

Déjà Vu

I woke up with the rain battering down on the top of the car like a million jackhammers. I reached up, wondering why I couldn't see. The pain of movement lanced through my battered limbs like fire, nearly pitching me back into the oblivion from which I'd awoken. Finally the fingers of my right hand got to my eyes and pulled my gummed eyelids apart. I looked around, trying to put two and two together, and still coming up with three.

The inside of a car, all maroon leather, lots of space. A seventies car, then. I don't know how I knew it. A big khaki bag on the passenger seat beside me. What else? A plastic figure of Jesus on the cross, glued to the top of the dashboard. Was that mine? I didn't feel very religious. Something about that train of thought disturbed me, but I couldn't tell through the sensory overload for a few seconds. Then it hit me like a brick wall. I didn't know my name.

I reached up and pulled the rearview mirror to where I could see myself. Dried blood caked my arm from the tips of my fingers to my elbow. The hairs were matted and crusted down, poking through here and there. I finally focused past it to the mirror. I looked upon a face covered in more dried blood, the eyes glaring out like spotlights. My God, what was happening?!

Calm down, I thought, think rationally now. The leather creaked under me as I shifted, looking at my surroundings. I felt bruised and battered, like my muscles had been stretched and twisted every which way. I felt around; no wallet, just some change in one pocket. My eyes fell on the bag, the traces of blood around the opening on top menacing against the white piece of rope that lashed it closed. I pulled it to me and worked at the knot feverishly.

As it burst free, the contents soaked in the dim rays from the streetlight outside the window. Money. Not just a little. The bag was stuffed full of banded stacks of fifties and hundreds, God himself only knew how much was there. I closed it quickly, looking around. For the moment I was still alone, but this neighborhood with its ramshackle houses and broken-down cars wasn't very inviting.

I checked the glove compartment next, and found a 9mm pistol. No blood on it, and for some reason I knew it wasn't mine. Just what the hell was going on? Just get yourself moving, Jonathan, I thought. And right there, I knew at least half of my name. Jonathan who? Damn, will my head stop hurting already?!

The car fell into first gear effortlessly as I started rolling, scared as hell. Finally, after fifteen minutes of dodging as much traffic as possible, I found a do-it-yourself carwash. I pulled in, hoping no one saw me as I dropped the coins into the machine. The sprayer started up, and an LED countdown told me I had two precious minutes of sudsy water. I cleaned as much of the blood off as I could before turning to the car. Taking off my bloody shirt, I mopped up as much blood as I could from the interior and cleaned all the areas I remembered touching since I woke up. Not perfect, but it would do. I wondered how I knew to do all these things.

The keys in the ignition glimmered in the reflections of the puddles around me. I took them out and went to the trunk, hoping for some clean clothes or a suitcase or something. It creaked open ponderously; the hydraulic lifting arms old and weak. Inside was a plastic tarp, and the beginnings of a sweet odor: rot. Pulling aside the tarp, my eyes fell on the ugly Latino man lying there in repose. Half his face was gone; it looked like a shotgun blast. Jesus and Mary, save me. I hoped I hadn't done it.

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Twenty minutes later I was rolling the car into a ravine, with the dead man's wallet in my back pocket. I took it out and went through it as the brown flash-flood water sucked the car in greedily, the rain feeding the swollen riverbed. His name on the laminated plastic read James Knowels. Carrying the bag with me, I started walking toward the lights of the town, the wet freeway under my feet. Somehow I had to find out how I got to some little shithole southern town with no memory and a corpse.



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I noticed the population sign as I made my way back towards town. Sedona, Arizona. Population 6,538, unless the hippies were there for one of their spiritual days. I knew I must have been in this area for a while to know these things, and it galled me that I couldn't piece things back together. The winding two-lane road wound up over a heavily wooded hill and back down to a bridge. I crossed it in the darkness as the rain continued to pound down. Monsoon season, and the air was still a bit chilly.

