

# **Fixed**

**By Jason Halstead**

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## Forward / Disclaimer by the Author

I used to play Shadowrun many, many years ago. We're talking 1st and 2nd edition years ago, which is a lot. I think I may have even enjoyed it more than Dungeons and Dragons, but only one of my friends showed similar interests and we parted ways after our glory days of high school.

With that admission put out there, Shadowrun provided a lot of inspiration for me over the years in my creative endeavors. It's flavored many of my books, including my various [Dark Earth](#) books, as well as my [Wanted](#) series, my [Vitalis](#) series, and even my [Dark Universe](#) series. But I felt like I wasn't really doing Shadowrun justice even though I thoroughly enjoyed each and every one of those books I wrote.

So I looked back into Shadowrun a few months ago and holy cow, things had changed! There were computer games written for it (I sampled them and they didn't do much for me), and 3 more versions had come and gone. Naturally, I had to do some digging and I picked up what I could of the most recent edition of Shadowrun - 5th edition. It was nearly overwhelming trying to wrap my head around it all!

But my love of the setting conquered the rule books and, by the time it was all said and done, I knew I had to do something with it. I don't have the resources (time, firstly, but also interested players and / or a game master) for role playing these days, but I do have a rabid imagination. So I created characters that were begging to be made real. And once I had them, I had to tell their stories. Turns out their back stories were intertwined, and the details unveiled themselves as I wrote the novel you're about to read.

With all that out of the way, here is my first Shadowrun novel: Fixed. I submitted the first chapter to the current creators of Shadowrun and received a favorable response, even though they passed on it for now. I was invited to send any future works their way for consideration, but I may have satisfied my urge to write about Shadowrun with this novel.

So what you have here is a work of fan-fiction. Because I cannot and will not charge for it, it does not have a beautiful cover like my other books do. It also has no professional editing like my other books. If you do find mistakes, I encourage you to let me know so I can fix them.

I hope you like reading it as much as I did writing it. When you're done if you haven't already tried them, I encourage you to check out my other books. Some of those are free as well, so start there and see what you like! They can be found virtually anywhere ebooks are sold, and several are available on Amazon in print.

Enjoy, chummers, and stay whiz!

-Jason Halstead

## Chapter 1

"Drek!" was what the caller heard hissed into the commline. Unheard was the sound of the back of a man's head striking the sheet of metal.

A gentle chime in Tank's ear was what prompted the not so gentle response. The caller's info popped into his vision as he rubbed the forming bruise. Grid number: unavailable. Caller: unavailable. Location: unavailable. But somehow he'd answered the call even as he smacked his head on the underside of his GMA Bulldog's hood.

"Catch you at a bad time?" the caller's question was masked by a scrambler that garbled his voice.

"No, I... sorry, I was working on something," Tank answered while he struggled to guess who would call him using tech like that. The list was short, but the odds were good it would be profitable. "This is Tank."

"Hoi Tank, this is Judge" the caller said. Judge was a man known for knowing people. He was a liaison for just about anything and everything a chummer could want in the Greater Detroit Metroplex. "Got a minute?"

"Got a headache," Tank subvocalized. Talking to Judge meant work, and work was always confidential. He was in his garage and he swept it for bugs regularly, but there was no such thing as being too careful. "Guess I can take a few minutes though."

"They make pills for that," Judge pointed out.

"Naw, I'm whiz. Just finishing up some maintenance on my van."

"Oh, good, it's ready to go then."

"Uh huh," Tank said, ready for the pitch. "Me too, what you got?"

"Not too different from your usual delivery job."

Delivery? Tank smiled to himself. His deliveries were typically other people's property. And by delivery he meant smuggling. He wiped the grin off his face and grunted. "Borders?"

"It's... a little more complicated than that."

"Hmmm," Tank said. More complicated than smuggling something across a border? "Complicated isn't necessarily a bad thing."

Judge laughed. "If the price is right?"

Tank grinned. "You got it."

"Let's get some facetime and talk it over."

"Aight. How soon?"

Judge hesitated before saying, "Three hours, at the View."

Tank raised an eyebrow. The View started out as a ritzy club that greased the right palms to get licenses a night club typically wasn't allowed. The kind of licenses that permitted entertainment that made a live band look pretty tame. Unless the band members were naked and covered in glitter and sweat. These days the View was just past its prime, which made it a good place for a meet. Especially if you liked glitter and sweat.

"Can do. You're buying the first round though."

"Only if you take the job."

Tank chuckled. "Slippery fragger."

"See you."

Tank ended the call and bent back over the hybrid engine in his GMC Bulldog. Three hours was nothing, but that meant he had to put everything back together and clean up, especially

if he was heading to The View. Not much chance of a skinny punk like him catching the eye of a dancer, but he'd have no chance at all if he was covered in grease and dirt.

\* \* \* \*

George shut the door of his trusty pickup and started towards the stairs that led down to the street level. With a mental command he opened and shut the port on his cybernetic palm to make sure it was clear. His apartment complex was next door, a short walk, but he didn't believe for a minute that Detroit really was the safest city in the United Canadian and American States, even if the government loved bragging about it.

The machine pistol built into his cybernetic forearm was fully loaded and ready to go. He'd never had to use it, but that didn't mean it was a bad investment. In fact, he'd hardly used any of the extensive modifications he'd paid for recently, but he knew it was only a matter of time. If he didn't... well, what was the point? He'd burned through most of his family's savings and so far only managed to upset his wife and make his daughter think he was suffering a midlife crisis. His teenage son thought it was cool, so he had that going for him.

He stepped into the apartment complex and let out a grateful breath as the less-humid air washed over him. Detroit was hot and muggy in July. The Amerinds kept babbling about restoring the Earth's climate to undo all the damage mankind had done, but mankind kept doing damage. Maybe their shamans had stalled it, he didn't know. Whatever they'd done, it was still too damn hot out and the building's HVAC system struggled to fight it.

The elevator door's opened and revealed an empty elevator. He smiled, surprised that his luck was holding out. That or he was going to end up stranded in it all alone halfway up to his third floor apartment. Most of the time it worked, but his luck hadn't been the best lately. He didn't dare be late or Penny would have his hoop.

His commlink chirped as he stepped out of the elevator. He glanced at the display in his field of view and frowned. No caller details available. "I buy the priciest model I can afford and it can't tell me drek about the caller," he muttered before he answered the call.

"Pepper, you're looking good," the garbled voice said. The caller's image was not available.

George stiffened. None of his friends called him Pepper. Well, not the friends Penny approved of, anyhow. The ones that did were more like acquaintances. Contacts. Mr. Johnsons. And that meant this guy was one of those. And mostly like this contact was named Judge. "Thanks," he said. "Wish I could say the same."

Judge laughed. "Occupational hazard. I've got someone that needs your services."

George let out a relieved breath. "Protection?"

Judge hesitated and then said, "Yes. Short contract."

George opened the door to his apartment and stepped in. Penny looked up from where she stood behind the kitchen counter, her face an unreadable mask. He smiled and waved with his matte black metal hand. "When?"

"Face to face meet tonight to discuss particulars. The View, two hours."

George winced. He had time to get there, The View was in Pontiac, well within the Greater Detroit Metroplex's eight meter tall wall. It wasn't the distance he was worried about, it was the location. "All right. I'll see you there."

The line went dead and George lowered it. He looked at Penny and saw her staring hard at him. "See you where?" she asked.

"Got a possible job," George said.

"A job," she deadpanned. "What sort of job?"

"Protection. I find out more tonight."

"Where?"

George steeled himself before admitting, "The View."

If he hadn't seen it, he wouldn't believe it was possible for her to stiffen anymore. She glanced down the hallway towards the bedroom and then back to him. "Oh hell no," she hissed.

"Penny, come on. This is what I've been wanting. This is what I've worked so hard for!"

"To go stare at naked girls dancing?"

"What? No!" he insisted. He caught himself and lowered his tone before either of his teenagers came out to investigate. "I mean this type of job. I've busted my hoop for two decades working at Knight Errant trying—"

"Trying to get in the field," she cut him off. "I know. You've told me about it time and again. Except I don't understand why. You're a manager, George. You make decent money and you're safe! Working on one of their threat response teams isn't safe. What happens if you get hurt or killed? You know damn well where I came from. What I came from. I can't go back to that – I won't let the kids live like that."

"That's not going to happen," he insisted. "I've trained with the teams more times than I can count. I'm even better than some of them."

"What do I tell the kids when their dad doesn't come home? Sorry guys, dad said he could handle it? If that's true why aren't you in the field already? "

George met the fury in her eyes with silence for a long moment. He shook his head before answering, "I don't know. I guess I'm too old now. Or maybe I pissed somebody higher up the chain off, I don't know."

Her tone dropped to a supporting one as she said, "So stay safe. Work hard and get that promotion you were talking about."

He snorted. "Too late. Debra got the boost. They said my performance wasn't upper management level yet, but offered some courses for me to try and improve my game. The problem is numbers, that's all they care about. They don't give a damn about turnover or employee satisfaction as long as you hit the bottom line. My people are people, they deserve better than that!"

"We all deserve better than that, but that's now how the world works."

"Yeah, well, maybe it should."

"If you feel that strong about it, do what you have to so you can change it."

George took a deep breath and let it out. "I can't make a difference there. My career is washed up. I've been shot down how many times now? I've taken the classes. My file is thick with adequate and satisfactory ratings. With those ratings I'm done, I'd need to be born into Knight Errant or Ares and have a full blown corporate SIN. With only a corporate-limited SIN they won't take a second look at me even if I grew a second head."

Penny pressed her lips together while he admitted the bitter truth about his life as a wage-slave. "George, if it were just me I wouldn't care so much. No, that's not true. I would care. I do care... about you. But I'd support you. I lived on the streets, I know what it's like and what you have to do to survive. I'd face that as long as I knew I was with you... but this isn't about just us anymore."

He sighed and glanced at the hallway to the kids' rooms. When he looked back at her he said, "This job, this side job, that's the kind of thing that can make a difference. I can help people that way... help them and get paid for it. It's a win-win, don't you see?"

"No, not really. If you want to help somebody, help your family! So far all you've done is hurt us chasing this fantasy of yours."

"I told you, I'll make back what I spent. And more!"

"This isn't about the money," she said. "Sure, that's important, but having you alive is more important! You think I don't know what happens on these jobs?"

"I'm protecting people," he insisted.

"Protecting them from what? Criminals. Thugs. Killers. Maybe your head's in the right place, but theirs isn't. They don't care about you, they only want to hurt you. Or kill you, so you can't get in their way."

"That's why I've trained... And it's why I spent all that money. I'm faster than they are. Faster and tougher. It would take a troll with a damn big knife to even cut through my skin these days."

"They aren't going to bring a knife to gun fight."

He shrugged. "You might be surprised."

"I don't want to be surprised! I want to be bored and content. I want to be safe and secure, knowing my husband is home with his family. You can protect us, if you want to protect someone so bad."

He grinned. "You can't afford my rates."

She scowled, unimpressed with his attempt to deflect the situation. "I hope you get this out of your system before it's too late."

"Baby, I'm going to be fine, I promise."

"This time, maybe. What about next time? Or the time after that?"

"Nothing's going to hurt me," he reassured her.

She stared at him through misty eyes. "Maybe, maybe not. What if I get tired of waiting for the time you don't come home?"

His eyes narrowed. "What are you saying?"

She shrugged and turned away. "I... I don't know. Just... go. If you have to go, then do it."

He swallowed and moved closer to her. He started to reach for her but stopped when he saw he'd almost touched her shoulder with his cybernetic hand. That would be one way to drive her over the edge, she hated the damn thing. "You're going to be here when I get back, right?"

Her shoulders shuddered before she nodded. "Of course... I'm just frustrated that you can't see things the way I see them," she whispered.

He nodded. "Okay. That's all I ask. Then you'll see. I'll be fine and this will be a good thing. It'll bring in money and...and... you'll see."

She nodded again. "Okay, we'll see."

George hesitated a moment longer before he turned to leave. He had everything he needed. His gear was stashed in a storage shed he rented under a fake system identification number, other than the integrated machine pistol.

"Wait!"

George spun in the doorway and barely had time to brace himself as she crashed into him. She kissed him, hard, and squeezed him even harder. "Be safe," she whispered.

"Always," he promised her.

She gave him one more squeeze and then backed away. Her eyes dropped to his cybernetic hand and then jumped back to his face. "You're so hard now..."

"That's what she said."

She shook her head. "I meant all the body mods. Keep talking like that and you don't need to come back."

He chuckled and locked gazes with her until the door swung shut and broke their connection. He turned away and rolled his neck, getting a couple of pops to relieve the tension in his back. He had work to do.

## Chapter 2

Industrial grunge throbbed in the background, loud enough to provide a heavy white noise cover but not so loud a private conversation was impossible. The lighting was dim and multi-colored, with the occasional strobing flashes from the main stage or several suspended stages threatening a seizure. The View was outdated, but still an easy second rate club filled with not only stages for entertainers, but dance floors for customers as well. Sometimes the line separating the two became fuzzy.

"Ah, here comes the other half of your team."

Tank forced his gaze away from the raven haired elf dancing on the main stage. Her stage name was Bling, which was obvious given the way her piercings, fingernails, and outfit sparkled. Well, the outfit wasn't sparkling much anymore, she'd tossed it aside and was teaching a pole new tricks that would leave the chrome blushing if it could. Her piercings were more distracting than the occasional strobe lights, from her nipples and belly button to a shiny jewel on a ring that peeked out from between her legs.

"Tank?"

Tank shook his head and grinned. "Sorry, she's kind of distracting."

Judge chuckled. "She's got too much talent to be working her, wonder why she hasn't moved to one of the new clubs downtown."

"She started when this place did, guess she's got a sense of loyalty."

Judge snorted. "Loyalty's not worth a damn. She could make more at a half dozen places. She's got some moves on her and a body to match."

Tank shrugged. "I guess. Loyalty's not a bad thing, as long as it's shared."

Judge laughed. "This from a professional smuggler! You think this place cares about her beyond what she can bring in? She's easily the prettiest and most talented girl they've got, but she's replaceable. Everybody's replaceable if the costs are too high."

"Sad but true, I guess."

Judge waved Pepper over to join them in their booth. He slid in further and offered the tall man the seat beside him. "Pepper, this is Tank."

"Tank," Pepper said, reaching across the table to shake the younger man's hand. He was concerned over the grime on Tank's hands and wrist, but Tank's grip was solid. Pepper hid his shock considering the man didn't look like he'd eaten all week and would have had a hard time picking the half empty beer in front of him.

"Tank's a rigger that specializes in transporting products in a timely and safe manner," Judge explained. He looked at Tank before explaining Pepper, "Pepper's skillset is geared towards extraction and protection of assets. I've been waiting for a chance to get you two together, it seems like a good pairing of talents."

"Please don't tell me you drive a tank," Pepper said.

Tank smiled. "Not yet, but I'm still young."

Pepper chuckled. "I think we're going to get along just fine. So what's the job?"

"I have a client who's interested in some breakthroughs in the automotive field. Interested enough that they want to have a firsthand look at some prototype gear boxes."

"Differentials and transmissions," Tank corrected. "Still gear boxes, but you should know what you're getting into."

Pepper grunted. "Okay. Not sure I could tell the difference between the two if I saw them, but I know what you're talking about at least. Who has them?"

"Magna-Dassault powertrain division. They have a facility in Troy. Moderate physical security, enhanced matrix security."

"Got a decker?" Pepper asked.

"I don't have anyone available. This isn't a datasteal though, so there should be minimal matrix cover needed."

Tank frowned. "Alarms, cameras, communications, doors..."

Judge smiled. "I provide the job, you determine if you can do it or not and what you need. Then we negotiate."

Tank and Pepper matched stairs. Judge waved away a waitress heading their way and turned back to the runners. "Acquire the prototypes and deliver them – the location will be within the metroplex. I'll confirm destination once you have the items. Minimal collateral damage is requested, with a bonus for pulling it off without discovery."

"What's the bonus?" Pepper asked.

"Hold on, we're not getting much in the way of intel, what's the pay?"

"Fifty thousand, split as you see fit."

"Twenty five K a piece," Tank mused.

"Seventy five thousand, plus a ten k contingency," Pepper countered.

"That's almost a fifty percent jump," Judge said.

"Twenty percent, plus a contingency fund to insure things go smooth and quiet," Pepper said. "We're going to need to call in at least one more person, that's why we need more. You get as much of the contingency back as we have left."

Judge favored him with a humorless smile. "You'd be the first team to not spend all of it."

"There's gotta be a first," Pepper said.

"I'll do sixty thousand," he said. "The contingency too, and if you pull it off quiet you get it as a bonus. If you don't, I take it out of your earnings."

Pepper looked to Tank and saw the rigger was watching the sparkly dancer, now fully dressed, walking through the club. Fully dressed meant an electrochromic vest and matching dental floss that almost hide the naughty parts. "Hey, Tank!"

Tank jerked and turned his attention back. "Yeah, I heard. Sixty K is good with me."

Pepper raised an eyebrow, surprised that the slender man had paid attention while staring at the stripper trying to work the crowd for private dances and tips. He turned back to Judge and nodded. "What's the timeline like?"

"The sooner, the better," Judge said. "Before the weekend, which gives you three days."

Pepper winced. "Not much time for legwork. All right, sounds like we're in."

Judge smiled. "Good. Call me when you have it in your possession and we'll arrange for delivery. Move fast, gentlemen, I expect both security and interest from other parties to increase rapidly."

Pepper and Tank watched the fixer slide out of the booth and gave them another quick smile before he walked away and left the club. Once he was gone Pepper looked to Tank again and saw the man searching club.

"You know any deckers?" Pepper asked.

Tank gave up his search for the stripper and focused on Pepper. "A decker? No... well, yeah, but nobody that I'd trust or available. Why pepper? You like spicy food or something?"

"My daughter," Pepper said while reached up to give his short hair a gentle tug. "She made fun of me when my wife dyed my hair once to hide the grey."

"Salt and pepper... I get it," Tank said. "Wait, you've got a daughter and a wife?"

"Yeah, son too. Both teenagers."

Tank stared at him and shook his head. "That's whiz."

Pepper laughed. "You think?"

Tank grinned back at him. "Naw, man, you're one crazy fragger!"

Pepper laughed harder and nodded, agreeing with him. "My wife thinks that too."

After they collected themselves Tank said, "So here's my thoughts: just you and me, that's thirty K a piece. You bust in and grab it and I'll provide drone cover. I pick you up and we book out. I'll take care of any pursuit."

"So much for stealth?"

Tank shrugged. "Thirty thousand each, omae. Screw the contingency, we go in just us we don't need it. I'm no decker but I can pull layouts from public records, it's only a couple hundred nuyen."

"Guns blazing means somebody's going to get hurt. Maybe a lot of somebodies. Maybe me."

"Maybe," Tank agreed. "But that's occupational hazard."

"Yeah, but here's the next problem. Like Judge said, I'm good at protection. Extraction means getting people out of a tight spot, not breaking and entering. I'm not a thief."

Tank made a sour face. "What, you're standing tall on ethical grounds?"

Pepper chuckled. "No, I mean I have no idea how to steal something. I couldn't pick a lock with a key."

"Frag the locks, use a grenade launcher!" Tank said. "The ends justifies the means."

Pepper frowned. "Give me your number. I'm going to do some digging. If nothing else, I might know somebody that can help us out."

Tank frowned. "All right, but don't screw this up. We miss our chance and we get blacklisted with Judge."

"Don't worry, I'll call you tomorrow. Not sure when tomorrow, but it will be before tomorrow night."

Tank nodded. "Okay, I'll talk to you then."

Pepper started to get up and saw that Tank wasn't moving. "What are you going to do?"

Tank's cheeks darkened a little beneath the dirt and two day old beard. "I'll check things out too, I'm just going to finish my drink is all."

Pepper frowned. "Judge never bought me one."

"Yeah, I had to pay for mine too."

Pepper snorted and gave the rigger a wave as he headed out of the bar.

Tank sipped at his drink and stared around the club. There were dancers a plenty, both the kind paid by the club and locals looking to recreate the magic the View had for the first nine months of its existence. He didn't have to wait long, halfway through the next song he saw her come out from a door to the back. Sparkling crimson high heels, an electrochromic micro skirt that couldn't hide the flash of her panties in the right light, and a matching halter top that flashed underboob with each step she took.

As she walked past a table full of customers one of them grazed her arm with his fingers. She spun around and looked at him, a smile lifting her lips and lighting up her face. From across

the club Tank thought she looked like an angel that had fallen to earth. He didn't see any reason why elves couldn't be angels.

The customer talked to Bling for a few moments before he slotted a credsticks in the table to tip her. Her smile never left her face as she straddled his legs and proceeded to start writhing and grinding against him. Tank had to remind himself to breathe as he watched her performing a lap dance that might have been illegal before the United States re-organized in the United Canadian and American States.

Then Bling lifted her shirt up and exposed herself. The studs piercing the tender nubs on her chest glistened in the multi-colored lights. Then Tank lost his view as she proceeded to rub her breasts against the lucky customer's face.

The song ended and Bling sat on his thighs and pulled her shirt down. She gave him a kiss on the cheek and started to stand up. He reached around her and grabbed her butt in his hands, pinching hard and making her eyes narrow. Tank couldn't hear her, but he saw enough to know she wasn't happy.

The dancer pushed his arms away and started to turn away. He grabbed her arm and stopped her. Bling tugged at her arm but he held her fast. Her eyes narrowed even more and Tank knew drek was about to go down. Her hand flashed across even as he jerked his head back. He was too slow, her sparkling fingernails reached out and caressed his face with just their tips.

The man across the table from him rock back in his chair in shock and reached up to his face. He stared at his fingers and saw the blood on them. The customer Bling had hit was holding his cheeks and blood dripped between his fingers and fell in his lap.

To his credit, her attacker recovered fast and lunged to his feet. He reached for her but Bling leapt back and landed with her legs bent, ready to react. Tank watched, stunned, as she managed all this in her heels with near-perfect balance.

Blood ran unheeded down his face from four horizontal cuts across his cheek. Nearby customers cried out and pointed, drawing attention to the scuffle. A few leapt to their feet and backed away while others stayed put and watched. Bling and her angry customer ignored them all while he stalked after her.

She said something to him but Tank couldn't make it out over the music. He apparently didn't like it because he lunged for her again. She was moving before he'd done more than shift his balance and dropped to her knees. When he overextended above her she punched up and nailed him square in the crotch with his fist. His entire body jerked up, leaving the floor for a half second. He crashed down behind her and glanced off her back.

Bling rolled away from him and leapt to her feet, landing again on her heels. She twisted back to look at him and saw the fight was over. He was curled up in a fetal position and clutching his busted balls. She turned back and saw his four friends standing around the table and staring at the fallen man. As one their eyes lifted to hers and they began to leave the table behind.

The View's bouncers crashed into them, pushing them back and, in one case, knocking them to the floor. Another one, a large ork with gold capped tusks, wrapped his arm around Bling and pulled her into the back.

Tank watched her disappear and returned his attention to the others. The bouncers gathered them up in no time and had them moving to the exit. He waited until they were gone, splitting his attention between them and wondering if Bling was going to come back out. He sighed and realized she was probably done for the night. Even if she did come back, she'd been in a lousy mood and any customers would be scared of setting her off.

He sighed and finished the last warm swallow of his beer. He belched and pushed it away. He could grab a six pack on his way home and maybe the night wouldn't be a total waste. Besides, he had a job to do. Might be a good idea to check the place out. He could park nearby and use one of his spy drones to check the place out.

Not the way he'd hoped the night would go, but this was probably better. He should be thankful for the drekhead customer, he'd saved Tank the trouble of finally getting a chance to talk to his dream girl, only to find out that she thought he was a dirty creep. He'd meant to clean up, he really had, he just ran out of time.

He tossed the recrimination away and stood up, he had work to do.

## Chapter 3

Tank crawled into his padded seat and secured his harness. He accessed the cybernetic controls of his vehicle control rig and ran a quick diagnostic of his van. The system was well within tolerances and ready to fire up. He sent the wireless command to the van, starting the engine with a rumble that dropped to a purr.

A movement ahead, a figure stepping from the darkness into the light shed by an overhead light, drew his attention. Tank's jaw fell open as he watched Bling walking across the parking lot wearing a long coat that she left unbuttoned. The sexy sway of her hips was gone, instead she took long strides with her long legs. She'd changed out her heels for a pair of boots that stretched all the way up to her thighs. The boots were in the back almost as much as her previous footwear, although the heel was almost thick enough to be considered sensible. Almost.

She still wore the micro skirt and the halter top, but she wore an open vest over the top of it. She wasn't indecent, thanks to the coat, but there was no way anyone would call her decent either. Gorgeous? Sure. Heart-stopping? probably. Scandalous? Definitely.

Tank had to force his mouth shut and tried to swallow past the dryness in his throat. He stared at her as she walked, desperately wanting to talk to her. The set in her jaw and the stride of her legs told him not to bother, but it didn't stop the fire in his chest. She was on a mission, but the only cars and bikes in the direction she was walking were in the customer parking spots.

"Holy drek, that's her! Get the slitch!"

Tank whipped his head around as the van's speakers picked up the conversation and relayed it to him. Sure enough the five guys from the club were getting out of their Ford Americar. Bling saw them and slowed. One of them pulled a knife and the man with his face still raw and bloody pulled a large pistol out of the car. She turned and ran.

Tank watched, stunned by the unfolding events. She moved faster than he thought possible in her high heeled boots, but not as fast as the men behind her. She ran between a row of cars and risked a glance over her shoulder. The man with the knife had cut her off and was too close for her to make it back to the employee entrance of The View.

Tank wanted to help her, but he wasn't sure how. They were between her and him, and he didn't dare pop the covers on his van's weapons. He had licenses for them, but they weren't any more legal than his SIN was. Good enough to stand up to a border inspection, but not a murder investigation.

Before he could make up his mind the guy with the knife caught up to her. He lunged at her and tried to stab her in the back, but the knife hit her vest and slid off to the side. Bling twisted around and grabbed his wrist, pulling hard against him and kicking her legs in front of his. They both went down but she was ready and rolled with the impact while he skidded past her.

She jumped up and drove her heel down on his back as she took off at a run again. He howled while his friends raced past him after her.

They herded her like a pack of wolves, forcing her back into the parking lot and away from the building. She was surrounded in seconds and trapped in space the size of two empty parking spots by three of the men. The man she'd scratched joined them, his gun held in a two handed grip and pointed at her. The other man had reclaimed his knife and was limping as fast he could to take part in their macabre hunt.

Bling turned around, jerking her head back and forth to watch them. Tank started his van moving forward, creeping up behind them and counting on the finely tuned engine to stay quiet. Their attention was on Bling, allowing him to get closer.

"You want a piece of me? Try and get it," Bling taunted them.

"I'm gonna leave a mark on you, slitch," the man she'd cut spat at her. "You're gonna beg me before I'm done with you."

"Just like your last girlfriend begged you to pay a street doc to give you a bigger dick implant," she snapped back.

The gun trembled in his hand and went off. Bling twisted and looked behind her to the smashed in window of the car. The gun thundered again and her shoulder jerked with the impact, twisting her lithe body around. She cried out from the fire in her shoulder but caught herself and stayed on her feet.

The man closest to her, someone she hadn't tangled with yet, lunged for her. She swung her hand at his outstretched arm and heard him cry out as she sliced through the flesh on her arm. He staggered and grabbed his forearm, trying to stop the flow of blood. He lifted his eyes to her just in time to see her open palm slam into his chest.

The wounded man convulsed and flew back into the side of the car. He hit it, leaving a small dent in the door, and slid down. Smoke rose from his scorched shirt and his arms and legs continued to twitch.

"What the frag! She's a mage! Geek her!"

Tank raced the van ahead and slammed on the brakes to squeal the tires when he came level with them. He was one lane of cars away but there was no way to get closer in time. He triggered the door to slide open and shouted, "Get in!"

The four standing men stared in shock at the van. Bling reacted. She sprinted through the opening left by the man she'd blasted. She vaulted over the hood of a car and slid across the far side as another bullet slammed into the car beneath her. Bling hit the ground and ducked as she took four more steps and then leapt through the open van door.

Tank willed the door shut and gave the van every ounce of acceleration it had. The tires squawked and then grabbed, pressing him into his seat and rolling Bling across the floor into some of the spare equipment he had stashed in the back. He raced out of the parking lot, skidding as he turned the corners hard, and was headed down the street and away from The View as fast as he could.

