

# Overkilling It

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## Foreword

*Overkilling It* is just what it sounds like, premise and all: gunplay to the extreme. A car chase here and an explosion there. Some testosterone-filled humor and sharp sarcasm. The action is detailed but smooth-flowing and the imagery is on point without being gag-worthy. This was written like an action flick with some fluidic dialogue injected with dark humor and the parody of life through brotherly camaraderie. Don't go in reading and expect a vacuity of emotion, however, because you won't get a narration of indifferent killers. Callous vigilantes and bringers of the law in a twisted fashion, sure, but perhaps it's best not to expect anything at all and just **read**.



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# 1

**M**orning dew lingered on the two men's shoulders as it coated their vehicle's windshield. The 1970 Pontiac Firebird was a perfect onyx black on the outside, but the interior featured burgundy seats and stainless dashboards. A peculiar motif for a peculiar pair of men, partners in the combative sense. Cohorts and best friends since the dawn of their time. One was the trigger and the other the hammer. Their actions always spewed chaos at a controlled rate.

Mark and Rashid. Surnames were irrelevant.

As far as they were concerned, and such they'd gotten use to over the course of four years, they had no surname. No birthrights, parents, siblings, just each other and the guns and the bloodshed and the rewards.

The law, arguably, was their proverbial cherry on top.

"Breakfast is on the table," Mark said, having just popped the trunk to the custom Firebird. He peeled back a black tarpaulin to reveal the trunk's contents. An arsenal of sorts, albeit a bit limited in comparison to what they were used to. Mark sighed, shaking his head, feeling Rashid's cold glare branding the side of his face. Mark replied without diverting his gaze from the trunk's bowels. "I know, it ain't much. But we're far from home and this is what we've got."

Rashid scoffed. "It's like Fat Albert being refused a Big

Breakfast at McDonald's, man. It ain't right."

Mark nodded agreeably. His expression alone showed how strongly he was in accord with his partner.

"What're our numbers today?" Rashid asked, reaching into the trunk.

"Eight, nine."

"Fucking kidding me? In a goddamn *apartment room*?"

Mark shrugged. "As good as any."

Rashid didn't know what that exactly meant, but he knew Mark didn't either. It was his way of trying to cope with their inadequacy in the ordnance department. An aspect of their jobs or missions or—more colloquially called—takedowns, which they always exercised gratuity with.

It heightened their confidence in lieu of being outnumbered. However, seldom were they ever outgunned. It was simply unacceptable, and illogical, given their connections. Their pot-o'-gold funds.

Perpetual five-finger discount at God's Gun Shop.

Today wasn't one of those beautiful instances. Today, ten minutes to seven in the morning, they were crippled by distance and lack of accurate Intel. Initially it had been two for quantity, or numbers, in regards to the amount of bad guy assholes they'd be facing at the predetermined location. Typically they would sniff out their own dealers or pimps or simple scumbags and wing it as they saw fit, which typically meant bringing 12-gauges and .357's to a two- or three-man operation. This time was different. The crickets were chirping in the concrete jungle and the birds singing their mockery out of the partners' reach, as if heckling the men's lack of preparation.

Mentally, physically, they were always ready.

Mark and Rashid have declared on many occasion that they were *born* for this. Their pasts might have entailed years of combat in lawful and 'patriotic' matters, but the man-eating sharks caged within each of them were only at home out here.

Southern California was their ocean.

And they were at the top of the food chain.

## ONE

“We’ll round it out at ten,” Mark said calmly. He reached into the trunk only once his eyes had found his treasure. Plural, actually, as it had always been; seldom did Mark ever accompany Rashid for a takedown carrying only one pistol. Only when other, larger weapons were available would he sacrifice the marriage for the bachelor.

“Hell, according to this kind of bullshit Intel,” Rashid added, changing his selection on the fly, “we might as well round it at out twenty.”

“That many and we wouldn’t be able to open the fucking door. It’s a one-bedder up there, one-bathroom and a fridge the size of me. I believe it’s safe to say twelve, maximum.”

Rashid dwarfed Mark by four inches. Rashid was 6’2” and had a muscularly lean figure that Mark shared only in a shorter figure. Mark donned slicked-back dark umber hair that looked black in the shade of night but a light brown in dewy mornings such as this one. His goatee was thin, five-o’clock shadow scraggly at best. His forehead was almost always creased, featuring a heavy brown and dark eyes that looked pissed off whenever he wasn’t grinning—really, really grinning.

On the other side of the spectrum, Rashid was bowling ball bald, shine and all, with a dark mocha complexion and jet black hair where it circled his mouth in a solid goatee that slightly crept inches onto his jawline. His dark brown eyes had the ability to look jovially affable when he wasn’t imitating the devil in human form, capable of eviscerating a steadfast man with his gaze alone, given the right circumstances.

Mark had the haplessness of being underestimated all the time. Rashid saw this, of course, as a great advantage especially in their line of work.

Unlike Mark, whose threads always consisted of T-shirts and sweaters and jackets with casual fit jeans, Rashid had a “don’t hate the tailor, hate the game” attitude when it came to takedowns. He liked looking sharp even when bloodshed was on the menu and brain splatter typically ended up on the walls. He would sport a basic suit from white button-down and black

necktie to black sports jacket buttoned at the stomach and dress slacks no lighter a shade. Usually the most casual Rashid would get were jeans and a white button-down, necktie optional dependent upon his mood.

“Either way,” Rashid said, shaking his head and arming himself, “we should have shotguns for this kind of deal.”

“Eight, nine guys up there,” Mark said with another shake of his head. He racked the slide to his pistol, a Kimber Grand Raptor II, before stuffing it into the back of his jeans beside its twin. They gathered necessary ammunition. “Plus whatever heaters they’re carrying, doped up on crack and PCP for all we know...yeah, we should have fuckin’ shotguns.”

Mark slammed the trunk shut and they turned their back on the parked Firebird. They walked from the nearly vacant back parking lot to a rear access door that led them to a concrete stairwell. The guardrails were rusted steel, one shade black and one shade green, with a whiff of mold and something vaguely resemblant of rat shit.

The vermin they were seeking out were different.

Rats in the form of being pests to this society, albeit camouflaged well in the region of So-Cal decay. They were not snitches in the street language entry for ‘rat,’ and would take twenty-five years at Chino if it meant keeping their homies’ names clean. Well, as clean as they could get out here.

Not all of these kinds of scumbags were this twistedly loyal, of course. When the law came busting through their door, they’d get all giddy and their balls would drop without ever returning to them. They play off the tough game in front of their compadres but in a steel chair facing a one-way mirror with a humming fluorescent fixture haloing a guilty conscience they’d ultimately vomit the truth to the pig interrogating them. All for a deal, all for a shorter sentence and eventually broken parole to lurk the streets yet again distributing narcotics and weapons and death in a various forms to people that should know better by now. They don’t, though, because they’re naïve and stupid.

Mark and Rashid did what they did for two reasons.

# ONE

One, they enjoyed the chaos and violence and no-bullshit sense of control that came without any false pretenses.

Two, they enjoyed surpassing the jury and the judge. They took pride in being the gallows and the noose, the guillotine and the firing squad all rolled into one meaty burrito with bullets on the side and extra gravy.

They knew they're going to hell in a hand basket.

It's with the slightest bit of speculation that they might as well cushion their journey with some good deeds soaked in the sins of the sinners worse than themselves.

Vigilantes with a whisper of law on their side.

They took what they could get; in the past three months that meant just about everything.

"What a shithole," Mark muttered as they crest the stairwell. The place reeks of more than just rat dung but societal filth as well, in a variety of ways they'd rather not explore. They've familiarized themselves with it already, whether they intended to or not.

"No different than most other places we visit," Rashid observed.

Mark didn't utter a response. He knew it was true. Made him enjoy kicking down their doors all the better. He knew they were grateful for being in this situation, having one-name identities and Casper-like backgrounds. They weren't in the System. Even the most connected hoodlums wouldn't be able to find squat about their pasts or affiliations, present or otherwise. They've been undercover for four years for a damn good reason. They do their job with incredibly limited interference from their acronymic superiors. When they do their two-man raid and complete a takedown, generally leaving no survivors unless they rarely intend on it, Mark and Rashid were entitled to some given rewards.

Guns were theirs for the taking, should they choose. They kept off the drugs, and didn't complain for it. This property of their superiors. So was the money at the scene, excluding a few handfuls the men take as 'predetermined gratuity,' should

there be any pocket change left on the bad guys. There almost always was. And after a takedown is completed—once they’ve cleared the scene—a simple text to their highest superior, whom they simply called Chief, is made to signify success.

In the event of conducting their own raids outside of any tips from their connection, a text was made with the address.

Do this and they got to keep eating from their silver spoons and not having to worry about bullet wounds. Proper equipment for high-profile raids. From weapons to tactical gear.

Ninety percent of the time they wore some kind of mask on their operations. This was to avoid potential witnesses outside of their target area, where they make certain to leave behind no survivors, unless otherwise directed.

A rare occurrence all the same.

On this takedown they’re going in with the basic form of protection—a thin Kevlar vest under their shirts. Mark could have probably worn a full-blown KV under his hoodie, but given their distance from ‘home’—aside from their Firebird, the partners’ greatest luxury—and lack of accurate Intel until late, they were forced to stick with the basics. These vests were thin and flexible enough so that they could theoretically be worn under a T-shirt without obvious detection, unless said attire was fitted. For Rashid’s current outfit, jeans and a button-down with black necktie, it was perfect.

They had been awake since four this morning.

Showers and coffees and shooting practice. Out where their home was, a hideout by better words, the latter was a luxury they could afford—secluded on enough private property to give Hugh Hefner a run for his money. The half-stilted cliff house was glass and oak with ivory pillars and Ferrari-grade leather sofas. Separate bedrooms with dense walls made privacy impeccable, especially on nights occasionally spent with an escort or two from a respectable agency.

The men didn’t dabble in street prostitution.

They knew the chances, the risks, and that wasn’t just in reference to their pimps. Pimps they could handle. It was the

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other kind of diseases that this society had brought upon itself. A kind of carnal curse that even Mark and Rashid couldn't brandish a gun at or defeat.

In addition, they valued their privacy and security for a damn good reason. The amount of criminals they've put away for life and then some six feet under had certainly left an impression of paranoia slinking through the So-Cal underworld. Nobody knew who they were, and nobody ever could, but the paranoia worked both ways.

Mark and Rashid were as careful as they could manage without sacrificing their overabundance of havoc.

"Room 84, right?" Rashid said as they walked the hallway, gazes scanning each door plaque as they passed. Brazen number after brazen number pinned to each door carried them through the seventies before they reached their first eighty toward the end of the hall.

Nineties carried onto the next floor.

"Yes, sir," Mark said, reaching a hand into his open zip-hoodie. Beneath it he wore a loose navy T-shirt that covered the thin Kevlar vest. If the boys on the other side were packing anything more than medium-caliber pistols, that vest might as well be construction paper.

"Glad this shithole doesn't have any cameras," Rashid remarked, digging out a simple urban-camouflage bandanna from his back jeans pocket. He tied it around the bottom half of his face, veiling him from the nose down. The triangular fold draped down to the knot in his necktie.

"Got that right," Mark agreed, hand withdrawn from his hoodie holding a black half-mask with white skull rendition. He donned it immediately, his nose sheathed with a special fold allowing respiration; the mouth was minutely perforated.

"Ready?" Rashid asked, his voice quiet while the bandanna muffled it even more.

Mark watched him draw his black MRI Desert Eagle XIX, with an extended magazine and bare Picatinny rail. In deft response Mark occupied both of his hands with his twin Kimber

1911's. Black slides on stainless frames and mahogany grips. Thumbs disarmed safeties. Rashid racked the hefty slide to the Desert Eagle and nodded before supplying a thumbs-up gesture.

The two men put their backs to the beige walls hugging Room 84. Pistols raised parallel with their heads. Mark on the left, Rashid on the right.

There wouldn't be a single knock.

Just the firm sole of Rashid's size-thirteen boot to the door beneath the handle. Wood splintered and buckled and the deadbolt exploded from the jamb. The cheap door wobbled under the impact as a topside chainlink lock kept it from swinging inward all the way. Rashid used his shoulder in the same instant to finish the breach.

He dropped to his knees as he entered the room.

Elbows locked, both hands on the Desert Eagle.

Mark was right behind him, standing, both arms extended with two identical .45-caliber pistols. Their weapons were not suppressed—they seldom were. They preferred the turbulence of a raid in full-swing, incomplete without the rolling thunder of multiple gunshots and the ringing in their ears afterward. They had grown so accustomed to it that it no longer impaired their functionality, however, some things couldn't be avoided.

In this instance, they found themselves thrown into a slow-motion Mexican standoff. Ironically enough, three of the seven—not eight, nine, fifteen or twenty—scumbags present in the room were Hispanic. Two were Caucasian, the rest African American. Of them was blacker than Rashid's Desert Eagle, the other arguably Native American. The two white guys looked paler than the bleached walls when they'd breached the room, a shared expression of rage and shock and dismay staining their faces.

All in all, hands reached for guns.

A white guy and black guy were playing cards on a far table. To their left was the balcony, demarcated by a sliding glass door. To their right was a couch upon which sat two



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Hispanics snorting lines. The third was rolling a joint in the kitchen to the far left of the entrance in a corner. Sitting opposite the two cokeheads on another decrepit couch were another white and black guy counting money.

All in all, they had shit reflexes.

Hoping that there weren't any surprises lurking in the sealed bedroom or bathroom to the right of the entrance, the two undercover DEA agents took action with a husky breath.

Despite entering first, Mark wasn't the first to shoot. Rashid's Desert Eagle barked and roared, punching a half-inch slug into the card-playing black guy's left temple. The other side of his head opened up like gruesome grapefruit all over the sliding glass door to his right. Rashid's hands angled the Desert Eagle lower to accompany a coke-high Hispanic putting his hands on a tabletop Beretta. Just as Rashid wasted him with one well-adjusted shot, Mark was squeezing at his triggers and dissecting his aim. His first two shots smacked the other cokehead in the face, killing him with a lick of certainty. His left gun tracked cowering movement of the young man in the kitchen, unlit joint still miraculously pinched by his lips. One shot, two shot. A quart-sized jar of bagged mollies shattered. Pills spewed in every direction. Three shot, four. Empty beer bottles left on the kitchen counter exploded; residual alcohol misted the air like artificial humidity. The man mewled as he shifted into the dining room just beyond the kitchen.

Regular speed of time and motion resumed.

Rashid capped the other card-player with a high shot to his face, rendering him an unidentifiable mess. His body crashed through the chair he'd been stumbling to get up from. A straight flush stained with his blood floated to the carpet.

Mark's right Kimber was occupied with the two money-counting thugs that had swiftly taken cover behind the couch, whose back directly faced the front door. His left gun, however, was fixated on the fleeing scumbag that had reached a table in the dining room. Upon this table rested what Mark's keen eyes recognized as a 9mm Uzi machine-pistol. It took the man less

than a second from picking it up to begin firing out of sheer panic. Torrents of 9mm hollow-points began shredding the inside of the apartment between where he stood and the front door. Fortunately there was a large pillar between them, which connected to the kitchen.

A blind-fired gunshot rang out above the back of the couch six feet in front of Mark. The pistol shot smacked the wall to his right, missing him by an arm's length. Mark rolled forward, keeping low while Rashid fired over his head twice before making a dive for the kitchen.

Uzi gunblast peppered the barely-hinged door just above Mark's head and now some five feet behind him. The cheap wood shredded and swayed as its hinges groaned distressingly.

The Uzi went dry and the scumbag wielding it cursed under his breath.

Mark flopped down to sit on his ass and extend his legs so that the soles of his feet pressed against the back of the couch nearest the ground. The two bastards behind it continued idiotically firing over their heads without looking. Their semi-automatic pistols rang out over and over, missing time and time again.

They clearly hadn't spotted Rashid make headway for the kitchen, which was to the left of the couch, or else they would've surely taken a shot.

Counting money probably doped up, too.

The stench of weed and cocaine, sweat and booze filled the apartment room. It violated every sense the two men had, but they were used to it. The violation didn't bother them. The only scent that had an effect on their performance was that of gunsmoke, and in which case it tended to cause invigoration.

"I got Mr. Uzi!" Rashid shouted as the Uzi-wielding bastard began firing from a fresh clip.

"You do that!" Mark replied, undoubtedly muddling the two thugs behind the couch he now aimed at. Elbows locked, fingers fondling triggers, Mark waited until he felt the couch budge ever so slightly from their movement—

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He emptied both of the Kimber pistols' magazines into the back of the couch. A total of six rounds acquired perfect penetration, two catching one man in the knee as he prepared to stand while the other thug took three in his left side. Blood filled his lung and he died painfully in the matter of seconds. The kneecapped man was less fortunate, in the sense that he endured more pain at the expense of more time on this Earth. Not necessarily something to be praying for at the moment...

Regardless, Mark wasn't an answerer of prayers.

Especially those regarding leniency or mercy.

"Clear?" Mark called out to Rashid as he ejected both magazines simultaneously. They clattered emptily to the floor and he ambidextrously reloaded via two magazines protruding from his waistband. The pistols' slides locked forward.

"Two Mississippi's," Rashid replied. He rose to his feet from behind a cupboard and caught the scumbag readjusting his Uzi's aim from the couch back to the kitchen. Rashid planted a climbing shot to the man's sternum, creating a messy exit wound out the center of his back. Shoulder blades snapped back and pain ruptured his entire body. He reeled backward, into an empty hutch. The doors shattered and his weight collapsed all of the unoccupied shelves.

Mark counted two seconds.

He stood and vaulted the couch quicker than a rabbit on crack. He came down with his right heel in the wounded man's left shoulder, pinning him down. Mark stumbled an inch before righting himself and putting two rounds into the back of the cretin's skull. His face seeped into the carpet beneath Mark's feet.

Meanwhile, Rashid approached the man who had nearly swallowed his rolled joint and long since dropped the Uzi. One round to the man's forehead ended his suffering, as well as the waiting game the partners preferred to keep at a minimum.

Mark announced that he was checking the bathroom, which was adjacent to the bedroom. Both doors were shut.

"Press pause," Rashid said, hurrying across the apartment

room to stack up next to Mark. "I'll get the bedroom."

"All clear over there?"

"Deader than dead."

"Good. Leave the Uzi, by the way, we've got better."

"Seems that's the case all around here," Rashid said, coming up to Mark's right. "POS guns to go with POS scum."

Mark shook his head and sighed. He then nodded to Rashid who proceeded to grin wide, teeth like headlights.

"If anyone else is in there," Mark said, distorting his voice to sound like a whiny fifteen-year-old playing cops-and-robbers, "I suggest you surrender now or forever hold your peace...in pieces."

"Yo!" Rashid barked, voice deeper than it really was. He banged on the bathroom door. "It's Will Smith and Marty Larry, I suggest you open the fuck up or else—"

"Eat shit and die, faggots!" someone screamed from inside the bathroom, firing shots that punched mice-sized holes in the wooden doors. Splinters misted the air and Rashid recoiled, putting his back to the wall clear of the door.

"Oh, no, I don't *think* so," Mark retorted under his breath. He waited until the six shots ceased and swung out in front of the Swiss cheese door. He began firing round after round, gun to gun, until the sound of a body dropping and shower curtain rings popping could be heard. Then he boldly kicked open the door to find a wiry white male that looked like Seinfeld's spitting image crumpled in the bathtub, curtain draped across his legs, blood smearing the tile wall. On the floormat rested a sizable revolver with its cylinder open and six empty shells circling it.

"Jesus, that thing was bigger than him," Rashid remarked.

"Now a popcorn kernel's bigger than him," Mark said, entering the bathroom. "Stupid motherfucker."

"My turn, eh?"

Mark looked up from the sure corpse in the tub to Rashid in the doorway. He entered the bathroom and faced the mirror.

## ONE

“Nailgun it?” Mark asked.

Rashid nodded. He raised his arms, leveling the Desert Eagle to aim at the mirror with a minuscule downward pitch.

“Lemme get in position,” Mark muttered. He shuffled past Rashid, behind him, and out of the bathroom. He gingerly stepped in front of the bedroom door and waited for Rashid’s shots. The Desert Eagle had miniature thunderclaps for reports, and after seven of them slugged through the wall dividing the two rooms, Mark kicked in the door. He found a slightly overweight, shirtless black man with a warhawk and face tattoo ducking on the other side of the bed. In his quaking clutches was a chrome Desert Eagle, and two readied magazines at his feet.

Upon Mark’s breach, the man’s reaction was that of a snail on LSD. He diverted his focus from the jagged holes in the wall ahead of him to the doorway just in time for Mark to shoot his gun out of his hand and put two in both shoulders. The man tumbled back into a dresser, slumping down quickly thereafter. He groaned and howled in pain for all but two second, by which time Mark’s patience and tolerance ran out.

He halved the distance between them and executed the heavysset man with a less-than-clean shot to the forehead. His warhawk was ruined, but Mark saw the fatal head wound as just treatment for that awful face ink.

“Clear?” Rashid’s voice resounded from inside the bathroom still.

“Crystal,” Mark replied. “Now let’s get the fuck out of here before the interracial show up.”

Rashid chuckled. “I guess it’s a quick exit, then. This place is trash.”

“No paper?” Mark asked after policing the dead guy’s corpse and surroundings. He found a few fifties and decided to pocket them ‘on principle,’ especially with no impressive weaponry to take back.

“Not really...wait, scratch that.”

Mark emerged from the bedroom to see Rashid dumping a padded envelope of money stacks onto the coffee table.

“Bust.” Mark nodded. “Read it and weep, fellas, you’ve been fucked.”

“Hard.” Rashid chuckled and shook his head. He began stuffing the money find under the nearest sofa cushion. “Wouldn’t want the coppers to think too creatively why someone would kill these assholes and not take money out in the open.”

“Sure thing.” Mark doubled over the couch he’d previously shot the bad guys through, and cooped up the scattered bills they’d been counting. “This is ours, though.”

Rashid rose to his feet and armed the safety on his Desert Eagle. He and Mark funneled out of the apartment room with their masks still on and gloves nonexistent. One thing about being ghosts in the criminal world was having no prints on file. Even their dentals and facial features were wiped screen from the database. They had no mugshots, no records whatsoever.

As far as the world was concerned, Mark and Rashid didn’t exist.

They preferred it this way.

Neither of them shut the door on their way out. And not once did a single head poke out of their rooms to take a glimpse at the murderers. Ruthless vigilantes, some might say.

Mark and Rashid saw the only crime present was disturbing the peace. And at that rate, there was no peace here. Just squalor. A diamond in the rough on this block was a rarity to say the least.

They hurried down the steps and pushed past a shaken janitor before turning the corner. They took a look over their shoulders and confirmed that the coast was clear. Then they unloaded their weapons into the trunk, shut it, and piled into the 1970 Firebird’s cabin.

When Mark tore out of the parking lot, the janitor was nowhere to be seen. Nor was a single soul on that property, or even across the street. The district was dead, or still sleeping. As for those roused by the ruckus, they might as well be either one.

“Text sent,” Rashid said, returning his phone to a pocket

## ONE

and stretching in his seat.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry as shit.”

“McDonald’s or BK?”

“You know what my preference is and all,” Mark said with a smirk, “but I’m feeling that I want it *my way* today.”

## 2

After a Burger King breakfast they headed home. The Firebird's custom 435 twin-turbo V8 pushed 900 horses and hitting eighty on the highway sounded like the Kraken belching. The partners were full in the stomach and full in the head, pains tapping at their temples. They wanted a nap on top of their work today before they got to it again later. Seeing as how they were basically on-call employees, the only downside really in the thick of their many benefits, the lingering fear of getting a text from the Chief could keep them up at night. Or, in this case, urge them to reach home faster in hopes of acquiring some Z's before said text rapes their inbox.

Loud music and a louder engine somehow soothed their chaotic brains as Mark pushed the black Firebird down the highway. It sported DEA plates, but interchangeable wherever they went. If they were ever pulled over and the plates were run, their buddies at the Agency would straighten things out right away.

Yet another benefit, the best kind of insurance.

The second best kind was that of complete isolation and security from a world teeming with havoc. Given, Mark and Rashid were agents of chaos themselves, but in a way their violence subtracted from the bigger picture. The bigger pitcher that poured unjustified bloodshed all over the state, along with



## TWO

its many trails leading into the Midwest. From all of this they managed to hide from at their secluded home, a speck of glass and oak on a small mountainside in El Toro, California. However distanced they were from civilization somehow didn't matter in the end—they were still on call, still a text away from returning to the storm whose eye they came to occupy after nearly an hour's worth of driving.

Mark was in the process of meticulously parking the Firebird on their thin gravel roundabout driveway when Rashid began opening his door.

"The hell are you doing, man?" Mark exclaimed in his typical thin and raspy voice when agitation and humor collided.

"Cramped as fuck. Pa'k the cah, retahd."

"Ha-ha," the half-Irish Mark replied with a shake of his head. "Don't rush me, man. We've been through this. It needs to be *perfect*."

"Who the hell for?" Rashid released a cragged laugh. "We're in the middle of the mountains."

"It's the *principle*, man, the *principle*. I figured you of all people would understand a compulsion for tidiness."

"This isn't tidiness. This is crazy. But then again, hey—the shoe fits."

"Get fucked."

"You're not my type," Rashid said sarcastically, raising his eyebrows and toothlessly smirking. Mark simply shook his head and at long last backed the Firebird up into an unmarked spot on the flattened gravel. The front door was ten feet from the rear fender. Rashid popped open the door. "Finally!"

"Go laugh it off." Mark killed the engine and lazily exited. "I got the hardware."

"Suits me." Rashid was at the door by now, entering after a four-digit code on the adjacent keypad had been typed in. The right pane of glass acting as half to the double-doors closed just as slowly as Mark was taking his time.

He popped the trunk and leaned in, removing the tarpaulin from an array of weapons beneath. He first withdrew

the two Kimber pistols he'd personally used this morning, tucking them into the back of his jeans. He scooped up the Desert Eagle that had taken four lives earlier at the hands of Rashid, and closed the trunk with his left arm. He toted the five-pound pistol in his right hand and ambled to slip inside the house just before the sluggish door closed. It automatically locked upon shutting, and the security keypad beeped once.

The likelihood of anyone finding them here was slim to nil, and while they didn't mind taking risks out in the world, their home was no laughing matter. Somehow or another the possibility of getting killed during a takedown was more of a tolerable chance than being the victim of a home invasion, especially by the kind of people they're usually issued to eliminate.

To this effect, neither of them saw the home security as an unnecessary indulgence.

Just the same, the amount of firearms permeating the house—from hidden emergency stashes in every room to the loadout kept in the Vault—wasn't the least bit excessive. With virtually the U.S. military's arsenal at their disposal through DEA hookups, they saw it as simply being perpetually prepared.

Cases like today, however, countered that.

The emergency stash of sidearms in the Firebird's trunk might need some expanding after today.

