

TwoDee's Shadowrun Storytime

Written by TwoDee

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Chapters 1-21, Last updated 28/12/2014 CE

For almost two years, /tg/ was treated to one of the best series of storytime threads ever to appear on the board. All told, it covers nearly 500 pages and shows just what kind of fun you can have in Shadowrun, whether you're a new player or a veteran GM. Save this on your commlink, because we'll be here a while.

The editing of this compilation is minimal, mostly spelling and syntax errors that TwoDee usually caught in a follow-up post. There are some greentext comments from TwoDee and other commenters in the threads to clarify certain points. As well, the dates (when provided) are also green, and you should pay attention to them to follow the foreshadowing at certain points.

You can find all the original threads (including 15.5 and 21.5, when the original chapter threads hit their limit and a new one had to be started to continue the story) on sup/tg/ by searching for the "Shadowrun" tag or archive.moe by searching "Shadowrun Storytime." Special mention goes to Jarboot, who originally started to compile these threads.

Buckle up, chummer; you're in for a hell of a ride.

Introduction by TwoDee

As a general rule I really enjoy /tg/'s tales of woe and wonderment, enough so that I'd like to think that one of my gaming group's ongoing tales is worthy of adding to the fold. In particular, it is the tale of TROUT, formerly called "DEAD MAN" (his own personal choice of street name), techno-ninja extraordinaire and That Guy also extraordinaire. Those of you prone to screaming "WEEABOO" at every character concept, prepare to scream it at a character that deserves it.

Ask three Shadowrun players what the core character roles of Shadowrun are, ESPECIALLY Shadowrun 4th Edition, and you'll get four answers. However, I've got a little exercise from you, /tg/, for more storytelling "oomph," which requires a basic consensus on the character roles. Hence, for said exercise, we will assume that there are four core roles: Street Samurai, Hacker, Mage, and Infiltrator. Though the team had both a Rigger and a Face as well, these were both half-roles and thus are irrelevant in this particular instance. In brief summary:

>A Street Samurai is a combat monster who fucks shit up, and usually figures prominently in backup plans.

>A Hacker is a nerd who runs everything computer-related.

>A Mage is your dude who does magic. No fucking shit.

>An Infiltrator is a guy who either ninjas or bluffs his way in to gather intel or complete mission objectives.

If anyone could confirm that they're in the thread, I can move on to the next part of said exercise. Basically, we're going to play a little game, and I need someone to answer questions for this game. I'm going to describe each of our player characters in order. You are going to guess what role they filled. That way, when you hit That Guy, you can properly appreciate the dawning horror that filled the hearts of the GM and all of the other players. Sound good?

CHARACTER ONE:

>Real Name: John Doe?

>Street Name: Dervish, formerly "Featherstep"

>Metatype: Orc

Dervish was a genengineered super-soldier who woke up in an alleyway in Everett with a pair of pants, a room key to a coffin hotel, 20 bucks, and a host of comically illegal cyber bits. Experimental cybereyes? Check. Implanted blades all throughout the body? Check. Wolverine skeleton? Check. Rocket feet? Check motherfucking check. Dude is like a hoverbike on legs. Whatever he was before his memory got erased, Dervish apparently wasn't very nice. Well, assuming he wasn't, like, in a tube up until 15 minutes before the start of the campaign.

His positive qualities were mostly stuff like biocompatibility and a type O system, which makes it easier to put bioengineered parts in him, and his negative qualities involved him being an amnesiac (amnesia rank 1) and having no contacts (hung out to dry), what with probably being a brainless tube baby prior to the campaign.

I'm sorry if this is insultingly obvious, but it's for good reason to emphasize the terribleness of the last character. Which role did Dervish fill?

>Mage

>Hacker

>Street Samurai
>Infiltrator

>Street samurai?

Correct!

CHARACTER TWO

>Real Name: Malcolm McWilliams
>Street Name: 2D
>Metatype: Human

2D was a teenage member of the criminal hacking group Chaos Engine (fluffed as /b/ but more murderous) and an all around directionless loser when the Crash 2.0 rendered him comatose at his computer. Waking up in the hospital to find his immediate family deceased and his pockets empty, he was swiftly placated by his mind's quasi-mystical connection to the new Wireless Matrix. After a shifts-and-giggles crime spree, he was pinched by Evo Biomedical Seattle and only saved from a swift trip to the dissection table by the timely intervention of a bunch of novacoked-up Halloweeners blowing up the warehouse he was being temporarily held in. At the time of the start of this story, he is known by the media as the 2D Bomber, a terrorist wanted for using matrix-connected RC cars and walking dolls loaded up with nitro and hand grenades to blast Evo medical clinics.

Negative Qualities:

Enemy: Evo Biomedical Seattle
Vendetta: Evo Biomedical Seattle

Signature: leaves a databomb on hacked nodes, with an old-timey-gunpowder-bomb icon.

Paranoid: EVO IS AFTER ME YOU GUYS

Positive Qualities:

>Technomancer
>Paragon: Daedalus (Basically he's like the hardware tech support guy from hell)
>Erased: When he shows up in video feeds, an old-timey bomb appears over his face, Laughing Man style.
>Made Man: Chaos Engine

2D was a...

>Mage
>Hacker
>Infiltrator

>Hacker!

Correctamundo!

CHARACTER THREE

>Real Name: Damien Sanitiere
>Street Name: Geppetto
>Metatype: Elf

Although an unassuming suburban Italian-American white-collar Ares middle management man by day, Damien hides a terrible secret: he is actually a serial killer obsessed with ritual suicide, using mind-and-body-puppeting magic to orchestrate a spat of suicides and murder-suicides across Seattle. He keeps his dual life well-hidden, carefully concealing his magical talent. His magic in and of itself is perverse and sinister, reflecting his nihilist beliefs: his spirits are cruel, spiteful things, taking the forms of mysterious men in black, mocking fey, and whirlwinds of infernal fire. However, on the surface, he is just Mister Sanitiere, shipping manager and neighborhood watch member, and he likes it that way.

Positive qualities were mostly magic related except for a variant on the Assassin's Creed Oath, which basically swears him to secrecy. Negative qualities were mostly obsessive-compulsive stuff of the type that serial killers are prone to.

Geppetto was our (herp derp)...

>Mage

>Infiltrator

>infiltr-MAGE

Ayep!

CHARACTER FOUR

>Real Name: Jo Sekigahara

>Street Name: DeadMan, later Trout

>Metatype: Elf

Jo Sekigahara was a Japanese national who was also a member of the Texan Lone Star PMC and also a Yakuza member at the same time. He became a wanted man when he did something totally more grimdark and hardcore than 2D or Geppetto's silly players could have thought up, namely shooting up an orphanage. But it was okay, the orphans' parents were Mafia members, and all is fair in the secret war of the Yakuza. Sekigahara has not been found by his former employers at Lone Star because he is a ninja. In addition to being super stealthy, he is a master of guns, like Mami Tomoe from Madoka Magica. He took the name of "DeadMan" because he knows that, like all honorable Japanese, he must die someday.

Negative Qualities:

>Wanted: DeadMan had a gigantic bounty on his head for geeking a bunch of orphans.

>Records on File: Lone Star, the same corp that wanted him, had a complete dossier on his behavior, psychology, safehouses, and contacts.

>Criminal SIN: DeadMan was implanted with a chip that broadcast his location to the cops (who know everything about him and have a gigantic bounty on his head) every time he passed or entered any gridlinked municipal area, namely all of Seattle.

>Braggart: DeadMan had to make a composure check to avoid interrupting conversations to talk about how he geeked all those orphans, resulting in an alert which called the cops who had a gigantic bounty on his head and knew everything about him.

"Positive Qualities": DeadMan thought ninjas were really cool so he blew all of his money and a Restricted Gear quality on a freaking tactical ops suit, to the point where he didn't have any money left for a lifestyle and thus was a homeless guy in tactical gear. However, he didn't like the idea of

“playing an ugly character” (his words), so he minmaxed for social infiltration, including blowing at least half his karma on facial sculpt adept powers.

He had the power to be anyone and anything, so long as that anyone and anything had an implant that identified him to everyone who ever looked at him as Jo Sekigahara, wanted fugitive.

What role did DeadMan fill?

>Infiltrator

That’s right, it’s this kind of story.

Chapter 1: The Start of Darkness

Our GM has a very specific style, in the sense that he likes using modules, but will then completely warp them to his own ends and just adapt, adapt, adapt. Basically, it allows him to not have to make up shit like statblocks on the fly, but he also effectively heads off metagaming because people who think they're going the direction of the original module often end up driving their snazzy Mercury Westwind off a cliff. However, there is one module that he will always use, gleefully unironically, in every Shadowrun game, because it is awesome.

That module is Food Fight. I have no idea how many Runners have met during a Stuffer Shack shootout, but hot damn, it's gotta be a lot of them.

Our first session opened up on Dervish, at the time known as... well, he didn't have a name, so I'm just going to stick with Dervish even though it's anachronistic. He awoke in an alleyway in Everett with naught but pants, a room key, and 20 bucks. His legs weak, he used a dumpster as leverage to stand, and then tottered into the streets, nearly missing a few speeding cars. Remember at the start of Terminator, with a confused-but-purposeful-looking muscle robot walking naked through the street? Yeah, basically that, but give Arnold tusks and grey-green skin. Eventually Dervish managed to ask a few terrified and baffled bystanders where his key came from, and started on a 7-block walk to the hotel.

When he got there, and managed to locate his cubicle, he found a full set of clothes and a briefcase with a commlink and a gun in it, answering absolutely NO questions whatsoever. Drained, confused, and a little bit scared, Dervish dressed, pocketed the gun and commlink, and decided to reflect upon his situation over a shitty soy burger, as he set his commlink to search for the nearest Stuffer Shack, two blocks away.

Meanwhile, in a Hallweener block about seven streets down, 2D woke to his belligerent hung-over orc juggalo girlfriend yelling at him about a distinct lack of beer in the apartment. He was casually informed that, if there was no beer in the apartment within the next hour, one or more of these things would happen:

- >His knees would be caved in with a baseball bat
- >No sex for a month
- >He'd be out of the apartment
- >She'd break those computers to teach him to love them more than her
- >She'd break his toys.

The last threat there involved toys filled with nitroglycerin, so 2D hastily threw on his best white-text-on-black ironic t-shirt and did a skinny white boy jog downstairs to his pickup truck, avoiding the burly orcs in clown makeup that haunted his apartment building. Considering he was running to the Shadowrun equivalent of a 7-11, he didn't think to bring his drones. This was probably a mistake.

DeadMan, for his part, was walking down the street in Everett, using his tactical suit to be totally inconspicuous as shit. Sensing an easy mark (after all, some idiot was walking down the street in a six-digit-cost-suit), a mugger jumped out of an alleyway, sidled up alongside DeadMan with a gun, and demanded his money. Without hesitating, but also without waiting for any demands, DeadMan drew his Ares Alpha, a loud-as-fuck heavy pistol, and shot the guy in the face. Note that, though Everett is not a good part of town by any stretch of the imagination, shooting someone in the face in

broad daylight in the middle of the street is a different thing entirely. Our GM warned DeadMan that he should probably get going.

DeadMan: “No, I loot him first.”

GM: “You...loot him?”

DeadMan: “Uh, yeah. This is an RPG, right? I loot him.”

GM: “Okay, you take his gun. It's a Ruger--”

DeadMan: “Not just his gun. His gear.”

GM: “He's a mugger, he doesn't have any gear.”

DeadMan: “He's wearing armor, right?”

GM: “You mean clothes?”

DeadMan: “Yeah. I loot that.”

GM: “You take his clothes.”

DeadMan: “Yes.”

GM: “You strip the grungy-ass mugger with a hole in his face naked.”

DeadMan: “I can't sell his loot if I don't.”

GM: “What?”

DeadMan: “The party is meeting up at a shop, right? I'll sell the loot there.”

In case you're wondering, we'd actually played a game with this guy before. It was in the Song of Ice and Fire RPG, and he'd played a Maester who didn't know heraldry and didn't heal. Although that was kind of a dumb character, it was at the very least believable. The fact that he had regressed into JRPG logic for Shadowrun was a completely new phenomenon.

All things considered, it was probably lucky for Geppetto that he joined the campaign late.

So Dervish arrives first, and enters the Stuffer Shack. A bell rings. The cashier boredly announces, “Welcome to Stuffer Shack, stuff your face on half the cash...” Dervish instinctively grunts and makes for the soy-burger aisle. Considering that, to his knowledge, he did not exist before 30 minutes ago, he briefly wonders how the hell he knew what a soy burger was, and begins pondering this while zoning the hell out, staring at the burger packaging.

2D arrives shortly thereafter, grumbling about his relationship and “never enough beer in the apartment.” He stomps over to the drinks aisle in his clunky combat boots that he thinks are totally

badass, but mostly make him look like a tool since he's 5'4 and weighs about 130 pounds.

DeadMan, in his bloodstained tactical ops gear, marches right the fuck up to the cashier, deposits a worn, stained set of clothes and an armed handgun on the counter, and prepares to ask how much money the vendor will give him.

The GM wisely decided to launch the module at this point.

The bell rings once as a scared-looking elf girl, huddling a child to her chest, sprints through the doors and makes for the maintenance door of the stuffer shack. The baby is in absolute conniptions, having evidently been recently disturbed. The girl looks tired but also alert, and tries to melt behind the aisles as visual cover.

Not one to ever help a clearly desperate situation, 2D accesses the store's speakers (which he had previously hacked, on instinct as he entered the store) and announces, in his best saccharine fake-public-service voice,

“Would the mother of the child in aisle six please shut him the fuck up, lest the staff shut him up for you?”

The girl whimpers and shrinks behind the snack stand just before four dudes in balaclavas, each wielding shitty barrens guns and dressed in torn, second-hand combat fatigues, burst through the door and yell,

“NOBODY MOVE!”

Trout rolled extremely well in initiative and went first. Skipping any of the silly steps like “taking cover” or “finding out what they want,” he defaults to picking the mugger's gun back up off the counter and shooting at the thugs. His shot goes wild, striking one of the arcade machines.

Dervish, operating on instinct and spurred by gunshots, boosted right over the burger isle. The thugs didn't realize what the fuck had happened until the guy who had yelled “nobody move” fell apart in three chunks, arterial spray coating the plexiglass of the slidey doors.

2D did the thing that a channer would do, namely booking it out back with the girl, where they both hid behind the Stuffer Shack's delivery van and made awkward eye contact. His eyes unfocus as he switches his vision to that of the interior cameras.

Girl: “Did you hack the speakers?”

2D: “Shh. I also hacked the cameras. I'll let you know when it's clear. Just keep that baby fucking quiet.”

By this point the Stuffer Shack has turned into a punk music video, with shoppers running around knocking over stands and smacking into each other, DeadMan firing wildly and hitting windows, displays, and the odd bystander (he had about 5 dice to pistols, 7 with automatics but he was using the mugger's revolver), and Dervish killing a dude per initiative pass. 2D watches, giggling, through the security camera, as Dervish systematically tears the terrified thugs into their constituent parts with his

cyberblades and bare hands. You know those extremely brutal two-dude lethal finishers from the new Deus Ex? Think that, but about twice as fast and with four guys.

By the time the fourth guy's head pops off, 2D announces, "Oh SHIT!" and uploads the whole vidfeed to 4Chan.

In a chipper mood now that his day has been lightened with some seriously hardcore gore (and OC to boot!), 2D steps out of the back of the store clapping and cheering for the rocket-powered murderorc at the front of the store. The girl slowly follows him, holding the baby tight and eyeing the ragu sauce dripping from the walls nervously. Dervish exits kill-mode to see that everyone is more or less unharmed, except for a random elf poseur who took a bullet from DeadMan and the fact that everyone in the front half of the store is covered in thug bits.

2D: "Dude! You are the fucking BOMB! Where'd you learn moves like that?"

Dervish: "I don't really know."

2D: "Oh, so it's the ware then? Where'd you get the hook-up?"

Dervish: "I don't know that either."

2D: "...do you have a name?"

Dervish: "...I don't know."

2D gave him a long, confused look.

2D: "Do you have a commlink?"

Dervish produced his commlink.

"One of these things?"

2D grabbed his commlink from his hands, quickly unlocking it and looking through his files.

"It's registered to a Garrett Jordan."

Dervish: "I guess that's me, then."

2D: "Well, look, Garrett, I'ma put my name in your contacts, considering you evidently don't have many friends, judging by your contacts list. I feel like you'd be a useful guy to know."

At this point Dervish was thoroughly confused, and was almost thankful for the sound of Lone Star sirens (in GM's world, when KE picked up LS' Seattle contract, they also ate up the local LS branch).

DeadMan was less thankful for the sound of Lone Star Sirens, and booked it out the back at top speed.

2D and Dervish sat on the curb and prepared to give their testimony to the Star. Right as one of the

cops sidled over to the two of them to ask for a statement, though, the other took a look at the vidfeed from the Stuffer Shack.

“Hoh...lee...shit.”

His partner spoke up.

“What is it?”

“SEKIGAHARA IS LIKE TWO BLOCKS AWAY FROM HERE.”

“NO FUCKING WAY.”

Both cops promptly ran back to their car to chase after our erstwhile weeaboo, and 2D and Dervish quietly split to their respective homes.

The next morning, 2D and Dervish got a conference call from one Danny McReary, a fixer in the Irish Mafia. He thanked the two burgeoning young criminals for their service in saving his niece's life, and offered for them to come down to his runner bar to see if they were the right material he was looking for. Figuring that, as a broke channer and an amnesiac, they had nothing to lose, they both headed down to the bar.

DeadMan went down there independently because, as he informed us, “I am already a professional and proficient runner, unlike 2D and Dervish.”

Danny: “Alright. First things first, you boys will need street names. As of this little job, you two are officially deniable. So come up with something. Alright, white bread, you're up first.”

2D: “2D.”

Danny: “Well, everyone and their mother will know you're a hacker, but it works. Big guy?”

Dervish: “Featherfoot.”

Danny: “What?”

2D: “Gay.”

Danny: “No.”

Dervish: “Okay, Featherstep. You know, 'cause I have hover feet--”

2D: “REALLY gay.”

Danny: “Have to agree with 2D here.”

Dervish: “Alright, you bastards, what do you suggest?”

Danny: “Considering how you carved those thugs into mincemeat, I'd go with 'Dervish.' “

2D: “Not gay.”

Dervish: “Okay, fine. I'll be Dervish.”

Following this little bit of improv comedy, Danny explained the nature of the job. His niece had made the mistake of being the mistress of a Department of Water and Power official. See, this official had been rerouting water out of the North side and into more profitable developing areas, areas in which he'd bought property. Think the plot of Chinatown with Jack Nicholson. When Brianna, his niece, had a kid, this official decided he was getting too tied down and tried to...get rid of her.

So 2D and Dervish were going to get rid of his other mistress. Right on his wife's doorstep.

The GM had realized that the party was leaning pretty black-hat from the start, and BOY did he deliver.

Now, onto DeadMan...

I will forever hold a special place for my GM in the rotten apple core that is my heart over this encounter. He had expected DeadMan to hook up with the main team and, you know, not be terrible, so he had to quickly ad-lib a milk run for DeadMan, basically as a way of gauging if the player could do ANYTHING in Shadowrun right.

So he introduced “Mr. Jackson.”

Mr. Jackson was a frat boy. An orc frat boy. He had a baseball cap on and his white polo shirt had its collar popped. He had earrings on the back of one ear. He was wearing overexpensive AR shades, and they were running a porn vid. He was on his fifth Keystone Light by the time he approached Trout.

He was called Mr. Jackson because he forgot what the name that a runner's employer was called was supposed to be.

Jackson: “Yo, wassup homeboyee? You look like a Shadowrunner, and I be needin' a runner for real, dawg.”

DeadMan: “Greetings, employer. Watashi wa Shadowrunner.”

Jackson: “Watoshi-what? Dudebro, I don't need no fancy Asian shit, I just gots a job that I needs a stone cold killin-ass motherfucker to do, knowmsayin? That you, bruh?”

DeadMan: “I am indeed a stone-cold killing-ass motherfucker. What is the job?”

Jackson: “I'ma pay you five hundred bucks to totally beat the shit outta this nerdlinger in my econ class.”

DeadMan: “...go on.”

Jackson: “There's this douche-fag named Simon Berckiwitz in my econ class, bruh. Econ 104 was

s'pose ta be tight solid, knowmsayin? Just coast on the fuck through and getcha GPA up. But this fucker, he goes to every class and aces every test and it ain't FAIR, yo, the way he be bringin' the bell curve up! The only curve I like is dem tittays, knowmsayin', bruh?"

The GM at this point was pantomiming Jackson's overly macho body language, and clapped DeadMan's player on the back loudly.

DeadMan: "You said it would be 500 nuyen to rough this Simon Berckiwitz up? How much violence constitutes roughed-up?"

The GM made a point to snigger sophomorically at the word "tit" in "constitutes."

Jackson: "He needs to be black and blue and all shades of red, yo. Once he can't walk no more, I wantcha to take a picture of him and send it to my number. I'ma hit you up with my digits now, dawg. No homo. Just send me the pit-tchures when you done goin' down on that guy. No homo. I wire you yer money when you do your services, right, dawg? No homo, cuz I don't take no services from dudes, knowmsayin? This dawg likes the PUSSAY!"

DeadMan: "Kōi ga okonawa remasu. The deed will be done, Johnson-san."

Back to 2D and Dervish's run. They looked up the executive, did some digging, found the mistress' house. 2D waited outside with his pickup and hacked the street lights to direct traffic (except the mistress herself) away from the block while Dervish B&E'd his way into her garage. She parked her Americar in the garage, stepped outside, and Dervish promptly popped out from behind her storage shelf and snapped her neck in one twist. He covered her in a tarp, hucked her in the pickup truck, and the two of them made carefully for downtown.

DeadMan spent his day shadowing the nerd. Man, was Simon Berckiwitz a nerd. Pocket protectors and bowl cuts, dude. Like the polar opposite of Mr. Jackson.

And, at the last moment, inexplicably, he got cold feet and decided that Simon was an innocent man and he would not harm him.

The GM, the other players, and I all have our own pet theories for what the hell happened. I figure he thought playing a morally ambiguous--hell, EVIL--character would be easy, and was having problems with it now. Maybe he thought the job was a trick. There's another hypothesis, that his unwashed player saw a little too much of himself in the nerd.

Point being, a be-tac-suited DeadMan ran up to the nerd and began squealing on the whole plan to him in broken Weeaboo Japanenglish. Try to imagine how you would feel if, walking around campus, a Japanese dude ran up to you in illegal military gear and started screaming about "SIMON-SAN! A FURATTU BOY IS GOING TO BEAT YOU UP!" Yeah, it was kind of surreal. He explained that the evil Mr. Jackson all but DEMANDED that he perform this dishonorable task, but luckily, DeadMan had a devious idea to cheat Mr. Jackson and get out ahead, while not wronging Berckiwitz.

You see, he would go buy some cosmetics (which incidentally cost pretty much the whole reward) and then make Simon up to look like he'd been beaten black and blue. Simon, not wanting to be beaten up by a clearly mentally unstable man, relented.

Problem (in addition to all of the problems inherent in this whole retarded plan, like how it was costing him what he would get back): DeadMan relied on facial sculpt, melanin control, voice control, and so on to do his disguising for him, so he hadn't actually bought any ranks in disguise. He had 3 dice to it, 1 because he was defaulting.

He rolled a 1. Critical glitch. Simon came out looking like some sort of clown.

Bafflingly, Trout uploaded the pic to Mr. Jackson anyway, figuring that it would “have to do.”

What followed was, over the phone, a 19-year-old frat boy explaining runner ethics to a 28-year-old Japanese man.

“Dude, so look. Runnin' ain't about ethics an' bein' good an' evil an' sheeit, it's about doin' the job, yahearme? An' sometimes that job's gunna suck dick, like Tracey in the sorority down the street, yo. Sometimes it's even gunna come back to bite ya ass, like Tracey's herpes. She gave head like a fuckin' angel though, mang, you shoulda been there. Point bein', as a Shadowrunner you don't gots tha chops to turn down a job, homie! Sho you can pick and choose yo jobs comin' in, but once you says “it's on mothafucka,” then shit IS on! You gotta do the job, dude! Still, it's not a complete loss cuz I'm sendin' this pittchure to e'ry girl in econ class, but it's the principle of the thing, knawmsayin? You don't get cash if you don't beat up no nerds. Peace out.”

Meanwhile, 2D and Dervish had dumped the girl squarely at the foot of the W&P official's doorstep. 2D failed his signature check and blew out the entire building's node with a databomb, causing emergency services to come running. The two newbie runners cheesed it out of there, heading back to the runner bar.

When there, they ran into a dejected DeadMan. Or rather, he ran into them, because he had since changed his face and even though he could recognize them, they couldn't recognize him. 2D had not by this point become paranoid enough to start checking prospective teammates for active criminal SINS.

DeadMan asked the other two if they were runners, too, and what kind of job they'd done today. Did they beat a guy up? Maybe take his things?

2D and Dervish promptly enlightened DeadMan as to that they had, in fact, killed an innocent woman for a paltry sum and mafia goodwill. DeadMan was amazed that two souls could be so truly ruthless, and gave them his comm code in case they ever needed an infiltrator.

It probably isn't a surprise that the next job came through to 2D and Dervish, not DeadMan.

The job was simple. The Johnson was a blustery, pink-faced Mafioso, and he explained that a small gang called the PH34RM0NG3RS were muscling in on his turf. The gang consisted of Bojack, a burly Rastafarian orc who was a cybered-up veteran of the Amazonia conflict, Rager, an elf spellknack with a video game addiction, Gears, an orc rigger with a sexy custom Harley-Davidson, and four hangers-on, one of whom was a gigantic troll named Bunny. So long as we could kill Bojack, Rager, and Gears, the others would probably split, but we needed to kill those three before Mr. Johnson would give us our money.

Mostly for metagame reasons, we called up DeadMan and promptly invited him into the job. Okay, entirely for metagame reasons.

First came the legwork. We discovered fairly early on that Gears kept a regular schedule each morning, and it would be easy to hit him while he was out and about. Rager had a bad habit of playing games in hot sim when he felt he could get away with it, which would make him easy pickings for technomancer toasting. Bojack was pretty tough, but with Bunny at his side, he was basically unstoppable.

Lucky for us, we discovered that Bunny was actually the brother of another one of the hangers-on, Raj. Weak link, here we go. Since no one else had any infiltration skills, we made the terrible mistake of sending DeadMan to scope out Raj.

As Raj walked through an alley in the slums, he was assaulted by a rival ganger, and it turned into a quick hand-to-hand scuffle before Raj finally put the other ganger down. He looked out into the street, making sure that no one had seen the fight.

DeadMan used this opportunity to begin stripping the unconscious ganger naked to “sell his gear at the next vendor.”

While in the tacsuit.

So basically, it looked like the Ghost of the Alleyway (tm) was molesting the guy.

Raj promptly walked over, eyes on DeadMan. DeadMan did nothing because “he can't see me!”

Raj drew a pistol and placed it against DeadMan's temple. DeadMan suddenly realized that he had a pair of pants slung over the shoulder of his tacsuit, to say nothing of the wallet he was leafing through.

Raj: “Tacsuit off, motherfucker.”

DeadMan: “WAIT! I'LL TELL YOU EVERYTHING! I'M A SHADOWRUNNER! LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT MY TEAMMATES!”

Raj: “...Go on.”

In his hurry to squeal, DeadMan had forgotten that 2D was running comms, and he was speaking while wearing a subvocal mic.

2D's icon, with its little bomb-head, popped into DeadMan and Raj's AR.

“So, our infiltrator is an idiot. Look, what will it take to get you and Bunny the fuck out of Dodge by this time tomorrow?”

Raj made his check to identify the 2D bomber by his iconography, and frowned.

“Shit. Well, you're gonna have to pay me an awful lot.”

2D laughed dryly. “How does 2,000 nuyen and not dying sound?”

Raj's eyes widened. “You're offering me 2,000 nuyen?”

2D responded, “Yes. By which I mean you will be stealing every appliance worth more than 100 nuyen in your apartment. I tallied up the costs. If you don't count Rager's computer gear, you probably got 4 grand worth of shit in there.”

Raj thought the proposition over.

“And what if I decide to screw you over, kill your infiltrator?”

2D laughed outright at this. “You mean the infiltrator who just tried to sell us out?”

“Point. Okay, gimme till noon tomorrow.”

“You screw us and you die by inches, Raj.”

“I don't doubt it.”

Most of the rest of the day was spent with 2D and Dervish violently berating DeadMan, since for metagame reasons we couldn't just kill him.

Don't worry, we got fed up enough eventually. Just not yet.

The rest of the plan--the part without DeadMan--went like greased clockwork. We started off with Gears. Gears made his rounds early in the morning, so 2D and Dervish hopped into the truck and followed him onto the freeway. With Dervish at the wheel, 2D hacked his Harley and activated the emergency brake, sending Gears careening into oncoming traffic. One ganger down.

2D pulled the hacked bike over onto the shoulder, with the intent of dressing Dervish up in leathers and then having him appear to be “Gears” on the way back. What neither teammate expected was the fact that the bike was the pimpingest thing since gangsta rap. It was covered in gold studs, sported flame decals in both real and AR space, and had a martini shaker affixed to the back. It had a custom horn and colored brights. It had a Doberman drone with a gun in the sidecar. It was, in fact, the least subtle bike ever made.

Dervish loved it, and promptly claimed it as his own. 2D, for his part, stuck a machine sprite in the drone before logging on to cap Rager.

Rager was playing a fantasy game when 2D struck. He had a brief moment to recognize that bombheaded dudes were not part of the Dungeon of the Dragon King before lethal biofeedback boiled his brain out of his nose.

Bunny and Raj made off with a fridge filled with small appliances and commlinks, escaping out the back.

And, finally, Bojack and his two remaining thugs were taken very much by surprise when “Gears”

rammed his motorbike into Bojack, and then he and the drone proceeded to butcher everyone present. Against the better judgment of everyone involved, but trying to be nice to the player, DeadMan was given a full share of the cash afterwards.

Chapter 2: Geppetto

Some of you will not know very much about Shadowrun, or have a very distinct preference against it, considering it is basically a mish-mash of Gibson and Tolkien that is, at best, schizophrenic. To these people I say, Shadowrun may not be your bit, but to rage at a weeaboo is universal.

For this run, we (“we” consisting of 2D the channer with the internet brain, Dervish the orc with armblasses and rocket legs, and DeadMan the That Guy infiltrator) were alerted that we'd have a little bit of extra help, in the form of an additional hired-on runner named Geppetto (!). If all went well, we could gauge him for use as magical support on the team, which Danny felt we could use. By this point DeadMan had identified himself with the team as well (no matter how much we tried to distance ourselves) so we were stuck with him.

The Johnson was a barrens drug dealer, who had gotten a new chem cocktail out of an Ares lab and wanted to try it out before he paid for more. Rather than trying it out himself (don't mix business with pleasure), he was selling it to a client. The job was to oversee the drug deal, then follow the client and report the effects of the drug.

The barrens, you see, are a shitty part of town. A really shitty part of town. Do you think your city has shitty parts of town? Do those parts of town have walls that separate the gangers from the “civilized” people outside, ghouls that eat human flesh and sell the organs on the black market, snuff film studios, bug monsters that eat you from the inside out, and ghosts made out of radiation? I thought not. I repeat, the barrens are a really, REALLY shitty part of town.

Therefore, the team understandably geared up a little bit before they decided to take the plunge.

The gearing up turned out to be a good idea, since the team must have killed at least a dozen gangers on the way in. When people have an overabundance of guns and a lack of, say, medicine, food, and pants, shit tends to get desperate. After a while, the team noticed that ghouls were following the stepvan to capitalize on the bodies being left behind. Smart move on the ghouls' part. We didn't confront them now, but it wasn't the last we'd see of them.

Geppetto introduced himself to the team on equal terms as a runner, which basically means well-meaning paranoia. Dervish trusted him pretty straight-off, as did DeadMan (who had at this point been inadvertently taught that he could try to sell his team's dox to the enemy and still get a full share of the haul, our bad), but 2D and Geppetto had a few trigger-finger-twitching moments before they cooled off. That's what happens when you stick a black-hat hacker and a black mage together in the same room without a proper introduction, I guess.

After all four teammates had rendezvoused at the bar in the barrens (it was a real shithole, although that's kind of an informed quality in the barrens), they made to introduce themselves to the Johnson. He told them that the client would arrive in about 30 minutes, and he was an Amerind shamanic adept from the Native American Nations.

Also, he was a troll.

Dervish's player, at this point, needed to bounce for a frat meeting, so Dervish took his place at the Johnson's side to run his security for the night. The rest of us took a table (well, a bench and a box, really) as a comically gigantic troll wearing shamanic fetishes strolled through the door. After a brief

discussion with the Johnson and the palming of some cash into the smaller man's hands, the Johnson handed the troll a diamond-tipped (bastard had orthoskin, too!?) syringe filled with a bright, candy-red liquid.

Nothing good is ever bright candy red.

The troll disappeared into the bathroom, presumably to, erm, “freshen up.” After a lot of encouraging, DeadMan finally agreed to shadow the target, which is kind of the entire point of an infiltrator, but fuck if he'd do his one job.

DeadMan amazingly did not cock up his startlingly low infiltration roll, and sidled up alongside to find the troll doing a line of coke off of a dirty toilet seat. The troll then proceeded to produce ANOTHER syringe, this one looking to be filled with morphine, and injected it into his arm. He then speedballed this with MORE coke, took a literal handful (and troll hands are the size of a dinner plate) of pills, and injected the red liquid into his other arm.

This was when we began to suspect that the night was going to get eventful.

2D ran to get the truck warmed up as Geppetto popped in the back. DeadMan followed the troll out, and then the team vehicularly shadowed the troll down the dirt road. The troll seemed to be getting more and more excited, his face slowly contorting in a manic grin as he hummed chipperly to himself. His steps picked up pace as he began jogging with an almost dancing spring. This all changed when the troll was accosted by two AK-wielding gangers who wanted his fancy leather jackets.

With one swing, the troll's fist went literally clean through a ganger's torso. Like, his ribcage caved in one blow, then all his internal organs, then his spine. With a ganger dangling from one arm, the troll then grabbed the other by the neck and began to eat his face in long, messy bites, shaking his jowls back and forth like a dog and trailing face-meat and eyeball goo everywhere.

2D was the first to speak, and he spoke well.

“Jesus flipping shit dicks!”

Moving like a puppet with its strings attached to a bottle rocket, the troll hurled himself bodily in the direction of a nearby slum, frothing violently and trailing blood (some his own, some the ganger's) from every orifice on his face. His vocalizations quickly went from metahuman to animal, and he screeched like some ancient, majestic ape as he crashed through a shantytown and landed on a gigantic, troll-sized motorbike. As he drew a combat axe from the side of the motorbike and revved its engines, Geppetto screeched for 2D to “DRIVE, MOTHERFUCKER, DRIVE!”

2D did not need further encouragement.

The troll burst out of the shantytown at top speed, swinging his combat axe at random passers-by with the force of a Mack truck. Dismembered body parts flew about the barrens to the tune of motorcycle engines and human anguish, marking a marginally more violent day than usual as far as the neighborhood is concerned.

2D took a brief moment to look at the orc's trajectory, and then his face paled.

“He's headed right for downtown.”

If you could imagine the whole next segment set to either Yakety Sax or Motorhead's “Ace of Spades,” that'd be great.

2D stuck his machine sprite (the same one from the Bojack gunfight earlier; he'd registered it) in charge of driving, and began focusing on the troll's nodes. It turned out the adept was also pretty heavily cybered, and moreover had an implanted commlink that networked to a bunch of his implants. Idiot move, and if push came to shove 2D could probably capitalize on it.

With the team freed up from driving, they could freely take in the situation at hand.

DeadMan: “What!?”

Geppetto: “MOVE HACKER FUCKING MOVE THE TRUCK!”

2D: “AAAAH I'M GOING AS FAST AS I CAN OH BALLS OH MAN OH SHIT IT'S NOT MY FAULT THIS PIECE OF SHIT CAN'T GO AS FAST AS COKEZILLA'S MOTORCYCLE!”

Geppetto: “Is that a Lone Star siren?”

2D: “NO PIGS! NO! STAY AWAAAAAY!”

Geppetto: “YOU CANNOT SAVE THEM NOW! KEEP YOUR DISTANCE!”

2D: “WHAT THE FUCK THOSE CRUISERS HAVE BULLETPROOF GLASS YOU CAN'T PUNCH THROUGH THAT!”

2D: “WHAT IS HE DOING WHAT IS HE DOING WITH THE COP!?”

Geppetto: “OH GOD HE'S KEELHAULING HIM!”

2D: “JESUS FUCK I'M GOING TO BE SICK IT'S LIKE A DUDE CHEESE GRATER!”

DeadMan: “Guys, I could take potshots at him! If I lean out the window I'm pretty sure I can get him!”

Geppetto and 2D (in unison): “NO!”

Dervish, meanwhile, sipped beers and made friendly chat with the Johnson about Urban Brawl, in a sports bar in Snohomish.

So the chase carried the team through the Arcology Housing Project Mall (during which the troll stuck his arms out at his sides like a bird flapping its wings and clothes-lined passing shoppers, killing many of them), further up downtown, and eventually on the freeway up to Salish territory. It was at this point that 2D regretted putting the machine sprite in charge of driving, considering its literal orders were to “follow the troll at any cost.”

The troll, you see, ramped off the shoulder of the bridge, and was currently in free-fall over Puget Sound.

Sprite: “Following!”

All three runners: “NOOOOOOOOOO”

Geppetto's player and I mimed hugging each other for dear life, which got a lot more awkward when DeadMan's player all but lunged to join the hug. But I digress.

So, the party found themselves in the air over Puget Sound in a beaten-up pickup truck. The three teammates survived. The pickup...didn't. The machine sprite did all it could to get them towards shore, but the pickup was long gone as the team emerged, coughing, soaked, and spitting up water, onto a forested beach that they didn't recognize.

Geppetto bemoaned the ruin of a perfectly good business suit as he began undoing his wet tie, and helped a sputtering 2D, who had long since lost his combat boots and was currently shivering in a pair of shorts and an ironic t-shirt, to his feet. DeadMan's tac-suit made awkward sputtering noises but survived.

There was a horrible, inhuman moan of pain, and a guttural growl of rage, from deeper into the forest. The whole team, even the black magician, gulped collectively before sneaking into the woods to complete the job.

As we edged into a clearing, we saw what had made the moan of pain. The troll had beaten a sasquatch into pulp, and was currently eating its innards raw. As it turns out, this forested area was the Vancouver Wildlife Preserve, and we'd stumbled right onto Sasquatch Island. The troll sniffed at the air, and his head rose. His bloodshot eyes locked onto our location.

DeadMan did one of the few things he was proficient at, and ran like a bitch. Geppetto turned invisible. As 2D began to run, he realized that there was a smarter option than trying to escape conventionally, which is not a chanter's strong suit.

No, he backdoored on the commlink hack he'd done earlier, and erased himself from the troll's cybereyes.

Which, incidentally, meant that only the tac-suited ninja was even conventionally visible anymore.

The troll caught up to DeadMan, and gave him a little tap. DeadMan lived up to his name and flew clean through three trees before getting smashed on the trunk of a fourth, sporting two broken legs, a broken arm, four broken ribs, three cracked vertebrae, and whiplash that would stun a rhino.

DeadMan temporarily disposed of, the troll locked onto 2D again, this time by scent, and began hunting him out.

In the real world, Dervish's player got back to the table, and Dervish glanced at the news. You know a fun thing about a criminal SIN broadcasting your identity to anyone who wants to know?

The news headline, featuring a helicopter shot of the action, read,

“DERANGED SPREE KILLER JO SEKIGAHARA AND MYSTERY HACKER ACCOMPLICE SQUARE OFF AGAINST MURDEROUS TROLL”

Dervish and his player both had to fight down a spit-take.

2D frantically burned out all the cyberware he could, causing physical damage to himself, but the troll kept coming. Just as it was about to grab him, there was a loud “ZOT” and, brain boiling out its ears, the troll slumped to the ground.

Geppetto dropped out of invisibility in a nearby tree, rubbing his temples to allay the headache caused by the powerbolt.

“Miss me?”

Geppetto succeeded on an arcana check to realize that sasquatches could heal, so he dragged 2D over to the furry beasts, who were all too eager to help their saviours. They also healed DeadMan but, well, healing magic can only go so far. With most of his bones still very broken, DeadMan proceeded to gasp for air and flop like a dying fish.

Geppetto: “We should call him Trout.”

And that was how Trout got his name.

Trout was deposited at a street doc (a colorful Hallweener named Doctor Laughsalot) and the team collected their earnings. In triplicate, considering the original sum offered by the Johnson no longer seemed quite adequate. Yes, it's bad form to do this, but hey, the Johnson did offer.

The next run, I'll mostly skip over because it wasn't particularly funny. The Johnson was a Yak who wanted the characters to retrieve a bunraku puppet who had gone rogue. This was skeevy and illegal as shit, even for 2D, Geppetto, and Dervish, so they were prepared to turn it down, but Trout blurted that they would take the job, so there they had it.

Trout for his part immediately disappeared into Everett to begin “the hunt,” while 2D, Geppetto, and Dervish did actual legwork. The only lead was a spooky as fuck stalker who'd been so obsessed with the girl that he'd been barred from the bunraku parlor. Using the stalker as an informant (and then rolling one of his neighbors for his organs at the behest of a Tamanous contact 2D picked up in the barrens, because hey, side job), they traced the girl back to a street gang, and with some quick hacking and a request of a Lone Star contact, 2D had tied the gang to a bunch of high-profile crimes around Everett. Dervish, for his part, ran in to “save” the girl from police brutality during the resultant crackdown, only to knock her out and deliver her to the Yaks.

Speaking of resultant crackdowns, a very unhappy Jo Sekigahara called up the team for a pick-up, having been shot by one of the many cops that 2D had called into the neighborhood. He had to spend his entire share of the reward on street doc fees and fixing his tacsuit, and lived up to the name of Trout yet again.

The next run was the team's first corp-level run, and the last run of Trout's career.

Danny warned the runners that this would be at a much higher league than before, so they should act the part when they entered the club that the Johnson meet was being held at.

There was a bit of a fashion montage as the team picked up nice suits. Geppetto's suit had green trimming and jade dragon cufflinks, emphasizing that he was magically active. He also wore a fedora, designating him as the face of the team. Dervish wore a tightly-tailored suit with a red interior, suggesting the power inherent to the role of a street samurai. 2D had a tie that doubled as a small AR screen, from which he broadcast matrix designs.

Trout bought a black suit with red trim and jade dragon cufflinks and an AR tie and a fedora. We explained to him that the point of the suits was to emphasize roles, so he just wore a simple black suit afterwards, but he insisted on keeping the fedora to emphasize his role as the team's leader.

The time before the Johnson meet was punctuated by small problems. 2D, Geppetto, and Dervish all bribed their way in, but Trout conveniently forgot his bribe so Dervish had to come back and bribe for him. Geppetto and Dervish both had their powers limited (by mage cuff variants and cyberblade covers, respectively), whereas Trout tried to sneak a loaded, unshielded, stock heavy pistol past the MAD scanners at the gate and got the shit beaten out of him by security. Trout began hitting on everything female in the club, to the disgust of the GM. You know, normal problems that runners deal with daily.

To those of you whom have played the module "On the Run," this should seem familiar. The Johnson was a troll, who wanted a disk retrieved. Not a datachip or a commlink, an actual disk. Like the kind you put in a disk drive. 2D the technophile had to resist a snort.

It was labeled "To old friends..." and the Johnson had reason to believe that it had been offered for sale to various buyers around the entertainment field. The Johnson very much wanted that disk, and if we could not procure it via larceny, he would appreciate it if we could at least put him in contact with the seller.

The Johnson meet wasn't even over before 2D had identified one potential buyer, an orc rap-rocker named Naybo.

The GM fluffed Naybo as something of a sell-out. He followed the Linkin Park career track: he had started out underground, writing songs about his problems and the bullshit that he'd had to put up with, but somewhere between a million-nuyen Horizon contract and platinum disk sales, his rapping about the problems of the common orc had gotten a little less credible. That was the point of the concert he was throwing in a few days in an orc neighborhood in Puyallup, to re-establish his dwindling street cred.

Dervish wouldn't be conspicuous during this run, but 2D wouldn't be particularly smiled upon, and elves like Geppetto and Trout would definitely have to watch their backs. We spotted a few ins, namely that there was call for more security at the warehouse that Naybo would be at, and that Naybo's manager had a raging novacoke addiction. So the plan became to infiltrate from both of those angles. Dervish would join the security force as a temporary guard, and Geppetto, physically masked

as an orc, would get a hold of some novacoke and use it to get in with the manager. Backstage during the concert, Dervish would remark loudly that he needed a comm to call his buddy and tell him how awesome the concert was, and Geppetto would hit Naybo with a suggestion to toss that motherfucker his commlink because shit, he ain't no stingy bitch, and the concert WAS awesome. Dervish would hit up 2D, 2D would hack the commlink and grab the data on the CD seller, problem solved.

The only thing left to do was find something for Trout to do, because he had refused to infiltrate on the grounds of "it's too dangerous."

So, we stuck Trout on Naybo follow duty, a bullshit position that we made up. He was to shadow Naybo from the airport to the concert, make sure that there wasn't any funny business.

We had severely underestimated Trout's idiocy.

You may be asking, how did he fuck this one up? Did he:

>Wear his tacsuit while driving a vehicle, making the vehicle look like it was being driven by a fucking ghost?

>Drive Dervish's incredibly pimped-out loud-as-fuck flame-decaled motorbike, the most conspicuous vehicle in the sprawl?

>Shadow the media convoy from about 10 feet away?

The answer is all of the above.

Trout had been following for about 10 minutes when a tac-cloaked Horizon infiltrator landed on the back of his bike, pressed a gun to the back of his head, and told him to pull over.

Trout defaulted to his usual danger response:

"LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT MY TEAMMATES."

The Horizon spook waited until he had spilled literally everything he knew about each of his teammates, then stuck a taser to his neck and tased the bejeezus out of him until he stopped twitching, jacked the bike, and made for the concert.

2D jumped at the rapping of a tac-cloaked figure at his driver's side window.

"Dude, Trout, the door's open."

The Horizon spook got in, and aimed his gun at 2D. He gleefully announced,

"Hey, 2D! This shouldn't take too long. We're just gonna talk about your shadowrunning real quick."

2D's voice dripped with despair.

"The little bitch GAVE YOU OUR NAMES!?"

Luckily for the team, the spook wanted the data off of Naybo's commlink, as well. Apparently Naybo had received a lot of undo attention from some other Horizon branches over this little offer, so he'd allow us to go through with the run if we did EXACTLY as we'd said we would. After all, there's not much of a better cover for ignoring a big offer as "shit, runners jacked my comm data." So, the run went down as planned, it's just that 2D was doing his work in AR space with a heavy pistol to his head and a taser pressed against his nuts. And you think you have a stressful work environment. The moment 2D had gotten the data, the agent casually announced over the team's frequency,

"You now have 5 minutes to leave the building or I will kill your hacker."

Dervish and Geppetto never moved so fast.

Regrouping, the team began to come to terms with the fact that their infiltrator had a serious compulsive betrayal problem, to say nothing of the fact that he was apparently actively wanted by a cop corp that knew where he was at all times (which reminds me, his apartment had been raided by this point, so he didn't actually have a lifestyle score anymore and had resorted to squatting). However, this was all sidelined by the fact that the end of the month was coming up.

And the end of the month means RENT IS DUE.

We were all prepared to blow it off since as far as we were concerned, Trout deserved to be homeless, and we had enough money for our rents. But Dervish winced as he tallied up his finances, and noticed that he couldn't afford his next month in the coffin hotel. Worse, 2D and Geppetto couldn't both pay their rents and spot him. Something needed to be done to get some quick cash.

2D, being in a particularly irreverent mood, had just the suggestion.

"Gentlemen, I have found a way to stick it to...the MAN. Our consumerist society runs on greed, and on inferior services that we are expected to be thankful for. The people bleat and feed from the trough of mediocrity. It is up to us to free them.

By which I mean...

The armed robbery of a Red Lobster in Renton."

Desperate and more than a little entertained, the team went along with the plan. The Red Lobster was in the middle of suburban Renton, and had no idea what was coming.

2D hacked the node and disabled the SIN register and the silent alarm. Geppetto seeded himself in the restaurant, buying a side order of biscuits. The plan was that when Trout and Dervish, in hoodies and balaclavas, burst in to demand everyone's commlinks, jewelry, and credsticks, he'd smooth everything along by setting a precedent of cooperation. He'd scream "EVERYONE JUST GIVE THEM YOUR CREDSTICKS, THEY'RE NOT WORTH YOUR LIVES," and hand over his credstick first. Dervish and Trout would take max sixty seconds to grab all the valuables they could, and then the team would bounce.

That was the robbery, in theory. The whole thing went to shit when a burly Texan in back screamed

“LONE STAR, FREEZE” and pulled his Cavalier Deputy.

The GM's menacing growl when the cop spotted Trout was priceless.

“...*Sekigahara*.”

Immediately, the cop began popping off shots, suddenly confronted with a known killer of children in the middle of a suburban chain restaurant.

Dervish, frustrated, grabbed every credstick he could, and boosted out the window at seventy miles an hour.

Geppetto ran out with the screaming crowd.

Leaving Trout alone with the cop.

Trout attempted Dervish's window jump, which was a little less impressive when he wasn't 400 lbs of meat and steel flying out at freeway speed, but rather a spindly Japanese elf with a Body of 2. The Texan aced a few shooting rolls, and soon Trout was lying face-down in a pool of his own blood in the middle of the suburbs, slowly bleeding out.

It was now that 2D realized a problem.

Namely that Trout would squeal on ALL of them.

So, against his better judgment, 2D hit the cop with a passing hacked-on-the-fly car (didn't kill him, just broke some important limbs), parked next to Trout, and dragged the comatose elf into his stepvan.

2D quickly realized another problem, namely that Trout's blood was all over the street, and a ritual magician could kill him or worse during any important part of the current run. In short, Trout was fucked every which way, and the team was fucked with him.

Unless...

2D: “Hello, Lone Star? I'd like to cash in a bounty. But only if you can offer me immunity.”

“Why, yes. It IS that bounty.”

And that was the end of Trout.

Chapter 3: Viking-Ghost Fist Fights, Ghoul Hospitals and All-Around Awesomeness

So, the first thing we do after Trout is out of the picture is call up Danny, our fixer. See, Mr. Johnson had given us a job intended for four runners, and thus to keep attempting it with three would probably not fare well for us (even if Trout wasn't a particularly convincing fourth runner). We needed a replacement. Any runner of our talent level would do.

We got Tank. Tank was Trout's player's second character. Although he made some mistakes, he was never catastrophically bad to the extent that Trout was, and indeed he atoned for some of his prior missteps after a stern talking-to. Tank is why the title of this thread is now Shadowrun Storytime, and not Shadowrun That Guy Storytime, because Tank, although he was a little dumb at times, was by no stretch of the imagination That Guy.

Tank was a troll. Because the GM had built most of his attributes, skills, and ware, he was a very standard lol troll build, alternating between a combat axe and an LMG depending on the range of engagement. His player handled his qualities, which meant there was a little stupidity there, but they were by no means the train wreck that Trout's qualities were.

First and foremost, the player insisted that Tank have a charisma of at least three, and would not budge on this matter. He had never played an “ugly” character in his life, and would not budge on it now, even though he had no charisma-related skills and thus the 25 karma spent on it was basically a glorified makeover.

Next, his player bought the Enemy (at max ranks!) and Vendetta qualities. 2D had the same qualities for Evo Biomedical Seattle, but he was also a paranoid motherfucker who alternated between hidey-holes and changed out his access ID every few hours. Tank bought these qualities for a Prime running team and their fixer, which had some of us groaning, but again, it wasn't so much a terrible choice as a dangerous one.

Next, he picked up Big Regret, which raises his notoriety score. It was related to his feud with the rival fixer.

Finally, he picked up Dependent. Dependent means that there is an innocent person who relies upon you entirely to survive. In this case, it was his adorable 8-year-old sister, a freckly little girl with pigtails who wanted to grow up to be a lawyer someday. The GM made a point of doing something insufferably adorable every time we visited Tank's place, to remind us that the Dependent quality is not to be taken lightly.

Point being, the team had a vested interest in keeping Tank safe because otherwise an adorable eight-year-old was toast. Even 2D and Geppetto, who wear hats so black that they qualify as vacuums, had to be considerate about this new piece on the playing field.

So, our first encounter with Tank was...less than stellar. You see, he lived in a block with the “Quiet Neighborhood” and “Nosy Neighbors” quality, so it was basically the most white-bread human, Christian burb you can imagine. We marked the stepvan up with the AR decals of a delivery van and parked on the street corner to pick him up, so that his neighbors wouldn't connect him to running.

Imagine our surprise when he came out, in his full heavy combat armor, with his LMG drawn and the safety off, to stroll down the street to the van. Neighbors watering their manicured lawns stared. A

mother pushing a baby carriage screamed.

With an angry yell of “DUFFLE BAGS YOU STUPID FUCK,” 2D floored it out of the neighborhood as the sirens started sounding.

The GM, not wanting to lose a new character in literally the same session that the player had lost the old one, graciously allowed a redo, and the next time around, Tank came out with his equipment in duffel bags. From that point onward, the team stored Tank's running gear at 2D's apartment, since juggalo nutcases don't give a fuck if you come out of your house packing.

So, 2D had called up one of his contacts, an encryption specialist within Chaos Engine, to decrypt the message that Naybo had received and see if he could trace the seller. In return, the contact, v1ct1m, whom the GM and I had fluffed like a /d/eviant gone wrong (most of 2D's contacts were based around 4chan boards, and 2D himself was based off of /b/), wanted the team to acquire a...unique porn film from a seller in the Redmond barrens.

The film itself was not hard to acquire from the seller, a skeezy little dwarf who sweated like a pig, but the case was that they still had to determine whether the film was legit or not. The team drew straws, and Geppetto got the short one. Geppetto, being the face, made a convincing argument that, since 2D had gotten the team this side run, really, it was his responsibility to watch the porn flick and make sure it was the right one.

2D confirmed that they had the right film right around the time he was yelling, “OH SHIT WHAT ARE THEY DOING TO THAT HORSE!?”

Pleased with the acquisition, v1ct1m handed 2D an IP node hidden somewhere in the city.

Operating through a proxy commlink for fear of vengeful technomancy (paranoia quality ho!), 2D hacked the node. Whatever it was, it had been long stripped of any useful data. It was probably a disposable commlink, sitting in a trash can somewhere.

The real fun started when the proxy comm started beeping an alert later that night.

2D logged in to find the icon of a winged fairy sprinkling pixie dust all over the virtual landscape, turning his commlink into fucking candyland. In game rules terms, the enemy hacker had hacked his commlink and was using the edit program to vandalize the shit out of it.

2D, being a channer, only appreciates matrix pranks when they're (a) being done by him, and (b) involve ruining people's lives.

So he flipped his shit. His bomb headed icon streaked into the saccharine fantasy landscape, blowing everything to kingdom come with a series of indiscriminate black hammer attacks. The enemy icon began fluctuating violently, close to de-rezzing. The text feed in his commlink read,

>Z1PP3R: oh fuck

>Z1PP3R: FUCK

>Z1PP3R: CHAOS ENGINE FUCK

The mystery hacker disappeared, presumably taking dumpshock, and a vengeful 2D gleefully followed her data trail right back to her commlink. It turned out that the strange vandal was a Hispanic dwarf named Zipper (go figure), who mostly operated between Seattle and Tir Tairngire.

2D did the natural thing that any channer would do, if given internet superpowers and the dox of someone who fucked with him.

He decided to ruin her life.

2D, raging like a buttmad troll in an anime thread possessed, stomped from her Horizontube account to her social networking profiles, changing her relationship status to “DEAD” and her occupational status to “STUPID WHORE.” He put lethal feedback databombs in every appliance she owned. Every profile picture was defaced with his iconography. Every time she logged into anything, she got him walking physically onto her screen, shaking his little digital fists and screaming that “I’M GONNA FIND YOU AND WHEN I DO THE CORONER’S JUST GONNA FIND DUST,” before kicking digital dirt on her icon, dropping a databomb, and irreparably destroying whatever commlink or computer she happened to be using.

During all this, the team was headed to Tir Tairngire, resolved to find the girl and get what information they could out of her before 2D drove her so far underground that they’d need an oil derrick to find her.

Eventually, the team triangulated her location to a merchant bar on the outskirts of the Tir, sitting with a friend and miserably using said friend’s commlink because all of hers had been ruined.

The moment that 2D had hacked the interior cameras and caught a glimpse of the girl, he tried to step out of the van, giggling that “No one escapes from Anon, hahaha-GURK!”

That ‘gurk’ was Dervish grabbing 2D by the head and pulling him back into the van, responding to a prior order by Geppetto that 2D wasn’t allowed to get his murder on until Geppetto was done getting mission-relevant information. 2D obliged, if only to busy himself hacking the girl’s new commlink while hyperventilating excitedly.

As Geppetto neared the girls’ table, looking very purposeful in his intentions, Zipper hastily texted a mystery number, with a message of “fuck a guys coming up think he might be with the 2D guy if i dont make it hide the goods”

Her commlink responded two seconds later with,

“IF YOU MAKE IT THEN I HAVEN’T DONE MY JOB ZIPPER AHAHAHAHA”

She reflexively tossed the commlink in the nearest ashtray before it began sparking and burning from the inside.

Defeated, she let Geppetto sit down at the table. She briefly fingered a holdout pistol, and then seemed to decide against it. As Geppetto cleared his throat to speak, she finally broke down and

started spilling her life's story to the mage in a long, blubbing stream.

The story was long and convoluted and mostly concerned how ever since she was a little kid she'd loved the Matrix and the feeling of being a PART of something and she always wanted to be as COOL and DANGEROUS as those SHADOWRUN HACKERS and those CHAOS ENGINE guys and now they were gonna KILL HER and she was SOOO SCARED and she DIDN'T WANT TO DIE and she would TAKE IT ALL BACK IF SHE COULD and she was SOOO SORRY.

2D, listening in on the conversation, began to feel like something of a heel. Sobering up, he asked Dervish to please let him exit the stepvan.

What followed was a gigantic super-awkward apology between a black-hat hacker and a script-kiddie whose life he had ruined. Eventually, though, with a little guiding by Geppetto, the two hackers began to strike up a rapport, and the whole incident swiftly started becoming something to laugh about.

“Hey,” 2D quipped, “it could have been worse. You could have been an elf like Geppetto.”

Geppetto took the joke in stride. The other elves in the bar didn't.

An elf guard approached 2D, and asked him if he'd like to back up his words by force of arms. In response to a request of “English, please,” the elf clarified that he was challenging 2D to a duel. He would magnanimously allow 2D to choose the weapon by which the battle would be fought, so that he might die with honor.

2D gave him a GameBoy SP.

The elf got laughed out of the bar. It was a good day for 2D.

Now, I know that you guys are thinking this went in the sex direction. Two rival hackers get over their differences and bone? Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you. 2D already had his dedicated monogamous relationship with an insane orc juggalo in Everett, and he didn't want to give up the physical security offered by that arrangement just yet. Besides, he was kind of fond of his girlfriend. She was fun, in a break-your-knees-during-sex kind of way.

So, Zipper handed over the comm code of the seller, a bartender back in Seattle by the name of Kerwin Loomis. That much closer to finishing the job, the team made for Seattle once more, but not before giving Zipper a little dosh to buy a new commlink.

We went to a runner bar in Tacoma to meet the seller, a kind of grungy, bearded human, accompanied by three bodyguards (two thugs and a street sam), and a fourth, cloaked somewhere in the alley. The bodyguards/runners were there as insurance, but that didn't mean we had to like the arrangement.

In an alley behind the bar with good visibility and firing lines for both sides to discourage violence, Kerwin handed over the disk. Geppetto gestured for 2D to grab it, and 2D was able to verify the goods by the “to old friends” label.

Everything would have gone down perfectly if not for the sudden “clack-clack-clack” of suppressed automatic gunfire that filled the alleyway.

Kerwin went down in the first round, as did the two closest bodyguards, with three holes in him, chest-chest-head. Military precision. These guys didn't fuck around. Tank took a truly startling amount of bullets (in keeping with his role) but didn't go down, so they hammered him with a stun spell.

Recognizing the spell, Geppetto screamed “MAAAAAGE,” at which Dervish spun into action, switching sight modes on his eyes and picking up speed, moving through volleys of gunfire.

Luckily, this is Seattle, and Seattle had a propensity to rain, all the time. We got lucky, as the rainfall delineated five men in tac-cloaked military armor, equipped for a full assault.

What was less lucky was the fact that Geppetto took five rounds to the chest and dropped.

2D's drones and the remaining bodyguards returned fire, turning the alleyway into a warzone. Scanning the low rooftops, Dervish noticed a discrepancy in the air, similar to but without the digital texture of the tac cloaks.

Invisibility.

He'd found the mage.

So, blades out and boosting to top speed, he prepared to follow the Shadowrun adage:

“Geek the mage.”

Try to imagine, if you will, a WWE wrestling takedown, but the guy doing the takedown is moving at the speed of a motorcycle and has swords for fists. Point being, the mage was paste.

2D launched his much-utilized machine sprite (I kept re-registering my services on the little bastard, useful as fuck) to disrupt the enemy's tacnet and take out the rival rigger or hacker, if he could. The sprite succeeded, and there was an explosion further down the alleyway (hello, gremlins power on a vehicle engine), and the advancing soldiers briefly stopped shooting as they lost tactical coordination.

That is, until one of them pointed at 2D and shouted,

“Techno! Sight him!”

2D dove into the nearest dumpster, an action which saved his life, as he took only one out of the fifteen bullets headed his way.

As Dervish boosted in and took down another soldier, judo-flipping him at top speed, and 2D's drones poured into the alleyway, the tac team decided to cut its losses. They split, grabbing the body of their fellow and the shishkebabed mage as the other soldiers and a drone of their own provided covering fire.

Before they disappeared into the rain, Dervish got a clean view of the Horizon logo on the dead mage's ballistic armor.

I believe that when I told this story to one of my own Shadowrun players, I described it as “Geppetto is roughly resembling a pre-op 50 Cent at this point, with less rapper and more dying.” The first contact called was Laughsalot, who asked the team why literally ALL of them were in need of medical attention (albeit Tank and Dervish a little less so than 2D, and 2D considerably less so than Geppetto). The moment the word “Horizon” came up, he announced, “Oh shit, I don't know you! Fuck you! Prank caller! Prank caller!” and hung up.

Geppetto, out of his mind on all the painkillers that the team could scavenge from their respective medkits, is gurgling out his own esophagus and asks if there are any other options for doctors off Horizon's radar.

2D grimaced and said, “Well...I know a guy who's KIND of a doctor. Does an organlegger count?”

2D was, of course, referring to his Tamanous buddy, a ghoul named John. John technically WAS a doctor, at least before the whole zombie plague thing happened.

You see, unlike the rest of the team who had things like morals, standards, and dignity, 2D appreciated the virtue of having a buddy who would eat the bodies of dead people you didn't want lying around. In his off-time between jobs, he had been doing his best to be buddy-buddy with John's little ghoul nest, and so John made sure to reciprocate 2D's altruism in kind.

With the collected demeanor of a surgeon, John gave the team rudimentary first aid instructions to keep Geppetto alive, and directions to Tamanous' largest compound in the Redmond barrens, an abandoned hospital reinforced with a perimeter wall. He put the compound on alert, and warned the ghouls on guard about their expected guests.

2D checked the local gridlink and, as expected, Horizon was moving out in force. SWAT vans and helicopters force. The nice thing about the barrens, though, is that no corp wants to go there without serious backup, and even then they have to work their way through the border wall. So, the team was mostly without meaningful opposition as the stepvan sped into the barrens, at least until the high-force guardian spirit slammed onto the hood of the truck.

The van slowed to a crawl, weighed down by the incredible mass of the spirit. Geppetto had enough left in him to deliriously burble,

“Norse tradition...looks like a Viking...gotta challenge it...fight it in the material...”

So, in the most metal scene I have ever witnessed in a Shadowrun game before or since, Dervish and Tank got out of the van and challenged a ghost Viking to a fistfight.

2D, being officially incapable of driving or fighting, decides instead to concern himself with how he'll get the paydata of the disk when no one uses cyberdecks anymore, much less cyberdecks from the era of disk drives. A quick call to John confirmed that the basement of the hospital still had some of the antique computers, but learning how to use the outdated tech would be another challenge entirely.

So, with helicopters and SWAT tanks incoming, and a bloody, brutal Viking fistfight raging literally two feet above his head, 2D logged into 4chan to hastily ask the oldfags for a crash course on decking.

The channers told him to get rid of the Viking on the roof first. Confused, 2D asked them how they knew what he was doing. They responded to him by forwarding him to Horizon news' top story, which read, "TERRORISTS ON THE LAM: SUSPECT IDENTIFIED AS 2D BOMBER."

With a final punch from blood-and-ectoplasm-stained knuckles, Tank punched the ghost Viking the fuck out, helped a beaten-up Dervish back into the van, and then 2D floored it once again, with the sound of helicopters fast on their heels. As they sped into the Tamanous compound, armed and armored ghouls manned the walls, and the Horizon forces backed off, not wanting to get into an engagement in an infected zone.

John, dressed in his best suit (which was a little frayed at the edges), approached the team and gave them the facts.

2D and Dervish could be given hazard suits for their open wounds and would be safe from infection. Tank's wounds had already healed, thanks to his platelet factory bioware. But Geppetto...Geppetto was a problem. If the ghouls were going to operate on him, he was GOING to get infected. It was as simple as that.

After tense deliberation, Geppetto, who had lost his vision and most muscle control, coughed up blood and snarled "do it."

Shortly after bringing him into the compound, John had a banshee infect Geppetto. If he was going to be an Infected, he would at least be a monster that could pass for metahuman.

Geppetto the black magician was living up to his reputation, because from this point onward, the only thing he could eat would be souls.

Dervish oversaw Geppetto's surgery as insurance, while 2D--escorted by Tank and his drones for fear of the ghouls around him--made his way to the sub-basement and resumed his crash course on decking. The run would have ended there, but it's never quite that easy.

There was a loud THUD as Tank hit the ground with a half-dozen empty syringes in his back.

2D turned around to find himself facing his second tac-team of the day. This time the soldiers, four of them, were wearing the rubber gloves and white gas masks of an Evo Biomedical narc squad. Horizon didn't want to waste its own resources going after 2D, but as it turned out, there was already someone out there who wanted him more...

2D's life was saved by an edged initiative roll. He booked it down the hallway and sprinted through abandoned basement rooms, screaming, "OH FUCK OH SHIT TITS JESUS CUNTBURGERS ATTACK ATTACK ATTACK!" His drones opened up on the narc squad, including one armed with a grenade launcher, turning the operation into a grueling back-and-forth firefight.

Tank's bioware, which the tac-team hadn't counted on, quickly flushed the toxin from his system, and he rolled over, armed his machine gun, and joined the drones in the assault on the Evo goons. As

ghouls swarmed into the tunnels, alerted by the gunfire, the corp troops decided that this wasn't what they had signed up for, booking it and leaving their dead to be devoured by the ravenous undead.

2D hid behind an overturned gurney, clutching an ancient cyberdeck to his heart. Breathing heavily through his respirator, he fumbled with the disk but eventually managed to insert it.

2D had been listening to the music for about a minute before he registered that the CD was a music album. The genre was angst-rock from back in the 2050s, the singer a deep-voiced crooner. Even 2D thought he'd heard the voice before, and a search confirmed it; this was JetBlack, the most popular rock star of the 2050s, whose career had been cut down in his prime by a terrible accident.

Moreover, the songs on this CD weren't listed among published JetBlack tracks.

It all clicked with a little more research and some contact-plumbing. The troll Johnson was Darius St. George, JetBlack's manager from back in the day. JetBlack had left him a disk of never-before released tracks, an entire album's worth. The value of the disk was priceless, enough that Darius could buy out Horizon's entire music label, Shangri-La Records, or even launch his own.

The team took a vote. 2D wanted to go through with the mission, because the last guy who'd tried to sell it was dead in an alleyway in Tacoma. Tank wanted to keep the CD, sell it, and live like kings forever. Without the clincher of Geppetto (who was currently undergoing open heart surgery), Dervish voted that they finish the mission, because they were runners, dammit, and runners do the job they're paid for.

Tank was put in the van, which was remote-controlled out to Tacoma as a decoy. Dervish and 2D now needed a ride to downtown.

Luckily, the pimp-bike could be remote-controlled.

Donning their helmets, Dervish mounted the flaming golden motorcycle, and 2D held on tight. What ensued was a police chase across the freeways of Seattle, Dervish dodging in and out of traffic to escape Horizon's interceptors. When the two of them hit the nightclub, though, it was over. Horizon called off the dogs. They had won.

Tank drove the van, a bit more pock-marked than it was previously, back to ghoullville, and picked up a wheelchair-bound Geppetto.

The Johnson meet saw everyone at least a little worse for wear. 2D had bandages running all up his side, Dervish and Tank were scarred in new and exciting places, and Geppetto was limply clinging to an IV drip. Darius himself had a cast on one arm and a few teeth missing, having run afoul of a Horizon hit squad himself.

To explain the situation, JetBlack's ghost, a free spirit, manifested in the middle of the room. As it turned out, when he'd been alive, JetBlack was a media shill. When he started spreading out, finding his roots, the Horizon media group had organized his horrible and unfortunate demise, so that his legacy (and tragedy sales) could live on forever. His last act of revenge had been squirreling away his newest tracks, hiding them on a CD intended for Darius, and Darius alone. It should have ended there, but when Horizon began repossessing Jet's things, pillaging his legacy, Darius had to hire

Shadowrunners to “liberate” the CD, tripping off this whole situation. Only one of the runners from that team was still alive, a hacker by the name of Zipper. Horizon was hot on the trail of what they'd lost, and so greater risks had to be taken.

He glanced at Geppetto uneasily with that last comment.

We were paid in full, and Jet informed us that he owed us one, for not giving us the full details of what we were going up against. We marked Darius St. George and JetBlack in as contacts. Funnily enough, we mostly haven't used them until recently, and by recently I mean two real-world years of roughly biweekly Shadowrunning later.

So, for an epilogue before I break for questions and begin setting up for my Pathfinder game:

GEPPETO met and accidentally fucked (as in he screwed her before he knew who she was) Dona Rowena O'Malley of the Seattle Families. Luckily for him, his strain of the virus is non-communicable by fluid exchange. At her recommendation, he signed on with the Merlyns, a subgroup of the Mafia consisting entirely of mages, and said goodbye to his day job and hello to his buttons.

Geppetto also died for a few days, and came back with a distinctive albino complexion. A few homeless people started showing up dead in the slums, their life force sucked out of their bodies and their faces contorted in expressions of horror, baffling the cops.

DERVISH moved in with Geppetto in the suburbs, sick of living in a coffin hotel. Geppetto's white-bread Humanis-sympathizer neighbors did not particularly appreciate Dervish, especially given that for shits and giggles Dervish started pretending to be gay to fuck with them. Looking to improve his skills, Dervish got into contact with Sensei, an old Aztec pit fighter living like a hermit in the barrens, and began training in the art of Sangre y Acero, the storied Mexican martial art of brutal prison shankings. He was also attacked by a random human who claimed that he had killed his father, suggesting that Dervish was a bad dude long before he could remember. According to the kid's testimony, he'd been killing for YEARS.

2D bought a wind farm in Snohomish, the farming community north of Seattle. His girlfriend came with him and gentrified very quickly, although she kept her juggalo lingo and psychotic tendencies. They lived in a tasteful and well-decorated agrarian townhouse, which also happened to host a Chaos Engine node filled with gore, illegal pornography, black programs, and unsafe BTL softs.

2D also sent his Machine Sprite out for something like its 20th service, which rendered it complex enough to start manifesting into a Free Sprite in his brain, nearly flatlining him. When he woke up in the hospital, the first words he heard were in digital, not meat, space:

“...Dad?”

In the meantime, the local head of Evo Biomedical was purged for incompetence, involving some sort of situation with a narc squad getting ghoulished. 2D, once he was cogent, contacted the new head and called a truce, and thus his Enemy quality started fading.

TANK moped around and looked for jobs, when he spotted a car following him home. He did not call the assassin, the technomancer, or the evil dark mage of black grimdarkness of death. He figured it

was nothing, so he went home. As a breaching charge leveled his door and he was filled with bullets, we thanked fuck that his adorable sister was still at school. Tank was saved (by which I mean he didn't die, he was just left writhing on the pavement outside his house with a clip's worth of lead in his gut) by Knight-Errant ultracops pouring into the neighborhood, but by that point, with the thrum of helicopter wings, the runners were gone. The last thing he saw was a flashbang grenade with the word "FUCKER" spray-painted across it hitting the ground near his face, before waking up in the hospital.

And that's why the Enemy quality sucks balls.

Chapter 4: Ares, Interrogations, and SINS

The story picks up a few months after the last run was finished, as the team took a well-deserved winter vacation off their profits from the JetBlack run. Darius St. George and JetBlack, themselves, went off to establish their own independent record label, with Black operating under a pseudonym because it would cause kind of a stir if Kurt Cobain's ghost just up and bought himself a rap label, and this was basically the equivalent.

Did you guys ever watch the Venture Brothers, where there was that scene with all the normally-heartless supervillains chipping in to help barn-raise the Monarch's hideout out of the goodness of their hearts? When Arianna, sobbing and alone, called up the only emergency contacts on Tank's phone -his running team- it turned into that. 2D, Dervish, and Geppetto would give this little girl a place to live, goddamn it, or they weren't morally questionable mercenaries.

Because, you see, if they didn't do this, they'd just be pure evil, not questionable.

The rail-thin channer, the creepy albino elf in the black suit, and the buff-as-shit rocket orc were not exactly well-received by Tank's nosy neighbors. The cops were called for fear of how sketch the team was, but luckily Geppetto had a nice chat with an officer about how we were just rebuilding this poor little girl's home. It occurred to me briefly that we were probably giving Arianna an incredibly stilted view of the altruism of Shadowrunners, but whatever, she was adorable and deserved it.

While we were working on refurbishing the bullet-strewn wall paneling, Arianna brought up a problem at home that she was having. We were almost eager to hear about the inconsequential problems of a child as opposed to the often-murderous demands of the Mr. Johnson of the week, so, putting aside partially finished modular furniture for a SoyKaf break (or, for Geppetto, utility guy down the street whose body would never be found break), we sat her down and asked her what was up.

Arianna was almost out of elementary school, and Tank had paid the school good money to ignore the fact that she was SINless. However, her grades were stellar, so she wanted to apply to a private prep school for middle school. The problem here, of course, was that she NEEDED a legitimate SIN, because bribes won't cut it at a prep school. She wanted to go down to the SIN registry and get chipped, but there was a problem; she was a minor, and thus she had to be legally in the custody of an adult with a SIN. So, Tank would have to get a SIN too, which was very bad for business.

Wanting to help the adorable little girl follow her dreams, but not wanting to gimp poor Tank, the runners approached a corrupt bureaucrat within the SIN registry (as referred to them by Danny the fixer) with a special request.

We wanted to get a fake SIN under Tank's real identity. That way, he could keep the SIN for as long as it took for the prep school to do a background check on Arianna, then scrap it. His identity would only be vulnerable for a small window. A quick call to Tank in the hospital, who confirmed that he liked this plan, and the job was on.

The SIN, as it turned out, was expensive. Enough so that Tank couldn't afford it and the team had to pay for it for him while he was getting released from the hospital. But, we figured it'd hold up when Arianna got interviewed. We set up an interview appointment with an agent from the prep school, to make sure that everything was in order and help Arianna give off a good impression.

Unfortunately, when the interviewer, a shrewish-looking woman in a beige skirt-suit, scanned Tank's spanking new SIN, she rolled nothing but hits, and he rolled a critical glitch.

Twice, having attempted to edge the first glitch.

Luckily, she didn't realize it was a fake, because it was under his real biometrics. What she did realize was that this poor man's SIN had an error, and she had better call the registry to get him re-instantiated right away! Two police officers escorted Tank down to the SIN registry as Arianna began the interview.

This is where 2D called the registry contact, a conversation that both began and ended with him screaming "GIVE US OUR FUCKING MONEY BACK."

So, Tank and Arianna got SINs. Which was great for Arianna's scholarly career (she had aced the interview!), except Tank had yet to break it to his tiny sister that there was a running team out for his blood who could now, without a doubt, identify her as a blood relation whom he loved very much.

After a quick deliberation, 2D basically browbeat Geppetto into accepting Tank and Arianna as two MORE roommates (Dervish having already moved in), because it was either Geppetto's or his place, and a wind farm with a glass façade in front, a hacker-ganger couple living within, an infectious cannibal zombie best friend who stopped by periodically, a baby AI with no sense of right and wrong compiling in the kitchen, and a home node filled with guro pornography was neither a healthy nor safe place to raise a child.

Geppetto relented that, yes, an inconspicuous house in the suburbs was probably a better place to hide Tank and his sister from murderous shadowrunners than the Fucking Juggalo 4Chan Wind Farm (tm). Even if he didn't particularly relish four people, one of whom was a gigantic troll, living in his modest home.

After the little vacation was shattered by the move-in of a fuckhueg troll and a tiny little girl to Geppetto's place, Danny got in contact with the team again. Danny had been so impressed by the team's performance during the last completely-out-of-their-league corp run, that he'd decided to line them up another completely-out-of-their-league corp run! He assured the team that, no, it wasn't something stupidly dangerous like an extraction or a datasteal, and no, Horizon was not involved. Not in the slightest. Seriously, Geppetto, Horizon isn't involved, stop being paranoid!

Geppetto contacted his former boss at Ares, Bradford Nice, a charismatic, manipulative, rich, middle-management fuck (one of our nicer contacts, if I do say so myself), to see if Nice knew anyone who could get us good suits for the Johnson meet, which was in the private suite in the Eye of the Needle restaurant. Nice referred us to a tailor, and also asked us to...keep him in the loop on our next mission.

Not suspicious at all, no sirree bob.

So the Johnson is a human with a lot of social and combat ware, most of it delta at the very least. He introduces himself over steaks as a hostage negotiations expert for Ares. Normally it's in the best interests of the Johnson to stay deniable, but in this case his identity was unavoidable. You see, we needed to retrieve the daughter of one Mr. Wilkins, a high-level Ares regional head.

Helen Wilkins had been kidnapped in broad daylight, along with her backpack, commlink, and Scottish terrier Pluton, off the streets of the Seattle Ares compound's elementary school. Ares didn't know how, but somehow Horizon had nabbed footage of the whole thing, and was pulling a “concerned citizen” act by plastering her face all over everything, in the process making Ares out to look inept and weak. Mr. Johnson was not a fan of this. Our job was to retrieve Helen Wilkins from her captors, with a bonus for the retrieval of the school supplies/commlink or the dog.

The job was fishy from the start, but it's hard to say no to 30 grand and an Ares discounted expense account.

Well, now we knew why Bradford Nice was interested, at the very least. But we still didn't smell a rat. Or, rather, we all smelled the rat (maybe not Tank), but the smell of the nuyen in the expense account was a lot nicer. 2D kitted out his drones with new guns and tac-cloaks, Tank picked up a new LMG, and Dervish got himself a prize--a silenced sniper rifle.

We were issued footage of the kidnapping. The girl had been walking to the bus stop when a stepvan pulled up alongside her, the door opened, and a man in a tacsuit grabbed her and pulled her in. The van then disappeared, presumably under a mage's invisibility spell.

Running on a hunch, 2D hacked the traffic registry system for the compound, and began cross-referencing the feeds from the pressure sensors at stoplights with visual footage from those intersections. It was slow work because another hacker had evidently already been and tried to clean up some tracks (mostly editing displacement of materials in the street, though; he'd forgotten the pressure sensors), but 2D caught the van heading North for a few blocks.

Then he hit a problem. Namely that the pressure sensors stopped reading and, after checking the cameras, he could confirm that the van was no longer on the road.

After a bit of backtracking and reverse-editing of footage to reintroduce those discrepancies that the other hacker had removed, 2D's fears were confirmed.

The invisible van had started flying.

2D can only give the team a rough estimate that the runners had made for Everett, given that it would take a BULLSHIT amount of effort for a mage to maintain the flight spell any longer than a few city blocks. Geppetto takes this info and runs with it, summoning a Spirit of Man (since he follows the Dark Magic tradition and his Mentor Spirit is Adversary, fluffed as Satan, the spirit came out looking kind of like Slender Man), showing it the pictures of the girl and the dog, and tells it that it is to return once it has found them in Everett, or once it has exhaustively searched all of Everett and turned up nothing.

The Spirit returned in the dead of night, when the rest of the team was asleep (camped out at Geppetto's place). Geppetto himself was awake, what with the whole being undead and not technically having much of a biological need for it any more. It had positively identified both girl and dog in the basement of a dockyard warehouse, being kept in some fashion of cage.

Dervish was the closest thing we had available to an infiltrator, but we figured if we kept him at a

good distance from the warehouse and he merely used his telescoping heat-vision (man, do I love max-rating cybereyes) to scope out the place, then we could get a better idea of what to do. 2D piggybacks into Dervish's cybereyes for additional spotting, and Geppetto assigns the spirit to lead Dervish to the warehouse.

We were not banking on two things. (1) The enemy had someone who could see astrally, as we should have recognized from the flying invisible van shenanigans earlier. (2) They had spotted the spirit.

The bullet had struck Dervish's skull before he heard it coming.

The whole team watched the feed as Dervish fell backwards, and then the view flooded with red. Geppetto screamed for his man spirit to retrieve Dervish, and to bring him to the hospital as the team scrambled for the hospital, themselves.

At the hospital, the SIN register glitched and identified Dervish as SERGEANT Garrett Jordan, veteran of the Amazonia conflict. We weren't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, as he was in a coma, with the bullet lodged just into his brain, somewhere between his frontal and temporal lobes. It was bizarrely impersonal, seeing the big, burly, jocular street sammy just lying there, limp as a ragdoll, his face swathed in bandages, his mouth slightly agape. The doctors told us that he was lucky he had bone lacing augs, or else the damage could have been a lot worse, but the chances were still high that he wouldn't survive.

The team vowed that the chances were high that the enemy running team wouldn't survive, after this bullshit. With nothing left to do for Dervish, we piled back into the van and made for Everett, hoping to catch the team before they left their safehouse.

Turning the van over to the gridlink for the time being, 2D popped his flyspy over to Everett and saw that the enemy team was piling into two vehicles, a sedan and the stepvan from earlier. Both had polarized windows, so either could have the girl. Taking a 50-50 chance, 2D dove and began hacking the sedan as the rival mage traced Geppetto's spirit and sent a Beast Spirit after us.

A gigantic wild boar, mane ablaze with astral fire, manifested across the freeway from us and began charging the van headlong. 2D was zonked, hacking the sedan, but luckily Geppetto had prepared for this eventuality.

He released a spirit that he'd summoned in the hospital, a Fire Spirit, a malevolent demon of eldritch flame. The freeway got treated to the closest thing Shadowrun gets, short of dragons, to a Kaiju battle, with the Fire Spirit beating the Beast Spirit off the car and causing serious collateral damage to the adjacent vehicles in the process. Tank loaded sticknshock and went to town on the giant boar, giving Geppetto a brief moment to look back to 2D.

It was probably a good thing, two, considering 2D was boiling blood out of his mouth and nose, dangerously close to flatlining.

With a cry of "oh fuck!" Geppetto launched a healing spell at 2D, knitting together 2D's much-abused neural synapses.

In netspace, the two high-rating Black Intrusion Countermeasures saw the technomancer that they had

just gotten the drop on recompiling. And boy was he pissed.

2D moved to a different, and frankly dubiously ethical, tactic. He began spamming weak fault sprites at the Black IC, sending them in wave after wave like World War One soldiers charging a machine gun entrenchment. Dozens of fault sprites lost their lives (existences? They're only partially sentient) but eventually 2D brute-forced his way into control of the node.

2D let out a virtual cry of despair as he activated the sedan's interior cameras. It was a decoy, being driven by a single orc with no passengers. Just one lowly street samurai.

Overcome with rage, 2D dove the sedan and began piloting it himself, picking up speed and aiming for the nearest concrete wall.

The sammy noticed what was happening and tried the doors, but found them locked. He busted out the driver's side window and leapt out at about 60 miles an hour, sustaining some serious scrapes in the process.

The sammy knew what fear was when the car he'd dove out of slowed down, turned around, and then began revving its engine again.

Sprinting like a man possessed, the sammy bobbed and weaved through buildings and alleyways, under assault from his bloodthirsty Hyundai. Every time he made it to a street temporarily inaccessible by the car for a breather, 2D would on-the-fly hack another passing car, located with his flyby, and thus the evil car ghost would be after the sammy yet again. A few shin bruises and rough tumbles later, the sammy had disappeared into an alleyway street market. Curses. More inventive measures would have to be taken if the team wanted anyone left to question, considering that the van was long gone.

This was when Geppetto loosed his Man Spirit, under the instructions of "Incapacitate him. And make it creative."

As the sammy is passing through the flea market, his one meat arm just reaches out and grabs the CHOICE ASS of a passing lady. At first he begins to think that groping passers-by is not the right way to hide from a deranged hacker on a revenge trip, but the voice in his head that is not a Spirit of Man reassures him: "Dude, appreciating some CHOICE ASS is never wrong."

The woman calls the cops and, instead of the usual Lone Star flunkies, two Knight-Errant badasses pick up, abandoning their coffee and donuts. The voices in their heads insure them that this is just some twobit punk. Easy pickings. Everett street trash. What's wrong with a little police brutality? A man has needs. Needs from back in the days of hunters and mammoths. Violence, man, violence. No one will vouch for this fuck. No class action-lawsuits headed your way. Why not go to town on him?

As the Knight Errant goons, best described as Robocop and his partner, Judge Dredd, pull up and approach the flea market where the street sammy has all but attached himself to the screaming woman's buttocks, the team began to fear Geppetto's spirits.

The team winces and contemplates popcorn as the two super-cybered, hardcore cop corp mercs go completely apeshit on the hapless runner. They both start with their stunsticks, but then one starts

using the butt of the stunstick, and then the other pulls his sidearm and starts pistol-whipping the guy, and it just kind of goes downhill from there. Soon they're working the poor fucker over with just their bare fists, strewing teeth and bits of face all over the sidewalk. The pedestrians scream and run away as the two Knight Errant stand, wiping the blood off of their boots...

And then the spirit hits them with another Suggestion each and they start going to town on the guy's cyberlegs with every hard object available. One of them goes back to the police interceptor and gets a tire iron while the other cracks a kneecap over the curb. The two of them mutually hallucinate that the nearest dumpster is a jail cell, and with a gleeful drawl of "boom 'em, boys," from the Man Spirit, the cops pick the dude up bodily, hurl him into the dumpster, slam the lid shut, handcuff the lid handles to each other, and then split for motherfucking donuts with a high-five.

His lip pursed in appreciation, 2D began to clap for Geppetto. The Spirit materialized in the view of the nearest security camera, bowed, and disappeared, its services to Geppetto fulfilled.

With the flea market cleared out, it was a simple matter for Tank to snap the handcuffs, toss the broken sammy over his shoulder, and return to the stepvan.

Now, we had a problem. There were two places we could interrogate this guy. One was 2D's place, which had a giant glass facade in front and no basement, but the right atmosphere. That was ruled out, because it was too exposed. The one remaining option was Geppetto's basement, but Geppetto happened to be living with Arianna the adorable 8-year-old, and she would probably not take kindly to brutal torture and/or information extraction.

Thinking quick on his feet, 2D connected to Geppetto's sedan and transferred Geppetto, Tank, and the captive sammy from the van to the car. Then, washing the blood from the floor of the stepvan, he called up Geppetto's house.

Arianna: "Hello?"

2D: "Hey, Arianna, it's uncle Stuart!" (2D's fake SIN's identity was Stuart Pot, local mechanic and 20cen pop music enthusiast)

Arianna: "Hey, Uncle Stuart! When are you, uncle Vito, and Uncle Garrett going to be back?"

2D: "About that, sweetie. Uncle Garrett isn't going to be in for a while, but your brother and uncle Vito need the house for a while, so your Aunt Jozie and I are taking you to FUNLAND!"

Arianna: *girlish screams* "Can I bring my friends!?"

2D: "You can bring all of them!"

2D picked up Jozie, his orc juggalo girlfriend, briefed her on the situation (she just liked being able to go somewhere fun), and, in a position any of his 4Chan buddies would have killed for, picked up five prepubescent girls in an unmarked grey van.

2D left his comms open. As the hostage came to, in a dark basement, unable to feel his legs, with an elf in a suit and a troll in armor (both in balaclavas) standing in front of him, he wondered first and

foremost why the commlink placed on a nearby table was playing the sound of little girls shrieking on carnival rides.

Already off to an awkward start, Geppetto stripped the guy naked, and found himself gawking at the street sammy's gargantuan elephant dong. This was larger than porn star huge. This was bigger than "compensating for something" huge. It was down to his knees. Geppetto instinctively stepped to the side for fear that there was a cybergun of submachine gun or larger caliber hidden in this tube steak.

He had a stupidly huge dick, is what I'm saying.

There was a brief pause as all involved tried to take in the pure, consolidated weird of the situation, punctuated by 2D bitching about shitty cotton candy over the comms.

Geppetto opened up.

"Who are you working penis? OH GOD DAMMIT."

The street sammy clammed up almost instantaneously, as much stubborn as he was weirded out by the whole ordeal. Frustrated, Geppetto announced into the commlink,

Geppetto: "2D? Anything you wanna suggest before we resort to violence on this guy?"

2D (shouting over rides): "OH WOW HAHAAAA DUDE WHY WOULD YOU LINK ME THIS FOOTAGE. OKAY HERE'S WHAT YOU DO."

Tank: "I don't like this."

2D: "OKAY SO THAT'S OBVIOUSLY A CYBERDICK, THAT OR THIS GUY HAS REALLY WEIRD SURGE. SO TANK, YER GONNA NEED TO START HANDLING HIS DICK. LOOK FOR A MAINTENANCE PORT."

Tank: "What? No."

2D: "SEARCH HIS DICK TANK OR I'M NOT HELPING."

Tank: "Ewww. Okay, there's this little thing that looks like a headphone jack right near his balls."

Sammy: "What are you doing to my dick?"

Geppetto: "Shut up!"

2D: "SO NOW PLUG YOUR COMMLINK INTO HIS DICK."

Tank: "I'm not plugging my commlink into this guy's dick! I don't know where he's been!"

2D: "GEPETTO?"

Geppetto (sighing): "Do it, Tank."

Sammy: “AAAUUUOOHGAWD WHYYYYYYY!?”

Tank: “WHAT DID YOU DOOOO!?”

Geppetto: “2D, why is my captive's dick sparking and doing loop-de-loops?”

2D: “TEACUP RIDE!”

With that, 2D hung up.

Geppetto called 2D back.

Geppetto: “WHAT THE FUCK DOES 'TEACUP RIDE' MEAN!?”

2D: “IT'S IN HIS DICK!”

2D hung up again, having learned the valuable lesson that the marketing isn't all bullshit, and sometimes dreams do come true at Funland. When security picked him up for hacking the teacup ride, he paid the (comparatively paltry) fine with a smile on his face, and an announcement of, “Nothing you can tell me will make me sorry, but I will gladly apologize anyway.”

So, confronted with terminal levels of weird, the sammy finally spilled his guts. There were two guys leading this operation; a hacker named Two-Times, who came from some sort of black ops background, and an elf physad named Joy, his long-time partner. Two-Times had some kind of obsessive-compulsive duality gimmick, hence the two vehicles, the digital and magical concealment, and the fact that (as we learned) he had eight teammates but split them into two teams.

2D, sitting boredly in the theme park security office, begins to mash the gears together, and realizes that the captive sammy is probably on Two-Times' tacnet.

So, working on the assumption of “two backups, always,” he checked the node space above Geppetto's home. He found a fly-spy surveillance drone. With a grunt of “cheeky bastard,” he zonked in his chair to begin hacking it.

The drone was child's play.

The skeleton code, stripped and replaced with a lethal feedback databomb, wasn't.

With an ear-splitting scream, 2D began bleeding from his ears and collapsed onto the pavement of Funland.

Meanwhile, across the city, in the trauma ward of Seattle General a pair of cybereyes blinked open, and with a SNAP, a surgeon went missing. Doctor Dervish retrieved his duffel bag full of gear (generously unsearched) and, with a cursory glance back at the crisp white hallways of the hospital, he was gone into the night.

Geppetto got a call.

Geppetto: “Dervish, what the fuck? You should be in the hospital!”

Dervish: “Mage. I need a trajectory on the pursuit of the hostage in Everett.”

Geppetto: “Dervish, I think 2D is down and--”

Dervish: “Where are they, Geppetto?”

Geppetto: “...I sent some watcher spirits to tail them. They've mostly been dying, though. Their mage is good.”

Dervish: “A direction, mage.”

Geppetto: “Uh...South. Dervish, what's happening? You're--”

Dervish hung up, and made his own call.

Dervish: “Hello, Seattle Tacoma? I'd like to report a bomb threat.”

TwoDee awoke on the streets of Funland with DocWagon paramedics standing over him, holding a defibrillator and a fuckton of stims. The Resonance was hazy for him, considering he'd been briefly in a coma, but he was able to loosely recognize a few messages from Geppetto buzzing in his vision. While still flat on the pavement, he connected his AR shades and rang up Geppetto.

2D: “H3Y G3PP3TT0 WH4T'S UP”

Geppetto: “Um...wow. I'm getting some kind of distortion here. You feeling alright?”

2D: “0H 1 D0N'T KN0W MY BR4IN JUST W3NT TH3 W4Y 0F THR33 M1L3 1SL4ND, CH3RN0BYL 0R CH1C4G0 1F 1'M B31NG G3N3R0US BUT 0TH3R TH4N TH4T 1'M G00D 1 GU3SS. N0T L1K3 1 4LM0ST D13D 0R 4NYTH1NG.”

Geppetto: “How long is this going to last?”

2D: “PR0B4BLY L1K3 F1FT33N M1NUT3S N0W G3T T0 TH3 FUCK1NG P01NT.”

Geppetto: “So Dervish called.”

2D: “W4T.”

Geppetto: “And he was going...what's south of Everett?”

2D: “FUCK!”

Geppetto: “What's south of Everett that I'm missing, 2D!?”

2D: "G3T 1N Y0UR FUCK1NG C4R R1GHT N0W, 1'M H4CK1NG TH3 C0NTR0LS."

2D continued,

"H3'S G01NG T0 TH3 41RP0RT. TH3 K1DN4PP3RS KN0W TH3 H34T 1S 0N S0 TH3Y'R3 FL331NG TH3 UC4S."

The team beat a hasty rendezvous in which 2D, driving both vehicles simultaneously, arranged for his girlfriend Jozie to take all the little girls home and to then take Arianna to the Fucking 4Chan Juggalo Wind Farm (tm) for safety (I know, irony). The rest of the team hauled ass toward Sea-Tac in the rigger van.

2D called up Dervish and got no response, so feeling particularly desperate, he searched out Dervish's commlink's node, somewhere on the runway of the airport. Wait, not the runway. Was he...was he...ON TOP of the control tower?

Bouncing into his backdoor into Dervish's cybereyes, 2D found himself staring down a pair of crosshairs. Dervish blinked reflexively, and spoke, such that his own sensorium would hear him, thus broadcasting to 2D.

Dervish: "Hello, Hacker. You have arrived just in time to witness me doing our job. Do you see that congregation in hangar C, Hacker?"

Dervish: "They have foolishly left the hangar doors open. This allowed me to recognize the man who shot me in the head. I very much intend to return the favor."

2D scrolled text across Dervish's eyes.

2D: "Dervish, dude, we can talk about this--"

Dervish: "Target sighted. Breathe."

2D: "DERVISH, SERIOUSLY, YOU'RE JEOPARDIZING--"

Shortly after the sniper went sprawling, headless from the nose up, across the tarmac, the crosshairs leveled over the enemy primary street samurai, scrambling for cover at the death of the sniper.

Dervish: "Target sighted. Breathe."

2D: "SERIOUSLY--"

The street sammy dropped like a rock with a burst of pink mist.

Dervish planted one in another hired muscle before the rest of the rival team had scrambled to close the hangar doors. In the rigger van, 2D screeched in panic and floored it toward the airport, grossly violating the speed limit.

Back in netspace, 2D noticed through Dervish's eyes as the dying street samurai and thug began levitating towards the remaining crack of the hangar doors. Without a second thought, he sighted their heads, and planted a second shot in each. There would be no healing on his watch. The deed done, and without any remaining advantage from sniping, he activated Trout's tacsuit (which 2D had not noticed he was wearing) and rappelled to the tarmac below.

2D, Geppetto, and Tank arrived at the airport to find it swarming with Knight Errant, due to the high profile bomb threat. Before they could get on the tarmac, Knight Errant stopped the team, demanding clearance. 2D hastily bullshitted up some fake digital clearances for himself and Geppetto, but the troll with the LMG (and a REAL SIN, which couldn't be modified on the fly) was not going to fly. Thinking on his feet, Geppetto summoned a Spirit of Man to drive one of the Knights postal.

During the ensuing spree shooting, 2D was able to floor it onto the tarmac, albeit not in a subtle fashion. On the way in, the stepvan was buzzed by a military landing chopper, en route for the very hangar that they were rushing towards. It was jet-black, unmarked. This was some serious shit.

That last sentence was all but confirmed as a squad of Ares Knight Errant, in full hotzone loadout gear, poured out of the helicopter, battle rifles readied. They breached the hangar, and then...there was a suspicious lack of gunfire.

The team knew that they'd been hired by Ares, though, and Firewatch was the best of the best, so this was a good thing, right?

Imagine our surprise when the hangar opened again, and we saw a prop plane with thick armor plating making its way to the runway...escorted by the commando team.

Dervish: "This doesn't make sense. You can't bribe Firewatch."

2D worked it out first.

2D: "NO. FUCK NO. FUCK ME IN THE EAR WITH A TROLL'S DICK. WE'RE SCREWED."

Geppetto: "What!?"

2D: "They WEREN'T bribed. WE'RE WORKING AGAINST ARES. THIS WHOLE TIME WE'VE BEEN GEEKING AN ARES-SPONSORED RUNNING TEAM."

Dervish approached the plane.

Dervish: "The mission is still on."

2D: "NO IT'S FUCKING NOT. I'M CALLING THE JOHNSON, WITH MY AWESOME BRAIN, AND TELLING HIM THAT THE JOB IS OFF, HE HAS A SMALL DICK, AND I HOPE HE ENJOYS GETTING FRAGGED BY ARES. THIS MISSION IS DONE. CLEAR THE FUCK OUT."

Dervish, standing further down the runway, seemed to have a brief seizure. As he blinked rapidly, a tone of softness seemed to return to his voice.

Dervish: "Oh. Oh fuck."

Activating his skimmers, Dervish boosted back to the van as fast as he could go, recognizing the mortal danger that the team was suddenly in.

The team voted to reconvene at Geppetto's place. Or, rather, Geppetto, Tank, and Dervish voted for that. 2D wanted to flee to the sewers and never come out again.

2D: "This is so fucked, this is so fucked, seriously, Tank, leave your shit, we need to get out of here."

Tank: "I left my backup guns in Geppetto's house! I gotta get 'em back!"

2D: "DUDE I'M CALLING IT NOW THERE'S A BOMB IN THERE."

2D dove into the nearest dumpster (the second time this saved him from danger in his life) as Tank opened the front door, and was promptly blasted back across the street by the resultant house-shattering explosion. Ares Knight-Errant sirens lit up the night, closing fast.

2D: "TOLD YOU FUCKING SO. BY THE WAY THERE'S AN ARES HUNTER DRONE TWO MILES ABOVE US RIGHT NOW. NOW GET IN THE VAN YOU BASTARDS, WE'RE GOING TO THE SEWER MAIN."

Tank was rather the worse for wear at this point, but all things considered it was probably for the best that it was the big dumb troll who opened the door, since he was the only one who wouldn't have been put critical by the explosion. He was dropped in the nearest sewer entrance and, as per 2D's suggestion, the team went dark, separated into different parts of town, and dropped into different areas of the sewers one at a time.

2D was the last one, so he had no idea what he was dealing with when he entered the sewers.

Namely, he didn't expect the Firewatch team that would be waiting for him, ordering him to kneel on the floor or die.

As the team, all of whom had been captured individually, were lined up against a wall beneath a storm drain, an Ares agent walked through the ranks of Firewatch, who were organized with disturbing similarity to a firing squad. The agent smiled grimly, and explained the situation to the team. Both teams had been hired on by legitimate Ares authorities. These two authorities just happened to be involved in an interdepartmental conflict. The agent reprimanded us; we had been captured by the faction that we'd been hired by, but imagine if we'd been so foolish as to get captured by the faction we were running against? Why, we'd probably be dead in the sewers right now.

Now, here was the deal. Mr. Wilkins was part of a pivotal conflict against Mr. Bradford Nice's department. This was part of a much larger conflict between heads Damien Knight and Arthur Vogel. Mr. Nice had organized the kidnapping of Mr. Wilkins' daughter, to better grease the wheels of reintegration into the local Ares branch.

There was, however, a loose end.

Pluton the Scottish terrier.

You see, one talented and rather infamous shadowrunner by the name of Two-Times had decided that, upon delivering the girl to safety, he wanted to keep Pluton the dog. This would not normally have been a problem, but Pluton was no ordinary Scottie. He was a biodrone, a “data dog” as per Ein from Cowboy Bebop, and he had some rather...potent Ares company secrets on him. It was unknown whether Two-Times wanted the dog for this data, or just as an attack against Ares, but this was quite the blow.

And, as it just so happened, Ares had found some Shadowrunners that had a bone to pick with Mr. Two-Times.

Namely, us.

We had two options:

- (1) Find Two-Times, kill him, and retrieve the dog, and in the process be richly rewarded with millions of nuyen.
- (2) Be ignominiously summary-executed in a sewer in Auburn.

It took a little thought, but we went with option (1).

Ares generously gave us what little intel they had on Joy, Two-Times' partner in crime. Namely, that he was known to be a compulsively big spender in Vegas, and he had just made tens of thousands of nuyen from the kidnap job. So, that was where we were going first, and we had a day to say goodbye to our contacts in Seattle. Off to find a disguise adept in the City of Sin.

Chapter 5: Hunt for Joy, Dirty Dealings, and Dervish's Revelation

When we last left off, the team had been recruited at gunpoint to kill the proxy-nightmare hacker Two-Times, as he had made off with Ares' experimental datadog. The mission was to neutralize the hacker and retrieve the dog to have the data on it erased. The payment was one million nuyen and, after a little nagging from TwoDee, the dog itself. The punishment for failure, death.

Because of the aforementioned proxy nightmarehood, the team was bound for Vegas to hunt down a master of disguise named Joy, one of Two-Times' confidants. A compulsive gambler, Joy would be SOMEWHERE in Vegas. The problem, of course, was that he could also be ANYONE in Vegas.

The team had a few hours on the plane in which to prepare for this first leg of their mission. Dervish did some skillsort training, Tank dicked around and watched trid, TwoDee compiled and registered a few more sprites, and Geppetto had a more...interesting task.

You see, Geppetto was not happy with his spirits. The callousness of one particular Spirit of Man had nearly cost Dervish his head, and had in fact already cost him part of it, if not the whole. Dervish seemed to be mostly back to normal, but the high-caliber rifle round jiggling around in his skull was a serious reminder that all was not well on the Astral Plane.

Geppetto traveled to the plane of his Mentor Spirit, Adversary. Adversary manifested as his doppelganger, cruel and pale and eerily beautiful. The two eyed each other for a brief moment, and then Geppetto posed his request: he wanted his spirits to be properly obedient.

Adversary grinned, revealing thin, sharp teeth, and chuckled deeply. It promised Geppetto that his spirits would follow his every whim to the letter and the--pardon the pun--spirit, whatever he wished, if he would but allow Adversary a small...service.

Anything, Geppetto said.

Adversary made his offer thusly: It had been so long since he, a spirit of innumerable high force, had smelled the human refuse on the material plane, had tasted their rancid air...and, why, Geppetto really had no purpose for sleep anymore, being a banshee, no? Adversary wanted--needed--an avatar, and if Geppetto could just sleep nightly as normal, then he would be returned to his bed, unharmed, by morning, and all would be as it should be as far as he was concerned. A pittance, really. Like a time-share on life.

Geppetto agreed, with a few exceptions:

- 1) No endangering the team, directly or indirectly.
- 2) Any team member could tell Adversary to wake Geppetto up in an emergency, and he would hold up to it. If Adversary (or his proxy, as it turned out, a Force 14 Black Magic Free Spirit) felt that this was being abused, he could call for a renegotiation of contract.

Adversary made a toothy smile and said that this would be fine by it. It would hopefully be seeing Geppetto...soon.

With a smile, Geppetto woke up in his airplane chair and knew that it was the dawn of a new era.

The team arrived in Vegas and felt like they were being watched. They didn't look like mobsters (well, everyone except Geppetto), gamblers, or depressed sararimen looking to feel something, so the city wasn't especially welcoming to them. The ambiance just wasn't there. Even the Matrix felt weird to TwoDee, all gambling sites and virtual slot machines and none of the pervasive corporate propaganda of Seattle.

Vegas being a mob-controlled town in NAN territory probably had something to do with that.

Not wanting to ring anyone's bells, the team bought two rooms at a midprice Radisson off the Strip, and began setting up.

It was at this point in the session that Tank dropped the bomb. Namely that this would be his last session because his player suddenly had family obligations on our normal Shadowrun nights. None of us were, say, bawling that he had to go, but it was kind of dick on all involved that it had to be dropped on us so suddenly that he was dropping out of the game. He also couldn't reschedule, because this was family obligations of the "his Dad, the only member of his family who drives, believed that games were a waste of his time and banned his son from playing them so he could have more FAMILY TIME" variety.

Considering Tank was deeply entrenched in the plot and his sister had been effectively adopted by TwoDee's girlfriend by this point, there wasn't really much of an option left. He had to disappear or get killed off, because the GM did not particularly relish the thought of GMPCing Tank's character for the entirety of the Two-Times arc, which he had planned as a year-long multi-continent bonanza.

So, the GM assured Tank's player it was okay, and although he was a little annoyed that all the metaplot he'd written up for Tank was getting abandoned (thereby wasting hours of his time) that Tank would get written out of the story. Tank's player didn't exactly like the sound of this, but he didn't have much of a choice because he was bouncing at this point.

So, that night, 2D called up his girlfriend to make sure that she and Arianna were okay, Dervish decided to take a walk to scope out Vegas, and Geppetto fell asleep and promptly got back up again. He cordially introduced himself to 2D, who in turn identified himself as a big fan of Adversary's work and offered him some AR shades.

Adversary: "Oh? And these are?"

TwoDee: "AR Shades. I get rights to the footage, by the way."

Adversary: "Oh, you mortals. Well, try to keep up, hacker."

With a piff, he was gone.

A few minutes later, there was a click behind 2D's head. 2D sighed loudly and put his hands up.

2D: "Make it quick, please."

The runner behind him responded with a terse "kay," before pulling a cloth over his face and

chloroforming him.

Across the strip, Dervish didn't notice the immensely strong troll physad shadowing him until the arms locked around his throat, putting him in a sleeper hold.

2D blinked groggily and woke up. He glanced to his left, and saw Tank. Then he glanced to his right and saw Tank. Upon closer inspection, he realized that it was more like there was half of Tank on either side of him. And more elsewhere in the room, resembling something like a very clean gibbing.

Creepily enough, some of the parts were still breathing. Well, gurgling, rather. The whole hit reeked of magic.

Naturally, 2D flipped a shit, staggered out of the room, and called 911. An operator picked up and announced, "Emergency services, sir, what seems to be your problem?"

2D was still cogent enough to deny all involvement with this fucked-up bullshit, lest he be implicated in Shadowrunning.

2D: "THERE'S A DEAD TROLL ALL OVER MY ROOM AND I DON'T KNOW HOW HE GOT HERE."

Operator: "..."

2D: "AAAAAAAAAAAAAH."

Operator: "We'll send a CrashCart team right away, sir. Hold tight."

2D: "FUUUUUUUCK."

In Seattle, you see, emergency services are run by DocWagon, which is an independent AA corp that does purely emergency medical work. However, Evo Biomedical found that DocWagon's business model worked so well that they bloodily ripped it off for their own competing subsidiary, CrashCart. The two franchises would normally come down to a difference in preference and metroplex contract bidding, but in this case 2D had a very real cause to be worried: he had pissed off Evo in the past, and even though they were nominally at a truce now, he didn't know if some young idiot on the ER team would have gotten the message by now.

After a bit of fidgeting, he resolved to play it cool. Evo didn't know what he LOOKED LIKE, right? He decided to edit Tank's name out of his room, to make it look like he really DID have no idea how his room became filled with dead, twitching trollparts, and hacked the hotel node posthaste.

Jumping into the hotel's registry, 2D was surprised to find another hacker. After a quick stand-off, he identified the other hacker as a member of the killer runner team from Tank's enemy quality that he had never bothered to hide from or dissuade (the ones who had his real SIN name, which he had bafflingly signed into the hotel with, and whom had access to a helicopter), and oddly enough they were working at parallels. The UCAS has sort of a runner brotherhood thing going on; you don't dick over other runners for no reason. 2D, Geppetto, and Dervish weren't involved aside from hiring Tank on, so the killers weren't going to penalize them unjustly.

Thus, Tank was made to look like a dude who had busted into 2D's apartment with intent to do terrible things, and the enemy running team was erased from the footage, becoming mystery runners once more.

2D logs out and sits back down, waiting for CrashCart and, although a little more self-assured, still terrified that they'll recognize him.

Dervish, meanwhile, wakes up in an alleyway and begins rocketorcing towards the hotel, realizing just how long he's been out, and that someone (or everyone) is probably dead by now.

2D stood outside the room as a team of heavily-armed Gas Mask Mooks (not linking to TVTropes because I'm not an attention-whoring prick attempting to emotionlessly codify a fandom of my choosing) in Evo paraphernalia scoped out his room. Not wanting them to stick around too long, but also not wanting to cause suspicion, he resolved to be as mundanely unpleasant as humanly possible.

CrashCart Operative: "Sir, what did you say happened?"

2D began openly bawling, grasped weakly at the Evo soldier's hazard suit, and dribbled snot all over it.

2D: "I DON'T KNOOOOW! I WAS HERE WITH MUH-MUH-MUH-MY FRIEEEEENDS, AND I DON'T KNOW WHERE THEY AAAAARE, AND THEN THIS BIG 'OL TROLL CAME INTO THE ROOO-HOO-HOOOOM, AND HE WAS GON 'TA, GONNA...TUH-TUH-TUH-"

CC Operative: "Uhm...take your time, sir."

2D: "TUH-TUH-take ADVANTAGE of MEEEEEEEE!"

At this point 2D broke into hysterical sobbing, falling to his knees and melodramatically trailing snot and tears all the way down the operative's hazard suit.

2D: "AND THEN I WOKE UP AND HE WAS DEAAAAAAD!"

At this point, CrashCart took custody of the body and decided to cede control of the crime scene to HardCorps, the local cop corp.

Now, let me go down the list of PMC professionalism, starting with Ares Firewatch.

>Firewatch: The best of the best, multinational commandos equivocal to a high-tech, magically active Navy SEAL corps.

>Knight Errant: The mass-produced, military-scale footsoldiers of Ares, whom Firewatch recruits from.

>Lone Star: The crappy corrupt version of Knight Errant, with shittier training and gear.

>WildCat: Lone Star without the money, protocols, or restrictions.

>HardCorps: The ghetto reject version of WildCat.

So, a bunch of dudes in ill-matching grey armor jackets with peeling patches that read "HARDORPS"

(the C and D were kind of stuck together but the graphic design was shitty) and wildly nonstandardized firearms, all with the safety off, poured into the apartment.

2D was promptly questioned by a depressed inner city orc who seemed to be stuck in a rut, and a Hispanic human who seemed WAAAAY too eager to read conspiracy into things. Without any prompting from 2D (indeed, at first he did not let 2D speak at all), the human decided that Tank was part of an EVIL SHADOWRUNNING TEAM that was going to rob/rape/kill/maybe all of the above poor Stuart the IT specialist, and after a disagreement over the loot there was a ferocious gunfight that somehow ended with no bullet holes in the walls, and Tank lying in cleanly-separated pieces around the hotel room.

To illustrate this, he swung around a troll-sized (troll metahuman adjustment) Ruger Super Warhawk magnum pistol, with the safety off. He nearly cold-cocked his partner multiple times, only slowing his wild gesticulations when he accidentally planted a round in the hotel room's couch, punching a fist-sized hole through it.

The partner agreed that evil shadowrunners were probably to blame, if only to get his partner to stop swinging a 50-cal handgun around like a parade baton.

2D decided that he wanted these two numskulls out of his room, and without any physical ability to throw them out, he instead resorted to weepy mode again, this time with the added unpleasantness of mild racism.

2D: "I HEARD ABOUT RUNNERS ON THE NEWS! They have BLADES in their arms and replace their eyes with ROBOT EYES and I hear they put ROCKETS IN THEIR LEGS for illegal STREET RACING like in the MOVIES and I hear a lot of them are ORCS! They sound like horrible people!"

Orc Officer: "Rockets in...what!?"

Human Officer: "Exactly! There's our suspect! Look for orcs with rocket legs!"

