

TOMASZ MARCHEWKA

2 AM-SHE CALLS



CYBERPUNK
2077

☒ 2AM – SHE CALLS

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THE 2071 AD

In Night City, it's the little things. Like this bang-up noodle shop in Kabuki. Little place called Nuan's. Nuan mops up the counter grunge, then wipes her ladle with the same sad rag. As she spoons out your noodles, you think the filth should've stayed where it was. You also think the meat might be sewer rat, but if this is sewer rat, you could eat these noodles every night. Long as they came slathered in Nuan's extra-hot.

Little thing about cab driving – if I wanna eat, I switch off the combat comms, pick my spot, park... and eat. Love it. Triple-patty melt yesterday, baby back ribs today. Master of my fate. It's a nice change of pace after the NCPD grind – there, you eat when you can grab a minute to yourself. After punching out your twelve hours, or on the job and on the run. Once you're done with the gig for good, you grab any chance to eat like a civilized human being. Don't take my word for it. Ask the ex-cons who do the same thing once they're out.

I'm half-sitting on the hood of my Combat Cab, slurping down the last of Nuan's noodles. My comms pings. The private one. I know the number. It's one I never decline.

I reach into the car through the open window and punch the connect to dispatch. One-two-three.

EN ROUTE - VACANT - PICKING UP CLIENT

The three messages flash quickly, blend into one. My empty noodle box lands in a greasy rustle on a heap of forty others in the can outside Nuan's door. I don't bother to check the address. Downtown. I always pick her up downtown.

Half past midnight. Atypical. Too late to be getting off work, too early to be leaving a party. Usually calls around two. Did something happen? No, if something'd happened, she wouldn't be calling me. Means like hers, she'd

call the NCPD, Trauma Team, private studiocorp huscle or all three. Maybe she already did. Maybe I'm just another gonk in a whole fucking retinue of gonks tripping over each other to save the saucy dame in distress. I glance at the message again. Just the address. No sign, no signal, no cry for help. I gun it anyway. Just in case.

Once downtown, I start looking for trouble. Old habit. And I'm good at it, usually spot trouble before it spots me – another parting gift from my time on the force. Except downtown, it's not always so simple. Up in Kabuki, trouble flies out the biz end of a semi-automatic or caves your skull in with reinforced brassknuck implants. Downtown? Downtown trouble dons kid gloves. Maybe a starched white collar, too.

No trouble on my way to the pickup. I pull to the curb at the address on my display. Some new place I don't know. Floor-to-ceiling glass, the ceiling arriving around the fourth floor, where fussy chandeliers clash with the otherwise pervasive Japanese minimalism. I see a throng at the door, waiting to get in. A choom stands behind a thick reservation book. His head does nothing but nod, but he's gotta be telling one would-be guest after another how *terribly* sorry he is...

There she is. My fare. She gets in, slams the door. The meter flinches into action.

PICKING UP CLIENT – EN ROUTE

Ora Dominguez, or as the city knows her, Ora Di. Di as in deep. As in desire, delight... demise? Olive skin. Jet-black curly hair shooting out of her head like a fistful of razor wire. Good-looking, very, but no model – more like the hottest girl on the block. Deep, raspy voice. The slightest accent, a whiff. Hazel-brown eyes that reviewers like to dismiss as “boring” but that Ora stubbornly refuses to swap out for implants. In the braindance world, she's a type – a “gangerchick.”

“Hey, Frank. Glad to see you.” She lights a cigarette. “Let's go home.”

“Which one?”

“The real one.”

Vista del Rey it is. We drive.

I gently adjust the rear cam so it shows less road, more Ora. The cam

feeds to a monitor a little left of and under the wheel, keeping my view hidden from hers. Leather jacket, ripped jeans, knees exposed – *La Catrina* grins out of the left tear. Leather spike heels, too.

Ora's smoking like it's going out of style. More pissed than stressed, I think.

"Shit party?" I offer, courteous as always. Maybe a chat will calm her down. Her, me, either of us, both? "Little early to be headed home."

"Shit date. Blind," she replies, trying to be nice. Can't be sure if it's for me or if it's the braindance biz poking through. "Ever been on one?"

"Not my style."

She grins.

"Wasn't even a real date. Media ploy. You know, studio sets you up with someone you might scroll with. To see if it 'sticks,' if people see us out together and like it so much they just gotta talk about it... You go to some hip new spot, have a drink, sit there bored while pretending not to be. Ideally, you sit where the paparazzi can see you. And if it sticks? You make page two, maybe three in a normsheet, page one of the screamers."

She ends her sentence with her smoke. Before it dies, she lights another and tosses the glowing butt out the window. Stress it is. I sense there's more to the story. Can't remember a time she was ever this worked up about, well, work.

"Tellin' ya, Frank. Grab one of the screamsheets tomorrow, first thing. If you see Zane Magnum made a gangerchick swoon, that means I stand to make some serious scratch. Fuck."

She never liked braindance. Said once that she might as well be pushing boosters down on the corner, but, wouldn't ya know it, scrolling braindance pays better. I see Ora start to fidget on the monitor. The smokes aren't helping.

"Choom not your type?"

"Not really."

Another smile cuts across her face, different now. Sincere.

"Too short?" I venture. "Too tall?"

"Let's just say I think a man's ink should mean something."

We drive in silence for a moment. This time of night, traffic's down to a trickle, giving us about fifteen minutes to Vista. Eight and a half months I've been driving her, now. Started right after her first big production. A little romdrama about a down-home 'Tino girl and a 6th Street macho with big corpolawyer dreams. Romeo and Juliet – recycled, repackaged and regurgitated in Heywood. But hey, it "stuck." Nobody remembers Guy Whatsisname. Everybody remembers the first time they felt what it was like to come up in the streets. When they needed a ganger before, they grabbed an actor. Usually some affected, tattoo-stained ass who over-snorted and could barely manage to grunt out an "ese" on cue.

Ora knew Vista, the old Vista. Not the nice, respectable, tame del Rey of today. First time she got mugged, she was eleven. She had a knife. The poor bastard who tried her patience got a hole in his liver and a trip to the ER. For parental figures, she had a lonely deadweight father who could barely take care of himself, let alone a budding teenager. Her mother – still sitting out the rest of her third sentence. Might get out one day, might not. Girls like Ora don't usually land in a gang. They wind up the playthings of tough streetmachos or they wind up dead. Me, I never relived any of her BDs. I don't have to. I know what I'd feel if I became her for a moment. Something like the will to survive.

Gangerchick. It stuck.

The studio gave her a pad downtown, and she might have even spent a few hours there. In the end, though, she'd insist on going back to her old haunt. Realizing they couldn't win, the studio tried to give her a private limo. One of those sleek, fancy caskets, an AI at its helm. Ora preferred to call a Combat Cab. Ora preferred to call me. First time around, it was dumb, blind chance. She called twice and I happened to get the call both times. Right around 2 AM, my hour. After the second happy coincidence, she just grabbed my direct line.

"Think of it this way," I start, breaking the silence. "You had a nice dinner on the studio's dime."

"You would," she snorts. "A full belly and Frank's happy."

"You know me well," I reply, smiling – woman's not wrong.

"Food was terrible. 'Sides, I don't really do Asian."

"You say that, but... I know a place that'd change your mind. Great noodles. I mean, that's all they do - noodles."

She flashes me one of those smiles that got her where she is today. A smile with that special something. It grabs your eye and won't let go. I'm sure she doesn't see it. Ora thinks the studio pays her to be "exotic."

"Maybe you'll take me there sometime," she adds. Even though I know she's teasing, I let myself believe it. I could see her sitting there, swinging her tattooed legs at Nuan's disgusting greascounter. Shit, she might've even liked it.

"Uh-uh-uh - doubt your input would be happy about that," I tease right back. "Heard he's the jealous type."

"Emilio? He's a teddy bear."

She actually believes that.

"Huh. Where I'm from, teddy bears don't do six in the can for armed robbery and aggravated assault."

"Prolly know smarter teddies than I do."

"Probably." I can't help but smile again. "What's good with him?"

I glance at Ora and the polite, good-natured mask falls away. Hm, seems she did learn something about acting while scrolling. Now she's the angry, in-your-face firecracker, her frayed nerves on her torn leather sleeve. I remember Emilio from the old days - him and his crew. They were POIs for me 'cause I was Organized Crime. All the boys in blue used to say they'd be the Valentinos to watch in a few years. He and Ora were an item even then. A few years down the road and she's a star. I don't know what's up with Emilio. I don't run around chasing goons like him anymore. I just drive his girl to and from their place in Vista del Rey.

"Been dealing with some shit," Ora finally answers, candid despite knowing I used to be police. Maybe she trusts me. Maybe I just popped the question the very second she stopped giving a fuck. "You know how it is."

"I know."

I notice Ora's face. Might've finally dawned on her how well I do, in fact, know.

"He's stubborn, Frank. Keep tellin' him he's gotta think about the future. About where we'll be in a year or... three. Like I am," she sighs. "But he thinks things are the same as when he got out."

My memory's good. I remember the shit Emilio's crew pulled back in the day. They rose up quick, made big, fast eddies jumping corpo convoys, hitting up chop shops. Those bastards would sell the chooms' own merch back to them for half the going price. They feared nobody.

Crazy times. Good times.

"You'd rather see him turn upstanding Night citizen? Get a real job, move out of Vista? Not like you don't have the cash."

By you I mean them both.

"Psh, Emilio holdin' down a 9-to-5? No way, not our way." All of a sudden, her streetsong comes rushing back, the syncopated rat-tat-tat you could barely catch when she first walked out of the club, the rhythm that ricochets off every corner in Heywood. "Peeps like us don't just fuck off outta Vista."

"People like you, Ora? I mean, you seem to be holding down a real gig just fine. A good gig. I'd say it's in the realm of the possible."

"Me...?" she grimaces. "Please. I ain't no actor. In it for the scratch, holmes. Be real. All this right here? Born yesterday, be dead tomorrow."

"So, a five year plan and then back to Vista?"

"Back? Wanna go back somewhere, you gotta leave first."

We pull up at the spot. Ora gives two short raps on the bulletproof divider, then slides out like a sigh and closes the door. On the screen I see her open the gate, walk through the front yard and vanish into a squat little duplex. Not too many of those left in Vista, and the ones that are still standing aren't there by some happy coincidence. Anyone tried to demolish them, they'd get demolished themselves.

VACANT.

I drive to my next pickup.

THE NEXT DAY

Watson. I hate Watson. Whole district's bad luck. I knew it, too. Had a real gut-punch feeling I should've hit DECLINE. I glance at the pickup monitor again: Northside Industrial District, Watson.

"473 here," I sigh into the dispatch comms. "On my way."

PICKING UP CLIENT

See that right there? That's my whole problem. Stubborn, refuse to learn from my mistakes.

Had the good fortune to be in the area after dropping off a fare in Kabuki. Kabuki's technically Wats. Technically. The Tygers do what they can to hold the place together. Tygers you can talk to. Maelstrom not so much. And Northside's their haunt.

After years in the Fifth, I still see the city from above, spread out below me in neat, slightly creased, color-coded pieces. Fifth Division, Organized Crime, the Gangbusters - depends who you ask. To us, Northside was always the ruddy brown of the Maelstrom freaks.

I drive along without too much trouble. Not like you'll be driving down the street and suddenly someone's semi-automatic starts spraying out their window at you. Wouldn't rule it out, but usually when they shoot, you probably gave 'em a good reason to. My brain knows it, but I still keep an eye out for the red dots of laser sights. Watson. I hate Watson. I drive up to the pickup point and keep the engine running.

