

It was after noon at Paddy's Roaring Twenties Tavern when the rapping of a fist beat on Patrick "Paddy" Brennan's door. It broke the muffled roars of the automobiles on the street. A drop of sweat trickled down the cheek of the frozen "Paddy" Brennan. He looked over and grabbed his revolver, a cheap five-shooter he got earlier that week.

An el train ran by with its blowing horn. The rapping picked up. A muffled voice shouted from the other side of the door. The el train was gone and the voice became louder by comparison. Whoever it was, he would wake the dead or worse, alert the cops. Paddy pulled back the hammer and walked up to the door. He slid open the peephole. He pointed his revolver at the door but out of sight.

Standing there was a tall man in his mid-twenties wearing a rich, dark red fedora and a feigned grin on his face. He looked down from the last step before the door to the bar.

"Paddy Brennan?"

"No. There's no one here by that name."

"Oh, that's strange."

"Strange?"

"Yeah, I been looking for a Paddy Brennan for a good hour and then what do you know I found this alleyway tucked back here away from the street. Maybe it's just a coincidence but I might suspect that something fishy is-"

"Okay. Fine. Just get in here." Paddy shut the peephole and opened the door. The man stepped in. He wore a rich, deep red vest with matching Oxford bag trousers. He turned around to talk to Paddy but the first thing to meet his eyes was Paddy's five-shooter.

The man's eyebrows perked up. He raised his hands to his shoulder, palms out, "Hey, whoa, aren't we in a rush?"

Paddy clenched his teeth. "I've had enough of scum like you coming here trying to cut into my business."

Jackson turned his chin up. His eyebrows perked. “Well what a coincidence Paddy. I want to help you that’s all. My boss wants to help you.”

Paddy leered. “Who?”

“Boss is Ed Bononi. I bet you heard of him. Me? Jackson Starr, at your service.”

“What service?”

Jackson pointed to himself with his thumb. “I keep the bad guys out of this joint. You join Bononi and he’ll have this place protected 24/7 and the cops won’t ever know.”

“I know what you’re trying and I ain’t falling for it.” Paddy backed away from Jackson for his bar.

“Falling for what?” Jackson Starr followed Paddy, “I’m-”

Brennan shot Jackson. Jackson stumbled back. He caught a pool table to keep on his feet. His grin was gone. His eyes could have glowed red.

Paddy kept his aim on Jackson. “I’m not paying out to nobody! This is my bar! Get out of here!”

“Why the hell did you do that Paddy?” A deeper hue of red formed underneath Jackson’s vest. Jackson ran up to Paddy. Paddy took another shot but Jackson grabbed Paddy by the wrist. The two men struggled for control of the revolver. More shots fired.

“You idiot!” said Jackson. He pointed Paddy’s aim at a window, “You want the cops to hear us?”

“Get out of my bar!”

“You made me do this, Paddy!”

Something in Paddy gave. For a moment he did not understand what. He let go of the pistol. Jackson had it now.

Paddy looked at his fingers. They bent completely backwards, each knuckle popping out of place. The pain left him with no voice for the first few seconds.

Jackson punched Paddy square in the face, knocking him on his rear. Jackson pointed the revolver at Paddy. Paddy broke and cried at the pain of his hand.

“You could have said, ‘Yes,’ you know, but then you had to shoot me.” Jackson clenched his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. “You made me do that to you. Now I gotta do this.”

Jackson held Paddy’s revolver between his palms. Paddy watched in horror as Jackson squeezed the revolver and crumpled it like a wad of paper.

Jackson held the ball of crumpled revolver up, ready for an overhand swing, “So what’s it gonna be, Paddy? Me, or the boys in blue out there?”

Paddy threw his arms up to protect himself. “Bononi! Bononi, dammit, Bononi!”

“Damn right,” said Jackson. He threw the balled up revolver at Paddy square in the ribs. It would leave a bruise but Paddy’s hand was another matter. Every joint was in pain and Jackson did not look like he was in any hurry to reverse it.

Jackson clutched his chest. He winced as he walked to the door. “Bononi will send somebody here within the week. Better have that first payment and it better not be in lead!”

Jackson slammed the door shut. Paddy heard him walk up the steps and vanish into the hustle and bustle of Chicago. Paddy curled up in pain, tears welling. He stood his ground like they told him to and now he had a broken hand and he would pay out to a protection racket.