2D would have been be more worried if HardCorps as an organization wasn't actively incompetent. As the officers cleared out, though, they passed by Dervish, who stepped out of the elevator as they entered it.

The look on the orc officer's face as Dervish announced "officers," and passed by them was a thing of beauty. 2D giggled like a schoolgirl as Dervish approached his room.

Dervish: "What's so funny?"

2D: "Nothing, just this thing with HardCorps. Oh, dude, you will not BELIEVE how Tank just died."

So, at this point, 2D is feeling dandy because Evo hasn't pegged him, and Dervish is back to provide him with much-needed security. Which is good, because he had an errand he wanted to run, considering it wasn't that late in the night by this point.

2D had plugged John for any Tamanous hideouts in the Vegas area earlier, since they'd been incredibly useful thus far, and considering that they were seeking out a presumably-hostile Face

Adept, they'd probably have a body to dispose of soon. He'd gotten the address on a back-alley black clinic off the strip, but didn't want to go marching into ghoulish territory without a little backup. Hence, the Dervish.

As they approached the clinic, there was a cavalcade of noises. A weird drilling noise sounded from a basement window, while the “thuk thuk thuk” of hammer blows echoed from behind the clinic. Dervish clutched his head, the drilling noise putting him into PTSD mode from all the surgeries that his poor, metal-laced bones sustained, requiring 2D to keep him steady for a moment.

Curious of a potential threat, 2D peeked around back to check the drilling noise and saw...

Geppetto, wearing fancy AR shades, crucifying a dude in the alleyway upside down.

This was where 2D got a message from one of his contacts, HawtSawce, a Chaos Engine infobroker.

HawtSawce: “There's this guy on the forums who said he knew you. Asked for everything I could find on the crucifixion of Saint Peter. Any, uh, any comment on that?”

2D texted back, “You wouldn't believe it if I told you.”

2D: “...Which is why, once I've blurred out all the faces and voices, the feed is going up on the boards tonight.”

So, since, due to his contract, Adversary was (weirdly) the safest place to be, 2D dragged Dervish over into the alleyway. As Dervish took his meds and recovered, they made small talk with Satan as he re-enacted Saint Peter's death with what we later found out was a local deacon.

When Dervish recovered, he and 2D entered the clinic, walking through the front door. There, they met a very pleasant, pretty young nurse, who promptly changed her tune (and her magically-maintained disguise, back to her natural ghoul rictus) when 2D name-dropped John.

She escorted them down into the basement, where they met David Pitweiler, an oooooold ghoul who's so far gone that he talks through a vocoder because his vocal cords fell out. A talented street doc, Pitweiler operated while inside a special hazard suit that basically held his body together. Dervish, always a fan of invasive surgery, promptly submitted to a diagnostic while the opportunity was being bounced around, and this is when Pitweiler broke an...issue to 2D and Dervish.

Namely that, unlike the team's suspicions about Dervish, he wasn't a clone.

He was clones, plural. A big 'ol amalgamation of bioware that thought it was a dude. Pitweiler had no idea how he was even alive, being functionally a Frankenstein's monster.

Hello, GM's justification for his amnesiac character taking the Biocompatibility AND Type O System qualities.

So, the sort of expenses that went into Dervish were the sort of thing that, obviously, only the Big Ten could manage. Pitweiler casually warned Dervish that he was...probably wanted by at least one of the Big Ten. Moreover, if he was captured by any of them, he could probably expect to not live long, at

least not without seeing a vivisection table.

That learned, Dervish asked for more cyberblades, please.

2D added that there was a dude nailed to the wall of the clinic that would probably need disposal.

Pitweiler sighed melodramatically through his vocoder, and sent the nurse to do some house cleaning.

The next day, Dervish was still under the knife and 2D had only had about half a night of sleep, having instinctively watched on Dervish's surgery to make sure that there was no funny business (thankfully, Pitweiler only ate the parts that wouldn't be going back into Dervish anyway). Geppetto had a full, extremely restful night of sleep, and resisted a giggle when he learned that Tank had been brutally murdered.

2D, wanting to make some more contacts in the Vegas area since contacts were the only way to find a shapeshifter in hiding, trolled the job market on a Jackpoint subsidiary, and found a promising lead. Namely, amongst all the “YO CAN YOU BEAT UP THIS NERD FOR CASH” offers, there was a comment that read,

“I have an offer of employment for young entrepreneurs such as yourselves. Meet in room 432 of the Caesar's Palace Hotel and Casino at 4:30 PM today if you are interested. --J”

While 2D was working on this lead, Geppetto, the mafia member in the party, tried to track down the local don, but to no avail, considering the Consortium owns like half the casinos on the strip and he could have been in any one of them.

Dervish, with his tiny list of contacts, went out on a complete fucking limb and asked his sensei if he knew anyone in the area.

Weirdly enough, the reclusive Mexican gladiator gave us the best lead. He had served, you see, with a special ops unit during Operation Omega, and one man from the team, whom currently went by Donald Kane, had gone on to become the Security Director for the Consortium.

With a few new contacts and a Johnson meet upcoming, we prepared to take the hunt for Joy in earnest.

Chapter 6: Bend, Stoned Spirits, and 2D's Orgasm

So, the team had a few leads in Vegas. Not necessarily on Joy the physical adept, but on getting to know the people who might be able to steer them in the right direction. 2D had picked up work with a Mr. Johnson operating out of Caesar's palace, and the team was prepared to meet him that afternoon. Geppetto had tried to get in touch with Don Dominic Freda of the Verontesse family, the power behind the Casino Consortium, but couldn't pin the old mob boss down. Dervish's sensei the Aztlan pit fighter had tossed him a reference to a man named Donald Kane, a black-ops spook who supposedly now worked Consortium security. Don Freda seemed like something of a presumptuous move on our part, so in the morning before the Johnson meet (and after freshening up), the team decided to see if they couldn't find Kane.

As it turned out, the team got lucky on a hunch. As 2D and Geppetto scoped out Caesar's Palace, Dervish stopped by the casino floor's security office and got himself an eyeful. Making the rounds and checking in with the spiders and guards (or at least the ones that were publically visible) was a giant of a man (or at least a giant of a human), his tailored suit unable to conceal his barrel chest and Chris Redfield biceps. Donald Kane was old, his wrinkles obscuring the faded ink of military unit tattoos, and he sported a big 'ol handlebar moustache. He had worked black-ops in Bogota for years: running security for all of the major casinos on the Strip was still probably like a luxury dream retirement for this guy.

His name tag read "Security Chief Roger Larson." Dervish approached and, in what might have been a minor mistake, asked, "Excuse me, Mr. Kane?" Kane's fingers twitched instinctively, reaching for an assault rifle that wasn't there. Dead eyes, suddenly icy and robotic rather than glinting and full of light, locked onto Dervish.

"Wha'd you call me?"

Dervish coughed. "Sorry, Mr. Larson. Uhm. Sensei sent me, said you'd know him."

Larson/Kane's eyes narrowed. His frown showed teeth, an instinctive sign of primal aggression.

"I don't know any Yaks, boy. Must have me mistaken for someone else."

Dervish clarified,

"Sensei isn't a Yakuza. He's Mexican. A former gladiator. As old as you. Covered in prison tattoos. I think his real name is Jose."

And, in a split second, Donald Kane was back to a grinning, jocular older-uncle figure. He chuckled heartily, grabbing Dervish by the shoulder.

"Well, why dintcha say so!? And fer the record, kid, his real name ain't Jose. 'Least, that's not the "real name" I know; could be the bastard's gone soft."

Dervish gulped.

"So you'll help?"

“Hell yes I’ll help,” Kane laughed, with just a trace of a Midwestern accent. “Yer sen-say and I go way back. God, where’s that spinning ball of cyberpsychosis livin’ these days?”

“Redmond, sir.”

“Well, explains why he never calls. So watcha need, son?”

Dervish explained,

“We’re looking for someone named Joy. An elf. Have you heard of him?”

Within an instant, Kane’s features reverted to the dark expression he had worn when Dervish first confronted him.

“Why you lookin’ for someone named Joy?”

“Uh, do you know him?”

“Answer the question.”

“Well, we need to question him. We’re after one of his friends.”

Kane took a deep breath.

“Joy’s well-known as the cheatingest shit on the strip, son. Not one of my casinos ain’t been gifted by his theivin’ ass. So I s’pose you could say, yes, I’ve heard of Joy.”

“Well, we’re not his friends.”

“So I gathered. Tell you what, whichever one of us finds him first, we’ll give him a turn with the other one.”

Dervish was pretty sure that he knew what that meant.

“Your turn happens after our turn, I’d assume.”

Kane grimaced. “Technically, together the Consortium constitutes a Double-A corporation, which means extraterritoriality. Which means you don’t get to ask what we’ll do to him.”

Dervish saw Kane going to the dark place again.

“Thanks for your help, sir, but I’d really best be going. My friends and I have a meet with Mr. Johnson upstairs.”

Kane smiled, reverting once more back to his public persona.

“Have fun!”

The team organized across from Mr. Johnson, a hawkish sort of man. Mr. Johnson was lean and

harsh, checking his watch with an annoyed sort of demeanor at almost eerily regular intervals. The team didn't know what he was waiting for, and didn't want to ask.

Geppetto coughed, and Mr. Johnson finally spoke.

“Greetings, gentlemen. I can see that you're professionals here, which is why I'm not making a point of pleasantries. I need you to rob a banker.”

Geppetto nodded. “Go on.”

“This banker has considerable debts to the Consortium, ones that he does not intend to pay for fear that his employers will catch the loss. The Consortium wishes his debt returned. Not returned with interest, not returned with violence, merely returned.”

“Mr. Johnson, what, then, is the debt?”

“Two and a half million nuyen.”

The team had to hide their surprise.

The Johnson continued,

“The sum is being kept on a platinum credstick. The banker is currently occupying one of the penthouse suites at the Four Seasons off the Strip. We do not know which one. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, will be to procure this sum of money and return it to myself or any Consortium representative.”

Geppetto nodded. “Let's discuss payment.”

“I believe that twenty thousand nuyen will suffice.”

Geppetto gave the Johnson his best niggaisyouserious.jpg face.

“Add five thousand to that, Mr. Johnson, and you're giving us a one percent cut of the money we're being paid to steal.”

“I believe it to be a satisfactory sum, especially given that the money is outside of the bank and currently in a vulnerable position. I have also heard it down the grapevine that you require the assistance of Don Freda with something. I can act as a liaison.”

“Be reasonable, Mr. Johnson. We're going to need at least fifty k.”

“I can do thirty.”

“Thirty-five with the five up front.”

“Deal.”

With a little bit of rudimentary hacking on 2D's part, the team was able to get a basic floor plan of the Four Seasons. It was agreed that it was best to try to do the run that night if at all possible, as although no time limit was given for the job, the target would likely be attempting to leave the city in the immediate future, and if he did the job was forfeit.

The first obvious pitfall was that the security had their own hardwired network. 2D didn't particularly relish the concept of attempting to sneak into the security room, so he poked around on the employee clearances on the public nodes to see if there was a shortcut. Lo and behold, the two security spiders, one who operated during the day and one who operated during the night, had network backdoors that would allow them to connect to the hardwired system via special hardened uplinks, in the event that they needed to operate the system remotely (for instance, if they were out sick).

So, the plan started to come together. Dervish would nab the day spider as he left the building, at which point 2D would use his commlink to tell the night spider not to come, that he was going to try to clock in extra hours. From there, Geppetto would turn into fog (one of his banshee powers), infiltrate the target's room, and mind-control him into dropping the platinum credstick down the trash chute, for pickup by Dervish.

Obviously, although the team didn't know which room the target was in, 2D could spoof his way into the system using the spider's AccessID, and find out that way. One problem remained, that of astral security. Spirits were doubtless patrolling upstairs, but 2D wouldn't be able to spot them, so there was a chance that Geppetto, being a dual-natured creature, would pop into the target's room right in time to be nuked by a fire spirit.

Still, it was the best plan the team had, and they decided to go with it. Dervish shadowed the day spider as he took the elevator down from the security room to the lobby, stepping into the locker rooms so he could take off his uniform--which incidentally sported a biomonitor, so the moment he had it off, being knocked unconscious would no longer pop on the security system.

The spider strolled, humming, to his car, and the moment he'd unlocked it Dervish put him into a sleeper hold, shoved him into his car, and bound and gagged him. 2D jogged from camera blind spot to camera blind spot to make his way to the car, where he took the spider's commlink and texted the night spider:

>Dude don't come in today, I need the overtime hours to buy Stacey a Christmas gift.

2D, thumbing through the day spider's contacts, had found his daughter. The night spider replied,

>You are such an ass, I was already like two blocks out. Whatever, but you owe me one, okay? I need a steady cash flow, too.

2D took the opportunity to yoink the profile specs of the night spider, if he needed to pretend to be him in the immediate future.

>Thanks man, you don't know how much this means to me. Coffee's on me for a week.

With a quick "go time" to the team, 2D spoofed the profile specs of the night spider and backdoored into the security system, posting a message of,

>Caught in traffic, setting car to auto and running things from here until the jam clears up. Don't worry guys, I'm here.

He received a few dull acknowledgments from some security guards on the network, and proceeded to begin scoping out the hotel's security layout. There were tactically-networked security guards on each floor, and a single tac team just below the penthouse level to be deployed in the case of emergencies like, say, high-profile robberies. Pretty standard. The problem was the on-staff mage, who had a spirit rotation going through the penthouses, just as 2D had feared. He couldn't even peg the spirit's patrol routes, as spirits are invisible to cameras when manifested.

"I don't like these odds," Geppetto remarked to the team, having turned into gas in the elevator and then ghosted his way into the penthouse vent system (with 2D carefully opening necessary vents and stopping spinning fans for him). 2D agreed,

"Yeah, I don't like those odds either. Lemme see if there's something I can't do to distract the spirit."

2D relocated himself to the cafe on the first floor of the hotel, to better coordinate with Dervish (in the basement) and Geppetto (at the penthouse level). The cafe was set as the rendezvous point for Dervish and Geppetto upon the completion of their roles in the job. Absently chewing on an overexpensive salad, 2D IDed the target's penthouse (the target was sleeping fitfully), then checked the security feeds from the other penthouses.

Penthouse 1 one had a corper family, Japanese by the look of them. Sleeping. No dice.

Penthouse 2 had a single elf reading a book. Again, no dice.

Penthouse 3 had two sim-sense stars whom 2D recognized as a reality show guido and a porn star going at it like bonobos.

He could work with this.

2D tossed a message to the security mage.

>SPID8R: Hey, Mike, remember how we had that bug last week on the cameras up in the penthouses?

>Mike: Not really. That's for you two spiders to work out, not me.

>SPID8R: Well, it's still stuck in thermo, and I'm getting these weird feeds from P3. It looks like some kind of fight. Can you direct the spirit over there just to be sure?

>Mike: Sure, whatever.

2D promptly connected to Geppetto's earphones, with a cry of "go, motherfucker, GO!"

Geppetto dropped out of the vent into the banker's room and hammered him with a body-puppeting spell. Still asleep, the Banker instinctively punched in the combination to the room safe, produced the platinum credstick, and tossed it down the trash chute before returning to bed.

>Mike: Jeff, you idiot, they were just fucking in there. Like they were last night, and the night before.

>SPID8R: Dude, they really need to fix this bug.

>Mike: You're an idiot. Returning to patrol at P4.

2D sent Geppetto another message, this one to the tune of “GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT”

Geppetto didn't need much encouraging, and flew back up into the vent, following the ventilation system down to the cafe men's bathroom. He emerged from the restroom adjusting his tie, as though he'd always been there, and sat at 2D's table.

“The deed is done.”

“Badass. Just gotta wait on Dervish, then.”

Dervish jogged up the stairs to the lobby, whistling happily, and rejoined the team.

“You know, that was almost too easy.”

2D, upon hearing Dervish's opinion, instinctively began running for the lobby as five thugs in balaclavas burst through the street entrance of the cafe, sidearms drawn.

“WHO TOOK THE TWO AND A HALF MIL WE WERE GONNA STEAL!?”

2D screamed, angrily,

“NEVER SAY IT'S TOO EASYYYYYY!”

>2D was hacking and rigging, although most of his rigging was just done via orders as opposed to jumping in (no simrig). At the start he wasn't particularly impressive, 2 Body, 2 Strength, 2 Agility, 4 Intuition (later 5), 3 Logic (later 4), 3 Willpower, 3 Reaction, 6 Resonance with a few submersions under his belt (later 8).

>Most of his relevant hacking skills were 4s, and most of his complex forms were at six when he could manage.

>As for requiring cybercombat for hacking, that's bullshit. Hacking is always a hacking+exploit roll. You can either choose to do it as an IP/test extended test, but the device rolls to detect your Stealth program/complex form every round, or to do it as an hour/test extended test, but the device rolls to detect once. Commonly referred to as “hacking on the fly” versus “probing a node.” Cybercombat only EVER becomes relevant when/if you're detected, and even then only if they sic IC on you instead of booting you from the system.

>That said, and I'm going to be completely honest here, mundane hackers are statistically better in almost every way to technomancers. The three things technomancers have up on hackers are A) they're way cheaper monetarily, B) they can thread any program they need for weird cases where they need languagesofts or sniffer programs that a mundane hacker

wouldn't bother buying because they're too arcane, and C) sprites are the motherfucking bomb, because they're based off of spirits and spirits are broken.

>Also, they can do resonance quests to do crazy stupid bullshit that hackers can't, but you won't really run into that in an average campaign aside from submerging.

So, the team was all ready to just book it, until one of the masked men caught sight of 2D and yelled, "The hacker's runnin' with the cash! What do we do, Joy!?"

One of the masked men, an elf, yelled back, "IDIOT! Don't use that name here! Just get the runner!"

Joy didn't have much time to give other orders, as he was swiftly distracted by the spatter of the yellor's guts all over the floor as Dervish boosted over the screaming crowd and began going to town on Joy's buddies. Geppetto began flinging spells as the enemy team broke formation to fight while one of them sprinted after 2D.

Dervish's next blade blow was blocked by a thin razor just like it. Standing in front of him was a harsh-looking elf brandishing a similar cyberblade setup: a razorboy. The elf was wearing Ancients colors.

Joy yelled,

"Shit! Razorwind! Get him!"

and beat feet out of the building, with Geppetto struggling to keep up while under fire from the remaining gunman.

Geppetto was the first to notice that the enemy gunmen were using sticknshock when a tiny micro-taser hit his leg and nearly blacked him out, flooring him. Cursing, he stumbled to his feet, but Joy was gone.

He yelled,

"D! We've lost him! Take care of this guy and move out!"

Dervish yelled back,

"I'm trying! Holy goddamn!"

'Razorwind' was matching Dervish blow-for-blow, engaged in a high-stakes sword fight between Dervish's Sangre y Acero and some kind of elvish fencing art. Figuring the job came first, Dervish activated his skimmers and boosted for the outside, intent on making it to Caesar's Palace and, if he could catch him, tackling Joy.

Unfortunately, Joy was long gone, having doubtless gone invisible as he fled.

Also unfortunately, 'Razorwind' lifted off his feet as he activated his own skimmers, and gave chase at eighty miles an hour.

Geppetto fought off the gunman he was facing (read: bodypuppeted him to stick his obnoxious taser-shooting gun in his mouth and pull the trigger), and charged into the lobby to find the remaining gunman searching the pockets of a thoroughly-worked-over 2D, glancing anxiously towards the security elevator. He announced into a mic,

“Hacker don't got it, Joy! Must be the sammy!”

Geppetto would have gotten the guy right then, but with a BLAM, a security guard vaulted the front desk and did Geppetto's job for him.

So, you know what's badass? Parkour.

You know what's more badass? Parkour chase scenes.

Still needs some badass. Let's try a parkour chase scene across the Vegas strip.

Nah, not badass enough. A parkour chase scene where the two participants are SWORD-FIGHTING when they catch up to each other.

Better, but it still needs a bit more. I'm thinking WOLVERINE KNIFE-HAND FIGHTING.

Better. Now we just add that both participants have goddamn ROCKETS FOR FEET, and we have a real man's chase scene going.

Pedestrians shouted and pointed out at the Bellagio fountain as the two dueling figures sped across it right in the middle of the nightly light show, dodging bursts of water while periodically pinging off of each other like Beyblades, if Beyblades were made of approximately 50% more meat, 100% more murder, and 200% more awesome. Dervish vaulted the divider and launched into the middle of the street, dodging cars in wide banking turns and ducking in between vehicles as Razorwind charged headlong towards him, knocking off side mirrors and chunks of fender with his blades.

Geppetto quickly covered things with the security guy (“We were just eating in the cafe! We're on the security footage and everything! The spider can confirm that!”) and, after a quick healing spell for 2D and an “all's clear” message from 2D's spidery alter-ego, Geppetto and 2D returned to the car (I forgot to mention, they had stolen a car because they couldn't take the rigger van from Seattle down to Vegas) and made for the Strip.

As Dervish neared Caesar's Palace (captcha: technovid palace.), Razorwind picked up speed, desperate to get his two and a half mil before he lost it to the Consortium. Dervish literally backflipped up the casino steps, dodging blade swing after swing until, with a BLAM, it was all over. Razorwind stopped chasing. The warning shot, placed by a troll sniper at the doorway, had made its message clear. He'd lost. Pushing his feet forward, he boosted back into the streets and was gone.

2D and Geppetto arrived at Caesar's Palace in time to witness Dervish handing the platinum stick over to Kane.

“Good job, kid! You know, we think we may have pegged Joy.”

Dervish groaned.

“You don't say.”

“No, I mean, we got intel on what his next job's gonna be. Intercepted a courier.”

Dervish brightened up.

“Oh. So you're gonna help us nail him?”

“Well, really, YOU'RE going to help US nail him. You up for another Johnson meet?”

The team got paid, and reconvened with both Kane and Mr. Johnson. Mr. Johnson continued to check his watch, although now he seemed to be doing it more frequently.

“Good evening, runners. How'd you like to play at wearing white hats, for once?”

Geppetto grinned.

“If it means we get Joy, I'll wear any hat you want, Mr. Johnson.”

Mr. Johnson cut right to business.

“Mr. Joy is set to rob the Bellagio vault tomorrow night. Horizon is hosting a party, so most of our security assets will be focused on the ballroom. There's also been a recent shift change between casinos-part of Consortium policy, you see, so we have a lot of rookies on-staff. You're runners, you're competent, and you know how runners THINK, so we want you as our extra security detail.”

Geppetto continued to smile.

“Asking price?”

“Forty thousand, a shot at Joy, and a personal audience with Don Freda.”

Geppetto frowned.

“Forty thousand can't be split three ways.”

“I know. Which is why there will be four of you.”

The elf with Anglo-Saxon features entered the room in grey fatigues and a beret, quietly sitting between the team and Mr. Johnson.

“This Sean Falstaff, codename 'Bend.' Former Tir Ghost, went mercenary a few years ago. We figure that if anyone knows how to infiltrate a set-up like ours, it's him. So we bought him out as a...consultant.”

The team gawked, but Geppetto immediately picked up the dialogue.

“You know our fixer, Danny. He vouches for this guy?”

Kane grinned.

“One hundred percent.”

Bend turned to Geppetto, saluted, and announced,

“Good friends, actually, sir. In a purely civilian capacity.”

Dervish chuckled.

“I like this guy.”

With a sniffle, 2D began to weep quietly.

As everyone looked at him awkwardly, 2D burred,

“I just...I'm having flashbacks to our last ninja, and you look...you look so close to the real deal. I...I'm sorry, I need to ask you some questions.”

2D straightened up, locking eyes with Bend.

“Do you have any outstanding warrants for multiple child homicide?”

The former Ghost blinked.

“What.”

“Answer the damn question.”

“No. That's stupid.”

2D looked at him judgingly.

“Are you under monitor by a cop corp?”

“No.”

“Would you identify yourself as a ninja badass?”

“If you want to look at this that way, sir, but I prefer 'infiltration specialist.' I don't do wetwork if I can help it, and the 'ninja' implies assassination.”

“Have you ever sold your team out because a sprawl ganger scared you?”

Bend's eyes narrowed.

“That one is actually insulting.”

With a sob, 2D grinned and grabbed Geppetto and Dervish by the shoulders, using them for support as he wept openly.

“We found him, guys. We found an infiltrator that doesn't suck.”

The team was given the rest of the night to scope out the security systems of the Bellagio vault. 2D continued to ask Bend incredulous questions.

“So you've never been arrested.”

“No, but I was special ops before I went merc, so I always enjoyed certain liberties.”

“So no outstanding warrants.”

“Why do you keep asking me that?”

“SO I CAN NEVER BE HURT AGAIN.”

Bend gave 2D the look.

“Look, I'm going to go check out this back elevator. The blueprints only had one elevator, the one I came up on, so I'm betting this leads to somewhere secret. We should scope it out to make sure that Joy's team hasn't set anything up.”

2D began sniffing again.

“Oh my god, you have good, tactically sound ideas and everything.”

Bend briskly powerwalked towards the elevator in question, the better to avoid the damaged channer.

All things considered, the vault level was fairly unremarkable. A u-shaped hallway with an elevator at either end (one that led up to a reinforced door on the main level, one that was a seekrit) and, in between, a security room with food vending machines, a spider nexus, a room full of drones keyed to the spider nexus, the vault itself, and a bathroom. Geppetto set up on the casino floor, the better to assess the partygoers in the ballroom to see if he could spot Joy early.

Bend found a security elevator, keyed to only the ground and vault floors. Experimentally, he followed it up, and found himself in a long, reinforced hallway. Following the hallway, he hit a dead end, but there seemed to be hinges on it...

With that, Bend exited into the first-floor men's bathroom off the Casino, through a secret door behind one of the sinks. He called in to the team,

“Secret entrance in the casino bathroom. Hidden but way less reinforced than the main entrance. If they know about this they'll have a way easier time of it, considering the elevator's mechanical so 2D's got no control over it.”

2D blared over the comms,

“DUDE YOU THINK OF EVERYTHING.”

Dervish sighed.

“Shut up, 2D. Yeah, that's a good thought, Bend. Get your tacsuit and gecko grips, I'm thinking we cloak you and then stick you on the ceiling of the bathroom.”

Bend responded curtly.

“Acknowledged. We'll need someone watching this exit.”

Dervish set up in the nexus room to protect 2D, and the team prepared for the run. That's the downside to being white-hat: you know SOMETHING's going down, but never WHEN.

All was quiet for most of the day. Geppetto summoned a fire spirit and a man spirit to act as astral security belowdecks, then boredly observed media personalities milling about and making contacts. He received a sideways glance from Darius St. George, one of the personalities at the event.

This all changed when all the lights went out. Belowground, in the vault level, everything reverted to the familiar crimson of emergency power.

2D gestured to the Bellagio's security spider.

“Shit. Jack into the nexus, make sure everything's fine.”

The rookie spider plugged in, and immediately began foaming at the mouth. His biomonitor started flatlining.

2D: “FUUUUUUCK. DERVISH GET OUT THERE AND SEE WHAT'S GOING ON.”

2D called up a fault sprite, dove the nexus and found himself next to the de-rezzed icon of the security spider, across from an icon of a red-hatted Italian plumber tooling with the virtual pipes of the security system.

Activating his black hammer complex form, he announced, bomb-headed icon grinning manically,

“Oh, it is ON.”

Geppetto spurred his spirits to search for hostiles and attack, and got no response. He tried to contact them again, and once more got no response. Which was weird, because mages have an intuitive connection to their bound spirits and know when they get poofed, and both spirits were manifested

and very much alive. He jogged over to the main vault elevator, to find the blast doors open, and the elevator already at the vault level. The clak-clak-clak of silenced gunfire sounded from below.

With a melodramatic sigh, Geppetto hovered down the shaft.

Down below, Dervish exited into the hallway to find a troll in a security uniform emerging from the vault with a backpack full of...something, while a human in combat-armor dual-wielding silenced SMGs covered his back. Perforated security guards littered the hallway, no match for the gun adept.

Dervish figured that he'd be a bit more his speed, and activated his boosters.

In netspace, 2D tossed digital bombs at Mariohacker, while setting the node's IC to lock the bastard in the system. Wherever he'd come from, this fucker was HIS.

That is, until he saw the entire environment de-rezzing around him as a third, cloaked icon began crashing the node.

Recognizing the stink of Two-Times (bastard!) 2D quickly jacked out before the node crashed, with Mariohacker and his fault sprite locked in it. Mariohacker was a good thing, because the fucker had some serious dumpshock in his future, and couldn't jack out because of the modded blackouts that the IC were hammering him with. The fault sprite was a bigger problem, since 2D's fault sprites were never on quite good terms with him, and one of them had just had its connection severed from him, freeing it into the Resonance. This would require later attention (namely finding and killing the little bastard in the Resonance before it could go full Free Sprite and put a name to its hated former master), but right now Mariohacker was the greatest issue. 2D exited the now-ruined nexus room and, in a hunch, checked the bathroom.

There he was. A fat neckbearded bastard who looked like he spent too much on /v/ was lying face-down on the bathroom floor, with his datajack adaptor still plugged into some exposed wiring that he'd drilled out of the wall between the bathroom and nexus. The dude was out cold, having suffered the full effects of a dumpshock.

Next to him was a tasteful potted plant with gold flecks in it, for some reason.

2D put his poser combat boots to their (roughly) intended use and began to stomp on Neckbeard's head until he started hearing snaps.

“WHO’S JUMPING ON WHOSE HEAD NOW YOU GOOMBA BITCH.”

Breathless, Geppetto stumbled into the room, and sternly lectured the air,

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me, you two.”

2D looked at Geppetto quizzically as the fire and man spirit manifested, both completely stoned off their asses and giggling to each other.

“DUUUUUUDE,” the man-shaped column of infernal fire announced.

“DUUUuuuuUUUDE,” agreed the slender mockery of all that is man.

“Dude, why are your spirits completely fucking bombed?”

Geppetto took one look at the tasteful potted plant, cursed loudly, and began stomping on it with his fancy loafers.

“God dammit 2D, you're wearing boots, help me out here.”

Confused, 2D proceeded to stomp his bloodstained boots on the plant, strewn pottery and plant matter everywhere.

“I'm not getting any closer to understanding this.”

Geppetto grunted, continuing to kick at the plant.

“Haven't lily. Causes a positive background count.”

“English, please.”

“The bastards got my spirits stoned.”

The fire spirit choked out a few belly laughs and announced,

“Bro, I'm not stoned!”

2D stared at it sideways.

“You look pretty stoned to me.”

The man spirit put on its serious face and said,

“No, honestly. He's not stoned.”

2D and Geppetto both looked at the man spirit expectantly. After about five seconds it broke into a squealing laugh.

“Pffffffcuz he's a FIRE spirit so he's BAKED!”

The man spirit and fire spirit high-fived and promptly collapsed into hysterics. Geppetto facepalmed with a “whap” noise.

“Great. They're completely fucking useless like this.”

Meanwhile, in the hallway, Dervish was picking bullets out of his orthoskin while scraping the gun adept guts off of his cyberblades. As the troll retreated into the secret elevator, Joy materialized long enough to hit the “up” button. Unfortunately, the system was purely mechanical, so Dervish wasn't able to make it before the gates closed and the elevator began ascending.

In the bathroom, Bend looked down as a human wearing an earpiece and a few active foci entered and then scooted into one of the stalls. He murmured,

“Look, boss, I can only hold the mind control on the troll for so long. Sooner or later he's gonna remember he was a security guard. I'm maintaining it as long as I can, but you need to get out of there. I'm pretty sure we already lost Click-Clack and the Plumber.”

Grinning like a loon, Bend proceeded to follow “geek the mage” protocol, flipped upside-down into the bathroom stall, and proceeded to garrote the guy, hitman-style. The mage went limp, and all his maintained spells dropped.

In the secret hallway, there was a call of “alright, guard, lead me back to the security entrance,” followed by the sound of a roaring, enraged troll, and a cry of “OH GOD MY LEEEEEGS!”

Dervish, Geppetto, and 2D ascended the secret elevator to find Bend and a very, very pissed-off troll security guard putting cuffs on a screaming Joy. One of Joy's legs was snapped off below the knee, spurting blood, and he was screaming deliriously as paramedics stormed into the room through the secret entrance.

“Jesus Christ,” muttered 2D, “It's beautiful.”

The troll picked up the backpack and handed it to Geppetto, who gasped at the feel of an extremely high-force magical item within. The troll announced, in an irate Joisey accent,

“Gets this backs to the vault. Hestaby's gunna want her focus unders lock and key.”

He then glared back at a swiftly-paling Joy, malicious glee in his eyes.

“Gots youz, yah punk.”

Geppetto, as he walked the backpack back down to the vault, called up Mr. Johnson.

“Johnson. It's over. Returning to security rounds. We expect our cred at the end of the night. Geppetto out.”

The next day, the team was escorted to Joy's fortified hospital cell. His leg had been reattached, although the look on his face suggested that it didn't much matter if his likely fate was any indication.

Geppetto said two words:

“Two-Times.”

Joy grimaced.

“I'll tell you everything if you can promise me one thing.”

“I'm listening.”

“Tell them to make it quick.”

Geppetto looked back at Mr. Johnson, standing in the hallway, who nodded slowly.

“That can be arranged.”

Joy exhaled loudly.

“We have two more teammates, Mirage and Stimpack. Mirage is a bio-sammy, and Stimpack's a healing mage. Each of us has the codes to a satellite uplink that Two-Times operates through, so that if we ever really needed to find him we could cross-reference our access points.” He tossed a small teddy bear with a data port to 2D. “Here.”

2D connected to the teddy bear, and found himself diving a satellite over Southeast Asia. The theme from “2001: A Space Odyssey” played in his head, as the sun rose in his sensors, warming his solar cores. Terabytes of broadcast data raced through his mind.

In the real world, 2D came violently in his shorts and then passed out. Joy winced dully.

“Ew.”

Geppetto didn't miss a beat.

“Where are Mirage and Stimpack?”

Joy frowned.

“Haven't seen hide nor hair of Stimpack. Might have gotten geeked. Saw Mirage, though. She got out of the game. Married into Shiawase.”

Geppetto had a bad feeling about this.

“Shiawase North America?”

Joy laughed cruelly.

“Try Shiawase proper.”

Geppetto rubbed his temples, exasperated.

“Brilliant. We're going to Japan.”

From the floor, 2D wheezed,

“...awesome...”

Dervish looked at Geppetto.

“We've still got that talk with Don Freda, if you want, Geppetto.”

Geppetto sighed.

“I guess. It'll be a formality, though. I'm not sure how many people he knows in Neo-Tokyo. We've got something to cover first, though.”

He turned to Bend.

“Bend, how'd you like to sign into our contract full-time?”

Bend raised an eyebrow, nonplussed.

“Sounds like you're into dangerous work.”

“How's hunting down a rogue hacker for a hundred thousand sound?”

Bend smiled.

“I did always want to see the cherry blossoms.”

In the REAL real world, the players and GM congratulated our new player on passing the test. He was officially our replacement for Trout's player.

The meeting with Don Freda was a mildly awkward one, because not only was Geppetto a representative of a different mob family, the Finnigans (kind of an irony, considering he was Italian, not Irish), but also the hacker was wearing jizz-stained pants. These difficulties aside, Don Freda offered what little help he could.

He knew a man by the name of Taka in Neo-Tokyo. Taka was a man of the vilest sort, capable of committing any crime if there was a profit in it. However, he was also an oni, a brightly-colored metavariant of orcs endemic to the region, and for that the Yakuza and the corps had not picked him up. He remained a valuable contact of gaijin criminals in Japan, and Freda had no doubts that he would prove useful if appropriately...greased.

We were not to trust Taka under any circumstances, however. The Don assured us that if anything happened to one of Dona O'Malley's faithful servants, he would be most displeased.

With little else to offer, the Don greased our palms a bit more for our troubles (2D promptly used this money to buy more drones, two little manhack-like unfolding buzzsaws for personal defense, while Dervish upgraded his combat armor), and arranged for a flight to Neo-Tokyo.

Chapter 7: Tokyo Shenanigans

Traffic passed in a rigid progression of exact, ordered consistency, gridlinked vehicles taking exact turns crossing intersections at an enforced snail's pace. But that wasn't the remarkable part. Remarkable was the sheer density of the crowds. Hordes of sararimen, nigh-indistinguishable but for the minor differences in dress code from zaibatsu to zaibatsu, moved like a human sea, an ebb and flow of wrinkled suits and power ties. Occasionally a punk or a yakuza shirt would weave through the ocean, swimming adeptly through the crowd. Literal schools of schoolgirls surfaced briefly at street corners before being swallowed again by the human mass.

Towering above all of this, great dense blocks of mass bore the logos of the corporate giants: Renraku, Shiawase, Mitsuhamma. Advertisements and cutesy logos sang like sirens in the city's consistent AR overlays, their catchy jingles overlaying each other in a cacophony, a banshee scream of greed.

“Man,” complained 2D, “FUCK Neo-Tokyo.”

When last we left off, the team was on the trail of Mirage, a former teammate of super-pro hacker Two-Times. The team has been tasked with killing Two-Times and stealing his dog. Yes, that is actually their mission. They've been doing okay at it, since they got the codes to one of his three positioning satellites from his buddy Joy, back in Vegas.

The four Gaijin looked remarkably out of place stepping out of the cab into downtown Neo-Tokyo. Geppetto, in his silk suit, fedora, and bonafide Ferragamo tie, was way too formal. His compatriots, the orc in motorcycle leathers, the elf in fatigues, and the hacker in an “ASSTechnology” novelty t-shirt, weren't formal enough. They got a few weird looks from the crowds, but not enough to spur a confrontation.

“2D,” growled Geppetto, “how are you coming on those linguasofts?”

2D shot Geppetto his best expression of painful jetlag.

“Ease up, dude. I'm codifying the entire phonetic Japanese language in my BRAIN. No big.”

With a “boop,” a little icon of a bomb in a dictionary appeared in everyone's commlinks, entitled “SPEAK GLORIOUS NIPPON OKAY!”

Dervish looked at his commlink, nonplussed.

“So have we figured out somewhere to sleep yet? I'm pretty sure I'm about to die if I don't find a bed.”

Bend clapped a hand to his forehead.

“I KNEW there was something you idiots forgot to do.”

“2D the badass saves the day,” grumbled 2D, as a map appeared in everyone's AR. “I got a coffin hotel in Mushashino that's got a suite open. Whatever a suite is. Probably better than a coffin.”

Dervish groaned.

“I started running so I wouldn't have to wake up feeling sore.”

“I was under the impression you started running so you could afford to stick more foreign objects into yourself.”

“Eat a dick, 2D.”

Tempers were flaring, so Geppetto called the shots.

“Gentlemen. We're going to go to that coffin hotel. And then we're all going to go to goddamn sleep. Acceptable?”

2D: “Solid.”

Dervish: “Ayep.”

Bend: “Acceptable.”

Dervish: “Bend, leave your door locked because Geppetto turns into Satan at night.”

Geppetto: “Technically, 'Adversary.'”

Bend: “...this was not part of my briefing.”

A short explanation later, and Bend had learned the value of being open with your teammates about potential problems. Also, the value of locking his door.

The coffin hotel was an unremarkable place. It was a building that looked like it was made out of Lego blocks, done up in awful acidic colors. Renraku advertising mascots danced their way around the base of the building in AR, giggling and reminding passers-by to buy GO-JIRA! flash noodles, available from the vending machine 3 meters to the south.

The receptionist was a tiny little sprite of a woman, obnoxiously peppy. Whether it was by contract or natural, the team didn't know, and didn't want to ask.

“Oh! Foreigners! How wonderful to have you here! Takitaki capsule hotel is proud to--”

Geppetto interrupted her, rubbing his eyes.

“The suite.”

“What was that, sir?”

“How much for the suite?”

“It's 100 nuyen a night, sir! Of course, that includes all of the amenities!”

Geppetto blinked.

“Amenities?”

“It has its own bathroom, sir!”

“...I feel like I should have asked this at the start, but what exactly constitutes a suite?”

“Four coffins connected to a bathroom that you all share, sir!”

Dervish choked.

“God dammit.”

2D smacked him in the back of the head as Geppetto put down the money.

“Fine. That's fine.”

The team sat in their meeting room to plan. By which I mean that Geppetto sat sideways in the bathtub, Dervish sat on the toilet, 2D stood awkwardly in the remaining square foot of floor space, and Bend attached himself to the ceiling for lack of any other room.

“So,” Geppetto began, “anyone have any leads?”

“I actually got a really good one,” 2D put forth. “One of my contacts, HawtSawce, the infobroker, operates out of this city. I think she's a Renraku corper kid in daily life or something. I helped her out with a thing with some corp troops a while back.”

Geppetto smiled.

“Okay, so we have an infobroker. And we need to find where someone's hiding. That isn't bad. Anyone else got anything?”

Dervish and Bend shook their heads.

Dervish: “I could try Sensei again, hoping for a random coincidence...”

Geppetto: “I don't think that trick will work twice.”

The team split to sleep, and the next morning reconvened in the bathroom/meeting room/very shitty lounge. Everyone took a moment to stare at Geppetto, who was wearing visual kei makeup stained with blood.

Bend: “Adversary's been busy.”

Geppetto: “Ayup. Business?”

Bend: “Business. 2D?”

2D: “Right. Calling up my contact.”

There was a brief moment, and then Hawtsawce's icon, an empty dress gown, appeared in AR.

“What's up, 2D?”

“I need some help finding someone, Tsuko.”

“Hey! Don't use my real name!”

“You know that Anon thing doesn't mean shit in private, right? Besides, we're all tripfags anyway. We're already hypocrites. And assholes, but that's kind of an informed state with tripfags.”

There was a pause, and Hawtsawce changed subjects.

“What do you need, 2D?”

“Shiawase employee. Bioroid, probably in security if she works at all, considering she married in. When she ran she went by the name of Mirage. Probably using her real name now. Need to find which compound she's at, arrange a meet if possible.”

“Hmm. The meet's up to you but I can look for her. I'll see what I can do, but I'm gonna need you to do something for me in exchange.”

2D waited for the nod from Geppetto, and then spoke.

“Name it.”

“I need you to rescue an innocent woman from the Japanese Imperial Guard. Sound copacetic?”

2D wagged his hand. In AR space, his icon shrugged.

“I dunno, we tend to be better at the kidnapping of innocents than the rescuing.”

“You gonna do it or not?”

“Sure, why not. Give up the details.”

“Awesome. Okay, she's being kept at the police koban in the Imperial Gardens. It's a big tourist trap park, can't miss it. They're gonna transfer her to an actual jail in a few hours, so you're gonna need to do this quick.”

“Anything we need to know about the girl?”

“She's a friend. Also, weird hair color. She won't look Japanese.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“You'll know it when you see it.”

“Okay, so the girl's being held at the Imperial Gardens police station, and will be transferred today. That's all you can tell us?”

“Afraid so, Malcolm.”

“HEY! REAL NAMES!”

“Hypocrite.”

Hawtsawce logged out, and 2D cracked his knuckles as he stepped away from the wall. Unfortunately, Dervish stood up at the same time, knocking 2D into Geppetto, who accidentally hit the “shower” button, delivering a jet of cold water directly into Bend's upside-down face and generally making a squirming mess of the entire room.

“I really hate coffin hotels,” bemoaned Dervish.

“AWARGHLBLARGLWARGH,” agreed Bend.

The team put on their best tourist uniforms (in other words, the exact same thing they had been wearing yesterday), and made for the Imperial Gardens. The cab ride was a solid hour through densely-packed traffic. Getting through the lines was another hour. The team was not exactly making good time. Luckily, they hadn't spotted any patrols coming out...yet...and the omnipresent security cameras sticking out of every tree, bush, and wall did not inspire confidence.

Bend turned to Geppetto.

“Permission to take photos of the cherry blossoms, sir. They are beautiful this time of year.”

“Permission denied, soldier,” replied Geppetto, sarcastically. “We're on the job.”

“As the infiltration specialist, I believe it to be good cover, sir.”

Geppetto looked sideways at Bend.

“Fine, whatever. I'm going to scope out the police station.”

The police station was situated in the middle of the park, a three-room building at the end of a cobblestone path. The roof was arched in an old-fashioned style, but the walls were pure steel and concrete.

“2D,” Geppetto asked through his subvocal microphone, “you seeing any ins here?”

“Uh, yeah,” responded 2D. “The cameras on the side of the building look like they have maintenance ports, I could probably pop into the network from there. I’m not tall enough, though. Dervish would need to give me a boost.”

Geppetto sighed.

“You’d also need to be poking the camera with your finger like a dumbshit in full view of all of these patrolling cops.”

“On Dervish’s shoulders.”

“Yes, while on Dervish’s shoulders.”

There was a pause.

“Okay, so pay attention to the guards’ rotation, we’ll enact this retarded plan while they’re not looking.”

As the guard turned the corner away from the camera, Dervish ran for the camera, holding 2D at arm’s length like a baby about to throw up. 2D jacked into the camera and zonked in Dervish’s hands.

Dervish: “Hurry up hurry up hurry up.”

Five seconds later, an alarm sounded inside the police station, and 2D jacked out again.

“Oops.”

“Oh SON OF A-”

Dervish dropped 2D to the cobblestones and began scrambling up the side of the building. As a guard rounded the corner, submachine gun gone, Geppetto hit both the hacker and the sammy with a low-force invisibility spell, just enough to make them invisible to the human eye.

“2D, good try for today, but I’m thinking now is the part where you cheese it.”

“Dude! Sorry! This never happens to me!”

“Erectile dysfunction later. Flee now.”

2D jogged into the nearest crowd, working his way as inconspicuously as possible toward the nearest exit.

“Great, this run is blown. Any ideas on how to salvage this?”

Bend spoke up.

“While 2D was trying to hack I hit the building with wide-band ultrasound and juxtaposed it with thermal. Got two cops in there and four prisoners. My tacsuit's in my bag, if we had cover fire--like say, Dervish from the roof--I could spot the target and we could extract her at range with one of Geppetto's air spirits.”

“Why did we not have that idea first?”

“I was busy photographing cherry blossoms.”

And so, the team prepared for the Shadowrun tradition of “Plan B.”

The guards began gesturing for the crowds to leave. A loudspeaker blared in Japanese (which, luckily, the team could artificially understand),

“Attention, everyone. Hackers have been detected on the premises. The Imperial Gardens will be closed for a security sweep. Everyone please file out lawfully and calmly at your earliest possible convenience.”

Geppetto began milling towards the exit as Dervish lay flat against the roof and Bend put on his tacsuit in a bathroom stall.

“You two got this?”

“Keep the spell up on Dervish and give an air spirit's services to me, and I can run this.”

“Excellent. I'll rendezvous with 2D at an alleyway about five blocks from here. The air spirit should be able to transport the girl and Dervish to there.”

As soon as Geppetto was out of the gardens and had disappeared into the back alleys, a mischievous-looking fey woman, half-transparent and with cruel, red eyes, settled down next to Bend. Bend responded, nonplussed,

“Huh, I wondered what his air spirits looked like. Alright, team. I'll start by IDing the girl. When I say “Alpha,” Dervish, begin firing until the guards run for cover. When I say “Bravo,” Dervish jumps for the girl, gets in close proximity. When I say “Charlie,” the spirit swoops in and flies you both to the drop point. Good?”

The spirit nodded. Over the mic, Dervish agreed,

“Good.”

“Well, fuck.”

Bend growled over the mic as the cops escorted the four prisoners out onto the cobblestone path...all wearing black bags over their heads, obscuring their features.

“Hold on, I'm going to need a moment. We can rule out the two men. Which leaves the women, the short one or the tall one.”

After hitting the vision mags on his goggles, Bend caught sight of a tuft of bright, fiery orange hair sticking out of the shorter girl's head-bag, as well as something stirring in the back of her shirt.

“I think we got our girl. Target is the third prisoner, repeat, target is the third prisoner. Three. Two. One. Alpha.”

The air filled with noise as Dervish withdrew his sniper rifle from his duffel bag and fired it wildly at the guards, sending them sprawling for cover in the sparsely-wooded garden.

“Good! Bravo!”

With a massive boost of his skimmers, Dervish launched off of the rooftop, sending shards of crunched shingle flying in every direction. He sailed through the air toward the girl, duffel bag in one hand, rifle in the other.

“Aaaaand Charlie!”

With a WHOOSH, both Dervish and the girl were gone, flying into the distance like a mildly-more-dangerous Team Rocket.

“Move like clockwork,” Bend ordered, over the mic. “2D, Geppetto, they're going to land soon. 2D, you can hack, take the bag off her and unlock the slaved cuffs. Geppetto, take 2D's tag eraser and go over her for trackers. Dervish, keep alert, they could be following.”

As Dervish landed with the girl in his arms, 2D immediately grabbed the cuffs with one hand, connecting with his skinlink as he used his other hand to remove the bag.

2D: “What...what the fuck?”

Girl: “I'm a kitsune! Arf arf!”

2D: “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

2D: “AAAAAAAAAAAAA-OWFUCK!”

Dervish reciprocated the previous day's head-whapping with a slap of his own.

Dervish: “2D, now isn't the time to freak out and what the fuck she has a tail.”

Girl: “That's because I'm a fox!”

2D: “IT'S HAPPENED GUYS. IT'S HAPPENED. WE'RE IN AN ANIME GUYS.”

Geppetto: “Pull yourself together, 2D. Miss, can you explain why you were in the custody of the imperial forces?”

The kitsune furrowed her brow and blew up her cheeks in an incredibly cliché moe thinking expression.

Girl: “Well, gosh! That'd probably be because I'm an Awakened fox, and Awakened animals aren't granted citizenship or human rights! Yip!”

She playfully lifted the cuffs to her face and began gnawing on them, inadvertently slobbering all over 2D's hands.

2D: “JAPAN IS EVERYTHING I DREAMED IT WOULD BE, GUYS.”

Geppetto: “Oh my god, we need to end this job quick before 2D creams himself in public again.”

Geppetto cast a quick physical mask on the girl to make her look like a normal Japanese person, rather than a catgirl from an anime of the most disgustingly insipid persuasion, and the team walked for a few blocks before calling a taxi.

Girl: “Humans sure are weird, tee hee!”

Geppetto: “This is not happening.”

2D: “So I'm thinking we take her back to the apartment and call up HawtSawce for pickup?”

Bend: “Brilliant. Another person to fit in our tiny bathroom.”

The girl attempted to nibble on Bend's long elf ears, earning them a weird look from the cab driver.

Girl: “I can fit anywhere! I'm a fox, ~uguu~!”

2D: “Oh my God, please say 'desu.' Just once.”

The fox-girl made a peace sign with her off hand.

Girl: “Kawaiiii, desu ne!”

2D shuddered a little.

2D: “Oh my God. Oh my God, guys.”

Dervish: “Anyone else vote that 2D walks the rest of the way?”

Bend: “Miss, please stop attempting to bite my ear.”

The team arrived at the coffin hotel with the squealing schoolgirl in tow, causing the receptionist to stare for a moment, but repeat her chipper message of “Welcome back, sirs!” nevertheless. All things considered, she'd probably seen sketchier things going on in the building.

Geppetto: “Okay, I move around when I sleep so I'm just gonna conk out in the bathroom. Thanks to the stupid traffic, it's getting kinda late, so kitsune-chan there can use my coffin.”

Girl: “Geppetto-kun is such a gentleman, yip yip!”

Geppetto: “Shut. Up.”

2D called up HawtSawce.

2D: “So when do we unload the anime character onto you?”

HS: “I'm actually out of town for tonight. Maybe tomorrow afternoon?”

2D: “Sounds good. Did you know she was a kitsune?”

HS: “I don't know. Do I have eyes, ears, or common fucking sense?”

2D: “She's really shitty at hiding her shapeshifting.”

HS: “Tell me about it.”

Dervish: “I'm going to bed. I'm going to wake up with a cuteness hangover at this rate. Fox-girl better not shed, so help me God.”

Aside from a minor incident with 2D, Bend, and Fox-Girl waking up all crammed into the same coffin with the ambient AR theme set to “guro tentacle porn” (an Adversary prank, since the contract only stipulated doing no direct harm to the team), the following day was as uneventful as living in a 4-squarefoot environment with a clingy anime stereotype could be. She was unceremoniously deposited at the gate to the Renraku compound in Chuo, and 2D met with Tsuko, a pudgy Japanese dwarf.

2D: “Tsuko.”

HS: “Malcolm.”

2D: “I thought you'd be taller. And skinnier.”

HS: “I thought you wouldn't look like a skinny Kurt Cobain with all the cool vacuumed out.”

2D: “Ouch.”

HS: “Your girl Mirage is at the Shiawase Robotics compound in Akihabara, nerd village. You're unlucky. That's one of the more fortified ones. I can't offer you any schematics or anything, I'd suggest seeing a fixer.”

2D: “We got one. Name of Taka, I think.”

Tsuko coughed out a humorless laugh.

HS: "Oh man, you're going to regret that."

2D: "We get that a lot."

So, the team met up in their second-best suits at Taka's club. It was a grungy place, not quite a dive but definitely far from legal. The kind of place with pulsing music to drown out the drug deals. The kind of place where it's hard to identify the chick with the tattoos as a yakuza, a hooker, or both.

Taka himself wasn't hard to find, what with being an oni. The bastard was sitting at the bar in an Erika business suit, his gigantic cartoonish circular bug eyes scanning the club. Goblinization had hit the guy HARD. Aside from the eyes, he had ridiculous curved teeth that stuck out of his mouth, horns, and to top it all off he was a marvelous shade of cherry red.

"Mr. Taka, I presume?"

Taka grinned ear-to-ear, like a perverse Cheshire cat, and his chameleon-esque eyes swiveled, one after the other, to face Geppetto.

The rest of the team absently noticed that there were no other runners in the bar.

"Oh my. It's not so often I'm graced with Shadowrunners. To whom do I owe the pleasure?"

His voice dripped with sarcasm and the smell of cheap sake.

"My name is Geppetto. I'm a shadowrunner from America, and this is my team, 2D, Dervish, and Bend."

Taka placed his elbows on the counter, leaning in to get face-to-face with Geppetto.

"And why does Gaijin-san come all the way here from America? It's not the booze. I serve watered-down shit."

Geppetto, a consummate face, didn't skip a beat.

"The Shiawase compound in Akiba. We need to meet someone. We were told that you would be able to get us in."

Taka placed one arm behind his back and arced the other one around to scratch his chin, slowly and dramatically like a kabuki actor. If you could imagine him being voiced by Norio Wakamoto at his hammiest, that would be great.

"Oh, yes, that your brother Taka can do. But...that's such a difficult thing. I will require services rendered. Maybe two."

Geppetto hardened.

“Name it. My team is too professional to piss around.”

Taka looked at leather-clad Dervish and t-shirt-wearing (today's shirt read “official breast inspector”) 2D and snorted aloud, his wide nostrils flaring.

“Oh, are they, American? I seem to be the one holding all the go pieces, as it were. I know that doesn't quite translate, but I do love appropriating those little bits of American culture. To make you feel at home, of course.”

He chuckled at his own joke, wherever it was. Geppetto continued to stare the oni down.

“Name the job.”

Taka slammed his hands down on the table, arching his shoulders to leer at Geppetto.

“An armored car.”

In an instant, Geppetto responded,

“Done. Which one?”

“It's traveling through Chiyoda right now. Registered to a Daisuke Investments Company. Single-A.”

Now was absolutely the right time for 2D to ace his spoof and data search.

“North or South Chiyoda, sir?”

Taka gawked, taken aback.

“What?”

“North or South? Daisuke Investments Company has two vehicles registered to the gridlink in that area.”

Taka paused.

“South.”

2D grinned. “Alright. Dervish, borrow a motorbike and get Bend down to the area I'm marking on your map. Bend, bring your satlink, so I can hit mutual signal range of the truck, get a machine sprite in it.”

Taka's gargantuan eyes flitted from American to American as Dervish and Bend filed out and 2D sat at the bar, zonking out into VR.

Geppetto wore the shit-eatingest grin of his entire life. He could devour a whole sewer and have time

for seconds.

“As I said, my team is too professional to piss around.”

I'll skip past most of the job because it was quick and we completely cakewalked it, but Taka stared blankly as, 30 minutes later, 2D led him out to the garage behind his bar to see the armored truck, with the two drivers still inside, screaming that their communications had been cut. Bend sat on the roof of the truck, smart jammer activated.

Taka's expression quickly turned from one of astonishment to parodical, blatantly fake anger.

“No, no, no. You did it wrong. The guards witnessed everything. Now I have to kill them. You do another job.”

2D looked at him incredulously.

“Dude, seriously? You have a problem with killing people? You?”

“You do another job or I don't give you the codes to the Shiawase compound.”

Geppetto growled.

“I swear, if you're jerking us around for free labor...”

Taka put a hand up and spat on the ground.

“That's insulting. Don't insult me. Or you won't get my business. I'll have another job for you tomorrow.”

The team went home that day thoroughly pissed-off.

The team reconvened in the closet-sized bathroom of planning and logistics to discuss.

Geppetto: “This is bullshit, he obviously doesn't have the codes.”

2D: “I dunno, he came recommended. Doesn't stop him from being a pissant though I guess.”

Dervish: “I still think we shoulda called sensei.”

Bend: “Look, let's just do the job tomorrow and see where it goes. We've got enough money to last, and this hotel is costing us pennies. I'm gonna go down and get some ramen, anyone want some?”

The team paid attention to Bend's wisdom and, after a night of mostly dicking about and watching trid (although 2D dispatched his fly-spy to get a view of the exterior of the compound, which confirmed that it was as heavily-fortified as they'd feared), they went down to the bar in the morning. This time, they didn't bother wearing suits.

Geppetto: "Hey! Asshole!"

Taka: "Speaking."

Geppetto: "You said you had a job for us."

Taka: "Yes. I was going to stick you on a jailbreak but something else came up."

Bend: "Pity. We're good at jailbreaks."

Taka: "What? Shut up, gaijin. Look. Look at this."

In AR, Taka put up a picture of a man in a suit, flanked by 12 WildCat mercs.

Geppetto: "So it's a Johnson and a bunch of security. You give a flying fuck why?"

Taka: "They set up shop in an office right down the street. I wanna know what mercs are doing right down the street from me."

Dervish: "You dense bastard, they're obviously protecting this guy, who is doing something entirely unrelated to you. You are not actually that important."

2D paused.

"Woah, hold on a sec."

2D pointed out the subtle outline of softweave armor beneath one of the merc's armor suits.

"Here. He's wearing mil-tech armor underneath the merc armor."

Doing a little more scanning, 2D continued to notice discrepancies.

"That one, too. His sidearm is a Thunderbolt. That's a top-tier pistol, gotta get em special commission from Ares. Tac-team material. Not to mention if you look in all their ears--" 2D rotated the trideo, "-flesh-colored earbuds. Spy toys."

Taka gulped audibly, having evidently not noticed any of these details in the picture before. He quickly recovered, though, long enough to start spewing bullshit.

"See? SEE!? They're up to no good! I know it. Make contact with them. Ask the man in the suit what he's doing here."

Geppetto sighed.

"Okay, I suppose this is a legitimate threat. Everyone get ready to run if we blow these bastards' cover."

2D started with a little legwork, hacking the building's surprisingly unencrypted normal office node and going through employee records. The commando teams were all using pseudonyms, but the man in the suit was interesting: he was, go figure, Mr. Johnson, but he was billed as the representative of a company called Ginsen, in San Francisco. A bit more digging found that Ginsen was a shell company, and the only acquisitions on file for it were, go figure, a dozen mercs. A bit MORE digging pegged Ginsen as the subsidiary of a London single-A, also called Ginsen.

“Guys,” said 2D, warily, “I think we might be stumbling onto some serious conspiracy theory shit.”

Geppetto sighed.

“I guess we'll go talk to Mr. Johnson for you, Taka, but I swear to God, you give us the schematics and access codes after this.”

Taka placed a long-nailed hand over his chest.

“On my honor, Geppetto-san.”

The team donned their suits and crossed the street, heading towards the Ginsen offices on the 10th floor of an office building. They didn't really know what to expect.

What they certainly DIDN'T expect was a cheery receptionist sitting at the front desk in a sexy skirt-suit, and an office full of hardened merc badasses dressed in business suits making PowerPoint presentations, getting coffee, and asking each other whether they'd seen the game last night. The entire cubicle farm was done up in tasteful pastel colors with photos of inspiring places.

2D: “I swear to God, one of them just said 'how's the wife.' Like, unironically.”

Geppetto: “Let's just play it cool. Ahem. Excuse me? Ma'am?”

The receptionist looked up from her game of solitaire and popped her bubble gum.

“Need something, handsome?”

Geppetto took a moment to collect his thoughts.

“We're looking for Mr. Johnson.”

The receptionist winced.

“Oh noooo! Mr. Johnson's in a meeting. Can I take a message?”

“Well, miss, we really need to talk to him. Say it's from Mr. Takamoto.”

“Ooooh,” the receptionist responded, not really registering much of anything. “Go ahead and sit over there.”

After 15 minutes of the team awkwardly being shot smiles by passing black-ops badasses wearing office monkey shirts, the receptionist said, “Mr. Johnson will see you now!”

The team was seated across from the suited figure that they recognized as Mr. Johnson. Mr. Gary Johnson, to be precise. Dervish was actively thumbing his gun, thoroughly creeped-out by the whole proceedings, while Bend had long since put on his goggles, scanning for discrepancies, hallucinogens in the air, ANYTHING.

“Mr. Takamoto! We've been expecting you!”

Johnson reached across the table and gave Geppetto's limp hand a firm, hearty handshake.

“Well, actually, sir, Mr. Takamoto is--”

“Yes, yes, you're just his representative. But worry not, sir, we understand Taka's unique position. We're not here for him. We're here to expand Ginsen's holdings into Japan, to take hold of the dynamic markets of Neo-Tokyo.”

“What exactly is it that Ginsen does, Mr. Johnson?”

2D: “This is weirding me the fuck out, man.”

Bend: “Shhhh!”

Johnson: “Heh. Sorry, new in town. I guess we got set up rather quick, that must be what's got your boys surprised, eh? The proper question would be, sir, what DOESN'T Ginsen do?”

Geppetto took an expression of abject confusion.

“You didn't answer my question.”

“What question?”

“...the question that I just asked you.”

Mr. Johnson swirled some creamer into his coffee, and looked up as though he was just noticing that Geppetto was there.

“What question was that?”

“What does Ginsen do?”

Mr. Johnson let loose a practiced laugh, personable and utterly cheesy,

“Ha ha ha! Good sir, what DOESN'T Ginsen do?”

“I was asking you that. You said that already.”

Johnson frowned.

“I did? No I didn't.”

One of the office workers, a Salish man with a deep scar up one side of his face and prison tattoos, popped into the office.

“Mr. Johnson, Stacey just called in, she won't be able to make it till later today, something about her sister's birthday.”

Johnson slapped his forehead.

“That was TODAY!? But I'd had the presentation up to show the board and everything! You know that she needed to show the profit graphs!”

The merc shrugged.

“Sorry, sir,” he said, with a sudden, cheery smile, “but I could do those graphs for you in a jiffy, if you need 'em.”

“Boy howdy do I,” laughed Mr. Johnson, “You're a lifesaver, Carl!”

2D gawked.

“Where the hell are we?”

Johnson looked at 2D.

“You're at Ginsen corp, of course!”

Geppetto resisted the urge to scream.

Bend aimed his directional hearing earpieces back into the office, trying to pick up something from the employees.

“Did you hear about Dave? He's been out sick something fierce. Think it may be the new flu going around.”

“Aww, that's just precious! Do you think that they taught the cat how to do that or it did it on its own?”

“Man, I really wish Stacey's sister the best. Poor girl, I know there've been complications.”

“Look at Carl again. Wonder how he keeps his nose so brown.”

“You catch last night's Urban Brawl crossover match? Wuxing was on FIRE! Literally.”

“Hey Jenna, can I get some coffee over here? I'm probably gonna need to pull a long night and there's no sense not getting the caffeine in early.”

“Frisco is compromised, repeat, Frisco is compromised. Initiate order 5, 10, 2, 7. Good luck, gentlemen.”

Bend: “What?”

With a “PAF,” Mr. Johnson's head exploded, coating the room in gore.

2D: “aaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Aside from 2D, who was in catatonic shock and had bits of Mr. Johnson's face up his nose, the rest of the team dove for the ground, taking cover behind the desk.

Dervish: “WHAT THE HELL.”

Bend: “CODE RED! CODE RED! MISSION COMPROMISED!”

After a moment, Geppetto peeked up from the desk and looked into the office. The drawers of every single desk were open, and there were discarded sets of business clothes all over the office.

Geppetto: “No fucking way.”

“PIGS,” 2D yelped.

Geppetto: “What?”

“PIIIIIIGS.”

With that, 2D sprinted across the office, opened the elevator with a mental command (backdooring on the office node), and dove in, literally sliding the last few feet on bits of face and brain.

Dervish: “What do you think he meant by that?”

With that, a Tokyo Metro SWAT team burst into the office from the stairwell, arranged in breaching formation.

“PORISU! MINA WA BUKI O SUTERO!”

Dervish: “FUCK.”

Geppetto cast a high-force invisibility spell on himself, but not before screaming “SPLIT!”

Bend drew his sidearm and shot out the nearest window before jumping at it backwards, crashing through it with his shoulders and then quickly flipping to catch the side of the building with his gecko pads. Activating his tacsuit, he crawled a few floors lower and then settled on a lower balcony, nearly invisible.

Geppetto himself jumped out the same window, issued a command to his air spirit, and was soon PeterPanning it into the distance.

Dervish found himself staring down a SWAT team alone. He looked at the window. He looked back at the SWAT team. Window. SWAT team.

Activating his thrusters, he screamed, “SHIIIIIT” as he zoomed back to the opposite wall, and then accelerated to top speed and rocketed out the window while under heavy assault rifle fire.

“Dervish,” 2D screamed, through Dervish's comms, “DERVISH!!!”

Dervish vaulted the next building, easily clearing 30 feet of distance to land on top of another office. The helicopter's gunners opened fire in the middle of the jump, bursting another line of windows as pedestrians below ran screaming from the scene.

“WHAAAAAAT!?”

“Dervish! I'm safe. I'm inside a metro station down here. I'm gonna try to hack the helicopter.”

“WELL DO IT FUCKING QUICK.”

Dervish threw himself to the roof instinctively, as a marksman's rifle round burst a large water pipe where his head used to be, sending a fire-hose-tier spray of water up into the air and eventually down into the streets, like a perverse waterfall.

“Okay okay okay okay,” 2D said, stressed, “I've only got spectator access now. No driving. I'm gonna try to spoof a signal.”

“WHAT SIGNAL!?”

On the helicopter pilot's dash, an alert read “MULTIPLE MISSILES INBOUND, ENGAGE IN EVASIVE MANEUVERS IMMEDIATELY.”

The helicopter began to wax and wane violently, tilting at an obscene angle.

“Oh this is bad,” said 2D over the comms.

“HOW BAD 2D!?”

“THIS IS BAAAAAAD.”

As the helicopter plowed into the building, smashing clean through the facade into one of the offices, Dervish jumped the next rooftop with a cry of “FUUUUUUUUUUU-”

As Dervish landed on the rooftop, 2D quickly yelled to him:

“STAY THERE! Stay right the fuck there.”

“So I can get my ass shot off by snipers!?”

“They're too busy watching that 250k chopper go down the drain. Stay right where you are. Geppetto's spirit is making another pass.”

There were a tense few moments as Dervish stood in place, hearing the screams of panicked masses, the rattle of the SWAT team continuing cover fire on the rooftop that they thought he was on, and the emergency sirens in the distance. Then, with a yelp, he was airborne.

The team reconvened in an alleyway a few blocks away, watching ambulances rush by.

Geppetto: “So...”

Bend: “Um.”

2D: “...fuck Taka.”

Dervish: “FUCK TAKA WITH A RAKE.”

With a loud “OOF,” Dervish impacted what he was aiming for: the rooftop of the adjacent building, which was only marginally shorter than the one he'd jumped from. He was now only NINE stories above the streets of Tokyo.

The SWAT team ran to the window and opened up a line of suppressive fire, attempting to pin Dervish down. The point-man's automatic shotgun was still loaded with shock-lock breaching rounds. This had the unintentional side effect of bursting out the upper windows of the building with stray shots, showering the pedestrians below with broken glass. Dervish popped and weaved through bullets and flying scrap metal and glass and eventually found cover behind the top of the external stairway, catching his breath.

There was a low thrum from somewhere below him. Then a FWOCKA-FWOCKA-FWOCKA. Then he saw the searchlights.

As the Police helicopter rose into view, Dervish screamed, “OH, COME ON.”

“TAKAAAA!”

Geppetto burst through the door, his arms ablaze with eldritch fire. Behind him, Dervish cocked his shotgun, training it on bar patrons who moved to stand.

Taka the oni was sitting at the bar, looking very surprised that Geppetto had survived.

“Oh, shit.”

He began to scramble away, only to find two drones, whirring with mechanical blades, blocking his path.

Geppetto grinned viciously.

“Let's talk about Mirage.”

“Right. I've got most of the schematics. But I need you to do just one more-”

Dervish cocked his shotgun loudly.

“NO. MORE. JOBS.”

Taka shook his head, putting his hands up in an “I don't mean to harm you” manner.

“Look, this job is good for both of us. I swear on my honor. Call it recompense for past wrongs.”

Geppetto glared.

“Speak quickly.”

“I went over the schematics to the Shiawase compound. There's a vault in there, a high-tech bank vault. I pulled a LOT of favors--at great personal expense, mind you--to get all the access codes to the doors around the compound, and if you can get into that vault, I have it on good authority that there are two pieces of experimental tech in there RIGHT NOW.”

Geppetto scowled.

“Why do we believe you on this? And moreover, what's in it for you?”

Taka said, soberly,

“I just need you to slip a little package in. A bug. Then you can take the experimental tech, as quick as you like. Call it your payment. You'll be in the compound anyway, and with all the access codes I gave you, it should be a walk in the park. Look, I even have full floor plans and schematics.”

He tossed an AR window over to 2D, who began to work through the map of the compound.

2D: “Seems legit.”

2D continued perusing the data, and his eyebrows cocked as he hit a snag.

“Wait a minute, you edited the data for the residential blocks out. Why'd you do that? This doesn't tell us where Mirage lives anymore.”

“About that,” said Taka, his mouth widening into a toothy grin, his eyes darting from 2D to Geppetto,

“I'm not giving you that data until you plant the bug.”

“THIS WASN'T PART OF THE DEAL,” roared Geppetto, grabbing Taka by the collar.

Taka shoved him off bodily, laughing cruelly.

“Deal with it. You've come this far, and I'm the only one with the info. I can delete it just as quickly.”

There was a brief moment of tension as we all wondered whether Geppetto was just going to kill Taka outright. He was certainly capable of doing so. Dervish glanced from side to side, shotgun readied.

“Alright,” said Geppetto, deadly calm, as he stood back up. “Alright, Taka. But you're going to regret this. You are going to regret ever fucking with my team.”

“I regret NOTHING.” Taka gestured towards the door. “Get out of my sight. I'll send you the domestic floorplans when I get a read from the bug.”

The team scoped out the compound, and began to work out a plan.

The Shiawase compound consisted of three buildings surrounded by a high concrete wall with guard towers. One building was manufacturing, which we wouldn't be touching. Manufacturing did have the security facility that connected to the other two buildings, though, so it would probably be our first stop if we wanted to neuter security.

The second building was R&D. It was all labs except for a ground floor lobby. The vault was in the basement, and was opened at regular intervals by registered security personnel. The labs, we weren't interested in, aside from the procurement of a researcher's key card, which factored into the third building.

The third building was residential, and it was locked off to anyone who didn't have a valid keycard. Security were locked out if it was off-schedule for them (unless ANOTHER, purely residential building, spider opened it), so we figured our best bet was a researcher's key card.

The only ways into the compound were heavily guarded kiosks that cleared each shipment in and out of the compound.

From this we began to work out our plan.

>DERVISH replaces one of the delivery truckers.

>BEND uses his contortionist abilities to shove himself into one of the shipment boxes, buried beneath product.

>DERVISH delivers BEND to the manufacturing bay

>BEND activates tac cloak, sneaks through manufacturing, by the vents if possible, enters security room.

>BEND connects a cloaked satlink to the security nexus.

>TWODEE hacks the shit out of it.

>TWODEE creates temp security clearance for GEPPETTO, as an “escort” for one of the researchers, so the guards won't ask questions.

>TWODEE opens doors, and GEPPETTO enters R&D, swipes himself a researcher's keycard.

>BEND makes his way into R&D at the same time, slips in while Geppetto does so no one wonders why the door is opening for nobody.
>BEND heads to the basement, waits.
>TWODEE uses nexus to order a piece of tech from manufacturing put in the vault.
>When the guard opens the vault, BEND slips in, takes the tech, puts down the bug, leaves, hitches the next truck out of the compound.
>GEPETTO enters the residential building to find Mirage, at which point no one can help him, but he should have the info from Taka.

And that was the plan.

The team wasn't under any illusions that nothing would go wrong, considering the first part of the plan would involve Dervish becoming a trucker.

So, 2D looked up a nearby trucker bar for Dervish, to see if he couldn't find someone good to jack a truck from.

“2D,” gawked Dervish, as he approached the trucker bar, “What exactly am I looking at, here?”

“It's called dekotora. Japanese truckers are fucking nuts. They paint their trucks up like Lite-Brites as a sign of personal expression. They think it makes them unique but mostly they just look retarded. Like tripfags!”

“Ooookay. So what's the plan?”

“Listen around. Find one who does Shiawase shipments. Figure out his schedule, then jack him later. I can bullshit up the clearance once you steal the truck.”

“I am not driving one of these things.”

“You will if you want us to get out of Japan.”

“Now that's incentive.”

Dervish stepped inside to find that the bar was cowboy-themed, with miscellaneous American pop culture relics decorating the walls. Setting his hearing to “directional,” he took in the ambiance.

As it turned out, that was irrelevant, since he immediately spotted two big yankii wearing “Shiawase Cargo Shipping” leather jackets, alternating shots of rice vodka.

>How did our heroes deal with the fact they were (obviously) not Japanese?

>Dervish: Trucker. Underclass. Makes sense for a foreigner.

2D: Not on site at all. Hacking remotely.

Bend: Physical infiltrator. With any luck, wouldn't be seen by ANYONE.

The only problem was Geppetto. We were hoping the “he's an exotic high-class prostitute” bit

would stop people from inquiring.

>Ah, *that* kind of escort. Bit of a language barrier here. Also: of course they thought about it!

“Heeey,” announced Dervish cheerily, advancing on them at the bar.

“Dervish,” asked 2D, in Dervish's ear, “what are you doing?”

Dervish pointed at the two truckers and asked, grinning stupidly,

“Lifers? I thought the truckers were all indie in Japan!”

There was a brief, tense pause, as both of the truckers stared at Dervish but apparently the linguasoft held up enough to not make him sound like an ass.

“Nah, we're contracted. SCS gets most of the shipping contracts, though. We even do work for Renraku and Mitsuhamma.”

“No shit?” Dervish sat down at the barstool next to one of them. “What kinda routes do you keep?”

One of the yankii, the younger one, pointed at the older one.

“Jubei here mostly works in-city for the Shiawase compounds. I mostly do runs up to the tech firms in Osaka.”

Dervish grinned at the first sentence, and then settled back into a normal smile for the second.

“Really? Bet that route's beautiful this time of year.”

“Well, I keep odd hours so I get to see a few beautiful sunrises...Hey, who are you and why are you so interested in trucking?”

Dervish laughed.

“Oh man, that was rude of me, huh? I forgot my Japanese manners. I'm Garret Jordan. I truck the route from Salish to Seattle, mostly do Ares work. I'm here in Neo-Tokyo on vacation.”

The younger man struggled with the name.

“Gar-ruh-retto, huh? I'm Bancho. Well, you certainly chose a weird city for a vacation. How well you get paid in America?”

“Well, I freelance, so I mostly make shit. I like having the freedom to take what jobs I want, though.”

“I hear ya, I hear ya. Hey, you ever drink rice vodka?”

Dervish motioned for the bartender.

“Not before now I haven't.”

Within minutes, Dervish, Bancho, and Jubei were watching Urban Brawl, cheering and trading shots.

Dervish: “Dude, what ish the DEAL with your razorboysh and katanash? Is it a cultural--hic--relic or shumthin? Katanash are shitty shwordsh.”

Jubei: “Well it looksh good for the crowd, and beshidesh, when yer goin all fasht s'better'n a gun.”

Bancho: “WOO! Go Mitsuhama! Kick thoshe meta Ebo bashtardsh to the curb! Uh, no 'fense.”

Dervish's cybereyes caught the glint of something on Jubei's wrist. Something incredibly convenient, when he magnified the vision to catch what it was: a bracelet warning about how to respond if Jubei succumbed to a grain allergy.

Dervish: “WHO’S UP FOR A DRINKIN' GAAAAME?”

Jubei and Bancho: “WOOOOO!”

They traded shot after shot of rice vodka until they were well and truly plastered, but then Dervish ordered wheat vodka, to “switch things up,” well after either Japanese man was past the point of caring. A few shots later, and Jubei doubled over, vomiting profusely.

Jubei: “Oh nooooo...*hurrghlrlgl*...my allergiesh...”

Dervish: “Fuck man, you okay!?”

Bancho: “Shit! And you had to bring that new shipment of circuit boards in tomorrow and everything!”

Jubei: “Oh fuck...call an ambulance...”

Emergency services were called and Jubei was carted off, silencing the bar. Bancho bemoaned aloud,

“Oh man, oh shit, Jubei had the big shipment tomorrow and everything.”

Teetering slightly, Dervish stood.

“I'll do it.”

Bancho blinked, stunned.

“You what?”

Dervish struck his best sentai pose, and yelled at the top of his lungs,

“I WILL COMPLETE JUBEI'S LEGACY.”

The bar was silent as Dervish stumbled drunkenly towards the wall, pulling down a novelty American flag.

“I WILL BECOME THE MASHKED TRUCKER. AMERICA-MAN. I WILL DO HISH JOB, AND I WILL SHEND HIM THE MONEY, BECAUSHE I AM A HERO.”

Bancho started clapping, utterly off his rocker.

“Ooohhh shiiiiit.”

Dervish began to wrap the American flag around his face, forming a shemagh.

“LET NO ROUTE GO UNTRAVELED. FOR I AM THE HERO. IT ISH ME. FOR AMERICA.”

At this point, the bar started chanting, “Amerika-san! Amerika-san!”

“ALL YOU MUSHT DO, FELLOW TRUCKER BANCHO, ISH SHIGN ME ONTO HISH CONTRACT ASH A TEMPORARY SHUBSHTITUTE, AND I *WILL* SHAVE HIM FROM THE DISSHONOR OF FAILURE.”

Bancho, his mouth open and gawking, started scrawling away on some e-paper.

“FOR I. AM. AMERIKA-SHAN.”

As Dervish spilled out the door of the bar, there was an uproar. Dervish stumbled towards Jubei's truck, but not before vomiting in a gutter.

“Fuck youuuu, 2D,” he drawled into his mic, “I do things MAH way.”

Dervish woke up in the truck, wrapped in his American flag, with the smell of booze and puke on his breath.

“Rise and shine, sleepyhead,” announced Bend.

Dervish groaned.

“My heaaaaaad...”

“We got a mission, numbnuts,” 2D reminded Dervish, over his earpiece. You've been out for seven hours. The shipment's coming up, and you need to get moving.”

Dervish smacked his lips, sat up in the cab, and started the truck, reversing it slowly into a dumpster with a small crunch.

“Okay. I'm good. Hold on.”

He switched back into forward drive and started on his route.

The pick-up of the shipment of prefab circuit boards was fairly uninteresting. Dervish's clearance (under the name GARURETO JORDAN, AMERIKA-SAN) checked out, and he got the goods loaded. Bend took a few out of the box, and began to cram himself in. By the time Dervish arrived at the Shiawase compound, he just had a cargo hold full of boxes, as far as the naked eye could see.

The first part of the run went as planned. Bend's crate was offloaded into the shipping bay, and Dervish left the compound to keep up his cover by doing more trucking. Bend used his thermo to wait until there were no witnesses about, then popped the top of the crate, tacsuit activated. He carefully wormed his way up to the ceiling with his gecko grips, and then worked his way into a ceiling vent, with 2D running overwatch to direct him to right over the security room.

Bend dropped silently into the security room, behind a jacked-in spider. Carefully, ever so carefully, he connected the satlink to the nexus.

Now, we get to a problem with 2D. Hacking a nexus on the fly would be retarded. Meaning, he had to be undisturbed. Completely undisturbed, somewhere with good matrix connection, hopefully close for the purposes of backup.

2D made a few purchases while he was in Akiba.

The proprietors and waitresses of the Meido Cafe gawked as the stringy, unwashed American, garbed in an authentic Mitsu-Fashionline Kimono Moderne (tm), holding a body pillow of Yoko from Gurren Lagann under one arm and a plastic bag full of truly filthy hentai BTL chips, slammed the door open. He shouted in broken, weeaboo Japanese (despite, unbeknownst to them, having a perfectly good linguasoft),

“I REQUIRE A PRIVATE ROOM GADGET HELLO.”

“S-sir? Do you want--”

“I AM SPEND THE TIME WITH MY AUTHENTIC WAIFU CUTENESS EXPLOSION.”

The maids led him to a private room, keeping a five-foot distance at all times.

“I AM PAY YOU IN THE NUYEN FOR THIS ROOM, PUCHUU. DISTURB ME NOT FOR NO REASONS, EVEN IF THE NOISES YOU HEAR.”

Settling down on the pillow-chairs of the private room (which he stacked up to form a big comfy mound to rest on, spooning the body pillow for, um, cover reasons), 2D announced,

“Alright, guys, I'm in.”

Geppetto: “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Dervish: "All that goodwill that I just made, wasted."

2D: "Ha ha, I am the karmic imbalance to Amerika-san, legendary trucker. Bend, you connected the uplink?"

Bend: "Yep. Go ahead, 2D."

2D: "Sweet. This is gonna take a few hours, though, so Bend, settle down in a good hidey-hole in the basement of R&D."

One of the maids knocked on the door.

"Sir, do you require--"

2D: "OINK OINK OINK, MMMM YOKO, HOW DOES MY BEASTMAN DICK FEEL!?"

The maid stopped knocking.

Bend: "Why...why would you leave comms on?"

Geppetto: "WHHHYYYYYY?"

Dervish: "MY BRAAAAIIN."

2D: "Please. As if it's the worst thing I've ever done."

Geppetto: "It's up there."

The team continued to bide their time. Geppetto parked himself at a cafe (the normal kind, not the kind that 2D was currently violating) across the street. Dervish continued to truck. Bend found himself a nice hiding spot at the bottom of an elevator maintenance shaft. 2D set a data sprite to play the choicest bits of weird porn at loud volumes from his commlink every time someone came to bother him, and wire hourly cred to the Meido Cafe. This lasted for three hours.

"Okay, I'm in. Admin access, too. They think I'm the chief spider. Geppetto, you've got your clearance. Bend managed to get through the door without you, but you're still going to need to pop by R&D to yoink yourself a keycard. As for you, Bend, I've got a security guy headed your way to drop off one of the crappier prototype gun mods in the vault. It's like an Alpha but shittier. Follow him in, grab the prototypes, drop the bug, get out. Easy peasy."

Geppetto: "Roger that, 2D. I'm headed in--"

2D: "WHY YOKO, IS THAT YOUR TWIN SISTER OTHER YOKO BODY PILLOW? I AM LUCKY BEASTMAN OF TWO MANHOODS TO PLEASURE BOTH LADY ANDROIDS OF THE BEAUTY POWER!"

Geppetto: "I'm headed in now. Over and out."

Bend: "Moving to position."

Geppetto stopped at the front gate. A guard held him up.

Guard: "Clearance."

Geppetto: "Right here. I'm here to assist Mrs. Yokohama."

Guard: "And what will you be assisting Mrs. Yokohama with?"

Geppetto gave him a look.

Guard: "Sir?"

Geppetto: "Personal matters."

The guard blinked for a moment, then started with a little jolt.

Guard: "Oh. OH. Go right in, sir."

Geppetto caught the guards gossiping to each other as he walked into the compound.

On the vault level, Bend shadowed the marked security guard to the vault itself. The guard placed a key into a special locking mechanism, then punched out a code in AR, then submitted to a retinal scan.

With that, the vault door slid open, revealing a clean white room filled with pedestals. Most of the pedestals were empty, but a few bore fancy-looking credsticks, and two had small boxes.

2D: "The boxes, Bend. Wait till the guard turns, then liberate them."

Bend made his way towards the first box and, when the guard turned away to put his own box on one of the pedestals, swiped the first box, then the second. He replaced the first box with the bug.

The lights immediately turned to a shade of red as an alarm sounded.

2D: "What was that?"

Bend: "Alarm. Pressure sensors."

2D: "This doesn't make any sense. They didn't have pressure sensors installed."

2D took a second look at the blueprints, and called up the manufacturing details, which read, "Akiba Shiawase compound, 2069."

The current year was 2072.

Downstairs, the maids winced as their “guest” roared,

“FUUUUUUUUCKING TAAAKAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

2D: “Get out of there, Bend. Get out right now. I don't know what other sensor arrays they could have in there. The specs Taka gave us are out-of-date.”

Bend: “Okay. Moving. Gotta--Oh shit!”

There was a short shootout as the guard accessed the sonar arrays that the team didn't know about, then plugged Bend with his sidearm twice, right in the chest, sending the elf sprawling to the floor.

Bend: “Fuck...man down...”

Guard: “Keikoku! Shin'nyū-sha keihō!”

Operating on instinct, 2D activated all of the compound's defense drones.

2D: “Geppetto, you're gonna want to book it for residential, because this is about to get really shitty really fast.”

2D did a little bit of tooling around with the compound's targeting systems.

```
>if asset=Shiawase then target=friendly  
>ERASE LINE if asset=Shiawase then target=friendly  
>if asset=Shiawase then target=intruder  
>Red alert activated
```

With that, 2D dove a Steel Lynx and began driving it down the corridors toward the vault, intent on rescuing Bend.

All other sounds in the compound were drowned out as a veritable small army of drones opened fire on the closest Shiawase assets they could find, which in this case meant everything within sight range. Pedestrians as far away as 2D's maid cafe could hear the gunfire, explosions, and screams.

Geppetto: “2D. Taka gave us the residential layout, but the woman isn't on it.”

2D: “THAT'S BECAUSE IT'S THREE YEARS OUT OF DATE AND I'M GOING TO MURDER TAKA WITH A SPOON. DO THE SEARCH THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY.”

Geppetto used the cover of gunfire to transform into mist and fly through the fancy newfound bulletholes in the residential doorway. He'd managed to procure a researcher's ID, but no sense not doing things an easier way.

Bend lay still as the guard advanced on him, clutching the sucking wound in his chest and gasping for air. He could barely register the guard saying something about “execution” as the light began to dim...

Luckily for Geppetto, there was an employee map, and he was able to find that one of the executive

garden suites was registered to a woman matching the biometrics of a high-power bioroid. Casting an invisibility on himself and weaving through the halls, he made his way to the gardens.

“Bend.”

Bend awoke. Something was buzzing in his ear.

“BEND.”

He gasped. He was dying. He was going to die. There were alarms going off. There was a guard lying next to him, riddled with smoldering wet holes. There was a Steel Lynx combat drone on his other side, its minigun barrels still spinning.

“I need you to attach your gecko grips to the drone, Bend. Can you do that for me?”

“Uuuuuh.”

Bend wrapped his arms around the underside of the drone, then lifted his leg with much effort.

“I think he got...I think he got a lung.”

“Keep it together, man. We'll get you out of this.”

As Geppetto entered the garden, his invisibility became more and more distinct, until he was obviously visible, if transparent. Assensing the gardens, he found his culprit: the plants dampened magic. He was a sitting duck, no longer a magical banshee but a dude with a pretty face.

He sprawled across the flowerbeds as a feminine hand grabbed him by the back of the neck and hurled him bodily over a half-dozen yards across the garden. A wiry woman in a kimono glared at him angrily and planted a preternaturally heavy foot on his throat as he tried to get up.

“Who are you working for!?”

Bend barely registered the rattle of machine gun fire and the scream of motors as he was carried up, out of the R&D building, and into the compound. It was a warzone between man and machine.

“Two...TwoDee?”

“Sorry! 2D isn't here right now! Can I take a message?”

“Machine...sprite. Where's...2D...?”

“He said he had something to do! But I can get you out of here, no prob!”

As 2D stepped out into the maid cafe proper, he shouted,

“I REQUIRE STIMULANTS. THEN I WILL DEPART FOR INDIGNITIES ELSEWHERE AND ANOTHER TIME.”

In his head, he made one last command:

- >Designate_location "Taka's Bar."
- >Designate_asset "Taka's Bar."
- >If asset=Taka's Bar then target=Renraku Strike team, terminate with extreme prejudice
- >All units converge at location "Taka's Bar."
- >All systems free
- >All weapons free
- >Collateral damage overrides activated
- >Log out

Absently groping his growing erection, 2D grabbed the cup of coffee that was handed to him with a cry of "YES. YEEEEEESSSSSS. MORE COFFEE I SAY. MORE COFFEE FOR UNLIMITED CUTENESS ARCHANGEL HACKER TWODEE."

Geppetto wisely decided to nearly asphyxiate and black out.

He came to in a bed, with his arms and legs bound. The bacteria was still eating away at his magic, keeping him from casting spells.

"Now," said Mirage, "where were we? Something about who you're working for?"

"Someone who wants Two-Times," said Geppetto, blankly. "You know him?"

Mirage chuckled.

"Oh, wow. You could have just asked right-off."

Geppetto struggled with a shrug. He shrugged.

"I was going to but then you threw me across a garden and kicked my chest in."

"Sorry about that. Precaution."

The bioroid undid his binds.

"You gonna kill him?"

"Naturally."

"Excellent. In that case I want you to return a gift he gave me."

Geppetto stroked his sore wrists, sitting up in the bed.

"Name it."

Mirage handed him a jar full of used, ballooned and flattened bullets. Most of them still had little

scorched chunks of meat on them.

“It was his retirement present to me. I think he'd like to have them back, don't you?”

Bend registered the drone jumping in his pained haze. He didn't think drones could jump. Evidently the machine sprite disagreed, as it leapt the barricade into the streets. He saw...lights? And a really gay-looking truck?

He awoke to see himself stripped and his torso covered in bandages as Dervish, a medkit at his hip, poured some water down his throat. Bend gulped greedily.

Bend: “Why...still wearing the stupid flag?”

Dervish: “Because I am Amerika-San, life-saving hero.”

Bend: “How long...?”

Dervish: “About an hour. Geppetto and 2D should be en-route.”

Geppetto opened the door, wearing a singed and slightly ripped fancy suit. He had gigantic flaming demons on either side of him, Force 7 fire spirits.

Geppetto: “Mirage played ball. Here.”

He tossed Dervish a second teddy bear. Dervish unzipped its back, fished around in the stuffing, and produced the second orbital uplink.

Geppetto: “Just waiting on 2D?”

Dervish: “Looks like it.”

Geppetto: “So, did we get revenge on Taka yet?”

Dervish: “Not to my knowledge.”

Geppetto nodded to the fire spirits.

Geppetto: “Taka's bar. Burn it to the ground.”

Geppetto: “By the way, Mirage talked with Stimpack a few weeks ago. He's with the Peace Corps now, by the way. German guy. Named Hermann Julienne.”

Dervish: “Excellent. We've got a lead.”

2D stomped into the back of the truck, his kimono fluttering. He was not wearing pants.

2D: “We also have REVENGE. I have set all of the drones on our dick-ass fixer. Moo hoo ha ha.”

Geppetto blinked.

Geppetto: "Well, this just got more interesting."

Dervish handed the uplink to 2D.

Dervish: "Here, get the second code."

Bend: "Wait...don't."

2D's brain took in the information of all world communications rushing through that satellite. He heard a phone call in Germany. He saw a TV show in Brazil. He watched porn in South Africa. He was an automatic firmware update for a toaster in Seattle, in body and soul.

2D promptly ruined the kimono and crumpled to the floor of the truck.

Geppetto: "STOP DOING THAT WHEN HE'S RIGHT NEXT TO US, HE ALMOST GOT MY SHOES."

2D regained consciousness a few minutes later.

2D: "I got the code!"

Dervish: "We noticed."

A Mozart concerto filled the air. Geppetto was getting a call. He picked up his commlink neutrally, looked at the comm code, and then grinned before putting it on speaker phone.

Taka: "aaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRGGGGHHHHH I WILL KILL YOU I WILL MURDER ALL OF YOU AAAAAAAAH MY FUCKING HEART."

Geppetto: "I don't understand what you're talking about, Taka! Please, speak clearer."

Taka: "I CAN'T SPEAK CLEARER BECAUSE A DRONE SHOT ME IN THE GODDAMN CHEST BEFORE LAUNCHING A GRENADE THROUGH MY WINDOW. YOU WOULDN'T HAPPEN TO KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THAT WOULD YOU!? OR THE FACT THAT MY BAR IS CURRENTLY A SMOLDERING CRATER SURROUNDED BY DRONES?"

Geppetto: "Wow. That sounds mighty awful, Taka. I'm amazed that you could escape alive from those drones and spirits."

Taka: "I NEVER SAID ANYTHING ABOUT THE SPIRITS TORCHING THE WRECKAGE, YOU CRAZY FUCK."

Geppetto: "I am gifted with preternatural wisdom."

Taka: "YOU LISTEN TO ME AND YOU LISTEN TO ME GOOD, MAGE. I WILL RUIN YOU. IF YOU EVER COME BACK TO NEO-TOKYO, YOU WILL NEVER GET A JOB AGAIN."

Geppetto chuckled darkly.

Geppetto: “Actually, Taka, about that. I checked the fixer blacklist and noticed that you were on it, which gives you approximately zero sway in deciding what work we do or do not get. Moreover, as an independent fixer, you were almost entirely reliant on your bar to provide an environment for your illicit activities. A bar that you no longer have. I also imagine that the police will probably have a word or two with you in the hospital, if those sirens are any indication.”

Taka: “THIS ISN'T OVER.”

Geppetto: “It is for us.”

There was a brief pause.

2D: “So...what now?”

Bend leaned over, reaching into his tacsuit, which was folded up beside him, and producing two small boxes.

Bend: “I'm thinking we check the loot on a plane back to Seattle.”

Chapter 8: Lagos, Nextwave, and Runner on Runner Action

When last we left off the tale, the team had abused the bar of their corrupt-as-hell Japanese fixer, and was jumping on the first supersonic plane back to Seattle for a little R&R. They figured Ares could put some resources into finding Doctor Hermann Julienne, the owner of the third and final satellite locator code that would allow the team to lock on to Two-Times.

There were two things that the team figured they had to cover before they returned to their home city. The first of these things was to look over the mystery tech that they had acquired from Shiawase. The second was to break to a little girl in Seattle that her beloved big brother was never, ever coming home.

But why get concerned about the negative thing first? The team giggled and opened the boxes like a gaggle of schoolboys poking a dead dog with a stick.

Box number one contained a little capsule with an interface on it. It was like one of those little Faberge eggs, but with less intricate designs and more featureless steel. Since only 2D could pop that one, he was given the capsule to work on while the rest of the team opened the other box.

The second box contained a glove woven in some kind of micro-light, stretchy fabric. Upon closer inspection, Geppetto determined that the glove was magical in some way, although how he couldn't quite determine. It was a bit like a spellcasting focus, but not of any tradition that Geppetto could recognize. Experimentally, he put it on, wagged it around a little, and found no immediate difference.

"Try casting a spell," suggested Bend, tentatively.

A force 3 suggestion later, and Bend was gleefully picking his own nose.

"You're an ass."

Geppetto looked carefully at Bend's display of shameless nostril-diving.

"Anything particularly different?"

"I don't know, I've never been hit by a suggestion telling me to pick my nose before."

Geppetto took the glove off, concentrated, and soon both pointer fingers were up Bend's nose. 2D stifled an immature chuckle while Bend gave Geppetto the stink-eye between snorts of discomfort.

"No, that wasn't any different."

Dervish, driving the truck, sighed and adjusted his rearview mirror.

"Maybe it's only a certain kind of spell?" suggested 2D, his AR shades ablaze as he interfaced with the little metal capsule.

"Hmm."

Geppetto pulled the glove back on, focused on a low-force stunbolt, and promptly blew out the back

windows of the truck.

Dervish swerved for a moment as bits of glass rained all over the interior and exterior of the truck.

“WHAT THE FLYING FUCK, GEPPETTO!?”

Geppetto grinned, picking himself up from the floor of the truck.

“Universal combat spell empowerment. Very nice. I don’t think I’m going to keep it, though.”

2D snorted.

“I’ll keep it for you, then.”

“No, numbnuts. I mean that we can probably curry a lot of favor with Ares if we toss this to Nice. To say nothing of the pocket change we could get out of this.”

2D nodded soberly.

“True, true. They’re the weapons guys, they’d pay good money for a prototype like this. Oh hey, I got it open!”

2D poured metallic sand out of the capsule onto the floor of the truck. He frowned and looked into the now-empty canister.

“Woo. Aluminum dust. What I’ve always wanted.”

There was a hissing, chattering noise as the sand began to form into a swirling composite shape, and then began eating one of the walls of the truck.

“Oh SHIT! NANOBOTS! WHAT I *REALLY* ALWAYS WANTED!”

Dervish turned around and slammed the brakes instinctively.

“GOD DAMMIT 2D WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO MY TRUCK.”

“Hold up hold up, I’m trying to get them back in,” chattered 2D, as he hammered at the button on the side of the capsule.

Eventually the nanobots whirled back into the capsule, but not until after there was a perfect, AK-97shaped hole in the side of the truck.

And an AK-97 and two clips of ammo, unmarked and unregistered, sitting on the inside of the truck.

2D was overcome with glee.

“MOTHERFUCKING GUN-MAKING NANOBOTS.”

Bend groaned.

“I get the feeling that we’re not going to be doing anything GOOD with this, are we?”

These interesting things discovered, the team then got to the next problem.

“Oh, crap,” realized Dervish, “We have to tell Arianna that her brother died.”

The team all bowed their heads for a moment, before Geppetto looked in the hacker’s direction and suggested,

“I volunteer 2D.”

2D boggled.

“WHAT!?”

“She’s living with your girlfriend,” continued Geppetto, “and that makes this your problem.”

“Dude, you’re the one who’s like a suave French guy-”“

“Italian, 2D.”

“Dude, you’re the one who’s like a suave gigantic faggot, and I have all the social tact of a troll at a high-class dinner. You should handle this!”

Geppetto shook his head.

“Calling this as team leader. You gotta break the news.”

2D looked pleadingly at the rest of the team.

Bend: “Don’t know her, joined the team later.”

Dervish: “I am driving the truck and don’t want to be distracted by a child’s screams of grief.”

2D grumbled.

“I’m putting this on speaker phone, you orc bastard, just for you.”

He phone rang a few times, and Jozie, 2D’s orc juggalo girlfriend, picked up the phone.

“2D, my ninja! Why you haven’t come home yet!?”

“Look, baby, I-”

“Not that I don’t appreciate the chedda you sending back or nothin’ but I gots to spread the mad clown love, you know? All physical-like. Gotta getcher scrawny ass back here, knawmsayin?”

Bend gagged a little bit.

“Honey, can you put Arianna on?”

“Sho, sho. What’s this about?”

“Er. Ah.”

Arianna’s adorable girly voice rang over the speaker phone.

“Hi, Uncle Stuart! How’s Tank doing? Can you put him on?”

2D gulped.

“Um, no. Tank can’t come on. Ever. He died. He died a little bit.”

Arianna responded, stunned,

“What? What do you mean he died a little bit?”

“Well, I mean, he died, like, IN little bits. In parts, I mean. Constituent parts. But he died. Your brother is dead.”

There was a screeching noise as Arianna broke into tears.

The entire team gave 2D the stinkeye as his girlfriend said, over the comm connection,

“What the fuck, Malcolm?”

And hung up.

2D: “I AM NOT VERY GOOD AT TALKING TO CHILDREN.”

The flight back to Seattle was thoroughly awkward, with Joze informing the team that Arianna had, in fact, ran away from home. In Snohomish, so she didn’t have much of anywhere to run, but it still drove home the fact that 2D was a massive heel.

When the team touched down in Seattle, they each went their separate ways, with a promise to reconvene at a later date. 2D wanted to check in at home and make sure that Arianna was okay, Geppetto had a meeting with Bradford Nice of Ares Seattle, Dervish wanted to stop in with Sensei in the barrens and thank him for his help on the Vegas job, and Bend checked in with Danny, the team's fixer, to get briefed on the team's history, since he'd at first just been an interim replacement.

Since Bend's section was mostly just an infodump of everything that you guys have read in the last few storytimes, I'll start with Dervish's section.

Dervish arrived at Sensei's crappy dilapidated building, surrounded by razor wire and concrete dividers, and strolled right in, because the front door had fallen off for approximately the third time that month. He ducked under the hanging shotgun trap and instinctively sidestepped the landmine, before he caught sight of the dead feral ghoul with no legs across the hallway and realized that the landmine had already been tripped.

“Sensei? Sensei, you home?”

As he walked through the hallway of what was once an unidentifiable consumer building, Dervish caught sight of more dead ghouls, along with a few gangers. The gangers seemed to be covered in a mish-mash of ghoul bites and stab wounds.

“Sensei? You in here? Something happen?”

There was a crashing noise as a troll fell through the ceiling, his neck bent awkwardly, hanging from a length of chain. He was covered in horrible radiation burns. Carved into his chest were the words “GO BACK.”

Dervish took a step back.

“Ooooh....Kaaaay.”

His synaptics went off. Danger from his left! He instinctively dropped as a cyberfoot flew past his face, taking out a chunk of rebar in the wall. Dervish looked up to see the blind, elderly orc, covered in blood, gunshots, and burn marks, cyberblades bristling from every joint.

“KUYAAAAAA! HA! DIE, INGRATE!”

Dervish activated his thrusters and flew to the opposite side of the room.

“DUDE, SENSEI, IT'S ME!”

“I KNOW THAT, IDIOT. THIS IS A TEST. NOW FIGHT ME YOU PANSY BITCH.”

Following “when in Rome” sensibilities, Dervish promptly tore off his shirt, extended his own knuckle and elbow blades, and engaged in a no-holes-barred shank-fight with his master. That wasn't a typo. It wasn't no-holds-barred, it was no-holes-barred. As in they put holes in each other, and were both bleeding pretty badly by the end of it, but luckily they were both crazy cyber-and-bio-monsters so to them it was basically the equivalent of an MMA match. Hell, at certain points Dervish even really got into the stunting aspect, running up a wall to elbow-drop sensei with his armbldades.

Panting and coughing up blood, the crazy old blind orc patted Dervish on the back and congratulated him.

“Son, I have met many murderers in my life, and truly you are one of the most efficient. You are my prized--” he spat up a piece of meat--”You are my prized student. My best and brightest. Anything you want, and it's yours.”

Feeling sentimental with blood loss, Dervish burred,

“Well, I think you're pretty badass and you're kind of like a dad to me and I want to shank gangers to death with my fists when I'm bored so I think I'd like to live here instead of a shitty suburb if you don't mind.”

Sensei clapped, accidentally stabbing himself in the hand but not giving a fuck.

“I'll set up your bedroom.”

And that was how Dervish moved in with his crazy murderous Mexican surrogate dad.

2D showed up at home to find a very somber-looking Jozie, devoid of clown makeup or even her iconic orange-and-black Halloween threads. All things considered she could probably be mistaken for a respectable orc security guard or something.

This was how 2D knew he fucked up.

“I caught Arianna, and she's in her room,” said Jozie, “But 2D, we need to talk.”

2D winced.

“Serious relationship talk?”

“The seriousest.”

Jozie sat 2D down at their tasteful farmhouse coffee table.

“2D, you need to get out of the running biz. Tank was a lot bigger and a lot stronger than you, and the way you put it he up and died out of nowhere.”

“Yeah, but I'm smarter and. Um.”

Jozie glared at 2D until he closed his mouth.

“The lil child and I don't want to see that happen to you. You done fucked up bad telling Arianna about her brother, but I still love ya, so help me, and now you're the closest thing she's got to a dad. And you can't let her lose that.”

2D gulped,

“But baby, I--”

Jozie blurted out,

“I'm pregnant.”

2D came to again with his eyes tightly closed. A message popped up in his brain.

JOZIE: cum on 2d i kno ur awake

2D: Hi, I'm 2D! I can't come to the phone right now, so leave a message!

JOZIE: stop pretending to be unconshus 2d and open ur eyes

2D: Hi, I'm 2D! I can't come to the phone right now, so leave a message!

JOZIE: stop being stupid doodd

2D: ...How did you know?

JOZIE: ur eyes r closd but my phone says ur comm is online stupid

2D: Curse my sexy internet brain. Curse it.

2D opened his eyes to find Jozie and Arianna standing over him, having propped him up on the couch.

"I have reached a decision," said 2D, carefully, "and that is that I'm going legit. Lemme make a call. Well, hack a call."

Geppetto looked disinterestedly out at the Seattle sprawl. The Ares tower was tall, over a hundred stories, but in 2072 that wasn't a particularly fantastic feat, and the former Renraku arcology and current Aztechnology pyramid both loomed threateningly on the skyline. Still, Geppetto had to smile as he saw the network of stockyards and concrete blockhouses expanding from the tower's base, a veritable network of military design, research, and testing sites that was home to the largest PMC on Earth. It was a good place to make a deal.

"Damien!"

Bradford Nice, a youthful human handsome in that generic, otherwise boring way that aging Republican senators seem to get, swirled his red wine over the shoulder of his imported couch. He was dressed in a fancy Italian suit, with a tiny little American flag pin marring it over his breast, like a little patriotic zit.

"I'd offer you some of the red, but my sources tell me you're drinking a different kind of red these days. And what brings you to my--" he gestured to his lavish penthouse apartment--"humble abode?"

Geppetto hefted a small briefcase.

"Business. Shiawase weapons technology."

Nice's eyes lit up.

“My birthday was in two months, you know.”

Geppetto cracked the briefcase, revealing the glove. Nice looked at it quizzically.

“We're not in the market for 20Cen pop stars, Geppetto.”

Geppetto rolled his red eyes.

“Ha, ha. Notice how appreciative I am being of your pop culture references and jokes.”

“So what is it, Geppetto?”

“Universal combat spell focus. Uses some kind of mana weave, I don't know the tech behind it.”

Nice smiled.

“Oooh. Problem with that sort of thing is that it's hard to reverse engineer. We'd have to either spend a lot of time differentiating it from the Shiawase product, or cut our losses and basically admit we stole it. I can offer you 40,000.”

Geppetto sighed and began to close the box again.

“Please. This is an experimental prototype. My boys will need at least 80.”

Bradford put his hand on the briefcase.

“60. 15 for each of you. That's my final offer.”

Geppetto was reaching his hand forward to shake, when a little bomb-headed icon popped up in AR space between the two.

“2D,” Nice grimaced, “to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Drop it to 45. But I want a favor.”

Nice leaned forward and bent his fingers together, looking intently toward the little icon.

“Go on.”

“I'm dropping my share of this money, and my share of the Ares job. 35k in total. But I want in.”

Nice drawled,

“Define 'in.' “

“Into Ares. Into the family. I want to be an obnoxious conservative pundit flag-wearing high-paid

motherfucker.”

Nice popped a small smile.

“Oh? And aside from the money, what exactly is incentivizing me to do this? You're not exactly the shining model of a true blue American hero. From what I gather we could hire your street samurai for that.”

“I'm the dirtiest fucking black-hat hacker this side of Seattle. I don't mean shit in the real world, but online I'm a Chaos Engine member, a technomancer, a master of programming and mechanics. And I have rep. You put a white hat on me, not only am I going to be better than any shitty tenure career spiders you have in this entire compound, but people are going to KNOW not to mess with your systems. I broke into your traffic registry last month without breaking a sweat.”

Nice chortled before taking a swig of his wine, abandoning the pretense of culture.

“So you want to be a spider, do you?”

“Motherfucker, I want to be HEAD spider.”

Geppetto winced as Nice broke into a full belly laugh, spilling the remainder of his wine.

“Oh, the BALLS on you! The brass balls on this little nerd you've got, Geppetto!”

2D's icon stood fast.

“Tell you what, 2D, if you're as good as you say, you'll make good on the mission you're on right now. I'm not going to help you. Two-Times is entirely on your team. But you make it, and you have the position of Head Spider at the Ares compound. Ares Seattle will be your personal playground. BUT, this comes with caveats. One, is that Chaos Engine doesn't touch us. They do, and you will be held responsible. The second, is that you'll become a contracted lifer. You'll live, eat, sleep, all in-building. Your family will go to Ares schools, buy Ares clothes, and watch Ares TV. Your talents belong to us forever after the Two-Times job. Understood?”

2D's little icon held forward its tiny hand.

“Understood.”

There was an awkward moment as Nice's hand passed repeatedly through 2D's icon, and then he just pantomimed shaking a hand.

“I'll inform Human Resources that none of the prospectives are getting the Security Head position. And you, Geppetto, I'll have the money sent to you. Tell your hacker he has a lot of nerve for me.”

“Dude, I'm right here.”

“It was for emphasis. Get out of my commlink, 2D.”

In Snohomish, 2D told Jozie the news, resulting in a bout of incredibly rough impromptu clown sex.

The team reconvened two days later at the orders of Mr. Johnson, standing in front of a prop aircraft at the Ares airstrip.

“Gentlemen. Good to see you all up bright and early in the morning. You've been given access to Ares mechanical and armory facilities until 1800 hours, and then we're sending you off.”

Geppetto pulled his fedora down over his eyes, groaning at the sunlight.

“Where exactly are we going?”

Johnson smiled, a humorless, icy expression.

“Dr. Hermann Julianne is a talented medical mage, boys. That means that he was sent to a place where he could allay great human suffering. Get ready for a foray into Lagos.”

2D groaned.

“Aw, shit. That's worse than Japan.”

Bend scoffed.

“Yes. That is a LOT worse than Japan.”

For the uninitiated, Lagos is basically the Shadowrun equivalent of a very real contemporary nation.

By which I mean the Democratic Republic of the Congo. But with magic, monsters, and evil spirits. So, yes. A lot worse than Japan.

2D called home.

“Honey, tell Arianna and Trigger that I'm not coming back alive. If you can't find Trigger, he's probably in the fridge node at this time of morning. He's a little hazy on ephemeral concepts like death, so--”

Dervish slapped 2D upside the head.

“Stop being such a pansy. I'm not scared of Lagos.”

“You're six foot five and made of steel.”

“Still.”

The team split and binged on Armory purchases. 2D modded his stepvan for jungle travel with gigantic off-road tires and wobbly suspension, and bought two Steel Lynx bots that quickly became

known as “the war crime bots:” tac-cloaked, environmentally modified to operate in jungle locales, equipped with fuzzy logic decision-making adaptability programs and gigantic honking machine guns. These would be his escorts, and he would not settle for anything less.

Geppetto picked up an illusion focus. Black Magic foci are hard to come by what with the whole being illegal thing, but Ares was able to pillage a Knight Errant evidence bin on a triple homicide.

Bend got more wonderful spy toys and a sexy monofilament knife.

And Dervish...Dervish bought heavy milspec power armor.

Dervish had saved up a lot of money, you see.

Done up in Ares colors, Dervish couldn't resist quipping,

“I AM AN AMERICAN HERO.”

Dervish's legs made a GASHUNK, GASHUNK, GASHUNK noise and sent light spiderweb cracks up the pavement as he jogged around in the yard, testing out the suit. For shits and giggles, he sprinted through the live fire range, watching the bullets ping off of him.

“Dude,” 2D said, in disbelief, over the comms system in his red, white, and blue helmet, “subtlety.”

“We have Bend for that,” responded Dervish, before vaulting the training yard climbing wall in a single bound, leaving craters in the pavement on either side.

“Oh, I like this. I like this a lot.”

Geppetto adjusted his tie, looked at his watch, and glanced from his gigantic America-themed street samurai to his distraught hacker to his distraught hacker's half-invisible murderbots, to wherever it was that he'd last seen Bend before Bend disappeared entirely.

“Gentlemen, we do have a schedule to keep.”

He found an empty seat in the Osprey and turned around to sit, but heard a cough from behind him.

“Sorry. Sitting here.”

“God dammit, Bend.”

“This tacsuit upgrade ROCKS.”

>Now would be the time to look up the Far Cry 2 OST on youtube. It's basically all I played for the ambient session music in this arc.

The time was early the next morning when the Osprey touched down at the Peace Corps camp in the jungles of Lagos.

Dervish stomped off first, his power armor whirring into motion as he surveyed the area around the camp, scanning for hostiles.

“Showoff,” grumbled 2D, as he slouched into the compound, flanked by the two jungle-camo Tachikomas of Doom. He tapped the side of his head absently, clearing pop-ups and Nigerian email scams from his head. His van sat in the middle of the compound, having been airlifted in an hour prior.

Geppetto followed with all the dignity he could muster, brushing condensation off his suit jacket. Bend, goggles and face-mask on, followed him from behind, keeping up the rear.

Mr. Johnson approached, flanked by a nervous-looking Peace Corps doctor, a young Asian woman in a jumpsuit.

“Gentlemen, this is Doctor Myra Chu. She’ll give you the brief on Doctor Julianne.”

Chu hastily shook hands with Geppetto.

“Doctor Julianne has been kidnapped by Fanti Pirates. We need you to rescue him.”

2D groaned.

“Of COURSE it wouldn’t have been this easy.”

