

Doug the Bounty Hunter 1

Special thanks to the crew that came before: Alex, Scott, Jahru, Ra'mir, Mark, Bryon, Preston

The salty scent of Chicken Ramen noodles dominated Streak's sense of smell. The microwave noodles were still boiling, but Streak held the tall, plastic bag tightly in his left hand. The steam from the open bag condensed on Streak's chrome-plated hand causing the droplets to trickle and drip. His eyes rolled in annoyance as the Siamese kitten rushed across the carpet towards Streak's location on the overstuffed maroon chair.

Streak gave a sigh of inevitability as the kitten looked up at him and meowed. "Alfred," whispered Streak into the TeleCell® A-Gent© banded to his wrist, "pop on the vid."

The flat screen monitor in front of the couch flashed to life, but was absent of all noise. "How loud, sir," whispered the voice of an elderly cockney man.

"One," hushed Streak as he looked at the couch to watch Drake's sleeping face.

Drake nearly sat up on the couch as his enhanced hearing captured the minute audio signal and boosted it up to five hundred percent. Drake instantly regretted the move. His body was feeling every day of his fifty-five years.

"Damn," Drake muttered while standing. The video screen, he watched an overly, self-assured man with perfect hair and a thirty-three tooth smile talking up the uses of his wares.

The onscreen graphics warned the prices were momentary. The camera panned over the various add-on gadgets and accessories compatible with A-Gent© clones.

Streak and Drake turned and watched pear-shaped Jitters waddle into the living room.

The Hexbox® game console gave a mild hum as Jitters turned it on. The face of a man with a dark complexion brandishing fangs filled the video screen and the words, “Cyber Shadows” slowly materialized. The red status bar began to jog across the screen.

“Oldie, but a goodie,” said Jitters as he snatched the hand controller from the coffee table and let his ass drop onto the couch.

Streak nodded in agreement from his seat at the edge of the other end of the couch. He slurped Ramen noodles that were still too hot for consumption. A mere foot below the steaming bowl was a curled up Naggy, the overly affectionate kitten Streak found in an alleyway.

As Drake leaned against the room’s door jam, his agent began to buzz with an urgency on his belt. Drake pulled the hand-sized communications device from its custom holster. Streak and Jitters began to reach for their own agents vibrating of the coffee table.

“Hey, Angel,” said Drake as the small screen on his agent lit up with a bright eyed, twenty-something wearing a perky smile. It was not like the “Queen of Texting” to make a call for anything less than life and death.

Angel hesitated a moment as the screen split three ways and the geek and the Streak joined the conversation. “A major score, people,” Angel said. Streak and Jitters pepped up, but Drake’s face was unchanged.

“Who’s heard of, ‘Doug the Bounty Hunter’?” Angel asked the group.

Angel watched as Drake's eyes shot to the right for an instant. A telltale sign his agent was whispering into his Sabretooth® audio link.

Angel looked at Streak. His eyes did the same. Finally, she looked at Jitters.

Jitters's eyes jumped as his agent began to speak softly through the Sabretooth® audio link, "*Doug the Bounty Hunter. . .*" Suddenly Jitters raised his eyebrow as the device began speaking Spanish, "*. . . es el programa número uno en. . .*". Jitters swiped the agent's screen left pulling up the device's settings. His fingers began dancing around the surface of the screen.

Angel sighed. "Are you guys serious right now?" she asked. "He's the most bad-ass Bounty Hunter on Video 54."

"What's the gig?" Asked Drake.

Angel perked up and smiled. "Doug is in town. I got us gigs as behind the scenes muscle," she said proudly. "A big payday," she added after seeing the blank stares of the others.

"You should have led with that," Streak grinned widely and looked at Jitters who was still losing his battle with his agent's translation mode.

"So," said Angel in an all-business tone, "ten-thousand for the week; half up front and wired to your account."

Suddenly the elegant female voice of Streak's agent chimed in. "No new deposits in your account for the past three weeks," she said.

"Thank you, Lexi," said Streak with annoyance. "I don't need reminding."

"¿Debería comprobar su cuenta bancaria?" Asked Jitters's agent in a macho voice.

