

## Tightening the Noose

*June 22nd, 2003, Early Morning*

The Russian man walked into the study, a bottle of vodka in one callused hand. "So we have a deal, comrade?" he laughed in Russian, unstopping the bottle. He poured two stiff shots for himself and one for his compatriot.

"*Da, Comrade Kasinov,*" the man in the trench coat laughed, sitting with his legs outstretched in a comfortable chair. He switched back to English, disdaining what he considered a sub-par language for that of his homeland. "Here are the coordinates. Keep them safe and destroy them after you've memorized them. Bring some backup if you must, as you know we will. Just tell them to keep their itchy fingers off the triggers. And the scientist comes with us, as well. I consider him a freebie for the \$8 million you're getting in return."

The Russian mobster smiled when he heard the trenchcoated man speak the sum of money that would soon be in his hands. While it wasn't exactly enough to retire on, it was a good start. Leave the mob racket to those that enjoyed cracking heads, Kasinov thought as he downed another shot. "Yes, we certainly do have a deal, *Comrade Cypher*. We will see you tomorrow night, on schedule."

Cypher, second in command of the Cold Zero Clan, downed his shot in one swift motion and pulled himself to his feet. The lanky, blonde-haired and spectacled spy smiled slightly. These post-cold war negotiations were always fun, he thought. Especially when the man he was talking to had an inkling of just how powerful Cold Zero truly was. He turned to leave.

"One more thing, Cypher," the Russian said, yawning, "make sure your men can hold their stomachs, no? This...thing...gives off an aura that makes you want to throw up worse than the little girl in your American Exorcist movie."

The tall man walked out without another word. Kasinov memorized the piece of paper containing the coordinates and crumpled it up, tossing it into the wastebasket with contempt. No one was going to get into his home and see it. And no American told him what to do. Shutting off the light on his way out, the mob boss went to bed, dreaming of naked Russian prostitutes and expensive vodka. Tomorrow, he thought as he drifted off, my dream *will* be a reality.

Two prongs slid under the sash of the window, deftly maneuvering to the alarm wire. Outside, Spyder's breath fogged up the windowpane as gentle snow still fell this far north in Siberia. Working more by feel than sight, she gently cut into both sides of the contact wire at the same instant, feeling the buzz as the capacitor equalized the voltage in a microsecond and clicked to life. Sliding another shim between the wood and plastic, she dexterously popped the window lock and slid it up. Securing her voltage prongs more easily, the intruder slid over the windowsill and into the room.

Snow spiraled in the darkness as she crossed to the wastebasket and pulled out the paper. Smiling grimly, she retreated the way she'd come and vanished into the cold. When tomorrow night fell, she'd be ready. Cold Zero had tried to claim her soul, but she would take much more. Starting with this kill, the assassin knew she'd be embarking on a long road of retribution. First: weaken the enemy's power structure, one contact at a time. Second: infiltrate and get close to her target. Third: Put Ojimba Noray's fucking head on a pike.

Famine had taught her that, in those few short days with her.

## Tightening the Noose

The snow drifted down like a white sheet in the dark as Spyder trudged through the snow. The lightweight plastic and mesh snowshoes on her feet kept the intruder above the four-foot drifts, allowing her to make greater speed across the surface of the snow than she otherwise would have been able to do. The back of the warehouse loomed up on the outskirts of the city in front of her, a dark and cold metal wall. The rendezvous was not set until well after nightfall, she recalled, more than enough time to poke around.

Reaching the back door, she shivered in the cold before looking around thoughtfully. There...a ventilation shaft. Digging in her pack, Jocelyn pulled out a simple climbing harness with a grappling hook and whirled it by her side, letting more line out by releasing the pressure on her thumb ever so slightly until the wickedly barbed hook just brushed the snow by her feet. Two more rapid-fire revolutions of her wrist, and it flew up into the night to clang off the side of the building.

Too low. She reeled the hook back in and started again, concentrating past the occasional gusts of icy wind whipping around the side of the building. The hook rocketed skyward again, and this time settled onto the exposed beam with a satisfying clank. Adjusting her massive pack, Spyder mimicked her namesake by pulling herself swiftly up the cord. Her harness took up the slack and locked in case she lost her grip, but it proved to be unnecessary.

As she reached the top, the wind whipped her from side to side with fury. The assassin pulled a battery-driven screwdriver from her waist pouch and deftly pulled the screws. The grate over the vent gave way, dropping like a lead weight into her waiting arm. Swaying crazily, she spun and hooked her legs into the opening, wrestling with one hand on her harness to let out a little line while she trusted her other hand to keep a grip on the heavy grate cover. Inch by inch she made her way inside, pulling the extra rope in with her before loosely sealing the cover back into place with some sheet metal screws from the inside. One solid kick would send it flying to the ground below when she made her escape.

Now to spin the web, she thought...

## Tightening the Noose

Spyder settled into her sniper perch, close in proximity to the grate she'd use to escape. The views of the three miniaturized cameras coded to her palm pilot flicked onto the screen every few seconds in a loop. When the boys decided to come out and play, she'd know.

