

COOPER BLACK

American outlaws try to reclaim the money they lent to other criminals. On the way, they are contacted by an anti-criminal organization to carry out a set number of missions to try to earn some more money. At the same time, foreign troops invade the United States and it is now upto the reckless outlaws, the pure agents of chaos, to bring peace home to the nation.

Follow upon the escapades of Cooper Black, a modern American cowboy who loves to attack criminals and works as a vigilante to defeat big mafia leaders and terrorists while also maintaining his own set of hobbies.

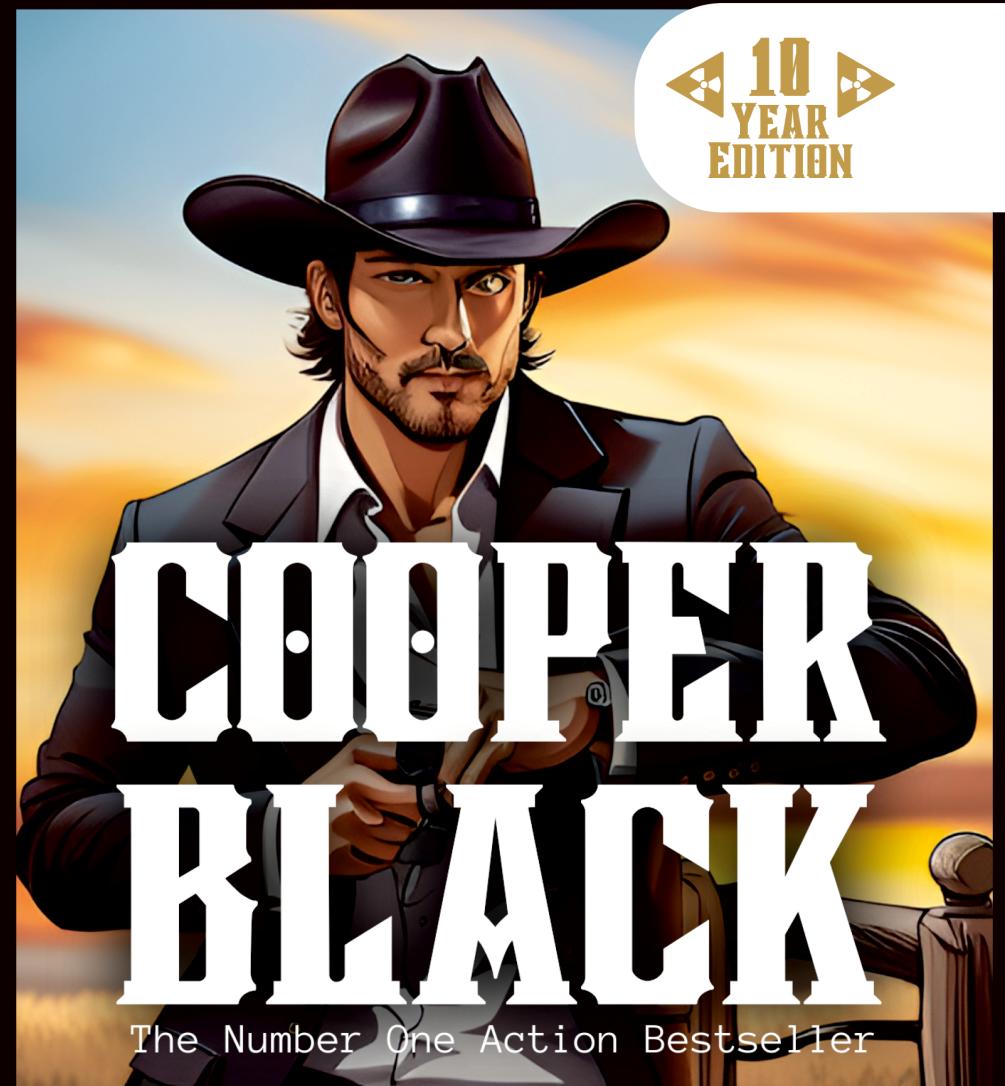


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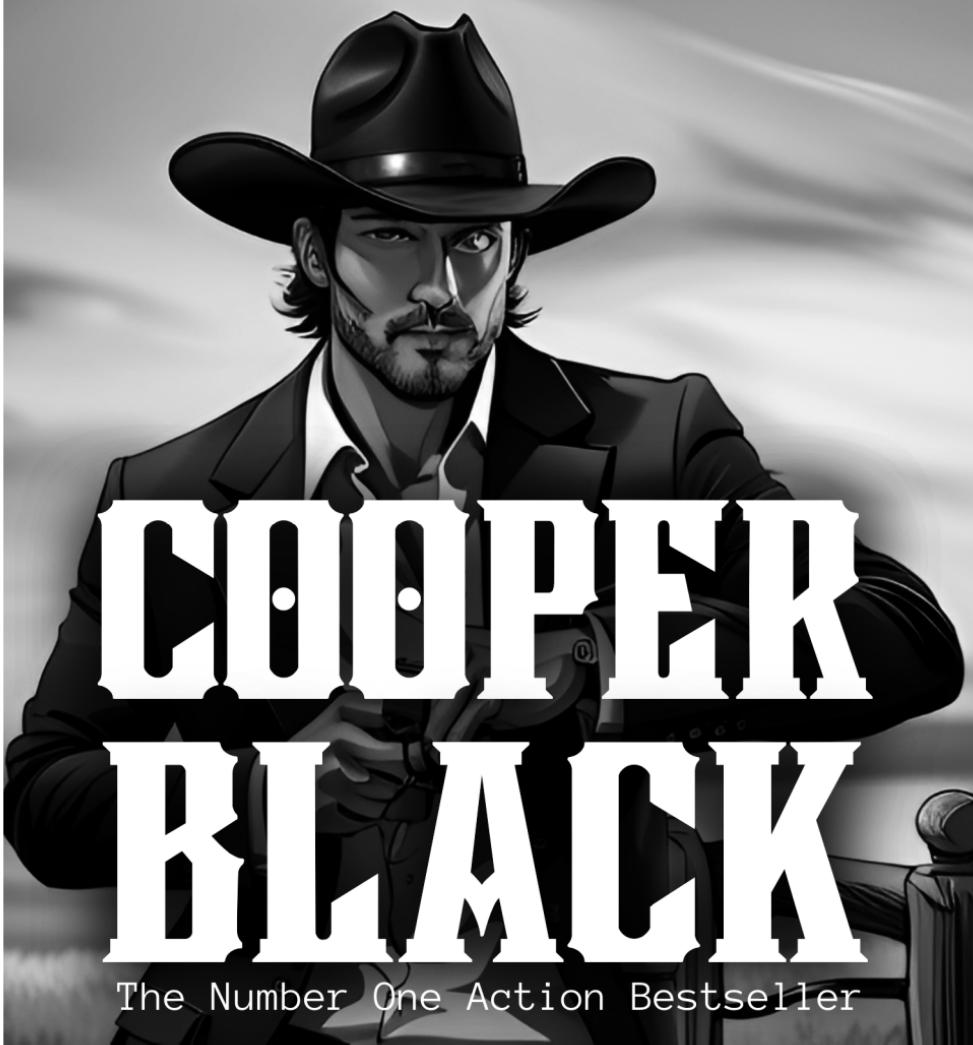
COOPER
BLACK

BLACK ▶ Dewan M.I. Mukto

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The Number One Action Bestseller

Dewan M.I. Mukto is a hobbyist author and poet born and raised in Sylhet, Bangladesh. Although his actual academic interests and professional occupations differ from the usual works of literature, Mukto aims to inspire and entertain countless people through the few publications he can spare.

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COOPER BLACK

A Novel

By
Dewan Mukto

COOPER BLACK

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For
Md. Jawad Iqbal,
who read through every chapter in the early
manuscripts

And
Mahir Hasan Chowdhury,
greatest friend I can forever cherish

FOREWORD

Ah, 2014. The year when the first sparks were set to light up the embers that would evolve into the storyline we've all grown to love and recognize - the Cooper Black series.

Although Cooper Black was penned no earlier than 2016, the foundations that laid down the fictional landscape of a Post-American continent had faced their genesis atleast 2 years prior to the initial manuscript.

Hence, here I am at the heralding corners of 2024, reminiscing back at the way the characters have evolved and how I might continue to draw in new plots for expanding upon Cooper and company's escapades. Surely, this book that you hold right now has faced a lot of history. And it isn't the end either!

Just a quick note as always: this part of the opening instalment of Cooper Black The Hombre was actually written by my 13-year-old self. So be careful about silly errata as well as comical and nonsensical motifs.

Stay safe, stay charmed.

Enjoy. And feel free to adapt the characters you meet in this novel as your own. (I love seeing fanfiction!)

Dewan Mukto
8th December 2023

PROLOGUE

Hot waves of dusty breeze tackled swiftly across the face of the Sonoran Desert. A tiny wooden shack - roughly built out of pinched timber - accompanied the lonely cacti, dead bushes, and the numerous insects straddling along. The sun played its game of light and beat down a shower of rays onto the thatched roof.

Joe Catshoe Black had seen far warmer summers and temperatures than this. His mouth was grim and silent as a shadow, tensed with a deep fear inflicted in him. Sweat perspired on his forehead and his hands - they had a luster that outmatched ordinary oily glow. Blonde beard tingling of stress, head tilted at an angle like some drunken brawler, he cradled his injured arm on his lap as shades of a rosy liquid poured out from bullet holes in his flesh.

Joe's mind was stumbling over facts faster than a copy of the latest computer processor. It pained him to recall of the series of events that he'd witnessed, that he'd foreshadowed and dreamed of; he was never sure that one day it might come true.

The past was the past - gone to smoldering ashes and oblivion. The present was a scourge of lost hopes, corrupted hearts, rising chaos, and political power.

The future, yes. Joe finally collected an option from his mental well of ideas. The future still holds the truth. The apex of a trail of corrupted men.

Time was slipping free from the universal hour glass. How could time ever be stopped? It was about time that the glowing embers of previous worldwide wars were about to light the fires of a new revolution. The beginnings of the new era were drawing closer, and so was death inching forward to witness the final moments of Joe Catshoe's life.

His shelter was all he could afford now. His land and money at California were now decaying with the new arrival of an infiltrating army from the biggest country in the world. He'd once lived peacefully with his family, living their dreams of a better tomorrow, a new dawn, a dawn of pure happiness that clarified souls. How stubborn his family had been; they hadn't cared to evacuate on time.

They'd stood rooted to their home, their grove of sacred trees of tradition, not long before the huge planes intruded the airspace and ejected deadly bombs and missiles on the West Coast.

Thinking of the past hurt him more than anything. Joe tasted curdled venom and sunburnt wine, as his mind flashed pictures of his brother retreating after his sister-in-law, while all nearby suburban buildings toppled and collapsed under the weight of deafening booms and bangs and sizzling bombs.

"Ghaah..." Joe dropped from his chair as the cries resonated inside his mind like echoes from a distant valley of torment. Nostalgia was of two types, and sure enough, the old cowboy was being attacked by the tragic ones.

He resolved to his desk and picked up a ballpoint pen with a hand bandaged from wrist to fingertips. With trembling fingers, he scribbled a note on a piece of paper. He inserted this into a manila envelope and rolled it up into a tube.

His only family had been gone within a flutter of a moth's wing. However, somewhere deep in his heart brittle with sorrow and broken with so many losses, he believed that his nephew, Cooper Black, was still alive.

His last strand of hope to accomplish his dream was in the palms of Cooper, that wasn't until the envelope was delivered.

Pain bubbled and fizzed in the hotspots of his left arm. The hut was providing little protection from the sun's hobby of boiling the Earth's atmosphere.

In the distance, something buzzed and hummed. It wasn't a bee, and that was sure; bees cannot survive in deserts. The strange disturbing sound appeared closer and louder - like a thousand beats of some humongous insect's wings.

"In the name of---" Joe's eardrums were ringing like a tuning fork struck continuously. The agony of his left wasn't bothering him anymore. He knew that his arm was as good as dead. His bloody arm limply dangled loosely as he rose from the chair again and walked over to a corner of the barely two square meter hut, where a tool of defense awaited him. "Now this'll come in handy. Hmm...handy and powerful, indeed."

The deafening beat of the flying object was about to be answered by a M1014 shotgun. In the field of handling guns, the forefathers of the Blackburn family tree were never beaten and always respected; Joe Black belonged to this family.

He slipped a chain free from the indoor lock mechanism and proceeded to step outside, in the scorching world of sunlight borne from the smiling sizzling sun. The pupils of his eyes took their time and slowly adjusted to the sudden gradient from dark to light. By squinting heavily, the helicopter could be seen shining like obsidian in the near hand horizon.

'Russians' was the first thought that struck his mind. His hands willed to shoot it down with brute force, although he wasn't 100% sure that it was part of the usurpers' military.

The helicopter was a giant black beetle clad in heavy armor, so shotgun shells and bullets were worthless in contact. The AH-64 slowly flew around the visible corners of the desert, according to Joe Black's point of vision, before turning towards his hut's direction. What were the pilots thinking? Were they going nuts?

"Speak of the devil," Joe felt uneasy as the helicopter started to descend, the distance between him and the machine vehicle decreasing with each second. His right armpit tucked the shotgun into a stable position as his hand fingered the little trigger that controlled the outflow of shots.

SAND DESTINY

After trudging helplessly, Vandermann's throat was as dry as a piece of sandpaper lying in the middle of the Sonoran Desert for weeks. He was indeed in the Sonoran Desert. He was an U.S. Marine, and Marines were all real tough guys. But what could he do, when all the tough guys are down, killed by some nasty Russian paramilitary? The Russians had captured the entire west coast of America, to get their dirty hands on the damn nukes beneath the Yucca Mountains. The U.S. president had sent for the American troops to go ahead and intercept. But what could they do, in the heat, the unbearable heat, of the desert that lay between the mission destination, and the army base?

Obviously, the Marines had to use aircraft to get there, right? Well, they did. But on the way, Sgt. Vandermann Vugerton's helicopter had suffered an engine failure. So he and his partner, both escaped from the chopper, before it hit the sandy ground, and exploded. They found a tiny wooden hut, where a cowboy was lurking in the shadows. Vandy's assistant had a fight with the guy, but the guy had a damn Remington 870 shotgun. So there was a bang! bang! and both the cowboy and Vandy's assistant, dropped to the ground, covered in blood.

In his dying moments, the cowboy, named Joe Catshoe, handed Vandy some letters, crammed into an envelope.

"Take them," the cowboy had said, spitting a bit of blood out of his lip as he spoke. "And give them to my nephew, Cooper Blackburn. But when you...when you'll hand these...these letters...tell him..."

"Tell him what?" Vandermann took the envelope from Joe's severed hand. "Tell him what, sir?"

"Tell him...that...ahh..." the cowboy's body gave a quick jolt, and his words barely escaped from his mouth. The last bit of info was really crucial, but Vandermann missed it. Too bad.

So there he was, walking along the cursed sand, with no hope left in mind. But hope reappeared, in the form of a vehicle.

His right hand clutched the envelope tightly, to protect it from the harsh, dusty desert winds blowing from the southeastern direction. His eyes stung from being assaulted by sand grains. His M4A1 carbine rifle was hanging from his back, swinging this way and that.

Here follows a bit of a brief biography of this newly-met character.

In the year 1740, Vandermann's great great great father's grandfather had settled in Arizona of the United States from an ancient town called 'Chinkinalknalcholi' from Peru in South America.

In 1989, Vandermann was born – in a subway tunnel. His birth was a disaster indeed. As soon as he was out in the world, his parents' train clashed with another incoming train from the opposite direction. During the impact, Baby Vandy had been thrown off through an open window by his mother, with tearful eyes, as both parents were crushed to death. Due to some miracle, the boy had survived with only a few bruises as he had landed on another woman's lap through the window of another passing-by train. So you could say that Vugerton learnt to do acrobatic stunts from the time when he was still in nappies!

The woman who found him was the depressed Mrs Vugerton, who always wanted a son. She was praying for a child when suddenly, in her hands, was a live one! She was so impressed by God's blessings that she gave up smoking for a month!

Thirteen years later, Vandermann's fighting abilities could be seen in his hobby of collecting pictures of war, maps of war-torn countries and watching movies full of violence (and war).

He was immediately taken to a military school where he launched his first assault (demonstrated his talent). In a few hours, he worked out a cross-country battlefield defense maneuver technique, which he performed in front of an Army General. He got an instant diploma and was rushed for training.

After a number of years, he had his first real-life war experience. It took him only 3 minutes and 47 seconds to destroy the enemy base. All of this was the cause of an 'accident'.

While he was testing the turret of an M1A1 tank, he accidentally stepped on the accelerator while the tank's gear was in reverse. As he pulled a lever, thinking it was the gear shift, he had elevated the turret upwards by 25°. It was all thanks to a tiny fly which landed on a button, after stinging Vanderman, that his hand went to swat the insect. Instead, he hit the button. Big mistake! The button was the launcher of the turret cannon, which shot a heavy 120 mm shell towards the enemy frontlines in the North. The shell pierced through the fences and exploded over the enemy headquarters - due to some thankful defects in that particular shell itself.

The Russian encampment (the enemy) got shocked to such an extent that they instantly began departing away from the States to gather more reinforcements.

And the rest is history.

Now.... Back to the present....

In the horizon, he could spot a few clumps of cacti, and dead bushes and scrubs. Nothing interesting, just regular desert crap. The sky was an ever-blue blanket of infinite proportions, cloudless, and bright with hue. Usual weather. Nothing fun, nothing extraordinary. Just the lonely, sandy desert. Typical.

Slowly, a soft rumbling of an engine drifted towards his ears. It was a 4x4 jeep, by the looks of it, mounted by soldiers and cowboys. Great, so now more shitty cowboys were coming to take revenge for what Vandy's comrade had done to that old wretch. Hostile or not, he wasn't so sure. The sun was burning the back of his head. This had to be it. He deserved medical help, ASAP. And chance was peeking at his opportunity.

"Hey! Stop! Stop-halt!" Vandermann raised and waved his arms, to try to grab their attention. And sure enough, he did. The jeep decelerated calmly. But sand slipped through the tire treads easily.

"Yeah, how may we help you?" a cowboy with black aviators and big jaws spoke on behalf of the driver, sitting beside him. "Speak!"

"Um...I'm a Marine, so learn to respect men of high order. But that's not the reason I stopped you. I need help, sirs. Get me to a city or human settlement. I lost my air transport vehicle. So please let me in your gang."

"Okay, we'll see about that!" The tough-looking cowboy sunk into deep thought, for a while. He was wearing black in everything, except for the yellow outer jacket. A black cowboy hat sheltered his shoulder-length hair, dark as black. "Are you part of, or in association with, or allied with the Russian forces?"

"No, sir."

"Then what the hell are you doing, standing there, homie! Get in. Our gang is free and friendly to those who oppose against the damn Russians. We are a type of rebellion force, run by agencies back at New York. Ever heard of the Mission Integrated Workforce (MIW) or the Integrated Mission Force (MBC), buddy? Those are our sponsors! And this—" he widened his arms, indicating that he meant the jeep. "—is our mode of transport. Like or not, we'd have chosen you to join us, even if you hadn't tried to stop us. And do you need anything else, homie?"

"I need to see Cooper Black..." he showed him the envelope. "To give him this."

"Oh, in that case..." the cowboy loaded a Colt.45 pistol. "You are certainly welcome to come with us."

Vandermann gulped, as he slid into the space available at the back of the jeep, between the two soldiers.

"So when do I get to him?" he asked after a couple of minutes.

The cowboy beside the driver grinned.

"My dear friend, you already did!" he shot a round into the heart of the sky. Vandermann understood.

CHASING AMMO

Cooper Black was travelling back to his home lodgings, with two NATO soldiers, and a driver with an 'Avalon' haircut - and glazed yellow-tinted sun shades - named Exodus Luke. They were bound to fight back against the Russians in California, and stop them from causing chaos in America. The Cheetah 400 4x4 land rover they were riding on, was stolen from a car dealer in Arizona. Luckily, Cooper had left \$30,000 bills on the cashier desk. Unluckily, perhaps the dealer hadn't noticed the money on the desks. That's why Cooper Black had to gun him down as always, to shut the bloody mouth from uttering a word to the cops.

Vandermann was seated at the back, with the soldiers. Maybe the Socom 16 rifles in their arms unnerved him.

"Need a drink?" Cooper handed a can of Redbull to Vandermann, and he himself glugged some down from his own can, before flinging it away to drift with the desert winds, with a "Whooohooo!"

They arrived at a road, composed mainly of mud bricks, dried in the sun for weeks, months, or even years; they spotted a milestone beside the road, but the inscribed text was too faded to read.

The soil here was sandy, bare, dry. A vast barren wasteland. The closer they moved towards the west coast, the more frequent number of cracks.

"So... Mr.Black," Vandermann began, after finishing the soft drink.
"How far are we from your place?"

"Firstly, just call me Cooper Black," he replied grimly. "And secondly, we are still 15 miles away from the estate. Thirdly, we aren't going to 'my' place. And fourthly, we're going to visit a 'friend' of mine. El Rickardo Viz is his name, and dealing guns is his fame."

The ground was crackling under the blazing hot sun, with gaps 11 mm apart. The scenario clearly stated the lack of moisture or rain in that particular region. "The Rodeo Region" it was called.

In front of them, a bulky collection of blocks was arrayed in a row. The middle block was two leveled, with two single leveled ones flanking on either side. A rusty, brownish red saying "Rickardo's Baestro" hung from two black iron chains.

Ornate, aged glass windows let the outer atmosphere and light in. Two iron-bound wooden doors with brass rings were the only entrance to this estate.

Sadly, the 'lonely' estate lay surrounded by a vast wasteland of desert. The glaring sun reflected off the windows, and the solar panels perched on top of the rooftops were being overcharged by the radiation.

"So this is Viz's estate, huh?" Cooper's eyes squinted to make out the outlines of the bulky mansion.

They knocked at the door, by a brass ring.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

The 2.5-meter-tall doors creaked noiselessly open outwards. And there and then, the impact of bullets came hurtling towards them at lightspeed.

"Everyone, duck!" Cooper yelled, unexpectedly.

They took shelter behind the steel-framed body of the 4x4D car. But the lead-antimony bullets were being shot at such a speed, that the car's body was about to be pierced through, after a dozen hits.

The soldiers, along with the driver, lay crouched with their hands covering their heads. Cooper Black and Vandermann flanked the doors, dodging bullets.

Cooper gestured at Vandermann, and he was off!

Both of them performed an edge-to-edge barrage, running to and from each side of the doors. They kept at it until a blanket of smoke covered the interior of the mansion.

The duo reloaded their SMGs, while the dust cloud cleared.

When it seemed safe enough, they scoured the insides.

It was a mess, inside. Picture frames lay torn and broken, and yet, they hung on the walls. The walls were covered and coated with scarlet wallpapers, decorated with patterns of the attackers' blood. There was a peach leather couch, flipped over for the back to face the doors; it had acted as a kind of hiding spot for covering and shooting at the same time. The floor was a field of Turkish carpets, scattered randomly around the room.

From the left and right-hand-side of the room, staircases emerged and led to the upper floors and halls. Used shells of bullets lay scattered on the floor.

However, even when there were countless stains and splotches of blood, there wasn't any sign of the bodies of the ambushers.

"You, Vandermann," Cooper pointed his index finger at him. "You stay here, and guard the doors. Make sure nobody leaves. I'm goin' upstairs, to see off El Rickardo's men, myself."

Vandermann nodded as the great Cooper Black ascended up the stairs, pushed through a partly-locked door (he shot at it), and entered a dimly-lit room full of bags, crates, and boxes full of white powder, bearing the logo of the 'USS Enterprise'. Cooper recognized the powder as cocaine.

But as Cooper Black approached one of the crates, two muscular, hairy, and oily arms grabbed at his neck and dragged him backwards, with a muffled cry of pain.

It was too dim, too dark, to make out the details of the muscular cannibal's face, and Cooper wriggled and sputtered about. Having no other hopes left in his mind, Black tried one last attempt to get rid of the mugger's grasp. He chose the craziest option available in his mind. He licked the mugger's hand with his tongue, before spitting a large glob of saliva.

"Eww...yuck! Sh*t! Moth*r***ker!" the mugger release him, to wipe the dirty stuff from his hands. But big mistake for the mugger! Cooper Black didn't take it pleasantly when a stranger attacked...especially NOT from the back. He aimed one kick at his face, but the mugger caught his foot mid-air, causing Cooper to lose his balance. He fell in a heap on the floor.

The mugger grinned a nasty, satisfied grin. Only, it became 'nasty' when Cooper completed his revenge by knocking three of the mugger's teeth out.

Enraged, the mugger punched the gun from Cooper's hand right as soon as he drew it from the holster. Cooper, too stunned to speak, gulped as another strong blow made a dent on the side of his face.

"Ow...hey! I spent \$399.50 for my facial issues, man! Not the damnable face, man!"

This made the weirdo mugger's grin wider by 5 mm, as he laid another satisfactory blow on the other side of Cooper's face.

Cooper now had his 2nd revenge done in his own absurd ways: he sent his opponent howling as he smashed his groin with his kneecap.

Cooper dived across the rotten, hardwood floors, and picked his gun back up.

On instinct, the mugger held his hands up high, and dropped down on his knees. In his mind, Cooper tossed a coin - either Mercy or Death. Tragically and psychopathically, the coin landed as Death. Cooper shot three magazines full of rounds at the mugger, spraying blood, guts, and flesh everywhere. He hoped Rickardo wouldn't mind him messing up his storage chambers.

Instantly, a cry filled the rooms below. More like a shout. Gunfire followed by the sound of broken glass. Vandermann was in trouble.

When Cooper reached the ground floor, he found another mugger sprawled on the floor. He had been knocked out by a blow from a wine bottle, swung by Vandy. Vandermann held another such glass bottles in his grasp when Cooper found him.

"Oh, there you are! I thought I had lost you," Cooper dragged the corpse down the stairs, and placed it over the 'other' mugger's body. Wiping sweat off his forehead, he noticed the bottle of alcohol in Vandermann's hand. "By the way, where did you get that bottle from? Here, lemme see that!"

He snatched the green-stained glass container and read the label.

"Well, well! It's a bloody Osgerdo 1984, a priceless vintage nowadays, indeed! Will you bother a sip or two, Vandy?"

Vandermann shook his head, "I'm not into drinking alcoholic stuff, sir. I suggest you should drop the habit, too."

"'Kay then, as you wish," Cooper yanked the cork off and glugged down half the drink within a single gulp. He refrained with a relieved "~Aaaah!"

"So where to now?" Vandermann asked when Cooper Black drained down the full bottle and left it on the upturned couch.

"Now..." he wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "We strike direct gold! Follow me, for money's sake."

They strode off outside, into the warm, fresh sunlight, unlike the cold, dusty chasms of the so-called mansion. The soldiers and the driver were dozing in the car, for they hadn't slept a blink since they had left for California.

"Everyone! Onboard!" Cooper commanded his crew, half-drunk and half-sleepy. "I wa-want a n-new carr-rr. We now lea-leave for Cala-Ca... California, where a c-car deal-l-ler awaits. C'mon you bluh-blood-uh-bloody mates. Let's get the heh-hell outta dis phlaice."

DEALING DOESN'T MAKE SENSE

The troop was back on the suburban highways. Their destination: Yon Roncho's Auto X, downtown California.

Vandermann still didn't understand why they raided the mansion for no fruitful purpose at all. Peurcto Rickon, one of the NATO soldiers explained their cause.

"You see, Mr. Black had lent an epic sum of money to several dealers in the United States. Of the \$25 billion, Rickardo had borrowed \$10,000; Yon had taken \$85,000; Mick Lardo had scruffed up \$5,000; and lastly, Philias Cacroe, a hunted gangsta/gambler had looted \$24,999,000,000 by hacking into Cooper's bank accounts. Now, Cooper Black shall pay. He'll pay his debtors with their deaths."

Vandermann sunk back in thought.

"But Cooper hadn't killed Viz," he found the catch in the previous mission. "All we did was taking down a few of Rick's goons. They were armies of Viz, but not Viz himself!"

"Yeah, we know. It was a failed attempt, since we didn't have the ammo to fight back the demon, Rickardo Viz, who's always handy with his supply of M4 carbines. Plus, he's totally unpredictable."

"Yet, a few thousand dollars won't hurt a bit. The car dealer in California holds much more cash than the estate owner. Okay, Vugerton, let's wait till we reach our...um...destination."

When they reached the inner states, the main road was blocked by three concrete barricades, set up by the local police. Ford Interceptors formed quite a picture here. There was some kind of

bank robbery taking place, but the thugs were still inside the bank, collecting their swag. The police took positions outside the building, flanking the entrance.

The five parked their 4x4 in a nearby alley and proceeded to the bank, toting their SMGs.

Cooper knew that it'd cost them a delay, but yet, saving souls was tenfold better than killing one. Anyways, they didn't have any choice.

The only way they were passing through the barricades, was by stopping the robbery.

A huge block of hollow concrete, riddled with glass windows, air conditioner outlets, and ventilation shafts - not to mention the two glass doors at the entrance - was the CFB (Civil Finance Bank), currently undergoing serious criminal treatment.

Of the five that arrived, only Cooper Black, Vandermann, and Exos Luke pushed their way among the dozen policemen, ignoring the strange glances and expressions they received.

Even from this distance, they heard the continuous tingling of an alarm bell ringing in the ground floor.

Cooper placed a hand on the door handle.

"Sir, watch out," a policeman warned. "What the hell are you doing? This is no place for a civilian."

Cooper frowned at the officer; his eyes burned beneath the black shades.

"Who, me? I'm simply livin' my dream."

"Well dream whatever you wish, mister. Jus'...just don't try to act smart and stupid."

That ought to shut him up. Cooper pulled on the handle to bring to light a world of bright lights, fresh A/C, crisp dollar bills, and fear. The spectacular interior design of the bank took their breath away. Shaded lights and lamps shone evenly across the stretch of the room.

The trio thought they'd bring the robbery off in the end, but all their hopes turned to water when a guard took them in and then held a gun behind their backs.

Cooper saw the point at once, and thought if he could bring him round to releasing them, with a bribe.

"Now lookie here, man," he showed him a \$100 bill. "I'll pay you if you release my fellas. Do as I say, pal. Take the money. Take it."

The 22-year-old G4S guard took his words in and accepted his offer. He took back his 9mm pistol and shoved aside Vandermann and Luke while barging his path in an attempt to flee - but failed. He tasted the pain of wearing handcuffs right as soon as he left the gates.

Stupid amateurs, Cooper smirked. He turned back to his main business. The collection of thugs was right in front.

"Well, well, well!" the leader of the thugs, a buffed-up biker-type criminal, chortled in the most iconic cliché way of greeting. "What de hell do we have here! Valiant heroes that've come to *cough* *cough* the peoples' *cough* *cough* rescue!" He hefted a large version of the HK MP5.

His companions were only three in number, but wielded MP5ks for their initial support. The leader of the pack gestured, and the thugs were off into the vaults of the bank, cascading down a flight of stairs situated at the southeastern corner of the room. Before they were through, one of them warned, "Don't you *uc*ing dare!"

By the time Cooper and co. had arrived within the bowels of the vault, the goons were already on the move. Sure enough, according to the 'international etiquette of chaotic outlaws and gangsters', they had left their mark.

The metal walls were badly shot at; the flickering halogen lighting couldn't keep darkness at bay; security guards lay dead at their positions, with their guns either missing or broken apart.

A faint clinking noise came from the end of the corridor, with many money-gold safes leading out of doors. At the end of the corridor, a platinum-plated triple layer gate blocked access to the prime treasure inside. The thugs were already through the first layer, drilling with a 15 cm pinwheel. Looks like the thugs were greedy enough not only to claim the money, but also the 'stuff' stored in the most secure place in CFB. Beyond the platinum-tungsten alloy

gates, 150 tons of 26 carat gold (extra extra pure gold) stood on platforms, shaped in fresh ingots.

"Well, gentlenthugs, I'm sure that your playtime's over. Come and see us off with guns, and not words or masks."

The leader thug raised his hand, slowly coming into contact with his head, and removing his mask. Beneath his mask, hid a bulky block of flesh with two eyes sunk deep under the weight of his bulging, frowning eyebrows. His nose wrinkled with anger, his large, yellowish teeth gritted against each other, above the bushy black beard, striped with gray. His hair, as well, was colored black as jet, with streaks of gray near the sideburns.

"Ho! I'm Dorritor Kho," the leader of the thugs introduced himself.
"I come from Costa Rica—"

"Yes, yes! That's enough, that's enough. No need to provide any further detail of your history," Cooper broke in. "Let's all just get along and be done with it."

Everyone in Cooper's team unholstered their weapons.

But the thugs laughed out loud.

"You...you puny, little, bravosian warriors! Which generation are you guys livin' in, huh?" Kho took out a pulse cannon the size and shape of a baby Great White shark. "This is BFG10K, baby! A real 21st century weapon. Unlike your 1980s SMGs!" the thugs broke into another fit of laughter. "Now...now eat these waves of radiobeams!"

The miniature pulsar trapped inside the cannon began charging up, whirring at incredible rates of speed. A green LED display lit up on the side of the gun, indicating a numerical 'loading progress'.

"Ah, snap!" Kho hit the gun with the heel of his palm of his hand. "This *uc*ing thing takes such a long time to recharge! Speed up, you little piece o' weaponry gizmo. Oh, sh*t!" he turned towards his thug mates. "Didn't I tell you lot to bring me some new pieces of raw coronium core? What're you looking at, *itc*es? Take your MP5ks out! We'll show these 'suckers' what we can do!"

Not a moment was wasted.

Cooper aimed a shot at Kho's left knee, but it hit the right hand, and the pulsar cannon went flying towards the floor. In an instant,

a fight began and ended, as the other thugs were knocked out cold by Vandermann and Exos.