By the time he'd made two turns to try and keep the men from being able to find them Bling was crouched behind him and held herself steady with a hand on the back of the passenger seat. He turned his head and saw the large opening of the barrel of her Remington roomsweeper.

"Woah! I just—"

"Who the frag are you?" she snapped. "You've been staring at me all night and just happen to have a creepy white van without any windows. Got a bag of candy in here too so you can pick up school kids?"

Tank stared at her, too stunned and distracted by driving the vehicle to respond.

"Motherfragger!" she swore. "Stop the fragging van and let me out!"

"Hang on, damn it," Tank managed. "I'm not... I— look, I just saved your life!"

"Yeah, maybe. Thanks."

"Maybe? What, so you hurt two of them and blasted another. What about the guy with the g— Oh drek, you got shot! Are you okay?"

Bling's eyes narrowed and then she glanced down at her shoulder, turning her head as far as she could. She shrugged and then winced. "I'll be fine."

"You were shot," he said. "People with bullet holes in them don't turn out fine."

"It left a bruise, that's all."

"A bruise? Oh... oh! That coat's got an armor lining, doesn't it!"

"Yeah," she said. She lowered her shotgun but kept it ready. "So what are you?"

"What am I?" he asked. He laughed. "Shouldn't I ask you that? I've never known a stripper that could kick ass like that or use magic that fried a guy's chest."

"I'm not a mage," she said. "Shock circuitry in my palm, that's all."

"Shock... holy drek. Those were hand razors in your fingers, weren't they?"

She shrugged.

He twisted in his seat to look her up and down. "How wired are you?"

"Hey, watch the road!"

Tank reached up and tapped the jack next to his temple. "I'm jacked in to the van. Wireless, I mean. I see everything."

"Oh.. that's whiz. So what are you, like, a rigger?"

"That's right. Name's Tank."

She snorted. "This is a van. You got a tank at home?"

He blushed. "No, it's, uh, it's cause I'm so skinny. You know, like they call fat guys Tiny?"

Her lips twisted up in a smile for the first time since she'd been attacked. "That's kinda cute. I'm Bling."

"I know," he blurted out. "You're the most beautiful girl at The View."

Her smile faded. "Okay, you're getting creepy again. You stalking me?"

"No! I... Okay, I've followed you. Not in person, I mean, dug up a little on you just because you're something special. I... oh god, I really do sound like a stalker."

"Yeah, a little," she said. "You saw what I did to those guys. Trust me, one on one, you don't want to frag with me."

He held up his hands. "No, I don't. Even if I hadn't seen you in action. Really! I'm not some rapist or anything. I just... I admire you, okay?"

She grunted. "Yeah, sure. Just admire quietly then. And if you're going to jerk off, I don't want to see it."

"What? God no! I would never... that's sick!"

"Jerking off is sick?"

"I didn't mean that! I meant— you know what I mean."

She grinned and let him off the hook. "So, uh, where are you taking me since you didn't stop the van. Back to your lair where you hope I can live out every fantasy you've thought up?"

"Oh! Good question... um... I can drop you off at your place, I guess. Where do you, um, live?"

"You're not very good at this good Samaritan thing, are you?"

Tank blushed. "That was creepy again, wasn't it? I promise, I'm not like that! I would never—"

Bling waved a hand to stop him. "I'm starting to believe you."

"Really? Thank god!" he gushed and then waited for her to keep talking. When she looked out the window away from him he waited a little longer. "Uh, Bling? Where do you want to go?"

She sighed and reached up with a hand to touch her face. When she turned back to him he thought he saw a different kind of sparkle on her cheeks — one caused by tears. "Anywhere, I guess. I'll find my way."

He frowned. "No, really, I can take you to your place. I'll forget the address, I promise."

She tried out a fake smile but even he could see through it. "It's not that I don't trust you — I don't, by the way — it's that I've got nowhere to go."

He turned away from her and stared out the windows of his van. He took the next right and pulled over on the side of the street. Once he was stopped he gave her his undivided attention.

Her eyes widened at his abrupt stop. "Wow, that was quick. Guess it's true about dating a homeless girl, you really can drop them off anywhere."

"No! That's not it at all. I, um, I just didn't want to be distracted by driving. Or worried that we might go the wrong way."

"There's no right way," she said. "Besides, this is fine. I'll find a place."

He shook his head. "How can you not have a place? I mean... I saw you, you were raking in the tips!"

She shrugged. "I got debts too. Like anyone."

"Yeah, okay... but still... you're the feature entertainment at The View these days! Unless... oh drek, you're not, like, a junkie or something, are you?"

Bling let out a harsh laugh. "No... no chips, no drugs... nothing. I'm clean. Just broke is all. And I'm not the feature girl anymore. I'm not anything, after tonight."

"What?!"

She nodded. "They fired me. Guess I cut one too many abusive motherfragger and management doesn't like that. Doesn't matter how long I been there or how much I brought in."

"No fragging way," Tank breathed.

She shrugged. "There's other clubs."

"You could get in at one of the new ones downtown. Like when The View was new."

"That's sweet, but I doubt it. I'm old for a dancer."

"Old? If I didn't know you been there for years I wouldn't think you're old enough to work there!"

She studied him for a long second before she responded, "Aww, you really are kind of sweet. I'm an elf, we look young. That's how I've stayed where I was so long. Well, that and a lot of procedures."

He lifted an eyebrow and asked, "Procedures like hand razors and a built in stun baton?"

She laughed. "No, those were extra. A girl can't be too careful in my line of work."

He nodded. "I believe that. A lot of sick fraggers out there."

"You have no idea!"

"You move fast too," he pointed out. "And smooth. Just how much work have you had done?"

She smiled. "That's none of your business."

He held up his hands and laughed. "Okay, fair enough. A lady has to have some mystery to her."

"I'm not much of a lady."

"You are to me," he said.

"Getting creepy again."

He winced. "Sorry... I'm... I'm not good at this."

"At what, saving a damsel in distress or kidnapping a girl having a rough night?"

"Neither!" he gasped.

She grinned. "You're pretty easy, you know that?"

"Easy? What do you mean?"

"Easy to tease."

"Wh— oh. Um... yeah, I guess I am."

She rolled her eyes and laughed. "I owe you though, but I can't pay anything right now. And no, I don't do the joygirl thing anymore either, so don't get your hopes up."

His face paled. "I'd never—"

She laughed. "You're a man, sure you would."

"No! I mean, if you and I... If we... but I'd never expect it. Or, um, think you owed me *that*."

She studied him and chuckled again. "I think I believe you. You're a real character, Tank."

"Thanks... I think."

"You're welcome. Now, let's get moving again. This is Hellraisers turf and I've seen a couple of people checking us out from the alleys. They might get more interested if we stay much longer."

Tank jerked around and stared out the windows of his van at the mention of the gang. He tapped into his van's limited sensors and did a sweep of the area, but didn't pick anything up, but that was just the van sensors. He really needed to upgrade them. "I don't see anyone."

"You're not an elf," she pointed out. "I can see in the dark."

"Oh... that's whiz. I forgot."

She smiled. "So, where to?"

Tank started up the van and pulled back onto the road. "Uh... well, I thought of a way you could pay me back."

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh yeah, what's that?"

"Keep an eye out for me."

Her eyes narrowed.

"I've got some security work to do," he said, twisting the truth. "It would be nice to have someone I can trust keeping an eye on me while I'm working."

Her suspicious glare didn't waver.

"I'll pay you," he blurted out.

"Save my hoop and willing to pay me? How much?"

"Five hundred," he said without thinking about it. Five hundred was a lot. He could cover it, but he had debts too. Then again, this was for the new job... this sort of thing was what the contingency fund was for, right? And if they blew drek up he could take a five hundred hit on a thirty k payout.

"Five hundred? What are you getting yourself into?"

He waved it off. "Not much, I just need to park the van and do some remote security sweeps. I'll patch you into my comm-link and you provide overwatch to let me know if anyone is coming my way."

"Five hundred?" she mused. She nodded and smiled. "You've got a deal, chummer."

## Chapter 4

Bling reached into the pocket of her duster and pulled out her glasses. She glanced around the rooftop she was lying on before putting them on. A few taps to adjust the magnification and she surveyed the cityscape surrounding Tank's van. He'd pulled into an empty Stuffer Shack parking lot and parked behind the building, where service vehicles would unload their cargo. When she'd hopped out she chased out an angry stray cat. She crossed the street and climbed up the cracked brick corner of the office building across the street.

Now she was keeping an eye out for him. Overwatch, he'd called it. If that meant she was watching over him, she got it. He needed it, from what she'd seen. Poor guy got all tongue tied around women. She could understand that too, since he didn't look like he knew how to take care of himself. He even had a smell to him. Not just oil and fuel either, he had that unwashed stink to him if she got too close. Kind of a shame too, he was cute and she liked him. She didn't like him, like him, but he was fun to tease and she felt almost comfortable around him. That was a rare thing.

"See anything?"

Bling reached up to the earpiece connected to the commlink in her pocket and pressed the transmit button on it. "I see a suspicious white van parked in an alley. There was a big fragging cat too. Probably had rabies or something, they way he hissed at me."

"I'll take that to mean all clear," he said, humor in his voice.

"Yeah, I guess. What am I looking for anyhow?"

"Other vehicles, people — especially if they're armed. Anybody that looks like they're looking for something. Or anyone following my drones."

"Oh, um, that's whiz. Nothing yet."

"Okay, drones popping out now."

She watched the back doors of his van open and three small metal insects fly up in the air. "Holy drek, those are giant bugs!"

He chuckled. "Fly Spy drones. Mitsuhama makes them."

Whatever the frag that meant. "Whiz."

"You watch me, I'll watch them," he instructed.

She laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Usually I'm the one being watched."

She heard the laugh in his words. "Yeah, guess it's a role reversal. Plus I'd look bad in a thong."

"Don't knock it till you try it."

He coughed and cleared his throat. "Uh... maybe some other time. Work now?"

She grinned while scanning their surroundings from her high perch. "I'm working, aren't you?"

"You're distracting."

"A girl's gotta make a living."

Tank fell silent while the three drones lifted up in the air and disappeared into the night sky above her. She strained her ears but couldn't hear anything other than the unsteady hum of vehicles passing by a few blocks away on the I-75 superhighway. At this time of night it was mostly unmanned trucks that roared past, although Detroit was a city that never really slept and

still had a fair share of commuter traffic and the occasional go-gang racing past on their motorcycles.

I-75 was mostly neutral territory for the go-gangers, but this area was held by the Blood Gushers. They didn't bother people on the interstate much unless they had a direct run in with them. So far tonight they seemed more interested in drinking, smoking, and doing whatever else boys with fast bikes and small penises did.

She shifted position and picked herself up enough to look in the other direction, where she thought Tank's bugs had flown. That was toward the interstate, although there were a couple of big buildings between them. A card dealership and a bank, plus a few other buildings that she wasn't sure about.

It was a professional part of Troy, not the best place for gangs to hand out. No apartments, clubs, or small businesses here. Plus the kind of businesses she saw had security. The bank, the big building with the Magna-Dassault sign, and the Ford dealership had security guards around the clock. They'd seen one Knight-Errant patrol car already too when they first showed up. The neighborhood was as safe as any she'd ever seen.

She wondered if she could get used to being in a place like this. This much security kept the place clean. More than clean, it felt almost safe here. No joygirls or boys on the corners and no gang members offering anything for a price. She could lose her edge in a place like this, and that scared her more than living with the drek she put up with.

Bling popped her fingernails out, extending them each a full centimeter. She bent and twisted her fingers, admiring the sparkling blades. When she'd hit the fragger in the club her razors hadn't been extended so she'd only scratched him. His buddy in the parking lot got the full treatment though. She cut his arm deep before she hit him with the shock circuits in her palm.

The nails retracted and once again looked like completely normal bedazzled fingernails. She enjoyed the light reflecting off of them and then returned her attention to the world around her. A quick glance confirmed that everything was still clear. She almost hoped something happened, she was getting bored. When she got bored, she got tired. Sleeping was never good though. When she slept she dreamed, and her dreams were seldom good.

That meant she kept busy. As busy as she could until she couldn't keep her eyes open anymore. She even tried Longhaul once, but it scared her. Even worse, she'd felt that way for four days. Four days without any sleep. That was reason enough to stay away from it, even if she hadn't seen too many kids fragged up on the drek they took. Too many people childhood friends. Too many lives ruined on drugs. She wasn't going to be one of them.

"Still quiet?"

Bling jerked and spun around so she could look back down at Tank's van. "Everything's good," she said. "You done doing whatever you're doing?"

"Working on it," he said and then went quiet.

Bling waited a moment and thought about asking him more, but she was worried she might interrupt him. All that gear, he must know what he was doing. If he could throw five hundred nuyen at her just to sit and watch him, he probably had money. He might have been somebody important. Or maybe...

Bling turned and looked at the buildings to the west again. What was he doing? He was using spy drones. She didn't know drek about drones, but she was smart enough to know that using something with the word 'spy' in the name meant he was probably spying on somebody. Or something. Or some place. The bank or the dealership, maybe? Was he going to try to break into the bank? Did anybody do that anymore? Sure, cash still existed, but hardly anybody used it. At

least not in the 'plex. Outside the wall she heard there was a lot more trading going on. Bartering items and services, or using hard currency like cash.

But she was inside the plex, and so was the bank. So that didn't make sense. That left the big factory and the Ford dealership. Was he going to steal a car? Would that even work? Wouldn't the Detroit GridGuide system know the car was stolen? Unless he took it out of the city, but how would he get a stolen car through one of the gates?

She frowned and set to thinking about what she knew. Tank was a rigger — he specialized in cars. Fixing them and driving them. Probably more than cars, since most riggers could handle different sorts of vehicles. Maybe he was a pilot too. Or a captain — or whatever the guys who drove boats were called.

A boat! Was he going to load up some stolen cars on a boat and take them down the Detroit River? Or maybe up it, to Lake Huron or somewhere else. Except he'd have to pass them through customs there too. Frag it, how was he going to do this?

Parts! That had to be it. He'd steal the cars and take them to his garage, then strip them down for parts and sell the parts off. Maybe even make more than if he'd sold the car.

Bling repositioned herself so she could see the dealership. She zoomed in as far as her glasses would and studied the cars in the lot. They were tucked in behind a one meter ferrocrete wall topped with a security grade chain fence. Probably electrified too, for that matter. There were dozens of cars in the lot, maybe even a hundred. All sorts of models too, from the 2078 Mustangs and other family cars to F-150s and a few heavier trucks. She wondered if he'd go for the sports cars or the heavy trucks. They cost a lot more, so it made sense their parts would sell for more.

Whatever he was going to take, she wanted in on it. He sucked when it came to meeting people, she could be his face. She'd handle negotiations, he just had to tell her what the drek was worth. She'd even do it for a discount, this time. Once she showed him how much she could help him out, she'd convince him they could be partners. There'd be no stopping them. He had the gear and the smarts to handle scoping a place out and stealing the cars, she'd take care of everything else.

Why stop with a dealership? Once she proved herself they could find better rides. Real sports cars. Ferrari's and Porsches and... and... other fancy cars she couldn't think of the names of. Steal some rich fragger's quarter million nuyen ride and break that down. People would pay an arm and a leg for those kinds of parts. Maybe literally!

Grinning ear to ear, Bling made her way back to where she could keep an eye on her soon-to-be Partner's van. She reached up to her earpiece and tapped the transmit button. "How's it going?"

After a few seconds that made her more and more tense he replied, "Good. I'm pulling back in now. Hold your position for five and then I'll pick you up on the southeast corner of the block."

She leaned over the edge and looked down. That was at least a hundred meters away and out of sight of both the Stuffer Shack where Tank was parked and the Ford Dealership. Out of sight meant out of mind. Was he going to ditch her?

"How about I come down now and meet you there?" she asked.

Tank took another long second before he responded. "I'm not a decker, I don't know where all the cameras the city of Troy has are located. Better for both of us if there's nothing recorded of you getting back in here."

Bling twisted around and stared at the rooftop she was on. She kept turning until she spotted a camera at an intersection on a traffic light pole. She kept looking and spotted another on the upper corner of a nearby building. She swore under breath and looked back at him. "You didn't telling me the city had fragging cameras!"

"Oh... I thought you knew. Sorry... I'm in a blind spot here, I think. So are you, but one probably caught you walking before you climbed up there. That's another reason for me to pick you up. They'll just think that, um, well... you know."

"No, I don't," she tried not to hiss.

"Um, well... that I'm, uh, picking you up."

"A joygirl."

She could see him wincing in her head and it might have made her smile if she wasn't mad at him.

"Something like that."

It didn't seem like an easy five hundred nuyen anymore now that she was risking being caught on camera. Drek! He hadn't paid her yet. God, she was so stupid!

"You chill?"

Bling unclenched her fists and stared at his van. "You're going to ditch me, aren't you? I should have known five hundred nuyen was too much. Too easy to sucker me."

"What?" he gasped. "No! I'd never—I... are you kidding me right now?"

"Are you fragging with me?" she growled.

"Look, I admit it, I kind of stalked you. Not personally, just through the media releases. And I've been to The View a few times. You're amazing, I never hid that from you, right? So do you think that a loser like me is going to do anything to run away from a goddess like you?"

Bling glared at his van and chewed his words over. She'd been called amazing and beautiful and a goddess before. Plenty of times, in fact, and it was always by creeps that wanted something from her. Usually sex, but sometimes it was something else, like money or even an ego boost to know that they'd beaten her at their sick game.

"Bl— oops. Sorry. Anyhow, are you still there? I promise, I'm not going to ditch you."

She tilted her head a little when he'd almost said her name and stopped himself. He'd said her name before, her stage name, at least. Had he not used it over the commlink? Had she called him by name over the commlink?

"The connection's still open... are you okay? Did something happen? I can send a drone up an—"

"I'm chill," Bling said. "I'm trusting you, don't frag me."

"Never," he promised.

She nodded. "Okay, five minutes?"

"Be there in five minutes," he agreed. "Starting now."

Bling rolled away from the edge of the building and crawled across the top to the other side. She wasn't sure what cameras were around or what views they had, but she figured there weren't any above her. The lower she stayed, the better. Her knees scraped against the roof but the bioware orthoskin modification to her skin made it extremely resilient. No way it was going to leave a mark on her.

She reached the far side and worked along it to the northeast corner of the building. She chewed her lip as she swung her legs over the edge and then began to inch her way down as fast as she could. Speed was desirable, but not practical. She had to stretch and dig in for every finger and foot hold she could get against the weathered brick.

She tapped her glasses when she dropped the final half meter to the ground and easily took her landing by bending her knees. She straightened and looked around, wondering if she'd been spotted by anyone or anything. The only cameras she spotted weren't pointed at her — they were watching street traffic. She spun away fast enough for her duster to fly out a little. She was moving by the time it dropped back against her legs.

She had 45 seconds to go. She increased her stride, her long legs eating up the meters. She rounded the corner and slowed, she had eighteen seconds left. She made it to the far corner with three seconds to spare. She stutter-stepped and stopped, pretending to find something wrong with her boot. She bent over and fidgeted with it, pretending to fix it, and then straightened. She took an experimental step and noted Tank was seven seconds late.

"Motherfragger," she breathed. "I'm gonna—"

The sound of dirt and asphalt crunching under tires brought her around. She turned and saw a white GMA Bullpup van heading towards her. Nothing short of a PMSing troll with a minigun could have wiped the grin off her face.

She flung one side of her coat out and stuck her leg out, bending it at the knee and cocking her other hand to rest on her hip. She waved with her free hand and Tank pulled up beside her. He grinned at her and opened the sliding door in the side.

"Awfully sure of yourself," she teased.

"I figured you'd want to make a clean five hundred nuyen," he tossed back at her.

Bling laughed. "You know the way to a girl's heart," she said and climbed in. The door shut behind her while she squeezed between the seats and climbed into the passenger seat.

Tank stared at her until she started feeling a little creeped out again.

"What?" she asked.

He blushed and looked away. "Sorry... I was, uh, driving. Didn't realize I was staring. I mean, I wasn't! I was—"

"Bulldrek," she said. He blushed darker.

"You're beautiful," he blurted out. "Those glasses... oh my god."

Bling reached up and pulled them off. "Oh, forgot I left them on. I was in a hurry..."

"You need glasses?"

She shook her head. "No... they're special."

He grunted. "What mods?"

"Magnification and smart— hey, that's kinda personal. You know, I like to be mysterious and all."

He grinned. "Yeah, sorry. I knew your eyes were real. They're just too beautiful to be cyber."

"Oh yeah?" she asked, flattered in spite of herself.

"Yeah. Sorry, was that something a lecher would say?"

She shrugged. "Probably, but it's okay, I forgive you."

"You do?"

"It's hard for a girl to blame a guy for calling her beautiful, even if he only wants to get in my pants," she admitted. "Just don't let it happen more than ten or twenty times a day, okay?"

Tank barked out a laugh and glanced at her. "You've got a deal."

"Speaking of deals..."

"Oh! Right... the money," he said and fumbled to pull a credstick out of his pocket. He held it up and waited for her to fish hers out. She tapped it against his and pushed a button on the

side, registering both sticks wirelessly with each other. He held down another button and said, "Transfer five hundred nuyen."

The credstick display flashed as it processed his voice and thumbprint. Hers flashed with the funds received. She pulled it back and made it disappear in the pockets of her coat.

Tank opened his mouth to say something but Bling was there. She hugged him and pressed her lips to his cheek, leaving a tingle of warmth when she backed away and sat down. He missed his turn and kept driving until he shook his head to clear it. "Woah... what was that for?"

Bling grinned at him. "For not being like everyone else."

"Huh?"

"You picked me up," she said. "You told me you were going to be there and you were. Not many people do that."

"No way! For you?"

She shrugged. "It took a lot for me to trust you."

"Wow. That's a shame."

"Yeah, well, don't go getting a big head. It's not like you're my boyfriend of anything."

Tank laughed. "You might not know it to look at me, but I'm not really a popular guy."

Bling snorted.

He blushed. "So anyhow, I fantasize a lot. No, not like that! Well, I mean, that's not what this is about... Um, where was I? Oh yeah... okay, so we've all got our celebs we daydream about or just day to day people we wonder about. I have to say, you're nothing like that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you're so much better than I ever hoped you'd be."

"Better? How?"

"You're funny, for one," he explained. "Smart. We already covered beautiful. What else... vulnerable. That's awesome. Not because I want to blackmail you or anything, just because it makes you more human."

"I'm an elf."

He waved her comment off. "Whatever. We're all human inside. And you've shown me a little bit of what's inside of you. I think it's just as beautiful as the outside."

Bling studied his face for a long time and then turned away and looked out the window. Tank watched her without staring at her and noticed her reach up once to wipe at her cheeks again.

"I'm sorry if I upset you," he said. "I just... I'm not good with people. I say things when I shouldn't, so if I—"

"Shut up."

Tank clamped his mouth shut. He almost opened it to apologize again but stopped himself.

"Where to now?" she asked.

"Uh, I don't know. I mean, I need to head back home, I've got to put together my recordings and study them. Then I need to do some more research and, uh, get ready for a meeting tomorrow. Where do you want me to take you?"

"I don't have a place," she said. "I've got a few things stashed with a roommate, but nothing I can't leave behind. Everything I have is on me or in me."

Tank raised an eyebrow but let her strange phrasing go. She must have meant cyberware. "Okay, so..."

"So can I crash at your place?" she asked.

Tank's eyes nearly fell out of his face. "No way!"

"Oh, sorry, I thought... do you have a girlfriend or something? I can sleep on a couch or the floor. Hell, even in your van— does this seat tilt back?"

"No! I mean no way you asked me that."

She stared at him, confused.

"Yes!" he blurted. He cleared his throat and grinned. "I mean, of course you can stay at my place. And yes, you can have the coach. No, no girlfriend. Yes, the seat does recline, but it's not very comfy."

She laughed. "Am I too much for you?"

He nodded. "Definitely! But I'll learn to deal with it."

She smiled again. "Just so you know, I'm not sleeping with you—"

He held up his hands. "I never expected you to! I just... I really like you and want to help. You helped me, so it's only fair."

"Hush and let me finish," she scolded him.

Tank clamped his lips together and pantomimed zipping them shut.

"Now I was saying, I'm not sleeping with you until you take a shower. You're dirty and, to be honest, you kind of stink. Clean up and then who knows..."

His eyes widened and he missed another turn.

## Chapter 5

Tank blinked, bringing the fuzzy world around him into focus. A smile tugged his lips upwards, the first sight of his day more beautiful than the sun rising over the Detroit river. Last night hadn't been a dream after all. Somehow, against all odds, Bling had come home with him. More than that, they'd hooked up and she'd spent the night with him. In his bed, no less!

After he'd taken a shower and brushed the fur off his teeth she'd given him a genuine smile and told him he cleaned up nice. What happened after that made nice seem like a four letter word— figuratively speaking.

Even with bed-ridden hair and lips gaping as she slept she was still the most amazing sight he'd ever seen. And that was saying something since his first love had always been machines and the engines that brought them to life.

His eyes traveled across her face, committing every line to memory. Her slightly almond shaped eyes and delicate cheek bones swept into the graceful pointed ears, all signs of her elven metatype. Her nose was small and slightly pointed, but in the cutest way possible. Her lips... oh her lips and the things she'd done with them. He shivered next to her in bed and smiled. Even considering where they'd been he yearned to kiss them again.

Her jawline was as delicate as her cheek bones, but there was a set to it that he'd seen when she was stubborn about something that tugged at his heart. As pretty as she was when she smiled, she was adorable, if dangerous, when she was mad too. He couldn't spot a flaw on her if he spent the entire day staring at her. Even down to the dark shadows and red splotches on her neck where the sheets covered her.

Tank shifted in bed. Red splotches? Those hadn't been there before. He was sure of it, he'd been over every inch of her body the night before. He felt the blood rush to his cheeks as he remembered just how thorough she'd wanted him to be when it came to touching, kissing, and rubbing her. No, there definitely hadn't been any redness before.

He reached out and pulled the sheet away from her chest, lifting and lowering it to not drag it across her skin and bother her. The redness wasn't just a splotch, it covered her entire chest, shoulders, arms, and breasts.

"What are— ohhhh," Bling murmured before her question turned into a groan.

Tank pulled the sheet back up and placed it on her chest. "You're covered in a rash," he said. "Are you okay?"

She groaned again and jerked. He thought she was having a convulsion or a seizure at first until he realized her frantic movements were accompanied by half muttered curses and moans of pain. The sheets and blanket writhed on top of her, gathering around her as she struggled to try and toss it away. "Get it off!" she finally managed to yell.

Tank sprang into action. He flung the blanket down, only to learn she'd managed to wrap it around her. He tugged harder but she was still writhing and he couldn't do much but pull it tighter against her. He swore and leapt out of bed, stumbling and falling in his haste before he managed to run around the bed and grab onto her. She struggled hard, making it hard for him to get a firm grip. By the time he tugged her out of bed and dropped her on the floor he had a few scratches on his arms and a fat lip from her head rocking back into his face.

He tugged the last of the sheets away from her feet and knelt next to her. She curled into a ball on the floor, naked and shining a bright red from neck to toe as the rash covered her entire body. Tank stared, horrified and confused.

"What... how can I help?" he stammered.

She moaned and tried to talk, but her jaw was clamped shut. She shook her head and tears ran from her eyes to drip onto the carpet. "Allergy," she managed to whimper.

Tank looked around, confused. What was she allergic to? There was nothing out of the ordinary in his apartment. Sure, a lot of people, especially metahumans, had allergies, but he'd never seen anything like this before.

"I can take you to the hospital," he offered.

She shook her head again. "No.... hosp... no SIN."

"That doesn't matter, I can find someone who'll check you out. I know a guy who can help."

"Can't... money," she managed.

"I'll pay for it!" Tank offered. "Just tell me how to help. What do you need? What are you allergic to? There's nothing special here, just common everyday stuff."

"Cot— cotton."

"Cotton?" Tank said and let his eyes fall on his bed. "You're allergic to cotton?"

"Y—yes," she chattered.

"Cotton," he repeated. "Who the hell is allergic to cotton?"

"Me!"

He winced. "Yeah, I guess you are. Bad too... okay, I'm going to pick you up and take you to someone. Don't argue with me either!"

She shook her head violently. "No!" she shouted loud enough to rock him back.

"What then? Is this going to just go away? You're hyperventilating and it sounds like your wheezing. Isn't this what it sounds like when somebody goes into allergic shock and dies? You're not going to die on me! Not after I just met you."

