

Hunter Cell

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'The Executive Branch of the United States government authorizes, for the purposes outlined within this document, the establishment of a special agency to be utilized strictly for the purposes noted herein. A special team of legal assassins, directed and reporting to the Supreme Court and the Special Executive Committee, shall act upon the receipt of an authorized contract executed and endorsed by the two Powers named herein, to locate and execute said contracts.

For the purposes of saving tax revenue and penitentiary space, this special team shall execute contracts upon those U.S. persons knowingly found to be involved in the following crimes and activities: drug cartels, organized crime, mass murder, murder in the first or second degrees, acts of terrorism, treason, hijacking, carjacking, thefts valued at \$10,000 U.S. dollars or more, or any other egregious act that both Powers listed herein deem necessary for the initiation of a contract.'

Excerpt from Executive Order Theta 19666

Killing is a business, and business is good. You don't get much time in this line of work for personal reflection. I suppose that I could spare a few minutes now to let you in on this unusual assignment. The agents are getting near the end of their current contracts anyway.

Ever since the President signed nineteen-triple-six into action back in 2033, we've been able to exist. We were ordered to clean up the dregs and take out the social trash of our American Civilization -- and we're damn good at it. What we have done is nothing new or innovative. The great civilizations of the world have done it before. Feudal Japan had the ninja, the Crusades had the Nizari and militaries around the world train their snipers. No, what we do isn't new, it's just been legalized.

We had to take it a few steps further, though to protect our -- interests. When quantum computing technology became mainstream we found ways to use it to our advantage. All of our recruits for this particular assignment had to (and still must for that matter) undergo a medical procedure that connects a quantum processor to their brains. It's small, painless and definitely invasive. The Cell uses these to track and monitor our agents in the field. We wouldn't want a cold-blooded assassin with a license to kill running rampant in our neighborhoods, would we?

There are those in the social media that believe that what we do is wrong and an abuse of power. Screw them. They didn't see their own kid get raped and slit from ear to ear. They weren't there when a cheap smartass thought that it was a good idea to sell state secrets to punk terrorists at the expense of our own troops. They certainly weren't there when the drug cartels were smuggling humans and dope across the borders.

No. None of those fools were there, and I'd bet a dollar to a stale doughnut that most of you weren't either. There will always be those who will go out of their way to find something wrong with a perfectly good system. No matter, though.

I've seen the question come up in the media, move in social circles and I've even been asked it myself on occasion over the past eight years.

How can I get into your organization?

There's no clear cut easy explanation or operating procedure for what we do. I tend to borrow a piece of

advice from another ancient organization: to be one, you have to ask one.

That's going to be a tall order to fill. We're a small outfit that's always on the move. As it stands, we have a rather sizeable buffer of anonymity working in our favor, too. The best advice I could give to you, if you really think that you've got what it takes, is to plant your nose in the tabloids, and keep an ear to the ground on the national media.

I really would love to stick around and chat a bit more, but you see I have a business to run. As I mentioned earlier, we never seem to have a shortfall on scumbags. So, I must get back to my duties at hand, and make sure that my agents aren't playing outside of the lines.

Q - Out.

Chapter 1

May 2041
Las Vegas, NV

She had to wait until the entire restroom at the Stardust-Orion Casino and Resort had cleared. One final flock of sorority girls freshened up their makeup, and herded themselves out the doors into the bustling crowd. The young vibrant woman with Asian features unzipped her small handbag. She pulled out a thin clear plastic vial. Ivy quickly drank its contents, and chucked the plastic into the trash can in the corner. She looked over herself in the large mirror of the upscale resort. Her sleek black hair on the left side of her scalp fell over her almond eyes. She had always kept the right side cropped really short. So, it was more of a 30s style. Big deal. Ivy combed her long bangs back behind her petite ear, and began to freshen herself up for the big night ahead.

She had been working on this contract for nearly six months. Ivy had found a way to get into the inner circle of a major crime syndicate which operated in the Southwestern United States. She had a way with men. She knew it, and used it to her full advantage. They loved her exotic look, sports cars, her expensive designer clothes and the way she always gave them her undivided attention. No matter what, they all ended up the same to her - dead.

Now Ivy was the arm candy of one Julian Escobar, the known Don of a large mafia. She had witnessed them running drugs, buying and trading stolen import cars, moving young girls across the Arizona border to brothels and dropping large bribes into the laps of area politicians. All of this just in the past six months. The other hunters could take out a target in less than a month, but Ivy liked to work her way into the lives of her hits. Yeah, the Cloud Courts got this one right for sure. Escobar was an A-1 asshole of the highest order. She would definitely enjoy watching him die.

The exotic young woman pulled a small bottle of nail polish out of her handbag, and gave it a good shake.

'Getting ready for the big night, I see.'

Jesus, Q!

She had been an agent for nearly four years, but Ivy still couldn't get comfortable with the idea of her boss butting into her mind at any given time to have a thought

conversation.

Stupid quantum processors.

'Don't knock them, dear. They serve a grand and noble purpose.'

Sure, Q. What do you need?

Q never sounded the same in any of Ivy's mental conversations. Sometimes Q would be an older male fatherly figured voice, and then next Q might come across as a young woman.

You give new meaning to the term schitzo, Q.

'I'm just here to make sure that everything runs smoothly for you.'

Have I ever botched a contract, Q?

'Not to my recollection, no. It's not only about that, though.'

Ivy took the applicator brush out of the bottle, and applied a generous coat of clear polish to her index fingernail.

'Going to poison him through the nails? Death by clawing?'

Sure. You gonna stick around for the peepshow?

'I don't get involved in that sort of business.'

Are you sure? I wore some cute underwear this time.

'You took the antidote, I assume.'

Just did a minute ago. Come on, Q. I'm not a rookie anymore.

Ivy raised her finished left hand up to her ruby lips and blew her nails dry.

'I know, but Julian Escobar is no ordinary man, Ivy. He's dangerous and powerful. One wrong move and I might have a vacancy to fill.'

The petite goddess giggled at that thought.

You worry too much, Q.

'You don't worry enough.'

I'll be fine.

'Does Escobar suspect anything?'

No. I don't think so.

Ivy touched up the ring finger on her right hand with the poison polish.

He still thinks that I'm the rebellious daughter of an Asian mafia Don.

'Good. Do you need anything uploaded into your processor? Some grappling moves? Intermediate Spanish? The Karma Sutra?'

Ha, ha. Very funny, Q. Nope. I'm good to go.

'Very well. I'll leave you to it. Make for Wyoming at the conclusion of this rendezvous.'

Sounds good.

'Best of luck, Ivy. Q - out.'

The sensual assassin blew the last of her venomous weapons dry, and put the polish back in her purse. After straightening out her mini-skirt and touching up her lipstick, Ivy gathered her belongings and headed back out onto the busy casino floor of the Stardust-Orion.

The gambling den had a packed house tonight. It didn't surprise Ivy in the least. This was a Saturday night during the peak summer tourist season. Every gullible gambler from here to the Atlantic shore was in tonight. The air in the open casino floor reeked of bourbon and cheap cologne. The blackjack tables all bustled with activity. Sassy hologram dealers stood behind the crescent tables and managed the games. An older gentleman sat and pondered over the fourteen points in his hand. Ivy glided over to his chair and watched the game unfold.

"Would you like a hit," the beautiful blonde hologram dealer asked, "or would you like to stay, sir?"

The unkempt old-timer tapped his cards with a bent stubby finger. He noticed the foxy new arrival just over his right shoulder, and turned to her.

"What do you think darlin'?" he inquired. "Hit or stay?"

The athletic woman leaned in over the table to get a better look.

"I'd say take the hit," she said leaning on the edge of the playing surface.

The old man slapped the red felt table next to the little card-sized chrome box.

"Hit me!" he shouted with excitement. "You only live once, right hon?"

Ivy gave him a single nod, and brushed her bangs back over her left ear.

The lifelike hologram dealer smiled as a playing card shot out of the chrome box in front of the aged gent.

"Your card, sir," she said.

The man pushed his ball cap back on his sunburned head, and flipped his card over.

"Five of Spades, hah!" he shouted in triumph. "I call sugar bits. Whatcha got?"

The hologram Barbie's right hand lowered even to the table's surface, and pressed a button. Two large digitized replicas of her playing cards appeared to the hologram's left. The dealer turned to face the cards, and held out her arms in her best Vanna pose.

"The house has a jack and a queen. Twenty," she said.

"Dealer wins, sir. Please place your cards in the slot to the right of the dealer box."

The old man huffed in frustration, and slid his cards down into the little chute next to his chrome box.

"Better luck next time, darling," Ivy said as she swaggered off into the dingy bells and blinking lights.

The New Wave Retro movement was alive and well here in Vegas, too. All of the young hipsters had brought back all of the essence de cool from the 1940s. As a result, most of the guys wore the three-piece suits, fedoras and trench coats from that time period. Some of them might be caught wearing a newsboy and rugged jeans, but by and large, the vast majority of the NetRo pop culture got into the fedora look. The girls reverted back to the victory roll hair styles, hats and solid-toned dresses.

All of the big sales giants had also been cashing in on this NetRo wave. Chevy released a throwback-style racing coupe called the Hornet. Swooped body moldings, big chrome grill... the works, cat. The tobacco giants also jumped on the bandwagon. They saw the need for a healthy alternative to their traditional products. So, they came up with healthy smoking. It was a synthetic product rolled in a new hydrocarbon paper that burned off as steam. Lucky Strikes, Chesterfields, Camel and Old Golds all came back with the new look. The hydros pumped oxygen-rich air into your lungs and gave you a distinct after taste of your choice depending on the brand.

Yes, the Stardust's main casino lounge was filled with hydro smoke this evening. Ivy wound her way through a sea of fedoras, newsboys and porkpies. The assassin swaggered down the wide staircase, and into an inviting rendition of *Paper Doll*. Several young men undressed her with their inebriated eyes as she strutted by them. There was only one man that was going to have her tonight, and he was going to wish that he hadn't.

She sauntered through the set of large gold doors to the right of the main stage, and went back into Julian's private party room. As soon as Ivy entered, Escobar snapped his fingers in the direction of his private bandstand. The quartet quickly fired up an old classic from the later part of the last century. Bowie, Buoy, Ivy couldn't recall exactly what his name was...

Escobar was a pig. She snapped her handbag to her right side, and marched over to him - fake smile in tote.

"Everything alright, China Girl?" he asked from behind his dark gold-trimmed shades.

She wanted desperately to punch him in the throat.

"Fine," was all Ivy could manage.

Julian looked like a fool to her in his fedora and black suit. All of those gold and platinum rings and chains; it was overkill.

"Come on, chivato!" one of the other thugs shouted. "I'm callin' What you got, man?"

The muscular mafia don laid out his hand in a fan on the felt surface.

"Full house," he proclaimed. "Aces over eights."

"Dead man's hand," one of his fat cronies to his left muttered.

"What, man?" Julian inquired with a confused mug.

The obese Venezuelan sporting pork chop sideburns quickly shook the comment off.

"Too bad!" his younger brother shouted from the far end. "Royal flush, bro."

"Damn!" the elder Escobar huffed slamming his bejeweled hand down on his cards. "You're lucky you're my brother," he said smiling.

"Lucky my ass, Jules," Marco retorted. "I've always been better than you at poker."

"It's alright," Julian said. "I've always been better with the women." He stroked Ivy's inner thigh and teased her panties with a chuckle.

"Let's go another hand," Marco said raking in his winnings. "I gotta win some more of my hard-earned money back."

Julian leaned back in his chair and looked up to his girl. The veteran mob boss saw the invitation in her alluring eyes.

"Don't think so," Escobar said tapping her ass. "We've got some other business to attend to."

The mafia don snapped his fingers at the band again. The band leader looked up from his guitar.

"Pump the tune upstairs into our penthouse, would you?"

The band leader nodded and pushed a switch on the floor with his foot. A thin layer of translucent blue light surrounded the small stage.

"Come on, China Girl," Julian said grabbing his pack of Lucky Strike hydros. He turned to the chubby Venezuelan, "Rodney, would you take my chips to the front and cash them out?"

"Sure, boss," Rodney said rounding up the massive columns of different colored poker chips.

Julian, with Ivy on his right elbow, lit up a hydro and strode out of the room and over to the bank of private

elevators. Once inside, he slipped Ivy a kiss.

"Feeling lucky tonight, Jules?" she asked rubbing his bicep.

"Sure am, sugar."

"Ten minutes with me, and I'll change your life."

Escobar licked the lip just below his pencil-line mustache.

"I believe you, China."

He took another drag off of his synthetic cigarette as the elevator doors opened into their private hallway. Two huge gorilla-like thugs nodded to Escobar as he passed between them and into his five-star suite. The hologram band continued to belt out his request on a repeating loop in the far corner.

Julian walked over to the huge bed at the heart of the room, and tossed his fedora into the chaise lounge chair under the window.

"Just give me a few minutes to freshen up?" Ivy asked leaning on the doorway into the bathroom.

Julian nodded undoing his tie and pointing his finger at the wet bar near the kitchen. A room servant quickly prepared a gin and tonic, and shuffled it over to the impatient mobster. The kingpin took a long swig from the tumbler and waived the youthful attendant away. Escobar sat the booze on the nightstand and crushed his hydro out in the ashtray. He turned around to see a vision that must have come straight from beyond the gates of Heaven.

Ivy strode into the bedroom wearing nothing more than a slinky pair of red undies and matching bra. Julian was sure that he'd never seen anyone with as much natural beauty before. His China Doll unbuttoned his high-dollar shirt and unbuckled his trousers. She kept her eyes fixed in his almond stare as she knelt before him and went to work.

The tattoo of a cherry blossom tree on her lower back writhed as Ivy rocked back and forth on top of Julian. He bit his lower lip and locked up. Escobar was close; Ivy could feel it within her. The assassin leaned in and frenched the mobster one more time, and dug her nails into his bulging biceps. Julian grabbed her hips and arched upward in ecstasy. The hologram quartet still repeated the chosen song.

The sweaty youthful woman climbed off of Julian, and strode into the restroom to freshen up. He smiled at her as she primped her hair and turned on the water in the shower.

The song was growing on her. Escobar was still a pig -- just a pig with decent taste.

When Ivy walked back into the bedroom wearing nothing but a wet towel on her head Julian was convulsing on the California king. She slid her panties back on, and sat down beside the quivering mob Don. The red lines on his biceps now bubbled with white foam.

"Nothing personal, Jules," she said leaning into his horror-stricken face. "This was just business."

Escobar's eyes widened even further as the white foamy substance rolled out of the corners of his mouth. His cry of shock and rage couldn't be forced past the poisonous knot that was gagging him to death.

Ivy finished getting dressed, gathered her handbag and made for the main doors into the penthouse. She opened the door with her slender hand, and was greeted by one of Escobar's thugs outside.

"I think I wore Jules out again, boys," she said. "Give him a few hours to catch up on his beauty sleep?" she whimpered rubbing the hulking bouncer's arm.

"Yes, ma'am," the ape said with a smile.

The killer closed the big door on the band and her fulfilled contract for good.

Chapter 2

May 2041
Somewhere in Arizona

The old man was busy behind his store counter taking inventory on a new shipment of snuff when the stranger walked into his shop. He'd seen him in here several times before. The guy always showed up once every month or so for the same thing.

"Evenin'," the old man said.

The biker said nothing. The cool dark form strode over to the automotive aisle and knelt down to its lowest shelf. His long black duster blew up a few dust bunnies taking refuge under the lip of the store shelves. The stranger plucked a small blue and white rectangular box from the shelf, and made his way back around to the cash counter.

"That be all?" the old man asked as the stranger tossed the box of matches on the counter.

"Yup," the cool man said. His eyes were hidden under the brim of his black leather cowboy hat.

"I see you in here on a regular basis," the clerk said slicking back his patch of snow white hair. "You gotta name?"

The biker laid out a slip of cigarette paper on the counter and lined it with a small amount of tobacco. His face remained motionless underneath its five o'clock shadow.

"Nope," the biker said rolling up his cig.

The old man scratched his sagging chins.

"Well, you got any friends?"

The stranger knelt down and put his cloth roll of smoking tobacco back in his right boot.

"Nope," he replied from below the counter. The man stood back up and scratched the stubble on his cheek.

"Well, sayin' you had some friends," the clerk prodded, "what would they call ya?"

The biker slipped the thin roll of white into the corner of his mouth, and took a match from the box. He struck it across the rough edge of the counter. The cowboy lit the end of his cigarette, and tossed the smoking match onto the tile floor.

"If I had a friend, Mac," he said taking a drag, "they'd probably call me an asshole."

The stranger let out a small cloud of white smoke and

picked up his box of matches.

"Thanks again, Mac," he said as he strode out of the door.

"Sure thing," Mac said closing the drawer of his register with a cheerful ding.

The renegade straddled his Bad Boy and fired it back to life. The last thing that Mac saw was his black duster flapping in the wake of the rider's departure.

The broken strips of yellow rolled under Rider's Harley Bad Boy as he thundered down a desolate strip of Arizona road. A few lone cumulus clouds sailed just above the painted peaks in the growing distance.

'You ready?'

Rider shifted his steel horse into a higher gear, and twisted the throttle.

As always, Q. To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?

Rider was a veteran of the Cell. Local legend around the Southwest stated that he'd killed more people than small pox.

'I know that you can handle yourself, Rider. Consider this more of a random audit.'

The desperado gnawed on the end of the unlit cigarette in the corner of his lips.

You gotta do what you gotta do.

The sun set over Rider's left shoulder showcasing the multi-colored layers of the staggered peaks.

'How are you planning on taking Sanchez out?'

The assassin gruffed. He knew where this conversation was headed.

I'm giving him the option.

'You sure that you can take him in a shootout?'

Rider shook his head and leaned into the gentle curve in the cracked roadway.

Of course I can. I'm the fastest gun in this century, Q!

'Sanchez is the leader of the biggest militia in the southwest. He'll have protection.'

The veteran hit man turned his attention to the painted strips on the hillsides to his left. They did look beautiful in the setting sunlight.

Don't worry, boss. I'll take care of them. It'll just be him and me.

'Do you need anything uploaded? Maps? Spanish? A good burger joint?'

The biker laughed out loud at that. Q knew him all too well. Rider had a soft spot for only two things in this world -- burgers and redheads.

Not unless you know of a nice diner with a cute redheaded waitress.

That got a healthy chuckle out of his supervisor.

'I'll see what I can round up in that department, and get it to you later.'

The tall golden grass bent over in the wake of the motorcycle's fury as Rider blew past another cactus.

Sounds like a deal, boss.

'Listen, Rider. I need you to make yourself available after this contract for a team get together.'

No problem. Where and when?

Rider did love the feel of the arid desert wind in his dusty blonde mop. The grit of the fine sand that stung his neck was another matter.

'Not entirely sure just yet. Head for Wyoming, and I'll give you the details en route.'

Rider leaned into another turn, and slowed down to roll over a set of rusted out railroad tracks. His iron beast roared in glory once on the other side, and sped back down the strip of concrete.

Will do, Q.

'From there, we'll take a look at what we've got coming down the pike in terms of contracts for you guys. Be safe.'

I will.

'Good. Q -- out.'

A lone dirt road appeared over the next soft hill in the road. According to his onboard navigation system, this was the way to the training ground for this local militia. He'd been here several times already this month, though. The tracker only used the GPS as a backup. Rider had done his homework on this outfit. Darren Sanchez was no weekend warrior. He had served in the Mexican Army for twelve years, and was heavily decorated for his service in the Peruvian Conflict in '32. The man was a well-oiled mercenary, plain and simple. Rider knew that one of his old school Wild West shootouts with someone of Sanchez's caliber could go wrong quickly. He'd have to scope the target out, and maybe get a glimpse of how he shot.

Since his departure from the Mexican Service in early 2041, Sanchez had set up a militia of over two thousand soldiers in central Arizona. Rider had been on his trail for just under three months now. Finding their training camp was the easy part. Getting to Sanchez -- that was

going to be the challenge. From what the assassin had gathered thus far, he knew that Sanchez never traveled alone. There were always at least two huge bodyguards flanking the field general at any given moment. Rider also knew by now that Sanchez always did some range shooting with his troops tonight, and then went down to a local watering hole to talk business. These were the times when the leader would be most vulnerable. He would be nearly alone, and likely underground talking with the mafia gurus. He would leave his guards for the night for the assumed protection of the family.

Rider slowed his bike down and made the left turn onto the dusty dirt road. Weathered wooden fence posts staggered off in a tilted line toward his destination. The cowboy pulled his leather hat back onto his head, tightened the drawstring under his chin and slowly rolled down the road past the winding gorge on his right. Once the bright explosions of gunfire could be seen in the distance, Rider stopped his Bad Boy, and slid its kickstand out.

"Good a place as any," he said brushing the tails of his black duster back.

The loner reached down into his right boot and produced a small wooden match from its hidden pouch. He struck it on the side of his dusty boot, and held it up to the bent cigarette in his mouth. He took a deep drag off of the imported Swedish tobacco that he'd rolled just thirty minutes earlier. Rider pulled the brim of his cowboy hat down over his brow, and shot a thin plume of white smoke out of his right corner.

"Let's just see what you goons are up to this evening, shall we?" he said reaching into the inner left pocket of his custom-made duster.

It had been fabricated out of a state-of-the-art material that was light weight, fire retardant and bulletproof. One of the perks of having connections in military R&D. Rider slid the dark pair of shades up over his cool gray stare.

"Infrared on," he muttered.

The glasses obeyed and showed the killer the landscape in hues of cool blues and violets. Rider turned his gaze down the gorge in the direction of the random gunfire. The specs picked up a couple of dozen bright orange forms shooting at the firing range.

"Bingo," he said. "Range finder, on."

Again, his glasses did as commanded and displayed a bar at the bottom of his field of vision. The numbers rolled up and down as Rider's eyes focused on different

objects. His eyes came to rest on the warm bodies at the firing range. Rider could see them testing their newly received order of AK-65s.

"You guys really suck," he whispered through his smoldering cig. "You couldn't hit the broad side of a small town."

Rider panned his view over to a makeshift obstacle course 700 yards away. Several men and women swung on ropes and ran across an elevated log.

"At least there's some hope for you," he said pulling out his replica 1880 Colt Legends of Steel .45 revolver. Its polished black barrel and body shimmered in the fading orange rays of the sun.

Rider loved guns. He packed two Beretta 9mm pistols on thigh holsters, but this one was his favorite by a long shot. It had a solid walnut hilt and the words 'Legends of Steel' inlaid in a gold scroll on its barrel. The gun also had six gold portraits of Sam Colt on each of its barrel chambers, ornate scrollwork on the backstrap, a gold hammer and a single gold medallion with the telltale rampant colt seal inlaid in the hilt.

"Just like Earp's Peacemaker," he whispered unlocking the swing cylinder.

The cowboy slid its bullets one by one out of his waist belt, and loaded them into his pride and joy. As always, Rider loaded them all clockwise, and pulled the bullets out of his belt from right to left. He was a self-proclaimed mild OCD. He took a drag off of his tobacco, and closed the cylinder of his revolver with a quick snap of his wrist.

"Let's find the man of the hour, and see what he's doing."

Rider slid the colt back into its holster at his right hip, and focused his shades on a large building at the far southern corner of the range. There were three figures wandering around inside one of its rooms. Two huge goons and one short muscular man inspected crates of their recently acquired AK-65s from the Russians. No one else was present in the massive structure.

"There we are," Rider said loading rounds into his 9mms' magazines.

