

West Hollywood's Finest

Author: Jest

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Setz sits in one of the few dark corners in an otherwise well lit dance club. A brief glow of light appears every time he takes a drag from the cigarette that slowly burns in his mouth. Both his hair and the stubble on his face are a matching pale brown. His face shows subtle signs of aging despite being just over thirty. His clothes are ragged but stylish, though they look like he has spent many nights sleeping in the gutter.

Outside, a sign flashes with the club name, the Lucid. Trance music blares as a crowd of all ages dances with a neon glow around them. Setz wouldn't normally come to a club like this, neither for business nor pleasure. The places he normally frequents are devoid of clean cups, bright lights, and clothed waitresses. The Lucid is a Fiver-run dance club just outside Corporate Point, a place where citizens can go to slum it to pick up Hollywood girls and drugs. Any place out of West Hollywood feels foreign to Setz, and rightly so. The two sections of the city are so different they may as well be separate countries.

Setz ashes his cigarette in a small glass in front of him that previously held the club's cheapest scotch. His eyes periodically switch between the door and the women dancing in cages above the dance floor. His contact, named Johnny "Quick-Feet", is late. Quick-Feet is as fat as they come, and sticks out like a sore thumb any where he goes. No one but him knows where his nick name came from.

The time is just after three in the morning when Setz spots Quick-Feet. After entering the club, he starts scanning the room. He has pasty white skin, is balding on top, has a brown ponytail down to the middle of his back, and wears a bright orange Hawaiian shirt with khaki shorts. Quick-Feet spots Setz and walks towards his table. The Fiver guards take note of both Quick-Feet, but also the previously ignored Setz, who wears a scowl on his face that could kill.

"You never heard of being a little inconspicuous? Damn Quick, maybe you can have the DJ announce our meeting to the entire club. And while yer at it, maybe you can tell me why in the nine hells you choose a Fiver joint to meet in?" Setz rests one arm on the booth ledge, occasionally bringing it to his mouth to remove the cigarette to blow a puff of smoke. The other arm is underneath the table, fingers twitching at the trigger of his gun. Not that he doesn't trust Quick, but the precaution has saved his life on more than one occasion.

"Sorry Setz. I have the information you requested. And I like this place." Quick-Feet takes long pauses between sentences. He speaks in a very slow and formal tone of voice.

"For the love Quick, have a seat, and don't talk to me like I'm yer mother."

Knowing he can't easily fit in the booth, Quick-Feet walks to a nearby table and pulls a chair to the end of the table opposite of Setz, who is cursing under his breath.

"Sorry Setz."

"Don't be sorry, just tell me what I paid you to learn."

Quick-Feet leans in and whispers, still with a formal tone. "The name of the man you are seeking is Adam Reyes."

After a short pause. "And?"

"He lives in the Motiv executive complex like you suspected. I have the layout with suggested entry points here." Quick-Feet holds up a disk and slides it across the table. "The device you seek is most likely in the vault on the third story of Adam Reyes's estate."

"Damn, Quick, nice work. One of these days you'll have to tell me how you get all this info."

Quick-Feet just smiles.

As Setz is distracted with concealing the disk in his clothes, he doesn't notice the three Fivers in black suits as they walk up to the table. Each has an automatic machine gun pointed directly at Setz. One of them speaks. "Beat it fat ass."

Setz sighs and shakes his head at Quick-Feet.

Quick-Feet stands up and leaves. "Sorry Setz."

"Put the gun on the table." The lead Fiver with dark sunglasses says. "Slowly."

Setz lifts the pistol up from underneath the table and sets it down. "So, how's business tonight ladies?"

"Boss wants to see you. Get up." The man with the dark sunglasses says.

"What about?"

The lead Fiver takes the gun off the table and points behind him. "Now."

Setz gets up and follows the lead Fiver, with the other two behind him. They lead him into the side room as the nearby drugged out club patrons pay him absolutely no attention.

In the back room and up a flight of stairs, Setz sees a middle aged man with a goatee sitting at a desk. Two guards with assault rifles stand at each end of the desk. The well dressed man in the middle is Nixon, the owner of the "Lucid", and a person who is well known in Setz's circles.

The Fiver with shades throws Setz's gun to Nixon, who inspects it before saying anything. "Beautiful piece. You're packing some expensive heat for some one's name I don't know. Paul was right to bring you up here." Nixon throws the gun back to the Fiver with shades, who is most likely the one named Paul, and who is currently grinning a toothy grin. "Tell me mate, what are you doing in my club?"

"I'll be honest with you. The trance beats are absolutely unbeatable." Setz says sarcastically.

Nixon nods to Paul, who sucker punches Setz from the side. Setz spits blood on the ground and wipes his mouth with the back of his gloves.

"Perhaps you have mistaken me for some one that enjoys my time being wasted. I'm going to ask again. It will be the final time I need to repeat a question. What are you doing in my club?"

"Business."

"Ah, business. Let me guess. You sell makeup door to door."

Setz grins. "Am I that transparent?" Another punch hits Setz from the side.

Nixon stands up and walks to Setz. "I hope you can appreciate my position here mate. I don't like people doing business in my club. Especially not Hollywood trash like you. So next time you get the bright idea to conduct a business deal, do it some where else. Capiche?"

"Yah."

He walks back to his desk as he speaks. "Excellent. We'll take care of any drinks you purchased for the night. Now get the hell out of my club, and don't come back."

Paul unloads the clip and the bullet in the chamber before handing Setz his gun. Paul pushes him towards the stairs and grins. Setz puts the empty gun back in his belt and leaves the Lucid.

Nixon stands up from his desk and walks to the one-way glass above the club. "Follow him."

If Setz has learned anything in his life in West Hollywood, it's that very few people like or trust a person who is only loyal to themselves. Every one has loyalties, whether it's to a corporation, or a gang, or something in between. Sometimes several at once, and sometimes a foot in one and out the other. Loyalties are constantly shifting, but most important is that people have them. Because the truth is, that's the surest way to survive. If a denizen of the city is alone, then he is a target that every single other group in the city is looking to take advantage of. There is no law enforcement keeping him safe. There isn't a government body looking out for his interests. It is just him against the bit and steel wilderness of the city.