* * *

It was nighttime in the Windy City. Jackson Starr sat drinking with other criminal types like him. Smooth clarinet and drum beating filled the bar. It was a different speakeasy that Jackson long ago coerced into paying out to his boss, Ed Bononi.

“He shot you?” A man walked by Jackson, patting him on the back with a laugh as he sat down with a bottle of beer. “Better you than me.” Mick Hammer. When the boss wanted a guy to pay he sent Jackson. When he wanted payback he sent Mick.

“Yeah. Can you believe it? Didn’t even let me finish what I was saying but now I need to take these duds to the cleaners though.” The bartender handed Jackson a pair of whiskey shots. He would not meet anyone’s gaze. Jackson dipped his finger into his whiskey before knocking it back.

“You and your blessings,” said a big, tall, hoss of a man with more bottles in front of him than the rest of the gang combined. “Triple D” Dorian Donald Donovan.

“I gotta stay sharp,” said Jackson. He knocked the shot back.

“You’ll be six feet under at that rate, Jackson” said Donovan, “Gotta use your words better.”

“Because you are such a smooth talker,” said a suave man who sipped a mixed drink. Zack Bonnar.

“Way I see it, I got another cash machine thanks to Jackson.” Edoardo Bononi. The Boss. He riffled through a wad of cash. He slipped out a five dollar bill, folded it, and flicked it across the table to Jackson. “There. Get some new clothes. I got a job for you tomorrow night”

Jackson grabbed the fiver with a sigh. He smiled with gritted teeth and pocketed it.

“New job?”

“Looks like we got a tough nut to crack and you’re the guy to do it, Jackson.”

Jackson took another sip, “All right, what?”

“Place called *The Roundabout*. Guy named Ringo Styles. The stuff I hear about this place makes it sound like another money making machine. Nothing like it.”

“Yeah but did you hear about that guy they found in the river the other day?” said Triple Dee.

“Nah.”

“Legbreaker like Jackson. The skin on the side of his face looked like it melted off his skull.” Donovan ran his fingers over the side of his face. Zack clutched his own face and clenched his teeth. Jackson and Mick widened their eyes. “Yeah, like boiled chicken or something. Bullet in the noggin too.”

Everyone looked over at Jackson. Jackson sat up. “And you think I’m the guy to shake him down?”

“To be frank, no, but you’re the first guy I send,” said Bononi, “Low man on the totem pole. If you fail I send Mick.” Mick Hammer beamed.

Jackson wrinkled the side of his nose. “If I bag this guy, get this joint to pay out to you Ed, think we could find someone else while I move up with you guys?”

Bononi, Bonnar, and Donovan all exchanged glances. Bononi broke the silence.

“Sure, Jackson. Sure.”

“How much for this job then?”

“How much you think?”

“Five?”

“Yep. You’ll get your big break soon enough Jackson. No more fivers when that happens.”

“Look, Ed, you had me for five years and I paid my dues. I want to run work for ya.”

Bononi leaned toward Jackson to touch his shoulder. “Jackson, you’re like a brother to me. You had my back. We all had each other’s backs at one point or another. We gotta have structure. Heirarchy. This stuff takes time. I’ll see about fitting you in somewhere. Kay?” Bononi pushed away and leaned back in his chair.

“Fine, Ed. Five bucks for *The Roundabout*.” Jackson raised his eyebrows and showed off his teeth.

Donovan pulled out a piece of paper and wrote something down. “All right. Like Ed told you, *The Roundabout*. Guy who runs it is named Ringo Styles. When you get there, tell him that, ‘you get around.’”

“I get around.”

“Right. Here’s the address.” Donovan handed the note to Jackson.

Jackson read the note. He closed his eyes and recited the address to himself. He read it one more time and then shredded the piece of paper. Jackson got up and pulled out some money to pay for his tab, “I gotta head home and hit the hay. You’ll hear back from me soon enough.”

Jackson raised a whiskey glass to the boys and took one last shot. He got up and paid the bartender who still would not look him in the eyes. As he walked out, Bononi, Bonnar, Donovan, and Hammer’s eyes all followed him before they returned to talking.

* * *

Lampposts lined the midnight streets of Chicago. The air was warm and humid with summer. Jackson lit a cigarette and started the march to catch an el train. The streets were quiet, the only sound being his footsteps against the concrete.