He followed the three figures as they made their way out of the headquarters, and went to inspect the readiness of their troops. Sanchez grabbed a rifle from one of his soldiers and took a knee at the firing range.

"Here we go," the loner said. "Night vision on," he commanded. "Zoom in ten times resolution."

The shades obeyed and zoomed in on Darren Sanchez firing rounds downrange at paper targets. Popcorn bursts reverberated through the gorge as he squeezed off several rounds.

"Amazing," Rider said in disgust. "All of those legendary weapons and not a damn one of you can shoot for shit."

His glasses focused on Sanchez's target at the end of the shooting range. Some of his bullets had made it to their destinations in the chest of the black silhouette. Many of the other rounds hit the mound of sand and earth behind it.

Sanchez handed the weapon back over to its owner, and waived to his goons to follow him past the o-course. Rider watched as the three made their way to a huge decked-out SUV parked at the end of the only road into this camp. Sanchez turned to his bodyguards, gave them some sort of instructions and hopped up into his boat on wheels.

"Time to roll out," Rider said pressing the ignition switch on the handlebar.

His stallion of steel fired to life under his lean frame. He swept the kickstand back up with the heel of his boot, and placed his right thumb over the print pad next to the throttle. Its numbers clicked down from five to zero as they had been designed to do. Rider always loved to wait until the engine shutoff ID got to two before putting his digit on the ID pad.

Identification confirmed, the onboard systems said.

Rider swung his bike around to point back up the dirt road that he had just come down. The massive black SUV's tail lights came alive, and seconds later it rolled down the road out of the valley. The assassin revved the throttle on his ride, and headed out after his contract.

He had stayed close enough to Sanchez to trail him, but not so close that the militia leader would have suspected anything. Sanchez came to rest at a nearby hole-in-the-wall bar just a few miles from his camp. Rider parked his Harley on the far side of a long line of street bikes, and shut the beast down. He slid the brim of his leather hat back down over his eyes, and meandered over to the brute bouncer at the bar's entrance. The thug held a meaty paw out to Rider's left breast. The killer looked down at the hand and back up to its owner in defiance.

"Hold on, pard," the Latino bouncer said from behind his designer shades. "Synthetics only inside the bar."

The cool cowboy took a long drag off of his cig, and blew a cloud of smoke into the face of the bouncer.

"No problem, friend," he said dropping the stub of his tobacco to the soil. He rubbed it out in the ground with the heel of his boot. Before the brute could lay a hand on the stranger, he had already made his way inside.

The club was relatively desolate as most of them were on a Thursday evening at dinner time. A pair of sultry biker chicks shot a game of nine-ball on the elevated platform to his right. A few rednecks drowned their farming sorrows in watered-down brew at the bar.

One way out to the right of the bar via an old spring action door, Rider noted.

The stranger seemed to float within his black duster as he strode up to his bar. There wasn't much to see beyond that -- two holsters strapped to his dirty jeans, a gray t-shirt, one more pistol on a hip holster and a leather hat with five o'clock shadow.

"What'll it be?" the barkeep asked as he hobbled down to the stranger's end of his bar.

"Where's Sanchez?" The stranger's question was cold and deliberate.

"Dunno, man," the tender replied drying off a pint glass.

The desperado was visibly perturbed.

"I'll ask you one more time," he said in a hollow tone, "and if I don't like what I hear, I'll put you through that glass wall behind you."

The barkeep swallowed hard. He still couldn't see the man's eyes to know if he really meant it. It was something in the stranger's methodical motions that told the beer pusher that this guy meant business. He reached under the bar, flipped a switch and motioned the stranger around behind the old oak top.

"This way," the bartender said with an audible shutter in his voice.

A bank of beer taps opened to the right revealing a hidden staircase trailing off into the dark.

"I'm not takin' you down," the tender said. "You're on your own!"

Rider nodded once, tipped the brim of his hat and took one step into the cellar.

"Leave this doorway open," the assassin said. "Any funny stuff from any of you, and I'll burn this shit shack to the ground. Understand?"

The bartender went to say something snide, and then he noticed the top of the stranger's tattoo peeking out from

under his shirt collar. It was a medieval-style banner with the words *Fratres Mortis* centered on it. The Brotherhood of Death. The middle-aged Mexican man had heard about this guy on the local news.

"Holy shit -- you're..."

"In a bit of a hurry," Rider said pulling the neckline of his t-shirt back up. "Am I going to have any problems with you?"

The keep shook his head nervously on his pudgy neck. He now hoped to God that this lone assassin did kill Sanchez. If he didn't the militia man would surely nail his nut sac to the restroom wall.

Rider crept down the old wooden stairs with his back to the right side of the wall. He removed the nine mils from their holsters and flipped the safeties off. He trained one ahead of himself into the growing darkness and the other back up the stairs at the fat gut of the bartender.

"Keep it open," Rider mouthed in silence back over his left shoulder.

The bartender nodded once, and turned around to guard the only escape route out of the dungeon.

Once around the corner at the bottom, Rider holstered the pistol in his left hand, but kept the other Berretta out. This cinder block corridor was lit by naked bulbs hanging from half-stripped wires every ten feet. He bent the pistol up parallel to his eyes, and pulled the action slide back with a snap. He spun it once around his finger, and slid it back into its thigh holster in one fluid motion.

The trained killer crept one leg over the other keeping as much of himself as he could out of the direct light. Rider pulled his shades back out of his duster pocket, and put them on.

"X-ray, on," he whispered.

The glasses switched to an electric blue outline of the walls and surroundings with three figures in the room ahead. Their skeletal forms leaned over a tall stack of crates in the chamber's center. Sanchez's ghostly form picked up an AK and inspected its firing line. The form nodded in acceptance, and then its arm slid a briefcase toward the tall lanky sack of bones to Rider's left. Sanchez packed a pistol on his right hip. It was most likely a semi-automatic based on the display of marksmanship that the assassin witnessed earlier. The other two men each had a pistol on their hips and a knife in the small of their backs. The shorter one also packed a sawed-

off 12-gauge under his duster.

"I'm gonna get one shot at them," he whispered as he knelt down ten feet away from the door. "If I miss, I'll be scattered with buckshot." He slid his shades back into his black duster.

Rider pulled his tobacco kit out of his right boot. He slid out a piece of paper, lined it with tobacco and twisted it tight on either end. The renegade struck a match along the coarse block wall, lit his cig and put his kit back into his boot.

"Should be any minute now," he said eavesdropping on their talk about the next shipment of ammo in June.

Rider slid his hands into the back of either boot, and came back up with throwing knives in each. He stood and pulled the right side of his duster back to expose the holster of his .45 revolver. He positioned himself a few feet back from the doorway, and studied the shifting shadows on the underside of the crack. A lone tendril of smoke wound its way up from the corner of Rider's mouth, and into the maze of pipes and wires above.

The knob on the door started to turn. The men on the other side chuckled in amusement and success. They had no idea what kind of copperhead was about to unwind on their asses.

The two Russians were the first through the gateway to Hell. They took notice of the stranger soon enough to see the cowboy raise his sandpaper chin, and look into the burning red eye of his cigarette. The last thing that the tall one saw was a quick shimmer of silver. Then all went black.

The short Ruski in the duster fared no better. By the time his eyes had widened in shock at Rider's presence, he already had the other of the killer's throwing knives in his forehead.

"Fuck!" Sanchez shouted reaching for his weapon.

Before he could pull his pistol, the silent stranger had the black and gold barrel of his revolver up against his forehead.

"You've got guts," the gunslinger said pulling the gold hammer of the replica revolver back with a click. "That's why I'm going to give you one chance at a fair fight."

"W-What do you mean?" the stunned Columbian asked. "Who are you?"

The stranger took a drag off of his smoke, and talked through its release.

"Put your gun back in its holster," the cowboy said.

Sanchez hesitated for a moment too long.

"I said put it back in, or I turn your brains into a work of impressionism all over that wall."

"Ok, man," Sanchez stuttered. "Ok."

He slid his firearm back into its holster, and put his hands out to his sides. The desperado backed away slowly with his peacemaker trained on the man's greasy forehead.

"I like your style, Sanchez," the stranger said.

"That's why we're gonna do this like gentlemen."

Sanchez shrugged his shoulders in confusion.

"When I say draw," the cowboy instructed, "you go for your smoke wagon. Any questions?"

Sanchez shook his head. His face and neck visibly quivered.

Rider backed up to a distance of thirty feet from Sanchez and holstered his Colt. He took the smoldering stub out of the corner of his mouth with his left hand, and spat.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Guess so," Sanchez replied. His right hand quaked over the hilt of his weapon.

Rider put the smoke back in his mouth, brushed his duster back over his holster and positioned his hand for the command. The sixty-cycle hum from the light above them droned on for what felt like forever to Sanchez, and then the air was split.

"Draw!"

Sanchez was quick on the draw, but much to Rider's relief he was as miserable up close as he was at a distance. Sanchez squeezed off a round in Rider's direction, but it missed the mark. His bullet bounced off of Rider's bulletproof duster and ricocheted down the hall behind them. Rider's shot found its target, and left a bloody hole just over Sanchez's left eye. The Columbian took one unsure step forward, and then slumped to his knees.

"The path for you is decided," Rider said walking up to the dying man.

Sanchez collapsed at the boots of the assassin with a watery plop. Rider inspected the two Russians to ensure that neither one was playing possum, and then walked back up the stairs.

The bartender heard him coming, and quickly stepped to one side as the killer reached the top step.

"You've got a bit of a mess to clean up down there," the stranger said.

The barkeep only nodded. He didn't care. Sanchez was

dead, and that was more important right then. The loner held up his black Colt revolver, and slid its cylinder out. A single spent shell fell at the feet of the barkeep.

"A little souvenir for your trouble," the man said shoving the cylinder back in. He spun the pistol on his finger before holstering it.

"Evening," the stranger said grabbing the brim of his leather cowboy hat.

After the man had left, the tender bent down and picked up the shell. He held the end of it up under the fluorescent light over his bar. It was engraved with a golden H and a golden C crossing over its lower right leg.

Chapter 3

May 2041
Monterey, CA

That's me over there. Yeah, that's right. The guy in the black fedora and brown trench coat. The fog had rolled into the bay and blanketed this sleepy little town once again. Wasn't anything new. It happened nearly all of the time out here in Central California. You can call me Judge. The only people that matter anymore all do.

The man pulled a pack of Chesterfield synthetics from his right coat pocket, and tapped them on the side of his fist.

I had been following this contract for four months from southern Idaho. Now I waited for his next victim under the entrance to the Golden State Theater on Alvarado Street. He was one of the toughest targets I'd had in my past six years with this outfit. A convicted serial killer who had also took it upon himself to invade a small elementary school off of I-84 in Southern Potatoland.

Judge removed a hydro from the pack, set it in the corner of his mouth and struck his Zippo. He took a few puffs off of the mint flavored cigarette, and snapped the lighter shut.

The gutless bastard took the lives of nearly one hundred children alone on that day. Since then, he'd been laying low in northern Cali. Sure, (a cloud of smoke drifted up from the brim of his fedora) Idaho sent the troopers after this bozo, but he beat them across the state line. After that (Judge peered down the misty sidewalk as a couple emerged from the fog) the Feds put him directly into the Cloud Court servers. Didn't take the circuits long to come back with a conviction: premeditated murder in the first. Multiple counts. His sentence (took another drag from the Chesterfield) the Judge.

A large crowd poured out of the main entrance to the NetRo-styled theater. A cluster of teenage girls all sporting victory roll hairdos giggled and swooned over the leading man in the film they had just seen.

'Judge?'

Judge tapped the embers from the burning end of his Chesterfield and held it at his side.

Evening, Q.

'Still talking to your imaginary audience, I see.'

The hip man in his early thirties ran his left hand through the short wavy rust-colored hair just above his ear.

Come on. Lay off my case, Q.

'Complete with the Noire jazz ambience. Nice.'

A young girl of fourteen wandered out of the Golden State Theater, and looked around for her ride. It wasn't there.

This is my style, boss. Take it, or leave it.

'I know. You're in with the hipsters in this 1940s throwback fad. What do they call it -- metro?'

Judge nearly gagged on his mouthful of mint. The oxygen-rich drag revitalized his lungs and senses.

That's NetRo, Q. New Wave Retro.

'What did I say?'

What you said applied to pretty boys half a century ago, bub.

'Right. So, are you going to fulfill this contract with the long-range rifle this time?'

The assassin turned his emerald stare down toward the violin case at his feet.

Nope.

'I see. Using the Gavel, very well.'

Nope. The .38 is staying in its holster.

'Well, you're certainly not setting in with the community orchestra.'

Judge chuckled and took another hit off of his synthetic. The young girl appeared to be getting unnerved as she stood alone on the other side of the entrance.

No, Q. I've got something swell planned for this chump. Something I've been saving up for just such a special occasion.

'Now I'm curious.'

Let's just say what goes around comes around.

A towering hulk of a man walked out of the entrance, and glanced in the young girl's direction. He then wandered down the sidewalk past another Sam Spade wannabe leaning up against the side of the building. The teenage girl finished the call on her cell, and then strode past Judge at a quick clip. The towering shadow followed her at a safe distance down Alvarado Street into the thick fog.

Looks like it's time for me to earn a living.

'Ok, Judge. Need anything?'

Nah. I'm just swell, Q. I'll take care of business, and be home in time for breakfast.

'Stand by after this contract, Judge. We're going to meet in Wyoming.'

The killer picked up his instrument case, and glided down the sidewalk after his contract.

I trailed the guy over Del Monte and into the strip of shops near the bay's edge. The dame must have figured that she was being followed. She sped up her pace and walked toward the open square near the maritime museum. The strangler followed suit.

Judge took one last drag off of his hydro, and then flicked the Chesterfield onto the damp bricks.

She tried to lose him on the other side of the fountain, but the murderer was smarter than that. Sorry, doll face. He smelled blood. Nothing was going to stop this madman, or so he thought.

The assassin jogged after the mysterious figure in the fog over the paved bay trail, and into the Fisherman's Wharf. The crosshatched strings of white bulbs still burned in the mist overhead. All of the shops and restaurants had been long since closed up. Judge peered around frantically.

"Now, where did that numbskull get off to?"

Just then a dark form passed under the halo of a lamppost at the end of the main wharf.

Not tonight, clown. I jogged down to the corner of Isabella's restaurant, and set my case down in front of me. Yeah, I had something really special planned for this jackass.

His long coat draped over either side of his instrument case as Judge made quick work of putting together his newest toy.

I had spent the last eight months doing the research and rounding up all of the replica parts for it.

He pulled out a small black metal ammo drum, and snapped it in place at the front of the barrel. He then slid the front pistol grip into place just behind the drum.

Yeah, this dirt bag was gonna feel pain tonight.

Judge tugged the action slide back toward him, and let it go with a click. Muffled cries pierced the dense cloud from the shadows of the docks. The assassin stood up, and let his M1921 Thompson Annihilator hang at his right side.

"No! No, stop it!" the young girl shrieked through the struggle. "Someone!"

The towering man felt her frail hands trying to pry his off of her mouth and throat. There was something primal deep within the recesses of the murderer's being that got a cheap thrill out of watching people die. He loved the power. He yearned for the control over who got to live, and who was taken.

The dark form clenched his massive hands around her

fragile throat choking her screams at his knees. The young beauty's eyes bulged, and her body went tight. It wouldn't be much longer...

"Hey, jackass," a mellow voice said from behind him. "Why don't you try picking on someone at least your own age?"

The massive brute turned to see a man of average stature standing at the other end of the pier. His black fedora hid his face. A thin line of white smoke trailed up from the corner of his mouth. The murderer tightened his grasp on the teenager's larynx. She gasped in desperation.

"I said," the stranger proclaimed with force, "let the girl go. Now!"

The man in the charcoal suit swept his long brown coat aside, and tilted a Tommy gun up beside his black hat. His left hand took the hydro out of his mouth.

"You will pay with your life for interfering with other's affairs," the strangler said tossing the child to the wet dock.

The lean stranger placed the cig back in his mouth, and dropped the machine gun to his right hip.

"This is for all of those kids," the man said through his smoke. "Do unto others, you smug son of a bitch!"

The massive monster tried to whip out his Sig Sauer pistol, but he knew it wouldn't matter. The Bogart look-alike unloaded his 100-round drum of .45 caliber bullets. Revenge tore red holes in the murderer's torso at 1200 bullets per minute.

"One round for every school kid you murdered!" Judge shouted as he advanced on the staggering mass of blood and gore.

The young girl cried and raced behind her strange savior as he marched on her killer. The towering nightmare tumbled backward with every strike. The rounds' momentum pushed the beast back into the sea. Bullets thwipped through the planks and wooden posts of the pier in splintery explosions. Empty casings rained down leaving a trail to their relentless source.

"How does it feel now, tough guy?" the assassin exclaimed as the killer stumbled over the end of the pier.

Judge walked up to its edge and peered over at the floating corpse in the bay.

"Tell it to the judge, pal," he said coolly. "Court's adjourned."

He strode back over to where the young girl lay whimpering.

"You okay?" he asked.

She nodded without making eye contact.

"You wanna ride to the local police station?"

Again, she only nodded.

Judge held out his left hand, and the girl's quivering grip tightened around his.

"It's gonna be alright, sweetheart." he said as he led her back to his midnight blue '38 Chevy Hornet Coupe.

Chapter 4

May 2041
Hartington, NE

She heard the stairs outside of her room creaking as one foot hobbled in front of the other all the way up to the top. A frail hand rapped on the outside of Katana's door.

"This is your seven AM wakeup call, dear," the elderly owner of the B&B said. "Rise and shine."

The twenty-two year old assassin brushed her long deep red bangs out of her face. No matter how many times she did it, no matter who she worked for -- Katana was never going to become a morning person.

'Morning, sunshine.'

God, Q. Will you ever give me just a few minutes to wake up?

Kat threw the old handmade quilt off of her body and popped up out of bed.

I would -- usually, but there's been a bit of speculation in the local media that your target may have tried to attack again.

The athletic young woman threw off her Iron Maiden sleep shirt and fleece shorts. She stretched as she sauntered into the en suite bathroom.

I know. He's tried to attack again, but he's been chased off twice now.

'Time's getting short on you, Katana.'

Kat pulled her long mane of fiery curls forward over her right shoulder.

What a load of shit.

'Pardon?'

Not you, Q. My hair.

'Oh. Well we need to move on this contract before he does attack again.'

She tossed her brush across the room in frustration, and tied it up in a ponytail behind her head. Kat gave her pale Irish features a once over, and went back into the bedroom.

I'm taking care of him tonight. I've staked out his planned point of attack.

She slid the tight jeans up over her green undies and threw on one of her favorite Megadeath tees.

'Just be cautious, Katana. The conspiracy papers have

caught onto your ninja persona. We don't want your identity leaked.'

Kat tied her last Converse into place, and slid her duffle bag over her shoulder.

I will be. Let them think what they want. No one has ever seen me in my shinobi let alone unmasked.

'Very well. Do you require anything to be uploaded into your processor?'

She grabbed the car keys off of the writing table in the corner, and headed downstairs. The inviting aroma of a home-cooked breakfast teased her senses.

Nah, I'll be fine, thanks.

'No problem. Listen after this job is done, head for Wyoming. I'll give you more details en route.'

Something wrong, Q?

'No. We just haven't had a group get-together in a while.'

"Good morning, red," the old man said as he sat a platter of steaming scrambled eggs on the large oak dinner table.

"Morning, Mr. Grady."

Consider it done, Q. I'll be there.

'Very well. Q -- out.

"Pull up a seat, and dig in, hon," he said in a cheerful tone.

Katana slid into a chair and spooned some eggs and tossed a biscuit onto her plate.

"There you are, dear," said Ms. Grady setting a cup of coffee in front of Kat. "Blueberry this morning."

"Thank you, Ma'am."

After a hearty meal, Katana tossed her bags into the trunk of her compact car. She decided to wander into downtown from her accommodations in West Elm Street. There weren't many people out this morning. There was the occasional elderly person making rounds and the young mom on a power walk with the toddler, but beyond that -- nothing.

"Kinda dead," she muttered, "even for a Thursday morning."

The assassin decided to turn down North Broadway to see what was going on at the town library. She walked past the furniture store, beyond the drug store that had been there forever and stopped in front of the old white sign: *Hartington Public Library*. It had seen better days. The old two-story home that served as the repository had, too. Just

then, Kat caught movement out of the corner of her eyes. It was him.

"Bingo," she whispered.

Katana jogged up onto the front porch of the library, and hid behind a large bush at its corner.

"What are we going to get into today, Lennie?" she said peering at her contract through the small leaves.

The twenty-eight-year-old man zipped up his light jacket, and trotted across the street. He bounded up the right side of South Broadway heading back into the heart of the town.

Time to move.

The stealthy killer leaped over the railing, and trotted up the opposite side of the street in pursuit. Lennie finally slowed down in front of the outdoors shop and went inside. Kat waited a few seconds, and then wandered inside.

The outdoor shop was surprisingly busy. Dozens of fishermen from all over town perused the aisles of the store for their guarantees at the big catch. Kat relied on her training and instincts and blended into the middle-aged crowd.

Lennie went back into the gun department and rummaged around.

Stocking up for the big show, are we?

He strode back to the gun counter with a large hunting knife and a box of ammo. Kat watched her hit from around the corner of a backpack display.

"That be all?" the clerk asked.

Lennie nodded. He grabbed his plastic bag, and wound around the end cap of the camping aisle. She sped down to the other end of her lane, and watched the man intently. He picked up a bundle of rope and started to shove it inside his dark blue jacket. Lennie must have got the jitters because he second-guessed himself and tossed the rope back into its bin. She let him wander back out into town. Katana knew where and when he was going to strike, and now with what.

Night wore on, and Katana drove her car to the lot behind the ball field at Febler Park under the moonless skies. The time for fulfillment had come. She took her duffle bag out of the trunk, and nonchalantly made her way into the nearby thicket. Kat looked over her shoulder to ensure that no one was watching her, and then ducked behind a large bush.

Lennie strolled down the running trail that ran parallel to hole number seven at the neighboring golf course.

"She should be trotting along any time now," he whispered.

The sinewy man tugged the hood of his jacket down over his face, and peered back over his shoulder. Her steps grew louder as she approached him. *A young mom, out on her own for the evening jog... perfect.* The athletic brunette trotted by -- her ponytail swang in rhythm to her strides. Lennie double checked for any witnesses over his shoulder. No one even cared. He sped up in pursuit of the next life he was about to wreck.

Katana stood up in her white ninja shinobi. She took out a thin mesh white mask, placed it over her eyes and tied it tight behind her head. She knelt down on all fours and crept out from behind the bushes. The agile assassin pressed the activation switch on her state-of-the-art shinobi, and the white took on the likeness of the bushes and trees that surrounded her. She disappeared.

Lennie ran at a light jog as he gained ground on the brunette with every step. She rounded the turn and took the path to the right at the Y-intersection. The thug followed her into down the unlit path and into the shadowy thicket. He caught up to the unsuspecting woman, and threw her to the soft ground. She didn't fully understand what was happening to her until he was already on top of her. She fought and kicked for all that she had. Lennie punched her across the nose sending a spray of crimson onto the green blades of grass. He jerked her warm-up pants and panties down. She swung a small rock at his temple.

"Goddamn it!" he shouted through a growing field of stars. "You'll pay for that, bitch."

He slugged her again in the upper lip jarring one of her incisors loose. She whimpered in pain begging him to stop. Lennie loved it. It made him feel even more empowered.

"Now you're gonna get it," he hissed unfastening his own jeans. "Now you'll see what a real... Ah, fuck!"