The lights were still on at the strip of shops going up the hill into the canyon, the cheap American Indian tourist pottery glaring out of every window alongside shot glasses and jewelry that would turn your skin green. I pushed open the door to the first one, conscious of my bedraggled appearance and lack of a shirt. The storekeeper, a crystal cruncher by the look of her outfit, peered up from her new age magazine while slipping her joint below my view behind the counter. Obviously she thought she had a kindred spirit in me, though, and pulled it back up to take a puff. I couldn't blame her, my lack of an outfit screamed of transient. I smiled and walked past, feeling her gaze at my well-muscled body. So I must work out, or something.

I pulled a shirt from the rack, a brown tee with Sedona plastered all over the front and a picture of one of the rock formations I'd noticed scraping the clouded sky on my walk in. I slipped it on and made eye contact with her to let her know I wasn't going to steal it. She nodded once and returned to her reading. I collected a new wallet, again with Sedona pressed into the leather, and an extra shirt. Walking up to the counter, my eye fell on a display case of knives. "How much for that survival knife," I asked, smiling at her.

"You're really roughing it, aren't you, brother?" she asked, looking at her price list, "\$19.95, or two for \$35."

"I'll take just the one, thanks. Any hotels around?"

"Just the Motel Eight, the others don't let people like us in there. Where are you coming from?"

My mind groped for answers. Behind her, my eye fell on a picture of a rock formation named Bell Rock, looking at least somewhat like the liberty bell. I ran with it. "Spent the last couple of days around Bell Rock, just feelin' the vibes, you know?"

"Yeah, I was up there two weeks ago for the festival, man," she answered back, stuffing my new belongings into a pink and green plastic bag, "it was wild. But the spaceship didn't launch, though. Too many of us putting our crystals up against the rock pulled all the power out of it. People are saying we'll have to wait for another thousand years for it to recharge, man. Sucks big time."

Yep, she was definitely a freak. "Yeah," I answered back, "I don't think I have that long to wait." She laughed hysterically at that. I got my stuff, pulling two fifties from one of the banded stacks of cash. She took it, giving me incorrect change. Not a very bright freak. Not like I was hurting for money, though. I made some more small talk and convinced her to let me take a map with me.

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Stepping back outside, I oriented myself under the halogen light and made my way to a McDonald's painted the same garish shade of pink as the rest of this tourist trap. The burgers went down fast, and I realized I must have been hungry for some time. The cashier looked relieved as I left, happy to be rid of the hippie infestation. I couldn't blame him, I guess. Crossing the dwindling lines of traffic, I pushed into the Motel Eight and haggled a room from the man at the front desk. Once inside the second-floor room, I peeled off my clothes and took a nice long shower. There was a cut on my scalp that reopened, but it stopped bleeding by the time I was done showering. That explained all the blood on my face, but not everywhere else. I pulled my hair forward to hide the cut and sat down to think.

One of the towels found its way into my bag along with everything else. I looked at the wallet of the man I'd found dead in the trunk of the car. James Knowels wasn't his real name, that was for sure. I pocketed his small supply of cash and a picture of a woman; I couldn't say why. Probably his wife. Looking through the rest of his things, I tossed his ID and a credit card in his name on the bed. One other slip of paper was in there, a business card for Consolidated Lenders, based in Phoenix. The number on the bottom of the card wasn't a Phoenix area code, though. Shrugging, I dialed the number.

"Consolidated Lenders, this is Pam speaking."

"Hi Pam," I said, feeling her out, "I'm calling about a man named James Knowels. Do you know him?"

The voice hesitated. Cover identity sprang to my mind, of course. "Yes, he's one of our salesmen. Did you need to get in contact with him?"

"No, no, I met him at a bar here in Sedona, he told me to give this number a call. You know, just trying to get a loan on his good word. He said he'd help me out."

"Oh," she said, obviously searching for something to say. She wasn't prepared for this, that's for sure. "Why don't you give me your call-back number, and I'll see what we can do for you." I heard her fingers flying over the keyboard.

