and stared at the back of Muggy's monitor. He wondered again what exactly the point of it all was. Muggy somehow threw him into this ridiculous scam and now they have an entire warehouse full of people clicking away. For what? To increase a number beyond any measurement that he could rationalize? In a currency that itself, seemed as tenuous and fleeting as Muggy's own whims? It was beginning to grow very tiresome, if still profitable, somehow.

Wesley let his eyes slide close and sleep to overtake him. The peace was broken by a shout just outside the office door. “What the fuck!?” It was Muggy. Wesley sprang up from his couch and dashed to the window to view the scene. Upon reaching the window, his eyes rose in surprise. The entire warehouse, the dozens of men who were supposed to be clicking away, had stopped. They had all risen from their trances and were standing perfectly still. They still seemed to be dazed, but instead of idly clicking away they stood stock still, staring out into nowhere.

Down on the warehouse floor, Muggy had grabbed the nearest worker by the collar and was berating him, loudly. “What the fuck do you think you're doing?! Get back to work! All of you!”

The worker in question was shaking terribly but said nothing.

“Answer me, dumbass!” Muggy screamed.

“We-we...” began the man, stuttering terribly. “Are staging a protest in order to bargain for better treatment and-”

Before the man had finished talking Muggy had flung the man by the collar lower to the ground and aimed a knee sharply into his chest. The man fell to the floor and gasped for air. Muggy immediately grabbed the next worker and repeated his question.

The next man answered, still frightened. “We are protesting for-”

Muggy dropped the man's collar and readied his leg. When he's angry enough, he can strike with enough force to plow right through a man's chest, and he seemed just angry enough now. Before he could strike, however, Wesley's hand gripped his shoulder, the rest of him filling the space behind him in an instant.

“Muggy,” he said plainly. “While I do agree that some means of punishment is in order, need I remind you that killing one of your own workers will only put us further behind schedule once we get things back in order.”

Muggy ground his teeth loud enough for everyone to hear. “Fine!” he barked, returning to a standing pose. “You handle this, Wesley! Before I get really pissed off!”

“Very well.” Wesley stood in front of the still-terrified worker and crossed his arms behind his back. The man obviously could not see them, but he knew very well that Wesley's brass knuckles were tightly in his grip. Wesley locked eyes with the man. “Get back to work.”

“We- we are bargaining for-”

Wesley shook his head. “There will be no bargaining. You are not employees. You are our peons. You will do what we ask or I will let Muggy kill you. Then I will go to the next person in line and repeat the same command. If the same answer is given, the result will be the same. Now, get back to work.”

“You-you can't kill all of us.” stammered the man.

Wesley's eye twitched.

“If- if you kill all of us then you'll have nothing! We will stand together and-”

In a flash Wesley's hand lashed out and gripped the man by the throat. He stared daggers at the struggling man, piercing through his very soul with a mere look. His brass knuckle hand was at the ready, tense with a muted, but nonetheless hostile, rage. It flew, fast and hard.

“Who the hell is that?!” shouted Muggy.

Wesley halted his fist, a mere inch from the man's face. He craned over his shoulder and caught what Muggy was referring to. Muggy was standing there, face filled with rage, pointing upwards at the office. Inside the office, just illegible behind the window, was the shape of a person. Immediately Wesley dropped the frightened man, his body flopping to the floor. He dashed past Muggy, who followed behind him quickly. They ascended the staircase at a rapid pace, flinging open the office door once they reached it. Once inside, they stopped in their tracks.

Sitting on the couch was a man the two did not recognize. He wore a sharp, midnight blue suit with a black tie. His hair was a soft gray, slicked back against his scalp. His shoes were as deep black as his tie, and sharpened to a razor edge. His eyes were soft yet fierce. The face of a lion basking before his pride. Yet as every member of the jungle knows, that face hides some rather large fangs. He spoke to them, in a dry yet intense monotone. “Hello Muggy. Hello Wesley. Sit down, won't you? Anywhere will do. Or if you'd prefer, I could tie you by the hands and have you put on your knees.”

Muggy pushed past Wesley and growled at the man, “Who the fuck do you think you are?! No one give me orders in my own place! I outta kill you where you stand!”

The man chuckled lightly, a gravely, grueling laugh. “Don't you mean sit?”

