The Depths

The hum of the lights above me never stops. It's this constant, droning buzz that sounds like a headache whispering against the inside of my skull — low, uneven, impossible to tune out. Every few seconds, the old bulb flickers, spilling light that fades and returns like it's gasping for life. The room itself feels alive in a way it shouldn't. The walls sweat. The air clings. It smells like copper and concrete and skin that's been pushed too far. I can taste the iron in it when I breathe through my mouth.

I'm sitting on a dented metal bench, elbows pressed into my knees, staring down at the bucket between my boots. The water's pink, clouded with streaks of red that twist and curl with every breath I take. My hands are raw — skin split along the knuckles, small cuts forming constellations across my fingers. I can still feel the tape glued to my wrists, stiff and sticky with blood. The fight's over, but my body doesn't know that yet. My pulse is steady, unhurried, beating in time with the dripping faucet in the corner. Each drop hits the basin like a second passing — patient, deliberate, endless.

The noise from above has started to fade. The crowd, the gamblers, the shouting — all of it muffled now, like the whole world's gone underwater. What's left are the sounds that never leave: a dull hum, a distant door slamming, the faint scrape of boots dragging through the hall outside. Someone laughs, but it dies fast, swallowed by the walls. There's a rhythm to this place, a strange kind of music made of exhaustion and violence. I used to think I didn't belong in it. I used to think I was better than this.

Now I'm not so sure.

I lean forward, my fingers trembling as I dip my hands into the bucket again. The water bites at the open cuts, stinging sharp enough to make me hiss. I leave them there anyway. The pain feels clean — honest. I swirl my hands, watching the color darken until I can't see the bottom anymore. The reflection that stares back at me in that blood-water isn't one I recognize. He looks too calm. Too centered. His eyes don't look tired; they look… quiet. Like the storm inside him finally found a place to rest.

I drag a towel across my face, feeling the grit and salt and blood pull against my skin. The towel's already ruined, streaked brown and red from fights that weren't worth remembering. My cheekbone stings where a knuckle landed earlier. My lip's split. My jaw's sore. But it all feels distant — background noise to the silence that's finally taken root inside me.

The mirror on the far wall is cracked straight down the middle. I lift my head, meet my reflection. The flicker of the bulb above keeps breaking the image apart — half shadow, half man. I stare at myself for a long moment before I hear footsteps at the door.

“Hell of a fight.” The voice pulls me out of the silence. I don’t look up. I don’t need to. It’s Calvin. Always the same — leather jacket, cigarette smoke clinging to him like guilt, voice thick from too many nights down here. He walks in slow, easy, a grin tucked under his beard. He’s holding an envelope in his hand, thick enough to bend.

He tosses it onto the bench beside me, and it lands with a wet thud against the towel. “You’re the draw now,” he says. “Crowd upstairs was chanting your name before you even showed your face. Lawler. Law-less. Whatever the hell they’re calling you tonight. You’ve got their attention.”

I finally lift my eyes. My voice sounds steadier than I expect. “You don’t care what they call me.” Calvin smirks, the corner of his mouth twitching like he’s biting back a laugh. “Names don’t sell fights. Pain does.”

He lingers in the doorway for a second, waiting for something — gratitude, anger, maybe just proof I’m still human. He doesn’t get it. He turns halfway, hand braced against the frame. “Next one’s in two nights. You up for it?” He already knows the answer.

When he leaves, the silence comes back thicker than before. The smell of smoke and sweat and money lingers behind him, mixing into the air like part of the building itself. I reach out, drag the envelope toward me, and weigh it in my hand. It’s heavy — not just with cash, but with everything that comes with it. A piece of my soul traded for a crowd’s attention. I set it back down.

I close my eyes for a moment, listening to my heartbeat. It doesn’t race. It doesn’t tremble. It just exists — steady and slow. That’s how I know I’m not chasing the adrenaline anymore. I’m chasing something else. The quiet that comes after the violence. The second between a hit landing and the crowd roaring. That’s the only place I feel peace anymore — in the space between chaos and applause.

When I stand, the bench creaks under my weight. My knees pop, my back protests, and the blood that’s dried across my chest cracks with the movement. I grab my jacket from the hook by the door, sling it over my shoulder, and take one last look at the mirror. The man staring back doesn’t look like me — not the version I used to know. He looks harder. Still. Alive in a way I don’t remember being.

“You wanted to know who you were,” I say under my breath, eyes locked on my reflection. “Now you do.” I push open the door and step into the narrow hallway. The light buzzes overhead, flickering as I walk beneath it. The walls are damp, the floor slick with something I don’t want to name. A faint draft carries the scent of rain through a vent at the far end. I follow it, boots echoing with every step.

When I reach the door to the outside, I pause — hand on the rusted handle, listening to the city breathing somewhere above me. It's quiet up there. Sleeping. Pretending everything's fine. But down here, in the dark, in the places people don't talk about, I finally stopped pretending too.

I push the door open and step into the night.

