

# CUT

Brock opened his eyes, rolled onto his back, and squinted into the afternoon sunlight. The wounds on his arms and torso had stopped bleeding, and were now covered in clots of red and black. Reaching up to touch the side of his face, he could feel a long slice running from his temple down to his jawline. Everything ached.

He managed to raise himself up; first on his elbows, and then on the palms of his hands. Each movement brought new waves of pain. After a few moments, he found the strength to stand upright, but his first step caused him to falter and fall to his knees. Nonetheless, he had no choice at this point. He forced himself back to his feet, and began slowly plodding up the hill, his pistol clutched tightly in his bloodied right hand.

As he reached the crest of the hill, Brock looked down the other side, where he saw Marius Krane lying in a clearing a few yards away. He was still alive, but he wasn't going anywhere. Both his legs appeared to be broken. More importantly, his rifle lay on the ground about fifteen feet away, clearly out of reach.

Marius turned his head to stare back at Brock, his teeth gritted in a combination of pain and defiance. An odd look of calm now appeared on his face, as if he was resigned to his fate. He went to speak, but no words came out. He coughed, swallowed hard, and then began to talk in a barely audible whisper.

"So it's come to this," he said hoarsely. For some odd reason, he seemed to be smiling, although it could have just as easily been a grimace. "This is what you wanted. Do it quickly."

Brock exhaled loudly. His voice, too, was low and rough. "This isn't what I wanted. But this is how it has to be."

Marius found something funny about that comment. He began to laugh, but it quickly dissolved into a series of hacking coughs. "Don't pretend that this moment, this very moment, isn't what you've been dreaming about. Fantasizing about, even. At least have the decency to admit that. At least let the last thing I hear on this earth be the truth."

"I am telling the truth," Brock retorted. "I take no pleasure in your demise. Between the two of us, we have caused suffering and death for countless others, and to what end? For this moment, when one of us dies and the other just walks away? Is that some sort of victory?" Brock leaned forward, placing his hands on his knees. He looked like he was about to faint. "I have become the thing that I loathe. I have become violence in the pursuit of peace. I have become destruction in the pursuit of preservation. I have become death in the pursuit of life." He now spoke slowly and deliberately. "And I will continue to live this paradox, this hypocrisy, unless this all stops....and it – must – stop – now."

He then quickly bolted upright, and in a completely clear voice, asked, "Can I do that again?"

"CUT!" Warner Fife's voice blared through the bullhorn. A moment later, he charged over the hill, as the rest of the camera crew watched. "What the hell is going on?" he shouted, running directly towards the actor playing Brock. He did not look pleased. "Explain?"

"It just thought that, you know, this was a big decision point for Brock, and we needed to pause a little more dramatically between words."

“Well, the way you did it was just fine, but that’s beside the point now.” Warner spun around and began marching back. “One more time!”

“Can we just start again from here?”

“No, this was a single continuous shot, so get back down on the ground and look wounded. And please don’t drag it out so much this time. It’s not like you’re coming back from the dead.”

And so they shot the scene again. And again when a plane could be heard passing overhead. And again when Brock and Marius forgot the sequence of dialogue and spoke over each other. And again when a bird flew in front of the camera. Finally, after several takes, Warner had the shot he wanted, or at least one he could live with. They were beginning to haul the equipment over to film the next scene, when one of the crew members – a younger fellow, his name was Brad or Brian or something, Warner couldn’t remember – ran over to him, holding his phone up in the air like it was some sort of beacon.

“I have a message from Lenora,” he shouted.

Warner looked across at him, visibly upset. “What the hell does she want?”

“She says that Brock has to kill Marius.”

Warner kicked into a whole new level of anger. “Are you serious!” he bellowed.

“Yep. And she is too.” They had long ago learned to not take Warner’s reactions personally. He simply got mad at everyone in the course of the day.

“Give me – no, wait – damn it! Where’s Armand?” He went to grab his baseball cap from the top of his head with the intent of throwing it at someone, but decided that would look too staged. Instead, he grabbed the bullhorn. “That’s it for today. 8:00 am tomorrow!” The entire cast looked at each other in confusion. Normally they would be working until the last bit of light left the sky; it was now just after one o’clock.

At this point, Warner was already halfway to the trailers. “Where the hell is Armand?” he shouted to no one in particular.

