

THE SHUNG KING

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THE BARREN SANDSTONE ground was fractured and lay in broken patterns stretching onto infinity. Large slabs of thick twisted steel and concrete in chaotic patterns dotted his left and right, lining the apocryphal path, his gaze one of decay. The sky was blank, a reflection of the saturated earth, dead and unforgiving. The faint orange glow of the sun was barely able to escape the choking clutches of the sickly plumes of dust that hung overhead. Far to the east an ominous sculpture of casted iron and stone lay broken against the sky, a bulbous cloud of clotted sand and smoke reflecting the sun in alien shapes of stretched rectangles through the stone archways of this cast-iron monolith.

An old man looked down at his hands in front of him. His left hand grasped an ancient treated oak cane, topped with a filthy glass shard. His veins through his tanned skin appeared as twisted canyons of dark violet and red. Oozing blisters scratched at his filthy skin beneath his sand-blasted moccasins. Meat, rotting old meat. The stench rasped around his nostrils, tearing apart his filth-lined lungs. Reese, that was his name. From some blasted past he could remember his mother gave it to him, though he had no recollection of her. He touched his creased face with his hand, feeling the sagging wrinkles around his cheeks and brow. An overgrown beard of tangled white hair hung from his chin. He scratched it, then began walking, tanned leather moccasins kicking up small plumes of sand with each step, adding to the growing miasma of choking dust.

HE KEPT WALKING until he reached a small pool of brown water, hidden in the shadow of a rustic metal obelisk. He dropped his cane, and began to drink frivolously. Water ran down his beard, matting it to his bare chest, and he drank three litres before he began to ache. He then looked into the small pool, seeing a pale man in his young forties greeting him, a stone gaze with an uninteresting face and short brown-black hair amidst the sickly, shallow depths. The face began to speak, but no sound penetrated the water's surface to the old man on the other side. The old man began to scream at the puddle. He howled at the reflection, an effort in futility as the roars went unnoticed, swallowed by the dead void of this world. He stood up, looking down at himself. His veins and tanned skin had been replaced by a black khaki overcoat, nearly sweeping at the ground. His hands were covered with black nanocarbon gloves. The knuckles on either hand were replaced with a hardened titanium alloy casing. He felt for his face. The thick beard was gone, the wrinkles replaced with youthful, elegant, surgically infused plastiskin. His forehead was a plate - a shell - covered with the same grafted skin. A small bilayer of clear plastic covered his pupils, beginning on the inside layer of the eyelid. Information was suppose to be read out to him on this fine layer, though it was clear for the time being. He began walking again, leaving the cane.

A YOUNG WOMAN in red stood solemn and menacing against the infinite backdrop of thick orange and bronze. Her dark auburn hair wrapped around her shoulders and dangled down to her breasts. Her Victorian dress was a solid layer of dark crimson, giving the appearance of a pronounced gash against the world. The bottom of the dress touched the decaying ground, but no stain could be seen at the trim. Ornate patterns of crimson and violet wound their way up the dress, dotted with embroidered images of old storybook tales and creatures. She looked at this strange man from across the flat expanse of sand. Her shaped eyebrows protruded down towards her surgically sculpted hazel eyes. Her rosy lips curled across her small, delicate face, which held a look of curiosity, taunting the strange man in black. Reese stopped and stared. He didn't dare call out to her, though he began walking briskly.

The Woman turned, flaunting her hands for him to follow. Picking up his pace, he gave chase, as she casually walked into a growing cloud of dust growing out of the sky. Reese kept running, outstretching his hand in an attempt to grab the back of her dress. She looked back at him, and was absorbed into the oncoming sand storm. Crystals of lit green neon, pyramids of golden light and information written in Kanji, Arabic and English began to envelop him. Entities the size of suns shot their way from the ground, the sky turning into a mixed array of wildly different objects and figures, mathematical concepts, atomic particles. Immeasurable amounts of data overloaded him for a brief second.

She screamed out his name from the storm, "Adrian!"

Solid white light overtook Reese, then he went black.

