

Liability

by Matthew S Williams
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“As every citizen of this great nation is probably aware, today we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Libertarian Act. For many this day is a time of celebration, but for others, it is a time of sober reflection. At the time of its passage, the Act was designed to curb the growing problems of violence that were sweeping the country. In America’s inner cities, crime continued to escalate, schools became the sites of increasing gang violence, and in time, the problem began to spill over into every community. No one appeared to be safe, and no place seemed untouched. Under the burden of a crushing national debt and a crumbling social structure, both state and federal officials were at their wits end to find a solution. The Libertarian Act responded to these problems by giving private citizens the power to enforce the law. Following on the heels of the Safe Streets Act, the Libertarian Act repealed the use of the National Guard to enforce the peace, and gave official sanction to bounty hunters and vigilantes who were now permitted to track down and arrest offenders. With one stroke of the pen, the life of every known or suspected criminal in America became redeemable for money. Those who were willing to adopt this often dangerous, sometimes glamorous, life applied for licenses, and bounties were paid out to those who brought offenders in, dead or alive. The question we are asking ourselves today is, after twenty years of vigilante justice, is the Libertarian Act still needed?”

Gord sat and tried not to let the annoying sound of Tyson sucking his spaghetti distract him from the TV. The investigative journalist was getting to the end of all the background junk and was about to get to the good stuff, the stuff that involved them. Grabbing the remote, he turned the volume up a few notches and leaned forward in his seat.

“It’s coming!” he yelled, pointing to the set.

“I’m standing here with a group who calls themselves the Watchmen...”

“Yes!” Gord yelled. Tyson continued to eat his food, eyeing the TV with only mild interest. Across the room, Janey continued cleaning the assorted gun parts she had lain on the table and shook her head.

“Relax, Gord!” she ordered. “It’s just another human interest story.”

“Yeah, but I get to talk this time. The last time they came around, all they wanted to do was to talk to Tom.”

“What good is it, anyway?” she retorted. “You had your face covered the whole time?”

“Shut up!” he demanded, pointing at the screen. “My parts coming up!”

On the screen, a black hooded figure stood next to the reporter, a microphone in his face, trying to look tall and threatening. Underneath that hood, speaking in a low, husky voice, a bounty hunter attempted to speak his mind.

“It’s all about freedom, about the protection of our rights and our homes from those that would do them harm,” he said.

The reporter brought the mike back to her lips and asked: *“So is it fair to say you see yourselves as the last line of defence against the problems we see in our streets?”*

“Yes, ma’am. I do.”

She moved next to the hooded figure that stood next to him, a taller, heavier man who kept his big, dark arms folded across his chest.

“What about you sir? Why did you get into this business?”

A deeper, gruffer baritone voice replied: *“Cause’ it’s where the money is. Plus I think the crooks are the ones who oughta’ be afraid, not us.”*

“Do the men you hunt fear you?” she asked.

“Oh yeah!” he replied.

“Good one,” Janey said. Tyson smiled devilishly and nodded. Gord hushed them both again. “This is your part!” he said, pointing to her.

“What are your reasons, ma’am? Do you see many women involved in this line of work?”

“Some, but not nearly enough. It’s still very much a man’s industry.”

“Is that why you joined?”

“Yeah, pretty much. I didn’t want to leave all the fun to the men. Plus, we girls got a lot more to fear being on the street alone. I don’t think the guys in this business understand that too well.”

“Do you find it hard dealing with the men in this business? Are they tolerant of women, do you find?”

“It depends. I think they look at themselves and think it’s their manly duty to solve these problems all by themselves. I figure I’m here to remind them that they can’t do it alone, and... we have as much business being here as they do.”

“What about your colleagues? Do they work well with you?”

“They do, but only because they know they better.”

“Ouch!” Tyson said at her. “Careful girl!”

“She spent a lot of time on you,” Gord complained. “I had the most to say.”

“Yeah, you were the one who kept trying to hog the mike,” she came back.

“Yeah, whatever. Just listen.”

The shots on the screen moved back to some panoramic views of city streets, crumbling schools, and old riot footage. For a moment, Gord phased out as the report got into more background stuff.

“At the time, analysts cited the nation’s crushing debt and the crumbling social system as the cause of the situation. For decades, the inner areas of America’s greatest cities were known for their violence. But soon, citizens saw the problem spill over into smaller urban and even suburban areas. After a short-lived stint with martial law, the federal government found that the cost of keeping soldiers in the streets only exacerbated the debt situation, and created conflicts with the citizenry. The Libertarian Act was seen as a compromise that would be pleasing to both civil liberty advocates and an angry citizenry demanding action.”

“Here I am! Here I am!” Gord yelled again.

“One of the things that makes this country of ours great is that we believe that the government’s got no business controlling our lives, telling us what to do. I think that this law recognizes that. It simply places in the hands of the people what is already theirs to begin with...”

The camera cut again to a shot of the reporter in another area of the city. Gord threw his hands up in frustration.

“Damn it! I talked for like five minutes, they only used a bit of it!”

“What are you gonna’ do?” Tyson asked, taking another mouthful of spaghetti. “Can’t hog the limelight forever.”

“But of course,” the reporter went on, “not everyone agrees with the Libertarian Act or its provisions. We were speaking with one such person earlier today who prefers to remain anonymous, who claims that the act endangers the very social fabric of our community.”

The next shot was of a pixelated face sitting in a dark room, the voice garbled to conceal its true sound. The three of them leaned closer to listen to this critic, whoever he was.

“These vigilantes - or these mercenaries, as they should be called - are not the solution to our country’s problems. If anything, they are a symptom of the larger issue. We have had a situation in this country for close to half a century now where guns are too available, and schools and inner city neighbourhoods are allowed to just rot while the bureaucrats porkbarrell and waste our tax money on people who don’t need it. As long as these problems were confined to certain areas, no one did anything about it. But then when the situation finally got out of control and threatened the rich neighbourhoods, suddenly you had demands for action. The troops and the National Guard couldn’t do it because the government couldn’t flip the bill, not without reversing all the tax cuts they’d been promising the rich folk. So what do they do? They put more guns in the hands of people and tell them to solve their own problems.”

“But haven’t we seen a positive effect?” the reporter asked.

“But at what cost? How many innocent lives are sacrificed everyday in the name of public safety? We have no idea how many of the bounties were even legitimate, because bounty hunting doesn’t even rely on the court system. What about due process, what about the rights of the individual? There’s more to liberty than just the right to have guns.”

Gord blew a loud raspberry at the set, while Tyson and Janey simply gave him a thumbs down. No one liked listening to the bleeding hearts when it came time for these stories. At least the reporter had kept the man’s part short and stuck to the good stuff.

