



Rifle

Kyle Curlew

The bullet slid into the rifle with a solid click. It was an old rifle. A relic from an ancient world of comforts and civilization, its brand name long worn off the side of the barrel. Now replaced with various carved symbols: A skull, a fang, and a few other indecipherable scratches. And a name, the Peon, was crudely carved into the side of the rifle. The man holding the gun pulled the pump on the underside and clicked it back, a few rust shavings fluttered like oxidized snow to the ground, he felt the familiar feeling of the bullet falling into place. The Peon focused on a makeshift scope, the rifle poised at a large lion rummaging through some debris on the side of the decrepit road. A road overrun with weeds and long grass growing through its many nooks and cracks

The ancient ruins are dangerous, they said. The Peon couldn't remember who they were, nothing but an ethereal voice somewhere in his head. The crumbling spirals that made up the ruins at one time were called metropolises. He could not remember how he knew that, but he knew it nonetheless. They were full of predators and bandits, some of the worst sort. The kind that hung heads around their territory: a warning for the weary, for the curious, for the dangerous. They were also trophies – broadcasting their hatred and their loss of humanity. Those heads would hang from crude barbed wire and chains and bits of debris and chicken wire. They would hang from the tall buildings, covered in broken glass and vines and rust and crud. Lots of blood, most of it coagulated. Some called it an urban playground, not many though. Most of them were foolish scavengers, slinking around the shadows looking for artifacts to trade in the markets. Did I think that? Or hear that? The Peon didn't relish the thought of bloody playgrounds. You don't want to know what they do to the bodies; a voice spoke in the Peon's head. A voice from a distant place, far, far away. He could feel the rifle shaking in his arms, his teeth began to chatter. Another voice was coming in; it spoke over the first one, much louder, and less distant. Get out of here! It cried, what have you done? Another one. You monster! A gun shot.





Paper Mill Press

The lion in all its golden magnificence dropped into the tall grass, twitching. The mother lion and the cubs scurried off into one of the buildings frightened by the crack of igniting gunpowder echoing through the concrete ruin. The Peon stood up, shaking the voices and haunting sardonic images from his head. They were getting worse, he thought. With the rifle slung over his shoulder, the Peon slowly approached the twitching body of the lion. Finally something to eat, something living and breathing and bleeding. He smashed the butt of the rifle into the lion's skull, it made a sickening noise – a wet Thunk – but it put the poor beast out of its misery.

The glistening of something on the ground caught his eyes: a rear view mirror with the glass still intact, it was caked in rust but still usable. A rare artefact in these days. He knew he didn't have much time – vultures were coming. They would have heard the gun shot ring across the ruins like a dinner bell. They would know where to go. It was their hunting ground. The Peon reached down, his blood caked hands wrapped around the frame of the rear view mirror. His face was as overgrown and beat up as the road he was standing on.

Hold him down, a voice said and the Peon was slammed into a table and strapped down with thick strips of leather, faces appeared over him. He felt like he should recognize them, but didn't. Couldn't.

Gentle. Another voice said, between sobs. Be Gentle.

Quickly, get the drugs – he has been through enough pain, the first voice said once again.

What have they done to them? There was a clatter and a smash, as if someone dropped a glass.

They've flayed him. There were more sobs.

The damned raiders! It was a woman's voice. There was the sound of clattering as someone ran from the room, followed by an echo: The damned raiders!

Then the Peon was somewhere else. The sun was shining, blood, fresh blood all over his hands. The Peon looked down to his feet to the pile of beaten flesh and a large stone. The body was far beyond recognition. His hands began to shake. He turned his heels and ran through the fields of tall grass away from the ruined

spires. E
would b

open scr
tears. H
missing :
leave; he
so loudly
the lion,
He wrap
ly. Vult
voice wh

a table.
focus. F
prick on
bounds i
doctor tl
hind hin
why. He
made no

as the Pe
the cart i
heap of t
sound of
take the
wouldn't
as they c
masters c
piece. A
monstro

so famili

him in tl
ing in th
collided





o the
. off into
powder
king
ey were
ulder,
Finally
ing.
e a
ut of its
his eyes:
rust but
t have
l the
d know
d down,
r view
ie was
nmed
faces ap-
t didn't.
le.
gh pain,
and a
e was
wed by
ining,
vn to
dy was
red his
ruined

spires. Engines revved up behind him. They would kill him. They would break him first. The vultures were coming.