"Sure thing," I said, giving it to her. She said thank you and hung up. Whatever I'd gotten myself into, someone would be coming for me. No lender is open after nine at night. Either I'd find out what was going on, or someone would try to kill me. I fingered the edge of the knife thoughtfully. Oh, well. What else could I do?

I cut up the ID and the credit card with the knife, leaving small slices in the cheap pine of the bedside table. Gathering up the pieces, I shoved them into the air vent on the wall. If anyone were going to find the body, it would take them some time to realize he'd died of foul play instead of fucking with Mother Nature during monsoon season. After that they'd have to find out that I had something to do with it, and then find the cut-up plastic. I felt safe enough from the cops; it was whoever was on the other end of the line that I truly feared.

A knock sounded at the door, urgent and harsh in the stillness. I tucked the knife into one hand and opened the door to the limit of the security chain. In the hallway stood a distinguished-looking man in raingear, holding a hiker's pack in one hand and a second one draped off his shoulder. "Time to go, buddy, before they get here."

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“Who’s they?” I asked, surveying his rugged appearance and salt and pepper hair, “and who the hell are you?”

He shifted the pack to his left hand and held his right one out to me. “The name’s Chief, son. Now we’ve got to move before the Cold Zero agents surround us.” I shook it and grabbed the pack from him, grabbing my bag off the bed as well. Something about him said I could trust him, though I didn’t know why.

A man in a ski mask burst up from the floor below, holding an Uzi in one meaty palm. He had it down by his leg, obviously not counting on running into us in the hallway. Chief reared back and kicked him in the face, hard. Stunned, the man toppled backwards down the steep stairwell, bouncing a couple of times and ricocheting off the bend in the railing. I think I heard a wet popping sound, but Chief was already pulling me the other way, towards the fire escape.

Moments later we were rushing along the alley, the sounds of pursuit close behind us. The rain lashed out at us from the darkening sky. “This one’s ours!” Chief yelled, jumping into a Jeep Wrangler. I followed him, throwing my backpack into the open rear and climbing in. He stuck it in first and roared out of the alley, mowing down one assailant in a splatter of blood. A second later, the windshield wiper brushed it aside to clear the glass.

We were free, for the moment.

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The rain continued to pound down on us as Chief tore up the winding switchbacks of Oak Creek Canyon, reducing visibility to almost nothing. Headlights appeared in the darkness behind us, closing with every turn. The man next to me grunted his disapproval and smashed down even farther on the accelerator. I buckled my seatbelt.

"Who's after us?" I asked, glancing back.

"They're Cold Zero Clan, son," he snarled, whipping the Jeep around a switchback, "you stirred up a hornet's nest."

"And who are you exactly?"

"Son, we're the good guys. If you don't know that already, you must have taken a shot to the head." He glanced at the cut on my scalp and whistled. "That's an ugly one."

I don't remember what I was going to say next, because Chief whipped around a corner and killed the lights, pulling straight over to face the hillside perpendicular to the road. "You might want to unbuckle that seatbelt," he said, "and hold onto something. If we start going over, jump out. Got it?"

Before I could process what he was saying, the old man flashed a grin at me in the darkness and put the Jeep in reverse. As our pursuers whipped around the corner, he let out the clutch and stomped on the gas. The Jeep barreled backwards towards the ravine, smashing into the other car. Screams of fear mingled with the discordant sound of broken glass and rending metal as the SUV we hit spun quickly. Losing traction on the gravel shoulder, it whirled around a couple of times and vanished into the gorge.

But the rain, coupled with the narrow, twisting road, sentenced Chief's Jeep to the abyss as well. Reacting with unnatural speed, I planted my feet and grabbed onto the top of the windshield, vaulting onto the hood. My feet slipped as the Jeep tipped up, but I regained my feet in time to jump clear.

I looked around in amazement, watching the Jeep tumble to the bottom next to the SUV. Nothing moved down there.

"Give me a hand, will ya?" a voice called, making me jump. I rushed to the edge of the gravel and looked over. Chief clung desperately to the trunk of a pine tree growing out of the side of the cliff. The roots of the tree strained taut with his weight pulling inexorably downward. The steep slope glistened with wet rock outcroppings, beckoning for his life. That wasn't going to happen. I dug in and hauled him up, slipping more than once on the gravel. My heart was up in my throat by the time I'd pulled him to safety.

