

DOG EAT DOG

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He has written freelance non-fiction for UK magazines and had short stories published in the UK, US and Canada. His presence on the Internet got him a place in a BBC documentary, 'Through The Eyes of the Young' directed by Chris Terrill.

He spent 8 years working for a government agency, within the IT Division, developing a virtual communications service, before moving into commercial online project management for a UK media company.

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SAMPLE PREVIEW
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Novels

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Short Stories

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Murder At Sharky Point

David J Rodger

DOG EAT DOG

Sample Preview
Work in Progress
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1

Carlos stepped away from the battered metal door of the command bunker. A fancy name for what had been a shabby caravan trailer ten years earlier. The woman behind him moaned through her gag. Somebody else chuckled. Men around him spoke briefly in French. Cigarettes were being lit. You could have cut the tension with a knife.

The air was boiling hot, humid and sticky; the command bunker was like an oven in the unrelenting Mediterranean sun. Flies were lazily swirling within the few pools of natural light. Most of the windows were covered and every face in the shadow-choked chamber was slick with sweat. The cigarette smoke wasn't going to help: but this was a vital moment. Not just for them, but for Carlos too. Finally, after months of proving himself, he had access to the inner circle of this group. He lowered his head, looked outside through a grubby window shielded by strips of metal, squinting against the bright sunlight and watched the leader of this rag-tag bunch of thugs stride through the camp towards the command bunker.

Carlos pushed the heavy-framed spectacles up the greasy skin of his nose; his pulse rate increased several notches. At least his hands had stopped trembling: was he getting used to the effect this man had on those around him?

The man was Marchand; he strode across sun baked mud, between rows of caravans, with his bulky chest pushed ahead of him like a snow plough; guards lowered crossbows and stepped aside at his approach. A mutter

went through the command bunker, uncertainty and anticipation; the woman moaned again then squealed wildly through the rag as somebody kicked her.

Marchand entered without uttering a word and scanned the cramped and crowded space. Carlos averted his gaze. Marchand saw the woman and moved forward with deliberate slowness, savouring the look of fear seeping into every aspect of her blood-snot-and-grime-smearred face. She knew him, and knew what he was capable of. In his early fifties he carried his large build with a graceless swagger; a single-handed sword hung from a leather hip-belt and flapped back and forth with every move. The Talisman hung around Marchand's bullish neck from a length of silver chain. Carlos shuddered against his will and found his eyes straying back to the Talisman again and again; he resisted the urge to push up the heavy-framed glasses again, cautious not to draw any more attention to them.

Something was said in a harsh military tone; Carlos missed the exact meaning, his thoughts distracted by a swirl of emotions: very unlike him. It wasn't the woman or her state of distress; he'd learned a long time ago to partition his morality. It was the awareness that the power of the Talisman was real: an effect beyond mental suggestion and hypnotic mass hysteria.

Marchand moved closer, his gaze fixed on the woman. Carlos looked at her, pushing the Talisman from his mind for a few moments to dwell on what he thought he might be about to see. Evidence of previous episodes had come to his attention during the months he'd been here: lifeless bodies with a fury of savage wounds, and bloodied marks that matched the curious tattoo Marchand and all his most loyal men shared. The tattoo was their symbol; a sign of their brotherhood. Most of the men in the command bunker had the tattoo; Carlos was one of the few who didn't.

Those bodies were carted off to the old man who lived alone amongst an area of deserted caravans, next to the shore of the stagnant lake: Sebastian Faust. Carlos had no idea what the bodies were used for; some kind of experiment within the barn-like structure that had been built down there.

There was purpose to the killings; a method and ceremony, it seemed. Carlos wanted to see what Marchand did and to understand the significance to those within the inner circle; those with the tattoo.

The woman was thirty-nine, three years Carlos senior, any good-looks lost to the last ten years struggling through poor summers and harsh winters to survive. A heavy face, deeply lined, bad skin flushed red in places. Long hair had been cruelly cut down to dark tufts.

She was naked. Propped upright on a sturdy wooden chair, rolls of fat compressed together around broad hips, hands cuffed behind the slats, bruised ankles cuffed to each chair leg. The chair was covered in dried blood. The blood wasn't hers. Not yet.

Carlos knew her name but chose not to dwell on that fact.

She stared at Marchand as he stepped closer again; her eyes bugged wide, pleading and watery. The trembling in her body had her head juddering up and down.

Marchand eyed her with all the favour of something he'd just scraped off his leather riding boots. The men packed into the command bunker were jittery and restless. Marchand was unpredictable, psychopathic and violent. Yet they wanted to see their leader enforce their law, and this was an opportunity for a killing. A ceremonial killing?

The woman's crime: her son had abandoned the settlement without Marchand's permission. It was feudal law and rough justice.

Carlos maintained an impassive stare. He couldn't muster up a fake grin of anticipation. He just felt numb. The responsibility for her situation rested on his shoulders. He'd smuggled her son away. He'd stashed the jewellery the son had given him as payment: par for the course.

Marchand grabbed the woman by her face, dirt encrusted fingers sinking into her flabby flesh. She squealed involuntarily, a muffled sound through the filthy rag tied around her bleeding mouth; snorted to catch a breath through her nose. He pushed her head back so that her neck was arched, throat exposed. He lowered his gaze and surveyed sagging breasts and the untidy mess of dark pubic hair, his expression soured with disgust.

The silence had Carlos skin buzzing. It was like waiting for a bomb to explode. He wanted to walk away but the job made him stay.

"Alexandre."

A middle-aged man stepped forward at Marchand's prompt; mud splattered fatigues with urban cammo tucked into knee-high walking socks; equally muddy sports trainers on his feet; a padded-nylon body warmer over a bare chest; thin but muscular arms. A rainbow coloured

belt supported the weight of a hand-axe hanging from one hip.

Marchand didn't look at Alexandre, didn't take his gaze from the woman as he forced her head even further back. She struggled to breath and mumbled incomprehensible pleas through the gag.

"Drag this worthless sack of skin and bones over to the lake," Marchand instructed in French, "Leave her in the chair and put her in the water. See how long she can stand the cold... give her time to contemplate the misbehaviour of her son."

Marchand let go of her face. Her head swung forward and she sobbed and gasped through the gag. Marchand drove a fist into her mid-riff, and leaned in close as the woman rocked forward, retching.

"I want you to remember how good I've been to you and your people."

The woman sucked in air through her nose; saliva and mucus slid down from the gag.

"Hmmm?" he enquired if she understood.

Her body shuddered with a sob.

Marchand grabbed one of her sagging breasts in a violent grip and twisted it. The woman thrashed against her bonds, squealing in pain.

Carlos felt a mixture of anger and disappointment. Anger at Marchand's brutality, and paradoxically disappointment at the realisation he wasn't going to witness the power of the Talisman... if that's what was really causing the various phenomenons Carlos had witnessed and experienced.

There would be no killing today.



The sun was cooking the parched ground, it hadn't rained for weeks. The air must have been 40c plus. Carlos dealt with it, walking at a steady pace, not swinging his arms, conserving energy and reducing the amount of moisture evaporating from him. His grubby clothes and strips of leather armour were stained with overlapping sweat stains;

he probably reeked but he was impervious to such smells these days.

He was 14 kilometres North East of Le Lac des Rêves, the place he'd been calling home for the past four months; he was walking along the badly weathered surface of what had once been a major motorway, the A9 Autoroute. Like most strips of tarmac it had suffered from weathering without repair over the past ten years. No vehicles had passed him in the two hours he'd been walking along it; no carts; no horses; no people. The silence was vast but not ubiquitous: the repetitive clicks and chirps of little insects, coming from the overgrown wilderness either side of the road, kept him company. It was probably too hot for the few survivors who were settled here to venture out on any unnecessary journeys; and the majority of people still left here would be working the dehydrated fields for food or crafting objects that they would take to the traders in Montpellier, when it wasn't so hot.

Carlos licked his cracked lips and tried not to think about the half-litre of water he had with him; in a battered plastic bottle, the label long since peeled away, even the flecks of adhesive removed from years of re-use. He knew he would need that water for the return hike. There was another $\frac{1}{2}$ kilometre or so to his destination, then five minutes of dicking around before he could start to make his way back. Hopefully nobody in Marchand's crew would ask awkward questions about where he had been; so far he'd made seven of these trips without raising suspicion.

He saw the marker. It was a two-story farmhouse, concrete walls covered in badly drawn graffiti and a later layer of wild vines; an intact roof of beige-coloured tiles; smashed windows; twisted guttering dangling from the eaves. Burned into the roof tiles was a symbol that resembled an oval shape with two large circles within it: the result of a high power laser from orbit, although to any casual observer it was just another bit of accumulated vandalism. The marker was his prompt to pay attention.

Carlos scanned the edge of the road ahead and saw the subtle break in the wildly overgrown maquis; this was where a small access road had once joined the Autoroute, now almost entirely overwhelmed by nature left to run her course for the past ten years. The access road led to the badly damaged farm-house. He adjusted the small day-sack he had across his back, stepped off the road and pushed his way through the break, careful not to leave too

much sign, and began to follow the barely visible route of the access road.

He pushed his way through the leathery, broad-leaved evergreen shrubs. Many of the wild shrubs were aromatic and he caught strong scents of mint, laurel, and myrtle.

Approaching the farmhouse he orientated himself with the South West facing wall and began walking through an expanse of small trees, stopping at a fig tree having counted off thirty paces, remembering the number in case he needed to return to this spot for some reason.

He unslung his backpack, extracted a sharp edged trowel wrapped in a dirty shirt. Getting onto his knees by the base of the fig tree he used the trowel to dig down by the roots. The tree provided no shade and the intense sun blazed against him. Sweat began to trickle freely from his crudely shaved hairline. Flies began performing aerial displays around his face.

With a small but deep hole completed, he unscrewed the handle of the trowel, tapped out a rolled-up ziplock bag, and then a small semi-opaque plastic container of which there were four remaining. If the job was to last any more than another two months he'd need to arrange a DLB to replenish his gear.

Carlos opened up the small leather pouch strapped to the belt around his waist; took out the thick-framed glasses; extracted the sliver of a data-chip: a whole MU of video and audio footage recorded through the glasses over the past two weeks.

He carefully inserted the data-chip into the semi-opaque container, then used a cracked and dirt-engrained finger nail to activate the locator beacon. Somewhere a few hundred miles above his head a satellite would be registering the signal and starting a chain of events that would result in a team coming down at some point in the next few days to retrieve the data.

His employer was interested in Le Lac des Rêves; specifically in Jean Marchand and the group of men who followed him.

The original brief from his employer had been the usual: infiltrate, observe, document and provide evidence of criminal activities likely to destabilise a community attempting to grow within the wreckage of post-Yellow Dawn. In this case it was the large spread of farms and artisan workshops that had sprung up in the rural areas beyond Montpellier. Montpellier was classed as a Living City but it was small and had a brutal Dead Zone. The

farms and artisans created support zone that was typical for the phenomenon of Living Cities in this pos-Yellow Dawn world. Marchand and his men were terrorising these people; a parasitical force. The question Carlos had originally intended to answer was: how much was Marchand operating as an independent criminal force? Or was he working to an agenda; a paid operative?

This job was different from all the others. Marchand wasn't just involved in the usual trade of banditry; there was a dark, unspoken core to the loyalty the men had towards Marchand. The Wilderness began spawning tales of new religions and a return to pagan ways with echoes of the Dark Ages within weeks of Yellow Dawn taking place. Ever since survivors in the Living Cities got the power back on and started blogging about what the hell had just happened, these stories spread and multiplied. People lapped them up, notably people in the unaffected comfort of orbit and deep space.

The Talisman entered Carlos' thoughts; although to be truthful with himself, he acknowledged it had never really been absent from them. He could see it almost as if it was within touching distance, disembodied yet still attached to the twisted threads of silver chain around Marchand's neck. It wasn't much to look at; a thin ovoid sliver of a solid creamy white substance that reminded him of guitar pick; but there was an organic quality to it, not plastic. It had a faint mother-of-pearl effect on its surface. The whole thing was only the size of a thumbnail, couched in a framework of silver which Carlos sensed, somehow, without knowing why, was merely ornate and unnecessary decoration.

Thinking about it now, Carlos felt as if there were tendrils of the thing reaching beyond what was physically visible. He frowned, staring down at the small deep hole he'd just dug in the dry earth; his eyes narrowed... it was as if he had made a connection with it, or rather, it had made a connection with him. But that suggested it was somehow sentient, malevolent even, and that was ridiculous. It was the people who acted upon what they believed that made something malevolent, not the inanimate object itself.

People like me, he wondered?

Some sickening sensation of guilt lapped at the distant shores of his conscience; Carlos snapped away from such thoughts and focussed on the here and now. A bead of sweat dripped from the end of nose onto his deeply tanned forearm; he watched it spread and merge with the layer of glistening moisture and the sparse follicles of dark hair

turned blonde by the sun. His skin was covered in scabbed scratches and accumulated filth of living weeks without washing.

He would need to start heading back soon. He didn't want to risk Marchand or his men becoming suspicious towards him; Carlos needed to further cajole and ingratiate his way into the inner core of what was taking place at Le Lac des Rêves. He snapped down the lid on the semi-opaque container, placed it within the hole and used his hands to push the pile of loose earth back onto it. He patted it down but not enough to make it obvious.

Grimacing in the relentless heat he picked up the small ziplock of blank data-chips he'd extracted from inside the trowel handle; moisture from his fingers made the ziplock slippery and made it difficult handling the delicate slivers of raw memory. He inserted a blank data-chip into the thick-rimmed glasses and returned those to the leather pouch around his waist. Then repacked the trowel handle, screwed it back into place and dragged the handle through the dirt a couple of times to add context.

He took the plastic water bottle from his day sack, slung the day sack over a shoulder, then rose up from one knee and began to swagger his way towards the marked farmhouse. He unscrewed the worn plastic cap took a slug of warm gritty water.

Marchand had a supply of fairly clean water for the camp at Le Lac des Rêves; some technical boffin who'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time and picked up by Marchand's men. The boffin was doing anything on the promise of Marchand not harming his wife; the boffin had no idea his wife was currently the plaything for every dirty dick in the camp. The water was good though.

Carlos stopped in his tracks. A sound had caught his ear. His eyes tracked from the ruined farmhouse, across the overgrown terrain to the silent black strip of Autoroute. A vehicle was approaching. Combustion engine, still some distance away but approaching fast; rough gear changes and high revs.

Years of training snapped into focus; he hunkered low and covered twenty metres at speed, angling away from the building. He looked for a place where he could drop down and observe with minimal risk of being seen. Several more loping strides he saw a shallow depression flanked by several small trees. He threw himself down and scabbled round in a small cloud of dust so he was facing the road. The sound of the approaching vehicle told him it was only

couple hundred metres away. He rolled onto his side long enough to hook his free arm through the empty strap of the day sack; he wanted to be free to sprint if he needed to, without having something hanging from one shoulder. He kept the water bottle in one hand.

A glint of sunlight reflecting off windshield caught his eye and he saw a battered pickup zooming into view. It was coming from the direction of Marseilles, which also meant it could be connected to Le Lac des Rêves and Marchand: that idea made his chest tighten and his skin tingle. It had a small cab and a flatbed with high sides; the passenger window was down, a tanned forearm visible; wire mesh covered all of the windows.

The sun was baking the back of his head and neck but he didn't move.

Abruptly the pickup began to decelerate, more rough gear changes; the driver was aggressive but inexperienced. Carlos guessed there was only room for two people in the cab; the driver and passenger.

The pickup swerved onto the far edge of the road and stopped, only metres from the break in the maquis.

Shit, who the hell are you?

Carlos snaked one hand down to his thigh and began to unfasten the clip holding his hunting knife in its sheath.

Two men jumped out of the pickup; both pushed their respective doors to without slamming them. They were both glancing around, scanning the terrain, looking for something or somebody.

Looking for me?

Both men were similar in build and appearance; white skinned, recent tans, muscled and toned. The men were dressed in scavenger gear but they looked too well-fed and 'cosmetically' gritty to be the real deal. He began to wind down his state of tension; he had an idea what this was about.

"Carlos Rivera!" one of the men shouted in English, his voice clear and authoritative; it wasn't the name Carlos used at Le Lac des Rêves.

"Agent Rivera we're from Central," the other man called out, "Please identify yourself."

Carlos whistled to catch their attention and slowly got up onto his feet. Both men saw him and nodded, began to approach purposeful but unthreatening. Carlos didn't bother to move to meet them; he took a deep gulp of warm water, did some Balinese hand movements to get the flies out of his face and waited for them to come to him. If they

were from Central then they must have been camped out nearby waiting for the beacon to activate.

Both men would be low rank field agents, probably on support duty to boost their experience. They seemed relieved to be finally meeting their mark; they also came across as a little wary and Carlos guessed they were inwardly shocked at the state of his appearance.

"Hello sir, can you code-in?" the authoritative one requested formally.

Carlos grimaced; he always suffered an unpleasant disorientation when 'the office' intruded on his fabricated reality. "Sure," he began in French out of habit and then switched to English, "Alpha-Romeo-Bravo. Six, niner, six, two, echo, echo. How's that?"

"That's fine sir, thank you."

The less authoritative one stepped closer and began to talk conversationally, "We've been sent direct from Director Reinhardt."

"The big man himself, eh?" Carlos didn't conceal his disdain. Gerard Reinhardt was the Director of EFIB, or what remained of the Eurofederation Intelligence Bureau following the catastrophe of Yellow Dawn. Reinhardt was also the man who had simultaneously fucked his life and given him a career. It was a complicated relationship.

"Er, yes sir. There's been a development and the Director wishes to change your O-D with immediate -"

"Effect," Carlos interrupted, already second guessing the conversation, "You're kidding me, right?"

"No sir."

"What bloody development?" Carlos was angry about the potential they were going to say something that meant he'd just wasted four months of his life; but inwardly, a separate voice in his mind was confessing he was shocked at the idea he wasn't going to get a chance to get near to the Talisman.

"Well, it's a bit difficult to explain but the easiest way I say it is that somebody just bought EFIB."

Carlos narrowed his eyes, necked a long sip of warm water, abruptly aware of the nauseous taste of degrading plastic that he'd been suppressing for weeks now. He used the pause to allow the information to sink in. A grin spread across his face and cracked his lips.

"So the old man is out of a job with the new management coming in, that right?"

"I couldn't comment sir. We've been instructed to escort you back to Aigues-Mortes with immediate -"

“Effect,” Carlos finished the sentence quickly, again, “Uh-huh, and what about the data I’ve just dropped off.”

“We’re to collect that first.”

Carlos nodded, stepped aside and held out his arm to gesture the general direction of the DLB. “Happy digging. I don’t suppose that heap of shit you’re driving has aircon?”

“No, sir, it doesn’t,” the authoritative one responded.

“That figures.”

2

Manhattan stretched below him all lit up like a Christmas tree. Mikhail Drobná smiled and felt the thick folds of scar tissue stretch across his face. He was on the 160th floor of the d'Cota building, gazing out through thick plate glass, savouring the breeze of air-control and ignoring the heavy scent of perfume wafting off the girl who was getting undressed behind him. He swirled a brandy glass within one massive hand and took a sniff: the sharp tang was rich and inviting; the liquor was over 130 years old, so he'd been told; part of d'Cota's personal stash, but Drobná had privileges in this place.

