Later, Schuller would wonder if he had already been high when he followed those kids into that alley. Either from shock or withdrawal, or some cocktail of the two, he couldn't remember much from earlier that morning—just the queasy slide from his tenement to the department and then out on patrol. A typical shift, forgotten even as it transpired. But then a breakfast hit had become pretty typical of late, hadn't it?

It should have been a neat bust. The pair of cutters were young and brown—obviously guilty, easy to bully. Should've been, anyway.

The thing about the guilty is they always run, and the thing about guilty animals is they always run fast. Schuller didn't like to run, which is why he drew his softly heaving pipa from its holster before he announced his presence to the delinquents. The gun's forelegs looped around his trigger finger in a sticky hug.

"Field trip's over," Schuller called as one of the kids glanced over his shoulder and saw the thick shadow they'd acquired, the pipa already aimed at their backs. Other than a rancid dumpster, the drizzly alley offered no cover. They knew better than to run, but for a couple of obvious middle-schoolers of the public persuasion, their pimply mugs threw off as much attitude as a baby-faced college freshman stopped by the Toe-Toe.

"We got a pass, shoat," the girl sneered up at him, her bracelets jangling as she crossed her arms over the front of her hoodie instead of producing the alleged permission slip.

"Uh huh," said Schuller, sliding his piece back in its slippery holster now that he was close enough to smack these thugs around if they tried to run. Or called him a pig again. A round or three off his pipa was better than these perps deserved anyway. "Let me guess, it's autographed by the dean of Convex Prep."

"Hunh," grunted the boy, puffing up his pigeon chest and staring the truant officer dead in the eye. Schuller knew respect was too much to expect from this new crop of dickwhiskers, but with ones as young as these he hoped for a little fear at the very goddamn least. Hell, he would've settled for defiant anger, but all he was getting from this half-pint was a smug little grin.

"You really bringing the class trash?" said the girl. "Think we Miller hoodrats, huh?"

“Nice try, but I’m guessing you runts got another year or two before you make it up to the majors,” said Schuller, though truth be told he’d feel better about these kids cheesing him so hard if it turned out they were skipping out on Miller High instead of Shinya Middle.

“We C.P. for real, bitch-hog, and we got a pass, so get to step,” said the female, sounding so haughty you’d almost think she was a legit rich girl.

“Real nice language for a private school chica,” said Schuller. Eying their designer-grown streetwear and then flicking the boy’s imitation bone necklace, he said, “I see they’ve changed the uniform since the last time I busted one of you uppercrusties.”

“Fuhh!” Instead of flinching away from Schuller’s attention the boy actually bowed up at him, shrugging off his scaly backpack like he was about to throw down at recess.

“Step back, shoat!” The girl squealed on her boyfriend’s behalf. “That chain’s worth more than your brokeass life!”

That fucking tore it right, there, and in turn Schuller tore the punk’s necklace off without a second thought. Tried to, anyway, but evidently it wasn’t a knockoff after all—instead of snapping in his fist the electroplated bone chain went taut and jerked the kid off his feet. He went sprawling in the foul, wet alley, and Schuller was just congratulating himself on coming off even harder than intended when the girl jumped right up in his grill and the boy started screaming his fool head off.

“Badge number!” the girl demanded. “Badge number, you brutalizin’ bitch-hog!”

“Police!” The boy wailed, sitting back on his knees and staring at his skinned palms. What an irony that this was the first and apparently only word the little beast knew how to enunciate. Schuller’s temples began to pound and his throat closed up tight at the ruckus these thugs were causing. “Police! Police!”

“Badge number!”

“Police!”

As if he was the menace to society here. Something hot and raw and righteous awoke in Schuller at their shrill baying.

“Badge number!”

“Police!”

“Already here,” said Schuller, his fury transmuting into elated satisfaction as he whipped out his pipa and put it to its intended use. The gun squelched twice in his hand and just like that the lippy hoodrat wasn’t in his face anymore. Even as her legs crumpled underneath her, he put another round right between her bulging, raccoon-painted eyes. Sticky wetness spattered his face, and he licked his lips as he turned to the boy still kneeling beside him in the alley.

“Police,” the punk whispered as Schuller lazily tickled back the bone hammer on his pipa. He didn’t look so hard now, nor so old… or so brown, as far at that went. Schuller shot him in the throat, and as the shitstain toppled over, he pulled the trigger again, and again, and would have put a fourth round into him if the pipa hadn’t unlocked its tiny hands, denying him a trigger.