Tonight marked the fifth year that Jackson acted as a legbreaker for Ed Bononi and not a thank you or a compliment or a bonus to be had. *You’re going nowhere*, thought Jackson. *He’s lying like he always does.*

He won't find another enforcer, another legbreaker. He's gonna keep you under his thumb as long as you let him.

A few blocks down, Jackson walked up a flight of stairs that led up to a train station. He hopped aboard the first el train of the day. Jackson was heading home. The train rang over the streets as the Windy City pretended to sleep. Jackson wished he could stay up longer but The Boss already gave him his marching orders.

Jackson rested his chin against his fist. *You're a kid again. You're right back at the orphanage.*

"Ticket?" It was the collector. Jackson smiled and pulled out a ticket. He looked at it. It was from earlier that day. However, as he looked at it, the ink on the ticket shifted. Numbers and letters changed. In a few moments, the time and date were accurate. This train line only checked tickets, no tearing.

The collector moved on. Jackson had not bought a ticket in over ten years. So long as he used this line, he never planned to buy one ever again.

Jackson's mind drifted to that earlier meeting with Bononi and the boys. His smile was gone. However, he did not look angry. He was thinking now.

I handed that bastard another cash machine for a measly five bucks and he hands me another job that the others are too scared or too lazy to take care of. Rat bastard. Not a "Thank you Jackson." No, "Great job, Starr."

No. You're not a kid again. You never stopped being one.

Jackson arrived at the station which was a block away from his apartment. He headed down the stairs to walk the street below.

To hell with Ed. To hell with all of them. If they won't give me what I deserve then I will take it for myself. But how?

Inside of Jackson's apartment the doorknob clicked and turned. The dark of the apartment gave way to the dull, blinking light of the hallway as

Jackson stepped inside and hung his hat from a hook next to the doorway. He took out his gun and reloaded it. He slid the muzzle back to make sure there was a bullet in the chamber before walking over to place his hand to his armchair.

The fabric of the chair came undone, threads unsewing themselves. A pocket of fabric ripped away where he placed his gun. The rip reversed and swallowed up the gun as the fabric sealed again.

Jackson opened his refrigerator and pulled out a raw steak. Despite his pay, Jackson bought high quality foods from across town. He unwrapped it, crumpled and tossed the paper, slapped the steak onto a plate, and lit the stove.

While Jackson waited there was a knock at the door. He sighed but walked over and looked through the peephole. It was his tall, curly-haired neighbor Spadowski waving at him before knocking again.

Jackson unlocked the door and opened it, “What do you want, Spud?”

Spud’s eyes widened. “What happened to you?”

“Look, I don’t have time to-”

“D’you get roughed up by one of those gangs?”

“Spud...”

“You got blood on your shirt, pal.”

“It’s nothing serious.”

“Nothing serious? What happened?”

Jackson broke the flow, “Spud, why are you here?”

“Oh, well, Mister Peenman was looking for you earlier.” Mister Peenman was their portly superintendent. “He was talking about you being late on your payments. You need a hand?”

“No...”

“You’d owe me but I can help you out.”

“No, Spud. I got this. Anything else? I’m beat. Rough night.” Jackson pointed at his shirt.

“All right all right. But if you have any more trouble, you come to me.” Spadowski prodded his chest with his thumb and gave a stern look at Jackson. He turned to head down the hallway. Jackson closed the door and locked it. He took his bloodstained shirt off. He would need to buy a new one for the job tomorrow. Not a big deal in terms of money but having to do it was a pain in the neck. Instead of a being red with blood all over his chest and belly, Jackson was clean with not even a scar to signal a gunshot wound.

Jackson walked over to the wall and pulled down his Murphy bed. He undressed and climbed in. There was no bullet wound in his chest. Jackson would not sleep much that night. His body would toss and turn only half as much as his mind would. A spark was lit, he only needed to give it fuel and accelerant. *I’ll never make it working under Bononi like this. I need to make my own way in this city. But how?*

* * *

Earlier that night, Jackson sat in his apartment across town. It was run down and befit a working class man struggling for air even in these rich and decadent times. His rich, red jacket and hat hung off of a clothes hook by the door. His shirt and suspenders adorned his upper half. He had a half-burnt cigarette in his mouth while he talked on the phone with his boss, one of the big bosses of Chicago, Edoardo Bononi.