His eyes traced the boundary between light and dark down there, following the line of the Hudson River, the boundary between life and death...and undeath. He enjoyed this view at night, when everything beyond the Living City was lost within the darkness. If he walked to the other side of the vast room he could look down and see an identical sight: the lights of Manhattan Island and an endless uninterrupted sea of darkness beyond the East River. A thousand horror stories would be playing out there in the Dead Zone, all the travellers who'd not managed to get a ride through before the sun went down; it was bad enough trying to make that twenty-mile journey during the day but at night, you were alone in the dark with the risk of any noise bringing Them screaming onto you.

Drobná thought about his father and wondered if the worthless fuck was alive or dead. The smile faded, and Drobná grunted involuntarily, aware of the familiar sour

mood seeping into his state of mind. He wanted to tell the girl to hurry the fuck up but stayed silent. Against his will his gaze drifted high above the city lights and drilled far into the endless darkness, his vision blurred with the strain whilst his brain segued into distant memories that were as vivid as yesterday. He began to mutter a familiar mantra, something the doc had once said before giving up on him, "Keep moving, keep busy...don't relax. Relaxing lets the bad thoughts in."

Or maybe the doc had never actually used those words but Drobná had just modified the statement to make it fit how he wanted.

But he couldn't move just yet, there was work to be done. So he stood where he was and swirled the brandy in the glass.

In his mind's-eye the sloshing liquid became the bottle in his father's meaty left hand; a memory forever burned into his brain; the bruised knuckles clenching the bottle neck, and the blood spatters not even dry, dripping down his father's wrist: it was the night he walked in and found his father with mother. The night his shitty miserable world got flushed down the toilet. The night that left him living with regret for a failure to be a man.

His thoughts flipped back to the here and now. What was he doing in this place? Enduring this tedium of fulfilling a rich man's whims; this wasn't his future, his destiny lied in the blood and entrails of other men, in the thrill of something he didn't yet have...something he couldn't even define. It was a feeling, a yearning, a desire to break free of this city and this cage of luxury. New empires were being carved out in the wilderness. He could be a part of that, if the right opportunity came along...or if he got out and found it.

Never turn from the fear, face it head on.

He needed a new chapter in his book. His thoughts flipped back to his past. Drobná ran through the story the doc had patched together with him during the few weeks he'd tried to get help: distilled into a simple summary of trauma that led to him becoming the man he was now.

Born in Toronto to a Russian father and a Polish mother. Father was a long haul driver and was rarely home. Mother was a cook in school - and always cooked Bigos for him at home.

When he was eight, his mother got sick. The company she worked for had a good health policy and looked after her, but then the company got bought out by another,

larger company and somewhere in the shifting contracts and pathetic union resistance his mother lost her healthcare and financial support. Drobná started bunking off school so he could look after her. His father changed jobs, became a delivery truck driver, but obviously lost the freedom of the long roads. His developed a taste for cheap whisky and a hatred of the burden his wife had become.

At the age of nine Drobná came home from school early one afternoon and saw his father's truck parked outside the house; walked inside and found his mother's wheelchair lying on its side on the kitchen floor...mother lying in a pool of blood. She'd been beaten and then stabbed to death. His father was sat on the sofa in the next room, still clutching the knife, too drunk to stand and sobbing how sorry he was...slurring Russian... saying "come to papa".

Drobná turned and ran.

He wished he'd killed him.

His father was arrested but somehow got free on a technicality after only 8 months in custody. Drobná was placed within the juvenile care system where his size ensured every thug wanted to take him down to prove their superiority. He had to learn to fight. He grew up nurturing a hatred for his father; he dreamed of finding him and hurting him. During the endless scuffles in school and the care homes, when he broke their teeth and bones...Drobná would always picture his father in his mind.

As he grew older he put on muscle, the care system moved him around as a trouble-maker; eventually dumping him on a remote farm in Saskatchewan until he was eighteen. There were good memories there, but even that turned to shit.

A bunch of hired farm hands were driving West at the end of the season and invited him to join them. He landed a job in Vancouver, working the door of a gritty club on Granville Island. The first time he killed somebody he was nineteen: a punk who didn't like being denied entry and pulled a knife. The authorities wanted to prosecute but Drobná got off on self-defence. The detective in charge of the case was working for the local criminal network and the rest is history. The detective gave him 'work' and kept him one step ahead of the law: like being back in the care-homes, every time he fucked somebody up, he always pictured his father in his mind.

Yellow Dawn happened when he was twenty-eight, and that changed everything.

“Okay now what?” the girl’s low-class accent interrupted his thoughts. Drobná’s eyes shifted focus on the plate glass window he’d been gazing through; Manhattan blurred and the reflection of the girl came up sharp. She was naked. Almost; a shiny blue triangle between her legs. He swung round to face the room, moving his gargantuan, muscular, two-metre tall bulk without aggression. She was staring at his face; he could feel the point of her gaze tracing the savage scars. He stepped to one side and placed the brandy glass on the plinth occupied by a marble head: several hundred years old, from Europe, apparently.

Drobná gave her a look that included the tacky panties.

She returned a resentful, defiant glare but couldn’t hide the fear of him. That didn’t make him feel good. Another example of how he would never be able to fit in to a place like this. He was a freak. D’Cota’s personal Frankenstein monster; only he’d been born and raised, not put together from the parts of dead men.

Then her eyes did another scan of the room soaking up the exuberant wealth and luxury portrayed by every object within it. A twitch lifted one corner of her mouth. Drobná didn’t say anything; he just watched, like he’d watched countless girls before her. The money spoke of power and avenues of escape; the money always won.

He’d already told her to remove everything and he could see her working out he wasn’t a man to ask twice. In a quick move she stooped, took the panties down and unhooked one leg leaving them hooked around one foot with cherry-painted toenails. Whipping her foot she flicked them towards him, falling short. He didn’t budge.

“Satisfied? What’s this for anyway?” she complained.

“To make sure you haven’t got a dick.”

She gave him the finger, “Lap it up wiseass.”

He smirked at her bravado then gestured for her to come closer. She hesitated a moment, then slinked across the thick grey carpet, moving between two long leather sofas that probably cost more than this girl could ever make in a lifetime. How many cock-sucks and anal gang-bangs would she need to go through to even earn what she was getting for this one night with Mr d’Cota?

Drobná didn’t react to the teasing wiggle of her hips or the alluring smile spreading like honey across her lips as she held his eyes, moving closer. He’d met a thousand women like this long before he’d gotten bored fucking them; these were the only kind of women he got now; his face made sure of that.

She moved right up against him and shivered in the downwash of the air-con. "You get first try? Is that the deal?" she said coyly, unafraid of him or just high: he'd soon find out. The smell of her cheap perfume masked stale sweat; he doubted she'd seen soap in ten years.

Drobná smirked, took her gently by the shoulders and eased her back a step, his massive hands exaggerating her small frame, undernourished but firm. Quietly, calmly, he checked each arm; lifting them up to examine her armpits; he checked her ankles, between her toes, behind her knees. He examined her scalp for lice. Took a swab from inside her mouth.

Throughout all of this she followed his face with her eyes; her ethic-blend of features frozen in a bemused expression.

Extracting latex gloves from a small plastic bag inside his jacket pocket, he told her to bend over. She silently complied. He examined her cunt and her arsehole with his fingers; he didn't bother being delicate. Somewhere between sixteen and twenty years old, she'd probably been sucking dicks to survive since before she was ten. The only way for a girl like this to survive in the Living City, where space was at a premium far more than at any time before Yellow Dawn: three million survivors packed into a cramped box of glass, steel and concrete, protected by rivers, and bridges forming infection-free zones guarded by flame-thrower towers. Or maybe it was only recent misfortune that dumped her in the gutter? It didn't matter to him. He knew the places to find girls like this. Girls desired by d'Cota.

Removing the latex gloves he dropped them on the floor, then extracted a small Maglite torch from a top pocket, opened her mouth and probed her teeth with his fingers. Using the beam of the torch he examined her tongue, the roof of her mouth, the insides of her cheeks. She had a good smile, he thought, and a slutty mouth: one of d'Cota's requested criteria.

He returned the Maglite to his top pocket, extracted his PA and checked the hardscreen for the results from the swab-gizmo: all clear, no viral contamination, no STDs. He'd felt no warts or sores inside of her.

Stepping away abruptly, he scooped up the brandy glass, took a gulp and began to rattle through a familiar monologue:

"You'll find a bathroom through there," he gave a cursory nod to a door of solid polished wood, "Wash the

smell of the street off you. There's make-up. Don't try and steal anything. I'll be frisking you before you leave. I find anything, I hurt you. You tell anybody about tonight, about who you're with, I'll find you and hurt you. My employer's a lot nicer than me but he's not interested in sob stories or relationships. He's trusted me to find him somebody entertaining. Don't let me down."

A cunning smile parted her lips, "Sure thing, honey."

She turned on her toes and began to move away, stooping to collect her discarded panties before scurrying towards the bathroom door.

Pausing, she swung round to face him and pulled a face that said she had something to tell him.

Drobná angled his head and raised an eyebrow, inquisitive.

She patted her shaved crotch, "I need a dick like you need a mirror."

He laughed, genuinely amused by her insult, and felt the thick folds of scar tissue stretch like toughened rubber.

The bathroom door closed behind her; his stomach rumbled. He dwelled on the idea of steak but knew it would have to wait. He sipped brandy and voice-dialled d'Cota's personal secretary to let him know the girl would be ready.

Motel-Ba'al-Achtung/The Looking Glass

By Tradchick



D183, Y+10 woke up today and realised, for the first time, that I accept how my Dad died. This is when it all began... D-000, Y+0 {mm}

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<mm:02879999:dayzero:deane_jurowski>

Day Zero / Deane Jurowski

The advertising exec lands in Cairo at 2am. Despite the hour the concourse is heaving with tourists arriving to enjoy a warm winter break. He's travelling light, two leather holdalls clutched in either hand. Several men in galabias hassle him, offering to carry his bags, their fingers already tugging at the leather handles. He jerks both bags free and quickens his stride without a word to acknowledge them.

A taxi ride from the airport, a battered metal hulk that could have rolled off a production line more than thirty years ago. The faint smell of fried chicken suggests home-made fuel. They speed through the sprawling conurbations of Heliopolis, and eventually into the city itself.

The taxi pulls over on the edge of the Nile, not far from the 6th October Bridge. Lights from numerous ships illuminate the river. He is surprised how many people are still on the streets. He authorises the fare to be deducted from his cash account, and then climbs out. The air is warm but unpleasant, smog grabs his throat and stings his eyes, and the noise is jarring as thousands of tons of traffic rumble past him, horns tooting haphazardly. All of them belching fumes and burned oil. He slips his respirator over his face and eases into the loose throngs of tourists and locals, and starts walking towards a café that has a Western brand name.

A building several metres from the café explodes outwards. At least that's how it seems. Rubble is crashing down on the people below the collapsing walls. Already his brain is replaying the streak of an object he saw hurtling out of the sky only a moment before. He's knocked sideways as a surge of panic ripples through the crowd. People are screaming and he can see flames licking the ragged wound in the street. </mm>

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3

The two E-FIB agents dropped him off on the potholed Route de Nîmes, five hundred metres from Aigues-Mortes; they didn't want to go through the hassle of the security checks to get through the main gate.

He jumped out from the pick-up's flatbed and said a desultory goodbye. The burst of abrupt activity brought out an immediate sweat; the sun was still beating down. He glanced at the scavenged shells of residential buildings with an instinctive apprehension; long since abandoned, this area was technically a Dead Zone, albeit a very small one but Aigues-Mortes had taken special measures to hunt down and remove all Infected.

Even so, the sparse yet ubiquitous clusters of travellers and merchants he'd seen on the road, clattering along with their horses, wagons and travois, all moved very slowly and very quietly when they reached this stage of their journey.

One of the E-FIB agents handed him a cash card loaded with 10,000 credits: a bonus from Director Reinhardt. They passed on Reinhardt's personal message: one day of decompression, then Marseilles and hotel Regina, booked under his name. Carlos stuffed the thin rectangle of plastic into the leather pouch hanging from his belt, beside the thick-rimmed glasses.

Marseilles?

That was going to be one heck of a journey, but then Carlos realised he was still thinking like a survivor. Why had Reinhardt brought him here to Aigues-Mortes? Montpellier was a Living City and only a stones-throw from

Marchand's camp at Le Lac des Rêves; whereas they'd just driven fifty or so kilometres East, in the opposite direction to reach this place; taking the long looping route to avoid the risky Dead Zone of Lunel. Then Carlos saw Reinhardt's thinking; no risk of Marchands' men being in Aigues-Mortes. Marchand's spies would never have a chance recognise him; leaving it an option for him to return at some point in the future? Or simply a clean fracture from his recent existence? The latter notion resulted in a flash thought of the Talisman followed by a pulse of anxiety. What was that about? He threw his mind in another direction: one day, though; it wasn't much time.

Slave driving, as usual Gerard, Carlos mused, tapped his hand on the pick-up's cab then walked away, feeling an uneasy echo of the Talisman's power in his peripheral awareness.

The pick-up did a three-point turn as Carlos headed towards Aigues-Mortes; a number of crashed gear changes caused him to cringe in mild panic and glance at the shattered remains of the buildings: if there were any Infected lurking they'd be out with a noise like that.

Carlos kept moving, a quick and strong-legged stride. An oven-like heat reflected up from the weathered tarmac. There was nothing on the road ahead of him. About three-hundred and fifty metres away, the skeletal tangle of collapsed buildings, the outcome of intensive scavenging, gave way to an open area occupied by a canal and a small road bridge. Beyond that rose the unbroken bulk of Aigues-Mortes. Quickly the sound of the pick-up's engine faded into the distance and a new sound settled onto his ears: a muffled chorus of clanking (blacksmiths), throbbing machinery (pumps and generators), music (the market place) and the vocal calls of hawkers and several thousand survivors packed into a fortified rectangle of medieval stone. He saw the moving outlines of the settlement's watch, silhouetted against the bright blue sky, as they walked the upper ramparts of those vast and imposing walls.

Carlos knew Aigues-Mortes from hearsay and research. Ironically, up until this morning, being part of Marchand's group, Carlos was considered enemy number one by this settlement; relentless raids on merchant and supply convoys travelling between Aigues-Mortes and Montpellier, rich-pickings feeding and funding Marchand's steadily increasing influence in the area. Carlos had a vague uneasy feeling that he might be about to walk into a world of trouble if somebody had his identity tied to Marchand.

Dating back to the 13th Century, the fortress had a historical pedigree for security which allowed its current masters to pick and choose the type of survivor it wanted as residents: typically wealthy, industrious and connected.

Reaching the small road bridge, he saw that several of the watch had stopped walking the ramparts and were now observing his approach. The canal split away in three directions; cluttered with moored barges, ready for loading or already unloaded of cargo. This was the settlement's Golden Goose, providing access and transport for major settlements running North and West through to the Atlantic via Bordeaux, and further into the heart of what remained of France; and a short distance South West to Le Grau-du-Roi connecting to the Mediterranean Sea and the network of surviving shipping routes beyond.

Ahead of him, across the bridge, several streets remained intact, running parallel to the Eastern wall of the fort; their residential and commercial buildings repaired and maintained. The open ground between these streets, the canal and the Eastern wall was occupied by a dense cluster of tents and marquees; a haze of wood smoke and filled the air, laced with a jumble of cooking smells. Various slovenly dressed people tended stalls or moved between them. Carlos smirked at the notion this probably didn't look much different to how it would have been five hundred years ago. Manky horses tethered to stakes in the ground; rickety carts readied for loading or in the process of unloading if they weren't authorised to venture inside the settlement; a few men-at-arms loitered where they were paid to do so; Carlos noted them and saw single-handed axes, crossbows, swords. One lump of a man had a pump-action shotgun cradled comfortably against his chest; Carlos scanned the trading table the lump was guarding and was pleased by his guess: an outpost for the CRC.

The modern world was still visible, primarily through the mismatched collections of scavenged clothing being worn. Such things were typically supplied by a CRC outlet like this one. The CRC (City Recovery Corps) was a professional scavenging company: now a big business after ten years of skimming the lost property of the dead. These clothes, and anything else of even basic value, would have taken from the billions of homes and factories left virtually frozen in time by the speed and ferocity of the Kwave, Yellow Dawn's opening lethal blow against humanity.

In the same way that Carlos scanned and second-guessed the people and their purpose, so he too was being

observed and scrutinised. Two surly, Arabic-looking youths detached themselves from a military-grade tent on the outer edge of this makeshift encampment and began striding towards him.

One of them held a policeman's telescopic baton in a clenched fist; but otherwise they appeared to be unarmed.

Brave or stupid, Carlos wondered, aware they were in view of the watchmen on the walls, and that Aigues-Mortes wouldn't want to deter visitors. *Unless of course you look like a bandit*, he mused.

"Fifty copper and we'll get you inside," Baton Boy grunted in French. His companion was a well-built skinhead with hand-inked tattoos covering his neck, shoulders and arms; probably good with using his muscle to grab and restrain. Both of them stopped several paces in from of him and waited for his response.

Can't appear to be a trouble-maker, Carlos thought through his options, taking a moment to squint up at the watchmen gazing down on the confrontation. These boys were simply opportunists, he judged. They'd stay for as long as they could until the watch took action to move them on, or until a bigger group of thugs took them out.

"What makes you think I'll need your help?" Carlos replied in French, coming to a stop two paces away, grinning with clenched teeth.

Something in Carlos' tone, in the undaunted confidence of his body language set off alarm bells in the skinhead who took an immediate step backwards. Baton Boy didn't seem to have the same instinctive survival skills.

"I'm not asking, fuck-head," Baton Boy told him. "You look like marsh scum, the fucking flies are even sick by your smell. You won't get in without our help. Give us the money or give us your things."

The skinhead seemed reassured by his companion's aggression and stepped forward again. Carlos spared a moment to glance at him and hold his gaze, keeping his expression a calm mask. Skinhead frowned, not liking this apparent challenge to their authority, "Think you're something special, huh? I'm going to fuck you up unless you hand over the money. Hand it over now."

Carlos held up both his hands, palms open, in a peaceful gesture, "Okay, okay. But I tell you what, here's an offer. If you're so sure I'll not get inside, why don't you let me try and if I fail, then I'll give you...fifty copper each. How does that sound?"

Baton Boy raised his weapon arm and threatened to lunge forward, "Wasting our time you mother's cunt."

Carlos didn't flinch, kept his hands out and palms open, "No seriously, seriously, I'll give you fifty each, make it sixty but that's almost all I have. Okay? Come on, look I don't want any trouble. I've come a long way, I'm tired. Let me try and if you're right, then you've won both times. What do you say?"

"Give him his chance, Marco, let the fool fuck himself," Skinhead said to his companion, and then addressed Carlos, "But you fail and give us everything you have."