Muggy sprang into action, his form filling the front of the man's vision in an instant, foot already in motion like it had already acted without permission. It sprang forward, heel first and lodged in the drywall just to the side of the man's head. For a brief moment Muggy and Wesley felt a sharp tension between them as the realization hit them. Muggy hadn't missed. The man had simply moved so quickly, at last possible second, to avoid Muggy's blow, that neither of them had noticed him move.

Muggy wrenched his foot but it wouldn't budge. “Shit, I'm stuck!” he cried.

At this Wesley ducked in next, moving just to Muggy's side and aiming a fist square at the man's head. Wesley felt the blow but grit his teeth as the impact raced up his arm. Before he could fully process it his mind immediately jumped to the logical conclusion. *I must have hit the wall too! I must pull back and-* but upon pulling his hand back he found it would not move. He must have made the same stupid move and gotten himself stuck in the wall like Muggy. Only when the rest of his body caught up to his brain did it finally sink in. It wasn't the wall he'd hit, it

was the man's palm, suddenly in position to block his strike. The man's palm had curled around his fist and held it tightly, his grip feeling to Wesley like a huge brick of concrete encasing a small ham.

The man smiled lightly and batted away Wesley's hand. He arose from the couch, causing Wesley to jump back. As he rose, he bumped into Muggy who shouted "Shit!" and lost his balance, clattering to the floor with one leg still stuck in the wall. As Muggy shouted to be released from his unusual yoga pose, Wesley eyed the man, readied in a fighting stance. The man crossed to the other side of the room, his arms laced behind his back. Wesley observed him carefully. Observing that the man didn't seem to be carrying any weapons, but nonetheless feeling a dangerous aura emanating from him.

The door to the office slammed shut suddenly. Causing Wesley's eyes to dart from the man to the door and back again. He confirmed it wasn't merely the wind once he heard the click of a lock sliding into place.

Without turning around the man said, "I have my associate Stefan keeping guard while we have our conversation. This way there will be no interruptions." he eyed the warehouse floor, where the workers were still standing defiantly. "Wonderful, isn't it? A whole platoon of workers making a grand show of unified independence. A single organized unit made up of smaller wholes."

Wesley remained guarded. "So you're behind this revolt?"

"Indeed I am." said the man. "Your devices are remarkably easy to hack into unnoticed. I simply entered your systems and began sending messages to your workers on a daily basis, convincing them they are getting a bad deal and that an organized protest would put a stop to all your horrible treatment. This took quite a while. Propaganda doesn't seem to work if you blast it at someone all at once. Drip feeding it seems to work better. Over the course of several months I've been inundating your workers with... well, the truth of course. I told them that whatever deal they've been given, or lack thereof, actually only benefits you and not them. Once that pillar of freedom had sunk in the rest was easy build around. Of course, the end result of this protest isn't freedom, it's new management. But, do be a good sport and don't tell them that. It would just break their spirits."

Muggy finally freed himself from the wall and stood, pointing his rage directly at the man at the window. "New management?! The hell is that supposed to mean?!"

In front of the window, the man frowned. "You're quite slow on the uptake, Muggy. Even when I do my best to explain my plan in detail you still fail to catch on." He turned to them. "Let me put this in words you can understand. I stole from you, Muggy. But I didn't steal some cybergood this time, I stole your workers. I stole your work, I stole your progress, I stole everything that you have. It is mine now, and I'm not giving it back."

Muggy flew into a mad rage, charging forward and letting his legs fly as fast as they could. The man before him dodged and blocked every strike as if Muggy was an uncoordinated toddler. After a series of blows, Muggy faked a kick to the left before striking from the right, which the man caught easily and brushed it away, sending him to the floor once more.

As Muggy wailed and whined on the floor, Wesley stood still, doing his best to keep up with the lightning fast blows. As Wesley's gaze settle on the man, they locked eyes. "This time?" He said.

The man smiled. To him, the smile was composed and reassuring. To Muggy and Wesley,

it was the smile of a knowing imp. “Ahh Wesley. It was obvious that you were smarter and more rational than Muggy. Yes. This time. I've stolen from you before. You probably don't recognize me, but I wonder if you even remember me.” He looked down at Muggy on the floor, who was gazing back up at him with a glare. “But I sure remember you both.” He wrenched back his foot and delivered a heavy kick to Muggy's side, lifting him from the floor and tossing him across the room like he was nothing more than a wad of balled paper. “I stole something from you once and your retaliation was to break into my home and kill my friends.”