“All right, I got a job for you,” said Bononi, “There’s this joint downtown called *The Roundabout* that rakes in the dough every night and double on Sundays. So far nobody has managed to shake the owner down. Some guy named Ringo Styles.”

Jackson said, “And you want me to take care of him? Is he that tough?”

“Last guy got half his face boiled off by hot coffee or something.” Jackson coughed a plume of smoke.

“Yeah. Body turned up floating in the Chicago river. Popped a hole right in his head. So I knew you would be just the guy to talk Ringo into it. Do that and Bononi will hear about it. Tell Styles that you get around at the door.”

“I get around?”

“There you go.”

Jackson took a drag, “Alright, what’s the payout?”

“You’ll get what I give you. You barely stopped sucking the riverbed. Gotta keep that hustle, got it?”

Jackson sighed and then said, “Ten bucks?”

“Yeah. Ten bucks and you’re sure to get another job later this week. Got it?”

A pause but then Jackson said, “Got it.”

Ed Bononi hung up on Jackson. Jackson hung the receiver and steepled his fingers. He looked out of his apartment window. Jackson had been a two-bit thug for five years. Five years and he still made ten bucks a job while Ed rose up and left him behind to do the dirty work while he called more shots until he became the big boss and did nothing for Jackson who helped him along the way. Jackson could make do with ten bucks a job. This was about respect, recognition, pride.

The train rolled by, rocking the building from the vibrations. Jackson’s apartment was a story up right outside of a set of railroad tracks. It kept the rent down. Let him keep a low profile.

Jackson walked up to the window and looked down at the streets below and then at the apartment across the street from him. Some nice looking broad he had yet to talk to lived there. Sometimes they exchanged looks. *I should talk to her*, he thought.

Jackson drew the shades. He donned his hat and jacket and then squatted down next to his chair and pressed his palm against it. The fabric ripped open. The cotton stuffing flowed from the opening and pushed out a gun which Jackson caught and holstered. He pressed his palm against the chair again. The fabric returned to its original shape with no rips.

Jackson walked up to the door of his apartment, looked behind himself for a moment, and shut the lights off. The dull light of the hallway traced the red silhouette of his tall frame as he closed the door and went to work.

In the dark of the night, a young couple came to the mouth of an alleyway. They looked around themselves, gathering their surroundings. Once satisfied, they entered. Down they walked until they found a set of stairs going down to a door with a peephole.

The young man said, "What was it?"

"We get around," said the young woman.

The young man knocked on the door. They couple waited in dead silence. No music came from inside.

"Maybe this is the wrong alley," said the young man. The young woman cupped her hands over her mouth and nose. She stared ahead.

"Let's get moving. We'll check a couple of the other alleyways. If no one answers we'll go back to Moonshine Manor."

They heard footsteps at the mouth of the alleyway. Whoever it was, he was already in the shadows. Their only ally was the light of the stars under a new moon.

The young woman latched onto the young man. They both looked into the darkness. They were unsure if they wanted the peephole to open up or not anymore. They were prepared to be lost and stupid enough to walk down an alley mistaking it for a shortcut to a street over.

The footsteps kept a steady pace towards them. The first thing that came into view was a tall silhouette given away from the glow of a cigarette. Under the dim starlight a red brimmed hat emerged. The cigarette seemed to move on its own as the approaching man flicked the ashes off of it.

"What are the two of you doing here?"

The young woman looked up to the young man.

"Um, we were just cutting across."

"Picked the wrong alley to do that. Dead end down there." Another tap of his cigarette.

"We don't want any trouble, okay mister?"

The peephole slid open. The cool gaze of a pair of icy blue eyes drew everyone's attention.

"What are you doing here at this time of night?" said the icy blue eyes.

Before the young man or woman could respond, their red hatted, smoking acquaintance was already eye to eye with the man on the other side of the door.

"Oh, we get around. You know how it is." The man turned to the young couple, "You too? You get around?"

"Yes!" said the woman, "We get around all right!"

The peephole shut. They all heard the clatter of locks. A warm glow engulfed them as the door swung inside.