The rain hits me before I even clear the doorway. It's not the kind that falls gentle — it's sharp, stinging, driven sideways by the wind. The kind that feels like it's trying to wash something off you whether you want it gone or not. The city around me is half asleep, half alive. Neon signs blink in the distance, their reflections spilling across puddles that stretch along the cracked pavement. Somewhere a siren wails, distant but steady — a reminder that the world keeps breaking in its own rhythm.

I pull my jacket tighter around me, not to stay dry, but to feel the weight of something against my chest. The Underground's door slams shut behind me, cutting off the hum, the voices, the heat of sweat and steel. Out here, everything feels colder. Cleaner. My boots splash through puddles as I walk, the sound hollow against the empty street.

Every step feels heavier than the last. It's like the adrenaline refuses to let go, but the body's already trying to catch up. My hands are shaking again — not from fear, not from fatigue, just from the aftermath. The body remembers every hit long after the mind has moved on. My knuckles throb with each heartbeat, the skin around them tight, raw. I look down and see small dots of blood seeping through the tape, spreading slow, soaking into the rainwater dripping from my fingertips.

There's a strange peace in it. In the rhythm of rain meeting skin. In the way the cold numbs what's left of the pain. I pass a flickering streetlight, and for a second, my reflection stares back at me from the puddle beneath it — distorted, doubled, pulled apart by ripples. The face looking back doesn't seem angry anymore. It doesn't even seem tired. It just… exists.

I don't know how long I walk before I stop. The rain hasn't let up, and I don't bother looking for shelter. I tilt my head back and let it hit my face, running down my jaw, over the cut on my cheek. It stings, but I welcome it. It feels earned. I close my eyes, breathing slow, listening to the sound of the city breathing around me — cars in the distance, wind cutting through the alleys, a lone train whistle somewhere far off.

There was a time I would've called Sarah by now. Just to hear her voice. Just to remind myself that there was a world outside all of this — one that didn't reek of blood and cheap whiskey and broken teeth. But those days are gone. The silence between us has stretched too far to cross with a phone call. And maybe that's for the best. Maybe she's safer not knowing this part of me.

I keep walking. The rain gets heavier. The street ahead bends around a corner where an old neon sign buzzes faintly over a diner that never seems to close. The kind of place that doesn't ask questions — they just serve coffee and let the world pass by outside. I push the door open, the bell overhead letting out a tired chime.

Inside, the air smells like burnt coffee and wet floor cleaner. A few scattered customers sit in booths, most of them lost in their own worlds. The waitress behind the counter gives me a look — not judgmental, just curious — then goes back to refilling a pot. I slide into a booth near the window, the vinyl seat creaking beneath me. My reflection stares back from the glass, half-hidden behind the rain sliding down the outside.

For a moment, I just sit there, hands on the table, fingers tracing the cracks in the surface. The fluorescent lights overhead hum, softer than the ones downstairs but still constant, still alive. I can feel the weight of everything I've done sitting in my chest — every punch thrown, every scream swallowed, every night I told myself this was the last one.

The waitress comes over, pad in hand. "Coffee?" she asks.

I nod. "Black."

She scribbles it down even though she didn't need to. Habit, maybe. She walks away, and I watch her go, then turn my gaze back to the window. The street outside glows in streaks of red and blue, distorted by the rain. I can't tell if it's a passing cop car or just the way the light plays tricks when you've been awake too long.

When the coffee hits the table, the cup's chipped. The steam rises fast, curling toward the light. I wrap my hands around it, letting the heat soak into my skin. The first sip burns my tongue, bitter and harsh. It's terrible. But it's real.

I stare into the cup, the surface trembling slightly in my hands. I think about the fight again — the sound of knuckles breaking against flesh, the way the crowd held its breath when I went for the final strike. It should bother me, how much I liked it. But it doesn't. It makes sense now. For the first time in years, it makes sense. Up there, in the spotlight, I was performing. Down there, I was alive.

I finish the cup and leave a few bills on the table. The bell above the diner door gives a faint, defeated jingle as I step into the storm. It's like even the metal's tired of the sound. The warmth from inside disappears in an instant, replaced by the sharp bite of rain that feels colder than it should for this time of year. It's coming down harder now—each drop a tiny needle that cuts through the streetlight haze and sinks into my jacket. The glow of the diner sign flickers behind me, buzzing weakly in red and blue, reflecting across the slick asphalt like a heartbeat losing rhythm.

I keep my head down as I cut across the empty parking lot and into the narrow alley that runs between the diner and an old laundromat that's been closed for months. The rain collects in silver threads from the roof, dripping steadily through the rusted metal of a bent gutter. The air smells like wet concrete, oil, and rot. Every few seconds, thunder rolls in the distance, low and uneven, shaking the puddles near my boots.

The alley's darker than I remember—half the bulbs overhead are burned out, the rest flickering in a way that makes everything seem alive when it isn't. Trash bags slouch against the brick walls, their shadows stretching long and strange with every flash of light. A cat darts out from under a dumpster when I pass, the metallic scrape of its claws echoing for longer than it should.