Streak wore blue jeans and nothing else as he stood at the stove stirring the large pan filled with Pasta Monsta. “Add meat and eat!” Streak mimicked the product’s jingle as he stirred in minced breakfast sausages. “And that my friends,” said Streak, “is the last of the meat.”

Angel’s belt bag began to buzz with a call she expected within the last two days. She reached into the leather fanny pack covering her belly and pulled out a pay-as-you-go cell phone. “Angel here,” said authority and a hint of nervousness that only Drake noticed. Angel’s smile was tempered by whatever the caller was saying. Angel looked at her fellow housemates. The only noise in the room was the sizzle and scrape of Streak dealing out the pre-pack cuisine onto four plates. “OK,” said Angel as focused on the voice in her ear, “we’re on it.” She immediately hung up. Then, it dawned on her.

“Did I mention they think we’re all solos?” Said Angel sheepishly.

“Are you kidding me?” Said a worried Jitters who looked up from snapping his cyberdeck into its thigh holster. Angel shrugged.

“It’s an ambush job,” said Drake as the parabolic microphone in his left cybereye reset itself to optics mode. “The target is a gang that refuses to allow Dougie Productions to operate on their turf,” he added.

“The Dough Boys,” Angel chimed in. Drake nodded affirmatively.

“We’re to ‘send a message’,” Drake said. “And I know just how to do so.”

“Look at this dumb ass right here,” said Trace as he and Goosestep rounded the corner of the block. In an instant, Trace’s cybernetic, binocular vision zoomed in on the scene. A lone, black man stood at the side of a metro car. The woman driving handed a wad of cash to the man as he looked nervously up and down the street.

Suddenly, the man’s eyes locked onto the two gang members watching him from a distance. But not enough distance, thought D.R. as he crunched his hand holding the money into a fist. Without a word, D.R. turned and ran up the middle of the street. A risky move in a world where guns were more popular than wrist watches, but the Slaughters of the South were known to put their money into “hands on” cyberwear especially the illegal types as opposed to firearms.

D.R. didn’t look back, as Trace’s profanity and racial slurs echoed up the vacant street. D.R. slid between the bumpers of two cars parked along the curb and slowed as he entered the dark, narrow alleyway between the two brownstone buildings.

A second later, Trace and Goosestep could hear the start of the midnight bells of a distant cathedral. The third bell rang as the duo slipped into the darkness of the alleyway. They watched as the lone human silhouette speeding up the alley misjudged the tipped garbage can’s height and fell noisily to the pavement.

D.R. listened wide-eyed as the fifth bell tolled.

The fifth bell of the midnight hour rang as D.R. slowly picked himself up off the pavement after his failed leap over the garbage can. He had made it to the other end of the alley, but as he looked up, D.R. seen the ominous shadows of two men one in Kevlar brandishing an older Russian assault rifle. The other, shorter one was noticeably heavier and wearing a large pack wrapped around his husky sized blue jeans. Probably for a cyberdeck, thought D.R..

D.R. made a nervous smile. “We’re cool, right?” He asked the taller man dressed in dark blue fatigues with a Kevlar helmet and a mirrored riot visor. Both of the figures gave an affirmative nod.

D.R. smiled and sprinted from the sight of Trace and Goosestep who were realizing the severity of their situation. Together they turned around to find a lone figure walking toward them. Without further thought, they decided to take the two to one odds.

The two gunmen couldn’t shoot down the alley and risk hitting their friend, figured Trace and Goosestep as they charged as fast as the garbage can arrangement allowed. As they closed in, Trace stopped for a moment and his eyes went wide. Oh, shit, he thought as light illuminated the stranger’s face.

“That’s Drake,” said Trace to Goosestep.

“He’s dead,” said Goosestep as two foot long Cold Steel® rods extended from each hand’s knuckles. The rods were fashioned into crude blades. A moment later Goosestep and Drake entered melee.

Drake stepped into the alley after the two individuals wearing the Slaughters of the South emblem on a blue jean vest did.

