

**Cameroon** – We've been in the bush here for days, waiting on the outskirts of some village I've long forgotten the name of. I am the private op for Gabriel Sexton's Archangel Security Consultants. We're a private security firm headed up by a former CIA agent and we specialize in doing bad things for good people – for money, of course. Just think about the premise for most 80's primetime action series and you've got it. When I'm not doing my private op thing, I'm a relatively distinguished photojournalist. So no matter how you look at it, I make my living running head on into some of the worst environs around the globe. Sometimes I'm carrying a camera and sometimes it's a gun. And whether or not either one makes a difference I'm starting to have my doubts.

No camera for me on this trip though. As it is I have five loaded weapons on my person at the moment and I've never wanted to use them more badly in my life than I do right now. We're here because Gabriel sent us. He got the good word that some of the Boko Haram sympathizers driven out of Amchide have settled here. They've taken over the village, by force, naturally. But that's not the reason for the mercs and the artillery.

Cameroon's highly trained Rapid Intervention Battalion has been working hard to rid the city of Amchide of an infestation of Boko Haram<sup>1</sup> sympathizers. Boko Haram's power base is notoriously located across the border in neighboring Nigeria. In seeming contradiction of this fact, although not necessarily ironic, many of the terrible crimes against humanity that this organization perpetrates against its own society are planned on the other side of the border. Amchide is the entry point in the well-organized gun and drug smuggling operation that so generously feeds the Boko Haram war machine. So successfully has Boko Haram beaten and bullied the local population into submission that it has become harder and harder to distinguish peaceful villagers from blood thirsty killers-in-waiting. But I may be getting ahead of myself.

Maybe you've heard of this and maybe you haven't. Maybe you give a damn and maybe you don't. But at some time during the night between April 14<sup>th</sup> and April 15<sup>th</sup>, members of a radical Muslim separatists group in Nigeria, calling itself Boko Haram, stole into an all-girl boarding school in Chibok, Nigeria, and kidnapped 276 teenage girls. Some were able to escape. Many were not. Intense external pressure has forced Nigeria's president to accept

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<sup>1</sup> Which loosely translates to: "Western education is sin"

outside help in locating the kidnapped girls. Several countries have sent advisors and even the US is conducting drone surveillance from another neighboring country, Chad. Me, I'm in Cameroon. So you may be wondering why I'm here in Cameroon with three men I barely know, near a small village twenty-seven miles away from Amchide.

I've now seen it for myself that they have over a dozen of the kidnapped students with them; apparently bride gifts from Boko Haram as compensation for a job well done smuggling weapons into Nigeria for them. The reason Gabriel sent in two sniper teams is that stealth and surgical precision are required. With the eyes of the world focused on this region, civilian casualties would mean an international incident. So here we are, waiting and identifying our targets carefully so we can be ready to drop the hammer at the right time. In the meantime the things that we've had to allow to happen are starting to keep me up nights.

I'm used to working alone so I don't confide much in the others. They're good guys, but this isn't a counseling session. While you have to categorize all of us as mercenaries on this job, don't expect to find any of the snarling, money hungry, violence-for-pleasure psychopaths you've seen in the movies.

Acting as spotter for me is Billy Haniford, a rich WASP from New York City that I haven't completely figured out yet. He's a good shot though – for an Army guy. It's too bad he never applied to a sniper school. Billy signed up to be all he can be at twenty, to get out of the alcoholic, drug-addled social environment that was slowly killing him at the time. He was honorably discharged from the Army as a Sergeant after hitting his high year tenure<sup>2</sup>. That means he was basically coasting, so my guess is that he wanted to hide in the military while trying to avoid any real responsibility. But if that were the case, how did he end up here? Like I said, I just haven't figured him out yet. And I still don't know his connection to Gabriel. I don't know why that bothers me.

The other team is a little easier to nail down. Tom (Reese) and Jerry (Coughlin) were a sniper duo back in the first Gulf War and have been friends ever since. They worked with Gabriel a couple times back then, so when he approached them with this mission, they jumped on it. They're Marines, like me, so they've got that in their favor. They're at least ten years older

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High\\_Year\\_Tenure](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High_Year_Tenure)

than me and not exactly in prime condition, but whatever either of these two lacks in physical prowess, they more than make up for in skill, balls, and sheer will power. When I say these dudes are tough, I'm not kidding. In each of their iPods you'll only find Metallica and Trace Adkins, (they call it their Macho Man Music). These guys are really quiet too. But then again, they primarily communicate in sign language. Jerry is a hunting man from Alaska, just outside Anchorage. Tom is a Midwestern tough guy out of Cleveland. Two men couldn't be more dissimilar and alike at the same time. They left the desert tour business they run together in Dubai to help Gabriel. I don't know if I'd call that "going native," but I guess the desert is a very special place for both men.

It's been four days since we reported the acquisition of actionable targets and still no kill order. The issue is most likely some red tape bullshit, the kind of stuff that frustrated Gabriel the most when he was with the Company. Political nonsense is exactly what inspired Gabriel to found Archangel Security Consultants and even continue to put his own life on the line as a private op. In fact, he did almost give up his life for the cause. After that he brought me in, but he continues the mission any way he can. Still, I think he's working with some people who remain on the Inside, so he has to play by their rules. But out here, in the shit, we don't.

Jerry Coughlin and I stalk into the village just after 2am. Billy Haniford has my rifle so he and Tom Reese can cover our collective back. The hit list has eight priority targets and three more persons of interest that will be eliminated if possible. We expect to be able to take out all eleven under the circumstances. And by circumstances, I mean the M9 bayonet (standard issue during the Persian Gulf War) that Jerry is carrying and the Warcraft Tanto<sup>3</sup> currently in my possession. I'm a little more particular about my cutlery. Snipers aren't supposed to be into knives. That whole concept of shooting people from afar is counterintuitive to hand-to-hand combat. We all learn knife skills in basic training, but once you graduate from a sniper school a blade is basically relegated to "sharp utility thing." Jerry is a hunter so he knows his way around a pointed object. I got into blades after leaving the Corpse - because of a book.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.coldsteel.com/Product/13TL/Warcraft\\_Tanto.aspx](http://www.coldsteel.com/Product/13TL/Warcraft_Tanto.aspx)

One of the last things my grandfather gave me before he died was an original copy of "Arte Dell Armi<sup>4</sup>," a sword fighting manual written by a sixteenth century Italian fencing master, Achille Marozzo, who also happened to be my namesake. Despite my grandfather being a very peaceful man, the long tradition of military service in my family ended with him. He served his time admirably but refused to allow my father to join, instead cultivating a love of the arts in his son that would eventually lead to my father's career in Hollywood. Still, my grandfather loved military history and was fascinated by the men that shaped the world around them through violent aggression. I can only assume that the topic interested him so much because it was so diametrically opposed to his own nature. I quickly learned to identify Achille Marozzo as a pioneer, an artist, and a deadly tactician. I was hooked. Seven years ago I went to Italy to study with one of Marozzo's distant disciples. During that time, I also started to learn my way around a camera but, with the sword fighting techniques, all the moving parts were my own.

This village is quite small so the fact that the targets are spread out is of little consequence. We have no name or history for most of these men, but what we have witnessed since arriving here has made it easy for us to determine who must die. Billy and Tom divvied up the eight primary targets by proximity so now Jerry and I are on our way, moving in for the kill.

"Let's reach out and touch someone," Jerry whispers with a wink.

In another place or time I may have found that disturbing but not tonight. My first target is a man who I have seen violently mistreating the people who inhabit this place, routinely doling out beatings for the smallest of infractions. He is cruel and unworthy of the quick death he gets when my 7.5 inch blade plunges into his heart while he sleeps. He has no captive wives to free so I move on to the next bed.

I have watched this man sleep uneasily for several nights. I don't know if its guilt or gas but his immortal soul is not what concerns me<sup>5</sup> at the moment. He treats his two wives like less than servants. When one attempted escape he was able to capture her. But then he beat the other savagely, forcing the girl who tried to flee (as well as me, Billy, Tom, and Jerry) to watch. I cut his throat quickly but with such force, combined with the

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<sup>4</sup> <http://mac9.ucc.nau.edu/manuscripts/marozzo.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> I'm not Hamlet after all...

remarkably keen edge of the blade, that I nearly sever the head clean off. His wives have not been disturbed so I move on with my bloody work.