My hood's soaked through already. Water runs down my neck, into my collar, soaking the gray shirt beneath. I don't care. The rain's almost a comfort—it hides the sweat, the blood, the smell of what I left behind. Every drop feels like penance, though I can't decide for what. The alley bends left, and I follow it, boots splashing through puddles deep enough to mirror the faint glow from the diner sign.

I stop under a fire escape that leans against the wall like it's about to collapse. The metal's slick with rust and rain, creaking with every gust of wind. I lean against the cold brick, breath heavy, and glance down at my hands. My knuckles are raw—split open in three places, small rivers of diluted red tracing over my skin before washing away into the puddles below. The sting is sharp, steady. It keeps me grounded.

There's a small pool of water just in front of me, its surface trembling with every drop that hits. I crouch beside it, the water distorting my reflection until it looks like someone else staring back—someone harder, someone I don't recognize but can't look away from. The rain ripples through it again, bending my features into something monstrous, then smoothing them out, as if the storm can't decide who I'm supposed to be.

I whisper to myself without meaning to. "You wanted this."

The words come out low, almost lost in the rain. Maybe it's a confession. Maybe it's a reminder. Down there, in the Underground, there's no pretending. No lights, no audience, no rules—just pain, breathing, and survival. The world makes sense in that kind of violence. It's the only place I've found lately where I don't feel like I'm drowning.

Up here, everything's different. Cleaner on the surface. Filthy underneath. Everyone wears a mask, and the worst part is they forget they're even wearing it. But down there? You see the truth in every punch thrown, every drop of blood that hits the floor. There's no room for lies when someone's trying to break you open.

I stare at my reflection again. The man in the water looks calm. Too calm. The kind of calm that comes right before something snaps. I press my hand against the brick beside me, feeling the rough surface dig into my palm. My jaw tightens until my teeth hurt.

A car passes by at the far end of the alley, tires hissing over the wet road. For a second, the headlights cut through the darkness, lighting everything up in white. The puddle flashes like a mirror, and in that brief second, my reflection vanishes completely. Just black water, swallowing the light whole. Then the car's gone, and the darkness rushes back in.

I straighten slowly, the rain drumming steady against my shoulders. My breath fogs in the cold air. I look down the alley, where the light from the street barely reaches, and see something half buried in the water—a flyer plastered to the wall, half torn and soaked through. The words are barely legible, but I catch enough of them to know what it says: **UNDERGROUND FIGHTS – ONE NIGHT ONLY – NO RULES.**

The ink's running, the edges curling, but it feels like it's looking right at me. Calling me back.

I tear it from the wall, the paper ripping wet in my hands. I fold it once, then again, before sliding it into my jacket pocket. I can feel it there, heavy despite the paper being thin.

The rain keeps falling, relentless. The sound fills the space between thought and breath.

I take one last look at the puddle. The reflection's gone now. Just water and darkness and me standing over it. Maybe that's all that's left to see.

I pull my hood tighter and step out of the alley. The city's still awake, but it feels like I'm the only one left alive in it. The storm follows, and I don't look back.

The rain finally eased sometime before dawn. I don't remember when—it all blends together. Streets, shadows, and silence bleeding into one another until the city itself feels like it's breathing with me, heavy and exhausted. By the time I make it back to my apartment, the sky's a dull gray bruise bleeding into the horizon. The hallway smells like wet carpet and dust, that old, stale scent of somewhere forgotten. My boots leave faint prints down the corridor, ghosted impressions that fade faster than I can make them.

Inside, the air is thick and unmoved. I kick the door shut behind me and stand there for a moment, listening to the hum of the refrigerator, the slow tick of the wall clock—everything that pretends life is normal. My jacket hits the chair by the door with a wet slap, and the folded flyer slips from the pocket, landing on the floor. The paper's warped, ink bled into itself, but the words are still there: **NO RULES.**

I crouch and run my fingers across it. The paper's cold, soft around the edges. That phrase sinks in deeper this time, burrowing under my skin like a promise I didn't mean to make. Maybe that's

what I've been chasing all along—somewhere I don't have to follow the script. Somewhere I can stop pretending.

The coffee pot hums faintly on the counter, a mechanical heartbeat in an empty room. I pour a cup, the smell burnt and bitter, and carry it to the couch. Outside the window, the city stirs to life. Headlights streak through puddles. Horns echo down the street. People move, work, exist. They don't know what happened last night. They don't know what's still echoing in my head.

I take a slow sip. The heat stings my tongue, grounding me in a way nothing else can. My hands ache—split knuckles, bruised skin—but the pain feels clean. Honest. It's the only thing that still feels real. The phone on the table buzzes once, the screen lighting up with a name I don't bother reading. I just watch it fade out, the glow dying against the wall.

I lean back and close my eyes. The coffee cools in my hand, the storm still rolling somewhere deep inside my chest. The flyer lies on the floor by my boots, water-stained and defiant. The words are smeared but not gone. Neither am I.

Next week's already waiting. Another fight. Another release. Another chance to let the violence speak for me. And as the first light of morning pushes weakly through the blinds, I realize I don't know if I'm fighting the darkness anymore—or if I've started feeding it.