Stupid safety mechanism—had it ever occurred to the dumb animal that there might be a very good reason why an officer would need to fire more than four shots in quick succession? Besides, it took Schuller that many hits to even get properly fucked up anymore, so the potentials for overdose were clearly exaggerated by the egghead Board of—

Or maybe not? Rather than lying peacefully in the alley both kids were having fits, shivering and shaking on the grimy pavement, eyes rolled back and foamy yellow spit bubbling out of their mouths and noses. Schuller had never seen a kid react like that. Then again, he’d only actually used his pipa on a handful of suspects, and never at point blank range—in every one of those incidents the cutters had been attempting to flee, and instead of connecting with naked flesh the narcotic rounds had to soak through flapping clothing, losing some of their juice in the process. He’d never even shot a kid all the way under before, just gave them the jelly-legs and frog-fog.

These two fuckers, though. A shiny black pipa egg was lodged in the dark flesh between the girl’s eyebrows like an ingrown hair, her sweat-glistening face contorted and twitching. The boy’s neck was already bruising from the impact. Wracked faces, lolling tongues, and kicking legs…

Shit, was that how he looked after he needed an extra hit to fall asleep at night?

Schuller was just wondering if he should call in somebody medical to have a look and make sure they weren’t going to OD when he noticed the folded up white paper falling out of the front pocket of the girl’s hoodie.

A pass. A real one, too—he’d only seen a handful in all his years on the force, the vast majority of those offered to an arresting officer blatant forgeries. Not just any pass, either, but one with a great big fucking gold seal and the scrawled signature of the Dean of the Convex Preparatory Academy of Lower Crampton.

Schuller began sweating harder than the kids. This didn't make any fucking sense. No way these fucking hoodrats in their boosted streetwear were—

The boy's overfull backpack had bloomed open on the wet street when he'd shrugged it off, the jacket of his school uniform spilling out. Definitely fucking Convex kids. No wonder they'd given him so much lip—even without a pass, most truant officers had more sense than to harass gilded cutters, lest their wealthy parents start squawking about child abuse and due process and an honest officer suddenly found himself out on his ass without a pension.

This was bad. He glanced to the mouth of the alley—now that the rain had stopped more people were passing by. It was only a matter of time before someone glanced over and saw a man hulking over two small bodies. A couple of innocent tween prep-schoolers brutalized by an overzealous truant officer. The timing couldn't be shittier, either, with the new DA looking to make an example after that muckraker's smear piece on the department made national headlines. Forget his job and pension, Schuller was headed to fucking jail as soon as these kids woke up and put the finger on the Toe-Toe who… who…

Schuller licked his lips again, his tongue tingling from the briny pipa residue that splashed him when he shot the girl at such close proximity. It tasted like bleary mornings. Like finding yourself halfway to work not really remembering what happened after you punched the clock the previous afternoon. And that was a big guy like him, one who'd acquired something of a tolerance for his sidearm's potent rounds. Young, developing brains like these would be lucky if they remembered how to wipe their asses once they came back from their trip out past the lily pads.

Still, it never hurt to be careful. Willing his hands to stop shaking, Schuller started to coax the pipa back into an armed position. The protocols required a gentle touch, so the weapon could recognize its officer was relaxed and didn't intend to use it in anger. He must have been emanating rage, because despite his strokes it refused to form a trigger for him, blinking its useless opaque eyes as he stifled the urge to crush the delicate instrument in his fist.

Deep breaths, Officer Schuller. This wasn't some fucking inanimate object, it was a pipa. His pipa. The closest thing he had to a partner. The closest thing anyone of his tax bracket could come to a pet. The whole reason they'd bred the ugly fucking things was to instill their owners with empathy for their fellow creatures, to prevent them from treating their guns as simple tools that could be thoughtlessly used. People were just about the only living things still born outside of an assembly line lab, and in this increasingly icy, dead world, it was easy to forget the warm sanctity of life. And so in their infinite wisdom the biotech powers that be had granted them what, cute and fuzzy machinery? Purring sidearms you could cuddle after a long, hard shift? Of course not—pipas were as cold-blooded as their owners had to be, if they wanted to make it to

retirement.

“There, there,” Schuller murmured to his pipa, the veiny grip pulsing in his palm as he dipped the fingers of his free hand into its slimy holster, smearing it with hydrating ichor. The weapon croaked its appreciation. He made sure to work the goo into the freshly emptied divots in its back, and applied a far lighter touch to the live pockets that were still bulging with narcotic eggs. His little shootout with these thugs had used up half his ammunition. He’d have to feed it as soon as he got back to his desk to make sure it laid new rounds before their next shift.

Soothed out of safety lock, the pipa obligingly stretched out its forelegs and then looped them together to form the trigger.

