

# A SOLO ASSIGNMENT

By Cliff Dale

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Cliff Dale  
Servus ad Artem





It came as no surprise that things were not quite going to plan, to start with, there wasn't much of a plan anyway, that was what the client wanted, it was supposed to look like more of a punt, a random takedown, a sort of give it a go and see what happens type of thing, as it transpired, it wasn't going anywhere good at all.

As required, there did appear to be no obvious strategy involved here, at least nothing subtle, this was rough and ready, but it was still a bit too on the fly to be the smart option. Interestingly, it wasn't brutal, perhaps, in hindsight, that's exactly what it should have been, a tad more clinically ruthless, but needs must, and opportunities were few. There was an argument for a just dive-in approach for this contracted engagement, you know, get down and get bloody dirty, go for the throat, gouge a few eyeballs, maybe keep the good ones, then cut off a few limbs in the melee, you could go back and check them later for upgradables, and you could always lop off a head or two, hopefully, keeping yours where it was supposed to be, after all, there could be data storage drives in there, a potential for additional revenue. No, it was too late to change things now, besides, you had already stood off and let rip, sure, you hit your designated target, and he was down and bleeding out, but it wasn't cool, didn't have the customary polish you were better known for, this was, well, not putting too fine a point on it, amateurish. Once again, you had to tell yourself that this was all at the client's request, it wasn't how you liked to do things, it didn't sit well, and it went against your better judgement. Should this hit be monitored, a very unlikely scenario, then compared to your previous work, this was a poor show, you were never going to admit to doing this one, not that anyone would be asking, not if they had any sense, but at the end of the day, the desired result was there. You could prove the target was eliminated as had been requested, it did appear to be haphazard, it was a mess, it looked a proper clusterfuck, and you knew it deserved better, there should have been more finesse, there was an art to assassination, and you were, dare you say so yourself, an artist.

Right now, you needed to get your act together or what was left of the entourage was going to fry your ass good and proper, you'd taken out three, but the other two were right on it, chasing your ass down despite their pay cheque bleeding out on the street behind them, they were acutely aware that they would be in need of a new employer extremely soon, hunting you down and taking you out would look better on the next job application, it would at least show that they were not complete screw-ups. Sadly, for them, it was the next corner where they were going to join their master, they were not going to join the ranks of the unemployed for long, just the list of those found bleeding profusely in the gutter.

The alley was like many others in this part of the city, dirty, rubbish strewn, it did not smell too sweet and looked like it had not been swept in a decade.

The doorways all along it were grilled, security bars everywhere, not that you intended to try and open one, a few streetlights functioned, and most of the light came from the neon lamps advertising the businesses within. There was the odd rubbish bin, and every fifty meters or so would be a large skip-sized thing that had not been emptied in a month, most were full to overflowing, the only things happy about that were the rats and the roaches.

It came, the corner, you swerved around, ducked, and turned, a swift look left, right, behind, clear of people, good, and it was dark and dingy like the rest of this god-forsaken shithole, the Solo got down on one knee, no, there was no heartfelt proposal here, no kissing of the ring and the offer of eternal love, there was just the promise of a swift ending, more heart-stopping than anything else. The mark nine was raised and ready as runner number one blundered around the corner completely unaware of the final solution you had planned for him, so, you get in the customary double tap, the first 7.62 round you realise is way too low, the bruiser is a jacked up two meters plus in his boots full of useless buckles and straps, and the round just removes his manhood. The look of shock and horror on the man's face was repeated as the second round goes under his ribcage and explodes through the spleen before continuing its upward trajectory to rupture the heart, that stopped him, and it. The first runner is swept off his feet and crashes to the pavement to your right, the surprised and somewhat pained look still on his face as the light in his eyes faded to black, there would be no need to check his pulse, the life force had poured out and he is gone. Runner number two doesn't quite realise the predicament he is in, he has seen the fine spray in the dim lighting and is slightly puzzled by the red mist, and then, realising, way too late, that the noise he heard was his buddy's head smacking on the paving, he is unable to stop his forward momentum. Sadly, for him, he was to take two rounds right under the chin, the second shattering the vertebrae and separating the cranium, allowing the head to tilt all the way back. This bruiser still had his eyes wide open as his body crumpled and collapsed, and it too splattered on the paving, the skull's structural integrity was already compromised by the first round, at least you got the angle right on that one. Now, that was more like it, that was the brutal the first hit should have been, that was way more satisfying, and if you had done that to begin with, then this sprint finish would not have been necessary.

You make a mental note for next time, don't take on these terms and conditions again, it isn't you.

You get up off the knee, dust down your trousers and check for bloodstains, a quick swipe with a UV light pen and, nope, none, missed all the crapfest, that's good, no clean up required, all good to go.

There was just one thing left to do, as per the contract requirement, you went back past the prone body of the target and popped another red-tipped round

into the skull, and three seconds later, once you had moved a sensible distance and out of grey-matter splatter range, the explosive round detonated. The dull whump sound confirmed there was not much left inside of the cranium, and any data storage implant was suitably destroyed along with the unfortunates soft tissues. It was a shame, that was an extra revenue stream just wasted, as was the target, still, the fee for this one did take the revenue loss into account. The mark nine slips back in the full-length leather coat inner pocket made for it, and you button up, feeling the slight chill in the dusk air, and finding your shades, you slip them on, tap the side twice, and engage the enhanced mode. A quick scan left and right reveals nothing, no one gawping, any bystanders are doing the sensible thing, hightailing it out of here, time to join them, look like one of the panicked, become the wolf hiding amongst the sheep, you already know that there is no shepherd in attendance to pick you out of a line-up, quite right too.

It didn't take long to get to your temporary accommodation unit, it was a brief walk at a normal pace along the bright neon-sign lit streets, and you were grateful that this all went well this time, this time, there will be a next time. Once again, you live to strike another day, another customer duly satisfied and another tick in the right box, the target was destined for a different type of box but that was to be expected. Back at the accommodation unit, your transit room is as you left it, tidy and bare, nothing defining in it, nothing incriminating either, just the trappings of someone simply passing through, here one day and gone the next, and you were, for now, it was time to check out. Five minutes later and you had paid the bill and were on the way to the nearest cyber-café, it was time to meet your NetRunner, he always kept you secure, kept the net-nasties from worming their way in and had the knack of keeping the snoopers out, and you're assured that the backtrace is clean with a simple nod in your direction. There is a smile from the girl as your coffee is served, she has nice teeth, not sure about the blue lippie though, and as soon as she is gone you can begin to securely contact the client, not directly of course, but through the Fixer, you need to give them the good news that the contract is fulfilled. Now you can report that it was a bloody mess just as requested, amateurish as required, and although it was difficult not to provide the usual clinical finish, they will be glad to know that their message was not clearly sent, but it should be understood, they wanted to keep the interested parties guessing. What the message was about or why it was not to be clear was not your concern, you didn't ask those sorts of questions if you knew what was good for you, but if you chose to pry, then aside from getting told to keep your beak out, you were likely to find that you would not get further contracts from this Fixer and his seemingly endless list of clients. You couldn't afford to piss people off in this line of work, it didn't matter who you were or how good your reputation was, in this game, it was your rep that was

everything, it followed you about, often, preceded you, made your stock valuable, your services sought after, and it stopped your belly from rumbling. A rep could define you; it was your marker in this grim shithole, it was the only thing worth preserving, and like the media stars on the networks, you were only as good as your last hit. Sadly, all you did was to consign another layer of filth to the gutter, you removed it from the private domain to publicly dump it for someone else to scrape off the bottom of the social scrap heap, and the end result of your work was often not a pretty sight and was certainly not a job for the faint-hearted, or for those with a conscience.

This sector was proper grim, high-rise hellholes and lowlife assholes, and that thought raised a smile to your lips, it was the same in many places, times were tough, and you needed to be tougher, to be soft here was to be stomped on. You worked alone, a solo Solo, yes, there was a reliance on others for some things, but the jobs you took on were for the lone wolf, the one v one, or the several as the case may be, it mattered not, you took on what you were comfortable with. You were a specialist, one of the many out there perhaps, but your services were in demand, you were not going hungry for lack of work like some, but neither were you a glutton, making enough to make life comfortable, not overdoing it to make the wealth noticeable, it wasn't too taxing, it seemed you were doing just enough to keep the other wolves from your door, making the right impressions. It got you a managed place on the smarter side of town, somewhere the lights were bright and stayed on when other places browned out, the streets were swept, the cops were kept, and you could afford to relax the shoulders just a little.

It was not like that everywhere, today's job, for instance, was in the more industrial area, still plenty of hovels for the almost homeless, some small businesses, but generally it was slop shops and chop shops. He did not take in the sights much, the assignment was all about the target, unarmed of course, but he came with an entourage of five minders, all heavily armed and armoured, jacked to the nines on chemical enhancers, and it did them no favours, three didn't know what hit them, the other two gave a brief chase but it came to a bloody end as anticipated, at least you expected it, they didn't. Armour piercing rounds were lovely things, all pointed, beautiful, shiny, and gloriously explosive, all custom-made of course, nothing off the shelf, it was not reliable enough. Your munitions man was a little like yourself, took his job very seriously and never asked questions, only asked the basics specific to the task required and nothing more, it kept him employed, and more importantly, it kept him breathing. You knew, as did your armourer, that there are plenty more just like you, and like him, they are out there in the shadows, listening to the whispers, avoiding eye contact, waiting for their opportunity, vultures looking for that last breath, but all in this line of work know that no one is irreplaceable, one less will not be missed for long.