“Well there you have it, folks,” the reporter concluded. *“While the results are still cause for debate, no one can doubt that for the most part, the criminals are the ones who have suffered the most. Today in America, statistics confirm that crime has dropped in most areas of the country past where it was twenty years ago. Some say that this recent decline is reason enough to consider repealing the Act, while others believe that keeping it in place is the best way to ensure that crime will never again return to what it was. But in the end, the real question is who are these masked men and women who hunt the streets for criminals? Are they mercenaries, or the last line of defence against the rising tide of chaos? No one can say for sure, but one thing no one can doubt is their patriotism or their commitment to what they do. For NWN news, this is Daisy Menendez reporting.”*

“Alriiiiight! We got our fifteen minutes!” Tyson said sarcastically.

“That sucks!” Gord griped, shutting the TV down and walking over to the fridge.

“You worried about your time still?” Janey asked. “Don’t be such a baby! You got your say, and you sounded good saying it too.”

“Yeah, well just be glad they didn’t give the interview to Mason and his gang. Tom would have flipped if they did that,” Tyson added.

“I don’t get that,” Gord said, opening the fridge and grabbing himself a cold one. “He could care less if they interview him, but he doesn’t want someone else getting all the attention.”

“Not just someone, Gord, Mason.” Janey replied.

“Yeah,” Tyson nodded. “Whatever happened between those two that made him want to hate that guy so much?”

“Who knows? He won’t talk about it.”

“Yeah, and good luck trying,” Gord said, cracking the can open. “I tried once. Tom almost ripped my face off.”

The gang’s speculation was interrupted by a suddenly thump at the door. Gord dropped the beer can and reached for his gun, grabbing a spot behind the kitchen counter. Janey stopped cleaning the components and took her shotgun in hand, cocking it to get a slug in the chamber.

Tyson, for the first time that afternoon, put down his food long enough to flip out his weapon. Looking in the direction of the door, Janey asked: "Who is it?"

"It's me, you idiots!" the voice on the other side yelled. "I'm coming in!"

The door slid open, and on the other side, with bags of groceries in hand, stood Tom. The grizzled face and glasses were indication enough, as was the mocking look he had on his face.

"Don't shoot," he said sarcastically. "Just came to make sure you losers were stocked up. And don't bother to help."

And no one did. Walking over to the kitchen, Tom placed the bags down on the counter. Gord suddenly became aware of the can lying on the floor, and the growing puddle surrounding it. Tom looked down, shook his head.

"Get a towel, dumbass!" he ordered. Nodding meekly, Gord ran to the bathroom to fetch one. Looking over at the other two, he asked: "What are you two up to?"

"We were just watching the interview," Tyson replied, getting back to the last few strands of spaghetti he had left in the bowl.

"Don't care," Tom said, walking back to the kitchen to unpack the bags. Reaching into one of the bags, he pulled out a bunch of envelopes. "Mail call!"

"What have you got?" Janey asked.

"Some cheques, already cleared, some bills, not yet paid, and some more requests for more TV spots."

"Oooh, don't tell Gord!" Tyson begged.

"Tell me what?" Gord said, emerging from the bathroom with a rag in hand.

"Tom! Please!" Tyson repeated.

"We got an offer from a producer of some reality show," he yelled over at Gord, "wants us to consider being on their program for next season."

"Man! I told you not to tell him!"

"It's okay, T-man, I already told them no. This is just them pleading with us, trying to get us to change our minds."

"You said no?!" Gord cried in dismay.

"Take it easy, Gord! There's no way I'm letting you embarrass yourself for those bloodsuckers! You remember what happened to those dudes who called themselves the Black Dragons?"

"Yeah, they were cool! And they got a lot of business thanks to it!"

"At first, yes. But soon, the crooks stopped taking them seriously. Nobody takes you seriously if they start knowing about your private life."

"We have private lives?" Janey asked derisively.

"I got a private life!" Tyson interjected.

"Oh yeah! You're real popular! The ladies love a man with lots of guns who can't stop eating."

"You'd be surprised!" Tyson came back.

"Will you two cut it out?! I said we weren't doing it. Besides, the show's been going downhill for years. We got nothing to gain by going on it now. End of story."

Gord finished wiping up the puddle and slumped back to the fridge to grab himself another beer. Suddenly, he looked like a little kid, the way he sipped at it with his head hung low. Tom looked back at Janey and Tyson, who looked away quickly so as not to appear like

they were challenging his decision. Letting the matter drop, Tom decided to deliver his next bit of news.

“Also, I forgot to tell you, I ran into Baby Doc about a week ago,” he said, using their friends formal name. “He’s invited us to a meeting, his father’s hosting it.”

“When is it?” Janey asked.

“Tomorrow. Afternoon, up at his dad’s estate.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” she demanded.

“I told you I forgot! Anyway, they want us there, he said so.”

“Poppa Doc wants *us* to be there?” Tyson asked, suddenly taking an interest.

“Seems that way. From what he told me, his dad’s got a big proposal and wants all the bounty hunters in the area there to hear about it.”

“We’re moving up in the world!” Tyson surmised.

“Hope so. So you guys up for it?”

“Sure!” Janey said, looking over at Tyson, who was also nodding his agreement. Tom looked at Gord, who also seemed a bit more animated by the news. He nodded too.

“Great! I was thinking we do some clothes shopping this afternoon. Gotta’ look presentable for the old man.”

Janey, Gord and Tyson looked around eagerly as people continued to file into the room. Everywhere they saw faces they knew, or ones they vaguely recognized. Now and then, they had to ask who someone was, which usually prompted by the reply: “You don’t know? Why that’s...” To this, they had to shamefully answer “Ohhhhh!” Ten minutes into things, they made a profound realization: clearly, they were coming up in the world. Unfortunately, this was counter-balanced by the equally powerful realization that they still had a long way to go before they could consider themselves the equals of those around them. Under the circumstances, they couldn’t help but feel shy and overwhelmed. But at least the meeting place was nice. Poppa Doc had generously volunteered his own private estate for the occasion, an opulent manor house down by the waterfront that had lush lawns and a very spacious interior. All those who had come were gathered in the front guest room, which Doc’s servants made sure was catered with plenty of food and drink. In addition to the sandwiches, cheese plates and fresh fruit, they had provided fondue, smoked salmon, and pâté. Everyone appeared to be getting on well, forming little conversation groups, and catching up with old friends and colleagues. In the middle of it all, Janey, Tyson, and Gord hovered together and tried not to look as out of place as they felt. After a few terribly tense minutes, Tyson finally said something.

“Man, I am sweating in my boots, here!”

“Me too! Where’s Tom?” Gord followed.

“Relax, you guys. Don’t look weak in front of the others!”

Janey’s sage advice was cut short when, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Cali – one of the world’s most notorious woman hunters - walking towards her. Her dark skin, the eye patch, and the long brown curls descending over a form fitting jump suit with a knife at her collar, were what gave her away.

