



SHADOWRUN

ENHANCED FICTION



NOTHING PERSONAL

OLIVIER GAGNON



I let the warm water trickle down my body. Not warm enough though. I need hot; scalding. Something about hot water makes you feel cleaner, fresher. What I got was that nasty state between warm and cold, where it's warm enough so you want to believe it's warm, but, no, you know that's a lie. The shower curtain has a clear plastic strip at eye level. It's thick plastic, more translucent than clear. It makes the bathroom beyond, with its annoying flickering neon bulb, seem surreal. Like a shitty dream.

The company holed me up in the shittiest Ramada hotel I've ever been in. Something about a convention in the area; all hotels were booked, this was the only thing they could get. Whatever. My room smells of stale smoke, with a hint of Indian sweat. That last part isn't racist. I mean it. The owners are Indian and they live in the hotel, cook their food here obviously. That spice smells gets everywhere. Fucking Indians. There, that's racist. Fuck 'em.

I get through the motions. Wash. Shave. Head to the "lobby"—yes, quotation marks, cause this ain't no damn lobby—and have "breakfast." Sure, I'm sour, but I have stuff to do. The body needs a good start. "Most important meal of the day," and all that jazz, according to the flickering AR display. What do I get instead? Fucking cardboard cereal. There's a waffle press, but I've had waffles for a few days now. You can get sick of waffles. Yeah, I didn't know that either, so cardboard cereal it is. There is a group of four brown orks. I don't know what nationality, maybe Indian, maybe Sri Lankan, who knows. Anyway, they huddle at ungodly o'clock in the morning, like me, and have breakfast, such as it is. They are covered in white paint flecks, so I assume they are painters or laborers of some kind. Probably SINless, or illegal immigrants. I can tell they're dead inside. Every morning they have breakfast here, probably because it costs nothing. They must know the owners. And I can tell they are dead inside, cause they aspire to nothing more. They expect nothing more. They are at the bottom of society. They go through the motions, and that's it.

They make me feel better.

I'll be out of here in two more days, back to Manhattan. Fuck Alpharetta, Georgia. What the hell am I doing here? Yes, I'm actually doing stuff here. What I appear to be doing is providing training to a bunch of accounting clerks on the newest Renraku Sherpa ERP system. That's not my real job, but it just so happens I actually know about this shit. I learned it in a previous life, which is a concept my hotel landlords should understand.

Anyway, today is the third day of four days of training I'm giving. It's going well. Interestingly, though, the class is composed of six female accounting clerks. This is interesting precisely because they are accounting clerks. That's not super high in the corporate ladder, you see. That means these girls aren't used to being paid attention to. They aren't used to consultants like me. They aren't used to the confidence I exude. They think I'm something, that I am a hot jet-set bachelor, and they want a piece of that. Two of the girls have fallen into a rivalry. Clearly, this is

continuation of work issues, power struggles, dominating personalities clashing, that sort of shit. The thing they're fighting for now is my attention. Who can answer more of my questions? Who do I say "That's right!" the most to? Oh, 'cause I'm different when I give training. I'm all nice and professional. I'm awesome. You're awesome. Aren't we all awesome? So, anyway, I'm fucking both those girls.

First one was yesterday. She's a bit of a skinny girl. I think I overheard that she's part Native American or something. As if I cared. She's way too nice. She really wants to please me, like she still needs me to say "That's right!" all the time. Sweet, but you know, that's it for her. She'll give you cavities.

The next one is more of a challenge. I like that. I'd say she's playing hard to get, but that's not really it. She's a tough one. Somewhere in the course of the day she told me she grew up in the outskirts of Chicago. That'll make you tough. Anyway, she's an ork, little bit of extra weight, kind of short. Now, if you think all orks are ugly, you've been reading too many Human Nation brochures. Ork girls are cute too; just open your eyes and look. The thing that really gets me going is her tough-girl attitude, mixed with a little urban hipster style. She doesn't know how to say she's interested. But she is. That's in the eyes. She wants it too; she just doesn't quite know it. No, I'm not gonna rape her. She'll come around.

Anyway, I spend my day doing this training class. A full day, ten unbroken hours of training. I feel bad for the girls. Their brains are overheating. Well, that works in my favor, ultimately. Oh, there is this awkward moment where Needy Girl shyly asks me about my plans for tonight, looking for more. She's insatiable, at least when it comes to getting her emotional validation rocks off. Anyway, I smile a big charming smile and give her the dashing "Not tonight, duty calls," line. She understands and nods vigorously. I'm not rejecting her. Of course not, I have work to do. Meanwhile, Chicago Cutie eyeball-fucks me furtively every now and then throughout the day. Stolen moments. I can see she is trying to stay professional with me. I play it cool, of course. Act like I'm above her. She wants to be on top. I know the dance.

During a break, I discreetly make arrangements with Chicago Cutie. She blushes and looks down when I flirt with her, invite her for what is obviously going to be sex in my room. A *new* hotel room, because I pulled the strings I needed to and got something better. Fuck that Ramada. On the way out this morning, I saw a small white box in the vending machine. It was labeled, with a marker, "CONDOMS." Seriously, who does that? The new place is much nicer. Anyway, I think Needy suspects us. It'll nag her. She'll either convince herself she is wrong, or, more likely, she'll hate the other girl even more. More fuel to the fire of their existing power struggle. Whatever—that's their problem.

I discover that evening, once that torturous training is done with, that Chicago Cutie fucks well. I knew she would. To my surprise, she doesn't try to dominate me.



What do you know? The tough girl thing is just an act. She has the typical self-consciousness of a girl. She's amazed a big shot like me likes her even though she has curves. I'm just a tad disappointed. I thought she'd have more self-esteem. She acted like she did, but things change when the pants drop. I fuck her doggy style, and I'm glad to see she gets into it. Squeezing her big tits as they bounce, moaning and letting loose. She gets her confidence back as I'm fucking her hard. That's nice. Good ending to the story. She's way better than Needy. I could get to liking her, but that's not in the cards. I have a pleasant evening. She does too, which is important to me. I knew she wanted it. It's win-win.

So, I finally finish that training bullshit and get on with my real purpose. I drive back to Atlanta and book another hotel. The kind of luxury that pissants can't even dream of. I change into my good suit. A small, boutique label I get from this Italian guy I know. I freaking love this suit. It has a black vest with hues of marine in it. Black satin dress shirt, Italian again. Nice Louis Vuitton tie. Yeah, they make ties. Those whores will make anything they can sell, but I respect their brand, for one reason only: Louis Vuitton will destroy their overstock product rather than sell it at a discount. That's some stubborn shit. I like that. I much prefer their leather items—they remain master of the material—but the tie is nice too. And again, shoes from my Italian guy, his own private label. Luko Vera, he calls it.

Now that I feel like myself again, I head out for the meet. It's at a hotel bar, but not *my* hotel's bar. Come on, I don't shit where I eat. I used the hotel across the street. It's a nice hotel too with a modern bar. The AR overlay is tasteful, enhancing the beauty of the physical. I appreciate that. Too often, bars and clubs just use AR as a means of cutting costs on the physical material. My guy shows up. He is a black troll with big scar across his face, but intelligent eyes. Well, I'm about to kill him, so he can't be that smart.

He sits on the stool next to me. I nod my head. He gives me a sideways look and then shoots the same look to the whole place. He grimaces and finally nods. He hates it here, and he hates me. There's so much money dripping off of everything. It's not his world. He could pry shit off the walls, pawn it, and feed his community for a week. If he were to sell my suit, he could finally fix his damaged cyberware and survive another month. I understand. I'd be disgusted too in his place. I empathize. I can do that. When I want to. But, fact is, I'm the one in the fine Italian shoes. And as it so happens, his world disgusts me just as much. So fuck it, I'm gonna kill this guy. I slide a tiny chip to him, just as my drink—a fancy drink, of course—arrives. He puts a finger the size of my entire hand over the chip and slides it over to himself. I can see him access it via AR and read it. I drink my drink, all innocent-like. I might whistle if my mouth wasn't full of delicious, delicious, whatever this drink is. Damn it's good. I'm happy again. Fuck the Ramada and the whole training bullshit. Or most of it—I'm gonna miss Chicago Cutie.

He snaps me back to my job with a grunt. "You sure on the security?" he asks in an incredibly deep voice.

"Yep," I answer curtly, with a tone that insinuates he's wasting my time.

It has the desired effect. He looks at me suspiciously, back to the data, and back to me. Figures asking anything more will make him look like an idiot. Except for one thing. They always ask about this one. "And the money?"

"Half now, half on completion. Generous terms, but you come highly recommended."

Oh, shit! Take that! Now he's destabilized! The money is good; I just acted like he was wasting my time, but now I'm complimenting him. Whoa, what just happened, right? I love my job.

He shifts his eyes and looks a little prouder than he was before. Even these guys, even these killers and thieves and people that sleep with a gun under their pillow, even these guys swallow a lie if it makes them feel good. Goddamn it, I weep for mankind.

"All right," he announces. He gets up and walks out. Sometimes they shake my hand but not always. We're not friends. We're not even mutual business contacts. I need him and he needs my money. Just as well. I mean, I would have done it, I would have looked him straight in his eyes—well, okay, maybe I would have involuntarily glanced at his big-ass scar, but still—looked him straight in the eye, shook his hand, and smiled. I don't feel bad about this. I have no regret. I enjoy it with every ounce of my being.

The bartender comes back to check on me. Handsome, square-jawed young man. He fits perfectly with the décor. I bet that's how he got the job. That's all right, I respect an establishment's desire to offer good-looking products, even if that extends to staff. Sucks for ugly people, but the world's always been like that. There are jobs out there for ugly people. Just ask the big-ass ugly troll that just left.

"This is delicious. What is it again?" I ask the bartender, twirling my empty cocktail glass.

"Thanks. Pretty Brown Eyes. It's Eagle Rare Bourbon, Benedictine, lemon, Ben Marco and a float of Malbec."

"No shit. That was wine on top? Wouldn't have thought it would work."

"Yep. One of my favorites here. Want another?"

Informative, polite, but down to business. I love it. If only everyone acted this way. We wouldn't have wars. I tell him no and pay up. Time for my next meeting, which unfortunately means I have to change establishments again. Golden rule of my profession—never meet two teams at the same place. It doesn't matter if you schedule them hours apart. The sneaky shits will either stake out the place in a fit of paranoia, or the first party will stall and stall and stall and next thing you know, they run into each other. Yuk. Unprofessional, very possibly hazardous. So, off I go.

I get into an automated cab a couple blocks down. I arranged for the meet in a lounge club. It's early in the evening, so the place only has a handful of patrons. That's fine. When I was young and went out with my friends, people



would avoid these empty places like VITAS bred there. They were mortified of being in a club early in the evening. I never got that. I don't mind. They still serve drinks. They still play music. Your friends are there. Forget everyone else, they're just crowd noise. I dunno, maybe I'm not cool. Or maybe I hate other people.

I settle in, a pretty elf girl with bioluminescent make-up escorting me to my seat. Man, these clubs stock up on the pretty hostesses. Girls this pretty don't even exist in the outside world. I tell her I like her makeup. She smiles, thanks me, and leaves. She couldn't care less. I'm thinking more of that at-the-club-early prejudice. A guy that shows up alone in a club early can't possibly be interesting. Don't get me wrong, I'm not interested in her. I'm not interested in nightclub girls. They're nothing but vapid eye candy. Not my style. I prefer discussions like I had with the bartender; polite, informative, down to business. I didn't get that now.

I figure out the elf girl is just there to seat you. Another girl, equally unbelievably good looking, comes by and asks me if I want anything. I order an Old Fashioned. "You do them with oranges here? Great. Muddle an orange in it," I add. She almost answered my question before I ended with a statement. I do that sometimes. I ask a question, realize the answer is irrelevant, and state what I'm really looking for. Some people don't like it, but it helps me get what I want. I'll tip her well enough to make it all worthwhile.

It doesn't take too long before my next appointment shows up. I watch them come in and make their way to my table. The guy is interesting. He's really muscular, barrel-chested, but he has—well, I don't know what to call it. Let's say a delicate face. A face with wisdom and erudition in it. Maybe it's the long, sleek, grey hair reflecting in the huge chrome cyberarms. I like his style.

There's a girl with him. Sorry. Woman. Asian—I'd say Japanese. She's actually wearing a sort of kimono. Red raccoon strip airbrushed over her eyes. Delicate look. Piercing eyes.

They sit at my table. They move with elegance, smoothly. There is an immediate comfort in my presence. Like, a respect, but distance also. It doesn't change; they are runners, I'm Mr. Johnson. But it's not hostile, just a clearly defined barrier. I don't get that much. Usually it's a jostle for position. Who has the biggest cock—the runner or the Johnson. But not this time. I nod at them. The big guy calmly nods back. The woman tilts her head slightly.

We sit in silence a moment. The waitress comes back, takes their orders. My Japanese shadowrunner gives her a level stare with a polite smile for an uncomfortable couple seconds before giving an almost imperceptible shake of her head. The guy looks at my drink, then says "The same." I give her a nice smile and say, "Nothing else for me." She hadn't thought of asking me. She catches herself and tries her best to act like she was expecting me to say something

before she scrambles away. Poor girl—it's only going to get harder for her once the crowds come in.

My male guest speaks. "I'm called Titanium Angel, Angel for short. This is Vanity." His voice is like a calm sea, but with a slight roughness in the back of the throat. He has an accent too, which I can't place. Vanity gives me the same level gaze she gave the waitress, but with even more of a crooked half-smile. She says nothing. I like the theatre of it, but it's nothing I haven't seen before.