Our respite didn't last long. The glare of headlights screamed around a corner, painting our terrified faces in patches of light and shadow.

"Oh shit!" Chief yelled, "Jump!"

We dropped over the edge as the car sped through the space we'd just been occupying, sending gravel showering over the edge in a cascade of stinging pellets. The hillside rushed up, the rocks like jagged teeth gnashing at a chance for blood.

Oh shit was right.

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I hit the sixty-degree slope with knees bent, making a little jump to keep on my feet. That worked well for a few tries, but finally my feet flew out from under me. I lost that inevitable battle and flew ass-over-teakettle down the slope. I remember seeing a huge rock running full-tilt to get in my way, then a flash of white light followed by darkness.

When I woke up the moon was drifting out of the clouds, bathing the tree-studded slope above me with alternating streaks of light and shadow. Almost beautiful, I thought, except that someone's trying to kill me. A gash on my right arm, a throbbing right knee, and a massive headache let me know I was in fact still alive. Bummer, I thought, wincing in pain.

The cut in my scalp had opened back up, and there was a second slash farther back in my hair above my left ear. My hand came away from it slick with blood. If there was a God, he hated me. Too many shots to the head lately, I knew. If I made it out of this dilemma, I vowed to start wearing a helmet. Even in the shower.

The slashing beams of flashlights cut through the trees, dilating my eyes. Whoever these guys were, they were tenacious. Getting my bearings, I saw the Jeep flipped over a dozen yards away. The smell of gas was heavy in the air. Then I saw my rescuer, Chief. He was sitting up, cradling his ribs gingerly. Blood soaked through his shirt, black in the moonlight.

Stumbling to my feet, I pulled him up, cringing at the gasp of pain he let out. "We've got to move! They're coming down after us." We staggered to the Jeep and grabbed our packs. Pondering briefly, I pulled the bag of cash out too. You never know...

Long shots rang out behind us, sounded like .45's. So they weren't throwing peanuts at us. By now I quit trying to figure out how I knew what a certain caliber sounded like as it flew by my head.

We ran, the rain and darkness swallowing us up. Ahead in the dark the creek raged, floodwaters expanding its borders. We turned south, following the mocha-colored water and trying to keep to the shadows. By now our pursuers would be on the floor of the canyon, moving faster than we could with all our gear. Our options were to run faster, or turn and face them. We ran faster.

The woods cut close to the waterline, letting us keep in the shadows while still giving us a semi-clear path to run on. The slick tufts of grass looked like green diamonds where the moonlight hit them, ruining my night vision. I navigated with my peripheral vision mostly, blazing a trail for Chief to follow after.

Behind us, a thud and a scream sounded as someone fell into the creek bed. He went washing by us, limp as a rag doll. I hoped the fucker drowned. That small glimpse let me know that at least some of them had combat vests on, black Kevlar. There was some kind of insignia on the left breast that looked familiar, but I couldn't be sure in the tossing of the rapids. He whirled around a bend in seconds, swallowed up by the water. They'd probably find his body a few miles downriver.

Just then, searchlights cut through the trees in front of us. We were cut off. Our chances were slim as far as getting around them. Once they hit their buddies less than a quarter of a mile behind us, they would all turn and pursue us like bloodhounds. I looked at Chief and knew he was thinking the same as me: we had to fight our way out.

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“Don't worry, ninja boy,” he laughed shallowly, holding his ribs, “you're not the only one that can kick ass and take names. I was studying Shoto-kan before you were in grade school. I'm just a little old, that's all. Reminds me of a shirt my sons got me for father's day one year: ‘The older I get, the better I was.’ “

I laughed at that. Whoever this guy was, he could always crack a joke even when in mortal danger. I like that about the people on my side.

