
GUNLAW

by Nicholas Stillman

An Entry in the 2013 Windhammer Prize for
Short Gamebook Fiction

Background

When the world went broke, cities fell into apathy. Countries sold their nuclear stockpiles, and the casual use of atomic warheads seemed inevitable. Frightened masses fled to inhospitable regions or moved underground. New societies emerged with their own rules.

The town of Gunlaw has only one law: everyone must carry a gun.

In this *pre*-apocalyptic Western, the reader makes choices. You will control the most important actions of the hero, a ranger from Gunlaw. First, pick one gunfighter skill from the pair below.

Quick Draw- Draw and fire many rounds with superhuman speed.

Bullseye- Hit anything at a distance.

Next, choose one tactical skill.

Ambush- Conduct and detect surprise attacks.

Brawler- Raise hell with fistfights and wrestling.

Finally, select a personality skill.

Good Looks- Persuade others with looks and likability.

Rodeo- Take punishment and handle performance through pain.

Write down or memorize the three chosen skills. Also keep a mental or written tally of any *Justice Points* earned for righteous deeds. The hero, drifting into a new region, starts with zero *Justice Points*.

But what kind of hero did you have in mind?

-A cowboy (start at section 1).

-A cowgirl (start at section 2).

1

They call him Billy Joe Canfield, and he hails from Gunlaw. In the ranger versus raider life, he settles any threat to the territory, often with a gun. With his wife Sue in the posse, neither gunfighter can keep the demanding death toll secret.

After years of killing, the Canfield family seeks a life worth saving. Billy Joe longs to rescue any children from Maslow, the City of Lowdown Death, by rustling them to Gunlaw. Call it redemption. But some call it insanity, a fever that sops up the restless before the bombs drop. Rumor says kids don't even live in cities anymore.

But around Gunlaw, no talent goes to waste.

So today, Billy Joe and Mayor Roger Hemlock ride across the Rich Desert. The whims of nature deposit them at a crumbling road leading to Maslow City. Hemlock will take Canfield's horse back home to spare the animal from gouls.

"Good luck, ranger," Hemlock says through his white beard. "We've got plenty of lodging for whoever you haul from that accursed city."

Billy Joe checks his gear: gunbelt, revolver, cartridges, canteen, hunting knife, and bedroll. A skilled ranger can make the return trip on foot.

Having watched Roger and the horses disappear into heat waves, Billy Joe stands on the dilapidated highway in nowhere. He winces in the sunlight, looking beyond the cracked yellow line. The road goes straight, just like the mayor's map showed.

Ahead, rusted out cars flank the pavement. Their windows glare heat and sun at him like a magnifying glass. This road should join with another that leads to Maslow. After hearing of gouls, Billy Joe wouldn't mind if a mushroom cloud sprang on the horizon, turning him back. Instead, he rubs some dirt off his stubble and walks down the road.

A car enters the world. Canfield takes to the roadside, throwing his long silhouette on the desert once more. The rumbling echo approaches, the vehicle powerful, pearl-colored, and sleek. A shadow driver stomps the pedal, rocketing to the Maslow interstate.

If Canfield has the Brawler skill, turn to 4. Otherwise, turn to 3.

2

The women of the West became famous after folk like Sue Canfield signed on as rangers. Alongside her husband, Billy Joe, she patrols the wild outskirts of Gunlaw. Their posse weeds out marauders, keeping the town and region pure. Often, gangs that won't scare off need killing.

Sue, having turned so many men to bones, gained the sobriquet "The Gun of Ire". In their deadly adventures, the Canfields caught rumor of a nuclear assault planned to destroy the closest city, Maslow, within the year. Driven to prove she can *save* lives, Mrs. Canfield vows to rescue the Maslowian children from the coming warheads.

Some say Maslow, the City of Lowdown Death, doesn't even have children anymore. Or, the few born become gouls like the grownups. Either way, someone better have a kid and pay up when Sue arrives.

So today, Sue and Mayor Roger Hemlock ride across the Rich Desert. The whims of nature deposit them at a crumbling roadside leading to Maslow City. Hemlock will take Canfield's horse back home to spare the animal from gouls.

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Sue checks her gear: gunbelt, revolver, cartridges, canteen, hunting knife, and bedroll. A skilled ranger can make the return trip on foot.

Having watched Roger and the horses disappear into heat waves, Sue stands on the dilapidated highway in nowhere. She winces in the sunlight, looking beyond the cracked yellow line. The road goes straight, just like the mayor's map showed.

Ahead, rusted out cars flank the pavement. Their windows glare heat and sun at her like a magnifying glass. This road should join with another that leads to Maslow. After hearing of gouls, Sue wouldn't mind if a mushroom cloud sprang on the horizon, turning her back. Instead, she fixes her hat and walks down the road.

A car enters the world. Canfield takes to the roadside, throwing her long silhouette on the desert once more. The rumbling echo approaches, the vehicle powerful, pearl-colored, and sleek. A shadow driver stomps the pedal, rocketing to the Maslow interstate.

If Canfield has the Brawler skill, turn to 4. Otherwise, turn to 3.

3

The car shoots by in a cloud of dust. Canfield resumes travel, following it like a snail. The junk heaps parked along the shoulder had their windows smashed out by looters. Some have sunflower stalks rooted in the seats, growing through the rusted out roofs. Hundreds of such wrecks pass with the hour.

Another vehicle approaches, this one from Maslow, heading opposite of the previous driver. But instead of passing, the black van stops fast, wobbling the bloated motorbike clamped to its roof. Hooting jocks rock forward, armed with beer and spilling it. Canfield sees their jersey logos, *The Maslow Steeds*, matching that on the van's side.

Gunlaw folk would question all they ever heard about the goul city. If Maslow has a high school sports team, it has lawmen too.

The boys hop from their van like monkeys off a river raft. Canfield counts five, plus a gum-chewing cheerleader who reluctantly joins them. One stud throws back his gelled hair and howls while crushing a full beer can in each fist. Others look mentally handicapped. Well, to sound more proper, they *all* have hair gel.

Canfield stands sideways, like musket duelers long ago, to block their view of the holster. Killing them, however, would seem unfair since they didn't bring guns.

They strut, determined to beat up someone for today. Canfield's gut doesn't bother tightening up anymore. This posse amounts to short stature diabetics with gynecomastia. They form a quarter moon around the ranger and awkwardly try to look down their noses.

"Mornin' boys," Canfield drawls. "Y'all didn't bring your knee pads...for beggin'."

Their captain, having the tallest hair, looks bemused. "You some kind of chameleon? Well we don't allow that here."

"Comedian," the girl says with a phoney sigh. "Binet, can we go now?"

The fattest one finally notices Canfield's belt, ammunition loops saturated.

-Canfield fires a warning shot at Binet's beer can (5).

-Canfield pistol whips Binet (7).

4

The white car shoots by, spitting up bits of the road. Canfield watches like a fencepost. Soon, the Pontiac throws up its red flags and reverses. The wheels stop by Canfield's boots. The ranger gives a tip of the hat to the ripe young thing making the window go down.

But folk from afar often guess wrong. The squat lady driver looks about 40. Add another 20 from the smokes and jowls. Her short hair, once blond, looks a sickly greying color Canfield didn't know existed. She scans that holstered gun with its ornate handle curved like a cat's spine.

"You taking that weapon into the city?" she asks.

"Yes ma'am," Canfield drawls.

The woman turns and just stares at the road. "Hop in."

"Yes ma'am!"

Canfield walks around the bumper, smiling at the driver's deadpan face behind the windshield. The morning star hood ornament twinkles, and the door handle scalds. Before the ranger's second boot gets in, the woman tears up the road. Canfield slams the door going 70 km/hr.

"Many thanks, ma'am. They call me Canfield back home." The ranger turns to shake hands, but the driver's knuckles have become extra ridges on the steering wheel grip.

"Marg Halverson." She drives faster, and the car seats eat them a little.

"Mighty fine ride you have, Miss Halverson."

"Thanks. The Employer gave me it brand new...for the mission."

She crushes the gas pedal, and Canfield's hat needs fixing.

"Ma'am, I don't mean to pry or nothin' but—"

"Want one?" Marg digs out a cigarette and tortures it with the pop-out dashboard lighter. Canfield declines and glimpses out the passenger window. The rippling desert gives nothing back. A walk to Maslow on this road could take weeks. Time to whip out some Gunlaw manners.

"I'll help with that there mission, for the ride. You best tell me what to shoot at, though."

In the glow of the orange landscape, Marg tells her story. Occasionally, a pothole adds wretched thunder. Marg made the same mistake as many in the 2050s—she went into debt. The state simply incarcerates anyone who can't make interest payments. Debtors rot until family can spot the money. Those without connections wait for miracles.

The godsend: foreign enterprises can buy prisoners, thus balancing state *and* individual liabilities. Inmates watched the laws change overnight. The Employers arrange full pardons for...various tasks. This includes eliminating interest groups who threaten the foreign agenda. Marg's job to earn her pardon: kill Prince Durkheim, some visiting royalty celeb.

The towers of Maslow City appear on the horizon like grey silhouettes. In the desert heat, buildings slide and swap places like cards in a hand, a mirage fooling even Canfield's eyes. Then, giant commercials flicker onto the skyscrapers themselves. The East and West ends *do* consist of movable cityscapes, where conglomerating ad companies slide entire buildings on a vast grid of tracks.

The city buildings merge into two mighty screens flanking everything in the dwarfish middle. Each superscreen looks several blocks wide and dozens of storeys high. The westside commercial displays "CAPTAIN SUIT RETURNS" in red block letters bigger than clouds. The eastside ads flick by at 100 per minute, marking the onslaught of rush hour.

Marg squints. "Can't they post the damn weather? Check the web player there to find what you want in Maslow."

The screen on Canfield's armrest looks simple to learn. Just tap the letters.

-Canfield uses the device to research Maslow police (6).

-Canfield kindly offers to look up whatever Marg wants (8).

5

Canfield draws and fires. But the captain flinches.

If Canfield has Bullseye, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 9.

The roar of Canfield's gun startles the desert itself, the echo forming a symphony with the girl's screams. The beer can jumps from Binet's hand. All the jocks scatter and hide behind some ancient cars, leaving the girl to her shrieking. *Add 1 Justice Point.*

Canfield snatches her arm. "Miss, you willin' to drive that there motor or should I shoot out the tires and we go on foot?"

* * *

The van backs and turns ever so slowly. At the wheel, the girl trembles in her stockings and tiny cheerleader skirt. Canfield rests in the warm passenger seat. They drive off, leaving the jocks behind.

After watching the desertscape roam for a while, Canfield turns to the girl. Binet had yelled "Crissy" as they left.

-Canfield strikes up a conversation (11).

-Canfield uses the cell phone in Crissy's purse to look up "Maslow children" (13).

6

"Alright," Canfield says, and points a finger at the controls like a gun.

The buttons look a bit more complex than the ones on Canfield's shirt. Still, the ranger tinkers on the web with success. Dabbing the screen lets anyone look up standard police protocols; they don't have any. No regulations. A mafia infiltrated (and gradually replaced) the Maslow Police Force. They only let in their own boys, and face no laws or reprimand from the crime boss "Chief". A badge means as much as a candy bar to a kidnapper. The world knows. No one cares.

Any ranger who can't handle a beating or two should avoid the cops.

The web world has thrown confidentiality in the dust. Canfield taps the screen some more and peeks at Marg's rap sheet, open to public view like all others'. She's racked up over 70 driving violations. Twenty happened in one of her "bad spells".

The old road meets with a major highway. The Pontiac sails onto its gleaming pavement like floating onto a new world. Bubbly SUVs fill the multilane. Marg does mirror checks every time she blinks.

"This way to Maslow," she says.

Marg tenses when a potbellied man in a motorized wheelchair appears in the bike lane. She recognizes that deformed face. Frighteningly, the car speeds up.

Hunched now, Marg veers to the shoulder. She intends to kill the guy. The driver side window oozes down, and she sticks her head out to scream.

"Merry Christmas, you turd!"

The disabled man's mouth opens like a bottle, and his dentures fall out. He can't escape; gravel on one side slopes to the desert.

-Canfield tries to talk Marg out of it (10).

-Canfield braces for impact (12).

7

Canfield draws, but Binet lashes out for a shoulder grab simultaneously.

If Canfield has Quick Draw, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 9.

Canfield raises the gun overhead before the jock captain can get his hands up. The ranger's arm, if visible at all, would resemble a boneless snake whip. The butt of the revolver smacks Binet's temporal bone, knocking him unconscious.

"I'll take the girl and the ride," Canfield says, grabbing the cheerleader's arm and casually waving the gun at the others. "Y'all can live if you run fast enough."

They run. *Add 1 Justice Point.*

"Miss, you willin' to drive that there motor or should I shoot out the tires and we go on foot?"

* * *

The van backs and turns ever so slowly. At the wheel, the girl trembles in her stockings and tiny cheerleader skirt. Canfield rests in the warm passenger seat. They drive off, leaving the jocks behind.

After watching the desertscape roam for a while, Canfield turns to the girl named Crissy by her foster parents.

-Canfield strikes up a conversation (11).

-Canfield uses the cell phone in Crissy's purse to look up "Maslow children" (13).

8

Marg uses an identical device on the driver side.

"I once volunteered in the Recreation Music Program at the hospital," she says. "It might calm my nerves to reminisce."

She puts on an audio recording of herself playing acoustic guitar and singing "Jingle Bells". Some geezers mumble along, but Marg truly shines. But at the final chorus, the sound cuts off. A man's voice interrupts.

"Margaret, I know you'll hear this some day. Look what you drove me to! You deserve to know...I did this because of *you!*"

His voice garbles. Canfield recognizes a shotgun blast that follows.

"Damn you, Pete!" Marg hollers, punching the web player. "The bastard lived, too."

She drives in teary-eyed silence for a while.

* * *

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9

Canfield accidentally shoots the captain in the heart. The jock has a drop seizure without the seizure. His teammates run; to them, the kill looked intentional. The cheerleader falls and cradles her slain boyfriend.

"Why did you go and die, Binet? WHY!? Oh my god! Oh my ga-uh-uh-ud."

She sobs away, oblivious to the tinkle of a spent shell dropping on the payment. After reloading, Canfield scoops up her purse and sifts through its jingle-jangle.

"Miss, it says on this here card you can ride a...motor ve-hic-le."

* * *

The van backs and turns ever so slowly. At the wheel, the girl trembles in her dirt-torn stockings and tiny cheerleader skirt. Canfield relaxes in the warm passenger seat. They drive off, leaving the pale and soiled body behind.

After watching the desertscape roam for a while, Canfield turns to the girl. The driver's license had "Crissy Gamache" under her picture.

-Canfield strikes up a conversation (11).

-Canfield uses the cell phone in Crissy's purse to look up "Maslow children" (13).

10

"We've got a mission, Marg," Canfield says. "Besides, he'll die good enough on his own."

If Canfield has Good Looks, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 14.