"You can call me Mr. Johnson," I say, of course. But, it's not what you say. It's how you say it. Say it firmly, and you're saying you don't want bullshit. Say it ironically, and you're saying names are unprofessional. I'm saying it politely. Matter-of-factly, like "How's it going." A simple social lubricant.

I hand over a data chip to Angel. "Sorry, I only have one," I say, without a hint of apology. That was a "You were supposed to come alone" message.

He doesn't care. Takes it and reads it. I glance at Vanity. Her eyes glitter at me as she shifts a little. So what's her game? She's a shadowrunner, a killer. They may be cute, but there are always claws waiting to come out. Maybe she's just having fun, or she thinks she can make me squirm. That's fine. But there's something in the airiness of her look that intrigues me. She makes me think that life is an opera, and she's looking down at it all from a box seat. Maybe it's the slanted Asian eyes. Maybe it's the painted raccoon strip. Maybe it's the whiskey.

Titanium Angel finishes the uptake. His drink has arrived; he takes a mouthful. Then he says something to the girl I don't catch. Quick Latin-based language. It wasn't Spanish; Portuguese? I have no idea. If anything, I would have expected them to speak Japanese to each other. Guess not. Either way, I don't speak it and I don't care. There's a million ways for shadowrunners to communicate without me catching on. Speaking out loud in a foreign language is refreshingly worldly.

Vanity nods and says what sounds like a cross between "Si" and "Sing." I assume she said yes.

He turns back to me. "So, there will be a secondary team?"

"Yes. For support." I'm careful not to say "For distraction."

"The timeframe is short. Normally this would take several weeks." He frowns. I don't blame him.

"Yes, but as you can see, extensive preparations have already been done. You have detailed intel and a support team." I like getting down to business. His objections are normal, and I can see he's not just whining about it to ask for more money. He's considering all the angles. I like that, some goddamn professionalism for once.

"As a rule of thumb, we don't take inside jobs."

I blink. That was Vanity speaking from my left. Her tone flows evenly and articulately. She surprises me, and I kind of stare dumbly at her for a split second longer than I'd like as I register what she just said.



“Nobody said anything about an inside job,” I finally say, talking slowly to make the preceding pause feel more natural. But as I say it, I’m thinking. My tone is exploratory. They let me think it through. Poor little dumb Johnson, doesn’t know the score. All right, all right. It makes sense. So much intel, so much planning. It’s not hard to figure out, and it is, in fact, something Renraku routinely does to test runners. I just didn’t bother thinking about it till now. One half of my brain tells me this is fine, all the better if it’s an inside job. The other half of my brain is ringing a small bell that there’s something I’m missing. I don’t like that, but I have to ignore it for a minute, because I gotta get these shadowrunners to take the job. Who doesn’t take inside jobs? Like seriously, who cares?

“Your convictions are your own. I’m sure you have your reasons. I’m not here to beg. You know the terms. Are you in or out?” Truth is I am gonna kind of have to beg if they say no. I don’t have a backup team to fill this slot. I hope they don’t know that.

Vanity gives me a charming little smile and lets it hang. My eye twitches.

“What’s your name?” she asks me.

Aw shit. I don’t like her. She’s transparent about how she’s trying to get to me, and the fact that it’s working, even a little, irritates the hell out of me.

“Martin,” I answer, keeping eye contact. I’m not about to let myself be intimidated by her.

“Well, Martin, there is something about you I like. We’ll take the job. We will meet at the Opera in two nights from now.”

I let out a breath I hadn’t noticed I was holding, but quietly. They get up with the same fluidity and grace they sat with. Vanity leans over, putting her face close to mine. I make a superhuman effort to stare into her eyes and not her suspended cleavage. See, I’m professional.

She speaks slowly, but with an incredible flow and crispness in her words, like a Tahitian waterfall. “We’ll take fifty percent of the payment up front, and we’ll take ten thousand more nuyen than you offered.” I am mesmerized by her perfectly articulating red lips, the same shade as the raccoon-band makeup. She’s not asking for anything I wasn’t prepared to give already, but I let her believe her techniques are what’s winning the day. I say nothing as I stare back into her eyes, which is all she needs to know.

She breaks the spell and joins Angel by the door as they leave.

In the quick cab ride back to my hotel I send a text to my boss. “Teams hired, within budget. No issues. Will report back Thursday.” I glance up at the glass towers of downtown a couple of blocks from my own glass tower hotel. Capital of the C.A.S., huh? It’s all right, but I don’t really like it here. I’ll be glad to get back to Manhattan. Think I’ll pop some vacation after this.

I’m pretty beat as I hit my room. I’m kind of a lightweight when it comes to alcohol, and my drinks have made me sleepy. I turn on the trid, just to have some sort

of background noise, and I brush my teeth. I admire the bathroom and reflect how much better it is than the Ramada. Life is like that, really. It’s not about what you have, or where you are. It’s where you came from and what you had. It’s the delta. The difference between had and have. In a way, I’m grateful for the Ramada. It makes me appreciate this. I wonder fleetingly about scarface troll. I wonder if he’ll ever be happy chasing my corporate nuyen. But he’s not very interesting, and he’ll be dead in less than twenty-four hours. A flash of Vanity enters my mind, bent over and almost whispering her deal in my face. My dick moves a little. Down, boy.

I swing back to my lofty bed. I notice my commlink is showing a new message. Except it’s not my normal Matrix service. This gets my attention. I sit on my bed, with my shirt half unbuttoned, staring at my commlink. I have an ARO rotating in mid-air, using an unusual icon. I peer at it closer and see it’s using an encryption routine I haven’t seen in years. A while back, I was part of a test for a new secure communications app Renraku built for us Johnsons. I worked closely with the lead programmer that made it for us, and the testers were me, my boss at the time, and a colleague, Matthew. The project was mothballed after headquarters decided to go with another solution, which is now in widespread use. So, really, there are only three other people in the world that may be able to communicate with me this way, if I include the programmer. I open the secure message, which is text-only.

“You’re being burned. This is a fall job. They are coming for you. Hide. Will do what I can, but this is big. —Wolfman”

Wolfman is Matthew. It’s from an inside joke only the two of us know about, so, combined with the super-secret channel, I’m thinking he’s serious. Shit. My mind freezes. Instead of thinking at full speed, I just sit there like a dumbass. Work, you useless brain, work! Why can’t I think about anything? I turn off the trid with a whip of my hand.

There’s a soft crunching noise outside my door, like feet against crisp carpet, which suspiciously stops dead when I turn off the trid. I stand in silence. It stands in silence. One second stretches into, two, three ... four. My brain comes back online, just like that, boom. I start moving, grab my commlink. As I move, the presence outside the door must have similarly come to the conclusion the jig is up. There is a rustling sound. I hear the card reader on my door beep, and it opens. A tall elf with a white hair top-knot, face painted white and jet black cybereyes stands framed in the doorway. He is carrying a blade. Clearly, he’s not room service. He heads straight for me. The glint in his eyes is unmistakable. If you ever have the misfortune of coming face to face with someone who has, beyond all doubt, decided to end your life, it’s something you won’t ever forget. No negotiation, no surrender, no saying your life decisions were bad and you now realize the mistake of your ways. You want to just fall to your knees and give everything up, go back to school, make a new life. You see flashes of you eating cereal as an eight-year-old boy with



your mom lovingly cleaning up after you, and you see the first person you kissed and remember what the sky looked like on one particularly clear day, and you wonder how it all went wrong.

Yeah, all that, but not today. I ain't dying today. That's all I have to say about that. That's all it comes down to. I grab the nearest object, which happens to be a lamp, and chuck it at his face. Not exactly a killing blow—it just makes him angry. But it broke his speed just long enough for me to reach into my shirt and grasp the little glass marble I have hanging around a chain necklace. It was a parting gift from a girlfriend. Or “the” girlfriend, if I want to be accurate. Marie was the only real girlfriend I ever had. After her, it was just girls. We tried for a while, we really did, and I even invested time and emotions and all that junk in the whole thing, but it ended anyway, like things do. Before we parted for good, she gave me with this little gift. She knew what I did for a living, and she said if I ever got into trouble, I should break it. I take her at her word, and since she was a mage, I believe that whatever this thing is going to do will be good. A final leap of faith for her.

Psycho Killer Elf comes back at me, and I'm within range of his knife. I surprise the hell out of him when I attack, smashing my little marble in his face. Light flashes brilliantly white, and he flies clear across the room, taking part of the bed with him. There's a big gust of wind, shit goes flying everywhere. Not bad. But he's still alive. Come on, Marie, couldn't you give me something lethal? Oh well. This was indeed her style. She was a much better person than I ever was, which is why it didn't work out between us. But I can reminisce later. For now, I hop over the mess on the floor and run the hell out of my room. And I mean I *run*. I tear down the carpeted hallway and get to the stairs. Right before I crash through the stairwell door, I see Elf Guy run into the hallway. He turns the wrong way, doesn't see me, and flips around. Then he sees me. Boy, does he look angry. There's fucking *rage* in his eyes. But it's nothing compared to the look on his face after I pull the fire alarm.

A strident old-school bell starts ringing loudly, *very* loudly. Now that I've infuriated my would-be murderer, I blaze down the stairs. I can hear the elf right behind me. Thankfully, I'm only some ten stories up; yeah, *only*. I have no idea how this'll play out. I'm running down the stairs, jumping the last four, five steps, landing, turning, running down the next flight, and so on. The elf is doing roughly the same, except he's better at it. My ankles and the flats of my feet are killing me from all the stair jumping. But it doesn't seem to bother him much. I have my nice Italian shoes. He has combat boots. I realize this is a losing proposition.

However, on the third floor, just as he's about to pounce on me, with barely half a flight of stairs between us, people get into the stairwell with us. That's right! Fire alarm in a hotel; can't use elevators, right? Now, I know damn well witnesses wouldn't stop him from knifing me. I also don't

expect an off-duty SWAT guy to happen to be there and decide to help me. All I need are meat shields. Okay, that's a little heartless. But I'd rather be heartless than dead.

I push the first guy I can reach onto the elf. With minimal effect—the elf effortlessly tosses him against the wall. The guy hits the wall so hard I see blood as he moans a deep “Oof.” The elf smirks. He enjoyed that. Sadism and hired killers go hand in hand.

I get down another flight. I feel the elf grab my collar. I lose some balance and land into more people in the stairwell landing, people who stopped to take in the commotion, much like sheep. I smash into two dazzled guys, and the four of us are now stumbling in front of the bleating spectators. The elf stabs at my face, with a swift, professional movement aimed at accessing my brain by going through my eye. But because of the people between us he misses the mark, grazing my temple. It stings like hell, and I feel just how insanely sharp his chrome switchblade is. I manage to push some people at him. Psycho stabs the first guy, just like that. The guy screams, clutches his gut, and leans against the wall. Panic finally sets into the herd and there's screaming, shouts, and warnings. It's funny how stuff like that works. It's a bunch of strangers in a stairwell; nobody knows each other. One knife-wielding maniac stabs one of them. Suddenly, they are as one. One herd closing rank, defending itself against a predator. Ancient, pre-historic instinct. They all turn against him. Two burly guys try to grab his arms, push him back. Another guy tries to disarm him.

It's a nice sentiment, but this is 2076 and that elf is a pro. He has augmentations. He thinks nothing of killing people and is too much for them to overpower. He fights back by slicing, punching, and kneeing them in the head. He makes a bloody mess. I don't see the detail, because I am gone the second after they grab him, but from the sounds I deduce what went down. Three lives, three full seconds of distance between me and the Destroyer.

I reach ground level and bolt back onto the carpeted floors of the lobby. There are more people, all slowly heading out, wondering if this is a real fire alarm or some sort of annoying exercise. I hear murmurs as they ask each other what's going on. The louder, bolder ones make passive-aggressive jokes about how the hotel should reimburse them for their trouble. Then, as they notice me run by them like a freaking rocket, they hesitate between thinking I'm an idiot for taking this alarm so seriously, versus wondering if I know something they don't.

The latter fact becomes clear as the elf crosses the lobby at full speed after me. He's covered in blood, his arms red up to the elbows, and there's splatter on his painted white face and clothes. He is not inconspicuous. At this point, some people are calling the cops, but that's not going to help me in the short term.

Now, I work out. I go to the gym, and I have a virtual trainer app on my commlink that tells me exactly what to do to reach my stated goal of weight burn and muscle



development. I'm actually quite proud that I manage to train consistently twice a week. But does this make me an athlete? Absolutely, without a doubt, not. I am nowhere near in the same kind of shape as my pursuer. So given the exertion of the chase I think I'm going to vomit my lungs soon. My breathing is hard and shallow. I'm getting tunnel vision, chest pains. All I hear is the blood rushing in my ears. My higher thought functions are out the window. I'm driving on pure instinct. In a straight-up race, I'm dead. While he favors knife, I must assume the elf must have a gun. That means I need to get into cover, and I need to break up the straight run; great, awesome plan. How do I do that? My adrenaline-hyped brain provides the only logical answer: run into traffic.

The hotel is in the middle of Atlanta, facing a busy boulevard, with sleek cars zooming by, their high-speed efficiency controlled by GridGuide. I run right into oncoming traffic, managing not to die instantly. Wide-eyed drivers throw on emergency overrides to disengage GridGuide, or GridGuide reads the danger and brings vehicles to a quick halt. The perfect flow of traffic disintegrates. People aren't used to manual controls, so the ones that hit the override add chaos to the mix. One car hits the divider at an angle, causing it to spiral and land on its roof, sliding a few meters. A delivery truck slams into the side of a commuter car. Safety glass bits fly everywhere.

