

'Demption Road

By Justin Porter

Cass always woke slowly. He moves his feet, feels the dense, worn-down heels of his boots rasp on the wooden edges. He moves his hands, runs them over his body. Scratches where he finds an itch and rubs sore, scarred knuckles.

He draws up his heels, bridges a little, lifting his lower back off of the assortment of blankets padding the pile of wooden planks he slept on. Rolling onto his side, he puts his hands together like a prayer between his knees. The joints would ache if he allowed them to pillow each other. He would never be able to sleep like that, his hands so occupied, so confined. Eventually he sits up, opens his dun-colored eyes and looks out at the place he'd built.

His place.

Sunlight streams in through the windows, dust motes playing within the rays like ecstatic children. Between each aperture, an accentuated dark. The corners seem to swallow light and pass shadows.

When Cass had claimed the warehouse as his own, his bed had lain in the heat of one of those windows. He had woken, angry and abrupt, his eyes opening first, to those hellish rays of sun. That night he slid the pile of boards to a darker corner, his hands soon studded with splinters. They still sported dark spots where bits of desiccated wood lay driven beneath the first layers of skin.

Head aching, throat dry, he casts about his bed for the bottle from last night and, like most mornings, it's empty. He shouldn't have bothered. If he woke to find a bottle at all, it would always be empty.

Cass stands up, shirking his clothes around him, his pant-legs out of the tops of his boots. His belt buckle sits dead-center. He reaches overhead stretching, passing his hands through the sunlight from a higher window, feeling warmth. Turning, he drops to a crouch and slides a hand under his rolled-up jacket. The jacket that held his head as he slept. He notices with distaste a sizable wet spot from when he must have drooled the night before.

Under the jacket, his hand bumps something and grasps around it. Cass slides the object behind his belt-buckle and makes sure to pull the hem of his ripped and spotted shirt over it.

What Christina awakes to is an unyielding hardness at back, shoulder, and under his ass. His knees ache at their awkward position. He could see the alley around him and feel that the parts of his body that weren't protesting were against garbage bags.

Rubbing at his face, he smells the perfume that he had put on the night before. "My flypaper," he had joked to his roommate as he got ready to go out, indicating a small bottle. His roommate had shaken his head, mystified, but secretly happy with himself for being cool with so counterculture a roommate.

Christina smells the rancid garbage on two sides. He smells his skin and clothes, which held traces of the things he had done the night before. The things he had done willingly and with enthusiasm.

And the things he had not done willingly.

The enthusiasm of others.

Both had been part of his plan when he left the house the night before.

Christina was thin, delicate even. Narrow of shoulder and hip, willowy and beautiful. His face's bones, his large eyes and harshly pouting lips made some of the baddest faggots gasp. Forget themselves, forget not to fight over these bitches. Christina knew that. And loved it. Loved to make these men put the boots to each other.

Thugged-out, heavy knuckled and big-dicked.

Christina loved them all and they loved him.

He felt that maybe they had loved him a little too much too far this time, as he braces himself against the alley wall and stands up. Feeling the sore places on and inside his body, like the echoes of a canyon-scream.

He pushes off the soiled brick and puts his weight on his left ankle. Crying out shrilly as the joint buckles, Christina topples into a pile of garbage. Cries of outrage replace cries of pain.

He drags the pieces of himself together and wraps his arms around his knees, hugging. And from somewhere back, back before the hateful words, the clenched fists and the fast push out of a door that held safety on one side and hell on the other. Before all of those things, he remembers that there used to be arms that held him. Protected him from everything, including himself. A ghost of that whispers in his own clutching arms.

Tears reach his mouth and were tasted before he knows that he is crying. Once he notices, it comes hard and fast, pushing and shoving to get out, as though it knew it had just this one chance.

He wracks and shakes.

He turned 19 yesterday.

Cass pats his pockets as he walks to the front entrance. A tiny key lies in the folds of a pocket. It had rolled out once while he slept, and he had lost sleep and patience finding the damn thing. But he wasn't that bad off, some had lost blood.

He later found it between the slats of his makeshift bed.

The only new thing on the building is the padlock that Cass had bought for the warehouse's only entrance. The tiny key opened it. Cass had robbed three people to get the money together to buy what was originally a bike lock. He saw messengers, and all of them had the same one. He figured that it must be good.

Cass removes the metal pipe that he slid through the door's mechanism to keep it shut at night. From one end of the pipe, he unloops the chain and lock and takes the key out of his pocket.