"Damn you all, moth*****ers!" Dorritor cursed while Cooper pinned him down to the floor. "I'm tellin' you, I'll burn down each of you to-*muffle*-"

Exodus inserted the muzzle of the BFG10K into Kho's mouth, silenced by his own weapon.

They heard footsteps of the policemen, marching down the stairs.

When all the clapping, shouts of applause died down, and after the police barricade was removed, the trio rendezvoused with the other two NATO soldiers. They hit the road once more, on their Cheetah 400.

It was almost nightfall, when the team arrived at a parkway, in front of the forsaken automobile showroom, named 'Yon Roncho's Auto X", beside the road.

No doubt, the place was full of brand-new models of sports cars, travelling limos, patrolling roadsters, etc. The lights were on, and could be seen from afar, since all the walls of the building were made of bulletproof, polished glass; except for the opaque concrete floors and ceilings.

This time, Exos and Black moved out, leaving Vandermann to sit back and chat with the soldiers - plus, they could safely enjoy the view of any possibilities of a gunfight. Furthermore, the walls were made of glass and were transparent, so they'd easily observe any detail of the movements of people inside.

"Hello, and welcome, sirs," Yon Roncho, a middle-aged man of the mid 40s - with thinning gray hair and a freshly-shaved beard - greeted the newcomers with an innocent friendly smile on his face. "How may I help you, to choose the perfect style of your ride? If you like sporting racecars, please step this way. If you prefer roadsters or SUVs, come with me, upstairs. And if you like—"

"Enough chitchat. We're not here for buying or selling automobiles," Cooper fingered a 9mm bullet and a rifle bullet, in his pocket. "We're here for the money. The money you owe Dirt Muncher."

While trading, Cooper usually put forward his pseudonyms, the better to keep his own identity secret. "All eighty five thousand dollars."

"Umm...may I get your role in this business?" Yon felt troubled all of a sudden. Sweat droplets sprinted down his neck, and danced on his forehead. "Who are you gentlemen? Do you work...do you work for Dirt Muncher?"

"Wrong answer," Cooper showed him a revolver, a legendary Magnum 44.8 (doesn't even exist!). "I am Dirt Muncher. Now where is the goddamn cash stash, huh?"

Yon froze solid like liquid CO₂. For a moment, they thought he'd faint and drop down to the ground like a hinge at his feet. Without warning, he dashed out of the building and made for a yellow Lamborghini Murcielago, parked adjacent to the Cheetah 400.

"Hey, don't you...c'mon mans, lez take him down!"

"You know it, Black," Exos Luke kickstarted the 4x4, literally! He slammed his foot so hard at the accelerator, the gears broke loose and fused together to form an "ultra-gear".

"Get the car! Get the car!" Cooper constantly kept shouting and pointing at the yellow - the only yellow - car on the streets. The NATO soldiers drew out their Socom 16s, but Cooper gestured them a 'no'. "No dudes, I don't wanna make him bleed. We only need to chase him down to wherever he desires to take us to."

The Lamborghini was modified, with extra nitro boost tanks, and a 15-turbine transmitter engine. But the speeddevil's speed was no match for the highly-durable and compatible range of the land rover. The engines in both cars hummed, pumped, and whirred, sending clouds of exhaust behind, as a trail.

While Yon Ronch freaked out in his car at every turn of the road, the penta team was having a relaxed atmosphere. They listened to 'MH21:Trail' on their Mp3 player, while chugging down more cans of 'Red Bull', enjoying every bit of the long run, as they chased their target downhill, along highways, graveled roads, across bridges, and even took to the skies when there was a ramp nearby.

The petrol fumes from the engine, overheating too much, wafted towards their nostrils, as they listened to the natural music of tires screeching against asphalt. Yon Roncho, on the other 'grimy' hand,

pressed his shoes hard against the pedals, trying to save himself, and prayed silently as he panicked, wide-eyed, breathing his last gusts of air and muttering his last words, i.e. "How the hell did those bi**h*s find me?"

Eventually, Cooper and co. (penta team) grew bored of the sport. Exos Luke ended it all, with a gunshot at the Lamborghini's rear tires.

The car went screeching towards a cliff with a small patch of the western beach, below. There wasn't much traction between the tires and the sandy soil, hence the car slipped out of control, spun round 180 degrees, and skidded along the dead end of the road, between rows of vegetation fringing as hedges for windbreak, to prevent any form of soil erosion. The sea was open, a mass of glittering blue with a mixture of shades of green, complete with the volatile reflection of the waning moon, now in its gibbous stage. It was quite a peaceful place, but what would happen if somebody's death was planned here, tonight? Who'd dare shed blood in such tranquil waters?

Yon Roncho's car skidded to a halt, just inches from the edge of the cliff. A fall from there would be like falling from a 60 feet high building's rooftop. The cliff's edges already were crumbling down, due to the weight of the Lambo. In a few more minutes, the entire cliff would collapse - along with the car, and Yon Roncho, unless he didn't get out of the car ASAP.

For Yon's part, the stakes were deadly. It would mean madness, if he got out of the car, straight into the hands of Cooper Black, who's currently demanding money in order to save his hide. It would mean death, if he stood locked in his car, as the cliff collapsed sooner or later. Worst of all, it would mean suicide if he jumped off the cliff. He'd receive fatal injuries in either paths, or even if serious, death. What choice did he have remaining?

Roncho's mind flicked from one choice to the other. Yet, each choice was worse than the previous. Only one final decision clogged up his mind: 'fake surrender'.

He planned that, as soon as Cooper and his friends would arrive near his car, he'd hold his hands up high and pretend to surrender. He'd even agree to pay back his debts to Cooper Black, and on their way home, he'd grab a gun and shoot each and every one of them to bloody red pieces of sh*tty sh*tty smithereen-like pulpy lumps of humanoid clusters of messy, gross corpses.

A wide grin spread like 'Jello' on his face, while he pictured the scene. He opened his car door, and changed the devious grin to an innocent pout.

"I surrender!" he lied. "I surrender, sir! I'll obey your each and every —"

A flash of light. A bang. Yon's lightweight body went flying away, down and down, over the edge of the cliff.

"— command," Yon's voice went drifting through the wind, so it sounded more like "chand".

Cooper, not knowing what 'chand' meant, typed the word in Google translate on his phone. His smartphone screen read, " 'Chand' is Indian for 'moon'."

"Damn, that Roncho sure is mad!" he scratched his head. "I wonder what he meant by 'moon', when he's only getting his soul wrapped with death."

Cooper holstered the smoking revolver, and gestured his companions to follow him.

Down below, Yon Roncho glided forwards, towards the shallow blue coastline, as his clothes flapped around. The wind rushed against his face. A bullet hole in his left shoulder marked the spot where Cooper had claimed him. The sea crept up to embrace him. A deathly embrace, that one would never forget.

"Shiddamn! Such a waste!" Cooper realized what he had done. "If only I kept my temper and if that crazy, blockheaded Roncho hadn't died! Now there goes all my eighty-five grand down de drain!"

He turned to his mates. "What're you guys looking at? Come, let's find a cheap motel to spend the night in. It's gettin' late and cold out here."

HAPPY DEATHDAY TO YOU

The next morning, Cooper arranged a meeting at the lunch table, in one of the suites of 'Klirkson Star Motel'.

"Now listen up, comrades," Cooper Black began, after a sip of Starbucks. "Today's our final day, to earn back what was ours, by right. The previous missions were miscalculated and returned as flawless failure. We've lost quite a bit of money that could've been recovered. I had hired you, Puercto Rickon, and Fredrick Max," he pointed at the two NATO soldiers. "But I haven't said whether or not will I pay you, right?"

They simply nodded.

"Right. So I have decided that I will indeed pay you all handsomely, if we can get back the money by sunset. If not, then sad to say, I'll kick you outta the gang," Cooper smiled in his awkward habit of smiling whenever he put terms and conditions straight.

A political map of the USA was spread out on the table, with many lines drawn, depicting routes and 'planned' roads.

"We also have a new member with us, yeah," he patted Vandermann's shoulder like a long-lost brother. "It has been an honor to have you by our side, Vandy. You've proven your worth, I guess," he turned to the NATOs. "Well...as for you two, I've got better plans. Go back to HUAC177 and report to General Skywalker for a few.. um.. plans, I've prepared for Mission Forkenstein. You know what I mean, righ? Good," he bade them away.

Cooper got some suspicious and curious stares from Luke and Vugerton.

"Um...they're part of...an agency for whom I partly work for," he dabbed some perspiration from his forehead. "What? What's

wrong? Oh, don't worry you guys...I'm not part of anything 'evil,' he drew a sigh. "Kay. Exodus and Vandermann, I regret to tell you this—" the door shut with a thump as the NATOs left. "The deaths of the people so far, haven't returned a single buck!" he got up from his chair and armed a Gatling gun. "Today, will be a fruitful day, I tell you! Today, there mustn't be any mistakes. Gentlehomies, let's take to the streets!"

And so, the trio left for the location of another debtor: Phoenix, near the Grand Canyon, bound for more money. But will they succeed in their mission, or will it be less profitable than the last? Or, will it be the difference between life and death?

The three members of CB's team rode their Cheetah 400, early morning, bound for Phoenix. More soundtracks from Mahir Beats rolled in the Mp3 player. PET bottles and aluminium cans of 'Red Bull' and 'Coca Cola' were fully stocked, equivalent to the amount of ammunition they carried this stance. With the subtraction of two men from aboard, the ammo crates fit in comfortably.

They wolfed down giant hamburgers the size of paving stones, sizzling with sauce, and luscious with mayonnaise. Their 4x4 passed a milestone, engines roaring in the crisp morning breeze of dawn. Their 4x4 sent dust particles billowing after them. Luckily (or maybe unluckily), most of the west coast of America was currently deserted, due to the Russian invasions that struck violently at the coastlines. The cunning Russian military made their dens away from the reach of peoples' vision. No wonder why many Hummers and LAVs were found patrolling the highways.

Inselbergs, buttes, gorges, and mushroom rocks remained scattered around their environment, on either side of the road. The scenario clearly stated, "Turn back, folks, or get lost! This is the Grand Canyon of Arizona and Phoenix."

When they reached a place called Flagstaff, they stopped their course to refuel, for a brief break. They ordered burritos, to get themselves back to the 'wanderlust' mood.

After a short period of three hours, Cooper knew they were in the wrong direction. They came face-to-face with an altitude in the Earth's crust. It rose to a height of about 3851 meters above sea level.

"Humphrey's Peak?" Cooper scratched his head, and led his fellow members back, southwards.

They had lost a total of five hours, by arriving at the wrong point, in the wrong direction. Unlike many other sci-fi tech agents, Cooper Black didn't trust the coordinates. Vandermann had accidentally placed his SMG near the vehicle's built-in compass. It came into contact with the magnetic field, interfering with the directions. Hence, he was the one at fault.

And now, introducing...

...Philias Cacroe!

He was the best liar in the whole, round, wide world. He was the greatest gangsta, cruelest mugger, and money sucker. He inspired millions, and most of them had become well-known criminals like himself. His family were all dead (father died of smoking, mother of choking, brother of drinking), so he rented a small hotel on the outskirts of urban Phoenix.

He was peacefully having a cup of cappuccino coffee, when the doorbell rang, and three sweaty, hairy fists knocked on the door, at the same time. It made a sound similar to thumping a block of wood, with an iron rod.

No answer. They rapped again, at different intervals.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Philias Cacroe expected them, to be new recruits for learning stealth craft.

On the third wave of blows (actually, it was 'kicks' this time), Cacroe dared to open the latch, unlock the padlock, and input the digiSMART code into the digiLOCK. The birch doors burst open, and Cooper and his troops rolled sideways, as they barged through.

"Yo Cacroe! How's my money you borrowed? All sold out? Give me back my cash, or I'll blow your brains out! You stupid schmuck!"

Philias stood rooted to the spot, unable to decide what to do. His nervous eyes peered from corner to corner, looking for a good gun.

Cacroe's room was full of dust, books on crime cases, guns of different sizes - from 9mm pistols, to Kalashnikovs; criminal

magazines, and was littered with rotten pizza slices, burger buns, spilt ketchup, and pieces of crumbled paper. A heavy M1014 shotgun rested on an oaken desk, full of drawers bearing cartridges, shells, magazines, and bullets.

An open glass window revealed the road, 20 feet below, outside, surrounded with concrete buildings, apartments, cafés, amidst the backdrop of an evening sky, fresh with its purplish hue.

The criminal squeezed through the window with ease, thanks to his lean and flexible body. In fact, he had been in the Olympic gymnastics thrice, before turning evil and defile.

Unfortunately, his calculations weren't accurate; he dropped like a stone being dropped into a pond, landing on all fours, on top of a taxi cab, parked below.

"Oy! Get 'im!" Cooper Black reloaded the Gatling in his hands. He barraged away ruthlessly at anything that stood intact in his sight, from dumpsters to glass windows, props to cars; but not people. People weren't on the streets today. But with all the chaos and wreckage they were causing, it took only seconds for the neighboring people, to peer out of their windows.

The older folk - not understanding what this sort of fight was all about - dialed 911 on their phones. Soon, the area was full of people gazing out of every window visible, enjoying the live action. From tiny toddlers to retired elders - all remained silent as the 'group of troublemakers'(what they called Cooper & co. and Philias) fought with big guns with loud noises.

ROAR! DANG! WHIZ! TUONG! TANG! BANG! DHASH!

While Cooper distracted Cacroe, Vandy and Exos tumbled rapidly down the stairs and found a vantage point each. Vandy took position behind a ruined dumpster, while Exos Luke crouched behind a crate with dimensions 4x3x4 meters. They gestured to Black, "We're ready."

As for the criminal, he found a hiding spot, too, on the other side of the street, under the shadow of a roadworks barrier. Out of his pocket, he produced an ultra-sophisticated model of the traditional Colt.45 semi-automatic handgun.

"Alright, everyone, in positions?" Cooper whispered into a miniCOD (mini-Communication Operating Device).

"Yes, sir," replied Vandermann.

"Yessss... er..." replied Exodus. "Black, I'm not sure about this!"

"FIRE IN THE HOLE!" snarled Cooper Black. His black pupils reflected the sight of the body of Philias Cacroe bursting with the impact of so many bullets, launching bits of meat, and sprays of blood around its environment.

Finally, it all ceased.

Cooper Black couldn't believe he'd done it; he couldn't believe they had it! They couldn't believe..

BANG!

Police sirens filled in every corner of his mind.

TO BE CONTINUED...

...IMMEDIATELY! ^_~

A blinding flash of light.

He was there...pointing a gun...

A blinding flash of light.

...he was there pointing a gun...

A blinding flash of light.

...he was there pointing at his own reflection...

Complete darkness.

...he put his finger on the trigger...

Complete darkness.

...he pulled the trigger...

Those eyes. Those eyes, bleeding face, falling body...

"Cooper...Black..."

He got nearer.

"...the letters..."

Then he understood.

"Cooper Black, wake up sir. Take these letters, from Joe Catshoe," Vandermann said to a stranger, sitting on the floor of his jail cell. Instead of a cowboy hat that usually shaded his face, it was now free. His wild hair stood flaccid. Vandermann showed him the clutched envelopes. "Take the letters, sir. I should've given them to you earlier."

They were in an underground maximum-security chamber, surrounded with rocky walls, held in place by wooden frames. The other cells were empty; only Cooper's cell wasn't vacant.

It used to be an abandoned mining shaft, but since the government wasn't paying the jailors much money, they had to rebuild this shaft as an underground prisoner managing institute.

The builders wanted to be misers ("Hey, let's be misers!") and they saved \$49.79 by using wooden frames instead of iron ones. The electricians wanted to be the worst misers ("Hey, we're the worst misers, yo!") and saved \$500 by stealing the old incandescent bulbs and selling them for \$80 each, to the shaft's owners. They made a total profit of (C.P.=\\$0, S.P.=\\$80x10, P=SP-CP, T.P.=\\$800!) \$800. But \$300 were needed to bribe the cops to keep their mouths shut. As a result, the UPMI became the worst, I mean the WORST, prison on the planet!

For example, there weren't any toilets, nor any food to be given to the prisoners, and no guards – wait, 'no guards'?

Cooper thrust his massive arms through the rusty iron bars, and tore them off...clean off.

"Vandy, thanks for dropping by and making me realize my mistake."

"No problemo. I had tried to explain, that killing innocent people..."

"Not about that, you fool! I never knew, that this place was unguarded! If I had known, I'd have escaped within forty-two seconds!" he shook his head and snickered at himself. "But let that all go, buddy. Come, let's get to street level."

"So-called maximum-security chamber! No guards at all! Making me a fool of myself, huh!" Black grumbled as they walked along the unknown road, with buildings lit with neon signs on either side. Cars, buses, trucks, etc. blocked pedestrians from crossing the street.

The street was similar to the one at Las Vegas. The entire place seemed like a clone of the actual Vegas. Cooper tried glancing at some of the signs: "Starlight Casino", "Deluxe Dream House", "King Kline's Palace", "Pompo's Pizzaria", "Middle State Casino", "Sweeter Thangs", "Dunklesteus Autos", "Cenarius's Scenario", etc.

The closest sign they saw, was a hotdog stall beside the sidewalk. It read, "Warton Wellington's Hotdoggies...57, Vundoppler St."

"We're in Vundoppler street?" Cooper seemed startled. "I never thought the place even existed!"

Vandermann said nothing. The location was too ultra-modern for him. The array of concrete-and-glass towers and skyscrapers

soared to astonishing heights. In the horizon, 24°up, and on a 010° bearing, the duo spotted a well-known building with its iconic slanted rooftop.

"Whoa, I didn't realize there was a Symbiocyte branch here, as well!" Cooper Black had known a friend named Harrison Garrison. He lived in New York with his motel and GF, working for the MBC. From time to time, he stole away into Symbiocyte to receive intel on technology. "Looks like there's an outlet or research center everywhere in North America! Right, Vugerton?"

Vandy nodded. He still wore his military cap and gear.

"Say, would you wanna go into one of those 'asinoes?"

Vandy nodded, again.

"Okey then," he squinted around, choosing a perfect casino. Unlike the other western parts of America they had visited so far, Vundoppler St. was teeming with citizens. Cooper's eyes danced around, trying to find a suitable casino while Vandermann checked his black wrist chronograph which displayed [8:43 pm]. "Aha, I got it!" Cooper slammed his fist onto his palm. "We go to... that one."

His index finger pointed towards the northwest, where a 50 m radius giant upturned frustum advertised its name with blue-red neon lights, "Fortune-K Casino", with the "K" illuminated by a yellow neon.

"Looks pretty awesome to destroy, right?"

Vandermann silently nodded, once more.

If you ever believe in heaven, after seeing the interior of the casino, you'll not believe anymore.

After passing through the polished birch doors, the duo stepped onto a red velvet carpet that stretch endlessly in all directions. It even covered the interior stairs.

The walls were layered vertically, with black marble at the bottom, white diorite in the middle, and peach granite at the top. The ceiling was made of a material that had a yellow luster so shiny, it looked like gold. It was so well-polished and neat, it behaved as a

mirror, reflecting all the light and focusing it onto the people and flooring.

As for the lights, they were tinted yellow, hidden behind stained glass decorated with ornate frames, perched evenly at the top layer of the walls.

They had never been in such an atmosphere. It all so rich, so exquisite, so fascinating...indeed, every American lived their dreams. The building was circular in perimeter, with air conditioning and soft orchestra music piped in through invisible speakers. The single hall was packed with rich couch potatoes who only made a living by gambling. A strong perfume was also present, which made you think of pink.

At the very center of the place, a giant maze of casino games stood arranged in a ring, with the harder games inside and the easier ones outside. Nonetheless, gamblers and addicts hustled near every game possible. The outermost ring was the easiest game: virtual 'match-3-and-win'. The innermost game (it was the hardest, so it was at the hub - a diamond chandelier hung about ten feet above) was the renown 'Wheel of Fortune'.

"Whoah..." both Cooper and Vandermann exclaimed, in awe. Sadly, they didn't have enough cash to afford ANY of those games. Instead, they chose to slump onto one of the purple leather couches situated throughout the perimeter of the casino ring. Though still energetic, the duo drew an abyss of sighs. "Phew.. damn my *ss, where's this Luke gone?"

Vandermann shrugged his shoulders.

"Nope, don't ask me. I haven't seen him since we split for the Cacore... Cac... oh, whatever that guy's name was!" Vandermann was helpless, too. Both he and Cooper were totally frustrated with the whole day's effort leading to no victory.

"Kay, lemme see what I can—"

Cooper was about to dial Luke's number on his phone, when he caught sight of something unexpected, that made his heart leap.

WE PLAY NO GAMES

Exodus Luke, driver of the Cheetah 400, sat in the VIP lounge, having a chat with some other men, all dressed in official suits.

"Well, well! Lucky piece of iron hanging around with bars of gold? This is seemingly madness, yo!" Cooper Black grumbled as he paced towards him.

"...and then, I said 'Who are you looking for, eh?' ha ha ha..." the group of VIPs shared an ancient Italian joke, which certain people have lost their taste in. Exos cleared his throat as he caught sight of Black steaming towards him. He gulped as he, too, shared a seat on the marble-chiseled chairs.

"Gentlemen, would you mind leaving?" Cooper proffered.

"Well, no but...um..."

"Leave now, or else..." Cooper produced a Mustang Snub revolver. He shot six rounds at the vaulted ceiling, in a 'C' pattern.

Immediately, utter chaos and shock hovered and spread through the place, and people began jostling their way out - including the casino staff! That noise drove off the flock of VIPs, as well.

"Ahh! Finally some peace!" he turned to Exos. "As for you, dear friend, you'll need to have a bloody explanation ready...you got a LOT to explain, buddy. Oh yeah, a lot."

"L-look Black, now don't do anything stupid in front of all these—"

"Shhut upp, you stupid *uck! What and how de hell did ya get here, that too, without informing or inviting us?" Cooper swung the revolver back and forth in his hand, dangling from an arm rested on the chiseled marble.

"Well I wanted to tell you this...but...you see, Black, I 'own' this casino," Exos tried his best not to seem afraid. Let alone his reputation, Cooper - when totally pissed off - has the potential to

kill his own loved ones. It was one of the negative virtues he possessed.

"You...WHAT?! HOW? WHEN??" Cooper boomed in a voice so loud and menacing, the people sped out in augmented flurries. "If you lie, then it'll be your last lie you ever speak, friend."

The extended accent on the last word made Exos gulp.

"Calm down, please! Let me explain," he took a deep breath before continuing. "We really shouldn't be talking about this in the open. Follow me, bud," he stood up from his 'throne of reclusion'. "We need a ride. I got a Lambo."

"You...got....a...Lambo?" Cooper felt as if stabbed by greed and envy. "And you...you never told me?" he looked at his old friend with a pitiful expression. "Why man? Why the big difference and the big secrets? Why, I tell ya, WHY?"

"Patience, dude. You'll gain your answers," Exos Luke escorted him away from the main entrance. "Oh, no, dude. Not that way. We go out the back."

Cooper's anger receded like a runny hourglass. He holstered his weapon, looked up at the damage he'd caused, and sunk his head in shame.

Vandermann picked up their tail.

Exos Luke led them to the queer back of the casino, untouched by engineers and architects. Loose wires and planks were a frequent guest. A dilapidated wooden door met their sight at the end. Luckily, Luke found a few rotten chairs secluded from the crowds, so it was optional for them to exit the casino. Cooper preferred that they stay indoors.

"So, Exos. Begin."

"Okay," Exos Luke cleared his throat before proceeding. "Previously, in the past few months, I had been working at the eastern harbors."

Cooper nodded.

"I worked for Hratt Wright, an international firearms supplier who exported large stashes of M4 carbines to the other nations. I decided to take one crate for myself, when one sneaky little bugger

named Kooka Shont caught me in the act. I punched him, he kicked back. I kicked him, he punched back. He was quite a formidable opponent, that *itch!" Luke allowed himself a wide grin. "Finally, I had managed to eliminate him...using one of the guns from a nearby crate. Immediately, all the workers and Hratt with his goons, sped along like street dogs towards me...towards the direction of the noise. They brought metal wrenches, wooden canes, etc. to pin me down.

"Alas, I shot them all down!" his eyes lit up with an insane gleam. "Till I was left with about thirty crates full of illegal weaponry, and 'bout a truckload o' corpses. I had to think for half an hour on how to get rid of those 'harmful' objects. Suddenly, my brain was hit with the most brilliant idea I had ever imagined!"

Cooper's eyes grew wilder by the minute, eager to listen to Exos's story of glory. "And then, what?"

"Then, my friend," Luke inhaled another gulp of air. "I rushed to the nearest Ammo Nation store, and sold all of the damn guns. In return, I got another heavy burden! I received more than \$48 billion genuine greens fo' selling those guns! Later on, I deposited all of the cash in buildin' this entire casino. As for the corpses, I.. uh.. left 'em there for the stupid cops and FBI to scratch their heads with no clue to who killed such great a number of people, heh heh!" Luke paused a moment. "I still wanted more adventure. I had already lost my job. So I joined you guys in your everlasting quest to cleanse this land from the Russian Rebel Forces."

They heard the babble of voices in the background. People had gathered back in and settled down. It was quite strange to assume that moments ago, they all were scrambled away by Cooper's gunshots. And now, they were back in!

"Wholly! All these days, I never knew we were ridin' with a billionaire!"

Exos Luke nodded and patted Black's back.

"So what do we do now, leader?"

"Leader, me? I don't think so. You, Luke, are the perfect man worthy of such a title."

"No, Black! No. Even if I'm richer than you doesn't mean it is my 'duty' to serve. No matter what, you'll always remain the man of the match."

"Oh, damn you, Luke, you hell of a draconian **stard! Come give me a hug, brother!"

Cooper and Luke embraced in the brotherly love they shared. They shook hands and patted each other's backs. Vandermann only watched them both, feeling lost.

"Here in this casino, we're at your service, Exos."

"Al'ight, Black you crazed son of a *other**cker! In that case, feel free to play the games we offer around here," he said boldly. "Here's \$200 for both of ya," he handed two \$100 tokens each. "Play Blackjack; it's cheaper and easier than Baccarat or Roulette."

When the VIPs returned, Luke resumed their talk as well as tried to explain whatever weird stuff had happened in the last ten minutes. The duo (Coop an' Vandy) settled at a Black jack table. The crowd was back to normal.

Cooper Black felt left out. He didn't know which fact was worse: 'the fact that your friend is lonely and poor' or 'the fact that your friend is richer and more popular than you think he is'.

He turned his thoughts to the game.

He placed \$100 as the bet and drew. The opponent had a 7 clubs and a ? card. His tock held 9 hearts. He drew again. Opponent added 8 clubs, Cooper got a J spade. He squinted as he stopped the draw. Scores : Opponent = 24; Cooper Black = 19. Cooper won!

"That's right!" he received additional \$200."You risk getting lost, if you know what I mean!"

Enthusiastic, this time Cooper placed all the money he had (\$300) as the bet, and drew. The opponent had a K diamond and a ? card. Cooper drew 6 clubs. At the next draw, opponent held a Q heart, while Cooper got 9 diamonds. He thought he'd strike rich again, so he stopped. Oops! Opponent's score was exactly 21! Cooper lost \$300.

"Ai, that's not fair, yo!" he tried to snatch it back, but he couldn't. He glanced at the nearby table, where Vandermann played like a pro. His stock kept soaring to \$25,000 without a single loss! His mind

worked like a machine, his eyes and face were still as a stone statue. His mouth was silent as a mime. The only action his body worked, was the movement of his hands, as he gestured to draw, bet, stop, and collected his cash rewards.

"Now that's a real playa," Cooper felt pride in Vugerton's work.
"Wish I could play like that."

You see, dear readers! Gambling is illegal because it not only increases your overconfidence, but also decreases the amount of money you have. When someone wins a game, the person takes the opponent's money, right? The person taking the money is the equivalent of a thief robbing the money from a victim. What's worse, it happens in front of the victim's eyes, and there's absolutely 'nothing' that he/she can do about it! Sad, isn't it?

So, unless you're a blockheaded, half-witted, brainless dork, DO NOT GAMBLE...EVER! Throw away the gambling habit, or suffer as you've never done before! If you don't believe me, then you shall not proceed any further, with Cooper Black's story.

I'm waiting...

A while later, Cooper settled down beside Exos Luke, with the letters in his hands.

"Oh, eternal torment! I lost so much money! All the \$25 billion is lost!" Cooper Black cursed their ill luck and spoiled fate. "Now, now. Lemme see what these envelopes hold. Might be a bill, a warrant, or maybe some advertisement. Who sent this, by the way," he checked the text on the cover. "Hmm...it's from my uncle, Joe Catshoe."

Vandermann stared at the floor, drenched deep with guilt.

"Last seen my uncle a year ago. Wonder where he is, now. Probably in exile after the landing of the damn bloody RRF!" he gripped the edge, stuck a finger under the flap, and ripped it open with a single stroke.

Three papers popped out. He picked one out and scanned the page. He figured them to be dossiers of some sort. His uncle's research. Within minutes, his face glowed, his eyes lit up, and a hearty smile was born on his face.

"Guys, these are important research intel collected by my *ucki*g uncle Joe. He's discovered a bio lab at the heart of the Sonoran Desert, where the freakin' Russians are conducting weird-as-hell experiments," Cooper pulled out a second paper. "Detroitilities! This is a list of missions me uncle was supposed to do. I guess he wanted us to complete them for him. Guess he's too busy with his work."

With every passing word or sentence concerning Cooper's uncle, Vandermann's face sunk in depression. What if he gets to know? What if they hunt me down for what I had done?

"Completing each mission objective shall deposit \$40,000 in our bank accounts! Holy shit, Luke, we just hit the jackpot! We just need to bring the evidence to some selected people in New York, and voila, we get ourselves a nice sum of money."

"Good to hear, Black. But I suggest we spend the night somewhere safe. We need all our energy for tomorrow. I've got suites booked at King Kline's Palace. Jus' down the street. Meet you there, buds."

"But where the hell are you off to, Luke?"

"Oh, nothing much. Jus' need to send an explanation plus a hefty bribe to the local police department. I gotta hide your tracks 'fore the cops know that you're here. Damn, man, all because of your stubborn attitude I gotta explain to people that your 'gunshots' was nothing but a publicity stunt."

"Heh heh. Sorry for your inconveniences, Luke. But you're my bro, yeah. You're de perfect bro I could offa!"

The next day...

"So, where to now?" Exos Luke led them to the back alley of his casino, where his awesome Lamborghini Aventador awaited their arrival.

"Now...it's time for the unfinished business."

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Fast forwarding thirty hours...

The trio was back in NYC, searching around Manhattan for an 'Ammo Nation' outlet. But point to be noted: you'd have to be dumb to set up an unauthorized weapon shop at street level, that too, undisguised. Cooper had befriended a certain gun dealer, though, who dealt with "extreme" items. Eventually, they found a deteriorated apartment, covered with urban tags.

They parked their car. They stood stiff. Wooden beams blocked the entrance to the building.

"The hell? Why's the door boarded up?" Cooper concealed no hidden facts about the dealer's whereabouts. He hadn't checked in at the store for nearly a fortnight. "No problemo. I think I know what's the flaw here."

He bent down and removed the doormat. Beneath it, he dug out a loose slab. Beneath that, he found a tomahawk.

"To kill a thug, you got to think like one," Cooper chopped down the beams with a single blow. He pushed open the main door, and gestured at his mates to follow.

Inside, they found a corridor without any doors leading out of it, save for a staircase at its end. No lights were on. Blankets of darkness and layers of isolation hovered along the whole length of the corridor. At the bottom, there was an iron door barring the way. Cooper knocked on it thrice. A sliding peephole slid apart. Behind that door, two blue eyes studied the three figures awaiting entrance. Recognizing Cooper, the door instantly clicked open.

"Olé lefollo, Cooprion!" a bearded biker greeted Black, Luke, and Vandermann. He wore a plain red jacket, with the cloth torn at the

shoulders. A pair of blue-gray denim shorts adorned his soccer legs. Blonde hairs grew on his chin and also covered his head like a heavy wig. Biker gloves shielded the coarse hairs on his knuckles. "Welcome back, Coopriion." he turned his attention to the newcomers. "And welcome to the world of guns, guns, guns! Dear sirs, how may I help in fragging your opponents?"

He reclines on a wooden bench, his back facing the wall. All around the hall-like 24 sq. meter room, crates full of metal scraps were crammed into every available space. Wait! These metal scraps were actually freshly-imported weapons from various nations and makings round the world. Among the brands and trademarks, "Heckler&Coch" and "Colt" were dominant.

"Will it be the usual M-burners, Blackburn?" the keeper of the store got up and walked over to a collection of M4 carbines.

"Erm...no, Jake. I'm assigned to a task. Agency duty. Wanna join?"

"Sure thing, man...but I've got my business to take care of. Plenty o' substitutes and competitors in the market, dude. Even a day off from ma' store means day off for life! And those *itchin' Hit Team members are back in town. Ahem...anyways, what sorta guns d'you need?"

"The kind that bashes freakin' spies, soldiers and scientists within seconds."

Jake paced about the shelves of heavy metal gear.

"Oh, lookin' for speed and gory passion, eh? 'Kay. Perhaps these Gatling monsters shall be of much use to you."

"Suppose so," Cooper thrust a hand into his pocket like a harpoon and drew out his wallet like a captured blue whale. "How much?"

"Well...about three K dollars."

"\$3000! Nah, that's a bit too much, Jake. Make it \$2000."

"Alright, deal."

He extracted a meter-long 'Barracuda FLM' 1.5 cal Gatling gun and handed it to the enthusiastic buyer.

"Ooh, kinda heavy, too," Cooper checked its balance. "Will work like real steel, I guess. Thanks. Take \$1000 for now. I'll pay ya the other half soon."