GridGuide detects the problem and reroutes further incoming traffic. Still, I got my wish. There are busted cars and debris all around me. Which is desirable because I was right: The asshole has a gun. He takes one look at me blitzing into traffic and figures, why do that? He pulls out a handgun and starts shooting. He hits cars, hits people in the cars; who cares, right? They're collateral damage. There is an eerie sort of silence to the whole thing. I mean, after the crashes, and once GridGuide reroutes traffic, there really isn't any noise. Those gunshots—one bullet, a significant pause, then another—are all I hear as I dodge and take cover. You know you're screwed when the shooter takes time to aim. He's not worried. He's not panicked. He lives in the moment. And his one and only desire right now is to kill me. I'd admire that if I wasn't terrified. He's calmly getting closer to me, flanking my cover. He shoots at me only if I try to leave. He is basically, all by himself, suppressing me while he flanks my position. Wow, I suck.

Then, a moment of desperate yet serendipitous prejudiced thought hits me. This is Atlanta, capital of the Confederated American States. These redneck yahoos all have guns, no? I'm hunkered down behind the yellow Mercury Comet that spiraled over. The guy inside is unconscious. The windows are shattered; a door's ajar from the impact. I kick it open and reach past the driver and into the glove compartment. Right there, just like that, is a Colt L36. Bullshit? Well, no, not really. Half the people I know have a gun in the glove compartment, and Atlanta is a pretty rough town in parts, so, to be fair, it's not because they are rednecks. It's because this is the world they live in.

In any case, now that I'm armed, things are looking up a bit more. I pull myself away from the car, apparently not cautiously enough because a bullet lands about two inches away from my head. He's totally flanked me now. I see him, to my left, standing amidst the wreckage I've caused with a cold, smug smile on his face, his gun pointing right at me. I wheel at him and fire. Fuck you, right in the gut. He doubles over.

Of course, he's wearing body armor. Who wouldn't be? I just knocked some wind out of him. In contrast to the ugly, rage-face he gave me when I pulled the fire alarm, now, as he slowly unbends, his face is pretty much devoid of expression. I've pissed him off so much he went off the scale and reset to zero. And I'm scared. But I have enough brains left to figure out the very simple and effective next step. I shoot at his legs. I unload. He doesn't just stand there and take it, of course. He fires back rapid shots as he dodges to the side. In those two full seconds, or two thousand milliseconds, let's say, I unload, he unloads, he dodges. It's over in the blink of an eye. I'm still alive. He's on the floor. There is a red blotch on his leg. All my dreams have come true. I am such a happy little princess.

That's the end of it. I'd like to kill him, but I have no means to do so. My ammo's out. So I get up and run. I feel something like a concrete tennis ball hit my shoulder. I swallow a roar of pain while my eyes swim. I stagger, but stay upright and keep going. I duck into an alley across the hotel. I hear sirens. I keep running.

I am screwed. Utterly and thoroughly. Here's why. The cops have likely been called several times and are coming. They're going to be looking mostly for the elf who went all stabby on some innocent bystanders, but they're also going to be looking for witnesses, people the elf was after, possible accomplices—anything that might help them make sense of what went down. That's bad for me. At this point, I'm what they call a "person of interest." I may even be a suspect or an accomplice. There are lots of titles for me. Ultimately, they all spell bad news. If the cops get their mitts on me, they'll want to bring me in for a talk, and that's no good. I am fundamentally just as much a criminal as the people I hire. There is no special amnesty for Johnsons. What saves us is a number of layers. Firstly, I am living under a fake alias. If you remember how all this started, I am a "corporate trainer." I have the identity to prove this. It's pretty solid stuff, expertly crafted by Renraku. Secondly, if I do get pinched, Renraku lawyers tend to come out of nowhere and get their fine, upstanding corporate citizen out. A few deals, a few threats, and local authorities decide their meager resources are better spent elsewhere, so the corporate citizen is freed. I know this because I was pinched a while back, in Boston. I burned a red light. My ID, which is normally very well crafted, had a hole in it that time. Cops got suspicious; lawyers had to bail me, money changed hands, and so on. Not a very interesting story, but I'm pretty sure the hacker who made my ID got canned. Anyway, I digress. The last reason why Johnsons are hard



to pinch is that we take great care to remove ourselves from the mayhem we unleash, so it's very difficult to get the evidence to nail us down.

All of these layers of protection—all of them—are dependent on our employers. Renraku protects me from everything.

But Renraku wants me dead.

That thought swims inside of me as I make my way through the city, getting as far away from the crime scene as possible. I walk for what must be two or three hours. I find a little nook in the alleys behind some stores. I've hit a pretty quiet area, and the graffiti jungle tells me this is a bad part of town. I sit down and take stock of things. First I carefully check my shoulder. I'm almost afraid to assess the damage. I take off my vest. No hole. I touch the skin, and it feels like I'm touching the tip of my dick after too much sex. I wince but see there is no blood on my fingers. My suit is only lightly armored. It must have been a glancing shot to not have penetrated. I put my vest back on, then take out my commlink. Right now, it's a death beacon. I turned it off a while back, one of the first things I did. Part of me wants to outright destroy it, but I need it. It's got my passport, my SIN, my banking details. I just make sure it's completely off, not transmitting anything at all, and stow it in my pocket.

Then, I stare out into the night. I am so screwed. I feel betrayed. I love my job. I don't necessarily love my employer, because that sort of commitment is dangerous. But I respect the corp, and it's treated me well. I believe in what I do, and I do it well. I've made plenty of nuyen for Renraku. I'm not naive. I don't believe in loyalty. Loyalty is a word used to con you into doing things that run counter to your interests. I believe in equality. I provide excellent service to Renraku in exchange for top remuneration. It is a mutually beneficial relationship. This is the only god I believe in; the god of win-win. And now ... this. Why? It maddens me, it saddens me, sickens me. But mostly, it frightens me. I think of my pad in Manhattan. I think of my days off where I kick up my feet and play on my gaming rig. I love sim games. And I think of how far from that I am right now.

I'm torn from my self-pitying thoughts by noises in the streets. I peek out of my nook. Looks like some gangers out for a stroll, four humans. There is a blond kid, hair all spiky, wearing a grey armored vest and carrying a baseball. I can see the glint of a chrome handgun tucked in his belt. He's whooping and jeering and hitting whatever he can with his baseball bat, taking glugs from a bottle in his other hand. He has a girl with him. Dirty pink hair, she's walking around topless. Her bare breasts are painted over with concentric yellow, red, and blue stars. She's hitting a bottle too, her walk is sluggish. The two others behind are carrying a conversation composed mainly of swear words.

Then, headlights appear down the lonely, abandoned road. Whoever is driving here is either desperate to get somewhere or stupid. Maybe not paying attention to

what GridGuide is doing, bringing her down this path. I put my odds on it being a poor, single mother wageslave secretary, held late at the office, forced to complete some menial paperwork that couldn't possibly matter at all by a cruel boss that just loves to hate. I don't know. But it's what I imagine. Maybe I'm projecting.

Anyway, wrong time, wrong place. The gangers all hoot excitedly, draw pistols, and start peppering the car. The driver swerves crazily, hits the gas, and takes off as best he or she can. The gangers laugh excitedly. The pun-kette shakes her painted breasts at the car and gives it the finger, yelling "Fuck you!" hoarsely, with every fiber of her being. They all laugh.

I pull back into my recess. Jesus Christ. People accuse me of being elitist, but they don't see this shit. How can you think we are equal beings? I must regretfully inform you that society diverged at some point. At some point, some of us kept civilized, educated, and well-fed, and we taught our children to value hard work and family and drek like that. Others, well, just didn't. Sure, if I think about it, I pity them a little. It's not their fault. They didn't get to eat full nutritious meals when growing up. They're stunted. They're dumb. It's not their fault—not entirely, anyway. But what do you want me to say? The fact remains is they are sub-humans, and I'm not. I am the human race. They are our excrement. You think you can save them now? Now is too late. Maybe we can save the kids, if we start with them. Feed them, teach them. But their animal-like mothers wouldn't let go of them. They don't *want* to be elevated. Isn't that true? Don't they despise us? So there you go, full, vicious, cycle. They are their own worst enemy. They want to be like this. So let them. Let them die like this in their filth.

I get up. I'm a top dog. Nobody gets me down, not for long. I ain't staying here to die with the filth. There are ways out of this. I'm not dead. So whoever hired that killer underestimated me. It wasn't a thorough job. It was half-assed. If Renraku—and I mean Renraku, the whole god-like unidirectional might of it—wanted me dead, they could have done it a million other ways that would have succeeded. There are reasons—reasons the corp wants me dead, reasons the psychotic elf was hired to do the job. If I can figure those reasons out, if I can unravel the story, I can get out of this. And if not, fuck it, I'm employable. A well-trained, top-rank Johnson isn't exactly common. It's a rare blend of civilized smarts and street grime. I have value, if not for Renraku, then for someone else. So let's get this show on the road to keeping me alive and civilized.

I head back toward the city center, back to civilization. I stop at a bank, turn on my commlink, and make a cash withdrawal onto a certified credstick. The machine only allows me a couple hundred, but that'll do for now. I do one more thing, send a quick note to Wolfman to tell him "thanks." It's part of the code—someone sticks their neck out for you, you acknowledge it. Then you help them when you can. Maybe it'll help both of you stay alive.



I immediately turn it off once the message is sent. Yeah, I just told my hunters where I am and they know I withdrew some money, but I figure that's not telling them much they wouldn't figure out on their own. With some of the money, I buy a disposable commlink, just to get basic apps. A phone, map AROs, etc. Now I can move.

I formulate a plan. Okay, it's not really a plan. A real plan is a series of vetted actions you suspect are likely to happen in a particular order. That's what I call a plan, anyway. What I have is more like a vague prayer, with far too many uncontrolled elements. But at least I'm honest enough with myself to admit I'm working from a disadvantaged position. Sometimes your moon waxes, sometimes it wanes. Overconfidence and underestimating your enemies are how you lose. I have confidence, but I estimate my enemies fairly.

I hop a cab, paying with my precious certified cred, and head for what is my only hope right now.

The Opera club is happening. There is a lineup to get inside. I hesitate and opt to wait a while. It's a common misconception you can just wave money in the face of a bouncer and get in a club. Those guys have professional pride, you might be surprised to hear. They hate macho assholes who think they can get in just because they have money, or more likely, because their daddy does. I mean, in theory, a guy waving dough around to get in the club will be good for business. Mister Big Spender is going to drop lots of dough to get bottles to get the girls. You'd think the bouncers would like that. Thing is, bouncers aren't big on the whole concept of "corporate good." They really don't give a shit how much money the club makes. They only care about regulating justice. You're on the guest list, you get in. You're not, you wait your turn. You act nice and respectful, maybe they'll let you in faster. You act like an asshole, they'll tell you to shove off. I've seen them do it to known gangsters. I'm serious; they care more about the philosophical order of things than they do about money or their own personal safety. Bouncers: Don't mess with them.

So I don't. I play it straight, approaching the bouncer for a friendly chat. I show respect, ask him how things are. He shows respect back. I make it clear—through my actions, not direct words—that if I get in I'll spend some money, play well with others, and not cause a scene. That's what he wants from a customer. We shake hands, he tells me to enjoy myself. It's simple: Drop the attitude and you'll make friends. Maybe this will make a difference later, if I need it. You want to be a Johnson, you start thinking like this. This is how we operate. This is how we stay alive.

Opera is an interesting place. I assume it must have been a theatre or something in some past life. The shell is vaguely shaped like a theatre. I've been in a theatre a total of twice in my life, and both were field trips when I was a kid in school. The arts aren't what they used to be. I live in Manhattan and have never been to see a Broadway play. I hear the special effects are nice.

Anyway, once you get past a lobby area, the club has immensely high ceilings. There are tables on the ground floor, a huge bar, and more tables on the second level. The floor isn't slanted like a theatre's would be. That would make it pretty bad for dancing. The walls are given depth by having a weird kaleidoscope of overlaid AR scenes from popular operas. But they flash in quick, disorienting succession. It's mesmerizing, but I command my commlink to dim the effect. It's a little too much for me right now. I head for the bar. It's fairly crowded with people in their twenties and thirties, mostly women. Their styling favors somewhat stripped-down Renaissance-style dresses with wild bouquets of hair. The men are dressed in similar era pieces, layered with scarves, brooches, and a few top hats. More a mish-mash of fashion from the Renaissance, to Victorian England, with a touch of classic modern Japanese sarariman suits. Wild, powder-heavy, makeup laced with nano-tags, causing a wispy double image of the person. I get the feeling Atlanta, or at least this club, is being influenced by the opulent Neo-Renaissance fashion of Montreal. They do it pretty well here, but it's even more grandiose up north. But colder.

I run Vanity's description by the barman. He shrugs. His eyes dart to the bar, his body drawing away from me, eager to get back to serving drinks before there is a riot, but not wishing to offend. I feel pressured. I say simply "Goes by the name of Vanity." Oh, different look now. I have his attention. He nods his chin towards the upstairs level. I nod my head and pull back into the crowd, my precious bar-side real estate quickly swallowed up by the crowd of fashion dilettantes.