“The Fanti are experts at evading authorities and surveillance. You’d have to get in contact with them through the local warlords--they do business with most all of them. Please--we know you have business with Dr. Julianne, but we need him back. The camp’s falling apart without his magic and we can’t meet any of our quotas.”

Geppetto took the woman’s hand in his own.

“I swear to you, we will rescue this poor, innocent man. You have my word.”

Bend nodded approvingly. Geppetto continued,

“Dervish, you’re basically impervious. Scout out the road down to the Lagos safe zone. I don’t want any nasty surprises on the way down there.”

Clapping his helmet faceplate shut, Dervish saluted, and made his way towards one of the waiting taxis outside the camp.

An extremely sketchy-looking cab driver waved to Dervish.

“American! That is a nice suit of armor you have there! And a nice gun, as well! For this I will take you into town for half-price!”

It was a blatantly obvious trap.

“Deal,” said Dervish, grinning behind his helmet.

Dervish just remained sitting in the car as the driver veered off the road about halfway to the town of Lagos (the namesake of the region, itself a lawless frontier of Nigeria), bailed out, and yelled, “NOW!”

A couple of bullets hit Dervish's head. They didn't do anything. Dervish waited until the small-arms fire quieted down to step out of the taxi, whereupon his sensors detected 8 gunmen, having seemingly emptied their weapons, almost entirely pistols, into the cab. Admittedly, in this case “emptied” does not imply a full clip, since each of them had maybe three bullets apiece.

Dervish made a careful note of marking each of them on his tacsoft, and then slammed his fists together, creating sparks.

“I'm not even gonna waste my blades on you idiots.”

Using just his thrusters (souped up with additional thrusters from the armor), his gauntleted fists, and his very, very heavy legs, Dervish launched himself directly at the first assailant.

Many screams, snapping noises, and bodies flying dozens of feet into the air with things twisted in directions they weren't supposed to go later, and Dervish was advancing on the last fleeing gunman, chuckling loudly through his facemask speakers.

Dervish kept advancing casually forward, even as a small convoy of Hotspurs (read: jeeps/hummers) approached from further down the road. He had just managed to grab the last, scrambling man by the neck and was contemplating seeing if he could snap it one-handed when a warning rocket flew by his head, detonating somewhere in the tree line.

Dervish announced over the speakers in his armor,

“You have my attention.”

A beret-wearing African man with a series of wicked scars (some of which looked to be self-inflicted) stood up in the first hotspur. He announced, over a loudspeaker,

“I am General Sadami of the Lord's Army of Restoration. That man is one of my recruits. They failed their initiation. You will put him down.”

“I dunno, what can you give me?”

“Your life.”

A gunner loaded another RPG.

“I dunno. I was in the mood to make a deal.”

There was a pause.

“Go on.”

“We need to meet with the head of the Fanti Pirates.”

“And what is it you can offer us, American dog?”

Dervish grinned.

“Guns. Hundreds of them.”

2D spotted Dervish while he was driving down to Lagos. Dervish was sitting on an overturned pickup truck, playing Matrix games in his AR.

2D unlocked his rigger cocoon and looked out the window.

“Dervish, what's the deal?”

“Funny you should use that phrase. We gotta find a fixer in town. Someone who can tell us where there's a whole shitton of scrap metal. Maybe a fragged tank or something.”

2D glanced at his nanobot capsule.

“You didn't...?”

“Damn right I did. General Sadami of the whatever fucking Revolutionary Militia or something says he'll give us the Fanti pirates in exchange for 100 AKs.”

Geppetto smiled.

“That's good news, assuming he doesn't try to screw us. Stand up, we'll start with the pickup truck you're sitting on. Or what's left of it.”

20 minutes later and 12 AKs richer, the team continued the journey into town.

Lagos rose over the treeline, a metropolis of squalor. Once a small African town, it boomed over time to meet the needs of the rising mercenary population and the economy of blood they perpetuated. Shipping containers stacked haphazardly into makeshift towers, adorned with ladders and wooden framing. The team passed by not one, but three assaults in progress in the streets, usually by the mercenaries nominally in charge of keeping the peace on the hapless civilians and refugees. As the van rolled under a crashed airplane remade into a squatter refuge, a cheering teenager jumped onto the roof and rode for a few meters, before taking an awful spill off. No one moved to help him, but a gang of urchins did emerge from the nearest shantytown, looking eager to rob him blind.

“Okay, Bend was right,” 2D acknowledged. “This is, like, WAAAAAY worse than Japan.”

“I’m glad we agree,” sighed Bend.

Putting out a few feelers onto the ghetto, spotty-as-fuck local Matrix, 2D located an old colonial plantation house turned fixer bar a few miles in.

“Alright, gents. I think we have a hit.”

With a rev of the engine and a splatter of mud and loose rocks, they made for the center of town.

Kwame M'Bora did not expect the runners to enter his bar. Well, he expected runners to enter his bar in general. But the runners he was used to were hard-nosed South African ex-soldiers, or Congolese psychopaths, or the occasional professional type from a colonial power, on the run from someone or something. What he didn't expect were a gigantic America-themed mecha, a thin albino in a black suit, and another elf in tactical gear. Okay, the last one he could have guessed.

2D milled around in the van.

“Make it quick, guys. I don't want to have to sic the killer drones on these idiots outside who look like they're thinking of jacking me.”

Kwame stood. He had learned that all business was good business in Lagos, even weird business. Especially weird business.

“What is it that you need, my good sir?” he asked, experimentally, in English.

Geppetto responded, slotting a 2D-brand Igbo linguasoft,

“Scrap metal. Tons of it. All in one place if you can manage.”

Oh, and this WAS weird business.

“I can get you that,” said Kwame, grinning and showing off gold fillings, “I can get you that indeed. I just want one thing in return.”

The African pointed at Dervish.

“The big one. I want him for my bar. Security, see. Only as long as it takes you to get that scrap metal. No big deal.”

Geppetto eyed the Nigerian fixer.

“So you know where we can find this metal?”

“Yes. Do you agree to my price?”

Geppetto patted Dervish on the shoulder.

“I think we can handle being apart for a little while.”

Out in the car, 2D glared at the half-dozen sketchy-looking African men now pressed up against his windows, trying to get a peek inside through the polarized glass. He announced over speakers, in Igbo,

“IF YOU DO NOT GET AWAY FROM MY VAN I SWEAR TO GOD I WILL FILL YOU WITH SO MANY HOLES YOU WILL RESEMBLE THIS SHITTY BROWN MOON-LANDSCAPE YOU CALL A COUNTRY.”

Kwame looked at Geppetto.

“Your driver is a bit of a loose cannon. Tell him that I am putting on your commlink the coordinates to a broken tank. Aztechnology make, an import of a warlord-long dead. It should provide you all the metal you need.”

Geppetto nodded.

“Thank you, Kwame. We will be back for our samurai soon.”

As Geppetto and Bend returned to the van, Kwame turned to Dervish and asked, with a grin,

“How good are you at drinking?”

“Drinking?”

“Drinking.”

“I’m pretty goddamn good at drinking.”

“Prove it.”

Kwame handed Dervish a cup full of liquid.

“It’s black.”

“But it’s good shit.”

“It’s...BLACK.”

“Are you racist, American?”

“Booze isn’t supposed to be black.”

“Drink it, American pussy.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Are you a chicken?”

Kwame made absurd clucking noises.

“Fine, I’ll drink your shitty Nigeria war booze or whatever. But this better not do anything stupid.”

Dervish downed the drink.

He woke up in an underground cell, naked but for his pants.

“GOD DAMMIT.”

“Wakey-wakey, American.”

Kwame jingled keys from the other side of the cell door.

“That was a really stupid trick.”

“And yet, you fell for it.”

“What am I doing here? You don’t work for anyone who wants me dead, otherwise I would be.”

“Dead?” Kwame laughed. “No, I don’t want you dead.”

He opened the cell, revealing two trolls behind him with very large guns.

“I want you to compete in my secret underground pit fighting ring.”

Dervish gawked.

“You’re shitting me.”

“I...what?”

“American expression. You’re yanking my chain.”

“Well, yes, figuratively, but we have not chained you--”

“Pulling my leg?”

Kwame looked at Dervish, confused, and slowly shook his head.

“You’re kidding.”

Kwame coughed and picked up his villain monologue again.

“No, I most certainly am not. You will be the star of the show, a street fighter from AMERICA, land of the free! And you will lose in the second match, to a homegrown African champion, before engaging in a series of storyline grudge matches that the crowd will LOVE.”

“You could have just asked me.”

“Yes, but this way I do not have to pay you.”

Dervish nodded, rubbing his sore muscles.

“True, true. So when's the first fight?”

Kwame was again at a loss for words.

“You're not mad?”

“A little pissed, maybe. That booze was really shitty. Who am I fighting?”

“You'll need a name first.”

“Got a name,” said Dervish, reaching into his pocket and unfurling a certain Japanese-made American flag, before wrapping it around his face. “It's America-San.”

As Kwame walked Dervish down an underground hall towards the roar of an arena, Dervish asked,

“So there's no way I could negotiate for money?”

“Negotiating?” Kwame laughed and nodded to the trolls. “Gentlemen, would you please have this white devil taken out back, beaten and sodomized?”

“Woah. Point taken. No need to go all prison shower on me just yet.”

“Your first fight will be against General N'Gola. He's not actually a general. It's his first fight, too. We need you to lose.”

Dervish peeked out into the arena, at a cybered-up black man half his size and about a third his body muscle. Imposing, but not anything close to Dervish.

“You're kidding.”

“Nope, you have to lose. If it helps, we're not paying him anything, either.”

“You owe me for this, Kwame.”

“Beaten and sodomized.”

“You owe me nothing for this, Kwame.”

Dervish advanced into the ring, to the jeers of the crowd.

“Alright, let's get this over with.”

Dervish leapt into the ring and let the “General” go on the attack, blocking his punches effortlessly. He used the opportunity to make conversation with the other pit fighter.

“So they roped you into this, too?”

“A crooked street doc sold me out.”

“That sucks. Hey, wanna get a little revenge?”

“Not if it gets me killed.”

“Move your head right for a moment.”

Dervish jabbed at the N'Gola's face, doing a lot less damage than it looked and sounded like he was.

“Sorry about that. No, it won't get you killed. I need you to hit me with an uppercut, then pick me up and throw me at Kwame up in the stands. Think you can handle that?”

“Just got muscle toner in last month.”

Dervish bit his own tongue, and when N'Gola punched him under the jaw, he spat the resultant blood with a gory “PHWAH.” The crowd roared.

As N'Gola picked Dervish up and pitched him into the crowd, Dervish's skimmers briefly activated to right his course into a flying “accidental” headbutt that blasted Kwame clean through the back of his chair. Wheezing and holding his gut, Kwame growled,

“God dammit, American--”

“Sorry boss,” said Dervish, kipping back up, “this guy's a real fighter.”

Before Kwame could protest again, Dervish dove back into the ring, “flooring” N'Gola with an extremely-broadcasted clothesline maneuver.

Miles away, 2D pulled up to the side of the fragged tank, exactly where Kwame said it would be. It was surrounded on all sides by hills and underbrush.

“I'll deploy the drones to scout. One of you two guys, the nanobots are active. Just pour them on the tank and keep exposed metal away.”

Bend grabbed the canister.

“Alright. I’ve got this one. Geppetto, you wanna pop a few spirits? I’m not liking these hills.”

“Roger.”

Geppetto's eyes gleamed as he began a summoning ritual.

“Okay. Let's make this quick. Get in, get--”

Bend slid open the side door of the van, and there was a loud “POONK” from a nearby hilltop.

“--OUUUUUUUUT.”

Bend threw himself to the ground as a flying antipersonnel grenade airburst just next to the van, filling Geppetto with shrapnel and blowing out the windows. The van rocked wildly, nearly tipping over. Geppetto slumped to the floor, his healing factor slowly kicking in, as Bend rolled over in the mud, fumbling for his sidearm.

The explosion was immediately followed up by a deafening roar of automatic gunfire, the distinctive whir and clatter of high velocity assault rifles. Two of the van's large off-road tires popped outright, dropping the front of the vehicle with a CLANK. Bend buried himself deeper into the mud as bullets skimmed by him, grazing him by fractions of inches. As it turned out, this saved him when a flamethrower spell went off above him, nearly missing setting poor Geppetto on fire and washing over the van.

As 2D's drones circled around the hill to return fire, the enemy runners hopped into their own off-road vehicle, a Hotspur, and floored it. The attack had been brief and devastating. Under cover of his drones' gunfire, 2D made for the back of the van to apply first aid to Geppetto. Luckily for him, Geppetto's own healing had pushed most of the shrapnel out, and so the resultant procedure was mostly a patch-up and stimpak job.

Geppetto glanced up in the sky above the van and spotted a watcher spirit. Realizing he had to act quickly, he summoned up his fire spirit and sent it after the van, with instructions of “geek the mage or, failing that, cause as much damage as possible.”

The fire spirit flew off. A few moments later, its empathic link with Geppetto registered extreme, murderous satisfaction, and then silence as it popped.

“Okay,” rasped Geppetto. “I did some damage. What the fuck was that?”

“I’d recognize that sort of hit anywhere,” coughed Bend, picking himself up from the mud. “Those guys were like us. Shadowrunners. It’s in the timing.”

2D coughed.

“Brilliant. Someone hired runners to come after us. Who would know OH BALLS.”

Geppetto groaned, picking bits of broken glass out of his suit.

“Two-Times. He knows we're here. How did they hit us this early, though?”

2D thought back to when the sketchy thug-types were poking around the van.

“Oh, FUCK. Bend, Geppetto, search the outside of the van for trackers, maybe a satellite uplink. I'm going to check the van for viruses.”

2D dove the van's node to find a torn-up, viral morass, obstructing the van's start-up command and picking apart necessary functions.

“FUCK ME.”

Bend produced a miniaturized, tac-cloaked satlink.

“Right here. One of them bored a hole in the side of the van.”

“He's been hacking us the whole time! He's been relaying our position to a running team! But now we can't move! We're sitting ducks!”

Geppetto reached into the gear in the back of the van, looking for body armor.

“How long is it gonna take to get us moving again, 2D?”

“I'm gonna have to do a hard reset. Then I'm going to have to purge the virus manually.”

“English.”

“It's like digital fucking trench warfare. It's gonna take hours.”

Geppetto spat angrily.

“Fuck. Okay, Bend? We're going on shifts. The drones are keeping a perimeter. Get ultrasound up, keep connected. 2D, send your flyspy up to keep long-range watch.”

As 2D activated his sprites and agents in cleanup mode, sweeping the van's systems for viral code and taking bites out of it (which of course promptly regenerated, making the whole thing an arduous process), he leaned back to ask Geppetto,

“Do we actually know where Dervish is right now?”

Geppetto paused for a moment.

“FUCK! Backdoor on his eyes!”

2D put a hand to his head and saw...a brutal but fake cage fight against Dervish and a lanky, black elf. Dervish was really wailing on the elf, but 2D could see that it wasn't nearly as much damage as the elf was pretending to take.

“AMERICA-SAN DEFEATS THE LEADING CONTENDER!” shouted Kwame.

“He's...cage fighting...” said 2D, blankly.

“Is his comm on?”

“No.”

Geppetto sat down to think. 2D paused, motioned for Bend to come inside, and said, “Gather round, kids. I think I have an idea.”

2D explained his plan:

“Since Dervish is offline, it'll take them a little while to find him. And, assuming I'm not backdooring on his eyes at the time, they won't see a wireless signal. He'll appear to have gone completely underground.”

Geppetto made a circular motion with his hand.

“And this means...?”

“It's going to look like we don't know where he is. Especially since he obviously DIDN'T sign up for this. So they're going to try to hit him, since he's an easy target.”

Bend smiled.

“Aaaah. So we use Dervish as bait, surround the arena, and then geek the runners when they try to geek Dervish.”

Geppetto looked at Bend.

“I thought you were a pacifist.”

“Technically, this is self-defense. Or, I guess, Dervish-defense.”

2D nodded.

“That's the idea. Lemme go over the footage from my drones, see if we can't get a face on one of our mystery runners.”

Bend frowned.

“Is Dervish gonna like being used as bait like this, without knowing it?”

2D shrugged.

“Well, he'll live. Probably. Dude's made of steel.”

Geppetto nodded.

“Still, we're going to have to move our asses quick, given that the car is still supposedly hours away from movement. I'll stick some watcher spirits out there, but anything more might ruin the ambush. Your job, 2D, is to get us mobile as soon as possible. Bend and I can replace the front tires with spares if you need.”

2D bowed his head to drop into VR.

“Sounds good. If you think you can do that safely, do. Don't bother with the nanobots; all priority is on these mercs right now.”

With 2D personally helping his sprites and agents, the virus was cleared up fairly quickly; it only took about 30 minutes.

Of course, knowing Two-Times, 2D promptly delved the system and found another virus, wedged deeper in. This one took another 30 minutes to purge, and then he spent another 30 reconstructing the van's systems. Still, he technically remained short of the “hours” mark.

“Okay, we're mobi--”

2D winced as the feed from his flyspy was cut off and its burnt little husk spiraled off into the jungle.

“Fuck it, we need to MOVE.”

The team piled into the van and made for Lagos escorted by the killer drones, doing everything they could to lose any tails.

It was on the way back that 2D's search program got back to him.

“Hey, we got a facial match on one of these guys.”

One of the gunmen was a runner active on the German and Russian fixer networks, an orcish former French Foreign Legionnaire who went by...

“Jean Ducard,” groaned Geppetto. “John Doe. If we ID this guy, it's gonna have to be by facial recognition. And he's not especially distinctive, he's just a generic white orc street sammy.”

“Dervish is a generic white orc street sammy,” offered Bend.

2D countered,

“I'd lay off on 'generic.' He wears an American flag on his head.”

“True.”

Rather than pulling up to the fixer bar (or its arena basement), the team parked in one of the ubiquitous shipping containers a few blocks away. Geppetto cast an invisibility spell, Bend activated

his cloak, the murderbots also cloaked, and the two elves and two drones made for the building, weaving through the streets and trying to minimize sight range.

“Op is live,” 2D said, over the team's comms, “Op is live. I'll be running overwatch, robots and gentlemen.”

Upon entering the underground arena, Bend spider-crawled up the wall and onto the ceiling, pivoting torso-down to get a clear view of the entirety of the stands. Geppetto merged into the crowd, trying to stay hidden (and not dropping his invisibility), while the murderdrones moved to flank the exit.

Geppetto and Bend swiftly identified two obvious targets. On the West side of the room was the orc they'd ID'ed earlier, Jean Ducard. On the North side was a Russian-looking man that Geppetto quickly identified as an Eastern Orthodox Christian Theurge, a magician. Bend crawled towards the magician as Dervish--sorry--America-San was released into the arena below, to allow the limber elf his “revenge grudge match extreme.”

Dervish's synaptics (and a little bit of luck) kicked in just in time and he dropped to the floor as a shot barely missed his head, flying into the opposite wall. 2D quickly scanned the room through Bend's ultrasound sensors and recognized the gunman, a tac-cloaked infiltrator wielding a compact, high-caliber assault rifle.

The mage was also confirmed for an enemy when he gestured towards Dervish, and Dervish melted into some kind of immobile flesh-jelly, his cybereyes floating awkwardly alongside his cyberfeet, pants, and American flag in a greenish dude-pool.

“Bend! Get the infiltrator. Geppetto, geek the mage and see if you can undo whatever he just did to Dervish. Take out Ducard next.”

“Roger.”

“Roger.”

As Geppetto summoned up a Guardian spirit, a black knight that galloped into the center of the arena on a flaming steed, the crowd began to scream with the realization that this was probably not part of the show.

Bend (crawling steadily along the ceiling) and Geppetto (in the stands) watched in horror as the rival infiltrator reached for his belt, produced a grenade, and tossed it into the ring, causing it to land directly in the aforementioned dudepool. Luckily for Dervish, the rival fighter wasn't particularly interested in dying horribly, so he picked up the grenade and hucked it into the stands. There was a brief gaseous “pffft” before it exploded, coating about a quarter of the screaming crowd in white phosphorus and setting an entire corner of the room ablaze. Ducard tucked and rolled out of the blaze, cursing in French, while his Christian compatriot hurled stunbolts at the spirit in the ring to no avail.

With a cry of “BLOOD AND THUNDER” the black knight charged at the Christian Theurge with its wicked-looking bastard sword drawn. As the Theurge stumbled for an exit, it lopped his head off in one fell blow, laughing madly.

The crowd by this point was in utter chaos and also partially on fire. Geppetto was knocked flat by screaming patrons piling out the exits (including Kwame, who was booking it for his life), while Kwame's trolls pulled iron only to be put down at extreme close range by Ducard's HVAR. Bend dropped from the ceiling and carved a deep gash down the infiltrator's back, and the infiltrator stumbled forward with a yelp of pain and surprise.

Dervish resolidified with the death of the theurge, and sat up to find the arena on fire. Spotting a gunman killing the house guards (Dervish had not been briefed on Ducard), he rocketed up to the stands, deployed his elbow blades, and took the fight to the gun-sammy.

As 2D's murderdrones piled into the arena, bowling over fleeing civilians, Bend pulled his sidearm and engaged in a close-range firefight with the wounded infiltrator, with both parties scoring a few glancing shots on each other. Ignoring silly things like "crowds of people in the way," 2D ordered the drones to put down the enemy infiltrator, which they did, with gusto. 3 seconds and well over 30 bullets later, the infiltrator was a pair of disembodied legs and a chunky stain on the wall.

All the chaos, death, fire, and destruction, meanwhile, played perfect host to the free Nuclear Spirit that emerged from the ring in a burst of white light, horribly flash-burning those still stupid enough to be in the first few rows. Appearing as a humanoid figure composed of brilliant, sickly light, it began running its long fingers along the sides of the ring, slicing out swaths of carpentry and masonry in nuclear fire.

"Um, that wasn't part of the plan," observed 2D.

The crowd simply redoubled their attempts to flee, crawling up, over, and around 2D's drones.

"I think this is about time that we bailed on this op. Bend, latch on to one of the drones. I...wait, I have a sneaking suspicion."

Back in his shipping container, 2D carefully deployed his two Manhack-from-Half-Life-2-style Dragonfly minidrones around the front of the shipping container, and then had them circle around to the back of the van. Sure enough, there was another street samurai, a less-experienced-looking thug with a reinforced armor jacket and a heavy pistol, advancing on the van.

2D took the opportunity to direct the drones at his ankles.

6 seconds of horrible, horrible screaming later, the back of the van was coated in blood, and the Sammy was clutching the stumps where his feet used to be, wailing in pain. The van's bumper collided with his head as 2D pulled out of the shipping container.

"NICE TRY MOTHERFUCKERS. HA HA HA HA HA!"

Back inside the arena, Dervish was suffering from a critical dosage of bullets, and Ducard was staggering from a few well-placed shanks. Ducard had been schooled in a variant of Marine Corps Martial Arts, using his rifle as a melee and projectile weapon, and had been really going to town on Dervish, whereas Dervish had utilized his own Sangre y Acero training, found an opportunity to get under Ducard's gun and delivered a few good punches right into his side.

However, enough was enough, and a nuke spirit certainly counted as 'enough.' Dervish activated his thrusters, announced,

“You're fucked, dude,”

...and promptly boosted towards the exit, fleeing upwards to the surface.

This left just Geppetto, Ducard, the nuclear spirit, and a few writhing, burning bodies.

Acting on a flight of whimsy, Geppetto elected to remind his teammates and whoever was running overwatch for the enemy running team just why black magicians have such a nasty reputation.

Jean Ducard knew when a mission was hosed, and this mission was long hosed. The theurge and the ninja were all kinds of dead, and they'd lost the rigger earlier when the fire spirit torched him--now was the time to run. Picking up his assault rifle, he beat feet.

Or, rather, he would have, if he wasn't hovering with no traction a few feet above the ground.

Ducard scanned the crowd until he found the black mage, standing there in his suit and pointing at him, maintaining the spell. He tried to aim, to pull the trigger, but he was too disoriented, and it was like there was something in his mind keeping him from shooting...

He noticed he was floating, slowly, at a rate of inches, towards the center of the ring. And the mage was smiling. Glancing briefly towards the nuke spirit, he felt his eyeballs begin to tingle.

And then something in his head made him look.

And he screamed, and he screamed, and he screamed, as he died by inches as he was slowly moved closer and closer to the spirit, until there was nothing left but his constituent atoms, and the shadow of a man in inconceivable, incredible pain, etched forever into the opposite wall.

Geppetto made eye contact with the spirit (with his shades on, of course), and, despite himself, he smiled. He could almost feel the spirit smiling back. It had been a truly exquisite death, and it wasn't often he met anyone or anything else capable of appreciating that.

>...And that was basically the darkest scene in the campaign, yes.

Geppetto felt a burning sensation in his head, as a single, thin mark appeared over it. A sign of the nuclear spirit's pleasure? He didn't particularly know, but didn't care to find out. Tipping his hat, he exited the room and ran up the exit to see the van flanked by the murderbots, with the side door open and Bend and Dervish, fully geared-up and armored, inside.

“Let's go make some guns,” said Geppetto, with a sadistic grin.

They pulled out to the site of the fragged tank, and 2D put the nanobots to work. The team did a much better job of setting up a proper perimeter and firing lines, although it was for naught: nothing was coming their way.

2D tapped on the interface of the van, waiting as the tank slowly melted into guns. He noticed something in VR space, and locked on to it.

“This is weird. Something's interfacing with the van, but it's not an icon. Some kind of signal.”

2D followed the signal back, to something moving. Something moving fast in the skies over Lagos. Doing a scan, he identified...

“Predator missile.”

2D choked a little.

“PREDATOR MISSILE! RUN FOR THE TANK!”

Bend, Dervish, and Geppetto boggled, before sprinting for the partially-destroyed tank. 2D grabbed onto one of his Lynxes before the murderbots split, driving off into the jungle at full speed. But would it be enough?

The entire team looked upwards in terror as the missile finally came into view, a gleam in the sky getting closer, faster, the sound of its roaring jet finally hitting their ears, and as it descended, Geppetto reached into his pockets...

>“WHAT IS IT?” yelled Bend.

Geppetto screamed something, but Bend couldn't hear it.

“WHAT!?”

“The SPAGHETTI!” screamed Geppetto, “IT FELL OUT OF MY POCKETS!”

“HAVE YOU TRIED WALKING THE DINOSAUR?”

And then the missile hit and everyone died.

...and produced his summoning foci, calling up his guardian spirit as quickly as he could, to add just one more shield to the mix, in case that would make a difference.

The entire team hunkered down as the missile hit, rocking the tank and turning the stepvan into scrap.

Rolling off his Steel Lynx, 2D wept openly at the loss of such a reliable machine.

“God damn you, Two-Times. Why'd you have to go and do that?”

Over his comm, Dervish announced,

“Uh, we're all still alive, 2D.”

“I WASN'T TALKING ABOUT YOU. HAVE SOME HEART MAN.”

“Wait a minute. This isn't as bad as I thought it was.”

The team emerged from the tank as it fell apart into over a hundred AKs. Dervish took off his helmet and responded,

“I thought that you were just crying in tragic grief over the loss of your beloved van.”

“I was. But then I remembered that there's another car.”

Geppetto blinked.

“Another car?”

Bend asked, incredulously,

“Where!?”

“I'll be right back.”

Mounting his Lynx again like a horse, 2D took off over one of the hills.

Dervish turned to Geppetto and Bend.

“Do either of you dandelion-eaters have any idea what he's talking about?”

Both elves shrugged.

About 20 minutes later, 2D drove back over the hill in a scorched Tata Hotspur, with the driver's seat fried to a crisp and a torched skeleton tossed haphazardly into the shotgun seat.

“Idiots lost their rigger so they couldn't fix it. It was a routine replacement anyway.”

Geppetto took off his hat.

“I fucking love you right now, 2D.”

Loading the AKs into literal stacks in the back of the Hotspur, the team took what they could from the wreckage of the van: not much, considering most of the team's gear was on their persons, but the rigger cocoon, being effectively a black box for a dude, was not only salvageable but in fairly good shape. Being driven by their familiar black bubble thing again, the team piled into the utility vehicle for the trip back to General Sadami.

At Sadami's camp, the team kept their guard as teams of children unloaded the AKs. The “General” sat in a lawn chair, smoking a cigar and polishing a gold-plated assault rifle. Geppetto stepped out of the Hotspur to approach him.

“One hundred AKs and clips, as ordered. You have to tell us where the Fanti in the region are based, now.”

Sadami nodded amicably, although he didn't resist a chance to blow a smoke ring in Geppetto's face. Geppetto didn't blink.

“The Fanti are based on an old defunct oil rig off the coast of Asamando, the nation of walking death. North from the capitol, I'll give you the coordinates. I hope you have bite-proof clothes, my friends.”

Geppetto smiled.

“We have our insurance. Thank you for your help, General.”

As the team drove out of the compound, they heard Sadami beginning a speech over his megaphone about “exterminating the impure of Lagos and bringing punishment upon their women.”

Bend: “Shouldn't we be worried about this? Or at the very least guilty?”

Geppetto and 2D: “Naaaaah.”

Dervish remained silent, preferring not to comment.

Despite the very threatening nature of the title “Nation of Walking Death,” Asamando was actually probably the most civilized nation in Africa. It had paved streets, multi-story buildings with decent engineering, and even working vehicles and a business-based economy that took nuyen.

It just so happens that the entire nation was populated by flesh-eating zombies, and the entire food industry of the nation was based around importing corpses from conflict zones like Lagos.

“Uh huh,” said 2D.

“And you take a left on Ngumbe Drive,” directed John, 2D's ghoul doctor buddy.

“Ayep.”

“And then another left on second--you're sure that they don't have the gridlink up yet?”

“I'm sure, John. It's like a third-world nation out here.”

“That's not funny, 2D.”

“It was kind of funny.”

“Maybe a little. Keep straight for three or four blocks and you should hit the docks. You mentioned pirates: if you're dealing with the Fanti look out for Lubnana Kwesi. He's their leader, fancies himself ‘The Jackal King.’ “

“That's a retarded name,” 2D complained.

“Don't tell him that, 2D. Alright, you at the docks?”

“Yeah.”

“Ask for Goro. He's the best boatman I know out in that neck of the woods. He should see you through.”

“Cool, thanks, John.”

“Anything for a friend out in my home country.”

The team stepped out of the jeep adorned in protective gear. Dervish wore his armor, 2D and Bend wore thick clothes and respirators, and Geppetto was already infected and didn't give a fuck.

They found Goro the boatman in his speedboat, reading a print girly magazine. Although mostly bald, Goro wasn't particularly rotten, with only a little decomposition around his cheeks.

“Goro?”

“You're looking at him, American.”

“How much to get out to the Fanti oil rig?”

“That's a dangerous route.”

“Mmm.”

“I'm going to need at least 150 nuyen. Maybe 200.”

Geppetto stifled a chuckle mostly successfully.

“That's...that's pretty steep. I suppose we'll have to go by that price.”

2D scrolled text across everyone's feeds that read “I LOVE THIRD WORLD ECONOMIES”

Goro the boatman pulled on a pair of goggles and stepped to the front of his speedboat.

“By all means, gentlemen. Get in, get in.”

Piling into the back of the speedboat, the team set out to find the Fanti pirates and “save” Doctor Hermann Julienne.

Chapter 9: Pimp Suits, Wedding Bells, And the End Of the Two-Times Arc

The boat pulled up alongside the team's own. In it were four men. Three of them wore shemaghs and rags, and were carrying small arms. The fourth, the obvious leader, was every Horizon stereotype of the scary black man known to man. He wore a military uniform of indistinguishable make, with the arms torn off, revealing massive bronzed biceps. His face was unshorn and covered in curly black hair. He wore huge aviator sunglasses, and surveyed the team with a slight, dismissive snarl.

"White men. Explain yourselves."

Geppetto adjusted his tie, stood up, and announced impartially,

"We wish to do business with the Jackal King."

The lieutenant growled.

"And on whose behalf do you speak?"

"We are Americans, but we come recommended from Ares and General Sadami."

"And what is it that you have to offer?"

"Money. Money and guns."

The lieutenant seemed to consider this, and nodded slowly.

"All who wish to speak with the exalted Jackal King will come on this boat, with us. The dead man will take his boat no further."

Goro nodded.

Geppetto gestured to Bend and Dervish.

"They'll come as my security. 2D, stay in the boat. Keep your rotodrones and dragonflies aloft, and dismantle anyone who tries to double-cross us. We'll take another boat back and switch you out with Bend when we need you to verify Julianne's code."

"I hear yah. Diving now."

2D lay back in the speedboat, reaching into his backpack for sunblock and his water canteen. His "I'm not racist, I hate everyone equally" t-shirt was already soaked in nerd-sweat.

The lieutenant gestured for the team to cross into his boat. Although it bowed dangerously when Dervish stepped in, the boat held true.

Dervish, Geppetto, and Bend were treated to a montage of human suffering as they were led through the Fanti's floating kingdom. Dozens of African civilians, perhaps volunteers, perhaps kidnapped labor, perhaps a mix of the two, lay and sat in various states of starvation-induced languor across mountains of sharp, hot scrap metal. Gunshots resounded at the team approached the stairs up into the

rig proper, and intensified until they reached one of the exterior catwalks. A loud, angry man was drilling a dozen small children to use their sidearms properly as they shot at rough scrap facsimiles of Nigerian provisional government soldiers. One scrap mannequin actually wore a torn uniform, stained with old blood. The drill instructor repeated the mantra,

“The government will show no mercy! Neither will you! Kill him! Kill him before he kills you!”

Geppetto stifled an absurdist smile. The smell of gunsmoke, sweat, and cocaine rang triumphantly through his nostrils. For all of the good looks and kindness that the Evo commercials would have you believe constituted the world, this was the real face of humanity. Ignorant, cruel, poor, disease-ridden, with nothing left to it but violence.

Bend just looked deeply, deeply uncomfortable as they neared the top of the defunct oil rig, nearing the foreman’s office; the court of the Jackal King.

Compared to his minions, the Jackal King lived in utter excess. His corroded metal walls were done up with garish purple wallpaper. Gold plating covered utterly superfluous objects such as a commlink and a set of ceramic body armor. A fancy heart-shaped bed with curtains had been imported, like some kind of tacky harlequin romance fixture.

Lubnana Kwesi, the Jackal King, sat on his plastic golden throne, having evidently just received very vigorous oral sex from one of the many women surrounding him, if his demeanor was anything to go by. He wore a leopard-print pimp suit, ugly diamond-studded bling, and AR shades of the “Kanye” variety. He looked healthy or even a little bit broad, with none of the malnourishment of his soldiers.

Standing in the back of the room was a harsh-looking German man in a Peace Corps uniform, looking drained. The medical set at his side was barely depleted, having evidently been claimed by the King, rather than distributed to his dying people.

“Americans!”

Kwesi laughed loudly from his chair, exuding the sort of childish glee that only a war criminal can when presented with new toys.

“And what do you bring me today?”

Geppetto stood in front of the Jackal King.

“Guns and money. Whatever you desire, sir. We only ask that the Peace Corps doctor return with us.”

Julienne turned his head toward Geppetto, attention piqued. Kwesi scoffed.

“The doctor is invaluable. He treats me when I become sick, and has many drugs, and the ability to make more. I will need many rifles for him. And much money.”

“Please, King, be reasonable. If you can fathom letting him go, then let us know your price.”

Kwesi growled and tapped himself on the knee. He held an arm out to the side and a bodyguard

handed him a diamond-tipped cane, which he began to fiddle with. Eventually he reached his decision.

“AKs. At least five. And one thousand of your American dollars. And your tie. Give me your tie.”

Geppetto stared.

“This is a Sicilian tie.”

“No tie, no deal.”

Dervish and Bend both looked expectantly at Geppetto, and he glared back at them out of spite. Eventually, with a huff, he began to undo his tie.

“I bought this tie SPECIFICALLY to go with this suit. Also, we’ll have your AKs and money to you as soon as we retrieve our hacker. We need to ask Dr. Julianne for something before we ‘rescue’ him.”

Julienne chuckled and spoke up.

“Something told me you weren’t doing this out of the goodness of your heart.”

“Of course not,” said Geppetto, with a cruel smile, as he tossed his tie to Kwesi, “We’re Americans.”

Julienne stepped forward.

“And what is it that you need before I can go back to helping people who truly need me?”

“The third satellite code to locate Two-Times’ bunker.”

Julienne raised his eyebrows, mildly surprised.

“Ah ha. So you were the reason that the German running team shipped in. I imagine there’s not much left of them, is there?”

“Burned to a crisp, to a man.”

“Well, I don’t intend to join them.” Julianne reached into his pocket and produced a small data stick. “Hand this to your hacker.”

Fifteen minutes later, 2D stumbled into the room, breathing heavily with five AK-47s tied to his back.

“Oh my god... guys... there are so many stairs on these things... so many stairs. And these guns are so heavy. Hold up, I gotta catch my breath.”

“We have the third satellite code, 2D.”

2D recovered in half a breath, immediately dropped the AKs on the floor, and lunged for the

datastick.

“Oh yeah fucking SCORE!”

2D jacked the datastick in and began thrusting wildly as his brain coordinated three satellite datastreams simultaneously, each bearing a complex encryption code applying to the other two. He slammed through barriers in dataspace bodily, feeling the pressure on his lungs. It was like fucking an earthquake. It was like flying up a waterfall dick-first. It was like being God, if God was on Viagra.

“OH SHIT YEAAAAHHHHNNNNNNNNNG.”

With a thud, 2D soiled his shorts for the third and final time and slammed to the floor with a CLANG. Julianne, the Jackal King, and the African soldiers all instinctively stepped back.

Dervish: “I think that one may have just killed him.”

Bend: “Couldn’t we have, like, went back to the boat first?”

“I FOUND HIM,” screamed 2D, maniacally, as he scrambled onto his elbows and knees. “I FOUND THE FUCKER!”

After a sobering moment of silence, he continued, “But you’re not going to like where the bunker is.” Geppetto almost resisted the masochistic urge to ask, but asked anyway.

“And that is...?”

“Bogota. Bogota, Aztlan.”

Julienne stroked his chin.

“Huh. I always figured on Greenland or something.”

Dervish brought up the minor, but pressing issue:

“Um. Bogota is an active warzone.”

2D gulped.

“Yeah. I know.”

The team stood awkwardly at the shipping terminal of Nyamkopon International Airport, waiting for the private transport Ares was sending to airdrop them into Bogota. Shipping workers, ghouls and other Infected to a man (although most of them wore hazard suits, to avoid scaring off their international and uninfected visitors) drove past the Shadowrunners in forklifts, carrying refrigerated coffins ambiguously labeled “MEAT.” 2D attempted to leave. Dervish grabbed him by the collar and dragged him back. This was approximately the third time.

Geppetto, who had been resting his eyes and his abused, sunbitten vampire skin, tipped his hat up to look at his hacker.

“2D, stop trying to run away.”

“You can’t make me.”

“I absolutely can. As can Dervish.”

“We’ll be dropped a few miles away from the bunker, 2D. We probably won’t even run afoul of Aztechnology.”

“I hear that if the jaguar warriors capture you, they rape you to death. With jaguar penises.”

Bend, sitting on a meat container and sharpening his knife, coughed involuntarily. Geppetto eyed 2D in disbelief.

“Where the fuck did you hear that?”

“4chan.”

“I figured as much. Look, I think our plane is coming in now.”

As the tilt-rotor transport decelerated overhead and began to settle down, Dervish went on a hunch, and called up Sensei.

“Dervish! Glad I caught you, son. Don’t come home. A bunch of feral goblins burrowed up through the basement. Luckily the sludge spirit on the second floor has started trying to drown them, but the building’s gonna smell like shit for weeks. I grabbed my horse and cart, I’m clearing out for a few days.”

“You have a horse and cart?”

“Well, something resemblin’ a horse and cart, anyway. What can I do you for?”

“Sensei, I’m going to Bogota.”

“Kill some Azzies for me, boy. Make me proud!”

“Well, about that. I’m not signing up militarily. I’m going there on a shadowrun.”

“Oh? And what do you need?”

“I need to get into contact with someone who can get us across the city. We’re going to be airdropped at the South end, but the place we need to get to is in the North. Azzie territory. Our pilot won’t go over the Azzie ground, he’ll get shot down since he runs with Ares. You got anyone? A resistance cell, maybe? I know you fought down there.”

Sensei growled into his commlink.

“Oh, yeah. I got someone. Don’t trust her for a moment, though. She’s a heartless bitch of the worst variety. I regret ever associating with her. Just pay her, stick close, get across the city, and DON’T make any lasting deals with her. She’ll make you rue that decision for the rest of your life.”

Dervish asked, timidly (or at least as timidly as a giant street sam can ask a question),

“So you don’t have anyone who won’t fuck us in the ass?”

“I’m afraid not, son. You find some resistance fighters, and you ask for Mariella Rodriguez. Tell her that El Caballo vouches for you.”

“This is awfully mysterious, Sensei.”

“So’s life. Tell Mariella to rot in hell for me.”

The team dropped in Amazonian Resistance territory at around 0400 hours. Dervish slammed down first, Iron-Man style, followed by 2D flanked by his drones, then Geppetto, and finally Bend, who had served as an actual paratrooper once upon a time. 2D and Geppetto both made asses of themselves on landing, but at least 2D remembered to pack his boots. Geppetto landed hard on his knees in a puddle of mud, ruining his slacks and loafers.

“Well, that was quick.”

Dervish grabbed him by the shoulders, lifted him, and made for a collapsed office building nearby.

“No time to whine about your suit. We’re in an active warzone now. That means you and 2D delegate to Bend. He’s fought the Azzies before.”

Bend decloaked in the cover of the building.

“Yeah, and they’re dirty bastards. I’m torn between the pain of having to fight these guys again and the happiness that I might get a chance to put another Azzie down.”

2D blinked at Bend.

“That’s, um. That’s a bit of a change of demeanor, Bend.”

“Back in the day, they captured the woman I loved because I fucked up a sabotage run, left a trail. You don’t want to know what they do to their prisoners. I say kill ‘em all.”

There was an awkward pause as Bend peered out a window on the opposite side of the building, then gestured for the team to advance. Gunfire rattled in the distance.

“Intel says that this is one of the traveled resistance routes, but since that relies on satfootage, the Azzies probably already know. Which in turn leads me to believe that the route’s fake, and it’s probably crawling with Azzies. Hold on, I have a hunch.”

The team followed Bend as he stalked over to the basement door, half-buried under rubble. “I thought so. Freshly disturbed. Classic resistance maneuver. Literally and figuratively underground.”

Bend cracked the door, only to duck as a clip of AK fire poured through it. The team hit the dirt and 2D’s drones armed as laser sights became visible through the fresh bullet holes in the door. A voice from behind the door called,

“Aztecas! Renden o mueren!”

Bend shouted back,

“No nos disparen! Somos amigos del Caballo!”

There was a brief pause and the gunsmoke dispersed. The lasers lowered.

“Americanos?”

“Si!”

The door opened and the team saw a small squad of Hispanic men wearing roughshod combat gear and wielding assault rifles. One man had leonine features, an obvious shapeshifter, some sort of jungle cat displaced from his home. Another was covered in fetishes, a native magician. The man at the front, a soldier with a cyberarm and dermal deposits, offered a hand to Bend.

“Any friends of the Stallion are friends of ours, as are the Americans who bring us guns and tanks to fight the Aztecs. What is your business here?”

Geppetto stood and spoke.

“We’re looking for Mariella Rodriguez.”

The rebel smiled.

“Come with me. I imagine she’ll want to know how four Americans ended up here, too.”

Mariella Rodriguez was a harsh-looking woman. Her hair was cut short, in a man’s style. She smoked a Cuban cigar, a minor luxury that clashed with her otherwise-stoic appearance. Her ceramic combat armor, an Ares set that doubtless accidentally fell out of a plane (Ares is a principled corporation that would NEVER prolong a conflict for arms sales, you see), was loaded down with additional padding of some sort of tanned hide. She had no less than four sidearms on her person, to say nothing of a prodigious amount of knives. The team found Mariella at an impromptu desk deep in the tunnels, next to a radio, marking spots on a map.

“No, Hernan, don’t take that route, it’s not safe. They cut off radio to Charlie sector, we need to send the scouts in first. Pick up a rigger or two, put them on disposal. And don’t check any corpses! Felipe, grab one of the mobile nexuses and pick up the 3rd mechanized as an escort. We need to get you out of the jammer zone to report back to Metr pole. For the love of Dios, remember the codes this time, I don’t want more reports of friendly fire.”

The rebel leading the team entered the room.

“Ahem. Capitan, sir-“

“Capitan, MA’AM!” Mariella whirled around to glare at the team. “And who are these gringos!? Do we invite our spies in now?”

“These are friends of El Caballo, ma’am.”

Mariella’s expression brightened to one of cheery hostility as opposed to the normal kind of hostility.

“Oh, El Caballo sends you? Well let him know that he is a coward and an asshole for running away from this conflict like a bitch with his tail in between his legs! Pinche Azteca motherfucker!”

Dervish grimaced.

“Hey! Sensei may be Aztec by blood, but he’s got every right to hate them! They made him into a pitfighter against his will!”

Mariella stared down Dervish.

“And what are you supposed to be? His advocate? His lawyer?”

“His student, ma’am.”

Geppetto stepped in at this point.

“Look, Captain Rodriguez. We just need to get to the other end of the front. We’re independent operatives, and in need of an escort. We can pull our weight in a military setting; in fact, we have more experience in danger than most soldiers. Do you have an in for us or not?”

Mariella spat on the ground.

“Sure, we got a troop movement heading that way later tonight. You got this chance to prove yourself, gringo, and I only take you in at all because El Caballo vouches for you. ONLY because of that man.”

2D squinted.

“Lady, what is it with you and Dervish’s sensei? You hate him but you trust him?”

Mariella held up a fist. Around one finger was a gold ring.

“Of course I trust him! Jose is my dickless coward husband! He’s supposed to be here with me on the front lines butchering Azzies but instead he runs off on some hermit kick! Motherfucker!”

The whole team stared for a moment.

“What are you looking at, gringos!?”

Geppetto began to back out of the room.

“Nothing, ma’am. We’ll get ready to head out.”

“Wait,” said 2D. “I got my rigger cocoon shipped out here, and like hell am I walking that whole distance. I’m an out of shape channer without a vehicle; a sitting duck. You need to give me a tank, or something.”

“This is so retarded. I feel like an idiot.”

“Stop complaining, 2D, at least you got a vehicle,” growled Dervish, as he helped 2D install his rigger cocoon in a beaten-up forklift.

“Yeah. A vehicle that handles like a shopping cart and will tip over if a 5-year-old pushes it.”

“2D, did you see the look on Captain Rodriguez’ face? I was surprised she didn’t shoot you in the head.”

“I guess it’s just my winning personality.”

“Yeah, that’s it. Hold up, I think it’s bolted in properly now. Lemme get inside.” 2D climbed into his cocoon. “How do I look?”

“Like a metal burrito with walrus teeth and wheels.”

“Fuck you.”

The team donned their night vision and the heaviest combat armor they could wear (which didn’t amount to much more than bulletproof vests and pads for Geppetto and 2D, but 2D was inside his cocoon), picked up some explosives for utility, and set out in the morning with a platoon of about 20 troops (many of them shifters) and a security hacker carrying a small mobile nexus as a backpack. 2D was escorted by every drone he could muster, consisting of the warcrime bots, his two dragonflies, and a rotodrone armed with a grenade launcher. They moved swiftly through Zona Centrico, keeping cloaks and maintained invisibility spells up as long as they could, making for Zona Norte.

It was the security hacker who called out first,

“Drone strike! Andale!”

Everyone split for the rubble as two heavily-armored Steel Lynxes rolled down the opposite end of the street. Geppetto, Bend, and Dervish each went to different parts of the surrounding buildings, while 2D turned his forklift into a garage. To his glee, 2D found that the lynxes were networked, and immediately began hacking one of them as an Amazonian rocket crippled the other.

“Targets neutralized,” yelled the hacker as 2D handed control of the other Lynx to his nexus, and the first Lynx sank under a hail of armor-piercing bullets, “move up! The Azzies know we’ve come out to play now!”

The platoon raced through Zona Norte at a run, ducking through alleyways whenever possible. Radar picked up Aztecs moving across the attack site, moving in on the platoon’s tail.

As the group hit a fire station near the border fence into the jungle, the lieutenant in charge of the operation, a jaguar shifter, gestured for the team to go through the fence and continue northwest.

“You got two routes you can take,” he yelled, over the sound of IEDs going off to the south, “the West or the East. East takes you closer to Aztec supply lines, they got a mobile bunker out there. West is mostly jungle, bad place to get ambushed. Either way’ll get you to the coordinates you’re looking for, but I don’t envy you. Stay strong!”

With that, he armed his underbarrel grenade launcher and began heading for the upstairs. “Everyone arm explosives or armor-piercers! First wave is gonna be armor, so don’t hold anything back! Contact in two minutes!”

Not wanting to be a part of the clusterfuck that was doubtless about to happen, 2D plowed his forklift through the fence and the rest of the team followed.

After a quick, terse discussion, the team ultimately decided on taking the jungle route to the west. Sensors of all kinds, including ultrasound, radar, and thermo, were among the team’s strong suits, so they figured that it would be smarter to face a hypothetical ambush with a heads-up instead of facing the Aztecs on their front lines.

As it turned out, it wasn’t much of an ambush, as a scouting Bend had to dive into the underbrush to avoid the notice of six skimmer-hovering mercs in full milspec, armed to the teeth and inbound directly for the team. Bend hit his subvocal.

“Incoming! Everyone grab cover!”

Dervish booted up all of his own armor’s passive systems.

“Roger that. Everyone hold, prepare to fire.”

The first merc over the ridge took a dozen APDS shotgun shells, as Dervish set his autoshotgun to “rock and roll” and emptied the clip. The merc’s skimmer disks sputtered and then gave out entirely, and he bounced and rolled across the ground, trailing loop-de-loops of blood. He eventually came to rest at the foot of 2D’s forklift, looking like a crumpled tin can full of tomato soup that has been

jabbed repeatedly with a nail.

“Hoo-rah! AMERICA!”

With a “WHUMPH!” Dervish launched over the hill, extending his blades out of the slots in his armor and launching off the ground in a power-armored hulkjump to engage the enemy directly.

The merc that Dervish was targeting only survived because he held his gun, a light machine gun, above his head as Dervish came down. The gun dented, then caved, then fell apart in three pieces as Dervish’s blades sliced clean through it. The merc, extended two katar-like blades out of his armor and lunged for Dervish, countering Dervish’s blows with his wrists.

There was an immensely loud KABLAM and a huge muzzle flash, and a tree behind Dervish split clean in two, like a weed being pulled. Leaves all over the clearing clouded the air, disturbed either by the falling tree or the shockwave from the massive gunshot. 2D yelled into the comm,

“Dicks! That’s an anti-tank gun! Geppetto, you got this one?”

As 2D’s drones rolled past him and opened up on the approaching mercenaries, forcing many of them to drop their skimmers and take cover behind the trees, Geppetto wormed his way through the underbrush towards where the muzzle flash had appeared.

“Almost. Stand by, 2D.”

Bend, on the other side of the field of battle, armed the heavy taser at his belt and began climbing a tree, working his way towards the mercs.

There was another KABLAM from the anti-tank rifle as one of the mercs exploded through a tree, a fist-sized hole punched through his chest. Bits of bone and rib tore like shrapnel through the surrounding foliage. Geppetto chuckled darkly into the comm.

“Mine now. Four still alive.”

With a “WHUNK,” Dervish slammed his fist blade through the chest plating of the merc he was fighting. The merc recoiled and dropped to the ground, clutching his chest.

“Ha! Got you, you FUUUAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Dervish convulsed violently and his visor clouded with blood as he rattled inside his suit from severe nerve damage, dropping to the ground.

Geppetto called to 2D and Bend,

“Powerbolt! The one at the back’s a mage!”

2D punched a few buttons in AR.

“Dervish, if you can hear me, stay down! Everyone else, drop for cover!”

The rotodrone deployed off the top of the forklift and quickly ascended to above the battlefield. Cross-referencing footage from the team's various sensors, it quickly targeted the mage. From above the battlefield, there was a THOOMP THOOMP THOOMP noise.

Everything went to hell as the frag grenades detonated, turning the mage into scrap metal and paste and sending another merc next to him sprawling. Dervish and the merc he had been fighting rolled violently, both caught slightly in the blast. Dervish recovered first, stumbled to his hands and knees, and slammed his elbow blade through the faceplate of the fallen merc with a loud crunch.

Bend worked his way to behind the slightly-singed anti-tank goon, jammed his taser into the vents in the back of his power armor, and pulled the trigger. Geppetto's puppet convulsed spasmodically as the metal interior conducted the electricity, and then crumpled into a heap at the foot of the tree.

As the last merc stood, reeling from the explosion, the murderdrones opened fire, putting him down for good in a hail of ballistics that tore up the foliage for meters behind him.

The rotodrone registered an incoming missile mere moments before it exploded out of the sky, its flaming parts dropping onto the battlefield.

“SHIT! MOVE!”

2D floored his forklift forward, tilting dangerously as he weaved through the foliage. The rest of the team scrambled to their feet and tried to keep up the pace behind him. Dervish stumbled, slightly the worse for wear.

As the rotodrone crashed into the foliage behind them, the 3 grenades left in the launcher and the 6 in its ammo box all cooked off, turning the clearing into a maelstrom of fire and shrapnel. The forklift bounced off the ground as the three other team members all involuntarily flew off their feet, knocked flat by the shockwave.

There was a long pause as the crackling of fire began to fill the smoky clearing. 2D asked, experimentally,

“Anyone alive?”

Bend stood up a little ahead of him.

“Yeah. I'm fine. I think Geppetto's tending to Dervish right now. What was that?”

“The death of a very, very explosive drone. How are you two doing? That missile might mean the Azzies are on our tail, and I don't wanna contend with both Two-Times' mercs and a bunch of pissed-off Mexicans.”

Dervish walked towards the forklift with Geppetto in tow, his helmet off and a fresh bandage applied to his head.

“Doing okay. Had to take a little while to patch ourselves up after the explosion. The bunker should only be another few miles up.”

“Well, what are you waiting for!? Let’s go!”

“Easy for you to say, forklift-boy.”

The team drove for a few more minutes, with Bend once again scouting ahead in his tacsuit. Bend set his goggles to record, and then forwarded the footage to 2D to show the rest of the team.

“Um, guys? This is a problem.”

Two-Times’ bunker was on top of a cleared hill, with mage-manned firing ports overlooking each hillside in every direction. Surrounding it was a veritable army of mercs who had set up camp, with snipers in four towers around the bunker and four patrolling Crimson Samurai guard drones armed with tank guns.

“Jesus tittytucking Christ,” remarked 2D, in disbelief. “It’s like a medieval castle.”

The team set up camp in the jungle to plan. I’ll skip over most of the planning, because frankly it took hours to come up with the plan that the team eventually went with. Rather, I’ll just skip to the actual execution of said plan and then go from there.

The guards sighted a vehicle as it rolled through the fence around the compound. Was it a drone? A tank?

It was a forklift with a rigger cocoon. The guards popped off a few shots lazily, but the forklift was a durable machine, even if it was pathetic as it slowly limped towards the bunker. Bored, the security rigger finally directed the Crimson Samurai drones to finish it off as it crept a little too close to the bunker for comfort.

The Crimson Samurai didn’t fire. The rigger tried again, then checked the signal.

...Jammed.

There was an earth-shattering explosion as the forklift rammed the side of the bunker and then opened on the side facing the bunker, revealing a man-sized blob of plastic explosive studded with grenades. A large hole caved into the side of the bunker and the merc mages inside toasted, dying instantly. Smartjammer held aloft, Bend directed for the team to follow him, and with a POW, Geppetto took out the relevant sniper on the hole’s side of the compound before dropping into invisibility. Holding 2D like a damsel in distress, Dervish jetted into the open hole, sliding into the bunker, followed by the Steel Lynx drones, which immediately spun to face the exits and wound up their miniguns.

The team was inside the bunker, surrounded by hostile mercenaries and vastly outnumbered. The only way to go by this point was down. The team descended to an iron door as the drones began firing at the mercenaries. Bend took the opportunity to grab a fallen keycard. With one swipe, they were in.

The first room seemed empty, save for a single hatch in the center that looked like it led down. However, as they edged into the room, Geppetto went on a hunch and assensed.

Above them, in cages presumably triggered by walking fully into the room, were drop bears, vicious magical koalas used as security paracritters. They looked hungry.

“Okay, here’s how it goes,” said Geppetto, very lightly. “Bend and I cloak and get the hatch. Only then do you dash in, and we all jump down. We good?”

The rest of the team gulped and nodded.

Geppetto and Bend rushed forward and threw open the hatch. Through a rain of murderous, screeching koalas, Dervish and 2D jumped down the hole into the next room, followed almost immediately thereafter by Geppetto and Bend. Geppetto, 2D, and Dervish all landed in a gigantic pile, while Bend flipped the hatch shut. There were loud raking sounds as the drop bears began to work on the steel of the hatch.

“That won’t last for too long, so we’d best keep going down,” noted Bend.

The second room was another featureless tunnel like the first, with yet another hatch. This time, though, it was 2D who stopped the team.

“Look at where we are. We’re in a tiny box of a room. You know what would fuck us now and leave no survivors? A bomb.”

2D took Bend’s power drill and, operating in hackvision(tm), drilled through a portion of the second hatch to uncover a small red patch of surface.

“As I suspected. This is amateur hour, really. Spoken as a former terrorist.”

With careful work over the next few minutes, 2D disarmed the bomb, although the second hatch looked like Swiss cheese by the time he was done with it. The scratching continued from above.

“No worries, I totally just saved all of us from dying horribly. Let’s see what the next level of this ridiculous kill-bunker holds.”

The third room was considerably larger than the first two, with a blast door in back and some kind of large vehicle in the center. It was dark as shit, and had sloped walls almost like...

2D moaned, as floodlights activated on either side of the room, “An arena!”

The ‘large vehicle’ in the center was a Mitsuhama Chinpira, a three-and-a-half-meter tall anthropoid walker drone with four arms, each armed with a chaingun. Two missile banks protruded from its shoulders.

“THIS IS FUCKING RIDICULOUS,” screamed 2D, as he booked it for the opposite end of the room, deploying his dragonfly drones.

The rest of the team was just content to scream other garbled curses as they split and the drone started firing.

2D was the first to go down, as a bullet swept his leg out from under him. He screeched in pain as it blasted a huge chunk of meat out of his calf, sending him sprawling. He cried out, to his dragonflies,

“The eyes! Go for the eyes!”

Its arms swung wildly to grasp him, smashing one of 2D’s dragonflies out of the air while the second carved a deep gash through its primary cameras. Blinded, it resorted to sonar, but was distracted by the loud noises already filling the space. It began firing wildly at all the walls, giving the team an opportunity to slide a few EMP grenades directly under it.

With a “FOOM” the Chinpira stopped moving, sparking wildly from multiple ports. Dervish jumped off of it, his own armor reacting adversely.

2D stumbled to his feet, producing a medkit from his backpack and doing what little he could to patch his mangled leg together, as Geppetto issued more comprehensive magical healing.

“I swear, if this next room has ninjas or something I’m going to kill myself.”

The next room had two things, and neither of them were ninjas.

They were an adorable Scottie dog, and a tridscreen, from which a very-satisfied looking man beamed. Two-Times the hacker was African-American, with a youthful face that seemed positively built for the cruel smile he was currently displaying. He had sunglasses and a baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, which obscured his face but did nothing to hide the multitude of wiring protruding from his forehead and the back of his shaved cranium. He worked an AR window in the foreground, chuckling lightly.

“Welcome, welcome, gentlemen. I have an announcement to make.”

Dervish’s shoulders slumped. Bend gawked, despairing.

“No way.”

“Oh, yes way, Sean Falstaff, Tir Ghost turned shadowrunner. That announcement is that you have approximately thirty seconds to live.”

There was a sudden flow of light into the room as a secondary hatch opened in the ceiling, offering a clear path to the sky.

“I finally succeeded in compromising the Ares global network. You were quite the impediment, but I managed it. First I used it to hire a truly prodigious amount of mercenaries and Shadowrunners, but that was child’s play. No, my masterwork will be your deaths.”

2D slammed his hands onto the screen.

“Can the villain speech, it doesn’t work for nerds. What the fuck are you talking about?”

Two-Times grinned ear-to-ear, and then the feed cut to a view of the earth from orbit.

“I have obtained one more satellite, courtesy of the proud Americans at Ares Macrotechnology. A Thor Shot.”

The entire team looked up slowly, except for 2D.

“Someone didn’t bank on a technomancer jamming his communications open.”

“What?”

2D slammed his hands onto the screen and activated his trodes, convulsing wildly as he back-hacked Two-Times across the world. For a brief moment he was in a nexus in a forest in Newfoundland, and then...

Then he was in space, his icon standing across from a featureless, muscular humanoid flanked by black IC. The enemy icon was working hard at decrypting a barrier surrounding, appropriately enough, the icon of a giant red button.

“I’ll make you suffer for this,” echoed Two-Times.

“I’ll make you die,” responded 2D, as two fault sprites moved to assist him in an overclocked Black Hammer, manifesting as something similar to a gigantic “hadoken.”

Two-Time’s icon responded in kind, blasting at 2D with a hammer of its own. Both hackers convulsed, one in the bunker and one visible in vidscreen, as their icons began to decompile. Manifesting melee weapons (a visualization of Attack suites), both hackers closed and engaged in a gory battle for their very lives.

The ending of the brawl was not a traditional happy one, as with a fell blow, 2D’s icon decompiled, and in the real world 2D’s biomonitor made a shrill noise as he flatlined and slumped against the wall, bleeding from his tear ducts.

“Oh no,” said Geppetto, advancing on 2D’s lifeless body, “I am not dying in a goddamn SHITHOLE like BOGOTA, COLUMBIA!”

He planted his hands flat on 2D’s chest, and summoned up the highest-force heal spell he could muster. He visibly took injury as magic coursed from his pale hands into 2D, eventually collapsing into unconsciousness with his veins bulging from the drain.

In a satellite high above Earth, Two-Times the hacker finally breached the barrier around the Thor Shot’s controls.

```
>Set_fire: unrestricted
>Password: purplemountainsmajesties1776
>Confirmation code: qQigT1sixA
>Secondary confirmation: kyfms5tN66
>Set_target: Bogota
>Arm Thor Shot
```

Another icon logged onto the system.

“Hi there.”

Before Two-Times could react, he was ganked by a blackout. His icon’s movement stopped, briefly stunned.

2D’s icon approached the red button, fiddling with details in the space around them.

```
>Disarm Thor Shot  
>Set_target: Newfoundland  
>Arm Thor Shot  
>Fire
```

In space, 2D could see a huge tungsten rod falling. And, in an instant, Two-Times’ icon disappeared.

“Well. That was that.”

In the real world, 2D fell back from the tridscreen, collapsing against the opposite wall.

Geppetto spoke first.

“Is it done, 2D? Are we going to die?”

2D rasped.

“It’s over. Gimme that fucking Scottie dog.”

The dog lapped blood off of 2D’s face as he sighed and sank down against the wall. He set his one remaining dragonfly drone to hovering in front of his face, acting as an impromptu camera.

“Now amscray. Get Mr. Johnson on the line. I got something to do.”

1 MONTH LATER

In the Ares Seattle compound, Mr. McWilliams adjusted the wedding band on his finger. He gulped against the fabric of his American-flag tie. It felt like a noose. He sat down at his desk, looking out at the office full of nerds sitting at nexi in front of him. One of them adjusted his glasses and looked expectantly at McWilliams.

“Uh...sir?”

McWilliams coughed twice, and lowered his manicured beard before the building intercom.

“Attention, everyone. This is Mr. McWilliams. From now on you will know me as Security Director McWilliams. I will control the robots that keep you safe. I will coordinate Ares’ good American soldiers in the Seattle metroplex. First and foremost, I will commit myself to making this compound a better place to live, work, and play. I want all security concerns reported to me directly or, failing that,

one of my spiders.

...and so help me god, if one of you tries to sell out the company or get extracted, I will have you jacked in to the Firewatch training UV node in hotsim dressed as a Muslim man with an AK-47.

Heh. Sorry. Company policy. Ahem.

I'm instituting a harsher policy on security concerns, but I intend to espouse a more positive and synergistic environment than the previous Head of Security. I'll keep my office door unlocked except during a time of crisis. Feel free to ask me whatever you want. I'll answer as best I can. And, um. I'll try not to troll you, I guess. Unless it's really funny, or you're a dipshit. If you're a dipshit I'm firing you."

As Security Director McWilliams sat down, the nerds in his office began to clap. He wasn't sure if they were being sarcastic or not, but he didn't give a fuck. They could suck a dick.

Absently, he turned his AR glasses to the news.

>NEWFOUNDLAND EXPLOSION EXPLAINED?

>This message was found posted to an anonymous messageboard early yesterday morning. No source has been able to verify it, and world governments are decrying it as a fake and a cheap, insensitive cash-in on the tragedy that leveled a large portion of Canada's natural forests. The video, depicting a masked hacker with mystery iconography superimposed over his face and voice modification, is not for the faint of heart, and we implore the viewers to make their own decisions.

>Ahem...shit. Is this thing on?

>[coughing noises]

>Hello. Hello to whoever gets this video, I guess. Hi, anons. Glad to see you around.

>I am the source of the explosion that destroyed miles of Newfoundland forest three minutes ago.

>I emphasize the timing as a method of verifying my claim, but I suppose that there are those who will cry fake anyway. And I guess that's fine. There will always be dipshits on the internet, just like how there aren't any girls.

>That's a joke. I'm sorry, I'm nervous.

>I recognize that I may now be one of the greatest cyberterrorists in history. I guess...I didn't want to be ignominious about it. No more anon. I'm not going to pretend that it was just some mystery guy who did it.

>I think it's, like, customary or something that crazy fuckers who set off bombs give a manifesto. I have a little experience in that, but not enough to prepare me for this one. So, I guess, here goes. I'm not going to make it too preachy, bear with me.

>Ahem.

>Do you idiots have any idea what really goes on in the Shadows?

>I mean, do you?

>I don't just mean Shadowrunners, your multi-million-nuyen action movie franchise headers. I know that you idiots know the parlance. That crime TV show taught you "Mr. Johnson." You know what a street samurai is, and how to differentiate a face from an infiltrator.

>But, I mean, aside from the sanitized guns-and-tits bullshit you see in the trids, do any of you really get what happens underneath your noses?

>Criminals run the world. Terrorists, mafia, gangs, shadowrunners. Some of them sit behind desks in offices and do more damage than all the gangs put together. It's all a gigantic circlejerk of increasingly ludicrous theft and violence.

>And that's the status fucking QUO. I mean, what the fuck? I have made more of a difference being a professional dirtbag than I would in ten lifetimes of wage-slavery. What's up with that?

>I'm monologuing. It's probably the blood loss. I'm not a philosopher, or, or, or, a psychologist. I'm a scared kid who hacked a Thor Shot. Because I had to.

>I'm going to be disappearing from the Shadows for a while. Naivety is looking pretty damn good right now.

>Just...think.

>Seriously, think. Think about the world you live in. And what you choose not to see, and what you choose not to do.

>It could save your life.

Chapter 10: New Members, Robberies, and Fast Cars

It was a hot July afternoon when Geppetto, Bend, Dervish, and Malcolm McWilliams--the ex-shadowrunner formerly known as TwoDee--received the message from Brianna McReary:

Danny McReary had been admitted to the hospital late the previous night, after a coughing fit ended with him unable to breathe. Upon diagnosis, the problem was revealed as terminal lung cancer, in a very late stage; Danny had long been a chain-smoker, but the lifestyle was finally catching up to him. It was a shock that it was catching up to him this fast, but the doctors thought it was a side-effect of his bioware muddying up his cell structure. Either way, he only had a few months to live.

The team arrived at Danny's hospital room to pay their respects. They were dressed in their best suits as an homage, although 2D wore his flag pin, a mandatory accessory for high-ranking Ares personnel.

It was an awkward meeting, mostly because Danny had been something of a shitty fixer. None of the bullshit that they'd dealt with under, say, Taka, but he'd operated multiple teams out of a bar, and it showed. Not even an office with a bar as a front; he had literally tended the bar while he fixed. He also hadn't done his research on more than one occasion, leading to fiascos like the JetBlack incident and the original Ares run that had kicked off the Two-Times story.

So, the team was understandably tense and uncomfortable as Brianna McReary cried over her dying father, condemned to a hospital room for the last few miserable weeks of his life. Danny himself was extremely profane and ill-tempered, due to the swift nature of his untimely and looming demise, but mostly he was just tired. Very tired.

Geppetto was the one who sprung the question first:

“Who's going to fix for us now?”

Brianna turned to Geppetto as Danny drifted into sleep.

“I will. I'm new to the field, but I've learned from a lot of my uncle's mistakes. That is...if you'll have me.”

“Sorry, I'm happily married.”

The entire team stared angrily at 2D. Bend commented,

“Sex jokes for the niece of a dying man, 2D? Really?”

“Fuck you guys, I'm making six figures. Besides, Danny loves sex jokes. I'm sure he's laughing in his sleep.”

Brianna and the shadowrunners stared 2D down.

“Oof. Okay. Whatever.”

Dervish spoke up.

“I, for one, would be happy to have you fix for us, Brianna. We've got a good relationship going, and I'd hate to start from scratch.”

Bend nodded.

“Me too. I didn't have any problems with Danny, personally, so you don't need to promise me anything.”

Both of them looked expectantly at Geppetto, who shrugged.

“Sure. There are worse fixers.”

2D pouted.

“And I'M the insensitive one?”

>Okay... it's been a while who was McReary again?
>The team's original fixer. He got them everything up to the very first Two-Times job, before Ares took over directly. He's responsible for the team's rise to professionalism, effectively. Brianna is his niece. The baby from the very first Shadowrun Storytime is now a two-year-old.

The team milled out of the building in their suits, making their ways to their respective vehicles. As 2D hit the clicker on his vanity sports car, he offered,

“Oh, so did you guys hear? I got a third kid on the way! I can tell it's gonna be a smart kid.”

Dervish cocked an eyebrow as he donned his motorcycle helmet.

“An adopted daughter and a freaky AI that thinks it's a little boy do not count as kids, 2D, even if you're legally their dad.”

Geppetto added, opening the door on his sedan,

“Dare I ask how you have come to the conclusion that your child will be smart?”

2D beamed proudly.

“Hacked its wireless node yesterday. It's already developing rudimentary system iconography!”

Bend gagged a little (a frequent occurrence when confronted with 2D) as he opened the side door to Geppetto's sedan. The near-death experience of the Two-Times run had changed him significantly. In a life-reaffirming measure over the team's vacation, Bend had taken up pacifism as a legitimate philosophy, and converted to Buddhism. As a surprise to him, his magic had reacted adversely, a “second Awakening” of sorts. He'd manifested all sorts of weird little powers, and was using the team's break-time to discover them.

Dervish sighed as he revved his engine.

“Fucking technos.”

WAKEFIELD, WEST YORKSHIRE, UNITED KINGDOM, 2062

It was Dylan Cadbury's twentieth birthday, and he was spending it in a prison cell. He at least had the cell to himself; his cellmate had been a Caribbean man, a Yardie type. He'd pissed off a couple of Yaks and didn't last long. They'd found him in pieces in the prison sewage.

Cadbury was serving life for a string of robberies, culminating with an attempted bank robbery in London in 2060. He had been eighteen then. He'd grown up on the mean streets of Edinburgh, a Scottish punk with a head for logistics only constrained by his lack of formal schooling. He'd played to the local chavs, and other disaffected orcs working the Leith district dockside. He'd pulled together a little gang, got them working tight, working professional. He'd handled logistics, just an orc kid with a head full of numbers and a want to hurt some people, to fight back against the big racist bugfuck that was the British government and make some cash on the wayside.

But when he tried the bank job it all fell apart. He'd done all the numbers right, he knew he had. He'd measured out the thermite properly, he'd handled the guns, he knew no one would snitch.

It turned out it was a tip from the costume shop owner he'd bought the clown masks from. Fucking prick. A sterling career as a criminal cut short.

Dylan had a visitor. His parents were Catholic, and hardworking dockworkers. They'd been heartbroken when they found out what he'd been doing, disowned him. His parents weren't visiting him. So who was?

Dylan decided to humor his visitor, donning his orange jumpsuit and exiting his cell to the escort of armed guards. He snorted, his porcine mouth contorted in an expression of contempt. A guard shoved him with the butt of his gun. Same old, same old.

The man on the other end of the bulletproof glass was Irish, pink and pudgy. He wore an expensive suit, tie, and waistcoat, and his fingers were studded with rings. As Dylan approached, he asked,

“Cadbury? Dylan Cadbury?”

Dylan sat down and looked tiredly out at the mystery man.

“And who may I presume is asking for me?”

“A friend. How'd you like to see the world, Dylan?”

“Did you come all the way from Tir Na Nog to taunt me, Irish? I'm not getting out till hell freezes over. Maybe a little earlier if the Queen takes a fancy to me.”

The Irish man scoffed, and produced some paperwork that he pressed against the glass.

“Look, Dylan. Myself and a few...acquaintances...reviewed your...work portfolio and found it to be very, very convincing. We're prepared to pull some strings, organize a parole hearing.”

Dylan blinked and pressed a little closer to the glass.

“Bloody 'ell, gimme a look at that. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, those are real. They told me I was going away with no chance of parole.”

“They could reconsider if you'd just do one little favor for us, Dylan.”

“Name it.”

“We need you to wear the mask just a few more times.”

ATLANTA, GEORGIA, CAS, 2068

Wildcard approached the outside of the Bank of the Confederacy main office, running a hand over his face, feeling absently at where his tusks had once been. What a strange, overgrown thing cosmetics had become. Moreover, if he no longer resembled an orc, would he still self-identify as one? This was a question that Wildcard frequently pondered. He pondered a lot of things, ever since the mob had hired a black surgeon to put a preposterous amount of extra brain tissue into his cranium. Once naturally gifted at mathematics, he was now a machine custom-made for robbery. He handled tactics, logistics, the upkeep and work-arounds for security tech and updated security procedures, mafia politics and safehouses, and hacking. On top of this, he was a backup gunman, and the team's getaway driver, as he operated out of a custom sedan equipped with a mobile terminus nexus. He also had the equivalent knowledge of a master's degree in economics and was fairly good with Renaissance history. That latter bit was especially nice to help him understand just how unique his new mask was: a plaster Carnivale mask custom-made by Venetian artisans, reinforced with plasteel and all the latest spy tech.

Truly, he was a sophisticate amongst bank robbers. He announced into his subvocal, in his thick Scottish accent,

“Belfast, report in.”

“Belfast in position. I'm at the security room now.”

Belfast was Wildcard's right-hand man, an Irish elf who was in a similar contract to Wildcard's. Both of them had a quota to make for the Mafia, and god damn if they weren't going to try to make it.

“Rook, report in.”

“Rook reporting in. Drone borers in position in the vault. Setting up the satlink for you to jam the secondary biomonitor signals. You're going to need to run alarms, though, I figured out they switched 'em up. They're a redundant system now, go through the security network.”

“Excellent, Rook. No change. Belfast, you'll be going five seconds prior to the established time.”

“Roger.”

Rook was relatively new. They'd picked him up a job ago, in Richmond. He'd held his own as a demo-expert and rigger, and he wasn't bad as an infiltrator either.

“Sunny, how about you?”

“I'm good. Holding tight in the lobby.”

“Alright. I'm coming in. Belfast, you're up in...now.”

Sunny was the new guy. An independent contractor they'd picked up in-city, he was as of yet unproven. Wildcard was deeply interested in seeing how he'd perform, which is why he was on crowd control.

Four dragonflies equipped with high-powered torches and di-coated drills settled onto the vault door as Belfast jacked his own satlink into the security nexus. Wildcard hacked it from a few rooms away, disguised as an inconspicuous businessman working in AR, while Belfast went to town on the two surprised security spiders, dropping his invisibility to stunbolt both of them with a flick of his fingers. The elf announced, deadpan, through his own green harlequin mask,

“Bang. Operation is go.”

The drones began to circle the vault door, carving out the joints and creating a loose curve to cause it to fall forward into the vault room.

“We're thirty seconds late, Belfast,” announced Wildcard. “What's the hold-up?”

“I'm getting a wireless signal! Somewhere nearby. Not an alarm, but someone might be calling the coppers.”

“That doesn't make any sense. No civilians where you are, and anyone else would try to hit the silent alarm. Activate your smart jammer and try to find the source. Rook can get the loot.”

“I hear you. Belfast out.”

“Rook here. I'm in. Jacking in to the banking nexus to download the cred, but you need to run crowd control now. I had to cut off connection between the front terminals and the nexus, so the tellers are gonna catch on real soon. The credsticks are also gonna ring like bells the moment I leave the vault.”

Wildcard made eye contact with Sunny from across the lobby, then peered over to the tellers. A few were poking at their AR screens, confused.

“Righto. I'm thinking we kick this up a notch before someone calls in authorities who know what to look for. Sunny, you're up.”

Sunny pulled his mask, a simple smiley-face, out of his bag, and donned it. He pulled his submachine

gun and fired a single shot in the air, screaming,

“EVERYONE GET ON THE FLOOR!”

There was general screaming and panic, and as Wildcard donned his own Carnivale mask and reached into his duffel bag to retrieve his assault rifle, he reprimanded Sunny.

“Procedure would have been to approach a teller and make them announce it. People respond better to figures of authority. Now help me put down the guards, and I hope to hell that you packed the right rounds.”

Both robbers blazed away as they took down the security guards that poured into the room in a barrage of high-velocity assault rifle and submachine gun fire. They concentrated on headshots, as gel rounds were extremely painful but not especially powerful, and headshots increased the chance of blindness, concussion, or unconsciousness. Wildcard announced,

“I apologize for the inconvenience, ladies and gentlemen, but I merely needed to assure that you all cancel communications and remain non-interruptive elements during this transaction. If you remain calm, you will not personally come to harm.”

Wildcard's tacnet registered a man in the crowd pulling a concealed firearm. With a blaze of assault rifle fire, he shattered the man's arm and left him reeling in pain. The crowd screamed and whimpered as he advanced, kicked the man upside the head to get him off the gun, and then picked the gun up and deposited it in the trash can.

“As I was saying.”

Belfast called in. Wildcard put his free hand to his ear.

“What is it, Belfast?”

“This is all wrong. The guards are keeping hidden, and they're using personal comms to call in backup. I can't jam all of them. Coppers could show up any time.”

“Shit! Who tipped them off that we'd be jamming the silent alarm? Rook, cut and run. Take what you've got. To use the colloquial, we're blowing this popsicle stand.”

Sunny and Wildcard split for the bank parking lot as the sirens began to sound in the distance.

Belfast and Rook poured into the parking lot with a set of carrier drones packed down with credsticks and valuables. Sunny's AR whirred as he checked exterior cameras. Rook poured shotgun covering fire back into the bank proper as Belfast approached Wildcard.

“That could have been a real clusterfuck, Wildcard. We ready to go? We don't have much longer, the cops are pouring in the front.”

“One thing.”

Wildcard drew his Ares Predator, pressed it to the side of Sunny's head, and pulled the trigger.

“Burn his body, we don't want a datatrail. Idiot signed his death warrant when he checked our bounties on his personal commlink. As if I wouldn't hack it.”

Belfast's outstretched hands poured fire onto the fallen would-be betrayer as Rook loaded the money into the trunk.

“Alright, gentlemen, let's go!”

With a roar of engines, a black sedan disappeared into the streets, as the cops rushed back to their cars in a panic.

RENTON, SEATTLE, AUGUST 12th, 2072

“So it's been a year, Dylan,” remarked Luca Valachi, a professional mob fixer, over penne Bolognese. “Are you still enjoying your freedom? Thinking of coming back to the mob?”

Wildcard swirled his spaghetti absently with his fork.

“Not especially. I mean, don't get me wrong, you've been bloody good friends to me, and I don't intend to disrespect you and your boys, but I've been wanting to go independent. It feels like the free thing to do, to use your own words.”

Luca chewed thoughtfully.

“So you're going Shadowrunner?”

“In essence, yes.”

Wildcard stared at his spaghetti, and then began poking at it in quick, purposeful strikes.

“What are you doing to that poor pasta, Dylan?”

“Seeing if I can make a Fibonacci spiral. I'm bored and I filled up on bread.”

“You ever regret that?”

Wildcard blinked and looked up at Luca. The surgical scars from his most recent face replacement bulged slightly.

“Do I regret what?”

“The brain tissue thing. Becoming a human computer.”

“Not especially. And it's not like I can reverse it.”

“Just seems like you've lost a lot of personality since the first few jobs.”

“It's been ten years, Luca. People change, Fibonacci spirals in spaghetti or no.”

Luca chuckled.

“I've got a tip, Wildcard, if you want it.”

“Shoot.”

Luca took a sip of his wine.

“I know you don't want to work with the mob no more, but there's a girl, an independent fixer loosely affiliated with the Finnigans. She runs non-mob jobs, so no worries there, but she's in with the Irish enough that I can probably pull some strings. Heard she's only got one team left since the last fixer died--most of 'em got poached--but she's got a group of some real pros that are out a hacker. You interested?”

Wildcard smiled and finally took a bite of his spaghetti.

“Of course I'm interested. You're one in a million, Luca.” He looked down, disappointed. “Damn it all, I fucked the spiral up.”

TACOMA, SEATTLE, AUGUST 15TH, 2072

Brianna didn't want to stay in the bar in Everett. There were too many bad memories associated with it. So, she'd sold it, and used the proceeds and some of Danny's accrued fixing payoffs to buy out a nicer bar. The establishment in question was Basil's Faulty Bar in Tacoma, and she'd bought it from the old fixer running the bar, Abe Heep, so he could retire to a simpler job than fixing; namely, actual bartending and mixology, because that's a thing that bars do. The place had an old-school Irish pub aesthetic, one that appealed to locals as well as runners.

Wildcard couldn't have been happier with the appearance of the bar. How quaint! This would be quite the adventure.

He knocked twice on the upstairs door, and a woman's voice called,

“Come in!”

Wildcard stepped in to see two elves and an orc sitting in chairs around Brianna McReary's desk.

One elf, an albino in a dark suit, asked,

“So you're the new hacker?”

Wildcard nodded.

“Hacker, driver, backup samurai. I don't do rigging, though.”

The elf nodded soberly as the orc stood up. The orc was a massive specimen, taller than Wildcard and bulging with muscle. He wore an American flag bandanna and motorbike leathers.

“Dervish, pleased to meet you. We hear you come with recommendation from the Gianellis.”

“That I do. And I'm pleased to meet you boys in turn. You can call me Wildcard.”

The other elf, an inconspicuous-looking sort in a grey suit with a prayer bead necklace around his neck, stood up.

“I'm Bend. Recon and B&E. And that's Geppetto. He's our mage. Hope you don't mind working with a fairly black-hat group.”

Wildcard frowned.

“Define 'fairly.'”

Geppetto stood with a toothy grin.

“Well, that's me, mostly.”

Brianna coughed.

“If you boys wanted to get to know each other better, I've got a milk run lined up.”

Dervish waved a hand dismissively.

“No need. We've got our own initiation ready.”

Bend blinked.

“I didn't hear about this initiation.”

Geppetto pouted his lips with a cruel smile.

“See, about that. We never actually initiated you, either, Bend.”

Bend edged up next to Wildcard.

“I swear I have no idea what they're talking about.”

Brianna sighed.

“Try not to kill the new hacker or your infiltrator, you two.”

Geppetto smiled back, and in a saccharine voice, responded,

“No promises!”

Wildcard gasped as the bag lifted off his head. He was in a dark room, tied to a folding chair, with no memory of how he'd gotten there. Geppetto sat across from him in a big black lounger, clutching the armrests in classic evil villain fashion. Dervish flanked him, with his arms crossed. Both were only partially lit.

Wildcard groggily turned to his left. Bend was tied to another chair next to him, equally confused. Bend looked at Wildcard with the kind of panic that only not knowing what the fuck is going on can bring.

“Gentlemen,” said Dervish, booming loudly, “welcome to the initiation.”

“What the fuck...”

Geppetto stood up, his red eyes glinting. His loafer heels clacked as they tapped across the ground.

“You do not get to talk, Wildcard. Not yet. Not until we have BLOWN YOUR GODDAMN MINDS.”

Dervish walked behind Wildcard and Bend, and there was a threatening clinking noise before he began to approach them from behind. Bend squirmed, reaching for his concealed knife.

“What are you going to do to us?”

“We are going to teach you about...the SYSTEM.”

Wildcard's mouth dropped.

“The what.”

Dervish reached around both captives, holding a small bottle of vodka in each hand. He pressed each bottle to the lips of a captive.

“Drink, rookies.”

Geppetto continued.

“A great man once told me that our consumerist society runs on greed, and on inferior services that we are expected to be thankful for. This man was wise in ways of the world far beyond you. He recognized how people are increasingly marginalized, herded through all stages of our society like cattle, like sheep. They bleat and feed from the trough of mediocrity. It is up to us to be their liberators, no, their saviors.”

Wildcard attempted to loose another “what,” but was too busy not drowning in vodka. He was already

beginning to feel it messing with his brain.

“We are the heroes that the world of Light needs, agents of the exalted Shadows. We will bring peace to our fractured society through a task of great importance.”

Bend hiccupped.

“What'sh...whasshatashk?”

Geppetto leaned forward and gripped Bend's shoulders.

“We are going to rob a P.F. Changs in North Tacoma.”

Wildcard burped loudly.

“Thash bullshit.”

Geppetto stared down his nose dismissively at Wildcard.

“It's not bullshit, Wildcard. It's revolution.”

“Ish a P.F. Changsh.”

“And this P.F. Changs will be a victory for our glorious uprising, like the Red Lobster that fell before it. What's more, you and Bend will be our planners.”

“But we're drunk.”

“I don't see the relevance of such states in respect to the glory of the revolution.”

“I can't plan when ahm drunk.”

“I have seen a self-professed master criminal fail this test while sober. If you can't do it shitfaced, then you have no place on our team.”

“Fahn! Lemmeatum!”

Wildcard attempted to stand, and pitched forward onto his face. With a “YEAAAAAH,” Bend followed suit.

Dervish looked at Geppetto.

“Don't you think this is a little mean?”

“I have not watched TV all month. It was this or mind-controlling two hobos into a bumfight for entertainment.”

“I'm a little afraid of climbing into a car driven by a drunk man in a clown mask.”

“Dervish, that is the smartest thing you've ever said in our career as shadowrunners. Let's lead the man with the clown mask to his car so he can drive us drunk to a mid-price chain restaurant.”

The team sat in the inconspicuous black Hyundai in the Faulty Bar's parking lot, only to find the whole thing done up with safety rigging like out of Nascar. Seatbelts, seatbelts everywhere. To say nothing of the concealed armor plating that was visible from the inside. Wildcard sat in the driver's seat, but didn't even start the engine.

“Um, Wildcard?” Geppetto settled into a seat in the back, and clipped one of the myriad seatbelts. “Why aren't we moving?”

“Not until you put on aaallll the sheetbeltsh,” slurred Wildcard. “I wanna drive shafe.”

Geppetto dutifully put on the rest of his seatbelts, all 6 of them, and Dervish put on Bend's before doing his own. Geppetto nodded toward Wildcard.

“Okay, we're good. Are you-”

There was an immensely loud “VROOOOOOOM” as Wildcard started the engine. Geppetto paled.

“That doesn't sound like a Hyundai engine.”

“Thash cuz it isn't.”

“Define 'isn't.' ”

“Acceleration and Shpeed modsh, racing-tier turbochanger...and...uh...nitroush.”

Geppetto gulped.

“Holy FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!”

With that, the inconspicuous black Hyundai tore out of the parking lot at triple-digit speed. Dervish yelled,

“THIS WAS SUCH A BAD IDEAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Approximately 2 minutes into a 15-minute drive, the team pulled to a stop behind the P.F. Chang's.

Geppetto stepped out of the car and promptly vomited blood. Not his own, admittedly.

“Wildcard, you drive like an asshole.”

Wildcard hiccupped, coming down a little bit from his drunk.

“I AM an asshole.”

Dervish, just a little bit green in the cheeks, asked Wildcard and Bend,

“So, you're in charge. What's the plan?”

Bend offered, still quite tipsy,

“I could totally like rob people and shit.”

Dervish nodded.

“Good, good. How are you going to rob people?”

“I'm gonna...steal their stuff while they're distracted by you and Wildcard!”

“Better. And you, Wildcard?”

“I'm gonna run through the front door with you, Dervish, and we're gonna point guns at people and tell them to give us their things and we'll jam outgoing calls. And we'll have Geppetto pretend to be a customer, and he'll seed the customers so they'll give us their money faster.”

Dervish nodded.

“He's a smart one, Geppetto.”

“Bloody right I am,” said Wildcard, donning his Carnivale mask. “Let's do this shit.”

“NOBODY MOVE! EVERYONE ON THE FLOOR!”

Dervish (in a balaclava) and Wildcard swept into the P.F. Changs, knocking over a fake terra cotta soldier to show that they meant business. Geppetto, appearing as a blonde woman with exceptionally large secondary sexual characteristics, swooned and squealed, quasi-patronizingly,

“Oh no! Don't hurt me! Take all my money instead!”

In the back of the restaurant, a lone, big Texan man twitched.

The Lone Star officer stood and began to reach for his sidearm, but Dervish quickly trained his shotgun on him.

“Woah there, big guy. No need to go out a hero.”

There was a short pause as Dervish looked over the big Texan.

“No fucking way.”

The Texan growled and dropped his hands to his side.

“Do I know you, shitstain?”

Dervish cocked his shotgun and gestured to his cybereyes.

“Oh, you FUCKER.”

In an instant, the Texan activated his Wired and, against all odds, quickdrew a heavy taser before Dervish could react. More unexpectedly, he aimed like a total champ, plugging Dervish square in the center of the face. Dervish flailed his arms wildly like a spaz and fell through a table, spraying steamed rice and Mongolian Beef everywhere.

Bend briefly stopped picking stunned restaurantgoers' pockets to ask over the comm,

“Uh...was that part of the plan?”

Wildcard fired a warning shot over the cop's head and then advanced on him, assault rifle trained.

“WOAH! One more like that and I pop you right now!”

The cop dropped the taser and put his hands up.

“No worries, that was all I wanted to do.”

Sirens sounded outside the front of the restaurant.

“Wow, sirens already? It's like someone hit the silent alarm.”

Wildcard reached for the cop's belt and grasped a pair of handcuffs, before slapping one end around the cop's wrist.

“Sass like that, you get to be an accomplice.”

The cop blinked.

“What?”

“You assholes. You incredible assholes. This is the most demeaning thing-”

“Oh, can it, old-timer.”

Dervish and Wildcard took cover from the SWAT team behind the front counter of the P.F. Changs. The police officer was handcuffed to the front of the counter, functioning as an involuntary human shield. The SWAT team's laser sights danced across his burly body as they tried to find a free shot, causing him to squirm and just compound his own problem.

Bend commented over the comm, from by the car,

“Uh, guys. The route to the car is still clear. If you can, you know, make it without being shot and all that.”

Wildcard glared at Dervish through his mask, hunkering up with his back against the counter.

“You incredible asshole, how'd you let him get you?”

“I am just as disappointed as you are.”

“Hang tight, I've got an idea.”

Wildcard pointed his gun at Geppetto.

“YOU! BLONDE LADY! GET YOUR SHAPELY ARSE OVER HERE!”

Geppetto melodramatically gulped and began doing his best bimbo-walk towards the counter. When he'd gotten close enough, Wildcard slipped behind him, put an arm around his waist, and stuck his Predator to Geppetto's head.

“LOOK, COPPERS. I MAKE IT OUT, THIS WOMAN GOES FREE. I'VE GOT ENOUGH WIRES IN ME TO TWEAK LIKE A WALLABY ON SPEED; I WILL PULL THE TRIGGER BEFORE YOU CAN PUT ME DOWN.”

Geppetto screeched,

“OH NOOOO! STAY BACK! HE'LL KILL MEEEEEE!”

The cop handcuffed to the counter wore a face of the utmost disdain.

“Really? You're doing the mage thing again?”

Dervish shrugged. “Not my idea.”

Wildcard, “hostage” in tow, tilted over a few tables to give Dervish soft cover to escape.

“Alright! We'll be leaving nice and peacefully. Nice and-”

With a “PHOONK,” Dervish launched an underbarrel flashbang right into the SWAT team. Wildcard dropped Geppetto and broke into a run.

“FOOKIN' LEG IT!”

The team sprinted into the car under heavy fire from the SWAT team. A few stray shots pinged off the back of the car as the team began working on the buckles.

Geppetto: “Fucking DRIVE, Wildcard!”

Wildcard: “Not until you buckle up!”

Bend: “Aw man, this is gonna SUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!”

The car took off towards the freeway at top speed down the opposite lane of traffic. The Knight Errant SWAT team disappeared into the distance behind them, but two police interceptors pulled in behind the car.

“Oh, you wanna play, coppers?”

Dodging wildly around oncoming traffic, Wildcard drove up the wrong freeway entrance, before ramping a center divider to get to the right side of the road. One of the interceptors followed, only to get T-boned by an incoming truck.

Pulling onto the shoulder, Wildcard gunned it up to well over two hundred miles an hour, putting everything else on the freeway to shame and kicking up an unholy amount of gravel. The rest of the team's gums flapped as they tried to sit up straight, but another interceptor pulled in ahead.

“Hold the fuck on!”

Wildcard slammed the wheel to the left, literally spinning the car like a top across multiple lanes to avoid the interceptor. The interceptor cut across the same lanes and skidded against the divider in the center, before righting itself behind Wildcard's Hyundai.

“Time to really pull out all the stops.”

Geppetto screamed,

“YOU MEAN YOU WEREN'T PULLING THEM ALL OUT TO BEGIN WITH!?”

“O'COURSE NOT! YOU TAKE ME FOR AN AMATEUR!?”

With that, Wildcard punched the red button labeled “NOS.”

The entire team's screams were drowned out by the roar of engines as they neared three hundred miles per hour. Wildcard began dodging speeding cars as if they were stationery objects, activating his Wired reflexes and schizophrenically drifting back and forth in short, controlled bursts of steering.

As Wildcard neared the next exit, he swiftly threw the car into a spin, slammed the gear into reverse, and then began driving in reverse at top speed down the freeway exit. Geppetto screeched,

“WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING!?”

Wildcard didn't answer, and instead pulled off the freeway in reverse only to immediately slam back into forward and merge illegally across lanes into a street that he had no business merging into, almost immediately after exiting the freeway. Slowing to normal speeds, Wildcard pulled into a nearby parking garage, and circled his way to the top. Without a beat, he undid his seatbelts, stepped out of

the car, and began running over the rear of the car with a tag eraser, plucking off RFID tags and trackers before tossing them into the beds of passing pickup trucks.

Somewhat belatedly, Dervish screamed,

“WOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Wildcard leaned toward the car and looked at the sack that Bend was carrying.

“So what's the haul?”

Bend peeked into the bag.

“Uh, three necklaces, five wallets, eight credsticks, and a designer watch.”

“I'd imagine that's about enough to get the bulletholes out of the rear of my car.”

Dervish smiled.

“I guess that makes this a successful run.”

Wildcard opened Geppetto's door, leaning over him.

“So? Do I get the job?”

Geppetto tactfully responded,

“BLUHUEHAAARGLARBL.”

“AUGH! MY PANTS!”

Chapter 11: A Hot Summer, More Robberies, and GEMS

Summer.

Damien Sanitiere, the shadowrunner better known as Geppetto, loathed summer.

Summer was hot, summer was bright, and during summer, the schools were out, so all the insipid salarymen polluted the streets, parks, and other valuable public spaces of the city with their disgusting maggots. Geppetto hated heat, he hated light, and most of all, he hated children.

Even before he'd contracted vampirism, summer had occupied a special, barren little grave in the clump of black coal colloquially referred to as his heart. TwoDee had once told him that he was not alone, because "summer brings out the newfags." Geppetto didn't entirely understand what this assertion meant, but he appreciated the sentiment nevertheless, at least as much as a sociopath could appreciate anything.

"Holy fuck," said Dervish, looking out the pub's side window, "yesterday's acid rain cleared out all the smog. I can actually see the sky."

"No way," said Bend, peering out from beside Dervish.

"God bless America," said Wildcard, in his Scottish brogue. "Let's bring a cooler up to the roof to celebrate."

As his three teammates all made for the roof access stairs, Geppetto glowered from his seat at the end of the bar.

"Come on, Geppetto, a little sun won't hurt you," called Bend, cheerily, as he grabbed a Japanese import beer from behind the bar. "Live a little!"

As Geppetto produced his black funerary parasol and followed the team with a grimace, he remarked that "a little sun won't hurt you" was the most damnable lie ever told in the history of metahumankind.

"Slainte!" cried Wildcard, lifting his mask long enough to throw down a gulp of ale.

"You gotta leave that thing on all the time, Wildcard?" Bend nursed his own beer, recalling the Buddhist attitude on excess. Spirituality was a new thing for him, and he was just as unnerved by the serene, monkish spirits that seemed to conglomerate around him as his teammates were.

"Gotta. All my tools're in here," said Wildcard, his voice becoming synthesized and metallic again as he slipped the mask back down. "May be nice and bright out, but I run intel for this team, and I'm not much use if I don't keep abreast of what's goin' on. Even off-duty."

There was a brief pause, and then a harsh metal ringing as Wildcard began guffawing aloud.

Geppetto stood in the shadow of an adjacent building, with his parasol held above him and his hat slung low over his forehead.

“Something we should know about, Wildcard?”

Wildcard spread his arms wide, opening up a large AR window.

“Well, media got a hold of this’n in a crack, diddun they?”

The third page of the day’s KSAF special action report bore a lovingly detailed 360-degree tridpic of a balaclava-wearing Dervish being tased in the middle of the forehead and falling through a table full of Chinese food, with the pudgy off-duty cop standing across from him, his moustache raised in a smile of righteous sadism.

The bulletin read “HERO COP JOSEPH GREEN SAVES INNOCENT RESTAURANTGOERS”

As the rest of the team fought down snickers, Dervish growled.

“We need a job. Otherwise I don’t know why I’m hanging around you chucklefucks.”

With flawless timing and the tapping of high heels, Brianna McReary poked her head out of the roof access stairway door.

“Are you four going to just laze around all day? I called you down here because I’d netted you a Johnson, not so you could contemplate summer’s lapsing beauty on my damn roof.”

“Thank you, God,” drawled Geppetto, as he stepped into the stairwell and closed his parasol.

“Mr. Johnson,” smiled Geppetto. “What a surprise.”

Geppetto and the Johnson shared a quick embrace before they sat at the pizzeria table. The Johnson was a familiar one, the squat, pudgy Irish mafia member whom had once upon a time asked TwoDee and Dervish to take care of a gang called the Phearmongers. Geppetto was familiar with the man from Finnigan family functions, but didn’t use his real name out of courtesy.

“Good to see you, Geppetto my boy,” said Mr. Johnson, with a grin that was mostly lip, as he began greedily pouring out a glass of red wine. “And good to see you picked yourself up a quality new member. Wildcard’s got quite the history with the family.”

Wildcard nodded with a small smile and poked at an order of bread and olive oil.

“Thank you, Mr. Johnson,” said Geppetto with a predatory, canine smile, back in his element. “Since we have such a good history, I think it would serve us well to just get down to business, wouldn’t it?”

“Well, funny, that,” said Mr. Johnson, swirling his wine. “The job’s actually fairly relevant to your new acquisition. Y’see, we need you to rob a bank.”

Wildcard blinked and looked up at Mr. Johnson as Geppetto beamed.

“That sounds doable, Mr. Johnson. Any particulars?”

“It’s a Wells-Fargo in the NAN. About a day’s drive to the southeast, in NAN territory. Little town in Clark County. We need you to extract some very important papers from the safe deposit boxes.”

Geppetto pent his fingers together.

“What kind of papers, Mr. Johnson?”

“Bonds. American, pre-UCAS. Worth a fortune in this day and age.”

“And payment?”

“I’m offering 10 k plus whatever else you can take from the safe deposit boxes. It’s not a milk run, but my sources assure me that the holder of the bonds doesn’t know that they’ve been targeted.”

“That’s not really much insurance for a payment that mostly depends on the willingness of the rich to place their investments in an ignominious small-town bank, Mr. Johnson. You’re sure you can’t offer 30?”

Johnson smiled, catching onto Geppetto’s meaning.

“I can meet you halfway. Deal?”

Geppetto stood and reached over the table to shake Mr. Johnson’s hand.

“Deal. Any more info you can get us? Layout? Security procedures?”

The Johnson just sort of stared blankly at Geppetto.

“It’s a Wells-Fargo, Geppetto.”

Wildcard quickly donned his mask and brought up a Google Maps image of the neighborhood, identifying the bank from its photos.

“Oh. It’s a B5-model. Early 2060s. One of four or five variations, depending on if you count the reinforced version of the C2 as a separate floorplan. Deposit boxes are in the back, next to the spider’s office. Gonna have to watch out for spirit security, not too worried about the matrix since most of these boxes haven’t had their hardwired systems upgraded.”

Johnson slapped Geppetto’s back, causing the slight banshee to jerk forward.

“This fuckin’ guy!”

The day after the Johnson meet, the team had something akin to a short summer road trip. It was one of those scenic freeway drives away from the sun that would totally be part of a coming-of-age movie, with the credits rolling over a Red Hot Chili Peppers song and the protagonist saying something like, “And then I knew everything would be okay after all.”

Except it was totally actually four professional criminals headed down to Clark County, Washington, to rob a bank, and not a coming-of-age movie at all. Still, it was a nice drive. Very calming. Wildcard even deigned to exceed the speed limit by only two figures rather than three.

Dressed in their civilian clothes and noshing on chicken sandwiches at a Dairy Queen across the street from the bank, Dervish and Bend clicked on their subvocal mics. Wildcard was sitting in the car in VR in a nearby parking lot, and Geppetto was entering the bank to make a withdrawal from one of his fake SINS' accounts, the better to record the interior with his networked contact lenses.

"Dobie slots on the outside," remarked Bend, eyeing the unremarkable mush that was his veggie burger (or, rather, "veggie burger") with suspicion. "Probably don't deploy them till night, though, and Dobies are pretty easy to evade if they're stock model."

Wildcard nodded unconsciously, even though nobody could see him.

"Most of these banks don't bother. Dobies are gobshite drones anyway, they mostly use 'em for perimeter and as a warning. Still, when we come back tonight, we'll let 'em take a few rounds, try to get the timing down."

"Hey Wildcard," Geppetto remarked, as he plugged his credstick into an ATM, "you getting this layout?"

"Yeah, thanks, Geppetto. No need to go 'round back, this is simply confirmation that they haven't changed the interior. Alright, lemme put up a map for all of you so we can run through the plans. Geppetto, if you don't mind, assense the place before you pop out. General astral security protocol on these places is just the one spirit, but they might have sprung for two."

"Roger," said Geppetto, opening his third eye. After a moment, he commented, "Yeah, got a hermetic Man spirit drifting through the walls. Seems to be on a fixed rotation."

"At night they'll probably have it running counter to the Dobermans, shore up the blind spots. Which gives us a very, very small window to work, smaller than I'd like. Only you and Bend can even see spirits, too, so even if I get the cameras, I can't warn you when it's coming."

"We could always kill it," grunted Dervish, over a literal pile of chicken burgers, his modified metabolism kicking in.

"Negative," said Bend, eventually deciding to take a bite of his veggie burger and immediately regretting it. "We kill the spirit, the mage knows. And then backup rides in."

"Right up our arse," agreed Wildcard. "Any ideas for an incap, gentlemen?"

"One," said Bend, "but I'll need a ride to the nearest parobotanist."

Geppetto chuckled as he exited the bank.

"Haven lily? Really, Bend?"

“It worked on us.”

Wildcard took a brief moment to look up “Haven Lily” on the Matrix.

“We’re going to stop the spirit by getting it stoned?”

“That’s the idea.”

“Bloody brilliant. I’ll drive.”

The team returned to their stakeout bearing, for lack of a better word, a shrubbery. It hadn’t been hard to purchase: Geppetto had popped into the Merlyns chapterhouse and a fellow member, Mars, had referred him to a relevant botanist. Though a suspicious purchase, Haven Lily was not technically illegal, and “Merlyns business” offered a fairly convincing - pardon the pun - smokescreen for what the plant was going to be used for.

On the drive back, Wildcard ran the team through the possible options.

“So, this sort of bank’s got two back doors. One leads to a reinforced hallway that connects the vault room and spider room. The other is the normal back door, but you can get to the reinforced hallway from the inside, too. They’ll prolly have Dobies and the like patrolling the hallway, so we’ll need to get me into the spider room first. Which is a problem, since that’ll mean going through the very hallway that the spider’s monitoring.”

“Invisible?” suggested Geppetto.

“Negative. You’ll still need to open the door, and the spider’ll notice.”

“We could try to drill our way in,” offered Bend. He gestured to Wildcard’s duffel bag full of tools, which sat snugly in the back of the car.

“The security room’s up against the back wall. With the right tools we could probably bust in even before the Dobermans round the corner.”

“That’ll be way too much noise on our hands.” Wildcard shook his head.

“Well...”

With a snap, Geppetto activated a silence spell. The car engine went so quiet that for a moment Wildcard thought it had died.

“Good man, good man.”

The rest of the team discussed the plan as Geppetto slipped around the back of the bank and carefully hid the haven lily behind the external generator, outside of where the patrolling drone would be able to see.

“That’s one security measure taken care of. So we’re going with the drill plan, right? I go gaseous, float through the hole, plug you in?”

“This is the only time that I’m going to thank my lucky stars to be running with a banshee, so enjoy it, Geppetto,” remarked Wildcard, taking a close look at what data he could manage from sniffer scans.

“Bend, the vault door and the drones are off the network. You sure you can dodge the drones and trick the door? It’s got a full retinal-thumbprint suite.”

“I’ve got spy tools to spoof both of those,” commented Bend. “Just erase me from the cameras.”

“That I can do.”

That night, as the employees cleared out and two drones deployed on the outside of the bank and began a circular patrol, the silence was punctuated briefly by the whine of a power drill that swiftly became silent. Bend and Geppetto, tacsuited and rendered invisible respectively, sprinted for the outside wall of the spider room, beside a dumpster, as soon as the drone passed.

Bend carried the di-coated power drill, while Geppetto trailed a long black datajack extension cord, connected two dozen yards away to their hacker’s cranial ports. Wildcard was zonked out in VR in his car, while Dervish kept a watch for passing cars, pedestrians, and whatnot. Wildcard commented over the team’s tacnet,

“You have 30 seconds till the next drone, gentlemen. Make it count.”

Bend slid to a stop at the side of the building, immediately deploying the drill at about foot level. The concrete of the exterior wall gave way quickly, although the two did have to make a quick dive behind the dumpster as one of the drones rounded the corner.

“Another 30 seconds. Keep drilling.”

Bend took the drill to the wall again, and this time he hit open space. Leaving the drill atop the dumpster for Geppetto to retrieve on his way out, Bend slipped the extension cord through the hole and then made for the hardened external door to wait for Wildcard to open it.

Geppetto melted into a noxious green gas and flowed through the hole, finding himself at the foot level of the spider, sitting at his nexus. As Geppetto flowed past his feet and rematerialized behind him, he noticed that the spider was watching a rather...flavorful scene involving two male orcs and a female elf on one of the nexus’ screens.

“Idiot’s watching porn,” Geppetto hissed over the subvocals, “We could have just walked in.”

“Don’t get cocky, Geppetto,” Wildcard responded, scolding. “Just plug me in then get out. Your part’s done.”

Dervish snickered.

“What is it, spotter?”

“Don't get...nevermind.”

Grumbling, Geppetto plugged the cord loosely into the nexus - so that it could be disengaged with just one quick snag and reeled back - and, for good measure, hit it with an invisibility spell. Even if it was just a thin black cord, that alone could be suspicious when leading back to the car.

“You're in, Wildcard. Get hacking.”

“Our spirit out?”

Geppetto passed by the generator as he fled with the drill, taking a cursory moment to identify a hermetic spirit of Man hovering aimlessly in space by the lily, giggling and doing loop-de-loops.

“It's gone.”

“Alright, this may take a few hours, especially dodging the spider. Even if he is distracted. Bend, gecko grip your way up to the roof above the doorway, keep out of the drone's sight while you wait.”

“Ten-four.”

Bend sat atop the doorway and watched the drones pass by in their endless rounds as Wildcard hacked.

Two hours later, there was a low “clack” noise as the locks disengaged.

“You're in, Bend. I've got the cameras looping footage, but watch out for the drones. There's another Dobie to dodge on the floor in there.”

“Then I won't use the floor.”

Swiveling to open the door while upside-down, Bend used his gecko pads to crawl along the ceiling of the hardened hallway, crawling directly above the Doberman as it rolled along the hallway, its camera and submachine gun scanning the space. He didn't stop until he hit the vault, at which point he flipped down from the ceiling.

“I think the vault door itself is a blind spot on the drone's ordinary patrol, but I'll try to make this quick.”

Synching up with Wildcard to grab some employee biometrics, Bend deployed his tools to spoof a false retinal scan and identification. He slid his specially prepared maglock passkey into the ID slot, hoping that the inbuilt algorithms would defeat the door.

After a brief moment of holding his breath, he heard the ricocheting pinging noise of multiple locks disengaging.

“I'm in.”

“Bloody good show. Grab the bonds, then anything you can. You got the duffel bag?”

“Yep. Hell and a half hiding it from the drone though.”

“Whatever. Time’s money, and money’s in the vault. Take anything that’s not nailed down.”

With a little help from Wildcard over the tacnet, Bend quickly identified which bonds were the correct ones, and then proceeded to slam open every safe deposit box he could, cramming everything shiny into the bag. He avoided credsticks and electronics: those could be tracked.

After tens of thousands of nuyen worth of gems had been thrown into the bag, Bend found a slightly more interesting haul.

“Hey, they got a painting up against the wall here. Old as all hell. Beardy guy. Looks distinguished. 1800s, I’d guess?”

“Will it fit in the duffel bag?”

Bend placed his gloved hands on either side of the painting, gauging its size.

“Negative. I could probably carry it by hand, though, it looks like it’s got a special carrying case stored in the deposit box linked to the same account. Think it’s worth anything?”

Looking out the back window, Dervish gawked.

“Guys?”

Wildcard didn’t notice him.

“Go ahead and take the painting, Bend. We’ve got the time.”

“GUYS!?”

Wildcard snapped briefly back into reality to see Dervish pointing at a grey van parking a few spots down from them.

“Oh fuck.”

Men in ballistic vests and Wells-Fargo uniforms with submachine guns stepped out of the van. Dervish began to go for his gun, but Geppetto hissed at him to not make any moves yet.

The tension was broken as one of the Wells-Fargo employees cracked some kind of joke, and another laughed. Backup had been called, but this was probably a regular thing. Maybe the shoddy AI in one of the Dobermans had caught something. The team wasn’t found yet.

But they would be, since two of the men were actively making for the back door.

“Fuckin’ hell! Bend! Get out of there!”

Bend hefted his bag and the portrait case, but the two men made it to the door before he could make it out of the vault.

“Oh fuck. Fuck...wait.”

Instinctively, Wildcard backdoored back into the spider nexus and removed the headphone hardware synchronization software.

And, in an instant, the entire bank began reverberating with the sounds of interracial fetish porn.

Bend asked over the comms, meekly,

“What did you just do?”

Showered in cries of ecstasy and a tasteful background soundtrack consisting mostly of OONTZ OONTZ OONTZ, both of the guards recoiled, startled, and then walked past the slightly-open vault to the spider room, not noticing the intruder. As they peered into the spider room, snickering loudly, Wildcard yelled over the comms.

“This is your opening, Bend! Cut across into the bank offices, then take the other back door!”

Bend made a mad sprint for the bank offices right before the other members of the tac team came through the hallway door to check out what the ruckus was in the spider room. With a quick jerk, Wildcard disengaged the cord and reeled it back in to the car. Bend abandoned all pretense of stealth and sprinted past the Wells-Fargo van into the back seat of the car.

“Buckle up, everyone!”

And, as an alarm sounded inside the bank, Wildcard wiped his sedan from the parking lot records and then disappeared into the streets at high speed.

As the team merged off the freeway into Tacoma, they went over the loot, aside from the bonds. A sack full of gems and jewelry and a portrait of a distinguished looking man circa sometime in the middle of the 19th century. Deciding offloading the goods sooner rather than later was probably for the best, Bend and Dervish hit up Brianna for any experts who could identify the painting while Geppetto and Wildcard plumbed their mob contacts for a “reputable” jeweler.

The portrait was quickly identified with some cursory searching around on Brianna's part: it was the gubernatorial portrait of Leland Stanford, the first Republican governor of California, director of Wells Fargo (ironically), and founder of Stanford University. It had been stolen from a Sacramento archive a few years back and the bounty was 20,000 nuyen.

Bend was very happy with this development, as returning an important, historic piece of art to its rightful owner almost balanced out robbing a small town of all of its valuables.

Wildcard and Geppetto were directed to Vincent Valachi, nephew of Wildcard's fixer Luca, widely reputed to be the best jeweler in the Gianelli family, but also the worst. Wildcard asked Luca,

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Luca had responded,

“Well, he's very good at identifying jewels.”

>Out of character, Vinnie “The Grin” Valachi was an old player character of mine from a Shadowrun game long past. He was a dick. I was very happy to see him return in a bit role that was extraordinarily appropriate for him. But I digress.