Finally, just as she felt her muscles start to cramp up from the cold, Jocelyn saw movement on one of the monitors. Game time. A door opened on the opposite side of where she'd made her entrance, flurries of snow whirling in the door to quickly coat the cold floor. Russian voices echoed in the dimness as two cigarettes glowed in the dark. Had she been so inclined, the sniper knew she could take both of them in less than two seconds, before their muddled brains could connect the gunfire to the searing pain of match-grade ammo blowing through their skulls. But the object of this mission was in decapitation: one of the heads of the snake that was Cold Zero.

Lights blinked on, swaying slowly in the chill wind that found its way through the open door. Below her, Spyder saw Kasinov's men filter in, going to one side to open a huge dock door. Beeping incessantly, a flatbed truck backed in with a huge box on it. Inside, something screamed once, indignantly, then eerily went quiet. Somehow, the silence was worse.

The men nearest the truck looked positively green, as if they'd had too much vodka. A moment later, the feeling hit her, as well. "What the fuck?" Spyder mumbled, doubling up slightly in her nest. The sniper's stomach tightened, like food poisoning, but she knew she wasn't the only one affected. The men below her pooled their collective strength to pull the case off the truck, then retreated to the other side of the warehouse, down below her.

The dock on the other side was opened, as well. A file of men came in, those she had been watching for some time now. The one guarding the door was missing several teeth. He was called Slapshot, a detestable thug that couldn't quite cut it in professional hockey. What a loser.

Then the man himself walked over to Kasinov: Cypher. From what she could gather, the bespectacled blonde man in the trench coat was the second-in-command of Cold Zero, but her attempts to find out who was the head of the snake were coming up empty. She had her suspicions, but...

The two men made a deal, Kasinov obviously pissed off at getting ripped a new hole by Cypher. Still, it was done, and the giant of a man that called himself Bruiser mounted the forklift in one corner of the warehouse to scoop up the case.

At the movement, whatever was inside sent another sickening wave of nausea outward as men abruptly turned into corners or against the wall to get sick. Jocelyn took a calming breath, closing her eyes and willing her lunch to stay in residence a while longer. It passed. Looking around her again, she sensed rather than saw movement.

The men began to depart as a shadow launched out over their heads, whirring by her with no sound. A man clad all in black glided on a line above their heads, releasing something tiny to land on the cab of the Cold Zero Truck next to the crate. Agent Famine.

Smiling grimly, she hefted the M-24 sniper rifle and waited for Famine to notice her. The Cold Zero convoy started out as he spotted her, his eyes widening in surprise. He held up one hand in warning before she sighted in and took the shot.