Outside in the fading sunlight, he chains it shut and slams home the lock's struts. Cass glares up at the setting sun and walks towards a group of other men like himself who had already started a fire in an old oil-drum. That's when he hears the crying. He hasn't heard anything that broken since four years ago when he caught one of the older

bums fucking a young runaway that had been stupid enough to think fellow victims don't prey on each other. Cass remembers the look of fear in the kids' eyes after Cass had beaten the rapist to death. Like his life had just gone from bad to worse. Cass had walked away disgusted.

But this crying sounds older and it lacked the grunting hiccups that accompanied the other. It came from around the side of the warehouse.

Christina gave up trying to stand. The torrent quality that his crying had taken makes it difficult to see. Any attempt to choke it back just made it worse.

While the tears fall vertically, the memories spanned panorama. The shouting, the hitting, the words. Learning the lesson that you were an idiot and a faggot at school and then learning the same lessons at home. You were an idiot for not being able to handle geometry and you were a faggot for painting your fingernails. *You wanna be a little girl? Fine. We'll start calling you Christina at home, not Christian. You wanna be a chick you can be chick, fucking little faggot.*

So absorbed is Christina, that he feels rather than sees that somebody is standing over him. Somebody large and somebody silent. Still struggling to draw an uninterrupted breath, Christina looks up into Cass's face. He would have collapsed further inward if it had been possible. This isn't like at the club or last night. He's sober, for one. For another, at the club, he was prepared to be used. Prepared to like it.

But this is the next morning, when he's hung-over and hurting. No safe-words out here. Not that he set them up for last night, but you know, it was a possibility. Not here, with this huge scary man standing up there, staring down with the most beautiful and emptiest eyes Christina had ever seen on another human.

Cass isn't sure what he's looking at. It's small, like a kid, but the face has some age. Slightly built like a girl and there's make-up, but it is also clearly male. What the fuck is it doing out here? Not a safe place for anything that looked like that. Cass could remember some people who would find a way to use it.

Christina tries to stand up again, tries to at least be on his feet when whatever was going to happen next, happens. But the ankle buckles again, and his whole leg from toes to hip rattle with a pain vibrato. As Christina falls, an arm shoots out and grabs him above an elbow. Not painfully, but not gently either and it makes pain easy to imagine. Christina looks and Cass is holding him up with one hand. He turns and guides Christina to uncluttered ground.

Having been taken out of the scattered trash and worse, Christina finds it easier to stand without help. He looks around at the blasted buildings and warehouses that surround like broken teeth in a beaten man's mouth. He looks down at himself, brushes the clothes that cover him. He tries to ignore the whitish stains and the rips that are new, settles the shirt more comfortably, more for a way to figure out what to do next. The silent one next to him still hasn't fully let go of his arm, but relaxes the grip a little.

Christina cuts his eyes at Cass, unable to keep a slight flirt from his mouth corners and eyelashes. "Where is this?" His voice forced falsetto, Christina gathers the

protections that life had forced upon him little by little. Now standing and confident again.

Cass just looks at him. No expression yet.

Christina casts him a withering look, frustrated. *Great*, he thinks: *It's Lenny from Of Mice and Men.*

Christina lowers his registers and answers in the voice he inherited from his parents. "Where are we?"

"Squa...squats." Cass's unused voice chokes on the first syllable before allowing him the pleasure of a full word.

Oh shit, thinks Christina. This is bad - first they spend the whole night rough with me, then they fucking dump me out here. Fucking assholes going for the whole experience I guess: snatch, gang-rape and dump. Then it occurs to him that maybe he was the only one enjoying a fantasy last night. He shivers and grabs around himself, shrugging all the way out of Cass's grip, who just lets his hands fall to his sides.

"I need to go here." Christina says, his slim hand holding what looks like a postcard.

Cass stares at the words on the card. A few of the smaller ones jump out at him, some of the ones he knows, but mostly it might be any language at all for all he's concerned.

"I can't read." he says, with just a hint of something in there with the gravel.

"What do you mean?"

"Forgot how."

"Oookay." Christina throws up his hands, placing one on a hip, wincing when a broken nail catches on the fabric. The other hand on his cheek, Christina stands, hip shot, and says: "It's The Old Souls Halfway House." The card is still facing the same direction towards Cass.

"I've never heard of it." Cass says.

"Fuck. Well can you tell me where I can catch a bus?"

Cass shakes his head. "We're too far out here for that. You're gonna have to walk."

Christina sighs and straightens up, looks around like some species of very dramatic water-fowl, and demands:

"Which way?"

Cass points vaguely.

