

Madrid – Arcangelo Buoniconti is an Italian man in Spain. A promising young mechanical engineer, who decided to devote his life to art, Arcangelo is in Spain working on his next installation¹. Buoniconti is noted worldwide for his focus on industrial processes and materials, and explores a connection between mechanical behaviors and physical properties of force. Because of this, his art pieces are notorious for having a high potential for danger, and some are basically weapons. If you aren't familiar with his work, he's best known for "Conseguenze Indesiderate²," a series of projects involving pieces of construction equipment painted white and programmed to make random movements very slowly. The installation was on display at an abandoned construction site in Zurich, so visitors had to wear hardhats, thereby adding to the overall experience. Because his projects are always kept under tight wraps before their debut, I can't even tell you what Arcangelo is currently devising. Regardless, I'm sure it'll be awesome and creative.

Every day the Italian artist takes the thirty-minute stroll from the NH Palacio De Tepa (the hotel where he's staying) to his state-of-the-art studio space at the Matadero Madrid. It's a great way for him to clear his mind before getting to work and is a really good opportunity to enjoy the surrounding area as well. But today won't be like other days, sadly. A black Mercedes van with French license plates pulls up alongside Buoniconti. Three men wearing carnival masks and black coveralls are out of it before the artist with his head in the clouds even realizes there is a van. At first the three are nonchalant and almost seem as if they are just going to walk down the street together. But it would be folly to believe such a thing would happen and, just as Arcangelo is making up his mind to bolt for his life, everything goes black (one of the masked men throws a bag over Buoniconti's head). He is still conscious, though, evidenced by the fact that he is aware of himself being hefted hastily and tossed into what he can only assume is the black Mercedes van.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Installation_art

² "Unintended Consequences"

New York – This is a city that I have loved for a long time. Truthfully, since I had to do a report on it in the fourth grade, I've been fascinated with New York City. One of the most fascinating things I have learned about this city is the remarkable value placed on space here. Take, for example, the Archangel Security Consultants office, which is really Gabriel's Co-Op in Chelsea (79 7th Ave to be exact). Gabriel Sexton lives in a 2,000 square foot loft, for which market value is approximately \$2,000,000.00. Though I still can't get a straight answer from the man as to whether or not he actually paid for it. I grew up in Hillsboro, Oregon, where two million dollars could buy a guy five acres of land and a mansion with more bathrooms than this place has rooms. The house I live in downtown may have cost me six million dollars, but I bought it from a film director who had previously been renting it. He'd worked with my parents a lot, and let me have it at a good price. And when I tell you that six mill is a deal for my place, let me tell you, it's a little over 13,000 square feet, has an indoor swimming pool, and my penthouse has a rooftop garden half the size of this place³. (Not only were my parents filthy rich Hollywood superstars but, after they died, my grandfather invested their money very wisely.)

So here we are, Ottawa Smith and I spending our afternoon in the "office," or Gabriel's living room, going over files for potential clients. As owner of the company, Gabriel has final say on the clients we choose, but I like to go over these things with Smith whenever possible, so we can talk logistics and offer legitimate feedback. We're discussing one particular option that coincides nicely with a project I want to work on in Jamaica, when the buzzer from the lobby goes off. We have a visitor, which is odd. Uninvited guests don't usually show up here. Most clients never see this place, and we're not exactly listed in the phone book. Smith goes over to talk to the front desk as my cell phone starts ringing. It's Gabriel. He's taken on a new client as of five minutes ago, and she's on her way over here to meet us with the details. I hang up the phone as Smith is opening the door to greet our new client. The dame walks into our office like a panther stalking through an Indian village at night - she's dressed in black and wearing a scent called "Trouble." I can't help but be reminded of how so many pulp fiction novels begin with the beautiful femme fatale sashaying into the private eye's office with the big problem and the bigger secret. The

³ [Check it out!](#)

difference here is that one of this woman's secrets involves me. Our new client is Fiorella Sassolino. She and I had a brief affair when I was living in Italy all those years ago. We met in Rome. I was there for a shoot and she was attending one of the universities, getting a graduate degree in Linguistics. Even then she was engaged. And then, just like now, she was utterly irresistible. When she walks into a room, everything else just ceases to matter.

"My name is Fio--" her sentence trails off into the ether when she notices me sitting on the sofa. She looks inquisitively at Smith, as if seeking an explanation from him.

"Hi Fio," I say, rising from my seat.

"Ashiel? Am I in the right place? I was sent here by a man named Gabriel."

"Yes, you are in the right place. I am the man that Gabriel sent you to see. And if that is the case, then you must need serious help. What can I do for you?"

As soon as the words pass my lips Fiorella floats past Ottawa Smith only to collapse into my arms. In about two minutes we've gone from dime-store detective novel to dime-store romance novel.

"I'll leave you two alone for a while and go get us some coffee," Smith says as he disappears out the door.

"You always did know how to make an entrance," I say, gently releasing her onto the sofa.

"I am in a terrible way. Please tell me you can help me!"

"What is the trouble?"

"My husband has been kidnapped!"

I suggest we take a walk. Strolling through the streets of NYC has an amazing way of calming and energizing one at the same time. It turns out that in the next phase of her life, Fiorella Sassolino is Fiorella Buoniconti, married woman and interpreter for an Italian diplomat. She got Gabriel's contact info from her boss.

"I spend a lot of time here because of my work at the U.N., so we have an apartment in Midtown. Arcangelo has a studio in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, so comes with me whenever he can. He was in Spain working on a new piece and I had plans to join him there when my work here is finished. My flight is in nine days. Can you promise me that when I fly to Madrid that my husband will be safe and waiting for me?"

“You know I can’t promise you that. But I will do everything I can to try and make that happen.”

“This is all so strange. First my husband is taken off the streets of Madrid, and then I see you, after all these years. Is it not irony that you are the man to bring my Arcangelo back to me? And you have been here all this time.”

“I have to admit, I’m shocked to hear that you’ve been living in my city and we’ve never run into each other.”

“Yet, here we are.”