"Anyone else interested?" Jake inquired after receiving his half due amount.

"Gimme two MP5s and six F1 anti-personnel grenades," Exos Luke demanded, with a handful of dollars. He dumped all of it onto the cash-in desk, lacking the patience to count. "Keep the change."

Vandermann used his \$25,000 in purchasing an AK-47 rifle, a flak jacket, a dogtag in the shape of a AH-64 helicopter (Vandy misses his favorite bird), and a Desert Eagle handgun.

"Bless you all for your purchases, sirs," Jake thanked while he bade off the customers. "Do spread the word 'bout my shop, okay? Bye-eye!"

Okay then, we're off dudes," Cooper's eyes shone in correspondence with New York's sunlit skyline. "Time for some opportunity, first. General Skywalker ain't gonna fire me from the MBC for being late. Besides, his mission is stale work. We got plenty o' time in our hands, so we use it."

"What's ringing in your bell, Coop?" Exos squinted amidst the burning sunshine.

"I say, we explore NY a bit. Learn about news. Then, we strike the Hit Team. Rumors say they are plannin' something big. Somethin' radioactive."

Meanwhile...

A few miles to the east, a cellphone blared. An anonymous speaker answered.

"Yes, sir. We're ready. Prepare the transaction. We should be receiving the nukes in ten hours' time."

A NEW DAWN

It was about time before Major Mord Dickens got his hands on the 5:FT, the greatest weapon on Earth. John Luther, the first eyewitness of the incident, had managed to call someone from the MIW, a secret organization that had the total control over the Symbiocyte Pharmaceuticals.

The very particular person's name was Harrison Garison, the great and skilled gunman agent of both the MBC and the MIW. Harrison had just returned from a hard month's work and wanted to take a vacation. He decided to go back to New York and settle there for a few years.

The plane landed at the local airport. A truck with a staircase came upto the door as it opened slowly, as if it didn't want to show itself in the hot-baked sunlight of the fresh autumn wind.

As the door was fully open, two men wearing black men-in-black coats with brownish-grey pants proudly stepped outside. The two men both looked the same, almost the same: one of the two had a moustache and was black, the other was handsome and wore a pair of black aviators.

They walked briskly to the black limousine that was parked on freshly-picked gravel.

"Well, Mr. Garison, I hope you're not spending your time here in NY," the man sitting next to the driver asked. He, too, was dressed in black. "Because I heard this place is full of blockheaded idiots and violent mafias. Certainly, I don't want you messing around with these sorts of people."

"It's all okay, sir," Harrison replied. "As long as I'm in my country, I've got no one to fear."

The limousine had an in-built radio and MP3 player that was playing MH21's (now named Mahir Beats) "Flight".

"Yes, and you know, last night I got a call from someone named John Luther. He was asking for you, Mr. Garison. I think he needs help or something."

"You can't always judge people by their names or their face," the man next to Garrison blurted out. "You need to see their actions then judge their qualities."

"Okay," the man in the car announced. "I think we'll be taking our leave now. Goodbye and goodluck, Mr. Garrison."

"You too, Jim Buavora."

The men got into the limo and sped off to Los Angeles, leaving Harrison Garrison alone.

"Phew!" he sighed. "It's getting hot in here. Better take a taxi."

Later, on the same day, but at night, Harrison reached his old living quarters that he once used to live in, before he joined the MBC.

In front of him lies the most unusual type of housing, that a man like Harrison could afford. He could've afforded a stay at a five-star hotel or even a mansion, but yet, he likes to live in places where he can get reminded of the precious, old memories of his previous days. All around him is noise and air pollution. People walking, children crying, cars honking, cops shouting, thieves running, drug cartels smoking,

robbers shooting, glass breaking, etc. was the usual noise produced near his housing.

The building where Harrison was staying was an old, 1980s, deteriorated motel named Lucky Charms. After a few years, the people started to become corrupt and greedy. They spray-painted tags all over the brick walls till it looked a slum house. The same thing was done to the entire neighborhood, creating the new name for this area: The Monster's Grave.

It was home to the world's biggest, deadliest, and meanest thieves, thugs, burglars, and robbers alike.

"Hmm...the building's looking too old nowadays. When will these stupid people learn to respect and take care of each other?" Harrison said to himself with a sigh as he took his suitcase and knocked on the door.

"Who the heck are you?" an elderly man answered the door with a shotgun in his hand. "Don't you know what time it is?"

"Whoa! Chill, chill, sir. Please calm down. There's no need to get angry at me! I only need the key to my apart-"

The door closed with a thud.

"-ment."

Harrison checked his watch.

[11:43 pm]

He had to find a way into his apartment. The motel was 5-storeys high. The 4th storey belongs to Harrison Garison.

Harrison looked around his environment. There was not a sound, not a trace of life on the streets tonight. He took out a 9mm pistol from the suitcase and left it there. He was glad that he had brought a few

weapons with him, if not for defense or killing people, surely for scaring people.

He strode off to the door again, but this time, he didn't knock or anything. He directly kicked the door open and stopped the old man at gunpoint.

"You'd better take me to my apartment soon. Or this pretty little bullet shall lodge into your blockheaded brain and will send your soul to the hands of God," Harrison said in a commanding voice. "Hurry up, you stupid schmuck!"

"O-o-okay," the old man stammered. "As you w-wish my li-liege."

One thing that Garison had learnt from all these years of experience is that: Everyone does as you say when you face them at gunpoint.

Garison's apartment was not at all, in a bit, as it once was. The floor was covered with litter.

Paper, magazines, pizza slices, dead flies, CDs, and lots of ketchup was spread out like a carpet on top of the polished granite floors.

The smell was generally fatty foods, and musk mixed with cologne. The evidence was already there. It was crystal clear that...

"Someone's been here in my apartment!" he cried, red with rage. "I won't spare him at all costs!"

Harrison dropped the contents of his suitcase on the floor and sank into his bed, that was sticky with hair oil and sweat. Before he could even know it, he fell back asleep...deeply asleep. He was too tired. Whoever the culprit was, he could wait until tomorrow.

Then, a few minutes later, his phone started ringing. Harrison couldn't believe his luck. Yet he answered, still dozing from his sleep, "Hello, Garison speaking. Who is this?"

"Mr. Garison, we need to talk. It's urgent."

AN OLD FRIEND

"My name is John Luther. I need your help, Mr. Garison. you won't believe what I saw!

"I saw two men dressed as security guards bring something really heavy inside the Symbiocyte Pharmaceuticals basement. You see, I was on tour. It was one of those monthly tours, and I had gone below the lobby through a secret staircase located near the southern corner's tip.

"It was a container of some sort, judging by the appearance. When they opened it, I saw a huge warhead. On its body was scribbled 5:FT or something like that. So, I quietly paced forward to see some more details on the thing when suddenly, Mord Dickens came with a troop of soldiers, real US military soldiers! The troop carefully took the warhead and placed it inside a wooden crate and loaded it onto a freightliner truck.

"I got into my car, a cool Aston Martin, and followed the truck to the docks. But one of them, a stout, red-cheeked, yellow-bellied soldier, saw me and raised an alarm. In no time, they all saw me and started shooting at me with UMZ 300 assault rifles. Oh, how I had to run! I ducked beside my car and stayed hidden for hours, from morning till dusk. Afterwards, when they had all gone a long distance away, when it was safe for me to come out, I scrambled into my car and drove off to the nearest hospital. My left arm was riddled with bullet holes, and so was my car. Fortunately, I paid some cash and everything's fit as a fiddle.

"If you wish to come and meet me, drop by at Café Bistro anytime. If you'd like to help me, I think now's the time to show up."

"Umm...who exactly are you, John Luther?" Harrison asked, trying to have a flashback of his memory.

"Why? Can't you recognize your old friend?"

Just then, Harrison's brain stumbled upon a fact. "Oh! Luther! My old friend! How come you're in NYC? I thought you were—"

"—dead?" Luther finished for him. "Well not anymore! If you ever have the common sense to meet me, drop by at Café Bistro."

The next day, Harrison walked calmly outdoors to face the fresh breeze, the honking of cars' horns, and people striding off about their business.

"Oi, taxi!" he hailed a passing American-yellow taxicab. "How much is the fare for Café Bistro?"

"That'd be \$14.99, mister," the bald, and aging taxi driver replied, baring his yellow teeth. "The direct road of fourteen miles has been temporarily closed down for some construction. We have to take the seventeen-mile highway."

"And how long will it take?"

"If we start now, we'll be there by noon 12 o'clock."

"Can't you get there any faster? Say...before 8?"

"Sure, but that is gonna cost you an extra five bucks."

"Alright, take me there...FAST!"

The cab halted beside a three-star bar, so-called the Café Bistro. Harrison paid the driver his fare and bid him goodbye before advancing into the café.

Inside, it was noisy enough to make even a healthy person deaf within 24 hours. People of all sorts, from young teenagers to rotting old men, were seated in groups of six, either drinking beer or eating beef burgers. Two bar tenders wrote down orders and passed them to the chefs through slits in the walls behind their oily, and fatty backsides. From a corner, someone called out Harrison's name.

"Yo my man, Harrison! Come here and wolf down some burgers with me," Luther called out. "Over here, you baby-faced rascal! Come and sit beside me."

Harrison did as he said and sat down on one of the plastic benches with a wooden table. There was a mug of beer in Luther's left hand, and a juicy-looking burger in his right.

"Good. That's my bro," Luther's voice muffled through the bits of burger in his mouth. Luther himself was a muscular man, his skin dark (he is an African-American), and having the style of Rastans and muscled like an ox. "It's good to see that you have come here so soon."

"What? Do you think that the difference between midnight and morning is' so soon?"

"What? Ofcourse not, I have been sitting here for you."

"That means you've been sitting here and eating jumbo-sized burgers for EIGHT HOURS!"

Luther made a face as if he were going to vomit. "You know what, Harrison, I think we should meet at your place. I'll hang out at your place tomorrow."

This time, Harrison made the face.

The next morning, a black Aston Martin parked in front of the slum house. A muscular man in a white vest and brown paint-splattered trousers steeped out of the car. That particular man was none other than John Luther, a well-known bad-ass buddy exceptional at handling guns and kidnapping 'thugs' at the dead of the night.

As he opened the rusty, moss-covered doors, there was a deep stench of musk, sweat, and body oil. A single tungsten bulb illuminated the ground floor.

The dust had covered the floors like an extra layer of paint over a white-washed wall.

"Hello? Anyone in here?" he asked to the dark gloom of the room. There was no one in the lobby. Luther found the stairs and climbed till he reached the landing of the Garison residence.

Ring, cring! The doorbell rang. There was a sign that hung above the door, which said, "Sweet wishes are the backbone of sweet dreams." Luther was somehow right, "Harrison really is a baby-faced little freak. The door opened.

"Oh there you are!" Harrison greeted his friend. "I thought you'd never come! What took you so long?"

"What do you think?" Luther had a very heavy, gruff voice which matched his biceps and 6-pack abs. "I got stuck in traffic jam."

"In New York?"

"No, in California, you dumb bird! I came all the way from there to bring you news. I was following them again and eavesdropped a bit. I came up with this: The men are coming to NY Hotel for a meeting."

"Thanks for the crucial data. But I'm sorry, I cannot help you. I'm on vacation. Now, if you'd like to go somewhere else, you may leave now. Goodbye."

Harrison was about to close the door when an idea came in his mind. He reopened the door and said, "Okay, you win! I'm ready for a new mission."

"Then let's get rolling!"

The Aston Martin cut through the traffic like a knife cutting through butter. The honking of the cars was enough to give someone a headache.

"You should learn the basics of car driving first. Like skimming through traffic and stuff," Harrison remarked proudly. "Look at me! I never drove a single vehicle in my life, besides a F15 military aircraft, and still I'm good at it!"

Luther sat beside him, trying his best to ignore the talk of Garison. He never knew that he was soooo talkative. He patiently sat there in his own car, trying to think which power on Earth made his mind to let Harrison Garison drive the car.

Luther tuned in to his favorite music channel: MH21. The music on the menu was "Real".

The car passed by cars, busses, and trucks and frequently changed directions and paths. At first, the car was being driven on a dirty street, then into a narrow alley, next on a highway, and over a bridge, and finally on freshly graveled road. They came to a halt and parked the car near a giant skyscraper of a building. The 20mX5m

sign, above the glass doors, read: "New York Hotel, your best friend in comfort is here."

"Okay, here's the plan," Luther showed Harrison the complete geological map of the New York Hotel. "This here is the entrance, the ground floor over there." He pointed to the glass doors. "The next room on the other side is the lobby with elevators and stairs, got it?"

Harrison nodded, "Yes, all in one's head."

"So, the elevators lead to the 18th floor. The men have booked their stay over there. One of them, probably their boss, was called Alwatt Woden by his partners.

"So, you go first and deactivate all the security cameras and activate the elevators. The elevators will lead to the secured area on the 18th floor. No need to worry about anything after that, 'cause that's my checkpoint.

"You only have to go to the 18th floor and kill all the guards. But remember this – Not a finger on Woden, or else the entire gang of mafias shall rise against us. Okay then, let's go!!!"

He handed Harrison a MPsk submachine gun and took one for himself, as well, from the hood of the car.

Startled by the sight of such heavy weaponry, Harrison said, "Where did you get such weapons from, Luther?"

"Oh, those...I just bought them last week from Ammo-Nation, the best gun dealers in town."

"But...aren't these forbidden?"

"Why o'course they are! Why else d'you think I always hide them in the car? Now shut your mouth and work your bones and muscles. Lock and load, baby!"

The guard at the front desk was reading New York Times' crime edition. He didn't notice anything as Harrison approached near him and shot him down.

Harrison strode silently towards the security room at the corner. Even though there was no one inside the room, he felt there was

someone watching him, from a distance. He let his eyes adjust in the dim light.

The security room was full of computer screens, buttons, levers, shafts, and other controls that were enough to keep a 24/7 watch over a V.I.P. such as the president Barak Obama. Two CCTV cameras were silently recording Harrison's movements from the ceiling.

When Harrison stopped midway and aimed his gun at the CCTV cameras, a trigger went off with a short, sharp beep. He was about to pull the trigger (not of the cameras, but of his gun, you silly!) when an electronic voice spoke, "Alert! An intruder in the house! Get your guns ready! Alert!"

Damn it! Harrison swore under his breath. How could he have been so stupid? He

slowly placed his gun down on the floor and reluctantly put his hands above his head.

Two men, dressed in black, hurried down the stairs and found Harrison Garison kneeling on the floor. They commanded him to stand up and follow them to their boss.

Meanwhile, outside, Luther was watching the whole incident. He waited for five minutes before changing his plan and reloaded his MPsk as he sprinted into action, towards the hotel.

Inside, a criminal mastermind looked upon his new prisoner, Harrison Garison. After questioning him, he thought it was no use keeping him alive, and thus, he got ready to fire his gun. But at the same moment, Luther appeared. Alwatt grunted as he placed a kick on Harrison's body.

"Game over, Mr. Garison," Woden grinned. "Game...over..."

A FRIEND IN NEED

Luther took hold of one of the dangling curtains, swung forwards, and knocked the gun off Woden's hand. Woden staggered backwards, and Luther lunged at him, a moment too late. Luther fell beside Harrison.

"Ah, I see! There are two of you idiotic rats sneaking in my high-security area, eh?" Woden grabbed Luther's arm and dragged him on top of Harrison's body. "You both look better while you're dead. Not to worry, dearest of all my friends! I'll end it all in a jiffy!"

His gaze fell on the MPsk guns lying on the floor. He took them both, one in each hand and laughed his life out.

"It is over, dear fellas, it is all over. You know what is? Your blood, ofcourse! Goodbye, and never come back again!" Woden pulled the trigger but it missed.

"Well let's try that one more time, shall we?" He shot, he missed, he shot, he missed again. "One...last..time!" Before he could shoot, he got kicked by someone. It was not a man, it was-

"Amy Catt, what're you doing here?" Woden was speechless. "How d-did you g-get h-here?"

A woman with silver blonde hair and slick, black tights had broken into a maximum-security room.

"You should improve your security, Mr. Alwatt!" she purred. "Your proximity system couldn't even stop a stealthy *catt* on the loose!"

She threw the guns back at the duo: Luther and Harrison, who just kept on staring blankly at her, speechless.

"You can thank me later, guys!" with that, she sprung back to the ceiling and disappeared out of sight.

Harrison stood up, picked up his gun, and shot down Woden. As he did so, Luther called an elevator and went to the ground floor. Harrison waited for the elevator to arrive back again.

The 18th floor was humongous. The hallway stretched from north to south, at a total length of 55m from wall to wall, with an wideness of 10m. Everywhere sprawled tables, chairs, stalls, and lab equipment. Numerous scientists were conducting experiments related to either chemistry or physics. Atomic physics.

In addition to the tables, chairs, and stalls, there were also warheads and nukes of different countries, shapes, and sizes stored on raised platforms.

He glanced at some of the names of the warheads. Some had pretty wacky names like TummyAche2000, BlisterDestroyerX, Gone2Deep, HumanCripplizer, etc. While others had just numbers for their names like 4X49FT, 3F23T, and also the warhead that Luther had mentioned - '5:FT'. He strode calmly towards it, and glanced at a robotic prototype in the corner: a giant snake-like GSFER. All the scientists were too busy at their work to notice about the intruder. They probably thought of Harrison as a visitor.

He was only inches from the 5:FT when the 'catt' woman reappeared. She pushed Harrison out through the wall (that's right! I said wall! Amy is no ordinary human; you shall learn about her later) and was falling 50 feet below, to their deaths.

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND?" Harrison was too flabbergasted to speak quietly. "WE ARE GONNA DIE IF WE FALL LIKE THIS!"

Amy replied calmly, "Don't worry, sir! Everything's perfect." She opened her parachute and let Harrison hold onto her. "What I did for you, was for your own good, sir. You'll see soon enough."

And sure enough, it happened. As they were safely landed on the ground, the entire New York Hotel shook with a tremor. The glass, walls, and rubble streamed out from the 18th floor as the 14m long GSFER slithered out. Onlookers on the road quickly scrambled for cover as lasers locked down on multiple targets.

"Humans detected. Kill code engaged..."the robot spoke as it shot missiles from its mouth at two (empty) cars. The GSFER dug into the ground, and peace was restored back...only for a few minutes.

"That's why I pushed you, sir," Amy said as she gasped for breath.
"That's a GSFER, a new generation of robotic facilities. It can
do countless actions; even professional terrorists can't imitate." She
took a piece of paper from her pocket. "Here. This contains all the
facts about these robots."

Harrison took the paper and read.

"Name: GSFERobot. Place of manufacture: Symbiocyte Pharmaceuticals, Industrial Section-B. Body: pure titanium alloyed with zinc, chrome, and tungsten. Movements: can crawl, slither, and dig through soil. Actions: roars when battery is low, glares at you if it is suspicious. Hostile Actions: can vaporize enemies with a touch of xenon-operated lasers, can shoot missiles at vehicles, can suck in fuel to restore some battery power and also squirts the same fuel (while it is burning) at enemies. Note: Stay 15 meters away from this machine IF YOU WISH TO STAY ALIVE!"

"So that's it?" Harrison said after he was done reading. "You mean to tell me that NY is doomed?"

"Well, actually no, Mr. Garison. I mean to tell you to assist me in preventing this new ingenious machinery from causing farther chaos. This is the bane of Alwatt Woden. He created this robot, and only he could've stopped it, if you hadn't intervened and slain him. I warned you NOT to kill him!"

Luther came back five minutes later.

"Yo Harrison, let's go man. Our mission is complete." He then realized who was standing beside Garison. "Hey you lady, stay away from my buddy here."

"Umm...Luther, I think I've got to tell you something."

"So that's what it's all about, isn't it?" Luther asked after he understood the current matter in hand. "What do we do now, Harrison?"

"I suppose we go searching for that GSFER. What d'you say, Catt?"

"Guys...I think there's no need to go searching...the GSFER is here already!"

The ground cracked and split where the GSFER sprouted from. It threw the nearby cars here and there, before slithering past Harrison.

Smack! The tail caught Harrison in his face and yanked him away, senseless.

And so, that's how Harrison used to get killed in the dramatic way. He was thrown off to a passing truck that took him to an airport and was taken to Australia. Poor Harrison! All he wanted was a nice, quiet, peaceful vacation which turned out to be a chaotic journey to death.

He got stranded, and left alone in the streets of Sydney, when his body was discovered in the back of the truck. They

left him to rot on the streets, where people stared at him, at his body, his ragged clothes. He lived inside a sewer entry, drinking the nasty, foul, and disgusting water to satisfy his hunger, and seldom found bits of food floating around.

One day, to his utter relief, he was found by an MBC agent, who took him quickly to the local headquarters. Fortunately, Jim Buavora was there.

"See? I told you! I told you not to go off into a bad-mannered country but yet, you didn't listen!" Jim Buavora had been preparing his speech for all this for days. Finally, it came to some use. "Now, as long as you're here, we'll perfectly make sure that I give you proper treatment and care till you get better. Okay?"

"O-okay," Harrison stammered due to lack of proper food for 3 days.

"Good. Now that you're here, you can help us in our current health crisis. Won't you?"

"Ye-yes, cer-certainly."

"There has been a recent shipment of drugs imported from Miami. See if you can locate the thugs behind this and bring them to custody. Since it is almost lunch time now, I guess you should get something to-"

Harrison fainted and fell to the floor with a thud!

"-eat."

After Harrison became better and fit again, he was sent to Miami by a plane, to search the city for the drug dealers. The plane touched down in Miami, the next day.

As the plane landed and came to a halt, two men from MIW got out their guns, heavy assault rifles of the 1960s World War 2. They aimed at Harrison as he climbed down the stairs.

"FREEZE! Not a muscle, or you're dead meat, bro!" warned an agent.
"What's your name, MBC?"

"Whoa, whoa! Calm down! I've come to give you news about your MIW. I'm Harrison Garison and have come to assist you in your fight for untold evil. Show me the path, and I'll show you mine."

The agents exchanged startled looks. They removed their weapons and gestured Harrison to follow. They led him to their car, a yellow Lamborghini, parked outside the airport runways.

"Get in." They got into the car, with Harrison on the driver's seat and one of the

agents, on the shotgun seat, aiming his gun at Garison's head. "Drive."

"But...I don't..."

"I SAID DRIVE! We saw you, driving like a maniac, with your friend. Drive like that."

"But where to?"

"Drive till...you drop down dead!" The agents snickered. "Drive to the docks. Section Alpha 42-6612, Storage Centre. Get there in time, and you'll get less pain in your legs."

This was enough for Harrison. It didn't take him a single moment to realize that these agents were frauds. They were thugs dressed in black to earn them respect and access to all restricted areas. He felt his coat for any guns, and surely, he had *some* fate.

And MH21's "Dark" was making him confused.

THE FIFTH JOB

Harrison Garison found a portable mini-MP5 SMG in one of the inner pockets of his brown suit-coat. There was enough ammo for assassinating Mord Dickens within an hour.

He gave the thugs a blank stare before taking out the gun and firing.

"Oh you stupid little ra—" the agent was already dead before he could say some rude words to Harrison.

"Thanks for the ride, gentlemen." Garison chucked the two corpses out the car windows. "Now..." he sighed. "...to find Luther."

The car was in good condition, and the engines, turbo boosters, suspension, 4WD, and handling was excellent. In a few minutes, Harrison was back on the highways and was zooming ahead at speeds of 293kmph. Garison himself was enjoying the qualities of a sports car. Within three hours, he'd be back in New York.

He checked his watch.

[12:34 pm]

Just then, a large, 18-wheeler truck bashed against his car. The driver had a scowl on his face, and was grinning at his work.

"Oi, maniac!" Harrison cursed. "Die, die, devil!"

The comments had no reaction on the truck driver. Instead, his grin became wider.

Harrison groped around for his SMG, but found nothing but the car's gear shaft. His eyes were fixed on the windscreen, for there was another truck at his front, carrying heavy road-rollers. At this

moment, it all struck to Harrison's mind: These men must be part of the Miami Mafia, hoping to poison all of the water in Manhattan; Garison's previous mission was to locate the mafia members, in his fifth job in the MBC. Memories of previous times were slowly rushing back to him.

The first job: To recover some stolen artworks in Italy.

The second job: To rescue kidnapped children in China.

His third job: To locate the NY Hoodriders, a secret organization created by street gangstas for Turkish, Chinese, and Russian terrorists.

His fourth job: To disable the control of the Symbiocyte Pharmaceuticals over the MBC and make the MIW a part of it.

His fifth job: To stop the Miami Mafia; however, he was fired from the MIW, and

had to take a vacation from the MBC, before he could complete his mission.

This could be his only chance to complete all his 5 jobs and get some respect from the MBC and rejoin the MIW. But will he get rejected once more? The last few memories were too painful, and thus, he stopped his mind from rewinding those scenes again.

Back to the present, Harrison struggled to gain some distance between him and the two trucks. He couldn't move his eyes from his windshield. But he had to...to get his gun...but how?

He was ready to take a leap of faith. He took a deep breath, opened his seatbelt, picked up his MP5 SMG, opened the car door and jumped sideways, into the hands of fate. Fortunately, the truck drivers didn't notice him escaping, and Harrison had a clean getaway. Unfortunately, he jumped

at the wrong timing and flew backwards, backwards, backwards and then...

Slam! He landed on a passing-by car's windshield, cracking it in a long fault line. The car braked immediately, as the driver stepped out. And he wasn't in a good mood.

"Hey, that's my ride, man!" the driver exclaimed. "And by the way, who the heck are—" He recognized who it was. "-you! My man Harrison! How good to see you back, my friend!"

"Man, get me to a hospital, first," Harrison groaned. "Why are you in Miami, Luther? I thought you were in NY City, chasing those... those.." He blacked out and said no more.

When he woke up, according to his wish, he was on a hospital bunk bed.

"Where are we, Luther?"

"Don't worry! Everything's fine. I spoke to the doctor, and he said you'll be fit as a fiddle once more...within 2 weeks."

"TWO WEEKS!" Harrison's head was already spinning. "Why the long delay? What happened to me? Is everything okay?"

Luther gave a nervous look. "Well...actually, you had broken two ribs, half your elbow, and lost a lot of blood. Fortunately, Amy Catt here, she..." His face seemed tensed. "She donated some blood to save you, since you and her had the same blood group. Nothing to be worried about, she'll be okay as well." He pointed to the bed next to Harrison. "There she is."

She was a sleeping beauty. Her silver blonde hair, her beautiful face. She lay asleep beneath the blankets.

"Did she indeed?" Harrison was puzzled. It was the first time he was being helped by a girl.

Luther nodded. "She seems to care a lot about you. She almost sobbed when the doctor told about your condition. Remember the saying: 'Whatever happens, happens for our good'? You got yourself a new...girlfriend!"

Harrison smiled, and softly blushed. "Damn you Luther, you overfed human friend!"

"Not in my life, man, have I ever met a man who rejects love from a woman." He chuckled. "Alright, I'll see to your fifth job. The local docks are only a couple of blocks away."

Luther left Harrison to rest comfortably while he did the hard work for him.

"Time to kick some butt!" he said to himself as he approached his windshield-less Aston Martin.

The dockyard was empty of ships that night. But there seemed to be no shortage of any single truck. Men were unloading supplies, packages, crates, and other stuff from the trucks as the Aston Martin roared towards them.

Some of them squinted at the sight. "Hey, I thought this was a civilian-free zone! Get that half-witted blockster outta my sight!" At

his command, three workers dressed in dungarees approached the car with metal wrenches in their hands.

"Get outta here, you stupid rascal!" exclaimed one. "Don't ya know that this area is restricted property? Who are you to oppose, huh?"

Luther smiled and put on his black RayBan aviators. "From the MBC, yo."

At this remark, several of the workers gasped, as if they got stabbed by a dagger in their gut.

"Holy smokes! It's the MBC! Run, peoples, run if you want to see the light of dawn again."

"The fun's just starting," Luther silently said to himself. "Wait till you see the climax."

Within seconds, all the workers were out of sight, nowhere to be seen. Perhaps one or two had gone to alert their leader, all the more fun! Luther waited for about fifteen minutes before an armoured truck approached the open side of the Storage Centre. Six soldiers, clad in armour, holding the latest M4 Carbines hopped off the back.

"HALT!" the soldiers spoke together. "DO NOT CROSS THE STORAGE CENTRE! OR YOU SHALL DIE MOST PAINFULLY!"

"Yeah, right! as if you guys can fight against a skilled gunman! Come, face me if you can!"

The soldiers walked in a straight row, barraging forwards with all their strength and senses, leaving their backs, completely vulnerable. And Luther just attacked always from the rear, as his habit. Three seconds later, they all dropped down dead.

The truck driver anxiously swayed his head side to side, looking for the troops.

"FREEZE!" Luther's sudden appearance could've given someone a heart attack. "Tell me all you know about your Boss, QUICKLY! Or this beautifully-shaped bullet shall kiss you lovely head goodbye."

The driver surrendered and spilled the beans. Yet, Luther had to kill him on the spot, to stitch in time to save nine.

Luther revisited Harrison after 2 weeks, to find him all better, chatting informally with Amy, sitting together on a bench in the waiting room.

"So, what's the news?" he asked Luther, eager to listen from his mouth those words of glory. "Are the mafia members dead?"

Luther gave them a blank stare and announced, "The Miami Mafia has fled from this city. They now store their stuff, guns, and drugs at Lab no.32, 88th floor, Symbiocyte Pharmaceuticals, New York."

"So, shall we...?" Harrison asked Luther and Amy.

"Yes, I fear so. But it would be better if Amy stays home, safe."

At Luther's words, she became enraged with fury. "How dare you! I said I'm coming with you guys!" She turned to Harrison for support. "Right Harry? You promised me right?"

Harrison was intrigued at how she got to know his true name. People preferred to call him Harrison Garison, but his real name was Harry Garison, or Harry Gary. "She's right. Luther, let's give her a chance to prove herself. She might join our team, and become quite an useful agent in the MBC."

Luther paused a moment, before smiling to Harrison. "Good, you're learning well."

Harry bit his tongue at what he had just said. This time, they all laughed heartily. But little did they know what the next dawn holds.

ROOT OF AWESOMENESS

The next morning dawned clear and sunny. Not a single moment of breeze. Everything was peacefully quiet, without any violence, noise, or pollution. But it was just the beginning. The beginning of the long, cold, harsh winter that was stirring up ahead.

Similarly, the Brave 3 (Harry, Luther, and Amy) had no idea what lies ahead. They might either find great fortune to favor the Brave, or a total catastrophe of disasters that might bring an end to their lives.

The trio arrived in front of Symbiocyte Pharmaceuticals by the morning. They had crammed themselves inside the Aston Martin of Luther's. The skyscraper in front of them was nothing compared to the NY Hotel.

The 95-storeyed giant had an inclined top that slanted sideways by 450s. The building was compact with chemical

vessels, scientists, chemists, and other scientific stuff. In fact, the entire building's walls were made of glass, making it highly transparent. Only the ground floor was made of concrete walls, with two iron-bound glass doors. Inside, a guard sat on a stool between the two elevator doors.

"So here we are at last, gentlemen," Luther got a cold stare from Amy."...and women. Today is a very important day for an important mission. As we all know, this here is the Symbiocyte Pharmaceuticals.

"Harrison, you go break into lab no.32, extract the formula, infiltrate the office, collect some evidence, go to Mord Dickens's room and stop him at gunpoint.

"I'll go and put an end to the proximity systems, bypass the main security communication lines, and delete the log of all the supplies that arrived this month. This shall buy you plenty of time to escape unnoticed by the guards.

"As for you, Amy Catt, you have the honor of keeping a watch on my car."

"No... oh c'mon !" she groaned." Please let me kill some bad guys with you."

"Sure, you will...but after this mission, okay?"

"Whatever; I don't care! Give me a mission that no one else can complete, and I assure you, you shall have your mind-blown!"

"Alright, everybody, into your positions!"

Harrison went in first, as his usual job as team-leader. The guard was dozing sleepily, with half his eyelids closed. Harrison could sneak past him with ease, since his actions and movements produce little, or no sound at all.

He gently pressed a button on the elevator's control panel, but to his

astonishment, the buttons produce a soft tone when touched, which is loud enough to wake the guard. This mission had to be planned critically, for this time, they can't use guns, as loud noises attract more attention. In short, 'Mission #3 : Symbiocyte' was in Stealth Mode.

The elevator arrived and as the doors opened, Harrison smashed the guard's skull with his bare knuckles. He stepped inside one elevator, and gestured Luther to the other, just before the doors closed.

The 88th floor of Symbiocyte Pharmaceuticals was a long corridor with labs on either side. The place was teeming with scientists, guards, and chemists alike. Harrison searched around for lab no.32 for about fifteen minutes before he found its entrance, a massive heavily-guarded door with US marines flanking the doors, standing bristly upright, ready for action, with SP3k shotguns in their gorilla arms. The sight of them made Harrison gulp.

Carefully, making sure nobody is following him, he walked over to the washrooms and hid inside one of the cubicles. He took out his phone and called John Luther. After three rings, the call was placed, and Luther received.

"Yeah, what is it?" Luther had some busy tone in his voice. "Hang on a minute, I'm not done yet! I need to get to the... [gun sounds]... um...can't talk right now, hurry...[more gun sounds]...wait! I need help! I'm here in the security control room, at the 52nd floor, with two guards trying to stalk me with bullets... [gun sounds violently]...Aaargh! One of them bullets caught in my arm...ooh, my arm! [guard shouts] Heh, heh, I threw my left shoe at one of their nasty heads. Hurry up Garison!"

"Okay, I'm on my way."

The 52nd floor was similar to the 88th, but there were no doors, or rooms, just a long corridor full of computers, control panels, screens, wires, and other sorts of data cabling equipment.