Guy runs out, I can't say from where. He flies over to the car, fumbles with the handle, falls in head first. The yellow-framed PICKING UP CLIENT jumps to EN ROUTE - the meter flashes green, the numbers start their song and dance.

"Fuck, man, fucking drive!" he shouts, lying flat on the back seat, staying out of sight. Great. "The fuck you waitin' for?! Foot, gas, now!"

I drive, pick up speed, brace for a sudden, sharp turn.

We've gone maybe twenty feet when the street bursts into flames. A bang, a flash, but no sound of cracking glass. Good. Still, shit's bright and hot as Satan's barf after a bender. Incendiary grenades, not Molotovs. Great. My jumpy, backseat-driving choom apparently pissed off some well-armed freaks. I yank the parking brake and turn on a dime. The engine screams, the tires screech. Gunshots.

Semi-automatic. Medium caliber.

I catch sight of 'em. Maelstrom - two goons and one chick, off to the left. They've staked out the corner and are busy emptying their magazines into us - fast. Two hold rifles, but that's about all they know, so most of the bullets fly over the roof. Maybe a few bounce off the armored body or bulletproof windows. Nothing the cab can't handle. It's covering fire for the third gangoon, who...

Fuck.

The third jackboot thug kneels to set up a rocket launcher. A motherfucking surface-to-surface rocket launcher. Fifty-fifty chance said rocket is homing. These odds I do not like.

Foot off the gas, I slam on the brakes. The car lurches, practically stops in place. My passenger slams into the glass that separates us. It's bullet-proof, his smashed nose leaves a red splatter like a bug. I duck down, reach under the seat. The Maelstromers might be shooting blind, but their bullets are starting to hit home. They clink, they ricochet, let's hope it stays that way till...

Hello, friend. M-76e Omaha - my saving grace in many a tight spot.

I drop the window, lift my gun and see the jackass wrapping up. He heaves the launcher onto his shoulder, sets his eye to the laser sight. I got two seconds, tops. I pull the trigger.

Where his head was - a cloudburst of blood. In the mirror, I see the other two stop what they're doing to rubberneck at what remains of him. Probably panic-wondering if he managed to press the big red button before his skull went ka-putt, if they won't be vanishing into a crater any millisecond now.

I hit the gas.

A hard right and I hope we're out of range. I speed up.

Intersection, light's red, we pull up. I take a moment to put my Omaha back where it belongs and steal a peek at my fare on the mon. Face gaunt, sallow skin stretched tight across sharp cheekbones. Sunken eyes – unnaturally jittery, unnaturally bright, unnaturally dilated pupils. Boosters, and not the cheap kind.

"Where to?" I ask, figuring he's had time enough to find his voice. I figured wrong – he only grimaces, as if he misheard or I was speaking Dutch or somethin'. Maybe he can't breathe. "Dispatch just gave me the pickup."

"Just get me outta Wats," he finally croaks. "You go to Pacifica?"

Ah, looking to go far. Where Maelstrom fears to tread.

"At this rate?" I gesture at the meter, already rounding off a nice couple of hunnies, "I go wherever you want."

We leave Wats through Kabuki to avoid the downtown traffic. 'Sides, Westbrook's a better place to drop any tail we might have picked up.

"Hmm..." he wonders for a second, and I can feel his eyes on me in the mirror. "Make it Rancho Coronado. Show you where."

All right. Trip might be worth it after all, considering. Especially since this choom's a man of few words. I like the quiet kind – they're my second favorite kind of fare. My absolute favorites are the ones who never open their mouths, not even to breathe.

"Where you learn to shoot like that?" There it is. Guess there'll be chit-chat after all. "In the war?"

"No." We drive along silently for a few seconds. Fingers crossed it stays that way.

"On the street?"

Stubborn, this guy.

"Could say that."

"Don't look like no ganger. What colors you fly, choom?"

This is gonna be good.

"Blue. NCPD," I reply and glance at his face. Looks like he just sat bare-ass in a bucket of ice. Choom's cojones couldn't shrivel up and hide

fast enough. "Protect and serve, kid."

"What, was you in Psychosquad?" he asks, in the same awestruck tone I've heard a thousand times before. You tell five people you were in the NCPD, four of them will ask if you were with MaxTac. "Shit, no wonder you can shoot."

"Organized Crime."

He shuts up again. Probably wondering if I caught the gang ink on his neck, if I got any pals I still keep in touch with back at HQ. We'll have our spell of silence after all.

"Listen..." Wow, doesn't give up, this guy. "Say I wanted you around for the rest of the week? I mean, I got places to go, chooms to see..."

Oh, believe me, I know. Not five minutes ago a pack of rabid gangoons were out to kill him, and one of them caught a dum dum between the eyes. That one's on my fare, not me. Just the way it works, makes everyone's lives easier. Maelstrom knows it wasn't personal on my part, it's just the job. Someone paid me good eddies to get him out of there. The real trouble waits for the hand that feeds the cred.

"How much you take for a gig like that?" he asks.

"Not my biz."

"Not your biz?" Can't tell if he's disappointed or offended. "Hell was that back there?"

"You scan my door?"

Gives me another look like he forgot how words work. But his booster-added brain puts it together eventually.

"Yeah. Combat Cab."

"Exactly. I'm no huscle for rent, I'm a driver."

"What's the difference?"

Jesus H. Merciful Christ.

"I'll give you a hypothetical. Say a couple of crews, Tygers and Maelstrom, bump into each other. They ain't the best of chooms."

"True..."

"They meet on neutral turf, say a parking lot. And there's a car there. And it just so happens, because it always just so happens, that you're hugging

your knees in the trunk of that car.”

“OK...”

“You give us a call, order a ride. I arrive and pop you outta that trunk, drop you wherever you wanna go. So long as you’re in my cab, you’re my client.”

“And if I get out?”

“You let go of the handle, you let go of the handle. Simple as that.”

Finally, mercifully, he nods and shuts up for good. We’re almost there. I fire up the cred terminal, he pays and gets out. Christ. Motherfucker didn’t leave a tip. No wonder the USA collapsed.



One AM, mid week – our hour. Me and the boys. We meet up at Tom’s. Small, old-school diner, nestled uncomfortably amid a clump of dark Heywood highrises. The interior smells of 24-hour fried eggs and bacon, barbecue ribs and endless refills of cinnamon-laced drip coffee. One AM, mid week – quite the time to be at Tom’s. Some diners are finishing their day, some’re steadying themselves for a long night. Still others never seem to leave the street, lit up 24/7 like Tom’s sign. Trauma Team unit in the corner, hunched over their plates. Even helmets off, they’re four clones in identical green uniforms. Four identical orders, number two specials, scrambled. In my experience, TTs are mostly decent people. Their gear might be high-end, but they make shit eddies plowing the hard plot of, you know, saving human lives. Lives rich enough to afford a TT policy, but still... Their eggs could be dinner or breakfast. At the next table over, two joytoys, streetwalkers. Faces aged beyond their years, hair standing stiff with hairspray, bodies skin-and-bones from eating one solid meal a week, tops. The deep holes in their forearms – either dug out with needles or scarred reminders of implants sold long ago. As I pass their table, one raises her head, fixes her eyes on me, her pupils flashing a looped Capitan Caliente ad. No scratch for a ripper? No problem – become a walking, talking scop commercial. Across the dining room, the NCPD booth: two long, pigs-only benches. Two heads sit

drinking beer, too young for us to know each other. So much the better – it's been over five years since I set down my badge. I'd rather it stayed down.

I pass Crystal, the would-be pin-up waitress with two young mouths to feed and a smile far too warm for Night City climes. I reach our booth. I'm last to arrive; Goldknuckle Bob, Stokes and Pedro are already there. Only one missing from the regular crew is Travis, but that's nothing unusual. Trav comes and goes as he pleases. Weirdo.

Stokes scooches to make room for me. Pedro grumbles something into his half-empty beer. Goldknuckle lifts his coffee mug in greeting, his eyes glued to the TV hanging over our heads.

The TV's why we chose this booth a few months ago – Goldknuckle needs his news fix. Tried asking him why – just for laughs? Or is he a believer? Could also be a cynic who can't wait to hear the next lie. Asked him a few times, never once got an answer.

Crystal takes my order. The usual number four, over-easy, extra egg, extra bacon, rye bread – toasted dry. And coffee... lots of coffee. My night's just getting under way.

"Fuck it all to hell," Pedro grumbles, nursing what remains of his beer. "High time we got outta the biz, boys, I'm tellin' ya. My numbers line up right, I'm gettin' the fuck out. For real."

Here we go. Pedro's been waiting for his numbers to line up since the dawn of time. Lucky numbers, lucky bet... his mind drools over the prospect. Soon as his ship comes in, he's out. For real. Pedro's been driving the longest out of all of us. Probably never held down another job. Taxi driver by vocation, so busy taking fares he forgot to set anything aside to retire on. For me, Bob and Stokes... a temporary gig that's gone a little longer than planned. Like, say, five years.

"What's it today?" I ask Stokes, knowing Pedro won't give me the satisfaction.

"Delamain," he mutters, tired of beating a dead drum. "Wheeling out a new personal combat mode."

"Easy to keep fares down when you don't gotta eat, sleep or take a piss." Pedro downs the rest of his beer, raises his empty glass and brows at

Crystal. "Pretty soon, all we'll have left to do is die."

"C'mon, they can't touch us," I reply. "Would Delamain run into a den of gangoons to pay your ransom while you sit hogtied to a chair with a bag over your head?"

"I wouldn't either," shrugs Pedro. "Why, would you?"

"I did, once."

"Shit."

Crystal brings Pedro a fresh beer and his check. I grab it before she can set it down.

"You had a bad day, Pedro" I explain, seeing his face. "Could use a little luck. Go grab yourself a winning ticket, champ."

Crystal smiles, takes the money. I give her a wink.

The joytoys by the door get up and leave.

"You heard? Car blew up in Japantown..." Stokes elbows me and raises his brows. "Think it was Tygers?"

My stint in the NCPD apparently makes me a psychic. Like all you need is a few years in uniform to develop a supernatural sense for why trains, planes and automobiles spontaneously combust. You take the name of the district where the bomb blew, the make and model, stir them into the grounds at the bottom of your cup three times, et voilà.

"Dunno," I admit, "Maybe, maybe not."

"It's not Tygers," Bob pipes up from his corner. His gold-plated fingers drum on the table as his hand takes on a life of its own. "It's war, boys."

"You get that from Nighty-Night News at Nine?"

"Nah, some old chooms."

Goldknuckle Bob. Says he used to do odd jobs, all sorts, even dabbled in corpo counterintel. It's when he got the hand, apparently. These days, its fool's gold plating is chipped and flaking... Huh, world's most expensive eczema. Bob can't afford a new one. Makes a nice souvenir of the days when he wasn't driving, though. Nobody believes a word he says.

"Go on."

"Heard it's the NUSA. Sticking its grubby fingers in the Night City cookie jar again. Myers is out secretly buyin' up city politicians, draggin' 'em on board

the Federalist train. She's not naive enough to think the council'll pass it, but just getting Night City to the table is huge. Now, our guys don't give half a shit one way or the other 'cause the Japanese are paying 'em better than the Feds ever could. And we all know what's good at the top, right? Same thing that's good down bottom."

"I'll drink to that," Pedro clinks his mug on the table, then nods my way. "Thanks, Frank."

"Anyway," Bob continues, "Apparently the FIA's in town lookin' for help, like, backup. Askin' around, posting on BBSes, tryin' to round up allies just in case. Skipping 6th Street for now, apparently. Last thing they need is some red-faced flag burritos megaphoning all over. Just lookin' for nice quiet eyes an' ears."