“Yeah. Big city, small world.”

“Yes. You know, I am happy that it is you who will be doing this. What we had was special, no matter how long ago it was. You will do this for me. I know it.”

“Well, you know me…” And just then, she puts her hand on my face and just when I think she’s going to kiss me, she pinches my cheek playfully.

“Here is a CD. The men who took Arcangelo sent this to my email. It tells me they have him and has very strange demands for me, and that there will be more information soon. It is a copy, so you may keep it. I am going back to my apartment now. Please tell me what I should do next.”

Back at 7th Avenue, I pop in the disc that Fio gave me and watch it with Smith. It’s old black and white footage of Francisco Franco cut together a la Max Headroom with a cheesy digital background that looks like some reject from a Hackers montage. Franco Headroom tells me that Fio is to auction off all her husband’s pieces. Further instructions will be provided later. My first thought is that this seems pretty convoluted for a hostage situation. Why not just ask for the money? And then Smith says what’s on my mind.

“You know anything about this artist guy? This must be something personal. I mean, why go to all this trouble?”

“Fiorella didn’t talk much about him when we were together. But the man she was engaged to was an Engineering student. I’m sure it’s the same guy, though.”

“Well, get on the Google and do some research, young buck!”

According to the interwebs, Arcangelo Buoniconti is some sort of mechanical modern artist. From what I can see, there is a clear engineering influence on his work, as many of these things are automatons. But the ones that stand out to me are from the "Verde" series, which includes, for one, a canon that shoots Heineken bottles filled with glue at a wall, as well as a bulletproof glass chamber that fills with gas at differing intervals, causing a Jameson bottle filled with glue to explode (the bottle is replaced and the process repeated until the chamber is covered in green glass). Weaponized art, who would've thought? And then it becomes crystal clear. Of course! These things are never going to make it to the highest bidders. It's a double-cross. They're going for the art and the money. I'm going to need tech support on this one, but Street is in Frankfurt on an op. No worries there, though, as she is a quick Skype video call away.

"What do you want, pretty boy? ¡Carajo! I'm halfway around the world and still you bother me!"

"It's okay, I miss you too. In a couple days I'm just going to need a little help tracking down some bad guys. Will you be available?"

"I'll definitely be here for at least three more days. And things are starting to pick up, so I can't guarantee I'll be around when you need me. I'll email you the info of a friend who may be able to help. He calls himself Evangerion and is better with a keyboard than even I am."

"Fantastic! I'll look out for your email."

Back at home, I call Smith and ask him to order a dozen tracking devices. Franco Headroom and his goons may be expecting that, but I have to at least try it. These guys could just be a bunch of muppets, after all. I've just finished feeding my red lionfish (Aslan, Mufasa, Elsa, and Lion-o) when the phone rings. It's Tim, my roommate. He has the first two floors, excepting the pool and my private office, while I sleep in a "penthouse" apartment on the third floor. He's down at the garage and needs a hand. Tim was my spotter in Afghanistan for two years and we had seven confirmed kills while working together. After what would turn out to be our last mission together, our Army escort convoy was attacked by insurgents. The HMMWV (Humvee) we were riding in went off the road and flipped over. Some good men

lost their life in the firefight that day, but I made it out - mainly because I was protected by the Humvee. I got set up and took out as many enemy fighters as I could. "One shot, one kill. Ready to die but never will!" Tim also survived, but has been legally blind ever since. After I decided not to re-enlist, I was able to track down the Humvee that saved our lives and buy it from the Army. It was decommissioned and going to be sold for scrap when I found it.

We keep "Clarence" in storage at a garage a couple blocks away from the house. I walk over to our spot and Tim is standing there with a droplight in one hand and his iSight super spectacles⁴ in the other.

"It's too fuckin' dark in here, man. These things don't work in 'low light situations.' [He's making air quotation marks with his fingers.] I don't get how it's so dark in this place. It's the middle of the fuckin' day, man!"

"Relax, Dunior. We can handle this."

Tim looks and talks just like The Dude from The Big Lebowski, but "Dude Junior" was becoming too much of a mouthful for the guys in our unit, so we eventually shortened it to "Dunior." Neither one of us has a clue about fixing cars, but working to restore Clarence has been Dunior's mission since I bought it. It has obvious sentimental value for us both, but as far as commitment goes, this is all Tim. I help when I can, but that really amounts to handing Tim the occasional wrench while he's doing his thing. Today turns out to be the opposite. Tim has been reading up recently and so is walking me through changing the transmission fluid. We've got all the fixin's, including a creeper, bottle jack, drip pan, and the afore-mentioned droplight; but none of the experience. And it is thanks to this lack of know-how that I end up with a face full of transmission fluid and a relatively dry drip pan. Once Tim finishes laughing his ass off, we decide that we've had enough fun for one day. Now, armed with the knowledge of how NOT to drain transmission fluid, we head home. I take a shower and we order sandwiches from Parm (because the food is fit for a sniper team, but the décor is not⁵). We devour our food and wash it down with Yuengling, Tim's hometown brew. There's even some conversation in between bites.

⁴ <http://www.esighteyewear.com/>

⁵ <http://parmnyc.com/photos>

“Seeing Fiorella again brought back a lot of memories – all of them good. At one point I really thought she was going to invite me back to her place and I don’t think I could have been the gentleman I like to tell myself I am. But she’s a very strong lady, she fought the urge.”

“You’re such a stud muffin, man.”

“Thanks. So now we’re waiting for another update from whomever on what the next move is. God, the waiting is what really sucks. Is it me or wasn’t it so much easier when they just gave us a briefing, then a gun and a map?”

“When his trigger finger gets itchy, someone’s gonna get scratched!”

“Really? This is serious. I have to find a way to get Fiorella’s husband back.”

“He’s got two guns – one to stop trouble and one to make trouble!”

“I thought you were doing the Blaxploitation movie marathon with Street.”

“Yeah, but the girl with the dragon tattoo is in Germany, isn’t she? She’s my little Emo bonbon and all, but Shaft, Trouble Man, and The Mack don’t wait for nobody.”