Marg yanks the wheel with milliseconds to spare, almost brushing a vanload of nuns. The disabled man loses his toupee, but not his life. *Add 1 Justice Point.*

The car calms a bit. Marg doesn't. Canfield turns.

"Mind tellin' me about that?"

"Pete. My ex. I ought to turn back and run him over slowly. Don't persuade me."

-Canfield puts on the radio (18).

-Canfield tells Marg about the mission to save Maslow's kids (16).

11

"Funny," Canfield says, "in the stories back home the woman drives all crazy-like so they crash because the kidnapper don't wear a seatbelt, and she knows it. But you can't really crash in the desert. Nothin' to crash into. Plus, you need the ve-hic-le to get anywheres."

"Yeah," Crissy says lifelessly. The blown ecosystem rolls by. Someone swept it all with progress. The van rolls onto an interstate packed with bubbly SUVs. "We reached the highway. You can have the van. Please just let me out here."

"I ride horses, miss. Best you keep drivin'."

Crissy sighs. "What do you want, anyway?"

"To take all the Maslow children out to the desert with me."

"Oh my god."

* * *

The towers of Maslow City appear on the horizon like grey silhouettes. In the desert heat, buildings slide and swap places, a mirage fooling even Canfield's eyes. Then, giant commercials flicker onto the skyscrapers themselves. The East and West ends *do* consist of movable cityscapes, where conglomerating ad companies move entire buildings on a vast grid of tracks.

The city buildings merge into two giant screens flanking everything in the dwarfish middle. Each superscreen looks several blocks wide and dozens of storeys high. The westside proclaims "CAPTAIN SUIT RESURRECTION" in red block letters bigger than clouds. The eastside ads flick by at 100 per minute, marking the onslaught of rush hour.

Crissy sighs. "Welcome to hell, shooter."

Canfield spots a cop truck many cars behind. Three officers stand in the back, probably to maneuver and shoot better. The jocks had cell phones too...

"Go faster," Canfield says.

Wanting to draw fire away from Crissy, Canfield climbs out the window and onto the roof.

"What—what the hell!" Crissy shouts to Canfield's boots.

Canfield will use the motorbike for cover. But Crissy's weaving through traffic nearly throws the ranger off the van.

-Canfield shouts for Crissy to slow down (15).

-Canfield grips the roof racks to avoid rolling off (17).

12

"Woman, you'll kill us all!" Canfield presses the dashboard with one arm and makes a sort of helmet out of the other.

If Canfield has Rodeo, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 14.

Marg hits her target head-on going 130 km/hr. Before tumbling over the car, the wheelchair launches its rider three storeys up. He lands in the desert with enough force to bury him. They'll only find his shoes.

Marg's face slams on the horn, stunning her. The impact also rattles Canfield. The Pontiac veers off the road like a drunk horse on roller skates.

But Canfield grabs the wheel and steers the car from the gravel back to pavement. A few yelps in Marg's ear rouse her. She takes her limp foot off the pedal and regains control, narrowly dodging a vanload of nuns. Her face swells, but the car and mission will go on. *Add 1 Justice Point.*

"Pete, my ex husband. He deserved worse." Marg checks her beaten face in the mirror. Diagnosis: "Worth it."

For a while, they sit in gloomy silence, with the traffic rumbling outside.

-Canfield turns on the radio (18).

-Canfield discusses the mission to save Maslow's children (16).

13

The web knows everything, and Canfield learns how to access it. Maslow women don't give birth anymore because of stress and inconvenience. They get a rapid caesarean section—early term, too—and sell the fetus to organ harvesters. Doctors "grow" some into adults and handicap them to make voters. Finding salvageable children may require help and the right social skills.

"Can't we go back and get Binet?" Crissy begs, "I'll tie them up myself."

"No, miss."

"Look, I don't know about you, but they'll die for sure back there."

"They'll get the snakes, or the other way around. Plenty of cracks in the pavement. Real big community down there."

"Oh god."

Her scrunchie lets go of some ponytail hair in the fighting wind. Nonetheless, she sweats until her cheerleader uniform smells like vinegar. Canfield watches the sea of dunes go by until the van rolls onto an interstate packed with bubbly SUVs.

"Look, I'll just text my girlfriends to get a ride for them, Okay? We can still go to Maslow like you said. No, uh, sheriff, I promise."

Canfield tosses the cell out the window. The ride doesn't go quietly.

* * *

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Soon, the city merges into two mighty screens flanking everything in the dwarfish middle. Each superscreen looks several blocks wide and dozens of storeys high. The westside commercial proclaims "CAPTAIN SUIT RISES" in red block letters bigger than clouds. The eastside ads flick by at 100 per minute, marking the onslaught of rush hour.

Crissy sighs. "Welcome to hell, shooter."

Canfield spots a cop truck many cars behind. Three officers stand in the back, probably to maneuver and shoot better. The jocks had cell phones too...

"Go faster," Canfield says.

Wanting to draw fire away from Crissy, Canfield climbs out the window and onto the roof.

"What—what the hell!" Crissy says to Canfield's boots.

Canfield will use the motorbike for cover. But Crissy's weaving through traffic nearly throws the ranger off the van.

-Canfield shouts for Crissy to slow down (15).

-Canfield grips the roof racks to avoid rolling off (17).

14

Marg ignores Canfield and pounces on the gas. But that slight distraction, the ranger in her periphery, tugs at her conscience and the wheel. The car drifts a notch left and only nicks the wheelchair.

Canfield twists to look. Marg checks the mirror. The wheelchair spins like a top from the impact. It shrinks from view, but both see the man's flaccid head flopping about on a snapped neck. He dies from whiplash five times over, almost spinning into a vanload of nuns.

"Pete, my ex husband. He deserved worse."

Eerie silence ensues.

-Canfield turns on the radio (turn to 18).

-Canfield discusses the mission to save Maslow children (turn to 16).

15

Crissy swerves madly, though the way looks clear. She *wants* to throw off Canfield. The cop truck rearends a van of nuns in the way.

"Miss," Canfield yells over the wind, "they'll kill innocent folk to catch up! You best slow down!"

If Canfield has Good Looks, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 19.

Crissy decelerates to let the cops get a close range shot at Canfield. The other motorists pass safely. *Add 1 Justice Point.*

-Canfield shoots the cop driver (21).

-Canfield lets them catch up for a shootout (23).

16

"Miss Halverson, I came from Gunlaw, a far off town, to rescue any kids stuck in Maslow. Back home, we call that place the City of Lowdown Death."

Marg cackles at that. "You know, that sounds about right." She jams a cigarette in her lips and beats it awake with the dashboard lighter. "You got a real task there, partner. Kids don't exactly flourish here anymore. Little need for them with most *smart* families moving underground. Stupid nukes." She massages her throat with a deep drag. "We've got some volatile work ahead. But I'll see that you reach Maslow."

"Much obliged, Miss Halverson."

"Call me Marg." She pings the ashes out her window.

"Yes ma'am. Ma'am, you probably sized me up before stoppin', and noticed this here gun. Well, think of that as my ticket to pay for the ride."

"Tickets. Don't remind me."

Despite Marg driving over 90, the dunes go by slower than grazing cattle of the old days. The dashboard lighter pops out again, jolting Canfield's nerves like the sound of gunfire.

Marg straightens when a black limousine falls into view. "Prince Durkheim. Let's put this wiener dog on the rink."

She accelerates, weaving through traffic like a needle through cloth. Car horns trumpet their wrath in her wake. Pulling alongside the sleek limo, Marg nearly bites her cigarette filter in two.

"Dethroned!" she yells, twisting the wheel.

Her Pontiac slams the limo. The bone-jarring crash bounce the two apart, rebounding Marg's vehicle more than the bigger one. After regaining control, Marg strikes again, bashing a taillight out with her bumper as the limo pulls ahead.

Marg speeds up, driving parallel to the beast again. She sideswipes once more, but barely scratches the limo side panels. Three windows slide down, revealing black suits with guns.

-Canfield shoots them dead (22).

-Canfield aims for a tire instead (20).

17

Canfield lies flat, spread like a starfish and gripping the roof racks for dear life. The sunbaked roof scalds the ranger, making the task nigh impossible. Behind, a vanload of nuns gawk.

If Canfield has Rodeo, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 19.

Crissy gives up trying to kill Canfield herself. She slows to let the cops take over. The other motorists pull ahead safely. *Add 1 Justice Point.*

-Canfield shoots the cop driver (21).

-Canfield lets them catch up for a shootout (23).

18

Canfield turns on the radio and fumbles through random stations. It gets stuck on high-pitched electric guitar solos that play 24-7. Mistaking the touch screen for buttons, Canfield presses too hard and breaks something. Now, the music won't turn down or off, ever.

"Turn that crap off!" Marg yells over the racket.

Suddenly, Marg straightens when she sees a black limousine ahead. "Prince Durkheim. Let's put this wiener dog on the rink."

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-Canfield shoots them dead (turn to **22**).

-Canfield aims for a tire instead (**20**).

19

Canfield's thumping around inspires Crissy to drive crazier. The *mafia* cops fire a shotgun through a senior citizen's rear windshield; his brains splatter on the front windshield like cherry pie. His SUV swerves off-road, clearing the way.

-Canfield shoots the cop driver (**21**).

-Canfield lets them catch up for a shootout (**23**).

20

Canfield draws and breaks the window with the gun. In the next lane, clean-shaven guards wait for their bulletproof windows to lower. Thus, the ranger can shoot first.

If Canfield has Bullseye, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to **24**.

The bullet hits, deflating a front tire. The limo wobbles and pivots sideways before flipping over at 120 km/hr. By now, motorists have gotten the police order to stop via radio and every wireless device on the market. Everyone has pulled over except Marg; she merely slows to ram the overturned limo at a survivable speed.

Bloodied men crawl out, and Marg reverses over them. She rams and reverses for 20 minutes until the occupants become a red muck on the pavement. *Add 1 Justice Point*.

Finally, police cruisers surround the scene. Apart from screaming insults and vulgarities, Marg goes "quietly". She has experienced this before, apparently. Canfield cooperates with the bullhorn. With excessive force, the cops haul the ranger away in handcuffs.

The police chief waddles over, a full camera crew clustered behind him. They do a show called *Police Brutality* demonstrating Maslow's pride in roughing up apprehended criminals. A squad of cops thrust Canfield before the roly poly chief. He tilts back, looking down his nose, and spits on Canfield's dusty boots.

-Canfield plays it cool for now (**26**).

-Canfield kicks the chief in the groin (**28**).

21

At an impossible distance, Canfield aims for the cop driver's unibrow.

If Canfield has Bullseye, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to **25**.

The bullet turns solid brain into stir-fry. The cop truck veers off-road and cartwheels into the desert.

The boys in the back wear special harnesses latched to the truck which, normally, don't let them fall overboard. But with such extreme speeds and forces involved, the straps hold true while the limbs detach and rain over a kilometer stretch of the highway. *Add 1 Justice Point.*

"Darnit," Canfield says, "I wanted a hangin', not a quarterin'."

A dozen police cruisers join the chase. Worse, Crissy starts pulling over. Canfield looks at the motorbike with its key left in the ignition and key tag flapping like a dog's tongue in the wind. A switch on the roof racks will release the tire clamps.

-Oh, why not? (27)

-Instead of riding the motorbike off the van, Canfield surrenders to the mafia police, hoping to infiltrate and destroy their headquarters (30).

22

Canfield draws iron and breaks the window with it. In the next lane, clean-shaven guards wait for their bulletproof windows to lower. Thus, the ranger can shoot first.

If Canfield has Quick Draw, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 24.

The puffy security thrust their guns out only to get shot in their foreheads. They die in perfect unison. The 110 km/hr wind pulls off their shades and swings their dangling arms like pendulums.

A fourth man, visible through the backmost window, squirms in his tuxedo, cowering behind a heavily jeweled hand. Canfield shoots him twice. Both eyes splatter on the bulletproof window behind his emptied head. They cook like eggs in the summer heat. *Add 1 Justice Point.*

"You killed Prince Durkheim," Marg says, letting the limo race ahead. "Now, when the cops get us, don't plea anything. The Employer will buy us both. I'll give you full credit. We made history, partner!"

Marg knows the road; indeed, a police roadblock awaits, a dense zigzag of over 20 cruisers. Canfield can't fight that many gunners.

Marg stops before the sea of red and blue lights. Apart from yelling insults and vulgarities, she goes "quietly." She experienced all this before, apparently. Canfield cooperates with the bullhorn. With excessive force, the cops haul the ranger away in handcuffs.

The police chief waddles over, a full camera crew clustered behind him. They do a show called *Police Brutality* demonstrating Maslow's pride in roughing up apprehended criminals. A squad of cops thrust Canfield before the roly poly chief. He tilts back, looking down his nose, and spits on Canfield's dusty boots.

-Canfield plays it cool for now (26).

-Canfield kicks the chief in the groin (28).

23

Canfield rises and steps out from behind the motorbike to face the three *mafia* lawmen. Summer wind ripples the ranger's shirt but doesn't thaw the stance. As the cop truck pulls alongside the van, Canfield draws and fires.

If Canfield has Quick Draw, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 25.

The trio have their guns out in advance, but can't raise them in the milliseconds needed. They each adopt a bullet and fall like bowling pins. *Add 1 Justice Point.*

Not far behind, countless police cruisers join the chase. Worse, Crissy starts pulling over. Canfield

looks at the motorbike with its key left in the ignition and key tag flapping like a dog's tongue in the wind. A switch on the roof racks will release the tire clamps.

-Oh, why not? (27)

-Instead of riding the motorbike off the van, Canfield surrenders to the police, hoping to infiltrate and destroy their headquarters (30).

24

With the whole world quivering, Canfield misses. Rangers don't train in such high speed vehicles. The limousine windows fall, and three bodyguards unleash a racket of gunfire.

Marg and Canfield duck. Windows smash over them, and the Pontiac becomes a drum kit for bullets.

While Canfield wastes a few shots for cover, Marg passes the limo. From its backmost right seat, a man with inbred features leans out the window. He vomits something luxurious. His driver, meanwhile, makes the mistake of rear-ending Marg Halverson...

Enraged, Marg veers rightward onto the roadside gravel. The traction, plus an angry woman stomping the break, slows the Pontiac. The limo flies past, vehicles grinding paint and clipping off side mirrors. Prince Durkheim's head squashes like a pumpkin before decapitating at 120 km/hr.

Marg cackles like a madwoman and somehow gets the shot-up car back on road. The limo fades ahead, collecting speed. For ten hilarious seconds, the driver and bodyguards remain unaware of the headless prince they protect.

Handfuls of glass chips run off Canfield's hat. Marg yells over the windstorm.

"We got Prince Durkheim. After our arrest, the Employer will buy us both. We made history, partner!"

Marg knows the road; indeed, a police roadblock awaits, a dense zigzag of over 20 cruisers. Canfield can't fight that many gunners.

Marg stops before the sea of red and blue lights. Apart from yelling insults and vulgarities, she goes "quietly." She experienced all this before, apparently. Canfield cooperates with the bullhorn. With excessive force the cops haul the ranger away in handcuffs.