Tank put his hand on her shoulder, making her jerk even as she trembled, but she didn't push him away. Instead she fought to slow her breathing and take deeper breaths for a few seconds. Long enough she could whisper, "My coat... commlink. Get it."

Tank bolted to his feet and ran through his small apartment to where her long coat was lying on the back of a chair. He rifled through it, finding her roomsweeper, glasses, three dull gray standard certified credsticks, and a handful of extra rounds for the shotgun, and some random objects he didn't care about. He also found her commlink and the wireless earpiece, which he scooped up and ran back to the bedroom with.

"I've got it," he said as he dropped to his knees beside her. He held it out for her while she coughed and shook. If anything her body was reacting even more violently than it had been before she woke up.

With a jerking hand she reached out and fumbled with the commlink. She poked at the screen and then dropped her hand. "Can't... Healz."

"You can't what? Can't use it?"

"No— yes."

"You unlocked it," he said. "Tell me what to look for."

"Healz."

"Healz?" he repeated.

He couldn't tell if she nodded or was having another fit.

Tank scrolled through the contacts on the device all of them as he scanned through the alphanumeric list. He found one for Healz and cried out in relief. He stabbed the entry and

wondered what was wrong when the device said it was dialing but he heard no noise. His eyes fell on the earpiece and he cursed.

Tank fumbled the earpiece into his ear and held his breath. The only noise he heard was the breathy whistle of each desperate breath Bling made. It stretched forever but only lasted a few seconds before he heard someone with a deep voice grumble, "You better be dying."

"Hello? Is your name Healz?" Tank asked.

There was a pregnant pause on the other end. "You're not Bling, who is this?"

Tank's heart leapt in his chest. Whoever this guy was knew her number. What was he to her? A brother? Boyfriend? Pimp? "No... but Bling's here. She's on the floor and having trouble breathing. Something about an allergic reaction to cotton? She wanted me to call you, said you could help."

"Drek!" the man swore. "How bad is she?"

Tank looked her over. Her eyes were puffy and only open to slits. Her lips were swollen and looked like she'd gone a few rounds in a boxing ring with an ork. Her body looked like it was on fire and she was struggling to breathe. "Bad. Real bad. Um, she's red from head to toe and shivering. She could talk before, a little, but now she looks like she's not even with it. Hold on."

Tank placed a hand on her arm and tried to shake her a little. Her skin was hot to the touch. "Bling... come on Bling, talk to me."

He got a breathy moan out of her.

"Frag, she's messed up. She was fine last night, I swear. Then this morning I woke up and saw—"

"Stuff it," the man said. "Where you at?"

"My place... um, I'm on the north side of Redford, near 6 Mile and Inkster."

"Gimme an address," he demanded.

"I can bring her to—"

"Gimme your fragging address!"

"Okay, okay," Tank said while staring at the shivering body next to him. He gave the man his address.

"Be there in fifteen minutes," he said.

"Wait! What about Bling? Can I help her?"

"You got an epi-pen?"

"An epi— you mean those things you stick in your leg? No."

"Then you done all you can. Maybe try praying."

"Oh drek," Tank breathed when the line went dead.

"Healz is on his way," Tank said. He watched for a response but Bling was struggling just to breathe. He put his hand on her shoulder and wondered how much hotter she could get before steam started to rise off her. He moved his hand, pulling her midnight black hair back from her face so he could watch her more closely.

"Hold on," he whispered. "Please hold on. I've never met anyone like you... I can't— I don't want to lose you. Not this soon. Not at all, really. Definitely not like this."

Bling wasn't able to respond or even let him know if she heard him. All she could do was shiver and gasp for breath. Tank kept talking to her though, rattling off whatever came to his mind while he rubbed her arm and sometimes brushed his fingers against her cheek. Time stretched on forever, but when a loud knock echoed through his apartment he felt like he'd just hung up the phone.

Tank ran to the door and yanked it open without bothering to check who was on the other side. He did a double take and stepped back when he saw a towering ork almost as tall as the door frame. The ork had a duffle bag in his hands and a long coat that hid his thick body beneath it.

The ork looked him up and down and, when Tank didn't move or say anything, asked, "Bling here?"

"Oh! Yes! You're healz?"

The ork grunted and stepped into the apartment. "Put some clothes on," he said and walked past Tank towards the doorway that led to his bedroom.

Tank stood dumbstruck for a moment and then realized he was standing naked in the doorway of his apartment. He shut the door and looked around. His apartment was an open concept design of a living room next to a kitchen. Two doors off the main room led to a bathroom and his bedroom, which were joined by another doorway between them. It was simple and small, but it gave him all the room he needed. When he wasn't here he was usually at the garage he rented where he kept his van and most of his gear.

He followed the ork into his bedroom and saw his pants on the floor. He tugged them on and fastened them before moving around the bed and watching the ork as he finished up a quick examination of the naked woman. She looked to be in the same condition he'd left her in.

He pulled out a patch from his bag and peeled the backing off it before slapping it on her thigh. He watched her for several seconds before he saw something he liked. He pulled out another small device, a biomonitor, and pressed several sensors on Bling's chest, forehead, and back. Lines began to track across the display and numbers popped up, displaying her vitals.

Tank tried to get a better view of the display and figure out what was going on, but other than blood pressure and a pulse, he wasn't sure what he was seeing. "How is she?" he asked.

The ork sat back on his heels and looked up at him. "She was close," he admitted. "You did good. Another fifteen, twenty minutes would have been critical."

"What do you mean?"

"Either anaphylactic shock or she might have gotten better."

"Drek!"

"Yeah," the ork agreed. He looked at the bed and the rumpled sheets. "How long was she in there?"

Tank looked at his alarm clock and did the math, "Only four or five hours."

Healz grunted. "She's got a pretty bad allergy to cotton. Crazy, I know, but you seen it with your own eyes."

"Yeah, it freaked me out pretty bad."

The ork studied him before asking, "How bad?"

Tank frowned. "I'm fine. She was the one in trouble, not me."

"No, I mean... forget it."

Tank's eyes widened. "So what, um, what are you?"

"What do I look like?" the ork asked.

"You look like you could play in the Urban Brawl league," tank admitted. "But I don't imagine any of them have medical training."

The ork chuckled. "Fair enough. I've known Bling for a while. She comes to me whenever she needs something new. If I can't do it, I find someone who can and babysit her."

She's a chummer and she pays her bills. She's a good person too, she don't judge people for what they done."

Tank filed the ork's observation away to think about later. Mostly he felt relief that Healz and Bling had a platonic relationship.

"What about you?"

Tank perked up. "Huh?"

"What are you to her? I haven't heard from her in a while, but I don't see none of her touch around here. She's not turning tricks again, is she?"

Tank blushed and shook his head. "No... no, we're... I don't know, to be honest. I hope we're something, but I'm not sure. I helped her out with some trouble and she helped me out with some work. Then we kind of ended up together and, well... she scared the drek out of me when I woke up and saw that rash on her."

Healz grunted and checked his biomonitor again. He nodded and peeled the sensors off her body. "She's coming down. Gonna be real tired today though, probably sleep most of it. You got someplace I can put her... some place without cotton?"

"The couch," Tank said. "Out in my living room. No cotton... I don't think."

"Looked like synth-leather to me," Healz said. "Got any cotton free blankets for her?"

Tank turned to look at his closet where he kept his spare set of sheets. He hesitated and then shrugged. "I don't know."

"Go get some, I'll stay with her."

Tank started to turn and then stopped. "Wait a minute—"

"I'm not going to touch your stuff," the ork snapped at him. "Bling's a chummer, I'm not letting nothing happen to her. I don't know you and you don't know me, but I'm not like that. Matter of fact, I don't even make house calls for most of my patients. She's special."

"Yes, she is," Tank agreed. He hesitated as he watched her and then nodded. Tank stuck his hand out and said, "I'm Tank."

"Healz," the ork said, engulfing Tank's hand in his and nearly snapping it off at the wrist. "You might want to put a shirt on before you go shopping."

Tank blushed and realized he was still half naked. He nodded and went to grab a clean shirt from his closet. By the time he had it on Healz had scooped the leggy elf up in his arms and was making her as comfortable as he could on the living room couch. When he finished he dropped onto Tank's other piece of furniture, a recliner that groaned under the ork's weight, and reached for the remote to the trideo.

"Beer and a little bit of food in the fridge," Tank offered. "I'll be back as soon as I can find something."

Healz nodded. "Got no appointments today anyhow, take your time."

Tank watched the ork a moment longer and found that he wasn't as worried as he probably should have been. There wasn't much in his apartment anyhow, at least nothing that couldn't be replaced. Other than Bling, that is. His other love, his van, was safe and sound in the garage downstairs.

Tank tucked his Fichetti Security 600 pistol into the concealed holster of his jacket and gave the ork a nod before he left his apartment and went shopping.

## Chapter 6

Tank opened the door to his apartment and found Healz still sitting in his chair. The ork's head was tilted back and he was snoring while the trideo played a rerun of Strawberry Hills, a manufactured no-holds-barred reality show where a dozen squatters volunteered to be thrust into a small community with limited resources and were supposed to survive to the end. In this particular episode it looked like a rogue insect spirit was thrust into their midst and was wreaking havoc.

Tank forced his attention to his couch where Bling slept. Healz had draped her long coat over her, but one arm hung out and so did most of one leg. From what he could see the redness was fading and her breathing was a lot slower, smoother, and deeper.

With a spring in his step he turned and dumped his haul on the kitchen table. He'd picked up two more cases of beer, some snacks he could zap to heat up, a new set of synth sheets and pillowcases, and a couple of synthetic blankets — all of it cotton free. He put the beer in the fridge and noticed he was missing two others. A quick glance showed the empty bottles on the small table next to Healz.

Tank shrugged and tore the packaging off one of the blankets. He walked over to Bling and picked up her coat as gently as he could. She stirred a little and even let out a soft whisper of a moan. He couldn't help but smile as he put the coat on the floor at the end of the couch and spread the blanket over her.

Bling huddled into the blanket and moved in her sleep to pull it tighter against her. Too late, Tank realized he hadn't checked to see how the rash was doing on her chest of stomach. He hadn't even ogled her body. He shook his head and bit back a chuckle at the missed opportunity. Something had to be wrong with him if he passed up a free chance to stare at the body of the girl of his dreams.

Tank looked around the room and realized there was nowhere left for him. Bling was tall enough she took up the entire couch— even without her boots on she was taller than he was by five or six centimeters and he was above average. Elves were skinny and tall and Bling was no exception to that stereotype. He went back to the kitchen and pulled out one of his cold beers. That and a soy-muffin from one of the bags on the table was breakfast.

Halfway through the muffin he remembered the deadline on his job. He cursed and lurched to his feet. He hurried into the bedroom and saw the bed was still looked liked it had hosted a professional wrestling match. If Bling saw that she'd think he was a slob. He had no idea what his future was with her, but he wanted to make sure it looked welcoming. More than looked, he needed to make sure it was welcoming! He detoured again and grabbed his new sheets and hurried to make the bed.

Finished with that task he admired his work — he lived along, making his bed was something that happened maybe once a quarter. She'd be sure to see that and think that he had his drek together. Maybe she'd want to try it out again. New sheets and all— and they were cheap too, compared to the cotton / synth blend he'd had before.

Tank shook his head and remembered why he'd come into the bedroom in the first place. He opened up his fire safe and pulled out a credstick registered to his alternate identity. Other, alternate identity, since both of the SIN numbers he worked under were fabricated. Content that any searches he did wouldn't be tied to the one he normally used for his day-to-day life, he went back out to the kitchen and sat down at the table.

He picked at his muffin while he worked with the commlink implanted in his head. Images popped up in his vision as he accessed the Matrix. He was no decker by a long shot, but anybody could log into the matrix via the personal area network of their commlink and be connected to the digital world. A lot of people did it non-stop, augmenting reality by having programs running that tracked places, objects, or people they recognized and displayed relevant information about them. Tank found the information overload too distracting most of the time. He was already fighting against attention deficit disorder on a good day.

He got to work, researching the Magna-Dassault facility and pulling up whatever publicly available intel he could get: old schematics and blueprints, rumors about acquisitions and personnel, security contracts, and shipping and receiving patterns among other things. He lost track of time and left the final quarter of his muffin and most of his beer untouched.

An incoming pulled him out of the web of articles and sources. It took him a moment to realize the person reaching out to him was Pepper. He glanced around his apartment and noted that both of his guests were still sleeping, although each had moved a little while he'd been working.

"Hoi, chummer," Tank subvocalized, trusting his commlink to amplify the volume.

"Hoi," Pepper replied. "I put some feelers out but I don't have anybody available. I figure we could use matrix cover and I'd really like a mage, but they're hard to come by and harder to afford."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Tank agreed. "I scoped the place out last night and I've been doing legwork today, among other things. I've got a few ideas."

"Ideas are good, but let's get together to discuss."

Tank glanced at his occupied living room again. "Uh, yeah... about that—"

"This don't sound good. There a problem?"

"No, no! Well, sort of. Tiny problem, on my end. I can't leave my place right now. I've, uh, got a situation."

"Don't tell me you live with your mom or something."

Tank laughed. "No! Nothing like that, just... well, it's complicated. I've got a, um, a friend that had some problems last night. Her and another chummer crashed here. They're good people, but I don't know one of them all that well and I don't want to just leave them alone in my place."

It took Pepper several seconds before he spoke. "All right, I can come over there."

Tank frowned and then realized he'd already give out his address to Healz, who was a complete unknown to him. He nodded.

"Well?"

"Oh, sorry!" Tank mumbled and realized that Pepper couldn't see him nodding. "Yeah, okay, I'm in Redford, near Farmington Hills. I'll send my address over, hold on."

Pepper grunted and waited for his comm-link to register the address. Once he had it he said, "Whiz. I'll be there in thirty."

"Thirty minutes? Where you coming from?"

"Warren."

"Gotcha. See you in thirty."

The line went dead and Tank decided he should clean up his place a little. It wasn't terrible, but if Pepper was going to work with him, he wanted the man to think he had his drek together. He started to close down the sites and articles he'd opened when he came across one he'd been reading. He picked up where he left off and promised himself he'd straighten up as soon as he finished reading the report. After all, there might be something relevant in it.

Twenty five minutes later a knock on his door roused Tank from a fourth report on the experimental research Magna-Dassault was conducting at the Troy facility.

He closed the links down in case any decker were to check for an open connection and jumped to his feet. He stopped right before he opened the door and pulled up the security camera via his comm-link. A window popped up in his field of view showing Pepper standing outside his door. He killed the connection and opened the door.

"You're early," Tank said and backed out of the doorway.

Pepper stepped in and replied, "Traffic wasn't bad." The man's eyes darted around the room, taking in Tank's kitchen and living room, as well as the two unconscious people in it. His eyes narrowed.

"Yeah, that's what I was talking about," Tank explained. "It's complicated."

"I'll bet," Pepper said. "Didn't know you had a thing with the stripper."

Tank's eyes darted to Bling. He hadn't expected Pepper to recognize her. "Um, I didn't," he said. "Like I said, it's—"

"Complicated," Pepper finished for him.

Tank chuckled. Before he could say anything Bling let out a groan and stretched on the couch. Both men turned to stare at her as she blinked her eyes open and looked around. Tank glanced at Pepper before he hurried across the room and knelt down at the side of the couch.

"Hey," he said. "Good morning."

"Didn't we—" She stifled a yawn and asked, "Is it morning?"

Tank checked the clock on his comm-link and fought back a gasp. "It's six thirty in the afternoon."

"Drek... what happened? We were in the bedroom, weren't we? And... wait a minute. Your sheets were cotton. Oh drek, I had a reaction. I remember some of it.... that's why Healz is here."

Tank nodded. "You told me to call him. He gave you a patch... in fact, I think it's still on your thigh."

Bling threw the sheet off and revealed herself while she searched her thigh for the three centimeter wide patch. She picked at the edge of it and got her nail under it, then peeled it off and held it up to study it. Pepper chuckled in the background.

Tank turned. "What?"

The older man grinned. "Nothing. Just admiring the view. You done fine."

Tank spun back around and saw Bling's wide open eyes. She flung the blanket back over herself while her cheeks took on the same red sheen her entire body had shown when she had the rash.

"You look good," Tank said, anxious to change the topic. His cheeks paled as he realized what he'd said. "I mean the rash! I didn't see it anymore."

Bling's eyes narrowed and then softened. A smile tugged at the corners of her lips but she kept it under control. "I feel good. Tired, but good. Sorry about flashing your friend."

"I'll try not to be offended," Pepper joked.

Tank smirked in spite of the flash of heat he'd felt a moment ago. "It's okay, I guess. I mean, it's your body, not mine, right? Um, by the way, that's Pepper."

Bling glanced at Pepper before she focused on Hank. she tilted her head a little and smiled at the rigger. "I'm going to go get my stuff, okay?"

He nodded and stood up. "Yeah, it's in the bedroom."

She smiled again and clutched the blanket to her as she stood up. She started to move past him and stopped when she was right next to him. She searched his eyes before leaning in and kissing him on the lips. Tank hesitated and then began to kiss back when she pulled away from him. He saw a gleam in her eyes as she whispered, "Thanks."

Tank managed to nod as she turned away and headed for the bathroom. The blanket was clutched to her chest but did nothing to hide her naked backside from them as she walked into the bedroom and shut the door behind her.

Tank stared at the door until Pepper cleared his throat. He jerked and turned around, then blushed and motioned for the table. He cleaned away the mostly-eaten muffin and went to the fridge. "Beer? I've got some Zombie Killer hard cider and some stuff from Griffinclaw brewery."

"Hard cider? I'll try it," Pepper said.

Tank scooped out one of the new beers he'd picked up and felt how cold it was. He nodded and handed it to the man before taking a seat at the table and picking up his warm beer and taking a swig. "Have a seat," he said after he swallowed it down.

Pepper took the chair on the far side of the table and glanced around. "Decent place you got here," he said. "I heard Redford and worried a little."

"North side isn't bad," Tank agreed. "Close enough to Farmington Hills to keep occasional Knight Errant patrols coming by. Far enough that they don't usually stop to ask questions. I've got a nice setup in a garage downstairs too. The price is right, you know?"

"I hear that," Pepper said and gestured with his beer in a virtual toast. He took a drink and nodded. "This is good. Hard cider, eh? I could get used to this."

"So I've been digging up whatever I could and I had a good thought, but I don't think it's going to work with a decker."

Before Pepper could respond the door between the bathroom and the kitchen shut and the shower turned on.

"Guess she needed a shower first," Pepper mused.

Tank's chuckle sounded almost like a giggle. He cleared his throat and nodded. "Yeah... guess so."

"So, this idea?"

Tank almost spit his beer out as he got back on track. "Well, I paint my van to look like one of their suppliers and we go in. With fake certs and a decker covering our hoops, we walk right in, generate a fire alarm or something, and load up the prototypes and drive off."

Pepper grunted. "That's good. No decker though. Not one I know of or trust."

Tank sighed. "Yeah, me either."

"That kinda cover would cost a lot too," Pepper said.

Tank winced. "Yeah... about that.—"

Pepper's eyes narrowed.

Tank pushed on in spite of the look the older man gave him, "I used up some of our contingency today. Building blueprints and some reports hidden behind paywalls. Oh, and I, uh, I needed some cover while I did my physical reconnaissance last night. All told, nine hundred nuyen."

Pepper nodded. "Okay. The contingency wouldn't cover a decker good enough to help us out anyhow."

"So there's my idea on the low-key side," Tank said. "Have you got anything?"

"I've got Knight-Errant's patrol schedule," Pepper said. "One of KE's subsidiaries big on the security contract too, but a smaller firm by the name of St. Clair Securities beat them out."

Their guys have minimal training and no cyberware, unless it's personal. Decent equipment, but on the cheap side."

"Gotta keep costs down," Tank mused.

"They've got some animals too though. Not awakened, but augmented. Shepherds and Dobermans."

"They chipped dogs?"

"Cheaper than people," Pepper said. "Plus they don't have to worry about a person getting fed up and jumping contract. They own the dogs, there's no escape unless they get killed or get old and, well, get killed. Reusable hardware at that point too."

"Dude!"

Pepper shrugged.

"Fragging dogs, man. That's messed up."

"What, you had a puppy growing up?"

"No, I just... It just don't seem right."

Pepper shrugged. "So I know nothing about breaking and entering, but I'm your man if it comes to a firefight and extraction. You got any experience with infiltration or B&E?"

Tank shook his head. "Recon and fire support. That and getting the hell out of a hot spot. I got hardware on my van and a few surprises in store for anyone that comes after us, but I don't know squat about getting inside. That's why I wanted a decker. You leave it up to me, I'm going to shoot the frag out of a wall and drive my van through the rubble to get inside."

"Subtle," Pepper chuckled.

The shower shut off, causing both men to turn their attention the bathroom door. They heard the shower door slide open and then nothing for a long moment. Pepper turned his attention to the sleeping ork and asked, "Who's this guy?"

Tank looked over at the street doc and said, "Calls himself Healz. Friend of Bling's... I guess he's worked on her before. Cyberware and stuff. He know how to help her out this morning."

Pepper's brow furrowed in thought. "Help her out? What happened?"

"Allergic reaction. Turns out she can't touch cotton."

"Cotton? Like, shirts and stuff?"

"My sheets," Tank admitted. "Cotton / synthetic blend."

"Nice."

"I thought so," he said. "Paid a little more for them but they felt nice. Had no idea it would almost kill her."

"Almost? That's some allergy."

"Yeah, she could barely breathe and was in a lot of pain. Slept in them for a few hours until I woke up and saw how red she was."

"Damn."

"Healz knew what to do though, once he got here," Tank said. "He stuck around to keep an eye on her and make sure she was okay, but then he fell asleep. Been like that most of the day."

"Healz," Pepper repeated. He studied the ork for a few seconds and then turned away when the door to Tank's bedroom door opened.

## Chapter 7

Bling stood in the doorway wearing the same outfit Tank had picked her up in last night, minus the long boots and long coat that was lying on the floor beside the couch. Pepper took her in, from her endless legs to her not-so-endless skirt and the belly shirt under her vest. Her black hair was wrapped up in a towel that rested on top of her head. Without saying a word she gathered up her coat and boots and moved to sit in the chair between Tank and Pepper at the round table.

"Feeling better?" Pepper asked as she started the long process of pulling her synth leather boots up her legs. She was turned away from him, not giving him much of a view, but Tank had trouble tearing his eyes away from her purple boy shirts on display under the micro skirt.

"Much," she agreed. She looked up at Tank and winked at him.

Tank blushed but couldn't pull his eyes away. She moved to her other boot and spreader her knees a little wider so she could work on it. Tank's jaw dropped another few millimeters and he fought desperately to not lose himself. "So, uh, the towel's okay?"

"Yeah, full synthetic," she said. "I checked the tags. I'm good, thanks. I saw you put new synth sheets on too, somebody's getting hopeful."

Tank blushed and managed to look away.

"Thanks," she said, bringing him back and sparing him the desire to jump out of his third floor window.

"So, uh, do you have to work tonight?" Pepper asked her.

She turned her head and looked at him. "No. Not at The View, anyhow."

He grunted. "Got the night off, that's whiz. Another job?"

"Tank didn't tell you?"

Tank coughed. "I, um... we didn't talk about you... much. I mean, it's your business, right?"

She smiled at her unlikely hero. "I got fired," she explained. "Cut a guy who asked for more than I wanted to give."

Pepper frowned. "They fired you for that?"

"It might not have been my first offense."

He snorted. "Still. They got no right being like that."

She studied him and smiled. "That's what I said."

"Work any other clubs?"

She shook her head. "Been at The View since it opened. So much for loyalty."

Pepper sighed. "Tell me about it."

She cocked her head. "Sounds like a story?"

He shrugged. "Naw, it's nothing. Life don't always work out the way you want it to. Kind of like what you got going on. I decided to do something about it, that's all."

"Oh yeah, what are you doing about it?" she asked him.

Pepper nodded at Tank. "Finding other opportunities. That's what brought Tank and I together."

She looked back and forth between the two men as a gleam lit up her eyes. "I want in," she said.

Tank's jaw dropped again and Pepper's eyes narrowed.

"In on what?" Pepper demanded, his glare accusing Tank.

"On the job," she said. "Look, I was thinking about it last night... and again in the shower just now. You're big, you must be the muscle, right? Sure you are, and Tank's the driver and he has all his drones for doing... stuff. Whatever drones do. But is that all you've got?"

Tank's red cheeks nodded with the rest of his head.

"That's all we need," Pepper growled. "Unless you can hack into their system. I don't see no datajack, so you're not a decker."

"No, I don't know drek about computers," she admitted.

"So what do you think you can bring that we don't already have?" the older man challenged.

"I've got a pretty face," she pointed out. "And I know how to make men forget it."

"I doubt that very much," Pepper said.

"Is that right?" she asked him as she turned to face him. "Tell me, how many times did you try to look up my skirt when I was putting my boots on?"

He shrugged. "I noticed it, but I wasn't trying to count hairs."

Bling laughed and Tank's eyes nearly fell out of his sockets. "What color are my underwear?"

"Don't know," he said, keeping his eyes on hers.

"Close your eyes," she said.

Pepper closed them.

"What color are my eyes?"

"Blue, with little flecks of silver in them," he said.

"Damn," she muttered. She turned to Tank, "Did you know that?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I knew your underwear was purple though."

Pepper opened his eyes and noticed her pull her legs back together. "You got a point though."

She looked back at him. "What?"

"I got a wife and kids," Pepper explained. "I like all of them. Love them, even, so I'm not looking for a good time. Not many guys like me though. Even the married ones like to look."

Bling smiled. "I can handle myself too. You know, if things go south."

Pepper chuckled. "You look a little tougher than Tank, I'll give you that, but I wouldn't let you go up against anything serious."

"You'd be making a mistake," she said.

Tank nodded and said, "I've seen her take on five guys single handedly. One of them armed. She got shut and didn't bat an eye, then cut one guy's arm so bad he might have bled out before they got him to a street doc. That's if the shock she dumped into his heart didn't kill him outright. Another guy she threw when he tried to grab her and she probably broke a few of his ribs."

"What about the other three?"

"The guy with the gun was the one that tried to grab me in the club," Bling said. "The other two didn't get a chance, Tank showed up and saved them from me."

Pepper laughed. "You jumped in his van to save them from you?"

She grinned. "Less paperwork that way."

The old man laughed again. "All right, cut the drek. What have you got? Implants, upgrades, whatever. I need to know if you expect me to trust you with my life."

Bling stared at him for a long moment before she turned to Tank. "You trust him?"

Tank looked at Pepper and then back to her. "Yeah. He's a chummer, I guess."

Bling pressed her lips together and nodded. She turned back to Pepper and ticked off a finger with each item she mentioned, "Aluminum skeletal reinforcement, wireless reflexes, orthoskin, muscle toning, hand razors, and my right hand has fifty thousand volts charged up in my palm."

His eyes widened as the list went on. "Drek! All that on a stripper's salary?"

She smiled. "Yeah, that's why I don't have a car or a place to stay."

"Or a job," he said.

She hesitated and then laughed. "You might be on to something. If I wasn't jacked up and able to hit back, I'd probably still be working there and letting creeps put their hands all over me."

"I'd say you did the right thing," Tank offered.

She smiled at him. "Me too. So what about us?"

The rigger's mouth went dry and his eyes widened. Bling winked at him and added, "I meant on your job. I figured it out last night, but I didn't know they had some brand new prototype in there. I think that's so whiz. We steal that and sell it to the highest bidder— or do you have a buyer lined up already? I have to admit, I thought you were just going to take some high end cars and strip them down for parts, then sell those off. I think it's still a good idea, but what you're after is probably better... this time, anyhow."

Tank and Pepper shared a look that ranged from shocked to questioning. Finally Pepper spoke, "Steal cars and break them down for parts? What are you talking about?"

"Isn't that why we were scoping out the Ford dealer?"

Tank groaned. "No, not the Ford dealership, I was doing a recon of the Magna-Dassault plant. That's where the prototype is. They've come up with some revolutionary electro-magnetic transmission. From what I've read, it sounds amazing. Standard transmission has, at the most, a ten percent loss of horsepower. This new one actually boosts power up to five percent."

Bling's glassy eyes stared back at him.

Tank laughed and shook his head. "It's cool, trust me. Potentially worth a lot of money."

At the mention of money her gaze cleared and she grinned. "Okay, so we sell it for how much? Just tell me what I need to know and I can handle negotiations."