"What are you, some kinda fuckin' retard?"

Cass turns slowly and looks at Christina from the direction he was pointing. Nothing changes about him, but something buried deep in Christina, something that's maybe buried deep in all of us, tucks its tail between its legs.

"No." Cass says, and then after a moment adds: "I'm not."

"Right. Well, I guess I'll just start fucking walking..," Christina says, taking exactly one step before his ankle buckles, causing him to shrill out and drop to one hand.

"What's the matter?" Cass asks.

"What the fuck, are you blind?"

“No.”

Christina flourishes an impatient gesture at his ankle.

“My stupid ankle is totally fucked! Help me.” he demands imperiously, extending one shattered-manicure hand. Wrist cocked at exactly 45 degrees, fingers reaching. He shrieks again when Cass pulls him to his feet as though he wanted to get launched into orbit, rather than simply stand up.

“Jesus Christ! What the fuck’s the matter with you?” Christina says, shaking his arm out from the shoulder.

“Nothing.” Cass says, speaking his truth.

“Can you help me find the shelter? I need to get checked out. After last night.”

“What happened last night?”

“Some guys I know kept me in a van for three hours taking turns.”

“Oh.” Cass’s features wrinkle and his tone darkens.

“Don’t knock it ‘til you’ve tried it, sweetheart.”

Cass shakes his head. “I’m too big for that now.”

He moves closer to Christina and ducks under the arm that matches the ankle.

Then straightens up a bit, allowing Christina to stand and walk.

“I’m Christina.”

“Cass.” Then thinks for a minute. “But that’s a girls name.”

“You have antiquated gender biases.”

“What?”

“Never mind, let’s just walk.”

Cass looks around after walking for what felt like hours, but judging from the sky and light patterns, it can only have been one.

“I’m not sure if we’re going the right way,” he says.

Christina sighs and sucks his teeth in irritation. “God. I thought this was like, your neighborhood or something?”

“It’s not anybody’s anything.”

“Yeah, well, whatever, but I think the buildings I see up ahead are familiar.”

“Then I guess you don’t need a guide.”

Christina stops and looks at him. Cass can see his fear’s fingertips in his eyes, edging up and peeking out. The boy he had saved from the rapist had the same look in his eyes. This time though, Cass is sure he’s seen as the savior and not the bigger of two wolves fighting over a scrap.

“Lets go.” Cass says and walks ahead, past the shaking Christina.

“What the fuck do mean, you’re lost?” Christina shrieks.

“Just what I said,” Cass rolls his eyes, but other than that, nothing is obvious.

“I thought this was your ‘hood or whatever!” Christina is still shouting.

“You said that already, and what did I tell you last time?”

“I don’t fucking remember! Fuck!”

“I said it wasn’t anybody’s anything. Now stop shouting. You’re gonna draw out the wolves.” Cass looks around obviously at the buildings surrounding them that appear to be empty, or at least abandoned.

Christina does a quick head-twitch look around, seeing nothing but figments of imagination in the windows. But imagination shape-shifts mice to werewolves and back again.

“Hang on,” says Cass as he walks towards a pile of slag near the stairs and doorway to one of the buildings. Nervously, Christina follows, picking his way through the trash and bottles on the balls of his feet, the heels scrabbling for purchase amid the chunks of the pavement.

Cass addresses the gray, shadow-clad heap.

“Yo, you know where there’s a shelter around here?”

Christina goggles at him. “What the fuck are you doing? There’s nobody there.”

Cass ignores him. Staring at the heap.

Christina turns and decides to go it alone when a voice that seems to be using barbed wire and poisonous snakes for vocal chords speaks up.

“Da journey man would ask a queschun of him dat see all, da gospel wh’a him speak, and the scripcha wh’a him lun as a buay and now rem’ba.”

“Uhhh, yeah,” Cass answers, “What can you tell us about the place?”

The shape shifts and twists, a head rising from the amorphous rags. Its hair (that which there is) sticks straight up or hangs in grease-shellacked hunks. Both eyes are milky, but they focus on Cass. The skin is brown, wrinkled and desiccated like a crack-addicted walnut.

“You can’na even ‘magine wh’a da cost a dis here eran’ gone need dee spendin’ of.” The face pauses and the rags shift, evoking an image of a large bird caught in an oil spill that is trying to ruffle its feathers.

Christina turns and tugs on Cass’s sleeve.

“What the fuck’s he saying? Is he Jamaican or something?”