The police chief waddles over, a full camera crew clustered behind him. They do a show called *Police Brutality* demonstrating Maslow's pride in roughing up apprehended criminals. A squad of cops thrust Canfield before the roly poly chief. He tilts back, looking down his nose, and spits on Canfield's dusty boots.

-Canfield plays it cool for now (26).

-Canfield kicks the chief in the groin (28).

25

Canfield misses and takes cover behind the motorbike for an extended gunfight. The trio of cops eventually get shot down; however, countless police cruisers join the chase. Worse, Crissy starts pulling over. Canfield looks at the motorbike with its key left in the ignition and key tag flapping like a dog's tongue in the wind. A switch on the roof racks will release the tire clamps.

-Oh, why not? (27)

-Instead of riding the motorbike off the van, Canfield surrenders to the police, hoping to infiltrate and destroy their headquarters (30).

26

"You got a name, scumbag?" the chief smirkingly asks.

"Early. Early Heart Disease. Canfield to most others."

"That a threat?"

"More like a prophecy."

"We'll add that to the charges."

"It won't add to your life, mister."

If Canfield has Good Looks, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 30.

They throw the ranger into a police van. Viewers at home fall in love with Maslow's new criminal. *Add 1 Justice Point*. The mafia cops drive Canfield, disarmed and handcuffed, to a courtroom in Maslow's law district. The 90-year-old judge glowers down, listing some 18 charges. In this backward system, fully televised, criminals enter a plea before police processing.

-Canfield pleas "not guilty" (32).

-Canfield tries to kill the judge with a flying kick (38).

27

Canfield mounts the motorbike, a Chekhov 9000, and starts it. After unclamping the roof racks, the ranger rides down the van's windshield, over the hood, and onto the pavement with a bounce.

Canfield looks back at Crissy who shakes her head bewilderedly. Weaving through tight traffic, the motorbike easily outraces the police. The ranger abandons it upon entering Maslow City. Here, the streets bustle with, not cars, but motorized wheelchairs piloted by a mostly sedentary population.

Ads lash out from the maze of neon and noise. A six-storey doctor projects a laser grid from his left pupil to scan Canfield's proportions. The hunky labcoat makes eye contact and speaks.

"Don't miss out on *full* health coverage with Mega Ultra Plan Plus. Get *your* diabetes today."

The red squares disappear. Ahead, Canfield sees a skinny girl, no older than eight, enter a glass booth. She looks sullen as a mud puddle, maybe because no other children exist here. Sobbing, the child presses some buttons, and the clear door slides shut.

Canfield dashes over and tells her to come out. But the girl can't hear through this miniature greenhouse jail. She weeps and waits, while a low humming winds up.

Canfield shudders and pounds on the walls, yelling to no effect.

-Canfield shoots the glass (29).

-Canfield forces a tech-savvy passerby to open the booth (31).

28

Canfield pretends to sway and lose balance from trying to break the cuffs. A step forward makes the surprise kick possible. It works. The chief gasps, his eyeballs protruding, and his mouth reverts to that of our fish ancestors. Police swarm in to tackle the ranger.

If Canfield has Rodeo, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 30.

Canfield handles the beating well, giving stern looks to anyone with a fist. Finally, they throw the ranger into a police van. Viewers at home fall in love with Maslow's toughest criminal. *Add 1 Justice Point*.

They drive Canfield, disarmed and handcuffed, to a courtroom in Maslow's law district. The 90-year-old judge glowers down, listing some 19 charges. In this backward system, fully televised,

criminals enter a plea before police processing.

- Canfield pleas "not guilty" (32).
- Canfield tries to kill the judge with a flying kick (38).

29

To onlookers, the gun just appears in Canfield's hand and fires by itself. But speed won't help; the slug bounces off the bulletproof glass. Heads turn, and someone hollers.

"Hey! Let that girl die. We don't need any leeches 'round here."

Desperate, Canfield looks around for help but finds only vultures. They stop and lean back in their wheelchairs to jeer with anticipation. More booths dot the city corners for those seeking a clean but spectacular escape.

The show begins. A soup of electric fire fills the disintegration booth. When the storm dissipates, only the girl's ashes remain. They fall softly through a grill to the sewer.

The distracting ads probably delayed this rescue attempt. Cursing the city of gouls, Canfield presses on. But two blocks behind, a swarm of police push through the crowd. To the left, a man in semiformal clothes approaches, one of the few healthy pedestrians.

"Hello Canfield," he says. "I work for an Employer who can find what you seek. You've become a celebrity here. Please follow me for some privacy."

- Canfield follows the man (33).
- Canfield goes quietly into police custody to infiltrate their headquarters (30).

30

The cops close in and deliver an old-fashioned stomping. They hoist Canfield up and lay in some extra body blows for the cameras. Finally, they throw the ranger into a police van.

They drive Canfield, disarmed and handcuffed, to a courtroom in Maslow's law district. The 90-year-old judge glowers down, listing some 18 charges. In this backward system, fully televised, criminals enter a plea before police processing.

- Canfield pleas "not guilty" (32).
- Canfield tries to kill the judge with a flying kick (38).

31

Canfield grabs a jiggly old businessman and shoves him against the booth. The CEO looks like one big bald spot.

"Open that door or I'll blow your brains out," Canfield says, cocking the hammer.

"Pffft. No thanks. The economy doesn't need more parasitic kids. Nice fake gun though."

"So you won't even try?"

"Nope. Call your mom."

The man starts to leave. Canfield doesn't lie, and brains really do come out.

Before Canfield can hold up someone else, a light show commences in the booth. Vultures stop and lean back in their wheelchairs to jeer with anticipation. More booths dot the city corners for those seeking a clean but spectacular escape.

The show begins. A soup of electric fire fills the disintegration booth. In this blender of bolts, each arc fluctuates in size at speeds only Canfield can discern. When the storm dissipates, only the girl's ashes remain. They fall softly through a grill to the sewer.

The distracting ads probably delayed this rescue attempt. Cursing the city of gouls, Canfield

presses on. But two blocks behind, a swarm of police push through the crowd. To the left, a man in semiformal clothes approaches, one of the few healthy pedestrians.

"Hello Canfield. I work for an Employer who can find what you seek. You've become a celebrity here. Please follow me for some privacy."

-Canfield follows the man (33).

-Canfield goes quietly into police custody to infiltrate their headquarters (30).

32

"Not guilty," Canfield says determinedly.

They take the ranger to a Maslow police station. There, two gender-segregated cells make up the ground floor's perimeter. A cluster of desks and coffee addicts sit in the middle.

Flanked by cops, Canfield waits for fingerprint scanning. The line of arrested hobos stretches long, allowing time to size up the place. One desk has two little buttons under a drawer. They open the cells whenever the blimp sitting there reaches under. Only one cell will open at a time.

Both cells hold many distressed folk, some of whom also eyeball the control desk. They also notice Canfield eying *them*. Finally, the cops uncuff the ranger for fingerprinting.

-Canfield punches a path to the buttons (34).

-Canfield makes a surprise dash to the buttons (36).

33

The man leads Canfield into a nearby building. He merely gestures at an elevator door and leaves. The ranger dutifully gets on and goes many storeys down to enter a small interview room with white walls.

A suited Asian man named Leon offers a seat across the table from him. The coolness of the underground and air conditioning settles in Canfield's clothes.

"So, Canfield, we've followed your journey here with much enthusiasm. Everything around Maslow goes on camera, especially events of entertainment value like your car chase. But we built a different society here in this network of vaults. Our value system conflicts with what you see in the streets above."

White panels slide over the elevator doors, and the room speeds along underground tracks. Canfield's gut feels a slight pull, like riding a horse on the plains.

"Of course," Leon continues, "the evil above will destroy us unless we annihilate them first. Decades of research shows that good must actively destroy evil. According to Write-off Theory, a colloquial name that caught on, people with enough brainwashing and reinforcement of antisocial behavior never recover. They remain monsters despite all attempts at reformation and treatment. Such detrimental minds harm everyone. So we assassinate them as the only reasonable option. Think of us as defenders of the good and innocent acting realistically for once in history."

"Like rangers," Canfield says.

"No. We have science to support our actions. But like you, we do defend our settlement. Now, I'd like to hire you to kill Mayor Dunlop and his cronies. They assemble in the Debtor building at 6 PM today. Earlier, the mayor will attend another meeting at the Maslow Mall. For payment, we'll give the location of Maslow's only healthy newborn. The rest get drugged and hobbled at birth."

Canfield sits up.

"We hear things, Canfield. So how about it?"

"Alright, partner."

"First, we should test your...talents. I want you to kill *me*. Know that in this room, I can't possibly get hurt, but please try anyway."

Canfield considers it. "Write-off Theory, huh? I don't feel so sure about all this."

But Canfield has already decided to join. Finding just one salvageable kid in this city will take the Employer's help. But Leon will surely use hidden technology to shield himself.

- Canfield keeps talking, then sucker punches Leon (37).
- Canfield keeps talking but prepares to shoot Leon under the table (35).

34

Canfield breaks an office chair over a cop's head and goes berserk. Officers draw guns, but with so many of their own throwing themselves on the ranger, nobody can get a clear shot.

If Canfield has both *Brawler and Rodeo*, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 38.

Each cop gets a good bop in the face. Their jaws feel nice and pillowy, and they haven't got the height for kidney shots. With all the prisoners cheering, Canfield runs the gauntlet of fists and reaches the control desk.

- Canfield releases 30 prostitutes with synthetic faces (40).
- Canfield releases 20 alcoholics in wifebeaters (48).

35

"This don't sound right at all, Leon." Canfield hunches forward, feigning anger and pointing a finger at the Employer. The other hand dangles, but sneaks up to the holster. "You just made this up to control the city for yourself. Besides, I won't kill an unarmed man."

"Ah, but the write-offs always appear unarmed. Yet, they use hirelings to prey upon the good and innocent—"

Canfield draws and fires.

If Canfield has *Ambush and Good Looks*, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 39.

Three shots hammer into Leon's belly. His chair slides back from the impact. He merely blinks. Another two shots put out his eyes. No blood.

The synthetic loses its cognitive, balance, and motor functions. It falls sideways off the chair. Canfield looks on dumbfounded as gun smoke fills the room. A voice, the real Leon, emits through a speaker in the ceiling.

"Thanks for joining us. After you eliminate Dunlop, an Employee will give the location of the newborn. I hope our two communities can one day form an alliance. Good luck, Canfield, with both our missions."

Add 1 Justice Point.

The room stops moving, and the panels slide away allowing access to a different elevator. Pressing the one button, Canfield takes the ride up to a similar vacant building deeper in the city. Outside, the distant Debtor tower looms over the others. The mayor's meetings won't take place for hours.

- Canfield seeks an elementary school to find children (43).
- Canfield finds a place to research this so-called Write-off Theory (41).

36

Canfield breaks a cop's neck and runs. Officers draw guns, but with so many of their own throwing themselves on the ranger, nobody can get a clear shot.

If Canfield has Ambush *and* Rodeo, continue reading. Otherwise turn to 38.

With a cop latched on every limb, Canfield reaches the control desk and headbutts the blob sitting there. Coffee sprays everywhere.

- Canfield releases 30 prostitutes with synthetic faces (40).
- Canfield releases 20 alcoholics in wifebeaters (48).

37

The Employer waits coolly for a reaction. Canfield becomes chattier, trying to lower Leon's guard.

"As partners, suppose I ask you to double the offer. What then, Leon?"

"I wish we could save *all* the newborns. But our Employees have only gathered the whereabouts of one. If you succeed, perhaps your people and mine cou—"

Canfield lurches across the table with a powerful swing.

If Canfield has both Brawler *and* Good Looks, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 39.

The punch knocks out Leon's incisors. Showing no pain, the Employer hurls the table aside and stands. But Canfield dropkicks him, and the two end up on the floor scuffling.

Leon doesn't scuffle well. Canfield breaks the Employer's neck many times, strangely without killing him. The head detaches, exposing wires and a plastic skeleton.

Canfield rises, looking dumbfounded at the broken synthetic. A voice, the real Leon, emits through a speaker in the ceiling.

"Thanks for joining us. After you eliminate Dunlop, an Employee will give the location of the newborn. I hope our two communities can one day form an alliance. Good luck, Canfield, with both our missions."

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- Canfield seeks an elementary school to find children (43).
- Canfield finds a place to research this so-called Write-off Theory (41).

38

The surprise attack fails, and the police pile themselves high on Canfield. They pick up and carry the ranger like a battering ram for safe disposal into a cell. One hour later, a lawyer appears at the bars. The lighting puts false bags under his eyes.

"Canfield, my dear friend. You've done so much for the city already. And we've watched closely. See, the more heinous your crimes, the more heroic we all look by treating you compassionately. 'Should have killed that vanload of nuns, comrade; we'd *shower* you will medical luxuries and therapy.

"But alas, you only get this." He hands a large ziplock bag through the bars. It contains Canfield's possessions, gun and belt included. The cell door unlocks. "Come. An Employer paid your bail."

Canfield cooperates for now, withholding all judgment except gratitude for this "Employer". Nursing bruises, the ranger gears up and follows the man outside.

Turn to 33.

39

Leon moves faster and dodges. He has explosive reflexes and putty for a spine.

"Stop!"

Canfield eases off and casually leans back in the chair. Leon takes a deep breath.

"Alright, you missed that time, but I think your skills can prevail. You used deception and charm, tactics our enemies may try. We'll send an Employee with details on the newborn *if* you succeed. Good luck, Canfield, with both our missions."

The room stops moving, and the panels slide away allowing access to a different elevator. Pressing the one button, Canfield takes the ride up to a similar vacant building deeper in the city. Outside, the distant Debtor tower looms over the others.

* * *

Mayor Dunlop and the lab technician look through the huge one-way mirror. In the grimy cell beyond, the synthetic assassin, a lean doll of a woman, meets the prisoner. The synth looks hotter than nukes in her miniskirt.

"This better work," grumbles the mayor. "Why does her nose look like a butter knife?"

The lab nerd smiles. "Watch."

No one tells Mayor Dunlop to remain patient. Until today. Until Canfield. So they watch.

The prisoner's face scrunches up, probably over the woman's hawk-nose. They spent millions perfecting her buff paint. Unlike the rest of the synth, her beak has no rubber overlay—just solid titanium with a paint veneer. But who cares? Everything else exudes female perfection.

The prisoner scowls. "What do you want?"

The lissom synth rolls her eyes. "They declared you the 'baddest mother trucker in jail.' So you get a night with me." She advances, sensually. "Unless you...don't want it?"

Mesmerized, the lab guy talks without turning from the rectangular glass. "Once she has the shoulders, game over."

The synth caresses the prisoner's shoulders. No one will ever know if he plans to molest her or push her off; what happens next requires slow motion cameras.

Her fingernails burrow completely. Latched to the shoulders, she headbutts the man nose-first in the forehead. The impact equates to getting hit by a car going 78 km/hr. She lurches back and pecks the inmate again in the same spot at a rate of 20 pecks per second.

The glass vibrates. Dunlop turns from the dripping gore as the synth faces them and deactivates, becoming statuesque.