"I imagine you got something from that guy in the bedroom?" Rashid asked from the kitchen, as he retrieved a bottled Heineken.

"Some fifties, not much," Mark sighed. "Why, you want to include it in the total pull?"

Rashid shook his head. "Nah, it was entirely your risk. Keep 'em. I'll be in the Greenhouse."

"Righteous." Mark passed the zone-design kitchen to snag a room-temperature Rockstar can from the black granite counter. Just the way he liked them. "Drop by the Vault once you're done splitting."

"Will do. Don't hurt yourself in there."

## TWO

“Try my best.”

The two men went their separate ways. Dialogue between them upon entering the house following a takedown tended to remain curt, but depended on each other's moods. Every takedown was a positive day, in the sense that they were still alive. Given, some went better than others; the sloppier ones usually resulted in grumpier individuals. It was never sloppy because of either man's mistakes or mishaps that directly affected the other, of course. Simply put, shit happens.

It always has, and it always would.

So long as the truly heavy shit only touched their enemies. The main point being death, and its fatal conclusion.

With life and some money in their pockets, guns in their hands and waistbands, the partners were handsomely content.

Routine remained the same.

Rashid tended to the money collected at the site of the day's takedown, visiting a DEA-grade cash counter in what the pair called the Greenhouse. It was nothing like an actual greenhouse, save a lone skylight at the center of the room. The partners' wealth was kept here in separate safes, divided by the large cash counter. Rashid attended the machine now to put a precise number on the bills he'd stolen from the dealers at the apartment.

In the meantime, Mark focused on the weapons.

The Vault, what they called their gun room, deserved its name. Access to its weapon-arrayed walls and a few glass cases, as well as ammunition caches, was limited to a massive steel door. A six-digit PIN was entered on it before the door could be opened; all it required was a slight pull after correctly entering the code, and then it swung wide by itself. A slow motion but a self-producing action nonetheless.

After doing so, Mark stepped over the threshold and entered the spacious room. It was twice the size of the partners' bedrooms combined, featuring three tall-and-wide pegboard walls with ammunition caches on the back wall through which the door opened. The few glass cases were located at the center

of the room, about waist-high, surrounded by a circulatory cushioned bench and bar-like counter. It was upon this black bench that Mark sat, where he used the counter to his tabletop advantage by laying out the three pistols from this morning. He unrolled a sterile disposable cleaning pad two millimeters thick, enough to cover a wide expanse of the counter. He took a seat on a high stool by the counter and prepared the Desert Eagle first. He locked the slide back and ejected the chambered round before releasing the magazine. He caught it and set them down—magazine on its side, bullet standing—on the countertop. He proceeded to snap the slide forward, squeeze the trigger, and disassemble the handgun.

With the recoil spring removed from the slide which was now separate from the lower frame, the pistol was good to clean.

All of the necessary cleaning products were already present on the countertop. He reached out and brought them closer to begin working. A song he'd heard earlier in the car bounced around his skull and quietly from his lips as he worked.

It was one of Rashid's mixtapes, in CD form.

Mark thought it was a skeet shot on the side of strange that Rashid still used CDs in this day and age, to which point an additional argument was raised. Since, Rashid has said, their Firebird features a six-CD-changer, why not use it? It didn't have a USB port and Rashid wasn't a fan of fiddling around on his phone while it was hooked up to a cigarette lighter adapter.

Regardless of its source, music always prevailed in the car. It was always loud, mind-numbingly so, but the genre ranged from metal to rap and hip-hop, occasionally a strange and feral mix between.

Mark couldn't place a title or artist to the song currently raging through his mind right now, all he knew for certain was that it calmed him. It was a chaotic tune, and he knew only every other voice, but it placated the residual adrenaline lacing his veins.

He began with a sterile cloth to wipe free extra lubricant before applying the micro-brush.

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“Put away the lube, lemme see your hands!” Rashid joked, marching into the Vault. His right hand clutched a bundle of cash two inches thick.

“Yeah, yeah, whaddya got?” Mark asked without diverting his eyes from the work occupying his time on the countertop.

“Half of one large,” Rashid said with a minute shrug. He arrived beside Mark and set down the thin bundle. “Roughly.”

“Roughly, my ass. Exactly?”

Rashid sighed. “Four-hundred and ninety-five out of nine-ninety, total.”

Mark paused his cleaning as he was almost done with the Desert Eagle, thus reassembling it and sliding his attention to its extended magazine. He nodded firmly and mock-saluted Rashid, still without looking up.

“Solid bust, considering.”

“Yeah, not bad.”

“Thanks, man.”

“No problem. Let’s just be glad it was an even split. I’d hate to bust out the coin rolls.”

Mark smirked. “Yeah. That’d be a damn shame.”

“Wouldn’t want to violate your piggy bank or anything. I know that bitch is getting full.” Rashid shook his head. “You crazy cracker.”

“Hey,” Mark lifted his gaze at long last to barrel it into Rashid’s grinning face. “I like to collect pennies, okay? Bite me.”

Rashid shrugged dramatically. “Hey, man, do what you gotta do to convince yourself you’re normal. I mean, shit, look around you—we collect fucking *guns*, man, and not just Glocks ‘n’ Ithaca’s.”

Mark half-smirked. “I take this collection a little more seriously, with due respect.”

“Understandably so.” Rashid clicked his tongue and loomed over Mark as he resumed the cleaning of the Desert Eagle’s magazine.

“You can trust me, Rashid. I’m not gonna break it.”

“Didn’t say nothin’.” Rashid backed off a little. “You want a hand, though?”

“Get lost,” Mark replied bluntly. “You’ve earned it.”

“Thanks, dick,” Rashid snidely said as he backpedaled out through the high and wide doorway. He left the Vault behind, along with an overly focused Mark inside, and made a beeline for the stairs. He trotted up them, one bare oak step at a time, with his stack of \$495 in his right hand. He already downed the Heineken while counting the money earlier. Now his gut was packed and his muscles fatigued, eyes no different.

Rashid reached the top landing and curled around the edge of the wall right into his large bedroom. The lights were off in the house, but with half of its construction glass there was seldom need for any during daylight. The glass panes were all shatterproof, which he foresaw a similar nature in the sleep to come for him. He blindly kicked his door shut behind him upon entering his room. Against the far wall was a wall of glass that overlooked the front driveway, about eight feet from the other side of the bed. Satisfied with the sealed blackout curtains, Rashid’s eyelids fluttered and he lazily stripped down to his boxers.

En route to the king sized bed he stubbed his toe on a fifteen-pound dumbbell but hardly seemed to notice.

He crashed prostrate onto the top of the bed’s comforter, face buried in a wrinkled pillow. Sleep seized him quickly, comfortably, a nap gone awry instantly.

Meanwhile, downstairs, Mark wrapped up the cleaning of the three handguns about the same time that Rashid acquired REM. He placed the cleaned and safely secured weapons onto their respective hooks along the scrupulously organized pegboard walls, then proceeded to lock up. He left the Vault with a sealed door and locked security mechanism.

His bedroom, contrary to Rashid’s, was located on the base-level of the house, which he preferred. Closer to the door, with quicker access to the Vault.

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In spite of Mark's persist concentration in doing what he's done, the veneer had the space to wear off now. He embraced this tranquility and stripped down to his trousers after removing his body from the vest hugging his torso.

Seconds after hitting his pillow he was counting sheep and shooting wolves.

# 3

Northern California never looked so appetizing to Gary and Sergio. Given, it was still a buffet of grime and crime that wouldn't wash away as easily as freshly inked words from a page. However, they very well knew that such societal blemishes required more than a second glance to mend. And even then...true progress required a touch of violence, an action of strength and vehemence, justified somehow or another.

A similar debate currently coursed between them.

"So you're telling me, if someone up 'n' killed me you wouldn't want to kill him?" Gary said, his voice deep and hoarse, not unlike a bear's should it ever acquire the ability to speak.

"Well, see, now that's a different matter. Because it's a *personal* matter, concerning myself, there'd be absolutely no doubt that the man would—sooner than eventually—die." Sergio's voice was like the pitter-patter of rain in a monsoon, constant and relentless. A perfect, seamless transition from word to word. His tone was naturally husky, and deep to an extent, but with a constantly uppity pitch in comparison to Gary. Or any other man his age for that matter. Sergio shrugged just then. "Given, I'd definitely take my *time* with the man, but that goes without saying."



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“Aw, I’m honored,” Gary replied with a briefly creasing brow and sarcasm thick on his tongue. “I’d hug you, but my hands are full.”

“That’s just your diesel heart talking. Shrouded by all that muscle and...facial hair. I swear, does that thing connect with your chest hair? Sometimes I can’t imagine that it doesn’t.”

“Perhaps it’s best that you don’t imagine at all. Stay focused, you know.”

“Right. Well, as long as you never strip it.” Sergio brandished his trademark ear-to-ear grin, paper-white grill sardonically bound by the goatee he spoke of. From his chin hung a stalactite of densely entwined black hair, like a railroad spike with the tip broken off just as it began to drastically taper. His upper lip was home to two bands of nearly conjoined mustache segments however detached from his beard strip, all a perfect black color. Occasionally on takedowns that might lend their faces to witnesses, or security cameras, Sergio would don a Guy Fawkes mask. Apart from the dramatic paleness and rosy cheeks, it was a borderline spitting image of himself. His persona was just a couple of steps behind, too, always wearing a cape of excessive paranoia but not without the proverbial gauntlets bearing gifts of sheer cunning.

Without Gary at his side, however, he’d have surely gone off the deep end by now.

This was to say he hadn’t already.

But at least this way he’d have someone to catch him, metaphorically. Gary has helped him out of many a thick situation since their partnership began three years ago. They hadn’t known of each other’s existence before then, but the experience has certainly become a bonding one.

A very, very strange but very, very bonding experience.

The back parking lot to the twelve-floor building currently under heavy construction was vacant except for a single El Camino. The two-tone 1967 Chevrolet model had limited modifications to its body, but beneath the hood rested its dormant true power. It was principally Sergio’s, who had

convinced Gary to buy it instead of a pickup truck. After some personally-added modifications, Gary was proud to call it their main set of wheels.

From the black and red El Camino's spacious bed to the partners' bodies had transferred their select weapons for the day. They were ascending the incomplete, bare concrete stairwell at the east end of the building. Two floors had already been passed. They climbed slow, taking their time, knowing that their quarry—as Gary, who thoroughly enjoyed the hunting of man ever since his experience as a Green Beret seven years ago, liked to put it—wouldn't be leaving anytime soon. This was a lead they were following up on, personally, outside of their superiors' knowledge; they'd been building it for two weeks. Branch-authorized takedowns occurred intermittently around this side-project of theirs, which had been all reconnaissance until now. Their covert operations were about to make a huge overt leap to finally put an end to their impatient patience, a waiting game they liked less and less every time they conducted it.

Gary wasn't the loose cannon that Sergio was, but he did overly enjoy himself some excessive force.

"Fine," Sergio continued, "I'll succumb to *one* option."

"Yeah?" Gary lifted his chin. "And what's that?"

"Personal preference according to the victim's family."

"Go on."

They reached the landing to the building's fourth level. Five more to go.

"Say Joe kills Mary's daughter," Sergio said, his voice yet again rapid gunfire, slinging random names for the sake of the debate. "Instead of the *government* deciding as per their bullshit standards, it is up to *Mary* to decide Joe's fate. Does he rot in prison under a life sentence or get the needle? Her choice."

Gary nodded once. Twice. "That's a heavy decision."

"For a mother, perhaps. For a sibling or parent, really, it depends on the *person* and therein lies the issue at hand—human moral code, what exactly are its parameters? I mean, before this theoretical option it was entirely up to the State, and hell—they

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ain't got a *droplet* of hesitation or regret or shame in putting Joe's sorry ass under the needle. Or in the chamber, for that matter. Ultimately, I think it should be up to the victim's family before sending a guilty man to instant death."

"Well..." Gary sighed gutturally. "You have a good point. However, if your way was the Word, then you'd say killers serve a life sentence?"

"That's more torture than instant death, in my opinion."

"You've done time, I haven't. I can imagine, but..."

"But that's as close as you could get."

"We've *both* put people away," Gary said solemnly. "Before we went undercover, we were right there reading them their Miranda rights."

"More like shoving 'em down their throats." Sergio stifled a cackle. They were passing level six and didn't want their voices to echo up through the stairwell, past the floors, potentially alerting their targets. Their quarry. An exact count of sixteen armed men, as per their previous surveillance before driving in, on the ninth floor.

"So I guess that ends it, then," Gary said with a grunt. "I'll take that option notion over instant life sentence."

"Yeah, but admit it," Sergio said, squinting. "If *your* way was the Word, you'd have all the prisons revert to guillotines and firing squads."

Sergio didn't even have to study his partner's face to recognize the austere agreement flooding his veins. Gary was a Herculean man of 6'6" in a linebacker's figure, with light skin that has seen its fair share of abuse. Four years as a U.S. Army Ranger took its toll on his mind and body but he didn't feel truly tested until he added another four years as a Green Beret to his belt. Aside from his sheer robustness, Gary looked like he could as much be a professional bodyguard or gung-ho bouncer as Sergio could be America's next Che Guevara. Without a self-righting quest to rid the true scum from the streets and find his calling with the DEA, Sergio might have become just that. Fortunately Gary was here to help him from straying off his

path—moreover, help the feral man from being killed so soon. Sergio was in his mid-thirties, despite acting fresh out of high school sometimes, and Gary was old enough to surprise his enemies every time he got the drop on them but young enough to avoid a midlife crisis. At this rate, with this kind of job, Gary truly couldn't picture himself ever having one.

"I'll admit," Gary said with a sigh and raise of his burly dark eyebrows, "I *do* think firing squads are a good idea. To an extent."

"And the Chief used to say that *I* was the sadistic one."

"You like toying with men's *pain*, I like toying with their *heads*. Big difference, there, see, a truly guilty man deserves no peace of mind before death. That's the fiercest torture there is to offer."

"Ain't nobody offering it, Gary. It's all a forced game."

"You know what I meant."

"Yeah, well, I still see that pensive look in your eyes."

Sergio cocked an eyebrow, which rose like a mamba. "Or maybe it's in the reflection on your big ol' head. God Almighty, do you *buff* that thing? Got a head like Sputnik—"

"Enough with the big-ass bald head jokes, asshole, get to the point."

"Oh, but I'm there. Do elaborate, G is for Goatee, what would be your *ideal* punishment for coldblooded killers in the judecimal system?"

Gary wasn't the smiling kind, but he just about let one loose there.

Just about.

"Fine. Hear this, then: Russian roulette. One revolver per inmate, one bullet per victim. So, you say...Joe, was it? Joe killed Mary? He gets one round in the chamber. Spins that sucker and squeezes the trigger under heavy supervision until the hammer ignites. Oh, but wait, Joe killed Mary and two others? That's three rounds in the cylinder. Let's see him sweat now. He knows he's gonna die, but this'll genuinely fuck with him."

"You twisted son of a bitch," Sergio said with a dire

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expression plaguing his face. He stared at Gary as they ascended the seventh floor. Sergio shook his head briefly before grinning broad. "I knew pairing us up was a damn fine idea."

"DEA picks well."

"That they do, my friend, but tell me this then—if a man kills six people, you're saying he gets six rounds in the chamber? Full house? Where's the mind torture there?"

"If a man kills six people and ends up in the slammer instead of a nuthouse," Gary said, cradling his Rossi Overland with one arm and rubbing his goatee-hidden chin with the other, "then he don't need a second of that bullshit. 'Cause his soul's condemned. Fill the cylinder and have him put himself out of the first step in a long line of eternal misery."

Sergio whistled quietly under his breath.

"Chief know you feel that way?"

"If he don't by now," Gary said huskily, voice like raking concrete, "then I suppose he don't need to."

Sergio smirked toothlessly and gestured the motion of zipping his lips.

"Here we go, eighth floor," Gary muttered. "Game faces on. War paint applied."

"Way ahead of you."

Gary nodded to himself. That indifferent Stonehenge façade came over his face. Every feature—from his high and broad bare dome to his rigid nose, from experience-etched cheeks to a blunt-tipped triangular goatee as dense as his muscles—became emotionless. They were as much human traits as they were niches in a cliff face, the grooves of a performance-first appearance-second weapon.

Sergio, meanwhile, knuckled down his sarcasm and dark humor-spiked personality for the sake of combat efficiency. He fought like he talked, overconfident and sly. This was as good a thing as it got, especially for him. His insanity didn't end where it began on the sidelines of the action; he took his 'job' seriously, although from Gary's perspective it could be said otherwise.

The fact that Sergio preferred sidearms—be they revolvers, pistols, or at the very most an SMG as small as it got—no matter the situation, was a telltale sign of this. Today he came heavily prepared, albeit without the assistance of anything outside the handgun class. Two 1860-model revolvers in pristinely functional condition occupied hip holsters complete with cartridge loops for the .45 ACP rounds it used. The revolvers were cartridge-converted black powder Colt Walkers with fixed cylinders. Both were a strong black featuring brazen trim around the loading gates. Despite being single-action revolvers, Sergio was a maniac operating one per hand; an onlooker might not expect Sergio to be the cowboy type, even Gary has trouble comprehending it from time to time, but the outlaw traits are all there. Except for the whole working-with-the-law side of things. Just the same, Sergio had a belted holster at the small of his back with a one-mag Beretta 92F as emergency assistance should he need it.

Both of them donned standard Kevlar vests.

This was an aspect of defense, and more particularly survival, that couldn't be overlooked. Sergio often jested about how Gary's pigskin-like hide could take a few pistol rounds like stones before breaking.

Gary, who wouldn't frequently acknowledge many of Sergio's jokes, sometimes just shrugged it off as if to half-prove the joke true.

In all seriousness, Gary was prepared for War World III during each of their outings, even on the smaller-scale ones. Unlike Sergio, despite a hidden cunning and preferred strategy, Gary favored brute firepower. In close quarters he was just as if not more so dangerous, and the Green Beret years bolstered this. Kept in a thigh-rigged sheath was a weapon he never left home without, even during riskless reconnaissance, all seven inches of its clip-point sawback carbon steel blade. The CRKT Saber Bowie knife had a four-inch rubberized grip and incisor-like hilt guards.

Outside of close-quarters, Gary would rely on the array

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of firearms occupying his body.

A fully loaded Kel-Tec KSG shotgun was held firmly in both hands, packing 12-gauge slugs. Slung onto his back was a Bushmaster ACR carbine, a comfortable line between sub-machinegun and assault rifle, but with the punch of 6.8mm SPC rounds. Lastly were the pair of stainless steel Taurus Raging Bull revolvers in dual Bianchi shoulder holsters.

Spare ammunition was surprisingly scarce for all of this, although considering the amount of options on his person, he really shouldn't have to ever reload. Aside from fifteen slugs packed into the KSG, its rail-mounted SureShell carriers added twelve additional rounds for quick reload. Gary doubted he'd need them, but best be over-prepared than under. Even so, this theme didn't carry over to his other weapons; the ACR had one thirty-round magazine locked in with another taped to it, jungle style, and the revolvers were packing six .44 Magnum cartridges each.

More than sufficient.

Excessive, Sergio would say. A bit unnecessary.

"I like keeping my options open," Gary's response would almost always be. And, on occasion, he'd add: "Hey—you never know."

And they didn't. It was all purely capricious.

This aspect of takedowns heightened the risk and because manpower odds were against them ninety-percent of the time, a little overkill wouldn't hurt.

Not them, at least.

It was meant to blow away their enemy, at any rate.

"Did you have a Power Bar or something when I wasn't looking?" Sergio whispered as they slowly rose to the ninth floor landing. "'Cause it looks like you're about to rip that shirt of yours. Save the vest, at least, man."

Gary rolled his eyes and shook his head.

To boot, all of the weight Gary was carrying around—much less up nine flights of stairs—was quite the workout. The greatest exercise, however, would be what was in store for them

beyond this door.

Gary took the right side, right shoulder to the coarse brick wall. They had more than halfway finished the stairwell, but beyond it expanded the ninth floor and those above it far less complete. The edges of the levels featured basic plastic fencing and scaffolding from floor one to six, but nothing higher than that. Floors were of course stable and sound to walk on, not to mention do construction throughout. Wooden and drywall pillars alike helped support the floors, providing minimal additional cover for their enemy. Once through that door, they were out in the open—except for a single stack of cinderblocks about four feet high and six wide. According to their reconnaissance, it should be less than ten feet from the doorway, with its longest side facing them.

This will be their primary source of cover.

Unfortunately, it won't be ample for two of them. They have already discussed their plan, despite its likelihood of changing ficklely on the fly. Sergio loved winging it, whereas Gary preferred at least a gentle influence of strategy. Without any tactics, they'd get nowhere but dead.

And neither of them liked that alternative.

So, Gary would stay behind to use the doorway as cover until Sergio stopped shooting to duck behind the cinderblocks for a breath. Hopefully in this instance their enemies will have scattered, and those still standing might have their backs turned to try seeking cover. As for Gary, he'd take this time to swing out and lay down some 12-gauge slugs from the KSG. Its range was greater and tighter than any buckshot spread, making it ideal for urban combat requiring incessant barrages. The high-capacity tubular magazine would help with this, and the SureShell carriers couldn't make things easier for Gary.

Easy and brutal.

"On your go," Gary whispered.

Sergio had put his back flat to the wall on the heavy metal door's left. Right now it was wedged open by a small door-stopper at their feet, creating a two-inch gap between it and



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the jamb. Fortunately it was a push-open door, not a pull one, in which case the fluidity of their plan would've been crippled.

They were both dressed to make ends meet.

Gary wore military-grade boots, black field cargo pants, a fitted black T-shirt under the Kevlar vest that couldn't contain his mountainous biceps. Bare hands were calloused this way and that, but he hated the concept of gloves, unless they were fingerless, and even then he was hesitant.

Sergio shared this feeling, except that when it came to adeptly firing his single-action revolvers, bare thumbs wouldn't cut it. If he had a free hand he'd try fanning for greater rapidity, if the situation called for it. Otherwise his hands were as bare as could be—save custom thimble gloves, sheathing only his fingertips to provide enhanced grip.

Sergio was his own tailor.

He donned black wingtip loafers that he swore by his life were actually comfortable for even urban combat, black casual-fit corduroy pants, and a white long-sleeve placket with black piping.

"Go fast," Sergio whispered, tilting his head back and drawing both Colt Walkers from his hip holsters. He raised them up, parallel to either cheek, elbows pointed at the ground. His grip-gloved thumbs cocked both hammers.

"Go hard," Gary muttered, head tilting back as well. He held the KSG at port-arms, already cocked and ready for action.

The sixteen armed narcotics dealers on the other side of this door were about to have their party crashed.

Instead of kicking the door open, which would cause more noise and cut off at least two seconds from his time to start shooting, Sergio pushed with his left shoulder simply by walking into it. The door swayed open without a lot of force, and if it weren't for the eight men facing the wall with the door—the eight others facing them, with their backs to the door—nobody would've noticed Sergio's intrusion until he squeezed the triggers.

Plural.

Sergio's arms leveled and the twin 1860 revolvers barked like waking Cerberuses. His first pair of shots blew craters into the backs of two men's skulls, misting their nearest cohorts' faces with blood, dropping them in an instant. The hollow level under construction echoed with the reports of the gunshots and the commotion of shouting, laced with diverse profanity, from the drug dealers. Black suits and white button-downs became smorgasbords of blood spatter. Of the sixteen men, only two weren't toting weapons, as they were the lead seller and buyer. As of Sergio's first two shots, the buyer became no more. The seller, however, swiftly fled with his tail between his legs, until one of his seven armed cohorts handed him a pistol.

This all happened within about three seconds.

The men scattered after the first shot was fired, and seeing as how the intruder clearly wasn't the law—in their eyes—the two groups' already paranoid bond of trust shattered like a brick to a window. The seller's group was facing the door to begin with, and instantly didn't mind cutting their gunfire *through* the buyers if it meant killing their common enemy.

Those who actually used their brains in this time of clusterfuck could tell that it was just that—a common enemy. Afterall, the revolver-wielding maniac burst into the room firing upon the buyers to begin with.

Nonetheless, the gun-wielding thugs fired every which direction. Not that Sergio or Gary were complaining.

Sergio put down two more bad guys on the buyers' side by deftly thumbing the hammers on his single-action revolvers. He then crouched down behind the pallet of cinderblocks just as the bullets started flying his way. None of their SMG fire could penetrate the rows of cinderblocks, no more than a BB could puncture steel. Stray bullets went off in other directions, too, some even pattering the open door behind Sergio.

Except now Sergio put his back to the cinderblocks and faced the doorway, where Gary waited for a pause in gunfire to poke his head out. When said pause came, he pivoted into view, his figure filling the whole frame, feet anchoring himself at the

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bases of the jambs. The KSG went up to his shoulder, finger around the trigger.

The first 12-gauge slug slammed into a gunman's back, right between the shoulders. Blood misted the air. These guys were decently prepared with quality sub-machineguns, however, it was mostly for show rather than tell. Nobody wore vests, and now they were paying for it.

Generally this wouldn't matter anyhow.

Sergio always aimed high, and being a handgun connoisseur lent him the advantage of greater accuracy at the cost of slow firing rates. Gary's aim was uncanny, but sometimes risking a miss for a headshot on a moving target was incentive enough to go for the torso wound. On an unarmored body, with Gary's precision and choice of weapons, this was seldom a mistake.

The first man victim to the KSG suffered a blow that nearly ruptured his sternum. Instead his intact chest reverberated with an insane pain as it fell forward, gun from his clutches. Another armed dealer—was it a buyer, or seller, now that they had all scattered like cockroaches it was difficult to tell—took a slug to the left shoulder, spinning him around. His hipped MP5 rang off and spewed bullets across the chest of a fellow criminal. More blood misted the air, rankly mixing with the gunsmoke.

Sergio leaned out from behind the cinderblocks, low on his right, to kneecap an enemy partially covered by a drywall pillar. The man howled in pain as one of his knees blew out and splashed the drywall. He fell off to the left, an axed tree, dropping his weapon and hitting the floor hard. Sergio ended the man's misery with a shot to the face, then reeled back behind cover in time to avoid a similar fate.

Despite a lack of cover out in the open—save for two sizeable drywall pillars and a concrete one forty feet away—the exposed criminals were still incessant on their weapons.

Manpower counted in this instance.

But when clips ran dry, balls shrunk and cowardice distended. Gary, who had since retreated back into the stairwell,

now took this additional pause to return fire again. He swung out and began pumping slug after slug from the KSG until his third kill's crown reached for the high ceiling in a fountain of brain matter.

Eight bad guys remained.

Six had managed to stuff themselves behind cover.

Meanwhile, the suitcases and duffel bags and an even a guitar case of weapons remained at the center of the floor where the deal had been transpiring. The duffel bag bulged with wads of clean, dirty money. One of the three suitcases had sprung open when the deal was initially crashed, its contents facing the doorway. Gary glimpsed through his peripheral vision various ammunition lining its interior.