“No. And shut up” says Cass, eyes never leaving the living heap wedged into the corner of the stoop. As if prompted, it kicks into life again like a carnival’s automated fortune teller.

“You’a al’reddy on dee pat’, keep youa feet trua and you’a purpows strang. Keep you’a ‘art on you’a task an’ you’a han’ on you’a blade and you be allri’. Remba’ wh’a I sedd. Go’an whichoo. Keep tru’a.”

“What the fuck..?” Christina whispers as he turns to follow Cass, who is already down the street.

“He says we’re going the right way.” Cass says over one large shoulder.

The sun sinks as the terrain of empty buildings continues strange around them. The only sounds are their heartbeats in their ears, their breath passing their lips and their footsteps. Christina has given up trying to talk to Cass. Each question was met politely, but tersely.

Ahead of them in the street, a darkness deeper than a project hallway with a blown light bulb detaches itself from the buildings and spaces between, or seems to rise

from the paving stones. As the distance closes, Christina shrinks to Cass, who seems to swell and spread the light that is lacking. As that distance is halved and then quartered the darkness ahead gives way to individual shapes.

Men.

And in Cass and Christina's road.

One shape takes the angle point of what became a wedge-shaped blockade. That shape pushes back the hood of a Raiders sweatshirt that had seen better millennia, never mind days. The exposed face is dark like ebony and smooth like something more. Its voice is loud.

"The fuck you want here?"

Cass shifts weight to both feet and makes his normally impassive face even blanker.

"Just to pass through, we're not here for anything."

"Cass..." Christina whimpers.

"Man says, pass through an shit, like that's just something you do. Please. Why the fuck we shouldn't just tax your ass?"

"We don't have anything you want."

"What do you got?"

"I just said, nothing."

Christina is starting to mold to Cass tighter or perhaps to hide inside him. Cass shakes a shoulder irritably, trying to dislodge him. Christina stops sticking to him, but a hand remains, holding onto Cass's shirt sleeve.

"Nobody has nothing...plus, I think my man back here wants a taste of that thing you got with you...Miss Thing over there." He gestures first over his shoulder to a huge man in a very old bubble jacket, and then over Cass's shoulder at Christina. Christina whimpers, but slides a hand into a pocket.

"No." Cass says.

The leader moves forward to Cass and gets in his face. Cass holds his ground, unmoving. The leader slowly moves a hand towards Cass's pants pocket, a ripple goes through the mass of men behind him. Cass feels a hand searching his pocket, and when it feels like the leader has his hand good and deep, he clamps his own hand down over the wrist and holds it there. The leader tries to pull away stupidly, giving Cass the delay he needs to clamp his other hand on the back of the man's neck and hold him while he whips his head forward. There is a crack and a soft yielding as the man staggers back, screaming and clutching his face. Cass's hand flies under his shirt and behind his belt buckle. He lifts out something old, and steps forward while the leader has his eyes behind his hands. Cass slams the object into his chest. The body folds, caves and becomes slightly less so, doing a full on marionette slump all the way down to stillness.

Cass looks at the group, and gestures at the body.

"There's your tax."

The mass falls upon the body, now gone from alpha to beta, ripping and twisting, clothing stripped and pockets gone through. In the resulting chaos, Cass and Christina move on while the moon rises higher and decorates the dome of the sky.

“Cass...” Christina trembles, voice shaking.

Cass grunts by way of answer and acknowledgment.

“Is that guy..?”

“If not just then,” Cass lifts his right hand in a fist and opens it abruptly, fingers spread, “by now for certain.”

“Oh.”

They walk.

The buildings grow less whole, if the pair could run fast enough the city might decay around them like flip-book animation. The street lights would fade and burst one after another. And so it seems, because light flees to hide in the shadows. Finally, each walk to the next street light becomes like several lights at the end of several tunnels.

In the distance something shakes and moves, passing through a pool of light like a shark moving too close to the surface. A block before it reaches the pair, it reveals itself to be a long white Cadillac.

Christina starts to slink towards the side of the road, near the buildings, when Cass shoots out a hand and wraps it around his upper arm, holding him in place.

“Don’t run, they’ll only chase.”

Christina shakes, but stands. Then when Cass prompts, they both begin walking again. Little by little the car and the pair get closer, until finally it stops moving. When their feet carries them parallel with the car, the back window rolls down with a whirring noise, morphed by the silence from whisper to shout. Sly and the Family Stone’s “Everyday People,” sprays from the stereo.

Cass stops and holds Christina close to his side, his grip the same.

“What you got there, soldier?” a voice from inside the car asks. A voice that sounds like nothing at all.