Even so, there is a place for Setz in Angel City. He is the prodigy child of West Hollywood. He was born in Angel City, which very few people his age could say. He knows only trivial details about his parents, and has never bothered to learn anything more. He enjoys every vice known to man and even some that aren't yet. His work is always dangerous. People pay him to do jobs that only he is desperate enough to do.

The only person Setz ever works with is Quick-Feet, who also has no ties to any gangs. Quick-Feet stays alive mostly through the means of being incredibly fat and pathetic. People see him as harmless, and he's learned how to exploit that. Setz finds him amazingly efficient in information gathering, and never even thinks of using another person for it.

Setz has several different contacts for work. His most frequent employer is Ricky Sledge. Ricky is loosely associated with the Broken Hammer, a gang out of West Hollywood. The Hammer don't typically work with any one outside of their fold, but they have no influence outside of Hollywood, and sometimes work needs to be done in the Point. Sledge brought Setz the current job to steal a p.d.f. from Adam Reyes, though whether it had anything to do with the Hammer, Setz couldn't say for sure.

The p.d.f. job is a curious thing. Several years ago, scientists from Seraphim, Inc designed a technology known as a p.d.f., or personal deflector field. These small devices, typically worn on an individual's belt or waistline, make a person near invulnerable to projectiles. Anything from a bolt of energy to a thrown brick will bounce right off. The personal deflector shield was quickly implemented onto combat personnel, but was taken off just as quickly. Intense pressure on the field, such as a barrage of bullets or any small explosion, would cause the device to not only short out, but emit a small electro magnetic pulse that would knock out all electronic devices within five meters, give or take a meter. As a result, a p.d.f. ultimately cost more lives than it saved. They are still used occasionally, but only by corporate executives who are risk of assassination, or by groups who go extremely low tech other than the p.d.f. Attempts at a failsafe device proved fruitless, due to the way the energy builds up. Several corporations have followed suite and developed personal deflector shields of their own with varying success. One such corporation is Motiv, who are wholly devoted to defense technology. It is this company whom Setz has been hired to work against.

The Lucid is out of site and Setz's next destination is in view. A twenty-four hour coffee shop known as Ruby's X-Net Cafe. Horrible imitation coffee, but plenty of open booths with terminals to check the disk given to him by Quick. And for the record, there is no Ruby, other than the grandmother of Acord's Director of Marketing whom the shop is named after. The place is trash but it provides people the opportunity to become a citizen without any of the normal skill sets one would need.

An electronic bell dings at the front as Setz enters the door. A blonde women with over tanned skin, a pink uniform, and a half empty coffee pot peaks out from the kitchen. "Have a seat any where you want, love."

Setz walks past the mostly empty booths and sits down in the corner. He slides an identity-less credit card down the side of the monitor and it turns on in response. Putting the disk in, he begins to cycle through the data.

The blonde waitress walks up to the booth with a now full pot of coffee and a nametag that says Susan. "Cup o' joe, love?"

Setz lights up a cigarette from his coat pocket. "Go for it."

She flips the mug on the table right-side up and pours it full. "Enjoy", she says before continuing on to another booth.

Setz flicks the ash of his cigarette into an ashtray and takes a sip of coffee while staring intently at the monitor. Quick is typically thorough with the information he provides. The disk contains everything from possible entry points to the Motiv complex to the history of the company to an employee roster with salaries and living addresses. It also holds more detailed information specifically related to the job. The details of the job are straight forward: destroy the prototype p.d.f. held by the Motiv chairman.

Motiv is a small time company in Angel City, comparatively speaking. The Motiv Chairman of the Board is Adam Reyes. As Quick had said, the device is in his personal vault. Certain questions already pop into Setz's head about the job in question. The main one being, why destroy a p.d.f.? The job doesn't indicate there is any special about his p.d.f., and the market value of one is far less than what Setz is being paid to destroy it. The specifics of the job were straight forward. There is even a credit bonus for any collateral damage caused. Almost all jobs of this nature have certain similarities with each other. There are patterns, trends, standards, things of that nature. But many of those normal patterns are missing with this job. Setz is never quite keen enough to figure out all the angles of any job he's given, but he doesn't need to know the specifics to know that something is wrong. Knowing there are potential unknowns always makes them a little easier to handle when they come up. Still, those types of jobs have ended badly on more than one occasion. Unfortunately for Setz, turning a job down isn't really an option for him. Vice doesn't buy itself, after all.

At seven in the morning, the graveyard shift waitress rotates with the morning shift. The new waitress is a middle aged brunette with a blue uniform. She empties out Setz's ashtray, puts a full pot of hot coffee on the table, and doesn't return to the booth again.

Setz does all his business in shops like this one. He prefers coffee shops, but doesn't limit his work to them. More and more businesses are offering XNet access. Setz does all the research he needs to do on a job in one stint, and he never comes back. When he steps out of the door of Ruby's, he will never step back in. Habits tend to be bad in his line of work. He likes to avoid being a familiar face or a known name. No one will ever set their watch by him, or come to expect him any where on a certain day at a certain time. No one ever wonders about a fresh face. In a city this big, it's the regulars that get questions asked of them. There are occasional exceptions to the rule. Last night's Lucid experience being one of them.

Realistically Setz could afford an XNet connection, but two reasons hold him back. The first being that a hard line connection isn't just a metaphorical representation of staying in one place, but it's also a physical one. His living quarters are no different than his XNet access. He tries to avoid being a familiar even in the random locations he lives at from week to week. And well, the second reason is nothing more than the aforementioned vices that Setz throws his cash at on a daily basis. He isn't addicted to any of them mind you, and could become "Johnny Corporate" at any time he wanted to. But the truth is, he enjoys the lifestyle he lives. It's the only life he knows.

