

A flare soared into the air, a fleeting star against the night, tinging the clouds with its glow. It left its own white trail atop the weft of city smoke. And as the rains came in to devour the skyline, the city had only a green sun to light the streets for a brief minute. The rain, too, was given the glare of color as it passed the flare. Below, there were no attentions to be drawn to the light. The slums lay far from the center of the city, where the sea threatened the residents. Mountainous concrete tetrapods littered the coastline, along with any sizable refuse that the people could part with—their desperate breakwater against the elements. But the caustic salt air still chiseled away at them. Residents of the ghetto relegated themselves to their rusting homes rather than their rusting bodies. And much to the central city's delight, the outskirts remained a reluctant shadow to them. The bright shine of the capital barely leaked into the slums. It was a soft glow that dissipated at some point. At some street in the middle. At some vague meter or mile where pure blended into polluted. At that point where the soft glow seemed to leach the light away from the slums leaving it desolate.

And far from that point, deep inside the slums, a Man had his eyes on a clearing. A roadway of empty pavement was lined by shipping containers and warehouses. The Man found himself crouched on one of these, a low rooftop where the rain was free to assault his hood. He beat out an impatient rhythm with his finger. A metallic click on the trigger, barely audible over the patter of rain. Idly, he allowed his other hand to fiddle with a dial on his shoulder, adjusting his arm for the recoil of tungsten sabot rounds. He stood one of four, and gave a cursory glance to the others, perched likewise on roofs. Without prior knowledge, he would be hard pressed to find them, lying prone and shrouded in similar cloaks.

"Remember, bullets away from the trunk. Keep the cargo safe," the Man whispered into his comms.

The light of the flare had long since dissipated when the vehicle rode beneath the lamps of a warehouse door. The slim black limousine seemed to complement the asphalt and its matte paint had kept it inconspicuous on the streets of the ghetto. Cautiously, yet simultaneously, the four doors of the car opened and four men in suits stepped out, rifle barrels leading their exit. Beyond dress, they held themselves identical in both stance and features.

"Go," the voice came over the receiver in the Man's ear, quiet, backed by static and almost lost in the rain.

But before their fingers could close on their triggers, a different voice sparked through the earpiece.

"Bystander."

A distant figure stumbled into the road. Even through his scope, the Man could only spot a silhouette. The narrow beams of the warehouses and streetlamps only overshadowed them more. And the snipers were not the only ones to notice. The rifles of the guards whipped to attention on the interloper.

The first man came across the line again. "Go."

So then clearly came four snaps. *Five*. At once, four bullets slipped toward the heads of the guards. Like ice, their skulls cracked and split from the entry. Even clearer was the clash of metal on metal. The bullets sheared through steel and drudged through soft copper and gold

alloys. Upon leaving, they burst out the other side and peeled back the petals of the exit wounds like a flower in bloom. The spalling of copper gray-matter gouged splinters in the paint of the car. The Man's own bullet was a comet tailed by bronze, carving a shallow trench into the bulletproof windshield of the car. And the fifth bullet came from a guard, whose reflex almost seemed faster than electricity. Fast enough to be coincidence and an itchy trigger finger. Not fast enough to avoid the dead weight of receiving a headshot. The trajectory of the bullet fell with the body, and the Bystander fell with a bullet to the gut. With heavy thuds, the guards fell dead, and the Bystander broke the rhythm.

The snipers remained still. They observed the scene and listened. They listened to the bodies, the bystander, and the rain above all. Even more oppressive after the silence fell, it had swallowed both sound and murder. It was only disturbed by the Bystander, slowly bleeding out, the cadence of their breath ramping up.

Then, the rain sounded *less*. Behind the Man and to his left. Without hesitation, he snapped his rifle around and blindly squeezed a shot off. His barrel collided with the body of the intruder, and his bullet flew into the distance, consumed by the light of the city. The sudden jolt threw the stranger's aim off and shifted the pistol that was poised for the Man's head. The pistol fired, clipping his neck. He flinched at the scraping, shrieking sound. The Man dropped the cumbersome rifle and drew a knife from within his cloak. Before the stranger could line up another shot, he lunged into them, driving the blade into their chest with one hand and diverting the pistol with his other.

Three more shots flew blindly into the sky while his knife struck home. The Man could hear the whirring pistons in his arm as he wrenched the knife upwards. In seconds, the stranger was dead, and the Man could contend with the knife that was now firmly lodged in the gash of splayed metal.

"Status?" One of the snipers asked.