“I don’t have anything,” Cass answers, the hand holding Christina tenses as he tries halfheartedly to bolt.

“That’s not true. I think you better put it in my car.”

“What? This?” Cass asks, shaking the arm holding Christina.

“It’d make a nice addition to my stable.”

“Since when does a pimp in this place,” Cass says, his free hand making an all-encompassing gesture, “run boys?”

Christina squawks and tries to pull free.

“I run it all, soldier, now put that pretty little piece in my car.”

“What are you offering?”

“It gets in the car, and you don’t go in the trunk.”

Cass pauses, and looks at Christina, who meets his eyes unflinchingly. Exactly what Cass needs to see.

“No.” Cass says, turning to go. He feels, less than hears, Christina sigh.

“Yes,” the voice answers, as a barrel pushes itself out of the darkness of the window.

Cass looks at the gun, and then cranes his head down a little to look into the darkness, only to have his eyes met with nothing. He lifts back up and turns his eyes to the road ahead and lifts the hem of his shirt.

“I’ll fight.”

“So will I,” Christina pipes up.

“You’ll die.” The voice answers.

“So you’ll have nothing but bodies. And I promise, I won’t make it easy.” Cass says.

Silence answers from the window. The barrel goes back inside. A hand reaches out, manicured, adorned with rings. The smallest finger sports an elongated nail. Between the rest of the fingers is pinched a folded wad of cash.

“My second offer. Put the slip in the car.”

Cass looks at the money for a moment and then turns away, drops the hem of his shirt and the pair moves on, leaving the car behind them. Cass waits for the shout, or the shot, or the movement of the car. But none comes. What he does not do is look over his shoulder to check. He just walks, and after a few feet he says to Christina, “So, you’ll fight, huh?”

Christina lifts his head defiantly.

Cass snorts and releases his arm, letting him walk on his own.

The road stretches.

Slowly, whether it’s dawn, or functioning streetlights, the world gets brighter. Cass looks around him and sees that some of the buildings sport lights, some of them were even whole. Towards the center of the block is one brownstone far larger than the others. It looks the way city houses must have looked before enterprising landlords chopped them up into apartments. A crowd sits around the entrance to this one. The gathering has the look of a Thug’s Red Carpet. Skinny junkies sit alongside iron-freaks studded with jail ink, fresh from Gen-Pop. Impassive men in monochrome seem to twitch constantly, hands reaching for the deadly lumps that used to be underneath their clothes. Ladies stand among them, black, white, chicana and boriqua, each looking like razors dipped in silk and gold.

As Cass and Christina come close, eyes swivel to take them in, but they are still a block away. Cass slows up, Christina looks at him sideways as he mutters under his breath.

“Fuck.” Cass’s hand twitches to be filled and it rests just on the outside of his clothes near his belt.

“It’s okay,” Christina says, placing a hand on his arm and shaking it a little.

“The fuck you mean, ‘It’s okay?’” Cass asks.

“This is the place.”

Cass looks again, sees the building is in good shape, that this isn’t just another pimp/hit man/crack house sitting in the middle of the squats like a hornets nest in the swamp, spewing out fast-moving danger. As they draw closer, Cass sees that there is nothing aimed at them. No guns, no knives, and not even a look. They are watched, but the eyes seem to look at them, and then beyond them, like there is another image to see.

Cass hangs back, unsure. Christina, for once, is ahead and is already heading up the stairs when he looks back at Cass’s hesitant form.

“Its okay,” says Christina. “This place is safe. I know people here.”

“I did what you asked. I got you here. What else is there?”

Cass is looking at Christina, noticing that there is nothing of the boy-victim in Christina's eyes now. Christina watches him a little before answering.

"You might as well come in and rest, get a cup of coffee." Then Christina sniffs - very meaningfully and very fey, "A shower?"

Cass looks around at the crowd and then realizes what was so odd about the whole scene. The crowd is totally silent. Nobody is talking shit, nobody is posturing, hitting on the women. Nothing.

Cass looks up at Christina again, who throws up his hands and flounces back down the stairs. He grabs Cass by one arm and walks him up the stairs to the entrance.

"C'mon, it's not a big deal. Besides, you helped me out, maybe these people can give you some clean clothes or something to eat."

"A drink?" Cass asks, remembering the empty bottles by his bedside.

"We'll see." Christina says noncommittally as they enter through the open archway. As they pass, a collective sigh goes up from group behind them.

