

## High School First Place

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### One Man--Two Fists

Jake Noonan watched as the flickering flashes of lights cleaved land and sky. Somberly he listened to the rumbling clamor of guns in the near distance. His square and rugged face was set with grim weariness as he slid to the floor of his muddy foxhole. With steely eyes lifted briefly upward, scrutinizing the trees above, Noonan pulled his knees to his chest, then lowered his head. The stillness of the night wrapped him in its frightening vise. A thick, drifting film of greenish mist hung low to the ground, enveloping him, choking him with its stench. Jungle birds emitted terrifying screeches from high in the creaking shadows of palms. The eeriness caused Noonan's soul to tremble long after their startling cries had faded. Unknown and unseen creatures moved about mysteriously in the darkness of tangled trees and strange growth of vines. Each sound that reached his ears heightened the tension gripping Noonan.

Six hours ago the outfits situated here in these crude trenches saw the first of battle. With the sound strength of human and mechanical force they had fought. Keeney, Savver, Smith, Lucas, Davies, Burrel – they'd stayed by his side all through the barrage of gunfire and the ground-shaking blasts of explosions. They still remained beside him, but their souls had fled into the night. The additional outfits gradually met with the same end, and all had dwindled to one man – one man, two fists. It wasn't much to go on. Jake Noonan recognized such with a bitter grudge, with clenched, powerful hands. It would be only a few more minutes before death closed in around him in the shadowy, creeping forms of men. A few minutes more –

"I'd like to see them try," he growled stoutly, sliding open the cartridge slot of his rifle, regarding its vacancy with thinned lips. "It'll cost a few of their own lives to take mine down." He slammed the slot shut with a fierce hand. "No one takes Noonan down."

His avowal seemed familiar; he paused, searching his memory for its source. The pounding echo of warfare rose to a crescendo, and then suddenly it died away like the fall of rain coming to a cease, fading, fading. Jake Noonan rose slowly upon his knees, peered cautiously through the darkness. That'd be Captain Cottle's company, caving at last. Just a mile of ground cover before they reached him – him and fists. Well--going to die one way or another.

The very thought of this certain conclusion he was about to face unsettled Jake Noonan, in spite of the hard, leathery man he was. Born and raised in the deepest slums of Chicago, Jake had lived on bread and fists, pushing his way through his adolescent years with a gritty temper and a mean upper cut. Not many kids ever denied the knowledge of his name--most held a reminder of some sort, attained in his company. No one ever did bring ol' Jake Noonan down--not once. But it was a fight that'd landed him here in this humid, dripping climate. The green coverage overhead was thickly bound together, retaining the warmth. Moonlight filtered through the feeble shafts, a dim, greenish light.

East Thirty-Fourth Street--that was where he and the kid, Larry, had encountered one another, taking a prompt transition from words to fists. Larry was licked long before the copper materialized and came running, blowin' his whistle. Larry had stumbled off down an alley, clutching his shoulder where Noonan's iron knuckles had bashed into him. Jake held his ground beneath the blistering summer sun, watching as the cop approached, his badge flashing in the blinding sun light, his feet pounded upon the dry, cracked pavement. Not even a cop was gonna push him around-- he'd stressed that avowal verbally and physically, bringing his upper cut to the copper's jaw, smart and powerful. After that, it was reform school, eventually he was thrust into the army and--well, somehow when he wasn't looking, Jake was placed in charge of six men, ashore a forsaken island in the Pacific. But his brutal self hadn't reformed over the passing time. His men could've vouched for it, had they been alive to share his thoughts – had they been alive--

Noonan glanced with an unfeeling face to the forms lying beside him. As he looked upon the first man to fall, Jake Noonan realized that nothing had changed--he hadn't changed at all. Noonan had seen Burrell fall upon his back as a bullet claimed his life. He'd seen the bitter expression upon his face before he died, and saw it now, imprinted upon his young face in the cold of death. As war thundered around them, Noonan had seen each one die a terrible death, each with terrible words upon his lips. Bitter, angry, and resentful--it was all his doings. The shadows of a cruel, unguided life, as dark as the alleys he'd once prowled still gripped Noonan's soul. These same shadows and bitterness had wrecked the lives of his men.

"And, so what?" Jake muttered sullenly, looking away from them, into the darkness. "They would've died, anyway--no one cares. You don't get no place living like some of those fellas I used to know. You don't get no place livin' like there was somethin' to it all. Guys like me know better, guys like me stick around. Suckers, that's what they were."

As human figures presently emerged and advanced upon the lone soldier, God above couldn't help but pity Jake Noonan as he leapt fiercely from the trench to face his final opponents. Somewhere beneath his tangled, biting nature, Jake Noonan still held a spark of human decency. But he never lived to find it as his cruel upper cut was beaten by cold steel. The single crack echoed through the moist deep of jungle, and Noonan was no more.