The next man, like the first, has no wives but is the most perverse of the bunch. He likes to wake people up in the middle of the night at gunpoint, and force them to “perform” for him. Once he made a young village boy masturbate in front of him. During another encounter, an elderly couple was made to fondle each other as he looked on. I jam my knife into his windpipe; his body jerks and bloody foam gurgles up from his mouth. His eyes open wide with surprise before the eyeballs roll back and his body is still again.

My last primary target is actually the man who has earned the most trophy wives of the lot, with six. This leads me to believe that he is relatively important. Luck of the draw is all, but still, bragging rights is kind of a big thing with my kind. Truly understanding the term “unspeakable,” I have no wish to repeat the things I have seen this man do to his wives. Young Billy Haniford recognized him as a footballer who once played for the Cameroon national team as well as some Spanish League team, the name of which I’ll be damned if I can remember. This guy was too arrogant, even for Spaniards, and too selfish for his national teammates and coaches to tolerate, so ended up out of professional soccer after a short career. Now he’s a terrorist thug on the run, driven off by his own countrymen for a second time. I drive my Tanto into his chest and the deed is done. But I can’t help myself from lifting it and jabbing the blade into him over and over again. I don’t even bother to count the number of times I repeat this. And then everything goes black.

When Jerry drags me away from the body, he holds me for a moment, which feels like an hour, while my mind races from one thought to the next at a breakneck speed. Eventually I regain my consciousness and Jerry let’s go, patting my shoulder. No words are exchanged between us but that small gesture, oddly, is enough. It feels more comforting to me than anything else he could have done or said. Still, I just can’t shake the feeling that, in some way, I will never be the same again.

Back at the rendezvous point I learn that we have taken out all eleven hostiles. Even Billy got a notch in his belt. No one mentions my episode as we pack up. We’re all just too tired to do anything more than go through the motions. There’s no victory celebration either because, honestly, after what we’ve all seen and done, there are no winners here.

Later we part ways with Billy, who has decided to stay and wait to escort the girls back into Nigeria. Waking the girls in the middle of the night would have been a mistake. These poor girls, already robbed of their innocence, don't need the images of our grim appearance to add to the collection of woes they've endured the last few months. I don't envy them having to wake to the slaughter we've left behind, but they will have their freedom and perhaps take some solace in the death of their kidnappers. Still, the same events that will haunt their sleep for the rest of their lives will likewise be the stuff of my nightmares for the rest of mine.

**Bangladesh** – “I've crossed a line, I know that much. But whose line is it anyway?”

Sitting by Nancy Pierce's bedside in a third-world hospital is a surreal moment, even though I have been out of Africa for almost two weeks. It wasn't supposed to be like this – her lying here with her eyes closed so serenely while machines beep and buzz all around. This is the moment in my life when I need her the most, but someone did put her in the hospital. So here I am, having the conversation that could have been. She hasn't stirred once since I entered the room. I couldn't get an update from any of the staff here so I'm completely in the dark as to her status. It doesn't look good and I'm starting to panic.

Before I left for the mission we had talked about meeting up in India. This is something we do often, given the likelihood of us both winding up in the same trouble zones because of our occupation. Obviously that wasn't the situation here, but I tend to take every opportunity I can to meet with Nancy. She's beautiful, intelligent, compassionate, and as tough as a two-dollar steak. While those traits may describe many women in the Nurses Without Borders organization, there is so much more to Nancy Pierce.

Nancy was raised in Washington DC and Tennessee, traveling back and forth between her estranged parents' homes. In DC she saw how her mother embarked on a successful medical career after leaving her father. This is also where she picked up her mother's love for Pikesville Supreme Straight

Rye<sup>6</sup>, which I do believe makes them the only two Black women in the United States (likely anywhere) who drink it. Going to the slums of Memphis to spend time with her father, who struggled mightily in his career as a studio guitarist, kept Nancy grounded and refined her appreciation for music. The woman can play a piano like a demon but sought out a more tangible career than that of concert pianist. Though, when her rugby achievements took a toll on her college grades, Nancy just switched from Pre-Med to nursing. Nobody puts Nancy in a corner<sup>7</sup>.

“I know I’ve done the right thing and for the right reasons, even if that thing was killing sleeping men without orders to do so.”

Over the years I have taken many lives, and expect that I’ll take more before I’m through. I have even worn the dead like a badge of honor – nine confirmed kills while in the service and so on<sup>8</sup>. As I said, snipers are a proud bunch. Where else in the modern world do you find people who make such sport of killing other people? Put plainly, I am a hunter of men.

“And do you know what? Stalking prey is not unlike becoming one with the prey. I must learn my target’s movements well enough that I can predict them. I become like my prey in order to destroy him. Working with Gabriel has only introduced a whole new level to this insanity. I go undercover, meet people, get to know them, ultimately use them, and then I just end up killing someone anyway. Killing from afar is rather easy. I pull a silent trigger and someone somewhere dies. That’s it. Do I witness this death? Of course I do. Still, there is a real disconnect. Going on these adventures is far more personal, just like the killing.”

I pause for a moment as it sinks in that this may be the only time I ever tell Nancy anything close to what I do besides photojournalism. This idea is completely ludicrous though. As disarmed as I am when around her, as my best friend, it is beyond difficult to have secrets from her. Should she be anything more than that it would be impossible to hide. I don’t like the slippery slope these thoughts are going down. So, enough about me, let’s talk about you.

“I got word about where to find you from a Dr. Callahan, an Englishman. He seems pretty intense, good looking though. He told me that the two of you were having lunch when a building came down just a block away.”

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.heavenhill.co.nz/prod01\\_copy\(4\)1.htm](http://www.heavenhill.co.nz/prod01_copy(4)1.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Yes that’s a Dirty Dancing reference – deal with it!

<sup>8</sup> Since then, I’ve stopped counting

Part of me does wonder if he's the reason there's no 'us.'

"Obviously being who you are, both of you immediately ran toward the chaos. I must say, it was probably quite the accomplishment, given the likely multitude running away from it. But there you were, helping victims, separating the living from the dead and dying. You couldn't have known that there'd be just one more wall to give right in your vicinity. Still, knowing you, I'll bet that even with hindsight, you wouldn't have done one damned thing differently. And that is only one of the reasons why I love you."

"You what?"

"Jeezus!" Dammit.

"Did you just say you love me?"

"I thought... B-B-Because you were just lying there with your eyes closed when I came in. I-I just assumed..."

"What, did you think I was in a coma? You should know by now that I'm made of tougher stuff than that."

"How long have you been awake?"

"Long enough. You said you love me."

"Oh that! Well of course I did. You're my best friend. Of course I have love for you."

"That's not what you meant and you know it!" Then she makes with the Claire Huxtable face, against which I'm powerless. See, a slippery slope indeed.

"Fine. You're right, it's not. I do love you. You are the best friend I have ever had and I can't imagine my life without you in it."

"Ashiel, I don't know what to say. I had no idea--"

"Well that's answer enough isn't it? Look, don't worry about it."

"That's not fai--"

"A photographer friend of mine helped pull you out. He spent the day snapping shots and assisting where he could; and got some really nice ones of you before the second collapse. I got in touch with him when I couldn't connect with you," I get up and start riffling through my bag to find the photos. In my periphery, I can see that Nancy is upset but, dammit, so am I. She's letting me have my space - for now. The photos really are amazing. Iconic stuff. I've already seen a couple on Reuters.

"I recognized you while helping him develop photos from that day. It was the damndest thing. He gave me copies and signed the back of each. Here, you can have them all. I framed my favorite one."



And with that, I'm ghost like Swayze. I'm sure she said thank you but I wasn't even around to hear it.