This assignment, now completed, was novel, there was some information on the target, nothing too specific, but he was a public figure, caught, hand not in the point of sale register, but taking backhanders, not unusual in itself, but he had denied the wrong people the outcome they had desired, and which they had parted with coin for, so, he had to pay for that denial of service, that failure was not to result in reparations of a financial nature, it was to be a contractual termination of a permanent nature, others in his department would get the message, the rumour mill would make it clear enough for them all to understand, even if the man's demise looked a little random.

The cyber-café is quiet, your man is there, plugged in and monitoring, keeping the unwelcome out, keeping the phishers at bay, the secure connection is engaged.

“Yeah, Nine Six, I will report that the contract is fulfilled as per the request, not too neat, a little sloppy, not my favourite way of doing things, but the job's a good'un. The important part is that the man went down hard, he did spill his essence all over the paving at a rapid rate, and the all-important storage module was indeed compromised as requested. His five-man team are toast, splashed to the four winds, they just were not good enough, not that I am boasting, much, an unfortunate collateral damage, but circumstances dictated their fate. Anyway, job done, as per usual, the final payment on confirmation is appreciated, and let me know when you need my services again, my team and I are ready and able whenever you need us, you know how to find me.”

There was a nod from the silhouetted figure on screen, the voice, as ever, disguised so you could not tell if it was male or female,

“Thank you for your prompt response, we do like doing business with you and your crew, most efficient, it is always a pleasure, for your information there is something that has just come across my inbox that suits your talents, I will get back to you soon when I work out the numbers, you are free of contract at this moment?”

There was a smarminess to the voice despite the voxbox running the interference, you always got the impression that they didn't like you much, perhaps it was fear, knowing what you were capable of, and sure that should their clients be disgruntled with them and turn the tables, you wouldn't hesitate to come calling and ice their bucket too.

“No, we are currently free, at your disposal should you see fit to pass something our way.”

There was that slow deliberate nod again and the metallic squawk just said, “Thank you, we will be in touch.”

The screen went blank, they disconnected, it always seemed rude, if you were honest, then it pissed you off somewhat, but they paid the fees on time, and graciously, you chose to ignore it.

The NetRunner signalled the disconnect with a simple cutthroat motion, and it was done with aplomb, a proper drama queen this one, still, the eccentricity was something you got used to, many of these NetRunners were cocky little mudders, but they could afford to be, well, if they were good enough they could. His man was, they had been together just over a year now, there were no complaints, no comebacks, and more importantly, no intrusions, it was going well. There wasn't much of a social interaction between the pair of them, sometimes it just didn't pay to get too close, particularly as it made him a soft target, take out the digital protection and you get access to the inner workings of the trigger man, that can be valuable data to acquire, it was the precise reason you needed to digitally plug the holes, couldn't have your employers business made public. The pair of them did converse, and they would do so now, a brief rundown of how things went would eventually lead to the all-important question every Solo wanted to know the answer to, was there any digital trail leading to or from the hit? Of course, you couldn't afford to have either, you dare not expose the client or the Fixer, and if you did, well, that would not just leave yourself wide open to judicial incrimination, but to terminal recriminations of your own making, all were undesirable outcomes. The NetRunners job was to protect everyone connected to the contract, and that included a decent dose of self-preservation, no one else was going to save his ass.

You were one of the few Solo's out there that were free of the cybernetic enhancements, not completely, there were several tweaks, but the replacement of limbs for weaponry wasn't one of them. You stayed well clear of many of the booster narcotic cocktails, most of it made you overly dependent on your Fixer or your Medic, and the rest just pushed one into a reliance that was nothing more than a downward spiral to a hyper-jacked mental implosion. That was something you were always up against, the hyper-tweaked and super-jacked wannabe's that didn't know shit about the craft, they were the death or glory merchants, often the one-hit wonders, occasionally, the dead at the first hurdle Solo's, thinking that the cyber-tweaks gave them the advantage, it didn't. You worked out long ago that it was time-served skills that gave you the edge, deep logic and street-smarts also helped, and a good backup team was a definite plus, but there simply was no substitute for experience. Despite the perceived lack of enhancement, you still got enough work though, and your Fixer was always willing to give you more, knowing you were not just a jacked-up jerk looking to make a name no matter the cost helped too, some of these Solo's were so full of their own shit you needed to stand upwind, they were more a danger to themselves.

What was it now, eleven jobs, no frag ups, at least none that were not designed to be so, and another was on the cards, just sorting the profit margins they said. That was another thing in your favour, you rarely haggled



the price, if it was too low, well, you declined to accept, often, a decent counteroffer was forthcoming. You knew they wanted your services, needed them, and you were well aware that if you give them enough rope, and time, gave the indication of a willingness to walk away empty-handed, then, they would reconsider the offer, you knew they could, they needed the income too. They had already calculated how much was still enough coin for everyone to turn a profit, for instance, just like this new offer to be considered, you all knew there were margins which were acceptable to all, the numbers would be crunched again and they would take what they could, but there were limits, you could work some of them out and stretch them a little, but it was a fine line you needed to walk. On acceptance of the offer, a simple digital handshake later, then it was off to wage war again, there was a new campaign to delve into, more ops to plan for, arrangements to make, and people to kill. Business was good, you didn't fight your own battles but waged mayhem on another's behalf, keeping their hands clean, their conscience was their problem, you were ok, you didn't have one. There were expenses of course, this was a business, you had people to pay, and your team were good, small, just the one permanent NetRunner, he used a few trusted others when it warranted it, but that came out of his slice of the payment pie. There were infrequent others, you had a Techie on speed dial but rarely used him, that was the bonus of not having chopped your arm off to stick a railgun on it, and your Medic was nothing more than the guy you used, although in this case, a female, but it mattered not, she was only interested in the coin you would put her way. She had once joked that her tweaking of your package had nothing to do with any sexual references, more's the pity, she was something to look at, physically tweaked herself, not overdone like some, just aesthetically pleasing. She had, in the past, enhanced your eyesight, tweaked your hearing, even your sense of smell, tightened a few muscles here and there, gave you a stunning six-pack, increased your lung capacity and sorted out your diet and hormone balance, and she had prescribed the right sort of boosters that heightened the senses but didn't screw with the mind, she was a trusted resource. Your permanent team was just you and the NetRunner, laughably, his name was Christian, in the religious sense he was most certainly not, very much more of a sinner than a saint, but he kept your digital butt plugged, and that was all you needed.

There were few you trusted in this line of work, which was a necessary evil, and friends were in short supply, they were always a backdoor into your hidden world, so, you kept them at arm's length, it made sense, another of those necessary evils, but you coped, compensated, made other arrangements when it came to socialising, paid for it mostly, but it kept you sane, not always clean, but you tried to keep it to a minimum, sometimes an itch just had to be scratched, you know what I mean?

The NetRunner signalled an incoming message, the Fixer was back online, the basic outline of the next job was available, a prelim price, and a general location, from there you would express an interest or decline, no specifics meant no harm, no foul, you could skip it if you wished, that had only happened once before, the issue being it was too far to travel and left you with no time to prepare.

The basics of this new job were simple, a single target, no entourage, zero preference for a method of termination, and just the one stipulation, sounded good so far. The target was a male, one syphoning trade secrets, reasonably local, and a time frame of seven days max, earlier was preferred. That was logical, if they are trading secrets then you needed to stop it, them, as soon as possible. The price was already good, but there was always a little wriggle room, and with a quick discussion with Christian on whether more personnel were needed, a deal was done, and now a few more of the target details could be revealed. Just like the last target, the only condition of the contract was an explosive headshot, this simply destroyed the data storage module, making sure it could not be recovered and the secrets re-traded by some third-party brain hacker.

What was not to like, a single male, lived alone, with no bodyguards, no contracted cover personnel and the distance to the target was only two hundred clicks, sounded straightforward, but where was the catch? The money was too good to be a simple walk-up and click at point-blank range, there had to be more to it, something was not clear yet, more was to be revealed. Sure enough, the message continued and suggested the target data was not yet fully encrypted enough to send, an hour or two and the full specs would be made available. That was interesting, there was a relatively long takedown timeframe, seven days was no rush job, but the details were still being processed, this did suggest a rush job in the specifics, was there going to be a sting in the tail of this one? The NetRunner was already on it and digging, all would be revealed by the Fixer when the information was finally available, but you could snoop and get an early heads-up if you were brave enough. Only the foolish rushed into the Fixer's systems, his, her, team were also good, and there were more of them, they were more likely to spot any intrusion. You could only poke your nose in so far before someone tried to bloody it, keep digging and all you were likely to do was dig your own grave, it just wasn't done, if you wanted more info you asked for it, or if you were really impatient, you paid a third party NetRunner to dig it out for you, no comebacks to your own digital gateway. That was what you learnt early on in this game, don't shit on your own doorstep and it will be fine, if you were stupid enough to try it and get caught, well, shit always rolled downhill and guess where you were standing, yep, at the bottom of the staircase, not a good place to be. That stench would follow you around, it stopped many things

including the indications of work availability, there was far more to this game than just pulling the trigger.