He finishes up his research at just before ten in the morning, making it at least a day and a half since he's gotten any sleep. He takes one last drag of his cigarette before adding this final smoke to what is left of his coffee. He tosses a couple of credits on the table for a tip and leaves Ruby's never to return. After memorizing every inch of the disk at the cafe, he burns it with a lighter and tosses it in a dumpster on his way back to the hotel. What he doesn't realize is that two Fivers have been watching him all night, monitoring all the information that Setz had parsed through on the net. One Fiver packs up the surveillance gear and walks back towards the Lucid. The other continues to follow Setz to his hotel.

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The Motiv executive conference room is on the top floor of the building. The building itself is in Corporate Point, a section of the city where skyscrapers tower above the horizon. Motiv shares the building with four or five other similar sized corporations, though Motiv is the largest in the building and occupies the prestigious top floor.

The window behind Adam Reyes has a clear view of the city all the way to the ocean. Adam wears a gray three-piece business suit with a crimson tie. His blonde beard is well trimmed, and like his hair, shows signs of gray. Across from Adam is his daughter Kristin. Her short brown hair is atypical for executives, but very little about her is normal. At the age of twenty two, she is easily the youngest in the room. She wears a

black suit and skirt somewhat uncomfortably, almost like a costume. Between Adam and Kristin the conference table is filled with other members of the Motiv Board.

"Has Dr. Ylin been taken care of?" A Board Member asks.

All eyes look to Kristin. "Yes, I took care of it personally, but it may be too late. He's already contacted several operations in Hollywood to destroy the device. Which is exactly what I told you would happen. That he only wanted the device destroyed proves he knew his life was short."

Adam Reyes takes a sip from the water glass in front of him. "You have too little faith in the company my dear."

"Too little faith? If the criminal world knows about the device, then the corporate world is soon to follow. You read the same report I did. Every corporation in the city will want that kind of tech. You think Seraphim wouldn't hesitate to unload an army right on top of us to get a piece of it?"

"With the advances it will bring, we'll be unstoppable."

"What advances? The only person who understood the technology is dead. Every attempt to duplicate the device has failed. Our brightest minds don't think they can get anything from it for another two years. And yet after the initial tests, it sits in your personal vault, which you have failed to explain any valid reason for. Father."

Adam smiles. "Testing will continue soon. If what you say is correct, taking the prototype into the open is too great a risk."

Kristin retorts. "And when exactly will it not be at risk? It was at risk the moment we left a trail of corpses to get the damn thing."

"I'm not to be questioned on this Kristin. Not even by you. In the mean time, increase security at the compound. Nothing and no one enters without my specific approval."

4

The elevator opens on the ninth floor. Whenever Setz has a job in Corporate Point, he stays in a hotel like this one. It always makes him uneasy, even more so than he was at Lucid. Hotels in Angel City are not hotels in the typical sense. The hundreds of miles of desert and outland savages aren't exactly a recipe for tourism. Still, the city is large enough and inter-city travel is difficult enough that these hotels are able to stay in business. They resemble apartments more than anything, and are fully furnished for long stays. Most who stay are citizens that work for a company that isn't large enough to provide housing. People who aren't citizens are welcome just until their credits run dry.

Setz walks to the door with a cast iron '927' on it and opens the door with a white key card from his inside coat pocket. He walks in and throws the key card down on the night stand, closing the door behind him. This particular room has no windows connected to it, so the room is pitch black.

"Late night?" A familiar voice says from a chair in the corner of the room.

Out of instinct Setz takes his gun out and points it toward the voice. He turns the nearby lamp on and lets his guard down. "Sledge. The hell are you doing here?"

Ricky Sledge. If Setz had either a friend or a boss, it would be Ricky. Ricky, however, is neither.

"The more immediate question is why you have an obviously empty gun pointed at me. You do take bullets with you on the jobs I pay you to do, correct?" Most people in Ricky's position wear designer suits and expensive watches. Ricky, however, wears a ripped trench coat, jeans, and blue sneakers. He prefers to use illusion for defense. People who are into money are targets, especially in West Hollywood. Very few people have the wealth that Ricky does without having an entourage of body guards. Not to mention the fact that Broken Hammer, his main source of capital, would never trust or work with any one who wears suits.

Setz tucks the empty gun into his belt. "Fivers. Which is what I get for letting Quick pick the meeting location."

Ricky laughs. "You still dealing with that tub of lard? You know what the Fivers do to people like you."

"Yah, yah. Thanks for the concern, but I can handle myself."

"It wasn't concern. You're the only person stupid enough to take the jobs I give you. And I do so hate turning down clients."

"I love you too. But yer making me nervous being here. Since when have you ever contacted me in the middle of a job?"

"Since never. But the heist is hot Setz."

"If it was easy to steal it then you wouldn't need me. But even so, I know you'd never risk yer own skin if it was only too hot for me, so that means it's too hot for you. Spill it, Sledge."

Ricky sighs. "You know I keep tabs on as much contract work happening in the city as I can. This isn't the only job to destroy the p.d.f."

"What, like competition? Since when is there a competitive market for blowing something up?"

Ricky nods. "It's more than that. The man who paid for this job paid quarter a million, with ten percent up front in cash."

"What?! Son of a bitch, Sledge. A quarter mil for this job and that didn't ring any alarm bells for you? That's twice the market value of even the most expensive p.d.f."

"It was stupid, I got greedy. But it's worse than that. I did some digging on the man who gave me the job. A Dr. Ylin, incredibly gifted scientist specializing in theoretical energy. Has a lab that is practically outside of the city limits. Sells his tech to the highest bidder. Thing is, he's dead. He was murdered two nights ago alongside his three very well armed bodyguards."

"Wonderful."

"Just drop the job. Lay low for a month and just forget about it. We both still get paid, so no harm."

Brrriiiiiiiiiing..... The hotel room phone room rings.

Setz lets it ring a few times before picking it up. "Yah?"

"Mr. Jones, this is Dave, the bellman." Setz always gives a fake name when staying at a new place.

"And?"

"You paid me to tell you if any one started asking about you."

Setz looks at Ricky. "And?"

"There are these three men in suits..."

"Three men?"

Ricky stands up from the chair.