“You have any bright ideas?” I asked, stopping to rest. My survival knife came out, and I wished I'd bought that second one at the tourist trap. I handed it to him hilt-first. Nodding gratefully, he took it.

After a moment of looking around, he focused back on me. “Yeah, I've got an idea. Those bastards coming up behind us are going to be more tired and a little lower on ammunition...”

Hey, I thought, even a suicidal plan is better than no plan at all.

“If I don't make it through this,” Chief continued, “look for Jonesy at the fire department station off of Highway 179 in Oak Creek, due south of here. He's a good guy, but he doesn't know what we do. From there get back to DC however you can. By the way, my name's Paul Fredericks.”

“Jonathan. I'm a little hazy on the second part. Let's just mess these guys up and get the hell out of here.”

“Amen, brother,” he said, melting into the shadows.

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The four men trailing us hurried their pace, reckless in their pursuit. They must have felt that the longer we were away from them, the farther away we were getting. It made them sloppy. Probably the only hope we had of walking away from this one.

I stepped from behind a tree trunk directly in front of the lead man. My perfectly-executed snap kick rocked him back on his heels, smashing the visor of his helmet. He screamed as shards of plexiglass drove into his eyes and cheeks. My knee came up as my hands latched onto his right arm. Pulling it flat, I bent his elbow the wrong way around my leg. He passed out before he hit the ground. Gunfire danced around me as the other three men opened fire with their sidearms. I jumped back behind the tree, praying Chief was in position. The 45's blew chunks out of my meager cover. Running, I dove for a rock outcropping a few feet away. I judged when they were getting low on ammo, and leapt back into the fray. My arm whipped forward, delivering a rock the size of a baseball to the shoulder of one of the goons. He regained his balance and smiled. Kevlar.

The funny thing about bullet-proof vests: they'll stop most low-caliber slugs in their tracks, leaving nothing but bruises and maybe knock the wind out of you. But when it comes to edged weapons, they're about as good as a thick shirt. Chief's blade glinted in the moonlight as he burst from a shallow depression. Pine needles and broken twigs flew everywhere. The trailing Cold Zero agent whipped around in surprise, only to get the business end of the survival knife right below the heart. He burped blood and sagged to the ground, staring up at the rangy fireman.

The guy I'd pelted with the stone turned halfway to look behind him, big mistake. I crossed those fifteen feet in the blink of an eye, diving feet-first into the side of his knee. Bone and cartilage gave way with a wet pop, and he screamed like a girl. I didn't think any less of him; any man would have done the same. Still, he tried like hell to get a shot off as he went down. It launched harmlessly into the night sky, the report of the pistol echoing off the trees and cliffs surrounding us. I was waiting with open arms as he fell backwards on top of me, still screaming. Grabbing his head in a vise, I wrenched it to the side until the vertebrae exploded like popcorn.

A few yards away, Chief liberated the 45 from the man he'd stabbed, pulling him up as a human shield. The last triggerman emptied the four shots left in his clip into the body of his friend, trying to get around Chief's protection. Finally the cylinder clicked on empty. Chief threw the body down contemptuously and gripped the hand cannon in a shooter's stance. His first shot plowed into the man's Kevlar, knocking him back a few paces. "Stand still, will ya?" he mocked. The second shot took out the guy's kneecap in a spray of bone and blood. The last one sank into the crease between his helmet and the vest, blowing the back of his neck out. Finally the ruined corpse tipped back into the pine needles and rocks in silence.

We grabbed a pistol each and all the spare ammo we could find. "Here you go," Chief called, tossing me a vest off of one of the bodies. I slipped it on, pulling a helmet off as well. No time to change uniforms with them, but the darkness and adrenaline would be enough to give us the edge.

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The man I'd first kicked sat where he fell, trying to pull shards of plexiglass from his eyes. I punched him in the face, driving them deeper. "Fuck you, buddy. Trying to kill me?" I laughed, and realized I was enjoying this a little too much. Tone it down, *compadre*.

"Let's finish this," I smiled. Chief chambered a round in answer. We ran towards the sound of feet smashing through the underbrush. They wouldn't know what hit `em.