Something stung the man in the left ass cheek. His victim struggled under his weakening grip. Lennie gave her an open hand to the face to put her back in her place.

"What the hell?" he said as he reached around and pulled a small dart out of the seat of his jeans.

Katana watched from the shrubs some thirty yards away. She had him right where she wanted him. The moron. She pulled a throwing star out from the pocket in her left

gauntlet, and launched it at her target.

"Holy shit!" Lennie screamed. An unimaginable amount of pain and heat exploded in his groin.

The rapist looked down to find half of a ninja star protruding from just above his penis. Blood pulsed out of the fresh wound. He felt his conscious nearly go out as he rolled on his side.

"What the -- ahh, God!" he shouted rocking on his left side.

The victim tugged her pants back up through a sea of tears, and scooted back on the ground. The horror of what unfolded next would haunt her nightmares for the rest of her days.

The trees bulged and shifted like a bubble on hot pavement. Then someone in a white ninja suit materialized out of thin air. The brunette watched on stunned by what was happening. The person in white held a single index finger to their masked mouth. She understood.

"Oh, Jesus!" Lennie cried as the white ninja stood over him. "What the fuck are you?"

Katana knelt down at her contract's side, and bent her mouth to his ear.

"You're taken by the wind," she whispered, and then stood back up.

Kat unsheathed both of her katanas in one swift motion. She took them by the hilt, and turned the swords upside down over Lennie's belly. The assassin rolled him onto his back with the heel of her right tabi boot.

"Please don't," he pleaded. "Please."

Lennie could have sworn that the blue eyes behind the mesh mask smiled after he said that. He looked on in horror as the assassin moved one blade up over his heart and the other down over his mangled crotch.

"Sweet Jesus, no!" he begged.

Katana looked over her shoulder at the brunette one last time, and then turned her vindictive gaze back down on Lennie. She plunged the deadly blades into their targeted zones, and gave each a wrenching twist before pulling them back out. Kat heard the woman behind her squeal in terror. She sheathed her weapons and turned to the victim.

The brunette watched as the figure in white took a few steps into the forest, and then vanished without a trace forever.

Chapter 5

*May 2041
Rio Rancho, NM*

His vision slowly came back into focus. The man tried to sit up, but his arms and feet were bound by something. Ramon Martinez tried to shout out an explicative. No good. His mouth was gagged, too. A towering mass of black muscle walked around to come face to face with him.

"Welcome back from the ball, Cinderella." The bald man's voice was deep and foreboding.

Martinez scanned the stranger before him. He wore reflective sunglasses, a sleeveless black military BDU blouse and matching trousers. Two Uzis were slung across his barrel-like chest hanging in a V just below each pec. A shiny hilt of another pistol sat at his left hip. The stranger's polished black combat boots paced back and forth across the rickety floorboards.

"I figure that you're wondering, how in the world did I get here?" the man said. "And more importantly, who the fuck am I?"

The boots stopped just to the left of Ramon's head. The confused Venezuelan felt the stranger's warm breath on his left ear.

"The name's Sledge," he said.

Sledge strode over to the busted out window and gazed out into the humid night.

"You're probably also curious as to just how in the hell you got yourself into this predicament. Let's just take a little stroll down memory lane, Ramon."

The huge militant man paced back over to Martinez's wooden chair. He crossed his thick arms, and continued to recount the events which led to this meeting.

"You see, I know everything about you," Sledge said in a condescending tone. "I know all about your little business ventures with the Venezuelan cartel. I know about your multiple hostels all over New Mexico."

The seventy-four inch tower of power circled his prey like a panther.

"You weren't an easy one to track down, Ramon," he said. He slid a large survival knife out of the small of his back and turned it in the moon's rays.

"I went to one of your whorehouses a little further

south of here. The Head Mistress didn't say much other than you liked to frequent a casino here in Rio."

Sledge paced back and forth in front of his visibly perturbed captive.

"So, I went there," he said spinning the tip of his blade on his right index finger. "I watched you for a week. I followed you around town, to the skin shacks, over to the race track and on down to the border."

The assassin walked around Martinez, and stopped right behind him.

"I watched you unload ten- and twelve-year-old girls into the basement of your smut shack," Sledge whispered into Ramon's left ear.

He leaned up and shifted his hairless head over to Martinez's right side.

"Makin' little girls your sex slaves," he said. "You make me fucking sick."

Sledge slapped the back of Ramon's head with his open hand.

"Then I trailed you over to the middle school," the explosives expert said. "I watched you as you stocked an eighth-grader up on cocaine, Mary Jane and pills."

"It's the punks like you," Sledge said burrowing the tip of his blade into Ramon's cheek, "that I get the most pleasure out of doing this to."

Martinez tried again to speak on his own behalf, but his words ceased at the rolled do-rag in his mouth.

"What's that?" Sledge asked sarcastically. "Doesn't matter now anyway."

The former Sailor strode back over to the window.

"You had your chance to speak," he said to the tree outside in the yard. "Your actions did the talking for you."

He pointed the tip of his knife at Ramon and glared at him from behind his designer aviator shades.

"You seem to love being blown, and blowing your mind for that matter."

Martinez attempted to stretch his neck, but his chin ran into something cold and soft around his neck. Come to think of it, his ass felt like it was on a cushion of some sort, too.

"I have heard your requests, and I am more than happy to oblige."

Sledge walked back over to Ramon. His boots thudded with each stride. The demolitions man knelt down in front of his cowering prey in the chair.

"You see, I dropped a little something in your bourbon

last night at the club. Ah, yeah! You were livin' it up last night, boy. Whoo!" the man shouted as he arched his torso toward the remnants of the structure's ceiling.

"You must've had every hottie in the club grinding on you out there. Made spikin' your punch pretty easy, man."

He tapped the tip of his combat knife against the side of his shimmering scalp.

"You might be wondering what ever happened to your boys Rico and Tyler."

Sledge stood up, and sheathed his blade. He took a thin metallic tube out of one of the cargo pockets on his BDU trousers.

"Not sure to be honest. Rico's probably in the local ER getting his windpipe reconstructed, if I had to guess."

The assassin studied his little contraption with stern attention.

"Tyler? Once he comes back around, he'll need to see a dentist and a good plastic surgeon."

Sledge stopped and looked down into Ramon's almond eyes.

"Once upon a time, I was a champion MMA fighter," he said in a cool voice. "Not too many people know that, so let's just keep it here between us, okay?"

Sledge placed the detonator back into his trouser pocket.

"Since you love getting blown so much," he said circling the thug again, "I've taken the liberty of setting you up for one hell of a ride."

He leaned over and checked the wires growing out of Martinez's neck and groin.

"There's enough plastic explosives chained to your neck and crotch to level half of a city block."

Sledge stood back up and got the thin metallic tube back out.

"Well, Ramon ole pal," he said continuing his circles around the chair, "I've got some good news, and some bad news."

"You want the good news first?" he asked stopping in front of the chair. "The good news is that no one's going to hear you scream when this all goes down."

Sledge scratched the underside of his chin with the tubular device.

"The bad news?"

The killer puffed out a single chuckle.

"I'm gonna punch you in the face, Ramon," he said. "Then I'm gonna walk out that door over there," he pointed to the main entrance with the detonator, "and blow your

dick clean off."

Sledge reached into his other cargo pocket. His left hand came back out wearing a pair of brass knuckles. He reared his massive left arm back behind his ear.

"This is for those little girls!" he shouted. The hook landed on Martinez's chin.

Three of the drug kingpin's bloody teeth rolled across the dusty floorboards. More of the man's crimson fluids gushed from his mangled maw. The towering shadow wound up for another strike.

"And this is for all of those kids that are now fucked up on drugs!"

This swing connected with Ramon's thin nose. Sledge felt the cartilage in the goon's beak give way. A spray of red exploded onto his cutoff BDU blouse.

"Man, I just had this washed and pressed."

Martinez's face lulled forward. Crimson streams cascaded from his nose and mouth. His brown eyes now rolled in the back of his skull. Sledge slid the brass knuckles back into his pocket, and headed for the weathered front door. He turned to Ramon one last time.

"The hammer just fell, bitch."

He turned and walked out of the door and across the barren lot. The muscular brute reached into the inside pouch of his BDU blouse and pulled out the short brown stump of a leftover cigar. He lit it with his Zippo as he crossed the street toward his custom Ford F-150. Its black finish and chrome motor gleamed in the moonlight. Sledge depressed the narrow end of the detonator as he stood facing his pride and joy. Three high-pitched beeps raced from the abandoned house in quick succession. Then the home went up in a massive fireball. The assassin expelled a plume of smoke into the arid desert heat, and climbed up into the cabin of his truck. Sledge turned his expressionless face to the orange pillar of destruction. One of Martinez's bloody arms burned in the front yard. The phone in his truck rang. Sledge recognized the number without even thinking. It was his wife.

"Yeah, babe," he said into the truck's cabin.

"It's Dahlia," his wife's worried voice said. "She's hypoglycemic and in the hospital again."

"Shit," he said. He grimaced at the thought of his only daughter being back under all of those tubes again. "I'm on my way."

He fired up the massive V-12 motor, and took off down the road away from the growing wail of the sirens in the distance. If he missed the morning rush outside of Reno, he

could be there by breakfast.

Chapter 6

May 2041
Great Smokey Mountains, TN

"They gonna want blood, brains and balls for this one," Tim Tom said as he and his partner made their way out of the thicket.

"Shut up, Tim Tom," Kernel snapped stepping over a fallen tree in the quiet mountain forest. "They shouldn't have been messin' around up here at our still."

"Shit, Kern," the lanky young man huffed. "Those wasn't any regular cops, man." He tugged at his suspenders. "They was feds - ATF!"

"Can it," the legendary moonshiner hissed.

The tandem tip-toed out of the underbrush and into a meadow of knee-high grass. Their beat up pickup sat at the end of the worn ruts. Its wooden flatbed covered in a blue tarp.

"There's a hundred gallons of peach brew in there," Kernel said. "At two hundred dollars a jug, that's..." The great grandson of a legendary shiner poked the air with his index finger, "two hundred grand, Tim Tom."

"We gonna be rich," the mountain man said rubbing his muddy hands together.

"We gotta get this shit to the stash house," Kernel said searching the area for any uninvited guests. "The distributor will meet us there."

"They gonna come lookin' for us, Kern. You know they ain't gonna let this one slide."

"We been runnin' from the law our whole lives," Kernel said as he fired up the old truck.

"I ain't talkin' about the law, man," Tim Tom said climbing into the bench seat across from his lifelong friend. "I'm talkin' about them."

Kernel turned a raise brow toward his buddy as he guided the jalopy down the worn path that the two had taken more than a thousand times.

"You know," Tim Tom said, "them killers."

"Christ, T," the short skinny driver said. "That' just a bunch of bullshit to scare the public into submission, man."

"Huh uh," his taller counterpart retorted. "They're for real. We gotta watch everyone, man. Everyone!"

Tim Tom rubbed his clean-shaven chin furiously.

"It could be anybody, Kern."

The truck bounded down around a bend in the dirt path, and toward a newer truck setting on the far side of a rusty gate.

"Let's just worry about gettin' this shine to the stash house," Kernel said. "Then we'll figure out a plan for your boogieman."

The short round guy in a flannel jacket stood next to the gate on the right side of the road. He tossed a nod at Kernel as the pickup rolled past him. Kernel stopped his pickup and leaned over Tim Tom.

"You seen any suspicious people around here since last week, George?"

The plump figure shook its head.

"See, T," Kernel said rolling back over behind the weathered steering wheel, "Nothin' to worry about."

He slammed the truck back into drive, and eased it down onto the old blacktop road.

"That don't mean shit, and you know it," Tim said staring off into the cloudy skies.

"It's been a week, and not so much as a local Barney has shown up sniffin' around," Kernel replied.

His childhood pal remained silent and stared off into the growing storm clouds to the west. He looked like a man who knew that his days were numbered.

The twenty-one year old man ran his hand over his flattened black mohawk atop his bald head. He followed its thin trail back to the neat braid that hung at the nape of his neck. This was the spot. Steam Punk knew it. He had staked out this little shack for four days now. They would be rolling up any minute to make another deposit into their stash house.

'Steam Punk, you there?'

The youthful assassin slid down into the bushes behind the old house.

I'm here, Q.

'Good. Have you acquired your targets?'

Punk scanned the perimeter through his sleek shades. *They should be along any time now.*

'Excellent. Have you found a way to get to them alone?'

I was thinking about doing them both right here.

A faded pair of light beams poked through the trees at the bend in the road in front of the cabin.

'No good, Steam Punk. Their distributor will be expecting them to make the transfer soon.'

"Shit," he hissed into the leaves in his face.

Punk rested his hands on the knees of his brass and titanium cybernetic legs.

Then I'll trail 'em for a while longer and see what I can do.

'Just don't get too cocky. I don't want to have to explain another incident like Cleveland.'

Steam Punk held back an outburst of laughter. Yeah, Cleveland. What a botched up job that was.

I didn't know that the Amish Mafia extended that far out.

'Well, now you know.'

"A single hit on an arms dealer turned into a friggin' holy bloodbath," he muttered.

'Just be more selective in your time and place of contract fulfillment.'

That's what Q usually referred to an execution as - contract fulfillment.

Alright, I will.

'Do you need anything uploaded?'

Nope, Q. I'm set. I'll take care of these clowns.

'Don't underestimate them. They've already killed six police officers and two AFT agents.'

I know.

'Very well. Head for Wyoming after this contract. Good luck. Q - out.'

Q had seemed to be a bit short with him since the carnage in Ohio. It wasn't Punk's fault, well not entirely. The slamming of the truck's doors shook him out of the trip down memory lane. Punk's targets appeared to be engaged in a heated exchange of their own as they made their way into the front door of the beat up cabin.

"I still say it's a bunch of bullshit no matter what the news people say!" Kernel teetered on the edge of rage.

"We gotta check our emails, man," Tim Tom urged as he shut the worn front door to their stash house.

Kernel tossed him a sour face over his shoulder as he propped the basement door open with an old 1950s era metal kitchen chair.

"We got no signal way the hell out here, and you know it."

The short man propped the front door back open with a rock, and headed back out to the bed of the truck.

"Besides," Kernel said. "If what they say is true, then you know that we're being tracked."

Tim Tom followed his partner out through the muddy yard to the night's drop.

"I'm worried, Kern," he stuttered. "I-I'm really worried, man."

Kernel tossed the old tarp back over the edge of the truck's bed. The entire back end of the pickup was lined with empty milk jugs full of liquid money. Kernel picked up an assault rifle out of the bed and held it across his chest.

"Let's see how they do against this."

The tandem unloaded the jugs into wooden crates and toted them into the cabin. Tim Tom followed Kernel down into the damp basement of the old shack. His vertically challenged buddy yanked the string switch on the overhead light bulb.

"We'll drop these jugs," Kernel began, "and then we'll run the rest down to Smitty's."

Tim Tom slid the hidden wooden door into the wall and set his jugs in with the rest of the stash.

"I don't think it's a good idea to be runnin' around out in public now at nip joints and the like," he said.

Kernel shook his head as he loaded his crate into the concealed compartment.

"Smitty's place'll be relatively quiet tonight, T. I doubt that we'll run into much trouble."

Steam Punk watched as his contracts emerged from the house again and hopped up into the cab of the old truck.

"Only two crates?" he whispered. "Must be doing a distro run to Smitty's tonight."

He stood up as the pickup bounded around the turn, and back down the mountain toward town.

"Guess I could use a chance to wet the whistle anyway," he said as his robotic legs carried him with ease back down to his Jeep Wrangler.

Punk swung himself up into the driver's seat. His bionic knee joints let out a gentle hiss of steam as he landed.

"Yes, I know," he said patting his right knee.

He had designed his own cybernetic legs nearly a decade ago. Technology had finally caught up to his needs and university education. The medical prefab ones that the prosthetics companies puked out were both overpriced and not his style. Besides, what good was having a doctorate in

robotics and cybernetics if you never did anything with it? So, Steam Punk combined two of his passions into one project. The result of his mad laboratory now propelled him around. Two legs constructed out of brass and titanium, and the whole system powered by steampunk technology. Hence the cover name. The assassin fired up the Wrangler and tuned in his police scanner to the local office.

"... got two CIs going in tonight," the male voice on the other end of the scanner said. "We're expecting a drop any time now."

"Copy that," a female voice replied.

"Shit!" Steam Punk exclaimed. "I couldn't go in there even if I wanted to now."

He hit the gas and led his monster Jeep back down the mountain in pursuit of his contracts. Two undercover cops at the nip joint tonight meant that a shot at taking the two down there was now definitely out. The static on his scanner broke the silence.

"We'll wait until the drop is made, and then we'll move in," the man instructed.

"Damn it," Punk said in disgust. "You're gonna do this now of all times?" he asked the scanner.

"Do you have a visual yet?" the male voice inquired.

"Negative, not yet," the woman responded.

"Roger," the man confirmed.

The scanner went quiet again as the young North Carolina native drove down into town, and found a concealed place to park for the show. His scanner perked up again.

"We have a visual on the target," the woman said. "They're pulling into the back of the club now."

"Copy that," the male voice said.

Punk figured that he had to be in his forties from the gravel in his voice. The cop was probably a chain smoker, too.

"Move into positions, and stand by," he said in a flat tone.

"Roger," the female agent replied.

Steam Punk looked across the lot and into the rear entrance of the nip joint. A tall black man popped the door open with a closed fist. The two cops crept around the front corner of the bar closest to Punk. Smitty motioned his flat hand across his throat as Kernel and Tim Tom kicked the truck into park.

"This may be the break I've been waiting for," Steam Punk said setting up in the bucket seat.

Kernel knew what the gesture meant: The Barney's are inside. The drop's off.

"Fuck!" Kernel shouted as he quickly fired his truck back to life. "This is NOT what we need right now."

"Goddamnit," Tim Tom said rocking back and forth next to him. "I knew something was gonna give sooner or later."

"Not now, T!" the Tennessee man said as the truck squealed out of the parking lot. "We gotta get to the safe house, and ride this out."

"... are on the move!" Steam Punk's scanner squelched. "I repeat they are on the move."

The female cop and her male partner bolted back into their Mustang.

"Get me a twenty on them," the smoker demanded.

The muscle car peeled out down the street and fish-tailed around the intersection in pursuit.

"This is it," Punk said. "They'll call George down off of the hill, and ride this thing out at the safe house."

He cruised down to the intersection, and turned back in the direction of the mountain.

"When they come back later on tonight to hide their shine," he said tapping the sawed-off 12-gauge next to him, "I'll be waiting."

Steam Punk parked his Jeep as close to their still up the far side of the mountain as he could get it. The local cops chased the duo away from their cabin, and now he had to beat the Barneys to their cooker. It was still going to be a steep climb partially up a rock face to get to the top.

"Better get while the getting's good," the young man said as he pulled out a hilt from the small of his back.

Punk flicked a switch on the side of the brass hilt, and its tiny gears hissed to life within. One flat brass blade flipped out of the side of the hilt and locked into place. Then another swung out from behind that. The last third of the machete blade whirred out into its position at the end of the weapon.

Steam Punk waded into the thick underbrush hacking a path as he proceeded.

"There better not be any snakes up in here," he said scanning the ground on either side of his new path. "I fuckin' hate snakes."

In no time at all, he had made it to the base of the

rock face. It stretched up for right around thirty feet according to Punk's guesstimation.

"Now how the hell am I," he started to complain. "Oh, there you are my little darlin'."

His bright brown eyes turned up to the tuft of grass that crowned the outcropping midway up the face.

"Won't need to break out the hook after all," Punk said stepping back to get a good run at the limestone face.

Steam Punk bobbed up and down on his robotic legs a few times to limber them up for the attempt ahead. He flicked the switch on his machete, and stowed it away once its blade had neatly compressed itself back within the confines of its hilt. Punk lowered his head and assumed a sprinter's starting block pose. He fixed his stare on his target some twenty yards away. Without saying a word, he bolted off of the logs at his feet. The powerful pistons in his thighs and calves hissed out a cadence that grew in speed. Once he had reached his chosen target point, Punk sprung off of his legs and catapulted himself up into the humid mountain night.

The outcropping sped at his chest. Then it sank under his feet.

"Oh, shit!" Punk cried.

The outcropping stopped its movement backward, and stalled below his brass toes. Then the Earth began to quickly close in on his lower body.

"Whew!" he sighed in relief.

Punk landed on the platform of dirt and grass, and then bounded off of it back into the air toward the top of the rock face.

"Damn near overshot that one."

Once at the crest of the limestone face, Steam Punk darted up the mountain's inclined surface. He sprinted off through the forest following the sound of the trickling spring to the still.

The rain had been coming down in a steady deluge since Kernel and Tim Tom had left the safe house. Driving in the rain at night really got under Kernel's skin.

"I can't see for shit as it is," he said leaning closer to the windshield. "Now this - at night!"

"That was too friggin' close," Tim Tom said squinting his eyes in an effort to navigate for his partner.

Kernel directed the old pickup through a long deep puddle of water that had now gathered over the winding mountain road.

"We gotta get back in there tonight and hide this shine," the short man insisted. "Can't cook nothin' in this for sure," Kernel said as he shot a stream of tobacco spit out of his window.

He parked the truck into its usual spot in the meadow, and pulled the brim of his old orange UT ball cap down over his weary eyes.

"We're gonna take some insurance in with us," Kern said slinging the semi-automatic rifle over his back, "just in case."

Tim Tom nodded as the tandem each took a crate of jugs, and stormed off into the wall of early morning rain. The mountain was especially treacherous now. The roots and fallen trees were so slick that the two veterans to this area nearly fell several times on the way in. He and Tim Tom crept down the shallow decline following the gurgle of the mountain stream to their secret location.

"We'll just cover these jugs back up," Kern said, "and then we'll head on back home. It's late and I'm starvin'."

"That sounds," Tim Tom began, but his reply was interrupted. "D'ju hear that?"

Kernel shook his plump head.

"Sounded like.."

A faint hissing noise wove through the raindrops again.

"There it is again!" T shouted. "Sounds like a rattler, man."

Then a form bolted from behind the cistern and stood before the shocked duo. The relentless rain streamed off of his nearly-bald head. The lone streak of black hair remained matted to his scalp.

"Holy Christ!" Tim Tom shouted.

Steam Punk saw Kernel go for the rifle on his back. Punk swung his sawed-off around in a blinding flash and pressed both barrels deep into the short man's chest. One second T's childhood buddy was standing beside to him, and the next there was nothing there but a cloud of white smoke. The smell of spent gunpowder filled Tim Tom's nose. Kernel was blown off of the ground and now lay in the mud with his heart pumping bright red fluid out of the crater in his ribcage. The blast of the buckshot echoed around the deep canyon.

"Pain is primed to do its educating," the stranger said in a hollow tone.

He swung the stubby shotgun back around his torso. Tim Tom thrust his open hands up in front of his body.

"Please, man," he pleaded. "You don't have to do

this."

The outside edges of the man's thighs bulged out with a hiss of steam just below the hemline in his denim shorts. Two .45 pistols popped up just above the hidden compartments.

"I'm afraid that your time is up," the dark silhouette said. "By the way, you do have the right to remain silent."

Tim Tom pissed his shorts then and there. He hadn't lost control like that in a long time. The hillbilly had figured that he might go because of the diabetes on his dad's side one day, but never to the likes of the metal-legged nightmare that bared down on him now.

"You have been found guilty of murder," Punk said, "on six counts to be exact. You know why I'm here, don't you?"