“Atta girl,” Schuller cooed, cocking back the warm hammer. Before he put an extra round in each kid’s skull to make sure they were extra forgetful when they awoke in the dumpster, he rolled back the sleeves of his mackintosh and suit jacket to expose his own pale wrist. Pressing the warm cloaca of his gun to the busy hub of cardiovascular circuitry, he pulled the trigger. The familiar sting hurt so good he shot himself a second time, and then—

Horked another spray of bloody vomit into the toilet bowl, so dazed and disoriented he almost slipped in headfirst after the final spasm. Bright red gore bobbed in the greasy water, making him gag anew. Schuller moaned, wept, tried to evict the hallucination from his blurry eyes. It clung on, persistent as a squatter on the cusp of legal recognition. Schuller slipped back onto his knees, weak and feverish. His heart careened against the inside of his chest, a prisoner bashing against the bars of its cell.

What the fuck had happened? What the fuck had he done? Last he remembered he was about to put an insurance shot in each thug and then toss them in the dumpster to sleep off the pipa ride, and now here he was puking up red in his apartment. Had he fucking eaten them? Or had his escalating pipa abuse liquefied his insides; was he puking up his own guts? He didn’t know which possibility was worse.

Dragging his shaking hand across his sick-slick mouth, he held it up in the faint glow of his bathroom bottle bulbs but just saw translucent drool. Huh. Forcing himself to look back in the bowl he saw it was just as disgusting as he’d thought, but then a drop of blood appeared on the yellow rim of the toilet. Relief surged through him like the first hit of the day.

He’d puked so hard he’d given himself a fucking nosebleed. That was all. It wasn’t chewed up delinquents or his own melted stomach in the toilet, just a lot of nose blood and… bits of half-digested pupusa, looked like. Good. He may have blacked out back in the alley but he’d apparently kept his head long enough to hit up Dalia’s. Everyone on the force knew the café had a clock on the wall that ran a dependable hour slow, for

those lunch breaks when you needed an alibi to go with your mild food poisoning.

His alarm went off. Staggering upright and swaying to the sink, Schuller winced at his haggard reflection. The sluggish torrent of blood still oozed out of one crusty nostril, webbing in his mustache. How the fuck was it morning already? He'd blacked out before, sure, but never for so long, and never from such a small dose.

Had he already been high when he followed the kids into the alley? Had shooting them from so close caused some backsplash from the pipa's gel-coated eggs? Or had he gotten more of the narcotic residue on his hands when he'd moved the snoozing scumbags into the dumpster? All three, maybe… Assuming he had even moved the kids. What if he'd just doped himself up and wandered off to stuff pupusas in his numb face, leaving them right there in the alley where anyone could find them?

Well, that wouldn't be such a tragedy, either—no chance of them being crushed in a compactor if they didn't wake up before sanitation emptied the dumpsters. However he'd handled it, Schuller must've done a decent enough job 'cause he'd made it through another day and night. Waking up to your own bloody vomit and an aching skull wasn't the best morning, but it sure beat waking up in a jail cell. Or a dumpster, far as that went.

He smiled to himself as he washed his face, then plugged his nose with toilet paper, and staggered out of the bathroom to turn off his alarm. He was already late as shit so it must've been going for a while. Good thing he'd slept in his suit, since he didn't even have time to change if he was going to make it to the department in time for the morning briefing. Considering what a bad boy he'd been yesterday, it wouldn't do to miss another mandatory conference.

Of course, one always had to make time for breakfast, and Schuller reached for his pipa… only to find his amphibious holster empty.

The terrarium. His first week on the force, Schuller had religiously transferred the pipa to its enclosure every evening when he got home. After that, he had never used it again since the pipa's holster kept it moist enough, and what kind of bleeding heart really thought a gun needed a "safe and stable environment?" As he waded through the squalor of his sour-smelling apartment to the terrarium, he told himself that's where it was, that when he'd blacked out his froggy head forgot he didn't use it anymore. It would be dumbly sitting there in its gravel, blinking its blind eyes, and—

Empty. Not that the pipa would've been happy about being dumped in there, anyway, with only a brown ring of crust to mark the former waterline in the dusty glass case.

Schuller patted his empty holster again, willing his sidearm to reappear. It didn't cooperate.

He stumbled into the bathroom, telling himself it must have fallen out on the floor and crawled back behind the toilet. It needed water, and a brown puddle often formed where—

Gone. Schuller tried not to cry. He should've sobered up by now but still felt completely fucking frogged out, unable to think in a straight line. What happened after he shot up in the alley? What?