Carlos nodded his agreement, switched his attention back to Baton Boy who was obviously itching to get to the violence but Skinhead appeared to be the restraining-element of their partnership.

Baton Boy lowered his weapon arm and stepped back and to the side, creating an opening for Carlos to move through. Skinhead made the mistake of folding his arms.

Carlos dropped his gaze, as if dropping his guard and began to move forward, all his sense straining towards Baton Boy.

Sure enough, Baton Boy couldn't resist the opportunity for an easy first-strike. As Carlos stepped between them Baton Boy whipped up the telescopic baton and moved into a position directly behind him to deliver a blow to his skull.

Carlos was already spinning round, at the same time stepping to the right, away from the incoming blow and from Skinhead's huge arms.

The telescopic baton whipped down; Carlos blocked it with his forearm, taking the blow on the toughened leather wrist guard, moving with it, stepping in, grabbing Baton Boy's weapon arm and hand, twisting, using the his opponents forward momentum against him.

Baton Boy screamed in shock and rage as the telescopic weapon fell from his grip. Carlos jerked his head to the side and caught Baton Boy full on the face with the edge of his skull. He heard and felt the crunch of nasal cartilage and bone, then the explosive hiss of air and blood. Carlos grimaced, and tried to orientate himself in regards to Skinhead, but the big guy had moved. Baton Boy fell away and staggered back, clutching his face and screaming; blood was running freely between his hands.

Carlos heard a yell behind him and felt Skinhead lunge into him, hands like blocks of rough stone grabbing his arms, trying to lock him into an embrace. Carlos snapped his head back but Skinhead was alert and ready for him.

Carlos kicked with his legs against the sun-baked tarmac, forcing them both to stagger backwards. Baton Boy was out the picture for now, feeling sorry for himself freaking out in pain. Carlos controlled his feeling of ballooning panic: Skinhead was going to be a problem. Out of instinct he tried to gland the cocktail of adrenaline and aggression boosting hormones, but his implant was dry; everything used-up in the past four months of playing bandit.

He kept pushing back and jabbing his elbows into the space behind him, but the day sack on his back was giving Skinhead plenty of room to work with.

Then Skinhead lost his footing and both of them tumbled to the ground. Carlos struck the ground with his hip and Skinhead landed on top of him, crushing the air from his lungs. Carlos arched his back, kicking, bucking, and struggling to reach his hand down to his sheathed knife. Skinhead wriggled around, buried into him, gaining the advantage with the toes of his boots dug against the ground, his knees digging painfully into his legs, the top of his scab-ridden skinhead slamming into Carlos' jaw and pushing down hard. The blow was a shock and sent his brain spinning.

Skinhead got all of his weight and muscle to bear onto him, pressing down, keeping his arms pinned.

"Marco? Marco?" Skinhead lifted his head to look up and call out.

Marco howled, Marco staggered, Marco spat out blood and sank to his knees.

Skinhead, who was now a hairless silhouette against the ball-baking sun above them, snapped a hateful gaze onto Carlos. Carlos could taste the guy's sweat on his lips and feel the lingering impression of his skull against his jaw. Carlos cringed, waiting for the head butt. Skinhead decided to strangle him instead; small but brutal hands closed around his throat and Carlos saw saliva spray from his twisted lips as he growled with rage. The grip around his throat was like a stone vice: Carlos felt as though his brain was swelling to the point where it would explode.

Carlos kicked his heels against the tarmac, trying to push up, bucking his hips; he tried to writhe out from under him, but Skinhead's mass was overwhelming and Carlos just got a load of road grit scraping through the gaps in between the strips of leather armour, cutting into his flesh. The heat of the tarmac was starting to cook his back, pushing through the core of his body in a grilling wave; matching the sickening heat building up around his neck

and face as Skinhead continued to throttle the life out of him.

Carlos tried to reach down to the sheathed knife but couldn't get his hand past Skinhead's body, the way it was pinned against him.

Carlos slapped his hands into Skinhead's face but he couldn't get his full strength into it and the blow just bounced off the man's determination to kill him. Carlos really started to panic. He saw his hands, surreally, as if they belonged to somebody else, claw at Skinhead's face but they just seemed to slip and slide off the man's enraged sweat-greased features.

With what felt like the last reserve of strength, Carlos pushed up one shoulder, allowing him to get a grip with both hands around the back of Skinhead's skull, in the same instant he drove his thumbs into the soft gelatinous orbs of his eyes.

Skinhead roared with pain and rage. He lowered his face and shook his head from side to side like a madman; Carlos drove his thumbs in deeper but couldn't deliver the damage he needed because his hands were starting to slip from his skull. Skinhead drove his chin downwards in a desperate attempt to shake off the attack on his eyes; forcing him to ease the grip around Carlos' neck. It also shifted the way Skinhead lay against him; Carlos sensed Skinhead's mass and drove up a knee straight into his groin. Saliva exploded across Carlos' face as Skinhead grunted in shock. Carlos slammed his knee up again and again, as fast and brutally as he could. Skinhead tried to re-establish his dominating throttle but Carlos used the momentary reprieve from the blood-stopping pressure; he got his shoulder up again, got a grip on the back of Skinhead's skull with one hand and began to drive a barrage of punches into his face.

Carlos pulled away from him, letting go of his head, punching and kicking. Skinhead managed to get a grip on the upper strips of leather armour crossing his chest. The fucker wouldn't let go. Carlos managed to turn on his side with Skinhead hanging on beside him, front down, hands on his chest; he thought about going for the knife.

A blow struck the back of his head, sending stars and flashes shooting across his vision. His punches went wild and he realised he was dangerously close to passing out; a stream of verbal abuse in French told him Baton Boy had recovered enough to come looking for payback. Carlos

heard the instructions to Skinhead: hold him down, let me stamp on his fucking face.

Skinhead began to scrabble forward, regaining the vital advantage.

Then a sound that wasn't familiar but Carlos had heard a hundred times: the ratchet noise of a pump-action shotgun getting a shell loaded.

A gruff male voice told them to break it up.

There were curses; Carlos took a couple punches to his face, then abruptly Skinhead pulled back, crawled, turned round and ended up sitting on his arse looking pissed-off. Baton Boy stepped away, hands raised; dark red blood streamed down his lips, chin and clothes from his ruined nose; he eyed Mr Shotgun with daggers.

Carlos pushed himself up on his knees and squinting in the bright light and pain, regarded his potential saviour. The lump from the CRC trading table.

The lump didn't look too pleased to be getting involved and regarded Carlos like he was something he'd just scraped off the bottom of his shoe.

"You," Mr Shotgun said to Carlos, "Consider yourself lucky. Your kind is not welcome here. Take yourself and fuck off."

Carlos pulled his best shit-eating grin, tentatively touched his face. "I have a hotel booking. You can escort me there and if I'm lying you can fucking shoot me."



The main access point to Aigues-Mortes was the *Porte de la Gardette*, and suitably named Carlos ruminated as he stood beneath the guards lookout window set above the gate. Although the main curtain wall was about 11 metres high, the guard tower in front of him must have been at least another 6 metres higher. The entrance was flanked by two enormous curving towers, possibly ten metres or more in diameter. The whole structure was physically imposing and generated an immediate sense of impregnability and

security. As did the two surly sentries giving him a hard time about his appearance and the scuffle that had taken place. Mr Shotgun was there, a couple paces to the side, watching with a face like he was chewing on a dog turd; reason: Carlos' claim to have a hotel booking had been proven true.

The sentries were still in mild disbelief; apparently the hotel was one of the best in Aigues-Mortes. Everyone that walked past during his lecture made a visible reaction to the eye-watering smell coming off him; several people nearly walked into the solid stone walls whilst trying to step away from the stench.

Carlos took it all in his stride and went on the charm offensive; which was his talent, when it involved getting things he wanted. The sentries were curious about the hotel booking; who had made it for him? Who was he? Where had he come from? How had he got this far on foot? To all of these questions Carlos gave them a polite "fuck off, none of your business."

They wanted to know if he had enough money to cope with Aigues-Mortes and not become a nuisance. Carlos dug into leather pouch strapped to his belt, picking through the remains of the glasses broken in the fight, and showed them his cash card. Pressing his thumb on the biometric reader allowed him to display the card's balance.

10,000 credits was a lot of cash even for a place like Aigues-Mortes. Then they tried the bribery angle. Carlos asked them how the Captain of the Watch would react to such attempts of extortion. They shut-up then and finished off by scanning him.

That surprised him. The sentries had been equipped with high-quality wands. They asked him about the wetware wired inside his skull: he told them the truth, a chunk of data-storage connected to a synaptic bridge. They asked him about the insertion-port below his ribcage. He lied, told them it was for insulin to treat his diabetes; in reality it was for reloading his gland-implant.

Then they checked for staph and other skin infections; they pointed out his tangled hair was full of lice; they didn't take his blood; they didn't take anything that could have his DNA.

Finally, they handed back his day sack. A sentry was pulled off guard duty by his superior and told to escort Carlos to the hotel.

4

The low-slung convertible coupe slid through Manhattan streets. It was not long past midnight. Mikhail Drobná eyeballed some young dumb punks guffawing at his status symbol; they quickly looked away. The girl beside him was silent. The neon glow of the holos washed the nocturnal grid in shifting colours. The holos never switched off; bars, late-night diners, lap-lounges and sim-stim holes spattered the streets with translucent people: party crowds, seminaked dancers and surreal combat figures from the latest sim-stim games coming down from the developer hives in orbit and deep space. At least they were silent; until you stepped into their audio zone. That could fucking wake you up at three in the morning with a skinful of booze; stumbling through one of those.

The ads for stims with Zeds were the worst, Drobná considered. Anybody who played those stims had definitely never been to a Dead City or stepped further than a few metres beyond the Boundary. He wondered how many CRC Roamers had crapped their pants on first glimpse of a Zed rezzing into reality and stepping into view a few metres away.

The girl had her eyes glued to the sidewalk, catching the eye of anybody who looked. A lot of people looked: he was driving a fucking nice ride. An Ichirou X3i, shipped in from New Tokyo, glossy black paint job with gold chrome trim and a HTMD control console radiating light like a bunch of Christmas baubles around his massive hands. The girl was

certainly a different human being to the sweaty slut he'd picked up a few hours earlier; she had transformed.

Her name was Charleez. Getting fucked in the ass by Mr d'Cota had given her a confidence boost, it seemed. D'Cota was a cruel and dirty critter but he could be a gentleman when it suited him, and treat woman like ladies... even whores like Charleez. She had taken to d'Cota like a kitten to cream.

He liked having her in the car with him. She turned heads. The car turned heads. It was moments like this he could fool the world he was normal: even if he did look like a thug a car too-good-for him, riding with a whore.

The air was warm with the left over heat from the day, radiating off the big buildings. The breeze blowing over the windshield smelled of burnt sugar, like it always did at night during the warm months: he could never work that one out.

Drobná followed the road with his eyes. There was shit all traffic this late, but that only meant it was more likely for some fuckhead to stumble out in front of him trying to use the road for a sidewalk.

A soft tone from his ear-clip signalled an incoming message. A similar alert flashed across the windshield, ghostly aquamarine characters spilled across, followed by a number of holographic icons for response options:

::CONRAD_hub_XXB:: ▼ = ?

Below this was a link to a secure audio service.

It was from one of the fixers who funnelled ad-hoc work his way.

His PA, a titanium cased Gauss-Zek, was stuffed into the trouser pocket of his hand-stitched suit; he could have still taken the call via his ear-clip but girl would hear his side of the conversation. What was the point of a secure audio service if you were going to sit within ear-shot of somebody who'd probably sell your mother's birth date to the black market she lived and slept in?

Drobná reached over the control paddle, his palm glancing off one rounded surface of tangible light: it felt like trying to push two magnets together. He tapped the icon on the windshield; notifying the sender who would enter the conversation later.

Charleez glanced his way as he sat back into the Kevlar sports seat but said nothing: she was in magic land. Mr d'Cota liked his girls on a cocktail of euphorics and amphetamines; apart from the sexual consequences, it was

a way to keep them loyal later down the road if the "relationship" became prolonged.

He swung the aggressive nose of the convertible around a corner, leaving Broadway for Broome Street. A lot of very nice apartment buildings. The immediate absence of holos; the colour wash was replaced by regular street lighting. Most of the ground floors were swanky cafes, boutiques and restaurants: all closed this time of night. No scavenger stores or CRC depots here. The X3i cruised along; no harsh acceleration; no ripple of rubber tyres, just high-performance compressive spindles clicking on battered tarmac. Even before Yellow Dawn the roads in this city were always fucked.

He cut across the Avenue of the Americas, then across Varick before turning North on Hudson Street, heading towards Spring and noticing the rapid change in the quality of the buildings and the type of people on the sidewalks. Hudson River was one big natural Boundary. People didn't like to live close to any Boundary; overlooking the Dead Zone reminded them on a daily basis of what had been lost. In this case the eroded and scavenged ruins of New Jersey. Sure, Drobná figured anybody would get used to it, living in sight of so many miles of ruins; he knew for a fact that ninety-nine percent of the population living in Manhattan who didn't have to look at that every day had lulled themselves into pretending life was okay. But everybody had lost 'somebody' during Yellow Dawn.

At that moment, Drobná sent out a silent wish to the God-that-never-listened that his scumbag of a father was one of those who perished.

The general hubbub of noise of the streets filtered into his awareness. Either side there were cheap bars with a mix of punters spilled outside; clusters of garden furniture and battered leather sofas and armchairs hugged the stretches of sidewalk around each venue.

Drobná clocked the various social tribes: Boomba Cuds, Zorm Boys, Dead Gurlz; CRC Roamers sitting on top of empty flat beds parked outside, catching up with R&R before the next scavenge tour; off-duty cops in uniform; local troops winding down after watch-duty, away from the Dead Zone boundary with various parts of riot-gear hanging open from their armour sub-frame.

Joe Public was absent. Asleep. Dreaming of day jobs and a life that hadn't really changed since Yellow Dawn ripped the rest of the world into paper shreds. Start again girls and boys; not here though, eh?

Once again, for the umpteenth time today, Drobná hurled his imagination beyond the Boundary and the Dead Zone, beyond the rural support zones with their 'idyllic' lifestyle, into the heart of the new wilderness. That's where he should be, he decided. Not here.

Back into the wilderness, he corrected himself, and absently rubbed a finger across one bumpy ridge of scar tissue around his left eye.

The girl seemed to register where she was and realised the ride was nearly over.

"So...how tall are you?" she asked abruptly.

Drobná didn't answer for a few moments; considering what the angle she might be dreaming up. He replied, "Six foot eight."

Charleez whistled through recently glossed lips, studied the many figures crowding the sidewalk; then she turned her head and looked right at him. There was a barely concealed flutter of her eyelids, a degree of features cushioned by curtains of freshly showered hair that he'd seen used by woman many times, her chin tucked into her exposed shoulder. He suffered a momentary flashback to earlier, his fingers inside of her ass and cunt.

"So what happened to your face?"

Not many people had the spunk to ask so bluntly.

"I cut myself shaving," was all he said.

"Uh-huh," she picked up on his tone; "Five times? And what did you use? Bolt-cutters?"

He didn't respond. This wasn't conversation time. This was drive and keep-the-fuck-quiet time. He didn't need bitches like this reminding him about how he looked. He knew how he looked.

Rough skin, swarthy complexion almost grey in colour, except where the left side of his face was criss-crossed by the hard bright pink ridges of five intersecting scars. The scars formed two clusters that distorted the left side of his face. Two scars made the first cluster; one rose up from below his cheek bone, curving up past his left eye to intersect with another, shorter gouge that arced up from behind his left ear and cut across his brow, pulling that side of his face into a frown.

Three scars made up the second cluster. They radiated outwards from around the left side of his mouth, tangling his lower and upper lips with the ugly hard tissue, and pulling down the skin below his left eye, exposing the lower eyeball.

When he got messed-up on whisky he could spend a night staring at his reflection, laughing, tormenting, crying...

Not pussy crying but fucking man-howling, teeth-clenched, lips curled back, with sounds coming from the deepest pit of his throat. More than once he'd woken up from such whisky sessions on the floor, surrounded by chunks of broken mirror and blood from his fists.



The nav-comp's position marker on the windshield switched from amber to green: they'd reached their destination. Drobná pulled over outside a shabby red brick building, with metal graffiti daubed shutters covering the windows of the first three floors. A few lights on higher up, years of grime clinging to glass that had never seen anybody bother to clean them. He could smell the river, only fifty metres away: his heart rate surged involuntarily. He hated being this close to the Boundary. He hated what lurked beyond the river. Impossible things, madness made real. He placed his massive hands on his thighs and squeezed, breathing slow and deep.

There was a brief flurry of activity from the shadows below the entrance steps. A bunch of junkies jolted out of their daze by the prospect of an easy robbery: cars like his wouldn't normally be in this area. He gave them a long stare until they sullenly settled down again.

Charleez wasn't moving. She was gazing out through the windshield, caught up in a swirl of magic land probably. Drobná leaned across her breasts and opened the door on her side.

"So what happens next?" she asked, and he heard her trying not to sound so desperate.

"If he liked you I'll be calling again."

Drobná knew that if Mr d'Cota really liked her she'd end up living in one of his apartments for a few weeks, maybe months, until he got bored with her. He'd seen a dozen of them, brought out of the tough streets into the luxury of it all and then tossed back.

He didn't need to drive them back home, they could get a taxi; but he liked to make sure they were okay. Was that a strange thing to do?

She lifted her legs and stepped out; high heels clicking on the road surface. He extended his hand towards her and offered a cash-card.

"What's this, an advance on next time?" she sounded hopeful.

He shook his head, "It's a bit of charity, in case there isn't a next time."

Her glossy smile faded; she snatched the card, thumbed it and checked the amount. Her eyebrows rose up, genuine surprise.

"This from you?" she asked.

Drobná didn't really answer; he just looked at her for a moment, and then gestured for her to close the door. She gave it a gentle slam.

"I'll wait til you get inside," he told her.

She nodded, gazing at him with a look that said she didn't really get him. Then she was across the road and up the steps, high-heels tapping out the rhythm of her ass-wiggling stride.

The junkies got twitchy then relaxed.

He'd had the X3i fitted with manual control pedals for his feet; a bit of retro nostalgia. The road was empty of vehicles. Nothing parked or moving in either direction. He 'floored it'. The compressive spindles leapt into action with a clickety-click-click that blurred into a gentle pitter-patter as the speed increased, rapidly becoming nothing more than a purr; the surge of acceleration pressing him deep into the Kevlar seat.

He turned right onto West Street without stopping and opened the throttle up; the engine roared and topped 100 MPH within four seconds. On his left side, glaring through his peripheral vision, a solid wall of darkness followed his route. Squatter camps lit up the piers with night fires and beyond those was the Hudson. Its dark oily waters the only thing giving Manhattan its Living status.

The corner of West 23rd loomed up fast as he braked hard and yanked the control paddle rough to the right. He slowed his speed, knowing the cops could turn a blind eye near the Boundary but deeper into the city they tended to be the same assholes they always had been.