Jackson Starr walked in with confidence and menace, a grin holding up his lit cigarette. He looked around the bar. *The Roundabout* was lit with a cozy, warm atmosphere that was dampened by the rampant smoke of pipes, cigars, and cigarettes. Piano music clinked along with glasses, bottles, and ice. A woman in a striking white dress was part of the act but she was in the middle of the break while the pianist flew solo.

Ringo walked towards the bar. Jackson and the young couple followed him. The perimeter was decorated with exotic paintings, pottery, and artifacts from around the world. Jackson noticed that the clientele varied. Working class, upper class, and everything between.

This place has money, thought Jackson. He turned to Ringo. "What do you have on tap?" Jackson said.

"Only the last brew you'll ever try," Ringo said as he grabbed a mug and filled it. He wiped the head off the frosted mug and served it. Jackson let those words pass as he reached over and put his finger into the beer.

"What are you doing?"

"Something I do with every drink. Call it my blessing." Jackson knocked the glass back. His eyes widened as the brew slid from mug to

mouth. The beer was chilled to perfection. It was smooth from lips to throat. It was the perfect brew. He guzzled it until only head was left. He slammed the mug down in excitement. The handle broke off. Ringo's back was still turned. Jackson had to think quick.

Ringo heard a slide and two objects land on the bar – one smaller than the other. He turned around.

“Another.” Jackson held the mug with a smile and a cigarette on the side.

Ringo looked down towards the keg. He knew that this guy was not here to just knock back some booze. He was the latest gangster sent to coerce him into a protection racket. Ringo would send this guy down the river too if it came to it. Ringo could shoot him or take him in a brawl but he had to use his time to figure out his strategy. For now, he at least had others to tend to.

While Ringo poured drinks for other patrons, Jackson stared ahead and took in the music, the smoke, and the booze. It was nice to be away from Ed, Triple Dee, Zack, or Mick. Those guys could yak and yak and they always made sure you paid attention to them. Here he could think his own thoughts and not get belittled for it.

It was cold comfort after long though. Ed Bononi wanted this place for himself. After tonight, Jackson would be back to legbreaking more guys like Ringo for fivers every week. Back to taking orders. Back to being the boy who never got to grow up, take real responsibility, and have some dominion over his world.

He took another drink.

Ringo spoke with some patrons on the other side of the bar. He smiled, greeted people, listened to how their day went. He kept watch of Jackson though. Jackson had not moved from his stool at the bar all night. He kept ordering another mug but he looked no less sober than when he first walked in. He could either hold his liquor or something was up.

It was early in the morning when Ringo turned out his last customer. The alleyway was still dark. The sun had a few hours yet to rise. He heard the toilet flush. He was wrong. This was his last customer of the night. The man in red stepped out and sat at the bar again.

“Another, barkeep,” said Jackson.

“One more and then I gotta close,” said Ringo. He went behind to bar to pour one more mug from the keg. Ringo could hand Jackson the mug and then crouch down to grab his automatic. If this guy made no sudden moves he could get him drunk, lay him out, and turn him out to the streets. Violence was not always the answer. Ringo would give booze a chance so he grabbed another mug and turned to the faucet.

“So, what is your name, stranger?” Ringo said as he filled the mug.

“Jackson Starr, at your service,” said Jackson as Ringo handed the mug over. Jackson dipped his finger into the beer again before drinking.

“Well, not really. I am Jackson Starr but I am not here to work for you.”

“So who do you work for?” Ringo pressed his luck and crossed his arms. He leaned back.

“That would be telling,” Jackson sipped from his mug. He was not guzzling it down anymore. The beer stopped flowing.

Ringo walked along the shelves behind him, “Can I interest you in any spirits?” He held up a bottle of tequila, the worm sinking to the bottom, “Have any taste for Mexico?” He grabbed an elegant bottle of vodka, “Here is one of the last bottles produced under the Russian Czars.”

“How about... that one?” Jackson pointed at a plain, rectangular bottle.

This gave Ringo an idea, “That? That bottle used to have the finest rum from out of the Caribbean but you would be lucky to drink anything better than shoe polish out of it by now.”

“Is that so? Something swishes in there. I can pay.” Jackson whipped out a twenty. Ringo cocked an eyebrow. This was now a business opportunity, “But I get a refund if it lives up to your claim. I pay for quality.”

“No take-backs. You buy the ticket you take the ride.”

“Pour a shot first then.”