According to Luther's instructions, his body should've been lying on the floor, where a few blood stains were visible. No sign of any guards, either. Just their guns. There was a trail of blood leading to a window. He gazed outside, and the eerie scene made his blood curdle. Luther's body lay spread outwards, his body had burst the moment it hit the ground, his face was a ruin. Such a ruin, that he hardly recognized him.

Tears welled in Harrison's eyes, as he marched back to the elevator, back to the 88th floor, back to the heavily guarded entrance to lab no.32...

...with a SP3k shotgun in his hands.

The guards' entrails fell to the floor as he laid siege to Symbiocyte's security system.

All the rest of the scientists and guards scrambled for elevators, as Harrison Garison entered the so-called lab no.32.

The room was more like a storage cellar than a laboratory. There were bags of a white, powdery substance, namely drugs. A treasure of drugs. He collected some samples of the stuff into a small Zip bag as he heard a familiar voice, coming from the depths, "HUMAN

DETECTED, KILL CODE ENGAGED," the voice declared. "GET THE HUMAN QUICKLY!"

"Ho great!" Harrison swore under his breath. "Here we go again! This GSFER had to come now?"

The floor split apart and crackled, as the giant snake robot burst into the lab. Its lasers were aimed at Harrison.

The GSFER threw him out through the glass walls, with one little swipe of its tail. Before he knew it, Harrison was hurtling to

the ground, at speeds of 200kmph, without a parachute!

The air was stinging his skin, as he lay falling to his death, to join Luther, to leave behind Amy, grieving for them. Just then, along came Amy Catt to the rescue!

She swung from ledge to ledge as she slung the whip at Harrison, bringing him safely to her.

"Well that's the second time I saved you," she sighed. "Just when are you going to learn to be wise, and not brave, Harry?"

Harrison dared not to tell her about Luther...yet. They climbed down the ledges, onto the ground, and that's when Amy caught the sight of the body lying in a pool of blood.

"Is-is that? -"

"I'm afraid it is."

They said or heard no more, as they returned to Harrison's lodgings at Lucky Charms. The couple walked in silence, for they had suffered a giant loss. A loss of a friend is more painful than a loss of everything you own. You might learn that lesson fast enough, and then, you won't have to suffer like they were right now.

BACK TO SYDNEY

The following night, at Harrison Garrison's apartment, he and Amy discussed their plans for coping up with such a loss as this. No Luther means no fun, no enjoyment, no curses to enemies, no offense to enemies, and no buddy.

Amy was still sobbing as Harrison walked about the room, trying to think how to complete his fifth job.

"Do you think it will be OK with you if I were to leave for Sydney on the morrow?"

She didn't stir, only kept staring at the floor, thinking blankly. Harrison took that as a yes.

He closed the door behind him as he readied himself for his ultimate challenge. He didn't have the money to afford for a flight to Australia; he had another option in mind. He had done it before.

That's right! He's gonna ride a GSFER to Sydney. The only problem would be to find it in the maze of New York City.

"Aaargh!" Someone squealed outside. And he knew what the reason was.

The GSFER was busy eating a car's fuel tank as Harrison approached it. It still didn't pay any attention as he used the grooves in its body to climb to its head. And there and then, Garrison made his move. Onlookers on the road watched in awe as he slid a hand between a chink in its armor. He grabbed a wire, cut it in half, and connected it to his smartphone.

The GSFER jerked his head forwards as the controls were downloaded in Harrison's phone. When it was complete, he held onto the robot snake's body as it dug deep into the Earth, headed for Sydney streets.

After a couple of hours, the GSFER appeared above the streets again. But it wasn't NYC, or the US, it was Sydney, Australia. The snake robot was so tired that it powered down the moment Harrison set foot on the ground. Luckily, there was no one around, on the streets. He checked his watch.

[12:09 am]

Midnight. They had travelled thirteen thousand four hundred and seventy three miles, within a single night!

There was debris all around the GSFER's body, and Harrison's legs were stuck in it. Carefully, he removed his legs from the debris, and started jogging towards the north.

What a bad day! Harrison thought to himself. Hmm...I remember Luther once told me about a hotel that he owned here, in Australia. If I can find it, I may be able to spend the night here.

Luther used to own a cheap hotel in Sydney. If Harrison could find it, about 25% of all problems in hand, would be solved. But unfortunately, he hadn't brought much money with him, and his beloved Samsung Galaxy S6 had been crushed while fighting the GSFER. Nobody was on the streets, so he cannot just barge into someone's house and ask for a phone in the dead of the night.

So he had to find the hotel the old-fashioned way: by walking.

It was almost dawn as Harrison approached the hotel. Luther was originally a pure citizen of Australia. But he lived in New York or California, trying to buy and sell stock. The habit of the stock market had turned Luther into a stock seller than a skilled gunman.

He had bought the hotel as a piece offering to Simon Kiff, one of his best

friends. The hotel was managed by Simon, but the actual owner was John Luther.

The polished granite walls had now become dull and red as bricks. The building was less used, and its reputation gradually decreased till the hotel became almost deteriorated and was now used as a public rest house.

Harrison knocked on the sunbaked wooden door.

"Yes, how may I serve you?" a waitress opened the door. "I'm sorry, there's no more room left for street beggars."

Harrison reluctantly did what he didn't want to do. He shot her. She fell to the floor, instantly; her blood dissolving with the dirt. Innocent blood was spilt. How could he have done this?

The greed of suspense, and adventure had turned him into this...this monster inside him, that he always hid from view.

Einstein was right: "One day will surely come when technology shall rule the Earth, technology including guns, robots, and machinery."

Without saying another word, he kicked her dead corpse away and examined the interiors. Bunkbeds lay side by side along the left wall. Two vacant elevators were on the right. Harrison got into one and pressed '4F' on the control panel.

When he had arrived, the elevator doors were about to open, when Garison sensed something coming. He quickly yanked the trapdoor down and ledged upwards, to the ceiling. He grasped one of the ropes that the elevator hung from. The senses were tingling a lot. Harrison kept on climbing, before he got forced upwards, towards the glass ceilings. The glass shattered on impact, but Harrison stumbled and rolled sideways, and landed on the rooftop, unharmed.

The 4th floor had been wired to a bomb, which exploded just before he could escape. Garison got back to his feet, and staggered off to the edge. He could see a platform down below, with some SUVs parked on it. If only he could bring it up to his 'level', maybe he might be able to get down to the streets.

He looked about himself for a switch or a button when something caught his eye. A family of pigeons were resting on a nest, which stood atop a short pillar. There were two holes in the pillar, as if they both were intended for keys.

He glanced at the holes and ended up putting his fingers into them. But it wasn't enough; he took a twig from the nest and inserted it into one of the holes, along with his finger. Another hole appeared inside the nest, from which emerged an egg-shaped button. He released his fingers just as he pressed the button, at the same time.

Down below, a mechanism had been triggered: the platform rose slowly upwards.

There was another pillar at the center of the platform. But this time, the button was already there. He pressed it and the platform began its decent downwards, to the street-level.

Everything was in utter chaos. The people were shouting, screaming, and even crying, as they ran helter-skelter for cover. All the buildings were on fire. The sky was inflamed by the heat of the entire city. The hotel was no more – just a pile of ash and dust. A moment late, and Harrison would've joined those who were the inhabitants of Luther's hotel.

Harrison checked his watch.

[4:32 am]

He quietly sprinted off towards an upside-down double-decker bus.

The glass was all broken, and everything was in a ruin. The passengers must've crawled out, as there was not a single person inside in sight. Only the driver lay dead in his seat, with blood staining the dashboard and the windshield.

From the distance, he could hear cop sirens, but there's nothing they can do about it.

He caught the sight of three students, two boys and one girl, dangling from the balcony of a 5-storeyed college. Blood was dripping onto the road.

Harrison soon began to wonder if he was the real culprit behind all this chaos and carnage.

He glanced at some of the people once. Some were crying, some were weeping, some were praying, some were running, some were just walking silently, and some were carrying banners and festoons that said : "The end is nigh!"

Harrison Garison approached a street where a serious gang war was taking place. Two groups of people, on either side of the road, were blaming each other for the disaster. They started fighting

with words first, and the brawl slowly shifted from words to pebbles to gravel to debris, and finally, to dueling with guns.

He covered his head with both hands as he crawled safely onto the other side. There was a milestone that read: "MBC Hq - 1000m ahead." The nearest headquarters was 1km away from his present location. He took to it seriously, and darted forwards.

It was too late. The MBC Hq was nothing more than a pile of rubble, with dead

bodies of the agents sticking out. Every agent in Australia was dead, including-

"No, this can't be~" Harrison was horrified to recognize one of the chief agents."Noooo!!!"

No one had been spared from these bombs. But these weren't bombs, they were nuclear warheads. And Luther's hotel wasn't the only target. Several other buildings had deployed that day. Each of them activated at the same time.

Harrison Garison fell to his knees. He had lost enough, but this was way too much. He couldn't control...he...he was transforming into his other self... his monster-side.

Yet, as he did so, tinkling tears dripped from his eyes.

Only one thing was left in his mind:

Revenge

VENGEANCE IS NOTHING

While Harrison was busy avenging the deaths of his friends, Amy Catt was back at Miami, driving in Luther's car. Luther might've been dead, but his black Aston Martin was good as new, except for the windshield, perhaps.

She hadn't received any news from Garison for a week, and indeed she was quite worried. She doesn't know what had happened to him.

She had kept Luther's phone with her as well: an old 2001 Nokia cellphone. One day, she had received a call from one of Luther's hotel customers. He stated that he saw a maniac man kill the waitress, sneak into an elevator, and right after that, the whole building went up in smoke.

She ignored all unnecessary calls afterwards. Amy parked the car and was listening to some music, when along came a thug, pointing his 9mm pistol at her.

"Ged outta the car, sweet buttercup!" the thug ordered. "Ged out quick'y or this bullet shall kill ya!"

With one quick turn of her hand, she twisted the thug's arms around and pushed him to a wall, squealing with agony. "You little devil's wife! You stupid Sister of a Paranoid Madman! I'll tear you apart!"

Amy stepped out of the car to shut his potty mouth...

...with a whip.

She smashed half his teeth, broke his jaw, and crunched his legs, before disappearing with only a glimpse of hair.

Silver-blonde hair.

Back at Australia, Harrison sat on a bench, head in arms. The surroundings had become much worse. The fires and the heat of summer made him both tired, and thirsty.

Police sirens wailed everywhere. Guns and bombs fired and deployed. Australia wasn't Australia anymore...

The entire continent was under attack. About two-thirds of the population was dead. All the sources of communication were destroyed. No network = no phones. No ships = no transport.

Australia had been cut off from the rest of the world.

"I hope Amy comes to rescue me soon enough!" Harrison thought to himself. "Till then, I have to wait and wait. There's nothing left to do in this cursed land.

Fast forwards.....

Police copters patrolled the streets. People hid in narrow alleys, and ran from

maniacs: the other people whose brains got mentally disordered after the blasts.

Harrison Garison sat at the edge of a tall building, watching the miserable humans suffer. Mankind was worth nothing to the terrorists who planted the warheads.

He checked his watch.

[8:88 8m]

"Great! Even my watch has been destroyed!"

The continent was becoming more radioactive by the minute. The peoples' brains, including Harrison's, had started malfunctioning.

He could end all his suffering and pain right now. All he had to do was move one step closer and he'd fall and fall...

But no, he got up. He threw his watch down. He loaded his MPsk and jumped...

But he didn't die; nor did he get hurt. He was about to do the impossible.

The New Dawn was only beginning!

Back at Miami, Amy Catt was determined to save Harrison Garison.

She approached a small private jet at the airport. The engines were on, and she had figured out who that 'maniac person' from the phone call was.

The plane was airborne and was on its way to save Harrison from the evil fortune that awaits him.

"ATTENTION ALL HUMAN CITIZENS!" several robotic voices spoke at the same time. "GET BACK TO THE SOIL OR SUFFER!"

This was the worst moment for everyone in Australia. Instead of only one GSFER, there were 500 more!

Harrison had taken such a risk fighting with 'one', but now, imagine what he could do!

The ground was nothing like it once was. Don't worry! Harrison was perfectly safe; he caught hold of a streetlamp and clung to it tightly as the entire continent's ground changed into a maze of twisty, metallic traps.

The GSFERs slid out from the ground and chomp! All nearby citizens were toast.

Harrison released himself and dashed off along the street and jumped, ducked, and did all the possible stunts to avoid the robots' street assaults.

There was little time left. He must get to the nearest airport, fast! Amy might be on her way, as his instincts said.

As the third street assault was taking place, the soil started to sink. Magma rushed upwards, as well as fire, which erupted through cracks in the crust.

So, Harrison Garrison kept on sprinting and sprinting, just like the action movies you watch...with the hero running, the ground cracking, lava sprouting, the hero's hair blowing in the wind, etc.

The airport was only 10 meters away.

The cracks got wider.

9 meters.

The smoke, the heat!

8 meters.

Lava sprouted.

7 meters.

The lava was just behind his heels now.

6 meters.

He could see the jet plane getting ready to lift off.

5 meters.

His shoes were now walking on lava. The soles of his feet burnt.

4 meters.

The trousers caught fire.

3 meters.

He opened and threw his shoes and trousers off. But the fire was on his feet and was torturing him.

2 meters.

The plane's exhaust wafted. The smoke made its surroundings stuffy.

1 meter only!

Harrison leapt from the gate of the airport hangar and caught hold of the plane's left dorsal wing, as it took off from

the cursed land, hiding and destroying it forever out of view (the continent, not the plane, you silly)

Inside, Amy panicked as she kept on pressing buttons. The reason – she didn't know how to maneuver a plane when it is low on fuel.

Harrison climbed into the cockpit through a side door. He chucked her away as soon as he saw the matter in hand.

"Move off, sweetling! Let me show you how it is done."

He gave a sharp twist to the left, right, up, up, down, left, up, right, right, and down; they were out of the sight of the GSFERs. He pulled the altitude levers to go higher.

The plane was midway across the Pacific Ocean, when the engines cluttered, and the jets refused to work.

"Uh-oh, we're going DOWN! AAAAAARGH!"

The plane zoomed towards the earth at a speed that was faster than the rate of sound. All they could see down below was a Spanish hacienda, with a 20-acre field filled with hay bales.

Astonishingly, both had survived. They jumped out of the plane and landed on the soft hay, whereas the plane burnt itself up and exploded somewhere near the West Coast of the USA.

Harrison became conscious again when an elderly farmer dropped a bucket of cold water on him.

"Well, well!" the farmer remarked. "Look what it's been raining lately! First a girl, and now a boy! And would you explain this nonsense, or should I force it out of yeh?"

Harrison resolved and gestured the farmer to wait. He cleared his throat and

began, "No, no, my good sir! This is nothing of the sort! We are both...um...friends. We were just walking through this...this farm when the gates–"

"Gates, eh? So how did you two enter this compound? Through the electric fences?"

Harrison gulped. He was *soooo* busted!

After several hours of false explanation, they were set free. Harrison carried Amy, since she was too tired, and quite injured; while she was escaping, some glass pieces hit her.

The farmer was in front of them, trying to call someone to let them borrow someone's car for the night.

It was almost nighttime as the last ray of sunlight, met its last ray of hope.

THE HUNTER AWAITS

Three days later, in New York...

Harrison Garison switched on the TV as he withdrew the curtains, to let some fresh sunlight into the room. His room had been swept clean, without any trace of the old garbage and litter that used to cover the floors. It was one of the pleasant days, but not pleasant enough, for the loss of two friends. Amy Catt was only an outsider to him. Finally, he urged to hear her out.

"I was born far away from here. Really far away. I was small as a child then; I didn't know the laws and rules and how the world worked. In fact, I was normal back then, with golden hair, instead of this silver that I have now.

"My mother died giving birth to me. I never saw my father, but I bet he was a famous scientist. But my memories contain only the time when he was sent to prison.

"I worked hard in my studies, hoping to become a scientist as my father. But one day, it all changed.

"Some thugs kidnapped me while I was still in my teens. They took me to Symbiocyte, where they injected me with a serum. Slowly, my body started reacting to it. First, my hair: turned all silver. Second, my strength: I could lift a 10-tonne truck with only one hand. And third, my reflexes: I could hide or escape faster than a light bulb going dim.

"In my mid-twenties, which means now, I started using my powers, for good. I help citizens, capture thugs, and stop drug cartels. I knew about Mord Dickens better than any of you.

Because.....he...is...my...brother!

"I was named 'Amethyst Julia Dickens'. But since my enemies refer to me as a sneaking cat, well...I named myself

'Amethyst Catt'. And I shortened it to 'Amy Catt'.

"And then I met you guys, that day at the NY Hotel. Thanks."

Harrison had been listening quite patiently, for her tale was both adventurous and sad. He replied, "Good. You may go have some rest for the day. You've done well enough~"

A news headline on the TV caught his ears. "Breaking News! BREAKING YOUR BONES, NEWS! the headlines screamed. "The health hazard of Manhattan has increased by 34% recently. Chances of death, by drinking water, from 88% to 90%. Police cannot locate the drug cartels' hide out due to GPS networking problems. The drug cartels have hidden their stash at the docks...Coming-up: Australian Assaults~"

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Harrison asked Amy with the hint of a

smile. "Let's rock some rolls! OH YEAH...WE'RE BACK IN BUSINESS. LET'S GO!!!"

They got out of the car. The docks were being illuminated by the moonlight. There had been so much traffic jam that it was almost midnight.

The docks were full of goons and thugs, all under command of Mord Dickens. Harrison finally got to let out his fury on the enemies, for what they've done to Luther. Amy was busy lashing at them with her whips.

"Harry, you go after Mord. I think he is in that battleship over there," she pointed to a Japanese Shikuga battleship at the eastern wharf. "You go get him, I'll handle these...these whatever they are...enemies and creepy thugs."

He was on his way, by the command of a lady, with a MPsk SMG in his hands.

He shot down some bare-handed thugs which were in his path. The bow of the ship was visible in the thick fog. He hid behind a crate

containing opium and waited. It wouldn't be safe to go into the ship while everyone expects you.

Sure to his predictions, one of the thugs had been scared off by Amy's war cry and had scrambled off to the stairs. When he reached the hull of the ship, he opened the hatch and a blast of flame leapt upwards, directly in his face. Fortunately, it was the thug instead of Harrison, but it hurt him to watch as the miserable thug yelled in agony and toppled over the edge of the ship and fell, directly into the misty, ice-cold waters.

As Harrison was about to start off in the direction of the ship, he was startled by a soft beeping sound. The beeping grew

louder gradually. At the zenith beep, the hatch exploded outwards and some men-in-black arrived. They were firing away like a maniac, at the choppers that arrived a while later, with M4 Carbines.

Even Harrison was confused, about who is after whom? One side was Dickens's, but what about the other one?

As the two forces were busy with each other, Harrison Garison found it as his chance to sneak into the ship. He hopped into the hatch, into the darkness, and was kneeling in front of Mord Dickens the next moment.

"Well, well! If it isn't the last MBC ranger left in this world!" He grinned and grimaced at the same time. "You ought to look better when you are a slave than an agent. Stand up! I am sure you still can walk with those legs, can't you?" He laid a kick on Harrison's face, sending him to a wall, and almost cracking his skull.

And that was the last memory that he remembered before blacking out.

There was a submarine anchored below the ship. Inside the submarine was the warhead. And right beside the warhead, was Harrison Garison, resolving to catch his surprise in front of him.

He knew the arts of rope-loosening, which came to some good use when he was tied-up. He undid the ropes within 3.94 minutes. As he stood up, there was a pressure plate on which he was standing, so it deployed immediately, and the airlocks strapped themselves

shut, along with a screen appearing in the side of the 5:FT warhead that read:

[1:59 waiting to deploy]

"Oh shi.....ps! Why does everything I touch turns into karma for me?"

[0: 30 ready to deploy]

"What in the world?"

He kicked the warhead, only to make it worse.

"Ouch! You stupid, sly, rusty piece of metallic junk!"

[0:09 deploying...]

"No, no, no..... I take it back. Don't deploy, do not d-e-p-l-o-y!"

[0:05 deploying...]

"Oh, whatever!" he smashed one of the glass windows and was out of the submarine in just 1.22 seconds! (new record, dude!)

He surfaced the water, gasping for breath.

[0:02 deploying...]

He reached the wharf and climbed.

[0:01 deploying...]

He darted off in the opposite direction.

Before he could get to safety, the bomb deployed, and he was thrown forwards in a gust of the inferno. Along came Amy, and they both ran, but how far.....even I don't know.

Let's just say that they both were perfectly fine.

The duo was on the streets, with the sun peeking above the horizon. A gun fired, and Mord Dickens dropped down...dead.

As for the person who shot the gun, he was there, on top of the summit of a mountain in the mist. And small wonder.....

Even after last night's work and stress, and not counting the risks, both Harrison Garison and Amy Catt had their senses stare in sudden relief, and emotion.....

Yet, they didn't lack the slightest bit of recognition.....

The person, standing on the summit, was none other than a long-forgotten friend.

It was Luther, alive.

MISSION FORKENSTEIN

Yo, dear reader! It's time for a zombie revolution. Are you ready yet? If not, settle down immediately! Be prepared for an extreme fight. It will begin shortly...

Black, Black, Cooper Black!

"Vandermann, now is the time to prove yourself," Cooper and his pals were at the entrance of a desolate area of sand, dust, murder, and mystery. "You take the northern gates and enter the compound. You find the nearest watchtower and send this flare," he handed him a paper firework rocket. "And then we'll be off in your direction. This area is highly toxic, so use gas masks and avoid physical contact with bare skin at all costs!"

Indeed, the entire 305 x 488 m containment of Area 5474N was surrounded by electric fences, topped with barbed wire. There were 4 titanium-chloride gates at each side, namely the 'North (bio labs)', 'West (genetic dispensers)', 'East (zombie domain)', 'South (RAMRN communication-transfer chambers)'. There was also a massive 2400-metre-tall tall located at the very center.

The place once used to be an 'experimenting ground' for testing genetic enzymes and other scientific bio stuff. One of the experiments had failed and the entire system had to be shut down. Too bad, the people were too late! They all became infected with the virus, and turned into vile creatures, a.k.a. zombies.

The single tower at the center was known as 'SATAN'; 'Secured Automatic Tower of Armed Neutralization'. The tower had gone dark ever since some Russians tried to destroy it with their Titan B-39 bombers.

The SATAN's upper floors are yet alive with life. But this life wasn't 'proper'. It's the zombies who ruled the place now, slowly decaying along with the tower.

[I know, readers! I know what you're thinking! You're getting bored with this description stuff, right? Well if you wanna skip over to the action bits, go to page X, paragraph Y, sentence Z.]

The NATO soldiers had once taken up a mission to kill every zombie there ever was so they had attempted to set up a defense platform. Symbiocyte had released 3 GSFERs into the territory but no one knows what had possibly happened to them.

Now it was Cooper Black's turn. Let's see if he succeeds in this mission. (I don't think he will...)

Cooper Black and Exodus Luke planned to take the Eastern gate while Vandermann Vugerton infiltrated the background borders of the Northern region.

The front gates had a metal barricade blocking the entrance to the massive grey structure in front of them. It was as big as thirty eighteen-wheelers parked together in rows and columns. The roof slanted from the middle, forming an inclined plane on either side.

"This place looks too good to be true," Cooper heard Exos mutter as they advanced towards the building which looked more like a factory than a biological asylum. They all clicked their guns together before letting it all go in an uproar. The barricade exploded inwards from a heavy blow of one of Luke's AP grenades. "Course clear. Let's move!"

Meanwhile, Vandy jogged along a thin strip of sedimentary rock with a small river rushing underneath. The afternoon sun glared at his heavy military armor, making even an energetic person like Vandermann to easily become exhausted within 3 minutes 47 seconds of trekking. He put his gas mask on, before approaching the Northern gates – two enormous iron-nimonic vertical plates dotted with rivets around the borders.

But as he stepped closer, only a few inches from the gates, an alarm went off somewhere inside the facility. The watchtowers unfolded hidden cannons, armed LMGs, and laser trackers. All of these followed a similar target: Vandermann Vugerton.

Electric buzz saws cut through the last layer of fortified concrete. The last pile of rubble was disconnected and a rectangular piece of the cut wall fell apart and crumbled to pieces as it collapsed inwards and landed on the floor.

"Okay, we're in!" Exos removed the buzz saw and hid it beneath the debris, because:

- a) They didn't need it anymore
- b) They certainly didn't want any 'scientist zombie' to find this equipment and turn it into a chainsaw, before using it on their backs

They were in some kind of storage room for biohazardous substances, labelled neatly on dirty, corroded shelves and packed in the form of fluids inside glass vessels.

"Phew! Good thing we wore our masks!" Cooper pointed towards a shapeless heap of flesh rotting in a corner.

When he got closer, he got the details. It was one of the scientists in their humanoid-zombie form. Whether he was dead or alive, it couldn't be made sure of. His eye sockets were empty, his jetblack hair was all crisped away. [You know what? If you hate gruesome details then please skip this chapter].

The zombie was still wearing its lab outfit that was a bit torn at the edges. His skin had gone rough, dry and scaly-green. His mouth, wide-open, displayed rows of serrated teeth. At the tip of his tongue, grew an eyeball. The eye caught sight of the two humans and the zombie began a strange 'dance'.

It stood up straight as an oaken plank, sucked in masses of air, and began jumping on its toes. Tip, tap! Tippity, tap! It waved its arms front, back, up, down, down, up, up, and down. Even stranger, the zombie began squawking and hissing.

"What a dumb zombie!" Cooper and Luke exchanged funny looks before bursting into laughter.

But soon, their laughter turned to sorrow.

ZOMBIE TOURS FOR FREE

The dancing zombie was sending out some kind of radiating signals to the others. Within seconds, hordes of monstrous zombies came crawling out through a hole in the ceiling, belonging to some kind of garbage chute.

“Waaargh!” both Cooper and Exodus hurried off towards their entrance, which was also their exit. “Quick! Luke, grab that drum of sulfuric acid! We’re gonna burn... I mean, dissolve the freaks right here, right now!”

There was a howler zombie among the creeps. A muscular one, that howler was! He wore a bulletproof jacket, blue Levi’s denims and a permanent snarl on his face. Previously he used to be a soldier commander before he became one of the foul Undead.

“Zxhaaaaaagaaraah!” a king zomboid bellowed nearby, with its frothing mouth; two 1-metre-long fangs dripping blood. Worst of all, the king zombie humanoid had ‘eyes’. Not one, not two... this ugly one had 5 brightened eyes, white as pearl, tough as enamel. “Kxxhaaaah!” he let out a blood-curdling scream.

One of the lesser zombies handed him a single-bladed korondium-forged chopping axe.

“Hey, don’t you think a chainsaw would be better? Exos Luke commented subconsciously. “Ooops! Uh, oh!”

The king zomboid dropped the axe and nodded. He gestured at the two humans to wait. The lesser zombies climbed back up into the chute and returned with a ‘King Slicer’ battery-operated heavy chainsaw with ‘>>>’-shaped teeth.

Vhnnnnn! Vhnnnnn! The king zomboid swung it from side to side. He roared with laughter, but a GSFER suddenly ended it all.

You know what GSFERs are, right?

If your answer is 'no', then here's a quick recap:

A 'Giant Snake Flame Eater Robot' has a 24-metre-long flexible metallic body forged entirely out of fireproof material (nimonic) and non-corrosive metal (a titanium-platinum alloy). According to their name, they look like giant worms and can dig into the ground. Their conical head contains sections which open up, like a banana peel, to reveal a flamethrower at its center with limb-like 'tongues' that detect infrared rays and forms of life. The tips of their 'tongues' contain mini-MG cannons, laser traps and sensors. Their tail-end is shaped like a giant drill with an opening at the end for an exhaust channel. Surrounding its head are 6 red laser 'eyes', 3 on either side.

Anyways, a GSFER erupted out of the floor and chomped the king zomboid into a bloody mush, squishing the flesg and spilling blood all around the place.

"ZOMBIES DETECTED," the GSFER's robotic voice scanned the area with countless laser beams zipping and scanning for any more signs of those 'irregular lifeforms'. "MUST DESTROY ALL ZOMBIES! KILL CODE ENGAGED!"

It shot a 4000°C hot ray of white-hot flames as it swayed its head around the spot, demolishing every object in sight.

"Whoa, whoa! Calm down, crazy robot snake dude!" Cooper held up his arms in surrender. "We mean you no harm. Chill, yo!"

The GSFER just did its job and sped upwards through the ceiling at an incredible hurtling speed of 180 kmph. Just as its tail-end was out of sight, not a single zombie was left standing. Nothing but red gooey masses of flesh and chopped limbs. The king zomboid's head floated on a pool of zombie blood. His blank eyes peering into the flames that had begun devouring the storage cellar into its ruin.

"Let's go wherever that GSFER goes!" Cooper and Luke grabbed a shelf and used it as a ledge to climb into the age-worn garbage chute – the room immediately above their current floor.

They arrived at another storage room and found a long straight digging trail of the GSFER. It was a path that clearly led to the SATAN tower.

Speaking of which, what happened to Vandermann?

Last time he was seen being knocked out by a heavy blow from a BF-38 mortar shell.

Now, fast-forwarding time...

Vandermann was somewhere in the SATAN, tied-up behind a pole. He saw a dozen zombie scientists constructing a giant portal gun. There was a label on the left-hand-side, which said, er.. ‘the evil weapon’. Pretty dumb scientists, right?

Vandy ripped the ropes apart, reloaded his AK-47, and started destroying the zombies savagely. The zombies were easy to kill. Just shoot a few bullets and they bleed and die.

But one of them was another king zomboid. This one had four arms and three legs. The four arms were okay, but the third leg was actually an enlarged version of his... well, better not to think about it!

The king zomboid vomited a green gooey lump of slime which evolved into two lesser zombies.

“Get him!” the king zomboid surprisingly spoke in English, as he pointed a thick slimy scaly-green finger at Vandermann.

None of the zombies were of any match for Vugerton’s Kalashnikov rifle’s fast, powerful bullets.

They all died. All, except the king-zomboid ofcourse!

The king zomboid (let’s call him ‘Mr Vomit’) pounced on Vandy the moment the last zombie scientist fell. He pulled the AK-47 out of his grip and threw it to clatter on the floor. Vandermann tried his Desert Eagle but since he hadn’t checked the gun for any bullets at the gun shop, the weapon currently had no bullets at all! He had been scammed! Worse, Mr Vomit just snatched his pistol away, as well.

Uh, oh! Now what is he gonna do?

Vandermann had a small 125 ml can of RedBull inside one of his pockets. Mr Vomit’s breath smelled like menthol. Aha! He grabbed the can, yanked the pin open and drank half of it down. He stored it inside his mouth and when the king zomboid was close to his face, he sprayed all the contents into Mr Vomit’s mouth.

"Game over, pal," Vandy rolled sideways, snatched his guns, and ran!

"I'm gonna thwack thou thfor theek... thouk thakeel!" the king zomboid's last words were spoken and then SPLAT! The entire zombie exploded outwards in a gigantic splash!

[P.S. Dear readers, do not try this at home! (Or maybe do it. See what happens!)]

"Good riddance, but bad slime," Vandermann was covered in the muck. He walked towards a staircase – a spiral concrete-based structure leading both upwards and downwards.

The entire tower trembled. Something else was trapped beneath this tower. Vandermann had to get out of there... fast!

Cooper and Exos climbed onto the back of the GSFER's head. They held onto the grooves and chinks in the GSFER's armor.

"Alright, T-Dog, take us to the SATAN." The robot's name was inscribed into the metal; **Tech-Detection and Operations GSFER**.

The GSFER drilled into the earth and mud, trash, chopped worms, bits of plant roots, etc. went flying past the two riders on T-DOG's back. Exos Luke was stunned to find a large 24 carat gold nugget accidentally fall onto his lap. Seeing his friend's luck run smooth, Black brought out his palms, expecting of collecting some too. But instead, a chopped mole fell into his hands.

"What the! Brrr... Hey T-Dog, can't you dig a little faster?"

"UNKNOWN COMMAND. NOT RECOGNIZED."

"Oh right! I forgot that you're just a machine!"

The GSFER didn't respond back.

As Vandermann was busy climbing down the stairs, he was totally bewildered to come face to face with Cooper Black, Exodus Luke and especially their newly-tamed GSFER.

"Guys, I've been waiting for so long!"

They decided to leave the forsaken land and continue their mission some other day. They returned back to New York City by riding on T-Dog's back.

They eventually ended up in front of the 'Lucky Charms' motel.

"Ahoy there! Need any help maintaining that GSFER?" a man by the name of Harrison called out to them. He was sitting on a bench with John Luther and Amy Catt on either side.

"No, thanks," Vandermann promptly replied. "We've got plenty of troublemakers already!"

LIFE IS A MESS

The moon was halfway across the sky as per its regular duties of the natural laws. But people live in the modern world now, with their own creations and technology. Buildings rise and soar upto the skies, ready to almost embrace any heavenly body that comes too close.

Downtown was a concrete jungle of buildings, each having its own beauty, style and height. Colorful billboards stood above every street-level store, shop, office, bank, etc. Even so, downtown in New York was rich in everything, but except for casinos.

Casinos were a rare sight in NY, since two-thirds of the world's casino population was situated at Las Vegas instead.

Showtime!

Cooper Black, Vandermann Vugerton, Exodus Luke, Harrison Garison, and John Luther were ready for an anti-zombie raid.

Vandermann was the man-in-the-turret of the heavily-armored assault vehicle. The 'Notoran 8' as Harrison called it.

