

The Citizen

The sun slowly tucked itself behind the towering mountains to the west of Shadow City. The archaic and powerful skyscrapers towered to the heavens, topped only by the gray clouds that cloaked the sky, hiding every star including the sun. A thin slate of water topped the cement from the rain that had just lightened to a drizzle. The air smelled of fresh rain. There were no sounds. Even the helicopter that flew above was silent. The city had frozen, focused on the heroic man.

The masked man positioned himself between the crowd of civilians and the three-dozen henchmen. He stood ready to fight – to protect. His bruised, torn, bloody body ignored the vast amount of pain raging inside. Soaked by rain and sweat and full of adrenaline and fear, his muscles swelled through the tattered blue and black marine gear. The black domino mask on his face failed to hide all of the bruises.

Snow danced from the sky to the ground. The sun could not penetrate the alley, leaving it in darkness. The pair of boys stood ten feet apart. Neither moved.

“C’mon, rich kid, give me your money,” threatened the older teenager holding a handgun. He had a wiry build. Both the jeans and sweat hood that he wore were black. A red baseball cap hid his face but could not conceal his wild, blond hair. The teenager did his best to intimidate with a false bravado.

The young boy at whom the gun pointed trembled. At fourteen years old, his life flashed before his eyes.

“Adam!” cried a middle-aged man from the end of the alley. The man, Henry Noble, wore a black suit and trench coat too expensive for even a successful man. His graying hair sat perfectly parted.

Both faces jerked to the man. Henry looked back and forth from the armed teenager to his son. He slowly lifted his hands to the level of his shoulders, indicating surrender, and gradually walked towards the young men.

The armed teenager’s eyes nervously bounced between the father and son. The gun, now trembling slightly, remained on the son. Finally, the father stepped in front of his son, shielding him from the young adult.

Henry broke the silence. “You want money, son? I have plenty.” He paused, watching the thief nod. “Okay, I’m going to reach into my pocket and grab my wallet. Then I’m going to toss it to you. Okay?”

The armed teenager nodded again.

Slowly, Henry slid his right hand underneath the suit jacket, reached into the breast pocket, and grabbed his wallet.

A crash, metal against metal, erupted from the construction across the street.

BAM!

The father fell to his knees, shock covering his face. Henry let his jacket and trench coat fall open and looked down at his chest. A red dot appeared on his white shirt and spread, slowly running down his body. Numbness engulfed him. Sound disappeared.

The gunman’s face contorted in fear as he stumbled backward. He looked in horror from the bleeding man to the gun and back. He stuffed the gun into the back of his pants, covered it with his sweat hood, and ran.

Adam Noble felt sick standing over his dying father. Frozen, he looked at the puddle of blood.

The elder man, Jack Noble, watched his grandson standing by the fireplace. For three years, the teenager had battled grief and guilt. With a mother who had died at birth, the boy was left with only a grandfather – a grandfather with whom he was scared to connect.

“Grandpa, I can’t be in this city anymore. I can’t stand it another minute,” Adam grumbled.

“Adam, I know your father’s death has been extremely tough on you. But you’re seventeen. You’ve got your whole life in front of you.”

Adam watched the small fire dance atop the logs.

“I’ve got to get out of this city.” He turned and looked at his grandfather. “And at least this way I can help people.”

“You have no business on the front lines. Some people are blessed not to have to serve and you’re one of them. There’s no reason for you to risk your life this way.”

“I have to do this. I’m leaving the day after graduation.”

Adam Noble turned away and left the room, closing the door softly. Jack Noble leaned against the desk behind him and covered his face with his hands. He wept quietly.

The farther Adam ran, the deeper he fell into his subconscious. The night sky and streetlights faded away and the city’s roar silenced.

He worried about his grandfather. The chemo appeared to be wearing on him. Adam wished his grandfather would recover quickly. He hated this city and wanted to get out as quickly as he could. But he couldn’t abandon his grandfather.

Adam pumped his arms faster and pushed himself further. He dodged pedestrians, signs, and debris without notice and plunged further into the city as he plunged further into himself.

A man’s cry for help ripped Adam from his rhythm. Another cry followed. Adam stopped and located the sound. He sprinted to the alley from which the cry originated.

As Adam reached the alley, he saw two large teenagers on top of a smaller man in a business suit. One of the teenagers pinned the man to the ground while the other enjoyed the squirming punching bag.

“Get off of him, now!” roared Noble.

The pair of thugs stood up. One approached Noble while the other stayed back with the man, pinning the man by pressing one foot against his face.

The approaching teenager bounced with the joy of another victim. The moment Noble was in his reach, the thug swung. Noble ducked under the fist and cut the teenager to the ground within a heartbeat.

When Noble looked up, the other teenager was already charging. The teenager tried to tackle Noble but instead found himself thrown into the air, then pinned to the ground.

Footsteps charged from behind. Noble’s muscles, as they had been trained to do in the army, reacted without thought. He turned with a single swift move and held the first teenager by the throat against a brick wall in the alley. The thug’s eyes bulged in fear as he looked down at Noble. He looked into the face of what he no longer believed was a man and trembled.

“Don’t ever let me see you or your friend again,” Noble bellowed. He dropped the teenager to his feet. The pair of teenagers scampered from the alley.

Noble turned to the crying man who lay on the ground. As Noble approached, the man slowly climbed to his knees and looked up at his savior. Words of desperate gratitude spewed from the man’s mouth.

Adam finally knew what he needed to do to fill the hole that had been ripped open within him six years earlier.