Upstairs is calmer. It's a lot darker. Small groups whisper in booths, the odd flirtatious giggle from courtesans in recessed shadows. Hands slipping down knees, up thighs. I walk slowly, my eyes needing a minute to peer through the veiled darkness to identify booth occupants. I see her long after she's seen me.

Vanity and Titanium Angel are in a booth with a commanding view, their backs to the wall. Goddamn shadowrunners. It's like instinct with them. As an experiment, I once met a runner in a restaurant, the table in the middle of the room. He was like a caged animal. His knee jumped up and down at an alarming rate. And I mean alarming, I think he was cybered. He chewed on a toothpick, constantly swiveled to look at the room. Jesus, that was uncomfortable. But also amusing. I didn't do it again, though.

Angel's eyes flash at me, slits of white in the obscurity. He quickly returns to his drink, ignoring me for the moment. Vanity gives me a big smile, her eyes sparkling in the half-light.

"Mr. Johnson, what a surprise. We did not expect to see you, seeing as how we have not yet completed our mission" she says grandly, obviously, mockingly. I groan inwardly. There's no dancing around with this one.

"I need your help," I say.

Vanity holds her smile. Angel extends a hand, inviting



me to sit. “What can we do for you?” he says mirthlessly. I wonder if he had a happy childhood.

I recount my predicament. How my employer has seemingly marked me for death. I tell them of Psycho Ghost Face Killer Elf. I tell them I am, effectively, powerless at the moment.

You might think this is a mistake. You may doubly think so if you correctly calculate that the gentle face-shooters in front of me have concluded that any connection to me could bring them the same trouble that’s come down on me. So, why keep me around? Why help me at all? Why not kill me, perhaps to appease the people after me, perhaps just because why-the-hell-not?

Well, these are intricate power games, indeed. If I held back and pretended I had encountered “just a slight wrinkle in the plan” or some bullshit like that, they would instantly know. They can smell Johnson bullshit from a kilometer away. They’d wonder about the real angle, wouldn’t trust me, and would tell me to pay them a fortune or get the hell out of their faces. I don’t have a fortune. What I have is the humility to accept I’m powerless. And that’s strength. If you can’t admit you’re powerless, it is because you doubt you will ever again be powerful, or that you ever were. I can admit my weakness because I know I will be powerful again.

Titanium Angel and Vanity understand that. They are top crew. They have power in the shadows. They don’t pretend to have it; they *have* it. If I didn’t know it from the rap sheet I have on them, I’d know it from just looking at them. So, after I lay down my cards, and after we all stare at each other for a moment—me, Vanity; Vanity, Angel; Angel, me; me, Vanity—they don’t tell me to fuck off. They don’t say much, but I know they have accepted.

“He shot you, you said?” Angel asks me, just to start somewhere.

“Yes, but my jacket took it.”

“This jacket?” he asks.

“Yes.” I don’t see the point to his questions, but it’s good to play nice with people you just begged for help.

He nods. “Okay.”

He gets up, Vanity too. So do I. I don’t know where we’re going. I don’t know if I’m supposed to follow. Stay. Follow. Stay or follow? I follow.

I guess right. We leave the club out the back. They have a sleek black sedan, nothing special. We get in, Titanium Angel drives. I’m placed in the passenger seat, Vanity directly in back of me, right where someone who wanted to cap you in the head would sit. It’s good to know that with all her playfulness, she’ll execute me the second something looks fishy. I wonder if other people have that problem with *their* friends.

We drive into a warehouse district and pull into the empty lot of a crumbly red brick building. We park and get in the warehouse using a steel door that opens with a loud metallic groan. Given my situation, I have no energy to appreciate how cliché this is.

It’s spartan lodging, wide-open spaces with not much in them. An unusually large, dinged-up wooden table sits in the middle, a bare light bulb hanging from a chain above it. Our steps echo, but other loud sounds reverberate all over the bare concrete structure. Someone is talking somewhere, the distorted words booming in the empty hall. There are crates lining the walls, lots of them covered in dusty tarps, but I also see a few small drones, grenades, and guns; lots of guns, actually. Assault rifles, sub-machine guns. There are pistols lying everywhere. Plus ammo to keep them all fed.

“We have a visitor,” announces Angel. The other noises stop. I look back and forth too quickly. I don’t want to look nervous, but if there’s one place a defenseless Johnson doesn’t want to be, it’s in the den of the shadowrunners he hired. They want me as far away as possible. I want me as far away from them as possible. I don’t want to know their private business. I don’t want them to fucking kill me. It’s pretty simple. I have the money and, really, after they go through the job which invariably is far more complicated than it was supposed to be, get shot up, or even have some of their buddies die, the line between killing the Johnson and not killing the Johnson is pretty thin. Sure, they haven’t gone through my bullshit mission yet, but then again, I don’t have their pay either. The point is, I’m pretty disposable.

A girl comes out of a side room, a spoon in her mouth. She has a wild bouquet of curly blond hair blossoming around her pretty young face. She wears an army-green tank top, the look completed with silver dog tags. She eyes me moodily, glancing to Vanity and Angel. Before she can comment, if she was even inclined to do so, a lean, muscled man steps in. He’s sweaty, covered in tattoos. I think he has cyberarms. His face is interesting. I would say California, Orange County beach bad boy. He has a bit of that permanent squint thing going. A suggestion of good looks is hidden behind scars. He has rough skin, dimply where scratches, cuts, and burns healed. His nose was definitely broken, most likely more than once. The overall effect is that he doesn’t look too smart to me, but I’m sure he gets into girls’ panties with little effort. Instinctively, I don’t like him. But, I’m going to do my best to find a way, or at least pretend to like him, because he can probably kill me easily, and he looks violent enough to do so without worrying about the consequences. Those are the worst, the psycho street samurais who have made themselves into killing machines but are too dumb to differentiate between the paying moves and the dumb ones. And so you have to rely on their teammates to keep them in check. Us Johnsons, that’s when we play the power game. With rational runners, you just keep it business and all goes well. With these mad dogs, you have to show you’re the alpha male. That’s all they care about. But it’s a dumb move. If they killed you, they’d be dead the next day, as matter-of-fact payback from the corporation. But these wired-up killers, they just don’t care. I hate that.



Of course, this jock razorboy is the first to speak. “The fuck is this?”

Angel speaks up. “This is our Johnson for the Renraku gig, or was. The corp tried to kill him. He came to us for help.”

The blond girl chokes on a laugh. The bad boy has a hint of a playful smile, but his eyes focus on me like prey.

“There is a big-picture move for us, here,” Angel says, in a “conversation over” kind of way. The other two simmer down. So, looks like we have Father Titanium Angel, Mother Vanity, and two kids. It’s an interesting dynamic. The younger girl looks up to Vanity, the gorilla recognizes Angel as the alpha male. I think I can work with that.

Vanity steps up to the blond girl and wraps an arm around her shoulder. “Mr. Johnson, this is Zoë, our hacker. That one over there is Irish. I’m sure you can guess what he’s for.” Zoë deliberately looks me over up and down with suggested disgust, while Irish cracks the joints of his fists. Then he loses interest in me and goes back to lifting weights.

Angel heads over to Irish’s corner gym and spots for him as he pumps iron. I eye them. I’m pretty sure they are having a silent commlink conversation by the way they occasionally look at each other and sometimes at me. I think back at the foreign language he and Vanity spoke. Guess for serious business, they still communicate the normal way. I can’t really blame them.

Zoë sits down in my field of vision and catches me staring. I blink and shift, giving her a curt smile. She is staring right into my eyes, about a half-meter away from me, slowly eating. What the heck is that, applesauce? She makes me squirm a bit, but I remember I have a game to play, so I quickly meet her stare and hold it. She’s young, younger than I thought. She can’t be past eighteen. She has the unbending arrogance of youth. After a minute of playing the starting contest, she smiles and puts her cup of what I am definitely calling applesauce aside.

“So, you in trouble, Mr. Johnson?”

The worst thing I can do right now is treat her like a child. It takes considerable effort for me not to do so. “Complications, yes. I’m hoping you can help me.” I pause. “That’s not easy for me to admit.”

“Huh,” she says thoughtfully, leaning back. One of her arms gets lost in her bushy hair.

Vanity comes back into the room. Zoë looks at her, with an eyebrow cocking quickly, and an open-mouth smile. Vanity smiles back at her.

“Be nice to our guest, sweetie,” she tells the girl. “Come on, me and Mister Johnson need to talk. *Vai.*”

Zoë strings something in that tongue again as she gets up and leaves us. “*Qué saudji,*” she says, winking at Vanity and giggling a bit.

“*Fala serio,*” Vanity answers back with a click of her tongue.

I give Vanity a quizzical look. I’d like to get to the bottom of this.

Vanity looks at me sideways. “What?”

“What language is that? You used it when we first met and it looks like you all do.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” she teases me. “It’s Portuguese. Brazilian Portuguese.”

“Ah. It sounds like Créole or something, wasn’t sure”

“You speak Créole?” she asks, surprised.

“No, I just kind of recognize it. I grew up in Montreal, lots of Carib people there. I don’t speak it, I just sort of know the sound of it.”

“Oh, Montreal, huh? You speak French?”

I think everyone asks me that when I say I’m from Montreal. Fact is, I purposefully don’t. My parents were driven from their country by fascist motherfucking language zealots. I have no desire to use their words.

I decide to share some of the adventures of my youth with Vanity. I need some emotional capital with my saviors. Vanity is a good person to start with. She seems interested in my story, but I don’t know. Always, in the back of my head, I know she’s a shadowrunner. She’ll play me, use me, and spit me out.

I finish my bit. I positioned myself well, now it’s her turn to volunteer something about herself. This I’m interested in. It’s for my mission. I need intel. That’s what I tell myself. But there’s something else I don’t want to admit to. It’s dangerous and I won’t even think it.

We’re interrupted by Angel and Irish who come back to where we are. They instantly get my attention because they’re fully equipped, with armored jackets and assault rifles. Uh-oh.

I stay cool. I look at them. Irish looks happy. *Not good,* I think.

“What’s going on?” I finally ask, since they don’t seem about to volunteer the information.

“Raven’s coming for ya, omae,” answers Irish. I think about it for a second. No, that doesn’t make any sense.

“What?” Not very eloquent on my part, but whatever.

Angel’s answer is much more useful. “The guy you tangled with in the hotel goes by the name of Raven. Irish knows him.” Irish smiles. Of course he does. Insane motherfuckers go together, right? “That bullet you think hit you? It’s a trace. Newer stuff. Just needs a glancing hit, deposits nano-dust trackers on you. He’ll be coming”

My eyes bulge a little but I get control of myself pretty fast. Nano-dust trackers. I feel like a complete idiot. I should have ditched my clothes. Stupid stupid stupid.

“Okay. So what do we do?”

“He’s not too smart. Surprised he’s still alive. He’s gonna come here and we’re gonna pop him,” answers Irish, with palpable delight in his voice. I guess that’s how psychos high-five or whatever. They “pop” each other. Shit, violent world.

“So ...” I continue my very articulate side of the conversation.

“He may have a teammate. He should be just about due; wait here,” says Angel. He and Irish get into position, which



is not very elaborate. They just get behind some of those crates they got lying everywhere, guns pointed at the door.

Not a moment later Zoë yells, “He’s here,” from the side room. I look at this set up. I’m sitting in the middle of a large empty warehouse where not two minutes earlier I was having a conversation. Angel and Irish are positioned in the simplest ambush I’ve ever seen. Vanity has gotten up and is standing against the wall, peeking out of the grimy industrial window panes lining the building.

This has got to be the dumbest, simplest plan I’ve ever seen. I have serious doubts about this team. Not just for keeping me alive, but for completing the mission I originally hired them to do.

“Shouldn’t you—” I begin, but a “Shh!” from Vanity silences me. She then gestures and Angel changes position. He runs all the way down the building and crouches by another window. He moves his head a bit, getting a good view or something, and then raises his rifle to his shoulder.

Just at about that point, the door to the warehouse squeaks open, tentatively. Nothing happens. So the door swings open wide, and that white-painted face asshole elf walks in. There I am, sitting at a table, looking at him dumbly. He smiles, and slowly, expertly, draws out a chrome razor blade. “Nice of you to wait for me,” he drawls menacingly.

Irish whispers, “Hey, asshole,” as he stands up from cover, rifle raised. Raven is taken completely by surprise. He recovers quickly, though, and reaches for a holstered gun. But Irish isn’t taking prisoners. He fires a burst right into his chest. Raven goes down. Almost at the same time come two quick bursts, then another one from down the building. I swing around before the last burst, and to my confusion, all I see is muzzle flash in mid-air. No Angel. No Vanity, either, I realize.

Well, shit.

I knew it all along. A goddamn mage. She had to be, right? On cue, both reappear out of thin air. Irish stands over Raven’s body. I can see Raven’s feet subtly moving, trying to push against nothing. Slight whispering sounds. Let’s be clear, he’s a terrible person that murdered innocent people in an effort to kill me. Of course, the latter part of that bothers me a lot more than the killing of innocents. When he walked in through that door, I felt a ball raise in my throat as I remembered the fear I felt in my hotel room, the thought of imminent death and urgency spreading through every fiber of my being wanting, above all else, to be alive. But, even with all that, I feel sad and pathetic watching him die. Faced with the end of his life, is he sorry, like I was? Did his life flash in front of his eyes, and did he regret everything that brought him here? Did he think back of the warm embrace of his mother and feel sad he grew up into a monster and let her down? Am I some sort of softie for thinking about this shit?