Your man gave you a shake of the head, he wasn't confident that the data was in the system, at least, not in the parts he could safely access, it seemed they would have to wait for the specifics, at least the generalised content allowed him to book transportation tickets and make the transit room reservations.

It took one hour exactly, almost to the second, and the encrypted file landed sunny side up in the inbox, and a brief decrypt later and the complexity emerged, the man may be a loner but he was hyper-cautious, bulletproof transport, always garaged, high security, like the property, internal access only, no easy external exposure, this hit was going to take planning and probably cunning, maybe even a slice of luck, not something to be relied upon.

The 'team' packed up and headed for the transport hub, tickets were already purchased, accommodation was confirmed, all they had to do was get there, at least this bit should be simple, barring travel delays and oiks on the InterCity shuttle, they were becoming an increasing nuisance according to the media reports.

It wasn't far to the Station, a five-minute wander along reasonably clean streets, this part of town was well maintained, though you paid for the privilege, or the residents did, prices here were some of the highest in the locality. His place was not as clean as this, nor as expensive, but he had done a bit of weeding himself, tidied the place up, the new man in charge wisely left him alone, knowing full well how he got the promotion opportunity. This locale was one of those areas where the only people you saw were the tidies, if you had a bit of a scruff thing going on here then the cops turned up, turned you over and turfed you out, couldn't have the mutts pissing on the paving.

The Station was clean and tidy, security was abundant, though personal checks were not made often, there was always the risk of confrontation if the weaponry was discovered in some random search, and you wouldn't get much chance to explain that you had licences for all you carried. In that situation, you would be staring down the barrel of several weapons, you dare not reach for anything, just swallowed hard and hoped no one got trigger-happy.

Thankfully, there was no confrontation, everything passed without incident and the journey started on time, there were just six stops to the destination and two hours, then the fun and games started.

That was a dumb thing to say, it wasn't going to be fun, there was too much serious stuff to do, and there were no games to be played, there was work and nothing else, the contract was everything and that was your focus, anything less than a professional approach was potentially lethal to your long-term survival prospects, self-preservation was the smart choice.

The pair never discussed an assignment in a public space, even with the NetRunner running interference there were still no guarantees of total

privacy, voices still carried, so the discussion was solely about the accommodation arrangements, any local intel on what they were going to find in regard to resident players, the Fixers they may need to find, and those they should avoid, and, of course, whether they were going to be the cause of any unintended third-party interference risk and what form that may take.

There were plenty of homegrown forces at play in the locality, from the Corporates and their Cops to the local yahoos, and there were going to be other Solo's and small bands that were likely doing their own thing too, most likely in direct conflict with the Cops, you didn't want to get stuck in the middle of whatever they had going down, that was likely to not end well. That was the problem round here, round everywhere, there was a strong probability that the localised shit that was about to go down was going to come your way, it always managed to somehow, it was like you attracted it, it followed you about, almost seemed to seek you out, it was uncanny, I mean, the target on your back was big enough at the best of times, though the NetRunner made the digital target smaller as you tried to stay under the radar, but it found you out most of the time, maybe that was because all the death and destruction in your wake gave you away. Eventually, the Cops may come calling, but your permits were bona fide, and if there was no blood splatter on your boots then there was nothing to pin on you, nothing they could query to detain you, and you'd leave, maybe a little delayed, suffering just a minor inconvenience, but it was part and parcel of what you did. You got used to it, eventually, just like you got used to the stench of death and the volume of blood that was spilt, and you learned to like the smell of cordite, now, the gun smoke no longer made your eyes water, and it had become easier with time, but there were limits. It was a personal choice, but you didn't do domestics, nor females, kiddies were a definite no-no, though most other things were fair game if the coin was right. A lot of what you did was political or corporate, whack one to get another promoted, not that they would do a better job, they would promise much and deliver nothing, taking the same skim from the top, not much would change except the face in charge.

The Solo wasn't exclusive to his Fixer, he did other work when it was offered, sometimes, twice in fact, he had taken out the very man a previous assignment had promoted, he didn't care, it wasn't his patch. You learnt to not question the ethics of a job offer, usually, there weren't any, anyone who ordered a rival terminated could hardly claim to have a good moral compass, to themselves perhaps, but that opinion was biased.

There wasn't much to like about this business, most of the time you dealt with the undesirable parts of society, some who should have known better, their standing in this place should have been enough, but people were greedy, that was hardwired into the modern human nature, that much hadn't changed with the times. This place was hard work, people had to grab what they could

when it was available, that is what you did too, but it was a living, and work was hard enough to find for most, but you took what was offered, tomorrow it will not be there.

This shithole of a place was like the rest of the shitholes, unpleasant, busy, with little time for the niceties of old, not that you remembered those, too young, but several of the seniors you had the odd conversation with whilst waiting for things to happen, they remembered, they knew what was missing, a few even knew where it went wrong, sadly, no one knew how to fix it. The modern society was properly broken and a new one had to be forged, and that's where we were now, in the shaping and reforming phase, what was out there was rough and not quite ready, but it was getting there, and to a point, that was part of your job too. Your role in all of this was the ironing out of the dents so to speak, smoothing the wrinkles, shaving the splinters, plugging the holes with filler, and making the smaller fixes within the bigger picture, you were a repairman of sorts, your tools were perhaps not for the do-it-yourself merchants, they could have a go, sure, but usually they failed miserably. Much of your work seemed to be in the removal of the skimmers and scammers in officialdom, heaven knows, there was little in the way of organisation at the best of times, and this removal just fractured things further. Weirdly, overall, it seemed to be working, it was still corrupt in a lot of places, some worse than others, and as it was once explained to you, your job was akin to horticulture, a bit of pruning here and there, ripping out the weeds where appropriate, this allowed the nice flowers to grow. Like many, you didn't quite get the weeds/flowers thing, for a start you had never seen a real flower, and most weeds were struggling for a foothold anywhere at all, but the seniors knew of flowers, one old lady was in floods of tears as she recalled a personal space she called her garden, it was somewhere to grow her own flowers, apparently, tall ones and short, all colours, and fragrant, not the stink that was out there now. This place smelled like a sewer everywhere, there was no personal pride in your surroundings anymore, people were in survival mode, the taking care of things left you exposed, that sort of exposure suggested you were soft, weak, it was not a good place to be. You didn't want to be seen as vulnerable, that only made you a target for the local bullies, those that thought they were tough enough, yet all they did was prey on the weaker members of this warped society, trying to get themselves seen on a higher rung of the social ladder, and not too bothered whose fingers they stood on in their efforts to get there. He had dealt with them before, several times, and where the client wanted the target to know the error of their ways, there was always the whimpering and the promises to do better, they still pissed their pants when they worked out you were going to pull the trigger anyway, you were not in a position to allow them leniency.

It was a shame really, it could have been so different, the crash of '94 was the catalyst, and had greed not played its part, then the Corporates would have been kept in check, instead, the governments were weak, corruptible, as they still were, and the rest is history, not so recent anymore, but little had changed. The political will was still weak, and the Corporations still pulled the strings and directed the traffic, it mattered little what continent you were on or which city you were in, the big guys stomped over the rest, and they rinsed the blood off their hands as easily as they rinsed the public purse. That was where this all went tits-up, the Corporations replaced the Governments, profit replaced responsibility, they took your money and took the piss, empty promises were no comfort to the dying. Branding became the new allegiance, it was a crud-fest and the people lost, it was perhaps inevitable that it would all go downhill from that point on, the problem is, it should have levelled off by now, but sadly, the slope just seemed to be getting steeper as the grab for profit continued. Therein lay the problem, the jobs market was shot to shit, people could not find work, what they would find paid little, and they could not pay their way, which had a knock-on effect everywhere. In the scramble for profits, the requirement for customer loyalty intensified, and the shitstorm began, initially, it was nothing more than a few ripples, loyalty to a brand was rewarded, soon it was a raging torrent, now loyalty was demanded, there was financial punishment for disloyalty, and there was no end in sight, the corporations had made a rod for their own back and could not see a way out of the mess they had created. Law and order suffered, partly due to the Corporates paying for 'cooperation' as it was referred to, most others called it blatant bribery, and as a direct consequence, the basic framework of society went down the toilet with everything else. The circle of life was short and not so sweet, the quality of life was as destroyed as the gross national domestic product, life became smash and grab for many, those that didn't grasp that concept littered the streets as rotting carcasses, already just skin and bones. There was no dignity in death anymore, that too had gone.