The Citizen turned to the crowd behind him and demanded they back up. He refaced the thugs armed with baseball bats, chains, and knives. He bellowed at them, "It all ends here!"

They laughed.

Suddenly, the Citizen charged into the gang of men.

A tall man stood at the edge of the rooftop of the seventy-story skyscraper, the tallest structure in Shadow City. He rested his eyes on the sea of concrete below him, his home. The sun had set behind the mountains and darkness enveloped the city. An icy wind slowly weaved through the air.

The man felt evil seep from the cracks of the city. Out of the alleys and drains slithered muggers and thieves, rapists and murderers. The innocent shut, locked, and bolted their doors.

His eyes slid from the city to his hands where a black mask rested. Apprehension flowed through his veins. Fear and doubt bombarded him. But he knew action was necessary. And he knew it was his only cure.

The man closed his eyes and slowly lifted the mask to his face. He felt the tack grab his skin. He felt the softness of the mask as it too grasped his face. A sense of place and home relaxed him as he finally felt the comfort he had desperately sought for years. The mask only covered his eyes but he felt as if it covered his entire body – his entire soul.

The Citizen opened his eyes and gazed at his kingdom below. What lie below he swore to protect – he swore to save.

As the clock struck midnight, a black sedan barely visible with its lights off in the dark construction lot slowly pulled up to a navy blue SUV. Three Italians in black suits climbed out of the sedan. Three African-American men stepped out of the SUV.

The third man out of the SUV looked more like a grizzly bear. He stood over six and a half feet tall with shoulders just as wide. While the five others met between the vehicles, he waited at the passenger door of the SUV. The Italians eyed him nervously.

The tallest Italian, standing between the other two, finally spoke up.

"Okay. Show us the diamonds."

The more wiry man with the bear turned, opened the backdoor of the SUV, and pulled out a small briefcase. He then handed the briefcase to the Italian.

The receiver opened the briefcase and smiled.

"Sales are gonna like that."

"Only if we see our money," interrupted the man that had handed off the briefcase.

The Italian turned and walked back to the sedan. From the floor of the passenger seat, he pulled out a much larger briefcase. After returning, he handed it to the requester.

"Thirty G's."

"Check it," interceded the giant from the side of the SUV.

The wiry man now holding the money opened the briefcase and checked its contents. He eyed the bills and scanned a count of rolls. Then he nodded approval to the bear.

The buyer on the left smiled as he watched his partner put the diamonds into the sedan. "Great. All done. Pleasure. And a pleasure not running into the mask."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

Fifteen feet to the group's right, the Citizen stepped out from the shadows.

Immediately, the two men with the giant pulled semi-automatic pistols from under their jackets and fired. As the Citizen ducked behind the dumpster, the Italians pulled automatic rifles from their car.

Two of the men with the automatic rifles slowly approached the dumpster. They held their guns ready to fire. The pair of men reached the dumpster and prepared to jump around and fire where the Citizen had hidden.

BAM!

A small explosion burst from behind the dumpster, launching the Italians back twenty feet. They lay on the ground unconscious.

The other three men with guns looked around frantically but everything was silent. The giant waited by the van with his arms crossed.

A grenade dropped from above into the middle of the three men. Smoke blanketed where the men stood. A loud thud sounded of a man dropping into the smoke, followed by a flurry of more thuds and grunts. When the smoke cleared, only the Citizen stood.

“It’s Tomlinson, right?” the Citizen asked the bear. “You seem to be running the show.”

Tomlinson unfolded his arms. They looked like logs once by his side. He slowly walked toward the Citizen.

Once Tomlinson was in the Citizen’s reach, the Citizen punched into the bear’s stomach. Tomlinson neither flinched nor stepped back. Instead, he grabbed the Citizen around the neck and picked him up off the ground. Tomlinson pulled the Citizen in close to his own face and whispered, “You’re going to regret putting that mask on.”

Tomlinson threw the vigilante fifteen feet into a group of trashcans. He pounced on the Citizen immediately. Grabbing the masked man’s hair, he punched the Citizen three times in the face. Tomlinson picked up the Citizen once again. This time he ran and rammed him into a dumpster, leaving a giant crater in the dumpster’s side. Tomlinson continued to pound the Citizen’s face and stomach with punches until the Citizen lay unconscious against the dumpster.

Tomlinson stood up. He swung open the lid of the dumpster, picked up the Citizen again, and tossed him into the dumpster. He then closed the lid and walked back to the mess of men on the ground.

He grabbed the diamonds from the back of the sedan, picked up the briefcase with the money off the ground, climbed into the SUV, and drove off.

Once in the car, Tomlinson pulled a cell phone from his pocket. He dialed a number and held the phone to his ear.

“Yes. Officers have a mess they might want to clean up at the lot at Seventh and Frost.”

The crowd marveled as the Citizen ducked under a swinging bat before propelling himself up. His fist crashed through a man’s jaw. He backflipped over a swinging chain and roundhouse kicked the swinger into unconsciousness. He smashed his elbow into one attacker’s face that charged from behind then punched another’s face that charged from the front. Water, blood, and thugs flew everywhere.

Jack Noble stood at the foot of the main staircase to the upper floor of the Noble Mansion. Bald and pale, he looked up the stairs ready to fight his way up again.

The door from the garage behind the staircase swung open and a loud plop hit the ground. Jack hurried around the stairs and discovered Adam. He lay on the ground unconscious, bruised, and bleeding still in his Citizen uniform.

Jack rushed to Adam.