Irish apparently doesn’t have these thoughts. “Well fuckface, I told you I was the better man,” he says before lazily hovering the barrel of his rifle to Raven’s head and pulling the trigger. A single loud retort echoes against the

concrete walls of the warehouse. “And you have a stupid name. Fucking chump.”

Irish looks up at me with a wide smile. I stare at him somewhat dumbly. “Good job, Mr. Johnson. You didn’t piss yourself, did you? Ha. See, don’t over-complicate a plan when a simple one will work.” He laughs. I see now that he’s high on it. He’s high on the kill, on being dominator, the king of the jungle. He’s genuinely happy right now. I look back at Raven and the pool of dark blood he’s lying in. I don’t feel happy. Should I?

Zoë comes out of her hiding place, tarp in hand. She lays it next to the body. “Come on,” she tell me, instructing me to help get rid of the corpse. I oblige, because he’s dead because of me. I help move the body, and I manage to do so without looking at his face. Zoë doesn’t seem thrilled with the task, but she goes about it with grim efficiency and no complaints. We bag him, heft him, and dump him in the trunk of one of the team’s cars. Zoë tells me she’ll take it from here. I frown.

“Won’t you need help taking him out of the car?” I ask.

She smiles at my naiveté. “Naw, the buyers at the other end will be more than happy to take him from me”

Buyers at the other end. Right. I heard Atlanta has a thriving ghoulish community, always looking to buy fresh meat. I don’t usually arrange body disposal. We have people for that at Renraku.

Zoë gives me one last smile, and her bobbing mass of hair follows the rest of her as she gets in the car and drives to the front, where Angel will load the second body, I imagine. I don’t even know who the second guy that Angel shot down might be. I guess that’s all right.

I go back inside and sit at the main table. Reflexes make me take out my commlink, ready to fiddle with it, but I remember it’s off. I haven’t checked messages or taken a call in way longer than I ever have, I think. I never noticed, but checking messages gives me comfort. I don’t know why. Maybe it’s the thought that people need me. I mean, not in a way a child or a girlfriend might. But people value my expertise. I fit in people’s plans. I guess I still do, except that now the plan is “Won’t you just die already.”

I pass a hand through my hair. I notice it has a slight tremble. That’s fairly normal. I can remember a few times where I’ve had the shakes. Occupational hazard. It goes away. I just need some rest. I realize just how tired I am. It hits me all at once. In a way it’s not that I want to sleep, it’s that I just want this day to end.

Vanity comes by, sitting at the table. She looks me over, full of interest. She has a way of making me feel like a lab rat. Again, that disconnected look, box seat at the opera.

“You all right?” I ask her.

She is amused. “I’m just fine, Mr. Johnson” she says. Her voice is a soft, even slide. “How are you?” She gives me a wide smile. She clearly enjoys her little games.

“I like your make-up, did I tell you that?”

She holds that wide smile at me, her head tilting to one side. “*Obrigado.*”



I nod my head. Nod it for a while. Yep. Nodding.

“Vanity?”

“Hmm?”

“Where can I crash?”

“Ah,” she says. It’s a sound of triumph. “There is a small room past the work area, to the left. You can take it”

“Okay.” I get up. I take a moment to figure out which way is left. I’m right handed, so that means left is the other hand ... right. Got it. I stumble into the room. A plain affair. Bunk bed amongst other supplies. My hands work to loosen my tie and unbutton the first few. I lack the patience to finish, so I slip the shirt over my head. Loosen my belt, shrug off my pants. I get in the cot and feel the covers over my bare skin. I pass out. I dream of dark streets, sudden violence, of chasms opening under my feet. I dream of flying, then falling, then both.

I wake up. Where am I? I’m in bed. I remember where. Vanity is in a cot next to me. Her eyes are open. She is observing me.

“Bad dream?” she asks

I grunt a yes. The dream was so bad I still feel rattled, even as my senses fall back into place. I look at Vanity. I flash back to the car, when she sat calmly behind me, ready to execute me in the blink of an eye. I don’t know where we stand anymore. I’m in a barebones safe house with a team of wired-up elite black operatives. Who am I anymore? Who was I ever? If you take away my Italian leather shoes, my whisky drinks, and my Manhattan condo, there isn’t much left. I sit on the side of the bed. I don’t think, per se. I kind of just marinate in my thoughts. I get up and start picking up my clothes and dressing back up. Vanity watches me idly the whole time.

As I stumble into the main room, it’s clear the rest of the team has been more efficient with their time while I was out. Gear has been packed neatly. Zoë is holding up what must be a map in AR and showing it to Irish. She hasn’t made the ARO public so I can’t see the actual map, but the way she’s gesturing in midair with Irish staring at nothing pretty much gives it away. The fact they are all professional and squared away, while I was being super busy sleeping makes me feel pretty sheepish, so as discreetly as possible, I look for some food. Because, seriously, I’m *starving*.

Vanity comes up behind me just as Angel rounds a corner to come meet Irish and Zoë. “Good, you’re up,” is what he says when he sees me. Irish and Zoë look up from their map to acknowledge me. Zoë’s eyes jump between me and Vanity, and a baldly fake smile crosses her face. Vanity comes up next to me, guesses accurately what I’m looking for, and points to one of the crates. “There are some ration bars in there. They’re good. Irish makes them.”

While the image of Irish wearing an apron, humming in a kitchen as he mixes nuts and honey in a big bowl is amusing, I question why Vanity would think specifying Irish prepared the food I’m about to eat would make me feel better. I expect to find granola bars with engine grease and nine millimeter bullets, but it turns out the ration bars

are pretty damn decent, both in terms of taste and nutritional quality. Irish eyes me as I eat one of his bars. I nod at him. He looks away without further acknowledgement. Kid has social issues.

“Since we are so privileged as to have you on our side today, we were hoping there were more details you could share with us about the strike tonight,” Angel says as Zoë shares the info package with me. The map and assorted data markups appear in blue light in my field of vision.

“Sure, there isn’t much I didn’t tell you, but we can go over it,” I begin. But I have a deck of cards to play, too. “But before we get into that, I think we should talk more high-level.”

They all look at me.

“First, I imagine you’ve already been contacted by my employer, with notice that your Johnson has changed, correct?”

They do a good job of keeping poker faces.

“Right, I know how this works. And I trust in our agreement. You said you’d help me, and I don’t doubt your word. I know you must have carried on the job with my replacement.”

Angel nods. “Nothing changed.”

I assume they must have offered up more money as an excuse for the disruption, but Angel didn’t mention it. And rightly so, since it’s none of my business.

“We can simply complete the mission, but that’s not the long-game payoff we could get.” If they object to the “we” terms I’m using, they don’t show it. “Zoë, I’m going to need some of your time, if that’s all right with you.” I have to be polite. I’m a guest here, not Mr. Johnson. I can’t dictate. I have to ask. She cocks an eyebrow and nods curtly.

“Sleep brought wisdom, and I think I know what game they’re playing and how we can all profit. Once I’ve confirmed a few things, I should be able to come up with our end-game scenario. I don’t expect the meat of the mission to change. I see you’ve reviewed the data package I gave you. It should still be accurate. Did everything in there make sense?”

Zoë nods. “Yeah, we’re hitting a Boeing facility. We’re lifting a new sensor-defeating technology they are working on. We have facility plans, security info, stuff like that.”

“And there’s a second team helping us, right?” asks Irish.

“Yeah, sort of. They’re going to die for you, actually. No use sugar-coating it. They’re going to get in deep enough to cause a good distraction, and then they’re going to get mopped up. During that time this team is going to make its move and finish the job.”

I pause and stare at them. Johnsons hiring teams to get killed as a distraction is one of the biggest taboos in our industry. Runners hate, *hate* that shit. Any team that survives such a mission—and trust me, there are few—are guaranteed to come gunning for Mr. Johnson, no matter how much they got paid. That’s never happened to me,



though; I make sure the teams I send to their death don't come back.

Irish gets a gleam in his eye. This guy executed one of his buddies not a day ago, and suddenly he gets sentimental about some team he doesn't even know. Zoë looks rattled. "So, they're just gonna die, that's it? What if we ..."

I cut her off. "Don't over-complicate when a simple plan will work." I toss a look toward Irish. He gives me a shrewd look back.

"He's right," cuts in Angel. "Continue."

"Now, you already know it's an inside job. You sniffed it the moment I gave it to you. Of course it is. I know that too. Before now, I didn't care. But there's something to this. You don't flush one of your Johnsons for nothing, so something's up here"

"Don't think so highly of yourself. Maybe they just got tired of you," retorts Irish with a cruel smile, trying to bait me.

"Unlikely. I've got a good record. So I doubt it would be as simple as that. I'm going with the working assumption there's something here, and that's what Zoë and I are going to confirm later. Once I have that figured out, I'll fill you in on the play we're going to make."

"The play *we're* going to make, or the play *you're* going to make?" asks Vanity. I turn to look at her. I'm not entirely surprised—I'd been waiting for that objection to surface. Her eyes are glassy orbs fixed on me.

"I'm here, and you guys waxed the psycho elf for me. I figure we're in it together now. And I'll make it worth your while—I'm not expecting you to help me out of the muck out of the goodness of your hearts. I expect to be able to leverage my findings into more money for you, and a renewed position for me." I shrug. "Worst case, more money for me too, and then I'll make my own future."

"They tried to kill you, and you want to go back to them?" asks Titanium Angel with a scoff. This indignation is the only emotion I've seen from him.

I shrug again. "You don't understand. It's not Renraku, the *company*, that tried to kill me. Rather, someone specific, higher up, is making a play, and I'm in the way and I got rubbed out. It's nothing personal. Now I'm going to make *my* play, screw over whoever is messing with me, and go back to my rightful place. No hard feelings."

"Wow," says Irish. Zoë scoffs. They all look pretty disgusted. That gets me a little angry. "Look, I get it. On this side of the fence, you all cherish your 'freedom' and stuff, and you never lie down for The Man, and all that. That's fine, I get that. But, with all due respect, you have no clue how the world really works. You think of corporations as one monolithic entity with one mind. That's the same as if I said you're crazy for still wanting to be a shadowrunner after Raven came for you."

"He came for *you*," corrects Irish.

"Whatever. My point is, it's as illogical as saying 'The streets tried to kill you, why are you still trying to be friends with the streets?' Megacorporations like Renraku, are not of one mind. Some slitch with the right access is trying to

roll me over. I'm going to fuck him right back, and then I'm going to ride on my horse right back into my office and be even more powerful than before, and fuck anyone that's going to try to stop me. That's my plan."

They all shuffle a little bit. Titanium Angel looks back at me with some respect. Irish shakes his head but doesn't say anything more. Zoë looks convinced, as if she wanted to ride the fucking horse back to my office with me. I give a sideways look at Vanity. As ever, she's just staring at me.

"You all right?" I ask her in a soft voice, a private question as the rest of the team gets back to finishing their prep drills.

"Yeah," she answers.

Again, I don't know what's going on with her. Par for the course. If she were taking one of my trainings, I'd know how to take this tension between us and turn it to sex by nightfall. Here, though, I'm off my game. And the power dynamic is all wrong.

Anyway, I go to check in with Zoë, who's in a side room, rummaging around and pulling out gizmos.

I move some crap off a chair and sit down.

"So, how are the new Matrix protocols working out for you?" I ask, conversationally.

She gives a small groan. "They kicked my ass for a while. When they flipped the switch, there was this moment of panic in the hacker community, like nobody could hack anything. Well, for like a day. Then people figured out how to get around it. It was the old-timers, they noticed they could adapt their old cyberdecks and at least get around. That shit was before my time, but I had friends, and they showed me how."

At Renraku, there was a lot of buzz about the new protocols. They said it changed everything. I didn't really notice anything different. But some of our in-house hackers said it was a radical shift, they couldn't get over it. So I'm curious to see what a black-hat hacker like Zoë thinks of it. I have to admit, I don't understand that side of things much, so I'm keen to use this rare opportunity to gain some perspective.

"So, now that you're used to it, is it harder or easier?"

"Oh, it's harder, in some ways. But it's easier to do quick things. It's like, soft shells with a hard candy inside, you know?"

I didn't really, but I found her use of candy analogy kind of cute. She reminded me a little of this girl in Marketing, with whom I had an on-again, off-again sex thing. She was young, so not really good for conversation or going out, or much else other than sex. But damn was she nubile. Little bit insufferable in her damned youthful arrogance and mind games, but it was good sex. I wasn't sure if it was going to be a good idea to, you know, dip my pen in the corporate vagina, but it worked out all right. We kind of grew apart and that was it. All that being said, Zoë looks way smarter. I'm guessing she's had a bit of a rougher time in the streets, so likely grew up a bit faster and wiser. That makes me think of something.



“Zoë, I was talking to Vanity, she told me you guys speak Portuguese to each other. How come?”

“It’s from Capoeira,” Zoë says.

“Capoo eh what?”

“Capoeira, Brazilian martial art. Well, calling it a martial art is a bit of a stretch. Acrobatic dancing with some fighting elements, I guess. Anyway, we all do it, it’s our thing. It keeps us tight, like a family. Titanium Angel is from Metrôpole, in Amazonia. He brought it, he showed it to us. We play when we have downtime, make a *roda*, train some moves. It’s cool. And with it comes some of the culture, some of the language. So we all kind of speak it, but just a little. Obviously, Ta knows a lot more.”

“Ta? Oh, Titanium Angel. Yeah, I won’t be calling him that. Metrôpole, huh? You don’t hear much about Amazonia, you know, except for the war stuff.” I try to conjure up what I know about the place. I come up with very little. I picture giant man-eating snakes in business suits arguing over third-quarter financial statements. I assume I’m probably not on the ball.