The front room holds nothing beyond a large, graffiti-scarred wooden desk. Cass eyes the room, right hand straying close to his belt buckle, the other held a little ways from his body in an absent warding gesture. Christina, moving with a confidence that Cass was seeing for the first time, walks straight up to the desk. Cass steps to lean with his back against the desk so that he can see the whole room. He looks over his right shoulder and down to see the book set into the desk. Christina is busily writing his name into it with a cheap ball-point pen that's attached to some dog-eared packing twine with a piece of lint-crusted duct tape.

"Christian?" asks Cass.

"Parents." Christina answers.

"So..." Cass trails off, the question audible in his tone.

"They gave me the other one when they saw what I was." he says again, his tone dull. He steps away from the book and gestures for Cass.

"I ain't signing shit." Cass says, looking around the room again.

"You have to or we can't go in." Christina says.

Cass sees that there are two doors leading out of the room. They're currently shut. Cass looks at Christina and defiantly walks to one of the doors and gives the handle a no-bullshit jerk. The door doesn't even flex on its hinges. He looks at the door again, then walks to the other across the room and pulls. Same.

"Told you." Christina says, mouth twisting into a smirk.

Cass shrugs as if he had never really been concerned, walks over to the desk, and signed the registry.

"Cass?" Christina says.

"Yeah?"

"That's it? Just 'Cass'?"

"Yeah."

"No last name?"

"Forgot it."

Christina looks like he's going to push the issue when the right-side door swings open and in walks a stone-faced woman, gray hair done up in dreds. They're bound at the back of her head with a blue bandanna, one lock had escaped and is hanging down the side of her face. Her face looks as open as the two doors had been. It's decorated with a nose and eyebrow piercing; one side sporting a faded tribal tattoo. It looks like the years must have been rough. Looks like she'd been rougher.

"What," she says. She doesn't ask. She doesn't exclaim.

"I was told to come here if I needed to get tested. I need to get checked out. I was raped last night." Christina says it the way you'd explain something that happened to you years ago.

"Who's that?" the woman says, indicating Cass without actually looking at him using a hand missing two fingers.

"He helped me get here in one piece."

"Okay. Follow me," she says.

Christina starts to walk, and then turns to check on Cass, who hasn't moved.

Christina widens her eyes, and impatiently gestures at Cass to follow. Cass starts forward, getting almost to the door before the woman turns and acknowledges Cass for the first time.

"You can't bring weapons in here."

Cass does his best puzzled look.

"I'm not."

The woman just looks at him, then she extends her right hand, palm up, her left arm crossed, the left hand resting in the crook of the right.

"You look like the kind of guy who hasn't been unarmed since he was in utero, and even then I'm sure you were trying to figure a way to strangle something with your cord."

Cass looks at her a minute, then lifts the hem of his shirt and places the object in her hand, holding onto his end for a moment.

"Nobody is born like that." Cass says, holding her eyes, "and I want that back."

They both look down at the sharpened screwdriver that Cass always carried.

When he looks up, she is watching him, and smiling.

"Point," she says, and turns around to lead them through the door.

The three walk into the next room, with its humans standing in clumps that probably should have been lines. The nature of the place gave organization the finger.

A woman with two children rests against one wall, their burns conspicuous against otherwise beautiful, coffee with cream, skin. The wounds look fresh. Cass guesses that this place was probably closer than the hospital. The woman would push herself from the wall and yell for somebody to come help them. Cass thinks to himself *good luck* - but to his shock, somebody comes right over with rolls of gauze, disinfectant and tubes of something. Cass isn't sure if it's going to be enough, but at least they were being helped. He looks away, and the person that ran to the families' aid was getting one of the kids to uncertainly smile and then to giggle.

Just as Cass is looking away, Christina grabs his sleeve and tugs him along.

“Take a seat here,” the woman with dreds tells the pair and walks away.

“Thanks, Izabel,” answers Christina.

“Izabel?” Cass turns to Christina, “You know these people already?”

“She introduced herself while you were staring off into space.” Christina answers.

“This place is strange.”

“Why?”

“People here are getting help, that's unusual for a shelter.”

“It's not exactly a shelter.” Christina says.

“What do you..?” Cass starts just as Izabel returns and beckons to them, Christina jumps up and tugs Cass along by the arm.

They were taken into a different room, where Izabel is moving to sit behind a weather and God-knows-what-else beaten school desk. She takes some forms from a drawer. When she sees the pair still standing, she waves impatiently to two chairs on the supplicant side of the desk. The pair sit, Izabel tries unsuccessfully to get her pen to work before fishing inside the desk for another.