He nodded slowly at Punk. Steam Punk could see the fear in the tall man's eyes. He whipped the pistols out of their custom holsters, and trained them on his target's widened eyes.

"Good," he said as he fired two rounds into either socket.

Tim Tom's body fell in a lifeless heap a mere two feet from the terrestrial remains of his lifelong pal. They had run all over this mountain as kids and later as young men. Now this towering mass of earth and stone would serve as their tomb.

Chapter 7

May 2041

Somewhere south of Baltimore, MD

"Out of the way, asshole!" Max shouted as she maneuvered her 1969 Malibu replica around a lagging garbage truck.

Her target picked up speed in his Mercedes, and wove in and out of the slow lane of Maryland Route 32 West. Her slender light brown hands had a death grip on the leather-bound steering wheel of her custom ride. Max threw the eight-ball shifter from fifth down into sixth gear. The oversized drag tires on the back axle of the machine squealed as she stomped the accelerator to the floorboard.

The beige Mercedes darted down a straight portion of the divided highway. Max knew that she was going to run out of highway soon.

"If I don't stop him before he gets to the two-lane part of this road," she mused, "things could get really complicated."

Max had trailed this target for nearly a month. His exact name had to be concealed by the request of other parties. So, she had taken to calling him, Jimbo. He had been suspected of, and later convicted for, selling high-level secrets to foreign powers. A big no-no in anyone's book. Jimbo had been watched by agents of a different sort for a year after he aroused suspicion. These folks followed his every move: his jaunts to Eastern Europe, quiet meetings with his handlers in Scranton, PA and the endless streams of foreign currency that flooded his overseas accounts. Once they had proved beyond a reasonable doubt that Jimbo was their man, they filed a case review with the Cloud Court.

Within three days the Court came back with a guilty verdict of high treason. His penalty - death by assassination. The Federal Government had gone under the concept of a lifelong prison sentence for such a crime for decades. Then the budget cuts finally hit the judicial system. Sure, the policymakers on Capitol Hill had made cuts over the last thirty years in the military, the Defense Department and had even shut down agencies such as

NASA indefinitely. These actions still did nothing to stifle the government's out-of-control spending sprees. Therefore, twelve years ago the government decided to do away with circuit and state supreme courts altogether, and replaced them with the Cloud Court Servers. There was still a circuit of human judges that reviewed the cases, and even a small panel of jury members if the judge required it. The new system did away with all of the wasted tax dollars on unnecessary jobs, court fees and utility bills and upkeep of the buildings. If the case was pretty cut and dry, the law enforcement agencies could submit their case and evidence packets to the Cloud Court, and get a verdict back within an hour or a few days at the most.

Such was the case for Jimbo. They had all of the evidence that they needed for the conviction, and the Cloud Court was more than happy to oblige. Jimbo did what Max had seen most of her other contracts do when they received their message with the verdict and sentence. He panicked. She could always tell when her target had found out because of their urgent need to escape the country. Several had tried this tactic, but none had ever succeeded. One of the hunters always got to them.

Max was a perfectionist, and had been conditioned to be so by her parents. Her dad was a good ole boy from the hills of West Virginia, and her mom was an urbanite from Cincinnati. The kids in school teased her from time to time about having interracial parents. Those things never stuck, though. What did were her parents instilled values of hard work, integrity and never giving up. Max never quit. Even when the chips were stacked against her, she never threw in the towel.

That perseverance is what led the assassin to her current situation. Jimbo had tried to skip the country at the Baltimore airport. Then an athletic and exotic young woman began flirting with him from across the aisle. Her bright blue eyes. Her light brown hair. They seduced the man into submission. Jimbo was about to ask her if she wanted to go to the bar for a drink while they waited on their flight, but a glint of light on her right hip caused him to run. This fox was packing heat. He assumed that she was a counter-Intel agent assigned to bring him in and ran.

The young woman manipulated the Cloud Modulation band on her car's radio. She navigated through a few submenus until she found the song that she was looking for. It was an oldie, but a goodie as her father would have said. Max didn't mind some of the crooner tunes that had resurfaced with the NetRo movement, but she still loved her classic

rock.

"Let's get this over with," she said as she cranked up the volume.

The trained killer punched the gas, and wove her Malibu in and out of the fast lane toward the Mercedes. She knew that the divided highway would end in four more miles. She saw Jimbo look up into his rearview mirror frantically, and then swerve his German sedan right in front of a van. The driver of the van slammed on his brakes and his horn as she blew past him.

Max maneuvered her muscle car up alongside her target. She rolled down her driver's side window, and picked up her pistol out of the shotgun seat. The assassin trained the barrel of her new toy on Jimbo's center mass and pressed a small button on the front of the trigger guard. A thin red beam of light shot out and trained on its target. The scrawny middle-aged man looked down in a panic expecting a bullet to quickly follow. The small screen behind the hammer of the weapon read, *target acquired*.

"Now for a little fun," the young woman said.

She pointed the gun out the driver's side window, and pulled the trigger. Two seconds later, Jimbo's chest exploded as the .357 round burrowed into his body. The Mercedes swerved frantically in the slow lane as its navigator clasped both of his hands over the small crater in his rib cage.

"Lights out, sugar," Max said as she cut her wheel hard to the right.

The front panel of her vehicle collided with its beige counterpart. Max continued to cut her wheel hard bearing the power of her car down on the flailing sedan.

The last thing that she saw were the whites of Jimbo's eyes before she sent his expensive family wagon careening off of a bridge and into the hillside below. The agile assassin tossed her pistol into the passenger seat and hit the accelerator.

'Max, are you there?'

I'm here, Q.

She had known that Q was going to make contact shortly after the contract hit. Max was a vet on the Cell, and Q's right-hand gal.

'I assume that your contract has been fulfilled?'

Jimbo's dead.

'Were there any witnesses?'

She heaved a large sigh. Q knew the answer already. Why go through this?

Yeah. I think there might have been a couple.

'Did you take your target out quietly?'
Were you in on that last little bit, Q?

The assassin shook her head.

'Unfortunately, no. I wasn't. I had to deal with some pressing business.'

He's lying in a crushed heap a mile back.

'I see. Did you get to test the Guided Munitions Gun?'
Yep. Worked like a charm.

Max slowed her machine down as traffic merged into one lane.

Hit him square in the heart.

'Excellent. Listen Max, we have some very pressing matters to talk about as a group. Can you catch a flight out tonight to Wyoming?'

She propped her head up on her left palm. This was just not her day.

No problem, Q. Where and when?

'Jackson Hole. Tomorrow morning at ten AM local time.'
Any place in particular?

She finally got to a place where she could make a u-turn and head back toward her townhouse.

'You'll meet with the others in a little diner on North King Street called Meg's.'

Max punched the pedal to the floor, and flew past a growing line of long-neckers in the opposite lane.

Anything that we need to be overly concerned about?

There was an uncomfortable silence that permeated the cabin of the Malibu.

'We'll discuss it later. There are several points to touch on, but now is not a good time.'

I understand, Q. I'll talk to you then.

'Great. Thanks, Max. Safe travels. Q - out.'

The black '69 Malibu sped down Route 32 East toward her little abode in Laurel.

Chapter 8

May 2041
Jackson Hole, WY

The flow of the jet stream out of Canada allowed the chill to remain in the air even this late into the year. Rider tugged his leather hat down over his head, and unsaddled his steel horse. Meg's Diner was a small little mom-and-pop joint with nothing of real flash or flare. The outside was a worn whitewash job from decades past. Its signage appeared as though it too had seen much better days. Still - there was something about it that drew you in to its rustic décor.

Rider took a final hit off of his cigarette, and flicked the stub off into the paved parking lot. He drew his duster in around his muscular frame to conceal his weapons, and glanced over his shoulder one last time at his Bad Boy. He knew it was still there, but he had to look anyway. He walked into the foyer where he was greeted by the aroma of grease as well as a lean red-haired waitress.

"Morning, Tonya," He said from under the brim of his headpiece.

She stopped with a coffee pot in hand and an expression of disbelief all over her.

"How did you know my name?" she asked.

The tall stranger pointed to the white nametag on her red blouse.

"Been a long shift, then?" he asked with a smirk.

She tossed out her hip and chuckled.

"And you are?"

"Just passing through," Rider said. He noticed a black fedora peeking up over the divider of a booth to his left.

"Can I help you find a place to sit?" Tonya inquired flirtatiously.

"I believe that I've found who I'm looking for, thanks."

The lean cowboy strode over to the black leather booth and slid into the vacant side.

"Morning, Judge."

"Rider," Judge said spinning his cup of joe around slowly on its saucer.

"First as usual, I see," Rider said.

"Of course," Judge said as he picked up his hydro and took in another deep drag. "Would you expect anything else?"

A plume of white smoke rose from the corner of the hitman's lips.

"Not at all, brother," Rider replied. "Do you have any idea what this shindig is all about?"

The PI look-alike leaned back into his bench, and picked up his coffee again.

"Nope," he said. "Not a clue, pal."

Tonya swaggered over to their booth making herself comfortable in Rider's personal space.

"Can I get ya anything, hon?"

He could make out the outline of her lacey thong through the back of her white skirt. Q had found a good place alright.

"Coffee," he muttered through his day-old stubble. "Two shots of cream, one shot of whiskey and one packet of sugar."

"I'm sorry, sir," Tonya started.

"Don't give me the health inspector runaround," Rider hissed. "You guys work in a hole like this, and your line cook doesn't take a nip from time to time?"

The slender waitress stood in shock. How could he know that?

"Make it happen, hon," the cool desperado demanded.

Tonya walked off still awestruck by the shadowy stranger's uncanny abilities.

"Must be good, though," Judge said, "if the boss wants us all here in person."

Rider nodded and flipped through the trifold menu. He glanced over the top of it in time to catch Judge's sagging expression. The assassin peered over his shoulder, and found the cause of the man's sorrow.

"Well, well," Rider said as the young man with a black mowhawk slid in next to Judge. "Wearing jeans this time, eh?"

Steam Punk gave him a stare that could have frozen an ice cube in Fairbanks.

"We don't want to get the natives all fired up over my manly legs again, do we?" he asked grooming the short neat braid at the small of his neck.

"Probably not after your handiwork in Ohio," Judge said smiling over the rim of his cup.

"Yeah Wildman," Rider said. "What exactly did happen out there?"

Tonya slid a cup of steaming coffee in front of the

cowboy, and took out her pen and order pad. Their conversation came to a screeching halt.

"Eggs, scrambled," he said staring down at the tabletop. "Sausage links, waffles and a bottle of hot sauce."

She made a quick note of the man's order and disappeared back behind her counter.

"Cleveland was jacked up from the beginning," Punk said. "Extenuating circumstances."

"Mmm, hmmm," Judge hummed through his sip.

"I was," Steam Punk said in a defensive tone.

"Whatever you say, Pumpkin," Rider said.

The agency rookie shook his head. He was visibly frustrated.

"You know we're just hacking on you, right?" the cowboy said.

"He does it to everyone," Judge interjected. "Nothing personal."

"When are you going to give up on those bubble blowers, and try a real man's smoke?" Rider cracked in Judge's direction.

"See what I mean," Judge said setting his cup back on the table. "About the same time you find a good razor," he shot back.

Rider chuckled under his brim, and leaned in over the platter of food that had just arrived. The fork of eggs had almost made it into his mouth. The loud rumble of a V-12 engine made him pause from breaking his fast. A black truck on raised tires pulled into a space at the front of the establishment.

"Sledge," they all said in near unison.

"He has to have the loudest vehicle on the planet," Judge surmised through a bite of bacon.

"Maybe," Punk said, "but it's so badass."

"He has to be able to beat the crap out of people," Rider said. "There's no way he's going to sneak up on them."

"Did someone mention my name?" a feminine voice said from nowhere.

Katana slid out from behind the booth next to Punk.

"Jesus!" he shouted. "Stop doing that."

"I could've had you," she said as she plopped next to Rider.

"You guys see that article out of Europe yesterday?" Kat asked. "They found three more known kingpins that appeared to have hung themselves. One in Madrid, one in Tel Aviv and the other one in Nice. Same M.O. No one else

killed, and no suicide letters."

"Do you think it was our guy?" Judge asked. "The mystery man in Europe?"

Katana nodded.

"You guys are up to your eyes in horseshit," Rider said.

"What?" she asked. "You don't think that the Hangman could be doing what we do over there?"

"It's not very likely, kiddo," Rider said.

A few moments later, Sledge dropped himself into the booth across the aisle from where the others sat. He looked tired - rode hard and put up wet.

"Doing okay, buddy?" Steam Punk asked.

The hulk of a man only grunted and put his bald head on his arms on the table.

"What are you all talking about?" Sledge asked.

"The Hangman," Judge said.

"Oh, that," the slumped mass replied. "You know, my boy goes on those ghost hunting adventures. He hasn't seen a damn thing yet."

"That doesn't mean that he isn't real," Punk said.

"I hope this is worth it," Sledge said from his makeshift pillow. "I've been on the road half of the night, man."

"Same here," Rider said taking another gulp from his cup.

A fiery red Ferrari came to an abrupt stop in the space next to Sledge's pickup. He rolled his weary head over momentarily to make sure that his ride wasn't damaged, and then went back to sleep.

Ivy shoved her purse under her arm, and strode into the little diner. She wore short and tight denim shorts and a see-through tee. She appeared to be all legs from where Steam Punk sat.

"Morning guys," she said as she slumped into the booth across from Sledge. "There's not enough coffee in the world for that kind of trip."

Sledge mumbled something that sounded like a greeting to Ivy from under his forearms.

"There she is!" Steam Punk shouted as the familiar exotic woman in the black leather jacket made her way to the gathering.

"Good morning everyone," Max said in tired tones. "Jet lag's a bitch."

The waitress set a few cups on their table and poured coffee into each one.

"Just leave that here," Max said as the waitress

turned to leave. The veteran server nodded and sat the pot of bean juice at the center of the table.

"You got any idea what this is all about?" Judge asked turning his head toward Max.

"Nope," she said taking a big swig of her coffee. "Said it was big, but that's all that I know."

"When's this thing going to get started?" Kit inquired impatiently.

Max looked down at her gold watch. It read 9:59AM.

"It should get under way any second n—"

Her reply got cut off by their leader's entrance into their minds.

'Is everyone here, Max?'

We're all here and ready, Q.

'Very well. I've tuned everyone in to the same line. So, we're going to be able to communicate this way simultaneously. That being said, don't think about anything that you don't want any of us to find out about.'

Katana wore a face of surprise at this notion. She quickly cleared her mind of any lingering thoughts.

'First off, let me start by thanking all of you for getting here on such a short notice.'

You have no idea, Sledge interjected.

'I understand, and I'm very appreciative. What I have to put out is of the utmost importance, though. It needed to be done in this manner. Our way of doing business may be in danger.'

What sort of danger? Max asked.

Yeah, what are you getting at? Judge inquired.

I'm not sure I like where this is headed, Rider thought.

'There is a person or entity out and about that likes to refer to themselves as the Architect. I don't have a lot of information to go on just yet. What I have uncovered points to the systematic dismantling of our organization - at least to me.'

In what way? Rider asked.

'This Architect has lots of money tied up in hundreds of investments. The one that caught my eyes was an Ultra-Rightwing group forming in Texas calling themselves the Minutemen.'

Another Tea Party spinoff? Punk interjected.

'Not exactly. They do have extreme views on what they feel is our infringement on their Constitutional rights. They aren't a violent militia, per se, but they want to expose all of us.'

That could make our lives miserable, Sledge said.

I don't get it, Q, Ivy thought. How are they going to hurt us?

'They're not going to hurt us, Ivy. They may very well get in the way of one of our targets, or form a mob that marches on the Capitol.'

How would they know who our contracts were, though? Judge asked.

'I'm still trying to find that out. Right now, they don't.'

Then we don't have a ton to worry about, Max said.

'Not right now, no. The Minutemen don't pose a direct threat to us. This Architect has got his hands in a lot of things. I need to know more about him. I don't have much to start on, but a good hunch. Sledge, I want you and Max to go see what you can dig up on a guy named Joey Rappone.'

Alright, Sledge thought.

'He runs a large racketeering and gambling outfit in Uniontown, PA. I've seen him come up on the Cloud Court System several times for different crimes, but he hasn't had a contract.'

Sounds suspicious, Max thought.

'I don't know if or even how he might be connected, but it might be a place to start. Find out why Rappone keeps getting bumped out. Something doesn't add up. Rider?'

Here, boss.

'Good. I want you to take a little trip down to El Paso on your way back home.'

Will do, Q.

'I have reason to suspect that a Minuteman camp exists in that neck of the woods. See what you can uncover, and while your down there find the contract that I'm uploading now, and fulfill it.'

A flurry of images darted past the cowboy's inner vision: mug shots, rap sheets, a list of addresses and several maps.

'Judge?'

Yeah, Q.

'I've got one up in your stomping ground, too. Patrick McGarren. He's been convicted of embezzling two billion dollars from his employer. It should be a pretty open and shut contract.'

No problem, boss.

'I'm sending you his file now.'

Anything for me, Q? Steam Punk asked.

'Yes, Steam Punk. As a matter of fact I do have something special for you.'

The young assassin rubbed his hands together with

excitement.

"Now we're talking," he said aloud.

'I need you to go to Lancaster, PA. There has been a murder up in Amish country there. Some think that the contract might be protected by the local mafia, so be cautious.'

Oh. Okay, sure, Q.

Judge could see that the young man was visibly disappointed.

'Sledge and Max, I want you to make yourselves available as backup while you're up there in case Steam Punk gets into a fix.'

Will do, Q, Sledge replied.

'For those of you without contracts, you've got a few days of down time. As always, be on standby in case something should arise.'

Ivy and Kat looked at one another and smiled from ear to ear.

'Another bit of business that we need to take care of while we're all together is an update.'

What kind of update, Q? Judge asked.

'With these events coming to light, we can't be too careful. I'm going to update our security and accesses from my side. Hopefully, this will help ward off any unwanted intruders in our system.'

Sounds good to me, Sledge thought.

'One final thought before we part company. Be on your guard at all times. Be very selective on time and location when fulfilling your contracts from here on out. I don't know who they are yet, but they are indeed looking for us. We have become the hunted, friends. Q - out.'

The group let out a collective sigh. The stakes in this great game just got raised.

Static Interference

*(An excerpt from the Conspiracy Theory Radio Program,
May 2041)*

Welcome back folks, Zack here. If you are just joining us on Static Interference, this hour we are following a story from the American Insider radio program of a woman in the black seen following a young man for several weeks before his blatant execution. What could have been this young man's crime? Did he refuse to obey the Mega state? This is further proof of movement towards a one-world government. The press-titutes of the main stream media won't cover these types of events. For fear that they may lose an interview with our Commander-In-Chief.

It is up to us. You and I are the resistance. The spirit of 1776! The loyalists are the mainstream media and the sheep that believe them. Watching their NFL and lethargically consuming. Government officials wait for events like the Super Bowl so they can slide by their bills, like the Internet kill switch of 2031. If things get too hot, if the masses decide to stand up, the mega state can now cut all of our communications. The forced inoculation act of 2038 was approved during the Summer Olympics. They just engineered a dangerous flu and watched the sheep lineup. Not me friends. Do you think Thomas Paine or Paul Revere would've lined up to have God-knows-what shot in their arms?

Well that's just when they're being honest with us folks. They'll pass a bill, but what about all of the covert garbage they never intended us to see?

They call us kooks. Loyalists called our forefathers kooks. It's not that I am comparing myself to our forefathers. It's just that I know historically what it means. We are fish in a barrel and if they think someone can prove that you did something wrong. Well, then you are as good as dead.

George Washington once said, "A free people ought not to be armed and disciplined, but should have ample arms and ammunition to maintain a status of independence from any who would attempt to abuse them including their government."

Folks I've said it before. It's better to be prepared ten years early than one day late. After the break we are going to talk with a man who claims to have had an encounter with one of these federal assassins. Says he was given a souvenir moments after a kill. So stay tuned and we'll be right back.

Chapter 9

May 2041
Seattle, WA

The alarm went off at 6:56AM waking Patrick McGarren from his otherwise restful slumber. His wife Eun Jin still lay fast asleep in the middle of the king-sized bed.

"Ah, hell," Pat said in his bayou draw rubbing the crusted crap from the corners of his brown eyes.

Outside the window to his oversized master suite, the rain poured down in a sheet.

"Another fine day in paradise," he said as he scratched his ass and lumbered into the adjoining bathroom.

EJ whimpered in her sleep, and rolled her petite body over away from the light ruckus her husband made. Pat made his way to the throne and nearly doused the ceiling when he was startled by his home assistant.

"Good morning, Patrick," the warm feminine voice said.

"Holy shit!" he hissed as he jumped at the unexpected intrusion.

The grainy hologram of a young slender blonde turned to face him. He finished and went to the sink to wash up.

"Can I start a pot of coffee for you this morning, Patrick?" the hologram asked as she followed his every move.

The thirty-year-old man rubbed the stubble on his face, and got out his shaving kit.

"Sure," he said, "coffee sounds great this morning, Sadie."

McGarren lathered up his face, and went to work on getting ready for another busy day as the Senior VP at First Rays Bank downtown.

"Shall I turn on the news for you downstairs as well?" Sadie asked. "Or perhaps the highlight from last night's sporting events?"

Patrick walked into the adjacent closet and got dressed in one of his favorite pinstripes. Sadie strolled behind him in her white form-fitting jumpsuit. He hadn't paid for the software upgrades yet that would allow the buyer to customize their home assistant.

"The news will be fine, Sadie," he replied straightening his tie. "Thank you."

She turned and walked back to the doorway into the master bedroom.

"Very well, Patrick," she said in a warm tone. "Your coffee will be finished in a minute."

"Thanks, Sadie."

Patrick grabbed a glossy pair of leather wingtips off of the shoe shelf and quietly made his way past his son's room and downstairs to the kitchen.

Sadie stood in the center of the large living room with her hands crossed in front of her.

"Your coffee is ready, Patrick," she said. "Shall I turn on the TV?"

Pat ran his hand through his wavy rust-colored hair, and poured the steaming brew into his Seahawks mug.

"Sure," he muttered. "How about some sports?"

"Very well," the athletic young woman replied.

She turned to face the large flat TV that hung on the far wall. It flashed to life showing six smaller screens each following a different storyline.

Patrick squinted to see the latest happenings on his TV through the transparent image of his assistant.

"Enlarge channel one-twenty-seven," he commanded.

The TV obeyed and brought the NBA highlight reel full screen on his set.

"... and the Pelicans did it again last night," one commentator said as one basketball forward dunked the ball home.

Pat jabbed his left fist into the air in celebration.

"Right on!" he exclaimed. "Evened the playoffs up to three a piece."

McGarren got heckled at the office for being a Pelicans fan, and even more so for his Cajun draw. Still, he remained true to his childhood teams regardless of where his corporate career took him.

"Your spouse has a wakeup call set for nine AM," Sadie said facing Patrick once more. "Shall I keep this call active?"

The man bent his five-ten frame down over his mug, and nursed in a few sips more of the bean juice.

"Mmm," he mumbled in acquiescence through his steaming coffee, "yes, keep it. I think she and Alex are going to run some errands later this mornin'" he said.

The hologram nodded.

"Shall I start your car and warm it up, Patrick?"

He grabbed his lunch bag out of the side-by-side fridge, and sat it on top of his briefcase on the counter.

"Sounds great, Sadie," he replied.

He heard the garage door activate and slide open. A few seconds thereafter, the V-6 motor in his Camry fired to

life. Pat walked into the front foyer and slid his long brown trench coat on over his suit. His home assistant reappeared in front of him in the foyer.