*Continued on next page...*

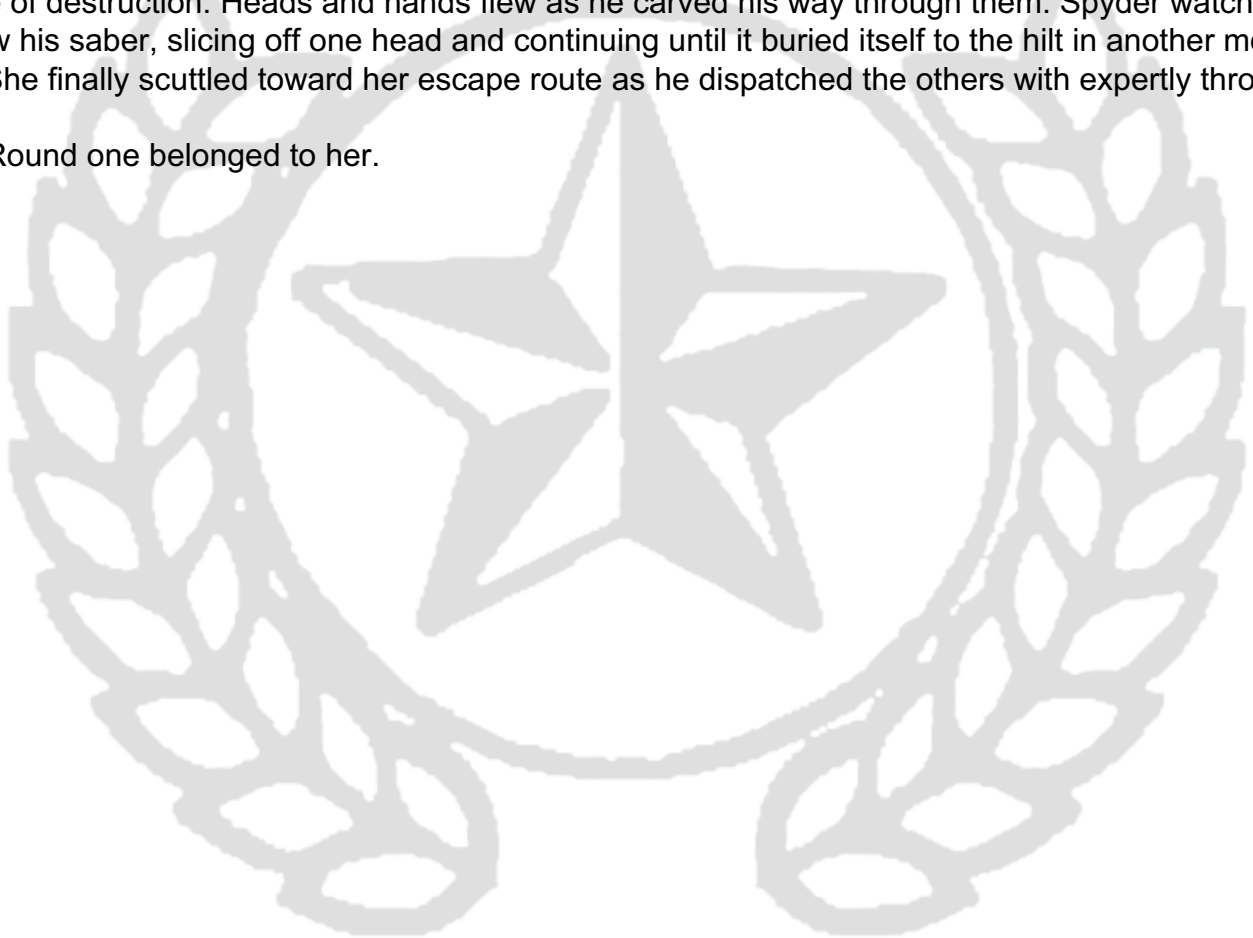
## Tightening the Noose

At just over 3 inches in length, the 7.62mm caliber shell traveled 2800 feet per second, and experts said it could penetrate standard armor as if it were paper. At less than 150 feet, the shot blew Kasinov's head apart like a ripe melon, spraying everyone near him in red gore before the massive boom of the weapon had even begun to reach their ears.

As Kasinov's goons dove for cover and opened fire blindly, Spyder smiled at Famine as she calmly broke down the weapon and watched. He knew what to do.

The other agent dropped into the midst of the men below him like a wolf among sheep, the epitome of destruction. Heads and hands flew as he carved his way through them. Spyder watched as he threw his saber, slicing off one head and continuing until it buried itself to the hilt in another mobster's chest. She finally scuttled toward her escape route as he dispatched the others with expertly thrown knives.

Round one belonged to her.





## Tightening the Noose

*June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2004*

Just over a year later, Jocelyn Lynch found herself on a crowded beach outside of Miami, just taking in the sun. Idly she held her hand up to shade her eyes, taking in the bronzed bodies that made up the local scenery.

After Siberia, she'd added two more notches to her belt: Zander Wilkins and Shane Montgomery. Wilkins was a money launderer originally from this great State of Florida, working in the Caymans. He rubbed more money than Bill Gates every year, cleaning up the illegal dealings of Cold Zero and other groups like them.

She'd simply climbed up to his penthouse apartment, planted a small bomb under his table on the deck, and watched until he came out for his morning tea. Boom. That was one thing that tickled her, how people could spend tens of thousands on a home security system to make sure no one got in the elaborate French doors, but not bother securing the deck itself.

Montgomery was another paper-pusher, and not really worth the trouble. But the assassin didn't care about him; it was the bigger fish she wanted to flush out. The scaled creature, in this case, went by the name of Jorge "Papa" Veralez, a Cuban nationalist with covert ties to all manner of terrorist groups. His best customer was one Cypher of the Cold Zero Clan. Her blonde friend from Siberia. It was time to rattle the cage.

The sniper had tried sneaking in close to get an audio bug into his car, but to no avail. The security at his beach house was top-notch; it would take a couple more agents to get the job done there, and she was on her own. Windows appeared to be bullet-proof glass, and he always went with a quick escort to his wheels, also armored. Surveillance cameras, pressure plates, a couple of dogs. The only one she knew that had even a remote chance of breaking through those defenses was Famine. She couldn't risk putting him in danger with Foster by contacting him now.

The office building, Division Financial, was the same: a massive fortress. It was time to get sneaky. Sighing, she pulled the canvas backpack open and lifted out the laptop. Powering it on, the rogue agent clipped on an electronic hacking pack and found a signal. It was the one Famine had given her before they made their fateful rendezvous with Foster on the Sylvenstein Bridge in Bavaria. The bridge where she'd died, and had been reborn. If she knew Foster, he'd report all of Famine's gear from the mission returned safely, just so no one would want to talk to the intruder about what had happened. If not, this would be a very short hack.

Division Financial's network came up, the hacking pack piggybacking into the transaction signals for email. Calling up all her expertise, Spyder navigated through the low-level programs. The heavy encryption she avoided for two reasons: her skills weren't that good, and secure documents weren't of any use to her for this mission. No sense in blowing the only door she was likely to find.

The first pull she made was for the employee database. After that, she began her search in earnest. Ahh, there it was, she mused, the human resources client computer. A half hour of poking, prodding and echo keys got her the passwords she needed. Logging onto the career portion of the website, she posted a need for a technical position for secure data systems and clicked SUBMIT. Somewhere online, job search engines logged the new entry into their databases. Time to find the perfect candidate for the job...

*Continued on next page...*

## Tightening the Noose

*Back in DC:*

Skynet dozed at the workstation, his algorithms crunching all the data for his assignments in less time than the four other people near him put together. He was sleepy: the Mountain Dew selector on the pop machine had the empty light flashing. One day the minds in charge would read his mound of complaints and replace the second Diet Coke selection with more Mountain Dew. Didn't they understand how this department worked at all?

His headphones beeped once, making his feet perched on the edge of the desk spasm. A horrendous crash ensued as his pyramid of cans crashed to the floor. Bolting to a full sitting position, the skinny hacker tried to look professional as heads poked out of the various cubicles.

Jenny Rinise, the hot brunette that was always giving him the eye, shook her head. "Getting that beauty sleep, Brent?" she asked, rolling her eyes at the mess.