Storming out of the hospital like a petulant child, I inadvertently collide with two men attempting to enter. One hits the ground. The other hits me. A sucker punch right to the gut doubles me over. But I don't go down. Standing over me is a very large Sikh in a black suit with a black turban. But all I see is red. I charge him, driving him backwards out the doorway and spilling him onto the street. I'm about to hit him with a Bondesque one-liner when I feel a tap on my shoulder followed by a fist on my jaw. That got my attention. I'm about to lash out with a mule kick when I hear my name.

"Hammond?!"

It's Younes Lalwani, an Indo-Moroccan gun runner who befriended me in Sharjah while I was on a mission<sup>9</sup>. He helps me to my feet and introduces me to his bodyguard as I dust myself off.

"Ashiel Hammond, this is Himmat Singh. I'm sure you can infer as to our relationship."

"Yeah, I think I've got it. He's your hairdresser." That comment elicits a pity chuckle. I really don't even deserve that much. But Younes claps me on the back.

"What are you doing here? Oh wait! Are you working on this case as well? You know I should not be surprised by this at all. You are a very honorable man."

At this point I don't even have the heart to tell him I have no idea what he's talking about. Before I know it I'm being shuffled back into the hospital and swept down a hallway past several police officers.

"Where are we going," I ask.

"We must speak with my good friend, Inspector Sandeep Aurora. Two days ago he told me that there was something suspicious about the building that collapsed the other day. He also said that there was a possibility that I am

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<sup>9</sup> Read "Entropy" for the thrilling backstory!

involved. The next thing I know, I am told to come visit poor Inspector Aurora here in the hospital.”

“You suspect foul play?”

“I most assuredly do! Sandeep told me that he was concerned about a cover up. I think his concerns have been confirmed! A very timely accident he had indeed!”

“Yeah, it doesn’t sound like a coincidence to me either. Is Inspector Aurora okay? Can he speak?”

“We shall soon find out.”

When we get to his room Inspector Sandeep Aurora is laid up in traction like some sort of Merry Melodies cartoon. He basically looks like microwaved hell. His face is swollen and his jaw wired shut. Well, there goes that lead.. Minutes later, we are in the back of Lalwani’s car as Himmat deftly navigates the streets of Dhaka. This is no small feat as the roads are clogged with rickshaws, auto rickshaws, scooters, and anything else on wheels that you can imagine.

Before long we’re at Mermaid Gallery Cafe enjoying great chai. Correction – Younes and I are drinking chai while Himmat is having bhang, a tea he made for himself at the table using an herbal blend that is mostly marijuana. This is most definitely illegal but no one in the restaurant seems to be in much of a hurry to condemn a Nihang Sikh<sup>10</sup>. He can drink all the weed tea he wants wherever the hell he wants. Younes has chosen a more traditional, yet oh so modern, delivery method for his herb. He’s smoking his top of the line Atmos vape pen. Back in Cameroon we smoked a lot of joints to get through the days and, since I left, it has become even more of a habit. As far as coping mechanisms go it’s hardly the worst but I need to slow down. Needless to say, it’s difficult to abstain at the moment.

“Inspector Aurora works in customs for the National Board of Revenue. He has been helping me smuggle materials into the country from India.”

“Materials huh? Well, that makes sense. You think it has something to do with all those newly broken bones of his?”

“I do. But I don’t know how.”

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<sup>10</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nihang>

“Well, when you’re smuggling things across international borders, it’s usually for nefarious reasons. Let’s start there.”

“But that’s just it. I was helping a group of engineers develop new technology for a business venture.”

“And they needed illegal materials for that?”

“No, it wasn’t the materials, so much as the transportation that was illegal. They were working without a grant from a government or a university so couldn’t afford to buy what they needed and ship it across borders. It was Aurora who put them on to me.”

“I see. And what was the project they were working on? Some kind of weapon?”

“Oh no, nothing like that. They were creating a new way to demolish buildings using sound.”

Did he just say what I think he just said?

“Oh hell!”

In about half an hour we’re across town at the warehouse where these young engineering hopefuls have created a device that recently leveled a building. They’re all there when we arrive and it seems like we’re interrupting a very heated meeting. The group consists of three Bangladeshi men, an Indian woman, one male and one female engineer from Japan, and an Australian man who appears to be the oldest of the lot. As it turns out, the man they’ve hired to help them find investors to further develop their SPB has skipped out on them. The best English speakers are the Indian, Ashwati Kumar, and the Australian, Byron Sinclair, so I take them to the side for my own interrogation.

“That fucking cunt Dennis Porter stole our design and sold it to some fucking German cunt before high-tailing it the fuck back to merry ‘ol fucking England,” Byron explains eloquently.

“Tell me more about the German guy. Do you have a name?”

“Porter brought by a potential investor who had a weird accent,” Ashwati explains.

“We thought it was German. Christensen was his name. It was something Christensen. Do you remember, Byron?”

“I can’t remember my own fucking mother’s name right now, I’m so pissed!”

“They’re coming apart at the seams, man,” Lalwani tells me when we get back to his car.

“They tell you about Porter and the German,” I ask.

“That and a little extra. No one seems to trust anyone else anymore. The Bengalese told me that they think the Japanese woman, Hanako, I think her name is, was sleeping with Porter.”

“That’s definitely curious but if she were in it with him, I don’t think she’d still be here. Maybe it is just resentment. Or perhaps she was used. I don’t know, but it seems like Porter is our best lead though.”

“I think you are correct, Hammond.”

“I’m willing to follow him back to England but, just to be safe, you keep an eye on the situation here, including Hanako.”

“Certainly. I will look into a few things here and let you know if she leaves.”

On the flight to London I have some time to relax and go over the details of this case. I’ve managed to successfully avoid calls from Gabriel and Nancy in the process. I tell myself it’s because I want to focus on my work. Yeah, I don’t believe it either.

So it turns out that what our intrepid young engineers were working on is called a Sonic Pulse Bomb (SPB for short). The SPB is a small machine –small enough to fit in a knapsack– containing volatile liquids. The bomb uses ultrasound to cause inertial cavitation<sup>11</sup> in said liquids, and the resulting shock wave is powerful enough to damage the surrounding area without using conventional explosives. In other words, loud noise can now make buildings fall down. It sounded like something out of a James Bond movie, but a very large building did collapse and it is entirely possible that this SPB made it happen. The question is why. Who stands to gain the

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<sup>11</sup> Yeah, I had to look it up too: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cavitation>

most from something like this? Or even, who has the most to lose? Difficult questions. Difficult questions mean difficult answers.

I traveled lightly on this trip, since it began as a social call, but was able to purchase a Glock 18 automatic pistol from Younes - to help with the difficulty. It's the same weapon his bodyguard, Himmat, carries. The Sikh showed me how to use it and I swear he must be the strongest man I've ever met, because he shot the bastard accurately without using a stock. Typically automatic weapons are for the lazy. After all, you just spray in the general direction of your target. You're going to put some holes in some things, one of which, you hope, is your target. With an automatic pistol there is an expectation of control. This is absolutely incorrect because a pistol is so small that the recoil makes accuracy even worse - hence the stock attachment. Which I bought. Eventually I'll be able to discipline myself to use it more effectively without the stock but for now I'm on training wheels. I also got myself a Ruger SR22 because there is no way I'm only going to have this automatic pistol anomaly to rely on. Younes has had a lot of trouble getting rid of these things so gave me two for the price of one.

Obviously Younes and I are friends, but the real reason for the hookup is Ottawa Smith. Smith and I work together sometimes for Archangel SC but he is primarily Gabriel's friend aside from one of the most dangerous men I know. Even at over 60 years of age, he's still one mean motherfucker. He may not be as fast as he used to be, but he can cheat real good. The man loves his weaponry and Younes puts the "art" in "artillery." So ever since I made Lalwani's acquaintance, Smith has been delighted to have someone with whom he can share his passion. They even talk on Skype. Needless to say the office armory (and Smith's personal collection) has grown quite a bit to show for it.

