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# An Interesting Job

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“Why do we need this woman again?” the blonde asked, running a hand through her almost perfect hair as the two of them walked quickly down a filthy alley behind a pair of equally decrepit and disreputable looking buildings.

“Because she’s good and if she gives her word, you know you can trust her. I’m only human. I have to sleep sometimes. And during those times, you’re vulnerable. Mags will fill in a gap in your protection.”

“Mags?”

“Short for Maggie. But don’t call her that,” he warned with the briefest of looks to her before once more lowering the armored faceplate on his helmet. Returning to their previous course, he continued walking a bit ahead of her as they proceeded down the alley.

A few minutes later, she asked, “If it’s her name, why not use it?”

“Because she’s got issues,” he replied, stopping before a heavy door. Pulling an electronic device from his pocket, he ran a quick scan on the door before them. “Mags is good at what she does and she’s reliable. However, she’s also temperamental, anti-social, and occasionally off her rocker.”

The woman shook her head. “She’s another mercenary, isn’t she?”

“That and more,” he agreed, putting the scanner away and opening the door.

“How much extra is it going to cost for me to hire her?”

“Nothing. One, your father hired me so expenses cost you nothing. And two, if she does join us, it will come out of my pocket.” he explained, leading the way up the building’s back stairs as the security door closed itself behind them.

“How gallant,” she replied with dose of sarcasm as they climbed the staircase.

“No gallantry here,” he countered with a smirk, eyes searching the area ahead of them. “Just good business. I have a reputation for honesty, keeping my word, and for not cheating the customer. Sometimes it gets me big money clients in need of protection or hiding. And sometimes those clients

recommend me to other people in similar circumstances... like yourself.”

“Do you drag them all through back alleys and slums?” she asked grumpily with more than a hint of distaste in her tone.

“Only the ones who are serious about living to see tomorrow.”

A few minutes later they stopped before a door on the fifth floor. Without ceremony, he re-opened his visor and began pounding on the door. “Mags! Open up! Come on Mags, get a move on.”

With a crash the heavy, pneumatic door flew open revealing a lanky woman wearing grey sweats and pointing a large, automatic shotgun at his head. “Garret. What the hell are you doing here? Come by to show off your latest whore? Well I’m not interested in playing games so you can just fekk off!” The door slammed shut before he had a chance to answer.

“Did she just call me a whore?”

Shaking his head, he stepped up and pounded on the door again. “Dammit Mags, open up! We need to talk.”

This time, her voice came from the panel next to the door. “Go away Garret.”

“I thought your name was Spectre,” his young companion stated.

“That’s just a street name. A name used to get me jobs and by which to spread my violent but sparkling reputation. Garret is the name I was born with,” he replied without looking away from the camera built into the wall plate. “Mags! I’ve got a job for you.”

“Why the hell would I want to work with you again?” she asked, incredulity plain in her voice.

“I’ve got twenty thousand reasons.”

“Bullshit!”

“Your mail slot have a scanner?” he asked.

“Of course,” she replied in slightly cautious tone of voice.

He pulled a small plastic envelope out and slid it into the panel’s mail slot. “Scan that.”

After a long moment, she responded cautiously, “Okay... it looks like you’re sincere. Now, why shouldn’t I just keep my twenty K credits here and tell you to hit the road?”

“Because,” he replied sweetly, with a big, false smile, “one way or another, I’m going to get my money’s worth. That means you’ll either help me with this job, return my money, or I’m going to watch those credits cover a large area, falling in tiny little burning pieces with the rest of your apartment.”

The heavy door popped open again revealing a smirking Mags, her shotgun now pointed at the floor. “Come on in.” Her speculative eyes turned to the young woman accompanying him. “Both of you.”

Five minutes later found the three of them seated around a kitchen table that was much nicer than the surrounding area might lead one to suspect.

“Glad to see old age and decrepitude haven’t slowed you down too much,” Mags told him with a grin.

“Thanks so much,” he replied with a smirk. “The job’s pretty straightforward. Transfer Miss Cargo here across too much of the continent into the Mexico Valley Trade Zone. Keep her alive and in one piece while so doing.”

“I am not ‘cargo’ dammit!” the young woman in question snarled, slapping her palm down on the table. “My name is Charity Lynne DeValas and I’m a person!”

“DeValas....” Mags said, shaking her head slowly as she turned her gaze upon Charity. “Your father is Pedro DeValas?”

“Yes, that’s right,” she agreed proudly.

Turning her gaze to Garret, Mags said, “You should have convinced her to keep her mouth closed. With Pedro turning over a new leaf, his enemies and friends alike will be looking for holds over him... or means of punishing him. And everyone knows he dotes on his daughter. Which makes

this an especially dangerous run.”

“Yeah,” he agreed with a sigh. “It’s certainly been an active run thus far. I’ve had her in my custody for eight hours now. Two attempts to snatch her by amateurs and I had to burn down Jonny Z.”

With a shrug, Mags replied, “He’d have ratted you out or shot you in the back, no question about it. So why do you need me? And what would you want me to do?”

“I need someone I can trust Mags. You may annoy me six ways from Sunday and have found more ways to piss me off than anyone else in history, but I know I can trust you to do what you say you’ll do. I need someone to watch our backs. Support when support is needed. You know the drill.”

“Yes,” she mused thoughtfully, “I do at that.”

Seeing Charity looking around, Maggie tilted her head towards the hall. “Second door on the left.”

With a relieved smile, the pretty young woman smiled and rose. “Thank you,” she replied as she moved quickly towards the indicated door.

When the bathroom door closed, Mags turned to Garret and said quietly, “You look tired.”

“Yeah. It’s been a long eight hours. And beyond that, the past year hasn’t gone as well as expected.” He took a moment to look around. “You seem to be doing pretty well for yourself. Even if it is in the Barrington Free Zone.”

“The rent’s cheap,” she replied with a wry grin as she looked around at the well-appointed apartment. “Getting the furniture here in one piece... that was a trick that took some doing.”

“So,” she stated with a direct look. “What’s the run?”

“Keep her to the low-tech side. Where there’s not a sensor, camera, and scanner on every corner. Go by foot to the Kandas train station. Take the train down to the Monterey Free Zone. Acquire a ground vehicle and take it across to Ciudad Gris. From there take the Barrabas Tunnel straight into the Mexico Valley Trade Zone.”

“Good plan,” she replied after a moment’s thought. “It won’t work, but it’s a good plan.”

Putting a hand over his eyes, he asked with a hint of exasperation, “Why won’t it work Mags?”

“Three reasons.”

With a motion of his free hand, he asked her to continue.

“One,” she began seriously, “Your Spanish sucks. Two, the Barrio Boys control pretty much all of Ciudad Gris. Three is the big one. The Barrabas Tunnel was discovered two months ago and collapsed.”

“Dammit,” he sighed. “I’ve been taking classes and my former secretary was teaching me Spanish. It’s a lot better. The Barrio Boys finally made someone’s list. I happen to know for a fact that most of them were killed and the rest are in hiding so deep they need a periscope to see the sewers.” He shook his head. “But I didn’t hear about the tunnel. All things being equal, I suppose I should have.”

“Quite a shame about the Barrio Boys,” she told him with a hint of vicious glee. It almost immediately disappeared though. With a shrug, she continued, “The Federales finally got tired of the smuggling. Collapsed the tunnel at three different points. Not much good to anyone now.”

“I need to think,” he stated softly, wiping both hands over his face.

A high pitched tone sounded throughout the apartment. In the blink of an eye he stood with visor once more down and a pistol in hand.

“It’s my counter-surveillance scanner,” Mags told him, moving quickly to a display panel. “Looks like a seeker drone’s attached to the bedroom window. It’s probably gathering ultrasonic images as well as audio recordings. Can’t get a visual though unless it breaches the window.”

“What the hell’s going on?” Charity demanded, stepping out of the bathroom. The high pitched tone immediately cut off.

“The seeker drone left,” Mags warned, moving quickly through the apartment. “Get her out of

here. Go out the west side exit. Cross the street and go directly into the PlexMart. They'll have a hard time taking you out there without drawing excess attention."

"What was that? What are we going to do?" Charity demanded, sudden fear making her brown eyes larger than normal.

"It was a drone, almost certainly searching for you. As for what we do, we watch ourselves, see what happens, and adapt to the circumstances," he replied. With the girl in tow, he was almost to the door before stopping. "Mags, you got an extra set of armor?"

"You should be moving," Maggie sang from her bedroom.

"We will," he said, changing course and moving through the hallway to the bedroom with an unappreciative Charity in tow. Pushing the partly closed door the rest of the way open, he paused a moment to at the sight of Mags pulling on her armored pants. "Damn girl. You've been working out."

"Why aren't you moving away from here in a effort to keep our client alive?" she asked with a distracted frown as she continued to dress quickly.

"Because in the long run three mercenaries are going to attract less attention than two mercenaries escorting a pretty young blonde woman with a distinctive and well-publicized face."

Mags paused a moment before pulling on her equipment belt. "Not bad. Not bad." Turning to Charity, she commanded, "Strip to your undies. Do it fast because trouble is on the way."

"I am not stripping."

Holstering the pistol, Garret whipped the heavy rifle off his back and started for the door. "Mags, there's a van just landed on the roof. I'll deal with them. Get her ready. Charity, be in an armor suit by the time I get back or I'll drag you the rest of the way to the Mexico Valley Trade Zone in your underwear or less. *Drone One, acquire. Next. Next. Lock.*" And with that he was out the door. With a deep thud the door closed itself.

From her closet, Mags began pulling out weapons and tossing armored clothing to Charity.

“Dress quickly. Once he engages someone, that will pull even more attention to this area. We need to be gone by the time the people at the other end of that attention get here. And he wasn’t exaggerating about dragging you along in your undies. Now, what size shoe do you wear?”

“An eight,” the blonde woman replied with a thoughtfully concerned frown as she hurriedly removed her expensive, blue patterned dress, tossed off her good walking shoes, and pulled on the grey armored pants. “These are heavy. And they look very hot.”

“Yes, they are heavy. And so is the rest of the suit. You’re in good condition. You’ll adapt to it quickly. However, it’s actually very comfortable temperature-wise. The suit has a built-in temperature control system.” The sound of not-so-distant automatic gun and laser fire reached their ears. “Hurry!” Rather than reply, Charity dressed more quickly. “The shirt locks into the pants here, here, here, and here. Once that’s done they auto-seal together.”

“Good thing we’re close to the same size.”

“Yeah, it’s just swell,” Mags replied, fully dressed and equipped, holding at ready a twin rifle to the one Spectre had carried. More distant gunfire could be heard.

“You don’t like me, do you?”

“I don’t have to like you. However, I’m getting paid forty thousand reasons to keep you alive so I’m going to do that. Put on an extra pair of socks before you pull the boots on. The boots are a little large for you but the socks should compensate.” Activating the comm link on her helmet, she called, “Spectre. Come in Spectre.” Shaking her head, she powered her laser rifle. “Dammit. Of course he’s changed his comm settings.”

“I thought he said twenty thousand,” Charity stated while pulling the socks on. “And the boots connect to the pants the same way as the shirt and pants connected?”

“Yes, that’s right. As for the money, that’s for me and Spectre to work out. But I’ll get my way and he already knows it. You know how to shoot?”

“My dad is Pedro DeValas. Of course I know how to shoot.”

“Here’s my door greeter,” Mags told her, presenting Charity the shotgun she’d carried earlier.

“Don’t shoot it unless I expressly tell you to. You got it?”

“Yes, I get it,” Charity replied, checking the shell in the shotgun’s breech.

“Good. Tuck in your hair and pull on the helmet. This equipment belt goes around your waist. This one goes over your shoulder and across your body. The black bag is one of my emergency gear kits. It has food, water, and other necessities. You get it, I’ll get the blue one.”

“Damn, all this gear is heavy.”

“When someone starts shooting at you, it’ll feel light as a feather.”

A sudden pounding on the door caused Charity to spin around, shotgun pointed at the door. “Good reflexes,” Mags told her with a pat on the shoulder as she walked quickly to the hallway monitor. “But keep in mind, if you shoot that gun without my express permission, I’m going to shove it up your ass. Sideways.”

Pressing a console button, Mags asked, “They dead?”

“Very. You ready to move?”

“Give me a sec.” Returning to the bedroom, she picked up the blue bag. “From now on, your name is Sonnet. You respond to that name and only to that name. I’m Mags and he’s Spectre. No other names. Got it?”

“Sonnet? Alright, that works as well as anything I suppose.”

“Spectre!” Mags called. “Get your arse in here. We need a comm sync.”

“Well, you’ve managed to find yet another urban paradise,” Sonnet grouched over their closed

and encoded comm system as Spectre led the three of them into another dismal alley.

“Yes,” he agreed without really paying attention to the conversation. “I’m good at that.”

“We’re well outside my normal stomping grounds,” Mags told him with a frown in her voice.

“Who’s territory is this?”

“This is the Shadow Lord’s turf. I’m on their good side at the moment. Joe’s their leader now and he and I get along well. A block over to the east is disputed territory though. The Urban Cowboy Mafia has been trying to muscle in. I’m on pretty good terms with them as well so if we stay out of the crossfire, we ought to be good to pass through and leave anyone trying to track us behind.”

“Yeah, right,” came Mags’ sarcastic reply.

Sonnet sighed dramatically. “At least I can’t smell what we’re passing through thanks to the re-breather.”

“Specification 3, military-grade re-breathing apparatus. Helpful for both noxious odors and most chemical weapons,” Spectre stated distantly as he continued advancing and scanning the area ahead. “Cross alley up ahead. We’ll pass it quickly. Once we get up to 251<sup>st</sup> Street, we should be out of the danger zone. From there, maybe we can look at finding a car to speed us on our way rather than hoofing it the whole way.”

“I take it that the two of you have known each other for a long time?”

“Yes,” Mags agreed flatly in a tone intended to kill the subject.

“I’m getting some EM interference from the east,” Spectre stated instead of answering Sonnet’s question. “And I don’t like it. The interference is broadening and strengthening.” He pointed to the building immediately to their left. “Mags, detour. Through and out.”

“Blow the door?” she asked, after a quick look at the armored door, already closing on the door in question.

“Yes, take it down. Both of you be ready to run. I’m having to pull both my drones well away

from our area to avoid the interference. *Drone One, acquire. Lock. Follow. Independent mode. Drone Two, acquire. Next. Lock. Follow. Independent mode.* Dammit, I hope that last command got through. We're under the EM field now. I've lost visual feeds and telemetry from both drones."

"Communications sure went to hell," Mags agreed, her broadcast voice filled with static as she pulled a pre-set explosive out of the blue bag on her back and attached it to the door. "I'm going to set a short timer, not going to risk a remote with all the interference. And if you didn't cheap-out on the drones, they should automatically switch to independent mode when the command signal is lost."

"Good on the explosive, make it a very short timer though," came the fuzzy response.

"This should do it," the female mercenary replied, already running away from the door.

A nearby explosion knocked Sonnet off her feet and rocked the other two.

Getting up, Sonnet started to run for the door when Mags caught her around the waist and threw her flat on her back. "What the hell?!" the startled woman demanded through a fading burst of radio static. A second explosion sent pieces of the door flying across the street.

Mags offered her a hand up. "That first explosion wasn't ours. What was it Spectre? Oh good, the comm unit finally compensated for the interference."

From the edge of the cross alley, he replied, "It seems that the Shadow Lords/Urban Cowboy Mafia war attracted a bigger fish. The PBA is moving in with armor. Explosion was a tank shell into the S/L lookout position." Machine guns and automatic laser fire could be plainly heard from just around the corner. Explosions followed in quick succession. "Fekk all! PBA infantry just arrived and now there's a big three-way charley-foxtrot erupting. Through and over Mags. Move."

"Who are the PBA?" Sonnet asked, moving to rejoin Mags. "The name sounds familiar."

"The People's Blue Army." Mags explained as the two of them walked quickly into the hole where the door had been. "It's what's left of the socialist movement of the Democratic Party. These are the hard-core whacko's as opposed to the usual soft-core whack jobs the socialists normally

produce. They've got a big, holdover mind-control mechanism from the old ACLU days that...."

