

1. BRAINS

THE STREET LIGHTS of downtown Johannesburg cast long shadows through the dirty front windows of an abandoned grocery store. Sammy stayed in the shadows as he darted from one hiding place to another. The air around him felt cool, but sweat rolled down his forehead to the end of his stubby brown nose. He crouched behind the customer service desk at the front of the store and listened for signs of someone approaching.

As he listened, he blew the perspiration off the end of his nose with a puff. It was quiet enough to hear the tiny splash as it hit the floor. Not far away, where the shopping carts stood, someone's shoe scuffed the floor. Sammy jerked his head in that direction, banged his cheek on the corner of the desk, and bit his tongue. The taste of blood reminded him how long it had been since his last meal.

I need to go some place they won't think of, he decided. He thought of the stock room behind him. He paused to listen again, fingering the weapon stowed in his pocket. An ambulance siren wailed as it passed the store. Sammy took advantage of the moment and eased open the stock room door just enough to worm his long body through the crack.

The room became almost pitch black when the door closed. Sammy walked with his hands outstretched, waiting to bump into the ladder he already knew was attached to the back wall. When he reached the ladder, he smiled.

No way they'll look for me up here, he thought as he climbed.

At the top, he steadied himself with one hand and used the other to push on the foam tile above him. The square gave way, but a shower of dust fell on him—his first shower in weeks. Struggling not to cough, he poked his head into the ceiling space. It was much brighter than in the room below him. Cracks in the ceiling tiles allowed dim shafts of light to stream in. It was enough illumination for Sammy to see a service walkway suspended from the roof.

He pulled himself all the way up, slowly putting his weight on the walkway. It held firm without creaking. Once he stood at his full height, he gave the platform a test bounce.

“Good,” Sammy whispered, “I don't want to die.”

Using the cracks in the ceiling as spy holes into the main store, he went on the hunt. In less than a minute, he spotted someone creeping around in one of the aisles. The person below was tall and wore faded fatigues; his left forearm sported over a dozen watches, each face reflecting a tiny point of light. In his right hand, he held a weapon similar to Sammy's. Sammy knelt down on the walkway and lifted the nearest tile. His eyes never left the target as he took the weapon out of his pocket, put it in his mouth, and blew.

The only sound was a tiny whistle as the projectile flew out of the end of the tube followed by a dull thump as it connected with its target. The camouflaged shoulders arched backward as it struck right between

his shoulder blades. Sammy noted with satisfaction his good aim. With his enemy motionless on the floor, he replaced the tile and moved on.

The next two targets he found together, working in sync, systematically moving from aisle to aisle at opposite ends. They probably hoped they could trap Sammy inside one of them. Reloading his tube as he walked down the platform, Sammy positioned himself at the end of the next aisle and waited for the one directly beneath him to leave his partner's line of sight.

This shot was even easier than the last. Sammy hit him on the side of the neck and dropped him. The third target, however, got spooked when his partner did not appear, and took cover in one of the broken freezers at the end of an aisle.

The target seemed to have no intention of coming out of hiding. Sammy tried to get a decent shot while still standing on the platform, but could not do it. In a bold move, he lay across the platform and a foam square, keeping as much of his weight on the walkway as possible. His hands shook more than before as he imagined himself falling through the brittle squares onto the metal shelves below him. With one hand holding up the tile, and the other steadying the weapon in his mouth, he took careful aim. He leaned . . . leaned . . . fired.

He heard a thump.

A perfect shot to the ribs! Sammy shook his hand in a fist of triumph. *One left.*

At that same instant, movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention. Sammy tried to adjust his body to face the source, but it was too late. A sharp pain stabbed his chest just below his collar bone, and the foam crumpled beneath him. His fingers scrambled to find something to clutch on to, anything to slow the fall, but they tore through the foam as his legs slipped off the walkway.

He screamed as he tumbled headfirst toward the shelves. His mind whirled in the panic of certain death as his arms and legs flailed uselessly around him. Then, just before he hit the metal shelf, something happened: for a fraction of a second, he slowed in mid-air. He felt it, though only barely—like hitting a thick pocket of warm air and bouncing off it. As he slowed, the weight of his legs flipped him over just in time, and he landed on his back instead of his head.

With a thundering crash, his body slammed into the top shelf. The impact forced the air out of his lungs. A second smaller crash rang out as his shelf collapsed into the one below. He stopped there, motionless and eyes closed. "I'm alive," he said, swallowing air in an attempt to regain his wind. *I'm alive. I'm alive. I'm really alive.*

Sammy heard the sound of his shooter running toward him, swearing under his breath.