The team made their way to “Grinnin' Vinnie's Pawn Shop” in Auburn. The sign out front read, 'Our Prices are so low, they're Criminal!' Geppetto sighed loudly as he passed by the two armed men in suits out front.

“Not exactly subtle, is he?”

Vincent Valachi was a guido of the highest order, with an awful tanning-salon tan, manicured nails practically obscured by ostentatious gold rings, an open-chested polo shirt with a suit jacket thrown haphazardly over it, and a dyed, greasy mop on his head that resembled the ass end of a bird more than human hair. The only sign of actual violence on his person was a thin half-Glasgow-grin running out of the left side of his mouth and up his cheek, doubtless the source of his name.

“My friends! Brothers! Good to sees yous! My uncle tolds me you'd be comin'! Now let's get a looks at them goods, y'know?”

The team began regretting this referral.

When Bend opened the bag of gems, Vinnie literally snatched forward and grabbed the entire bag out of his hand, pouring it out on the table before slapping on a pair of magnifying AR shades.

“Oooh, this is some good stuff,” he absently commented as he went through the various rocks and pieces of jewelry, surveying each carefully but then tossing them into a small pile whenever he finished, “you got at least 15 k in here, good haul.”

Geppetto smiled.

“Excellent. We'll take the fifteen thousand, then.”

There was a pause as he made eye contact with the jeweler, and then Vinnie broke out in a tinny giggle that swiftly devolved into a full-blown belly laugh.

“Oh shit, yous was serious? Getta load a this guy!”

He looked between each of the team members as though expecting them to be equally incredulous about Geppetto's request.

“I can give you five k. MAYBE. There's no profit in this for me!”

“But it's jewelry. Most of this is raw.”

“And most of it is STOLEN. At Grinnin' Vinnie's we sell reputable goods.”

Geppetto glared at Vinnie.

“I'm walking if we don't get a full ten grand.”

Without skipping a beat, Vinnie riposted,

“Nine.”

Geppetto continued to glare.

“Nine thousand five hundred.”

“Nine thousand two hundred and fifty.”

“Nine thousand four hundred.”

“Nine thousand three hundred.”

“Nine thousand three hundred and fifty.”

“Nine thousand three hundred and fifty but I want your tie.”

Geppetto looked down at his tie, irate.

“Are you serious?”

“Nah, I'm just joshin' you. But seriously, nine thousand three hundred twenty five.”

“The difference at this point isn't enough to cover a dinner. Are we really going to keep arguing this?”

Vinnie crossed his arms.

“I eat large desserts. Final offer.”

“Fine. Fuck you.”

Dervish took a moment to retract his cyberblades. He had instinctively deployed them for some reason.

“Pleasure doing business with yous. Here's your cash, the boys will see you out.”

Looking at his three glowering teammates, Bend offered,

“Hey, at least we did a good deed?”

He shut up as six evil eyes turned his way.

“I’m beginning to think that my Buddhist tenet of abandoning material possessions may conflict with my choice of profession.”

Chapter 12: College, Talking Blenders, and Nuclear Spirits

The go-ganger collapsed, gurgling, to the floor of the alleyway. Blood ran in thin streams over the collar of her leather jacket, escapees from Geppetto's searching fangs. Surveying the deep gouges on her neck as he produced his handkerchief to wipe his pale, colorless lips, the banshee figured that she'd probably live. Probably. The wound certainly wasn't fatal on its own, but that wasn't how a banshee killed. She'd live in body, and then only for so long. She'd probably show up under a bus in a few months, another unfortunate victim of hopelessness and societal stagnation.

"What a senseless waste of human life," commented Geppetto, with more referential humor than legitimate concern, as he used the heel of his loafer to nudge his victim further into the debris of the alleyway before returning to the streets near his apartment, picking up his briefcase again and continuing his walk home.

Geppetto was in a good place. He'd used the proceeds from the bank job to buy a nice apartment in the mob neighborhood in Tacoma, near to Wildcard's place. He had a nice trid subscription, comfortable furniture, and tasteful decorations. Home was now a nice place to return to after feeding or working, rather than a necessity. And boy, did it feel great to stroll through his doorway into a room with proper air-conditioning.

"Apartment. Climate-control on. Let's get a dry sixty-two degrees."

"Can do, Geppetto," announced Geppetto's blender. "Do you want to play?"

"No thanks, I've got a little stuff to catch up on," commented Geppetto. "But thanks."

After about five seconds, Geppetto remembered that his blender couldn't talk.

"Wait, what the fuck?"

Geppetto spun around to find the entirety of his kitchen appliances arrayed in a little battalion on the counter. Considering that he was naturally a hemovore, he'd never had much use for a blender or a toaster. However, despite his recent inexperience with such devices, he was pretty sure that they weren't supposed to be marching towards him a la "Toy Story" with unknown intent.

"Uncle Geppetto looks scared," announced the microwave. "What should we do?"

"Hugs!" The egg-beater spun its whisks, beginning to chant. "Hugs!"

As the appliances began to pick up their pace, Geppetto began slowly backing out of the room. There was a disconcerting whining from above him. Geppetto looked up to see his blender sitting atop the fridge, blades whirling freely. Time seemed to move in slo-mo as it jumped for him.

"HUUUUUUGS!"

Geppetto had murdered someone in an alleyway not 15 minutes ago, and this was still something he was not prepared to deal with. After briefly considering its options, his lizard brain opted for "flight."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Geppetto stumbled into his living room, knocking over his couch on the way in. He screamed to his home node,

“Home CHN! HOME CHN! Close the kitchen door! CLOSE THE KITCHEN DOOR!”

The house did not comply. As Geppetto's reading lamp hopped over the fallen couch, nudging against the vampire's tailcoats, it mournfully asked,

“Don't you like hugs, uncle Geppetto?”

The whine returned as the blender hopped out of the kitchen with its buddies food processor and vacuum cleaner. Falling into an awkward roll over the ruins of the couch, Geppetto continued sprinting towards his bedroom, only to find that the adjacent bathroom's showerhead had somehow become ambulatory and was busy crawling across his bedspread, acting like an explorer on an umbilicus. It cried, surprised,

“We've been discovered! Cheese it, boys!”

As Geppetto saw his entire supply of disposable commlinks and his electric toothbrush flee from under his bed to the undersides of his other furniture, he began to babble freely, no longer capable of producing coherent responses to the madness that was once his unobtrusive urban apartment.

In a final bid of desperation, Geppetto threw himself bodily into his closet and slammed the door shut. A few flashlights milled around his feet, nuzzling against his ankles, but none were capable of doing the damage of, say, a blender. This worked. This was fine. Geppetto had a call to make.

“Ares Seattle Personnel. Who are you looking for?”

“Security Director McWilliams. Make it snappy.”

“May I ask who's calling, sir?”

“Just connect me to him.”

A short pause later, and 2D's nasal tones resounded over Geppetto's commlink.

“Oh. Hey. Um, hi, Geppetto. You're probably wondering--”

“WHY ARE THERE SPRITES IN MY APARTMENT.”

“--you're wondering--”

“WHY ARE THERE SPRITES IN MY APARTMENT TWODEE.”

“--wondering why--”

“I WANT THEM TO GO AWAY TWODEE.”

--why--

"I HEAR SLAMS ON THE DOOR TWODEE, I THINK MY MINI-FRIDGE IS TRYING TO BREAK IN."

There was a brief pause, and then Geppetto's home CHN announced, in 2D's voice,

"Okay, kids. Show's over. Everyone back to your places."

Geppetto's apartment filled with the resounding "awwwww" of a flock of children scorned.

"Explain."

"Well, I was telling you that--"

"NOOOOOOWWWWW."

"...Okay. You cool now?"

Geppetto sighed and slumped down against the back wall of his closet. The handle jiggled a little and then the door teetered open, giving Geppetto a clear view of all of his appliances carefully returning to their respective places, now in full Toy Story mode.

"Okay. Yeah. I'm done. Why have you ruined the subtle balance of calm and tranquility that is my life, 2D?"

"Well, I'm not allowed to keep sprites on the building server anymore."

"If they got up to this shit, 2D, I can understand why."

"Well, actually, they found the launch codes."

"What."

"You know. The big ones."

"What the actual fuck, 2D."

"Yeah. On the 4th of July I had to stop them from accidentally nuking the complex during the fireworks display. Incidentally, you can thank me for saving Seattle from nuclear Armageddon anytime. Point being until they can understand real-world consequences I'm letting them gestate in an environment with less of said consequences."

Geppetto growled between his teeth.

"Namely, my house."

"Well, yeah. I couldn't use just ANYONE's house. That would be unprofessional."

Geppetto's cry of rage was so intense that his electric shaving razor fell over and then hid in the sink.

“Give me one good reason that I shouldn't just sell this apartment and then proceed to dedicate the rest of my shadowrunning career to ruining your life, 2D.”

“Well, for one, I can pay off, like, half your rent.”

“...that is a very good reason.”

And that was how Geppetto's apartment got the “sprite magnet” quality.

The mil-spec suit felt right. Dervish had recently had it upgraded at the Ares facility. The hydraulics were improved, the whole thing was lined with anti-thermal metamaterials, and to top it all off, they added new ports for his more exotic blade locations. Truly, Ares was a discriminating force in the world of power armor. It also helped having the team's old hacker in a cushy position in the company. Man, Dervish was so happy to have 2D working Ares these days. It just made everyone on the team's lives easier.

As Dervish jetted over a low, crumbling section of the Redmond wall, flying at low altitude over the rubble and dirt of the Barrens, he received a text from Jose Rodriguez, his surrogate father/sensei.

>hey son, problems at home. im probly gonna head out on the ol horse cart for a little while. you go ahead and see for yourself

With a shrug, Dervish continued home, knocking over the crappy hingeless plank that functioned as his door. He noticed that, weirdly, a lot of the booby traps had been set off but there were no obvious bodies. And these booby traps would leave bodies, or he wasn't looking at a shotgun duct-taped to a wall.

All was answered when he turned the corner to find a high-force nuclear spirit sitting on his dilapidated couch, absently hucking body parts at a wall with its telekinesis. It turned its featureless, blinding white face to him.

“So, um.”

The nuclear spirit remained silent.

“Are those gangers?”

“Yes.”

“Are you painting my wall?”

“I like the squish noise.”

The spirit gestured at a mangled corpse, which promptly hovered into the air and then rocketed at high speed into the opposite wall. The nuclear spirit giggled.

“How long are you planning on doing that?”

“Until I run out of bodies. You count as 'bodies,' by the way.”

Dervish surveyed the pile of bodies behind the couch. The spirit probably had a couple more throws' worth.

“Okay. I'm...I'm gonna go.”

“Don't let me stop you.”

As Dervish awkwardly exited out of the broken-down building again, he saw his old, blind, tattooed master pass by on a wooden cart filled with weapons, drawn by a three-legged horse.

“You down for a road trip, son?”

“Yeah. Dad, I think I really need a job.”

“It's the economy, son. Fucks all of us in the end. Ho, Lucky! Yah!”

“How you holding up, Dylan?”

Wildcard shrugged. He was sitting in a torn-up armchair in the lobby of an old medical clinic in Redmond, sharing tea with his street doc. Ancients signs were everywhere. Doctor Julia Greene was paid up with them, and they certainly kept the riff-raff out of the block.

“As well as can be expected, I guess. The runnin' business is weird.”

Greene was a stern, hawkish-looking woman. If she were a decade older, she would resemble the villainous matron from some Victorian orphan tale. As it were, she simply looked like the slightly more youthful version of said villainous matron. Ah, distinctions.

“Am I gonna be seeing you for cyberblades and more Wired anytime soon? Whenever I get runners in it's all they ask for.”

Wildcard chuckled and sipped his iced tea, briefly propping his mask up to avoid spilling on it.

“With any luck, no. Funny, though, I got a partner who'd be right up your alley.”

“Well, runners aren't normally my type, Wildcard,” said Greene, with a thin smile, as she looked at the bizarre foot traffic of gangers, beggars, and criminals that passed down the block, “although if his money's good I'll take as much as he's willing to give.”

“I could forward you his number, but that'd be redundant,” commented Wildcard. Greene cocked an eyebrow.

“Oh?”

“Because the idiot just went by in his red, white and blue power armor on a horse-drawn carriage. OY! BIGGUN! OVER HERE!”

Greene had been skeptical until she saw the amount of money Dervish was flaunting (literally the rest of his share from the last run AND the run before that) and then invited him to the operating table. As she was working on the bones of his cranium, cutting down into the bone to fit in the mesh inserts that would eventually harden and strengthen the skull, she found a minor problem, and called Wildcard over.

“First, Wildcard, your friend here is costing me a fortune in anesthetics. He keeps coming awake again. You didn't tell me this bastard had metabolic enhancers. He's like a metahuman goddamn weapon!”

Dervish groaned and reached absently for the hole in his skull, prompting Greene to slam another syringe of morphine into his arm. Its four brothers and sisters lay in the hazardous waste bin to the side.

“Yeah, Dervish is like that,” said Wildcard, with a shrug. “What's the second?”

Greene handed Wildcard a petri dish with a .308 armor piercing round in it, deformed heavily and covered in grey matter.

“The slightly more pressing issue is that there was a bullet in his brain. Considering the growth around it I'd hazard it's been there for a YEAR.”

Wildcard, of course, had no idea about Dervish's unfortunate run-in with the sniper at the very start of the Two-Times arc.

“Shouldn't he be dead?”

“You'd think so, but all I'm getting are some weird brainwave patterns. Like some parts of the frontal cortex shutting off when you jiggle the wound around. Either way, I'll try to implant some additional grey matter. Your boy here's got a Type O system, so luckily I don't need to worry about cloning anything. Either way, when he comes to, you give him a stern talking-to about getting shot in the head less.”

Wildcard pulled on a medical glove and looked over the bullet, curious.

“Well, he's a street sammy, Greene.”

“I didn't say 'not at all,' I just said 'less.’”

“You're sure this guy is legit?”

“He's one of us, Tartarus,” said Mars. “We don't call him Pluto for nothing. Just don't piss him off.”

Damien Sanitiere, better known on the streets as Geppetto, was better known by his SECOND code name, Tartarus, at the Merlyns sports bar Downtown. It was a small, homey establishment that just happened to play clubhouse for all of the different mages on the Finnigan family's payroll. Mostly the others were Hermetics and Christian Theurges of a decidedly corrupt catholic bent, but Geppetto didn't mind being the only Black Magician there. It added a sort of murderous mystique.

“I've heard weird things about Pluto, Mars. I don't feel safe buying an illusion focus from a guy I've heard weird things about.”

Mars, a cruel-looking, dark-skinned Mafioso adorned with hermetic fetishes, scoffed.

“Says Tartarus, the children's tales boogeyman. Sacrificed any virgins lately?”

“Please. You take me for an Aztec?”

Mars chuckled.

“Touché. Either way, this guy's as legit as any mook who's gonna sell you black magic fetishes. Take that as you will.”

Geppetto sighed loudly and melodramatically.

“I suppose I'll take what I can get. But if I die, Mars, you have to find another black magician.”

“I'll find another Christian Theurge and save myself the trouble.” Mars waved Geppetto out.
“Gettoutahere.”

Geppetto drove into Redmond to find Vulcan's Forge, identified on the map as a small bunker hidden in a large chunk of blasted land and rubble from a fallen skyscraper. Foreboding music practically played in his ears as he came within sight of the block of reinforced, magic-resistant concrete adorned with gun turrets and cameras. A single large blast door covered the front facade, with large slats built in to both the very top and bottom of the door. As Geppetto came within fifty feet, a voice announced over loudspeaker, as the gun turrets focused on him,

“NO CLOSER! Who are you!? Who vouches for you!?”

Geppetto put his hands up.

“I'm Tartarus, from the Merlyns. I'm here to redeem that order on the black magic manipulation focus.”

“Got anyone to vouch for that story?”

“No, because you demanded that I not bring friends, otherwise you'd take it as an attack and kill all of us.”

“Good, good. They haven't compromised your memories. Yet. Step up to the door.”

Geppetto stood in front of the fortified blast door.

“Okay, what now?”

The top slat opened into darkness.

“Stick your hand in there.”

“What? No.”

“STICK YOUR HAND IN THERE OR I KILL YOU. YOU COULD BE ONE OF THEM ALREADY.”

“WHO'S 'THEM'!?”

Geppetto reluctantly stuck his hand into the slat, only to feel a strong hand close around his wrist, yanking it down and out of sight radius to cast spells. He roughly identified the hand as that of a dwarf, judging by the strength and the stubby little--albeit gloved--fingers clasped around his own dainty hand.

“Ow, hey, what are you, OW! FUCK!”

Geppetto recoiled and struggled against the blast door as Vulcan slammed a syringe into his arm and drew blood, before letting go of his arm and letting Geppetto tumble back from the slat. As soon as Geppetto's arm was clear, the slat slammed shut.

“WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT!?”

The loudspeaker announced,

“Taking a blood sample. Insurance. 'Case I need to kill you anytime in the next few decades before the nukleocytes go inert.”

There was a pause.

“HEY! HMMHV! Bastard, you're infected!” The guns all turned down to aim at Geppetto. “You plannin' on eatin' me!? That it!?”

“HEY!” Geppetto yelled, throwing his hands above his head again. “That was in the damn brief! You already know that I'm infected! You think I get this fucking marshmallows and milk complexion naturally!?”

The guns retracted.

“Right. Just testing you again. Impostors everywhere. Put your hand in the bottom slot.”

“You gonna stab me again?”

“Only if you pull anything funny.”

The door was configured such that, to reach into the bottom slot, Geppetto had to plaster his face against the doorframe with no visibility. A moment later, a small object fell into his hand. He retracted his hand to find a small earring made out of bone, which emanated dark magic.

“Pleasure doing business with you, you fucking nut.”

“Wire me the rest of the cred when you hit the perimeter. Now march!”

Bend sat in an armchair in his totally normal apartment with no sprites or ghosts or ghouls or anything. He watched his totally normal trid and played with his illusion focus, a Buddhist monk’s sash that he had purchased through totally legal channels. All in all, his life was looking up, since he’d bought himself a nice place with his proceeds, and was eating good, organic food.

He got a call from Brianna in the middle of surfing the Matrix. Lifting his goggles, he picked up his commlink.

“Bend! I can’t reach Wildcard, Geppetto, or Dervish. I think Wildcard and Dervish are in, like, an underground bunker or something--maybe an illegal business with a jammer? I don’t know--and when I tried to call Geppetto I just got some dwarf yelling “who are you, who are you working for.” Can you round up the team?”

Bend sighed, wrapped the sash around his waist, and opened his closet to retrieve his street clothes.

“Sure, Brianna. I’ll get right on it. We got a job?”

“Not a big one, but yeah. Looks like you’ll actually get to do some good on this one, too.”

Bend smiled as he slipped on his Tir Military vet’s jacket, heading for the door.

“Those are words I like to hear, Brianna.”

“Just don’t tell Geppetto.”

“God, no.”

So, has anyone ever been to a BJ's Bar and Grill? Because that's basically where the job was. Specifically, it was in an overpriced mid-tier bar and grill in the Seattle University district, visited only by college students who had mommy and daddy's money to spend. Suffice to say, when the team approached the front desk and asked for the Johnson party, they had a sneaking suspicion as to what they would find, and it wouldn't be any crime kingpin or corp Johnson.

They found a short young man with wiry hair, who couldn't be older than nineteen. He looked nervously at the team over his order of cheese fries, clearly completely out of his league. Judging by his whimpering countenance, he'd never even seen a hardened criminal before, let alone done business with four of them.

Geppetto sat down and extended a thin hand to grasp Mister Johnson's own shaking mitt.

"Mr. Johnson. Shall we get down to business?"

The Johnson gulped.

"Um, okay. Yeah. You can call me, uh. Dan. Dan Granger."

"In this business we don't use names, Mr. Johnson."

Johnson squealed, but regained composure quickly.

"No. Um. I mean, I know that I'm Mr. Johnson. I know that. But my name is important. This job, um, this job. It's about my sister. So you'd like, figure my name out anyway."

Geppetto raised an eyebrow.

"I don't mean to be impolite, Mr. Johnson, but this is a brisk business. What's the job?"

"My sister, um, Emily Granger? She's a grad student in the School of Political Science. And she's been receiving death threats. I want you to find out who's been sending them, and, like, turn them into the police or something."

"Is there a reason why your sister has been receiving death threats, Mr. Johnson?"

"Well, she's dating this guy. Uh. Jonathan Riese."

Wildcard tossed an AR window in front of Geppetto. Geppetto read the article off of the window.

"Hm. Jonathan Riese. Running for county administrator of the university district on a liberal ticket. Going on about changing the system of crushing loans and high real-estate premiums, about tearing down the legacy of the incumbent county administrator, Roger Carmichael, conservative ticket. I can see how he'd make some enemies."

Granger gulped.

"Yeah. All the death threats are about, um, her being liberal, and about her being 'his whore,' and all

that. And she thinks she can handle it, but she can't."

"What do you mean by that, Johnson?"

"She's brushing it off. She says it just comes with the territory, but I think she's in real danger. These guys are serious. At least, I think they are."

Geppetto pent his fingers.

"Alright, Mr. Johnson. We can take care of the problem. What are you offering?"

"Uh. I've got 10,000 nuyen saved up--"

Geppetto frowned.

"As a general rule, Johnson, we don't go for less than 20."

"Okay! 10 before, 10 after! I'll scrounge up the money! Just stop them from hurting my sister!"

The team's first stop was Jonathan Riese's apartment, where both he and Emily Granger lived. Hacking Granger's phone would be the first angle on finding out where the death threats were coming from.

Finding Riese wasn't a problem. He and Granger lived in an on-campus apartment building, on the fourth story. Bend cloaked, gecko-gripped up, and set up one of his cameras at the window, sending the footage back down to the rest of the team in the sedan.

Inside the room, sitting around a table, were six people. Riese himself, a charismatic young man with a gleaming smile, was flanked by two attractive young women, quickly identified as his girlfriend/campaign adviser Emily Granger, and his secretary/PR agent Lisa Dawson. Across from him sat three burlier, less charismatic athletic and frat boy types, probably some form of security or assistant. Out of curiosity, Wildcard started bringing up the student registry (hacked) and Riese's campaign website (public), and started doing some cross-referencing.

"Okay. There's Riese, our girl, and Riese's assistant. The three palookas are Greg Hampton, Shean Mater, and Peter Smith. Football team, wrestling team, frat boy. Don't see what ties them into the campaign exactly, let me keep digging."

Wildcard set his botnet on hacking Granger's commlink as he looked up more information on the three aforementioned "palookas."

"Woah, hold on. These three all have Humanis-leading tendencies. Conservative families all. What are they doing on Riese's ticket?"

Dervish shrugged.

“Dunno. Enforcement? Cut them a deal maybe?”

Geppetto frowned.

“Whatever it is, I don't like it.”

Wildcard brought up a partition of his nexus, and made a copy of Granger's commlink on it.

“You don't have to, that's the beauty of politics. Ever heard the phrase about the best compromise being nobody happy?”

Wildcard thumbed through the threats, which were mostly incoherent cries of conservative outrage peppered with threats of rape and dismemberment.

“Hmm. Our would-be attacker's got a bunch of disposables, or he's more than one person. The threats are all coming from different nodes.”

Dervish offered,

“But couldn't it just be one guy doing that, you know, slaving thing?”

“True. We'll have to find the offending commlinks to be sure. Until then, Dervish, you get to shadow our girl. Gotta make sure she's not being shadowed by anyone else, capische?”

Dervish stepped out of the car, donning his black leather jacket.

“Don't have to tell me twice. Keep in contact.”

The night progressed slowly. Bend stuck a bug in the room, only to find that they weren't discussing anything scandalous at all, only advertisement policy for their upcoming smear campaign on the current county administrator, Roger Carmichael. Carmichael was a distinguished, salt-and-pepper sort, which tripped the team out: he or one of his aides certainly didn't seem the type to be sending “DIE HORE GUNNA RAPE U BITCH” texts 24/7.

Of course, the plot began to come together when Dervish spotted the enforcer, Peter Smith, following Granger with a knife.

“I think we have a hint, guys.”

The team made an executive decision. Namely, that it was time for Dervish to try out some of his new implants: shock pads.

Dervish stretched and flexed his fingers as he armed the black blocks of rubberized carbon that had replaced his fingertips as of less than a day before. There was a sharp crack as the surfaced buzzed with electricity. Smith turned around just in time for Dervish to grab either side of his head, at which point he squeezed the knife so hard it flew out of his grasp, spasmed wildly, and hit the pavement. Grabbing him by his jacket, Dervish hucked the frat boy one-handed into a nearby bush, as the rest of team pulled onto the street to pick up girl-watching duty.

“Oh man. That felt GOOD,” grinned Dervish, rifling through Smith's pockets. “Okay, we got a commlink in here with some texts from an anonymous number, tells him to rough the girl up something fierce. Wildcard, you wanna back-hack this?”

“Be my pleasure.”

Driving slowly, Wildcard popped open a few AR windows to begin hacking the commlink. In one window he ran a trace of wireless nodes, the better to identify the phone that the message had come from when he came to it.

Running his trace and trying to hack, Wildcard noticed an eminent problem.

“Commlink's slaved. Another commlink's running it. Like we suspected. I can't hack this, not effectively, since a remote administrator's running everything right now. But that means we can find the boss by running a rudimentary trace. This whole operation's run on disposables, it's got more holes than Swiss cheese. Bend, I'm starting from the whole campus then narrowing in, seeing when our mystery comm no longer shows. Ready for a game of hot and cold?”

Bend lowered himself down to the first story of the building and opened his polymer-coated bag of tricks, which in this case carried a tank top and pair of shorts. Stripping the tacsuit in an alley behind the building, Bend changed into the street clothes and stashed the folded-up tacsuit in a backpack that he'd left in the alleyway for just such an occasion.

“I prefer hide and go seek, Wildcard, but it'll have to do.”

Wildcard led Bend on a merry walking-speed chase around the campus. Early narrowing of the trace ruled out most of the science and arts campuses, but as Wildcard hit the library and humanities building he found the node moving.

“It's another disposable. May be slaved to a third system. Either way, it's on the move. Headed to the history building now. I'll highlight our target on the tacnet.”

Bend closed on the target to find a familiar face: Lisa Dawson, Riese's secretary.

“We got contact,” said Bend. “And a familiar face at that. We thinking the girl wants Granger out of the picture? Wants to get Riese for herself?”

“Maybe,” said Wildcard. “But if so, then why's she slaved to another commlink? She's not the ringleader, that's the case.”

“Maybe she hired someone else on,” suggested Geppetto. “A specialist. Mobster maybe. Someone more experienced than a polisci student in scaring a girl off.”

“Or there's more to this,” said Dervish, as he took some credsticks from Smith's pockets to make the attack look like a mugging. “You think you can run another trace, Wildcard?”

Wildcard brought up the trace window.

“Yeah, looks like yet another disposable. Somewhere on campus--fuck!”

Wildcard swore as Dawson turned her own phone off and tossed it in a garbage can.

“Bend! Get that phone and turn it back on! We need the master commlink!”

“On it.”

Bend leaned over the trash can as soon as Dawson was out of visual contact, and retrieved the disposable.

He turned it on, only to retrieve another slew of cursing from Wildcard.

“Bloody hell! Master commlink's off! And we were so close too.”

Geppetto turned to Wildcard.

“On the plus side, we know that the assistant and the thugs are in on it. So we know what to watch out for.”

“Except the ringleader.”

“I guess we'll have to run surveillance, then.”

“I guess we'll have to. You volunteering?”

Geppetto sat, cursing at his teammates, as he sat outside of Granger's apartment at 4 in the morning. She didn't sleep there often, preferring to stay with her boyfriend, but tonight she was sleeping in her own apartment, meaning that the team had to split up to cover both her and their suspects. Dervish was on similar duty for Riese's thugs, whereas Bend was keeping track of Riese. Wildcard had set his botnet to gathering all the information that they could on Riese's connections, and had gone to bed so he could be fresh for more hacking tomorrow. Considering that Dervish had the constitution of an ox, and Bend had adept powers that made his needs for sleep, food, drink, and air practically negligible, Geppetto was the only one actually getting tired from the ordeal.

And, there was the voice in the back of his head. It was an angry voice, but its anger seemed almost soothing. We had a deal, Geppetto, it said. When it's time to sleep, I come out...

In the morning, Wildcard pinged the rest of the team.

“Okay, the bots got into one of Riese's comms. Today's a free day, but he's hanging with the girl while the boys bounce. That means we can merge Riese duty and Granger duty. Anyone want to be put on standby?”

“Actually,” Geppetto said, meekly, “I'm probably going to need to step out for a while.”

“The hell's that supposed to mean?”

Wildcard's answer came in the form of a mad cackle that swiftly silenced as Geppetto's commlink turned off. Wildcard said to Bend and Dervish,

“I thought you were kidding about the Satan thing!”

As Bend and Wildcard met for lunch in the same food court that Granger and Riese were eating at (Dervish stopped in only briefly so he could get back to monitoring the three stooges after a truly preposterous, Jughead-esque amount of burgers), there was a sudden, extraordinarily loud cacophony of beeps and whirrs. Everyone on campus had received a mass text simultaneously. Wildcard received a prompt that his own nexus had sent out the messages, on command of Geppetto.

“FRAT PARTY TONITE AT ALPHA PHI. PREPARE FOR A NIGHT OF HEDONISM AND DEBAUCHERY UNLIKE YOU HAVE EVER SEEN. THE LORD OF DARKNESS SPARES NO EXPENSE. TERRENCE JACKSON SAYS BE THERE OR MISS OUT!”

Bend and Wildcard blinked and looked around as everyone in the food court started chattering about how “Jackson's pulling his old shit again,” and “I wonder how he got it to everyone, did he hire a hacker?” A lot of people agreed to stop by to see what the deal was...including Granger and Riese.

Wildcard clutched the sides of his head.

“Well, this just got a lot more interesting.”

Deciding that right now clever infiltration was no longer an asset on Riese and Granger, Bend and Dervish switched places, with Bend following Riese's thugs, and Dervish and Wildcard tailing the wayward couple.

Wildcard and Dervish made the frat party shortly after Granger and Riese, only to find themselves accosted by two figures. One was Geppetto, who had somewhere along the line lost his suit and donned a sideways baseball cap, a “Not tonight ladies/I'm here to get drunk” novelty t-shirt, a pair of off-green chonglers, and mismatched flip-flops. The other was the gentleman whom he was currently sharing a Camelbak with, a collar-popped cap-wearing orc frat boy with a pierced ear, expensive shades, and a porno trid apparently running on said shades.

“Yo yo yo, mah boi Satan here says you be doins some Shadow-runsing up in this bitch! Well the only runnin' I'ma be doin' is after I get me some puss-say, knawmsayin?”

Jackson turned to Dervish.

“Do I know you from somewhere, Brosemite Sam?”

Dervish's eyebrows narrowed over his mirrorshades.

“Was that supposed to be a play on ‘street samurai’?”

“Naw, Brosetta Stone, I just be keepin it real. This shit's energy drink and vodka, yo, I be gettin' mad unrecognizin' of everyone and shit.”

“No, Terrence. I don't think you know me.”

“Coo, yo. Feel free to drink and partay, yo, it's all on my new best friend here's bill. Just one thing, since I'ma be not up to recognizing NOBODY soon, yo. Ya feel me, sammy?”

“What is it?”

Jackson handed Dervish a credstick with fifty nuyen on it.

“You a runner, right? You be seeing that nerd fool Simon Berckiwitz, you rough his ass up MAD crazy, knowmsayin?”

“Uh. Sure, Mr. Jackson. I'll crazy his rough up, or whatever the fuck.”

“Good man. My man the mofuckin vampire here vouches for you. Together we be mackin on all the bitches of the night, fuckin broseratu, bitches be suckin our dicks while we be suckin their blood, hear?”

“Blood-sucking brosquitos,” concurred Adversary, who was completely sober and evidently having the time of his life.

“Okay, we'll make sure the nerd doesn't show up, Terrence,” said Wildcard, rubbing his temples. “Till then, we got business to take care of inside.”

Jackson's eyes widened. “Oh shit, bro siento, brah. I didn't realize you had--” he pelvis-thrusted obscenely, clearly mimicking horrible frat party bathroom sex, “--biznass! Don't let me stop you from gettin' ya freak on!”

With that, he attempted to chest-bump Wildcard, knocking the unprepared Wildcard on his ass. Jackson screamed, “WOO! PARTY!” and then disappeared into the crowd. Dervish turned to Geppetto's puppeted body as Adversary fiddled with his host's new earring.

“You're not going to, like, kill these kids or anything, right?”

“Well, today I figured that facilitating a truly record amount of date rape applied to the evil quota too.”

Dervish sighed and moved into the frat house.

“God dammit, Adversary.”

“That's the spirit!”

Meanwhile, Bend followed Greg Hampton past the campus and then the campus neighborhood, as the football player, phone at his ear, made for the freeway on foot. Bend followed him to an underpass with a small shantytown beneath it. Bend watched as Hampton fingered a small hold-out pistol in his pocket. Evidently the privileged human kid wasn't too keen on heading into the bad parts of town. The question was, why was he here in the first place?

Bend continued to follow him as he seemed to peek at and survey the destitute homeless beneath the bridge. He was clearly looking for something, and as he neared a pile of rags with what vaguely looked like an unkempt gray beard peeking out of them, he seemed to have found what he was looking for.

Hampton nudged at the pile of rags, and in an instant it seemed to rise up, as though reforming from a puddle. Hampton was speaking to a tall homeless man. Most of him was obscured by rags and hair, but Bend could make out a few cybernetic implants, most prominently two prosthetic hands. Even though he had cybereyes--and a recent model at that--something crazy seemed to glint in them.

“Watcha want, not-Willy?” The homeless man scratched at his face harshly, his metallic fingers bruising the flesh. His blank face betrayed an empty mind. “I heard ya had somethin for me. Somethin for me to do. I like doin things. You got the money? You got the money for me?”

Hampton held out a credstick, and the homeless man snatched it out of his hand.

“Yeah, yeah. This'll keep me goin. This is good. Who ya want done, not-Willy?”

Hampton nervously brought up an AR window showing Emily Granger, with a marker identifying her current location at the frat party.

“Riese wants you to scream something about liberals or Carmichael before you do her, if at all possible. Something to make it look good for the media. Seriously, Red. We need this to look like a freak conservative thing.”

“Don't worry bout me. I'll do it. Do it like you say. Make Willy proud. Red's a good Willy.”

Bend slid into hiding as the homeless man identified as “Red” began to walk towards him. He caught a glimpse of cyberlegs moving beneath the rags. New models, powerful.

And then his blood went cold, as Red passed by him.

Bend could feel it, in the astral. A screaming soul, rendered mad by unholy bindings, chained to a rotting face stapled onto a metal head. He was all machine, except for the little bits of flesh that still qualified him as something that might once have been human.

As Red's legs unfolded into skimmer disks and he picked up speed, revealing a powerful metal mech chassis beneath the rags, Bend sent a message to his team:

“CYBERZOMBIE.”

Wildcard threw himself into his car and screeched into action, beelining to pick Bend up.

“CODE BLOODY FUCKING RED, EVERYONE! BEND! MEET ME ON FIFTH AND NATIONAL, AND GET IN THE CAR FUCKING QUICK! DERVISH! GRAB THE GIRL AND FOR THE LOVE OF GOD WAKE GEPPETTO UP! WE DO NOT HAVE ROOM FOR ERROR HERE!”

As Wildcard swerved towards the freeway underpass, he saw the literal murder-hobo flying past down the middle of the street, breaking the side mirrors off passing cars as he flew. He moved with such force that he literally caused the cars to rock. A motorcyclist made the mistake of getting in his way and was tossed with his motorcycle into the side of a nearby storefront.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, that's what we're up against!?”

Bend Dukes-of-Hazzarded through the passenger side window.

“DRIVE! GET BACK TO THE FRAT HOUSE!”

Wildcard spun his car into a donut and flashed down the wrong side of the street, slowly gaining on the speeding cyberzombie.

Dervish had just finished bodily grabbing the screaming girl away from Jonathan Riese and out the door as the zombie, its tattered rags flying wildly from the force of its thrusters, crashed clean through the ceiling of the frat house in pursuit.

“I FOUND YOU WILLEEEEEEEEE.”

Dervish did the first thing that his instincts said to do, and that was to charge.

As he received a skull fracture (in his newly-reinforced super-dense stone-thick skull, no less) courtesy of a flying, di-coated titanium fist, and promptly crashed through the plaster of one of the frat house's walls into one of the bedrooms, he realized that charging was a mistake.

“I-I-I SAW YOU WILLEEEEE.”

The zombie clambered through the hole in the wall in a quadrupedal fashion more becoming of a predatory primate than something that was once a human being.

“I WANTED HER BUT I FOUND YOU. I F-F-FOUND YOUUUUUUUUU.”

Dervish backed into the adjacent bathroom and then boosted, smashing the tile floor as he rammed both blades into the zombie's torso. He looked down in disbelief to find that the blades had each only pierced an inch or so in, and that Red was leaking a blackish fluid.

The zombie grabbed Dervish by the throat and flung him back in a pitching motion. Before Dervish could get over the vertigo, he was outside on the pavement with several broken ribs and the vague awareness that he'd gone through at least two more walls. He scrambled to his feet, his vision a blurry red haze. His AR readouts gave him dire medical warning.

He looked up to see, blurry on his left, his teammates and the terrified girl in the car. On his right was the cyberzombie, which plowed clean through the front door of the frathouse rather than opening it. Crowds of screaming students fled into the street.

“WHY DON'T YOU STAY WILLEEEEE. WHY DON'T YOU STAAAAAAAY.”

Dervish threw himself into the car. Spitting up blood and what he was pretty sure was one of his tusks, he said one word, but he said it with all the emphasis he could muster.

“DRIVE!”

The team tore out of the university district at two-hundred miles per hour. Its face contorted in an expression of loss and anguish, the cyberzombie boosted to keep up and scrambled at the back of the car, but it simply couldn't make the speed necessary to catch them.

As the team disappeared into the streets of Seattle, they wondered what exactly they'd stumbled into.

Chapter 13: Bullets, Bombs, and Flower Petals

“I think it’s still behind us.”

Emily Granger, a polisci undergrad at Seattle U, had been repeating this phrase approximately once every five seconds for the last minute, in a half-catatonic state. Earlier in the day, she had been stopping by a frat party to curry favor for her boyfriend and political partner, Jonathan Riese, a grad student running for the local administrative coordinator position. Now she was in the fastest car in the greater Seattle Sprawl, with a bloodied, cybered-up orc spitting up teeth in the seat on one side of her and a pale, cold-looking albino elf on the other. In front of her were a man in a clown mask and a NASCAR-style crash suit and a man in a modern-day ninja suit. It was rather tough to see the fourth man, as the light seemed to refract around him.

A homeless man who was also a robot had crashed through the ceiling and tried to kill her. The orc had saved her. That was why he was bloody. She remembered that now. These were shadowrunners. Shadowrunners had saved her life. Her repeated phrase switched to “Oh my god” as she tilted forward in her center seat, hyperventilating.

The man in the sinister-looking clown mask glanced into his rearview mirror.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, she’s going into shock. Geppetto, talk to the woman.”

The albino man glanced in Emily’s direction and scowled. He was very handsome. However, cruelty glinted in his red eyes, and little else. She wasn’t sure that she liked the albino man.

“Wildcard, I’ve got watchers on the thing and it’s still after us. It’s running right down the damn freeway like it knows where we are. If you don’t mind, I’m going to focus on keeping us all alive right now by slowing it down.”

The man in the clown mask cursed under his breath as the mage began making summoning gestures.

“How ‘bout you, Dervish?”

The big orc responded with a growl as he injected himself with a stim from a medpack attached to the seat in front of him.

“A little busy.”

As if prompted, the distorted, transparent man peeled back his hood. He was an elf. An elf with a friendly face. She liked this man. He held her hand. His hand was partially see-through. The material covering it was rough. She felt like she was able to think clearly with him there. Not with the others. They were bad people, she could feel it. But he was okay. He wanted her safe.

“Hey, Emily? My name’s Sean. I need you to stick with us, okay? You’re going to be fine.”

Bend flinched slightly as the girl practically threw herself onto him, at least as much as she could manage through Wildcard’s myriad seatbelts. Wildcard yelled back to the team, over the roar of his engines as he accelerated,

“I think I’ve got a lock on some of the nodes on that thing, and it’s not stopping! It doesn’t have a vehicle though, that’s good! I’m thinking our first choice is to get out to sea!”

Geppetto asked, incredulous, as a fire spirit materialized behind the car to combat the incoming cyberzombie when it followed,

“You know how to drive boats!?”

“And fly helicopters.”

“Christ,” chuckled Dervish, “what did we ever need TwoDee for?”

“What indeed,” said Wildcard, as he slammed down the Everett off-ramp and made for the docks.

“Any of you have some buddies what would have a boat down here, now’s the time to pull in favors.”

Geppetto flipped out his commlink and called up Mars.

“Mars. Gonna make this quick. I’m in Everett. I need a boat.”

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line before Mars’ baritone sounded over the line.

“Mercury’s got a speedboat on Pier 15. He’ll send you a temporary access number but if you break it you’re paying for it, and he charges by the hour. What’s the need?”

“Escape, mostly.”

“Why is it always? Keep in touch, Tartarus.”

Geppetto clicked the clearance that appeared on his commlink, marking him as a “registered owner” of the boat, over to Wildcard.

“Alright, we’re due to the boat in 5 minutes,” noted Wildcard. Dervish asked,

“And about how long will it take the zombie to catch up?”

“Um...going by its trajectory, 7 minutes.”

Bend groaned.

“Well, this is going to be a swift and stress-free turnover.”

The car screeched to a stop a block away from the pier. Wildcard activated the car’s countermeasures then hit the release button on his safety gear.

“We got a two-minute window, everyone! Bloody well move!”

Bend took Emily Granger by the shoulder and led her out of the car while Dervish set up a perimeter, now properly suited up in his milspec armor. As soon as everyone had their gear from the car

(Dervish's milspec armor, shotgun, and sniper rifle, Bend's toys, Geppetto's foci, and Wildcard's machine gun and ballistic suit), the team began a tactical retreat toward the speedboat. There were faint destructive noise a few blocks away as the cyberzombie smashed past and over passing vehicles.

As the rest of the team sprinted for the speedboat, Dervish followed them slowly, back to them, facing the docks. Eventually, the monster came into sight.

Red had lost all of his rags by this point, and he wasn't a pretty sight. Every one of his extremities was a cyberlimb, head included; he'd clearly taken so many blows to the cyberskull that all that was left of his flesh was an awkwardly-stretched, ill-fitting, and jaundiced face that seemed almost stapled to his metal skull. Somewhere beneath a titanium chest, a heart was still beating, kept alive by drug injections and electroshocks.

The moment Dervish heard the scream of "WILLEEEEEEEEE," he opened fire. Red took 3 APDS rounds to the chest and didn't even slow down as he lunged for Dervish, denting Dervish's faceplate with a terrifyingly powerful blow.

"GO! GO! FUCK!"

Dervish beat the cyberzombie off of him with the butt of his shotgun as the rest of the team started the speedboat and began pulling out of the harbor. He swung his shotgun like a man possessed, alternating between shooting and melee wherever Red left him an opening. However, no matter how many rounds he unloaded into the zombie or how many times he slammed into him with his armored fists, Red kept coming, screaming back up, raining merciless blows on the already-wounded Dervish.

"TALK WILLY WHY WON'T YOU TALK."

Suddenly, Red seemed to stop. He looked up, his damaged cybereyes squinting and swiveling. And then he leapt over Dervish, flying towards another target. It was Emily Granger, standing on the docks, her arms spread wide, resigned. Dervish screamed,

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING GET BACK TO THE-"

And then one of Red's fists slammed into Emily's chest with a sickening crunch noise.

"Dervish! Over here!"

Dervish looked onto the water to see the team about 15 feet off of the docks. Emily Granger sat, unharmed but shocked, in the back, while Bend and a manifested spirit that resembled a Buddhist monk maintained some sort of spell. Geppetto yelled,

"They'll only maintain the illusion for so long! Jump!"

Dervish didn't need to be told twice. Activating his skimmer disks, he threw himself off the docks, landing on the back of the boat and causing it to dip wildly. Wildcard threw the speedboat into full throttle, powering away from the docks. From the dockyard, there was a betrayed wail of despair as the cyberzombie sped after the boat. However, by the time it could attempt a jump, the boat was already 30 feet out.

“WILLEEEEE NOOOOOO! WE JUST STARTED TALKING.”

Dervish yelled across the gap,

“I’M NOT WILLY.”

The zombie projected, its vocal chords long since replaced by synthesized sound,

“YES YOU ARE. YOU AND ME AND ALL THE OTHER WILLIES. YOU’RE NOT FULL THOUGH. YOU DIDN’T END UP LIKE THEM. DON’T LEAVE ME HERE WILLY. DON’T LEAVE ME HERE!”

Bend put a hand on Dervish’s shoulder.

“Any idea what he’s talking about, big man?”

“Even if I did, I wouldn’t want to stick around. Gun it.”

“Any idea where we’d be safe?”

Dervish and Geppetto exchanged looks. Geppetto suggested,

“Well, one idea. You know how to get to the Vancouver wildlife preserve?”

Wildcard looked at Geppetto blankly. Of course, with a mask, it’s hard not to look “blankly.”

“We’re hiding out amongst the animals?”

“Not animals,” said Dervish, examining the dents in his armor, “friends.”

As the speedboat pulled up on the beach, Wildcard took a gander at the small family of sasquatches gesturing them in.

“You have to be kidding me.”

“Met them during a drug deal gone wrong,” said Geppetto, smugly. “I think they’ve got a house around here somewhere.”

It wasn’t a house so much as a cabin with an adjoining tower build around the trees, but the Sasquatch family, five of them in total, lived in relatively good circumstances. They had wireless, a few game consoles, hot and cold running water, and a trid. All things considered they lived about as well as any of the runners, maybe a little better. One of the sasquatches, in an apron, cooked up some ravioli for the family and their “guests.” Wildcard played a little bit of Miracle Shooter with the 2 younger sasquatch kids. Emily became increasingly more and more weirded out as the team of hardened criminals interacted cordially with a bunch of Chewbaccas. All things considered it was a fairly

pleasant night.

Well, until one of Bend's spy toys, a signal scanner, picked up the signal of a tactical network approaching the island, obvious against the lack of signals elsewhere on the island.

"We got a problem. Wildcard, you wanna throw a sniffer up?"

Wildcard set his internal commlink to scanning, and eventually zeroed in on incoming traffic.

Namely, instructions from Mr. Johnson, who incidentally had the same comm code as Jonathan Riese. It was made clear that "Emily Granger must be captured, such that her death can be made to look like a political killing."

"Well, that's one question answered. Next question: they're coming in fast on a speedboat. Got a shaman, an assault rifle adept, a melee sammy, a rigger, and an infiltrator. How we wanna handle this?"

Dervish groped for his sniper rifle.

"I'm thinking overwhelming force."

Bend glanced over at Emily, who appeared to be on the verge of a panic attack.

"Considering she's target number one and they have an infiltrator, do you think we should find another place for her to hide?"

Geppetto, grinning at the prospect of an imminent fight, activated his foci.

"Like where? It's a forest, Bend. I'm thinking we just kill them all quickly."

There was a guttural call from the father sasquatch, as a guidance spirit appeared in the middle of the room. It resembled an ancient, wizened tree, reminiscent in some ways of an elderly man. As it drew its hands apart, a portal appeared, with a verdant, impossibly green landscape behind it. Geppetto gawked.

"You have got to be kidding me."

Bend looked at the sasquatch.

"You're a druid?"

The sasquatch nodded proudly. Geppetto offered,

"And a powerful one at that, if he can make metaplanar portals. Well, no sense looking the gift horse in the mouth. Let's get the two of you in there, Bend."

"Wait, you're sending me in?"

“And not risking her getting lost forever in the metaplanes, yeah. In you go!”

Bend gulped, took the girl by the shoulders, and jumped into the portal. The spirit closed it behind them.

Dervish, Geppetto, and Wildcard exchanged looks. Wildcard was in a full suit of ballistic SWAT armor, painted up in red and white like his mask. He clutched his highly-modified Ares HVAR, essentially a futuristic Chicago Typewriter. Dervish was in his Iron Patriot suit and wielding his sniper rifle, and Geppetto, though merely in his black Actioneer Business Line suit, was flanked by a cadre of giggling, menacing-looking spirits. The father sasquatch produced a compound bow, evidently quite keen on protecting his home.

“So,” said Wildcard, “plans?”

Geppetto gestured to his water spirit, an amalgamated piscine horror made of fins, tentacles, eyes and scales.

“I’m thinking we drown them, Dervish takes potshots into the water, and you gun down everything that makes it to shore.”

“I like this plan.”

The enemy running team was about 30 feet from shore when it came. A shadow in the depths, then a pair of sinister black tentacles creeping up the side of the boat, and then a loud crunch as the spirit dragged the speedboat down into the depths. As the rigger abandoned ship, he took a sniper shot square between the eyes and began floating face-down out to sea.

The rest of the enemy team, dog-paddling in the water, suddenly realized just how fucked they were.

“SPLIT,” cried the shaman, as he cast a fly spell and lifted out of the water. An arrow flashed into the water and then exploded with the force of a grenade, sending their infiltrator pinwheeling out of the water, trailing blood. As the shaman fled for the air he saw a pale man in a suit flying for him like a bat out of hell, and then his head ruptured as a powerbolt blasted him into oblivion. The adept and sammy dropped their guns and swam for their lives, which didn’t help the sammy overmuch as another two sniper shots had him sinking like a stone, falling into the jaws of the water spirit.

The panicked adept made shore, scrambling onto the sand for her life. She saw the tree-line, and began sprinting, hoping to reach cover.

She never made it, as a spray of automatic fire took her legs out from under her. Gasping in pain, she continued to crawl for the trees as a man in a SWAT suit and a clown mask approached her.

“Nothing personal, lass. Just business.”

The rattle of gunfire on the beach signaled the end of the team’s opposition.

The team converged triumphantly back at the sasquatches’ cabin.

“That wasn’t very long at all,” chuckled Wildcard. “Bend’s probably going to wonder why we sent him on a four-minute vacation.”

“Yeah, if he hasn’t already escaped to somewhere else, the weasel,” smiled Dervish. “Come on, let’s open it up.”

The druidic spirit nodded slowly, before opening the portal up again.

And out tumbled Bend and Emily, giggling and groping at each other, buck-ass naked but for hemp skirts and floral wreaths. They squirmed around on the floor, alternately tickling, kissing, and embracing each other. Bend looked up to make eye contact with his shocked teammates, and his normally-reserved face melted into a massive ear-to-ear grin.

“Hey,” said Bend, his eyes dilated, “It’s my friends! Hi, friends!”

Emily clutched Bend into a big hug, squealing happily as she imitated Bend’s voice.

“Hi, friends!”

Dervish and Wildcard stared.

“What...what the fuck?”

Only Geppetto understood what had happened, and buried his face in his palms.

“Metaplanar time dilation. God fucking dammit.”

“It was beautiful,” said Bend, spreading his arms wide. “As beautiful as Emily.”

“No, you’re beautiful!”

Geppetto, Wildcard, and Dervish looked between the 50-something elf and the 18-year-old girl with disbelief. Wildcard hazarded,

“So have you two, uh...”

“In the druidic metaplanes, love is free, man.”

“Dear God.”

Bend stood up and pulled a hemp sack out of the portal before it closed up.

“So, I kept, like, all my stuff. Because there were, like, runners, or something? I don’t even remember, it’s been like half a year.”

“It’s been five minutes, Bend.”

Bend’s eyes unfocused.

“It has been? Far out!”

Wildcard brought up a few AR windows.

“...So, if you all don’t mind, I’m going to send Riese’s messages to Knight Errant, let them handle this mess. All in favor?”

Geppetto and Dervish nodded frantically as a flower fell off Bend’s wreath, causing him to shed a single tear at the preciousness of life.

Jonathan Riese was busted for conspiracy to murder (and his thugs of attempted murder) by Lieutenant Pete Fisher of Knight Errant, one of TwoDee’s favorites within Ares Seattle. He was selected for the tipoff because of his wildly inappropriate use of violence in the field and his complete and utter corruption. Seeing Riese’s teeth being beaten out of his face on live television (ARES: COPS) was more than a little cathartic, especially for Emily Granger.

Bend was about to give his life some serious thinking over, until a strange woman made of starry void appeared to him in a dream, speaking in the voice of the lover whom he had once lost to an Aztechnology raid. She encouraged him to engage in whatever acts felt right to him, to abandon society and practice what he pleased.

He responded to his new mentor spirit’s urgings by continuing to pork a woman three and a half decades his junior, whose polisci projects began taking a radically liberal environmentalist bent for some reason that no one in her class could quite figure out. He began to suspect that maybe he was a mildly hypocritical Buddhist.

Wildcard, Dervish, and Geppetto had no major life-changing five-month-long metaplanar experiences. Unsurprisingly. They began to be a little weirded out by Bend, for obvious reasons.

It was another few weeks before the team got their next call from Brianna McCreary, urging them to come in to the Faulty Bar. The team came in on a humid September day, sitting around Brianna’s desk. She finally had her nexus in, behind the desk, and AR windows buzzed about her head.

“So, we’ve got three jobs in for you boys. And they all revolve around the Metroplex Prison on Sixth Avenue and Spring.”

Geppetto blinked.

“Are these jobs we can all do at the same time?”

“Well, two of them seem to be on the market as exactly opposed. Basically, one faction wants a prisoner sprung, one faction wants him kept in and is aware of the escape attempt, and one faction wants a message delivered.”

“Huh.” Wildcard fiddled around with a few AR bubbles carrying news stories, looking for info on the

prison. “Who’re the Johnsons?”

“Message Johnson is an Ancient. I think he’s got a brother behind bars, wants to give him something to help escape. I don’t know the identity of the man inside for the other two Johnsons, but the one keeping him in is a Yak and the one springing him out looks to be a corper. High-class, too. This is probably a feeder job for later work.”

The team all looked at each other, and reached an accord.

“The Ancients thing sounds a little small-time for us. Delegate it to one of your other teams, maybe a newer one. We’re going to work for the corper.”

“Very well. I’ll let him know you’re coming. The meet will be held tomorrow at 8 at the Purple Haze nightclub.”

The Purple Haze was a midclass rock and roll nightclub, nowhere near the level of Penumbra, and miles below, say, Dante’s Inferno. Considering that the Johnson was a high-level corper, the message was fairly clear: this was very lowly for him, and clearly whatever jobs awaited the team in the future from this Johnson would be more important than this one.

The Johnson was a generically handsome human with striking blue eyes, wearing a navy blue suit with a matching tie. He fit the Hollywood impression of the “corp Johnson” to a T.

“Gentlemen. Sit down, sit down. I suppose you’ve been briefed?”

“Yes, Mr. Johnson,” said Geppetto with a grin, “and we’re in. Just let us know who we need to spring.”

Wildcard and Bend watched quizzically as an AR window popped into the space in front of them. There was a mugshot of a bloodied Japanese elf, his torso bandaged from gunshots. He glared at the camera with a frown that was more betrayed and hurt than angry.

Geppetto gurgled a little. Dervish choked on his drink and began coughing loudly.

“The target’s name is Jo Sekigahara, codename ‘Trout.’ ”

Chapter 14: Cultists, Capybaras, and a Familiar Fish

Dervish was the first to growl his thoughts.

“Oh, you got a lot of nerve, asking us to do that, Mr. Johns-”

He was suddenly silenced by a jutting hand. His teammate, Bend, was reminding him of the etiquette of the Johnson meet; speaking out of tone was verboten. Especially with a high-class Johnson like the generically handsome, primly cut individual sitting across from them. Whichever megacorp he worked for, it wouldn't do well to insult them by proxy.

Bend glanced nervously towards Geppetto, the team face thus and de facto voice of reason. The team had always had a calm sort of understanding about this kind of thing, even since the days of TwoDee: the hacker was in charge in crisis situations, when having all the information at hand meant all the difference. Otherwise, all authority during...impasses went to the face or the mage. As Geppetto qualified for both of these roles, he was the immediately recognized team leader. Which was why it bothered Bend so much to see the wan Satanist wavering, especially this creature which he'd never seen hesitate even in the face of indescribable cruelty and butchery. Geppetto's thin brow wrinkled with a mixture of emotions - disgust and contempt mixed with a sharp twinge of perverse humor. He could not help but choke up a strained laugh.

“Could you repeat that offer, Mr. Johnson?”

Mr. Johnson, his face organized in a bland, surgical passivity, did indeed repeat his offer.

“The job is to retrieve the man known as “Trout” from the Metroplex Prison - colloquially referred to as “the Tower” due to its distinctive shape - on Sixth and Spring. My employer seeks his audience.”

Geppetto couldn't help himself. His composure buckled.

“By all that creeps and stings, Mr. Johnson, why?”

“That is for my employer to know, and not for shadowrunners to guess at. My employer chose you as his first option because of two of your numbers' considerable experience with the target. We contacted your replaced third, by the way - he merely laughed, addressed me as a ‘prank-calling cockbite,’ and blocked further communications.”

Mr. Johnson adjusted his tie.

“I suppose given light of extenuating circumstances I can show more leeway on what was initially supposed to be an intentionally small starter's fee. An invitation to future work.”

“What kind of leeway are we talking, Mr. Johnson?” Geppetto's eyes twitched involuntarily as text scrolled across the screen of his contacts. He noticed Dervish and Bend blinking and reading, too.

Wildcard had a keyboard and multiple AR windows up, and was hastily typing away.

>HOLD ON I HAVE AN IDEA

Johnson made note of the typing hacker, but turned back to Geppetto.

“I’m prepared to offer a 30,000 sum with a 10,000 expense account. As that is already extraordinarily generous, I do not plan on being bartered far up from it.”

That, of course, meant that he was quite open to an entire evening of barter in Johnson doublespeak. However, after a few seconds of scrolling, Geppetto found that the text read,

>HURRY THINGS UP/ CONTACTING BRIANNA/REMEMBER HOW THERE WAS GOING TO BE AN OPPOSING RUN TO THIS ONE/ THEY’RE HAVING THEIR JOHNSON MEET RIGHT NOW TOO/ IF WE FINISH NOW WE CAN GET THEM BEFORE THEY EVEN START

>WE CAN TURN THIS INTO EASY MONEY BY HITTING THEM RIGHT AFTER THE JOHNSON MEET

Geppetto could not help but allow his fangs to slip through his lips, a malicious grin bubbling its way to the surface.

“I understand completely, Mr. Johnson. And in light of - as you put them - extenuating circumstances – I do believe that the sum will do quite nicely. However, my hacker has graciously informed me that we have another appointment, so if you could send him the rest of the intel via datachip?”

Mr. Johnson cocked an eyebrow as he tapped away at his commlink, before inviting Wildcard to interface with it. Wildcard popped the plasticine port where his spine met his brain, trailing out the long, thin cable of his datajack.

“Another appointment already? I feel almost slighted. But then I suppose that many shadowrunners are busy people. Do show better form in the future, Geppetto.”

Geppetto made a curt little bow, showing deference to the Johnson, as Dervish and Bend stood to prep the car, suddenly over the tense precipice of the Johnson meet and thrust, quicker than they ever had been, into the job.

“I apologize wholeheartedly, Mr. Johnson. I assure you that we have your best interests at heart.”

Geppetto lead the team swiftly out of the club, buzzing with nervous energy. Geppetto got like this when there were murders to be done. Following him were Bend, resigned, Wildcard, detached, and Dervish, resolute.

“Everyone suit up. Where’s the enemy Johnson meet located?”

Wildcard gestured to a map of the city, pointing out a section of Tacoma’s tourist district.

“Fancy - well, fancy as a Mexican restaurant can get anyway, on Pier 64. Downtown, but on the Tacoma side of things. Yak territory.”

“What’s the drive?”

“45 minutes.”

Geppetto gave Wildcard a stern glare. Without bucking, Wildcard followed up,

“I’ll make it in fifteen.”

The team piled into Wildcard’s Hyundai, buckled their seatbelts, and the job was on.

With the clever abuse of a few streetlight hacks, Wildcard had the team outside Maximillion’s Fine Aztec Cuisine in eight minutes and fifty-two seconds. Geppetto ran the plan over with Bend.

“So, we don’t want to open up guns-blazing in the middle of the street, but we want them out of the picture. This job is on you and me, Bend. Right now, I need samples from all of them: hair, skin, blood, whatever you can nick. I’m going to do everything in my power to keep you unseen. And Dervish and Wildcard will be ready to go as backup if things turn ugly.”

Geppetto gestured to Wildcard’s car, and the passenger-side window rolled down long enough to give him and Bend a glimpse of an armor-plated fist done up in red, white, and blue giving a thumbs-up sign.

Bend nodded, but his expression was grim.

“You’re going to use ritual magic, aren’t you?”

Geppetto licked his lips.

“Oh yes. And I’m going to savor every minute of it.”

Bend frowned and furrowed his brow, but with a brief huff of air he put on his goggles, slinking towards an alleyway just off the restaurant. As he shed his overclothes - a hoodie and a pair of jeans - into his ruthenium-polymer-coated bag and activated his tacsuit, he remarked to Geppetto,

“I’m doing this for the good of the mission. But don’t expect me to stand around while you’re doing the deed.”

The rival team exited the restaurant soon enough. The first was a social infiltrator, female. She was human, and some manner of Asian, although her body was so statuesque it screamed of plastic surgery. In her blood red gown and AR shades, she practically wore her shadowrunning on her sleeve.

With a flick of his monofilament knife, Bend pocketed a single lock of hair.

“One target down. Looking like...four to go.”

The rest of the team exited the double doors of the restaurant as a mass. One of them - a troll with a mana ebb that flowed around him, deflecting some of Bend’s awakened senses - could quite literally qualify as a “mass.” The next was a hermetic magician, done up in typical “wizard” fashion, wearing

spectacles and a longcoat adorned with spellbooks and fetishes. Following him was the hacker, a geek in a trenchcoat with slicked-back black hair, big retro shades, and boots that looked like they belonged in a fetish club. He typed at a Shiawase commlink distractedly, looking up public documents on the Metroplex Prison. The final teammate, picking up the rear, was an orc gun adept. Her body radiated tense physical strength and incredible acrobatic ability, and her reedy muscles were taut against a tight tank-top. Her bent arm grasped absently, reflexively, at where a trigger would be, were a rifle slung over her shoulder.

Slowly, ritualistically, Bend unlinked the chain from his monofilament chainsaw. Stretching it and gauging its weight, he began a trot towards the clump of shadowrunners, the movements of a gymnast about to perform his routine.

And perform he did. Bend pirouetted through the shadowrunners, chain taught in his fingers, in an instant grinding bone shavings off of one of the troll's nerveless dermal deposits, slicing hair from the mage, hacker, and adept. As Bend gecko-gripped up the wall of the restaurant behind them, the adept felt absently at the back of her head, shuddered, but continued to walk. Bend growled into his subvocal mic,

"What a senseless waste."

At the directions of Geppetto, the team soon found themselves in an abandoned municipal playground in one of the poorer factory-worker neighborhoods in Auburn. Musing and cooing to himself, Geppetto strode about the rusted playground equipment, tapping purposefully with his loafers.

"What exactly is it we're looking for Geppetto?"

Dervish sat on a dented plastic bench, looking bored. He was out of his armor again, now back in his biking leathers and bandana. He noshed on a fast-food burger, having not had time to eat at the Johnson meet.

"Company, my friend. Or a portal thereto."

Geppetto began kicking around the roots of an old tree near the sand pit, and something gave way. Brushing at the dirt with his foot, he uncovered what looked to be a capped manhole. Wildcard hazarded the question,

"What kind of company are we talking, chummer?"

Geppetto gestured for Dervish to help him with the manhole, and began lifting, although he quickly gave way to the strain and let Dervish do all the work for him.

"Think about it. Shamanic lodges are set up all across the country for young spiritualists to learn the ways of their newfound talents. Theurges are led to the churches and temples of their gods, to hone their powers through faith. Hermetics go to college to study magic like proper little scientists. But how did I learn to do what I do? Haven't you ever thought of that?"

Bend retched a little. He'd seen this man levitate another metahuman into a nuclear spirit, slowly, excruciatingly, and consider it a perfect use of his magic later.

“No, I can’t say I’ve thought of it. Ever.”

“Well,” said Geppetto, gleefully, as he lowered his fancy loafers down onto a rusty rung, “you’re about find out anyway.”

The rooms underground were surprisingly complex, a system of intricate stone-lined hallways carved with symbols of the obscene and depraved. There were crunches of bone underfoot, and the occasional scrap of a tiny shirt or dress. No one wanted to ruminate on why the playground above was abandoned.

“See,” opined Geppetto, as he flicked on a flashlight (out of courtesy: he could see in the dark naturally), “the very nature of Black Magic is that it’s adversarial. It stands as the enemy to every other magical tradition. I mean, not in the way that the Bugs or the Toxics are - those are legitimate fucking MENACES, after all - but the point is that since we draw our focus on our power from all those storybook tales about boogeymen snatching children and enchantresses seducing good Christian husbands, well, it’s not like we can up and put a CHURCH OF EVERYTHING HORRIBLE AND BAD THAT STANDS AGAINST EVERYTHING YOU BELIEVE IN across from the nearest Mormon tabernacle, can we? It’s not against the law to be a black magician per se, but let’s just say that the law...frowns on our more colorful rituals. Ah! Here we are!”

Geppetto knocked on a slate wall, and announced,

“I am called Legion, for we are Many.”

The wall began to grind back, and greenish light spilled into the corridor from behind it.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” grumbled Wildcard, “It’s like a bloody Lovecraft novel.”

As Geppetto strode into a charnel house filled with swinging, iron-wrought cages, under the watchful eyes of a dozen ornately masked, black-robed cultists, he giggled,

“Isn’t it just?”

Bend excused himself at this point, and Wildcard commented that, as he was an expert in many fields but ritual magic was not one of them, he would rendezvous with Bend to peruse the Johnson’s information and plan the next phase of the mission. Dervish stayed on with Geppetto as a guard, although he made sure to retrieve his automatic shotgun and America-San armor before he’d cross the threshold.

Geppetto and Dervish were lead into a large, circular room, rent from the stone with magic to resemble some gothic nightmare temple. A very small cultist stepped forward and removed her mask. What at first appeared to be a pubescent human girl swiftly revealed its nature; as it grinned, its long, gleaming canines betrayed it as a vampire, stuck in a perpetual state of eerie teenage limbo.

“And who is this that approaches my court?”

Geppetto bowed deeply and floridly.

“I am Geppetto of the Black Lodge, and Tartarus of the Merlyns. My service to our Lord is writ in soul and blood, and the Adversary lives within me. This is my...ghoul in the occult sense, my mortal servant.”

Dervish gave Geppetto a look but knew better than to protest. The small vampire giggled with delight.

“Aha, so we have ascertained your identity, Tartarus of the Merlyns and Geppetto of the Black Lodge,” she squealed, mocking his tone of voice, “but not your purpose.”

“My purpose,” said Geppetto, producing four vials of hair and one of bone, “is sacrifice.”

Although he opened his mouth to continue speaking, his words were drowned out by a unanimous cheering and clapping from the dozen cultists circled around him, and the countless shadowy, cruel spirits that wafted through the air, wandering half-manifested in a listless, desultory vogue.

“You have not forgotten your ways, Geppetto and Tartarus,” beamed the vampire, her colorless face suddenly pink with orgiastic ecstasy. “The Black Lodge of Seattle welcomes you.”

“Dervish,” said Geppetto, giving Dervish an intense stare that was half commanding and half apologetic, “place the vials on the center altar and then stand back that we might do our work.”

Dervish, trying to remain as detached as possible, approached the altar - carved to resemble two skeletal, grasping hands - and placed the vials upon it. He stepped back to the doorway and positioned himself as a guard would, a witness but not a participant. It was perverse, but honestly, seeing black magicians at work was more entertaining than the low-budget tridshows and alleyway bumfights that Dervish’s budget usually allowed for.

As all of the cultists, Geppetto included (thereby raising the number of participants in the ritual to 13, a meaningful number), knelt around the altar, a portal of flame opened above it, revealing the mages’ targets. The enemy team sat around a table in one of their apartments, quietly discussing the job. The Black Lodge’s spirits jabbered and jeered, all summoned to their masters to resist the drain of the tremendous casting that was about to take place.

“Burn them,” an infernal fire spirit resembling a flaming demon yelled to its master, more cheerful suggestion than command. “Bathe them in cinders until black bones remain!”

“Drown them,” burbled a tentacled water spirit, in response. “Fill their lungs with water until it runs down their chins in rivulets!”

Geppetto’s own guardian spirit, the immense black knight, hefted its machine gun and spat,

“Kill them slowly, Master, that they might know terror before they die!”

Geppetto put his hands up, a universal gesture for silence.

“I believe that we will start with the troll. The highest-force powerbolt we can muster should suffice.”

The little vampire cocked her head at Geppetto.

“Why not a powerball? We could kill them all at once.”

Geppetto shook his head, briefly resembling a scolding schoolteacher.

“We want them to see each other die, one by one. Adversary exults in fear. Besides,” Geppetto clucked, with a harsh grin, “a powerball at that force would bring down the whole damn building, and we don’t need that kind of attention just yet.”

Jackhammer the troll and Rosie the orc gun adept were having a minor disagreement with Booker the mage, Phreak the hacker, and Vixen the face. Jackhammer and Rosie were of the opinion that, using the access codes that the team had received from Mr. Sato (“A Japanese appellation similar to Johnson,” Booker had been quick to unhelpfully offer), the team should masquerade as prisoners or guards and then ambush the breakout team when they arrived to capture Trout. Phreak, Booker, and Vixen didn’t like to get their hands dirty, and instead had suggested keeping a perimeter around the Tower and the adjacent blocks, keeping a network of spirits and agents up to look out for suspicious behavior.

The argument was swiftly and unsatisfactorily terminated when, with a noise not unlike a guillotine striking a watermelon, Jackhammer’s head popped with such a force that bits of his skull embedded in the opposite wall.

The team had a brief moment of confusion, before Booker, limbs twitching violently, went for his gun.

“Ritual magic! FUCK!”

In a senseless panic, the rest of the team split for the garage while Booker, rooted under the effects of a ludicrously high-force body-puppeting spell, drew his sidearm, pressed it to the base of his chin and, eyes darting wildly in panic, involuntarily killed himself.

Across the city, the vampire looked expectantly at Geppetto. The flaming demon behind her was panting with masochistic pleasure, absorbing her share of the spell’s ludicrous drain. Geppetto watched from the scrying circle as the gun bunny and the face piled into the back of the hacker’s Americar. The hacker pulled a datajack and hooked into the car, pulling out into the streets at high speed.

“Two down out of three, Geppetto and Tartarus. What now?”

“Let’s end it with a bang,” Geppetto drawled. “Wait until they hit a stoplight. Then, a fireball.”

The fire demon shuddered happily at the acknowledgement.

“Did we make it?” Phreak the hacker was tweaking, not paying attention to the road. “Fuck, man. Fuck! Who’s hitting us!?”

“It’s the other running team,” said Vixen, shaken. “They got us first. I don’t know how they got DNA

on Booker, though. Only Jackhammer's registered."

"You think they got it up close and personal? You think someone got that close? What if they got all of us?"

"That's impossible," responded Vixen, now irate. "No one's that good. Right, Rosie?"

Rosie the gun adept briefly thought about this proposition, and then put her head down as their hacker detonated like a block of C4.

Rosie woke up outside of the car, sprawled across the pavement. Pedestrians gasped and pointed at her and something to her left. She rolled to catch a glimpse of what it was, and immediately regretted it, only in part because of the pain in her side. Vixen lay in two halves in the middle of the street, with a bloodied car door a few yards off that looked like it had gone clean through her. Phreak lay in scorched pieces all around the totaled car.

Rosie couldn't help but shed a few tears. These people were her running team; they weren't exactly her friends, but damn it, she had fond memories of working with them. That is, until she didn't have fond memories of anything anymore.

"Finishing it with an Alter Memory spell," hissed the vampire. "Delicious."

"It was a moment of inspiration," smiled Geppetto, giving Dervish a glance.

Not feeling especially social, Dervish silently turned to head topside.

Mr. Johnson had given Bend and Wildcard some good shit. First and foremost were complete maps of the Tower, in addition to some limited mapping of the sewer system beneath; not enough to fully navigate by the sewer, but enough to recognize where it exited to Metroplex Prison facilities. There were also guard patrols and spider clock-in-times, which had a special significance since Johnson had managed to retrieve one of the spiders' accessID and codes for Wildcard. Although they'd make sure to run it past Dervish and Geppetto, Wildcard and Bend began to formulate a plan.

Wildcard would hack some public-access city planning nodes and try to get Bend a more comprehensive map of the sewers. From there, Bend would utilize his abilities as a contortionist (or, if necessary, his recently-acquired shapechange power) to squeeze up through a septic tank's drone maintenance shaft that connected to the guards' locker rooms, as it was the only bathroom that had direct line of travel to one of the spider nexi without passing through locked doors or sensor suites. Bend would then plug a satlink into the nexus, and Wildcard would backdoor into it under the stolen accessID to start unlocking doors leading Bend to Trout.

When Bend and Wildcard put up a discussion channel on the team's taclink and ran this plan by Dervish and Geppetto, Dervish was the first to point out a problem that Bend and Wildcard didn't have familiarity with:

"This implies that Trout possesses the capability to follow your orders and sneak out of prison with

the same degree of professional competence as you, Bend.”

“Well, he’s a professional infiltrator. I’ve read his dossier. I expect him to keep up.”

Wildcard turned the volume down on the channel as Dervish and Geppetto got all of their laughs out.

“Okay,” said Bend, miffed, “so he screams his presence to the world, apparently. Well, it’s not like we have a way to control his every action and force him to be sneaky.”

Dervish thought for a moment.

“Hey, Geppetto, didn’t you use your ritual magic to force that guy to off himself?”

“Yeah,” said the black mage, “but I’d need a sample of his - oh. Oh shit.”

What was once TwoDee’s apartment building as of early 2072 was now missing about a quarter of its prior mass. Judging by the dilapidated chemistry equipment interspersed with the rubble, a Cram lab had probably exploded during a bust. Not letting the material go to waste, someone had used a girder to prop up a section of billboard in the gap, before spray-painting it to read “HOLLOWEENTOWN.” Clownpainted thugs wearing predominantly orange and black drifted around the building and the blocks surrounding it, swigging malt liquor, comparing firearms, and talking shit about rival gangs.

“Trout’s blood?”

Doctor Laughsalot, the ghetto-as-fuck Halloween street doc, rubbed at the juggalo greasepaint around his eyes. The dilapidated once-a-condominium thumped with the sounds of horrorcore music and gunfire.

“Of course I have Trout’s blood. He was so far in debt for all the bullet removals that I just started taking transfusions as payment. Not that his fucking AB positive helps much.”

Geppetto slammed his hands down on Laughsalot’s desk, a vatgrown wood model that might have been classy once upon a time, before it was bloodstained and full of holes.

“WE WILL TAKE ALL HIS BLOOD.”

Laughsalot gave Geppetto his best skeptical grimace as he began sorting through a stack of coolers.

“You guys aren’t doing anything stupid, are you?”

“Who, us?” Dervish grinned idiotically. “What gave you that idea?”

The team convened outside of the Metroplex prison to review their plan. Wildcard ran through the details:

“Okay, Bend? I’ve got the sewers beneath the prison mapped out. Since they keep cameras fixed on most of the nearby sewer entrances, you’re going to be entering about a mile out, and walk most of the way there. From there, our prior plan applies; if you can’t contort enough to make it through on your own, don’t hesitate to turn into an animal of some kind. You do have that ability, yes?”

Bend donned his goggles and smiled.

“Yeah. Just picked up shape-changing before this job.”

Wildcard nodded appreciatively and continued.

“Good, good. You’ll pop up through the septic tank, use a water spirit to wash off if you need to, plug me into the nexus so that I can open the doors. From there, Geppetto hits Trout with a control thoughts, and we get the ball rolling.”

Dervish nodded from the back seat of the car, inspecting his shotgun to make sure that it was clean.

“Okay. What am I doing?”

“You’ll be with Geppetto. Since the plan hinges on him ritually casting a powerful spell, he’ll need the extra security.”

“Roger.”

“Any more questions, anyone?”

Bend, Geppetto, and Dervish all shook their heads with noncommittal grunts.

“Ducky. Let’s move out!”

Bend was dropped off at the nearest non-secured sewer entrance. In full stealth gear, he hefted his taser, activated the nightvision on his goggles, turned on his cloak, and dropped down into the darkness below. His goggles displayed an AR feed from Wildcard, a map of the sewers.

What they failed to account for were the den of HMMHVV-infected goblins he’d dropped into. Four stunted little men with grotesque, partially-translucent skin hissed and recoiled, raising primitive melee weapons to defend themselves.

“I smell elf flesh,” growled one of them.

Bend gulped, but stood strong. Mostly because he had the Commanding Voice adept power.

“STAY AWAY,” he demanded.

The goblins blinked, but advanced.

“STOP.”

No dice.

“DON’T HURT ME.”

One of the goblins licked its lips.

A little disappointed in himself, Bend proceeded to do the reasonable thing and book it like a motherfucker, goblins in tow. Not helping anything, he entered a no-Matrix zone in the sewers and promptly lost his map. Bend abandoned all pretense of stealth, spamming his Commanding Voice with the hopes that eventually one of them would fail.

“PLEASE STOP.”

“STOP PLEASE.”

“STOP CHASING ME.”

“I’M NOT DELICIOUS.”

Realizing that telling them to do things that were directly against their nature was probably the problem, Bend opted for another tactic.

“COULD ANY OF YOU TELL ME WHICH WAY TO THE METROPLEX PRISON?”

One of the pursuing goblins screeched,

“ABOUT THREE BLOCKS SOUTH AND THEN TAKE A LEFT, ELFMEAT.”

“OKAY THANKS.”

The goblins fell behind a little, confused as to why they’d all suddenly felt compelled to give their delicious prey directions. Bend took this opportunity to pull ahead, turn a few corners, and disappear into the sewers again, before making his way - more cautiously this time - to the guards’ quarters septic tank. Ultimately, the pipe was a little too slim for Bend in his natural form, but a quick shapechange into a monkey later, and he was dragging his gear up into the guards’ quarters. Some days, being a MysAd really had perks.

Bend found himself in a maintenance passage adjacent to the locker rooms, naked and covered in shit. With a wan gesture, his water spirit, a cheery old man in blue robes, appeared and hosed him down. Bend bowed in thanks, then put on his gear again. Slipping out into the lockers, Bend snuck past a few distracted guards, disappearing into the hallway. About halfway to the spider room, his commlink managed to sync up with Wildcard again.

“...Bend!? Bend, you’re running late! The entire team’s been waiting on you, what happened?”

“We’ll talk about that after the job,” responded Bend, over his subvocal mic. “No sense in running even later.”

Ducking into the spider room, Bend smiled at the oblivious spider, who had his feet up on the nexus, sipping a SoyKaf and reading an e-mag. He activated the ruthenium polymer coating on the team’s custom satlink (an expensive little toy), and plugged it in to one of the nexus’ dataports.

“I’m in,” said Wildcard. “Geppetto, you’re up to bat.”

Crouched in an alleyway a few blocks away, with Dervish at his side holding four blood packs full of Trout-blood, Geppetto drew a magic circle on the pavement.

“Roger that Wildcard. Keep an eye out for our boy.”

Jo Sekigahara wondered why he was walking out of his cell. He also wondered why his cell door was open. It seemed counter-intuitive, considering it was well past lights-out and this time was normally reserved for attempting to sleep with his ass to the wall. There was also the whole legs moving without him telling them to thing. That was a little weird.

He walked across the prison yard and found that one of the gates was open, the one leading to the guards’ quarters. He was a little perturbed at this development. He didn’t want to get beaten up.

As he wandered past the guards in the hallway, he began to wonder if he was invisible. He tried to look down to see if he was but his neck wouldn’t respond.

Eventually he found himself in a maintenance hallway above a septic tank drone maintenance port that was far too small for him. Was he going to escape? He wasn’t quite sure, but he was fairly certain that it was part of some master plan that he’d come up with earlier, because he was awesome. Although he didn’t remember ever talking to the elf standing across from him.

Bend took a few moments to blink at zombie-Trout, who was staring at him very intensely, wavering back and forth and drooling a little. His commlink vibrated and he answered the call.

“Hi, Sean!”

“Oh...hi, Emily. I’m working right now.”

“Oh!” Faux-African folk music sounded loudly over Emily’s end of the conversation. She was watching a nature documentary. “So you don’t have time to talk?”

“No, I’m afraid,” said Bend, looking at Trout and then looking back to the sewage port that was way, way too small for him. “I’m kind of in the middle of a...logistical problem.”

“Well, I don’t want to bother you while you’re at work, but I wanted to know if you’d be free to go to the movies this weekend? That new indie flick is coming out.”

“Yeah, that’d be great!” Bend thought for a moment. “Hey, you switched your major to veterinary science, right?”

It took Emily a few moments to respond.

“Uh...yeah?”

“Do you happen to know of any large, passive rodents that might be able to fit in an...I don’t know, like a one and a half foot wide tunnel in a squeeze?”

Emily didn’t respond for another fifteen seconds.

“Um...a capybara?”

“That’s great, thanks. I gotta run now, but I’ll see you this weekend!”

“See you this weekend!”

As Emily hung up, Bend turned to Trout with a wicked grin.

Wildcard waited nervously at the sewer entrance, seeing the searchlights turn on, one by one. The Tower had caught on to their missing man, and he had no doubt that Trout was chipped. He tapped a hasty message to Mr. Johnson:

SHOULD HAVE TARGET VERY SOON/WHERE DROP OFF?

Mr. Johnson responded with a set of coordinates:

AUBURN INDUSTRIAL PARK, WE’LL HAVE MEN WAITING

There was a “whumpf” on the hood of Wildcard’s Super Getaway Car as Bend leapt on top of the car, covered in shit, carrying a very confused capybara (also covered in shit), and being chased by goblins. Wildcard opened the passenger-side door and Bend, stumbling like a developmentally-disabled Dukes of Hazzard tribute act, hucked the capybara into the back before rolling into his seat.

“Drive!”

As Wildcard floored it and peeled out into the city streets, Bend hastily contorted backwards to start buckling the squirming, shit-covered capybara into the center back seat.

“BEND,” yelled Wildcard, as two police interceptors pulled into pursuit.

“WHAT,” Bend yelled back, over the roar of engines.

“WHY IS THERE A GIANT GUINEA PIG TRACKING HUMAN FECES ALL OVER MY PRISTINE CAR, BEND?”

“IT’S A CAPYBARA, NOT A GUINEA PIG.”

“WHY IS TROUT A CAPYBARA, BEND?”

“LONG STORY.”

“I’LL TAKE YOUR WORD ON IT.”

Swiftly accelerating into the triple digits and finding a nice modest speed at somewhere around 150 miles per hour, Wildcard tore onto the freeway and began effortlessly weaving around commuters as a third interceptor and a flying drone joined the fray.

“God damn, this has got to be the most wanted chinchilla in all of North America,” Wildcard noted over the subvocals. “Dervish, Geppetto, did you get the rendezvous coordinates?”

“It’s a capybara,” clarified Bend, “Native to South America.”

Dervish asked, confused, over the subvocals, as he and Geppetto mounted his bike,

“What did you do with Trout?”

“Long story,” said Wildcard, “meet in Auburn.”

Hauling ass through Downtown, Wildcard intentionally routed through corp territories, ducking through the neighborhoods of the SCIRE, the Aztec Pyramid, and the Ares Tower to force Lone Star to take less optimal routes. Hastily-deployed security teams just complicated the chase, as by the time Wildcard was noticed his car was already a mile away, cycling its revolving license plate to invalidate security footage.

Waiting in the parking lot of the industrial park in Auburn was a black SUV, with two men in black coats flanking either end of the vehicle. Both had the obvious bulges of small-caliber automatic weaponry on their persons.

Wildcard's black Hyundai peeled into the parking lot at high speed, spinning to a stop by the SUV. The two men in black looked on, nonplussed, as Wildcard and Bend emerged. They were slightly less nonplussed when Bend opened the back door and produced the world's largest land rodent, covered in shit.

“We've got the target!”

Wildcard held the rancid capybara in front of the two agents. It made a squeal of discomfort. There was a brief pause, before one of the men in black stated the obvious.

“...That's a capybara.”

“A capybara covered in shit,” noted the other, helpfully.

Wildcard looked down at the shit-covered capybara, suddenly reminded that this was not normal procedure for extractions. He wagged the capybara in Bend's general direction, unintentionally splashing poo all over the hoods of nearby cars.

“Bend. Fix this please.”

With a thought, Bend dismissed the shapechange effect. Wildcard loosed a cry of dismay and terror, as he was now holding aloft a grown Japanese man, buck-ass naked and still covered in a thick film of human excrement. Dropping Trout, who stumbled awkwardly and faceplanted on the pavement, Wildcard fell over backwards. He made a mental note to burn the suit he was wearing.

One of the men in black took off his AR shades, finally dropping all pretenses of imposing mysteriousness.

“Mother of God. Could you...could you wash him off, or something?”

Bend nodded.

“My pleasure.”

The water spirit from earlier materialized and, with a WHARGLBLARGHL noise, Trout was launched across the hood of the SUV by a horizontal geyser.

Wildcard stood up, trying desperately to brush turds off his blazer. His efforts were in vain.

“So are you gentlemen able to call the cop corps off on this one? Because that former-capybara was hot as a volcano out there, and I don't relish being hunted down for it.”

MIB #1 shook his head while MIB #2 strolled behind the SUV to retrieve the stunned convict.

“We'll handle it from here. Lay low for a day or two, and we'll have it all sorted out.”

“Good to hear,” said Wildcard, reaching out for the 30k credstick that MIB #1 was producing from his coat. Briefly jacking it into his commlink to check that the money was good, he then turned to Bend.

“As for you, ya nonce, there'll be hell to pay for shitting up my car. Quite literally shitting up my car, in fact.”

Wildcard settled into the driver's seat, although Bend didn't get in with him. Instead, a kindly-looking monk with flowing blue robes sat in Bend's seat, and gave him a little bow. Wildcard eyed the manifested water spirit suspiciously.

“Bend, what are you doing?”

“Cleaning up my mess. Hold still.”

“Wait hold on a--WHARGLBLARGHLWHARGL.”

And that was how, as the two agents pulled away with Trout, Wildcard learned what it was like to

have a car wash **INSIDE** his car.

Chapter 15: Invisible Kangaroos, Scientists, and the Magic Police

Rotten pizza.

Beer.

Was that...

Was that spunk?

Geppetto awoke to a cavalcade of smells. He could feel something squishing against his eyes and mouth, so he deigned to open neither. Instead he slowly, ever so slowly lifted himself, hearing the clatter of bottles, cans, and other assorted detritus as he sat up in his dumpster. It was late in the morning, and even with his Health focus activated and minimal sunlight trickling down into the alleyway, he was rocking a killer sunburn. Something cool that smelled like shit oozed against his cheek, and he was alternately thankful of and hateful for its presence.

Dervish leaned over the edge of the dumpster, his wide nose wrinkled in disgust. He had changed out of his suit into his motorcycle leathers and bandana, and aside from a few cuts and scrapes was not looking particularly worse for wear.

“Morning, babyface. I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Geppetto squinted up at the street sammy, before surveying himself. His brand new white designer suit was ruined forever. Brilliant.

“Dervish. What the fuck happened?”

“You tried to speedball human blood, novacoke, and jazz, vomited blood all over some Aztec corper, and then you passed out and Adversary started some shit. The bouncers left you out here when they were done trashing you. Lucky banshees regenerate, or otherwise you’d still be out three teeth.”

“Fan-fucking-tastic, Dervish. Good to hear you had my back. Where are Wildcard and Bend?”

“Wildcard chipped an unfiltered personafix and is currently applying bandages from the first aid kit in his car after a little stint swinging a dislodged bathroom pipe around, thinking it was a sword.”

Geppetto stood and brushed himself off, a completely futile gesture. Resigned, he began summoning a water spirit as he stumbled over the lip of the dumpster, hitting the ground hard with his shoulder.

“Oof! What about Bend?”

“Neurotically calling up his girlfriend about a whoring binge last night and telling her that he wants to go steady.”

Geppetto glared at Dervish as a horrible tentacled monstrosity emerged from the shadows of the alleyway and began hosing him down.

“I notice you haven’t stopped smiling throughout this whole update.”

“I guess it’s just really funny seeing you three cut loose for once. Now let’s get to the bar to start planning this Universal Omnitech thing.”

“Can we stop at my apartment first? I smell like a parking garage in Redmond.”

The team sat at a reserved table at the Faulty Bar, their usual spot. Brianna McReary had a few more running teams and independents contracting for her now, and combined with local traffic the joint wasn’t quite as empty as it had been. The bartender/backup fixer, Abe Heep, was having a loud conversation about guns with a group of street hoods who seemed to just be getting into the game. A large cybered-up troll guzzled hurlg while what was obviously his running team - a slim, dignified-looking human, a dwarf in steampunk gear, and an orc in a cheap business suit - cheered him on.

Wildcard spoke first, drawing up a map of the Vancouver Universal Omnitech Complex in AR space.

“Here’s our target. It’s only about two thousand by one thousand feet within the perimeter fence, barely bigger than Alcatraz Island. O’course, it’s just as hard to hit.”

He gestured to two gates in the fence on either side of the complex.

“These are the entrances. Both are open to the public; bottom three floors of the main building are a gigantic shopping mall with medical and pharmaceutical offices. There’s public parking adjacent to the main building. Since it’s technically sovereign territory, there are SIN checks at the border. Shouldn’t be too much of a problem if we all check out.”

Next, he pointed out a series of unmodified suburbs city blocks on the south end of the complex, still within the perimeter fence.

“This is employee housing. UO bought out a big chunk of the suburban neighborhoods to the south of their building about a decade ago; the higher-ranking employees like our doctor, Jennifer Chang, get their own houses instead of the communal living most employees get within the building. Speaking of which —”

Wildcard pointed at a 3D model of a small arcology, smaller by far than, say, the SCIRE, but still ludicrously massive.

“This is the UO home office, and it’s where most of the action is happening. Employees enter through a special security extension that leads up to the fourth story; the bottom three levels have their own elevator system, with only a security elevator for transport between the labs above and the civilian floors. We don’t know too much about the exact layout; the main research nexus is probably in the middle of the building, equidistant from all possible entry points, and the labs are probably situated around that, but that’s just an educated guess.”

Geppetto suggested,

“I think that we need to get Doctor Chang to actively help us to stand a chance.”

Bend nodded his agreement.

“Plus, she’d be able to sneak things past the security scanners at the employee entrance easier than us. She’s a smart woman, ingenious even; she knows she’s getting extracted, so she’s probably trying to subtly assist us already. Bring up her P2.0 profile.”

Wildcard obliged, bringing up social networking profiles for Jennifer Chang. They narrowed her down to a single P2.0 profile; a Chinese-American dwarf from the California Free State with a deep love of cinema and a PhD in pharmacology. Her status updates for the last few weeks were insipid; every day she commented on her lunch, how the guys at the security checkpoint annoyed her, and other minor things.

“Hold on a moment,” noted Wildcard, “each of these comments has a date and time. She’s just given us her entire work schedule, including when she walks down to the employee housing subcomplex. If we want to meet, we can intercept her in between.”

Geppetto looked between his three teammates.

“Alright, I’m going to go ask around my contacts about possible ins on UO. Bend, you get to intercept Dr. Chang when she’s heading home. Wildcard and Dervish will sneak you in under cover of visiting the mall, and they’ll also be your backup. Sound good?”

Wildcard raised his hand.

“We have a problem, Geppetto. Dervish’s only fake SIN is that of a UCAS military sergeant, and my best fake SIN has me as a migrant from the UK, and nowhere are we listed as having any relation to each other aside from obviously being shadowrunners. On top of that, if we compromise those SINs, we both lose our best identities.”

Dervish grunted.

“Yeah, it’d be a shame to lose Garrett Jordan this way once UO catches on. Some new SINs might be in order. Who was that corrupt guy at the registry who cocked up on Tank’s SIN? He owes us one.”

Geppetto chuckled.

“Oh yeah. I think his name was Aidan Remenalt. At the very least he owes us a discount considering he makes such terrible fake SINs. Well, all in favor of a quick shakedown?”

Everyone nodded or made grunts of affirmation, and the team set out for their first day’s work.

As Wildcard and Dervish pulled into the UO complex, they examined their brand-new SIN data.

“So, remember,” said Wildcard, checking in the rearview mirror to make sure that his SIN matched up with his meat face, detail by detail, “I’m Bill McDonach, second generation American. And I guess

we're bounty hunters?"

"With a name like 'Dirk Steel,' I'd better be," grumbled Dervish. "These are so fake it's unreal."

"Well, that's what happens when you threaten to bash down a registry worker's door if he doesn't make you a new SIN, champ," countered Wildcard. "And besides, these are obviously show names, anyhow. We're rednecks who changed our names, or something."

"Scottish rednecks."

"Hey, American accents are fucking hard."

As Wildcard pulled his black sedan up to the border, he and Dervish surveyed the two guards in pristine white ballistic armor standing at the toll booth. Universal Omnitech was a pharmaceuticals and cybernetics giant, and even their graphic design policies reflected cleanliness and surgical sterility. Although the guards were built like bricks and had hardened features to match, the armor made them look like man-sized iPods more than anything else.

Wildcard made a point of turning off the nexus in his trunk before he rolled his windows down. One of the guards, a human with imposing mirrored cybereyes, leaned down to look Wildcard and Dervish over.

"Names?"

"Bill McDonach and Dirk Steel."

"You're kidding."

Dervish grunted.

"Just 'cause I got it changed don't mean it ain't legally my name."

The guard rolled his eyes, causing the reflection to distort.

"Okay, sir. Reason for visiting?"

"Combat ware. We've got the relevant permits."

The guard's brow narrowed at Wildcard. Dervish covered,

"We're bounty hunters."

"I'm going to need to see registration on both of you gentlemen."

The guard produced a portable SIN scanner and ran "Bill McDonach" and "Dirk Steel"'s cards through. He frowned, and ran them each again. Then Dirk Steel again. Putting the scanner on his belt, he drew his sidearm, but made no aggressive moves, at least not immediately.

“Sir, you're going to need to come with me.”

Wildcard blinked.

“You're serious?”

“Not you, sir. You passed twice. The big one. His SIN's faulty.”

“This is the third goddamn time this week,” grumbled Dervish, stepping out of the car with his hands up.

“Third time this week or not, sir, we're going to need to scan you with the inbuilt scanner in the security kiosk to make sure you're not SINless. A precaution, sir.”

Dervish gave Wildcard a pleading look, but gruffly announced,

“Go on ahead, Bill. This'll get worked out.”

Wildcard didn't need to think too hard about the hint. Scrolling a message of “STALL HIM” across Dervish's field of vision, he pulled into the complex, booted up his nexus, and began an on-the-fly hack of the security kiosk.

“Hey, you still have my buddy Bill's card,” said Dervish, peevish. “You should go give it back to him.”

The guard sighed.

“You can give it back to him when your SIN checks out, sir.”

“Look, I really don't have time for this.”

The guard stopped just short of the kiosk, and turned to face Dervish, exasperated.

“You don't have time for this, sir? You were going to be spending an entire day shopping for 'ware. It is eleven in the morning, sir. Unless you're going in for surgery in five minutes, you aren't missing a thing.”

KEEP STALLING HIM, read Dervish's eyes.

“Look. We're tailing a fugitive, right now. We think he's going in for ware. We have a warrant. You're interfering with justice. I didn't want to tell you this, but there it is.”

The guard huffed angrily.

“You're a bounty hunter, sir, and you're on Universal Omnitech territory. That means that law and justice are MY jurisdiction right now, not yours. I'm scanning your damn card again.”

Dervish's eyes read, KEEP STALLING HIM!

As the guard lowered the card to the kiosk scanner, Dervish shouted,

“HEY! You're doing this because I'm gay, aren't you?”

The guard's mirrored cybereyes widened and his nostrils flared. He stopped mere moments before scanning the card.

“Sir, I can assure you that I had no idea--”

“Bull SHIT you had no idea! You scanned Bill's SIN, you saw that he was a gay rights policlub member!”

“Sir, we pay no attention to--”

“You fucking hater! I oughta put up a lawsuit.”

The guard finally exploded at Dervish.

“THIS IS OUR GODDAMN TERRITORY. YOU ARE VOLUNTARILY ENTERING OUR JURISDICTION. YOU HAVE NO RIGHTS HERE, YOU INCREDIBLE, PETULANT SHIT.”

The guard slammed the card through the reader, got an error, and slammed it through again.

“THERE. YOU'RE FINE. GET THE FUCK INTO THE COMPLEX. GOD DAMN.”

In the parking lot, Wildcard unlocked the doors when he heard Dervish tapping on the passenger-side window.

“That was a close one, big guy. Two seconds less and you would have been toast.”

“Yeah, I get the feeling we may have worn out our welcome with security, so try not to push it.”

Wildcard gestured toward Dervish's jacket.

“You got the payload?”

“You know it.”

Dervish reached into his jacket pocket and produced a live fox, before placing the fox in the back seat of the car. Reaching into his other pockets, he produced a folded-up stealth suit, a pair of tactical goggles, a commlink with subvocals, and a taser.

“It's all good, Bend.”

The fox twisted, bucked, and exploded into a very naked Bend the infiltrator.

“You dumbasses could have just put me in the back seat.”

“I think they checked there. And don't complain unless it doesn't work.”

Bend began sliding his legs into the stealth suit.

“You guys still have time to fuck this one up, especially if you mouth off to any more guards about your deep love for your fellow orc.”

“Get outta my car, you ingrate,” laughed Wildcard, stepping out of the Hyundai. He shrugged his shoulders, letting his blazer settle into place.

“Alright, Dervish, you ready to go shopping? And before you ask, I've already set your cybereyes to record, so once we get in go crazy with radar and thermographic.”

“I'm good. Hold on a sec.”

Dervish punched a credstick into one of the pay-per-space machines, and turned to catch up with Wildcard as a very invisible Bend brushed past him, headed for the employee village.

“Try not to trip any more alarms, Dervish.”

“Shut the fuck up, Bend.”

The two orcs crossed the street and entered the mall through the main door, and an alarm promptly began blaring overhead. The entrance had a MAD scanner.

As Dervish was surrounded by white-clad guards with shock batons, he growled to Wildcard,

“If you laugh I'll kill you.”

“Sir, put out your hands.”

Grumbling and making half-intelligible cursing noises, Dervish extended his hands as the guards fitted razorboy bracers to them.

“I'm assuming that you have a license for those cyberblades, sir?”

“Yes, I have a goddamn license. I'm a bounty hunter.”

“Technically this is sovereign territory, sir. You'll need to renew the license.”

“And how much is that gonna run me?”

“Five hundred. Plus the one thousand fine.”

“A fine? But I didn't even know my licenses didn't apply!”

“You should have thought of that before you walked through the door, sir.”

Now cursing like a sailor at the top of his lungs, Dervish began filling out the requisite forms while Wildcard stepped on an escalator up to the second level of the mall, surreptitiously taking trideo pictures of the security elevator and guard posts with a handheld camera.

Doctor Jennifer Chang was not surprised to be approached by a shadowrunner, at least not in the sense that it was something she was not expecting. However, she had to take a moment to adjust to the sudden weight of a subvocal microphone settling onto her throat, and to recognize that her eyes were deceiving her, preventing her from seeing the shadowrunner that was following her at an intimate distance as she walked home through the security posts. Putting her hand to her throat, she tested out the device;

“My extraction team, I presume?”

There was a brief whine as the audio feed calibrated, and a soft male voice responded,

“One of us. We’re going to need a little help.”

“I’ll give you everything that Mr. Johnson didn’t tell me not to tell you. Protection of his company, and all.”

“We understand. We have more practical concerns, such as the layout of the upper labs and possible extraction methods.”

“I see. Well, to start, I have a few requests if I’m going to be collaborating with you fully.”

“Name them.”

Chang waved to a passing intern, he waved back with a smile.

“I need to take my research data with me. There’s three years of work on the system, and I don’t want to lose it all in the extraction. You help me get the data out and I cooperate in every way I can.”

“Done. Give me an idea of what we’re up against, here, Doctor Chang.”

“Well, to start, there’s my two handlers. Equal parts bodyguard and captor. I have carte blanche to leave the company premises, but I’m a valuable asset so they go with me when I’m outside of the UO complex. I’d prefer you didn’t kill them; Scott has a daughter on the way and Mike’s an okay guy.”

“We’ll try not to harm them if it can be helped, ma’am. What other security are we looking at?”

“You mean aside from UO’s private army? There’s guards spread all up and down the complex, you’ve probably seen them, the whitesuits. There’s a small helibase on the roof and a couple of SWAT tanks in the lowest level of the parking garage. The windows are bulletproof glass, and there are impact detectors that deploy steel shutters, so don’t plan on going through that way. The only way up to the labs from the mall is the security elevator, so you’ll need clearance for that. The employee extension has a military-quality weapons scanner, as well as a special tag eraser. Of course, my clothes all have UO security tags; the eraser doesn’t get those. Most of the middle floors are labs, with the research

nexus in the central research lab, but I don't go in there often; the nexus' data is partitioned to relevant offices depending on research topic.”

“And the security nexus?”

“Security runs the upper floors, but they've got little enclaves all throughout the building. It's UO's home base; they can't afford anything going wrong.”

“So no hitting the security nexus wirelessly.”

“What is this, amateur hour? No.”

“Do you think that, if we equipped you with an analog stealth camera, you could sneak it past the security in the employee extension?”

“Ceramic components? No wireless link? Old-school film?”

“Of course.”

“That could work. Drop it in the bushes outside my house and I'll have it back by the same time the next day.”

“Excellent. We'll continue pursuing angles on your extraction, Doctor Chang.”

“I look forward to hearing from you...”

“Call me Sean.”

“Using names is bad form for a shadowrunner.”

“It's not actually my name.”

Bend retrieved his subvocal and peeled away from the employee village, skulking back towards the parking garage.

“Wildcard, what's the state of affairs on the mall levels?”

“One security elevator, heavily fortified. All internal workings, probably runs off the security nexus. Whitecoat depots on each level. Have you seen this ceiling fresco they've got on floor 3? It's a mimicry of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel fresco, but everyone has cybernetics. The cybernetics haven't aged well—Adam's reaching out to God with a Louisville Slugger brand cyberarm from at least fifteen years ago—but it's an interesting message.”

“I've never been a fan of deifying technology, Wildcard, especially not when you're dickin' around in an arcology. How's the camera coverage?”

“Total, but no more than one redundant camera for any given angle. If we wanted we could probably jam them, but that's assuming Doctor Chang would be coming through the mall level in the first place.

I heard something on the subvocals about getting her research, too, if I'm not mistaken, and that would require lab access.”

“I hear you, Wildcard. I'm thinking our best bet to get her and her research is an extraction from the labs through the employee partition, maybe even separately. In fact, I think we should work on getting her research first, and then extract her completely separately, maybe someplace where we only have to deal with her handlers.”

“Alright, let me grab Dervish and we'll get out of here. Don't mess with him too much, he's in a bad mood.”

“He tripped another alarm, didn't he?”

“As I said, he's in a bad mood.”

The team rejoined each other at their table at the Faulty Bar, and exchanged information. Geppetto had spent the day calling up contacts, but for the most part his search had been fruitless. Most of his contacts were Mafiosos, Ares corpors, black magicians, and Merlyns gangers (or some combination of the four), and none of those gave him any ins on the world's foremost pharmaceuticals and biotech firm.

“Wildcard,” noted Geppetto, “didn't you have a street doc contact?”

“You do, too. Have you tried the juggalo, yet?”

“You and I both know exactly how helpful he'd be. And yes. He asked me if I wanted to buy a third kidney.”

“You spring for it?”

“No, it wasn't fresh enough. But we're getting off-topic. Tomorrow you should talk to Doctor Granger, or whatever her name is.”

“Doctor Julia Greene. Emily Granger is Bend's girlfriend.”

Wildcard cocked a thumb in Bend's direction. Geppetto rolled his eyes.

“It all kind of blends together when you're immortal and don't give a shit about people. Can you follow up on that lead or not?”

“Yeah, I'll give her a call tomorrow.”

The next morning, Wildcard called up Julia Greene.

“Wildcard? Brianna told me you were working this week. What do you need?”

“I was hoping you could forward me to someone.”

“Oh? Who's the someone?”

“We need an in on the Vancouver Universal Omniplex Complex. I figured you have your ear to the ground on medical news...”

“So naturally I know every doctor from here to Aztlan, am I right, Wildcard?”

“Well, it's a long shot, but we figured we'd at least try you.”

“Well, good for you. You're in luck. Sort of.”

“Oh?”

“I've got a girl for you. She was my freshman roommate in college. Not exactly a friend but at least my name will mean something. Doctor Hannah Levine.”

Wildcard took a moment to write the name down.

“Okay, and what's the catch? Is she a loonie or something?”

“Funny you should mention that...”

Wildcard gulped audibly, shorthand for “what am I getting myself into” between him and his contacts.

“Hannah's a goody-goody. I mean, REALLY a goody-goody. Completely incorruptible. She joined up with UO right out of med school to help veterans of the Aztlan conflict and the border wars down in CalFree. She's been trying to create a long-lasting synthetic analogue to dopadrine, the anti-psychotic. She thinks it has applications as a PTSD medication for the UCAS military Veteran's Administration. I'd suggest sending Dervish to the Veteran's Hospital down in Fort Lewis if you want a convincing cover story. He's got a military SIN, right?”

“Yeah. You know, UO must not like Doctor Levine being so altruistic.”

“Well, they play it off as a PR thing. Point being, you frame this as a charity move or “for the greater good” and you're in. Just don't tell her whatever you're actually doing.”

“Hey,” commented Wildcard, faux-hurt, “what we're actually doing could be altruistic.”

He and Greene shared a brief mutual laugh.

“Just kidding. I'll see you around, Greene.”

“Likewise.”

Dervish, or rather Sergeant Garrett Jordan of the UCAS military, approached the gates of Fort Lewis on his pimped-out Harley. Flashing his SIN to the soldiers on guard, he made his way to the Veteran's Hospital.

He walked through the doors to find a sad, weirdly introspective sight; a half-dozen young man with extensive modifications, all shuddering with symptoms of psychosis as they held appointment numbers in quivering cyberhands. Dervish was blessed with a Type O system that adapted to 'ware easily, but these men had been made into monsters to fight for their nation, and left to rot with the side-effects when they came home.

“Um...Sergeant Garrett Jordan. I'm here for my checkup.”

The receptionist, a bored-looking middle-aged orc nurse, pulled up an AR window.

“Sergeant Jordan, we have your last checkup as being years ago. Have you been out-of-town?”

Dervish put on his best expression of sorrow and looked down.

“I've been...I've been looking for a home, actually. Pension ain't much.”

The receptionist nodded somberly.

“Take a number.”

Dervish was ushered into a room with a tired-looking doctor, in his fifties.

“Jordan, Garrett. I haven't seen you around here before. Been transferred?”

“No, sir. Just homeless.”

Dervish maintained the best puppy-dog face he could muster. He resembled a pug.

“Well, what are you in for today?”

“I'm getting the flashbacks something bad, doc.”

The doctor produced a handheld scanner.

“Well, let's give you a brief once-over to make sure you're not--”

The doctor stopped over Dervish's head. He tooled around with an AR window, then moved the scanner around, then took a sharp breath.

“Oh my god, why didn't anyone take care of this earlier?”

“Take care of what earlier?”

Dervish's voice rang, for once, with legitimate fear.

“Some of this synthetic brain tissue is improperly connected. We have nothing on record for this modification. Wait...your skull...”

The doctor's face contorted in an expression of horror.

“Did you get shot in the head!?”

“Uh...yeah. But a street doc patched it up, so it's all good, right?”

The doctor stood up, and yelled into the hallway,

“I NEED A GURNEY! GET THIS MAN TO SURGERY!”

Dervish exhaled loudly.

“Hooboy.”

Dervish woke up with a fresh new forehead scar, naked but for surgical scrubs, in a hospital bed. The doctor sat across from him in an office chair with wheels, looking relieved.

“How do you feel, Sergeant Jordan?”

“Ugggh...”

Dervish sluggishly attempted to put his hand on his head, and ended up smashing his knuckles into his face. Given the superdense bone growths added on to his skeletal system, he gave himself a hell of a nosebleed in the process. A nurse quickly wiped the blood off his face.

“Well, Mr. Jordan, we removed the synthetic tissue and replaced it with a vatgrown substitute derived from a sample of your own brain tissue. You're lucky you're Type O; you should be recovering very soon. The schizoid manifestations you've been experiencing should be much more controllable now.”

“Skizzid...whuh?”

“When your personality seems to “shut off.” You probably experience it during moments of extreme stress.”

“Nod recendly noooo.”

“Shh... Rest, Mr. Jordan. I'll sign for your prescription when you're up and moving.”

“Pregibbon?”

“Yes. We're giving you a year's worth of dopadrine--it'll be closer to a month for you, given that your suprathyroid will metabolize the drugs quicker--and some immunosuppressants. You're lucky that your condition hasn't been progressing, given how long you've neglected it!”

“Yearword Doperdin?”

“Yes. A year's worth of dopadrine.”

Cash register sounds ran throughout Dervish's addled mind as he passed out again.

”Okay, so we have a possible in,” said Geppetto, sitting with Bend and Wildcard across from a spread of Italian food. Geppetto had ordered a glass of wine just for the sake of ordering something, and was trying to choke down little bits of it, his hemovoric metabolism causing him nausea with every sip.

“Aye,” said Wildcard, sprinkling some pepper over a seared salmon. “Hannah Levine. And now we've got an extra edge on her - veterans in need, and a fuckload of dopadrine and immunosuppressants.”

“Have you considered that maybe selling drugs to a UO doctor is a bad idea?”

Bend looked from Wildcard to Geppetto incredulously before slurping up a long noodle of soygetti, never once taking his eyes off them.

“Considered it, and decided it's worth the risk,” noted Geppetto. “We pass it off as a charity thing, even if it's a sketch charity.”

Bend was nonplussed.

“What charity?”

“We'll make one up. Is it Christmas yet? We could do a Santa thing?”

“It's fucking October, Geppetto.”

“I don't keep track of Christmas. Too many kids. Okay, how about, I don't know, United Veterans'...”

Geppetto stalled, twirling his hand in circular motions. Wildcard finished,

“...Outreach Group!”

Bend glared at Geppetto and Wildcard.

“UVOG?”

“Hey, the acronym doesn't have to be pretty. We're a fairly shit charity.”

Bend placed his chin in the palm of his hand, and gestured wanly to Geppetto with the other one.

“Well, make the call.”

Geppetto frowned at Bend, flipped out his commlink, cleared his throat, and called Hannah Levine's office number. After three rings, there was a female voice on the other end.

“...Hello?”

“Hello, Doctor Levine?”

“Yes, that's me. Who's this?”

“My name is Michael Salvatore, and I'm calling on behalf of The United Veteran's Outreach Group. We have a charitable offer that we believe you'd find amenable.”

“...UVOG?”

“TUVOG, Doctor Levine. The 'The' is part of the acronym.”

There was a dull thud as Bend's face made contact with the table. Geppetto shushed him silent.

“Look, Mister...Salvatore? This is really unorthodox. I'm going to look up your website real quick.”

Wildcard and Geppetto briefly made panicked eye contact before Wildcard hissed out,

“Bollocks!”

Wildcard turned on his Wired Reflexes, mashed his mask onto his face, and began spasmodically torqueing in his chair, bringing up an impenetrable cylinder of at least thirty AR windows around himself.

His knuckles snapped loudly with the unearthly speed at which he began typing, while all ten of his agents activated their edit programs in concert. Wildcard's fingers gestured out a symphony of hasty web design at the speed of a fast-forwarded VCR.

Three seconds later, the team had a website. Of approximately the quality of a “Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff” comic.

“You'll see we come very well recommended.”

“I...see... Who exactly is 'Doctor Laughsalot?' “

“He's a very talented man with a few character quirks that are irrelevant to this conversation. Also, a foremost expert in the field of reconstructive surgery.”

“I think I read the quote you're attributing to him in a periodical. But in the magazine there were less typos.”

“All errors are reproduced as submitted, ma'am.”

“What exactly was the offer you were going to make me, Mr. Salvatore?”

“Dopadrine and immunosuppressants. A year's worth. We know you've been doing experiments on synthesizing a longer-lasting dopadrine derivative for use by veterans suffering from PTSD and other psychotic disorders, and we want to support that cause.”

“You...really? Wow, this changes everything.”

“We're glad that you understand, Doctor Levine. Would you care to meet tomorrow, at a restaurant near to the UO complex perhaps? We can hash out some details there.”

“That sounds excellent. Oh...and...Mr. Salvatore?”

“Yes, Doctor Levine?”

“Your website has you as 'VUOG,' or “Veterans United Outreach Group.” “

“Oh. Silly me. I'll see you tomorrow, Doctor Levine.”

“Yes, I'm sure we can make a deal.”

As Doctor Levine hung up, Geppetto angrily prodded at Wildcard with a fork.

Geppetto strolled into the unremarkable bar and grill, scanning the patrons consciously for any sign of a UO presence. There was one heavily-augmented human at the bar. He had Dervish sit at the bar to keep his eye on said human. Dervish had bandages on his head and wasn't taking to the painkillers so well since they'd sprung him from the veteran's hospital, so Geppetto figured he'd stick the big guy with an easy job.