Upon seeing the silhouettes of two men block the far end of the alleyway, the two gang members halted midway down the alley. The slimmer of the two glanced back at Drake smiling as he nudged his partner to turn around. Together, the two men began moving toward Drake, pushing and knocking down garbage cans as they closed rapidly.

Drakes Kiro® Speed Chip read the flashed instance of Drake's neuron pattern needed for activation. Near instantaneously, Drake's adrenaline flooded his mind and body. He felt *alive*.

Drake watched as the large, huskier of the two men popped long claws from between his knuckles marring his numerous rings. The instance of pain on Husky's face as they piercing his skin told Drake the wolvers were a recent addition to Husky's arsenal. Maybe installed a month or so ago, thought Drake.

Slaughters of the South were a known for their hands on fighting and tended to shun gun use unless an S&S "Happy Harry®" was needed to drive a bullet into some cyborg's brain.

After a few more steps, Slim stopped and said something to his partner, but his partner only intensified his efforts to reach Drake. Drake watched as Slim shrugged off whatever reservations he had and resumed his place walking boldly behind Husky.

"You're a dead man, Drake," said the six foot tall, two hundred fifty pound man.

Husky bent at the waist as Drake's front kick connected with the gang member's hip. Drake's hands clenched Husky's head in his hands. Drake shifted his feet. Drake alternated his legs as he threw his knee up and into Husky's waist high face.

Husky made a few blind swings with his claws at Drake. Coincidentally, Drake had just changed his stance giving the beefy opponent a target. The Cold Steel® claws found the outer edge of Drake's leg. The twin, razor sharp claws sliced through Drake's light Kevlar battledress pants.

As he grit his teeth, Drake reeled back and dodged the three foot long katana slicing the air above the bent over gangbanger. Seeing the solo release his grip on his friend's head, Slim was encouraged to continue. Slim's bloody-faced partner swayed slightly as he slowly stood up straight.

Drake felt himself slowing down. He glanced at the underside of his wrist. The sub-dermal Biometrix® readout posted a continuous count of his vital signs which glowed yellow beneath his dark, Caribbean skin. Drake's face remained cast in stone as he watched his adrenaline count dropping to normal levels.

Damn it, Drake scolded himself for starting the adrenal boost too soon. These two bangers took longer to get within melee range which wasted precious seconds off the minute long adrenaline rush.

Drake landed another kick to the bloodied opponent's hip. This time, Drake let the body travel backwards to the ground, but Slim lept back. Desperation showed on Slim's face.

Slim switched the steel katana to his left hand all the time watching as Drake put a Karambit knife in each of his hands. The blades faced his forearms.

Slim gave a knowing smile and sent his hand to explore the small of his back. When it returned, it was holding a Beretta 92F pistol. It's nine millimeter ammunition would not bring down a cyborg, but would have an easier time against a poorly armored, fifty-five year old, "surplus solo", surmised Drake.

Slim extended his arm and pulled the trigger. The trigger did not give and Slim glanced at his pistol with confusion.

Seizing the moment, Drake dropped his own knife, popped the hidden button on his right side thigh holster, and extracted his own pistol.

Suddenly the muzzle of Slim's handgun flashed and a supersonic crack filled the air. The errand bullet ricocheted off the old, stone house's exterior. Slim snarled to himself at the perceived cowardice of Drake dropping to the ground.

Streak and Jitters had a hell of a time moving silently through the alleyway of overturned metal cans. Where does one still find a metal can? Wondered Jitters as he walked stooped over.

Streak held his pistol in both hands. He took aim at the back of Slim's shaved head.

Drake leaped to his feet leveling his pistol at the remaining ganger's bloodied face. Years ago, Drake's pistol would have shot, but that is before two decades of shrink appointments and therapeutic surgery.

A shot rang out.

“Well,” said an English man’s voice, to the silent living room, “He certainly did not leave any instructions to awaken him after 7 A.M. this morning.”

“Ditto,” said the pompous cast away millionaire in a strong Harvard Alum accent.

“They’ve only been asleep for a few hours,” worried the voice of the wildly popular singer-actress, Sherone Sables. “And it takes at least eight minutes fifty seconds from the time awoken to the time of exiting the apartment,” continued Drake’s A-Jent©.