Ringo poured a shot. Jackson lit a new cigarette. As he pocketed his match book he took this opportunity to put his left hand on his pistol. The hammer cocked back as if with a mind of its own. Jackson nor Ringo heard a thing it was so slow and delicate.

“Nice place you got here, Ringo is it?” Jackson said as he looked around.

“Ringo,” Ringo handed the shot glass over. He squatted down and disappeared behind the bar.

“Yeah, Ringo. Right. You know, Ringo, I thought about starting a joint of my own. Get the suds flowing, get that jazz playing, get the girls dancing.”

“Oh yeah?” Ringo checked the pistol. There was a quiet click as he checked the magazine. It was down a bullet. No bullet in the chamber yet either.

“Yeah.” Jackson dipped his finger into the rum and knocked back the shot. He slipped out his pistol and trained it on where he last saw Ringo.

“Guy I work for has been taking me for a ride for years while moving up the ranks himself. Be nice to be my own man, get away from all that.”

Ringo kept crouched as he stepped backwards, “Bartending is hard work and a good hand is hard to come by. It can be a dangerous place. All kinds of people are after you whether it’s the police, robbers, or gangsters.”

Ringo realized his first blunder. *How did he already know my name?* He realized his second blunder as he heard Jackson’s voice was still across

from him as he said, “Still, you get that cash flowing and the buck stops at you. Uncle Sam can’t reach into your pockets. As long as you can... duck him...”

Jackson stopped talking. Ringo held his breath. Dead silence.

“Come on up Ringo. Slowly. Hands up first. Time to talk.”

Ringo’s hands rose up from behind the bar first, then the rest of him followed.

“All right,” he said, “Let’s talk, Jackson.”

Jackson kept his gun trained on Ringo. “Got a stool?” Ringo looked to his right. “Sit.” Jackson’s gun followed Ringo. He moved down a few stools himself but he stayed on his feet.

Ringo’s cold gaze still had yet to falter. “I’m not joining whoever you work for. *The Roundabout* belongs to me. My work, my sweat, my money, my bar.” He crossed his arms.

“It’s not like that at all, Ringo” said Jackson. “I keep the bad guys out of this joint. You join Bononi and he’ll have this place protected 24/7 and the cops won’t ever know.”

“I have done fine on my own up to now,” said Ringo.

“Up to now. Now you’re talking to Jackson Starr, Ringo.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Keep it up and you’ll find out, Ringo. Don’t make me do this.”

“I will not make you do a thing. It will all be on you. This is your choice too.”

“You’re really going to make me work for my meal aren’t you Ringo?”

“All part of the job.” Ringo slipped off his stool and took for the ground. Jackson did not fire though. There was a pause in the action. Ringo wondered what Jackson was up to. He looked to his right. The wood of the bar warped and swirled. It creaked and cracked and snapped open into a perfect circle of a hole, the light of the bar shining through.

Not single splinter littered the floor. No one stood in front of the hole though. Ringo blasted a shot to the left. Nothing. A shot to the right. Nothing.

Ringo looked up.

“Gotcha!” Jackson hopped off the top of the bar and landed on Ringo with a knee to the gut, knocking the wind out of him. Jackson mounted him and pressed his pistol to his chin.

“I knew that was gonna distract you Ringo. That’s why they hire me. So, you going to pay out to Bononi or am I gonna have to charge extra for cleanup?”

Ringo narrowed his gaze at Jackson who was sweating. That wasn’t the beer. Jackson was sober, there was not a single slur in his speech and no loss of motor or impulse control. The finger-dipping. His “blessing.” Jackson Starr was a professional. Ringo was not sure about what kind, but Jackson was one for sure.

“So? You have a bar to close, Ringo. Is it going to be yours or Bononi’s?” Jackson wanted to wipe his forehead and upper lip but he noticed that Ringo had his hand on a pistol of his own. Jackson needed to keep the pressure on. Ringo gritted his teeth but he kept his cool.

Come on, thought Jackson. Something was off. Was his gun heating up? He looked at his hand. Smoke and fumes came off of it and then the searing pain set in. Jackson yelled and dropped his gun. The top layer of skin stretched off of his palm and fingers with it. He sprung up and backed away from Ringo. Ringo had his sights set on Jackson with his pistol and he was poised to fire.