He pulled over fifty metres from the angled junction Broadway, spindles clicking as the X3i mounted the edge of the sidewalk. The street was quiet. The brightly coloured

wash of holos lit up the distant view. Drobná stabbed a console button and the nanomech roof rapidly reassembled itself above and around him. The interior of the vehicle became as silent as a tomb.

He used the touch-cons on the windshield to access the messages on his PA, and sent a status query to the fixer who'd tried contacting him. The response was immediate, green light.

Drobná activated the secure audio link.

A solitary dial-tone, then a male voice, slightly modulated by whatever encryption service was running on the server; enough to prevent a voice-print being taken.

"Enjoying the warm evening Mikhail?"

"What have you got?" Drobná didn't do small talk.

The fixer gave him a brief summary of a situation that needed some attention: a businessman who didn't like what his business partner was doing. Drobná asked a few questions without getting any specific details about the client.

"I'm interested. I don't do flat fees, you know that right?"

"Yeah, I've already talked it over with the client, told him you were the best man for the job but that you had certain terms. He's cool with the arrangement." The fixer sounded confident.

"Half a percent of pre-tax profits, for life."

"Yup."

"What's your take?" Drobná asked.

"I reckon the details are worth five big ones, up front."

"Must be some business," Drobná challenged.

"Small, but very profitable."

Drobná went silent for a moment to give it some thought. He knew it was Manhattan. He knew he could do it tonight.

Using the touch-cons on the windshield, he dragged a set of HTMD controls onto the console that sat over his lap; the translucent glyph and alphanumeric keyboard that appeared there glowed against the darkness of the foot well, and bathed his hands in coloured light. He set up a link to one of his orbital bank accounts, downloaded some funds and then sent them to the fixer's payment portal.

"Got it," the fixer registered the receipt, "Sending details through now."

An encrypted data-pack arrived through the secure link. Drobná used a finger on the HTMD controls to drag the

data-pack into his toolkit. It checked for viruses and spyware then ran a decryption app.

A name and address appeared on HTMD console, a photo and some other details were sitting in summary-format below.

“All good. Thanks.” Drobná said as a sign-off then cut the call.

He checked the other details; made the photo stick in his memory. He dragged the HTMD controls away; they vanished in a blink of light. Leaving the roof in place he gunned the engine and pulled away towards Broadway.

It was a short drive.

The address was on the East side. A string of low rent stores with tenements cramming the floors above.

He parked the X3i around the first corner. Slipped on a pair of latex surgical gloves from the bag of them he carried inside his jacket pocket. Getting out the car he realised he was sweating. His stomach complained about lack of food.

Going to the front entrance he buzzed several apartments repeatedly. There was a jabber of voices through the intercom. One person hit the door-release. Drobná stepped inside.

He used the staircase, moving quickly but not rushing.

Reaching the door of the apartment he saw the lock was electronic. There was a camera blister above the door but the casing was all scratched to fuck and it looked as useful as a handful of grit in your eye. He pressed his ear to the door and heard the sound of voices and melodramatic music. Television. He bunched his fist and gave the door a couple of heavy thuds.

Sound of a chain being slid into place. Several locks snapped open at once. The door squeezed open a couple centimetres. A middle-aged black face in the gap, too much flesh, sweating and reeking of some kind of spice.

“Yeah? Who the fuck are you?” The way he said ‘fuck’ made it sound like it was with an ‘o’ and not a ‘u’.

Drobná drove both hands into the door sending it slamming into the guy’s head, ripping the chain away like it was made of foil. The guy yelled in shock and pain, tried to grab the door to push it back but Drobná was already through, inside the guy’s stinking apartment. He grabbed the guy by his face and threw him into the wall. The plaster cracked. The guy moaned and went limp. Drobná wasn’t buying it. He grabbed the guy by his the back of his neck and span him round, pulled him close, pressed a meaty fist against his fat fucking face.

"You're stealing from your business partner. He wants you to leave, today. I'm going to give you five minutes to pack what you want and then I'm going to take you to the city limits. Got it?"

The guy's head lolled back, eyes-staring wide, shocked into a daze. Drobná slapped him with an open-palm.

"Fucking got it?"

"City...city limits?"

"Yeah."

"But-"

"No fucking butts. No sobbing. No second chance. You're out of this city."

"But-"

"I know the men who run the flamethrowers. I'm going to show them your face. If you try and sneak back into the city: I've paid them to burn you."

He was shaking his head violently from side to side; his brain was already taking him to the Boundary, showing him television documentaries of the Dead Zone.


"I can't... I'll die. Those *THINGS* will get me!"

Drobná grabbed his whole face with one hand and slammed him backwards into the wall, cracking his skull. The plaster cracked some more. 'Die here, die out there, it's your choice. At least out there you've got a chance. Four minutes."

Motel-Ba'al-Achtung/The Looking Glass

By Tradchick



 D184, Y+10 So I've decided to stop hiding from the possibilities. All those potential nightmare scenarios that are out there, ready to mess you up for good. I'm going to look with wide open eyes. From D-000, Y+0 {mm}

Enter URL for media here

MUNCH

<mm:02879999:KBSB:Sandra_sergevski>

Correspondent Witnesses Horrific Start to Robot Killing Spree

[Anchorman talks to camera]

ANCHORMAN: We've got a KLBB correspondent, Sandra Sergevski, ready to talk to us from Manhattan which is currently going into meltdown as reports of more of these killings come in.

[Anchorman turns to a hologram of the correspondent]

ANCHORMAN: What can you tell us Sandra?

SANDRA SERGEVSKI: We now know more about what started this incident, but we're still unclear about exactly who is behind the robots and their actions. UTOC military sources seem to be in state of panic and confusion: the persistent rumour is that the military lost control. It is almost certain that this event is linked to the robot killings occurring in other parts of the world, which is following the growing wave of people succumbing to an unknown virus. Official sources are connecting both events to the SOYAR corporation ship that tore through Earth's atmosphere and rained wreckage across the Mediterranean and North Africa on Sunday.

What I can tell you is that early Monday morning, in Athens, a businessman boarded a plane for New York. The flight was delayed for almost 24 hours. Just like many other flights disrupted by the SOYAR incident. It's likely the businessman joined the crowds of people stuck in the airport, watching the news feeds covering populated areas struck by the wreckage. It was Monday morning when several hundred million people across the impact zone woke up to see the sunrise tinged with an alien yellow glow. Subsequently the majority of media feeds now carry the strap line "Yellow Dawn".

The businessman was returning to New York after spending a week touring the Greek countryside. We're certain he was in the area of the impact zone at the time of the SOYAR ship breaking up. During the flight he started to complain about feeling unwell. By time he reached JFK he had developed symptoms that matched a bad case of flu. Coughing and sneezing, the businessman travelled into Manhattan, checked into a hotel and tried to sleep it off.

<mm:continue01>

<mm:continue02>

Early today, he walked into the nearest emergency medical centre, suffering acute symptoms of pneumonia, respiratory distress, gastric problems and rapidly began to haemorrhage from mouth, nose and eyes. Staff were alarmed, especially considering his recent international travel, but alarm turned into confusion as the computer system for the medical centre locked down the entire building.

Technicians to override the lockdown but failed. Then, about twenty minutes after the lockdown began, roughly six hours ago, a bi-pedal robot walked into the medical centre equipped with a tank of 'sticky' petroleum and nozzle-type weapon. The robot was more bulky than the familiar SONY houseman, drab grey metal stencilled with UTOC military markings. The hospital computer allowed the robot access to each part of the building in turn, room by room. The robot incinerated the businessman and over half the people trapped with him. </mm>

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5

The concierge didn't want to let him in. Carlos gave him 5,000 credits and told him to upgrade his room for one night. The concierge remained reluctant, eyes crawling quick time over the rags he was wearing, the strips of leather armour, the fresh bruises forming around his jaw, the spatters of blood. Carlos told him to use whatever was left to buy him a suit, two shirts, shoes, socks, underwear. He wanted the chef to prepare him a late lunch; was there seafood? The concierge bristled, responded that the hotel had fresh *rascasse*, *grondin*, *congre* -

Perfect. Carlos interrupted his flow and requested the chef prepare bouillabaisse, delivered to his room with a bottle of white wine; nothing fancy, just zesty and cold.

The concierge began to see the man behind the muck and the smell. Carlos smiled, depreciatively, requested that several services be arranged in any order that suited the concierge's abilities to manage them: a dentist, a masseuse, a pedicurist, a barber with hot towels and cutthroat. Preferably the masseuse last as he'd want time to digest, and of course, ensure there was time for him to eat in between all of these arrangements.

By now the concierge was standing to attention, pride gleaming through his tight-lipped smile. Carlos turned to the sullen sentry who'd been told to escort him to the hotel.

He handed over a small pouch made from a goat's gut; it contained the equivalent of roughly 200 credits in copper and silver; probably the equivalent of a month's earnings for somebody like him.

“I want you to forget you ever brought me here, understand?” Carlos requested firmly whilst the sentry opened the pouch checked inside and weighed it in his palm. “If I leave here undisturbed then there’ll be one gold for you here after I’m gone.”

One gold was equivalent to a hundred credits, give or take a little with exchange rates between digital and precious currency. The sentry didn’t know whether to salute him or shake his hand. Carlos smiled, turned to the concierge.

“My room?”



The suite was on the fourth floor, the uppermost part of the hotel, with several louvered windows overlooking the cramped Rue Théaulon; there was a lounge area that opened out onto a small ornate iron balcony above Rue Emile Jamais with a partial view of the crowded Place Saint-Louis less than fifty metres away.

Carlos stood in the early afternoon sun, naked except for a white towel wrapped around his hips. The towel was so clean it hurt his eyes to look at it. Unlike his grime-encrusted flesh. In one hand was a tall glass of chilled water, almost spotless apart from where his fingers had left greasy smears. He sipped and allowed his eyes to roam.

The view was distinctly European and Medieval. The rooftops of densely packed residential housing stretched away in a rough grid pattern; a mix of soft reds and clay coloured canal tiles; no roof the same height as the next, creating a jumbled affect; and because the historical lanes bisecting them were so narrow, it almost seemed as if the roofs formed one solid mass. Bordering his line of sight was the stout, unbroken curtain wall which surrounded the entire settlement; on top of which was the sentry-walk, bounded by a parapet crowned with battlements all the way along.

He liked it here. He would have enjoyed staying longer but he knew the Puppet Master would have a tight grip on the strings.

Glancing down he looked at his feet where he stood on the terracotta floor of the balcony; they were almost black with dirt, some of the skin glistening with an oily sheen; cracked and yellowed toenails with a thick rime of solid grey muck. He wiggled his toes and grinned.

Sounds wafted up from below and to his left. In the Place Saint-Louis, there a market was winding down and transforming into an open air seating area for the taverns that crowded the perimeter of the large open square. A good place for a drink later on, he decided.

A familiar emotion seeped into his thoughts; a blend of uncertainty, apprehension and excitement. It was always the same when he went through a transition from one state of existence to another, from one role to the next. That's all he'd been doing for the past ten years.

Rolling, reeling...running.

Always on the move. Never a moment to really find out who he was anymore. Of course, it was easy to blame E-FIB for that, to point a finger at Gerard Reinhardt, but Carlos knew he was just as complicit in the course his life had taken.

Did he still believe in what he was trying to achieve? That was the great litmus test. That was the ideal he clung to, that drove him to continue in this gruelling marathon of infiltration and deception.

His memory brought up a flash frame of a naked woman tied to a chair with a dirty rag in her bruised mouth. That had been this morning but it could just as well have been something he'd seen on television or experienced through a sim-stim. His emotional centres for such things were dead, so it seemed.

Carlos sipped the water and held the glass to his dry and blistered lips; the answer to the question: did he still believe?

He didn't know. He'd lost sight of the big picture. There was a vague, indefinable notion that his actions would allow the slow creep of civilisation to press against the New Wilderness, to push back the Dark Age that had snuffed out the lights of industry and recreational living in the wake of Yellow Dawn. He wanted to see law and security for ordinary survivors who just wanted to rebuild their lives without predators coming in to rape wives and daughters, stealing livestock and burning crops.

Did his actions make a difference? He couldn't honestly say yes or no.

Before Yellow Dawn he provided intel on highly organised criminal clans that were producing shadow drugs and unlicensed military bioware. Different objectives, same modus operandi, same life of violence and betrayal. The end justifies the means. That sanctimonious bullshit was burned into fleshy portals guarding the deepest vaults of his mind. The end justifies the means: the sentiment clung like fetid air above the graves he'd left scattered across every theatre of operation around the world.

His mood began to sour. The features of his face turned rigid for a moment as he gazed into the heat-haze shimmering about the walls of the settlement: blue sky beyond. Blue sky. Unlimited potential. Any idea can form. He played the mind game and shifted thoughts.

So Gerard Reinhardt was facing a takeover bid. Carlos knew that he to be the single most terrifying prospect for the Director. Reinhardt had been at the top of EFIB for nearly a decade *before* Yellow Dawn happened. The fact Reinhardt was still there now was a testament to how tenacious the sly old buzzard was. Conversely, the fact EFIB still existed as an entity at all was a verification of Reinhardt's abilities as a diplomat, manager and spymaster. The Director had been on Earth when Yellow Dawn happened, so he was one of the twenty-one percent who was made of the 'right stuff' to survive the K-wave unaffected. Reinhardt had rallied UTOC Civil Defence Forces to protect critical E-FIB assets that would have been otherwise plundered the anarchy that immediately followed. He organised recovery and storage of fuel, food and other vital supplies. He launched and co-ordinated the review of E-FIB offices across every territory to pick-up any personnel who had also survived; a mammoth undertaking but history shows Reinhardt responsible for saving over three hundred souls. Three hundred people brought together to deal with the crisis as a single team, where they could lean on each other and cope, who were loyal to the EFIB banner and even more loyal to Director Reinhardt.

Carlos Revira was one of them.

Of course, Europe no longer existed, just as no countries now existed; except in the memories of survivors. The handful of Living Cities that now remained were the new countries, separated by hundreds of miles, sometimes thousands of miles, of Wilderness and silent oceans. So the remit for EFIB had evolved as the dust of Yellow Dawn settled. The HQ was now in Budapest, ironically not yet an

official Living City, and EFIB worked under the political authority of the UDP.

A muffled knock on the door of the suite brought an end to his roaming thoughts. Carlos turned away from the balcony, into the cool shade of the suite, his bare feet padding across the soft carpet of the lounge. At the door he challenged the caller to identify themselves. It was the barber.

His stomach fluttered. Another transformation; perhaps he would see himself, however briefly.



The barber cut away the filthy knotted strands of brown hair, shaved the rest down to his bare scalp; a cutthroat razor removed several days of stubble and cleared away the twisted-braids of ragged beard from his chin. The dentist removed the polymer resin that E-FIB technicians had coated over his teeth before Carlos started the infiltration into Le Lac des Rêves and Marchand's lot; the resin had been formulated to give him a badly rotting smile. Although his natural teeth were healthy he'd lost one during a fight; there wasn't time to grow a new one so had the dentist render a ceramic prosthetic from the medical files he was able to pull down via the hotel's satellite link.

The pedicurist repaired his finger nails and toe nails, and cut away the layers of hardened dead skin from the soles of his feet. The concierge brought up a selection of cheap suits for him to choose from; they weren't scavenged but they weren't Paige-Lee or Tanaka either. Carlos kept one set of suit trousers but sent all the rest back. More luck with the shirts, shoes and underwear. Each time the concierge came back into the suite, the transformation was nearer to completion and caused him to mutter in delight and amazement.

Where had *monsieur* been? What had *monsieur* been doing? Who was *monsieur* and where was *monsieur* going?

Carlos deflected every question without causing frustration or offence.

Lunch was served on the balcony by the chef herself; it seemed word had gotten around that he was a client to take an interest in. The bouillabaisse was first-class, served with a home made *rouille* on slices of grilled bread. The wine was cheap and very local but he got what he asked for. The chef left pleased by compliments and his skill with the French language. Was it that obvious he was American? Correction: had *been* American.

It took willpower not to gobble the food in a frenzy of indulgence or to guzzle the wine straight from the bottle. He ladled the fish broth into the bowl with the bread and *rouille*, a little at a time, giving the flavours time to work across his taste buds. Every few spoonfuls, he stopped to refresh the palette with a sip of wine.

When the food was finished and dishes taken away, the concierge told him the masseuse would be there in an hour.

Carlos made good use of the time. He logged into a secure server within E-FIB, and launched a number of Internet portals from there. Four months of e-mails from his network of loose associations, people he could barely call friends and certainly none he could call a girlfriend; the very nature of his work precluded him from forming any lasting, long term or meaningful relationship. There were monthly reports from the agent looking after his properties in New Tokyo: the usual set of issues, all dealt with by preferred contractors in his absence, but the net result was a profitable income stream. His bank balances were looking very healthy. He made a mental note to review his stock portfolio and discuss options with his Wealth Manager.

Ignoring the bulk of the e-mails for now, he started to browse the global and orbital media feeds. A lot going on but no mention of E-FIB being bought or who a potential buyer might be. Maybe it wasn't a signed deal yet?

A small pulse of doubt and mild concern flared up within the main arena of his thoughts.

Was there another reason for him being recalled?

He wouldn't know until he reached Marseilles, so there was no need to think any more about it. He closed down those doubts and concerns.

Originally he'd planned to hire an aerodyne for the journey to Marseilles but there were none available in Aigues-Mortes. There was a company in Montpellier that was prepared to fly to Aigues-Mortes to collect him and take him to Marseilles; but he couldn't fly himself and leave the aerodyne there. Montpellier was a connection he wanted to avoid. He was about to pay through the nose for an

aerodyne to fly from Marseilles and collect him, but then had an idea and checked with local merchants and the City Recovery Corps. Aigues-Mortes had more than a fair share of wealthy and industrious survivors. Carlos found what he was looking for and wound up buying a microlight from an enthusiast who lived in the settlement. He'd be able to do the journey in two hours, probably less. Carlos made the payment electronically and had the concierge make arrangements to collect the thing and enough fuel for a two-way trip.

That left his massage, and then a whole night to enjoy what he had, shrug off the familiar edgy emotions and ease into his new state of existence.

6

Mikhail Drobná peeled off the latex gloves and dropped them into the Hudson River. He'd driven the business partner to the George Washington Bridge and helpfully escorted him to the barriers. The bridge was now an Infection Free Zone and the gateway to the West Corridor; it was a fifty-two mile journey, by foot or otherwise, to reach the fortress of Alphano which marked the end of the Dead Zone. From there he would have several thousand miles of empty choices in any direction except East.

The fat fuck had shuffle-stumbled across the bridge clutching a red vinyl suitcase too shocked and scared to make a fuss. Drobná hung around to make sure he vanished into the darkness beyond the soft glow of the flamethrower towers and the harsh glare of the Xenon searchlights. Drobná didn't have any clout with the soldiers who managed the IFZ or the toast towers, but he was confident the biz partner believed he did. And that if he saw him in the city again, he'd kill him.

The gloves vanished into the darkness below the bridge. No need for lights down there. Zeds didn't swim and the river was too wide for them to drift across; Drobná wrinkled his face in a display of disgust that was really to cover his discomfort at the idea that notion could ever be wrong.