This line of thought was not a good one and it was time to get back on track, the journey was just forty-five minutes shy of its terminus, so it was time to wind up not down. You didn't want to get boosted too soon, that was pushing things a tad too far, but now was the time to start becoming more aware of your surroundings, of those about you, there was no telling who was who anymore. Your NetRunner was still plugged into the mobile network, scanning and intercepting, there were moments you could see the traffic was heavier as the eyes widened slightly to accommodate the extra bandwidth, so far, there was nothing untoward. Further down the carriage you had spotted another crew, these were obvious, tooled up and cyber everything, weapons, eye reticules, ear enhancements, various pipes and coolers, and with every twitch, there was that little whine from a motor or servo. They were behaving

at the moment, only just, but they too would start with the infusions of pharmaceuticals, boosting to enhance the reactions, which may make them a tad more unpredictable, not that you could predict what they were about anyway. Your guy was monitoring their chatter, he was in and under their radar already, it seemed their Techies and NetRunners were not on the ball yet, once they were at the Station, the terminus of this train, they would certainly be on it, but by that time your guy would be a feature in their data traffic and they would likely ignore it even if he was digging too deep. Of course, he wasn't going to, all he was after was a heads up on when to duck, judging by the volume of the data and the conversations, it wouldn't be too far off.

The time passed quickly, and the other crew were getting more twitchy, somewhat hyper, they were asking to be noticed, coming on as the big 'I am' and it was so unnecessary, you didn't need to draw that much attention, they were already conspicuous, their hardware was evidence enough of what they were all about. If you had any sense of self-preservation then you stayed out of the way, some of these nutjobs were just looking for an excuse to cream someone and they were not too fussy about collateral damage, it left the innocent as an incidental in their clashes, and frequently those battles were with their own internal demons, and there were likely many of those raging in the background, trying to shout out above the whine of the servos.

The noise level increased again, and the officialdom was heading down the carriage determined to head off a confrontation but not seeing that their presence made it more likely, and they were met with a barrage of abuse which was simply ignored, but the group was warned, if they couldn't control themselves, they would be controlled, that could not be a good thing for anyone around them. The officialdom left and ignored the jeers tossed in their wake, but the NetRunner was listening to the security traffic, there was going to be a reception committee waiting on the platform, he advised that it was best to leave the seating and head for the door at the opposite end of the carriage, avoid the oncoming confrontation. The pair made their move early, it was five minutes to the final halt, and they decided to weave their way through two more carriages, putting as much distance as was practical from the inevitable altercation in the carriage they were in, the train decelerated. Through the door window, it was clear there was a sizeable contingent of security on the platform, that was a good thing, it meant there was unlikely to be any security staff available to perform personal checks, they would all want to be in on the action about to unfold a few doors up. The doors opened and the pair exited swiftly, small holdalls in hand, making towards the ticket barrier and determined to not look back, not until they were out of the line of fire, it was all going to kick off, you just knew it would. As if on cue, as soon as they had passed the automated barrier that had scanned the ticket, there

was the sound of shouting, the electric crackle of stun-sticks, and the distinctive sound of suppressed weapons firing, only a few rounds, but someone was unlikely to be going home tonight. It wasn't wise to wait, no matter how much you wanted to know the outcome, it could still spill out onto the platform and there were way too many casualties in waiting, a stray round could head their way, anyway, if they were that bothered, a full report would be found in the digital news outlets later.

The transit rooms were not much more than five hundred meters from the Station, as the pair exited the scruffy building and turned left, all sounds of the unfolding dramas were drowned out by the wailing wind that whipped through the spaghetti tangle of overhead wires. A quick scan of the surroundings revealed nothing new, it was much like everywhere else, ramshackle and dishevelled, a bit like the people he could see. He liked to pause when exiting a large public space, he wanted to know who was doing the same as he was, scanning the people, you could get a sense of what was coming if you did. He wasn't difficult to spot, sat on an upturned rubbish bin deep in the shade, was he some spotter for officialdom or just a wannabe looking to pick off the newbs to the area, grab some easy coin. The Solo tapped his foot against the NetRunners, the pointing of the toe showed him where to scan, and the discrete cough said he was on it. Ten seconds was all it took, and the scruffy man was already compromised digitally.

"Not much going on there," said Christian,

"He is connected, but no traffic, he's not scanning but I guess he is listening, perhaps his spotter is inside, more than likely distracted by the altercation on the platform, is he tooled?"

The Solo had already zoomed in, there was a decent-sized knife attached to the left hip, the man was right-handed, and the odd crease in the long jacket suggested something a bit larger than a peashooter under his left armpit, yes he was tooled, but he wasn't twitching, he had presumably not picked out the Solo and his NetRunner as a threat or a target, that was probably a wise decision, one that would keep him breathing. It would not be the first time they had arrived on assignment at some new location to be accosted by the local yahoos, he always politely declined their request to donate money to their particular cause and moved the full-length coat he always wore so they could see the tools of his profession. Some took the hint, the foolish soon found out that brawn was not sufficient to earn a crust, not that they earned anything except his contempt, and it was always a disappointment, a new place and instant troubles, that was the problem with this world, no respect anymore, everyone wanted something for nothing, to drag themselves up out of the gutter by using someone else's hard work as the stepladder. Quite rightly, he did not take kindly to that, and he told them so, several would no longer be able to listen, a few others would wish they had done, and the odd



one would still not live to regret their actions. He didn't like these confrontations, there was a job to do and these distractions got in the way, even going some way to highlighting who he was and what he was here for, it was an argument he didn't need but could not ignore.

The wannabe clocked he was being scanned, it wasn't difficult, the pair made it obvious they were not to be messed with, and he turned and looked away, not wanting to provoke a confrontation with someone who was clearly not intimidated by his attentions, smart boy.

It was not much more than a fifteen-minute brisk walk later and they were scanning their Docs with the duty reception staff and exchanging pleasantries, and with the formalities done, it was time to freshen up.

Thirty minutes later the pair were back in the poor excuse for a lobby, and they headed out for a recce of the possible target zones, no point in wasting time, they did not have much to play with.

The smog gave this hazy blue tinge to the places they travelled, the neons just modified the colours but could not disguise the taste, a sort of metallic, tin-foil tang on the tongue, this was an old mining town, the industry long closed down, but its spoil piles still told of the past. The map data they had studied earlier was surprisingly accurate, and they weaved their way down main thoroughfares and side streets, avoiding the darkened alleyways, they didn't need the hassles some of them could bring. The closest place of interest was the workplace, which was highly unlikely to be useful, it had heavy-duty gates, armed security in protected huts, and cameras all over the place, it was some sort of administration building, they continued onward. Part of the TAPP, the target acquisition profile package, was another map, and it suggested the route the target was likely to take, they were not always accurate, but it gave you a hint of what was known about the target. If that target was already aware that they were likely to be targeted, then they would sensibly vary their route anyway, their man was hyper-aware, but it seemed his choices were limited when it came to usable vehicular access routes. That was potentially good for them, not so great for the victim, but he was in an armoured vehicle, at least according to the TAPP, it just depended on your definition of armoured.

There were many levels of protection for vehicles, from the basic bulletproof windows to heavily armoured panels all over the vehicle, to full-on military-grade armoured trucks, heavy and lumbering, almost impervious to most heavy weapons fire. Everything had a weakness, you could not make anything strong enough for every type of attack, but it was unlikely the general Solo was able to call up some sort of missile strike, aside from only being available for military use in the main, any private purchases were exceptionally expensive, making the acquisition beyond most budgets. The pair of them strode on, taking in the grey and neon lit scenery as they did so, they were not looking at the architecture, but the cameras, public and private. They would

also take into account the lighting, traffic signals, the traffic flow and potential bottlenecks, public walkways, bridges, accessible elevated positions, and any other points of interest like where the nearest Cop-shop was. Of some importance were gatherings of potential third-party influences, road stops, docs checks, toll booths, and oddly, places to eat, after all, a man had to have a meal. It had been a long enough day already and the sun was setting as they walked past the tower block where the victim was said to reside, they hadn't seen him yet, and they may not for a few days, it was nothing unexpected. What they needed to work out was his daily routine and see where they could break it or manipulate it to their advantage, that may not be as simple as it sounded, but that was the challenge and the solution to their problem of how to get at this individual.

Two hours later and it was dark, they were already on their way back to the transit room when some young punk stepped out of the shadows to accost them, the Solo sighed,

“Not now son, just back away, I am not in the mood.”

“Give me your credits willingly or I will take them from your corpse,” he said. The NetRunner took a step back, slightly startled, the Solo stepped forward, into the punk's face, and with a grin, spoke softly.

“I bet my mark nine makes less noise than your pea shooter, do you want to dance?”

There was a clear indication that there was a movement within the taller man's coat, something thin and long, and, if it was a weapon, it was pointed in the punk's direction, he decided discretion was the better part of valour, correctly spotting the eye enhancements and the distinct look he received which showed no fear at all.

“My mistake, sorry to have disturbed you,” he said hurriedly, and taking just a few steps backwards, slunk back into the alleyway he had stepped out from just a few moments earlier, then he turned and disappeared into the darkness. From the right pocket, the Solo drew a small pistol, and in the shadow of the darkened alley there were two brief flashes and that thwack sound that indicated a silenced weapon, there was no other noise, no further infiltration into the alley itself.