Skynet ogled her unashamedly. "Must be, Jen, by the way you're lighting me on fire with those bottomless brown eyes of yours."

"Fuck you, pervert," she remarked, flipping him the bird. As she withdrew back into her cubicle, Brent leaned over to pick up the cans while he scanned the screen. Suddenly his hands went slack, letting the cans fall back to the floor with a massive clatter. "Jesus, Brent," he heard Jenny say, but his mind was already sorting through the logic of what he was seeing.

"Son of a bitch," he whispered, "I don't believe it. She's alive."

## Tightening the Noose

Russell the security guard crossed his legs and propped them on the second seat, idly looking over the security monitors on the top of Division Financial. Four of them showed the rooftop itself, while eight others panned around to get the shots of the adjacent buildings. Motion sensors showed nothing above the size of a pigeon moving around. All was well. Like it was every day. For the last two months since he'd taken the job. Bor...ring.

Suddenly, the thing they told him would never happen, did. Camera 12 on the north side logged movement just before it went to static. Spilling his can of tobacco spittings all over the floor, Russell flipped through the manual of emergency numbers while simultaneously redirecting cameras 11 and 13 to sweep the area previously covered by 12. There she was...

Jocelyn sighted down the barrel of her favored rifle, the M24, and lined up the second surveillance camera on the northeast corner as it swung her way. The M118 bullet launched from the muzzle at 2800 feet per second, shattering the glass of the camera before it had been looking in her direction for more than a few seconds. Swiveling back thirty degrees, she took out the one on the northwest corner a few moments later.

Time to go.

Papa Veralez sat down in the cramped security office, annoyed beyond compare. "You mean to tell me this woman took out three cameras in ten seconds, and no one finds her? What the hell do I have a security force for..." he glanced at the nametag, "...Russell?"

The security officer gulped, wishing he didn't have brown tobacco stains on his shirtsleeve. "Mr. Veralez, sir, she was good. But I've managed to string together enough footage to get her face from all angles. I've put the security team on alert on the roof, since that would be her likely point of entry. If she comes back again, we've got her."

Across town, Spyder slid her card into the reader on the door and slipped into the dark hotel room. She slung her sniper rifle breakdown case onto a chair and peeled off the blonde wig and latex face pieces that had given her a slightly chunkier facial look and thicker lips. Last to come off was the fat suit, taking thirty pounds off her in the span of six seconds.

Showtime.

Anika Jenson picked up the phone on the second ring, her soft voice slightly groggy at eight in the morning. Ah, the life of the temporarily unemployed. "Hello?"

"Hi, may I speak to Anika please?"

"This is her," the woman replied, mentally preparing herself.

Jocelyn shifted on the chair and put her hands on the keys of the laptop to put her through the motions. "Hi Anika, I'm Jenny Sawyer, from Division Financial. I understand you've been looking for a technical position."

The woman's voice immediately warmed even further. Poor kid, she didn't even know what was going on. "Yes, I am. Do you have something available?"

*Continued on next page...*

## Tightening the Noose

"Actually," Jocelyn smiled, "I've been looking over quite a few resumes, and yours just jumps out at me. Tell me, would you have a problem working with secure data systems in a financial environment? We're looking for someone trustworthy to handle private client information."

"I would love to!" Anika answered, "Is there some time I can come in for an interview?"

Jocelyn smiled. This was almost too easy. "You read my mind! I work directly for the president of the company, Jorge Veralez, and he's eager to fill this position immediately. How does 8:00 am tomorrow sound to you?"

"That sounds great!" Anika bubbled, "Can I get your address?"

"Absolutely. I've taken the liberty of shooting you off an email now. When you get to the security desk inside, just say that you're here for the appointment with Mr. Veralez, and I'll have you sent right up. A word of advice, dress in a skirt. Professional, mind you, but Mr. Veralez does enjoy the skirts. You'll do great!"

"Thanks! Jenny, was it? I'll see you tomorrow!"

"Have a good day, Anika."



## Tightening the Noose

Papa Veralez sipped his coffee and looked at the low-res images his security cameras had captured. Who are you, he thought, and what the hell do you want with me? In his heart he knew the answer: the money laundering, the killing, the drug dealing. His *madre* didn't raise an idiot, after all. And his son was no slouch either. The boy was destined to follow in his father's footsteps, and it was up to Papa himself to show the boy how threats were dealt with.

Suddenly the phone next to his elbow buzzed. He depressed the button for the intercom. "Yes, Jenny, what is it?"

The silky voice of his secretary came back to him from outside the bullet-proofed wall of his inner office. "Sir, I've got a woman named Anika Jensen in the lobby who says she's here for an appointment, but I didn't set her up for any such thing."

His interest piqued, Papa picked up the photographs in his gnarled, sun-darkened hand and thought. "Jenny, you can have the security camera linked to your monitor, correct? Without tipping anyone off downstairs?"

"Yes, sir, just how you arranged it. I'll bring it up now. Is this about the girl you were looking for yesterday?"

"Perhaps, Jenny, perhaps. I'll be right out, my dear."

Moments later he looked at the slightly grainy image of the woman patiently waiting at the security desk to kill him. Her shining blonde hair framed a familiar face, as he thought it might. Clever girl, he thought, you noticed the guards posted on the rooftop, and have altered your strategy. Still, it was the sign of an amateur. Assassination plans, good ones, took months to plan. And this silly *gringo* thought she could just waltz in the front door when Plan A failed, kill him, and escape? Oh, this would be fun...