Huh. Probably the best, least credible horseshit I've ever heard from Bob. Either he's improved his craft, or his mind is declining faster than we thought.

"Uh-huh," says Stokes, not smiling, but he's more amused than ever, too. "They call you up?"

"No. Wouldn't tell you gonks if they did, anyway." Bob's dead serious. "This is war, gents. You talk, you get a pipe bomb taped to your fender."

I can't hold it in anymore, burst out laughing, almost choke on my last bit of bacon. I reach for my coffee to rinse my throat and catch motion by the cop booth. Three plainclothes walk over, greet the two uniforms already seated. I recognize one. Grizzled suit, Forties combover, old guard narc. Or at least I'm pretty sure.

"Lookin' a little chewed up, Frank," Stokes says. Warm and fuzzy as always; guy smokes like a tire fire but never his own cigs. I don't know who taught him to bum smokes off people like that, but his talents are wasted behind the wheel. Should've been a traveling Eliyahu Bible salesman. Would've made a fortune and brought hundreds, nay, thousands into the fold. "Rough night?"

"Night's just gettin' started," I reply, downing the last of my coffee and wondering if I need another. Before I can decide, Crystal plods over and fills my mug. "Had a close call in Wats. One body, client walked."

"There's that, at least..." Stokes starts fidgeting. "Listen, Frank, you got a smoke?"

Unbelievable. Always asks me, knowing full well what my answer'll be - I don't smoke. But I pull out a practically untouched pack and set it on the table.

"Fished it outta the back seat," I say, pushing it toward him. "Guess it's your lucky day."

Me and Stokes are probably closest. Started driving around the same time, him a few weeks before me. We became fast chooms. Stokes told me about Nuan's. Also gave me the coords for a couple car washes that'll clean bits of brain off your upholstery should trouble grow large and unwieldy. Has a wife and two kids. The wife drives, too, but we've never met.

I glance at the news on the screen.

"...a firefight broke out a few hours ago in Westbrook. NCPD officers on the scene are calling it the latest chapter in the ongoing gang war between the Valentinos and 6th Street. The conflict was thought to be all but over, yet today's events prove the past two weeks were only a temporary ceasefire. Clearly, the gangs have yet to bury the hatchet. This latest attack appears to have been an ambush staged by one of the rival gangs."

Looks like a movie. Coroner's people pushing bagged bodies around on gurneys. Cameraman even manages to catch one sad sack with an arm dangling out of it. Cutaway to a closeup: Catrina tattoo prominent - the stuff of dreams...

CUT (again) TO: EXTERIOR. WESTBROOK. Close on Tom Braddock's tired face. I remember him. Good guy. Out to clean up the city. Refused to acknowledge what the NCPD lacked - bodies, funding, gear and, above all, heart. Stubborn that way.

"One bystander was killed in the fray. Ora Di, or rather, Ora Dominguez, a braindance star known to have had gang affiliations, was one of the individuals gunned down earlier tonight. In her younger days, Dominguez belonged to..."

CUT TO: Braddock, still talking, but I can't hear him.

I raise my hand for the check.



Crystal says something, not sure what. I pay, leave a tip, get up from the table, all without thinking. My legs feel like warm scop jelly, but I think I can stand. Gotta run, I say, got somethin' to take care of, somethin' important. Now. A voice asks if I'm all right. Probably Stokes.

I stumble toward the exit, a blind-drunk lunatic.

Trauma Team's gone.

I open the door. I walk out.

The two joytoys are on the corner, smoking. Leafy smoke - I smell it, my head spins.

The aroma conjures up her face, her getting in the cab that night. As the smoke lifts, so does she. I lurch for the parking lot. Taxis standing all in a row like soldiers. One, two... third Combat Cab is mine.

I get in.

I take deep breaths - five. I squeeze my eyes open and shut - three. Then red, I see red. Black spots on red.

Everything grows darker.

Five more breaths.

Better.

I fire up the engine, roll down the window, suck air and drive.

The meter blinks red.

UNAVAILABLE.

I can't think. I just drive. My hands on the wheel decide where. Pacifica, looks like, but I'm not going home. Bodybags. Tats. The perfect, lucky shot of the arm with 'Tino ink. A man's ink should mean something...

It's coming up on two AM. I glance at the comms, like every night. Almost two.

Not tonight.

This route I know well, but it's taking me further from home. The night air slaps me in the face - hot, even through the window of a moving car. I speed up, don't bother to look at the lights. Streets are empty. I breathe. I breathe.

Once out of Heywood, I decide. Ramp for Westbrook. I pop open the glove compartment – CLICK. It's full to bursting: crumpled burger boxes, telescopic baton, two old, half-empty packs of cigs, one brand they don't even make anymore, went bust last year. There it is. Down at the bottom.

I pull out a small transmitter, hook it in under the dash. NFC immediately tunes the Combat Cab firmware to an NCPD frequency.

"This is One-Adam-19. 10-7. Had enough for today."

"10-69, Adam-19. You drive careful, now."

"Got a 10-55 in North Oak. Says the chief's a personal friend. Plate is NC42-223, need a 10-28."

Voices. Static. Voices. Static. And memories rush in. God, I loved that gig... somethin' about it. Probably the nights like this, when you hang around waiting. I'm good at that. Probably why I'm a decent driver, too. Never thought about it till now.

Another voice breaks the static. This one's familiar.

"Five-King-13, coroner's picked up the bodies from Charter Hill, still ongoing here."

That's it. Charter Hill. On my way.

King-13 is Brian Lee, Organized Crime. Kind of guy who wears suits for kicks, not just 'cause the job demands it. Camera loves him. I might've expected they'd send Brian. Media's likely on the scene, like locusts.

Charter Hill, minutes later. On the lookout for flashing lights or corpomedia vans. An AV hovers in the distance. Civilian, gotta be those N54 or WNS hyenas getting their wide aerials. I know where to start.

"Should I call your wife, warn her you might not be home tonight?"

Olivia. Arroyo dispatcher. A ray of sunshine when you're four hours into scraping a cyberpsycho off the asphalt 'cause the MaxTac boys can't be bothered to clean up after themselves. Someone's gotta collect the evidence.

"Probably taking a lover as we speak. She can't stand to see dinner go to waste."

"I think I'd like to meet her sometime."

"You'd get along. Duty calls, over and out."

"Have a good night, now, King-13."

Smaller crowd than I expected. A few straggling journos wrapping up their stories for tomorrow. Only a handful of onlookers – most people in Westbrook have better things to do than stand and gawk at a police cordon at two in the morning. Two patrol cars. Probably a lot more earlier, so the news could show off the gravitas of the policing profession, at least until the coroner arrived. Bags're already bound for the freezers, so the only people still left are those who do the dirty work.

I pull right up to the tape. Before I can get out, a rookie uniform runs over. He waves at me to get the fuck away. I open the door and plant a foot outside.

"'Ey, 'ey, 'ey! You can't park here," he barks, his tone suggesting he's milliseconds away from him whipping out his shock baton. "Crime scene."

"Is that what this is?"

He yips something else, but stays on his side of the tape. We're turning heads, so I take advantage and wave – "Brian!"

I step forward. Rookie cop's hand jerks to his taser. Before he can draw it, a heavy hand with a gold class ring thumps down on his shoulder.

"Easy there, Sarge. I'll take this one."

The kid doesn't venture a reply as Brian moves him aside like a spare chair. I lift the tape, duck under, the kid's eyes on me the whole time. Zap me in a heartbeat if he could. Finally, Sergeant Kid looks away. He starts examining my cab, memorizing the number on the door. Until we meet again, tiger. Can't touch me tonight, though.

Brian offers his hand. When I extend mine, he grabs it with both his grizzly mitts and shakes. I remember his fist slamming into an Animal's jaw during questioning. Jaw cracked like a dry branch. Broad shoulders, wide, square jaw, meticulously coiffed blonde hair without so much as a grain of salt. Brian's the guy on the recruitment posters staring up and a little to the left, but he throws a left hook like the poster boy for the NC Golden Gloves. One of the few cops the gangoons in our fine city are actually afraid of.

"Good to see ya, Frank," he bellows, squeezing my arm, maybe warmly, maybe checking my bicep. "Heard you drive a cab now. Shame. Always a

shame when a good cop sets down his badge. But something tells me you didn't drive out here to shoot the shit about the good old days..."

He can see I've started looking over his right shoulder at a group of techies setting up the holograms.

"Come on," he says, "Doubt I need to tell an old dog like you how to do his tricks."

He doesn't. Police tango - how to step to avoid fucking up the evidence.

Some things never change. Chalk contours on the asphalt mark out where the bodies fell. We got holograms, laser pointers, real-time visualizers, doo-dads that shoot your data directly into the subnet. But you'll always find a cop who'd rather use chalk.

I count. Eighteen.

Don't need to ask who's who. The techies have already laid 3D holograms over each one, semi-opaque ghosts of Valentinos and 6th Streeters hovering softly over blood-spattered pavement. The holograms were generated from snapshots taken before the bodies were shipped off to the morgue. One gang in red, the other in blue. Two techies step carefully between the bodies.

Ten little 'Tinos went out to dine...

"Left, two inches," says one techie. The other's fingers fly over the keyboard of an NCPD-issue deck. A dead ganger flickers, reappears two inches further away. "All right. Let's get the ballistics set up, gonna take us till dawn..."

Fine green lines appear in midair, interlacing, linking the two sides of the firefight. Some connect bodies, others fly off into nowhere. Bullet flight paths, AI-calculated. Just for orientation now, but once the ballistics come back from the lab, the entire scene'll become a 3D movie.

Ten little Valentinos... one, two, three... No Ora.

"Classic Tuesday night firefight," Brian is behind me. "Typical set-up, looks like. Someone makes a call, let's meet, talk. Picks the spot. Could be over turf, could be payback for some random drive-by..."

"Tell me something I don't know," I mutter as I search. From the tenth to the first.

"You ask me, a weapons deal gone horribly wrong. Sixth Street got their hands on some heavy artillery. And despite what the pundits say on TV, they're not gearing up for an armed uprising. Merch was hot, they wanted to pass it on quick, let it burn someone else."

Didn't know that, but that's not why I'm here.

My eyes jump from body to body. Just the reds.

Brian's no idiot – got eyes and a brain. He says nothing but walks over to the guy manhandling the projector, whispers in his ear. A red holo fades. A woman's form appears in its place. A form I know well.

"Ora Di," he says, as if introducing us. "Swapped the holo out so those paparats-pricks couldn't grab a shot. Our innocent bystander – the one part of the story that's a little less cliché. Don't get many BD chicks showing up to a gang face-off."

Red haze. This time it disappears as fast as it arrived, thankfully.

"Any hypothesis?" I ask.

"Well, you're outta the biz, but I'd still bet good eddies you know who's running the hardest crew of 'Tinos in Vista. Emilio Aguirre. Six years on Brooks Island. The judge said it would do him a world of good. Damn well did – gave him some powerful, worldly friends. He met some Juarez chooms inside. Had all sorts of new tricks to show the barrio boys when he came home. Anyone who jumped got cut: Jimmy the Butcher's crew, Jock Brennan..."

"Yeah, I remember. Was still in the Fifth then."

"Yeah. And we've only found more since. Some big 'Tinos, too. Didn't even spare his own brothers."

"Where's Ora Di in all this?"

Brian's face twitches when I say her name. He sees there's something behind the question, he sees I see him seeing it, we both pretend we don't see a thing.

