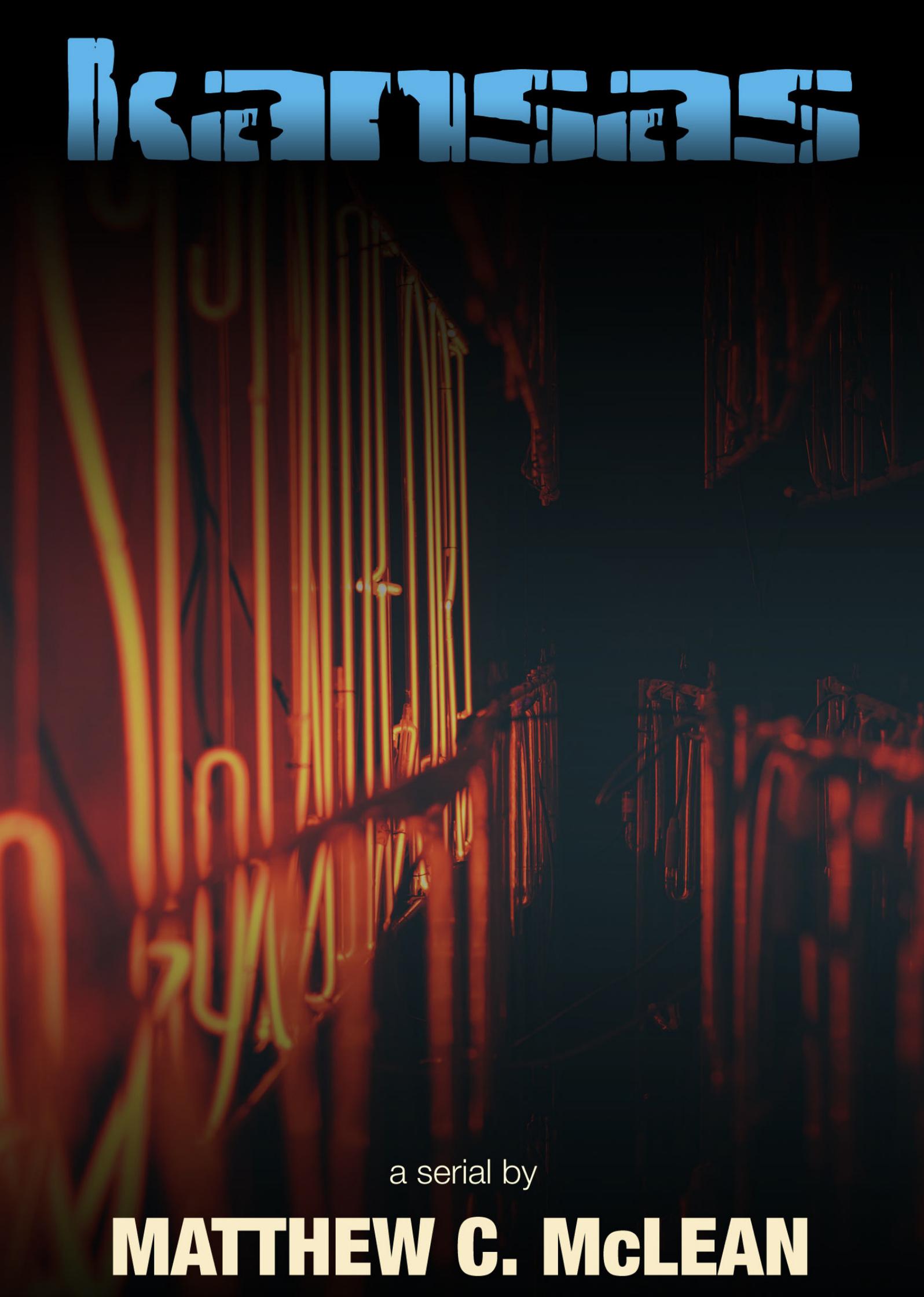


ROADHOUSE



a serial by

MATTHEW C. McLEAN

Kansas

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CHAPTER ONE

Awakening (by Bryan Cole)

The air stirred as the bandaged man stumbled around the dark apartment.

The shades were a yellowed and grimy color from the years of neglect and indulgence by the countless occupants of the room. They cracked open as the bandaged man worked the plasti-resin rod affixed to the top of the window.

Outside, the metropolis beckoned, but it, as many things, would have to wait. The bandaged man had only just begun to regain consciousness for more than a few minutes at a time. The dust leapt in between the rays of light afforded by the slats, and their hypnotic pattern nearly enticed the bandaged man back to sleep, but the buzzing of the alarm clock interrupted his trance.

Instinctively, his hands felt the bandages and his memory began to replay what had transpired to place him here in this room, his head wrapped in some mockery of an Islamo-fascist. An operation. It began to hazily replay itself in his mind. Dragon had set him up with a surgeon to get that god-damned bomb out of his skull. He contemplated removing the bandages to check the work, but decided against it after seeing the various stains on the artificial carpet and the general condition of the room in which he found himself.

Under the pillow he found the 14mm sidearm he had grown to rely on, its bulk and recoil only manageable by the augmented, which the bandaged man certainly was. Obviously, whoever had placed him here had left this as well, the bandaged man wondered if he had told someone to do that or not.

The suspicion vanished as he wandered over to the standing sink/toilet and removed the steri-lite toothbrush and nano-paste, operating on auto-pilot now as he brushed his teeth and made his body as comfortable as possible. The nanites that were slowly sewing his skull and skin together would require plenty of fluids. This he remembered from the 'briefing' before his operation. Food wasn't as much a concern since the nanites would not need to live longer than was necessary to repair him, and even that was almost a formality as his boosted immune system would aid in the healing process. Water had electrolytes, and electrolytes, as he'd learned when he'd first been augmented, were the lion's

share of the nanites' energy-source.

Back in the main part of the room he found the 4 litre canteen under the bed, and drained half of it in a matter of moments. Feeling more awake, he took in the efficiency in which he found himself. A simple viewscreen, with a large crack through it, stood in one corner next to a rotted card table and what could only passably be called chairs. Deciding the bed was the safest of the furniture in his room, the bandaged man sat back down and stretched his neck.

A half-lit outline of a sat-scramble pager revealed itself in his peripheral vision on the nightstand next to the bed. Instinctively, the bandaged man grabbed it and punched in a number he knew by memory.

The sat-scramble pager went green as it synched to Dragon's pager, delivering the pre-programmed message that the bandaged man had programmed in before the operation.

"Condition Five by Five. Headache Gone. Awaiting contact."

CHAPTER TWO

Success

****BEGIN ENCRYPTION****

Dragon-san:

It is my utmost hope that your new optical unit is operating correctly. If it has not suited you, we have kept your M-518 unit in cyrogenic freeze as per your request. It is still keyed to your genetic code.

Butcher-san is recovering from cranial surgery better than expected. Your claims to his constitution were not unwarranted. Your prize for the wager has been sent to the designated drop point.

Regardless, I must assist upon payment. The device extracted was quite lethal. Any misstep on my part would have resulted in the damage of much equipment, his death and the end of my career. Your understanding is greatly appreciated. As our dealings have always been pleasant (if less than \ '喀"J) in the past I am assured that you will keep your end of our bargain.

As per his instructions he is being moved at regular intervals. Unfortunately, I am unable to disclose his location. I beg your forgiveness, but this is at his instruction also. He assured me that you will be able to contact him at the appropriate time.