"My sweet Jenny, tell the front desk to frisk her thoroughly, then send her up. And get my security team down here. Tell them to wait in the boardroom next door until she arrives, then come in from behind and trap her."

Jenny brushed the hair back from her face and made the calls, clicking the recorder off of Jorge's office and redirecting the feed to the personal elevator instead. The security team could be heard tromping past the door to the outer office where the two of them waited, then the door to the conference room opened and closed. The team was in position.

"You may want to keep low, she's here to assassinate me," Papa said, putting his gnarled old man's hand on her shoulder affectionately, "I wouldn't want anything to happen to my little *senorita* now would I? This woman could be dangerous."

"Yes, she could be," Jenny murmured as he stepped to the center of the room and took position facing the door. The crime lord straightened his \$900 suit unconsciously, waiting like a lion for the sheep to find her way into the den.

From outside in the hall, a soft ding sound prefaced the swoosh of the elevator doors. The petite blonde had arrived on the executive level. Papa smiled and lavishly paused to light up a cigar from his breast pocket. Taking a few puffs, he settled comfortably into a fighting stance. He would beat her mercilessly, and his troops would make sure she stayed awake and conscious until he released her.

The door swung slowly open, a perfectly manicured hand showing around its edge...

## Tightening the Noose

Harley Jordan clutched the grip of his MP5 anxiously. He was the point man for the security team, usually a dull enough job in this impressive high-rise. But the moments of action were worth it. A real assassin, here!

The grizzled security veteran had a simple job, and he didn't want to screw it up. Move in after the bitch got into the outer office, and let the old man have some fun. Harley had done some hand-to-hand combat, like all the other guys on his team, and he knew firsthand that Papa's age belied his strength. That old bastard could break your arm if he felt like it. Harley admired that kind of power.

At last he heard her walk past and open the door to the secretary's outer office. Time to move. He raised two stubby fingers in the air, then pointed toward the door. His men followed after, silent and deadly.

Papa felt his body relax as the door opened. His mind was clear, as it always was before combat. The woman poked her head around the door uncertainly. "Hello?"

"Come on in," Papa smirked, "you must be Anika."

The blonde smiled and stepped around the door, her cheerful features tripping some alarm in his brain. Assassins were usually skilled at shifting moods, but something about this was just...wrong. She carried a manila envelope against her side, bulging slightly with the weight of lots of paperwork. He knew she'd been frisked, but the crime lord felt his heart begin beating rapidly. His sense of calm was shattered like a fine wine glass.

He meant to say "Time to die, bitch," one of his favorite expressions, but only blood bubbled out along with a slow wheeze. A tiny point of fire blossomed below his left shoulder, near the spine. Too late, the pieces of the puzzle all fell into place.

Turning, he swung out at "Jenny", knocking her blonde wig off. Dark hair curled out from under a surgical cap as he looked closely. She wasn't his secretary at all.

Spyder stepped in close, a terminal embrace, as she reached around him and withdrew the stiletto from his back. It was just long enough to slip through the rib cage and plunge into the lung without breaking out the front of his shirt. His hands fell on her shoulders as he slumped to his knees.

"Your time is up," she whispered, "I'll see you in hell." With that, she threw off his limp arms and plunged the blade through his chest into the other lung, this time leaving it where it was.

Dimly, Jorge heard a buzzing overlaying everything as he began to suffocate. Blood flowed where sweet air once did, filling up his lungs like syrup. He coughed; bursting a bubble of blood on his lips, and knew that he was dying second by second. A crash heralded the arrival of his security team, but they were too late. Too late. My son, I never got to tell you goodbye...

Papa Veralez died gurgling on his own life-sustaining fluid.

## Tightening the Noose

Harley Jordan was the first one in the door, planting his hand squarely in the woman's back. She pitched unceremoniously to the floor, her skirt ripping and several copies of her resume flying half-hazard through the air. The door zipped along the arc of the hinges, smashing the handle through the plywood and lodging there.

"Get down, bitch! Hands behind your head!" Harley yelled, letting his MP5 drop to the reaches of the combat sling. He whipped a zip tie out of one pocket and yanked the crying woman's arms back. The security team lead smiled slightly more as he felt the left arm come out of its socket. She screamed in agony.

"Target, target!" one of his men yelled. Harley looked up in surprise at his boss, at a loss for words as bright red, oxygenated blood bubbled from Papa's lips in a frothy wave. What the hell? A woman withdrew from Mr. Veralez' slumping body, picking something out of her purse perched on the edge of the desk.

It can't be, the mercenary thought. The canister's trigger flange popped off with a delicate movement of her thin hands. Time seemed to slow down as it looped four times through the air, making a *ting* sound against the leg of the desk before falling silently to the floor. She let go of the canister, twirling backwards like a ballerina, trying to put the desk between herself and the five-man team.