Pepper snorted. "Just like that?"

She turned on him. "That's right. I know people. I know how to get a good deal out of them. The ware I talked about is only part of what I've had done. Healz did my boobs and hoop too, plus some other tweaks along the way. I've put six figures into this body over the years... maybe a couple of times. But six figures I wouldn't have had if I didn't do it."

They turned and looked at the snoring ork. "That guy?" Tank asked. "He's a real doctor?"

She nodded and dropped her voice before saying, "I heard from a good source he used to work for Docwagon."

"Why'd he quit?" Pepper asked.

She looked him up and down and said, "I don't know. You look a little bit like corporate, why aren't you working for the man?"

Pepper sighed. Rather than defending himself against her accusation he said, "Fair enough."

"I've got a new idea," Tank said. After they both looked at him he leaned forward and laid it out. "Bling's got a good idea— the dealership— but I don't want to get caught up in that kind of job. Might work once or twice, but we'll get caught sooner rather than later."

"So what's your idea?" Pepper asked.

"Distraction," Tank said and leaned forward to share.

## Chapter 8

Gemini – leader of the Blood Gushers go-gang.  
Meds – Gemini's unstable girlfriend

The scream of a turbo-boosted alcohol engine spiking max RPMs split the night. It was loud and shrill, almost loud enough to cover the sporadic cracks of gunfire behind it. It rounded the corner too fast and the driver leaned too far over. His knees brushed asphalt while his passenger wasn't leaning far enough.

The passenger, a woman wearing the green and blue leathers of the Rippers go-gang, lost her balance and flipped off the back of the bike. She hit the ground hard before rolling and sliding across the road and up over the curb to slam into the base of the security fence less than two meters from the guard in the booth.

With the passenger's weight gone, the bike wobbled and slipped too far. It hit the ground and started to slide, leaving its driver to slide behind it until he began to tumble and roll. The bike's rear tire caught the curb and flipped it up and over, slamming it into the fence where it met the wall of small guardhouse. The man inside jumped back and fell down when he hit the far wall.

The guard clambered to his feet and looked around. He could see the front tire of the bike spinning and smelled the high octane alcohol. The driver was on the ground directly ahead of him. He was moving a little, his head rolling back and forth and his arms flopping a little as though he didn't know what he was doing. To his right he saw one of the woman's boots. She was wearing a sexy pair of black leather boots with a high heel. The rest of her had looked good too, but his glimpse had been so brief he couldn't be sure.

"Oh god!" he heard the woman cry out. "Somebody... please! Anybody... help!"

The guard reached for the panic button in his shack but his hand hovered over it. The driver had slumped down, passing out from his wounds or maybe even dead. The woman was sobbing and begging for help. He hesitated again and then grabbed a Defiance T-250 shotgun off the weapon rack. He checked that it was loaded and pumped a round into the chamber.

He hit the switch to open the gate and stepped out of his guard shack. The fence pulled away from the two lane entry, but he was moving through it long before it came to a stop.

"Jones, what are you doing?"

The guard reached up and pushed the button on his radio. "Dumbass biker and his slitch crashed into the fence. He's down but she's hurt. I'm checking her out."

"Wait till I get up there, at least," the other guard panted while he huffed his way around the side of the building from where he'd been on patrol.

"Hurry up then," the guard said without stopping.

"I'm too fat to hurry!"

Jones ignored him and looked at the smashed up bike as he walked around it. The potent mix had stained the sidewalk and continued to spread as it dumped out of the ruined fuel lines. He coughed as the smell of it made his eyes water. "Damn, I could get drunk just sniffing that," he muttered.

"Oh... oh thank god! Help me. My leg... and... and my hip. It hurts so much!"

Jones focused on her and grimaced. There was a puddle under her too, a red one. He shook his head and slung his shotgun over his shoulder. "You're hurt," he told her. "Looks bad, you want me to call Docwagon?"

She looked down and noticed the blood. "Oh drek," she whined. "I don't want to die... oh god... oh god... I—"

The sound of more bike engines interrupted her. They both turned and looked as a dozen bikes sporting variations of the black and gold colors of the Blood Gushers raced down the road towards them.

"Frag this," the guard cursed and started to turn away.

"Wait!" the women begged. "They'll kill me! Please... do something. Help me. I'll—I'll do anything you want."

He turned back, his eyes darting between the bikers and her. He cursed and hurried over to her. "You got any money?"

She shook her head. "No... but I know people. And...and...and I'll find another way to pay you. I promise!"

"You better," he cursed as he reached for her arms. He grabbed her under her shoulders and started walking backwards, dragging her across the ground. She cried out when she dropped off the curb, but it allowed him to get her around the spreading puddle of gas. He didn't notice the red-stained pouch stuffed under the fence.

The bikes were getting closer and he was glancing between them and over his shoulder to see where he was dragging her too. The other guard was gasping for breath as he staggered to a walk and then bent over to put his chubby hands on the thin security armor covering his thighs. The woman's arm jerked when he was looking over his shoulder. The micro-flare she'd thrown ignored right before it struck the ground and bounced under the bike.

"Oh drek!" the guard swore as the whoosh of the alcohol fumes catching fire lit up the night.

The woman cried out from the wave of heat that passed over them and made him drop her. He scrambled to his feet and grabbed her under the arms again. Adrenaline fueled his actions as he yanked her back and then dropped her next to the guard shack. He stepped in and slammed his hand down on the gate control.

The bikers roared down the road in front of the dealership as the gate rumbled to a close. They circled on the road, all but one of the bikes supporting a driver and a passenger. The bike with only one rider stopped in front of the fallen Rippers go-gang member. The rider had a short red mohawk with red designs cut into the shaved hair on the sides of his head looked down at the fallen man. He pulled out a heavy pistol and fired it until the magazine was empty. The body jerked with the first couple of hits and then lie still.

"Frag!" the heavysset guard cursed as he crammed himself into the guard shack behind the other guy.

"What are you doing?" Jones said.

"They just shot that guy!"

"Gang violence," Jones snapped. "The gate's shut and nobody's getting through it bikes."

"They got guns!"

Some of the bikes revved their engines and roared up and down the road in front of them. The shooter loaded a new magazine into his pistol and grinned as he aimed at the woman Jones had left lying on the ground outside. He fired and laughed. The bullet had struck the pavement next to her and made her jump.

"Watch out!" Jones shouted to his partner as he pushed the man out the door and reached down to grab the woman. He pulled her around the corner and into the guardhouse. His partner cursed as he was jostled and pushed away from the panic button he was about to hit.

"Why'd you bring that slitch in here? Are you stupid?"

"Shut up," Jones snapped. "And don't hit that button! It comes out of our paychecks if Knight Errant has to respond and it's not a real emergency."

"There's a fragging go-gang shooting at us out there!"

"They shot at her," Jones said. "And—"

Both men cringed as a bullet struck the ballistic glass. The bullet left a superficial mark but did no lasting damage.

"They're shooting at us!" the cowardly guard squealed. "Frag this, I'm calling in backup."

"Don't do that."

Both men stared at each other and then looked down to where the words had come from. The woman stared up at them, but their eyes went to the large opening at the end of her roomsweeper.

"Fragging slitch," the other guard growled.

The gun went boom. The guard collapsed on her legs while clutching his crotch. The cheap security armor that covered his ground had cracked when the gel round hit it, tenderizing his tenders.

Jones took so long to react the Remington barked again. The gel round hit him in the cheek, grazing skin and pulverizing his cheek bone before it hit the man's helmet and deflected up to the ceiling. The guard collapsed on top of his partner, leaving the woman on the bottom of the dog pile.

She tugged her legs out and climbed to her feet. The heavier guard whined with each movement she made until she towered over him. She drew her foot back and kicked him in the helmet, smacking his head into the wall in case the first concussion wasn't sufficient. He was unconscious.

She hit the button to open the gate and waited until the leader of the Gushers rode through and pulled up next to her. He waited for the other bikes to roar in past him and spread out looking for cars to steal. The passengers on the back of the bikes hopped off as soon as their drivers stopped and began applying maglock bypasses to the vehicles to gain entry.

"Nice job," the go-gang leader said to the woman.

Bling dazzled him with a smile and looked past him to the front. The driver of the bike she'd been on picked his head up and looked around. He groaned as he climbed to his feet and limped through the gate. After a few steps he worked through the aches and began moving better.

"Even for blanks, that was kind of close," Tank accused the man.

Meridian chuckled. "Wanted to make sure I sold it."

"You sold it just fine," Bling assured him. "Scared the crap out of the guards too."

Meridian turned to Tank. "Looks like those lockpicks you gave us are working fine. Which car are you after?"

"The GT1250 in the middle," Tank said.

"Whiz. Go grab it," he offered. He looked at Bling and winked, "I think I'm going to change things up and take something else for a ride."

Bling's breath caught in her throat. She knew that look all too well. "We had a deal."

"What?" Tank asked, looking back and forth between the two.

"Sure, but there's always room for negotiations. Besides, wouldn't you rather ride with somebody at the top? We move all these cars and I can set you up real good."

Tank's face turned red as he figured out what was going on. "Wait a minute," he growled.

Bling held up a hand and used her finger to beckon Meridian closer. He grinned and took a step towards her, only to have her reach out and touch his shirt where his jacket was open. She frowned and did the same for Tank's shirt. She smiled and nodded. "Touch his shirt," she said.

"What?"

"Go ahead, touch it," Bling repeated.

Meridian reached out and brushed Tank's shirt, taking care not to press hard enough to push the shirt against his skin. "Okay, so what?"

"You know what material that is?"

Meridian scowled. "Who gives a frag? So he's got a nice shirt. Baby, once we move these I'll get you the nicest clothes you could ever hope for."

Bling shook her head. "You can't just buy this material."

"What's so fragging special about it?"

"This?" she said and rubbed Tank's shirt and made sure to rub it against his chest. "This is boyfriend material."

Meridian stared at Tank and then shook his head. "What-the-frag-ever. My boys get their toys and we're out. If you're still here, you're on your own!"

Bling blew him a kiss as he spun around and climbed back onto his bike.

"Come on," Tank said and grabbed her hand.

Bling let him pull her through the lot until he reached the Shelby GT 1250 he'd mentioned. He looked it over briefly and whistled in appreciation before sticking his maglock passkey on the side and waited for it to decrypt the lock and pop it open. Just under three seconds passed before he heard the locks release.

"Get in," Tank said.

Bling giggled and ran around the car to the passenger side. She all but fell into the low seat on the car and clapped her hands. "This is so whiz!"

Tank glanced at her and was taken aback by how beautiful her grinning face was. He laughed with her. "Yeah, I guess it kind of is."

They heard a few of the cars starting up in the lot, indicating the ignition bypasses were working too. "Hurry up," Bling urged. "If we're not out of here by the time they leave, I could see Meridian trying to screw us over."

"I wouldn't expect it any other way," Tank said while he snapped his bypass into place. "It's kind of fair, since that's what we're doing to him."

Bling grinned and pulled her door shut. Tank waited patiently for the wireless bypass to do its work. Once the authentication was in, he remoted in through his vehicle control rig and fired the powerful engine. It rumbled to life around them and earned another squeal and a clap from Bling.

Tank pulled his door shut and used his commlink to send out an alert to Knight Errant about the robbery in progress. The GT was leaving the smell of melted rubber behind three seconds later.

"Phase one complete," Tank said over his commlink to the members of the team.

"Any problems?" Pepper asked.

"Wrecking a bike at over thirty KPH is not a pleasant experience," Tank grumbled.

"How'd Bling do?"

"I'm whiz," Bling joined in after slipping her earpiece in. "The trick is learning how to go down."

Tank and Pepper both coughed.

"You'll, uh, have to teach me," Tank said while his cheeks flared red.

"Oh, you can count on that," she leered back at him.

"What's your ETA?"

Tank rounded the corner, screeching the tires, and jammed on the brakes before wheeling into the same stuffer shack back alley he'd used two days before. He pulled up behind a parked Ares Roadmaster and said, "As long as it takes us to get out of the car."

The rear doors of the roadmaster split open to reveal Healz and Pepper standing inside. Pepper wore a Knight Errant police uniform, looking official beside the large ork in an armored jacket with a full blown combat axe strapped across his back. They stepped out of the back of the security transport so Bling and Tank could climb in.

Bling stripped off her jacket retrieved her roomsweeper and glasses. She picked up her lined coat secured the pistol-sized shotgun in the concealed holster and then put her smart glasses in a pocket. She looked down at the tears and scuff marks in her pants from the wreck and nodded. "This should do," she said.

Tank traded his green jacket for his regular brown one and settled into one of the padded seats ahead of the hospital gurney in the back of Healz's truck. He plugged himself into the Roadmaster to expand the wireless range of his control rig and synced to his van that was hidden nearby. He held up a thumb and said, "I'm ready. Gridguide shows a hazard in front of the dealership and is rerouting traffic. Knight Errant cops are inbound."

"Bling, you're on," Pepper said. "Remember the plan."

Bling flashed him a smile and handed Healz her folded long coat. "Don't lose this," she warned the ork.

He grunted and said, "Just got you feeling better, be careful."

She waved a dismissive hand, "You think I'm going to wreck this work of art?"

The combat medic rolled his eyes as she took her long legged stride to a jog. She cleared the corner and cross the street to the building she'd climbed on the roof of the other night. Now she stayed on the ground and made her way to the corner and around it, heading towards their true objective.

"How does she run in those things?" Pepper wondered.

"That girl's living proof that magic exists in the sixth world," Healz answered. "Maybe not slinging manabolts and drek, but there's something special about her."

"Hey, she's mine!" Tank turned off his commlink and pouted from the back of the roadmaster.

Pepper and Healz chuckled. "Relax, I'm taken," Pepper said.

"She's my patient," Healz said, as though that excluded him from being interested.

"She's moving pretty fast, I better get in position," Pepper said and took off in a jog.

Tank opened his commlink and said, "Knight Errant is showing up. Four go-gangers are still in the dealership, I'm going to override their controls."

As they moved into position, or in Healz case covered the vehicles and Tank, they heard the roar of engines and squealing of tires a couple of blocks away. The crunch of metal and plastic impacting echoed off the buildings and into the alley.

"Four crashes, casualties probable," Tank said. "I don't think anyone hit hard enough to get geeked. I can't be sure about the Knight Errant cruisers, but they're heavier and carry more armor than the average Ford."

A few seconds later Tank grinned. "They're shutting down a bigger section and bringing reinforcements. Looks like all of Troy and most of Sterling Heights is being reassigned."

"We're good," Pepper said, his voiced barely strained by exertion. "Bling, dazzle 'em."

## Chapter 9

Bling staggered around the corner, dragging her left foot as she limped along the sidewalk. The entrance to the plant was over a hundred meters ahead. A hundred long, awkward meters with her walking the way she was. She kept staggering though, she had a job to do.

"Wait a minute! I jumped off a moving motorcycle and single handedly took on two rent-a-cops," she muttered. "Why am I the rookie trying out for the team?"

"Your commlink's on," Healz notified her.

"Drek!" she hissed while Pepper and Tank failed to hide back their chuckles.

"You're doing good," Pepper said. "Just keep their attention on you and don't get shot."

"Don't get shot, got it," she agreed.

"Now stay frosty and get to work."

Bling fought the urge to flip the old man off and channeled her frustration into her gait. It took her nearly a full minute to near the gate, a full minute where her walk degraded as she pretended to be getting worse and worse. She stumbled and fell, hitting her knee hard on the concrete. Aluminum laced bones and unnaturally toughened skin or not, the hurt was real. She was bruised from the crash and knew she'd be feeling that later too.

She dragged herself across the ground a couple more yards before she gave up and collapsed. She looked around, moving her head slowly and blinking a lot to try and focus. The gate was four or five yards away. Close enough. "Help," she called out. "Go-gangers... my boyfriend—"

Pepper heard his cue and rounded the corner. He saw her on the ground and broke into a run towards her. Bling looked up at the sound of his feet slapping the ground and lifted a hand to reach for him. Her hand trembled and then dropped, sliding off her stomach to rest at her side.

Pepper knelt beside her and reached down. "Ma'am? Ma'am! Are you hurt?"

Bling's eyelids fluttered. "Hurt... I think so. My foot... where's Josh? He was hurt! They shot him! I saw—"

"Miss, calm down, I've got to get you some help," Pepper said. He reached up to activate the comm-link attached to the breast of his uniform and said, "Dispatch, this is KE one-nine-zero-seven-eight. I've got a ten-fifty one block over from the disturbance at the Ford Dealership in Troy, over."

A few seconds passed before Tank's electronically altered voice came through the comm-link. "Copy, one-nine-zero-seven-eight. Docwagon has been contacted for support. ETA is five minutes. With the nearby ten-thirty advise you find a secure location to wait."

Pepper cursed and looked down at Bling. "Ten minutes, ma'am. I need you to hold on for ten minutes. They said five, but they're never on time. First thing though, I've got to keep you safe. I'm not a doctor, but you're going to be fine, you're just in shock."

He looked around and settled on the nearby gate. Armored glass, a step up from the ballistic glass used at the dealership, protected the guard house and gate control building. "I'm going to pick you up and carry you," he warned her before he rearranged her and slipped his arms under her. He straightened, lifting her with his legs until his back had to take over. Bling let her arms and head hang limp, using the excuse to look around while making sure she didn't focus on anything so her eyes looked glazed over.

Pepper made it to the gate and called out, "Hey! Open up, I need a secure place to hold out while we wait for an ambulance!"

"Sorry, officer, we're not supposed to open up for anyone after hours without proper clearance," a woman's voice said over a speaker after a few seconds.

The sound of nearby gunfire made Pepper cringe. "You hear that? There's a goddamn war going on over there. Go-gangers against cops and the cops are outnumbered! They see me and her, they're not going to ask questions. They won't be leaving witnesses behind either."

He waited several more seconds without a response. "Look, my badge is one-nine-zero-seven-eight. Call it in and check— no, let me in and then call it in and check. She's in shock and I'm one man against what, two to four of you in there? You help Knight Errant out and you earn a citation for citizenship from the city of Troy, not to mention Knight Errant's good will and a favor from me. I don't know this lady at all, but I bet she'll be mighty happy you saved her life too."

A few more seconds passed before the inbound gate started to open. It was accompanied by the woman's voice. "Get in here and don't say a fragging thing to anyone."

"Thanks," Pepper said while he waited for the gate to open enough to walk through it with Bling in his hands. He cleared the guard shack and stopped when a giant Doberman started barking at him from behind the wall of a reinforced wire mesh cage. The dog's left eye was cybernetic and surrounded by a steel enclosure. His muscles bulged and his front teeth had been pulled out and replaced with steel variants.

"Holy drek!" Pepper cursed.

The door to the guard shack opened and a woman ducked under the opening so the curled up horns on her head didn't get hung up on the top of the door jamb. The troll pointed at an open spot in front of the cage. "Wait there," she barked.

Pepper turned and moved to where she'd pointed. He lowered Bling and fussed over her for a moment, checking her leg and then feeling for a pulse and respiration. Last he flashed his hand back and forth in front of her eyes. He scowled and turned to see the troll watching him, a Uzi IV hung from a strap across her belly. Next to her tall form it looked like a light pistol instead of a submachine gun.

"She's lost a lot of blood," he told the troll as though the woman cared. "She's in shock too. Do you have any first aid supplies in there? A blanket, at least?"

"No."

"Come on," Pepper said. "You've got to have something? A stim patch or a tranq patch?"

"You can't give her a stim patch if she's bleeding out, it'll speed it up."

Pepper looked down at Bling and back up. "I figured it would bring her out of shock."

"Maybe, but if she's bleeding she won't last long. Can't use a tranq if she's low on blood either, it might stop her heart."

"Frag," Pepper muttered. He glanced up at her. "You know a lot about this sort of thing? You want to come see if you can help her?"

The troll glanced at Bling and then shook her head. "Can't."

"Why not? You think you're going to get in trouble for helping someone out?"

The troll hesitated and shook her head. "Sorry, officer. I got a solid job here. Pay ain't great, but it's steady and as long as I don't screw it up, it's stable. I took a big enough risk letting you in here. I leave my station and it's all over for me."

Pepper sighed. "I get it," he said. "I respect loyalty too, but if it means this woman dies... well, if you've got any certifications you could get yourself in legal trouble for not offering to assist."

She glared at him and muttered, "Fragging cops... what was your badge number?"

Pepper had to fight back a laugh and masked it with a scowl. He opened his mouth when the sound of a siren growing closer distinguished itself from the bedlam happening on the other side of the block.

The troll turned and looked out her one way windows and then favored him with a smug grin. "Here's Docwagon," she said.

Pepper let out a sigh of relief. "That's great, thanks."

She snorted and turned to open the gate.

Pepper watched the GMC Bulldog with fresh paint scooted through the gate as soon as it was open. It screeched to a halt beside him and the back doors opened wide. The whirl of machinery was the first sign something was out of the ordinary. Two roto-drones drifted out of the back and opened fire, each blasting the troll in the doorway with a pair of AK-97 assault rifles loaded full of gel rounds.

The troll roared as she fell back under the unexpected onslaught. Between her security armor and the natural size and strength of a troll she weathered the brutal assault but ended up falling into the guard shack and scrambled to get out of the way. A second voice in the guard shack shouted something but it was lost in the gunfire.

Pepper plucked a grenade from his pocket and tossed it through the open doorway. It cooked for five seconds before it emitted a brilliant flash and a powerful burst of pressure that rattled the windows and walls of the guard shack. Pepper had to shake his head from the nearby effects of the flashbang grenade.

He lurched forward, drawing his pistol in and stepping into the doorway with the Predator V held in a two handed grip. Thermographic overlays helped him locate the guards immediately. His smartlink identified them and provided firing assistance even though at the range he didn't need it. He fired twice at the human and then three times at the troll, hammering them at close range with the large caliber gel rounds.

He surveyed the room a moment longer, making sure the guards wouldn't be a threat, and then turned to see Bling already climbing into the back of Tank's van. He paused to stare back at the Doberman that was going crazy inside his cage. He started to lift his gun and then shook his head and turned away. The dog and the guards were just doing their jobs, after all. He was the criminal here, not them.

"Let's go," Pepper said as he climbed into the vehicle. Healz pulled the door shut behind him while Bling pulled her long coat on and drew her roomsweeper. She checked to make sure the magazine was full and when she realized she hadn't reloaded it yet, quickly dug into her pocket to reload it with spare shells.

"Good job back there," Pepper told her as Tank remotely drove the van through the empty parking lot around to a loading dock.

"You too," Bling said and reached into her pocket to pull out her smartglasses. She slipped them on and smiled as her roomsweeper's smartlink system wirelessly synced with the glasses. Additional information popped up in her field of view, bringing in the augmented reality that helped display pertinent data at a glance. "You'd make a good cop. Especially the way you manhandled that woman, I thought she was going to either piss herself or tear you apart."

Pepper chuckled. "Yeah, I wanted to be a copy for a while. Trained with them a lot too, believe it not."

"That how you knew what codes to call in?"

Pepper nodded.

"So why didn't you become one? Other than good taste, I mean?"

He chuckled. "The real reason? Probably because I'm too old," he said. "That or I'd pissed somebody off up the food chain."

"Well, I like you a lot more like this," Bling told him.

"Knight-Errant's got a good crew," Healz spoke up. "Mostly. They do what they can."

"Oh yeah, the guys on the beat are solid," Pepper agreed.

"What about the ones on the take?" Bling interrupted.

Pepper frowned as he pulled his armored leather jacket over his cop uniform. "Knight-Errant keeps an eye on things so that doesn't happen... much."

Bling snorted. "Maybe they have a hard time hiding money, but trust me, they're getting a little special service to turn a blind eye to certain things."

Pepper grabbed his FN-HAR assault rifle and slipped the bandolier over his shoulder. Before he turned to stare at her. His Ingram Smartgun already rode on a holster on his thigh. "What?"

"You know, harass a stripper or a joygirl unless she gives them a freebie. Stuff like that."

"I didn't know," Pepper said. He frowned and glanced at the ork.

Healz shrugged. "There's always gonna be assholes."

"Showtime," Tank's voice said over their commlinks as the van stopped.

Healz threw open the backdoor and waited for Pepper and Bling to hop out. He sat on the edge and waited, a Colt Cobra TZ-120 submachinegun held in his hands. "Yell if you need help."

"I always do," Bling said while flashing the ork a smile.

They stopped at the access door beside the loading bay. Pepper dug through his pocket for a maglock unscrambler and looked down at the shotgun in Bling's hands. "Too late for janitors, Tank says the only thing in here is going to be drones and turrets."

"I know."

"You sure you want to use gel rounds?"

"I'm sure," she said.

Pepper shrugged and slapped the electronic lockpick on the door. He turned it on and pulled his rifle into position while he waited for it to sleaze through the simple firewall on the lock and disable it. He stepped to the side and nodded. Bling grabbed the door and yanked it open so he could step into the doorway.

## Chapter 10

Pepper moved to the left of the door to make room for bling while he swept the room from left to right. Bling slid through the door and moved to the right, covering the loading bay from right to left.

Cameras were mounted throughout the facility, many of them overlapping. Pepper and Bling noted and dismissed them. Bling had used her skills to offer a minimal disguise and it was the best they could hope for without a decker to take over the building's systems. It was discovery they were worried about – corps dealt with shadowrunners often enough they quickly learned that retaliation was costly and bad for PR. Especially if they needed to dig into their special operations fund to hire a team of shadowrunners themselves.

No, the reason they were wary of the cameras was because a smart system would identify their location and transmit it to defensive systems. If their target realized the value of their designs and prototypes, there were sure to be defensive systems.

"Clear left," Pepper said.

"Clear right," Blind responded.

Pepper led the way through the loading dock, following the yellow painted lines on the ground that indicated areas safe for human traffic. After hours there was little to worry about fork truck or other traffic, but he knew the painted areas would be clear.

The now-familiar whirring of a drone alerted them to look up. Three of the MCT-Nissan Roto-Drones rose above the production equipment deeper into the plant and began to fly towards them. Red dots flashed across the floor and stacks of pallets and parts near them as the drones approached.

"Watch out, those are big fragging guns," Pepper warned.

Bling's eyes widened and she bit her lip. She nodded and darted between two crates to the right, disappearing into the near darkness.

Pepper glanced her way and did a double take. "What the frag?"

"Easier to take them down if we split up," she subvocalized over her commlink.

He grunted and dropped to a crouch. His FN-HAR came up and the smartlink wired through his palm to the device confirmed he had a firing solution. He squeezed his trigger and sent a burst of three rounds into one of the lightly armored roto-drones. All three bullets struck the armor and left it chewed up and mangled as they deflected into the rafters. The drone rotated and seemed to hesitate while the laser sight brushed against his thigh.

Pepper threw himself to the side, rolling across the ferrocete ground. A long burst hit the ground where'd he been and left it cracked and marred, but not as chewed up as he expected. He chuckled even as he took cover behind a crate. "They're using gel rounds! Ingram fragging valiants and they're shooting gel rounds."

"They must want to take intruders alive," Bling said. "That way they can torture us to find out what we're doing and who we're working for."

Pepper scowled and risked a glance over the top of his crate. The drone he'd hit was hovering and searching for him. One to his right was canvassing the factory floor trying to find Bling. The final drone was circling from his left and coming over what looked like shipping and receiving offices to pin him down in a crossfire. "They're running on dog-brains."

"They use dogs for these too?"

Pepper fought against rolling his eyes. "No, a dog brain is an AI. Very primitive autopilot."

"Oh... so this is like a computer game on the hardest difficulty level?"

"And no save games," he added while slipping behind another crate to give himself some more room. He slipped around the edge of the crate and took aim again before firing a long burst into the flanking roto-drone. Several bullets raked through armor plating from bottom to top, brutalizing it and exposing holes to its innards. One bullet sparked off one of the rotors before the last couple passed over its head.

Pepper dove back to his prior hiding place behind the first crate while both drones moved to catch him in a crossfire. Their lasers passed across the floor and crates without locating him.

"More like a medium difficulty level," Pepper said. "They aren't very smart."

He circled around his crate and was about to expose himself to take another shot when he noticed the third drone was hovering about four meters above the ground and two meters out from some scaffolding built to hold three tiers of parts on pallets. He scrambled to bring his gun to bear on it, fearing it had him dead to rights.

Bling broke from cover almost directly under it. She ran between two crates and under the scaffolding, then caught a bar above her head on the far side of it. She swung up, flinging herself and letting go so she could flip and twist in mid-air. She landed on the second tier of the rack and took three more steps before leaping through the air and slapping her open palm against the bottom side of the roto-drone, just above its light machinegun mount.