The Man planted his foot on the corpse's chest to leverage the knife out, taking a moment to note the suit that matched the guards below. "Clear." Two circular vents on either side of his mask opened, and he let out a long breath. Hot steam billowed out of the openings, quickly dissipating into the night. Like a shiver through the spine, he felt his body cool. For a moment he could relish the rain as if it were condensation on his steel.

"Prepare for transfer."

The four snipers gathered on the ground and approached the car. They remained wary, surveying their surroundings much like the guards had only minutes before. One pointed to the Man.

"Keep watch."

He promptly turned his gaze to the alleys between warehouses and each side of the lengthy road. Meanwhile, two snipers went to lift the warehouse door. The fourth, slightly bulkier and taller than the others, entered the vehicle and rummaged around. A soft click and a satisfied grunt assured him that the trunk to the car was open. With a glance, he saw number four motion him over with a jerk of his head. Four's arms were full retrieving a woman's body from the limo.

Flesh and blood.

They both took a moment to marvel at the body. It wasn't warm flesh, no—it was cold, even colder than their metal frames. The rain turned to jewel-drops against its skin. In short time, its hair turned to icicles, dangling delicately with the chime of crystals.

In an unsettlingly loud clatter, the storage unit's shutter door rose. At the center of the room was a rather anachronistic machine settled comfortably on the smooth concrete. A human sized glass tube lay beside a metal table with a host of wires dangling between the two. The distracting, white lights from the apparatus displayed how empty the warehouse was. Its glow slowly faded in and out, with a low hum that matched its shifting intensity. It never went completely dark, but the light gave an uneasy texture to the warehouse. The glass swung open on hinges, and Four set to work securing the body in the chamber.

“What happened to your neck?”

The Man slid his fingers along it. “Fuck.” His hand hit a ridge. The metal around his neck was impacted, occluding the port.

Resounding curses echoed out over the rain and the damning crash of a rifle on concrete lingered in their ears. The sniper wasn't content on leaving it at that. They had taken to slamming their gun into the ground over and over again, until parts of the stock began shattering, leaving jagged shards of metal strewn across the floor of the warehouse.

“Do we scrub the mission?” the angry one, Rage, asked.

The Man and the others had spread out, each to sulk in their own way in a corner of the warehouse, as well as to avoid the rain of rifle shrapnel. But Four remained by the machine, enamored with the body. He watched as the gems melted, leaving wet tracks to stripe the skin. If he strained, he could almost imagine seeing a blush forming across its face.

“What about *them*,” Four said, turning his gaze outward, into the rain.

The snipers again stood in the downpour, their cloaks shadowing their features, and their figures overshadowing another. White coolant poured out of the Bystander's gut. The rain left the spilled coolant pockmarked. Every drop cratered the liquid, diluting it and leaving no more than faint wisps of white, ghostly trails that slinked off along the flow of water. The bystander was hyperventilating now. Even with the biting rain, it wouldn't be long before the heat burnt their brain out.

Four hefted them onto his shoulder. The Bystander let out a feeble noise in protest but was in no shape to fight back. The others had already prepped the machine for transfer. “Breathing's slowing. Get it started or there'll be nothing to transfer.” Four jabbed a cable into the Bystander's neck. At the push of a button, the lights flickered out. Despite the glare of the streetlamps outside, the interior was pitch black. But they could still hear a quiet hum—

In the distance.

A distant blaring noise ebbed and flowed like the lights of the machine. And it grew louder by the second.

“Close up the trunk and take the limo. We’ll come back for the body later. Drag them away from here. Streets are empty this side of town, get ready for a fight.” They moved in concert, readying the limousine and clearing the bodies out of the way of the tires. The Man reached up to pull down the warehouse shutter, taking a moment to see the glow of the machine ramping up again. When they had all seated themselves in the vehicle, they rolled the windows down and waited. Occasional drops of rain flew through the open windows, dotting their sleeves. The Man drew a skeptical eye across his rifle, ensuring that its drop on the rooftop hadn’t damaged anything. Rage took the wheel, and his rifle lay at his feet, its shattered stock free to scrape against floor of the car. The others sat comfortably, prepped with their barrels peeking out of the car, catching the rain. Likewise, the engine stood to attention, fired up and waiting for the pedal to hit the floor.

When the enforcers rounded the corner and the sirens hit fever pitch, the limo’s engine thundered. The tires spun in place, spitting rainwater into the air before shooting the car forward. The Man and Four were seated rearmost and moved simultaneously, bringing their rifles parallel to the car. Four’s curse was heard over the squealing wheels as his shot flattened itself against the bulletproof glass of the police car. After a slight swerve, the windows of the cop car slid open for two enforcers to lean out. Each returned their own barrage of automatic fire. A burst of heavy rain peppered the trunk and rear windshield.