"The car is warming up now," she said. "The traffic on I-90 from North Bend into downtown is mild."

"Thank you," Pat said grabbing his travel mug and other belongings.

"The rain showers are expected to continue throughout the morning and clear by noon," the pixelated assistant said. "Better take the umbrella."

Pat grabbed his favorite golfing umbrella out of the corner, and headed out the front door.

"Thank you, Sadie," he said in a warm voice. "Lock up behind me?"

"Of course, Patrick," she said.

The large front door closed with a cold clank. Pat wandered through the pounding precipitation and into his warm vehicle.

Sadie was right. Traffic was relatively light on 90 this morning. Usually by 8:30 the interstate was turning into a twenty-mile long parking lot into downtown, but this morning the roads were eerily quiet.

"Shall I pilot the vehicle in to your destination, sir?" the car's AI assistant inquired.

Pat peered over his steering wheel and onto the calm highway.

"Sure," he said.

"Your destination?" the assistant asked.

"Work, please," he replied. "Take the standard route in to the office today."

"Very well, sir," the Camry replied. "Your ETA to your destination is approximately nineteen minutes."

"Excellent," Pat said.

He opened his briefcase, and thumbed through some of the spreadsheets on the upcoming budget meeting.

"Display my work schedule for today," he said to the sedan.

"Your schedule for today, sir," the assistant said as a box appeared on the passenger side of the windshield.

"Nine AM - executive budget meeting," the AI said in deliberate tones. "Eleven thirty AM - meet Chuck for lunch."

"Hell," Pat winced. "I forgot about that."

He and Chuck had recently reunited after more than ten years since their graduation from L.S.U.

"Shall I reschedule that appointment?" the AI assistant asked.

McGarren heaved a stressful sigh.

"Nah," he replied. "Let's keep it. I haven't seen ole' Chuck since we were roomies."

He knew that he was going to be pressed to make it down to the bistro in time for the lunch if his meeting went even one minute over - which they usually did. His Camry rolled down I-90 weaving in and out of traffic and the relentless rain.

Pat had made it to his office on the ninth floor of the high rise on Madison Street with little interference. The security guards at the front desk greeted him with their usual snores. The elevator was crammed elbow to asshole as always. There were several businesses housed in this particular building, but the company that Patrick had slaved for the past nine years, First Rays Bank, was its main tenant.

McGarren had started with the Chinese financial giant as an intern back in '32. He had worked mainly as a courier for that year - paying his dues as his mentor had put it. After three years of running all over, he finally found a home in the Acquisitions Department. He learned the ropes quickly on how to buy out other competitors in the finance market. His direct supervisor said that he was a natural. Six years and two promotions later, Pat found himself moving to Washington to head up the entire North American headquarters of First Rays as its Senior VP in charge of Corporate Accounts. It was a big title that basically meant that he signed off on any investments that the company made stateside for charity, endorsements, or political contributions, etc.

"Good morning, Mr. McGarren," Sally said from behind her large crescent desk in a cheerful tone.

"Hey, Sal," Pat returned. "Have any of our guests arrived for the meeting yet?"

She peered down at the computer screen briefly, and then went back to pruning her nails.

"Nope," she said nonchalantly, "not yet, sir."

"Alright," he said as he turned the corner, and strolled past the long rows of cubicles.

He made his way into his office with a view overlooking the busy traffic on Madison. Pat gazed out into the garden of cubicles in front of his glass wall. He could record one day, and then just play it back every morning thereafter. It seemed to never change. Ralph, who was two years from retirement, sat in his box and played solitaire

all day. When he wasn't doing that he could be found in the break room griping about how little of a severance he was going to get. Mike and Cheri always flirted with one another when they thought no one was looking. Pat had even caught the secret couple in the supply room early one morning. Mike had Cheri's skirt hiked up past her ass cheeks, and was inhaling her face. They were too busy to notice that he had passed by, of course. Then there was the young go-getter, Angela. She was still only twenty-two, and full of pep. She was a hard charger and came in early and stayed late to make a good impression. *If she jammed her nose any farther up my ass, Pat thought, she could sniff my pancreas.*

Patrick sat down in his leather chair and fired up his computer system. The sleek square screen flashed to life, and the laser sensor below the monitor shot out a blue fan across the mahogany desk's surface. A virtual keyboard blinked into existence before his hands. Another laser shot out of a dimple just to the right of the monitor's power button. Pat set his right index and middle fingers in this beam of light, and manipulated the virtual mouse. The arrow on the main screen obeyed, and opened up his email inbox and calendar. By the time that he had checked his inbox and reviewed the news on the corporate intranet site it was time to get off to his meeting with the Board. He grabbed his files out of his briefcase, and hustled down the long corridor into the main conference room at its end.

The meeting had gone off without a hitch. Two of the founders had flown in from Beijing for the week, but neither had anything bad to say during the conference. Patrick rolled in his chair back up to the computer screen. The little clock in the lower right corner now read 10:58 AM. They had managed to get it over with a bit early.

"Thank God that's done," he sighed as he fluttered his right fingers in the virtual mouse's beam.

The sealed envelope icon flashed on the screen's lower bar.

"Probably another slice of corporate spam," he thought as he manipulated the laser to get the mouse to do his bidding.

He double tapped the desktop opening the message on his screen.

"What the?"

The message was not at all what he had expected. In fact, he nearly shat his trousers on the spot.

'Patrick Wayne McGarren:

You have been found guilty by the Cloud Court System on one count of corporate embezzlement and fraud in the amount of two billion US dollars. Your employer, First Rays Bank, Inc., has filed the charges against you, and has supplied the Cloud Court with enough evidence to render a guilty verdict. A human judge has also reviewed your case, and has concurred with the Cloud Court's findings.'

"Holy fuck!" Pat gasped. "This can't be right."

'After several weeks of investigation and review, the Cloud Court and your employer were able to trace the missing funds to multiple offshore banking accounts in your name. The punishment for embezzlement over the sum of ten thousand US dollars is death by assassination. Your sentence is to be carried out immediately at a time and place of the government's choosing.

Good day,
US Cloud Court, Washington State Supreme'

"This isn't right," Pat protested to his monitor. "I didn't do it. I would never even THINK of doing such a thing!"

He pressed the heels of his palms to his eye sockets. The overwhelming urge to vomit was suppressed only by the stronger impulse to get the hell out.

"I've gotta call my wife," he muttered as he picked up the receiver.

His finger shook as he punched in the number to EJ's cell. One ring, then another and another... Finally, it rolled over into her voice mail inbox.

"Damn it!" Patrick hissed slamming his fist down onto the desk.

"Hey, hon it's me," he said. "Look, something has come up. It's gotta be some kind of mistake. I'm meeting with an old friend who works as a... Shit! That's it!" he shouted.

"I have to run to a meeting," he said. "I'll explain everything when I get home. I love you."

He hung up the phone and rubbed his face in his open hands.

"Chuck's an attorney," he pondered to himself. "He'd

know how to handle this."

Pat grabbed his trench coat off of the rack in the corner, and rushed out of his office.

"Sal, hold my calls until I get back," he said as he blew by the front desk.

The brass elevator doors glided open in silence. Pat jogged out, wove his way through the crowd and out the front doors.

The agile young man turned to his right, and darted up the busy sidewalk toward the bistro in question.

"Oh, sorry," Patrick said as he ran into a slightly taller man in a trench coat and black fedora.

The stranger only smiled from under the brim of his hat, and took a drag off of his hydro.

"No problem, pal," the stranger said tipping his hat.

McGarren trotted two blocks down the sidewalk and was stopped by a flashing red hand on the signpost. The rain had slowed to an annoying drizzle, and a fog had settled in over the city.

"Come on, come on," McGarren pleaded with the signal.

The walking man finally flashed on the post, and Patrick ran across the crosswalk of Ninth Ave. Pat made his way past a few clothing stores and drug store fronts until he found himself standing before his favorite sub shop, *Bistro, Bistro*.

Chapter 10

May 2041
Seattle, WA

I had followed my contract from his place of residence to his work office. Yeah, he was another one of those stereotypical uptight suits. McGarren had gone into the high rise around eight or so. I decided to hang around outside, and get some fresh air.

About half of a pack of Chesterfields later, my boy came running out of the front doors. As a matter of fact, he barreled right into me! He said, 'oh, sorry', or something to that effect. I just tipped my hat, and continued to enjoy one of my hydros. What a knucklehead. Anyways, I followed this guy through the mists up Madison Street to a busy little joint called Bistro, Bistro. It was lunchtime. I could use a sandwich anyhow.

McGarren strolled into the place, got his grub and sat down with another stiff - probably another executive or something. I got myself a pastrami on wheat with all of the trimmings, and took up a seat in the booth behind these clowns. He didn't seem to recognize me. So, I proceeded to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"Hey, Chuck," Pat said. "It's been a long time."

His old college roommate chuckled and brushed the mist out of his dusty blonde hair.

"Sure has," the heavysset man said.

"Listen, Chuck. I've got a big problem," Patrick said getting to the point.

His old friend raised a brow in concern.

"It has to be some kind of mistake, or oversight or something," he said.

"Well, what is it?" Chuck asked taking a bite out of his meatball sub.

"I," Pat paused not sure how to break this news. So, he just spat it out. "I got an email from the Cloud Courts this morning."

Chuck's blue stare didn't falter from his friend's face.

"They think that I've..." He stopped himself, and lowered to a whisper. "They think that I've embezzled money from my employer."

"What?" Chuck said in shock. "Is it?"

"Of course not!" Patrick hisses. "They say that it's over two billion dollars, and they've sentenced me to death. Christ, Chuck what do I do?"

The pudgy lawyer gagged on his soda.

"Holy shit, Pat," he said. "That's heavy. Can you prove that you didn't do it?"

McGarren shook his head in defeat.

"No," he mumbled. "The Cloud traced the wire transfers back to offshore accounts allegedly in my name."

"Damn," Chuck said pinching his nose between his fingers.

"I've been set up, Chuck," Pat pleaded. "I would never do such a thing!"

Chuck leaned back in his wooden chair searching his endless sea of mental files on law.

"With your sentence, you don't know how much time you've got," the lawyer said. "My specialty is corporate compliance, not this kinda stuff."

They all tended to say the same thing. It wasn't me. You've got the wrong guy. I've been set up. Yeah, yeah. Tell it to the judge, pal.

"I figured that," Pat said. "I've gotta buy some time so that I can prove it."

Chuck nodded.

"I want to believe you," he said. "We've known each other since we were kids down in the swamps. I don't think that you could be capable of doing this sort of thing. I just don't know."

"I get it, Chuck," McGarren said. "I just don't know where to even start."

"I'd probably start with your employer," Chuck advised, "if you can. Plead your case to them. Get them to see that this has to be some sort of setup."

"I guess," Pat said. His southern draw found its way out again. "They're probably coming for me, though."

"They?" Chuck asked.

"Yeah, you know. Those assassins. They're probably on their way, and you don't know who they are, what they look like... nothing!"

You have no idea, hotshot. I love a good hydro after a

hearty meal.

Chuck rubbed his chin deep in thought.

"My best advice, as far as that group is concerned, is to keep your nose in the tabloids and your ear on the conspiracy theory radio," the attorney said. "It may be seen as crackpot trash by most of the public, but they're probably the best sources of info that you'll get on them."

Patrick only nodded. This must have been what his Uncle Bruce felt like when he had terminal cancer. You know that you're going to die. You have no idea of where or when.

"I just don't want it to happen in front of my wife and three-year-old, you know?" Pat said.

I'm no burger joint, pal. You don't get it your way right away.

"I know," Chuck said as he took another gulp of his drink.

"I swear, Chuck," Pat said. "I never intended for this meeting to be about this."

The stout man laughed.

"I know, bud," the lawyer said. "This is some serious stuff, though. If not me, then who?"

"I know, and I thank you old friend."

"So, where do you go from here, then?" Chuck asked.

"I was thinking about going home, and just calling it a day," Pat replied. "Management will probably come looking for me this afternoon anyway."

"I dunno if I'd go back home," Chuck said. "You don't want your family caught up in all of this, right?"

Patrick's face went motionless.

"True," he replied. "I can't just shack up in a hotel. They'll find me for sure."

Chuck leaned his portly torso in over the table. Pat followed suit.

"Listen," Chuck whispered. "You say that this doesn't add up. I'm going to give you some information that just might save your life."

He took a pen out of his shirt pocket, and quickly scribbled something down on a clean napkin.

"Take this," Chuck continued. "Follow the instructions and the directions. These folks will help you, if you can

make it there alive."

Chuck's meaty hand slid the thin napkin across the speckled tabletop. Patrick turned his eyes down toward the message. He looked to Chuck like he was trying to avoid having his eyes burned by the sun.

"It's paper," he said. "It's not going to blind you."
Pat read the notes:

*Static Interference - radio
Hailey, ID, Donna Moran Coyote Bluff Rd.*

"She's a valuable and trustworthy resource that can help you," Chuck whispered. "Think of it as a safe house."

"It's around 600 miles to Boise," Pat said in a flustered tone.

"This is on the other side of that," his friend said.

"That's a long way to go with an assassin on my back," Pat said.

"I know," Chuck replied. "That's the closest contact in the network that I have."

"Network?" Pat asked.

"Just follow the instructions and you'll understand," Chuck responded.

"I don't know how to..." Pat began, but his words were cut off.

"Think nothing of it," Chuck said holding out an open hand to stop his friend. "You would do the same for me."

Patrick folded up the napkin and stuffed it into his front pocket. His friend looked down at the gold watch on his right wrist.

"Well, we'd both better get going," Chuck said. "You heading home?"

Patrick's eyes moistened.

"No," he said. "I've got to find a way to prove my innocence."

His friend nodded once in acquiescence.

"Be safe, my friend," the chubby man said. "Get to her. She'll help you to clear your own name."

Pat extended his right hand across the table. Chuck grabbed it with a firm grip, and returned the shake.

"Thanks for everything," Pat said.

"Get going," Chuck said setting his trash on the little orange tray. "I'll clear the table."

McGarren nodded and made his way toward the front entrance and back out onto the foggy streets of Seattle.

Network, eh? Now there was some news that the boss would love to know. I grabbed my fedora and followed McGarren back out into the dense fog. The afternoon sun didn't even seem to make a dent in this crud. Seattle - what a piece of work.

I tapped another Chesterfield out of the pack and tucked it into my mouth. I preferred their mint after flavor to the wintergreen of Lucky Strikes, or the citrus bouquet of Old Golds. Anyhow, I dug up his file in my processor as I trailed him back toward his office.

Max had been able to compile a huge amount of data on this creep:

Name: McGarren, Patrick Wayne
Height: 70 inches
Weight: 165
Eyes: Brown
Hair: Red
Distinguishing Marks: None
Residence: North Bend, WA
Employer: First Rays Bank, Inc. Madison Ave, Seattle, WA
Job Title: Senior VP
Annual Salary: \$142,350 USD
Dependents: Wife - Eun Jin, Son - Alex
Vehicles: 2040 Mercedes Accolade SUV, 2041 Toyota Camry

There were maps, a brief history of how he got his position in the company, his past education - everything. McGarren went into the multilevel parking garage that sat next to his building. So, I went across the street, sat in my old '38 and waited. A few minutes later, my boy came rolling out in his dad-mobile.

This one was going to be tricky. If he wasn't going home, and he wasn't going to stop until Idaho then it was going to make the execution tough.

I turned on some old Sinatra on the radio and stayed a few cars back from him on I-90.

Think, Jake, think. How are you gonna take this bozo out?

If he stops for gas I could whack him under the canopy. If I wait until he gets to this safe house then I might be able to find some high ground and kill him from long range.

Hell with it. I'll get him at close range the first

chance I get. So, on I went cruising after this chump down I-90 East patiently waiting.

"Call home," Patrick commanded to his Camry.

"Calling home," came the AI reply.

The phone rang over the speakers in the cabin. Pat gripped the steering wheel to the point that his hands lost circulation.

"Hello?" came a familiar voice.

"EJ!" he shouted. "Thank God."

"I got your message," she said. "What's?"

"Listen," he interrupted, "I don't have a lot of time to explain..."

"Where are you?" she inquired.

"Driving down I-90."

"Are you sick?" she asked. "Why are you coming home early?"

"I'm not coming home, babe," he said in agitated tones. "Something happened at work today, and I've got to go out of town for a while."

"What?" she asked. "Why? What happened, Pat?"

"I can't explain it to you now," he said. "I shouldn't be gone long, though... two or three days tops."

"Where are you going?"

Her tone was taking a turn for the worse.

"I can't say," he replied.

"Patrick," she said in a motherly voice, "none of this is making any sense."

"I know, hon," he said. "I'll call you again once I get settled into the place I'll be staying. Don't worry. It'll all be over soon."

An audible stressful sigh blew over the car's speakers.

"Fine," she said. "Just call me back when you can."

"Your fuel is below one-eighth of a tank," the car warned.

"What?" EJ asked.

"Nothing," he replied. "It was the car. I'd better stop the next chance I get and fill her up."

"Oh."

"Listen," he said, "I'll call you later this evening once I get settled, ok?"

"Alright," EJ responded.

"I love you, EJ."

"You, too."

"Talk to you tonight, bye."

"Bye," she returned.

He could hear the tears welling up in her words.

"The call has terminated," the car said. "The nearest fuel station is in two miles."

"Thank you," McGarren said. "We'll stop there. Set destination."

The Camry complied and programmed the pit stop into its GPS.

We had been cruising down 90 for a couple of hours now. Surely this guy would need to make a pit stop pretty soon. I just...

'Judge, you busy?'

No, Q. What is it?

'What's the status on McGarren?'

I'm after him right now. He's heading into Idaho, boss.

'From Seattle? That's odd. I figured that he would have tried to run north to Canada.'

Tell me about it. Listen, I overheard him and one of his pals talking. His buddy mentioned some sort of network and a safe house. Any ideas?

'Hmm. No. I'll have to look into that further.'

He's pulling off of the interstate now. It's probably about time to gas up. Time to go to work.

'Alright. Just remember what I said back in Wyoming. Watch your back.'

No problem, boss.

'I'll be on standby until after your stop.'

Swell.

'Q - out.'

Well, no more time for small talk. I had to go do some of the government's dirty work.

"Your destination is approaching on the right," the AI informed him.

Patrick guided the car into the station and parked it under the large canopy next to an unoccupied pump. He unscrewed the gas cap and inserted the nozzle. A sleek dark blue coupe pulled up on the far side of the store. Its driver remained in the cabin for the time being.

Once the tank was full, Pat decided to go into the store to get something to eat. He made his way to the front door, and was joined by a tall stranger in a long trench coat and black fedora.

"Pardon me," Patrick said as he reached for the door's handle.

The stranger didn't budge. Patrick saw him slide his steady hand back under the coat. It emerged again wielding a cold black revolver.

"Jesus!" Pat screamed.

He held up his hands across his face. *This is it*, he thought. *I'm going to die at a goddamn gas station.*

"I'm innocent," he said calmly. "I didn't take that money."

He heard the hammer of the gun click back.

"Tell it to the judge, pal."

McGarren winced. The thought of what being shot was going to feel like played over and over in his mind. The bullet never came. Instead, the gun was kicked out of the assassin's hand by a figure that emerged from the dissipating fog.

His savior connected a right cross to the killer's face.

"Get outta here, now!" the man in the black knit cap and brown leather jacket exclaimed.

Pat didn't have the time or need to question it. He sprinted back to his car and fired up its engine. The two were still locked in a furious melee when his wheels wailed out of the station.

Chapter 11

May 2041
Uniontown, PA

It had been a long haul to get out to east, but Sledge had done just the same. When he pulled into the parking lot of the Blue Mountain Motel, Max was already there waiting in one of her muscle cars. Sledge stretched out his weary muscles as he strode over to his counterpart waiting in her '20 Mustang. The towering brute leaned against the driver's side door and rapped his knuckles on the window.

"Well, well, well," Max said rolling down her window. "Look what the cat dragged in."

"You drove from where?" he said hiding behind his reflective shades. "DC?"

"Something like that," she replied.

"I drove straight here from Reno," Sledge scoffed. "DC, my ass."

"We all have to do what we have to do," she said bumping his leg as she got out. "You look like you've been through hell and back."

The assassin nodded slowly.

"Yup," he replied. "I stopped somewhere in Tennessee at rest stop for about three hours, but that was about it - other than gas."

Max smiled at him, and locked the doors to her trophy with a chirp of the fob.

"The boss left us a rental car around the side of the motel," she said. "It's a less conspicuous ride."

Sledge got his duffle bag out of the truck's cabin, and followed Max into the front desk.

"You can use it if you want," he said scanning the lot for anything out of the ordinary. "I'm hitting the rack for a while."

"Guess I've got first shift then?" she asked in an annoyed tone. "I kind of expected it anyway."

"Come on," Sledge said playfully. "You've known me for what - five years? You know I hate working in the daytime. More jackasses out and about then."

"I know what you mean," she said with a chuckle. "I just don't see how you have much of a family life."

"That reminds me," Sledge said as they entered their cozy room, "I'd better call home and let them know that I

made it."

He tossed his large duffle bag into a chair in the corner, and flopped onto the old bed. Max set her small suitcase on the floor in front of the nightstand and sat on the other full-sized bed.

"Alright," she said, "I'm going to head out and get to work. You get your sleep. It'll probably be a long night."

The big lug responded with a loud snore.

"God, how does she get any rest next to you?"

She slid the top drawer of the nightstand open, and sure enough a small silver fob slid forward to the front.

"Do I know you, or do I know you?"

Q always used the same protocol when they went out on assignments. The room would already be booked, and if a rental was needed the keys would always be in the top drawer of the nightstand. Max grabbed the fob and shut the room's door quietly behind her. The motel was laid out in a long L-shape with only one floor.

"It's seen better days," she said as she strode down the long corridor.

The establishment appeared to her as if it had undergone a few renovations in its existence. Everything was clean and well maintained, but she could tell that its bones were old. The young girl behind the front desk only smiled as Max drifted past. She zipped up her leather jacket, and clicked the ignition button on the rental's fob. Its lights flashed twice, and the tiny four-cylinder motor purred to life.

"I hate these little wind-up shitboxes," she groaned as she popped the door open and slid inside.

Max had been working with Q long enough to know that whoever the person was, they had a twisted sense of humor. Sure, give the muscle car fanatic a tiny little electric shoebox. Ha, ha, very funny. It didn't matter to Max. She had a job to do, and she didn't care how she got there.

Max had found and trailed Joey Rappone from his bar downtown to a local Denny's restaurant on the other side of Uniontown. She waited until he and his little posse had staggered inside. Then Max followed the zombie-like trio in for some lunch.

Joey and his goons dumped themselves into a booth and proceeded to crash onto the tabletop. The stealthy assassin took up a seat two rows over.

"Man, I am so hung over," one of Rappone's cronies groaned.

"That was some party, Joe," the other chimed in.

"I had no idea you could do that to a goat," the local mob boss muttered from beneath his crossed arms.

This caused his buddies to burst out in cackles.

"No more farm animals at parties," the skinny one said. "No more."

A young server strolled over, and posed before the wasted bunch.

"What can I get for you guys this morning?"

"The usual," Rappone replied without even glancing up.

"Three orders of hotcakes and three large sodas. Anything else?"

Joey mumbled something from under his sleeves, but she couldn't make out what it was.

"Alright, I'll be back with those in a few minutes."

"What's on tap for today, boss?" the short one inquired.