The armored vehicle had sixteen wheels in its caterpillar tracks. Four bulbous headlamps shone down the front of the vehicle in a cascading 'V'-pattern. The engine protruded out of the hood of the van-like car, with exhaust pipes leading to circular holes at the back which dealt great gusts of carbon monoxide, polluting the world by 0.0315% an hour. There were two chainguns attached to the sides of the Notoran. On its top, stood a heavy 900mm shell launcher which was controlled by the supposed man-in-the-turret. The Notoran resembled a Land Rover, but equipped like a Panzer tank.

"Let's get this party started!" Luther pressed his foot onto the accelerator. Exos Luke listened to MH21's "NiteKid" song, bobbing his head up and down, roll and round. There were multiple compartments inside the vehicle, each with its own purpose. The

radio section was occupied by Harrison, transmitting some important messages to the nearest MBC headquarters. The diner section was occupied by Cooper, who was gulping down pints of 'Blue Label'. The toilet section was occupied by a constipated Luke, who was sending out weird fart messages and wacky smells.

The Notoran 8 whisked off towards the horizon, leaving a fresh track of oil leaking from the fuel tank. Harrison had advised Luther countless times to check the fuel tanks but nobody cared. Hence, they'll be suffering in no time.

They passed brightly-illuminated shops, malls, police stations, jails, sportstadiums, construction sites and many other commercial platforms and municipal accommodations. All the other honking noises of the cars were drowned out by the music blaring from the MP3 media player. "Pouring champagne, pouring another drink..." the vocals in MH21's song were all they could hear.

This time, they had set out fully prepared. They had stocked bazookas, flamethrowers, chainguns and chainsaws in their inventory instead of the previous explosives and infantry weapons.

There would be zombie soup being served at all local restaurants by the time they were done. The only next problem remaining would be any rogue GSFRs lurking within Area 5474N.

T-Dog was resting in peace inside the 'Lucky Charms' motel's garage.

Everyone was peacefully driving along the highway. And so, along came trouble! A red newly-purchased Ferrari slammed hard against the Notoran, giving everyone inside a free full-body massage.

"Yolly the what?" John stirred and found the attacker in-line with his sight; perhaps a bit lower.

The Ferrari and the Notoran quickly pressed on their brakes and stopped at a side of the road.

The Ferrari's windshield was cracked into several thousands of pieces of tempered glass. Fumes wafted from its ruined engine and out came some familiar faces.

Dorritor Kho, Rickardo Viz and the living corpse of Yon Roncho (who was wrapped in bandages and had to carry his life support stand wherever he went).

Rickardo had the furious face of a stunt biker, the body of a WWE wrestler and the clothing of a mixture of a school uniform, military uniform, and an actor. Greyish teeth glinted and shone in the glossy street lighting. A French beard gave his mouth a cool-looking shape. His eyes were designed for winking at passing-by girls, and his mouth was apt to whistling. The only problem about him: he was evil, corrupt and untrustworthy.

"Well, well! We meet 'gain, Black Cooper!" he clapped his hands as he emerged from the ruined Ferrari, as if he were making his entrance into a theatre from a fancy limousine, ready to embrace his hot actress partner. One of his upper incisors had a golden gleam to it. "So we meet, at last! You thought that Yon would die so soon, huh? Well, guess what?" he shot the living corpse which splattered blood onto the Notoran. "I now claim his share of \$85,000! How's that for a change?"

All the remaining members looked at Cooper, including his own friends.

"Alright! What do you want from me? I gave you all the money I had, so far! What more do you want, you greedy money sucker?! You want more; you want more? I'll give you more, you..."

Cooper grabbed a bazooka from the Notoran, shot, and missed. The missile hit a nearby police car. Luckily, the cops weren't onboard. Unluckily, the cops would now be their newfound enemies.

Dorritor Kho took the attacking lead, bobbing his head as he barraged away like a psycho maniac. Two middle-aged NYPD officers took cover behind their ruined vehicles. Rickardo huffed and roared, his face swelling with anger like an elephant toad and red as chopped beef.

"Damn that son of a ..." Dorritor came face-to-face with a cop holding a 9mm pistol." ...gun!"

Oops! Kho was busted for the day, or maybe a year. According to the 'American Book of Law & Order', he had broken 3 laws : "Never use an unauthorized weapon", "Don't show any guns in public", "Never fire a gun without its legally-approved license".

Yet, Dorritor Kho was only a newbie gunman when compared to the brilliant Rickardo. While the cops were busy giving Kho a 'kneel down', Viz snuck his way towards the Notoran.

Rickardo attempted to hijack the Notoran.

Luther turned their vehicle towards the Ferrari. There was a grinding sound of metal on metal as the Notoran slammed hard into the Ferrari.

Luckily, Rickardo had staggered off, rolled sideways, and yanked a 1997 Triumph T595 Daytona sportsbike onto the asphalt. He kickstarted it, did a wheelie, and zoomed forward.

"Hey! He's escaping! Go get him quick, Luther! Don't just stand there, Vandy! Go man the turrets!" Cooper boomed orders from his spot at the diner's section. He pounded his fist on the polished teak table every time he commanded one of his comrades.

The Notoran-8 jerked off to a start, but its speed was too slow to keep up with the bike.

"Hey, where's Harrison?" Cooper could find no sign of him. Where could he go at this critical moment?

Just then, a powerful Audi A3 Diesel car overtook them. Cooper could've sworn he saw Harrison's face and a 'thumbs up' hand pointing towards them, within the driver's seat.

One thing Harrison was good at was driving. He zoomed ahead into a suburban highway, never losing the trail of the bike. Unfortunately, they were in the left-hand-side aisle; Americans drive on the right.

The bike was okay as it could clip through the opposite directional traffic as a knife through packed butter. But a car?

Harrison was brushing past a 18-wheeler freightliner truck when he caught sight of two Blackhawk choppers trailing right behind his Audi.

Harrison sped-up like a speeddevil with his car's engine roaring simultaneously. He was catching up with the bike's speed.

The highway had a concrete barricade running along the middle of the road. Moss-covered brick walls, coated with white paint and urban tags flanked the edges of the total highway. There were four lanes in each 'side'. A total of eight for the traffic to run along.

As the Audi was about to overtake the 18-wheeler, someone with a UMZ-300 opened fire. Harrison ducked his head and retracted the

windows up. The highly-durable glass might survive atleast three dozen shots before cracking and shattering to smithereens.

Harrison managed a quick peek. He saw the truck driver, a macho mustachio guy, aiming the gun with his left hand and steer the truck with his right. He munched on fresh doughnuts and let the crumbs go billowing after the winds.

Rickardo's bike was gaining speed. Police helicopters were right behind them. What could Harrison do to get his damn hide outta this place?

Right at that moment, Harrison was overcome by a plan. A very wicked, dangerous and risky plan. This plan had once ruined the entire city of Sydney Harbor, Australia.

Without thinking twice, he dialled on his Samsung S7 Edge. Within three rings, someone answered the phone. And there's only one 'someone' who was currently at the motel.

"Hey, Amy, my love, do you still have the remnants of the '5:FT' with you?"

"Oh... okay, I'll try!" she must've been sleeping while the men were away. "What should I do with it?"

"Just send the thing, you *****!" Harrison had to crouch deep beneath the seats to take cover from the highly-accurate bullets. One such bullet bounced off the glass, leaving a faint crack before it left. "Okay, gotta go! Please hurry and send the warhead... soon!"

SLAM!

The 18-wheeler smashed the Audi A3 and crushed two ribs, a fingerbone and chipped an elbow of Harrison Garrison.

Out came a GSFER from the depths of the earth, with the warhead in its mouth. Bad choice!

Rickardo's Daytona was completely out of sight. The police were only 20 metres away from the wreckage site. But the 5:FT ended it all...

WHAOOZAH!

Stopwatch of the author says: 0.38 seconds. The adequate time required to demolish everything in a 32 metre radius. Within these few seconds, Harrison had managed to detangle himself from the wreckage of the vehicle. And a special thanks to a shard of glass that he accidentally sat on which led him to go ‘insaneous’! He bumped his head on the roof and bounced back on the seats. Luckily, he had slanted his body a bit, towards the car door and... boxed through the glass and landed onto the tar on all fours.

The GSFER was wrapping itself around the Audi A3 when Harrison was a long distance away from the destruction range, away from all the fatal terrors and into the hands of... the cops?

“Hold it right there, Mr Garison! We want no more funny business hanging around these parts!” a hostile-looking officer barked into his megaphone, with one arm clinging to the helicopter with his slender, muscular body leaning outwards. His golden blonde hair billowed in the fresh altitude breeze. He looked like one of those 1940s black-and-white movie stars. “Do you know who we are? We are a bunch of –”

“Cowards!” Harrison grinned. He loved interrupting.

“SILENCE!” the movie cop spat into the megaphone mouthpiece, but it damaged the circuitry. “Ho great! What have you... I mean, what have I... oh, forget it!” He slapped his head, trying to recover from his mental breakdown.

Just right at that moment, the 5:FT burst into ignition of the korondium core inside. The 18-wheeler gained an altitude of 82 cm, and wiped out the low-flying Blackhawk in a narrow, vertical arc.

Luckily, the movie cop was on the ‘other’ chopper. He grasped the side door but lost grip on the megaphone, which went **SPLAT** the moment it hit the ground.

The turbulence was awesome, especially when you were mid-air. It could've been applied in spas and massage shops at a 50% discount.

It didn't even take a single minute for the cops to understand who had set the bomb off in the first place.

"G-get him!" the movie cop began launching rockets with his 'Titan Killer' rocket launcher.

Harrison rushed along the highway, dodging all the blasts from the cop's Titan Killer, before getting back to his senses. He turned to the left, grabbed a niche and dug his limbs deep into the walls. He scraped some moss with his finger nails before climbing another niche and then over the edge, and 'Aaaaaaaaaah' then SPLASH into the waters of the Hudson.

How do you think it feels to become a world-class fugitive? Do you feel it? You don't? No problem, read on!

Introducing...

...Demonstar (The Monster / Demon Star), the newest and the fullest. This badass buddy has knocked them off!

He used to work as a laborer in South America, when he found a hidden stash of Aztec treasure worth \$34 million. He migrated to North America, but the cops were so jealous of his wealth, they didn't let him live in peace ("Sorry, sir, we are jealous of you and we can't let you have any peace")

Whenever a policeman found his Arabian Toyota Supra, lying on the pure American lands, they would huddle around the car like bees scrambling for spots around a beautiful bloodorchid and they would file away as many cases as they could.

The cops fed on bribes to keep their stubby mouths shut. Demonstar usually rode on freeway bikes to avoid all this 'stuff'.

His name might sound like he was some kind of gangster, but no! His usual outfit was a black Harris Tweed, RayBans, black Stetson cowboy hat and almost the same outfit as Cooper Black.

Oh, yeah! Now you've finally guessed it! Demonstar's real name was Daemon Black, who was the elder sibling of our dear pal, Cooper.

One day he returned back to New York and found a body floating among the rubbish at Ottoron's Waterworx. The pumping station was blocked due to that 'body'. Demonstar had arrived to check it out. A mechanical crane fished it out before him, straight from the Hudson.

He shook the body awake. It sputtered.

"Glhoo... glhoo..." his lungs were filled with water. Demonstar gave him an abdominal thrust and it all gushed out with specks of blood. Luckily, the body was alive.

"There ya go, that should do it!" Demonstar seated him upon a wooden chair overlooking the pump. "Now, sir, your identity, please." He had those sorrowful, understanding grey eyes that made you feel safe and sound, and spill all the beans out.

Slowly, the man introduced himself, his duty, and how he fell into the waters, etc. But he didn't include any details about his team members or the mission he was on. He just gave him a brief description of the truck driver, the cops, the bomb, the explosion, and the fall.

Demonstar believed him. His belief was strongly reinforced by each word's analysis. Demonstar had plenty of experience questioning perps.

He led him to his bike, and started off into the main city.

By the time Harrison and Demonstar had arrived near the 'Lucky Charms' motel, it was dusk. 7 pm. Cars and pedestrians filled the streets. Everyone was about their own business, on the busy Thursday night.

The motel was open, but the doors were blocked by wooden planks, pinned on from the inside. Someone must have robbed it!

Harrison laid a flying kick to a ground floor window and barged in. Demonstar leaned on his bike, waiting for someone to open the garage for him.

The lights were turned on for some strange reason. He was inside the office room. His mind couldn't decipher what the intruders wanted him to know about. On the desk lay an array of letters, files, books and a fly swatter. There were shelves on every wall, tottering

with piles and rows of books. Even the door to the lobby was a detached shelf. Light illuminated from a bronze chandelier, hanging from the conical ceiling.

He tried the shelf door; didn't budge. It was locked as well. If all the doors were locked like this, then there was only one way that he could get them all 'unlocked'.

From his pocket, Harrison produced a car alarm remote. It was made of black carbon fibre with two bright red buttons, shaped as a 'X' and an 'O'. He pressed one button and all the doors clicked open at once, leaving behind an eerie clanking echo of bashing a wooden bat with a dustbin lid.

The rusty lobby was full of flickering fluorescent tubes enlightening the path to the stairs.

Harrison took a gulp from a hidden imaginary wine bottle.

The lobby was bare except for a brown tattered sofa, pushed up against a wall adjacent to the LED flatscreen TV. The lights were flickering on and off, constantly. The air reeked of fatty soda and crisp pizza slices that had been lying rotten for about two weeks.

The lobby walls were made of bricks coated with a thin layer of iron to make the room seem 'metallic'. This design was created by the previous caretaker of the motel, a serious cranny old man who loved to spit his mucus onto newcomers. Luckily, the old fool was dead. Poor fellow died of a fatal heart attack when he saw a GSFER for the first (and last) time.

The raw wooden floorboards creaked with every step Harrison took. His vision was blurred by the curtain of darkness ahead at the staircase. He checked his pockets, feeling around for any sign of guns. No luck.

"Hey Blackie, is that you?"

Harrison never felt so dreadful ever in his life. Even by hearing the words spoken out, he could feel eyes watching him. According to instinct, his eyes spun round to meet the other pair of eyes – belonging to Daemon Black outside, knocking on the grey-tinted glass windows.

Garrison let out a sigh of relief. He was expecting someone like Dorritor Kho crouching under the window sill with a sniper rifle in his hands.

The stairs were solid concrete, but they reverberated like hollow structures. Harrison had been living upstairs all his life but tonight, it was a different matter. When was the last time he visited his bedroom? And then he remembered Amy Catt.

He nearly tripped over the edge of a stair block as he forced the dark oak doubledoors of his apartment open. He couldn't control his speed and ended up dashing across the dining hall and through the hardwood door of his bedroom dormitory.

"Eeeek!" Amy, half-dressed, slapped him hard across his face.

Harrison was thrown onto the floor as the door was shut off immediately.

"Damn that crazy woman!" he rubbed his left cheek where a bright red stinging handprint was visible.

BETRAYALS AND ALIENS

"It is a great sadness for all of us," Cooper began his speech entitled 'Oh my! I lost my mission!'. "That we couldn't catch that Rickardo in time. As I've already said, he usually travels with a large army. It's almost impossible for us to catch that sneaky devil within our rage... uh, I mean, range. It is our... our..." he peeked at his hand with the words scribbled on his palm. "Our destiny to complete atleast four of the tasks assigned by our agency. Here you go, guys. Take a good look at each of them."

They were at Cooper's cottage in California, seated upon fluffy golden-gleamed sofas with the scent of a Persian perfume. Nanofibrous rugs were under their feet. It wasn't much to their gang; just Vandermann, Exodus and Demonstar. Luther had gone back to New York to fetch Harrison back within 23 hours' time.

Cooper laid a letter on the white polished acacia table, imported straight off the Kalahari Desert from Africa. A light filled the room with brightness.

It was pure daylight, seeping through the open shutters from the 120 cm X 52 cm window. If you looked in that direction, you could make out the shape of the Pacific Ocean behind a solid curtain of skyscraping buildings.

Here's a copy of that 'letter':

THE M.B.C. GIVES YOU A CHANCE TO BECOME RICH!

Missions:

- 1) Kill all the zombies at Area SATAN
- 2) Find 3 pages from the Codex Leceister
- 3) Kill the members of the MIW

- | | |
|----|---|
| 4) | Kill Rickardo Viz |
| 5) | Meet up with the City Dogs |
| 6) | Find the hidden treasures of Aezed-Coc. |

"So what do you think?" Cooper sat back to his position onto the sofa with a large bundle of tightly-rolled dollar bills. "Should we call in the City Dogs or..." he produced another bundle from his jacket pocket. "The Bazooka Boyz will suffice?"

"Before that, where did you get these greens from anyway?" Demonstar Black put a hand on his MP5-mini, tucked and well-hidden behind his heavy Cuban belt. "You never had any real job, nor did you ever take any loans. Speak the truth, brother!" His grip tightened around the gun; his index finger was ready to pull the trigger.

"Whoa, chill down, bro. Chill down!" Cooper followed the same trick. His Wilhelm-43 dagger's serrated edge gleamed with suspicion. Behind his omni-present aviators, his eyes pointed sharply straight into Demonstar's greyish orbs, his so-called eyes.

Vandermann felt out-of-place in their eyeing matches. Before he could utter a single word, Cooper Black spun an arm around Vandermann's neck and he felt a blade scrape away at the jugular veins. His innocent hasteful eyes looked towards Daemon for support, but it was over.

The MP5-mini opened fire. Vandermann's eyes went blank and his body became lank. His blood hit the floormat like a warm, refreshing spray that slid through the holes of the Earth and made its way to Hell.

Back on the table, the letter was still open.

- | | |
|----|---------------------------|
| 7) | Kill Vandermann Vugerton. |
|----|---------------------------|

"Got everything that makes men bleed," Cooper's hands, arms, pockets, pant pockets, and his backpack was full of bullets, shells, cartridges, magazines and rounds. "Will this be enough, brother?"

Daemon Black was trying to find a number on his phone's 'Contacts'.

"No," the word split through Cooper's nerves. He dropped some of the ammunition he was carrying.

"No? What d'you mean 'no' for, bro?" he knew arguing with Demonstar was as dangerous as trying to step on an anti-personnel landmine to see whether it still worked or not.

The result came, quick as a countercurse. One moment Demonstar was into his phone, the other his hairy knuckles of the left hand was just a millimetre away from smacking Cooper's nose. Then, came a smack, light as a bop. Demonstar's furious gaze met Cooper's and suddenly they burst out laughing!

"Hahaha! Heheheh!" both the Black brothers had a peculiar method of pranking each other at odd times. "Yet, man, it's a 'no'. Oh, come on! You don't expect to knock down a single howler without losing ten times the amount, keeping the scorchers off their tracks! Only one certain gang knows the secret art of killing 'advanced' zombies."

"Who?" Cooper's eyes were wide, his ears were ready. Ready to embrace the next few words that escaped from his brother's lips.

"They are... the one and only... the City Dogs. I'm sure they can aid us enough."

A Month Later...

It was hard to believe, harder than smashing your favorite gaming console or plasma TV, but it was true. New York City's skyline was fully occupied by a single extraterrestrial aircraft, hovering above the metropolis, like a giant shadow filled with terrifying terrorizing terror. (If you ever had the chance to try the game 'Saints Row IV', maybe you might get a clear picture of the scenario.)

At the center of its base, was the core: a radioactive purplish glowing opaque hole. Purple wires, glyphs, and exhaust chambers pulsed single rays of blue, that traced its steps back to the core. No one knew what the thing looked like from the top, but from the worm's eye view, the platform-like aircraft's body was black and dark, like midnight. Sparks and bluish light erupted from the core, with occasional bursts of swirling lasers, that burned through nearby skyscrapers' tops.

The UFO platform, a.k.a. the Kor Ondrone, depicted a large circular drone, that remained suspended in midair. To dock it to the ground, several wireless KOLUs (Kor Ondrone Landing Utility) had plunged deep into the earth, smashing right through buildings, as if they were nothing but card castles. A 20-ft deep crater marked the outlines of each claw-shaped KOLUs, which caused devastating chaos, within the mega city. The KOLUs tethered the damn KO to the ground.

The bluish pulses of light flowed through many man-made structures, as well. All the cables, electricity wires, railways, buildings, and everything else that stood in the path of the twisting wreckage was covered up with the KO glyphs, and blue pulses/signals.

Of people, there weren't any signs, living or dead. Perhaps they hid under the ground, in hidden quarantine zones. Or perhaps they all vaporized when the Kor Ondrone released the smaller Kizi Bodrones to hunt for humans and shoot alpha particles at them. With no humans in sight, the Kizi Bodrones were of no use, so they all performed the well-known 'self-destruct'.

Vehicles littered the labyrinth of debris; slowly everything, from tiny specks of dust to giant architecture, was decaying into corondrium, the substance that the Kor Ondrone was composed of.

Harrison Garison didn't have much of a choice, nor time. The Lucky Charms motel was now a KOLU site, with everything he ever

owned, being decayed to alien dust. But he didn't lose everything; he still had his cute girlfriend, Amy Catt, with him. Amy and he were among the thousands of citizens who took refuge under the blanket of a secretly-hidden stronghold, specially designed, for withstanding atomic-nuclear blows.

For nearly a year, there was no sign of Cooper Black and his team of badass gun buddies. John Luther was here with Harrison, but he wasn't a bold match for the great CB, who was previously seen discussing about some Iranian terrorist with the City Dogs' members: Carl Jason, Rogue Jacob, and Li'l Jacob.

What took them so long to arrive at the city of distress, to answer the calls of a thousand citizens?

Before Harrison could rack his brains to find out, the KO opened fire: an extreme blast of a purple bolt so green, that its bluish glow made the surroundings grow red, with yellow outbursts.

Amidst all the madness of thousands of panicking New Yorkers, Harrison heard a refreshing tone. He rummaged between his pockets, to reveal his smartphone ringing. The display read: "Cooper Black".

BROTHERS IN ARMS

"Man, where have you been all this while?"

"Sorry, Harrison. Don't worry. I'm on my way now."

The Subaru 99 Forester SUV darted from one end of the starlit highway, to another, within 3 flashes. Cooper Black the legendary hombre o' the hills handled Harrison on the phone, while his elder brother Demonstar controlled the ride, sitting at the steering wheel. Rogue Jacob, Li'l Jacob, and Carl Jason were also onboard at the back of the SUV (long story), who kept an eye out for the glowing megacity, in the distance. The Kor Ondrone was yet suspended atop the sea of skyscrapers, buzzing with its field of energy.

"Hmm...looks pretty stuck-up, back there," Rogue Jacob focused on the giant aircraft, through the binoculars. "Do what you wanna do, but I ain't goin' in there, even if you bring a chainsaw from my uncle Fred's shed, and imitate to slice me down with it! I'm no fool, 'cause I'm not talking. Or am I?"

"Oh, just shhut upp, RJ!" Demonstar Black wasn't in a good mood. "That pile of zombie-alien crap will be bleeding metal scrap, when Coop'll detonate it with the '5:FT! Now keep your quiet, and also eyes on 'that' thing!"

The last few words must've insulted the Kor Ondrone, but the SUV kept on gaining more and more speed. Then, out of the American sky, there was a loud sonic blast, and the Kor Ondrone released one of its deadly purple lightning bolts. A lightning bolt, that had set its destination onto the SUV.

"Wholly, Black! Quick! Bank hard to the left!" Rogue Jacob yelled out, in alarm.

They made some confused expressions on their faces. For one thing, both Cooper and Demonstar, seated inside the Subaru was by the surname of Black.

"Which Black are yah talkin' about, ma?" Li'l Jacob was busy setting up his Saiga 12k shotgun.

"That Black!" Rogue Jacob pointed his gun at the bulky giant of a man driving the SUV. "Demonstar, look out! Buddy, watch for that--"

Brother Black yanked the steering wheel to the right, and shifted his body weight to the left, to make the entire SUV tilt over. For just one hair's width, the purple energy bolt missed them, by luck. But due to luck, they still had to suffer.

The Subaru tilted to the left, by over 45°, and then Slam! The SUV hit the black asphalt of the highway road, on its side. Glass shattered from the windows as Demonstar Black punched his way out from the ruins of the vehicle.

He coughed and waved his hand, to clear the dust cloud away.
"Black, Jacob, Jason, you okay?"

"Yeah."

"Roger."

"Copy that."

"Yeah, man."

D.Black stood up. His M4A1 assault rifle was perfectly fine, thank the God. He loaded a magazine onto it, before gesturing to the others to follow him.

The road beyond was a total mess. No, not the 'mess' in your room; this 'mess' was a major dump mess. The sidewalks had collapsed, with sewer water leaking through cracks. Cars, buses, freightliners, bikes, everything was scattered like a giant mass of giant vomit. Instead of the stinky slippery liquid you find in your regular throw-up, this mess was floating on a sea of bits of concrete, glass, tar, gravel, metal, and... coins?

In the far-off distance, a BOBCAT truck had crashed with an electric pylon. Its rear box-like compartment had been smashed open and was spilling fresh American coins from the mint industry.
{mint = government money-making factory; not the flavor or herb!}

The result: about \$85000 worth of currency being left to rot on the national highway. There was no sign of life anywhere. Nothing seemed to move.

Street lamps, and nearby bushes, shrubs, and buildings had been all mixed up in an endless jumble of Lego. Sewer pipes, parklot machines, and garden fences formed a mess within a mess.

The destruction grew more intense, and more powerful, the closer the road wound its straight path, into the main city. In the nocturnal sky, overhead, the Kor Ondrone released more and more sparks, in all directions, over Manhattan and nearby areas. The view from the road wasn't so good, so they had no idea what might be going on inside the city, inside the tall wall of skyscrapers.

"Brother, it's no use," Cooper Black collected his AEK-74. "We must find another way in. Looks like that UFO-thing over there can sense infrared rays, or something. I mean, look at all this," he spread his arms wide to show Demonstar the widespread remnants of destroyed cars. "See that? The only thing those alien-zombies can sense, is the heat. The heat from the car engines! That's why the lightning strikes the cars, including our Subaru Forester. Man, I loved that car. We humans do give off little amounts of heat, so we might get noticed somehow. We need to be fast. We need to be... cooler."

"What do you mean to say? Just cut to the chase, Coop!"

"Well, we might need to split up for this. Two squads. One will enter the city through the sewers and drainage systems. Nauseating, I know, but it has to be done. The other squad will enter the city...by force! They'll destroy stuff around to catch the Kor Ondrone's attention, and whoever's inside that giant thing."

"WHAT?!! SPLIT UP?!!" Demonstar (let's call him D.Star) boomed. Nearby glass frames rattled. Everyone held their ears. "Yeah right! Nice one, Cooper! Now the UFO-thing will blast us off, one-by-one. I say, why not all at once?"

Everyone glared at him.

"Oh...oh, yes! Yes!" D.star gave Cooper a thumbs-up sign. "Okay, CB, you're coming with me. We'll take the sewers. Jason, RJ, LJ, you're barraging your damn way into NYC. Good luck with your bang-banging! Gentlemen, move out!"

Without a word of complaint, everyone followed his orders.

The ground was cracking open in some places; lava glowed deep below. Half a mile off, the asphalt had broken off the road, and the gravel layer remained. The 3 C.D.s (City Dogs) carried their gear and guns, and continued the path, into danger.

Cooper Black and D.star lifted off a one-meter diameter sewer lid, and began their descent. The ladder-like rungs in the cylindrical wall stopped at a meter above flowing water. Nasty sewer water.

Cooper took out a flare, and plonked it into the rushing watery garbage, to emit a reddish glow, within. The blow torch flare was a special edition Symbiocyte product, purchased for free. (hell, they were saving NY, so obviously they'd get it for free!)

D.star went down, first. He attached a rappel hook to the lowermost rung, gave it a brief tug to check to see if it was secure enough, and released his foothold. His hands hung onto the last rungs, and released grip. But sadly, he hadn't locked the other end of the rappel hook to such a secure part. He'd attached it to his backpack. Hence, the left side straps of his backpack tore off, and he went down, down, down, into the stream of shitty waters.

"Brother!" Cooper tried to reach out and hold his hand, but it was too late. His brother was taken by the dark current of the rushing sewer water. Only the rappel hook, with a piece of backpack strap, remained.

INTO THE DANGER

"Well, I hope he doesn't get carried away too far!" Cooper Black grieved for his brother, who'd been taken by the currents. He wasn't sure he was dead yet. Demonstar Black was no coward. He was twice as strong as Cooper, but also twice as dumb.

It was now Cooper's turn, to rappel down...safely. He attached rappel hooks to the rungs, and to his revolver holster belt. He tried not to look down, but he had to look down. He didn't have hydrophobia or anything, but the nasty water made him feel sick. Probably it was the nauseating stench of shit.

"Okay then, here goes...my belt!" Cooper Black released both his foothold and his hands, to gain speed and kinetic energy. Instead of drowning (actually, this water never hurt or killed anyone) in the sewer water, he swung to and fro, twice, while hanging from the rappel ropes. After swinging like the crazy version of Spiderman, he released his belt, along with the rappel hook. Thanks to momentum, he landed on one of the dry 'side' paths flanking the rushing stream of water, of the sewers. (Oh c'mon! Don't expect me to put 'everything' into detail! I'm pretty sure that you had seen these scenes, in Hollywood movies!).

"Ho shit!" Cooper realized his loss. "And there goes my 1911 Colt Walker revolvers! They were a limited edition!" Two guns got swept along with the belt. And what were in those holsters? Get the point?

His AEK-74 had a flashlight attachment; not to mention the laser-directed eyepiece, 30-round magazine system, multi/burst/single shot conversions, and a razor-sharp retractable knife at the front end. He turned on the flashlight on his gun, and walked slowly and thoughtfully, to an iron door on the rusty, mossy wall, near his landing site. Each step he took carefully, aiming his assault rifle from side-to-side, as he went.

Environments like these were extremely dangerous, with the additional fear of being ambushed by enemies, lurking in the dark.

The iron door had been rusted away to a reddish-brown hue, and there was a strange stench. The stench wafted from behind the iron door. Blood, rotten flesh, and buckets of human waste, probably! Cooper Black was familiar with these smells since going on a zombie hunt at Area SATAN (Secured Automated Tower of Armed Neutralization). The tower had gone dark ever since some Russians tried to destroy it with nuclear bombers.

There and then, a zombie appeared from the shadows. Black reacted immediately. He shot off a dozen bullets, and the wretched freak flopped about, before dropping to the floors. The creep had been hiding in the shadows, guarding the iron door. What could be inside; so precious a thing?

He checked the handle. Locked.

He used the butte of his gun, to try to slam the lock out of place. The door still didn't budge.

Instantly, mild tremors shook through the earth. Some of the water overflowed. Great! It was some kind of flood trap. Cooper got his mind back to breaking the lock. More tremors. This time, red alarm lights appeared from the ceiling. The ceiling began to descend.

"Damn, the sewers have been modified," Cooper thought. "Who could be behind this? Not only those zombies or aliens. I think maybe some team. Some gang. Some major destructive and master terrorism gang."

Some weird bubbling in the water indicated that more zombies were underway, ready to strike.

Perfect! Now he was trapped! Nowhere to move, nowhere to run. But wait...the door!

Cooper Black roared, and kicked the iron door with such a force, that it swung open in a wide arc, inwards. No time to lose! He shot away at the zombies climbing out of the depths of the sewer, all wet and hideously ugly. Cooper quickly dived inside the room behind the iron door. All the rest of the zombies were crushed by the 9000 lbs of corronel alloy in the descending ceiling. Soon, they were grinded and squished out like ketchup between two pieces of bread.

The reddish light from his flare was shut off by a wall of hard metal. Some kind of safety airlock. So right now, the only source of light was coming from the AEK-74's Li-ion battery-operated flashlight.

But something told Cooper Black that he'd come out of the frying pan, and into the fire. Red, luminous eyes stared down at him, from a dark corner of the room he was in. Cooper aimed the rifle at the unknown monster, but when he pulled the trigger, he found the magazine empty.

He gulped. Luckily, he had a M1014 shotgun strapped to his back. He loaded a shell, and got into action.

GROUND CONTROL

The three members of the City Dogs were nearly into the city. Just one more kilometer, and they'd strike home. The squad moved between covers, to avoid the least possibility, of getting spotted.

The Kor Ondrone began to expand. Every minute, one of its outstretched wing-like structures expanded by 10-20 meters. The core was busy sparking, and showering radiation on Times Square.

"CJ, help me get some flanking fire on those zombies!" RJ pointed at a roadblock, ahead. Zombies dressed in cop uniforms, held G3A3 heavy assault rifles, and stood on a watch, for any intruders. Some parts of their bodies were flesh, some were skeletal. Their faces were half-skulls, and half-the ugliest face you can imagine.

Carl Jason took out his Saiga 12k shotgun (the standard gun of the City Dogs), and aimed through the scope. The Saiga looked like assault rifles, but their impact force is similar to a shotgun. One shot might get all three of the cop zombies.

"Okay, RJ, I'm on," CJ viewed through the scope attachment. Carl held the gun into a steady position. Light breathing and light footsteps were coming from the blockade. When he peeked over the edge of an upturned truck cover, he saw two more cop zombies had joined the opposing team; this time, they were armored heavily, and held MP7 SMGs. The new zombies looked tougher and fiercer.

"No time to lose! C'mon man, shoot to kill!" the two other City Dogs couldn't risk getting caught, so they both hid behind a van, about two meters away from Carl Jason's position. "Man, c'mon! What're yah waitin' fo'?"

With both hands clutching the heavy shotgun, CJ opened fire. One zombie fell down to the earth; slowly... two, three, four of the cop zombies dropped dead and bloody. The last one standing was hard to kill.

"Gofero mofogeh!" the zomboid growled something in his weird zombie language, as he barraged away at the upturned truck, that was serving as cover for CJ. The zombie paced towards the City Dogs, shooting with his G3A3 and MP7. The guns never seemed to run out of ammo, but it ran out of users when the zomboid was thrown back by the impact of the Saiga 12k. And that's the reason why everybody loves the Saiga 12k!