Drake startled awake as a tune played and grew louder in his cyber hearing. With a groggy mind his eyes searched the living room for the vid player so he could throw a shoe at it. After a second more, Drake answered the ring.

“Yeah?” He asked in a hoarse whisper.

“Are you ready?” Asked the perky voice of Angel. Drake frowned for a moment as he cleared away another rather dark dream.

“You have an appointment with the producer of Doug the Bounty Hunter at noon,” said Sherone through Drake’s cyber implant. Always listening, thought Drake. “Also,” continued Sherone, “your Swiss account recently registered a one dollar transaction from Pepe Productions, LLC.”

Jitters sat on the couch and stretched. He reached for his socks and cross a leg over one knee. “Agent,” Jitters said initiating the preparatory command, “what time is it?”

“*La hora actual es. . . las once y treinta y cinco de la mañana?*,” responded his agent.

Jitters threw his sock at the dark blue device.

“It’s your standard Non Disclosure Agreement with a Combat clause,” Said the well dress man wearing semicircular glasses to the other four occupants of the posh, stretched, six-door suburban vehicle. The lock of the alligator leather briefcase on his lap popped open after a comically long entry of a pass code. He retrieved a handful of what looked to be clear, plastic sheet protectors, closed the briefcase, and began distributing one of the Blotts® tablets to each of the other passengers.

Streak and Jitters were last to receive their tablets. They touched and held their index fingers on the face of the blank sheet. After a few seconds, they were rewarded with a Blotts corporation logo materializing on the screen in black and white. The logo gave a slow spin. The backside of the logo was in rainbow colors and as it completed the spin, the words “ColoringPad®” emerged below the logo.

After watching this event, Drake used his newly found knowledge to turn on his own ColoringPad tablet. Despite the promise of vibrant colors, the document displayed was in pure black and white. The contract was a single document, but three legal pages in length on the life sized screen.

“And payments?” Asked Streak. Jitters looked up from reading. Both he and Streak waited with raised brows. Richard gave a hint of a smile at their eagerness.

“The usual one thousand Gold Standards per day,” said Richard before continuing, “Payments are posted at midnight of the following day.”

“Market value of one thousand Gold Standards is approximately three thousand two hundred forty-six Euro,” offered Sherone in Drake’s ear link.

“Good to know,” whispered Jitters upon hearing his agent’s translation of commodities to derivatives.

“What does the Combat clause entail?” Asked Drake as he sipped the complimentary hazelnut coffee. “I like the coffee,” Drake added taking another sip. The one hundred eighty degree beverage didn’t cause Drake to hesitate to drink like most people. Seven years after removing the Kiro® Pain Processor had permanently dampened his pain receptors in his brain. He also was prone to scratching fits with the same frequency as sneezing.

Richard gave a slight, knowing smile. “It’s kopi luwak,” Richard said. Angel raised a brow and halted the progress of tilting the mug that rested on her lip. Sitting directly across from Angel, in the spacious passenger area, Jitters discretely spit out the coffee in his mouth back into his mug.

“Such is the nature of our business,” Richard casually shrugged in response to Drake’s question. Drake nodded his head affirmatively as he tilted his neck back and drained the last of his coffee. “Should an unaddressed matter arise,” said Richard, “compensation will be given post action.”

“Act first. Paid later?” Summarized Streak before downing his whiskey neat.

“Exactly,” said Drake as he initialed in three places and quickly scribbled his signature at the bottom of the pressure sensitive, paper thin tablet.

Richard collected the tablets from the Angel, Jitters, Streak, and finally Drake.

“Today’s task,” began Richard after he secured the contracts in his thousand dollar attache case designed by Tanaka Akiko®, “is a simple drop off to the local turf gang.”

“The Dough Boys,” said Drake, “Angle told us.” He and Angel shared a head nod.

“The city P. D. says they are a localized threat,” said Richard to everyone. “Is there anything I should be aware of at this moment?” He asked..