Gary unloaded a few more slugs into the corners of both drywall pillars, breaking off sizable chunks, before retreating back into the stairwell. He planted his right shoulder firmly against the stone nearest the door jamb, holding the KSG at a low angle. The foregrip fixed to the pump slide was slave to Gary's firm right hand, while the trigger guard resided with his left.

He took a deep breath through flaring nostrils.

"Cease fire, cease fire," Gary shouted. He tried to make his voice as thin as possible, a difficult veneer to fulfill. "Fuck this shit, Jimbo, they ain't worth it."

Sergio's face lit up with a wild grin.

He cocked the hammers on the Colt Walkrs in preparation, and resituated himself behind the cinderblocks. He propped himself up to a squad, his messy head of short black curls inches from being exposed over the stack.

"Yeah, you're right. This is a clusterfuck. Let's bounce. I'm right behind ya—"

How stupid could these dealers be?

Very, apparently, was the answer.

Gary and Sergio have played this hand before. It only worked with the most frenzied, ignorant of criminals. Although the two of them had managed to halve the dealers' entire number

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within fifteen seconds, they still had the gall and brainlessness to take the bait.

All six of them—two behind the drywall pillar to Sergio's left, three behind the one on the right, and a lone wolf by the stone column further out—stepped out to fire. They had been expecting to catch their enemy in the back during a 'full' retreat.

Instead, they met head-on.

Few of them barely had the chance to squeeze their triggers. Gary focused on the leftmost pillar, Sergio taking the right. The Colt Walkers spat .45 ACP rounds until they went dry, but not before killing two of three enemies from the right pillar. He swiftly withdrew to holster the two revolvers and draw his Beretta 92F. In the same instant Gary finished off the two bad guys from the left pillar just before the KSG ran dry. He swiftly ducked, set it down on the ground, put the ACR carbine in his hands, and rolled forward before coming up with it shouldered. The ACR's firing lever was a small crossbar along its barrel, and with each shot it cocked back before springing forward again. Bullet after bullet ejected from the breech, clattering to the unforgiving floor. Gary burst-fired into the far stone pillar, focusing on its sharp corners, 6.8mm rounds doing nothing more than chipping away small chunks.

He glimpsed movement from his peripheral as a survivor from Sergio's targeted right pillar swung out to fire upon Gary. He held a Heckler & Koch UMP-45 in his hands, and wasn't hesitant on using it. A curst burst of .45 ACP rounds punched into the stone wall to Gary's right, cutting hard left.

Time slowed for Gary.

He was going to get shot, he just hoped his Kevlar took it and not his right arm.

He paused on the trigger and swung his aim right.

Sergio dove left like a sideward jack-in-the-box, Beretta 9mm two-handed. Before he hit the ground in a sliding fashion, the UMP-wielding man dropped like a sack of bricks. His blood pooled around him, haloing his head as the neck wound

worsened.

Sergio could have acquired a headshot. There was no doubt. But he had his ways.

Meanwhile, Gary's muscles relaxed and he paused fire altogether. The ACR had probably ten rounds left in its magazine, if that. Their last remaining target was cowering behind the stone pillar some fifty feet ahead, its corners no longer sharp but blasted away into jagged formations thanks to Gary's persistent ACR.

Sergio got to his feet and Gary casually joined him.

"You stay put, hug the left pillar," Gary whispered, slinging the ACR and drawing both Raging Bulls from their shoulder holsters. "Empty your Beretta into the left side of his cover. By the time you run dry, I'll be knocking on his door."

Sergio shrugged. "Don't trip."

"That was one time," Gary growled under his breath. He shook his head and slinked over to the right-side pillar. The neck-shot man on the floor there had been dead for seconds by the time Gary reached the other side of the pillar. His boots avoided the spreading puddle of blood.

He looked sharp left and saw Sergio in position, then nodded to him once. Sergio commenced shooting, two-handing the Beretta pistol and firing at a controlled rate. As soon as the first shot sounded, Gary was en route. He ran at a casual speed, like a fenced-in stallion, with both argent revolvers raised. The daylight that washed in through the space between levels provided the luminance, and gleamed beautifully off the four-pound guns. Their weight was perfect in Gary's hands. He locked his elbows as he neared the far stone pillar, hanging a right-side curve that gave him an angular advantage.

Within five seconds he ought to spot the man hiding.

"You fucking animals!" a man's whimpering face mewed out from behind the pillar. A stray pistol shot sounded around the left corner of his cover, sacrificing that hand seeing as how Sergio was still pitting rounds in that area.

And then the black slide on his Beretta locked back.

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Shots stopped hammering the pillar's left side, Gary noticed, knowing that it was his turn to shine once again. He fired a round from his right Raging Bull into the right corner, nearest Gary, blowing off a massive chunk. The revolver bucked wildly, a muzzle flash appearing at the end of the five-inch ported barrel as soon as it vanished.

The man behind cover instinctively fled from the imposing shot, emerging around the left side of the pillar and thus exposing himself. His Ruger P90 sidearm was raised, but never got off a shot. Within a second of charging out from behind the pillar, Gary's left arm swung in that direction and squeezed the trigger. The Raging Bull kicked and barked and blew a .44 Magnum round straight through the man's left temple and out his right. What remained of his head followed his body to the floor, where a wide mess of gore sunk into the floor.

Gary's boots skidded to a stop.

Putrid smoke from spent lead hung in the air.

Gary holstered the two Raging Bulls and swept his gaze across the spacious room, until he and Sergio were certain they had killed everyone. Then they reassembled at the center, where the cases and duffel bag were.

"So, what do we take?" Sergio asked with a cocked eyebrow and sly smile.

"What's the money look like?"

"Clean bills, or so it seems. Neat bundles. Say, ten large. Maybe twelve."

Gary nodded, cleared his throat. "And the guns, I'm sure the D' can file away a nice bust with that."

"Yeah, but no drugs? Disappointing."

"Be smart, Sergio, I know it's difficult for you sometimes—but be smart." Gary took a few steps and squatted down by the guitar case of weapons. He peeled back the lining below the sub-machineguns and pistols to find bags of heroine.

"Oh, bingo," Sergio reels back, clapping his hands. He's since holstered the empty Beretta. He struts over to Gary, who tosses him a bag. Sergio inspects it before handing it back.

“Pure. This’ll be a solid bust. Get us a nice bonus. Let’s just walk.”

Gary stood, straightening himself out.

Sirens could be heard in the far distance. Far, far. Distant, distant. Nonetheless encroaching.

“I guess we’re walking, then,” Gary said.

So, they walked. Terminologically this referred to the two of them leaving the scene of a takedown with nothing in their hands but what they came in with—no weapons, no money. Nada, zilch. However, they knew that as hefty a bust as this was, from the high body count to the cash and dope, they’d be compensated well. And as neat as the money was, probably an even count too, it could be deduced that nothing was taken. However sketchy this might appear to the black and whites didn’t concern Gary or Sergio. As they faster-than-walked down the nine flights of stairs, they knew that the DEA would provide additional whispers in the ears of the local PD as per what might’ve happened here.

For all they knew, there was more than just what remained. Another bag of money, or another case of guns. Either way, who’s to say that the perpetrators responsible for this kind of bloodshed and twisted vigilantism didn’t run off with additional lucre, drugs, or dead presidents? Maybe they got hot feet at the sound of approaching 5-0. Maybe they got antsy, panicked and bailed.

Maybe they had a train or plane to catch.

Maybe they knew all too well what they were doing and weren’t going to slip up for even the faintest reason under the slightest of inklings.

Maybe, just maybe, the two men were monsters themselves, and covering for them with the PD’s own erroneous theories was as much a crime as pulling the trigger.

Or, on a distant planet, maybe they had souls. Hearts.

The violence that emanated from their hands was for a greater cause. Sure, they enjoyed it. Sure, it got their blood racing and their adrenal glands pumping like a fuel-injected



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V10. But they could sleep at night knowing that what they've done, however wrong it might've been, was somehow also right.

With this notion swimming in their veins, Gary and Sergio laid some rubber in the opposite direction inside of the El Camino. They pushed further north, they extended their gazes and reaches toward home in Calistoga.

Sergio sent the text.

Gary read the eulogies with a fresh magazine.

And the rest of the day awaited their clutches.

# 4

Mark was out back on his final round of target practice when their phones rang. It was a shared number between the two of them, but Mark's hands were full and his attention occupied too much to grab the call before Rashid did. Rashid had been sleeping. It was seven hours since he'd dozed off on his bed, a heavy day's sleep without any disturbances—until now. Mark, on the other hand, hadn't slept but three hours and upon waking slapped together a sandwich before hitting the makeshift range behind the house. It was a porch with a wide view and an array of metallic silhouette targets secured to tree trunks down the ridge.

After the ringtone cut off, Mark assumed Rashid had gotten it. He was part shocked and part comprehensive as to how Rashid could actually sleep through the practice-makes-perfect gunfire Mark was conducting in their 'backyard.' It still baffled him to this day, but he'd gotten used to Rashid's anvil-laden sleeping habits.

Less than ten minutes later, Rashid emerged from inside the house eight feet behind where Mark sat. He occupied a wooden bench in front of the extra-wide porch guardrail, where a scoped rifle rested with its bipod supporting the front weight. Mark only had one earplug in, as he claimed that the other was half-shot already, and sort of dumber down—immune, he'd

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say—to the effects of proximate gunfire.

Nonetheless, Mark wasn't aware of Rashid's presence until after he had passed through the sound-proofed sliding glass door and called his name.

Mark tried to play off his startled reaction.

He casually looked over his shoulder and raised his eyebrows, forehead distinctly creasing, curiosity dwelling in his gaze.

"Who was it?"

"Bobby, over in East L.A.," Rashid replied, standing bare-footed on the smooth oak porch with his back to the open door.

"Oh, yeah?" Mark said, nodding once. He returned his attention to the Remington M24 SWS at his clutches and checked the magazine as he spoke. "And what'd he have for us? Good or bad news?"

"A lil' bit of both."

Mark sighed. "I suppose that's all there is these days."

"I'd say so."

Mark armed the safety on the rifle and closed the lens cap on the telescopic sight. He twisted around on the bench, wearing jeans and a sleeveless shirt, to face the less-dressed Rashid. He was in nothing but a pair of basketball shorts.

"A bit too comfortable, are we?" Mark said dully. "You sleep well, Snorlax?"

"I'm gonna ignore that reference and say 'fuck you.' When there ain't any calls or texts, that'd be an *off day*. See, I don't need any target practice."

"Practice makes perfect, man. Didn't your momma teach you that?"

"Hey, you leave my momma out your mouth."

"Too late for that," Mark joked, unable to repress the smirk any longer. He held up his hands, palm out, in a sort of helpless gesture. The haughty smirk remained nonetheless.

"We gonna talk business or what, man?" Rashid said, shaking his head and failing to hide his own smile of defeat as

his gaze drifted elsewhere.

“Business, oh okay, so it’s *that* kind of news?” Mark cocked an eyebrow and pulled his game face on. “Put it on the table, then, c’mon.”

“It’s always business with Bobby. He’s our grade-A rat, man.” Rashid sighed.

“So...good news?”

“He knows where our guys Nicolai and Zayas are gonna be, along with full company from both sides, until four tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, shit. Sounds solid. And...the bad news?”

Rashid’s smirk faltered. “He knows where our guys Nicolai and Zayas are gonna be...” Rashid unfolded palm-to-palm hands as if revealing a gift.

Or realization.

Mark cocked his eyebrow emphatically, a shift of curiosity and incredulity in his face.

“Apparently they’ll be in a single Greyhound heading east to cross over into Nevada. They’ve got a hideout not far past the border, whom they’re allegedly paying off to look the other way as they transport a good bit of contraband aboard the bus.”

“Jesus. What *kind* of contraband?”

“Bobby said he didn’t know. Could be the T or the F.”

“Or the N.” Mark said, referring to narcotics in place of ‘tobacco’ or ‘firearms.’ Basically, any kind of drugs or weapons.

“Or straight money. Who’s to say, really—all we know is that this could be a *major* fucking bust, but the risks are obvious.”

“What’re we looking at here, night op for sure?”

“Unless you’re ready to bounce this instant and we hightail it there to arrive before dark.”

“Fat chance on the latter, since I sure as shit ain’t ready this minute.”

“So...tonight?”

“Late tonight.”

“Are we talking about hitting ‘em en route, or at a stop?”

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“Rest stop would be ideal. Driver’s gotta get an hour’s R&R at best, ya know? Trip like that...” Mark shook his head, kneading his chin in thought. Then he looked up. “When’re they hitting the road?”

“Already have.”

“And Bobby’s saying they’ll be in Cali ‘til about four in the morning?”

“That’s right. I imagine we can expect ‘em to be reaching the preliminary border by three-thirty, so we oughtta best treat Bobby’s purported ‘four’ as ‘three’ AM.”

Mark nodded pensively. “I guess we’re gonna need a favor, then.”

“What’s that?”

“The identification number Bobby gave you for their Greyhound, text it to the Chief. We’re gonna need some satellite assistance. We’re closer to the border than they are, anyway, so we have time on our side and no need to race them there. Best we hit them at a rest stop, though, or at least when the vehicle is stopped...so we’re gonna need location confirmation from our boys at the D if this op’s gonna go down any way but wrong.”

Rashid nodded. He whipped out his cellular from a shorts pocket and began thumbing away at the touchscreen.

“I’m on it. But we can’t expect full cooperation, ya know? Expecting favors from the Chief is like expecting it to rain Kardashians.”

Mark half-scoffed, half-laughed. “Regardless, I bet the names of our targets will pitch their tents. The Chief’ll say something like “I’ll get back to you on that” and I’ll put my money on ten minutes before he swings back around with a “you got it, keep me in the loop.” Same ol’ shit. Give ‘em the toe-tags to fill out, we’ll tie ‘em on.”

Rashid, smirking, continued texting.

Without looking up, he asked Mark: “So how you been out here? Pumping away at that Remington?”

“It’s real smooth. Might be my new favorite—.300 Win-Mag, only thirteen pounds empty.”

“Nice. Shoots straight?”

“Straighter than your orientation.”

Rashid clicked his tongue. “Impossible.”

“I admit, it’s no CheyTac, and not as fast as the EBR, but the bolt action is smooth and the power’s all there.”

“I’ll stick with my REPR, but you have fun.”

Mark chuckled. “Oh, I will.”

“Alright, so where’s the money?”

“Huh?”

Rashid pocketed his phone. “‘Twas nothin’ but a thang, chicken-wang.”

“Get the fuck outta here. Just like that?”

“Just like that, you skeptical son-of-a-bitch.” Rashid grinned, slapping his hands and rubbing them together.

“I wasn’t skeptical, you asshole, I was being *generous*.”

“Bullshit, I want money in my *hands* or free lunch.”

“Uh, Earth to Rashid,” Mark said, standing and lightening his voice, “it’s almost *four o’clock*. Lunchtime’s over, pal. I suggest you grab a Ho-Ho and start packing. I’m gonna put the Remington back and take a shower.”

“Hey, what do you think I am, a bum? I gotta shower too.”

“Whatever suits you, Rutger Hauer.”

“Do I look white to you?”

Mark chuckled, carrying the M24 SWS inside, past Rashid. “I dunno, you tell me, hobo.”

“You’re a smartass.”

“I *am* pretty intelligent.” Mark’s voice echoed through the house as he ambled toward the Vault.

Rashid was left behind, shaking his head on the porch. A breeze rushed by and his bare skin turned to gooseflesh. He turned his back and closed the sliding door when his gaze caught something glint on the porch floor. A guttural sigh fluttered past his lips.

“Hey, Mark,” he shouted, “do me a favor and clean up after yourself from now on! I swear to God, if I step on another

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spent casing on this porch again I'm gonna shove it up your ass.”  
“Yeah, yeah!”

Fifty minutes later and a lot had gotten done. After returning the Remington to its place following a quick clean-through, Mark hopped in the shower. He reassured himself that he'd either pick up the spent shell casings on the porch tomorrow after their job or whenever Rashid's impatience caught up to him.

Punctuating his shower was a quick workout accompanied by loud music permeating the rec-room.

During this time Rashid had gotten cleaned up, made himself a quick sandwich, clapped a pair of hefty headphones over his ears before proceeding to prepare. The night ahead of them was going to be a challenge unlike anything they've done in quite a while, as usually they're sent to locations void of civilians and while the sun's up.

They weren't vampires, however, they've always functioned best during the day.

Tonight it would be approaching ten o'clock, potentially later if the Chief got back to them with updated Intel, and their night would supply sufficient cover. This was the only advantage, working under the cloak of darkness while wearing all-black and—of course, in lieu of civilians—masks. To reduce civilian panic, and draw less attention to themselves both audibly and visible as per muzzle flashes, they'd be equipping suppressors to their weapons.

The partners reminded each other of this before they began prepping their loadouts.

A change in their plans went from being both of them on the ground to one providing sniper support and the other hitting the bus on foot. They went back and forth on who it would be on the ground, before ultimately Mark was the decision. Rashid had a steadier hand and greater patience, the opposites to these two traits making for a better vanguard to hit the bus directly. Rashid would take the sniping route, which he eventually got excited for because he got to use his favored DPMS Rapid Response

Precision Rifle, acronymically REPR, which he pronounced 'Reaper.' It was a ten-pound semiautomatic sniping rifle four feet long including the suppressor. Foldable bipod, high-tech telescopic sight, hollowed out rail system, and intricate desert camouflage pattern made it stylish enough for Rashid to thoroughly enjoy using it. Besides, in takedowns these days long-range tactics were seldom called for.

They each took a separate cello case to the Firebird, complete with individual Bianchi shoulder holsters for pistols and outfitted in the necessary tactical gear. Kevlar vests were worn beneath long-sleeve shirts they currently had rolled up for ventilation. No overcoats or jackets would be worn on top of their shirts in order to promote freedom of movement and aeration. After all, once out of the Firebird at the setting of the imminent takedown, the belts they'd don would provide ample ammunition storage.

"Grabbing another quick bite, be ready in five," Mark told Rashid as they finished ferrying their loadouts to the car.

"Okay. I gotta hit the toilet real quick. Move out by seven?"

"Yes, please do. Don't bring any of that nonsense into the 'Bird."

"It's *our* car, remember?"

"Well I'm driving tonight, so it's mine, now hurry up before you have to change all over again."

Rashid rolled his eyes and trotted off to the bathroom.

Meanwhile, Mark made him a ham sandwich and finalized his preparations for the night.

His twin Kimber Grand Raptor II's hung securely in their individual holsters by his sides, suppressors already fixed. An unsuppressed stainless steel Desert Eagle was snugly holstered to his right thigh, a just-in-case sort of logic for him. His primary weapon of the night would be the compact Heckler & Koch G36C assault rifle in his cello case of guns, alongside a Kel-Tec PLR-16 SMG. Both were already suppressed, and ready for action, complete with jungle-style double-magazines to



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minimize reloads.

Mark completed his rounds, mostly being vain about the appearance of the Firebird but also securing its new plates, just in time for his sandwich napkin to hit the trashcan and hear a toilet flush. Rashid strolled into the front room as if he had just had sex with a trio of models, a smug look coating his face.

"There's something severely wrong with you taking pride in what you just did," Mark said, raising a sole forefinger at his partner.

"Hey, I'm a man through-and-through, what can I say?"

"We'll have unquestionable proof about that tonight," Mark said, dusting his hands off. "Now, let's go. We've got a long drive ahead of us."

"You mean *you've* got a long drive ahead," Rashid sneered as he followed Mark out the front door. He continued talking as he locked it up. "Hell, all I gotta do is put my head back and doze the fuck off, buddy."

"We'll see about that when I'm blasting TAIM and pushing eighty on the expressway," Mark replied.

Rashid turned to face Mark, who stood at the driver's side of the Firebird with his door open and arm on the roof. A smug grin was pinned to his pale face.

"You're an asshole," Rashid said plainly, jabbing his finger at Mark from across the way and shaking his head. He climbed into the Firebird and then Mark followed in suit.

As Rashid buckled up, he noticed something was a little out of place.

"Where's my case?"

"Trunk. You know the thumb."

"Yeah, but not the rule." Rashid shook his head and sighed through a smile. "You are compulsive as hell, man, illogically so!"

Mark threw it into gear. The Firebird's twin-turbo V8 roared to life. A few birds scattered from their trees nearby. The very gravel beneath its thick tires might as well have been vibrating.

“Oh, really? Tell me, how’s that?” Mark said.

“It’s called *ease-of-access*, you crazy bastard,” Rashid said, lurching in his seat from Mark’s feral maneuvering in their own driveway.

“Sorry,” Mark clenched his jaw as he bucked a U’y and sped across the downhill gravel. “But I’ll take security over convenience any day of the week.”

“Oh, *bullshit*,” Rashid laughed. “You’re about as far from being a man of safety as a cat is from being a dog. Yeah, you act like you play it safe ‘n’ all but when shit hits the fan—and with you it never isn’t—you’re not too concerned about snagging an umbrella.”

Mark didn’t reply at first. He appeared half pensive, half ashamed.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he finally admitted. The Firebird’s tires careened off of gravel and onto a coarsely unpaved road, long since made smoother by their constant travel. Mark sighed, one-handing the steering wheel at its upper arch. “I tend to wanna flip the switch on ‘high.’”

A smirk escaped his stern face.

“Hey, at least you own up to it. Nonetheless, when you think about it, leaving the gun cases *within reach* would’ve been smarter.”

Mark wasn’t shy to shake his head and retort.

“Negative,” he said firmly. “Thing is, should we get pulled over, it’s not like the fuzz has X-ray vision, but the suspicion levels would skyrocket off the bat. Also—”

Just the same, Rashid wasn’t shy to interrupt.

“Suspicion levels? Christ, Mark, *look at us*—we’re rocking professional shoulder holsters and suppressed sidearms. Your Kimber 1911’s are flashy to say the least, you got a goddamn chrome D-Eagle strapped to your thigh, and my two-tone USP’s are no different. I mean, c’mon. We’re not exactly a couple of stoners, much less businessmen on an average commute. And the custom Firebird snorting nine-hundred horsepower ain’t what I’d call low-key, either. So enough with

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your excuses. Just say it, be proud, “I am a control Nazi.” Say it with that smug pride you accuse of me all the time.”

“Ah, go fuck yourself.”

Firebird tires screeched onto pavement. The rear end fishtailed briefly before traction was acquired and Mark beelined down the road. Thickets of trees thinned out on either side of them until it opened up completely to a dusk-bled sky and dull green grass medians. Other cars were eventually added to the mix and traffic commenced, except for when Mark disobeyed its parameters. Rashid enjoyed rolled-down windows until Mark insisted on reckless-level speeds, his eyes a police radar on their own.

Yet as soon as Rashid started acting too comfortable, insinuating imminent sleep with closed eyes and a reclined chair, Mark pumped the volume up and let the subwoofer keep his partner’s veins racing.

“This shit’s good for your *soul*, man, c’mon—open up!” Mark hooted.

“It might be, if we were on a twenty-minute drive to go knock down a bunch of nine-toting thugs, but considering the opposites at hand, it is merely *shit* that’s going to give me a fucking *concussion* without even moving my goddamn *head*!”

“I’m sorry, what, I didn’t quite hear you?” Mark replied, cupping his right ear.

Given, the noise of the music was thunderous, and they had to yell like soldiers under a Black Hawk’s rotors to be heard, but their coherency was up to par. Mark just liked pulling Rashid’s chain in this situation.

“Like I said, *we* got a long drive ahead of *us*!” Mark added, grinning from ear-to-ear. “So nut up or shut up, just sit up and listen up ‘cause it’s only gonna get heavier from here on out.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that,” Rashid replied, his voice low. He readjusted his chair to a more upright position and shrugged off his indolence. “I sure as hell don’t doubt that.

“And I’m ready for it.”

“How far out are we?”

“About fifteen minutes to the penultimate rest stop, according to their predestined route.” Mark sighed and pointed his right forefinger skyward. “Which we give thanks to the Chief and our Eyes in the Sky for satellite coverage.”

The speakers had gotten their fair recess while dialogue kicked up between the partners regarding their encroaching takedown situation.

“Yeah, well, they’re only sticking around for final confirmation,” Rashid said, cradling his phone in his right hand.

“I think we’ll be good with this second rest stop,” Mark said. “I mean, you think about it—our targets aren’t gonna hit the rest stop nearest the border. By that time they just wanna *go*, especially since their place in Nevada ain’t that far out.”

Rashid nodded. “Sounds solid.”

Mark shrugged. “I imagine the Chief feels the same way.”

“Probably why he hasn’t doubted our move.”

“But,” Mark said, clicking his tongue with a bite of incredulity, “if we’re wrong and their Greyhound overshoots the rest stop we set up shop at, you’ll get the text and then our Intel vanishes until takedown. Success or failure.”

Rashid nodded contemplatively.

“What’s your gut saying, Rashid?” Mark sincerely asked.

“It’s good, actually.” Rashid stopped nodding and looked over at Mark, raising an eyebrow too. “It’s good and convincing.”

“Attaboy,” Mark smiled small. He inched up the volume and MJK vocals soothed their veins. Drums were slow, pensive, ambient chords in the background resounding the partners’ reassurance for this operation.

The atmosphere was set, the night growing heavy.

It was just barely past nine o’clock and neither sun nor star could be seen. Another hour or so and the latter might be spotted high in the dark blue, soon to be a steely black with

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reflections from the crescent moon.

Climate was warm, but not sweltering.

Calm winds reeled their way through the Firebird's cabin and soothed the skin of the men's exposed forearms. Rashid dangled his right arm out the window for some time before traffic picked up again and they were approaching a rest stop.

"This exit, right?" Rashid asked, indicating the off-ramp.

"Indeed. We're there."

"Time to pull on our game faces. Which route are we taking? Around back, atop the restrooms?"

"I figured as much. That's all you, though, buddy."

"I know, I know. And you?"

"The waiting game, home girl."

Rashid clicked his tongue. "Watch it, douche. Wouldn't want Karma biting you in the ass *tonight*."

"Yeah, true, I'd much rather give 'er the *fingers* tomorrow night. Cook a nice dinner, ya know, treat a movie, maybe cuddle some. Then *bam!*"

"Pow, right in the kisser?" Rashid said casually.

"Something like that."

"You're loose in the head, you know that?"

"Since day one."

Rashid's phone vibrated. He checked it. "So, guess what?"

"Chicken ass?"

Rashid smirked, shook his head. "Our bad guys are about twelve minutes behind us."

"*Twelve* minutes? Damn, the Department's really taking a swing at accuracy. Did they give a readout on seconds, too?"

Rashid, smirking, just shook his head. He pocketed the phone and flexed his hands.

"You ready, man?" Mark raised an eyebrow.

"Born, let's do it."