* * *

Adam eased his eyes open and groaned. He looked around, finding himself tucked into his bed with an I.V. stuck in his left hand. His grandfather slept in a chair next to the right side of the bed with a book in his lap.

Adam tried to move but every muscle in his body was too stiff. He groaned again, waking Jack Noble.

“Look who’s back in the land of the living.”

Adam laughed. The pain in his chest made him regret doing so.

“How long have I been out?”

“Since you stumbled in yesterday morning,” Jack replied looking at his watch. “About thirty hours now. Luckily, Dr. Clancy was still here from my checkup.”

Adam started fumbling with the I.V. in his hand.

“Leave that alone,” Jack snapped. “He’ll check on you soon. He’ll take it out if it’s okay.”

Adam let go of the I.V.

“So you’re the Citizen, huh?”

“Yeah. Just made sense after I got back from duty.”

“Wearing a mask, jumping on rooftops, and getting beat to a pulp made sense? I might need to get you another doctor. You need to give up the mask. You’ve done some good things so far – saved a lot of people. But it’s too dangerous.”

“You’re right,” Adam responded. “I’m doing something great. I’m not just sitting in a tower making money.”

“That’s enough.”

“No. I’ve not done enough yet. This is why I’m here – why I’m on this planet. I’m here to make a difference and the Citizen is how I’m to do that.”

Jack stared sternly into Adam’s eyes.

“You’re giving up the mask. End of story.”

Jack got up to fetch Dr. Clancy as Adam noticed his left arm was also in a sling.

“Yeah, until my arm’s out of the thing.”

Alone in the room, he sat and thought. He had done fine as the Citizen until yesterday but he knew he was lucky to be alive today. Tomlinson had handled him like he was nothing.

Adam would have to spend his time healing and learning. He decided he would use this time to reinvent himself – to become smarter, quicker, and craftier.

Tomlinson had taught him a lesson. He didn’t want to have to learn it again.

Adam Noble stood between his publicist and manager backstage at the auditorium for Richardson High School. On stage, the Principal talked to the thousand high school students to whom Adam would soon speak.

His publicist, Mark Harris, was a middle-aged man who had been with the Noble family for over twenty years. Now starting to bald and in fantastic shape, Adam guessed his low-key grandfather and cool-under-fire father had made Mark’s job easy for years.

Ben Connelly was another story. Planning the Nobles’ schedules had to be hell and it showed even though Ben was only thirty-eight. His hairline had receded already and Adam had noticed his growing waistline. He needed an assistant but was too proud to hire one. Still, to anyone who did not know him as well as Adam did, he looked on top everything.

Adam looked over his shoulder and saw a teacher reading a newspaper behind him. Paired with a giant photograph, the front-page headline read: CITIZEN FOILS BANK ROBBERY, SAVES 20 HOSTAGES.

“Looks like they finally caught the Citizen on camera,” Adam mumbled to the men standing with him.

“If I were his manager, he would’ve been on camera long ago,” replied Ben. Adam chuckled.

Then he noticed a beautiful woman walking towards him. Her long blond hair was pulled back into a bun with two long bangs hanging over the left side of her face. She wore a lime green dress that covered her shoulders and hung past her knees. Her white heels added a few inches. She stood about five and a half feet but she carried a presence that would have towered over even an Amazon woman.

The woman smiled to Adam as she stepped up to him and extended her hand, “Hi. I’m Miss McCloud. I’ll be introducing you today.”

Adam was hooked.

He needed a few seconds to wake up from his daze.

“Great. So what do you teach?” he asked.

He grabbed her hand and shook it. Her skin was smooth and soft and he never wanted to let go.

Miss McCloud ignored his question. Instead she turned to his publicist. “Do you want to look over my introduction again?”

Mark took a piece of paper from her. He and Ben looked over it.

“So what do you teach?” Adam asked again.

“English.”

Adam waited for more of a response but it never came.

He persisted, “And yet you don’t talk?”

“I’m focused right now.”

“Well let’s get some coffee sometime when you’re less focused.”

“No, thank you,” Miss McCloud replied.

“Sorry. Boyfriend?”

She smirked as she took the paper back from Mark and Ben. “No. Just no.”

The Principal finished his announcements.

“I have to introduce you now.” Miss McCloud turned and started walking to the stage.

Adam yelled after her, “Think it over.”

She replied back over her shoulder, “Ummm. Sorry.”

Adam smiled as she walked onstage.

Twenty thugs lay unconscious around the poorly lit warehouse. In the center stood Tomlinson. Fifteen yards from him, the Citizen stood scared out of his mind. He had spent two months healing after their last encounter. And he spent another month training to get back in shape. In his three months back in uniform, he knew he would have to face this test at some point – he hoped he was ready now.

The pair stood frozen staring at each other.

Finally, Tomlinson smiled.

“I’ve been waiting for this since the day I found out you weren’t dead.”

The Citizen stood silent, taking in his surroundings.

“Am I going to have to make the first move again?” Tomlinson joked.

The Citizen broke into a dead sprint away from Tomlinson. The bear chuckled before tearing off after him.

Tomlinson was closing fast. As the Citizen passed the last stack of crates in the warehouse, he broke left, taking him into a darker area of the warehouse. Tomlinson followed, still gaining ground.

Suddenly, Tomlinson lost his footing, crashed to the ground, and slid out of control into a few stray crates. He felt the ground, realizing what had caused his fall. Marbles.

With a lot of effort and groaning, Tomlinson slowly rose back to his feet. He saw the Citizen standing twenty yards away under a light hanging from the ceiling. Infuriated, he started limping toward the vigilante. He passed stack after stack of crates as he approached the Citizen.