Muggy shot up from the floor, unfazed by his physical assault. “That could be anyone! Some mother fucker is always trynna steal from me! They always want my shit! So when someone does get lucky and gets one over on me I-”

“Get to stompin', yeah, yeah.” finished the man, tiredly. “I've heard it all before. You haven't changed at all, have you? I haven't seen you in five years and you didn't change at all. An ageless pillar against the tides, aren't you?”

“Grr!” growled Muggy. “Shut up! Don't interrupt me! Who the hell are you anyway?!”

The man smiled. “My name... my former name, was Bernard.”

“Bernard!” Muggy repeated. “Stupid name.”

The man chuckled lightly. “Guess you got me there. I'm not surprised you don't remember me. It's not a very memorable name, is it? I never did like my name. Too boring, too dull. More to the point, it's not befitting of respect in the criminal underground. No one takes you seriously with a name like Bernard. So I decided to change it. I prefer Burn, now.”

“I don't care if you call yourself the King of Australia! I'm killing you and getting back to work!” Muggy declared, charging at him again.

Burn responded with a roll of the eyes and a fighting stance of his own. As Muggy's kicks flew out they were once again brushed away with little effort. Everything that couldn't be avoided was blocked as if Muggy was kicking a solid brick wall. The last kick was blocked, and Burn's grip laced around Muggy's foot, yanking it sideways and sending him tumbling backwards again, falling with a crash to the floor yet again.

Wesley had been standing ready again, awaiting to see the results of Muggy's assault. He analyzed their movements as best he could. “Muggy...” he finally said. “I... don't think we can beat him.”

“Fuck that!” shouted Muggy from the floor.

“Hmm...” said Burn. “Maybe... maybe not...” he looked down at his own hand and flexed it, clenching and unclenching his fist. “I must admit my training was long and arduous and yielded some pretty amazing results, but only so much can be done in five years. Blocking and dodging are fairly trivial to me now, but throwing a punch is still something I haven't quite gotten down. I bet if I threw a punch at you, Muggy, it wouldn't hurt all that much.” He straightened and folded his hands behind his back again. “Which is why I don't think I should have to.” His eyes slanted over to Wesley, who hadn't moved an inch since he began his stance. “Wesley... how would you like a job?”

Wesley blinked. “Come again?”

“Would you like to come work for me? Surely you must be as tired of Muggy as the rest of us are. Help me deal with him and you'll be rewarded with a place in my inner circle. We have an opening, anyway.” He narrowed his eyes at Wesley. “One I haven't been able to fill for five years.”

Wesley blinked again.

From the floor, Muggy shouted, "You're a fucking idiot if you think Wesley would even think about leaving me!"

Wesley shook his head. "I'm not that stupid. This is another layer to your plan. I'll be just another pawn, following orders as blankly as those fools in the warehouse down there."

Burn tut-tutted. "No, no. We're not talking about simple employment. I'm talking management. Those let in to the inner cabal will be given the upmost respect and treatment compared to the average underling. I'll still be in charge, of course, but I don't think you'll have a problem with that when you see what we're working towards."

"He already said 'no!'" Screamed Muggy.

"No I didn't." said Wesley flatly, causing Muggy to snap his face towards him. Wesley did not return the look, instead keeping his eyes on Burn. "What exactly are you working towards?"

Burn grinned and spread his arms wide. "Complete... and utter... control. Control of the underground itself. The Mafia, the Triads, the Yakuza, eventually, someday, they will all be under my reign. Our organization is small now but I already have a fleet of drones to work under me, as well as the technical and logistical expertise of some highly skilled and experienced criminals. With Wesley on our side we'll have an additional bit of muscle for when kind words and espionage tactics no longer fit our needs."

After a brief silence, Muggy let out a wailing laugh. "Ha ha ha! He he he! That's so stupid, that's rich. That's absolutely brain dead!" He arched forward, pointing in glee. "You actually think you're gonna be King of the Crooks or something? That's so stupid. You honestly think that the *entire* Yakuza and *all* of the Triads will just hand over the keys to their empires?! Now I get why your hair is gray, you must have gone senile!"

Burn smiled, unbothered. "Perhaps it is a bit foolish... but it's a lot more fun of a goal to have than endlessly pacing back and forth and watching a number go up, isn't it?"