Pepper watched as the drone flashed from internal shorts. Bling kept going and hit the ground hard, rolling into a large press. The drone crashed to the ground behind her, smoke rising into the air from its toasted electronics.

He twisted around and fired from his hip up at the first drone he'd damaged. He missed the main body but chewed the metal of the rotors with his short burst. The drone's laser swept across him but the damage to its rotors caused it to rotate too far. The return fire slapped the floor and a crate next to him and showered him with concrete, plastic, and gel fragments.

He dove forward under the drone's firing arc and twisted to land on his back. Pepper's gun roared as he fired on full auto and riddled the bottom of the drone until it jerked back and forth and spun out of control with a final puff of smoke.

"You good?" Pepper asked while he rolled over and started to get up.

"Yeah, I—"

The auto fire cut her off and sent Pepper rolling as gel rounds slammed into the back of his jacket. He had his breath knocked out of him but he scrambled to pull himself behind a conveyer line. The auto fire stopped but his back was on fire and he still couldn't breathe.

"Pepper!" she shouted, her voice easy to hear through his commlink and the factory.

The roto-drone spun around, orienting on the new threat. Pepper kicked his foot into the bolted leg of the belt and pushed himself enough so he could bring his rifle to bear. As soon as the smartlink flashed he squeezed the trigger and held it down until his magazine was empty.

It was a good thing he'd battered the drone earlier because most of his shots went over the drone. The first couple punched through the weakened and gapping armor, shattering control boards and destroying a battery. The drone's rotors stopped and it dropped the floor, canting to the side until it came to a final rest with its machinegun pointing straight at him less than two meters away.

Pepper lurched to his feet and staggered several steps until he was finally able to draw in a ragged breath. He winced and rolled his shoulders, feeling the burn of the hard impact the gel

rounds had made against his upper back. Something flashed in the bottom corner of his eye and when he focused on it he realized his rifle was empty.

"You're okay!" Bling said as she jogged out from the assembly line she'd fallen into.

Pepper finished seating his new mag and cycled a fresh round in. "Won't be sleeping on my back anytime soon though," he said.

"Turn around."

He did and she stepped up behind him and studied his back. "No blood and no holes, but the leather's torn up pretty good."

He grunted. "I'll live," he said. "Let's get this done. Hopefully that's the last of the defenses."

"No kidding!" she agreed as she fell in beside him.

"That was pretty whiz," he admitted. "You used to be some kind of gymnast or something?"

She grinned at his praise. "Nothing official. I've always been flexible. That and, well, you know... a stripper. I've done some pretty wicked pole routines."

He chuckled. "Didn't think they taught that at stripper school."

She laughed. "I've never been in to any kind of school. At least not for more than a few days. Orphaned as soon as I was born and because I was an elf, no foster parents wanted me. I escaped before they could make me into something I didn't want and spent my childhood on the streets."

Pepper glanced at her and studied her. He nodded. "Considering all that, I guess you done pretty good for yourself."

She grinned again. "Thanks!"

"So does this mean you're done dancing?"

"God, I hope so!" she said. "The money's barely there anymore, at least at The View. I mean, this pays what, fifteen thousand? That's good, but it won't last long. I'd really like to see where this thing with Tank goes, and I've got all sorts of ideas for things we can do to make more money. That car job, for example — if we hit a couple more dealerships or some private owners with expensive cars, that will pay nice."

Pepper scowled. "That's bad news. Knight Errant will be on to that in no time. Better being a runner than a criminal. They get pressured to nail serial criminals."

She pouted. "Tank said that too. Say, you seem to know a lot about cops and Knight Errant, why is that?"

He pressed his lips together and then shook his head. "Another time."

"Aw, come on!" she pleaded. "You want me to tell you a dirty secret first?"

"Gah! No!"

She laughed again and brushed her shoulder against his. "Okay, fine, but I'm holding you to that."

They made their way through the manufacturing portion of the plant past several doors, reading the signs at each. When they finally found one that read, "Lab," Pepper gestured at it.

Pepper slung his rifle over his shoulder and drew his Predator. He popped the mag and slid into his pocket before ejecting the gel round in the chamber and adding it to his pocket. From his utility belt he pulled a new pistol magazine and loaded it, then racked a round in.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Tanks said this door is probably going to be too secure to unlock," he explained while pointing his pistol at the lock. "So I'm using my own skeleton key."

Bling's eyes widened. She clapped her hands over her ears just in time. Pepper's pistol bucked in his hands once, twice, and third time. Each round hit the handle and lock with a secondary explosion that peeled back the metal and left it exposed. By the third explosive round the lock was battered and beaten, but still in place. The door around it, however, was twisted and ruined.

Pepper kicked the door, making it shudder and bending the remaining metal was screwed to the locking mechanism. He scowled and kicked it again. On the second try the metal of the door broke free and the door swung in.

They had barely registered the dimly lit hallway beyond the door when fire blossomed out of the shadows and hit them both hard enough to send them rolling.

## Chapter 11

"I'm hit!" Pepper spat over his commlink. He scooted across the smooth floor and put his back to the wall beside the door before reaching across his body to check his wounds. His chest felt numb, but at the same time his body was shaking and there was a burning ache in his right shoulder. He brought his hand away and looked at it, expecting the worst.

There was nothing on it.

"What the..." he craned his head down to look at himself and flipped through low light and thermographic vision modes to verify there was no blood. His jacket was chewed up and breathing was harder than ever, but whatever had hit him hadn't chewed him apart.

"Bling? You okay?"

"No," she hissed. "Fragging drone shot me!"

"Me too," Pepper said. "My armor held up. Shoulder's acting funny though."

"I'm bleeding," she said. "Feels like my side's on fire!"

Pepper cursed and looked across the open doorway to the other side where Bling was backed against the same wall he was. She was using her right hand to tug at her coat and shirt to examine herself. "Is it bad?"

She hesitated a moment as she continued to self-diagnose. "It's... I don't know. There's a lot of blood and it hurts to take in a full breath— like now. Looks like... oh drek! You're not gonna believe this."

Pepper brought up the smartlink camera in his gun and shoved the rifle around the corner. The drone sat in the shadows, waiting for them to reappear. It spotted his rifle and swiveled on the four wheels, each attached to an insect-like leg, to bring it into sight. Pepper yanked his gun back just as a fresh burst of gunfire tore jagged holes in the metal door and blew chunks of ferrocrete out of the corner of the wall.

"Try me," Pepper said.

"He shoot me in the boob! Exit wound on my left side halfway back. Hurts like a motherfragger, but the rest his my coat and didn't punch through."

"Good," Pepper said. "It's holding position."

Tank spoke over the commlink, his voice clipped with tension. "What is it?"

"Four legged drone with a big-ass gun on its back. Kind of looks like a cross between a four legged spider and a mobile turret."

"Steel Lynx," Tank said. "Only a single weapon?"

"Yeah," Pepper said after another glance showed the lynx hadn't moved and the corner he was hiding behind was beginning to resemble Swiss cheese. "I think it's a Stoner M202."

"What's that?" Bling asked.

"Big-fragging-gun," Pepper replied. "A medium machinegun and it's using real bullets, not gel rounds."

"You need to move your hoops," Healz told them. "Your distraction is getting quiet and even if you did take out the guards, these drones must have an automated system to alert somebody. Do you need me to come in?"

"I'm okay," Bling said. "We'll make it."

"Any suggestions how?" Pepper asked.

"It's got one gun," she said. "There are two of us."

"That drone has really good armor," Tank warned.

"Of course it does," Pepper muttered. "I've got one flashbang left, but that won't do crap. Down to two mags for my rifle."

"What about your pistol?"

The pistol still had explosive rounds in the magazine. In fact, there were twelve left. "It knows where I am," he said as slung his rifle and drew his pistol. "I'm not sure how this is going work."

"Easy," Bling said as she spun around and crouched beside the doorway. "Well, maybe not easy. I'll get it tracking me and hide while you open up. When it turns on you, I'll pop back in."

"This is a bad idea," Pepper growled.

"You just keep it busy," she said.

"I'd like to walk away from this too, you know!"

"You saw me on the storage rack, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So trust me. I won't let you down."

Pepper hesitated and then nodded. "All right, let's do it. And kid... don't get shot."

"Again."

He frowned. "Yeah, again."

"Going," she said before popping around the corner and firing her roomsweeper. The heavy slug passed between its legs. The lynx spun on its wheel, tracking her while she fired twice more. She yelped and ducked behind cover almost too late – powdered ferrocrete and steel slivers blasted her left arm and hand where the bullets chewed the corner of the wall.

Pepper's Predator V barked again and again, hitting the lynx's main body and leaving dents and scorch marks in the armor where the bullets struck and exploded. It looked like a dimpled golf ball by the time he was ducking back under cover, but the drone's effectiveness hadn't been reduced in the least.

Pepper only waited long enough to draw a single breath before he popped back out and fired twice more. The lynx fired back, hammering his arm with three bullets as he tried to retreat. The bullets grazed the armored sleeve of his jacket, stinging his arm and ripping gashes in the leather.

Pepper stood and stuck his gun around the wall. Using his smartlink he fired again from the higher vantage point. His bullets weren't as accurate but two out of three hit the lynx. The end result was the drone firing back a long burst that stitched through the wall as the gun rose toward him. He jerked back in time but shrapnel from the disintegrating wall stung the back of his head and neck.

"Any time now," Pepper shouted while he ejected his magazine and slammed in a fresh one of normal ammo. He holstered his pistol and retrieved his rifle. "My Predator didn't do drek to it!"

Bling spun around the corner a heartbeat before Pepper did the same. The lynx started to turn towards her but Pepper's reappearance rated a higher threat on its system. It turned back toward him, firing as it rotated.

Pepper fired back, going full auto and hammering as many bullets into the lynx as he could while the rifle bucked against his shoulder. Bling took three long running steps forward and then leapt like she was trying to slide into home plate. She twisted in mid-air so her back hit the ground while Pepper was sidestepping to the right and staying a few centimeters ahead of the drone's stream of deadly lead.

Pepper ducked behind right side of the wall where Bling had been hiding. More bullets tore apart the door and reduced the corner of the wall to rubble. He clenched his teeth together and checked that he had twelve rounds left. It wouldn't be enough to make a difference but he had to do something or Bling was dead.

He jumped out, landing more than halfway to the other side of the double doors and brushed his finger over the trigger. He held his fire when his smartlink flashed a warning in his vision, Bling was in front and underneath the lynx. Potentially in his firing lane. The lynx recognized the threat and began to roll backwards.

Bling dropped her shotgun and grabbed onto one of the rear legs. She was yanked back with it as it retreated. The lynx raised its rear legs and tilted its gun down towards her legs. Before it fired on her she pulled herself back and jammed her right palm up under the main part of its body. She released the charge stored in her capacitors at the same time the Lynx opened fire.

Bling wanted to scream as her legs were bathed in fire. Instead everything froze around her for a split second that, when it was over, felt like a lifetime. She sucked in a breath and felt the ground beneath her. Her hand, the one that had been holding onto the drone's leg, was lying above her head and she couldn't get her fingers to stop twitching.

She lifted her head up and looked down to see flames. She sat up and hit her head on the smoking underside of the lynx. She ignored the headache and stared as the flames came into focus. When she realized where the fire came from, her legs, she screamed and scrambled to get out from under the drone. She flopped and flailed for a moment she could reach down and swat at her legs. She managed to smother the fire rising from her leather pants and then gasped when she saw the inside of her right leg had been turned to hamburger. In a few places, charred hamburger thanks to the point blank range of the drone's gun.

Bling fell back as the dark tile ceiling spun in circles above her.

Pepper was beside her a moment later. "Healz, you better get in here!" he called over the commlink.

The ork cursed. "On my way. What's your status?"

"Not sure. She took the drone out but it shot her leg up pretty good. Not as much blood as there should be, some of the meat got cooked and cauterized. Looks like she's in shock — for real this time."

"Copy," Healz said and the comms went silent.

"Tank, how's it look out there?" Pepper asked.

Tank was silent for a moment before he said, "Is she... never mind, sorry. Um, they're cleaning the mess up. No sign of Knight Errant being notified that I can tell. Doesn't mean somebody else isn't on their way though."

"Roger that," Pepper said. He leaned down closer to Bling and left his commlink off when he said, "You did good, kid. Damn good. We'd both be dead if it weren't for you. Just hang in there, your old buddy's on his way."

Bling blinked and squeezed her eyes shut. A tear ran down her cheek.

"We got no time," he said. "Healz will be here in a few seconds. Do you need me to stay with you?"

She opened her eyes and stared up at him. Her pupils were so wide there was barely any white visible around them in her almond shaped eyes. She focused on him a little better and whispered, "Would you? Really?"

He nodded and reached down to squeeze her hand. "You passed any test I could think of," he assured her. "You risk your life for me, I'll risk mine for you. We're family now, kid, we been shot together and there's no better bond."

Another tear slid down her face. "Healz is coming?"

"I can hear the big guy on the factory floor."

She listened a moment and then nodded. "Go ahead. Finish this."

He squeezed her hand again before standing up. "I'll be back for you."

She attempted a smile but it was worse than fleeting. He smiled back and then turned and jogged down the hallway to the first doorway. The maglock on it was serious business but he wasn't in the mood. He backed up a step and raised his FN-HAR. A quick aim and a full blast that emptied his clip took care of the lock. A couple of kicks later and he was inside the lab.

"Tank, what am I looking for?" Pepper asked.

"A transmission."

"No drek," Pepper spat. He slaved the video feed in his cybereyes to his commlink and transmitted it. "Pick up my video feed and help me out."

Pepper walked into the room and scanned it slowly, looking from right to left.

"There! That... thing on the table. It's hooked up to an axle, a differential, and some wheels on that makeshift dyno."

Pepper strode over to the transmission and looked down at the skeletal drive train. "I can't carry all of this."

"Find a cart, I saw one a minute ago when you were looking around."

Pepper scanned the room again and saw the cart Tank had mentioned. He went over to it and knocked the items on top of it to the ground. He pulled it back over and stopped beside the testing table. "Now what? I can't get all this on here."

"You've got to disconnect the pieces. All we need is the two gearboxes."

Pepper scowled. "I don't have time to tear this drek apart!"

"Release the clamps," Tank said in a stern voice. "The ones on the transmission."

Pepper fought back a nasty comment and looked at the transmission. He saw the screwed down clamps Tank referred to and went to work twisting them back until he could pull them off.

"Good, now tug on the transmission, pull it away from the drive shaft."

"It'll pull it with me," Pepper snapped.

"Trust me, okay?"

Pepper scowled and stepped around the table. He tugged on the transmission and was about to give up when he felt it move. He tugged again, getting serious about it this time, and dragged it across the table several centimeters until he heard a clang.

He peered around the other side of the transmission and saw the drive shaft had fallen out of the transmission. "It wasn't connected! That's useless."

"Electromagnetics," Tank said, as though that explained it all.

"Electro-what?"

"It... just go with it, like you said, we don't have time. Gridguide is reporting some sensors that are alerting about vehicles blowing through red lights and speeding."

"Frag," Pepper swore. He grabbed the transmission again and heaved it up and over onto the cart. Fresh sweat broke out on his brow but he ignored it and went to the differential to attempt the same thing. All three axles pulled out once he removed the clamps holding everything in place. He loaded the drive shaft and the differential onto the cart and began to push it out of the lab.

"How is she?" Pepper asked as he rolled up on Bling and Healz.

"Her leg's gonna need some serious work," the ork said. "More than I give her here. Might even need a replacement, meat or metal. The rest will heal, but she'll need some special treatment to avoid scars."

"Bling, Healz is going to have to carry you," Pepper said.

"Don't bother," the ork warned. "She was in bad shape so I tranqed her. She's out."

"Oh... okay. That's gonna be expensive, fixing her leg."

The ork nodded. "Yeah, probably."

Pepper glanced at the destroyed drone, his eyes settling on the medium machine gun. He stepped over to it and twisted off the latches that allowed it to be removed for cleaning or replacement and tossed it on the cart. The ork watched him, one eyebrow raised.

"A little bonus for her. She earned it, taking that mother out."

Healz nodded and scooped the unlikely street samurai up in his arms. "Time to go?"

"And how," Pepper agreed. "Reinforcements are on the way."

The ork tossed Bling over his shoulder and drew his submachine gun. "I'll lead."

## Chapter 12

Pepper pulled into the dark parking lot outside the pitted and rusted hangar. He reopened the line to Tank and said, "I think I'm here."

A second passed before Tank responded, "I see you, come on in."

The large door to the hangar opened revealing nothing but a pitch black interior. Pepper had killed the headlights before he pulled off the road into the parking lot so he had to rely on the low-light mode of his cybereyes to pull the stolen GT 1250 into the hangar and park it behind Tank's van. Beside both of them was the large roadmaster that Healz drove. There was something ahead of him, but it couldn't make it out until he shut the car off and climbed out of it.

"Holy drek, you've got a helicopter!"

"It's a little one," Tank said.

"A little one? What's that supposed to mean, you're not compensating for having a tiny penis?"

The lack of a response worried the man. He looked around and was about to ask when he heard the roadmaster's shocks shift. He walked over and knocked on the back doors.

The automatic door of the hangar shut behind him before Tank opened the door to the roadmaster. He was already heading back to watch Healz while the large man bent over Bling's leg and worked on it. There was a lot of blood on the table.

"How is she?" Pepper asked in a hushed voice as he came up beside Tank.

Tank shrugged. "You weren't followed, were you?"

Pepper sighed and glanced at the rigger.

"Hey, I don't know. I wasn't there," Tank said. "I... nobody knows about this place, okay? I'm just a little anxious, even sharing it with you guys."

Pepper nodded. "That's fair. We don't know each other, other than the last couple of days. I won't sell you out, you've got my word."

"Somebody planning to sell me out would say that."

Pepper smirked. "How do I argue that?"

"I guess we just see how it goes."

"Yeah, I guess."

They fell silent while Healz did what he could to connect torn muscles and ligaments and reattach severed blood vessels. The ork worked in silence but sweat beaded up and ran down the side of his face. He managed to keep it from falling in her open wounds, but the conditions were far from sanitary.

"Can I ask you something?" Pepper asked. "It's none of my business, but I was wondering..."

Tank glanced at him and after a moment of thought he shrugged. "Yeah, go ahead."

"You two... you're a thing, right? In a relationship, I mean?"

Tank glanced at him. "Yeah, I... I think so?"

"You think so?" the man chuckled. "Brother, if I had a girl like that into me, I'd make damn sure of it."

Tank blushed. "She and I... well... she told the leader of the Gushers I was boyfriend material. That's something, right?"

"Yeah, that's something."

Tank smiled.

"Here's the thing," Pepper said while he stared at the sleeping beauty. "You're not acting like someone you care about is hurt real bad. Maybe hurt so bad she won't come out of it."

Tank's voice cracked as he asked, "She won't?"

"That's better," Pepper smiled. "She should. That's a lot of blood and she lost a fair amount on the way back to the truck, but Healz was there all the way and had her in hand. There's a lot of arteries in the leg, especially since she got hit high up on her thigh. I didn't see any spurting, but anything could have happened."

Tank licked his lips and tried to swallow past the dryness in his mouth. He nearly gagged when he couldn't.

"That's just worst case," Pepper said. "I think she'll be fine. Looks like our large friend here might have big fingers, but he can still thread a needle. Docwagon doesn't let lousy medics on their high threat response teams... and they usually don't want to let them leave, either."

Tank looked at the ork as the questions began to form. He pushed them aside for now and replied, "As long as he saves her, that's good enough for me."

"Will it be good enough for her?" Pepper wondered.

Tank frowned. "You're kind of negative, you know that? Are you trying to make me doubt everyone?"

Pepper shook his head. "Sorry, no. Just playing devil's advocate. Usually my wife does that to me to make sure I've thought of everything that can go wrong. Drives me crazy—"

"I can see why!"

Pepper smirked. "Yeah, well, in the shadows maybe it's not such a bad thing. Having your kid's friend talk behind their back is one thing. Getting a Johnson to pull one over on us and getting us all geeked is another."

"You want to know the truth about Bling?" Tank asked, changing the subject. "Truth is, I'm scared. Terrified, even, but there's nothing I can do. We need a street doc or a mage, and we don't have a mage. We do have a street doc though, and he's loyal to Bling and seems to know what he's doing. That's good enough for me."

"Fair enough."

"Since I can't do anything about her, I'm doing everything I can to stay distracted. Watching Gridguide and keeping myself plugged into the security cameras around this place."

"Good idea," Healz grunted. "Both of you, take a walk. You talk too much."

Pepper glanced at Tank and shrugged. Tank's face turned a darker shade of red but he turned and walked to the back of the truck. He hung his head as he walked, sulking a little. Pepper followed him and shut the door behind them.

"Hey, let's call The Judge," Pepper said. "Sooner we can unload it, the sooner we get paid. Sooner we get paid the sooner we get Bling's leg fixed up, proper."

"You don't think Healz can do it?"

"Too much damage, omae," Pepper said. "She might walk, with a cane, but that leg is never gonna be something she can dance on again. I seen her in action and it was a beautiful thing. That kid... she can fly! I don't want her stuck on the ground when she should be doing cartwheels and back flips."

Tank whistled. "That's a lot of scratch to cover that."

Pepper nodded. "Yeah, but I know a guy who can put the good stuff in if she wants it."

"Me too," Tank said.

Pepper tilted his head, surprised. He nodded. "So she's covered. I'll chip in, if I have to. She saved my hoop in there. Saved us all, really. Made the job something we could finish."

Tank's shoulders dropped a few millimeters and he nodded. "Okay, I'll link you in and make the call."

Pepper waited until he received the request for the group call on his commlink. He approved it and waited four seconds until the call was answered.

"I was wondering when I was going to hear from you," The Judge answered the call. "I see there was quite a disturbance in Troy this evening, something about several cars being stolen?"

"We wouldn't know anything about that," Tank lied.

"I see. So to what do I owe the pleasure of this call?"

Tank glanced at Pepper. "We, uh, we're hoping to get together again."

"Oh, that is news. One moment, please."

Tank and Pepper waited, occasionally glancing at each other, as the seconds crept by. Finally the line picked up again.

"Sorry about that, I needed to verify the line was clean. You know how security is."

"Of course," Pepper said.

"Speak freely, gentlemen, I'm afraid I'm unavailable at the moment for any rendezvous. Tell me, was your retrieval a success?"

"It was," Tank agreed.

"I haven't heard any noise about it yet, tell me, were you noisy?"

Tank glanced at Pepper.

"A little," Pepper admitted. "Four drones had to be dealt with. Some minor collateral damage too, but the guards were disabled and not seriously injured in any way."

"Hmm, I see," the fixer said. "I'll pass that along, I'm just the messenger, after all. It's up to Mr. Johnson to decide if that meets his criteria or not."

"There's more," Tank blurted out.

"Oh?"

When Tank stared at Pepper with a pleading look in his eyes the older man nodded. "We subcontracted some assistance and one of them got shot up pretty bad."

The Judge's voice turned cold. "The terms were agreed upon, the payout is to be divided between the two of you and any further expenses you need to deal with."

"We're not disputing that," Pepper said. "Our new friend is going to be fine, we think, but unable to continue unless we can get her some assistance with a rapid recovery."

"We've got someone working on her now — a doctor," Tank interrupted.

"But you're after a rapid recovery," The Judge said. "Magical, clearly?"

"I don't know of any other way," Pepper agreed.

"Let me see what I can dig up. There will be an expense, of course."

"Of course," Pepper kept the growl out of his voice as he agreed.

"If— and note I said if— I can find someone I'll have them meet up with you during the next stage of your job."

"When and where?" Pepper asked, knowing better than to ask too many questions.

"Windsor, four hours. I'll send the address shortly."

Pepper winced. He wasn't getting any sleep tonight. "All right, we'll be there."

The Judge dropped off the line, leaving the two of them on it until Pepper closed the connection. He sighed and rubbed the bristles on his cheeks. "My wife's gonna be pissed when I don't come home tonight."

Tank laughed. "She knows what you do, right?"

He nodded. "Yeah... sort of. I better go call her and let her know. Damage control, you know?"

Tank shook his head. "Okay, I'm going to see about taking care of the car and that gun you grabbed. Won't be able to do it tonight, but should be pretty quick, I imagine."

Pepper gave him a thumbs up and walked into the back of the hangar to stand near Tank's Northrup Wasp two-seater helicopter while he braced himself for an unpleasant conversation.

## Chapter 13

"This is not going to end well," Pepper mused as Healz drove his Roadmaster down the street towards the repurposed customs gate at the Wyandotte public docks. "If they contacted Knight-Errant about the theft, these guys will know and we'll get busted."

"It's whiz," Tank said. "Turn right and then after two blocks, turn right again. No checkpoints, that way."

Pepper shook his head. "Not yet, maybe. Why else bring us down here though?"

"Any way to find out if they reported the theft?" Tank asked. "You seem to have some hookups with Knight-Errant."

Pepper frowned. He had more than hookups, but any inquiries he made could be tracked back to him. "Not really," he said. "At least not right now. In a few hours, maybe."

"That doesn't help," Healz said. "Hope for the best, it's all we got. Security only checks for people anyhow. This is making sure the right kind of people are coming in or going out of the Detroit 'plex."

"Unless there's something specific to look for," Pepper said. "Trust me on that one."

Healz shrugged and yawned. "Getting late... or early."

"Going to pull another twelve hour power nap?" Tank teased.

Healz glanced at him and shrugged. "You spend two hours putting someone's leg back together and see how you feel."

"It is late. And early," Pepper said. "I'm going to need more than just soykaf to make it through work today."

"Work?" Tank asked. "You've got, like, a regular job?"

Pepper winced. "Drek, I must be tired."

The rigger studied him as he asked, "Why, you didn't want us to know?"

"Honest? No, I didn't. None of your business."

"Maybe not, but so far I'm the only putting myself on the line here. My van— Healz's truck now too— my apartment, and my backup hideout. Seems like karma's coming around finally. So what do you do?"

Pepper shrugged. "Not much. Low-level manager over a department of report-filing wage slaves."

"Let me guess, since you seem to have some connections with the cops, you work for one of Knight-Errant's subsidiaries?"

"Something like that," Pepper said and gave Tank a tight lipped smile that said he wouldn't get any more out of him.

Healz pulled into the parking ramp Tank pointed at. He drove very slowly up the ramp, concerned his Roadmaster was too tall for it, but managed to make it through without any problems. He made it to the third level before a car flashed its lights at them. He pulled up near it and stopped.

Tank whistled. "Nice ride," he said as the doors of a SK-Bentley Concordat opened. A tiny slip of a woman got out of the driver's side while the other side rocked on its suspension as a massive body all but rolled out of the car.

"She old enough to drive?" Pepper asked as the woman approached with a device held in her hand.

"If she's not, are you going to say anything about it?" Healz asked while studying the troll that drew himself to his full height.

The troll rolled his neck and stretched his shoulders before stepped forward to join the woman. A combat shotgun, the Enfield AS-7, hung from a strap at his side and a large pistol was holstered on his hip. The troll wore a jacket that hung on his wide shoulders and had his horns trimmed to keep them out of the way. His eyes were hidden behind a pair of goggles.

"David and Goliath," Tank suggested.

"Davina," Pepper corrected.

"The sun's gonna come up if we don't do something," Healz muttered.

Pepper nodded. "Yeah, you stay with Bling, Healz. Tank and I will go talk to them."

"Fine with me," the ork said.

"If it goes south, I'll take the girl. Tank, you get the troll."

"What?" Tank yelped.

Pepper grinned. "Relax, we'll have Healz run him over or something."

"You want to pay for damages, sure thing," Healz said.

They shared a laugh at the poor joke made funny by fatigue and exited the side of the Roadmaster. The woman stepped forward as soon as they cleared the vehicle. Her purple hair was pulled tight into a topknot that fell down to the side of her face and hung almost to her waist.

"Where is the package?" she asked with a slight Japanese accent.

"I thought we were supposed to deliver it somewhere. Are we handing off instead?"

"No," was her curt answer as she began to walk towards them.

Pepper moved to block her path and held out a hand, "Hold on there, Miss. How about you tell us what's going on before we get too friendly?"

She stared up at him, her gaze making him feel like she'd reduced his height advantage by at almost a meter so that he was shorter than here!. "I must inspect to make sure it is in proper condition. If yes, I will give instructions."

"That's fine, but I'm going to need any weapons you might have first."