He stared into the mirror at his face; his mouth was gaping open screaming. When the Peon realized this he stopped. No tears. He was overcome by nostalgia, the painful sort, like he was missing something and he had no idea what. He knew he had to leave; he dropped the rear view mirror into the grass. It clattered so loudly he thought he heard an echo. He stumbled his way to the lion, dragging his injured leg across the ground behind him. He wrapped his arms around it. "Quickly". He muttered, quickly. Vultures are hungry. Vultures are ruthless. Quickly, a woman's voice whispered, quickly, you have no time.

He was back in that place. He was awake; he was bound to a table. Voices, so many voices clouded the Peon's head he couldn't focus. He probed around with his hands blindly until he felt a prick on his finger, it was a scalpel; he shaved away at the leather bounds until they snapped. His first victim, the doctor, the good doctor that gave birth to him so many years ago. He snuck up behind him and carved a new smile across his neck. He didn't know why. He just did. The voices went silent. The gurgling doctor made no sense.

The lion's limp body nearly knocked over the shopping cart as the Peon shoved it in with the last of his strength. He pushed the cart inside a building and collapsed on the ground in a smelly heap of torn clothes, sweat and blood. He could hear the distant sound of engines; vultures were coming. They were coming to take the lion. They were coming to finish what they started. They wouldn't kill him right away, he knew; they would make it as slow as they could. When they lost their humanity the vultures became masters of torture. To them it was an art form. A living masterpiece. A living sculpture: blood, screams, and flailing. They were monstrous – the stuff of children's nightmares.

How could you? She cried, how could you? The voice was so familiar.

Another voice cried, kill him. Kill the fucker. A rock hit him in the jaw, it was large, and he could taste blood. He was lying in the grass, the sun shining over the dirt and rocks his face just collided with.





Paper Mill Press

Fish B

Amanda

Leave him alone. Another voice called out – do you know what they did to them? Do you know what he went through? What he witnessed in the ruins?

Fine. Let's give him back to the Vultures. The Peon sobbed at this, he would have protested, but the vultures took his tongue. He would rather die than go back to that place.

The Peon crawled through the building, leaving the lion in the shopping cart. He had a trail of blood left behind – the vultures would have him soon. He fumbled for his last bullet and slipped it into the old rifle.

He was no longer in the ruins, but in a barren field of grass and rock. Not so far in the distance he could see the ruins and their decrepit spires through a light haze of fog and dust. Here. A voice said. Drop him here. His wrists were chained up loosely. He can go back with his own damn kind. The voice said. He had been thrown out of the vehicle; a rifle and a small bag of personal effects followed him. Hitting the ground opened up his wounds again; blood slowly soaked the front of his shirt. The vehicle drove off. The vultures would be coming, the watchers would have seen them approaching.

The Peon could feel his life spill out before him, all over the floor. Just a little longer. Just a little more strength. A wave of nausea overcame him, he could feel his head sagging, it felt so heavy on his neck. He bit down on his lip, the pain brought him back to life and he wrenched the pump of his rifle open and back into place. He felt the familiar feeling of the bullet lodging into place in the barrel. Turning the rifle around and putting the barrel into his mouth, the Peon could taste rust as he began fumbling for the trigger.

The voices returned. But they were not real. The Peon walked through an empty city, trailing blood behind him. Relics of the past surrounded him. But he did not care. The voices kept him moving. It was then that he saw the lions, a family of lions. Majestic and strong and golden. The parents and two cubs. The voices disappeared for a moment. A moment of beauty – quiet and serene. The Peon took a hold of the strap of his rifle and slung it up; reaching into his pocket he pulled out a bullet and slid it into the rifle with a solid click.