“Janey? Janey Whitman? Ladyhawk?” she said, using her real name and alias. Janey’s heart leapt into her throat. She couldn’t believe who was addressing her, and as if she knew her.

“Yes– yes, that’s me?” she said when she found her voice.

“Do you know who I am?”

“Um... ah, yeah!”

Cali laughed. “Well, good. I was worried there for a second. I just wanted to say hi, since I’ve been following your career these past few months. You look good out there, girl. Anybody ever tell you that?”

Janey couldn’t speak. Somehow, she managed to shake her head in reply. Thank God that hadn’t failed her too, otherwise she’d look like a complete idiot!

“Ah, too bad. And I saw that interview you did, I was proud of what you had to say. I couldn’t said it better myself.”

“Really?!” Janey said. Her voice had come back, but unfortunately too loud.

“You were right. We girls got to stick together in this boy’s club.” Cali swept her one eye around the room, encompassing all the men that were there. “Not enough of us around yet to even the odds, you ask me. I’ve been saying it for years now, glad I heard it from someone else’s mouth too.”

“Uh, huh!” Janey laughed, trying to sound out an affirmative.

“Well, I’ll see you around. Poppa Doc’s sure to have something interesting to say. Good hunting out there, girl!”

“Yeah! You too!”

Cali walked gingerly away. Her catlike footsteps were something else she was famous for. Perps never did hear her coming until she was right behind them, that knife of hers at their throats. Leaning over her, Gord and Tyson began to prod.

“So much for relaxing, eh, Janey? Gord said.

“Yeah, real cool there, Ladyhawk!” Tyson added.

“I don’t believe it,” she said, practically ignoring them. “Cali knows *me*, and has been following *my* career.”

“Yeah, good for you,” Gord replied.

“I never imagined...” Janey said, still oblivious to them. Leaving them behind, she walked off to get herself something to drink.

“Now what do we do?” Gord asked.

“Where the hell is Tom?” Tyson replied.

Across the room, next to a bowl filled with ice and beer bottles, Tom had cornered Baby Doc and the two were having a chat. Tom had donned his best sport jacket for the occasion and some fine black trousers, but kept the stubble and glasses. There were certain things a hunter couldn’t lose if he wanted to maintain a certain image. Baby doc, had on a light grey suit jacket with matching pants, and on his head he wore a ceremonial skull cap that made him look like a visiting African dignitary. Compared to his father, he was really quite small, and stood at least a head shorter than most people in the room. Still, no one doubted that the little Haitian’s family cast a long shadow, which was more than enough to compensate for his height. Over two cold ones, they exchanged the usual pleasantries, and then Tom got straight to the point.

“So what exactly has your dad got planned here?” he asked.

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, it’s a regular hunter’s convention here. You’ve got people coming in from all over the country. What’s it all about?”

“Let’s just say my father’s hoping that people can pool their resources here. It’s not exactly a growth market out there anymore.”

“Well, yeah,” Tom said. “So I’ve heard. The news keeps saying how much better things are getting, but what’s that got to do with all of us?”

“You’ll see,” Doc said simply.

“Come on! You can’t give me one hint?”

“I said, you’ll see,” Doc replied with finality. “You just be on your best behaviour when he’s talking to you later.”

“Why do you say that?”

Doc took a sip from his beer, licked at a droplet that hit his chin. He looked like he was trying to figure out how to say something sensitive.

“Well, let’s just say he invited everybody from the neighbourhood, including people who might not get along with other people.”

Tom’s face went sour. “You don’t mean –?”

“Behave yourself. I’ve told him the same.”

Doc walked away, leaving Tom to curse quietly over his drink. Not sure how to vent his anger, he tossed his beer back as fast as he could. He would need another too at this rate. Hell, there was not enough alcohol in the world that would make him want to sit in the same room with his old rival, let alone deal with him.

In the middle of the dining hall, hundreds of people were seated at an exceedingly long table. At its head, a towering Haitian man stood and stretched out his long, heavy arms to encompass everyone he had gathered there. Aside from Tom, every member of the Watchmen sat and watched in awe as the old legend conducted the meeting. The descriptions they’d heard, although a little exaggerated, had done him some justice. There was the whitening beard and the heavily chapped lips that made him look old and distinguished. If not for his immense arms and broad, barrelled chest, people would assume he was someone’s kindly old grandfather. The finely tailored light coloured suit was also a nice contrast to his deep chocolate skin. Altogether, he was the picture of a veteran, one who inspired ease and respect in the same instant.

As for Tom, he sat and stared unflinchingly at the one person he didn’t want to see there. Just a few chairs down and on the other end of the table, Mason sat and looked ahead. His bright, shining eyes hadn’t bothered to look over at him at all. He knew Mason had seen him coming in, but seemed perfectly happy to ignore him. Were it not for their surroundings, Tom would have surely spat something at him. Nevertheless, Poppa Doc was oblivious to their little conflict, and went ahead with his introduction.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said in a deep, heavily accented voice. “On behalf of my organization and my family, I welcome you all. As you’ve no doubt heard, I have a business proposal that I want you all to seriously consider. As you know, all across this country, our profession is celebrating its twentieth anniversary. We have done well for ourselves, yes?”

There were nods and muttered agreements from around the table.

“And yet,” he continued, “within the last few years, business has begun to slide. We are even beginning to hear economists say that there’s a recession in our industry.”

The positive noises were replaced with some troubled murmurs. Baby Doc stepped in to say the next bit.

“Our success has always been based on this country’s ability to keep sliding into moral decay. The ongoing crime rates and the inability of our government to deal with them is what made us such a growth industry. But what do you do when things start getting better?”

“Indeed,” his father interjected. “Like all businesses, you have growth for a long time, and there’s plenty for all. But eventually things start to change, you get growing competition for shrinking markets, and then things get dirty.”

“Competition in our industry would not be healthy, I’m sure everyone here would agree?” Baby asked.

Not everyone looked like they really concurred with that statement, but since it came from Poppa’s own son, they all nodded. Poppa smiled once he felt they had the room with him. “No we don’t want that at all. Which is why I propose that we come together to form a new organization, one that brings everyone here under one roof.”

At the end of the room, someone raised their finger. After Baby pointed to him, the man asked: “Do you mean like a union?”

“Something like that yes,” Poppa replied. “We would form a nationwide organization that would enlist anyone willing, making sure that they enjoyed the protection and benefits that comes from being in an organized body. We are already working less, this way we could work less and get paid more.”

There were more murmurs from around the table. They were confused and unsure. Clearly the proposal was something no one had ever considered.

“I know this must sound strange to you,” Baby said. “No one among us considers what we do to be anything like old fashioned blue collar work. But the world is changing, and we need to change to keep up with it. If we’re going to survive the new climate that’s out there, we need to organize.”