"Everywhere and nowhere. Apparently, they cozied up to each other before they put him away. But word about her didn't start to spread until he got out. Wanna know what I think? Went about like this: when they met, she was the prettiest girl in Vista, he was a macho with a gun. Bet he beat

her and milked her for scratch, as much as he could. Instead of taking her BD eddies and getting the hell out, the dumb cow kept going back for more. Heard she was back on the block lately, so... checks out." He pauses, glances at the dead girl's holo, waves to the techie. Holo flickers, disappears. A nonexistent Valentino reappears in her place. "Case closed."

"So... what?" I continue. "They forgot words, used bullets, and the girl just happened to be here?"

"Yes, Frank. This is one of those cases where it's better you don't go looking for any deeper meaning. Waste of time, waste of life. Boys'll wrap up here, I'll spend a thrilling evening writing up the report, end of story."

I nod, but I'm not sure he's right.

Something's not sticking, pieces're missing.

We stand silent. I wait for Brian to ask me why I really drove out all this way. He doesn't. Probably has a theory, but needs no verification just yet. Least not till someone pays him to get it. Yeah, that's the lightly tarnished side of the golden boy.

I should leave, but something's bothering me, I'm pinned to the spot. I look from body to body. No Emilio. Two lie face down, one on his side - maybe I haven't recognized him yet.

"Aguirre?" I ask. "Ora's here, he oughta be too. Doubt he'd have let her go alone."

"Not here," Brian throws up his hands. "Looks like he sent the girl to do his dirty work. Real gentleman, huh? Sent a patrol to grab him from Vista for a friendly chat. You know, just in case. But he'd flown the coop."

One last glance at the holograms. The one hiding her body - smack dab in the middle. Weird place for someone with just one foot in the gang world, a tourist passing through.

"Thanks, Brian," I say, offering my hand again. He holds it a second too long. "Good luck."

"Good to see you, Frank," he says, looking me in the eye. "Guys like us should stick together."

Huh. Guys like us.

I turn, leave without another word.

First, Braddock appears on TV to announce the NCPD is securing the scene where Ora Di was gunned down. Hours later, Brian Lee hides her holobody from the media's hawk eyes. It doesn't add up.

A big-name investigation means money from City Hall. For overtime, cruiser tune-ups, bulletproof vests. If said investigation proves a spectacular success? Means an even bigger slice of the city budget for the brave boys in uniform come next year. You don't sweep a jackpot like that under the rug. You also don't give it to a guy like Detective Brian Lee. Far back as I can remember, the NCPD golden boy's hands have been grubby with bribes right and left. Fuckin' reverse Midas over here. Pulls in a good chunk of scratch from strategically scattered, dangerous people. They make sure he's never fired and give him the orders and artillery to pour lime all over the NCPD's PR pooch, Detective Braddock.

There's someone behind all this. Someone bigger.

Maybe it went like this: Braddock got there first, stepped in front of the cameras, said what he said. Then Brian showed up, shoved all the bodies in bags, placed techies in their spots and shut down the whole circus. Question is, why.

I walk back to my car. Young gun's gone. I get in.

Had enough for one day. I drive home.



Doubt I'll sleep. Fuck. I step through my door, shut it behind me, glance at my bed... g'night.

I wake up late the next day. Same clothes, fresh hangover.

I look in the fridge - yesterday's pizza, two slices. At least one cup of long-suffering coffee in the pot. But that's what microzappers are for. On the news - not a word about Ora Di.

Guess it's no surprise. She wasn't front-page material; more like page two or three. Question is, were other people really that uninterested? Or did the person who ordered her ignored have media pull?

Or am I growing grizzled and paranoid?

I finish breakfast, take a shower and find it's late afternoon. Where are my comms? I scroll through to find Timmy G.

Timmy answers quickly.

"Top o' the mooornin' to ya! Where to today, Frank-n-wiener?" he begins, his voice lunging at me like an amped-up radio host spouting verses from *The Anarchist Cookbook*. He's the guy you trip over while scanning the frontier frequencies in insomniatic stupor. Timmy. Timmy G is a fixer. Timmy won't tell you he'll fix you the Moon, he won't tell you he knows everyone in this town and they know him. But. But. He has two traits on any other fixer in this town: he always answers my pings, and I like the guy. "Talk dirty to me, choombo."

The sense of humor and composure of a perpetually held-back high school freshman.

"Timmy, need you to put your ear to the ground." I hear him take a breath to interrupt, so I hurry. "Got a feelin' someone's about to unleash some heavy iron on the street. Semi-automatics, machine guns, maybe heavier, though maybe not. Things you could hand out to street soldiers like they were going trick-or-treating. And, wait for it... it's NOT coming from Maelstrom."

He doesn't answer.

"Timmy?"

"Riddle me this, one old choomble to another..." he starts, then stops. The quiet's sweet for a moment, I try to remember how we met. I was still wearing a badge, he'd just started out fixing. Pulled him over, bullshit reason, broken taillight maybe. Just so happened the trunk of giggly Einstein's ride was full of neuroreactors. The very same neuroreactors someone had klepped from a Petrochem lab the week prior. Merch like that's a hard sell - it don't work in run-of-the-mill implants. Only clientele you'll get are full body conversion types. Like, say, megacorp death squadrons. I let him walk for twenty percent of the take. So yeah, you could say we were old choombles.

"You got real specific feelings, man."

"Intel's from an old friend. Former gig friend."

"Understood," he says, and I'm sure it is. "I need to listen for somethin' particular? Like, you tryna know where the toys're headed?"

"More interested in where they came from."

"Choombaaaataaa!" he shouts in my ear like he was declaring a fucking choommunist revolution. Zero cool, this guy. "This gig's startin' to sound like somethin' your boy TG don't wanna be hearin'. Like, kinky? I mean, I like it. Ya got style, Frank. And a man's gotta have style when he's wadin' into deep, hot shit."

Timmy G may be a clown, but he's not an illiterate clown. He reads between the lines.

"You find anything, you know where to come."

"That's what she said, Frank. Laterz."

He hangs up.

I leave my apartment, walk down the third-floor corridor. Yeah, I've thought of getting something higher up. Thought of it a few times: view's better, stink's fainter or refreshingly different – less the bold, stale grease of the fryers below, more the subtle notes of noxious fumes billowing in through the vents. On the other hand, I'm already here, so fuck it. I leave the residential sector, walk past the gun shop and up to the newspaper dispenser. I dig an eddie out of my pocket and feed the machine – my daily ritual.

I hear Pedro and his Delamain diatribe again. Pedro can't understand that some things never change, never get swept aside by the forward march of technological progress. They'll be here forever, immune, immobile – meanin' papers, cabs and cash. Broadsheets printed on pulp only fit to wrap synthmeat in down at the fryguy's. Papers piled high, one atop the other, fifty sheets of prime sleeping material for a man with nowhere else to lay his head. Paper money, passed hand to hand under tables, rolled up tight and sealed with a rubber band. Stuffed into the duffle bags of chooms off to the weapons-n-blow market, untraceable.

And taxi cabs.

I buy a copy of the *Dataminer* and pull out the thick, folded paper. There it is. Front page. She told me once she wanted to make the front page. Long as it wasn't grinning like a *culera* alongside all the other BD starlets

in *VirtuJock Now!*

GANGERCHICK – INNOCENT BYSTANDER, VICTIM IN FIREFIGHT

Pic's black and white, she's smiling. The scoop: a poor, innocent girl whose murky past came back to bite her. Not a word about the date with the famous actor. No wonder – who gives a shit anymore?

I leaf through the rest, then grab a copy of *VirtuJock Now!*

There it is.

ORA DI-SAPPEARS AFTER ONE LAST DATE

The hyenas never disappoint.

I scan for names and spot the stage name: Zane Magnum.

Guy she mentioned.

Down on the parking level, I get in my car. One more glance at the newspaper before I set it down on the passenger seat. Just before I turn the engine, I remember one thing.

Comms unit - Olivia Garland, Arroyo precinct, private number.

"I don't believe it." Can't see her, but I hear a smile. She was on duty last night, she's off today, probably savoring her first sip of coffee as we speak. "Missed ya, Frank."

That subtle flirtation in her tone, light husk to her voice... I missed her, too.

"Good to hear you, Liv. Even though the frequency's not quite right."

"Ah, you got nothin' to regret. Big man's runnin' the place like a south-of-the-border sweatshop. It's good you got out when you did. That way only one of us gets an ulcer." Big man – Commissioner Ramos. No love lost between us. "Heard you're driving now."

"You ever feel like a new dispatcher gig, I could put in a good word."

"Same old loveable Frank..." We would talk, one or two in the morning when I was on a stake-out. I do miss her. "But, all right, you're calling on biz, so get to it."

"You're breakin' my heart."

"Frank, I know you."

"You do."

"Whaddaya need?"

"Actress got killed yesterday, O--"

"Ora Di," she interrupts. "You ever relive 'Valentino Revenge'? Ooh, she was so good in that. Seemed like a sharp one to me."

"She was."

"Was she, now?"

Dead air. A slurp. She's actually having coffee.

"Body count was almost twenty," I say, no biggie. "Think you could send me a list?"

"Oh, Frank, Frank..."

"Pretty please?"

Another slurp. The clunk of a coffee mug on a countertop.

"I'll see what I can do," she says, finally, the smile still on her breath.

"Your brother doin' all right?"

"Eh, you know. Take care of yourself, Frank."

She hangs up.

Olivia's brother is NCPD, too. Sits out his days behind the bars of Supply and Facilities Management, handing out weapons, shuffling papers, rubber stamping shit. Fucking hates it. He was a detective in the Fifth once upon a time. Then someone planted a corruption charge on him. Weren't for me, he would've landed behind thicker bars.

I start the engine. My hand reaches for the Combat Cab term. Old habit.

I hesitate.

UNAVAILABLE

Not today.

I drive.



Brainwave. Ora's studio. Scrolling their latest in Pacifica at the Hotel Tropique. We're Night City neighbors. Bought my pad just as the recession hit and everyone flooded out, thinking the 'hood would devolve into another Combat Zone. Then the film outfit moved in, set up shop on a few floors of

the five-star-hopeful, started camping out with the roaches. Looks like a sad, forgotten place in a sad, forgotten silent picture. Neon signs long gone dark and dirty, smog-smudged windows power-washed by acid rain for months, years. No future to be found.

Brainwave. A beefy, chrome-jawed guard at the door. A teeny studio badge on his overgrown chest. Those floating past and in he scans from the neck down, looking for the old-school IDs. I don't even have to try. I grab a techie, drag him around the corner, ask if he'd like a hunnie to take an hour-long coffee break. At the word "hunnie," his eyes light up and he offers to throw in an audio team hoodie.

I hang the plastic from my neck and glide past the gorilla. Just as I thought - a badge is a badge is a badge. Inside, shit gets weird. Story time: the Hotel Tropique, one of the more spectacular failures of the 2060s. A time when big men with big money rode yippee-ki-yay into Pacifica to erect a late-stage capitalist heaven on Earth. Right here, with rooms and pillow synthchocolates for all at the Hotel Tropique, Hotel Haiti, a jungle-like atrium at the bizarro-named Grand Imperial Mall. The crisis hit. Whole 'hood-wide project went tits up and got stuck that way, thrashing, flailing, a handful of Voodoo Boy wizards squatting here and there. The scroll stage at the Tropique - a desperate, doomed attempt at reviving a dying biz. Lipstick on a pig.