Her lips pressed together in a thin line before she reached into her designer jacket and withdrew a Fichetti Tiffani Needler pistol infamous for both its high price and flechette ammunition. She held it out for him to take and asked, "No more weapons."

Pepper looked her over and nodded. "All right. What about a mage of some sort? We were told there might be one to help an associate with her recovery."

She glanced at the troll and turned to head into the Roadmaster.

Pepper turned and looked at the troll. He grinned, showing off tusks and teeth alike.

"If yes?" Tank mouthed to pepper.

Pepper shrugged. "You're a mage?"

The troll moved closer to them and nodded. "*Da.*"

"*Da*, great," Pepper sighed at the troll's Slavic accent. "Well, our friend is in the back of that Roadmaster. Our doc patched her up, but he says there's no way she's walking on it anytime soon, and she might need to do more than walk. I've heard mages can do some pretty amazing things when it comes to healing people."

"You pay, I try to heal."

"Try to heal?" Tank asked. He looked at Pepper, concern filling his eyes.

"*Da.*"

Pepper nodded. "Okay, how much?"

The troll rubbed his chin. "Five hundred now. If heal is good, more. I tell you then."

Pepper's eyes narrowed. "Seems a little like extortion."

"You want flat rate? Fine, two thousand, no matter what. Or you pay five hundred now and maybe less. Is this friend or just chummer?"

"We'll pay," Tank snapped. "Come on, I'll show you to her."

The troll grinned and followed Tank around the back of the Roadmaster. Pepper took a position to watch both the side door and back door and waited.

"Here... her leg," Tank said as he gestured down at the sleeping woman. "Healz— he's the medic up front— operated on her an hour ago. She won't wake up for another hour or two."

The troll had to stoop to enter the Roadmaster. He reached down and picked up the edge of the sheet near her foot, then lifted it up and over her leg until he pulled it a little too far and revealed that she was naked under the sheet. He tucked it back down where her leg joined her hip, offering a meager pretense of modesty.

He focused on the bandage wrapped around her leg. The multiple layers of cloth and swollen tissue beneath made it thicker than normal.

The lumbering mage lifted his goggles off his eyes and set them on his head under his horns. "No blood? This fresh?"

"The bandage? About an hour old, maybe less," Tank said. "She bled a lot, but he put some back in her too."

Healz squeezed in between the front seats and slipped around the woman that was passing her scanner back and forth over the prototypes. Other than glancing at her he ignored her and moved to stand the near of Bling's gurney.

"There a problem?" Healz asked.

The troll looked up from Bling's bandaged leg to Healz, almost brushing his shaved horns against the ceiling of the vehicle. "No problem. Battle injuries are bloody."

"It was," Healz agreed. "Took a couple hours to close off all the bleeders and put everything back together."

The troll gestured at the bandage. "May I? I must see what I am to heal."

Healz grunted and moved closer so he could start unwrapping the bandage. The troll reached down and held on to Bling's foot, holding it still and making it easier to remove the covering.

"This scan looks good. I'll— oh my god, that's disgusting!"

Everyone turned to look at the petite woman with the unnaturally pale face. Her hand flew to her mouth and she turned and rushed out of the side door of the Roadmaster. They could hear her gagging and retching.

The ork, troll, and human exchanged looks with each other before looking back down to the wound. Her leg was puffy and flushed from her upper thigh all the way down to her ankle. Her foot, somehow, had avoided being hurt. One long cut from top to bottom was closed with large staples. Several smaller incisions were either closed with smaller staples, stitches, or even Superheal glue. It was red and angry looking everywhere.

The troll let out a breathy whistle. "Where I come from, we would have cut the leg off."

Tank sucked in his breath and bit down to keep from reacting out loud.

"She's a dancer," Healz said. "I couldn't do that."

He put his hands on the gurney to brace himself and closed his eyes. A moment later he opened them. "This is good. Still, she would take a metal leg, no? Already much metal in her."

"Thought about it," Healz admitted. "But the bones was only broken in two places and they were easy to set and promote healing. Still going to be a few weeks before she could put

much weight on it though. Months before she could exercise or begin therapy to try and get back where she was."

"Much metal," the troll mused. "But I will do what I can."

"What does her cyberware matter?" Tank asked.

The troll looked at him. "It is dead to me. It corrupts the body. Much harder to heal."

"Oh... I..."

The troll waved a massive hand. "*Nyet*, this is fine. I will try. You see, *da*?"

"*Da*," Tank said.

The troll took a deep breath and closed his eyes again. When he opened them he let out the breath and took in another, normal. He began to chant and held his hand out over her. He channeled the magic with his will and passed it along into Bling's leg by resting his hand on the weeping wounds on her thigh.

Bling's thigh turned fuzzy for a moment, as though some barely visible mist surrounded it. It faded away, leaving behind flesh that was pink but barely held the traces of scars above her knee. Below her knee the damages seemed less severe than they had been. The smaller incisions were smoothed out to fine scarred lines. The major cuts looked as though a few days of healing had passed, causing the skin to edge closer and begin to seal, though some gaps remained.

The troll staggered back and caught himself with a heavy hand to the wall. He sucked in a few deep breaths and shook his head. He straightened when he was sure he'd recovered and struck his head on the ceiling.

"Watch it," Healz said. "I bought this because it was big enough to fit me, but you're bigger still."

"*Da*," the troll said. "Short for troll, but still tall."

"Can you do it again?" Tank asked. "Her leg above her knee looks pretty good, except for the staples and stitches still in it. Her lower leg though..."

The troll shook his head. "Too much metal. This all I could do."

"You can't try again?"

"*Nyet*. One time only."

Tank frowned as he stared at her leg. She'd be scarred for life.

"The bone is good now. Strong. Flesh... not so much. Muscles heal some, skin last. She will walk. Run even, probably. Dance again? Maybe. Not like before. Too much damage."

Healz grabbed his medical equipment and began plucking the staples out of her healed flesh. When he'd removed all the ones he dared he cut the stitches in the same areas and plucked them free as well.

"Those will leave marks," the troll pointed to the holes left behind by the staples and stitches. "That happen after."

Healz nodded and looked at Tank. "I've worked with mages before. He's telling the truth about all of it."

Tank let out a noisy breath and nodded. "All right."

"I was soldier, not medic," the troll said and then closed his mouth as though he'd said something he shouldn't have. He shook his head. "Sorry."

"Tank!"

Tank jerked his head up at hearing Pepper's voice. He hopped out the back and saw his partner was standing near the woman. Both of them were as far as possible from the puddle she'd left on the floor.

"I got this," Healz said and reached for a fresh bandage.

Tank led the troll back over to Pepper and the woman. "She's better," he reported. "Bones are healed and her thigh is patched up. Her lower leg... it's a mess, but..." he turned to look at the troll. Referring to him as a tusker in front of him didn't seem like a good idea.

"Ivan," the troll said.

Tank nodded while Pepper snorted at the generic name. "Ivan says she'll walk and probably run."

"Too much damage," Ivan explained. "Too much metal."

"Metal?"

"Cyberware," Tank translated. "I guess too much of it makes it hard to use magic to heal with."

"*Da*."

Pepper frowned. "All right, what do we owe you?"

Ivan considered the price for a moment and then shook his head. "Nothing. I helped, but she will never be as she was. Her days at The View are over."

Tank and Pepper both stiffened. "You know her?" Tank asked.

Ivan nodded. "*Da*, Bling. Seen her once or twice there."

"Looks like your girlfriend is famous," Pepper teased.

Tank's face flushed.

"You and her?" Ivan asked. The troll grinned and clapped the rigger on the shoulder as gently as he could.

Tank still had to take a step to keep his balance.

"This is fascinating, but we have to be going," the woman snapped. "You are to deliver the prototypes to Foreccio Industries in Windsor. You must do so with minimal disruption and leave them in their R&D center on the fourth floor. It must be completed tonight or there will be no payment."

"No payment!" Pepper blurted. "Just a fragging minute! We agreed to the snatch with three days to spare. This is day two."

"It's day three now," she pointed out.

Pepper clamped his lips together before he said something he couldn't take back.

"We agreed to the run, including delivery, in three days," Tank agreed. "We've got until midnight?"

She considered and then said, "Four am, almost twenty four hours."

Pepper shook his head and started to turn away. He turned back to Ivan and stuck his hand out. "Thank you for doing your best."

Ivan's hand nearly swallowed Pepper's. He nodded. "Healing was not my specialty."

Pepper's eyebrow lifted. "A big guy like you needs to blow people up with fireballs?"

Ivan shook his head and patted the shotgun at his side. "I have weapons for that."

"What kind of magician are you?" Tank asked. "Oh wait, do you summon spirits or elementals or whatever they're called?"

"Same thing," Ivan said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "*Nyet*, my training is tactical. I... well, I learned to use magic as part of a team."

Pepper studied him and nodded. He opened his mouth when the woman snapped.

She clutched the scanner to her side and held her hand out to Pepper. "Come on, Ivan, we have to get back."

The troll shrugged and offered them another grin. "Good luck, chummers. If you live look me up. I'd like to see how my patient is doing."

Pepper chuckled and handed the Fichetti back over to her. To Ivan he said, "I bet you would."

"What's your number, I'll give you a call," Tank offered.

Ivan considered the rigger a moment before he said, "You give me yours."

Tank shrugged and gave the troll one of his safe LTG codes.

Ivan winked at Tank and said, "I'll check up on her."

Tank frowned but before he could say anything the woman spun on her heel and walked away with a brisk step that made up for her short legs. Ivan followed her, easily keeping up with her and then struggling to get back into the large armored sedan. She beat him inside and had the engine running and the car moving before he finished shutting his door.

Pepper and Tank shared a glance. "Well, looks like we got some work to do," the older man said.

"What about your real job?"

Pepper smirked. "It don't get much more real than this."

Tank frowned. "We need time to plan for this. If you've got contacts at work, maybe you should go. I'll dig up what I can and you do the same."

Pepper nodded. "Okay... sounds like a plan. Try to get some sleep too."

"You won't be able to."

Pepper nodded. "I know. See if you can get your hands on some cram or something, we're going to need it."

"Why not long haul?"

Pepper winced. "I'll need to stay up a few extra hours, not extra days."

Tank chuckled. "All right, but you might need the extra time to make this up to your wife!"

## Chapter 14

Tank was immersed in the never ending nightmare that was Foreccio Industries. They were serious about their plant security — more than serious, even. Every article he uncovered hinted at runs gone bad against them or a success that required such an investment of resources that it wasn't worth it. At least the pyrrhic victories allowed them to walk away with their lives.

A sound jerked him out of the augmented reality world he'd been caught up in. He'd long since learned to ignore Heals as he paced back and forth in between trying to find a comfortable position. The ork destroyed what was left of the takeout they'd grabbed on their way to the hangar, leaving nothing for Bling when she woke up. Tank hadn't made a fuss, they could always get more food. He'd get anything for Bling.

He dismissed the phantom images in his mind and blinked to clear his vision. Faint light from the small kitchen lit up the crash pad they were in. Healz was passed out again, his back pressed against the wall and his head propped up by a meaty arm. The street doc wasn't what had woke him though. The ork's voice would never be soft and feminine.

Tank rose from the hard plastic chair and tried to work the stiffness in his back and legs out as he crossed over to the ratty couch Bling was lying on. She took in a shuddering breath and blinked her eyes several times until she focused on Tank.

"Hey beautiful," he said with a smile that he didn't have to fake.

She groaned and picked her head up. She grimaced and pulled her elbows back to support herself as she looked down at her leg. She stretched one hand out and tugged on the blanket that covered her, exposing most of her leg. "Oh frag!" she hissed.

"Your friend patched you up real good," Tank said. "Saved your leg, from what I heard. I wasn't happy with it though..."

Bling looked at her leg and up at him. "What? You weren't? Why?"

Tank glanced at her leg and then back up at her. "Well, Pepper wasn't either, to be fair. We, uh, we got a mage to come check you out and heal you too."

Her eyes widened. "A mage? I've never... oh god, what did he do? Do you owe him a kidney or something now?"

Tank let out a surprised chuckle. "A kidney? No. Just a few hundred nuyen. Decent guy. Russian, to hear him talk. Said his name was Ivan— hey, he knew you! Not, like, personally or anything, but he said he'd seen you a few times and he was a fan."

Bling rolled her eyes and shifted on the couch, pulling herself back and sitting up. The blanket fell off, leaving her nude on the couch. She ignored her lack of modesty and left her leg stretched while she stared at it. "Okay, so what aren't you telling me?"

Tank sighed. "Well... um, he said you had too much cyberware. He could only do a little. Fixed up your upper leg pretty good. You know, above your knee. Your knee was in decent shape, I guess, but your shin... well... he healed the breaks in it."

"You're killing me, Tank," she said. "Spit it out, already. I can still use it, right?"

Tank licked his lips and nodded. "Yeah... sort of."

Even in the dim light he could see the color drained from her face. "Sort of?"

"Walking, sure. Maybe running too, he wasn't sure. He said the damage was bad though... without his magic you'd never get that far."

Bling's eyes narrowed. "What else?"

The rigger took in a deep breath and let it out. "He didn't think you'd ever dance again. Or, um, anything like that."

Bling's eyes dropped from his face to her leg. She stared at it for a long moment and then nodded. Her shoulders rose and fell with a deep breath. "Okay... well, I said I was done with that. I must have meant it."

Tank remembered to breathe and used the air he found to talk, "You... you're okay? I mean, you're going to be all right with this?"

"I don't really have a choice, do I?" she asked.

Tank let out a nervous chuckle. "I guess not. I mean...well, there's always a cyber replacement. They could do a partial or whole leg replacement. Healz and I were talking and he said he'd do it for you, no cost, as long as you bought the leg. He said the synthetic ones look like the real thing, you can't even tell. Well, you could tell, but—"

She reached down and started to unwrap the bandage around her leg. Tank fell silent as he watched her uncoil the bandages one loop at a time. As the skin began to show she slowed and stared as every pass uncovered a few centimeters of ghastly wounds that looked as though they were a week old.

"Bling?"

She jerked her head up to look at him. She faked a weak smile and said, "Looks better than it did last night."

Tank nodded. "It was really bad. Healz is a hell of a doc. Hard to believe he's running with us instead of living the good life."

"Hey, who says this isn't a good life?"

Tank smirked. "You know that couch you're sitting on is probably older than Pepper."

Her eyes widened and then she brushed it away. "I grew up counting myself lucky if I had a cardboard box to sleep in. I hit the jackpot one time and found a wooden pallet with only a couple of boards missing."

It was Tank's turn to gawk.

"This couch is like sleeping on a cloud," she assured him. "And you... you've been something out of this world. The way you keep looking out for me and helping me out... You're really messing me up, you know that?"

He frowned. "How am I messing you up?"

"Because I don't know what to make of you. I mean, sure, it looks legit, but this kind of drek doesn't happen to a girl like me."

He almost laughed. Almost. "You better pinch yourself then, because it's happening right now."

She stared him down until she had to look away first. Her eyes fell on her leg and she blinked away tears. "I'm damaged goods now," she said.

"So?"

"So you won't want me anymore. If I can't move and look like I did before I—"

Tank turned and walked into the kitchen. He opened and shut a few drawers and made some clanging noise before he walked back in with a large knife in his hand. He held it up and saw the shocked and scared look in Bling's eyes.

"What are you doing?" she breathed.

"You're choice," he said. "Either we cut your leg off so you can see that I'm still crazy about you, or if you want you can carve me on a little bit so we have matching scars."

It took her several seconds to process what he'd said. "You.. you're kind of crazy, aren't you? In a sweet way though."

"Yeah, crazy. Crazy about you."

She nodded. "So what happens when the infatuation wears off? When you realize that I'm not the dream girl you saw on stage? That even when the other night I was pulling out all the stops to impress you?"

He shrugged. "Then we live a normal life, like everybody else."

"Normal? What's normal? Maybe I don't want normal," she said.

"I meant a normal relationship. Some days are great, most are good, and some are rough. We'll fight, but as long as we know we've got each other's backs and we care about each other, we'll get through."

"You're asking a lot."

"Why, because we just met each other a few days ago? Sometimes it happens like that."

"Well, yeah. That and I'm complicated. Lots of baggage."

"We all got baggage. Tell you what, let me start."

"Start what?" she asked.

"Steve Pierson, that's my real name. No SIN, my mom lives in California last I knew bouncing from one man to another trying to get by. I managed to runaway and make it to Seattle by getting a job on a fishing trawler, but I only made it one trip before I quit and found a better way. Better for me, anyhow."

Bling stared at him as she absorbed what he'd told her. "Wow... that's... is that true?"

"Every word," he promised.

She blew out her breath and shook her head. "You're crazy."

"Yeah, probably."

She laughed and extended her hand. "Hi Steve. I'm Amelia."

"Amelia? That's a beautiful name."

She blushed. "I don't know what my last name is, but I took up the name Foster as a kid because I didn't understand what having foster parents meant. Then when I figured it out the hard way, I ran away and never went back into the system again. No SIN for me either, but I've got some good fakes."

Tank chuckled. "Yeah, that's how we have to do it. Well there, we got that out of the way."

"Yeah, we did," she hesitated and looked at him. "So now what?"

"Now we finish this run and you move in with me if you've really got no place to go. We try it out— if you want, I'll take the couch. After all, it'd be a waste to not use those new sheets I bought for you."

She laughed and then winced as she brushed her leg against the back of the couch. She moved it back and nodded. "Okay, we'll try it out. I like you, Steve. I really do... but be patient with me, okay? Don't be clingy, but don't give me too much space either... knowing me I'll probably think that means you're done with me and I'll shut down on you."

"So not too much, but not too little?"

She smiled. "Told you, I'm complicated."

"I love a challenge."

Her smile turned into a grin. "Then you're going to love me! I mean... well, you know." He laughed but couldn't decide the best way to respond so he let the moment end.

She looked around. "Where's Pepper and Hea— oh, there he is. He's sleeping on the floor?"

"I guess. I was getting intel on tonight."

"Tonight? What's tonight?"

"We deliver the prototypes to Foreccio Industries. They're in Windsor," he said.

"Windsor... okay. Tonight? How long until we need to go?"

Tank checked the time in his commlink and grunted. "We've got about twelve hours left. Gotta be quiet too - nobody knows we were there or we don't get paid."

"What the frag?" she spit out.

He nodded. "Don't worry, it gets worse."

Her eyes narrowed.

"Sooo," he said, drawing the word out while he tried to put together everything he'd read, "Foreccio takes their security to heart. In-house trained security department, all of them cybered, and as part of that they have rigger controlled cameras and regular drone sweeps for every plant around the clock. Their buildings include some kind of bacterial moss or something that prevents mages from investigating or invading magically too. That's fine - we don't have a mage or a shaman with us, but the only way in I can find is from above. Dropping in with either a super-silent VTOL craft — which don't exist — or parachute / wing glide in. I don't have to say how bad of an idea that is either, what with the camera and drone coverage, as well as manned patrols."

"Sweet Jesus," she muttered. "We have to get in there without anyone knowing?"

"With the prototypes, and they're kind of heavy to be carrying around for a stroll."

"This is impossible," she muttered.

Tank nodded. "Yeah, it's gonna require some thinking outside the box for sure."

Bling fell silent as she considered what he'd said. After a couple of minutes she sighed and stretched her arms up in the air. She glanced down and remembered that she wasn't wearing anything. "Where are my clothes?"

"Drek! I forgot... wow!"

"You forgot?"

Tank blushed. "Yeah... I... well, I mean, I guess I got used to it— to you, I mean. Being naked. I, uh, I like it... a lot! I just mean that, uh, I've been working hard on figuring this thing out. That and—"

Bling couldn't hold her laughter back any longer. Tank made it worse by blushing and looking like she'd scolded him. When she caught her breath she said, "You're forgiven... as long as you tell me where they are."

"Oh, right! Um, your coat and pants are in Healz Roadmaster still. Your pants and boots... they, uh, they didn't make it."

She looked down at her leg and sighed. "Yeah, figures. I really liked those boots too."

"Hang tight, I'll get your other stuff. Uh, I've got some spare clothes here you could borrow. Keep you decent, at least."

She raised a manicured eyebrow as she appraised him. "You might be on to something. Your legs are shorter than mine, but it just might work. Hips are more narrow too, but I guess we'll see."

"Uh... yeah. Hang on, I'll be right back," he said and hurried out the door of the small office turned makeshift apartment.

Bling waited a moment to be sure he was gone before she sucked in a deep breath and pushed down with her hands on the couch. She used her left leg to support her weight and slowly shifted her balance onto it. Once she was standing she lowered her right leg and grimaced as she felt the pulling in her barely healed muscles and cuts.

She waited a few moments, getting used to standing on both legs without touching anything. Satisfied she wouldn't fall, she took a short step and sucked in a quick breath as the sensations jolted up her leg. She stopped and took a few quick breaths to calm her racing heart. Her leg didn't just hurt, it felt weird.

"What are you— be careful!" Tank yelled as he walked back in with her coat, vest, and shirt in hand.

Bling looked up. "You're back!"

"Uh, yeah. The truck is six meters away from the door."

"Oh, right. Well, I needed to see how bad it was," she said.

He looked down at her leg and asked, "Well, how is it?"

She forced a smile and said, "Not too bad."

"Really? That's great!"

She warmed at his genuine smile and decided to try and make her lie a reality. She locked eyes with him and took a step forward. Her skin tugged at the sutures and staples and her muscles felt like they were on the verge of pulling apart. She made it, but she wobbled a little to catch her balance.

Tank stepped forward and reached out to catch her with his empty arm. Her hands went to his arms and then she clung to him. Without knowing who started it, she ended up hugging him and holding him tight while tears began to slide down her cheeks. They dripped onto the back of his jacket, sparing him their wetness.

"Are you okay?" he whispered.

She nodded, not trusting her voice quite yet. She grabbed her clothes from him and turned away. "Where's your spare clothes?" she asked over her shoulder so he couldn't see the wetness on her face.

He pointed at the storage bin on the far side of the couch. "In there. Anything you want, it's yours."

She nodded and took a few limping steps towards it. She made it without incident and set her clothes down long enough for her to bend over and opened the bin. True to his word, there were a few sets of casual clothing in there, everything from shorts and shirts to full length pants and socks.

"I can make this work," she said.

Tank nodded. "Great. Do you want anything to eat? Healz cleaned me out, but I can go get something."

She considered it and nodded. She wasn't hungry but food was probably a good idea.

"Yeah, I should eat something."

"Whiz. I'll, uh, I'll go grab something."

"I'll be here," she said. She glanced at the softly snoring ork on the floor and added. "And Tank... hurry back, okay?"

He grinned. "Count on it!"

## Chapter 15

"This doesn't make sense," Bling said a few hours later when they were gathered in Tank's backup pad. She was sitting on the couch with Tank beside her. Pepper stood and Healz was still on the floor, though he'd woken up and sat up to lean against the wall.

"Kind of like your clothes?" Pepper asked.

Bling blew him a kiss and flipped him off at the same time. She'd found a pair of Tank's jeans that were tight around her hips and a terrible fit around her legs. They were too short for her too, so she made them even shorter with her finger razors and turned them into the kind of shorts that would turn heads. Above them she wore one of his shirts that was short enough to expose her midriff and stretch nearly to the point of bursting across her chest.

"I think she looks fragging hot," Tank said in her defense.

Pepper laughed and shook his head. "If you were my daughter you wouldn't leave the house looking like that."

"Good thing I'm not your daughter," she said. She glanced down at herself before admitting, "It would be nice to stop on our way so I can pick up a bra, at least."

Tank twisted to look at her. "Just a bra? No underwear?"

"I said, 'at least.'"

"I think it's pretty sexy when a woman doesn't wear them," Healz offered and winked at Tank.

Pepper groaned.

"Oh, I agree," Bling said without missing a beat. "But that's when I do it for the person I'm with, not because you cut mine off on accident when you were stripping me down!"

The ork shrugged. "Occupational hazard."

"Occu—" she shook her head and sighed. "Men!"

Tank tried to swallow his grin, but her smack to his thigh only made it harder to hide.

"Anyhow," she growled. "It doesn't make sense. If Foreccio hired us to get this prototype, why all the hassle to get it to them?"

The mood shifted from teasing and fun to deadly serious with her question. Pepper offered up the first explanation, "Deniability. If something goes wrong they can say they had no idea."

"Bulldrek," she retorted. "They want to be able to deny somebody delivering stolen prototypes to their facility? Can you hear how crazy that sounds?"

Pepper shrugged. "Corps do crazy drek all the time. If they can make it stand up in court it's good."

"And then they lose out on everything," she said. "They keep the payout, but Tank said this tech is worth way more than what they're paying us."

Tank and Pepper looked at each other. Pepper shrugged, giving the rigger the unspoken approval to go ahead.

"What are you suggesting?" Tank asked.

"We reach out to them," she said and paused to make sure they didn't look at her like she had two heads. "Contact them and offer it to them. Worst case they insist we do what we're doing now. Better case, we end up talking to somebody who doesn't know about the run and is willing to pay more for it. Who knows, maybe we can swing it so we get both payouts? And not get shot up... again."

"You're talking about renegotiating the deal we agreed to," Tank said. "That's a quick way to being blacklisted. You run the shadows you get a rep. A stain on your rep lasts a lot longer than a dozen good runs."

Bling's eyes darkened. "It was just an idea," she mumbled.

"I didn't say it was a bad one," Tank responded. "That's just something we have to consider."

"It was a little weird the way the job worked out," Pepper agreed. "Usually The Judge hooks me up to a Johnson. He gets his cut and I deal with the Johnson direct."

Tank nodded. "Yeah, if I didn't know better I'd say The Judge is the Johnson, but that doesn't make sense. He's got no direct stake in this kind of tech."

The older man nodded. "There's something unusual going on. I'm too damn tired to think straight though. That reminds me, did you pick up any stims?"

Tank shook his head. "Sorry, I got caught up in researching Foreccio."

Pepper swore. "It's gonna be a really long night."

Healz shifted and dug into his pocket. He pulled out a dark bottle and popped the top off. He poured a couple of pills out in his hand and then held them up. "This'll help," he said. "Kicks in under an hour and should last another six hours or so after that."

Pepper took a pill and looked at it. "What is it?"

"Cram," the orc said. "Docwagon used to feed them to us like candy when we were on duty. You'll crash after, so don't take it too soon."

Pepper studied the pill and nodded. He shoved it in his pocket.

"You look like you'll need one too," Healz said to Tank.

The rigger glanced at Bling but she was lost in thought and not paying attention. "Okay, I'll take it."

Healz tossed the pill to him. He pocketed it while the orc tucked his bottle back into his jacket.

"Well, this may not help us think any straighter, but it'll make sure we're awake," Tank said. He turned to Bling and said, "You don't want one?"

Bling looked at him. "Want one what? Oh, Cram? No. I'm good. I had a nap today, remember?"

Tank winced. "I'll stick with being tired instead of what you went through."

She smiled. "Smart boy."

"So back to your idea," Pepper said. "Since this place has defenses tighter than a federal prison."

Bling nodded. "Well, that's about it, really. That or we try to sell it to another corp. We take a hit then on our rep, but if it's worth as much as Tank says, will it matter? It's not like corps can't afford to pay. They're all stinking rich."

Pepper's lips twitched while he thought about it. "Problem is, they have budgets. If they don't figure they can get a good return on it, they won't go for it. Labor costs, R&D, production, those all cost money."

Bling scoffed. "What are you, PR for the corps all of a sudden?"

Pepper scowled. "No. I just... I know how they think. People don't matter, only results do. Results and how they impact the bottom line. Everything in the world is done to make the rich richer. The rest of us are just parts in the machine. Replaceable parts."

"Sounds like you want to stick it to the man," Tank said.

Pepper shrugged. He glanced at Healz. "What do you think?"

The ork's lips twisted up in a smile. "Corps burned me, but I got my payout. Only one I got a beef with is Docwagon."

"So you want to play it safe?"

"Naw. Don't really care that much. I got plenty of business digging bullets out of gangers and stuffing the latest augs into people. Never really tried being a runner before, don't care much what people in that circle think of me."

Pepper turned back to the rigger. "Tank?"

Tank looked at Bling. He knew better than to cross a Johnson, but if he didn't support Bling on this, he'd never have a shot with her. "You really want to try this?"

"I'm not a coward," she began.

Pepper laughed, interrupting her. "After what you done, nobody here would ever say that."