"Brains!" Sammy's friend, Feet, hollered as he ran. Feet was breathing almost as hard as Sammy. "Brains, you all right?"

Sammy opened his eyes and saw his friend's pale shocked face. "Yeah—yeah, I'm fine. My back's going to be bruised, but I'm fine."

“I had no idea,” Feet gasped for air, “you’d fall like that.”

Sammy accepted his friend’s hand and let himself be pulled off the shelf. “Did you see what happened?”

“Yeah, man. Scary!” He stared at the wreckage of the shelves. “Sure you’re okay?”

“No—yes. I slowed down in mid-air!” Sammy said. His voice cracked with excitement. “I slowed down!”

Feet grinned, then laughed. “Whatever.”

“No, I’m serious.”

The grin stayed on Feet’s face. The giddiness of getting away with doing something very, very stupid was settling into Sammy, too. “Well, at least you’re not dead. Sure you didn’t just land right?”

Sammy replayed the fall in his mind from beginning to end. “I’m sure. I felt it.”

But Feet just shrugged his shoulders. “You saying you flew? That’s nutty, man.”

Sammy tried very hard not to sound as crazy as Feet thought he was. “I didn’t fly. I slowed down.”

“Then you landed right,” Feet insisted.

Sammy considered arguing again, but decided against it.

“I think we should make the ceiling off limits,” Feet continued, “just to be safe.”

Sammy nodded, but was still thinking about the fall. *I didn’t imagine it*, he told himself. Feet gave him a playful shove, driving those thoughts temporarily out of his mind.

“Hear me, Brains?”

The others were approaching now.

“No, I didn’t.”

“I said you should’ve been quicker.”

“I can’t believe you were behind those pallets.” His face now mirrored the wicked grin his friend wore. “I looked everywhere for you.”

“Obviously not everywhere,” Feet shot back, “or you’d have seen me. Nice thinking, though—going up in the ceiling.”

“That was the whole point. Catch you off guard.”

“How’d you do it? Fly?”

“Ha ha,” Sammy answered and returned Feet’s shove. “There’s a ladder in one of the storage rooms in the front of the store.”

“Yeah . . . never thought of that.”

“Three months here and you’ve never thought about doing that?”

“Who lost? Who lost?” said short and plump Chuckles from behind Sammy, poking him in the back repeatedly. “Brains lost! Brains lost!”

Sammy made a rude gesture to Chuckles. “Shove it up your hole. I took you out. You didn’t even come close to touching me.”

“You still lost.”

“That puts me—uh—three wins in the lead, Brains?” Feet asked. He had an innocent expression on his face that Sammy saw right through.

He pushed Feet again. “Don’t give me that crap. Like you really lost track of your wins.”

“Maybe if you stopped trying to be a one-man show you’d win more games,” Chuckles said. “Right, Feet?”

“What do you mean?” Sammy asked.

Fro-yo’s voice came from several aisles over, swearing repeatedly. “Who’s got my peashooter?”

“Crap,” Chuckles muttered, looking at the peashooter in his pudgy hand. “I’m pretty sure this one’s mine, but I don’t really know ‘cuz I dropped mine after you hit me. Stupid thing must have rolled halfway across the store.”

Chuckles wandered off in the direction of Fro-yo’s voice.

“That a welt?” Feet asked, pointing to the spot where his marble had hit Sammy.

Sammy pulled down the neck of his hoodie and showed his friend. Feet grimaced when he saw the large bruise forming on Sammy’s chest. “And,” Sammy reminded him, “I’ll probably have more just like that all over my back.”

“What hurts more?” Feet asked. “The bruises or me being three games up on you?” He snickered at his own joke.

“Oh please, just shut it.” Then Sammy lowered his voice as he asked, “What was Chuck talking about? Does everyone think that about me? That I’m a one-man show?”

Feet’s answer did not come immediately. “No, Brains. But . . . you should probably start relying on your team, you know, maybe a little more.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” Feet’s answer came too quickly.

“No, what did you mean?”

Feet kicked at one of the bottom shelves still intact and shrugged. “C’mon, man, you know what I mean.”

Sammy responded with a grunt and vigorously rubbed the spot on his shoulder where he had been hit. He liked Chuckles the least anyway. Who cared what he thought? He cursed again as he looked at the spot on his chest. The thick hoodie had done little to cushion the shot. He would indeed have a full-blown welt within the hour.