Sincerely,

医从 生命ノ

****END ENCRYPTION****

CHAPTER THREE

Bochum

Lawrence Dragowski was a man who did not fit in. After spending half a lifetime pushing others to conform, he had arrived at a time and place where he did not.

Bochum (is/was) a city of models and movies, Germany's sophisticated answer to Hollywood. Beauty as common as it is cheap.

Sitting in a lounge chair in one of the Langendreer sector's opulent night clubs, the lifetime of injuries and hardships on his face made him stand out as if one of the multi-color spotlights from the stage were pointed right at him. He scratched at his right eye, still uncomfortable with the new cybernetic model that had been implanted. Even the best surgeon had been unable to remove the scar that the outdated model had left around the orbital bump.

Dragon kept his German idiom chipset intentionally intermediate, tipping off anyone who had not noticed from his dress that he was American. The small cigars he smoked resembled something out of an old cowboy vid.

By not fitting in, Dragon had found, he was finally able to have all of the things in his life that he thought were meant for others. Money, women, a small measure of power, and (most importantly) freedom all came to him. At the same time, he became invisible, at a glance, just another tourist. But many people in Bochum needed something different and a good look told them that Dragon was it.

He gave a broken grin to a gaggle of young women that were eyeing him. He considered buying a round when he felt his beeper go off. A message scrolled across the backlit screen:

CONDITION FIVE BY FIVE. HEADACHE GONE. AWAITING CONTACT.

Dragon's smile widened a notch. The Butcher had made it after all.

He touched the beeper to the subdermal datajack in his wrist. The message was encrypted, of course, but he could still pull down some source information.

He closed his eyes, letting the information cascade down the back of his lids.

Korea. Damn – he was still too hot after the Fujitsu job to go anywhere near the Pacific Rim. Even going into Kharagpur for a quick 'nap had gotten a slamhound put on his trail.

Dragon thought for a moment. One of the women waved shyly at him and he rewarded her bravery with another broken grin. Looking at her, he thought, "Of course." He touched the beeper to his wrist again, transmitting his message.

****BEGIN ENCRYPTION****

MOSCOW. ALON BAR. ASK FOR ALEK. SHE'S WITH THE RUSSIANS TOO.

END ENCRYPTION

CHAPTER FOUR

Mag-Lev (by Bryan Cole)

The mag-lev train sped past the glacial landscape. Hatcher Aspen, dispossessed, watched quietly out the carriage window at the pristine scenery speeding past. The near-solid white, only occasionally punctuated by glimmers of grey from the sky or patches of civilization, made it difficult to determine the actual speed of the Russo-Fuchida mag-lev train.

The slow boat out of Kangnung had been easy, just a stowaway on a cargo ship til it hit the docks at Vladivostock, then some hitchhiking and backpacking to Korfovskiy, a ticket onto the railway and the fast-track across Russia. Although the railway could be joined at Vladivostock, it would be too risky to pop up at the very edge of a country, and at a seaport at that. Hatcher would have to be as deliberate as possible, and leave the smallest trail he could. The caution of his career became second nature. The hardest part, he thought, as the train announced its impending stop (one of two per day) and began to slow, was not knowing when you could turn the paranoia off. The vids would always show the agents slipping over the border in mere moments, and then on to the glitzy locales or the extravagant underground bases or the comical firefights, but they never showed the hours and hours of waiting. The mind-numbing downtime that he'd learned to cope with in the Forces.

The easy part had been getting the language chips for the journey, and trying to figure out what areas the trip might take him through that he would need to plan for. His only real panic so far had come from the immigration and customs officials when he materialized to get his ticket for the railway. Hatcher half wondered if maybe the fuss had actually come from the inefficiency that still plagued Russia to this day, their inheritance from the bankruptcy of communism. They understandably had some trouble verifying his identity, but after several reboots of the ticketeer's workstation and some frenzied typing by his supervisor, they had finally found a matching record for Hatcher's assumed persona. They explained that although it wasn't uncommon to see farmers take the railway to visit the western provinces, since he hadn't ever left the country or utilized Russia's 'glorious public transportation system' before, his record had, regrettably, been archived at central servers in the Moscow Department of Transportation annex. Displaying the impatience that men of the earth had for

computers and their electronic magic, Hatcher had pushed his hand but not overplayed it, expressing his disgust of this new chair-ridden society that went against the grain of all 'real' working Russians.

It helped that he looked older than he was.

It hadn't escaped him later, once the train got moving, that this may have been a ruse to draw time. But since they hadn't swooped in and tried to take him, or sent anyone to tail him (that he could tell) he chose not to drive himself mad over the possibilities.

There would be time for that once he hit eastern Europe. Once Hatcher got to Kharkov, he would have to debark the train, get his way into the Ukraine from there to Moscow. He figured on at least four more border crossings. That was his minimum exposure, and he knew that the law of averages was bound to tack a couple more onto that already very conservative guess.

Out the window, the distant gleam of Lake Baikal reflected the grey sky overhead. With the train stopped, the porters loaded meals and conveniences onto the mag-lev as the clock beat down. The teams were so efficient that they could have the work done in less than the proscribed thirty minute clock, but sometimes tourists wanted to hop off the train for a short walk or to visit the kiosks and stores setup at the station; tourist traps, mainly, and maybe a restaurant or two. Hatcher noted that a drink was starting to sound like a good idea.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Nazi

If you were Italian, Japanese or German, and in Moscow, the Alon Bar was the place to be. A bar for expatriates, it could provide all of the comforts of home, even for Americans. Francesco Basso desperately wanted to get there.

Stumbling down the alley, he felt as if he were extremely drunk. He knew then with certainty, he had been badly hurt. He crashed into cold mortar, lurching into one of the buildings that formed the lane he moved down. He stopped for a moment, panting, feeling life drain out of him. A constriction in his chest moved him on.

After an endless mile, he stumbled onto the back stairs of the building for which he had been searching. The sign above read EXIT in dull red letters. Below, painted on the door, were the words ALON BAR.

Francesco collapsed on the stairs, rapping on the bottom of the door with the strength he could muster. He would never know how long he lay there.

The door opened and a man in a dark suit stepped out. He reached and pulled Francesco halfway off the hard stairs. For a moment, all Francesco could see were a pair of beautiful, feminine feet standing in superb Italian shoes next to the man who held him.

He couldn't move, but his head rose. His vision traveled from the feet, up the legs, and eventually came to rest on the face of a beautiful, blonde woman.

In his delirium, Francesco thought, "She's a Nazi."

A disembodied voice said, "Alek?"

The Nazi spoke, gesturing inside.

"Bring him in."

CHAPTER SIX

The Operators (by Bryan Cole)

The Lada '15 slid to a halt in front of the Alon bar, and the bulky, dark clad figure that emerged paused briefly to pay the driver, then crossed the street to the cart-vendor who was peddling Arabic coffee and blintzes. Hatcher got a coffee and a couple of pancakes, then had a quiet breakfast while he scanned for a tail.

After a few minutes, he crossed back to the other side of the street and walked in past the ferro-crete and faux wood exterior, the dim neon ALON BAR sign (in the local streetspeak of Cyrillic and English) only barely visible in the light of a sunny, snow-riddled Moscow morning. The bar looked nothing like its exterior component.

