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A handgun is like a firecracker—unpredictable. Light a firecracker, toss it, and you never really know where it's going to land or the damage it's going to do. The same's true when you shoot a handgun.

An Uzi is even worse—it's like a string of firecrackers. Much more likely to hurt something, but still awkward and unruly.

A rifle is elegant. It's an extension of your will. Take aim, squeeze the trigger, make things happen. In the hands of an expert with stillness inside of him, there's nothing more deadly than a good rifle.

The first thug fell to my shot. I inched the gun to the side, then squeezed again. The second went down. The other two lowered their weapons, dodging.

Look. Squeeze. Three down. The last one was full-out running by the time I focused on him, and he managed to get behind cover. I hesitated, spine itching—waiting to feel the bullet from the sniper

hit my back. It didn't come. Hardman, it appeared, had realized that I was a good guy.

I stood up hesitantly. It wasn't the first time I'd killed, unfortunately. It didn't happen often, but once or twice, I'd had to protect myself in the understreets. This was different, but I didn't have time to think about it.

I shoved those emotions aside, and not knowing what else to do, I turned to the left and took off at a dead run down the street after Fortuity and the Reckoner woman. The Epic cursed and weaved toward a side street. The streets were all empty. Our explosions and gunfire had caused anyone nearby to clear out—this sort of thing wasn't uncommon in Newcago.

Megan dashed after Fortuity, and I was able to cut to the side and meet up with her. She glared at me as we barreled down the cross street, shoulder to shoulder, after the Epic.

"I told you to stay put, Knees!" she yelled.

"Good thing I ignored you! I just saved your life."

"That's why I haven't shot you. Get out of here."

I ignored her, aiming my rifle as I ran and taking a shot at the Epic. It went wide—it was too hard to run and fire at the same time. *He's fast!* I thought, annoyed.

"That's useless," the girl said. "You can't hit him."

"I can slow him down," I said, lowering the rifle, running past a pub with lights off and doors closed. A group of nervous patrons watched from one of the windows. "Dodging will throw him off balance."

"Not for long."

"We need to both fire at once," I said. "We can pin him between two bullets, so either way he dodges, he'll hit one of them. Checkmate."

"Are you insane?" she said, still running. "That would be near impossible."

She was right. "Well, let's use his weakness, then. I know you

know what it is—otherwise you'd never have gotten those handcuffs on him."

"It won't help," she said, dodging around a lamppost.

"It worked for you. Tell me what it is. I'll use it."

"Slontze," she cursed at me. "His danger sense is weakened if he's attracted to you. So unless he finds you a *whole* lot prettier than I do, it's *not* going to help."

Oh, I thought. Well, that was a problem.

"We need to—" Megan began, but then cut off, raising her finger to her ear as we ran. "No! I can do this! I don't *care* how close they are!"

They're trying to get her to pull out, I realized. It wouldn't be long before Enforcement arrived.

Ahead of us an unfortunate driver, probably on the way to the club district, pulled around the corner. The car screeched to a halt, and Fortuity cut in front of it, heading to the right down another alleyway that would lead him toward more populated streets.

I got an idea.

"Take this," I said, tossing my rifle to Megan. I whipped out my extra magazine and tossed it to her as well. "Fire at him. Slow him down."

"What?" Megan demanded. "Who are you to give me—"

"Do it!" I said, skidding to a stop beside the car. I pulled open the passenger door. "Out," I said to the woman behind the wheel.

The bystander got out and scurried away, leaving the keys in the ignition. In a world full of Epics with the legal right to take any vehicle they want, few people ask questions. Steelheart is brutal with thieves who aren't Epics, so most would never try what I'd just done.

Outside the car, Megan cursed, then raised my rifle expertly and took a shot. She had good aim, and Fortuity—just a little ways down the alleyway—stumbled to the right, his danger sense prompting him to dodge out of the way. As I'd hoped, it slowed him considerably.

I gunned the engine. It was a nice sporty coupe, and it looked practically new. Pity, that.

I tore off down the street. I'd told Megan that I'd been a cab-driver. Which was true; I'd tried it a few months back, right after graduating from the Factory. I hadn't mentioned, however, that the job had lasted only one day; I'd proven terrible at it.

You never know how much you'll like something until you try it out. It had been one of my father's famous sayings. The cab company hadn't expected me to "try out" driving for the first time in one of their cars. But how else was a guy like me supposed to get behind a wheel? I was an orphan who had been owned by the Factory for most of my life. My type didn't exactly make big money, and the understreets don't have room for cars anyway.

Regardless, driving had proven a tad more difficult than I'd expected it to be. I screeched around the corner of the dark street, the gas pedal pressed to the floor, barely in control. I knocked down a stop sign and a street sign on my way, but I made it down the block in a matter of heartbeats and screeched around another corner. I hit a few trash cans as I went up over the curb, but managed to retain control as I turned and pulled the car to a stop facing south.

I was pointing it directly down the alleyway. Fortuity was still stumbling through it toward me, tripping on refuse and boxes as Megan slowed him.

There was a pop, Fortuity dodged, and my windshield suddenly cracked—a bullet blasting through it about an inch from my head. My heart leaped. Megan was still shooting.

You know, David, I thought to myself. *You really need to start thinking your plans through a little more carefully.*

I slammed the pedal down, roaring into the alleyway. It was just barely wide enough for the car, and sparks flew up on the left side as I veered a hair too far in that direction, shearing off the side mirror.

The headlights shone on a figure in a red leisure suit, hands cuffed together, cape flapping behind him. He'd lost his hat while

running. His eyes were wide. There was nowhere for him to go in either direction.

Checkmate.

Or so I thought. As I got close, Fortuity leaped into the air and slammed his feet into the front of my windshield with superhuman dexterity.

That utterly shocked me. Fortuity wasn't supposed to have any enhanced physical abilities. Of course, for a man like him—who avoided danger so easily—there may not have been many opportunities to display such things. Either way, his feet hit my windshield in an expert maneuver only someone with super reflexes could have managed. He pushed off and jumped backward, the windshield shattering into pebbled glass, using the momentum of the car to throw himself into a backflip.

I slammed on the brakes and blinked as the glass sprayed my face. The car screeched to a halt in a shower of sparks. Fortuity landed his flip with poise.

I shook my head, dazed. *Yeah, super reflexes, a piece of my mind thought. I should have realized. Perfect complement to a precog portfolio.* Fortuity was wise to keep the secret. Many a powerful Epic had realized that hiding one or two abilities gave them an edge when another Epic tried to kill them.

Fortuity ran forward. I could see him glaring at me, lips curling up in a sneer. He was a monster—I'd documented over a hundred murders tied to him. And from the look in his eyes, he intended to add my name to that list.

He leaped into the air, toward the hood of the car.

Crack! Crack!

Fortuity's chest exploded.