Wildcard and Bend were outside, monitoring communications from Wildcard's car with a signal scanner, and also keeping an eye on foot traffic. The bar and grill was as safe as it ever would be.

Geppetto cautiously approached the young doctor sitting at the booth by herself. Hannah Levine was a human barely out of grad school, blonde and rosy-cheeked and insufferably naive. She wore large sunglasses and a thick coat, as if those made her less conspicuous and not more.

“...Are you Mr. Salvatore?”

“Yes, Doctor Levine,” said Geppetto, dropping his white noise generator, “and you have by now doubtless figured out that we're shadowrunners.”

Levine looked to either side of the booth, as though she were in a bad spy movie.

“What do you want for the drugs?”

“We want access to the research database.”

Levine immediately hardened and withdrew, leaning back in her seat.

“Why would you want that?”

Seamlessly, Geppetto transitioned,

“Believe it or not, we're runners who actually have a veteran among our numbers. One of our fixers gave us good intel that UO is withholding a next-generation antipsychotic because imitators would jeopardize their stranglehold on the Veteran's Administration. All this at the expense of good soldiers.”

“You want to sell it?”

“We want to publish the chemical formula for free on the Matrix.”

Levine's face was one of unadulterated starstruck love.

“I need to...I need to think about this.”

“Take your time, Doctor Levine.”

Over subvocal, Geppetto commented to Wildcard and Bend,

“This looks like it's finishing up. You two should go get that ceramicam.”

“We'll stick around till you've called a taxi for you and Dervish and made it out of eyeshot, boss,” commented Wildcard. “I'm getting some weird readings here. I think there's an invisible mage in the alleyway out back.”

Tense, Geppetto and Dervish made their way out to the street corner and called a cab. Wildcard and Bend watched as the cab peeled away, and then the sonar outline of the invisible figure slowly dissipated.

“This is all kinds of weird,” commented Wildcard, over the team's tactical network. “Bend and I are going to get that camera into the employee village tonight, but you two better lay low. What were the plans for the camera again, Bend?”

Bend responded,

“Already ordered it from my spy toys dealer. Ever heard of a guy named 'The Eyes?'”

“Can't say I have.”

“Good. He chloroforms you and takes you to an undisclosed location before he lets you order, like a goddamn nut. Lucky for you I got this order out of the way while Dervish was having surgery. If you

see a grey unmarked stepvan dropping off a package, avert your eyes or he'll probably shoot you for being a witness.”

“Brilliant. There a place we're meeting this mystery stepvan?”

“Yeah. Parking lot back out by the suburbs. You should probably just stay in the car.”

It was close to eleven at night when Bend returned to Wildcard. In his hands was a tasteful, unobtrusive Chinese-style hairpiece with a patterned bauble on the end.

“Here's our camera. Don't ask me what I had to do to get it.”

Wildcard looked over the hairpin approvingly.

“Nice workmanship. You'd never know it was a camera.”

Bend brushed a thin layer of grime off his tacsuit's shoulders.

“Yeah, only the best for The Eyes. Now comes the fun part, getting this into the bushes outside Chang's house.”

“Well, that's on you, buddy. I'll park in the 'burbs outside the complex, I'll be there to drive in real quick if you need me.”

“As per usual, Bend gets to do the dangerous part. Let's get to it.”

As Wildcard and Bend pulled into the suburbs around the UO Complex, something was...off. There were lights on the helipad, and movement on the ground. The rumble of heavy-duty engines broke the ambiance of the night.

“Huh. Musta been a security breach.”

“Don't get yourself killed. If security's been upped around the village, Bend, then return to the car. Also, activate your signal scanner, see if you can't make heads or tails of the situation.”

“Roger that.”

Bend pulled down his goggles, hood, and mask, before gecko gripping over the perimeter wall. Beelining to the employee village, he found that security in that part of the complex was roughly the same as always. However, his scanner was picking up a massive amount of traffic. UO was wide awake this night.

Suspicious, he dropped the camera in the bushes, twisted a few flowers off to mark the camera's location, and then snuck towards the main arcology.

His signal scanner picked up a broadcast from a mercenary commander, whom he could make visual

contact on, gesturing to dozens of white-armored soldiers in front of a stalling VTOL;

“...Repeat, this is NOT a drill, we have concrete PROOF that this is an attempted datasteal. We fuck this up, and it's everyone's jobs--maybe even some lives. We have three suspects; orc, male, tall, goes by “Dirk Steel.” Last known location, Seattle, Tacoma. Elf, male, awakened, goes by “Michael Salvatore.” Last known location, Seattle, Downtown. Human, male, goes by “Bill McDonach.” Detected in the suburbs ten minutes ago, Chopper 9 should be receiving clearance any minute...speak of the devil!”

A Fantome attack helicopter buzzed low over the heads of the mercenaries, spurring a raucous cheering.

“You have your orders, gentlemen! Get to it!”

Bend took a moment to fumble for his subvocal.

“Wildcard. Drive.”

“What?”

“Fucking drive.”

“Oh shite.”

Wildcard leaned out of his side window to see the white-painted UO attack chopper buzzing low over the rooftops, its minigun barrel spinning.

“Oh, SHITE!”

Wildcard let his Scottish brogue get the better of him as he gunned the engine, flipped all four turbochargers, popped a burst of nitrous, and began roaring through the suburbs as his car spat flames from its rear.

“HOLY FOOKIN' SHITE!”

Wildcard tripped his Wired Reflexes and began spinning the car into tilting turns through every narrow thoroughfare he could manage, as the helicopter slowly got closer. He was burning for the sprawl of Vancouver, trying to put buildings larger than two-story houses between himself and it.

Vancouver was still a few miles away.

With its powerful targeting computer, the minigun achieved lock and began peppering away at Wildcard's car. Every time he ducked behind a house, it had to take a moment to recalibrate, but would swiftly reposition itself and begin putting holes in his hood again. Luckily, Wildcard had invested in a preposterous amount of stealth armor for his vehicle, but the hood wouldn't hold out for long, regardless. Lights turned on, sparsely at first, until the entire suburb was lit up. Someone in the distance screamed.

Being that off was the general direction in which Wildcard wanted to fuck, he threw himself onto the freeway and began hauling ass for downtown Vancouver, dodging the few cars that were out this late at night as though they were stationary objects. The helicopter followed, although it pulled away to a slightly further distance.

Wildcard's nexus alerted him to an attempted wireless lock.

“Oh, they're not going to try that. They're not going to try that on a public freeway.”

There was a distant 'PAF' noise as flames were shunted out behind the helicopter, and a chrome streak flashed through the sky toward Wildcard's tail, trailing smoke.

“FOOK ME!”

Wildcard uncorked the rest of the nitrous, turning the highway into two streaks of blackened rubber shreds on heated asphalt. Streaking across the pavement at over two hundred and fifty miles per hour he almost managed to race the missile that was determined to play tag with his car.

Well, two could play at that game. Recognizing exactly how much this was about to suck, Wildcard slammed on the brakes and threw his car into a tailspin as the missile soared just overhead and then smashed into the asphalt in front of the car. It exploded when it was still four meters out from Wildcard's car, and the force still removed what was left of the hood and blew out every glass surface on Wildcard's car. The car swerved to the left, tilted, hit the crater that was once a chunk of road, and corkscrewed through the air nose-first for two rotations before smashing down back onto its wheels. Acting on pure adrenaline, Wildcard gunned the engine again, and responded to the barks of the powerful racing model with thankful tears as he threw his new convertible into forward motion again. As sirens approached from the opposite direction, the helicopter tilted back, and then there was a shimmer as it disappeared from the night sky. Wildcard's nexus, miraculously intact, picked up the swift work of an Edit program; its node was being erased. As far as anyone except him was concerned, the helicopter had never existed.

A few Data Searches and a call to Luca later that mostly consisted of screaming and sobbing, Wildcard found himself at an ask-no-questions garage deep in the middle of urban Vancouver. He had no illusions that this was a safe hiding spot; he'd already spotted the node signatures of three surveillance drones orbiting overhead. However, he was amongst people, awake, witnessing people, and witnesses meant safety. For now. Hands shaking as he nervously lit up a cigarette, he used his backup commlink to put in a group call to Geppetto, Dervish, and Brianna McReary:

“Job's off. Run and hide while you can, chummers. UO is coming.”

”And how long did you say you'd be needing this for?”

The warehouse manager looked over the credstick he'd been slipped. He seemed to be trying to find a way to flip through it, as one would a wad of paper cash, and failing. Geppetto did not relish doing business with this man.

“At least a week. I'm moving between houses and need interim storage.”

“And a shipping container in a dockside warehouse was your first instinct?”

Geppetto scowled.

“Friend told me you were cheaper than self storage.”

“Well, you got that right.”

The pudgy man pocketed the credstick and pointed out a long red shipping container to Geppetto, tucked away near the back of the warehouse.

“That would be yours. Don't go getting into no trouble, you hear?”

As Geppetto stalked toward the crate, he could swear that the man winked at him.

He threw open the doors of the container and was greeted by the foul stench of human offal. There were makeshift mattresses--more rag piles, really--on the floor. There was a bucket overflowing with shit in the corner, surrounded by flies. Geppetto grunted in disgust.

“The prior tenants could have at least had the decency to clean this out.”

It took Geppetto around an hour or two to begin getting bored. His commlink was compromised, so he couldn't even play with it to keep himself entertained. Magic could only go so far, too; it took a lot out of him. And to top it all off, he had no idea if his team was alive or dead.

He turned gaseous and drifted about the stockyard, eyeing the dockworkers. It was early in the morning, which meant that bleary-eyed workers were just beginning to drift in for work.

That was good. Geppetto needed a messenger.

Materializing atop a large stack of shipping containers, he spied his target: a worker, separated from the others, untangling a long length of chain. He called up a Control Thoughts spell, and forced his will upon the man's mind:

LOOK UP A WOMAN NAMED BRIANNA MCREARY. TELL HER THAT THE BAT IS IN HIS CAVE. ASK HER FOR A HEAD COUNT. WRITE HER ANSWER IN CHALK ON THE PAVEMENT BY WAREHOUSE 6.”

The man clutched at his head, as though in pain, and then began looking around, wildly. Geppetto knew that mistakes had been made when the dockworker stumbled towards other workers, pulling out his commlink and yelling to his comrades.

“Someone just done tried to fuck with my head!”

Geppetto grimaced. It was a thing that he was doing a lot of lately.

“That could have gone better.”

A lone kangaroo approached the back door of the Faulty Bar. Despite the fact that kangaroos were not native to Seattle (or, in fact, North America), this was a most incongruously stealthy kangaroo. It was, in fact, an invisible kangaroo. Were one to see said kangaroo (which they wouldn't, because it was invisible), one might suspect that it was not, in fact, a natural kangaroo, but rather a shapechanged MysAd choosing the form for its capability to pouch valuable mission equipment while still running at forty miles per hour.

The invisible kangaroo snuck its way through the back door and the kitchen, then carefully up the stairs towards Brianna McReary's office. However, just as it was reaching for the door, there was a click from behind it.

“You pinged on sonar, motherfucker,” growled a deep voice. “Turn around slowly.”

The kangaroo dropped invisibility.

“...Kangaroo?”

With a noise best described as “SCHLORP,” the kangaroo turned into a naked Bend. His clothes shot towards the ceiling comically as his pouch rejoined his stomach, squeezing them upwards at a high speed.

“It's me, idiot.”

“Oh, fuck. Sorry, Bend.”

Dervish put his shotgun back in the shotgun scabbard on the back of his armor, deactivating his ruthenium polymer cloak. Chuckling softly at his own paranoia, Dervish grabbed the handle on Brianna McReary's office door before the entire door exploded outward with a KABLAM. The wind flew out of Dervish's lungs as he fell flat on his ass with an equally loud CLANK, snapping one of the floorboards in half. However, given that Dervish was wearing articulated heavy milspec armor, he was left with a few dents and scuff marks on the paint job but not much else from the two shells of buckshot and the shrapnelated remains of the door that had struck his chest.

Bend stuck his head through the new hole in the door.

“A little on edge, Brianna?”

“UO's been asking about you.”

Brianna stood up from behind her desk and nonchalantly began reloading her shotgun.

“We gathered,” grunted Dervish, just walking clean through what remained of the door rather than

bothering to open it.

“They've got snipers outside. Wanna keep those cloaks up. Make for the barrens, they won't follow you there.” Brianna pointed towards her work nexus, which was turned off. “Comms are compromised, so keep out of contact if you can. I'll work on clearing this up. Till then you lay low. Good?”

Bend and Dervish nodded in concert.

“Dervish, please tell me that you have another vehicle aside from your stupid fucking bike.”

“Well...”

Brianna sighed.

“Better make a sprint for Redmond, then.”

“You sure you ain't been followed?”

The Mafioso looked behind his back nervously as he walked Wildcard behind a Renton public school, passing by a few children just leaving the playground for pick-up.

“I'm sure. Had to hack three different drones but I'm sure. Car's parked in a parking garage in Auburn, plates switched, silver paint job, had the whole car EMP'd to kill every tag I coulda missed. Where's the saferoom you promised me? Not to sound ungrateful to Luca or some such. He's really bailing me out of a pickle, here.”

The Mafioso approached a boarded-up door in the back of the schoolhouse, and pulled a few of the boards free.

The smell hit Wildcard.

“Did someone die in here?”

“Yeah, back during Crash 2.0. Teacher was wired into the school network. It used to be a PE closet but the corpse became a biohazard before city services could pick it up, so they just kind of boarded it up. Should get wired matrix access just fine, and the room isn't included on maps anymore so you'd need someone to actually come looking for this specific hidey-hole to be in danger.”

“Sounds good. You want beer money for your troubles?”

“That'd be great, chief.”

Wildcard tossed a credstick to the gangster.

“Forget you ever saw me. Standard corp emergency policy is to move sensitive data by courier, and

that's probably got me locked down till they've got it all sorted out.”

“Fuck.”

Geppetto ducked back into his shipping container. Alarms screamed from all directions, the siren call of the police interceptors circling the docks. There were Department of Paranormal Security cops - essentially Awakened super-cops in sexy trenchcoats and with good publicity - all over the dockyard, throwing containers open, one by one. Geppetto should have paid more attention to wiping his astral signature: Control Thoughts was an illegal, ILLEGAL spell.

It was only a matter of time before they caught his aura. Geppetto was a manipulation magician first and foremost. These were hunters. Combat mages. Ex-military, mostly. And nothing screamed good publicity like taking out a Black Lodge member.

Geppetto had no intention of becoming an advertising campaign for a bunch of spoiled magecops. He was taking the inevitable into his own hands and wringing the life out of it.

Ironically, the first step was letting go.

He stepped out into the hated sunlight, his mind dulled to the shouts of the cops as they raised their guns. His gun was deadlier than they could even conceive of. He put his fore and middle fingers to his chin, and pulled the trigger.

A Control Thoughts spell rocketed through Geppetto's brain, screaming one word:

SLEEP.

Geppetto slept.

He awoke.

Wildcard was surveying the news with his limited Matrix connection. He had been following the special on “DPI Specialists Uncover a Black Magician” with dread. As he watched a dozen gunmen perforate Geppetto on live TV, then follow up with spells, that dread certainly did not abate. As the bullets in question blasted outward from Geppetto's frame in a greenish fireball of death, that dread continued to not abate and, in fact, increased. His eyes flooded black with the hollow nothingness that exists in the heart of a murderer, Geppetto took one look at the helicopter cameraman and then the feed abruptly cut out, although the audio of a dozen men screaming in incredible, unearthly pain remained for about a half-second longer.

Wildcard sent Brianna a message:

“I think Geppetto may have just ended his career, Brianna. I'm still okay for now. Over and out.”

Wildcard recognized his mistake and began packing his bag again even before Brianna sent a message back.

“They’re tracking me, dipshit. Ditch your hiding spot.”

Wildcard was out the door and on the sidewalk, making for the nearest metro station, within half a minute. With his mask in his duffel bag, he looked like Johnny Nobody, average salaryman. He calmly took the escalator down, approached the nearest maintenance closet, produced an autopicker and, pretending desperately like he belonged, slipped the autopicker into the lock. Jimmying the door free of the lock, he popped into the closet long enough to get a maintenance jumpsuit over his suit, and then began working his way down the maintenance catwalks in the subway tunnel, making for the barrens, where he could split off into the abandoned tunnel sections. He felt around in his bag for his assault rifle; he’d need it, where he was going.

Wildcard slowly walked the length of the sprawl from Renton to Redmond, just using the subway tunnels. Eventually he hit an old barrier--wood and chain-link fence, mostly--between the abandoned subway tunnels and the active ones, and a few minutes with a wire cutter and a hatchet from his duffel bag had him moving again, albeit through much less friendly environs. The tunnels beneath Redmond weren’t as well-mapped, and they saw overlap with the sewers, impromptu basements created by building collapses, and the odd bug spirit hive. Wildcard donned his mask and switched on the night vision, priming his smartlink for action. Every once in a while his boots crunched on something that he didn’t care to observe, and he had to avoid tensing up. Panicking was his worst enemy in a scenario like this.

He dropped to a crouch and slowly worked his way along a wall when he spotted lamplight and heard voices coming from an abandoned subway station. Shadows on the opposite wall showed three men with handguns flanking a large box of some kind, and two men in some sort of armor with assault rifles standing across from them. Activating his headphones’ selective sound filters, Wildcard started to pick up bits of the conversation.

A synthesized voice, distorted by means of some sort of vocoder device, announced,

“We’ve been over this. Your payment was half up front. We’re not paying your gang double for the goods, that wasn’t part of the deal.”

A more recognizable voice, a male, human probably, retorted,

“Well, you didn’t warn us about the level of heat going into this. We say cough up double or we walk and take it to your competitors.”

Vocoder shouted back,

“You and I both know that we have no competitors! The Seattle underground is ours!”

“Piss off!”

“You have three seconds to back away before we take the merchandise by force. One, twoFUCK!”

The shadows of the three men pulled sidearms. One of them managed to pop off a few shots (which went wild) before all three were promptly put down in a volley of fire from the two armored men. One of the armored men immediately ran to the corpses and put a single bullet in each of their heads before pulling a knife and squatting over the bodies. The other ran to the box, popped the top off with a plasticine “click,” and breathed a heavily-distorted sigh.

“Merch still there?” This voice was different. Distorted in the same way that the previous voice was, but still a distinctly separate male voice. Wildcard guessed that it was probably the corpse-squatter. The first voice replied,

“Merch is still there. Not as much as promised, though.”

With a horrible squelching noise, the squatting figure stood up from the bodies.

“It's why John doesn't make a point of dealing with go-gangers. We use the 162s for a reason when we want quality merch, not freelancers. Let's beat feet before we attract the Rusted Stilettos.”

As the two men approached his position, Wildcard loudly cleared his throat. Both of the shadows tensed and raised their rifles. The second voice shouted,

“WHO'S THERE!? Back away and we won't hurt you!”

“I rather doubt that,” said Wildcard, “which is why I'm not showing myself. I'm not looking for invisibility so much as protection.”

There was a pause.

“...go on.”

“You gentlemen sound like you belong to a reputable criminal org somewhere on the unfriendly side of the law. I like that. You see, I happen to be a runner, on the run from the law, and I was looking for someplace to lie low. I can pay or work, or both. Amenable?”

There was another pause, as the two mystery men made hushed whispers to each other, which came off more like radio static. One of them put his hand to the side of his head, probably calling in another opinion.

“You don't ask any questions and help us get this shipment of merchandise back to our home turf, shadowrunner, and we'll give you a place to kip out for five hundred a week. Deal?”

“Deal. You don't get the five hundred till we get back safely, though,” said Wildcard, stepping out into the open.

He was confronted by two men wearing Mitsuhamas EE hazard suits, outfitted with makeshift PPP armor additions. The glass on the hazard suits' hermetically-sealed faceplates was polarized. Wildcard couldn't see an inch of skin on either man.

“Very well. What's the merchandise?”

“Hearts, mostly, but we didn't get a chance to check.”

Wildcard gulped.

“...cow hearts?”

“Guess again.”

”I'm telling you! I don't know your sister! And if she looked like you I definitely wouldn't have fucked her! Don't--”

Dervish punched the “offending” lowlife in the face, knocking a few teeth out and rendering the guy completely unconscious before stomping out of the barrens bar. The surrounding gangers clapped and cheered.

As Dervish exited the bar, Bend materialized next to him, holding a large sack full of commlinks.

“You snag some more?”

“Yeah, about six off the crowd, seven if you count the guy you just decked. Most of 'em look to be disposables, though.”

“Still. We can use 'em to stay off the radar and sell a couple off when funds are getting low.”

Bend straddled the back of Dervish's bike, keeping an eye out for any tails as Dervish climbed onto the front. Dervish was still wearing his milspec armor, too paranoid to take it off while they were Universal Omnitech's Most Wanted.

“Think Wildcard or Geppetto made it?”

“Dunno. If we can hook up with them, we'll talk about whether we want to lay low then try to pick up the mission again, or just fucking bail.”

Dervish kicked the engine into motion, and the two runners tore across the busted streets of the barrens. As they pulled onto the roof of an old parking structure, the sky above them began to darken noticeably.

“Aw, fuck. Are the smog spirits out today? Goddamn toxics.”

Bend squinted, turning an eye skyward.

“No, that's...oh. Oh shit.”

Cackling madly, Geppetto pinwheeled through the sky, his flight spell faltering. He trailed blood in long arcs through the air, spiraling towards the ground. He seemed very intent on landing near to

Dervish and Bend. Dervish growled,

“He's going to slow down, right?”

He didn't.

With a painful SNAP noise, Geppetto landed on the parking structure, bounced, skidded, and then ground to a stop. The impact and the rain of blood from above left the immediate area around Geppetto resembling a schlocky horror flick. Bend ran over to Geppetto's body.

“How'd you find us, Geppetto?”

Geppetto grinned up at the team. This would not have been a problem if his body weren't face-down. As it were, his head was about seventy-five degrees backwards. His arms twitched and spasmed, before drooping into lifelessness one digit at a time.

“Geppetto isn't home right now, but you can leave a message.”

Dervish stood over Geppetto, looking over Geppetto's blood-soaked jacket.

“Fuck, Adversary. Your head's on backwards.”

“Is it, now?”

With another SNAP noise, Adversary twisted his head a little further back to look down at his body. In the process, his fedora fell off, revealing that Geppetto was missing most of the right side of his face. His right eyeball dangled like a yo-yo from a massive crater in his head.

“I didn't notice.”

Bend took a moment to stagger a few feet away and vomit his guts up.

“J-Jesus, man.”

Bend coughed up a few more dry heaves before wiping his mouth.

“We've got to get you to a hospital.”

“Considering I'm the only thing keeping your cocky little teammate alive right now,” agreed Adversary in a sing-song voice, “I'd second that assessment. Of course, where-oh-where are we ever going to find a hospital free of Universal Omnitech pharmaceuticals interference? And if we find that, how about a hospital that accepts banshees? I'd put my hands on my cheeks dramatically but, what do you know, I'm paralyzed.”

Dervish snapped his fingers. In the armor, it made a CLANG noise.

“TwoDee's buddy. What was his name--John. The Tamanous guy. The ghoul. Tamanous runs a hospital only a few miles from here.”

“Better get me there fast, chuckles,” giggled Adversary. “I’m beginning to stop hurting, and not in the good way.”

Loading Geppetto's broken body into the sidecar, the team sped for the Tamanous hospital.

At the gate to the Tamanous compound, John tsk-tsked, at least as well as anyone could tsk-tsk while not having lips.

“A year ago, this man came into this hospital in a similar state. I turned him into a banshee to spare his pain. Look at what difference it has made.”

“Look,” said Dervish, impatient, “can you save him or not?”

“Likely not,” responded John, adjusting his tie with a funerary flair, “but I can try. We refurbished the waiting room if you wish to stay there for the night. There's another runner renting it out, but something tells me you'll be amenable roommates.”

“He could be a bounty hunter,” noted Bend, unconvinced. John turned and began walking back into the hospital as two ghouls gingerly loaded Geppetto onto a stretcher.

“You'll work it out. You runner types do tend to get along with each other.”

John turned back briefly.

“Oh, and if you have open wounds, please ask one of my aides for one of the hazard suits from the basement. It wouldn't do well to infect ALL of my clientele.”

“Well, whoever this mystery runner is,” said Dervish, as he stepped into the waiting room, “he'd better not fuck with me.”

“Wouldn't dream of it, Dervish,” responded Wildcard.

“Oh. Good to see you're alive.”

“Likewise,” responded Wildcard, tapping at an AR screen. “Was that bloke with half a face Geppetto?”

It was three days later when the team was allowed into the recovery ward to see Geppetto. The recovery ward was a dismal place, given that it hadn't been used for a medical recovery since Geppetto went under the first time, and not for years before that.

Geppetto was loosely cogent. He still resembled, more than anything, a marionette with its strings cut, and being devoid of all of his trademark clothes made him look awfully exposed. His body was

covered with bandages of all varieties. John spoke as he undid the bandages around Geppetto's head.

“It was a miracle that we managed to fix your spine. You'll walk again--soon, even--but the nerve damage is permanent. You'll probably never feel much in your extremities again. With the amount of muscle tissue we had to clone, you'll also be weak. If you insist on going back on the job, I'd recommend putting you on crutches, a cane at least.”

“My face,” Geppetto rasped. “Tell me about my face.”

John grimaced. It was a hideous thing, all teeth and bleached, atrophying gums.

“Well, we repaired it. Mostly.”

Geppetto's face had mostly recovered, although around his right eye was a mess of scar tissue. He had no eyebrow to speak of, and even the eye itself was set a little differently from its twin. What was more disturbing was the trickle of orangish-red liquid out of what used to be Geppetto's tear ducts. Geppetto snarled when he looked in the mirror.

“What the hell is that!?”

“It's cerebrospinal fluid. When we were reattaching the ocular nerve, your regeneration kept kicking in. It thought that your eyelids--lacerated as they were--were a wound and kept sealing over your eye. We had to create an incision and hold it open long enough for the regeneration to slow. Your eye may be permanently damaged, but more pressing is the seepage of the fluid into your tear ducts. You'll have to come in for periodic checks, but it should be harmless.”

“HARMLESS!?”

With a burst of magic, Geppetto smashed the mirror.

“YOU CALL LEAKING MY BRAINS OUT MY EYE HARMLESS!?”

“Technically, Geppetto, the fluid around your brain. And you're lucky that you survived in the first place.”

Wildcard somberly stepped forward.

“Look. Geppetto. We can call up the Johnson, get this whole thing called off--”

Geppetto grabbed Wildcard by the throat with a deceptive strength, shutting him up. Arduously, with pain evident in every motion, he drew Wildcard closer to himself.

“No, Wildcard. We're finishing this mission. We're finishing this mission because I've lost too fucking much already, and I'm not prepared to make it all for nothing.”

The team gathered around a table in what was once the old hospital cafeteria. The plates and trays

were still in use by the hospital's Infected inhabitants, but the cafeteria slop was a little...bloodier now. Geppetto greedily, shamelessly sucked the blood out of a piece of unidentifiable human meat, occasionally choking a bit when the fluid leaking from his eye dripped down over his nose and mouth.

Wildcard, Bend, and Dervish did their best not to cringe.

“Okay, so here's what we've got,” said Dervish, gesturing to one of the commlinks in the phone-sack. “I managed to get a hold on one of Brianna's disposables; UO doesn't know about it. She says she's working on a distraction that will take some of the heat off us. She says to wait a few days for couriers to distribute the information off the UO research nexus, though.”

Wildcard nodded.

“I figured as much. Geppetto, I hope you don't mind that, since we're going to be late on our week deadline, I called up Mr. Johnson and got us a week extension. Johnson halved our pay.”

Geppetto grumbled, but nodded slowly.

“That's fair; we fucked up, big time. I'm thinking our first step is to retrieve the camera. UO thought we were trying a datasteal. On the plus side, that means that they won't be looking carefully for an extraction.”

Bend gawked.

“You want me to go back in there!?”

Geppetto stared him down. With his new facial features, it was more imposing than usual.

“Yes, I want you to go back in there, Bend, and do your goddamn job. And then you're going to go in there AGAIN to get Doctor Chang's research files. Assuming they're not getting transferred.”

Geppetto grumbled, but nodded slowly.

“That's fair; we fucked up, big time. I'm thinking our first step is to retrieve the camera. UO thought we were trying a datasteal. On the plus side, that means that they won't be looking carefully for an extraction.”

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“Yes, I want you to go back in there, Bend, and do your goddamn job. And then you're going to go in there AGAIN to get Doctor Chang's research files. Assuming they're not getting transferred.”

It was the dawn of the second week when the invisible kangaroo hopped through the backyards of the suburbs around the UO compound, keeping an eye out for any flying drones. The coast was clear, but there were loud noises coming from the compound, and the sound of approaching police cars from the suburbs.

As Bend approached the compound, he found the source; a group of runners in what looked to be an Ares Citymaster had broken through the fence. With a “THUNKA-THUNKA-THUNKA,” a troll with an assault cannon carved his way through a line of stalled traffic, sending the UO whitecoats taking cover on the other side stumbling. Screaming civilians ran for the safety of the arcology.

Bend returned to his natural elven form and popped earbuds, calling up Brianna's backup number.

“Hey, Brianna? Your little fix for the problem wouldn't have been sending a bunch of runners on a job at the UO complex, would it?”

“Technically, not MY fix. I just let people down the fixer network grapevine know that UO was sending out couriers in response to a datasteal. Eventually somebody would do something stupid, UO would clean up, and the heat would be off you boys.”

Bend nodded appreciatively, not that Brianna could have seen it even if she was there.

“Clever. Man, they're going full terrorist out there.”

The helicopter that had assaulted Wildcard a few days ago passed the compound in a strafing run, and with an extended volley of minigun fire the right side of the troll's upper body turned into a pink mist. A milspec-suited gun-sammy and a tacsuited infiltrator dragged a screaming whitesuit into the back of the Citymaster.

“...And that'd be one of the couriers. Man, the business breeds some dumb runners. How do they think they're going to get out of this?”

“I don't think you get to talk about dumb runners today, Bend.”

“Touché.”

Bend slipped over the perimeter fence as a white-painted SWAT tank rumbled up from the depths of the parking structure. As he slipped into the employee village, there was a cacophonic exchange of fire, and then silence, save for the rattle of a few more distant small-arms in withering suppressive fire.

“I think that about does it for our scapegoats. Lucky way to take them out, too--scorched the bodies so they can't say for sure if we were in there or not. Although I'm not sure I approve of glorified human shield tactics, Brianna. Runner solidarity and all that.”

“There's a lot you don't approve of, Bend. If you need any more help, call me up.”

With that, Bend's comms went silent.

Approaching Chang's house, Bend found the lights off, but the flower bushes had been disturbed again. Fishing around for a moment, he recovered the hairpin. Pocketing it, he wasted no time in getting back out of the UO complex before UO got wise to the fact that there were more runners than accounted for on the premises.

The team reviewed their footage back in their ghoulish hospital temporary base. Chang had been incredibly thorough--over the course of a few days, she'd found an excuse to walk through almost every relevant floor, office to office, lab to lab. She'd even brought a batch of cupcakes to the guys in the security nexus.

What was most interesting was the AR displays with which she worked. Her research remained on the nexus; from what the team could gather, it was chemical data on a new line of experimental "smart" immunosuppressants. The team began to formulate a plan.

"If we can special-order a ceramic simrig," commented Wildcard, "we could sneak it into her office and have her wear it, then just go through all of her research systematically before deleting it off the system. There'd be no record of an unauthorized copy, but all of the research would exist on the simsense recording."

Bend whined,

"I'm going to have to deal with the Eyes, again, aren't I?"

"Oh, take one for the team, Bend," spat Geppetto, fiddling with his wheelchair. "Lord knows I have."

Bend approached the unmarked grey van. It had parked outside of the Tamanous hospital at his call. It waited. Ominously, it waited.

As he approached, the side door slid open, beckoning him to enter. All the seats and upholstery had been removed, and there was a barrier separating the driver from the empty space in back. Of course, Bend had no doubt that the driver wasn't actually in the van at all, but rather rigging it remotely.

As he stepped into back, there was a "pfft" as the van began flooding with neurostun and DMSO. Bend sighed loudly, in the process breathing deep of the chemical cocktail.

He awoke, as per the usual, blindfolded and tied to a chair. Between this and the talismonger Vulcan, Bend was getting used to this sort of thing. A synthesized voice asked,

"What do you need, son?"

Bend cleared his throat of some lingering phlegm (neurostun did tend to do a number on the sinuses) and answered,

"A simrig. Plastic and ceramic components. We need as little wiring in it as possible, or if that's

impossible, we need the electronics to be shielded. I want to be able to walk through a MAD scanner.”

“That's going to cost you.”

“I know. 5 grand good?”

The voice barked back,

“Six thousand.”

“How about 5 and a quarter?”

“Six thousand.”

“Five and a half?”

“Six thousand.”

Bend didn't know why he bothered trying to barter with The Eyes.

“Done. Two days?”

“Three.”

“Sounds good. Pay-”

With a THUNK, a neurostun syringe planted itself in Bend's arm. He woke up sprawled outside the hospital again.

“...I HATE that guy.”

Wildcard asked,

“You sure you're up for this, Bend?”

The team sat in the sedan a few blocks away from the UO complex. Bend took a deep breath, let it out, and then extended his arms to Wildcard.

“As much as I'll ever be. You've got the portable MAD scanner. Scan me.”

Wildcard ran the scanner over Bend while Bend grumbled aloud, patronizingly,

“Magic isn't everything, Bend. You should get some cyberware, Bend. Who cares if you pop in MAD scanners, Bend. Well, look at me now!”

“I don't know if any of us, specifically, ever told you that, Bend,” said Wildcard, putting away the

scanner. "You're clean. Get in there and get out quick; we can't help you once you're inside. Dervish and I will be armed up if you get spotted on the way out, though."

Bend nodded, his joking edge losing ground to his on-the-job persona.

"Right. Wish me luck."

"Godspeed."

Bend stepped out of the car, and then vanished into thin air as he made for the hole in the perimeter fence.

Bend approached the employee entrance, and worked his way up the veritable labyrinth of security measures on the interior. Most of the weapons scanners, metal detectors, and such could be gecko-gripped over, or slipped past. A few doors required employee IDs. In those cases, he could simply lift an ID off an employee or, more commonly, follow an employee in. Only one MAD scanner in particular had laser triggers and pressure pads around it to prevent circumvention, and it was at the end of the employee partition before the research labs. Steeling himself, he slipped through just before one of the researchers, but the alarm didn't trigger. Instead, the researcher and the guard made small talk about the latest Urban Brawl match while Bend disappeared into the employee hallways.

The labs of the UO complex were decidedly less sinister than Bend thought they would be. Although they continued in the theme of the pristine white aesthetic, no one was doing any horrible surgeries or torturing any secret prisoners. Mostly it was a bunch of people working with gloves in sealed containers, and more than that researchers seated at desks, in offices and cubicles, carrying out their research via remote mechanical "hands" in sealed laboratories near to the research nexus. Even more were simply reviewing and editing research documents. The UO doctors were chatty and cliquish, often standing over each others' desks to talk about their latest accomplishments.

Jennifer Chang sat at her desk, adjusted for her small size, while eating her lunch. She tooled around with her research, pretending to work, when an elf appeared next to her, placing a subvocal mic over her throat. Once again, she was startled, but not surprised.

"Idiot! There's a camera!"

Bend pointed to the camera on the ceiling.

"That one? There's a trid phantasm of you slacking off on the job while eating a chicken wrap over the lens."

"Smart. That doesn't mean you're not a week late, Sean."

"We renegotiated. I need your help getting your research off the nexus. Your extraction is tomorrow."

Chang shook her head.

"I can't make copies. I can only view the research from my desk node."

Bend produced the small spy-toy simrig.

“I know. It's why I brought this.”

Chang's eyes lit up.

“Ingenious. Stick around for twenty minutes, and for the love of god turn your cloak back on.”

Chang tucked the simrig into place, and adjusted her labcoat and hair to cover it. Slowly, systematically, she went through every one of her research notes in review, occasionally taking the time to spin 3-D models of various chemical chains around in AR space. She was approached by co-workers a few times, but would always shoo them off, saying that she “thought she was on to something, and would catch up to [them] later.”

After almost exactly twenty minutes, she detached the simrig and handed it back to Bend.

“All my data should be on here, now. Where's the extraction going down?”

“Keep your commlink on.”

As Bend disappeared back into the halls, making for the employee partition again, he tapped his subvocal and hit up Wildcard.

“Wildcard. Stage two.”

As Chang went down to grab a small dessert with her handlers, her commlink was hacked. A single message was left, which read:

“HELLO, DOCTOR JENNIFER CHANG, AND WELCOME TO THE EXCHANGE! AS YOU HEAD DOWN TO THE MALL, PLEASE TAKE THE ESCALATOR UP AND DOWN TWICE BEFORE HEADING OUT. YOU WILL THEN RECEIVE A KARMIC REWARD!”

Back in the car, Dervish grunted at Wildcard,

“I still think this is a stupid idea.”

“Everyone knows The Exchange, Dervish.”

“Everyone knows The Exchange is weird as hell. How do you know her handlers will go along with this?”

“It's free stuff. Hard to turn down free stuff.”

As soon as Bend verified that Chang did indeed take the escalator multiple times before heading down again, Wildcard used one of his scrap commlinks to buy three tickets to one of the latest late-summer blockbuster shitfests.

“CONGRATULATIONS, DOCTOR CHANG! YOU HAVE WON THREE TICKETS TO SUKIE

REDFLOWER FOUR: THE HALF-MOON CONSPIRACY! THE EXCHANGE PERSONALIZES YOUR KARMIC REWARDS BASED ON YOUR PREFERENCES! HAVE A NICE DAY!"

Bend caught his last glimpse of Doctor Jennifer Chang, staring blankly at her commlink, as he slipped out of the UO arcology.

Dervish waited in the movie theater lobby. He had cut his hair short, had grown out a bit of a beard, and had his protective cybereye covers retracted, to avoid being an obvious match to "Dirk Steel," UO fugitive. Bend sat behind the three seats reserved for Chang and her handlers, not in his usual tactical gear but rather in his inconspicuous street clothes. Wildcard and Geppetto, the latter of whom was still very weak, were parked outside the theater in Wildcard's now-silver sedan.

"She's not going to show," commented Dervish over the tacnet.

"Yes she is," Wildcard shot back. "Never underestimate the power of "free." Greed short-circuits the mind."

"Have you SEEN the reviews? It's the worst movie of the summer." Bend plucked up a few pieces of popcorn individually, eating them in the absolute wrong way to eat popcorn. "Not to mention apparently there's a twist where Sukie loses all her powers due to a negative background count, and then Awakens again into a different tradition."

"Now, that's just offensive," commented Geppetto. "These studios really need to have mages on staff when they write up shit like that; a five year old could tell them that's not how it works!"

"You complain about this and I complain about the inaccuracies in every 'Fast and the Furious' trid ever made," threatened Wildcard. "Your move, gentlemen."

There was a short pause. Geppetto snickered, daubed at his eye-goo with a handkerchief, and turned to Wildcard.

"You've watched every Fast and the Furious trid?"

"...that wasn't what I meant and you know it."

"You have absolutely watched every Fast and the Furious trid."

Doctor Jennifer Chang stepped out of the car, flanked by two bored-looking whitesuits. She was playing up the "devout fangirl" angle to a T.

"I swear, back in Tsukie Redflower 3 I swore that she loved Rex Carlson, but it turned out that she was really in love with Lu Peng, from that secret guild of assassins--"

"Jenny, I know. We've been over this. Know that we're going to this movie as a favor to you."

Jennifer sighed melodramatically.

“I know. Hey! Let's get a hot dog! I haven't been to the theaters in FOREVER.”

Chang gave Bend a brief, knowing glance as she sat in front of him, before being flanked by her two guards. Bend nodded subtly, but kept his eyes on the screen.

About thirty minutes into the movie, Bend stepped outside. He made a point of being louder than usual, making “excuse me” comments to the people on either side of him.

About six minutes afterwards, Chang stepped out to go to the bathroom. Although one handler followed her to the bathroom door, Bend was already inside--with an invisibility effect on him, maintained by Geppetto.

Activating his foci, Bend cast a Body Double effect on Chang. While the real Chang waited in the bathroom, Dervish began making a commotion in the lobby, screaming about a lack of sweetness in his frosted confection. With her bodyguard momentarily distracted, Chang stepped out into the lobby long enough for Geppetto to look in through the facade of the movie theater, sitting in the car. With a quick spell, he rendered her invisible.

The body double stepped out of the bathroom a moment later, puppeted by Bend. It asked the guard,

“What's that guy's problem?”

“I don't know, Jenny. I think he's diabetic or something. Let's get back into the theater.”

Bend paid attention to the body double long enough to walk it back to its seat, and then set it on a looping series of “oohs,” “ahs,” and popcorn-munching. The real doctor stepped into the back of Wildcard's car, and was swiftly rejoined by Bend. As the ushers came running, Dervish also left the theater, returning to his motorbike.

Doctor Chang leaned over to Wildcard.

“The rendezvous point is in Snohomish. Is this a fast car?”

“Lady, you have no idea.”

After a surprisingly uneventful--save for Wildcard's absolute destruction of the local traffic laws--drive, the team pulled up in front of a farmhouse in Snohomish. Two men in black suits carrying H&K submachine guns opened the back doors of the sedan, and Doctor Chang conversed quietly with them before going inside the farmhouse.

One of the men said, blankly, in an imposing fashion that seemed almost at odds with the content of his message,

“Mr. Johnson will meet your team for lunch tomorrow at 12:15, at the Nacho Mama near the Auburn Shopping Center on Main Street West.”

Geppetto blinked.

“Mr. Johnson is meeting us for fast-food Mexican?”

“He was in the mood.”

“That's a little insulting.”

The guard turned around and began stalking back towards the house.

“That's not for me to say. Good day, sir.”

As the car pulled away, Geppetto growled,

“They were fucking with us. As though less than absolute perfection is insulting.”

Wildcard gripped his steering wheel tight, tense.

“I think they were within their rights, Geppetto.”

“How!? We did the fucking job, that's all they can ask.”

Wildcard turned to look Geppetto right in the eyes, and revealed,

“Their AR feeds. All the text was in German.”

Geppetto took a moment to put two and two together.

“Oh...oh fuck.”

Dervish asked, over the tacnet,

“Soo....tacos with Saeder-Krupp?”

Bend nodded soberly.

“Tacos with Saeder-Krupp.”

Mr. Johnson was a strange sight. To keep within the theme of dressing much lower than his station, he was wearing a powder blue business suit with rumpled shoulders. Considering that Johnson himself was a man of impeccable handsomeness and poise, it was a little weird to see him snarling down a burrito at a fast-food Mexican restaurant.

“Gentlemen! I heard you had some minor setbacks?”

“Ha ha,” said Geppetto glumly, sliding into the booth after putting his crutches aside.

“You know exactly what happened, Mr. Johnson,” noted Wildcard, while punching in an order for “the works” nachos on the table’s AR display. “And we’re prepared to accept half-pay. We did get Chang out as ordered, though.”

“Yes, and you needed to pull in a time extension and--correct me if I’m wrong--a lot of favors,” countered Mr. Johnson, with a smile. His statuesque face was marred by a little bit of shredded cheese stuck on his lip. “Consider this you boys’ wake-up call.”

Johnson brought out a credstick with 50,000 nuyen on it, and gave it to Wildcard, before forwarding half of the expense account to Wildcard’s commlink.

“But you still did a good job in the end. So I’m prepared to make you an offer.”

Geppetto looked at Mr. Johnson suspiciously.

“Oh?”

“Your fixer is just getting into the big leagues, and I’m a very important Johnson. I can pass word around--let everyone know that you and your guys are up for the big stuff, and she’s the way to contact you. I’ll vouch for you personally on the Johnson networks. You might even get rich out of it. What do you say?”

Wildcard nodded.

“That sounds quite amenable, Mr. Johnson.”

Bend nodded, although less swiftly than Wildcard.

“Yes, I agree. I hope we’re professional enough for it.”

Dervish grinned at Mr. Johnson.

“Hell, I been waiting for a big break since my first milk run.”

A mutual good-natured laugh sounded around the table. Geppetto stood up, a thin smile on his lips.

“Get a new mage, you suicidal fucks. I quit.”

With that, Geppetto retrieved his crutches and began slowly making his way out of the Nacho Mama.

After about a minute of stunned silence, Johnson asked,

“Who’s gonna eat his taco?”

Chapter 16: Felix the Eagle Warrior, Supersonic Cars, and Drunken Hold-Ups

A SMALL TOWN IN MEXICO, 2030

Ten-year-old Felix Rodriguez had a basic idea of why his parents were sending him off to Aztechno's boarding school program. Ever since he'd been born, he'd been acutely aware of being Special. Being Special was not necessarily a good thing, and in fact it ostracized him from his peers more often than not, but his pointy ears and the strange little things that happened around him marked him irrevocably as Special nevertheless. He'd get proper training on how to handle his strange new powers, the Aztechno rep had informed his parents, themselves poor coal miners. The gods of the Ancient Aztec civilization were showing favor on him, and it was nothing to be afraid of. He was - even the rep used the term - special. When Felix was loaded onto the bus and saw that almost every other boy was a large orc or troll, he felt even more alone. However, everyone was deeply respectful; stern, even. The Aztechno rep - who insisted that he be referred to as "Jefe" - cheerily let all the boys know that, from this day forward, they would never be bullied again.

TENOCHTITLAN, 2048. OPERATION RECIPROCITY IS IN FULL SWING

"Hold the block! 2nd Armored needs to push through here in fifteen minutes with the General!"

Lieutenant Felix Ramirez vaulted over half of a civilian car as a Shiawase RPG slammed into the storefront behind him, splashing glass and chunks of brick and mortar all over the street. Felix scrambled to his feet and dashed for what remained of his squad's APC, now a hunk of scrap flash-welded to the street after a particularly colorful encounter with a Drake Prime detachment. Shiawase and S-K were doing most of the heavy hitting in the capitol itself, but Felix had heard horror stories of the Red Samurai being airdropped in Medellin; of the strip mines going up in flames, depositing toxic flak into the surrounding countryside.

As Ramirez slid behind the APC and reloaded his LMG, his milspec armor's interface alerted him that structural integrity was greatly compromised on his left arm. He'd taken a single grazing shot from an assault cannon earlier, closer to the capitol building, back when the army still held it. He'd thought that it hadn't done much except blast the decorative blue Eagle Warrior designs off the shoulder, but evidently the servos were fucked up something fierce, and his jarring movement wasn't helping. He hadn't managed to catch up to whoever it was firing the thing, but the steady "THUKKA THUKKA THUKKA" further down the street let him know that his assailant - one of many - wasn't especially far off.

Ramirez focused his will, and called to him an aspect of Xiuhcoatl, the fire serpent. Gesturing in the direction of the Shiawase-garrisoned building that stood between him and what remained of his unit, he yelled "take 'em out!" As the spirit roared over the totaled vehicle, he rolled out of cover, shot a grenade through the window, and then began to lay down a blaze of suppressive fire.

Screams rose up from inside the building as flames flowed out of the windows. Seeing his chance to move, Felix sprinted for the burning building even as he felt the familiar emptiness that came with the destruction of a bound spirit.

Shiawase had two strengths; manpower, and loyalty. The building was filled with well-equipped paratroopers. Unfortunately for them, Felix was magical, he was better equipped, he was better trained, and he was better armed. As the soldiers inside recovered from the spirit's fire, Felix fell upon them like Huitzilopochtli himself, filling the room with armor-piercing rounds from his LMG even as he shot burning magma at the closest aggressors with the power of his mind. By the time he was done,

the building looked like a charnel house, and he'd killed seven men.

Felix didn't even stop to think about what he'd just improbably lived through, and leapt out the back door of the building. He could see his men garrisoned in a garage that they'd barricaded with vehicle parts. Corpses - soldier and civilian alike - littered the streets. He counted heads; Sergeant Major Contreras, the Jaguar Warrior, was wounded but had propped himself up on the barricade, gun in hand. Tamayo, Herrera, Salazar, and Osuna also looked mostly intact, if shellshocked. Luna, the squad's doctor, was tending feverishly to Batista, the sniper, but Batista, who'd been shot by a countersniper while he tried to provide cover fire for the team earlier, looked like he wasn't going to make it.

"Status report?"

Contreras smiled a weak smile.

"The general's going to make it out. We've cleared the street out back, and we've got a good clear range of fire for when they push through the hood that you just came out of. There's a bigass troll with an assault cannon; he's going to be first target, obviously. You think you can get him with your spells?"

Lieutenant Ramirez grimaced.

"His trog children will grow up without a father. That is a certainty. Hold the line!"

The rumblings of the mechanized division picked up behind the building, but the enemy wasn't pushing to intercept the VIP. In fact, no one crossed the perimeter.

"This doesn't feel right," growled Contreras.

There was a loud droning from overhead, slowly getting louder. Felix looked up. Far above the battlefield were massive, bloated twinrotor planes, done up in a garish red paint job with stars and stripes. Behind them trailed little black dots, dots that slowly got larger as they fell towards the ground.

The entire squad solemnly put down their guns. Luna muttered a Catholic prayer. No one reprimanded him on following a non-Aztec religion. It didn't matter now.

"Ares," choked Felix, a single tear running down his cheek, as his Guidance spirit grabbed him, preparing to whisk him away from the neighborhood that was going to imminently be his entire squad's grave, "Ares Macrotechnology, you American cocksuckers."

AZTECHNOLOGY COMPOUND IN THE PCC, 2072

Felix Ramirez adjusted his tie for what had to be the twentieth time in the last hour. It felt strange to be wearing a suit, to be banking on his looks, charisma, and talent for the first time in over two and a half decades, rather than his innate proficiency with murder. Less than a week ago he'd been in Bogota getting shot at by snipers. And then he'd received word of his "promotion."

To a jarhead like Felix, the civilian sector didn't constitute a "promotion," even if he was becoming an assistant-executive-in-charge-of-public-whatever-the-fuck. He'd seen his job on the line against the Aztechnology Homegrown Warrior Program flunkies for years now; it was probably better that he got out while he still had the benefits.

"...and that's what you'll do, at least in PR. You'll of course have other duties. Which reminds me, we've got a staff meeting for the security mages tonight; you'll be expected to show up at seven."

Victor Gutierrez had been taking Felix on a tour of the building and opining on bits of corporate doublespeak that had flown far over Felix's head. Pulling his eyes away from the window, Felix refocused on the conversation.

"Right. I'll be there."

"Remember, Colonel," said Gutierrez, a weaselly little man in a suit that didn't quite fit him, "we all know how hard it was to get used to a new workplace at first." His hand hovered insincerely over Felix's shoulder without quite making contact. "Don't hesitate to talk to people."

Felix nodded solemnly and entered his office, a privacy-less glass affair with a cushy synthleather seat and a nexus partition. He didn't speak to anyone until the mandatory meeting.

The meeting was in a boardroom. A bunch of enthusiastic-looking young mages and adepts sipped coffee and chatted, laughing at office gaffes and recountings of the latest telenovelas. Felix feigned smiles and returned conversation when it would be rude not to, but he wasn't in the mood.

Gutierrez sat at the back of the boardroom, and gestured for everyone to start quieting down. Slowly but surely, the conversation drifted out of the room.

"Alright, gentlemen," said Gutierrez, with a smile, "I'm sure that, considering last week's fiasco, you know what this meeting's all about. Horizon snuck a runner team into the basement, killed off a bunch of the spirits. We've got some spirits down there as a stopgap now, but obviously protocol will need to be restored. Volunteers?"

An orc security mage raised his hand.

"How much material are we working with?"

Gutierrez brought up a few SIN images in AR space.

"Two captives. One's a troll, though."

Felix cocked an eyebrow.

"Wait a second. What do prisoners have to do with anything? I've got a few bound spirits, I could place them downstairs if need be."

Everyone looked at Felix as if he were stupid. Gutierrez hazarded,

“Well, yes, but you didn’t perform the proper rituals. We can’t have half-rate spirits. This is a high-security facility.”

It took a moment to click for Felix.

“You...you mean blood magic!? But the Corporate Court outlawed it!”

A raucous laugh went around the entire boardroom. Gutierrez wiped at his eyes with a tissue.

“Yes, Mr. Ramirez, and I’m sure that MCT has stopped experimenting on technomancers and Renraku has stopped making Artificial Intelligences. It’s a fact of magic; sacrifice makes the best spirits. And at Aztechnology, we don’t settle for second-best.”

Felix tried not to show the disgust on his face.

“Well, you’re the new mage, Mr. Ramirez. What say we get you properly initiated?”

The other mages all nodded and looked at Felix in expectation.

“Uh...yeah. That’d be great. Company spirit and all.”

“Company spirits, Mr. Ramirez. When should we expect to see you down in the sub-basement?”

“How about this weekend?”

Gutierrez smiled brightly.

“Excellent! Next on the meeting schedule: catching the asshole who keeps stealing sandwiches out of the company fridge on floor 15.”

That night, with trembling hands, Felix turned on a disposable, untraceable commlink (a holdover from the front lines dodging Amazonian black-hat hackers) and called up an emergency contact that he’d been saving for a rainy day.

He said only this:

“Hello, Mr. Johnson. I would like to organize an extraction.”

REDMOND BARRENS, SEATTLE, PRESENT DAY

Felix had been waiting in the bolt hole for two months now.

The runners had entered the compound through the roof and extracted him via helicopter. Felix had left bombs around the compound as a distraction. He’d also set up spirits loyal to him within the various security checkpoints. He’d done everything to secure his freedom.

Everything except Blood Magic.

Their chopper had been shot down en route to one of the corporate complexes in Downtown Seattle. The runners had directed him to a collapsed building in Redmond that they used as a safehouse, and were keeping in case a direct hand-off wasn't feasible. And then they had all died when a second missile hit, although Felix had fled into the sewers in the chaos. He had been, at the time, a bit concerned that maybe Johnson wouldn't be able to find him after this fiasco.

He had been right.

Felix was on his last can of pork and beans, and wasn't relishing having to step out into the city, but it looked like the extraction was officially off.

Felix took a look around his “apartment,” tallying up his inventory. None of the outdated electronics in the apartment were worth trying to bring with him to sell, from the trid to the wall fan (which was once a ceiling fan until the building had fallen over) to the refrigerator that he was using to bar the door on the ceiling to keep the devil rat nest on the floor above from toppling into his bedroom.

He had:

- >One (1) LMG
- >One (1) Heavy Pistol
- >One (1) suit of Aztechnology Milspec Armor, still bearing its Eagle-Warrior accents.
- >One (1) ballistic vest
- >Three (3) Commlinks, brand-new.
- >Two (2) Fetishes, aspected to the Aztec faith
- >One (1) bound Guidance Spirit, Force 8
- >One (1) fake SIN, “Pablo Hernandez”
- >Seven (7) sets of clothes
- >One (1) business suit
- >One (1) sense of growing hunger
- >Eighty-nine (89) cans of MREs, all eaten.

Felix brought up “Pablo Hernandez.” He was listed as Occupation: Male Stripper, and yet in the SIN picture he had an awful horseshoe moustache. Brilliant. Who the fuck did they get this SIN from?

Resigning himself to what was probably going to be a terrible fate, Felix donned a polo shirt and his ballistic vest, threw on some jeans, and hit himself with a Movement spell.

It was time to find a job.

Felix had no idea how freelance business mercenary worked. He'd been a corper for close to forty years, and never even touched the business of shadowrunning except with movies and tridshows until his extraction. But he'd run out of food, his safehouse was falling apart, and he needed money. Runners had fixers, right? That was how they got jobs?

Felix plugged “fixer bar” into his commlink and followed the instructions.

What he hit was more like a fancy restaurant than a bar, which was something of a problem. He couldn't exactly sit down and order food, because he had exactly zero nuyen to his name.

So, mostly he just stood in the waiting area, milling around, being awkward, and shuffling his feet. It didn't help that he was in a polo shirt and jeans with obvious armor showing.

An attractive redheaded elf in a dinner gown showed up with a blonde man in a blue suit. Noticing Felix, the elf directed the man to go and get seated, and approached the Aztec mage.

"You look lost, sweetie."

Felix had personally watched the light go out of mens' eyes as he clutched the bayonet buried in their heart. He wasn't prepared for an attractive woman approaching him in such an awkward, embarrassing situation. He struggled to make eye contact.

"A little."

"Tell you what," said the woman, gesturing to the bar, "we'll take fifteen to see if I can help you find whatever it is you're looking for. Because, dressed like you are, it isn't here."

Over a tequila cocktail (which the woman had graciously offered Felix, given that he was completely broke), the woman explained herself.

"My name's Brianna McReary. I'm a fixer with the Finnigan family. You know the Finnigan family?"

Felix slowly shook his head. Brianna cocked an eyebrow.

"Have you been hiding under a rock, or are you just new in town?"

Felix shrugged sheepishly. His answer came out with the tonality of a question.

"I left Aztlan two months ago and have been hiding in a bombed-out apartment building since then?"

Brianna let out a 'woosh' of breath.

"Hoo boy. Azzie extractee?"

Felix nodded emphatically.

"Yeah, we get those in the biz occasionally. Well, the first thing you want to know is that, if you're trying to get into running, you don't show up at a fixer bar. These are private establishments. Only fixers and Johnsons show up here, and we pay good money to keep our business quiet."

Felix's heart sank.

"Oh."

Brianna swirled around her own cocktail, a peach Bellini.

“However, I couldn't help but notice the Aztec fetishes on your belt, and I have a team that happens to be out a mage.”

Felix brightened up.

“You're serious? You're offering me a job?”

“I'm offering you a position. Johnson offers you the job. You're a complete rookie, so the team will have to show you the ropes.”

Brianna handed him a business card that listed her as the owner of a local bar and grill.

“Show up at noon tomorrow. Don't be late. Any questions?”

Felix's stomach growled loudly.

“Um...could I get an advance payment of maybe 20 nuyen for a hot dog?”

Brianna smiled thinly.

“Sure, but I expect to be payed back in full.”

Felix walked to the bus stop chomping on street meat, wondering what he was getting himself into.

Felix wore his best suit to the Faulty Bar, only to find that it was a casual establishment. Evidently dress was a very peculiar thing in the running underworld. Undeterred, he marched by the old man in the trenchcoat at the bar, the half-dozen young hoods congregating around the sports vidfeeds, and marched up to the upstairs office.

The first figure he noticed was the absolutely massive orc in the American-flag bandana and armor jacket sitting on two folding chairs that had been propped up next to each other. He was working a plate of no less than three tri-tip steaks, with a few remaining bones suggesting that he'd already been through one or two.

The next figure was a thoroughly average-looking fellow leaning back in a recliner that was probably normally intended for visiting Johnsons. Upon spotting Felix, he reached into an adjacent duffel bag and produced a ballistic mask done up to resemble the face of a smiling clown, and donned it. The eyes of the clown-face lit up in a blaze of blue as the man began working in AR.

Brianna herself sat behind the desk.

“Welcome, welcome. Go ahead and introduce yourself.”

“My name is Felix--”

“Wait, fuck!”

A thin elf wearing an odd hodgepodge of hippie getup (tie-die shirt, long shorts, sandals, Buddhist sash) and military gear (bodysuit beneath clothes, red beret, military goggles, heavy police taser, combat knife) appeared out of invisibility.

“Don't use real names! Give us your street name!”

Felix recovered.

“Felix was a fake name. I don't have a street name yet.”

The elf glared at Brianna.

“Great. You got us an Azzie and he doesn't even speak Runner.”

The big orc swallowed loudly and turned to the elf.

“Dude, Bend, chill. We were all rookies once. Even you. What's your background, friend?”

Felix pantomimed holding his LMG.

“I'm an Eagle--a FORMER Eagle Warrior. I cast mostly combat and utility spells. I was also in Public Relations for a little while.”

Hippie Commando groaned.

“We're going to have a COMBAT MAGE facing for us!?”

Clown Face took a moment to stare at Hippie Commando. Surprising Felix, he spoke with a thick Scottish brogue.

“Bend. What is your bloody problem?”

“I don't know, Wildcard, maybe that we're replacing Geppetto with a forest-killing human-sacrificing brainwashing Aztec?”

The orc burped. He'd made it through another steak.

“Geppetto did all of those things, too, and he had fun doing them. Which is arguably worse.”

'Bend' looked between Felix and the orc. Eventually, with a pout, he slumped against the wall. Everyone took a few more moments to stare at Bend. The Clown turned to face Felix first.

“Look, I don't know what the hell got into him. The name's Wildcard. I run hacking, driving, and fighting in a pinch. Biggun's Dervish--or America-San if you're from Japan--and that's Bend making an arse of himself.”

Bend snorted.

“Is he going to keep being like this?”

Felix pointed to Bend.

“I hope not,” announced Brianna, judgingly, as attention once again returned to the infiltrator.

“Look,” said Bend, “the love of my life was killed in an op against Aztechnology. She wasn't the only good Ghost we lost, either. Found guys split open like fucking fish. Takes you a while to forget that shit, you know?”

Felix shook his head.

“I never did blood magic. I left before they could make me.”

Bend took an aggressive step in Felix's direction.

“Fucking woo. You want a cookie? Want me to bake you a cake and write 'the one good Azzie' across it in whipped cream?”

Standing up, Dervish moved to step in between the two elves and defuse the situation.

“Bend, I thought the love of your life was a college sophomore.”

“Fuck you, Dervish! Fuck you! You leave Emily out of this!”

“MEN! Come on, calm down.”

Now everyone was standing, as Wildcard put his hands on Bend and Dervish's shoulders.

“The question comes down: do we give...uh...Pablo Hernandez a chance?”

Felix looked down at his commlink and found a virus alert. Evidently the runner team hadn't left him the best firewalls.

Dervish grinned.

“I say fuck yeah. Besides, initiating new members is one of my favorite things.”

Bend scowled, avoiding eye contact with anyone. Eventually, he slumped his shoulders.

“Yeah, I guess.”

Wildcard nodded.

“Okay, so it's initiation.”

Brianna slapped her palm onto her face.

“Do you really have to?”

Dervish nodded enthusiastically.

“Hey, I didn't make the rules. Geppetto did. And now it's fallen to us to continue his legacy.”

“Fine, just make it quick and don't be too stupid.”

“Wouldn't dream of it, Brianna.”

Bend pulled out his taser. Felix eyed it suspiciously. Were they going to test his vest or something?

Dervish patted Wildcard on the back.

“You're better with words than me or Bend. You wanna handle this one?”

“Sure thing, Dervish. Let me just send that Texan cop a message from “THE EXCHANGE” winning him a gift certificate to The Cheesecake Factory.”

Felix looked between the three teammates.

“What does any of this have to do with shadowrunnAAAAAAAAAAAAUUUUUUUUUGH.”

Felix's question was interrupted as Bend jammed the military-strength taser into Felix's balls and shot ten million volts right into his nutsack. Felix's head collided with one of Dervish's fold-out chairs, upending it as the combat mage crashed to the floor, convulsing wildly.

Bend grinned.

“Welp, let's grab some booze and get him to the basement.”

Felix awoke strapped to a chair, with aching nuts, breath inexplicably reeking of more tequila, and a hood affixed to his head that forced him to see through mirrored AR goggles. He panicked and began straining against his bonds, as without a direct line-of-sight his spells were worthless.

Wildcard stood in front of him, in his best business suit, with his clown mask donned. The eye sockets of the mask glowed red, as did Bend's goggles and Dervish's cybereyes. All three were swaying a little, and Dervish was holding an almost-finished handle of vodka.

Wildcard glanced back at Felix.

“Oy! Boys! Sleeping beauty fookin awakes!”

As Wildcard began to walk towards Felix, stumbling a little, Felix moaned,

“What do you want with me?”

“We want to teach you--” Wildcard roughly grabbed Felix's shoulders, and leaned in close, the vocoder in his mask distorting his voice sinisterly, “--about the fookin' SYSTEM.”

“The system?”

“Rookie, where the fook d'you think I grew up?”

Felix shrugged against his restraints.

“Uh, Scotland?”

Wildcard punched Felix flat-out across the face before forcing a bottle of malt liquor into his mouth.

“Wrong, rookie! I grew up in the bloody Scottish Exclusion Zone! Ain't nothin' left of old Scotland there, just a big stinkin' glowin' radioactive fookin' pit! And you know what they do in that pit?”

Felix gargled against his liquor.

“That's goddamn right, they don't do nothin' cause they're all SINless! From the Yoo-fookin-Kay to the Yoo-fookin-Cass, our society's built on a teetering bloody Jenga tower of the suffering of the unwashed dipshit masses!”

At this point Felix was legitimately terrified.

Dervish yelled,

“You WANNA be an unwashed masses, Rookie?”

“Isn't it the singular? Unwashed mass--”

Felix spat blood as Wildcard clocked him across the face, hooking from the other direction this time. Dervish leaned in to Felix's face and continued yelling,

“THERE AIN'T NO SINGULAR WHEN YOU'RE IN A RUNNING TEAM, ROOKIE! NOW SIT THE FUCK BACK!”

Felix spat and choked as Dervish forced the rest of the handle of vodka down his throat.

About five minutes later, an alternating treatment of violence and alcohol had Felix truly soused. Felix wailed,

“But what are we gonna DO about the system! You gringo motherfuckers haven't told me anything!”

Wildcard leaned in close enough to kiss Felix. His porcelain-textured “nose” brushed against Felix's own.

“Rookie, you have asked the question that needs asking.”

“I have?”

Bend and Dervish saluted Wildcard while Wildcard sniffled like a patriot reciting the national anthem.

“A great man once told us that our consumerist society runs on greed, and on inferior services that we are expected to say 'yes thank you' to! Well, this man knew his biz! He recognized how people ain't people no more, herded through all stages of our society like fookin' sheep! They bleat and they eat and they soak up their mediocrity like mud! It is up to us to be their liberators. To be THEIR SAVIORS.”

“It...it is?”

Bend slit the ropes binding Felix's hands as Wildcard helped him up, gripping his shoulders tightly.

“We are the unsung fookin' heroes, but today we're gonna sing. We're going to wake them all up. We're going to show this society what it means to be the underclass. You wanna know how?”

Felix burped up a little vomit. He was very excited to show the world this thing that they were going to show it about...people.

“We're gonna rob a bloody Cheesecake Factory in Bellevue. We're gonna rob the SHITE out of it.”

There was a long pause. Felix eventually broke the silence with a cry of,

“Well, fuck YEAH!”

The entire team drunkenly cheered and made for the car.

At Felix's command, because the Rookie always made the plan during Initiation, the team stopped at his hideaway in the Redmond Barrens. After numerous jokes about his shitty living situation, Felix burst out of his closet (read: hole in the wall) wearing his full Eagle Warrior regalia. Across from Dervish in his own power armor and Wildcard in his SWAT armor, the team was loaded for bear.

As the team walked back to the car, LMG, HVAR, shotgun, and heavy taser in hand, Bend asked,

“Well, what's the plan, Azzie? Newbie always makes the plan.”

Felix took a few moments to think.

“I think...”

Everyone looked at Felix expectantly.

“I think...we should burst through the front door...kick their asses...”

He paused again. Dervish's metal hands clinked in a “go on” motion.

“I think we should burst in through the front door, kick their asses, and take all their shit.”

Bend gawked at Felix.

“That's the plan?”

“That's the plan.”

Wildcard electronically set his HVAR to “full auto.” Dervish ejected his clip of stun shells and replaced it with an extended magazine of sticknshock. Dervish nodded approvingly and responded,

“That is a FUCKING EXCELLENT plan.”

“EL DINERO IN LA FALDA MOTHERFUCKEEEEERS!”

That was all the warning given to the upper-middle-class families and dating couples and local fashionistas of the Bellevue branch of The Cheesecake Factory before the door literally EXPLODED from one of Felix's spells. As the dumbfounded diners gawked, an Aztec Eagle Warrior in full regalia stomped into the restaurant, followed by a man in SWAT gear wearing a clown mask and America-San, the Nico Nico Douga meme. A maître'd stood up shakily from a menu stand and said,

“I'm calling the--”

“I TAKE NO SHIT FROM BITCHES YOU AMERICAN FUCKS.”

With that, Felix threw his arm forward, caught the maître'd's chest, and flipped him into a tasteful hardwood display like a pro wrestler.

Wildcard lowered his gun a little.

“Um, I think we gave Rookie a little too much to drink.”

Dervish fired his shotgun in the air.

“Roll with it, dude! EVERYONE DROP THEIR CREDSTICKS! THIS IS A ROBBERY!”

In the back of the restaurant, a lone Texan slowly stood and drew his Cavalier Deputy.

“POLICIA!”

With a “BRRRRRRRRRRR,” Felix opened up with his LMG, ruining the wallpaper (and walls, and adjacent bathroom) behind Officer Joseph Green. The cop dropped his gun and threw himself to the ground.

“Jesus CHRIST, Stars n' Stripes, you've got your Rookie using live ammo!? Someone could get hurt!”

Dervish slapped Felix on the back of the head with a “CLANG.”

“Sorry about that, buddy! And it's America-San!”

“I don't care what the fuck it is!”

Green yelped as a rifle butt nudged his back. He looked up to see Wildcard holding a pair of zip-ties.

“Oh, COME ON.”

Bend materialized in the middle of the crowd with a sack full of jewelry, credsticks, and commlinks.

“Guys, did we disable the alarms?”

A SWAT van promptly smashed through the front of the restaurant's facade.

“LOCK AND FOOKIN LOOAAAAAD!”

Bracing his HVAR on Green's shoulder, Wildcard let loose with his HVAR on the first cop to jump out of the truck. A dozen expanding rubberized gel bullets smashed into the SWAT soldier's head and upper body, stumbling him back towards the truck. Dervish landed a sticknshock on the next cop to jump out, sending him crashing to the ground as well.

With a “PHOONK,” Felix fired an underbarrel grenade directly into the truck.

Green gawked.

“YOU GAVE YOUR ROOKIE GRENADES!?”

Wildcard protested,

“We didn't know he had them!”

The entire team hit the deck as SWAT cops poured out of the truck and stumbled into the restaurant, before the whole back end of the truck caved outward with the explosion. A few of the cops at the back took the shrapnel to the back armor plates and stumbled, but no one was killed. The truck, on the other hand, was totalled.

Not wasting any time, Wildcard and Dervish promptly opened up on the cops with their less-lethal rounds, each echoing a chorus of “FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK” as they backed towards the kitchen.

“FELIX! JESUS FOOKIN' CHRIST, THIS ISN'T A WARZONE! WE'RE NOT IN FOOKIN' BOGOTA! WATCH YOUR FIRE!”

Wildcard let his HVAR hang on its sling and drew his Predator, the better to fire with while dragging

Officer Green along in a headlock. As a tac-suited cop breached the back door, he plugged him clean in the neck with a gel round, dropping the gasping Knight Errant officer in one lucky shot.

“Sorry! Force of habit!”

With that, Felix landed a stunball in the middle of the pursuing SWAT team, dropping quite a few of them (as well as some unlucky dining patrons). As the team ducked behind the kitchen shelves, the cops opened up, turning the dining room into a hell of splintering wood and gel rounds. The civilians fled in a mass, in the process bowling over and trampling a few cops trying to get in through the SWAT van hole.

As Dervish powered through the back door and approached the parking lot, he saw something very bad.

Another SWAT team parked a few spaces off from the car.

Without hesitating, the SWAT team promptly opened fire on the team. As Dervish was knocked flat on his ass, he yelled to the rest of the team,

“We've pissed them off now; they're using live ammo! What the fuck is wrong with you, Rookie!”

“I'm sorry! I said I was sorry!”

Felix loaded a clip of gel rounds and hosed down the remaining cops in the dining room as the team rallied around the back entrance. Wildcard loaded another clip.

“Alright, Rookie, you've got more juice, yeah? We're gonna need you to hit 'em with something with a good area, then we'll move for the car while laying down suppressive fire.”

Felix nodded.

“Tres, Dos, UNO!”

The team punched out of the back entrance in a cacophony of gunfire, with Felix first out of the breach, then Wildcard and Dervish, then Bend. They alternated between running at full tilt and keeping the cops behind cover, before piling into the car.

There was a metal clinking noise as a grenade landed on the roof of the car. Acting on instinct, Bend cast a levitate spell and flung it back onto the hood of the SWAT van. The startled cops promptly began vaulting over the adjacent cars.

Wildcard turned to yell at Bend, feverishly buckling his seatbelts.

“BEND! WHAT THE BLOODY HELL WAS THAT!?”

“I JUST SAVED OUR LIVES FROM THAT GRENADE!”

“YOU THROUGH IT AT THE FOOKIN' COPS!”

“FUCK!”

With a horrible KERBANG noise, the front of the SWAT van caved, marking the second truck the team had destroyed in the last fifteen minutes. Glass shattered and car alarms shouted throughout the parking lot.

“JUST DRIVE,” yelled Dervish, as more sirens closed in.

The car tore into the streets of the poshest, most tastefully decorated, lowest-crime neighborhood with somewhere in the neighborhood of five police interceptors, six police cars, and another SWAT van in tow.

As Joseph Green slowly stood up in the parking lot, without the use of his arms, coughing at the exhaust, gunsmoke, and other assorted smoke in the air, he yelled,

“GOD DAMMIT!”

With all windows rolled down, and the runners inside returning fire on the cops, Wildcard had to maneuver more and more tightly through the promenades of Bellevue as the team saw increasingly more pursuit. Compounding this, of course, was the fact that everyone was still mildly to very inebriated (with the possible exception of super-metabolism Dervish).

Wildcard yelled, as a helicopter raced overhead,

“I’M GOING TO GET ON THE FREEWAY!”

Dervish angrily yelled back,

“WHAT!? THAT’S INSANE! WE’LL BE SITTING DUCKS!”

“IT’S BETTER THAN HITTING A BUILDING!”

As Wildcard slammed up the on-ramp, ramping onto the shoulder to evade traffic, he considered that this might be an especially ignominious end for the team.

His car hit its max speed near 280 miles per hour.

Then it kept going.

Wildcard looked in the mirror to see a glaring representation of Tonatiuh, the Shining One, otherwise known in this instance as a Force 8 Guidance spirit.

“FELIX WHAT DID YOU DOOOO?”

“I ASKED IT TO MAKE US GO FASTER.”

“HOW MUCH FASTER?”

“I DON'T KNOOOOOW.”

The car had now outpaced the helicopter, and appeared to be racing with the planes lifting off from SeaTac. Cars turned to mere blurs, even ones heading in the same direction as the team. Wildcard stayed on the shoulder, unwilling to even try to dodge the cars.

“OH SHIIIIIII-”

The entire team sank back into their seats as a KRAKATHOOM noise rang in their ears. Soon, the planes were blurs, as was everything else on Earth.

>You see, a Guidance or Man spirit who uses movement multiplies the speed of its target by its force. As Dervish's player calculated for us at this point,
> $280 \times 8 = 2,240$ miles per hour

At this point, GM made the executive ruling that Movement also cancels out the force of friction, so Wildcard's car didn't just explode by the third sonic boom.

Recognizing that it was only a matter of time before the car torpedoed clear through a freeway wall and into a building, Bend, Felix, and the Guardian spirit put concerted effort into Levitating the car, at least enough to clear them a route out to the Snohomish boondocks.

Slowly but surely, its wheels spinning so fast that they were actually causing spontaneous flames to appear, Wildcard's car lifted off, rising above the oncoming traffic.

Bend and Felix's seatbelts snapped open, the buttons depressed by sheer force of air against the plastic and metal. The entire team realized with terror that they couldn't breathe.

As the car sailed over the border of Bellevue into Snohomish, racing over treetops and houses and blasting the leaves and shingles off of them, respectively, the second sonic boom sounded.

KRAKOOOOOOM!

Although he'd been trying to hold on to the grip above his seat, Dervish's fingers finally pried apart one by one, and his fist smacked loudly into his face and remained stuck there. Felix was smushed into the back seats of the car, while Bend was up against the rear window, which was made of double-layered bulletproof glass that was nevertheless cracking.

The car hit its third sonic boom as it neared Salish territory, which then hit the car AGAIN as the car began to slow down once more.

Deep in Salish farmland, the car began decelerating, and as it decelerated it descended, until it eventually hit a wheat field at about three hundred miles an hour. The second sonic boom hit again, finally blowing out the rear window, as the car neared one-hundred and fifty. Bend hastily gecko-gripped the interior of the car as he flopped like a ragdoll.

Slowly the car came to a stop, just in time to vault the edge of the field onto a country road. There was a brief pause as, shaky-kneed, the team stumbled out of the car.

Felix began vomiting profusely out of his cracked faceplate right as the original sonic boom hit, sending everyone sprawling onto their asses.

Felix's arm-servomotors whirled as he attempted to stand up again while still hosing down his own face and everything in a direct 90-degree angle away from his face, and he slipped and tumbled repeatedly in his own vomit before finally lying still. Wildcard roughly grabbed the chin of his mask and threw it off of his face, sending it arcing into a roadside ditch, before joining Felix in his debasement. Bend made gurgling noises, but lay flat on his back on the road and managed to fight it down.

Aside from a bruised face, Dervish was mostly okay. He kicked Wildcard in the side softly.

“So...I'm thinking we lie low for a little while.”

A defensive interceptor missile sailed overhead and landed somewhere in the forest. Dervish and Wildcard winced at the explosion.

“Yeah, I'm...I'm thinking that's a good idea. I'll take the rookie.”

With a loud CLANG, a hubcap fell off the Hyundai.

Felix woke up in a strange bedroom in a suburban house at two in the morning. His interface alerted him that he'd only had an hour of sleep. This was unimportant. Perimeter was important. He didn't know whose house this was.

Still quite drunk, he stumbled towards the closet, and threw it open, revealing his milspec armor. Hastily, he donned it, and backed into the corner of the closet, bracing his gun and hitting the joint locks on his armor so that he wouldn't have to rely on his own strength. Not when he was so tired. And drunk. And dehydrated. And did he have internal bruising?

Felix promptly passed out again in his armor, standing up and braced against the back of the closet.

The closet was opened in the morning by Wildcard. Wildcard was wearing nothing but his clown mask and a pair of boxer-briefs that his cock was hanging halfway out of, and holding a cup of coffee and a bowl of cereal.

“Felix? Hello? You in there?”

Felix promptly started awake and, with all of his joints still locked, toppled forward and face-planted directly onto the hardwood floor. Groaning loudly at the mighty and eternal God-king of all hangovers, he unlocked his joints and slowly rolled over, bleeding from the nose.

“My everything hurts.”

“Well, hopefully your pride doesn't, rookie, because I've got good news.”

“Huh?”

“You passed initiation.”

Felix's eyes lidded.

“Do I get a street name now?”

Wildcard poked the servos on Felix's elbow with his toe.

“Of course you do. Welcome to the team, Locke.”

Chapter 17: Helicopters, Troll Gangs, and Christmas

“There you have it,” said the out-of-town fixer, as Brianna McReary, Bend, Wildcard, Locke, and Dervish eyed the purchase. “It’s got two Gatling guns, a bank of missiles, cots and rations for a full squad, military-grade armor plating, lock-on and EMP countermeasures, and an emergency eject that deploys away from the rotors.”

Wildcard whistled loudly.

“Only used by a little old Red Samurai Squad on Sundays, eh?”

“Mitsuhamma, actually,” commented the fixer, “and then one of my Prime running teams. A Hound ain’t much of a stealth craft, though, and they’ve been doing runs across the border in Denver, so we’ve been in talks and they’ll upgrade to a T-Bird as soon as they can offload this attack chopper. You interested in buying?”

Wildcard nodded emphatically, but Dervish and Bend glared him down. Locke responded,

“That depends on if the price is right. It’s a nice helicopter, but we’re in the market to protect ourselves, hypothetically, from an Aztec attack squadron, and a gunship it isn’t.”

“Full price I’m expecting all paid is two hundred and fifty thousand, but I assume you’re not paying it all up front.”

Locke got a quick OK from the rest of the team over the subvocals, and then responded,

“We can handle the fifty right now, and then we’ll do the rest in down-payments.”

The fixer frowned and examined his nails. He was a barrel-chested African-American human in a nice suit and shades, and cultivated an intentional air of aloofness despite the nigh-comically-illegal transaction that was taking place.

“I need some incentive for you to pay up quickly, otherwise my team isn’t getting their T-bird. I’ll accept that if I get to charge ten percent interest every month until the full price is paid off.”

Locke rebounded,

“Done, but you only get the interest off whatever’s left in the payment. So if we pay it off early, the interest goes down.”

The fixer nodded slowly.

“That’s agreeable. You have a deal. Brianna, I’m expecting my fee.”

McReary reached into the pocket of her smart pantsuit and produced a credstick.

“Thanks for putting us at the front of the line, Dimon.”

“Anything for a fellow fixer. You boys treat this bird right. Oh, and the hangar doesn’t come with, so

I'm expecting you out in 24 hours."

Wildcard grinned.

"Don't worry. I'm itching to take this lass for a fly anyhow."

As the team arced over the skies of Auburn and then rode the smoky updrafts of Puyallup, keeping out of range of any of the megacorps' greedy eyes, Wildcard quizzed the team. His eyes twitched in his head as he interfaced with the helicopter's Move-By-Wire override, but he maintained enough cogency to talk.

"Smooth ride?"

Everyone else on the team grunted their approval.

"Familiarized yourselves with the guns?"

Dervish put up a thumbs-up from the minigun's control console.

"Shot up a couple of cars as we passed over the scrap heap."

"Was wondering what that was. That just brings us to the most important question."

The team looked expectantly at Wildcard.

"...where the hell do we park this thing?"

Jose Rodriguez, the blind, elderly orc gladiator-cum-freedom-fighter known to his young protégé and said protégé's running team as "Sensei," was mildly jarred by the loud "FWOCKA FWOCKA" coming from the roof of his crumbling Barrens abode. DocWagon, the news, and the cops tended to stay out of Redmond, which meant that the helicopter he guessed to be approximately 20 meters above his humble home (and lowering fast) was corp, privately owned, or merc.

He leapt to the reasonable assumption that Aztechnology had found him again, latched up his ceramic ballistic armor, ran a quick diagnostics check on his cyberblades, tossed a grenade belt over his shoulder, and made for the roof.

As Sensei spotted the Eagle Warrior on the rooftop, gesturing for the large combat chopper to land, he knew that his hunch was right. His sight was failing, but his sonar scan would pick up the distinctive balance fins on the armor anywhere. He crept in, knowing he'd only have one chance for the kill.

"I'VE GOT YOU NOW MOTHERFUCKERS!"

As Sensei leapt from the rubble, the Eagle Warrior responded with astonishing speed and fluidity, his Improved Reflexes spell in full tilt. Sensei ducked and dodged towards his enemy while the Aztec yelped in surprise, shooting gouts of smoldering ash at his assailant.

Sensei landed atop the Eagle Warrior with a laugh, deploying both of his elbow cyberblades. However, to his surprise, the Eagle Warrior shouted,

“I won’t let you take me alive, Aztec!”

Sensei stopped an inch short of punching both blades through the Aztec’s faceplate.

“Hey, kid, that was my line.”

Dervish stepped off the helicopter, looking sidelong at Sensei and Locke as he finished a fast-food hoagie.

“Hey. Mexicans. Chill.”

Locke adjusted the hermetic seal on his beak-like helmet and glared at Dervish.

“Who the fuck is this!?”

“Dad, meet Locke. Locke, meet Dad.”

“I can see the resemblance.”

As Locke skulked back into the helicopter, Sensei stood up and brushed himself off, retracting his cyberblades.

“Where are the clown and the hippy? They in the chopper?”

Dervish beamed.

“Yep. We were thinking about parking it here when it’s not in use, since no corp is going to go searching in the Barrens.”

Sensei grimaced at Dervish.

“Son, you can think all you want, but that’s not going to stop every two-bit hood, man-eating monster, and radioactive mutant in Redmond from gunning for the combat chopper on my roof.”

Wildcard stepped out of the back of the helicopter, holding large sacks of cement under his arms.

“We were also thinking we’d set up a concrete perimeter with an electric fence and a lumber and camonetting façade over the helipad. Maybe a few attack drones for good measure.”

Locke added,

“We’re also going to set up a ward and a few spirit patrols.”

Sensei pointed at Wildcard.

“No cost to me?”

“I’m footing the bill personally.”

Sensei leaned over and put his arm over Dervish’s red, white and blue shoulders.

“Enjoy your new parking spot, son.”

It was late in December, 2073, and with the notable exception of Dervish, who was now living with Sensei in their fortress compound built around a decaying office building, the entire team had taken the compromise of their identities and living spaces during the Universal Omnitech run to be an omen that it was time to upgrade their living quarters.

Wildcard had moved into a Finnigan Mob suburb in Renton, paying off his unassuming white picket fence and backyard pool with periodically helping his repugnant landlord, Mrs. O’Malley, to rough up the local debtors. He also started spending money on real food, at least until Locke started coming over to mooch off of him. He then promptly stopped.

Bend moved to a Puyallup Neo-shamanic Buddhist fusion post-capitalist organic co-op, sharing the space with dozens of other young ideologues. Of course, Bend himself was well into his fifties, but the point was that he was young at heart, wasn’t it? He found himself pleased with the busywork that distracted him from his criminal lifestyle, such as maintaining the gardens and refueling the hybrid-biodiesel-and-used-vegetable-oil generator in the basement.

Locke’s door/roof finally collapsed, dropping the devil rat nest on the floor above into his bolt hole. He proceeded to move to the other bombed-out ruin next door, but not before clearing out a nest of feral ghouls and a sludge spirit.

The team sat in their usual seats in Brianna McReary’s office as their fixer, wearing one of her better skirt-suits, hung up festive decorations. She bounced about the office, hanging up a wreath for the desk, some mistletoe for the door, and four stockings monogrammed with the street names of the team. She whistled cheerily as she went about her work, periodically stopping to survey AR windows floating out from the nexus.

“I hate to bring down the festive atmosphere, but while I’m all for spending the avvy getting minced on eggnog, I was under the impression that this was a business meet.”

Brianna shot a glare Wildcard’s way, a little bit miffed.

“Give me my moment, okay, Wildcard? This is the closest a fixer gets to a holiday.”

“Reminds me,” commented Dervish, who had brought an entire six-pack of cherry-and-coriander holiday beer upstairs with him, and was currently working on the fourth bottle, “are you doing a Christmas party again like last year?”

Brianna positively beamed.

“I finally got the dining room at my house renovated, so I’ll be able to do it properly this year, too. The roast turkey, the decorations... You’re invited, of course, and let me know if you’re bringing guests. Right now it’s mostly Abe and my other business contacts, but Damien will be stopping by, and Malcolm promised he’d bring his kids to play with my son...”

“They sound so innocuous now that they’re out of the game,” shuddered Bend. “Damien and Malcolm, law-abiding citizens.”

“Damien and Malcolm, James Bond villain and flag-pin-wearing spider nutball,” agreed Dervish, popping his fifth beer.

Bend frowned at Dervish.

“Are you gonna insult me when I retire, too?”

Wildcard shrugged.

“We do it now, you dandelion-eating ponce.”

Locke chuckled at Wildcard’s sentiment, prompting a complaint from Bend.

“Hey, Azzie! Show some respect!”

Locke looked at Wildcard with his mouth half-open, looking for validation that Bend was being hysterical. Wildcard just shrugged and commented,

“Respect is important, newbie.”

Locke rolled his eyes and looked at a couple of passing AR windows, mostly detailing events in the corporate world.

“So, are there any good-looking jobs on the market, Brianna?”

“Well, Bend mentioned that the team still wants to gauge your skills, Locke, and I wanted to toss you something easy for the holidays, anyway...”

Locke looked over at Bend to find the tie-dye-wearing infiltrator wearing a smirk.

“...which is why I’ve got a simple wetwork job lined up for you.”

Bend’s smile promptly disappeared.

“Wait, what?”

Brianna shrugged.

“It was the best-paying job in its class, Bend. You used to be a Ghost, you shouldn’t have a problem with killing.”

“Well, Buddhism suggests that conflict can have grave circumstances on one’s harmony, and on top of that, killing is gross.”

It was Locke’s turn to wear the shit-eating grin.

“My religion is fundamentally based around killing!”

Brianna nodded toward Locke.

“Bend, you DID say you wanted to get more of a feel for his skillset.”

Bend proceeded to grumble as he stole one of Dervish’s beers.

“Hey! Get your own six-pack!”

The Johnson meet was at a steakhouse. On the class rating of steakhouses that the team was used to, it was on the lower end; designer and formal suits were abandoned in favor of business casual, and classical music made way for country-western. It was the kind of establishment that featured an “eat six pounds of steak in one hour and you go on the wall” challenge (trolls need not apply).

As the team was led to the Johnson Party table by a chipper human girl wearing pigtails and a too-tight-to-be-classy blouse, Dervish made his intentions eminently clear:

“Guys. I’m doing the six-pound steak challenge.”

Wildcard playfully punched Dervish.

“Not during the Johnson meet. Giggles later.”

“Come on, I’m four hundred pounds of meat and suprathyroid. They won’t know what hit ‘em.”

Locke adjusted the buttons on his silk shirt and repeated Wildcard’s ultimatum.

“Not during the Johnson meet.”

Like a dejected child, Dervish kicked one of his wide-toed cyberfeet at the floor and grumbled.

Johnson was a wiry elf with the calloused knuckles and chin scarring of a life lead hard. He apparently didn’t believe in obscuring one’s loyalties; the ugly tie he wore over his business-casual monkey suit seemed distinctly chosen for its garish use of red and green. Johnson was an obvious Ancient, through and through, which meant many things right out the bat. Johnson wasn’t professional, Johnson wasn’t classy, and Johnson would probably be okay with sloppy wetwork. Without even waiting for anyone to order food, Johnson opened up with his pitch:

“I need you to kill a troll and his friends.”

Without skipping a beat, Locke responded,

“How many friends?”

“At least two. Essentially, we want you to cripple a gang by killing all the movers and shakers.”

Dervish smiled despite himself, remembering a similar run so very long ago. Locke continued,

“Let’s hear a few more details before we talk price, Mr. Johnson. For all we know this troll could be ex-specops.”

“Try ex-con,” countered Johnson, putting up an AR image of a large troll with titanium dermal deposits and an absolutely massive, overmodified chrome cyberarm. “This is Curbstomp. Curbstomp was promised a cushy life if he stayed inside.”

Locke hazarded a guess,

“Curbstomp didn’t stay inside?”

“No, he didn’t. He made some friends and now he’s in Puyallup, poaching our turf again.”

“So you want him and his friends taken care of.”

“Permanently.”

“So who are these friends we’re hearing so much about?”

“We don’t have surveillance - only orcs and trolls are allowed into the gang’s compound - but we’ve heard rumors about a warboss - troll, mostly bioware, a real Frankenstein job - and a voodoo magician. Curbstomp apparently got in deep with some Haitians while he was on the Island and the houngan is their way of saying ‘thanks.’ ”

“So we kill the boss, the warboss, and the houngan and we get paid?”

“And any other gangsters that you’d care to kill. There’s maybe fifteen other regulars, mixed orcs and trolls. If you impress me there’s always the chance of a bonus.”

“No offense, Mr. Johnson,” said Felix, leaning back in his chair, “but professionals don’t deal in chances.”

Johnson grimaced.

“Well, I do, and you can take it or leave it. Twenty thousand nuyen.”

“Try forty, Mr. Johnson. This is still wetwork, even if it’s ghetto trash. And with three powerful trolls

I'm not liking our insurance."

"Twenty thousand."

Johnson's hard face...hardened.

"You can at least do thirty. We do have lifestyles to uphold."

"I know that this is way below your professionalism grade, which means you're probably doing this as a test run of some kind and it's not about the cash. Twenty k."

"That doesn't mean that we don't like cash, Mr. Johnson. I'm going to have to move it up to thirty again."

"Twenty and five up front."

Locke looked around to see the rest of the team shrugging and looking complacent.

"Not my favorite figure, but it'll do."

Johnson and Locke shook hands, and Johnson stormed off, looking like he had other business to attend to.

Wildcard, Bend, and Locke all instinctively threw themselves to the floor and began reaching for their guns as festive music played in AR and streamers and confetti shot out of the ceiling. Two waitresses in branded T-shirts carried a platter with a truly preposterous steak over to the table and fastened a bib around Dervish's neck.

As Dervish's teammates picked themselves up from under the table, Dervish announced,

"Meeting adjourned."

Thirty-two minutes-later, there was a large picture of Dervish, his face stained with steak sauce, smiling for the camera.

The name plate read "AMERICA-SAN."

Wildcard asked, incredulously,

"Are you happy, Dervish?"

"Inordinately."

Dervish gripped his stomach, moaning as he slumped into the back of Wildcard's Turbocar.

"So," asked Locke, "how are we thinking of going about this?"

Dervish responded, with a wide grin,

“Well, this is below our pay grade anyway, so I figure it won’t hurt to have some fun with it.”

Bend gave Dervish a sidelong glance.

“Define ‘fun.’ ”

“This is a terrible idea,” griped Locke, thumbing his binoculars as he and Wildcard sat atop the catwalks of an old, defunct Puyallup factory. “Why aren’t we leaving infiltration to the infiltrator?”

“They catch him, they kill him for being an elf,” rebutted Wildcard, “whereas Dervish is appropriate for the environment. Consider it a part of legwork.”

“We did enough legwork just paying off the trash around here to direct us to the Crushers’ hideout.”

Wildcard pushed his mask up on his face long enough to pop a cigarette into his mouth and light up, leaning over the railing.

“Patience, Moaning Minnie. We get Dervish in there, we get a long look at their facilities and personnel, yer?”

Locke sighed, paying careful attention to Dervish as the orc strolled fearlessly in bandana and armor jacket up to the scrap-metal gate of the compound.

“I guess. I think we could probably handle them anyway, trolls or no. Wait a minute, is that-”

Bend, the innocuous seagull flying above the compound, found himself in a cloud of toxic gas and held his breath. This was normal for Puyallup.

The fact that the gas followed and began giggling was less normal, but still believable for Puyallup.

“Smog spirit,” called a deep voice from within the compound. “Everyone load up!”

Bend cawed in fear and peeled away as the trolls below began emptying futile magazines into the cloud of gas where he had been. In a panic, he called up one of his Buddhist air spirits, which just contributed to the clusterfuck before the smog spirit exploded.

“And that,” said Wildcard, “is why we weren’t sending Bend in.”

In part to draw attention away from his teammate’s gaffe, Dervish promptly slammed his fist on the gate. A small viewport slid open.

“Who are you supposed to be?”

“Kid, I’m supposed to be the baddest-ass trog this side of Puyallup. You don’t need to know why I’m here, just that I got services to offer to your boss Curbstomp.”

“Curbstomp don’t take no solicitors, bitch.”

“Call me bitch again, son.”

Dervish’s cyberblades slowly began sliding out of his fists and elbows. There was a minor commotion or argument behind the gate, and a much deeper voice growled,

“We were doing recruiting this week. Yer half as badass as you say you are, you get a chance. Reason why you so up to get into the boss’ good graces, trog?”

Dervish growled back,

“Cause katana-wielding Suzuki-riding dandelion eaters are moving on my hood, and I need backup to teach them to back the fuck off. We solid?”

After a pause, the door swung open, revealing an orc and a troll in a strange hybrid of military gear and barrens rags.

“Yeah. We solid. Just so happens we arming up to take on the elves. You do your part in the pit, you get your place in the gang.”

Dervish cocked an eyebrow.

“The pit?”

“The pit.”

Sitting up in their factory-roof hidey-hole, Locke, Wildcard, and Bend paused over their professional-grade surveillance tools and a pack of OrganoStyle popcorn.

“The pit?”

Dervish was ushered, alongside about twenty other young orcs and trolls who appeared to be housed somewhere else in the complex (from inside it turned out to be three ancient storefronts cobbled together with scrap and concrete barricades into a makeshift courtyard), into a concrete-floored basement. Pipes and rusted machinery ran along the ceiling and support pillars. Spattered patterns the off-brown of old blood ringed the room. A few dingy lightbulbs supplied murky light down onto a thick crowd of orcs and trolls, cheering on and making room for two trolls beating each other senseless in the center of the crowd.

At one end of the room were three makeshift “thrones” made out of broken machinery and car parts. In the center “throne” sat Curbstomp himself, looking on appraisingly as one of the two trolls finally grabbed hold of the other’s horns and smashed him face-first into the concrete wall. He was flanked by two other trolls. The troll on his right was dressed in a suit jacket over a bare chest with white skull-mask face paint, covered in fetishes. The troll on his left was a vatjob freak, his horns and dermal deposits replaced with superdense vatgrown bone, and his muscles corded and taut to action-figure specificity. These were, presumably, the targets.

Curbstomp stood up, and loudly announced,

“ALL NEW BLOOD RISE FOR WAR LEADER MADDEN!”

The vatjob stepped forward as the room calmed down into a frenzied muttering. The bioborg announced,

“MY NAME’S MADDEN, BUT UNTIL YOU’RE IN THE GANG, YOU CAN CALL ME “BOSS.” I FIGURE YOU ALL CAME HERE, YOU KNOW WHAT INITIATION IS. SO GET TO IT. EVERYONE PICK OUT THE GUY YOU’RE FIGHTING. ONLY ONE OF YOU GETS TO JOIN THE GANG.”

The young gangers around Dervish all broke off and began making eye contact, occasionally pointing or shouting at someone that they thought they could take. Eventually everyone was paired off. Everyone except Dervish.

Dervish just stood and pointed at Madden.

The room went from energetic conversation to dead silence in a few seconds as everyone realized what had happened.

“Um, Dervish,” asked Bend, over the subvocals, “what the fuck are you doing?”

Dervish responded, simply,

“Having fun.”

Nostrils flaring, Madden stepped up to Dervish. His vatgrown eyeballs swiveled and focused on Dervish, dilated in rage and adrenaline.

“Who the fuck do you think you are, rookie?”

“Bitch, I don’t think, I KNOW. I’m Garrett from the Redmond fucking Barrens, and I’m not afraid of anything.”

Madden gritted his teeth and growled like a pitbull as Curbstomp, in the back of the room, burst out laughing.

“Shit, Madden, are you going to take that?”

Dervish danced back and forth, his cyberlegs flexing.

“You gonna take that, Madden? You gonna throw that punch?”

Back at the hidey-hole, a large buzzard carrying three Nukit Burger value meals with super-sized sodas in its talons transformed back into Bend, landing naked on the catwalk.

“Okay, I got the stuff. It started yet?”

Locke gestured wildly toward the vidscreen.

“It’s about to! It’s about to! Sit down!”

Madden threw the punch, and it came like a freight train. His synaptics blazing, Dervish tucked under Madden’s arm as it flew over his shoulder like a shotgun blast, smashing the rookie behind him into the crowd, trailing blood. Dervish spun underneath Madden’s shoulder and, utilizing his Sangre y Acero training (even if blades were a no-no for this match), planted an elbow right into Madden’s flank.

The crowd roared at the impact. Madden’s muscles were as dense as corded steel. It just so happened that Dervish’s bones were about twice as dense as that. The troll staggered. Adrenaline pumping, Dervish’s cybereye covers slid into place as he yelled,

“You’re mine now, bitch!”

With an animalistic roar, Madden spun, swinging his arm around in a brutal right hook. He moved faster than Dervish had anticipated, and Dervish caught the blow right in the chest, and then continued to catch the blow as Madden followed through with the punch, literally carrying Dervish another six feet before Dervish fell off of Madden’s fist and hit the ground. Madden followed up with a vicious stomp, but Dervish rolled out of the way. Madden laughed, happy to see Dervish flailing on the ground.

It didn’t last long, as Dervish rolled into a crouch, activated his skimmer discs, and promptly launched upward into a full body check to the troll’s center of mass. Madden staggered long enough for Dervish to reach up and grab the troll’s horns, before using the horns as leverage to lift his knee to Madden’s chin. The blow imbalanced the troll further, and Dervish hopped off to the cheering of the crowd as Madden smashed into the floor.

Of course, the metahuman body can take a lot of punishment, especially an augged-up orc or troll. Dervish dropped back into his stance, legs bent and elbows up, as Madden loomed over him once more.

Madden swung both hands in a hammer strike. It was a bad move, especially as Dervish had positioned himself with a support pillar behind. As Madden struck the pillar, Dervish maneuvered in between Madden’s arms and landed four quick, brutal elbow strikes into the troll’s gut, knocking the wind out of him. Bloodied and bruised, Madden pulled his arms in to attempt a grapple, but Dervish ducked out of the way and landed a spinning right hook directly into Madden’s jaw, loosening his tusks and knocking a few teeth loose.

As the crowd whooped and cheered and Dervish’s teammates kept a running commentary, Curbstomp and his houngan looked at Dervish appraisingly.

Madden landed a few punches on Dervish, but they were less focused than before, and typically grazed rather than impacted, and Dervish was able to counterattack with more ferocity each time. Eventually Madden reared back, curling his arm in an extremely telegraphed haymaker. When he

threw the punch, it smashed through one of the support pillars with enough force to total an engine block, and the ceiling shuddered dangerously.

However, Dervish was nowhere near ground zero of the punch. He was a good distance above it.

Scaling the twelve-foot troll like a ladder, Dervish grabbed onto Madden's horns once more, and flipped over his back, dragging the troll backward into an awkward limboing position. Before Madden could counterattack, however, Dervish activated his skimmer discs, overclocked his cyberlegs, and jumped, flipping back over Madden's shoulders and carrying him bodily by the face, before ricocheting off the ceiling and riding his head straight down into the pavement. Teeth and chunks of concrete flew out into the crowd and a few orcs in the front row staggered with the impact. The cheering reached a deafening roar as Dervish stood up and kicked Madden's limp body over. The troll was out cold.

"Five nuyen each, it was a minute and a half," said Wildcard, sipping on his cola. Locke and Bend grumbled and tapped out transactions on their commlinks.

As Dervish cracked his neck and rubbed his muscles, Curbstomp stood and made his way for the circle, a wide grin on his face.

Throwing out his cybernetic hand, he chuckled,

"Welcome to the gang, Garrett from the Redmond fucking Barrens."

The houngan stepped forward to address the crowd.

"THIS DOESN'T MEAN ANY OF YOU ARE OFF THE CHAIN, MEAT! GET TO FIGHTING!"

The crowd roared.

The team watched through Dervish's cybereyes as Curbstomp walked Dervish around the main building of the complex, a mildly-less-dilapidated affair that looked to once have been a motel.

"Voodoo boy's Stahlman. Made friends in prison, he came out with me. Big guy that you trashed is Madden, he still ain't woke up. Hulk is somewhere--"

With a 'yeaaaaaaah,' a teenage troll leapt from the rafters into an attempted tackle of Dervish, and instead ended up bouncing and rolling along the ground.

"That's Hulk. He's the village idiot."

Hulk stood and brushed himself off. His face was pockmarked with acne, and his voice cracked awkwardly. It was rather disarming for a troll.

"One day I'ma be a shadowrunner!"

"Sure you will, Hulk."

Curbstomp ran Dervish through a few more of the facilities: a rec room with trid, a makeshift gym, and a bunch of bedrooms.

“Figure since you damn near killed my lieutenant, you get a room to yourself. So long as you put those crazy moves to work on some Ancients pussies. After one more wave of recruitment, we’re gonna move on the local chapterhouse, slash and burn, you feel me?”

“Oh yeah, I feel you, Curbstomp,” grinned Dervish. “Ancients been on my shit list since before I was born.”

“Good to hear it,” said Curbstomp. “Dinner’s at seven. Hope you like fucking beans.”

Back at the hidey-hole, Locke and Wildcard armed up, loading armor-piercing rounds. Troll-killing rounds. Bend slipped into his chameleon suit, resigned.

“So we’re doing it tonight?”

Wildcard nodded, the lenses on his mask flashing with color as his smartlink calibrated and connected to the tacnet.

“We got all the info we need. Floor plans, windows, entryways. And this is the best time to hit them, right when they’re all recovering from ‘recruiting.’ ”

Locke grunted his agreement. He called up a Xiuhcoatl, his fire spirit.

“What’s the plan looking like, Wildcard?”

“Bend and you maintain silence spells on the team. Bend opens Dervish’s window, we take care of any curious guards. We get Dervish’s shotgun and armor through the window, Locke follows, and they do the killing. Bend, you’re backup, and I’ll watch from outside.”

“Pity it had to go this way,” commented Dervish, over the subvocals.

“Curbstomp made his choice. He isn’t blind to the repercussions, eh? So let’s make it quick and painless.”

As night fell on the compound, the mission began. With tactical monitoring from Wildcard, Bend and Locke slipped past the guard and scaled ten feet up to Dervish’s window, carrying Dervish’s armor. Under a spell of magical silence, they armed up and coordinated entirely by tacnet, entering Stahlman’s room first.

Stahlman had a spirit watching him, and it possessed his body to save its master. His eyes flew open, glowing with energy, as he shot flames at his two milspec-suited aggressors. It wasn’t enough, as Locke deftly counterspelled the effect, and then he and Dervish filled Stahlman with enough rapid-fire lead to leave the entire room perforated, bedfeathers and bits of plaster strewn haphazardly amongst the blood. All of this happened in mere seconds, in complete silence, before the team confirmed their kill and moved onto the next officer room.

Madden was laying in bed, awake but crippled, wheezing through broken ribs. Although he could do nothing to prevent his fate, he mouthed “race traitor” in the silence when he spotted the shadowrunners, before Dervish elbowed him in the neck one last time, this time with a blade extended.

Curbstomp was next. Locke didn’t even give him the chance to wake up before coating him in gouts of magma. His screaming and frantic flailing went unheard, like a macabre slapstick comedy act from a silent movie. As both runners unloaded into his burning frame, he danced to the wall and lay still.

“There’s a little kid hiding above the staircase,” commented Dervish. “Don’t kill him, he’s done nothing wrong. Same with the new recruits, they’re being housed in the next building over. Rest of the core gang is in the building near to the gate. We position ourselves at the windows we can probably take them all out.”

“Roger,” commented Bend, gecko-gripping up to Hulk’s hiding place. Hulk was, mercifully, sleeping, although Bend hit him with narcoject just the same. “See, this is why I don’t like wetwork.”

Dervish asked,

“Cause it’s nasty to look at?”

“Nah, because a lot of the time you get to know the mark first.”

“True that,” sighed Dervish,” as the team converged on the barracks that housed the rest of the regulars, reloading. Wildcard perched himself by the outside window while Dervish and Locke took the inside ones.

“Here’s hoping the rookies get the picture and move onto something better.”

Bend countered, sarcastically,

“Like Shadowrunning?”

“Still better’n offing a man for the point of his ears,” countered Wildcard, before opening up on the bunkbeds within. The room turned into a frenzy of flame and bullets in moments, and Locke and Dervish moved to bar the doors with debris from outside as the blaze grew amongst the crawling survivors.

In mopey silence, Dervish put his hand under the large, scrap-iron gate at the front of the compound, lifted it single-handedly, and led Locke and Bend outside. Wildcard returned to the car and started up the engine.

“Let’s go get drunk on Mr. Johnson’s money,” sighed Dervish.

Locke nodded.

“I’m down for that.”

As if to remind the team that all was not dreariness and depression, their fat 5,000 nuyen paychecks came in right before Brianna McReary's Christmas bash. It was a very large dinner party, especially once guests started getting invited. Brianna's son Daniel and TwoDee's "kids" Arianna and Tr1gg3r sat at the children's table, playing with coloring books. The topic of the day was that Tr1gg3r was cheating, because he was able to download pictures from the internet and trace them directly with his mechanical hands. The tiny robot countered that his "sister" and Daniel were merely jealous. While TwoDee himself and his very pregnant wife bounced around the party, catching up with old friends (including a particular ghoul doctor in a hazmat suit), Geppetto showed up only very briefly with mob maven Rowena O'Malley on his arm and an escort of black-suited bodyguards, made very distant greetings, and proceeded to handle some order of business by commlink, periodically daubing at his leaking eye socket with a silk handkerchief.

Wildcard took Doctor Greene to the party as a date, and the two of them shared sarcastic faux-intellectual gifts (a limited edition "operation" game for Greene, and a tiny Malibu Barbie sedan with a souped-up electric engine and a disposable commlink in the trunk for Wildcard). Wildcard also got to exchange gifts with his former fixer, Luca (a home cooking set for a nickel-plated Predator), and his old partner Belfast (more decorative masks, both ways), although only Luca could make the party (Belfast being on contracted work during the holidays).

Dervish formally invited Sensei, and although he managed to get the old coot to dress up in a suit, he couldn't convince him to shave.

Sensei spent most of the evening grumbling about how he never liked the shadow community because it was so "fixated on appearances," but he lightened up once Brianna had convinced him to have some wine, and especially when Dervish showed him his Christmas gift, a pair of wicked katars fashioned after sharks' teeth.

Locke brought absolutely no one, and proceeded to mope around the party getting increasingly drunker because he didn't know anybody. When the party games started, though, Geppetto didn't care to reprise his role on "the team," allowing Locke a fair degree of fun.

Bend brought Emily, although Emily spent most of the evening being intimidated out of socializing by the likes of Geppetto, Sensei, and John the Ghoul. The evening was, however, livened up when he opened an anonymous gift to reveal an armed pipe bomb wrapped in a ribbon and bow, which he, TwoDee, and Wildcard promptly scrambled to disarm. When the ticking stopped, a card fell out of the gift, flitting to the floor. Bend picked it up.

"JUST MAKING SURE MY FAVORITE AGENT HASN'T GOTTEN SLOW
MERRY CHRISTMAS
--FORMICK"

Bend blanched at the card. TwoDee poked at him, angry that he'd had to put down his wine to defuse a bomb.

"Hey, asshole, what's the deal? You trying to kill us?"

“Hardly,” said Bend. “Jordan Formick was my commanding officer back when I was a spy.”

Chapter 18: The Team Goes To Hell

JANUARY 8th, OREGON, 2057

The laser sight danced on the skull of liberal politician Kyle McHauser, recently outed on the State media as Rinelle ke'Tesrae, a Spire rebel. Special Agent Peter Colby was prepared to do the job clean; he hung upside-down from a vent above the target, who was sitting at a computer terminal, sending out messages of revolution and class uprising onto the Matrix. Colby had breezed his way through Hauser's security; a tranq dart here, a slap patch there, an autohacker mashed onto a camera. The bunker was an old, outdated model, intended to survive an invasion by the Russians back in 20Cen; it was actually the Japanese who had ended up invading the West Coast, but Colby had been smart enough to get out of San Fran when THAT shit hit the fan.

And here was this man, this slimy middle-aged Socialist, this agitator against the monolith that was the Princes. A caller for democracy in a monarchy. An adherent of racial equality when elves were scientifically proven to be superior. A dedicated follower of endangering freedom.

A dead man.

"You're a spy," said Colonel Jordan Formic through his earpiece. "You can do anything. And you can especially put a bullet in the head of a known terrorist." Formic had the James Bond act down; he'd spent his life fucking off to various parts of the world, doing classified work to protect the Tir's interests. Colby was more like James Bond junior.

"But he's not a terrorist," said Colby, "not really. He's just a scared Lib hiding in a hole."

"And liberalism is dangerous," retorted Formic. "Especially when we've already got dragons and Indians barking down our doorstep. Not to mention the Japs. Take the shot."

"But why?"

"Soldier, it isn't your place to ask why, and if you keep thinking it's your place you're getting court-martialed. This is a matter of state security."

Colby disengaged, pulled back up into the vent, and made slowly for the bunker's locker room. As he neared the surface, the sounds of rain above went from sporadic whispers to a steady hiss.

"State security? You mean I'm buying the Princes another damn month before we inevitably become a democracy?"

"That's dangerous speech, Colby. You sure you want to go down this path?"

Colby dropped down into the locker room, using his sonar scanner to crack one of the bodyguards' lockers.

"It's a path we're all going down, sooner or later. The Princes can't delay a revolution forever. All this killing...we're putting kiddy Band-Aids on a gunshot! This is the absolute WRONG way for the Ghosts to be going about this! We're a subterfuge agency: we should be seeding the population, changing attitudes at a grassroots level. Instead, we wait for an agitator to become a martyr, and then we obligingly martyr the bastard!"

Formic's unflappable tone turned into one of bitter sarcasm over the radio, dropping the "emotionless superspy" facade.

"Might I remind you, Special Agent, that we're spies? It's not our job to enjoy our work, it's our job to do what the government wants--what the government NEEDS. We're not people, not anymore. We're tools. We're the silenced sniper rifle of the state, the hand behind its back, gripping a knife. And guns and knives do not QUESTION. Guns and knives shoot and stab and wound and maim and kill, and they leave the rumination about morality to civilians. Finish the damn job."

"No," said Colby. "No more." He cracked the locker and found what he was looking for; a leather jacket, jeans, a trucker hat. Street clothes. If he could stall Formic for a little longer, he could get out without being picked up by his handlers.

"This is going to be treason," said Formic, darkly.

"It's not treason," scoffed Colby, "it's resignation. I failed the mission, and I resigned. That's all this has to be. The question is whether you respect me enough to let me have my resignation in peace."

There was a long pause as Colby surfaced out of the bunker, hopping over the comatose bodies in the house above before slipping into the streets of the town.

"...Alright, Colby. I've called off your handlers. Your resignation papers are due tomorrow morning. But I'm sending in cleanup. Consider it on your head."

Colby huffed, bowing his head to let the bill of his trucker cap keep the pouring rain off his face. He didn't even glance to the side as a black SUV roared by him, stopping in front of the house, and men in body armor with submachine guns poured out. The dull slaps of silenced gunfire merged and danced with the pitter-patter of rain.