**London** - On the way to my apartment at the Athenaeum I give a listen to Gabriel's messages. Shouting and cursing. He gave me Holy hell. I'd never been called a numbskull before today. In between the profanities and insults, I made out that there was some pushback from the government in Cameroon. It turns out whomever is in charge over there had a last-minute moment of

clarity and decided he didn't want a group of white men killing the Boko Haram fighters. This makes sense. At worst (if we fucked it up) it would look really bad for everyone involved if it got caught up in the global news spin cycle. And at best it's looks like the white man coming to save the day in darkest Africa. None of the messages mentioned anything leaking and I certainly haven't heard any stories break. So the old man is reading me the riot act because I didn't wait for orders and we did the whole Lone Gunmen<sup>12</sup> thing. Well that takes care of that. There's no way I'm going to him with my hat in hand asking for help on this job; which means I can't expect any help from my portly Falstaffian friend Darcy or any of Gabriel's other contacts<sup>13</sup>.

The next best thing to Gabriel's pigeons is Gabriel's daughter. Street is able to get me flight records for the last three days and there is no one named Dennis Porter flying out of Bangladesh and into London within that time period. There are two Christensens though - Mansfield and Anders. The plot thickens.

At the Piccadilly paradise known as The Whiskey Bar (conveniently located within the Athenaeum) I enjoy a glass of Gentleman Jack with a cheese recommended by the bartender. It's a semi-soft cheese called Suffolk Gold that has a buttery flavor and is complimented very well by the Gentleman Jack. Arsenal is absolutely humiliating Aston Villa on the "tele," which is, of course, the natural order of things. This is the Gunners' year and I'm selfishly hoping I'll be in town long enough to catch a match. As far as wiling away the hours waiting for an update on these Christensen characters from Street, this is about as good as it gets. My mind has been swirling with scenarios. Perhaps we're dealing with twin international terrorists like Tomax and Xamot from GI Joe - ruthless industrialists by day and acrobatic killing machines by night. I've got a couple others but that's the one idea I keep coming back to.

My phone starts buzzing. It's Street with a situation report. I leave the cheese and take the Gentleman Jack up to my room.

"You've finally given me something worthy of my talents, Hammond."

"I try not to disappoint. Lay it on me."

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<sup>12</sup> Speaking of which: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0243069/> - great show

<sup>13</sup> Read "Heroic Bloodshed" for more on Darcy

“Of the two Christensens sharing the flight home only one, Anders, has a criminal history. In fact, there is no record of a Mansfield Christensen anywhere.”

“Juicy. Tell me more.”

“Anders is from Copenhagen. There are three arrests listed, starting with a mugging at the age of 14. The next is for the robbery of a neighbor’s home. He spent real time behind bars for a bank robbery at 18.”

“Sounds about right, this is pretty typical fair for a common thug.”

“I agree, but get this, his father is some big shot banker over there. Little Anders was born with a silver spoon shoved up his ass.”

“I guess it’s just proof that Mother Nature does, from time to time, pee in the gene pool.”

“Either that, or pops is nothing but a crook too, just a white collar one.”

“How did someone so young get to be so cynical?”

“You want to talk genetics? Have you met my father?”

“Gabriel is jaded for sure, but cynical, not at all. Face it, little girl, that chip on your shoulder is all your own. But enough about you, let’s talk about Anders Christensen.”

“He served every minute of his prison sentence in Denmark, where he got into a lot of fights – with the guards as well as other prisoners. But after that, he fell off the radar. Then a few years later or, in real time, about three months ago, his name starts popping up as a suspect connected to several cases. Guess where.”

“Do tell.”

“Scotland fuckin’ Yard, baby! And, get this, the new stuff isn’t even in the same stratosphere as the shit he was pulling back in Copenhagen. I’m talking about confidence scams, illegal gambling, and extortion.”

“Racketeering. These are the type of activities you see associated with organized crime.”

“Yup.”

“Intriguing. Were you able to find anything on the other Christensen, Mansfield?”

“Not Mansfield, but Anders has a little brother named Magnus.”

“That’s got to be our Mansfield.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Fun fact for you: when people choose an alias they often can’t refrain from keeping the same initials. I should know – my alias is Anderson Howe.”

“I happen to agree with you, but at least I’ve got something a little more credible than that. Daddy sent Magnus to London for his schoolin’ when he was 16. That was eight years ago. He went to the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David’s in Swansea but I don’t see any record of him graduating.”

“Well played, Street. Anything else I should know.”

“That’s the fun stuff. The rest is on its way now.”

She hangs up and my wireless printer comes to life, spewing pages all over the floor of the apartment. Street is sending me the paper on Anders and his brother Magnus. Given this new information, I have to think that it was Magnus, now Mansfield, in Bangladesh pretending to be Dennis Porter. He seduced the scientist Hanako, and then stole the Sonic Pulse Bomb she’d developed with her partners. The Christensen brothers then used the SPB to level a factory building. Okay, we’re dealing with two brothers – one is a criminal genius just out of diapers and the other is a sticky-fingered career thug. I guess I wasn’t too far off after all.

So it was Colonel Mustard in the study with the pipe wrench. But why? The warehouse they brought down was being used to manufacture clothing for a London-based menswear brand called Bull & Terrier. I have complete confidence that if I pay a visit to the office of Bull & Terrier I’ll find at least some answers.

The next day I’m at the chic Newburgh Street address of the Bull & Terrier shop, being stonewalled when inquiring about whether or not the owners, Jeffrey Saunders and Jordan Lumley are available. I understand. They have a small but growing brand and are making a name for themselves, so can’t appear too chummy with the plebeians. A simple Google search got me their names and it also led me to the fact that they are graduates of The University of Wales, Trinity Saint David. So, yes, while I understand why I’m being given the cold shoulder, I am very impatient to find out what the connection is between these upstart clothing magnates and London’s own Avon Barksdale<sup>14</sup>.

The fashionably red storefront is just on the corner where Newburgh meets Lowndes Court and there just so happens to be a lamppost nearby. With

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<sup>14</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avon\\_Barksdale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avon_Barksdale)



some effort I'm able to climb up and can't help but think about back-in-the-day lantern lighters. It's 11am and all is not well. No bobbies<sup>15</sup> around to beat me over the head with a baton, though among the growing throng of onlookers with their cell phone out, someone is assuredly arranging for them to arrive very shortly. I sure hope my butt looks good on YouTube. With a quick hop I'm standing on the narrow ledge below the second-floor windows. After just a few steps I reach an unlocked window, raise it, and enter.

Please allow me to digress. By trade, I deal in lead, but stealth is one of the most powerful tools at my disposal. I have been trained in the art of death-by-stealth (sorry American Ninja Warrior<sup>16</sup>, but Marine Corps Snipers are the only real ninjas around) so my manner of entry usually matters. By this point, I've been out of the Corps almost as long as I was in it and sometimes you've just gotta say fuck it. Still, I don't like breaking and entering in broad daylight, within public view. Call me old fashioned.

Inside, I find myself in a room filled with fabric, sewing mannequins, and drafting tables piled with drawings. So this is where the magic happens. Under different circumstances, I'd be inclined to take a look around but, as it is, I can't afford to steal a glance at anything. What I am looking for is the door. If some concerned citizen has in fact contacted the authorities, I need to move swiftly.

Locating the door, I open it ever so slightly and listen for noise in the hallway/other room/inter-dimensional portal - whatever the hell is on the other side of it. \*Whew\* nothing but a hallway. The right side of the hall has two doors beside each other, about one-third of the way down from me. There are none on the left side, which ends in a staircase. Venturing a guess, I assume the further door leads to some sort of storage room, as it is likely much larger than the room behind Door #1.

Opening the door closest to me, I stride in casually, expecting some sort of office. An office is exactly what I walk into. There are two antique-looking polished mahogany desks a few feet apart from one another with two chairs in front of each. Behind the desks are large leather chairs that look like they belong in a country club sitting room. The first set of furniture is empty. On the other side of the room are Jeffrey Saunders and

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/70767/bobby>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.nbc.com/american-ninja-warrior>

Jordan Lumley. Jordan is seated in the big chair with Jeffrey draped over the side. The pair looks like they just stepped off a tennis court – from 1921. They sit in opposition to two seated men wearing grey suits.