Mark nodded, hand tightening on the steering wheel. He drove the Firebird around to the rear parking lot of the rest stop, away from the main road and behind the brick outhouses. There

had only been three other cars out front, decently spaced apart, as well as a pair of eighteen-wheelers way off to the side in their designated spots. The pavement restricted to buses was clear and appeared to have a clear radius around it; the closest civilian vehicle was a minivan forty feet away.

Mark killed the lights and backed into a spot.

Then, he shut off the engine and exchanged a stone-cold gaze with Rashid.

They exited the Firebird, whose slick black coat became one with the night, and their getups no different. Doors shut slowly, quietly, locked and loaded rapacity inside each man. They met around back, where Mark popped the trunk and they doubled over the rear fender.

“You take yours, and I mine,” Mark said, leaning in to snag his cello case arsenal. It was an all-black felt case, unlike Rashid’s mahogany leather one, and a bit lighter. After lifting it from the bowels of the trunk, Rashid followed him, and shut the lid with his free hand.

“Good luck, have fun,” Rashid winked.

“Never fail to.”

“I’ve got your back,” Rashid added.

“Try not to give me a buzz-cut, eh?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll leave you your eyes.”

“Psh,” Mark shook his head, smiling. “Let’s just get to work. You got a lasersight on your REPR?”

“Calibrated in-sync with the NV scope.”

“Superb. I’m going in completely black,” Mark said. “No lasersight, no NVG, just a red-dot reflex on the G36 and the eagle eyes in my head.”

“Don’t get too carried away on yourself, eh?”

“Only after we’ve put these scumbags in the dirt.”

“I’ll toast to that.”

They gave each other reverent nods and then divided their routes. Their plans conjoined at the hip, but their gazes were diverted from one another. Mark hugged the backside of a brick outhouse facing the Firebird in the rear parking lot, and put

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his heels to its base. Boots sunk into damp grass and it was evident that it had rained recently. A slick humidity even hung in the air, but nothing distracting or cumbersome. If anything, a twisted placation. While Mark doubled over his cello case, which he popped open and began equipping himself, Rashid worked on ascending the other outhouse.

A three-hole black balaclava enveloped Mark's head.

He finished by slinging the Kel-Tec sub-machinegun, its fat suppressor making things more awkward than he preferred. But with the G36C in his hands, safety disarmed and set to full-auto, things were right back to palliative. Given, the intensity of the situation was about to skyrocket due to his placidity, so the opposites attracted his preference of violence.

Knowing how qualitative their enemy's gear was, the partners didn't want to risk channel interference by bringing headsets to facilitate communications between them. Given the circumstances, it certainly would have been a stellar idea—however, some things, even the smallest risks among much heavier ones, these two would have nothing to do with.

"Set to go," Mark so said to himself, as if speaking into a headset that would've been linked to Rashid.

Meanwhile, Rashid used a high decorative concrete barrier on the side of the outhouse to reach the roof from a low dumpster. Once up top, he rolled flat and pulled the cello case in close to him. He had a two-foot-high clearance behind the raised stone ledge which, with its floral decorations, provided gaps in his cover perfect for threading the REPR suppressor through. He would be able to pivot his aim while keeping the bipod unfolded and the suppressed muzzle threaded, reducing visibility. A high tree whose canopy hung partially over the outhouse's roof provided additional shadow cover but was too far from the ledge to offer an easier way down.

Otherwise, he'd had used it to get up in the first place.

Range from where he resided on the rooftop in a prone position to where the target Greyhound was—hopefully—going to be parked: ninety feet.

Once Rashid had unpacked his DPMS Panther Arms-manufactured REPR, he scooted the case two feet aside and set his two backup magazines within easy reach. He pulled a plain black bandanna around the lower half of his face, from the bridge of his nose down to drape over his collarbone. He adjusted himself to his sight, lens cap freed, but kept the muzzle-bound lasersight deactivated.

“And now,” he murmured to himself, taking a deep breath, “we play the waiting game...Mark’s favorite.”

A few seconds later and Mark’s skin was tingling with anticipation.

“Fucking hate this part,” he sighed, shaking his head, back to the stone wall of the outhouse. To his far right was an open expanse between the two outhouses, and up about ten feet there was another undercover DEA operative with enough firepower to do the mission himself. He certainly had the vantage point for it, however, Mark knew this wasn’t entirely the case—they needed someone on the ground, for sure, to confirm the neutralization of all hostiles inside the target vehicle before they bailed.

Enter Mark and his G36C.

Additional armaments were present, but he doubted he would need them tonight. Part of him wished it wouldn’t come to that, but just as ludicrously the other part hoped that it might.

They waited for some seven minutes before the best news of the night rolled into view of Rashid’s night-vision eye from the main road. A single Greyhound bus with its argent sides ever so gently glowing under the passing streetlamps, but with windows blacker than the night beyond their radii.

“That’s it, shit, that’s them,” Rashid muttered under his breath, spotting the right plates and rooftop identification. He rolled onto his left side, scooped out his phone, and swiftly texted Mark.

Mark’s phone vibrated gently in his hand.

He wouldn’t pocket it until he was absolutely sure the mission was initiated and confirmed by their eyes-up-top—



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Rashid.

One new text message, from Rashid, and it read clearer than the voice in Mark's head.

*Vessel confirmed*, said the text. *Release the Kraken*.

Mark smirked briefly and pocketed the phone, then zipped it shut to seal anything from falling out later. He didn't need to respond to Rashid, because his presence below him in a few seconds would be confirmation enough.

Meanwhile, Rashid texted a more proper confirmation to the Chief, also from which he would not receive a response.

And then it was game time.

Kickoff. Green lights. Gunshot at the start.

Blood at the finish, but not theirs.

The Greyhound crept to a stop where it ought to, parking somewhat parallel to the other cars in the regular lot, except with its frontend more perpendicular to theirs and facing the main road. This meant that its rear end faced the outhouses, giving Rashid less visibility than he'd hoped for. Had the driver backed into the spot, Rashid would've been happier.

Rashid, and Mark, were more content when the door pulled open and only one man staggered out. It was clearly the driver, although even he was packing. Rashid took note of the barely hidden shoulder holster, whereupon a chrome-finish handgun rested.

"You guys are not very inconspicuous, eh?" Rashid whispered so quietly it might as well had been an inner thought.

The driver stretched and clumsily walked his way toward the outhouse, coincidentally the one upon which Rashid was lying. Not once did he notice anything, as the middle-aged and somewhat ungainly man never really diverted his gaze from the restroom door.

Nature was calling, but auspiciously just for him.

Auspiciously, that is, against him. Because as soon as the restroom door shut behind him, Mark dashed out from behind the outhouse he used as cover and—knees bent—shuffled onto the pavement. At least this way, the bad guys inside the

Greyhound would never see him coming.

The worst one might do is glimpse his approach through one of the bus's ample side-view mirrors, and from there all hell might break loose.

But apparently the goombas inside were too busy with each other, if not reclining for a good hour's sleep. Perhaps less by a little or a lot, depending on their plan and the driver's mindset. Not to mention his bowels.

Given, Mark and Rashid planned on cutting the bad guys' siesta short by a landslide.

Rashid, squinting through the NV-enhanced telescopic sight atop his rifle, tracked Mark's movement toward the bus. He hugged its right side, so close to the point where his elbow gently rubbed the panels beneath the windows. When he reached the door, he paused for a breath. A hundred conflicting thoughts crashed through his head; they all had the same fragmented concept: what if, by some horrible miracle, this bus wasn't the one carrying their targets? Mark would be entering and opening fire on what, a bunch of elderly or businessmen or even families?

He would have to enter gingerly, but swiftly, and make meticulous visible confirmation on his targets. A particular Nicolai and Zayas, while simultaneously making sure that only criminals were present.

Mark felt an ounce or two of sympathy for these crime bosses' families, more or less innocent bystanders in the mess of it all. Undoubtedly spoiled children and trophy wives, the youngest of the prior genuinely incapable of escaping to form their own lives.

A deep breath transitioned Mark's focus to ground zero.

His right hand tightened around the foregrip under the G36C's muzzle, and his left index finger hovered by the trigger. The compact assault rifle's skeletal buttstock was practically buried in his left shoulder. His chest heaved patiently, avidly, only slightly nervously. He's done 'this' a thousand times before—just very seldom with so many counter-factors.

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His three-hole balaclava was stifling, but he had his game face on and the zone swallowed him up.

The instant before Mark prepared to dip inside the bus, whose door remained open but none of the windows, he turned on his heel to look around. To the far right of the bus were two civilian cars a good distance away, packed with sleeping families. Beyond them by at least a hundred feet were the eighteen-wheelers existing as if in a separate dimension.

And then Rashid's eye caught movement.

Mark's ear tuned in to a minutely creaking bus chassis. Scuffing footfalls. He pirouetted to face the Greyhound's open-door step-down entrance not five feet from him. A tall, ungainly man with slicked-back jet-black hair and round cheeks donning a full, albeit disheveled suit, stepped outside. His loafers tapped the asphalt and his mouth flew open in shock when he spotted Mark, eyes wide, thoughts abound but no time to scream or utter a single word.

Mark glimpsed a red dot appear between his eyes.

Rashid put a .308 Winchester round into the man's forehead, which exited the back of his skull with a spray of blood and brain matter on the retracted door. The window there splintered from the exited bullet, but didn't shatter, garnering only the attention from a groggy crowd inside the Greyhound.

The suppressor on Rashid's REPR had barely even sneezed a sound.

Mark acted fast, though, as he had to. The man's corpse had since slumped to the ground, making for an omen that Mark had to step over and into the bus, rising up three steel steps. His G36C was prepped, his mind and blood racing, just the way he liked things.

He sprang up from behind the first seat, visible to the row-upon-row of what appeared to be a full house.

Italian and Hispanic crime bosses and smugglers with stereotypes up the ass and mismatched luxury abound. The shock swept every face that either had been awake or was now stirred conscious, and many were already drawing sidearms from

inside their coats. Profanity was slung around in three different languages, and within three seconds of exposing himself Mark added lead to the mix with a dash of gunsmoke.

He'd made sure.

This would be a bloodbath.

Mark opened fire before a single one of them could squeeze their trigger. The suppressed G36C spat a hushed muzzle flash every five shots, reports no louder than muted white noise. Ten-round 'bursts' of 5.56mm ammunition streaked the rows of seating, eighty percent of Mark's kills resultant from headshots. Three of these extended spurts later came the clacking sound of the weapon's firing bolt locking back. Mark ejected the magazine and spun it around to reload faster than one of the few survivors had expected, who rose from behind a seat to fire his Beretta.

He got as far as locking his elbow and acquiring aim.

Mark didn't flinch, cringe, or bat an eyelash. He snapped the firing lever and squeezed his trigger in the same motion, mowing down the potential shooter with a burst to the face. His black hair became a plume of crimson and his brains hit the ceiling. The man toppled backwards, Beretta on the floor. Another survivor, clearly wounded by the sounds he cravenly made, actually tried escaping through a window. He popped it open without getting shot but only got so far as sticking an arm out before Mark put a few rounds in his neck and cheek. Gore splashed the closed windows on either side of him, the black leather seating, and of course that damn fine but now ruined suit.

Mark took the final step and tiptoed for better view. The crown of his balaclava was inches from grazing the ceiling. All that he could see were dead bodies and blood splatters and gun holes pocking seats and corpses.

A nod later left him partially confirmed on the takedown.

Now he just needed full-fledged, absolute, without-a-doubt confirmation. So, he first emptied his second magazine into the rows of seats before setting down the G36C beside the driver's chair and drew both suppressed Kimber pistols. He

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slowly began walking down the aisle, stepping over bodies when he needed to. If a corpse didn't have a hole somehow about his head, no matter how motionless or seemingly lifeless they were, he'd put a single .45 round to their temple for finality.

A shell casing here, a shell casing there.

More blood pooling on the floor or dripping off the edge of a seat.

Mark was toward the back of the bus when the chassis creaked ever so quietly and a hushed breath caught his acute ears. He ducked and threw himself back into a seat before a loud shot rang off inside the bus and shattered a window now above his head. Glass sprinkled across his chest and he was glaring up at Nicolai from across the aisle. The man had a gunshot wound to the chest, right side, leaking blood and energy seeing as how his cadence was jacked. His face looked wrought of dismay and pain and utter rage, however, his aim was off and his balance shot.

A 5.56mm jacketed round to the chest would do that, even to the built man that Nicolai was. His white button-down was stained with blood and his tie loose from the neck.

There was nothing fancy or professional about him, though, and Mark reassured himself of this.

"You're unbecoming," Mark muttered, and in the three seconds stretched out between them he took the shots before Nicolai could readjust his aim. The two suppressed Kimber 1911's spat one round each that, together, took a chunk out of his jugular. Mark knew there were other ways of identifying the man by the Department, but he didn't want things to get...*too* messy.

"And, now we got awareness," Rashid sighed, surveying the area after the gunshot inside the bus. He didn't have to hope Mark was okay—he believed he'd taken care of it. Or else he'd be hearing follow-up double-taps from whatever bad guy inside fired the first shot. It was a pistol, he recognized as much, nothing higher caliber than a 9mm.

But in this silence that was more than enough...

Cabin lights came on inside the civilian cars in the area, though the eighteen-wheelers remained undisturbed.

Rashid heard a door open and footfalls rush out of the restroom below him. He waited until the now-wielding driver had reached the side of the bus before he fired. One round capped him in the crown, killing the toupee and its flooring, pitting the man into the asphalt. His pistol clattered innocuously out of reach, as if he'd ever need it again.

A deep breath later and Rashid removed his eye from the scope. He hard blinked three times before resuming position and was just in time to spot Mark exit the bus in a hurry, roadie-running back toward the restroom. By this time two of the three proximate civilian vehicles had already peeled out of the parking lot. The third's cabin light went dark and so did their presence.

"Good coverage," Mark muttered to himself as he darted around the slain driver.

He reached the brick outhouse behind which was located his case, then quickly began getting ready to bounce. By the time his gear—including the unused Kel-Tec and even Desert Eagle, was in the case—a bandanna-masked Rashid was on his feet and approaching.

"Send the text as soon as the doors are shut," Mark said quietly, panting, closing the case and putting its handle between his fingers. Rashid trailed him four seconds and together they stowed their arsenal in the trunk.

Mark was last inside, first to hit the gas.

The Firebird careened out of the parking lot, Rashid sending the necessary text while the stifling feeling of their masks remained until they were back on the expressway.

Mark took a huge alleviating breath and leaned back, grinning ear-to-ear.

"Now *that's* what I call a takedown!" Rashid howled. They clapped hands in victory and hooted warcries. As the Firebird took its name to the late-night asphalt the two partners cackled like hyenas after a well-deserved meal.

Rashid demanded details on Mark's encounter within the

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bus, to which promises were made for a later time.

Pumped and tired rolled into one, Rashid was first to kick the volume high and let the car's subwoofer carry them home.

They would definitely sleep well tonight.

Like babies high on gunfights.

# 5

Four days had passed since their bus-bust, as Rashid came to call it. Their reward from the Chief was direct, though not face-to-face, but as close as they could ever be. And it had been more than a bagful worth of compensation for their efforts. Since then, two other takedowns were accomplished between Mark and Rashid. In comparison to the bus-bust, they were walks in the park. Pieces of a cake best served cold and hard. They've enjoyed multi-hour reprieves composed of extensive sleeping and quality escorts.

It was Mark this time who answered the emergency line. The phone, he was cleaning a rifle when the ring came. When he picked it up, he was caught unsuspecting.

Gary's voice was stressed, to say the least. A ranting rage, the likes of which Mark—though it'd been a while since exchanging dialogue with the man—had never heard from him before. Gary and Sergio were Mark and Rashid's Northern counterparts in this great state of decadence that was California. While not quite as active as Mark and Rashid, their No-Cal "brethren" were nothing short of ruthless in their efforts. And their achievements, just as undying. With Gary's experience this side of the law and Sergio's on the other, as well as their yin-yang balance of insanity, they were quite effective.

And now this...



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Seldom has Mark literally ‘dropped what he’s doing’ in lieu of bad news or an urgent matter. However, as Gary’s husky voice chopped through the secure telephone line, Mark was rushing to grab Rashid’s attention. He was finishing up with a black-haired pale-skinned escort while Mark had Gary on the line, and didn’t get to him until after she left. By this time Mark and Gary finished their discourse, which was mostly one-sided, although Mark’s solemn responses helped comfort his No-Cal friend.

Friend. Gary and Sergio were the closest things to friends that either Mark or Rashid had outside of themselves.

And friends help friends, always. Especially in this case.

“I hope she was the best damn lay you’ve ever had,” Mark said after the woman was gone. He brandished the cellular. “‘Cause *this* shit—it’s for *real*, and it sucks like a Dyson on crack.”

“That’s a powerful simile, and I respect everything you just said, but...she was alright.” Rashid smirked and shrugged.

“Buckle the fuck down, Rashid. I’m serious.”

“Jesus, Mark. Don’t bite me. What’s going on?”

“Put some clothes on, meet me on the back porch.”

“I’m there.” Rashid rushed to get dressed more appropriately, while Mark returned to reassemble his weapon and put it up. Ultimately he and Rashid met up on the back porch, Mark leaning forward with his bare forearms on the railing. He was handling his cellphone in both hands, dangling over the porch, when Rashid approached.

“You ready for this clusterfuck?”

“Hit me, man.”

Mark sighed. “Gary called. No-Cal Gary. We haven’t heard from him in so many months, seemed good at first that we’d catch up. But he’s alone. And the ire in his voice, man...”

“Wait, wait, wait—what you *mean*, he’s *alone*?”

“Sergio’s been nabbed. Gary’s followed up on it, covertly, kept in the shadows. He says the perpetrators are some “quality scumbags,” his words, and it must’ve happened last

night during their individual outings. Gary discovered where they're holding him, undoubtedly swapping between torture and indecision on posting ransom, even if it's just for luring us into the open. Given, we don't know what *they* know, about Sergio—about us, if anything at all, but as it stands shit's sharp-edged. Now, Gary phoned us because he knows he can't take these assholes by himself, they've got a legit hideout and manpower convoy-strong. So, even with the three of us, it'd be a time and a half more challenging than the hardest takedown we've ever faced."

The look on Rashid's face nearly matched Mark's.

Disgust, anger, and all of their kin.

"Gary also mentioned something else, as he already contacted the Department on the matter." Mark sighed. "The Chief won't authorize an infiltration operation to retrieve Sergio for two reasons: apparently ATF has a faceless undercover that has possibly been compromised in these criminals' ranks—and, two: "we don't fucking exist, remember!?" Gary's words, but as you can tell, I'm in solid fucking agreement."

In the quoting of Gary's line from earlier on the phone, Mark acted out a fraction of his rage just then.

"Yeah, I can tell—and my blood's on fire beneath my skin, you know I'm down." Rashid looked it. His face was austere, his body language unyielding despite being kindled for something worse.

"And you don't even gotta ask me."

"Have we got the slightest plan?"

"Yes and no," Mark said with unease. He straightened himself out and pocketed the phone. His hand gestures were to keep him from going off the railing as he spoke. The fury was present, the gravity palpable in the air that he breathed. "Knowing where they're indubitably keeping Sergio, Gary figures we stake it out and wait for hopeful relocation. The place is a fortress, but he says there are vehicles coming and going all the time. *He* reckons they'll try to move him elsewhere, just as possibly a way to lure Sergio's cohorts into the open."

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“Us.”

“Yeah, well, what the fuck else are we gonna do at this point? Hell, I say we go for it. Load up for World War Three and assemble with Gary at his place. He said he’s been keeping tabs on this place of theirs, less than an hour from where he and Sergio stay. A little less secluded than us, ya know, but the hideout of the bad guys—smack dab downtown.”

“Shit...” Rashid shook his head, kneading his chin. “This is bad news, Mark, bad fucking news. Doesn’t sound like there’s many directions this thing can go.”

“Just down. Hard.”

“For them or for us.”

“Yeah,” Mark said fervently, “and even harder for Sergio, the poor crazy bastard.”

“I guess he’s lucky there’s a similar ember of insanity in each of us.”

“Right on. So, we’re doing this?”

“No need to ask, man, I just need to know when.”

“At this rate, ‘now’ is probably the best option.”

“Let’s do it, then. Full arsenal?”

Mark shrugged, forcing a lopsided smirk. “No such thing as too much.”

“And masks,” Rashid made the point.

“Yeah, even if the relocation happens at night, which I doubt—supposing they really wanna guard their asses, call our bluff on attacking during daylight—we’re gonna need covers. Especially in lieu of civilian traffic down there.”

“And, besides,” Rashid clapped his hands together, “three dudes overkilling it with masks oughtta look more imposing than those without.”

“A good point, Rashid, you make a damn good point.”

“I’ll get ‘em, you start on the arsenal.”

“Alright. I’ll phone Gary back to give him confirmation.”

“Say Rashid gives him full reassurance.”

“He ain’t exactly a man for condolences, but I suppose in light of the circumstances he’ll take it to heart.”

Rashid nodded, Mark replied similarly, and they split up. Mark called Gary back en route to the Vault while Rashid gathered a few masks.

Rashid kept to the basics, more or less.

Bandannas were brought just for the sake of it, however, their real interest weighed in with the '80s hockey masks. Each of them were evenly padded on the inside, with secure head straps and reinforced construction. They could take small arms fire to the cheeks and forehead, but no more than a couple of rounds.

Rashid preferred the Mike Liut St. Louis mask that covered his face well, and according to Mark, was a perfect fit for his "Sputnik head." As for Mark, he favored Pelle Lindbergh's first mask from Philadelphia. Unlike Rashid's glossy black and red mask coloration, Mark's was a canvas matte finish with a tattered off-white look.

Both were equally menacing, although Mark's made him look more like a serial killer and Rashid's closer to an actual goalie.

Nonetheless, together they were unidentifiable.

Meanwhile, Mark finished with Gary on the phone. He had placated a bit, mostly thanks to Mark and Rashid's eager compliance to join forces with him up North. Their plan, as Mark had put it, was more-or-less. It was flawed, whimsical, and subject to fickle change. It was as good as they were going to get, and just as bad as they could cope with to make things work somehow or another.

Ultimately it was very 'them.'

After ending the call with Gary, Mark proceeded to pack their arsenal as an extensive carryout via cello and briefcases. Bianchi shoulder holsters on the double, bandoliers, slings and BDU belts and Kevlar vests, oh my! Part of Mark felt like a fat kid at a buffet line, avid and bloodthirsty for action. The other part felt anxiety and unease—this was unlike anything he or Rashid had ever faced before. They've been in the middle of thick situations that might be distantly compared, but that was it.

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They knew of Gary's past, and that he was pretty adept in this situation. His personal ties to Sergio, however, them being partners for so long and having each other's backs for years on end, exacerbated his situation.

At any rate, the three of them could help balance each other out.

Mark saw it this way, felt it reasonable.

And with all of that tucked away under his skin and buried in his heart, he put his utmost focus into his selections. His, and Rashid's, loadout.

Mark knew his arsenal right off the bat, no hesitation, so he gathered them first. In a black briefcase he put his favored pair of stainless steel .44-caliber Desert Eagles, a Kel-Tec PLR-16 sub-machinegun, and supplementary preloaded magazines. He shut the lid, locked the clasps, and set it aside. It had a small chrome 'M' at its center; the monogram was simple in differentiating their weapons cases in moments like these. Another briefcase sat to the side with a similar 'R' at its center, for Rashid.

All of their cases were complete with padded foam interiors that molded to the weapons put in them, prohibiting movement once the lids were shut.

As for Mark's black felt cello case, the larger weapons were stowed. An H&K G36C with jungle-style double-magazines went first, which he fixed a reflex sight to its Picatinny rail. Knowing Gary, this wasn't going to be a silent mission—even if they did things at dark. Besides, they *wanted* the assholes to know they were coming—full force, no holds barred, jaws agape and muscles flexing.

They were going in loud.

So Mark didn't pack any suppressors. Better this way, more space.

Along with the G36C and its additional magazines went a sawed-off Zebala shotgun, chambered for 12-gauge buckshot. The side-by-side double-barrel configuration and wooden dovetail stock made it an instant favorite for vintage fighters,

including its break-open box-lock action, and Mark knew that was Sergio's style. He hoped that after they rescued him—and they would, he reassured himself—he could hand Sergio the Zebala as a sort of accolade.

And Sergio would grin diabolically, maniacally.

Mark and Rashid knew Sergio for half the time that Gary has, but that still put them at a count of years. The bond of loyalty between the two pairs of undercover DEA agents was as strong as they got before creating a blood pact; they didn't need to do this, as it was somehow or another already set in stone. Their actions, their faith to the law no matter how violent they act or what kind of past they come from, was what made them the men they've become.

And nobody could take that away.

Mark was more than confident believing that Sergio knew this, too, at the very least thinking Gary would try getting him back. How Gary even found out where the bastards were keeping him to begin with, he thought, slightly baffled him. But only slightly. Afterall, Gary's ex-Green Beret and SWAT, if Mark remembered correctly.

He envisioned the bad guys having Sergio bound to a chair in some rank warehouse or holding cell with a guy as big as Gary and a hundred times uglier pummeling him with cold hard fists. Just the same, he envisioned Sergio grinning ear-to-ear in between blows with bloodshot eyes and crimson-outlined teeth, those that remained, beaming through the sweat and pain of a face-turned-punching-bag.

Mark believed Gary pictured a similar thing, too, and that the both of them were not far off.

"We're coming for you, Sergio," Mark heard him mumble as if from a distance, as he finalized his loadout. "We're coming."

He finished securing his briefcase and cello case before moving onto Rashid's. As he began, moving like a machine on the assembly line, Rashid entered the Vault wearing urban-camouflage cargo shorts that ended six inches from his ankles

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and a black fitted T-shirt. Looped around his neck for quick application was a plain black folded bandanna, its pointed end crumpled over his upper chest.

“How’s it coming along?” Rashid asked.

“Solid. Looks like you’re on point. Got the masks?”

“Yeah, they’re already in the car, under our seats.”

“Nice. Which ones?”

“Me – Liut, you – Lindbergh.”

“Awesome,” Mark said without looking up, focused on preparing Rashid’s loadout. “Assuming you trust me with your ordnance, might I suggest you go ahead ‘n’ take those two cases out to the car?”

“*In* the trunk, will do,” Rashid said, scooping up both cases by their handles. As he began to turn around, Mark’s voice halted his steps.

“Actually,” he said with a minute pause, “put ‘em in the backseat.”

Rashid tentatively nodded. “Right on.”

As Rashid exited, Mark swiftly finished with his partner’s briefcase. A black Desert Eagle XIX chambered for .50-caliber AE rounds and a lasersight on the Picatinny rail. A couple of magazines to go along with it. Last in the case were spare magazines for a sight to behold by anyone outside of Mark and Rashid, although even they are all grins when glimpsing it. Mark preferred his Kimbers even with these things available, but Rashid’s quite the opposite. The pair of double-barrel .45 ACP pistols look like Siamese-twin M1911s, seeing as how that’s pretty much what they were. Manufactured by Arsenal Firearms, the AF2011-A1 DBP was just that—with a combined capacity of sixteen .45 rounds per pistol and dual triggers. This pair happened to be black steel with diamondback hyena brown grips.