She was interrupted by Spectre yelling, "Run you slow-ass bitches! Run! Run! RUN!"

Without hesitation, Mags began sprinting down the long hall leading to the back of the building. Confused, Sonnet chased after her, surprised at just how fast the older woman ran. A man with an old model rifle stepped out from a doorway as Sonnet glanced behind to find Spectre much closer behind than she'd expected. Apparently he was a fast runner as well.

"Run for your life!" Spectre told the surprised man as he sprinted past.

Exiting the building at a flat-out run down the old wheelchair ramp, Mags dashed to the right, running along the far edge of the deserted street with the other two hot on her heels. Thirty meters away, another series of explosions sent them flying off their feet and sprawling. The building they'd just passed through as well as buildings on either side had all the windows and doors blow out into the street just a heartbeat away from being perfectly synchronized. A moment later the two four story and one three story building collapsed in upon themselves.

"Mother fekking, genocidal, pig sucking scum!" Mags snarled, getting up quickly as dust filled the air. "You two okay? Was that targeted specifically at us or was it a generic assault?"

Pulling himself out from under half a door and other, less identifiable rubble, Spectre pulled out a hand-launched rocket grenade while transferring his rifle to his left hand. "The PBA tank targeted our area. When it's turret started turning towards us, I ran and told you to do likewise. And now we need to keep moving. If the Shadow Lords and Urban Cowboy Mafia don't take out that armor, it's going to sweep through the area killing everyone who might be affiliated with either target group. Since we are moving in the area, that could include us.

"Sonnet? You okay?"

"Not really, no."

"Are you injured?"

“I don’t think so.”

“Then let’s keep it that way,” Spectre told her, as Mags helped her to her feet. He pointed into the dust cloud that now enveloped them. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Amen!” Sonnet agreed with a groan.

“Well, this is certainly the *circuitous* route to the train station,” Mags stated wryly some three hours later.

“We’re going to the train station?”

“Yes,” Spectre agreed, beginning to sound annoyed. “That’s the plan.”

“The Kandas train?”

“Yes, that’s the one,” he agreed again. “It’s privately owned and they couldn’t care less about who gets on the train or with what... just so long as you’re willing to pay the price of a ticket and don’t damage too much.”

“You know who owns the Kandas train?” Sonnet asked, suddenly sounding even more tired.

“Your father’s chief rival?”

“So you know. And you’re still planning to put me on the train?”

“Last place they’d expect to look,” he replied with a shrug, finally putting away the rocket grenade he’d been carrying. “I’d originally planned on you using a facial mask and a body-type altering suit. However, the armor should work just as well and provides more protection.”

Mags asked, “You think the PBA is done with us?”

“I think we’re well out of S/L or UCM territory. If they were indeed just clearing new turf, they’re done with us.”

“If. So who’s area are we in now?” she asked, keeping an eye out as they walked along another alleyway.

“To be honest, I don’t have a clue. We’re farther afield than I had anticipated.”

“How do I know that you putting me on the Kandas train isn’t just a ploy to turn me over to my father’s enemies?” Sonnet half asked, half demanded.

“Several reasons,” Spectre replied without turning around to look at her. Instead, he kept his gaze on the alleyway ahead of him and on the readouts he was once more receiving from the two aerial drones. “First, I’m being paid a great deal of money to get you safely to our target location. Second, I work hard to protect my reputation because my reputation leads to my bills getting paid. Third, your father would be very unhappy with me if I betrayed you and therefore him. Fourth, and most importantly, I told you I would get you to our destination. And I keep my word.”

There followed several minutes of silence as the three continued down the long alley that paralleled the neighboring streets. Finally, Sonnet said, “I suppose I can accept that. I’m still going to keep my eyes open though. Understand, I don’t want to come across as being ungrateful. I just don’t want to fall into the hands of my father’s enemies. They’d use me to hurt him. And chances are, they’d... they’d do very bad things to me along the way.”

“Caution can save your life,” Mags told her. “But taken too far it can kill you. We’ll get you to your destination. You have my word on that in addition to his. But don’t cross the line and step over into paranoia. Keep asking questions if it makes you feel better. We’ll be as forthcoming as the mission allows.”

“Why do you keep referring to where we’re going as ‘my destination’ or our ‘target location’?” Sonnet asked with a frown. “Why don’t you just say the name of the place?”

“Even here in the poor zones there are signal snoops,” Spectre replied. “Short distance as they are, it’s still likely that some of our conversational broadcasts are being picked up. Snippets will be fed

into distant computers that are very good at cracking encryption. Eventually, someone could hear those decrypted transmissions who does not have our best interests at heart. And....”

“...It’s better for them to not know where we’re going,” Sonnet finished.

“Exactly,” Mags agreed. She then turned to the man leading them down the alley, “Spectre. We’re going to need to rest before getting on the train. Food, toilet, sleep, the works. It’s way too early to start stimming.”

“Agreed on all counts,” he replied with a gesture towards their surroundings. “That’s why we’re taking the scenic route. We’re going to a safe house I have nearby.”

“You’re going to have to explain about that later,” Mags said in such a way that left no question that she was not happy about something.

“I will. Trust me.”

“Last time you said that, we ended up married,” she replied sourly.

Over Sonnet’s surprised gasp, Spectre replied equitably, “That didn’t turn out all bad now, did it?”

“Bad enough,” she stated grimly.

“Your safe house bears a strong resemblance to the basement of an old abandoned factory,” Mags noted.

“Yes, it rather does at that,” Spectre agreed with a welcoming gesture. “I keep a couple of cameras here so that I can ensure that no one moves in. The MREs I keep stashed inside are a few years old by now but they’ll still be edible.”

“I brought some with my emergency supplies,” she replied, looking through scattered trash in

the corner of the basement. “Actually, Sonnet brought them. And I sprang for the good stuff. Five to one odds you bought the cheap crap... again.” The teasing grin was plain to hear in her voice.

“*Drone One, recall. Drone Two, recall,*” he said before removing his helmet. With a grimace he shook his head and smirked. “You would win that bet I’m afraid. There’s a field shower in the box over there. Water container next to it is sealed and should still be good. You can set up the privacy curtains if you prefer. Yes, there in the box next to it. There’s a floor drain over in the far corner. That’s the best place to set it up” He walked across the room and powered on a large wall screen as well as the computer located there. Soon, images of the building began popping up.

“Shower’s a good idea,” Mags told him, removing her helm as well. Sonnet immediately followed suit with a relieved sigh. “You gonna go ahead and get some shuteye?”

“Yeah, just as soon as I start the drones recharging and setup my perimeter defenses. Most of the internal cameras are old but should be secure enough. These are the ones I only power on when I’m here. Feel free to tap the feed into your helmet optics.”

“We’ll go over the defenses together before you sleep.”

“Yes,” he acknowledged, wiping a hand over his tired face. “That only makes sense.”

“Why do you have this place?” Sonnet asked with a touch of distaste pursing her lips.

“Keeping a safe house or two is always a good idea when violence is a big part of your life,” he answered as the first of two heli-drones flew into the room. Landing next to him, the drone’s two counter-rotating blades quickly powered down and retracted. “This place is also one of my armories. Obviously not one I use often but it is a good place to keep stuff that other people might want.”

“Stuff?” Mags asked as she stopped setting-up the curtains for the area around the corner where she’d placed the field shower.

“Stuff,” Spectre agreed as he connected the first drone to the H-cell generator housed in his armor before storing it in an armored socket on his back. The second drone landed and was soon

hooked up next to it. “In addition to the usual small arms and ammunition, I’ve got five Calico anti-armor missiles, a Unicorn heavy laser, and two 35mm Tekra omniscanning automatic gauss guns.”

“Where the hell did you get those? And where do you have them stored?” Mags demanded, putting her hands on hips as she shook her head.

He grinned, “I don’t seem to remember just where I got them. Funny how memory works sometime. As for where they are, check behind those crates. There’s a door. You know the code on the lock. Just in case you don’t though, don’t get it wrong three times.”

“Trap?”

He mouthed the word ‘boom’ and moved his hands in the shape of a mushroom cloud.

“Righto,” she muttered, looking thoughtfully at the crates that hid the door in question.

“Anyone mind if I go ahead and eat?” Sonnet asked.

“Go ahead,” Mags replied with a grin. “You carried them, you might as well have first go at them.”

“She’s not quite the fluff ball I expected Pedro DeValas’ daughter to be,” Mags admitted as she and Spectre walked the perimeter of the building, setting mines upon the entrances in addition to other motion-activated explosives along the way.

“Let’s just say that during the first eight hours, there had been considerably more fluff than what remained by the time you met her,” Spectre countered with a rueful grin. “However, I must admit, there does seem to be some metal underneath it all. All things being equal, she’s holding up better than I expected and I’ve been flat-out pleased with how she’s held up during the shooting.”

“Where are the facial mask and body suit you had planned to use for her getting on the train?”

“In my gear bag,” he replied as he set another mine. “They still might come in handy.”

“Yes, I suppose they might. Are they geared specifically to women?”

“Yes, they are.”

“Then I suppose one of the women should carry them. Did you cheap out on that too?”

“No, not on that,” he frowned. “Too important. The body suit didn’t cost that much but the facial mask was ridiculously expensive.”

There followed a companionable silence as the two of them took turns setting perimeter traps.

“Have....” she started to ask but stopped.

“Do I sense a delicate question not quite clearing the horizon?” he asked with a slightly sad and thoroughly tired smile.

“Have you been to see him lately?”

“Almost a year ago,” he admitted, looking off into the warehouse after a quick look at her face. “Your father was none too happy to see me but he didn’t give me too much crap. Your dad stayed home while I took him fishing. We talked some. He’s older now. Almost a teen as you well know. He took turns resenting me and being happy to see me. I ended up teaching him a few tricks they don’t show you in Tae Kwan Do classes. Later, he actually caught a pair of salmon. Nice fish. I showed him how to clean the first and he cleaned the second. We cooked them over coals and ate them that evening. Talked a little more as the stars came out. It was a good day.”

They were halfway back to the basement entrance when she slowly said, “I saw him seven months ago. A week before his birthday. Father wasn’t any happier to see me than he was you apparently. He gave me the whole ‘not good for the boy’ lecture again. As though it hadn’t been my idea to try and give our son a normal life.” She shook her head as their steps slowed. “Devon thinks we work for the government. An idea my father fostered no doubt. I suppose that sounds better than ‘mercenary’.

“He wasn’t quite as resentful with me as it sounds like he was with you,” Mags continued quietly. “I took him to see his favorite hockey team play. After that, we went to an arcade. There we hit two astro-fighter simulators, participated in two different team attacks using jetpacks against a grav-behemoth, drove underwater power sleds through Atlantis, and blew up aliens attacking Houston. We ended the day with ice cream. He... He said he wanted to see us more. Both of us.

“It was hard telling him it couldn’t be.”

He pulled her into a loose, one-arm hug. “We made the right decision. Even if it is hard as hell.”

“I know,” she sighed, leaning briefly against his armored chest. “But I never realized it would be so difficult a decision to keep when I made it. When we made it.”

“Ain’t that the damn truth.”

“Come on tough guy,” she said with a sad smile, pushing him towards the basement entrance. “We’ve got a mission to complete and that starts with you getting some sleep.”

“How long have you two been apart?” Sonnet asked in a near whisper while across the room Spectre slept.

“Shouldn’t you be sleeping?” Mags asked with a wry smile.

“Yes, and I will. But I want to understand the two of you. You’re holding my life in your hands. I want to know who I’m entrusting it to.”

“Didn’t you check him out thoroughly before you hired him?”

“No. My father did. His retirement came as a complete surprise to me. Welcome to be sure but a complete and total shock nevertheless. One minute it was business as usual and the next I was being

dropped off in an alley with the mercenary known as Spectre who would get me to... you know where. My usual body guards were none too pleased by this.”

“That abrupt? Really?”

“My only warning was the suggestion that I wear walking attire to lunch. We saw the announcement on a public display board a couple of hours after your ex took over custody of me. We also heard about the attempts on Dad’s life. Thankfully, the failed attempts. Now, back to the original topic: the two of you.”

Leaning back against the wall, Mags turned her eyes to the man sleeping across the room. “We got married fifteen years ago. The two of us were young and stupid then. More stupid anyway. Both ex-army with a few years of mercenary work under our belts. Back then we were part of Kendal’s Raiders. Most of our off-time was spend fighting or having sex. Or both on a couple of occasions.”

Into the ensuing silence, Charity said, “And then you had Devon and everything changed.” Mags head whipped around and her suddenly furious eyes locked onto the other woman so fast that Charity almost fell from a position sitting on the floor. Holding up her hands, she quickly explained, “Sorry! You were the only thing moving after I got done eating so the surveillance system put the two of you and your conversation on the wall. It’s not like I did anything to intentionally spy on you.”

After giving the other woman a long, hard look, Mags relented. “I suppose not.”

“Please. What happened after the baby came?”

Looking at the floor, Mags let out a long sigh. “We tried living normal lives for a while. I taught community education classes. Garret started a mixed martial arts dojo. But it was no good, violence was in our blood. We were both action junkies. By the time Devon turned two, Garret was doing illegal blood fights and I was sidelining as bait for a metro crimes-against-women task force. I kinda liked that job but a serial killer almost got me and I freaked. Before I realized what I was doing, I’d caved the guy’s skull in. Cops didn’t want me helping after that so I lost my action fix.

“A few months down the road, the bloodsport operators Garret worked for drew organized attention upon themselves. Kinda like what happened today. First one of the bigger gangs started muscling in. Then a crime syndicate got involved. When the latter found out who he really was, they hired Garret and by proxy me to wipe out the gang. And we did. Everything went really well. It was bloody, violent, and smooth as silk. Everything our lives had been missing.

“And it was the beginning of the end for our marriage.

“We tried holding onto our normal lives. We loved our son and each other. But it wasn’t enough. No, I can see now what I couldn’t see then. Both of us wanted our old lives back. We longed for the action and the adrenaline. But neither of us wanted to be the one to say it. So, instead of talking to each other, we started slowly turning on one another.

“Things got ugly.

“One evening while my father had Devon, Garret and I got into a knockdown, drag out fight. We wrecked the apartment and each other. Black eyes, busted lips, bloody noses - the works. And then my father returned with Devon. That led to a verbal version of the same fight.

“Two weeks later we agreed that Devon should live with my father. Our son needed a life that didn’t include a burning desire for the next eruption of violence. It... it was a difficult thing to do. But it was the right thing to do.”

“And you both returned to being mercenaries?”

“Yes, and that saved our marriage for a while. While we were away, Kendal’s team had gotten absorbed into Assault Inc. Those were pretty good times for the most part. Lots of action. Lots of bonus pay. Then Assault Inc. took on more than it could chew and our HQ got wiped out along with the entire command staff. It was pretty close for us. Closer than either of us wanted to admit.

“After that, we started setting money aside for Devon’s future.

“And we started drifting apart again.

“Each of us began taking on solo jobs. No partner. We started bragging about how well our jobs had gone. Bragging about our skills. Who was better than the other. Where once we had used friendly competition to keep ourselves sharp, we turned the sharpness on each other. Eight months after Assault Inc. blew up, we blew up.”

“Is this the first time you’ve worked together since the break up?” Charity asked.

“No. Now go take a muscle relaxant and get some sleep. Tomorrow’s going to be a long day.”

“Stealth drones,” Mags said with an appreciative smile. “Yet another instance when you didn’t cheap out. Could it be that there’s hope for you yet?”

“Cost me a bloody fortune they did,” the freshly showered Garret grouched, giving the drone he held a fond look before powering it up and tossing it into the grungy sky. It rose quickly and was soon out of sight. The second drone soon followed it into the smog. “I don’t skimp on my weapons or armor and you know it. No, these little guys were the best investment I’ve made in years. Saved my ass on several occasions they have.”

“I didn’t get a chance to get a good look at the armament package they have. What did you put in them?”

He chuckled before walking back inside to pick up his gear.