The younger of the two is wearing a slim fitting 3-piece number with a white shirt, skinny black tie and a white pocket square. The other man in grey has a blue-checked shirt with a black knitted silk tie and no pocket square. The suit fits him perfectly, yet he looks completely out of place in it.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I say, never once breaking my confident gait. “I was looking for the Ozwald Boateng<sup>17</sup> shop, am I in the wrong place? Please don’t get up. Hi Anders. Hi Magnus.” I offer the designers my hand. “Anderson Howe. You must be Jeffrey and Jordan. It’s a pleasure. So, what did I miss?”

“Bloody well lost the plot, this one,” says either the bull or the terrier. I don’t know which because my eyes are locked squarely on Mansfield Christensen.

“He’s about to lose more than that,” says Anders, bolting up out of his seat. This gets my attention. He looks like he can’t wait to take that suit jacket off and beat me within an inch of my life. His eyes say it all.

“Come now, dear brother, you protest too much. Are we not gentlemen? Where have all our manners gone,” Mansfield says coolly. “How might we be of service, Mr. Howe?”

“Well, I’m just curious what all the fuss is about? I mean gentlemen of your ilk don’t just do gallivanting around the world stealing developmental technology to level a building full of people just for revenge on a pair of second-rate shirt makers because of some stolen milk money back in college--”

“Now wait one moment! I won’t--” Jeffrey Saunders says, leaping to his feet in outrage.

I shout at him to sit down and find that my voice is joined by Mansfield’s. We lock eyes for a moment. Apparently he’s not as impressed as I am. Oh well. “But it also seems just as unlikely to be about a shakedown. I mean that’s one hell of a warning to send – especially since it directly interferes with these young men’s ability to make the money you no doubt want in exchange for your protection.”

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<sup>17</sup> [http://instagram.com/ozwald\\_boateng](http://instagram.com/ozwald_boateng)

I meant to only pause for dramatic effect, but decide to just stop talking and let the silence ride out. Ball's in your court, bozos. The turks are stone-faced but the Brits are baffled, exchanging sideways glances with one another and the occasional eye turned toward Mansfield and me. They are both poor poker players. That bodes well for me.

Mansfield finally rises from his seat, buttoning his jacket. Anders takes his feet as well, though his jacket has been fastened the whole time.

"Unfortunately, your timing couldn't be worse, Mr. Howe. We must be off to another appointment. Please excuse us. In our absence, I hope that my friends here will be as forthright with you as I would like to have been."

And, with that, he glides out of the room, holding the door open for his elder brother, who I can tell is fuming. Before making his own exit, Mansfield Christensen turns to set the room ablaze with his piercing stare. I certainly feel threatened and, judging from the looks of my company, they do too.

Once The Christensens are gone, Jeffrey and Jordan gain a semblance of testicular fortitude, basically telling me to piss off, using intimidating words like "police" and "sue" in between more Brit slang curses than I can count, let alone comprehend. The whole thing reminds me of [Darwin Mayflower](#) from Hudson Hawk, threatening to torture the titular hero so slowly that it would feel like a career. These guys are not nearly as brilliant as that, but they are cartoonishly over the top.

It's almost 7pm and these two nerf herders are still on my tail. They've been following me since I left the Bull & Terrier shop and I've taken them to visit the most tedious places I can imagine, which includes three nearby parks. I really thought they'd die of boredom - I nearly did. The sun is going down and I haven't been able to shake them yet. I have an idea, and now is the time if I'm going to pull it off. This has to work, since I really don't have much recourse here.

I head over to Fulham Road, in Chelsea, to a restaurant called Goat<sup>18</sup>. They have a member's only bar upstairs called The Chelsea Prayer Room and I

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.goatchelsea.com/>

happen to be a member. I give the passphrase to the hostess "I'm here to repent my sins," and am directed to a keypad where I enter the passcode to gain entry. And the hostess is more than a pretty face, believe me. I've seen what happens if you enter a wrong code twice. It isn't pretty.

Inside, I think I've earned myself a respite, so make my way over to the bar. But before I can order, a drink is set down before me. It looks to be a vodka martini.

"Shaken, not stirred, ja?"

The voice is one of a smoker who's been at the task for 36 hours or more. The voice belongs to Anders Christensen.

"You are James Bond, are you not?"

"Just a concerned citizen."

"A concerned American, bah," he knocks back a shot of aquavit from a small glass. Admiring the glass while savoring the after-taste, he continues. "It really is a pity. When these private clubs start letting in foreigners, things go to Hell very quickly."

"You don't say? When this is all over, remind me to buy the bank your father works at so I can fire him."

That got his attention. Anders fixes a penetrating gaze on me, then chuckles. I can tell he's doing his best to restrain himself. Why is it always daddy issues with these criminal types?

"You're a funny man, Mr. Howe," he says with no hint of an accent. People from Germanic or Scandinavian countries are often able to speak perfect English, though I am surprised that even an arch-dirt bag like Anders is capable of it. "I came here to wait for reports that you'd been grabbed off the street, yet none came. And now, here you are. You brought yourself to me."

"Yeah, this is all so hilarious. Is this the part where we go into the alley and I kick the shit out of you and your goons? You'll really see how funny I am then."

And, as if on cue, three very large men show up behind me. I can tell they are very large because they're blocking out the light and actually casting a shadow over the bar. Anders hands the bartender a wad of pound notes before he and his burly friends whisk me up to the roof.

Five minutes later the three big guys are down for the count with various bones broken by blows from my knees, shins, and feet. Savate is a French street-fighting martial art that I am quite proficient in. Fights

Like this suit me just fine. I've heard people complain about movies where a group of bad guys stands around while one or two attack the hero. This is because of the belief that it makes sense for all of them to just bum rush the guy. This, of course, makes no sense. If eight guys attacked one man at the same time, they would just end up hitting and kicking each other. These guys tried ganging up on me, which only made it easier for me to take them out. I don't need a lot of room for big sweeping kicks or other wasted movements. Being far more martial than art, Savate is not a flashy style, so close-quarters combat works in my favor.

Now Anders and I are circling each other, neither of us wanting to be too aggressive. He's seen what I can do and so is being cautious. For my part, I know nothing of what to expect so I'm waiting for him to show me something. I'm about to go in for a Chasse Bas kick<sup>19</sup>, when I hear the sound of a muffled gunshot. Anders goes down, stops moving. He's as dead as disco.

The man with the smoking gun steps out of the shadows then proceeds to put holes in each of the three big men until they also stop moving. When he finishes, I greet him with my P-3AT leveled at his forehead. This pint-sized pistol packs a punch. The spring-loaded rig up my sleeve allows me to make a great first impression.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend, eh?"

"So it would appear, old boy," replies the cool, confident voice in the Queen's English.

"And how do I know that?"

"You're still alive."

Fair point there. He got the drop on all of us and could have easily ended me if he'd wanted to. I lower my arm and drop the P-3AT into my pocket.

"Oh good, because I thought you just needed help getting rid of the bodies."

"Well, these chaps are about 20 stone<sup>20</sup> a piece."

"Okay, so we've got a deal. I help you dispose of the bodies and, in turn, you tell me just what the hell is going on around here." The new player in the game is about ten years older than me and he's in good shape - tight skin, good build, and moves well. He must be some kind of former athlete. Maybe he is just taken aback by my American forwardness, but the

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-x0UPhalE>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.metric-conversions.org/weight/stones-to-pounds-table.htm>

man appears to be on pause, as he seems to be making eye contact and looking past me at the same time.

“I’ll just take your silence for compliance. So lay it on me, John Steed<sup>21</sup>. What’s going on?”

After dropping our portly burdens into the alley below, I help load them (rather awkwardly) into the back of their nameless killer’s black Land Rover. Throughout this process he’s providing me with details about the situation at hand.

It turns out that Jeffrey and Jordan are members of a secret society known throughout the college world as the Pregnant Scholars. It’s something like the Skull & Bones we have in the U.S.; young privileged college students are invited to join a billionaire boy’s club with shadowy traditions and lofty aspirations. From what little info I am given, I am able to intuit that this is related to some sort of experiment involving the fashion industry as a new way for this group to gain social prominence.