“That’s got to hurt nasty,” Feet said as he inspected the bruise closer.

“I’ll just add it to my collection. Remember the one on my butt? That only just went away.”

Just then, Watch showed up, complaining about a large purple and blue bump on his back and how three of his watches were no longer ticking the time. Sammy had to admit to himself that maybe he’d gotten off lucky—but it was Feet who had won. That always burned.

That's all right, Sammy told himself, I'll get him in the next game.

Feet was Sammy's greatest adversary and best friend. They looked absolutely nothing alike but had everything in common. Sammy was tall with chalky brown skin and a powerful build for his age; Feet stood a good ten centimeters shorter, pale skinned with jet black hair and blue eyes that shined with much more intelligence than he let on. Because they were acknowledged by the gang as the best army players out of the seven, they were never allowed to play on the same team. The rule only fueled their competition.

Watch piped up, "So what's next on the evening's agenda?"

"Where's Honk and Gunner?" Sammy asked.

"Oh, good question. Where's Honk and Gunner?"

Gunner called out far down the aisle, another tall kid but paler and with thick glasses that always seemed on the verge of slipping from his nose. He and Honk carried about a dozen pizzas between the two of them.

Feet turned to Sammy with a raised eyebrow, silently asking what he was thinking.

"Where did the food come from?" Sammy asked them.

Honk and Gunner exchanged smirks. "Pizza Pop's down the street— like you needed to ask. Ain't eaten nothing since yesterday morning. My stomach's been screaming like a son of a—"

Sammy swore and spat a piece of dust out of his mouth. "What if you'd been caught? They catch you and we all go straight back to the Grinder! You know how lucky it is we even found this place?"

"Don't be a hypocrite!" Gunner shouted, but then Feet stepped between Sammy and the boys with pizzas. "No, Feet. For real. Whenever Sammy's the one who's starving, it's fine to steal, but—"

"Chill," Feet interrupted. He turned to Sammy. "Brains, come on, we need the food. Honk, Gunner, you really should have run it by all of us before you did it. Don't be nutty, man."

"Chuckles told us to go get it after he took us out of the game." Gunner complained.

Sammy could not ignore the rumblings in his stomach. This was not the first time he had eaten something he should have paid for; it likely wouldn't be the last, either. Besides, how could he ask for more than a piping hot pizza when his last four meals had come from cold, smelly dumpsters?

The fresh food raised everyone's spirits, Sammy's especially. The night was cool and young, and his belly was almost filled. All thoughts of the falling incident were forgotten when Gunner challenged Chuckles to see who could eat more slices. When Chuckles won on the ninth slice, the boys needed something else to do. That was the problem with life as fugitives: getting bored happened too often, and sooner or later one or more of the boys left to steal whatever they could get their hands on.

"Now what?" Fro-yo asked.

"Manhunt?" Sammy said. He loved playing games. It was easy to lose himself in the competition. The bad memories went away.

"Come on, we just played a game," Honker said, wiping his large, chronically dripping nose.

"I'm down with a run of flags," Gunner said.

“Sure, flags,” Sammy said, finalizing the decision.

“How long will the game be?” Watch asked as he set the timer on his favorite digital watch. “There’s a late movie tonight me and Honk are gonna sneak into. It sounds like there’s a lot of boobies.”

“Two— two and half hours?” Sammy suggested. Anything to keep his friends off the street for a little longer.

“That’s too long,” Chuckles said. “Last time we played for only an hour and a half, and both teams stole the flag almost a dozen times each.”

“Just because you have trouble counting above ten with your shoes on,” Sammy said, and several others laughed.

“Very funny,” Chuckles said, taking a meaty swipe at Sammy’s arm, but missing badly. “Me, Brains, Honk, and Gunner against Fro-yo, Watch, and Feet,” he said, counting off. “Two hour time limit. Watch, make sure you’re honest on the time. Everyone has to go to the customer service counter and touch—did you hear that Fro?—*touch* the register before you can throw a ball after you’ve been hit.”

“Sounds great,” Sammy said. “Who’s got my balls?”

They all laughed again.

“I do,” Honk said, swaggering. Gunner gave Honk a push, and Honk handed green-glowing tennis balls to Sammy, Chuckles, and Gunner, and blue-glowing racquet balls to the others.

Sammy led his three teammates to their side of the store where they set up their first flag. The store was so dark now that the flag could not be seen from a distance of more than a few meters. Sammy turned to his teammates and asked quietly, “Who’s guarding the base?”