“Was that a clever way of saying you aren’t going to tell me?” she asked as the three of them began once more walking towards the train station.

“Something like that,” he agreed, pulling on his helmet.

“Remember,” he warned quietly as the train station finally came into view. “Talk as little as possible and keep the helmet on as much as possible.”

“Yes!” Sonnet snapped in quiet exasperation. “I understood it the first two times you said it.”

Pulling off his helmet, he stopped and as the other two did likewise, he turned to look her in the eyes. “See that you do,” he told her in a quiet, serious voice. “If you screw up, there will be violence. And lots of it. Innocents will die. And I don’t think you’re the type of person who wants that on her conscience.”

“It won’t be on my conscience! It would be the fault of the people hunting me!” she replied angrily.

“You’d make a good mercenary,” he stated before putting his helmet back on. “Let’s move.”

“Was that supposed to be some sort of crack at my expense?” she demanded.

“I think,” Mags suggested into the ensuing silence with a wry twist to her voice, “he meant it as a compliment.”

“I am not like you. Either of you,” Sonnet stated flatly.

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

Mags turned a quick look on her. Already walking after Spectre, Sonnet never saw the smile behind the other woman’s armored visor.

“Alright, I’ve got our tickets,” Spectre informed the two as he rejoined them. “We board on platform two. Let’s get a move on. There’s work to be done and money to be made.”

“Damn straight there is,” Mags agreed, as they walked towards the forcefield-guarded entrance to the platforms. “I’ve got an upcoming island vacation to pay for. A *nice* vacation at that.” Instead of simply being inane, their chatter was intended to give the impression that the three of them were on their way to a job - as opposed to two of them already being on a job.

“Excuse me,” the Kandas Line employee said as he reactivated the forcefield over the entryway before them. “You’ll have to holster all weapons and remove your helmets.”

“Why?” Spectre asked. “About removing the helmets? Is that a new policy?” He slung the rifle he carried over his back, doffed his helmet, and stuck said headgear over the rifle butt. The camera mounted behind the train employee pointing directly at the new arrivals did not escape the mercenary’s notice.

“Yessir,” the fellow replied with a little shrug. “New policy. Just implemented yesterday.”

“Okay, it’s no big deal. It’s been a while since my last train trip. Any other new policies I should know about?”

“Explosives have to be checked with the shipping clerk,” the fellow stated, pointing to a fellow at a window some twenty feet on the other side of the force field. “We lost a train car to some improperly cared for dynamite that a group of miners were carrying two months ago. Management certainly does not want that happening again.”

By this time both Mags and Sonnet had removed their helmets. Mags’ now rested on the butt of her rifle just as Spectre’s did. Since Sonnet’s shotgun had no stock, she was having to carry her helmet.

“I certainly appreciate steps being taken to prevent the train from blowing up beneath us,” Spectre replied with a chuckle.

“Yes,” the rail employee agreed seriously. “Everyone’s happy this way. Have a pleasant journey.” With the press of a button, the forcefield dropped.

“Thanks,” Spectre replied absently walking past. Mags grunted as she passed the fellow

followed. Sonnet said nothing as she brought up the rear. The forcefield raised again after they'd passed through the entryway.

"You," the man behind the counter called brusquely, looking up from his monitors before pointing at Sonnet and then at the portal at the other end of the hall. "Pass on through."

Sonnet turned a quick, concerned look to Spectre who gave a bare nod. Without another look, she strode out of the hall. Once she'd passed through, the forcefield there snapped back up.

"You," the man said to Spectre, pointing to the place in front of his window. "I need to see your ticket."

"What's this about?" he asked, handing over the ticket which the clerk immediately scanned.

"You know what this is about."

"I do?" the mercenary asked in a cool voice as he mentally prepared himself for violence. Confined as the corridor was, the smell of the ozone generated by the two forcefields grew noticeably stronger.

"Yes, you do. You need to check that rocket grenade. Your ticket will be your voucher. You can retrieve it when you've reached your destination."

There followed a moment of silence as he mentally relaxed a bit. "Alright. You lose it, I'm getting my money's worth for it. One way or another."

"All checked items are insurable," the clerk replied equitably. "Would you like to purchase insurance? For this grenade, that would be ten credits, payable now."

"No," he replied with a smirk. "If you lose it, I'll find a more interesting way of getting my money back."

"Is that a threat sir? Threats against the line are reason for ticket forfeiture."

With a laugh, the mercenary shook his head. "If I ever threaten you or the line, you won't have to ask if I've made a threat."

“Very good sir,” the clerk replied with a nod of his head as he stowed the rocket grenade in a heavy blast container. A moment later the conveyor behind him carried it away out of sight. “Ma’am?” he asked, turning to Mags.

With a string of curses, she opened the blue bag she’d been carrying and set out two packs of C16 high explosive as well as her train ticket. “There!” she growled. “Satisfied?”

Taking his time, the fellow scanned her ticket and then set the explosive packs into another heavy blast container. He slid the ticket back to her and then turned his eyes to the display in front of him. With a raised eyebrow, he gestured her back.

“What now?” she demanded, just a hair away from being truly angry.

“I believe you know the piece of equipment to which I am referring,” he stated blandly.

“I believe you are mistaken,” she whispered back in a frigidly cold voice.

“What is it the damn scanner’s picking up?” Spectre demanded with no small amount of exasperation in his voice.

“Sir, it seems there is still the matter of the grenade in your companion’s bag,” the clerk stated, apparently on the verge of gloating.

“Grenade?” Mags asked, blinking. She then began digging around inside the bag. Looking surprised she pulled out a small grenade, looked at it a moment, shrugged, and handed it to the clerk. “Huh. I thought I was out of these guys.”

“Of course,” the clerk replied neutrally as he placed the grenade alongside the other explosives, sealed the container, and sent it on its way with a push of a button. With no sincerity in his voice at all, he told them, “Have a pleasant journey.” And with that the forcefield at the far end of the hall dropped.

“No doubt,” Mags muttered sourly as the two mercenaries walked out onto the train platform.

“They had facial recognition software running at the check-in station. Didn’t they? And where are you going?” Sonnet asked him as the train they’d recently boarded began slowly moving away from the station.

“Platform at the back of the last car,” he replied, walking quickly. “I’ve got to retrieve my drones before the train clears the city. Once that happens, it will pick up speed and there’s no way my little drones can keep up. And yes, they did have said software in place. That was behind their new ‘no helmet’ policy. It’s clear they’re looking for someone. Good thing none of us look like whoever it is they’re after.” Sonnet’s hand involuntarily reached up to touch the high-tech facial mask she’d put on shortly before they’d left the warehouse.

Two cars later, a man moved to block their way. “There’s a toll to pass through this car,” he told them. Three friends of his stood to add menace to his statement.

Without slowing down, Spectre punched the man hard in the solar plexus. He then grabbed the hair on the back of the fellow’s head and proceeded to smash his face into the wall several times in brutal, quick succession. Dropping the unconscious man to the floor, the mercenary continued out of the car, also without slowing down.

“Sod off twinkies,” Mags told them with a grin. “And don’t be here when we get back.” When the three moved to close with them, Mags handed Sonnet her blue bag and said, “Go with him. I find myself in need of exercise.”

“I could....” Sonnet began before the other woman interrupted.

“You could do what I say young rookie merc. Otherwise, when I’m done with these bitches, I’m going to introduce my foot to your ass as well.” The fact that she said it with a huge smile didn’t make the other woman take the threat any less lightly.

“Okay, watch yourself,” Sonnet responded with a worried frown before stepping through the doors and into the next car. The doors automatically closed behind her. “Spectre!” she yelled as she ran

to catch up with him. “Mags is about to fight the other three thugs alone! You’ve got to help her!”

“Help her? Fight those punks?” he asked with a smirk as he stopped at the final door and pulled a small, black box out of a pouch and powered on the display. “She doesn’t need my help with the likes of them. And she’d be insulted if I did help her.” He then pressed the back of the box below the locked door controls. When he released it, the device remained attached just below the electronic lock.

“What’s that?”

“Lockpicker and door control,” he replied as the door beeped and opened. Air from outside rushed over them as he stepped out onto the small deck at the rear of the car. “*Drone One, recall. Drone Two, recall.*”

“Why are you so worried about your two little drones?” she asked with a frown.

“They’re remote eyes,” he explained as the first drone flew down and landed. “They provide high resolution video feed as well as thermal scanning capabilities. Part of the reason our path was so twisty and turny is the information I received from them. We avoided many more confrontations than we actually ran into. Many more. Oh, and last but not least, they’re godawful expensive and I’m a cheap son of a bitch.” He powered the drone down and placed the cylindrical drone all the way down into an armored container built into the back of his armor. This particular model couldn’t recharge while in the launch position. However, after their short walk from the warehouse, the drones hadn’t been up long enough to actually need more power.

“You mean we’d have gone through worse things without those?” Sonnet asked, somewhat incredulous that there could have been worse encounters available.

“Much worse,” he agreed as the second drone landed and retracted its blades as well. A moment later it was powered down and stored in the twin container on the other side of his back. Stepping back into the car, he told her, “Go ask Mags if she needs to throw out any trash before I close the door.”

“But what if she’s still fighting them?” Sonnet asked.

“You’ve got a shotgun. I think you’ll find it makes intimidating people extremely easy. And if Mags objects, tell her time ran out. I need to stay with the door so get a move on.”

“Alright,” the reluctant woman replied, not sounding the least bit happy.

Halfway back, just as she was getting ready to retrieve the shotgun from her back, the door ahead opened and Mags stepped through, apparently none-the-worse for wear. “What are you doing here?” the mercenary asked with a frown.

“Spectre wanted to know if you had any trash you needed to throw out before he closed the door.”

“Oh.” She turned a speculative look back towards the closed door behind her. “No, what’s left can stay. Tell him to lock up and let’s move to a more comfortable car towards the front.”

Mags reached out and grabbed her arm. She leaned close and whispered, “Careful not to sweat with the facial mask on. Sweat comes out from underneath the edges of the mask. It’s a give away for those who know what to look for.”

“I.. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“See that you do.”

“Welcome to the Monterey Free Zone,” the mechanical voice announced. “If you have checked baggage, your ticket acts as your voucher. To retrieve your baggage go to the Platform Five Purser’s desk in the station proper. Debarkation will begin in thirty seconds.” The message cycled three more times in as many languages.

“Let’s move,” Spectre told them as he pulled on his helmet and locked it in place.

“Right,” Mags agreed as she and Sonnet followed suit.

“What’s going to happen to the men you beat?” Sonnet asked as the train eased to a stop.

“The cleaning crew will come on after the passengers have left,” Mags replied absently. “If the punks can’t get off on their own, an ambulance will pick them up. They’ll be taken to a local hospital and treated. If they can’t pay for the ride and the treatment, they’ll end up donating something to cover the expense.”

“Donating?”

“If their blood type is rare enough, maybe just blood. If not, maybe a piece of their liver. If the price for putting them back together is high enough, the hospital might take a kidney. Also kinda depends on the place they’re taken to, what financial situation said medical establishment is in, and what kind of day their administrator has had.”

“That... that’s horrible!”

“Yes,” Mags agreed with a little shrug. “I try not to get shot in the Monterey Free Zone without having lots of credit available.”

Halfway across the platform, Sonnet slowed. “It’s brighter here.”

“Yes, there’s not as much smog here in the MFZ. Allows more sunlight through. Side effect is that it’s hotter. That you’ll be noticing soon as well.”

“I think I’m already noticing it.”

A short time later they’d retrieved the stowed gear and were heading into the large city. “*Drone One,*” Spectre commanded, “*auto-launch.*” With a quiet pop the drone launched up into the air. As it began to drop, the two sets of blades emerged and almost instantly began counter-rotating. Soon the drone had flown out of sight. “*Drone Two, auto-launch.*”

“Well,” Sonnet said with a shrug. “They do seem to be quite convenient.”

“Did you have a place in mind for acquiring a ground vehicle?” Mags asked a bit impatiently.

“Assuming we’re still following the original plan as much as possible.”

“Yes and yes,” Spectre replied agreeably.

“We’re back on our scrambled channel,” Mags stated with perhaps a touch of forced calm when no further response seemed likely. “This level of non-communication is not necessary.”

After slightly shorter moment of silence, he replied, “You’re right. Sorry. I suppose aggravating you just for the hell of it is just a leftover habit.”

“Yes, I rather suspected as much myself.”

“We’re going to Tio Jose,” the mercenary explained. “I’ll buy an old wheeled-car from him as well as travel papers. It will be slow going but it should keep us under the radar. Both figuratively and literally.”

“Tio Jose?” Mags stopped. “As in Loco Tio Jose?!”

“The one and only,” he agreed without slowing his pace. Sonnet slowed to remain equidistant between the two.

“You can’t trust him!”

“I *can* trust him,” Spectre countered seriously. “I can trust him to do exactly what is in the best interest of Loco Tio Jose.”

Resuming her earlier pace, Mags asked with a frown they could hear but not see behind her helmet, “And just how are you going to make sure that he understands that what we need is in his best interest to supply. And keep quiet about afterwards?”

“Oh, I think you’ll find that in the years since we separated, I’ve become most persuasive. I’ve developed a way with people. You’ll see. Hell, you might even be impressed.”

“Who is Loco Tio Jose?” Sonnet asked.

“He’s a procuring agent,” Mags replied grimly. “He gets people what they want. Then he turns around and sells the information on the open market. Last time I was here, he almost got me sold to

slavers out of Guadalajara. A group known as the Barrio Boys who later settled in Ciudad Gris. I've been half-ass planning to come here on vacation, beat good ol' Tio Jose black and blue - and maybe shoot him some - just to show him how much I appreciated that little experience."

"He... he doesn't sound like a good man to deal with...."

"Oh, don't you worry about ol' Tio Jose," Spectre told her with a cheerful smile coloring his voice. "I have absolute faith that he'll do exactly what we want him to do and not a bit more. Absolute faith."

"You have something on him...." Mags half asked.

"No," he replied with the same lightness, "but I'm about to."

"Tio Jose!" Spectre called loudly as they entered the well-littered office positioned between the Tio Jose Used Goods store and the Tio Jose Scrap Yard. "Where's my favorite uncle?!"

An old Hispanic man stepped out of an office. "Who are you? Your voice sounds familiar."

Spectre pulled off his helmet and tossed it to Sonnet who barely managed to catch it. "It's me Tio Jose! Spectre. Come on now, it's been a long time but not that long."

"Spectre?! My god man! You're still alive! Who would have guessed such a thing? Mercenaries have short life spans mi amigo. It's a miracle you're still with us. Come into my office, have a drink."

"Well, that sounds good," the mercenary replied, following him into the ratty office. "Unfortunately, I can't drink now. Or eat either for that matter. Side effects of a rather unusual infirmity. The circumstances behind my current health issues are actually related to my current

mission.”

“Really?” Tio Jose asked, raising an eyebrow as he sat on the corner of the desk. “Sounds like you must be very hungry and thirsty.”

“Oh, you have no idea. No idea at all.”

“Tell me about it. Perhaps I can help.”

“Tio,” Spectre sighed, relief showing on his face as he perched on the arm of one of the chairs, “those are the exact words I was hoping to hear.”

“What can I do to help you? You know, for a gringo you were almost like a son to me. What can Tio Jose do to help you with your current predicament?”

“Tio, I need a reliable ground car. Something nondescript. A car or maybe truck that can carry three for a long trip. Maybe even so far as the California States.”

“That’s a long drive,” the old man began thoughtfully, “but they have very good medical facilities in the California States.”

“Oh? Do they?” Spectre replied with a knowing smile.

“I can get you such a vehicle. And I can get it fast. What else do you need?”

“Travel documents. Three sets that will pass close inspection. A man and two women. You already know what country one of these needs to be for.”

“Passing close inspection means quality work. And just what would those theoretical documents say your business was?”

“This is your area of expertise,” Spectre replied expansively, raising his hands to show he didn’t have a clue. “What do you think would get three armed and armored mercenaries across the border most easily?”

With a chuckle, the old man smiled. “Why working for the government, of course. The question is, which government to have you work for?”