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We broke into the clearing where the other five soldiers were making their way towards us. “Run!” I yelled, barreling right for them. Chief followed my lead.

“What?” the squad leader said, starting to bring up his assault rifle, “stand down and report! Where are Spinal and the old man?”

Spinal. I realized they were talking about me. How would I get that goofy of a nickname, playing too much Mortal Kombat? First things first. My wild charge brought me to within a few feet of the leader. He put out an arm, like a traffic cop telling me to stop. I shoved the 45 into his palm and pulled the trigger. The burst of fluid followed the bullet as it punched through the brittle bones of his hand and continued on to blow apart his face shield. He dropped like a sack of potatoes.

The other four whirled around, bringing up their weapons, but we were amongst them now. They couldn't fire without catching each other. Still, they were professionals. One dropped away from the fight, waiting for a clear shot, as the other three let their assault rifles fall to hang from combat harnesses. Chief closed in on two of them, 45 in one hand and the combat knife in the other. The one on the left freaked out at the sight of the gun. He fumbled for his assault rifle, but he was way too slow. Chief shot him in the foot as I dodged a punch from my guy.

The fighter I was up against was a little more battle-savvy than the others. He stayed between my gun and Chief, never giving me a shot without risk to my rescuer. The hell with this, I thought, and heaved the gun at him. Off balance, he barely had time to get his arm up to block the heavy pistol before I was all over him, working the body for a while, then his throat, moving on to the groin. My knee hit a wall there. He was lucky he was wearing a cup. His right cross made me see stars for a second, and he tried to kick my legs out from under me.

Big Mistake #1. I pulled my leg back by shifting my weight and rotating my hips. His foot soared just inches past my leg as he overbalanced and slid on the pine needles. His arm flew out to break his fall. That was Big Mistake #2. I waited a half-second until all his weight was on that arm, then blew the hell out of the joint with a snap kick. He fell the rest of the way to the ground, yelling his lungs out. I stepped on his throat and twisted, feeling more than hearing the cartilage and bones popping. He lay still.

I looked up to see Chief kick the now one-footed man in the face to send him into oblivion. Blood sprayed the pine needles and storm-tossed leaves as the guy fell backwards and started jerking like a beached fish. Having your nose crammed up into your brain pan will do that to you.

Chief brought the 45 up and fired, but the man in front of him dodged underneath his aim and knocked the gun out of his meaty palm. Chief just smiled. The other man that had been watching from a distance had a nice bullet hole just below the vest, giving him a second navel. The wily old dog had used the guy in front of him as cover, expecting him to move, I realized. Damn. Mr. Belly-button sank to his knees slowly, still not quite sure what had happened to him.