“Snot-nosed little shit, don't diss me by turning your back, you won't be doing that again,” said the Solo to no one in particular.

There was a knowing nod from the NetRunner, well aware that the Solo had likely detected the figure in the alleyway long before they had stepped into the dim light of the streetlamps, and the mark nine was the distraction, the pistol would have taken the fool by surprise, and the disrespect of turning your back on the Solo was just plain stupid, he should have known better. The NetRunner was already scanning any local radio transmissions, the strongest signals were still some distance away based on their power spike, it seems the

idiot had no backup either, a proper loner, obviously not the sharpest tool in the box, just a tool, sadly, for him, one that was now permanently blunted. Nothing more was said, the NetRunner knew better than to second guess the Solo, and it was probable he was already past this small incident and was back on the current contract already, looking at the pitfalls for them on the potential route to be travelled by the target, and the man was correct, there was still work to be done. It was a NetRunners job to monitor the local digital traffic, he relied on the Solo to keep an eye on the physical surroundings, and as the earlier incident showed, he was on top of that too.

They decided to walk off the incident, to get some clarity and perspective, refocus, so the pair backtracked a few routes, checked a couple of interconnecting alleyways, seeing if they could offer a faster through route than the more popular side streets. They always entered with caution, the Solo scanning in the infrared for heat sources as they went, the NetRunner scanning the transmission frequencies, there were no further complications until they went to enter one alley not far from their accommodation. On entering just a few paces, the NetRunner touched the long coat of the Solo, just a subtle tug but he got the message, something was up that he could not see or hear. The pair of them stopped where they were, no more than two paces inside the pitch dark of the alley, there didn't seem to be any danger ahead, but something had caused the NetRunner to react. He felt the two taps on the coat, looked down where the finger was pointing, and spotted the problem, a light-operated trigger, to what was not clear yet, that is what they were waiting for. It took a further five seconds, a very slight click, followed by another, the first was a door handle somewhere within the alley, the second was the safety on the small pistol in the right-hand pocket of the Solo. They both distinctly heard the third click, another door lock being opened, and right now, it was a stalemate, now it was all about who blinked first. The NetRunner knew he was not to move unless instructed to, but at the end of the day, the Solo would look after number one, the NetRunner knew he was a distant second. The left hand of the Solo touched the NetRunners jacket, giving a slight pull downward, and he did as requested, slowly and quietly sinking to his knees, the Solo soon joined him. Now, they both heard a door open wider; it needed more lubrication on the hinges, and there was a faint green glow that appeared to be getting wider, this was from a badly fitting pair of night vision goggles, some people just didn't have a clue, it wouldn't be long now. The NetRunner tapped the ear of the Solo, he had picked up a transmission, he held up three fingers in the gloom, surprisingly, he heard the Solo nod, the leather in the coat collar spoke for him. A second door opened just a fraction, there was a brief exchange over the radio that the Runner picked up, 'they' didn't see them, they were not sure what triggered the sensor, whatever it was, it wasn't moving, wasn't detected. What the Solo

noted was the movement of the mouth of the nearest yahoo, he was talking, waving his arms about with some visual representation of what was being relayed, opposite was another pair of waving arms, a third man was further down in the darker reaches of the alley, he could see them all. Next came the flashes, three of them, the green light slid downward and extinguished, and there was another thud and a definite gurgling sound, followed by the sound of a door opening wide and a clump, clearly a body hitting the paving, the gurgling continued for twenty seconds, followed by a brief cough, very congested, like a winter cold that had wormed its way deep into the lungs, then it ceased. There were no other sounds, though the NetRunner could hear his own heart beating loudly in his ears, he tried to block it out, but it persisted, there was no further radio chatter.

Then the Solo got to his feet and said simply, "It's done, let's go."

The expectation was to go back the way they had come, just a few paces back into the side street, but no, the man marched forward saying, "Watch your step, blood pool to your right in the open door, another on your left, the bod is in the street, he was the gurgler, what is wrong with these people, have they no common decency left?"

As they walked past the body in the right-side doorway, it was clear he wasn't quite dead yet, it would not be long, half his head was missing, the Solo paused and looked at the man, probably still in his teens, what a waste. "I see your problem, on the left side of your brain there was nothing right, and now, on the right side of your brain there is nothing left, sorry, but I do not share your pain, you, my friend, need to give in to the approaching darkness, embrace it, it will engulf you soon, not so animated now, are we?" Oh wow, what a thing to say, of course, the dying man could not respond, it was the frontal lobe of the brain that controlled the facial muscle responses, it was smeared all over the wall and dripping from the door frame, it was probably the reason he was not screaming in agonising pain, but his eyes told you everything you needed to know, he knew the darkness was coming. He hadn't detected the location of the third door, maybe it was better lubricated, it could be he had just missed it, but it mattered not, the Solo was marching forward so the way was obviously clear, he followed. There was a third body somewhere, presumably behind one of the closed doors, or maybe in another one still open that he had yet to see, not that he could see much, there was hardly any light in the alley, there may be the hint of moonlight, but the smog lasted long into the night too.

The light increased as they got to the end of the alley and turned into another better-lit side street, and it was a case of following the Solo, his head was clear, unfazed by the moment just past, and heading right he knew they would be in a far busier street, and one hundred meters further on they would

intersect with an even busier street, their accommodation unit was two hundred meters to the left on that same route.

They made their way in silence until twenty meters from the lobby entrance, there, the Solo spoke again, just one word, "Shoes."

Turning to face the wall, the NetRunner lifted the left foot first, then the right, did a brief three-sixty, arms by his side, and then took the UV pen and scanned the Solo as he did the same.

"Clear," was the reply.

There was a nod, and they went forward to the lobby entrance, scanned their security keys and gained entrance to the inner sanctuary of the lobby, the Solo gave the assembled clientele the visual once over, and satisfied, he headed for the stairs, they never rode the elevators, too many cameras.

In the NetRunners room, the Solo nodded and got one in return.

"That was unexpectedly eventful, it never ceases to amaze me how cavalier some people are with their lives, what the frag was all that for? Stupid, all of them, and frag me, twice, I ask you, twice, remind me not to come back here again, except for target practice," and he huffed his disdain.

The NetRunner had no answers,

"Not a clue what that was about, the last one was a simple trigger switch to alert them of someone in the alley, and presumably anyone foolish enough to wander in would get robbed, I saw the NVGs, but only the one set, did the others have night vision?"

Apparently, they did, all were now badly blood spattered, definitely broken and of no further use, not that the Solo needed them, his optics had that capability built in already.

Instantly, there was that switch of his own, the Solo back into being focussed on the assignment, the deaths of others by his hand were nothing more than a minor inconvenience, an irritation.

"Ok, the first walk-through holds no promise of an easy hit, you saw his work and home locations, I would suggest they are both a no unless we can get inside and be sure of getting out, work seems highly unlikely, home seems doubtful too, what we need to see now is his vehicle of choice, that will determine how we need to proceed, for now, I suggest we sleep, get an early start and see if we can catch a glimpse, OK?"

It wasn't actually a question, more an order, he was used to it, they had been together just over a year now and he had learnt very early on to do as instructed, especially if you wanted to live a bit longer.

This guy was good, exceptionally so, and he wasn't just good at his particular game either, one of the reasons the NetRunner chose to work with him was because there was no digital footprint, nothing, this guy was a real ghost in the cyber-machine, and that took some skills too. At the interview, the Solo had

given the NetRunner the rundown on his own life, which took skill too, he had hidden what he could, created deflections, false trails, those breadcrumbs he skilfully avoided, and some of the central database stuff was, he thought, untouchable, but it would seem not, that took extreme skills or friends in very high places, he often wondered if that is the extra 'his' guy had. He was something of an enigma, he introduced himself as ninety-six, and when they needed a name he would answer to Syd, when booking anything in advance his given family name was to be Enham, there was nothing even remotely like it in any database the NetRunner chose to hack into, and he had burrowed his way into hundreds of them, the best he could come up with was the name of a now devastated area just over ten kilometres outside of central London. He knew nothing factual about the man at all, he guessed he was late twenties, early thirties perhaps, white-skinned, with short cropped dark hair, there was a non-surgical scar on his upper right arm, as another guess, it was likely a knife wound, he had a few tattoos, nothing other than decorative, no military or gang tats, and aside from he knew the man could be trusted, there was not one shred of evidence as to who he really was. It didn't bother him at all, his job was to keep the man informed of who was listening to their conversations or snooping into their affairs and to give a heads up to chatter that was likely to raise safety concerns for their wellbeing, like tonight and the transmissions in the alley. The job, his job, was easy, he was a good hacker, fast, accurate, thorough, and a good memory recall, handy when it came to coding on the fly. They worked well together, work was always serious and was to be treated as such, everything else was kept to a highly professional standard, and there was no playtime or downtime, at least none he had been privy to. After each assignment, bar two, the previous job was only the second incidence, there would be a break of five days, no more, no less, and then it was back on another job, some you had time to plan, others were shorter, like this one. In his position as NetRunner, he was aware of all the data relevant to the target, it allowed him to run the searches through the many databases and archives looking for the smallest of chinks in the target's armour, it was the Solo's job to prise the armour apart and insert the explosive round. This current job was unusual, the target was fairly well hidden, not digitally, and although there was not a lot of background data given, it was available if you knew where to look for it, he did. Everything they had worked on in the past had come with a sizeable dossier, known associates, places of interest, known hangouts, and quite often, a reasonably detailed list of the perceived wrongdoing the target had done to warrant being on someone's hit list, this guy, the current target, there was none of that, at least not in any great detail. What they had was scant, locations were listed as just home, work and bank, the family details were simply there was a brother, no parents, no spouse, no lover, and the dossier contained no given associates, work or otherwise, it wasn't much to go

