

"A life goes by,
but the pain never sees
the scars your world put on me."

Saigon Kick

"Freedom"

One: Before

The river moved, and the trees bore witness, casting shadows across the constant rippling of the water. The amorphous weight and movement of the water against an uneven course broadcast tension upward through its depths, but the plane of the surface only hinted at the turmoil below. It flexed and warped with a deceptive lethargy, glints of afternoon sunlight at the ever-shifting high points.

He sat on a substantial lower branch jutting out over the water, ancillary shoots farther along fanning out, some with leafed tips raking interruptions in the current. His back was to the immense trunk, legs outstretched and ankles intertwined. The pose was placid, but one foot beat irregular time against the other in minute taps, more muted externalizations of a larger inner turbulence.

His head raged. He supposed that was why he came here. He sought a counter, something outside in contravention of what was inside. But it was not just his head.

No, there was always the body to consider. They were always companions despite the hierarchy, the head and its chauffeur, and the inevitable out-working of impact against living tissue took its toll on both.

He realized his fingernails were cutting into his palms, and he forced clenched hands to relax. No need for him to contribute. There was pain enough.

He watched the river with a desperate intent. It seemed to whisper to him of departure as all that mass slid by, even though it was constrained by its boundaries to arrive at an inevitable destination.

Something new occurred to him. Perhaps it was the destination that called, not the departure. He imagined its dilution by degrees as it passed into the delta, its alteration as it forced its way toward the sea, and finally its assimilation into the big blue.

The analogy didn't go any further for him. He knew there was also its extraction into the atmosphere, and its return in rain, but screw the circle of life. The furthest point away was just fine with him, whatever that looked like.

The memory of his encounter with the strange girl in town surfaced again, and his unease deepened with each replay. It should have lessened and disappeared instead of showing up with an increasing frequency. It was just a slice of his life that

should never have made it past short-term memory. He knew that. It should be nothing by now.

But here it was again, uninvited and dismayed in its vividness.

He'd slipped the chains of home by the thinnest of margins early on a Saturday morning. Ursa Major had over-slept long enough to put the meeting with Lieutenant Dan in jeopardy, so he'd gone by himself, taking the four already-wrapped packages along the foot-path to where it met with county road twelve. The piece-of-shit Chevelle waited there under the huge magnolia as it always did, the red coal of Lieutenant Dan's cigarette glowing in the darkness of the interior. Smoke drifted out the open window as he approached. He drew even with the door, and could see the dim form inside in the low light. It regarded him.

"Over-extend himself?"

The voice was oily, but he was used to it, and he appropriated a tiny measure of Ursa Major's typical dismissal without much thought.

He shrugged, looking away.

The danger in the voice brought him back in an instant.

"Boy, you show me that face again, I will put one in your head. You ain't your dad."

"Sorry, sir."

"Give."

He offered up the packages without meeting the dim eyes within the car.

They disappeared, the spidery fingertips leaving a clammy residue on his.

There was a moment of silence.

"That's the second time he ain't made it. You tell your old man that if we hit three there will be some hard renegotiation happening."

"Yes, sir."

He knew that he'd do no such thing. Ursa Major probably wouldn't kill the messenger, but a beating was a pretty good bet.

The ancient v-eight belched to life, and the car slid out onto the county road, running dark in the early morning twilight. It passed the first curve, and was lost to sight.

He took a deep breath, and then followed it toward town.

An hour later, he was nearing Sagamore street as he passed through the alley behind Birkland grocery. The sun was up now, though not high enough yet to do anything except cast the loading dock and dumpsters in shadow, and illuminate the upper landings of the three tenement buildings across the narrow avenue. Chain-link fenced rear lots were also still dimly lit, full of cast-off vehicles and other detritus, which is why he didn't see the girl until she spoke up.

"You shouldn't go that way."

He stopped, muscles instantly tensing as he located the speaker.

She stood behind a waist high chain-link gate, looking at him. Dark hair hid part of her face, but there was enough light to tell that she was sort of pretty. She was younger than him, and wore stained sweats and a dark t-shirt with "wild child" emblazoned on the front. Her feet were bare, and she was still, except for her right fist, which tapped against her outer thigh with a steady tempo.

"What?"

"You shouldn't go that way."

He regarded her in silence, each of them motionless except for her hand, until he broke it.

"Why not?"

The tempo of her fist tapping increased, and she reached up and tugged at her hair several times with her other hand before dropping it to her side again. She looked away for the first time.

"I don't know. That wasn't part of it. There was only telling you not to."

She was looking around at other things now, as though she had lost interest in the conversation after having said what she

needed to say. The fist tapping slowed. His confusion grew, and he was starting to get irritated. It never took much.

"What are you talking about?"

She looked at him again, but not for long. She scratched her cheek with the hand not beating out a rhythm against her thigh, and looked away again. When she spoke, it was as though she was speaking to someone else.

"I don't know. It was just that. Bye."

She turned and walked away across the asphalt toward the steps leading to the first-floor porch.

Several responses came to mind, but none of them really fit, because he couldn't make any sense of it. What came out was a useless end-bracket to the conversation as she crossed the porch, headed up the stairs to the third floor apartment, and went inside.

"Yeah, well, whatever."

He stared after her for several minutes after the door closed behind her, still trying to figure out what had just happened. He replayed it in his mind a few times, but came up empty, which just irritated him more.

He started walking again, with only one more backward glance at the rear lot.