THE WALLS AROUND the crowded bar were the colours of faded neon, covered by the night's thick haze of cigarette smoke. Prostitutes clung to the walls, tempting young dock workers and foreign businessmen with calls of flesh. Thick red lipstick applied lazily over drawn, old faces, with multiple coatings of white masking powder. Modern geisha's. Muscular sailors lined the bar, with the occasional heavy brandishing their metallic augmentations to the bright-eyed local Chinese teenagers. Flem, the owner and bartender, was busily running up and down the cramped aisle behind the bar top, his mirrored eye casings flashing with bright strips of neon shining in from the grimy window, which cast rainbow polygons across the ancient wooden floor. Reese was familiar with this place, aptly named the Patch. A refuge of centralized scum on the Shung King, one of Hong Kong's redeveloped "Family Zones" during the latest phase of gentrification.

The bar smelled of acrid sweat, Chinese-Cuban ripoffs, a hint of cocoa powder, and an eye watering aroma of steaming onions.

"Hey Cocoa Puff, wake up."

Adrian Reese lifted his bruised face off the bar. An imprint of his face was drawn in dried blood on the table. The man across from him drew on his Camel, letting out a small cloud of smoke to join the growing smog. Down to a yellowed stub, the cigarette was promptly put out into the ash tray, adding to the small mountain of ash on the overflowing Hatachi-branded tray.

The man had a thick beard, tangled and filthy. He had small hairs poking their way out from under his chrome-topped, balding skull, giving the appearance of a silver bowling ball. Ringed dark bags sagged below his narrow eyes; his pupils reflected a maroon neon sign for the bar.

"How long have I been out?"

"Bout' four hours." The man gave a menacing smile. Decaying brown teeth overlade with gold alloy, Middle Eastern studs.

"So how long do I have to sit here?"

The man returned his gaze. "Long as it takes. You stirred up a lot of trouble with your stunt back in Tokyo. Kagasaki isn't one to forgive or forgot, unlike his father." Reese felt him adjust the barrel of the fletcher under the small circular table.

"How much they paying you?"

The man chuckled, "More than you can afford. Took quite a while to track you down, you know that?" Reese grumbled, feeling his bruises. "Yeah, long time. Nearly three weeks." The man took a drink of his beer, the warm alcohol splashing down his beard.

"Can I go take a piss?"

The man cranked his neck to the side. "No. Kag's boys be here soon. You'll piss then, trust me." The man checked his plastic digital watch. "Hey, how much were those?" The man tapped his fletcher on Reese's smooth metal knee augmentation.

"More than you can afford."

His face bunched up, furious, then started chuckling again, the bowling ball heaving in vertical motions. "Funny, smartass." He leaned into the table, closer to Reese. "But really, where did you get 'em?" He rattled the fletcher again.

"Berlin."

The man straightened in his seat again and took another swig from the bottle, splashing down his beard. He let out a strange sound of acknowledgement "Yeah, got this thing in Quebec." He tapped his skull, a slight hollow ring echoing into the bar, absorbed by the chatter of a dozen conversations.

"Religious man?"

"My father. He died of a stroke."

The man took out a fist-sized carton of cigarettes, the plastic logo of the Camel peeling off, with a coat of grit stuck to the adhesive. He lit a cigarette with a stainless steel lighter and put the carton away back into the inner pocket of his elephant hide jacket.

"Well I think god is dead." The man looked at Reese for a response. Reese stared at his beer bottle, uninterested. The man continued, impatient, "He dead because we killed him, you see? All of this, *all* of this. This kill him. Or her...I always wonder if god was a man or woman, or maybe a animal? You know what I mean?"

"No."

"Anyway, he, or it, is buried, '6 feet under', as you Americans put it. All that political bullshit before Day of Dollar."

Reese could remember the Global Currency Reform, or Day of Dollar as the Yakuza assassin grossly misused the language. Everything, everywhere, all dollars. No more yen, euro, pound, rupee. Dollared credit. Paper money could get you five years in the crimstim, so of course the peasants and mobs took to it in force.

"Wiped him out, government making everything outright secular. Instant Atheism." He paused to think, his miniscule brain aching to achieve critical thought, or memory, overridden with countless hours of Japanese jujitsu training exercises and killing techniques.

"My father was a sarariman, a cleaner for R&D at LocoMotion up in Osaka. Over thirty years he work for them. He would come home and tell me, my mother and brothers about these great machines they building. He couldn't get into their factory floor, his pass was not high enough. But he said he could see them playing with 6 foot skeletons, robotic visions of us. He would watch them take apart the metal person and the head's mouth could keep talking, even without the body. It's strange why we make things like that, these electronic humans. My father would compare them to children. He always say 'they keep playing with their dolls, like little girls. And like little girls, they don't know why.'"