Getting back into the X3i, he fingered a button that disassembled the nanomech roof. His guts rumbled and flexed, sloshing around excess acid. He checked the windshield map for his nearest favourite steakhouses. The navcomp responded by sprinkling a bunch of amber tags

across a 1:500 view of the city. There was a place only thirteen blocks away.

A beep came from his ear-clip followed by a priority call tone. Drobná had time to mouth the word, "shit" before Aaron d'Cota's voice came through. No option for Drobná to reject the call; it was part of the boss man's employment terms.

"Where are you?" d'Cota queried, gruff and no-nonsense.

"The G-W."

"Some late night sport?"

"Not me," Drobná responded, equally no nonsense. D'Cota was referring to the insane notion of Zed-baiting.

"You're not dumping Charleez in the D-Z?" a chuckle that hinted at a sick sense of humour.

"She's home."

"Ah, safe and sound. You're a guardian angel, Mikhail, you know that."

"That's what you pay me for."

A moment passed; Drobná sensed d'Cota smiling, "Do you know Charles Beaker?"

Drobná plucked a skinny middle-aged face with florid cheeks from his memory, a tall gangly guy with ginger hair turning grey; "He runs Three Moons."

"That's the one. I want you to pay him a visit, soon as. I'm sure the turd is skimming the cream dirt for Tounadre. You know who Tounadre is?"

"Yes."

"Find out what Beaker's up to."

"Of course."

"And Mikhail..."

"Yes?"

"Don't kill the cunt, just make him talk. Okay?"

"Sure."

The call ended. Drobná shifted his massive frame within the Kevlar seat and wiped the steakhouses layer from the windshield map. Dinner would have to wait.



Charles Beaker lived in a plush apartment building on 81st between Broadway and West End Avenue. It was the kind of building realtors liked to call pre-war. The place had been well-maintained. A glass and ornate metal door led into a comfortable lobby. The door looked locked. If there was a doorman he was either asleep or taking a dump somewhere.

Leaving the X3i parked across the deserted road, Drobná fished out the titanium cased Gauss-Zek from his trouser pocket and crossed to the glass door. The sounds of Broadway drifted down but otherwise the street was quiet; professional people were having professional sleep.

He activated the HTMD and several interface options appeared around the PA, encasing his hand in solid-light. With the index finger of his other hand he prodded several translucent icons; he ran a tag sweep, checking the building's broadcast. No Charles Beaker: the man kept things private.

Drobná dialled Charles Beaker's private number; courtesy of Mr d'Cota.

It rang five times and went to a mailbox; Beaker's aging ginger-fuck-face appeared in a small window that formed on the periphery of the HTMD. Drobná hung-up and dialled again. Mailbox. He dialled again, another six times. If he got to ten tries he'd think about waking up the doorman, or interrupting his dump if that's where the man was.

Beaker answered on the ninth try; no video, just voice: "This better be good whoever the fuck you are."

"Yeah? Try this. I work for Mr d'Cota. I'm outside your place. Open the fucking door."

"What? What the fuck time is it? Have you seen the time?"

"I like to work late. Open the fucking door."

"Who is this?" Beaker didn't sound happy.

"Drobná."

"Drob-", Beaker nearly swallowed his tongue. "I know you. I know what you do. Did d'Cota send you? Why has he sent you?"

"Quit your jabbering and open the door."

There was a long pause, followed by the sound of the door's electronic locks snapping open.

The lobby was soft-lit. A couple of leather armchairs and several enveloped-sized hardscreens fitted with magazine chips. There was a smell like cigar smoke and aftershave. Drobná took his time; he closed down the HTMD and returned the Gauss-Zek into his trouser pocket;

he checked the exits from the lobby and examined the stairwell. No sign of a doorman. He slipped on another pair of latex surgical gloves.

Beaker lived on the 32nd floor. Drobná rode the elevator to the 31st floor, crossed over to the stairwell and climbed up the remaining level: just in case. Beaker had sounded angry and scared, not a good combination, and he'd heard defiance in the man's voice. Beaker was dangerous. Beaker might do harm thinking he could then jump into Tounadre's camp. Maybe he could; Drobná had no intention of letting that happen.

Stepping out from the stairwell, Drobná entered a high ceiling hallway with fake marble floors. Beaker was standing in the doorway to his apartment; watching him with narrowed eyes; he was wearing a red satin dressing robe with black trim, sticking out below were skinny white legs and stupid black silk slippers.

Drobná walked up to him. Beaker made to step aside, inviting him in. Drobná rabbit punched him in the throat and grabbed him by the collar of his dressing robe as he tried to spin away. Without breaking his stride, Drobná carried on moving into the apartment, propelling Beaker ahead of him then snapping him upright as he stopped to kick the door shut.

Beaker was gasping, rasping and wheezing, trying to suck in a breath through his bruised windpipe.

"You alone in here?" Drobná asked gruffly, his eyes leaving Beaker to scan the spacious room. Leather furniture, potted plants and some arty oil paintings of the New York skyline, all pre-Yellow Dawn. Back to Beaker, "Hmm?"

Beaker had his hands up by his throat, massaging away the pain. Beaker nodded, and obviously got the idea that telling lies right now was going to be bad for his health.

Drobná pushed him over towards a fancy leather armchair and shoved him roughly down. "Want a drink?"

"Brandy," Beaker managed to choke out the word, then nodded to a cabinet beside a bookcase.

Drobná walked over, picked up two glasses, poured a generous measure for Beaker and a small dose for himself. Handing him the full glass, Beaker's eyes registered the latex gloves; his Adams apple started bobbing up and down. Beaker gulped brandy with trembling hands.

"Know why I'm here?"

Beaker shook his head but didn't look him in the eyes. The fuckhead was lying. Drobná had a vague idea how

Three Moons operated. It was a dirt digging and dirt dealing enterprise, with exclusive first views for Mr d'Cota. Smear campaigns, blackmail and leverage. Three Moons belonged to d'Cota. Beaker belonged to d'Cota. It used to belong to Phillippe Tounadre. If Beaker was skimming the cream dirt for Tounadre then Beaker was stealing from d'Cota.

Drobná took a slow sip of the brandy, giving the man a long appraising stare. Beaker looked up once and went back to guzzling what was in his glass.

“Mr d'Cota thinks you're giving it away to Tounadre.”

Beaker lowered the glass, licked his lips, stared at the soft white carpet. Drobná could see the cogs spinning round in his mind.

Drobná knocked back the small measure of brandy and carefully placed the empty glass on a small polished table.

“How much is Tounadre paying you to fuck over your boss?”

Beaker's legs were quivering, but not with fear. Abruptly the man lunged out of the seat, hurling the glass into Drobná's face, and made a run for it towards the main door.

The glass span past his head and smashed somewhere behind him; brandy splashed his face and the shoulder of his suit. Drobná didn't really care or notice; he was a big man but he wasn't slow. In fact, he was phenomenally fast. Beaker didn't even manage to get the door open before Drobná was on him, full force. He rained punches into him; he grabbed him threw him bodily into the wall, busting up an oil painting that had been in the way. Beaker screamed for a few moments then went quiet; moaning or grunting like a burst medicine ball with each blow.

Drobná locked his long iron-like fingers across Beaker's throat and hauled him across the room as if the man was a coat rack. Reaching the drinks cabinet he kicked away his legs and slammed him down against the back of a leather sofa, still gripping his throat, forcing his spine to arch the wrong way. Beaker's slippers flailed about to find the floor; his hands clamped around Drobná's mighty paw, desperate to release some of the pressure.

Grabbing the brandy bottle, Drobná smashed the neck against the cabinet and held the shattered end towards Beaker's mouth.

Beaker screamed.

“Open your mouth and drink!”

“God no! No!”

Drobná used his moment of pleading to tip the bottle end-up: brandy splashed into Beaker's mouth and across his face.

Beaker gagged, spluttered and coughed; he tried to push himself upright. Drobná tightened the grip on his throat and pushed him back, arching his spine further. Beaker sucked in a breath and tried some more pleading: his mouth opened, Drobná poured.

Brandy flowed over Beaker's face and splashed across the leather upholstery. Beaker let go of Drobná's hand and tried to knock the bottle away. Drobná stopped pouring, turned the bottle and slammed it into Beaker's nose, blunt end first.

Beaker's head lolled back, his hands still tried to fight the bottle off; his palm caught the broken neck of the bottle, blood began to drip and splash.

Drobná smacked the bottle into his face again, then tipped it round and emptied what was left, much of it going into Beaker's mouth. Drobná threw away the bottle and clamped his hand over Beaker's lips. Beaker's chest heaved, his whole body went into spasm as he started to choke; brandy sprayed out through his nostrils, mixed with blood.

Drobná pulled Beaker upright and let him catch his breath.

After a few moments of gasping and rolling eyes, Beaker started to find his senses. He looked at his hand and went pale. He looked at Drobná.

"What do you want to know?"

"You're skimming quality dirt from Three Moons and giving it to Tounadre?"

"Yes," Beaker nodded sullenly.

"Tounadre's cutting you in on a profit share?"

"Yes. But it's specific intel. Gamboa, Isaac Gamboa's task force against MOCID. Tounadre's got a buyer for it. MOCID, I think."

The mention of MOCID made Drobná's blood run cold. He didn't want to fuck with people like that.

"What's your cut?" Drobná pressed.

"It's a monthly deal. Tounadre pays a flat rate every month whether there's intel or not. But Gamboa is picking up pace, his whole campaign's getting busy. Gamboa just bought E-FIB."

E-FIB.

MOCID.

These were big players.

Drobná could see credits rolling up on a digital display in his imagination. Money and power. Beaker was connected to something huge.

“Files? You got files?”


Beaker nodded, then paused, a crafty look seeping into his blood and brandy smeared face. Drobná brought up a fist, quick as lightening, pulling the punch short of Beaker’s jaw. Beaker twitched and flinched. He started nodding quick-time, “Files are in my office, in the next room.”

Drobná smiled and felt the scar tissue stretch.

Motel-Ba'al-Achtung/The Looking Glass

By Tradchick



 D184, Y+10 Maybe if they'd let the robots do their thing none of this would have gotten so out of control. I found this from D-000, Y+0{mm}

MUNCH

<mm:02879999:UTOCDC:sub-committee440#12b>

Transcript fragments of Col. Karim Javez, Operational Commander of Dragon Breath Project, speaking via virtual presence at UTOC Defence Council, Sub-Committee 440#12b

Ref: Emergency Schedule – Collateral Damage – Dragon Breath

JAVEZ

(in response to question posed by Sub-Committee 440)

We...er, we, began the DB exercise three days ago, as planned and agreed with yourselves during the whole project initiation phase....

...the exercise was scheduled to run for 48 hours. It's scope was to test the Civil Defence Force response to chemical and biological attack...

...three AI nests were brought on-line to run the DB exercise. One of them, APOC, was tasked with generating simulations. A dirty bomb attack in packed sports arena. Biological agents released on an urban transport system. And feeding the imaginary outputs to the Primary AI, and to the Secondary AI that was programmed to work as a back-up. APOC was delivering outputs via ER wards, school registers, and transport hub bio-chem sniffers.

The Primary AI was supposed to manage the Civil Defence Force responses and provide remote-drone assistance if the 'scenario' was large enough to require it. Everything was running perfectly, at first...

...we knew we had trouble when the Primary AI walked a Militech Ranger in an ER station in downtown Manhattan and incinerated twenty-seven people...

...Primary AI had registered an Alpha Grade biological infection and took all necessary steps to handle it, as it's programmed. None of APOC's generated scenarios were programmed to include Alpha Grade attacks, precluding this level of response. We're not sure if the Alpha Grade infection was real or...

...Alpha Grade infection would indicate a pathogen capable of mass extinction on a global scale...

<mm:continue01>

<mm:continue02>

...Primary AI began to interrogate the available records of the people it incinerated in Manhattan, reviewing an audit trail of travel from phone positions and transport routes. It then looked at contact probability with other members of population, and dispatched Militech Rangers to deal with them...

...APOC must have realised the Primary AI was not following the 'game' scenarios of the exercise and successfully terminated it. This has led to an unfortunate situation. The Secondary AI has now gone into full lockdown mode, and is continuing the exercise beyond all parameters of the project...

...so far the Secondary AI has incinerated two-hundred, thirty seven citizens across twelve UTOC territories. We've changed APOC's end-game to try and predict who the Secondary AI will attempt to target next...

...we still don't know if the Alpha Grade infection is actually real. If it is then...

...I understand, of course, this is a disaster unfolding at an exponential rate and very embarrassing for the Defence Council, but if the Alpha Grade infection is real then I feel the Dragon Breath project is...actually doing its job. SOYAR Corp still haven't confirmed the complete cargo itinerary of their ship that burned up. Surely we should wait...

...I have a team of technicians ready to work on destroying the Secondary AI nest...

...estimate we could terminate the AI in about three hours. </mm>

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7

Marseilles was a patchwork quilt of colour in the mid-morning Sun; ancient stonework and roof tiles, mingling with modern constructions that had been well maintained. Even from the air, the decay and devastation surrounding the living nub of the city was somehow smudged out, concealed like an illusionists trick. Or possibly just another example of the human mind editing what it chooses to comprehend.

Like the hundreds of Infected out on the ruined streets; Carlos Revira chose not to see those.

He had landed the microlight on the wide section of the Canebière. It was a broad avenue, crowned by the two gothic spires of the Réformés church; once the domain of motor vehicles that was now kept clear for small aircraft. It enabled Marseilles to maintain aerial links without the risks involved in building a corridor to the airport and creating a protection zone around it. He had flown along the coast for much of the way, passing the three offshore islands that enclose and protect the bay, and directly over the deep blue waters of Vieux-Port that extended from the Pharo gardens and the imposing palace there. He'd passed between the huge stone bulks of Fort Saint-Jean and Fort Saint-Nicolas, and had a striking view of other landmarks such as Notre Dame de la garde, with its gilded statue of the Virgin gleaming like a beacon of hope and faith in the dazzling sun. Carlos had no time for religion: any God that allowed Yellow Dawn to happen had no love for his 'children'. As for

faith, Carlos had an unflinching faith in himself and his abilities to survive.

The port was bristling with vessels; predominately fishing boats which thrived off the bountiful stocks of the Mediterranean; but there were military cruisers from the UDP, clearly marked by flags and colours, and a rag-tag collection of former military boats run by small emerging coastal 'nations' that had the money and skills to repair what they could salvage; and there was a scattering of pleasure craft, belonging to those individuals who had survived intact, or done very well out the chaos following Yellow Dawn.

It was sights like this that could lull the brain in a sense of thinking nothing had changed. Like in any of the handful of Living Cities scattered across the world, you could forget about the heavily fortified perimeter with the Dead Zone, you could keep from your conscious mind the consequences of that perimeter failing at any point. Budapest was an example of that, Carlos reflected, recalling the sight of people running around in blind panic outside the headquarters of E-FIB where an infrequent but regular breach had occurred: only a few Infected had come through but it had quickly spread, causing mayhem until an IC Team came in and dealt with it. The smell of burning flesh had lingered in the air for days.

Carlos brought himself back to the moment; walking down the Rue de Rome with a sort of swagger, towards the address for the Hotel Regina. The street was a slowly surging mass of people; expensive boutiques were wedged in beside scavenger stores; above the sea of heads Carlos could see the tall column of the fountain in Castellane Square. There was a smell of raw fish, body odour and garlic; he didn't find it offensive. Most of the street was in shade but the day was becoming rapidly warmer. Scanning the clutter of hand-painted signs protruding from the 1st and 2nd floors, he saw one for his hotel.

The building was narrow, six stories, with salmon coloured rendering, and ornate black wrought iron railings enclosing the minimal balconies at the front. The golden arches of a faded yellow 'M' logo was still affixed to the side of the hotel where protruded above its shorter neighbours.

The reception staff didn't flinch when he checked in on the pre-arranged reservation. He was just another customer. They gave him a room on the 5th floor. He took the stairs, his state of physical fitness carrying him easily on a long-legged stride.

The door required a physical key. Entering the room, he smelled the cologne before he heard the familiar voice, an accent from the former Southern States of what had been America.

“Welcome back, Carlos.”

“Director,” he greeted, barely giving the man a glance as walked to the tall Napoleonic window that overlooked the crowded street below. This was a massive surprise. Gerard Reinhardt did not meet agents in the field. An email, a phone call or a holo-presence but never a face to face.

How bad had things got for Reinhardt to be here?

Bad enough for you to need me, Carlos mused. He began scanning windows opposite out of routine instinct, checking for sign, observing the status of the view. “It’s good to see you outside the office.”

It was the first time he’d used English in months.

“Cut the small talk. Grab yourself a glass of whatever it is they serve for fine wine around here, sit down, shut-up, and listen.”

Carlos’ lips stretched into a tight smile as he fixed his attention beyond the tall window; the man never changed. The visual checks revealed nothing out of place. He turned to face the room and Director Reinhardt who had taken the only armchair, in the corner, between the internal wall and the narrow bed.

Short and carrying a little bit too much weight for his frame. Podgy was a good way to describe Reinhardt. His figure was formed of curves. Despite pale skin he had very dark features, a full head of thick black hair combed back into some kind of 1930’s wet-look. A rounded face that tapered to a small but firm chin, large gently arching eyebrows that could rise to express a vast range of moods. His eyebrows converged on a narrow nose that descended in a gentle curve to a small mouth, topped by a thin black moustache. The most striking thing about Reinhardt was his eyes, large, almond shaped, smoky, and unflinching and projecting an impression they had witnessed a hundred-thousand secrets.

Carlos saw an unopened bottle of white wine sitting in an ice bucket; there was only one glass. The label was hand printed; the bottle scratched and boil washed, recycled from pre-Yellow Dawn.

Reinhardt watched in silence as he went through the process of opening and pouring himself a drink. His hand trembled a little as he gripped the bottle neck; damn, the old man still made him nervous.

Lowering himself onto the corner of the bed so that he could face the Director, he crossed his legs, took a sip of the wine, and waited.

Reinhardt now had his attention; the Director hated interruptions and distractions.

“Good work with Marchand,” Reinhardt congratulated.

Carlos squiggled his lips; the Talisman slithered from the shadows of his mind, causing him to tense up: “An unfinished job.”

The Director paused and studied him for a long scrutinising moment; Carlos knew what he’d just said was out of character. “Unfinished, of course. The next phase begins but-”

“Not with me,” Carlos cut in.

Reinhardt nodded curtly.

Carlos sipped wine and waited.

“I’m relocating you to New Tokyo.” Reinhardt told him.

His heart did a double-capacity pump then fluttered for a few moments. New Tokyo. A melting pot of survivors and orbital culture; scavengers and high-end technology. The last place he ever really knew who he was. Carlos thought briefly of his father the last time he saw him there: strung-out, emaciated, crying and pathetic. Carlo turned his mind on the memory as he’d turned his back on his father.

“As you know the Bureau, or rather its assets and functional apparatus have been acquired by a new...team,” Reinhardt explained carefully and without emotion.

“I thought you’d been bought by some private sector enterprise. Who sells E-FIB, anyway? The UDP?”