“Who’s going to be in charge of this thing?” Tom’s glance shot back to Mason. He had been listening to the Doc’s for the past few minutes, and had almost forgotten he was there. Suddenly, he was asking questions.

“I will be,” Poppa Doc replied unapologetically. “I will be the first man to head up this organization, and my son will follow in my stead. All contracts will go through me.”

“All decisions will be done through consultation,” Baby reassured them. “You’ll all have your say, just like any union. But it will be this family that runs things for the time being.”

“You don’t need to decide now,” Poppa said, wrapping things up. “Stay here today, enjoy the comforts of my humble home. But consider what I have said. Take the weekend to talk it over to whomever you need to. I would like to know who plans to join by next week at the latest.”

“What do you think he meant by he wants an answer by next week, at the latest?” Gord asked. The meeting was now over, the three of them had huddled together outside of the dining hall, and like the rest, were trying to come to some kind of consensus over what they just heard.

“You don’t think he means he’d start knocking off the competition do you?” Tyson asked.

“Doc? No way! He’s not like that,” Tom replied. “Although he did say times were changing and he didn’t want to see us competing with each other.”

“All sounds kind of scary, you ask me,” Janey surmised.

“Well, we’re free to leave,” Tom said, “so why don’t we all just get out of here and —”

“Well, well!” a voice came from behind him. “What do we have here? Tom, the Water tower Man, and his band of misfits!”

Tom’s face suddenly looked very sour. Slowly, he turned around and was face to face to his old colleague-turned-enemy.

“Aren’t you going to say hi?” he asked.

“Hello, Mason,” he replied bitterly. “Still alive, I see.”

“Surprised?” Mason asked.

“More like disappointed,” Tom came back. Mason laughed, his bright eyes lighting up as he did.

“Just can’t let go of the past can you, old friend? Still, you should think about what the old man had to say. With the way things are, business could get vicious out there. I’d hate to have to go up against you.”

“I wouldn’t,” Tom replied. Mason laughed again. Reaching into his tan-coloured suit, he pulled out a set of shades and applied them over his eyes.

“Gotta go, old friend. Word is, there’s a poolside party in the making. Drop by if you want to fight some more. Otherwise, I’ll see you around, probably.”

Tom smiled acerbically and watched angrily as Mason left. Behind him, Janey, Gord and Tyson looked at one another with a lot of shared confusion. They let him stew for a few minutes, not wanting to say anything that might set him off. Finally, he turned around and said something to them.

“Let’s go. I want to get out of here now.”

“Can’t we hang out for just a little while? There’s people here we kinda’ want to talk to,” Tyson asked, carefully. Janey and Gord nodded, also carefully. For a second, Tom looked like he was about to say something obscene and threatening. Instead, he just took a deep sigh.

“Fine, you stay. I’m leaving and I’m taking the car. You guys can get a ride with someone else?”

The three of them nodded.

“Good. I’ll see ya’ around.”

“A contract is a contract!” Tom said, changing the magazine on his rifle. “A contract is... a bloody, bloody contract.”

Tom cocked the lever, chambering a .416 round into place. Through the scope, he saw every detail on the white practice dummy, including the bull’s-eye in the middle of its face.

“I’m the Water Tower Man! Pick you off from any distance, from any height with my trusty rifle! I’ll put a hole through the back of your head big enough to see through! Oswald was a f—!”

The crack of the gun reverberated off the walls of the practice grounds. Another hole opened in the target’s head, spewing forth a powdery residue. It certainly wasn’t the same as shooting a man. The white powder was not the pink mist. Still, it did the job when he needed to blow off some steam. Tom chambered another round, felt the dryness in his mouth that demanded he take another swig of his hooch. Setting the rifle down, he reached over and grabbed hold of the whiskey bottle he had brought with him into the rifle range. Sucking down another few ounces, he took up the rifle again, rambling to himself between shots.

“I got you! No getting away from me! You can’t even move! You can’t shoot back! You can’t give me a reason not to! You dead like everyone else I seen through this thing!”

The gun sounded again, another round tearing through fabric and cellulose fibre. The dummy was unresponsive, neither pleading for mercy nor shouting in defiance. It just stood there, a holed-up version of a human being that could not bleed or feel pain. Tom was unsatisfied. The pain and revenge he was hoping to taste would not come. There was only the thought of a mocking smile, of a friend dying cold and alone in the streets, betrayed by those he thought were his comrades. The bullets didn’t make it go away, but the booze seemed to help. Grabbing it again, he sucked the hard burning liquor back without another thought. Unfortunately, the bottle soon ran dry.

“I’m outta’ hooch!” he yelled down at the practice grounds. “You got any?”

The target just stood there, standing still without a care. He could shoot it again and again, and it didn’t seem to care. And worse, when he yelled at it for some liquor, it didn’t respond.

“Well f— you too!” he yelled, hurling the bottle at it. But without his weapon, it was hopelessly far away. The bottle shattered harmlessly on the target range, somewhere between him and the dummy. Hell, even with a weapon, some things could never be reached, especially the things from the past.

The rifle was especially heavy for some reason as he hauled it and a few boxes of unspent rounds back to the armoury. The whiskey must have had something to do with it, or maybe it was the heat at the ranch. In any case, it was nice to be back inside. There, in the cool confines of the armoury, he managed to get his head back in order. Far from being the place where he stored the Watchmen’s arsenal, it was also where he kept his mementos. His medals and citations decorated the walls, as well as pictures from the old days. There were the ones of him and his old buddies during their tours in Iraq and Iran. There were even a few of Mason, another combat vet who met up with him after they got out of the service. Then there were the articles cataloguing the exploits of the Haymakers - the group he and Mason had once belonged to. In their time together, they had accomplished much, taken out many known and suspected criminals, and had made some serious money doing it.

Suddenly, the articles ended, with the one detailing how the body of a hunter had been found dead. According to investigators, the man had been taken out by what clearly were professionals. At least one journalist had suggested foul play. The bloodied face of the corpse held a dubious expression, caught somewhere between anger and terrible sadness when he died. The authorities, when asked, claimed that his death had been a clean hit. Apparently he had done something to warrant a contract on his head. No investigation was mounted and no one ever stepped forward to claim responsibility. Just another criminal who got what was coming to him, it seemed.

Slamming the door to the arsenal shut, Tom walked back into the kitchen to fetch himself another bottle. Once he found one, he uncapped it and raised it in a mock toast.

“To old friends, dead, but not forgotten!” he said and slugged it back. “Damn them! They just won’t be forgotten!”

A loud thumping noise roused Tom from sleep. His head was spinning, his face covered with sweat, and he wasn’t even sure what time it was. The thumping continued. Someone was knocking at his door. Slowly, Tom pulled himself up from the couch and stumbled towards the front door. The knocking was getting louder, and more annoying. It was probably his neighbour coming to complain about where he parked his truck again. Damn beet farmer always did have it in for him! Probably because he was a beet farmer! A few feet from the front, and the knocking got louder again.