A faded, dusty reception desk. They've managed to hang a few screens, stand a couple of underpaid kids next to them. The kids take the fast food from the delivery drones, nudge and shoo small flocks of interns, audio guys and camera crew like the undergrown sheepdogs they are. Sometimes they vaguely point people toward the toilets. Well-dressed bubble-people float through the room, trying to outdo one another in import and gravitas. Each is the center of his or her microverse, waltzing through the vast cosmic sludge of brainbiz. A few security heavies in the mix - old habit. One I recognize, worked at the same precinct. Jack? Jake? The jerk's added a good ten pounds of muscle on his arms, his sleeves ready to burst like a pair of Polish hot links. Left shoulder - RealSkinn. Nice, pricey toy, that. For an ex-cop, the private sector is heaven on Earth indeed. More money, fewer

problems.

Could've been me there, guarding nothing. Comms pinged a few times after I left the force. Good offers, too... good eddies. But I just couldn't do it, couldn't turn studio huscle. I'd have felt like a cop without a badge to flash, lugging around heavy toys Joe Cop couldn't dream of affording. I'd have felt like I was playacting, pretending. And I never liked to pretend.

I walk up to reception and peer thoughtfully at the screens. One displays a studio map:

LEVEL 1 - CATERING AND LOGISTICS

LEVEL 2 - WARDROBE

LEVEL 3 - TECH AND MAKEUP

LEVEL 4 - SCROLLING STAGE

Level two. Up the stairs. Left, left again, room 203: ZANE MAGNUM – bingo.

I get moving. Dunno if he'll be there, dunno if he's even scrolling today. Can't hurt to check.

Stairwell's empty. My eyes jerk to all the corners for cams. Can't say why – not like there's anywhere to hide. Level 2. I hang a left, then left again, I'm in front of his door. Knock-knock. I wait. Nothing.

I try the handle. It's open but nobody's home. Instead, there's a righteous mess – mounds of empty scop pockets, drained vodka bottles, crumpled, soiled clothes and other sundry shit. The light's on. Security woulda turned it off after a hard day's softie work, so Zane's gotta be on set. I leave.

Stairs, next floor up. People everywhere, not a head turns my way. That's the studio magic of most scroll sets: just look like you got a right to be there, like you know what you're doing, and nobody'll ask you any stupid questions. Ora told me why. Showbiz is the biz of being nice to people. The fewer you talk to, the fewer face-cramps you get from all that fake smiling. No closed doors here. A long tangle of cables black-taped to the floor every few feet keeps 'em open. The cables veer off into rooms lining a long corridor. I walk down it and catch what's inside – BD calibration seats. Conversations, in pieces, float up to my ears. I'm looking for a thread to follow.

"No, no, no, here, right there. Slide 'em aaaall the way up when they step

in the club..."

"Saturation, crank it. The eyes, I want 'em crying blood. Just their sight, don't you dare touch hearing or taste..."

"Need ya to get me that techie from Wats on comms. You know, guy who did the emote sigs for 'Queen of the Afterlife.'"

"Oh, man, I'm gonna hurl..."

"Stop fidgeting and relax. You go on set with that hangover, we'll have to toss the whole scroll."

I peek inside.

Hello, Zane.

The tabloid coverboy's coif could use some gel. Looks kinda like someone crumpled him into a ball, regretted it, then tried to smooth him back out. But it's Zane all right. He sits, a thick cable feeding into his skulljack, thinner ones sprouting from his wrists. A techie sits next to him, doing her girl scout best to be nice.

I shove the ID in my pocket and walk in. I'm ignored. I stand and stare for ten seconds, more... it becomes painfully clear I haven't washed up in the wrong room. I look at Zane. He doesn't see me. With his goggles on, he's deaf to the world. The girl turns. Young, pushing twenty? Heavy geisha warpaint, severe bangs, shapeless sack-clothes that lie a little too well to be hand-me-downs. The big purple insect lenses in her cheap frames don't just look great - they display diagnostics, too.

"We're busy," she says, irritated, as if to a janitor come to mop up Zane's puke. "You one of Ben's boys? Tell him we need a few more minutes. If you don't mind."

"Not Ben who sent me," I answer. I look at her. "I gotta talk to Zane. Give us a minute."

"Seriously? We're running late already..."

She fidgets. Like there're fleas in those shapeless pants. It's nibbling at her by now. I could be someone important. So how's she gonna wriggle out of this? Zane can either be another half-hour late, or she can fob me, potential VIP, off. She scratches at her cuticle. Hypnotic fractals leap across her nails.

"I gotta talk to Zane," me, calm and low.

She makes up her mind, flounces her bag-pants out the door. She can't slam it, but shuts it far as it'll go. It thuds against the braid of cables between door and jamb.

"Fuck..." Zane yanks off his goggles with a neat velcro crunch. With everything firmly jacked into the gear around the room, he has to hold them up in the air. "The hell you want?"

I take the techie's chair. I look at him. Bloodshot eyes, bloodshot skin. Swollen red face of a choom who hit the vodka so hard his maltreated body was forced to take on water. Cotton-candy muscles that look great on camera. A juicy, deepening bruise under his left eye. Interesting.

"I don't know you," he observes, like he found a fresh turd under his shoe. Doesn't even try to be nice. A page two buffoon who thinks the front page'll be his any day now. Little does he fucking know that any day'll never arrive. Christ, no wonder Ora hated him.

"What do you want?" – slow now.

"Wanna talk," I reply calmly, though it's a struggle. I wanna punch this guy. "Got a few questions about Ora Di."

"You a cop?" Most logical conclusion if a stranger pays you a surprise visit and has a few questions. Or... is it that I still stink of cop? "Sure took your fuckin' time."

Weird. Brian meant to bury this case, but his people still should've talked to Zane. If only to pad the paperwork.

"You met up, night before she got shot," I say, ignoring his stupid comment. "A hot date you two had."

He looks at me with big sloshed eyes. Wonders if I'm asking or telling.

"Fuck, man, you mean the marketing bullshit?" he answers, unsure whether to be afraid or indignant. "Go ahead, check upstairs, proly some invoices for the dinner and drinks so they can write it off."

"Uh-huh."

"You know, if we'd of felt like taking it back to the hotel, they'd of expensed that, too." When he says hotel, his filler-puffed cheeks spread into a sickly grin. "They pay for everything, long as you get enough people following,

taking pictures for the papers. You know?"

"So you wanted to?" I toss it out to see if it sticks. "Take Ora back to the hotel?"

"Nah, man, you're gonked." He shakes his head. "Her input..."

He trails off in abject terror. Still a swig or two of survival instinct in his waterlogged body. Zane might have the bulk, but he's the real teddy bear. Terrified that if he says one word too much, the 'Tinos will remember where he lives or what car he rides backseat in.

"I know Emilio."

"So you know what would happen to me if I touched her." Using his words, now - doing a little better. Oh my sweet, simple gummy bear, paid well to look good but stay soft. If you only had a heart. Couldn't give a shit about Ora's death, not an ounce of respect for human life in you. "'Tinos would of crucified me on some picket fence in Santo. Those chooms don't fuck around. Fuck, I didn't even wanna show."

Interesting.

"Why not? Creative differences?"

"No, man, it's not... She was hard to work with, you know? Here, you got people, normal people." When his lips say normal, his eyes look me up and down. "But she was, you know... You know?"

I wanna sock him in his good eye.

"'Fraid I don't. Tell me."

"Fuuuck..." He twists and shifts, a discomfort I savor. "She knew people. But not like, you know, normals. Not some huscle who knows a fixer who knows who to call, you know, just in case. Her people were the ones you called, right? You say the wrong thing, look at her wrong, shit could get bad."

"She aggressive?"

"Choom, you ever relive any of her scrolls?"

No, choom, I haven't. Ever. But I don't want to give this spray-tanned marshmallow the satisfaction. He'll just have to use his words again.

"Slot it and you feel like you're on one bad trip, you know? Like you have this itch to, like, look over your shoulder, but you hold it in or whatever. Why they paid her so good. You pay for the feel. To feel like someone else. And

she was someone else. She was a fucking... animal. You don't even know, man... you never knew if she was gonna run or fight."

"What was she like on your date? You remember, notice anything?"

He hesitates, but this time he really needs to talk to somebody.

"Hand me that bottle with the vitamin shit?"

I grab the bottle, a blue liquid sloshing inside. I smell the vodka oozing out of him.

"Thanks." He drinks slowly, buying himself time to arrange the facts. He's being cautious but honest. "Her and her input. Fought about something. She was yelling at him, just caught a few words. But choom, if they started thinkin' I was out to get something, you know, from her...?"

"They'd hack your nutsack off."

"Yeah."

"That's all I know, serious. And man, I'm late."

When he says that's all he knows, he deflates.

"You tell anyone else?"

"Studio huscle. Came over that night, soon as the news broke. They're real quick."

'Course. Studio needed to stem the rising PR crisis, fast. 'Course. They're paying Brian to fill out the papers, get the whole thing filed away in some basement. They might've even written the report for him, got enough ex-cops hanging around. Wipe any and all traces of Ora; first the asphalt, then the files, then the media. Lots of money, lots of hustle, zero moral fucks given.

I stand to leave.

"That's all I know, man, seriously. . ." His voice lingers behind me as I walk out of the room.

I don't turn around. Leave him there to sit and stagnate. A man-toy abandoned, tethered to his spot, with a black eye to nurse and a baby bottle of vodka to suckle, the better to forget he's just another fucking screamsheet byline they can rub out the second they get tired of him.



They call him Cejas. Owns a tech shop. I know Cejas from the good old days. He and his thick eyebrows've been running the joint since before said days were good or old. Wanna talk to him. Ora brought him up a couple times - they were close - and Cejas is one of Emilio's top brass. High up enough to know what went down. Might tell me why Ora was at that meet.

I pull up to the store. Comms blinks: a message from Olivia. That was quick. Very quick. I run my eyes down the list - names and nicks. Interesting. She left a voice message, too.

"First three are heavy hitters, insiders, direct line to Emilio Aguirre. His captains, say. Three in one place means no accidental bump in the night. 'Sides that, our starlet and a few soldiers, couple of minors on each."

She pauses - the message continues. Silence crackles for a few beats.

"Don't go sticking your fingers in this case, Frank. Not if you can help it. Little bro says hi."

She hangs up.

I leave the car parked out front. Bright red neon: CLOSED.

I try the handle. Open.

Empty. Nobody home. Big boxes stuffed with inert gear. Flickering screens tuned to dead air but pulsing to a faint bassline throbbing from tall, spindly speakers muttering Mexican rap. Drones, transistors and cables. Cables everywhere, cables running over everything and around everything and through everything. Cables dangling off shelves like weird Spanish cybermoss. Voices. Off to the right. I move, turn the corner around a looming shelf of cable-twisted chrome, and see I've come at a very bad time.

Cejas is sitting at a table, head in his hands. Hunched, cowering. Two Valentinos flank him, right and left. One's familiar - Corto. Two years at San Junipero. Carjack with a real short circuit. Quick to draw, suspect in at least two first degree murders, never convicted. The other 'Tino, the one I don't know, speaks.

"We're closed," he spits and moves toward me. Corto stops him with a wave. "What?"

Flashback: five years ago. Eerily similar sich. I'm wearing an invisible bulletproof vest with Organized Crime tattooed across its chest. Had I shown up here in that vest, it'd still be unpleasant, tense, but the 'Tinos would have it in the back of their heads what happens when a cop gets got. Problems, problems for everybody.

But that was five years ago. I'm not a cop anymore. Question is, does Corto know that?

Man's changed since I last saw him. Swapped his left forearm for chrome, covered the rest of his body with sharp-angled tattoos in shrieking colors. New, expensive tattoos that morph in places, cyberware shifting the dermal ink in real time. A snake, the Devil himself, the Holy Virgin, seven blades in her chest.