Half an hour later, Warner was well on his way to the city, sitting in smouldering anger in the back of a limousine, while Armand silently navigated his way along the highway. He had been promised full creative control over the latest Brock Lineman production, tentatively entitled *Brock Lineman: Agent of Justice: The Devolution of the Octoplex*, but now it appeared that promise was being rescinded, like so many others over the years.

Warner was one of the few people who could walk into the headquarters of P83 Studios without any questions being asked. He was instantly recognizable, with his dark beard, aviator glasses, and ever-present baseball cap, which was so worn no one could tell whatever logo used to be on it. On this particular day, the only person that even said a word to him was the security guard on the 24<sup>th</sup> floor. “Good afternoon, Mr. Fife”, he mumbled, without bothering to look up from his newspaper. Warner responded with a wave in his general direction.

Upon walking into Lenora’s office, he found her standing at the bar. She was always at the bar. Today, she wore a white t-shirt and faded jeans. Warner didn’t think this was appropriate attire for the office, but no one would dare tell her. “Do we have an appointment?” she asked casually.

“We do now. What’s this about Marius being killed? That wasn’t in the script.”

“Oh, yeah,” she replied, as if this was the most trivial of details. “We ran the numbers and decided that it was best that he end up dead.”

“Best for who?” Warner responded. “This was supposed to be a major inflection point in Brock’s character arc.” With a deal in place for four more Brock Lineman pictures, Warner was thinking ahead.

“Maybe so, but if we don’t make that change, then the low end of the 95% confidence interval for our expected profit drops below zero.”

Warner didn’t quite understand what she was talking about. “But you promised me full creative control.”

“Yes, but that was before we did our latest scenario analysis. Look, this studio has \$2 billion tied up in production costs each year. A chunk of that gets thrown away on art-house films that nobody goes to see, in the hope that we might win a couple of Oscars. Then we have the cop movies and romantic comedies that we’re lucky to break even on. What’s left is the tentpole films with franchises like Brock Lineman, which could make or break the studio. We can’t take the chance of booking a loss on any of these.”

Warner was getting increasingly frustrated. “But what’s changed? I got the green light from you to let Marius live on!”

“A lot has changed. I don’t know that you’ve noticed, but the general economy is starting to soften. And when economic times get tough, as you should know” – implying that he didn’t – “audiences don’t want feel-good stories about old enemies burying the hatchet. They want something cathartic, where the bad guy gets what he has coming to him, and gets it good. So taking that into account, and adjusting the correlation coefficients for expected weather patterns next summer, we are looking at a conditional tail expectation for losses at the 90% level that exceeds our risk tolerance.”

“Where in hell are all these numbers coming from?” Warner shouted.

“From our actuary,” she replied matter-of-factly, gesturing towards the corner of the room where Greg Collen sat with his laptop, trying to maintain a low profile. It had worked, since Warner had no idea he was there. Greg nodded politely. “How’re you doing?” he said.

“We needed to bring in some resources to help manage the risk profile of this studio,” Lenora continued. “For too many years, we’ve made and released films, crossed our fingers, and hoped that enough people went to see them. If it worked, great. If it didn’t, then we took the financial hit and moved on. But I want to still be in this job next year, and I don’t want to gamble on our success anymore. Greg has done the analysis, and built the models, and we now have a better understanding of what works in the current environment. And a kinder, gentler Brock Lineman is not what people want to see. We need him to kill Marius in this film. Make it happen.” It was clear that she was not up for negotiation.

Warner was incensed, but also cognizant that there was nothing he could do about it, so long as the studio held all the purse strings. “All right,” he said through clenched teeth. “But I’m doing this under duress!”

Lenora glanced over at Greg and raised her eyebrows, as if to say “what can you do”? All Greg could do was nod back.

Greg had gotten used to seeing this conflict between studio management and creative types since he started this practice four years ago. He made it a point of staying out of the debate, since his role wasn’t to help mediate disputes. His job was to do the analysis, and paint as accurate as possible a picture of how a film would perform, and more importantly, the likelihood of it being a financial bust. This was still a new area of actuarial work, and Greg was one of the few actuaries based in and around Hollywood to serve this market. He had developed some pretty comprehensive models, with hundreds –

sometimes thousands – of inputs, all of which were meant to assess audience reaction, at least in terms of dollars they were willing to spend. There were still some major studios that hadn't bought into the whole concept, but Greg felt that he was gaining ground. His clients appreciated having a better idea of what their financial fortunes were expected to be, rather than just relying on the whims of a notoriously fickle movie-going public. Of course, this sort of analysis did not sit well with directors like Warner Fife, who wanted to have free rein to do what they wanted, but Greg didn't have to deal with them, which he was thankful for.