"Canfield doesn't kill women," the geek says. "We'll exploit that."

But Dunlop left the room to vomit. He never saw a liquified brain before.

* * *

The mayor's meetings won't take place for hours.

-Canfield seeks an elementary school to find children (43).

-Canfield finds a place to research this so-called Write-off Theory (41).

40

Canfield throws off a cop and presses the button. Prostitutes flood from the cell and grab guns from startled officers. The station fills with gun smoke as a shootout erupts, killing the entire day shift of cops.

The police chief waddles in, flabbergasted and jowls aquiver. Eight prostitutes grab him, two seizing each limb. They spread him out like a starfish while others line up to kick him in the groin...to

death. *Add 1 Justice Point.*

Meanwhile, a cougar retrieves the ranger's confiscated gear from an evidence box, and returns it to Canfield.

One wall shows a floor plan in the Debtor building. Based on the security details, a meeting takes place there with Mayor Dunlop tonight at 6 PM after another meeting at the Maslow Mall. Having rearmed too late for the gunfight at hand, Canfield leaves, vowing to kill the mayor.

- Canfield seeks an elementary school to find children (43).
- Canfield wants *more* revenge against mafia cops (45).

41

Canfield spies a building whose billboard reads: INTERNET CAFE. Beyond its glass walls, wired-in geeks saturate the computers like clones. For 20 minutes, none of them budge. The ranger needs a computer, but doesn't want to bully the users away at gunpoint.

As Canfield enters, the cafe freezes in time. All chatter dies. Some folk tremble; others convert to Catholicism on one-click websites. These media addicts have followed the gunfighter news coverage.

"I declare this place..." Canfield says, scanning the crowd intimidatingly, "the Internet *Dance* Cafe. Anyone asked to dance...must dance."

The first person to breathe, a pasty bucktoothed clerk with blueberry pie filling smeared on his cheeks, spins to the voluptuous chick nearby.

"Melony," he asks, "will you dance with me?"

"Sure."

They find a spot by the counter and dance. The hunched clerk does a swimming motion; the reluctant meaty girl squirms in place, relying on mostly eye contact. Without making any sudden moves, a worker eases over to the radio and cranks it.

Canfield sits at the clerk's abandoned computer. The next kid over helps with looking up information. In seconds, he finds ten scientific journal articles on Write-off Theory and arranges them on one page. He explains how to view them using just the mouse wheel.

By reading the articles' abstracts and discussions, Canfield finds the theory valid. The Employer spoke true.

Canfield leaves, wading through many web addicts living out their dance fantasies. The electronic billboard outside now reads: INTERNET DANCE CAFE.

- Canfield searches the alleys for street kids (53).
- Canfield checks a playground instead (47).

42

In trying to look cool, or just by poor gunmanship, Canfield's first shot misses. Nonetheless, the punks wet themselves and scatter like minnows.

None of the newborns had to die by Canfield's hand. However, the whole city will watch reruns of this blunder. Surely, more fools will pursue the reward money.

- Canfield helps a sick old man nearby (100).
- Canfield helps a pregnant homeless woman (58).

43

Canfield must grab a few wheelchair gouls and press a revolver to their necks, but they eventually point the way to Maslow Elementary. Some warn about its "gun problem."

The rundown rat maze looks like a waste of city space, the only one-storey building around. Canfield enters its lonely hall, immediately setting off some metal detectors flanking the door. A good shooting puts them to rest.

"Takes care of that." Reloading, Canfield roams a century-old stained carpet. The drone of children singing, like in horror movies, grows louder.

"Eight times eight. Sixty-four. Eight times eight. Sixty-four. Eight times eight..."

Upon finding the classroom and peeking in, Canfield recoils. All 50 children sit in motorized wheelchairs with IV machines pumping fluids into their necks. Morbidly obese, they've all had their legs amputated at birth.

Canfield spots two machine gun turrets suspended from the ceiling at the front of the class. Normally trained on the kids, they rotate to face the door. The ranger shoots apart the turrets' wires and dangling ammunition loops, then steps into full view, reloading as the class stares. But once the gun holsters home, all the kids drive their wheelchairs out of there.

"Now hang on, folks," Canfield says. "I got a proposition for y'all. Anyone who wants to follow me can sure 'nuff leave this place for good. Like class dismissed forever. If y'all want to live a proper life of hard work and satisfyin' country livin' —"

But they ignore every word in the rush out. Soon, the classroom empties. But the school principal, Dr. Maloley, rises from his hiding place behind the teacher's desk.

"They won't join you," he says, straightening his grey suit that matches the grey beard and bowl cut. "They can't. Those kids need constant nursing care and medical supplies. They wouldn't last a day out there."

Dr. Maloley strides around the desk, his voice echoing in the vaultlike classroom. Grizzled historical figures gaze down from their portraits which encompass the ceiling.

"And don't worry about those," he gestures to the turrets. "We'll have them workable by tomorrow. The curriculum will go on."

Canfield listens, for now.

"We could put blanks in them. Dropouts and permanent detentions have dropped almost entirely with this year's drug regime. In fact, your escapade today just reinforced the system; they leave when we *let* them."

"De-tention?"

"An old term. Today, *coffins* detain anyone who tries skipping class. You can't stop the cycle. Each generation passes their ruin onto the next. I can only get ahead by doing my part as a cog in the machine, wrecking the vulnerable as my caregivers wrecked me. Before, these kids would grow up and do even worse to me in my elder years. Now, we stunt them ahead of time. Why don't you go home?"

-Canfield punches the principal (50).

-Canfield leaves, refusing to use unnecessary violence (45).

44

Exploring an alley lush with video ads, Canfield freezes. Six freakishly tall and boney hipsters stroll up. They wear stovepipe tuques and trenchcoats with meter-long pointy collars. Over this flamboyancy, the gang wears deformed babies harnessed to vests called "morality armor". Portable IV machines and less mentionable tubes keep the infants alive, barely. Foolishly, nobody brought guns. Yet, they surround Canfield with intimidating poses.

"Whachyagonna do, hick," the leader, Sigmund, asks, "shoot these defenseless babies? You can't win, not even by hitting just us. If one of us falls, a kid gets crushed."

He twirls like a dancer, displaying another emaciated baby strapped to his back.

"You *will* turn yourself in to us," Sigmund says, killing his own smile. "We *want* that reward money. Now put these on." He holds out a pair of glow-in-the-dark handcuffs.

"You better surrender," says the most androgynous one. "They've got cameras everywhere. Kill one baby, and the public will turn on you like piranhas."

"Cameras, huh?" Canfield scratches an ear, acting cool and considerate. But this dilemma must end with shooting. The newborns have surgical scars about their heads where doctors "emptied" them. None will live another month anyway. The city folk don't really care about saving kids, but some could spin a story to vilify the ranger.

But maybe if Canfield looks righteous by carrying the right expressions and composure, the people will forgive this horrible deed...

-Canfield shoots Sigmund in the head and coolly lectures the others (46).

-Canfield shoots all of them fast and tells the cameras that winners don't use morality armor (52).

45

Canfield exits the building with the trickle of escapees. But trouble on wheels lies ahead...

* * *

In a closed laundromat, the Neckbeard Gang load their weapons. The three scruffy men eye their latest recruit across the table—a 600 pound sumo ninja sporting a tight yellow jumpsuit. They'll need him against Canfield, if they hope to collect that reward money. Gus, he calls himself, dual-wields uzis and fixates on the i-shelf device by a pile of ammo.

The screen shows a live footage encounter between their target and a wheelchair cop. The officer motors around to accost Canfield. If one looks closely, the cop's gun barrel lazily points to the ranger's left trapezium muscle.

Canfield doesn't look too concerned.

"Gus the Bus," says one gangster through his handlebar mustache. "That sounds good."

Gus only stares at the screen where the wheelchair cop reads Canfield's rights: "You have the right to remain gay. Anything you say can and will sound lame in the court of lols."

The Neckbeards glance about uneasily. "So, Gus," the leader says, his beard bouncing on a beachball potbelly, "you study your target well. But what about speed, bro?"

Lethargic silence. A fly lands on a dryer door to look at its reflection.

"Canfield's got moves," the third member shouts. "Think you can handle the heat, spud man?"

Gus stares catatonically at the i-shelf, where the ranger's face becomes impatient. Somewhere in those high-definition frames, the gun teleports from the cop's hand into Canfield's. The officer didn't notice either.

The Neckbeard leader grows bored with the reactionless ninja. "No matter," he mutters, sliding a clip in place. "Canfield will choke on enough bullets to make rice."

Gus electrifies with rage. "You can't choke on rice!" he screams.

His uzis bark out bullets, annihilating the gang. Their peppered bodies go white like empty ketchup bottles. Their fly vests don't contain any metal, but packets of fruit roll-ups. Nobody lifted a pistol in time, meaning Canfield could take them anyway.

Easily.

Gus resettles in his chair and checks the i-shelf. Now, pixelated Canfield sits in the wheelchair gripping some crude reins made from the officer's uniform. The cop, fully naked, pulls the chariot on all fours.

"H'yah!" Canfield yells, shooting the pavement by the cop's head to spur him.

Another interruption: "WE'LL CONTINUE WITH FULL COVERAGE OF TERRORISM NEWS RIGHT AFTER THIS."

Something changed in the gunslinger's psychology today. A line broke. Too many fools messed with the wrong outsider.

In time, Gus puts an uzi in his mouth and shoots out his brainstem.

* * *

"Why'd you stop, ya damn mule?" Canfield says, hopping off the motorized wheelchair.

Walking around, Canfield sees the wheelchair cop collapsed in a puddle of blood. The naked lawman had picked up his neck fat like a sandwich and took many bites. His analgesic meds block pain, allowing the desperately hungry cop to eat himself to death.

"Only in Maslow," Canfield says.

- Canfield checks an alley for street kids (53).
- Canfield explores a nearby playground instead (47).

46

Sigmund extends the handcuffs. They swing like a pendulum before his cloud-white grin. Canfield casually draws and fires from the hip.

If Canfield has both Bullseye *and* Good Looks, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 42.

The bullet chops the dangling chain in half, dropping one bracelet. The same bullet blows Sigmund's occipital lobes all over the pansy behind him. Canfield catches Sigmund under the armpits and lowers the rag doll gently, laying him sideways. That way, neither the front nor back infant gets crushed under his body weight.

"I should castrate y'all," Canfield says to the five who back away, "but it wouldn't change much, would it?"

They run, and Canfield lets them. Authorities will collect Sigmund's armor, and who knows what will happen to the doomed infants. But none died by the ranger's hand. Maslowians will watch reruns of this altercation until the nukes hit. *Add 1 Justice Point.*

- Canfield helps a sick old man nearby (100).
- Canfield helps a pregnant homeless woman (58).

47

Canfield finds the playground fenced in and devoid of children. All the equipment has carpeted surfaces, for cats with cancer live here. No one has changed the sand box lately.

* * *

Dr. Emmes holds up a squashed bullet with special tongs. Lead. No need to speed-read the test results. Just lead, like in the old days. In all her years as a ballistics expert working at Forensics, she never saw a lead projectile. Killing had gone green in the 2030s.

"How can this even exist?" Emmes asks her less attractive co-worker. "Why would anyone *make* these today?"

Her lab partner shrugs. "You saw the weapon on full zoom, Emmes, and the perpetrator. Video doesn't lie, not what gets sent to us. Ten bucks says the spurs will have horse DNA."

Emmes's face looks lost in her bedding of frizzy curls. As she studies the slug, other lab dorks make jokes: lightning struck a mannequin at the museum, gunslingers found an ancient time machine in their goldmines, aliens like to mess around in historical costumes, China invades with androids from the wrong era, holograms can fire guns now. Stupid geniuses.

Emmes bags the bullet and leaves work early.

* * *

Meanwhile...

- Canfield displays fearlessness in a camera-laden district (44).
- Canfield lays low at a low-tech bar (51).

48

Throwing off a cop, Canfield presses the button. The drunks, lined up orderly in advance, charge out when the cell door opens. They beat the outnumbered day staff to death in a murderous riot.

While everyone loots the place, Canfield retrieves all the confiscated ranger gear from an evidence box. Someone releases the prostitutes who begin setting fires, which activate the sprinklers.

Canfield storms a backroom the police converted to a mini casino. Slot machines enshrine a stripper pole. A giant wedding cake sits gloriously by the roulette table. And at a blackjack table stands the police chief, alone and sweating from morbid obesity and fear. He gawks at the silhouette in the door, fire and rain ruining everything beyond.

"Draw," Canfield says.

The chief draws a deuce of hearts. The ranger draws a revolver.

Canfield shoots, but a Kevlar vest stops the bullet. The chief topples back and falls into the wedding cake. He struggles, but unable to right himself in the mountain of slippery icing, the mafia boss drowns in the mess. *Add 1 Justice Point.*

One wall displays a floor plan of the Debtor building. Based on security details, a meeting takes place there with Mayor Dunlop tonight at 6 PM after another meeting at the Maslow Mall. Canfield leaves, vowing to kill the mayor.

- Canfield wants more revenge against the police mafia (45).
- Canfield seeks a school to find children (43).

49

Canfield pokes one arm through the palm trees to shoot. But Bulldog fires first, not even having to aim. Half the pub fills with bolts, some touching Canfield's arm and causing convulsion.

If Canfield has both Quick Draw *and* Rodeo, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 56.

After jolting backwards, Canfield regains balance and fans the hammer. The drunkards only see a machine gun blast from the hip. All shots hit, sending Bulldog back like someone took a jackhammer to his chest. He topples over the bar, slamming into shelves of endless hard liquor and something they call Rocket Fuel. It all breaks, showering the Headhunter with inflammable alcohol.

Canfield reloads without looking. The armor worked; Bulldog rises, using the uber taser as a crutch. But the electric current ignites the liquor...

The place burns down. *Add 1 Justice Point.* Everyone evacuates in time, but no one knows if the ER Reality Team can saw through Bulldog's charred suit to save him.

- Canfield helps a sick old man nearby (100).
- Canfield helps a pregnant homeless woman (58).

50

Canfield knocks the principal across the classroom. But Dr. Maloley rises as if at a picnic. He pats his face, checking for blood and finding a lump. Maloley takes opiates like all his students.

"The more you hurt me, the more sick days I get," Maloley says. "And trust me, you don't want substitutes around these kids."

Canfield paces, then pulls a gun. "Walk. Show me the library."

* * *

A crowd has gathered around a street corner where video spans each side of the building. They can see every pore in Bulldog the Headhunter's meaty face. Sweat greases his blond dreadlocks, and a man could fall inside his scowl lines. You can't keep a retired wrestler down.

"Heads up, Maslow," Bulldog growls like a motorcycle. "When someone comes to MY town, on MY tour, and hogs the headlines, you can bet I'll get angry! But when some loser in a cowboy costume starts making trouble with THE. MASLOW. POLICE. FORCE, I get MAD!"

"They can take that reward down right now 'cus *The Bulldog* never loses. The DOG always gets there *first!* DEAD. OR. ALIVE. Your choice, shooter."