As an operator for the majority of his adult life, Hatcher first took notice of the windows and doors within the space he found himself. Exits were priority since he was essentially unarmed. The next thing that took hold of his attention was the striking Nordic lady sitting calmly at the bar. She appeared to be checking through a datapad, but Hatcher noticed that her drink hand had disappeared casually underneath the bar when he had directed his gaze in her direction.

Grinning, he strolled to the bar, trying without difficulty to keep the lovely blonde in view while scoping for security within the bar. If Dragon had told him this was the place, Hatcher felt that it would no doubt be friendly. Experience, however, told him to keep his eyes open and his head up.

"Kak vas zavoot?" He rolled out as he sat at a stool one removed from the lovely blonde.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand," she said back, her eyes turning towards him with that familiar mix of curiosity and disgust that only Hatcher could elicit. He switched back to English subconsciously, but he was aware of an additional presence moving in the area.

The guy was good, too, his footsteps almost in perfect unison with the

bartender. Almost.

“Look, there’s no need for trouble. Tell your man that I’m unarmed. I’m here because a mythical creature told me to come.”

The lady looked at Hatcher sideways for a moment before cracking a smile. “I’ve heard Dragon called a bunch of things, but ‘mythical’ is definitely a first.”

Hatcher smiled back. This was definitely more friendly territory than he’d known in a while.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Scalpel

Alek had learned that Russia was the place for a free agent. In the control zone of the European Union, it took years to acquire the contacts needed to do any real business. The Middle East was too dangerous, too religious, or too radioactive for a woman to work.

Dragon's money and contacts, plus her charm, had been all that it had taken to set up shop in Moscow. The Alon Bar was proof of that. The local outfits had been a challenge at first, but they had seen the use of having an outside player. With the local economy it only took a modest cut of the take to operate unmolested.

When 'mythical' Dragon's friend showed up, the bar hadn't even begun its real evening operations. While the place was quiet she made polite conversation with the beast, even flirting when she felt safe. To his credit she could discern very little from his demeanor or what he said in the time they had together. He was smart enough to keep conversation at civilian level while they were at the bar, never mentioning why he was there or from where Dragon had summoned him.

It wasn't long before the evening crowd had come in, Russians mixing with expatriates. Mobsters and polizei mingled with the foreigners, lifting bribes from the knowing and gifts from the naïve. Alek gave a smile to the Butcher she didn't know and excused herself. His discomfort was almost undetectable.

She walked past the bar, into the kitchen. An iron door flanked by large men opened at the rear and she walked into a cold, grey room. The door closed behind her leaving her with the two men inside.

The man standing carried a scalpel and gauze. Alek smelled the vodka on him as she approached the table in the middle of the room.

Francesco Basso lay on the table, his blood flowing from him and pooling at Alek's feet. She looked down at him and gave him her most gentle smile.

“Franco,” she blinked, keeping her composure without much effort. “Where is it?”

Laying there on the cold metal table Francesco smiled for the first time in what felt like an eternity. “I have it.”

Alek returned his broken smile and laid a cool, calming hand on his forehead, gently brushing his hair away from his face.

“Good.” She dropped her hand to brush the back of her hand against his cheek. “Where is it?”

Francesco coughed, still smiling. With much effort he raised his left hand and pointed at his rib cage. “I carry it.”

Alek straightened, pulling away from Francesco. Her face grew harder than a beauty should be. She turned to the other man, leaning forward until she couldn’t stand the smell any longer. “Cut him open. Get it.”

She gave a sad smile to Francesco and left.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mesh (by Bryan Cole)

The mesh confounded Hatcher almost as much as it had helped him. Designed for covert ops to mask artificial limbs against casual scans, the synthetic mesh was not quite as fragile as a butterfly's wing, but it certainly did not appreciate rough handling. Hatcher had made it part of his post-op recovery regimen, and had gingerly kept it moist and wrapped using paper towels, old newspaper, and, on the Trans-Siberian mag-lev, rolls of toilet paper. He knew that Dragon would have the contacts necessary to get him some more, but he carefully worked the electric weave back into evenly dispersed bunches so that he could at least get to Dragon. His scan-defeating lacework back in place, Hatcher carefully re-wrapped his arm with the polyprene diving material he'd acquired during a lunchtime shopping trip. Putting his jacket back on he walked out from the bathroom stall after giving another flush to the pressure-toilet.

The highly attractive, if strangely calm, lady was back at the bar. She was one of those people who could look composed sitting in the middle of a typhoon. A beauty that came about from a strongly centered peace of mind. Hatcher felt uncomfortable with all the activity in the club. The urban jungle had never really taken to Hatch the way that the Malaygay jungles had, although he had since learned many tricks that would help conceal him in the concrete version.

"I hope you remembered to wash your hands?" The blonde vision remarked to him as he sat down to a (thankfully full) glass of bourbon.

"Yeah. They teach you that in the service." He remarked, hoping to get something resembling conversation rolling with this snippet of voluntary information.

"Really? Big guy like you, I figured you for a dilettante, arguing at the cafe with the proletarianiks about the state of the world." Hatcher wasn't bright in the book-smart sense, but he got the jab.

"Well, I needed to do something to help me sound smart." He was wandering out into deep here. Best to switch tracks if he got the opportunity.

"I need you for something." She said to him, cutting the dialogue and looking directly at him.

"Sure ma'am. Is this professional....or personal?" Absolute cheese, he thought. Why did you even go there?

"I'm afraid it's professional, but for you, I imagine, possibly personal as well." Was this lout hitting on her? It's a good thing Dragon doesn't have tits, Alek thought. "I think you'd appreciate a slightly warmer climate. And Dragon would like to see you as well. That is after all why you travelled all the way from..."

"A good ways off, yes." Hatcher finished her question. He had gotten used to the mixed feelings he could produce. A man could only carry so much death with him until the smell permeated all he wore. Or touched. He blanched, as he always did, at the thought of his past.

"Nothing too dramatic. No suitcases or disks, I'm afraid." Alek handed over what looked to Hatcher to be a keychain. "I'd like you to take it to Dragon for me. He's at his casino in Madrid. We can arrange for papers to get you to Spain, and I understand that I am to offer you a train ticket to assist you in getting there if you would like."

"That'd be great." Hatcher didn't fume on the outside, but his pride took a moment to struggle with the concept: Errand boy. Still, he'd get to see Dragon, and that was why he'd come all this way in the first place, wasn't it? Didn't he want to see the man who'd helped him get free? A part of him realized that this was the foreseeable future. He owed Dragon; owed him a good deal. He'd need to learn to suppress these reactions or risk offending the wrong person...or worse still, isolate himself from a very powerful person in the European community. If he was going to play ball he would need to be ready to do mundane work, and he suppressed the urge to explore what else might be mundane. Time had dulled his sense to how much Dragon had helped him before and he reminded himself that he would do well to start remembering.

Within the hour Hatcher had finished two bourbons, been given his train ticket along with his bar tab. Hatcher clipped the keychain onto the aluminum keys he had picked up from a vendor in the streets of Korfovskiy: Better to look like he had somewhere that only he could get into. It was the little things that counted when you wanted to avoid surveillance.

He contemplated saying goodbye to the blonde, but thought better of it and faded into the Moscow streets. He was sure they would be watching for a portion of his journey anyway, just to make sure he wasn't going to burn them.