All watched as he took hold of the another briefcase that was half its predecessor’s size. The rugged, industrial build case had no leather, just a flat, Kevlar reinforced hard cover with chunky rubber corner braces. Jitters’s face brightened up like Simone had just shown up for a flash concert.

“Is that for us?” Asked Jitters as he sat up on the front edge of his seat.

“No,” said Richard. “You’re to deliver this,” He patted the black case on the seat beside him, “and me safely to and from a meeting with the Dough Boys.”

“Is it the SX model?” Asked Jitters with an obvious urge to ask to hold the top dollar cyberdeck.

“The Dough Boys are nothing to worry about,” said Drake.

“You’ll escort me everywhere,” said Richard, “I’ll be in charge of this. . . gift.” Richard looked each occupant in the eyes until they acknowledged understanding. “Good, Richard said, “you’ll be dreaming of ways to spend you earnings half an hour from now.”

Streak looked at Angel with a mischievous grin.

“Maybe you can track down some of that kopi luwak coffee for Drake,” said Streak. Angel rolled her eyes.

Drake perked up at the sound of his name. “I would not mind that,” he said looking at Angel.

“Oh,” angel said disarmingly, “Drake, you really don’t want me to. . .”

“Sure I do,” Drake said a little too quickly. Every once in a while mister tall, dark, and handsome reminded her why they were not a couple.

“You know what, Drake,” she said with a smile. “For you,” she said, “ I’ll find two.” Streak and Jitters broke into laughter. Even Richard gave a huff of a laugh.

“Sir,” said the voice of the heavy man driving the vehicle, “we have an issue behind us.” Instantly the vid monitor that doubled as a window between the driver and the rear, passenger compartment turned on. All in the rear compartment recognized the two driving the van.

Their pale faces and ear to ear grins marked them as full on Gotham Grins members.

“Shit,” Richard said. “Can we out run them to the next gang’s turf?” He asked.

“The entire city is Grins’ turf,” said Drake as he reached down to his gun holster strapped to his thigh. He opened the single plastic clip and drew out a rather large pistol.

“Any,” started Drake, as he dropped his gun’s magazihe into his lower hand, “restrictions?”

Richard gave a real smile, “Not a one,” he said.

It was Drake’s turn to smile.

Drake moved from his seat that backed to the vid monitor. He knelt on the seat between Richard and Angel and took stock of the situation through the tinted rear window. After a moment, Drake gave his report.

“There’s more in the back, but unknown how many,” Drake said as he continued his watch through the window. Drake caught himself as he lunged rearward. The V-12 of the premium Italian SUV leapt to life sending Jitters and Stretch out of their seats and onto Richards and Angel’s laps.

The gang’s van answered by engaging their own V-10 engine. The gang members’ chant’s could not be heard, but the message was the same. The chase is on!

Despite his extra size, the V-10 closed the gap to the excessively heavier Berardi® SUV. The SUV blocked the van’s forward progress and even though the right lane was vacant, the van chose instead to swerve over the center line.

Daniels looked to his left through the clear window of the SUV. Forehead perspiration was not new to the three hundred pound man in a black suit. However, as he watched the van slowly passing him on the left side, Daniels swore under his breath.

“Lower the back windows,” said Drake over the intercom.

“They don’t lower,” said Daniels as he watched the van’s side door slide open. Four purple suited gunmen laughed wildly as they tucked their assorted submachine guns to their sides with one arm and held the ceiling strap with the other.

“Oh, shit,” Daniels mumbled to himself as he glanced at the van. His last sight through the window was the image of a purple suited man the size of a McMac’s mascots. With a popcorn effect, the bullets created golf ball sized impacts in the one inch thick ballistic glass. Daniels watched all the usual suspects become lodged within the glass: .45 cal, 9mm, even a .7.62 cal from a bolt action pistol. He gave a sigh of relief.

Daniels couldn’t see the van due to the state of the driver’s window, but he did take advantage of the Grin’s reload time to take evasive action.

“Hold on,” he muttered into an intercom as he held the intercom button on the underside of his lapel. In a micro second, his neural woven network in his brain flashed a bio-electrical resonance image. The V12 suddenly reverted to neutral and all forward momentum stopped – Daniels had mentally hit the breaks and watched as the van load of grins bellowed past; the van’s bio fuel leaving behind the scent of old french fries.