"Hell no!" Barked Muggy. "I've had enough of this garbage. Let's kick his ass, Wesley!" Muggy readied a stance next to Wesley, who hadn't moved during their entire conversation.

As Muggy reached his side, Wesley finally spoke. "Do you have health insurance?"

Muggy balked and felt the world spin around him. "Wesley!"

Burn smiled warmly. "Right now? No. But with profits like these, who needs it?"

Wesley relaxed his stance and began walking to Burn while Muggy stood quietly, eyes bugged and face pale in shock. Wesley finally reached Burn and took position behind him, hands folded behind his back. His eyes landed on Muggy. "Nothing personal, Muggy... thought to be honest I did hate working with you."

"This- this can't be happening. You- you traitor! You bastard! You-! You-!"

Burn shook his head. "And so completes the great heist. I've stolen your workers, stolen your profits, and now I've stolen the last of your crew. You have nothing, Muggy. Everything that made you, you, now belongs to me."

"I- I-" stammered Muggy. He fell to his knees. The world started to bend and turn around him in unnatural patterns, making him feel dizzy. "I'm going to die."

Burn grinned and approached Muggy, kneeling down at him at eye level. "No, Muggy. You will not die. I detest killing when it's not necessary. But, seeing as how you have nothing to offer... I suppose I will find some other way of disposing of you."

"Wha-" stammered Muggy. "What do you m-mean?"

“I mean that I will not kill you, but I will break you.” He towered over Muggy again, his shadow spreading across Muggy's terrified face. “Your punishment, Muggy. Is to remain eternally you. What's left of you, anyway. I am denying you death out of what mercy I have left but what I am also denying you, is the chance at living a life. I am denying your ability to harm me, my friends, or anyone else ever again. All the while, you will remain you. You will remain an insignificant little spec who probably could have used all of his time and money and resources to do something with his life, but instead chose endlessly to bully, berate, and abuse those around him, so that he could selfishly, increase an arbitrary number by one.

Because the number was truly all you had. The facade of what you were was obvious to everyone, even you. That's why you were like that. That's why you reacted so poorly when my friends and I stole from you. You saw someone get one over on you, and you realized that the little empire you had built for yourself wasn't made of steel, but of sand. That at any moment, anyone could take the thing you worked so hard for, and that once that was removed, you had nothing left. No Muggy, I don't need to end your life. I've already taken any meaning it had. Ending your life would be just as pointless as letting it continue.”

Muggy began to gasp for air, his lungs suddenly tight and his mouth suddenly dry. “This can't be happening, this has to be a dream!”

Burn shook his head. “No, Joseph Steccotti is more like a dream. That man is... ephemeral. Abstract. A walking contradiction. He showed me things I could never dream of.” His gaze angled elsewhere, dreamily. “If Hell is real than it must have been inspired by Joseph Steccotti because there is no other explanation for the den of horrors that man showed me. I will never truly know if he saw me as a some kind of prophet or some kind of puppet to be molded and shaped in his image, but I need not know, for his wisdom has settled upon me, coiling around my brain like a traitorous serpent.”

“What the hell are you talking about?!” screamed Muggy.

Burn's gaze returned to Muggy, losing his dreamy delight and replacing it with dower disgust. “I'm talking about how this is not a dream, Muggy. But I most certainly am your nightmare. Now, burn!”

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It was on this day, in the late summer months in the city of Hollando, that the locals became a touch more superstitious. It happened as all superstitions start, with a rumor here and a murmur there. Supposedly it all began one hot summer day on the remote side of town. A warehouse stood there, baking in the heat like everything else. Yet passersby were stopped in their tracks as a ghastly, pained wail came erupting from the warehouse itself. It echoed throughout the warehouse and spread out to the city block itself, weaving a hellish melody. The locals recoiled in horror and shock as the cry penetrated their very being. To this day there are those that say they can still hear the scream, as if it tucked itself away in the recesses of their minds, letting it out only when the subconscious delights itself in an awful prank. Overnight the warehouse became an urban legend, the shrieking building from which erupted the endless screeching of the tortured souls trapped within. Though of course, if you ever stop by and ask the owner of the place what he thinks, the kindly man in the sharp blue suit, he'll smile warmly, and tell you that this warehouse is merely a place of business.