The sign taunted Colby as he growled and continued to walk away:

"NOW LEAVING BEND, OREGON"

JANUARY 14th, SNOHOMISH, SEATTLE METROPLEX, 2074

Peter Colby or, rather, "Sean Falstaff," sat in the hydroponics room of his hippie commune in Snohomish, on the phone with his youthful girlfriend, Emily. A marijuana joint slowly burnt down towards his fingers. He hadn't really taken to the drug, but it was part of fitting into the community. And hey, it helped with the PTSD.

"Emily, I swear, I'm getting out of the business as soon as I hit the big leagues. We're already Prime runners, we just haven't had our datasteal yet. We haven't hit the big score that turns it from a job into a hobby."

"I don't want to lose you, Sean. You were in serious danger during that whole Universal Omnitech thing. If you think your life is threatened, I want you to break off."

“It's not that simple, Emmy,” sighed Bend, pulling the joint to his lips, thinking about it, and then grinding it down on the tile counter. “I have loyalty to those guys. It's like a brotherly thing.”

“And I'm your lover. You're going to have to choose eventually.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it. Look, I just finished a really simple milk run. I'm going to ask Brianna to give us something big for the next run, then I'm out, OK? But I'm doing that run, start to finish. I want some retirement funds.”

There was a long pause.

“...Okay. I love you.”

“I love you too. See you this weekend.”

Bend hung up, pocketed his comm in his ragged thrift shop jeans, and climbed the ladder up to the surface of the compound.

The first thing he saw was a blinding spotlight, then the outlines of gun barrels. The other hippies in his commune were face-down and cuffed, shouting at the pigs.

Knight Errant. Knight Errant had raided the compound.

Working on reflex, Bend took the shape of a seagull and shot into the night sky, zipping past the Knight Errant security teams and alighting on a rooftop outside the compound. A man with a loudspeaker at the entrance to the compound announced,

“Sean Falstaff! You are wanted for possession of an illegal substance, unlicensed mercenary work, larceny, grand theft auto, and child murder! Show yourself immediately and we will not use force!”

Taking the form of an elf once more, Bend grimaced.

“Child murder?”

Not wanting to find out what Knight Errant did to kid killers, he dropped his clothes, donned his tacsuit, and somersaulted into the alleyway behind the building before melting into traffic. He called Wildcard and got no response. Then Dervish, no response again. He thought for a moment, sucked it up, and called Locke.

“This number is not in service right now. Please try again later.”

Although it was not an unusual feeling for an infiltrator, Bend realized that he was completely, totally alone.

“...Fuck.”

JANUARY 9th, DOWNTOWN SEATTLE, 2074

Mrs. Johnson was a nervous housewife, sitting in a trendy Spanish Fusion restaurant that she did not look to be appreciating. Or, more specifically, Mrs. WELLERS was a nervous housewife, sitting in a trendy Spanish Fusion restaurant that she did not look to be appreciating.

“Look, Mrs. Johnson,” said Locke, peevish that he'd had to waste his suit on an obviously amateur Johnson, “your name for the purposes of the verbal contract is 'Johnson.' By identifying yourself as 'Wellers' you're compromising the security of both halves of the operation.”

Mrs. Johnson trembled. She was dressed in a conservative dress with an old antique analog watch on her wrist. Evidently she didn't get out much.

“I'm...I'm sorry. I needed you to know that I was Mrs. Wellers so that you knew that I was having you rescue my children, not that I was some stranger kidnapping children for some godawful purpose.”

“So the job is the retrieval of children from their guardians, Mrs. Johnson? We don't differentiate between good or bad. Your moralizing is irrelevant. We just need details and a sum.”

Tears welled in Johnson's eyes.

“My...my late husband and I worked for Ares during the interdepartmental conflict last year. During the conflict, Shadowrunners...they kidnapped my children, Madeline and Timothy. And they didn't give them back during the reunification.”

Locke sighed with exasperation.

“So you want us to rescue them?”

Johnson nodded frantically up and down, sobbing into a handkerchief.

“Mrs. Johnson, do you have any leads? If your children are just 'somewhere' then I'm afraid we can't help you.”

Johnson continued to nod and slipped a piece of E-paper forward. It detailed an apartment complex in an Ares neighborhood.

“I did...I did a lot of searching on social networking sites. Two of the runners retired, and kept the kids...they're Madeline and Timothy Robbins now!”

Legitimate rage showed in Mrs. Johnson's eyes through the tears.

“They renamed my children! They named my children after them!”

“Mrs. Johnson,” said Locke, tentative, “are you ABSOLUTELY SURE that they're your children? That this isn't a false positive?”

“There are too many coincidences,” sobbed Mrs. Johnson, shaking her head back and forth. “Knight

Errant won't help me. They treat me like I'm hysterical.”

The team settled back into their seats awkwardly. Wildcard stared at his burrito, making flawless eye contact with two jalapeño slices. Bend repeatedly poked his salad with his fork, stirring it around but not actually eating any of it. Dervish whispered to Wildcard if he was going to eat the rest of his burrito.

Locke finally broke the silence.

“How much are you asking, Mrs. Johnson?”

“Just...anything. Anything. I want my children back.”

“Well...we usually don't go below 30,000 nuyen.”

Mrs. Johnson's expression turned steely.

“Done.”

Wildcard winced a little bit. The etiquette was to bargain down from the high price and find a happy middle. They'd just stiffed Mrs. Johnson hard.

“Alright...” Locke shook Mrs. Johnson's quivering hand. “We'll get little Timmy and Maddy back. Where's our drop-off?”

“I'm staying at the Radisson up the street from the civic center,” Mrs. Johnson said. “Room 206. You can come in through the window?”

“Yeah,” said Locke, demure. “We can do that.”

Mrs. Johnson sobbed her thanks, and then ran off.

As soon as she was out of earshot, Wildcard noted,

“I feel like a horse's arse for cheating her like that.”

Dervish shrugged.

“It's what she gets for not reading up. Besides, we're doing the right thing during this run, right? We get to play white hat, so it doesn't matter if we cheated her or not. Right, Bend?”

Bend sighed loudly and pushed his salad over to Dervish, who promptly began to shovel it into his mouth.

JANUARY 9th, ARES NEIGHBORHOOD, DOWNTOWN SEATTLE, 2074

The building, Ares Arms Apartments (everyone groaned at the pun) was lightly defended, more a

home for low-level employees or families coasting on cushy staff positions than contracted mercs. There were the obligatory Knight Errant ultracops patrolling the neighborhood, but they were comparatively sparse. That didn't mean, of course, that they wouldn't come pouring out of the woodwork if the team fucked up, so Wildcard did the same thing that TwoDee had once done and hacked the traffic registry, the better to facilitate their escape in the event of a high-speed vehicle chase.

The mission legwork went quickly. Locke bluffed his way in, pretending to be a visitor, and although he wasn't allowed past the front desk ("no visiting after hours, sir, I apologize"), he did manage to get a list of apartments by name. From there, it was trivial to find the Robins family: a family of four, living on the third floor.

With a window overlooking the parking lot behind the building.

Dervish, in his cloaked armor (recently oiled and fitted with quieter servomotors), sat at the bottom of the building as he and Bend worked to set up a rappelling system at the third story window. Wildcard hacked the building's security system ("like dodging an angry dog chained to a backyard fence post" he chuckled) to turn off the window's alarms, and then let Bend work his magic. Backdooring on Dervish's wideband radar and juxtaposing it with his own sonar and thermo input, Bend was able to identify that they were entering the children's bedroom, that the two kids were sound asleep, and that the "parents" were watching grid in the living room.

A final check on the building's registries confirmed everything: the mother and father were both ex-merc, and the kids were "adopted," not blood-related. The children's family was said to be "deceased in interdepartmental conflict."

"Alright," said Wildcard over the subvocals, holding a fist with a thumb up outside of his car window, "everything checks out. Do it."

Bend nodded (not that anyone could see) and began silently carving a small hole out of the window, just enough for him to reach in and undo the manual latch while Wildcard worked the electronic one.

With a pop, the window opened, and the children stirred. Not wasting any time, Bend stuck a slap-patch filled with sedative onto each of the children's arms, and 12-year-old Madeline and 9-year-old Timothy went limp underneath their glow-in-the-dark-star-covered ceiling. Rainwater dripped off his tacsuit, falling onto the cartoon-character-adorned carpet.

"Dervish. Get ready."

Dervish had been climbing to a halfway point on the second story, and Locke stood below him on a planter in front of the parking lot. Bend passed the girl down first, and then the boy. Locke was the first to notice something wrong, as he held Timothy in his arms.

"Something's wrong. The kid's having problems breathing."

Wildcard bolted out of the car, trailing the deluxe medkit he kept in his glove compartment.

"Fuck, it's an adverse reaction to the narco. Someone hold out the kid's arm while I get the

succinylcholine.”

Bend hissed into the subvocals, as he placed the little cut-out sliver of glass into place in the window once more,

“What's going on down there?”

“Kid's gonna suffocate. Dervish, hold him steady! Locke! Clear his airway, we're going to stick an oxygen tube down there.”

Locke gulped.

“Fuck, I didn't know you were this prepared for this, Wildcard.”

Rain trickled over the lenses of Wildcard's mask and he wiped the condensation off with his sleeve before giving the limp boy the injection. He placed a respirator over the boy's face before starting the attached inhaler.

“Call it experience. Luckily the dose of narco we gave him isn't going to stay in his system for long, but this is one hell of an allergic reaction while it lasts. We'll need someone to watch him on the way back.”

Locke nodded.

“I can do that. I've got the second-most medical training in the team.”

Still on the third floor and packing up his rappelling technology, Bend saw the flashing lights and sirens coming from a few blocks away.

“We've got company. Move!”

Locke and Dervish placed the kids between them on the middle seat of the Hyundai while Wildcard revved the engine. Bend practically frog-jumped down the side of the building before sliding over the hood and jumping into the shotgun seat.

“Seatbelts, everyone!”

Before the cops could make visual contact, the silver Hyundai was out on the streets, already headed back to downtown.

On the freeway, Wildcard looked over his shoulder and pointed at Locke.

“How's Timmy doing?”

“He's breathing. Completely blacked out, though. Not moving.”

“We may want to hide out for a few hours before we give the kids back to mum. Let the drug run its course.”

“We also don't know if the kids are chipped,” retorted Dervish. “Who cares if he's out cold?”

“Wait!” yelled Locke, excited. “Wait! He just mumbled and started grabbing at my hand! He's sleeping normally! He's good!”

Wildcard sighed.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Let's not pull that trick again. Don't want to have any deoxygenated braindamaged tots on my hands.”

Mrs. Wellers awoke to the tapping of fingers on her window. Seeing her two children sitting on the recliners on the hotel balcony, she burst into tears and ran to the window in nothing but a t-shirt and her underwear.

Bend deactivated his cloak and coughed.

“Mission completed, Mrs. Johnson.”

“Thank you, thank you,” sobbed Wellers. She reached out as though to embrace Bend, and then, seeming to think better of it, walked back inside.

“I'm still waiting on the bank to accept my withdrawal, but you'll have your money tomorrow. Thank you so much.”

“Anything to help,” said Bend with a smile, before disappearing off the edge of the balcony.

JANUARY 14th, RENTON, SEATTLE, 2074

Wildcard was sitting at his kitchen table, eating breakfast (as you do), when the SWAT team breached. He had considered running when he caught the node signature three blocks away, but then he had found the tacnet of the three snipers watching each of his house's doorways. Better to see what they wanted. He was mobbed-up, and this was hostile territory to the cops; Finnigan turf. If he needed to escape, he could escape later. If he needed to be bailed out, he'd get bailed out.

As the laser sights fluttered over his cheerios, Wildcard calmly asked,

“I don't suppose that you gentlemen brought me orange juice? Because I'm out.”

The response was a SWAT operative grabbing him by the back of the head, throwing him out of the chair, and cuffing him.

“Calvin MacIntyre, you are under arrest for possession of illegal firearms, criminal hacking, unlicensed mercenary activity, multiple traffic violations of varying degrees of severity, and child murder.”

“Gentlemen, we all know the game. I’m not going to get busted on any of those charges except for the fourth one. And the fifth is just insulting.”

“You have the right to remain silent.”

Wildcard sighed, standing up and arching his back to stretch as the cop behind him struggled to grasp his arms again.

“I can also haver on if I feel like it, copper. I’m not going to struggle because that would mean you’d actually have an opportunity to do some real damage.”

Wildcard deserved the cuff to the back of the head he got for that, but it had been worth it. As he was escorted out of his front door, he nodded to a crowd of suited Mafiosos watching the whole proceeding.

“Take care of the car. Keys are in the knife drawer.”

One of the Mafiosos, a generic-looking young man who could well have been a salaryman in another life, made a grunt of affirmation and began walking toward the garage. A police officer activated his stunstick and gestured at the crowd as Wildcard was loaded into the back of the black truck.

“Clear out! This is Knight Errant business!”

DAWN, JANUARY 15th, REDMOND BARRENS, SEATTLE METROPLEX, 2074

“ATTENTION, RESIDENTS OF THIS COMPOUND! WAKE UP!”

An entire brigade of Knight Errant cops stood in perimeter around their pair of APCs and a SWAT tank, nervously eyeing the scattering refugees behind them. They faced a set of double concrete walls topped with barbed wire, behind which was a ruined old office building topped with camo netting and lumber reinforcements. The Captain checked his mic, and spoke through the loudspeaker again as the bomb squad prepped their tools behind him.

“I REPEAT: WAKE UP AND MAKE CONTACT OR WE WILL BREACH. WE HAVE CALLED THE BOMB SQUAD TO DISARM ANY AND ALL BOOBY TRAPS, AND ARE PREPARED TO USE LETHAL FORCE. JOSE RODRIGUEZ AND GARRETT JORDAN, SHOW YOURSELVES.”

A heavy attack chopper circled overhead, shining a spotlight through the broken windows of the complex. Dervish yawned, looked out his window, and sighed to himself.

“Idiots. Making this much noise will just attract the mutants.”

As if on cue, a troll covered in horrible lesions and radiation burns came screaming out of a nearby junk pile, wielding an entire stoplight as a medieval polearm.

“GIMME YER TRUUUUCKS!”

With a yelp, one of the riot cops opened up with his gun, prompting the troll to throw the stoplight, smashing the man back towards the APCs like an armored rag doll. The rest of the police quickly organized and put the mutant down in a hail of fire.

“SCAN WINDOWS! CHECK FOR HOSTILES!”

Dervish leisurely strolled downstairs, getting dressed and armored, as the cops continued to do battle with the small tribe of mutants that Dervish knew made their home in the wreck down the street. It was about time someone cleared them out, anyway.

Nevertheless, he was curious as to what exactly was going on, so he made his way to the intercom and loudly asked,

“WHAT HAPPENS IF I DON'T COME OUT?”

The police captain, having scrambled to the roof of one of the APCs, yelled back,

“WE BOMB YOUR COMPOUND.”

Dervish gave this some thought.

“I SUPPOSE I DON'T HAVE MUCH OF A CHOICE THEN. AM I UNDER ARREST?”

“NOT YET, SERGEANT JORDAN. WE JUST WANT TO TAKE YOU BACK TO THE OFFICE AND ASK A FEW QUESTIONS.”

With a blaring noise, the gate of the compound slid open and Dervish marched out, armored up with his shotgun strung up on his back.

“Well, let's get to it, then. I don't have all day.”

DUSK, JANUARY 15th, REDMOND BARRENS, SEATTLE, 2074

Felix Ramirez knew that they would come for him eventually. Two of their operatives were moving through the hallway to Apartment 206 now. He could see them through the thin drywall as he hid behind his bed.

The Aztechnology operatives had made one major mistake, and that was that Locke had moved from room 206 to room 207 last Wednesday.

As the soldiers breached his old room, Felix bailed out of the door into the hallway, taking off at a sprint and putting covering fire on the doorway to 206 with his pistol. He turned the corner and heard orders for backup being shouted (in English, curiously). It was at this point that he began to consider that this was not an isolated set of Aztechnology operatives.

He amended his hypothesis to “Knight Errant SWAT” as he turned another corner and found himself

face to face with a taser shockwave boob trap.

“Putade MaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAUGH”

As Locke spasmed violently and crashed to the floor, the SWAT team circled around him, training their guns on his twitching form.

“Quick, black-bag him! Chief Inspector wants him by midnight!”

The Chief Inspector of Knight Errant Seattle, a broad African-American human in his mid-40s, sat across a boardroom table from three Shadowrunners in varying degrees of condition. Garrett Jordan was the real catch: one of the world's top gunmen (and even better with a cyberblade), a hardcore merc with ties in Lagos, Japan, the UCAS military, and Ares itself. The orc sat across from the Chief Inspector, looking resentful. Next to him, calm and weirdly bland without his distinctive getup, was the operative only known as Wildcard, rumored to be, among other things, the world's best getaway driver. The Chief Inspector had taken the liberty of removing Calvin MacIntyre from the Ares SIN database, as it was almost certainly a fake. The third man, groaning and leaning face-first into the table, was the newcomer, whom a cursory DNA test had turned up as Felix Ramirez, a rogue Aztec mage with a truly preposterous bounty on his head. Notably absent was the former Tir Ghost, alias of Sean Falstaff, who had (predictably) eluded capture. The Chief Inspector hoped that he might be persuaded to come in on duress to his teammates.

On any other day, this would be one of the greatest busts of the Inspector's career: these four were purported to be big shots in the Seattle underground, not runner legend level, but at the top of the game. However, they were untouchable. Their fixer knew the system well, Wildcard had mob ties, Falstaff was a Tir Tairngire citizen, and the Chief Inspector technically had to answer to a former teammate of theirs, and resented it. Which was why this whole operation was going off-record, and he was going to shoot them all in the head himself if they wouldn't play ball.

The Chief Inspector knew that he had a few legs up. Most of them revolved around Ramirez: the party didn't have their face in the best condition to handle negotiations, and in fact Ramirez could be used as leverage with Aztechnology if push came to shove. There was also the fact that, if push came to shove came to a firefight, they had been frisked and were about a man and a half down in the middle of Knight Errant's home office.

“Gentlemen,” began the Chief Inspector, “you can call me Mr. Johnson.”

“And you can call me Trixie, the prostitute in Halloweentown who trades toothless blowjobs for a packet of novacoke per, but that doesn't make it true,” Dervish shot back, his cybereye covers retracting to give the Inspector a better view of his death-glare. “Runners work for money, not threats.”

“One of those threats is pretty convincing,” noted 'Johnson,' pointing to the groaning Ramirez. “You don't clean up your own mess, he gets deported back to Aztlan.”

Wildcard spoke up, his Scottish brogue sounding very alien coming from his generic, WASP-y

features.

“Congratulations, you daft booby. You've mildly inconvenienced us. I can't speak for Locke, who may have more invested in this than I, but I got no want to get skelped on behalf of a paddy of hot-shot Sherlocks.”

Johnson growled.

“This isn't a negotiation, this is a demand. If there's one thing I expect runners to do to keep the status quo, it's to clean up their messes.”

With a flick of his wrist, Johnson tossed an AR image up above the table. It displayed the autopsy tables of Madeline and Timothy Wellers, their faces contorted into expressions of caricatured terror, their skin bleached white. Wildcard and Dervish both briefly dropped facade while staring in disgust.

“What the fuck,” began Dervish, “those are those kids...”

Wildcard finished,

“...that we rescued, yeh.”

Johnson nodded somberly.

“Well, either you're all fabulous con artists, or my hypothesis checks out. You had no idea you were killing the kids when you did your last job.”

Wildcard stared slack-jawed at the bloodless, grey cuts in Timothy's chest, bleached and dry. His considerable medical knowledge was failing him.

“What in the bloody hell is that?”

“Essence drain. Your last Johnson, gentlemen, was a nightmare. A dark spirit that feeds on fear. And you bought into a sob story and gave it two kids to eat. Two Ares kids.”

At the mention of nightmares, Locke lifted his head from the table.

“You can't be expecting us to go pop it.”

“Pop it?” Johnson gave Ramirez an expression of disgust. “I want you to go get its spirit formula, make a metaplanar jaunt, and kill it. Knight Errant already popped it yesterday, but that's not going to stop 'Mrs. Wellers' from coming back in the long run. Your fuck-up, your redemption.”

Dervish stood up, throwing his hands in the air.

“Welp, I'm out.”

He was greeted at the door by two armed Knight Errant guards, not that it phased him.

“Mr. Johnson, unless you can turn these two stooges into extradimensional creepy-crawlies out to steal my soul, I'm taking my chances with shooting my way out of here.”

Wildcard stayed sitting down, and gestured for Dervish to return.

“What Mr. Johnson means to say is that, given that we're specialists who are considerably higher-tier than the dobbers he's got here in the precinct, he's going to be giving us forty thousand nuyen up front and access to the Knight Errant armory. We're going to be needing heavy equipment to geek a damned demon, after all.”

Johnson glowered, his eyes narrowing in hate.

“Mr. Johnson, drop the purity act. We're all solids here, and you know it. Yer not appealing to us on a moral ground, and you know that. Fact of the matter is, if any of yer stooges had a chance at taking this thing on, you'd have done it yer damn self, and gone on yer merry way. Yer trying to strong-arm us into this because we're the only ones who could pull it off without a big heapin' bunch of Knight Errant widows mucking up your public relations.”

“I could have you killed this instant!”

Wildcard chuckled.

“And I, you; Dervish is right there-” Dervish grunted in response, “-But getting geeked on either end isn't good for business, and Knight Errant would still have its nightmare problem to deal with, because we're the only damned lunatics you can even halfway trust to pull this suicide mission off.”

Veins protruded on Johnson's temple and he balled his hands into fists, but he spat,

“Armory access, so you have a chance. But you're getting twenty thousand. I'm not paying you any more than a courtesy price.”

The team looked amongst each other. Dervish grunted.

“Actually go to hell, try to kill a demon permanently, barely any pay, but on the plus side no child murder prosecution and we get to keep our Mexican. Yeah, that works. Bend, you can show up anytime.”

A lithe elf in a tacsuit appeared on the ceiling behind Johnson, before dropping to the floor in a catlike stance, standing up, and walking over to the rest of the team.

“As usual, Locke ruins it for everyone. And Felix was totally his real name, I wish I'd made a bet on that.”

Dervish used his shoulder to brace Locke, helping him stand up.

“Stop being so harsh on the new guy. He proved his worth.”

“Yeah, he did a great job detecting that nightmare. Which is a mage's job, last I checked.”

Seeing that Johnson was beginning to make an angry whistling noise as he exhaled between his teeth, the team wisely made for the armory.

Dervish's nose twitched as he disengaged his helmet.

“Huh. That's a smell.”

“Yeah, I smell it too,” sniffed Bend, looking between racks of ballistic plates and spare ammo for the culprit. “Smells like fish.”

“Can't say I smell it, but I'll take you boys' word on it,” commented Wildcard, plucking a drum of APDS off the wall. “Now down to business.”

“Like, seriously, Wildcard,” grunted Dervish, with a chuckle, “you have to smell this. We're talking the alleyway behind a sushi restaurant. Doesn't Knight Errant have janitors?”

“Okay, fine, but only 'cause you piqued my curiosity, ya--OH! That is FOUL.” Wildcard clapped his mask back down onto his face. “Business? Please?”

“I gotta get some foci from evidence,” said Locke, looking nauseous. “Be right back.”

Bend immediately gravitated towards the sidearms; holdouts and spy toys, mostly.

“You know, it's a damn shame that only cop corps get access to these,” he said, fingering a Ruger Thunderbolt burst pistol. “Ruger could make a lot of runners happy by going public.”

Wildcard stomped in in a set of Ares Milspec, albeit a lighter model more on par with Locke's birdsuit than Dervish's man-tank. Locke also returned to the room, now in his full gear (albeit covered in evidence tags). Wildcard eyed the fancy chrome sidearm.

“Ain't the peace and posies route more your bag?”

“Not when we're about to be fighting demons, I'm not. They get bullets.”

“Glad to see you coming around,” grunted Dervish, as his own set of milspec flexed. Diagnostics were turning out positive on the new hydraulics.

“Still a pacifist. That hasn't changed. How you doing, rookie?”

Locke groaned, cradling his head as he fished an obsidian spear tip from a plastic evidence bag. The tip briefly lit up as it attuned to his magic, then returned to normal.

“Shut up, Bend.”

“Felix is growing some balls!” Dervish clapped Locke on the back, smashing him a clear 15 feet across the room into a rack of Alphas. “Oops.”

JANUARY 15th, DOWNTOWN SEATTLE, 2074

Tonatiuh the Sun God, in the form of a great-form Guidance Spirit, stood in a laboratory in the Ares Fabrication Compound beneath Seattle, holding open a portal that screeched and clamored with the voices of the damned. Three men in armor (and one in a skin-tight bodysuit) stood before it. Dervish had turned himself into a walking fortress of invulnerability, done up in red, white, and blue. Wildcard, in something resembling the Judge Dredd suit by way of Rob Liefeld, tapped at his plasteel faceplate and reminded himself to get the plaster cosmetics to reconstruct his signature ASAP. Felix was loaded down with every focus he could muster over his suit of Aztech armor, fully prepared to spend weeks in withdrawal if he made it out alive. Finally, Bend stood behind them with his new guns and a few new gadgets on his belt, looking the most apprehensive of the lot. Locke ran the team through the drill:

“Alright, everyone's updated their wills. Wildcard's server is set to send them to Brianna if we're not out of there in a week. We've all called loved ones--those who have them, anyway...”

Dervish leaned in Bend's direction and snickered.

“Did you really have to give Emily that “Maybe 50 years from now, maybe...yesterday” line?” Dervish made sure to pause dramatically before whispering “yesterday” with kissy-lips.

“Hey,” said Bend, defensively, “she asked when I would be back, and it was really romantic. Plus, accurate, what with metaplanar time shenanigans.”

“Let's not have the metaplanar time shenanigans talk again,” groaned Wildcard. “Now get your antipsychotics ready, everyone. Shadow spirits feed on emotions, so it'll be best if we all had none.”

Reaching into the plastic slots on the back of his neck, he chipped a “TABULA_RASA_IV” personafix.

Wildcard's eyes dulled and his expression softened as Locke and Bend each donned a rig and did the same. Dervish drew his sniper rifle from a slot on his back, placed the barrel near to his head, and fired, triggering a relapse in the condition caused by his frontal lobe damage. His face contorted with a cruel harshness, and then relaxed. With a monotone that passed “sinister” and drifted right into “downright terrifying,” he droned,

“Once more...into the breach”

JANUARY 15th?, SHADOW SEATTLE, 20??

“Huh,” remarked Wildcard, his demeanor muted. “I didn't expect it to look like this.” He took the form of an old-school 1920s gangster in full suit and fedora, save for his face, which had taken on a number of aspects of his mask and looked like inanimate porcelain.

“I didn't expect *us* to look like this,” noted Locke, who resembled nothing so much as an Aztec temple made anthropoid, all stairways and fortifications.

“Metaplanar appearance. Based off of inner self. Think ‘The Matrix,’” commented Bend, who appeared to be the unholy elven bastard child of Sam Fischer and James Bond, done up like a /k/ommando on Christmas. A single flower in his hair made the whole ensemble a little surreal.

“Interesting,” noted Dervish, deadpan. “Back to the job.” He looked like...Dervish.

The team waded through tall grass in what appeared to be a public park, albeit twisted and of largely relative size. A blasted Seattle loomed above them on all sides, exuding nearly palpable gloom, always in the distance no matter what direction one moved in and yet always at the forefront of the mind. As the team formed a square formation, inching through grass blades the size of palm trees that suddenly shrank and wilted with the slightest touch, Locke stared ahead.

“I’ve got something. I recognize the spirit from earlier. A part of it, anyway. 50 meters west.”

Wildcard moved into position to cover him.

“Slowly.”

Locke approached a tiny shred of nothingness, hanging in space like a rift.

“Part of the spirit formula. Ares gave us the little shred they had, so I can compare.” There was a pause as he analyzed it, his magical senses intentionally blocked from his environment. No one wants to astrally perceive the Shadow Metaplane. “Fuck.”

Dervish parted a nearby bush, scanning for movement.

“Define ‘fuck.’”

“These are the same size. Well, size by metaplanar standards, which is iffy. Point being, if they’re all this size, then we’re looking at 5 more.”

“Seven shards,” commented Bend. “I guess that’s meaningful somehow, but it escapes me. Wildcard, can you get a bead on them?”

“I could, but I’m not magic,” Wildcard shot back, moving to Locke’s position to keep the group in adjacent twos.

“Everything’s subjective in the metaplanes. You’re the guy we use to track things normally. Try your computer.”

“Computers won’t work in the metaplanes,” said Wildcard. “Negative.”

Bend blinked, as frustrated as he could be while still emotionally neutered.

“Not your computer. The *idea* of your computer. Two totally different things.”

Wildcard, as if to spite Bend, pulled out an ancient 1920s rotary phone. Much to his shock, as he recalled the details of his commlink, it formed a weird, half-finished replica of the piece of tech,

responding to his search query.

“Now that's unnerving. 5 shards still across the city, at least if...well...Hell-Google has anything to say about it. Closest one's in an office building two blocks away.”

As if on cue, the grass fell away and shrank down to normal size, revealing a path to the office building in question amidst blasted cars and contorted skeletons. Potholes formed entire gorges amidst the wreckage.

“The sooner we get this done, the better,” sighed Wildcard. “Watch your step.”

As the team searched amidst the desks and cubicles of the nameless office building, Locke reached out to touch a nearby skeleton, sitting in a chair, tie still around its neck. It dissolved into dust although, curiously, its shadow remained.

“Anyone else reminded of 20Cen Hiroshima? Looks like a nuke came through here.”

Bend nodded.

“When magic first started manifesting, nukes around the world started malfunctioning. Maybe this is where they ended up.”

“Can the chatter,” grunted Dervish. “Locke. Location.”

“Formula's ahead. But it's moving.”

“Moving?”

With a cry of “SHITE!” Wildcard fell to the floor, clutching a bloody gash in his stomach. His machine gun began discharging, spraying the office with fire.

“CONTACT!”

Dervish dropped into a crouch, scanning the area around Wildcard. “Locke, what was that!”

“It's a spirit,” yelled Locke, “An invisible one! Moving fast! Too fast for me to track!”

With a yelp, Locke was catapulted into the air, hitting the ceiling before falling onto a desk and snapping it in half.

“No good,” said Bend, before running around to nearby cubicles and setting down sensors. “Keep your PANs on, and shoot when you get movement. Wildcard, network these.”

Not willing to question the logic of metaplanar computing again, Wildcard punched buttons at random and the sensors armed. Clutching his stomach, he scrambled to make it to the perimeter.

Slowly, Dervish extended one cyberblade.

Right as Wildcard was about to make it past the sensors, Dervish launched over him and slammed into a tangible force mere inches behind his teammate. He opened up with one cyberblade, and then began freely maneuvering with the others, delivering brutal and unceasing blows to the invisible foe. Finally, a contorted, shadowy manlike figure appeared very briefly, gasping, before disincorporating into another black wisp.

“Shard 3,” groaned Locke. “Everyone okay?”

“Peachy,” coughed Wildcard, producing his medkit to bandage up his midsection. Dervish moved both himself and Wildcard back into the perimeter for the team to recollect their thoughts.

“Next shard,” said Dervish. “Where?”

Wildcard tapped at his commlink, clearly not understanding what exactly he was doing.

“Uh...Downtown. Roof of one of the skyscrapers.”

“Sounds dangerous,” responded Dervish, his voice empty of thought or feeling. “Let's go.”

“I'm never going to get over that,” Wildcard commented quietly to Bend.

JANUARY 15th?, DOWNTOWN SHADOW SEATTLE, 20??

The team found a woman in a wispy funerary gown standing atop the roof of the skyscraper. A raging lightning storm blazed above, periodically striking a mismatched amalgamation of a radio tower, a fire escape, and innumerable humanoid corpses. The tower was terrifyingly thin, and swayed from side to side as its top disappeared into the clouds.

“The tower is tall,” the woman commented, “and perilous. Many have tried to reach its height, many have fallen. All lost sight of themselves.”

Bend craned his neck.

“Up there?”

Wildcard nodded somberly.

“Up there.”

“Damn.”

“You'll never make it,” the woman said, her voice echoing eerily amongst the metallic debris. “It's too much for anyone. Everyone forgets, unless they give up everything.”

“Shadow spirit,” Dervish said, raising his shotgun to the woman. “Engaging.”

Locke put his hand on Dervish's barrel.

“Hold on. I don't think this is as straightforward as it looks.”

“He speaks the truth,” continued the spirit. “Sacrifices must be made before the way is clear. Though you be wretches and lost, you have the capacity for sacrifice still.”

Dervish stepped up.

“Fine. Assuming the sacrifice is some kind of physical harm, I'm the most likely to survive. State your purpose or we kill you.”

The spirit chuckled darkly.

“Very well. You, faceless man. Why do you stay in the shadows? Why do you hide from the merchants in their high towers, consort with scum and filth?”

“I run for the money,” responded Wildcard. “The money and the thrill.”

The spirit nodded soberly, and ran a thin, feminine hand over Dervish's chest. The hand was covered in sores.

“And you, soul of peace in turmoil. You could do so much better; why dwell beneath the surface when you could do good above?”

“Good's subjective,” commented Bend. “I run to escape from the one time I thought I was doing good. And to provide a more ethical alternative to other runners.”

The spirit again nodded.

“And you, cracked temple? Surely your gods will put up with your absence no longer. Tonatiuh begs you face the sun, and instead you hide in cities that are anathema to him and his, places of black clouds and shadow.”

“I run to hide from his other servants,” commented Locke. “As far as I am concerned I am the only legitimate practitioner of the faith.”

The spirit nodded a third time, considering.

“And you?”

Dervish grunted.

“I run for me.”

“And so you have the most to give.”

There was a moment of dawning realization and everyone had half-raised their guns before both the spirit and Dervish were already gone.

“FUCK!”

Wildcard took a few potshots at where the spirit used to be before Bend grabbed him by the shoulder.

“Don't get emotional! If we get emotional they'll get all of us. We need to get that shard. And look.”

Bend pointed upwards at the tower, the top of which was now clearly visible through a hole in the cloud line.

“I'm the best climber among us, so I'm going up there. Both of you cover me.”

Wildcard nodded soberly and he and Locke moved into position as Bend began scaling the swaying wreckage. Periodically he had to take small breaks in which to adhere himself to the side of the structure for particularly violent bursts of wind, but he held his own. A few minutes later, and once he was well out of sight, Bend noted,

“I've got the fourth part of the formula. And...uh...”

Wildcard turned to watch the stairway doors. He had heard something in the distance, but wasn't sure where it was coming from.

“I found...this guy.”

As the tower began rotating and collapsed down into the roof like a scrap-metal vortex, all that was left standing in its former spot was Bend, and a naked orc wearing nothing but pants, with two experimental cyberlegs from the knee down.

Wildcard trained his gun on the newcomer, but Locke gave him the “he's clear” signal and they both lowered their guns. Dervish looked between his former teammates, his expression one of fear and confusion.

“Who are you guys? What's going on?”

“Dervish,” said Wildcard, without a beat. “What's the last thing you remember?”

Dervish put his hand to his forehead and groaned in exertion.

“I...There was a shootout at a Stuffer Shack, and I met this blonde guy...and he...I forget.”

“Dios mío,” cursed Locke. “The spirit wasn't kidding. At least he's alive. That's what's important. Give him some of your backups.”

Within a few minutes, a very confused Dervish hefted Wildcard's nickel-plated predator, adorned in an armor jacket and helmet.

“You guys...are we runners? Am I a runner who lost my memory? Is that's what's happening? Why does this city look so spooky?”

“Yes, yes, yes,” said Bend. “And we’re in the Shadow Metaplanes.”

Dervish gave him a blank look.

“Hell.”

Dervish gulped. Bend looked to Wildcard.

“Where’s the fifth?”

“Funny you should mention that,” said Wildcard, fiddling with his commlink. “It’s incoming.”

The entire team ducked for cover (even Dervish, seemingly operating on instinct) as a burst of gunfire shattered the stairway door, the ambient shadows in the gun smoke coalescing into rough facsimiles of armed guards.

“Corpsec wraiths,” commented Locke. “Hell has stopped being subtle. OPEN FIRE!”

As the team used cover fire from Wildcard and Locke (manifesting as a Thompson submachine gun and a ray of searing light, respectively) to move to the fire escape, the shadows around them began coalescing into new and increasingly threatening shapes. Somewhere in the distance, a helicopter’s rotors sounded, although the sound was distorted, imperfect, and wrong, as though belonging to a vehicle-sized creature attempting to merely imitate a helicopter,

“THE FORMULA’S DOWNSTAIRS, ON ONE OF THE SPIRITS,” shouted Wildcard. “GET INTO THE BUILDING ON THE NEXT STORY DOWN, WE’LL FIGHT A RUNNING BATTLE DOWN AND TRY TO LOSE THEM IN MAINTENANCE HALLWAYS.”

Dervish fired wildly at the shadows, periodically striking true and dropping a screeching demon.

“WHAT DOES THAT EVEN MEAN!?”

“JUST FOLLOW OUR LEAD!”

JANUARY 17th?, DOWNTOWN SHADOW SEATTLE, 20??

Minutes had bled into hours, had bled into days. At some point halfway down the building, shortly after killing a hellish tac-team commander and recovering a wisp of spirit from his corpse, the floors had just started repeating, right down to the opposition on each floor.

“This is floor 12 again,” gasped Bend, his burst pistol blazing. “3 security guards, 10 office workers. Remember, the office workers will try to claw you.”

The team breached the door in a blaze of gunfire, putting down the guards first and then the zombie-like cubicle monkeys.

“This is some kind of rammy we've gotten ourselves into, boys,” sighed Wildcard. “It's like Shadowrunner hell, having to kill all the witnesses from your gobshite performance over and over.”

“That would be the idea, yes,” groaned Locke, moving to the stairway door. “Floor 11. Five guards barricaded behind a table. Grenade.”

Bend grabbed Locke, stopping him before he opened the door.

“Hold on. Wildcard, do a search query for the next formula shard.”

“What good would that do?” Wildcard leaned against a wall, catching his breath. He was covered in bandages from a half-dozen ghostly small-arms wounds.

“Because for the last I don't even know how long, we haven't been focusing on getting the shards. We've just been thinking of getting the hell out of this building.”

Locke nodded.

“So we've been keeping it at the forefront of our minds. Makes sense. Plug in the coordinates.”

Wildcard fiddled with his phone, before taking up a breaching position at the door.

“Says it's right through here. Hope this works. Dervish, you're the kicker.”

As the team smashed through the door, they tumbled out and down another short flight of stairs, having been disgorged from a parking lot somewhere in Everett. Across from them stood the shadowy double of the Bunraku parlor from TwoDee, Dervish, Geppetto and Trout's early days running, although Dervish the only one from that time, couldn't recognize it.

A ghostly woman in latex get-up, her face obscured by tangible shadow, stood at the doorway. Numerous doubles covered their smoky, vague chins and giggled behind her.

“Hey, booooy.”

“Succubi,” Bend, Wildcard, and Locke agreed, speaking simultaneously.

“Suck you--what?” Dervish looked between his teammates, confused.

“Any way we're getting through this unscathed?” Locke closed on the succubi, his LMG raised.

“You'll find that the girls and I have very reasonable rates,” said the ambulatory latex suit. “Just a little bit off the top--only an hour of time, really--and the spirit formula's all yours. Wellers is just another name to us.”

Locke did some assessing.

“Bullshit. An hour with you would kill any one of us. And our magic would be the first thing to go.”

Wildcard grimaced, his mutated porcelain lips widening grotesquely, like a cartoon character.

“What if Dervish and I spent half time each?”

Locke gave Wildcard a look of shock.

“You'd both be crazy fucked up at the end of it. We can't risk it.”

Behind him, the succubi giggled, as though this was the height of comedy.

“Better than fighting them,” said Dervish, his voice wavering with uncertainty. “I think?”

“He's right,” said Bend, somberly. “They'd at least come out of it likely alive, rather than if we fought all of them. You see how powerful those spirits are.”

“Delicious,” said the lead succubus. “I get those two, then?”

“Thirty minutes each,” said Wildcard, walking into the building. “Starting now. Bend, if my biomonitor flatlines, you know what to do.”

Dervish clenched his teeth and followed Wildcard.

Exactly one half an hour later, Wildcard and Dervish stumbled outside and fell into a groaning pile, clutching between them the second-to-last fragment. The succubi behind them made kissy-noises and then slammed the door.

Wildcard slumped up against the wall, unable to lift his head. His skin was deathly pale, his breathing shallow. Locke assensed him and found his Essence to be in the fractions. Dervish was doing mildly better, and slowly stood on uneasy legs.

“We got it, guys,” coughed Dervish, holding up the fragment triumphantly. “We got it. I don't know what it is but we got it.”

Bend patted Dervish on the shoulder, eyeing Wildcard warily.

“Good job, big guy. We only have one left to go. ...Wildcard?”

Wildcard slowly, and with much exertion, lifted his head. The momentum of it lolling over his shoulders caused him to smash the back of his scalp into the wall, drawing blood. His eyes were drained of color, reduced to soft grey orbs.

“...Huh?”

Bend snapped his fingers in front of Wildcard's face.

“Wildcard, you with me?”

“...Yeah.” Wildcard let his head drop again, and limply flopped his arm around with the vague, blind intent of being helped up. “...all things considered...getting' melted by succubi...ain't a bad way to lose a soul...”

“It's not your soul, Wildcard, at least not the whole one. Stick with us, we can get you therapy when you get out of this.” Bend braced Wildcard over his shoulder and lifted him. “You think you can find the last shard?”

Wildcard blinked. His mouth hung open, trailing a single strand of drool.

“Huh? Oh...yeah. ...Yeah. Here.”

Wildcard mashed his entire hand into his commlink, but the gesture sufficed. The team found themselves standing in a public library, comparatively clean and bright compared to the rest of Shadow Seattle. As they slowly moved into the foyer, four pedestals rose from the tile floor. On each pedestal was a large, blank tome, with a quill pen and ink.

“Some kind of trap,” noted Bend.

“Or a puzzle,” added Locke. “Let's try writing in them.”

“But we're already writing in them,” said Dervish.

With a start, Locke and Bend realized the three of them were already standing at the pedestals, having seemingly teleported. Wildcard lay on the floor of the foyer, twitching spasmodically.

“This isn't good,” said Bend, panic rising in his voice. “I can't take my eyes off the book, and I can't stop writing. You guys?”

Locke and Dervish were in a similar strait. Both here attached to the podiums by their right arms, which were writing feverishly in the books at a rate far faster than any human had a right to do. No matter how they pivoted their bodies, their eyes remained locked on the books, although they found that they could focus on each other's books as well.

“PETER COLBY was born in Portland, Oregon, United States of America, in 2018, to Brandon Colby and Caitlin Vance. As a child, he was bullied for his appearance: by the time that he was eight, the oldest metahumans were merely teenagers, and the phenomenon was not well-understood. He was plagued by crippling self-doubts that his parents did not love him because he was different, a state of mind that led to a lifelong pursuit of excellence in the military field, well-known for its strictly hierarchical structure...

“FELIX RAMIREZ was born in Cuetzalan, Mexico, in 2020, to Alejandro and Mariella Ramirez. His parents, both poor coal miners for the Oro Corporation, saw his elfin features and magical powers as a gift, despite dark and persistent rumors that Oro's regular medical check-ups were actually experiments designed to “homegrow” soldiers, the implications of which would be that the child was not wholly theirs. Despite the crushing poverty of his childhood, Felix was pampered...

“JONATHAN RED-EAGLE was born in Alamosa, Colorado, Pueblo Corporate Council, in 2024. He at first appeared to be an ordinary human boy before his goblinization, so his unique gene structure went unstudied until his adolescence. His childhood was marked by small incidents of violence common to the transitory times during the formation of the PCC: compared to his peers, he was only a small percentage Native, and his mother was expelled from the fledgling nation early in his childhood...

Bend used his other hand to clutch feebly at his head, his eyes becoming bloodshot.

“What the hell...it's...stealing my thoughts.”

A giggling imp appeared, sitting atop one of the bookshelves.

“And soon I'll have your whole life's stories, and then you'll be finished. I'll manage what all of the others couldn't! I'll end the intruders!”

It cheerily flitted about behind each of the runners, carefully avoiding moving into their peripheries to negate any chance of being attacked. Dervish's eyes scanned his book, feverishly.

“I have...two brothers? ...And they're both human? And...I'm fifty years old?”

“It's leeching our creativity,” Felix yelled, pulling his sidearm with his left hand and firing wildly in the general direction of the bookshelves, missing the imp by a mile, “Every minute we spend writing is more of our soul getting taken away!”

All three teammates struggled, calling for Wildcard to help them. Wildcard stirred on the ground, but lacked the strength to lift his gun high enough to shoot at the Muse.

“...PETER COLBY was fast-tracked into the Ghosts at the age of twenty-five. As part of his contract, his death was faked and his parents were put into protective custody, where they both still live today. He retains no contact with any of his friends or family from before his spy work, leading to intimacy issues that cause him to be drawn to those younger than him, whom he views as more spontaneous and full of life...”

“...FELIX RAMIREZ excelled in the Homegrown Warrior program, attending military school and training exercises throughout his childhood. The other children in his class, disproportionately orcs, took issue with his metatype and magical acumen, culminating in a fight with another boy, Jose Ramos, in the school gym. Ramos was burned to death by a fire spirit, inadvertently summoned by Ramirez, an event leading to Felix's aversion to sacrifice...”

“JONATHAN RED-EAGLE spent many years sequestered in government testing labs, with the PCC's lax cruelty laws exploited by the still-unsolidified nation, despite the protests of his friends and family. However, he disappeared during a terrorist strike on the facility, an act later rumored to be linked to Aztechnology...”

With a sudden burst of gunfire, the front cover and first few pages of Dervish's book disappeared, shredded paper flying everywhere. Wildcard inched across the floor on his belly, gun held aloft and shaking. He edged towards Dervish on his elbows, struggling to train his gun on the book without

hitting his teammate.

“It's useless,” crooned the imp. “He'll keep writing until he's all mine, regardless of what you do. And then, when you're done languishing down there, I'll make you write your own!”

Wildcard leaned his gun against Dervish's podium, letting out a sigh of breath as he let go of the weight of it. He clambered up the podium with grasping, claw-like hands, his head lolling back lifelessly. The imp screeched out a harsh laugh.

“You can't take the book away from him, either. His hand is stuck there until he's done writing.”

With a low rumbling growl, Wildcard hefted the back end of his gun through the gaping hole in the front of the book, then put both hands on the underside of the cover and lifted it, forming a rudimentary turret for Dervish.

“Oh,” the imp responded, with a dumbfounded blink.

One drum of APDS ammo later, and the team were all closing their books, massaging their strained eyes with their knuckles. A final wisp of black energy flowed from Dervish's perforated tome and coalesced with the others into a single, ancient-looking scroll.

“Thanks, Wildcard,” said Bend, with a warm smile. “We owe you one.”

“M'name's...Dylan Cadbury...m'frum Edinbuh.”

“Didn't need to make it a fair play thing, we know you're trustworthy.” Bend helped to lift Wildcard again. “Hang in there, we've got all the formula fragments. We just need to kill--”

With a scream, Dervish was lifted bodily into the air and absorbed into a mass of cancerous black shadow with two glaring, red eyes. Bend turned to the nightmare, and completed his statement:

“...Mrs...Wellers...”

Without hesitation, Felix manifested a fire spirit and began hurling goutts of burning ash at the nightmare, as Bend dropped behind his podium for cover, spraying bursts of explosive handgun bullets at the creature. Loud banging noises from inside the cloud of inky blackness meshed with screams, suggesting that Dervish wasn't going down without a fight.

Wildcard crawled for cover behind a bookshelf, taking awkward and mostly useless shots with his holdout pistol, only for the whole bookshelf to lift off the floor and go catapulting into Locke, knocking him prone and taking a large chunk out of his armor.

Bend fought like he'd literally never fought before, abandoning his traditional pacifism to unload round after round into the encroaching black cloud. As a tendril of pure shadow wrapped around him, he spent the clip, reloaded, and continued to spray concentrated bursts between the thing's eyes, screaming a wordless yell over the gunfire.

And then, it was over. As if an invisible threshold had been reached, “Wellers” violently exploded, the very force of her personality taking leave and rendering the surroundings blurred and indistinct. Dervish toppled to the floor, the life half-drained from him, cracking the tile (or the diminishing idea thereof). Wildcard slumped into unconsciousness. Bend let out a huff of breath, stumbled over to Locke and, in the almost uncanny silence, gasped out,

“It's over. Get us back home.”

His hands trembling, Locke summoned his guidance spirit, which slowly opened a portal...

JANUARY 13th, LATITUDE 42.22, LONGITUDE -138.5, 2074

“I MEANT HOME AS IN SEATTLE YOU STUPID MEXICAN FUCK,” yelled Bend, treading water.

“LO SIENTO! FUCK!” Locke clawed at Bend, trying to scramble out of the water which surrounded them on all sides.

“SUMMON A NEW ONE YOU DICK. WILDCARD AND DERVISH ARE SINKING.”

“I'M TRYING!”

“OH FOR FUCK'S SAKE.” Bend stripped off his tactical suit and, stretching his shape change power to the best of its abilities, shifted into the form of a giant squid before holding his companions aloft. The giant squid burbled something angry and squeezed Locke, who hastily summoned another guidance spirit.

JANUARY 13th, DOWNTOWN SEATTLE, 2074

Sergeant Powers leaned against the water cooler of the Knight Errant armory, putting the pieces of a dismantled predator back together.

“Hey, did you hear about the kids that the Chief Inspector is going on about? Apparently a bunch of runners gave a nightmare some kidnapped kids.”

Sergeant Maxwell put his helmet in his locker, eyeing the photo of his own kids inside, and winced.

“I swear, it's criminal how everyone just ignores shadowrunning. Corporate crime, tow the party line, et cetera, et cetera. They're a menace to fucking society. You never hear about how runners are killing your kids, just romanticized counterculture bullshit.”

“I'd like to see a good cop movie these days,” added Powers, finishing the gun, holstering it, and moving to his own locker. “Search me as to why the crime genre is so popular with the kids these days.”

“Well, you have to admit, it is pretty glamorous,” noted Maxwell. “You never see runners make

stupid mistakes unless it's for drama, so—ABLRLBLRLRLBBBRRRR!”

With that, 4 tons of sea water, 3 runners in full mil spec gear, approximately 25 assorted fish, and a giant squid clutching a tacsuit fell into the armory.

“ONE MORE TIME, ONE MORE TIME,” yelled the giant squid, as it popped back into the form of a handsome and very naked elf.

“WAIT HOLD ON I THINK THIS IS YESTERDAY,” responded the runner wearing a beak-esque helmet.

“OKAY,” yelled the former squid. “MAKE SURE TO ARREST US TOMORROW OR ELSE CAUSALITY WILL BE INTERRUPTED.”

“Wh...” Powers slowly picked himself up. “...what?”

“THANKS BYE.”

JANUARY 16th, DOWNTOWN SEATTLE, 2074

The team gathered in the Faulty Bar, having been doing their level best to avoid any time loop shenanigans, because none of them were particularly versed in this extensive level of metaplanar time bullshit, and unless every time travel movie was lying to them, fucking with their past selves would cause problems. Thus, despite the considerable advances it would have made to science to experimentally change the past, most of the team had just waited at the bar, then went home after they were sure that they had been arrested.

Wildcard, recognizing that it would make everything easier for himself, was sure to get a few touch-ups done on his face during the regenerative therapy he needed to get himself back to normal, and then went home during his own arrest and retrieved his car keys from his own house.

Dervish found that his memories returned when he was outside of the subjective space of the Shadow Metaplane, and mostly just watched pirated trid and hung out with Sensei, who noted that “your meeting with Knight Errant didn't take that long,” but otherwise didn't ask questions.

Bend found himself a nice tree, turned into a squirrel, and hid away in that identity for a while.

And Locke went to Wildcard's house and drank all his coffee again, by excuse of “I don't know if Knight Errant put out my information, so my hideout is compromised.”

All things considered, things were exactly where the runners wanted them: status quo.

Needless to say, this would change with their last, and greatest, run.

Chapter 19: The Final Run Part 1

8:58 PM, FEBRUARY 23rd, 2074, DOWNTOWN PORTLAND

Sirens rang through the night sky, accompanied by an AR bulletin, spoken by a soft-voiced, feminine announcer:

“Attention, Citizens. There has been a terrorist attack downtown. Large-scale police action is in progress. Please return to your homes immediately. Evacuate affected areas if at all possible; otherwise, locate the nearest authorities and they will direct you. Attention, Citizens. There has been a terrorist attack...”

The gray SUV was burning rubber, making for the source of the explosion. Captain Danvers briefed his team as the driver, Perkins, dodges abandoned cars and fleeing people.

“Listen up, gentlemen. As of eighteen-hundred hours, Company 12 is active on the G contract. The finances are good; they've been cleared through shell companies in San Francisco and London and check out. We're moving into an active combat zone, but this isn't like Columbia, so pay attention. Our job is to get in, get the package, and get out, rendezvousing with Companies 3 and 8 if possible.”

Bridges, Westlake, Jackson, and Ellis grunted in acknowledgement for Danvers to continue.

“Speaking of which: there are two packages, Priority Alpha and Priority Beta.” Danvers brought up an AR image of two identical black boxes. “We want Alpha. Only difference between the two is that Alpha has a magical aura, so we'll put Westlake on that when we secure a package.”

Westlake, the team mage, nodded and adjusted the hermetic power focus dangling from his rifle's receiver.

“Command says that Chameleon already made off with Priority Beta, so we're looking at less AZT resistance around Alpha, but that doesn't mean we're not really in the shit today. Corpers are still swarming the place--” Danvers paused as Perkins gestured for the team to hold on, and executed a tight turn through two stalled, empty police cruisers, “--and word is that Big Man is on-site.”

Danvers nodded to the combat hacker, Bridges, who saluted and then brought up a satellite image of a single orc wearing naught but an American-flag bandana, a UCAS Veteran Administration armor jacket, and a tattered pair of slacks. The orc was standing on the roof of the target building, surrounded by broken, exsanguinated corpses and the charred wreck of a helicopter.

“Report, Bridges.”

“This is Codename Big Man, aliases Garrett Jordan, Dervish, and America-San. International merc, best of the best. Considered by command to be the second-most dangerous living entity in the Tir, after Hestaby. Augged to all hell, top-tier bioborg, capable of speeds up to one hundred and forty miles an hour, proficient in all firearms and guerrilla warfare, one of the reigning world masters of Sangre y Acero, and suspected to also be one of the leading experts in Krav Maga.”

Jackson, a burly orc in full-combat gear, grunted.

“Did he do all that without combat armor?”

Danvers nodded solemnly.

“Before Company 1 went silent, there was comm chatter about him dodging bullets. You see Big Man, you mark him on the tacnet and shoot on sight. We want all eyes on this son of a bitch.”

Perkins pulled the SUV to a stop amidst a parking lot in honking chaos, riddled with the car wrecks of various nobles and high-society wannabes who had tried to escape too fast. Gunfire sounded all up and down the block, brief spurts of overwhelming noise as small firefights started and ended in instants.

“We’re making for the roof, gentlemen,” said Danvers, knocking Ellis, the point man, on the back of the helmet. “Move!”

The team slammed out of the SUV as a unit, navigating the mass of cars and scanning for potential combatants. The panicked civilians hit the asphalt as Ellis sprinted for the front stairs of the building, a regal old-world affair now missing most of its roof and west wing. Engines roared overhead as a gunship did a pass, pouring fire onto the roof. A single unguided rocket flashed out from somewhere in the building, exploding in the air as the gunship yawed to the side. Somewhere in the distance, a dragon breathed fire, and the night sky lit like a torch.

“Contact!”

Ellis, only feet into the building, ducked behind a pillar as gunfire rattled from amidst the fancy dinner tables set up in the great hall, shattering champagne flutes and plates full of foie gras. Jackson breached next, laying down suppressive fire with his assault cannon while Westlake circled around. With a cry of effort, Westlake levitated the table that the tango was hiding behind, leaving him open to two shotgun blasts from Ellis. Ellis vaulted tables and ran to the target, kneeling over the prone body.

“Tango down. He’s in combat armor, Hispanic male, has some kinda weird braid hairdo.”

“Aztec special ops,” commented Danvers, “probably separated from his squad. Make for the stairs.”

As the team approached the stairs, a lone kangaroo hopped by, looked at them awkwardly, and began hopping faster.

“What the he--”

Bend had provided all of the distraction that Dervish needed.

Westlake was the first gone, in keeping with Shadowrunner policy. He gasped as a blur of steel caught him through the throat at over a hundred and twenty miles an hour, sending a spurt of blood through the air and into Jackson’s field of vision, broadcast to the entire squad simultaneously via tacnet.

“IT’S BIG--”

The team spun to begin firing, but by the time that fingers were even compressing triggers, the blur

had caught up to Jackson, who gulped throatily as a blade lodged itself in his upper spine, protruding cleanly through his solar plexus. The milspec armor he'd invested so much personal money into tore like wet cloth. Jackson's death rattle sounded loud and clear over his subvocal as the blade tore out through his flank so quickly that his body didn't jar, roaring through his chest plating like a can opener.

“--MAN!”

Ellis, Perkins, Bridges, and Danvers poured rounds into Jackson's spasmodic, still-standing body as Dervish boosted his skimmers into a low roll, sliding underneath the tables. Mid-slide, he pulled his shotgun from his bandolier and, one-handing it, began firing. His cyberlegs bent backwards to right him at the end of the slide, catapulting him through a buffet table, spraying shrapnel and armor-piercing rounds.

Ellis squawked as three APDS slugs landed in his sternum, blowing baseball-sized holes out of his back. The remaining three survivors watched in horror through the tacnet as cameras pitched and biomonitors flatlined.

“FUCK!”

Danvers dropped his in-control attitude as he set his battle rifle to autofire and began shooting at where Dervish had been mere microseconds before, continuing to slaughter the broken corpse of the buffet table. His periphery vaguely recognized a gust of pink mist where Perkins had been, and then Perkins' camera tilted as two legs, severed at the knee, spiraled into Danvers' field of view. He pitched to his right just in time for a grenade to land behind him, turning Bridges' feed into static.

For a brief moment, Danvers saw a head wearing a brightly-colored bandana straight down his iron sights. So he fired.

And Dervish dodged.

Danvers gasped as his gun fell in half, taking his left arm below the elbow and most of his right fingers with it. As he fell to his knees, the shirtless orc that was now standing in front of him grabbed him by the head with both hands, and spoke directly into his helmet cam.

“My name's not Big Man,” said Dervish, calmly. “It's America-San.”

Dervish leaned in so close that Danvers, quivering in shock, could smell his breath. It smelled like steak and overpriced champagne. The merc captains' vision blurred as he saw the protective cybereye covers retract, giving him a good look into Dervish's cold cybereyes. Dervish positioned his mouth over Danvers' subvocal.

“This patched into command, scrub?”

Danvers gulped an affirmative, letting out shuddering breaths. Dervish spoke softly.

“Feed me more mercs.”

Dervish stood back, still holding Danvers' head, and his cybereye covers slid back into place.

“Wait no no NO--”

The feed blurred, spun, and then cut out as Dervish popped Danvers' head off like a bottlecap.

NOON, JANUARY 20th, 2074, SEATTLE U

“DUDE! DUUUUDE! DUUUUUUDE!”

The voice of Terrence Jackson grated upon Wildcard. Admittedly, it grated upon everyone, but Wildcard was the one who was currently hiding out in the Seattle U off-campus housing. He'd tolerated Locke squatting in his suburban house until Locke had explained the full story of Felix Ramirez and His Departure from Aztechnology, at which point Wildcard decided that it was probably the best if he acted on one of his contingency plans, rented out his house to some subletters, and made for his backup safehouse. This was, of course, on top of the ongoing animosity with Knight Errant, which lead Wildcard to be certain that he took no chances. A little plastic surgery to look younger, a new fake ID, a cover story about getting a postgraduate degree in chemical engineering, and he was ready to assume the life of an exchange student at Seattle U until he was sure that the heat had blown over.

The only downside was the roommate.

“Dude! Bro! Dudebro! Runner dude!”

Wildcard fingered the nickel-plated Predator underneath his pillow, thought better of it, and popped his head up above the top bunk.

“What?”

Jackson was wearing two polo shirts, and both popped collars formed something reminiscent of a Renaissance neck-ruffle. Today's porn vid, if the slight spill-over of sound from his headphones was any indication, was Big Elf Butts 15. It had been his favorite of late, Wildcard noted.

“Tracey Ross from Delta Kappa is putting on this sick party, and--”

Wildcard hopped onto the ladder, and slid down to the floor. The Predator remained in its hiding spot.

“Yes, I recall you advertising the shindig as 'BJ City.' Suffice to say I won't be joining.”

Jackson huffed.

“Aw man, I get this badass international mercenary cat all up and hiding out in my 'partment, and I don't even get to show him off none?”

“That's the idea, ‘bro,’” chuckled Wildcard, sliding a holdout into the concealed holster in his armored coat (not the Mortimer of London one, which was for special occasions, but rather the gray one that

he frequently used to impersonate city service workers) and zipping up his duffel bag. “Gon'ta be oot of the place for a few days. Hangin' wit the boys, then business. Don't break anything and I can get you that deepweed that you wanted in time for Valentine's Day.”

“Dude, you the bomb!”

Wildcard gingerly handled a mil-spec helmet retrofitted with a custom bulletproof ceramic faceplate designed to emulate a snickering Punchinello. The eyes lit up as the inbuilt commlink booted.

“I know I am, Terrence. I know.”

1:00 PM, “VULCAN'S FORGE,” REDMOND BARRENS

“Ow, OW! Dang!”

Bend pulled his hand out of the slat in the talismonger's door, instinctively licking the spot on his wrist where Vulcan had drawn blood.

“Look, I'm not even here to buy anything magic,” complained Bend, wiping a daub of blood off on his tie-dye T-shirt. “I just need a repair spell cast on my favorite smart jammer, it's got sea water in the wiring and you can't fix that normally.”

“Same rules apply, same rules for everyone.” Vulcan grunted from inside his bunker. “Your cred's good. I'll be done with the jammer in a moment.”

“I swear, you're just like The Eyes,” muttered Bend, kicking up Barrens rubble with his flip-flops.

“The Eyes? Psssh. Amateur.” A third slat in the door that Bend wasn't even aware of before, hidden amongst the armor plating, opened, and the jammer slid out on a mechanized tray. “You have 30 seconds to get the jammer and clear the perimeter or else the turrets open fire.”

“Nice doing business with you,” sighed Bend, slipping the jammer into the pocket of his chonglers and jogging for the edge of the killzone.

“You now have 26 seconds,” responded Vulcan through the loudspeakers, as a turret extruded from the roof of the bunker.

2:03 PM, DERVISH AND SENSEI'S CRIB, REDMOND BARRENS

“I'm serious, man. You've gotta either go back home or find a new bolt hole,” growled Dervish, searing a plate of real steak incongruously over an ancient, battered gas stove. “Sensei and I have a pretty sweet deal here and the last thing we need Aztechnology fucking it up.”

“Can't,” responded Locke, sitting at the “table” (read: fallen concrete slab too heavy to bother moving) in his full battle armor, periodically lifting the helmet to get a bite of his terrifyingly-still-good 1983 military MREs. “My safe house here in Redmond is docced, and Wildcard's pretty sure

that they're watching his house right now.”

“Well yeah,” said Dervish, with a shrug (he himself was wearing a wife-beater that he had not bothered changing for two days straight), “but if they got pinged by Knight Errant, then they know about this place, too. And Bend's commune.”

Behind an inch and a half of unbreakable plasteel, Locke's eyes widened.

“Fuck! I didn't even think of that! Is there an underground escape tunnel, a secret vault here? Wait, no, call Wildcard, we've got to go upstairs to the helicopter! I looked up this volcanic island in the Philippines on my maps app, it said it was uninhabited so we can--”

“Calm the fuck down, Locke,” said Dervish, with a light chuckle. He reached into the pan with his bare hand, grabbed the steak with the insulated tips of his fingers, and promptly crammed the whole thing into his mouth. He spat bits of cow as he continued to talk. “The guys are coming down anyway to hang out, and corps can't make big moves in Redmond without causing a stir. Consider it early warning.”

Sensei finished a “shake” composed primarily of soy protein supplements, D-grade hamburger patty, and raw egg.

“What did you say was happening tonight, son?”

“Trid night. We're gonna use Wildcard's nexus to hook up a local AR network, watch a bunch of trashy action flicks. You want in?”

Sensei blinked his blind, gray eyes at Dervish.

“Oh, don't you fucking give me that. You could have got cybereyes a million times over, you just like telling the story of how the Aztecs blinded you that one time in Sao Paulo, and how it 'just made you more in tune with the spirit of Sangre y Acero,' you damn windbag.”

Sensei couldn't help but stifle a grin.

“Guilty as charged.”

“How can you be so calm!?” Locke glanced at the boarded-up windows, ducking for cover from an imagined sniper. “There could be a team of Shorn Ones on their way here right now!”

“I got a haircut yesterday, but I'm not sure I count,” said Bend, walking into the room with Wildcard and carrying a set of truly awful trid chips (TSUKIE REDFLOWER PART 0: ORIGINS). “Smart jammer's all fixed, so we're officially good to be back on the market.”

“I jumped the gun on that one a wee bit,” noted Wildcard. “Been goin' a little stir-crazy, so Brianna's set us up for something two nights from now. She says it's a great big one, S-K Johnson's lining up again, so get your suits laundered.”

“Suits laundered!? We are UNDER ATTACK! We don't see it but they could be flying in a tactical

drone this very instant!”

The entire team stared at Locke blankly.

“Look, Azzie,” said Bend, miffed, “If I go sneak into your old bolt hole, and I don't find any Aztec warriors, can we put this conversation to rest?”

“For now,” snapped Locke, but he followed it up apologetically with, “Yeah. That would help my state of mind. A lot.”

“I'll be right back,” said Bend, with a roll of his eyes, as he began donning his ruthenium-polymered suit of light milspec armor. “Send a watcher spirit first, see if it catches anything obvious.”

3:32 PM, FELIX'S BOLT HOLE, REDMOND BARRENS

Felix's apartment block was only a thirty minute walk away, but Bend was nothing if not a consummate professional, and had snuck the entire way there, and then rather than beelining to Locke's bolt hole, was clearing the building room by room.

“Nothing in the lower building. Some weird magical trails, a mage might have been through here recently. If he's still in the building I'll report.”

Finally, Bend worked his way up the hallway (literally, given that the whole building was tilted, Titanic-style) to Locke's bolt-hole. The door had been wrenched off its hinges, but that was nothing new.

Bend stealthed into the room, and did the unthinkable. The truly unfathomable. Preposterous, even. He did something that those who knew Bend would list as the single least likely thing he could ever do.

For the first time in his career as a spy or a shadowrunner, he tripped. As in, physically.

Bend caught his foot on a loose floorboard (wall-board?) and, his cat-like reflexes briefly abandoning him, he face-planted into Locke's kitchen.

He looked up to see a tiny Aztec face staring back at him, its tongue lolling obscenely.

Bend's heart tightened in his chest.

“Hi Bend! You're the second person in this room!”

Bend let out a whoosh of breath.

“Thank god, I thought you weren't one of Locke's spirits for a second. Wait--”

The second person in the room grabbed Bend by the throat, lifted him bodily, and slammed him into

the wall, caving floorboards.

Bend found himself dangling from the outstretched arm of a man who was easily seven feet tall, dressed in a leather biker's outfit. But, as Bend paid closer attention (which was hard, as he was currently being throttled a cool one and a half feet off the ground), he realized that it wasn't a man at all. Its eyes were synthetic and uncanny, and didn't have the telltale pink where the edges of the eye meet face. The same could be said of the lips, which curved inward but then stopped at the teeth rather than continuing into the mouth; a plasticine mask rather than real skin. The texture of the skin was off, and on his throat Bend could feel a "cling" similar to a wetsuit. Bend's highly-sensitive ears could hear the servos in the arm whining as the figure continued to hold him up, displaying almost no strain whatsoever. Its preternaturally calm face showed no emotion as its doll-like mouth opened and shut, approximating the words that were actually issuing forth from a high-quality speaker in the back of its throat.

"WHERE IS FELIX RAMIREZ?"

Bend gasped in pain, so the cyborg switched hands, easing up on his throat but using the other hand to shove against his torso, lifting him even higher against the wall. It repeated,

"WHERE IS FELIX RAMIREZ?"

Bend choked out,

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

The cyborg's free hand split in half, the synthetic flesh rending as a rifle barrel extended from the forearm.

"WHERE IS FELIX RAMIREZ?"

Bend felt a rib crack as he tried to struggle out of its crushing pressure.

"I don't know any Felix Ramirez!"

The cyborg trained its gun on Bend's head.

"YOU KNOW FELIX RAMIREZ. WHERE IS FELIX RAMIREZ?"

"I'm serious!"

"WHERE IS FELIX RAMIREZ?"

"Stop asking that!"

The cyborg paused for a moment, dipped its head in thought, and then let Bend fall down the wall again to continue throttling him. Recognizing that the thing intended to capture him, Bend drew his heavy taser, put it under the thing's chin, and pulled the trigger.

The cyborg shuddered spasmodically and sparks flew out of its ears and eyes. It froze in place, not letting go of Bend's neck. He continued to choke in its grasp, going blue. A synthetic "computer voice" issued forth from the cyborg's slack jaw.

"INICIANDO SECUENCIA DE REINICIO."

Bend lifted his entire body up onto the cyborg's outstretched arm (he could feel his vertebrae stretching as all of his weight briefly rested on his neck), wrapped his arms and legs around it, and used the leverage to wrench his neck free of its grasp. He promptly fell off its arm and hit the floor hard, gasping for breath.

"REINICIO EN DIEZ SEGUNDOS."

His screaming muscles running on adrenaline, Bend lifted himself out the window, sprinted to the edge of the building, and bailed down to the street below, pulling into a tuck and roll. He shapeshifted into a kangaroo, packed his gear into his female-kangaroo pouch (Bend believed that the utility made up for the body dysphoria) and made off as fast as he could, only turning around once to see the cyborg step into the streets, resolute.

A few minutes later, another watcher appeared in front of Bend.

"Hi Bend! Felix told me to go talk to the kangaroo because I couldn't find you the first time! What happened!?"

Unfortunately, Bend had a bruised trachea and two broken ribs, and did not much relish the thought of shapeshifting back now that the adrenaline has run out, just to talk. So, he scratched the words "FULL BODY COMBAT CYBORG" in the dirt and looked expectantly at the watcher.

The watcher helpfully shouted,

"I CAN'T READ!"

Bend tapped his kangaroo foot frustratedly at the words.

"OKAY!"

The watcher disappeared as it made back for its master.

4:12 PM, DERVISH AND SENSEI'S CRIB

"He gave me words!"

Locke flinched and pulled his sidearm reflexively as the watcher reappeared beside him, even though he had known it was coming.

"And what did the words say?"

The watcher wagged its tongue in thought, and then scrabbled “EUL8ODYOOM84TOY8ORG” on one of the filthy windows. Locke blinked.

“Eulbody Oombat Oyborg?”

Dervish, Wildcard, and Sensei all winced. Sensei sauntered over to a nearby filing cabinet and pulled a pair of reins out.

“Welp, I'ma take the old three-legged horse out for a spin for a few days.”

Dervish grimaced.

“Yeah. Uh, yeah. You do that.”

Wildcard fiddled with his keys.

“I'm goin' ta bring the car inside the complex then get the chopper warmed up.”

Locke promptly set his gun's safety off.

“Oh. FULL BODY COMBAT CYBORG. I felt like an idiot there for a moment. Yep, the Philippines it is.”

Bend ran naked into the room and immediately began packing his bags. Dervish looked at the bruising on his chest and neck and reflexively asked, “Woah, what the hell happened?”

“My first mistake,” grunted Bend, “was trying to help Locke. My second was getting spotted by a watcher spirit.”

Dervish cringed.

“Bad day?”

Bend huffed.

“Really bad.”

Wildcard came over the team's comms as his car roared into the compound.

“Gentlemen, don't look now, but we have a visitor.”

Bend glanced through the boards on one of the windows to see the cyborg pulling up to the barbed wire fence on a motorcycle. It made eye contact with Bend, and then walked clean through the fence.

“Fuuuck, this is like right out of 'The Terminator.'”

Dervish hefted his sniper rifle, making for a firing position as Wildcard ran back up the stairs, sprinting for the helicopter.

“El Terminador? I'd watch it.”

With a cacophonous boom, Dervish planted an explosive round in El Terminador's skull, taking a long line of “flesh” and “hair” off of its scalp and exposing a di-coated titanium braincase. El Terminador lifted its arm and began laying down suppressive fire as Dervish hit the floor, covering his head on impulse from the shards of splintering wood. As the spinning of helicopter rotors began to disperse dust around the compound, Sensei rode his three-legged horse out the back.

“SEE YOU, SON!”

“SEE YOU, DAD,” yelled Dervish, as he popped up to plant another round in El Terminador's head, to equally dramatic but ineffectual results.

“Good to go,” said Wildcard, arming the helicopter's weapons. “Getcher fat rears up here!”

Weighed down with duffle bags and firearms, the team sprinted into the helicopter, and as Wildcard lifted off the roof, he got a missile lock on the cyborg.

“So long, tin man.”

The cyborg merely stared at the helicopter as the hellfire missile raced toward it.

The cyborg, missing all of its skin, its left arm, and a small portion of its torso, continued to stare up at the helicopter, its metallic eyes gazing unsettlingly through the smoky crater around it.

“Oh, you've got to be kidding me,” said Bend, staring in disbelief through the cams.

The sensors began blaring as Wildcard pitched the helicopter into a sprint away from Seattle, over the ocean. Locke's brows furrowed.

“What was that?”

“Oh, nothing. The Aztechnology pyramid just launched interceptors. A metaplanar portal would be nice.”

Locke's eyes went wide.

“But-”

Wildcard turned to stare at him, the voice modulator in his mask blaring unnervingly as, for the first time in their mutual careers, Wildcard yelled outright.

“A METAPLANAR. PORTAL. MIGHT BE. NICE.”

Locke's shell-shocked neurons connected, and he brought forth his Great-Form Guidance Spirit.

“That island we talked about with the mana boon! Now!”

Tonatiuh spun in the air and opened his mouth, beckoning the helicopter come inside, as a pair of missiles streaked through the skies over Elliot Bay.

In an instant, the helicopter was gone, and the missiles disarmed, deactivated, and dropped into the bay.

And, as the interceptors darted back to the Aztechnology pyramid, the day went on much as it had in Seattle.

1:15 PM, JANUARY 20th, 2072, A SMALL ISLAND IN THE PACIFIC

After a lengthy metaplanar jaunt, the helicopter emerged, battered from spirit attacks and other metaplanar shenanigans, over the island in question. It was a volcanic rock with a jungle around it, old-school Bond-villain material. Wildcard breathed a sigh of relief, glad to be free of the Aztec metaplanes.

“This the place?”

Locke nodded wordlessly.

“Yeah. Set us down on that plateau?”

Wildcard gingerly eased the helicopter down, settling onto a mountain across from the caldera.

“Alright, gents. We’ve officially hit it big on AZT’s shit list. Luckily, we’re well out of their territory, the chopper’s stocked with emergency food and water for weeks--”

Dervish tore a can of baked beans open with his hands and guzzled the entire thing.

“--for days, rather, and I can set up a connective hotspot to hit up some of our contacts for relocation. My personal suggestion is Italy or Germany, given that we don’t want to blow off Saeder-Krupp Johnson. Anyone know German?”

Nobody raised their hands.

“Anyone know Italian?”

Only Wildcard raised his hand, although Bend gave an “eh” sideways hand signal.

“Italy it is.”

“Let’s hide out here as long as we can manage,” commented Locke, who was eyeing the jungle warily out of the helicopter’s window. “I don’t doubt that nearly wasting that cyborg made me any LESS of a target.”

Bend nodded.

“Agreed. Especially because it'll give us more time to lay low, ply the airwaves, work out our options.”

Locke glanced at Bend. Bend looked at him, looked back at Wildcard, and looked at Locke again.

“I thought for sure that you were going to give me shit for getting us into this.”

“I thought I would, too,” sighed Bend. “I thought I would, too.”

Dervish promptly opened his second can of beans, this time with his teeth.

As Wildcard set up a field comm and opened up an encrypted wireless network, the team distributed disposable commlinks. They would all work their contacts for all they were worth, to make an international transition to Italy as smooth as possible. Wildcard hit up his old fixer, Luca, Bend called up Geppetto, Locke called Brianna's special line to let her know to postpone the Johnson meet as far as possible without angering the Johnson, and Dervish sat on the edge of the mesa and over watched the birds flying over the jungle.

“What?” said Dervish, with a shrug to the rest of the team. “My only notable contact is Sensei and he's busy riding away from Aztechnology on a crippled horse.”

With a little collaboration (and promises of vouching and future favors), Luca and Geppetto managed to get in touch with a few capos of Don Feretti, the head of the Alta Commissione in Sicily. Geppetto arranged for a preliminary “parking spot” in Palermo for the helicopter, an empty lot guarded by corrupt cops (he snarkily closed his conversation to Bend with “don't call me again unless you've actually been shot”), while Luca ordered four fake SINS to be delivered upon landing, with the natural expectation that they would be paid off. He also reminded Wildcard that it was traditional to pay respects to Don Feretti upon entering the city, and that the team had best remain humble and on their best behavior.

Locke actually had the most interesting conversation, as Brianna let him know, a few hours later in the day,

“Funny you should plan on Italy. Mr. Johnson's employer is in Italy, and has decided to handle the meet personally. More information forthcoming.”

The team was so preoccupied with planning that, even as they milled about their unoccupied rock, they didn't notice the small Japanese man approaching.

The man was bald, perhaps 5-foot-three, and wore an old-style kimono in a warm red. He looked between the three runners, his mouth hanging open slightly, as though doubting their existence. Dervish was the first to notice, and let his hand rest on his gun while he chipped the old Japanese 'soft from Neo-Tokyo.

“Hey guys, we got company.”

There was a brief silence as the whole team stared at the old man in the kimono, who stared back at them. The old man wagged his arm experimentally, as though expecting the runners to act like a mirror. Finally, he spoke,

“What are you doing on my island?”

Locke, the only one without a Japanese skillsoft (who wasn't Bend, who was fluent), asked,

“What's he saying?”

“He says it's his island,” grunted Dervish, turning back to the old man. “Look, this island isn't registered to any private or public ownership, so it's not yours. We're just squatting here for a few days, so how about you back off?”

The old man blinked and gawked at Dervish, looking more in awe than mad. Dervish looked between Wildcard and Bend. He said, in English,

“What's his problem?”

Bend frowned at Dervish.

“I don't know, I guess he's just a hermit and doesn't know what Shadowrunners are or something--”

In Japanese, again,

“I know what Shadowrunners are.”

The old man looked at Bend, his facial expression one of utter confusion. He continued to look expectantly between the runners, as though expecting a reaction that he clearly wasn't getting. Wildcard tapped at the chip in the back of his neck, wondering if the translation was somehow faulty. These kinesics were weird.

“Okay,” said Bend, forcing a smile, “You know what Shadowrunners are. Great. Well, we don't mean you any harm. We're just hiding out for a few days and then we'll be on our way. How about you go back to...wherever it is you live, alright? Hell, we'll even pay rent.”

“I don't want to be paid rent.”

Bend threw his hands up in the air.

“Sir, is there something we CAN help you with?” He muttered in Sperethiel, audible to Locke, “This is so surreal.”

“No. I don't need to be helped with anything. This is my island. I don't want Shadowrunners on my island and I think I've been very polite.”

“Well, that's all well and good, sir,” said Wildcard, his Scottish brogue butchering his Japanese, “and

yes, you have been very polite, but there are extenuating circumstances and we can't leave. We're very sorry but we can't leave yet.”

The old man gave Wildcard a thousand-yard stare, now entirely slack-jawed. He gesticulated at Wildcard, as though he expected the gestures to make something “click” that hadn't been accounted for. However, as far as Wildcard could measure, it was still just a tiny old Japanese man standing by their helicopter, acting weird.

“Alright, let's start again,” said Bend, “We're just going to be here a while and we don't want to be a burden. I'm Sean, and these are Clarence, Garrett, and Pablo. What's your name?”

The old man stared directly into Bend's eyes, his expression completely blank. Bend began to realize what the expression was; he'd seen it in California before. It was the expression of someone used to being recognized...not being recognized.

“My name is Ryumyo and you're trespassing on my island.”

“HOFUCK--”

>Great Dragon Encounter Count: 1

“Oh, WOW. We're sorry, sir, we didn't know that this was your private island, and we'd like to beg your forgiveness and that you please not eat us,” babbled Bend. “Um, we were actually recommended to come here by some guys doing a really shady deal, so I think this was all a part of a double-cross and really, you'd be playing into it by killing us-”

Wildcard punched Bend square in the jaw, decking the infiltrator flat. Panicked, his voice took on more of his accent than usual.

“Yew're tryin' tae bullshit a Greet Dragonne, ya numpty poof! Don' try tae bullshit Greet Dragonnes!”

“How do we know he's real,” yelled Dervish, “if he were the real Ryumyo he would have killed us by now!”

“Don't fucking TEST that,” yelled Locke, who tackled Dervish as Dervish made for his gun. The team quickly devolved into two scuffles, as all involved parties tried to reciprocate panicked violence while desperately fleeing outright for the helicopter.

Ryumyo continued to blankly stare, looking more confused than ever, and slowly followed the team back to the helicopter.

“I'm not going to kill you.”

“YA HEAR THA YA FECKING JESSIE!? YOU TRIED TA BULLSHIT HIM AN' NOW HE'S GONNA KILL US!”

“Felix, so help me, give me back my gun. I'm not going down without a fight.”

Ryumyo repeated, with a roar in his voice this time,

“I'M NOT GOING TO KILL YOU.”

The team went silent, and Bend removed his taser from where it was pressed against Wildcard's thigh.

“Oh. Well, that's nice of you.”

“Yes,” said Ryumyo, planting his face firmly in his palm, “yes it is. Please get back in your helicopter.”

Bend put his hands up as he retreated into the helicopter,

“Sir, I'd just like to remind you how sorry we are--”

“I don't care. I have imbued your vehicle with the ability to temporarily move at exponential speeds. Please use it to leave and never return.”

“Yes,” said Wildcard, settling into the controls. “Yes, we'll do that.”

The helicopter remained firmly in place.

“Ehrrm,” said Wildcard, fiddling with the course mapper, “where are we gonna go?”

“ITALY,” said his other three teammates, simultaneously.

“Right. Italy. We're goin' there. Right.”

With a sonic boom, the helicopter suddenly launched into motion in the general direction of Northwest.

As the helicopter slowed down from its brief stint of super speed a few hours later somewhere over Mongolia, Bend reached into his duffel bag with a quivering hand, drew a joint, lit it, and began drawing frenzied breaths. Dervish was the first to say it:

“Fuck.”

“FUCK,” agreed Wildcard, from his position at the controls.

“FUCK ME,” said Bend.

“Fuuuuuck,” Locke chimed in.

There was another silence.

About thirty seconds later, Bend physically jumped on top of Locke, screaming like a jungle primate

through teeth gritted around the joint.

“SOME FUCKING UNINHABITED ISLAND SO HELP ME IF I WASN'T A PACIFIST I'D BE THROWING YOU OUT OF THE HELICOPTER RIGHT NOW YOU DEADBEAT LOWLIFE MEXICAN FUCKING PIECE OF SHIT NEVER LEARNED ANYTHING IN YOUR FUCKING AZZIE BULLSHIT SCHOOL YOU BABY-EATING FUCK WE COULD ALL BE DEAD RIGHT NOW WE COULD ALL BE DEAD AND EATEN RIGHT NOW AND YOU HAD ONE DAMN JOB AND THAT WAS TO FIND A FUCKING UNINHABITED--”

Dervish put Bend in a full nelson, although that only barely dimmed Bend's fury, who began to kick wildly at Locke with his legs while his screaming slowly devolved into a single, primal, bestial hunting cry, his veins protruding dramatically from his face and his eyes completely bloodshot. Dervish struggled to keep hold of him as he turned into a chinchilla, shed his fur, turned back into an elf, and proceeded to continue bashing Locke's head against the side of the helicopter.

Dervish put Bend in a sleeper hold, and looked pleadingly at Wildcard, who shrugged as Bend began to bite hard into Dervish's arm, failing to break the strengthened skin.

It was going to be a long trip to Sicily.

8:27 AM, JANUARY 21st, 2074, PALERMO, SICILY

The team, battered, bruised, sleep-deprived, and exhausted, settled onto the dirt lot in Palermo as two shady-looking men in Italian motorcycle cop uniforms waved them in. It had taken a few more calls to move all of the planning back to the day of, but it was done. However, the team owed their contacts a lot for this one.

Wildcard stumbled out onto the lot, bleary-eyed. He grumbled in Italian,

“Hey, I have a flight manifest and a list of goods, and our passports are on the way--”

One of the cops shook his head.

“You the guy?”

“The guy?”

“The guy.”

Wildcard took a moment to think.

“I am the guy.”

The cop looked at his partner.

“He's the guy.”

“Yep, he's the guy.”

Both cops put up a police barricade by the lot.

“Nothing to see here, people! Clear out! Just arresting these here international criminals right now! You didn't see nothin'!”

Wildcard sighed with happiness. It was refreshing to see authority figures so...complacent. He rapped twice on the side of the helicopter, hearing the groaning of his napping teammates inside.

“Would you gents mind escorting us to a restroom of some sort? We have our suits in the helicopter but we're all rather...disheveled.”

One of the cops looked at his watch. The other clucked his tongue, nodding.

“Yeah. We don't got anything like that down at the precinct, so we'll just have to skip down to Don Feretti's villa.”

The other cop agreed, his expression neutral behind his aviator sunglasses,

“Yes, I hear that Don Feretti is very generous about the use of his restrooms. Let's go there and not to the precinct, because the criminals need to use the restroom, and neither of us is aware presently of anything of that sort to exist at the precinct.”

“And we wouldn't want to infringe upon their rights,” concurred the first cop.

Wildcard could almost cry.

The meeting with Don Feretti was relatively uneventful. The Don was an old, dignified man, but lacked much of the haughtiness of power, and so took no offense at the rather eclectic gaggle of runners gracing him. If anything, he derived amusement from it; a change from the norm. With Wildcard facing, the team negotiated a brief, paid-for stay at the Feretti villa, with the team sharing two bedrooms between them. They were promised safety, security, and--most importantly--a stable contact base to operate in Italy. So long as they continued to pay, the helicopter would remain “a crime scene” and they would be under “protective custody” in the villa.

NOON, JANUARY 22nd, 2074

Only after a day of taking in the sights in Palermo (which did wonders to calm the team's rattled nerves) did Brianna get back to the team.

“I got in touch with Johnson's employer.”

Wildcard put his mask down, answering the call and gesturing for the rest of the team to do the same. This point in time found the team having lunch at a roadside cafe, people-watching and playing “spot the goomba.” The running ratio was one for every fifteen civilians.

“Oh?”

“He's an old-school professional, says he Johnsoned back in the days of Seretech. And the one who got pulled off the job here isn't exactly an unprofessional Johnson; he's the same guy from the UO run. Which means we're looking at a big, big job here, if S-K's using two Johnsons as middlemen.”

Dervish thoughtfully chewed on a piece of ravioli.

“You think it's him? Lofwyr, I mean? Calling the shots on this one?”

“I doubt it,” responded Brianna, “but anything's possible. You boys have something of a reputation. Especially you, Dervish.”

Dervish grunted.

“Regardless,” continued Brianna, “unless he comes out and says it's Lofwyr, don't ask. But you already knew that by now.”

“So this new Johnson,” said Bend, “what do you have on him?” Bend continued to pick at his terrible vegetarian panini, wincing with every wilted, dry bite.

“Not much to go on,” responded Brianna. “Says he retired from Johnsoning decades ago, but got pulled back into this on a favor. Works as a professor now. Some kind of European, maybe German, maybe Italian, couldn't pin the accent.”

“Any guidelines?”

“Old-school Johnson meets are a lot less formal; you'll like it. You're meeting him at the Fortunato al Pantheon restaurant in Rome in two days. Oh, and guys?”

Locke nodded reflexively.

“Yeah?”

“Get new suits. Really, really good ones.”

“On your dollar?”

“You fucking wish.”

Dervish laughed.

“Take care of yourself, Brianna.”

“Likewise, guys. This is...this is the big one.”

The team decided to not fuck around for this Johnson meet, under the assumption that, as of the phone call, they were on the job of making a good impression. A fancy hotel room near to the restaurant was

rented, four flight tickets to Rome were purchased, and the suits...suits were researched. Eventually the team settled on the Milanese A. Caraceni, a longstanding family business, with a "less is more" philosophy. The team assumed (perhaps correctly) that an old-school Johnson would appreciate such a hearkening back to old fashion mores.

...And they guessed correctly, as the team filed in to the back room of the restaurant, where they found, sitting across an intimate table, a lone, grey-haired dwarf, wearing an old-style, understated suit, much as they were.

"Greetings," said the dwarf, in his untraceable, vaguely-European accent. He had a warm smile, reminiscent of the pastel cels on an old Disney feature. "You gentlemen can call me Mr. Johnson. And none of that 'only the face talks' hoorah. We're going to have a nice dinner before we talk business."

"That's a surprise," said Wildcard, accepting a glass of wine from Johnson.

"It shouldn't be," responded Johnson, a little taken-aback. "This business used to be a trusting community, before the internet went and mucked it all up. Tell me about yourselves."

"Not much to tell, really," said Wildcard, "I'm a bank robber from Edinburgh--back when it still existed, yeah--and I got into the biz from organized crime. It's something of a thrill-seeking jaunt."

Dervish grunted.

"I'm Dervish. I woke up in an alleyway and don't remember shit. I'm in it for me, I guess. There's a bimonthly doujinshi about me called "America-San." "

Johnson chuckled.

"Yes, some of my students are familiar with your wacky antics. Tell me, are the stories involving the oni true?"

"What, the red one?"

Johnson shook his head.

"Blue, I believe. Apparently you hit him with a motorcycle."

Dervish scratched his chin.

"Nah, I never...the oni was red, and I...I really wish I'd hit him with a motorcycle, damn."

Johnson left Dervish to his reverie and turned to Bend.

"Bend. Ex-intelligence. Don't want to expand on it too much, Mr. Johnson. I figure information is an advantage..."

Johnson pursed his lips at Bend.

“Oh, please. Maybe in the Johnson meets you're used to, but here we're friends first and clients second. Honestly,” he scoffed, “Americans. Thinking everyone else is out to steal up your little slice of the pie. If it makes you feel any better, I'll tell you a little about myself.”

Johnson cleared his throat.

“I'm from Prague originally, and maintain a tenured position at the University there. Magical Studies, as it were; as you can tell from my then-unique physiology, I was quite 'on the ball' with the whole magic thing from day one.”

Johnson laughed at a joke he hadn't made, and then continued.

“Suffice to say, my unique skillset got me involved with Saeder-Krupp, who I'm doubtless sure that you're aware you're working for, although my relationship with them was always transitory and on a by-necessity basis--” he took a sip of his wine, “--much as is your relationship with them, I imagine. I'm here now as part of a very big favor to a very old friend in the company, if you'll believe it, although that makes it sound much more ominous than it really is. And you:”

Johnson pointed at Locke,

“You are Felix Ramirez, famous fugitive. Are you aware that Aztechnology has put up wanted ads all over North America?”

Felix stared at his wine and mumbled,

“Well, I guess I'm happy that I'm not in North America, then.”

Johnson laughed again, and an earnest one at that. He seemed to just be a very jovial man in general.

“Alright, gentlemen, now that introductions are out of the way, shall we begin?”

Locke nodded.

“The negotiation?”

“No, the dinner!”

The team enjoyed themselves throughout the dinner, humoring Mr. Johnson's many stories about the “good old days” of deckers and trenchcoats. Finally, over a horribly unhealthy cream dessert, and after everyone had partaken well of the wine, Johnson gestured for the servers to disappear.

“Now, regrettably, comes business, gentlemen.”

“About bloody time, we're shadowrunners, we don't have time for fun,” chortled Wildcard, causing a laugh to circle around the table.

“Now, I don't intend to be the flighty Johnson and withhold information, but some of this is on a

need-to-know basis. That said, here's what I've been cleared to tell you.”

Johnson brought up a mugshot of a handsome but nondescript Hispanic elf. He actually rather resembled Locke.

“This is Rodrigo Alvarez, Aztechnology's foremost company man. He's one of the biggest runner-killers in the business, to say nothing of what he's pulled off on rival corps. Don't bother taking the picture to heart, he's a face-changing adept. Aztec tradition, likely, but don't discount Hermetic or Path of the Wheel.”

Johnson pulled up another image, this one of a sealed black box.

“Speaking of magic and dealing with other corps, that's the crux of this job. My old friend--the one in Saeder-Krupp--had a very powerful item stolen from him by Mister Alvarez. It should be kept in a special environmentally-controlled case, pictured here.”

Locke raised his hand, and Johnson gestured for him to speak.

“Is it magical?”

“Very. But the case should hamper that somewhat. Regardless, you can still assense it to make sure it's in there, which is the important part.”

Wildcard spoke up.

“What is it?”

Johnson grimaced.

“Need to know, I'm afraid. And, in fact, at great risk to your lifespans were you to.”

“Got it,” said Dervish, with a nod. “Assense the box, but don't look inside.”

“That's the spirit,” chuckled Johnson. “Now, my employer wants it back from Mister Alvarez, or whomever currently holds it.”

Dervish mocked “bracing for impact” against his fine leather-clad seat.

“The catch incoming, T-minus 5, 4, 3...”

“Oh, stop that,” giggled Johnson. “But there is a catch, isn't there always? You see, Mr. Alvarez has gone AWOL. He deserted Aztechnology, whom are rather infuriated with this whole debacle, given that they were presumably the ones who orchestrated the theft. He's been underground for a month, but recently resurfaced, albeit very briefly, in Tir Tairngire.”

Locke raised an eyebrow.

“You didn't get him then?”

“Tried, but missed the man and the object. A total botch. And this is Drake Prime we're talking about, to give you an idea of exactly how wily this snake is.”

Bend asked,

“Any idea why he'd be in the Tir?”

“A hypothesis,” sighed Johnson. “The Tir ball season is upcoming. Princes, festivals, expositions, people pouring in from far and wide, the whole circus--rodeo? Circus?”

“Circus is probably the better term,” said Wildcard. “Go on.”

“We think he plans to sell the artifact to someone, maybe one of the non-Aztec megacorps, maybe to an independent buyer, maybe to the Tir, and he's using the party season as a smokescreen. So, you're on a time limit, although regrettably I don't know what exactly that limit is.”

“So,” said Bend, “the mission is to enter the Tir, figure out who the buyer is, if there IS a buyer, beat Alvarez, and get the artifact to Saeder-Krupp without removing it from the case.”

Johnson nodded.

“That is correct.”

“And what do we do with Alvarez?”

“Irrelevant. Kill him if you must, but I'd prefer this be accomplished with as little violence as possible...although I fear that may be unavoidable.”

Dervish snorted.

“You and me both, buddy, if a mega's involved. Got a pricetag?”

“Two hundred thousand plus expenses, an unlimited account to be cleared personally by me, paid-for airfare and lodging, and a negotiable bonus.”

The entire team gawked. Locke put down his spoon with a loud CLINK.

“You heard me,” said Mr. Johnson. “The price, by the way, is non-negotiable, unless for some unearthly reason you wish to negotiate DOWN. Take it or leave it, that's the bounty for retrieving the object that even Drake Prime couldn't.”

Wildcard's eyes twitched in his head as he furiously browsed his internal commlink for some kind of precedent, while Dervish, Locke, and Bend continued to gawk. Finally, Locke commented, stupidly,

“That's a lot.”

“Yes, Locke, it is. This isn't a setup for a paltry double-cross, either, as I hypothesize the artifact to be

worth approximately one thousand times that value alone, albeit with the ticking time bomb of my old friend's animosity tied to its ownership. Take it or leave it, gentlemen.”

Dervish nodded.

“I’m in.”

Bend grit his teeth, but nodded as well.

“Me too.”

Locke smiled.

“And me. Wildcard?”

Wildcard blanched in his seat, catatonic. Locke patted him on the back.

“Wildcard?”

“What? Yes?”

The entire team looked at him expectantly.

“Er. Yes. Yes, considair me tae be in.”

“It's settled, then,” smiled Johnson, reaching a hand across the table to shake hands with Locke first, and then working his way around the table. “I’ll book you the first suborbital back to Seattle, under your new Sicilian aliases for obvious reasons.”

Everyone cringed when they shook Johnson's hand. His body temperature was very hot: not burning, but equivalent to a very high fever, and probably some kind of magical effect. Wildcard cringed more than his teammates.

As the team left for the streets of Rome, Locke patted Wildcard on the back.

“I take it you found something out during the Johnson meet? What is it? It seems pretty big going by your reaction.”

Wildcard brought up an AR window, and meekly commented,

“Found Johnson.”

“Oh, hell no,” gulped Bend.

Locke remained silent but began fiddling with his tie neurotically, just scrolling up and down the window as though he'd see something different.

And Dervish just laughed, and laughed, and laughed, bracing himself in the arch of a nearby doorway.

“The fucking old friend bit, he got us good,” laughed Dervish, leaning on his knees.

It was a news article dating back to 2061, picturing a tall, handsome man with silver hair shaking hands with Mr. Johnson, the comparatively underwhelming dwarf. Both were being photographed in front of a podium, and the images of dragons had been superimposed behind them.

The article read,

“LOFWYR AND SCHWARTZKOPF MEET TO DISCUSS PHARMACEUTICALS BUYOUT.”

>Great Dragon Encounter Count: 2

>Great Dragon Encounter Count: 3

11:00 AM, JANUARY 22nd, 2074, VANCOUVER, SALISH TERRITORIES

The team sat around the coffee table in a mid-price hotel room in Vancouver, milling through AR windows and E-paper bulletins. Everyone was coping in a different way: Wildcard had buried himself in the job, Locke had begun binge drinking at six in the morning, and Bend had called Emily no less than fifteen times to make sure that she was okay. Dervish was, well, Dervish as usual, and sipped a black coffee as he went through the plans with Wildcard.

“Okay, so we can't use our Sicilian passports; we need some kind of legitimacy at the border, is what I'm getting here?”

Wildcard nodded, his gleaming Punchinello eyes running over with data.

“From February to April, Portland locks down like a Catholic school prom. No immigration, no emigration, restricted travel, restricted trade...it goes on and on.”

“I'm assuming there's exceptions?” Dervish looked over a number of fake SIN cards, all of Wildcard's ex-identities.

“Quite. Obviously there has to be some sanctioned trade, although tariffs raise considerably to discourage too much traffic. On top of that, Tellestrian Industries gets the full benefit of Tir Prince status, so they make a tidy profit acting the courier to interested parties during that time. Speaking of which, Tellestrian might be a good place to start if we could get Locke or Bend into there. Elf corporation, AA, handles most of the Tir's imports and domestic products.”

Dervish chuckled.

“Corrupt?”

“As all hell.”

Bend spoke up.

“What kind of events are we looking at? I'm sure there's a schedule of some sort.”

“I've got it right here, but we'll have to narrow it down,” responded Wildcard. “The sooner we can get into the Tir and get our ears to the ground, the better.”

“I've taken the liberty of assuming that the trade-off is of the utmost secrecy, given our intel, which means it's likely going on during one of the major events, when there are enough people and factions around to provide a smokescreen as to who is doing what. So, we've got two clumps of events, one in early February, and one in late February and March,” he continued. “It's probably going to be in the later clump, if this thing is as hard to sell as Johnson's made it out to be, but we'll want to do all our legwork regardless.”

The first bulletin up was a Horizon event, a preview expo of all of the new media debuting during the upcoming year, on January 28th. It was run by Larry Zincan, a mid-level Horizon talking head and minor movie star. Invite-only, black tie.

“First, we've got this,” said Wildcard. “It'd certainly be loud and flashy enough to cover up a sale, but it's damn short-notice and the invite-only tag makes it a hard sell. Think we could make it in?”

Dervish patted Wildcard on the back.

“Yeah, I've got an in with Darius St. George. Swinging that wouldn't be a bad idea, and if we're right and the trade-off isn't happening there, hey, free movies.”

“Excellent. You get on that, Dervish. Next up:”

Wildcard brought up a bulletin for the second event, an extremely exclusive invite-only charity ball held at Hestaby's villa on Mt. Shasta.

“Consider this one unlikely. Invite-only, and atop that you have to be invited by a Great Dragon, which is hostile territory for our man Alvarez.”

Locke and Bend nodded as Locke transitioned from tequila to vodka, quite content to drop into a stupor.

“Third event set off some alarm bells. This one's the mage's conclave, on the 6th. Hestaby WILL be there, but busy with her own side-conference. The mage's conclave is a publicly-sponsored brain trust between mages of varying magical traditions. They've rented out an entire hotel for the damn thing, albeit a very modern-looking one with big windows, lots of exposure, and little privacy. Not the best option, and still very soon, but if Alvarez already has a buyer lined up, then it's probably going down here so that he can blend in with all the other mages and magical artifacts.”

Bend groaned.

“This sounds like a nightmare. Any ideas?”

Dervish jerked his thumb at Locke.

“We could enroll Fabio over there in the conclave.”

“Under fake credentials? We can't use his real name; every Aztec in the building will be hunting him down like a dog.”

Felix snored. Bend grabbed his half-finished mixed drink and took a swig of it.

“I'm beginning to see the virtue of constructing a consistent false identity for the entirety of the trip. And I know just the man to talk to about that sort of thing.”

Dervish smiled.

“If this ends in us relying on that shady SIN dealer again...”

Bend shook his head.

“No, I'm talking about my old boss, Jordan Formic.”

Wildcard paused.

“Wasn't he the bloke who mailed you a pipe bomb for Christmas?”

“Well, I mailed him a bottle of wine filled with cyanide for New Years', so we're even.”

Dervish cocked an eyebrow.

“I thought you were a pacifist.”

Bend made a 'psssh' noise with his lips.

“Well, it's not like he was going to drink it.”

“Moving on to the second clump,” said Wildcard, “We've got the charity gala at the Museum of Science and Industry on the 23rd. This one's open to the public with a cover charge, and is being double-hosted by Hestaby and Ares Macrotechnology. Ares has some fancy-schmancy new drone line that they're rolling out, all proceeds go to charity, you know the drill. Hestaby's there to get all the princes to clap when Ares unveils their new killer robot. That said, this one will probably be one of the all-around busiest, but also one of the events with the most empty space, so it's a contender.”

“We could probably try to get hired on as security,” commented Dervish. “Institutions like that tend to take on extra muscle in time for rich bitch season.”

Bend nodded to Dervish.

“You want to handle that angle, see if you can't get hired on as a provisional?”

“Yeah, I can do that,” agreed Dervish.

“Excellent,” said Wildcard. “Next up, the Aztlan ambassador's ball on the 10th. This one's a real 'belly of the beast' scenario: no dragons allowed because there was some big nasty international incident with Surrurg blowing up a town in Mexico, very hush-hush. If Johnson's wrong and Alvarez is making for AZT, he'll be here. Otherwise, it's a risky proposition.”

Bend nodded.

“How many more?”

“Just one. There's a day-long festival gala on March 21st to celebrate the equinox. The streets are filled like Mardi Gras, everyone parties. This one's a big risk: Alvarez will have to hide out with the artifact for two months to make it to this point, but he'd have the whole city to hide him when he makes the deal.”

Bend and Dervish looked at each other soberly. Wildcard commented,

“We have a beginning plan of action?”

“Getting new identities, to start. I like the idea of mid-level government employees, maybe bodyguards or investigators following our respective ambassadorial party. Problem is keeping it distant but reasonable.”

Locke started awake.

“We should go as guys from the CAS.”

Dervish put his hands up.

“Woah! He wakes! Any particular reason, champ?”

“They prolly have legacy positions for all the Tir's neighbors. Know the ambassador from UCAS, know the guy from NAN. Also, easier to cross-ref when they're right across the border. CAS is convenient. Far enough away to be a bitch to clear the alibi, close enough to be politically relevant. Plus it would explain how I'm Mexican.”

Bend stared at Locke, who began to sway back in his seat again.

“We don't need to explain why you're Mexican, Locke. There are Mexicans outside of Aztlan.”

Locke was unresponsive. Dervish put a finger on his chin, and asked,

“Is it just me, or was that a really well-thought-out and reasonable idea?”

Bend scoffed.

“Tequila must rejuvenate his dwindling jarhead brain cells.”

Wildcard interjected,

“Back on topic, what's everyone's job? I'm going to be asking around the local infobrokers and networking team operations.”

Bend said,

“I'm going to contact my guy in the Ghosts for assistance, and also to cover up. When Locke isn't drinking himself to death trying to forget that dragons exist, he'll try to make inroads into the mages' conclave.”

“I'll gun for a gig at the tech museum,” grunted Dervish. “Maybe ask TwoDee for help if I need to pull the Ares angle, although I don't expect it.”

“All's in order,” said Wildcard. “Now to procure some CAS SINS.”

Dervish groaned,

“Oh no, not the shady fucking SIN dealer! I said that I hate that guy!”

9:20 AM, JANUARY 25th, 2074, TIR TAIRNGIRE--NAN BORDER

Dervish grumbled, looking at his ID card as the team's newly-repainted black sedan made for the Tir border from the South side, up through the NAN.

“Honestly, is a 'John Smith' so fucking hard? Who names their kid 'Tex' anyway? Not Texans, I can tell you that.”

“Quitcher bitchin,” groaned Wildcard, adjusting his thick sunglasses as he pulled into the line of travellers held up at the border. “I've had to go a whole hour without my mask while getting into character as a Southern asshole.”

“You've got the asshole part down,” chuckled Locke.

“Ha ha, very funny, special agent Da Silva. Remember, we're an attaché to Theodore Aimsworth, the Senator from Georgia. He's staying in the Portland Hilton.”

A few minutes later, the team pulled up to the border checkpoint, where two guards in full military-police uniform stood at attention. On a hill in the far distance, a sniper scope gleamed.

“Name and reason for entering the Tir?”

Locke leaned out the passenger-side window and responded, looking disinterestedly at his datapad,

“I'm Vincent Da Silva, and these men are William Carpenter, Michael Hawkwood, and...Tex Strongarm.”

Dervish cringed.

“We're with the CAS envoy; part of his attaché.”

The guard looked...skeptical.

“Can you back that up with the proper forms?”

“Yes, sir, right here.”

Locke produced Wildcard's lovingly forged fake paperwork. There were some unknowns and guesswork, but the team was banking on the soldiers not knowing enough to check the fine print, so to speak.

“Um...this seems to check out, sir, but I'm going to need Mr...Strongarm to step out of the car.”

“Everuh gawd-damned border,” growled Dervish, in his best Southern drawl, “Thanks, Ma n' Pa. Ain't nothin' gonna go wrong namin' yer boy Tex Strongarm!”

As Dervish was escorted into the checkpoint kiosk, the inbuilt MAD scanner began blaring like crazy.

“Right, I guess I gotta declare my weapons.”

Dervish put his briefcase on the table in the kiosk and produced a disassembled sniper rifle, a tactical shotgun, two heavy pistols, a machine pistol, and a holdout.

“I've also got two sets of cyberblades, a spur--government-issued, see--and an assault rifle back in the car. Here are my nine licenses.”

The guard gawked.

“Sir, I'm going to need ALL of you to please come to the kiosk.”

Between them, the team registered two assault rifles, a LMG, a HVAR, a burstfire pistol, five heavy pistols, four holdouts, a shotgun, a sniper rifle, an underbarrel grenade launcher, an underbarrel shotgun, and a riot-cop quality heavy taser.

Infuriatingly, however, they all provided relevant licenses and paid all relevant fees, and no matter how many times their SINS were scanned, everything checked out. Regardless, the guards put them through the rigmarole on principle, as a sort of punishment for making them do that much paperwork, but that was to be expected.

As the team reunited in the Super Getaway Hyundai and pulled back onto the road, Bend commented,

“I'm pretty sure that we've just landed ourselves on every Tir watch list. Speaking of which...”

Bend looked expectantly at Wildcard.

“Yeah, I hacked the SIN register and wiped you from the cameras. Far as the Tir's concerned, you're a ghost again.”

“Thanks. It'll make a good impression with Jordan.”

“Speaking of which,” continued Wildcard, “where were we taking you, again?”

“It's a cabin in Crater Lake National Park. Registered to a proxy of a proxy of a proxy of a proxy of Jordan Formic.”

Dervish chuckled.

“You think the old spymaster's gonna be there?”

“No, but I do think he'll have left a series of increasingly preposterous secret messages and/or booby traps in the event that I ever ‘came home.’”

Locke grinned.

“Was it always like that?”

Bend shrugged.

“Nah, Jordan was always very old-school. I think he watched one too many Mission Impossible flicks as a kid.”

Dervish put down the window to let a fly escape the car's cabin, shooing it out with his hands.

“You think it might have rubbed off on you?”

Bend shot Dervish his best 'sassy metrosexual' look.

“Oh, and what's THAT supposed to mean?”

Wildcard noted,

“Let's put it this way: you never settle for walking down a hallway when climbing across the ceiling's an option.”

“Or the vents,” noted Locke.

“I'm pretty sure he does the Batman thing with his girlfriend and enters through the window,” laughed Dervish, “how corny is that?”

Bend slunk into his chair, turning his nose up.

“Art cannot be constrained, gentlemen.”

A few hours later, the team pulled up the dirt road to the cabin in question, which appeared well-maintained, if not necessarily in use. The porch lights were on, but the interior was dark. Bend gestured for everyone else to wait by the car, and began donning his tactical suit.

“So is this going to, uh,” ventured Dervish, drawing burger after burger out of an interminably large fast food bag, “take a while?”

“I don't think so, but I don't want to rush it,” responded Bend, tapping his goggles and scanning for radar and sonar signals. As an act of sentimentality, he even donned his old Tir Ghosts beret.

“Well, this little detour is costing us precious time, so on with it,” said Wildcard, gesturing wanly in the direction of the house.

Bend stood up, stretched, slipped a length of monofilament wire into his hand, and sprinted headlong at the house.

As Bend neared the twenty yard mark, he leapt for the surrounding trees, and began jumping and bounding off of them rather than touching the ground. Finally, he leapt like a frog for the exterior wall, adhered, shimmied to one of the windows, and carved out a small circular hole before unlocking the window from the inside. From there he vaulted up to the ceiling, and was gone from the team's sight.

Inside the cabin, Bend had a stunning view of a state-of-the-art laser grid and pressure pad system, highlighted by a custom software suite that he'd installed in his goggles. A Manservant drone—innocuous but probably weaponized--routed through the cozy living room, doing chores.

Leaping like a platforming hero possessed, Bend leapt for the robot, landed on its head, and used his inertia to keep going through a gap in the laser grid, landing in a tuck and roll behind the couch just in time for the embedded grenade to go off, blowing out the windows and leaving just the smoldering drone's legs standing.

An AR bulletin popped up on the home CHN:

“YOU REMEMBER A FEW TRICKS...

BUT CAN YOU SEAL THE DEAL?”

“Watch me, you James Bond wannabe,” laughed Bend, spinning and shooting out the lock to the next room before bailing through in a diveroll, slamming it shut just as a pair of dragonfly hunter-killer drones deployed from the living room fireplace.

As the dragonflies ground against the door, slowly carving through, Bend took the liberty of sticking pieces of silverware in their rotors when they breached, promptly incapacitating the little monsters. Of course, not one to take chances, he promptly shot them each with one burst, then picked them up and baseball-chucked them out the window, in time for *them* to explode, too.

Outside, the party sat on the hood of the Super Getaway Hyundai, staring awkwardly at the house as things exploded.

Past the kitchen was the basement door, which was where Bend was headed. The maglock/manual lock/retina lock was child's play. His sequencer, lockpicks, and a carefully sculpted image of an eye (he chose Formic's sister, knowing that Formic's own eye would probably cause it to shoot lasers or something) left the door hanging open, whereupon he descended into a basement wine cellar.

Searching through the vintages, Bend found what he was looking for: the very cyanide wine bottle that he had sent to Formic's disposable PO box for New Years'. Behind it was a lockbox. The puzzle seemed fairly straightforward, which is why it wasn't. Bend tied a long line of wire around the cork, hucked the wine bottle out the basement window, and yelled,

“GET AWAY FROM THE HOUSE! FIRE IN THE HOLE!”

He yanked the cord, causing the chemicals in the wine bottle to detonate upon exposure to oxygen.

Bend yelled, out the now-shattered basement window,

“IS THERE A KEY UP THERE IN THE SHRAPNEL?”

“NOPE,” Wildcard yelled back.

“DANG.”

Bend slunk back to the lockbox, turning it over for clues. It would be a simple matter to lockpick, but Bend knew how Formic operated. There was probably a capsule of acid in there or something, ready to release if he stuck a lockpick in.

Suddenly, Bend slapped himself on the forehead.

“Oh, of COURSE. The wine. Alcohol. The James Bond thing. Duh.”

He climbed the stairs back up to the kitchen (or rather, climbed the ceiling above them, as every third stair had been hollowed out to hold a claymore mine) and, turning it away from himself, opened the martini shaker. No spring gun: a good sign. Bend waggled a frying pan over the martini shaker, which triggered the laser tripwire inside the martini shaker, causing a bullet to lodge itself halfway through the frying pan.