He projects for 22 minutes. Finally, Bulldog raises a black taser the size of a ghetto blaster. Blue arcs dance across a quartet of metal skulls at the weapon's tip. The video replays, the growls and scowls digitally enhanced.

* * *

In the mouldering school library, Canfield forces Dr. Maloley to burn the school down at gunpoint, then leaves.

- Canfield checks an alley for street kids (53).
- Canfield explores a nearby playground instead (47).

51

Canfield enters a bar called The Hellhole. Nothing ever happens there except liver damage. Apart from the aging slobs embalming themselves, the place looks pleasant with its decor of houseplants. Lisa canes and cacti sit in a bath of techno music, wanting to die.

Canfield takes an empty table and watches the patrons neither come nor go. Something finally happens at another table. A blob of a man, his face like a plate of mashed potatoes, peeks at a similarly built woman across the barroom. They exchange embarrassed smirks and grimaces. The man's drinking buddies nudge him encouragingly. Likewise, the woman's girlfriends giggle and whisper.

The exchanges continue. Canfield's eyes slide to the left, to the right, then back, following the two. The blushing builds, the jostling nigh erupts. Men prod; women squeal and squirm. The anticipation and heart flutters reach palpability.

Then...action. The man downs the melted ice in his glass. He rises, about to find love—love between insulin shots, but love nonetheless. He crosses the room. Canfield watches, and flips the table over for cover as a lightning bolt interferes with everything.

The bolt tears off half the man's face, leaving a bubbly black flesh over his torso. His clothes and body hair burn off in a microsecond, and what customers don't inhale will become plant food. Lunch gurgles out a crispy hole in his neck, and he falls.

The blast came from one uber taser, leveled by Bulldog the Headhunter. He aimed for Canfield, who scurries behind some pots bearing palm trees.

Bulldog, six foot eight, weight unknown in all that black armor, presses a button, transforming the uber taser. Its firing end sprouts a porcupine of mini tasers. They maximize lightning spread but

lessen the voltage. Canfield will take some juice, unavoidably.

- Canfield shoots Bulldog in the chest six times (49).
- Canfield aims for a weak spot (54).

52

"Seems I have no choice," Canfield says with a grain of sadness.

"Correct," Sigmund says. "If it makes you feel better, we'll spend the money on tassels for our girlfriends."

Chuckling ensues. They shift their weight every few seconds. Unimpressed, Canfield doesn't shift an eye muscle. "Should have brought them girls to the fight."

A silence chokes them. Pupils widen. The gun leaps out.

If Canfield has both Quick Draw *and* Good Looks, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 42.

The "fight" ends in 1.5 seconds of muzzle roars. No one takes a step. One flake has time to cover his ears before getting shot. Reflexes. Two of them conk heads on the way down. Bullets smash through the vest babies on the way to their proper targets. But the six punks fall like mannequins in a hurricane.

"Now to all you folks at home," Canfield says, salting Sigmund's body with spent casings, "don't bring hostages to a gunfight. Bring guns."

Canfield checks all 100 windows and snaps the reloaded gun back home. "And write your will beforehand."

On this black day for the fashion industry, stock prices in morality vests have plummeted. *Add 1 Justice Point.*

- Canfield helps a sick old man nearby (100).
- Canfield helps a pregnant homeless woman (58).

53

Canfield searches a nearby alley for street urchins, but finds none. Soon, a woman runs up, her frizzy hair bounding into a big mess. She looks too smart for a crazed fan, especially in the labcoat. She sticks her hand out uncertainly, and the ranger shakes it.

"Dr. Emmes. I just wanted to ask you something before..." her pitch lowers to concern, "the army brings you in."

"Don't count on it."

"Oh."

"I meant about the army."

"Ah..."

"You had questions, ma'am?"

"Yes! Well...how do you even *exist*? Why does your society produce these relics? Those look like real spurs. And a *canteen*. What the hell!"

"Thanks."

"And what do you want here? Why come to Maslow?"

Canfield looks over both shoulders, as rangers often do. "Tryin' to get my sanity back, ma'am. I'll answer the rest, for a price. I want the youngest child in Maslow."

"For organ harvesting?"

Canfield stares at her. "Yeah. For harvestin'."

Dr. Emmes looks over her shoulders too. "I'll try to find one for you."

She doesn't have a gun under that white coat. Canfield turns and walks.

- Canfield lays low at a low-tech bar (51).
- Canfield displays fearlessness in a camera-laden district (44).

54

A flap covers Bulldog's atrophied testicles, so Canfield aims for the *second* smallest appendage, the thumb. But, the Headhunter shoots first. The ranger takes some bolts and convulses while firing.

If Canfield has both Bullseye *and* Rodeo, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 56.

Bulldog's gloved thumb snaps off like an icicle and pings into a flower pot. He squeals, runs outside, and gets run over by a diesel tanker. *Add 1 Justice Point*. Canfield leaves the Hellhole through a parting crowd.

- Canfield helps a sick old man nearby (100).
- Canfield helps a pregnant homeless woman (58).

55

The old man introduces himself as Mr. Meta. He then presses a button protruding from his neck. The implant stimulates medulla nerves causing him to vomit french fries joyously. Canfield offers him some water. The old man sips from the ranger's canteen and presses the button again to vomit.

"Ah, what a filthy habit! Don't ever start."

His advice extends no further.

* * *

Ted stands cross-armed, like a statue in formal office wear. His co-workers flock to the 19th floor windows. They had drained from their cubicles to see the celebrity in person, leather boots and all.

"Look Ted," says a schlub, "you can see the gunfighter walking right by our building. The one with the hat!"

"Nah," Ted replies, "I prefer the satellite." He gets lost in the blue plaid shirt and determined gaze shown in crisp detail on the wall screens. All day, they show this gunslinger from another reality, unintimidated by modern glibness and tipping that famous hat to all the prostitutes. They say Canfield doesn't kill women.

"Some kind of walking time machine..." Ted mumbles.

This one they call The Piper has no trailing cloud of paparazzi; pointing cameras might get interpreted as guns. Rumors downstairs say the police won't go near Canfield after what happened today.

Ted glances at his competitors in the building across the street. For once, their blinds open, revealing a hoard of advertising executives also huddled to see today's oddity walk by.

* * *

Canfield leaves the vomit addict, content to have met the nicest man in Maslow while learning to act on impulse: those with Good Looks should choose the *first* option in any opportunity to speak.

- Canfield studies the nearby rails that allow buildings to slide (68).
- Canfield asks some pedestrians about Maslow children (59).

56

Whether from poor marksmanship or the tasing, Canfield misses. A fern vase takes the bullet. Bulldog's armor looks too bulletproof anyway.

But bulletproof rarely means knifeproof. As Bulldog slings the uber taser over his shoulder and reaches for a miniature flamethrower, Canfield darts forward. The hunting knife comes from nowhere, and Canfield sticks the blade under a flap covering the Headhunter's armpit. Girly screams issue from the helmet, and the two end up entwined on the floor to the beat of techno drum.

Minutes later, the music and screams stop. It takes some sawing and fierce pulls, but the armored head comes off.

No one knows what happens next. The Hellhole crowd never cared much for gizmos, so no video footage exists for the event they call "The Feast". According to witnesses, Canfield said, "No one leaves." But authorities call this a pun about plants created through urban legend. People probably stayed out of grim fascination.

They say Canfield used the flame thrower to cook Bulldog's head inside the helmet, possibly adding condiments. Anyone wearing a "Bulldog the Headhunter" shirt or logo had to line up (at gunpoint) and take turns eating from the "black kettle".

Coverage of Canfield resumes at 3:06 PM with everyone herding out of the bar.

-Canfield helps a pregnant homeless woman nearby (58).

-Canfield helps a sick old man (100).

57

Canfield breaks into the complex by shooting through its glass door. Oddly, more pathetic cries emit from each apartment door along the hall. The girl's screams come from one in particular, found after a torturous listen at each.

Finally, Canfield kicks in the proper door, gun raised and ready. In the bachelor beyond, a flaky man in a tuxedo lies on the floor. He sings so effeminately, his "songs" sound like girly shrieks. A puddle of tears reveals the level of emotional attunement needed for this progressive style.

"Violated," the crumpled figure cries, probably still singing. "You can't enter like this."

"Shuddup."

Canfield concocts a potion in the bathroom sink with aftershave and other toiletries. The ranger glaring back in the mirror doesn't resemble the one who rode into the region this morning. Something snapped. The music endured along that hallway caused a profound psychological drift—a breakdown of all morality.

"Everything must go," Canfield mutters, soaking a towel in the inflammable brew. This entire complex holds Maslow's finest—aspiring entertainers who, for sociocultural reasons, live and rehearse here.

Doors fly open. Boy bands look up. The intruder's eyes blaze, as does the torch. But none protest, for the maniac has a gun, and the building has fire escapes.

Canfield sets all the beds on fire, but doesn't watch the building burn. The light-and-leave method always works on mattresses, and Maslow's all-volunteer fire department have little competence.

-Canfield studies the tracks on which the buildings slide (68).

-Canfield asks pedestrians about Maslow children (59).

58

The homeless woman wears a leather jacket over a prom dress. She lumbers along, begging pedestrians for change, only missing a beat to lean her stocky form over and vomit. She looks up from wiping her mouth and sees Canfield.

"Ma'am, I'd like to help."

"I hate your guts and your family's guts. Just kidding! Got any change, hon?" This wreck has some psych problems—probably six. But with that belly, the child may live.

"No money, ma'am. But speakin' of family, I can offer somethin' better, a safer life in a carin' town. Real good folk. They'll live and die to protect you and your family."

"I wanna use an ice cream scooper to fling their brains into kitty litter. Just kidding! But no, I only need change for the bus. Sure you don't have any, hon?"

He mouth hangs agape. A line of colored drool lets go. Canfield's finger puzzles over the revolver. Would this woman and her child survive a forced march through the desert?

"Oooooow!" More splattering, this time down her ankles. Her water broke. Canfield helps lower the woman to an unbusy patch of sidewalk and spreads out a large handkerchief between her legs. She goes into labor.

-Canfield puts a bedroll under the woman's head for comfort (60).

-Canfield puts a leather knife sheath in her teeth to bite down on (64).

59

While Canfield looks for a friendly face, a hawk-nosed woman in a miniskirt hurries over, undulating and arms outstretched.

"Oh my god, the shooter! Can I get a picture with you? Let me fix your shirt."

Canfield draws and fires nonchalantly. The bullet knocks off the synthetic's right hand. Anyone with good perception could spot the facade: total dryness in the robot's mouth, nostrils that never move when she talks, pupils not dilating while walking, and a face more symmetrical than any human.

She, or it, stares sullenly at the plastic tubes protruding from her wrist. "I...can't perform my duties anymore."

"I'll blow your head off too," Canfield says, "so watch out."

"But...but...then I'll lose sentience. M-maybe they can build me a new hand."

The smoking muzzle veers and fires. The shot takes off her other hand.

"Yeah, maybe. Now scram."

She does so, one hand dangling from a wire like a yo-yo. Canfield replaces the two spent cartridges and resumes travel.

Soon, the Maslow Mall appears. The mayor will have his first meeting somewhere inside. A huge sign flashes: BARGAIN! ONE HEALTHY BABY BOY AT 90% OFF! DETAILS INSIDE. Canfield will need keen eyes while walking into this obvious trap. Alternatively, Mayor Dunlop would not expect the ranger to show at his next meeting in the Debtor building. The security there, however, won't go down easy.

-Canfield enters the mall (61).

-Canfield heads for the Debtor building (63).

60

Canfield rigs a crude pillow and leans close to position it. Passersby don't even glance down. The woman screams with labor pains and punches Canfield in the mouth. Palming some blood away, the ranger swallows the pain and stays focused.

* * *

Billy Bob Trenholm grabs the cell phone by his room-sized waterbed. He wants to crush the

buzzing thing like a wrist. The tall, bald, and brooding man stands and paces to control his anger. He won this year's Fighter's Ultimate Conquest *and* Martial Arts Championship. What the hell more do his sponsors want?

No one calls him on his panther nap hours. *No one.*

"What."

"MAC, listen up. We've got a ridiculous deal. Forty mil. Dominoes all lined up."

"Who."

"Canfield. In two hours. Not sure where, but the helicopter will take care of—"

"Whoa. The shooter?" Trenholm's free hand shoots out without his awareness.

"Yeah. Don't worry; Canfield won't have a gun, guaranteed."

Another promoter laughs in the background. "Won't have a chance, either!"

"Easy pickings, MAC. The whole city wants this. Make that the world. More cash down the line too if we get the right lighting. MAC? You there?"

"Yeah. Sign for me. What product do I eat right after?"

"This time...it doesn't matter."

Trenholm delicately puts the phone on the waterbed.

* * *

Meanwhile,

-Canfield holds the pregnant woman's hand (62).

-Canfield encourages her to "push" (66).

61

Canfield sneaks through the Maslow Mall shipping doors around back and roams the endless well-lit but vacated aisles. Beyond a shop of swords and phalanx of gleaming lawn tractors, the store entrance comes to view. Hoards of overweight citizens press themselves to the sliding doors. Some have camped there.

Almost as a warning, the doors part slightly. Wide Sale Wednesday frontrunners thrust their arms through, grabbing handfuls of the rubbery mall air. Anticipation and jostling builds. Then, the crowd hushes as a nasal voice breaks over the store-wide speakers, and the sound carries outside.

"Attention shoppers. Gunslinger giveaway. Don't miss out on our mascot's free coupons. 90% off everything in store. Only 20 coupons available. See our mascot for details."

The doors whip open wide, and a stampede begins. Everyone charges in, wanting to rip Canfield apart for those nonexistent coupons. And six bullets won't stop the flood of hundreds. The place turns to thunder.

-Canfield shoots the lights out and hides in the dark (69).

-Canfield shoots the six biggest males and holds the rest off atop the escalators (65).

62

The beggar screams and crushes Canfield's sword hand. She does not, however, crush Canfield's gun hand. Something starts crowning, a sight horrible enough to have lasting consequence.

-Canfield flees without seeing the monstrosity (68).

-Canfield encourages her to "push" (66).

63

Determined to kill the mayor, Canfield enters the Debtor tower. The main floor bustles with half-human traffic in a maze of wheelchair ramps and lifts.

Canfield takes the stairs to the wheelchair-inaccessible second floor, finding a cubicle haven for absorbing phone calls. Office workers do their slow dances with pillar-like coffee machines. The ranger prowls along the glass walls until grabbed by a flabby arm that bursts from an ajar door.

The hand yanks Canfield into a darkened office and only lets go to slam the door. Canfield refrains from shooting, but sinks the barrel into the double chin of a tall man in a pink tutu.

"Don't kill me," the lardo in drag says, eyes wide enough to nearly fall out. "Never mind. Kill me, please."

The sweating man ignores Canfield's icy and confused glare. He uses a scissor motion with two fingers to crack open the blinds and peek out.

"Mister, you mind telling me what—"

"Look," the fleshy man says, "I don't know how much you drank last night to dress like...*that*. But I had *lots*. I only remember leaving Tiffany's and crashing here. I must have left my clothes at the bar. If anyone sees me, my career goes splat."