The City Dogs' squad was about to proceed over the blockades, into the inner states, when a distant rumbling intruded the silence of the dead cops.

"Did yah hear some'in'?" LJ asked the others, as they jumped over the police blockades. Then they stopped dead in their tracks.

Whatever the vehicle was, not a single picosecond was there to lose.

"R-run! Fallback!" RJ shot with the Saiga, but none of it was useful, against the armored HE tank, now rumbling towards them. "Quick! Over there, into that alleyway!"

The three comrades dived over the second layer of police blockades, and into a narrow alleyway. The tank homed a missile at RJ, first ('cause maybe the alien-zomboid driver thought that he was the leader or something).

A green laser locked onto RJ's back, and fired.

"Duck, bro!" the missile missed him by inches, and blasted into Channel 24's building's ground floor.

Metallic clinking noises inside the heavy artillery vehicle indicated that the zombie driver wasn't alone; there were more two or three of those freaks inside, reloading the main turret.

"Forward, forward, let's go, let's go!" Rogue Jacob took the lead (as usual), and strafed left, as they were through the alleyway. Another missile missed them, and went sailing into the midnight sky.

"Okay now, follow me!"

"10-4, pal!"

City Dogs' squad snaked their way through the twirling maze of wrecked cars, double-decker buses, taxi cabs, street lamps, bits of glass, etc. The surrounding buildings soared to extreme altitudes.

The buildings were all tilted, or slanted, due to the pressure exerted by the Kor Ondrone. Broken glass littered the empty window frames. One small problem that seemed so huge: where the hell are the damn people?

Sudden tremors answered their thoughts. The tank tore apart the glass, steel, and concrete of the narrow alleyway, to make it wide enough for the entire tank to pass through.

"Aw...not again!" Carl Jason groaned, as he reloaded his Saiga 12k."These bullets cost me a damn fortune! Have you any idea about that, you slow, old, creeping loser!"

Instead of blasting them all to pieces, the tank used its secondary turret: a narrower, shorter pipe-like thing, on the front left side. The secondary turret shot rapidly.

"LMG!" Rogue Jacob announced. "Get the **** out of this ****ing place of this mother****ing city!"

The LMG turret would've almost hit Li'l Jacob on the right knee, if Rogue Jacob hadn't tugged onto the collar of his leather jacket. The squad split up; each man for himself.

Carl Jason switched paths repeatedly, between the destroyed vehicles lying scattered on the road.

Li'l Jacob proned below the high suspension cars.

His elder brother, Rogue Jacob, was busy sliding over the hoods of shiny and brand new sportscars. He was almost over the edge of a Ferrari Laferrari, when the tank shot the missile turret, at a Buggati Veyron parked just thirteen meters away from RJ.

"Hurry up, bros! This way!" RJ crawled over to a van for cover, but it was blown up to shrapnels, as a missile hit it. "Ho shit!"

BLIGHT OF THE SEWERS

Demonstar Black coughed and sputtered, as he regained his balance, and climbed aboard the paths on the sides of the sewer stream. One more second of delay, and he'd have been carried away by the currents, all the way to the bowels of Manhattan sewers. Luckily, he'd survived, and his weapons weren't carried away. His torn backpack was wet and soggy (also smelly). It contained a M4A1 assault rifle, a M1014 shotgun, and shells for a SMAW. The SMAW's parts were split up, among each person. Brother Black had the honors of carrying the ammo; Cooper Black, the launcher stem; LJ, the handle; RJ, the scope; and CJ, the front end. They had made plans, of rendezvousing at Central Park. But everyone had lost contact with each other.

The sewers had come to an end. The rest of the rushing sewer water plunged down a huge, hollow pipe, vertically, like a (smelly) waterfall.

Oh, what could I be thinking? All this time, I didn't clearly describe the terrible stench of the sewers, did I? Well, the stink was so terrible, that both the Black brothers' noses got clogged up, bad.

This part of the sewer was illuminated by fluorescent lights, that gave off a greenish glow. Unlike the usual, flickering lights you find in subway tunnels, the sewer tunnel had got well-disciplined lights that remained lit up, forever.

Although the path was slippery, DB didn't find it hard to walk along it. He didn't even need a flashlight, like Cooper did.

He approached another one of those iron doors, and found it locked. But no problemo, 'cause Demonstar could smash through concrete walls, like a human cannon ball. This corroded iron door, was a crumb of cake to him.

"Yeah!" he kicked the door open so hard, that it tore off its hinges, and crushed two zombies hiding behind it, to death. "Well, well! More damn zombies, huh?" he reloaded his M4A1."Die you sons of zombie sluts, die!"

He just wasted 38 bullets for nothing. The zombies were already dead.

It was dark in the room, so he turned on his flashlight attachment on his M4A1. And he just found his way out, instantly.

The flashlight revealed a series of ladder-like rungs that led up, and up.

LAND OF ZOMBIES

"Why don't you just DIE!" Cooper Black fired off twelve shells, at a time. He was still trapped in that room. His flashlight was now resting in the monster's stomach, in peace. Cooper guided himself, by the glow of its red, red eyes. "DIE, you lame, old ***hole!"

He had two jobs in hand, at the moment:

- he had to defend himself
- he had to kill that thing.

"GraaaAAAH!" Cooper Black made some snarling noises. Maybe 'cause the monster drove him crazy. Maybe 'cause he wanted to frighten the creature off.

He dived, and dodged a claw. He ducked, and dodged a tentacle. When he tried to punch that thing below its eyes, it seemed soft, wet, and sticky. What sort of monster could this be? Surely not from Greek legends, 'cause Cooper Black had finished reading each and every book in the Percy Jackson series. Not from magical lore, either. Even the Harry Potter books had any kind of monster like this. Looks like CB had to find it out, himself.

Hours passed, it seemed. But yet, nothing had changed. Cooper Black can fight well, but not fight forever. Every hero has his weakness, no doubt.

"What the hell?" he felt some scales on the creature's body. "What are you, a crocodile?"

Gneek!Xeeh! The beast let out a blood-curdling scream. "Ghaah!"

The fact that the thing could speak, made Cooper Black lose his balance, and the monster snatched the M1014 shotgun.

"Hey! Not fair, yo!"

"Gheeh, ghaah! GHAAH!"

"Okay then, if you love that shotgun so much, then marry it. You'll get half-monster half-gun kids!" the fact made him shudder.

"Alright, fun time's over. Now gimme back my thing, before I take it back by force, and shove it up your--"

The monster snatched Cooper, and threw him down a pipe, that he hadn't noticed it was there before.

"Aaaaaaaaaah..." he dropped down and down, like a human torpedo.

AMERICA'S LAST STAND

"Phew! That was close!" The City Dogs squad finally got rid of that menacing tank. "Everyone alright back there? Man, that was a T-90, and we just survived! I don't know how!"

"Yeah, but our trouble's still not dealt with," Rogue Jacob pointed at the Kor Ondrone, which was now so big, it covered half of New York City. "What could those alien-zombies be wanting? Money? Power? Fear? Respect? Or blood? That is quite a tough thing to consider."

The UFO roared as it sent a sonic blast around Times Square, that made nearby skyscrapers shudder and wobble. The ground crackled, as the tremors passed through. Some of the buildings bent slightly, due to the powerful shockwave's impact.

"Yo know what, bro?" Carl Jason was busy tending to his wounds. Although he'd taken care of defense, he got shot by the T-90's LMG. "Maybe we should sneak up on that murderous tank, kill the freaks, and claim it for ourselves! That armor could be useful for both transportation, and defending ourselves."

"Hmm...I think you're right!" RJ thought about it. And the plan wasn't so bad, after all. "Okay then, squad. Let's move!"

Another shockwave from the Kor Ondrone made their skins sting.

"Radiation! We need some cover above our heads."

The trio sprinted through narrow alleys, across (empty) speedway zones, along the catwalk under bridges, under vehicles, and through the cracks of (empty) buildings' walls.

If you've read any war books, like Tomorrow, when the war began, or Parvana's Journey, or War of the Worlds, or if you'd played war

games like Call of Duty, or Battlefield 3, then you'd probably know what the landscape looked like. It was quite similar to war-torn countries like Iraq, Syria, etc.

All of this war...it makes you feel suspicious. That's right! Some Iranian terrorist has to be behind all this.

The squad retraced their steps back to the place where they'd last seen the tank. It was nowhere to be seen. Ho great! They'd just ran about two-three miles, just to find their objective had failed. And dawn was breaking. The New Dawn was about to steadily creep up.

"Oh, c'mon! I thought North America had good defense supplies! Where are the U.S. Marines? Where are the Navy Seals, the Air Force?" Li'l Jacob asked himself, in vain. "Are we in this alone? Are rest of all Americans truly cowards?"

They thought they were alone. But no! They were not!

Just wait till dawn, and then the 'real' fun shall start!

It was almost 5:30 am, when the first ray of sunlight struck atop the summit of the concrete giants, the skyscrapers of everlasting glass, steel, and brick. Not a sound, except for the distant humming of the UFO object, covering 1.4 sq miles of the sky, with occasional sonic booms, when the core showered the earth, with radiation rays.

"Alright, time to scour the surroundings," Rogue Jacob and the others were breaking their fasts on the packed rations. "Let's see if that damnable T-90 dares to inch forward."

Li'l Jacob hid behind an Aston Martin, while Carl Jason and Rogue Jacob flanked the sides of the road, behind electric poles. "Okay, make sure you select Saiga 12k, and fill it with full metal rounds, instead of tracer bullets."

All three members of the City Dogs, reloaded their guns, and aimed, through the scope.

No sound. No sign of life.

There was a continuous humming sound. But it wasn't the usual noise produced by the Kor Ondrone. It was...

"Yeah, right!" Rogue Jacob squinted towards the sunlight, as he laughed sarcastically. "So once we've breached our way into the city, once we have done most of the hard work, the entire nation reacts, huh?"

Four F-22 military jets skimmed past, overhead. But they weren't headed for the alien craft; they just zapped around the city, scaling each and every corner. The grey, metallic birds produced a buzz - humming tone, similar to a TV whose volume has been set to 100%. If only CJ hadn't insisted on bringing ear plugs, the entire team would've been deaf, by now.

The planes travelled in a 'block'(square) formation, with their dangerous missiles, ready to deploy. But something was strange.

"Oh, no, no, NO!" RJ turned to his friends. "Fall back! Fall back! Those hawks are gonna blast our fleshy bodies, away, and spill the blood and entrails, all over the place!" He led them inside a small café that sold coffee. There wasn't enough time, to read the shop's billboard sign, outside; nor to find out the brands of coffee it sold. Time is quite precious to those who preserve (conserve) it; it is plentiful in lazy people, but scarce in hardworking people. Get the picture, bro?

The four planes of doom flew clockwise, over the 2 - storeyed coffee shop. There was nothing 'Bricksmasher' squad (a.k.a. The City Dogs), could do now. They'd have to wait for 'Boxcrusher' squad (Cooper Black and his brother), to rendezvous. The only thing they could do now, in this moment of distress, was to...er...drink coffee.

Just then, there was another loud, piercing sound (similar to a jet engine's roar, when you get close enough), that made all the wooden chairs, porcelain plates, and ceramic cups, to rattle and start disco-dancing. It sounded like a sweep of an air fleet.

When they thought it was safe enough, they managed a peek. Clear. The squad slowly crouched and snuck out of the main cafeteria, and looked outside, to find:

An entire war force! Tanks, AA cannons, marines, B-2s, stinger soldiers, SEALs; the US has finally decided to lend a hand, or should I say, an entire arm!

Planes raced in the skies, while infantrymen cleared the path for the M1s, Flak Halftracks, Leopard tanks, and M1A2 tanks, to safely pass through.

Pops, crackles, and smoke clouds in the distance told the news: the war has begun, at last. The 3 City Dogs stood there, in awe, as they watched hordes of marines, moving in straight lines. One of them stopped by, to greet them.

"Hey there! Are you part of the U.S. Army?" the soldier asked the squad. "Are you in the Air Force; the Navy? Anything? NO?"

Rogue Jacob didn't know what to do, or what to say.

"Oh, alright! As long as you're all humans, and sane humans, you've got nothing to fear. We Marines shall take care of the rest. I'm sergeant Dan Walker. You can join our forces, and assign yourselves as...um...guerillas."

"WHAT!? We sign up as gorillas!? Are so big and hairy that you think that we are--" Li'l Jacob was steaming with rage.

"Calm down, bro," RJ laid a calm hand on LJ's shoulder. "He meant 'guerillas', not 'gorillas'!"

Rogue Jacob turned to the Marine."Yo, I'm Jacob. Roger 'Rogue' Jacob. Just call me RJ," the leader of the C.D.s introduced himself.

"And these are my... uh... comrades. This one's Carl Jason, the expert sneaker in the group. The one crouching near the cashier and pretending to steal the cash is my brother, Li'l Jacob."

"Oh," SGT. Dan Walker fixed his M16 gun into position. "Alright then, it's nice meeting you guys! I've got to secure the northern part of Manhattan."

He was about to salute them off, when his eyes gazed upon their guns. "Whoa! Is-is that...a Saiga 12k? Those guns are quite hard to find, nowadays

Where'd you find those?"

"Why?" Rogue Jacob held the shotgun out. "Wanna swap?"

"Sure," the Marine exchanged the M16 assault rifle, for the Saiga 12k shotgun. SGT. Dan Walker aimed at a few porcelain cups inside the café, and fired a shot. The gun fired a spark and a loud Dhokl! (sound produced by this shotgun), and the cups were now a pile of ceramic dust. "Hmm...nice. I hope no one saw me vandalizing the shop, except you three. Okay, I gotta go. You guys can help in defending, too."

"No, thanks. We've already got too much on our plate. We're looking for some missing friends."

"Missing, you say? Well, you'd better check out the subterranean quarantine chambers."

"Subterranean what?---"

There was a loud Smash!, as a nearby 18-storeyed building collapsed under the impact of a B-2 Bomber. Whatever it had done, it wasn't a Just Testing signal.

"Ho shit!" Dan Walker quickly evacuated the café and looked up at the huge plane dropping bombs on Manhattan. "Damn! Why is that B-2 bombing us? Shouldn't it be destroying the... thing?"

Ground-based portable flak cannons opened fire, and so did the Halftracks. Within seconds, the B-2 crashed into a 22-storeyed skyscraper, which was now showering bits of broken glass, and steel, down the road. Then the B-2's fuel tank exploded. A massive shockwave was generated. The wave made the entire skyscraper cleave in half, top to bottom. The building was on fire, and the wrecked aircraft burst open. Metallic bits and shrapnels rained

down. The building made some creaking noises, before beginning to tilt over, and the entire top half landed on the road, crushing an AP tank, and twenty Marines. The eastern road was shut off by the broken carcass, of the broken building.

"Ah ****! How are we getting to Suffolk, now?" a Marine's words were overheard by the squad. Everyone was now busy cursing in the worst slang and taboo words, that the English language knows about.

FORGET ME NOT

Demonstar Black finished climbing the last few rungs, to the top. But there was something round and heavy, blocking the exit. He pushed it outwards, and shoved it aside.

He was somewhere near Yonkers, and the sky was a maze of black alien alloy, purple glyphs, and bluish pulses.

Somehow, he'd gone in the wrong direction. Both squads were supposed to rendezvous at Central Park, Manhattan. His clothes were fully drenched in the nasty sewer water. So that explains the condition of his phone. His phone wasn't waterproof.

He saw nine planes travelling in a row, aiming for the giant obstacle hovering in the sky. WHOOSH! The F-15s homed missiles at the Kor Ondrone, and let them off. Each missile clearly hit the Ondrone's body, but not even a scratch was to be seen.

The thing was now almost the size of New York. Looks as if 'expansion' was its hobby, or something!

More jets joined in, arriving from the west.

Hmm, Brother Black thought to himself, if I can head off to the west, I might find some aircraft carriers. I might need a skiff to get there, but I'll manage that. I just need one of those damn planes, and fly it over the huge o-drone, and land on its top. No one's ever been to the top. Who knows how vulnerable the thing is, on the inside!

Without even turning back once, he sprinted off towards the western docks. A pity; he should've looked back. He left his M4A1, behind.

What goes down, must come up.

Cooper Black learnt it, the hard way.

He dropped down a pipe, leading to a floodgate. He grabbed hold of the grooves on the wall, and steered himself towards the rungs.

The two floodgates had been closed on both sides, so the pipe was at one end, and the ladder-like rungs, on the other. A little water remained stationary, deep below. The grooved walls were actually the floodgates. In short, imagine a rectangle, top-view. The longer sides were the floodgates, and one of the shorter sides was the pipe, and the other was the ladder. Clear picture, now?

One small wrong step, and he'd plunge deep below, and never come up, again. There were some red alarm lights turned on, so it wasn't hard for Cooper, to notice the greyish slime, at the very bottom of the floodgates.

The grooves helped, but not much. At some points, the grooves were covered with cement, blocking the path ahead. And Cooper was no Prince of Persia, that he could move along the ledge and make the jump from one floodgate's grooves, to the other opposite one. The gap between them was too far apart; about 8 meters. There was no way he'd risk a 'grab ledge' act, that'd make him die, here, in this dark, smelly, and suffocating place. Something told him, that there wasn't a regular supply of oxygen, down here. He had to get the hell out of this place, ASAP. But how?

He noticed that there was a small, yellow button, near the rungs. If he could press it...

"Hmm...nice button. Can't wait to press it!" he took out a 9mm pistol (emergency use only). He checked the magazine. Only 6 bullets, and one shot.

With his right hand hanging from the groove, he aimed the pistol at the button, using his left hand. After some careful estimations, he fired at will. Two bullets hit the metal rungs, three hit the wall, and only one hit the square bit of plastic, a.k.a. the button.

There was a sudden whirr, a mechanical whirr, as some shafts of light entered the floodgates, from above the rungs. Great! So the button was only for opening a trapdoor-like hatch?

He slowly slid along the groovy ledge, and stopped when the groove was occupied by the cement. He tried pushing it away with his hands, but they were too hard. Last chance: jump onto the rungs. He did, and he survived.

But the rungs started moving upwards, automatically.

"What the hell?" Cooper Black looked up and saw some arms lifting the iron ladder up and out. Ironical, huh?

Cooper Black shifted his backpack to a comfortable position, and got his...his...oh, damn! All his guns were lost. Now the only thing he had left, were his fists. So he got his fists ready. If his suspicions were correct, his fists would be very helpful. He saw bright light, at the top.

"Is it morning already?"

He was about to punch, when he saw what it was.

It was daylight, almost noon. The sky was clear; without any clouds. Except for one: the K.O. If he'd indeed punched, he'd have punched a colonel.

Two soldiers pulled the last few rungs, along with a human attachment. The military's reaction wasn't any different. A few Marines set had set up MG nests, surrounded by sand bags, near the area.

"Hold your fire! Halt!" the colonel commanded his troops. "That ain't no zombie, that's a human cowboy, if I'd ever seen one! Come 'ere, you! What's your name?"

"Blackburn, Cooper Blackburn," he answered as ordered, but still the two Marines grabbed his arms, while two others joined in, to remove the backpack, and explore the contents. "I'm one of the good guys, sir. Please... um... release me."

"Good guy, huh?" the colonel dumped the contents of the backpack. "So where exactly are you headed, carrying so much ammo, and firearms?"

"Where'd you think?" Cooper pointed at the UFO. "Me and my pals are going up there."

At this word, everyone burst laughing, even the colonel, himself. Meanwhile, Cooper counted the number of soldiers around him, and also spotted an AP tank, between the MG nests.

"You-you think-you think we're gonna believe this nonsense stuff?" the colonel became serious. "Now enough chit chat, terrorist scum! Tell me where are the nukes."

"What nukes?" Cooper sounded confused. "I know nothing of nukes. But ask me all you want to know about the UFO thing," he wished he hadn't spoken the last sentence.

"Aha! So you're one of the Project SATAN spy agents, eh? Gentlemen, take this intruder to the lockup, if you don't mind."

"That's it! I've had ENOUGH!!!" Cooper Black roared, and snatched a M4 carbine from one of the two soldiers, before diving forwards, and hiding himself behind a flattened news van. He reloaded the gun, and performed a dive-barrage, sideways. He dived and shot away at the Marines, not caring about his own kin. The colonel burst with blood, flesh, and tattered bits of military uniform. Cooper dodged the incoming rush of bullets, as all the Marines in his area began shooting at his body.

Cooper dived again, and shot at the MG nests, but the soldiers were highly-skilled, too. He hid behind a concrete blockade, as he reloaded his assault rifle. Then his eyes caught sight of a package in front of him. Lying on the ground, next to the blockade, was a box with the Symbiocyte emblem on top. He brought it close, with the end of his gun, and opened it. Two S-shaped blades gleamed in the sunlight.

"Cool! Now let me try this," he wore the extra gloves that came along with the blades, probably as a free accessory. He threw them at the two Marines who'd pulled the rungs out. Their necks cleaved in half, and a spray of blood painted the faces of some other two Marines standing behind them, in crimson. The first two's heads flopped backwards, to create a kind of red smiling mouth, at the front of their necks, that grew wider and wider, and finally dropped off. The beheaded bodies, followed by, and dropped lifelessly. The two blades operated like boomerangs, returning back to the owner, who'd thrown them.

"Ha, ha! Magnoblades!" Cooper grinned, as the blades safely landed on the palms of his hands. "Now for you two!" He sent the magnoblades rotating like a fidget spinner, and hurtling towards the other two Marines, the red-faced ones. (It's not that they're red 'cause they're embarrassed; they'd got the tinge from the previous victims' blood, remember?).

The two Marines watched in awe, shock, and horror, as the magnoblades sunk deep into the flesh of their bellies. When they were fully sliced, the blades returned back to Black, by re-entering their bellies again, and also carried a small, red lump at its edges.

"Hmm...these might be your appendices, right?" Cooper asked the two Marines, now half-paralyzed. "Well, too bad, your books don't have any appendices; all it has, is a big, bad THE END!"

The bodies dropped onto the dusty asphalt. Their stomachs, and intestines gushed blood, and greenish bile. There was a mushy liquid pouring from the split stomachs, which seemed to be enzymes, hydrochloric acid, and half-digested food. From the widely-cleaved intestines, yellowish clay-like substances squeezed out, which figured out to be half-formed feces (shit).

"Ha, ha, ha! Look at you, miserable weaklings!" Cooper Black taunted, at the dying corpses. "You're dying, and rotting like--uh, oh--" the MG nests' soldiers opened fire. Cooper Black dodged the attack, by diving towards the news van, again.

He was just about to face the MGs off with the M4 carbine, when the news van went up in flames.

"Whaaawwooh!"

He didn't know what was the cause. Was it the MGs? Was it the RPGs, on the balcony of a 6-storeyed hotel? Or was it the sniper, crouching on the rooftops of a nearby Auto-repairs garage?

All he remembered was the mind-shattering boom, and his body went flying off, towards an electric pole, before he blacked out.

DUSK IS NEVER EARLY

The City Dogs were busy maintain a M1 tank while the Marines joined the force that cleared away debris from the collapsed top section of a building. B-2s, F-16s and F-15s were busy homing missiles at the 'Dark Cloud' (local name for the Kor Ondrone).

"Port, left, by 45 degrees... halt," Rogue Jacob was in charge of directing the driver of the tank, Li'l Jacob. Carl Jason manned the turrets.

"Oh, c'mon, brother!" Both 'port' and 'left' mean the same!"

'Let it be, LJ. You drive, I direct. Seen anything suspicious yet, CJ?"

"No, bud," Carl Jason scouted the surroundings with a pair of binoculars. "Nothin' yet. Jus' the U.S. military patrolling the streets."

"Okay; LJ, forward by 80 kmph."

The tank gave a sudden jolt forward.

"Ho, sh... hey, can't ya drive a tank properly?"

Li'l Jacob shook his head. "C'mon, you take over."

"Alright. Move over. Let ME show you how it's done!" RJ had never driven anything in his life, except for driving people mad. "Okay, here we goooooo —"

The tank's gear shifted to such an extent, it began accelerating at the speed of a Nissan Skyline GTR.

"Whooohooo!"

The tank's caterpillar tracks whirred at a breakneck pace. And at breakneck pace, they almost broke their necks when the tank

slammed hard into a T-90. The T-90's exterior frame wobbled and an enraged tank commander appeared from the hatch door.

"What d'ya think you're doing?" the commander waved a wrench in one hand and a two-way radio in the other. "Get outta my sight before I blow a hole in that M1 of yours! Scram!"

The M1 reversed a bit, before making another dent on the left side of the heavily-armored T-90 tank.

"Hoi!! Don't ya know how to drive a tank?"

RJ was feeling confused and sweating badly. He rotated a knob, pressed a button, pulled a lever and kicked a pedal.

The tank was now in a strange dancing position. The built-in hydraulics pulled the c-tracks up and down. Extra hidden attachments like homing missiles, green neon lights, boom box speakers, a large US flag and wide exhaust channels appeared.

"Whoa! How'd you do that?" the tank commander watched in awe. He had driven tanks for 30 years but never before did he ever witness a tank evolve into a party decker.

The boom box played a rap tune – 'The Creeper Rap' by Dan Bull. "Boom, boom, boom! I can't stop singing this bloody tune, tune, tune!"

At each syllable of the song, the M1 rattled within.

"That ain't no proper M1! That's a fake one!" the tank commander descended into his tank. "Die, intruders!"

The T-90's main turret rotated anticlockwise by 45° and shot. The missile bashed against the M1 tank. RJ pressed a few more buttons to bring it to its normal stance. The rap tune died down instantly.

But during this delay, the T-90 loaded another shell. It fired. **BAM!**

This time, the missile hit the opposing tank directly at the top turret.

"Haawoooh! Ow, man!" CJ dropped down into the cabin. He went for the second turret – the LMG. The entire top portion of the City Dogs' tank had been blown off, leaving a hole behind. Now the tank had a permanent sun roof.

"Why you little... CJ, fire up the LMG," Rogue Jacob kept an eye on the other tank through the narrow horizontal slit at the front.
"Okay; LJ, check the back for some AT. Get it ready - quick!"

Li'l Jacob nodded and set to work. There were a few heavy gears stored at the back of the tank's cabin. After searching around for a few moments, he found the cylindrical object he was seeking.

"Found it!" LJ crouched beneath the hole with the AT in his hands.
"Alright, 3... 2... 1... and —"

There was a loud **SMASH**. The tank shook the way your parents do to you to wake you up.

"Brothers, get me some suppressing attacks on that thing. I can't concentrate properly."

"You bet it, LJ. Well, you heard him. Get ready."

"3... 2... 1... SUPPRESSING!"

The T-90's armor was blown off like a puffball mushroom blowing off spores. But the tank wasn't fully destroyed yet. The LMG turret aimed at the slits of the M1 tank.

"Holy —" Rogue Jacob ducked his head down, just in time to save his skull from getting battered by the battering LMG bullets for battery.

Meanwhile, Li'l Jacob loaded another rocket. He got into position and waited for the signal.

"3... 2... 1... SUPPRESSING!"

Carl Jason barraged away at the other tank with his LMG. Li'l Jacob stood up, aimed through the scope, and released the rocket.

Just like the fireworks show on 4th of July, the T-90 tank exploded in a fiery combination of metal, flesh, blood, entrails, organs, limbs, skin, cloth and gears. And coincidentally, RJ accidentally pressed a button on the dashboard with his elbow that made the US flag appear again. The flag added to the effect well.

"Phew! I don't know what's up with these marines. I know the cops have been turned to zombies, but where's the SWAT?"

And to answer Rogue Jacob's question, thirty or so SWAT gunships, armed with Gatling guns on their wings, flew overhead.

The rotor-bladed aircrafts were headed for NYC westwards.

"Hmm... why's there a large air force of choppers heading 'that' way?"

"Dunno; maybe something big, major and important is happening."

They got off the half-broken tank and searched around for a faster mode of transport.

"Ooo... nice bikes!" CJ pointed at some FrisBee 1900 freeway bikes parked outside a departmental store named 'Big Mart' (but some taggers had spray-painted over the letters to make it appear as 'Pig Fart').

The Bricksmasher squad crossed the road, laid a hand on each bike and said, "Yeah, the bikes are untouched. They're totally intact."

Carl Jason and Li'l Jacob went back to the M1 tank to fetch their guns and stuff. Rogue Jacob examined the 'Dark Cloud'.

The sun was almost setting. Night would strike again soon. Then it'd be showtime. But suddenly, RJ's vision was blurred by a red ray of light. When he looked at the source of the light, he saw a sharpshooter crouching on the rooftop of a 7-storeyed building. The sharpshooter's fingers went to the trigger of the M98B and pulled.

It was almost night time when Demonstar Black set out with a Toshika-50 skiff stolen from a dockyard. Beneath the purple-violet glow of the evening sky, the skiff hovered above a sea of blue-red. In the distance, there was nothing besides the emptiness of the vast, vast sea. But behind the skiff's trail of diverging currents, the city was alive with a yellowish glow beneath the dark mass hovering atop the highest skyscraper.

Silence was good. So was speed and stealth.

Daemon Black would be needing those well for stealing a fighter jet from an aircraft carrier.

He thought the ships would be quite offshore but he found battleships, frigates, destroyers and eventually, aircraft carriers.

"Thank God, that none of them have turned on their lights," he thought to himself. "Okay, so here I go."

He threw a harpoon at the side of a carrier but missed and fell into the waters. DB tugged on the rope attached to it, to try to bring it back.

If you've ever seen a military video or played a game involving aircraft carriers, you'd understand why it was so difficult to grab an edge. These ships have high edges and high sides (hull) that slope concavely.

There and then, the lights flicked on. He heard some voice-over radio commanding soldiers onboard. There was a sudden clanking of footsteps on metal stairs, a few red light signals and the loud boom of a plane thrusting forwards. Demonstar caught sight of the plane, a Phoenix-9, as it zoomed to the endless, dark sky.

Some more clanking of stairs, a shout, and spotlights activated on every corner (this assault carrier had 18 corners). Ho great! Now he was doomed, unless...

"Help, help! Somebody help!" Demonstar mimicked the cries of a castaway. He even waved his arms, jumped about and tried to look stupid to gain their attention. "Help, help, you lazy sons of –"

One of the spotlights flashed straight at his eyes, causing him to squint.

"Don't worry, you're safe now," an army major called down to him with a megaphone. "Swim down here and grab a hold of this ladder." A few SEALs let down a rope ladder (not that it looked like a rope; the ladder was made of ropes). "There. Now hurry up, please. What? Can't swim? Okay we're sending some SEALs down to help you."

Two SEALs began climbing down the rope ladder. They looked more aggressive than friendly.

BLACK BUSINESS

The City Dogs got back to doing black business. Since no one knew about their encounter with the tank commander, all the other marines seemed friendly. But Bricksmasher squad knew the whole truth of it. Even the highly-disciplined could get corrupted. Or was it the Kor Ondrone's radiation? They couldn't tell.

Anyways, on we go, with the storyline:

The 3 Dogs – Carl Jason with the cesar, Li'l Jacob with the dreadlocks, and Rogue Jacob with the afro – were riding freeway bikes on a road that had more bumps than asphalt. If you've ever dared to open a Physics textbook and turned to the chapter on 'waves', you'll know that the road's surface wasn't any different from the diagrams.

The bikes were unique: each had its own attachments.

Rogue Jacob's one was black, decorated with fire stickers. The double exhausts, on both sides, had wider holes than usual. Weird or what, the bike's engine had a glass panel to reveal an internal blaze burning within the bike's bowels. The more the speed, the more the flames and more the light emitted.

Li'l Jacob's one was purple with rainbow stripes. And to dominate over that 'girly' feature, his bike had green neon and disco attachments. The headlight had a skull painted on it that emitted a ghostly shadow in front of the bike's headlamp's range.

Carl Jason's was the craziest. When he pressed a button on the dashboard of his bronze-golden bike, it made a duplicate copy of the bike on the right side of the entire chassis. There was a seat in the middle of the 'bridge' between both the bikes, made by interwoven parts from both bikes. If he sat on the seat and gripped a handlebar of either of the bikes (one original, one cloned), it would transform into a Mercedes-Benz sportscar. But right now, he was driving it in its standard 'bike' form.

Li'l Jacob tried to drive one-handedly, while he popped open a metalcap of Pepsi. He just managed a sip before his fingers began to slip. "Hey!" he grasped the bottle tightly and drained its contents. The carbonated beverage brought him back to his spirits. When not a drop of the drink was left, he threw it at a roadside dumpster. But it hit a Marine on the head instead.

"Whoops! Sorry!" LJ grabbed both handlebars tightly and strained to catch up with the two blurs ahead. CJ and RJ were accelerating at such a rate that all nearby automated speed guns crashed as their displays read "999.99 mph".

And then, the deceleration took place. Up the road ahead, there was a blockade, flanked by zombie cops.

Carl Jason and Rogue Jacob opened parachutes and let go of their (stolen) cool bikes. The freeway bikes quickly switched from being 'cool' to totally 'uncool' as they crashed against concrete and became nano A-bombs.

The concrete blocks sailed in all directions, digging into buildings, roadside hotdog vendors, props and parked cars.

Li'l Jacob got off his bike, safely, after slamming full on the brakes. The wheels skidded to a halt and he unmounted. But more zombies appeared from the shadows. He took out a Saiga 12K, loaded a round, and let it go on a zombie, 30 yards away. He loaded another round and fired it at another one, 60 yards away. Both zombies were headless and wobbled around for a few moments before colliding to the ground.

"Heh, heh!" Li'l Jacob held the gun with his right hand and hefted it on his shoulder. "C'mon quick, you guys! We've got plenty o' mean streets to clear tonight!"

One thing was true: the City Dogs were born experts at killing zombies. They practiced it at home by chopping onions and veggies, squirting sauce onto the chopped pieces, throwing spices at the mixture, and burning them over a hot flame in a pot. They called this method – cooking.