Which is why he was shocked to receive the phone call that he got a couple of weeks later. The message was rather terse: "Warner Fife would like to engage your services for a project. He'll meet with you this coming Wednesday at 2:00. We will send a driver." Greg noted that they didn't ask if he was free, but he had learned that was the way things operated out here. They assumed you would just arrange your affairs to accommodate them, which of course, he did.

Armand picked him up precisely on time, and they made their way into the hills overlooking Los Angeles. Greg had been in the area numerous times before, and when they arrived at Warner's home, he wasn't impressed as he thought he would be. Sure, it was a typical California mansion, but something about it was a bit, for lack of a better word, off. The circular driveway out front was covered with twigs and leaves, and was in need of a good sweeping. The white paint on the surrounding pergolas was flaked and peeling. And, he couldn't be sure, but he thought he got a glimpse of something green growing on the surface of the pool out back.

The foyer of the house was more of the same. Under normal circumstances, it would have been pretty spectacular, were it not for the piles of furniture and boxes of books, files, and papers that covered most of the floor. The sitting room off to the side was in a similar state of disarray, only with the added feature of having all sorts of camera equipment scattered around.

Armand escorted Greg to a wicker couch. "I'll get you a drink. A whiskey sour." It was more of a question than a command. Greg accepted it graciously, and waited for Warner to appear, not knowing how long he would be sitting there. He prepared for it to be an hour or two if necessary.

Mercifully, Warner arrived within five minutes. He entered the room in a flourish, wearing a pair of ragged jean shorts and a long-sleeved shirt, engaged in a phone call. "No, I do not want him having anything to do with the production. Why? Because he's a dilettante, and if you need to explain that word to him, go ahead." He then spotted Greg, raised a finger to indicate he would be a minute, and wrapped up his call. "Look, just make it happen, please? Today? All right, love you, Charlie. Bye." He then turned his full attention to Greg, grabbing an ottoman – it didn't match the couch – and taking a seat directly in front of Greg. "Okay," he declared, clapping his hands together. "Here's what I need. I'm developing an independent film, and I need your analysis to draw in potential investors. Can you do that?" Getting right to the point. Greg kind of liked that.

"That's what I do," he said confidently. "What's the movie about?"

"The working title is 'The Life of Alessandro Rossi'. He was a peasant that lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in what is now modern-day Italy."

"And what is his claim to fame?"

Warner smiled broadly, as if he were to impart something profound. "Nothing," he declared.

"Nothing?"

"Not at all. His name has been lost to history."

"Then how do you know about him?"

“He’s a fictional creation,” Warner said, as he leapt off the ottoman, apparently to seem more expressive. “The film goes through a single day of his life, when basic survival was far from guaranteed, when the simplest things we take for granted, like having our next meal, represented an existential struggle.”

“I see,” Greg said. “Any idea who’ll be playing him?”

“Oh, nobody you’ve heard of. Or anyone for that matter. I want someone completely unknown, so they don’t associate him with some other character they may have played. I want the audience to be solely focused on him, and the suffering that was an integral part of living during that time in history.”

They were interrupted by stocky denim-clad man who walked into the room holding a large cardboard case. “Where do you want this?” he asked.

“What is it?” Warner asked.

“The tempranillo.”

Warner shook his head. “I don’t know. Leave it at the top of the stairs.” He turned back to Greg. “This will be a complete departure from what I’ve done until now. No special effects, no battle scenes, nothing like that. The audience will see the world through the eyes of someone from a different time and place, and experience a single day just like they would.”

He was visibly enthused about the project. Greg was about to ask another question when they were interrupted by a woman who walked into the room unannounced. She wore sunglasses and held an exceedingly large purse under one arm. Warner turned and looked at her. He clearly knew who it was. “What is it?” he asked, sounding slightly peeved.