Honk whispered, “I’m on that.”

“All right, just don’t get ambushed. And make sure you muffle your sneezes. Remember the last time you had sneezing fits? You sounded like a flock of peahens.”

“A flock of what?” Honk asked.

Sammy ignored his question. “Everyone else just play offense, got it?”

“Don’t you think we should have some kind of a team strategy this time, Brains?” Chuckles muttered.

“Hmm, yeah, let’s think.” Sammy tapped his chin in a mocking gesture. “Strategy . . . strategy . . . how about get more flags than the other team?”

Chuckles blew a raspberry and muttered something that sounded like “one-man show.” A retort was on the tip of Sammy’s tongue when a shrill whistle sounded.

“They’re coming,” Gunner said.

“We’re gonna get slaughtered,” Chuckles said as he crept away.

Sammy repressed the urge to throw his ball into the back of Chuckles’ head. Instead, he snuck off in the opposite direction, jamming the green-glowing tennis ball into the pocket of his sweatshirt. He stalked up the main row, looking for a blue light and listening for the sound of footsteps.

He heard the double doors in the back of the store swing open and shut again.

“Hey! Out of bounds,” Sammy called. “That’s a point for the other team.”

As soon as he shouted, footsteps came toward him. He dashed into an aisle and hid on the floor under a low shelf. He waited there until the footsteps moved past him. More came, but this time he heard them in the aisle just ahead.

Chuckles’s voice taunted in the same vicinity, “I see you.”

Then Sammy heard something unexpected: the sound of compressed air being discharged from the standard-issue electroshock weapon only police were allowed to carry.

Chuckles gasped, and Sammy heard his friend’s heavy body hit the floor hard.

More footsteps. Footsteps all around!

He knew what was going on: the pizzas.

“Shocks!” he screamed. “The Shocks! RUN! Get out!”

Two beams of light pierced the dark. Combined with Sammy’s adrenaline rush, the store now seemed much brighter. His ears picked up every noise as he ran down the aisle to find Feet, and hoping the Shocks wouldn’t find him first.

Another voice rang out, this time an older man’s: “Attention children. You are all under arrest for theft and trespassing. Officers have surrounded the vicinity. You are ordered to give yourselves up.”

Sammy snickered despite his situation. None of them would “give themselves up.” The weight of the pact the gang had made before escaping the Grinder was stronger than their fear of the Shocks. Even still, his desperation grew as he hurried into another aisle to find his friend. He turned the corner and ran straight into him. Sammy’s jaw smacked Feet’s forehead, and both friends hit the ground.

Feet got up first and helped Sammy, asking in a whisper, “Do you know where anyone else is?”

“No.”

“Do the Shocks know where we are?”

“I don’t think so.”

They heard footsteps approaching quietly from behind. It was only Fro-yo and Gunner.

“They got Honk and Watch,” Fro said.

“And Chuckles,” Sammy added.

Feet swore under his breath. “Get us out of here, Brains.”

Sammy’s brain gathered and assembled the data like a machine. *Six to twelve Shocks. All armed. Four of us—unarmed. Need cover, weapons. Two Shocks came in from back door. Front doors, side doors still being watched. Best chance ... what’s our best chance?*

“We’re agreed that we’re not going down without a fight?” he asked in a whisper.

All three gave him affirmative answers. His friends upheld the oath. That was what he wanted to hear. Sammy calculated more factors into consideration. *The shopping carts are only six—no, seven meters away. Need to distract Shocks.*

He took out the ball in his pocket and threw it as far from the carts as he could. It bounced on the top of a shelf. “Over here,” a Shock said.

Sammy heard them running to the noise. “Okay, quiet. Follow me.”

Sammy led them to the front of the store and motioned for them to each grab a shopping cart. “Go,” he whispered to them. “Go and don’t stop.”

The wheels of the cart squealed loudly on the floor as the four boys sprinted to the back of the store through the narrow rows. Sammy was slow next to Feet, but by no means a turtle. A bright light shined down their aisle, right into Sammy’s eyes.

“Stop right there!” a voice ordered them ahead. But instead of obeying, they ran harder and tilted the front of the carts up to shield themselves.

The Shocks fired at them, but the puffs of air were followed by the sound of metal bouncing off metal. Jolts ricocheted off the carts and electric blue sparks created tiny fireworks in all directions. The heat of the sparks on Sammy’s face made him giddy with fear and the insanity of the moment. The Shocks shouted again for them to stop, realizing too late that they could not intimidate the boys.