Jackson may have miscalculated. This Ringo Styles guy was cunning and had tricks of his own. *The skin on the side of his face looked like it melted off his skull. Like boiled chicken or something*, he heard Triple Dee say in his head. And now the top layer of skin had been cooked off of Jackson’s left palm and fingers. His gun had heated up somehow and it

really smarted. But in the moment Ringo was set to blast Jackson with his gun.

Ringo took the shot but Jackson dove down to grab his dropped automatic. Gripping it was painful because of the loss of the top layer of skin from his left palm. His right hand would have to do. He needed to cool the gun down somehow. *Son of a bitch!* He thought as he scrambled backwards.

Ringo took another shot and clipped Jackson on the shoulder. Jackson reached the edge of the bar and backed up around the corner. Once there he rose to a crouch.

Ringo stood up and trained his gun for where Jackson should be.

“I must ask you to leave now Jackson,” said Ringo, “Bar is closed for the night.”

Wood creaked behind the counter. Wood was being whittled and shaved. Jackson had taken one of the bar stools, broken it into pieces, and sharpened the legs into wooden stakes at a touch.

Two when I made the hole, one I dodged, one in my shoulder. Three left, thought Jackson as the stool leg he held came to a sharpened point.

Why didn't I reload the gun? Ringo thought as he walked out from behind the bar and came around the corner. A wooden stake shot out at him. Ringo whipped back but it slashed him in the midsection. The stake impaled the wall. Jackson sprung up and braced himself and his next stake.

Ringo thrust his gun out towards Jackson. They dove behind tables and chairs as they took shots at each other in midair. Ringo shot Jackson's stake and chipped it enough that it hurtled past him and slammed against the wall. Jackson had another long, wooden stake ready. He threw his third stake. It flew past the chair inches away from Ringo's face.

“You got two shots left and I ain't taken one with my piece yet. I have you dead to rights Ringo!” said Jackson. He looked for something to

be a shield. The table would do. In moments, part of the wood came apart and enclosed around his wrist.

“Do not call me Ringo. I am not your friend.”

“Funny. I was hoping to make friends. Maybe even business acquaintances.” Jackson chucked a fourth stake Ringo’s way. It took down a chair, removing some cover.

“Not happening.” Ringo sprung up. The bullet inside the chamber was white hot as it spun out of the chamber. It exploded in midair like a shotgun blast. A shower of cherry-red lead hit Jackson’s makeshift shield, lighting it on fire.

Jackson looked at his flaming shield for a moment, “I insist Ringo.” He then charged. He bashed Ringo and knocked him over. Ringo was singed but he stood up. The flames continued to spread over the shield. The wood around Jackson’s wrist warped open and he dropped it to the floor.

Jackson threw up his dukes. Ringo held up his gun and his index finger in his other hand. “One left.” He aimed at the defenseless Jackson.

“Shit,” Jackson dove behind a table. Ringo paced himself towards Jackson. Jackson was a cornered animal.

“Okay. You got me. I give up. I’ll go.”

“You know I cannot let you go. You are in too deep. I am in too deep.”

“Cut me some slack. I’m just doing my job.”

“The job that your boss ordered you to do. You did not have to listen to him.”

A table leg bent like a tube, causing the table to tilt into Ringo’s leg. It gave Jackson enough distraction to draw his pistol out and shoot Ringo in the leg to knock him over. He ran over and kicked the gun from Ringo’s hand.

“You’re good, Ringo, real good.” Jackson stood over Ringo, his gun aimed square in the face. He shot Ringo in the knee, “Don’t go anywhere.”

Ringo grunted, “Go ahead then. Do it. Finish the job.”

Jackson took aim and pulled the trigger. At first nothing happened but then he noticed frost along the barrel of his gun. He pulled the trigger harder but then the trigger broke off and fell to the ground. The gun was cold to the touch. Like it was left out in the cold in the dead of winter.

“You asshole. You made me break my gun! Fine. I’ll just get yours.” Jackson walked over to grab the gun he kicked out of Ringo’s hand. Ringo looked down at his bleeding knee. He closed his eyes as the blood stopped and cauterized. He stood up and winced.

Jackson’s back was to Ringo as he brass-checked the pistol. Nothing in the chamber. He slid the magazine out. Nothing. *Wait, so he-*

Ringo spun Jackson around and punched him across the jaw. Jackson fell back over a table. Ringo kept on him, hammering blow after blow to Jackson’s face. Blood flowed from the nose and from a cut on the forehead.