"Yes sir, they showed a picture of you and bribed the front desk to get your room number. They took the elevator to your floor just a few minutes ago."

"Fuck..." Setz drops the phone and takes out the empty gun from his belt. It doesn't take long for Ricky to figure out they are in danger. He takes out an automatic shotgun from his coat and points it at the door at the exact moment it's kicked in. Ricky pulls the trigger and the suited man is sent flying from the room as quickly as he entered.

The two remaining Fivers begin to fire into the room. Ricky drops to his stomach and takes cover behind the couch while Setz crawls his way to the backpack on his bed for a fresh clip.

Ricky gets to his knees and fires several rounds into the wall. A yelp sounds from the hallway as one of the suited men gets hit.

The shots continue and in the hail of bullets, Ricky is hit in the shoulder and twice in the chest. A bullet proof vest stops the shots to his chest, but the force of the bullets with the pain of the shoulder wound is enough to knock the wind out of him.

One of the men enters the room with his gun pointed at the defenseless Ricky, but Setz stands up from behind the bed and fires his freshly loaded gun into the suited man's head, which splatters brain and bone into the doorway behind him. Setz runs to the door and fires two quick shots into each wounded man in the hallway, killing them both.

Ricky regains his composure, rips off a piece of his shirt and wraps it tight around his shoulder. "Damn Fivers! I knew I'd regret warning you. What in the hell did you do to piss them off?"

Setz hurries around the room and throws his belongings into his back pack. "Since when do they need a reason? You ok?"

"I'll live." Ricky gets to his feet and reattaches the shotgun back inside his coat. "Let's get the hell out of here."

They run to the stair well but from the bottom floor, security is already on its way up. Setz points up and they run up the stairs. Setz kicks in the locked door to the roof and they run to the fire escape ladder.

Ricky cringes on the way down the ladder, but they make it to the alley way. "Setz, take my advice for once. I can't back you this time. Leave this one alone. Just walk away."

Setz nods. They both walk onto the sidewalk and each go a separate direction. But whatever is going on, Setz knows he is in too deep to walk away right now. Fiver hit squads don't go away just by laying low. He has to see this one through to the end.

5

The night is late as Kristin continues to work in her office. She sits at a desk in front of a computer terminal. A lamp on the desk is her only light.

There is a knock at the door.

"Enter." She says with eyes still fixed on the terminal.

A young man enters. "Ma'am."

She takes off her reading glasses and sets them on the table. "Yes Chris, how can I help you?"

"It's about your father. You told me to let you know if he does anything unusual."

Kristin stands up from the desk. "What is it?"

"He left on his corporate helicopter, but he didn't have me notify the executive complex as he normally does."

"Where was he going?"

"I wondered the same thing so I checked his flight plan. Ma'am, he's headed straight for Mercy Hospital."

"What? Why would he go to Seraphim, unless... oh God... Chris I need you to call the complex. Tell them to go on high alert. I have a bad feeling."

6

Adam Reyes sits in a lone chair facing a table of seated Seraphim, Inc executives. One stands, and he alone speaks.

"Mr. Reyes, why come to us with this information?" Asks the man.

"Our top scientist studied the device, but was unable to duplicate it. It was only a matter of time until word got out of what we had. I came here with a proposition."

"Yes, I have read over your proposal. If what you say is true about the p.d.f., you will get everything you've asked for."

"Excellent. I can have it here by tonight."

"That won't be necessary; we've already dispatched an agent to recover the device."

"But... my daughter..."

"The agent has been given specific instructions not to harm your daughter. Don't worry Mr. Reyes, we'll be welcoming both you and her to the company within the hour."

The Motiv executive complex is well guarded but not impenetrable. The complex is a square mile surrounded on all sides by a ten foot concrete wall. There are four main access points, one on each side of the wall. A protective field resonates in a half-sphere above the walls. The buildings found within have varying degrees of security depending on their level of importance. Each building is given a color. Yellow for low importance, orange for moderate, red for high. The mansion of Adam Reyes is designated as red. Roaming guards, DNA coded doors, security cameras.

If what Sledge said was true, then other groups are after the personal deflector shield and who knows what else inside the complex. Some one wants Motiv hit hard. Setz walks along the deserted sidewalk on the north end. His gun is tucked safely inside his jacket to avoid suspicion in the event of running into a patrol. Not that the backpack full of explosives and cracking equipment wouldn't be a dead give away.

Normally Setz would case a place for weeks. He would learn the personal schedule of every single person who comes in and out of a location. But there isn't any time on this one.

The first step of getting to the vault is the complex wall. Or at least it would have been if some one hadn't gotten to it first. In the exact spot where Setz was going to enter, a two meter hole in the concrete still glows red from the beams that cut into it.

A square mile wall and he picks the exact two meter spot as some one else. Too much of a coincidence, Setz thinks to himself. Some one has the same intel he does.

Setz enters the hole in the wall and feels the warmth from the still-burning edges. The courtyard in front of him is dark. Automated spot lights from guard towers comb the area, but not in any way which is worrisome to Setz. He takes out his gun and runs quietly from shadow to shadow. Not a single guard is in sight, which is never a good sign.

After passing several buildings with no one in view, Setz kneels behind a small wall in view of Adam Reyes' personal mansion. The outside of the house resembles 20th century architecture, but it was most definitely built within the last few years.

As Setz scopes the area, he feels something wet seep through his boot and between his toes. Nearby is a dead security guard with a gaping chest and head wound. The blood drains to where Setz is kneeling.

"Wonderful". He says quietly to himself.

Setz recalls back to the intel Quick provided. A guard at each external entrance, two rooftop guards with sniper rifles, three roaming external guards, and a dozen or so internal guards with varying shifts. That's a lot of guards for none to be visible. He takes a pair of binoculars and surveys the mansion. He finds no sign of them until he scans the roof. Only one is visible, but he's as dead as the guard beside Setz.

Whoever did it are only minutes ahead of him, and while they are obviously talented, they are extremely sloppy, probably leaving such a body count that stealth is irrelevant at this point. Setz has a lot of ground to make up if he is going to make it to the p.d.f. in time. Of greater concern, however, is the firepower of whoever is ahead of him. They are better than him, and he knows it. He decides to cross that bridge when he comes to it.