With the briefcase loaded up, he shut the lid and pushed it to the side. By the time he had the mahogany cello case agape before him, Rashid reentered the Vault. He scooped up the briefcase and admired its weight.

“I put your two DBP’s in there, with the D-Eagle.”

“You’re so kind, Mark.”

“Merry fucking Christmas.”

Rashid smirked and left the Vault with the briefcase in his hand. He strutted far too buoyantly, Mark mused.

To finish up Rashid’s loadout in the cello case were his choice shotgun and assault rifle. A custom black Benelli M4 featured a foregrip, perforated stock, and pistol grip. He threw in a box of 12-gauge buckshot shells after loading up the Benelli’s tubular magazine. Rashid was unnaturally fond of the Colt CM901 assault rifle, even with its bland sandy coloration, but only if it was fitted with an ACOG telescopic sight. So Mark fastened an ACOG scope to the CM901’s top rail, and threw in a few additional magazines.

With Rashid’s cello case secured, Mark got to his feet.

He took a deep breath and realized the full gravity of what they were preparing to do.

Then he remembered the *who* of the equation, and the *why*, factors that calmed the blood in his veins.

A subtle invigoration stemmed from his heart.

“We good to go?” Rashid asked as he strode into the Vault.

“Yes, sir. Just get your shoulder holsters and BDU rigs on, at least to carry in the car. Strap your knives, ‘n’ what have you.”

“What if we get stopped?”

“This is some heavy shit, and we ain’t risking any kind of hiccups.” Mark, donning his empty shoulder holster and BDU rig, slowly walked past Rashid toward the door. “I’m bringing my shield.”

Rashid’s eyes went wide.

They were official, authorized DEA agents on some board or another. They both had their issued pieces—Glocks which they seldom used—and, of course, badges. Their stainless steel shields in leather flip-cases. They were prohibited from wearing them in the field in order to authenticate their



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undercover status and reduce likelihood of their cover being blown. But today, today was *it*—and Rashid knew Mark was right. So they'd put their official DEA tags on the Firebird, wear their badges on short ball-chain necklaces, and violate every speed limit sign from here to Gary's place in No-Cal.

This was it, indeed.

# 6

Gary was waiting for Mark and Rashid after receiving a text from them indicating their ETA. He was decked out, ready to go, skin crawling with anticipation. He was restless, unlike they'd ever seen him before, but still wearing that stone-cold calm that was a Gary trademark. More to Gary's archetype was his loadout upon their arrival. He wore a deep gray fitted T-shirt and Bianchi shoulder holsters, with black cargo field pants and combat boots. In his holsters were his trustworthy Taurus Raging Bulls, twin stainless steel .44 Magnum models. Slung was a Kel-Tec KSG shotgun, and leaning against the sofa behind him was an XM8 LMG, complete with bipod and Beta C-Mag. To round off Gary's ordnance like the proverbial cherry-on-top was his thigh-rigged CRKT Saber Bowie knife.

From top to bottom, Gary was ready.

After they shook hands and gave firm pats-on-the back all around, Gary introduced them to the vehicle he figured apt for this operation. While all eyes were on his and Sergio's fierce El Camino, they agreed with Gary when he suggested something with greater capacity and versatility. Basically, a meaner version of the El Camino that could take a beating and not sacrifice its style in the process. Enter the Nissan Titan King Cab PRO-4X, full black with chrome badges on the tailgate and side doors.

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Notable features were chrome step rails, a raised suspension, monstrous off-road tires, and 22-inch black Ballistic Jester rims with chrome bolts. The truck was flashy, but dominant from brush-guard to taillight.

"I don't mean to ridicule your judgment, Gary," Rashid said, "but ain't this a bit...much? I mean, we're going *downtown*—not rock-crawling."

Gary abruptly stopped walking around the truck, having been giving them a sort of casual tour of admiration. He turned on his heel and approached Rashid, who stood still and regretful, stopping just inches from his face.

"Think about what you just said, Rashid. I mean...*really*." Gary's eyes squinted slightly, his voice husky as ever. He took a few steps back, sized up Rashid, then Mark, then himself. "I don't think any of us really have the right to dismiss something because of its exorbitance."

Rashid ultimately nodded, then shrugged.

"Well, when you're right you're damn right," he finally said. "Not that I don't agree with you on some scale, ya know? Besides, this'll be perfect for riding up on the sons-o'-bitches."

"I figured you'd appreciate at least that."

"At least," Mark said, clicking his tongue. "I think she's a fucking monster. This is perfect. And that bed...say, Gary, are you not telling us something?"

Gary shrugged. "I'll put it this way—I've got some ideas up my sleeves."

"What about tricks?" Rashid asked.

"That's why I called you two over. We're gonna take care of this shit-show once and for all. Those motherfuckers ain't gonna know what hit 'em."

"Right on, brother," Mark said, bumping fists with the man who was nearly twice his size.

"How're you on your angry face?" Rashid asked.

Gary cocked an eyebrow.

Mark smirked. "That's what Rashid calls masking it up, sometimes. We got our 'angry faces' in the Firebird. Figured we

bring ‘em with, wear ‘em when shit gets heavy.”

“Right. As it definitely will.” Gary nodded. “Well, I know it’s been awhile since we’ve had a reunion, but Sergio and I aren’t so different from y’all. Sergio, at least, always been a man for masks. Fucking weirdo, ya know, but when the going got tough as it frequently did, he’d always pull through.”

“No different from today, my man,” Rashid said.

Gary nodded, mum.

“So whaddya got, just a bandanna?” Mark asked.

“Yeah. I like to keep it simple.”

“Says the guy toting a fucking Kel-Tec KSG and XM8 machinegun,” Rashid chuckled.

“Yeah, well, you haven’t seen yet what I’ve got waiting for me in the backseat.” Gary patted the passenger’s side door behind the driver’s.

“What’d that be?” Mark asked curiously.

“Rossi Overland,” Gary said simply, and already Mark was whistling under his breath. Rashid appeared a bit slow to the talk until Gary ardently elaborated. “Two twenty-inch side-by-side barrels calibrated for ten-gauge shells, and I happen to have a torso bandolier ready with slugs that could put down a moose from twenty yards.”

Now Rashid whistled, more than impressed.

“And, might I add,” Gary said, “something with greater range. Figured I’d bring it...just in case. Can never be too careful, especially in situations like these.”

“CheyTac?” Mark raised a brow.

“Let’s be...a *little more* reasonable.”

Mark let out a curt laugh.

“Barrett?” Rashid asked in the guise of a statement.

“Oh yeah.” Gary looked like he could kill a moose with his bare hands just then.

“Fifty-cal?” Mark asked.

“No, not the M82A1. Think smaller.”

“It’s a fucking Barrett, there’s no such thing as ‘small,’” Rashid said.

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A loose smirk escaped Gary's cold façade. "Right you are there, but let's just say it's a compact version of the M82 if we gotta throw up a comparison."

"Where is she?" Mark asked.

"In the bed, in 'er case. Fully prepped."

"May I?" Mark asked.

"No," Gary said like a concrete barrier. "I think it'd be best if we move out now, instead. Trust me, when we set up our raven's nest, you'll get to see 'er."

"Wait...*raven's nest*?" Rashid asked, taking a few steps closer. "You're saying we're gonna be...up high?"

"Three stories' height above their hideout's roof. On a building opposite theirs, across the four-lane street. It's a condemned building, ours, trust me I've already scoped it out and secured the site. Never does a single soul ever sweep a gaze its way, much less scrutinize the high roof's ledges."

"Advantageous vantage point," Mark nodded.

"You got it. For first opinions from you two, get our shit straight. Hell, I figure if we're gonna stake it out, we might as well do it from a distance but still be close."

"I dig it," Rashid said.

"And if we need to get on the ground, fast?" Mark asked.

"There's a fire escape just over the ledge, and two stories down is a ladder that drops the rest of the way—five levels total. I figure, with the right gloves and focus, we descend the fire escape and slide down that ladder to the curb, where we'll have the Titan parked."

"There's that Green Beret talking," Rashid said.

"Oh, he never left," Gary replied firmly.

"That sounds on point and everything," Mark said with a hint of uncertainty, "but what about exposure? Visibility? I mean, how're we gonna park the Titan right in front of these bastards' hideout—in *broad daylight*, no less—then hop out, looking as we do, and enter that building?"

"That's 'cause we don't."

Both Mark and Rashid cocked their eyebrows.

“Sergio’s cousin, Javier, lives in the area. This guy’s straight, but you wouldn’t believe it looking at him. He’s done time, has the ink, and that look that would make others cross the street just to avoid them.”

“Kind of like you, eh?” Mark jeered.

“So I’ve been told...from a distance.” Gary managed to get a few laughs from them before cutting to the point. “Anyway, with Javier as a faithful contact, I’ve already rolled out a plan that lets him help us and keep clean at the same time. Essentially no risk for the guy, considering his look and all.”

“Valet?” Rashid hinted.

“You got it,” Gary said. “Javier’s gonna meet us on the other side of our building, ‘round the black and outta sight, but not outta mind. We debark, taking only what we have on our person—along with my Barrett—and exchange a favor with Javier. He circles the Titan around to the front of the building, parks it directly below the fire escape, waits ‘til his wife—dressed as a hooker—approaches the truck, then is lured from it and taken around the corner.”

Mark kneaded his face. “You sure got this all figured out, man. And with Javier, his *wife*—you got deep pockets, or what?”

“Deeper than the Mariana Trench, but that’s not the catch. Javier is family to Sergio, and after everything the two of them have been through on both sides of the bars, he ain’t about to let this slip. His girl, she’s been on his arm and in his heart since high school. This shit is solid, boys, but like I told Mark on the phone—it’s still a whimsical plan, and the fan’s always spinning. So we just gotta be on our feet, eyes open, frosty and hot without a second’s hesitation.”

Mark extended his hand, and Gary shook it firmly.

“Nobody but warriors here,” Mark said. His expression, his voice, everything was austere and veracious.

“I’ve got faith in just that,” Gary said, subsequently exchanging a shake with Rashid for the second time today.

“Then let’s get to it,” Rashid said.

“Let’s.” Gary proceeded to round up his truck keys and

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cell phone, then boarded the black 4x4 Titan.

Mark took shotgun, and Rashid rode in the backseat. He had his eyes all over the Rossi Overland double-shotgun intricately mounted on the ceiling above where he sat. After being convinced from Gary that it wouldn't come loose unless pried by strong hands, Rashid started ogling at it. When he asked if he could give it a hands-on tour with fingers free from the trigger, Gary rigidly denied. Rashid didn't object.

The rest of Gary's sizeable arsenal was transferred to the backseat as well, kept to the opposite side of where Rashid sat. As for Mark and Rashid's cases, they were secured in the bed alongside Gary's contained Barrett.

The contents of the Titan's engine compartment were equally intimidating. A 5.6-liter V8 pushed upwards of 340 horsepower. All of this and more came into play when Gary tore out of the driveway and set fire to the asphalt. He recklessly and not to mention impatiently hopped the curb on two occasions in less than ten minutes from setting out. Both occurrences might as well have gone unnoticed by them as the truck's superior suspension and tires made it seem like nothing.

Sure, Rashid had been right earlier—the truck was a touch gratuitous, but ultimately it was most apt for them. It provided copious capacity, comfort, rigidity, and a ruthless appeal that carried over into its performance.

It became their chariot to their destination.

The hell that was downtown Vallejo, California.

An otherwise alright place to be, but on this sunny midday it could be prone to a wave of chaos should the events unfold that way. And, if they were to, the three undercover DEA agents were more than adept to handle it.

In most cases, the three of them operated best when under stress. In the wake of turbulence and disarray, their proficiencies dabbled around in steroids and PCP to boost their efficacy. Tunnel vision was activated with the right peripherals not omitted. Trigger fingers became the only ones they had and volatility walked hand-in-hand with control.

Patience, however, was a trait they all needed some work on. And it started now, during the forty-minute drive south to their destination.

From there, more patience would be required.

They could only play it as it transpired, and hope that Sergio still breathed and could walk on his own.

Hope that they wouldn't be in over their heads.

Arriving in Vallejo lent them distant sky-blue horizons quilting deep green mountain ranges and the spires of the Alfred Zampa Memorial Bridge crossing the Carquinez Strait. This landmark wouldn't be so far from their target building, the gapped sandwich of concrete soon to be them and their enemy. And their taken comrade, partner, friend.

After they reached the condemned building that was seven levels up of bland walls frequently riddled with graffiti, it was a quick exchange between them and Javier. The man was a couple of years younger than Sergio, was difficult to recognize any resemblance seeing as how they were cousins, except of course their ethnicity. Javier's hair was black and slicked back, with a jagged goatee that ended in an upturned triangle on an aptly slender face. High cheekbones, bony brow, dense brown eyes, teardrop tattoos and black ink on his hands. He wore a matte black T-shirt that exposed arms also mottled in tattoos, and baggy jeans to complete the getup. His build was average, and he was considerably short.

Javier's voice spoke strong, and the loyalty was more than evident amongst them.

After the exchange behind the condemned building and out of sight from their enemy's hideout, the three proceeded with their plan. They entered the condemned building from a rear access door that had been boarded up but was since missing two key panels that provided a ducking entrance. As they disappeared into the shadowy confines of the desolate structure, quickly moving to the squalid stairwell, Javier slowly departed in the Titan.



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Slung to Gary's back was his compact rifle.

It was a black Barrett M98B, ready for action. It featured a fluted compensator, perforated receiver, adjustable bipod, ten-round detachable magazine, and a 10x variable telescopic sight.

At 3.5-feet-long and just under thirteen pounds, the M98B was a perfect fit for any soldier. In this case, it was ideal as a compact long-range rifle for the ex-soldier and perpetual badass that was Gary. It would also be a prime fit for Mark and Rashid, the prior of whom found himself salivating over it as Gary set it up on the rooftop.

They were three stories higher than the top level of the enemy's hideout, which had a similarly flat layout except with more ventilation exhausts and A/C units. The building itself, the hideout that is, was longer than theirs and nearly twice as wide. It appeared to be some kind of warehouse with the disguise of a huge restaurant. Out front was a ten-foot-long awning that ended at the sidewalk, where two Lincoln LS sedans were parked, their V8 badges pristine against black paint. Aside from this pair of distanced vehicles, leaving enough space between them to fit two more bumper-to-bumper, no other vehicles could be seen on that side of the road for a quarter-mile.

On *their* side of the road, however...

Seven floors below them Gary's Titan King Cab PRO-4X sat on thick treaded tires at the curb. Inside loitered Sergio's cousin Javier and strutting toward him on the sidewalk was a woman with a prostitute's outfit. She was tall with long dark hair streaked maroon and caramel skin and curves in every direction. She fit the role perfectly, and played it just as convincingly, as she came up on the pickup truck.

Javier and his wife could've won a SAG award.

But they were no Oscars—not that it mattered. All they needed to be was the slightest bit convincing. Besides, the hideout's front doors and its bare rooftop were vacant of lookouts. The only people who might've been scrutinizing the area would be inside those two Lincolns, with black-tinted windows.

“And there our boy goes,” Gary muttered under his breath as Javier was ‘lured’ from the truck and onto the sidewalk. He and his woman eventually disappeared around the corner at the base of the building, circling to the back.

“Well fucking done,” Mark whispered.

“So, boys, here we are,” Gary sighed, leaning back from the rifle’s lens. All three of them were crouching behind a high ledge which they overlooked from the rooftop. Gary didn’t remove his hand from the Barrett as he spoke. “The waiting game, the “patience-is-a-virtue” card that we all hate playing. And there you have it—the place that’s holding Sergio. I ain’t gonna go into how exactly I tracked ‘em down, but don’t either of you dare ask me whether or not I’m *sure*. ‘Cause I am—Sergio is *in there*.”

“No doubt to it, my friend,” Rashid said, shaking his head and breathing out in controlled spurts. “Thing is, now we just gotta juggle time—and pray that Sergio’s still alive in there.”

“You pray, I’ll wait.”

“And I’ll watch,” Mark added.

So, they did just that. For minutes that stretched into the tens and eventually the twenties. A little over half an hour’s worth of waiting on top of that rooftop finally paid off. A commotion arose somewhere inside the hideout, so close to the front doors that they assumed a group was moving through the foyer. Gary tightened on his M98B, finger hovering by the guard while his left eye glued itself to the scope’s lens. The bipod-supported rifle pivoted briefly as Gary adjusted his aim and enhanced the zoom on his scope.

Mark and Rashid had either side of Gary, leaning forward against the high ledge in suspense, eyes squinting against the daylight to stare down. They each had only the weapons on their bodies—dual handguns in double-shoulder holsters. Directly below their position waited the truck, keys in the ignition but engine off, and encased weapons lying in the bed.

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Then their attention was firmly seized.

The double doors hidden beneath the fabric awning burst open and out rushed a throng of men. Voices could be heard distantly, while minimal traffic drove back and forth along the four-lane road separating the buildings. As their shadows neared the edge of the awning, and thus the curb, a silver SUV approached from the east. It pulled up along the curb, parking obliquely without straightening itself between the two Lincolns.

“Vehicle, vehicle!” Rashid said hurriedly.

“Not blind,” Gary mumbled. He adjusted his aim, his sight, and narrowed on the SUV. “It’s a Land Rover, an LR4. That’s gotta be it—that’s Sergio’s ride outta here.”

“And the Lincolns?” Rashid said.

“Convoy,” Mark muttered. He eagerly thumbed the safeties off his twin Desert Eagles.

“Easy, now,” Gary said under his breath, without ever deviating his gaze from the scope that was affixed to the curb now. He backed out from 10x to 4x until the throng emerged from beneath the awning and approached the LR4. Gary’s breath took a sharp turn, but his stagnancy remained. “Sergio. I see him. Middle, up front. Wait...okay, four guys total—five including our boy. Guy on the left—his right—forward, guiding him to the LR4. Guy behind Sergio, hold on...”

Mark and Rashid waited in high anticipation as Gary readjusted the scope atop his Barrett.

“Sergio’s hands are zip-tied behind his back, and one of the fuckers—the one closest behind him—has a pistol buried in his spine. Sergio’s not gagged, but he ain’t about to squeal just to get shot. He’s waiting, too, but his patience is gone and I know mine damn sure is too.”

Gary’s words began as a scrupulous observation that was composed and calm. However, it quickly escalated to something of a ferocity that gifted the other two as much as it did curse their equanimity.

“Gloves and masks on?” Gary said as he backed away from the rifle and began folding it up. He started with the bipod,

then the stock, before slinging it onto his back.

While Mark and Rashid were donning their smooth-gripped tactical leather gloves, and their respective masks, Gary secured a black bandanna to the bottom half of his face. And then his voice caught their ears as he noted a change below.

“Three...no, make that six more hostiles exiting the building. Three to each Lincoln, filing in. That’ll make four total each, I hope, including the driver.”

“Unless they got Leprechauns in the trunk,” Rashid said, “I’d say that’s a valid assumption.”

The silver Land Rover’s black-tinted windows made it impossible to identify Sergio amid the others inside. Its engine kicked up from idling to first gear as it rolled out behind the leading Lincoln. By the time the second Lincoln, taking up the rear, was in neutral, Gary was leading Mark and Rashid in overdrive down the fire escape. The damned network of weathered steel rang and clattered as they descended its two levels before reaching the ladder. Gary went first, hands-free with the Barrett securely on his back, and then Mark. Rashid was distantly afraid of heights, but he transcended it in lieu of Sergio’s fate which hung in the balance of their efficacy now. This instant. This this very capricious plan.

Just the way they liked it.

All six booted soles were on the sidewalk just as the rearward Lincoln reached second gear. Distant pedestrians gasped and conversed quietly from afar. Gary slid the Barrett into the driver’s seat in the same motion of him entering the cabin. He slammed his door shut behind him and had the V8 roaring to life while his cohorts boarded the back of the truck. They went supine as soon as they’d vaulted the sides, making for a perfect fit from head to toe. The bed was 6.5-feet-long, two deep, and 4.5 wide. It wasn’t an extra-long bed, just shy of being a square due to the bulky King Cab, but provided all the space they needed.

Rashid reached up and slid open the truck’s rear window panel, facilitating communication between Gary and them.

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They'd have to yell to be heard, but at this point that was a given.

The thunder would be rolled and belted if it meant getting Sergio back safely.

# 7

Sergio was uncomfortable, agonal, distressed, and genuinely pissed off. He had been beaten every which way, certain his nose was broken and all he could taste for the past twenty hours was that coppery bitterness of blood in his mouth. It streaked his teeth, coated his tongue and the insides of his cheeks, while a split bottom lip didn't help. He felt like a big shark in a small cage—used to the taste of blood, craving violence, but feeling entombed. Unable to react the way he wanted to, unable to bite the hand that fed him. In this case, nothing more than knuckle sandwiches.

Five other men in this godforsaken Land Rover.

One behind the wheel, he never got a good look at. Then the four who took him from inside their home-shit-home outside. Undoubtedly the same ones responsible for bagging his head and tranquilizing him last night.

Some bullshit that was, he mulled miserably.

These guys were mostly Hispanic, with some African Americans and eastern Europeans thrown into the ethnic Chex Mix. One thing they all had in common was bad suits and impressive firearms. It was like all of their funding went straight to the armory, and they paid their tailor the scraps.

Of course, with a big gun in your hands attire was the last thing in their enemies' heads.

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The first, in this case, would be their bullets.

The fact that all of these bozos were strapping shiny pistols marginally unnerved Sergio. Inside their hideout, which was a restaurant front and a soundproofed warehouse in the back, Sergio had glimpsed his fair share of greater weaponry. Military-grade shotguns, AK-47s, AR-15 carbines, MAC-10s, UMP-45s, and then the narcotics. Bricks upon bricks of cocaine bundled into palletized stacks.

This was a big-budget, high-profile operation.

All of it with a small mask and somehow or another an undisturbed continuation. Sergio couldn't help but believe there was a Department connection with these guys, if not an undercover gone bad then a rat which worked both ways. Maybe not even the DEA, but the LAPD or ATF or 'worse.' The Feds, Sergio thought with a wide third eye. Government acronyms buzzed through his head among all the other shit. CIA, NSA—but they didn't make any sense. FBI involvement alone seemed a bit too hot. He had to assume DEA or ATF, some kind of camouflaged association going on that not everybody was aware of.

Sergio sure as hell wanted in on the D-L.

But he wasn't going to get it. All he was going to get was a 9mm in the spine—now in his right gut, courtesy of the asshole sitting beside him—and death glares all around.

Now with this Land Rover on the go, escorted by two black Lincoln sedans, Sergio was losing faith in his situation. Given, from the get-go it certainly hadn't been a promising scenario. He was stripped of his heat and injected with enough sedatives to put down a pony.

They underestimated him, somewhere along the way.

Two tranqs later and he was out like a light bulb, only to be screwed back into place hours later in a warehouse god-knows-where with a black bag on his head. Then came the fists, and eventually the bag was removed, succeeded by more fists and the general questions.

"Who do you work for?" came the expected inquiry,

belted at Sergio in broken English. Even they threw acronyms at him. All of the above, everything one could think of. They even asked if he was military—Army, Marine Corps, National Guard for fuck’s sake. These guys were relentless, but spoke curtly and didn’t give much detail about why exactly they nabbed him in the first place.

He quickly began to give less and less a shit.

Less than a block away from where these assholes took him from and they boarded this Land Rover, the one on his right suddenly elbowed him in the gut. Sergio was bruised from the brow down to his waist. Fortunately they hadn’t tortured him yet, not in the traditional sense, whatever the hell that meant. Instead he’d been the receptor of a fury of fists in a variety of shapes and sizes and a few brass knuckles for the insecure wimps.

Now, as he doubled forward—which actually felt decent, considering the placement of his bound wrists—a black sack was thrown over his head. Down it dropped, and someone pulled a cord so that it tightened around his throat. Nothing nearly life-threatening, but simply to secure it.

Behind a myriad of tinted windows, except of course the windshield, they couldn’t be easily seen from pedestrians and other passersby.

“Fucking cowards!” Sergio exclaimed under his breath.

Another elbow to the gut. He coughed up what had to be blood. His eyes searched for identification outside the sack and outside the vehicle, but everything was a vague murk. There was the faded daylight which surrounded them and easily filtered through the windshield, but he sat in the furthest back seat on the left side. The bad guy on his right was heavier built than he, and had no problem keeping Sergio from getting too close to the window. That Beretta 92FS Inox wasn’t making Sergio’s life any easier, either.

Through all of this, Sergio’s faith in Gary lingered.

It was growing thin, however, still present. He breathed a constant anticipation since the first hour, no matter how



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ridiculous his odds might've seemed. As the night became day and sunlight crept lazily through soot-caked windows high up in the warehouse portion of the building, Sergio's nope never lilted.

Now was hardly any different, although it had become regrettably gossamer. Even so, his conscience fought for optimism. A trait that had always been lacking in Sergio.

This was the first time since they had brought him to their place the previous night, however, that they were taking him outside. And not just for a smoke or outdoor beatdown. This was transportation, probable relocation.

Or, they were going to say fuck it and dump him in the river. Or the ocean. Or someone's pool. Did it really matter at this rate? These guys probably had connections at a junkyard or the local landfill.

Sergio didn't know where he was, and ninety seconds without a bag over his head outside the building wasn't going to map it out for him.

He had spotted suspension bridge spires in the distance, but it was a quick and passing glimpse. It was also entirely inconclusive and unhelpful.

What immediately did become helpful, and conclusive, was the sudden gunfire Sergio heard. It wasn't occurring within the SUV, but outside, and not directly outside. Sergio reckoned at least thirty feet behind the Land Rover, if not more. The vehicles' windows were all rolled up, but automatic gunfire had its distinct sound that easily penetrated glass even from a distance and over the hum of engines. Tires screeching. Horns blaring. People screaming. And the guys in the SUV which he occupied suddenly throwing exclamatory fits in their native tongue.

Sergio didn't need to be fluent to understand.

Through all of the pain and soreness, behind the black bag engulfing his head, Sergio grinned a mouthful of blood.

Mark and Rashid were popping up from the bed of the truck to squeeze off bursts that targeted the rearward Lincoln. The black

car now swerved frantically to try covering the LR4's ass, but in all truth the shooters from the Nissan Titan weren't aiming for the SUV. They were aiming for the Lincoln, and that was that.

Gary kept it as steady as he could, dodging a few other cars that weren't intelligent enough to pull aside in the wake of their ultraviolent road rage.

Between Mark and Rashid's 5.56mm volleys of assault rifle fire, the rearward Lincoln didn't stand a chance. Its taillights were already shattered, trunk shredded, rear window blown out, and one of its inhabitants dead. Unfortunately for the masked DEA agents, that one kill hadn't been the driver.