A loud pop sounded as Tomlinson stepped next to one of the stacks of crates. The wood on the bottom crate cracked from the small explosion planted by the Citizen before crumbling under the pressure of the crates above. Tomlinson could not avoid the crates as they crashed down upon him.

Tomlinson fought to get out from under the crates but his efforts were futile.

The Citizen walked up with a smirk and squatted next to Tomlinson's head.

"You'll look great in inmate orange."

He then put a chloroform cloth over Tomlinson's mouth until the bear passed out. An overwhelming sense of relief and pride rushed through the Citizen's veins.

Excitement built as this single man battled the sea of thugs. The crowd grew more excited and cheers roared. Four men down. Five men. Six. Seven. Ten minutes ago, the Citizen appeared exhausted and defeated. Now he fought with a fury the observers knew had never been seen in the entire world's history.

The Noble Tower Ballroom was packed as Adam pulled open the door and peered into the room. He had avoided Noble Enterprises affairs since returning from service but Jack had grown more insistent that Adam attend events as the cancer battle continued.

Adam turned back from the ballroom. His date approached to rejoin him after checking her makeup and hair.

Adam nearly swooned seeing her glide toward him in her long, purple gown. The gown hugged her body tightly, emphasizing her curves. Her blond hair flowed to her shoulder blades and danced along with the silver earrings Adam had bought her.

Adam mouthed the word wow to her when their eyes met. She laughed as she walked through the door Adam held open.

The pair walked into the ballroom. As Adam extended his arm, his date wrapped her arm around it. Adam weaved through the crowd exchanging formalities with old family friends he had known growing up.

Finally, Adam found his grandfather sitting at a table alone enjoying a whiskey. He looked exhausted. Jack was starting to win his battle with cancer but he still had a tough fight ahead.

"Don't tell me these parties are starting to wear on you, grandpa."

Jack laughed and stood up. He patted Adam on the back. Then he turned to his grandson's date with a huge smile on his face.

"I'm guessing this is the angel I've heard about everyday for the past month."

"Yes, this is Jenna McCloud," Adam replied.

"It's an honor to meet you, Mr. Noble," Jenna said. "Obviously, I'd heard a lot about you even before I met Adam."

"Please, call me Jack."

Jenna smiled and nodded.

Jack took a sip from his drink. He turned to Adam.
“I’m glad I finally got you to one of these events. You’re going to be running this company one day.”

“That’s a long way off, though.”

“Don’t jinx me,” Jack replied. “But I want to get you more involved, so you know what you’re doing when you’re in charge. There’s one guy you have to meet. He’s my number two and you’ll be wise to keep him as yours. Where is he?”

Jack Noble stretched his neck and began peering over the crowd. Jack stood a little over six feet, just an inch or two shorter than Adam. He had an easy time peering through crowds.

While Jack searched for his man, Adam turned back to Jenna.

“You handle yourself well in a crowd of hyenas like this,” he joked to her.

“There not as bad as you make them out to be.”

“My dad always joked to never trust a man wearing a tie.”

“You’re wearing one. Can I not trust you?”

“Maybe I’m just wearing a mask right now.”

Jack finally found his man and waved him over.

Upon sight, Adam did not trust the man. Adam’s gut told him not to trust him.

Adam towered over the man – he must have been no taller than five feet, eight inches. His black hair was slicked back and his Armani suit was all black, too. Adam could feel this man’s hunger for power and he did not like it.

“Richard, this is my grandson, Adam. Adam, this is my Vice President, Richard Cain.”

Cain stuck his hand out and Adam shook it. Cain had a death grip matching that of Tomlinson.

“Nice to meet you, Richard.”

Cain seemed to cringe at being called by his first name by Adam.

He replied quickly, “The honor’s all mine, Adam. Jack’s always spoken very highly of you.”

Adam smiled and patted his grandfather on the shoulder. “He seems to lie more than he lets on.”

Everyone laughed.

“So, Adam, where do you want to start in Noble Enterprises?” Cain asked. “You don’t just want to start at the top, do you?”

Jack interrupted, “Actually, I’m going to have Adam shadow me starting next week.”

“Oh, good,” Cain replied. “There’s no one better to learn from.”

Cain looked at his watch.

“Wow. I need to get out of here actually. I have an important call I need to make. Why can’t the whole world be on our time zone?”

Cain smiled, nodded, and excused himself. Jack excused himself as well.

Adam watched Cain as he walked away.

“You don’t like him, do you?” Jenna asked.

“Not one bit.”

The Citizen pushed his exhausted body to the brink of its possibilities. The army of three-dozen thugs continued to fall but also continued to rise and persist – thirty-six against one.

The Citizen’s fists were numb now. He had fought since sunrise and the sun had just set. He had scoured most of the city, dethroning the infinite amount of criminals in the massive riot that had engulfed Shadow City – one against thousands.

The Citizen squatted next to Officer Martinez behind the low brick wall that separated Reynolds Park from the downtown streets. Three armed men were positioned around the armored car they had managed to stop fifty feet down the street.

More police were on their way, but the armed men would be on the road long before backup arrived unless the Citizen slowed them down. He needed to get closer to disable them but their automatic rifles made it difficult.

“I want you to give me some cover fire. I’m going to run to that alley,” the Citizen said as he pointed at the alley twenty yards closer and off to the right. “I’ll throw a smoke bomb from there. When I move closer, I want you to move to the alley position. Got it?”