Setz runs to the building and opens the door with gun drawn. As he walks through the hallway, his feet stick to the ground and he leaves faint footprints of blood on the wooden floor behind him.

The bottom floor of the mansion is what one would expect. Each room along the hallway looks mostly the same. One is filled with couches, another with a billiard table and a bar, another with a large dining table. The only thing any of them have in common is the dead security and staff. None have a weapon drawn.

Gunshots echo far in the distance. Not within the mansion itself, but it's enough to kick off whatever security the complex has. The lights go dim inside the hallway and are replaced with a faint red glow, and a not-so-faint alarm siren. An explosion erupts outside and a painting on the wall falls down in front of him.

Setz runs through the empty hallway and reaches the stairs. The video cameras in the hallway have been shot out. According to Quick's intel, the vault is on the third story. He walks up two flights of stairs and come to another hallway. The sound of gun shots continues, but this time the echo is inside the mansion, and only a few rooms ahead of him. He enters a vacant room to his left and exits through the window. Every room on the third floor save the vault room is connected by a terrace from the roof.

As he exits the window, a fire burns in a nearby building. Red lights flash from the southern gate, signs of a firefight.

Setz walks slowly on the terrace, looking into each window as he passes. Upon reaching the window closest to the vault, he sees three people in body armor firing into the vault room. The body armor is more advanced than Setz is used to seeing. Their automatic weapons make absolutely no noise as they fire. Only the gun fire from those inside the vault can be heard.

A grenade that is tossed out of the vault room explodes near the wall. One of the three is caught in the blast and the body armor does very little to protect against it. He explodes in a mixture of blood, limbs, and electronic equipment. One of the remaining two

screams in a woman's voice and throws a small object into the doorway of the vault. The object transforms into its true nature, a seeker-destroyer.

The seeker-destroyer is by far the most lethal personal weapon created in Angel City. Most corporations have banned their use and stopped all production on them, at least on the record. Absolutely and positively kills every single living thing in a room without mercy.

The screams inside the room are over as quickly as they start. As the screams end, Setz, still on the terrace, hears a faint whirring sound above him. Looking up, a marked Seraphim, Inc helicopter hovers over head. A well-built man with blonde hair wearing light body armor drops to the roof in front of him. One man from a Seraphim helicopter could mean only one thing. He is a Seraph, a near-indestructible avatar for Seraphim, Inc. The typical Seraph could wipe out half of the entire complex before going down, and Setz is not about to get in his way.

Setz begins to regret not taking Ricky's advice. He looks back into the window in front of him and the two armored thieves are gone. Setz enters the room and runs as fast as he can through the hall way, quickly ducking around the corner out of view of the vault entrance.

Inside the vault, one of the thieves sees the blur of Setz as he runs by. He walks into the hallway and turns to see the Seraph with a shotgun coming in through the window.

"Oh, shit..." The armored man says before opening fire.

The bullets seem to pass through the Seraph as if he is a ghost. Not a single shot hits and the armored man cusses more before ducking into the vault. The thieves now find themselves in the reverse situation, shooting out of the vault that they worked so hard to enter.

The Seraph stops outside of the vault entrance. "Fivers! Leave now and our the treay will be respected. You can leave with your lives."

"Fuck off Seraphim!" The woman yells back.

The Seraph aims at her location and shotgun blasts tear holes in the vault's plated wall. The thieves return fire through the walls, but their bullets are unable to penetrate it. Shrapnel from the plated wall hits the female and causes her to yelp.

In an act of desperation, she pulls out another two seeker-destroyers and tosses them into the hallway.

The seeker-destroyers are too fast for even the Seraph. He shoots the first, but the second drills it's blades into his chest and arms. Without a show of emotion or pain, the Seraph rips the seeker-destroyer from his chest and smashes it again the wall.

The male thief takes the opportunity and enters the hallway with guns blazing. The Seraph doesn't evade these, but gets off a shotgun blast before falling to the floor. The Seraph is unconscious on the floor while the thief's upper half of his torso is sent skidding across the hallway to where Setz is hiding.

The female peeks her head out the hallway, fire a few bullets into the Seraph, and then returns to her work. She grunts in pain as she sets up the vault cracking equipment.

Setz stands up from his hiding spot and walks slowly to the vault room. The seeker-destroyer smashed into the wall still makes a whirring noise in front of him. The sound of gunfire and explosions continue in the background.

He enters the room with the thief kneeling in front of the vault-cracking gear, her back turned towards him. A green light turns on and the vault's latch opens.

"Gotcha." She says with a smile.

Setz doesn't hesitate. He puts the gun to the back of her head and pulls the trigger. She dies instantly.

He steps over her dead body and enters the vault. Valuables practically litter the shelves, and the personal deflector shield sits eager to be plucked on the back wall.

The p.d.f. is about the size of a pistol clip. Though it is unlike any Setz has ever heard of. In addition to the typical controls, there is also what looks to be a trigger on it. As if it is a weapon. When Setz picks it up, he feels the energy pulsing in his hand even while the device is turned off. Judging by the parties interested in the device, there is no doubt something special about it. The original job was to destroy the device, but with the doctor dead, stealing it is the only way for payout.

A true professional would only take what he has been hired to steal, but Setz isn't exactly a professional. He stuffs his backpack with as much vault goods as it can fit before he leaves.

As Setz steps out of the vault, the presence of the Seraph body is noticeably absent and sends a chill down Setz's spine. Only a small pool of blood remains where the body once was.

Setz runs through the house, down the stairs, and back along the path he took to get there. The spotlights shining on the ground and sky have been replaced by a red and orange colored clouds reflecting the fires spread throughout the Motiv complex. As he exits the hole in the wall, the city is quiet. No cars are on the road, and no pedestrians are on the sidewalk.

With a grin on his face, Setz starts walking in the direction of West Hollywood.