"I've got lives to save and others to end, mister."

"Well if the Big Guy sees this, they'll make a sitcom out of me."

Canfield holsters the iron. "I'll need a word with some 'big guys'. They meet here at six. Know somethin' about that?"

"Yeah, the hyper-execs who run the city. What do I care?"

"Tell you what, Sampson," Canfield says, checking the nameplate on the desk, "I'll return with a suit just your size, but only after my meetin' with the boys upstairs. You best hope I find the place real fast."

"Deal!" Sampson lunges to his computer and types for his life. "Okay, they still have their meeting at the 60th floor's conference room. When security tosses you out, just take my credit card down to the —"

Canfield gags Sampson with a handkerchief and, at gunpoint, hogties him with a power cable. The ranger takes the elevators to floor 60 and throws open some ornate double doors. Beyond, some elders in jet-black suits lounge around an oval table of solid marble. Some half smirk at their intruder's clothes; others have worn their smiles since birth.

A tux holding a sleek black pistol stands between the door and Canfield's targets. The guppy looks confident in both his haircut and skills. Federally trained Agent Ray—if you believe his laminated nametag—has already won the gun draw. Though, the piece now points at the floor.

"How did you get in?" Mayor Dunlop asks. "Do you believe in ghosts, Agent Ray?"

"I believe in union cops," Ray replies, smiling with only his mouth and not his eyes. "Game over, Canfield. Lie down with all your fingers spread on the carpet."

His stiff gun arm begins to rise.

-Canfield kicks the pretty boy's gun away and scuffles (67).

-Canfield shoots him (70).

64

The woman bites down on the sheath but only to whip out the knife and and dart it at a random wheelchair motorist. It stabs the man's forehead for an instant kill. Canfield chases after the speeding chair to retrieve the knife, then returns to the crazed beggar.

* * *

Erikson leans out the window of his monitoring station, shoulders permanently hunched. Like a UFO, his discoid office hangs from the Maslow Mall ceiling. The mouse-faced manager grins over a microphone.

"Attention shoppers," his nasally voice echos. The waddling crowd below freezes like time and space died this afternoon. "Towel dryers in aisle 91 now 40% off. Limited time only."

Like robot ducks, the shoppers pivot and embark for aisle 91. So beautiful a pattern. Erikson's silver capped teeth would gleam with salivation if he could ever manage more than a smirk. No such deal exists, except in consumers' minds. But they *believe* in the deal. The item starts at imaginary price X and lowers to real number Y. Simple.

"Take a look, sir," a near clone of him says. The seated endomorph in a crisp white shirt turns a screen to Erikson. On it, Canfield's face, tough as a bed of nails, appears from the shadow of a cowboy hat—an authentic one made of dead animal, not the paper crap from aisle 106. The piggies want the shooter brought in, and they'll pay a quarter mil. The gold numbers glow and vibrate under Canfield's chin.

They'll double that reward each hour.

"Close the mall. Make everyone wait outside like Wide Sale Wednesday. Give them free tents, and get advertising on the phone."

"Yes sir."

Chubby fingers patter across the control board.

* * *

Down on the streets of Maslow,

-Canfield holds the pregnant woman's hand (62).

-Canfield encourages her to "push" (66).

65

The ranger shoots while running backwards for the escalators. If Canfield has both Bullseye *and* Brawler, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 71.

Modern escalators have triple speed to better transport shoppers. Canfield empties the revolver while riding upward. Each slug, thanks to deadly aim and height advantage, lands in a brain. Atop the escalator, the gun holsters home, and the fists come out.

Canfield bloodies each knuckle defending the bottleneck position from the swarm. Fatsos wind themselves trying to outpace the down escalator. They clamber over the fallen who pool at the bottom. At the up escalator, knocked-out roly polies tumble down the steps indefinitely; the escalator carries them up as they roll down. Both ways soon clog with bodies.

Finally, Canfield has time to reload and escape.

-Canfield risks everything to find Mayor Dunlop's meeting here (74).

-Canfield drops the revenge scheme and searches for street children (77).

66

Time passes with sweat and wincing on both sides. Finally, Canfield sees the baby's head emerge.

"Ma'am, somethin' don't look right...at all."

Canfield gives it a yank and delivers...a placenta full of caviar. They can bioengineer fish to live in utero now.

The horrified ranger, who's gutted animals to survive, gazes at the sack of veins and fish eggs

brought into daylight. Canfield courageously wraps the hellish parcel in the umbilical cord and sets everything on the seat of a nearby tricycle. The woman crawls over and cradles the product, inhaling its bloody odor. Incredibly, she paddles away on the tricycle, hoping to find a buyer or a fridge.

Canfield stares aghast at the trail of afterbirth, and something like a cable snaps deep inside.

- Canfield asks pedestrians about Maslow children (59).
- Canfield studies the tracks on which buildings slide (68).

67

Canfield boots the pistol away like a hacky sack, sending it into some houseplants. Agent Ray retracts his hand like a sissy and goes for his second gun while the ranger punches *fast*.

If Canfield has both Quick Draw *and* Brawler, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 72.

Neither combatant has time to fetch a weapon as they entwine. The politicians watch, amused by the scrap. Canfield takes several karate chops, but after getting fed up, puts Ray into an inescapable hold—the German Sheppard Headlock. The agent's face reddens from clamped circulation and a touch of embarrassment. They don't train how to break such a silly outlandish move. He can only whimper and claw at the ranger's pants.

Canfield punches Ray's cranium ten times and drops him like a bundle of sticks. Meanwhile, Mayor Dunlop rummages through the houseplants for the agent's gun. This puts him on all fours. Finding no other trajectory for a fatal shot, Canfield shoots Dunlop in the anus. *Add 1 Justice Point*.

"Y'all look like turds," Canfield says. The ranger puts a hole in five men at the table and kills the last one barehanded.

Reload. Travel. Like always.

- Canfield strips a suit off and takes it to Sampson (76).
- Canfield leaves the Debtor tower before trouble arrives (80).

68

Canfield hurries to the next block where a skyscraper on train wheels grinds along a huge steel track. But a hawk-nosed woman in a miniskirt interrupts the sightseeing. When someone walks directly at Canfield, fixated and fake-smiling, that means trouble.

Canfield socks her in the neck. She falls and thrashes about trying to stand. But they designed this synthetic for killing, not gymnastics. The doll swims around on the pavement, tearing off her fake skin at the knees and elbows.

Her robotic arms patter over the track, and the skyscraper runs over both hands, crushing them off. Startled but somewhat relieved to see wires instead of blood, Canfield walks away.

Soon, the Maslow Mall appears. Mayor Dunlop will have his first meeting somewhere inside. A huge sign flashes: BARGAIN! ONE HEALTHY BABY BOY AT 90% OFF! DETAILS INSIDE. Canfield will need keen eyes while walking into this obvious trap. Alternatively, Dunlop would not expect the ranger to show at his next meeting in the Debtor building. The security there, however, won't go down easy.

- Canfield enters the mall (61).
- Canfield heads for the Debtor building (63).

69

Canfield draws without thought and shoots the fluorescent lights.

If Canfield has both Bullseye *and* Ambush, continue reading. Otherwise, 71.

A tiny pocket of the mall goes black. Crowds race toward the shots, but gouge each other blindly. The flood of shoppers brawl amongst themselves, hoping to pry coupons from the unseen figures. Canfield sidles to the checkout counters. Unsurprisingly, the herd didn't even notice the lack of cashiers today.

The ranger ducks under a cash register and reloads. The swarm has already dispersed, and a scavenger hunt ensues. Needing a strategy to conserve bullets, Canfield sees each checkout counter has a microphone.

* * *

A strange accent permeates the Maslow Mall. Shoppers freeze and listen to the speakers like a religious experience.

"Attention y'all. Them coupons...well...someone got 'em all. But today only, anyone who can drive a lawn tractor out of here can keep it. And...any folk who become sword swallows and take a picture of the deed win a free...ve-hic-le."

* * *

Canfield rises from hiding. The roar of a hundred motors rips through the mall. In minutes, shoppers have started every electric-powered lawn tractor and now ride them to the entrance. However, the onrush and desire for *two* lawn mowers cause a traffic jam. Riders ram their mowers like bumper cars.

Canfield gapes at the mayhem, for the greediest try swallowing swords *while* riding lawn tractors. Those who don't slice open esophagi and drown in blood still ride with their heads tilted back. Having managed to swallow razor sharp swords, they drive while only seeing the ceiling.

Monsters take advantage, crashing into neophyte sword swallows. The impact jars the swords, drawing blood at best and dismounting the distracted drivers at worst. Canfield watches a man's arms get mowed. Blood confetti and a cell phone lodge in another rider's mouth as he eagerly attempts to eat a sword. He chokes, falls off, and gets his head run over. The tiles go from a granite grey and white to red and red.

Gagging on blood odor, Canfield looks to the entrance.

- Canfield risks everything to find Mayor Dunlop's meeting here (73).
- Canfield seeks a hospital to find newborns (79).

70

Canfield fires from the hip.

If Canfield has both Quick Draw *and* Ambush, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 72.

Before Ray can flinch, a bullet hits his chin catapulting him over the table without his shoes. Maybe after surgery he'll have a cleft chin.

The city council would have goosebumps for a week, if Canfield let them live. Instead, they all get shot into a slump, spilling their brains on the tabletop. All goes quiet except for a moan from the floor and the patter of dripping blood. *Add 1 Justice Point.*

"I've done this a long time, mister," Canfield says, kicking aside Ray's gun.

- Canfield strips a suit off and takes it to Sampson (75).
- Canfield leaves the Debtor tower before trouble arrives (78).

71

Some shots miss, either from poor aim or the countless grabbing arms. Canfield can't find a safe position to reload in the chaos.

Canfield, through cardiovascular supremacy, outruns the hoard to the entrance and escapes with some torn clothes and missing buttons. The shoppers dare not chase outside, for they would miss out on fantastic deals.

From the parking lot, Canfield sees huge lineups at checkout counters despite the lack of cashiers. The search for a child continues.

- Canfield sneaks into a hospital to save any newborns (79).
- Canfield beats up citizens until they reveal the location of children (77).

72

Canfield misses, and Ray dives for cover behind the table. The ranger does likewise, and they have a sloppy shootout across the marble slab. All the politicians flee.

Crouched and running like a beheaded chicken, Canfield races around the table and gets a clear shot at Ray who has stayed put. Now, he will stay put forever.

The agent's death bought the mayor time to escape. Canfield reloads and leaves, having no chance of finding Dunlop again.

- Canfield searches a construction site (80).
- Canfield checks the poorer district (78).

73

Screams of carnage dissipate as Canfield wanders through an EMPLOYEES ONLY section. Faint applause comes from a conference room down the hall:

"Gentlemen...ladies. Thanks to last year's funding, we've developed the ultimate technique in male mind control, the next phase of market psychology. No more will consumers vote on Captain Suits or governors; instead, we give them...

"A fog machine with lasers. We've maximized levels of 'awesome' without sacrificing variables 'epic' or 'badass'. The last quarter showed us 'awesome' correlates with 'epic' and can synergize with 'badass' provided the product size doesn't interfere with background Purple Lighting. We've airbrushed the Exploding Skulls formula on the casing—metal casing with spikes depreciates 'badass' too rapidly—to increase 'badass' perception more predictably. This comes at a slight cost of lower saccade rates, but neon strobe lights will compensate. Colleagues, I implore you to raise funding further to see the old days of propping up human representatives vanish."

The ring of men, neatly interspaced with androgynous businesswomen, applaud. They don't see the arms-crossed figure leaning by the door.

Question period. "No one wants static explosions," a droopy face says. "Why not have *two* laser fog machines fighting each other with real explosions? We gave you billions to perfect the explosions!"

Finally, a mole-speckled goul spots Canfield. Bushy eyebrows and glances redirect the others.

"How did someone get in here?"

"Looks like one of the idiot retards. We've got one already!"

The committee vibrates with chuckles.

"You'll pay for that," Canfield says. The room converts to stoicism. "For I believe a higher power watches over us. Someone judges us all and holds more might than any of you. The Almighty will answer folks' prayers and strike fear into y'all."

"Who?" demands one prune. "What Almighty Being judges us all?"

"Me. Suckers." Jaws don't have time to drop. Canfield shoots all the males and leaves without reading their name tags. Mayor Dunlop lies among them, dyeing the carpet red. *Add 1 Justice Point.*

Back at the mall entrance, Canfield walks through the pool of minced human flesh, leaving red bootprints on the way out. People got their free lawnmowers.

-Canfield sneaks into a hospital to save any newborns (79).

-Canfield beats up citizens until they reveal the location of any kids (77).

74

Canfield barges into an EMPLOYEES ONLY section. Voices come from an in-store factory down the hall.

"I don't have time for a tour, Erikson. I came for the meeting." Mayor Dunlop frowns at his gold watch again. "You say this room turns city compost into french fries or something? I don't get it. People won't eat rotten banana peels and maggots."

"Right, so we deep fry it. Simple!"

The steely room beyond has a razor sharp grate floor. A one tonne cube of compressed compost rolls in on a conveyer belt. When it thumps to a rest, the ceiling slams down. The cube gets pressed through the floor, cutting it into compost fries which fall into boiling fat below.

"It smells like diapers," Dunlop groans through his handkerchief.

"But we deep fry it and add cinnamon. Simple!"

"Attention shoppers."

They spin and see Canfield who shoots Dunlop on sight.

"Don't kill me," Erikson says, "I've got four kids to feed!"

"Alright, hand 'em over."

"What—the kids?"

Canfield nods.

"But...family status increases sales."

Disgusted, Canfield shoots the manager's ears off. Erikson hunches and runs, scurrying into the room he just showed the mayor.

The ceiling slams down. Erikson falls through the floor and becomes french fries. *Add 1 Justice Point.*

Canfield leaves the mall, desperate to save Maslow's children.

-Canfield beats people up for information (77).

-Canfield will sneak into a hospital to save any newborns (79).

75

The ranger strips a plus-size suit that has miraculously little blood spatter and returns discretely to Sampson's office. The tutu wearer nearly explodes with fear until Canfield unties and untags him.

"Where did you get this!?" Sampson squeaks, snatching the black suit and shoes from Canfield.

"I—"

"These cost more than my house. Never mind. Just guard the door."

He frantically dresses over the tutu. Canfield looks out Sampson's office window and sees a dangerous construction site with youthful workers. Maslow's rundown district nearby may require

caution among the lawless poor. Suddenly, a 400 pound tycoon barges in.

"Sampson," says the Big Guy, "I wanted that report finished this morning. Instead, I hear you spent all last night dancing a jive at Tiffany's. Well, Sampson, let's see that jive."

Sampson obeys and flips around like a trout. The tutu skirt has already begun to burst out in places. Canfield slips away, hardly noticed.

-Canfield goes to the construction site (80).

-Canfield heads for the poor district (78).