"You and Lurch need to go into town and collect on some businesses that owe us some dough," Rappone said. "I ain't protectin' nobody for free."

"We gonna do that party at your place tonight?" Lurch asked.

"Yup," Rappone said. "It's gonna be a real wild one this time," he said with a smile.

"I've been waiting months for this one," the short one said.

"You don't wait for nothin', Tubbs," Lurch snapped. "You party all of the time, cat."

The waitress came back with a large tray full of steaming hotcakes.

"Here we are, boys," she said, "three platters and three sodas."

She swept each plate off with ease and sat one in front of each of her weary-eyed patrons.

"Thanks, doll," Tubbs said digging into his grub. He spread his napkin out over his lap as to not get any on his designer suit.

Joey brushed back the bangs of his jet black hair, and dug into his own feast.

"This is gonna be an exclusive shindig, now," Rappone said through half-masticated bits of breakfast. "I don't wanna see none of them gutter dames up in my house."

He turned a foul eye toward Lurch.

"What?"

"You know damn well what."

Joey took a swig of his soda.

"I didn't know those broads were from a whorehouse,"

Lurch said.

"Dressed up like they were, where did you think they's from," Rappone asked in a thick Pittsburg accent, "a local Girl Scout troop?"

The beanpole of a man scoffed, and sipped on his soda.

A party, huh? Sledge will just love that.

"Anyways," Joey said, "make sure that Dannie and Mike get all of the stuff an' 'at together before five."

"Is your sister coming?" Tubbs asked.

Rappone gave him a dirty look as he pulled three syringes out of his inside coat pocket.

"I can't help it," Tubbs pleaded. "She's smokin'."

"She's also the girl of a very powerful man," Joey said sliding each of them a syringe.

"Ahh," Lurch sighed as he shot its contents up his right nostril. "Nothing like a little vitamin C."

Rappone chuckled and followed suit shooting up on his own dose of the latest narcotic. This customized drug had snuck onto the scene back in 2035. Some cartels in North Africa had found a way to synthesize cocaine and caffeine with a small dose of chloroform. What resulted when a person injected the serum into their noses was euphoric. You would feel the crazy high of the coke which would be magnified by the addition of the caffeine. Finally, you would come down off of your high some days later, and fall into a soft slumber for several hours. Some people liked the crazy visions that they had during their deep REM cycles, and would request a modified form of the narcotic called Sandman. It would come with an increased dose of chloro in its formula, and gave the user wilder visions on what they referred to as the freefall. Hundreds of people had already died from the Chloroform overdose, so Sandman was still considered a roll of the dice by most regulars.

"Damn," Joey said rubbing his nostrils, "that's some strong shit."

Tubbs shook his bulbous head violently after injecting his own syringe.

"Gonna have a wild ride tonight!" the fat man shouted.

The young brunette came back around to collect the plates and their remnants. Her three amigos were now laughing uncontrollably at one another.

"You fellas all finished here?"

"Sure, sweetheart," Rappone said.

She gathered up the dirty dishes, and turned to take them back to the kitchen. Joey reached out and slapped her ass as she walked away.

What a scumbag. Ah, hell.

Joey's lustful stare faded away from the lean waitress, and landed on an exotic vibrant woman just across the aisle from him. He tossed his signature smile in her direction. The woman quickly looked down at her half-eaten sandwich, and pretended not to notice him.

Just stop staring at me you douche.

After a few seconds of the cold shoulder, Rappone shrugged his shoulders, and tossed a blueback five on the table.

"Time to head back out, boys," he said fitting his fedora on his wavy black locks.

His goons slid their hats on, and fell in behind their fearless leader as he strode out the doors.

The clock on the TV read 4:38PM when his counterpart came through the door of their home away from home. She appeared rode hard and put up wet to Sledge.

"Bad day at the office, dear?"

She read right through his sarcasm. He always had nagged at her like a big brother.

"He's a real tool," she replied. "Your typical mob man. Too much money - not enough brains."

Sledge flipped the TV off, and went to the chair in the corner.

"Figures," he said as he slid on his cut-off vest.

"I did see something unusual that you might want to follow up on, though."

"Whatcha got?" he asked sliding a full magazine of rounds into his pistols.

"Right before I left," she said, "a stretch limo pulled up with a classy female inside."

Sledge nodded as she continued the debriefing.

"At first, I thought that it was just another one of Rappone's bitches, but she wasn't. It was his sister. They

went on talking about some big plans going down in Pittsburgh."

"Uh huh."

"He said she's running around with some power player. Sounds to me like Rappone might be just a puppet."

The muscular man slid his extra clips into the pockets on his vest and tightened the straps on the Uzis across his chest.

"I'll keep an eye on him and his sister, then. Maybe I can convince him to give me some names."

His counterpart raised a suspicious brow.

"What? I'll say please."

"We're not here to kill anyone, Sledge."

The towering hulk grabbed his truck keys and made for the door.

"I know."

She looked at his hands.

"The boss wants us to use the rental."

"No way in hell am I driving that little punkass toy. I wouldn't even be able to sit down behind the wheel."

Max laughed at the thought of that sight.

"I'd stand out more lookin' like some clown in a circus car than I would in my own pickup."

"Do what you've gotta do," she said cocking her head to one side.

A warm breeze blew into the cabin of his truck from beyond the cluster of elms and oaks up on the hillside. Rappone had quite a large spread on the outskirts of town, and his long driveway was beginning to fill up with flashy rides. The moon was nowhere to be seen in the star-filled skies. Sledge sat slumped down in the driver's seat a hundred yards away from the property - watching and waiting. The cloud band radio pumped out some old soul from an age gone by as the assassin studied his new terrain.

A huge SUV slowly made its way up the long paved driveway. The rowdy crowd of girls got out and stumbled up the steps to the front doors.

Sledge turned the volume down a little, and sat up in his seat.

"Call home," he commanded to the vehicle.

"Calling home," the AI assistant responded.

The telltale ring pulsed out from the hidden speakers.

"Hello?"

"Hey babe," he whispered. "It's just me. I made it here alright."

"I was beginning to worry."

"Sorry," he let out a guilty sigh. "I was just completely exhausted when I got here. I had to crash."

"You had to crash? You were forced at gunpoint?"

"Ha, ha. You know what I mean. I hit the bed and it was lights out."

"I know. I just like giving you shit every once in a while."

He peered off into the house in the distance. The party was well under way now.

"How's the little one holding up?"

"She's doing fine. She's coloring at the moment. You want to talk to her?"

"I can't. I wish I could."

His wife of nearly twelve years groaned from the other end of the line.

"Look, I'm on a job right now or I..."

"I know, I know. When you comin' home?"

"I should be back in town the day after tomorrow. I'll probably stop for a break again in Nashville."

She was getting pissed, and he knew it. There wasn't anything that the man could do about it, though. This was the nature of the job, and she knew it just as well as he did going in.

"Alright," she said in frustration. "Well, be careful out there."

"I will, hon."

"I'd better get going. Dahlia's getting restless for dinner."

He could hear the tears welling up in his partner's voice.

"Will do. See you guys in a couple of days. Love you guys."

"We love you, too. Bye now."

"Bye."

The big man's pain was silenced by a high-pitched shriek coming from the front door of the house. He looked out through the hedge row to see what all of the commotion was over. A twenty-something blonde clawed desperately for the door's frame. The side of her head facing Sledge was matted with dark crimson fluid.

"Oh, no you don't!" a male voice shouted.

It was Rappone. He grabbed the girl by the hips, and dragged her kicking and screaming back into the party.

"What the hell? Something ain't right, man."

The assassin grabbed his shades from the center console, and locked his truck up.

"What kind of party is he throwing in there?"

Despite his larger-than-life size, Sledge moved up the side of the yard and onto a knoll behind the house with the stealth of a cat. Most of them party-goers would have been too drunk or wasted on C to notice him anyway.

"That sleazy son of a bitch!" he snarled as he watched the thug's every move through an open bedroom window.

The young lady laid spread eagle on a bed tied to its four posts. Three of Rappone's goons leered on as their ringleader whipped out a switchblade.

"Now I'm gonna turn that pretty little crotch of yours into a colorized wound," Joey shouted. "Then you'll have to piss out of your belly button!"

The girl attempted to scream, but the gag in her mouth muffled her pleas.

"I'm not good enough for your hole, eh?" Rappone hissed. "Now we'll make sure nobody gets to have any fun."

The blade lit up to a bright blue as the mob don lowered his weapon toward his victim's pelvis.

"Fuck," Sledge spat out. He knew what this poor girl was about to endure if he didn't intervene right now.

Joey lowered the kinetic blade to the button on her jeans. The fabric around the little brass button sizzled under the intense heat of the weapon. Small tendrils of smoke snaked their way past his manic expression as the button popped loose with a hiss.

"Screw this!" the trained killer said as he leaped up off of the cool dirt.

He ran up under the ledge of the window, and pulled the combat knife out of the small of his back. The assassin tried to wiggle the blade into the locking mechanism, but it was no use.

Sledge stormed around the far end of the small mansion, and sheathed his blade.

"Time to crash the party."

He whipped out his Uzis and put his large right boot through the knob of the imported Italian mahogany door. The thick timber gave way with a loud crack and splintered into several pieces at the warrior's feet.

"Oh, shit," Sledge said as the growls of large dogs invaded his ears.

Two bull mastiffs trotted around the corner of the kitchen and into the foyer to meet the intruder. Both bared their fanged maws as pools of slobber formed at their feet.

"What?" Sledge said to the mutts. "Did they go and forget to invite you guys to the party?"

The animal on his right let out a deafening bark.

"Look, I love animals and all," Sledge began. His thought was cut short by another defiant snarl.

"Suit yourselves."

The two beasts charged the invader with deadly speed. Sledge raised either gun toward a dog, and unloaded. A firestorm erupted from the muzzle of both Uzis leaving nothing but blood and quivering fur in their wake. The screams continued from somewhere beyond the foyer to his right. The skilled assassin hit the magazine releases on either gun. Their spent clips fell to the hardwoods and he let the Uzis hang at his sides.

'Sledge? Sledge are you there?'

Now's not a good time, Q.

'I'm getting distress signals going up all over on you. Your biometrics are off the charts. What's going on? Rappone's got some girl bound and gagged, and he's doing some kind of sick torture.'

'You can't kill anyone, Sledge. Do you understand?' We don't have any contracts on anyone in there.'

I get it, but I've got to do something to stop him.

'Max said there's supposed to be a big party going on there tonight.'

True.

'Then where are all of the people? Why is it so quiet?'

The assassin's brow furrowed in confusion.

Dunno, boss.

'I don't like the smell of this.'

Sledge rounded the corner of an archway that led into the main room on this floor. The music blared from a system somewhere in here, but no one was in the room with him.

'Sledge, you've got to get back out. Do you hear me? I'm going in to get her, Chief. Then I'll bail out.'

The towering terror took cautious steps toward the source of the music. When he found the small box setting on top of the desk he yanked the plug out of the wall.

'Sledge, get out now!'

The big man wasn't paying any attention to his supervisor.

'No. Bail out now. It's a...'

Two bloody hands grabbed at the frame in the far wall.

"No! You've got to help me!" the girl pleaded. "He's trying to kill me."

The big man had had enough.

"This horseshit stops now."

He strode out into the large room across a large

oriental rug on the floor. Sledge was brought to his knees by a sudden powerful jolt of electricity that pulsed throughout his muscular frame. When the surge ceased he stood back up to find Rappone standing in front of him. The mob don had the young blonde in front of his body by the waist. The kinetic knife's searing blade was poised just above her jugular.

"Let the girl go."

The young man laughed manically as his black bangs cascaded over his wild gray stare.

"I got one! I can't believe I got one!"

Sledge stood to his full seventy-six-inch height - a full head and shoulders over Joey and his hostage.

"I said, let her go."

Rappone giggled hysterically once more as he shuffled himself and the terrified girl forward. Sledge went for his machine guns.

"No use, asshole. The field's blocking the firing circuits. You're both gonna get schooled tonight!"

He positioned the burning blade over the girl's right eye with a snap.

"You don't fuck with the Teflon Don!"

The assassin lowered his head in disappointment. He'd heard some shitty nicknames in his day - Moose, Stiffy, Nick the Dick - but this one had to have been the worse to date.

"That's right, motherfucker! Nothin' sticks to me!"

"And that's the best you could come up with? Not the Greased Pan Gangster, or the Butter Spray Boss?"

Another surge of power made the man quake where he stood.

"Fuck you, man! Who's your boss now, huh?"

Sledge thought about it for a second.

"My wife?"

Rappone shook the girl violently and moved the knife closer to her right eye.

"I'll deal with your smartass eventually. In the meantime, let's see what happens to a prudish cunt that refuses to put out, shall we?"

Joey thrust the knife deep into the girl's eye socket. Dark red fluid pulsed out of the molten wound as she shrieked in pain and shock. Sledge instinctively tried to charge the punk, but remained stuck to the floor.

"That's right, bitch. Now you'll see what the punishment is for your lack of action."

Rappone wiggled the blade back and forth in front of the assassin. Sledge's jaws locked up in anger. He clenched

his massive hands at his sides.

"I didn't like you with blue eyes anyway," Rappone whispered into her ear as he continued to move the knife around the perimeter of her socket.

Her eye flew out with a sudden pop. A jet of crimson sprayed all over Sledge's black vest. He looked down expecting to soon feel the warmth of the blood through his soaked t-shirt, but it never came.

"What the?"

Rappone's form flickered for a second, and then an identical twin to the mobster walked right through the laughing blood-soaked maniac.

"Shit! You're all just a bunch of..."

"Holograms," Rappone filled in the blank for the killer.

Sledge peered at the rug on which they both stood.

"It's the shoes, genius," Rappone said. "Insulated soles."

The hologram of the wailing girl and the manic Rappone fizzled out of existence.

"It's alright, guys. You can come out now!"

The big guy watched as two other goons and a perfectly unscathed blonde strode out from behind the far walls.

"Now we all get to see the valiant Sir Galahad that came to save our damsel in distress!"

"Hey, sugar," the young girl with Italian features said. She gave him a flirty little roll of her fingers.

"Danny, Mike," Rappone instructed, "why don't you boys show our new guest to his room?"

The muscle-bound meathead in the tan three-piece suit, matching fedora and white wing tips guffawed at this statement. The leaner man in black slacks and a white undershirt strode up to Sledge. His black suspenders hung at his sides along with a chrome segment of gas pipe. He smirked at the assassin from underneath the brim of his newsboy.

"Allow me to take your luggage," the slim one said.

"Good one, Dan-O," the meatball chimed in.

Sledge caught a glimpse of a chrome pipe rushing toward his temple, and then his world went dark.

Chapter 12

*Unknown. Weak signal.
Communication interrupted.*

The hazy form of the slender man in suspenders slowly came back into focus. The room was cool and dark except for one large floor lamp in the far corner. Something was attached to the side of his bald head, but Sledge had no idea what it was.

"Well, well."

It was the voice of the meatball, Mike.

"Look who's comin' back around?"

"Fuck you... Ah!" The left corner of his mouth was swollen and crusted over.

Danny's fist connected with his left eye. A sharp burst of stars blurred his field of vision.

"Don't matter what the law does," he said as he walked around Sledge's chair. "We'll get to you eventually."

He shoved the assassin's big bald head forward.

"Easy!" Rappone instructed. "Don't damage the goods!"

He was on the phone and leaning up against a replica statue of David.

"Yeah, sis," he said proudly. "I bagged one."

"You did what?" Anna hissed. "I told you if you saw one of those assholes snooping around to get your ass to Pittsburg immediately! Christ, Joey!"

"What are you gettin' all pissed for? I thought you'd be proud of me."

"You kill him?"

"No. He's tied up in the panic room."

Anna sighed heavily through the line.

"Son of a bitch killed Gus and Molly. There's gonna be some slow payback for my babies."

"No! Don't do anything else. I'm going to send someone from Cerberus down to take care of this, Joe."

"Troy?" he asked with enthusiasm. They had known each other since their grade school days.

"Nope. Troy's doin' a job in El Paso. It'll likely be Jagger, knowing Robert."

"Oh," he said in disappointment. "Well, the albino can have whatever's left of him."

"I'm serious, Joey."

Her tone had taken a quick turn into Mothertown.

"I don't know what Robert wants done with him yet. So, bring him back to Pittsburgh alive."

"Yeah, yeah. Listen he wasn't alone, sis."

"What do you mean?"

"We saw another dame earlier at the restaurant."

"Which one?"

"Max, I think. Cute little number. I was hoping to lure her in here, too. Instead, we're stuck with blacky. He looks like a wrestler."

"You're telling me there's two of them in town? Nevermind. Just leave them there for Jagger, and get your asses out!"

"This shitstain killed my dogs!"

"Listen to me! You may have bagged the best of the bunch. These people are nobody to mess with, Joey."

"Don't worry about me, Anna."

"Fine. Stay there if you want, but when Jagger gets there he'll collect your ass for me. You're comin' to Pittsburgh today!"

"We'll see about that. Talk to you later, sis."

"I mean it."

"Bye."

"Ah, fuck," he said as he slid his phone back into his hip pocket.

"What's up, boss?" Mike inquired.

"Jagger's comin'."

The big lug's face went pale. Jagger was from Cerberus. After having worked for the big boss for some time, Mike had found out that these mercenaries were the big man's guard dogs. If one of them was coming then the shit had already hit the fan. Their boss was the guy that paid for all of this, and kept them all off of the Cloud Court's hit list.

"Fuck," Danny interjected. "This is serious."

"Screw the albino!" Joey said defiantly. "We'll talk - smooth things over, an' 'at. Then everything will be fine."

"Jagger's a son of a bitch, Joe," Danny said. "The big man doesn't send him in on just anything."

The mob boss glared at him nervously. He knew that Danny was right, but how was he going to...

"Christ!" Joey shouted in disgust. "I can't think with all that racket going on out there."

Rappone turned to his muscle who stood idly at the panic room's door.

"Mike, go turn that shit off so I can think straight."

The brute nodded and stormed out into the great room

beyond. There was a huge crowd and mosh pit in the massive living area. A legendary heavy metal band belted out one of their classics on the stage. The lead guitarist's hips gyrated as he exploded into a solo that every guy in the crowd seemed to know by heart. The crowd bent in a wild frenzy as the long-haired hero knelt before the altar of the metal gods, and offered up his solo for sacrifice.

Mike wove in and out of the crowd until he made his way behind a large cabinet of electronics. He grabbed the bundle of cables in one of his meaty palms and gave them a good jerk.

"That's it gals," he announced, "party's over."

The hologram concert twitched twice and then blinked from existence. A young blonde and a radiant brunette sat alone once more on an oversized leather sofa.

"Damn, Mikey," the shorter blonde with Italian features said. "We were just getting to the good part."

"Yeah, what the hell, Mike?" the taller brunette complained.

"Joey's orders," Mike retorted. "We've got business to tend to."

"Screw Joey," the short one said.

"According to him, you already have Teresa."

"Shut up, Mike."

Teresa turned to her taller companion, and slumped further into the couch.

"I'm bored, Amber."

"Me, too," Amber said gathering up her purse and coat. "I'm crashing. I need to get home."

Teresa turned to the bruiser and gave him her signature pout.

"Tell Joey to take us home - please?"

Mike ignored her and strode back in the direction of the panic room.

Rappone stood over him dealing one weak blow after another.

'... alright? I repeat, are you alright?

Yeah, I'm still kicking. They got me tied up in some sort of panic room.

'... sending in backup. This is (static) way out of control.'

No! Keep Max out of this. I can handle these morons on my own.

'(static) need to get help, and get out now.'

Damn it, Q. I can hand...

His comm-link had been completely shut out.

Rappone reared his right hand back and prepared to deliver another blow to the assassin's already mangled face. Sledge saw the opportunity and pounced on it. As Rappone's fist descended upon him in its wide arc, the trained killer snapped his head to one side.

"Ah, fuck!" Rappone wailed in pain. "I think I just broke my knuckles."

The magnet on the side of Sledge's head was flung to the tile floor in two broken pieces.

'Do you read me? Sledge?'

Comms are back, boss. I'll fill you in later.

"You small fries want to know something about pain?" the assassin asked through swollen lips.

Their prisoner brought his arms out from behind the chair. A shattered zip tie hung by its in-tact companion on his bloody right wrist. The mobster's eyes turned into massive brown saucers as a huge black fist connected with his throat.

Danny watched as his boss staggered back, and then collapsed to the ground gasping for air.

"Damn it!" he shouted as he darted for the assassin's Uzis on the far shelf.

Sledge knew what the man was going for, and shuffled his feet propelling his massive body backward. The old oak chair plunged deep into the gut of the lean thug with a loud crack. Sledge backed up and prepared to ram his assailant again. Danny whipped an Uzi around and pulled the trigger.

"Die bitch!"

The gun didn't respond. He turned the weapon over on its side to reveal a flashing red DNA recognition plate.

DENIED DENIED DENIED

The piece of oak furniture crashed into him again. This time it buckled Danny to the floor, as the chair splintered into a shower of timber.

"The funny thing about pain," Sledge said removing the chair's remaining stumps from the back of his legs, "is that it's only temporary."

The killer swung both stumps at his opponent's head. The remains of the chair's legs snapped over Danny's skull making him fall to one knee.

"Try to take my gun?"

The towering terror grabbed Danny's left arm by the wrist, and snapped it backward. The man's elbow joint protruded in the opposite direction making him look like some sort of bizarre alien. Sledge scooped the quivering

assailant up in both of his massive arms, and brought his back down over a brawny knee. It was a domino effect of sorts for Sledge. The low guttural snaps of his spinal discs radiated up Danny's back, and ended in a girlish shriek.

"Now disability," Sledge said dropping the stiff mass of flesh to the cold floor, "that shit's forever."

The unchained monster turned his revenge and swollen gaze on the leader of this band of misfits. Rappone still lay slumped up against the statue on the floor. He had regained his ability to breathe, but the fight had effectively been beaten out of him. Sledge stormed over, and thrust his steel-toed left combat boot down on the man's hand. It hit the tile with a crunch. Rappone attempted to use his good hand to pull the tree stump of a leg off of his mangled extremity. The looming nightmare swung his other black combat boot around. It landed against Joey's face sending a spray of blood and teeth against the statue.

"Now," Sledge said in a calm tone. "We're going to have a little discussion on just how it is exactly that you know so much about me."

The creak of the room's door caused both men to focus their attention in that direction.

Nothing would have prepared Mike for what he saw when he poked his head through the door of the hidden room. His best friend writhed on the floor mumbling something about not being able to feel his legs. Joey lay trapped against the wall under the boot of the man who now stared at him through bloody sacks of inflammation. These were the horrid scars of a monster he created, and was doing God knew what to his childhood pal. So, Mike did the only sane thing left to do. He bolted for the front door, and charged through its shattered remains. When the muscle-head got to the front porch he was hit by a speeding truck. That's what it felt like to him, anyway. Mike lay dumbfounded on the Victorian front porch with a shattered hip and fractured femur. Something hissed just above the range of his vision. Mike turned his gaze up to see two robotic legs. The porch lamp's light shimmered on their brass and titanium components.

"Hey, sport!" a voice shouted cheerfully. The outside parts of the legs hissed apart in small clouds of steam. "I bet you thought that you were the baddest son of a bitch that God ever knocked Mother Nature up with, didn't ya?"

It didn't take long before the screaming commenced.

Chapter 13

May 2041
Uniontown, PA

Steam Punk trailed behind Max as she maneuvered her way through the mansion and back into the room of terrors. What the young assassin saw when he got there was nothing short of a tornado's aftermath.