8

Kristin surveys the destruction to the complex as her helicopter touches down. As she steps out, a balding man in a disheveled suit meets her.

"What's the damage?" She asks, continuing to look over the complex.

"Over thirty dead and close to fifty wounded."

"The target?"

"Your father's vault. Most likely the personal deflector shield."

"Who has it?"

"We don't know. The mercs that attacked the front gate didn't make it far enough in to get it. The dead we found in the vault room have been identified as Fiver operatives. A Seraphim helicopter was also seen taking off from your father's mansion. We intercepted radio communications that lead us to believe Seraphim went home empty handed. We suspect the Fivers have possession."

"I want the troops mobilized. Set up watching stations at every known Fiver operation. I want the p.d.f. back."

"But ma'am, what about your father? Where is he?"

"He has defected. Under no circumstances are you to make contact with him."

"I see..."

"Notify me when you find something. I'm going to handle this matter personally."

9

The heist had finished hours ago and night was fading. Setz spent the last three hours walking. He had dropped off his back pack in one of the hidden caches he typically stores his stuff at. No sense in walking around with a backpack full of millions of dollars of stolen goods when daylight hits.

With the goods stashed, he decides to head to the warehouse he had initially agreed to meet Ricky at. Ricky had said his contact for the job was killed, but taking into account

the parties interested in the device, Setz knew it was worth more than whatever he had initially agreed to pay anyway.

The lights on the street begin to turn off one by one as the sun rises over the horizon. The sidewalks show the first signs of life for the day as people working the morning shift head to work.

Arriving at the warehouse and wary of going right in, Setz sits on an empty bus bench and waits. The warehouse he had agreed to meet Ricky at is owned by Ricky himself. Though it has little other purpose than a meeting place for occasions such as this. There was no guarantee that Ricky was even here, but neither Setz nor Ricky had many options for getting a hold of each other, and right now this was the best one.

Forty minutes pass and there are no signs of activity from the warehouse. Deciding it to be clear, Setz decides to go in.

He crosses the street, walks through the back door, and takes out his weapon. The warehouse is filled with rolls and rolls of incredibly old carpet. Shadows of a previous era in Angel City.

Setz walks past a stack and feels the cold tip of a pistol against his head.

"Don't even think about it." Says the man with the gun. He is in a suit and wears dark sunglasses. Setz recognizes him as one of the Fivers from the Lucid.

Several more armed Fivers appear from their hiding places.

Setz drops his gun on the ground. "It's Paul right? How's the clubbing business?" Without a word, Paul hits Setz over the head with his pistol and Setz falls unconscious.

10

Setz feels a drop of water hit his nose. He wakes up staring at pipes along the ceiling. He is slumped in a chair with his hands tied behind it.

The room is dark. The only visible exit from the room is a door atop some stairs. He is obviously in a basement. The only other thing in the room with him are two people also tied up, one to his left and one to his right.

To the right of him is Quick-Feet. His face is cut and mutilated. Underneath him is a pool of blood. His feet are smashed and broken. A knife remains in his chest and the once orange Hawaiian shirt is now stained red. Quick-Feet is long dead.

To the left is Ricky Sledge, also tied up. His face is bruised and battered, but he is in considerably better shape than Quick-Feet. Ricky is alive, but barely so.

"Sledge... Sledge!"

Ricky comes to, and raises his head. He turns towards Setz, but is unable to open his eyes. "Setz. You got it... didn't you...?" He smiles and half chokes, half laughs.

A light shines in the room as the door opens. Three suited figures walk down the stairs. In the front is Paul.

"Well lookie here boys, our man is awake." He pulls up a chair in front of Setz and sits down. The two other men stay standing with arms folded. Paul pulls out a cigarette and lights it. He takes a puff, blows the smoke from his nose, and continues speaking. "I hafta say, I was a little surprised when I learned a no talent scrub like yourself managed to get the score over our team."

Setz just stares at him coldly.

Paul leans close. "Nothing to say? Soon you'll be begging me to speak. You'll want to confess everything you've done since you were twelve. Be smart like your pal Ricky here and tell us what we want to know. Don't be a stubborn bastard like your fat ass friend."

Ricky coughs. "Setz... I'm sorry..."

Paul nods to the man on his right. The Fiver takes out his pistol and fires three shots into Ricky's chest.

"You son of a bitch!" Setz yells in frustration.

Paul smiles and takes another drag from the cigarette. Behind Paul, the door to the basement opens and closes. No one in the room notices the faint blur on the wall behind them.

Paul takes out a pistol and slaps it across Setz's face. "Tell us where the device is, and your death will be just as fast."

Setz rubs his tongue along his teeth and spits blood to the ground beside him. "I'll take it to the grave with me."

Paul grins. "I was hoping you'd say that."

The Fiver on the left dies first. He doesn't make a sound until his lifeless body hits the ground. Before the other Fiver's even realize it, the one on the right drops, too.

"What the f..." Paul says just as the bullets hit, but he finishes with a whimper. Each bullet makes a faint thumping noise as they pierce his body armor. He falls dead into Setz's lap.

Setz looks around but sees nothing. A part of the wall in front of him changes gradually into a female figure in an armored gray suit that covers every inch of her.

She takes off her mask and pushes the dead body off Setz's lap, with her gun aimed directly at Setz. "So, you are the thief?" To say the woman was easy on the eye would be the understatement of the century. Her intense green eyes don't break from Setz for a second.

"Only for the chance to meet you, hon." Setz's teeth are covered in blood as he grins, uncertain of whether he has replaced one torturer with another. Figuring he has nothing left to lose, he goes for broke.

"Cute. Who are you? Who do you work for?"

"Name is Setz and I work for myself."

She scoffs. "You managed to get past both the Fivers and Seraphim to steal from us by yourself? I have a hard time believing that."

"So don't believe it then. I don't care. How about you untie me and we can talk some?"

She walks to him and sits on his lap, putting her gun under his chin. "That all depends on you, now doesn't it. Here is the deal. Against my better judgment, I let you go, we go straight to the p.d.f., and you go away with your life."