“I’m not so sure she’s Emo. I think she’s a Goth chick.”

“There’s a difference?”

“Well, as far as I know, Goths hate everyone and Emos just hate themselves.”

“Okay, great. Now, you want to hear a real moral dilemma? Check this out, man. I’m hanging with this dude last night, Steve. Now Steve’s going through some shit right now, so he’s going extra heavy on the booze. I’d stuffed a couple sick pot brownies already, so was laying off the sauce myself. But this guy’s going like a champion – like some frat boy who lost a bet, you know?”

“Sure,” I have no idea what the fuck that even means.

“So we started out, calmly enough, at his place. But then this fucker wants to go out. And he’s already blitzed as fuck when he makes this particular proclamation, so I’m like ‘fuck,’ ‘cause I don’t wanna go out, man. But I know Steve, and in his condition, this dude was gonna get into some serious trouble if I didn’t go with him. So, long story short, we end up getting tossed out of two bars and Steve almost got knifed by a cab driver.”

“And that’s with you there to keep him out of trouble? Remarkable. How does a blind pothead find himself in so many situations like this?”

“Shit fuckin’ luck, man. But anyway, today, I’m patting myself on the back for keeping this guy alive through the night, but then I get to thinking. Would any of that shit really have gone down if I hadn’t gone out with him? I mean, what if I said ‘no’ and he just went home and jerked off to porn all night?”

“Such profundity and profanity. It’s quite impressive, I must say.”

“I try, man. But seriously, I wonder.”

“Don’t. You can never know what could have happened. If this guy went out by himself and got shived by a cabbie or stomped by some juicehead bouncer, then you’d really have something to think about. Don’t dwell on this for another second.”

“I guess. So when is my girl Wednesday Addams coming back?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Come on, dude. Fuckin’ tell me.”

“Nope,” but that reminds me to check my phone for Street’s email. Got it. Good. After firing off a quick email to Evangerion, I go back to conversing with Tim for more cuddly, yet expletive-laden stories of drunken debauchery.

After a couple hours, and no emails from Fiorella or Evangerion, I retire to my apartment for the evening – trusty laptop in-hand. Upon opening said trusty laptop, I am greeted with a Word doc written in Japanese which reads thusly:

私はあなたの電子メールを持っている。私はあなたが誰であるか知っている。私はあなたが何をすべきか知っている。費用は\$10,000です。私は頭金として5000ドルをとっている。ありがとうございました！あなたはすぐに領収書をもらう。

私はまた、あなたが私のウェブサイト上のアカウント与える！年間のための唯一の129.95ドル。お楽しみください！

A quick hop over to [Google Translate](#) informs me that I have been shaken down⁶. A quick hop over to the included web address informs me that I have been shaken down by a Japanese hacker who runs a porn site – to which I am now the proud owner of an annual subscription. The site features a pretty, young-

⁶ Copy and paste the text into Google Translate to see or hear what I mean.

Looking Japanese girl calling herself L.A. (Live Action) Anime⁷ and is full of pictures and videos of her wearing various anime costumes, as well as other pop culture-related ones, and stripping down to her underwear. There are also lots of innocent pouts and faux embarrassed looks sprinkled throughout for good measure. Dunior will definitely get a kick out of this subscription, (especially the video of her with Nekomimi ears and a Hitachi Magic Wand). I could do without the “I’m-so-ashamed-to-be-doing-all-this” posturing though. That’s a moot point, since I have apparently already paid a retainer for my hacker helper’s services, regardless of whether it’s actually the model or her web admin.

Two days later Fiorella emails me the latest video from Arcangelo’s captors. Franco Headroom informs us that they know of nine pieces currently housed in storage at Arcangelo’s Brooklyn studio. All are to be auctioned off on April 1st through a website that has already been set up, with online bidding capabilities and a built-in payment system. April Fool’s Day, these guys have a sense of humor, but they’re no muppets. That’s just four days from now, luckily they included a list of Who’s Who in the art community to whom notification is to be sent in order to get the word out quickly. Something tells me these people won’t bat an eyelash that an eccentric genius has suddenly decided to sell off his work at a last-minute auction. This thing is going to succeed. There’s no way to guarantee that the tracking devices will work, since these guys seem pretty technically proficient. They can disrupt the signals if they’re expecting it. Good thing I have a hacker on retainer. I tell Fio that I will handle all the details so she doesn’t have to get involved. It would definitely be too much for her to have to deal with. Seeing the pain that this is causing her, only makes me want to see this thing through, and punish the guilty, all the more.

I check out Arcangelo’s studio in Williamsburg and go over the inventory along with the guy from Sotheby’s who will run the show for us. Due to the size and weight of these pieces, the auction will be held here in the studio. That should lend some credibility to the auction, for anyone who

⁷ The real (and original) L.A. Anime is an awesome rapper and member of [Th basterds](#)

thinks it seems suspicious. I have no idea what the kidnappers would do if the auction doesn't produce the results they're expecting, so I'm taking this very seriously. After the auctioneer leaves, Smith and I get to work bugging everything, so there is plenty of time to test them before we have to ship these bad boys out.

The next day I receive a large envelope from Japan. Inside is a pair of white cotton women's underwear, size S, with Hello Kitty on the back and a hand-written note on the crotch that says:

**“U paid \$5,129.95 to LA Anime! Thx!
XOXOXO”**

Well, that settles that. There's been no new communication from the kidnappers, but I send a link to the auction site over to my otaku gravure model so she can track down the web developers.

A few hours later, my Skype opens itself with a video chat. Yoji Biomehanika's "Look @ The Heaven" is suddenly blaring from my computer's speakers. And there, on the screen, dancing to the music is the one and only LA Anime. She's wearing an Alice (as in Wonderland) costume with a blonde wig and white Playboy bunny ears. This doesn't seem to be a video for the website, though. This is LA Anime rocking out. The girl is ecstatic, lost in the beat; and I'm fairly positive she has no idea I'm watching. After a few moments she realizes she isn't alone. The hacker formerly known as Evangerion lowers the volume on the song, though I can still hear it in the background.