"Good God, Sledge!" the young man shouted. "What the hell happened?"

Max strode to her partner on this assignment. She stopped briefly over the writhing form on the floor before storming the rest of the way to Sledge.

"I thought I told you to go easy. We don't even have any contracts here."

"I did go easy," Sledge replied in his own defense. "All I did was give him a little love tap."

"You look like shit," Punk said studying the man's swollen mug.

"My face will eventually heal. What's your excuse?"

The inexperienced assassin scoffed, and rubbed his nose nervously. Rappone whimpered in agony under the brute's boot.

"Oh, yeah," Sledge said turning his attention back down on his prey. "I didn't forget about you. How did you know we were coming?"

Joey gave him a defiant look in between his gasps for air.

"If I have to repeat myself I'm going to get pissed."

The assassin bent down, grabbed a fistful of Rappone's Armani shirt and yanked him to within an inch of his blood-crusted nose.

"You don't want to see me pissed."

Joey continued to suck in air in spells, and turned his tearful gaze away from his attacker.

"Last call, small fry," Sledge said. "Then I turn your windpipe into a Frisbee."

The mobster's eyes snapped back over. He glared into the assassin's cold grey stare.

"I don't know the source. I've never met him," Rappone said. "We get hardcopies of everything on all of you."

"From where?"

"A guy named Jagger."

"Where do you keep these files?"

Rappone stood his ground in silence.

"I said where!"

"Upstairs," he gasped, "in the bedroom closet."

Sledge looked to Max. She knew what plan percolated beneath his bald head without a word being exchanged. Max nodded, and strode off in search of the staircase. He tossed Rappone to the cold tile floor.

"Who's Jagger?" Sledge inquired as he put his weapons and gear back on.

"I'm not sure. Some British asshole. He's just a courier - a nobody."

Steam Punk walked over from the body that still lay rigid on the floor.

"So, how did they catch you exactly?"

"They were after Max, but they got me instead."

"Wow," Punk said, "talk about a bait and switch."

Max crept up the solid oak staircase with her semi-auto next to her face. The upstairs reeked of smoke and sex.

"Must have been some party," she said as she crested the top of the staircase.

A lone figure stood at the far end of the lengthy hallway. A trail of white smoke snaked its way up around the brim of his fedora. The figure had his back turned to the assassin, and peered off into the darkness as she approached. Max lowered her pistol in a slow deliberate manner. She stopped when the stranger spun around to face her.

"Can you kill that which does not exist?" the figure asked.

"Screw you, you unoriginal bastard," she replied recognizing the movie line right away.

The bullets from his twin Tommy guns didn't outrun his manic laughter, but they would have come close. Max clenched her torso bracing for the firestorm's impact, and pinched off two rounds of her own. The bullets passed right through his phasing form, and pierced the glass behind the hologram.

"What?" the assassin was confused. "Now I'm gonna have every cop within ten miles busting this place down."

She picked up her pace and ran into the upstairs master suite. The room was in shambles, and the remnants of the party remained.

"Come on, baby. I'll show you a good time," the half-clothed hologram said.

She wore the headpiece of a nun, lacy black panties and nothing more.

"Sick bastard," she said. "This whole place is rigged with them."

Max made quick work of locating the files, and headed for the commotion downstairs.

"What was that?" Steam Punk asked turning his head in the direction of the gunfire.

Sledge shook his head slowly above the now unconscious Rappone.

"Doesn't sound good to me."

The tandem headed off to give their partner some backup.

"Please," the man on the floor gasped, "you've gotta help me. I can't feel my damn legs!"

Punk stood over the helpless form, and studied its contortions.

"I'd say you're probably right. A slow death is a bitch."

"No, wait! You can't leave me like this!" Danny shouted as the two figments of the public's imagination disappeared from the panic room.

Max came bounding down the stairs carrying a cardboard box.

"You alright?" Sledge asked.

"Yeah, we heard gunshots," Punk added.

The veteran agent scoffed at their infantile attempt at chivalry.

"What do you take me for?"

She stomped past them and into the great room. All three pulled their weapons out when they saw a lean man with pale features on the far side of the chamber. His snow white hair stood on end from every inch of his scalp. The man picked up an expensive vase, looked at it and set it back on the end table.

"We can do this the easy way, or the you'll-die way," Punk announced.

The figure in the long crimson leather duster - its collar upturned - didn't seem to hear them. He picked up the vase again, and repeated his previous actions.

"It's just another hologram," Max said.

"I know," Sledge agreed. "How did some two-bit punks like these guys get their mitts on military-grade decoy holograms?"

"Definitely not the grainy casino level holos that you

see all over," Punk chimed in.

"The one upstairs nearly made me piss my pants," Max confessed. "Let's beat it."

She strode out of the great room, and straddled the last piece of wood hanging on the bottom of the front door's frame. The big muscle-head was still dragging himself along the porch toward the steps.

"Got to - get to grass," the thug whispered apparently out of breath.

Sledge and Steam Punk walked over the pile of flesh toward their waiting rides.

"You know him?" the big assassin inquired.

Punk smirked.

"Yeah, we've met."

The meathead grabbed at Max's pant legs.

"You gotta call my ma - no wait!" He winced in pain as his shattered hip rolled over on the concrete. "I think I'm gonna die!"

"Touch me and I'll snap your other leg," Max said kicking his thick hand aside.

Max stood in front of the boys, and stopped them at the end of the walkway.

"Listen," she began, "I'm going to get in touch with Q, and explain what went down, what we found.. you know. You two head back home. We'll figure out what's next."

"You don't have to tell me twice," Steam Punk said. He lumbered off in the direction of his jeep.

Sledge merely nodded. It had been a long night, and he was ready to be home.

The albino walked with a cool swagger across the first floor of the estate. His long crimson duster floated just above the carpet as he drifted into the disheveled panic room. Joey was starting to come back around from an apparent blackout. Danny had been nearly broken in two. The cripple was mortified when he saw the Cerberus agent.

"Just go ahead and put me out of my damn misery," Dan-O groaned. "I'll never walk again anyway."

Jagger's black leather pants creaked as he knelt down closer to Danny. He slid his shades down, and fixed his red irises on the disabled man.

"Up until a moment ago, I would have," he said in his familiar chim-chimney British accent. "It seems as though the chap outside has given me some divine inspiration."

Jagger strode over to Rappone who was now awake and aware of his surroundings.

"Ja - Jagger," Rappone managed through his cloudy steel-toed hangover.

"You've messed up royally this time, Rappone."

The cold-blooded hitman turned his crimson eyes to the mansion's ceiling.

"Phone, on."

"Phone ready," the home's AI assistant announced.

"Call boss."

After a few rings, the line clicked.

"Yes," an aged wispy voice demanded.

"Jagger, here. This place is a train wreck. I watched them leave with the files just moments ago."

There was an audible sigh of frustration from the disembodied voice.

"Are they still alive?"

"Yes, but barely," Jagger replied. "Michael's alive. Daniel has had his spine broken in at least one location."

"I see," his supervisor replied. "Then you know what to do, Jagger. Kill 'em all."

"Right-o. Jagger out." He slid his shades back over his eerie eyes.

The line went silent with a click. Danny's eyes widened in terror at what he had just overheard.

"Not you, Danny boy. I've got special plans for you."

"Conversation terminated," the AI assistant declared.

"Well put," Jagger noted as he turned his demonic stare down on a quivering Rappone.

"Look, Jagger," Joey begged, "I can make it right. Just tell him to give me another chance."

"You're praying to the wrong god."

The flash of the four silver buckles on the outside of Jagger's black left boot were the last things that Rappone saw before his miserable existence was snuffed out.

Chapter 14

June 2041
Hailey, ID

Patrick had found his way to Hailey with only one stop at a Qwik Mart to ask for directions. The last rays of the sun had faded over the hillsides an hour ago. There had been no sign of his assailant since the stop at the gas station. Whoever the other man was that had saved him had also vaporized into thin air.

"I really hope he gave me the right address," Patrick said as he made the right-hand turn onto Coyote Bluff Road.

He pulled his Camry into the blacktop drive of an upscale two-story home. The garage lights were the lone beacons piercing the growing darkness. An SUV and a 2039 Ford Tornado roadster sat in front of the two-stall garage. McGarren set the emergency brake, and got out of his vehicle with a stiff groan. He scanned the surrounding twilight as he shuffled up the lit sidewalk.

"All seems quiet on the western front."

Pat nearly jumped out of his skin when he turned around on the front porch to ring the doorbell. A short pear-shaped woman stood on the other side of the glass. Her face was sour and defensive.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" she demanded. Her voice reminded him of that little woman in the old horror movie. It was high-pitched and childlike.

"I -I," Patrick stuttered, "Well, a friend of mine recommended that I talk to you."

Her beady eyes narrowed within her thumb of a head.

"What friend? Recommended for what?"

Pat took a cleansing breath and continued.

"He's an attorney. His name's Chuck..."

"Kozlowski?" she said.

"Exactly. I'm in trouble, and he suggested that I..."

"Get inside - now," she ordered.

McGarren followed the short woman as she hobbled across the hardwood foyer and into the spacious living area. He had to crane his neck to take in the room's entire twenty-foot splendor.

"You got a hit out on you, right?" she asked.

Pat nodded still staring at the sculptures on the walls.

"I've already had a run-in with my assassin."

This made the woman's bushy brows shoot up.

"You actually saw one, and you're still alive?"

Patrick turned his gaze to her with a nod.

"I don't understand. How's that possible? Did you kill them?"

"No. Are you Ms. Moran?"

"Of course," she said. "I guess I should've mentioned that. How did you escape?"

"Some guy, I don't know who, saved me."

Donna inched up to the edge of her recliner's worn cushion.

"He got into a brawl with my killer, and told me to run. So, I did."

Donna rubbed her chins in contemplation.

"Then it must be true."

"What?"

"What Zack has been saying over these past few weeks," Donna said. "Nevermind that for now. What did you do?"

McGarren let loose a long sigh, and recounted the tale of his day. The portly woman eased back into her recliner and absorbed every last syllable that the new arrival uttered.

"I know you probably have heard it over and over before, but I swear I didn't commit that crime," Pat finished.

She kept her keen eyes on his body language. He looked her square in the eye when he told his story to her. There weren't any noticeable twitches or quirks that would have given him away as a liar. Still, there was something off about his whole situation. How did he really get away? She wanted deep down to believe that the theory of a group of archangels sent out to protect the falsely accused was true.

"Wow. That's some day at the office!"

McGarren nodded his heavy head. The adrenaline was wearing off, and fatigue had caught up to him.

"I'm sorry. Where are my manners?" Donna said breaking the silence. "You must be tired and half-starved."

"I really could use something to eat and a nap, but first I've got to call my family."

The little woman got out of her nest, and waddled over to her kitchen.

"There's a study over there," she said pointing back toward the front entrance. "Make yourself at home while I fix you up some food. We'll get you filled up, rested up and back on the open road in no time."

"Thanks."

Patrick took his phone out of his pocket, and shut the doors to the small study. The small clock on the bookcase read 9:49PM. EJ usually put their son down around 8:30. He only hoped that his wife was still awake.

"Hello? Pat?"

"Hey, hon! Thank God. I didn't wake you, did I?"

"Who cares at this point? Where are you? What's happening?"

"I miss you, babe. I'm safe."

"Why can't you come home?"

"Can you put your phone on Triad?"

"Sure - one sec."

He held the screen of his thin phone in front of his face. The soft worried features of his life partner soon appeared on the screen.

"There. Can you see me alright?"

"Fine. I just needed to feel your touch," he said caressing the screen with his fingers.

Patrick could now hear, see and feel his wife. Some people believed that all of these modern technological advances like Triad were the Anti-Christ. Moments like these proved to the executive how wrong they all were. Her cheek was soft and inviting to his cold fingers.

"You're cold, dear," she said shivering on the screen.

"Sorry. It's been a very long day."

"Why can't you just come home?"

"I can't go into a lot of details, but I think I've been set up."

"What? Who?"

"I don't know, but they've had me marked for death."

She sucked in a quick mouthful of air.

"Dear God, Pat! What do they think you did?"

He let out a lungful of defeat.

"Embezzlement. Two billion dollars."

He felt her small lean fingers caress his own.

"What can we do to help?"

"Nothing right now, thanks. I just need you to go on about your daily activities, and I'll contact you again real soon."

"What am I supposed to tell Alex? He's really confused right now."

EJ's voice sounded strong to him, but her eyes gave her pain away.

"Tell Allie that I'm just out of town on a business trip for a while. I'll be home soon."

"I wish I knew why this was all happening!"

Patrick felt her warm tears cascade over his fingers.

"Me, too. I've got someone helping me. Maybe she and I can find a way to prove that I'm innocent."

"I don't understand why someone would do this to you. It doesn't make any sense."

"That's exactly why I've got to stay on the move, and work with these folks."

He took his wife's lack of response as an affirmation.

"Listen, babe," he said, "I've gotta go right now."

"Fine."

Her demeanor could have severed the arm off of an angry yeti.

"I'll call you as soon as I can. I promise."

"I love you guys."

"We love you, too."

Ms. Moran knocked on the glass of the closed doors to the study.

"Soup's on," she said swinging one of the doors inward.

Patrick turned off his device and followed her into the dining room. The long oval oak table had a square white cloth draped over its form. A mountain of leftovers sat on a lone white plate.

"Barbecue chicken, greens, baked potato..." she tossed a snide eye at him.

Pat read into it as, 'just try and make a lame potato joke, asshole.'

"It all looks fantastic," he said. "Thank you for all that you're doing for me."

He sat down at the head of the table and dug into the home-cooked meal. The aromatic steam skipped his nose, and went straight for his gut. It responded with a loud gargle.

"That's what I figured," Donna said.

"So, I've got to ask," McGarren said in between forks full of corn and potato, "why are you doing all of this? How do you and Chuck know one another?"

His little fairy godmother let out a long sigh. This was going to be a long and hard tale to tell.

"You see, Patrick, there are a lot of things out there in the world that we as the average members of society just aren't privy to. You're just now starting to realize this."

She pulled her coffee cup up to her thin lips and took a sip.

"Your friend and I are both members of a secretive consortium call the Minutemen."

"Like in the Revolution?"

"Not exactly," she continued. "There are frontline

militia groups peppered around the country for that, but the level of the organization that your friend and I are involved at is something bigger."

She paused to stir in another cube of sugar.

"At our level, we choose to remain secretive to protect our identities. This, in turn, gives rise to what I'm about to tell you."

Patrick let his fork drop to the side of his plate. He knew something monumental was about to come down on him.

"The Minutemen are an interconnected network of people both professional and typical. We aim to assist people like you who either may have been falsely accused, or who we feel may have a major impact on proving the current judicial system unjust."

McGarren forced his bite of chicken down with a hard contraction of his esophagus.

"We covertly operate a web of information, intelligence and resources to assist people in need. Think of us as a modern day underground railroad of sorts."

The banking executive turned fugitive sat dumbfounded by this revelation.

"Then you believe me?"

Donna ignored his question, and took another sip from her poodle mug.

"We can provide you with anything from a place to sleep to access to private servers to gather the information needed to prove your innocence."

"Great! Then you can help me prove that this is some sort of mistake."

"Chuck is probably already investigating your accusations and case that was submitted into the Cloud Court. With any luck, we'll be able to pull some strings with our sleepers in other key positions. They can then work to present the new evidence before the Supreme Court on your behalf."

McGarren perked up in his oak seat. This was the best news that he'd heard all day.

"This all has to remain confidential. If any one of our identities were uncovered, we could be tried as an accomplice. They would likely then put a contract out on one of us for accessory to murder."

Pat shoveled in the last remnants of his chicken and sweet corn.

"Well," Ms. Moran said picking up her favorite mug, "enough on that for now. We need to get you some sleep."

"That would be great."

"I have a spare bedroom upstairs that you can use for

a while. I'll come and wake you around three in the morning."

Five hours, Pat thought. Better than nothing.

"From there," the little woman said, "I'll get you on your way to another safe house."

A meaty jab woke Patrick from his much needed slumber. He rolled over on the hand-stitched quilt. The time was 3:02AM.

"Rise and shine," his guardian said in a sing-song tone. "We've got to get you back on the open road."

He was about to question where he was, and what was going on. Patrick quickly sobered up to his newfound reality. His comfortable and familiar bed seemed so far away just then.

"Where am I going next, and I'll program it into my phone?" he asked grabbing his cell off of the nightstand.

The little old lady's lower jaw collapsed to the floor.

"No! You mustn't leave any digital imprints!"

Donna's mood shifted from rage to worry.

"Please tell me that you didn't put my address into that thing of yours."

Pat looked at the phone, and then back to his hostess. She saw the guilt all over him like last night's barbecue.

"Sweet Jesus! Oh, Lord, save me."

"I -I'm sorry," he stammered. "I don't understand."

"It's too late. They're probably already here."

She jerked the quilt out from under him.

"Get up! You've got to get out of here right now!"

The petite woman paced around the room frantically.

"They're going to know where I live - who I am! You NEVER put our information out into cyberspace. Never! That's why we will always give you our info in writing only."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"It doesn't matter now," she said peering out the second story window and into the pitch void. "Get downstairs. Go quickly."

McGarren said nothing, but stuffed his keys and phone into his pockets. He followed close behind his protector as she scurried down the old staircase as fast as her stumpy legs could carry her. Donna rattled the bolt lock back with a nervous hand.

"Here," she said handing him a small slip of paper,

"put this in a safe place, and get to it."

Pat didn't have to look at it to know what was scribbled on the paper. He just hoped that he could make it to the next stop with little or no incident.

I lay there and scanned the front yard through the telescopic lens on my rifle. I took a drag off of my Chesterfield, and set it back on the flat rock to my right. McGarren was coming out soon. There had been too much commotion in the house over the past ten minutes for him not to. I wasn't sure how this old dame had fit into the picture, but aiding and abetting a known criminal were serious offenses. Not to mention obstruction of justice. It was none of my business then, though. She'd get hers.

Then came the moment I'd been waiting for. Mr. Moneybags and his sawed-off companion emerged from the front door in a rush. I pushed my hat back on my head, and put my good eye up to the scope again. He was a little shorter than the average guy. That was going to make him a bit harder to get a good fix on, but that wouldn't stop me. McGarren walked down the sidewalk behind the short dumpy woman. He scanned the area as he walked toward me. He knew I was here. He just didn't know where I would be coming from. It's all part of your punishment, pal.

"Scope, enhance field by ten," Judge whispered. The lens responded by bringing the image of his target into full view.

"Overlay circulatory."

Thin red lines pulsed through McGarren's body and revealed his vital organs to the sniper.

That's right, sleaze ball. I'm inside you, and you don't even know it. I'll know your next breath before you take it.

I took slow deep calming breaths, and moved my crosshairs up over the poor schlep's heart. My ex always accused me of having some sort of God complex. At times like these, she might've been onto something.

"Now, be sure to tell him that I sent you," Donna said stepping aside to let her guest get to his car door.

"Yes, ma'am."

Patrick stuck his right leg out in the direction of his car, and then he was dropped to the driveway. A massive

stinging sensation shot up his left thigh and into the nape of his neck. He grasped at his leg. The warmth of his own blood soaked his hand.

"What the?" he gasped clinging to the hood of his dad-mobile.

I had his heart right in my sights! I never missed. A second later, I had my answer. I felt like I'd been bitten in the back of my thigh. I looked back to see my designer slacks turning crimson. I pulled out my .38, and rolled over to counter my attacker. It was him again.

"Well, well," Judge said pointing his revolver at the man in the leather jacket and knit cap. "Couldn't leave well enough alone back in Washington, eh?"

The stranger ducked over the far hillside and fired off two more rounds. The front driver's side tire on the Hornet popped and deflated with a hiss.

"Ah, hell!" he shouted. He forced himself to his feet and staggered over to the far side of his disabled cruiser.

The figure had disappeared into the underbrush and made his getaway. Judge rushed back over to his rifle, and plopped back on the ground.

"You're not getting away that easily, scumbag."

He fixed his sight back down on the house. McGarren was backing out of the driveway in a frenzy. He fixed his crosshairs on the windshield of the Camry, and fired off another round.

Pat was in tremendous pain. The bullet had only grazed the outer part of his thigh, but it left a large gash. He kicked the car from reverse into park, and punched the..

BANG!

His side mirror blew apart in a shower of plastic and glass. He heard the projectile thwip through the rear door panel and lodge itself into the backrest. The final image of Donna Moran was her covering her beehive and running for the house in a state of panic. McGarren sped off around the turn, and plowed down the road in search of the interstate.

'Judge. Judge are you alright?'

Ah! Yeah, I'll live, Q.

'The biometrics indicates a shot to the leg.'

Yeah. Listen, I'm going to need a doc and a ride to him.

'What happened?'

The same stranger from back in Washington, boss. He showed up here unannounced. He put a slug in me and then two more in my cruiser.

'It appears that you're not bleeding from a vital artery or vein. I can get an ambulance to the nearest gas station. That's just over one mile.'

I'll take what I can get. I'm gonna get that son of a bitch.

'You just stay focused on getting that wound fixed. I'm sending Ivy in to trail him from his last known point.'

Roger that, boss. Just give me a minute to put away my things, and I'll head out over the hill.

'I'm serious, Judge. Get to the local clinic. Don't try to hack yourself open again. You're not Rambo.'

Who?

'Nevermind. Just get on that wagon. Q - out.'

The perturbed assassin took off his jacket, and removed its left sleeve.

"I never liked that shade on me anyhow."

He tied the sleeve around his wound tightly.

"That'll last until I can get to the ER."

He popped the trunk on his pride and joy, and tossed the drab olive duffle bag full of gear into its matching midnight blue interior.

"If I ever get my hands on that weasel," he said slamming the trunk lid shut.

Judge took his crumpled pack of Chesterfields out of his hip pocket, and put a bent hydro in the corner of his mouth. He lit the end with a strike of his lighter and took in a deep lungful of its minty relief.

"Let's get this over with," he said as he hobbled off down the worn ruts in the side of the hill.

Chapter 15

June 2041
Reno, NV

*'You've got to slow down and take a step back.'
You know I can't do that, Q.*

Sledge forced the thin pedal to the floorboard of his modified pickup. The top of the motor peeking through the hood of his ride rattled as he watched the speedometer dart past 175 miles per hour.

'We know that they had your identity, but we can't ascertain for certain...'

Bullshit, Q. They had my address!

'What do you mean?'

Under each of our mug shots there was a long string of numbers. We didn't know what to make of it at the time but I just got off of the line with Max a few minutes ago. She unscrambled them. They were the fucking coordinates to my home!

'She didn't tell me that.'

She probably figured that you both knew what I'd do.

'Sledge, don't overreact to this. Just let me validate what Max has as accurate information. They could be bluffing.'

You can review my files. I broke the bastard's spine.

'If they have coordinates to the homes on all of you then you know what has to be done.'

Yeah, I know, but my kids won't like it.

Sledge maneuvered his truck into the concrete driveway of his home. His wife's van was parked down along the street. The kid's toys were scattered around the side lawn. Everything seemed to be on par for now. He gave himself a

quick once-over in the rear view mirror.

"Hell."

His eye was still puffy and blackened. There were several cuts around his lips.

"Lucy's gonna shit a brick over this one."

He pulled his large duffle bag out from behind the passenger side seat and jumped out of the cabin. Sledge stomped off past the garage. His son's band belted out a tune from within its cluttered depths.

"That figures."