Daniels clinched his right fist to tighten up its leather glove’s interface. The old wives tale bettered the link between the glove and the hand’s receptors. Daniels knew, but he still subconsciously performed the ritual whenever things got “real” as his father used to say.

The Black van painted red with house paint swerved from the oncoming lane to a spot several meters in front of the stretch, armored SUV.

Daniels had a sense of deja vu as the rear doors flew open and a half dozen purple suits leveled their reloaded weapons at the front of the armored vehicle. Daniels lips hinted a smile as he clenched his black leather fist tighter.

The assault squad watched what seemed to be one of two forward facing exhaust pipes give a tremendous flash. The posers covered their eyes for a second. Daniels continued watching as the two inch grenade canister punched the joker in the center of the door way square in the throat. The caricature was knocked violently backwards into the van's cargo hold.

"Four, three," Daniels counted down, but the armored windscreen was suddenly peppered with golf ball strikes. To Daniels's surprise, a sharp pain struck his chest. It worsened with each breath.

Then the grenade's timed fuse burned the last of its powder igniting the main charge. The thin metal canister lid crumpled and a heavy, white cloud rapidly flooded the van's interior.

Daniels smiled as one of the gang's Tommy guns dropped to the road and passed under the SUV. The gun's former owner coughed and attempted to cover his mouth. The white phosphorous smoke coated every inch of the van's contents from the window screen to the interior of the passenger's lungs. Daniel's smile widened at the sight.

Suddenly the van's brake lights flashed to life locking the van's and Suburban vehicle's bumpers. A gun's bipod slammed onto the hood of the SUV.

Just die, thought Daniels.

The V12 engine went silent, but passengers of the armored suburban were too busy being thrown forward against the back of the driving compartment. The back of Drake's head slammed into the vid which showed the various cameras of the suburban's security system.

All watched as the video monitor sprouted inch long protrusions just mere inches from Drake's head. Drake recognized a titanium flechette when he seen one.

Drake sat calmly for an instant. After a moment, he had to grit his teeth to hold back the adrenal rush taking control of his mind, body and soul.

If he had one, thought Angel somberly.

"Open the sunroof," Drake said though gritted teeth and all the occupants searched frantically revealing how to close the minibar and activating the compartment's ultraviolet lighting.

Precious seconds were lost until, finally, the sunroof slid open flooding the rear compartment with light and an acrid smoke that slipped over the empty space.

Drake drew his preferred sidearm, a Samson® .50 cal pistol. Without further hesitation, he peaked his head above the sunroof's slip stream. Willie Peter, thought Drake as the diluted white phosphorous smoke slipped momentarily into his nostril. Drake instantly halted his breathing. With but half a breath, Drake watched as the only Gotham Grin member with cybereyes and nasal filtration slammed the bipod of the Chinese answer to the American M60 machine gun onto the hood of the SUV. .

Drake's attention was drawn to the ammunition belt with its black tipped, AP rounds.

Drake was unsure of the condition of the vehicle's windscreen, but he knew it mattered little if this clown-faced cyborg cut loose with armor piercing rifle fire. A brand new window would be defeated after twenty-five to fifty strikes. The remainder of the gun's one hundred round ammunition belt was going to get through to those inside.

Drake checked his wrist's bio meter. His adrenaline was still climbing which explained why everyone was moving so slow. Including myself, thought the veteran soldier as he aligned his pistol sights in the swirling smoke.

Once the rear and front sight notches matched, Drake began to slowly pull the trigger. It seemed an awful long time before he felt the recoil of the large caliber bullet leaving the barrel. The shot went directly as aimed. The guy with the makeup half burned from his face managed to shoot three steel jacketed bullets before Drake's own black tipped steel jacketed round impacted the unseen titanium plates implanted in the guy's forehead.

The reputation of the stopping power for a .50 caliber Samson pistol was on the line.