“Konichiwa!”

“Konichiwa,” and thus ends my Japanese contribution to the conversation, though I can't stop myself from returning her “Victory” hand sign. The girl's energy is that enthralling.

“Good-o news, Ashierusan! I haf trace-u website-o to Spain,” well, this is going to be tough... At least she's using her real voice and not the girlish one she appropriates for her subscribers. LA Anime seems naturally exuberant and even a bit childish, but definitely not to the extreme levels she displays when working the camera.

“You're amazing! Where in Spain is the web developer?”

“Birubao,” yeah, I’m writing that down to look up later.

“Deberoper name-u is Pio Porro. He is bery bad hacker-u. I know him shitty work anywhere. We work togeser wis Region.”

The conversation goes on like this for a few more minutes before I congratulate her on a job well done and ask for a digital copy of what she’s found. After reading that, my prior conversation makes a little more sense. The web developer is someone with the handle Pio Pollo, from Bilabao, Spain. LA mentioned that she has worked with him before in “Region” but if I’ve got my Engrish right, she means “Legion,” the hacker collective where all the members wear respirator masks with black hoodies in public. They are an interesting lot. With no leadership, and no real direction, (though they’re definitely anti-establishment) members are willing and able to band together to bring down cyber bullies just as easily as expose a corrupt politician. Despite their efforts to come off as an army of hacker storm troopers, at the end of the day, they are a global consortium of smaller interconnected groups who share a similar ideology and penchant for computers. Kidnapping is nowhere near their MO. Graffiti, Denial of Service attacks, no question, that’s their bag, baby. This just isn’t Legion’s thing.

More likely one of the smaller networks is behind this, a local Spanish hacker group. A little more research brings me to an important clue. Bilbao is in the Basque country. The only agitators I know from the Basque country are the ETA, but they are much more direct in their efforts – think the IRA, but with wineskins instead of whiskey. This isn’t the way the ETA operates either. Extortion and kidnapping, sure, but kidnapping artists to make them sell their work, not so much. No, this is definitely the work of lone gunmen, which may turn out in my favor. Hackers aren’t violent normally, besides the occasional delusion of being Neo or the Deliverator (though I have yet to run into any of the katana-wielding, pizza delivery type). But these cyber punks have successfully pulled off a kidnapping and orchestrated this whole auction scenario, so I can’t take them lightly.

I’m meeting with Fio for coffee to discuss the news. She is looking better now. I think she really has faith in me.

"I don't know why, but I have faith in you," she tells me over apps and espresso at Cibo near the U.N. building.

"You sure know how to instill confidence in a guy."

"I mean it. I have no reason on Earth to feel good about you doing all these things. To me, you will always be the beautiful boy who made me feel like the angel and the demon whenever I was with you."

"Go on," I tell her. She laughs. She laughs like Sophia Loren – when all her refinery fades away and there is nothing left but the sheer joy of the moment. I don't kid myself that I've earned it though. She's been a wreck, but is coming around nicely. Little by little, as things come together, her strength is returning.

"I'm going to leave for Bilbao before the auction. There's a group we've found, called La Movida Nueva, they're young radicals; the kind that have no patience for the pace at which the world changes today."

I leave out that I suspect they have some nefarious ideas for Arcangelo's work and that the auction is likely the reason for the kidnapping. She wouldn't feel right about going through with it if she knew what they could be used for. Her husband wouldn't either, and all that got him was tied up in a corner somewhere in the North of Spain.

"Everything for the auction has been arranged. All the pieces have been cataloged and are ready for tomorrow. My man from Sotheby's will handle everything. The guests have been invited and the studio in Brooklyn is being prepared now. Having said all that, I advise you not to go. Tomorrow's going to be a long day and you don't need to sit through it. It will be very stressful for you to watch what happens knowing what it's all for. Go to a show, better yet, get out of town if you can. I don't care what you do, but do something. Anything would be better than being in Williamsburg tomorrow."

"I understand," she replies. "I'm going to find my way in to a bottle of amaretto and I'm not coming out until it's empty."

"That's one way to go about it... But who am I to tell you to do otherwise? I have an address so I'm going to check it out. I just don't like leaving this--"

"I want you on that plane to Bilbao. Don't worry about me."

"You've got it, boss lady."

Bilbao – So, Bilbao is a beautiful city. I'd never even heard it of before yesterday, but it's definitely a place I'd like to come back to when I'm not chasing down bad guys. I've got my Leica d-Lux and am taking advantage of the opportunity to take some great shots of the Casco Viejo neighborhood where my man Pio Pollo lives. The main objective, of course, is to reconnoiter the area; and the 'ol "tourist" cover is the best in the book. But I'm not going to let that stop me from taking some amazing photos of the medieval part of town. I've covered about a half-mile radius around Pollo's apartment on Mirasol Kondearen Kalea, and this is the end of my little tour.

My hotel is here in the old town, so it's about time to head back so I can review my pictures and really get a feel for the territory. I can't resist a little chimping as I walk into my building. My attention is slowly drawn away from my photos as I see a Smart car navigating the streets nimbly in my periphery. An Audi follows closely behind, but the people sitting in the outside cafes on the street actually have to move out of the way so the Audi can pass. By the time it does, the agile little Smart car is already long gone. I managed some nifty shots of that little piece of uniqueness too.

No clandestine meetings with any of Gabriel's pigeons are scheduled for this trip. I like that. As helpful as Gabriel's associates can be, I like the feeling of going at it alone. I kind of miss the old days when it was just me and my camera. I've been busy with ops recently and haven't had as many chances as I'd like to do some potent shutter work. I've already told LA Anime to keep track of Pio Pollo's activities – what he posts and where, and to let me know if anything pops up. I'm not expecting much though. At this point, it's a waiting game since the auctions are being held now and he'll need to wait for the money to clear his bank accounts and it'll also take some time before there are any shipments for him to cyberjack and re-route. I don't know if he has anyone else working with him or what his final intentions are for Arcangelo but, no matter what, there's nothing for anyone to do right now.