“Yeah, not much gets out. But I think that’s about to change. It’s messed up to say, but losing the war was probably good for them, at least for the people.” I can tell she is definitely making a distinction between the people living in the city and their Awakened overlords. I realize there is probably a divide there I never knew existed. The business person in me can’t help but wonder at the opportunities that might be opening up down there. Hmm, maybe I can get a transfer from Renraku to an office down there; play the shadows there for a while.

And then I realize, my life may not be like that anymore. Being out with Renraku is hitting me in waves. I’ve never done anything else, never worked for anyone else. I might get my life back, yeah, but let’s face it—maybe it won’t be with Renraku. Maybe the best I’ll be able to do is get in another corp. Ares, somewhere. Horizon? I try to picture their corporate culture, and the thought of the change scares me. All I know is Renraku, and I like it.

I get a little more somber. I look at Zoë and I noticed she is too. Renraku for me, Metrôpole for her. Way to pick good conversation subject. I take a breath. “All right, are we doing this?”

“Yep, all set,” she says quickly, relieved at the change of topic. She places two devices on the table.

Two, I don’t like that. “What’s this, why two? You don’t expect me to ...”

“Oh yeah you are. You’re coming with me. You’ve got passwords I need. I ain’t cracking files I don’t need to when I’ve got you around. Besides, it’ll be good for you. These babies are hot-sim. You’re gonna like this.”

I don’t think I will, but I’m pretty sure I don’t have a choice. I reluctantly plug in after a brief “Hacking 101” lesson from Zoë.

We jack in to the Atlanta Grid. It looks like a cleaner version of the city. But the sights come with an incredible exhilarating feeling I can’t quite describe. That would

be Zoë’s hot-sim, I imagine. It’s something else. It makes me smile. I think. I’m not sure what is persona and what is meat me. It all feels intertwined. Wow.

Zoë grabs my virtual hand to get me to pay attention, since I’m so distracted. We hop over to the Renraku grid. Of course, I’ve seen it before, but I never felt it in hot-sim. The lights are more intense, and I can feel their pulse in my blood. When we fly over the gaudy neon, air whooshes by my face, and a knot of dizziness clutches my stomach. It’s awesome. But Zoë doesn’t let me enjoy it, next thing I know we’ve found the North American office, the one in Manhattan, and we’re making our way through it. I supply Zoë with the access codes she needs. Sometimes I don’t have them, sometimes the ones I have are denied, but she makes it work anyway. I think whatever I have is enough for her to extrapolate and quickly generate new marks. Hell, let’s be honest: I have no idea what she’s doing. In any case, we work together. I know where we need to go. I know where the juicy files are. We slice and slip into the black heart of Renraku and get to the repositories Johnsons use for themselves.

The construct we need to search is rendered as a huge, dark library full of old tomes. Zoë makes me a flashlight that allows me to read books from the shelves. Just outside the dim light I have I can see oily swirls of blackness, black against blackness, shimmering and dart around. I hear faint noises, like hissing, like whispering. I shoot Zoë a look. Her face is a mask of concentration. I know what’s out there is. Black IC—and I’m running hot sim. Which means that shit can *kill me*. I flip through pages as fast as I can. Whatever looks remotely promising, I download. I go faster and faster, until really I read the title and if it looks interesting, I download it. I’ll read it offline later. You know, like when pure blackness isn’t circling around me looking for a brain to liquefy into burnt black goo.

“Johnson, we really gotta go.”

Zoë hasn’t shown any stress throughout our slicing and dicing on the way here, so her current tone of voice doesn’t make me remotely doubt her.

“Okay, yup, let’s go” I say. The sea of shadows around us is getting agitated, like the North Sea in a storm. I feel a primal fear. I want out. Now. Now. *Now*. And that’s when it happens. Before I will myself to jack out, I feel a tug on my leg. I look down and see an oily black tentacle wrapping around my leg. It’s narrow at the end that’s coiled around my ankle, but its diameter gets exponentially fatter as you go down the length, though it quickly disappears in the shadowy darkness. I don’t know what to do. It’s slick, dripping with sticky black stuff, and oil is running down my leg. It gives me a violent lurch, and I fall. It drags me into the darkness, toward its mass. I yell. Zoë appears by my side, a gleaming white katana in hand. She hacks at the oily limb. The darkness screams. Hundreds of screams. All around us. I feel mass all around us, bearing down. Slick, oily limbs uncoil and slice at Zoë’s figure, cracking like whips. She dodges them. She hacks at the limb holding me as I drag



along the floor. I claw at the ground, try to hold myself back. I notice a small 1940s Luger pistol in my hands—my attack program. I fire at the approximate center of mass of the darkness I'm being dragged into. The limb jerks. A hissing squeal comes from the darkness—sounds wet. Zoë dodges stabbing tentacles. And then there is a moment where she looks up toward where I'm being dragged. She looks into it for a second. Then she starts hacking frantically at the tentacle holding me. She roars and screams. The limb is severed. "Jack out now! Jack out *now!*" she screams.

Right before I will myself out, I glimpse the owner of the tentacle. A mass so large it is inconceivable. A home for so many tentacles it makes no sense. Rows of teeth, tar for spit. But it's the eyes that really get me. The mass, writhing, a horizon of horror, but the eyes are calm and calculating, and entirely aware of me.

My eyes pop open and I gasp for air. The world spins. I don't know where I am. There is the loss of sensation. Am I dead? Everything is so dull. My senses return to me at a fifth of what I had before. No, we jacked out. This is the dull world of reality, the hot sim gone.

There is a white-painted geisha face in front of me. I blink. What? I blink. Oh, it's Vanity. She eyes me with interest. I look past her and see Zoë, recovering from the sensorial gap between Matrix and real world much better, though she looks pale.

"Got what you needed?" asks Vanity. She is asking Zoë.

"Yeah, Mr. Johnson got some files. I think he needs to look through them. Damn, I ain't going back there, guys." We both look at her. She is standing akimbo, shaking her puffy mane of blond hair. "What the hell, that was the most bulked-up glacier I've even seen. Holy *shit* was that black. Glad we had your passcodes along for the ride."

I grunt. I know that in one sense what I went through wasn't real. But it felt real. It inflicted pain. It could have killed me. So it was real *enough*. And it's still got me shaken.

"You all right?" Vanity asks me gently, as I try to regain a footing in reality.

I nod, run my hand through my hair. "You got a spell to get rid of the cobwebs in my head?" I ask her jokingly.

She gets a slightly mischievous look in her eyes, then I see her peer past my eyes to a spot inside my head. All of a sudden, I get *quite* the feeling. A rush of pleasure. I tingle all over. It's like when I get girls to massage my scalp gently with the tip of their nails, stroking the roots of my hair. It sends jolts through my spine. It's not quite like the pleasure of sex, but something related to it. And then it stops.

I blink and, again, I'm catching my breath. "Whoa," I say in a small voice. "What was that?"

Vanity's mischievous look turns into a playful one. "Maybe you'll get more of that sometime," she says coyly.

I'm still recovering, from the dumpshock or the spell, I'm not sure which, when Vanity turns and takes her leave of me. She stops by Zoë and places a hand on her wrist. "But you got files for *us*, yes?"

"*Com certeza*" answers Zoë, with a sly smile.

Well. I guess that should have been predictable. I'll label that as "cost of doing business." Both girls turn to look at my reaction. I make it known I heard them but am not protesting. They both giggle. I still hope they didn't get *too* many of our secret files. Then again, that only matters if I still work for Renraku, right?

So, without further ado, I get to absorbing what I've downloaded.

It takes some interpretation. It's not like everything is spelled out, but being in the know, I can piece it together. What I find is that a guy I know, Nomura, is basically behind all of this. He's a senior Johnson—that's not his official title of course, but that's what he is. Biggest uptight bastard I ever met. He's a cold motherfucker, with a very "if you're not Japanese, you're nothing" attitude. I would hate him if he weren't so scary. But, he doesn't get his hands dirty much anymore, so it's interesting he's this close to the ground. He had also transferred back to Japan last I'd heard. Anyway, he used his influence to get the mission to change. He had me rubbed out, seemingly without much consideration. Just kind of like "Oh, and of course, kill the Johnson running this operation. Thanks." That sort of explains the sloppy attempt with that Raven character. They hired an operative on the rush, didn't check his full credentials, and so they got someone good but not good enough. That works for me, I guess, though it's a little insulting to have someone decide to end your life as an afterthought.

Now, the real question is, what's going on here? Why would Nomura even bother to do this? Let's chase the product back up. The op is to steal new sensor-defeating technology. That's a hot ticket. Anything in the aerospace industry, like sensors and counter-sensors, are grade-A shadowruns. Who are the players? Renraku and Boeing. Hmm. In the pile of files I grabbed from the archive, I have some interesting documents pertaining to this. Well, well, it looks like Fed-Boeing and Tetradyne Matrix Systems had a little joint R&D venture into new sensor-defeating technology. This is *all kinds* of interesting. Tetradyne is a Renraku *Europe* subsidiary. While it's not unheard of that they would have struck a research agreement on American turf, it is odd Renraku America would have pulled any sort of shadow op against them.

Unless this was one of our recruitment ops. Renraku likes to have its prime talent on retainer. But they only want the best, so to determine prime talent, we have to test them. Of course, the best way to test an unknown team is against an environment we control. By pitting teams against Renraku assets, it's easier to assess how the team lives up to its reputation and thus if we want to make the investment of having them on retainer. Titanium Angel's team is definitely top-notch, so maybe this was just a test run.

All right, so then, where does Nomura fit in? He's a guy from Asia, and he hijacks a training run to turn it into a *real* run. Stab Fed-Boeing in the back and blame it on Tet-



radyne. Meanwhile, Nomura acquires some juicy paydata for the Asian branch of the corp.

This is really just another example of the notion that there is no single “Renraku.” No megacorporation is nearly as unified as you might think. At Renraku, this is actually kind of a culture problem. Different subsidiaries, especially from different regions, screw each other over all the time. If—and that’s a big if—Fed-Boeing ever figures out the team was Renraku, they’ll be pissed at all of Renraku, not just Tetradyne. But this is just business. Tetradyne will mend the relationship. Offer them off-the-books compensation, something like that. Maybe a Tetradyne boss will lose his job. If you think at a way-high macro view, yeah, that’s bad for all of Renraku. But in the human-sized scope of things, the subsidiary Nomura is working for will gain a huge R&D boost, shares will go up, people will get promotions and fat bonuses. And really, that’s all that matters. Nobody cares about “Renraku” as a single concept. People only care about their immediate surroundings.

Well, almost. Thing is, Renraku culture, it’s as backstabbing as I just said. But, behind closed doors only. The prevailing culture as Renraku is that noble bushido samurai thing. People must act honorably, or at least appear to. Managers caught doing dirty deeds, be it as simple as cheating on their wives with prostitutes, accepting bribes, or making wrong decisions and losing company money, fall on their swords. Literally. Seppuku. Even if it doesn’t go that far, you certainly lose your job. So, Nomura’s plan will work great, so long as nobody finds out about it.

Now, it’s obvious he’s co-opted my division at Renraku America. Even if, as Matthew’s text message warning me proves, I still have friends there. But they won’t act against Nomura. I wouldn’t act against Nomura. Like I said, that guy is scary. But, as luck would have it, I happen to know who I can enlist. I know the boss of Renraku Europe, Karl Stadt. We met a couple of times, and we sort of hit it off. He thinks I’m competent. I always thought he wanted me to come over, but he didn’t want to poach a resource from America. Most importantly, he is one pig-headed angry little badger. You don’t mess with Stadt. He’s been fighting toe-to-toe for business in Lofwyr’s backyard for years. He has balls the size of golf fields. I can imagine just how pissed he’s going to be when he hears that Asia is trying to screw him over with Fed-Boeing.

I’m smiling. Things were getting grim for me for a minute there. But now, now I got my mojo back. I got that little worm Nomura by the balls. The smile dies a little on my lips. Shit, what time is it? I check my retina clock. It’s 8 p.m. It’s late in Europe. I said I knew Stadt, but I don’t know him on a “wake him in the middle of the night” level. I won’t be able to speak to him till tomorrow. And Titanium Angel’s team won’t back out of the run, not even with what I’ve figured out. They’ll want to proceed. Arrrgh! So close, yet so far. All right. Okay. That’s not so bad. It’s not ideal, but we can do the run anyway. Just so long as Nomura doesn’t get the paydata; I’ll hand it over to Stadt, I think that will work out.

In any case, I still try to contact Stadt’s office. I send him a message explaining everything. I call his office, try directly calling the few other people I know in Europe. Talk to a few of them. They tell me they’ll do what they can to reach Stadt. After a while of that, I feel that I’ve done everything I can to reach him. What can I say—one does not reach the Director of Renraku Europe on a whim.

With that side of things done, I switch gears and go check out the team’s preparations.

Everyone seems to be chilling out. Irish is crashed in a corner, arms crossed over his chest, snoozing. Zoë is in the Matrix. Angel is having a phone conversation, pacing the empty warehouse. Vanity is sitting in a corner, watching AR trideo. I go sit next to her. She’s watching a *Casablanca* remake from like twenty years back.

“I love this movie,” she says distractedly, enraptured by the images, as I plop down next to her.

“Have you ever seen the original?” I ask her. I sure as hell haven’t, but she’s a fan, so who knows.