Corto looks me in the eye, breathing shallow. He calculates. Wonders what to say. I wonder if I wanna interrupt his thought process. Do I let it run its course? No, gotta cut his math short, do what I would do if I still held a badge as my shield.

"Closed? Even better," I say and step toward them. "Wanted to talk to Cejas in private."

Corto keeps his eyes on me.

"Cejas is busy. Right, Cejas?"

Cejas stays silent. His face stays glued to his hands. His elbows rest on alabaster-white plywood. Blood seeps through his fingers and drip, drip, drips onto the smooth, clean surface.

"So I see."

From Corto, the slightest of nods. The other guy stands, circles around me, stops at my back. I don't like this at all.

"Let's see it," Corto says.

His upper lip rises, a rabid dog without the growl. New titanium teeth.

Fuck. Miscalculated. Badly. Set my badge down five years ago, forgot to bring it with me today.

Slow and steady, as if reaching for my gun, I slide my hand inside my

jacket.

Another nod. Even smaller. Microscopic, so much so it should go undetected. I sense it.

A rush of movement behind me. The 'Tino's fast. I'm faster.

The world plunges into the warm, gelatinous wine of Sandevistan. I spin around at full boost and pray my muscles can take it. If they can't, they'll tear clean off my bones.

Hand. Gotta get the hand. Hand with the gun. The hand pulling the Unity out of its holster, aiming to empty it in my gut. I strike his elbow. The sickening snap of breaking bone. I strike his wrist. A heavy boot on broken glass. The gun falls, falls from fingers open wide in surprise. A swift parting kiss to his jaw, and I reach for my gun.

Too late. Corto's beside me. The dull jerk of the knife as it sinks in under my right rib. That's it. This is how it ends...

Or it would be if I didn't have a metal plate in lieu of a rib. A lucky charm from the time a Maelstromer decided to test his mantis blades. I got two months in the ER and a medal.

Fuck the gun. I grab Corto's shoulders and channel my entire boosted might through my forehead, into his face. The knife drops. Corto slumps.

Sandevistan courses through my muscles, pulsing, fading. Tomorrow. Oh, tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll wake with the biggest fucking hangover. Like I'd pounded back a whole convoy of Centzon and lived to regret it. Pain shoots through my body, like someone strung me up piñata-style to whack the shit outta me with a telescopic baton. Christ. I can feel it already.

Choom whose arm I snapped in three is back... He shrieks in Spanish and bolts out the door. Deep breaths. One. Two. Three. Better. I grab a plastic folding chair and take a seat at the table. Cejas has separated face from hands. He eyes me like a beaten cur. Can't say I blame him; he just rose from the dead, too.

"Got a couple questions," I say, glancing at Corto to be sure he's lying where he fell. Good boy. "Cejas?"

He doesn't answer. He sits and looks at me. I slap him. Not hard. Enough to remind him where his head is.

"Cejas."

He doesn't cower, doesn't duck behind his arms. There's a ganger in there after all. Something shifts in him. He rubs his jaw, scratches his arm, shakes some life back into himself.

"You the badge. One who drove Ora 'round."

Color me surprised. Blindsided? I got so much surprise I don't know where to direct it. Is it that Cejas knows who I am, or that Ora told him about me? Feels like someone revealed a dark secret.

"In the flesh. Call me Frank."

"Ain't your choom," he answers. Sure. Rules are rules. "Whatchu want?"

"Wanna know what went down in Charter Hill."

"Watch the news. Tuesday night firefight. Gang war. You ain't heard?"

I feel like slapping him again, harder. Keep my hands to myself. I reach, pull out my gun, lay it on the table. Thud. Maybe this'll change his tone.

"I heard," I begin slowly, calmly, looking pointedly at the gun. "Sixth Street Rough Riders got in a tussle with some hot-blooded 'Tino boys. A BD starlet happened to be there. A victim of her own innocence, naiveté. Her unsullied virtue opened the door to her dark, murky past and let it in to ravish her."

He snorts like a wet dog. More offended than mad? My boy Cejas is barely holding it together. He doesn't want to be the guy holding the slice-n-diced cop giblets, though. Time to lay out all my cards. Maybe he'll show me one of his.

"Lemme tell you a story, Cejas. You tell me where it turns fairytale. Our *mano* Emilio made a nice Valentino career for himself, climbed the ladder rung by rung. At first. Then he made some new chooms on Brooks Island, they backed him, he started hopping, skipping, jumping. Pushing merch worth tens of thousands, money enough that it needed scrubbing." I glance around the store. Half the shit here's ready to start a new life on a new side of the border, or it was lured here with dirty eurobucks. I know it, Cejas knows it, doesn't matter. "Ora was busy building her BD career. Time and again, they told her to leave, but Emilio was her shield. He feared no one, so she feared no one."

„*No mames, cabrón!*" – it bursts out. I can see he didn't want to, but ay

ay ay, the milk's outta the glass and he's not gonna cry about it. "She ain't need no fucking shield. She the same as him. Hungry, get it?"

"I get it. I knew her."

"Emilio never pushed her, never tol' her what to do. Shit was the other way 'round."

He stops. Too late. Plop. One drop too many, spilled. But I can't let Cejas see I saw it, not yet.

"Charter Hill," I circle back. "You boys got stacks of eddies, but they need a bath. Meanwhile, down on 6th Street, they got merch, but not an enny to their name. This gang war is a media-stirred cocktail of pure, unadulterated horseshit. Keeps city hall warm at night, though. 'Yes, yes, the body count's up, but don't look at us, blame the baddies down in Heywood that can't stop pew-pewing at each other.' Like I said - horseshit. Think we both know that fire's been ceased."

He nods. A nod like a nervous tic, but he's listening. I talk on.

"Emilio sends Ora to seal the deal. Why? Already got Buchón there, you got Smith, Jimenez..." I toss in a few of the 'Tino names Olivia gave me. They stick. Cejas sees I've done my homework... and starts to crumble. "Or maybe he didn't send her? She just happened to be there, you know, passing through..." I finish.

He says nothing, differently. Anger's gone from his brow. Something's thrashing around inside him, trying to get out. I wait.

"They fought about it. Bad." I catch a note of tender dismay. "Emilio didn't want to talk to 6th Street, but Ora talked him into it. Said they had to think like the big boys, do real biz, you know? You don't stack eddies, you invest 'em, diversify. She said it was time to stop playing stupid war games, gangs are done. But we still had to get our slice before the fucking collars rode in to pack it up in their portfolios."

She would say that.

"What about the others?" I ask. "Emilio's still boss."

"Corto stood with Emilio, normal," he wipes his battered brow, glances at the body laid out on the floor. Directs some hate its way. "Corto look up to him the same way he look up at *La Virgen*. But Buchón, Cortez, Smith..."

they listened to her. Maybe Corto was right. Maybe it wa'n't worth it..."

"Not for a half-dozen crates of assault rifles?"

He frowns - angry, surprised, I can't tell.

"Rifles? *Vato*, it ain't about no rifles..."

He breaks off. His eyes jerk over my left shoulder. The door creaks.

Fuck. The guy that got away. I forgot. I follow Cejas' gaze to see what the 'Tino dragged in. My gun's on the table, I don't reach for it.

He's maybe sixty, maybe eighty. Whatever it is, it's a damn lucky number. Most people in his biz don't make half that. They call him Padre. A ganger ex-priest with Juarez ties. Spent years in prison. Saw pictures of young Padre once - his entire holy body covered in tattoos, though he hides them now. They say Padre found his faith some time ago. They treat him as if he was ordained. I doubt it. Not gonk enough to ask, though.

Padre says nothing. He drifts over to the table, not a glance at Corto. He looks at me.

"It is finished." I hear a thick Mexican accent; I hear my time is up. "Time to go home."

Cejas. Got one more question for him. Saved the best for last, the one about the fucking guns. But Cejas is no longer with us. There's the shape of a man, you can look that shape in the eyes, but the light's gone out. The man behind them snuffed.

If what they say about Padre is true, they won't touch him. Padre is a fixer. Heywood's sole fixer. He good shepherds his people, keeps them safe, pulls them off each other's throats if needed. Story time. Took a call once, some choom was out there waving a machete, ready to lop off another guy's arm. Over a girl, what else. One of those calls where you don't go to ask questions, you go to shoot, because the motherfuckers you're bound to find are bound to be out of their goddamn heads. Padre got there first. We pulled up to see him standing between two brain-boasted, chromed-out glowering gangoons, between two machetes, each bigger than my arm. Padre walked over to one, slapped him, shouted something about loving thy neighbor and took the machete from the ganger's hand like a toy. Didn't bat an eye.

"It is finished," he repeats, a little lower. The file on his Juarez activity

pops into my mind. It's the tone for ordering a slow and painful scalping. "Let us go."

I stand, reach very, very slowly for my gun. Place it gingerly back in its holster.

Padre looks me in the eye the whole time. He walks over to Cejas, places a gentle hand on his head and bows his own. For Cejas? For himself? A nod points me to the exit. Padre leads me out, even holds the door. A send-off committee stands outside. Six Valentinos, including the now gimpy-armed one. I know what they're waiting for.

"It is settled," Padre says to them. Their faces - angry, vengeful at first. Now utterly obedient. They don't even shoot me a dirty look. Padre turns to me. "Let us talk. Do you know why you are still alive?"

"Think so," I say before I actually do. "God's will, right?" - with a twitch of my brow.

Yeah, good going, champ. Piss off the guy who could unsettle what was just settled.

"Don't get smart." I can't tell if it's a scold or a joke. Can't read this guy at all. "Life should be respected. Your life, the lives that waited for you outside, the lives still inside."

"Corto's alive."

"I know. As are you."

Awkward silence. Awful.

"Last night, some acted without respect for life," Padre resumes. "Today, many others have come here with many, many questions. You are not the first, you are not the last. Some seek the sinners, others seek to hide them. But none has respect for the life of his brother, of his neighbor."

He knows a lot more than me. Might be the only one in this world who has the whole story.

"Who's guilty, Padre?"

"Let us walk." He nods toward my car. I open the door, get in. He sits beside me. When was the last time someone rode shotgun? He stops me once more. "You live because she spoke highly of you."

Don't know what to say to that. I nod and start the car.

"Where to?"

My hand itches to hit dispatch. Got a client, don't I? Padre points: straight, turn here, go back. We drive in circles for a while, make sure nobody's following. You don't get that many wrinkles by throwing caution to the wind. Padre's face was dug by the Devil himself.

"My first time in a Combat Cab," he says. He shoots a decoy glance around the interior. He's going somewhere. He taps the bulletproof divider. "I would usually sit in the back, no? For safety."

"Mhm," I nod. "'S how it works. You call, order a ride, I pick you up and drop you off. Pull you out of trouble if need be."

"A little like this, right now."

"A little."

"When I leave the car, we are even."

"Yep."

"And if they shoot me in the head two minutes later, that is not your problem."

"You let go of the handle, you let go. Ride's over."

"I see. And if they shoot me the next day, in the middle of the night during a gang meet, you come to check on me?"

I don't answer.

He smiles. No hint of mockery. Warmth, actually. Weird.

"Turn left."

"Where we goin'?"

"To meet a friend. You may want to speak with him, but even more, I think he must speak with you. He's lost, you see. You could show him the way. There are hounds out for blood, and they are swift. But you are no hound, Frank. You are more like a dog. Loyal. Good old Frank. Who wished to be a wolf."

He's pleased with his metaphor, though it's biblically lacking.