The irritated look on her face was smoothed away by an appreciative smile. "Thank you... but what I meant to say was that this place is going to be a hell of lot harder to get into than what we already did. There's no way without more time and money to do it the way they want us too, and that means it will get bloody. I've got all my fingers and toes, but one leg isn't working right. I'm not at a hundred percent, or maybe even ninety. I'd rather take a hit to my rep than have some or all of us end up dead or in prison."

Tank smiled at her and nodded. He turned back to Pepper and said, "All right, I'm in. I built up my name on smuggling anyhow, so if this goes bad it shouldn't affect it. I can go back to that easy. The profits are tighter, but I'm good at it."

"You can save some money if you've got a dedicated assistant," Bling teased.

Tank's lips parted as he jerked around to look at her.

"Or maybe not," she mumbled. "Sorry, I was just joking around."

He shook his head and found his voice. "No! I mean, no, that's not what I want. I... I'd like that. A lot, actually."

"Great, invite us to the honeymoon," Pepper said. He shook his head and added, "Kids!"

Bling's expression changed again to a bright grin. She leaned over and kissed the surprised man on the lips before settling back into her seat and facing the other members of the team. She cleared her throat. "Oh, sorry. Where were we?"

"We—"

Tank held up a hand, stopping Pepper in mid-sentence. "I've got somebody calling me. I don't know the number but they've included a name with it. Ivan. I don't know any—"

"The troll," Healz reminded him. "The guy that healed our favorite dancer?"

"Oh! Drek, that's right."

"Go ahead and take it," Pepper said. "I'll do some digging with the people I know to see if I can find us a contact at Foreccio."

Tank nodded and flipped the mental switch to answer his commlink.

"Hoi, this is Tank," he subvocalized.

"*Da*, this is Ivan," the troll replied. "How is patient?"

Tank glanced at Bling and saw her watching him intently. He flashed her a smile before answering loud enough for him to hear, "She's good. Walking some, but she says it's real sore."

"*Da*. Good. Tell her I sorry I couldn't heal better."

"I did. She... she's going to look into what options she has as soon as we finish our current job."

The troll was silent long enough Tank double checked the connection to make sure it was still active.

"If, uh, if you'd like to meet her sometime I'm sure we could arrange something. She's very appreciative of what you did for her."

"Drek," the troll hissed.

Tank's brow furrowed. "You don't want to meet her?"

"I do... I hear something. Something bad for her. For you...all of you."

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Does not matter. Tonight is trap, this I hear."

Tank's eyes narrowed and his voice got louder for everyone to hear. "What? A trap? It does matter where you heard this."

"When we deliver scans. I listen with magic and hear this."

"Frag," Tank swore.

"I do this because I sorry I could not help Bling more," Ivan said. "You have this number now, *da*? If you live, I meet Bling?"

Tank nodded without realizing he was doing it. "Yes, yes, we'll meet. And yes, we'll live. Thank you, Ivan."

"Good luck. *Dasvidaniya*."

Tank made sure the connection was closed before he looked around at everyone and see he had their undivided attention. A quick check of his clock confirmed they were running out of time and the situation was more complicated than ever.

## Chapter 16

"You might be the only street samurai in the world that doesn't have a built commlink," Pepper said.

Bling smiled and reached up to tap the transmit button on her earpiece. "And you've got really hairy legs for a gun bunny."

Pepper's chuckle carried across the line. "Fair point, but I like to consider myself more of a merc, if we're stereotyping."

"Wait a minute," Tank interrupted the long distance conversation. "What are you doing checking out Pepper's legs?"

Everyone on the line laughed, eager to put off the tension a few precious seconds longer. When the laughter faded Pepper dragged them back into the here and now. "You sure you can handle this, kid?"

Bling nodded, certain he could see her through the scope of his Desert Strike sniper rifle. He was perched half a kilometer away in a tall building. Tank said it once served as a former psychiatric hospital. Before that it had been a children's hospital. "I'm good."

"Tank, how's the decoy coming?" Pepper asked next.

"It'll be ready," Tank said. "Just making sure it's got some cover, but not too much."

"Copy," Pepper said. He let out a heavy sigh that came across the line. "You know what to do and say, right?"

"Pepper, I got this," Bling insisted. She put as much confidence as she could into her words, even though she wasn't sure she felt it. Fake it till you make it — that mindset had gotten her everything in life, from hundreds of thousands working over the years to bluffing her way past gangers, thieves, rapists, and worse.

It hadn't always worked, but every failure was a lesson that led her to where she was in her life now. A scary place, maybe, but if they could pull it off, it felt like a good place to be. She had Tank to back her up until he realized he could do better. Healz had always been there since she first ended up on his table after she'd been hurt by some over-amorous fans that followed her home. And then there was Pepper. For an old guy he was genuine and she liked him. He wouldn't sell her out, she knew it. At least not unless there was a lot of money on the line and his old lady found out about her.

Live in the now, but plan for the future. That's how she handled life. Enjoy the moment but keep an eye on at least two ways out. She was always ready to bounce. In this case there wasn't much of a way out though. Tank had called Ivan back and his decker friend, Smokey, had dug up the contact info for a researcher at Foreccio. A few hundred nuyen had been a small price to pay to avoid an ambush.

Now she was standing in the middle of an empty parking lot waiting for Foreccio's team to show up. She was surrounded by parking lots, baseball and soccer fields, and probably had at least a hundred meters in any direction before she could find cover. The position looked a lot smarter on a map than it did in person.

And she couldn't run worth a damn. They'd stopped on their way by the mall in Novi and she'd picked up a change of clothes. Reinforced thigh leather boots with a disappointingly low heel rose high enough to disappear beneath the bottom edge of her pencil skirt. To Tank and Pepper's relief she'd bought a pair of mini shorts she wore beneath the skirt.

On top she wore a form blouse at least one size too small for her chest. To compensate she'd had to leave the top three buttons undone. Her armored vest and long coat completed the outfit, though both looked out of place given her semi-businesslike attire.

"Decoy's in place," Tank announced. "Just in time, looks like we've got three vehicles inbound. Looks like a Rover between a Hyundai Equus and a GMC Phoenix. The Equus has 4 bodies and the Phoenix has two. I can only get thermals on a driver and passenger in the Rover, but the back of the van is shielded.

"I got you covered, kid," Pepper said.

Bling erased the flicker of a smile from her lips. Pepper might be old, but she didn't think he was old enough to be her dad. He kept calling her that though, and she knew it meant he cared. He'd better, after the drek she'd done to save his hoop. "Good thing I'm used to old men that can't keep their eyes off me."

Pepper snorted and Healz chuckled.

"Young men too," she added when she thought of Tank.

"Damn right," her boyfriend agreed. "Headlights off. They're turning down the road, stand ready."

Bling saw the dark shapes moving down the road and heard the sound of their Runflat tires on the pavement. "I've got them," she said.

"Me too," Pepper announced.

Bling ran her fingers over the thermal smoke and flashbang grenades in her jacket pockets a final time before pulling her hands out and holding them at her sides. She waited while the three vehicles pulled into the parking lot and came to a stop with the muscle car pulling off the right at an angle and the armored sedan pulling off to the left. The luxury van turned to face her broadside and came to a rest.

The car doors opened, disgorging four men and one woman. Each wore tactical harnesses under armored jackets or long coats. Pistols rested at their sides and she caught sight of a couple of submachineguns poorly concealed beneath their coats. They spread out but didn't surround her. It was a smart move, she would be cut apart in the crossfire if the guns came into play, but they didn't risk hitting each other.

The driver and passenger doors on the van opened, allowing a woman and another man to join the party. The driver had one side of her head shaved and the other swept over in a jagged frosted purple wave. She wore a skintight outfit that looked better suited for yoga than security, but the sword on her right hip and knife on her left suggested she'd planned her wardrobe for the occasion.

Bling studied her as she walked and approved of the fluid grace of her movements. She had a natural glide that would suit her well if wanted to dance, but the way she moved wasn't for show or entertainment. She was a huntress.

The woman eyed her as she walked beside the man. She came to a stop as he did and, after locking gazes with Bling, gave a slight nod of her head. A greeting of equals, or a test. Bling returned the nod and added a smile just to be a bitch.

"I doubt you have the packages that were mentioned hidden under your coat," the man said.

"Tried to get them under my skirt, actually," Bling replied. She shrugged. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Johnson. Did you really think you needed all these men to handle me?"

He looked at the men standing in position in a semi-circle around her before turning his gaze back on her. His eyes stayed above her neck, unlike most of the security team he'd brought. "Young lady, I don't know who you are or what you're capable of. If the man I spoke with earlier is correct, you have something of interest to me, but seeing as how they are not here for me to investigate, my interest is fading."

"My friend was very genuine," she said, trying to pull him back in. "We were concerned is all. You've got so many friends with you, after all. Didn't seem like a good position to negotiate from."

He tilted his head and nodded. "I can appreciate that. An open place like this though, I'm sure you have sufficient support in place."

Bling offered a noncommittal smile and shrugged her shoulders enough to cause movements in other parts of her anatomy. "I'm satisfied with my level of support, but it might bother some."

Mr. Johnson's driver smirked for the briefest of moments.

The Johnson ignored her antics and said, "Seems we're getting nowhere and I have a busy morning tomorrow. If you have nothing else..."

"I have a lot of other things to offer," Bling informed him. She smiled to gain a precious second while she listened to Tank's instructions in her ear. She relayed them as quick as she could. "For example, I've heard that your organization is working on something very similar to this, but you've run into roadblocks along the way. We have working prototypes that could help get you over that bump and, perhaps, slow down the process for a competitor."

"That's an interesting presumption," he said. "Where did you hear such a thing?"

She shrugged again, taking care to make sure her jacket had slid open enough to provide a touch of distraction to the man's guards. His driver alone remained fully focused on her and not her cleavage, though Bling knew she was aware of Bling's antics. "In this day and age even the walls have ears. It's all about knowing a girl who knows a girl, you know?"

Mr. Johnson glanced at his driver and then back. "A girl?"

"Or a guy," she shrugged again. "Sexism is kind of outdated, don't you think?"

He smirked. "A fair point. Well, miss, I'm afraid I can't offer any sort of a deal without any sort physical proof."

"You should," Bling said. "It really is in your best interests. Your company's too."

His eyes narrowed. "Is that a threat?"

Bling laughed. "Oh no! Certainly not a threat. I mean this is something that will work out in your favor very well."

"Why is that?"

"Well, I'm not supposed to offer any of the goods early, but I guess I could let a little something slip as a freebie."

His answering smile made her think a shark had learned to walk on two feet. "Do tell."

"Well, you see, we've been double crossed," she said. "We acquired these items and after an examination to make sure they were legit, we've been told where to deliver them."

"A little out of the ordinary, but certainly acceptable," he commented.

"Right, but we were told to deliver them to your company."

His brow furrowed. "My company?"

Bling nodded. "And, thanks another girl who knows a girl, it turns out that as soon as we attempt delivery, police and probably at least one other group are planning to show up to the party."

"I see," he said. "So my company is implicated in this and you are removed from operation in one fell swoop?"

"You sound like you admire the plan."

He chuckled. "I admire efficiency. I'm a scientist at heart, that's all. Trust me, if you can deliver something of use to me, then the last thing I would want to do is have you and your friends disposed of. If what you offer is legitimate and what you say is true, than if you don't attempt any clandestine activities, everything will be fine?"

Bling grimaced. "See, that's the problem. If we don't show up, they'll assume we did the impossible and found a way in. The corporate cops, local police, and who knows who else will show up anyhow. Maybe they don't bust us right away, but they'll still prevent you from doing anything *or* from utilizing any knowledge you've gained."

"I see. That does complicate things and lessens your negotiating power considerably."

"No, this gives you an opportunity to be a hero."

He glanced at his purple haired driver and then back to Bling. "A hero?"

Bling hesitated a moment until Tank realized she needed his help again. She spoke as he spoke, twisting his words into something she would say. "You take the items and hide them some only you and your crew know about. Study them. Figure out where you went wrong. Backwards— no, reverse engineer— them. Bring your product to market first or at the same time. Then reap the rewards. Something like this, I'm told, is worth millions of nuyen."

Thanks to her elven blood she could see how wide his eyes were and the hungry look that was in them. "You're official facility is raided and declared free and clear, giving you an alibi. Get to market first and you can even file legal action against the original owner. That's a win-win for you and us both."

He laughed. "Leave it to a woman to be diabolical."

Bling grinned and gave him her best shrug yet. This time even his eyes flickered towards her chest before he snapped them back up. "There remains the obvious problem — I don't know if what you have is legitimate. And even if it is, you said it was investigated by a third party already?"

Bling smiled while Tank whispered in her ear. When he finished she said, "Yes, there is that. Fortunately, I have a friend who is a specialist who knows enough about these things to make some modifications before they were scanned. Modifications that have already been undone to restore it to a proper working state."

He stared at her for a couple of heartbeats before asking, "Is this true?"

"I wouldn't share it if it wasn't."

Mr. Johnson nodded. "All right, I'm interested. How do you propose we move forward?"

"First we agree on a price," she said. "I'm taking offers. We figured you deserve the first opportunity, what with your company being targeted and all."

He twisted his lips as he considered. "If— and this is a big if— everything is as you say, I'm willing to offer one hundred twenty thousand nuyen."

Bling hoped neither he nor his ninja-driver could hear her heart hammering against her ribs. She pressed her lips together to fight the smile and waited as though she was considering. "Millions, Mr. J. This is worth millions and I think you know it. Not to mention what it would mean for you, personally. A promotion and a fast track to a great place. Nice corner office, maybe. Not to mention rubbing it in the noses of your co-workers and the guys at other companies that you go there first."

"Name your price," he said.

"Two hundred."

He scowled. "I thought you said you weren't extorting me."

"It's worth at least ten times that!"

"There's considerable risk in bringing this to market," he countered. "One hundred fifty."

Bling sighed, fully into her role of a negotiator now. "I've got a lot of interested people in this, but I have to say I really like your friend's look. That hair sells it. One bit of advice though, more resistance training and less cardio. You've got the chest and hoop of a thirteen year old elven boy. Get some curves back, girl, you can still kick ass. I can give you the name of a great street doc if you want some work d—"

Mr. Johnson waved his hand to cut her short. His driver's cheeks were red as she struggled to keep from laughing. "One hundred sixty. Final offer."

Bling hesitated and reached up to touch her micro transceiver. She waited a moment and then nodded. "Okay, one sixty is acceptable."

He sighed. "So now what?"

"I stay, you stay. Ninja-lady can stay too, everyone else gets in their cars and goes to the other parking lot. It's close, but not too close. Then one of my friends drive here and you inspect. If you're happy, we're happy."

The Johnson studied her and then gave a curt nod. He turned to his personal Cuisinart and said, "Arrange it."

The purple haired bodyguard glanced at the rest of the security team and jerked her head back while her boss returned to the van. A few of them cast a last fleeting glance at Bling before they turned and retreated to their cars. Once they'd loaded up they drove out of the parking lot and went to the other one several hundred meters away. They parked there and waited, cars running and ready to return at a moment's notice.

The bodyguard studied Bling a moment longer before she said, "Mary."

Bling blinked. "Sorry, I'm seeing someone. You're cute and all, but just not my type."

The woman laughed. "That's my name. I figured fair's fair."

"Oh!" Bling grinned. "Sorry. Does that mean you want my name now?"

Mary winked at her, "I've already got it."

"I didn't realize I was a celebrity."

"You leave a lasting impression. I had a client a few years back that had a thing for you. His wife didn't approve when she found out."

Bling chuckled. "Damn women, always getting in the way of a good thing."

Mary chuckled. "I bet she probably thought the same thing."

"What about you?" Bling asked. "Were you a fan?"

"An admirer," Mary admitted. "But not a fan."

Bling considered the difference. "I can appreciate that. Thank you."

Mary gestured at her. "Moonlighting, or did you get out of entertainment?"

"I'm diversifying. I've got experience at negotiating for both services and money and, it turns out, there are a lot more opportunities to put those skills to use than I realized. Especially when I'm dealing with a man."

Mary shrugged. "You'd have a good impact with women too."

Bling raised an eyebrow. "Is that right? Are you..."

"Ha! No, sorry," Mary said. "My former client's wife wasn't upset because he was lusting after a stripper. She was upset because it was you— she hoped to win you over herself and set you up as her personal, ah, assistant."

"Oh!" Bling recovered from her shock with a frown. "I don't remember anyone like this. Are you sure it was me?"

"Oh, definitely. Because of their arranged marriage and appreciation of both business and contracts, they agreed that neither one of them would pursue you."

"Wow. That's... something."

"Yes, I suppose it is," Mary said. "I always wondered, would you have done it?"

"Agreed to be their harem girl?"

Mary laughed. "I suppose that's one way to put it."

Bling shrugged. "Depends on when it was in my life. There was a time where I probably would have. Lord knows how I would have turned out."

"What about now?"

She smiled. "Not a chance."

Mary shrugged. "If you change your mind, let me know. I could probably arrange something."

Bling heard the soft chime of a contact request being transmitted to her commlink. "I thought this was a former client?"

"It is," Mary said. "I don't burn bridges if I can avoid it."

Tank's voice whispered in her ear, "Thirty seconds out, you should see the headlights in three...two...one... now!"

Bling turned and saw Tank's van heading down the road. She smiled and pointed at it. "Here comes the product now."

Mary took a half step back as she turned, keeping distance from Bling. She saw the vehicle approaching and looked back to Bling. "Once again, I'm impressed. I never expected you for this kind of work."

Bling laughed. "That makes two of us! It's exciting, pays well, and keeps me on my toes."

"Dancing didn't keep you on your toes?"

The former stripper laughed again. "Toes? Not that much. Back, knees, and wrapped around a bar – sure."

Mary laughed with her.

"So what gives with the swords?"

"I like a close shave."

"Laser hair removal. Best money I ever spent. I don't need to shave anything ever again!"

Mary rolled her eyes. "I meant shaving other people."

"Oh! Got ya! Wait, does that mean you don't shave yourself?"

Mary groaned. "Of course I— thank god, here's your partner."

Bling grinned as Tank brought the van around in a circle and parked it just behind her, leaving a total of ten meters between the vehicles. Ten meters with only Bling and Mary taking up space. Or targets if either vehicle hid men with guns.

The back doors to Tank's van opened and revealed Healz. The ork stepped out and turned to grab the cart that had the prototypes on it. He pulled it out, lowering it slowly to the ground and then spinning it around so he could push it over to where Bling and Mary stood. He left the cart and moved to stand beside Bling.

"We had to disassemble the parts to transport them, but they go back together very easy," Bling explained.

Mary moved to the cart and studied it. She kept the cart between them and kept glancing their way to make sure they hadn't moved. When she was convinced there was nothing dangerous about it, she backed up three steps and motioned for her employer.

Mr. Johnson climbed out of the van and walked across the parking lot, his hard soled shoes striking the pavement until he reached them. Without a word he moved to the cart and began fidgeting over it, touching the prototypes and pulling out a handheld device that he used to take readings with. Mary had to shift positions several times so she could maintain an optimal placement to offer protection while he circled the cart and studied the equipment.

"If you want to see it working, you'll need a power source. The tube plugs into the two boxy things and it just works, or so I'm told."

"Yes, yes... it's an electromagnetic lock. Frictionless, even, outside of the resistance air provides. I wonder how they handled power loss or phase shifts. Decoupling under speed could cause catastrophic problems."

"Uh... good questions," Bling fumbled. Tank began to explain the process in her ear but she gave a quick shake of her head and said, "We'll help you load it up and you can figure everything out at your convenience."

"Yes, yes, of course," he agreed. He straightened and glanced back at the Rover. "Go ahead and load it up."

"Gladly, just as soon as the payment is confirmed," Bling said with a smile.

"Oh, payment. Yes, of course, half a moment... I'll need an account to transfer it to, I don't have any spare credsticks of a sufficient level on me."

Bling hesitated and then pulled up her account. She hesitated a moment longer before transmitting the encrypted public access key to it. He grunted, which she translated into assuming he received it. A few seconds later she received a notification of a deposit into her very depleted account. A sizeable deposit.

Bling flashed the man a grin. "All set! Healz, if you'd be so kind?"

Healz nodded and circled around her to push the cart over to the side of the van. Mary fell back with her boss and opened the sliding door in the side of the van. She waited until her client was back in his seat on the passenger side before she helped the ork pick up the cart and move it into the deluxe van.

"Holy drek, she's strong!" Blind thought out loud when she saw Mary lift her half of the cart.

Healz backed out of the van while she secured the cart in place. He made it back to Bling's side and whispered, "She's an adept."

"A what?"

"Physical adept," he explained. "Not too many of them around. Either they're really good or they end up dead. Kind of dumb bringing a sword to a gunfight, even if they've got magic boosting them."

"Magic? She's a mage?"

Healz glanced at her. "Not a mage, an adept. They use magic too, but they don't toss spells around. They use it to enhance themselves."

"Like cyberware or bioware?"

"Yeah, kinda."

"Huh," Bling studied the woman as she waited for the van door to shut and then turned to flash her a smile and a wave. "That's pretty whiz. How do you know so much about magic?"

Healz opened his mouth when Tank's voice sounded over the group comm line. "We got incoming," he warned. "Entire fragging convoy headed your way hard and fast! Trying to get a read on where they came from but they registration isn't public record."

"Knight Errant?" Pepper asked.

"No, these are unmarked. Two Roadmasters and four Jeep Trailblazers. The Roadmasters have turrets with some kind of machinegun on them. These guys have the gear and skill to be pros, and they do not look friendly!"

"Drek!" Bling swore. She waved her arms and shouted, "Mary! Wait!"

"What are you doing?" Healz growled. "We gotta bolt!"

"If they found us here, they're not going to let us get away," Blind hissed while Mary stopped her door from closing and pushed it back open.

"What?" Mary asked. "You change your mind about that offer?"

Bling ignored the question, "We've got incoming. Unmarked convoy moving fast. Heavily armed, too."

Mary stared at her and turned to look at the road. "How do you— drek!"

The convoy turned onto the road and roared down it towards them.

"What is this?" Johnson shouted from his seat. "Are you double crossing me?"

"No! Nobody is supposed to know about this," Bling insisted. "Get your men ready, we've got to work together."

Johnson cursed and spat something out to Mary. She reached up to her ear and her lips moved, but Bling couldn't make out what she was saying. It was obvious a few heartbeats later as the doors to her security team's cars opened and the men spilled out. This time they had their submachineguns in hand as they picked positions and used the cars, the maintenance building between parking lots, or crumbling cement curbs near the end of the parking lot as cover.

"This is going to suck," Bling promised her ork friend.

## Chapter 17

"Don't think you can flirt your way out of this," Pepper shared over the comm line.

"Is that a dare?" Bling retorted.

"No! There's no need to get your hoop shot," he snapped. "Let the Foreccio team slow them down, then get in the van and let Tank get you the frag out of there!"

"The way out is through them."

"Two open baseball fields and some fences. That van can beat a fence," Pepper said.

Bling glanced behind them at the baseball fields. She hesitated and looked back. "Healz?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Your call."

She scowled. "Why is it my call?"

The lead jeep squealed into the far parking lot. It spun to the side and braked hard. Doors flew open so the newest players could leap out and take up positions. They were dressed in dark grey and black combat armor and three out of four held Ares HVAR assault rifles, while the fourth sported the SA Nemesis light machinegun.

One Jeep blocked off the escape to the road while the other three were lined up across the parking lot. Both Roadmasters slowed to a halt and disgorged half a dozen more opponents. The turrets activated and swiveled to point at the Foreccio cars.

"Maybe—" Bling was cut by one of the turrets opening up before she could finish expressing her hopeful thought.

The Equus rocked under the impact of the bullets against its armored body. Everybody with a gun opened fire, including the other roadmaster's turret.

"Holy frag!" Bling shouted over the deafening thunder. In the first few seconds one of the Foreccio guards was down and another was wounded. She surveyed the battle and saw the conclusion was inevitable.

"Engaging," Pepper said right before one of the uniformed soldiers slapped his hand against the side of his helmet and spun around. A second shot struck him in the throat and punched through the flexible armor. He clutched at his throat as he fell to the ground.

One of his teammates saw what happened and called out a warning. Three of the members of the overwhelming force spun ran to take cover, searching their surroundings for Pepper.

"Good time to get that distraction up and running," Pepper said.

"You got it, follow the red dot," Tank replied.

Bling turned to the street doc, "Get in the van!"

He nodded and saw she wasn't turning with him. "Where you going?"

"I'll be there, hold the door for me."

The ork glared at her for a half a second before the whip of stray bullets passing close by convinced him to get moving. Bling turned and ran towards Mary's van. With the adrenaline of a firefight rushing through her she'd forgotten how fragged up her leg was. Two steps in and she was rolling across the parking lot when her leg didn't move the way she expected it to.

She rolled up onto her knees and staggered forward, rising and continuing with a combination limp and hop before she slammed into the side of the Rover. Mary spun around in her seat, her knife drawn and held so she could slice Bling's throat from ear to ear.

"What are you doing?" Mary had to shout to be heard over the din of battle.

"Your men are being cut apart," Bling said. "Follow us out of here!"

"you got paid, why help us?"

Bling frowned. "Because I got paid," she said. "Now shut up and hurry!"

Mary glanced at her boss. His face was white and his hands had a death grip on the door and his seat. She turned back and nodded. "Go, we'll follow."

Bling turned and threw everything she had into making her leg work. She hobbled at a gruesome trot across the pavement, ducking as bullets zipped past close enough to snap the air. She felt the tug as one stray round plucked at her long coat where it flapped around her legs. The next round slapped her in the butt and made her suck in a hissing breath and take a stutter step. She kept her balance and made it to the back of the truck before she fell into it.

Healz grabbed her by the coat and yanked her in, dumping her on the floor of the van while he hauled the doors shut behind them. "We're secure, go!" the ork barked into the comm line.

The Bullpup's engine roared as the tires slipped against the pavement. Bling had risen just enough that the sudden acceleration tipped her over and into the rear door of the van. She swore and grabbed her elbow where she'd banged her funny bone against the wall.

"What was that about?" Healz demanded while offering her his hand.

She took it and kept his hand in hers to help her deal with the sudden twists and bumps the van took around them. She climbed into the passenger seat and buckled herself in. Healz was too big to make the maneuver so he knelt behind the front seats and held on to them. The driver seat remained empty while Tank piloted the van remotely.

"Protecting our rep," Bling said.

"Hey, the Johnson's van is following us," Tank announced over the comms.

Bling reached up to activate her earpiece. "I told them too. We— Damn it, Tank, be careful! Anyhow, I figured if we help them get clear, then it boosts our rep more. Shows we've got integrity, or some drek like that. Tank! Watch out for the bleachers!"

"I know," Tank muttered as the van turned hard to the right.

Bling yelped and groped for anything she could for fear it was going to roll over.

When the van stayed upright Tank continued, "Two jeeps are on our tail. Well, behind the Johnson's van. They're taking more fire than we are, fortunately, and it's all small arms."

"Lucky us," Healz mused.

"Johnson's rear guard is in bad shape," Pepper reported. He grew silent for a moment and then spoke again, "I've taken out three bad guys, but they're starting to figure out Tank's laser sight on his drone isn't where the shots are coming from. Smarter than I gave them credit for."

"Are they surrendering?" Bling asked.

"I don't— drek! They're starting too. Only three left anyhow."

"They can't tell them who the buyer is," Bling said. "If they do we're jacked! Saving Johnson does us no good, and our rep goes to drek because we sold everyone out, as far as they're concerned."

"Should have thought of that before you abandoned them," Pepper said.

Bling clenched her teeth through another sliding turn and then grunted when the bullpup dropped off a curb and back onto a roadway. The tires squealed as Tank jerked it to the left and opened the throttle up. She opened her mouth and then let out a curse as a barrage of bullets hit the armored wall of the van with the sound of popcorn over an open fire.

"Armor should be fine against their guns," Tank said.

"The task force took out one more but now they're moving to capture the survivors. Might be some wounded, definitely two at full strength. I— okay, another jeep just took off after you guys. Over."

"Copy," Tank said.

"Yeah, copy... Pepper, you have to stop them."

"Not a chance. There are ten fully armored people down there, and they're keeping under cover. If I shoot, they'll find me. I'd rather have a bad rep than a eulogy."

"You only need to shoot twice."

"Twice, but— holy drek, kid. That's dark."

"You got a family to take care of, are those two guards worth more to you than your family?"

Pepper chuckled. "Didn't think you had it in you. Stand by."

Bling held on, figuratively and literally as Tank took corners on two wheels. She checked the mirrors and saw the Rover was hanging with them. As good as Tank was, Mary seemed to be able to compete. "She's good," she mused.