Sammy and Feet rammed them, sending them sprawling out onto the dusty floor. Sammy picked up the shocker that clattered on the ground. Fro-yo and Gunner were first to reach the double doors in the back of the store and pushed through them with their carts. Feet continued pushing his cart while Sammy ran behind, holding the weapon ready to fire.

“Give it to Gunner,” Feet said, reaching for the weapon.

Sammy pulled it out of his friend’s reach and asked, “Why?”

“He shoots better.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

They ran for the main exit in the rear of the store that loomed ahead. A Shock stepped out from behind a garbage compressor. His beam pointed square at Sammy’s chest. “Drop it! NOW!”

Sammy threw himself behind the cover of Feet’s cart and fired at the Shock first. His hands trembled so badly that he missed all three shots. The Shock stood his ground and returned fire. Feet snatched the weapon from Sammy, let go of the cart, and fired off three more jolts.

A shiny triangle formed by three metal darts hit the Shock in his neck. Just as the man reached up to pull the jolt out of his skin, it activated, dropping him to his knees in convulsions and finally rendering him unconscious.

Feet cursed badly, then crossed himself and said, “I’ve just nailed a Shock. I’m so dead if we get caught.”

Fro-yo and Gunner abandoned their carts while Feet picked up the second shocker and tossed it to Gunner. They burst through the back door into the cool night, still running.

The back of the store opened into an alley with two exits. They went left. Halfway to the main street, they heard the door behind them slam open again. Sammy turned to see the other two Shocks coming out of the store, one yelling into his com as he ran, “Four juveniles, two black, two Caucasian, headed west through the alley onto Market Street. Armed and dangerous, shoot on sight.”

Sammy released a long stream of curses and checked behind them again.

“Where to now?” Fro-yo asked as he followed Sammy at a run.

“Joubert Park.”

“Regroup?” Feet said. “No, that’s nutty.”

“There’s always the chance,” Sammy insisted between breaths.

“There’s no chance,” Gunner said.

“Look at us. We got out,” Sammy said finding it more and more difficult to speak while running. “How long does a jolt take a person out for, Gunner?”

“Just a few minutes,” was the answer, “but I don’t think--”

“Then we go,” Sammy decided. “We picked the park as a group.”

The others stopped arguing, probably to save their breath. As they headed north in the direction of the park, a black car with flashing lights turned onto the same road about a hundred meters behind them.

“Do they see us?” Fro-yo asked.

“Does it matter?” Sammy shot back. “Just run!”

They crossed the length of another building and turned a corner, out of view of any Shocks or passing patrols. Sammy glanced back and spotted a car with flashing lights pulling to a stop in front of the alley they had just left.

“Now what?” Fro-yo asked.

“Still going to the park,” Sammy said.

“C’mon, Brains,” said Gunner. “We got to go and not look back. I’m tired.”

“Hey, who busted us out of the Grinder?” Sammy yelled. “Me. They didn’t find us because we were in the store, Gunner. They found us because you were stupid and ripped off those pizzas. You brought them to us. You did.”

“This is different, Brains,” Fro-yo said. “We get caught now—after busting out once, we’re going away for a long time. When they realize who we are—”

Sammy did not bother letting Fro-yo finish. He started running again. Someone cursed at him, but they all followed. Sammy led them under the shadows of buildings until they emerged three blocks east of the black car. He stopped behind a dumpster to make sure they would not be seen when they went into the open.

“Is it clear?” he asked Fro-yo.

“Brains,” Feet started to say, but Sammy ignored him. “Brains, this is bad trouble—they’ll get us.”

“So what would you do?” Sammy asked, but Feet did not have time to answer. Fro-yo, whose head had been poking around the side of the dumpster, fell straight back into Feet. Sammy saw the jolt protruding from his friend’s thin black tee shirt.

“You dirty mother—!” Gunner shouted, but his voice was cut off with a jolt to the right shoulder.

Sammy and Feet ducked behind the dumpster, scattering three rats eating a rotted apple core. “They got a heat lock on us,” Sammy hissed. They had no chance of helping their friends now. “We need to shake it. This way.” They ran down another alley, leaving Gunner and Fro-yo. Dense walls were their best shot at getting rid of a heat lock besides running into a large crowd of people.

Feet stopped abruptly and clutched his sides in pain. “I can’t keep running like this!” he exclaimed, gasping for air. “I don’t think we can get away.”

“We keep going as long as we have to,” Sammy said, leaning against the brick wall.