The dim flame flickered as he drew on his cigarette, "He had this one story, it was before when my older brother was born. He was cleaning one of the men's toilets when a labcoat came into the bathroom. The scientist was frantic and kept turning the taps on and off, washing his face over and over. His eyes were huge and bloodshot, like he extremely tired. My father was getting mad, but left him alone because he was just cleaner. He saw the man call someone on his ear phone, kept asking where they were and when. He said he had something, and was coming up to meet them soon. My father saw the scientist open his lab coat and there was a metal spine clung to the inside pocket. The labcoat checked to make sure it was okay then ran out of the bathroom. My father never saw him again. Next month, Westerman Automation comes out with new spine replacement for wounded soldiers and old rich fuckers. Stronger, better."

"Hm."

"Anyway, he dead now. Maybe they kill him, I don't know. They say you are sarariman for life. Corporate birth, house, wedding, children and funeral. My father was like that, he try to get us out. I think they killed him. Maybe they think he steal the spine? I don't know." He finished his cigarette, adding it to the mountain of ash, like the others.

"Take a piss now?"

The man's face scrunched up, furious that Reese hadn't seemed to care, "Fuck, whatever. Stand up." Reese stood, the man rising in unison. He snapped the fletcher in a quick motion to the inside of his jacket, still pointing the barrel at Reese.

"Walk, gaijin. You make one move, you'll be dead before you even know it."

They made their way through the bar, clamouring groups of sararimen, prosthetics serving drinks and peanuts, and the geisha's. They arrived at the door, *MEN*, written in Chinese, a painted elephant curled into a resting peaceful ball below the sign.

"Now hurry up."

Reese moved to the closest urinal, unzipping his exhausted khaki jacket, followed by his trousers, the barrel digging against the groove of his back. The urinal flushed; murky water came down peeling around the cake.

"Got to wash my hands."

"You fine princess, just move."

They walked toward the door when an obese heavy 'augger' walked in. Reese sidestepped, causing the man to trip over his leg, falling onto the Yakuza behind him.

"Shit!" The fletcher fired off several shots, one hitting the heavy, others splattering off into the ceramic ceiling. Reese spun and grabbed the fletcher from the Yakuza's sweaty palm. He stood, shooting a small fletcher into the Yakuza's face, above the left cheek. The small dart let off a small micro explosion three seconds later, immediately dropping him to the ground. The eyelid began to peel back into his skull, leaving behind a miniature volcano of blood and seeping eye fluid.

Reese kicked the grungy restroom door open, the imprint of his nanocarbon boot marking the door. The bar was still alive, no soul had noticed the scrap, save for Flem standing behind the bar holding a dated Mossberg. Only a handful of patrons seemed to mind, ducking and running toward the safety of the exit, into the dense, illuminated pedestrian flow of the street. His aim was concentrated on a tall figure who stood in the middle of the bar, surrounded by bar stools.

"Reese." A hint of anxiousness in Flem's Scottish voice, "This a friend of yours?"

The man in black wore dark glasses. Matte, as if they absorbed the plethora of neon from the street. He was very slim, standing erect in a pool of heightened stature. *Military scientist, or a high up sarariman; had to be*, he thought. He wore a plain black business jacket as well as the complimentary suit pants.

"Lower your gun," came out with a thick American accent.

"I ain't lowering anything." Flem touted back. He adjusted the shotgun, remounting the wretched nylon of the stock to his shoulder.

"I am no Yakuza."

Reese narrowed his eyebrows.

"Reese, I got you." He turned back to the American, "Prove it." The man raised his left hand. A slim sheath of matte onyx titanium alloy sheathed in a thin padding, wrapped around his wrist and palm, engulfed into the unknown of the man's jacket sleeve. The bare skin rising out of the metal of the palm showed a complete human hand.

The Yakuza tended to remove initiates pinky joint, as a sign of utter devotion. Though many

replaced their joints later on if they managed to escape (though few did), it was a universal symbol for adherents.

Corps didn't even bother with such barbaric methods; if you left they simply planted a polite note in your mailbox and a lead bullet through your skull.

"All right." Flem lowered his shotgun.

"Thanks." Reese gave a swift friendly nod in Flem's direction.

"Just get out of here, you've attracted enough Yak eyes already."

"Mr. Reese, we have a vehicle waiting for you outside. Can help you with your local trouble." The man stepped in, his voice booming across the room.