She speaks slowly, like someone just waking up from a deep and pleasant sleep, and looks a little vacant, so I think she’s tripping on a moodchip to complement the flick. “No. This is the only version I ever saw. First time I saw it I was like fourteen. It inspired me. It relaxes me now. Brings me to another place. It’s like a fairy tale for shadowrunners.” She adds a vague little chuckle at the end.

“Fairy tale? Doesn’t it end with heartbreak?”

She stares at the images for a moment. “It’s not about how it ends. It’s about the setting. The going. It always ends in heartbreak, or else it wouldn’t be called the ending.”

I blink. That may have been profound.

“So, no plan revision, or training?” I ask.

“Nah, not this close to the mission. We all try to relax now. No matter how many times we do this, we all get the jitters. We try to distract ourselves. It makes Irish sleepy. Me too, a little. I kind of just cocoon up and wait for it to pass.”

I consider a life where you make your money going up against odds stacked squarely against you with fair odds of having your flesh split by a bullet. It’s a crazy life. I’m reminded that despite my time spent with Vanity and her team, I will never understand why they do this. Professionally speaking, I don’t need to understand them, so that’s okay.

We sit in silence, watching the trid. After a few minutes, Vanity seems to notice me out of the corner of her eye. She suddenly turns to face me. “What? What’s the matter?” I say slightly alarmed.

She leans into me and gives me an open-mouth kiss, her lips gently forcing mine apart, giving me an intense and quite pleasurable mouth exercise. She pulls back slowly and settles back to watching the movie.

“What was that for?”

She shrugs. “We might be dead tomorrow,” is the only explanation she offers. I’ve had some chicks from the corporate life I’ve hooked up with tell me that as an excuse



for cutting loose and doing it with a bad boy like me, but it never had an actual true meaning like this.

We don't get to see the end of the movie. Before it's done, Angel walks over to everyone and shakes them out of their thing. Vanity turns it off, denied the famous ending, without complaint. They all wordlessly get busy equipping up, getting into body armor, picking up their guns, hooking on electronics, checking everything.

Irish tosses me an armored vest, which I don't catch because I'm not expecting it. As I look at it at my feet, he hands me a pistol grip-first. I raise my eyebrows at him. "I'm not going." It's a statement.

He smirks evilly and Angels answers for him. "Yes, you are. You're with Zoë. You're coming in with us."

"I have no training for this. I'm a Johnson. I talk. It's all I do." I say this very plainly. The obvious insanity of his crazy words must be apparent. Maybe I misunderstood him.

"You're coming in. You won't be where the shooting is. Zoë will keep you safe," confirms Vanity. I stare at her open-mouthed. *Et tu, Brute?*

Zoë gives me a wink. "You'll be safe with me, honey," she says, greatly amused by her role as my protector. "Don't worry, Ta and Irish do all the shooting; Vanity will run backup for us all, and you and I are going to squeak by like little mice." She uses her fingers to mimic little mice ears. I stare in disbelief.

Regardless, all said and done, I find myself dressed in black, body armor slapped on, and pistol holstered. I don't really plan to use it. The only reason I'd have to fire it is if everyone else is dead. At that point, I'm just going to take my chances and surrender. That's what I decided. Still, while I'm not too cool with the fact I was enlisted, I have faith in the team. I hired them, after all.

After what seems to me like mere moments, we make our quick drive to the city outskirts, and we find ourselves laying outside the facility perimeter, hunkered down in the high grass. As Irish cuts the wire, I realize there is no going back. We all get up and make a run for our next cover. We're exposed here, so Vanity has a spirit hiding us. We check time. We're slightly ahead of schedule. I have to say so far I'm impressed. They move as one, with an efficiency shared by top-notch Special Forces units. I've seen Red Samurai in action before, and Titanium's team reminds me of those guys.

The next step is breaching the door to the main building. After that, stealth alone won't be enough. Everyone exchanges looks, and then all eyes set on me. We're waiting for the distraction team. Somehow, I am personally responsible for them, like they're my kids or something. We pass the time marker. Nothing. Irish gives me a nasty snarl. "Just wait," I whisper, though I have serious doubts. I'm far removed from my operation. Since I got canned by Renraku, it isn't impossible they canceled the distraction team. Maybe I gave myself away when we invaded the Renraku node. I haven't been in control for far too long. I don't like it at all.

Suddenly, we hear the staccato of burst fire echoing off in the distance. Yells. More erratic gunfire. Then a giant fireball lights the sky. I feel a degree or two of heat, even at this distance. I smile.

"Go," Titanium Angel softly commands, and we're off. We get to the side wall and our intrusion point just as sirens start blaring loudly. Zoë's mental work quickly unlocks the door, which, in a rare moment of trust in my abilities, I am left responsible for holding open as Angel and Irish roll in. They immediately fire their silenced weapons. One burst each, then another from Irish. That's it. Once everyone else is in, I roll in myself. Angel and Irish are already moving off into the distance. I see two downed security guards and one guy in khakis and white shirt. Wrong place, wrong time, chummer. My mind vaguely registers that they probably didn't need to shoot the civilian, but I'm so jacked up on adrenaline I discard it as non-essential to my survival and thus not important.

I focus with everything I have and remember I'm supposed to follow Zoë. Follow her where? Why? What then? I start to panic. I don't know what I'm doing here. This is so over my head. I push it down. It's so hard just to focus on simple instructions. But I realize that if I do what I was told, I'll give myself a chance to come out of this alive. I close my eyes and focus, and steady myself. I follow Zoë. We branch off to the right, down a flight of stairs, then down some hallway. Zoë always stops us when we reach doors or have to turn corners. We stop, she carefully checks ahead, we proceed. We meet no one on the way. We're in some basement. We're going down hallways. We hit a security door. Maglocked. Zoë stares at it for a few seconds and it opens revealing a security guy, dressed in black armor and toting a submachine gun on a sling. He looks as surprised to see us as we do to see him. Zoë savagely points her handgun at him and fires four rounds into the black glass of his visor. He falls down. She looks down to dead-check him. Right at that moment, another guard turns the corner and raises his gun at Zoë. I pull up my gun. Fire fire fire fire. Fire. As I shoot, my muzzle flash is all I see. I have to stop shooting to see what happened. I hit him. There is blood against the wall and he's crumpled on the floor. I blink rapidly, trying to chase off the white spots I'm seeing from the flash. Zoë takes a breath, realizing that could have been the end for her. We both look at each other and nod. On we go.

Zoë lets the rest of the team know that we met unexpected guards but dealt with it. Angel and Irish are perplexed, since those guys weren't supposed to be there. It doesn't matter. We hit the computer lab where the technology is being worked on. It is deserted, as it should be. Zoë hooks up and starts hacking. This should only take a minute. I wait nervously.

A man comes out of nowhere, running into the room, out of breath. He sees me standing there, and sees Zoë with a cable running from her head to the control screen. You'd think he'd bugger right out, but that's not what he does.



“No! You can’t do this. This research is too important!” he says, angry. I assess him to be one of those top-notch R&D geniuses that don’t care about dying, only about not losing their work. I know the personality profile. We often extract them.

I point my gun at him. “We’re taking it.”

“No! You can’t!” he says defiantly. This is insane. He’s not armed, and I’m pointing a gun at his head.

“Back off! I’m pointing a *fucking* gun at your *fucking* head. You’ve *lost*. Back the *fuck* out!” I yell at him. I feel like an angry troll. I feel the power of the gun in my hand. I just killed a guy. Right outside. I did. I can do it again.

“You bastard!” he roars as he makes a charge for me. I fire; then fire again, then once more. Three rounds, into his upper back, as he comes at me head down. He instantly collapses to the floor, like a puppet whose strings are cut. He doesn’t yell anymore. A pool of blood is quickly flooding out of him. I take two steps back to avoid it touching me.

Zoë blinks back into this world. “Ho-ly crap!” she exclaims, seeing my handiwork.

“He came out of nowhere, one of the project scientists or something. He charged me, can you believe it?” I say, my voice much higher-pitched than usual.

“You couldn’t just whip him across the face?” she asks, looking at me wide eyed.

I realize that sounds pretty sane. I could have just done that. I don’t know why I didn’t just do that. My mouth opens and closes. I have no answer.

“Doesn’t matter. I got the data. We’re Oscar Mike,” she says, getting up.

“What? Who?” I say, confused.

“Oscar Mike! On the move! On the fucking move! Let’s *go*!” she urges. This shooting of people wasn’t part of my plan. Look what happens when you improvise. I’m all messed up. Go back to keeping it simple. Follow Zoë. Just follow Zoë.

Going out is a blur, since my brain is still catching up on processing what happened going in. It’s a slurry of hallways, flashing lights, and blaring alarms. All I know for sure is that we meet back up first with Vanity, who looks tired, her face ashen, then with Titanium Angel and Irish. There’s a little blood splatter on them. Irish moves like his ribs hurt him. Our planning—ha, who am I kidding, *their* planning—was solid and is holding up. We exfiltrate based on the planned coordinates. On the other side of the facility, it looks like the diversion team is still kicking. Zoë informs us she’s patched into their frequency. Angel tells her to forward to our earpieces.

I recognize the gruff voice of the man I hired in the bar, the ugly troll. His voice is tight, angry, determined. His teammates sound the same. Every time they speak, background noise of gunfire comes through. They’ve figured out they hit a wall. They are taking way too much fire. “Exfiltrate, you dumb slags!” yells Irish, though our channel is listen-only. Perhaps his ardent advice is psychically received, as right then, the troll calls it and gives the order

to bugger out. I feel everyone here breathe relief. It’s like listening to a football game on the radio with a bunch of overly caffeinated superfans.

But just as we’re pretty much out of the industrial park and the other team is on the retreat, a pair of heavy-looking roto-drones, flight lights blinking calmly, buzz toward the combat scene like fat bumblebees full of pollen. They change from a transit vector to an operational one, and all I hear is a terribly loud ripping sound. Two bloated little dots in the sky rain down minigun fire below them, tracer rounds making it look like they are pouring long streams of molten metal. Their little bloated bodies shift in a circular pattern, and the sound of metal sheets ripping resumes while more molten metal falls down below. Things grow quiet after that. We pick up whispering on the audio channel. Too faint to make out the words. Might be a prayer. Then nothing but static.

Zoë tunes out the channel. None of us speak. We get back in our van and drive away in silence.

We all quietly busy ourselves with removing gear and stowing equipment. My head is light. I feel oddly serene, but if I close my eyes I see black rolling storms. I pick up my commlink and check my messages. I have a message from Stadt, or more precisely, one of his bagmen. I clear my throat to get everyone’s attention. “I have a message from friendly actors within Renraku. They have superseded the operation. We’ll be making a delivery to a friendly agent.” I put away my commlink and meet Vanity’s eyes. “It shouldn’t change anything for you. You’re still being paid. It’ll settle things for me, though.”

Vanity keeps her eyes locked on me, without any acknowledgement. The slanted almond curves of her brown eyes observe me with tranquility. I find it odd nobody says anything. I figure they might still blame me for the diversion squad’s destiny.

“Good,” says Titanium Angel, after a very long pause. Nothing more is said until we get back in the city.

I ask Zoë for the data files we pulled and look them over. Engineering specs for sensor-defeating material. It’s highly technical crap; but clearly enough data for any engineer to figure out how to make the same thing or even start on counter-technology. It’s just another milestone in a never-ending arms race. It almost seems pointless, but I know we’re talking billion-nuyen data here.

We’ll be offloading the paydata right away with Stadt’s agent. We drive to the meeting spot. I wasn’t clear on my orientation when I was by myself, after the hotel incident, but I recognize it again, seeing it now. We’re in the same neighborhood where I saw those punks. In fact, we pull into the large back lot of the same store where I sat for a while. I chuckle softly at the fact that I’ve come full circle.

“What is it?” asks Vanity. She must have been watching me pretty intently to notice my barely noticeable reaction, which surprises me. “Oh, nothing,” I mumble. “I was here earlier, is all. Seems odd. Fateful, maybe.”

Angel takes an odd interest too. “That is all?”



“Yeah,” I say, brushing it all off. I don’t know why they’re paying such close attention. I told them I’m fine. I think maybe they think I got too rattled. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

I see Vanity and Angel exchange looks, but they drop it.

A black sedan pulls in and parks nearby. No mistake who that would be. “Go,” Angel tells me.

“Me? You’re not doing this?” I ask.

“No, it’s fine. We trust you. You must have things to discuss with him about your situation. Just bring back our money. We’ll be waiting.” He nods at me. Titanium Angel has an intense gaze, and his speech is all business, but he certainly has a self-assured presence that commands respect. He’s someone you want in your corner. He’s a good leader for this team. I nod back and get out the van. I reach to close the door but Vanity stops me. “Leave it open, just in case. You can’t ever be too safe.” I acquiesce and leave it open, walking toward the sedan. I think again of that car ride yesterday. Vanity, sitting behind me, ready to kill me. You can’t ever be too safe.

A man gets out of the sedan as I approach. I can’t help but feel nervous. The handoff always seems so risky. I’m always tense during handoffs with my crews, and they are too. Nothing ever happens, or at least it hasn’t so far, but it’s like at this point, your at a threshold where the runners have to give you what they fought so hard to acquire, and they feel vulnerable, and everyone thinks about what could go wrong and how anyone at the meet could decide to kill anyone else. But it usually is a brief moment of tension. Then it passes, they hand over the goods, and my side hands over the payment. Nobody pulls any guns. Everyone backs away. Everything is fine. Usually.