Martinez nodded but fear showed in his eyes. He could not have been older than thirty-five. He probably had young children and a wife at home – people that relied on him for support.

The Citizen shook himself from the distraction and refocused. He watched as two of the men continued moving bags of money from the armored car to the SUV while the third kept lookout.

“Move fifteen feet to the left. Then give me cover.”

Martinez jumped back into a squat and ran the fifteen feet. He took two deep breaths, stood up, and fired at the man keeping watch.

The Citizen broke for the alley. Bullets blasted the brick wall of the apartment building behind him as he ducked behind the alley wall. He then reached into his belt and pulled out a smoke grenade. He pulled the clip and hurled the grenade at the three men.

The Citizen peeked over at Martinez who was ready to bolt. The vigilante turned his head back to the three armed man as the smoke began to fill the area around them. He raised his hand into a position telling Martinez to wait.

Martinez broke as soon as the Citizen’s hand lifted. At the same time, one of the men in the smoke fired a random spurt of gunshots.

Martinez was dead before he even hit the ground.

Adam Noble stood in the back of the crowd at Officer Martinez’s funeral. His head hung low. No one there knew he was the Citizen. Still, guilt overwhelmed him.

He watched Mrs. Martinez crying in her chair. He looked at the two kids next to her – a five-year-old boy and a three-year-old girl – that would never see their father again.

Adam looked at the boy and saw himself. The boy’s father had been stolen from him decades too early. The boy would grow up without a father. In a city as dangerous as Shadow City, that could be lethal.

Adam squeezed Jenna’s hand a little harder. He had insisted she not come. She could not possibly understand why the funeral was so hard on him, but he was glad she was there with him.

With the way things were going behind the mask, he needed her at his side.

Adam still could not wrap his head around how Tomlinson escaped from prison. Tomlinson was probably well connected, having been so high up in the Shadow City underworld, but security is always tight in prisons and Tomlinson is not the easiest person to miss.

It did not matter now, though. Tomlinson was back on the street and the Citizen would have to find him. Adam did not like the thought of having to fight him again.

Things were unraveling for the Citizen. After the death of Officer Martinez, the vigilante’s public opinion had soured. He was starting to lose the fight against the underworld and Shadow City was noticing.

Jenna sat back down on the couch next to Adam. She put a giant bowl of popcorn in his lap as Adam pushed play on the DVD remote. He slid his arm over Jenna's shoulder and she leaned into his chest.

Officer Martinez's death had also put a new thought into Adam's head. What if anyone figured out he was the Citizen? Jenna and his grandfather would be at serious risk. Adam could handle himself but an everyday schoolteacher or an old man with terminal cancer would be a much easier target. Adam could not keep the pair locked in Noble Tower.

"You going to eat any of the popcorn I just slaved over?" Jenna joked.

Adam tried to laugh but the thought of Jenna getting hurt would not leave his mind.

"I'm sorry, Jenna. I can't do this anymore."

Ten minutes later, Adam was alone.

The Citizen finally achieved a breakthrough and the henchmen dropped like flies again. The number of thugs lying defeated on the ground slowly climbed.

Disaster occurred with four men left.

The Citizen lost his focus for only a second. A baseball bat crashed down upon his back. Within a heartbeat, all four men were upon him. Two men grabbed his arms and held his exhausted, almost unconscious body in a position resembling a man crucified. The Citizen's head hung loosely, his neck no longer strong enough to lift his head from its stare at the ground.

Adam Noble stepped up to the microphone and scanned the numerous reporters that had gathered at City Hall to hear him speak.

"Fellow citizens of Shadow City, I come to you today as your neighbor and friend. I come here to save our city and more importantly to save our people.

"Today marks the two year anniversary of when the Citizen first put on a uniform and vowed to protect our streets. For that I am thankful. He has done great work and has saved more people than I can imagine.

"But his service is a double-edged sword. Every time we feel safer due to his service, we also become more dependent upon him. We leave more for him to do and we do less ourselves.

"It is for that reason that I ask the Citizen to retire. He is doing great things for the city but the best thing for this city is his retirement. Only then will Shadow City need to and be able to stand up for itself and save itself. Thank you."

Adam Noble stepped away from the microphone. He knew he could not turn the tide of his war against the underworld back in his favor alone. Adam wondered if his message would ever sink in to the people's heads. More importantly, he wondered if it would sink in in time to save the Citizen.

"I saw your speech yesterday," Jack Noble whispered with a smile. "Moving."

"Can we talk about other things, Grandpa? Don't waste your energy on that stuff."

Jack lay in his hospital bed facing impending death. He looked at his grandson sitting in the chair beside his bed.

Jack had always cared for Adam's safety but now he saw the problem that really plagued his grandson. He could see the shadows under Adam's eyes and the sag of his shoulders. He could see the slight pout that Adam failed to hide. And he could see the hollowness growing back within Adam – the hollowness that had plagued his grandson for years after his father's murder. Adam had lost hope.

“I have to tell you my big life lessons before I go,” Jack whispered as playfully as he could. Adam faked a smile.

“First, make sure you’re happy. Do what you love and give it everything you’ve got. And keep yourself surrounded by people you love. Yes, I mean Jenna.

“Second, in my time on this planet, I’ve learned we’re all here for a reason. I’m starting to think Henry and I were put here to make you the man you’re going to be. You have a bigger future than anyone I’ve ever met.”

Jack paused to cough twice.

“You’re going to save a city. Remember that. Things may be dark now but keep going.”

He paused to cough some more.

“You’ll get out of the tunnel. Trust me.”