“Well,” the mercenary began thoughtfully with a frown, “we can’t take a direct route. That means that theoretically, we could run into people from several areas. Best to be prepared for all of them.”

Tio Jose’s eyes turned serious and then angry. “You are talking big money getting good documents for six governments. Frankly, I doubt you have that kind of money to spend and I do not like having my time wasted. Miguel! Ernesto!”

“Tio!” Spectre declared, walking to the office door with his hands theatrically placed over his heart. “I’m hurt that you would think I’d come to you empty-handed.” Turning to Mags, he pointed to the smaller of the two armed men that came walking quickly in from the back. “Juniper, I don’t want the left one intruding on my business with myself, the big guy, and Tio Jose. See that he has other things on his mind.”

Mags turned and stared a moment before finally nodding.

When the big man reached the office door, Spectre kicked his leg out from under him and grabbed his arm. Using the arm as a lever by which to move the larger man, the mercenary smashed the big man’s face into the desktop. As the his body recoiled away from the desk, Spectre kicked him in the chest, sending him across the room to crash into the wall and the assorted trash before it.

Eyes blazing with anger, Ernesto started to stand. “Metal alloy combat frame asshole. Sticks and stones can’t break my bones and now I’m going to really hurt you bad.”

“I know you have a combat frame, amigo,” Spectre replied with an evil grin. “A *metal alloy* combat frame at that. That’s why I chose you.” He then fired the taser built into the forearm armor of his suit. The tines hit the larger man in the neck. Helplessly, the big man twitched and twisted as the electricity poured into him and was conducted by the metal covering his bones all over his body. “What do you say Tio? Should I let him cook? This isn’t your standard, self-defense taser. I can run as much as ten amps through him. What do you say? Do you have any further use for for this guy?”

“He’s my older sister’s boy,” the old man replied helplessly as the enforcer jerked and convulsed on the floor.

“Was that a ‘live’ or ‘not-live’?”

“Let him live... please.”

With a shrug, the mercenary turned off the juice and retracted the taser leads. “See. Our first transaction in years and it’s gone well so far. For the use of the word ‘please’ you purchased the life of your nephew. Quite a bargain I’d say. Wouldn’t you Ernesto? Oh, he seems to be unconscious. Well, I’m sure he’d agree if he was awake.”

“What do you want?” the old man asked in a tired voice.

“Why I want what we talked about earlier,” the mercenary explained in a pleasant voice. “And I want it very, very fast.”

“It will take some time,” Tio Jose replied, looking over at Miguel, the other enforcer as he slid across the floor into the edge of the office. It appeared the other nephew was now equally unconscious as the other in addition to bleeding from both the nose and mouth.

“It had better not take too much time and it had better be primo work on the travel documents,” Spectre told him with a pleasant smile. “But I trust you to know what’s good for you and what isn’t.”

“Yes, yes,” the old man agreed with a tired sigh. “Death and destruction if I don’t follow through. I’ve heard it all before.”

“I know you have,” the mercenary replied, still smiling. “Now take off your shirt.”

“What? Why do you want me to....”

“Do it!” Spectre shouted in an instant fury. Then, in a bare whisper, he told the old man, “Do it. Right. Now.” Startled by the sudden outburst and then the equally sudden reversal of volume, the old man unbuttoned his shirt with trembling fingers. “Yes. That’s better,” the mercenary told him in a normal tone of voice. “Last time we had dealings, you sold information about where we would be to

the Barrio Boys. They tried to kill me and take my wife into slavery. That's the sort of thing I take personally Jose." From one of the pouches on his belt, he removed a black box with rounded edges on the front that fit into the palm of his hand. Smiling again, the mercenary pulled off a sealed backing and pressed the back of the box against the old man's breastbone.

"What the hell is this?!"

"This is box Jose. The back of the box has a molecular glue mixed with a small amount of narcotic. I'm not a complete bastard you see. The narcotic is to minimize the pain caused by this: *Bomb One, activate.*" There came an acknowledging beep from the box immediately followed by a whining noise. Tio Jose staggered back and fell into his chair.

"Those are the self-tapping screws firmly attaching the bomb to your sternum otherwise known as your breast bone. It will take a major surgery to remove the box. And a major surgery will set off the tamper switch. Same if someone breaches the housing. Either way, tamper switch goes off immediately followed by you and a large portion of your surroundings magically going away. Yes, I see you understand. If you ask my opinion, I think you should be very careful with that box Tio Jose. Very careful indeed. Furthermore, I think you should be even more careful preparing our travel documents and ground transport. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," the old man gasped as the whirring stopped. "I understand."

"There is a coded chip in the bomb. It sends out a seemingly random signal every so often. If that signal is not replied to by the chip in my controller, the bomb explodes. Now the chip in my controller does something very similar. It sends out a little signal. The bomb knows when to expect these signals. Failure to receive.... Well, you get the idea. Don't you Jose?"

"Yes," Tio Jose whispered, sitting up with a grimace. He looked for blood around the box but found none. Slowly, he began buttoning up his shirt.

"I considered wiping out every male member of your extended family," Spectre explained

pleasantly. “However, this seemed more... to the point. That and I’m holding the other idea in reserve as my Plan B. If you mess with me or mine again, I *will* find you again. And if it comes to that, I will stop playing all these fun little games and start doing something extremely unpleasant to you; sometime in and amongst killing off those relatives of yours. I’m talking the stuff nightmares are made of. This I promise you. And as you are probably now remembering, I keep my promises.”

“Yes, I know,” the old man whispered regretfully. “I do remember that now.”

“I...” Sonnet began as their ground vehicle approached the edge of the Monterey Free Zone, “I thought I was starting to know and understand you. But I was wrong. I don’t understand anything.”

“Well, that puts you further along than most folks,” Spectre replied equitably as Mags drove. “Most folks think they know and are very mistaken in that belief.”

“Why did you do what you did to that old man?” She Sonnet asked in confusion. “How could you do that to him? How could you do that to anyone?”

“Tio Jose is not a man,” the mercenary replied indifferently as he continued scanning the road ahead of them and kept an eye on the readouts from the two drones. “He’s a piece of filth in the shape of a man. A bottom feeder who sells out those who do business with him. And as I explained to him, he betrayed the wrong people. The bomb should ensure that he doesn’t try to sell us out or flag the travel papers. If he does....”

Mags stopped the car abruptly. “Take off your helmet,” she demanded of him, taking her own headgear off. Confused, he did so. She climbed halfway across the seat and kissed him with a fierce passion. A startled moment later, he returned the kiss with a passion equal to her own. After a long moment, she pulled away from him. Sitting back in her seat, she donned her helmet and started driving

again.

“By Kendal’s buckshot-riddled ass that was beautiful work!” Mags declared with a bright smile coloring her voice. “God! I’d forgotten how much I enjoyed watching you work when you were ‘on’. And were you ever ‘on’! Payback for him was the whole reason you routed us through the MFZ, wasn’t it?” she asked with a glance at him before returning her eyes to the road.

“I’ve been planning that for the last few years,” he admitted with a dark grin. “The box was not terribly expensive to have made even though it is scan-resistant. It did however take a certain hard-to-find craftsmanship to get it done right. Finding the perfect situation the right length of time from when he betrayed us... that was the real trick.”

“I knew it!” she declared with a fierce grin neither of the others could see. “When you called me Juniper so I wouldn’t say anything, I knew you were up to something and I wondered if Loco Tio Jose’s time had come. But what you did.... God! That was pure artistry. I almost had an orgasm seeing the look on his face after you planted the bomb on him. Thankfully, I had my helmet recorder on so that beautiful moment has been saved for posterity.”

“You’re both crazy,” Sonnet stated quietly from the back seat.

“Yes, we are,” Mags agreed with a smile and a shrug with a glance into the rearview mirror at the other woman. “I thought you’d have caught onto that sooner.”

“You still carry a signal scanner with your equipment Mags?” Spectre asked shortly after retrieving his drones. They were now driving across barren countryside as the MFZ dropped ever further away like an unpleasant smear on the horizon behind them.

“Yes. You wanna check the car?”

“Seems like a good idea.”

“Only if he’s using old tech,” she countered. “Or something that’s streaming data. If there’s a pulse beacon being used, I doubt my gear will find it. Not in a simple sweep. We’d have to leave it running. And it will definitely find your drone communication gear when it’s up and running.”

“Is it going to beep in an annoying manner while it’s detecting my gear?” he asked with a frown.

“Hmm...” she replied thoughtfully. “Maybe not. I think it’s programmable. More than that, I should be able to tie it into my suit computer. Hell, for that matter I can probably run the feed to my visor. Do you have any tape? I don’t want to risk the cable getting in the way. I should be able to activate the scanner, mount the antenna on my shoulder, and leave the device itself in the pouch. So that’s actually two cables. One for the antenna and the other to connect to the computer.”

“You’ve got the cables?” he asked, rummaging through his gear bag.

“Of course I’ve got the cables,” she replied with exasperation. “Do you have the tape?”

“Aha!” he declared, pulling out a wide roll of black tape. “The mercenaries’ best friend: duct tape. Good for fixing anything as well as prisoner restraint.”

“Nice,” she replied, slowing the vehicle to a stop. “Let’s hop to it.”

“Shouldn’t we keep going?” Sonnet suggested.

“This shouldn’t take too long to setup and reprogram. Probably not more than an hour.”

“Then why don’t I drive while you work on that?” she asked. The two mercenaries looked at each other. Mags raised an eyebrow while Spectre shrugged with his facial expression.

“Okay,” Mags told her. “You drive for a while. We’ll work on it in the back seat. If you can’t see what’s ahead clearly, slow to a crawl. There are some nasty gullies out here. And with the reduction in ground traffic, some of them now cross what’s left of the roads.”

“Video feed, two audio bugs, and three location fixers,” Mags itemized with a smile as she tossed the small, delicate pieces of equipment into the ditch running alongside this section of road. “Bye Tio Jose. Stay out of our business... or else.” And with that she fired her laser pistol into the equipment until she felt satisfied it was all well and thoroughly out of commission.

“There. That makes me much happier now,” she announced with a bright smile. “Sonnet, would you like to continue driving or would you prefer a break?”

“I’d like to keep driving,” the other woman replied, getting back into the vehicle. “It makes me feel useful.”

“Then by all means, drive to your heart’s content.”

“We need to put several hours behind this place before we camp for the night,” Spectre told them as the car once more picked up speed. “Just in case Tio Jose sells us out or someone else was picking up the signals from those devices.”

“Aren’t we getting close to some border territory?” Mags suggested with a frown.

“Depends on who’s map you go by,” he replied with a shrug.

“What does that mean?” Sonnet asked.

“For the moment,” Mags told her with a smirk, “it means you keep on driving.”

“Here,” Spectre said, handing his fellow mercenary a chip he just removed from the computer on his armor.

“What’s this?”

“That is the control chip so you can tap into the audio-visual feed coming from Tio Jose’s bomb. Just monitor this frequency,” he sent her suit a quick data blip. “The chip has recordings of everything it’s received since the bomb was activated.”

She studied him a moment before saying, “You have become a sneaky bastard. I like it.”

“Why thank you.”

“Guys,” Sonnet called, nodding ahead. “There’s something up there.”

“Someone’s got a checkpoint setup which includes a rudimentary roadblock,” Mags muttered. “I’m going to... increase magnification... and enhance the image... there. Okay, there’s a badge. Looks like it’s a Republic of Mexico checkpoint. I count, six... no, seven soldiers.” She returned magnification to normal as Spectre pulled out the appropriate documents from the armored case they’d acquired with them. Once closed, the case’s complex lock reset.

Documents ready, he powered up a small box in one of his belt containers. “According to my readings, they’re broadcasting on 551.921. I’ll pre-set a jammer.”

“Why did you count them?” Sonnet asked, a thread of concern running through her voice. “And why did you setup a signal jammer? I mean, it’s not like we’re going to be attacking them... is it? That *is* why we went to all the trouble to get these credentials. Right?”

“We’re not going to look for trouble,” Mags replied with a smile in her voice. “But sometimes trouble has a way of finding us. And it’s possible that Tio Jose might actually be loco enough to try betraying us again. So we prepare for the worst. And in this case, that includes you. We’re more heavily armed and armored than they are. Keep your shotgun out and ready. If either of us begins shooting, you have my permission to open fire on anyone who is not one of us.”

“Oh. I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Not until we’re through the checkpoint or everyone there is dead,” Mags stated firmly.

They continued their approach, slowing the closer they got.

“Fekk!” Spectre declared with growl as he began coding in the combination on the armored briefcase where their illicit travel documents were stored even as Sonnet slowed the car to a stop.

“What?” Mags asked, followed almost immediately by, “Oh crap! Sorry Spectre.”

“What?!” Sonnet demanded, trying not to panic.

“They’re not Republic of Mexico,” she explained, plainly angry with herself. “They’re Unification federales.”

“Go distract them for a couple of minutes while I get this damned case open and retrieve the right set of illegal travel documents,” Spectre told her. “Sonnet, get out of the car, take your helmet off, and bat your eyes at one of them.”

“I don’t...”

“Move!” he interrupted in a fierce whisper. She moved.

“Buenos noches,” Mags called as she approached the soldiers.

“It was until you showed up,” the man at the gate replied sourly, putting down the book he’d been reading. He deliberately paused to look around at their barren surroundings. “What are you doing here?”

“Much the same as what you’re doing,” she told him, most of the pleasantness leaving her eyes.

“I’m working,” he stated, raising an eyebrow. “My soldiers and I are here working to reunify Mexico by holding this checkpoint. Is that what you’re doing?”

“As you well know, I’m not working on holding any checkpoints. How about if I let you read for yourself just what it is that I am doing here?” she countered a little too sweetly.

“Fine, fine,” he replied with a shrug. “Go ahead and bring me your travel documents. And tell the bimbo to stop making eyes at my men. If they stay distracted, my fine soldatos will end up extending latrine trenches for the next two weeks back at our main camp and they won’t like that.”

This statement did indeed seem to put an end to the staring that had been going on.

“Yo!” Mags called. “Slowpoke! Where are the damn travel documents?”

“Did anyone ever explain to you just what an obnoxious bitch you are?” Spectre replied loudly, as he closed up the little armored case and exited the car.

“All the time! What does that have to do with anything?” she countered with a smirk.

“What were you doing in there?” the officer asked Spectre as he approached with the documents.

Spectre raised the visor on his helmet and looked the man in the eyes. “Lieutenant, I am not a nice man and I am not here to answer your questions. Read the damn documents and then get the hell out of my way.”

“You have a bad attitude,” the officer replied slowly as he cautiously accepted the documents the mercenary provided.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” Spectre replied with a feral grin. “Pray that you don’t.”

“Dios mio! You sound like those special forces guys....” He stopped as he plugged the first of the travel documents into his reader. “Jesu Christo! You are those special forces guys. What the hell are you doing driving around in this thing out here?”

“Improvising in preparation for seeking and destroying,” the mercenary replied, holding his hand out for the travel document.

“I need to check the other two as well....” the lieutenant said with dwindling confidence.

“If you insist on delaying us, do it fast,” the mercenary all but growled. It did not escape his notice that most of the men had gone back to staring at Sonnet. While she looked different from her original appearance due to the facial mask, she was still beautiful by anyone’s reckoning.

“Okay, okay,” the officer relented after putting the documents into his reader barely long enough for the information to display. “You can go. Have fun chasing around in the desert. Hope

you're carrying enough water and supplies because we can't give you anything from our stores."

"I don't need anything from you other than that barricade out of the way," Spectre replied, taking the last of the documents from the officer and stalking back towards the car.

"You heard the man," the lieutenant called. "Move the damn barricade." He began muttering under his breath just low enough that the other man couldn't quite make out what he'd said. With a couple of shrugs federales walked towards the heavy truck blocking the road.

"I love it when you turn on the charm," Mags announced as the three of them got back into their dusty vehicle. It wasn't immediately clear which of the other two she spoke of.

"Ciudad Gris, dead ahead."

"I really don't like that particular phrase," Sonnet replied with a frown.