“I’ve come for the rest of the glassware,” she replied, in a distinctly bored tone.

“It’s packed in boxes under the pool table.”

She shook her head. “Really, Warner,” she muttered as she walked away.

Greg couldn’t help himself. “Who was that?”

“Ex-wife,” Warner replied. “One of them.” He turned his attention back to Greg. “So what do you need to get started?”

“I’ll need any financials for the project. Copy of the script, even if it’s still being developed. A list of who will be appearing in the film.”

“You won’t know any of the actors,” Warner replied. He seemed to be somewhat proud of that fact. “How long do you need?”

“Give me three weeks?”

“Excellent,” Warner replied as he clapped his hands again to signal the end of the meeting.

“Thanks so much. We’ll talk to you then. Armand will get you home.”

And, in an instant, he was gone again. Greg noted that they didn’t discuss fees, but that was common. He knew his clients would pay him whatever he wanted, even if it was wildly overpriced, but he kept his costs reasonable nonetheless. You never knew when something you did would come back to bite you in this town.

Their next meeting was set for later that month, at an outdoor café that went by the unpronounceable name of Kdtàn. Greg ordered what he thought was a steak, but turned out to be three thin strips of beef arranged in the shape of a flower on a bed of arugula. He was still hungry after he was done. Warner ordered a quinoa salad which he ate quickly and wordlessly, evidently not wanting to let business interfere with lunch. When he was done, he dropped his fork onto his plate with a loud clatter. “OK, what have you got?” he said.

Greg had been dreading this moment. “I know you don’t like to waste a lot of time, so I will get right to the point,” he replied. He paused for a moment before delivering the news. “This project is going to be a financial disaster.”

He didn’t know what Warner’s reaction would be, so Greg was somewhat surprised when he just nodded silently. “OK, tell me why.”

Greg took the opportunity to jump into the details. “I’ve run thousands of scenarios with this, and almost none of them return a profit. On average, your investors will only get back sixty cents for every dollar they put into the project. Thirty percent of the time, it’s less than forty cents. Ten percent of the time, it’s absolutely nothing.”

Warner still nodded. He was clearly paying attention. Greg decided to keep going. “You have no familiar names appearing in the film, no action, no conflict, no exciting locales, no interesting relationships, and the main character dies at the end. It’s depressing and disturbing and nobody is going to want to see it. You can put your marketing budget through the roof, and that wouldn’t make a difference. The best case scenario for making a profit is that all the other major studios close up operations and stop producing films, and that’s not something I would want to bank on. So my recommendation is to not do it.”

Greg felt his pulse racing. He had just trashed a director’s pet project, which he himself knew was a risk. His reputation could take a hit if Warner Fife started telling everyone what a doomsayer he was. News spread quickly in Hollywood, and reputations could die just as quickly.

Warner, though, seemed almost philosophical. He took a long sip from his wine and cocked his head slightly. “Do you think you’re missing something here, Greg?”

“I can’t conceive what that would be.”

“OK, I get that, so I’ll tell you. Do your models encapsulate the value of the experience I am trying to create?”

Greg was confused. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Ask yourself – what is the value of watching a beautiful sunset?” He gestured to the west, but their view was blocked by a twenty-storey apartment building. “Imagine we could no longer do that. What sort of price would you put on that privilege?”

Greg thought about the question. “Well, what you could do is ask people how much they would pay to see a sunset if that option was no longer available to them, and....”

Warner interrupted, but not in a rude way. “I think you’re missing the point,” he said. “The value of a sunset, or looking out over the Grand Canyon, or riding a gondola in Venice – if you try to put a price tag on those things, it would be in the trillions of dollars. Nothing can replicate what you feel when you see or do that. Have you even seen the Mona Lisa in person?”

Greg had. It was a lot smaller than he expected.

“It’s a thing of sublime beauty. It’s not something you can put a price on. But the world is an infinitely better place because it exists. Do you see what I’m saying?”

Greg sort of did and didn’t at the same time.

“I’m not saying that my film a comparable work of art, but I do know we are better off by having it, and watching it, and feeling all the emotions that come with it – good and bad. Your models look at dollars and cents, production costs and box office receipts, audience reaction, the economy, the price of milk, for all I know.” Greg actually did have a parameter for grocery prices. Fewer people spent money on movies when food was more expensive. “But there’s a big piece that’s missing. It’s what a work of art brings to the world. There’s value there. You’re just not capturing it.”