Fool me once, Jordan...

With the trap fired, Bend reached into the shaker and retrieved a piece of old-school parchment. It read:

“THE KEY IS UNDERNEATH THE FLOORBOARDS, BUT THE LOCKBOX IS A BOMB ANYWAY SO DON'T BOTHER. WELCOME BACK TO THE FOLD, BEND. KELLS IRISH RESTAURANT AND PUB, PORTLAND. ASK FOR THE HOUSE SPECIAL AND SAY O'MALLEY RECOMMENDED IT.”

Bend calmly threw the parchment out the window as it, too, burst into flames with a tiny PAF.

Bend yelled,

“WE'RE GOOD!”

6:00 PM, KELLS IRISH RESTAURANT AND PUB, PORTLAND

The restaurant was a rather gimmicky affair, full of Irish “culture.” There had been rather an influx of Irish culture ever since Tir Na Nog went into lockdown, and nowhere was it more evident than pubs, which were basically 2074's Starbucks.

Wildcard was busy on the phone with his old bank-robbing pal, Belfast, in talks to get the teams' milspec armor, explosives, and heavier spy gear (which, as opposed to assault weapons, COULDN'T get explained away with licenses) through the border by way of a smuggler. The issue of lodging came up:

“You're shitting me that you're in town!? Say that the authorities are gon'ta be too busy dealin' with pissy Princes to protect the banks!? Well, of course I'm down to catch up, we'll have dinner after I'm done not eating this dinner!”

Dervish grinned at Wildcard, glancing back to Bend.

“I think it's kinda cute how they've got their little bank robber pen pals thing going.”

Wildcard continued,

“What? No, I mean, I'm going to order the dinner here, but not eat it. Long story. Look, you just want to grab a McDonald's or something? I'm not exactly discriminating.”

There was a pause.

“They sell wine in fast food restaurants here!? Well count me the hell in!”

“Hawkwood party, party of 4,” grumbled the bored waitress. The team was led past a party of screaming blue-collars arguing over the latest Urban Brawl match, and into a corner booth.

“So, is there anything I can start you out with?”

“Actually,” said Bend, “We're ready to order. We'll all have the house special. O'Malley recommended it.”

The waitress started, nodded solemnly, and 15 minutes later, delivered four shepherd's pies.

Bend sniffed at his meal experimentally, cut a piece out, sniffed that, ran a scan on it, and then put it down on his coffee plate. He began slowly hollowing out his shepherd's pie, trying to get a good look

at the bottom of the tin.

“Dervish, don't eat that, it's got arsenic and tranquilizers in it.”

“Fuck arsenic and tranquilizers, I'm hungry,” complained Dervish, finishing his second bite but wisely deigning not to continue.

“Aha, here we go,” said Bend donning his goggles and lowering his head face-first into the pie tin.

“Embossed by the serial number of the tin is the word 'upstairs.’”

Wildcard asked, amidst shoveling bits of pie into his napkin,

“You think it's a trap?”

“No, but the stairs probably are. I'm going to have to go up the long way.”

Locke asked, handing his pie to Dervish, who scowled at him,

“Why not just shapechange into a bird and fly up there?”

Bend frowned.

“Well, it would work, but then I'd be naked for my dramatic reunion with my mentor, and frankly Jordan and I were never that close.”

Dervish stared longingly at his pie.

“Why not just climb?”

“Yes, that's looking like the best course of action. Not the back alley, though. The front. Where he least expects it, and thus most expects it, and thus least expects it.”

Wildcard boggled.

“What?”

In a flash, Bend was changed into his tacsuit and out the door, followed by his curious team.

Bend circled around to the front of the building, prepared to climb, and then circled around to the back of the building to climb in the alley because the table was probably bugged, PSYCHE. The rest of the party stared up in bemusement, sipping their mid-price Irish beers that they had casually carried out of the restaurant.

“We're just going to make sure you're okay, Bend, and then I'll go handle the smuggling thing. You get on that too, two heads are better than one.”

“Shhh! You'll blow my cover!” Bend slipped up a drainpipe to the top of the building, spotting a man in chameleon-cloaked armor kneeling over the ledge with a sniper rifle. He moved to place his gun

against the back of Jordan's head, then spun around to face the opposite side of the building because it clearly wasn't the REAL Jordan; that was too easy.

Bend found himself pointing his gun at the head of his old boss from the Tir ghosts, a dignified-looking black-haired elf who was, himself, pointing his gun (a Walther, SHAMELESS) at Bend's head.

“Jordan.”

“Peter.”

“Please, call me Sean.”

“You got my message, Sean.”

“You got mine.”

The two spies embraced, but not before engaging the secret handshake to ensure that the other one wasn't an insect spirit or otherwise compromised.

“Ah, Tir Tairngire,” said Bend, taking in a huff of the night air, “it's been awhile.”

“Too long,” agreed Jordan, “but like any classy lady or liquor she ages well.”

“God, you've just gotten worse,” chuckled Bend.

“And you,” said Jordan, looking Bend up and down, “you've gotten...better.”

They both stared meaningfully into each others' eyes before Jordan looked down and spotted the running team.

“--Could you--”

“Oh, yeah.”

Bend cupped his mouth in his hands and yelled to the team,

“GET OUT OF HERE, WE'RE HAVING A SPY MOMENT.”

Locke shrugged.

“Not our fault if Formic pushes him off.”

Dervish downed the rest of his beer.

“They're elves. They land on their feet. It's how elves work.”

“Elves don't...fuck it. Fast food tacos?”

Dervish and Locke high-fived.

“Fuck yeah. I am always down for the extra cheez.”

As the party went their separate ways, Formic asked,

“So what's up with them?”

“Well,” said Bend, who was standing manfully beside Formic at the edge of the building, “the Scotsman is running off to get drunk with an Irishman, and the Mexican and American are running off to get fast-food tacos, of which the American will eat four peoples' worth.”

“Such stereotypes,” observed Formic.

“Indeed,” concurred Bend.

“So what brings you to Tir Tairngire?”

“Business.”

The two spies stared into the sunset, hands on their hips.

“What kind of business.”

“Intrigue business. The kind that I need you to cover for me on.”

“Define ‘intrigue business.’”

Bend turned to face Formic.

“Two great dragons are after an Aztec with a 10 million nuyen box.”

“Oooh...” cooed Formic, “...that IS intriguing business.”

“So you'll help?”

“Welcome back to the Ghosts, Special Agent Colby.”

Chapter 20: The Final Run Part 2

8:45 PM, FEBRUARY 23rd, 2074, THE JUNCTION OF THE 5 AND 405 FREEWAYS, PORTLAND

A black Eurocar Westwind 3k convertible sprinted across Marquam Bridge, its tailpipe sputtering blue flames in gunshot gasps as it caught up to the VIP. The VIP's vehicle nominally resembled a garbage truck, although most of the machinery was non-functional and the surface grime was artificial. Most of the trash compactor had been excised to make room for a turbocharger and expanded engine, which certainly explained why the Eurocar's driver had to even put any effort at all into keeping up with the otherwise-cumbersome vehicle.

Behind the unassuming little convoy, a large orange dragon and a smaller white dragon circled downtown Portland, diving between buildings and periodically passing out of sight. A black cloud billowed out of the shattered roof of the Portland Museum of Science and Industry, underlit with a flickering yellow-orange glow from the gunfire and open flames below and standing in stark contrast to the ubiquitous sprawl permadusk.

“-a terrorist attack. Please stay inside and evacuate Downtown Portland if at all possible. Do not call emergency lines at this time unless you have a medical crisis. Response teams are forthcoming--”

Miss Reagan, the Westwind's driver, clicked the radio off. She was an unconventionally attractive woman with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a jawline that, whilst normally out-of-place, could be accurately described as 'handsome' on her muscular frame. She wore a skirt-suit primarily composed of a prototype armor weave that could stop large-caliber rifle fire but, much more importantly, had the texture of fine Italian silk.

Of course, Miss Reagan was a shapeshifting adept, as was her partner in the shotgun seat, Mister Monroe, so it made the matter of appearances somewhat irrelevant. Monroe adjusted his thick black sunglasses and leaned over the back of his seat, scanning the freeway behind them. Most traffic had cleared out due to the large flashing emergency signs superimposed over the freeway, which made spotting hostiles all the simpler.

“Grey SUV. Mile back and closing,” commented Monroe, reaching between his legs for a black briefcase which swiftly unfolded into a ceramic high-power SMG frame. The gun let out a tinny whirr as the smartlink booted up.

“Think it's the G's?” Reagan pulled the sports car back from the VIP truck, her knuckles tightening on the wheel in case she needed to go into manual.

“Fits the bill,” said Reagan, loading a magazine of APDS rounds. “Just be happy it isn't the Aztecs or the runners.”

“No sense of restraint,” agreed Reagan, gesturing with her hand to the truck ahead of them. “Mister Hepburn, your services are required.”

“Acknowledged,” commented a voice over Reagan and Monroe's tacnet, as a figure in green fatigues popped up from the back of the truck, followed by the long thin line of an anti-materiel rifle as it was braced along the top of the truck. “Gs are driving evasively. They're on to us.”

“Just get a clean hit,” griped Monroe, tapping the side of his gun absently. “Since the VIP’s driving, we don’t want to put any more risk on you than necessary.”

As Hepburn slowly lined up his shot on the SUV, which had accelerated into the hundred range and would close within a few seconds, a massive tiltrotor gunship done up in garish red, white and blue buzzed over the freeway overpass at dangerously low altitude, sending detritus flying and setting off a few car alarms on the streets below.

“What was that!?”

“Ares is making for the ground zero clusterfuck,” yelled Reagan. “Focus, Hepburn!”

Reagan and Monroe ducked as the Westwind’s windshield shattered and the trunk rattled violently. A grey-clad mercenary was leaning out of the SUV’s passenger side as it veered to the left, his battle rifle roaring.

“G’s in heavy armor,” barked Monroe. “Get the engine block!”

The sound of the battle rifle was briefly overshadowed by the cacophonous bang of the anti-materiel gun as it planted a single fist-sized hole on the left side of the SUV’s hood. The SUV’s machinery screeched in anguish, but the large vehicle kept gaining.

“No good!”

“Keep firing!”

Hepburn cocked the rifle and planted another hole through the windshield. Blood and bits of meat and metal spattered out the rear window, but the pursuit continued.

“Got one of the rear gunners. Cover me!”

“Screw this,” growled Reagan. “When we get back, Hepburn, you’re getting a citation. Monroe, you know what to do.”

Monroe grunted an affirmation, tugged gingerly on his gyro mount, sighted the general area of the front of the SUV, and let the SMG rip.

The gunner was the first to go, flopping limply back into the SUV with what remained of the adjacent car door, trailing thin red lines. The driver pulled forward to avoid getting struck, only exposing the one remaining man in the rear of the SUV, who fumbled to load a rocket-propelled grenade before taking three rounds to the head, shattering his helmet faceplate. He pitched forward and out of the SUV, his heavy combat armor doing little to stop him from becoming a stain on the road.

Hepburn re-sighted the driver of the SUV, although he was stalled by a feeling of intense heat just behind him. He spun to face a large fiery serpent, manifested in the vestigial garbage reservoir with him.

“AZTEEEECs,” yelled Hepburn, before his feed abruptly cut out as a geyser of fire washed out of the

top of the truck.

“FUCK!” Monroe pulled a micro-grenade launcher and planted a shot into the wheel well of the battered SUV, finally causing it to flip dramatically and careen into the divider, its rag doll occupants pinwheeling onto the road. He loaded a new mag of APDS into the SMG and scanned for hostiles.

“It's not the Aztecs, it's the runners,” groaned Reagan, peering in the rearview mirror. A silver Hyundai family sedan was flying up the 405 at unbelievable speed, leaving visible red-hot tracks. “They're pulling something with spirits.”

“We are no longer playing nice, Reagan,” growled Monroe, reaching behind his seat to retrieve a disposable fire-and-forget missile launcher. He smiled as it linked with his glasses, targeting the oncoming car.

Reagan gasped.

“Holy fuck!”

Monroe spun in time to see the cars disappear, revealing the real sedan, keeping pace directly in front of their own vehicle while driving in reverse, pinning the two cars bumper-to-bumper. The familiar silhouette of Aztechnology power armor glinted from the space above the sunroof, as well as the click-clack of an LMG bipod settling into place.

Time slowed down for Monroe as he tried to bring the missile launcher up to bear. His ears rang and then dulled as he watched the hood of his car deform and shred apart like tissue paper, the few remaining fragments of windshield likewise giving way and turning into a burst of razor snowflakes. Reagan shuddered, her hands gripping and then relaxing off the steering wheel as her guts sprinkled into the back of the car, taking a shortcut through the sundered vinyl that had been her seat.

Monroe briefly achieved missile lock, until a wheezing thud signaled that gravity no longer applied, and the world turned into a spiral of color as black rubber sinews snapped and catapulted off into the sky. He obtained balance as a shooting star erupted from his shoulder and made for somewhere in the financial district.

He was halfway through making peace with God when his entire universe became pavement.

8:00 PM, JANUARY 25th, 2074, KELLS IRISH RESTAURANT AND PUB, PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

“Why didn’t you tell us you knew each other!?”

Belfast the bank robber and Jordan Formic the super-spy sat at one end of the table with a lithe, hardened elf woman in a leather jacket, facing Wildcard, Dervish, Bend, and Locke. All involved parties were freely partaking of libations (and Wildcard and Belfast had already been pre-gaming), although no one trusted the food aside from Dervish, who had gone with the rationale of “how hard is it to fuck up a steak?”

Dervish grunted in dismay at his tofu steak as Belfast, an elf with the same sort of too-many-plastic-surgeries John-Doe vibe as Wildcard, downed the last of his Guinness. His voice was a high-pitched Irish brogue, in contrast to his former partner's baritone Scottish.

"M'sister's a smuggler fer the Ancients all uppan down the West Coast," said Belfast, gesturing to Kara, who briefly looked up from pulling her long, blonde hair into a ponytail to wordlessly acknowledge that she had been mentioned. "Use'r whenever I needta get weapons into the NAN or CalFree."

Formic looked at his watch but smiled dimly. He clearly had somewhere else to be but was waiting for the appropriate etiquette to dismiss himself.

"Meanwhile, I've taken to using the Ancients--Kara in particular--whenever I need to deniably access some...less than-legal-goods."

Locke raised an eyebrow.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Formic stirred his martini and allowed his thin smile to crack into a roguish grin.

"Let's just say that the raging novacoke problem in Seattle's political scene happens to make things easier for certain Tir interests."

Kara spoke up, at last. Her voice was dry and husky, displaying the harsh life that she had lived in much clearer detail than her comparatively unscarred appearance.

"So, when Peter and Dylan asked my boss and my brother if they knew a smuggler..."

Bend gave Formic a good stink-eye.

"You used that name? Really?"

Formic scoffed.

"Well, I figured as long as you're not using it, Sean."

He put extra emphasis on the 's,' getting a brief chuckle out of Locke, who proceeded to stare into his drink when the stink-eye found its way to his doorstep. Dervish, eyeing his empty plate with half-resolved intent to lick, instead looked up and asked,

"We gonna get down to this?"

"Oh, right."

Wildcard pulled up an AR window and began marking spots on a Seattle map.

"Managed t'bring most of our guns through customs on an intelligence thing, but still got a lot of gear

Seattle-side that needs movin'. Milspec armor's th'big one, but there's also the plastic explosives, th' thermite, an' the explosive and sabot rounds for the guns."

A list appeared alongside the map, demarcating where and in what amounts the aforementioned could be found.

"Jesus," chuckled Kara, nervously, "are you boys gearing up for war?"

Dervish responded, deadpan,

"Maybe."

Kara gulped.

"Nother problem," mentioned Wildcard. "If we're gon'ta be smugglin' through the Ancients, we need insurance that they won't screw us jus' cuz we got a coupla greenskins on'th team."

Belfast waved a dismissive hand.

"Ancients are more a syndicate now'n a gang; racism's not good for business. 'Sides, y'haven lookt like an orc since sixty-eight! Both of us are 'ssentially humans at this point."

"Easy for you ta say, ya little squint," countered Wildcard, affectionately, "Mister Essentially Human But Lives Forever."

"I can assure you, there will be no double-crosses," interrupted Kara. "We'd be violating three golden rules of West Coast gang life."

Formic seemed intrigued by the novelty of this statement, and made a nonspecific, inquisitive noise, prompting Kara to continue.

"...Don't go back on deals, don't mess with another man's stuff..."

She eyed Dervish, who was sipping nonthreateningly on his whiskey, nervously.

"...and don't fuck with no Dervish."

Dervish looked up from his drink, nodded approvingly, and then finished the glass.

"I think that's my cue to leave," said Formic, standing up and slipping his tailored jacket over his slim turtleneck.

"I'll see you out," said Bend, standing as well.

As the two elves stepped outside, Bend whispered, harshly,

"You're sticking it to her, you corrupt, horny old bastard!"

“That’s classified, soldier,” responded Formic, lighting up a cigarette and disappearing into the streets.

9:00 AM, JANUARY 26th, 2074, ANCIENTS CHAPTERHOUSE, LAKE OSWEGO, TIR TAIRNGIRE

The frenetic beats of synthtrash hadn’t dimmed all night, although through the well-soundproofed floor they were mostly reduced to vibrations that one could vaguely catch the gist of through one’s feet. Dervish sat on his futon in the dim attic room, admiring the four suits of milspec armor against the wall, artfully lit by a single, bare bulb. Bend’s was the lightest, a ruthenium-coated softweave number that could be folded up and stuffed in a backpack in a pinch, but which could nevertheless stop a rifle burst (also in a pinch). Wildcard’s thick, plated suit had been recently modded, and although the shoulder pads and chestplate still were clearly Knight Errant SWAT with the serial numbers filed off, the ceramic, clown-like facemask and the integrated armor commlinks were all Wildcard. Locke’s eagle warrior combat gear was burnished but faded, its dramatic flanges worn down by time, combat, and hasty field repairs.

And then there was the America-San suit, Dervish’s magnum opus, a state-of-the-art fighting vehicle that had the audacity to pretend to be a suit of armor.

Dervish sighed affectionately, wiped a smear off his cybereye, and stood up to rejoin his team, who were outlining the plan over “scrambled eggs” by the attic’s only window.

“I think this guy’s our best bet,” repeated Bend, gesturing to a hovering AR window that depicted an uncharacteristically plain, male elf with short brown hair, dressed in a frumpy business suit. Dervish yawned.

“Who?”

“Nice of you to join us, mate,” chuckled Wildcard, switching off the camping stove that he was using to field-brew coffee.

“You know,” said Dervish, “the elves downstairs prob’ly have a coffee machine.”

“Back on topic, please,” said Locke, sitting cross-legged in cargo pants and a t-shirt, scraping at a greasy paper plate for survivors.

“Harry Dexter, import-export guru,” reiterated Bend, “considered by many in the Tir business world to be the preeminent man in the know when valuable goods travel in or out of the Tir. Has people all over the shipping and insider trading scene. Specializes in magical goods and artifacts. Sound familiar?”

“Sounds like our man,” agreed Dervish. “So when do we do the hit?”

Everyone stared at Dervish blankly.

“Y’know, not a HIT hit. But when do we scope it out, move to steal the info?”

“Actually,” said Wildcard, speaking simply, as he would to a child, “we were just thinking of setting up an appointment and paying for the info like businesspeople.”

Dervish gawked.

“We can DO that!?”

Bend grabbed the AR window and absently tossed it behind his shoulder.

“I know it’s hard to visualize, D, but there are people who like money just as much, if not more, than we do.”

2:00 PM, DEXTER IMPORTS ADVISORY OFFICES, DOWNTOWN PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

The team strolled through the crisp, clean lobby of the office building. The whole interior was done up in soft coffee colors; a tasteful mocha for desktops and other surfaces, a smoky almond for the walls, and an understated cream tone for the floor. The team’s leather loafers clacked against the vanilla tiles, with the exception of Dervish’s raptor legs, which made shrill ‘ting-ting-ting’ noises as they adjusted to carry his prodigious weight across the room.

“I’m getting weird vibes,” growled Dervish, under his breath, as he eyed a bored-looking elven rent-a-cop at the front desk. He adjusted his red, white and blue tie, which fit a little too snugly around his massive linebacker shoulders. The top two buttons of his plain white button-up shirt were undone by necessity, rather than choice. “Cult vibes.”

“That’s how you are around salarymen in general, Dervish,” responded Locke, himself in a pink silk shirt with slate slacks, artfully arranged with his three-day stubble and tousled hair to evoke just the right level of calculated neglect to appearance. “Just don’t get knocked off your donkey and start shooting up the place.”

Wildcard, in his plain grey business suit, gave Locke the best expression of confusion he could manage with his mostly-plastic face.

“It’s an Aztlaner phrase,” noted Locke, with a shrug. “I guess it doesn’t really translate.”

“Nah, not really,” agreed Bend, peering over the sunglasses of his black G-man ensemble, pressing the ‘up’ button on the elevator. “We doing this?”

After a brief, nonlethal exposure to a muzak cover of Christie Dae’s “Dancing with the Fireflies,” the elevator doors dinged, and the team exited into a cubicle farm that echoed the quiet cacophony of business. Phones ringed and were answered nonstop, as desk jockeys offered clients advice on both local and abroad investments. Disembodied conversations about an orichalcum lode discovered in Nepal and an exhibit of magical artifacts being featured at the Bellagio in Vegas intermixed with the whine of an active microwave in the kitchen and the politely understated cheers of two men on break watching the local Combat Biker semifinals in the lunch room. An elf of indiscriminate ethnicity with an athletic build, tanned skin, high cheekbones, and bow-shaped lips whistled the tune of Maria Mercurial’s “Take it to Mister,” making his way towards the team.

As he approached, Locke stepped forward to intercept him. The young businessman almost bumped into him, but adjusted at the last moment and grinned a saccharine smile.

“Hey, you guys are Mr. Dexter’s two-thirty, right?”

“Yes, and you are...?”

Locke put his hand forward to shake, but the elf stepped back and held his hands up disarmingly, revealing that he was missing the ring finger on his left hand, and it had been replaced with a plastic prosthetic.

“Not important enough for this! Mr. Dexter made very clear that I should escort you directly to his office.”

Locke shrugged, and followed the young man, who immediately pursed his lips and resumed his tune as he marched forward into the office.

“Fair enough.”

The employee was getting awkwardly into the last few notes of the song, whistling over the volume of anything else in the office and doing little dance moves, when he stopped at a black box of polarized glass at the back of the office.

“Mr. Dexter is right through here. He’s expecting you.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Where’s my tip? Kidding!”

The elf laughed at his own joke and shimmied past, dropping the previous song and launching into an equally shrill rendition of one of the recently-released “just-rediscovered” JetBlack tracks. Dervish cringed and stretched his knuckles around his cyberspur ports.

The plain, brown-haired elf with the bad sense for suit sizing appeared at a previously-unseen door in the polarized cube, peering out suspiciously.

“Sorry about that. He and all the other temps are new hires. News of fresh money on the wind and, buzz buzz buzz, I find myself in need of a few more drones. Harry Dexter.”

“Vincent Da Silva,” said Locke, reaching his hand out to shake and smiling when his offer was answered this time around. Dexter eyed Dervish, Bend, and Wildcard.

“Step into my office, Da Silva and...associates?”

Bend snarked,

“You could say we’ve been through hell together.”

The team settled into seats around Dexter's real wood desk, looking out upon the office. The glass was a muted tint from the inside, enough to survey the rest of the office without being distracted by it. Dexter tapped a button on the underside of the desk, and a white noise machine began broadcasting.

"I looked into the topic that we discussed on the phone, Mr. Da Silva."

"Yes, and?"

"You asked if I knew of any shipment of a major artifact into or out of the Tir. I'm afraid that I don't have anything matching that description."

Locke scowled, crossing his right leg over his left and leaning back in his chair as Dexter settled in at his desk.

"Then why call us in, if you already knew?"

"Because I have some information that might point you in the right direction," said Dexter, coolly, "and I'm willing to waive the fee entirely if you're willing to help me help you."

"With all due respect, please cut the jargon," said Locke, sternly.

"Word is that a local talismonger, Alexander Gomez, has received a startlingly large commission from outside sources for a variety of strictly need-to-know spell formulae. He refuses to accept my price for the information, which is unfortunate, because it is, in fact, my business to know these things to keep my consultancy running, and it also leads me to believe that he may be dealing with shady clientele."

"And in the Tir festival season. The audacity," leered Bend.

"Exactly. So, I figure whatever this is, has to do with what you boys are after. And given your unique trade..."

Dexter leaned his elbows on the table and Locke nodded sagely in response.

"Yes, I think we can look into Mr. Gomez for you, provided you tell us what you know afterwards."

Dexter's fingers intertwined beneath his calculating smile.

"We have an arrangement, then. I'll have my secretary provide an address."

As the party stepped out of the building into the parking lot, Wildcard clicked his keys. The black sedan chirped agreeably.

"This seems pretty cut and dry."

"Not so," said Bend, gravely.

Dervish stopped a few feet away from the car, surveying Bend apprehensively.

“Oh?”

“You guys go handle the thing with the talismonger. You’ll need Locke there for the magic stuff, anyhow.”

Wildcard sat on the trunk, causing the car to bow slightly.

“...and you will be doing?”

“I’m gonna shadow that whistling kid.”

“What,” asked Locke, “the annoying temp?”

“Yeah,” said Bend. “Dervish, do you remember that feeling you got?”

Dervish nodded as Bend held up a hand and put his commlink to his ear. The team just got his side of the conversation.

“Yeah. Um, specific employee. Security Director McWilliams. Yeah, him. Uh, it’s Sean Falstaff calling for him. Yeah, from the Christmas party. He knows me.”

There was a pause. The whole team looked between each other. No one except Bend had any idea what was going on, evidently.

“Hey, TwoDee. Look, can you do a little favor for me? Wait, hold on, is this line secure?”

Bend held the commlink away from his ear as a tirade of nasal-tone cursing screeched out of the receiver.

“Yeah, okay. Security Director. Ask a stupid question. I get it. Look, does your brain have, like, photo archives? You know, like a family photo album folder on the desktop or whatever. Okay, I get that...semantics, I get it...look, do you still have the material from that whole goatfuck with Taka back in 2072?”

The commlink screeched again.

“I know, I know, we had that whole ‘never speak that name again’ thing going, but I figured you wouldn’t still be mad after...okay...you do? Great. Could I get a copy of that?”

The commlink ceased screeching and made an obliging ‘ding’ noise.

“Wow. Um. Prompt. Thanks, I...no, Emily and I don’t have time to watch your kids next week. We’re on the job, TwoDee. I don’t care if you have tickets--we’re in Portland, no, I can’t--”

Dervish squinted, trying to catch whatever it was that he was missing about ‘that whole goatfuck with Taka back in 2072.’

“No, our job isn’t to fuck with your new killer robot that’s about to be unveiled here. Would you believe it has nothing to do with Ares? It’s--okay. Bye.”

“If it turns out my hunch isn’t correct,” Bend said, settling down onto the trunk of the car with the rest of the team, “then it’ll be a load off my mind, I’ll tell you that.”

Locke and Wildcard didn’t know what, exactly, they were looking for, but watched attentively.

The “camera” approached a cheery receptionist sitting at a cheap, synthetic-material desk. Behind the desk, a terrifyingly immense Salish man wearing a business monkey outfit stepped around a potted plant, carrying a pot of coffee. A wiry man with a prominent Glasgow grin leaned over another visible desk, fiddling with a spreadsheet. On one pastel-colored wall was a photo of Mount Kilimanjaro, and on another was a picture of a marathon runner, captioned “THE ONLY WAY TO LOSE IS NOT TO TRY.”

The ‘cameraman’ said, his voice nasal and unpleasant,

“I swear to God, one of them just said ‘how’s the wife.’ Like, unironically.”

The effete albino elf in the black business suit held a hand in front of the camera. His voice was soft, but with the slightest traces of a New York accent.

“Let’s just play it cool. Ahem. Excuse me? Ma’am?”

The receptionist looked up and popped her bubble gum.

“Need something, handsome?”

Geppetto stepped forward and leaned on the desk.

“We’re looking for Mr. Johnson.”

This garnered an immediate wince from the receptionist, as a large African-American orc with sleeve tattoos passed by, chatting on his commlink about ‘the big merger.’

“Oh noooo! Mr. Johnson’s in a meeting. Can I take a message?”

The camera watched from behind Geppetto as he took off his hat and made eye contact with the receptionist. To the left, Dervish leaned against the marathon-runner wall display.

“Well, miss, we really need to talk to him. Say it’s from Mr. Takamoto.”

Bend paused the video, as an athletic man of indiscriminate ethnicity with high cheekbones, bow-shaped lips, and a missing ring finger passed by on the way to the water cooler, whistling 2072’s latest flash-in-the-pan J-Pop tune.

“Ho Ho Holy fuck,” said Dervish, his cybereyes wide and awestruck. “Ginsen is back.”

Locke looked expectantly at Dervish.

“Ginsen?”

“Before you and Wildcard’s time,” said Bend, pocketing his commlink and opening the rear door of the car to begin retrieving his spy gear. “Ginsen was a whole bunch of shell companies based around some kind of black-ops hardcase merc team, that we ran into by coincidence in Neo-Tokyo.”

Dervish nodded in agreement and spoke up.

“Super pro, from what we saw. Settled in and started acting like ordinary office workers; it was crazy, like a bunraku switch got flipped. We blew their cover and they all made out like ghosts.”

“Well, all except their public face,” noted Bend. “They detonated his cranial bomb the moment it was clear we were on to him.”

“So,” said Wildcard, pulling up a series of public access pages on ‘THE GINSEN CORPORATION: COHESIVE BRAND SYNERGY FOR A MORE DIVERSE FUTURE,’ “you boys ran into some kind of super black-ops team in the past, they pulled a fast one on you, and now they’ve resurfaced in a magical imports consultancy as we coincidentally know that a major artifact is coming into town.”

“That’s about the long and short of this, yeah,” said Dervish, sitting up from the trunk of the car and causing the suspension to jump up by easily 10 inches. “So expect things to get real shitty, real fast.”

“Well, we should be on the safe side on our end, just shaking down a talismonger,” noted Locke. “I’m worried about what happens if you get caught.”

Bend smiled darkly as he pulled his tactical hood over his head. As the goggles settled down over his eyes, they whirled and lit up with Bend’s UI, and then darkened to match the ambient light.

“Locke, you ever read ‘Spy vs. Spy?’”

4:00 PM, EAGLE’S EYE TALISMONGER, NORTH PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

Alex Gomez, a pudgy Native American elf with a greasy ponytail hairdo, had enjoyed a recent upsurge in profits, coinciding with the beginning of the Tir festival season. He’d “inherited” his (human) father’s business a few decades back when all the humans were relegated to second-class citizens, didn’t give it back during the reintegration, and had never looked back as far as unscrupulous acquisitions went. The spree of recent special orders had tipped him off, somewhere in the dim recesses of what remained of his morals, to the prospect that major shit was about to go down, but it was quickly squashed with the familiar ‘not my problem’ mantra, and buried in the convenient ex-post-facto excuse of customer confidentiality.

And it would have stayed that way, were it not for the aloof Aztec in the silk shirt who was asking too many questions.

“Look, amigo,” said the roguishly handsome, Latino elf standing across the grungy, fetish-covered counter, “I can really make it worth your while. My employer just has an interest in seeing what kind

of arcane hardware his contemporaries are packing, comprende?"

Gomez scowled. In the back of his mind, he resented this interloper, this quisling of the 'elves-are-all-attractive' stereotype that genetics had unfortunately deemed him not worthy of.

"Unless your employer wants to buy something, your employer isn't touching the sales records, *amigo*."

"Okay, fine," said the asshole, with a practiced smile, "do you have any Aztec-tradition mind-reading spell scrolls in? Nothing illegal, but enough to get a little edge, know what I'm saying?"

Gomez eyed the massive orc in the armor jacket who was milling around by a row of Christian iconography. He assented everyone who entered the shop, and the big guy wasn't even Awakened, let alone a Christian Theurge. This was looking more and more like Runner business, which the special customer had warned Gomez to be wary of.

"No, I don't have anything like that in," Gomez lied, "and I'd advise you and your trained monkey to piss off before I hit the panic button for extortion."

"How much does a bullet cost?"

The big lug in the back spoke up, having moved to a rack of enchanted weapons. They were a big draw among normies, appealingly forbidden in the same way that a teenager will lust after a state-carnival katana. Obviously, most of the weapons on the rack were non-magical, but designed to look appropriately fantastical such that idiots would buy them.

"What, like a magic bullet? The silver ones will run you a few hundred--"

"Nah, nah," said the orc, shrugging his shoulders informally and stepping towards the counter. "Like a normal bullet."

Gomez blinked at the strange serenity of the six-and-a-half-foot inquisitor.

"Like, 10 nuyen?"

"That a fact?"

The orc nodded sagely, looking around the store in muted wonder. After an awkward silence, he turned to look down at Gomez again. The Aztec stepped away from the counter obligingly.

"Guess weapons taxes are stricter here. Makes sense. Well-armed populace under a monarchy, sheeeit, that's asking for trouble."

The orc's cybereyes made a click-whirr noise as he blinked, only evident because of the silence in the rest of the shop.

"You know how much a cyberblade costs?"

“I don’t know,” Gomez lied again, “a couple thousand?”

“Nah, man, nah,” laughed the orc, shaking his head. “Not when you’re dealing with Dervish.”

The name clicked to Gomez as he was picked up bodily by the throat. A sword the length and thickness of a machete jutted forth from the orc’s other arm as protective covers slid over his eyes.

“When you’re dealing with Dervish, cyberblades come motherfucking free.”

Gomez resisted the urge to shit himself.

Gasping, he attempted to focus on a powerbolt, only to feel it fizzle. His aggressor commented,

“See, when Dervish is making a sale, ain’t nothing gonna come between him and closing the deal. S’why he brought his man Locke. Locke ran magical ops for the Aztecs for decades, even specializes in counterspelling! No shit, right? That’s what we in the running biz call convenience, chummer.”

Feeling the watching eyes of the Aztec, Gomez instead went to his last resort, and pushed the panic button on his commlink, resolving to bribe the cops to overlook his more questionable stock.

“Now, Dervish also don’t appreciate outside investors attempting to edge in on these mad once-in-a-lifetime deals, which is why his homie outside took the liberty of jamming all outgoing communications -panic buttons included- while we were scoping out the joint. That way it’s just you and Dervish, so you can know that we here at Dervish Industries are taking your case personally.”

As Dervish slid the blade under Gomez’s inseam, the urge to shit himself overpowered his previously-staunch resistance. He gurgled and squirmed as his bowels voided.

Dervish looked down in muted disbelief.

“Bitch just shat all over my sword, Locke.”

“Just wash it off in the bathroom.”

“I put that shit in my BODY, Locke.”

Gomez saw white fog and red spatter as Dervish threw him, one-handed, through the door to the back room. His hearing cut in and out, like a television with bad reception.

“...Gotta keep it sticking out till I can wash it...awkward...”

Gomez wiped the blood from his eyes in time to see Locke crouching over him, all pretense of friendliness absent from his smile.

“So let’s revisit the whole sales records thing, amigo.”

7:00 PM, WESTMORELAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

Bend's goggles alerted him to a call from Wildcard, which he routed to his microtransceiver. For the last few hours, he's been hanging upside-down in a tree, watching--or rather, listening to--the Whistler and a few grey-jumpsuited compatriots pretend to fix a power line outside of Harry Dexter's townhouse. A van marked "Pan-X Repairs" appeared to be their mobile command center, and Bend had caught a glimpse of a lot of guns inside.

"Hey, Wildcard. Check that the line is secure, real quick."

"Aye, wait for a moment..."

There was an ominous silence at the other end of the line.

"Naw, someone was runnin' a sniffer on ye. Not ye specifically--jus' afraid that *someone* is followin' 'em."

"And you just let them know that we know," hissed Bend.

"That lil' silence was me takin' one of your ol' phone conversations an' loopin' it in so we sound like a coupla civvies."

"You record our phone conversations?"

"Not important. Look, we tracked the spells that were being ordered."

Bend looked up, briefly catching the familiar glint of a fly-spy drone before it disappeared again into the night sky. He eyed his quarry, who hadn't acknowledged if they were on to him, but that didn't comfort him.

"Yeah?"

"Whole buncha surveillance an' mind control spells. Not all of 'em strictly legal. Control Thoughts, Alter Memories, Read Memories...nothin' good. Bought, go figure, by the Ginsen Corporation, now based outta Seattle. Amazonian shamanic tradition, figure that's whatever mage they've got on staff up here."

"Last time we ran into them, they were Londoners in Neo-Tokyo, pretending to be from San Fran. Sounds like a new chain link. Anything else?"

"Yeah. Lot of combat gear sales to types matching runners, too. Some hermetic destruction spells tied to an account in Germany, a nonstandard power focus special-ordered to an account in CalFree..."

"In other words, there are more runners around."

"Aye. Dinnae how pro they are, but we're far from the only tossers got suckered into this job."

"That's almost comforting,"

“Almost. What’re you up to?”

“Participating in the great surveillance circlejerk of our time. Whistler and his Ginsen buddies are keeping tabs on Dexter, so I’m keeping tabs on them. And I’m pretty certain that someone is trying to find me, although I doubt they’ve spotted me yet.”

Bend managed to spot the fly-spy again, which was circling a few blocks away.

“Yeah, I’m catching a drone node operatin’ on hidden. Slaved t’another node, a commlink. Also flyin’ around, some hunnerd feet up. You spot a flying mage?”

Bend scanned the skies, flicking between filters, only to blanch at what his ultrasound registered.

“Not a mage,” whispered Bend, conspiratorially.

“What’s up?”

“I’ll tell you what’s up,” said Bend, shimmying down from his tree. “A seven-foot-long lizard with wings, wearing ruthenium-cloaked tactical armor and operating a helmet commlink.”

“Drake,” said Wildcard, his voice cold and calculating. “Any idea if it’s one of S-K’s?”

“I hope so,” hissed Bend, letting his feet settle on the ground, excruciatingly slowly, “otherwise it means there’s more than two Great Dragons in on this.”

“Hestaby?”

“Maybe. It is her turf.”

“Don’t suppose ye’ll be wantin’ta stick around.”

“No, I don’t suppose so.”

8:00 AM, JANUARY 27th, 2074, ANCIENTS CHAPTERHOUSE, LAKE OSWEGO, TIR TAIRNGIRE

In light of existentially-and-physically-terrifying revelations, the team hadn’t slept very well. Increasingly, Schwartzkopf’s request that bloodshed be minimized on this job was looking unfeasible. Wildcard countered the general feeling of dread by putting together another homemade breakfast.

“We’re running late on the jobs we’d set aside, gentlemen. The Horizon gala is tomorrow night. Dervish, tell me you got an invite for that.”

Dervish grunted over a slice of fake bacon.

“Yeah, but only for me, since I’m the only one Darius knows personally.”

“I can run comms on that, but I think we’re in agreement that Alvarez likely won’t be there. Bloody small event, everyone crammed into a single theater. It would be a nightmare for him to try to get the artifact in, especially on such short notice. Still, good to pay attention to, regardless.”

“What about the Mt. Shasta thing?”

Bend spoke up at this one.

“I think, given the amount of Great Dragon scrutiny we’ve been seeing on this, Alvarez would have to be an idiot to try anything in Hestaby’s *house*, at her *dinner party*. Consider that one nixed.”

“The mage’s conclave is the big one,” noted Locke. “I’ve been slacking off on trying to make inroads there, and we know that it’s where he’d have the most cover and plausible deniability. The artifact wouldn’t even ping to security mages.”

“Let’s put you on that today and tomorrow,” agreed Wildcard. “For now, though, I have another important job for you.”

“Que necesitas?”

“I need you,” said Wildcard, brandishing a spatula, “to get more instant coffee from the Stuffer Shack across the street.”

“The one across from the dog park?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“Sure.”

Locke stood and brushed off his jeans.

“Be back soon.”

As Locke disappeared down the stairs, Bend noted,

“Shouldn’t we be watching his back?”

Dervish waved a dismissive hand.

“To grab coffee? It’s under a block away, Wildcard has his biomonitor signal, and he’s a combat mage. Locke can handle this and if he runs into trouble we can be out there in actual seconds.”

Exactly twelve seconds later, an alarm began issuing from Wildcard’s commlink.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

As the team loaded up their combat gear, Wildcard kept an eye on the biomonitor.

“They’re takin’ him for a ride around the block. What’re you thinkin’? Hostage? Trap?”

Bend shook his head, in the process shaking his goggles down to eye level.

“Interrogation. Maybe magic, maybe not. We get to find out.”

Dervish grunted in acknowledgement as the team stomped downstairs.

As it turned out, the team was too late. They found Locke in the dog park, slumped against a tree, unconscious. The snow hadn’t begun to set into his clothes yet, suggesting that he’d been dropped off very recently. No one pulled iron, although Dervish kept his hands on the heavy dufflebag containing his automatic shotgun while Bend and Wildcard moved to check on their teammate. A prim-looking elf man in tennis shoes caught Dervish’s eye as he jogged past.

“Uh, is that guy okay?”

“Yeah,” said Dervish. “He looks like he passed out from exhaustion or something. I think those two guys are his friends.”

“Oh, that’s...that’s...okay.”

Dervish stared down the yuppie, who glanced at Locke a few more times and then jogged off.

“Ain’t safe out here. Too exposed.”

Wildcard nodded in agreement, scratching absently at the datajack ports at the base of his skull.

“The fly-spy’s above us. Same one as before. The drake rigger is working for Ginsen.”

Locke moaned groggily as Bend slapped him across the face a few times.

“Stopiddd, stop it!”

Bend checked Locke’s pupils as Locke continued to groan in discomfort, slurring his words.

“Whatah doin, Bend!?”

“Checking you for drugs. Your pupils are about the size of pennies right now, so I think we can safely mark that off as ‘yes.’ Probably tranquilizers but Wildcard should still check your biomonitor.”

Locke blinked disbelievingly, beginning to come back to his senses.

“But...I was just...I napped...I nodded off for a nice nap because I was tired...”

Bend snapped his fingers in front of Locke’s face, getting him to focus.

“Did you see or hear anyone?”

“...No.”

“Do you remember being dragged into a van and taken around the block?”

“No!”

Wildcard and Bend made eye contact.

“Alter Memories,” said Bend. “The Amazonian magician was just here.”

“He also ordered Read Thoughts,” noted Wildcard, “which means...”

Bend’s face contorted with anger and frustration.

“Shit! They know everything!”

“Cool it,” said Dervish, eyeing the slowly-gathering crowd dispassionately. “We don’t know shit. Which means they know whatever they know, plus shit. That’s probably not a lot. We need to clear out before these people call the cops.”

As Wildcard helped Locke to his feet, Bend called out,

“Don’t worry! My friends and I are going to take this man to a hospital!”

8:15 AM, LAKE OSWEGO, TIR TAIRNGIRE

The team reconvened in an alleyway to gather their senses. Locke slumped against a dumpster, looking especially humbled.

“That was some amateur hour shit,” he remarked. The rest of the team made subdued noises of affirmation.

“From now on,” noted Bend, “we travel in twos. We always operate in pairs. Even if I’m sneaking in to do spy things, I want someone else within 30 seconds.”

“Yep,” noted Dervish. “Even I’m starting to get uneasy at how many resources Ginsen’s moved into the Tir, and I don’t think we’ve even run into a Triple-A yet. We got any more leads?”

“Actually, we do.” Wildcard pulled up an AR window with a simple text message. “Dexter sent me an encrypted message with a time and a place. Behind a sports bar about 5 minutes from here. I think he’s come through.”

Bend grinned.

“Well, what are we fucking waiting for? There may be hope for this FUBAR op yet.”

NOON, BEHIND NICOLI'S GRILL, LAKE OSWEGO, TIR TAIRNGIRE

Bend sat on the roof of the sports bar, communicating with Wildcard (who was sitting in the parking lot) to smartjam suspicious-looking individuals. Both had inconspicuously tossed a few cheap microphones around the bar, using Wildcard's powerful nexus to filter the sounds from within and isolate any out-of-the-ordinary behavior.

In the alleyway itself, Locke sipped at a cheap beer and leaned against an Ancients tag, waiting for Dervish to finish setting up the team's portable white noise machine.

The white noise machine blared to life and Dervish nodded at the nervous businessman across from them. Dexter spoke up.

"We safe to talk?"

"We are now," said Locke. "You know you're being tailed?"

"Yeah. Don't know by who. I pulled some big, big favors, and reeled in a shark."

"Tell us what you know."

Dexter brought up an AR window depicting a small cargo ship, scuttled on the coast.

"Orichalcum's been big business lately with the mining boom, so I've been running a watchgroup on any transactions involving it. This ship is a smuggling vessel; runner-operated. Tir Coast Guard nabbed it at about four in the morning. Found four dead smugglers, an empty spot in the hold, and a nexus shot full of holes."

Locke nodded.

"Where's the orichalcum come in?"

"Whoever this was, they didn't scrap the nexus thoroughly enough. They were probably rushed. I managed to get one of my people in--one of the people I can trust--and he sent me some of the data from the hard drive. They were transporting orichalcum on behalf of a Mr. Johnson. A hell of a lot of orichalcum."

As Dexter paced in the alleyway, Dervish asked,

"We going to get a number?"

"It's the kind of number you have to estimate based on market value."

Dervish squinted.

"So, we're talking 'could pay for a major artifact' here."

Dexter shook his head, distraught.

“We’re talking ‘could pay for two.’ “

Locke pent his fingers.

“Anything else?”

“Yeah. An anonymous message telling them to hold position at a specific spot in the ocean, because “the seller” wouldn’t be ready for a few more days.”

Locke and Dervish glanced at each other. Wildcard noted, over subvocal,

“Unless it’s a bluff, that means the Horizon screening is hosed.”

Dervish turned to face the back door of the sports bar and responded, making sure not to vocalize where Dexter could hear,

“Just as well. Today Locke and Wildcard can handle the mage’s conclave thing, but I want Bend watching my back.”

Bend glanced instinctively over the side of the roof.

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to be watching Dexter from here on out. He just gave us really sensitive info and I don’t want Ginsen nabbing it.”

“Fair enough. So we’re sure about the Horizon thing?”

Wildcard brought up an AR window in everyone’s PANs, indicating an increased police presence at Festival events for the next few days to counter “risks of terrorism.” Bend pieced through the article, and commented,

“Unless Alvarez also controls the cops, that makes the already-unlikely circumstance of a handoff there even unlikelier. It would mean that whoever has the funds--assuming that they’re the buyer and didn’t just steal it, delaying everything--would need to make sure that everything was legit within the next few hours, plan for the operation, and then execute it before the night is out.”

“I think it’s time we called this to an end, Dexter,” said Locke, smiling. “We’ve got some business to handle.”

“You too,” said Dexter, although his smile was more transparently anxious.

“The drake’s closing about five hundred feet up,” said Wildcard, updating the team. “No sign of the drone.”

As Dervish and Locke turned away from their contact, Locke hit Dervish with an Improved Invisibility spell.

“Double back to the car and get your armor, then follow Dexter. The spell should keep you clear of Ginsen’s detection for the time being.”

“Right on.”

“I’ve got a hotel to scope out. Keep in contact.”

3:00 PM, THE RIVER’S EDGE HOTEL, PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

Locke had donned his ‘confused tourist’ getup for this operation, which meant wearing a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, slacks with sneakers (which were filling with snow with every step), and the most tasteful Hawaiian shirt that money could buy. The downside, of course, was that the most tasteful Hawaiian shirt that money could buy was still not, by any stretch of the imagination, tasteful. The hastily-bought snow jacket atop all of this, left mostly undone, was merely the piece de resistance. He hefted his bookbag as he approached the hotel, trudging through the two-inch snow along the decorated path that flanked the Willamette.

“Remember, see if you can get into contact with anyone in authority, plumb what you can find off them,” buzzed Wildcard, into his ear. “If you’re feelin’ especially bawsy, you can even pull the fake CAS secret service SIN we trumped up for you.”

“I think I’ll play it by ear,” responded Locke, as he made it into the lobby...

And promptly ducked his head, bringing his straw hat up to cover the top of his face perhaps quicker than was entirely inconspicuous.

“Hijo de puta, the face-rec suite you installed on these glasses just kicked me in the eyes,” hissed Locke. “I’m counting at least five of the Ginsen guys from that old vidfeed, all over the lobby.”

“Roger that. I’m going to pull around the block to cover you if you need to vanish. Can you still follow up?”

“Yeah,” said Locke, slipping into the crowd by the customer service desk and doing his best to make eye contact with his shoelaces. “Let me see if I can’t find someone on security who doesn’t ping as Ginsen.”

“That could just mean that they’re recent hires or members of another cell,” cautioned Wildcard.

“That’s what my good sense of intuition is for. Besides, only one of the goons is wearing a security uniform. The rest are dressed like tourists.”

“As I said, I’m here if you need an extraction.”

Locke instinctively looked down at his subvocal, and harshly barked,

“I know what I’m doing, okay!?”

“You don’t look like it to me, sir,” said an attractive, raven-haired elf woman in a smart business suit, as she approached Locke through the crowd. “Why don’t you come to the security office?”

Locke triggered his tailored pheromones and forced out the dorkiest smile he could manage.

“Of course, miss! Just let me finish my call. Bye, honey!”

“I love you, too, darling,” said Wildcard, switching input to the backdoor on Locke’s earbuds.

“You don’t look like an ordinary tourist to me,” said the authoritative woman, as she led Locke past a series of security cubicles and into an enclosed office with old-school blinds.

“That’s very flattering, ma’am, but I don’t get why I’m being singled out--”

“Cut the act,” she responded, her eyes like ice, as she pulled the blinds shut and closed the door to the office. A white noise machine began whirring automatically. “You carry yourself like a soldier, and my wage mage assensed you as an Aztec combat magician with military ware. And I’ll let you fuck me right over this desk right now if that Scottish baritone talking about extraction was your wife.”

“Would you buy that he’s my husband?”

Without so much as a laugh, the woman pulled a sleek custom Beretta on Locke. The smartlink whirled to fitful life.

“Damn, tough crowd.”

“The only thing funny right now is the fact that you’re still too stupid to talk.”

Locke rolled his eyes.

“Fine. I didn’t want to play this card, but check my ‘link. It’s in my front pocket. My name is Special Agent Vincent Da Silva. I’m with the CAS.”

The woman pursed her thin lips and pulled the commlink from Locke’s pocket. Directed by Wildcard, it displayed the appropriate credentials that had allowed them past the border.

“You’re a long way from home, Special Agent Da Silva.”

“One of the sacrifices I make for my work,” deadpanned Locke, putting his hands at his sides. “So if you’re so good at catching spooks, you’ve no doubt noticed the mercs haunting your hotel. They’re a counterintelligence op out of Seattle. Command’s got us here because we ran afoul of them on an op gone foul a few years back, and we’ve kept an eye on ‘em since.”

The woman adjusted a pristine lock of hair with her left hand and then let her right, still clutching the handgun, drop to her side.

“No shit. I was wondering who was pulling the strings on those new hires.”

Locke's expression hardened.

"How many?"

With a playful smile, the woman lifted her handgun again.

"Wouldn't you like to know? Step off for now, soldier. We'll handle it."

"On whose authority!?"

"Mine. Julia Rothchild. Tir Department of Defense."

Locke chuckled, settling into a synthleather armchair in the corner of the office.

"I suppose that this is the part where you have your way with me, then."

Rothchild's laugh was more incensed than anything, but a slight edge of earnest humor betrayed the pheromones working their magic.

"Are you fucking flirting with me!?"

Locke sank into his seat, doing his best to ignore the tension that armed firearms brought to a room.

"No, it's just that, as we've previously established, I'm in a committed relationship with a very large Scottish man and if you plan on tying me to a chair and hooking a car battery up to my nuts then he might get jealous."

"You're a real class act, you know that, Da Silva?"

Locke shrugged, doing his best to ape Jordan Formic's body language as he luxuriated.

"Well, I'm no James Bond, but I try. This was going to be the part where I reversed the gun on you and then magnanimously spared your life in return for you letting me run my op during the mage's conclave, but instead I thought I'd just ask nicely."

Rothchild smirked.

"That a fact?"

"I'm good with my hands."

"Now you're DEFINITELY flirting with me."

"One of the earliest things you learn in espionage school. More than one way to disarm someone."

"I guess so," said Rothchild, opening her jacket and sliding the pistol into a concealed sleeve holster. "However, I still don't see what's in it for me. As far as I know, these black ops fucks are harmless,

and so long as they don't shoot up the visiting wizards I'm golden."

"Well, there's two things that would be in it for you," said Locke, holding up his fingers to demonstrate. "One, I keep you in the loop if they are trying something, so you can reroute security forces to more pressing concerns. Two, how's dinner sound?"

Rothchild snorted loudly, but then broke out in a grin as she pointed to the door.

"Fine, and fine. But in both cases, you're not touching any sensitive information. Get the fuck out, and I'll see you at eight."

5:00 PM, WESTMORELAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

Dervish started as the phone in their rent-a-jackrabbit sounded. Bend continued to watch the "repair crew" (they had switched up their numbers, Bend noted) while Dervish groggily pressed the "call" button on the AR interface.

"Guys," said Wildcard, "Locke just went crazy."

Bend pulled his goggles up and glanced back at the static image of Wildcard's mask hovering in front of the windshield.

"What, you could tell the difference?"

"He nicked himself a date with a Tir DoD official."

Bend blinked.

"What, like he kidnapped him?"

"No, like he and SHE are having dinner at a fancy restaurant."

Dervish grinned a toothy grin and stifled a guffaw.

"You're shitting me."

"Nay, pure dead serious, chummer."

"Well fuck," said Dervish, rifling through a bag at his side for the last scraps of a fast food 'chicken' sandwich, "let's see what happens."

1:00 AM, JANUARY 28th, 2074, ANCIENTS CHAPTERHOUSE, LAKE OSWEGO, TIR TAIRNGIRE

Wildcard was keeping watch when Locke stumbled into the safehouse, a few buttons loose of the prim business ensemble he'd worn going in. With a throaty chuckle, Wildcard tossed an AR window

to Locke, who moved to catch it instinctively. As he wasn't wearing his gloves, the window instead just passed through his head, causing him to blink.

"The prodigal son, et cetera," said Wildcard. "You seal the deal?"

"A sweaty makeout session in an elevator, but no sex."

Wildcard stared blankly at Locke, his artificial face flat. Locke kneaded his forehead with his knuckles, and sat down on his bedroll.

"Oh, you mean the info. Yeah. I got info."

"Good work, Casanova. Start briefing. I'll run everyone through it in the morning."

"You can run us through it now," buzzed Bend, who was still afield, over Wildcard's tacnet. "Dervish is out, but I only need an hour of sleep a night, remember?"

As a window opened displaying Bend's video call, Bend looked to Dervish, who was curled up in the car seat, cradling his duffel bag of guns as if it were a teddy bear. Wildcard asked,

"We gonna risk waking him up?"

Bend shook his head.

"Alright," said Locke, unbuttoning the rest of his shirt, "we'll bring him up to speed when he wakes up. First off: Rothchild knows that hotel security is compromised. She's been catching some sketchy access codes, so it's reasonable to assume that they've been using the security network to their own ends. Asked her to give me more, but her lips went tight after that."

"In other words," said Bend, "we're going to be running the River's Edge Hotel's security nexus tomorrow."

"I thought of that, too," said Locke. "So I, uh, I made sure to get a good glance on the way over to her room, even if it didn't amount to nothing--"

"For fuck's sake, you sleazy Aztec, it was a first date," interrupted Wildcard. Locke recovered,

"I mean, I didn't get her comm or anything. But I did get a good look at the security exterior. They've got a special elevator on each floor that goes directly to the security offices. We rode in it on the way up--"

"Was that where 'sweaty elevator makeouts' happened?"

"I thought you didn't care about that stuff. Continuing."

Wildcard nodded a concession, and Locke picked up,

"The security elevator is tricky. The call button console on the outside of the elevator runs on a

different system from the interior systems of the elevator. The call button needs to be given proper clearance, and then from the interior console, a spider has to clear your transit. So people who spoof the clearance get trapped in the elevator.”

“But is there a maintenance panel in the elevator?”

“Yeah, looked like.”

“That’s good. It means that, since the spider clears it directly, I can backdoor on the connection to get into the security nexus. Only one problem.”

“What?”

“I’m going to need someone else to physically stand there at the call button, jamming it open and spoofing an all-clear, while I go to work in the elevator.”

Locke hazarded,

“Is that something I can do?”

“Probably not, chummer.”

“Actually, I may have a solution,” announced Jordan Formic, as he joined the video call.

Bend growled,

“Christ, Formic, were you tapping our comms?”

“Just making sure that you boys aren’t so much as grazing the pointy ear tips of any Tir armed forces or government personnel,” announced Formic, “and thank you for not doing anything stupid like clipping Rothchild. She was going to get fast-tracked into the Ghosts, although given how easily she got her shapely ass compromised, maybe I should rethink that decision.”

“You said you could help?”

“Right, right,” drawled Formic. “First off, the Horizon thing was a bust. A bunch of celebrities watching movies, and my boys verified the ID of everyone who came up Awakened. Ran the thing tighter than a 10,000-nuyen-a-night whore. Everything was legit, aside from some washed-up pop tartlet doing blow off a toilet.”

Bend repeated,

“You said you could help, Formic?”

“I just did one-quarter of your job, soldiers. You should be lining up to suck my international superspy cock at this point, much less thanking me. Lucky for you I have a way for you to make it up to me, and help yourselves at the same time. I have another decker for you. Just for the one job.”

Wildcard gave Formic's vidfeed a sideways glance.

"...And the catch?"

"It's my kid niece. She's a damn good hacker, even compromised my commlink once, but she's got it in her head that shadowrunning's as romantic as it is in the movies. Figure you boys could give her a little runner tourism."

Locke posited,

"So this is going to be, what a scared straight thing?"

Formic laughed.

"Oh, goodness, no. Any seventeen-year-old that can hack the Ghost network has the chops for espionage work, and running's as good a start as any. Just show her the ropes and keep her alive."

11:00 AM, THE RIVER'S EDGE HOTEL, PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

Lisa Formic, a spritely freckled elf barely out of high school, practically bounced in place as she walked with Locke to the maintenance entrance of the hotel. Dressed in a coy mini-skirt and a vintage Fuchi hoodie with a backpack nearly twice as big as her torso, she looked every part the decker stereotype, which wasn't really good for Locke's endgame, but a promise was a promise.

"Where's Dervish!? I want to meet Dervish!"

"Dervish is out on a thing with Wildcard right now, but he and Bend will be switching off when we do the run. Remain professional, Lisa."

"Divatrix!"

Locke gave Lisa a questioning look. Pouting, she withdrew her head into her hoodie and whined,

"It's my street name, I got it on Formspring..."

The maintenance door cracked open and a transparent blur emerged, carrying three maintenance uniforms.

"Right on time, Bend."

Bend de-cloaked and handed an appropriately-sized uniform to both Locke and Divatrix.

"How did you acquire these, Bend?"

Bend cocked his head proudly.

"Picked the lock on the maintenance hallway, gecko'd up to the ceiling, tactically traversed it to the

locker room, waited for no cross traffic, then grabbed these from the bin, unjammed the cameras, and made good my escape.”

Locke snorted.

“You know you could have just walked in and taken them, right? Nobody in hotel maintenance gives A shit.”

“And set a bad example for the tourist? Never.”

Divatrix beamed as a call came in from Wildcard.

“Hey Bend, we good for the switch-off?”

Bend tapped a finger to his ear and nodded instinctively.

“Copacetic.”

“Y'think you can handle Dexter duty on your lonesome, even though we were doing the split-into-twos policy?”

“I think Ginsen’s more concerned with this end right now. Watch yourselves. Over and out.”

Bend’s tacsuit reactivated as he pitter-patted through the snow, off into the streets.

12:00 PM, THE RIVER’S EDGE HOTEL LUXURY SUITE, PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

“I’m sorry, Garrett. It’s just not working out,” said Divatrix, her voice cold and unfeeling over the phone.

“No, baby, please,” pleaded Dervish, his fingernails scratching anxiously against the commlink’s receiver.

“I’m leaving you. I’ve found someone better. Someone I deserve.”

“Julie, please. Please--”

The line clicked dead.

In the security office, the spider who had been listening to incoming calls chuckled at the orc getting dumped, but then hastily sobered up when the cameras showed the massive guest, wielding Jack Daniels and Kalashnikov Vodka akimbo, body-slamming clear through the door to his room and stumbling his way down the hallway, smashing the wall lamps and screaming

“JULAAAAAAAAY” as he took tearful swigs.

“No no no no no--”

The spider had just sounded a security alert when, filled with rage and sorrow, the orc punched clear through the security elevator control panel and got his hand stuck.

As twelve elves in security uniforms dogpiled onto Dervish, who was at this point throwing a balls out temper tantrum and spilling booze all over everything, the spider called in for maintenance.

“For fuck’s sake, some greenskin just up and broke the security elevator. We need maintenance on the fifth floor, stat.”

“Roger that,” said Locke, powering up the focus underneath his maintenance uniform and casting Physical Mask on himself, as Divatrix continued to reroute the maintenance call and Wildcard checked his toolkit.

As the three ‘maintenance workers’ pulled their uniform caps low over their faces and approached the elevator a few minutes later, Dervish’s screams had abated, as he was now being detained in a corner office, sobbing openly and promising to pay for the damages.

“We want this back up by three,” said a gruff elf security guard standing next to the elevator.

“Yessir,” nodded Wildcard, as Divatrix found the relevant exposed port through the wreckage and hacked the elevator doors. Locke started sweeping up the debris around the hallway.

“What are you doing?” grunted the security guard as Wildcard settled into the elevator and removed the maintenance panel.

“Running a basic systems diagnostic,” countered Wildcard, as he looped the interior cameras, “since these old models tend ta go tits-up with too much jostling. Door repair’s actually pretty cut and dry, just want to avoid any system damage from false positives.”

The security guard nodded and went back to his post. Divatrix flashed Wildcard a wide grin, visible in the guard’s periphery, although Wildcard gave her a disapproving glare in return, causing her to look down in embarrassment.

After about a minute of sifting and dodging the spider, Wildcard found paydirt.

“Bingo,” his voice sounded over the team’s tacnet, “Ginsen’s mole set up a concealed backdoor to their own systems in the security nexus. Spider hasn’t found it yet, didn’t know to be looking for it. I’m going to brute-force it.”

“This is so cool!”

“Can the chatter,” said Locke. “You think you can manage to do it quiet?”

“Even if they know we’ve hacked ‘em, it’s eye for a bloody eye at this point.”

“Solid copy. Do what you have to do.”

A few minutes later, Wildcard jacked out of the elevator maintenance panel.

“We’re good to go.”

Locke moved to make small talk with the security guard, making the other two team members’ subvocalizing less suspicious. Divatrix asked,

“So now’s when we escape?”

Wildcard gave Divatrix another glare and responded,

“Not unless you want the bloke with the gun there to catch on. No, now we repair the elevator.”

Divatrix frowned.

“I didn’t know running was this much manual labor.”

“Consider this a learning experience. Wrench?”

6:00 PM, ANCIENTS CHAPTERHOUSE, LAKE OSWEGO, TIR TAIRNGIRE

With Bend and Dervish afield again, Wildcard put together an encrypted conference call and began running everyone through the pilfered data.

“Our worst fears aren’t quite confirmed, gents, but this all comes close. First off: Ginsen knows me, Dervish, and Locke by name and skillset. Bend they’ve tagged as a “mystery accomplice in the Ghosts,” which speaks volumes to how Bend’s been keeping himself sparse to their scrutiny. Interestingly, the organization seems to be on hostile terms with Aztechnology--there’s a kill-on-sight order for AZT agents--which would explain why they haven’t sold Locke up the river.”

Locke grimaced as he played with his Macuahuitl, clearly distressed by this turn of events.

“The organization seems to be about 90 percent outside mercs, and 10 percent in-house specialists, the majority of whom are Amazonian, which might explain the hostility to AZT. They’ve got about 10 active agents operating in the city right now, including Mr. Whistler, but a small army of mercenary sleeper cells lying in wait around the Tir.”

Dervish asked,

“Anything on the target?”

“Glad you asked. Ginsen is definitively not on Alvarez or his buyer’s side, and their info nullifies the Aztecs as a possible buyer, nixing the Aztlan ambassador’s ball as a hand-off location. Ginsen’s goal is to steal the artifact from either side for high command, whoever or whatever that is. Interestingly, they still mark the ambassador’s ball as a target site, but for a totally different reason: Ginsen suspects that the ball is being used as a front to move Homegrown Soldier Program specimens, and they’re going to stage a major bombing on the Aztecs.”

“They really have a hate-on for the Aztecs.”

“I think we can safely assume that Ginsen is in bed with the Amazonian liberation movement at this point. Now, as for Alvarez, they almost caught him earlier this month, but he slipped through. They managed to get his astral signature, though.”

Bend smiled.

“And?”

“He’s Path of the Wheel. Which is a popular Tir magical tradition, yes, but if we assume our info is good and he’s having to impersonate an important person at one of the ball events to sneak the artifact past, that narrows our candidates for impersonation down to four.”

“Kick-ass,” said Dervish. “Let’s get a brief.”

“First candidate is a Tir Armed Forces four-star general, Peter McKinley. Known Path of the Wheel combat mage, also a confirmed bachelor. Attending the Ares drone unveiling, but not the mage’s conclave. Has a team of Ghosts on him at all times, so an unlikely but possible target for replacement.”

Bend shook his head.

“McKinley’s a famous hardcase. More trouble than it’s worth.”

“Still worth a look-see, though,” riposted Wildcard. “Next up is Larry Colburn, a minor executive in Tellestrain Industries. Tellestrian handles magical imports during the ball season, so we can flag this as a very likely possibility for Alvarez’s smokescreen. The only downside is that his authoritative position over magical goods makes him almost too obvious of a target. Lives in a posh condo uptown. Will be attending the mage’s conclave and the Ares unveiling.”

The whole team grunted affirmation, and Wildcard continued.

“James Lynch is the Horizon Liaison to Tir Tairngire. Unmarried, like the other two. Lives in a townhouse with a dedicated staff, which does mean that there’s a smaller window to replace him. Will be attending the mage’s conclave and the Ares unveiling.”

More affirmation.

“The last possibility is Harrison Graham, the Tir Na Nog vice ambassador. He lives in special housing in the government building, has a lovely wife, and also has a dedicated staff. Will be present at the Ares unveiling.”

“He sounds really unlikely,” noted Locke.

“Yes,” agreed Bend, “but Alvarez could want us to think that.”

“True.”

“We’ve got a few more variables,” said Wildcard, bringing up some images of various shadowrunners. “Ginsen’s tagged Alvarez impersonating a Johnson and since then has been trying to correlate runners to employers. Four teams operating in the Tir came up consistent as currently working for Alvarez. First is a German heavy-combat assault team, led by a combat mage known as Quake. Other team members include a sammy and a physad, but mostly a mystery. Classic German shadowrunners, organize for the job then fracture. Already killed about four of Ginsen’s guys. Second and third teams are both pretty standard setups running out of Seattle. Sammy, infiltrator, hacker, mage. You know the deal. Last team is...special.”

Locke cocked an eyebrow.

“Special?”

Wildcard cringed.

“...Los Angeles runners. A shadowrunning team out of Hollywood that goes by “The Nightengales.”

Mage and social infiltrator named Tulip, technomancer named Echo, gunbunny adept named Tweak, and razorgirl named Gillette.”

“How’d Ginsen dig up that much info?”

“They’ve released two albums and a reality tridshow.”

Dervish choked.

“You’re shitting me.”

Bend sighed and interrupted,

“You’ve never met Los Angeles runners. I believe it.”

“One final variable,” noted Wildcard, his voice dark.

“What’s up?”

“Ginsen’s pegged us as working for Lofwyr and Schwartzkopf, with certainty. They’ve also been keeping tabs on Hestaby, although standing orders are to avoid her.”

“So Ginsen is operating on dragon-level.”

“Seems so.”

Locke gawked.

“Black-ops motherfuckers...”

“Let’s get back to the job at hand,” said Wildcard, sternly. “Dervish, tomorrow you’re enrolling as a provisional security guard at the Museum of Science and Industry.”

“Can do.”

8:00 AM, JANUARY 29th, 2074, ANCIENTS CHAPTERHOUSE, LAKE OSWEGO, TIR
TAIRNGIRE

“What the hell is all this,” asked Dervish, in his tailored business suit, as he approached the police cordon around the museum. “Was there a break-in?”

“Yes and no,” said Wildcard. “Breaking news this morning. Runners were caught trying to plant cameras and other sensors in the storage room where they’re keeping Ares’ drone.”

“You sound giddy, Wildcard.”

“That’s because the runners, who are currently in police custody, match Ginsen’s specs for one of Alvarez’s Seattle teams. They plead guilty to corporate espionage, they’re saying that Aztechnology is trying to steal the drone.”

Dervish grinned.

“What dirty fucking liars.”

Bend popped into the call to caution,

“This could be a double-blind, guys.”

Wildcard countered,

“Unlikely, with the money that Alvarez supposedly put into these people. Millions for placing cameras? They’ll be set even when they get out of prison.”

“Where is he getting these funds?”

Dervish suggested,

“He could have stolen the orichalcum. Otherwise, I don’t know.”

“Ace that job interview, champ.”

“I plan to.”

As Dervish bypassed the cordon and made for the security office, he observed the maintenance workers removing bullets from the walls and refurbishing exhibits. A few faces pinged, recognizing newer Ginsen operatives identified by Wildcard’s stolen data.

“Ginsen’s got the same hunch we do. I’m not inconspicuous. They know, and now they know we do too.”

“Couldn’t be avoided,” commented Wildcard. “Just get the job.”

“Jenny Haldeman,” said the stocky woman sitting at the security desk, as she stood up to shake Dervish’s hand. She was not an unattractive woman, per se, but suffice to say she clearly favored practical over aesthetic muscle. Only her inherently-slimming elven genetics saved her from resembling a steak with tits and security armor. “Security director. You must be Mr...Strongarm?”

“Yeah, that,” said Dervish, trying not to roll his eyes as he shook her hand.

“So, Mr. Strongarm, what credentials do you think you will bring to this position, given the recent break-in and other security concerns?”

“Look, ma’am. I’m going to be straight with you. I’m an international mercenary stepping in for quick cash. I’ve served in Bogota, Neo-Tokyo, and across North America. I figured that you could benefit from my talents while I base here to pursue my own agenda.”

Haldeman stared at Dervish, and an awkward silence reigned for about 15 seconds.

“Your first day on the job is the 7th, Mr. Strongarm.”

As Dervish nodded astutely and stood to leave, Haldeman smiled conspiratorially at him and added,

“I’ll trust you to use regulation equipment and not bring the armor suit.”

Dervish’s grin nearly split his face in half.

“Holy hell,” commented Wildcard, “was that a fan?”

“Seems like,” said Dervish.

“Hey, Dexter’s giving me the ‘urgent’ signal on my commlink,” said Locke. “Let’s set up another meet.”

Bend said, tentatively,

“More info already?”

“It seems to have been spilling in a lot lately,” responded Dervish.

HIGH NOON, THE BLUE BOHEMIAN RESTAURANT, DOWNTOWN PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

The team, in their best suits, sat in a luxurious real-leather booth across from Dexter. They had ascertained a relatively private booth at an extremely fancy French Canadian restaurant, with large windows with ornate blinds facing the street. The interior was richly decorated and dimmed in a very

traditional esthetic, bringing to mind both romantic evenings and major business mergers. Wildcard had been loath to hand his car over to the valet, and so had instead parked half a block down from the entrance.

“Big news,” said Dexter, his fingers quivering over his poutine. “Really big.”

“It’s obligatory,” said Locke, “but how big?”

“Triple AAA megacorp and great dragon big.”

“Shit.”

“First,” said Dexter, looking up from his food, “Horizon just moved billions of nuyen through Tellestrian Industries, corresponding with the hit on the orichalcum boat. No intent stated. There’s word—whispered word, mind--that Dawkins is involved.”

Wildcard blinked.

“Dawkins?”

Locke responded,

“Horizon special ops. Spies specializing in public opinion manipulation and memetic warfare. Also, strictly speaking, an urban legend.”

“Not to me, they’re not,” grumbled Bend. “They’re absolute hell to run a counter-op on. Well, I guess we have our buyer.”

The team nodded. Wildcard extrapolated,

“Alvarez fits the bill of the Dawkins Group to a T. It sounds like he’s jumping ship to Horizon and buying his way into a powerful position in the org with the artifact.”

“Likely, but we can’t guess at that yet,” said Bend.

The team all looked expectantly at Dexter, whose face showed the all-too-familiar pallor of fear.

“That’s...that’s not all. A few of my contacts say that the magical signature of a Great Dragon is somewhere in the Tir. One that’s not Hestaby. Someone who showed up unannounced.”

There was a long pause as everyone deliberated, but Wildcard broke the silence.

“Oh...Oh God. I know who it is, too.”

Everyone looked to the hacker.

“Amazonian black ops targeting Aztechnology, running espionage on Hestaby and Lofwyr?”

Bend was the next to get it.

“Holy fuck. No. That can’t be what it is.”

Locke announced, sullen,

“Sirrurg the Destroyer is running Ginsen.”

>Great Dragon Count: 4

After yet another long pause as everyone stared into their plates, Dexter announced,

“I’m going to get some air.”

No one stopped him.

About fifteen seconds later, Dervish jumped to his feet so hard that he flipped the table.

“SHIT!”

As the screaming patrons of the restaurant scattered, Dervish pulled his shotgun out of his duffel bag and launched bodily towards the front door of the restaurant. Wildcard was next up, his limbs jerking into spasmodic reflexive motion as his Wired Reflexes kicked into gear. His nickel-plated, tricked-out Predator launched into his hand from his hidden arm slide as he used his other hand to don his mask. Locke used the tipped table as a makeshift magical circle and summoned a flaming serpent, while Bend pulled his Thunderbolt, turned to the crowd, and yelled,

“EVERYONE STAY DOWN!”

As Dervish stumbled out of the restaurant, the valet asked,

“Sir, which car should I retrieve for you?”

The valet’s face pinged as Ginsen. Seeing Dervish’s hostile intent, the valet pulled a tactical pistol from his vest, at which point Dervish tore out his trachea, to the screaming of the crowd. The valet gurgled and fell backward into the street, turning the snow red.

“Target sighted,” screamed Wildcard as he made a dead sprint in the direction of his car. Across the street a tinny whistling (this time the instrumental to a CrimeTime rap) could be heard from a man in full milspec armor as he ushered Dexter at gunpoint into a grey stepvan. A mage in combat fatigues decked out in shamanic fetishes grabbed Dexter by the wrist and pulled him in as a dozen pedestrians watched.

“The pedestrians aren’t running,” yelled Locke. “Why aren’t they running?”

As submachine guns met fists and the pedestrians were revealed to be wearing ballistic vests under their clothing, the Whistler stopped whistling briefly. His voice sounded, over his suit mic,

“LIGHT ‘EM UP!”

Wildcard pitched bodily behind his car and Locke and Bend dove behind the bar of the restaurant as a clacking cacophony of silenced gunfire burst every window in the restaurant. The restaurant-goers who had been too stupid to kiss the floor were the first to go; men and women in rich yuppie clothes spouted red as they pitched back into the dining plaza.

Roaring like an orc possessed, Dervish boosted across the street to attempt to catch the car, taking innumerable small-caliber bullets in the process. He indiscriminately fired an underbarrel grenade into the Ginsen tac-team, causing them to scatter long enough for Wildcard to pop the trunk of his now-bullet-riddled Hyundai and retrieve his HVAR. The unsilenced gun sounded like a jackhammer as he pumped a solid stream of rounds into their aggressors, ruining the facade of the fancy playhouse across from the restaurant. Three Ginsen operatives hit pavement.

Bend yelled, as Whistler slammed on the gas,

“They’re getting away!”

Dervish kept pace with the car, but was suddenly knocked sprawling by a large-caliber APDS round that slammed through his shoulder. Wildcard isolated the node signal on the restaurant’s roof. His accent bled through as he yelled,

“The fookin’ drake lant onna roof! E’s got a bleedin’ anti-material rifle!”

“Cover me!”

Locke vaulted his cover and plowed through the shattered window to take cover with Wildcard behind the Hyundai, as Wildcard and Dervish laid down suppressive fire. The pure hail of bullets and debris had put down five Ginsen agents at this point, although the rest had taken cover behind parked cars on the other side of the street.

Locke retrieved his LMG, slammed the bipod down on the Hyundai’s hood, and began going to town as his fire spirit roared past towards the speeding van.

“What’s it doing,” yelled Dervish, as he loosed another grenade with a FOONK.

“Accident!”

With an ear-splitting BANG, the entire left rear wheel of the van disconnected, causing the vehicle to slam headlong into a concrete road divider.

“Give me cover!”

Wildcard broke into a low sprint on the teams’ side of the road, trying to keep his head behind the cars, as Dervish got his footing and boosted across the street into a flanking position. Bend sprinted outside, tossed a flashbang onto the roof of the restaurant to keep the drake occupied, and then dove prone as a renewed torrent of bullets tore apart everything on the street. As Dervish opened up into the undefended crowd of sleeper agents, Locke took the opportunity to switch targets and try to tag the

drake.

With eight Ginsen casualties spattered all along the sidewalk, the remaining four agents hauled ass for the alleyways as the drake took a few of Locke's bullets, shifted back into a dragon, and blasted into the sky, away from the team. Rather than pursue, Dervish extended his cyberblade and worked his way along the line of writhing bodies, systematically finishing each of them off with swift jabs to their heads.

When Wildcard caught up to the van, the engine block was on fire, and the Whistler was sputtering, reaching for his sidearm. Not taking any chances, Wildcard slammed into the driver's side door, pressed his Predator directly against the seam between Whistler's helmet and the rest of his milspec armor, and squeezed the trigger.

And squeezed it, and squeezed it, and squeezed it, until Whistler's helmet came loose, revealing that the would-be office monkey was choking to death on his own blood, his eyes wide with shock.

Wildcard put two rounds in his temple, to be sure.

Wildcard pulled his silent body from the car, before stepping into the driver's seat and looking back into the passenger cabin. The Amazonian mage briefly made eye contact with Wildcard, although his broken arm distracted him long enough for Wildcard to nail him twice in the chest. As he sputtered and gasped, Wildcard reached out and grabbed him by the collar, then pulled him in and put two in his head, as well. Dexter squealed as the gunshots echoed in the confined space, his face covered in blood.

There was a lull as Wildcard checked his Predator's magazine. 5 shots remaining.

"Th-thank God," sputtered Dexter, although he looked up to see the barrel of Wildcard's Predator.

"Sorry, mate. I'm feert that you jus' became a security liability."

As Bend caught up to the van, Wildcard stepped out, absolutely covered in gore. Sirens rang in the distance.

"Bend. Dexter's dead. Sitrep."

"Ginsen's scattered. Dervish is hurt, but not bad. Your car's whole left side is fucked."

"Does it still have an engine?"

"Yeah."

"Then we're fucking off s'far as we can make it."

As the team piled into the Super Getaway Hyundai, Dervish grabbed the passenger-side door, which was hanging on one hinge, to keep it in place. He groaned in pain as the action put pressure on his shoulder.

There was a brief pause as Wildcard didn't start the car, and Bend gave him an accusatory glare.

“BUCKLE YER FECKIN' SEATBELTS, YEH CUNTS!”

Everyone did.

CHAPTER 21: The Final Run, Part 3

>If you have epic drama music, now is the time. I find that music really helped me in writing this story, which is why I tend to make suggestions for enjoying it.

>My personal suggestion is the London Metropolitan Orchestra's cover of Amon Tobin's "At the End of the Day".

8:40 PM, FEBRUARY 23rd, 2074, MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY, DOWNTOWN PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

Barlowe checked his watch for the fifteenth time. He insisted on wearing the old thing; he didn't trust some fancy computer brick to tell him the time. Tetchy, the 250-pound orc paced around the crates in the dim basement, his combat boots clacking on the hard floor as he checked the ammunition in his LMG. He glanced at IceQueen the hacker, sitting atop one of the stacks of crates and kicking her feet absently as she fiddled with her commlink. The tall, skinny elf was dressed provocatively, despite her paramilitary gear; her idea of a heavy combat loadout had always been more "Tank Girl" than "The Punisher." She rattled around a pill bottle with her off-hand and unceremoniously put it to her lips, swallowing a few as if it were a gulp of a beverage.

"Fuck, you gotta do that here?"

"Keeps me focused, boss."

"Keeps you focused on the ceiling when you fuckin' OD is what."

IceQueen stuck her tongue out at Barlowe.

"Whatever you say, Dad."

Meld, the team's mage, spoke up--quietly, as always. It was easy to ignore the broad dwarf in the black hoodie (although today he wore a ballistic vest over the characteristic item of clothing), which was a fact that had kept Meld alive a long time in the running biz. Meld was leaning on an old-school transport trolley, atop which sat a toddler-sized, jet-black ceramic box that he had assured the team was "the right one."

"How's Johnson doing?"

"Right. Um, lemme check," said IceQueen, scrambling for her commlink again.

Barlowe grunted.

"Helps you focus my ass!"

IceQueen rolled her eyes and brought up an AR window for the rest of the team to see.

"Horizon's extracting Johnson in about 45 seconds. Then we wait for his all-clear to take the package to the roof. Then we get our million."

“Ain’t that simple,” growled Barlowe. “Not with Dervish in the building it isn’t.”

“Dervish is after Johnson,” clucked Meld. “Not us.”

“That’s Johnson’s information. Johnson’s information is compromised.”

“We don’t know that, not for sure. What happened to the Nightengales could have been a bad coincidence.”

“Grow the fuck up!”

IceQueen screamed, putting her hand up,

“COOL IT!”

A bare bulb flickered once as the orc and dwarf looked to their teammate.

“Johnson gave us the go-ahead. We hand the package off to the German running team and then we’re home free.”

Barlowe blinked.

“Op’s live, then?”

“Op is live.”

“I hear something.”

The elevator dinged as it settled into the basement, surprising the three runners, who hastily scrambled for cover. Barlowe dragged IceQueen behind a stack of boxes while Meld stashed the trolley in an open crate and then dove behind an antique reel-to-reel that was gathering dust.

The doors opened, revealing four men in gray armor jumpsuits and balaclavas. The merc in the lead had one of the museum’s security guards at gunpoint, and was marching him into the basement.

“Where is the box!? Speak quickly.”

The guard spoke waveringly, through the polarized glass of his helmet faceplate,

“It hasn’t been moved. It’s down here.”

The lead merc nodded back at his teammates and hefted his gun, an Ares Alpha with aftermarket attachments.

“Serano! Você pode ver o artefato?”

The merc in the back fingered a dreamcatcher and pointed at the crate holding the package.

“Sim, esta na caixa.”

Barlowe glanced over at IceQueen and whispered,

“Aztecs?”

IceQueen shook her head and whispered back,

“Amazonians.”

As the merc mage peered into the crate, nodding, the lead merc looked back at another teammate.

“Desconecte seu biomonitor, depois atire na cabeça dele.”

With a nod, the addressed merc produced a commlink, tapped a few commands, and then pulled a Crusader machine pistol and planted a clattering burst in the back of the guard’s neck. Brain and bone dribbled from the polarized faceplate as the guard crumpled onto the tile floor.

“Fucking hell,” hissed IceQueen.

“Backdoor on the security system and jam the elevator doors open,” commented Meld, calmly, over the team’s tacnet. “We’ll hit them when they all clump up.”

Barlowe nodded slowly.

“Roger.”

“Mexa-se!”

The mercs beat a tactical retreat to the elevator, with the mage pulling the trolley. As the merc hacker pressed the “door close” button and nothing happened, the rest of the mercs instinctively glanced towards him. That was the opening that Meld and Barlowe needed, as Meld planted a Stunball right in the middle of the elevator, and Barlowe followed up by popping over his crate, setting his LMG at shoulder-height, and then opening up on the stumbling figures within the elevator. The mercs cried out in pain and surprise as Barlowe carved expert lines across their flailing bodies, taking care to avoid the trolley carrying the package. With the elevator reduced to a charnel house, Meld and IceQueen advanced to either side of the elevator and surveyed the scene.

While Meld drew his combat knife and dispassionately checked the bodies for life, IceQueen gingerly stepped over one of the corpses and investigated the clean holes planted in the back wall of the elevator.

“No machinery hit. Elevator should be good.”

Barlowe tromped into the elevator, leveling his gun at the hip to face the doors.

“What are we waiting for, then?”

“Just your go-ahead, chief,” said IceQueen, as she willed the doors closed, putting her hand on the interior railing to keep from stumbling over the bodies as they shifted with the elevator’s ascent.

As the elevator lurched to life, Meld glanced at the ceiling.

“Don’t look now, but there’s another one of those micro cameras up in the corner.”

“Yeah, they’re slaved to this Hyundai out in the parking lot,” commented IceQueen. “Go ahead and fry it.”

Meld nodded succinctly and glared at the tiny lens, which crackled and popped with heat. As the elevator began slowing down on the top floor, Barlowe adjusted his LMG on its gyromount and prepared to fire.

The elevator doors opened onto the Planetarium, in the middle of a show. The moons of Jupiter hovered above the spherical room as the team cautiously advanced into the room, their boots clinking on the catwalk-esque floor.

“The show’s motion-activated,” commented IceQueen. “Doesn’t start until people enter the room. Someone was here before us.”

“Probably the Amazonians,” commented Barlowe. “Stay frosty.”

As the team advanced toward the center of the room, they found a body slumped against the base of the central projector. The infiltrator’s tactical cloak sputtered and turned on and off, interacting poorly with the blood dripping from a few well-placed gunshot wounds to the sternum. Barlowe placed his hand on the transparent hood and pulled it back, revealing a photogenic blonde woman.

“One of Horizon’s. She’s fresh. The Amazonians definitely came through here.”

“Doesn’t mean that there isn’t anyone else,” retorted Meld, pushing the trolley towards the roof-access stairs.

Barlowe wordlessly backed toward the stairs, moving to cover his team.

As the team advanced up the stairs, with IceQueen helping Meld to lift the trolley, Barlowe shifted ahead in the thin concrete passage to deliberately block access to the package if they were double-crossed. He knocked twice on the roof access stairs, which were unlocked and opened after a short pause by a broad, Slavic-looking orc with a shaved head and obvious cybereyes, decked out in a suit of black ceramic tactical armor.

Barlowe surveyed the situation. Debris fluttered across the roof, spurred by the still-spinning dual counter-rotors of a jet black transport chopper, retrofitted with twin miniguns that gleamed in the electric light of the Portland sprawl. Six men in matching black combat armor were set up at firing positions across the roof: four in each corner, one guarding the helicopter (whom Meld swiftly marked on the tacnet as an Adept), and the one holding the open door. The seventh man, who didn’t match the mold, was a harsh-featured German human in urban-camo paramilitary fatigues who jogged

up to Barlowe. A series of hermetic foci dangled from his bandolier as he slowed his pace, surveying the package behind Barlowe as if the orc wasn't there. The air around him crackled with energy.

"Hermann! Der Artikel ist gut! Informieren Sie unsere Arbeitgeber!"

"Lot of new languages today," grumbled Barlowe, as he approached the mage. "Are you Quake?"

"Ya, that is me," said the German, nodding. "Give us the package, like arranged."

"Hold up. I need to make sure that my team doesn't get double-crossed," said Barlowe, holding a hand up. "I'm going to have my team take up firing positions as I do the hand-off from the cover of the stairway."

The German's face hardened.

"We don't have time for this. Hand it over."

"I know enough to know we're in over our heads. If you start shooting, the deal's off."

Quake seethed as Barlowe retreated into the tight stairwell. As Meld lifted the package to his grasp, a voice shouted from the darkness of the planetarium,

"Nobody move! The hand-off is off!"

Barlowe sighted the goggle flare off a lithe elf in a tactical cloak taking cover amidst the seats in the planetarium. His finger hovered over the trigger, although the next call stayed his hand.

"If anyone so much as raises their gun, I'll blow you all to kingdom come!"

Quake shouted, over Barlowe's shoulder,

"It's a bluff! I had my men sweep the roof and they didn't find anything!"

The elf decloaked and held a hand over his cover, clearly gripping a detonator. He shouted back,

"There's a Comp-C pipe bomb under the rooftop staircase. Have your hacker check it."

IceQueen glanced under the stairs, paled, and looked back up at Barlowe and Quake, as Meld kept his hands up.

"There's a box down there, wrapped up in ribbons like a Christmas gift."

Quake shouted, enraged,

"That's because it's a bluff!"

Meld spoke up, quietly,

“He’s a Buddhist mystic adept. I read this guy’s dossier, Barlowe. He’s a pacifist.”

“You’re fucking sure about that?”

Quake growled, quietly enough for the elf to not hear,

“I have the same information. He’s on Dervish’s team.”

Barlowe squeezed the trigger of his LMG, tearing apart the chairs that Bend was using for cover and sending him sprawling to the ground, spattering the display behind him with gore. Barlowe barked,

“Let’s move!”

As Barlowe tossed the black box to Quake, who caught it awkwardly, IceQueen screamed,

“BOSS! THIS IS A REAL BOMB!”

As the trid phantasm melted away, the real Bend reappeared behind the planetarium’s central projector, whimpering through open tears as he clutched the detonator to his heart.

“M-m-m-m-m-”

Meld’s throat caught in his chest as he broke his cool facade to yell,

“WOAH! HEY! YOU’RE A PACIFIST! REMEMBER, YOU’RE A PACIFIST!”

“M-m-merry Christmas.”

“What--”

Barlowe, IceQueen, and Meld were reduced to particulate matter as the roof erupted like a volcano, spewing ash, twisted metal, and concrete into the night sky.

In the distance, sirens sounded as the Tir Terror Alert System blared to life.

>Did Bend just rules lawyer his way around his Pacifist quality by claiming that having them open fire at his illusory double let him claim 'Self Defense'?

>He actually burned off the Pacifist quality right then and there, with karma, and only because of the extreme duress placed on the character (as you will see during this storytime). We all agreed it was dramatically appropriate.

3:30 PM, JANUARY 29th, 2074, LEWIS AND CLARK HIGHWAY, TIR TAIRNGIRE

Dervish cradled his once-shattered shoulder, which had managed to piece itself back together through the select combination of his Platelet Factories and Locke’s magic. Nevertheless, he had lost a lot of blood, and he felt nauseous and lightheaded as he reclined in what remained of the shotgun seat of the

Super Getaway Hyundai. During the healing process, he had kept dropping the passenger-side door, and so the team had simply had him force it into the hinges, crushing it into place. As the river flowed to the South of the highway in dissonant serenity, Wildcard asked, darkly,

“So we’re all in agreement, then?”

Locke nodded.

“Si.”

Bend paused for a moment, but then nodded as well.

“Yeah. Let’s do it.”

Dervish weakly grunted an affirmation.

A stock “phone-ring” sound effect played as Wildcard called up Schwartzkopf.

“Mr. Johnson speaking.”

“Johnson,” gulped Locke, “We’re here to renegotiate.”

“Now,” said Schwartzkopf, calmly, “I don’t see why you would so unprofessionally--”

“We know about Surrurg, Mr. Johnson. We know he’s after the item. We wouldn’t run against you for two hundred thousand, and we sure as hell won’t run against him for two hundred thousand.”

“I see.” Schwartzkopf sounded disappointed. “I believe that we had a miscommunication as to the difficulty of this mission, and I’m sorry that you weren’t up to the task.”

“That’s not quite the case, Mr. Johnson,” said Locke, tentatively. “We merely believe that if we’re to break one of the core rules of our profession, to the extent that our job security in the field will be jeopardized forthwith...”

“...You would like a reward more in keeping with a retirement fund than merely paying off existing debts.”

“I’m glad that you understand, Mr. Johnson.”

“Yes, I believe that I do. I’m going to put you on hold now.”

There was a long, tense silence. The entire team was well aware that, given Lofwyr’s reputation, they were running the chance of having the kill order dropped on them then and there, and everyone knew it.

“...Mr. Ramirez? Are you still there?”

“Yes, Mr. Johnson.”

“I’ve talked to my old friend about expanding the resources assigned to this operation.”

Locke didn’t have the balls to ask Schwartzkopf to continue. There was another pause.

“He’s agreed to two million per head, plus a bonus.”

There was an audible “woosh” as everyone in the car exhaled.

“Thank you, Mr. Johnson, and please extend our thanks to your old friend. Could you please clarify the nature of the bonus?”

“In fact,” said Schwartzkopf, “that is the next order of business. You see, should this mission be a success, as compensation for your imminent retirement, my old friend has offered each of you one wish, within his ability to grant, to be redeemed after the mission’s success.”

Dervish gawked.

“Like...like a genie?”

There was a loud “clang” as Bend slapped him upside the head.

“...Yes, Dervish. Like a genie. If you have any suggestions now, it would help for me to arrange the necessary factors.”

A single beaded tear ran across Wildcard’s unmasked neck, a brief souvenir of his prior certainty that he would be eaten.

“Are you serious, Mr. Johnson?”

“Quite. Let’s start with you, Mr. Ramirez, since I suspect that yours is the most obvious.”

Locke nearly blurted out,

“I want the bounty called off. And I want a stable job somewhere that I never have to see an Aztechnology billboard again.”

“Yes, that’s approximately what I expected. Mr. Cadbury?”

Wildcard said,

“I want a pointless government position somewhere that I can use as a cover for a criminal fixer network, filling in the talent gaps between syndicate contractors. I want to run heists from Manila to Tokyo with impunity and be untouchable for it.”

Schwartzkopf paused.

“So you don’t want out of the criminal life?”

“I want further in,” said Wildcard.

“Very well. Mr. Colby?”

“I want back into espionage, and the authority to pick my own jobs in the Tir hierarchy.”

A scribbling noise suggested that Schwartzkopf was writing the wishes down on a piece of physical paper.

“And you, Dervish?”

Dervish took a moment to think about it.

“I wanna be a company man. Not some stooge; somebody rich and kick-ass, like Alvarez. And I wanna meet my real family, I guess.”

“With your talents, I’m sure that it can be arranged,” said Schwartzkopf. “Very well, gentlemen. I hope that you are pleased with the renegotiation, and expect to hear a report of your success very soon.”

“Y-yes, Mr. Johnson,” said Locke, trembling, as Schwartzkopf hung up.

The team had a few minutes of driving (under the speed limit, for the first time in Wildcard’s criminal career) to recollect themselves. A lone vanity speedboat buzzed down the Columbia River to the team’s right, passing them as two yuppie elves briefly regarded the car and then went back to their business. An AR bulletin hovered by the otherwise-unspoiled wilderness to the left, alerting onlookers that deer had been spotted in the area and might try to cross the highway. An eighteen-wheeler passed by in the opposite direction, honking twice at a bank in the road.

“We need to go back,” gulped Wildcard. “I promised Belfast I’d help him with a bank robbery.”

“Yeah,” said Bend, glumly. “It was the payment for Kara to move our stuff across the border.”

“I’m going to consider any job to be a welcome distraction from...” Locke trailed off, “...you know. This.”

Dervish grunted an affirmation.

Wildcard began decelerating to look for an opportunity to make a U-Turn, which unfortunately had the added effect of allowing their pursuer its opportunity to plow through the treeline.

Heralded by the immediate flight of every bird roosting within a kilometer, a seven-foot-tall creature launched over the highway, adjusted in midair with a burst of its thrusters, flipped twice, and landed on the engine-block feet first with a horrible screech and earth-shaking crunch. The rear of the car jumped with the sheer force of the impact as a humanoid figure that was almost entirely mechanical reared up and deployed a machete out of one arm and a rotary machine gun out of the other. The

jaundiced, stigmatized upper half of an orcish head lolled from atop a buzzing electronic spine, its mechanical lower jaw gnashing.

“G-G-GIVE ME FELIX RAMIREZ.”

As Locke just screamed aloud and flailed for his LMG, Dervish extended his cyberblades and instinctively stood up, his shoulders plowing through the flimsy remains of the car’s roof. The cyberzombie’s machine gun spun to life and began firing wildly as Dervish grabbed it by the arm and forced it to pepper the river with shots.

The cyberzombie stared at Dervish, its unadorned red cybereyes rolling across his features. A flash of recognition scrunched up its features.

“WIL-WIL-WILLIEEEEE!?”

“Oh, for--fucking WHAT!?”

The cyberzombie hooked with its machete arm, slamming the blade deep into Dervish’s head but not breaching his highly-reinforced skull. Nevertheless, Dervish catapulted off of the veering car, slamming into the ground and rolling as he trailed blood from his brow. The cyberzombie re-focused its attention on the vehicle and was promptly knocked off, itself, as Bend nailed it right in the sternum with a burst of fire from Dervish’s shotgun. As the car swerved to a stop on the shoulder, the cyberzombie did a backflip, settled into a low hover over the highway, and then began pouring rounds into the left side of the car, blasting off the driver’s-side door and prompting Bend, Locke, and Wildcard to take cover behind the whole of the vehicle. Dervish stumbled to his feet fifty meters away, wiping a prodigious amount of blood from his face.

“WHY DO CYBERZOMBIES KEEP CALLING ME THAT!?”

“DO NOT IN-IN-INTERFERE WILLEEE THE FUGITIVE HAND OVER THE FUGITIVE”

Locke slammed his bipod down on the wrecked hood of the Hyundai and proceeded to work his way through a drum of APDS in response, continuing to scream at the top of his lungs, as Wildcard and Bend scattered. Flinching at the impacts as though it was reacting to being pelted with softballs, the thing slowly turned to face the car again. Its jaw lolled open, snake-like, as it produced a rocket-propelled grenade launcher from its upper chest and folded its inhuman head down to aim it. The orcish face tore and bled further.

Suddenly, a Tir Attack chopper appeared in the air. It literally “appeared,” in the sense that Bend had hit the radius of the zombie’s mana-dampening field and popped off a trid phantasm. The fake pilot announced,

“WE HAVE YOU SURROUNDED. STAND DOWN.”

With an awful snap, the cyberzombie’s head/neck/rocket launcher spun 180 degrees and launched the grenade at the chopper, whereupon it proceeded to sail right through and fly into the afternoon sky. The zombie stumbled on its feet as Wildcard sprinted up to it with a fresh drum full of Ex-Explosive and began hammering away at its upper body at point-blank range, tearing its gun arm clean off with a

spray of synthetic blood replacement. Nonplussed, it turned to face him, writhing as it danced with the explosive bullets, and slowly began to step forward like a swimmer stepping into a wave. Its machete arm gleamed.

“TH-TH-THAT WAS A DIRTY TRICK DIRTY TRICK DIRTY TRICK THAT YOU FIRST.”

Wildcard screamed, panicking,

“Any time, Dervish!”

With a roar, Dervish slammed bodily into the cyberzombie, carrying his elbow blades through its shoulders. Abandoning all pretense of restraint, he crashed his bladed fists again and again into the zombie’s face, not stopping until the top half of its head was gone. As its remaining arm and legs continued to flail, he tore each of them off and proceeded to hammer away at its unprotected torso, not stopping until every semblance of movement had ceased. When all was said and done, the asphalt was coated with nuts, bolts, strips of flesh, and surrogate blood.

As the party stood up to examine their kill, a single family minivan filled with terrified-looking elves pulled to a stop at the scene of the carnage. Wildcard made a circular “as you were” gesture with his forefinger, causing them to speed off towards Portland.

“This is the second time a cyberzombie has called me ‘Willie,’” noted Dervish, as he began dragging the zombie’s legs to the side of the river. “Shit’s getting weird.”

“Maybe you’re just, like, the cyberzombie whisperer,” said Bend, kneeling over the decapitated skull. “Woah, hey.”

Wildcard raised his gun instinctively at the ‘woah, hey’ as Dervish tossed the legs into the water and doubled back for the arms. Bend raised the head by its scalp.

“Doesn’t this look like Dervish?”

“It’s the top half of an orc head with cybereyes,” said Dervish, deadpan, as he flopped a cyberarm over each shoulder. “Not exactly difficult.”

“No, I’m serious,” said Bend, looking the head in its still-twitching eyes. “Dervish, open your mouth.”

Dervish paused in the middle of a hammer-toss. The arms flopped into the river with a “plunk.”

“What.”

“Open your mouth.”

“Why.”

“Do what the man says, Dervish,” said Wildcard, in the middle of (very gingerly) dragging the torso, but only after running a brief scan for explosives.

With an “aaaaaah,” Dervish opened his mouth, and Bend crouched down to hold up the cyberzombie head next to his.

“Holy fuck, this guy’s got your teeth. Like, exactly.”

Dervish instinctively stepped away from the head.

“You’re kidding me.”

“Locke,” said Wildcard, gesturing for the team’s mage, “can you hit this thing with a Read Thoughts?”

“Put a madre! I’m not even TOUCHING it!” Locke shouted back, as he loaded his LMG back into the trunk. “Cyberzombies are filled with more bad mojo than a Tijuana talismonger.”

Wildcard shrugged.

“Can’t you jus’ read its thoughts a little? I’m feert I dunno how magic works well enough.”

“Well, maybe you could lean over and give its neck-stump a good lick,” said Locke, bitter, “but only just a little.”

“We’re spinning our wheels here, Locke,” grunted Dervish.

“Fine,” said Locke, with a melodramatic sigh, although he whispered “pendejos,” as he took the twitching head from Bend.

With a flare of magic and a deeply violated sensation, Locke dropped the head on the road and jerked backwards. Bend hit him with a quick assensing and, satisfied that nothing had leaked in, asked,

“What’d you see, rook?”

“Nada mucho,” said Locke, kneading his temples. “A bunch of tanks. Orc bodies with cyberware. Recognize the tech. Aztechnology Homegrown Warrior Program. They put us in similar tanks to install our ware. Standard numbering system for Infantería Móvil. 3220-IM, 3221-IM, 3222-IM... Hard to make out because this guy typically saw them upside-down, from the perspective of an operating table.”

Dervish blinked, not that it was evident behind his retractable cyberblade covers.

“What about 3177-IM?”

Bend made a confused expression as Locke clarified,

“Not that I saw. What were you thinking?”

Wildcard interjected,

“He was thinking that if you flipped the callsign 3177-IM upside down, it would look a hell of a lot like you were spelling WILLIE.”

Dervish snorted in agreement.

After a short pause, Locke punted the head into the river, patted Dervish on the back, and turned to head back to the car.

“Welcome to Aztechnology, amigo. We’re assholes.”

5:30 PM, JANUARY 29th, 2074, HERMISTON, TIR TAIRNGIRE

“So, you said you were in...an accident?”

A young elf with a crew cut wearing a wife-beater and capri shorts surveyed the bullet-riddled mess that was Wildcard’s car.

“Yes. The Hyundai Shin-Hyung is one of the most common cars in the world. Are you saying that you don’t have the replacement parts on hand to patch the hood, roof, and passenger-side doors?”

“And the windshield...and the sunroof...”

“Standard wear and tear,” noted Wildcard, as Locke took a smoke break outside and Bend and Dervish leaned against the walls of the garage.

“Y’know, I go down to the shooting range on weekends, and these are 7.76-caliber bullets in the INSIDE of your door here. That isn’t a hunting caliber--”

“Double standard fee, chummer,” said Wildcard, with a sigh.

“Triple and I replace the armor plating you hid in the upholstery.”

“Now yer speaking my language, friend,” said Wildcard. “Get it done quick and you get a tip.”

The mechanic popped the trunk, got an eyeful of illegal automatic weaponry, and closed it again.

“Yessir.”

As the mechanic went to the front of the shop to flip his “I’m sorry, we are CLOSED” sign, Locke filed back in, dispensed with his cigarette, and noted,

“So, plan?”

Dervish grunted,

“Wait for the rube.”

As the mechanic filed back in and got to work on the car, Bend set up his white noise machine in the garage's office and Wildcard sat on the edge of the desk.

"Plan is, we're gon' ta help my bud with what we promised him, first off. It's a downtown bank, so we'll be hitting it like Shadowrunners do, quick and quiet. His muscle will be on hand if things go south, and regardless of how we perform--which will be well, mind--Kara'll get our milspec and high-explosives 'cross the border."

Dervish leaned forward as he pulled up a folding chair, handling his healing shoulder gingerly. His head wound had already solidified into a wicked scar, one of many.

"Alright, well what about the primary job?"

Bend toyed with the settings on the white noise machine.

"I think you should play up the Haldeman angle. We've got a strong hunch that the deal will be going down at the drone unveiling, and we already know that she's on the up and up. There's worse things you could be doing than sucking up to the museum's security director."

Locke nodded as he closed the office door.

"I agree. I'll handle the mage's conclave as well, just in case, since--"

"Yes, we all know you're sticking it to a homeland security agent," spat Bend, "for like the fifth time. Still a good idea, I'll give you. You know what's an angle I think we haven't played yet?"

Dervish grunted, and Bend continued,

"The Nightengales."

Wildcard brought up a discography of the Nightengales' albums.

"What, Alvarez's ridiculous obvious red-herring Los Angeles runner team?"

Bend clarified,

"That's the thing. You know how I used to run the CalFree-Vegas shadows? Well, that's just how runner culture works down there. Going by their aboveground fame, I think it's safe to assume that they're highly competent in the shadows and getting well-paid for their efforts. We should try to find out what Alvarez has them on."

Wildcard nodded slowly as he sifted through the Nightengales' dossiers.

"Excellent idea. Once we have what we need we can knock them off to deny Alvarez that asset, too."

Bend cringed.

"Dude. They're women."

“They’re shadowrunners,” corrected Locke. “They’re fair game.”

Bend grumbled and sank into his folding chair. Dervish commented,

“What about Ginsen and Aztechnology? They’re both out for our asses and each other’s, too.”

“The less we fuck with SIRRURG and the Azzies until the big day, the better,” said Locke, resolute.

“I’m inclined t’support Lockie-boy on this one,” said Wildcard, bringing up their intel on Ginsen’s sleeper teams. “We want them to think we been spooked, since they’re both much bigger pieces on the game board. Better to let them whittle each other down and then sneak in under their noses.”

Although he didn’t stop making grumbling noises, Bend nodded his agreement.

“Bank job’s on Friday,” noted Wildcard. “All in favor of sticking around in this pointless podunk ‘til the heat blows over?”

Four hands shot up.

NOON, FEBRUARY 2nd, 2074, BANK OF THE TIR, SE MORRISON ST, PORTLAND, TIR
TAIRNGIRE

“No, honey, I think it’s great that you got into the eco-charity thing, I’m just a little worried about the Student Equity Union’s ties to Greenwar, is all,” said Bend, the shadowrunner formerly known as Special Agent Peter Colby. “Before they mellow out, young liberals tend to flirt with radicalism and it’s not good company. Believe me, I’ve been there.”

As Bend adjusted the micro-charges placed on the seams of the datavault that held all the unprocessed credsticks, Emily responded,

“Yeah, don’t worry, Sean. My student politics phase is behind me. I just want to make sure that, like, I’m doing all I can for the environment, you know? Also, if I can totally show up Jennifer from the Young Technocrats, all the better.”

“Negativity breeds negativity,” lectured Bend, as he finished with the charges and slapped a small black box onto one of the external servers. “Look, baby, I gotta go. I’m at the bank and they’re about to call my number.”

“Okay, fine,” said Emily, as the black box blazed to life and began siphoning cred into the hardened server-van in the outside alley. “Hey, did I tell you my application went through for that philanthropy work in Lagos?”

Bend scowled as he switched to the other line briefly.

“Hey, Wildcard. The boxes and the charges are in place. You’re sure that we can’t just make it out of this one without being detected?”

“No can do, knife-ears,” chuckled the Scotsman on the other end of the line. “Either we jam them and they know, or their hardroom spider catches the increased data traffic. Still, keeping it silent for as long as possible, that we can do.”

“I still think we should have hit the spider first,” growled Bend.

“Would have had to go loud early. Damned if you do, et-fecking-cetra. Keep your eye on the prize, Bend. And stop using your subvocals for personal calls. I can hear all that shite.”

Bend hastily switched lines again as he neared the thick grate that separated the server room from the bank floor. He had piggybacked on a large deposit a few hours ago in the form of a wombat and had been hiding in the server room since, although with Locke, Dervish, and Belfast’s crew walking through the front doors his prodigious subtlety would soon be for naught.

“That’s great, Emily, but you know how I feel about Lagos. Look, I gotta go.”

“I’ll be fine, Sean. I love you.”

Bend got through “I love you t-” when Dervish plowed headlong into the security spider’s “black box” armored cubicle, pulled him bodily from his nexus, and slammed one of Wildcard’s satlinks into the computer. Bend hastily hung up as the security doors slammed shut.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” announced Belfast, his voice augmented by a loudspeaker/voice-modifier hybrid in his mask, “this is a robbery. If everyone would please line up wit’ their hands over their heads in an orderly fashion, we can relieve you of yer credsticks and be oot in ten minutes.”

There were a few muffled yells as Belfast’s men plugged the startled guards with gel rounds from their SMGs, quickly moving to disarm the twitching bodies.

Predictably, everyone put their hands over their heads.

Everyone except one middle-aged Texan standing at the bank counter, sporting a whole new host of muscle augmentations and in the best shape of his life. His cybereyes spun and focused on Dervish, narrowing with a whirr over his bushy moustache as he sighted his adversary’s American Flag shemagh.

“Dervish.”

Dervish released the unmoving spider from a sleeper-hold and tried to identify what he was seeing.

“...holy fuck, it’s Hero Cop guy.”

“Captain Joseph Green. Freshly enlisted in Knight Errant last year because I felt I had lost control of my life,” said the Texan, emphasizing every word from “lost” to “life” as he shrugged his muscular arms and reached for his sidearm. Belfast’s goons glanced to Dervish, who simply shook his head ‘no’ and held a hand out.

“Really sorry to hear that, Joe,” said Dervish. “How’s that working out for you?”

“Real well, actually,” said Green, who noted the guns trained on his Predator-hand and didn’t move to draw, despite his ever-narrowing brow. “Said they ain’t ever seen an old man so motivated to fight crime. ‘Course, they had to fill me up with augmentations, y’know. Make me competitive with the young bucks.”

Dervish stepped towards Green nonchalantly.

“You find that doesn’t interfere with your personal life?”

“Naw. The R&D monkeys over at Ares warned me that all these--watcha callem--pro-to-types might have side effects, but I ain’t seen hide nor hair of ‘em yet. Wife’s pleased, too, and not just ‘cause I got work again. We went on a second honeymoon to the Tir.”

Dervish flexed his inverted cyberlegs, rising and lowering on avian feet. The bystanders began slowly lowering themselves to the floor, not wanting to be in the line of fire if anyone started shooting.

“I can see that, Joe. So, I’m going to cut this little coincidence short. I’m imagining that you want to beat my face in more than anything right now.”

Green looked to the goons on either side.

“S’about right.”

“And I’m invested in these boys robbing this bank with little to no collateral damage, so I really don’t want to play the hostage card.”

Green nodded.

“I imagine you don’t.”

“Well, I think I got just the thing for that, courtesy of my buddy working the servers right now. Ain’t that right, WC?”

With that, the emergency shutter covering the front door lifted, grinding and creaking to the sounds of distant sirens. Dervish stepped outside of the bank and settled into a fighting stance.

“Well, darn. Guess there’s still honor in the world today,” said Green, as he ran towards Dervish.

“Happy second honeymoon.”

“Thanks, bud!”

With that, Green activated his skimmers and boosted into a full-body haymaker, smashing Dervish jaw-first into a parked car and irrevocably destroying its drivers-side wheel well. The security shutter slammed shut once more as Belfast’s goons got to ferrying the ill-gotten loot out into the back alley and Locke went to work melting through the security grate to allow Bend back into the lobby.

“Interesting company you keep,” said Belfast, as he dropped a trid phantasm of an ordinary, functioning bank over the facade to stall for a little time.

“They’re quirky, but effective,” agreed Wildcard, from his safe position at the rooftop of a financial firm three blocks away. “Remember to send word to Kara that we kept our side of the deal.”

Wildcard and Belfast watched from their respective vantage points as Dervish stunned Green with a body blow and then threw him into a street light so hard that it tipped and flickered. The blow would have killed an ordinary man, but the middle-aged Texan responded with a small flinch and a wicked roundhouse kick, which Dervish caught, reversed, and used the leverage of to plow him into the street light again, snapping it clean in half.

“I don’t see why that one even needs armor,” noted Belfast, as he watched the laughing Dervish gather the livid, sputtering Green into another sleeper hold. The sirens got closer, visible a few blocks away from Wildcard’s position. Dervish yelled,

“I’LL BE SURE TO RECOMMEND YOU FOR PROMOTION TO MY BUDDY BRADFORD NICE!”

“Fighting dragons, mostly,” said Wildcard, deadpan, as he made for the fire escape at the side of the building. He wasn’t lying. “If you’ll excuse me I need to bail him out of there.”

“Godspeed, chummer.”

> 7:30 PM, THE RIVER’S EDGE HOTEL, PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

“I’m quite sorry, Miss Haldeman,” said Dervish, wincing a bit as Wildcard and Locke plucked a treasure trove of bullets out of surface wounds across his body. “Something came up in Downtown a few days ago. That’s why I had to void my contract. However, I believe that I’m currently free to resume work if you can spare the room.”

Bend flipped through muted channels on the hotel room’s trid. Since the room wasn’t technically being rented by anyone right now and was listed as “under construction” on the hotel’s nexus, the pay-per-view options were limited, although he did catch “MASSACRE AT THE BLUE BOHEMIAN STILL UNSOLVED, ASSAILANTS UNIDENTIFIED.”