"Ciudad Gris, directly ahead?" Mags asked with a grin.

The other woman smiled. "Yes, that definitely sounds better."

"So Spectre," Mags began as the other mercenary woke up from a long nap, "Who's in control of Ciudad Gris since the Barrio Boys unexpected but welcome downfall?"

"Last time I was here," he began before stifling a yawn. "Sorry. As I was saying - last time I was here the Republica Libertad were the ones running the show. Their leader is Don Eduardo Balderas. He's a good guy. I hope he's still alive."

"You haven't been in touch with him?" Sonnet asked.

"No. I didn't want to tip my hand to anyone who might be watching me... or who might be watching him."

"You two live such... closed lives," she said with a touch of sadness.

“Whatever,” the mercenary replied absently as he focused on the city ahead. “Time for you to put the facial mask back on.”

“Oh. Alright,” she sighed.

“I’ve been listening to what Tio Jose’s been up to,” Mags told them as Sonnet worked to put on the expensive mask.

“And just what has our favorite uncle been up to?” Spectre asked around another yawn.

“Mostly cursing you. I’m glad this is all being recorded. I’m learning a lot of new ways to curse in Spanish. So far, it looks like he’s playing it smart. The boys we danced with are out of the hospital now.”

“Dance?” Sonnet asked, pausing in her efforts. “You didn’t dance... oh. You mean the bodyguards you fought,” she sounded slightly disappointed.

“Exactly,” Mags agreed. “So far, he’s playing it smart. I admit to being kinda torn though. On the one hand I’d like this run to go smoothly. On the other hand I’d like an excuse to push the button and blow his sorry ass to kingdom come.”

“Don’t worry,” Spectre told her with a smirk, “I’m sure you’ll get a chance at action enough soon.”

“It’s not just action,” she explained. “I want that sorry bastard dead and in little pieces.”

“Well, I put the transmitter in the box specifically to find out if he was going to betray us... again. If he does....”

“Yes,” she purred, “when he does....”

“Ciudad Gris seems like a nice city,” Sonnet observed after their documents had been checked

and they had driven into the large metropolitan area. “There’s trees everywhere. Plants and shrubs and flowers... it’s beautiful.”

“You should have seen it before,” Mags stated as she followed Spectre’s driving directions. “It was a hell hole on par with the Barrington Free Zone or Monterey Free Zone. Worse even. That was back when the Barrio Boys were in charge. The people were afraid. You didn’t see crowds like this. I’m guessing that slavery is now illegal here?”

“A horrid practice,” Sonnet declared, still looking out at the city.

“Yes it is,” Spectre agreed with both of them. “Eduardo and his Republica Libertad people seem to have performed a miracle in turning this place around. When I left, the main fighting had been over with for about a month. There were bounties on the heads of the surviving Barrio Boys and the people were turning on them left and right. That gang had been in charge a long time. The people remembered everything that had been done to them. Everyone who’d been taken from them. It was not a good time to be a Barrio Boy.”

“I wish I could have been here for it,” Mags said, driving and keeping her eyes on the road ahead.

“Yeah,” Spectre agreed with a thoughtful look at his ex. “Me too.”

“Hola Eduardo,” Spectre greeted the man with a smile.

“Spectre? Hey! How’s my favorite gringo?” After a quick embrace and handshake, the dark-haired Mexican pulled back to take a look at the two armored women. Sonnet had removed her helmet and was openly looking around while Mags had her visor up and was scanning the area. “These two ladies were not part of the crew you used to free my city. New hires?”

“Sonnet’s new,” he explained with a gesture towards the woman as she ran her fingers through her once more perfect looking hair. The mercenary then nodded towards the other woman. “Mags and I have worked together before on several occasions,” he explained with a grin. “She’s top grade weapons material.”

“Pleased to meet you both. I am Eduardo Balderas. Welcome to Ciudad Gris. Now please, come inside all of you. You must have a drink and enjoy my hospitality,” Eduardo told them as he led the way into the presidential villa. They walked through the nicely but not opulently appointed house to a comfortable living area. “Sit sit. Make yourselves comfortable.” The mercenaries did so, Spectre and Sonnet with a smile and Mags with a more cautious look on her face.

“Oh, what am I thinking? Where are my manners? I’m sure you’ve traveled a great distance to get here. Would you like a chance to change clothes?” Eduardo asked. “Get out of the armor for a while? Maybe a shower and shave while you’re at it? We still have a room set aside with your leftover stuff from your last visit Spectre. And I’m sure we can find something from my wife’s extensive clothes closets to fit your companions. I know everyone would be delighted if you could stay the night.”

“Eddie,” Spectre replied with a sigh and a smile, “that would be fantastic.”

A few minutes later found the three mercenaries alone in a good-sized bedroom with a large attached bathroom. “You trust him?” Mags asked with a frown.

“Yes,” Spectre replied, setting his helmet on a dresser. “I worked with him for several months. Eventually, I more or less put him in power here and then setup his security. Most of them were my people at one time. And most of them seem to still be here. And his wife is a friend of mine as well.”

“How good a friend?” Mags asked archly.

“She was a friend. Nothing more,” he told her as he started pulling clothing out of the dresser.

“Hey, I’d forgotten I had this shirt. Nice.”

There came a quiet knock at the door. Spectre opened it, allowing in a maid with a pair of dresses, sandals, and two bags as well. “Senor Spectre,” the grey-haired woman greeted him with a smile, “it’s good to have you back with us.”

“Thank you abuela,” he replied with a smile. “It’s good to be back. Even if it is just temporary. So, what do you have there?”

“Clothes and toiletry items for your lady friends,” she replied, setting everything on the bed. “We’re preparing two more bedrooms. They should be ready in a couple of hours. Is there anything else I can get you?”

After a quick glance at his companions, he shook his head and smiled, “It appears we’re good. Thank you very much.”

“Enjoy your stay,” she replied as she let herself out of the room.

“You know, I’m still pissed off with you,” a clean and nicely dressed Spectre told Eduardo with smirk.

“You are? With me?”

“Hell yes! I finally managed to get a halfway decent secretary and you stole her away from me. To this day I still haven’t found a worthwhile replacement!” he finished with a smile.

“What can I say my friend?” the other man asked, holding his open hands before him with a little shrug. “True love conquers all. I wish you could have been here for the wedding. It was wonderful - singing, dancing, and such incredible food and drink. You’d have loved it, I know. Which reminds me, thank you for your gift. It meant a lot to us.”

Shaking his head, Spectre replied, “I wish I could have been here too. Instead, I was fighting

and bleeding all over Singapore. What a mess that was.”

“Oh?” Mags asked.

“Another time,” her ex replied with a self-mocking smile.

“Bad?”

“Another time,” he repeated with exactly the same inflection.

“Alright.”

“You live a tough life my friend. So?” Eduardo set down a tray of drinks. He took the last one for himself and drank a bit before continuing, “What brings you to town my friend? Judging by the gear you arrived in, I’m guessing it’s not pleasure.”

“You’re right,” Spectre agreed after drinking half the limeade in his glass. “What can you tell me about the Barrabas Tunnel? I heard the federales collapsed it in four places.”

“Three places my friend. Are you looking to get into the Mexico Valley Trade Zone without... what is the phrase... drawing undue attention?”

“That is the exact phrase,” Spectre told him seriously. “And that’s exactly what we’re looking to do.”

“I think we can help you.” Pressing the top of his ring, he spoke into it saying, “Corazon, I need you to bring me the area map and updated information on the Barrabas Tunnel. And in case you haven’t heard already,” he continued with a wink at Spectre, “your worthless old boss is here.” A lovely laugh came from the gold ring. “I’ll be there in a moment mi amante.”

After a couple of comfortable minutes had passed, a lovely and very pregnant woman with long, black hair swept into the room. She paused to hand Eduardo a portable drive and to give him a quick kiss before moving on to Spectre to whom she gave a hug. “It’s good to see you Garret. How have you been? Found a replacement for me yet?”

He embraced her with a fond smile. “I was just complaining that I have in point of fact *not*

found a replacement yet. I'm afraid you're one of a kind. I don't suppose I could hire you away from this guy?"

With a laugh, she returned to her husband. "I think I prefer the life of soon-to-be mother and wife to the president than that of secretary. However, I must admit, being your secretary was one of the most interesting jobs I have ever had."

"Oh well," the mercenary replied with a smile and a shrug. "At least I tried."

"The tunnel?" Mags prompted with a raised eyebrow and a gesture towards the display Eduardo now had up.

"Oh very well," Spectre agreed with a grin. "If you're going to insist on bringing business into the equation in the middle of a mission, then I guess we'll humor you."

"You are such a dork sometimes," Mags told him with a smirk and a shake of head.

"Oh!" the pregnant lady exclaimed from across the room with a laugh, "I think I've found a new sister! I've been saying that exact thing for years!" Mags smiled at the other woman before returning her attention to Eduardo and his display.

"Okay," the Ciudad Gris President began, "here we have the Barrabas Tunnel. Originally used for train traffic through the mountains, as train traffic died out due to the onset of grav-plate technology, the tunnel evolved into a major smuggling route between my fair city and the Mexico Valley Trade Zone. The tunnel worked in this role for years. Ten years ago, the federales took control of the MVTZ side and started charging taxes. This resulted in side tunnels being dug here and here. Tax free trading re-commenced. Eventually the federales figured out that they were no longer intercepting most of the smugglers. Rather predictably, they found the other tunnels. However, instead of setting up more tax stations, they decided to collapse the tunnel at their end as well as where each of the two side tunnels intersected." He touched the wall and the image changed to show the tunnel with the collapsed sections.

“That looks pretty permanent,” Spectre observed with a purse-lipped frown.

“It sure looks that way, doesn’t it?” Eduardo asked with a grin.

“But it’s not?” Mags hinted hopefully.

“You are correct.” He touched the wall again and the image once more changed. “There had already been additional secret tunnels dug into the main tunnel here and here. On top of that, there are old train service entrances located here and here. Using the combination of these four tunnels, you can still make the crossing. First, you enter the main tunnel via this west entrance. Five kilometers down the tunnel, you exit via the east service tunnel. You pass through the lovely little mountain village of Villa Rosa, walk a couple of scenic kilometers, and re-enter the main tunnel via the concealed smuggler’s entrance, here. You walk a few more kilometers and this puts you on the MVTZ side of the mountains. Taking the west service exit, you come out low in the mountains and enjoy an easy, downhill walk into the Mexico Valley Trade Zone.”

“How safe is the tunnel itself?” Spectre asked thoughtfully. “Is there much of a collapse hazard? What about the terrain outside the tunnel?”

“According to the people I’ve talked to, the main tunnel is pretty stable. What didn’t collapse before doesn’t seem likely to suddenly do so now. The terrain around Villa Rosa is steep. Supposedly you don’t need climbing gear but most of the people I’ve talked with are part mountain goat so I can’t honestly say what it’s like there.”

“How long would you say to make the complete crossing?”

“I’d say six to twelve hours - depending on the weather in the mountains and how fast you travel.”

“Security on the other side?”

“Minimal for ground traffic,” Eduardo replied. “A few foot patrols looking for smugglers but the remaining smugglers work around them or bribe them regularly. You shouldn’t have any difficulty

with them.”

“Sounds good,” Spectre nodded. “We’ll head out in the morning.”

“I suppose the public works projects didn’t extend this far,” Sonnet stated with some distaste as they walked through the poorer side of Ciudad Gris. They’d parked their vehicle inside the shell of an abandoned house and were walking the last few kilometers to the concealed tunnel entrance on this side of the mountains.

“It would appear,” Spectre agreed amicably.

“Lot fewer people here. And who could blame them?”

“Every city has to have a poor side. Otherwise, there’d be nothing to compare it against. The nice side just wouldn’t have quite the sparkle.

“That’s a load of tripe,” Sonnet replied indignantly. “The nice side of town does not require other people to be poor just so it can look better by contrast. It is nice because people work hard to make it nice. They spend money and time on infrastructure and on maintenance. And the purpose of such areas is to provide a nice place for one’s family and friends to live. It is not to make other people look bad by comparison.”

“So, you’re not really a fluff ball at all. You just pretend to be from time to time.”

“You are an asshole.”

“I agree with you Sonnet. He is.” The mercenary woman stated as she began taking notice of her surroundings. She was not liking what she was seeing but for different reasons than Sonnet.

Spectre’s smirk was plainly heard when he said, “Thank you both ever so much.”

“Enough of that. What are the drones showing you?” Mags asked with a frown. “It’s too quiet

here. She's right about her earlier statement. There were not enough people here. Now, there's practically none. Where did all the people go?"

"Frightened away by the sight of three armed mercenaries maybe?" Spectre suggested as he looked more seriously around the area.

"Not likely," Mags snorted.

They were halfway across a deserted intersection when a man called out, "That's far enough. Stop right there."

"Preston?" Mags responded, obviously surprised. "Preston, is that you?!"

"Hello Mags," an armored man replied as he stepped out onto the sidewalk across from them. Well over a dozen heavily armed and lightly armored mercenary troopers stepped out from various doorways up and down the street. "It's good to see you again."

"I wish I could say likewise but I'm getting the distinct feeling that this isn't a social call."

"Maybe we can turn it into a social call," he suggested, lifting his visor and thus revealing the grinning face of a man in his late twenties. "You give me the girl, we go to a quick meeting, and then the two of us fly off to a certain ski resort again. We had some good times there. With the money I'm getting paid, we can buy the damn place and retire."

"Mags?" Spectre asked with a scowl in his voice. "Who is this guy?"

"This is Preston Scofield. More commonly known on the mean streets as ColdStriker."

"Is he supposed to be famous somewhere?"

"He's fairly well known in the New York Federation," she replied with a shrug.

"Why are you here?" Spectre asked the other mercenary.

"Come now," ColdStriker replied, gesturing vaguely with his automatic laser rifle. "Let's not play games. I'm here for the girl. Give her to me and we all walk away safe and sound."

"We don't have any girl. There's just Mags, Sonnet, and myself."

“Spare me your feeble lies. I went by Mags’ apartment. Guess who’s DNA I found there? None other than that belonging to one Charity Lynne DeValas. Charity, walk towards me or my people start firing.”

“Who’d have thought it?” Spectre asked, turning slightly to Mags. “The *drone won.*” On his visor a clarification query for Drone One appeared. His control software wanted to be sure that the command it heard was not simply part of a sentence that did not pertain to the armor or any of the various sub-components it controlled like the remote drones. “*Yes,*” the mercenary continued, activating the Command menu. Turning to face the man, he asked, “How in the hell did you *acquire* our location?” The drone’s auto-targeting information displayed across his vision. He turned back to Mags, “You know, it’s hard to believe. *Next,* we’ll be ambushed by children.” The cross-hairs moved to the next target the drone had acquired.

“You wound me deeply,” ColdStriker replied, with a fake grin. His eyes were cold though as his voice turned serious. “And if you’re not careful, I’ll return the favor - with a hail of laser fire and bullets.”

“We don’t need heavy weapons,” Spectre mimicked Mags’ voice back at her. “*Next* time we bring the heavy guns and your delicate sensibilities be damned.” The cross-hairs advanced to the next target. “No, better yet, *next* time we bring more people.” Another target advance.

“You are such an asshole,” Mags replied, shaking her head.

“We still think a lot alike,” ColdStriker told her seriously.

“You are too,” she growled at him. “I can’t believe you’re trying to horn in on my mission. It’s not what friends do to other friends.”

“Business first,” he countered. “Wasn’t that your motto? And face it Mags, my mission pays a hell of a lot more than your mission. Join me. Live the good life for once.”

“You are such an asshole,” Mags replied.

Spectre asked her, “You think you can take the one’s to the right and behind us?”

“Of course I could but what would be the point? They still outnumber us greatly?”

“You are such a tease!” he declared loudly. “First you *fire* off about how you want action.” A mercenary at the rear suddenly dropped back inside the doorway he stood in. Dead from a laser blast to the chest. “*Next* you *fire* off about how much you enjoy shooting.” The next mercenary up dropped dead as well. “Yet here we are and you don’t see the point! I can’t believe you can stand *next* to me and not see it.” Cross-hairs jumped to the next mercenary. “Well, the point is that we’re heavily armored. This provides good protection against enemy *fire*.” The lightly armored mercenary who’d been unfortunate enough to have the drone target him dropped dead in the street.