The titanium plate deformed absorbing the bullet's energy rapidly, but the metal layering was only so thick. After caving in a quarter of an inch, the plate split open allowing the weakened bullet to penetrate and lodge in the frontal cortex. Drake started watching as the Gotham Grins began to fall victim to the cooking of their lungs. Drake sighed. He hated to see dumb animals die needlessly.

“I’ve been hit,” said Daniels openly over the vehicle’s intercom, “badly.” The van and the stretch SUV continued to slow as one. The van driver must be dead, thought Daniels before bringing the two ensnared vehicles to a halt. Car and truck horns sang a chorus of horns as surrounding traffic sought to pass yet another daily commotion.

With the van registering empty of hostiles to his 2x optical zoom, Drake boosted himself up onto the roof of the passenger compartment keeping his pistol trained on the van’s cargo bay. Meanwhile, his eyes had a hard time finding new targets in the heavy smoke. Drake risked a look into the SUV windscreen. It was heavily peppered with flechette holes and three white-ringed holes that punched through the glass first shot. He knelt on the hood and looked through the untouched passenger’s side of the windscreen. The heavy set driver wore only a business suit. Probably Kevlar weaved, thought Drake before he watched the rear doors of the SUV open annoyingly slowly.

“He’s hit badly,” Drake confirmed over his cyberaudio into the ears of his colleagues.

Even as he relayed the info, Drake maneuvered his way to the ground, before beginning his search around the outside of the van.

Angel covered her nose as the smell of the charring bodies and caustic smoke lingered in the air. She donned a mask taken from her pocket.

Richard stood beside her saying, “Please check Daniels the driver,” before pressing his handkerchief over his mouth and nose.

“Do you have an agent with you?” Angel repeated as she tried to tuck her hand behind Daniels to feel for exit wounds. Daniels rolled his head. Negative, she thought. “Okay,” she said. A shadow blocked the light behind her. She looked back.

“Simone,” said Drake calmly to his agent. “Non-hostile extraction of wounded. Multiple gun shots to the torso. Armor Piercing,” he added as Angel wondered how he always knew so much about things when they go south. “Rally on me. Send.,” Drake concluded.

The diligent agent with the golden voice instantly opened a priority one medical alert. A billion, trillion calculations passed through Simone’s circuitry within the second it took to format Drake’s messages into a coded software package capable of routed transmission to. . .”

“Trama One®. . . Metro Medical® . . .St. Christopher’s Hospital,” Simone’s list of responding medical facilities continued to populate as the signal continued to radiate from Drake’s current GPS position. After the first few seconds, Simone began to filter out the less desirable facilities. R.P.H.D, and other back alley “clinics” offered their skills as well. Simone surmised Drake was not calling in a priority one call for cyberwear extraction. At least, not this time, thought Simone.

“Metro Medical,” spoke up Richard. For a moment, everyone looked at the producer. Metro was a bit upper scale for the usual work contract. “Daniels opted for the Combat Clause as well,” Richard explained.

A corp who cares? Wondered the four new hires.

“Oh,” said the Dough Boy’s voice on Richard’s cell phone. “Right,” the gang’s point of contact said. Richard did not need a voice analyzer to tell the man was not expecting to hear from him again.

“Look, we still want to meet” said Richard evermore loudly as the engines of a wingless, rotor-less, helicopter-like aircraft slowed to land vertically on the pavement.

Smart Town® Signaling Services track the deployment of emergency vehicles to urban destinations. Usually, air transportation services opt for only the landing zone’s closure, but Smart Town also has a pathfinder option which will create and lead first responders to the incident’s location.

With traffic lights capped red and detour routes established, the Metro Medical’s Para-Jump VTOL hesitated just long enough to run a full scan of the windows and roof tops before dropping twenty yards back from the two collided vehicles.

Despite the “non-hostile” call in, the Para-Jump extraction team was ready for the opposite. Drake watched as two soldierly types exited one from each of the two sides of the VTOL mainframe. Protocol says they would not stop patrolling until they the target was extracted. As the whining engines were placed in neutral, two aerial drones leaped above the fuselage.

Others deployed down the ramp and walked to the collision site.

“Those guys are hopeless,” said one paramedic as he pointed towards the burning van.