Of course, they didn't want to risk the Lincoln inadvertently rear-ending the LR4 with Sergio in the backseat, let alone veer off onto the sidewalk. They needed to limit civilian casualties, though preferably not have any at all.

Hence the greatest challenge that this operation was.

"Taking fire!" Gary's voice roared out to them.

Two of the surviving bad guys in the fishtailing Lincoln had poked their torsos out the passenger side windows firing semiautomatic pistols. Sunlight gleamed off each piece, which Gary recognized as an M1911 and some kind of Beretta. So, one short-clip .45 and one high-capacity 9mm.

"A forty-five and a nine, left and right!" Gary followed up. He did a little evasive maneuvering of his own, tires howling on the asphalt as bullets pocked the windshield. The 9mm rounds didn't go through, but two of the .45's did. Fortunately they were all amiss, nothing close enough in front of Gary to matter.

"Hold 'er steady!" Mark, who had the right side of the bed, yelled out. He waited two seconds as Gary realigned the truck on the road, then he popped up and—shouldering the G36C—fired over the truck's cabin. Spent casings were ejected on the right side, spilling out onto the road. Bullets pattered the enemy Lincoln's rooftop, one burst catching a gunman in his throat. Blood streaked the roof and road alike as his M1911 dropped to the asphalt. His upper body lolled outside of the car,

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but his legs kept him weighted inside.

And then the Beretta-wielding man withdrew into the car, probably to reload. Mark paused shooting for a nanosecond as he realigned his aim to the glassless rear window. He spotted the man duck down and fired away. Another second later and the man Mark had just killed was pushed out of the door window through which he hung. His body dropped to the asphalt and rolled, but Gary was unable to evade it in time. The Titan's big tires around 22-inch wheels drove right over the corpse as if it were no more than a high curb, chassis easily readjusting.

"Ten points!" Rashid howled.

Mark chortled as he emptied his magazine into the Lincoln's rear window, getting a kill with his final shot. The driver's head suddenly plunged forward, into the steering wheel, and the horn went off. The man in the backseat could hardly be heard screaming as the Lincoln careened into a parked van, crashing at thirty miles-per-hour. His body was flung from the backseat toward the front, breaking a shoulder on his way between seats and cracking his head open on the dashboard.

Glass rained down and the sedan's front end was left crunched accordion-style.

"Twenty points, motherfuckers," Mark panted. He dipped back down behind the King Cab and reloaded his G36C. He then set it down and popped open his already unlocked cello case. His hands seized the Kel-Tec PLR-16, fingers prepping it for combat.

Meanwhile, Rashid had risen to shoulder his Colt CM901, peering down its stock iron sights to put a bead on the remaining Lincoln LS. The four-door luxury car was packing a V8 and a reckless criminal driver to boot, complemented by three insane gunmen. The car had dropped back to cover the LR4's rear, which proceeded forward at an alarming speed. It began slaloming between cars, those few that remained on the road in lieu of the violence being conducted behind them.

Gary pondered if these assholes had ties in the local PD—maybe they had an open window on the roads, but

probably no more than thirty minutes' time. In this case, it was going to work against them in a way.

Gary and his guys couldn't be dealing with cops at the moment. The only cops they dared to trust or fare with at the moment were, twistedly so, themselves.

"Target vehicle's gaining some distance, fellas!" Gary shouted.

"Yeah, yeah, I see that!" Rashid barked back just before firing two quick bursts into the Lincoln's rear. Its back window blew out and a man inside screamed painfully, his voice shrill. Suddenly a gunman popped up from the sunroof like a diabolical jack-in-the-box, wielding a Heckler & Koch UMP-45. The potent SMG belted a single .45 ACP round every two seconds. It was a considerably slow-firing automatic weapon, but considering but its 25-round magazine and power, the thing wasn't to be taken loosely.

Rashid responded rightfully so. He fired a panic burst before ducking back down behind the truck's cab. His last few rounds missed the gunman by half a foot, riddling the roof with bullets.

"Now what?" Rashid looked over at Mark.

"Make up your minds, guys!" Gary called out.

The man with the UMP-45 was now hosing out across the truck's windshield, haphazardly focusing on the driver's side. Gary jerked the truck to-and-fro, ducking the best he could while frenziedly evading.

They had just now reached the expressway on-ramp, leading them past a sign indicating the approach of a Carquinez bridge. The road opened up into four lanes, and broader but still considerably thin traffic.

"Plan B," Mark snapped back before rising up from the bed. Except this time he didn't stand up to shoot his weapon over the roof of the truck's cabin. Instead he peered over the lip of the bed's side, getting a lower angle for better aim.

He wasn't fixating on the gunman this time.

A streak of gunfire from the PLR-16, which he could

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composedly one-hand for the first couple of bursts, cut low and hard. The Lincoln's back two tires suffered enough 5.56mm rounds to pop them and dramatically offset the vehicle's balance. At its current speed, some forty miles-per-hour, this meant bad news. The sedan fishtailed one turn before veering hard right and flipping up on its left side. The front bumper corner skidded across the asphalt as the car's backend lifted into the air. It came down in a tumbling roll onto its roof, killing the jack-in-the-box without delay while crushing the cabin altogether.

Gary floored it.

The Titan lurched forward, slinging Mark back into the bed, where Rashid held onto him and they confirmed each other's good health.

It was all open road ahead of them now, save the civilian motorists around them and between their truck and the enemy's SUV—with Sergio inside.

Mark reloaded the PLR-16 before returning it to his case, closed it, then unholstered his right-side Desert Eagle. Its chrome finish glinted under the encompassing sunlight. The road wrapped around in a broad turn that clearly approached the Al Zampa Memorial Bridge. Its concrete towers and red-orange suspension cables were unmistakable.

Rashid poked his head in through the truck cabin's rear window. He asked if Gary was doing alright.

"I'll live," Gary replied grumpily.

"You're hit? Where?"

"Right shoulder, grazed by a .45 UMP round." Gary grunted, two-handing the wheel and leaning forward. The bandanna masking the lower half of his face hushed his voice the slightest, but with a tone like Gary's it was difficult not to hear him. He just had to strain to make himself coherent over the whipping wind and roaring V8.

"Oh, shit, man," Rashid said. He turned at the feeling of Mark squeezing his shoulder gently. "Mark, Gary's hit, grazed his shoulder—"

“Hey!” Gary barked. “I’ve had bee stings that hurt more than this shit. You guys ready or hat back there?”

Rashid pulled back, laughing under his Liut mask and shaking his head.

“Oh, yeah, we’re peaches ‘n’ cream, Gary,” Mark said. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

“I’m forever indebted, you assholes, now let’s end this shit once ‘n’ for all!”

They gave their warcries as Gary stomped it.

The Titan’s limits were being pushed, its envelope tearing at the seams.

The three men were no different.

“So, how’re we doing this exactly?” Rashid asked as they weaved through traffic toward the silver LR4 doing much the same.

“I imagine hitting a tire or two, but keep it precise.”

“Says the guy who just wrecked a whole Lincoln from butchering its back two tires!”

“Like I said, Rashid, be *precise*. Take out *one* tire for starters, slow ‘em down. From there, Gary—” Mark raised his voice “—Gary will put us up right alongside the SUV so that we can take care of the passengers. Injure the driver, but don’t kill him. And whatever you do, keep your shots high—fire *through the windows*, not below them. Sergio will know, if he doesn’t already, his head will be *down*. If he’s free to move so, he’ll be down on the fucking *ground* ‘til this shit’s over.”

“Your plan sounds like stone, Mark, let’s just hope it all works!” Gary shouted back. “We’re on the fucking bridge now, so I’m gonna hurry this along so we don’t risk losing him on the off-ramps.”

“We’ll be ready.” Mark nodded to Rashid. “Get over here, Rashid, hug this side of the bed. I’m going to target the tires, you aim for the passengers. Hit the tire first, then the passengers. That way Sergio will know when to put his head between his knees should he not already—”

The truck was almost right up on the LR4, at its left side,

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while surrounding cars honked and tires screeched relentlessly. Then glass shattered a bullets slammed into the windshield nearest Gary. Mark and Rashid heard the gunfire, but Gary's voice caught their attention the strongest. They both sprung up to peer over the edge of the bed—the LR4 was two car lengths ahead, on their right. Its rear window was gone, outlined in jagged glass, and a man was firing a Beretta Inox at the truck with arms outstretched and both hands on the pistol. Through this gap in the back of the SUV's cabin they could see someone driving, another man in the passenger's seat, and two other heads excluding the one shooting at the truck. That accounted for all of the bad guys, but not Sergio.

Mark and Rashid assumed he was ducking.

The shooting paused as the single enemy in the LR4's backseat withdrew to reload. Then Gary voiced his similar assumption, by sticking his head out his window and—as loud as he could, through the bandanna—yelled three key words.

“Stay down, Sergio!”

Whether the assholes present did or didn't know the name of the man they held captive wasn't of any concern. They went going to live past this experience to further investigate the matter.

Gary, Mark, and Rashid were going to make sure of it.

“Now, aim high!” Mark barked. He popped up again and leaned over the edge of the truck's bed. The enemy in the backseat had sprung up, too, his aim readjusted. Gary accelerated to seize a position running up along the LR4's left side.

Rashid stood to tower over Mark, CM901 shouldered. He had toggled it to single-shot mode, and was as precise as he would ever be. One squeeze of the trigger put a lone round through the forehead and out the back of the man's skull, throwing him against the middlemost seats.

One man, on the left seat, blindly fired his pistol out his window. The other one dove toward the console, down just out of sight.

Rashid had fired earlier than planned, but it worked out well. Now Mark could fire with more concentration. So he two-handed the Desert Eagle and popped the left rear tire with ease. It blew out and the speeding SUV fishtailed briefly as it worked for stability. The driver lurched with the steering wheel, and the jerking motion of the vehicle brought the front passenger briefly into view over the console. Rashid put a round into the back of his head, and quickly another for confirmation. Blood splattered the inside of the windshield, and misted the right cheek of the driver.

Panic struck him hard.

The Land Rover began swerving more chaotically now. Mark knew that he wouldn't be able to shoot another tire without toppling the vehicle altogether, and didn't want to risk the wreck with Sergio inside—probably not even wearing a damn seatbelt. So instead he aimed upward and squeezed off two frantic rounds at the arm extended from a passenger's window on the SUV's left side. The first missed but the second struck his forearm, .44 Magnum doing a number on flesh and muscle. The man screamed with unrivaled pain in his voice and the pistol previously in his hand was now crushed beneath the Titan's wheels.

As he flailed about inside, Rashid finished them off.

Two rounds in the back of each headrest, and their bodies fell forward. Rashid started to relax when he forgot about the man who'd previously dove out of sight, and was now struggling toward the backseat. Toward Sergio, he imagined.

"I've got two left, including the driver," Rashid said.

"Hold off, take a breather!" Gary shouted.

"What, why!?" Mark retorted.

"Just *do it!*" Gary roared.

They didn't object any further. Their bodies dipped and their backs went to the rear of the cabin in the bed, legs extended. They each took to reloading their weapons, while Gary pulled up closer to the side of the Land Rover. It had previously speeding in excess of fifty miles-per-hour, but was



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now crippled to twenty under that thanks to the blown tire and distracted driver.

Gary unholstered one of his Taurus revolvers with his right hand, while his left steadied the wheel. He automatically rolled down the passenger's side window with a push of his free left forefinger, then leveled to take aim. Elbow locked, right hand squeezing the grip and fingering the trigger guard, Gary took a deep breath. When he fired the hefty revolver, the man in the backseat lost his face. It transferred to the nearest intact window, and the driver screamed.

Gary accelerated until he was right beside the silver Range Rover, with about a quarter mile worth of bridge left. He readjusted his aim and cocked the hammer this time.

"Pull over, *now!*"

"You know what?" the mustached Hispanic guy behind the wheel snapped back. "Fuck you! You ain't gonna shoot me 'cause you don't wanna risk me crashing! So, yeah, fuck you, *hijo de puta!*"

Gary's patience was running thin.

And so would the road as it approached a division of asphalt into two off-ramps.

"Pull the *fuck* over, *now!*" Gary reiterated, his voice barely recognizable from a bear's.

The driver, whose right side of his face was smeared with the passenger's blood, stuck his left arm out the window and gave Gary the finger. He then returned the hand to the wheel and pushed forward at a greater speed.

He barely got an inch. Gary squeezed the trigger.

The Raging Bull bellowed and the driver's nose seared off in a spray of blood that splashed the dashboard. His scream was a hundred different noises rolled into one burrito of pain. He released the wheel to blindly clutch his face, and a split-second later Gary put a more accurate round into his left temple. The sizable .44 Magnum chunk of lead nearly obliterated his entire head.

The Land Rover bucked right, but Gary's jerky control of

the truck managed to catch the vehicle's front left fender alongside its front right. The two cars slammed into each other's sides, and together they spun briefly before coming to a lurching stop. Metal groaned on distressed chassis and residual glass crumbled.

Deep breaths all around. Engines idled.

"Sergio?" Gary asked, his voice actually tired.

Six solid seconds passed before Sergio sprung up from the middle console with a black bag over his head. Everyone in the truck exhaled with relief, but distant sirens put them on the other side of placidity.

"Mark, get him the fuck outta there, will you?" Gary said. "And Rashid, get ready to take care of the 'Rover. You can use my XM8 if it makes you feel any better. Let the fuzz have some fun with cartridge variation and casing recovery."

Was that a bleak, twisted smile on Gary's face?

Rashid had thought so, distinguishable even under that bandanna. He didn't hesitate, however, as Mark vaulted out of the truck bed with pistol holstered. He popped open the right passenger side door and helped Sergio out. With the bag off his head, while Mark worked free his wrist binds, Sergio bitterly spit into the Land Rover and gave the foulest expression any three of them had ever witnessed from the man. Hands free, Sergio joined Mark in returning to the black Titan and boarded its bed.

The distant sirens were getting closer, but still not yet to the on-ramps leading up to the Al Zampa Bridge.

Once inside the low confines of the bed, Mark and Sergio hunkered down out of sight. Mark tilted up his mask to confirm his identity with Sergio, shake hands awkwardly, then inform him that the man still standing beside them was his partner Rashid.

"Yeah, yeah I recall you two cats." Sergio grinned lopsidedly. "Thanks, by the way. Indefinitely."

"You'd do the same for either of us, eh?" Mark said.

"In a heartbeat," Sergio replied just as quickly.

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Rashid slapped the cabin's roof and Gary put it into gear. Rashid, with Gary's XM8 machinegun shouldered, howled and began firing. He swung his aim from left-to-right, belting out some fifty rounds of 7.62mm fire into the SUV by the time they had peeled off. A fire caught under the hood, but that didn't stop Rashid from shooting. He continued until the vehicle detonated from the fuel tank, exploding upwardly and scorching everything within immediately. What remained of it just sat there, spewing smoke into the sky, any fingerprints present no longer existent.

They figured that the Department would have a good enough time with the intact Lincolns left behind. More importantly, the dead assholes inside.

As for Gary, Mark, Rashid, and now Sergio, they were miles off down the road by the time the sirens reached the bridge.

# 8

**R**eturning to Gary and Sergio's place in Calistoga had been, more or less, a slice of cake after their prolonged confrontation in Vallejo. Drowned in the past, and the Titan's rearview mirror, were encroaching cops and the mess they'd left them to probe about. A bloodshed of sorts, with enough vehicle carnage to stretch three miles. Fortunately no civilians had been injured, aside from a bump or two in pushing through traffic, but surprisingly enough not because of Gary's driving. As monstrous as that truck was, and as irate as Gary's blood had been, he'd managed to navigate it through traffic very efficiently.

With Sergio unscathed by bullets, the operation was chalked up in the 'W' column. Sure, Gary had suffered a grazed .45 to the shoulder, but nothing more across the whole group.

Once home, everyone stripped their gear and helped Sergio with his wounds. He cleaned, Gary offered a hand in bandaging, but Sergio declined it to do it himself. So Gary ventured into his own bathroom to mend his own wound. In the meantime, he told Mark and Rashid to gather cold water bottles from the refrigerator. Sergio asked for a Corona, so Rashid one-handed both in addition to his water bottle. Mark grabbed a bottle for him and Gary, then together they convened with the other two—eventually—in the house's spacious den.

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Their No-Cal place wasn't too different from Mark and Rashid's, except that it wasn't on any stilts and had a flatter backyard. Still a lot of glass, a lot of mahogany furnishing here, and—as per Gary's taste—some mounted antlers, shark jaws, and two stuffed Grizzly bears.

Sergio took a seat, wearing gauze around the circumference of his upper skull, a black eye patch, and some cheek bandaging. His eyes were heavy, dark, and ominous. That brooding comical atmosphere was absent in them, a sight easily and frequently distinguished in Sergio's gaze. At this moment, however, they were quite grave.

Gary was looking more solemn than usual.

He might as well have been a gargoyle at present.

Mark and Rashid, on the other hand, were standing there—the latter leaning against a brick fireplace column—appearing little different than when they first received the news regarding Sergio's status. Though not aloof about the situation, they were certainly not without deep concern regarding the next step...should there even be one, seemed out of the question.

Even so, a tense silence lingered over them.

"I don't know how they knew where you'd be, who they think you are, or why they'd even grow the balls to do what they did—" Gary paused "—but what happened today, that was only to get you back. I don't for one second consider it punishment."

Sergio nodded austere.

"And what exactly *do* you consider punishment for these top-notch scumbags?" Rashid asked.

Gary didn't answer right away. He let the thought break waves through his conscience, create pictures that evolved into a video reel which ultimately spilled from his lips.

"Tac-Op," he finally replied, simplicity no blunter than that. A couple of seconds after letting that sink in with no objections, he added: "CT-caliber."

Everyone understood. It was lucid enough on their faces, in their stiff but coherent body language.

A tactical operation, generally a raid warranting full gear

to the likes of a SWAT force. And at the caliber of a counter-terrorism operation, there was little that couldn't be done. In other words, their limits were limitless and their actions became borderline indiscriminate.

The deadline was simple: neutralize all hostiles.

"When do we start?" Mark asked.

A corner of Sergio's mouth curled up. "Yes, Gary. Do please tell us."

Gary couldn't help it. He figured if any time was to smile, it was now—on the singlehandedly most dangerous mass-takedown they've ever conducted. Which, even surpassing their bus-bust, included Mark and Rashid's experiences too. This would be considered going all-out, raiding a full-house, outnumbered but not outgunned.

"You guys *do know* that this op will put us in a cage of very unsavory odds, don't you?" Rashid said, although his tone and expression didn't match his question. It's like his words were escaping the truth that was Rashid's stance on the matter—afraid or not, he was ready for this, he was bred for it, and at this point he wouldn't turn his back on it.

"I'm very acknowledgeable of this matter," Gary said.

"As am I," Sergio sighed. He got to his feet from the couch. "But, after today's little escapade of yours, I'm very confidence that the odds aren't exactly your concern."

"And with you back on our roster," Rashid half-smirked, walking toward the center of the den away from the fireplace, "things will fall right into place. They won't stand a fucking chance."

"Hell, they won't even know what hit 'em 'til their guts are in their laps." Mark smiled toothlessly, forehead creased and brow raised. "The quantitative odds are against us, gentlemen, there is no denying that. But the qualitative odds are all for us, and that's what fucking matters."

Mark's words joined them at their hands, dead-center.

But fully alive.

"Mi casa es su casa," Sergio said. "Gary will show you

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the Trove, Mark. Rashid, we'll go to the Treasury and gather all of the gear. They'll prep our arsenal."

"So you guys call your gun room a Trove?" Mark asked. "That's dope. We call ours the Vault."

"The Vault," Gary said in a dramatic voice. "I like that."

"And the Treasury?" Rashid asked. By this time they were already splitting up. "Sounds like a money cache."

"It is," Sergio said. "But it's also got all of our tactical gear, shit we seldom use, like SWAT rigs and gas-masks."

"Hey, everything you guys pick out, return to the den and lay it out," Gary said before they fully separated. "We will too."

"Sure thing, hoss," Sergio spat back.

Gary shook his head and led Mark into the vast room that was their armory. It was very slightly larger than Mark and Rashid's, but only because Gary and Sergio's tastes in weaponry were more diverse. The gray walls were lined with weapons specific to their types—sidearms, sub-machineguns, assault rifles, scoped rifles, light-machineguns, and auxiliaries. Auxiliaries included any form of grenade possible, although the HE and WP ones were far less profuse than the non-lethal flashbangs and tear gas canisters. Ammunition appeared to be kept in corner-bound crates and drawers.

"I gotta hand it to you guys, Gary," Mark shook his head in slight disbelief, "this place is ridiculous. A little bigger than ours, far more diverse, and for me to say this it means a lot but—more organized, too."

"Believe it or not, Sergio's got the biggest hand in that department."

"No shit," Mark sighed. "Yeah, I choose not to believe."

Gary clicked his tongue. "Nonetheless, he's definitely the main reason for the variety present. And he's always feeding me that line: 'it's the spice of life' bullshit. After a couple of years, I finally 'extended my horizon' too."

"I can definitely respect that." Mark nodded as they approached the walls and began eyeballing potential selections.

Gary was obviously quicker to choose. “In fact,” Mark added, “Rashid’s got the same exact outlook...except that it applies more to women than guns for him.”

Gary hid a smirk and shook his head once.

“So,” Mark asked, putting an M4A1 in his hands, “this is really happening, huh?”

“Sure as shit it is.”

“I guess that’s about as sure as things get around here, eh?” Mark said, half-smirking.

“Got that right.” Gary cradled a black tactical AK-74u in his hands. “You have an eye for anything specific over there? What about Rashid?”

“Well,” Mark sighed, returning the M4A1 to its place on the wall, “one thing’s for sure—Rashid’s picky as hell. He loves his CM901 and that custom Benelli you saw him bring in. As for me...I’ve always been pretty partial to the G36C, but I could do for something a little *heavier*. But, you know, still an assault rifle...”

“I know what you need.” Gary said.

“Oh, do you now?”

“Well, don’t look at me...just keep your eyes peeled, you’ll find it.” Gary shook his head as he slung the loaded AK-74u around to his back. “You might not recognize it right off the bat, but it’s all there. Just a...certain variant.”

“You don’t say...” Mark trailed off, his gaze having found what he thinks Gary might’ve been referring to. An all-black polymer AK-47, with a foregrip between the curved magazine and muzzle, a stripped buttstock, and a 3x sight on the top rail. He went on his tiptoes to retrieve it, and instantly realized he’d found a replacement for his G36C. At least for this operation.

“Told ya.”

“Yeah, no shit. And what’s that you got there?”

“Tactical AK-74u. Basically, a smaller version than that, but with a holographic sight right above the muzzle.”

“It’s a peculiar look, but sharp.”



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Gary shrugged. "Works well, why not?"

"Right on." Mark handled the strapless AK-47 well, becoming very fond of its reduced weight compared to the all-metal bodies of its brethren. The foregrip was also a nice touch, especially for such a powerful and high-recoil automatic weapon.

"You keeping those Desert Eagles on you?" Gary asked, nodding to Mark's donned shoulder holsters and the guns in them.

"Actually, I wish I'd brought my Kimbers along to replace them for this op—too much weight, these two plus this and all the ammo, gear..."

"Which Kimber models?" Gary asked, raising an eyebrow. "I've got a few myself over here. They're all full-sized frames, though."

"I'm not a midget, I can handle 'em." Mark said, following Gary over to the furthest wall section. It was arrayed with various handguns, including revolvers both modern and functionally vintage. "Even Kimber's biggest frames don't match the size and weight of these monsters."

"This is true." Gary stepped aside when they arrived and Mark's gaze washed over the pistols.

While the Grand Raptor II wasn't amid Gary's collection of Kimber 1911 variants, another did pique Mark's interest. He gingerly set the AK-47 down, leaning it up against the knee-high counter below the walled weapons. As he reached for the Kimbers that caught his eye, Gary said he would gather Mark and himself some ammunition for their Kalashnikovs. In the meantime, Mark reveled in the presence of his newfound selections that would soon replace the Desert Eagles in his shoulder holsters. They were a pair of Kimber Gold Combat II 1911 pistols, featuring a black stainless steel frame and umber Micarta grips; the two-inch top-fluted chrome compensator added to its length and appeal. Mark imagined that it helped with performance in accuracy as well.

"Where do I fill out the adoption papers?" Mark joked,

turning around with the two Gold Combat II's in his hands.

"Consider them signed. You can just set your Desert Eagles on the countertop at your knees. Eject the mags first, though."

"Will do. Thanks." Mark complied, ultimately slipping the two Kimbers into his shoulder holsters and readjusting their tightness due to the change in size.

"You want extended mags for those, or regular?"

"Uh, regular will do. I plan on getting something else, too." Mark spun on his heel and sidestepped over to the shotgun area. "Maybe a sawed-off..."

"Speaking of which," Gary said, "I noticed you had a Zebala in your possession."

"Oh, yeah. We don't have much of that kind of weaponry in the Vault back home, but I figured Sergio could appreciate it as a sort of gift. Looking here now, I see that he already has some similar options..."

"You give him that Zebala, he won't turn it down. He could have ten of 'em up in here, different fucking colors. Wouldn't matter." Gary walked over to Mark. "Fact is, what you and Rashid did today—meeting with and helping me on that whacked-out plan of ours—that's something that bonds us for life. Hell, if we weren't already—now we sure as shit are. And you can believe that."

"Fucking A, man, fucking A." Mark rigidly shook Gary's hand. "Never a goddamn doubt."

"We're just about ready out here," Sergio's voice peeked into the Trove. He saw Mark and Gary's hands in one, and recoiled. "Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt. You need any more Dutch with your Rudders?"

"Oh, get fucked," Gary pulled away from Mark to throw the stink-eye look Sergio's way.

"No thanks, I've had enough of that for one day."

Gary half-smirked, clicked his tongue, shook his head. Sergio whistled and hooted as he carried vests over his shoulders into the den.

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“*Anyways*,” Mark said, rolling his eyes and returning to the shotguns selection. It didn’t take him long. He loved the look and promise of the revolving drum-magazine shotguns, but for the sake of size and weight—especially since he’d have the weapon slung when the AK was in his hands—he required something more reasonable. It didn’t take him long to find it—a light gray shotgun with clear Benelli influences on the receiver. It was incredibly compact, yielding a mere fourteen-inch barrel, whose sliding stock comprised nearly half its overall length, a black pistol grip, stripped buttstock, Picatinny rail, and holographic sight atop it. A carrier clip was racked on the left side of the receiver, holding four 12-gauge buckshot shells. Mark assumed that was the shotgun’s full capacity, due to its size.

“And that’d be an FN SPT-14,” Gary said as Mark cradled it comfortably. “I assume you’re gonna sling it?”

“Yeah. Planning to.”

“No problem. I’ll get you a strap. It’s so small, not used to being carried that way, I usually one-hand it for quick ops.”

“Well, aren’t you just Mister Badass?”