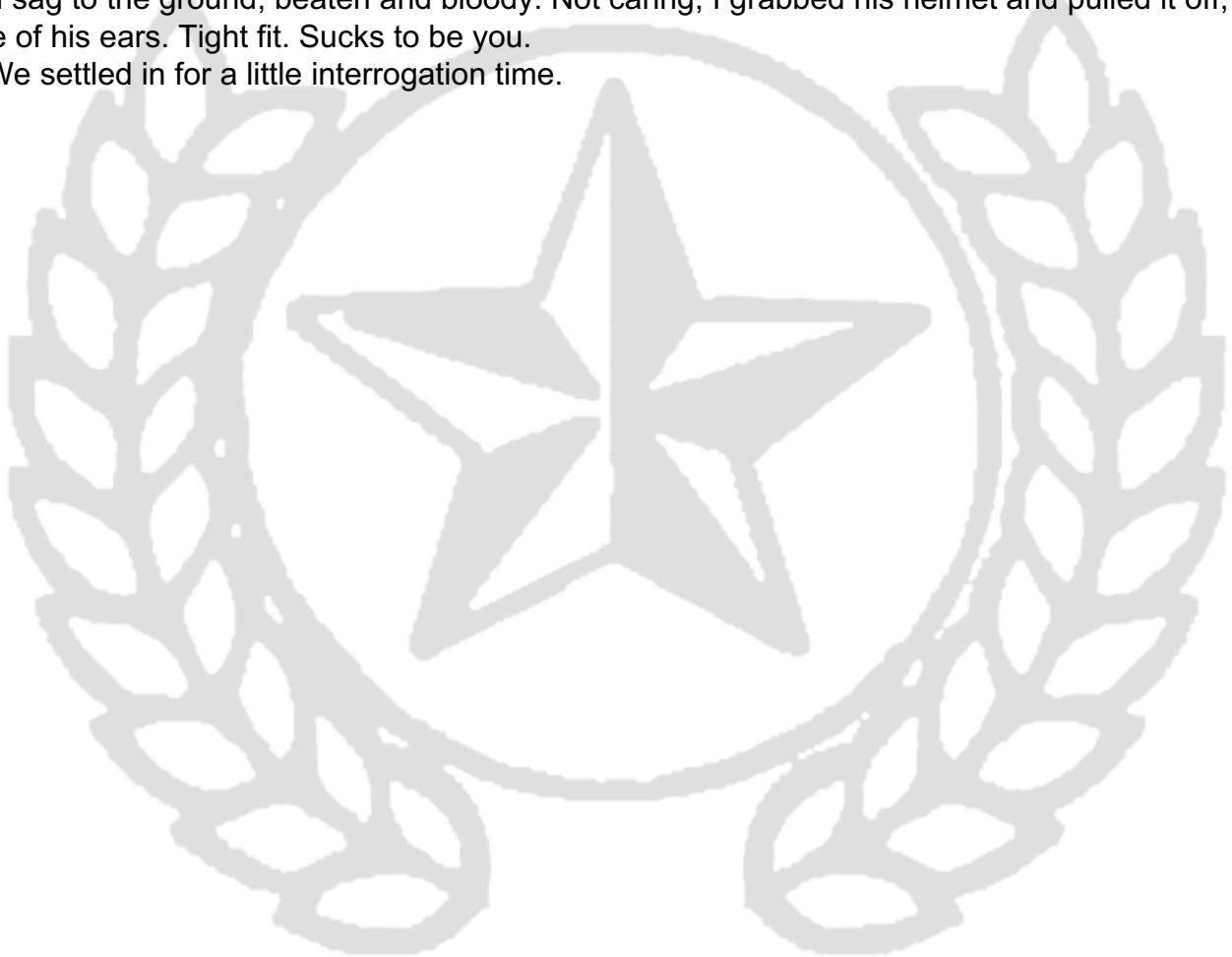
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One to go. He lashed out at Chief's body, the old man not even trying to move. Another punch rocked the fireman. He was taking punches on the vest, giving me time to move into position. I didn't let him down. Grabbing the goon, I pinned his arms back and got him in a full nelson. He was strong, but not enough to break my grip.

Chief balled up his fists and came in swinging, delivering body punches to the sides where the vest had a gap. "Now...you...are...going...to talk!" he yelled, each word punctuated with a punch. I let the man sag to the ground, beaten and bloody. Not caring, I grabbed his helmet and pulled it off, along with one of his ears. Tight fit. Sucks to be you.

We settled in for a little interrogation time.



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The rain continued to fall steadily as I rolled the body into the raging brown floodwaters. Chief appeared out of the woods, carrying our packs and my bag of cold hard cash. He tossed it to me and helped me throw some pine needles down over our tracks. Not that it mattered. The monsoon would wipe out all signs of our struggle except the trees blasted by gunfire and the wrecked vehicles in the ravine upstream.

"Do you think he was telling the truth about you?" Chief finally said, turning to walk downstream, "are you really part of Cold Zero?"

I turned to follow him. That he had his back to me was proof enough that he trusted me; it meant a lot. "I'm not sure. I'm so hazy on the details, but I know I don't mind violence, and that scares me, Paul. You're sure you've never heard of me before now in the Agency?"