Dervish nodded.

“Okay, ma’am. I’m glad that you understand how...uh...dynamic the workflow can be. If I’m going to be going back right into overtime, would you mind outlining...”

Dervish listened a bit more, trying not to make his pained grunts audible as Locke closed his shoulder wound for what was easily the fifth time.

“I see. Where is this, uh, this external locale I’m going to be guarding?”

Wildcard took the opportunity to backdoor on the phone call and look up the address that was promptly mentioned, bringing up a satellite image of a tasteful house in the suburbs outside of Portland.

“A very important person, ma’am? Of course. I’ll guard them with my life. Whatever it takes to get the job back. Yes, I’ll...see you then? Okay. Goodbye.”

As Dervish hung up the phone, he growled,

“Could you maybe dig your fingers in there a little deeper, Locke?”

“Sorry, bro,” apologized Locke. “I had to make sure it closed up right before I heal it.”

“Hey, Dervish,” noted Wildcard, his modulated voice cracking with amusement. “This ‘external locale’ you’re going to be guarding is Security Chief Haldeman’s house.”

“She’s probably keeping the VIP there so Ginsen doesn’t tag him at the museum,” said Dervish, resolutely, as Locke broke out into a full-force giggle.

“No, you stupid hijo de puta,” laughed Locke, “she wants you there for your BOD.”

“What, my body?”

“No, amigo. B. O. D. Big Orc--”

Bend began coughing loudly as Dervish’s face lit with dawning recognition.

“Oh. That would explain why she said to wear street clothes.”

Bend sighed melodramatically and stood, addressing Dervish with a sassy jaunt of his heel as he settled onto his feet.

“She wants to ride the Dervish train, dude. We’ve suspected that since she came out as a fan. Either way, I’ll be coming with you. It’s all coming down to the Ares unveiling so I imagine Haldeman will have all sorts of tails. You give her a little shake and we’ll see what comes spilling out.”

Wildcard did his daily scan on the Ginsen-compromised Nexus, found nothing of interest, and tapped a few commands out on his commlink. He grumbled, although not without a fair share of amusement,

“When did we become a team o’ man-hoors, again? This seems t’be a trend.”

Locke grinned with guilt as he slung his duffel bag into place and shrugged to make it settle.

“Don’t look now, chief, but I’ve got some ideas for the Nightengales...”

9:00 PM EASTMORELAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

>Recommended listening: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mx66lEcR9Ts> (Toxic – Mark Ronson)

The neighborhood was affluent and green, filled with vanity gardens and perfectly-manicured front lawns. The houses were 20Cen relics, stately and well-upkept with modern amenities. Sparse AR reminded would-be thieves of the neighborhood watch, as well as the local PTA's meeting on Thursday. 9:00 was already bedtime, as far as Eastmoreland was concerned, leaving only one house with its lights conspicuously lit.

Jenny Haldeman answered the door in a negligee that left nothing to the imagination. It was admittedly not the most flattering outfit on her, given that the ensemble that her figure most complemented consisted of jackboots and body armor. Still, it was a welcome gesture.

Dervish, borrowing one of Locke's silk shirts (which was splitting at the seams on his catastrophically large muscles), shifted his body instinctively to loom over her.

"Tex Strongarm reporting for duty, ma'am."

"Please," said Haldeman, eyeing the street and not spotting Bend's hiding space perched atop her neighbor's roof, "call me Jenny."

"Charmed, Jenny," said Dervish, with a toothy grin that he imagined was a roguish smile. "Call me Dervish."

"Oh, you can bet your ass I will," said Haldeman, as she pulled Dervish into an open-mouthed kiss in the threshold of her doorway and then lead him inside.

Through his own mouthful of 3-hour-old fast food fries in the car across the street, Wildcard grumbled,

"Dervish gets groupies. I want groupies."

"It's the upside of public awareness," said Locke nonchalantly, as he held up a pair of fancy binoculars and stared out the window. "Downside is everyone knows exactly where to find him."

"So in other words," said Wildcard, "you get the best of both worlds."

"I dunno," said Locke, with a chipper shrug. "I could still stand to be a little less well-known."

"Can the chatter," subvocalized Bend, "we got contact in the backyard."

Bend marked the tac-cloaked interloper on the team's tacnet as he vaulted to the roof of Haldeman's house, silently sprinted toward the front porch, hung upside-down from the overhang, and began picking the conventional lock on her door while still hanging.

"Now that there is a go-getter," gawked Wildcard. "Why now, d'you suppose?"

“Easy,” responded Bend. “They’ve marked Dervish as one of the Big L’s operators and are trying to see if the two of them share any game-changing insights while in flagrante.”

“They?”

Bend marked the second infiltrator as he silently dropped from a nearby tree, producing a long, silenced pistol. The new infiltrator moved to settle in under one of the front windows while keeping a clear line-of-sight on the man at the doorway. Just as he appeared ready to shoot, Haldeman’s recycling bin tipped open, upending a dragonfly drone which raced after the gunman, causing him to disengage and flee around the side of the house.

“This is surreal,” commented Wildcard, as he observed the perfectly silent, invisible struggle, only able to witness it because of Bend’s diligent highlighting.

With a quiet ‘paf,’ a ninja materialized behind the upside-down infiltrator right as he finished lock-picking the door. As said ninja raised a garrotte, he was suddenly knocked prone with the quietest of “CLACK” noises, trailing blood from a silenced gunshot that had emanated from the trash can next to the recycling bin. Quickly picking himself up, the wounded ninja absconded into the streets, ducking and dodging a spray of perfectly-silenced gunfire as he made for a grey SUV across the way. Sensing that he had been made, the overhang infiltrator opened the door, climbed inside from his upside-down position, and disappeared into the house right as loud sex noises began emanating from the window that the first gunman had previously been hiding under before being chased off by the drone. The first infiltrator left the door open, and a single silenced bullet whizzed through the open doorway, mercifully not hitting anything loud.

“I’d better get in there.”

Effortlessly, Bend hopped roofs, acrobatically swung from the overhang, and launched himself into a perfect diveroll into Haldeman’s tasteful living room, done up in 2050s kitsch. He landed in the middle of a gunpoint stand-off between the first infiltrator and the second, whom had evidently circled around and entered through the back to avoid the dragonfly drone. A single AR window displaying all of Haldeman’s phone calls from the last week hung open near to the first infiltrator, while the second was still holding some manner of paper dossier that he had extricated from a nearby bookshelf.

The stand-off was broken as Haldeman cried “OH SHIT, FUCK MEEE-E-E-E!” from the adjacent room, providing enough audio cover for the trigger-happy trash-can inhabitant to circle around the front doorway and begin popping off shots. The SUV carrying the wounded ninja fled off into the night as Bend and his two newfound friends dodged and flipped across the room, seeking cover.

The silent gunfight suddenly stopped as there was a lull from the bedroom, with the last shot loudly cracking a kitchen tile and echoing around the house. All four infiltrators released muffled groans, as Bend was the first one back out the front door, circling around the side of the house again. The trash can man and the first infiltrator barreled out the door next, vaulting into the neighbor’s yards. The gunman who had hidden in the tree was the last out, and Bend took the opportunity to stun-gun him right in the neck before dragging his convulsing body across the lawn, where Locke finished him from afar with a stunbolt. Locke jogged into the street to help Bend load the man into Wildcard’s trunk as

Dervish walked into the living room, wearing only a hastily-donned pair of boxers (his favorites, patterned with little luchador caricatures) and his America-San bandana. He yelled,

“Hey, I think you didn’t lock your door right; it drifted open.”

“Weird.”

As Dervish gave the team a thumbs-up and a wink from across the street and closed and locked the door, Wildcard finished screwing the silencer onto his Predator, sighted the trash can gunman settling into another trash can, casually walked up to it, lifted the lid, and fired the whole mag of gel rounds down into it. He lifted the lid again, reached in, and pulled the groaning man’s mask off as his PAN scanned the interloper’s face. He subvocalized,

“One Ginsen fuck, taken out with the trash. We got an ID on our guy?”

“Give me a moment to read his thoughts.”

“Cool.”

Wildcard loaded a mag of subsonic lethal rounds, double-tapped the Ginsen infiltrator, and closed the trash can as a few more lights turned on across the street. He walked casually back to the car as Bend shuffled past him, invisible.

Locke gulped over the tacnet. Bend asked, settling into the back of the Hyundai,

“What’s up?”

“Gunther Leimann, Drake Prime. Lofwyr’s double-booking on us. Official designation Drake Prime Two, with a heavy combatant he only knows as Drake Prime One and a spider handler he only knows as Drake Prime Three. Has no less than three suicide teeth.”

“Well,” said Wildcard, as he settled into the driver’s seat, “those’ll have to come out before we have a misunderstanding.”

Bend cocked an invisible eyebrow.

“Sure we shouldn’t just turn him loose?”

Wildcard shrugged.

“What, and let Lofwyr eat him? Better to act like this was our plan to get into contact with him all along, salvage the situation and share some info with our employer.”

“Point.”

MIDNIGHT, FEBRUARY 3rd, 2074, THE RIVER'S EDGE HOTEL, PORTLAND, TIR
TAIRNGIRE

Drake Prime Two awoke, naked, to water being splashed in his face. Instinctively, he attempted to bite down on his suicide tooth, then his two backups, only to find that all three had been removed and carefully sutured up. He then attempted to activate his own cranial bomb, only to find it disconnected. Finally, he groggily attempted to flip into a fighting stance, only to end up carrying the sturdy aluminum chair he was firmly cuffed to down to the floor with an awkward clanking noise.

"You quite done, fannybawz?"

Wildcard put the bucket down by Leimann's head and crouched to make eye contact, or as close as could be approximated through his polarized lenses as his prey lay face-down on the bathroom tiles.

"We took out all yer kill-yerself bizzo when we melted you last night. From there it was jus' a wee little dobber to the burnside, and here we are."

"You," grunted Leimann, in flawless, barely-accented English, as he tried and failed to parse the Scottish vernacular, "you're our Shadowrunners."

"Technically," said Locke, whom was leaning against the outside of the room's doorway, "we're your bosses' runners, amigo. You weren't part of the deal when we took this job."

"You renegotiated with Johnson," said Leimann, flat and resentful, as he torqued his body to look at his captors. "You expressed doubt about your capabilities to carry through with the mission so we were called in."

Locke stepped into the room as Wildcard moved to lift Leimann back into a sitting position.

"That would be true, if you weren't actually on the job since before we got here. Didn't know that you were the team that failed to intercept Alvarez when he first entered the Tir. Afraid to go back home to your boss without results?"

Leimann cringed.

"What do you want?"

"We're not gonna turn this into a daft bloody jurisdictional dispute," said Wildcard, patting Leimann on the shoulder, "if you were worried about that. You'd have to be a feckin' roaster to try to compete over the same goal in this scenario, yanno?"

"So you're offering your cooperation," said Leimann, decisively, as he avoided eye contact with Wildcard or Locke. "Very well. I believe an exchange of information is in order, yes?"

"So long as it's a two-way street, chummer," said Locke. With a sizzle and pop, Leimann's cuffs disengaged.

"As you wish." Leimann's words were pointed as he stretched his back and massaged his aching wrists. "I assume that you've already identified Alvarez's tradition and possible aliases."

“Path of the Wheel, most likely aliases Peter McKinley, Larry Colburn, James Lynch and Harrison Graham.”

Leimann shook his head.

“Take Graham off the list. He has been...convinced by our liege to cooperate with us.”

“Good to know,” said Wildcard, taking notes. “That leaves just Lynch and Colburn at the mage’s conclave. Between both of our groups we can shadow each of them.”

Leimann nodded, resolute, as he settled back in the chair. His nudity did not seem to be bothering him.

“If Alvarez is planning on replacing one of them for the drone unveiling, he may very well have not made his move at all yet. We have reason to believe that he has chosen the drone unveiling, as we intercepted a communique between the target and a combat mage named “Quake” as to a rendezvous at the Museum of Science and Industry.”

“That backs up our suspicions,” agreed Wildcard. “We identified the runners who were caught breakin’ in last week as being on Alvarez’s payroll. However, our mutual friends in the field have the same intel.”

“You mean the Destroyers?”

Locke nodded.

“We know them as Ginsen Corporation.”

“Just because all signs point to the drone unveiling,” noted Leimann, “doesn’t mean that the mage’s conclave isn’t a possibility.”

“Just a lesser one,” commented Wildcard. “Anything else?”

“Nothing vital.”

“Well then,” said Locke, standing to the side. “Have a nice night, Mr. Leimann. Your clothes are on the couch.”

Cursing up a storm in German, Drake Prime Two exited the hotel room.

“We’ve got three days till the Conclave,” noted Bend, finally materializing from his hiding spot in the hotel’s closet.

“Sounds like just enough time to deal with the Nightengales,” said Locke, with a grin. Bend crossed his arms with a frown.

“How are we going to find them?”

“Oh, that part’s easy,” chortled Wildcard, bringing up the band’s P2.0 fanpage.

10:15 AM, FEBRUARY 4th, THE HEATHMAN BAR, PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

Tulip’s fashionably unrestrained black hair fell about her shoulders as she surveyed the bar. She and the Morrigan, her particular interpretation of the Dark Goddess mentor spirit, shared a metaphysical commentary on the nature of various men present at the bar this early. The discussion frequently came down to whether they’d make a good fight or a good lay. She and the Morrigan both agreed, most men who started drinking at ten in the morning wouldn’t make much of either.

She continued to drink the world’s most expensive Bloody Mary as she waited for Echo to finish parsing the data that Johnson wanted on the Amazonian chucklefucks who had been coming after them for the last few days. She wore the same little black dress that she had worn yesterday. It fit as well as ever.

Over at the table where Echo was zonked, Gillette’s delicate, lethal titanium fingers danced across a fork and knife as the old-school razorgirl munched on a single order of eggs benedict. She actually required fairly minimal calories, so this would serve as her food for most of the day. A lack of any organic limbs tended to cut down on metabolic needs.

“Where’s Tweak at?”

Tulip lazily subvocalized over to the street samurai. Gillette yawned, angled her beautiful alphaware cyberarm to take another bite, and subvocalized back, her voice as ice-cold as her eyes, ears, and limbs,

“She ran out of nitro. Again.”

Tulip groaned and placed her empty glass down on the counter.

“Girl’s lucky that so many dealers are in town for festival season.”

Gillette rolled her featureless chrome cybereyes. It was a purposeful gesture, meant to express emotion that wasn’t really there so that Tulip would be more comfortable.

“Girl’s REALLY lucky we haven’t kicked her temper ass out for being such a little junkie.”

“Says Class-I cyberpsychosis incarnate.”

Gillette frowned, dully hurt.

“Hey, I take my meds.”

“Just joking. Heeeeeeeey!”

Tulip glanced towards a party being seated at the next table over.

“Whaddya think, Gillette? Fight or fuck?”

Gillette grinned uncannily, revealing gleaming white (natural) teeth beneath her thin lips.

“The little Hispanic guy, or the big orc? Because I’m all over the orc.”

Tulip tossed a saucy glance back to Gillette.

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“I choose both.”

“You can’t choose both! You have to choose one!”

With that, Echo left her technomancer-trance and said aloud, pouting,

“You guys are being really gross.”

After a second or so of awkward lag-time, Gillette affectionately tousled Echo’s bleach-blonde hair with her glimmering palm.

“Tulip, whose idea was it to bring a sixteen-year-old along on a prime run again?”

Echo pouted even harder as Tulip laughed aloud and finished her drink.

“Mine, for the umpteenth time. Technomancers of her caliber are hard to come by.”

The shamelessly Matrix-addicted high school prodigy grinned and dropped back into netspace, her eyes lolling as she slumped in her chair.

“She makes the weirdest faces when she does that,” observed Gillette, before taking another bite of her eggs benedict. “How about you?”

Tulip batted her eyelashes flirtatiously as she gestured for the bartender to bring her another drink.

“How about me what?”

“The guys at the table over there eating waffles. With the orc that I can’t have both ways.”

“Oh.” Tulip spun on her barstool and shot a roguish smirk at Gillette. “I want the Hispanic guy.”

“Lucky you,” snarked Gillette. “He looks like he wants you too.” As Locke approached the bar with a sheepish smile, Gillette closed comms with, “although you didn’t say whether you wanted to fight or fuck.”

“So,” said Tulip, twisting her glass between thumb and forefinger, “what’s your line, handsome?”

“I hadn’t decided yet. I was thinking something disarming and a little self-aware.” Locke plopped down onto the stool next to Tulip, swiveling to face her. “Nothing seems to be coming to mind, though.”

Tulip glanced knowingly over to the large orc, who had stood and approached Gillette and Echo’s table.

“Given the synchronized approach you boys are going with, I get the impression that you were looking for us.”

“It’s hard not to,” said Locke, as he placed a credstick on the bartop and then levitated a bottled beer into his hand from the exposed refrigerator. The barman shot him a dirty look, but Tulip was amused. “You’ve got a bright aura.”

Tulip hissed laughter through her teeth.

“I ask you what your line is, and you blow it on some stupid mage thing? Get out of here, cowboy!” She flapped a hand dismissively in Locke’s direction, bidding him to go, although she was only half-serious about it. “You’re lucky you’re so damn photogenic or I’d have slugged you.”

“I couldn’t resist the joke,” laughed Locke, “and I promise you, I’m not going to turn that into a line too. In all honesty, I’m actually here because I need some information from you.”

Tulip hid her disappointment behind a saccharine smile.

“We’re not really in that business, chummer.”

Locke just smiled wider.

“I think I can make it worth your while. My name’s Vincent Da Silva. I’m an intelligence officer acting to protect the CAS’ interests--and mages--in the Tir until the festival situation is over. I know that you’re runners, but don’t worry. You’re out of my jurisdiction. I’m actually here because I’ve been digging up some skirmishes here between Amazonian and Aztec agents, and I want to make sure that it doesn’t spill over politically onto us.” He gave Tulip a piercing glare, his voice becoming serious. “I’m not interested in what you girls are doing here, so if you could tell us all you know I could negotiate to get some serious materiel in for you.”

“Christ, you can’t just SAY all that in the open--”

Locke gestured to a white noise generator which he had surreptitiously placed at the end of the bar. Tulip relaxed, placed her drink to her lips, and downed the whole thing.

“Okay. You get to live a little longer, handsome. Let’s get right down to brass tacks.”

“Business before pleasure. I can admire that.” Locke said, with a smirk. “I imagine that I wasn’t in the wrong to assume that you’ve run afoul of our mutual enemy?”

“If you’re talking about ‘Ginsen Corporation: Synergistic Management for a Diverse Future,’” sighed Tulip, rolling her eyes and gesturing for another drink, “Then you have no idea. We’ve got everything you could possibly want to know on those assholes, but it’s going to cost you.”

Locke nodded slowly. If Tulip knew about the firefight between Ginsen and his team, she was doing an exceedingly good job of hiding it. Not beyond her capabilities...but if she knew the threat posed by he and Dervish, then Tulip should have taken the opportunity to initiate the attack the moment they’d been isolated.

“But,” Tulip continued, “You get to incentivize me, G-Man. I don’t sing for free.”

“I don’t imagine that you do,” grinned Locke. “I was thinking I’d squire you about the mage’s conclave. Fine dining and luxuriant treatment all day, and a fat credstick at the end of it all. With you marking every bogie you spot at the conclave, naturally.”

“There doesn’t seem to be a number associated with ‘fat credstick.’ “

“Government salary only goes so far, but I’m prepared to offer 5 grand and immunity to prosecution from Tir Homeland Security for the entirety of your job here,” lied Locke.

Tulip’s eyes lit up.

“Your influence goes that deep?”

“I can call up the agent handling the conclave right now and arrange the details.”

Tulip shot Echo’s table a glance. While Dervish and Gillette flirted animatedly, Echo returned Tulip’s look and nodded slowly. She’d compromised Locke’s commlink, and the number in question was legit. Locke actually had the relevant Tir Homeland Security agent in his frequent contacts.

“My technomancer assures me that you’re not lying. Frankly, this isn’t an opportunity we can pass up.”

Locke cocked an eyebrow.

“Your technomancer shouldn’t be hacking my phone.”

“Precautions, Agent Da Silva. Precautions.”

“Fair enough. Why don’t we take tomorrow to get to know one another?”

Locke’s smile (and designer pheromone glands) briefly pierced Tulip’s defenses, and she let loose a capricious laugh.

“Sure. Why not?”

“I’m on a sporadic schedule,” said Locke, standing and straightening out his rumpled pants, “but we’ll work something out. Here’s my number.”

Tulip punched the number into her commlink and reached out to accept her next drink.

“Be seeing you and your big friend.”

“I hope not,” chuckled Locke, as he walked away from the bar. “He’s got work tomorrow and should know better.”

NOON, THE HEATHMAN HOTEL ANNEX

Locke, having taken a taxi around the block so as not to be seen directly stepping into the Super Getaway Hyundai, reconnoitered with Wildcard in the hotel parking lot. His gadgets dimmed upon exposure to Bend’s smart jammer, placed inconspicuously in one of the cupholders.

“What’s the score?”

Wildcard brought up a photo of a brutalized drug dealer, accompanied by the dossier of a wiry but attractive young woman in a leather jacket, jean shorts, and a pair of combat boots.

“Meet our weak link. Street name “Tweak.” Temporary in-fill for another bandmate, who’s currently out in Los Angeles with a bad case of corpsec-induced coma.”

Locke nodded.

“I heard something about a nitro addiction?”

Wildcard scrolled through a Vice article on the drug.

“Raging. Designer combat drug, speedball-in-an-inhaler. Intended for trolls in war-torn balkanized zones. She probably transitioned from a novacoke addiction as her gateway.”

Locke gawked.

“How the hell’s she survive that crap?”

“Some kind of supercharged immune system. Burnout adept. Couldn’t peg the tradition.”

“So what’s the plan?”

Wildcard opened a secured line to Bend.

“Easy. We’ve had Bend scoping out their rooms at this hotel. They’re sharing two suites on the third floor. We figure out some way to make Tweak have reason to not trust the rest of the team--think she’s being replaced, maybe--and we wait for it to devolve before pulling a ‘police tip’ on the whole thing.”

Locke cringed.

“We’re involving the cops in this? Really?”

“Easiest way to handle it, honestly,” shrugged Wildcard. “How are we doing up there, Bend?”

Bend came in over the encrypted channel, his voice surprisingly clear through the smart jammer.

“A lot of chemicals, but I’m pretty certain they’re of the cosmetic rather than the explosive variety. No dice on any sensitive details yet. The big razorgirl’s coming back into the room so I think I’ll put the stakeout on hold for the time being.”

“Solid copy,” nodded Wildcard.

9:30 AM, FEBRUARY 5th, THE HEART COFFEE BAR, PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

“So, how’s it work out for you? Being a, you know...”

Locke trailed off over his mocha chai latte. It was real coffee, rather than SoyKaf, but that was where most of the expense had gone. The coffee was watery and a little plain, relying on its expensive beans to do the work for it. Tulip’s hand traced down to her own coffee, briefly obstructing Locke’s view of her ample (and expertly placed) cleavage.

“A shadowrunner? It’s not so bad. A lot of people treat it as if it’s the scrounging dregs of the criminal world. No syndicate, no connections, and all that. That’s just the chumps, though. The real experts make enough money to share.”

Locke, clearly not enjoying his chai monstrosity, tipped yet another packet of artificial sweetener into its murky doldrums.

“The impression I got from that statement is that you consider yourself an expert.”

Tulip crossed her arms and pouted.

“I don’t like being doubted.”

Locke put his hands up in apology.

“Hardly! I just don’t have a lot of experience with your side of things, is all.”

“Well, you’re in the hands of the best of the best,” sighed Tulip, “even if the best of the best is currently making a premium to rat on a bunch of merc chucklefucks.”

“Speaking of which,” said Locke, reaching into his pocket. “I have your two and a half grand for forward expenses right here. I imagine that’s good form?”

Tulip rolled her eyes and scoffed, although her posture eased.

“God, you’re such a square. Good form would have you in mirrorshades calling yourself ‘Mister Johnson.’ “

“So gauche!” Locke laughed and finally settled to just swipe his coffee cup off into his periphery.

“There are some guys who can pull off the look,” offered Tulip. “I think you could manage it.”

“Despite the job title, I don’t go in very much for the spy thing,” smiled Locke. “Now what say we talk about the plan for tomorrow?”

Tulip brought up an AR screen, finally in her element.

“I’d love to.”

10:10 AM, FEBRUARY 5th, THE HEATHMAN HOTEL, PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

Bend crept around the Nightengales’ hotel rooms, straining to maintain an invisibility spell atop his tactical cloak. Redundancies were necessary, especially with a zonked-out technomancer at the writing desk who could snap out of it at any time. As Echo mumbled something about intel and background checks, he carefully leafed through the Nightengales’ belongings. Although they were sleeping in two adjacent rooms, they had left the divider open between them and had stashed most of their gear in a single closet.

The drug paraphernalia was Tweak’s, obviously, as were the scrunched-up soy-beers strewn about her unmade bed. Gillette’s street samurai gear was locked away into some manner of custom case, although a little clever lockpicking found a wide assortment of knives and firearms. Echo had mostly packed trendy electronics and kitschy collectibles, reminding Bend that she was, in fact, still a teenager. He would make an effort to spare her if at all possible.

Tulip had brought numerous vanity objects and changes of clothing, although there was nothing overtly incriminating. Satisfied, he returned to Tweak’s bedside and scoped around for anything that could be used to drive a wedge between her and the team.

Although the well-loved leather gun-case (with tiny brass plates reading “Avarice” and “Envy,” presumably the names of the twin Thunderbolt pistols) underneath her bed was empty, it did give him an idea.

“Guys,” he subvocalized. “I’ve got this. I’m going to be hanging out in this neighborhood tonight. The rest of you are on the conclave tomorrow with Tulip. The Nightengales will be done by lunchtime tomorrow.”

“Roger, Bend,” responded Wildcard. “Need anything on your end?”

Bend bailed out the open window flawlessly, without touching anything to make noise. With a front flip, he tagged the balcony with his gecko grips and began his descent.

“Yeah, actually. Can you call up your cyberdoc and just get me a mock-up of a cyberarm blueprint?”

11:30 AM, FEBRUARY 6th, THE RIVER'S EDGE HOTEL, PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

Tweak awoke as she usually did: mad at the world and feeling vaguely inadequate for reasons that she couldn't quite put her finger on. Her body jolted into motion moments before her mind did, courtesy of regular, drug-fueled nightmares that interacted badly with her long-ignored Adept magic and combined to create a sensation of disconnect akin to full-body phantom limb syndrome.

Tweak liked the disconnect for the same reason she liked the drugs and the booze: it dulled the pain of being Tweak, and that made it easier to put the hurt on the poor sons-of-bitches who took on the Nightengales.

Throwing on a tank top and a pair of boy shorts (both from yesterday), she yawned heartily, stood up from her bed, and stumbled into the bathroom. After haphazardly brushing her teeth, she stomped back into the common area, pulled her umpteenth beer from the mini-fridge, and promptly rendered the tooth-brushing meaningless.

Belatedly, her eyes wandered to Gillette's bed. It was perfectly made, which suggested that Gillette had been gone for a while (as always). Rather than bother to peek around the divider and look into the other room, she merely contented herself with yelling at the top of her lungs.

"YO! GILLETTE, ECHO!?"

There was a murmur.

"ECHO! GET THE FUCK OUT OF VR!"

Echo grumbled meekly from the other room,

"What do you want, Tweak?"

"WHERE ARE GILLETTE AND TULIP!?"

"Wow, indoor voice. Gillette is off running recon for Johnson and Tulip is squiring some G-man boy-toy around the conclave."

"WON'T THAT PUT JOHNSON AT RISK!? WE TOLD HIM TO STAY PUT!"

Sighing, Echo finally stood up and tromped over to the doorway between the rooms. She was wearing a set of teddy-bear pajamas, which were perhaps a little bit infantilizing for a teenager, but she was a late-bloomer.

"We can trust Johnson to do his own thing at this point, Tulip said. The less we know about the museum handoff the better for all of us."

"Ffffuckin' always taking orders from Tulip," grunted Tweak, as she flopped down on her bed, absently groping beneath it.

“She’s the face,” said Echo, sternly.

“Exactly. Not the leader. Just the face. Fuckin’ Hollywood rules. Woulda noped on out if I knew how this shit worked coming out of the Seattle scene.”

“You’re drunk,” responded Echo.

“Always,” laughed Tweak, with something approaching mirth, as she withdrew the leather case from beneath the bed.

She sobered up quick.

Echo responded to Tweak’s sudden expression of confusion and anger by taking a step back from the doorway.

“What’s up?”

Tweak looked up at Echo, her expression accusing and hurt.

“Envy’s missing.”

“You probably just misplaced--”

“I NEVER misplace my guns!”

Tweak dramatically stood from the bed and threw the covers off in a single fluid motion, her eyes on fire.

“Look, you were pretty coked-out last night and--”

Tweak’s glare shut Echo up as she repeated,

“I. NEVER. MISPLACE. MY. GUNS.”

As Tweak tore up bedspread, then curtains, and finally began pulling out the drawers on the trideo cabinet, a lone wireless signal flitted through space just long enough for Echo to briefly catch it.

It was a text message.

The message read “now.”

Terrified, Echo glanced at the windows, then the door, afraid for an imminent ambush, but none was immediately forthcoming. There were no gas grenades, no attack choppers. No, the most imminently dangerous thing in the room was still her teammate Tweak, who was standing, livid, with tears staining her caked-on mascara, as she stopped in the middle of pulling out another drawer.

Tweak became the second-most dangerous thing in the room when, with a slam, the door opened and Gillette spilled in. Gillette gasped, with as much urgency as her emotionless facade could muster,

“I got your emergency signal, Tweak. What’s happened?”

Echo realized belatedly that Tweak didn’t have her phone. A moment’s backdooring registered that it had sent the team’s mutual emergency signal from the hotel parking lot, but Tulip hadn’t received the message.

Stuttering, Tweak pulled Envy from the cabinet drawer, and with it, printed out on real paper (to keep it away from the prying eyes of any meddling technomancers), a glorious, wonderfully-optimized schematic for a hypothetical grafting of the gilded Thunderbolt into Gillette’s distinctive cyberarm. Both the gun and the cyberarm were depicted on the schematic in stunning detail, clearly the work of someone who had a vested interest in observing the mechanical interactions in both.

“H-how l-l-long--HOW LONG--”

Gillette held out her arms in a disarmed gesture, but she couldn’t help the gleam in her cybereyes and the instinctive heavy breaths she made as she first glimpsed the schematic. Any proof of her innocence was drowned away in a sudden and crushing onset of her cyberpsychosis.

Echo watched on with horror, immediately recognizing what the other two didn’t--the work of an outsider, playing directly to the team’s psychological weaknesses.

It occurred to her far, far too late that this hypothetical outsider might have also tampered with Tweak’s drugs.

“F-F-FUCKING CUNT!”

As Echo screamed, Tweak dropped the schematic, drew Avarice from her hip holster, and in a singular fluid motion, the Combat Adept kicked her bandolier up from her bedside, speed-loaded two mags of APDS, and began blasting.

The hotel door behind Gillette burst into the hallway in pieces as she crashed through, blocking her vulnerable meat body with her prosthetics. Her right cyberarm exploded at the elbow, its haywire servos sending shrapnel careening across the carpet.

Echo’s protests were met with speed and fury--both combatants had the finest in magical and technological reflex-enhancers, and so were already fighting for their lives before the technomancer could get the words out.

Sliding balletically on her heels, Gillette caught the hallway wall and launched herself directly at Tweak, catching a few more bullets for her troubles and thus only badly cutting the Adept’s thigh as she stumbled and crashed through the trid cabinet, scattering the smashed hardwood as easily as the papers on its surface. As she launched a heel out to sweep Tweak’s weakened legs, Tweak backflipped onto her own bed before catching her wounded thigh wrong and collapsing onto the headboard with a gruesome slam.

“CUNT! SLAG WHORE!”

Seeing her moment, Gillette silently stood and leapt for her prone opponent, but Tweak, leashing a bloodcurdling howl, set her custom pistols to switch ammo from the smart-mags and promptly planted two explosive rounds in Gillette’s forehead as Gillette was airborne and unable to navigate. The street samurai briefly ricocheted off the ceiling, cracking the light fixtures, before collapsing on the divider between the beds with a pockmarked cyberskull, a ruined cybereye, and shattered limbs.

As Tweak huffed and stood over Gillette’s twitching body, aiming her guns at the street samurai’s head, Echo tried to shout,

“It’s a setup! We don’t know that she--”

“SHUT UP!”

Tweak fired a warning shot at the wall near Echo, but as she still had explosive rounds loaded, it instead blasted clean through the wall and sent debris scattering into Echo’s room.

“Bitches always talking down to me. Well I get the last laugh now because--”

There was a horrendous crack as Gillette whirled her weapons case out from under the bed, snapping Tweak’s non-wounded leg clean at the ankle and cracking the case open from the force. As the howling adept tumbled, guns firing wildly, the samurai produced her katana from the case and leveled it below Tweak’s neck.

The decapitation wasn’t a clean one. As Tweak fell on the blade, it cut deep through her throat, showering gore on the pastel-covered carpet of the hotel room, but wedged below her skull. As Tweak gurgled and struggled, Gillette spun on the ground and leveraged her weight onto the handle, pulling the blade through and sending Tweak’s head careening off into the room with a sound like tearing leather.

Sputtering and coughing up blood, Gillette crawled towards the schematics, the new object of her affection. As Echo retreated into her own room, unable to come to terms with what she had just seen, she screeched aloud when she nearly backed into an elf in a set of tac-cloaked military-spec armor.

The man looked at her dispassionately, his face obscured but for the frown on his handsome jaw.

“We called the cops three minutes ago, Echo. You’ll want to get out of here.”

Bend waited for Echo to calm down.

“B-b-b-but T-t-tulip--”

“She’ll be shackled up at my friend’s hotel room for at least another hour, and when she gets back I expect you to be gone, just like Tweak is and Gillette will be.”

Tears welled up from Echo’s eyes as she began bawling, falling to her knees. Bend recoiled, visibly uncomfortable with the turn of events.

“Wh-where--”

“Go back to Los Angeles. Get a SIN and an education. Keep making music if you think it will make you happy.”

Boots tromped in the hallway.

“Wh-why?”

“Because we’re after your boss, and you got in the way.”

Bend paused.

“Grab anything you absolutely need and I’ll open the window for you. If you take the fire escape it should buy you a little extra time.”

Echo didn’t need to be told twice.

12:00 AM, MIDNIGHT, FEBRUARY 7th. THE RIVER’S EDGE HOTEL, PORTLAND, TIR
TAIRNGIRE

The team reconvened in their hotel room, faces grim. Wildcard tossed AR windows across the room in a frenetic hurry, coalescing all of the team’s newly acquired data. Locke was the last into the room, shedding his blazer with a huff. Bend was the first to speak up.

“How’d it go, champ?”

“Tulip was shattered. Echo’s AWOL and Gillette’s comatose and under police lockdown in the hospital.”

“You think you were made?”

Locke grit his teeth.

“No. Until the cold reality of it set in, it was actually a pretty nice date.”

“Sorry,” offered Bend.

Locke waved a dismissive hand. Wildcard asked,

“What about Lynch and Colburn?”

“I made sure to keep my eyes on Lynch, and Leimann followed Colburn all day. They’re both clean. For now.” With a frustrated huff, Locke added, “I’m plugging in the new info on Ginsen’s armaments and personnel to the DB. They’re mostly using a conglomeration of merc outfits from around the

Mesoamerican CZ, but the core group all have similar augs. Mostly bioware all-rounder stuff, but there's also some interesting things like hydraulic jacks to look out for."

Dervish's eyebrow cocked at the last detail.

"So we're assuming it has to be the Museum?"

Wildcard nodded as he pieced together multiple sources of intel from across the run; Harry Dexter, Drake Prime, Schwartzkopf, Ginsen themselves, Haldeman and the Nightengales.

"Even a master stealth adept like Alvarez couldn't pull a hoax this big. There are too many compounding factors."

Dervish grunted,

"You think so?"

"I know so," responded Wildcard, tapping the back of his own cranium to indicate his meat head rather than the ever-present mask. "Custom made for micromanagement."

"With that in order then," said Bend, slowly, "let's go over what we're all going to be doing to prepare for the 23rd. We've got a little over two weeks."

"You're going to be working with me," said Wildcard. "Familiarize yourself with the layout of the Museum of Science and Industry, inch by inch. They're going to be doing a security sweep right before the event, and I need you to install a few hundred stealth cameras in between the sweep and the doors opening to the guests."

"I assume I'm in charge of procuring the cameras?"

Wildcard just nodded silently at Bend.

"Right. I can probably swing some favors through the Eyes, my spy toy dealer, and maybe see if I can't get Formic or Brianna pulling some extras. You mind doing the pickup after I make contact with my dealer? I feel like I'm better used here in the Tir."

"Naturally," agreed Wildcard.

"Cool. Trideo or vid?"

"Just vid, no sense in breaking the bank," said Wildcard. "Get yourself a trideo, though, for when you're mapping out the museum. We'll also have you sitting with all your gear in storage down there for the last couple of days, since that's the obvious location for any magical artifacts."

"Which is why Alvarez won't use the storage," commented Locke.

"Maybe he's that stupid," countered Wildcard, causing Locke to scoff. Locke asked,

“Okay, so how about me?”

“Simple,” said Wildcard. “You’re bait.”

Locke blinked.

“I’m what?”

“Well, not entirely. You’ll serve multiple functions, however. We need you on the ground floor of the party t’assense Peter McKinley, Larry Colburn, and James Lynch. Assume that they’ll have been replaced by Alvarez mere moments before the party.”

Wildcard pulled up a file on the Aztechnology compound in Portland, and continued, “In turn, this will require you to operate openly and show your face, which will expose you to the Aztechnology assets who will doubtless be on-site, searching for Alvarez. Although this is purely ad-hoc, we could use the opportunity to trump one of their agents and get a little more last-minute info.”

Locke gulped.

“What’s my insurance here?”

“Easy. I’ll be running comms and monitoring the cameras from the parking lot. Say you run into trouble. You make it to me, we jump onto the 405 at 400 kilometers an hour.”

“If I make it to you.”

Wildcard’s metallic tone betrayed not a hint of emotion.

“Yes.”

After a long pause, Locke sighed.

“Okay. Fine. How do I get in? I’d need to be invited by Hestaby or one of the other big-shots.”

“Funny you should mention that,” said Dervish. “We took care of that today with a call to Johnson.”

Locke was earnestly surprised.

“Wouldn’t having Schwartzkopf vouch for our entry into the party blow our cover?”

“Which is why,” said Bend, “Schwartzkopf promised he’d work on Hestaby. She probably knows we’re here already, so there’s not much lost in playing nice with a passive participant.”

“And Hestaby will agree to this?”

Dervish shrugged.

“Johnson seemed to think so.”

Locke placed his thumb and forefinger on his eyes as he collapsed into a cheap armchair.

“What was this about not making deals with dragons again?”

Dervish chuckled.

“We’re already double-fucked. Why not make it triple?”

“Besides, it’s just an invite. Fancy stationery and a tuxedo, no scales off her back. Speaking ‘o ‘double-fucked,’” interrupted Wildcard, “Let’s talk about your role, Dervish.”

Dervish made a noncommittal grunt.

“You’re going to do exactly what you’ve been doing, and that’s to act as a provisional security guard at the museum. Yer on--” Wildcard coughed, “--good terms with the Head of Security, and it’d be a shame not to use that.”

“What about my armor and weapons?”

Dervish glanced over at the heavy roller-suitcase that contained his sniper rifle, shotgun, and disassembled America-San armor, nestled near the hotel room’s bathroom. Wildcard pulled up a few rent-a-car websites, tossing the AR windows over to Dervish.

“I’ll rent a van remotely on the day of the gala and Kara will transport all of our really nasty stuff there through the security perimeter before I slave it to my nexus. That way if we need to use the car to flee we can have our gear in a ready-to-go location. O’course, I’ll be fully armed-up in the car.”

“Smart,” responded Dervish, although he didn’t elaborate further.

There was a silence as the whole team took a collective deep breath. Bend hazarded,

“You guys wanna, like, watch a movie or something?”

“Fucking hell,” laughed Dervish. “I thought nobody was going to ask. Hand me a beer.”

9:00 AM, FEBRUARY 17th, 2074, MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY, PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

Bend watched from the basement shadows for the umpteenth time as a maintenance crew swapped out the ammo tank on the Ares FarCast FAB Dispersal Drone. It was a clunky thing, brutish but functional, designed to clear out Insect Spirits and other dual-natured creatures with weaponized chemicals. There was evidently going to be a demonstration of the drone at work up in the main hall, involving it using its ammo selector to kill and spare different types of magical plants in quick succession, but the regular maintenance crews needed to make sure that none of the ammo cartridges leaked or contaminated the main firing mechanism.

Bend had gathered this because when he had first passed in front of the drone, an automated hologram of Matrix Security Director McWilliams had appeared in response to his motion and talked him through the hypothetical demonstration that the drone thankfully had not done in the middle of the storage basement. It was a little unnerving to see a former teammate in Virtual Intelligence form trying to make a sales pitch for a glorified bug-sprayer, but then, Bend surmised, it was probably TwoDee's baby. He always did have a thing for killer drones, and it seemed that Ares was capitalizing on that skillset.

Returning his attention to the new boxes across the room, Bend slunk behind the maintenance crew and examined the arrivals. Most were the sort of cases that were used to carry conventional antiques, with only a few that were thick enough or made of the right materials to hide a magical artifact. Double-checking over each shoulder, he cracked the shielded boxes just long enough to assense, and was left disappointed. A few magical auras, yes, but nothing on the magnitude he was seeking.

Resigned, he slunk back across the room to the maintenance elevator doors and climbed into the vent above them, settling atop the elevator.

It had been a long week, and it was going to be a long week yet.

11:00 AM, FEBRUARY 19th, 2074, CASTLE ROCK, WASHINGTON, SALISH-SHIDHE

Wildcard tapped his left loafer impatiently against his car door as he slowly drew up to the Tir checkpoint from the Seattle-outbound freeway. For the fifteenth time, he went through his identification for "William Carpenter," the CAS attaché to a mostly-fictional diplomat. Everything was in order, but Wildcard had felt on-edge ever since the dinner date at the Blue Bohemian back on the 29th and it wasn't a feeling that abated lightly.

Naturally, the two-hundred and thirty-seven fingernail-sized spy cameras that he had crammed into every corner of his car were not doing anything to make him feel more secure about passing into the Tir for the second time.

He took a deep breath and checked the rearview mirror to make sure that his expression was humanlike as he approached the kiosk.

A disinterested soldier in full mil spec load out approached the car, brandishing akimbo a battle rifle and an e-clipboard. This level of armor was unusual on the border guards, Wildcard noticed. The Tir was probably starting to catch on to exactly how much shit was about to go down.

"Name?"

"William Carpenter."

"Purpose for visit?"

The soldier's words were curt.

“Reconnoitering with my companions, in keeping with a visit earlier this month. I sent the details ahead.”

The soldier put his fingers to the earpiece built into the side of his helmet. A few tense seconds passed.

“Everything seems to check out, sir.”

Wildcard had almost slammed on the gas when the soldier put his hand out.

“And sir?”

Wildcard rolled his half-raised window back down and peered out.

“Yes?”

“Jordan Formic sends his regards...and requests that you don’t break any government property.”

Wildcard managed a thin smile, the closest thing his meat-face got to a grin.

“O’course.”

1:00 PM, FEBRUARY 21st, 2074, THE RIVER’S EDGE HOTEL, PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

Locke paced in the hotel room, trying and failing to pay attention to 2073’s premiere pay-per-view documentary, “JetBlack: the Untold Story.” Wildcard was zonked out in VR in the walk-in-closet, calibrating his nexus individually to every tiny camera in a massive box of such (and deducting a rebate for each, individually, from the team’s forward expense account), and Bend and Dervish were both at the museum doing their respective duties. This gave Locke plenty of time to fret.

He refamiliarized himself with the three men that he would be identifying—and, if need be, bagging and tagging—at the soiree.

The first AR window to his fingertips was Larry Colburn, the obvious target. Colburn, the Tellestrian Industries importer, was a generically-photogenic brunette with a smile that belonged to an equally-photogenic barracuda. He would doubtless be handling aboveboard magical wheeling and dealing during the gala, and so it would be simple enough for Alvarez to pursue his agenda under that cover.

Locke would check Colburn first.

The next dossier was on James Lynch, the Horizon Liaison, a blonde Hollywood type with a chiseled jawline. It was worrying to imagine Alvarez with the Dawkins Group at his beck and call.

It was even more worrying to imagine that Alvarez was, as the team feared, being extracted by Dawkins, artifact in tow. Locke prepared himself for the distinct possibility that he would have to kill James Lynch on the 23rd, regardless of whether he was actually Rodrigo Alvarez or not.

The final possibility was Peter McKinley, a distinguished four-star general (by elven standards of “distinguished,” he had the regal bearing of an old man, but looked to be 25). McKinley was a talented combat mage, but by all accounts Alvarez was an assassin who required the element of surprise to be effective. An attack on McKinley—were he Alvarez and not the real deal—would go in Locke’s favor, but either McKinley himself or an impersonator could bring to bear the might of the Tir Military, which had recently been gearing up their MPs for the upcoming fracas with Ginsen.

Locke didn’t like any of the options, but didn’t have much further time to contemplate just how fucked he was. A knock on the door heralded a much more immediate concern, although when he attempted to determine just who was at the door (by way of assessing, ultrasound goggles, and peering through the peephole in the door with his sidearm at the ready), he found that there was only a single piece of fine vellum parchment on the hallway rug.

Briefly cracking the door to snatch it from a crouching posture, he put his back to the door as he slammed it shut and unfurled the parchment.

It read,

“APPLYING TO ONE MR. FELIX RAMIREZ AND GUEST

TO BE REDEEMED ON SATURDAY THE 23rd OF FEBRUARY IN THE YEAR 2074 AT 8 O
CLOCK IN THE EVENING

AT THE MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY IN PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

TO ATTEND THE TECHNOLOGICAL GALA

AT THE INVITATION OF THE ORANGE QUEEN, DRAGON KEEPER OF METAHUMANITY

HESTABY”

Locke wiped a bead of sweat from his brow.

“Dios mio.”

>Great Dragon Count: 5

3:00 PM, FEBRUARY 22nd, 2074, DOWNTOWN PUBLIC PARKING COMPLEX, PORTLAND,
TIR TAIRNGIRE

Dervish approached the rear of the rented van, which was marked up with the logo of “Danny’s Pizzeria,” which was (after a little research) revealed to have been foreclosed in April 2072. It was a chunky-looking vehicle, like a brick on wheels, but this brick on wheels was packing mad heat.

“This the one?”

Kara the Smuggler’s throaty voice responded over the other end,

“Everything should be accounted for, D.”

Dervish didn't even bother to check over his shoulder. His sonar and radar senses insured him that there was nobody else in the structure as he slammed the key (manual lock, like the old-school models) into the doors and slammed them open.

“If I could cry, Kara,” said Dervish, his tusks jutting forward as he broke out into a full-face grin, “I would be.”

It was glorious. Dervish felt like Howard Carter opening the tomb of King Tut.

Or he would have, anyway, if he had any idea who the fuck Howard Carter was.

Plastic explosives frolicked with armor-piercing sabots of every caliber. An entire backpack filled to the brim with EX-Explosive rounds leaned precariously against a fire-and-forget missile launcher. Wildcard's HVAR stood out from a rack of disposable SMGs, their numbers hastily scrubbed both digitally and in meatspace. Locke's LMG sat atop a pyramid of breaching tools, a greater testimony to the glory of his gods than Tenochtitlan ever was. Crossed in the back like a pair of duelist's sabers were Dervish's overmodified shotgun (attached grenade launcher in tow) and anti-materiel rifle, each an instrument of death at ranges that the other couldn't manage.

Only one thing was missing, until Dervish peered beneath the upholstery of the van and saw just the tip of a 300-pound, red, white and blue boot with inbuilt thrusters.

“It's beautiful,” he murmured, as much to himself and perdition as to Kara.

“You think that's great,” she responded, over his earpiece, “I've been working with Wildcard, Formic and your Johnson to try to get your helicopter in-city.”

Dervish ran a hand lovingly over the titanium kneepads of his armor suit.

“Any luck with that?”

“Not so far, but I think we may manage a miracle by tomorrow.”

The mention of 'tomorrow' snapped Dervish out of his reverie.

“You said you'd be getting this into the parking structure across the street, right?”

Kara paused. She hadn't been interrogated on this point.

“That's the idea.”

“I'm a little worried about how quickly I could get to the gear in a crisis situation.”

Kara's response was flat, grounded.

“I told you before, any closer and it's risky. You don't want the shooting to start early, especially at a smuggler like me, and especially with a load this hot.”

“I don't think shooting's going to matter when this turns into the O.K. Corral,” countered Dervish, looking through the high-explosive grenades fitted for his launcher.

“O.K. Corral?”

Kara let loose a croaking laugh.

“Try another Operation RECIPROCITY.”

5:00 PM, FEBRUARY 23rd, 2074, ARES ARMS SEATTLE, DOWNTOWN SEATTLE, UCAS

Security Director Malcolm McWilliams furiously masturbated himself beneath his office desk as he gaped, open-mouthed, at the most recent projected profits graph on his new drone. The PR guys had just come through with a redesign that added a bunch of sleek futuristic bits to the chassis that really made the whole thing pop with that Ares pizazz, and diving into the drone from afar while the maintenance guys affixed the new additions had him in such a tizzy that he'd let his meat body's urges get the better of him.

TwoDee very frequently let his meat body's urges get the better of him. He was dimly aware of his manager's presence somewhere in the periphery of his matrix-filled vision, but it wasn't until Mr. Nice sent him a message digitally that he really registered it.

>FROM: BRADFORD NICE

>CONTENT: FOR FUCKS SAKE MCWILLIAMS PUT YOUR PANTS BACK ON

“No,” said TwoDee, returning to reality with dick in hand and annoyed boss in doorframe.

“No?” Nice restrained a laugh at the absurdity of the situation.

“As I distinctly recall,” said TwoDee, still making no moves to lift his belt from the floor, “my fifteen minute break starts at 5 and my savant matrix security techniques are not to be questioned during me-time.”

Nice made a gagging noise.

“If you didn't get such great results I'd have you shot.”

“You know I once jacked off while simultaneously controlling like fifteen of those rail-mounted turret guns on level B3? I perforated this troll runner in a ballistic suit. Best fap of my life.”

“Are you quite done?”

There was a short pause and then the clinking of TwoDee's belt buckle as he finally donned his slacks.

“Yeah, I guess. You ruined the moment I was having with my robot, Nice. LIKE ALWAYS.”

Nice hazarded a peek over the top of the desk and let out a sigh of relief.

“I was coming in to let you know that Operation: Prototype has been greenlit.”

TwoDee’s eyes glinted like a Christmas tree.

“No shit! The Board signed off and everything?”

Nice smiled calmly.

“To a man. They all agreed that the asset would be better in Ares’ hands than one of our rivals.”

“What kind of resources am I looking at?”

“For starters, Firewatch-1 is getting shipped out from Detroit on the first suborbital we can launch. We’re looking in to getting one of the new gunships loaded up in time. Word is there’s been terrorist threats in the area and the Board doesn’t like to take chances.”

TwoDee gawked, his wavering lips caught between the expressions of awestruck joy and grinning malice.

“Operational authority?”

Nice stretched his lips flat against his teeth and squinted before admitting,

“Full.”

There was a lull as TwoDee placed his elbows on his desk and pent his fingers together in front of his face, aping his best “evil genius” pose.

“This isn’t doing anything to kill my raging hard-on, Bradford.”

Nice leaned in and made eye contact with TwoDee. It was much closer than he would have liked, but it helped to emphasize a point that he needed to make.

“Just get results, Malcolm.”

TwoDee let out a shrill, childish giggle that just increased in pitch as cruelty bled into his tone. For a moment, Nice saw him exactly as he was on the inside; a barely-postadolescent demonic manchild, relishing in all the new toys that Hell had belched forth for him to break.

“Oh, I’ll get results, Bradford. I’ll get your fucking results.”

8:00 PM, FEBRUARY 23rd, 2074: THE MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY, PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

Locke produced a handkerchief and wiped the persistent, nervous sweat from his face as he approached the front of the museum, lining up behind a duck's row of hoity-toity high society elves all at least as attractive, if not more, than he was. On his arm was Julia Rothchild, the Tir DoD agent, in a dressed-up little black dress, which had not been his best last-minute decision, all things considered.

"So am I just lining up for disaster to strike all my friends? Is that what happens to your one-night stands?"

She was referring, of course, to Tulip, whom she had witnessed Locke spending the entire afternoon at the Mages' Conclave with. Reasonably speaking, Locke should have accounted for the fact that the agent in charge of running security at the Conclave would notice him there, especially when part of his bluff had involved putting Tulip and Rothchild in contact.

"I had nothing to do with that. Look, Julia, you're not a one night stand. First, this is our second night out, and second, we just fooled around a little--"

"And 'Felix Ramirez?'" Julia hissed, peevish.

"Just one of my cover identities," said Locke, reassuringly.

Julia seemed placated by this.

"Couldn't you have named your cover identity something less stupid-sounding?"

That hurt.

"I don't get to choose my cover identities," grumbled Locke, as they neared the front of the line. Rothchild tugged on Locke's sleeve, excited.

"Oh, hey, look!"

At the top of the entrance stairs was a harshly angular, strikingly tall woman with gorgeous locks of auburn hair, flowing freely over an elegant rococo-style gown done up in earthy greens and rich golds. Her posture was regal and impeccable, but as she shook the hand of one guest and embraced another, it was very clear that she was taking every possible step to appear approachable and welcoming.

Locke's tongue dried up as he tried to fight down a small panic attack.

"H-Hestaby," Locke stuttered as he made, for the third time in as many months, direct eye contact with a Great Dragon in her human form.

Hestaby's smile was earnest, betraying no intent to speculation.

“...And you must be the inimitable Felix Ramirez. I recognize that you’ve brought with you a woman of some acquaintance to me. It’s good to see you again, Julia. You did excellent work at the Mage’s Conclave. I hope that you will take today to relax.”

Rothchild dipped into one half of a formal bow, dropping her head further as if kowtowing.

“Of course, my Lady.”

Locke hurriedly did the same, only to find that Hestaby lifted his head, and kissed him on each cheek in a distinctly European gesture of hospitality, before doing the same to Rothchild.

Locke wondered if Rothchild had received the same painful, aggressive burning sensation on her cheeks, or if that was intended as a warning.

“Enjoy the party, both of you. I find that the star of the show is a bit sterile for my tastes,” Hestaby said, referring to the large bug-fighting drone set up on a pedestal in the exhibition hall, visible from inside the great hall, “and I always did love greeting the best and brightest of Metahumanity.”

As Locke stepped into the gala proper, observing the rows upon rows of catered tables and flitting groups of elves in gorgeous gowns and suits, he let out a breath that he’d been holding in since he’d first made eye contact.

“Julia, would you mind finding us a table? I need to use the restroom.”

Rothchild smiled in return.

“Sure, Vincent.”

Locke immediately began searching for Larry Colburn, although he spotted Peter McKinley first, in an animated conversation with some of the event’s heavily-armed security guards. He passed an elegant sign on the way that read “Security Armaments on Loan from Ares Macrotechnology.”

“Peter McKinley himself! I can’t believe I’m meeting you!”

THE SECOND FLOOR

Meanwhile, in the closed-off exhibits, Bend circled the museum with a ruthenium-polymer-coated sack of spy toys and cameras, placing the latter in cubbies and corners like a deranged ninja Santa Clause. As he scaled a tasteful modernist pillar to get a camera in the corner where it met the ceiling, Wildcard sounded over the encrypted channel on the team’s tactical network,

“Bend, I know it’s a bit late to change plans, but could you start doubling up on your coverage?”

Bend stuck the camera in its hiding space, adjusted it to set the adhesive at the right angle, and responded,

“What, like just aim for the major angles of transit?”

“Yeah,” said Wildcard, forwarding him a vidfeed of a pair of party guests, from the perspective of the camera in the West hallway. The woman was in a stunning skirt-coat combo, with the man in a cutting-edge Zoe suit. However, as both of them turned directly to regard the camera’s viewpoint, their faces shifted and blurred. They had both adopted completely neutral (and more worryingly, human) countenances as the woman plucked the camera from its hiding space and crushed it.

“Dawkins,” gasped Bend.

“They’ve been following your path and breaking cameras. They’re missin’ three outta every four, but it’s still making my job tougher.”

Bend slipped back down the pillar and propped his head over a banister, looking down at the unlit scale-model of a submarine interior in the exhibit beneath him. His invisible face blanched as he spotted a group of would-be utility workers, in slate grey jumpsuits, donning balaclavas and checking a set of submachine guns in the “engine room” of the submarine. There wasn’t a guard in sight, which suggested that either the guard had been paid off or knocked off.

“Ginsen’s already arming up, ‘Card.”

Wildcard responded, calmly,

“They work for a Great, so they’re not going to do anything stupid like barge into the main party area. They’ll probably start following search protocols and sweeping for Alvarez.”

As if on cue, one of the jumpsuited men tapped out a few instructions on a commlink, causing every (legitimate) security camera in their wing to deactivate, while another sighted a guard patrolling on the balcony opposite Bend.

The guard collapsed, victim of an obvious stunbolt, as the mercenaries fanned out from the submarine in threes, searching the exhibit thoroughly. Bend caught the whine of night-vision goggles activating.

“I hope for our sake that you’re right,” he whispered.

THE EXPO HALL

“--Technical difficulties,” apologized the virtual hologram of TwoDee, its bearded face contorted in a caricature of a sad expression. “There has been a malfunction on the lock between the backup ammunition canister and the feeding nozzle. As Ares’ state-of-the-art diagnostics system has caught the error, maintenance is going to have the demo up and running in a jiffy!”

“I guess they haven’t fixed all the bugs,” grunted Dervish, in his visored security armor, as he mingled amongst the guests in the expo hall.

Wildcard chuckled at the “bug” joke that he had detected, even if Dervish hadn’t made it intentionally.

“Speaking o’ bugs, ours are going out. Horizon’s got at least a half-dozen Dawkins guys on the ground floor, although they seem to be creating a safe perimeter around the Expo Hall. Ginsen’s got a ton of mercs on the floor, and more seem to be coming up through the basement. They’ve compromised the security nexus and have been hacking guards’ monitors before dropping them.”

Dervish cursed and turned away from the guests, catching a glimpse of Locke and Peter McKinley in frenzied discussion, sharing stories about Operation RECIPROCITY.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me sooner!?”

“Because they’ve been running quiet so far. Stunbolts and tranq rounds. They’re not making a big scene. They’re waiting for Alvarez.”

As Dervish moved across the expo hall to get a better look at the closed-off parts of the museum, Wildcard barked over the comms,

“We’ve got three more contacts. A city garbage truck is pulling up to dispose of some of the party waste--looks like city workers for the most part, anyhow--and there’s a big black truck parking a block behind the museum, on the other side of the parking garage. There’s also a helicopter flying low over the building, although it looks like they have clearance. Maybe spoofed.”

Locke asked, as he detached from McKinley, heading purposefully back to the main hall where he had spotted Larry Colburn and James Lynch in discussion with each other at the end of one of the tables,

“You got a view of the truck?”

“In a mo,” said Wildcard, and the team heard the sound of his binoculars extending over the subvocal. “Oh, Jesus Christ.”

Dervish growled, as he forayed into the educational movie theater and spotted three guards crumpled and stacked haphazardly behind the second row of seats,

“Status?”

“Aztecs,” groaned Wildcard. “Loaded for bear. Crazy feathered armor suit get-ups, like Locke’s but in better shape. These two twin-looking blokes at the front with braided hair, giving orders to the flunkies and...”

Wildcard’s voice wavered with fear, “...and that cyborg from back in Seattle, paired up with one of our Willies. They’ve got one hell of an assault loadout, and it looks like they’re making to breach into one of the rear maintenance passages.”

Dervish half-shouted,

“How the FUCK did they make it past the barricade!?”

A few party guests turned their heads, and Dervish reassured them, “Everything is under control, ma’am. Just some setbacks.”

“We have another problem,” noted Locke.

THE MAIN HALL

Locke forwarded the team the feed from his contacts and earbuds, which were optimized enough to pick up elements of Lynch and Colburn’s conversation from where he had deliberately situated himself with Rothchild.

Lynch asked, his fingers tracing his wine glass as he lowered his voice,

“And the package?”

Colburn responded, with his characteristic barracuda grin,

“In the basement. The men in the maintenance crew did a hell of a job.”

“I figured no one would check the Ares angle,” said Lynch, with a shrug. “And no one did. Speaking of which, you’ve probably noticed that our mutual friends arranged for the payment.”

Lynch eyed a few party guests (whom Wildcard immediately marked on the tacnet as ‘POSSIBLE DAWKINS?’) as Colburn downed the last of his own wine.

“Just as planned,” said Colburn. “It’s been a pleasure doing business with you. I’ll take my share when this all blows over.”

“As always,” responded Lynch, before standing and separating from Colburn, who went in the opposite direction shortly thereafter.

Over the subvocal, Bend groaned,

“One of them is Alvarez but they’re fucking working together.”

“Colburn is suspect number one so Locke should follow him,” said Wildcard, flatly. “Dervish?”

Wordlessly, Dervish followed Lynch, absentmindedly pushing a few stunned guests aside.

The lights flickered and there was a dull thudding noise from elsewhere in the building. As the guests murmured and looked around, Wildcard shouted,

“Aztech just breached!”

“What the hell did they mean by ‘the package?’?”

Wildcard highlighted the Ares drone maintenance team, whom had just finished detaching one of the ammo tanks from the drone in the expo hall, replaced it, and were now taking the spent tank hastily to the maintenance elevator. Wildcard marked them, beneath their disguises, as Barlowe, IceQueen, and Meld, one of Alvarez's runner teams.

"Either the payment or the artifact is in the Ares ammo canisters," shouted Wildcard, his composure breaking over the comms. "Bend, get after them!"

Bend slipped into the vents, making his way to the top-of-the-elevator hidey hole.

"Aztechnology making for the main elevator," updated Wildcard, in a frenzy. "Ginsen moving back downstairs. The helicopter is landing on the roof. It's the German running team."

"Guests are disappearing," said Locke, as he followed Colburn into the Main Hall restroom.

"Dawkins," said Wildcard, breathlessly, as Locke walked up behind Colburn at the urinal. "Go loud."

Locke stunbolted Colburn in the back of the head before grabbing him by the hair and smashing his face down into the top of the urinal, sending spiderwebs of shock up the porcelain. Colburn crumpled to the floor with cracked teeth, although, disappointingly, his face did not change as he fell unconscious.

"It's Lynch," yelled Locke, holding his hand to his earpiece before regarding a gasping guest at the doorway to the bathroom. "Stand back! This is a homeland security operation!"

"Hestaby just launched into the sky," said Wildcard. "The horizon to the south of Portland is lighting up. The mainstream news channels are reporting some kind of disaster in rural Oregon but details are scattered."

>If you want the full "when this campaign ended this song was the shit so I actually played it at the gaming table" effect, I'd cue up Kanye West's "Power," but I'd really just suggest playing whatever epic cyberpunk battle music fits your fancy for the next section. The *Revengeance* soundtrack is a good option.

THE EXPO HALL

"Sirrurg," said Dervish, as he forded through a huge crowd of guests who were beginning to panic, making his way to the Expo Hall bathroom that Alvarez/Lynch had disappeared into, at almost the same time as Colburn had. As he approached, he caught a glimpse of one of the other visored security guards at the bathroom door, glancing around in confusion.

"S-sir?"

"Get ready to fight," growled Dervish, as he shoved past into the bathroom. All the stalls were closed.

One by one, he kicked them open with his raptor-legs, exposing, first, two startled elven men (and one elven woman, who seemed to have been in the middle of something with one of the men) and then, at

the end of the row, the naked corpse of one of the security guards, propped up atop the toilet with James Lynch's clothing strewn about him.

Back in the Expo Hall, the security guard that Dervish had regarded prior was marked on Wildcard's cameras as he vaulted effortlessly up the pedestal that Ares' drone was on, unscrewed the recently-installed ammo canister, and then began a headlong sprint across the Expo Hall for the maintenance exit that lead to the stalling "garbage truck." The garbagemen poured into the Expo Hall through the same exit, producing concealed submachine guns as their faces blurred. One of the Dawkins operatives yelled, as a few of the "guests" ferried out with their own concealed weapons to join their ranks,

"Nobody move!"

THE MAIN HALL

"What the hell is happening," asked Rothchild, her hand over a holdout pistol strapped to her thigh, as Locke came sprinting back to their table.

"Julia--" Locke began,

A pair of double doors separating the main hall from the closed-off fossils exhibit fell into multiple pieces as the cyberzombie's blades tore through it, revealing the Aztec tac-team to the screaming guests. One of the braided men behind the zombie barked,

"MATEN FELIX RAMIREZ! MATEN RODRIGO ALVAREZ! COGE EL ARTEFACTO!"

Wildcard said, through Locke's earpiece right as Locke yelled it to Rothchild,

"RUN!"

THE EXPO HALL

Dawkins barely had time to react as Dervish plowed through the two "garbagemen" at the fore, snapping both clean in half with a snicker-snack of his cyberblades as he continued, without losing momentum, into the alleyway with the garbage truck.

Or, rather, the alleyway that HAD held the garbage truck, which was now speeding out to meet the freeway with a fancy sports-car behind it, faster than a garbage truck had any right to move.

As a rocket-propelled grenade flashed out from the sports car and raced for Dervish, he ducked low and blasted off for the street in front of the building, seeking the parking lot. The missile missed him by inches, crashing into the side of the Museum as alarms began to sound.

THE PARKING LOT

Gunfire was sounding loud and clear from the Museum, but Wildcard could scarcely hear it as he drifted up the circular parking garage, maintaining as high a speed as his Hyundai could without careening through the wall and off into the night sky.

He pulled up behind the van and, leaving his engine running, dashed out the door and unlocked the back of the clunky vehicle.

Everything was still there, although he found what he was looking for in particular: Locke's milspec armor and LMG, nestled amidst oodles of other tantalizing but unnecessary items of gear. With a grunt of exertion, he hefted both haphazardly into the back seat of the Super Getaway Hyundai, and then jumped back into his car as the tacnet registered Dervish reaching the bottom of the parking structure. Bystanders--those who had caught on to what had happened early--were rushing for their cars, and regarded Wildcard as he blasted back down the parking structure with terror.

As Wildcard passed Dervish while he was racing up from the third floor on blazing skimmer discs, the two exchanged a curt nod.

"Felix," said Wildcard, slipping and using Locke's real name, "You're getting extracted. Meet in front of the West--"

One of the windows of the Expo Hall blasted outward in a shower of melting metal and liquid glass courtesy of a certain custom superheated-ash spell. Locke, bloodied and battered but alive in his ruined suit, launched bodily outside and pulled into a tuck-and-roll on the pavement.

Locke sprinted for the car, running on adrenaline and fear as two Aztec troops chased after him. With an immense BANG, one of the Aztecs hit pavement with a clean hole through his torso, courtesy of Dervish reaching his sniper rifle at the van.

"Nice cover, Dervish," yelled Wildcard, as he propped his HVAR out of his driver's-side window and began hosing down everything in the general direction of the other, forcing the soldier to take cover behind a planter.

"Dawkins is closing in on me," gasped Bend, over the subvocal. "One of them got a shot in. Nothing serious, just the leg. Ginsen swooped in and blindsided them. But...but Alvarez's runners are doing the hand-off on the roof right now. And I can't stop them."

As Locke vaulted the roof of the Hyundai and circled into the shotgun seat, Dervish said, from his sniper perch,

"Stop them."

"I told you I can't--"

"STOP THEM," repeated Dervish.

"I couldn't," said Bend, his voice breaking up.

“Bend,” said Locke, as the Super Getaway Hyundai did a donut over the grass lawn and then flashed off to the 405 freeway, “Do it.”

Bend sobbed.

“Yeah. Okay. So much for pacifism.”

Twenty seconds later, Wildcard saw in his rearview mirror as the roof of the Museum exploded. Suddenly, thousands of AR bulletins leapt into action across the periphery of his vision. The Terror Alert had been sounded.

The Tir was under martial law.

THE ROOF

The roof, now a crater of wickedly exposed rebar and precariously hanging concrete, was host to a small race of sorts, as Bend, caught under a large hunk of steel, spotted Quake in much the same position. Next to Bend, the merc named Barlowe--sans legs--sputtered and grasped for his gun, clearly in shock. Bend also registered movements at the periphery of the roof where the pipe bomb hadn't done as much damage, likely the remnants of the German team's gunners.

Quake screamed bloody murder as he sighted Bend and his helicopter, relatively unscathed, appeared overhead, shining spotlights on both runners. Bend desperately rolled over, catching and cutting himself badly on the steel girder as he flopped behind a collapsed pillar. An immense, unrestrained shockwave blasted out from Quake, nearly missing Bend and sending Barlowe catapulting, screaming in terror, into the night sky.

Not wasting any time, Bend popped around the other side of his cover and loosed a Thunderbolt burst, but the shots went wide. He was swiftly driven back behind cover by a hail of fire, and recognized with dismay that he had probably killed very few of the six other Germans.

The second-story elevator dinged behind Bend, and he gasped in terror as he spotted two Aztecs at the door, guns at the ready, but then the struts holding the elevator to the wall suddenly burst at the seams and flew in opposite directions, causing the elevator to peel free of its structure and drop to the basement with a horrifying crunch. Standing in the center of the rooftop crater, Quake began laughing madly, blood freely streaming from his tear ducts and nostrils as he loosed destruction spell after destruction spell, living up to his name.

“Please,” grunted Bend, his broken ribs and perforated leg searing in pain, “I need backup. Anyone.”

“Give me five minutes,” said Dervish, from across the street. “I can't see any of the gunmen with my rifle through all the smoke, but if you give me time to grab my armor I can make it over there.”

“Dervish,” coughed Bend, as he stumbled for another broken wall as Quake plowed through the one he was hiding behind, “I don't have that long.”

“Three minutes,” said Dervish, as he tore up the upholstery in the van.

Bend's voice was serene.

"Dervish," he said. "I am going to die."

Dervish stared longingly at his America-San power armor. Instead, he donned his camo pants and his UCAS Veteran's administration armor jacket. Almost reverently, he tied the tattered American flag that was crumpled in his pocket across his forehead, making a headband.

"Hold the fuck on, you pansy." Dervish slid his anti-materiel rifle's bandolier over his left shoulder and his shotgun's over his right. His skimmer discs activated as he slowly lifted off the ground and picked up speed, boosting up the cylindrical ramp and banking against the side barriers to keep himself balanced. His voice softened as he finished, "I'm coming to save you."

Bend watched in awe as a shooting star launched from the roof of the parking structure, alighting in the sky over the street by the German helicopter.

The Adept in the Helicopter screamed in panic, as the streak in the sky passed,

"HERR AMERIKA!"

Quake turned to the sky in time to witness a series of skyward flashes, like manna falling from heaven, and then three APDS slugs blasted through his ribcage from the shoulder-blades down, dropping him. He hadn't finished falling to his knees when Dervish crashed into him, raptor-legs first, reducing Quake to a red particulate paste and a stream of gibs.

One of the coughing Germans yelled, looking for the boxy protrusion that was once the roof-access stairs,

"STREUEN!"

Dervish stood up and spun in a fraction of a second, launching an underbarrel grenade from his grenade launcher at the open firing platform that the German adept stood in in the helicopter. The adept caught the grenade and, with a pinwheeling motion, hucked it back at Dervish, missing by a short distance and blowing a hole clean through the floor of the second floor into the first floor.

Ramping up the side of the crater, Dervish grabbed one of the Germans by the neck and used him to soak covering fire from his teammates, before pitching the unfortunate sod off the roof and firing, in quick succession, another two underbarrel grenades.

As the adept flung the first into the night sky, the second sailed past him, leaving him unable to react when the grenade airbursted, blowing out the side doors of the helicopter and shredding the adept. The helicopter pulled into a tailspin, its miniguns spinning to life.

As the helicopter alit and loaded a short burst of fire into Dervish's last known position, a small white dragon wearing what appeared to be full military-spec barding flashed out of the air from the direction of downtown, alit on the nose of the chopper, and breathed a cone of high-pressure fire directly

through the windshield. The chopper died in the air before violently smashing into the middle of the street below as the Drake bailed off into the air again.

“Gentlemen,” said Gunther Leimann, over the team’s comms, “my partner.”

8:49 PM, FEBRUARY 23rd, 2074, THE 405 FREEWAY, PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

-- stay inside and evacuate Downtown Portland if at all possible. Do not call emergency lines at this time unless you have a medical crisis. Response teams are forthcoming and all citizens are advised to cooperate to the fullest possible--”

Wildcard switched off the radio.

Tonatiuh the Sun God (or at least an aspect of him) sat behind Locke and Wildcard as the two runners practically flew along the freeway, magic and maintenance causing their supercar to hold together even when approaching speeds better reserved for aircraft. As Locke donned his gear from the shotgun seat, making sure that all relevant locks, buckles, and seals were arranged correctly, Wildcard’s nexus ran scans on passing vehicles as they blew by.

“Most gridlinked vehicles have been locked down,” explained Wildcard, as Locke arranged his spirit binding materials along the dashboard and began quietly chanting in Aztlaner Spanish. Wildcard jerked to avoid a police barricade in the midst of being set up, sending the cops scattering from their cars. “So we can peg the grey SUVs that are passing by as Ginsen or the like. We passed an APC sixty seconds back as it was hitting the opposite onramp; here’s hoping it’s Tir guys, because with the numbers Ginsen is throwing at this thing we need a little more firepower on our side.”

“The Tir’s not on our side,” responded Locke, as the binding materials glowed with the auras of their constituent spirits.

“Tir’s enough on our side to count,” clucked Wildcard, although he had to avoid the instinct to slam on the brakes as the silhouette of a massive gunship passed overhead, far too low to the ground to be safe. “Bloody hell was that!?”

Locke peered over his shoulder.

“Looked like Ares.”

“Couldn’t have been,” said Wildcard, as he adjusted his steering wheel and picked up speed again. “Ares isn’t involved.”

“Maybe they are now,” said Locke, tightening the seal on his helmet. “Coming up on the target.”

Wildcard and Locke watched as the Dawkins operatives in the sports car escort exchanged fire with a van full of Ginsen mercenaries.

“Ginsen’s getting the worst of it,” observed Wildcard. “Bloke in the truck with a big gun.”

“Let’s change that,” said Locke, summoning up his fire spirit and sending it after the truck.

As the top of the truck lit aflame, to the distant screams of the operative thereupon, the Ginsen van flipped and careened into the center divider, leaving the runners as the only aggressive contact. Wildcard barked, tightening his hands on the wheel,

“As we planned, Locke!”

Locke grimaced as he called up his water spirit (in the form of Tlaloc, the Rain Goddess) to help him maintain his illusions. This was going to suck.

As the supercar continued to catch up with the sports car, Locke placed his hands on the armrests and gripped harshly, steadying himself as he focused. A perfect double of the Hyundai split off from Wildcard even as, with the assistance of the water spirit, the Hyundai itself was rendered invisible. As Wildcard accelerated even further, straining to steer as he pulled alongside the flaming truck, the Dawkins gunner sighted the illusion with a rocket, finger hovering over the trigger.

“You’re not going to like this,” said Wildcard.

Locke nodded with a pained grunt as Wildcard opened the sunroof.

“Try not to vomit.”

Locke nodded again before Wildcard threw the car into a tailspin and slammed into reverse, utilizing the momentum provided by the spirit’s Movement to slide in front of Dawkins’ considerably-slower car. Locke clambered up to brace his torso against the hood of the car, thankful for the fact that the armor was between him and hundreds of miles per hour’s worth of air current. Posthaste, he slammed his bipod down, flicked the safety on his LMG, and squeezed the trigger.

It wasn’t an elegant use of the weapon so much as spray-n-pray, but as the Westwind came apart at the seams under a sustained stream of heavy-caliber APDS rounds, accuracy was a secondary concern. The driver died almost instantly, taking easily a dozen bullets and most of the windshield, and as the car steered erratically, Locke’s line of fire carved across both left wheels, causing the car to enter a dramatic sideways flip and, in the process, catapult the gunner straight into the ground. The rocket-propelled grenade sailed into the night sky, off to ruin somebody else’s night.

Without skipping a beat, Wildcard spun to get behind the truck again (causing Locke to clank against the roof and curse loudly), and as a man in a garbageman’s outfit leaned out the passenger-side window with an assault rifle, Locke blew his last Fire Spirit service.

Just like a month ago at the Blue Bohemian, the Accident effect caused the internal mechanisms of the garbage truck to go awry, and the tall, unbalanced vehicle began to wobble, steering dangerously close to the right edge of the freeway as the assailants merged onto the 5 freeway and started through the fashion industrial district. Wildcard pulled to the left as the assault rifle began peppering shots at where the car had been, giving Locke an opening to begin thumping away at the truck’s wheels with his LMG.

The weakening was exactly what he had required to do lasting damage, and the truck tilted dangerously onto its left side. Overcorrecting, the driver swerved to the right, and Wildcard and Locke watched with more satisfaction than they would have liked to admit as the garbage truck plowed clean off the freeway, crashing through the brick and mortar separators and falling into the streets below. There was a resounding screech and then a deafening crash as the truck skidded along the road, knocked a parked car aside, and then came to a stop in the fountain in front of an office park.

Wasting no time, Wildcard took the next exit and doubled back, pulling out to the front of the plaza as murmuring bystanders looked on and took pictures with their commlinks. Magnified by each individual commlink, the Tir Terror Alert system continued its tinny whine in the background. The truck was belching forth great plumes of smoke into the sky from its ruined engine block, and the water from the crushed fountain flowed around it and dribbled into the street.

The rubbernecking elven crowd didn't panic, but just watched as Wildcard and Bend stepped out of their car, weapons in tow, advancing on the office park. Given their distinctive armor choices, it was too surreal to take seriously, and the way that they moved with seemingly no self-awareness that they were being caught on hundreds of cameras added to the effect. It was like a reality TV stunt. As Wildcard swapped out his drum of APDS for a drum of EX-EX, he gestured with his left hand for Locke to flank.

Locke circled the wreck, LMG shouldered with a new box of APDS attached. The front cabinet was a mess of blood and broken glass, with the broken corpse of the gunman in the garbageman's outfit lolling out, face down in the water. Locke picked up the pace and rounded the vehicle as Wildcard whistled loudly, the sound coming out unnerving and unnatural through his mask filters.

A man in a suit of museum security armor, clutching a very dented Ares FABCast ammo tank, slowly crawled away from the wreck, trailing thin streams of blood. He noticed Wildcard and Locke belatedly, although as he pulled his sidearm, Wildcard rushed up and kicked it out of his hand before following up with another kick to his head, dislodging his security helmet. He looked identical to the dead guard from the museum bathroom. Plus or minus a broken nose. Wildcard shouted, in full view of the astonished onlookers,

"Are you Rodgrigo Alvarez?"

The guard stammered,

"I-no, I'm not--"

"ARE YOU RODGRIGO ALVAREZ!?"

Wildcard locked his HVAR into his hip pad brace and brandished it, its massive ammo drum brushing against his kneepads. The guard's face melted and reformed like plastic under a fire, swiftly taking on the form of "Rodgrigo Alvarez" that the team had seen in Schwartzkopf's dossier. Despite his generically-handsome ken-doll features, Wildcard noted that his nose was still broken.

"Okay. Yes. I'm Rodrigo Alvarez. But if you let me live I have a lot of sway with Horizon. I'm sure I can arrange to double whatever you're receiving--"

Wildcard and Locke looked at each other. Even though they couldn't see each others' faces through their respective helmets, the understanding was implicit.

"Sorry mate," said Wildcard, as he dug his feet into the ground, widened his stance, and leveled his gun at Alvarez. "You fucked with Lofwyr."

Alvarez's screams were cut short even as the crowd finally began screaming themselves, spurred by the blaring clatter of the HVAR being loosed into Alvarez's torso. Locke took up a firing stance shortly after Wildcard, gripped his LMG, and also began pouring round after round into Alvarez. The APDS rounds punched through meat and bone into pavement as the explosive rounds scattered what little remained to the wind, turning Alvarez, over the course of approximately 145 bullets, into liquid.

A few brave (or foolish) bystanders remained, still recording on their phones, as Wildcard and Locke furiously clicked their empty guns, breathing heavily through their mask filters. Sirens closed in as both men slowly stood.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," Locke groaned, spent.

"First things first," said Wildcard, as he hefted the ammo canister. "Assense this."

Locke stared at it for a brief moment before moving to help Wildcard carry it.

"Help me get it to the car."

Wildcard asked,

"So it's the artifact?"

"Better."

As Wildcard began pulling the car back into the streets of Tir Tairngire, Locke opened up communications.

"Bend, Dervish: the package is the one on your end. We'll be moving to reinforce you as soon as we can."

There was an agonizing wait, filled with static.

"Tir's set up barricades all over the district," barked Dervish. "Can't get back through in the car."

Wildcard let out a sigh of relief.

"Actually, we were going to check on the status of our miracle."

From behind the two runners, a police megaphone announced,

"PULL OVER!"

--AFTER we shake the cops."

8:53 PM, FEBRUARY 23rd, 2074, THE MUSEUM OF SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY,
DOWNTOWN PORTLAND, TIR TAIRNGIRE

Dervish's shotgun hammered away at the broken statue that the remaining 3 German mercs were using for cover as he slowly advanced, his cybereyes scanning for movement. Bend limped behind him, thunderbolt raised, as he tried to keep his eyes on what was behind Dervish. The gesture was tactically useless--Dervish could "see" in 360 degrees--but Bend appreciated the sense of safety it gave him, especially with how conflicted his emotions were.

"Bend," said Dervish, purposefully, and Bend whirled, planting a Stench spell behind the Germans' cover. As the three black-armored mercs stumbled out, gagging, Dervish boosted forward, slamming his blades through the chests of the first two. The third turned, in a panic, but couldn't move fast enough as Dervish pulled both spurs inward, carving through his back and sending him ragdolling across the floor.

"Wildcard's not on ops," grunted Bend. "Next attack could come from anywhere."

"Windows," said Dervish, before grabbing Bend bodily around the waist and dragging him down behind a collapsed ceiling support beam. Automatic fire crashed through the street-side windows before, with the distant clanking of hydraulic jacks, four masked gunmen leapt through the windows.

Dervish popped up from behind the beam and boosted into the first merc before they could even get their bearings, punching both blades through his chest and sending him careening back out into the street. As the sammy whirled to regard the other three, he caught the whine of a minigun across the hall with his sonar and threw himself to the ground, getting a faceful of broken glass for his troubles.

The three remaining mercs had a few moments to fire an erratic stream of bullets, some at Dervish and some at the newcomer, before all three were carved apart by the automatic cannon, which also punched through the second-story wall they were situated against, causing another section of the ceiling to collapse and join the crater.

"GIVE ME FELIX RAMIREZ," announced the cyborg, its humanlike facade filled with pockmarks and bulletholes, as it advanced into the room from the main-hall stairs.

"God-" Bend threw himself off the second-story balcony and into a hang over the expo hall, adhering to the lower wall as bullets raced overhead, "Dammit!"

The main body of the Aztechnology force, Bend noted, was engaged in a fighting retreat upstairs, being pushed out of the main and expo halls by a renewed force of Ginsen reinforcements. If Horizon was still here, he wasn't seeing them.

Scampering on all fours to behind the dead Germans' cover, Dervish grabbed the ammo canister that held the artifact to his chest. He boosted with his skimmers to under a collapsed section of roof, hoping the break line-of-sight, when the canister was yanked from his grasp mid-slide. It hovered into the air, slowly levitating across the roof and flying towards the parking structure.

“Fucking Horizon are across the street,” yelled Dervish. “They’ve got a mage!”

“I got it,” responded Bend, as a spirit that resembled a Buddhist warrior-monk, done up in prayer beads and shawl, burst into the air and physically grasped the canister, wrestling it back to the ground.

The spirit only made it halfway before El Terminador leveled its minigun. Bend vaulted back onto the second story, pulling his taser and sprinting towards the cyborg.

“No, no no no--”

There was a cacophonous boom as a tungsten-carbide shell the size of a coffee mug slammed into El Terminador’s chest, causing the cyborg to lift bodily off its feet and tumble down the staircase, catching a few Aztecs with it. A few Ginsen mercs vaulted up from the Expo Hall to the second story, guns brandished, as Bend leapt, grabbed the canister, and was spirited back under the collapsed roof section by Dervish.

“What now?” moaned Bend, as a garish red, white and blue gunship settled into a jump-jet hover in a slow circle around the Museum. As a bomb-faced icon appeared in AR space in front of the gunship’s cockpit, a familiar voice broadcast on the local AR.

“ATTENTION TERRORIST CHUCKLEFUCKS,” yelled TwoDee, “WE ARE HERE TO EXTRACT THE PRIZE PROTOTYPE THAT YOU HAVE RECKLESSLY ENDANGERED WITH YOUR FLAILING SHENANIGANS. ARES MACROTECHNOLOGY AND ITS SUBSIDIARIES OFFICIALLY DISAVOW ANY AGENDAS SEPARATE FROM THE EXTRACTION OF SAID PROTOTYPE.”

“Oh, god,” whimpered Bend.

“ARES ENJOYS A POSITION AS AN OFFICIAL CONTRACTOR TO THE TIR MILITARY. ANYONE WHO DOES NOT COOPERATE WILL BE SHOT UNTIL DEAD. YOU WILL RECEIVE NO WARNINGS.”

One of the Ginsen mercs launched a shoulder-mounted missile at the gunship, which yawed obscenely, deployed chaff, and then returned fire with its main cannon, blasting the offending merc in two.

“I SEE THAT WE’RE DOING THIS THE HARD WAY, THEN. FINE BY ME!”

Ginsen and Aztec alike dashed for cover as the gunship began indiscriminately firing on everything it could see, continuing to ruin what little remained of the roof as Dervish and Bend leapt down through the grenade-hole onto the first floor.

Above in the sky, Wildcard’s helicopter decelerated in close proximity to the Ares gunship, ushered to speed by a Great-Form Guidance spirit that Schwartzkopf had left bound to the helicopter with one service. Bomb-headed icons appeared on every monitor as TwoDee breezed into the helicopter’s systems.

“Heeeey, it’s the guy from the Christmas party,” laughed TwoDee. “What’s up!?”

Wildcard noticed that, despite the jovial tone, the gunship had achieved a missile lock in a matter of microseconds.

“Just trying to save Dervish, is all,” said Wildcard, curtly.

“Funny, because you just stepped into Ares jurisdiction, given a stipulating clause in the loan contract to the Museum of Science and Industry,” giggled TwoDee, “so how about you sit this one out?”

“No can do,” said Wildcard, as he glanced back at Locke, nervous.

TwoDee audibly pondered this, making “mmmmm” thinking noises.

“Tell you what, replacement,” said TwoDee, as the gunship settled onto the roof and deployed a vanguard of four men in Firewatch milspec and two modified-to-hell Steel Lynxes, “I’ll race ya. You like races, right?”

Wildcard remained silent as TwoDee continued, this time over the local AR,

“SHOOT EVERYTHING THAT MOVES, GENTLEMEN! FIRST ONE TO DERVISH GETS THE PRIZE!”

As Wildcard’s systems were returned to him, he pulled out into the airspace over the river, and immediately hailed Bend and Dervish.

“Ditch th’ package, you two! Ares is after you!”

Downstairs in the main hall, Dervish regarded the panicking kangaroo at his heels as he dropped the headless body of a Ginsen merc.

“That’s the problem; we already did.”

“Well, where the fuck is it, then!?”

A flying Aztec shaman in full Eagle Warrior regalia blasted out of the roof, arcing over the Ares gunship.

“Sorry,” grunted Dervish. “Put it down to kill these guys.”

“LOCKE,” yelled Wildcard.

Locke called up a flaming serpent and sent it coiling after the mage, only to watch it get stunbolted out of the sky by the combined force of the Aztec mage and the Horizon mage on the adjacent rooftop. With an angry growl, Wildcard loosed a missile at the Horizon team, causing the Dawkins operatives to scatter and flee further down into the parking structure as the parked cars erupted. Bleeding from the nose, Locke cracked the door of the helicopter and tried to sight the mage for a spell manually, but was suddenly knocked directly up into the ceiling of the helicopter, struck by

something that carried through the roof and mercifully missed the rotors. Locke flopped back into the helicopter with a massive hole through his lower ribcage, sputtering and retching blood.

“Locke is down,” yelled Wildcard. “What the fuck was that!?”

Another projectile blasted through the air at immense speed, barely missing the helicopter. Wildcard identified the silhouette of the “Willie,” which was carrying a huge magnetic railgun in its cold titanium hands.

Not wasting a moment, Wildcard spun in the air and launched a barrage of missiles at it, reducing it to parts in a crater in the street even as it fired off one last shot, blasting a hole clean from nose to tail of the helicopter and causing the machinery within to screech in agony. Half of the monitors went unresponsive in an instant.

“I don’t think I can stay aloft much longer,” said Wildcard, increasing altitude to distance himself from the fight. Standing in the compartment, he let the auto-stabilize take over long enough to produce the DocWagon biomonitor bracelet from his wrist and clasp it around Locke’s.

“That shaman is on you.”

“The downsides to not just remotely rigging your chopper,” taunted TwoDee’s voice, through Wildcard’s AR.

“Shut up, corper.”

Below, Drake Prime One flashed through the sky and tackled the Aztec mage out of the air, eviscerating him and retrieving the canister. It cut low towards the roof until the Horizon mage, now running across the street with his team, blasted it with a powerbolt, causing it to drop the canister in the Museum wreckage by the submarine exhibit as it struggled to stay aloft. Although the Dawkins operatives moved to intercept, an enfilade of fire from three Ginsen mercs at the drop site had one of them kissing pavement and the rest scrambling for cover.

As Dervish jack-jumped back upstairs to get a better vantage point and Bend, back in elf form, tac-cloaked to circle around the battlefield and retrieve the canister, Firewatch hit the main hall stairs. The pride and joy of Ares hardware, each operative had a different experimental weapon--a next-gen Alpha, a railgun, a flamethrower and a laser cannon--and the perfectly coordinated fire turned the unprepared Ginsen who were pouring into the room into so many colorful corpses. As a remaining Aztechnology squad rounded the entrance from the Expo hall, sighting Firewatch, the dwarf with the laser swept across them and sliced them all at the legs, dropping them into a screaming pile. The troll with the flamethrower ran up and hosed down the writhing, screaming bodies, dropping the boot of his matching power armor on anything that kept moving.

The human at the front, with the Alpha, announced through his helmet vox,

“AZT has left the building!”

With a “HOORAH!” the four operatives settled in a breaching position at the Expo Hall, approaching the drone.

Dervish wisely resolved not to drop down and fuck with that. Instead, he boosted to the pockmarked floor above the expo hall, in what was once the offices of the building. As two shell-shocked mercenaries reacted to his presence by popping up out of cover from behind a conference table, he instinctively vaulted up, ricocheted down low to crash through the table as the guns started blazing, and then severed both men's legs before finishing them off with rapid spur blows as they fell. Huffing but unharmed, he contacted Bend, whom his tacnet registered as being outside by the expo hall windows.

"Bend, do you think you can get another spirit through there to raise the package to me?"

"Absolutely," responded Bend, breathless. "I just need a--"

There was a roar of gunfire as Ares breached into the expo hall, taking on the scattered remnants of the mercenaries.

"--Distraction."

Dervish watched through his sonar as the package was lifted up to the balconies above the submarine exhibit. He dashed to the first available one and reached out, taking it from the hands of the Buddhist spirit. The canister's protective casing was partially worn away, revealing a large oblong object with a scaly texture inside. He made sure not to pay too much attention to it, in keeping with Schwartzkopf's wishes.

Not that he had much time to contemplate what he'd seen, as Horizon had circled around when Ares engaged the mercs and were now running up the stairs. Somewhere along the line, they'd loaded into full milspec armor, which wasn't a gamble that Dervish wanted to take when he had the unprotected artifact in tow.

"Out in the back alley, where the garbage truck was," Gunther Leimann said, patching into the team's comms. "Hurry."

Without any better directions, Dervish fled for the window nearest to the alleyway. As he passed beneath gaps in the ceiling, he made sure to stay out of sight of the circling Ares gunship. Higher above, he registered that a DocWagon helicopter was hovering next to the team's own helicopter, which was a dire sign. As he burst out through a window, shielding the artifact with his body, Dervish found Drake Prime One; or at least, he guessed that the bleach-blond and mostly naked human form standing next to a ruined set of dragon-sized power armor fit the bill.

"Give the artifact here," said the drake, aggressively.

Dervish calmly leveled his shotgun at the wounded Drake.

"The artifact goes to Schwartzkopf and whoever he vouches for. I need to call him up first."

"I am Drake Prime," shouted the drake, although he put his hands up in a sign of surrender. "I am the hand of Lofwyr!"

“And we work for Schwartzkopf,” said Dervish, as, amidst Ares’ gunfire and the blaring of alert sirens, he visibly called up “Mr. Johnson” in his PAN. “If he vouches for you, you’re gold.”

The drake scowled, baring sharp, half-shifted teeth in a roar.

“Can it.”

As the phone continued to ring, there was a sonic boom in the distance as the silhouette of a massive orange dragon appeared on the horizon, bearing fast. Dervish watched, dispassionately, as the phone continued to make stock “ring ring ring” noises. He continued to watch as the dragon circled the Ares gunship as if in warning, flew directly overhead, and then dropped to the ground next to Drake Prime One, immediately shifting into the familiar auburn-haired form of Hestaby. Her ball gown was a little out of sorts. Regardless, the drake immediately ceased menacing Dervish and threw himself into a face-down kowtow in front of the Great.

“Dervish,” said Hestaby, her voice cool. “Excellent. I’m here to escort the artifact to safety.”

There was a pause. Hestaby looked expectantly at Dervish, who merely continued to hold his gun and repeated,

“The artifact goes to Schwartzkopf and whoever he vouches for.”

“I am Hestaby,” repeated Hestaby, clearly expecting the statement to make a difference.

“I am America-San,” responded Dervish, balancing the package in his left elbow to make a “phone ringing” gesture with his left hand.

The ambient temperature began to heat and loose elements of garbage began to come aflame as Hestaby quietly regarded Dervish for another twelve agonizing seconds.

“Dervish,” said the familiar voice of Schwartzkopf.

“I’m going to cut to the chase, Johnson,” said Dervish. “Hestaby wants the egg.”

There was a pause.

“Well bloody well give it to her then.”

Dervish frowned.

“You’re sure that Hestaby can be trusted with it?”

Hestaby’s calm smile faltered entirely as Drake Prime One gasped aloud. Over the phone, Schwartzkopf responded, simply,

“...Yes.”

“But its Lofwyr’s,” said Dervish.

“Dervish,” said Schwartzkopf, “please hand the artifact to Hestaby posthaste. Any further speculation into why my employer trusts Hestaby with this matter should be discouraged, lest I have to eat you.”

Dervish gingerly held out the broken remnants of the canister containing the artifact, and Hestaby snatched it away from him primly, or rather as primly as one can “snatch” anything.

“Pleasure doing business with you, ma’am,” said Dervish, extending a hand to shake. After a moment, Hestaby reached out to accept the hand.

“Likewise.”

The rubber shock pads on Dervish’s palm bubbled and produced smoke as they melted.

“Please deal with the remaining enemies on-site,” said Hestaby, addressing both Dervish and the drake as she wove a crackling stream of magic in the air in front of her. “I trust that you can manage this with some rudimentary magical support.”

As both Dervish and the drake’s wounds closed instantaneously, Dervish found himself hovering a few feet above the ground without the aid of his skimmers. Testing the limits of his motion, he swiftly found that he could move around through the air. Very, very fast.

“Oh, hell yes,” said Dervish, rocketing into the sky, only partially in response to Hestaby. As he dove back down, arcing through the sky like Orc Superman, he focused his enhanced senses on the Horizon tac-team on the second floor.

Horizon’s point-man was the first to go, as Dervish landed directly on top of him, punching him clean through floor and then carrying him down in a piledriver into the concrete flooring above the basement. As the professional company-men sighted him, he shot back upstairs faster than they could perceive, knocking the team’s mage into the sky with a shriek before shouldering his anti-materiel rifle and firing straight up, silencing the screams.

As the mage rained down about their shoulders, the remaining four Horizon troops unloaded their mags into Dervish.

Dervish was as surprised as they were to find that none of the APDS rounds breached his skin.

“OH, FUCK YES.”

Like a twig, the Dawkins tac-team’s morale broke. The man in front yelled,

“Goddammit, run!”

Laughing ecstatically, Dervish chased them down as they fled down the stairs, pitching them through walls, floors, and ceilings, multiple times if necessary, like metahuman rag dolls.

Dervish circled the building in instants, each time slaying one of the few remaining mercenaries effortlessly, adding mass to the utter piles of bodies that had begun to stack up around the museum.

It was equal parts hubris and confidence that led him to simply hover directly into the expo hall, in full view of the Firewatch squad that had camped out there.

Dervish settled before them in his pristine musclebound glory, American flag headband fluttering as if daring them to attack. Lasers, flames, bullets; he could take it all at this point. He had the buff spells of a Great Dragon behind him.

Instead, the human in the lead just yelled back to his team,

“Secure the prototype!”

Dervish blinked as the Firewatch squad surrounded him and then settled into firing positions, facing outward. The troll in the rear put his hand flat on Dervish's back and began gently pushing him forward, towards the stairs, as the team of operators combat-shuffled in sync.

“You--what.”

The human glanced back from his position at the point of the formation and said, through his polarized faceplate,

“We're securing the prototype.”

Dervish, still being effortlessly pushed along in his low hover, pointed at the completely scrapped Ares robot.

“Prototype's over there, dingus.”

“Negative, sir,” said the man at the head of the Firewatch squad. “The Prototype next-gen super-soldier. Project name “America-San.”“

Dervish pointed at himself.

“I'm the prototype?”

The fourth team member with the railgun, a human woman under her power armor by the looks of her, laughed through her own vocoder.

“With all due respect, sir, you didn't think we were really putting this much effort into retrieving a bug-spraying robot?”

As Wildcard settled his helicopter down near to the carnage, directly next to the DocWagon chopper that was currently keeping Locke alive, if in critical condition, TwoDee's voice sounded over his comms.

“I win the race.”

As Bend limped out of the building, hobbling over to the helicopter, a tank flanked on either side by APCs trundled into the courtyard, offloading Tir Marines who began hurrying into the building. A few of the elven soldiers eyed the runners warily, but a yell from their commander at the rear of the formation had them jogging back into position.

“Where's Dervish?”

Wildcard, whose mask was off for the first time in over 36 hours, pointed at the Ares gunship, which had settled into the cratered remains of the roof.

“He found some new mates and is gettin' acquainted. We'll get along without him.”

“Here's hoping for a quiet ride back to Seattle,” joked Bend, although there wasn't much mirth behind the joke. Wildcard just nodded in agreement, his plasticine face barely expressing.

There was a beat before Bend spoke again.

“How's he doing?”

Wildcard grimaced.

“Likely he'll live. They've got him on life support, although our team Aztec is going to be needing some new organs before all this is over.”

Bend looked glumly at the DocWagon transport.

“Are we fielding the costs?”

“Actually,” said Wildcard, with a half-smile, “we're just deducting it from his share.”

Bend scowled.

“Don't ever let the Azzie know that I'm defending him on this one, but that's messed up. For all we know he's going to need to keep up treatment for years, and that's going to really eat away at the money he made off this whole thing.”

Wildcard placed his armored gauntlet on Bend's shoulder.

“Bend,” said Wildcard, “I don't think you fully appreciate how large ‘his share’ is.”

NOON, FEBRUARY 26th, 2074: THE FAWLTY BAR, SEATTLE METROPLEX, UCAS

The Fawltly Bar was popular, even at noon. Abe Heep had gathered a clutch of would-be runners--teenagers and street thugs, mostly--around the bar, and was telling them a lurid tale of the olden days of katanas and trenchcoats, pink mohawks and non-wireless Matrices. A scrawny moppet who was almost certainly too young to drink nursed her beer, seemingly more terrified at the prospect of a dial-up internet connection than she was of insect spirits or shedim.

“And speaking of which,” the old sammy said, as Bend stepped into the doorway in a muted green suit, carrying a small briefcase, “this is a man who's seen it all.”

The wannabes gathered around the bar parted and allowed Bend access, some of them clapping him on the back but most keeping a respectful distance.

“And hid from most of it,” said Bend, earning a small smattering of laughs from his audience. “Hey Abe, is Brianna in?”

“Middle of a telephone call,” said Abe, but nodded towards the back office anyway. “Feel free to let her know you're here.”

“Hey Abe,” said a large troll, from the corner of the room, as Bend stepped behind the bar, “What the drek is a telephone?”

Bend took the small flight of stairs up to Brianna's office, finding that the rest of the team was already there. Dervish, in his tight black suit, bore an Ares pin on his lapel, identical to the one worn by TwoDee and Bradford Nice. Wildcard was in his usual pinstripes, although the suit in question was particularly expensive-looking and he sported a platinum luxury watch on one wrist. Locke was perhaps the least fashionably-dressed, but that was understandable given that he'd been in surgery for the better part of a week. He sat in an armchair in the corner of the office, dressed in a simple tweed jacket over a patterned t-shirt, and smiled weakly at Bend as he entered.

Brianna McReary was as harried-looking as always, brushing her scarlet bangs out of her freckled face with her left hand as she clutched one of her fifteen or so commlinks with her right.

“No, I'm sorry, Senator. My boys have somehow gotten it into their heads that they're retiring--yes, I know that you prefer to work with known quantities, but I can make referrals--no? I'm sorry we couldn't agree on this. Goodbye.”

Brianna made a frustrated huffing noise as she flopped down into her office chair, initiating a little spin that caused her to regard each of the team members in turn.

“You boys have put me in one hell of a bind.”

“Sorry, Brianna,” said Locke. “We're not ungrateful, but that last job was something of a wake-up call.”

Brianna looked at Locke conspiratorially.

“You know the whole thing is totally classified? I can't even ask anybody. All the channels are hush-hush. The media seems to think that Surrurg was to blame for those industrial parks that got lit up in the south of Oregon, but nobody's taking responsibility for whatever the hell happened to the Museum of Science and Industry.”

Bend cringed.

“Speaking of which,” continued Brianna, as she turned on a trid recording behind her desk, “maybe one of you can explain to me what the hell this is.”

The image was of Dervish and Bradford Nice in a press room, wearing matching suits and speaking into microphones.

“--given exemplary service in Portland, we are proud to adopt Garrett Jordan, known to many out there as Dervish or America-San, formally into the Ares family. Although Mister Jordan was not aware of it at the time,” lied Nice, through his shameless movie-star teeth, “he was actually a testbed for a number of now-confirmed experimental Ares products. Naturally, his utter dominance of the shadowrun world should be considered a statement as to the quality of the tech.”

There was an uproar from the reporters.

“Mister Jordan,” said one of the reporters, “what do you say to allegations by the Aztechnology rep that your origins actually lie with proprietary tech developed by their company?”

Dervish spoke into the mic, clearly coached,

“While it's true that there has been some cross-pollination between Ares and Aztechnology thinktanks in the past, the frank fact of the matter is that those accusations are baseless. My past is purely mercenary, aside from my underlying loyalties to Ares. All of my interactions with Aztechnology were strictly on a contracting basis.”

“Yes,” agreed Nice. “Fundamentally one can't account for every influence in a wide-standing, far-reaching project like this. As always, the men and women of Aztechnology's cyber labs are an inspiration, but we here at Ares prize hard American work and ingenuity. Garrett can look forward to a star record of service in Knight Errant Firewatch, fighting enemies to peace around the globe.”

“And also,” said Dervish, leaning into the mic, “my own reality TV show, coming in the next fiscal quarter. It's about me fighting crime and terrorists.”

Nice spat up a little bit of his glass of water, although he swiftly recovered composure.

“Yes. That. That was a thing we certainly had planned for all you fans out there.”

“I'm going to have a sidekick. He's a Knight Errant officer who acts as the letter-of-the-law good cop to my renegade. I picked him personally.”

Nice mouthed 'what' and moved to take Dervish's mic from him as Brianna stopped the clip.

“Everything in that video is true,” said Dervish, deadpan, as he stood in the corner of the room.

“So that's it?” Brianna stood up, her expression hurt. “No notice? All of you just going your separate ways?”

Everyone nodded and grunted their agreement.

“If it helps,” said Bend, “we put together a little gift to let you know how much all this time together meant to us.”

Brianna looked like she was trying to hold back tears as Bend lifted the small briefcase, placed it on her desk, and opened it.

Inside was small, grapefruit-sized gift box, done up with ribbons and a bow. The wrapping paper depicted little nuyen symbols.

“What the hell is this?”

Brianna picked up the box, shook it around to a metal clinking noise, and pulled the ribbon off as the team watched expectantly. Perhaps what they weren't expecting was her particular choice of vocalization.

“FUCK!”

Brianna pulled the bar of orichalcum out of the box, hefting it in her palm.

“Our target was getting paid in two hundred and fifty million nuyen's worth of orichalcum,” explained Wildcard. “That's your share as part of the team. All fifty million of it.”

“Don't spend it all in one place,” chuckled Locke, before coughing harshly into his elbow.

Tears welled in Brianna's eyes as she looked between each member of the team, with everyone grinning (except for Wildcard, who was sporting the usual thin, botoxed smile).

“I'm going to miss you guys.”

“We'll keep in touch,” said Bend. “Who knows, maybe someday we'll all get back together for one last job.”

Everyone laughed, although no joke had been made and nobody really believed the sentiment.

“Now, if you'll excuse me,” said Bend, “I've got to get back to Portland. The diplomatic corps needs me on the home front to help with this PR nightmare.”

“I'm off to Detroit,” said Dervish, “to get a new suit of armor fitted. Then Lagos to clean up some warlord asswipe.”

“Rome,” said Wildcard, “to begin laying down the groundwork for my grand project.”

“And I'll be teaching in Vienna,” said Locke, standing for the first time.

“Until we meet again,” said Brianna, producing a bottle of nice vodka from one of her lower desk drawers. Everyone lined up their shots.

“Until we meet again,” repeated Dervish, as all five gulped down their drinks.

As the four runners left the Fawltly Bar, they didn't look back. Not at the bar, and not at each other. Each man was confident that his own destiny was merely beginning.

~~1:30 PM, JULY 20th, 2074: KWAI TSING, HONG KONG FREE ENTERPRISE ZONE~~

~~Spees sat alone in a four person booth in the corner coffeehouse. He dragged his finger across the e-paper in his hands, closing the final page of the America San biweekly doujin. He briefly considered getting up and asking for a refill of his cooling coffee, but that would be too hard. What if the server pointed out he was only half done? What if they thought he didn't like the coffee? Better to just not talk to anyone. Ever.~~

~~Sometimes, Spees did have to talk to people, however, like when his teammate Ebu swaggered into the booth and sat next to him. The massive oni had a face like chipped porcelain, its smooth surface dented by piercings and old scars. Ebu was, as always, in full punk party-boy getup, and the rest of the coffeehouse stared at him. Spees reddened just by being viewed in proximity.~~

~~"That America San is one hell of a guy," said Ebu, in clipped Cantonese. "You catching up?"~~

~~"...Y yes," said Spees, making eye contact with the reflection in his coffee.~~

~~"Well, don't bother. The author takes too long to update! Industriousness is one of the truest virtues! How can we trust tales of valor from a man with no honor?"~~

~~Ebu flexed his muscles to emphasize...something.~~

~~Spees continued to hide in his hoodie as a statuesque Chinese woman and a tiny, harsh-featured Philipino dwarf sidled across from him into the booth.~~

~~"I don't like being stared at," grunted Widow.~~

~~"Then," said Jade, calmly, "you probably shouldn't be running with Ebu and I." She turned to face Spees. "Are you done with your coffee?"~~

~~"Yeah," said Spees, standing. "I'm done."~~

> SHADOWRUN STORYTIME//END [?]

EPILOGUE

>Originally I was going to do the epilogue as all separate posts, but holy FUCK is it late so here's the cliff's notes so I can go to bed. I may go back in and rewrite all of these another day.

>DARIUS ST. GEORGE and JETBLACK'S indie record label struck it big, competing with Horizon's in-house music studio directly.

>EMILY GRANGER married Bend after two years of dating. She remained a frequent metaplanar tourist and pursued charity work.

>JULIA GREENE continued her rise to become the premiere cyberdoc in the Seattle area, becoming frequently referred to as “the one-woman crime wave”.

>JOSEPH GREEN became Dervish's sidekick by mass public appeal, taking on the identity of “Little Texas,” Dervish's handler and partner who can't deal with Dervish's over-the-top shenanigans. He didn't have to do much acting.

>JORDAN FORMIC became Deputy Head of the Tir Ghosts, but never accepted the position of Head because that would mean he couldn't go on operations anymore.

>SENSEI guest-starred on Dervish's TV show for 3 seasons, reconciled with his wife MARIELLA, and then upon learning that he had come down with a terminal heart condition requested to be airdropped into the jungles of the Amazonian front with nothing but a combat knife to see how long he could survive.

>VULCAN was eaten by his own security drop bears. His abandoned bunker is presumably filled with telesma, but is something of an urban legend to local runners, as all of its contents are guarded by roving drop bears and obscene arrays of automated weaponry.

>AIDEN REMENAULT THE S.I.N. MANAGER was fired for gross incompetence and ended up homeless.

>DOCTOR LAUGHSALOT finished his residency, changed his entire identity, and refused to serve Halloweeners for the rest of his entire natural lifespan, Hippocratic Oath be damned.

>THE SASQUATCHES continued to hang out on their nature preserve, play video games, and generally be awesome.

>JOHN THE GHOUL eventually became head of Tamanous, which didn't stop him from still showing up to all of TwoDee's kids' birthday parties.

>TRIGG3R became a systems management AI, eventually becoming the custodian to the Ares Seattle node when TwoDee moved on.

>ARIANNA THE TINY ADORABLE CHILD goblinized into a massive troll upon puberty, but was fitted with the best headware that Daddy could buy. She eventually went to law school and became a metahuman rights attorney.

>JOZIE had two more natural children by TwoDee, both orcs and technomancers. Against all odds, she raised them mostly right. Mostly.

>BRIANNA MCREARY used her money to go into politics, serving two terms as Mayor of Seattle and a later Governorship. Although she didn't make a Presidential bid, she did appear across multiple cabinets in various positions, becoming known as a distinguished warhorse of a politician.

>JO "TROUT" SEKIGAHARA escaped from a secret Saeder-Krupp project dedicated to reverse-engineering adept powers, whereupon he was picked up by Horizon for a secret project dedicated to brainwashing adepts. After the project was deemed a resounding failure, he was unceremoniously dumped on the streets of Seattle, where he perpetrated a crime spree of petty larceny and senseless violence for 6 hours before Lone Star recaptured him.

>DAMIEN "GEPETTO" SANITIERI eventually lead a vicious coup of the Merlyns, seizing the Catholic Mafia's pet wizgang for his own purposes. He used his position of authority to catch the ears of major mob figures, driving them to ever-greater acts of cruelty and depravity and causing mob-related crime to become a serious epidemic in the years to come. His more audacious acts lead to extreme public notoriety, making him something of a supervillain.

>MALCOLM "TWODEE" MCWILLIAMS eventually got promoted to head of Matrix Security Development for Ares as a whole, and moved to Detroit with his wife and three meat kids. He maintained his cronying friendship with BRADFORD NICE, then a member of the Board of Directors.

>FELIX "LOCKE" RAMIREZ was given sanctuary by the Corporate Court and extradited to Vienna, where he worked in magical R&D developing combat spells. He also taught at the University of Vienna and kept a lasting friendship with the Great Dragon, Schwartzkopf.

>DYLAN "WILDCARD" CADBURY founded a Eurozone fixer network called Condotierri 15, referring to the Italian name for a mercenary soldier and the minimum sentence in the United Kingdom for bank robbery. C15 maintained its own ranks and hierarchies independent of the existent Eurozone running culture, predominantly focused around financial monitoring and large-scale heists and thefts. His lieutenants, BELFAST and LUCA, maintained his cover identity as an Italian foreign minister, the better to approach their eventual goal: robbing GOD.

>PETER "BEND" COLBY married his girlfriend Emily and joined the Tir Diplomatic corps as "external advisory and troubleshooting." In the years to come, any runner doing business with the Tir Princes would come to know him by a different title: "Mr. Johnson."

>JONATHAN "MOTHERFUCKING DERVISH" RED-EAGLE/ GARRETT "AMERICAN" JORDAN was eventually reunited with his real parents, a lower-middle-class couple living in Denver. The identity that he had come to represent, however, was very different from that which they associated with their son, and so although he came to involve them more in his life, he always felt distant. He maintained a public identity as Ares' chief aboveboard company man, first into the fray in every conflict Ares fought in his natural lifespan.

Alongside him were his trusty camera crew and his sidekick, “Little Texas,” whom earned Dervish's admiration for real when he killed noted arms dealer and international criminal TAKA with a motorcycle. When he eventually began aging, as a distinct counterpoint to his elf teammates (or Wildcard and TwoDee, who leonized), he chose to grow old in honor of Sensei, eventually taking on his own students.

The Final Run