The long and short of it is that Mansfield wants in to the organization and is trying to blackmail Jeffrey and Jordan to get it. These Pregnant Scholars are in no way willing to let anyone foreign-born join their flock – apparently this is a cloak-and-dagger society only for those who can claim a majority Britton bloodline. Neither are they eager to be drawn into a violent, and ultimately public, struggle with a criminal outfit. And that’s all I am allowed to know from my man, who claims to also be in the KKB. What the hell is the KKB anyway?

I get back to my apartment at the Athenaeum a little before 11pm, and take a lengthy shower before committing to some research on the Pregnant Scholars. Luckily my roommate back in NYC, Tim, happens to be a conspiracy theorist and could be of use in the matter. Dude Junior (Dunior for short) was my spotter in the Corps and lost his sight after my last mission and now he lives with me. So I’ve had plenty of time to hear his rants about the Illuminati, alien interactions with the government, the Gnostic bible, and dozens of political conspiracies and cover-ups as well. After years of his monologues, I have come to question some things but, usually, as soon as something starts to sound legit, the theories turn a corner into fantasy. The fact that we participated in covert operations with the CIA only emboldened Tim in his beliefs. Speaking as a person who does international

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/character/ch0012861/>

covert work-for-hire, I understand that there is a whole world that exists beyond the average person's understanding, but I'm just not ready to venture as far down the rabbit hole as Tim. Still, it's great to have him as a lifeline today.

"What's up, Dunior? Please tell me you're feeding my fish."

"I am."

"Good. Thanks. Now, are you busy? Do you have a few minutes?"

"Yeah, man. I'm just having a Black Mexican<sup>22</sup> and chillaxin'."

"Great. I just need to know if you know anything about a secret society whose members call themselves Pregnant Scholars."

"Pregnant Scholars, huh? Let me think," there is a long pause, interrupted occasionally by the tinkling of ice cubes as my blind roommate sips while searching his memory banks.

"Oh yeah! Yeah, they're heavy duty British cats, man. But they don't really go by Pregnant Scholars, no, they have a Latin name. Of course they do. Fuckin' stuffy Brits, you know, man? Anyway, yeah, they're called Opes Vis. Real heavy hitters, man. They hate Masons and Nazis like nobody's business."

"Well, that's interesting," and as I say the words, I regret them. Now I've opened up the floodgates. I find the comfiest chair in the room and sit down in preparation for a lesson in alternative history.

"Yeah, man, it totally is. You see, these guys were dug in in Palestine at the time, trying to fend off Haganah & Irgun, who were bombing the shit out of the place to get the fuckin' British out. Obviously, they wanted to establish a Jewish state, which they obviously did, so there's that. But you know how it is with these secret societies; they're all about consolidating power and establishing a new world order."

I can just see Dunior pacing around the living room still in his pajamas with his Black Mexican in hand.

"They thought Palestine was going to be theirs for the taking, but guess, what uh-uh. So when things flamed out there, they decided that the next target should be the Soviets."

"What?"

"Yeah man, the fuckin' Bolsheviks. You see, Opes Vis knew that the Nazis were going down soon. Trust me, dude, only Americans think that we're

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<sup>22</sup> The rest of the world calls it a [Batanga](#), but that's Dunior for you...

the reason the world isn't speaking German right now. But I'm not tellin' you anything new, you know the Russians were taking the fight to Hitler hardcore and the fuckin' Reich was scared shitless."

"Yeah, that's about right. But, you know, with the Cold War and all."

"Exactly, man. But, Opes Vis, being a group of sneaky rich assholes, decided to try to hit two birds with one bullet. Knowing that the Nazis feared the Russians as much as they did, OV started propping up a little group called The Free Corps."

I've never heard of this group and as I said before with conspiracy theories, it's always the filling in of my historical blanks that gets me. Besides just because I've never heard of the Free Corps, doesn't mean they didn't exist. But Dunior will explain it all to me anyway.

"These fuckers were British soldiers who fought alongside the Nazis on the Eastern Front. OV figured that if ze Germans did end up winning, they'd be in good with the führer, and if they lost, they could still hit the Soviets hard and early. Long story short, The Free Corps was an utter fuckin' disaster and a bunch of dudes got hanged for treason. But none of them were from Opes Vis of course."

"Of course."

"OV were so pissed at the fuckin' Reich for botching the whole thing, that the bastards even helped Israeli revenge hunters find Nazi leaders hiding out down in South America."

Wow, didn't see that one coming.

"Okay, Dunior, take a breath now, big guy. Damn, that sure was a lot of information you just threw at me."

"Well you asked, man!"

He then tells me to check out a website called SocietyPages.com which is devoted to researching secret societies and is run by a guy who apparently knows even more about this stuff than Dunior. After 5 minutes on the site, I'm on the pages dedicated to Opes Vis. Yes, you read that right, pages. I'll only stick to the highlights, though.

What I find most interesting about this organization is their structure. All members of Opes Vis are identified as Pieces on a chess board, so there is a King Black and a King White, and so on and so forth. They only take on new members when a position becomes available and each Piece has eight pawns below him at any given time. Pawns are the young up-and-comers working to be promoted to a Piece. According to Society Pages "Rooks are the most cunning,



Bishops are the most powerful, and Knights are the most dangerous,” so I’m guessing that my new friend is a Knight. I don’t see any references to the KKB he mentioned, but I’ll leave that part alone for now.

I email a quick update to Gabriel then call Younes Lalwani to let him know what I’ve found out.

“That is most excellent news, my friend!”

“Things have been moving pretty quickly but we’ve got a name and I should be able to peg a location tomorrow.”

“Excellent! I will fly to London tonight and meet with you tomorrow to find out the whereabouts of our young mystery man. But I must ask that you leave this Christensen fellow to me. I helped build that sonic weapon and a good friend is in the hospital because that bastard stole it. No, I must see this through.”

“I’ve got a dog in this race as well, you know. Besides, this certainly isn’t something that I plan to let you go ahead with alone.”

“But, you see, I am not alone. As you already know, my friend Himmat is particularly skilled at being dangerous and I also have some connections in London who will be obliged to help, so you can rest assured that I am not putting myself in harm’s way.”

“At least you can admit that you’re out for justice and revenge. There’s a lot of debate about whether one act can truly achieve both. It’s mostly inside my own head though.”

“Learn your heart, Ashiel Hammond. We will speak tomorrow.”

I have killed for my country as well as for the moral high ground, but I have never taken a life lightly. Anders Christensen is dead. Mansfield Christensen deserves to die. Every time I draw my weapon I must be prepared to use it; because when I do, I literally hold life and death in my hands. It is for this reason that I must always determine if pulling my gun is the best solution to the problem. If I finish this, it would be for all the wrong reasons.

The morning is a good one. I’m skipping breakfast so I can get over to the Bull & Terrier shop early. I need to find out the phone number that

Mansfield Christensen uses to contact them. With that, Street should be able to track down a location.

Suddenly my cell phone starts ringing. It's Street.

"Where's the car? We just got off the red eye and Smith is pretty on edge. Can you believe it? I slipped him three Xanax on the plane and the old bastard is still ornery as hell. We need to get situated in a hurry."

"What?"

"Oh, never mind. I see him. Okay, see ya soon."

"Wait. Wha--?"

She hangs up. What the hell are Street and Smith doing here? And since I didn't call for them I certainly didn't send a car for them. I call Street back but there's no answer. I don't like this. Dashing over to my laptop, I throw it open and go straight to my email. There it is. It's an email from me all right, using all the proper encryptions and everything. It even sounds like I wrote it. The only problem is that I didn't write it. Have I really been hacked again<sup>23</sup>?

Just then the door to my room is kicked in. The human battering ram who took the door off the hinges is followed in by four smaller men. This funky bunch is a bit international - there's a Jamaican with the requisite long dreadlocks, two Koreans, and a right proper cockney bastard from the East End if ever I've seen one. These must be the baddest asses in the crew. I have to say I appreciate that Mr. Christensen deemed it necessary to send his best for li'l 'ol me. Lucky for all of us, though, I'm not feeling particularly feisty. No, in fact, I'm feeling rather cooperative at the moment.