He paused, considering. "No, nothing. But we're spies, after all. I'm sure there are plenty of agents a search and rescue boy like me doesn't need to know about. Still, they looked like they were out for revenge, like it was personal. If you betrayed them and came to us for a way out, that could explain a few things. Son, sometimes you just have to realize you're not going to find all the answers to your questions."

Shrugging, I adjusted my pack and followed him into the downpour. Once we got back to the Agency, I'd see what I could dig up on my past. We came to a service road and followed it, the red mud seeping and sucking around our boots. A black car materialized out of the rain, parked on the side of the dirt road with one door still left partly open. So that's where our second group of buddies had started their pincer maneuver.

"Wait here," Chief motioned, checking inside the tinted windows carefully. He gave the all clear, so I strode up and checked the beast out. It was one of the new Magnums, the station wagon of the new millennium. The back cargo area was filled with tarped munitions and extra body armor. They were bringing the party to us, evidently. It took Chief and I a few minutes to find the tracking device he said all Cold Zero vehicles had on them. We left it lying in a puddle and got the hell out of there.

Sky Harbor Airport opened up before us as we entered the sliding door a day later. The rush of people was in direct contrast to the remote location we had just escaped the night before. I should have felt safe in the crowd, but I didn't. Too many distractions. I breathed deeply, pseudo-meditating to calm my nerves.

She walked out of the crowd directly towards us, long legs and hips swaying gracefully. Her red hair glowed like fire in the sun as she smiled gently. Brushing past us, she did an expert handoff of a plain white envelope. Chief slid it into his bag without a thought and started walking. I followed him to the men's room and took the stall next to his, all the way at the back. I heard tearing paper, then the envelope passed under to me with half its contents gone. Inside was a new Arizona driver's license and the name Jonathan Harker. Obviously whoever made up ID's for the Agency had a sense of humor. Next to it was a plane ticket to DC leaving in an hour. I wondered if I hated flying, and it bugged me that I couldn't remember.

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After a long nap, on an otherwise boring flight, we made it to DC and into a waiting car. A secluded ramp with a single armed guard led us to an underground tunnel. "Ah, HQ. We'll be debriefed, and then you get to start a new life, Jon. My advice, don't tell them about the cash. What they don't know won't hurt `em." He settled back in the plush seat cushion and looked out the window.

We were ushered into an interrogation room, given the third degree. They let Chief go early and focused on me. My "I don't know" routine started to get on their nerves, I could tell. I don't know how long I was there, only that I felt like falling asleep again by the time they got the clue that I really had lost my memory.

"Ok, Jon," the red-haired little pudgy man said, slamming his hand on the table, "don't go far. We'll be calling you back shortly for some medical evaluations. Call me if you remember anything." I read the name on the card: Rex Foster, Internal Division. So he was a handler, then. And someone that would tell me only what he deemed necessary. No answers would come from him about my past.

I grabbed my worn, mud-stained bag and flipped it over my shoulder easily.

"What's in the bag, Agent?" he asked from the comfort of his chair. His beady eyes bored into mine as I turned to face him.

I pulled the drawstring open and grabbed one of the spare shirts I'd bought, tossing it to him. "Souvenirs, Foster. Now go fuck yourself."

A dark-skinned man waited as I walked down the hall. "Excellent work, Spinal," he said quietly in a thick accent, glancing around, "I'll be in touch." He handed me a piece of paper with what looked like a combination on it, and the initials R.W., and then just walked away.

Chief pulled up beside me, a cup of coffee in each hand. "I'll show you around the joint, kiddo."

"Who was that guy? He creeped the hell out of me."

"Agent Soul-Eater. Never did catch his real name, and I'm not about to ask. Why? What did he want?"

"He acted like he knew me. He said he'd be in touch."

Chief looked thoughtful. "So, you must have been part of the Agency, right?"

"I'm not so sure," I said, taking the coffee gratefully, "something wants to break out of this brain of mine, but it's not coming."

"Don't stress yourself, Jon," he said, "I've been around head trauma before. It'll come back when you're ready. Some things we can't remember for a reason, some kind of trauma that we're not ready to live with."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I whispered, turning to follow him.

End