"That model of Rover has better handling and acceleration than my bullpup," Tank responded.

"Targets down," Pepper reported.

"Slot and run!" Pepper said.

"Ya think?" he snapped back.

A few seconds passed and Tank took a corner so tight the van began to shift to the left. He brought it back, settling it back down, and then tore a streetlight out of the ground with the van's bumper. "Oops."

"Drek! The jeep that was coming for you guys spun around. They got me pinned between them and the others.

Bling held on to the van with white knuckles and asked, "Have they seen you?"

"Where are they going?" Tank wondered.

Bling's brow creased with confusion. "Where are who? The jeep?"

"The Johnson, they didn't follow us around the corner."

"Drek!"

"They know I'm here, they figured I was in the building, but they don't know where I'm at exactly."

"Get to the roof," Tank ordered.

"Nowhere to go up there," Pepper said.

"Trust me," the rigger said. "Reinforcements inbound."

Pepper swore again and went quiet on the comms.

Tank burst through a red light at an intersection and turned the van left at the last moment. Tires squealed and the weight shifted hard to the right. It was going over and there was no stopping it.

Bling had the air driven out of her as he shoulder slammed into the door and her head bounced off the reinforced glass of her window. Fireworks burst inside the van and she had to pick her head up and shake it to try and clear both the pretty colors and the ringing in her ears.

The van jerked again, helping her back to her senses. The first thing she recognized was Healz growling out a stream of curses behind her. She turned around and looked through the cracks in her window and saw one of the jeeps beside her. The side of the Jeep was dented, scratched, and partially caved in.

"We hit them," she mumbled.

"They flanked us," Tank explained. "Looks like one jeep went after the Johnson and the other snuck around the block on us."

Bling shook her head and then yelped when a series of pops rattled the side of the van from automatic weapons. She risked a glance and saw two men standing up in the back of the open-roofed jeep and swapping out their magazines so they could fire again.

"Armor's good still, right?" she asked.

"Should be," Tank said.

"Should be?" Bling repeated. "Oh drek, they're aiming low... for the tires!"

"Runflats," Tank explained. "Relax."

Tank's suggestion fell on deaf ears. Bling heard the stuttering of the assault rifles and felt the van tremble around her. The trembling turned to vibrating and then shaking bad enough her teeth started to chatter.

"Tank! What the frag?" she stuttered.

"Just hang on!" Tank exasperated.

"Runflats don't do drek if they tear the tire apart," Healz said as he returned to his kneeling position behind her.

Bling glanced at him and then turned to stare out the front window. The van felt like it was falling apart around them. Ahead she saw the lights of the boardwalk along the river. Beyond that, she know, was the Detroit River itself.

## Chapter 18

"I've got two men covering their ride and two men sweeping the building," Pepper said. "They're moving fast too, they've got some serious gear to let them know they haven't found me yet. Probably some high tech thermal drek."

"Shoot them," Tank said.

"Can't, they're covering each other too well. I pop out to get one and the other will nail me. These guys know teamwork. I've got to find cover."

Pepper glanced around and saw some ducts where hot air was vented out of the building. He ran over and ducked behind them, then shifted over and down until he was lying on the rooftop. He didn't think the metal of the ducts was thick enough to stop a bullet and he didn't have to find out firsthand.

Pepper dropped his head fast when the door to the stair well opened. Too fast, his chin bounced off the asphalt on the roof. He bit his cheek and then had to clench his teeth to keep from swearing. Once the immediate pain had numbed he focused on listening.

The wind was light and blowing west to east, blowing against him when he'd been set up in his sniper roost. During the battle the wind had carried some of the sounds of the firefight to him. Now he was worried it would work against him and sweep away the important sounds of a boot crunching on asphalt.

After nine seconds that felt like a lifetime he couldn't resist any longer. He picked his head up and raised himself up on his elbows enough to peer over the duct. His low-light enhanced vision painted a stark image in shades of green. The lack of color definition made it more difficult to recognize details, but the movement of a gunman in the doorway as he swung towards him was easy to spot.

Pepper dropped again and that was all the time he had. He couldn't berate himself. He couldn't curse. He couldn't even spare a moment to pray that he hadn't been seen. Bullets tore into the duct and spit out razors of lead and steel. The rounds slammed into his hip and side, hitting hard enough to sting like a snake bite and steal his breath.

Pepper rolled with the bullets, struggling to put distance between himself and the duct. He found his Ingram Smartgun as he rolled and triggered the wireless link from his commlink to the smartlink in the weapon. It was ready to go by the time he completed his second roll and lurched up on his knees and left hand. He fired the submachinegun one step shy of blindly, spraying the stairwell with suppressive fire.

Almost as fast as he popped up he went down again. His left arm gave out as an enemy bullet found a seam between the armor plates and burrowed into and then out of his upper arm. He dropped to his shoulder, grunting at the fresh bruise and scrap on his cheek. More bullets zipped above him, parting the air where his head had been.

Pepper focused on his smartlink and kept his finger contracted, hammering at the pockmarked cement of the stairwell and the gunmen that were retreating back to its cover. Pepper watched the thirty two round magazine dwindle to zero in less than a second and knew he had to act.

He lurched to his feet and left the spent magazine lying on the roof. He ran across the roof, ignoring the throbbing in his arm and fumbling to retrieve a fresh mag from his belt. He succeeded and slammed it into the receiver as one of the gunmen cleared the doorway again. He'd improved his position and tried to keep the stairwell between them, but he wasn't there yet.

Pepper dove, as a flashing white star burst into existence at the front of the gunman's rifle. Bullets zipped past him and one even creased the back of his thigh, leaving what promised to be an angry bruise beneath his armor-lined pants.

Pepper hit the ground and rolled, grinding his left arm into the tiny asphalt particles. The extra pain combined with his adrenaline to chase away the doubt and fear and replace it with heat and fury. He stopped rolling and took the briefest aim possible, which is to say he pointed the gun in their direction and fired before his smartlink confirmed a target. The link flashed a few times as the gun bucked in his hands, but he wasn't focused on a quality shot. Right now Pepper's concern was quantity — throwing as much lead at his hunters as he could to give him time to come up with a better solution.

It worked. The gunman retreated to the doorway again. The door itself was riddled with holes and had a few dark colored splatters on it with some streaks running down. He'd hit one of them, maybe both. He couldn't be sure and until they were dead and he wasn't, it didn't matter.

Pepper popped the spent mag free and pulled a fresh one out. He raised it to the receiver and felt his hand slapped and twisted. He grunted and stared at it, stunned and not understanding what had happened. His entire hand stung, from his thumb and fingers to his palm. The magazine was gone and his glove didn't look right. The edge of his palm, below his pinky finger, was misshapen. Blood burst out of the uneven semi-circle, falling in a steady stream in his lap.

Understanding bloomed a moment before the pain kicked in. He clenched his fist and teeth in the same moment. The pain was one thing but he could deal with that. If his hand didn't work that would slow him down. The loss in effectiveness wasn't acceptable. He had to be able to fight. Had to grab another mag and—

Pepper looked up as a dark shadow fell over him. His injured hand was struggling to pull a fresh magazine from his belt. His last magazine. A foot slammed into the hand holding his submachinegun, sending it flying across the rooftop and over the edge. Pepper rolled with it and struggled as he rolled to get his hand inside his jacket. He ended up on his right side before he got his hand on the pistol and threw his shoulder back to help him draw the weapon. He got one shot off high into the air while his attacker kicked his arm out pinned it against the ground.

"Let go," the woman said while she pointed her assault rifle at his chest.

Pepper groaned. He flexed his arm once, testing her, and realized he had no chance. If he threw all his weight into it he could knock her off, but by then she'd have put however many bullets she had left in her magazine into his chest, ride the recoil up to his throat, and finish by turning his face into hamburger.

She triggered a burst into his chest, blowing the air from his lungs hard enough to spray spit and blood with it. He clapped his chest with his wounded left hand out of instinct and felt only the shredded faux leather of his jacket and the dented plates within. His ribs felt like they were being slow-smoked over a grill and when he finally dared to try to breathe the pain was almost worse than getting shot had been.

The gunwoman slid a fresh magazine into her rifle with practiced ease and said, "Told you to let go of the gun."

Pepper coughed and jerked as the pain flared from his chest and throat through his body.

"Holy drek, you're still alive?" she asked. She squinted and stared at his chest before pointing her rifle at his face. "That's some good armor in that jacket. Didn't stop a girl from kicking your ass though, did it?"

Pepper let go of the pistol and moved his left hand up and above his head. He winced at the pain in his bicep and palm and clenched his fist to put some pressure on the wound. He shook his head and tried a few ragged gasps of breath.

"He dead?" the other gunman called from the stairwell.

"Almost," the woman replied.

"Good, I want some payback."

Pepper turned his head and saw the man limping towards him. He had a tourniquet around his leg and his dark armored uniform was stained darker on his arm with blood. As he hobbled over the woman kicked his handgun away and took a half step back, all without ruining her aim at his face.

Pepper raised both arms, pointing them up towards her in a gesture of surrender.

The man stepped around her and came up on Pepper's left. He scowled and slung his rifle so he could draw his pistol. "Lucky shot, dirtbag," he said.

Pepper swallowed and glanced around. The woman was the immediate threat and the other guy was wounded. He had one chance at this. His smartlink with the machine pistol in his hand was online and ready to fire. He just had to think it and—

"What the frag!"

Pepper fired. The burst of small caliber slugs tore through his glove like rice paper and glanced off the woman's helmet as she turned her head to see what her partner was talking about. The bullets fragmented as they hit, sending slivers of lead and ballistic nylon into her cheek, chin, and throat.

She fell back screaming and firing blindly. The bullets tore up clouds of asphalt to Pepper's right and passed over him. He rolled to the left and flung his arm back to fire a second burst that missed everyone.

Dust and small asphalt rocks pelted Pepper as the wind blasted him. He squinted as he rolled across the roof and tried to line himself up for another shot. He cringed and hit the deck when the roof exploded a dozen meters in front of him amidst the heavy chatter of hammers driven by trolls against metal anvils.

He lifted his head as the echoing gunfire continued and tried to see through the semi-solid mist of asphalt. The geyser of cement and asphalt tracked across the roof and caught the male gunman as he tried to leap away. He was spun around and shredded by the explosive bullets. His partner was hammered down to the ground when two rounds caught her armored back and as she was already off balance.

Pepper looked up as the twinned Ingram Valiant light machineguns stopped firing. Silent but for the barrage of auto fire and the rotor blades swishing through air, the Northrup Wasp spun in midair even as it dropped down and landed within two meters of Pepper's legs.

"Get in!" Tank snapped over the comms.

Pepper struggled to his feet and saw his pistol nearby. He staggered over and scooped it up, then had to duck as the woman's rifle spat out a burst of bullets that passed close enough he heard the snap of air. Pepper fired back, shooting in her direction without stopping to care if he hit her. He ran, firing until his gun was empty and then let out a grunt as he was slapped in the lower back once and felt the bite of a bullet tearing through the armor lining in his pants to lodge in his thigh. He staggered and pitched forward.

Pepper caught the small forward stabilizer wing of the Wasp and wrapped his arms around it. He struggled to ignore the burning in his hamstring and get his feet under him when he felt the chopper start to rise. He grabbed on and hung tight while the Wasp twisted in mid-air.

Pepper's boots dragged as he tried to find purchase on the spinning rooftop. The wind from the rotors pressed him down and made it difficult to breathe, but it was nowhere near as aggressive as the dragon's roar that erupted from the paired Ingram Valiants mounted under the stubby wings along the Wasp's fuselage. In spite of the downwash from the rotors he felt the heat from the flames that burst out of the muzzle behind him and heard the whine of bullets centimeters behind his head.

The twin streaks of bullets pinned the woman down behind a metal box where a duct emerged from the ceiling. Instead of twisting further to bring one of the guns in line the turret mounted weapon beneath the nose launched a micro grenade. The high explosive round hit the box and performed as advertised, reducing the box to twisted and burnt remains while the woman hiding behind it was tossed half a dozen meters across the roof.

His ears ringing in spite of the dampers built into them, Pepper was able to get his feet under him and yanked the door of the Wasp open. He crawled in, nearly collapsing into the seat, and hauled the door shut behind him. He relaxed into the seat and gasped for breath in small pants he hoped would minimize the pain in his chest. It didn't help.

"You hurt?" Tank asked.

"Got hit a couple times," Pepper confirmed.

"Gonna make it?"

"Think so."

"Good. Try not to bleed on my seats."

Pepper flipped the dashboard of the chopper off as it rose rapidly into the air and pitched forward. It banked hard, swooping down and between the high-rise buildings of Windsor and passing within meters of the man-made chopper-killers on either side.

Pepper fumbled with tourniquets for his arm and leg and dug through his gear for some sort of a patch to keep him awake and dull the pain.

## Chapter 19

"Tank, there's a giant fragging river ahead of us!" Bling screamed over the screeching growl of metal on pavement.

Runflat tires could shrug off a hole or two as long as they weren't driven hard or fast. They also needed to not keep taking damage from security grade firearms. Tank's wheels failed both tests and it was everything the distracted rigger could do to keep the van moving down the road in a more or less straight line as the right wheels rode on rims.

"I've got an idea," Tank said. "Hold on!"

"Hold on?" Bling hollered. She grabbed the five point harness he'd installed and pulled it over her head to fasten it.

"Drek," Healz said before he latched one hand onto Bling's seat and another on the driver's to brace himself. He shoved one leg out against the wall of the van to fortify his position.

The darkness of the river loomed closer, with only a half meter cement barrier and some flimsy wooden fences separating them once the road ended in a T and the boardwalk began.

"Maybe take a deep breath too," Tank said in their ears. "Just in case."

"Tank!" Bling screamed right before the van twisted hard to the right.

The rims were useless for traction but the other two tires had more than enough traction to bring the van around. The van's momentum, on the other hand, would not be denied. It teetered for a heartbeat that felt like a lifetime and then rolled over to the left. The side of the van landed on top of the concrete lip, easily overcoming the obstacle. It collided with the steel and wood fence and sheared through it, sliding across the boardwalk and just as easily clearing off the final safety fence before it tumbled over the edge and rolled upside down in mid-air.

The broken windshield flew free of the spinning wreck, giving Bling a glimpse of the Detroit city lights reflecting on the surface of the still water. She gasped in a desperate breath and let it out in a grunt when her restraints bit into her and her legs slammed into the dashboard. Any thoughts of pain or confusion were washed away by the cool water that gushed through the empty windows and sprayed in her face.

Bling struggled against her restraints, forgetting in her panic that she'd fastened them for a few terrifying seconds. When she remembered she fumbled with the release but couldn't get it to work. Lashing out in a mix of panic and frustration, she popped her finger razors and shredded the restraints and left rips in her clothes and skin beneath.

She fell free of the seat, her head and face smashing into the ceiling of the van before her legs slid out from under the dash and let her flop onto her back. The water was already over her and rising fast as the van sunk.

she sat up and hit her head on the headrest of her seat. She grabbed it and pulled herself up, gasping for breath as soon as her face cleared the water. She spun around, looking, and found the windows were underwater. The van was sinking— for all she knew it had already sank— and there was no easy way out.

"Healz!" she gasped, turning to find him. He wasn't there. Or at least, he wasn't above the water.

She wanted to scream and cry and kick somebody. Tank, most likely. A well placed kick in the balls would serve him right. If she got out of this, that's exactly what she was going to do. With her pointiest boots she had. If she made it out alive... and that was unlikely. Not only was she trapped in a sinking van, but she couldn't swim.

Bling twisted again, looking for anything that would help her. It was dark, but enough light filtered in through the water that her elven eyes could make out the diminishing airspace in the van in shades of grey. She took a few quick but deep breaths and then ducked under the water. She searched around, having a harder time seeing in the water, and found the ork. His leg was wedged under her seat.

She pulled herself down and tugged on his leg. His knee was stuck fast, the angle preventing him from getting up. Even worse, he wasn't helping her. She tried to shake him but he didn't respond. Was he dead? Killed in the crash or just knocked out? Then again, unconscious underwater probably wasn't any better than dead.

She worked at his leg again, pulling with all her strength and then when she couldn't get it loose, she popped her razors and went to town trying to cut him free. The water grew cloudy with blood but she felt his leg starting to move. She pulled and sawed and finally had to suppress the urge to open her mouth and cry out in victory when she got him free.

Bling pulled Healz up and pressed her face and his against the ceiling of the van. She gasped in fresh air and hoped he was doing the same. If he'd already inhaled water she had to get the water out, but now wasn't the time. There wasn't enough air left in the van to breathe very long.

"About time I saved you for once," Bling said before she pulled the ork to her chest and wrapped her arm around his head. She pinched his nose shut and held her hand over his mouth to try and seal it before she took a final breath and went back under. She pulled Healz with her and used her other hand and feet to navigate through the van.

She made it out the front window and pulled herself up around the van towards the shimmering lights above. She broke free of the surface and gasped, then went under again. She pulled herself back up and grabbed onto the bottom of the van that was still a few centimeters above water.

Her friend and healer was too heavy to pull out of the water but she kept his head out by switching her grip to the neck of his shirt. She pulled him out of the water onto the van and clung to him while she lay on the dirty underside of Tank's doomed vehicle. She panted and was able to pull him out of the water enough to swing her left hand around and punch him in the chest.

Five punches later—the point at which she had given every last bit of effort she had in her to give—Healz coughed and gagged. He heaved in her arms and vomited river water. Bling almost lost her grip on him but she snagged his coat in time to keep him from slipping under again. He wretched a few more times before he began to alternate between coughing and gasping for air.

He spun around and grabbed onto the side of the van, allowing Bling to wrap her arms around him and hug him. She was crying and babbling something. She wasn't even sure what she was saying other than thanking him for not leaving her and rambling on about what had happened and what she felt and—

The heavy rattle of automatic weapons filled the night behind them. Bling flinched and turned her head to look back. Instead of seeing winking stars that sprayed streams of steel jacketed death towards them she saw a helicopter streak across the shoreline and strafe a path in front of the parked Jeep. The armed men that had emerged from it fled, trying to return to the safety of their jeep. One was cut down before he'd taken a step.

The Wasp rolled up in the air and spun, coming back down like a skateboarder on a half pipe. The twin Ingram Valiant's spewed flame and death again, riddling another man's body and

punching a dozen holes in the side, windshield, and hood of the Jeep. He slid out of the open door and slumped over in a puddle of his own blood.

The third pass of Tank's helicopter met with resistance. The two remaining defenders opened fire with their assault rifles. Tank swerved to the left, out over open water, and then brought the Wasp back around. The turret mounted micro-grenade launcher belched out a single grenade that flew into the open roof of the jeep before detonating.

The shock from the high explosive round blew out the jeep's windows and slapped Bling and Healz. Broken pieces of jeep splashed into the water around them, hissing water into steam as the scorched metal cooled.

Bling picked her head back up and looked around. The bottom of the van was even with the surface of the river now. Only the bottom half of the two inflated tires remained above the surface.

"Boat's sinking," Healz rasped. "Swim for shore."

Bling twisted around and looked. The shore was ten meters away, and it wasn't a shore, it was a vertical wall three meters up to where the broken fence was at. She whimpered and said, "I can't swim!"

A gust of wind picked up and blew Bling's hair in her eyes. The wind grew stronger, flinging water hard enough to sting when it hit. She twisted and glared through squinting eyes at the helicopter that was approaching just above the surface of the water.

It came to a stop next to them, blowing the water away from the bottom of the van as it sank. Healz coughed and pointed at it while mouthing the word, "Go!"

"Go where? I—" Bling reached up to her ear and realized she'd lost her microtransceiver. She looked down at the van and then cursed. It was lost forever. She turned again and climbed to her hands and knees, then rose to her feet slowly to keep her balance. The van was tipping back and forth and sinking fast.

The door on the right side of the Wasp swung open, revealing Pepper leaning back in the seat and looking really pale. He gestured for her to hurry. She glanced down at the water that was up to her knees and didn't need to be told twice. She waded the two steps it took and then climbed in.

"I'll climb over you," she shouted to be heard.

"No room," Pepper said. "Healz goes there."

Pepper hesitated and looked down at him. "Where the frag do I sit?"

Pepper's anemic grin would have been lecherous on anyone else. "Just don't tell my wife."

"You're a dirty motherfragger," she snapped and then pulled herself in on his lap tried to find a position that wasn't horribly inappropriate and still a little bit comfortable. "This thing is not built for two people."

"Not like this," he agreed while shutting the door.

As soon as the door shut the wind stopped shrieking in her ears. She gasped and moved her jaw to pop her ears. Inside the Wasp it wasn't any louder than a car on the highway. She was about to comment on it when the Wasp swung around, drawing a yelp from her and a curse from Pepper.

"Careful, I don't want to bleed on you," Pepper said after the Wasp stopped spinning.

Bling opened her mouth to ask what he meant when the other door opened. Healz pulled himself in, struggling every step of the way to get his weight out of the water and into the seat.

The helicopter dipped to the left a moment until Tank compensated and leveled the flying machine. Healz made it the rest of the way in and pulled the door shut behind him.

"You fraggers are crazy," the ork sighed.

The chopper pitched forward and picked up speed, streaking across the river barely two meters above the surface. Bling gripped the door and Pepper's arm hard enough to make her knuckles white before they passed under the bridge and Tank eased back on the speed and gained elevation.

"We made it," Pepper said in a tired voice.

"We did?" Bling asked. "What about Mary and her Johnson?"

"Not sure, but Tank said he didn't hear anything on any of the public nets about them being picked up. Thinks they made it."

"Hope so," Bling said. She shifted and heard Pepper's breath catch. "Sorry. What's wrong with you?"

"Got my hoop kicked by a slitch with a big gun."

Bling shifted again, earning a fresh groan from the older man under her. "Oh my god, are you okay? You looked pale but I didn't realize..."

"Long as you stop moving I'll be all right," he muttered.

"Oh... sorry!" Bling blushed and settled back in on his lap. "You must have lost a lot of blood."

"Some," he admitted.

She turned her head enough to flash him a smile, "You're the first man I've given a lap dance to that didn't try to poke me through his clothes."

Pepper groaned and Healz chuckled. The ork's laugh turned to wracking coughs.

Pepper picked his head up enough look over and ask, "You okay, big guy?"

Healz composed himself and nodded. "Yeah," he rumbled in a gravelly voice. "Bling saved my hoop by pulling me outta the water. Crash knocked me out and I tried to breathe like a fish."

Pepper winced and Bling gasped.

"Oh my god! I forgot... your leg! You were trapped under my seat and I had to cut you out. I wasn't too careful about what I cut and I couldn't see much. Are you all right?"

Healz nodded. "Yeah, nothing I can't patch up. Couple stitches, good as new. Was my pants that got hung up I think, you ripped them up good."

Bling closed her eyes and let out a fresh sigh of relief. "Thank god!"

"Good to hear," Pepper said. "I'm going to need a little help when we land, I think."

Healz nodded. "Yeah, I can tell. Tank, hurry up and get us down, Pepper don't look too good."

"Ten minutes, tops," Tank said over a speaker in the Wasp's cockpit.

Bling jumped, causing Pepper to catch his breath. "Sorry," she whispered.

"S'ok," he mumbled.

"Tank," Healz said as Pepper's eyes glazed over. "You might want to call your troll friend and see if he can help us out again."

"Pepper?" Tank asked.

"Huh? What?" Pepper tried to rouse himself and sit up and remembered the weight on his chest was Bling. "I'm fine. I mean, I'll be fine. Just need to rest."

"He's bleeding on my seat, isn't he?" Tank asked.

"Think so," Healz said.

Bling turned her head and moved her arm so she could grab Pepper's shot up hand in hers. She ignored the sticky blood and squeezed it anyhow. "Hang in there, old man. You've got people counting on you!"

Pepper mumbled something they couldn't make out.

Bling held on top him, squeezing and talking to him while Tank flew as fast as he dared through the night.

## Epilogue

"I must admit, I'm impressed," The Judge said while the latest headline, a red-headed dancer named Fireball danced on the main stage in between jets of flame. "Everything worked out for all parties concerned. Even you."

"You didn't expect it to?" Tank asked.

"Honestly? No. Pepper was an unknown, a newcomer to the scene and rather old to be getting into the biz. You have a reliable history and a string of successes, but your work was fairly low risk and low reward. Recruiting assistance was honestly your only hope of success."

Pepper pushed his irritation back down in his belly. It was easier than it should have been, proof that he was about as wiped out as a person could get. The cram had worn off while Healz was patching him up, nearly making him crash on the table. The hard kind of crash too, not just the inevitable after effects of a designer narcotic.

Lucky for him, the worst part of the damage was blood loss and risk of infection. Healz patched him up and loaded him full of antibiotics, then Ivan showed up and gave him a magical boost that made him look almost like new. The troll had bitched about too much metal again, but admitted Pepper wasn't as bad as Bling had been.

Bling, on the other hand, had shown the troll nothing but appreciation. He got a hug and a kiss on the cheek for his efforts to save her leg. Tank had looked ready to shoot somebody or get up and leave the entire time, but he kept his cool while the troll worked.

By the time Pepper woke up Tank had set up the meet and here they were. Healz, Bling, and Ivan were sitting at a table nearby and pretending to enjoy the show. Well, Ivan wasn't pretending. All the while Pepper and Tank faced off with The Judge to collect their payment and tell him to get bent for screwing them over.

"This is good," The Judge said. "Good for you and good for me. Good for all of us."

"We got the hell shot out of us," Tank growled. "I lost my van in the Detroit river, that was worth more than you're paying us, by a long shot!"

The Judge held his hands up. "Occupational hazard. You know that. I expect better out of you, Tank."

Tank scowled at him. "Yeah, well, we didn't dare walk away or we'd never get work again."

"Not a real job, no," The Judge agreed. He shrugged. "But now? After this? You will. Better jobs. Real jobs worth real money."

"So what, this was a test?" Pepper asked.

"I suppose it was. One you weren't expected to survive."

The scowl on both men's face deepened.

"Relax, gentlemen, it's just business. Nothing personal. You've proven yourselves though. I admit, I'm disappointed to part with your payment but I'm expecting better things out of your team. When the requests come in for a team that can get things done, I know who to go to."

"Maybe we should work with someone else. You're not the only fixer around," Pepper said.

The Judge smiled. "You're right, I'm not. You're welcome to try, there's certainly no honor among fixers. But I will call when I have a job, and you'll not only take the call, but you'll take the job too."

"How can you be so sure?" Tank asked.

"You're shadowrunners. You've tasted the life and you liked it. You'll come back and you'll do it not only because you're worth more money, but because you need it."

Tank and Pepper looked at each other. Pepper snorted.

The Judge reached into his pocket and withdrew two credsticks. He handed one to each of them and said, "I added a small bonus for your ingenuity from my personal funds. Don't get used to it."

Both men checked their credsticks and pocketed them after nodding the numbers were right. He'd added a thousand to each stick and hadn't taken any of the expense account funding out.

The Judge slid out of the booth and stood. "Gentlemen, it was a pleasure doing business with you. I'll be in touch."

They watched him turn and walk out of the bar. When he was gone at last they looked over and saw Fireball had joined their friends at the table and was sitting on Ivan's lap while she curled up against the Russian troll.

"What's next for you?" Tank asked the older man.

Pepper sighed and pushed his untouched beer away. "Go home, convince the wife that I'm fine and show her the nice paycheck we got between Foreccio and The Judge."

"Your injuries?"

Pepper shrugged and ignored the pain in his ribs. "Explain about the wired up slitch that came after my client accusing him of cheating on her. She was juiced up on god-knows-what so it took a lot to keep her busy until Knight Errant could show up and take custody."

Tank laughed. "If she buys that..."

Pepper shrugged. "I'll make it work."

Tank took a drink of his beer and nodded. "Well, good luck, omae."

"Thanks... and Tank?"

"Yeah?"

"You're a good man. The real deal."

Tank blushed and raised his glass. "You too, Pepper. Until next time?"

Pepper grinned. "You know it."

###

## Afterward by the Author



As always, Thank you very much for reading and enjoying it. As much as I love writing, it takes readers to make it possible for me to do it. Leave a review, send me some [email](#) / [a tweet](#) / [a Facebook like](#). Don't miss out on a chance to [sign up for my newsletter](#), visit my blog (<http://booksbyjason.wordpress.com>), check out my website (<http://www.booksbyjason.com>), and tell your friends! Let's make the adventures in the world of Kroth a household thing!

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