on. It did not get much better with the mode of transport, it was listed as armoured, but there was no make or model, the vehicle registration tag was listed, and a check revealed that the vehicle was registered to the target at his home address, but there were no further details aside from the fact it was painted black. In itself, that was not unusual, many vehicles were not correctly registered, some by design, most by inept clerks that were not paid enough to care to be accurate, it was no big deal in the current state of affairs. For the pair, it was an inconvenience, but sometimes that lack of information made you more determined, it forced you to look deeper to find the smallest of cracks in the armour, finding something which allowed the way into a target and the solution to getting out undetected. Those eureka moments were oddly satisfying, despite it meant a person's demise, there was gratification in unlocking the puzzle and meeting the deadlines, and it meant they would get paid. It was true though, they, as a team, had never missed a target or a deadline, and the use of the word in this context made the NetRunner smile, dead-line, that is what they had planned for this data carrier. His life and data core would soon be wiped, there was a line as determined by someone he knew, and he had crossed it, now he was to be erased, rubbed out, and anyone else considering filling this man's shoes would think twice about doing so. That was the nature of illicit data transfers, the rewards were often great, but the risks were nothing short of life-threatening, and detection usually meant more than just job termination.

The morning came around all too soon and the pair of them were up with the sun, not that many places saw it clearly through the smog, and they positioned themselves outside the home underground carpark exit, the target made his move. They had seen three vehicles pass through the exit gate already, two were red, one was white, their man would be in a black painted vehicle, it duly appeared. There was no obvious rush, there was no driver to make rash decisions, these things were automated, pre-programmed, and perhaps that was their way in, hack the vehicles system, perhaps force a stop and open a door, that is what they were looking at now.

The NetRunner was scanning, pinging, tracking, and the vehicle, all vehicles, gave out signals, it was how they operated, short band radar was the collision avoidance system, and there were others, GPS tracking for route planning being the most obvious. The plan was to test to see if any of these were penetrable, if so, could they be used to infiltrate and compromise the system enough to allow them to control the vehicle or some of its functions? All that was needed was to open a window or a door, something that gave the Solo a clear shot at the target, then it was a case of getting in a second shot to remove any data storage, which meant a headshot, but if the victim is perhaps already slumped to the floor and the vehicle still moving, then that poses other problems to be overcome. To be avoided, where possible, was a high

explosive round in a confined space, this could disable the vehicle, and although it was most likely to terminate the target, if the vehicle breaks, well, that would allow the body to be discovered before they left the area, not the most preferable outcome. The vehicle paused as it turned into the street, there was a brief moment where it broadcast its UID, identified itself to the oncoming traffic, that unique identifier code was then accepted by the approaching vehicle and the handshake took place, the target car was allowed to tag in behind the first, so when the vehicle in front accelerated or braked, the target vehicle would do the same until their paths diverged, and right there was the possible way in, spike the handshake. They would not attempt that now, it would take a few seconds to generate the right commands and they needed to work on that, it had to be right the first time, but, at least it seemed there was an option. It was good to know, sometimes the smallest of gaps was all that was needed, if you can wedge something in the lock then you can break it, all you needed to find was the right tool. The pair of them took off through the side streets and back alleys, there was a reasonable idea of where the vehicle could be intercepted, and the plan was to see if it could be done, and they could only hope the vehicle took the same route tomorrow. Point one was good, the pair of them watched it, and the car it had linked to, pass by, then it was a sprint to point two, they arrived to see the vehicle on its own, the linked car at the front had obviously taken an alternative route, the question now was, if it would do the same linking tomorrow. Of course, tomorrow may be completely different, the route could be altered, the journey could be paired with another vehicle, and it may even be on its own all the way or in the centre of a train of them, it was perhaps random. The good news was that they had the handshake data, they could spoof that if they had to, it meant an extra piece of coding would be necessary, but if they prepared it now, it would take just a second to activate. They arrived at the man's office parking just in time to see the rear of the car disappear into the garage within, it still appeared to be on its own, they had missed it, but they could catch the vehicle on the way out. All journeys were both ways, the earliest exit they were going to guess was at lunchtime, maybe, he went home, though perhaps the man ate out, maybe he wouldn't leave until his shift time was over, all they knew of for sure was his home time. There was a café almost opposite the garage entrance, they would return in a few hours and check it out, perhaps the man felt safe enough to cross the street and grab himself some food and drink there, he had to meet his contact somewhere and pass off the data he had acquired. That again was an unknown, how often he collected these trade secrets, where he met his contact, how they conducted the business of verification and sale, these things by definition were small pieces of information in the main, even plans for machinery or new production techniques were small data files. Any file transfer would be quick, a few



seconds if both parties had decent hardware, it could be done in a queue to get food or a drink, the briefest of touches and that was it, data transfer complete, no one would be the wiser unless they knew what they were looking for.

In fifteen minutes, they were back in the NetRunners transit room, the NetPads were open, the data from the vehicles was downloaded and both of them were looking at the brief data packet exchange between the target vehicle and the car it followed. There wasn't much, but it revealed a decent amount of information, particularly about timing, and there was a way in, whether it could be used or not, that remained to be seen.

There was much clicking of the keyboards, virtual of course, and inside of an hour they had a custom hack that they would try and insert when the vehicle left the works garage later in the day, maybe lunchtime if they were lucky, home time for sure. All it needed was another vehicle to open the exchange and they could insert their code without needing to spoof the initiation of data transfer, that delayed any other vehicles in the queue and would be noticed, it may require a bit more luck, but home time was a busy period of the day and it was a busy street.

For now, it was sitting around for an hour, there was nothing constructive they could do, so to rest made perfect sense, if the target left at lunchtime, then they needed to chase him on foot to see where he went, neither of them possessed a vehicle, and hiring one left a data trail they didn't need and couldn't easily erase.

They sat in the café and waited, several vehicles came and went through the underground entrance, it was clear their man ate in the building somewhere, he never left. It wasn't a big problem, if he had walked in and ordered his food in the nearest eating place it would have been a bonus, however, it was unlikely, given that the man was already ultra-careful about his safety, but you had to hope for the best and plan for the worst, that way you were never disappointed with the outcome.

So, home time it was then.

They left and rested some more, then returned and waited just to the left of the garage doors, the target vehicle would be turning right, they should remain unnoticed, all they needed was for another pause as the vehicle waited to join a line of traffic, this was a busier street at home time. The target vehicle would need to filter into the traffic, if the traffic was heavy and perhaps stopped outside the garage exit ramp, then it would be allowed to join the queue, the software was designed to keep the traffic flowing, to allow vehicles to merge into the traffic lanes safely. No one had a manual override, you could get priority clearance that allowed your vehicle preferential access to the traffic lanes, but that usually meant high-level clearances were required, if you spoofed that, well, that sort of illegal software got you noticed quickly. Any

abuse of this system wasn't recommended at all, particularly if you wanted to remain safe, if you lost your driving privileges then there was no option other than walking or public transport, neither were safe options for the target. When they returned, it didn't take long before the target vehicle appeared, and as all the exiting vehicles were in a queue, the software allowed one car to join as four other cars passed in the lane at the front, as the data handshake with two of the cars in the queue took place, the hack code went in as well.

Why two cars?

There needed to be data transmitted from the car in front about its current running status, speed, direction of travel, intended exit, braking and the like, and the target car would pass this on along with its own intentions, to the car behind, the three cars, already in a longer line themselves, would then be safe to travel in the convoy, as one vehicle left, the digital handshake with the new partner vehicle would take place just as the vehicle leaving the group made its manoeuvre, it was a tried and tested system. The software was meant to be infallible, but there were several different versions out there, they had a few revisions and upgraded editions which left the odd small gap for data manipulation, this is what the Solo was aiming for, or at least the NetRunner was. In the general sense, the software in the vehicles worked as it was supposed to, the vehicles accelerated and braked with complete harmony, no one jumped the traffic light systems and any road accidents usually involved careless pedestrians giving the vehicles travelling at speed no chance of avoidance, rarely did the vehicles collide, the odd mechanical failure caused unexpected consequences, but there were not that many private vehicles on the highways compared to the number of people in the cities, and they were an expensive luxury item that few could afford. That said, there were still enough of them to cause queues in many places, and, of course, there were not that many safe routes one could travel, there was safety in numbers. The fix was in, now they needed to see if could be manipulated as they wanted, it was time for the NetRunner to earn his pay, not right now though, they were not in a position to take the man out now. There wasn't much point in following his route home, they had access to the GPS, they could see the route it took, and the planned route for all new journeys, one may be forced to deviate by circumstances beyond the user's control, road works or closures for example, but they would be advised of route changes, and they could make alternative choices where they were available, however, they could not override the changes where maintenance or closures were advised. The pair of them took a more direct route to the man's home address and arrived several minutes before the vehicle, the NetRunner was already scanning for the arrival, they didn't have to wait long. The vehicle left the small convoy it was in, passed its security codes to the garage gate system, and drove straight in, as soon as the rear of the vehicle passed the door, it started to close, nine

seconds from opening to closure, the clearance to the roof of the vehicle was just a few centimetres, it was all calculated to take as short a time exposed as possible. If anyone intended to run in and take a shot at the vehicle, then they were going to have to be stood right by the doors, a security red flag in itself, and then get in and out again in under nine seconds, taking the time to compose themselves to take a shot, all the while knowing that the vehicle was armoured, it was never going to work. That was never an option as far as the Solo was concerned, the target needed to be taken on in the street, in full view, and in the queue of traffic, a high-risk strategy, but it was possible, all it needed was all the elements to fall in place, and that is where the NetRunner really earned his coin. They returned to the Solo's room and scanned for intrusions, none, then it was all about planning for the final hit.