ColdStriker heard the sound and turned slightly, “What the hell?”

The time it took him to turn his head back towards his captives was almost equal to the time it took Spectre to raise his laser rifle and aim it at the other mercenary’s open visor. Preston’s eyes widened a split second before the blast struck his forehead, killing him instantly.

“*Assault mode*,” Spectre called. “*Autofire!*” The drone began choosing and firing on targets one after another in quick succession. He grabbed Sonnet’s arm and started running forward even as he switched his rifle over to automatic and began blazing away one-handed with the rifle. Opposing mercenaries either dove for cover, they died, or they received ghastly wounds - caught flatfooted wearing armor that couldn’t stand up to the firepower being used against them. A counter-attack most of them never imagined could happen with their superior numbers.

Behind them, Mags turned and charged one group of surprised mercenaries even as she threw the little grenade from the train station at those on the opposite side of the street. Mercenaries who stood their ground were the first to be burned down by her laser fire. Those who flinched became secondary targets, those who ran, tertiary. It didn’t take the seasoned mercenary long to work her way around to the tertiaries.

Sprinting the other way under increasingly heavy fire, Spectre and Sonnet dove into the open bay of an automotive repair shop. Both rolled up and took partial cover behind the walls of the garage as bullets and laser blasts ripped apart the little garage. But the drone continued shooting from high above and this began drawing the mercenaries' attention away from them and toward trying to find the sniper that was taking such a toll on their numbers. With a quick look at each other, Spectre and Sonnet swung halfway out of their cover and began returning fire. The quiet whine of the automatic laser rifle all but drowned out by the roaring of the shotgun. Receiving fire from three directions at once, the smart enemy troopers fled through the back of the buildings they stood before. Others tried running down the street and died in their desperate attempt to get away.

*"Drone two, ascend 500 meters. Scan. Mags? You okay?"*

"I'm good," came her reply over the radio. "Couple of armor hits but no real damage. Outta targets though. You got any left?"

"I'm scanning now but it looks like they're all bugging out. You need anything off your boyfriend before we go?"

"Was that supposed to be funny?" she growled with a heavy thread of anger running through her voice.

"Do you want to search the body or not?" he asked.

"I suppose there might be a clue on him as to who he's working for and what their plans might have been," she replied sourly.

"That's exactly what I meant," he lied.

Spectre reached the body first and with a quick look at Mags, closed the helmet visor, hiding the gruesome remains of the man's face and head with the chromed screen.

"Looks like I wasn't the only one who took some armor hits," Mags stated, looking the other two over quickly as she knelt down next to the dead mercenary leader. "So, Preston, what brought you

to this little part of the world?" she asked the corpse as reached over to undo his equipment belt and to search the various compartments built into his armor.

"Dammit," Spectre sighed. "Why couldn't I have asked him how he knew where to find us? While he was still alive that is."

Mags disconnected ColdStriker's suit computer from its armored housing. "Maybe this will tell us."

"You know how to hack one of those?" Sonnet asked.

"I've done it a couple of times before," the mercenary woman replied absently as she looked through the various pouches. "And thankfully, it looks like he brought along the gear for doing just that. Apparently, he was prepared for alternate scenarios."

"Give it to me then," the other woman told her, holding out her hand. "I provide the network security for my father's businesses. I also do a little hacking on the side. If he's got the gear there it looks like he does, it should be a quick peel."

Mags turned to Spectre who shrugged.

Having removed the last of the dead merc's gear, Mags followed after Sonnet, who was already busy plugging some of the other equipment into the suit computer she'd received. Without paying any attention to her surroundings, she trailed after Spectre. He slowed until the other two had caught up with him.

"I'm sorry about your friend," Sonnet told the other woman, not looking up from the computer gear while she spoke.

"I appreciate the thought but don't mention it again."

"Okay."

Looking at the city layout on his visor display, Spectre told the women, "We're about a click and a half from the...." The rest of his statement was drowned out by the roar of a large caliber

machine gun firing at them from within a shop ahead of them. Moving almost by reflex, he turned and shoved Sonnet down behind the wall of a dried up fountain that had once decorated the wide spot in the street they had been passing through. Explosive rounds ripped at the two mercenaries' armor as he and Mags followed Sonnet into cover behind, and in Mag's case, inside the fountain.

"Dammit!" Mags yelled, rolling up behind the fountain's center piece. "You two okay?"

"Fine," Sonnet replied, a little breathless and sounding scared. "Who's shooting at us?"

"Lovely. I'm just laying around enjoying the view from back here," came Spectre's reply.

Mags held up her rifle a little over the fountain. Just enough for her to see through the camera mounted under the laser aperture. "Not who. It's a what. In this case an auto machine gun on a tripod. Computer operated. Probably only basic targeting software." The auto-gun opened fire again, explosive rounds sending concrete and plaster from the fountain everywhere. The mercenary woman prudently pulled her rifle back below the top of the fountain. "Got any bright ideas on how to get away from it? I'd guess it's got at least another four hundred rounds. Probably closer to four fifty."

"Yes," Spectre told her unhappily. "I'd been planning to keep this as an ace in the hole though."

"Do not!" Mags began, "I repeat, do not try using that rocket grenade. The auto-gun has got us in the narrow focus now. That means any limbs that come up over the edge of the fountain will likely get removed."

"You hear that Sonnet?" Spectre asked. At her nod, he continued, "Good, keep your head down. No. That's not the ace I'm holding. The rocket grenade is more a king or maybe a jack."

"I'd rather not wait here all day for you to finally decide this ace of yours is worth the expense," Mags told him. "Especially if Preston left other people behind. Or the ones we ran off decide to come check out the noise."

"How'd you know it was expensive?" he asked.

"You don't skimp on your weapons," she replied. "However, you do tend to whine and dilly-

dally when it comes to expending costly ordinance. Whatever you've got, get on with it. We're burning daylight and tempting fate here."

"Oh, you are such a bitch," he complained. "Alright. Get down and stay down. *Drone two, acquire my target. Fire.*" There followed a momentary silence which ended with the shop across from them exploding. Pieces of debris rained down across the tiny plaza, the dried up fountain, and the three people using it for cover.

"Wow," Mags declared, standing up as the dust began slowly settling. "You really didn't skimp. What was it?"

"Self-forming anti-tank round," he replied, sitting gingerly on the edge of the fountain. "Using it can damage the drone though. I'll have to run a diagnostic on it tonight."

"Well worth the expense," she stated. "And you're bleeding."

"Yeah," her ex agreed with a grimace. He changed the display on his helmet and studied the results. "According to my medical signs, it's apparently nothing too bad. Hurts plenty but not too serious. Lost a few chunks out of my armor though. So did you. However, you don't seem to be injured. Lucky you."

"Where did that auto-gun come from?" Sonnet asked.

"I'm guessing this was ColdStriker's fallback position in case things went disastrously wrong for him," Spectre answered. "Fortunately, he wasn't here to join in with it. That could have been nasty."

"Go ahead or fall back to Eduardo's?" Mags asked, changing the subject.

"We press on," he sighed. "I'm sure Eddie wouldn't have sold our location but some of his staff might have. Hell, it could be someone running surveillance on his place that saw us. Or it could be something else entirely. But I'm not willing to take the chance. Let's move."

"We'll need to dress your wounds soon. Until we do, you're going to be leaving a blood trail

Helen Keller could follow.”

“Yeah, I know. Let’s put some distance between us and this place. Go east.”

“That’s not towards our current destination,” Sonnet warned.

“Exactly,” he agreed. “And we won’t head towards it until I’m no longer bleeding.”

“Oh. Smart.”

“Well,” Mags said with a smile in her voice, “he did learn from the best.”

“Oh, please!” Spectre said with a smirk. “Any more of that and you’re going to make me throw up.”

“That’s the last of the shrapnel,” Mags informed him, wiping off the last of the wounds with an anti-bacterial, coagulant gel. Guess what time it is?”

“Oh, that would be my favorite time,” he replied with a rueful frown. Though still more than half full, he went ahead and put in a fresh power cell for his rifle. It didn’t do much for distracting him from the next round of pain that was about to hit. Seeing his example, Sonnet dug around in her pouches, found the shells there, and began reloading the shotgun.

“What are you talking about?” Sonnet asked, determinedly not looking at his bloody injuries.

“Several of these little wounds need staples. Something he already knew. And being the big baby he is, he doesn’t like getting them.”

“Laugh it up bitch,” he grouched.

“Oh, I am,” she replied with an evil smile. When he didn’t reply, she began putting staples into the five wounds where she’s just removed shrapnel pieces. “You’re not going to cry now, are you?” she asked with a look of false concern on her face.

“Any moment now,” he replied with another grimace as she finished.

She wiped the stapled wounds with a quick drying plastic sealant. “Put your armor back on. I’m all done.”

“Good. Your bedside manner is even worse than I remembered and it’s not like I had fond memories of it to start with. Don’t trade in your rifle for a stethoscope.”

“Don’t you worry, babycakes. You ready to go?”

“I sure hope we find someone to kill soon,” he stated unhappily, walking out of the abandoned home and turning in the direction of the concealed tunnel.

“This is it,” Spectre informed them. “The west tunnel entrance. One secret tunnel revealed.”

“Hopefully,” Mags amended.

“Clever of them to build a house over the entrance,” Sonnet mused aloud as the three of them entered the old adobe building. A quick search revealed it to be empty except for the stairs leading down into the cellar. Checking the cellar showed them that the tunnel was indeed here. And that it was big enough for them to walk upright in with no difficulty.

“You know,” Mags began thoughtfully. “If the person who sold out our location also sold them our route, the tunnel system is the next logical place for our opponents to try and pick us up. Assuming they’ve already figured out Preston’s not going to deliver the goods.”

“Or assuming that whoever it is didn’t simply go to the expense of putting agents at all points along our route. Once we’re inside where communications will be dead, we’ll camp and see what Sonnet can find from our little buddy’s computer. *Drone One, recall. Drone Two, recall.*”

“This nightvision gear is cool,” Sonnet stated as they walked the last few meters of the small tunnel. “There’s no light sources for the camera lense though. So how does it work if there’s actually no light for it to amplify?”

Spectre moved ahead on silent feet as he reached the end. To his left he found an opening big enough for a man to move through sideways. He did so and eased his way into the old train tunnel. It became quickly apparent that if one didn’t know where to look, the little side tunnel would never be found. “Come on through, it seems to be clear. And to answer your question, the suits project light that’s not visible to the human eye. However, the camera picks it up and the hardware converts it into the visual image we see on our visors.”

“I like it. Maybe I’ll find some sunglasses that do the same thing.”

“Welcome to the Barrabas Tunnel. And regarding the glasses, you probably could. The smaller you get with this sort of equipment, the more expensive. But I somehow doubt that’s a big problem for you.”

“I do well enough,” Sonnet admitted. “But it’s not like I get to spend any of Dad’s money. Granted, my job does pay well but not much more than what I’d make doing the same thing for a big corporation. My toy and gadget fund may be bigger than some but it’s not so big as you seem to suspect.”

“Fair enough,” he replied. “Let’s find a place to camp so that you can do your thing and find out how those mercs knew where we were.” They walked a few meters down the track. “Mags, scout ahead a bit. I don’t want any surprises and I seriously doubt we’re the only one’s down here.”

“Righto,” she agreed, jogging on ahead of them.

“And keep an eye out for someplace that might work as a campsite.”

“You did mention something about that already.”

“And yet you still haven’t found us a place.”

“I suppose you’ll just have to be patient or go find one yourself,” she replied with a grin in her voice.

“Well, I suppose I’ll try the patience route for the moment. Some dozy tart just committed field surgery on me and it’s lucky I haven’t died of gangrene or something equally gruesome. So, until I’m feeling a little better, I’m putting myself on light duty.”

“Dozy tart?” Mags asked, trying not to laugh. “I’ll give you dozy tart if you’re not careful.”

“Wait until I’m a little healthier. Right now a dozy tart is a bit more than I care to handle.”

“You two are weird,” Sonnet interjected. “You know that don’t you?”

“Oh yes,” Mags agreed with a grin in her voice.

“Most definitely,” Spectre laughed. “Most definitely.”

“There’s a second set of tracks up here,” Mags informed them a half hour later. “It runs parallel to the main tracks.” The three of them continued walking. As the other two reached the point where the second set of tracks started, Mags announced, “The side track splits off and leads down a new tunnel. I’m going to check it out.”

“Don’t go far,” Spectre warned. “If you get too far off tangent from us, we’ll lose communications.”

“Righto,” she agreed.

Thirty minutes found the trio camped in the deserted side tunnel close to where it had been collapsed by a cave-in. Camp meant they were sitting on various rocks and in Spectre’s case eating.

Mags kept watch while Sonnet worked on hacking ColdStriker's computer.

"Hurry up and eat," Mags told him. "I've got something I want to do."

"What's that?" he asked around a mouthful of spaghetti.

"I want to go over the broadcast logs from Tio Jose. See if he said or otherwise did something to give away our location. I couldn't listen to him all the time."

"Umm... yeah," he agreed slowly before returning to eating. "Good idea.... I need to run a series of quick diagnostics on my drone and then you're good to return to historically spying on Tio Jose."

A few minutes later Spectre returned the little drone to its socket, inspection complete. He took over Mags' sentry position and she moved back a few paces and started looking through the bag Sonnet had been carrying for an MRE that sounded less bad than the others.

"Alright," Sonnet announced. "I've got everything hooked up. Now we find out how good the gear he bought really is."

"Let us know when you've found something," Spectre said, moving to sit on a slightly larger but equally uncomfortable rock.

"Umm hmm," she agreed distractedly as she worked on the computer.

Mags began eating and looking over the transmission files the bomb had sent.

"Okay," Sonnet announced a few minutes later, "I'm in. Let's see what we have here...." The young woman looked up surprised. "Well, that's the first time that's ever happened."

"What?" Spectre asked from his watch position.

"I've been asked to peel a computer many times by many different people. In all those times, once I announced it was cracked, I've immediately been surrounded by onlookers who began hovering around me like flies. But neither of you moved. It's... peculiar."

"Find us some answers and we'll be happy to hover for you," Mags replied, not looking away

from her search through Tio Jose's files.

"I hover for no one," Spectre replied with a grin in his voice.

"Okay, I'll get right on it," the network security specialist replied with a smile. "Answers coming right up."

Two hours later, Sonnet announced, "I've finally got it. This guy archived stuff strangely which is why it took so long. Anyway, we've got ultrasonic imaging files from the surveillance drone he used back in Barrington. We've also got audio files that include a fuzzy discussion the two of you had about Spectre's plan for getting me to our target location. Additionally, I've discovered that he was working for Emil Padon... a known agent working against my father and his interests."

"Good work," Spectre told her, still not looking away from the area of his watch. "Can you play the audio file?"

"Sure. There's a lot of static on it. Evidently, they weren't able to get the whole conversation you had. This one's been enhanced a couple of times. And by software that's not on this machine. That means someone else has this information as well. I'll play the file for you through the suits' comm system to minimize external noise."

"That would be good," Mags agreed, putting a hand on the other woman's shoulder as she leaned over and looked at the screen. A long burst of static came across their suit comm units which changed to identifiable words:

"Good plan," came the barely identifiable voice of Mags. "It won't work, but it's a good plan."

"Why won't it work Mags?"

"Three reasons. One, your Spanish sucks. Two, the Barrio Boys control pretty much all of Ciudad Gris. Three is the big one. The Barrabas Tunnel was discovered two months ago and collapsed."

“Dammit,” his sigh turned into a burst of static. When it cleared, Spectre was saying, “...teaching me Spanish. It’s a lot better. The Barrio Boys finally made someone’s list. I happen to know for a fact that most of them were killed and the rest are in hiding so deep they need a periscope to see the sewers.” A short pause and he continued, “But I didn’t hear about the tunnel. All things being equal, I suppose I should have.”