The Byelorussky Station was every bit as matter-of-fact as it could be. The

strata of society represented in the station's lines was quite narrow, quite smelly, and very loud. Identity number two, Javier Pavlovovich, son of a Russian father and Spanish mother, boarded Express No. 3094 at 02:00 (a.m.) Moscow Standard Time. Settling into his coach carriage and getting the complimentary pillow and blanket from the storage bin, Hatcher got ready to grab some downtime before the sun beat a path into the carriage. As Hatcher nodded off he calculated in his head that he had about 12 hours on the train until they crossed into Spain.

Thinking about the blonde he wondered, as he always did when his brain was restless, how things could have been different.

CHAPTER NINE

Surveillance

Jhel Phen looked at the earnest young woman in front of him and gave her his most comforting smile. He made certain to keep any hint of sexuality out of it, but that was easy for him. Jhel categorized his smiles and demeanors the way other lesser creatures categorized their wardrobes. He was aware of himself and the impression he gave to others at any given moment.

“Dr. Xiaong, I know that a lifetime contract with GT can be an unsettling prospect at first. You’ve put a great deal of time into your academic work and the value of your knowledge and intelligence are...” he paused, looking away to break contact, feigning sheepish awe. He looked up at her, making sure to catch her eyes and bring the smile up an octave. “Well, quite astounding.”

Draw the features in, bring the serious. “But think of what GT has to offer you. The resources that GT can put at your disposal for your research is unparalleled by any organization on Earth. Imagine what you could do with – “

The beeping of his smartphone was both unexpected and unwelcome. Jhel could feel that he was close to pulling Xiaong in. He was reaching down to shut it off when he recognized the notification tone. The confusion that this produced almost broke his smile, but his control set in.

“Excuse me for a moment.” Unclipping it from his belt, he knew who he would fire if he missed this hire. “I have to take this.” Standing up from the immaculate leather chair, Jhel knew that he looked good in the afternoon light coming in through the office windows behind him. He walked into the bathroom adjacent to his office. He opened the door and closed it behind him in such a way that Dr. Xiaong wouldn’t see the porcelain.

“What” the question sent spittle from his lips, “the fuck is it?”

“Uh,” the syllable was enough for Jhel to recognize the voice of Lee, his pet technician. “Sir, a flag just went up.”

“This fucking well better not be about the Canadian negotiation.” Jhel

lowered his voice. He knew the bathroom was soundproofed against the office, but you never knew who was listening.

“No sir. It’s about Kansas.”

There was an explicit understanding between the two never to mention this. The mention of it almost made bladder control an issue for Jhel. He was suddenly glad he was in the bathroom.

“Where are you?”

“Control Room 3RC, sir.”

“I’ll be down in one minute.”

Jhel knew from Xiaong’s files that she preferred green tea with honey. Spiking it with endorphins would hold her for long enough.

The executive elevator took only a few minutes. Stepping off into the sterilized halls of a non-existent basement floor, Jhel found his way to Control Room 3RC in little time. Hitting the biometric security, he pushed open the heavy door and stepped through in record time. The room was dark except for the flood of the monitors that lit Lee’s face.

Jhel walked up up behind the technician, standing at his left shoulder. “My quarterly bonus is upstairs and high. You have 15 minutes.”

Lee pulled a series of images off the bank of screens using his multi-touch sensor. They floated there as he highlighted a series of events.

“I’ve been following a package. We’ve got reconnaissance assets in the area.” With a snap of the glove Lee brought forward an image of a crumbling building front. It had a single sign that read, ALON BAR.

“The assets tracked the package here. When it remained stationary, observation was set up.”

“That doesn’t look like Kansas.” Jhel pointed at the floating image, some superstitious part of him preventing him from actually touching it.

“Moscow.”

“What, exactly, does this have to do with Kansas?” said Jhel, successfully managing not to spit.

“Wait.” Speaking and pointing, Lee pulled in another screen. Motion jumped in the illusion. A figure stepped out of that bar’s front opening and moved to the street, hailing a taxi. Judging by the number of people on the street, it must have been the dead of night.

The video held no value for Jhel, who was about to make that point very clear when Lee reversed the motion of the video and froze it. Pinching the taxi-hailer between thumb and forefinger, Lee magnified the face. A green, square halo appeared around the magnification and cleared up the resolution. Jhel recognized the face immediately as Lee pulled it into focus.

“It’s Kansas, sir.”

CHAPTER TEN

On Approach (by Bryan Cole)

The man in camouflage crouched next to the jungle tree. Height was important. Most human beings instinctively look within a foot of their own head level when scanning for people. In the jungle, the eye gravitates to patterns that don't fit the native foliage. The camouflage that the man wore had been specially designed and tested to guarantee that, if used properly, it would never betray the wearer's outline. 'If used properly' was always the key phrase, Hatcher wryly noted to himself as he listened for movement in the stillness of the jungle. Hearing none beyond the normal bush cacophony he gingerly stepped forward, creeping from the cover of the tree in a slow deliberate movement to the next patch of shadow.

He was close now. Close enough to hear the movement of his target's clothes as he breathed.

Hatcher slowly moved the 14mm pistol down to his belt, still keeping it at the ready as his left hand unsheathed the polymer-edged combat knife. If the rabbit bolted, Hatcher would have to shoot him to stop him. As the point man for this excursion, Hatcher's primary responsibility was to be the eyes and ears for his team, and secondly to remove those obstacles that could not be circumvented, such as this sentry. Hatcher switched the pistol to safe and let it glide back into the holster. The blade moved over to his right hand, his augmented arm would give him the needed strength to penetrate the target's rib cage and puncture the lung.

Hatcher's left hand came up and around the guerrilla's bandolier, using it as a noose for the man's neck. Pulling him back and to the left, he exposed the right kidney and, when the man's right arm came up to fight the choke, the right side of his rib cage. A quick and distinct 'snap' later, and Hatcher's knife had found its way through the rib cage and into the lung, breaking two ribs in the process. Extracting the blade, Hatcher then made another stab into the right armpit of the sentry to sever the brachial artery, then a final stab into the femoral artery of the sentry's right leg. Accelerated blood loss coupled with a collapsing lung would be messy, but it would also decrease the time Hatcher had to wait for the sentry's demise. After a moment of gurgled struggle, the sentry lay still.

The camouflaged man pulled the sentry's body carefully into the jungle's undergrowth. The firing pin was removed from his weapon, to be kept in Hatcher's pocket, while the weapon itself was to be hidden later during the march in a different patch of undergrowth. The rebels would scavenge every weapon they could in their struggle. Sometimes partially hidden weapons were boobytrapped to pick off the unwary, but the guerrillas had become smart about such 'discoveries,' and so the unofficially-sanctioned tactic had been discarded from the routine.

As Hatcher finished hiding the body, he glanced down at his arm. A caterpillar had crawled onto him during his tidying up of the kill site. He looked at the caterpillar, which would never know of the struggle raging around it, and let it crawl for a few centimeters before he reached for it to gently put it back onto the jungle floor.

Doing so, Hatcher noticed a cut on his arm, probably from the struggle with the sentry. The caterpillar had crawled through it, and had left a tiny smear with its tracks. Hatcher half smirked at a thought that he could not finish. As he watched, the caterpillar began to writhe uncontrollably, twisting and turning like a water hose that could not withstand the pressure of its contents. Within seconds, the healthy green of the caterpillar's skin turned an ashen grey, and then it crumbled into dust and ichor.