“I’m coming! Cut it out!” he yelled. Finally he got his hands on the knob and opened the door. To his surprise his three co-workers were standing there, looking worried.

“Guys? What are you doing here?”

“Can we come in?” Tyson asked. Janey took a whiff from him, curled her nose at what she smelt.

“Pee-yew! What have you been doing?”

“Whadda’ ya think?! Anyway, what’s this about?”

“We gotta’ talk, Tom. Can we come in?” Tyson repeated. Nodding, Tom waved at them to enter and stepped out of their way. The three of them shuffled inside and took up positions around him in a horseshoe pattern. Suddenly, he got the feeling an intervention was in the works.

“Hey, if this is about me drinking, I was here the whole time —”

“Tom! It’s not that!” Janey interrupted. “Just listen!”

Tom waited, there was silence. The three of them just looked at each other, one at the other, hoping the other would speak.

“Okay, what?” he asked.

Finally, Gord decided to speak up. “We heard this morning, yesterday, three bounty hunters in our neighbourhood went missing.”

“What? Which ones?” Tom asked.

“Merchant, Ivory, and Harbinger,” Tyson answered. “All disappeared within twelve hours of each other.”

Tom began to rub his temples, trying to clear his head of the pounding that was obscuring clear thought. But even through the hangover, the possibility seemed clear enough.

“Were they at the meeting yester—” Tom stopped, looked for his watch or some other thing that would tell him what day it was. Just how many days had he been wasting here at the ranch? “Damn!” he finally asked. “What is it today, Monday?”

“Yep,” Gord replied. “Day of the deadline. Sound suspicious to you?”

“No way!” Tom said. “There’s no way Poppa Doc would start bumping off his own people! There’s just no way!”

“You got a better explanation for why hunters are starting to disappear?” Janey asked.

“And why it’s happening now, of all times?” Tyson added.

“Poppa got his answer,” Gord said next, “you know his kind! Whoever’s not with him is against him!”

“Everybody just stay calm!” Tom ordered. “Let’s get some of our people on the line, ask some questions. Maybe there’s something else going on we haven’t heard of yet.”

Tom kept rubbing his temples for a moment, and did not notice them peering at him, waiting for him to do something.

“Oh! Right!” he said, going to find his phonebook and a phone. A few minutes later and the four of them were sitting around the kitchen table looking up names and punching in numbers. Tom used his home line while the others called on their cells. It was some time before they had any idea what was going on. Everyone they talked to spoke the same story. No one knew a thing, and everyone was scared. By the time they were done, the only thing they had learned was that the body count had climbed. Eventually, they starting putting their phones down and tried to take stock of things.

“What have we learned?” Tom asked.

“Breaker, T-Rex, Fusilier, and Boomer are gone,” Gord said.

“Taken last night,” Janey added.

“Cali too,” Gord added. “Sorry Janey.”

“Jesus,” she replied sadly.

“That’s not all,” Tyson said, putting down his phone last. “You know that compound the Grizzlies had up out in the woods?”

“Those backwood survivalists?” Tom said “Yeah, what about it?”

“I just got the word. It’s been taken out.”

“Oh my God!” Janey said, tears beginning to form in her eyes.

“They were hit with heavy stuff, from what I just heard. Tear gas, rocket propelled grenades, and lots of bullets.”

“We’re being wiped out,” Gord muttered.

“Bloody ruthless if you ask me,” Tyson replied.

Tom nodded. His hangover had all but disappeared. It had been replaced by a strange burning sensation in the back of his head and a painful movement in his stomach. Then again, maybe it was the hangover, but he was worried too. The kind of coordination and execution they were seeing was beyond anything Poppa Doc was capable of. Even with his entire organization fully mobilized, there was no way he could have knocked off seven of his competitors in less than twenty-four hours.

“Someone else is out there,” Tom concluded. “Someone who wants us dead. The question is, who?”

“And maybe why too” Janey replied.

“Yeah, sure, whatever.” Tom pushed himself up from the table, began to pace uncontrollably. “We got to get out of here. You guys armed?”

The three of them nodded in obvious fashion. A good hunter never went anywhere unarmed. Nevertheless, Tom still needed to ask.

“Good,” he said, “I’m going to the armoury. You got wheels out front?”

“Brought Tyson’s truck,” Janey said. Tyson nodded proudly.

“Great! That’s a good carrying capacity. Tyson and me will collect the heavies; you guys get the truck warmed up and keep an eye on the road. Let’s go! Move like you got a purpose!”

“Uh, Tom?” Janey said, pointing to his attire. Tom looked down and noticed he was wearing nothing but a robe, and it was hanging open around his legs.

“Right! Tyson, you get to the armoury, I’ll be there just as soon as I get some pants on!”

It was almost hour later when they came to the office. Although they feared it might not be completely safe, it was certainly a lot safer than the ranch. None of their houses were safe at the moment, and at least the office could be easily defended. Pulling up on the curb out front, they jumped out and started to unload. There was the .416 sniper rifle, the M60 machine guns, the M4 carbines, the Uzi and MP40 submachine guns, and plenty of small arms. Snapping on the utility belts, the four started strapping on whatever weapons they could, and grabbed the rest and hauled them in with the ammo boxes. With the truck unloaded, Janey hopped back in and pulled it in around back. Once they were all inside, they set down the guns, opened the ammo boxes, and started filling magazines.

“Okay, so here’s the plan!” Tom said once they were settled. “We canvass this floor, kick out anyone who’s hanging around. Then we set up checkpoints and kill zones, like we practiced. If anything goes wrong, we fall back here and start making our way back to the emergency exit.”

“Then what?” Tyson asked.

“We work our way downstairs, get the vehicle out of the back and get as far away as we can. Trust me, we can do this. We watch each other’s back, we stick together, and we will come through this. Anyone comes in here, their gonna’ regret it!” Tom put his fist into the middle of their circle. “You with me?” he asked.

The others stuck their fists in to the circle. Holding them together, they did a three count and raised them into the air together. One way or another, for better or for worse, they were in this together.

Gord took a deep breath and wiped the sweat from his forehead. That didn't help though. The real sweat was coming from inside his gloves. He felt all grungy and slippery cooped up in the tight stairwell, aiming his weapon precariously down it. He didn't dare remove his gloves though. Once his weapon starting blaring, it would heat up fast and burn his hands if they weren't protected. Tyson was just below him, holding his twitching M60 and aiming down the length of the hall. Janey was just ten metres ahead of him, manning the stairwell with her two submachine guns. Tom was on the ground floor, aiming his high-powered, high-calibre rifle directly at the front door. Between the four of them, they had set up a series of fire sacks designed to make life hell for anyone trying to storm the building. Whoever tried to break in, should they be dumb enough, would have to be willing to lose men at every corner.