The world sped up again, instantaneously, as adrenaline poured into his system. "Grenade! Shit!" His bodyguard training almost caught up with him, prompting Harley to leap to cover the prone form of his benefactor. Almost. He turned instead to run and fell headlong over the blonde woman he'd pushed to the floor, breaking his nose unexpectedly. He looked up in agony just as the grenade rolled to a stop in front of his face. "Oh --"

**BANG!!**

A blinding flash of light torched his eyes like he had looked into the sun, and a thunderclap of pain blew out his eardrums in one swift rush of sound. Had he been able to see or hear, he would have known that his quarry had escaped into the bulletproofed office walls of Papa Veralez' sumptuously appointed office. The door slammed shut and clicked just as the last member of his team leaned in from the hallway and peppered it with automatic weapon fire.

Sitting in ringing, buzzing darkness, Harley remembered a line from a movie. Something about the ringing in your ears after an explosion being the last time you could ever hear that particular tone again. He didn't think he'd miss it.

## Tightening the Noose

Spyder breathed deeply for a moment, perched on the edge of Jorge's desk. Bright scarlet dribbled out of a hole in her upper arm. Good, it went straight through, she thought. The injured intruder ripped a strip of cloth off the bottom hem of her shirt to bind the wound, then looked around. She didn't have much time.

As if in answer to her fears, a resounding boom rocked the left door on its hinges. The reinforced oak was strong, but the lock itself would give way eventually. Time to move.

Jocelyn pulled off the surgical cap and looked around. The tinted floor-to-ceiling glass windows were also bulletproof, but she wasn't planning on shooting her way out. It was a gamble, but the brunette was starting to get used to those.

As another blow of a heavy, blunt object smote the door, a resounding crack echoed in the confined room as a large splinter shot to the floor. Jocelyn swept everything off the huge desk feverishly, sending an ancient Faberge egg blasting into a million pieces. With a grunt, she levered the desk away from the wall and wriggled in behind it.

"This had better work," she mused, feeling the coils of terror in her stomach. It was quite the day to try new things. "RAAA!" she screamed, pushing with every ounce of strength. The desk slid out half a foot. Using the new space to her advantage, the assassin put her hands on the edge of the desk and walked her legs up the wall for more leverage. Pushing, she got the solid oak beast away from the wall. Now or never.

Screaming again, she laid into the side of the desk. Inertia tried to keep it where it was, but her perseverance paid off. It slid easier as she got her momentum up, racing towards the bulletproof glass. With a last mighty push, she launched the desk through the window and out into empty space.

Below, people looked up in alarm and began running as 700 pounds of one of the most durable woods known to man bore down on them like a glass-shrouded vengeful angel.

The door smashed again, blowing open under the combined weight of two security personnel and an end table from the secretary's office. Spyder reached into her pocket and pulled out the secretary's keychain. The mace canister unloaded in their faces, buying her precious seconds. Whipping off her belt, Jocelyn fed the monofilament wire coiled within the lining around the window casing and wrapped the belt bandoleer-style around her body. Time to go.

Burst after burst followed her out the window as she ran and lunged into open space, the wire unraveling behind her with only a whisper of sound. Down she plunged as the security team clustered to look out the window at her in amazement. Suddenly one of them knelt down. Damn, she thought, he's spotted the wire. No time for that, she had to brace for a rough landing. Concrete screamed up at her at a dizzying speed, liberally covered with shattered wood and broken glass. Lazily, a bird flew by her at eye level somewhere around the tenth floor.

A second later, she felt the line draw to a close as it slowed coming out of the harness. The sudden jolt took her breath away anyways, stopping her ten feet above the pavement and popping her another ten upward with a tearing wrench. She smacked into the side of the building and felt her breath rush out in one quick stream.

*Continued on next page...*



## Tightening the Noose

Somehow the line held. She prepared to drop to the bottom of the line for another, smaller stop, but it never came. Shit.

The guard upstairs cut the line as she came back down, dropping her the extra ten feet to the sidewalk in a bone-shaking sprawl. Dazed, Spyder sat up and tried to blink away the stars whirling through her vision. I've got to move! She screamed at herself, but her body didn't listen. Gradually the pulse of her blood died down to a low roar, and she began to feel the pain. A large shard of oak stuck up through her thigh, bright red blood scoring the point of it. Glass shards dropped wetly out of the backs of her arms. She couldn't feel the ones in her back yet, but they were there.

"Lady, are you okay?" some guy asked, dropping his briefcase, "Jesus Christ! You fell all the way from the top floor! That's got to be 50 stories! Shit, she's bleeding all over the place! Someone call 911!"

Jocelyn wiped her brow, noticing in a dreamlike fog that it came away wet with blood. What if my future husband is walking by and sees me like this, she thought idly. Then she realized she really had to be out of it. Marriage? The hell with that.

Her Good Samaritan brushed all the glass out from behind her and tried to push her to lay down. "Please, don't move lady!" He eyed the belt around her, then squinted. Some kind of almost-invisible line snaked up from the belt to...

As he followed the dim trail of monofilament until it disappeared in the sun ten feet up, he felt her raise up beside him.

"Please, God, you're bleeding out!" he cried, trying to stop her, but she shoved him back with a growl and pulled her leg off the oak shard with a wet sucking sound. Calmly, she got up and began limping away. The crowd, speechless, parted around her like the Red Sea.

Traffic screeched to a halt as she walked out into the street. Pulling open a cab door, she pointed at the couple in the back seat and coughed. Red spittle flecked her lips. "Get out." The woman screamed as her husband pulled her roughly out the other side. Climbing in, she tapped the glass partition to get the cabbie's attention. As if he really needed any coaxing, she laughed to herself. "Just drive." He gulped and ran the red light, wracking his brain for the nearest hospital.