Having no time to react, Hatcher could only look at the scene with curiosity and disgust. The cut, now coated in the remnants of the caterpillar, appeared to defy this gruesome bandage and a drop of blood spilled onto the jungle floor. Instinctively, Hatcher clamped his augmented hand over the cut to staunch the bleeding. But before he could, he heard a sound so horrible his mind screamed at him to tear off his ears, to somehow stop it at any cost, but he was dumbstruck. His mouth dropped and his eyes widened as he looked around in horror, the jungle was dissolving into ash.

His eyes opened as the sunlight played into the window of the train's carriage. He sat up and rubbed his face for a second. Checking around the cabin he occupied, he could spot nothing out of the ordinary, certainly nothing that looked threatening. He unscrewed the cap off of the water bottle he had bought at the train station in Moscow and downed it within seconds. Through repetition he had trained himself to block out the horror of his dreams. Luckily, the really vivid ones that stuck with him seemed to only happen every few months, but Hatcher secretly wondered if the ones he couldn't remember were worse in their content.

Collecting his thoughts and double checking his papers as the automated conductor announced their impending arrival, Hatcher stretched his back and

legs and walked around the cabin to finish waking up. The overhead storage bin came open with a cursory grab of the handle and Hatcher reached in to grab his git bag but was unable to stop it from falling onto the floor of the cabin. Reaching to pick it up, he began to go over in his mind his security routine for exiting the Madrid train terminal. He heard the snap as he shouldered the git bag and knew that the scan-defeating mesh had finally stressed its last.

Ducking into a bathroom as soon as the train had stopped moving, Hatcher occupied one of the stalls long enough to remove the remaining mesh lest it start cracking and tearing while he was in public, possibly drawing unwanted attention. He tore it into manageable chunks and inserted them into the toilet for their watery send-off.

Shuffling with the rest of the passengers towards the train exit, Hatcher stepped into the warm, Spanish sunlight and donned his imitation Oakley-Chiba thermonuclear resistant polarized sunglasses. Hatched had bought the glasses simply because that bit of marketing nonsense had made him laugh. A brief walk through the terminal and he found himself outside trying to hail a cab.

He wondered how Dragon would look after all this time.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Verification

Jhel stared at the screen, the perfected resolution of Kansas staring right back at him. He looked at Lee, knowing he was the only person he could trust with this. Between the two of them they had enough dirt to cover a dozen graves.

“Give me a cigarette.”

Lee feigned confusion for a moment, putting up a puppet defense. “Sir, cigarettes have been illegal in California since '29.”

Jhel stood at Lee’s left shoulder and looked down at him. “Don’t play stupid. Where’s your black market now?”

Lee gave Jhel a hurt look, while reaching into his pocket for a pack. He pulled out the box with Chinese characters on the label that Jhel wouldn’t have recognized without his Chinese language wetchip.

A cloud of greedy smoke lit the small room with a luminescent blue from the computer monitors. Jhel exhaled, billowing anxiety.

“Are you sure that’s him? He’s supposed to be in Leavenworth.”

Lee paused for a moment and Jhel sensed his fear. “No, I can’t be completely sure without some biometric data. But the composite has only a 5% margin for error.”

Inhaling deeply, Jhel tossed the half finished cigarette to the ground. It was making him sick.

“We have to be sure.” He looked at Lee and gave him his most winning smile. “I guess we’re going to Leavenworth.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Reunion (by Bryan Cole)

Lawrence Dragonowski casually looked out over the square. The bar on the roof of his casino in downtown Madrid afforded him some degree of privacy in off-hours as well as giving him a somewhat decent view, at least of the park. The spiraling arcologies had successfully enshrouded several blocks of downtown Madrid as the corporates pursued their goal of masses of labor huddled together, and the masses pursued their goals of consuming and working and providing for their children, the perpetual force that kept the economy rolling.

Lawrence Dragonowski thought that was a fine goal, if one either: a) Had no ambition or; b) Had no desire to see something better for themselves or at least their family. Not having a family, the Dragon had only himself to better. His casino owed the existence of its relatively low roof to a unique series of events. The building was seen as being upon structurally unsound footing, not due to the quality of the construction material, but for the gap under it created by the failed attempt of fundamentalists to blow up a synagogue.

What the amateurs (Dragon couldn't help but think of them that way) hadn't realized was that the foundation of the building was built on top of poured ferrocrete and rebar supports, and that by planting their semtex under the structure, they had only killed themselves when their device triggered prematurely. The concussive pressure was enough to send a half dozen manhole covers rocketing several feet into the air around the block they had targeted.

Since then the synagogue had moved, more due to gentrification than religion. The city engineers, however, had disappointed the new developers: Rather than risk a high-rise on a dodgy block that could collapse if it was given too much strain, they simply invoked a vertical limit on the site and quietly closed the matter. In the interim period, some squatter had converted the temple to an unlicensed speakeasy.

Convincing the squatter to vacate the premises was one of those episodes that Dragon had always and would always remain reticent to disclose. Those events, though, had given the building a reputation for bad luck that Dragon had leveraged into a dark reputation that lured in gamblers.

"You still taking it easy, old man?"

The Dragon half-smiled as he turned part way to address his guest.

"Hard to do with you whippersnappers running things into absolute shit these days."

"And here I figured you'd have decided to make yourself less ugly with all this cred you've got banked."

From the Fuchida-Matsuro Capital firm occupying the fourth through the seventh floors of the Ichiban-Martinez building, Accounts-Surveyor Pablo Espadillo looked briefly out of the window in his cubicle (which had been his reward for saving the company 250,000 when he isolated a graft account being used by one of the less-liked executives of the company). He witnessed two rather burly-looking men hugging on the roof of the casino he walked past on his way to work.

"A gay bar, that's just great," he thought to himself as he settled back in to working on his resume.

Dragonowski noticed with some surprise how smoothly Hatcher had palmed the object from Moscow into his hand, and he subsequently slipped it into his pants pocket with equal dexterity. It would never appear around Hatcher, either in form or in topic, again. Dragon knew enough about Hatcher to know that there would be no questions.

"Heard you got your freedom. Glad to see you up and around."

"Thanks. Good to still be with the living."

Dragon cut off the comment in his head that formed in retort. Whatever time Hatcher had done in Leavenworth, and for all the action he must have seen in whatever black outfit they had volunteered him for, he still looked capable.

"Guess we'll need to get you situated. Figure out where the Hell you're gonna live."

"You mean I can't bunk with you, grandpa?"

"No, junior, you're a big boy now, and I need you somewhere handy but separate from me."

Hatcher nodded his head as they headed for the stairs back down to the

casino. If they were already setting up OPSEC for his stay in Madrid, then he suspected things were about to accelerate to his preferred pace.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Over Kansas

Jhel washed his hands in the aircraft basin and noticed the band-aid on his right hand. It was dirty and ripped, barely hanging on. He turned off the water and straightened as best he could in the small compartment. The mirror showed him more of the same.

Getting out from under the microscope of GeneTech was not easy, even with Lee's assistance. Faking vacation notices, re-directs, and travel plans for the time needed was a monumental effort that required social engineering as well as an understanding of the machine. Jhel and Lee couldn't rightly explain why they needed to take a trip to one of the oldest and biggest Federal prisons in nowhere, Kansas. The resulting effort had left him with little time to sleep over the past few days.

Jhel felt the bump as the Ground Effects Vehicle detached from the wing of the suborbital and began to drop. He straightened his tie as best he could and exited the basin, making his way to the cockpit.