"I don't know what you're talking about." The man gave off a small laugh, a snort of derision, then returned to his dead, hard gaze. "You'll be dead within the week. Our Chinese contacts have located at least four assassins sent to find you, not including the man you were with tonight. It's your choice, Mr. Reese, but I plead you take the right one." Reese raised an eyebrow. "The pay is good, and you'll have your choice of equipment."

"Fine."

The man grinned, a dead smile complimenting his corporate stance.

"I'm glad. Please, follow me."

Without waiting for Reese, the man turned and glided out onto the street. Flem stepped down off the bar and stored the shotgun in a hidden compartment. He gave Reese a quick nod and tended back to refuelling Chinese drunks.

"Christ..." Reese mumbled, and followed the man out of the bar.

THE SHUNG KING. Hong Kong's dock district. The swirling vortex of neon, noise, colours and languages overwhelm. Strides of people heading in all directions warped and moved around Reese and the slim American. Constantly moving, shifting, evolving, one would be swept off without a determined bearing in this sea of pale yellow and brown faces. Shung King was a perpetual centrifuge, an experiment in post-modern globalization and social nihilism. It was a thunderous clash of Chinese, Japanese and American culture. Dragons of plastic and paper mache overlooked locally owned Chinese markets as a sign of good fortune, engulfed by bloated Japanese department stores on every block corner. The sky was a constant shade of rich orange and navy blue, a reflection of the rain slick roads and setting sun in the distant horizon, diluted and hazy with decades of industrial pollutant build up. Advertisements hung to buildings row on row, a dizzying maze of products, constantly overlapping, trying to achieve supremacy.

Reese remembered hearing somewhere the population of Shung King alone was nearly three million. San Franciscans and Japanese immigrants dominated this part of Hong Kong, formerly known as Kowloon. Hundred story condos, each one not unlike the last, spurt out faster than the children which they house. A small component in the massive convoluted, and dense sprawl that has become Hong Kong. Ironically, the Kowloon Walled City Park was the only sliver of land unexploited by multinationals. Decades ago, it served as the densest and most crime-ridden district of the city. Shipping tankers importing goods into Shung King's expansive harbour dotted the polluted purple water, the odd yacht or fishing craft interwoven between their paths.

His first visit was for an early job, must have been in his early twenties. The arrival into Hong Kong's newly refurbished airport greeted him with the smell of newly applied ceramic paste and clean pane windows.

The flight over he spoke with a woman. Bleached blonde hair complimented narrow brown reading glasses, growing into a matching white business blouse and knee-length plaid skirt. She gave

Reese a large, toothy grin, coloured an illuminated hue of shallow violet by the small eReader her richly spray-on tanned hands grasped onto. He remembered her reading something by Jodi Picoult, but the title evaded him.

They spoke for nearly the entire ride from San Francisco into Hong Kong. He could recall listening to her discuss political discourses back home, and how she was an arts student at Western Washington, on a trip to visit for a co-op. For half the flight Reese quietly listened while she spoke of the harsh political inaction of Americas democratic party as a result of the ever expansive power of multinationals. She had common textbook thoughts of bribes and conspiracies, and how the President was receiving payoffs from Mitsubishi Automation. Reese sat in silence, watching the beautifully painted glossy lips move, the purple tint growing fainter with the Reader's battery.

She eventually asked him what he did. He lied; he said he was a private construction foreman for a telecommunications company. He complained about the gross lack of hypothetical benefits and living conditions.

They made love that night, over polycotton pillows and satin white sheets, the pale full moon hidden behind a veil of King's navy clouds. The next morning they ate breakfast together at the Hilton's cafe. She sat across from him on the circular iron coffee table, a knee-length blue dress overlapping crossed legs. He ate a small Danish biscuit coupled with a warm mug of cocoa. She smiled, dabbling with small swigs from her frozen plastic bottle of CoffeeSlim Cappu-Caramel.

They visited a small market together, her tanned palm wrapped in his cool natural hand. It wouldn't be until the incident in Cape Town that it would become an artificial construct, like much of his body existed in - just a shell. The market held a stinging aroma of bouquets of freshly cooking fish and chicken, thin slices of charred tuna placed neatly in a woven basket. She was adamant about choosing organic foods, if such a thing even existed anymore. Adrian never cared for the stuff.

His employer called him that night after they had made love, she had nestled in to sleep gracefully on her side next to him. "Things have changed, Reese. You need to get back Stateside. Ling isn't too adamant about the whole idea, he's backing out, the dickhead. We'll pay you, and I advise you just get the hell out before they catch up. Your ticket will arrive with tomorrow's breakfast." As sudden as the call was, he promptly ended it.