Izabel turns to Christina.

“Name?”

Christina answers.

“Reason for being here?”

Cass listens to Christina answer in a monotone, and watches Izabel being impassive. Because he's heard enough nightmares, and seen plenty of people who didn't react to them, he wanders off to look at the rest of the shelter.

He ducks through the doorway, briefly looks over one large shoulder to check if his leaving is noticed or if it even matters, and sees Christina and Izabel talking to each other, absorbed. So he turns left and collides chest to chest with a dead man.

Cass jumps back from the unexpected contact and his hands raise up a little, his right twitches towards the now vacant spot behind his belt.

While his hands and body did the automatic, his jaw drops when he recognizes the face.

“Scabs?”

The man just looks at Cass, and smiles.

“But, I saw...” Cass remembers the night years ago when the kids had come through the squats. Kids yes, but in adult bodies, and looking for fun without consequence. Harsh young men, with mean habits. Scabs had tried to get them to share. Scabs, being the kind that was looking to get whatever he could into his body, hadn't been thinking. He was probably still not thinking when the last boot had fallen on his twitching corpse. But here he is in front of Cass. Whole.

Scabs just smiles at Cass again, his eyes unfocused, vague.

Cass stares at him and says: “So you made it after all? What you do? Come all the way here? Somebody help you?”

Scabs just smiles, and pats Cass on the shoulder as he moves past him and around another corner leaving Cass to stand in the hallway.

Cass shakes his head, says to himself, “Brain damage is a bitch.”

Cass keeps going into the central room, crowded with faces and stories all fighting for validation. Harried workers, distinguished by their focused looks, dart among them, passing one so they could be free to help another. Cass walks towards a staircase near one corner, expecting to be turned back at any second, but he isn't. Even when his feet touch the bottom step, and then eventually the top landing, he is ignored.

On the second floor quiet spread out, rising like heat from the noise below. On this floor, rooms flow off the main hall, each lacking a door, each empty until he comes upon the last room on the right. He looks in and sees a young boy sitting on the edge of a bed, at the boy's feet is a man hunched over. As Cass leans further into the room, he can see that the man is lacing the boy's shoes. Cass sees the boy's face, and recognizes him from the years ago, when he had beaten a man to death to save the boy from violation, the kid hadn't changed a bit. He looks up at Cass, this time with none of the animal fear in his eyes that was there the last time. Cass raises a hand, palm out, and the boy smiles shyly in answer. Cass turns his head and looks at the man.

And looks into the face of a man he had beaten to death those years ago.

The face of a man bent on raping a child.

The man's eyes as empty as Scabs's. His hand pauses around the boy's feet, still gripping the weathered sneakers. The same hands that had held the boy's head down as he fumbled at his belt, now tie the boy's shoelaces. Cass roars and bowls the man over, slamming him into the corner, upsetting a table with a crash. Cass levers his shin and knee across the man's hips, his weight pinning him in the corner. His left hand twists in the neckline of his shirt, his right crashing into his face, once, twice, three times.

With no visible effect.

Cass keeps hitting, he switches hands, he stands and stomps, down heels leading, and while he can feel his hands and feet hitting something solid, the man just stares at him and does nothing. There is no blood, the man's face is whole, his body does not rock with the impact.

Cass stands, and stops hitting. His breath coming in heaves and chokes. His victim still hasn't moved, and when Cass feels a light pressure on his arm, he whirls and sees the boy there, watching him and smiling. Cass turns fully to regard the boy when the man scurries from his place in the corner, around Cass and hides behind the child, cowering.

Cass reaches to move the boy aside and have a fresh crack at the rapist but the boy won't move.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Cass says in a loud voice, to nobody is particular.

"If you're finished flexing, I can explain it." Izabel says from the doorway. Behind her Christina looks on.

Cass points at the man behind the child. "He's a rapist. Of children."

"We know," says Izabel.

"I beat him to death three years ago."

"Oh? Was that you?" Izabel says.

"He was trying to rape him," Cass says, pointing first at the man and then the boy. "He's supposed to be dead."

"He is," Izabel says.

“What?” Cass hears his voice rising as he moves further from his normal self-control.

“Come downstairs,” Izabel says.

“Not leaving him alone with the boy. What the fuck’s wrong with you people?”

“Charles is fine. Perfectly safe.”

“If you motherfuckers are pimping kids out of his fucking place, I swear to God...” Cass yells.

“Downstairs. Now.” Izabel’s voice is its normal even tone as she turns and walks away.

Cass, at a loss of what else to do, follows.