It was a tactic born of urban warfare, cooked up in the worst furnaces of Stalingrad, Ortono, Vietnam, and Iran. Fighting close and dirty, making your enemy pay for every step they took. It wasn't fair, or nice, but that was the point. The best way to make sure your enemy gave up on trying to kill you was by making it too costly for them. Sooner or later, they'd realize it was not worth their while.

But alas, no one came. They had set up their little defensive line just before lunch, and by late afternoon, nothing had happened. More time passed, the sun began to set, and still no one came. Tom continued to stare through his scope at the door, waiting for something, some indication that someone was trying to come through. But there was nothing. No noise coming from the streets, no sounds of a massive convoy pulling in to unload the troops. No fiddling with the lock, no one trying to bash it in. The hours passed, the halls became stuffier, hotter and tighter, and no one came.

By late evening, Tom finally picked up his rifle and started up the stairs. Collecting Janey, Tyson, and Gord, they headed back into the office. It was a pleasure to be back in a room with windows, and around the room's dining table, they sat and tried to air out.

"Okay, so no one's coming tonight. Maybe they'll be here tomorrow." Gord suggested. "Maybe it was stupid of us to assume we'd be high on the list."

"Right. Everybody knows we're nobodies," Tyson said.

"Or maybe we're being messed with here," Tom replied. "I think our enemy, whoever they are, figured hunters would be going on high alert once they heard they were being bumped off. Maybe they're waiting for us to make the next move."

"If that's true, what do we do?" Tyson asked.

"We could get downstairs, get the truck revved up, try to make it out of the city," Janey offered. "It's what we planned to do anyway if all else failed."

"Yeah, but how far would we get?" Tom asked her. "Where could we go where we'd be safe? Damn, we can't know anything for sure as long as we don't know who it is who's hunting us!"

"We can't just stay here," Janey replied. "We're just stewing in here like pieces of meat, waiting for them to come for us. We got to leave."

"I'll bet they're outside, waiting for us, probably waiting to follow us, just as soon as we stuck our heads out and tried to get out of here. Probably their plan all along," Tyson began to mutter. The others started to mutter along with him, letting their fear and paranoia set in.

“They’re probably watching us right now!”

“They know all our moves!”

“They’re just waiting for us to slip up!”

“Who are they?”

“We don’t know!” Tom shouted. “So why don’t we stick with what we do know, huh? We can’t start second guessing ourselves! If anything, that’s what our enemy really wants!”

Tom waited for a second to let the air clear. The others nodded. Tom was right, as usual. There was nothing to be gained by letting all their uncertainties get to them. They needed to think, try and find out who was doing this and why.

“Well, we know that the first people to get bumped off were hit at home, right?” Gord asked. Tyson and Janey nodded. Janey raised her finger when she remembered something.

“But didn’t Breaker and Boomer get hit at their offices?”

“Yeah, and Cali was gunned down in the street,” Tyson said. “Sorry, girl,” he added to Janey.

“It’s okay. But it does tell us something, doesn’t it? I mean, look at us.”

“Yeah,” Gord said, “we come here, waiting for them to come, now they don’t. You think they’re moving in waves, anticipating us and what we might do?”

“That’s a possibility,” Tom concluded. “The first are killed when they’re unsuspecting, the next are hit when run to their offices for protection, and then they hit us when we try to run from there.”

“Crap!” Gord yelled. “How does that help us? We were about to run ourselves!”

“Then maybe we should stay put, wait until we can find something out.” Tom said, scratching the stubble on his face. With all that was going on, it had become bushier than usual. Dirtier too.

“How long should we wait?” Gord asked. Tom was about to answer when the phone rang suddenly. Everyone in the room almost jumped. They looked at each other, wondering what they should do. Should they answer it? Maybe it was a threatening phone call, a “come to the window and look upon your death” type of thing. Or maybe someone was trying to reach them, tell them something they needed to know. The phone rang again, and they were still looking at each other. Finally, Tom walked over to it and picked it up off the cradle.

“Hello?” he said coolly into the receiver. There was silence as the rest of them waited and tried to hear what was being said. Tom said nothing and simply listened. After a moment or two, he began to reply in a hushed voice, “Oh my God”, “Who?”, “No way,”. Finally, he said, “Alright, I’m on my way,” and hung up. Gord, Janey, and Tyson watched him with bated breath. Slowly, he turned around and looked at them.

“Poppa Doc’s dead,” he said quietly. “That was Baby Doc.”

“Oh my God!” Janey cried.

“He wants us to come to the estate, says we’ll be safe there. He’s gathered everyone who said they’d join his dad and they’re setting up a defensive perimeter. He says we better get over there soon.”

“Sweet Jeezus!” Tyson boomed.

“What about all the hits?” Gord asked. “Did he say anything about that?”

“Yeah, he thinks he knows who’s responsible, but he can’t be a hundred percent sure. He also didn’t want to say over an open line. Anyway, we gotta’ get going if we want to stay ahead of them. Start packing up, we move now!”

*

*

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The outside of the Doc manor was very dimly lit. Aside from the floodlights that shined up against the walls from the ground, not a single light was on. Amidst the shadows, they could see the silhouettes of men moving through the bushes. No doubt there were over a dozen guns trained on them at that very moment. When they finally pulled up in front, four red dots began to shine through their windshield and came to rest on them. Immediately, they all raised their hands and got out of the vehicle slowly. Like lightning, some black clad figures emerged from the dark and grabbed them by their arms. All anyone saw before they were ferried away was the flash of moonlight off of the men's goggles.

In another flash, they were inside the house, shoved through an open door into more darkness. Amidst the lightless interior, they were only vaguely aware of where they were being taken. Tom wasn't sure how far they'd been pushed, until suddenly they were ordered to get down on their knees and wait. He felt the reassuring presence of two of his friends beside him. The one on his left was arguably Tyson, given the size of the arm. On the right, he felt a firm arm that had soft skin. That must have been Janey. A grunt and a complaint over to his far left must have been Gord. At least they were all here.

There was a sound of footsteps as the black-clad men left the room. Slowly, the lights turned on. Tom could make out the shapes of a carpet, a desk, a few guards dressed in black suits, and a small dark man sitting at the desk. When the lights came up a little more, he recognized the face of Baby Doc, looking too small to be sitting in his father's desk.

"Tom! Glad you guys made it, I was worried!"

"Can we stand up now?" Tom asked.

"Of course, sorry about that. Security needs to be tight given the situation out there. I trust you weren't followed?"

The four of them worked their way to their feet. Tom brushed off his knees and his arm where the armed thug had grabbed him before saying anything.

"No, from what I can tell, nobody's been keeping watch on us."