"Who was in Vista before me? NCPD?"

"Sixth Street. The situation is tense, but this you know. No one wants to appear weak, no one wants a war. Sadly, it may be these wishes are mutually exclusive. And then everyone will have problems. Your old friends did come, eventually. I told them to leave, in so many words."

“Don’t get along?”

“They asked the wrong questions.”

“And I don’t? Didn’t tell me to fuck off.”

“They wish to place blame. You seek... a reason.” He stops to point me in the right direction. “The building to the left. Park there.”

We park in front of a toppling hotel. Grime central, out in the sticks. Its neon sign still glows, kinda. H and L – OK, E spasmic. Building looks abandoned. But it’s not. We walk in; the cryptkeeper at reception doesn’t bother to lift his head. Elevator out of order, Padre steers us to the stairs. Second floor, third. A long hallway veined with flickering, humming fluorescents. Plaster peeling off like wet, festering sores. Place stinks of damp, mold, rot.

319. Padre does the honors. Knock-knock-knock. Pause. Knock-knock. Pause. Padre enters.

Room’s clean, relatively. Walls aren’t disintegrating. Working large screen TV on one. Other than that – a double bed, two large duffels containing clothes in the corner, a table... and guns. Lots of guns.

My friend sits on the bed.

Emilio Aguirre, aged a few years compared to his file photo. A few pounds heavier, too, but most of it seems like muscle. Broad shoulders, thick biceps, a large tattoo across his pecs – skulls and flowers and Spanish... about death, most likely. Chrome, purposely exposed, where his left shoulder used to be. Tired, dark-ringed eyes. Like he hasn’t slept in days.

Emilio lifts his gaze. Padre speaks. Speedy, rat-tat-tat Mexican rap. I don’t understand a word. Quick but calm. Padre is always calm. Emilio nods. His eyes are sunken but alive, bright. There’s a man in there, still burning.

They’ve finished. He looks at me.

“Remember. It is for God to judge.” Padre glides calmly out of the room.

We’re alone. Emilio stands. He comes over, as if to take a closer look. He’s a mountain of muscle but doesn’t invade my space. Weird. Un-ganger-like. Emilio walks to the fridge droning in the corner. It’s empty except for a fifth of bourbon, half-full, less... He takes a swig, wipes his mouth, hands it to me. It’s sweet, sharp, the warmth spreads to my bones. Cheap bourbon’s good.



Emilio stretches out on the bed. I take a rickety chair.

"What do you want?"

"Answers. To a few questions. That's all."

"It's what everyone wants these days. Usually it's the same damn questions, too. 'Cept nobody wants the truth, *vato*."

"I do. And my questions *are* different." I take another sip. I smile. Situation's a divine, gut-busting joke. Is he cracking too? It dawns on us that we're holding a wake. "What happened, Emilio?"

"They shot her. You know that."

"Not in Charter Hill, not in Vista. Charter Hill's a stack of holos - the result. The reasons lie elsewhere."

He looks at me, surprised.

"You do ask different questions. Ex-cop, right?"

Weird. No gangoon aggression. Maybe Emilio's not so bad after all... Who'm I kidding - he stabbed a guy seven times over a fistful of eddies. Another murder nobody could pin on him. But we knew.

"This world, the gang world, you're familiar with it" he continues. "Other side, sure, but you've done time here. Gangsta life, *puto*, all that shit, you heard it all, seen it all."

"Nowhere near as much as you."

"Don't matter. *Carnal*, gang war - tell me who wins. Who gets the glory? The laurels, the spoils? They go to the strong or the rich? They go to the one with more guns?"

"Never thought about it."

"You should." He's smart, I'm surprised. Honest to God, thought he was a loud, furious gonk who thinks it's all about shooting up other gonks and shaking 'em down for scratch. There's more to the story and he knows it. "Lemme tell you. Glory goes to he who conquers his heart. It's a fight for our souls, this war. Look at us, look at 6th Street. *La Virgen María*, long live the NUSA."

My comms pings. Leaving Emilio to his musings for a moment, I reach into my pocket. Timmy G.

"asked around, got some fukin answers - u gon fuckin flatline"

And another.

"not on comms tho. even hashed and salted. need u to come over"

Should put him away, but he fires off one more.

"got us in some hot n spicy shit choom... tread careful."

Jesus. I look at Emilio.

"You're right," he says. "What happened in Charter Hill - the result. Holo, a trick of the light. But the cause? *Ambición. Desesperada y desmedida.*"

He brings the bottle to his lips, drinks his fill this time. Then he caps it, sets the bottle aside. The skull on his chest grins.

"Jones called me. Sixth Street Jones," he begins. "You don't know him - new guy, only been running things a few months. Started by fire-clearing a space for himself, cut three off the top. 'S got nomad contacts too. No idea how. Those *pendejos* play a good game of hard to get. Jones brings things in that don't come easy. Fixers love him, gangs respect him. Mr. Jones even got himself a couple nice police dogs."

I wonder how much he knows. About me. Like how I bit the hand that fed me and ran.

"Go on."

"Jones had hot merch to unload. Red-hot, burning, so he had to toss it quick. He called me."

"The competition? No secret that fighter jets and hammerheads don't get along."

"Ceasefire," Emilio shrugs. "We tried to talk. Thought maybe we'd go into biz together. Start out by showing some goodwill. Symbols, rituals, they mean something. Jones thought this could be it."

"Ora thought you should buy the merch," I confirm. "They had something everyone wants, bad - why shouldn't it be yours? You had the scratch."

"It wasn't about the merch, holmes. Wasn't about the scratch either. It was about her. It was always about her."

"Not sure I follow."

His face somehow sinks. Not sure he's got a heart in there, but if he does - it's shattering about now.

"She hated the virtu shit. She loved money. No. She loved not relying on a damn soul but her own self. Never wanted to be a gangerchick. Never wanted to be Mrs. Emilio Aguirre. She was Ora Dominguez and it's all she ever wanted to be."

"Sure sounds like her."

"Her curse, *carnal*. Before she got famous, nobody listened to her, never. Nobody!" He stands up, his fists clenched. Furious now, helpless... and it's fucking terrifying. I see now why Ora stood by him those years. He doesn't have what I saw bring so many others down under interrogation. Emilio's not self-destructive. His wrath is infectious, it's smart, it's the booster you could never afford. "Smith, Cortez, ay, even fucking Buchón... They couldn't get it through their skulls that little Ora might be right. About anything. But then she talked to some reporters, showed up in some papers, sat on a few fucking interview couches. And suddenly the boys listened."

"Gangerchick and star."

"A woman who never wanted to be a star, but went up there just to see. Came back with some souvenirs plus the conviction she could handle a pack of thieves. Tell you one thing, *vato*: you don't learn that shit off a scroll."

I think of Ora. How she never felt at home. Not on set, not in the gang. Everybody needs a home. Otherwise they wander, searching.

Emilio leans against the wall, takes a deep breath. I've got one, two questions tops before I've overstayed my welcome.

"Charter Hill - what happened? Was it a set-up, an ambush?"

"No, but... Jones was acting weird, even for him. Wanted to sell me something - bad, quick... but he wanted a lot of scratch. Quick and high price don't usually go together."

"He tell you what? Weapons?"

"Prototype. Was supposed to show me in person at the meet. Said if I didn't want it, I could help him find someone who did. But he was pretty fucking sure it'd get my dick up. When he saw Ora he panicked. Was afraid she'd talk. Was more afraid of that than he was of a war."

"Would've trusted you. Whole thing would've gone down quiet if it'd been you."

“Probably.”

He falls silent. He looks off into the distance. His pain is palpable. In his head, over and over, a question he already knows the answer to. Can't change what's done and gone, can't change what's settled.

“Jones is a dead man,” he adds.

That I believe. Hard to say if Emilio will survive this war, but Jones won't. I gotta ask.

“Why'd she go alone?”

He looks me in the eye. I see grief, wrath, sorrow. I hold his gaze.

“Sometimes you see the dots but can't connect them,” he answers. “I never... never thought my chooms would follow her, never thought they'd see a new Ora, not the one from five years back. I missed the hour when her star shifted. Did what I'd always done – slammed the door and left. Thought it would end there.”

I nod. He's said everything, anything that mattered.

I stand. No thanks, no goodbye. I extend my hand. He'll respect that.

“Didn't ask me what I'm doin' askin' all these questions.”

“Didn't need to, *carnal*. She told me about you.”



While I was in with Emilio, night fell on the city of its name.

No one outside the door; Padre left us to talk in private. No Valentinos in sight, though they gotta be close. Next room over, maybe? I listen. Nothing. It's quiet, empty. I walk downstairs, past the keeper of the keys, who sits exactly where I left him. I walk out the door, invisible as a ghost.

I get in my car. I'd really like to talk to Jones, but I don't know anyone down on 6th. 'Sides, got that thing...

My old choomble, Timmy G.

Timmy doesn't live in Northside, thank God, but it is still Wats. Oh well.

I don't catch Timmy in the flesh too often. Could count on one hand the times we've met, on one finger the times I've been in his pad. Fixing's a

relatively recent fascination for him. He's spent most of his Lost Boy years hooked up to an IV and skulljacked into a server, 'runner goggles blocking out the world. Timmy the Fixer doesn't have a 'hood – he has a subnet. Doesn't rule like Padre – shepherd to all his lambs. That'd be a Net impossibility. He wouldn't want to anyway. Probably for the best. Probably why Timmy G's still alive and shouting.

Twenty minutes and I pull up to the postindustrial wasteland my fixer calls home. The merch. What was it Jones wanted to pass off to Emilio's crew so badly? "Prototype weapon." Emilio knew exactly what it was, didn't want to tell me.

I step out of my car. Eerily quiet street. Dry leaves rustle. Elms. Can't tell if it's just this corner of Wats, or if something's really off. Got a bad feeling in my gut, but what's another bad feeling when you're rounding out day three of a non-stop, commercial-free bad feelings marathon. I leave the car on stand-by: cameras on, live feed to my comms. My eyes and ears outside once I'm in. Just in case.

I go in, climb the stairs, ignore the cameras. One hums and follows me. Paranoid clown. Timmy lives on the third floor; takes up the whole thing, actually. To get in, you gotta call him; then he cracks a security door in the stairwell. Rest of the building's empty. Probably. A negative space waiting for the gangoons to come in and squat, pop out a turd, lay claim to it. Could also be Timmy keepin' it peaceful and quiet. Who knows.

I walk up to the security door. This'd look great in Supply and Facilities Management. Evidence room, yeah. I raise my hand to hit the videocomms and see...

Door's open. Ajar.

Fuck.

My hand jerks to my gun. I listen. Stairs quiet. Empty apartments, above and below – quiet.

Could still bolt downstairs. Jump in the car. Drive off. Call Timmy, check up. Maybe he just forgot to lock down.

Who'm I kidding... Timmy would've shut it twice, checked it three times. Fucking tin-foil ranter.

I glance at my comms. What time'd he ping me? Wasn't that long ago; visitor could still be inside. Nothing on the cam outside.

I go on, squeeze through the crack in the door.

Another long, dark corridor. To the left – one door, three rooms. To the right – one door, two. Choices. Last one on the right is Timmy's "office." Can I take two shots of Sandevistan in 24 hours? No idea. Rather not chance it.

I tiptoe, inch my way down the hallway, the barrel of my pistol raised, a third eye. First room – empty. Hard to say if someone searched the place floor to ceiling or if Timmy just abides in chaos. Second – more of the same. Filthy, silent as the tomb. I check the third; I hear a thump down below. Maybe the murmur of the wind? A cat, a bat, a rat...