Had he dropped his gun when he hoisted the kids into the dumpster? Or left it in a booth at the papusa joint? Fucking hell, he couldn't remember the last sixteen hours so the fucking thing could be anywhere. The worst-case scenarios slouched against the back of his aching skull like hardened perps in a police line-up.

He needed to check the alley, obviously. It was risky as hell—if those kids had woken up and remembered enough of the details to report it, the adult authorities could be investigating the scene right now. Or even worse, what if he'd given those brats a fatal dose, sanitation had found their corpses in the dumpster at dawn, and the whole place was staked out as they waited for the killer to return to the scene to retrieve his croaking murder weapon?

He couldn't go back. Too fucking chancy. No, he'd have to play it cool, report the weapon stolen… but that asshole DA was watching the department like a drone. A missing pipa would result in an immediate inquiry, an inquiry his frazzled ass was in no state to handle. No, he had to get his shit together first. Once he calmed down enough to come up with a plausible story, he would report the theft and pray they didn't just shitcan him on the spot for losing a piece of equipment worth more than his annual salary.

That was it. Calm down. Think straight. Act straight. Above all, be consistent.

Yet as he hustled to work through the blinding sunlight, Schuller found it harder and harder to think clearly, his thoughts as fractured as his memories.

For a fleeting, joyous moment Schuller thought it could be stashed in the back recesses of his desk drawer at the department, but the object he felt turned out to just be his stapler. Heads turned when he furiously smashed the thing on the floor. He went to lunch.

No one turned anything in at Dalia's, the pupusa shop proprietor laughing at the suggestion an establishment of its reputation might have a "Lost and Found" bin. Schuller came within three blocks of the alley before hyperventilating so badly he had to take a knee on a stoop. The sun was trying to kill him.

The kids had found it, he decided. That was the worst thing that could have happened, so it must be true. That was the law of his luck.

Even if he'd accidentally murdered a couple of rich kids and left his sidearm at the scene for forensics to immediately finger him with, that would be preferable. He could still look himself in the eye in the prison mirror if he went down for getting excessive on a couple of smart-mouthed thugs. He could be a martyr for the department.

But fuck up so bad a couple of middle-schoolers made off with his pipa and he'd be left begging internal affairs to let him keep a desk job long enough to pay back the enormous debt he owed on it. They'd never let him hold another pipa, and the thought of going through life without its soothing balm made him want to take a nosedive off the roof of Convex Prep. Those fucking kids had woken up hungover in a dumpster, and then grinned to each other as they found his pipa crouched down in a filthy mud puddle.

He tormented himself with visions of them stomping the poor creature underfoot. When that wasn't bad enough, he pictured them taking it back to their posh private school, sneaking it into a lab during recess to vivisect the delicate weapon. He shuddered as he imagined them peeling back its bumpy skin to expose its skeletal gears, oohing and awing as they tortured it to death.

Bad as that made him feel, however, he finally settled on the evilest scenario of all, one that filled him with queasy dread. Crawling out of the dumpster, the girl discovered the pipa croaking in an oily pool. Her sharp eyes grew gentle, her grating voice softening to an affectionate purr. She rescued it from the foul pond, her brutish paramour likewise tamed by the spell of its charming helplessness. Holding it not by the spinal pistol grip but cupping its underside like an animal, she planted her glossy lips on its slimy back.

She took it home.

Bought it a giant terrarium.

Gave it a name.

Schuller threw up again.

Schuller tortured himself with the fantasy all through the sweltering day. That night his fevered dreams were filled with the happy songs of his pipa trilling through a rich girl's bedroom. The next day was hotter still, and his visions of his pipa's new life grew yet more ornate, more vivid. It was unnatural, disgusting, but he couldn't help himself.

He was just picturing her investing in real live insects to hand feed the rescued pipa

when he unlocked the door of his apartment and noticed his rain jacket lying discarded in one corner. A gyre turned in his head, like a live pipa egg slipping from its back pouch into the chamber. It had been raining that fateful day, but it had been sunny ever since.

He only checked the pockets to confirm what he already knew, that his pipa was lost forever, a pampered pet in some uptown penthouse, where—

It was here, yet it looked so much smaller in death. Its desiccated forelegs were reaching into the air, like a supplicant who had frozen to death even as he stretched upward for salvation. After being carelessly zipped into the pocket of the rain jacket and then forgotten, the pipa must have spent the last two days trying to climb free only to eventually dry out and die. All this time he thought it was being fawned over by that rich little bitch it had been here, waiting for him to come home.

It hit him hard as a slug straight to the jugular, his eyes welling with tears as he cradled the broken animal in his shaking hands: relief.