CJ and RJ were far behind now, straining to catch up on foot.

LJ reloaded his shotgun and looked to the west. Just a block away, Queens Village was glistening with nocturnal lights. It was quite strange. Although all the citizens of New York and surrounding

states had taken shelter in the ‘subterranean quarantine zone’ (SQZ), the buildings came alive with their own lights at night. And surprisingly turned them off during broad daylight.

And then he heard it – a distant crossfire which cracked like light thunder (similar to old-fashioned war tapes). Gunfire, in NYC. Somewhere close by, a loud growl filled the air.

Li'l Jacob gulped and crouched down with his hands securing the weapon, and his eyes aiming down the scope. A sweat drop dripped and splashed on the ground. The path ahead was shadowed by three tall buildings. The street lamps had been broken. No light.

He just caught sight of a brutal-looking howler pouncing on him when a heavy Sand King OL monster truck skidded to a halt, on top of it. The Sand King reversed a bit, to reveal a sticky pulp lying at the position where the howler (haoler) should've been.

The truck's door opened and a bulky figure, holding a M32, stepped out. He had the looks of a criminal, with grey streaks in his hair and beard. He aimed the M32 at LJ, and opened its barrel, attached a chain of 14 dozen bullets to the barrel, rolled the barrel, clicked a lock, pulled a hook-like lever, and closed the semi-circular cover of the barrel.

“Who are you? What do you want?” LJ found his hands trembling at the sight of the hulking giant.

The giant grinned and pulled the trigger.

On instinct, LJ backflipped and shot the attacker at the arm. There was a spray of blood and the giant guy bellowed in pain. He dropped the M32 and held up his arms in surrender as Li'l Jacob turned on the flashlight attachment on his Saiga 12K.

“Ow, hey! Steady, bro. Steady, steady!” the man tried to calm him down. “I’m Dorritor Kho. Have any idea who I am?”

“Oh, sure, I do! I need to decide on how to cleave all that fat from your body.:

“Okay... so there’s no need to be so aggressive.”

“Me, aggressive? It was you who aimed that MGL at me! And by the way, you’ve got the looks of a criminal, you got that?”

Dorritor snickered.

"What? Did I say somethin' funny?" LJ fired shots at the sky to catch his attention.

"Oh, um... I AM A CRIMINAL!"

"I should have known!" Li'l Jacob threw the Saiga at Dorritor's face and charged at him with a blade in hand. "Die now, suffer later! Whaaaaah!"

But DK was also an expert. He twisted his head around, 180°, and dodged the shotgun which clattered down next to the M32. He unholstered a Golden Eagle pistol from a hidden pocket and paid the City Dogs member back his debts.

"It's time for payback, chum."

"So you're here for joining us, huh?" the major talked over the munching of roast tuna. The ship's cafeteria was a crowded place. "Where are you off to, chap?"

Demonstar sipped from a soda can before replying. It tasted murky.

"I should say, I just need one of your jets. I'm gonna fly myself to the top of that *thing* and try to get a closer look."

"And then what? Get yourself toasted? Do you know how much heat that 'Dark Cloud' radiates?"

"Oh sure I do! Why don't you just call it by its proper name? It's called the Kor Ondrone."

The major became suspicious.

"Hmm... how come you know so much about those damnable structures? Perhaps you're one of those aliens in disguise!" he raised a Golden Eagle handgun but Brother Black knocked it out of his hand.

"Die, you pile of old bones!" D.star snatched the Golden Eagle and shot the major in the forehead. The bullet gauged a hole above his eyebrows and pierced through his cerebrum. The old wretch staggered and called his guards. But it was too late. Victory went to Demonstar Black's side.

However, he had just made some new enemies. Everyone unholstered their weapons and one of the chefs had an AUG.

"Holy –“ Demonstar flipped the table and used it as cover. There were more than thirty SEALs in there. How could he be so stupid?

He used the Golden Eagle to gun down the chefs and caterers. But it ran out of ammo before he could start attacking the rest. He rummaged beneath his coat and found what he needed.

"Ghaaaaah!" Demonstar Black roared as he unleashed the terror inside him, with a MPsk SMG. "Die, die, die! I'm on nobody's side!"

He wasn't aiming for the SEALs. He just suppressed his attacks so that he could step back, bit by bit, and make for the door.

He stopped shooting and rushed through the corridor, up the stairs, through another corridor, up another set of stairs, and up a ladder to reach the aircraft runway. Instead of hangars, all the planes were kept beneath the open air. The moonlight (waning crescent) shone off the ripples in the sea water.

He quickly climbed aboard a Phoenix-9 experimental prototype and checked both wings. Good condition. He tested the cannons, and heard an alarm blaring from the bridge of the ship. Cannons check. He could hear the hubbub of many other pilots coming up the ladder now.

He turned on the engine and tested the thrusters. Affirmative. The pilots were just about to grab a hold of Demonstar's plane's dorsal wing when the Phoenix-9 rocketed forwards.

The runway quickly slipped from beneath the wheels, which gave the signal that the aircraft was air-borne now.

D.star pressed a button and the wheels folded in. The thrusters were fully operational. But he was going in the wrong direction.

He turned the entire plane, from nose to tail, in a wide arc upwards. Then he flipped it from left to right by 180° to bring it back to normal position.

When he passed over the aircraft carrier again, the SAM sites opened fire.

The Phoenix-9's proximity sensors detected the SAM missiles and started beeping. At first, the beeps had long delays. But as the missiles reached closer, the beeps became more rapid and intense.

"Oh, I'm so stupid!" Demonstar jabbed his index finger into a button and the counterarms were released from the tail-end. "Phew! That was a reeeeaaally close one!"

But the trouble wasn't over yet. Some marines on the ship got their Stingers out and shot.

Demonstar tried changing his direction but those projectiles just homed in. No time for countermeasures – they were still being reloaded; he tilted the Phoenix-9 to the left and turned north. The first missile had been ticked off. But the other one hit the left wing.

"Oh, shi—"

The dashboard started wailing, beeping and was uncontrollable. He was about to collide with an incoming F-15 when he regained control of the jet, and turned right, facing the south-east.

Bits of metal blew away as the left wing continued burning. The turbulence made it hard, to keep the balance steady. Demonstar only had one go at this. He opened the cockpit and stood on the plane's hull.

The wing tugged at his clothes and shortened his eyesight.

"For the love of money!" he jumped from the plane, hoping to grab hold of the Kor Ondrone.

HOW HARD COULD IT BE?

The Phoenix-9 crashed into one of the Kor Ondrone's outstretched wing-like structures. And followed by the plane, was Brother Black. He used the plane's 330 kmph momentum to thrust himself forwards like a human dart.

He folded his limbs downwards (straight) to reduce drag. His cowboy hat was blown away by the wind. He was almost there. Just 50 more metres.

40... 30... 20... 10... **SMACK!** A semi-auto grapple hook's grasping end took hold of the Kor Ondrone's alien metal body and spread a sticky adhesive to hold it in position. Demonstar gripped the rope tightly as his momentum decreased to such an extent that he was left hanging by the rope. New York glowed below. Above, the Kor Ondrone.

His hand slipped and he was left holding the lowermost tip of the rope. He tried getting back up, but the pressure was too much for the rope to handle. And then **pop**, the rope broke.

"Aaaaaaaah!" Demonstar plummeted towards Manhattan.

"I mean, how hard could it be, man?" Harrison asked Luther as they climbed up the ladder-like rungs and got back to ground-level. Two US Marines saluted them as they passed through a security checkpoint at the entrance of the SQZ they were in.

"Not hard, I mean... have you ever slain a single zombie in your life?"

When they were out in the open, night-time air, they took a path to the left, then to the right, and into an alleyway amidst a huge maze

of skyscraping buildings. Then they took out their guns – an AEK-971 assault rifle for Harrison Garison, and a SCAR-H for John Luther.

“Hey Luther, what’s so cool about that SCAR of yours?”

“Nothin’ – I just like the way it ‘pops’ when you shoot,” he fired a few rounds at a tagged-up wall to prove his statement. “How’s that?”

“Good. Nice. Do you know how much damage can an average tagger cause in a year?”

“I don’t know,” Luther shook his head. “You tell me.”

“Well, it’s a lot! About \$80,000 or more, per tagger, per year. There’s probably 2000 taggers in the country. So that makes—”

A Porsche 918 grinded through the bricks and stopped in front of the duo, headlamps flashing brightly. The engine roared and Harrison blinked.

Then the car door opened and a figure stepped out. A female figure, with a slim appearance, curvy hips, wearing a purple top and purple skirt that reached down to her knees. Her silver-blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail. She held a MP7 SMG as she catwalked towards the men with the fragrance of an exotic rose species.

“Hi, guys,” that familiar voice; Harrison heard it somewhere before. “Need a lift?”

When she got close enough, they recognized their third member.

“Amy Catt! How’d you get here?” Harrison was startled.

“Same way as you did, fellas. Why, do you mind your GF doing things on her own? Hop in. We’ve got Cooper’s brother to save.”

“Demonstar? What happened to him?” Luther inquired as they got into the sportscar.

“Oh, he fell into Manhattan,” Amy put on her red-rimmed butterfly glasses.

“And how’d you get to know? By the way, since when did you learn to drive?” Harrison didn’t like the looks of Amy’s intentions.

"Well, a 26-year-old woman has plenty of freedom, you know. And I got to know about Daemon's fall when he called me."

"Wait, what?! What did you just call Demonstar by? Amethyst!"

"Um... heh, heh... err..." she could sense Harrison's inner fury developing. "I think we should move on."

"No! No one's moving in, tonight. But somebody by the name of 'D' will be moving out of this world!" Harry Garison was sitting beside Amy, so he quickly pulled on the handbrake.

The Porsche was drifting before skidding to a stop. When it fully halted, Harrison kicked the door open and spotted a Daytona bike.

"Luther, take care of Amy while I'm gone. There'll be a killing tonight."

"No, no! Harry, please no!" Amy cried out. "Don't hurt Daemon, I beg you!"

"Oh, I won't hurt him. I'll murder him!" he reloaded his AEK-971, shifted it to the back and mounted the speedy bike. "Luther, don't let her off; even if she entices you!"

"Got it, bro!" he saluted him off.

"NOOOOOOOO!" Amethyst Catt cried out and fell back to her seat, out cold. She whimpered like a sad kitten and curled up in a ball. Tears covered her cheeks.

Harrison started off with the bike.

"Ow... ow... simply ow!" Demonstar Black had no idea about the number of fractures in his body! He had been lying on his back, gazing up at the Kor Ondrone for more than half an hour. He just hoped Amy Catt would arrive here anytime now.

He tried sitting up, but it was of no use. It seemed like the lower half of his body was paralyzed.

He hoped his spinal cord hadn't been split apart. No, it couldn't be.

He heard a bike arrive, followed by the screech of a car. He tried to look into the direction of the sound but his head wouldn't budge even a single notch.

Footsteps, he heard, joined in by more footsteps. Then he heard voices.

"Luther, why are you here? Didn't I tell you to hold Amy back?"

"I did, but as I was driving down the Brooklyn Bridge, she slapped me, hard. Then she kicked me and tangled me in her whip. She threw me to the back seat and turned the car around. I struggled a bit, but her aura made me peaceful and sleepy. When I woke up, I was seated at the driver's seat, with no sign of her. I heard a bike and thus followed you here."

"Okay, so stay out of this while I do my deed."

Demonstar caught sight of Harrison and smiled, believing he'd be saved now. But his smile turned into confusion and fear when he saw the gun aimed at him.

"N-no! Are you crazy? What're you doing, bud? Stop! STOP!"

"There'll be no more stopping now, Black! You've gone too far!" He fired a bullet. But out of nowhere, Amy appeared in front of the bullet.

"Nooo! Amethyst!"

It was too late for Harrison Garison.

The delicate body of the silver-haired girl dropped to the ground. Blood welled out from her body, forming a pool around her. The purple velvet was discolored by red.

Harrison dropped the assault rifle and bent down to hold her in his lap. "Amy... w-what have you d-done?"

Harrison's voice trembled. It seemed like he had been stabbed with a knife right into his heart and lungs. The pain within, was terrible. He embraced her soulless body once more and kissed her one last time.

Then he turned his attention to Daemon Black.

"YOU!" he picked his AEK-971 up and shot so many bullets at Cooper Black's brother that he became a sticky mass, covered with blood.

He kept on shooting and shooting, till he had run out of bullets; till Luther had to stop him.

“Amy...” he still couldn’t believe he had lost her.

And Demonstar, who had once saved Harrison’s life, had been killed just for a silly matter between lovers. But the loss of Amy Catt hurt him more. He shot 3 bullets into the heart of the sky, as a kind of salute for the death of the cute girl.

THE K.O. GOES K.O.

"It's been two days... TWO DAYS, I TELL YOU! And still no progress!" Rogue Jacob and the others sat against a bricked wall. "How long will it take for Cooper Black and his brother to rendezvous? Let it be. Let's just hope they aren't dead. Bring in the prisoner, LJ."

Li'l Jacob brought forth the limping Dorritor Kho. All 3 Dogs had shot at his right leg so many countless times that it was of a corpse than living flesh.

"What d'you guys want from me?"

"Stop trying to act innocent. We know who you are! You are the one who helped Rickardo Viz escape. You are the one who robbed the bank, remember?"

LJ kicked him to a kneeling position. "No, I don't know... aaah! Yes... it was me, yes! I yield!"

"Good. Now what kind of skills do you have? Handling guns? Stealth? Anything more?"

"Yeah, I can do that."

"Do what?"

"Shooting, stealth and violence."

"Good. Very good. You'll be quite useful to us. Now c'mon."

They led him to a Ferrari Enzo, parked 3 blocks from their location. RJ gestured to DK. "Break the lock."

"Are you guys stupid?"

Carl Jason smacked him on the back.

"Mind your tongue, Kho. I might have to put a bullet through it."

"Fine. Just give me a gun. An assault rifle will do."

CJ passed him a (empty) M4.

"Now watch," he used the gun's butte and knocked it at the car window. When it cracked, he used his bare fists and smashed the glass. Then it was just a piece of cake to open the door and twist some wires under the dashboard.

"NOT A SINGLE MUSCLE!" a rude voice interrupted.

When Rogue Jacob turned his head to look into the direction of the voice, he felt like a mouse being trodden on.

About five SWATs appeared from a nearby bookshop. And they didn't look happy. One of them shot with an Uzi SMG.

Everyone ducked and ran for the car. But the car door snapped shut and drove away. Oh great! It was a setup! Doritor Kho had tricked them!

"Separation barrage formation!" Rogue Jacob commanded.

The City Dogs rolled sideways while shooting back at the SWAT. But shooting wasn't enough. Even though the bullets hit the SWAT, they were absorbed by the flak jacket.

Now what would they do? Just keep rolling? Never. There had to be a way out. What was their location? Queens? Then it wasn't far from the Lucky Charms.

The ground shook like it was shivering and out came...

...a GSFER! None other than T-DOG!

"HOSTILE ACTIVITIES DETECTED," T-DOG's robotic voice spoke.
"KILL CODE ENGAGED!"

It opened its mouth and shot a 4000°C white-hot flame at the SWAT. Lasers locked onto their guns and got attracted to its magnetic mouth. The GSFER munched on them like scrap metal.
"DELICIOUS!"

"Hey, T-Dog! Can you take us to Times Square?"

"LOCATION TIMES SQUARE.... PROCESSING... YEAH, OKAY, HOP ON!"

It let out some retractable flaps for the trio to hold onto.

“Carl Jason, you’ve been promoted! Drive that snake bot outta this place.”

“Got it, bud.”

When everyone was holding on tight, T-DOG buried itself into the ground and things went flying by.

30 minutes later...

The GSFER changed direction and burst out of the ground, onto Times Square. The core of the Kor Ondrone was hovering just 2800 metres above their heads. Great sparks of energy escaped from the craft and landed just 2 metres away from T-DOG’s position.

“Quick! T-Dog, switch to WCFR mode!” Carl Jason had to shout out loud to let his voice be heard among the hubbub of the buzzing of the K.O.’s core material. The core glowed as brightly as the sun but with a bluish light.

“What’s a WCFR?” Rogue Jacob wondered.

“Winged creature, flying robot. T-Dog, switch to WCFR, now!”

“PASSWORD?”

“Um... ah, got it! H loves A.”

“ACCEPTED.”

The retractable flaps closed in and dropped the humans to the ground. Then the GSFER transformed into a WCFR. The fire-breathing head remained the same but all the other segments were folding in and compressing itself. Now the snake robot looked more like a beetle with drills on its legs and a much bigger drill for its tail.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! CJ, you cannot just go in there!” RJ tried to hold his friend back but he was too fast.

“T-Dog, go to the Kor Ondrone.”

T-Dog’s lasers locked onto the core. “COMMAND UNKNOWN. WANNA TRY A HOMING MISSILE INSTEAD?”

"Hmm..." Carl Jason squinted up at the thing in the sky. "Okay, then. T-Dog, rapid fire at target."

"OKAY, SIR!" The WCFR ejected two rocket launchers on either side. "PREPARE TO BE BLOWN—"

Too late; one of the energy sparks landed on top of the robot. Carl Jason was thrown off by the impact force. As for the robot, it had become a giant toast for your afternoon tea.

"Fallback, fallback!"

Both the Jacobs ran into a 16-storeyed structure to hide themselves.

"Ah... ow... ah..." Carl Jason tried to sit up amidst all the broken glass, steel and alloy. One of the rocket launchers was still good as new. He staggered to it, but tripped over one of the drill 'legs' of T-DOG.

He had to move on. This was his chance. But even his legs felt like a heavy burden to him. He proned to the launcher and inserted the missile. But this was no ordinary missile. It had some fragments of the 5:FT nuke.

He held it up, his hands not able to cope up with the weight for long.

He tried to aim but his eyes couldn't focus properly.

Then... he pulled the trigger.

The missile propelled towards the core. Inside the core. Finally... **KA-BOOM!**

Everyone cheered, including the US Marines (who had been hiding inside a home décor shop nearby).

The Kor Ondrone burned inside out and split into a thousand pieces. The shrapnels exploded in all directions. The shockwave destroyed the tips of the Empire State Building and nearby skyscrapers. The war had been won. The first war, that is.

NOT THE USUAL HOMECOMING

Meanwhile, somewhere in Russia...

"Mr Dimitri Makovsvet, an honor to see you here, sir!" the sentinel bowed and entered the passcode into an input panel.

The secret lab door slowly slid apart and shut tight as the bulky man wearing a thick jacket with a hood entered. The hood covered most of his face, except for a small part of his albino white hair.

The airlock took a moment's pause and the other lab door slid apart. Although Dimitri was a heavy fellow, his footsteps never left any mark and could hardly be heard. His ghostly pale appearance and red eyes made him look more aggressive and fearsome than he actually was.

He stepped along a corridor lit with glowing floorboards. With each step he took, the floorboards glowed white and as he left, the usual bluish glow returned.

Dimitri turned round a corner, down some stairs and put his hand on a biometric scanner. The door to lab no. 35 slid apart.

Inside, it was every scientist's dream workplace: computers, test tubes, tables, chairs, turbines, air conditioning, instruments, everything. Behind an LED screen, sitting on a plush armchair, was a girl of Amy's age (26 years). She had red sideswept hair, Chic glasses, a slender torso... well, she looked just like a twin of Amethyst Catt.

"Rochelle," Makovsvet called out to her.

"Y-yes?" his sudden appearance had somehow startled her. "Ghost Walker, is that you?"

She got off the chair to greet him. She even wore the same velvet Amy had been wearing, except the fact that Rochelle's one was white, while hers was purple.

"How are things going, hon? Any news on the Kor Ondrone?"

"Um, yes... but," she typed something on the keyboard and pressed 'Enter'. The LED screen displayed a 'No Signal' error message. "Looks like someone has destroyed the thing."

"WHAT?!!" he shoved her aside like a domino. "How can this be POSSIBLE?"

"I don't know," she got back to her feet and didn't care about his rude behavior. "What're we gonna do now?"

"I'd expected you to say that!" he grinned. "Prepare a plane ticket to New York. I'm gonna plant the nukes myself!"

Rochelle had a mischievous gleam in her blue eyes. But this gleam protested against Ghost Walker's views. She walked to another chamber and typed the password into the input panel.

"Password?" the pre-recorded voice demanded.

"I've got silver-blonde hair and I hate wearing Chic glasses," she spoke the password. "Extract the three nukes."

"NUKE 1: ALTANOR, NUKE 2: BETAPHYL, NUKE 3: DELTALOL.
COMMAND COMPLETE."

Rochelle Lisby had half a mind to hand them over to her superior; and half a mind to save the world.

Hey, where's Cooper Black? The last time we found him being thrown off by the news van's explosion. The marines kicked him in the face and he kicked them in their groins. He had tried to get back up but one of the muscular guys had smacked the back of his head. And all went blank.

When he woke up, he was seated in a large gunship – the type that have a rear door-like flap that can be lowered. No lights, except for the reddish glow of two pairs of fluorescents.

"Get up, you!" a thug poked at him. "C'mon up, we've got lots of stuff to do!"

Cooper tried to regain his strength but he felt dizzy, like he had been knocked out for 3 days. He noticed a heap of US military uniforms. Oh, wow! The marines had been demoted to street thugs or was it the other way around? Let's just say, the thugs had been in disguise as marines, fake marines that is.

"Here, wear this if you don't want your head to become mashed like potatoes," the thug handed him a helmet shaped like a medieval knight's helm. Nice, now people were going to laugh at him than fear him.

"Wear this as well, a communication device," the thug handed Black what looked like bull's horns stuck on a hairband. He thought it was ridiculous but when the other four thugs also wore the same strange gadget, he atleast had the courage to try it on.

Then he realized something important – his cowboy hat was gone! No hat; no identity.

The gunship's beat of rotor blades on air was deafening enough to make you develop a taste for jazz music.

"Okay now, in positions! You, bullhead!" Cooper was pretty sure the thug was referring to him. "Step over here, and wait for my signal."

Reluctantly, he did as he was told. Every weapon had been taken away from him. Nothing was left, not even his biker gloves (knuckledusters in disguise).

He joined the others in holding a grey cylindrical container-like object. They all faced towards the rear exit flap of the gunship and waited for the chief thug's orders.

"Red is on! Yellow is on! Green is on!" the thug relayed the signals from a signal indicator on his smartwatch. "Quick! Bullhead, press that button!"

Cooper did, and the rear flap slowly descended outwards. The sparkling afternoon sunlight made everyone's eyes squint.

"Ready? GO! GO! GO! GO! MOVE! MOVE!"

They all pushed the cylinder out into the open and whoa!

Since the cylinder was heavier than the men, it was falling the fastest. Free falling.

All the thugs (including Cooper Black, since he was also dressed like one) got into a spread-eagle position and glided towards the Earth.

High up in the sky they were. Wispy clouds went sailing by. It was difficult to look down below, at Manhattan. Cooper looked in the direction of the others. Everyone was scattered in a mishap pattern. Only the dark blurry silhouettes were visible of the other four. Anyways, each of them enjoyed a breathtaking ride back to their hometown: New York City.

Cooper realized that even he was wearing the same gadgets and clothing as everyone else. He checked the altitude sensor on his smartwatch.

[1400 m]

Man, that was freakingly 'high'!

[1300 m]

Okay, so their average speed was...

[1200 m]

...ow, the sunlight hit Cooper's retinas and interfered with the calculations.

[1100 m]

Their average speed was about 100 metres per second (360 kmph!). Nice speed, yo?

[1000 m]

Cooper could hear the faint chirrup of birds, the rustle of tree leaves.

[900 m]

Okay, now the worrying part arrived – how will they land?

[800 m]

The tips of the tallest skyscrapers reached out to stop them.

[700 m]

Now Cooper could not only hear but also see the hubbub of pedestrians, honking of cars and other vehicles. It was a typical day on NYC streets.

[600 m]

He searched around for a parachute. No signs of it. Wing flaps? Yeah, there were wing flaps, but he didn't know how to activate them.

[500 m]

Chances of collision: 95% Chances of survival: 0.5% Chances of being filmed on a news channel: 4.5%

[400 m]

Cooper Black rolled sideways midair, to dodge a NYPD helicopter just taking off.

[300 m]

Oh, no, this is going to be really painful.

[200 m]

Aha! Cooper found the string that activated the wing flaps when pulled.

[100 m]

He tugged on it and slowed down by 50 m/s (180 kmph).

[50 m]

Shit! He was gonna fall on top of a taxi cab. He felt his speed decreasing even more, by 25 m/s (90 kmph).

[25 m]

Uh, oh! He hoped he fell somewhere safe; not on the busy road! He had fully slowed down. And right on time: only the tip of his shoes and the tip of his knight helm touched the taxi cab's roof. He was saved from the fall, but not from the enraged cab driver.

“Oi, whaccha doin’ on my damnable cab? Get off the roof, or I’ll kick your ass so hard you’ll be bleeding till —”

"Brother! How's up, my man, Cooper?" one of the pedestrians nearby greeted the total stranger kneeling on the roof of a yellow taxi cab.

"And who'd you think you are? Another mumbo-jumbo idiot like this bull-headed idiotic —"

When he looked at his car, Cooper was gone.

"Now where the hell did that lousy —"

When he turned to the stranger, he was gone as well.

The driver was left standing in front of his own cab; drivers of other cars and buses shouted out rude slang and taboo remarks to the driver.

"Ohh, sorry! Sorry! Really sorry!" he got back into his cab and drove out of the way, down Bellevue.

"How'd you recognize me?" Cooper Black yanked off the stupid horny hairband and weirdo helmet. He kept the smartwatch, though. "I thought you'd never do!"

"Don't worry, man. I know my ways around the city. And according to luck, you always show up when people are out there searching for ya," Rogue Jacob led him through an alleyway, up some stairs, a left turn, and they were now standing in front of Bellevue Hospital Center.

"Why the hospital? Anybody injured?"

"Nah, I mean... yes. Yesterday you should've been here, Black! Carl Jason had single-handedly destroyed the Kor Ondrone! Didn't you notice the changes?"

"Yeah, I noticed."

"Kay, so any sign of Garison and Luther yet?"

"Nope. I thought you guys knew about it. By the way, where's my brother?"

"Dunno. Maybe he's gone to chase some thugs or something."

“Speaking of which...” he stared up at the sky. Clouds were gathering in an assembly. “I wonder where those marine-thugs are, and what was in that thing!”

“What thing? What thugs?”

“Oh,” he had forgotten that RJ was hearing everything crawling out of his mouth. “Well, you see, during the war, some marines had attacked me. They knocked me out and dressed me in their costumes. Then they told me to push a grey cylindrical container out. I did, and that was when I lost track of the thing and also the others. I was too busy saving myself.”

“Yeah, you look really beat down. Where’s your hat, cowboy?”

“Um... my hat...” Cooper rubbed the back of his head, feeling embarrassed. No hat, no identity. “I’ll just buy another \$25 hat, no problem! I’ve still got about \$1,169,500 in my bank account!”

His smartwatch started beeping. He held it up.

[Mick Lardo calling...]

“So, this is from Mick Lardo, huh?” he just remembered that the chief thug owed him \$5000.

The sky suddenly turned dark as a fluffy grey quilt. Thunder boomed and the first raindrop fell on Cooper Black’s bare head.

ILL FATE

Rogue Jacob led Cooper Black to a private cabin in the hospital. Inside, on a bluish-grey bed with white bedsheets and pillows, sprawled Carl Jason. Beside him, Li'l Jacob listened to 'MH21 – Go Low' via headphones.

"Hey..." CJ's voice had turned shaky and weak. 99 bandages covered 75% of his body.

"Hey!" Cooper waved back at him. "I heard about what you did, mate. You made us all proud. You made America proud, man! Just wait till you get better! All the news reporters and cameramen will be flooding the place like the Nile breaking free of its dams! The waters, ahem... I mean, the people are already making a queue outside the Bellevue Hospital gates, man!"

"Are you trying to make me feel better or to make me get worse?"

"Uh, both!" Cooper replied with a silly grin. "But yet, here, take this. A million dollars. I guess you need it more than I do!"

He handed him a roll of fresh bills, crispy.

"No, there's no need. The government'll pay for my expenses."

"Okay, if you think so. Yet, keep the money. It'll serve as a cash reward for your hard work. And don't forget – we still have to take care of the SATAN tower."

"W-what?!" CJ almost jumped off the bed. "Yeah, man, damn! I hate those zomboid freaks. Isn't the MIW involved in it?"

"Who else?"

"Then what are you waitin' fo', man? Go! Leave me here. If I ever even kill a zombie again, I'll sear my foot off, you get it? No more 'cleaning' jobs. I've had enough of this City Dogs shit."

"I know, right! That's why I'm here, giving you all this money. It's a one-on-one chance – take it or leave it."

"I'd choose neither!"

Cooper saw that Carl's mouth hadn't replied. So who did?

"This all ends now!"

He twisted around to see who it was, when the 'other' guy fired off with an AEK-971.

"Harrison? What're you doing?" he grabbed hold of Garison's gun. But Harrison also had the equal strength. "Where had you been, man?"

"Chillin'," Harrison yanked the gun off Cooper's hands and smacked at Li'l Jacob with the butte. "No man alive shall exit this hospital and that means YOU!"

Rogue Jacob aimed a punch for Harrison's head, but missed. Harrison ducked and knocked his legs aside.

"Yeow, man! Cool down!"

"Oh, why don't YOU cool down first?" Harrison whistled and another person entered the room, carrying Glock-22s in each hand. "Luther, you take care of the two lesser chum; I'm going for the thrill of the hunt."

Luther yawned and knocked LJ out cold with just one mighty punch. But RJ smashed a glass bottle on top of his bald head. Luther howled in pain.

"LUTHER!" Harrison lost his attention on Cooper Black for only a moment. And one moment was all that it took for Cooper to snatch the assault rifle. "Oh great!"

Cooper kicked at his face and knocked him out cold as well.

"Phew! I wonder since when did they turn into psychos?" It was good fate that he hadn't turned into one, too. Otherwise, he would've pulled the trigger instead of knocking them out. "Okay, arms out, folks! Let's hope nobody saw us with firearms inside a hospital!"

THE NUKE WARS BEGIN

The train arrived at East Harlem station. Among the huge crowd of departing commuters and travelers, Exodus Luke picked up the two briefcases that contained the swag. One was full of \$1000000 worth of cash; the other contained his stash of nukes. 3 nukes: Altanor, Betaphyl, and Deltalol. Each had been stolen from the Russian mastermind named Dimitri Makovski, codenamed 'Ghost Walker'. The nukes had been shipped over to NY, by expert smugglers from the M.I.W. agency.

Exos Luke had been quite busy managing his casino at Vundoppler St. and didn't have enough time to join Cooper Black, in defeating the Kor Ondrone. But he was also working with another spy, in the meantime, who'd brought him all the intel that he needed. This time, he'd been given a very important, and dangerous mission. He didn't think the nukes would survive.

He hailed a taxi cab, and threw the briefcases in.

"Where to, man?" the taxi driver munched some ganja leaves while he talked. "You seem to be in a great hurry. Need any help, back there?"

"No, thank you," Exos shut the door after sitting at the back, and handed him a stash of dollars, from the cash swag. "Here, take this \$15000; drive me to Bellevue Hospital, ASAP!"

"You got it, bro!" the driver was excited to get his hands on so much money for such a simple task. He stepped on the gas, and accelerated like a dog without a leash. They dodged traffic, by taking hidden, secret bypass routes. Exodus could now breathe a little. He held out a RLC (Radiation Level Checker) remote, to check whether he got a fatal dose of the stuff, or not. The Geiger-Muller tube activated and produced a reading on a small LCD screen.

[Detecting...85%✿]

Oh, no! He had more than 80% of radiation! He's lucky that his brain cells didn't get affected by it...much.

The cab jerked to the left, and turned round a corner. They entered an alleyway, turned right, and were halfway to Bellevue.

"Phew!" Exos rubbed the sweat drops perspiring on his forehead, with the back of his hand. "That was so damn close!"

"What was close, man?" the taxi driver interrupted. Something in his tone made Exos Luke suspicious. "No, please tell me. What was close? Those nukes, or your life?"

Luke faced a hammer crack on his head. How come he knew about the nukes? Can he make it back to Cooper Black, alive?

"Wha-what do you mean by -- holy shit!"

The taxi driver stopped the car in a wide, dark alleyway. The tires screeched due to the friction caused by the brakes. The alleyway was far from the roads. Too lonely. Any gun fire or shouts for help, will hardly be heard, outside. Without warning, the driver took out an USAS-12 SMG shotgun, from the glove compartment.

"Now, either you give me those warheads, or I'll put a bullet through your bloody brain!" the driver aimed at Exos Luke, but he wasn't sure to do this. By the looks of the driver's lips quivering, it seemed he never had any working experience with killing people. Exos took this as an advantage, and charged forward.

He punched the t.d. in the face, grabbed his gun, and shot three rounds at him. The blood didn't matter much; Exos had seen worse. He thought that was the last of them. But how wrong he was!

From behind the covers of crates scattered all around the taxi cab, thugs crouched with MP7s in their hands. They all waited for Luke to come out.

Exos Luke didn't have much time left. He had to find a way out, somehow. He ducked his head down and counted the number of heads peeping around the car.

"1, 2, 3, 4, 5.... Hmm, 8, There are eight thugs, huh?" he looked at the nuke case. "And only 3 nukes. Well, let's make the thug number, 9. So each nuke is for three thugs. Hmm... not such a lucky shot. If I

do shoot them, half of them would be dead and the other half of them would fire at the fuel tank, so the nukes will go up in flames. Oh, this is so hard, so hard!" he had no option left but to flee. "Heads up, I'm goiiiiin!"

He grabbed the cash swag and shot at the windshield. He punched it and kicked it and barraged away at the thugs outside.