Back in my room, I have a glass of the Gentleman Jack I picked up in JFK while going over my photos. My assessment of the area around the target is that Bilbao is a typical European city with narrower than normal streets when you cross the estuary into the old part of town. 'Nuff said. I decide to have a small dinner at a highly recommended restaurant nearby called

Amboto. The food doesn't disappoint. I can't help the urge to have the best meal I can get my hands on before an op. Even though I should have the drop on this guy, so having no back-up isn't an issue here, the fact is that I could die on any operation. Might as well make the best of it when it comes to what could be my last meal. Then again, I do the same thing before I go out to investigate and photograph whatever little piece of Hell I'm covering as well. Maybe I just like to eat good food.

I wake up and have a cappuccino with a croissant for brunch. After all, you can't fight the good fight on an empty stomach. Today I leave the hotel without my camera, but let's go down the checklist of what I do have: handcuffs – check; driving gloves (no fingerprints...) – check; slide-mounted pistol – check; shoulder holstered pistol – check; no knowledge of the Basque language – check; seventh grade Spanish education – check; not even a semblance of a plan – check; brass balls – check. Okay, let's do this. Señor Pio Pollo lives in a building with no security, so there's that. I just stroll on in, walk up to the third floor and locate the apartment I need. Now this is just too much. I thought I was lucky with the door downstairs but the flimsy piece of plywood occupying the hole in the wall separating me from Pio Pollo's apartment is just laughable. I have to remember that I'm in Europe – not just Europe, but a sleepy old city in Northern Spain that doubles for a tourist attraction. Crimes of the B&E sort aren't exactly the norm here; like in NYC, where wrought-iron bars on doors and windows are quite common. In the land of style over function, basic security is an afterthought. I don't even have to go at this thing with my shoulder. Leading with a good chassé frontal kick, I burst into the apartment like Jason Statham with my gun drawn. A quick scan of the place reveals a small 1-bedroom apartment with furniture from some Spanish equivalent to Ikea. Oh, and there's also a skinny guy on his knees in a fetal position, cowering next to a small desk with a Mac on it. Looks like my element of surprise mixed with shock and awe worked well. I stride over to who I presume to be Pio Pollo and nudge him gently with my foot. He looks up at me slowly.

“English?” I say to him.

He shakes his head furiously with a wide-eyed glare. I don't believe that of course, but I'll play along for the time being. I step back and make sure to use my gun to motion him to his feet. Once he's standing, I pick his pocket for his cell phone then handcuff him to an uncomfortable looking wood

frame sofa so I can search the place. This won't take long. There isn't anyone else in the place – no Italian artists tied up anywhere and no would-be attackers lying in wait to hit me over the head with a lamp. Coming out of the bedroom, I make out a figure in my periphery, standing in the hallway where the door used to be. Turning, I see that it's a woman, about 5'3" wearing a bicycle helmet, leather jacket, skinny jeans, and boots. She seems frozen in place with the same wide-eyed expression I just saw on Mr. Pollo. And then she's off. She doesn't scream. She doesn't call out for help. She just runs. Next thing I know, I'm taking off after her. She's quick, I'll give her that, but I figure I'm probably in better shape, so I like my chances of catching up.

Well, there goes that. This chick, let's call her "Lola," runs and leaps like a gazelle. She makes a left at the corner and heads to the Plaza del Corazón de Maria. Smart move, it's in the open and there's people out, oh and the noon sun is glaring down on the place. Lola literally goes out of her way to bring me through a playground with kids I'll have to dodge and maneuver around. She, on the other hand, takes the ever-shifting obstacle course like a champion. From her fluid movements and the way she hurdles a see-saw, I can tell that Lola practices parkour. She's not aiming to impress anyone with high-flying flips and flashy moves, though. This is true parkour – navigating an environment with a natural flow. It helps that she knows this place better than I do, but I've got her for a guide after all, so it isn't too big an advantage. I'm happy to be holding my own right now though. My movements aren't pretty but I'm quick on my feet. I've been chased through the jungle by an angry Colombian drug cartel; this, I think I can handle.

Lola slides through a narrow hallway on the other end of the plaza. Unlike me, her momentum and lower center of gravity allow her pass through seamlessly. Me, I'm 6'0", 185 lbs and running as fast as I can. I bounce off the walls like a pinball because of the angle at which I hit it. Of course El sol (the sun) is waiting for me on the other end and I get blinded, and have to stop to get my bearings. I'm standing in the middle of the sidewalk of Mesedeetako Kaia, which runs along the estuary that bisects Bilbao. I catch sight of my lady friend across the street heading down to a lower path along the river way. This is a one-way street but traffic prevents me from following directly. Lola's heading to Erriberako Zubia to cross into the old town, so I just start running against foot traffic in the

same direction. She gets to the on ramp before me and is crossing as I arrive.

When I'm halfway across, I'm treated to the astonishing vision of the lovely Lola vaulting into a somersault over a car that comes careening in front of her as she tries to make it to the other side of the street. That's as impressive as it is disconcerting, but because she has to tuck and roll, I'm able to gain a little on her. Still, maybe I should just cut my losses and go back to Pio Pollo. The bird in the hand is worth more than the one with two-and-a-bush. God that sounds like something Dunior would say. Anyway, Lola dashes up Barrenkale, and that's when things get really interesting. The lunch crowd is already out at their tables in the streets. Lola jumps over the tabletops she isn't able to maneuver around as she weaves her way up the street. I'm lucky I only blow through one of them before Lola ducks around a corner onto a side street connecting to Harategi Zahar Kalea. The street ends in the Plazuela de Santiago and by the time I get there, I've lost little Lola. There are at least four different ways she could have gone and I have no idea in which direction she went. Giving up, I double over panting. I need to be able to go back to Pio Pollo with at least some of my dignity intact.

He's still there handcuffed to his uncomfortable little sofa. He's sitting on it now, smoking a cigarette. I'm sure he isn't surprised to see me return empty-handed. I know he speaks English so cut right through the bullshit.