“Fuck!” A lucky bullet burrowed into the scope of the Man’s rifle. At a hard right turn by the limo, he took a second to toss the gun to the floor of the car. The Man anchored his left hand to the roof of the car, clamping around the edge. He felt his joints lock into place, crimping the softer metal of the car. When he heard the distinct lack of gunfire, the man pulled his upper body out of the window. The plates of his forearm split. Spindly metal arms retrieved the pistol nestled in the compartment within his arm and proffered it to his waiting hand. A line of bullets spread from tire to tire, and when one of the enforcers made the mistake of popping out again, they were met with another burst. With flat tires, the cop car’s speed was untenable. The slick roads only aided in it hydroplaning to a screeching halt and a crumpled bumper along the side of the road.

The windows came back up. In damp comfort, they continued at max speed along the road. They soon reached a peak along the elevated highway. The lower rooftops adjacent to the road allowed for a clear sightline to the central city. It glittered with motion, advertisements dancing across glass platforms. Only taillights charted lines across the ground and sky. No one would move toward the slums. Except one hovering car neared their position, dissolving into view from the direction of the lights. In place of wheels were circular jets that swiveled to decelerate its approach. It breathed down plumes of heat and smoke on them, rippling their cloaks and ripping their hoods down.

Rage shouted over the turbines, “Our pickup’s here. We’ll circle back to the warehouse later—” He turned his ear to listen for sirens again. “Pop the trunk. We’ll leave a trail for them to follow.”

The Bystander woke up flailing. With only the slightest resistance, the glass tube came open and a quiet hiss was followed by the rush of cold air. The Bystander fell to her knees with a splash of droplets, like a shaken tree in morning. Her body shuddered and she felt the lurch of *material* dragging itself up the esophagus, into her throat. A bitter, acrid taste filled her mouth,

and her voice showed itself along with a torrent of foam and yellow liquid. It clawed at her throat and clogged it. Then came a jagged cough that stabbed her heart as much as it felt like it cut at her lungs. The beginnings of a scream weaseled its way out of her mouth. What little sound slipped out pierced her ears, and the sudden pain caused the air to catch in her chest.

She tried to raise herself off the ground, at least to get away from the stinging smell of acid that slowly spread across the floor. She slipped and sprawled sideways, finding herself confronting another empty patch of concrete. Even the smooth and polished concrete was too coarse for her. A touch was like a shower of needles. A movement, a scouring razor. No matter how much her legs fumbled for purchase against the slick floor, she couldn't regain her balance. Not with the booming in her ears, and the bitter taste of bile rousing another round of saliva that dripped from her gasping mouth. Every drop another explosion against the concrete, and—yes, the tempest that rushed back and forth through her skull. It was every breath she stole against the floor of the warehouse, as if she were trying to suck in air through the ground.

And now she recognized her heart. The pounding that threatened to rip through her. She could see her bare chest thump and heave with breath and beat. A meter that formed a violent counterrhythm to the breathing in her head.

Her eyes finally stopped swimming when she found something besides the monotony of the ground to focus on. She had found her body, and surrounding it was a pool of coolant that had dribbled down from the table. She vaguely remembered the gunshot that killed her and the pain of being carried here. But it was a far cry from the agony that she experienced now, just lying there.

Footsteps splashed outside the shutter. There was a thin gap at the bottom where the door had not descended completely. *Four of them?* It shocked her that she could differentiate through the cacophony of sounds. Although it might have been possible on a better model, the sensitivity of her previous body was incomparable to this one.

"We'll come back for the body later." That's what they said.

The thought gave her strength. Defiance pushed her to her feet. Fear cast her eyes across the warehouse and found pieces of metal, scattered across the ground, for her. She hefted a dagger sized chunk in her hands. They were smaller than her previous form.

Although her skin screamed at the touch of rough metal, self-preservation placed the shard against her neck as the curtain rose with a deathly rattle.

On instinct, the Man drew his pistol. For once his steady aim wavered at the sight of the blade. Hostages weren't usually wise to their own importance. *If you could call it one.* No, it was a jagged shard of metal. One that looked suspiciously like the rifle stock Rage had slammed into the ground. Rage must have noticed at the same time since he quickly averted his gaze from the Man's reproach.

The Man lowered his pistol. His arm began the process of storing it, but he cranked the speed down. He tuned down all of his movements to avoid surprising her. She was already backing away before he began edging closer. Unfortunately, all four of them had been gathered around the door when it opened. He couldn't send anyone around to the back entrance without

her noticing.

“Put it down.” He tried, lightly, but she flinched at his voice anyway. That damn blade had already left a nick at her throat.

“No closer.” Her words were hoarse.