Plan A was tomorrow at home time, and plan B, if they couldn't force the issue, was the day after, either direction was possible, but the homeward bound journey was favourite. They still had to see if they had access to the vehicle's onboard systems, there was a bit more code to add, the design of which came later this evening, and assuming that went to plan, then they had to work on the rest of it. They had the best part of the day to put it all together, so the pressure wasn't intense, but it was there, and the NetRunner had to get it right in order for the sequence of events to play out and make this contract succeed. They talked for two hours, each suggesting options, picking holes, finding faults, reformulating, there were unseen things, random events that could not be helped, nor got around, a Cop-car in the queue for example, that was an instant abort, they may be corruptible but that took plenty of planning, that sort of time they didn't have. There were seven potential possibilities, but only two could be identified as areas that offered the right opportunity for success and had decent escape routes, they became Zone One and Two, Zone Three was the garage entrance, but the window of opportunity was small, three or four seconds only, it was the last resort option. The bigger concern there was that the escape route was too long, to start with, they were on the wrong side of the street for an easy return to the transit rooms, which meant waiting for traffic lights and getting through pedestrian underpasses and over walkways, most of these were highly monitored, but if it was all that could be done, then it was better than failure to complete the contract. Zone One offered the best opportunity, the safer escape options, it was further away than Zone Two, but it was easier to disappear in the various side streets and alleys, which made it the logical choice. Zone Two was preferable to the garage option, but meant a long travel time to get there, limited options for set up, and a better out than the garage but not as good as Zone One.

An hour later they were outside the garage entrance, the Solo came from the left, the NetRunner from the right, they met right outside the centre of the

doors, greeted each other as friends and stopped for a conversation, only moving when the lights on the door flashed because a vehicle was wanting to leave, they had managed an uninterrupted seven minutes, the door opening gave them the briefest of peeks into the interior of the garage, not that they intended on going in anyway. As expected, it was well lit, exceptionally clean, and there was at least one Guard in attendance, he didn't look armed, but then he was partially hidden by a support pillar, again, they were not expecting to take him on and he wasn't bothered by their presence on the street, the security office had already informed him that there were two pedestrians in conversation by the doors, he was in a position to intercept should they make a dive inside the opening doors, presumably, there were more Guards not too far away if they were required. They talked outside in the fading light of the day for a further two minutes, the Net Runner not saying much, nodding every so often, shaking his head once or twice as well, the security office watched the pair shake hands again before these pedestrians continued on their way. Five minutes later the pair met in a café, it was reasonably busy and seemed full of workers intent on grabbing a bite to eat before going home, many people didn't have the facilities to cook meals for themselves anymore, preferring to pay someone else to do it for them. The pair of them spoke quietly, anyone listening in would not have picked up on the topic of the conversation and its implications, it wasn't supposed to mean much.

“OK, diagnostics ran nicely, I have confirmed the input of the data required to put in place the overrides, all we need now is to get at the traffic lighting system, once that is organised, then the stop can be made, position will be fixed, line of sight will be as required, click, click, boom, done.”

The Solo nodded, a quick scan left and right seemed to suggest no one was earwigging, and the NetRunner had not shaken his head, so there were no scans ongoing, he replied,

“OK, that's good to know, so, a low yield will minimise structural damage but still ensure data storage erasure, then it is shut the opening and send it home, it will complete its programmed journey and job done, we can get into the eyes in the sky and briefly pause them?”

The NetRunner just smiled, of course he could, it was like, did you really need to ask?

The Solo nodded, and there was a brief sideways glance of the eyes, from that, the NetRunner knew the waiter was coming with their order, they ate in silence.

Forty minutes later they were heading back to the rooms, the night was theirs to do as they pleased, the NetRunner had already hacked into the traffic systems network and the local surveillance systems, and he now knew what was looking where and when the lighting sequences would change, that was all they needed to know, the rest was simply a matter of timing. The

opportunity was there, all it needed was the right things to be nudged into place and they could take it, but not everything could be guaranteed, there were still plenty of variables, and although many could be minimised, you could not secure perfection. People were the obvious ones that created the greater variables in any scenario, from altering the time the target left the garage, to others delaying his place in the exit queue and changing his place on the street. Then there were pedestrians, they were always a hazard, sometimes you needed to drop one or two to get at the target, but hopefully, he could avoid collateral damage, get a clean shot and make a clear and decisive getaway, with no one the wiser to what happened. You had to hope for the best and plan for the worst, every job came with variables, those things that were in the way, some target potentially hidden from view by an unforeseen event, an unclear line of sight from your chosen vantage point, an unscheduled intrusion by other players and actors, Cops on routine patrol was another occupational hazard. On one job he recalled encountering another hit squad looking at a different target, the Solo still managed to pick out his man in the melee and take him out, he just wasn't in the optimum position. Still, the bonus of that one was that the other hit squad took the fall for the target's demise, so there was no immediate search for a second hitman, and the various security details at the event took them all down, it was only much later that they discovered the mismatch between the round that killed the target and the weapons recovered, by that time he was long gone and already looking for a new target hundreds of clicks to the east. But, you had to plan for the unplanned, it was part of the arrangements required for every assignment, particularly if you were closer to the deadline, they weren't, but taking all contingencies into consideration was a wise move. What you couldn't afford to do was show your hand and miss, that meant the target potentially went to ground, that was a clusterfuck too far, that hurt the bank balance and dented the rep, the latter was most definitely not helpful for your future employment prospects.

The bar downstairs was a busy place, and people watching was one of his favourite pastimes, he had already spotted the competition and their minders, and the several women looking to make a score, he noted at least three males on the prowl and looking for business, the local scrip dealer was in the corner doing a decent trade in illicit narcotics, obviously with the establishment's approval, you couldn't be that open and not have cut someone in, maybe it was the barkeep. They were always a fountain of knowledge, not good if you were the subject of their observances, but you were in their domain, they saw everything, they knew the local street girls, and the boys, as well as the local Cops and those wanting payment for protection, though sometimes they were the Cops. The Solo was approached by one of the boys and he was waved

away, which prompted the interest of the girls, and the tall leggy brunette was quickest off the mark,

“You have a room?” she asked.

“I do,” he replied, “but it is not for you to visit, at least, not tonight, tomorrow may be different, sorry.”

She nodded but couldn't hide the disappointment, she needed the coin for her fix, she was getting twitchy again.

The Solo continued to view the room, he spotted the wannabe, he was staring hard, tonight he was also out of luck, maybe tomorrow the Solo will show him what time-earned skills can do, and all without the need to jack up first.

That was the problem with many of these chancers, for that is what most of them were, they were taking a chance on whom they were going to intimidate, they avoided the obvious Solos, those with the mechanical enhancements, they were taking a chance on what appeared to be an easy mark, but sometimes they failed to do their research, their due diligence was lacking, as were their skills. Most of them you could ignore, if you failed to take the bait they dangled, didn't rise to their intimidating stare, they would move on to someone who would, they were mainly looking to impress the ladies, most of whom were just looking for a punter with deep pockets and fat wallets. He finished his drink and rose slowly, making sure the wannabe caught a glimpse of the shoulder holster under the jacket, giving him reasonable warning that you were not to be trifled with, it could be a costly mistake on the wannabe's part if he wanted a piece of this action, but the boy was wise, he turned away, message understood.

The night passed swiftly, sleep was shallow but suitably restful, he didn't quite sleep with one eye open, but did wake at the slightest of noise, thankfully, the corridors remained quiet, and his sleep was uninterrupted.

The following day the Solo waited one hundred metres from the garage door of the target, at the suggested time his car duly appeared and filtered into the early morning traffic, as it passed, the Solo was already ducking into a side street and was off and running, a few streets later he was waiting in the shadows for the car to pass, sure enough, it rolled by a few minutes later, it was funny that a man on foot could beat the early morning traffic. He swiftly crossed the street via the overpass walkway, and on the other side there was another dash through several dingy alleys and a pause at the end of one, once more waiting for the target car to pass, it did. That was good to know, it suggested that the target didn't feel the need to vary his route, he felt safe in his transport vehicle, that was about to change. Another dash through more alleys and it was out into the busier street where the target's office was situated, the car entered the garage area a few moments later, and now, it was all about the journey home.