"I know you speak English, so I'm going to get right down to it. You have kidnapped a friend of mine. I want him back. You're going to make that happen as quick and easy as possible. And no bullshit, I'm too tired for that now."

"I don't even know what you're talking about. You're not a Spanish cop or from Interpol, I don't have to talk to you at all!"

"I just told you I'm too tired for bullshit, but you're wasting my time anyway. You go by the name Pio Pollo. You're a member of Legion. You took an Italian artist off the street a few days ago and are making his wife auction off his pieces. That's what I know. And I'll be able to prove it all very soon. You see my hacker is better than you, so I'll find what you're hiding. Oh, and about me not being a cop? Well, that works more in my favor than yours, don't you think?" Queue the evil grin, and bingo!

"She had him moved to France two days ago. I have no idea where."

“She? Is that the same ‘she’ who ran out of here?”

He nods, affirmative.

“It was all her idea, her plan--” and then nothing. Maybe his Spanish pride kicked in and he realized how much of a rat he’s being. It doesn’t matter. All I have to do is send a quick text to LA Anime with a few details about his computer. Tokyo is 8 hours ahead of Bilbao so the timing works out. Either way, it only takes a few minutes before things start happening on the screen. Soon I’m glancing through translations of my host’s emails. Apparently Lola’s name is actually Didiane Jean Marc. There are even a few saved chat conversations between Pio Pollo and a Pieds Noir, who I also assume is Ms. Jean Marc. I immediately text the name Didiane Jean Marc to Gabriel so he can check it against the CIA database. Another text to LA Anime yields a confirmation that she has seen the name Pieds Noir on Legion-related web sites, but hasn’t had any interaction. After pocketing Pio’s cell phone, I leave the key to the cuffs a reasonable distance away from Laughing Boy and make for the door (if you can even really call it that anymore). I stroll out of the building, making sure to use Google Translate on my phone, when I run into a cop on the street, to explain that there is a man upstairs who has committed a crime.

Back in my room, I’m treated to a stream of pages coming hot off my printer. They’re from Gabriel and detail what he was able to dig up on Ms. Jean Marc. So, she’s a French Algerian. That’s where it begins and ends for Didiane Jean Marc. All the paper on the floor is about her grandfather, Edmond Jouhaud, one of the most decorated officers in the French Army in his day. He was also the Inspector General of the Air Force in Algeria. But the fun fact is that he was second-in-command of the Organisation de l’Armée Secrete (OAS) which was a terrorist group concerned with preventing North African independence from French rule. The closest organization I could compare the OAS to is the Klu Klux Klan, based on the ideology behind the formation of the group. Members of the OAS wanted Northern Africa to remain French colonies and were willing to kill to keep it that way. Jouhaud is best known for his role in the “Quartet of Retired Generals” a cabal of former French military leaders that attempted a coup of France from Algeria.

They planned to use their connections to seize control of French Northern Africa by force then invade Paris from above using paratroopers. French intelligence got wind of the operation and cut it off before it could even get started.

Now, imagine what life must have been like for Jouhaud's family. Edmond fathered two children with a French "pied noir"⁸ named Corinne Vidocq; a daughter, Desiree Jouhaud, and a son, Lionel Jouhaud. Lionel Jouhaud left Algeria with his mother for Ciboure, France, the place of her birth. Apparently Desiree stayed in Algeria under her mother's name because there is a marriage record for a "Desiree Vidocq" to an Algerian man, Philippe Jean Marc. So what's a French-Algerian girl doing in Spain kidnapping Italian artists for ransom? Then my phone rings. Only, it isn't my phone, it's Pio Pollo's phone. It's Lola, I mean Didiane.

"Catch your breath yet?"

"Hello Didiane. Yeah, my hacker is better than yours."

"My parkour is better than yours."

"Touché."

"I wanted to tell you that we have received the final payments from yesterday's auction. We have our money now. And soon we will have our propaganda as well. You may think so well of yourself, but today is not your day."

"Just because you're in France, doesn't mean I can't find you," I can locate Ciboure on a map easily enough and I'm fairly sure that's where I'll find Arcangelo Buoniconti.

"Forgive me if I doubt your American geography skills."

"Speaking of which, how does an Algerian girl end up kidnapping people in Spain?"

"In recent years, I have seen real revolution come when it is needed. The Basque people deserve to be masters of their own destiny, and this is our time. Spanish control of the Basque country must end. Guy Fawkes, your John Brown, and even that man in the Emirates now, whatever his name is. They are all revolutionaries without revolutions. They failed to capture the heart of the people, so their "revolutions" failed. The ETA has given up armed aggression, but continues to work to stir the Basque people. I wish them luck, but I will do what they could not. I will hack my revolution. I have

⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pieds-noirs>

already hacked the name “Movida” and soon a word these pompous Spanish bastards once loved will be associated with fear and terror. I have hacked this ridiculous artist’s freedom and will hack his so-called art to help bring attention to the injustice that is daily visited upon the Basques in Spain.”

With a very dramatic, if anti-climactic, click of the phone, thus ends her diatribe, and thankfully so. She said “hack” four times in that little speech! Friggin’ hacktivist...

Ciboure – There is even less information available about Lionel Jouhaud than there is about Didiane Jean Marc, which means that he is likely an upstanding citizen. He’s family and he’s in France so I have to start with him. Didiane’s uncle has been in Ciboure since leaving Algeria with his mother in 1961. Getting to Ciboure from Bilbao by sea is about a two-hour trip in a go-fast boat, and is a far better option than planes, trains, or automobiles. Along the way, I can imagine Arcangelo making this same trip stowed away in the hull of a boat just like this one, perhaps even this one. I don’t ask. Smugglers are notoriously greedy and disloyal, so I could get the answers I need. Still, they are a generally untrustworthy lot and I don’t want to risk the boatman tipping anyone off that a nosy American has arrived. I’m deposited in the port of Socoa, which is full of fishing boats bearing fishermen bearing scowls as we pull in to dock.