Greg could tell that Warner wasn't being condescending. He sincerely believed in the truth of that he was saying. But that didn't change what his work was telling him. "I get all that," he said. "But you're still going to lose your shirt on this one." Just as he said that, he coincidentally noticed that there was a hole under the arm of Warner's polo shirt.

Warner smiled, much to Greg's surprise. "We come from different worlds," he said. "You see things your way, and I see things mine. That's why you're good at crunching numbers, and that's why I'm good at creating. Neither of us is right or wrong. We just have different perspectives." With that, Warner extended a handshake. "Thanks for work, anyway, Greg. Maybe we can work together again sometime."

Greg doubted that would ever happen, but he still remained somewhat astonished at his reaction.

As he drove home, Greg thought a lot about their conversation. Did Warner have a point? Did all of Greg's risk assessment models miss that key element, the intrinsic value of a creative venture? He agreed that the world was better off because we had works of art, whether they be paintings, or music, or movies. Was this a quantifiable value? Maybe some things in life simply can't be quantified, and maybe all the best actuarial models in existence would never be able to capture that. It was an interesting metaphysical question, and one he didn't have the answer to.

The premiere of *The Life of Alessandro Rossi* took place a couple of years later, at the Gavin Newsom theatre in downtown Los Angeles. The crowd wasn't as large as what would be expected for the latest Brock Lineman film – the recent premiere of *Brock Lineman: Agent of Justice: The Battle of the Exoconsciousness* had drawn a significantly larger attendance – but it was still a decent turnout. As usual, Warner Fife avoided the press and paparazzi at the entrance to the theatre, and snuck in through a back door, taking his seat in the upper balcony, where he was practically invisible to most everyone else. He sat with his trademark extra large box of popcorn, with his cap pulled down over his eyes, as he waited for the screening to commence.

And if anyone looked carefully, they would have seen someone new beside him. It was none other than Greg Collen. Several months after their last meeting at the café, Warner had reached out to him again. The production was in bad shape, and he needed help. Greg was all too happy to oblige, and against all odds, the film was now complete and ready for the world.

The lights dimmed, and a plain black background appeared on the screen. The words "A film by Warner Fife" appeared in small white minimalistic letters at the bottom left-hand side. A moment later, the face of Alessandro Rossi appeared for the first time. He was asleep on an evidently uncomfortable straw bed, on the dirt floor of a dilapidated wooden shack. A shaft of morning sunlight broke through a crack in the wall, shining directly on his face, waking him up.

He rose and stumbled to his feet, in obvious discomfort. His face looked haggard and worn, seemingly nowhere near able to face the day. He took a few halting steps out the open doorway, and into the surrounding yard, which was covered with rocks and greyish soil. A couple of chickens could be seen desperately pecking the ground in search of nourishment. An empty field stretched beyond, with a few scrawny trees, most of which appeared dead.

Alessandro was turning to walk to the back side of his cabin, when he stopped and froze mid-step. His eyes darted back and forth; he must have heard something. Slowly he turned, with the camera

following, to reveal a gigantic bear-like creature standing behind him, its mouth open to reveal rows of razor-sharp teeth. Its eyes glowed red. The only sound it made was a low, guttural growl.

Alessandro stared at him. "I haven't even had breakfast yet," he deadpanned. With that, he picked up a large wooden staff that was lying against the wall, and swung it forcefully towards the creature, smashing it in the side of the head. It was enough to momentarily stun it, which was all that Alessandro needed. With a forceful thrust, he plunged the staff into and through the chest of the creature, causing it to momentarily step back, before falling to the ground in a dead faint. Alessandro shook his head, and then pulled back the sleeve of his cloth tunic, revealing a device that looked like a modern Apple Watch. He tapped the screen, and then said, "Get me the hell back to the twenty-first century, would you?"

The audience erupted into yelps and cheers. This movie was going to be a ride, and they were ready to come along for it.

It was at this point that Warner leaned over and whispered to Greg, "I still can't believe you convinced me to turn him into a time-travelling warrior."

"Yeah," Greg replied, "but you're going to make a lot of money on this one."

"Well, there is that," Warner said, as he stuffed a handful of popcorn into his mouth.