Jack paused once again – this time not to cough, though. He looked Adam in the eye and fought hard to get every last word out he could.

“You suffered something no child should ever have to. I tried my best to help you but I know I never did enough.”

Jack coughed again. Adam squeezed his grandfather’s hand as tight as he could and tried to force as much life into the old bones as he could.

“But I did my best. I hope you know that. I did my best. I’ll always love you and I’ll always be with you – like your father is.”

“I know, grandpa. I know,” Adam replied fighting back tears as best he could.

Jack looked at Adam one more time before his head fell slowly into the pillow. His hand relaxed inside Adam’s. The heart monitor switched to a solid whine.

Tears flowed from Adam’s eyes. But it was not sadness alone that flowed through his veins. He could feel pride and dedication pouring itself back into his body.

His grandfather believed in him – that he could save Shadow City. Adam could not let his grandfather down. He knew he had to spend every day of the rest of his life making sure Shadow City was safe. He would prove his grandfather right.

Adam waited in his Lamborghini in the school parking lot. He watched the clock and the rear view mirror, consistently taking deep breaths over and over to calm himself. School had let out a while ago but Jenna still had not come out.

Had she seen his car? Would she not come out until he left? Or did Adam miss her when she climbed into another teacher’s car?

Adam placed both his hands on top of his head and continued breathing deep.

Then Jenna came outside. In a blue shirt and jeans, she walked outside digging through her giant green purse. She looked back up when she reached the parking lot and stopped immediately.

Jenna watched Adam climb out of his car. She put her head down and speed walked toward her car. Adam broke into a jog for Jenna’s car. As soon as she saw him take off, she stopped, looked up, and pointed at him with more rage than he had ever seen in one person. Tears flowed from her eyes. Adam stopped dead in his track.

“No! Leave me alone!”

Every word Adam had prepared vanished from his mind.

Jenna tucked her head back down and resumed walking to her car.

“I know I’m an idiot,” Adam finally said.

“So was I,” she replied. “I’m not making that mistake again.”

Adam scrambled through his head for something to say. Jenna reached her car and tried to open the door. She had yet to unlock the door.

“We weren’t a mistake. Me running was the only mistake.”

Jenna finally unlocked her car door. She extended her hand for the door handle.
“You made me happy for the first time since my father died.”
Jenna’s hand waited on the door handle but she did not pull the door open.
“From the day I met you, I couldn’t have a bad day anymore – as long as I could see you.
As long as I could kiss you. And think about you. Well, until I ran. And I’ve been miserable ever since.
“Now that my grandfather’s gone, you’re all I’ve got. But that’s not what’s important. What matters is you’re all I want.
“I want your smile and your laugh. I want your hugs and kisses. I even want you grading papers and pretending you’re too busy to see me.”
Adam saw a smile crack Jenna’s face.

Tomlinson had been hard to find but persistence paid off. The Citizen had roughed up a few dozen drug dealers to find a couple shipment arrival locations. Tomlinson finally got out of a car at the third location. The Citizen sat perched on a building overlooking the scene, watching with binoculars.

The bear oversaw the unloading of the drugs off the barge and onto the delivery trucks. A heavy security force of about fifty men with automatic rifles stood around the perimeter. Whoever Tomlinson worked for wanted to make sure the Citizen thought twice before interrupting.

Once the trucks were loaded, the armed men piled into the trucks. The Citizen let the trucks drive off. They were not important. Tomlinson was tonight’s prize.

The Citizen moved back down to his motorcycle and tailed Tomlinson’s car as it left. He followed without headlights as far back as he could see the brake lights. When Tomlinson’s car moved into the city’s streets, the Citizen crept a little closer to help ensure he would not lose it.

Tomlinson’s car finally pulled into a garage downtown. The Citizen rode past and tucked his motorcycle into an alley a few blocks down.

The building Tomlinson had entered was a fifteen-story high-rise condominium. The Citizen knew the units were some of the most expensive in Shadow City. He would have known anyways with the glass windows and marble balconies.

The Citizen reached the roof of the seven-story apartment building across the street and started searching rooms for Tomlinson. He looked and he looked, floor to floor over and over again, but found nothing.

As he was ready to give up, someone turned on a light on the eleventh floor. The Citizen peered into the room with his binoculars but the balcony obstructed his view into the room.

Tomlinson’s head eventually poked over the top of the balcony in the room.

Ten minutes later, the men in the room made their biggest mistake, revealing themselves to the Citizen. Onto the balcony with Tomlinson stepped Richard Cain. The balcony was poorly lit for the only light on it came from inside the condo but Adam recognized the slimy, dishonest face he had met once before.

This would not bring down Cain in a court of law. It all could be an extremely unfortunate coincidence for Cain. But Adam, the Citizen, knew what his gut told him. He would gather the evidence he needed and make sure not only Tomlinson but Cain, too, was locked behind bars for life.

One of the four men, a lanky youth, turned to the crowd and spoke, “Today we teach you the most important lesson you’ll learn in your life. Shadow City belongs to us now. It’s going to take a lot more than a silly guy in a costume to get rid of us.”

He turned back to the large man not holding the hero.

“Bruno, let’s see who’s behind the mask.”

The large man stepped in front of the Citizen, reached down, and pulled the black domino mask off of his face. He muttered an indiscernible word. When the man stepped aside, a collective gasp escaped from the crowd. The hero previously wearing a mask now wore the most recognizable face in Shadow City. Adam Noble.

Instantly, the entire crowd understood what Adam Noble had been trying to teach them.