The Solo would return later with the NetRunner in attendance, just in case the target went home for lunch or finished early at the break for lunch, if he were to finish early later, then it would most likely be unobserved, the first they would know about it is when the GPS showed the car appearing from the garage exit tunnel ahead of the expected time.

The pair of them skipped lunch, they were ready and waiting for the target in case he changed his routine, and an hour later they headed to the café they had been in yesterday. At the moment, it was quieter than before, but they cared little, they placed their order and waited in silence. The food and beverages duly arrived, and they ate in further silence, there was nothing to say, they both knew the plan and didn't need to go over it again, its execution, like that of the target, was still a few hours away. Nearer to the target's home time the Solo motioned to pay the bill, he paid in coin, you never paid by card on a hit day, cash did not leave a digital trail. He left but the NetRunner stayed another five minutes, then he went outside, waited at the end of an alleyway, thirty metres from the target's work garage, and a while later, on time, the target vehicle joined the queue of slow-moving traffic. The NetRunner relayed his basic text message,

"I am moving, all as expected, be with you soon."

It was harmless, meant nothing, but spoke volumes. If 'he' was moving then the target vehicle was in the homeward-bound traffic, 'all as expected' meant that there appeared to be no issues with the other traffic around the target, and 'be with you soon' was self-explanatory, it was on its way, and he needed to prepare now. Just two minutes later came the next message, "Will be waiting by the lights, see you shortly."

Again, it meant nothing, yet it contained all he needed to know, at the next change of the lights the car should be right opposite the narrow alley they had selected as the best place to be, and 'shortly' was the signal that it was less than a minute until showtime. The Solo took several deep breaths, stuck his head out of the shadows and checked the street, very light foot traffic, nothing in the line of fire now, nothing that was likely to interfere in the next few seconds, he saw the lights change and the flow of traffic stop. Perfect, absolutely perfect, right in front of him, no more than twenty meters, was the target vehicle, he saw the window drop, saw the man look toward the opening, peering over the top of the heavily tinted window, there was that moment of recognition that something was wrong, then it was all over.

Outside, all anyone heard was a phwaat sound, quite indistinct, the sound contained in the walls of the alley the Solo was standing in, the second round fired made a slightly deeper whack sound, a different grain load to compensate for the weight change of the projectile. There was no muzzle flash, no loud bang, and the target was compromised as expected, he did not see it coming but knew that something was not quite right, by the time the

brain worked out that he should probably duck for cover, the first round went in through the ear and stopped the brain from sending any more bright ideas. Then, the second round went in through the jaw, shattering the teeth as it went, the sudden slowing of the projectile triggered the detonation, and the explosive round went off just above the victim's tongue, in the autopsy later, they would find it embedded in one of his ruptured lungs. The inside of the car, like the inside of the man's head, was a mess, blood and mush everywhere, but there was no shrapnel damage to the vehicle itself, and the window slid shut as it was supposed to just five seconds later. The car remained stationary for a further fifteen seconds and the traffic control lights changed to green, all the vehicles could now pass the interchange, and they did, the target car included. The rifle was already dismantled, he always wore gloves so the hot silencer could be handled without a problem, and any gunpowder residue would be on the gloves, these went in the nearest bin. The rifle's various other components were stowed in some of the inner and outer pockets of the long coat, and the Solo checked the street again, good, no runners, that meant a clean scene, no one saw anything. He sent his man a reply, nothing incriminating, a simple message,

"All done, hope you were looking away, see you at home soon."

It was all innocent enough, but as before, the real message was hidden, the target was dead, the cameras need to be looking away from him, the drones that monitored the footpaths and known trouble spots would be turned to look in a different direction, and he would be back at the accommodation unit soon, and as the message mentioned no alternatives, it would be by the planned route, next, they waited.

He sometimes likened his work to that of a chef, people came to your place because they liked your style, they made a reservation and the preparation began, some of the work had to be done in advance simply because it took a while to get the results you wanted, and of course, the client had expectations, they had read the menu. Then the order was taken, the kitchen mixed the right ingredients, cooked the main part all to order, adding the finishing touches, served it up with the right amount of flourish, and the job was done, the client ate it all up, enjoyed the experience, paid and left. Unseen to that client would have been the hours of prep work, a bit of cooking before the serving, the preparation and placement of the garnishes, the side dishes made available if appropriate, and although the final cooking of the main ingredient was rarely witnessed, the result was perfection. The finish took just minutes, it seemed the prep work went unnoticed, it was all about the presentation, the old saying that the proof of the pudding was in the eating, and then, obviously, someone else cleared away the mess.

The Solo turned and simply walked away, back down the darkened alley he had been waiting in, and through a short series of others, he walked with



purpose before appearing on the main street where the transit room accommodation was. He walked to the outer door, swiped his access card and headed for the stairs, the chancer stood up and then sat back down when he saw the steely look in the Solo's eyes, now was not a good time to chance his arm or anything else. It was the right move, the Solo was in no mood to take prisoners today, if the chancer stuck his neck out then the Solo would most likely break it, he needed to clean the weapon and alter the barrel. That was always done, make the weapon appear unused, at least not recently fired, and the barrel rifling was altered, so any test firing of the weapon will show that the bullets recovered from the cadaver will not match that from the gun. The chances of recovering an intact bullet from the targets head were slim, the rounds were purposely soft, meaning they deformed easily and shattered, making them unusable to use as evidence, plus, the explosive round was likely to have caused further damage, making it highly improbable that there was anything of forensic value to recover. But you never knew how these things went for sure, so, you covered your tracks, made it impossible to get an accurate striation pattern match, covered your bases, and knew that even if you were stopped and your weapons checked, nothing matched any known criminal investigation anywhere. It was basic, yet it was effective, he had never had cause to worry before, but he knew of others that had been stopped, some hadn't thought to change the rifling, those fools were duly hanged, and those that did tweak the barrel, well, they lived to target another contract for another day, so he knew it worked, he was living proof.

The coded tap on the door suggested the NetRunner was wanting in, the Solo opened it with the remote and waited in the shadows of the unlit bathroom, the man was alone.

There was a pause, the Solo came out of the shadows and into the light of the living space of the room, the NetRunner was busy scanning, and being satisfied they were unmonitored, he spoke,

“All good, the vehicle made it to the home garage, with luck, they won't find the body until tomorrow, but the program is set to run on autopilot for the next four days, I doubt if it will remain undiscovered for that long. Ok, a quick debrief, the light sequence, if they check, it will show a discrepancy of initiation nineteen seconds early, they will probably never pick it up, and the street cameras in the area all had random shutdowns from fifteen minutes before you fired, and for a further fifteen minutes after, they noted the issue, but it appears that they never got around to investigate the problem as it resolved itself before the techies arrived, as expected, they basically said it wasn't worth looking into unless it does it again, it shouldn't. The drones would show a movement of one hundred and twenty degrees, it will be seen as wind disturbances, happens all the time, they will not see the pattern. As I mentioned, the vehicle is in the home garage, they might note the vehicle's

arrival and spot the man is not at home, they may check it, but it is just as likely they won't, but it matters not, the man is dead, at least, I expect so. Currently, there is nothing on the Networks, and this close to the termination I would not expect it."

The NetRunner nodded to suggest he was done, now, the Solo spoke.

"Yes, it was all good, the vehicle stopped around a meter short of optimum, but it was still good, the line of sight was never going to be dead centre anyway, the window opened as expected and both shots were fired, both hit their target, as we know, the vehicle continued on its journey, it has remained undamaged as far as I could tell. The walk away was uneventful, clean up and adjustment are both complete, bags are packed, we can go as we please, do you feel we should leave just yet?"

It was a question, but he wasn't being asked for a personal opinion, the NetRunner was being asked if they were compromised and they needed to leave to avoid detention, he answered carefully.

"There is no need to leave for operational purposes, we can do as we please, as yet, the body remains undiscovered, there is no chatter, so, the conclusion is that the authorities do not know the man is dead yet, I suggest we leave as planned, I will confirm the ticket for tomorrow and we can return to the office, is that acceptable?"

The nod said all that was needed,

"Do you want the next five days clear?"

Again, there was just a nod, they would not get payment for this job until the body was discovered, but the client would know the target was not at work, they would most likely send someone to check his vehicle, particularly if it arrived at the workplace but the man did not exit, the vehicle would not travel if no one was in a seat.

In twenty minutes, the Solo was downstairs in the bar, the brunette was quickly by his side, she had not forgotten, maybe tomorrow he had said, time was up.

This was a story started in 2021, worked on in between other projects in 2022, and finished in 2023, after the release of book number 6.

It is set in a cyberpunk world of sorts, and in some respects, is a bit like the stories in the Anecdotes series, the telling of past experiences, in this case, of a Solo, a hitman, not an agent of the state.



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