Right across the bay, is a fort with a private beach and lots of yachts docked in front⁹. As forts go, this is a small one, but looming over the Mediterraneanish coastline, it does cut an imposing figure. That seems as good a place as any to start. I mean, how many places in this area already have a dungeon built-in? I make the short walk over and take a tour of the place. It turns out the boats docked here belong to members of a private sailing club that use this as their base. The fort, Forte de Socoa, was built by Henry IV in 1628. The tour only has access to the outer area, which allows for some pretty great photos and little else. So the tower, inner part of the fortress, and seawall are closed off to tourists as well as club

⁹ [http://i-cms.linternaute.com/image cms/original/229879-le-fort-de-socoa-a-ciboure.jpg](http://i-cms.linternaute.com/image/cms/original/229879-le-fort-de-socoa-a-ciboure.jpg)

members, which makes it an excellent choice as a hiding place. At the end of the tour, I go to the Information area and ask if there is anyone with the name "Jouhaud" working here at the fort. As it isn't a Basque name, it should stand out quite a bit here. He who dares wins! There is a groundskeeper here named Martín Jouhaud. That settles it, I'm coming back tonight. No, I don't want to meet him, thank you. Time is a factor and no part of me thinks that a conversation with this guy will end in a personal escort into the bowels of this place where I will find a bearded Italian artist chained to a stone wall and we can just walk out together. Instead, I'm coming back cocked, locked, and ready to rock. On the mainland I arrange to buy two sets of diving equipment, then find the closest hotel and book a room.

At 1:00 AM I leave the hotel, dive into the Bay of Biscay as discreetly as I can and make my way to the back of the fort. There's a road I could take that would bring me right to the entrance gate without getting wet, but it's closed at this hour and I don't have any equipment for climbing the exterior wall. Besides, I can't take the gamble that they don't have lookouts in the tower. Coming in by water at night wearing a black wetsuit makes me pretty hard to see so I have a good shot to get inside undetected.

Scaling the rocks isn't nearly the feat I thought it might be. The tide is pretty low at night and the eroded rocks provide lots of breaks for climbing. I stash the tanks, masks, and flippers on a mossy ledge just below the rampart then check my HK USP Tactical pistols (both with silencer and light of course). Because I was traveling to a place like Bilbao that's so close to so much water, I'd decided to bring weapons that won't jam if they get wet. Both guns are good. I keep the one from the shoulder holster out, replacing the other in its thigh holster. I hop up to a higher area and jump over the wall. I'm not expecting armed guards, but I can't really prepare for what I don't know, so I have to be ready for as much as I can think of; which is really just a complicated way of saying "Better safe than sorry."

The pictures I took during the tour helped give me an idea of the layout of this place, but not nearly enough of an idea to not still get lost as Hell. My best guess is that they're keeping him in the lower part of the tower. Of all the places not open to the public, that is the one least likely to be used by the staff. There's no direct entrance to the tower from where I'm standing, but a quick jog around to the other side presents me with an

entrance. It's locked, but two good shots alleviate that problem. Inside, the place is particularly dark and dank, but I kind of expected that. There is a stone staircase leading up and another leading down. There's no movement in either direction, so I opt for down. The spiral stairs are sturdy and not crumbling to dust under my footfalls. For a place that probably sees very little use, it is in quite good condition.

Upon reaching the bottom of the stairs, I am able to hear voices coming from behind me. Now below ground, I can see that the space expands into a labyrinth of small rooms and narrow hallways. There are rooms scattered throughout with small, flickering light but at the foot of the staircase I still have to strain to focus my vision. As I'm watching shadows move in a lit room down the hall, I realize that I also smell food cooking. Venturing a guess, I'd say it's a lamb stew. I decide to move toward the light in front of me. There could be just one guy in that room or there could be five. Behind me, there's more than one voice for sure, so I'll take my chances up ahead.

Slithering along the wall, I make my way forward like Sam Fisher from Splinter Cell. As I inch closer, the smell of the stew grows stronger. That must mean I'm heading to the kitchen. And then something occurs to me. There are clearly several men down here, so my hunch seems to have been right. And if that's the case, it would make sense that they spend their days sleeping - to avoid the inclination to move around, and potentially be seen by any wandering eyes. With at least one groundskeeper making sure others stay away, they have a good cover, but still, why take chances, right? I must be walking into lunch time for the nocturnes.

The first question I have is: who are these guys? The second question is: what is the likelihood that there are unarmed men protecting a prisoner? Answer: it isn't very likely. Wonderful, everyone is awake and presumably armed. Too bad I left my bullet-proof wetsuit back in the hotel. As to who these guys are, maybe some of the more militant members of the ETA that our friend Didiane was able to convince to help her. I could see that. The more I think about this, the less I like it. Fuck it. To quote the great Reggie Noble, time 4 sum aksion.

With a quick turn I'm facing the kitchen area and doing a scan with my gun light. There's one hostile with his back to me stirring the stew with an AK-47 strapped to his back. Oh, and he's eating a tomato like an apple. I should shoot him just for that. Despite this thought I'm about to let him

live and move on. But then he turns and sees me. He reaches for a nearby butcher knife, but I put one in his throat before he even realizes he hasn't made it. He stares back at me, losing all focus on the knife - choking will do that to you, but his hand is still desperately searching for the blade. He finally drops like a sack of potatoes. I continue on through the subterranean hive, checking each room for Arcangelo Buoniconti.

I find him sleeping in a dark room and shine my light to make him stir. As he groggily comes into consciousness, I grab him roughly and usher him out of the room. Hopefully he's got no fight left in him and is used to being moved around, because I don't have the time to stop and explain things. We make it back to the staircase without any trouble and as we near the top I see a shadow coming down. I bum rush the man coming down and slam his head into a stone stair. He's out before he even knows what's up but won't be down long so we really have to hurry. That little exchange gets Buoniconti's attention. We run around the tower back to the rampart where our diving equipment is waiting. He's asking questions to which I pay no attention. Still, I take a moment to tell Arcangelo one very important thing.

"Fiorella sent me."

"I can't swim," is his panicked reply.