The lanky man broke the silence with a horrifying laugh. “Mr. Noble? What an honor. I’ve always wanted to meet you.”

He stepped over to Noble, squatted, and took Noble’s hand, playfully shaking it. He moved his eyes from Noble to Bruno.

“Kill him.”

Bruno stepped behind Noble. He slid one hand under Noble’s chin and rested one hand on top of Noble’s head. Bruno slowly lifted Noble’s head to face the crowd. He twisted and snapped the man’s neck. Noble fell lifelessly to the ground.

The Citizen stared Tomlinson in the face for the third time. The man towered to the sky and looked like a boulder, even in his black suit. Facing the bear never became easier.

The Citizen had been video recording more evidence against Cain. He was too focused on the camera and let Tomlinson sneak up behind him. Thankfully, the door onto the rooftop needed to be greased.

After tossing his jacket to the side and loosening his tie, Tomlinson stood like a bear ready to eat an unfortunate camper. He did not bother smiling this time. The Citizen had embarrassed him last time and he refused to let that happen again. .

Having used his surroundings last time, the Citizen looked around him. There was nothing to work with this time – he and Tomlinson were alone on a flat empty rooftop, five stories off the ground.

Tomlinson started slowly scooting towards the Citizen, trying to back him to one corner of the building.

The Citizen peeked behind himself, seeing about fifteen feet between him and the corner edge. He stepped forward. The bear froze for a second, surprised someone had the courage to step toward him.

The Citizen made his decision – he had to be on the offensive. If he let Tomlinson run the fight, it would end with the masked man tossed off the roof.

With all of the courage in his heart, the Citizen charged the twenty feet between he and Tomlinson. The bear swung a fist over a ducking Citizen’s head. The hero rose from the dodge and buried his foot with all of the force he had into Tomlinson’s stomach.

The giant stumbled backwards, gasping for air. The Citizen swung his left leg behind Tomlinson’s ankle and pushed the bear’s chest as hard as he could. Tomlinson crashed to concrete.

The Citizen jumped on the bear and pounded his face with all the force and fury he could find. Blood and sweat flew everywhere.

A giant hand wrapped around the Citizen’s side and hurled the vigilante five feet to the right. Tomlinson stood back up and started wiping the blood and sweat from his eyes.

The Citizen bounced a few feet, scraping his body and face against the concrete but he was back on his feet before he’d even stopped rolling. He ran back at Tomlinson before the bear had finished wiping his eyes. The hero bolted past Tomlinson and jumped, swinging his elbow as hard as he could into the back of the giant’s head.

Tomlinson stumbled forward off balance. The Citizen pushed him over from behind and Tomlinson crashed back to the ground.

The hero pounced on the bear again. He grabbed the head the size of a basketball, lifted it off the ground, and smashed it into the concrete as hard as he could. He heard a crunch and a grunt.

Then a giant arm swung around behind its owner and caught the Citizen in the center of the skull. The hero fell off to the side woozy. He tried to stand up but everything around him spun.

The Citizen felt a hand grip him around the throat and pick him off the ground. His vision still spun but he could make out a giant black head staring him in the face. As his vision settled, he saw blood pouring down the face and the giant's nose had been crushed to the left.

The hand closed tighter around the Citizen's neck. He gasped and gasped but could not get any air.

"I'm ending this now," roared Tomlinson.

He started walking towards the closest edge of the rooftop, carrying the suffocating hero at his side like a bag of garbage.

Tomlinson reached the edge and dangled the hero over the alley. The Citizen's feet danced reaching for the edge of the building but only grabbed air. His eyes met with Tomlinson's and the bear smiled.

The Citizen felt the hand let go of his neck. He saw the giant arm slowing moving away from him millimeter by millimeter. He could see he was slowing inching down Tomlinson's body. Then he reached up and grabbed Tomlinson's tie as hard as he could.

His momentum stopped momentarily but ultimately yanked Tomlinson over. The giant tried to regain his balance but he was leaning too far forward. He slowly tipped over the edge and fell headfirst.

The Citizen tried to grab the brick wall as he started falling again. His fingers scraped the brick but found nothing to hold. He looked down and saw the only lip off the building on this side. As his fingers reached it, the Citizen gripped as hard as he could. His fingers caught hold. He felt his momentum stretching every muscle in his body as it tried to keep falling. His shoulders nearly ripped from his body.

But he held on. The Citizen dangled three stories off the ground from a lip of brick sticking out half a finger's length.

The Citizen looked down at the ground. Tomlinson lay sprawled on the ground in a pool of blood.

The crowd stood frozen in shock over what they had just seen. Their hero lay dead on the ground. Slowly, the spirit of Adam Noble sunk into their souls and, by the lead of a teenager near the front, the crowd charged forward at the gang to fight for their fallen hero. Hundreds of people forgot about their safety and threw themselves onto the remaining four thugs. The fight did not last long, for the fury of all the civilians quickly put down the men.

With the entire city unified in avenging Adam Noble, the criminal underworld was quickly destroyed. Many corrupt local figures were jailed, including Richard Cain. The death – the sacrifice – of Adam Noble motivated the city to save itself, a task it completed quickly. Shadow City had finally been jolted from its empathy.

"What do you want me to do?" Adam yelled. The frustration roared from within his voice.

"Be there. You never are," Jenna replied. "I love you and want you, but you can't always just leave me hanging all the time."

“I have no choice. I have to live up to the decisions I’ve made in the past,” Adam stated. He hoped he could salvage the situation but his gut told him he would be leaving Jenna’s apartment without a fiancé.