Reinhardt nodded again, his slicked back hair catching the sunlight, “The UDP consider they own the Bureau and there is no mileage in a political fight to argue the contrary. There’s a man called Isaac Gamboa, ever heard of him?”

Carlos shook his head.

“A bureaucrat with a hard on for defending morality and quoting from the Good Book. The man is on a personal mission to crucify MOCID and their masters within what remains of UTOC.”

“I’d say what remains of UTOC these days constitute quite a lot.”

“Don’t dilute my discourse, Carlos.”

“So Isaac Gamboa is a good guy,” Carlos replied rapidly, cutting to the chase, “His mission statement matches the Bureau. It could mean you’re out of a job. What’s New Tokyo got to do with all this?”

Reinhardt went silent for a long moment, his dark eyes regarding him with smug enjoyment; "Always interrupting Carlos, and so always missing the finer points."

Carlos maintained eye contact and sipped the wine.

Reinhardt raised his eyebrows and a brief smile creased his cheeks, "You are always my favourite criminal. But you have failed to capture the essence of what I have been trying to achieve through the Bureau for this past decade. I do not have a vendetta against UTOC, nor even MOCID. I disagree with the methods some heads of business within UTOC sign-up to, and to which UTOC administration authorises. I dislike the trauma caused by MOCID's Cultural Attaches as they execute those plans."

Carlos was aware of his blood turning cold. A professional state of detachment settled over his thoughts. Perhaps it was easy for Reinhardt to say these things, but Reinhardt must have known the scale of the horrors caused by MOCID's attempts to destabilise the fledgling peace and order of survivor settlements.

"MOCID needs to be contained, and shown evidence of when it has stepped beyond the line. Some aspects of what MOCID tries to achieve in its zealous loyalty for UTOC are however, for the good." Reinhardt affirmed. Then his brow lifted and he waved a small fat hand in Carlos' direction, "Marchand was not funded or controlled by MOCID. He wasn't acting towards some lofty goal of commerce engineered by a Chief Financial Officer in UTOC."

Carlos frowned, "I know that. That became obvious after a couple of months. Why keep me there?"

Reinhardt gazed at him, and softly repeated a statement he often quoted, "Without order, strange ideas can take hold."

"Marchand is running a cult."

"Yes. Ironically the man of real interest there is somebody you barely met; Sebastian Faust, but that's a different story. I know enough to respond, if Gamboa doesn't interfere. Your role in New Tokyo is back to brass tacks. Isaac Gamboa is a treacherous and tenacious slug who has managed to usurp my authority and risks dragging all the good men and women of the Bureau into a false cause."

"Explain?" Carlos requested.

"Gamboa has wormed his way into the moral vision of UDP. He's secured significant funding, from somewhere I've yet to uncover, to support his proposal. Based out of New Tokyo," Reinhardt flexed a finger in his direction to indicate

this involved him, "He is using his funding to buy up the Bureau, and the remains of other smaller agencies, all their resources and assets, to build a specific Task Force investigating UTOC and MOCID being involved in 'criminal destabilization'.

"Again, this sounds no different to your remit and that of E-FIB," Carlos suggested.

Reinhardt grunted, impatient, "How I act on the intelligence my agents gather is my business, and is usually handled in the realm of my community. That being the spy community. We deal in shadows and subtlety, to deliver threats and changes in policy. Gamboa is diametrically opposite; Gamboa wants to prosecute, he wants to drag names and faces through public prosecution. It's a glory wagon with his image on the sidings, and UTOC's reputation dragged through the mud beneath the wheels. The idea has the UDP salivating like wild dogs."

Carlos sensed there was something else about Isaac Gamboa that was getting beneath the Director's skin. "How does that hurt you or the Bureau?"

Reinhardt brought his small hands together in a steeple before his round face. "Some good people stand to suffer damage from this. Friends of mine. Do you understand, Carlos? Friends in the community."

Carlos translated: *friends in the spy community; friends in MOCID.*

Reinhardt continued in his slow methodical voice, without interruption, "Gamboa is the great deceiver. He's corrupt. His entire reputation with the UDP is based on his personal crusade against the villainies of UTOC...but all that is based on a lie. Isaac Gamboa is a UTOC crony who takes bribes before thinking of honour. There's more details in the files I'll be handing over to you."

"How do I fit in? What's my role?"

"Gamboa has asked for E-FIB people. His Task Force is gathering pace, he needs resources. I'm sending him you. Your role is sabotage his operation and find evidence of his treachery."

Reinhardt fell silent; now was Carlos' turn to ask questions. The sound of a street hawker filtered up from below; a young male voice shouting in French. Suddenly the language sounded alien to him, as if his brain was already assimilating his new role and detaching from the old. Lifting himself up from the corner of the bed, Carlos crossed the small room to the tall window and studied the street once again. New Tokyo was going to be a different

beast. The inner core of New Tokyo was an example of how the world would have become if Yellow Dawn had never happened; whilst the Dead Zones were the worst, according to the articles he'd read and the documentaries he'd streamed from the orbital media feeds. The Dead Zones were a fascination for those who witnessed everything unscathed from space.

"How soon do I leave?" he asked.

"Today."

Carlos nodded thoughtfully. What would happen if he said 'no'. *To hell with you, old man; I'm through with this.* The notion opened into visualisation of the scene; Carlos took it forward, imagined leaving here on his own steam, with his own purpose to follow: and there was nothing. A blank void. Then he saw himself standing on the flat marshy plains near Le Lac des Rêves, under a merciless sun, without roads or direction to guide him. It was a chilling sight.

His mind clicked back into professional gear; his eyes refocused on the crowded street: the sun was angling high in the sky and pushing away the shadows.

"Who's the friend in MOCID you're trying to protect?" Carlos asked and he heard the Director breath in slowly, sensed him smile.

"It's all in the files. The primary marker for your intel gathering. The somewhat complicated comms route."

"But in a nutshell?" Carlos turned away from the window and knocked back the rest of the wine: it was becoming warm and no longer tasted so good.

"Your placement within Gamboa's Task Force satisfies a number of objectives. You'll be feeding your intel to a 3rd party agency, an organisation called Three Moons that operates under the front of an investigation agency. It is run by a friend of mine, Aaron d'Cota. D'Cota normally shares juicy intel with me; I had intimated that I would be interested in anything coming out of Gamboa's camp. He targeted Gamboa but the quality of intel coming through to me was weak and I felt watered down. I suspect d'Cota is either filtering the intel for a reason, or, d'Cota has a problem within Three Moons: simply put, the intel is not coming through."

Carlos cut in, "You want me to feed intel to Three Moons but you also want me to report directly to you? You get to see what goes into Three Moons and compare it with what filters out?"

Reinhardt tilted his head briefly and raised an eyebrow, allowing Carlos the interruption, "That is an accurate assumption."

"So d'Cota has already targeted Gamboa's camp, who am I replacing?"

"I don't know. D'Cota and I share information, not the specifics of how we acquire it."

"D'Cota is a good friend of yours?"

"He has been for many years. Now, however, I'm beginning to have my doubts."

"Friends are a dangerous luxury in your business," Carlos quipped.

The remark caused Reinhardt to bristle, "As they are in yours. Are we done?"

"Not yet. So who's Gamboa's main target? Who's the MOCID agent in Gamboa's sights? Who's the Cultural Attaché you're trying to protect? Who is your friend?"

Reinhardt sat silent for a moment, slowly nodding, regarding him with an impassive, unreadable gaze. Then he answered, "Cesar Mecuri."



Drobná had Charles Beaker tied to a chair in his apartment. He sat in an armchair opposite, with a hardscreen resting on his lap, reading the files Beaker had dug out for him; he munched on a rare-grilled steak he'd nabbed from Beaker's fridge, fried-up and jammed between two slices of local baked bread. His eyes scanned headlines and his brain put together the building blocks for a story:

Isaac Gamboa

Special Task Force

MOCID is the target

Specifically, Cultural Attaches doing bad things

Target number one, Cesar Mecuri

Drobná could see relationships between people and information; he saw personal politics; he could see where information was being compartmentalised for the purpose of controlling who knew what. Drobná saw opportunities for influence, power and money.

Isaac Gamboa was a legal beaver creating a team to nail Cesar Mecuri to the wall. According to Gamboa, Cesar Mecuri was funnelling raw muscle out of a criminal rehabilitation plan into construction work focussed around reclaiming Dead Zones and shoring up their Boundaries; except a load of these criminals were ending up in a war zone a thousand miles from where they were supposed to be, in a region not too far north of New York.

UTOC Criminal Rehabilitation Programme

Cesar Mecuri

Kelston Construction Company

Tragan Conflict

A supply of armed and dangerous criminals

Drobná was liking the look of this story more and more. He took a jaw-wide bite out of the steak sandwich and chewed loudly, breathing through his nose. He swivelled his eyeballs up to see Beaker watching him, wrists tied to his thighs and doing a good job at boking miserable: the alcohol he'd made him guzzle was wearing off.

Drobná dropped his gaze and scanned notes attached to the files. The files had been logged through Three Moons and then checked out from the system by Beaker. Did Beaker have a way of removing dirt without leaving an audit trail? Drobná asked him through mouthful of half-chewed meat and bread.

Beaker responded sullenly, begrudgingly: yes, he had a way of siphoning data out of Three Moons; a back-door he'd created in the system.

Drobná grinned, showing teeth and food. He leant forward and plonked the plate with what remained of the sandwich on the floor by his feet; then picked up a pint glass filled with the red wine and soda water. The red wine was skanky stuff, one step up from home brew. He'd added soda to improve the taste and keep his mind moderately clear.

The files showed that his boss, Mr d'Cota had asked for Three Moons to plant somebody inside Isaac Gamboa's team.

"How come d'Cota wanted a needle in Gamboa's vein?"

Beaker tried to flex his shoulders, visibly uncomfortable; "Ask him yourself, you've got a better chance of knowing what goes on inside that head of his."

"If you want another knock round the face with a bottle then keep avoiding the question. You set up the needle. D'Cota asked you to do it. What do you know?"

Beaker glared at him; *have to admire his spunk*, Drobná thought. "D'Cota was passing the dirt on. He wasn't interested in it for himself."

"Who to?" Drobná pressed.

"Some Euro spook, I don't remember the name."

"Try and remember, your teeth and bones depend on it."

"Shit, I..." Beaker seemed to be genuinely struggling to remember.

"A spook? This guy was from the Intelligence business? What was the outfit called?"

Beaker nodded, narrowing his eyes as his recollections came together, "E-FIB. European Federation Intelligence

Bureau. The spook was the Director. Gerald... Gerard something or other. Rhinestone. I think."

Drobná didn't know fuck all about E-FIB other than they'd been around for a long time before Yellow Dawn even happened. "So what, d'Cota is pals with this Rhinestone?"

"Reinhardt. His name is Reinhardt. D'Cota and him are close, yeah. They've been sharing information for years, except..." Beaker started to say something then thought better of it: seemed to Drobná he didn't want to go down this route. Beaker sighed, loud, pissed off. "D'Cota wasn't passing anything on about Gamboa."

"What do you mean?"

"I was watching the data coming into Three Moons from the source. I checked the access logs and d'Cota was barely touching the stuff, he would look at it from time to time and then port out only really flimsy material... to pass onto Reinhardt, I guess. It was like it wasn't important to him. That's how I knew I could sell it on to Tounadre. That guy, Mecuri, he obviously had a sense Gamboa was pointing his African snout towards his corn hole."

Drobná ran his rough fingers across the hard scar tissue crossing his face; something was odd about this story.

"Who's the source?"

"With Gamboa?" Beaker queried his meaning; Drobná nodded. Beaker shook his head. "I don't know, and it's not important anymore."

"Why?"

"When Gamboa set up the Task Force he set up a fresh team, away from Orbit, in New Tokyo. It was like he knew there was a needle in his vein. The source couldn't make the jump."

Drobná thought about the call he'd gotten from d'Cota earlier that night. How did d'Cota suddenly get wise to Beaker skimming the cream off the dirt? "So there's no dirt coming through from Gamboa, but so what... d'Cota doesn't give a shit so you say?"

"Maybe, no, but like I said, d'Cota placed the needle into Gamboa for Reinhardt. It was Reinhardt who wanted the details about Gamboa. Anyway, Gamboa's bought up Reinhardt's whole outfit: he now owns EFIB. Gamboa's demanded Reinhardt send one of his guys across to help with the Task Force. But I think d'Cota arranged that to happen."

"You think? Why?"

"D'Cota and Gamboa, they're close. You know?"

“No, I don’t know,” Drobná responded aggressively; there was something smug in the way Beaker was talking now, like he had one up on him or something. In fact, d’Cota and Gamboa being close didn’t make sense; which tied into what felt wrong about the picture that had been forming. It needed some more thought. “So who’s Reinhardt sending in to needle Gamboa’s task force?”

“I don’t know, all d’Cota told me was, there was a new set of ears in Gamboa’s camp and gave me the drop box details for picking up the reports this guy would be sending through.”

Drobná nodded but didn’t respond or say his thoughts out loud. He ran his tongue across dry and cracked lips, then knocked back a mouthful of wine and soda. His pulse was up. He was excited. This was big, he could feel it.

Aaron d’Cota
Reinhardt the Spook
Isaac Gamboa
Cesar Mecuri

Even Philippe Fucking Tounadre, Drobná pulled a mental grin. There was a big lie going on. Somebody was playing somebody.

Drobná ran through what he suspected:

Reinhardt the Spook wanted dirt on the African legal beaver, Isaac Gamboa.

Reinhardt and d’Cota are pals.

D’Cota sets up a needle in Gamboa’s team as a favour for his pal, Reinhardt: but then he doesn’t pass any real dirt through.

Why?

D’Cota is appeasing Reinhardt’s request with one hand but then denying it with the other.

D’Cota is protecting Gamboa?

Why would d’Cota protect somebody who is setting themselves up to clean out the bad apples left in the UTOC barrel?

Aaron D’Cota is UTOC to the core: the corporate hierarchy, the alliances based on market share and business strategy; profit margins; expendable resources with fuck all care for lives or feelings.

Isaac Gamboa is UDP, which in itself was a political entity born from the ashes of Yellow Dawn; the moral majority; the defender of civil rights; and, most significant, the people who kicked UTOC off the throne and down into the basement to pump the fires to rebuild Earth.

I wonder if d'Cota's needle found dirt on d'Cota? Drobná pondered if that was the reason for him not passing the dirt through to Reinhardt the Spook.

A lot of this speculation depended on why Reinhardt the Spook wanted dirt on Isaac Gamboa.

Gamboa bought E-FIB.

Gamboa is a threat to Reinhardt's job.

Reinhardt wants dirt for leverage?

Perhaps, or maybe something else, a bigger picture.

The Tragan conflict?

A war being supplied with armed criminals as foot soldiers.

Drobná got another pulse of adrenaline; pure excitement at the idea.

What is the relationship between Reinhardt the Spook and Cesar Mecuri? Do they know each other? Was Reinhardt also investigating Mecuri and was hooked into Gamboa's team to steal their thunder? Or was Reinhardt spying on Gamboa's team to sell / trade the dirt back to Cesar Mecuri?

Drobná gave a mental shake of his head; there was a lot he didn't know and a lot that wasn't in Beaker's files.

He rolled back his ideas and focussed on what he did know:

Aaron D'Cota set up a needle in Isaac Gamboa's team as a favour for his pal, Reinhardt the Spook, but barely touches the files and isn't passing any real dirt through.

A stockpile of valuable dirt built up in the files not being passed on.

The dirt highlights Isaac Gamboa's progress with creating the Task Force to tackle MOCID, and specifically his case against Cesar Mecuri: the UTOC Criminal Rehabilitation Programme linked to Kelston Construction Company, linked to the Tragan Conflict.

The dirt would be of value to Cesar Mecuri.

Charles Beaker sees an opportunity.

Charles Beaker approaches Philippe Tounadre to sell the dirt directly to Cesar Mecuri.

Mecuri is happy because he's scoffing the inside scoop on what his enemy is up to.

Tounadre is happy because he's scoring a profit from Mecuri, building rapport with a MOCID Cultural Attaché.

Beaker is happy because he's getting a fat kick back straight into his pocket.

Drobná sat upright in the armchair, gripping the sides of the hardscreen on his lap as an idea took hold of his brain.

“Hey fuckhead,” he got Beaker’s attention, “Does Tounadre know about the first needle not making the jump from orbit?”

Beaker grimaced and wriggled against his bonds; the pain must have been filtering in because he looked pale and sick. “No, he doesn’t.”

“So what was going to happen when the dirt stopped coming through?” Drobná challenged.

Beaker swung his gaze around the room, blinked a few times, then sighed heavy and pissed off; “I was going to tap Tounadre for more money. Tell him I was having to shift resources to keep the information flowing.”

Drobná smirked, “But he doesn’t know about Reinhardt getting one of his boys in there, right?”

“That’s right.”

“And what about this gem, Benito Magnon; does Tounadre or Mecuri know he’s planning to squeal?”

Beaker shook his head, mouthing a silent curse.

“What’s that?”

“No,” Beaker responded to the question, his ginger eyebrows rising up, “Nobody knows. Not even d’Cota. He’s not checked into the files for days.”

“That’s fucking fantastic,” Drobná crooned, genuinely happy.



He thought about killing Beaker but knew he’d find it hard to justify the reason to d’Cota, who had a talent for sniffing bullshit. Besides, d’Cota had told him specifically not to kill him: and d’Cota was still the boss, for now.

Drobná untied Beaker and held him up against the wall by his throat for a few seconds, long enough to give him a message: don’t tell anybody about the dirt. Tell anybody, you die.

Beaker got the message.

Drobná pushed harder and laid down new laws:

Philippe Tounadre was now officially out of the loop. No more cream for him.

The sisters at Three Moons were to create an account for him and flag up every new scrap of data coming in about Isaac Gamboa and Cesar Mecuri. Drobna wanted first view of anything before Beaker had a chance to see it. Beaker agreed. Beaker grovelled. Beaker said 'Thank You' for not killing him. Pathetic.

Drobná left the apartment building and collected the Ichirou X3i convertible. The sky was starting to get light. He felt a tug of depression despite the current buoyancy of his mood. Daylight meant he could see the confines of the island, the restrictions on his life. He drove into the heart of Manhattan, to the Kelston Hotel and his permanent suite there. Beaker had a nice place but it wasn't a spec on the Shanghai Suite at the Kelston. A product of a 'cosy' arrangement with a business consortium that had tried to screw him over after he'd done their dirty work. The fuckheads were now paying for it by giving him the suite, for keeps.

Strong black coffee and an egg and bacon breakfast.

He looked into the options for getting to New Tokyo. The next scheduled flight wasn't due to leave until four days time. There were several ships leaving later in the day but the journey was over two days including trading stops along the way. Two days each way was too long to be absent from duty. Mr d'Cota would start digging.

The flight was expensive but quick. He figured he could get there, back and do his business without attracting attention.

He pulled funds down from his orbital account, washed it through an online exchange market, buying gold and silver ingots as if he was going to travel out into the wilderness. Then he sold the precious metals via a generic account used by d'Cotas' businesses, and transferred the electronic credits into an account held by one of his fake identities.