That tense moment is upon us now. I reach the Johnson on the other side. I know him. Young recruit. He’s dressed in a very expensive pinstripe wool suit, golden pocketwatch fashionably hanging off a fine chain by his breast. He smiles broadly at me, like I’m a friend returning from a walk.

“Jesus, Martin, you look like hell,” he says, and he flashes a perfect white-toothed smile.

“Yeah, well,” I shrug. I can’t think of a single coherent thing to say in response.

Jay—that’s his name—awkwardly looks for some words to break the silence, realizing my mood isn’t quite as good as his. “Um, yeah, yeah. Right. So, uh, your team got the data, right? You have the data?”

I nod. “And you’re getting this to ...” I prompt, just to make sure. We both say “Stadt” at the same time. He nods. “Yeah, Stadt, we talked, it’s all sorted out. Nomura actually had me out here, you know. What a bastard, huh? Anyway, at the last minute Stadt swoops in and shit gets shuffled, Nomura is out, they tell me my bit. Nothing much different for me. I just do what I’m told. But, uh, yeah, I think Nomura had it in for you. It’s all cool now, though. All cool.”

I nod slowly. What a tool. But he’s young, he’ll learn. I reach out for the small data chip where we dumped all the files and hold it up to him. “This is ...” I begin, but it gets cut short when his chest explodes.

Large marble-sized gory holes rip open, tearing his suit. I reflexively hold out a hand, my eyes wide. A sudden jump of sourness fills my throat as adrenaline revs me up. Jay has time to gurgle a bit before crumpling to the ground. I look around. I register a sound near me, but I see nothing. Then I eat a mouthful of metal. It *hurts*. My mouth fills with the coppery taste of blood. My jaw is numb as I fall. One moment I’m staring at nothing, the next Irish is looking down at me, barrel of a silenced Predator pointed at me, cold death in his gaze. Irish. He always had it in for me.

Oh shit. Then I register it. Invisible. Vanity. This is ... this is ... “Why?” I ask.

Irish stares down the barrel of his gun at me. Angel, Vanity and even Zoë walk into my field of vision. They all look down at me.

“We got a better deal from Mitsuhama,” says Titanium Angel.

I stare up at all of them. “*What?*” is all I can manage to say, pouring all my hurt and disbelief into it.

“We got a better deal from Mitsuhama,” repeats Vanity, like it’s the clearest thing in the world. Which it kind of is. Zoë picks up the explanation from there. “Your organization is so mixed up, they’ll never figure it out. We won’t take a hit to our rep. They’ll never know what happened. They’ll blame you. I erased any mention of our team from their files for this job. Nomura is out. He’s the only one that might have known what we were up to, and I doubt he cares anyway. We’re clean. So, we just sold it to the highest bidder. I mean, why not? You gave us the chance. That’s all. Nothing personal.”

I stare at each one of them in turn. They look down on me with the same interest an alien dissecting an abductee might have. “And what about me?” I ask, glancing at Jay’s body.

“What about you?” answers Irish with delight. Vanity raises a hand and lowers Irish’s gun. “Renraku—whether it’s your American bosses, or the Europe division—will figure you betrayed them. It might not make perfect sense, and they might not understand why, but they’ll figure you did it. There isn’t much you’ll be able to say to defend yourself. Even if you make them listen and tell them about us, it’s still on you. You hired us.”

And I know she’s right.

My eyes fall. I am broken, defeated, outdone, and outsmarted. And it wasn’t even that hard for them to do. For all my experience—this is hardly my first time dealing with shadowrunners—I have been played like a child in a grown up’s game. Too focused on saving my own skin, I didn’t think about what others might be up to, what their self-interest would push them too. The most basic calculation of all, and I left it down. What a fucking *newb* I am.

Angel loses interest and leaves. Zoë gives me a curt shrug and a wink and joins him back at the car. Irish sneers and leaves me, giving Vanity a meaningful look. Vanity crouches down next to me. She seeks my eye contact. I swat at her. “Fuck off, Vanity.”



I pick myself up, spit out blood, groaning. I swear. Start walking, sort of toward Atlanta. Vanity joins me. “Hey,” she says.

“I said fuck off, Vanity! If you’re not going to kill me, leave me alone”.

“Hey!” she says again, grabbing me. I slap her hand away. Then my limbs stiffen like they’re made of rusted steel and I can’t move.

“Really?!” I snap as her spell holds me.

She places herself in front of me. “Stop being a dick. If you can remember how.”

I feel the spell drop. I sigh. I regain some of my composure. “All right. What is it? You played me like a sucker. What else is left to say?”

“I played the game,” she says firmly, without a hint of flirtation. “Just like you played it when you set up a team for a suicide mission. Just like you played it a thousand times before. You dropped your guard, and you know what happens when people do that. You’re still alive, and lucky to be so. So do what the rest of us always do—find a next step to take, and take it.”

Now it’s my turn to give her a level stare.

She extends her arm and offers me something. It’s a commlink. I look at it.

“Take it. It’s linked to an account with some cash, and it’s got a fake SIN on it. Not much, but it’s a start. And it’s also got Angel’s Mitsuhamas contact. He wants to talk to you. He wants to offer you a job.”

I cock an eyebrow. I take the device. “Mitsuhamas, huh?” I ask slowly. I take a breath, and the last two days come all back to me. No, I won’t be going back to Renraku. Will not be stopping by my pad in Manhattan. It’s heavy. But I knew it could end like this.

End like this.

I smile, and it turns into a chuckle, then a laugh. I shake my head.

“What’s so funny?” asks Vanity

“*It always ends in heartbreak, or else it wouldn’t be called the ending,*” I recite.

A shy smile grows on her face. She blushes and looks to the side. “You know I was high when I said that, right?” she says.

I grunt. I toss the commlink up and down in my hand, as the moment stretches. “Well, we’ll always have Paris, huh?”

She delicately cocks an eyebrow over her almond eye. “Actually, we’ll have Metrôpole...” she says, turning curtly and walking away.

I frown. “Metrôpole?”

“Yeah. That’s where your new job is.”

“Oh. Okay.” I actually have a hundred questions coming to mind, but none of them can push their way to the front of the line and make it out of my mouth.

“That’s where I’m going too. Team’s heading there for a while.” A mischievous grin curves her lips. “Talk about coincidence, no?”

I chuckle. I watch her walk away, then call after her. “Maybe I’ll hire you, then. I promise it won’t be for a distraction run.”

As she gets into the van, I hear a single mocking laugh. “Even if you do, Mr. Johnson, it’ll be nothing personal, right?” I have a grin on my face as the van drives off, leaving me standing in the night.



GAME INFORMATION

VANITY (HUMAN)

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	M	Edg	Ess
3	4	4	2	4	4	4	5	5	4	6

Initiative: 8 + 1d6

Astral Initiative: 8 + 3d6

Movement: 8/16/+2

Condition Monitor (P/S): 10/10

Limits: Physical 4, Mental 6, Social 6

Qualities: Catlike, First Impression

Armor: 9

Skills (Dice Pools): Con 8, Pistols 6, Gymnastics 7, Negotiation 8, Perception 7, Sneaking 8(10), Sorcery skill group 9, Summoning 7

Spells: Improved Invisibility, Confusion, Influence, Control Thoughts, Physical Barrier, Manaball, Mind Probe

Gear: Armor vest [Fire Resistant 4], Erika Elite commlink (Device Rating 4), AR contacts (w/ flare compensation), hair sticks (spell focus, Manipulation, Rating 3), trodes

Weapons:

Colt America L36 [Light Pistol, Acc 7, DV 7P, AP —, SA, RC —, 11(c), w/ 1 extra clip]

TITANIUM ANGEL (HUMAN)

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	M	Edg	Ess
6 (9)	4	3 (5)	4 (6)	4	3	4	4	4	3	2.0

Initiative: 8(9) + 3d6

Movement: 8/16/+2

Condition Monitor (P/S): 11(13)/10

Limits: Physical 6(9), Mental 5, Social 5

Qualities: Toughness, Weak Immune System

Armor: 15

Skills (Dice Pools): Athletics skill group 7, Firearms skill group 10, Intimidation 9, Leadership 10, Perception 6, Sneaking 7, Unarmed Combat 10

Augmentations: Cyberarm (alphaware) [obvious, right, custom w/ Agility 1, Custom Strength 3, Gyromount], cyberarm (alphaware) [obvious, left, custom w/ Agility 1, Custom Strength 3, Grenade Launcher], synaptic booster 2, titanium bone lacing (alphaware), cybereyes [Rating 1, w/ camera, flare compensation, image link, smartlink]

Gear: Armor jacket [Non-Conductivity 8, Fire Resistance 4], Erika Elite commlink (Device Rating 4), trodes

Weapons:

Ares Predator V [Heavy Pistol, Acc 5(7), DV 8P, AP -1, SA, RC —, 15(c), w/ smartlink, 1 extra clip]

HK-227 [Submachine Gun, Acc 5(7), DV 7P, AP —, SA/BF/FA, RC (1), 28c, w/ 4 extra clips, silencer]

Colt M23 [Assault Rifle, Acc 4, DV 9P, AP -2, SA/BF/FA, RC -3, 40c, 4 extra clips, under-barrel Smartlink, Gas Vent Rating 3]

Cyber microgrenade launcher [Grenade Launcher, Acc 4(6), DV As Grenade, AP As Grenade, SS, RC —, 2(m)]

Flash pak microgrenades [Special, p. 435, SR5]

IRISH (HUMAN)

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	M	Edg	Ess
5 (6)	5 (6)	5 (8)	4 (5)	3	2	3	3	3	3	1.3

Initiative: 11 + 3d6

Movement: 12/24 +2

Condition Monitor (P/S): 11/10

Limits: Physical 8, Mental 4, Social 4

Armor: 14

Skills (Dice Pools): Athletics skill group 11, Armorer 4, Artisan 6 (Cooking +2), Blades 10 (Knife +2), Demolitions 4, Firearms skill group 11, Intimidation 7, Perception 5, Sneaking 9, Unarmed Combat 10

Augmentations: Cyberears [Rating 1, w/ damper, sound link], cybereyes [Rating 3, w/ camera, image link, flare compensation, low-light vision, smartlink, vision enhancement 3], orthoskin 2, reflex recorder (Automatics), suprathyroid gland, wired reflexes 2

Gear: Armor jacket [Non-Conductive 4, Fire Resistance 4, Chemical Seal 4], Erika Elite commlink (Device Rating 4), trodes

Weapons:

Ares Predator V [Heavy Pistol, Acc 5(7), DV 8P, AP -1, SA, RC —, 15(c), w/ smartlink, 1 extra clip]

Combat knife [Blade, Acc 6, Reach —, DV 6(7)P, AP -3]

Ingram Smartgun X [Submachine Gun, Acc 4(6), DV 8P, AP —, BF/FA, RC -2, 32c, w/ smartlink, 4 extra clips]

Yamaha Raiden [Assault Rifle, Acc 6(8), DV 11P, AP -2, BF/FA, RC 1, 60c, w/ smartlink, sound suppressor, 3 extra clips]

ZOË (ELF)

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	M	Edg	Ess
2	5	4	2	4	6	4	5	2	2	5.8

Initiative: 8 + 1d6

Matrix Initiative (Cold Sim): (Data Processing + 4) + 3d6

Matrix Initiative (Hot Sim): (Data Processing + 4) + 4d6

Movement: 10/20 +2

Condition Monitor (P/S): 9/10

Limits: Physical 4, Mental 7, Social 7

Qualities: Allergy (Gold, Uncommon, Moderate), Human-Looking

Armor: 9

Skills (Dice Pools): Athletics skill group 8, Cracking skill group 10, Electronics skill group 9, Pistols 7, Unarmed Combat 7

Augmentations: Cybereyes [Rating 1, w/ camera, image link], datajack

Programs: Baby Monitor, Blackout, Configurator, Encryption, Exploit, Fork, Guard, Hammer, Mugger, Signal Scrub, Sneak, Stealth, Track

Gear: Armor vest [w/ Non-Conductivity 6], Erika Elite commlink (Device Rating 4), Novatech Navigator [DR 3, Attribute array 6 5 4 3, Programs 3], datachips (3)

Weapons:

Colt America L36 [Light Pistol, Acc 7, DV 7P, AP -4, SA, RC —, 11(c), w/ APDS ammo, 2 extra clips]

Shock gloves [Other, Acc Phys, Reach —, DV 8S(e), AP -5]



F-B BUMBLEBEE

The Bumblebee is a heavily armored version of a typical Roto-Drone. While its weight means it's unlikely to be seen outside of fixed-perimeter security roles, the Bumblebee won *Corporate Security Weekly* magazine's coveted "Best New Drone 2075" award, improving its sales potential. The Bumblebee's role is straightforward: head where the fighting is thickest and rain death from the skies. The thick armor means it is unlikely to go down unless faced with anti-vehicular weaponry.

Standard Accessories: Stoner-Ares M202 [Machine Gun, Acc 5, DV 10P, AP -3, FA, RC —, 100(belt), w/ tracer rounds]

Stoner-Ares M202 Targeting Autosoft

The Bumblebee is operated with the Pilot Aircraft skill.

Handl	Speed	Accel	Bod	Arm	Pilot	Sens	Seats	Avail	Cost
3	2	1	4	14	3	3	—	12F	24,000¥

CREDITS

Olivier's Dedication: Special thanks to Elaine and Joanna for your graciously donated time, it means a lot to me. And a very special "thanks" to Noura for the Ramada - Bribé!

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