"My life is not as high of a bargaining tool as you think it is. That device is worth two million minimum, and you'd still be getting a steal."

"Considering you stole it from me, each second I sit here is another second spent wondering why I don't just kill you now."

"Time well spent. I don't typically have a beautiful woman sitting on my lap threatening me at gunpoint. One million."

"Deal." She takes a knife from her boot and reaches around him, cutting the ropes that tied him to the chair.

"Not that I mind, but do you plan on letting me get up any time soon?"

Still on his lap, she leans close to him. "Promise to behave?"

"For killing these assholes? Absolutely. I owe you. Who are you, anyway?"

She puts the knife back in her boot and gets off him. "Kristin Reyes."

Setz stands up and takes the rope off his wrists. "Reyes, eh? Wouldn't happen to be related to the Motiv chairman, would you?"

She nods.

"You want to pay me for what I stole from you? What promise do I have that you that you'll deliver?"

"Listen... what was your name again?"

"Setz."

"Listen, Setz. If you know of a better way for me to get it back, I'd love to hear it. But truthfully, if you hadn't stolen it, Seraphim would probably have it by now. And there's no way I'll get it back if that happens. So in some small way, I owe you, but try not to let it go to your head."

Setz picks up Paul's gun and smashes his shades into the ground with his heel. "Hey, fine with me, let's get the hell out of here."

As he walks up the stairs, a gunshot sounds from some where on the other side of the door. Several more follow it.

"Some of yours?" Setz asks with his hand on the door handle.

"Don't think so. Mine were ordered to keep at distance." Kristin answers.

Setz takes a glance back at Quick-Foot and Sledge. Kristin pulls the mask over her head and the suit fades to the background behind her.

Setz opens the door from the basement. On the other side is a kitchen. No sign of any Fivers. On the stove is a pot with water bubbling over the sides. Whoever was cooking it left in a hurry.

Setz walks to the next set of doors. Each has a glass pane looking into the next room. As Setz looks through them, he recognizes the room as part of the Lucid, the Fiver owned club. In it, a fierce gun battle rages. Fivers take cover but their enemy easily guns them down.

One Fiver runs as fast as he can to get away. He crashes through the kitchen doors which swing wide open. He is shot to the ground by a familiar face. Setz and the shooter exchange glances. It is the Seraph that Setz encountered outside the vault. The Seraph

grins and begins to walk toward the kitchen, still shooting at Fivers along the way. Typically Seraphim and the Fivers go together like butter and toast, with the former often employing the latter for just about every dirty job they do. So if they are fighting each other, then shit has truly hit the fan.

"Seraph." Setz says as he steps away from the door and puts his back against the wall behind him.

"Oh, God... are you sure?" Says the near transparent Kristin beside him.

"Very. There a back door?"

"Probably."

"C'mon."

Setz and Kristin run to another set of doors on the opposite side of the kitchen. After passing through a short series of hallways, they come to a door that looks to lead outside, but run into a group of Fivers also making an exit. At the lead is Nixon. They exchange a brief glance of bewilderment before unloading on each other. Setz leaps back behind the hallway.

"You son of a bitch! I'll kill you for bringing that Seraph here." Nixon yells as he shoots.

Kristin's stealth suit, which was previously visible only so Setz could see her, now turns fully invisible. She peeks around the corner and drops a Fiver with a single shot. The Fivers respond with another round of bullets into the doorway. Nixon continues to curse.

They are now between a rock and a hard place. Despite the group of heavily armed Fivers in front of them, it pales in comparison of the danger of the Seraph that survived a seeker-destroyer behind them. Only death waits that way. Setz and Kristin get bolder about fighting the Fivers with each passing moment. They switch constantly between shooting in front of them and nervously watching the door behind them.

"He's coming!" Kristin says frantically.

Setz doesn't know how she knows, but he knows she is right. "On three." He says coolly.

Three and two come quick, followed by a deep breath and long pause. When one comes, they run around the corner with kamikaze speed. The Fivers hesitate, overwhelmed by the boldness of the move, unaware that death follows behind them. They hesitate for only a moment, but it is enough. A flurry of bullets drops them one by one. In desperation the Fivers shoot down the hallway without aim. Last to fall is Nixon, with most of the bullets stopping against a thin layer of high tech armor under his neatly pressed suit.

Setz stands over Nixon, the former thinking of something to say, the latter just waiting for death. Nothing comes and Setz just pulls the trigger.

As Setz turns back around, Kristin is lying against the wall, now wholly visible and sporting a bullet wound to the stomach. One thought overwhelms his mind. Run. But he doesn't do it. He isn't totally sure why.

Setz goes over to her and lifts her up. By her expression, she is as surprised to see him helping her as he is. But it isn't enough. The end of the shotgun cracks Setz in the face, sending him and Kristin to the ground. Blood gushes from his nose.

With a smug grin still on his face, the Seraph calmly points the shotgun at them. "Take me to the device and you might live."

In reality the Seraph doesn't pose any greater threat than Paul did in the Lucid basement. Fivers are known to be masters of torture. But something has changed. He now has someone else's life to think about. Not that he cares for the girl any. But she saved his life even after he stole from her. That isn't the type of act that deserves his betrayal. Setz nods. The Seraph rests the shotgun on his shoulder. "Let's move. You can carry her ass to the car."

11

Setz drives as the business end of the shotgun is pointed at his face. Setz spends the time in conflict. A large part of him just wants to get out alive, but there is no guarantee with a Seraph. Seraphs are well known for killing anything that gets in the way of their objective, but are otherwise unpredictable. He is just as likely to kill Setz as give him a pat on the back.

Kristin groans in pain from the back seat as the car pulls up. A pool of blood begins to gather in the seat below her. She doesn't have much time.

The Seraph waits until Setz is completely out before leaving the car himself. Seraphs are typically hated and hunted in West Hollywood, but there isn't any one around for miles. It was part of the appeal for keeping his cache here.

Setz's cache is under the floor boards of a burned out diner. The diner had caught fire several years ago and was never fixed. This was especially convenient, as not even a squatter would give much consideration in staying the night in such a place.