Gary didn’t respond, verbally at least. A poorly hidden smirk did it.

“Are you always this giddy when preparing for a risky takedown that might leave you with bullet-holes and shattered surfaces?”

“Always.” Gary joked solemnly. “Hell, you should see me *afterward*. Giddy as a fucking schoolgirl—Sergio’s words.”

Mark laughed. “Oh, is that so? Can’t wait for that priceless moment.”

“Right, right. Well enough of that, let’s finalize this.”

“You gonna pull together Sergio’s loadout or have him do it himself?”

“How ‘bout you go give him that Zebala of yours, then tell him to come on back here.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Mark strode out of the Trove with his new Kimbers in their holsters. He spotted Sergio in the den,

piling some tactical gear and vests on the couch. He looked over his shoulder to see Rashid lingering in the hallway with stuff thrown over his shoulder, too, except that he was pretty affixed with texting. Mark's curiosity was piqued, but he'd wait until Rashid brought it up later for the time being. So he approached Rashid, digging the Zebala sawed-off from his bag on the floor by the fireplace before reaching him.

When Sergio turned on his heel at the sound of Mark, his eyes fell to the mint Zebala in his hands. He was instantly intrigued, and could read the veracity in both Mark's eyes and on his voice as he offered the weapon to him as a sort of accolade for their tacit brotherhood.

Sergio was not one to disappoint Gary's previous words.

"Speechless, Mark, truly speechless. It's much appreciated, though." Sergio gladly took the Zebala, dramatically acting as if it were Excalibur. He grinned broadly as he weighed it in his hands, and Mark just noticed a few missing teeth in his somehow-still-stellar grill.

"My honor. Just be sure to use it well today."

"Oh, man, I'm gonna get me some nice kills with this thing," Sergio said overzealously.

Mark nodded, mum, eyebrows raised. He patted Sergio on the back and left him with some spare shells to finalize the priceless transaction. Quickly thereafter he met with Rashid in the hallway, who was finishing with his texts.

"Guess who that was?" Rashid said as he pocketed the phone and took a deep breath.

"Chief?"

"Bingo."

"Was he pissed, thankful, or a bittersweet batch of both?"

"BBB," Rashid said simply, nodding.

"I guess that's better than being completely pissed."

"Considering the mess we made on the bridge?" Rashid widened his eyes. "Yeah, I'd say we got off lightly there."

"So, that's all?"

"No, actually."

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Mark waited. Nothing. “Well?”

“He, uh, insists that we dig a hole and pull a rock over our heads ‘til this cleanup in Vallejo has blown over.”

Mark laughed discordantly. “Right, and what’d you say?”

“Literally, word-for-word, I replied: ‘I’ll see what we can do.’ To which he said, ‘you better.’ So...yeah.”

Mark nodded. “Sounds like a threat to me.”

“True, but when have we not heard that before?”

“Right on the nose.” Mark shrugged. “But hey, so he *assumed* that the little bridge stunt and car chase thing was us—I understand, after Gary informed him of the situation. Strange that he texted us, though, not Gary.”

“Probably because he’s more comfortable bitching at us than Gary.”

Mark chuckled. “True, true.”

“So?” Rashid. Raised an eyebrow.

“So, jack. We’re doing this, that’s that. He can assume all he wants what happens after this but the way we’re going in—full tactical gear, masked and decked out, *four-man team*—it could be presumed otherwise. Regardless, I want you to text him back in an hour saying that we’re officially out of town. Don’t specify out of town *where*, just put it like that.”

Rashid nodded.

They followed each other out into the den, Rashid dumped his gatherings onto the couch, and they assembled with the other two in the Trove.

“So, you pick out any candy for me, Mark?” Rashid asked as they entered through the wide threshold.

“I figured you’d wanna stick with your Benelli and CM901,” Mark replied casually.

“Psh, nah, I’ve given the CM901 a good ride. I figure, hey, we’re guests here and Gary’s the King of the Armory, so—I might as well enjoy the buffet.”

“Just watch what you touch in the revolver department so far as Sergio’s concerned,” Gary said.

Sergio had already donned a waist holster and two sidearms to occupy it. One was a Beretta M92F and the other, a blued steel Ruger Vaquero. He was practice-drawing the single-action fixed-cylinder old school revolver as he spoke his next words.

“Really just nothing that looks like it might’ve been used before Gary was born. Seeing as how I’ve already got my baby on me, you should be good.”

“Well,” Rashid tittered, “just be thankful I’m solid in that department. Since I’m holding onto my pistols and shotgun, figured I’d browse the AR selection.”

“Go right on ahead,” Gary said, beckoning Rashid.

“That’s a mean-looking knife you got there, Sergio,” Mark pointed at the Bowie knife sheathed to his belt just above his right thigh. The sheath itself was tiger-striped with perforations, overtly exposing the gleaming stainless steel blade beneath.

“Gil Hibben Alaskan Survival Knife, sure is. Seven-inch fixed blade, four-inch Micarta grip. Treats the human breastbone like a dagger to paper.”

Mark clicked his tongue. “Good to know.”

“So, Mark, I’ve got all of your ammunition collected. Help me carry it out to the den, along with my own, if ya don’t mind.”

“Sure thing.”

Gary and Mark gathered all of their collective ammunition and shuffled out into the den.

“By the way, gents, everything’s out there. You can go ahead and suit up if you’d like, just gotta sift through for your right size.”

“Thanks, Sergio,” Mark replied from out in the den.

“Anything particular you got your eye on?” Sergio asked from a few feet behind Rashid. He’d returned his Vaquero to the right holster on his waist and was now pushing his attention toward an assault rifle.

“Ya know, originally I was thinking of sticking with a

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Colt—maybe a carbine or something—but that Tavor’s really calling my name. I’ve only used one once, but at home don’t typically stray from my CM901.”

“It sure is a reliable piece. Compact, but not too small, ‘n’ powerful. Me? I’m not much of a gunner outside sidearms, as you know. Especially them nice, older revolvers. But...in today’s case...things are calling for heavier firepower, greater variety. The weather’s looking like hail and I don’t wanna be caught without my umbrella.”

“I hear ya on that.”

“So, lemme squeeze by you here, while you’re all indecisive—” Sergio’s booted toes touched the base of the counter and he reached for his selection “—and get one of the few AR’s I’ve ever put full faith in.”

“Heckler & Koch, eh? Nice.”

In Sergio’s hands now was an HK416 carbine with a fitted red-dot reflex sight and a lasersight mounted parallel to the lower foregrip. The compact assault rifle featured a birdcage muzzle, perforated rail-encased barrel, thirty-round magazine, pistol grip, and stripped buttstock.

“Four-sixteen, my one and only for versatile tac-ops.”

“Definitely a fine choice,” Rashid replied. He finally severed his indecision and seized the IWI Tavor MTAR-21. Though not quite as compact as the HK416, its bullpup design and thirteen-inch barrel helped reduce the carrier’s silhouette when rounding corners in urban combat.

This would serve its purpose well today.

“Hey, Rashid,” Sergio said, all of a sudden dropping his tone a hint more solemnly. When Rashid faced to look at him, Sergio’s hand was extended, the other cradling his HK416. “I couldn’t thank you and Mark enough for tagging along, lending Gary the help. He’s a big motherfucker ‘n’ all, but for what you three just pulled off—he certainly couldn’t have done it without you guys.”

“Shut up and put it there,” Rashid said, jaw clenching. They firmly exchanged a handshake before withdrawing and

Rashid added with more emotion: “Now let’s get some ammo for these things and move out, eh?”

“I’ll drink to that.”

“I didn’t realize this was going to be a silent mission,” Mark said as Gary turned away from him.

“Think about it, brother,” Gary said as he walked away, heading for the Trove, “its daylight and we just wrought havoc from downtown Vallejo to the Al Zampa Bridge. Now, we’re going in less than three hours later, to the same building we just staked out to get Sergio back—they alone are probably stacking up on security right now.”

“Or,” Rashid suggested out of thin hope, “they’re so unnerved by what we just pulled, that they’ve packed up and—especially with the cops present—in the process of bailing.”

“Doubtful,” Sergio said, “especially with all of their hardware and how long you guys went before hearing sirens after that whole hot-pursuit shit.” Sergio shook his head more resolutely now that he really thought about it. “These guys have some kind of 5-0 hookup, whatever it might be, chances are it’s deeper than a simple VPD connection.”

Mark gradually nodded.

“So,” he said, shrugging, “we’re putting suppressors on what we can, holding off on what we can’t—or shouldn’t—for when the time comes. And it will, you have to realize, come.”

“What’s that?” Sergio raised an eyebrow.

“The noise.”

“Oh, yeah, well, that’s inevitable considering their manpower and hardware. Eventually shots are getting fired, and nobody in there seems to know a damn thing about subtlety.”

“I agree with that plan,” came Gary’s voice from inside the Trove across the way. “However, we still gotta go in like it’s a covert raid. Once we’re in, and we’ll be entering through the back—or roof, if need be—when things get loud on their end, don’t just automatically detach your suppressors or switch to your loud options. But, with shots fired by them, cold turns to hot and stealth goes out the window. After that, it’s all about



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speed of getting in-and-out as fast and powerful as we can. Leave *no* survivors, unless it's one or two men to carry a message or suffer the gavel."

Everyone in the house came to an agreement on that.

When Gary returned to the den, he had a collection of suppressors in an oblong tray. He stopped by the large La-Z-Boy to the left of the gear-occupied couch, and balanced it on the top headrest.

"This should be them all, as per your selections."

"That's a good eye you got there, Gary," Mark said with a high raised eyebrow.

"And memory," Rashid remarked.

The two men flocked over to the tray to retrieve their suppressors, which had white fine-print markings near their back ends, designating which weapons they were compatible with.

"Eight years' military experience helps with that."

Everyone mutely nodded, agreeing in silence.

Mark and Rashid proceeded to secure their suppressors to their respective weapons. Mark's custom polymer AK-47 had a surprisingly short piece, but still wasn't as stocky as the one fixed to Rashid's MTAR-21. The AK's was sleek, and the MTAR's had minuscule aeration.

Sergio's HK416 became significantly longer with its suppressor, making it as long as an HK417 with a longer barrel. Nonetheless, the weapon remained a compact and manageably concealable weapon. Given, this wasn't going to be that kind of clandestine operation—it was a raid, and raids weren't 110% discreet.

Gary, meanwhile, fixed a suppressor to his already very short AK-74u SMG. The weapon, with its hollow buttstock folded to halve its length, now had a sizeable suppressor attached to its muzzle and two magazines taped together. Gary, obviously, wasn't one to mind; he could still easily one-hand it as he'd intended.

"Hey, Gary," Mark asked as they all began donning their tactical gear, ultimately the only exposed skin left being their

faces. “I see you’ve got your twin Raging Bulls, and that AK-74u, but I’m feeling kind of skeptical. Where’s your third?”

“Skeptical?” Rashid chirped. “I’m *scared*.”

Frightened to know what sort of ludicrously brutish weapon Gary intended on bringing with him, that is.

“Wait, lemme guess,” Mark said, holding up a hand as he shrugged his ballistic vest on over the long-sleeve BDU shirt. “An M-60, bandoliers ‘n’ all. Eh?”

“Let’s be a *little* logical here, okay?” Gary said. “Now, as enticing as that does sound, it’s just not...realistic.”

“Like what you have in mind is any more realistic,” Sergio said with a smirk and shake of his head.

Gary sighed. “It’s still in the truck. Which, of course, we won’t be taking.”

“Of course not. Too much heat on that thing. And so many witnesses...you might wanna retire it, sad to say,” Rashid said. “A damn shame, too.”

“I’ll just remove the PRO-4X decals and change the color. Maybe lower it a bit.”

“Your play.”

“Okay,” Mark sputtered. “So *what*’s still in the truck that you’re bringing along?”

“The Rossi.”

“Christ, man. You really thing that’s wise? On an op like this?” Rashid said.

“Wise or not, it’s coming with me on this raid. Few people under my crosshairs have ever deserved it like this.”

“Alright, alright.” Rashid put up both hands, palms out. “It’s all you, man. Not like I doubt your ability to make it work, just...be careful.”

“I will, mom. Thanks.”

They continued to ‘get dressed,’ some needing one another to help fully secure their attire and holsters, the latter of which went on after everything else.

As they wrapped up, they finished sips from their water bottles—Sergio finished his Corona—and then complained

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about bathroom breaks. Fortunately their gear, although laden with it, was urinal-friendly. Rashid and Sergio had to attend, but Gary and Mark were fine. They proceeded to exit the house and approach the El Camino that would transport them to the scene-of-the-crime.

“Go ahead and put your stuff in the bed,” Gary said. “Just try to bundle it to one side. Shit...”

“What’s up?”

“This isn’t gonna work. We’re gonna have to take your Firebird too. Just not enough space. And I’m not too keen on risking getting spotted, or reported, with two dudes in military gear lying in the bed of a Camino.”

Mark sighed, shocked he hadn’t realized it sooner.

“Alright, no problem there. How ‘bout you and Rashid take the Camino, me and Sergio in the Firebird. Then all of our gear into the Camino’s bed, with a tarp secured over it. If for some reason we can’t fit everything in there—”

“We’ll be able to,” Gary reassured Mark.

“Alright, then. Well, I suppose we just keep our helmets and masks in our laps or by our feet ‘til we arrive then.”

“Sounds like a solid plan. I’m gonna grab my Rossi, you go ahead.”

Less than ten minutes later, after Sergio and Rashid were made aware of the revised transportation plan, everyone was set to go. Weapons that couldn’t be carried in the cabs of the vehicles with their owners were stowed into the El Camino’s spacious bed, on top of a cushioned pad and covered with a sleek black tarpaulin. Their ballistic vests and shoulder holsters remained, as well as their occupants. Since retrieving his Rossi Overland double-barreled shotgun, Gary also secured torso-strapped bandoliers fitted with 10-gauge slugs. Meanwhile, in their laps or at their feet were their gas masks and cropped tactical helmets. Tear gas canisters, smoke grenades, and flashbangs were apportioned to each of them and clipped to their belts.

Combat boots were all laced up.

Mental war paint applied

Game faces pulled on.

Gary and Rashid led in the two-tone red and black El Camino, while the sleek onyx Firebird followed with Mark and Sergio in tow.

# 9

Good thing Gary knows the back roads up here,” Mark said to Sergio in the Firebird’s passenger seat as they followed the El Camino. They obeyed every traffic law until they would arrive, planning to park obliquely with their rear bumpers facing the back of the hideout—ensuring a quick getaway.

“You think you’d get lost by yourself?” Sergio asked.

Mark shrugged. “Or worse.”

They simpered together.

“How’s the face?” Mark asked, keeping his eyes glued to the road and the tail of Gary’s El Camino.

“Sexy as ever, buddy,” Sergio replied. “You like my eye patch? Shocked I hadn’t thought of it sooner.”

“Oh, yeah. Real fly.” Mark chuckled under his breath. “Too bad the assholes who did that to you won’t get to see it under your gas-mask.”

Sergio shrugged. “No worries,” he said with a chipper attitude. “They’d be too busy staring down my Vaquero to concern themselves with anything else.”

“Hey, I hear that.” Mark banked a left to keep on the El Camino’s rear, practically tailgating Gary so as to prohibit anyone from getting between them. Mark let his mind wander briefly, glad to think of more positive matters before such an

intense mission. “Speaking of *style*, I bet Rashid’s not feeling too much at home right now.”

“Why’s that?”

“The guy’s obsessed with his getup, always prefers to wear a suit of sorts when we conduct a takedown.”

“Ah, I see. And you?”

Mark shrugged. “It’s whatever, just casual. Comfort first. I could give two shits about what a motherfucker might think as I fill his head with lead.”

“Ah.” Sergio nodded, then swung his head left and stared at Mark. “Is it also possible that you simply lack...*style*?”

Mark laughed. “Oh, fuck me—you’re no different than Rashid, are you?”

“My friend,” Sergio said slyly, twirling his bizarre mustache, “I am different than most.”

Mark chortled and drove on.

Meanwhile, in the red and black El Camino, a less talkative atmosphere persisted. Rashid was salivating over the El Camino’s interior and its surprising power. Gary held a similar pride in the form of smug muteness in between clamped teeth as he drove. He tried to keep it steady, keep it average, but somehow keep it fast. Haste burned beneath his skin and worked his adrenal glands like defibrillators charging up. He’d fight tooth and nail for this, give his own life as a sacrifice if it meant abridging these bastards’ existence. He would bring it all, and then some, but felt that even then it’d never be enough.

Gary felt as if all of his previous takedowns and all of the scumbags he’s ever faced had accumulated to this. They were all thrown into a meat grinder then regurgitated into that place they probably did call a hideout only to form some kind of gang with shit morals. In Gary’s conscience nothing could bang the gavel as hard as Lady Justice dropping her guard so that his team could be the ones pulling the lever at the gallows.

He’d be glad to watch them hang forever.

“This is a fine ride, ya know?” Rashid’s voice broke the silence, and put affable cracks in Gary’s ascetic silence.

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“Yes, yes I do.” Gary grunted. “Thanks.”

“Man, you need to *relax*. See me? I’m relaxed.”

“I’ll be better relaxed when I’m killing me some hostiles.”

“Bad-guy justice, I dig it.”

“You’re strange, you know that?” Gary said slowly, just as languidly turning his head to the right to stare at Rashid.

Rashid grinned back. “Hey man, I might have my peculiar moments, but at least I’m not like Sergio. No offense or anything, but if memory serves me right, he’s pretty fucking weird.”

Gary returned his attention to the road and cracked a partial smile.

“You are right about that,” he said. “Although, Sergio sees himself as “eccentric.” Sometimes he’ll hum and whistle before—or after—a takedown. He calls it *eccentric*, I call it *looney*.” Gary shrugged. “Whatever puts you in the zone, gets your war paint on.”

“Cheers to that.”

A few minutes later and the two cars were wrapping around to the back parking lot of a strip market in Vallejo. They slowed down dramatically, taking an immediate liking to the desertion along the asphalt. Very few cars, except a couple of parked half-trailer semi’s backed into separate loading docks. Further down the strip and around a slight bend got them to the seventy-foot stretch of pavement behind their target building. Just as Sergio had predicted, the back half of their enemies’ hideout was like a warehouse. The building as a whole, a kind of hybrid with the restaurant front.

Tires crawled to a stop and then the two drivers swiftly but quietly spun their vehicles around to park appropriately. A heavy exit door with no handle was beside a closed rollup door and an access ladder with a cage around its base. This general area was where they aimed their rear bumpers, parking with six feet worth of cushion between them and the bollard by the door.

Engines were killed and doors popped open.

However, before anyone got out, they prepped themselves for discretion. On went their M95 gas masks, each fitted with a CP3N filter, followed by black Delta 4-LT tactical helmets. They secured every head and chinstrap before stuffing their hands into Blackhawk neoprene gloves, all except for Sergio. He donned his usual custom thimble gloves, but had a neoprene backup pair stuffed into a belt satchel.

Decked-out from head to toe, the team exited their vehicles and left the doors wide agape. They could only pray that nobody would be dumb enough to screw with the cars before they returned. With the gunfire set to go off soon enough, they figured nobody with any brain cells could get the chance.

“Fall in and gather your gear, boys,” Sergio sang as everyone did just that.

Gary whipped the tarpaulin off the firearms arraying the El Camino’s padded bed. He let it droop over the side and leaned in to retrieve his Rossi Overland. He wasn’t proud about slinging it, and even for him it was an uncomfortable thing to do, but with discretion taking door-number-one, he needed to be patient. So into his hands went the AK-74u, with a metal clip behind the receiver so that he could snap it to his belt or holster later.

The others got set up, locked-‘n’-loaded, in no time.

They slinked toward the door, barely even giving it or the rollup a second glance. Their attention switched over to the caged access ladder, which rose to the flattop roof four stories up. They were fortunate no security cameras were visible this side of the building, just in case identification in their cars could’ve been made. Sergio quietly remarked about how the goons inside had been discussing the improvement of their security, or so he’d heard in between beatings.

The sheer fact that these assholes—no matter how well-connected and equipped they were, or how numerous—were willing to nab and pummel someone they must’ve known had dangerous affiliates, and *not* expected retaliation.

For every action there was a reaction, and a reaction from these four was never anything shy of overkill.



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Today, they intended on proving it just.

"I'll go last," Gary said, not wanting to risk the faint chance that his Rossi might snap from its strap and give someone below him an instant concussion. Besides, as nimble as he could be, with all of this applied weight he wouldn't exactly be the quickest one up a ladder.

"I got point on this one," Sergio said, stepping forward. The others fanned out behind him. He racked the slide on the suppressed Beretta M92F then leveled it at the padlock securing the ladder cage. He fired two quick rounds into it, searing it away. Hardly a sound was made. Gary stepped forward to pull it open, and Sergio holstered his Beretta before adhering to the steel ladder. It wasn't in the greatest of conditions, but its brackets were still concreted so it wasn't going anywhere.

Behind and beneath Sergio followed Mark, then Rashid, and lastly Gary. Rashid only boarded the ladder once Mark had reached the top, and Gary got on as soon as his predecessor was being lent a hand at the top ledge.

With the whole team on the rooftop, they hunkered down and proceeded to the nearest source of cover—a large aluminum ventilation exhaust.

"Now what?" Rashid asked under his breath, which pushed through the gas mask quieter than he'd expected.

"We're lucky this rooftop is covered shallow gravel, or else we'd be making quite a racket right about now." Mark sighed, looked around. "I suggest we find—"

"A ladder?" Sergio said, already detaching from the group. His direction immediately brought the attention of the others, and Mark felt like an idiot that he hadn't spotted it first. A ladder on the other side of an A/C unit less than thirty feet from the one they'd just ascended, curling down out of sight. It wasn't on the edge of the building, but somewhere on the rooftop, indicating that it led straight down inside.

The three of them shuffled over to meet Sergio by this ladder. It dropped to an alcove about five feet deep and eight long. As they easily descended, facing their legs was a panel of

glass.

A window.

“Is it open?” Rashid asked.

“Ajar.” Sergio said. “Perfect.”

The window was oblong and didn’t leave a whole lot of room for squeezing through, but sure did beat crawling through a ventilation shaft and being all kinds of noisy, not to mention cramped. Here they squeezed through like fat snakes and dropped as quietly as they could into a small room that wore the weak skin of a makeshift office. A desk facing the wall with a single door to its right, some filing cabinets, and a bunch of stacked papers shoved into the corners. Fortunately there were no windows, except for the single rectangular panel in the door.

“Stack up,” Mark said, patting his helmet.

He and the others filed in, grouping around the door but not standing right in front of it.

Mark heaved a breath and reached for the handle.

Upon pulling it open, having seen nothing or nobody directly through the window, it was declared clear. However, a step further put Mark on a catwalk that appeared to circle the rectangular warehouse, which was more occupied than they were expecting. This being said, it wasn’t an empty warehouse—it was being used for stocking and storing, but what exactly was contained in so many cardboard boxes across many rows of gondolas...it could only be theorized.

Perhaps just stock for another legitimate business.

Or, drugs. Money. Guns, even.

From an outside perspective, everything appeared authentic and—more importantly for these goons—legal. However, in the long run it wasn’t the appearance which mattered, but the contents. The same as any man with a gun—the gun and that mug meant nothing when it came right down to it, not if he didn’t have the gall or the spine to make it matter.

This didn’t apply to these four men.

All of them came to kill, risking their lives, confident they’d come out on top through the heat of the action. In more

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ways than one it was a kind of thrill for all of them, while more for some than others.

Below them, as they hugged the wall so they wouldn't be drooping over the guardrails, were dozens of armed men. At least half of them wore black sports jackets over white button-down shirts and black slacks. The others were in fitted black T-shirts and jeans if not field cargo pants. It was the latter that struck the men as more to keep an eye on—they were here strictly for security, nothing else.

In spite of what had recently happened, the bad guys' level of vigilance was not very noteworthy.

"Did they have some kind of boss that you knew of?" Mark whispered to Sergio.

Sergio shrugged. "El Jefe? Not that I know of. They all kind of just took turns smacking me around. If anyone was the head honcho around here, it was probably one of the assholes you guys killed in that Land Rover earlier. The one with his gun in my side definitely had that aura."

They all took that to mean as much as it could.

Long story short—kill them all, no discretion, and the end of the day none would be missed by people who mattered. Their families, wherever they might be, hopefully had nothing to do with their illegitimate business. And that didn't even go into the killing, the kidnapping, the torture.

Of course, for a man like Sergio it had been little else but a toughening experience. Developing leather skin for his leather skin.

"I suggest we circle around, keep things as quiet as we can before pitching the thunder."

Everyone agreed with Gary. So Mark and Rashid took left, and the other two hooked right. Their boots, at a steady pace, made practically no sound on the metallic catwalk. A girder-laced ceiling four levels off the ground hung not far above their heads, with fewer fluorescent fixtures than they might've expected. This, along with the high-rise gondolas and their crate-like cardboard boxes, made for a subtly illuminated warehouse.

Added cover, they figured, and less shadows cast to the concrete floor below where their targets ambled.

How many enemies for certain couldn't be detailed from up here, considering the rows of gondolas and thus limited vision. However, a multitude was sure enough and Sergio's testimony earlier sufficed.

Divided, Mark and Rashid had the left long side of the warehouse. Mark was on point on the catwalk, Rashid close behind him. Mark's custom black polymer AK-47 occupied his hands, its buttstock never leaving his shoulder. The same was for Rashid's MTAR-21, significantly shorter than Mark's Kalashnikov—even with its suppressor. Nonetheless, both men maintained slim silhouettes and their clandestine progress held steadfast.

Then they came upon a small alcove to their left, and stared out across their right to see another which Gary and Sergio approached. They signaled to one another for breaching.

Rashid, with a smaller weapon better built for close ranges, went first. Mark held back to cover his rear and provide additional support should it come to it. The door in the center of the alcove had no window but wasn't set so far in that it might be a large room on the other side.

Just opposite them, Gary was set to breach and Sergio backed him in a similar fashion.

Mark gently squeezed Rashid's shoulder and he reached for the doorknob. Just then it turned, and the door pulled inward. A man wearing a button-down and black sports jacket with matching slacks appeared in the doorway, with a sudden lump in his throat. Rashid squeezed the trigger and drove a burst from the MTAR-21 in an uppercut fashion to his chin. The man's face and forehead erupted to the lintel and he mutely fell back in the same instant. A grunt was heard from inside the small room, where another similarly dressed man was fastening the clasp on his slacks.

He was strapped—a piece in a shoulder holster, but he didn't have the chance to go for it.

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Rashid cocked an eyebrow and put two in his forehead.

Blood splashed the wall behind him and he crumpled in a heartbeat. The room could barely be considered a spacious closet, and entirely empty.

Rashid turned to face Mark and looked disturbed.

“Well,” he sighed, “that was strange.”