"Die, you rascal sewer rats!" he carried the cash case and sprinted away, out of their range. He could see the evening sun almost setting as he emerged from total darkness into the light of dusk.

But a speeding car crashed into Luke's body, thrusting him to the ground sideways, with a force of 2000 N. Ouch.

Exodus landed on the ground but his right-hand-side ribs were all broken.

"Aaargh! Man, that was NOT cool! Not cool, at all!" he had survived, astonishingly. And astonishingly, there were four more thugs in that car! "Ho shit! Die, lazy *****!"

He suppressed his attacks on those goons as he got back to his feet and grabbed the cash suitcase.

"He's escapin'! Geddim!" one of the thugs yelled out. They were using silenced weapons.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. B-B-B-BEEP.

Exos ran and dived, ducked and rolled. He didn't need to look at the RLC; he could *feel* the high levels of radiation.

"For the mercy from God!" Exos's feet suddenly stopped. He couldn't move forwards. His ears rang like bronze bells, his head was cracking apart. He couldn't bear the radiation anymore. He dropped to the ground.

His body was being forced downwards. He couldn't see properly. His brain was being cooked! He could feel his body cells being affected by the cancerous rays. And then, he stopped movement. His body had swollen up like he'd been stung by a whole hive of bees. All the other thugs dropped to the ground as well.

Inside Luke's grasp, the RLC remote was still functioning.

[Detecting...90%•]

[Detecting...95%⊕]

[Detecting...100%⊕]

[WARNING---%⊕]

[██████████]

All three nukes deployed at once. The entire area was consumed by the gigantic mushroom cloud – a thousand times more powerful than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bomb drops.

The nuke wars had begun.

INTERNATIONAL COLLISION

What do you think happens when 2 nations blame each other for planting nuclear bombs in their motherland?

That's right! War! A war between America and Russia. A war to claim the 3 nukes that had once been planted near Bellevue.

The US military had seen the City Dogs (including Cooper Black) in combat. They offered jobs in the marines and they gladly accepted – in return for \$24 billion.

The squad travelled westwards, on gunships, to the land of Siberia (Russia).

“Alright, listen up, gentlemen!” Dan Walker was in charge as their OC. “This here is the Arctic. Our scouts have reported that they have scanned some suspicious radiation levels in Verkhoyansk. But to get there, we have to cross the Cherskogo Range. The scouts have also confirmed that a large enemy defense fortress at Gora Chen is destroying all passing aircraft with its special AA towers and flak cannons. You marines have to infiltrate the compound and deactivate the towers. Any questions?”

Rogue Jacob raised his M416 assault rifle.

“Yes?”

“Do we really have to do this? Why don't we just –”

There was a loud bash and the gunship swayed from side to side. The interior of the gunship was the same as the one Mick Lardo and Cooper Black had previously been in.

"Ho shit! Ambush! It's the AA towers!" D. Walker pressed the button to lower the back flap and waved his Saiga 12K. "Hurry up! Grab a 'chute and jump!"

He picked up a backpack-like parachute and went skimming through the air.

"Let's go - go - go!" Rogue Jacob and the others followed. Outside, it was freakingly cold. A snow blizzard was blowing in their direction.

The Dogs' military outfit was warm enough to survive the cold. But not sturdy enough to withstand the blasts from the Russian fortress below.

The fortress was shaped like a pyramid or a cone. But the so-called fortress was actually a twisted, sloping staircase that hugged the peak of Mt. Gora Chen. Around this twisted structure, Russian soldiers opened fire in a countless range of weapons. From Stingers to AA guns to flak cannons.

Around every corner-like bend in the staircase, a MG nest barraged rapidly at the 5 marines skydiving towards them.

Cooper almost missed a flak shot by 2 inches. He looked at his smartwatch's altitude sensor.

[3400 m]

RJ flipped over a Stinger missile.

[3000 m]

LJ got hit by a MG. RJ threw a grenade at the fortress, but it was going down at the same rate as them.

[2600 m]

Everyone opened their 'chute, and landed at the foot of the winding staircase. They got out their weapons but had to scatter their positions immediately.

The Russians were heavily armed with AT.

Dan Walker and Cooper Black suppressed their attacks while the three Dogs assembled a Type 88 LMG behind their cover.

"Okay, we're in!" Rogue Jacob held up the LMG and barraged away at the MG nests while Dan and Cooper proceeded to set up a Radar Communication Device (RCD). Then Dan Walker contacted the Mission Base Control (MBC).

"Hello, this is Walker calling in. I require some air assistance from AF1. Please send it to our current coordinates: 120° to 150° east and 70° to 60° north."

"This is the MBC. We're receiving you. Standby, standby. You'll receive air assistance shortly. Over."

"Over and out," Dan turned to his comrades. "CB, we're gonna need a SMAW. C'mon, let's set it up."

A flak blasted the LMG from Rogue Jacob's hands. The enemy RPGs almost nailed Lil' Jacob away. Carl Jason crouched near a withered pine tree and shot with a M416.

The Russian soldiers were outnumbering them 10:1. There was a 0% chance of winning without the help of the MBC.

"Fallback! Into the trees!" Sgt. Dan Walker picked up the RCD while Cooper inserted a shell into the SMAW. "Leave that AT! Run, Cooper, run!"

But Cooper was no coward. He aimed the AT at the summit of the mountain. Why should he run towards nature when nature can run towards him?

"Heads up!" Cooper fired the shell, which dispersed into the solid rock, through the snow. And as for the snow, it turned into an avalanche that buried the AA towers at the top of the fortress. "Ha, ha! That should decrease the risk of aircraft by 20%."

The Stingers were left; so were the flak cannons. One such cannon hit Cooper Black.

"Aaaaa!"

Luckily, he was the only one wearing a flak jacket. "In your faces, Russian rat-faced scum!"

He reloaded the SMAW. Only 6 more shells were left. The ammo for the AT was limited. This time, he aimed for one of the three MG nests.

"Oh, MG, get ready to say 'OMG!'" he chuckled to himself as he shot the shell at the southern side of the mountain. But the Russian soldiers got their turn to attack. All the RPGs, AT troopers, MG nests opened fire at once.

"Oh yeah! I've been waiting for this!"

Cooper Black disappeared inside a cloud of smoke and snow from the impact of the bullets. When the rockets, bullets, and shells ceased firing, the smoke cloud cleared.

But a metal upturned bowl remained in place of CB. Then it shrank into a tiny disk and got back inside the gadget on Cooper's right forearm. It was not the smartwatch, it was —

"Heh, heh, heh! This here's a S-grade Symbiocyte gizmo. It not only has an invincible shield. It has this, as well," he turned his right hand into a fist and shot a grappling hook (similar to the one in Just Cause 2) with a **ziip** at one of the Russians. Then he tightened his fist to pull the hook back to the gizmo, with the Russian soldier attached to it. When he landed beside the gizmo, Cooper inserted a knife into the soldier's neck, yanked it off with a twist, threw it upwards to make it spin midair and grabbed it back. "Nice, right? How 'bout this?"

He pointed the right hand to the blank, white sky and launched a flare that exploded into tiny homing missiles. The missiles jabbed themselves into the fortress's frame and exploded once again.

"Also this!" Cooper pulled his fist inwards and the gizmo turned into a one-handed weapon. The lasers on a barrel rotated and concentrated to a single point. He was about to demonstrate what happens next when the Air Force arrived.

Two B-52 bombers, followed by a F-117 stealth fighter.

"Oh, great! Run!" Cooper Black turned towards the trees and sprinted. Behind him, the land was fully being demolished by the bombs from the American aircraft. He dived over a bush and kept running. There was no turning back. The others were also trying to keep away from the 'area effect' range of the dropped bombs.

"Run, run! Look for cover!" Dan Walker jumped over a fallen log and continued their sprint westwards. "I tried to warn you, Black, but you didn't listen! Follow me, if you can keep up!"

Cooper was gaining more and more distance between him and his partners. He accidentally tripped over a conifer log and completely lost sight of the others.

"Sergeant! OC! Wait up, man!" when he looked back, he saw the flames and the shockwave happily coming to embrace him.
"Shiddamn!"

"Mr Makovsvet, we've got intruders in the Gora Chen fortress!" an Army General informed the albino, sitting on a black leather armchair in front of a table carved from black marble, opposite a humongous glass window overlooking the Verkhoyansk Range in the east. The sun was just rising up.

"Yes, I know," the albino secretly loaded a USAS-12 shotgun behind his back. "You should've told me that earlier. I got the news that those intruders have even 'destroyed' the fortress, you know that?" his voice was soft in a moment of stress. No one could estimate his actions. "What? You don't know? Good. Please stand near the window."

The Army General expected him to reward a detention or even suspend his duty. But instead, he was thrown off the glass window by the bullets fired from the USAS-12. Blood sprayed around the polished onyx floor.

"Dave Dam, enter," the albino quickly hid his gun under the table. A muscular brutal-looking Elite entered the chamber from a dark oaken door on the northern side.

"Yes, Commander! What can I do?"

"Call Mick Lardo at America. To arrive at Tiksi by tomorrow. Also prepare a large army for me. I'm going there, as well. These Americans will stop at nothing to get those nukes!"

He stood up and made for the door.

"And one more thing! I'm leaving you in charge of maintaining this place. Do take care of Rochelle, for me. That traitor shouldn't escape, mind you! And if she does..." he smashed his fist and broke the door. "...I'm gonna kill her, myself!"

Back at the USA...

Mr Barack Obama, the US president, was seen on every TV channel, delivering a speech on the nuke wars.

“This is North America, people! Citizens of the US, heed my words! We've seen bloodshed, we've seen battles. The Empire State (New York) had recently faced an invasion from foreign forces. Millions of dollars' worth of property has been lost. It was all because of...” he picked up a map of Russia. “This land! This country!” he picked up a photo of the albino. “And this man! Dimitri Makovsvet, the Ghost Walker, the Dimlight, is the cause of all this destruction. But we Americans aren't just going to stand there and get beaten out. They will pay! While we're now defending the East Coast, the valiant US marines are on their way to get the nukes back. We already have –”

The television screen was turned off.

OH, SNOW!

"Ah, man, that was..."

Cooper coughed and broke free of the debris of the bombs' shockwave. He picked up his M416 and wore the SMAW on his back. "Well, time to get movin'."

After walking through the woods for an hour, he found the US military base in a clearing.

"Hey, Jacob! Wait up!" he had to run as fast as his legs could carry him, to grab the tip of the rear flap of the last gunship departing. He climbed aboard as the flap shut tight and the darkness of the interior approached his eyes. His pupils adjusted to the dim, red light inside.

"Where have you been, Black? We've been looking all over for ya."

"Looking? Does leaving me here, alone, count as 'looking' for me?"

"Aw, c'mon, Cooper! We were just kiddin' with ya."

Cooper frowned as his breathing returned to normal.

"So what's the plan?"

Dan Walker cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, it has been a successful operation. But, according to the intel the scouts have gathered from the bombing site, there's another one of these Russian fortresses at Zhigansk. There has been a change of plan. The nuke has been transported to that depot. So we're gonna have to control our patience and temper. Remember – the Russians aren't our enemy. Only kill those who try to kill you. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"10-4."

"Roger."

"Affirmative."

Cooper Black removed the gadget from his forearm.

"This," he showed the others. "is called the FLAW, Fast Light Armor and Weapon. I got this from Symbiocyte on the day before we left. It has a grappling hook attachment, a homing flare launcher, a tungsten shield, a built-in RLC, and ofcourse a laser-lock-on homing system that calls in a wave of GSFERs. Neat, huh?"

Everyone just made a bored face and clapped their hands in false awe.

"Okay, so are you done yet, Black?" Dan Walker didn't feel pleased by the 'waste of time'. "So let me continue... when we'll reach the air depot of the fortress, one of us will steal a plane and attract some military attention. This will let the others safely pass through the Zhigansk fort's security. Then we might get a chance to capture the nuke before they smuggle it away again."

"And who's going to be the 'plane-stealing' person?" Cooper felt all the eyes stare at him silently. "Oh..."

BOOM! The AA towers collapsed by the impact of B-2 bombers. The fortress at Zhigansk was epic. Hell epic. It was the size of sixteen Olympic-sized stadiums. Alarms blared. Russian marines flooded out of their barracks and mounted turrets.

"Move, move, c'mon! Don't just stand there!" Dan Walker led the squad in a long column formation towards the 'Azak' landing site. "Black, you go get some flanking fire on those 11.8 mm coaxial secondaries! Beware of secondaries!"

They crouched and avoided being blasted by heavy artillery. The snow and rock was being thrust into smoke clouds as the RPGs and missiles landed on the ground.

Before the B-2 could escape, the Stingers hit the wide hull of the plane. It exploded like a metal firework star.

The squad was just 900 metres away from the Zhigansk fortress.

A howitzer cannon launched a shell.

800 metres.

The shell was aimed at the US marines.

700 metres.

A Russian SU-25 jet flew overhead.

600 metres.

The SU-25 was heading towards the squad. Its LMG turrets were ready to shoot.

500 metres.

TASH-IOOU! The heavy long-range flak cannons barraged at Cooper's team. Each shell crackled and popped like spherical fireballs.

400 metres.

Everyone sidestepped as the SU-25 tried to shower them with bullets. Li'l Jacob almost got shot by a RPG. Rogue Jacob began assembling a SMAW. Dan Walker commanded them to continue running.

300 metres.

Instantly, rocket artillery got activated in the fortress and the path ahead was blocked by a stable rain of firepower.

"Fallback, and follow me!" Sgt. Dan Walker led the troops to the cover of some icy white bushes. The snow from the ground and the whiteness of the bushes might help in camouflage. Rogue Jacob had to prone to get over there.

More SU-25s had arrived and were pinning them down. Luckily, the smoke produced by the impact of the shots hid the US marines from view. More US marines joined in, from the southern side.

A BK-177 chopper beheld more elite troopers from the American side, who suppressed the attacks against the flak cannons.

One of them loaded a Stinger and slid open the helicopter door. He aimed at one of the seven SU-25s flying around them, this way and that. He pulled the trigger to unleash a homing missile that hit the core of the jet. One down, six to go.

The 'Lizardshitter' squad (Dan Walker + Cooper Black + The City Dogs) had to wait until their turn. It was a fight of heavy weaponry;

they had to have patience for letting the other squads breach a hole in the security system. It was absolutely impossible for puny infantry to make even a tiny dent in the fortress's walls.

The fortress was built on a plateau with double layers of walls for primary defense. Atop these double walls, Russian troops patrolled around the scenario, looking out for intruders. Many watchtowers had been set up for this job. If any soldier *did* find any intruders near them, all he had to do was alert one of the watchtowers. Then alarms would blare and everyone would mount their weapons – LMGs, MG nests, flak cannons, RPGs, AT turrets, AA towers, stored fighter/bomber aircraft, and even LAVs.

A Growler LAV (stolen from the Americans) was advancing from the western side to aid against the siege at the southern side. A MG turret was attached to it, mounted by a Russian mongrel. The driver was accompanied by another soldier, firing away at nearby US marines with an AEK-971.

The Growler turned round the corner and the menacing BK-177 was in their line of sight. The driver muttered something in Russian, “Get the helicopter! Kiril, mount the MG. Sikorsky, fire up the Stingers.”

“Got it, Mir,” the person named Sikorsky held out a Stinger on his shoulder. “Fire in the hole!”

The missile directly hit the chopper midair. The helicopter’s rotor blades got carried away by the explosion. As for the marines onboard, they had been roasted by the bitter flames. The empty shell of the burning BK-177 dropped onto the snowy ground.

Back at the eastern side, the Lizardshitter squad’s path ahead was still blocked by the continuous showering of the rocket artillery. In the meantime, Rogue Jacob had set up the SMAW but only had one shell left. The ammo drops were on the southern side. Great, now he had only one shot at this. All he had to do was aim for the tall communication antenna just within their range. He took a deep breath. He let it out again.

The SU-25s zoomed across their hiding spot.

“Did it see us?” Carl asked Cooper. “Oh, we’re so doomed! Quick! RJ, what’re you waiting for? Go! Go, this is your chance!”

Rogue Jacob took another deep breath and lifted the AT to his shoulders. He ran like Sonic the Hedgehog, going closer and closer to the rocket artillery shower.

250 metres.

He closed his eyes and thought of his parents, his target, his country. "FOR AMERICA!!!"

He ran straight through the curtain of death. He did it! He made it through! He locked onto the red-and-white striped tower-like structure and released the missile.

The missile hit the antenna and split it apart. Its top portion creaked off its center of mass and landed on top of the rocket artillery trucks.

But the Russians hit RJ with a MG.

"Ha-aaaaaaah!"

He dropped to the snow with a spray of blood.

"Nooo!"

"Jacob!"

"Brother!"

"Bud!"

Rogue Jacob was injured bad. But he didn't give up. He used his M416 to launch a grenade into the MG nest. He killed the Russian bastard who had shot him in the first place.

Although he was this close to death, he had hopes to survive. He had hopes to live. He creped towards the walls, with his hands. He slung himself against the wall and leaned on it. He waved a bloody hand to the others and smiled.

But the smile faded away as his soul left the Earth.

Out of the skies, a ballistic missile landed at the western side. Moments later, a huge mushroom cloud was observed, followed by a booming sound. Weirdly enough, the mushroom cloud was covered with blue-white electric sparks.

"It's an ICBM!" Dan Walker was shocked to see such an explosion.
"But it's also of the type I've never seen before!"

Cooper Black charged towards Rogue Jacob. He had some hope left that RJ was still alive. He had already lost Exodus Luke and his brother. He couldn't afford to lose any more friends.

He reached the walls and began tugging at Rogue Jacob's dying body with his grappling hook. He pulled and pulled.

A gunship had arrived near the squad's cover, with its rear flap facing towards the west. The flap opened and six soldiers quickly marched to Cooper Black and took the burden of a body away from him.

"Take him to a hospital or a medic, quickly!" Cooper watched the half dozen marines carry RJ's body to safety. "I said QUICKLY!"

When the gunship was out of sight, he turned towards the 40 feet high walls of the damnable Russian fortress. "Ghost Walker, you're sooo going down!"

He charged towards the walls with the FLAW on his right forearm. He shot the grappling hook at the concrete and began accelerating towards it, like a magnet being attracted to a large slab of metal.

When he set his foot onto the wall, he released his grip hold just as he shot the grappling hook towards another destination. He released the grip hold once again and climbed atop the first wall.

"Intruder!" a Russian spotted him from a watchtower, 100 metres away, on the side of the second wall, 10 feet higher than the first.

The first wall, on the eastern side, was empty; it had been swept clean by missiles launched by a F-117 stealth aircraft, hidden high above the clouds. Only the dead, bloody corpses of the Russian soldiers remained on top of the wall.

The MG nests had been cleared, the RPGs were lying at the feet of their dead users, and the Stinger soldiers had fled to the second wall.

The distance between the two walls were covered by snowy padding. A few AA towers and flak cannons remained vigil on top of the padding, unmounted by anyone.

The first part of Operation Ghost Striker had been accomplished.
But the trouble was yet to begin.

An AP Zenite turret aimed at Cooper Black from atop the second wall. Before he could think of anything, the enemy opened fire.

RAMPAGE IS NEVER OUT-OF-STYLE

Although the enemy had opened fire from an AP Zenite, Cooper Black rolled aside after diving sideways. The bullets missed his head by a notch.

“Why, you damnable son of a –” he dived to the left as a AA flak cannon dared to obliterate him. “Shiddamn! I hate this war by the minute! Hey, over here, you Russian scum! Eat shit and DIE!”

He savagely shot at the Russian soldiers with the M416. The assault rifle came handy with a grenade launcher attachment. He loaded a grenade and inched towards the danger.

“Hah!” Cooper roared as he launched the grenade 15 feet high, which drifted through the air in a wide arc, before initiating explosion at one of the AA flak cannons. “Ha, ha! Serves you right, betrayers of the peace!”

The flak turret burst outwards in a spray of metal scraps, blood, and flames. But a howitzer homed right at the top of the first wall, downhill.

“Ho shit!” Cooper dived onto the padding to get missed from a heavy blast. The blast was so powerful that some parts of the first wall cracked and collapsed.

Cooper tried loading another grenade into his gun but he was taking damage from an LMG. He leaned against the second wall with his back, hoping that the SU-25s didn’t spot him yet.

Just then, an RPG hit the second wall, 3 metres to the left of where Black was standing. When he turned in the direction of the RPG’s source, he saw Dan Walker giving him a thumbs up.

He didn't need assistance. What he needed was a way to get onto the second wall safely. But even if he did, the turrets would surely kill him.

He loaded the grenade into his M416.

If there was a way to get at the enemy, it would be via stealth or a distraction. He launched the AP grenade upwards, hoping it would land at the base of one of the howitzers.

BOOM!

"Aaaah!" a Russian soldier (possibly mounting the cannon) flipped over the edge of the second wall and landed at the outer side of the first wall with a **crack!** His spine had been twisted at awkward angles and his neck was hugging his back.

Meanwhile, the 3 Russians on the Growler steered their stolen vehicle around the southeastern corner, and halted near an albino bush.

"Kiril, prone over to that rock over there. Sikorsky, hide behind that bush and wait for my signal."

Dan Walker noticed the LAV parked to his left, about 100 metres away. Li'l Jacob spied on the Russian soldiers using binoculars. Carl Jason set up a M60E4 LMG and loaded it up with a 100 bullet chain.

"Kiril, get the one on the left. Sikorsky, get some flanking fire on the one on the right. I'm going in for the middle one," Mir spoke with the others, in Russian. "Okay? Ready? 3... 2... 1... GO!"

Mir dived forwards to land in front of Li'l Jacob. Kiril threw a knife at Carl Jason's hand, dropping the LMG from his hands. As for Sikorsky, he used his AEK-971 to damage Dan Walker's helmet.

Sgt. Dan Walker was thrown back by a heavy blast from Kiril's Saiga 12K. Sikorsky smacked Carl Jason with the butte of his SCAR-H. CJ was down, DW was down. Only LJ remained.

He tried to punch Mir in the forehead but the opponent was too fast. Mir inserted a knife into LJ's lungs and brought it out, red and bloody.

"Oh, sh... aa-aaaah..." Li'l Jacob groaned as he clutched his heart and sank to the ground. He tried to fight back but couldn't move a

single centimetre. The world turned blue, and then a whitish blur. Li'l Jacob dropped to the ground and lay still.

No movement, no sound.

"Well, that wasn't so difficult!" Mir dusted his hands. "The main problem would be *that* guy over there. The one who's trying to climb up the second wall."

"Let him do what he wants," Kiril contrasted. "He'll never get through the other side of the wall. Too many of our soldiers. Not to mention the turrets! He'll never make it out alive!"

"Still, there's a chance," Sikorsky rummaged through the US marines' packs for anything useful. "That guy is no ordinary human. He's dared to climb up the walls. He's destroyed the mountain fortress. Let's set up a sniper position and shoot that piece of shit to a pile of bloody flesh!"

It was clear that the guy they were referring to was none other than Cooper Black, the post-American cowboy.

From the northern side of the Zhigansk fortress, a large army of T-72 tanks were advancing. Inside one of them, Reximus Pill operated the 0.72 mm coaxial LMG turret.

Through the trees and the scrubby undergrowth, the tanks' caterpillar tracks sent wispy clouds of powdery snow billowing after them.

"This is the military division of Mission Base Control; we're advancing on the enemy. Over," the General's voice wafted from the radio.

"Yeah, this is Jerry Stone. We're bound for the target, 300 metres ahead. Over," the driver sent his voice to the MBC as an answer.

"This is MBC; you're currently on AP. Switch to AT for attacking the turrets and switch to HE to breach through the walls. Beware of secondaries. Watch out for AT troopers and howitzers. Over."

"J. Stone; target is 200 metres away. We're initiating siege barrage formation. Over and out."

When they were just 150 metres away from the fortress, the tanks were out in the clearing without any snow-covered pines to cover them from the cannons.

It was amazing! All the tanks began firing shells at the wall repeatedly. Most of them had switched to HE but some remained in AP mode to neutralize the Russians mounting the AA flak.

Within 5 minutes, all the flak turrets and howitzers had been smashed to pieces. And a huge section of the wall had collapsed and cracked outwards. The padding of snow spilled out onto the ground, forming a slope to get above the first wall.

“Rex, hit those Russians with the guns!” Stone drove their tank uphill.

“Which one? AP, AT, HE or LMG?”

“AP! C’mom, mount the turret and leave none alive!”

Reximus descended from the LMG hatch, loaded a 120mm shell into the cannon, and gave J. Stone a thumbs up.

Taash-iou! The shell lodged itself between eight Russian soldiers, blowing them all away.

Rex loaded another shell. Jerry shot.

The AP shell hit twelve Russian unworthies and killed them all.

Another shell was loaded. Jerry shot.

This time, it hit a (empty) MG nest, spreading the sand bags all over the first wall.

“Okay, Rexy, now switch to HE!”

“Got it!” Rex Pill clicked a lever, unlocked some gears, rotated the cannon and locked the gears again. Then he loaded a much heavier and stronger shell into the cannon. “Ready for action!”

BASH! The shell cracked the second wall.

“Once more, man. Let’s do that once more.”

“Alright!” Rex loaded a second HE shell.

JS aimed and fired.

BASH-DASH, DASH! Three other HE shells collided at the reinforced concrete. The wall broke apart, just like the first one. But instead of a padding slope, rocket artillery awaited them.

A ferocious-looking Russian General by the name of Dave Dam grinned at the American tanks, before waving his hand forwards. As he did so, the Russians attacked.

Some MIG-29s appeared soaring in the skies.

“Ambush!” Rex warned Jerry. “Turn back! Turn back! I’m going for the Stingers. You reverse this tank back to ground level. I’ll handle the MIGs, you drive! Let’s head out towards the ‘Azak’ landing site. C’mon! Move it! Let’s go, go!”

The tanks at their immediate front burst and exploded like mini A-bombs while RP’s T-72 drove out of the way and turned to the east.

“MBC here; team Duo Hiker! Halt! Stop! What are you doing? Turn back to the combat area now! Or I’ll —”

“You’ll *what*, huh? This is a situational emergency. Go to hell!”

“But... crrrt... srrrt... hrrtt...”

J. Stone yanked the radio out of its circuit. “Say, Reximus, would you do the honors?”

He handed the broken piece of equipment to him.

“Absolutely!” he threw it outside, through the LMG hatch.

Far out in the skies above, Henry Hudson scoured the fortress, monitoring each and every movement of any ‘irregular’ military units. He circled the F-117 stealth aircraft around like a hawk. He flipped it over and zoomed downwards into the compound within the second walls.

“The things I do for America!” he opened the canopy and let the \$15 million plane do its sacrificial stunt. The aircraft crashed into the rocket artillery, along with the General and more than half of his troops.

H. Hudson hovered in the cool air for about 15 seconds before starting to hurtle down towards the Earth, at speeds of more than 100 m/s.

The altitude sensor was functioning. He read the display.

[1700 m]

He enjoyed the fresh wind. The way the air particles tugged at his clothes made him feel aroused.

[1600 m]

He was descending towards the 'Azak' landing site.

[1500 m]

But then he spotted the Russian MIG-29s. They had spotted him first.

[1400 m]

One of the grey jets raced up towards him.

[1300 m]

It released two missiles, headed for hitting his body.

[1200 m]

He missed the first missile, but the other missile hit his feet. This resulted in a turning effect. So now he was rotating vertically, around the pivot (his head).

[1000 m]

The dizziness overtook him.

[800 m]

He couldn't breathe, nor could he see.

[600 m]

The altitude sensor was beeping. His hands fumbled at the clip that opened the parachute.

[400 m]

He pulled on it but its handle tore off. He must've exerted too much pressure. He tried it on the string.

[200 m]

When he pulled on it, he discovered that he didn't bring any parachute.

“Aaaaaah—”

SPLAT!

EPILOGUE

Cooper Black heard the explosions, felt the tremors, saw the planes but yet, remained silent as a shadow.

He clutched his M416 and scanned his field of vision. Clear.

He aimed the FLAW at the second wall's height and climbed up with just one grappling shot. Then he saw the wonders of Ghost Striker's fortress.

Within the second wall, lay an immense stretch of low altitude land. At the west, barracks and artillery depots remained stationary. At the south, a long, wide runway was flanked by hangars on both sides. At the east, nothing but the remnants of some of the rocket artillery. The north was a breach. The two layers of the walls had collapsed and the padding spilled over to create a ramp for the tanks to pass through. The T-72s travelled in a long convoy and made for the building at the center.

Six floors high and constructed with modern artistic architecture, Dimitri Makovsset's Zhigansk mansion would easily dwarf the walls. Its upper floors were perfect for sightseeing, as the walls were mostly composed of glass. From the uppermost floor, the glass had been smashed and tinged with a red liquid. (Yes, that's right! That's the spot where Dimitri had killed his Army General.)

Cooper used a rappel technique to descend down the inner side of the second wall. Then he shifted his guns to his back and freed both hands.

He began his sprint towards the whitish marble mansion. Since he was facing the setting sun (west), he put on his aviator sunglasses.

When he finally arrived near the doorstep, a T-72 was already parked beside it. A sergeant signaled him to stop.

"Stop! Wait!" the marine walked up to Black. By the looks of how he carried a M4A1, he seemed friendly enough. "What's your name, sergeant?"

He might've guessed Cooper's rank by looking at the number of 'A' signs on his uniform.

"Blackburn, Coopriion della Blackburn," Cooper replied blankly. The last time he had told his name name to a Colonel, the army had turned hostile.

"Stone, Jerry Stone," the other marine introduced himself. "So which squad are you actually from, Sgt. Black?"

"Lizardshitter," Cooper fingered a knife in his pocket in case of need. "From the Azak landing site."

"Oh, I see. So you're the one who destroyed the communication tower?"

"Uh, no. That would be Sgt. Roger Jacob. He's been sent back to the nearest MBC base, for sanctuary."

"Why? Is he injured?"

"Yes. Now please, move aside; I've got work to do," Cooper was getting impatient by every word JS uttered. He really wished to stab him with the knife to cut the unexpected conversation short.

"What's the rush, huh?" he aimed the M4A1 at the doors to the mansion. Then the doors burst open with splinters. "There you go. You may enter!"

Jerry gestured at him to enter.

"Oh, really? But I think you should enter first! After all, you arrived here first."

"Sure, but I have my tank to manage," he turned to his T-72. "Everything fixed now, Rex?"

"Nope, the turret's jammed. But I'll clear that out soon enough," another marine appeared from the hatch. "Whoa! Who's this guy? A Russian or American?"

"American," both JS and CB replied at the same time.

"Okay... so why you don't you go in and check it out?"

"Alright, I'll go!" Cooper turned to J. Stone. "But only on one condition."

"What's the condition?"

"The condition is... I get the spoils."

Both Jerry and Reximus stood rooted to their spots in awe.

"Fine. It's a deal. Now get in there, you coward!" Jerry slapped him on the back.

Big mistake! Never slap Cooper Black on the back and call him a 'coward' at the same time!

Cooper kicked JS to the ground and smashed his skull with his gloved fists. He crushed his rib cage with his foot and sank the knife from his pocket into the marine's neck.

"Hey!" the other marine mounted the 0.72 mm coaxial LMG turret of the tank immediately. "Traitor! Deceiver! American terrorist! Die!"

Cooper took out the bloody knife and, without even looking at Rex's direction, threw it at him.

He heard Pill's voice one last time as he gurgled on his own blood from the wound at his jugular veins. Soon, there was a **thud** of the body falling to the snow-covered yard.

Then he went into the world of black onyx. The interior of the mansion was composed of dark shades whereas the exterior was full of light, peaceful hues.

"What's up with this transition?" he asked himself in the third person.

The sofas, chairs, tables, and even the exotic wall paintings were of rich quality and made of blackened materials. From the high ceiling, a black chandelier exposed a yellowish burning candle army that drenched the room with its light.

The only thing eerie about the place was its silence.

Cooper found a spiral staircase and climbed up to the second floor, full of dark emptiness. The polished onyx floors served as a slippery carpet across the black void.

"Hello?" his voice echoed through the vast, hollow emptiness.
Hello-hello-'ello-'lo-'o'-...

He climbed up more stairs to find a huge indoor pool with black marble floorings. He spotted a woman's swimsuit lying flat on a tile.

"Whatever!" Cooper shrugged his shoulders and continued onto the fourth floor. The last ray of sunlight hit his pupils with every climb.

At the fourth floor, there was a long corridor along the length of the mansion. Cooper Black naturally walked along and opened a dark oaken door. Inside, lay a treasure. Not one, not two, not three. Inside the room, rested hundreds of portable nukes!

"Holy shot! Did the entire world dump their nuclear waste here or something?"

At his word, the nukes' display popped up.

[18:00:00]

"What the hell?"

[17:59:59]

"Damn!"

"Drop the gun!" a female voice intruded from behind him. "Drop it!"

Cooper dropped his M416 assault rifle and held his hands up high. But what he saw was a silver-blonde girl just like —

"A-Amy?" Cooper couldn't believe his eyes. "Is that you?"

"Who? I'm sorry, I don't know who that is," the girl replied. "I'm Rochelle. The world is ending."

This isn't the end. This version of the storyline has also been scrapped to start anew. Refer to the foreword at the beginning of this book for more information.

Stay up-to-date about the author's works on his website.

Thanks for reading Cooper Black (10th Anniversary Edition)!

COOPER BLACK

American outlaws try to reclaim the money they lent to other criminals. On the way, they are contacted by an anti-criminal organization to carry out a set number of missions to try to earn some more money. At the same time, foreign troops invade the United States and it is now upto the reckless outlaws, the pure agents of chaos, to bring peace home to the nation.

Follow upon the escapades of Cooper Black, a modern American cowboy who loves to attack criminals and works as a vigilante to defeat big mafia leaders and terrorists while also maintaining his own set of hobbies.