The flight cost 5,000 credits each way. He booked the return journey for the first flight heading out of New Tokyo back to NYC: giving him 30 hours to do business there.

All he could do now was wait, continue his work for Mr d'Cota and work through the rest of Beaker's files. Thinking was something he enjoyed. Thinking was something people didn't realise he could do: they just saw his size and his muscle and his scary face. Thinking was his edge.

Motel-Ba'al-Achtung/The Looking Glass

By Tradchick



D185, Y+10 All these years later and this is still the standard story the authorities are spinning. Here's the source, right back from D-000, Y+0{mm}

Enter URL for media here **MUNCH**

<mm:02879999:soyar[red flag]press_conference:mystic_al>

First press conference by SOYAR Corporation / [blogfeed]://Mystik AL

15:00 hrs EST, SOYAR Corporation is hosting a press conference from their offices in New Tokyo. Every media service around the globe has a representative dialled into the virtual presence. The spokesman confirms the following:

One of their merchant cruisers, the 'Kalisto', was returning from the Choma lab/habitat cluster, on the inner rim of the Kupier belt, on a standard product completion trip.

Five days out, the cruiser was struck by a solar flare. Standard radiation shielding failed. The ships' electronics were damaged – including all flight controls.

For reasons unknown, the ship ceased its deceleration programme but continued its course to SOYAR's high Earth orbit habitat. This habitat was successfully evacuated before the cruiser tore through and plunged into the Earth's atmosphere.

The spokesman is rattling off meaningless statistics. Over 95% of the cruiser and destroyed habitat burned up on re-entry. Debris impacts fell across a six hundred mile wide break up zone stretching eleven hundred miles west of Cyprus.

The spokesman is not answering questions on the nature of the cargo carried by the Kalisto.

What caused the Yellow Dawn witnessed by millions across the Middle East, North Africa and Europe?

Dissembling responses. Same old Corporate bullshit. I hear the SOYAR's board are shipping their families off-world. As I'm speed typing this I'm listening to sirens outside. Ambulance, fire and police. Manhattan is shitting itself. Did you know Robots started killing people today. Does anybody out there know the truth? Something big and bad is happening, I can feel it in my bones. Oh, yeah, and I'm coming down with a cold! Go figure</mm>

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Views [10] | Comments [1]

Jugger88: Do U No wot hapnd 2 Mystik Al? He used 2b massive!!!

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9

Having survived the K-wave and avoided infection through the subsequent Z-wave, Carlos Revira wondered if it was sick, twisted or wrong to fantasise about your death. He was on a rusting hulk of a merchant ship, crossing the Atlantic between the remains of Europe and the remains of America. The Talisman was now a fading thought, a lingering memory of a *feeling* inside his head.

The vessel was loaded with cargo and a few paying passengers from Marseilles, heading direct for the shipping ports of New Tokyo, on the East coast of what had once been the state of Florida. The de-unification and fragmentation of the USA was something that had happened over a decade before Yellow Dawn. Ancient history for Carlos, or so he told himself, conscious of the niggling memories that were gnawing away at the back of his brain: the end of his childhood; the start of manhood and confronting a failed father. He hadn't been to New Tokyo since all of those events had culminated in him walking away.

Carlos stood near the bow, amongst the sodden ropes and machinery on the main deck, gripping the handrail as the ship was hurled about in heavy seas. Rain and spray, whipped into frenzy by the wind, spattered his plastic poncho. His gaze remained fixed on the churning horizon, where black green water met a dead grey sky. He visualised himself in this place, in this moment; a solitary figure on a ship, on a trajectory through ocean, through space and through time. The ship a solitary vessel amongst the vast

emptiness of the globe; where there used to be tens of thousands of similar vessels crawling around the curvature of the Earth, now there were only handfuls. Likewise, there were only a few ports around the world where the remaining ships could go: the vast majority of ports were now abandoned to the Dead.

The *where* and the *when* of his death was more intriguing to him than the *how*.

The *how* would be violent, Carlos has no doubts about that. In fact, some dominant voice within his mind suggested that he hoped for it; in the context of his fears about growing old and feeble, or falling victim to the Infection.

That's a poetic way to put it, he scorned.

Falling victim. You didn't catch the Infection, it wasn't a flu virus anymore. It caught you. Carried in the cadaverous body of something once human: a running, screaming *Thing*.

Carlos shuddered at the memories the idea brought bearing down on him. Budapest again: the screams of terror, the shrieks of the running dead; shoeless feet slapping against concrete and tarmac; slamming doors, smashing windows; desperate howls of panic; physical struggles; savage snarling bites and the enraged roars of fresh infection.

To hell with this.

He stepped back from the handrail but clung on, his arms fully extended, his head pushed back, eyes screwed shut; squalling gusts of wind battered his face and drove needles into his flesh.



There was a cramped and grubby communal area for passengers, separated from the ships crew. It smelled of diesel, damp clothes, sea brine and stale vomit. Carlos was seated in a battered leather recliner, supping broth from a chipped ceramic mug. Three people occupied similarly shabby furniture; Carlos ignored them, and they left him alone having quickly learned he wasn't interested in small

talk. The remaining eight passengers were probably curled up in their bunks or catching air on deck.

Taking the ship had been the best of no options. The next scheduled flight leaving Marseilles for New Tokyo hadn't been due to depart for three weeks. Reinhardt had a helicopter fly him back to E-FIB headquarters, in Budapest, leaving Carlos with the files on Isaac Gamboa and a vibe that events in Gamboa's Task Force were escalating quickly: spending three weeks sunning himself in Marseilles was not going to be justifiable.

No rest for the wicked, he quipped.

What would happen if he just walked away? Again, his imagination conjured nothing but a big blank. That was the irony; when so many survivors struggled to maintain an income to sustain their miserable existence, he had funds stashed away in digital accounts that would enable him to vanish and start again.

No, qualify that statement. He had funds to upgrade his lifestyle when he wanted; when those rare opportunities arose. But Carlos had to admit he didn't have enough money to maintain a quality of lifestyle he aspired to: a deep space habitat, a life far removed from the horrors spawned by Yellow Dawn; enjoying the leading edge of technological advancement supported by machine colonies; a remote island in an artificial sea with an AI to facilitate every need and every desire.

Did he really want to leave the great mother, planet Earth?

Carlos didn't know. Deep space was just an idea, like so many others that emerged into his thoughts, grew bright, lingered and faded.

What would Reinhardt think if he walked out on the Bureau? There was a bond there unlike any normal Director / Field Agent relationship. It was as though he had inserted Reinhardt into the father figure - unforgiving and yet dealing out special favours. What frustrated Carlos was that he couldn't decipher Reinhardt: did he really look upon Carlos as a son and value him as more than just an expendable grunt? Or was Reinhardt performing the ultimate role of artifice; playing the role of father to keep Carlos entwined?

Did Reinhardt *really* care? And how much did it really mean to Carlos that he did?

New Tokyo was the gateway to orbit, which in turn was the stepping stone into deep space.

Bear that in mind, he noted, then focussed his gaze on his hands, fingers encircling the rim of the mug. His hands were small, but the fingers long with broad nail beds: the manicurist back in Aigues-Mortes had done a good job cleaning them up.

Not interested in small talk, he mused, and wondered cynically if that was another example of his empty character: without a role to play there was nothing inside.

What did people see when they looked at him? Carlos queried, visualising himself sat there being observed, with his shaved skull, strong features, deeply tanned and weathered flesh and toned physique. Especially now when he was conceivably just being himself, albeit between roles. Was there still a hint of the New Wilderness bandit about him? Was Marchand's taint deeper than the surface layers of skin he'd had scrubbed clean, waxed, oiled and massaged? Or was his transformation into the political investigator more complete than he was aware of?

If he was to describe himself he would do so like this: age, thirty-six. Height: 1.75metres. Latin American features and skin the colour of milky coffee and dark blonde hair: his mother had been English, with snow white skin and long curly locks of golden blonde hair.

Carlos paused for a moment on the recollection of his mother: he smiled, despite himself, a thin painful expression.

His head was long, perfectly proportioned; a high brow above broad eyebrows, straight nose, deep dimples either side of a generous mouth, blue eyes almost perpetually narrowed that could flick from scrutinising intensity, to light-hearted mischief in a heartbeat. Was he handsome? Hell yes, and he knew it. Carlos considered himself extraordinarily good looking, the kind of Adonis combination of facial features and physique that women would cheat on their husbands for; he knew that from experience. He didn't have the clumsy bulk of a body builder, but a lean and wiry build created by intense physical activity.

Generally his mind was very fast; he found most people predictable and often jumped ahead in conversations to get to the point. Although his attitude to new people was to charm them first - make them want to like him, let them drop their defences, open up and allow him to see what they can do for him.

His attitude to friends? Carlos snorted quietly at the question he'd posed himself. He didn't have any friends as

such, and any friendship he ever managed to build eventually grew sick of being used by him, or rather, grew sick of always being secondary to his needs.

As for his attitude towards women. Carlos considered sexual urges a weakness: one of the best tools to use to get an angle on somebody, an excellent weapon for leverage and blackmail. For him, women were liars, snakes in the grass...he'd always held love in disregard... his own mother cheated on his dad.

Deep down he was still angry at his mother about that but knew he was even angrier at the fact there was no longer a chance to tell her. She had died in the K-wave; verified by several witness statements from survivors who had known her and posted their recollections on an Internet service designed to help provide answers to the millions of grieving people left guessing what fate had befallen their loved ones. That was the unseen trauma left by Yellow Dawn; the holes punched into the lives of the survivors.

Carlos reviewed his internal affirmation about women. He didn't hate or despise women. In fact, he craved some kind of deeply fulfilling intimate friendship - even a relationship - with a women, but in recent years work precluded such things forming.

Being out in the wilderness had put calluses on his emotions and his natural empathy. Now that he was heading to the biggest Living City left on Earth, to work with civilised people and all their complexities, a part of him was necessarily apprehensive about the adjustments he was going to have to make. Yet he also looked forward to it with anticipation. New Tokyo was a place where money could buy great pleasures; and he had money to burn.



When Reinhardt had left him in Marseilles, he'd handed over several items. A datachip loaded with the files on Isaac Gamboa; a clean phone-chip, enabled with a sat-com account and ready to be inserted into a PA or ear-clip; a cash card loaded with 5,000 credits (another bonus); and a sealed tube containing prime compounds for his gland-

implant. He'd clipped the tube into his insertion-port almost as soon as Reinhardt had closed the door of the hotel room. Carlos didn't consider himself prone to addiction, but the gland-implant formed its own potent need in his awareness, especially when it was empty.

He knocked back the last dregs of the salty broth, tilting the mug to allow some pale over-boiled vegetables to slide down the inside and drop into his mouth.

An overweight middle-aged man glanced in his direction, looking up from a game of backgammon with tough-looking figure dressed in a coarse blue-wool jumper. Carlos avoided eye-contact or any reason for the man to strike conversation. He bent forward, plonked the mug on the greasy square of carpet beneath the leather recliner, and then reached into the pockets of the bright orange fleece he was wearing. He fished out a scuffed reconditioned PA and a rolled up softscreen, both purchased in a scavenger store in Marseilles.

The PA was a Microsoft Myne with a small integral hardscreen good for nothing except viewing menu options and a few lines of text at a time, but Carlos liked it because the overall device size was very small. The datachip from Reinhardt was already inserted. He could have transferred the data into his skull implant and reviewed the contents via a piece of integrated neural wizardry called a synaptic bridge; but the problem with that was it took a lot of concentration when dealing with big sets of files which always left him tired. He'd rather review the files in a more traditional format, then transfer only small highlights useful to have available at the flick of a cognitive switch.

He'd chosen the recliner because it was situated in the corner of the compartment, away from any doors or thoroughfares, so reasonably free from prying eyes. Carlos unrolled the softscreen across the lap of his baggy cotton trousers and switched it on. Thumbing the power stud on the PA he watched the scratched hardscreen blink into life and display its menu options; he allowed the device to connect to the softscreen.

Opening the 'Read Me' file first, Carlos took note of Reinhardt's general overview of the files supplied and the guidance on what he should pay particular attention to. Next there was a bundle of files from the original source inside of Gamboa's team, before Gamboa relocated from orbit to set up the Task Force in New Tokyo. The files from the source were weak. Carlos could see a loose story of Gamboa pitching his proposal around the orbital corridors

of the UDP, gaining political support with influential decision makers and then being challenged and pushed back on cost and lack of resources. Then bingo, Gamboa walks back into the debate with a wad of cash; substantial and verified funds, but no clue in the files where the money came from. The files covered Gamboa's purchase of UDP assets and his going about setting up the Task Force; these included the surviving apparatus of former intelligence gathering agencies and criminal investigation services from California, Harbour Coast, North West Alliance, Euro-federation, Brazil and nations from the African Geo-Stationary Belt.

Altogether the intel from the source was dishwater weak: a lot of the detail was missing. In Carlos' view, the source was either lousy or compromised.

There was a dossier on Isaac Gamboa compiled by the Bureau, pulling together a number of official and unofficial sources. Carlos went straight to the summary and soaking up headlines, ignoring the profile photo for now.

Gamboa came from some African nation that had spent the past few centuries getting a raw deal from the rest of the world. Educated in London, and then Beijing where he studied commercial law. After this he returned back to his African homeland and began to fight for better economic deals for farmers and miners there – specifically within the global market. He acquired meaningful prominence within the UCD Union but he was fighting a losing battle against the exponential growth in the power and influence of UTOC: the government of Gamboa's homeland had decided to sell out to the corporate overlords who ran the United Table of Commerce. As far as UTOC was concerned, the farmers and miners were now resources that belonged to them, and they had an internationally recognised legal agreement to support the argument.

Gamboa didn't stand a chance, Carlos commentated on what he was reading, feeling something close to admiration for a man who still fought on despite impossible odds.

Carlos saw the reference to a separate file from the Bureau, relating to a MOCID investigation against Isaac Gamboa. Carlos clicked on the link long enough to glance at the top headlines: a Cultural Attaché from MOCID had denounced Isaac Gamboa as a threat to the economic prosperity of Africa; a series of claims based around the concept Gamboa was working for a particular corporate alliance within UTOC that had lost vital market share inside the African territories; MOCID suspected Gamboa of taking

bribes and that his real purpose was to place the farmer workers and miners into the hands of this alliance.

It was the same claim Reinhardt had stated back in Marseilles; it had a ring of plausibility and dented Carlos' sense of admiration.

Back to the main files. Carlos saw a catalogue of dirty tricks and smear campaigns engineered through the Ministry of Cultural Integration and Development. MOCID weren't opting for arrest and 'vanishment'. MOCID were looking to crucify and burn Gamboa under the hot lens of the media. Gamboa lost friends and influence. Gamboa's twelve year marriage ended and he lost his five children in an uncontested custody claim.

Too busy fighting for the cause to worry about fighting to see your children, no wonder you hate MOCID so much.

Then Yellow Dawn crashed into the story.

According to Bureau sources Isaac Gamboa spent the years following Yellow Dawn in a mining town in his homeland that grew into an established fort for survivors – he became leader, and was then approached by the UDP regarding the protectorate option. Gamboa accepted and the fort entered UDP governance; Gamboa moved out, became active with the UDP administration and returned to politics.

There was a photo of Gamboa, beside his name and key physical stats. Carlos took a few moments to absorb what he could see: a beautifully crafted face of strong bones and refined features, the upper half of Gamboa's skull was a wide hairless dome in perfect counterbalance to the broad muscular jaw. The bridge of his nose was broad and almost flat with his face, flaring outwards just above the nostrils to create a shape that reminded Carlos of an arrow head. A small goatee of greying hair that looked as coarse as steel wool. Gamboa's wide lips were perfectly smooth, and as dark as his skin. Small, almond shaped eyes with barely any white visible, black and glossy with a vibrant energy.

This was Director Reinhardt's new boss.

Carlos had to smile at the concept.

The smile faded as his mood became serious.

Where did your money come from, Isaac?

Reinhardt wanted to derail Gamboa's Task Force. The files lacked any information about Cesar Mecuri, the Cultural Attaché who was supposedly the first prime target of the Task Force, and according to Reinhardt, one of his friends. There was undoubtedly a bigger play being made here, but he'd need a lot more information to even guess

what was at stake. For now, Carlos could only approach the job with a closed mind, focus on any specific tasks given to him by Gamboa and compartmentalise his sabotage.

The overweight man giggled loudly with unrestrained glee: he'd obviously just won an important game. Carlos glanced at the board with its brown and cream coloured chevrons; the doubling cube was set to '64'. The ape in the dirty blue jumper didn't look too pleased. Carlos wondered if they might arrive in New Tokyo with one passenger less than they started. No investigation. Just another digit on the missing person's tally. That was one of the few positives to come out of Yellow Dawn. Away from the Living Cities and places where under the governance of the UDP, the majority of the survivor world had lost the cluttered rules and soft padding. Disputes were settled with violence or cunning. It was you versus the rest. Out here, it was dog eat dog.

10

Newark Airport was just under twenty miles into the western Dead Zone, part of what used to be New Jersey. There was a standard joke in the city about the zeds in Jersey smelling worse than the rest, but from where he was sitting he couldn't see the funny side.

Mikhail Drobná had arrived by helicopter an hour earlier, the ride charged to Mr d'Cota through a company credit card associated to one of a number of ghost employees. It was easier than claiming expenses.

The helicopter allowed him to skip over the Dead Zone; there was a protected corridor and a variety of operators willing to make the journey for specific flights, but why take the risk if somebody else was willing to pay for an alternative. Not that d'Cota knew where he was going or why. Drobná's association with d'Cota was freelance with a flavour of permanent employee: he enjoyed the healthy income and the perks, whilst d'Cota got the benefits of his professional services at the drop of a hat. Drobná's loyalty was as enduring as the next paycheque.

Drobná had stopped by a luxury bar and grill combo in the restored parts of Terminal A. He'd had steak from some fancy farm in the rural support zone, forty miles away, and washed it down with beer from orbit. The steak had been cooked to rare perfection but the beer had been flown in direct from New Tokyo: it had come in a factory blown glass bottle with a printed label and everything. The beer had been fucking fantastic, a whole world better than the micro-brewery shit most places in the city had to rely on. He

supposed it was one of the perks for the franchises operating within the protected compound of the airport: access to exotic produce carried in from any Living City with a connection, and a client base wealthy enough to afford it. The airport was full of men and women in suits or uniform, a narrow spectrum of corporate, political and military. Fat fuck tourists in flip flops and Hawaiian shirts didn't get a look in anymore: they were an extinct breed.

Now he was sitting in a big black leatherette thing that was more robot than chair. He'd checked and was pleased to see a fat control cable snaking out of the thing; he didn't want it going nuts with the rogue Dragon Breath AI hacking in via a wireless connection. He still wasn't sure if that was urban legend or a real risk these days; but he hadn't seen any robot without a control cable, so he knew it wasn't just him who thought it might be true. Then again, he had never seen a robot attack anybody since the first hours of Yellow Dawn, and recently he'd heard New Tokyo and orbit was full of machines walking around with their own minds...