Mark peered in after Rashid exited, and found himself a little unnerved as well. When Mark returned to Rashid’s heels on the catwalk, Gary and Sergio had finished clearing their side. No contact over there.

Fortunately the warehouse was generally quiet, or else they probably wouldn’t have heard the sound of a door closing further down the catwalks. It resounded through the warehouse like a hollow echo, a clap of the hands. They spotted a man with a MAC-10 in his hand leave what appeared to be another office at the other end of the warehouse’s catwalk cadre.

“All yours,” Rashid said, kneeling back into the alcove.

The bad guy, wearing a fitted shirt and field pants, was like a smaller version of Gary. He looked up from an unlit cigarette in his mouth to first see Mark—and only Mark. Gary and Sergio had ducked back into the alcove, taking cover. Mark, however, stood against the wall to his left and—AK-47 shouldered, staring into its holographic sight—fired before he could even raise his MAC-10. His lips dropped the cigarette as brain matter misted the air behind him. He fell backward, a hefty sound made louder by the MAC-10 no longer in his possession. It clattered loudly on the catwalk and drew numerous gazes up from directly below.

A forklift sounded at the far end of the warehouse, the direction which they approached, masking very slightly their audibility.

Mark shot a glance to his right and saw both of his comrades peering over the edge of their catwalk guardrail. Gary’s suppressed AK-74u began spitting minuscule muzzle flashes and Sergio’s two-handed Beretta was no different. Three bad guys directly below them took hits across their chests, one

of them in the crown of his head before he could look up, then they fell to the ground. Two had been equipped with Uzi machine-pistols, which now clattered on the concrete. The other fell before he could even draw his pistol from a hip holster.

Rashid stepped past Mark just then to blind-fire over the ledge of a guardrail. Eight rounds rained below from a less-than-quiet suppressor, the clicking of the gun's charging handle making more noise than the shots themselves. The two MP5-wielding men below had spun to aim obliquely upward at Gary and Sergio, but were now less than capable of fulfilling their plan. Rashid neutralized them, permanently, then pulled back to put his heels against the wall.

"Nice reflexes," Mark said.

"I heard what you said back there."

"What's that?" Mark cocked an eyebrow, trying to feign not knowing.

"You muttered 'smoking kills' after you killed Gary Junior up ahead."

Mark rolled his eyes. He couldn't lie to it.

"Be a little more creative next time, eh?" Rashid said. "I'd expect that much from you."

"What-the-fuck-ever."

Rashid smirked, hidden behind his gas mask, and took point after checking his magazine.

With bad guys separated from line-of-sight by rows upon rows of occupied gondolas, the armed men up top had an upper hand. They proceeded with picking off as many goons as they could with their suppressed weapons before they'd be forced to go loud. Or at least, before a loud atmosphere would ensue regardless of their preferences.

By the time they reached the end of the catwalk, by the office which 'Gary Junior' had exited, the operating forklift below them had circled around. It was proceeding down a center aisle between two gondola rows, soon to discover a pair of corpses Gary and Sergio made earlier.

Creation from destruction.

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And then the forklift's driver did, immediately hopping out and shouting something Spanish. He drew his Colt Regent from his waistband, and aimed it in no particular direction whatsoever—before Rashid double-tapped him in the right temple. A thin film of blood smeared across the forklift's seat and he messily collapsed.

"Jesus," Rashid said, pulling back from the guardrail to look at Mark. "Even the *workers* are packing heat."

"OSHA might have a problem with that."

Rashid tilted his head. "Okay, okay. Not bad."

A curt whistle caught their attention and they flung it over the tops of three gondola rows. Gary and Sergio were shuffling toward the far end of the catwalk, by the office. They only had a little ways to go. At this pace, their footfalls were making a touch more noise than previously.

"Intruders, intruders!" someone yelled in a clear, irate voice. It was punctuated by someone yelling in Spanish and then another further down the warehouse shouting "Catwalks, they're on the catwalks!"

Following this were bursts of gunfire from a variety of SMGs and pistols, mostly MP5's and Uzis. Slews of 9mm bullets started pattering at the undersides of the catwalks, which were fortunate solid and not grated, but after enough pummeling it wouldn't matter. For now they held sound against the bullets hosing up from below, though soon it didn't really matter. Mark, Rashid, Gary and Sergio busted entered the far office to readdress the matter at hand.

"It's all out, now," Gary said simply. He dexterously swapped the sling from his Rossi to the AK-74u, slung it, and put the double-barreled shotgun in his clutches. "Choose as you may. Watch your fire, keep frosty on those corners."

"You're going down below?" Mark asked incredulously.

"Not right now," Gary said. "I was talking about Sergio and Rashid, considering their arsenal. Figured you and I would stay up here for some aerial coverage. Starting off, at least."

Mark shrugged. "I'm down." He nodded to Rashid as

they all readjusted their current arsenal. “Be careful down there. I’ve got you covered.”

“Gracias, madre,” Rashid said with a horrible Spanish accent. He had slung his suppressed MTAR-21 and put the Benelli M4 in his hands.

“Aw, mi corazón,” Sergio said softly, his accent more genuine, and his acting sincere.

“Enough, ladies, let’s get to it.”

There was no denying their enthusiasm, and Gary helped cut their shenanigans short. They didn’t mind. The time for retribution was here, the time for justice, the time for mayhem and bloodshed.

They were going to put a cork in the bad guys’ operation, whatever kind it was, for good.

Twenty seconds ago the shooting from below had stopped, followed by a hushed vigilance that had since swollen among the ranks of the bad guys at ground level. Now they split up, strategically, with Mark hugging the left side catwalk and Gary returning to the right. Just as coordinately, Rashid took to the left staircase and Sergio the right of this end to the warehouse. These steps were spaced steel and their boots made a whole sort of ruckus descending them.

At this point, cover was thrown out the window.

Two bad guys seemed to sprout from the woodworks as Rashid descended his staircase, bullets punching into steel around him. He crouched and half-slid down the guardrail with Benelli hipped. His right hand clutched the foregrip, and he fired a 12-gauge load of buckshot into the nearest man, ripping off his unprotected chest. The other man wore a vest, surprisingly, and took a spread to the abdomen without bleeding. The impact sufficed to knock him off his feet, however, so down he went in a backwards tumble. His MP5 was slung, so it didn’t hit the ground when it came from his hands.

Rashid vehemently pumped the shotgun using the foregrip attached to its sliding stock, and put a higher shot into his target. The man didn’t have time to scream. As he went



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down under a haze of gore, a third charged Rashid from behind some boxes. Rashid was cocking the Benelli when he appeared, and Mark acceptably stole the kill. His aerial view wasn't as perfect as he would've liked, but it did have its great advantages. He put a burst into the man's left shoulder, one of the 7.62mm bullets catching his jugular with 2,000 joules of energy behind it. Blood fountained from the wound and the man gurgle-screamed with seconds left on his rope.

Rashid carefully proceeded, stepping over the corpse and looking up to give Mark a casual salute.

Mark nodded and looked over briefly to see how Sergio was doing. He had descended his set of stairs with less opposition, a total of two gunmen-turned-corpses within ten seconds of touching down. Both of the kills were all his, while Gary hung back surveying the area for his own. Sergio's single-action Ruger Vaquero was a mean shooter and had a distinct sound as it popped off .357 rounds from its five-inch barrel.

A fresh silence filled with the echoing of gunfire and the quick but cautious steps of both Sergio and Rashid, now settled over the warehouse.

A sudden whistle caught Mark's attention. He looked up and saw Gary motioning forward with a free hand, thumb tucked to the palm and the other four fingers closed together. Mark shifted his focus and movement forward, realistically to his far left, and then down to ground level. Through a pair of double-doors were pouring into the warehouse a group of armed bad guys. All but two of the eight men were wearing vests over T-shirts and jeans or cargo pants. The two outcasts were wearing tuxedos, strangely enough.

Waiters from the restaurant called for duty?

Mark smirked at the concept. He and Gary closed in on their location, who were all too stupid to look up until the last second. One man exclaimed something in Spanish and the other started to yell "catwalks" but didn't get any further than the 't.' Gary fired first, arcing his double-barreled shotgun over the railing and squeezing one of two triggers. The Rossi Overland

made a sound not so dissimilar from a thunderclap and had an equal if not more devastating effect. One of the two men wearing a tuxedo lost his head in its entirety. The Rossi's 10-gauge slug sufficed for just that. Gore and brain matter were now smeared and spattered on the faces and shoulders of nearby cohorts, wearing expressions of disgust and anger and fear.

Gary and Mark worked off the foremost.

Their panic fed them scattering targets, but with their upper hand—literally—this wasn't much of a problem. Mark swept the aim of his AK-47 for a broad area of damage, cutting down three men with ease, including the other tux. His additional two victims took rounds to the head and the upper chest, just above the sternum and clavicles where their vests didn't reach.

Gary, on the other hand, didn't need to worry about Kevlar coverage. His 10-gauge slugs violated them at any rate.

He let his second barrel go off into a man's right shoulder as he tried fleeing the area without bothering with his weapon. The entire shoulder blew off in a spray of gore and splintered bone, tossing the arm off to the side. The man howled with pain and plunged into the floor flailing. As Gary reloaded, Mark emptied his first magazine after racking up five kills.

The two men's backs went to the walls away from the catwalk's railing so that they were out of sight for reloading.

Gary popped open the boxlock to the double-barreled shotgun and the two spent shells ejected through swirls of smoke. They clattered at his feet on the metal catwalk and he popped two fresh ones from a belted satchel into the breeches. He snapped it shut and returned to aim over the ledge while Mark had since finished and was trying to locate the survivor from the group.

"Mine!" Sergio all of a sudden shouted, and cocked the hammer to his Vaquero with one thumb then squeezed the trigger with his forefinger. The man who had taken cover behind a stack of boxes had his foot to thank on that one. Big toe and the one next to that blew off, blood across the concrete floor and

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a scream piercing the air. He staggered out into view and Sergio singlehandedly fired the Vaquero again, clipping his right shoulder. The man spun around, defenseless at this point. Rashid put a third .357 between his clavicles, which exited out the center of his trapezius muscle. Blood and agony spewed through the air as he fell backwards with a crippled ability to scream.

Sergio walked up to the fallen man, who squirmed on the ground, and glared upon him. He put one between his eyes before walking away.

Rashid joined his side and together they reloaded, back-to-back. Above them, Gary and Mark contemplated their completion. The bad guys' stupidity had taken them by good surprise, and now they appeared to be done.

"No sirens...yet," Mark muttered to himself.

Their relaxation came slowly, but surely. And, just as boldly, it was shattered.

"Check your fire, watch the merch!" came a virile voice toward the other end of the warehouse, past the forklift and between the staircases. The voice was void of an accent and thick with rage. "I want those motherfuckers' heads on a *plate*!"

Sergio and Rashid looked at each other, eyes wide behind their gas masks.

"*Somebody's* upset," Sergio said cutely.

"Hey, Gary!" Rashid shouted, looking up. He knocked on his gas mask's right eye goggle and said: "Read it and *weep*!"

Gary nodded once, firm, and leaned the Rossi up against the wall behind him. He jogged down the catwalk, toward the source of the angry bad guy, and glimpsed an influx of twelve men plus the bossman himself—tall, dark, and ugly. A scarred face, disheveled black hair, thin mustache, cleft chin, poorly tanned skin, and a suit that looked like it had just run an obstacle course.

Once in position, just as the Caucasian El Jefe spotted him on the catwalk to his left, Gary popped a tear gas canister and tossed it below. It rang out across the concrete floor, sewing a smog of dense gas whose effects worked under twenty

seconds. Until then, there was panic and confusion and the inability to spot their targets through the ashen haze.

Gary popped a second and tossed it down before drawing his dual Raging Bulls. He didn't hesitate. The first four shots, two from each, took out a pair of bad guys with instant and instantly messy headshots before the tear gas blocked his view. After that, until the Raging Bulls clicked dry, it was all guesswork. In addition to his Taurus revolvers' thunderous gunfire, the men below shot in staccato bursts toward the catwalks with a frenzied lack of precision.

Gary's ears were ringing ever so slightly as he reloaded en route back to his Rossi. He holstered the revolvers before scooping it up and putting the mahogany buttstock to his shoulder.

"Fan out!" Gary bellowed at the top of his lungs.

He hoped that put a new kind of fear trepidation in the bad guys' hearts and minds as they meandered about. He heard some guns being dropped, and a lot of coughing by now. He strolled back toward what might arguably be called the front of the warehouse, that is, where the staircases were and as such the entrance through which these men below entered. Upon arriving, he was glad to see that the Bossman hadn't cowered out through those doors in spite of the tear gas. He was probably panicking himself, lost in the bedlam caused by the CS gas, and would now suffer no different a fate than his goons.

Meanwhile, below, Rashid and Sergio divided.

Rashid took the aisle between gondolas he had traversed earlier, and Sergio the same to his. They navigated a floor littered with corpses, careful not to slip on any pools of blood, until first contact was made.

Rashid put two quick loads of buckshot into the man's torso, first in the gut and then up in the chest. His vest punctured and blood leaked out the sides of it. He fell into a comrade whose face felt as if on fire, and then Rashid put him down too with a higher shot this time. Spent 12-gauge shells popped out of the ejection port on the right side of the Benelli M4, twirling

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through the air and to the floor enveloped in wisps of smoke. Steam curled out of the shotgun's breech.

Sergio, across the way, ducked and knelt every time he spotted an enemy. The first he took out had abandoned his role as a gunman, but still suffered his predetermined fate. Sergio put a round in between his eyes real fast like, then followed by dropping the next—whose weapon was still wielded—in a messier manner. Three quick shots to the gut like lethal pop rocks digested poorly. He fell, clutching his bleeding-vested stomach, crimson smeared across his teeth and lips. Sergio sprung up, dodging a spray of gunfire from within the smog of CS gas, put his back to a gondola crate, and flattened his silhouette.

Above, spotting the automatic muzzle flashes on Sergio's side and knowing that it wasn't his comrade, Gary leveled his Rossi Overland. He squeezed one trigger and was disappointed he couldn't see his kill.

Sergio definite did, though.

The spray of blood and brain and skull fragments sufficed to call the threat eliminated.

Nearby gunmen screamed shrilly as their cohorts died gruesomely around them and their eyes seared with a nonlethal pain almost worse than death. Sergio returned to what might be considered out in the open, except that nobody could really see anything to begin with. He emptied the contents of his Vaquero's fixed cylinder into the crowd of tear gas and tumbleweed bad guys before spinning it on his finger and returning it to its holster at his hip. Then he unslung his HK416 carbine, hands practically gluing themselves to its surface, a particular trigger finger zealous for action.

On the other side of the gondolas stood Rashid, swapping out weapons. He replaced his Benelli, which slung onto his back, for the pair of double-barrel pistols manufactured by Arsenal Firearms. The black steel AF2011-A pistols were menacing to look at from the other side, but from where Rashid stood they were simply gorgeous.

He enjoyed squeezing both trigger on both pistols simultaneously, putting out four .45 ACP rounds in one instant. The recoil was reasonably double per hand, but Rashid has had ample practice. He handled it well, slowly walking into the tear gas filtered safely out via his gas mask. The CP3N filter did its job, and so did the AF2011-A's. One man on the other side of the tear gas where it was thickest apparently lost his mind and charged Rashid in a staggering dash. He emerged firing his MAC-10 in bursts, but Rashid was partially covered by a stack of cardboard boxes on a pallet to the right of the aisle. The man essentially overshot Rashid and nearly charged right past him had he not readjusted his direction. This readjustment came at the price of four .45 rounds—just to make sure—two taking him in the left bicep, another two higher up the neck. The man's body was flung into the side of a gondola, his weapon going off along the length of a crate. Bullets pocked holes in it and out poured in lazy streams some kind of white powder. Rashid's eyes went wide and he knew immediately that this would be a substantial bust for VPD or DEA, whoever was to get here first and claim lead jurisdiction.

Not to mention long after Rashid and the others cleared the area. Or so they planned, prayed for.

Rashid ducked in time to evade the buckshot of an enemy's 12-gauge Mossberg, then dove left firing his DBPs in a clumsy John Woo manner.

The man's knees blew out through plumes of blood and he cried out as he collapsed. The Mossberg clattered beyond his reach, and he reached for a sidearm holstered in spite of the bitterness biting his eyes.

Rashid stood and killed the man quickly.

Lastly he emptied the four total magazines into the crowd of tear gas and supposed bad guys, finally holstering them. He wouldn't bother with reloading, not now and not with those. Instead he replaced the vacuity in his hands with the suppressed MTAR-21. He returned behind cover, putting his back to it so he could catch his breath.

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“Head count!” Gary shouted.

“Marco!” Rashid called.

“Polo!” Sergio hollered just before returning to the fight. His HK416 was suppressed and better this way, making him all the more of a ghost in the rolling tear gas smoke. He swept his aim across the silhouettes still standing amid it, grinning when he heard their bodies and weapons crumble to the floor.

“Mark, nine o’clock!” Gary barked.

Mark, having thrown all of his attention downward at the tear gas fiasco, had obviously disregarded his rear. When he spun to face his right, which at the time was sort of his six, he spotted two gunmen scaling a ladder to his catwalk thirty feet down. One of them was already at the top, struggling to get up while one-handing a Desert Eagle. Mark snapped the AK-47 to his shoulder and put a messy burst into the ladder’s crest. Bullets ricocheted off metal before they shredded the bad guy’s face in half. He hung lifelessly off the edge of the catwalk where the ladder broke its guardrail, his torso anchoring him up instead of down.

His comrade didn’t have a problem with pulling him off and out of his own way.

Mark wondered why these people still even tried.

He knelt and stuck the suppressed barrel of the AK-47 through the guardrail, resting it on a horizontal pole. He squeezed the trigger and emptied his weapon into the enemy. The man fell, and fell hard. If he hadn’t died from the shots, he sure did die upon impact.

Mark stood, went to reload, and saw across the way Gary engaging his own enemies rising from the stairwell. New bad guys, fresh targets, wanting to dodge the radius of the persistent tear gas. They were coughing as they rose, nonetheless, considerably unscathed from its worse effects.

Gary’s shot from the Rossi Overland struck the bad guy in the chest, who was without a vest. The blast threw him backwards, and into his cohort, with whom he then tumbled down the staircase. The man whom his corpse had struck was

unharmd from bullets but on their way down one of his legs got caught going the wrong way in between a guardrail and—

A shrill scream sprouted from the staircase.

Gary went to reload, ejecting spent shells in one instant and scooping out new ones in another. Then another man rose past the two downed at the stairs, hopeful to get the drop on a reloading old man.

They were wrong to even try, really.

Gary spotted the vest-wearing man whose goatee was a rabbit's compared to him and whose mohawk was too short to notice. The guy, wielding a UMP-45, crested the stairs just as Gary dropped the Rossi to his left hand and drew a Raging Bull with his right. Three shots from the UMP-45 put the first two rounds in Gary's chest, and the third just over his left shoulder. Gary's feet scuffed the catwalk but did nothing more.

He responded with a fierce reaction and drove three shots of the .44 Raging Bull into the man's vest. The first one knocked the wind out of him at twenty feet's distance, the second more than bruised his breastbone, and the third clipped the collar to punch through his upper chest. Blood spewed from the exit wound in his shoulder blade and everything combined with the pain brought him down, hard.

Gary coughed into his mask and regained his bearings.

Mark, on the other hand, still hadn't gotten the chance. He was dealing with fools from both directions—at the staircase and behind him, rising from that damn ladder. He currently put all of his focus on the staircase, where three men worked on overpowering him as they ascended.

Gary wasn't too sure how that would work, but he had realized that the tear gas below was dissipating and he heard no further action down there.

"These fucking guys never quit," he mumbled to himself as he reloaded the Rossi and spotted the topmost goon crest the ladder. He immediately began circling the catwalk to reach the other side, waiting until the last minute to shoulder the Rossi and fire. He aimed low, so as to avoid the slightest risk of hitting



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Mark in the background. The shot from the Rossi startled Mark after he killed his first staircase target, and when he turned around he saw a hole in the bad guy's left chest where Gary was aiming. Mark nodded a courteous one before returning to the bad guys still rising up the steps.

Just then the second guy up the ladder dangled where he was to try shooting his weapon. The M1911 in his right hand went off, one bullet searing past Gary and the other clipping his right shoulder, just grazing the Kevlar there. Gary shrugged it off and blind-fired the Rossi, as risky as that was in itself. The Recoil from the weapon nearly took it from his own hands, but he managed to hold onto it while the M1911-wielding guy couldn't keep a grip on his life.

The man's corpse fell, headless, into the cohort boarding the ladder at its base. There was a hollow scream ensued by panicky small arms fire from below.

Gary set the Rossi to lean against the wall and unslung his suppressed AK-74u. He didn't blind-fire it, nor did he poke his head over the ledge of the ladder-mounted catwalk—until he heard the man below stop firing and start exclaiming.

Reloading time for him.

Killing time for Gary.

He walked to the edge of the ladder-mounted catwalk and towered over it, glaring down through his gas mask goggles to watch his enemy take a streak of 7.62s into the face and upper chest. The man dropped in a heap, and Gary couldn't see any other bad guys...wait...

He spotted someone weaving around pallet-stacks of crates toward Rashid's position, whom he spotted through the clearing haze of tear gas engaging an enemy at close-quarters.

Gary dropped the AK-74u and slid down the ladder in nearly the same motion.

Meanwhile, above, Mark went prone all of a sudden to dodge a line of fire from the only remaining enemy on the steps. He ran out of AK-47 ammunition and didn't have the luxury of reloading at the time, so he ditched it for his dual Kimbers. The

silver compensator-sporting Gold Combat II 1911s were gorgeous and deadly in combat. He squeezed the triggers as fast as he could manage, and slayed the guy on the steps with four rounds to the unprotected chest.

Mark knew it would only take two, if not one well-placed shot, but figured there was no hassle in making certain.

As he rose and reloaded his weapons, Gary was on the floor practically gliding toward his target. The enemy was thinner but not gaunt, about Sergio's size but with long dirty-blond hair. He came within sight of Rashid's figure—who was finishing off an enemy at his feet—when he drew his Uzi. But Gary was there in the same instant, claspings his left hand to the man's throat and pulling him back while his right hand unsheathed a knife which he drove into the bad guy's right abdomen. All seven inches of the CRKT blade buried itself into the man's flesh, seeping blood around it and a hollow squeal of agony between his lips. He sputtered blood but it didn't last long.

Gary yanked the knife from the man's side flesh then raised it to neck level and pulled its serrated edge across his throat.

"Fatality," he growled into the man's ear.

Blood curtained over his victim's collar and fell to Gary's feet. A deep breath later connected Rashid's gaze with Gary's and Sergio was at his right side. There was a faint groaning somewhere up ahead, toward the front of the warehouse and the concentration area of the tear gas. There was slight movement at Rashid's feet, slinking away from him.

Gary heard the sound of someone sliding down a ladder. He turned to see Mark touch his boots to the concrete, with his AK-47 coupled to wrap around his back alongside the unused FN shotgun. He then drew one of his Kimber Gold Combat II's, which were technically Gary and Sergio's. He strode up to meet Gary briefly.

"Don't forget your Rossi and AK up there. I couldn't fit 'em on me to bring them down."

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“No problem. And don’t worry, I won’t.”

Mark nodded and slapped Gary on his bicep. “Thanks for the coverage.”

Gary nodded rigidly.

Mark approached Rashid, and Sergio followed after he threw something snide Gary’s way.

The three of them eventually converged on Rashid’s position, who towered over a crippled Bossman. What appeared to be a legitimate ATF badge on a ball-chain necklace rested on his vested chest, which heaved with traumatized breaths.

“So, what was it, motherfucker?” Mark asked.

“The drugs, the guns, the danger, or the sex and rock ‘n’ roll?” Rashid added. He shrugged. “‘Cause I can get that shit legally, and for better cost. Well...except the drugs. I don’t fuck with that road.”

“Nor should you have,” Gary said, his voice low and bestial, as he took another step to tower over the man whose eyes swam with fear and regret.

“I...just...needed the money—” was all the dirty agent could whine before each man standing put their fair share into his chest.

If someone had possessed an omniscient vantage point, they might have said that Sergio fired the first shot. Or maybe Gary. At that rate, Mark and Rashid were just as quick to their triggers. The good-for-nothing ex-ATF agent’s chest became Swiss cheese in the matter of seconds.

Sergio’s HK416 spat a few rounds, shredding through a surprisingly unvested chest. Gary’s single Taurus popped a couple of shots off in the same instant. Mark’s borrowed Kimber 1911 and Rashid’s MTAR-21 brought closure to the mess.

Gunsmoke and the bitter scent of bloodshed hung poignantly in the air. The atmosphere within the warehouse was dense and practically pulsing with a foreign filth.

“You know there’s cocaine in some of these,” Rashid mentioned, toggling the safety on his Tavor. He looked around at their faces, shrugged. “Or heroine. White powder through

bullet holes is all I saw.”

“Probably guns and money, too, amid all of this,” Gary said. “All the more reason to bail sooner rather than later.”

“Yeah, I think that’s an accurate observation,” Sergio said, already turning his back on the corpse at his feet. He headed straight for the back door, which he assumed based on the warehouse’s layout, would lead them straight to their vehicles.

“Everyone, let’s pull out!” Gary said, patting the top of his MICH helmet.

The four men hustled outside, secured their weapons in the El Camino’s bed, hopped inside their respective cabins, and set fire to the asphalt before the faintest of sirens could be heard in the distance.

Whatever immunities that dirty agent had managed to buy, it couldn’t protect him against the justice wrought by these four nor could it secure him peace in a posthumous trial. The connection he had on the inside, or plural, would undoubtedly choke or panic and then the whole shebang would come to a close. Wrapped up with a pristine bow on top and the names of whoever gets jurisdiction in the front newspaper.

Mark, Rashid, Gary and Sergio would go unknown.

They were fine with this. It wasn’t fame or identification they sought. They enjoyed being ghosts clad with the fortunes of an infinite arsenal and boundless rewards.

None of them sought retirement, not even Gary.

This was their way of life, their maxim to live it.

Who’s to say that they wouldn’t suffer huge repercussions from the Department after what they did? Going against the Chief’s orders, just for some risky payback, was grounds for all kinds of punishment. They expected to be suspended from their special line of duty for some time, which they saw as retirement. Ultimately, though, they would be praised from the inside for their valiance and efficacy. The end result came to be a massive bust, the biggest this side of the U.S. in over a decade. Before any of their clandestine commendations

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and monetary rewards, they would suffer the necessary initial punishment.

They accepted this without a second thought.

In the end, however, it would always be how Mark put it one day following a gruesome takedown that resulted in twenty large being confiscated by the DEA alongside a couch full of bagged narcotics.

“They need us to do our dirty work,” he’d said.

“And,” Gary had so aptly responded, “if we just happen to level the building in the process, then so be it.”

“A victory’s a victory,” Rashid was on point to say.

Sergio: “Even if we go a lil’ crazy sometimes.”