It would be too late though. The claymore they set in his rented Mercedes was for him, though she went down before he woke to retrieve the purse she'd left behind.

His contract was reliable, and therefore, his employer too. They hastily went through the arduous task of bringing Reese home and passing off the burning hulk as junk metal, showing up a week later in some no name Chinese scrap yard a few thousand miles away in Hubei. Not a trace of her rose-coloured blossom robe was found.

A day later he was back, restless and exhausted, in Los Angeles International. A month later he would be browsing some government database for another contract; she was right about the President.

Her name was Jennifer.

SHOULDERING HIS WAY through the crowd, the man cut a path in the dense flow of pedestrians for himself and Reese. Reese was relatively tall, about six feet. But this man was exponentially taller than he; six-ten, at least. His dark sunglasses kept looking ahead for the vehicle, Reese guessed. Tourists gave curious glances when he passed; the locals however had grown used to the sight of strangers.

Reese looked down to his right. There was a small Chinese woman walking her dog alongside him. The woman was walking carefree with a small plastic grocery bag at her side. Her beige flower-

topped wool hat hung loosely over her curly greying hair. The dog was clearly anxious and out of breath from the grubby pack of pedestrians. Reese felt sorry for it; he owned a dog once.

Some girl next to him said, "Yeah, three grams of hexipose, bout' 40 bucks I'd say. That will top you off to the end of the weekend." Whoever the woman was talking to sounded like they agreed. Sounded like a rat trap; rich corporate workers from all over come to experience Kong's famous hallucinogenics. Small pink and yellow polygons, usually hexi or pentiposes, two to three a day, and you'll be flying high for the next three.

He looked ahead and could see the tall man nodding Reese toward the edge of the sloped curb. He manoeuvred his way through out onto the street. A teenager on a hand-painted, rustic two-seater rickshaw gave him an odd look. The blue painted wheels covered by a thin Persian blanket looked untrustworthy. The cart driver snapped his head back to the crowd and began calling out, "Rides, you sir! Bring your Madam on a wonderful ride! Only ten dolla! Sir!"

"Mr. Reese, if you please!" The Mitsubishi's chauffeur was holding open the door to a black sedan a few yards up the slick road. Reese acknowledged and walked up, climbing into the back seat into cool leather and air conditioning that gave off the scent of lilacs. The tall corpsman was sitting on the opposite side in the back. The driver returned to his seat and descended the Mitsubishi into the web of cars, rickshaws and trucks moving along the rain slick precipice towards the harbour.

Sliding hands over black leather, checking for ridges, bumps. Reese bent over, shoving his hands into the depths underneath the passenger seat.

"Why is the car manual?" Reese questioned, as a the sight of a driver was now uncommon, even in Asia. He continued sliding his hands around the steel struts underneath his seat.

"There are no explosives in this vehicle, Mr. Reese. We do not take any chances. You can stop checking. And the driver is an android, prosthetic to the car, if you must know. It adds a certain...class, that most sedans lack." The man was looking away from Reese out the window.

"Can never be too sure." He sat back up again, convinced the car wasn't laden with a charge.

"No, you can't. But we're professionals, Mr. Reese, and professionals take care of their assets."

"Assets?"

"You, Mr. Reese."

"I don't work for you." The corpsman turned to face him, removing his sunglasses. Deep wells of dark stone-coloured pupils greeted Reese with that same dead gaze he had seen in the bar.

"No, you don't. You work for my employers."

"And who would they be?"

The man changed the subject, "Are you well educated in regards to nanotechnology?"

"It's experimental, all secret corpotech. But don't change the subject."

"My apologies, I am simply trying to give some background on your next job."

"I'm retired."

He gave that same other worldly laugh he did in the bar. "Mercenaries don't retire Mr. Reese, you simply become *exhausted*."

"I was never a merc. Don't confuse me with those pea-brained dumbshits, running and gunning through Guatemala and other forgotten countries. I guess I'm good at security..."

He shuts his eyes for several seconds, tilting his head for an apologetic gesture, not so foreign from a common sarariman emote. "I work for the Girschman-Waller corporation, specifically in the public relations department. You may have heard of us."

"I've heard of G-W. You helped fund the Russians in their Eastern Bloc campaign."