Settling back, Jocelyn picked more glass slivers out of her arms and legs. What a goddamn mess. Still, she'd just killed the single most powerful arms dealer in the Cold Zero arsenals. It would take them another year before they could bump back up to production in the States, at least. Time to take a break from this nonsense and heal up. Stopping the cab, she got out and limped away towards the hotel room. Time to skip town.

Screw you, Florida. A vacation somewhere up in the mountains was in order.

*Continued on next page...*

## Tightening the Noose

The man at the front desk barely looked up as Jocelyn entered the lobby, bloody and disheveled. She skirted by him and made for the stairs. It was an old habit, one she imagined every agent picked up if they wanted to live long enough. Stairs had a ton of ways out: up, down, straight into a floor of a building, emergency exits. Elevators were just metal coffins with terrible music that made you want to kill yourself anyways.

Sliding her access key in the reader, she realized there was no light coming through the peephole. She distinctly remembered that the blinds were paper-thin and didn't do much more than block line of sight. As bright as it was just before noon in Miami, she should have seen something.

Ducking, the intruder turned the knob and kicked the door inward as hard as she could, hearing the pop of a small-caliber suppressed gunshot go off even as particles of the cheap pressboard door rained around her. A grunt from inside coincided with something heavy smashing into plaster.

The smart thing was to run, but she knew now that the man at the front counter was in on it. He'd been a little too good at ignoring her smashed up appearance downstairs. Likely he was already on his way up. And her guns were in the closet, if whoever was inside hadn't retrieved them already. Shit.

She ran a few feet down the hallway, and then doubled back. A beast of a man flung the door hard as he came surging out of her room, crunching the door handle into the plaster and sending a shiver down the already-distressed door.

Spyder's foot was waiting for him, already accelerating through the air to catch him in the throat before he could get his defenses up. Jesus, he was big, she thought, and familiar. Well over six feet tall and built like a linebacker, he had the square jaw and shattered nose of a die-hard thug. Good. She didn't have to go easy on him.

Not stopping to worry about catching his breath, the big man punched her square in the face. Spyder felt lighter for a moment, and had time to realize she was airborne before she smashed through the plaster into the room across the hall. The 2x4 aluminum studs creaked to each side as her body was forced through by the unbelievable might of the man's fist.

Clearing her head, she realized she was in an occupied bedroom. The man and woman, right in the middle of making the beast with two backs, froze. In any other situation, she'd have been laughing at their gaping mouths and fear-stricken eyes, but she was pretty sure she'd looked the same way sailing through the wall.

The big-ass behemoth put one hand on the studs and calmly bent them to each side enough to grant him tight access. Rubbing his armor-plated shoulders on both sides, he ducked through the massive hole in the wall and grinned at her.

"I know you," Spyder panted, rolling to her feet painfully, "you were in Siberia."

"So you were the sniper, then?" he asked, slapping his hands together, "I was hoping to catch up with you one day, little girl."

The man from the front desk appeared at the hole in the wall as the terrified couple vainly tried to pull bedsheets over themselves while still remaining inconspicuous. His long leather trench coat was at odds with the beautiful weather outside. "Just kill her, Bruiser. No time for fun."

He brought up an H&K pistol with a silencer and double tapped the trigger. The man in the bed blossomed red. Two more muffled shots sounded, and the woman followed her lover into the afterworld.

Bruiser started to run right at her.

## Tightening the Noose

Move, Jocelyn, her mind whispered. But her body, wracked by pain and held by fright, stayed where it was up against the closet door. The fine white powder of sheetrock drifted lazily through the air in the sunrays peeking in. Time slowed to a crawl as the enormous black boots of the Cold Zero enforcer thundered on the carpeted floor. They sounded like the drumming of a death knell. Hers.

MOVE, DAMN IT! Her brain screamed now, and finally her body listened. Planting her hands, Spyder collected her feet under her and lunged to the left just as Bruiser passed through the spot she'd occupied. With a cry of rage, the madman took the bi-fold door off its hinges with a shattering of cheap wood. A muffled explosion of more sheetrock echoed out of the small enclosure.

Spyder had no time to celebrate, however, as a searing pain raked her ribs. She smelled cordite, and realized she'd been shot. The extent of her other injuries coupled with this new shock to her system almost brought the woman down. Blood was everywhere, most of it caked into a dark near-black. The bright red was the new spot, with glints of white bone showing through. The bastard had taken her skin clean off her side.

Cypher smiled, adjusting his small-framed glasses with one hand unconsciously as he leveled the silenced pistol at her and pulled the trigger. Another bullet ripped through her body, shattering her collarbone with a wet pop. Blood peppered the wall behind her in a bright red fan as she was whipped around. Slowly she slid down the wall, eyeing the man that meant to kill her standing on the other side of the bed. Off to her right, Bruiser angrily ripped his way out of the closet. He snarled like a beast.

The trench-coated second-in-command of Cold Zero smiled nonchalantly as he lined her up in the H&K's sights. He pulled the trigger...and stopped smiling as the .45 jacketed hollowpoint crunched loudly in the chamber.

Complete silence enveloped the room for a split second as the three spies made sense of the situation. The world sped back up in a rush as everyone started moving at once.