Lee was wired into the GEV console through his multi-use tool. With the wetchips Jhel had requisitioned, Lee guided the aircraft down through the atmosphere in a near meditative state. Jhel remained quiet, not wanting to break his concentration.

The clouds were the only view from the cockpit for 15,000 feet. After that, the aircraft broke through and began its long elliptical landing pattern. As it swung around, Jhel could begin to make out the Fort Leavenworth compound. He stared at it intently, counting the buildings and playing other mental games.

Lee spoke in a distant voice, eyes not opening, "Uhhh...sir, I'm getting some rather disturbing news from the tower."

"What's that?"

"We're to land on Pad 3 where an honor guard is prepared to meet us."

Despite the numerous warning signs, Jhel unbuckled his seatbelt and stood to get a better look out of the cockpit window. As the GEV pulled its nose upwards and began to slow, Jhel could see a formation of men waiting on Pad 3.

“What in the Hell?” After going through numerous hoops to land at Fort Leavenworth covertly, the last thing he had expected was a red carpet.

The GEV touched down with the vent of hydraulics and the clank of steel on concrete. Lee opened his eyes. “Sorry, I couldn’t do anything about it. If I changed the landing pattern at the last minute the locals would be within their rights to shoot us out of the sky.”

Jhel looked out at the military formation just in front of the GEV. “No, no problem. We might be able to work this to our advantage.” He turned to leave the cockpit and Lee breathed a sigh of relief.

Landing complete, the belly of the GEV opened and Jhel stepped out, doing his best presidential imitation. Smiles and wave, keep moving and don’t answer questions. He approached the young woman in front of the formation and loudly stated, “I’m here to see Commander Reynolds.”

Her reply was lost in the sounds of the GEV’s turbines cooling, but she sharply turned and headed for an old HMMWV parked not far off Pad 3. Lee and Jhel climbed in with her.

A short drive through the compound ended at a brick building. Like most of the buildings it was short, ugly and looked like it could withstand a nuclear blast. Or a prison riot.

Without much discussion, the soldier led them through several security checkpoints and up flights of stairs. The walk ended at a finished wooden door that she knocked on. A curt, “Enter,” came from behind it.

Opening the door the soldier ushered Lee and Jhel in, standing aside to introduce them. “Garrison Commander Reynolds, your visitors, sir.”

Reynolds looked up from behind his desk, evaluating his visitors for a moment. Jhel took a moment to do the same.

Reynolds was obviously a professional, what some would call a career soldier. Older, he looked like he might have been carved from a block of wood. The various commendations and awards on his desk and decorating his shelves spoke of his life’s achievements. A quick glance told Jhel that most involved service at Fort Leavenworth. He had been here a long time.

Whatever Reynolds thought of Jhel and Lee, he kept it to himself. "Thank you, Corporal Jennings. You're dismissed." The corporal turned and left quickly, closing the door behind her.

Covering the distance from the door in long steps, Jhel stepped to the desk, extending a hand. His smile was confident, but he kept the usual warmth from it. The commander didn't seem like the type of man that would respond to that.

"Pleasure to meet you, sir. I'm Jhel Phen and this is my associate Lee Kennedy."

Reynolds took Jhel's hand, both men exerting more pressure in the greeting than necessary. "I know who you are, son. I approved the landing order myself. It's not every day that we get GT representatives down here."

Jhel retrieved his hand and Reynolds gestured to the chairs across his desk. As he sat Jhel replied, "Well that would explain the honor guard."

Reynolds smiled, "Well, we like to make everyone feel welcome."

Jhel felt his smile falter for a moment as he realized with certainty that the commander was lying to him. Reynolds was obviously a good poker player, but not much of a liar.

"Of course; it certainly worked." Smile back; shields up. "I know you're a busy man, so we won't take much of your time. We wanted to talk to you about one of your guests."

"Guests?" The commander raised an eyebrow, "That's certainly an interesting term. I don't think I'd invite any of these boys over for Sunday dinner."

"No, of course not."

"Regardless, I hope this isn't another offer from GT for biotesting on the prisoners. We said no to that in '35 and the military's position on that hasn't changed."

"No, commander, we're actually interested in a particular prisoner." Jhel felt his position weakening for no discernible reason. Something was going on here that he didn't know about.

"Really?"

"Yes, a certain Hatcher Aspen." Jhel took out his data tablet even though he had no need to consult it, "Prisoner Number 205587870, AKA Kansas."

"I know who he is," interrupted Reynolds. "The boys here call him by a different name, though. What do you boys want with the Butcher?"

Looking up from the tablet, Jhel was able to cover his surprise, "The Butcher?"

Leaning back in his chair, Reynolds reached for his cigar box, "Yessir. That's what the screws around here call him."

Jhel snuck a glance at Lee, who, not surprisingly, looked as surprised as Jhel felt. "Is this due to the incident in Malaygay?"

Jhel knew that Malaygay was the only reason Aspen could earn such an alias. It did come as a surprise, though, that the commander knew about it.

Rolling his cigar as he lit it, Reynolds took a moment to answer. Jhel saw the cigar for what it was; a tool. With the cigar as a prop, the commander could take as long in answering questions as he wanted. Also, the thick smoke from the Cuban made the air in the small office uncomfortably thick.

"Well, I'm not at liberty to give all the details, but the Butcher's here in Leavenworth for all the right reasons. During a military operation he killed a large number of foreign civilians. Apparently, it was pretty nasty stuff."

Jhel interjected, "The word genocide was mentioned."

Reynolds rolled a cloud of smoke out, looking at Jhel carefully. "Now why would you want to see a sunuvabitch like that for?"

"Sir," Jhel pulled on his business demeanor, professionalism at a shark level. "As you know due to our connections with the Federal government, GT has access to certain information. We have reason to believe that Aspen's actions in Malaygay and the resulting deaths were the result of a stolen meta-virus. We'd like to be investigate the possible connection."

"That incident happened several years ago. It took GT all this time to track that down?"

"We've been following any number of possible leads. The investigation has been slow going."

Reynolds chewed on the cigar and then shunted it to the corner of his mouth. "Well, sorry son. No one sees the Butcher. He's still in quarantine. He's been exposed to the agent a number of times and we're unsure of the effects it might

have on the general prison population.”

Small beads of sweat formed on the small hairs of Jhel’s neck. “Exposed to the agent? I’m not sure I understand commander.”

Demonstrating what Jhel knew to be feigned surprise, Reynolds replied, “Certainly you GT boys know about this. I mean, they call it the Kansas City Flu for fuck’s sake.”

It was Jhel’s turn to lie and he was much better at it than the commander. “Aspen grew up in Kansas City?”

“No, but there was an outbreak of the Flu on his farm here in Kansas. Hell, some of our boys worked the HazMat after we learned what it was.”

“So he was exposed to the agent here and then released it in Malaygay? How’s that possible?”

“I didn’t say that. Besides, I thought you said that the virus the Butcher used was of GT origin.”

Blinking in mock disbelief, Jhel replied, “Well, that’s not possible then. Experimenting with the Kansas City Flu and other retro-viruses was outlawed near the turn of the century. GT would never be involved in such an affair.”

Jhel’s exterior was impenetrable as he felt the commander’s gaze burn through the cloud of cigar smoke. “Of course.”

“Well, if the outbreak in Malaygay was somehow a result of Aspen’s exposure here in Kansas, then there couldn’t be any connection with the stolen meta virus.”

“Suppose not.” The commander used the burning tip of his cigar to emphasize the point, jabbing it at Jhel.