As he neared the mouth of the alley, two large figures appeared around the back corner of Birkland's, turning into the alley.

All three stopped, as recognition sparked. In the tiny corner of his mind not instantly filled with fear, the realization that the girl had actually been right popped into being.

"Well, isn't *this* convenient. Pay-back time, bitch."

Vic Duzio and Steve Pimm advanced towards him, twin grins filled with malice blooming on curling lips, Vic with a one-step lead.

He calculated, even as they closed the distance, judging angles and analyzing distance. Everything came back no clear win. He wasn't getting out of this intact.

It didn't matter. Fear was just a match to him, anyway. He struck it, and his rage caught fire.

He burst into motion, sprinting towards them, but angling towards the opposite side of the narrow alley. They hesitated momentarily, obviously confused by his choice of direction, but changed trajectory to intercept him. Vic closed the distance the fastest, and got a hand around his left bicep as they drew even, clamping down hard in an effort to stop him flat.

He shifted, leaving Vic holding empty air. Color drained out of everything as he moved forward, reaching the mono-

chromatic edge of the shift, and then he was thrown back, colors rushing back in as he returned to the world. Unfortunately, Steve got a leg out in front of his feet at exactly the same moment, tripping him. He pitched forward, but tucked himself into a roll that got him back on his feet after a single tumble, counting down the three-count before he could shift again. He was closing on the mouth of the alley when something slammed into the back of his head, and he saw stars.

There was no tucking in this time, just a forward twist in the air, and then impact with the ground. He rolled over several times, coming to a stop facing back down the alley, just in time to see Vic's heavy work-boot inbound toward his ribs.

He hit the zero count, and shifted again, catching only the tiniest initial bit of the impact before the boot passed through him, continuing onward and upward as impetus demanded.

As color snapped back into everything, he watched as the distance between Vic's forward foot and rear expanded above him, and his body descended towards what was shaping up to be a spectacular display of the splits. He whipped a fist up in a convulsive movement from where he lay.

It was his left, and lacked some of the power of his strong hand, but he could tell by the impact that he'd tagged the asshole's nut-sack pretty good. He hunched forward and rolled,

getting himself out of the way of Vic's descent as a shrill, upper-register scream pierced the morning air.

One down, he thought.

He struggled to get to his feet, only getting half-way up before Steve slammed into him with a body tackle that rattled his teeth, and stressed all the bones in his rib-cage. His head impacted the asphalt, and pain exploded along that entire side, a ringing instantly sounding in his ear. He lost track of where he was in the three-count, and Steve got in a few body shots, each one painful, but pale imitations of what Ursa Major could deliver when he was in the zone.

He shifted a third time and rolled away, ignoring the strange juxtaposition of his own body and Steve's as his attacker dropped onto the street through the temporary nothingness of his own. He rolled clear, and leapt to his feet as color returned. He sprinted for the street.

Behind him, he heard pursuit for maybe half a dozen strides, and then Steve's voice above the quiet retching sounds as Vic dealt with his personal result of the conflict.

"Run all you want, you little shit. We'll get you eventually. Unless maybe your old man takes you out first."

He raised his middle finger over his shoulder as he ran, right before he turned the corner onto Sagamore, blood streaming down his right cheek and neck. Expletives followed him, but he

didn't care. His pain served his anger as well, and he felt like he could run forever.

He came back to the present as the memory ended, and reality illustrated the biggest problem with deep introspection. It was the deep part. He didn't hear anything except the last footstep, and by then it was much too late.

"Should've climbed higher, boy."

A huge hand caught his forearm, and dragged him down.

He could shift, but it would create a bigger problem than it solved. Plus, he had nowhere to go.

He landed half in the water as pain sparked new paths from limb to head, and he briefly considered straight-up resistance as he was dragged out of it, toward the lessening trees ahead, and home.

No, he decided. There would be too many ripples.

"Lemme up."

The giant dragging him through the tall weeds stopped and turned, staring down, but didn't let go.

The face would've been handsome, if it were smaller. The features were too expansive though. It was more a caricature, a cartoonist's rendering of good looks. But the eyes spoke loudest. So brown as to be an effective black, they hinted many things, and none of them good.

"There you go again. You tellin' *me* what to do. Not even a 'please', either."

"Please."

The face drew closer as the huge man bent. The brown-black eyes glittered.

"Everybody says you got all *kinds* of smart. What am I missing, here?"

He drew in a deep breath, and then shook his head.

"I don't know, kid. I don't see smart, and got no patience with stupid. You *know* that."

The gigantic hand around his wrist began to squeeze harder.

The rage in his head grew, and he could feel himself vibrating inside like crystal approaching the shatter frequency. It was all he could do to contain it. He forced out one last try before he exploded. He looked away from the face above him.

"Please, Pop. Let me up."

The pressure on his wrist eased.

"You run on me one more time, I'll be putting you in several different size bags, and floating you down this river. You feel me? How you think your mom would feel about *that*?"

Then his wrist was free, and the big man was lumbering forward again, speaking over his shoulder.

"Get moving. You got things to do."

He shoved to his feet and followed, massaging his wrist. In the maelstrom of his mind, violence played like cinema against the massive shape ahead, and his hatred expanded. It was fast consuming the other parts of him, and he could see a time, not far removed from now, where it would be the last thing standing.

He thought of the river.

Sometimes the land dropped away, didn't it? The river was set free, if only for moments.

And not all of that water made it to the bottom.