Maybe we got company.

It creeps up on me: they might've been waiting. Knew I'd go in.

I grip my gun tighter, steady my nerves. I step into the office.

Timmy G in his netrunner chair. Inert. Unnaturally red. Drool drip-drip-drips from his slack mouth. Kinda stinks. Probably always kinda stinks in here.

His pulse: flatline.

Timmy was right. Up to our necks in a river of red-hot shit.

Bulging, burst veins. Must've pinned him down, roasted him in the Net. Maybe nothing happened here, not in this world. Door just creaked open when Timmy let go.

I take the goggles still linked to his deck, lift them off his eyes. Gently. Carefully. Need to peer under the eyelids of the dear departed, see where the hell he was when they got him. Could pull up the logs from his last sesh. But-but... Feel a little weird, poking around the files of someone who just shoved off this mortal coil. Might be my only chance, though. I punch a few buttons on the keydeck and hear footsteps just outside.

Damn. Company. Waiting for me the whole time.

I have the goggles in one hand, my gun in the other.

"Easy there, pal," I hear through the door. A voice, so familiar. Familiarity – the only reason I don't fire up Sandevistan and shred myself. "Easy. Put it away."

I flip the safety and holster my iron.

Brian is calm. Not at all surprised. I see it now. He was waiting. No questions, not a glance at the body. He was here long before I arrived. Brian takes the 'runner gear from my hand.

I nod toward the left, then the right.

"Yep," Brian answers. "All around us. Upstairs, downstairs." He pulls out a small cloth, wipes down the gear. Rubs out fingerprints.

He pinches the goggles through his rag, gently places them back on Timmy's dead eyelids.

He nods toward the door. I go first. Down the stairs. The camera's off, silent. Logs probably wiped already. Evidence-wise, nobody's come in, nobody's gone out. Clean.

Brian's voice behind me.

"Release the hounds," he says to... someone.

We exit and walk to my car. Before we drive off, two patrol cars race up to the building.



We walk into Tom's. Four-thirty AM, when the place empties out. We walk to the cop booth - a woman I don't know sits there in plain clothes. She sees Brian, he nods toward the door. This guy... The mystery woman tosses some eddies on the table, leaves. We sit down. Crystal is nowhere in sight. I spot a half-empty coffee pot on the counter. God, I want that bitter brown liquid so bad, don't care that it's cold.

I look around: there are three other diners, heads bowed, eyes averted. And there's Travis, alone at the drivers' table, shooting me a dirty look. Heh. Probably thinks I'm back in bed with the pigs.

"Let's talk..." Brian starts, then - "One sec."

He's read my mind and walks to the counter. Pours coffee into two mugs, places one in front of me.

"Assault rifles, huh?" I'm in no mood to dance around the point. Wants to

talk? Let's talk. "Fucking assault rifles."

"Frank, you stirred up a tsunami of horseshit. Shit I gotta take good time outta my night to wipe up. I was pretty clear not 48 hours ago: told you not to go digging. You forget how words work?"

"You knew I wouldn't listen. Wouldn'ta cooked up that fairy tale otherwise."

"You born yesterday? Fifteen years a badge, and I gotta spell it out that when an old choom tells you to fuck off, that means fuck off? Only person you should be pissy at right now is your own damn self."

Might be right. I sip my coffee. It goes down sandy – cinnamon sludge. Love coffee.

"Here's what we'll do," he says. "First, you tell me what you know. Second, I tell you where you're wrong. Third, you get it through your thick, stubborn skull that you never speak a word to anybody. You'll sleep easy for it. Deal?"

"Why, Brian? You don't owe me a thing."

"I remember you fondly." Huh. I see it's true. "The chick, right? It was never about her, Frank. You'll see soon as I'm done telling you."

I hold exactly no cards. But that bad feeling's back. And I'm starting to accept my new reality – a constant, relentless bad feeling.

"A clever 6th Street gun-nut's passing merch left and right on the down low," I begin my tale. "Sometimes it's smuggled, sometimes klepped, sometimes who the fuck knows where it's from, but he has it. Couple weeks ago, his sticky fingers pick up a real hot potato. Think we both know it wasn't pop guns."

"It was not."

"What was it, Brian?"

"We'll get there. Go on."

"He senses the shit is too hot to handle. He has to pass it on, stat. The dodge and shade's too intense, though. Can't just ping his fixer. He calls Aguirre – a man with a crew and more cred than he knows how to wash."

"Always were a great detective, Frank."

"Fuck you, Brian."

"Go on."

Huh, I see it now. Feel it in my gut. Brian doesn't have the whole story. One drop he just wasn't able to squeeze out of people. Asked the wrong questions.

"Come on, go ahead" he taunts, "Then what?"

"Ask me a question."

Silence. He nods.

"Why was the girl there?"

"She set up the meet. Aguirre wanted to leave the flag-wavers high and dry. His crew was divided. Half wanted the deal, half didn't."

"Sorry, wait. A second-rate BD starlet from the screamsheets set up a gang meet smack in the middle of an uncertain truce?" He shakes his head, genuinely surprised. "Fuck, what a story."

"You got no idea who she was."

"Shit. Someone oughta write a book about her."

That's right, Brian. Someone should.

"What comes next, Frank?"

"They meet. Sixth Street realizes they aren't talking to Aguirre, things get tense. They don't want word to get out. Someone grabs their gun, fires a shot. Every last Valentino falls."

"And the merch?"

"Still on 6th. Maybe. Haven't gotten that far."

He stares at his coffee, looking for something at the bottom. He looks worried, wonders if he could've played it differently. Is he concerned? Could just be pretending, hoping I'll place the last piece where it belongs. But this one I don't know how to solve.

"Question is," I resume, "where's Jones? Isn't that your job? Shouldn't you be out hunting him down, recovering that fiery merch?"

He sips his coffee, glances around for eyes and ears. There's nobody left, not even Travis. I didn't see anyone walk out.

"A few months ago, couple of guys from Supply and Facilities struck a deal with Jones. You know the NCPD, you know how thin a sliver you get as a beat cop. But every so often, Santa brings you a Militech, Arasaka or Petrochem package... Never enough to go around. And it always seems to

land in the laps of top brass or the hands of those spec ops assclowns. Real good shit, real good quality. Can make real good scratch pushing it out the side. Just need a guy like Jones on your comms.

"NCPD's selling hot-potato weaponry to gangers? Gangoons then turn that shit back on cops?"

"Even an old dog like you never woulda thunk it, huh?"

He says "old dog," but he doesn't mean my loyal service as an NCPD officer in this fine city. He means I had my snout in the kibble like everybody else.

I don't answer.

"A few weeks back, some braindead gonk marked the wrong package. Said package fell off the truck, you know the rest."

"Assault rifles' – stands for what, Brian?"

He looks me in the eye. Wonders if I can take the truth. When he opens his mouth, I know he's being honest.

"Combat processors for MaxTac."

"Fuckin' hell."

"Exactly," Brian says, "When Jones saw what he had, he started shitting bricks."

"Couldn't just return the package?"

"Who to? Two days prior, Internal'd taken down his one good connect. An unfortunate series of events."

I'm at a loss. He says nothing.

"Know where the merch is?" I finally ask. "Sixth Street? With Jones?"

He downs the rest of his coffee, sets his mug aside.

"And thus we arrive at your one misstep, Frank. Jones died that night in Charter Hill."

I see it now. Unrelated events lining up, the dots connecting to form a lustrous green laser line. Brian at the crime scene. Ora's hidden holo. Olivia's tone when I asked about the shootout – "Little bro says hi". That drunk buffoon Zane who the cops didn't waste five seconds on. Padre: "They asked the wrong questions." Emilio, who would never hide out in some seedy motel if it was just about 6th Street. Timmy G. The "assault rifles."

It wasn't the studio trying to bury this case alive.

It was the police.

"You wiped it clean."

"Internal started probing. I think you know that song and dance."

I do. Whole reason I left. After years of raking in hush money, things got too hot for comfort. If Internal had connected those dots, I wouldn't be sitting here at Tom's. I'd be sitting on Brooks Island. I know it, Brian knows it... it's why he hasn't planted a dum dum between my eyes. Might also feel like he owes me, considering he filled the void I left behind. Brian Lee'll never leave. They'll catch him or kill him, but he'll never leave.

"Sent the boys. They didn't know the girl was gonna be there. If things had lined up right, we'd've taken care of biz with Jones and Aguirre. But, you know, spilled milk."

Spilled milk. Motherfucker.

"Case like this, you can't sit on your hands. Gotta fill all the cracks with concrete fast. It's why I forced Braddock to step aside, too... before spouting word over half the city."

"Still went to Vista."

"We did, but we didn't find much. Padre was faster, and he's smart. If he'd found out we were looking for more than evidence, he could've raised hell."

"I talked to him. Not a problem you need to see to."

"Aguirre?"

There's the question. My test. I tell the truth, the man meets his maker within a week. They'd track him down eventually. Emilio can't brood at the Hotel Triste forever. He shows his face on the street, not even Padre'll be able to protect him. Emilio knows what Jones tried to sell him. Fuck me if I'm gonna clue Brian in.

"Not a problem either," I lie. "Talked to him, has no idea what the fuss was about."

Brian raises a brow.

"You sure?" he hesitates.

"I'm sure."

The least I can do for her, the last I can do for her.

"Well, we got the shit back. That's what matters." Brian offers his hand,

claps me on the shoulder. "Sorry about your gangerchick."

Red. Blood red, the same red haze that shrouded everything the night she died.

I shake it off.

I stand. Leave my coffee.

Brian stays seated, lights a smoke. He's closed his case.

I walk out.



I drive. I drive in circles. Don't wanna go home, don't want the day to end. When it does, it'll be a wrap on the Ora Dominguez case. Case. Jeez, talkin' about her like a fuckin' cop. Maybe that's what it was. Maybe I just conducted my last investigation. Sans badge, sans shield, sans vest, but clean, following better rules than those I followed back in the day.

Streets're empty. Too early to go to work, too late to head home.

A police siren. Shit. I realize it whines for me. Need to pull over. Where the hell am I? No people, no cars.

In Night City, it's the little things... I wasn't thinking. Just drove out to the middle of nowhere by the city line, never to be seen again. Shit. I might've made two missteps. Maybe Brian didn't let me walk after all.

Fuck it.

I stop my car.

Patrolman steps out of his.

Little things. Same little shit who grabbed my number the night Ora Di died. He grins.

Little things. He's pullin' me over for a broken taillight he'll bash in himself with his zapwand.

City code says I should stay in the car. If I don't, he gets to use deadly force.

I get out.

The lightning snap and crack of a baton at full charge. Huh. If Brian'd

sent him, he wouldn't be fucking around with half-measures. It's a complete coincidence. A blind, stupid, tragic accident.

He swings the baton back like a baseball bat.

He doesn't see my fist. It smashes his nose. Doesn't see my boot. It kicks his knee out. He doesn't see a thing, he's blind. He doesn't see hit after hit after hit as I drive him down into the wet earth. The baton falls from his hand. Ribs snap and crack like dry twigs.

I don't see him either. I see red. I see Brian, who they'll kill or stuff in a cage to rot. I see Cejas, a leper, a pariah among his blood brothers. I see Emilio, his heart shattered into a million razors, never getting his revenge on Jones. I see Pedro – huh – his numbers finally lining up. Least I hope they will.

I don't stop until the Sandevistan falls from my eyes, fades from my veins. Kid cop lies crumpled on the ground, barely breathing, bathed in blood.

I breathe deep.

I can barely stand.

I feel no relief.