“Well then, sir, I’m sorry we wasted your time.” Jhel stood, Lee following suit.

“No trouble. Sorry you boys flew out here for no reason.”

Jhel and Reynolds exchanged poker smiles one last time, “Better to be safe than sorry.”

“Odd isn’t?” Reynolds asked as he escorted the two to the door. “The Kansas City Flu burned off so quickly it never left city limits. But then it shows up on the Aspen homestead and kills everyone but him. No other farms in the area were

exposed.”

“Of course, there weren’t any farms in the area by that time. Most folks had moved on after being bought out. Come to think of it,” the commander’s poker smile disappeared, “GT owns most of that area now, don’t it?”

The smile on Jhel’s face felt as fragile as a china plate. “I wouldn’t know, sir.”

The smile came back to Reynolds as if it had never left. “Certainly. Corporal Jennings will see you out.”

It was a short trip back to the GEV. Jhel made sure that they were on the aircraft and out of earshot from anyone before speaking to Lee.

“He’s lying. Aspen isn’t here. Which means he’s covering up his absence. Which means that the military is covering it up.”

Jhel looked at Lee before he jacked into the console. “I think we’re in bigger trouble than we thought.”

Lee pushed in, preparing the craft for take off. “So what do we do?”

Jhel thought for a moment, “Are the assets we had tracking the package still doing so?”

“As of 23:00 yesterday, they were.”

“If they’re still on top of him, we’ll need to come up for a reason for his immediate termination. If the military is involved in this they may know about our involvement in Project Amber. We need to get rid of him immediately in order to make sure that it doesn’t come back on us.”

There was no need for Jhel to simulate an emotion for this discussion. He let his fear show through, knowing how it would affect Lee. “We’ve got to kill Kansas.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Place Settings (by Bryan Cole)

“Hope you’re not too upset with it.” Dragon probed, trying to decide whether or not to chide Hatcher with the squalid living conditions he had picked out for him.

“You kidding? This is still roomier than those barracks at Camp Sushi.” Hatcher wasn’t the kind of person who cared too much for where he slept, long as it was somewhat isolated and he could control access to the area if needed. Camp Sushi had been their unofficial term for the jump-off point in Northern California before they had deployed to Malaygay.

“Well, we need to up your street IQ a tad, and the best way to do that is to immerse you in the street as thoroughly as possible. No better way than have you live in it, breathe it, find out where the pulse is and how to get a finger on it.” Dragon knew Hatcher was a capable student and, as with all good lessons, he would have to learn the finer points of this one on his own. Dragon had to also admit to himself, Hatcher would do well to be surrounded in this blanket of the faceless. It would greatly supplement the anonymity he would need. It might also quiet Dragon’s continuing doubts about Hatcher’s recent arrival and, more importantly, from where he had departed.

“It’ll work.” And with that Hatcher and Dragon left the sleepbox-cum-efficiency. Moving to the elevator on the thirty-first level, Hatcher turned to face Dragon. “You taking requests on my attire or do I need to scrounge for my clothes?”

“What’d you have in mind?” The older of the pair asked.

“I need something with some kick. One stop. Preferably like I had in-country.”

“Not a problem.” Hatcher had always been fond of the 14mm. Dragon had anticipated this, but he’d still make the kid sweat it a little. “You want something a little less formal for those casual events?”

“Yeah. Been thinking about that. Maybe something ‘tech? The 10 is my

favorite, but that's only because you can accessorize the living hell out of it." The Ronin Militech Assault Rifle in 10mm was a mainstay of most of the armed forces of the world. Owing to this widespread employment, there was an avalanche of custom and not-so-custom modifications that had been designed for and around its unique chassis and specifications. Hatcher had a few in mind, but he'd need the tree before he could put the decorations on it.

"Not a problem, kiddo." The elevator announced its presence with a ding and the screechy movement of its doors. Thankfully, it was unoccupied, except for the stench of the last occupant, who had apparently purged his stomach all over the back wall.

Hatcher and Dragon took little note of the stench or the puddle responsible for it. They had trod through far worse in their time.

"Gonna get you some freebies as well. Call it a welcome-back present."

"Well, gosh, I don't know what to say. I...never knew you had these feelings."

"Can it, you confused sumbitch. I need you looking as pretty as your ugly mug is capable. Since I can't convince you to get some plastic surgery we may as well dress up that carcass of yours." Dragon knew Hatcher's sense of humor for what it was, but sometimes the kid could ramble on if you didn't put your foot down.

Hatcher stifled a smile. He had been able to ruin Dragon's briefings back in the day. The old dog had gotten a new trick under his belt.

Since they were at the tenement at one of its less-busy times (10:00 hours) the pair were relatively unbothered on their exit past the now-faded foundstone and into the busy streets of Madrid. Homeless in the sprawl of the modern cities tended to gather in areas where the corporates would never see them. Whether that was entirely the choice of the homeless or not was a memorandum that would never see the light of day.

The streets of Madrid, like any metropolis, were bustling with the odd assortment of life that one would expect at an aquarium. Rigid, sharp spikes of hair and dermal modification on some of the younger, more outlandish youth. The smooth, sure footed and slickened exteriors of various levels of corporate employees moving to and fro. BioTechna, GeneTech, Arasaka, Militech, Geodyne, Aerodyne, EBM, it read like a shopping list. Interspersed between the upper and lower extremities of the midlife in Madrid were the rent-a-cops, the corporate enforcers, and the city's own beleaguered peace officers.

Hatcher and Dragon caught a cab three blocks from Hatcher's new apartment, following security procedures that they both knew as instinct to try and either dissuade or lose someone who might be following them.

"So what are we looking at then? Am I going to be your manservant or something?" Hatcher was getting into a familiar routine now, and feeling comfortable and bored, decided to push his old mentor's comfort level.

"Yeah. I want some walking tincan with a hard-on around me to liven up my entourage." Dragon shook his head. "You're going to do well by learning some patience, grasshopper. We're actually heading to a gig I've got lined up for you as we speak."

"You getting your fiber there, grandpa? Awfully cranky today."

Dragon had learned that counting to ten was futile. Twenty was a much better number for some people.

They stopped in front of a pawn shop and paid the cab fare. They crossed the street, and after a short four block walk arrived at a nondescript storefront flanked on both sides by alleyways. Heading into the alley on the right-hand side of the storefront, they walked for fifty meters to an inset door with a sliding viewport and what looked to Hatcher to be about an inch of reinforced steel comprising the rest of it. Dragon gave two knocks in close succession.

The viewport opened. Dragon dropped his shades long enough to look into the pair of eyes that greeted them. A half-second after the viewport closed, Hatcher heard the metal sounds of dead-bolts and then the door swung away from them. He noted the door had no connections, no internetworking, no displays or sensors of any kind. The door was as dumb as an appliance could come. It could be opened by hand, and by hand alone.

Beyond it was a spartan room and a handful of people. Entering after his mentor, his eyes began to adjust to the smoky, neon haze. It looked like a coat-check to one of those clubs that the Corporates might have frequented. Hatcher said nothing but kept his arms as loose and as close to his person as he could manage.

Dragon finally spoke up, "Ole, Mi companero y buen amigo..." Hatcher bit his tongue briefly and gently rocked his head backward to slot the Spanish chip he had installed earlier. "...cher, and he's going to be assisting us with security here. He's an ex like myself, so keep a hand on your wallet and don't leave your drink unattended around him." There were a couple of half-chuckles.