Setz stops outside the diner. "It's in there." He points forward.

The Seraph doesn't make eye contact. He just looks from building to building. "After you."

After his last cache was robbed, Setz spent a decent chunk of change making sure this one wouldn't be. Any person reaching around under the floor boards who wasn't Setz would lose an arm from a localized explosion.

Inside the building, Setz removes the floor board from the ground and leans down. "It is just under here."

"So get it out."

He doesn't take the bait. It was a slim chance anyway. Setz leans down, turns the traps off, and opens the case. Inside are a gun, the p.d.f., and the backpack of valuables taken from the vault.

As he reaches for the p.d.f., an image enters his mind. He sees Sledge and Quick-Feet, both dead in the Lucid basement. He knows what each would say. Quick-Feet would tell him to just make it out with his life. Sledge would say that a score, no matter how high, is worth death. But they are dead. Dead because of the little device in his hand. Setz thinks to himself, there must be a reason so many people are after the p.d.f., maybe its time to find out why. But most of all, Setz just doesn't want to die a coward.

Setz stands up with the gun pointed at the Seraph.

The Seraph laughs. "Just what do you think you are doing? Drop the gun or I kill you and drop the girl off on the curb."

"Not going to happen." Setz says with the gun shaking in his hand.

"Your choice."

Both guns fire at once. The bullet hits the Seraph in the chest but doesn't faze him. Though for once, the expression on his face is not one of confidence, but of surprise. Setz stands with gun still pointed forward. Around him a light green field of energy glimmers and then disappears. The fired shotgun round is scattered around the room.

Each of them take cover and start to fire. Setz lands next to no shots as the Seraph somehow avoids them, but the blasts from the shotgun does virtually nothing to the barrier of energy from the p.d.f. which Setz holds in his left hand.

With each shot against the barrier, the p.d.f. begins to glow brighter and brighter. A normal shield would have overloaded within a few shots of the powerful shotgun. The reaction from the p.d.f. only encourages the Seraph to continue to fire.

But then something happens to the p.d.f. The green glow begins to turn into a dark orange and the barrier surrounding him begins to fade. Setz, in desperation, points the p.d.f. towards the Seraph and pulls the mysterious trigger.

A blast of orange energy rips across the diner and crackles against Seraph, who is sent tumbling against the wall. The Seraph just gives a blank stare. As Setz marvels at the use of the device, it slowly overheats. He drops it to the ground and watches his million dollars melt into a pile of liquid metal. Setz begins to understand. Dr. Ylin used the risk of detonation as an asset instead of a liability. Unknown to Setz, the beam of energy was actually an electromagnetic pulse that wreaked havoc on the Seraph's technical implants.

Setz walks to the Seraph and holds the gun to his forehead. The Seraph just keeps looking forward. Setz begins to pull the trigger, but hesitates. A person doesn't just kill a Seraph and then continue on with his life as usual. There are consequences to killing an angel. Consequences he doesn't want to live with.

Without saying a word, Setz leans down near the Seraph and takes the car keys from his pocket. Setz rests the shotgun on the Seraph's lap, picks up the backpack from his cache, and walks outside of the diner.

Kristin is startled awake as Setz closes the door behind him. "Did you get it?"

Setz starts the car. "Yah. I did."

She blacks out before she can respond.

12

The Seraph stands before a table of Seraphim executives. Adam Reyes sits in a chair nearby.

One of the executives speaks. "What is status of the personal deflector shield?"

The Seraph avoids eye contact and looks at the ground. "Destroyed..."

Adam Reyes stands up from the chair. "Impossible!"

The executive holds up his hand. "And the status of the man who stole it?"

The Seraph pauses. The Council isn't particularly forgiving for failure. "...dead sir. He was killed in the blast when the device overloaded."

The executive sighs. "Disappointing, though not unforeseen. We had long suspected the reports of the deflector to be exaggerated. I believe we no longer require the services of Mr. Reyes, wouldn't you agree?" He looks at the Seraph.

The Seraph nods. "Yes, sir."

Adam backs against the wall. "What? No, please!"

13

Two months pass since the Motiv heist. Setz had been living off the profit from the other vault loot, but that money was fast running out. Setz had been in hiding from the Seraph, but knows the Seraph would have found him long ago if he had been looking.

Setz sits in a private room of an XNet shop in West Hollywood. He twirls a data disk in his hand for a minute before finally deciding to plug it into the terminal.

A red message flashes on the screen. "Warning: Terminal Logged."

Just as he suspected, the device is relaying his location. Instinct tells him to leave as fast as he can, but then that same instinct told him not to use the disk in the first place.

After just under a minute, an incoming call beeps on the terminal. Setz clicks accept and Kristin's face appears on the screen.

"You're a hard man to get a hold of Mr. Setz."

"Kristin." He nods.

"Living off the proceeds of my father's vault, it was only inevitable that I'd find you."

"The device was destroyed Kristin, as I told your people."

"I know, we verified your story. But I haven't heard a single word from you."

"Without the million credit payoff there wasn't really any reason to. Plus I had to be sure that Seraphim wouldn't pursue me."

"You didn't need to leave so soon. I never got to thank you."

"I know... I'm sorry. I heard about your father."

"I'm sorry, too, but he died by the choices he made."

"I saw on the news that you were elected the new Chairman, congratu..."

Kristin interrupts. "Listen Setz. I could really use a guy like you on the company payroll."

"Not really my style, hon. Ain't the citizen type."

"I'm not either, but here we are. If you won't work for me, then at least let me buy you dinner."

He laughs. "You askin' me out?"

"I am. I figured I'd give slumming a chance and well, you are the only person from Hollywood I know." She laughs.

"You sure know to complement."

"Let me warn you, I don't take rejection very well." She smiles.

Setz pauses. "Tonight."

"Where?"

"I know a place." Setz grins. "Nicest place in West Hollywood."

Kristin laughs. "Fair enough."

"You'd like it. Food is near edible and the drinks aren't watered down."

"It's a date."

"Oh, and Kristin?" Setz smiles and winks. "Bring that suit again."