"That's odd," Baby said, "I was sure they would be after you by now."

"Who?" Tom asked.

Baby Doc stood up and walked around to the front of his desk. His hands were folded in front of him, his head hung low. "The Feds," he said somberly. "They've decided to revoke all hunting licenses in this country, permanently."

"What! That's impossible!" Tyson said.

"I'm afraid not, friends. They've finally decided that our kind is too much of a liability to the peace of this nation. After twenty years of relying on us for protection, they've decided to clamp down."

"But why now?" Janey asked. Baby was about to speak, but Tom cut him off.

"You've been following the news," he said. "The country's starting to recover, and this has got everybody asking whether or not they need us anymore."

"If average citizens are asking that question, you can bet the government is taking an even greater interest," Baby added.

"But we've kept the streets clear for years!" Tyson said. "We've done their job for them, now they want to kill us?!"

"Of course," Baby replied. "You have to consider things from their standpoint. When you're in a position of power, there's nothing more insulting than surrendering some of that power to someone else. Especially if in doing so, it makes you look weak to those you are

supposed to be protecting. They've never liked us, they've never trusted us, and it's strictly because they admitted they needed us in front of the entire nation."

"What about all that liberty crap!" Gord interjected. "What about how this was all supposed to be a good thing because we believe that private citizens are the best line of defence against chaos and tyranny?"

"Don't fool yourself, friend," Baby answered. "That sort of thing sounds good when it comes from some man on Capitol Hill who claims he's self-made. But none of them have any love for armed citizens who they know don't trust them. When it comes right down to it, it's us and them, and they've just stopped pretending it was any different."

"And who else could have done this?" Tom asked rhetorically. "Who else has access to our personal information, who knows where we live and work? Who is it that's responsible for issuing our licenses, and has all that information on file just in case?"

"Precisely," Baby replied. "But I'm afraid it's worse than that."

"I know," Tom said. "Somebody's been helping them out, haven't they?"

"Yes?" Baby said, surprised. "How did you know?"

From the corner of his eye, Tom saw that Tyson, Janey and Gord were staring at him in astonishment. Everybody wanted to know, it seemed.

"Well, the Feds know where to find us, but how would they know about the unregistered spots, like the Grizzlies compound? How did they anticipate our moves so well? How would they know to hit us today of all days, in order to cast suspicion on Poppa?"

Baby began to peer at Tom with greater intensity. The others began to as well. For obvious reasons, they were afraid of what the answer would be.

"Most importantly of all, how come they haven't hit here, seeing as how your poppa was the biggest name on their list? It's just sitting here in plain view, not like the Grizzlies place, so why is it so perfectly intact? And just who were those guys out front there, Baby? They sure as hell didn't look like hunters to me. Hunters don't move like that, all ruthless and machine-like. And they don't make a habit of wearing black jumpsuits and night vision goggles. What are they, FBI?"

Janey, Tyson and Gord looked back to Baby Doc, who was still staring hard at Tom. His face had lost all traces of sombreness, indicating that the jig was obviously up. Now he just smiled, obviously impressed.

"Clever boy," he said mockingly. "No wonder my father respected you."

"I gotta' admit, I didn't put it all together until we got here, but you left some pretty strong hints along the way."

"Like what?"

Tom looked over at his comrades. This explanation was more for them than it was for Baby Doc. "I have a confession to make, team. I never registered our office with the government, not our real office anyway. They got the address of some rat hole on the other side of town. That's why they never came for us, cause' they didn't know where to find us. Then suddenly, we get a call and an invite from the Doc here who invites us over, and we didn't see anyone trailing us. He's alive and his place is intact. It all smacked of a set-up."

"So why'd you come if you suspected something?"

"I had to be sure," Tom said. "Besides, what else could we do? I had to see the face of the one who sold us all out before they got us."

Baby Doc smiled again, nodded his head in agreement. "You're right about that," he said. "It was only a matter of time before they got you."

“What about your dad? You sell him out too?” Tyson demanded. Baby Doc straightened suddenly and went back to the seat at his desk. The mention of his father seemed to make him want to claim that chair for himself again.

“Don’t be stupid!” he said. “My father would have never let me take over for him. He knows as I do that his hunters don’t respect me! They never did, and he did everything he could to make sure they never would. This hunter’s union was my idea! He only ran with it because he didn’t want me building my own organization behind his back. He wanted to make sure that I would never be anything more than the little Baby, living in the Poppa’s shadow! Not anymore! Now this is mine!”

“And all you had to do was sell us all out to the enemy. Real good leadership skills, Baby!” Tom said.

“Are you trying to anger me, friend? I’m giving you a chance here. You can still join me, and avoid all this needless slaughter.”

“On a cold day in hell!” Tom spat.

“Don’t be stupid, Water Tower Man!” Another voice sounded from just outside the side door to the room. It came closer and walked through. For the second time in too few days, Tom saw the face of his old colleague step into the room.

“Mason! You bastard!” he cried.

“Sorry, old bud,” he said. “Things are in motion, and anybody who doesn’t sign on with the Doc here is likely to get crushed.”

“You see now why I called you over here, Tom?” Baby asked. “You have a chance to do as your old friend here has done. Like some others, he’s seen the light, and will enjoy the perks of being high in *my* new organization.”

“They’re going to let you run this organization, after all this?”

“Yes, in exchange for my help, some of us will be allowed to keep our licenses. There’s still plenty of money to be made out there, and we’ll have a corner on the whole market.”

“Think of it, Tom,” Mason said. “You and your people here get to live, make a tonne of money, and have a stake in the future with the best and the brightest in the hunting business. What else could you ask for?”

“Best and brightest?” Tom snickered. “You mean now that the real hunters are all dead? Yeah sure, what an offer!”

“It’s not my fault they chose to be so obstinate,” Doc laughed, reaching into his father’s humidor and grabbing himself a finely rolled cigar. “Anyone who can’t bring themselves to accept the revolution when it comes must be crushed. My father taught me that; said he learned it from the man he admired most, the very man whose name he appropriated. Our own country’s beloved, former dictator.”

“So you bumped off anyone who said no to your little idea, is that it?” Tom asked.

“No, Tom,” Mason interjected. “Killing the people who said no to his father would make no sense. Letting his father propose this union was the best way to make sure who’s his father’s friends were. They were the ones who’ve been buying it out there.”

Tom shook his head. He had nothing more to say. No longer angry, now he was just worried for his team. He had delivered them into the hands of his enemy, all for the sake of satisfying his curiosity. It would have been better to just start running, like Janey had suggested. Now it was all over.

“Get them out of here, Mason! I don’t want blood all over my nice rugs. Take care of them somewhere else.”