Another burst of static later, Mags could be heard saying, “... the Barrio Boys. The Federales finally got tired of the smuggling. Collapsed the tunnel at three different points. Not much good to anyone now.”

“I need to think,” Spectre could be heard almost whispering.

The loud tone from Mag’s apartment security alarm could be heard before the rest of the audio degraded to static.

“That’s pretty much it, but it seems to have been enough for the merc to find us,” Sonnet deduced, looking pleased with herself.

“We’ll need to be careful at each exit out of the tunnel,” Spectre noted pensively. “And there’s only two civilization points we can go to easily from the tunnel: Villa Rosa and the MVTZ. I suspect we’ll be meeting our opponent’s Plan B in either place. Maybe both....”

“Which changes nothing,” Mags stated, picking up his train of thought and moving away from Sonnet to resume going over her own files. “We were already going to be careful at each exit and already expecting enemies to pop out of the rocks. So basically we continue on, business as usual.”

“That’s what I said,” he replied with a hint of a grin in his voice.

“If we survive this,” Sonnet began seriously, “I want to hire you both.”

“Oh?” Mags asked before he got the chance. “What for?”

“I found ColdStriker’s banking information. I want to zero his accounts. But I’ll need help to

do it. Even, three-way split of the funds.”

“You pay expenses,” Spectre replied without looking around.

“You really are cheap. Aren’t you?” Sonnet asked with smirk.

“Damnbetcha.”

“Count me in,” Mags agreed. “I’m curious to see what you can do with your own bag of toys.”

“You’ll be amazed,” she told her. Her frown turned thoughtful, and she shrugged, “Or completely unimpressed. It depends on how well you know what you’re looking at.”

“Funny how that works for so many things,” Mags replied thoughtfully.

Less than a kilometer past their campsite, they came upon the east service tunnel. Three clicks down the service tunnel showed them the first daylight in what seemed a long time. Before they actually exited the tunnel, Spectre pulled out his aerial drones and sent them out scouting. Once he was sure the coast was clear, the three of them walked out of the tunnel into a partly cloudy day.

“I never was a big fan of mountains,” Spectre told the others as he started down a lightly worn goat path. “I always preferred the ocean. Especially in the tropics.”

“I like the mountains,” Sonnet replied. “Not big on salt water. Too many sharks.”

“Exactly!” he agreed. “And I could use a nice, big shark steak now. Preferably flame grilled and served over wild rice with a nice herb butter melting over the steak. Yes, I am a big shark fan.”

“And that doesn’t even bring shark shooting into the mix....” Mags added with a smirk.

“Now that’s a great sport!” he enthusiastically declared by way of agreement. “You get to shoot and then you get to eat the leftover pieces. Can’t do that with people. Other folks freak out and get all weird when you do that.”

“You have a very dark sense of humor,” Sonnet told him, shaking her head.

“I suppose I do at that. And I further suppose that’s Villa Rosa,” he presumed with a gesture, pointing ahead and up. “Damn, that’s a steep angle.”

“At least it doesn’t appear to be broken anywhere. No apparent gullies, fissures or creeks crossing it,” Mags told them as she telescoped her visor’s camera around the area ahead. “It looks like an easy enough slope. Just uphill.”

“I’m going to send one of the drones ahead to check out Villa Rosa. Make sure the villagers are moving around and acting normal. The bad thing about yonder slope is that there’s no cover.”

“There’s a lot of cover to hide behind on the left facing there,” Mags told him as she continued looking over the area. “Scout it carefully. Give it the full scan your drones are capable of.”

“Will do,” he agreed. He then pointed up ahead and to the left. “Let’s move up to that area there. The rocks will provide cover should it become necessary and it’s on the way.” Without waiting for agreement, he started walking. The other two followed without comment.

“What a lovely little town,” Sonnet declared with a smile they could hear.

“Yeah. It’s just swell.”

“It’s just another indicator that we are that much closer to our target location,” Mag told her. “But feel free to buy a sombrero as we walk through if you have to do the tourist thing.”

“You two are just no fun.”

“We’re loads of fun when we’re not on the job,” Spectre countered. Seeing an unexpected comm antenna in the village, he forwarded them an image of the device and continued, “And we’re not that far away from that time now. Soon, you’ll be able to go back to being a regular merc and can stop

playing decoy. We've still got eight hours until Team Two is scheduled to deliver the real package. In the meantime, enjoy getting shot at and try to restrain any urges you might have to buy sombreros."

"Riiiggghht," Sonnet replied. After a moment, she added, "It will be nice to move on to a nice normal job. One where I get to shoot people instead of just getting shot at all the time."

"That's the spirit," Mags told her with a grin they could hear.

"The path on the other side of the village is going to be fun," he told them, changing the subject as they approached the village. Several of the locals took one look and vacated the area. A few others waited around to see what the heavily armed and armored strangers would do. Spectre walked right on past them. "At one point towards the end, the path follows a cliff. Not too far unless you make a bad step. All the gullies and stuff seem to be on that side of the mountain."

"Do we need climbing gear?" Mags asked.

"I'd prefer jetpacks but that's unlikely and I wouldn't trust anything we found here anyway. So I suppose we at least need some ropes."

"I'll find us some," she told him. "You two move on through the village and wait for me there."

"Glad you could re-join us," Spectre grouched as Mags walked up from the village.

"Patience is a virtue," she responded. "And seeing as how you are almost completely without virtue, you should take the time to cultivate it."

"Maybe I'll look into cultivating some other virtue another time. You took all that time just buying rope?" he asked with frown.

"I didn't say that. Did I?"

"No you didn't," he conceded, still obviously unhappy. "So what were you doing?"

“Finding some real climbing harnesses for starters. The villagers use them for the occasional tourist group that comes by and for archeologists who periodically visit a nearby site where pterodactyl fossils can be found.”

“Your starter material is fascinating,” he told her in a deadpan tone.

The smile in her voice was apparent, “I also found out that the antenna in town is attached to the casa of the village mayor. He moved here recently. In village-speak that means within the last twenty years. It seems that he couldn’t be parted from his futbol broadcasts. So, he had the antenna installed. Occasionally takes large portions of the town on bus trips to see the games when they’re held somewhere remotely close by.”

“Right,” he stated, before turning on his heel and starting down the path.

“You don’t approve of my passive detective work?”

“Not really, no. It left two of us exposed in the open for forty minutes and the information you collected can not be verified one way or another. And regardless whether all that is true or not, the signal could still be tapped and used by all manner of scouts, spies, and operatives to transmit our location. So no. I do not approve of your detective work.”

“Too bad,” she responded, all the humor gone from her voice now. “It would have taken me just as long to get the gear we needed regardless. The explanation came from a pair of talkative locals while we worked to gather up the equipment we needed. It didn’t cost any extra so you can cram it and your lousy attitude right up your ass.”

“Time out guys,” Sonnet called. “Can we not argue? Especially considering your history?”

“Our history?” Spectre asked.

“Of fighting together during arguments as well as your general histories of destroying things during fights.”

He didn’t respond, instead leading them further up the trail leading away from the village.

Thirty minutes later, as they were climbing out of a deep gully, he held out his hand to help Mags. She ignored it and worked to find a good handhold for climbing up.

“You’re right,” he admitted. “I do need to work on being more patient. And I may have exaggerated when I said we were exposed out in the open.”

“Of course I was right,” she stated, grabbing his hand as she climbed out of the gully. “I’m always right. You should have realized that long ago. And did I hear you just make a noise?”

“Yes dammit,” he replied in obvious discomfort. They walked the hundred something meters necessary to bring them to the crest. From here they had a good view of the narrow valley before them as well as the next set of mountains.

Mags pointed down the hill and to their left. “There’s our trail and some good cover. We’ll stop among those rocks and I’ll see how many of your staples popped.”

He muttered something unintelligible under his breath and started out towards the rocks.

“Where’s the cliff we’ll need the ropes for?” Sonnet asked, trying to distract him from thinking about his injury.

“It’s about halfway down the trail,” he replied, his voice once more under complete control. “There’s a canyon down there and our trail follows the lip of it. Our next waypoint is beyond that.”

“Waypoint?”

“Position at which we change directions.”

“Oh. More jargon?”

“Something like that,” Mags told her with a smile.

Ten minutes later found them amongst some very large rocks. Spectre sitting down with his helmet and top off.

“Yeah,” Mags said, looking at the wounds and three blood pockets that had formed between the wounds and the plastic coating. “Looks like you popped five... maybe six staples. From the way the

blood is almost dried, it looks like a couple of them have been open for a few hours.”

“Could be,” he replied with a diffident shrug immediately followed by a small wince.

“You big baby, stop that.”

“Just glue it all together and let’s get on with it,” he countered with a frown. “We’ve got better things to do than sit around here all day.”

“To do that, I’ll have to remove the plastic cover,” she warned.

“Yeah. I know. Just do it.” She did. He sucked in a sudden breath as the plastic covering that she had sprayed on over the injuries pulled at the very wounds it was meant to protect. It also yanked the skin across the area it had been applied to as it was suddenly torn away. He mouthed several things but said nothing.

“If you’ll excuse the commentary,” Sonnet began, “I expected to see more scars on a seasoned mercenary. But you have very few scars and they are all small ones at that.”

“Commentary excused,” Spectre replied as Mags mopped up the blood and glued the wounds closed again. “I know a good plastic surgeon. We both do. From back in our days with the army. Long story short, he gives us a good discount.”

Mags finished and sprayed on a fresh coating of the plastic sealant. “I’m done,” she stated.

“Good,” he replied, pulling his armor back on. “Let’s get moving.”

A short ways ahead Mags contacted Spectre with a typed in request that he switch to a private channel. He changed to the same channel and she told him seriously, “I need to talk to you.” “Go ahead.”

“I’m not picking up the signal from Tio Jose. We’re in the clear and with the satellite bounce I should be getting him. But I’m not.”

“No,” he agreed. “You won’t. I forgot to tell the device we were going into blackout when we entered the first tunnel. It just completely skipped my mind. So, an hour and sixteen minutes into our

subterranean tour, the device activated.

“Boom?” she asked, sounding hopeful.

“Sorta boom actually,” he admitted with a smile of his own. “The device actually wasn’t a bomb. I just wanted him to think that. No, it was really an electrical device powered by two micro H-cells. There would have been a warning tone from the box that lasted a good ten minutes. During that time the device would have tried twice more to contact the chip you’re carrying. On the second failure, it would have discharged the H-cells into him. With the amperage that the box generated, it would have rendered him one crispy critter and probably disintegrated a large portion of his body. Somewhat less splashy than a bomb I thought. The intention was to kill him, not everyone around him.”

“Oh.... That’s nice....” she mused, grinning from ear to ear. “I hope we have footage somewhere.”

“The signal should have been picked up and transferred to my home computer. There should be a set of complete logs there.”

“Alright,” she told him a few minutes later. “Sonnet doesn’t need to know this. I don’t think she’d understand. Let’s switch back and get on with it.”

“You got it.”

“I don’t mind heights with a jetpack,” Spectre declared as he slowly worked his way along the edge of the cliff. “Heights without a jetpack... this is a completely different story.”

“It’s not that bad,” Sonnet told them as she walked along the narrow path. She was careful to keep her shoulder close to the stone beside her and to move slowly and steadily. When the rocks jugged out into the main path, she was careful but precise in the placement of her armored boots and her hand

holds.

Mags brought up the rear moving even slower than the other two. “I’m going to have to go with Spectre on this one,” she said unhappily.

“I don’t know,” Sonnet replied, sounding doubtful. “I think I can see our waypoint now. I don’t think landing there with a jetpack would be any easier.”

“Oh trust me,” Spectre contradicted immediately. “It would be *much* easier. And there’s some loose gravel on the trail here so be careful.”

“Will do. You must be a good pilot.”

“Reckless pilot is what he is,” Mags stated with the hint of a smile coloring her voice. “And he’s not afraid to just fly at speed into an open portal. Which to me kinda proves what I’ve been saying since we were in the army: that he’s not too bright.”

“No doubt about that,” he grouched. “I married you didn’t I?”

“That was one of your brighter moments,” she replied with a grin in her voice. “Fortunately for you, during those years you seemed to gain some intelligence by osmosis.”

“Oh please!” he laughed. A few minutes later, with a great sigh of relief, he reached a wide place in the trail.

“Not so bad, heh?” Sonnet asked as she joined him a couple of minutes later.

“Let’s just say I’d rather not do that again.”

Several minutes later, Mags caught up with them. “I am definitely looking forward to hitting the liquor cabinet after that one.”

“Maybe you’re not so dumb after all,” Spectre suggested with a grin.

“I married you didn’t I?” she countered with a tired smile.

“Okay, maybe you are so dumb,” he conceded with a similar smile.

“Into the tunnel dumbass,” she commanded with a dramatic sigh. “We’ve still got a long way to

go.”

“That’s the spirit,” he replied, stepping into the smuggler’s tunnel. “The liquor cabinet awaits!”

They’d been walking through the darkness of the main tunnel for several minutes when Spectre motioned everyone to the side. “I can see light ahead. And according to my schematic, we’re still half a click away from the service tunnel.”

“I’ll scout ahead,” Mags told him. “You two stay here.”

“Alright,” he agreed with a frown in his voice. “Radio silence. That includes you,” he said, pointing to Sonnet. She nodded her understanding as Mags powered off her suit’s comm gear and moved ahead.

By the time Mags returned, Spectre was almost to the point of having to physically restrain Sonnet from fidgeting. Mags powered up her comm system again and told them, “It’s a small cell of Barrio Boys survivors. Five of them, all lightly armed. Their camp is at some sort of room where power relays are routed or something like that. And speaking of liquor cabinets, they have a case of whiskey which they haven’t touched. I’m guessing they’re planning to use it for trade. There are two sentries ten meters on either side of the entrance to the room. One of the sentries was smoking and the other sound asleep. So far as I could see, no signal detection gear at all.”

“How do you know they’re Barrio Boys?” Sonnet asked.

“Their tats and piercings say it all.”

“I’ve always wanted my very own case of whiskey,” Spectre stated, hefting his rifle and starting down the tunnel again.

“Ahem!”

“My own *half*-case of whiskey,” he amended with a grin.

“Better,” Mags replied with a smirk.

When they were within fifty meters, they could see the sentries quite clearly. To the left the yellow light from the power room stood out in stark contrast. Spectre leaned his rifle against the wall and looked at Mags. She smiled and did likewise. Before Sonnet could ask, both had pulled a knife and a pistol. Via hand signs they indicated she was to remain there. Not one hundred percent sure there was no signal detection gear in the enemy camp, they both powered off their suit comm units and moved silently towards the unsuspecting Barrio Boys.

Two minutes later Spectre told Sonnet over the radio that she could rejoin them. When she reached them, she found that both mercenaries had smears of blood on their armor that had been haphazardly wiped at but certainly not wiped off. Returning their rifles to them, Sonnet tried not to look too much at the bloody corpses.

“Was that really...?” she almost asked when Mags interrupted.

“Yes. It was.”

Sonnet did not further reply.

“Okay,” Spectre began as they walked up to where the west service exit branched off from the main tunnel. “We’re almost there.”

“Thank God!” Sonnet stated with fervor.

“*Almost* being the operative word here,” Mags pointed out.

“Yes,” he agreed. “And this may well prove to be the toughest part of the whole trip. Or it may

be a cake walk. We'll have to just wait and see.”

“So,” Sonnet began slowly, “We watch ourselves, see what happens, and adapt to the circumstances?”

“Exactly,” Mags agreed with a bright smile.

“Quite right,” Spectre nodded. “However, before we continue on, there are a few last minute adjustments that we need to make....”

“I’ve been thinking,” Sonnet began as they followed the two little drones out into the sunlight.

“Yes?” Spectre asked.

“The Mexico Valley Trade Zone is controlled by the Reunification party, right?”

“That’s correct.”

“But we met Reunification federales back in that outpost. Why didn’t we just get them to escort us here?”