76

The ranger strips a plus-size suit that has the least blood spatter. Returning discretely to Sampson's office, Canfield finds the tutu wearer still hogtied and gagged. However, he had wriggled to a shelf and knocked down a large can of instant cocoa mix. Sampson had a serious chocolate addiction.

Had.

His face lies half buried in the messy heap of powder. Unable to remove the gag, and craving a fix, he snorted the spilled chocolate mix...to death. Dr. Emmes' colleagues will have a strange day at the autopsy table.

Canfield looks out Sampson's office window and sees a dangerous construction site with youthful workers. Nearby, Maslow's rundown district may require caution among the lawless poor.

-Canfield goes to the construction site (80).

-Canfield heads for the poorer areas (78).

77

After leaving the mall, Canfield marches up to accost someone, but stops in apprehension. The population glares back, and all seem glued to their mobile devices. Simultaneously, at 7:00 PM, they charge at the ranger with murder in their eyes. The tweet mob, 800 strong, consists of every able-bodied citizen in Maslow. Canfield runs.

The buildings ahead slide over the tracks with a rumble. They conjoin to form a giant wall that blocks any escape. The city itself, even the tallest buildings, want Canfield dead.

But miraculously, the two middle towers separate. The wall splits before Canfield, forming one alleyway. The higher powers controlling the West End want to *save* their hero by bottlenecking the mob.

Canfield runs through, and the perusing crowd jams into the artificial alley. The funneling masses trample over a blockade of bodies. Momentarily, the way looks clear. The desperate ranger can reach the city limits beyond the alley.

But a red figure descends to block Canfield's only escape. Billowing jets of purple smoke lower an eight foot metal tuxedo wearing a massive helmet. This upright fire engine readies his mecha bazooka, an impossible weapon the size of a sewer tunnel.

Speakers on his pauldrons of doom spout a triumphant song with trumpets blazing. Canfield freezes, and even recognizes a few notes from campfire songs long ago.

G E E1 D1

Captain Suuuu- uuuit!

C1 G D#

Captain Suit.

D E D# D G#—

The chase stops. For seconds, only sweat, breath, and contemplation exist. The armor looks too thick. A hundred six shooters fired anywhere won't dent it. And a human dam prevents retreat. For once, Canfield looks uncertain.

From the dissipating purple mist, Captain Suit launches a flaming mummy from his mecha bazooka. The ancient marvel soars over Canfield's hat leaving a trail of fire, and explodes on the piled stampede. Their screams mix with the looping theme song.

The angelic orchestra rips apart the night's eardrums. Canfield staggers in disbelief and falls on all fours, overwhelmed by the bombardment of vexing colors and sounds. The world spins in a flurry of agonizing stimuli; from behind, an immolating human pyramid spews tubbies who burn and bump. In front, another two blazing mummies fly like supermen into the crowd where every bandage explodes separately. The incomprehensibility of it all, the creation of mass in the mecha bazooka where more can't possibly fit, nearly drives Canfield delirious.

Captain Suit aims downward. He roasted the hoard in the ultimate expression of narcissism and self-glamorization. He wants Canfield for himself.

Looking up with a grimace, Canfield sees another mummy assembling within the bazooka. The shell-like parts spring off stacks on the interior, allowing for mummy storage akin to Russian dolls. Robotic arms press the wire frames together, forming a hollow exoskeleton. This pushes forward to receive a speedy wrapping with bandages from a giant roll. A canister of pressurized butane injects *and* coats the mummy which travels on rollers to a blowtorch near the opening.

Meanwhile, the strongest and dumbest of the lynch mob clamber over the charred human wall and rush in. Canfield, white knuckled and gritting, rises with a plan.

-Shoot the mummies, fend off the crowd, and condemn everyone for siding with the wrong "hero" (81).

-Shoot the mummies and climb over Captain Suit to escape (85).

78

Canfield leaves the Debtor building safely, but finds no children in the poorer areas outside. Incongruously, a man in a jet black suit weaves through the homeless.

"Good evening, Canfield. I represent the people of Maslow. The city has agreed to give you its healthiest male infant provided you leave immediately after. Our guys will let you check over the child and his certification, and you sign on behalf of your guys to avoid Maslow. We can't offer a better deal than that."

Canfield squints in the sun and hair gel. "Alright, soldier. Let's do it."

The man leads Canfield to a derelict school. He kindly holds the steel door open, motormouthing a line about keeping things out of public scrutiny. They enter a gymnasium filled with shabby sports equipment and 20 lawyers.

And in one corner sits a 250 pound baby. Only his hands poke from the heavy fat rolls that droop over him like a rubber sweater. With his legs amputated, the bulbous creature sits and masticates on endless candy from a tube at his mouth. Canfield couldn't carry the child or the candy tube coiled around him like a giant kiddy pool.

"He comes with an IV pole and flatbed truck," one lawyer jests.

The lawyers encircle the ranger, who stands in jaw-clenching silence. They thrust out their clipboards piled high with paperwork. Wary, Canfield reaches for the holster...only to find it empty. Someone pickpocketed the revolver.

Naive to the outdoor life, they don't know about Canfield's hunting knife concealed down one pant leg, ranger's standard issue.

-Canfield sweet-talks them into lowering their guard before bleeding them like lambs in the Old

Testament days (88).

-Canfield attacks right away, taking whatever abuse necessary to reclaim the gun (84).

79

The streets outside the mall have cars rather than ghouls in wheelchairs. Canfield asks around for the whereabouts of Maslow's hospital. But people either shrug or tell obvious lies. Many glare, and all seem glued to their mobile devices. Simultaneously, at 7:00 PM, they charge at the ranger with murder in their eyes. The tweet mob, 800 strong, consists of every able-bodied citizen in Maslow.

They chase Canfield to exhaustion. But salvation lies ahead; a man in coveralls climbs into a DIESEL tanker truck. Canfield just reads the DIE part. With enough surprise, fire, and panic, the mob should scatter.

Stopping just to aim, the ranger shoots the rubber hose coiled at the tanker's side. Aerated diesel gushes out and billows into something hot and pretty. But Canfield doesn't stare long at the fountain of fire or infernal lake expanding across the street; the lynchers almost catch up.

-Canfield hops in the passenger side and instructs the driver (82).

-Canfield jumps into the driver's seat (86).

80

Leaving the Debtor tower safely, Canfield finds a construction site and learns how anything gets done in Maslow. The workforce consists of malnourished African children—imports. A boy in a bulldozer here, toddlers carrying an I-beam there. Frail bodies bake in the sun and dust.

One of the taller (but equally bony) kids looks like the supervisor. He speaks crude English to two boys carrying a bag of concrete mix. Canfield greets him and notices each worker wears a grey plastic bracelet.

"You kids ought to come with me. We killed all the slave masters where I live. Children your age should run around playin'."

From behind, another boy clamps a bracelet around the ranger's wrist. Noisy machines and the kid's weightlessness make the task easy, and Canfield draws back too late.

"You help by joining us," the supervisor says, rubbing dust from his yellow eyes. "You die by leaving city."

Canfield stares disdainfully at the snug bracelet. Indeed, the warning sticker reads: TAMPERING WITH THIS DEVICE OR LEAVING CITY LIMITS WILL RESULT IN DEATH.

The silent boys wander off to resume work. Canfield will not become Maslow's prisoner. Dejected by seeing so many slaves, the ranger draws and kneels.

"I better start tamperin' then."

Canfield shoots the bracelet at an angle that won't hurt the forearm underneath. The device breaks off, but not before injecting drugs at various sites.

"No!" yells a woman too late.

Grimacing from the stings, Canfield turns to see Dr. Emmes stumbling over dirt mounds and rolled fencing. She arrives winded and disheveled.

"Hold still," she demands, and applies a double grip on the right side of Canfield's neck. "If I pinch the *right* carotid artery, the drugs will only innervate the left hemisphere ipsilaterally. They'll cause aggression, suicide ideation, self harm, and involuntary muscle spasms. The motoneurons cross over to the right side, so you'll only have control over your left."

"Ma'am, that hurts. Them words, and your hands."

"You'll hurt alright. DOES ANYONE HERE HAVE A STRAITJACKET? ANYONE?"

She snatches the gun just in time. Canfield's right hand clenches and goes wild. It punches the ranger's face repeatedly with slingshot speed. Dr. Emmes struggles to maintain pressure, giving the

left arm a chance to defend. However, clamping the blood supply makes Canfield's left side weaker.

The battle begins. All the slaves stop to watch Canfield's left hand blocking the blows of the right.

-Canfield begs Dr. Emmes to restrain the right arm (87).

-Canfield will handle this alone (83).

81

The jungle dance begins. Canfield races around the advancing mob, breaking jaws and kicking groins with whip speed. Urbanites topple; more replace them. A mummy strikes the concrete where Canfield once stood. The explosion showers five soccer dads in a curtain of burning butane. Dante never fathomed the lake of melted fat pouring off the human dam beyond.

People run around on fire. Some get tripped by jutting cowboy boots. Squeals and smoke fill the alley. While trying to holler some sense into the mindless mob, Canfield attempts to save them by shooting the next mummy.

If Canfield has *all three* of Bullseye, Brawler, and Good Looks, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 96.

The mummy whooshes overhead. Canfield shoots it midair, causing an explosion of lit sparklers to adorn the alley. People clambering over the wall of doughy death see themselves spared from the fireball.

But many still attack. Nobody listens to Canfield's protests:

"Look at your idol, this attention-seeking clown! You fly to him like stupid moths, seeking anything that sparkles or shines!"

Captain Suit launches another mummy, but Canfield shoots it down. The mob regroups to plan a tackle.

But someone up there, among the camera lords on a 19th floor, listens. The buildings close in slowly. The attackers retreat, spilling over the burning wall of corpses. Constrained by his bulk, Captain Suit tries to bench press the walls, but all the city enterprises push back. Canfield runs and squeezes through the tightening gap between the superhero's legs.

Canfield escapes and watches the buildings merge with the backing of a nuclear power plant. Captain Suit, The Indestructible Man, gets crushed flat becoming an everlasting movie poster.

If Canfield has 6 *Justice Points*, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 98.

A dented white Pontiac arrives, and Marg picks up Canfield. On the drive through Maslow, the video buildings replay highlights of Canfield's journey captured on satellite and surveillance: Marg nearly hitting Pete, Canfield shooting Prince Durkheim's tire and flipping the armored limo, later badmouthing the police chief, shooting out Sigmund's brains and lowering him fluidly, and fighting hundreds single-handed atop a mall escalator. But they don't show Canfield sucker punching Leon on the journey underground.

Turn to 89.

82

Canfield sprints to the diesel tanker and leaps through the passenger door. Speechless, the bald driver looks so concerned his mustache wiggles. One side mirror shows a flame bigger than the whole truck spewing from the tanker's side. The other mirror fills with hundreds of stampedes.

"Environmentalists!" Canfield gasps. "Protesters, man! Get movin'!"

The driver launches his tanker, now a giant flamethrower on wheels, into downtown traffic. He clips many cars trying to squeeze the rig through. Along his left, vehicles disappear under a curtain of wet fire.

Seeing a busy intersection ahead, Canfield leans out the window and shoots at car tires to halt traffic. This should create a small opening. The pursuing mob crams over to the right lane to avoid the blazing street.

Escape depends on Canfield's ability to shoot moving tires while instructing the driver where to steer. If Canfield has *all three* of Bullseye, Ambush, and Good Looks, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to **90**.

They picked a bad day to mess with Canfield. When the ranger and driver finally bail and scramble from the tanker, eight city blocks have gotten torched.

The fleeing mob clogs every street, slowing the evacuation. Canfield slaps the pale driver's back and smiles. Safely afar, they watch the tanker become a pillar of red and black, spreading a sea of fire across Maslow.

If Canfield has 6 *Justice Points*, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to **98**.

Surprisingly, Crissy arrives in a stolen car and picks up Canfield. On the drive through Maslow, the video buildings replay highlights of Canfield's journey captured on satellite and surveillance: Canfield shooting Binet's beer can, hollering on the swerving van's roof during the cop chase, shooting the cop truck driver, shooting Sigmund and lowering him fluidly, shooting out lights and watching the lawnmower massacre. But they don't show Canfield shooting Leon under the table on the journey underground.

Turn to **91**.

83

The struggle versus the self rages on. If Canfield has *all three* of Quick Draw, Brawler, and Rodeo, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to **92**.

Canfield takes a beating but survives by blocking most punches *fast*. When the drugs wear off, Dr. Emmes helps the ranger to her car. She drives to the city limits to free Canfield.

If Canfield has 6 *Justice Points*, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to **98**.

On the drive through Maslow, the video buildings replay highlights of Canfield's journey captured on satellite and surveillance: Marg's Pontiac hitting Pete, Canfield grabbing the wheel to save the mission, shooting Prince Durkheim and his security, getting beaten by cops unflinchingly, brawling to escape the cop station, riddling Bulldog with bullets, and defeating Agent Ray with a headlock.

"Do they need any ballistics experts in your town?" Dr. Emmes asks. "Because if they'll take me, I know where to find a child needing rescue."

Turn to **93**.

84

Canfield stabs some of the lawyers to death in a rampage.

If Canfield has *all three* of Quick Draw, Ambush, and Rodeo, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to **94**.

The rest punch hard, but Canfield retrieves the stolen gun from a slain lawyer's pocket. Suddenly, a tall muscular man in boxers enters the gym followed by his film crew. He squints at the cocked revolver, baffled.

"Kill everyone here," Canfield commands, "and I'll let you live."

As in his whole life, Billy Bob Trenholm does as ordered.

If Canfield has 6 *Justice Points*, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 98.

Outside, Crissy arrives in a stolen car and picks up Canfield. On the drive through Maslow, the video buildings replay highlights of Canfield's journey captured on satellite and surveillance: Canfield pistol whipping Binet, clinging to the swerving van's roof, killing the trio of truck cops, dashing through the cop station to release prisoners, riddling Bulldog with bullets, and shooting Agent Ray's chin.

Turn to 91.

85

Canfield hopes to run through a dissipating mummy fireball to reach Captain Suit.

If Canfield has *all three* of Bullseye, Brawler, and Rodeo, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 96.

Canfield shoots another mummy, exploding it, climbs Captain Suit and rides him like a bull, then dismounts behind him to escape. The masses overwhelm and carry their now hated superhero to stuff him in the mountain of melting bodies.

If Canfield has 6 *Justice Points*, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 98.

A dented white Pontiac arrives, and Marg picks up Canfield. On the drive through Maslow, the video buildings replay highlights of Canfield's journey captured on satellite and surveillance: Marg's Pontiac hitting Pete, Canfield grabbing the wheel to save the mission, shooting Prince Durkheim's tire and flipping the armored limo, getting beaten by cops unflinchingly, brawling to escape the police station, shooting off Bulldog's thumb, and fighting hundreds single-handed atop a mall escalator.

Turn to 89.

86

Canfield races over and opens the driver side door. The bald man at the wheel looks so scared, his mustache nearly jumps off.

"Environmentalists!" Canfield shouts. "Scoot over; they want bloooooood!"