Downstairs, somebody has placed a cup of coffee between Cass’s fingers which he clutches like a prayer.

Izabel watches him. The way in which she does is not one that Cass could remember seeing for some time. Appraisal without fear. A look that had not been turned on Cass in the odd fifteen years since he got his growth.

Christina sits off to one side, watching Cass, but with every inch of the fear that is absent from Izabel.

Cass looks up from the steam hovering over his cup. “What the fuck is going on here?”

“You’re dead.”

Cass shifts, the balls of his feet touching down, grinding into the floor, ready.

“You’re going to press charges for a piece of shit like that? Besides he’s not even hurt.”

“No, I mean that you are currently dead.”

“Right...” He looks up at Christina.

“These people of yours are fuckin’ nuts. You want to stay? Cool, hang out with the cult. I hear the Kool-Aid...” Cass looks down at his hands, still gripping the cooling coffee, and adds. “...or in this case the coffee, is great.”

“Cass...” Christina starts.

“I’m fucking out of here.”

“How else do you explain what you’ve seen here?”

“That I spend most of my free time drinking, and that it’s bound to have some effect on my mental state. I just didn’t expect it so soon.”

“You’ve seen two dead men here. And you know it to be true,” Izabel says.

“Maybe I wasn’t as enthusiastic as I thought with the child-fucker.”

“What about your friend in the hallway?”

“That junkie retard was never a friend of mine. How the fuck do you know that anyway?”

Cass stands up and walks towards the doorway.

“There’s nothing out there.”

“I’m going back home.”

“You’re past that point, all that waits out there are circles and jackals.”

“That’s different for me how?” Cass asks, looking behind him at the blue eyes between the dreadlocks, now unbound and framing the severe face.

“You died last night. Alcohol poisoning. In two days your body will start to stink with enough rot for some of your neighbors to move and lean against another warehouse.”

“I didn’t drink enough last night for that.” But as Cass tries to bring up a memory he finds himself reaching for things with less substance than the steam rising from his coffee.

“Yes. You did,” Izabel says.

“And him?” Cass asks, pointing at Christina.

“A guide.”

“Seems to me, I did most of the guiding. I killed to get him here.”

“A guide still, and a toll.”

“A toll?” Cass looks at Christina who still looks as fey and as slender as earlier, but had lost the defenselessness. Had lost the softness - and his eyes weren’t tough - more like ageless now.

“Your task. Your burden. Your price of entry. The man upstairs? The one you killed? He is doing the same. The boy that was once his prey, is now his master in a sense. He serves as you had served.”

“And the men I fought to get here? The people I spoke with?”

“Demons, supplicants and lost souls.”

“And this is ‘Heaven’?” Cass’s voice heavy with sarcasm.

“It’s a way station, and one that has to make sense to the people passing through it. This is what your life held, this is what your transition of life resembles.”

“Fuck this,” Cass says and turns to walk out. He gets as far as the front room. The doorway that led outside opens in his hand. Outside, the occupiers of the stoop stare in hungrily. But not at Cass. They look into the shelter as if eyes could salivate and not have it mistaken for tears. Cass stops. He hears Christina’s voice behind him.

“Out there is nothing. You’ll be fighting and running every day. There won’t be any change for you.”

Cass looks at him. Christina standing hip shot, body saying *fuck you*, eyes saying *please don’t go*.

“I did what I told you I’d do. I’ll take my chances out there.”

He turns his gaze to regard Izabel, who had come to stand sedately beside Christina.

“She gets it,” Cass says nodding his head to Izabel.

“He’s new,” Izabel says, regarding Christina.

He looks at Christina again and feels compelled to speak. Thinking as he did, that he spent more words this day than in a lot of days before. “I lived in the squats because it was a choice. I’m not about to go back to letting other people choose now.”

“But there’s nothing out there, this is all for you to step through.”

“When I believe that, I’ll have another choice.”

He sees Izabel nod to herself.

Cass holds out a hand to Christina. Christina places his hand lightly in it. Cass squeezes and then holds his palm out to Izabel. Instead of shaking it, she places Cass’s screwdriver in it, handle first.

Cass nods, tucks it behind his belt buckle and walks back outside.

Justin Porter was born, raised in New York City. He's been everything from a sponsored skateboarder to a amateur MMA fighter. He's made prints and sold rollerblades. He's been published in Thuglit and Demolition Magazine and hopes people enjoy the nasty little stories he writes. Then he hopes that those people pay him lots of money. Because he'd make a really bad clown for children's birthday parties.