Jackson thrust his leg out to push Ringo away. Ringo grabbed onto a chair to keep his footing. Jackson picked up a chair for himself. The legs stretched out and wedged into blades.

“I don’t need no gun, Ringo!” Jackson took a horizontal swing at Ringo. A pair of gashes tore through his shirt and cut into his flesh. Jackson lifted the chair overhead and swung downward. Ringo spun out of the way as part of the table caved in.

“You don’t need to do any of this, Jackson,” said Ringo, “Can’t you do better than shake down bartenders?”

Jackson tore a sharpened leg from the chair. The wood he gripped conformed to his hand like clay but it was as hard as the wood it was made of. He could wield it like a scimitar now.

“Maybe I like shaking down bartenders,” Jackson said. He swung the sword at Ringo who ducked it and jabbed Jackson in the chin. Jackson felt like he had been pelted by a ball of ice to the face.

“You like doing this? So someone else gets paid more for your work? You like being taken for a ride?” Ringo bopped Jackson’s nose before sidestepping a downward swing that chopped off the side of another table.

Jackson grabbed another sharpened chair leg and turned it into a second scimitar. He was ready to swing but he stopped short.

He’s right, Jackson thought.

Ringo raised another fist, ready for a haymaker.

“So what? You’re not tricking me into leaving you know,” said Jackson.

“Look at us. How much are you getting banged up tearing this place apart for?” Ringo backed away from Jackson, his dukes still up. Jackson kept his wooden scimitars up.

“I ain’t gonna welch on this job,” Jackson backed up and circled around opposite Ringo, “Gotta tell the boss something. I get nothing if I come back empty-handed.”

“You get five bucks if you come back with this joint. What’s the difference Jackson? You said you’re supposed to protect this place for Bononi, right?” said Ringo.

“Yeah.”

“And you want to be your own man?”

“Yeah?”

“What if you worked for me?”

“What?”

“If you were my bouncer you would get paid handsomely. There is a reason every gang wants their cut of this place.”

“Look, it’s not about the money. Power, status, pride, respect. Those are the fruits of my labor. That kind of stuff. I want to move up.”

“How is that working out?” Ringo had Jackson. He gestured around *The Roundabout*, “You are not in any shape to walk out of here with my bar paying anything out to anyone.”

Jackson gritted his teeth. Ringo had him there too.

“I’m not giving up my bar and you have yet to make me.”

Jackson pointed a lapsed wood sword at Ringo, “You ain’t stopped me yet either, Ringo.”

Ringo raised his dukes back up, “Wanna keep doing this?”

Jackson thought about the fight he had with Ringo and then about the pay and then about what Ed told him last night. *We gotta have structure. Hierarchy.*

He was giving me the runaround like he always does.

“Hey, remember what I told you about starting my own bar? I got a proposition for you, Ringo.”

Ringo turned his head to the side, his eyes staying on Jackson. “What?”

“You don’t pay out to Bononi. I don’t work for you. I get to run a bar and become my own man.”

“What are you saying?”

“Partners, Ringo.”

Ringo icy blue eyes squinted..

“Here’s how it works. We work together and run this joint. Two guys like us will be better than one. Half the profits are mine, half are yours. You have half the workload though. The boss collects the money and won’t know about our deal.”

“Won’t that make you still a part of Bononi’s gang?”

“Baby steps, Ringo. Baby steps.”

Ringo looked around at the bullet holes, the destroyed furniture, and the hole in his bar. He looked at the bleeding gashes along his wrist. The sharp pain of bullet wounds regained his attention.

I could try to take him out, but won't there just be another one like him tomorrow?

Jackson dropped his weapons. He extended his right hand forward. This was the same right hand which had lost its top layer of skin to a heated pistol. Jackson said through gritted teeth, "You won't regret it Ringo."

"If I let you go, Jackson, and this is a trick, I'm rubbing you out first."

"That's a risk that I'm willing to take."

Jackson Starr walked through the doorway of *The Roundabout*. The rays of the sun lit up the sky as night gave way to day. Ringo watched on as the tall, red-coated silhouette walked out into the streets of Chicago. This was the beginning of a new chapter in the lives of both men. Between Jackson's swagger and Ringo's cold eyes there was an unspoken feeling that both felt but would not tell the other about: fear.