“No. no,” said Angel. “Just him,” she added pointing to the shallow-breathed, two hundred seventy-five pound driver sitting up against the rear of the SUV.

“Post to Cab Nabber,” said Richard softly his agent. “Need one spacious, stretch transport for five. No,” he answered the agent’s unheard question before continuing, “No hostilities. Standard human weights and measures.”

“Well, that was quick,” smiled Streak as he looked up the street at the armored rig turning in their direction. After grabbing everyone’s attention, Streak sheepishly added, “Or, maybe not,” as the flat black, monster of a tow truck, slowly lumbered towards them.

The driver, a scrawny looking man with short hair and only a thin mustache to hide his rodent-like face. The truck’s engine stopped and the door opened up. “Are you from the production company?” Asked the buck-toothed driver.

“I am,” said Richard. The driver nodded and then looked at the heavily smoldering van and stretch SUV. “Yup,” he said colloquially, “I see yer problem.” Probably their being stranded in a dangerous location for two hours, blamed the driver. He yanked the heavy door closed.

The vehicle cranked over and the smell of RealDiesel® billowed out through the truck’s stacks.

Drake and the crew watched from shade as the recovery vehicle rolled into place. Right off the riot hose spout mounted atop the cabin let loose a torrent of water and oxygen stealing foam spray across the entire van and hood and driver’s cabin of the SUV. After a few minutes, the windshield wipers were engaged to handle the excess mixture dribbling from the now closed spout.

The driver exited the truck with a rodeo’s worth of yellow blast cord coiled around his shoulder and industrial ear muffs.

Drake sat squatted against the building's shaded side. He stood slowly as a large, lumbering vehicle rounded the distant corner and moved in their direction. As each member became aware, they stood and watched as the make shift collection of steel plates and "acquired" armored glass drove towards them.

"Nomads?" Asked Angel to Drake. Drake said nothing as he the optically zoomed image of the, male driver in his early thirties and a teenage girl filled his field of vision.

"Something is odd," said Drake. "A lone nomad?" As the vehicle came closer, the driver became aware he had an audience.

The nomadic bus's air horn blasted loudly in two rapid secession and the driver's face lit up with a sincere smile. The image jumped back to normal zoom.

"Oh, no," muttered Richard aloud beside Drake. Drake looked at Richard as Richard started to walk towards the oncoming vehicle. Richard raised his hand not holding his carbon fiber, designer briefcase and slowly shook his head negatively. "This is not what I ordered," he yelled. After a few more steps, Richard stopped as the battle bus slowed and then halted with the driver's window beside him. Air escaped the bus's brakes. With an effort needed for a stuck house window, the driver dropped his side window.

"Hey," said the pale faced driver with dreadlocks pulled together in the back. The sides of his head were skin close. "Is this the Doug Richards ride?"

Jitters and Streak laughed. After an instance of confusion, the driver joined them.

“This won’t work,” said Richards as he, Drake and Angel stood a few meters off from where the driver was cracking jokes with Jitters and Streak.

“It’s a solid vehicle if things go wrong,” voiced Drake.

Richard shook his head. “No,” he said, “we show up for a war and there will be one. We do this the easy way.” Richard pulled out his cell phone and began walking away from the group for privacy.

Suddenly, heavy barreled gunshots rang out and Drake threw himself involuntarily to the ground. But be the time he looked over and Angel was doing the same, Drake was already quelling the reflex and standing back up.

To loud. Too close. Outgoing fire, Drakes brain had registered as Angel’s hands touched the sparse, playground grass. Drake spin on his toes to see the bus Jitters and Streak laughing as the looked to the sky. The bus driver was on the ground talking up into the cab to the young girl. She was smiling as well as any child is when told to play with switched and dials.

“See,” said the driver turning around, “twin fifties turreted with a helicopter auto-feed.”

Jitters could not help himself from inquiring after seeing the computer array inside the forward cabin. “What you got there,” he said loud enough the girl. Immediately she turned shy and disappeared to the far twin seat . She began fiddling with her pre-collapse, Cyberdon® computer terminals running Lynx Os and two monitors each.