Cypher tried to clear the jammed chamber, gritting his teeth in fury. Bruiser threw his weight forward, trying to get as much momentum as possible before crushing her over the nightstand and into the wall.

But out of them all, Spyder moved a split-second faster. Her long fingers snaked up to the nightstand, ripping a half-full bottle of champagne out of the bucket of ice as she shoved her body up the wall to a standing position. Putting all her weight behind the throw, she launched the green bottle across the bed and let her follow-through pull her along onto the bloody bodies.

Bruiser flew by her again, but this time managed to throw his right arm out as he passed. His meaty hand whipped her leg into the headboard. Something didn't sound right, but she had no time to analyze what had happened before she fell heavily on the blood-soaked sheets and bodies. One pale blue eye stared unseeing past her, the blonde hair of the dead woman now an ugly dark red between Spyder's outstretched fingers. She recoiled from the coppery smell of spilled blood and tried to keep moving.

The bottle flipped end over end three times, centrifugal force holding most of the champagne inside the bottle until it collided heavily with Cypher's forehead as he looked up. The H&K leveled at her for a moment, then dropped heavily to the floor as he fell backwards, unmoving.

*Continued on next page...*

## Tightening the Noose

Pulling her wounded leg behind her, Jocelyn hobbled for the elevator as she heard the bed flying across the room behind her. A quick glance back showed a black-gloved fist grip the doorframe, crushing it into splinters as the big man used it to propel himself into the hall. Fuck.

Something ground together in her bad leg as the battered intruder pulled herself into the just-opening elevator. An old couple took one look at her and backed up against the rear wall. THOOM! THOOM! It sounded like the devil himself was on her heels as Jocelyn frantically hit the button marked L. The doors started to swing closed as Bruiser accelerated to attack speed. It was going to be close.

A foot, six inches, come on! She thought to herself, wishing she could do something. A black-clad hand reached in between the doors just before they sealed shut. The contact sensors reacted, sliding back open. The ugly son of a bitch stared at her in triumph, then reached for her throat. It was over.

Out of nowhere, a gnarled old hand holding a can of pepper spray reached over her shoulder and doused the thug's face in a noxious stream of chemicals. "GAAHHH!" the armored man yelled in agony, reeling back. The doors swung closed again as Jocelyn slumped to the floor.

"Oh, dear," the old woman murmured, "he was an ugly one, wasn't he?" The brunette just nodded, trying to ignore the blood caking on her side. At least the bullets had gone right through. Then, mercifully, Spyder passed out.



## Tightening the Noose

*September 15, 2004*

Jocelyn Lynch propped herself up in bed, savoring a second cup of coffee as she flipped open her new laptop. Her shoulder still ached where the bones were finishing knitting together, but her torn ACL would require another few weeks of physical therapy to get it moving correctly again.

The laptop she'd modified contained a newer version of the SkyHack software, bought illegally through an old alias within the Agency she'd cooked up months before she left on her last assignment. Before she'd been captured...

She brushed the curls out of her face as she shuddered inwardly, remembering the torment she'd undergone at the hands of Soul Eater and his reanimated brother. Before she'd been saved by a certain hacker and intruder combination.

Jocelyn had desperately wanted to get in contact with Famine again, but the time wasn't right yet. Soon, she promised, when it was safe for him to know she was still alive. Beneath his brutal kill-or-be-killed nature, she sensed he was a lonely soul that had reached out for her in companionship over those few days together. Something in her wanted to respond.

But for now, it was back to business: finding out the details of the people Jasper Collins associated with. From the little she'd been able to glean from the lower-level security access points, he was a loner for the most part with only a handful of acquaintances that could only superficially be called friends. The hacker Skynet was among the few exceptions, along with a Colonel Ruthers and a Master Sergeant McDowell. Both of the military men were currently covertly attached to guard detail for Randolph Wingate, the man that had brought Famine into the Agency. Everything else was coming up as a dead-end.

Contacting one of the premier career agents or his bodyguards was out of the question, but the hacker on the other hand...

Jocelyn plugged into the Agency database through her alias. It was risky, since she didn't know what had changed in the lengthy amount of time she'd been AWOL, but the risk had to be taken. A prompt for her password popped up. Breathing a prayer, she plugged in her code word and waited. The data input sprang up. So far, so good. Clicking away, she entered `STYLES >> BRENT >> Codename: SKYNET`.

A window popped up. **\*Access Denied...Scanning\***  
Shit.

Suddenly the scanning stopped, and a terminal opened on her laptop. A blinking cursor sat still for a moment, and then began moving to the right. Characters reeled out behind it.

**Stop it.**

The intruder stared at the screen incredulously. What the? "Who the hell are you?" she asked softly, then typed it in after a moment's thought.

**The 1 ur looking 4. Hello there Spyder. I was wondering when u'd show up.**

*Continued on next page...*

## Tightening the Noose

The little bastard had found her first! And just in the nick of time, it appeared. She began typing faster. **Need to meet with you. Name location.**

**Not so fast, princess. Go here. [www.theagencystar.com](http://www.theagencystar.com). Navigate to users, find fulwurm. Watch your back, I can only do so much. Lots to discuss.**

**\*\*End Transmission/Client side terminal void 3\*\***

And just like that, he was gone. She sat back and pondered. It had been a long year and more of relying on only herself. It was good to be amongst friends again.

End