“But how long till they catch us?”

“Never if we keep running.”

“We can’t outrun them forever. They’re Shocks. We’re nothing! Sooner or later they’ll catch up to us. It’s just a matter of time.”

Sammy shoved Feet against the wall and got in his face to snap him out of it. “Hey! We swore we’d never go back to the Grinder. I can’t go back there, Feet. Never.”

“I don’t know what to do anymore,” Feet cried. His voice cracked. “I don’t want to run forever. I just want a life. I just want a freaking normal life!”

Sammy had to say something. If not, Feet was going to lose it for good.

He calmed himself first and tried to hitch a smile on his face. His mouth felt all wrong, and he wondered how nutty it made him look. “Let’s leave the city for good,” he suggested. “If we make it to another territory and turn ourselves in as runaways, maybe we could ask to be put in with fosters again. Maybe they’ll even keep us together.”

The stupid, probably impossible suggestion worked. Feet now had some hope. Most of the wild-eyed fear left his eyes and he asked, “You really think so?”

“Yeah,” Sammy lied. “It’s worth a shot, right?”

“Where—where would you want to go?” Feet asked, his voice still shaky and tight.

“I don’t know yet,” Sammy said as he turned to walk, “let’s think about it.”

The longer they talked, the more Feet calmed; the panicky edge in his voice gradually disappeared. Occasionally, a vehicle passed. The cars made very little noise, and Sammy often did not hear them approach until too late. Each time one passed they hid behind trash bins or parked cars. It became easy for Sammy to think they had lost the Shocks for good.

Even if he knew the idea was stupid.

An unmarked armored truck painted all black turned onto the street, silently driving toward them. Sammy had a bad feeling about it the moment he saw it. If it was a Shockbox, more than a dozen Shocks would be inside it. Then red lights began to flash as it picked up speed.

Sammy groaned, alerting Feet to the new danger. They sprinted forward to the next alleyway. Sammy could hardly see a thing. The voices and footsteps of Shocks were not far behind. As they ran farther into the network of alleys, the nauseating odor of garbage and decaying animals grew thicker. Sammy felt trapped. At any moment they might hit a dead end.

And then what?

Frantically, he led Feet through one blind turn after another, praying that each corner would not be the last. They came to a fork in the alley and Sammy went right, hoping it would take them out of the maze.

The darkness prevented him from seeing more than a couple meters ahead, and all he could make out was the blood-red brick of an old building on one side and the metal siding of a warehouse on the other. Without warning, everything in front of him went completely black, and he heard a loud BANG.

Pain shot through his skull as his head smacked into a thick metal door, sending Sammy tumbling backward. Bright spots like little bombs splashed his vision. When he looked up, hope abandoned him. The only routes left were through the metal door or past the approaching Shocks. He and Feet pulled, pushed, and pounded on the door. It was firmly locked.

How can this happen? he asked himself.

The Shocks were very close; Sammy turned to meet them. Rage boiled inside him as he saw their beams of lights draw closer. The irony of it all. They had chased so long and hard after him and his friends for stealing food, but where had the worthless Shocks been when his life had fallen apart?

Where were you a year ago when my life was normal? When I was still good? It's not fair! He wanted to scream all this at them, but he was too terrified.

A reflection from the ground caught his eye. It was a pipe. Reason fled from him. He picked it up, brandishing it like a club. "Remember your promise," he told Feet, who pulled the shocker out of the back of his pants. "Don't let them get us."

The Shocks were close enough now that Sammy heard their labored breathing. Sammy hated them. He hated the world. He hated his friends for allowing themselves to get caught. And he felt real fear now. The lights on their guns bounced off the brick wall before the Shocks even turned the corner into the narrow space where Feet and Sammy were trapped.

Six Shocks stopped only two meters away from where the boys held their ground; they formed a line to barricade off any escape. Three shockers were pointed at each boy. One of men in the middle yelled, "Put down the weapons and get on the ground. Put down your weapons!"

Feet immediately got down onto the ground, but Sammy had no intention of obeying. How could Feet give up so easily? The boiling rage inside reached a critical point. He held the pipe higher in the air and defiantly screamed, “NO!”

Three of them fired at Sammy. The instant he heard the sound, he closed his eyes and threw his hands out to brace himself. A powerful surge flowed from his head, down his neck, and through his arms. It spread out of his hands and fingertips. He waited for what felt like an eternity for one of the jolts to hit him—to send him down to the ground in uncontrollable spasms.

It never came.