* * *

With their knees in the dirt, their heads leaned forward, Tom and the others waited for the bullet that would end their lives. Mason and Baby's guards stood behind them, cocking the pistols that would take their lives. Mason had offered to put bags over their heads, but they had all flatly refused. They would have preferred to see it coming, but Mason had not offered it to them. Cocking his own pistol, Mason asked:

"You ready?"

"Go to hell, Mason!"

"Any last requests?" he asked. Tom was about to suggest something humanly impossible, but Janey said something first.

"I got one!" she said. Mason walked over to where she was kneeling.

"What do you want?"

"I wanna' know how you and Tom know each other. I wanna' know what happened between you two that makes him hate you so much."

"Janey!" Tom yelled.

"I wanna' know!" she yelled back. "Why are you so loathsome, Mason? Why is it people just seem to hate you so easily?"

Mason scoffed, but felt obliged to honour her request. If it was to be the last thing they ever heard, it might as well be the truth. "Tom and I used to work together. After we got out of the service, we were both part of an elite group, the best there was –"

"Yeah, yeah! The Haymakers! We already know all that!" Tyson said.

"Yeah, the Haymakers. We had a good thing going for awhile, until Tom let feelings get in the way of business."

"If by business, you mean backstabbing, yeah!" Tom interrupted.

"Like I said, he let things get in the way. We had a contract to fulfill, he took it personally."

"What?" Janey asked.

"The contract was for a friend of ours!" Tom interrupted again. "We heard that a guy from another group, a guy we both served with, had gone nuts and hurt somebody, or something."

"Tom suggested we find this old friend of ours and try to help him, but I knew it was a waste of time. He had become a threat to himself and others, so I recommended we fulfill the contract. I figured it was better coming from us than somebody else."

"You didn't care!" Tom screamed. "You wanted the money, and you figured it was a good way to get rid of some competition. That's all it ever was about with you!"

"You think so, Tommy?!" Mason said, pressing the barrel of his gun against the back of his head. "You think I didn't feel bad about it? You honestly think I never let friendship enter into my thoughts? I cared about him too Tom, I figured it was best! The guy was our friend but he obviously went nuts! Christ, he was a vet; you know how it was over there! But you know what they say, we take care of our own!"

"Right, like you were thinking about his welfare when you were pulling the trigger!"

"Yeah, I was! It's all I could think about. And I had the guts to do it, unlike you! But you just gotta' keep thinking it's all about money and power, don't you!"

Smiling, Tom said: "Why not? We're here aren't we?"

There was silence. Tom couldn't see Mason's face. If he could, he might have seen the anger and frustration, the unmistakable signs of a man caught in a conflict. There were no more words, just the cocking of a barrel.

"We're done talking," he said. "Time to finish this."

Tom, Janey, Gord and Tyson all closed their eyes, waited for the inevitable to come. After what felt like a lifetime, Tom finally heard the crack of the gun. There was a thud, then another shot, and another thud. There was no third shot. Tom slowly opened his eyes and spun around. The two guards lay dead on the floor. Standing beside them with a smoking weapon was Mason. Turning the gun around, Mason pointed it handle first to Tom.

"Let's go!" he said. Tom just kneeled there in complete confusion. The others opened their eyes and spun around as well. "Let's get out of here, now!" Mason repeated himself.

"What are you doing?" Tom asked. "What's your angle this time?"

"You think I'm gonna' let that punk bump us off just so he can make a name for himself? Even you got to expect more from me than that!"

"Then what was with all that 'stake in the future' crap?" Janey asked.

"Sorry to trick you, but I had to play that game if I was going to gain his trust. Like you said, he's bumping off anyone he sees as a threat, and I wanted to live long enough to get a shot at him. I figured you might like to help."

Tom eyed the gun in his outstretched hand carefully. If there was some kind of double-cross in the works, he sure couldn't see it. Taking the gun, he stood up slowly and told the others to do the same.

"Good, now I know where Doc's arsenal is. We need to get there now before they figure out what happened down here."

"How are we going to get out of here?" Janey asked.

"Once we get some guns, Tom and I will hit Baby Doc in his room. You guys wait by the back door, wait for the commotion, then work your way out. Once the feds out there realize what's happening, they should be coming inside, and you should be able to get around front and get away."

"What about you two?" Tyson asked. "How do you get out?"

"We don't, do we, Mason?" Tom asked.

"No, we don't," Mason replied flatly. "They're no way out for us once Doc's dead. But he has to die for what he's done. Are you up for it?"

"Yeah, I think I am," Tom said.

"You guys think we're just gonna leave you here to die?" Gord asked. "No way, man! Let's just all get out of here, right now!"

"That aint' gonna' happen, kid! Anyone tries to leave here without Doc's say so won't make it as far as the front gate. We need to do this my way."

"Then I say we all do it together!"

Every head in the room turned towards Gord. Somehow, in this whole mess, something new had emerged that no one thought possible.

"Is that a trace of heroism I detect in your voice, Gord?" Tom asked.

"You know me, I'm a patriot!" Gord replied.

"Yeah, I just never thought it was for real. What about you two? Janey, Tyson, are you gonna toss your fate in with this lunatic?" he asked, pointing to Gord.

"You gotta' even ask?" Tyson said. Tom nodded, looked over at Janey.

"What about you?"

“That bastard killed my hero. Besides, there’s no way I’m letting a bunch of guys do all the work!”

“Alright,” Tom said, putting his fist in the centre of their little circle. “Let’s do this!”

Janey, Tyson and Gord threw their fists in. Mason’s followed.

“Old habits, eh Tom?” Mason smiled.

“Yeah! Just remember, this doesn’t mean I like you!”

“Like I said, old habits. Let’s do it!”

“This morning, in what appears to be the latest act in what authorities are calling a ‘hunter civil war’, the body of legendary bounty hunter Jean Philippe Maisonneuve, a.k.a. Poppa Doc, was discovered at his home. Apparently, the veteran bounty hunter was the victim of a home invasion that took place last night, and which also claimed the lives of many of his closest associates, their bodies also being discovered at the scene. The FBI announced this morning that this civil war is apparently the result of a long-standing power struggle between Pierre Maisonneuve, a.k.a. Baby Doc, and his father. The issue that appears to have set off the dispute is the question of who would control a new organization his father was planning. This organization, which some have dubbed “the hunter’s union”, led to open fighting between men loyal to Baby Doc and his father. In just over twenty-four hours, this war has claimed the lives of fifty hunters along the north eastern seaboard alone. No news has been given as to the whereabouts of Baby Doc, but he is presumed to still be at large.

“This morning, in response to the news, the president announced that his administration might be considering new legislation banning the use of bounty hunters and vigilantes in all states of the union. This latest attempt at organization, as well as the violence that resulted and is sure to continue, have become the latest argument in a growing case against vigilantism. No longer a question of liberty, it has now become a question of public safety. For NWN, this is Daisy Menendez reporting.”

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