“There are several reasons,” he explained as the three of them began walking down the slope towards the massive metropolis before them. “One, they would never have left their post. Two, they might have signaled in our position and you can bet the bad guys are listening very closely to as many comm channels as they can get their A.I.s to monitor... which is pretty much all of them. Three, I don’t know who in the Reunification is working with your father. I only know my contact and the command string to pull up the file on the emergency back up.”

“Okay,” she nodded. “I was expecting something like that.”

“Then why did you ask?”

“To confirm my suspicions.”

“Sure you don’t want to be a mercenary?” he asked.

“Quite sure, thank you very much.”

“That was easy,” Mags told them with a frown in her voice as they got onto a mini-bus leading deep into the metro area. “I thought we’d at least see one of those roving patrols Eduardo mentioned. Instead, there was nothing. Which makes me think *too easy*. And *too easy* makes me itch.”

“Yes,” Spectre agreed. “However, we’ve done all we can. Now we see how it plays out.”

“Is that blood on your armor?” the driver asked as he lifted the little bus off the ground and re-entered the traffic pattern.

“Yes,” Mags stated simply.

“Are you assassins?”

“No. We’re mercenaries.”

“There’s a difference?”

“On the good days there’s a huge difference,” she replied. “On the bad days... the differences are smaller but still there.” The driver nodded his understanding, if not his agreement, and returned his full attention to navigating the heavy traffic.

Thirty minutes later the bus landed at the requested point. In this case, half a kilometer from their destination. After paying the driver, Spectre turned and started leading them through the busy streets.

“What do the drones show you?” Sonnet asked.

“A crap load of people,” he replied with a smirk coloring his voice.

They continued walking for a while. Eventually, he stopped and the two women stopped with

him. “I’ve found our contact - one Hernando Emanuel Francisco Zapata. The scan I’m getting seems to match his physical profile.”

“What about the area around him?” Mags asked.

“I’m scanning through windows and such now. It looks like there are six... no, ten guards. I’m sending the images to your both. Sonnet, you recognize any of these as being your father’s people?”

“No, but that’s not really surprising. Dad has a lot of people working for him. However, I would expect to be escorted very quickly to see Mister Foley or maybe Jannette. Two of our family’s trusted confidants.”

“You have pictures of them you can show us?”

“On my home computer,” she replied as they walked slowly towards Mr. Zapata’s location. “But if I pull anything off it, it’s almost certainly going to get traced here to us. I know if I was watching someone electronically, I’d have their computer comm channels under surveillance.”

“Isn’t there a way around that?”

“Yes, there’s some stuff that can be done with the right combination of enough time and proper equipment. We don’t seem to have either.”

“Alright,” he acquiesced with a shrug. “It’s probably not important enough to be worth the time or risk. Let’s continue on as planned.” They continued walking down the busy sidewalk.

“Interesting,” Spectre stated as they stopped across and down the street from the building where Mr. Zapata waited. “It appears all those armed people are in a Gun Free Zone. The whole building has been so designated.”

“You’re Spanish *is* a lot better,” Mags observed.

“Yes. I think I’m going to change the location of the meet. Give me a few minutes to find a suitable location.”

“Well, here he comes,” Sonnet noted some forty minutes later. The three mercenaries stood in a small, sun-drenched garden located between a ground level parking lot and a boarded up three-story building.

When Mister Zapata’s car had slowly drifted down to earth, he and two body guards stepped out and approached the garden. They were careful not to move too quickly but seemed confident.

“Both the guards have full combat frames,” Spectre informed the other two. There’s also two guys to our left behind the last row of cars in the lot, a guy just inside the front door to the abandoned building to our right, two guys on the roof of that same building, two guys in each of the alleyways immediately across the street, and one who just showed up on the roof of the fifty-story building two blocks in front of us. I’ve got them all targeted and they’re being tracked.”

“I sure hope this works out. I’m ready to go back to being Charity. No pressure or anything,” Sonnet muttered.

Switching to the armor’s speaker, Specter held up a hand. “That’s close enough. And I can’t help but not see the rest of my money.”

“No worries my friend,” Zapata replied. “I have it right here. Miss DeValas, are you alright?”

Next to Spectre and slightly behind him, the woman not wearing blood-stained armor lifted her visor. “I’m fine. How is my father?”

“No worries there Miss DeValas. He’s doing well and awaiting you.”

“I’d like to speak to him.”

“I’m sorry but that’s not possible. Doing so would not be safe for us and it would certainly be dangerous for your father,” he told her sincerely. “Please, rest assured you will be joining him soon.”

“Who will be meeting me?” she asked as they baked under the blazing sun. “I’m assuming that it will be one of the usual people?”

“That’s what is supposed to happen,” he agreed easily. “Considering how hectic everything has been over the past days, I can’t honestly say who’s waiting to meet us.”

“Mags,” Spectre called. “Please be so good as to retrieve our money from Mister Zapata.”

Carrying her rifle pointed at the ground a pace ahead of her, the other woman walked over and retrieved a small case from the well-dressed man. Backing away, she paused to hand the case to Spectre before returning to her place some ten paces behind him. Spectre opened the case and pulled out a large number of large credit chips. He then pulled out a scanner and checked them. After returning the scanner to its case, he poured the credits into an empty pouch at his belt and tossed the case into the parking lot. “Well, everything seems to be in order,” he told them. “The only problem I see is that Mister Zapata is sweating from underneath the facial mask he’s wearing.”

“Well,” Mister Zapata replied with a smile. “We almost did this the easy way.”

“Almost,” Spectre agreed. To the drone hovering so high overhead, he spoke the pre-programmed trigger word. “*Betrayal*. It’s never a good thing.” The man on the roof of the fifty-story building died as the drone shot him in the head. His unused sniper rifle still zeroed in on Spectre.

The two bodyguards began moving towards the girl who pulled her visor down and flipped the automatic shotgun around with practiced ease. Speaking to the stealth bombs she’d planted in the parking lot and building next door before they’d ever called Mister Zapata, she smiled and said the magic word: *Detonate*.” Five simultaneous explosions ripped through the parking lot, shredding cars and instantly killing the two men concealed there before they could fire off a shot. At the same time, the C16 and six smaller devices went off in the basement of the abandoned three-story building next door. The man in the doorway was catapulted across the street along with a great deal of debris. The two on the roof fell before they could fire shots and were then buried in the rubble when the building

collapsed down into its own basement. A strong wind blowing through the city blew most of the dust and light debris from the building away from them.

Immediately, Mister Zapata turned and sprinted for his car even as he began spewing curses in Spanish. Starting at his left, Spectre began moving and blazing away, sending automatic laser fire over the mouth of the first alleyway across from the little garden. One of the men there dropped dead where he stood. The mercenary continued strafing across the area, shooting one of the combat-framed bodyguards before concentrating his fire on and killing the other two men at the mouth of the second alleyway. The big man staggered from the two blasts to his mid-section but continued on.

Just before the two men reached the girl, she opened up with the automatic shotgun. Shooting at the neck of the unwounded guard, she very nearly removed his head before the second big man wrapped his arms around her, picked her up, and ran with her towards the car that was even now slowly moving forward as Mister Zapata leapt into the open back door.

Spectre switched to a one-handed hold on his rifle and then pulled, activated the targeting system, and threw his rocket grenade. Using its smaller rocket motors, it zoomed up into the air. Most of the motors cut off suddenly but when the grenade lined up on its target, the main rocket motor fired. The little grenade crashed through the lightly-armored, driver-side window and detonated its high explosive warhead. The large car blew up, sending flaming debris across an area already covered in burning debris.

Neither Mister Zapata nor the driver made it out of the car.

The big man came skidding to a stop less than three meters from the burning wreckage.

“You can set me down asshole. I’m not Charity DeValas. I’m just wearing a facial mask to look like her. Kinda like your late boss,” Mags told him. “Otherwise, I might feel compelled to knife you in the crotch.” She nudged that area of the big man’s body with her knife.

With a guttural roar the combat-modified guard threw her into the raging inferno that had been

Mister Zapata's car. Taking offense at this, Spectre spun and shot the big man in the head with his laser rifle. Injured, the big man whipped around and was almost upon the mercenary when Spectre fired his taser into the man. The big man dropped to the ground convulsing. Without hesitation, remorse, or a second thought, he cranked up the amperage to lethal levels and the big man burned. Not being one to leave anything in doubt, he fired the laser rifle until he could see daylight through the man's armored skull.

Mags got herself out of the inferno quickly. Spectre helped her remove several burning pieces of car interior that had stuck to her armor.

The whine of a laser rifle on automatic surprised them both. To the left of them, just clearing the smoke field from the car burning before them, the unwounded man from the alley dropped dead, his gauss rifle dropping to the parking lot after firing off a couple of wild shots.

"Good work Sonnet," Spectre told her.

"*Very* good. And thank you," Mags told her with a wince. Looking down at the burn she'd received where her armor had been blown away previously, the mercenary moved quickly to retrieve her shotgun. "Your timing was excellent."

"You're welcome," Sonnet replied, sounding pleased with herself.

"Now let's go somewhere quiet where I can find out who our emergency contact is," Spectre suggested. "I rather strongly suspect the federales might be on their way here so let's get a move on."

"Okay," Spectre began as their limo turned a corner, "that's the Juarez-Sanchez Tower Complex. According to what I found, there are five of those seven story, blue-glass buildings surrounding the central tower which is nineteen floors. The fenced in complex is surrounded by

forested lawns and gardens. There are five outlying security posts at the points of the pentagonal-shaped grounds. Each of those posts are usually manned by five to ten armed guards.”

“You sure found out a lot in a short time,” Charity said with a smile. “I recognize this place from pictures in Dad’s office. He wouldn’t tell me what was going on though. Only that it was something big.”

“Having good sources of information is a must for our line of work,” Mags told her with a smile.

“I suppose it is at that.”

The limo slowed down as it approached the security cordon around the beautiful Tower Complex. Computers in the car and security station exchanged information. The driver received confirmation that all was well and he smoothly accelerated again. Soon, they were parked in the garage atop the central tower.

An older man with mostly white hair opened the limo door.

“Mister Foley,” Charity sighed with relief. “It’s so good to see you again.” The two were about to embrace when Mags stepped between them.

“Mags....” Charity began but was interrupted.

“Mister Foley, if it is you, please tell Charity something you and only you would know.”

The man stepped back and looked surprised, as though he hadn’t noticed the mercenaries before. He then rubbed his chin thoughtfully and smiled. “Charity will know this to be true and will further know how many others are aware of it. Mister Zorro is smart and prefers lots of sugar in his tea while Mister Rabbit knows best and has a secret crush on Sofia.”

Charity laughed, stepped around Mags, and hugged him. “My old stuffed animals and their tea party gossip. It’s good to see you again Mister Foley.”

“And you as well Miss DeValas,” he replied fondly, hugging her gently. “Your father has been

very worried about you. But he knew that the attacks on him were going to be worse. And as usual, he was right. Mister Spectre, I am happy to see you are as good as your word and reputation.”

“And I am happy not to disappoint.”

“Please tell me about your expenses and we’ll settle up. We won’t be here much longer as we’re going to meet Mister DeValas very soon.”

“Dad’s not here?” Charity asked, obviously disappointed.

“No, I’m afraid not. But he’s not that far away either. You’ll see him in short order. I promise it.”

“Thank you Mister Foley,” she replied, giving him another hug and a kiss to the cheek.

“No thanks to me, my dear. This was all your father’s idea.” The computer on the old man’s wrist beeped. He glanced down at it and asked, “Yes?”

An unseen man told him, “Sir, the pre-flight tests are all green. We’re ready to launch now.”

“We’ll be there shortly,” the old man replied with a smile. He then turned to Spectre. “Time to settle up so we can be on our respective ways. And you have our thanks. From the DeValas family and myself.”

“You’re welcome. It was an interesting job.”

Charity gave each of the mercenaries a quick hug. “I’ll be seeing you soon. But not too soon,” she finished with a smile.

“You got it,” the other woman replied with a warm smile.

“Mags will bring the whiskey,” Spectre grinned.

“Cheapskate,” Mags told him, shaking her head which caused Charity to laugh.

Mister Foley paid the second half of Spectre’s fee, the expenses incurred, as well as a generous bonus.

Five minutes later, Charity smiled and waved as the two mercenaries slowed the small car she

had given them to a stop just over the edge of the roof. “You two take care.”

“We will,” Mags replied.

“If you would like to see something interesting,” Mister Foley began, “you might circle around the area. I’d say a three kilometer radius would be enough to provide you with a good view.”

“We just might do that,” Spectre replied. “Good day to you both.” And with that he goosed the little car and it flew quickly away from the tower complex. A moment later the car received notice that it had exited restricted air space.

“What do you think it is?” Mags asked. “This interesting sight? A closeup of a surface to air missile hitting a car?”

“I have no clue,” he replied, slowing down to circle the complex. In this portion of the city, there wasn’t much air traffic so they pretty much had the skies to themselves. As they continued moving slowly around the complex, he said, “But I doubt they’ll betray us. I checked DeValas and his people out pretty thoroughly before I accepted the job. And speaking of jobs, I suspect you’ll be wanting a bonus....”

“Plus expenses,” she confirmed. “Damned straight I do. On top of my forty thousand base fee.”

“Forty thousand?” he asked with a glance at her before returning his gaze to the complex below. “Did you take a head wound I missed? We agreed on twenty thousand.”

“No, you paid twenty thousand to get my attention and to gain access into my apartment. We didn’t agree on a price. And we didn’t do that because you ran off to kill people on the roof of my building when you should have been negotiating.”

Just then the entire Juarez-Sanchez Tower Complex shook.

Spectre stopped the car and the two of them paid close attention. A moment later the large compound shook again... and then began slowly rising. Majestically, the pentagram-shaped complex,

including the forested grounds, continued smoothly ascending. Below the level of the grounds the main buildings reached downward just as far as they stretched up above the grounds.

“It’s a grav behemoth,” Mags breathed.

“Wow,” he agreed quietly. Slowly, the behemoth began drifting to the east. The two sat there and watched until it had become a small dot in the sky.

“Forty thousand,” Mags declared, turning her gaze away from the distance.

“I suppose you do deserve it,” he conceded thoughtfully. “You want me to take you back to your apartment in the Barrington Free Zone?”

“Maybe later,” she replied with a grin. “Right now I want a vacation. I know this cool little island that’s a perfect place for dealing with half a case of whiskey.”

“Do they have sharks?” he asked with a smile as she punched in the coordinates.

“Yes, but most of them walk on the beach,” she laughed.

“That’s close enough for me,” he agreed, setting the autopilot to take them to the island.

“Any idea what the future holds for us?” Mags asked seriously.

“Another day, another mission,” he replied as the car flew them over a mountain pass.

“We’re not as young as we used to be and this was a good payday,” she told him, turning serious. “Have you thought of what you’re going to do later? After the vacation’s over and when the missions all call for younger people. When the rush is no longer enough to fill the empty spaces?”

“Yes I have.” He gave her a speculative look before adding. “I have a project that I’ve been working on. Maybe I’ll let you take a look.” His gaze turned even more thoughtful. “Hell, maybe I’ll let you join.”

“What is it?”

“Later,” he replied mysteriously. “After I’ve had my fill of sun, sea, and shark.”

“Alright,” she agreed after a moment. “That’s fair enough. I...” She paused and gave him a

look that seemed just a touch uneasy to him. Taking a breath, she told him, “I think we should call Devon tonight. Let him know we’re okay.”

“Together?”

“Yeah. Together.”

“I like it,” he replied with a thoughtful smile. “In fact, maybe we should bring him down for a couple of days. And your dad too, I suppose. Turn it into something of a family vacation.”

“Well, I’m not going to let this fine opportunity to pass me by,” she told him as her smile turned into an evil grin. “It’s not often that you offer to foot all the bills.”

“That is not what I said,” he contradicted.

“That is exactly what I heard,” she teased.

“You are the most argumentative woman I have ever met.”

“No I’m not.”

“You most certainly are.”

After five minutes of bickering, the two suddenly began passionately kissing. They arrived at their island destination wearing not a stitch of clothing.

Which should have served as a warning to the island natives that trouble had arrived.