"Nobody is being dismissed, I just need a little extra for the immediate future,

and Hatch is going to fill in. I can vouch for him, so you don't worry about him in a stretch. Just get him familiar with the regulars, and walk him for a bit so he doesn't get himself lost."

Dragon made a cursory introduction of all parties present, revealing very little in detail other than name and a rough idea of the pecking order at work here. Two of the four guys in the room were definitely wired and chipped as far as Hatcher could tell. The lieutenant of the group looked like what the Spanish called a Solo, an ex-military man like himself or Dragon. He was an anvil of a man with the name DeSantos, who looked like he had more muscle than flexibility, but Hatcher knew better than to waste his time with that assumption. The lead of the security group, a well-shaped but leanish man by the name of Guillermo, could have been a Solo but Hatcher suspected he was definitely ex-corporate or ex-police by his demeanor and appearance. Ex-soldiers and especially grunts didn't give a rat's ass how they looked. That was the side-effect of having people yell at the way your laces were tied for eight weeks at boot camp.

The other two, Haviland and Cruz, weren't much to look at. Cruz in particular must have really impressed Dragon somehow, because he had the nervous and roaming eyes of a teenager. Hatcher couldn't read Haviland because he avoided eye-contact almost to the point of ridiculousness. His stance revealed even less. Hatcher had been in the business too long to let these initial impressions blind him though, but his curiosity would have to wait for now.

They weren't a talkative bunch, which suited Hatcher just fine. The gig turned out to be bouncing for a gambling establishment that Dragon had one of his fingers into. The casino, which catered to a relatively respectable crowd, probably served several purposes other than income for Dragon, but Hatcher wasn't concerned about business and enterprise. It gave him a legitimate paycheck and more importantly, it gave his new identity, Arturo Villareal, less of an unusual profile for anyone who might make an inquiry.

Dragon finished scribbling on the tablet he'd picked up and handed it to Guillermo. "Let me know if these are doable. And I'm not too concerned about cost."

Guillermo didn't look at the pad more than once and simply nodded. "No problem, we'll have them ready for his shift tonight."

The Dragon turned to his newest employee. "Come on, kid. Let's go get a coffee while the boys run your shopping list."

The younger of the pair smiled at him. "And here I thought nothing was free in life." Hatcher followed Dragon back through the reinforced door to the

alleyway.

"It's not, you know." Dragon half mumbled as they neared the street.

"I know," Hatcher said in reply. "Just tell me they're not going to be doing my grocery shopping."

"Guillermo will get your duds for tonight and the uplink for your comms and that's all." Dragon paused, and turned to Hatcher to emphasize his point. "I don't trust anyone to handle my weapons except me, and I'll be damned if I think you're any different. I went ahead and messaged my contact about your list, and after the coffee we'll be going uptown to get your stuff. Are those acceptable terms?" It was Dragon's turn to be a smart ass.

"Yeah. I'm just having some trouble settling in is all, Sarge. I'll calm down in a few days."

"Don't sweat it. You'll want to keep that edge. It's the part you cut with."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Moving Forces

Opposite of the Ichiban-Martinez Building, across the way from Casino el Liberal, Wilcox Nixon watched two men hug on the roof of the casino. Shielded by the setting sun, behind the glass of his suite in the Plaza Carlos Holiday Inn, Nixon had been watching the casino since the man from Russia had arrived.

When the two men had stood across from each other on the night club rooftop, he hadn't known what the men would do. Hug wasn't even on the list of things he might have expected.

The knock at the door Nixon made curse and jump up from his place at the window, quickly leaving the surveillance equipment behind. As he walked to the door, crossing the floor of the suite, he drew his sidearm.

Looking through the peephole he recognized the individual behind it. Nixon smiled then disarmed the door security and opened it.

"Quick, get in here," Nixon turned back to the window. "The Russian just arrived."

"Russian?" Nixon's visitor followed him in: He was a short man of Mongolian descent dressed in a sharp suit. He walked to the window and pushed the curtains slightly to the side to see the target. "I thought we were following a package."

"Orders changed, Durham. Pursue and terminate courier." Nixon sat down behind a set of gear at the window and began adjusting it to make sure it was tracking properly.

Durham took a quick look at the two men, then back at Nixon. "Who's the target?"

"Dunno," Nixon mumbled as he went over the equipment.

Durham cocked his head and mentally went over the mission parameters in

his head one more time.

“How long have you been tracking the package?”

“Since it was lifted from the Oslo facility.”

“And when did orders change to void the courier?”

“Just after Moscow. Apparently the report got back to central and the change came down.”

Durham looked out the window again. The two men weren't hugging anymore, but felt secure enough to remain on the rooftop. Nixon leaned over to adjust the parabolic microphone, but only static came out of the feedback. Whoever they were, Durham thought, they had enough sense to carry a white noise generator. At this distant even his augmented vision didn't provide Durham with much detail of the scene. They were two men, white, one older, neither from Madrid.

“So who's the courier?”

“Fuck I care?”

Durham looked back at Nixon and barely resisted the urge to shake his head. Some of his professional peers felt that asking no questions was the best policy. Durham disagreed.

He walked back to where he had set his luggage down and cracked open a laptop case. He moved it over to Nixon's equipment, then began to connect several wires to the computer.

Nixon broke away from his voyeurism long enough to ask, “What are you doing?”

“I'm pulling in an image of the courier to run it against any databases we can secure. If the mission changed when he walked into it, the more we know about him the better.” Durham spoke without looking at Nixon, busily connecting the ports and wires.

Nixon turned back to the two men after briefly considering a protest. No skin off his nose.

The two passed the time without speaking for awhile. The noise of Durham's typing and the low purr of the surveillance equipment filled the room.

After a time Nixon, still looking at the men on the roof through the ocular unit, said, "Haven't seen you in awhile."

"Had an accident outside of New York. I had to spend some extra time in the growth tank afterwards."

"Good nap?" Nixon asked with a grin, turning to Durham.

Durham looked up at his sometimes partner, and smiled his response, "Fucker."

Nixon chuckled, then the two lapsed back into silence. The two turned back to their separate tasks.

"They're leaving," Nixon said, leaning back in his chair away from the ocular unit.

"You can track the package still?" Durham did not look up from his typing.

"Sure," Nixon turned to the tracking monitor. "Whatever case they put it in kept the signal scrambled for awhile, but I cracked it." He adjusted a few knobs on the monitor. "But it looks like its switched hands. The other guy must have it now."

"You've got all the entrances covered?"

"Sure."

Durham continued to type. Nixon shrugged and went back to the surveillance equipment, following the package with the monitors.

Durham spoke even as he continued to type, "I've got something. The composite of the courier I uploaded flagged a file out of the Black Box."

Nixon turned away from his equipment; Durham had his attention. The Black Box was the secure server from which all agents received their orders and to which they uploaded their after action reports.

"There's no name. Just an encoded file named Kansas. I can't access it. This thing has about thirty hazard markers on it."

Nixon felt his anxiety level jump. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing, just give me a minute to massage the security points. I'll find something." Durham stopped short, the sound of the keystrokes died instantly as

he recognized the full-screen composite of the courier that came up on his screen.

Durham was a professional with a long career behind him. He had worked with many men and women, all of which had known the rules and lived by them. Except for one.

“Oh shit. That guy’s not Russian. He’s the Butcher.”