The man pinches the bridge of his nose, his nostrils flare, "Yes, if look deep enough. We have

had some misdealing in the past, but the past is past. The present is now, Mr. Reese, and I can gladly assure you, we are the largest exporter of citizen and military-grade limb augmentations in the world."

"So what do you need me for?"

The driver turns down right down a smaller street. The flow of people gradually thins out as they drive along the harbour's edge.

"We are building two things, actually. One of which is very public."

"The Arcology."

"Yes, specifically named-"

"Rhodes, after the statue. I've read the news."

He grinned, "I'm glad. That will make your job much easier."

Reese glanced out the window. A trickle of rain was making its way across the sheet of glass. The passed an industrious and filthy looking manufacturing plant. The loading dock doors were covered with a flimsy wall of sheet metal.

The Woman looked down at the car from the second story outer rusting walkway, as it passes the plant. Her smooth, frail hands grasp the chipping paint of the handrail with crisp elegance. She stares down into the car, chilling to the bone. Reese meets her eyes, but the moment is lost as she walks into the darkness an open door of the plant.

He turns his gaze back toward the man. "What's the job?"

"As you know, Rhodes is nearing its completion. We already have the first bottom quarters complete, and the upper section should be done construction and completely furnished within the next four weeks. We already have nearly ninety-five percent of living quarters sold to employees and outside parties. However, we've suffered some...structural damage in recent events," he reaches under his seat pulling up a bulky aluminum briefcase. A quick coded sequence on the case's locking mechanism and he began taking out several plastic photographs. He shows the first one to Reese; a twisted maw of a blasted ceramic floor in front of an enormous imploded titanium safe lock head door. He shows the other photos, each one showing the same blown lock head at different angles.

"The police are already investigating, but the BPD doesn't have a large jurisdiction, and I'm sure our perps aren't stupid enough to stick around Boston. They've sent out an APB, but the UN and CSPAC are putting up the red tape, giving us the story that nothing was stolen. Claiming losses would result it this going public, which we cannot afford at the moment."

"What was stolen?" Reese narrows his eyebrows.

He replaces the pictures back into the case and settles it under his seat, "Nanochip."

"Experimental?"

"No. Our premiere consumer-grade chip, the EarthLink 001. We have had militarized nanochips for quite a few years now, but they've been so specialized, they're absolutely useless for home use. That's now changed."

"So, you want me to find this chip?"

Nodding his head, he continued, "No, that would be futile. By now it's either being replicated by a rival company's R&D, or some rich hacker prick is slotting it as we speak. A good company prepares prototypes, backups. We can build more," he paused, briefly fixing a microscopic imperfection on his jacket cuff, "No, no, we need you to find out who stole them and what they'll be using it for."

"Maybe Ukrainian-Americans?"

"We thought that too, at first. Get back at those Russians right?" He massaged the bridge of his nose, "However, when we looked into the explosive materials, and had our servers run back tracers on their trojans, we realized Ukrainians were out of the question. Their hackers used SOCOM-grade

blackICE stabbers, broke right through, not a chance. Then their ground team walked right in, used C4 charges with francium extract, extremely unstable, extremely explosive. How they got it in without killing themselves, I'll never know." He sighted down the black arm of his lenses, then placed them delicately back onto his rigid face.

"What's it pay?" The car passed another row of derelict industrial plants, which are now home to thousands of low income workers.

"First off, we'll get rid of your bounty with the Yakuza. Secondly," his face straightened, and Reese gave him a stern expression. "Two Swiss accounts, each five million. If you require anything else, I'm sure my employers would be more than flexi-"

"That will be fine." The man nods, a pencil smile pulled across an angled face.

"I've arranged for a flight tomorrow in the afternoon. You'll find the ticket and all other documentation in your apartment. I'll be waiting outside at eight o'clock."

"We're here," the drive declared from the front.

It began to rain again as the Mitsubishi pulled up in front of Adrian Reese's apartment. He opened the door, stepping out onto the battered curb. The man grabbed his arm as he went to put his other leg onto the split asphalt sidewalk.

"Tomorrow, Mr. Reese. You'll have a new life ahead of you. Think about it, Adrian, this one job can put everything behind you. The good life, Reese, the good life!" The man was shouting over the escalating torrential downpour.

Reese completely stepped onto the curb, and looked back into the dry, artificial cowskin interior of the sedan. "What's your name, pal?"

"Valcourt," he said, reaching across to close the door.

The Mitsubishi pulled away from the curb, water splattering off the sedan's thin sheet roof of carbon nanotubes.

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