That's when all the gunfire starts. They do have a spotter and he has terrible aim, but he does have a machine gun. We hop over the parapet and duck down. At this angle, bullets fired from the tower can't hit us, but all the shooting will surely have alerted the others. Tempting as it may be, we can't dash for the road because we'd be out in the open. That means we have to stay and fight. Taking out all these guys is going to involve a lot of runnin' and gunnin'; just like in Contra, only I have pistols instead of plasma canons. Anywhere else we go now ends in water, so we'll need to double back here to make our getaway. It's going to require some trust and suspension of disbelief from Mr. Arcangelo Buoniconti in order for us to make it off this rock together. When I tell him as much, he just winks his agreement. I'm starting to like this guy.

Scrambling to the other side of the grass, we go over the wall and drop eleven feet to another grassy area below. We make quick time running the length of the grass and onto a slight incline leading into a small courtyard. There's no one here yet, so I run like a madman back to the entrance of the tower where I expect to see an outpouring of armed guards (at some point here, in my mind, Arcangelo and I became Butch Cassidy & The Sundance Kid).

There are a few men heading up the steps carrying assault rifles and shouting God knows what in Basque. I jump into the doorway and start firing with both pistols, managing to take down the first three scumbags. They tumble backwards, taking the rest down with them. That should buy us a little time to make some distance so I can start to thin this herd and pick 'em off more easily. Only then can we leave this place without the fear of hot lead in our back.

As I make my mad dash to the small wall that separates the grassy area around the tower area from the courtyard, a hail of bullets follows. Unscathed, I am able to rejoin Arcangelo, who is crouched behind the wall. Good, now I can rid us of that spotter. I really do hate machine guns. I could've killed me five minutes ago, with a lot less bullets, and would be enjoying a nice bowl of hot lamb stew right now. Lucky for us, I'm not up there. Instead of windows, the tower has two-foot high slits all around it. There are only so many places the bastard could stash himself and still be able to shoot at us. At every break in gunfire, I pop up and take a shot at a different slit. On the third try, I get my man.

Just on the other side of the courtyard is the supply store / gift shop. We run for it and crouch behind a bush. On the other side of this building is a parking lot. Beyond the parking lot there is a ten-foot drop off leading to the beach. The alternative is to try the boathouse to our right, but I don't like that idea at all. The possibility of being trapped like rats in there is way too much of a risk. I kick in a window to the store, but we don't go in. Instead, we stay down behind a nearby bush. Bullets rip through the side of the building near where I kicked in the glass. Four men with machine guns run over to the area and I push Arcangelo out to get him running. I jump out right behind him and lay down cover fire. We run back across the courtyard and down the ramp we came up, which leads to the entrance gate. It's about a fifty yard run, so after I let off a few shots to keep the pursuers honest, I focus on running like my life depends on it. It just happens to. More bullets follow eventually, but we make it to the entrance. There's a chain with a huge padlock wrapped around the closed gate. I take the lead and start shooting at it as we get closer. I slam my body into the gate, forcing it open with a loud crash and bang. It hurts something fierce, but fuck that.

Once we clear the entrance way, I wave Arcangelo forward, and he keeps running. I fall into a comfortable position on my back with my left gun

trained on the top of the wall and my right gun pointed at the gate. Next to the ramp we took is that elevated grassy area and the guys behind us could have easily taken it to gain the high ground and rain down Hell on us as we made a run for the road. It's what I would do, but I can't leave this last part to chance.

Of course the bastards have to make it tough. There's a guy I can see stopping just before the gateway to take aim at Arcangelo. I squeeze my right trigger then immediately look up and shoot down the other man now standing on the wall taking aim at me. With him gone, I concentrate on the man I wounded on the other side of the entryway. Still shooting, I rise to my feet and walk through the gate, until he finally goes down for good. You may say that it was shitty to use Buoniconti as bait, and it was, but if those guys didn't see someone running away who knows what they would have done. I needed this to end now.

Back at my hotel, we don't speak. I don't know what the last few days have been like for him, though can't see any visible bruises or scars. He doesn't seem interested in talking about it and I won't press him. I likewise do not mention the auction, nor do I presume that he has any idea why he was even kidnapped. He sleeps very well. Maybe it's because I am here or maybe it's just because this has been the most stressful thirty minutes of his life, preceded by the most stressful week of his life. No rest for the wicked, though. I reload my pistols, have two neat fingers of Gentleman Jack, and watch the door to my room like a hawk until sunrise.

Madrid - The next day we're in Arcangelo's hotel. I texted Fio last night and if I know her at all, she'll be here in a few hours. There are several reasons why I won't be here for the joyous reunion, but the only one that matters is that it deserves to be a private moment between Arcangelo and Fiorella. I arrange a security detail through the hotel, so the archangel will be safe. I can't stop thinking about Didiane Jean Marc though. Eight men died last night for her cause and where is she? I wish I could say that I won't rest until she's brought to justice but the fact of the matter is that I just don't have the goddam time for that. I got the happy ending. Justice will just have to wait.

New York - At home there's a new package from Japan waiting for me. Inside is a pair of receipt panties. This one is light pink with two little cherries on the crotch and another hand-written note:

“I wore these while doing your assignment. The \$5,000 balance due has been debited from your bank account. Thanks! XOXOXO -LA Anime”

Dunior must never know of these. And, speak of the Devil, in he walks grinning from ear to ear.

“Man, thanks for hooking me up with that subscription to LA Anime's web site! Did you see the new video of her with the hoola hoop and roller skates? Dude, that chick's got an ass like a 10-year old boy!”

I'm unable to hand out the tongue-lashing he deserves for that last comment because a postcard that was under LA Anime's envelope catches my eye. It's a picture of a graffiti mural with the artist, a short-haired woman in silhouette crouching down, gazing up longingly at the artwork. The mural shows eight men standing with their hands tied behind their back, each wearing a black blindfold and smoking a cigarette. Every one of them has bullet holes in him, but instead of blood, the Basque flag leaks out of their wounds. The back of the postcard just says “Never Forget.”

END