“You’re right! That’s who you are! But it’s not who you’ve always been. At the start, you were the sweetest, most romantic man I’d ever met. But you’ve separated yourself. It’s like I’m dating two people now. I still get to see the sweet romantic guy every once and a while, but most of the time I’m stuck with the other guy – a guy who’s too busy for me. And, when he is around, he’s too distracted to notice I’m there.”

Adam turned from Jenna to face the window that looked down at the street. He put both of his hands into his hair and exhaled.

“Why won’t you let me in?” she screamed.

Adam was so deep in his thought he stared through everything in front of him. Could he tell her his secret? Could he give up the woman he loved?

Two parts tore at each other within him. One part screamed to let her in. It demanded he not leave the love of his life. No one else came close to her in terms of comforting the pain he had carried for years. He knew he could find no other. He should do anything for her – even give up his uniform.

The other side roared that he had to think of more than Adam Noble. Noble had to put the Citizen first if he wanted to save Shadow City. One woman was not worth an entire city’s population.

Jenna waited for an answer. She did not know what troubled him but she knew Adam was choosing between her and someone else.

Adam stood there still for several moments before he made his decision.

Richard Cain sat perched in his penthouse office gazing at the prime land below. Every building, every light, and every person he saw as an opportunity to increase his riches.

When he heard knocks at the door and the entrance of a man, he removed himself from his craving and turned to face the visitor.

“What do you want?” he asked in his threatening voice. Cain had conquered the criminal underworld and now ruled with an iron fist. No one crossed him – everyone trembled at the mention of his name.

“Um sir,” stated the nervous man, “Tomlinson was in an altercation with the Citizen last night.”

Cain waited as the visitor froze in fear. The messenger prayed to avoid what information remained.

“And what?” Cain demanded.

“He’s dead. The Citizen killed him.”

Cain immediately felt his blood bubble and his skin burn red. The Citizen had been a thorn in his side for two years now. Only the Citizen stood in the way of conquering Shadow City.

When Cain finally spoke, the lust for blood resonated in his voice. “For too long, I allowed this thorn to tickle my side as I worked to secure my grasp upon this city. Now the thorn has stabbed me. Swift and powerful punishment must be dealt. Get me a hold of the dons and the gangs.

“Citizen, the city can thank you. Now is the time to open the gates. Shadow City, I welcome you to Hell.”

Adam stopped in the doorway from the kitchen to the living room. He absorbed Jenna's beauty as she sat lay on the couch in front of the sports channel Adam had left the television on. She starred back at him. He smiled and she mirrored.

"I still can't believe it," Jenna said.

"I can't believe I told you."

He walked over to her and stopped just in front of her, placing his hands on her shoulders. He never moved his eyes from hers. She stood up and he wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her in tightly. She gently grabbed his face and the pair kissed.

After many moments, Adam pulled away and sat on the couch. Jenna lay down, resting her head in Adam's lap. He changed the channel to the news.

Their jaws dropped immediately.

Images of thugs destroying stores and mafia henchmen beating civilians filled the screen. Even police were shown fighting each other. The anchorman reported that Shadow City had broken into a massive riot. He pleaded for the Citizen to save the city.

Jenna's eyes bolted from the television to Adam. She wished he would not go but she knew that was impossible.

Adam remained still, stuck in thought. The second soul within him, the soul he had finally buried in the previous night's passion, roared back to life. He knew the Citizen was needed. He had no choice. He just wondered if he would ever get to be just Adam Noble again.

The entire city converged upon Reynolds Park the afternoon that Shadow City held a memorial for Adam Noble.

Thomas Washington, the newly elected mayor, stepped up to the microphone. Every muscle within his body shook with fear. He had to deliver the eulogy for the greatest person his city had ever known.

Washington began, "For two and a half years, the Citizen ceaselessly fought the evil that wished to consume our city. For two and a half years, the Citizen protected us. Everyday he risked his life to make sure everyone else was safe.

"The Citizen fought so well that he became more than a man. We forgot he was still flesh and blood just like us. We forgot he was mortal – just a man named Adam Noble.

"The Citizen became an idea – an idea that Shadow City could cling to for hope – hope that the city had not been lost like so many people had thought before he put on the mask.

"He became a symbol for justice. He represented the future of Shadow City – a Shadow City no longer overridden by crime. He represented a free, safe Shadow City. He represented the Shadow City of today."

Washington paused as the crowd roared.

"Victor Hugo once said 'An invasion of armies can be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come.' Shadow City, Adam Noble's idea has reached its time. We have come together and our city is saved. The evil has been punished and justice has been served."

Washington paused as the city erupted into another thunderous roar. The applause and cheer filled the entire city.

"Now we are left with one task – one task to continue to redeem ourselves to Adam Noble. It is everyone's job here today to make sure that Adam Noble, one of the greatest human beings to ever walk on Earth, is always remembered – that his epic actions leave a mark on this world and do not rot in yesterday's news. That the lessons he taught us are always remembered.

"He taught us the power of one man. That one man can stand up to an entire army. That we should stand up against all cruelty, all evil, no matter if we are forced to stand alone. He taught us how to be a great human being – a true hero.

“Thank you, Adam.”

As Washington finished his words, his eyes glided over to the tallest hill in Reynolds Park. He lifted his hand and pointed at the giant object covered with a sheet.

The sheet was pulled from the structure revealing a large statue of Adam Noble standing as the Citizen with his mask in his hand.

The city roared once again, this time at a deafening level that shook the mountains.