The driver springs over, and Canfield hops in. Having no driving experience, the ranger turns the key and stomps the pedals. As the truck jolts forward, flame showers every sidewalk, car, and building along the left. The mob follows on the unlit right lane. As the cab starts cooking its occupants, the worker jabs the air conditioning buttons.

Rocking the wheel, Canfield sideswipes every car in the way. The yelping worker slams about like a marble in a can in a hurricane.

Seeing a busy intersection ahead, Canfield leans out the window and shoots at car tires to halt traffic. This should create a small opening for the tanker. Even so, progress will take dozens of bone-jarring head-on collisions with the hope those smaller vehicles will flip and ping away. If Canfield has *all three* of Bullseye, Ambush, and Rodeo, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 90.

They picked a bad day to mess with Canfield. When the ranger and worker finally bail and scramble from the tanker, eight city blocks have become a conflagration.

The fleeing mob clogs every street, slowing the evacuation. Canfield slaps the petrified driver's back and yells "Yeehaw!" Safely afar, they watch the tanker become a pillar of red and black, spreading a sea of fire across Maslow.

If Canfield has 6 *Justice Points*, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 98.

Surprisingly, Crissy arrives in a stolen car and picks up Canfield. On the drive through Maslow, the video buildings replay highlights of Canfield's journey captured on satellite and surveillance: Canfield shooting Binet's beer can, clinging to the swerving van's roof, shooting the cop truck driver, dashing through the cop station to free prisoners, shooting off Bulldog's thumb, shooting the mall lights and causing the lawnmower massacre.

Turn to 91.

87

"Help, woman!" Canfield yells through a busted lip.

If Canfield has *all three* of Quick Draw, Brawler, and Good Looks, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 92.

Canfield blocks the punches, but tires out. Dr. Emmes bellyflops onto the ranger's face to cushion the blows. She gets punched repeatedly on the back until the drug finally wears off.

"I needed a massage anyway," she says, as the two wearily rise.

Canfield addresses the awestruck slaves. "You saw how we beat the bracelet. Y'all can do likewise by workin' together. Then, seek a place called Gunlaw."

Dr. Emmes drives Canfield to the city limits to free the ranger. If Canfield has 6 *Justice Points*, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to 98.

On the drive through Maslow, the video buildings replay highlights of Canfield's journey captured on satellite and surveillance: Marg's Pontiac nearly hitting Pete, Canfield shooting Prince Durkheim and his security, badmouthing the police chief, mowing down Sigmund's fashion gang, and defeating Agent Ray with a headlock. But they don't show Canfield sucker punching Leon on the underground journey.

"Do they need any ballistics experts in your town?" Dr. Emmes asks. "Because if they'll take me, I know where to find a child needing rescue."

Turn to 93.

88

"Gentlemen, we have a deal." Canfield flashes some teeth with an extra helping of gums. "Now why don't y'all stand abreast so I can wet those papers one after another. You do the flippin', I dot the i's."

They oblige, forming a line shoulder to shoulder. Their arms all lower, holding out clipboards like fans getting autographs. Canfield sees the blood pumping in all those neck vessels, a row of Adam's apples like houses along a street, pores excreting oil, neck fat waiting.

"Now boys, I *do* want that flatbed truck, ya hear? 'Cus this back of mine doesn't want any trouble."

Canfield winces, reaching back to rub a fake injury...and pulls a huge knife.

If Canfield has *all three* of Quick Draw, Ambush, and Good Looks, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to **94**.

Canfield slices open four necks, nicks a fifth carotid, and jabs out an eye. It happens in one arc. Lawyers fall and ruin their suits. The lucky ones run away, shielding their faces with clipboards.

"Here, let me dot those i's," Canfield says, crouching to pull heads back by the hair and stab eyeballs.

Canfield retrieves the gun from the back pocket of one blood-gargling lawyer, then wipes hair gel and vitreous humor off both hands.

A crash interrupts the insanity. Two muscular men in black T-shirts throw open the the gym door and flank it. A ripped seven foot bald man enters wearing only boxers and tattoos. His trainers slam the door and soon regret it when they see Canfield facing them with a blood-caked knife in one hand and a six-shooter in the other.

Billy Bob Trenholm looks baffled. "Whoa—they said no guns."

Canfield shoots the two trainers in their groins. They collapse, and Trenholm falls to his knees between them.

"Don't kill me Canfield! Please!" Big tears run down the fighter's sunken cheeks, irrigating old acne scars. "I'll kiss your boots. I'll lick your toes. I'll lick *between* your toes. I don't want to die in a c-c-crappy gym. I'll even lick under your toenails."

Things get indecipherable with all the sniffs and sobbing. Meanwhile, the remaining lawyers hang themselves with their ties off the basketball backboard, afraid of having their eyes carved out. Canfield sidesteps Trenholm and wades through a paparazzi and camera crew waiting outside. Nobody follows the ranger to the city limits; instead, the cameras flock around the weeping champion.

If Canfield has *6 Justice Points*, continue reading. Otherwise, turn to **98**.

Surprisingly, Crissy arrives in a stolen car and picks up Canfield. On the drive through Maslow, the video buildings replay highlights of Canfield's journey captured on satellite and surveillance: Canfield pistol whipping Binet, hollering on the swerving van's roof during the cop chase, killing the trio of truck cops, mowing down Sigmund's fashion gang, and shooting Agent Ray's chin. But they don't show Canfield shooting Leon under the table on the journey underground.

Turn to **91**.

89

"I quit smoking," Marg grumbles, "so they better not mess with us on the way to Gunlaw."

"I just wish we could find someone worth savin', Marg."

"We can. My Employer gave me a final mission: to tell you the location of the last healthy newborn in Maslow. We arrive in five minutes. Why else would I keep driving around this cesspool?"

Turn to **93**.

90

The tanker doesn't get far. Whether the tire shooting or steering went wrong, Canfield and the driver must bail. They flee in time to see the rig become a tower of red fire.

With the masses still up for a lynching, Canfield skirts *toward* the blaze. The few who can handle the agonizing heat get gunned down, leaving plenty of time to reload. Finally, the mob disperses in

the evacuation. Drenched in sweat, Canfield guzzles from the trusty canteen and leaves Maslow. Turn to **98**.

91

"I've always wanted to see a real horse," Crissy says, contemplating a life in Gunlaw.
 "I'll give you one to ride. But first, we go back and rescue any children."
 "My university plans on destroying one tonight at Dr. McCrae's Ethics lecture. Let's go!"
 And they do. Turn to **93**.

92

Canfield's left hand begins to lose against the right. Dr. Emmes fidgets, too scared to intervene. Finally, she jumps onto the rabid right arm. But she either delayed too long or interfered with a winnable fight. After the self-inflicted pommeling, all goes black for the ranger.

* * *

Canfield awakens on an elevator floor. Dr. Emmes had wrapped her lab coat around the attacking right hand to cushion the blows. She apparently drove, dragged, and dumped the ranger here.

"Well, you lived," says a thin business man. His clothes look slept in too. "That woman saved your life. You tried choking yourself."

"Where did she go?" Canfield asks, rising groggily.

"Once you passed out for good, she left. She felt awful about it too, but doctors have reputations to keep. I didn't catch her name, but she told me to stay and keep you safe."

"Thanks, partner." Canfield unwraps the lab coat and tends a bloody nose with it. Dr. Emmes also holstered the gun.

"No problem. Glad you made it. So...I guess you'll want to get off on main?" He presses a button. "After all, you can't live in the elevator."

But Canfield misses the stop to nurse bumps and check gear. The elevator goes back up and down for a while. People get on and off. They remain politely quiet despite seeing the whooped gunfighter. But the thin man never leaves. He sweats like an awful poker player.

"You live in the elevator, don't you?" Canfield asks. "Like a squatter."

"Yes," the man weeps through his hands. "No one knows...but that woman probably does." He sobs.

Too beat to search anymore, Canfield leaves the man, the elevator, the unknown building, and finally, the city.

Turn to **98**.

93

In a darkened auditorium, Professor McCrae begins his presentation. The puffy man presses some controls on a black lectern. From it, a glass dome rises before the audience of 200 students. Under the thick glass, a healthy baby boy reaches and kicks at nothing.

"Well perhaps we can get under way," McCrae says through his trim white beard. A mild chatter dies under his amplified voice.

"Here we have an infant donated to the faculty for this ethics demonstration. The question becomes: why should we force anyone to provide for this child who some consider a parasite? People today demand a high salary for parenting. Who should pay? The government already overspends on underdeveloped fetuses delivered via caesarean section. This full-term kid has potential to grow normally and receive the several hundred expensive rights that *we* all have.

"Furthermore, without an inheritance, this child will succumb to a massive radiation dose after the much predicted nuclear attacks—"

Dr. McCrae misses a beat as heavy footsteps echo closer. He glances around. His powerful bifocals can't see through darkness, though, so he continues.

"The—uh—nuclear fallout will slowly kill off anyone who hasn't yet bought a shelter, and with rising costs of—"

A figure in boots, somehow of leather and metal, steps into McCrae's periphery.

"—drug plans from hyperinflation, euthanasia seems like the most ethical choice. Now last year, a few protesters threatened to burn down the university—"

The footsteps end with a jingle of spurs.

"Ah—no questions just yet. Take a seat, please."

Canfield doesn't take a seat. McCrae dons his cross voice. "And who has the indecency to interrupt my lecture?"

"A pro-tester."

Silence. A dog would smell fear.

"Don't you watch the news, Doc?" Canfield circles over to view the child. Behind the controls, the ranger sways like a cobra over the glass dome.

"No one here has time between studies to watch anything." The professor steps firmly toward the controls.

Canfield puts a gun to McCrae's nostril. "Don't get congestion, Doc. Now open the glass."

"No one can." McCrae's body freezes, but his face becomes more animated than in 20 years of lectures. "My supervisor set the controls. All of those buttons will start the incineration."

The class murmurs. Betrayal never sounded so soft. Canfield lowers the gun, planting the muzzle in McCrae's navel.

Ignoring the threat, McCrae turns to the class. "I guess we get a free credit in Gunslinging," his diaphragm booms. "A Western elective, surely in the Humanities. Not so much in the social sciences, mind you. I might even recommend a language prerequisite."

The audience chuckles. As if he had a gun of his own, McCrae twirls to face Canfield in an academic shootout of words.

"So tell us, Luddite stranger, why would your people condemn this child to a life—and death—of radiation poisoning when the ethical answer lies right before you?"

Canfield scans the audience—all jowls and no cheekbones. Over the next hour, the ranger answers questions from the professor and students about Gunlaw. Most of the lecture ridicules Maslowian parasitism without revealing much about Gunlaw's better systems. Folk must *earn* that knowledge.

At the end, McCrae removes his glasses.

"I bluffed, Canfield. We all knew you would attend. Take the child. The button says 'open'. I think you can read that better than anyone here."

-Canfield presses the button (97).

-Canfield thinks of some other way of freeing the newborn (95).

94

Many lawyers back away in time. Losing surprise, Canfield starts killing them individually, stabbing one in the guts. Coffee comes out. The lawyers find a box of old bowling pins, and with them, clobber the ranger half to death.

But Canfield prevails, finding the revolver in a back pocket of one gutted lawyer. Seconds later, the school becomes even deader than before.

Canfield flees to the city limits, too beat to hunt for other prizes. Turn to 98.

95

Canfield aims the revolver at the dome's top, but hesitates. The curvature and thickness look like a ricochet nightmare. Heavy glass could fall on the newborn. Breaking the concentration and silence, a hawk-nosed woman approaches from the audience—the synthetic assassin. She holds up her shattered wrists.

"I came here to...heal. They teach healing here."

"No," demands Canfield. "They teach killin' here. And you'll get what the rest of these folk deserve, only quicker. Now try openin' that there glass, lucky."

The handless synth obediently steps around the lectern to gaze at the dome. Standing by Canfield, she tilts her head, fixating, calculating. In a spectacle too fast to perceive, she slams her face on the glass repeatedly. The blows, hitting nose-first, occur at woodpecker speed.

Students gasp. McCrae jostles back. Glass chips away like a maniac's ice sculpture in the making. The synth's face peels off, revealing (only to Canfield's scrutinous eyes) a titanium plate underneath. Her arc of motion changes from buff to silver. Applying subtle variations in force and angle, her beak decimates a perfect circle through the dome.

When the pecking stops and the synth erects herself, Canfield shoots off what remains of her head. The abomination drops, and the ranger holsters the iron for good.

Carefully, Canfield lifts the newborn out. The child expresses a sort of merriment that, out of everyone here, only McCrae and the ranger ever witnessed. The infant and his rescuer disappear through the fire exit.

Turn to 99.

96

Something goes wrong in the chaos. Canfield gets clobbered to the ground, and the hoard closes in for a lynching. Captain Suit crushes his own fans to death trying to stomp close enough for the glorious kill.

Somehow, Canfield crawls up and darts between Captain Suit's legs. Half limping, the ranger reaches the city outskirts beyond the alley. Nobody follows, for the battle moves to bringing down the now hated superhero. The mob succeeds. A look back reveals man-children making off with trophy pieces of the red armor and even redder body parts.

Turn to 98.

97

Canfield presses the button. The child incinerates, and everyone laughs.

But this only happens in Canfield's maddened thoughts. Really, the dome opens. The ranger carefully lifts the newborn out. The child expresses a sort of merriment that, out of everyone here, only McCrae and Canfield ever witnessed. The child and his rescuer disappear through the fire exit.

Turn to 99.

98

Exhausted, Canfield has escaped Maslow City but can never return. Tonight, the army moves in. The failed search for children only lasted this long due to the incompetence of citizenry and police. The journey home to Gunlaw will take every bit of desert survivalism: rainwater collection, shooting vermin for meat, and building tools from plants and bones...

...and the occasional look back for a mushroom cloud.

99

Outside Saint Jesus University, the refreshment of a cool summer night awaits. The ranger returns to the car, newborn held close. They don't encounter any trouble. With Canfield's new companion at the wheel, they drive out of Maslow City.

"Do you think they'll all die by nukes, Canfield?"

"They'll die without 'em," Canfield replies, holding the last Maslow newborn.

They eventually leave the highway, driving deep into the Rich Desert. The baby sits happily in the cowboy hat on Canfield's lap. The radio describes an army convoy pouring into Maslow to deal with mass hysteria.

At Canfield's direction, they stop at an unremarkable patch of rock. They had traveled so far that, without the right skills, no goul from the City of Lowdown Death could make it here. Even in the night, Canfield spots the familiar bones of one marauder who did.

The car engine falls silent. A moment later, a perfect circle, big enough for some horses to stand on, forms a depression under them. The car and its occupants sink ever so slowly with the hum of hidden machinery. They descend many storeys underground...deep into the town of Gunlaw.

100

As Canfield approaches, the senior perks up and points. "Ranger," he calls over the crowd, "I have the knowledge you seek!"

But suddenly, a little girl screams from somewhere in a distant apartment complex.

"Damn decisions," Canfield says. "Why can't my adventure end here?"

-Canfield goes to the old man (55).

-Canfield searches for the girl (57).