"Take me to your leader," I say throwing my hands in the air. There's a loud sigh from the rotund maniac who knocked down my door. I guess he really wanted a fight. I guess that's why he sucker punches me as I walk by. Once I'm able to breathe again, I slam my shin into his crotch three times and he goes down like a considerably large sack of potatoes. Not exactly avenged sevenfold<sup>24</sup> but it'll do.

Downstairs I am ushered into the back seat of a black Jaguar XJR. One of the Koreans gets into the driver's seat while the other gets behind the

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<sup>23</sup> Read "The Spanish Prisoner" to find out about the last time someone hacked into Ashiel's computer

<sup>24</sup> I don't always seek vengeance but when I do, I prefer it be Biblical.

wheel of an identical vehicle. Ram Man joins me in the back and that's when things get really uncomfortable.

As the car pulls off, I turn to look out the back window and what catches my eye is mind-blowing. The Rasta and the Cockney are wrestling with two other men. It takes only a moment to realize that the two men are Younes Lalwani and Himmat Singh. Singh struggles with the Cockney from behind while using his leg to pin the Korean driver inside the car. Eventually the Cockney draws his gun but Himmat is on him like lightning, seizing the weapon and using it to put two shots in the driver before finally being able to take out the Cockney as well. My driver is in disbelief as he watches the show through his rearview mirror. Meanwhile the fat man is screaming at him to pull off.

Suddenly the car roars to life, leaping out into traffic - quite literally. The driver dashes across two lanes of oncoming traffic from our right and bursts through some small orange and white plastic partitions. This leaves us careening southwest on the A4. As we near the Wellington Arch, I see Singh pull up beside us. He isn't able to ram the car because of oncoming traffic and pedestrians all over the place in the roundabout. This, of course, is not a problem for my chauffeur, who maneuvers through the circle aggressively, missing his correct exit but opting for another - which involves going through a partition and a line of pedestrians, ending up on A302. Singh is able to follow the path of chaos and is behind us in no time. With the Buckingham Palace Gardens to our left, the going is tight, with little opportunity for Himmat to overtake us. He's not slack in his effort but conditions here are a bit beyond his control. At one point, the Sikh speeds past us on the right, prompting my seatmate to unbuckle his safety belt and attempt to shoot out the other Jaguar's tires. When he lowers the window to set his sights, I take throw all my weight to his side. It works as expected, eventually. It takes three tries, but the big man is propelled into oncoming traffic, taking the car door with him. I almost end up as road kill as well, except I'm able to grip the front passenger seat and avoid being dragged to my doom by the big guy.

Then things really start to get scary. As soon as I'm able to situate myself in the backseat again, the driver slams on the brakes and crashes into the car in front of us. We flip over the former car, landing upside down in the lane to the right. An oncoming car swerves left to avoid us but can't quite make it and ends up clipping us, sending our vehicle spinning into a

construction site on the far side of the road. Of course I have no seatbelt on but, fighting every instinct my body wants to operate under, I allow myself to go limp. This way I'm able to prevent fatal damage by going with the flow as opposed to stiffening or trying to do something to counter the car's motion. With the exception of a few bruises and nicks, I make it through okay.

The Sikh pulls me out and drags me away from the wreck. When we get to the street I see that it's his hijacked Jaguar that had stopped short in front of us. It was a reckless and dangerous move, which is exactly why I love it.

"Check the driver," I tell him. If he's alive, he can still lead us to where we were intended to go.

Because this isn't some low-budget action movie, we are able to coax the Korean into taking us where we want to go with relative ease<sup>25</sup>.

I'm now riding with Younes Lalwani in the passenger seat of the Tesla, following Singh in the Jaguar with his Korean tour guide. In between marveling at the banged-up rear in front of us, I can't help thinking about the concept of Brain vs. Braun, which is a typical trope in comic books. I, for one, will never know why. For example, Superman is undoubtedly the most powerful being on the planet while his arch-nemesis, Lex Luthor, is arguably the most intelligent man Earth has to offer. Take, even, the Hulk, a gamma-irradiated monster, fueled by rage, who often finds himself matched up against the Leader, a man with a gamma irradiated super brain. It is always the case that the hero is successful due to the sheer force of his indomitable spirit, represented by his similarly indomitable strength. Why is this? Why do we celebrate physical strength and fear intellectual power? I ponder this, for some reason, though I find myself in a similar fight. I've been outwitted by an opponent who cannot match my physical prowess. I want desperately to be the hero with the big muscles and the bigger heart but, in reality, that just won't be enough.

After a short non-descript drive, we arrive at the huge home that is our destination in Brixton. More specifically, we pull into a gated private driveway on Kings Avenue with spaces to accommodate five parked cars.

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<sup>25</sup> Why are henchmen always so loyal in these movies? I have yet to meet an entry-level thug willing to die for his boss or a job! Criminals just don't operate that way, there is no honor among thieves.

We walk up to the double glass doors and the next thing I know there are two men wearing rubber aprons brandishing automatic weapons, pointing them in our direction. The bodyguard immediately draws down on them, but I lower his weapon.

“Clearly we’re expected. Let’s try not to disturb the neighbors.”

As we approach I can see blood on the aprons, which is not surprising given the circumstances. Still, the circumstances involve my friends very likely being held in this same place. As much as I try to fight it, I’m beginning to lose my cool already. We’re escorted through the house, across a small backyard to a little blue guest house which appears to be made from a shipping container. The structure is 20-feet across, the full width of the yard. Judging by the walk, I’d say the whole yard is about 60-feet in length.

Inside, the shipping container has been transformed into a den with an adjoining bedroom off to the left and a bathroom to the right. We are abandoned in the den while the Korean is basically manhandled as the horror movie rejects marshal him toward the bathroom. After a beat we hear the toilet flush and then silence.

A few minutes pass before someone comes out of the bedroom. It’s the Knight from *Opes Vis*, wearing a three-piece tweed suit with a red bow tie and a driving cap. With a quick yet stern wave of his hand, it’s understood that we are to follow him. Beside the bed, the Knight has just put the receiver of an ornate Maharaja phone<sup>26</sup> up to his ear and swings the rotary dial three times. He listens to someone for a moment then nods his head, affirmative.

“Yes,” he says. “Mjölnir.”

An instant afterwards, the foot of the bed shoots up into the air and remains there at a ninety degree angle, revealing a staircase below. The Knight goes down first and I follow behind with *Younes & Himmat*.

The subterranean bunker we find ourselves in is at least the size of the entire backyard. Downstairs Mansfield is pacing back and forth so deep in thought that he doesn’t even notice our arrival. Our knighted friend strolls over to herald us but Mansfield looks up as he approaches. He does a double-take and then stares through his new hired gun. He’s looking directly at me and I can feel the scorn from where I stand, just as I imagine he senses the fire behind my eyes as well. Christensen takes a deep breath then his eyes turn black. A smile, wholly bereft of kindness or pleasure, slowly

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<sup>26</sup> [http://i01.i.aliimg.com/photo/v0/104747269/Maharaja\\_Phone\\_black.jpg](http://i01.i.aliimg.com/photo/v0/104747269/Maharaja_Phone_black.jpg)

makes its way across his face. And then I realize that it isn't even a smile at all. It's a sneer. He's baring his teeth like a wolf in the wild.

"Kings Knight Black, please take Mr. Lalwani and Mr. Singh to join our other guests."

"If you think I am any kind of prisoner here, you are sadly mistaken," Younes says with all the dignity of an Arabian prince. "But here me, boy, let it be the last mistake you make, or else your end will be all the worse."

"Dear me! Where are my manners? Of course, it is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Lalwani. Yours is a reputation to be envied and I shall hope that we can do business in the future. My name is Mansfield Christensen and by no means are you meant to be my captive. Having said that, I don't think you'll want to miss what's in the other room."

"It's okay," I tell him. "I promise not to kill him before you get back."