He continued on the sidewalk past the small clusters of cacti that Lucy had made him plant last summer. The panicky punisher walked frantically around the perimeter of his house examining every window and doorway. Sledge finally checked the cellar entrance, and once he was satisfied, he continued up to the front door. The expert killer examined the last doorframe thoroughly. There were no wires, leads, or signs of forced entry of any kind anywhere.

"Maybe I'm just getting too worked up," he said opening the door.

He lumbered into the foyer of his twenty-six-hundred square foot ranch home and tossed his bag against the maroon wall. Loud dance music pumped out from the living room down the hall.

"Get those legs up!" a male voice commanded. "You've gotta keep your heart rate high, folks."

"Well, that explains why my calls weren't answered," he said pulling off his boots.

Sledge walked to the corner of the living room, and peeked around the corner. His wife of nearly twelve years pumped her long legs like pistons trying to keep up with the hologram of her fitness trainer.

"Come on," the muscular sweaty hologram said, "just five more."

He had to tell her at some point. They were going to be forced into pulling up their roots and moving once again.

"Just a couple more years, and then we can finally just live."

The big man took in a chest full of air hoping that it would calm his nerves. Sledge couldn't put his finger on its scent, but it was that familiar home-smell that the man missed. He strolled up behind his wife, and grabbed her by her slender waist.

"Whoa, shit!" she shouted as she jumped forward. "Bobby, you scared the bejesus outta me."

"It's good to be home," he said pulling Lucy closer to him.

She studied the healing wounds on his face with concern.

"What the hell happened to you?"

"Chalk it up to a rough day at the office, babe."

"Rough day at the office? Did you get a job as a door-to-door telemarketer?"

Sledge lowered his head.

"Rough day my ass."

"You know I can't talk about it."

"Yeah," she said walking into their kitchen for a glass of water, "I'm well aware of that."

"You didn't start fighting again, did you?" she asked in her motherly tone.

"No," he said leaning on the edge of the bar in front of the kitchen. "You know I gave up MMA a long time ago."

Lucy stabbed her glass of water onto the marble countertop next to the fridge.

"Look, I'm sorry, hon. I just can't stand seeing my man all jacked up like this."

Sledge walked over to his wife and wrapped his huge arms around her.

"I tried to call you," he said giving her a peck on the cheek. "Three times, in fact."

He pressed his battered lips against the bridge of her nose. She melted with a whimper into his embrace.

"Damn it, Bobby. You know I can't resist..."

"I know."

He slid his calloused hand into her panties and worked her into a frenzy.

"It's good to be back home," he said nibbling at her ear lobe.

"Mmm hmm," she moaned as his fingers probed her groin.

He moved his hand around to her outer thigh and tugged her shorts and panties down to her knees.

"God, I missed you, baby," he said pulling at his fly.

Lucy bent over the sink arching her ass toward her man. In a few moments she felt his member caressing her labia, and finally he penetrated her body.

"We've got to get ready to go get Dahlia from the hospital," Lucy said walking into the master bedroom from the steamy embrace of the shower.

She dried out her shoulder-length hair, and strode

over to the walk-in closet to get dressed.

"Is she stabilized now?" Sledge asked pulling on some designer jeans and a tee-shirt.

"Yeah," came his wife's response from the closet. "She nearly went into kidney failure from this episode, but her doctor thinks that they've found the right meds this time."

Lucy walked out in a little red sun dress that stopped mid-thigh. She smirked at him and leaned on the door frame to the closet.

"You like it?"

He nodded in acquiescence as his eyes studied every inch of her figure.

"If you play your cards right, you just might get lucky later tonight after the kids are in bed, big boy."

Lucy slipped her last heel on, and headed for the kitchen.

"Come on. We've got to be at the hospital to talk with her doctor in fifteen minutes."

"Alright, alright I'm coming," he said falling in behind his athletic spouse.

"Tell you what," she said, "I'll get Randy and start up the van. Why don't you lock up, and just meet us down there?"

"Sounds fine," Sledge said grabbing his keys.

He walked to the front door and slid on his favorite pair of sneakers.

"One of these days I'll be able to retire to this kind of stuff every day."

He went out the front door, and turned around to lock it behind him. He heard his son sliding the side door on the van closed. The moments like these made the hard times on the road seem worth it to the assassin. Sledge took the short cut down through the front yard. Lucy was turned in her chair toward the back of the van. Randy had likely gotten himself into trouble already.

"When's that boy ever gonna..."

A wave of hot air and vinyl siding blew the big guy right off of his feet. Sledge peered up toward the van in time to see his wife's horrified expression and his home engulfed in flames through the window's reflection.

"Oh, my God!" she screamed from its cabin.

Sledge jumped to his feet knocking off the broken glass and debris. His first instinct was to turn to see what was left of his house, but then another nightmare flooded his mind.

"Lucy, don't!" he shouted as he ran toward the van at a full sprint.

She was looking forward down their suburban street when the red wall of fire engulfed her. One second Lucy sat there looking as beautiful as she ever had, and the next she was living flame - a melting contortion of her former self.

"Lucy! Randy!"

He tugged on the driver's side door handle. The heat from the blast had melted the door to the frame, and branded the man's left hand.

"Fuck!"

Sledge kicked on the window with all of his strength.

"Lucy!"

He stopped when he saw her burning form collapse into the fire in the passenger seat. She and Randy were both gone.

"Holy Christ."

Sledge stammered back up the small embankment and fell on the neatly pruned grass. For the first time in a very long time, Sledge broke down and cried like a battered child.

"Luce," he forced through his tears.

Just then a flutter of flannel pierced his peripheral vision. A stranger ran behind the towering inferno that once was Sledge's home.

"Those fuckers," he said wiping back his pain and rushing to his feet once more. "Get back here, you son of a bitch!"

Sledge ran around the opposite corner of his crumbling house. He knew that the yard was fenced and locked out back. The only way out now was to come straight at him through the front yard. That's exactly what the perpetrator also discovered. The man in the flannel shirt rolled to the ground after tripping over Sledge's feet.

"Oh, shit, man," the stranger stammered crawling back across the short grass. "You don't understand."

The heartache was replaced with blind crimson rage.

When Sledge had come back down off of his adrenaline rush, the stranger was tied to the base of his palm tree in the side yard. His face had been pulverized to a bloody pulp. The man's shirt and jeans were both soaked in gasoline. Its fumes permeated the assassin's healing nostrils. A lone burning match flickered between his left forefinger and thumb.

"You've got until this thing burns down to give me

some names. Who sent you?"

The battered crony groaned from beneath the remnants of his nose. His long bangs hung over his features.

"I said, who sent you?!"

Sledge knelt down and lowered the lapping flame to within an inch of the man's gas-drenched shirt.

"Jagger, alright?" the stranger spat. "The man's name is Jagger."

Sledge remained crouched on his knees as the tongue of fire crept closer to his fingers.

"Who does he work for?"

The goon tried to look away, but Sledge yanked it back with his free hand.

"Time's wastin' away. Whose lap does Jagger climb into?"

The stranger gazed through his swollen socket. The big man's fingers twitched as the flame licked at his thumb.

"I don't know his name," he confessed. "Jagger calls him the Architect!"

Sledge stood up and backed away from the trunk of the palm. He glared down at the trail of fuel in his yard through a mask of sorrow.

"I told you their names!" the hitman pleaded. "I told you all that I know!" He began to sob behind his long brown bangs.

"Karma can be a bitch like that sometimes."

It felt like time slowed down as he watched the charred match tumble through space. It landed on the grass next to Sledge's foot and smoldered. The stranger breathed a quick sigh of relief through his smile. His terror quickly returned when the little flame sprung back to life. The orange snake of fire overtook the thug in a flash. Sledge stood there and watched every second of it. He wanted the images of this burning bastard to replace those of his late wife and son. He wanted it desperately, but the change never came.

Chapter 16

*June 2041
Logan, UT*

Patrick had made it across the Idaho border before the pain in his leg got to be more than he could bear.

"Damn!" he shouted into his dashboard. "I've got to find some kind of clinic, or something. I can't take any more of this horseshit."

Ms. Moran warned him against such an endeavor saying that his likelihood of being spotted by someone and turned in would be greater, but the goddamned pain wouldn't give.

He pulled his sedan into the small paved lot of the Meadowdale Urgent Care Clinic. It was just after seven in the morning. Patrick took note of only three vehicles on the left side of the lot: a newer pickup truck, an SUV and a Ferrari. He figured that this one had to belong to the doc.

"Looks good enough," he whispered. "Only a few people in, so this should go pretty quick."

McGarren grabbed his key fob and limped over to the tinted glass doors at the small building's entrance. The bleeding had long since ceased, but the fear of infection and reopening the large gash tipped his moral scales in favor of the visit.

The air in the waiting area was cool and inviting. The talking head on the TV screen on the wall ran through the latest news. An overweight nurse in pink scrubs greeted his arrival with a freckled grin.

"Good morning, sir," she said cheerfully. "Have you been to the clinic before?"

Pat shook his head.

"I'm from out of state on business."

"I see."

She slid a thin blue tablet under the glass.

"Just fill in the information as the system prompts you, and bring it back to me when you're done."

"Thanks," Pat said with a nod.

"If you get stuck, you can press the help button in the upper right corner. The virtual assistant will guide you from there."

He nodded and toted the small tablet over to an empty

cloth chair. Patrick clicked the power button in the tablet's upper right-hand corner, and read the news ticker at the bottom of the TV screen while he waited. Most of it was the same canned news: a bus crash in the Midwest, tornadoes in the Southeast and corruption on Wall Street. A couple of headlines did manage to catch his attention, though:

7:04AM. Seattle Galaxy gain five points over Cleveland Pulsars in Galactic League Championship match when their commercial vessel, Silver Seahawk, successfully touched down at the lunar port of Apollo City. Galaxy now lead 67-58.

"No kidding," he said seemingly baffled.

The Galactic League had been the brainchild of wealthy sporting entrepreneurs and the fields of science. When NASA folded back in 2026, it left a gaping hole in the people's imagination. These sporting juggernauts saw the next big hit on the horizon, commercialized space travel, and cashed in big. They came together to form league teams in major cities across the US, and a few more in Asia, Europe and Russia. These teams competed for points by using their fleet of twelve spacecraft each. Teams earned points over the course of a one-week match by successfully launching people into orbit, landing on the moon, flying around the moon and for new scientific discoveries.

The modern space race had taken the form of friendly international competition complete with company sponsor's logos on the vessels. They reminded Pat of the NASCAR racers of old. Each vessel had different logos for their sponsors ranging from parcel carriers and insurance companies all the way to your favorite laundry detergent. The games were always fun to keep up with, and their TV ratings were constantly through the roof. The biggest payout of all, though, was that scientific discovery and leisure space travel had both exploded since the league's inception in 2030.

The other headline made McGarren shudder in fear:

Home explosion near Reno, NV leaves entire family dead. Police left with no leads.

Sure, it could have been an arson or random gas leak, but Pat had a gut feeling that it went beyond that. The next line on the ticker confirmed his suspicions.

Body of unidentified male found tied to tree in the yard was burned beyond recognition.

"That was no damned arson."

He typed in a fake name and address on the tablet. Whoever these hunters were, they meant business.

"They'll stop at nothing," he said finishing up his information forms for the clinic.

Patrick hobbled over to the front desk and slid the thin computer back under the glass.

"All finished, Mr."

The nurse quickly glanced down at the front page of the tablet.

"Quimby?"

"Yup, all done."

She flipped through the screens on the tablet scanning each with hazel eyes set like gems in her puffy cheeks.

"A leg injury, huh?"

McGarren nodded.

"Please have a seat in our waiting area, Mr. Quimby, and we'll be with you shortly. Feel free to use our Cloud ports while you wait."

"Thank you."

He hid his injury as best as he could as he strode back over to his warm and waiting chair. He pulled a small square glass coffee table up in front of him and touched its glass surface. A wispy stream of blue wove its way out from beyond the cloudy depths of the glass's 3-D interface.

'Welcome to the Cloud!' it read as a shapely female assistant materialized to the message's right.

'Press anywhere on the surface to begin.'

McGarren tapped the glass on the small table, and three-dimensional icons flew from behind the clouds in neat rows in front of him.

'Where would you like to go?' the assistant asked.

Patrick tapped on the icon labeled National Network, and the system obeyed. The homepage for the US's national Cloud system appeared on the surface. He called up the virtual keyboard from the lower left, and began to type in the site address for Chuck's firm.

"Mr. Quimby?"

Pat kept manipulating the cloud oblivious to his own alias.

"Mr. Quimby?" the nurse called louder.

McGarren looked up from his portal.

"The doctor will see you now. Please follow me."

He followed the nurse back down the corridor to an empty exam room. Her oversized ass flopped with each step.

I wonder how many points we could get for successfully landing a team on that fucker, he thought mesmerized by its warble.

She set his tablet down on the plain white desk.

"The doctor will be in to see you in a few minutes."

Pat nodded and plopped himself down on the exam table. It wasn't even a full minute when a sexy young woman swaggered into the exam room shutting the door behind her. McGarren was awestruck by her exotic beauty. The woman's petite Asian features reminded him immensely of his wife.

"How are you this morning, Mr. Quimby?" she asked brushing her long black bangs back over her left ear. The hair on her right side, he noticed, was cropped close to her scalp.

"I've been better."

She sat on the brown leather stool and flipped through the pages of the tablet.

"So, you say that you have a leg injury."

"That's right," he replied rolling over on the side of his good leg.

The woman winced as the gash became apparent.

"Let's get a quick scan of your vitals, Mr. Quimby, and then we'll patch you back up."

She wheeled around on her stool, and came back wielding a thin white wand. She tapped a small button on the base of the apparatus, and yellow light fanned out from beneath its top portion. She waved it slowly over her own left hand while watching the computer screen in front of her.

"Let's make sure that this thing is working real quick."

The screen showed an image of her left hand. Pat watched as her blood pulsed from the image's wrist. The slender bones in her fingers curled and released on the thin screen.

"Looks fine," she said as she rolled over next to the table. "Now, just lie back and we'll get your vitals."

Pat did as commanded. The intriguing woman lowered the wand just over his forehead, and ran its beam slowly down the length of his body. McGarren watched his internal organs appear on the screen behind her head. The computer registered his blood pressure and heart rate in the top right corner of the screen. In its lower right-hand quadrant was his complete blood panel.

"White and red counts look slightly elevated," she said studying the screen. "Your pulse is elevated, too. It's a good thing that you came in when you did, Mr. Quimby."

He wore a confused expression intermingled with concern.

"You're on the verge of a serious infection."

"That's what I was afraid of."

She sat the wand back in its upright charger, and walked over to the doorway.

"I'll get the doctor. Just wait here."

A few minutes later, Pat heard the muffled discussion going on just beyond the door to his room. A tall well-tanned man in his mid-fifties walked in with the cute nurse in tow.

"Good morning, Mr. Quimby," the man in the lab coat said. "I'm Dr. Adams."

"Hi."

"So, what happened here?" he inquired as he read the information on the computer screen.

"Company trip. I had an accident during a team building event at an outdoor adventure park."

"Uh huh," the living Ken doll said still staring at the screen. "Well, we can certainly patch you up, but we can't find any record of your insurance in the National Health Cloud."

Patrick felt his palms begin to moisten. His story was starting to unravel.

"In fact," the doctor continued, "your address only matched up to someone named Pervis. No Quimbys there at all."

McGarren could feel his blue stare boring holes right into his inner thoughts.

"She's my Aunt. I've been staying there to care for her. She can't afford the hospice."

"Right well," the doc began as he turned for the doorway once more, "I'll come back in a little bit with a kit, and we'll put you back together, okay?"

"Sure, sounds great."

"Sit tight, champ."

The doctor's words trailed off after him as he walked back down the hallway.

His Asian assistant hurried over to Pat's side, and grabbed him by the shirt sleeve.

"We've got to go now," she said. He could see the terror in her eyes.

"Go where? I don't understand."

"They're onto you, and your alias has been flagged in the national system."

She led him to the doorway and peered past its metallic edge.

"Who are you? Where are you taking me?"

After making sure that the hall was clear, the attractive stranger led him out the back entrance and around the side of the building to her waiting sports car.

"This one's yours?" he asked in astonishment.

She hit a button on her fob causing the doors on the Ferrari to swing upward.

"Of course," she replied. "Get in."

"But, why should I..."

"If you want to stay alive long enough to prove your innocence then you'll get in the car."

A male orderly came running out of the front doors in a flurry.

"Hey, you! Stop right there!"

The driver's side door clicked closed. This mysterious woman fired up the V-12 engine and leaned over the center console.

"I've been in your shoes, Pat. Get in."

He didn't know how she knew his real name, but if she did then he figured that she must be with the Minutemen network. Patrick jumped into the shotgun bucket seat, and strapped himself in. His new chauffeur backed the red speed machine up, and peeled out of the small lot in a cloud of white smoke.

Within minutes they were back on the interstate and headed eastward.

"You're not really a nurse, are you?"

"Very perceptive," she said sarcastically.

"Are you with the network?"

She smiled at the windshield, and continued to race down the highway at over 100 miles per hour.

"I've been in your position before, Patrick, and I've lived to tell about it."

"That's good to know."

The strange female shifted the car into sixth gear and floored it. Pat felt his torso sinking into the seat even farther.

"I've been down your path," she said. "I know what it's like to be on your own with no one on your side."

"So, what in the world makes you think that I stand a snowball's chance in Hell?"

"Because, unlike everyone else you've met thus far, I believe you, Pat."

McGarren felt his burden lighten as he sank into the black Italian leather with a smile. His chances looked brighter as they sped off into the heart of the sunrise.

Epilogue

June 2041
Near El Paso, TX

Rider tossed the smoldering match into the sand at his boots, and strode over to his steel horse. He turned on his bike's cloud band radio tuning it into a station that had been suggested to him a week earlier. The big voice of the show's announcer shot out of the sound system.

'Politicians and lobbyists might want to touch that dial. You're not going to like what you hear. It's time for Static Interference with your host Zack Hearst.

Good evening, friends. We picked up little story about a lesser known MMA champion who went by the name Roberto 'the Hammer' Farns. He was catapulted in to stardom eleven years ago with a spectacular fifty-three second knockout over rising star Jesus Alvarez. Because of the internet hype, he was offered a title shot. He ground out Adrian McBrain for five rounds to win the decision. Some say his biggest mistake was excepting a challenger so early after he won the belt.

Only two months later, the current champ Steve Murray made short work of Hammer with a Camorra submission early in the second round. He never stepped into the octagon again. The guy just kind of disappeared. No, you're not listening to WKLS and the station hasn't directed me to cover jockstrap-toting has-beens. This poor unfortunate soul has been targeted for extermination.

This came out of the Las Vegas press yesterday. Roberto Farns: wanted for questioning in the double murder, and disappearance of a Pennsylvania lowlife. It doesn't actually say lowlifes, but that's the impression you get from the article. Sounds like a steroid deal gone bad. The article continues: police had responded to the suspect's residence. Before the APB came through, the suspect had already detonated a bomb in a car that contained Lucy Farns, his wife age thirty-one, and Randy Farns, his son age sixteen. Traces of explosives were found in the basement.'

Rider sat down on his bedroll next to the small orange

cone of fire. He pulled a dark blue and white speckled mug off of a small iron grate.

"Dear, God," he muttered as he gazed off into the last burnt amber rays of daylight. "What did you get yourself into now?"

The assassin nursed his small cup of coffee, and leaned back on his left elbow.

'Now that sounds like something any rational person would do. A drug deal goes bad, or for whatever reason you need to kill a few guys. I would rush right home with a hostage in my trunk and murder my family; hell shoot up the whole block. Why stop there? Why not steal a fighter jet and napalm the Pan American Freeway!

Folks, let's take a look at what really happened here. Mr. Farns got caught up in some unfortunate business, and in the Hunter Cell's fast track to Justice they sent out a specialist. Apparently a sloppy one. What was the first thing I said when these rumors of assassinations emerged? Can someone find the tape? It was something like, "How long before innocents are caught in the cross fire?" Well this is just the first we've heard of it. These assassins are trained to kill from afar. It's in our culture with the micro drones used in Libya. A young man plays a video game, and thousands of miles away a human being dies. They sat a block away, in this case, and pushed a button. It dehumanizes their target, and lets them sleep better at night. Well, how's that working out for you now?

The article says Roberto is at-large, and is to be considered armed and dangerous. Yeah, he's at-large like Jimmy Hoffa. Don't blame the investigators. They are just brainwashed like everyone else. You can point your finger the media for not doing their job. The New World Order wants you to know they did it. They just can't come right out and say it. When government fears the people there is liberty. When people fear the government there is tyranny. That's Thomas Jefferson, and it still rings true today.

Before the break, I teased you with the prospect of something I haven't delivered for God knows how long -- good news. We have reached out and done damage to the enemy. If you take a military class on tactics and strategy the first thing they are going to teach you is initiative. You need to call the shots. You need to get them reacting to you. Our militias can't sit back and train and drill in harmony waiting for them to kill again. They need to hit

these assassins hard and frequently. And ladies and gentlemen that's exactly what happened.

Now I can't get into the specifics of what happened. I don't want to bring a lawsuit down on us. But what I can say is there is a small group of patriots who put our Bill of Rights before their lives and stopped an assassination. Unfortunately, the targeted young man fled. He may not live to exercise his right to a jury of his peers, but he escaped for the time being. Thanks to one man... (sound of shuffling papers) who's part of a group, just a handful of guys. Hold on, I got it here. Cerberus they call themselves. It means watchdog or guardian.

It warms my heart that the brave young men took the initiative, but the truth of it is they aren't going to last long. Not without our help. Join your local militia. There's a list of organizations on my webpage. I understand all of us are not warriors. There are plenty of ways to pitch in. These guys are training six days a week eight hours a day. The militias also need cooks and stewards to accommodate them. Help them to help you restore the rights our forefathers intended us to have. You can also donate, or join me in our march on Washington next month. Buses are leavening from El Paso, Boston, Albuquerque, Jacksonville and many other affiliated cities. It's time to rattle the cage of these politicians and make a difference.

Springing fugitives is not our goal. Unfortunately, it has become a means to our goal. I just want to reassure all of you out there. If we get our hands on one of these targets we have judges in our midst and plenty of jurors. If the government wants to come in here with a prosecution we will accommodate, but if they come with an executioner they will have to kill every last one of us! We'll be right back after this break.'

The lone cowboy tossed the last remnants of his drink into the glowing red embers. The coals hissed in fierce defiance releasing white tendrils of steam into the arid desert twilight.

"Well, pard," he said pulling the rolled cigarette off of the rock near the flames.

Rider took a long drag and rested his weary head on his makeshift pillow. He patted the empty pockets of his dusty jeans.

"If I had any fucks to give, I just might give you one."

His small fire snapped and crackled sending a flurry of red sparks dancing up into the moonless star-filled skies above.

"It would unfortunately appear as though I am fresh out."

The gunslinger dropped the brim of his leather cowboy hat down over his eyes. The crackle of his fire and the night songs of the crickets lulled the desperado into another nightmarish slumber.

Joshua Dyer is a writer, blogger and the author of several books available for purchase. Visit <http://www.scribesorcerer.wordpress.com> for more information.

Ever wonder what really happened to Steam Punk in Cleveland? Want to know more about the agents? Want to get more information while you wait for Book 2? Follow them at <http://www.huntercell.wordpress.com>. Here's your secret access code to bonus material, special interviews and artwork located in the Briefing Room on this site: **coldkillers**.

Look for **Subterfuge**: Book 2 in the Assassin Quintet series wherever eBooks are sold.

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FRATRES MORTIS