What did he care? So long as the thing he was sitting on behaved as a chair or a sleeping module if needed, then he was happy to leave the debate to the boffins.

The flight wasn't due to start boarding for another forty minutes, but that could change depending on how long it took any delayed scheduled passengers to reach the airport. Sometimes a flight could be delayed for hours because some moron got caught up in some gang-fuck trying to get through the Dead Zone. He was sat facing an inwardly sloping wall of plate glass, overlooking the south-west corner of the asphalt apron and the grubby, smoke stained metal perimeter, shored up with heavy timbers that enclosed what used to be the main entrance to the car parks and pick-up concourse. The entrance was now barricaded by an old passenger coach decked out in thick metal armour and skirts of wire mesh; the whole thing could roll back and forth when needed, under the scrutiny of the twin toast towers mounted either side.

The sky was blue but his mood was grey. His eyes didn't want to leave the perimeter, or the pleasing flicker of the ignition flames on the ends of the barrels protruding from those toast towers. Beyond this, his peripheral vision was flooded by the mass of the decaying urban sprawl which loomed in close: an unending patchwork of rooftops that were either collapsed or covered in moss and lichen; a million empty windows, cracked, shattered or just gone. He hated the shadows in Dead Zones in the bright sunlight; he

always felt like something was watching him; something he couldn't see. Not the zeds, either, but some *Thing* else. The way Drobná felt: it was if all those zeds added together should make six, but instead made thirteen.

Zeds. People liked to call them that, or zombies, because it was a concept you could sort of accept, get used to even. That's what people did when they didn't have to see them every day: they got used to the idea. They tricked themselves and Drobná was the first to admit he was no exception. Call them zombies because anything else just didn't make fucking sense. A hundred years of cinema and sim-stims had given the public voice a vocabulary of monsters; Drobná grunted, and shifted his weight in the leatherette chair, he knew too well about that vocab. Frankenstein they called him, most of them too stupid to realise that Frankenstein was the mad doctor and not the lump of reanimated meat he sent stumbling through the countryside.

Flexing his right arm, he clenched his fist working out some of the heaviness in the limb. Several people in the other chairs glanced his way out of instinct and immediately looked away. His long arms ended in huge hands, with long thick fingers and oversized knuckles that were revealing the wear and tear from years of blunt trauma.

Drobná unclenched his fingers and prodded the waxy scar cluster that tangled his lips and caused the disfigurement to his eye socket. No mad doctor did this to him. Just fate and a couple of guys trying to do their best. It was a story he didn't think about often. An incident not long after Yellow Dawn left him with several flaps of skin for a face. This was outside of Vancouver, in the forest near Grouse Mountain. He was found by a couple of survivors out hunting for food. They could have left him but knew he would have died then. The men knew how to use a knife to gut and skin the meat they caught, and one of them had a crude needle and thread kit for sewing together hides. They pulled the flaps of his face together and stitched them up as best they could. The two of them nursed him through the fever; shared the food they found and helped him build his strength up. He got back on his feet and helped them repair the place they were living in. The place was solid. There was good soil for growing food; the forest for fuel and medicine, and hundreds of miles of open land and wildlife. Yellow Dawn hadn't touched the animals. The Z-wave didn't reach North America for a couple years, so at this

point it was all about the survivors of the K-wave pulling their lives back together.

Some more people arrived. A small settlement started to grow. A simple life became complicated. Despite the open space he'd never felt so confined. One day he just got up and left. He'd never looked back.

His mind returned to the here and now; his eyes unglazed and refocused on the filthy metal barricade.

Zombies. There was a lot very wrong with that description. It didn't fit. Zeds, if you were ever unlucky enough to get close to them, were altogether more horrible.

After the Z-wave crashed across North America, Drobná had signed-up for a tour with the New York Defence Force, specifically the teams sent out into the Dead Zone to hunt and kill as many zeds as possible along the protected corridors. Setting up reinforced cages and working in rolling formations even the fucking ancient Romans would have been proud of, Drobná and his compatriots had slashed, hacked, chopped and burned their way into the rotting meat of the Infection; north through Yonkers and Irvington, towards Sleepy Hollow and securing Tapanzee Bridge. All who were involved rapidly learned that the monsters had once been known by other terms: mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, wives and husbands. Children.

Six months of his life, killing for eight hours a day: it did something to his soul, if he ever had one, he figured. A lot of the men he fought alongside, who avoided Infection, went on to burn out in different ways. It wasn't a war like it had been described; and it wasn't a place to make friends or form bands of brothers. If somebody in a cage even suspected you'd gotten the infection, they'd cut you down before asking how you felt.

Three men to a cage. Containment. Precaution. Protection.

Fucking paranoia more like.



The whole Three Moons / Cesar Mecuri angle was dripping with opportunities. For the first time since he could remember, Drobná felt his stomach flutter with raw anticipation. He had a softscreen spread across one of the chair limbs, which had widened accommodatingly, with the chair holding him in a sort of forward hugging position that made him feel like a fucking astronaut: his ass was almost on the same level as his shoulders, or that's how it felt.

He scanned the headline notes he'd been jotting down, amber characters glowing off the grey-green background of the screen:

Isaac Gamboa
Special Task Force
MOCID is the target
Specifically, Cultural Attaches doing bad things
Target number one, Cesar Mecuri
Cesar Mecuri
UTOC Criminal Rehabilitation Programme
Kelston Construction Company
A supply of armed and dangerous criminals
Tragan Conflict

The chair had an integral hardscreen that could slide out of some hidden recess but Drobná didn't want to trust any technology he hadn't one-hundred percent control over. The softscreen was reliable, with a physical cabled plugged into to his PA; the I-C field disabled

He slid a big finger into a file folder and tapped it open; extracted the Three Moons summary on Cesar Mecuri.

Cesar Mecuri: a Cultural Attaché for MOCID directly funded by the remnants of UTOC that refused to dismantle their favourite dirty tricks outfit. Forty-five years old; short in height with a lean build: into regular exercise, but a habitual smoker, heavy drinker, user of dextro-amphetamines and party-grade opiates. Homosexual. Sadist. He had an account with Regeno Corp who were holding cloned copies of his vital organs on ice.

Somebody who knows they're a target or thinks their lifestyle might kill them, Drobná reckoned.

Independently wealthy as a result of skimming various corporate and UDP contracts. Respected by UTOC administrators involved in supporting MOCID as an operational entity.

That's the thorn in UDP's gullet, he guessed. That's what Gamboa's special Task Force has set itself to do: shutting down MOCID. Forcing UTOC to 'give it up'.

Drobná flipped pages with finger taps on the softscreen; Cesar Mecuri came to life in his brain.

Mecuri's whole adult existence was enmeshed within UTOC. UTOC sponsored his education. UTOC gave him a career, then status and then power.

Before Yellow Dawn Cesar Mecuri became a policy auditor within UTOC, then moved into policy development working closely with Porfirio Strotz.

Policy development for UTOC, fuck me.

That was like being an architect for the Nazi death camps, working with Hitler's henchmen. Porfirio Strotz was a filthy name in Drobná's vocab. This made Cesar Mecuri far more dangerous than any ordinary Cultural Attaché, who themselves were bad news in anybody's book: before Yellow Dawn, when UTOC had held all the power and before the UDP existed, a Cultural Attaché could force the arrest and detainment of heads of government and state if there was evidence to suggest the person was hindering unrestricted commerce. The Fluid Investment Medium was the bedrock of UTOC authority and the mandate for MOCID's existence. Drobná was no financial professor but he knew dirty business tricks when he saw them, and the Fluid Investment Medium was the biggest land grab since the Enclosures Act took place in British history; but this time it was corporations grabbing money from government coffers. He'd read that somewhere but he understood the issue: it was the non-elected stealing taxpayers money from the elected. The taxpayer had no say in the deal, or in where their taxes were invested or how it was spent.

This was all history now. Yellow Dawn had shattered the power of UTOC and what pieces remained had been amalgamated into the reign of the UDP. But UTOC still existed, and so did MOCID.

It was no surprise to Drobná to read in the files that MOCID approached Cesar Mecuri. Usually it was the other way around.

Mecuri was hot MOCID property.

Drobná wondered if Isaac Gamboa really knew what he was letting himself in for going up against a character like this.

Using his fingers to slide the Mecuri files into the background, he opened up a profile on Isaac Gamboa compiled by Three Moons.

Drobná got mixed vibes from what he read. On one hand Isaac Gamboa came across like the was history recalled President Obama, after he got himself assassinated

by the religious right wing, or Mossad, whichever way you viewed the conspiracy blogs.

On the other hand, Three Moons had dug up dirt to suggest Gamboa was a charlatan, using the moral high ground as cover for a lifetime of backhanders from friends in the corporate echelons of UTOC. None of these propositions had been substantiated by a Tweet of proof and very possibly the result of dirty-tricks.

It's only going to get worse now you've set your targets on Cesar Mecuri, Drobná mused.

He went back to the Three Moon files on Cesar Mecuri, specifically the dirt coming out of the needle in Isaac Gamboa's camp. These were the files Charles Beaker had been stashing and selling on to the French dirt trader, Philippe Tounadre.

According to Isaac Gamboa's investigations, Cesar Mecuri was responsible for an ever growing catalogue of crimes against humanity, but Gamboa was focussing on one particular set. This involved an ongoing programme of abuse and terror tactics against survivors occupying settlements in a region of new wilderness several hundred miles north of New York.

It had been an area seeing significant rebuilding, growth and prosperity for the survivors living there. This had attracted the attention of the UDP who offered further support and assistance in exchange for the right to govern. Initial reports indicated the whole region was amicable to becoming a UDP enclave; it would have been a minor coup-de-grace for the UDP. More significant, it was viewed that the existence of such a UDP enclave would have put pressure on the government of New York.

Around this time saw an exponential increase in bandit attacks. The central claim by Isaac Gamboa is that Cesar Mecuri is responsible for funding and supporting these attacks; and continues to be responsible for the ongoing situation that has been dubbed the Tragan Conflict; with a UTOC and MOCID driven motive to destabilise UDP's interests in the area.

Drobná reviewed details of the Tragan Conflict compiled by Three Moons from various sources, including low-grade global media; New York government officials and dispatches from UDP garrisons operating on the expanding fringes of the conflict. Nothing major; the Tragan Conflict wasn't big news. A couple of the photos really grabbed him: a pile of severed right arms at the base of a rusty and blood stained engine block, with the lucky survivors huddled in the

background, corralled there by bandits wielding swords; the bodies several woman, young and old, lying sprawled in the mud of a road, clothes ripped open and flesh bruised, raped then murdered. Somebody had managed to get video footage, maybe thinking the bigger world audience would give a shit and come help, or maybe just to soak up the glory, depending on who did the filming: he watched some, all shaky hand-held camera work, people screaming during attacks, people crying in the aftermath, hugging the dead and dying. Drobná noted no gunfire. It was all edged weapons and crossbows. Like most of the new wilderness, guns were easy to find but all of the ammunition had been used up in a short burst of time after Yellow Dawn.

The bad guys were the Tragans, members of a dispersed family group known in the area before Yellow Dawn for criminal activities and involved in a white-supremacist movement. The Three Moons files suggested the Tragans who survived the K-wave quickly banded together and used their combined strength and aggression to carve out criminal niches across a wide region. The Tragans would be a perfect resource for any MOCID Cultural Attaché looking to stir up trouble against the UDP: organised, an entrenched command structure with loyalty based on blood, comfortable with violence.

Cesar Mecuri was topping up the infantry head count with criminals being processed through the Kelston Construction Company.

Drobná smiled and felt the scars on his face stretch and twist. If Isaac Gamboa could prove what Mecuri was doing then the Cultural Attaché would be toast; even with friends in high places, Mecuri wouldn't be able to keep operating, and the UDP might throw everything they had at him to make an example. In fact, Drobná realised now why Gamboa was going after Cesar Mecuri as the first target: bringing him down would be a massive coup for the UDP.

An eye for an eye and all that jazz, Drobná thought, reflecting on what the UDP had lost because of the Tragan attacks.

He experienced a flutter of anticipation. The Three Moons dirt that Charles Beaker had been clinging onto contained a nugget of pure platinum. Isaac Gamboa had found somebody willing to squeal on Cesar Mecuri. An attorney involved in the processing of criminals through the rehab programme, into Kelston Construction Company. The attorney was called Benito Magnon and apparently he had evidence connection Cesar Mecuri with the repurposing

of criminals, through the Kelston Construction gig, into the Tragan Conflict.

Benito Magnon could bring Cesar Mecuri down.

Cesar Mecuri didn't have this slice of dirt; because Charles Beaker had been holding it back as part of his plan to negotiate more money through the French trader Philippe Tounadre.

Benito Magnon could bring Cesar Mecuri down.

What would a Cultural Attaché pay to know he had that kind of problem; what would a Cultural Attaché like Cesar Mecuri pay to have the problem resolved?

Another flutter in his guts, edged with something like anxiety. If his pitch to Mecuri worked he would be dialled into a serious money flow; if it failed, he'd either walk away without an audience or find himself vanishing into some place MOCID liked to keep secret.

Drobná had done his best to prepare for the worst eventuality; if he vanished then all of Beaker's files would find themselves in the hands of the media: that would be the threat. And if that worked he'd need to watch his back but that was something he'd been used to doing since he'd been put into social care.

Movement caught his eye. There was activity on the apron. A short line of passengers was walking briskly from somewhere below his vantage point: mostly men, all of them wearing very expensive suits, long shadows in the sunlight. Drobná followed their trajectory and saw a compact private jet waiting on the asphalt; heat convection warping the air behind its motors.

Drobná thought about the abandoned terminal buildings. Had anybody been in to clear away the remains? He'd used Newark Airport several times now and he'd never thought about it before. The terminals would have been stacked with rotting bodies after the K-wave tore through the place. The transit points had been flooded by people trying to escape the death sweeping across the planet after the SOYAR impact. The only viable escape route had been space, and that meant getting to New Tokyo. The orbital colonies remained unaffected but their fear of the virus ensured that nobody but the mega rich and powerful got above the atmosphere. So had anybody removed the bodies before sealing up the abandoned terminals, or were they all still in there...just a few hundred metres down the asphalt?

Drobná didn't get much of a chance to dwell on the idea.

Flames flared up in his peripheral vision; at the same moment all heads on the apron turned. A couple of smart-looking men in the departure lounge leapt out of their seats and ran to the window.



Drobná suffered a moment of familiar terror; his throat tightened; his chest went ice cold, his breath froze in his lungs; his mouth became as dry as dust.

One of the toast towers was belching burning fuel down at some target beyond the metal barricade; then a second tower began doing the same. He took a moment to glance at the passengers on the apron; some of them were now sprinting towards the jet but the majority were motionless, watching what was taking place two hundred metres away.

Drobná's gaze locked onto the main entrance. He saw several figures in padded suits and face masks running to one side of the old passenger coach; they carried long sticks fitted with sharp blades at the end. A number of other figures appeared at a run, dressed in riot armour, carrying shotguns; one of them vanished inside the front of the passenger coach; the others began lifting up large sections of reinforced wire mesh that had been lying on the ground. Within seconds an enclosure had been formed, standing flush with the mid-section of the coach; but now the coach began to slowly reverse and Drobná could see the wire-mesh enclosure would match up with the soon to be revealed gap in the barricade.

The other two toast towers lit up either side of the gateway; white hot showers that rolled yellow. Lots of black smoke coming up from the other side of the barricade. Lots of things burning. Drobná had flashes of memory bursting across his vision: even though he couldn't see or hear what was happening where those flames were landing, he could see the flailing limbs; he could hear the shrieking of undead throats - not pain, they didn't feel pain, but rage.

Over a dozen people had gathered along the window now, gazing down, gasping or silent.

Drobná swept away the softscreen from his lap. His breathing was coming in short sharp snorts through his nose; his heart was pounding; sweat was building up around his collar. He struggled with the chair to release him from its grip.

The coach reversed enough to open the gateway with practised timing. An SUV came into view, approaching at speed and braking hard, steel plates covering the windows, small slits to see through, liquid fire dancing and swirling off the fucked-up paintwork. And sprinting after it, half a dozen burning bodies. Into the cage. The coach accelerated forward, closing the breach. The men in padded suits got to work with their blades on sticks.

Drobná untangled himself from the chair and walked away from the window. He'd seen enough during his six month tour. He didn't need to see more.

Motel-Ba'al-Achtung/The Looking Glass

By Tradchick



>>Unhide Main Nav

📖 D186, Y+10 Stuff like this, it makes me sick because so far as I can see the bastards got away with it. Those Nazis that killed all those Jews... they got put on trial and executed. These people killed billions. Did the guilty really get what they deserved? Or was it more like those found "guilty" were just scapegoats? Here's some more D-000, Y+0{mm}

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Truth might be the death of me / [blogfeed]://Jinko Herze

They've precluded any of us from warning friends and loved ones. There are armed guards watching this accommodation section. I've found a way to get these words out...they'll find out who I am, but the truth has to be known.

The gathering took place within UTOC's administrative building in New Tokyo. High ranking corporate officers and scientists from SOYAR. The CEO was there. We went through three bottles of quality red wine, several dozen espresso cartridges, and a mountain of finger food during the six-hour grilling. SOYAR finally admitted they were subcontracted by Batron, one of the multitude of defence contractors feeding into UTOC's procurement programme. SOYAR were told by Batron to produce a biological agent capable of preventing necrosis in dying flesh. SOYAR believe Batron were working with UTOC's Defence community to produce a solution to diseases caused by mass casualties in a war setting, particularly through rotting cadavers. The meeting rolled on. There was lots of conversation about indemnity. UTOC has got its tail in its mouth. One part is eating the other part. Every word just made me more and more mad.

When it ended the majority of the SOYAR contingent was dismissed to go about their business. The CEO and top scientists were told to remain behind, me included. Then all of us are priority shuttled to a secure UTOC habitat in High Earth Orbit.

That's where I am now: I can see the blue peel of Earth rolling past my window. I wish I could open that window. I wish I could just let the universe suck me out into the nothingness so I don't have to live through what I know is about to happen down there.

They gave us details of an undisclosed satellite...also destroyed during the collision between the Kalisto and SOYAR's orbital lab. The satellite contained genetically modified organic compounds. They asked us to determine the possible consequences from these GMOCs being combined with the cargo of the Kalisto: the agent SOYAR developed for Batron. It didn't take us long to comprehend the significance of the strands of ancient amino-acids.

<mm:continue01>

<mm:continue02>

It's already starting to happen down there. The first wave is spreading... like a virus. But I suspect this is only the tip of an iceberg. The space elevator from New Tokyo has been shut down; all outbound shuttles are being intercepted. We can't let this thing get up here. God help them all.
</mm>

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Jugger88: Hey gurl, I b liking wot u put 2getha here. V cool 2 c it drippin out like dis. Wot happnd 2 ur Jinko Herze?

Faziel666: I would think MOCID found out who he was and executed him. Most likely.

Jugger88: Hey Faz, I hear u. U da gurl bhind dis blog?

Faziel666: Nope. :o)

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