Satisfied, Younes leaves the room, followed by Singh.

"Surprised, Mr. Hammond? Oh, tell me you didn't think you're the only person with access to quality hackers? I'll have you know that cybercrime accounts for 63.4% of my enterprise's activities. I've only had a little time to read over your history but I am impressed. You have been a very naughty boy, Ashiel. You don't mind if I call you that do you?"

I don't reply, opting instead to maintain my poker face. He's playing coy because he thinks he has the upper hand. I'm not going to do anything to confirm or injure that perception until I know what's going on with Street and Smith.

"Good. It's so much more interesting than 'Anderson Howe' anyway. Let me share a little fun fact with you. Did you know that most people, when choosing an alias, just can't help but keep their original initials?"

"Is that so?"

"It is."

"Look, let's get on with this. Younes Lalwani is going to kill you. And I'm going to let him, so let's dispense with this whole cat-who-got-the-cream routine and get to the point."

"I think there's quite enough Christensen blood on your hands already," his reply is chilly to say the least. I think he's just as sickened to be sharing this room with me as I am.

"Oh, your brother, so that's what this is about. Did your black knight friend tell you--"

“Kings Knight Black told me everything. He’d been following Anders and me for quite some time. You see, while I have the newest technology available, Opes Vis has old money. They do things the old-fashion way. He told me how you showed up at the Chelsea Prayer Room and killed my brother.”

What? It figures the bastard would lie. Before I can clear the air, the bastard in tweed comes back into the room with Himmat Singh pointing a gun at his head.

“They want us in the other room,” he says.

While Mansfield’s mouth is agape, I release my P3-AT and point it at his temple.

But before I can even say “you heard the man,” Kings Knight Black disarms Himmat Singh and has him down on one knee, with his arm locked in a firm grip. And I guess he’s about to make a dry British pun, except that a foot-long pointed blade<sup>27</sup> slides out of Singh’s left jacket sleeve and is immediately plunged into KKB’s tweed-covered chest. Wow! I did not see that coming.

As we walk it becomes clear that this bunker is composed of more shipping containers, so it’s just a series of containers below the grounds that make up this little stronghold. When we reach our destination everything changes.

Street and Smith are tied to each other and gagged. Smith’s knees are heavily bandaged with bloody gauze and surgical tape. Street’s hands are wrapped in the same way. The sadistic little shit has broken all of her fingers and kneecapped one of the toughest men I’ve ever seen. He’s just gone to the top of my Shit List –with a bullet.

“I tried to be patient, truly I did. I wanted you to be here, all helpless and confused. Powerless. But I just couldn’t bare the waiting. But no worries, we can keep playing now that--”

Lalwani punches Mansfield Christensen in the face. The force of the blow knocks him backwards and Younes pounces. I can’t take my eyes off my friends though. They’re alive and they’re conscious. But they aren’t squirming or pleading for their release through their bonds. They’re just looking at me and I can’t stand it, so I avert my eyes. Looking down I catch a glimpse of a blinking red light on Smith’s chest. There’s one on Street

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<sup>27</sup> [a Katar dagger](#)

too. I grab Younes and pull him off of Mansfield and point at the blinking light.

“Younes, is that what I think it is?!”

It only takes him a moment to realize the situation.

“I should say it is!”

“It is. They are,” Christensen interjects with features swollen from the beating.

“Can you defuse it?”

“I cannot,” Lalwani replies. This looks homemade.”

Smith’s eyes widen and he tries to tug his arms free. I loosen the ropes around his mouth.

“I can do it. But they broke all my fingers too.”

At that moment, a door on the other side of the room opens and the butchers are back with their splatter vests and machine guns, and my Korean driver.

Mansfield Christensen stands up, pulls himself together.

“I think the Tesla will be fine compensation for your behavior today, Mr. Lalwani. The keys please.”

His left hand is outstretched to receive the prize while his right hand is suddenly wielding a Glock 17. Lalwani gives him the keys without hesitation, then spits on them and the hand holding them. Christensen responds with a Taekwondo sidekick to Himmat Singh’s chin.

“Do be mindful of the timer,” he says before exiting through the door we came in. I hear the door lock a moment later.

The gunmen remain resolute with their weapons fixed on us.

“These motherfuckers need to leave,” Smith says turning to the men behind him. “If you’re stupid enough to let fly with those things, then you deserve to die, but you damn sure ain’t takin’ me with you!”

As if they were waiting for permission, the armed men back out of the room and lock the door. I can hear their footsteps on the stairs, and then my attention shifts to an object I see behind Smith and Street. I walk slowly over to them to see what it is. The 50-pound artillery shell is immediately recognizable once I’m able to see the whole thing. Each of their detonators is connected to this one IED<sup>28</sup>. Oh, and the countdown clock is

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<sup>28</sup> Improvised Explosive Device



already down to 2:11.

“Talk to me Smith. Tell me something.”

“Are there any markings on the ordinance<sup>29</sup>?”

“I don’t see anything.”

“Okay, young buck, we have to get this right. I don’t want to take the chance of trying to remove these detonators ‘cause they could be motion-triggered.”

Street speaks for the first time.

“Smith, look at my detonator and tell him what to do on yours,” she says without a stammer, though her voice is distant, hollow.

“That’s my girl,” Smith says. “I told you we’d make it out of this.”

He winks at her then turns his focus to me.

“I heard your friend say he made these things himself and a smart amateur bomb maker would use a failsafe to protect himself from an error. But I don’t know which one of us has it on, so you’ve gotta do exactly what I say.”

“Right.”

“Or else we all die.”

“Yeah, no pressure.”

Smith walks me through a render-safe procedure he knows. The device looks complicated as hell and on top of that, all of the wires are green. The whole process takes a little over a minute but it feels like an eternity. I don’t have any wire cutters so I’m going to have to sever the connection by pulling the correct wire out of the detonation device. There are eight green wires here and, according to Smith, two of them are dummies meant to confuse me. Pulling any of the other wires, besides the correct one, will doom us all. I sure as hell don’t know what he sees squinting at Street’s detonator, but as our resident munitions expert, Smith has made a bomb or two so I trust his judgment. I knew a couple of EOD (Explosive Ordinance Disposal) guys from my time in Iraq but I only saw a bomb actually get defused just once. More often than not, they removed devices and transported them to a safe place to detonate with a counter charge. Now I understand why.

The first wire I pull is a dummy. I’m happy that we’re all still alive but the blinking red light is so disheartening. I lost about seven years off my life from just pulling that wire. Before I pull the next, I look at the

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<sup>29</sup> Military jargon meaning “bomb”

faces standing around me. Smith and Himmat Singh are stoic, even grim. These men are true warriors and I am proud to have met each of them. Younes Lalwani is a man I am honored to call my friend. He stands away from the rest of us, facing the door through which Christensen fled. I do not know whether he is praying or planning but, whatever it is, every fiber of his being is at work doing it. And then there's Street, who has become like a gothy, moody little sister to me. The look on her face pains me beyond words. She doesn't deserve to even endure a situation like this, let alone die in this way. I silently swear to God, Zeus, Crom, and anyone else listening that if I survive this day I will commit every resource available to me to finding Mansfield Christensen and making him pay for all the pain he has caused. And then I pull the wire.

The detonator on Smith's chest stops blinking. And then the red light on Street's chest starts to blink even faster.

"Oh my God! Oh my GOD! OH MY GOD!"

Street is frantic and so am I. Smith lunges toward Street, hitting a button on the detonation device with his forehead. His goddam forehead! This causes the detonator on Street to stop blinking as well. That must have been the correct failsafe button. There is an identical one on Smith's chest, but pushing that one would have detonated the bomb.

I untie Street while Younes unties Smith. As soon as she's free, Victoria Calle wraps her arms around Smith's neck and sobs into his shoulder. After that, we able-bodied transport the wounded above ground.

I get a cab to take me and my teammates to my apartment, leaving Younes and Himmat to ransack the house. Smith falls asleep almost immediately and Street, wearing the former's leather jacket, gazes out the window as the city passes us by beneath a light patter of rainfall.

**END**