

## Liability

*“As every citizen of this great nation is probably aware, today we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Libertarian Act. For many this day is a time of celebration, but for others, it is a time of sober reflection. At the time of its passage, the Act was designed to curb the growing problems of violence that were sweeping the country. In America’s inner cities, crime continued to escalate, schools became the sites of increasing gang violence, and in time, the problem began to spill over into every community. No one appeared to be safe, and no place seemed untouched. Under the burden of a crushing national debt and a crumbling social structure, both state and federal officials were at their wits end to find a solution. The Libertarian Act responded to these problems by giving private citizens the power to enforce the law. Following on the heels of the Safe Streets Act, the Libertarian Act repealed the use of the National Guard to enforce the peace, and gave official sanction to bounty hunters and vigilantes who were now permitted to track down and arrest offenders. With one stroke of the pen, the life of every known or suspected criminal in America became redeemable for money. Those who were willing to adopt this often dangerous, sometimes glamorous, life applied for licenses, and bounties were paid out to those who brought offenders in, dead or alive. The question we are asking ourselves today is, after twenty years of vigilante justice, is the Libertarian Act still needed?”*

Gord sat and tried not to let the annoying sound of Tyson sucking his spaghetti distract him from the TV. The investigative journalist was getting to the end of all the background junk and was about to get to the good stuff, the stuff that involved them. Grabbing the remote, he turned the volume up a few notches and leaned forward in his seat.

“It’s coming!” he yelled, pointing to the set.

*“I’m standing here with a group who calls themselves the Watchmen...”*

“Yes!” Gord yelled. Tyson continued to eat his food, eyeing the TV with only mild interest. Across the room, Janey continued cleaning the assorted gun parts she had laid on the table and shook her head.

“Relax, Gord!” she ordered. “It’s just another human interest story.”

“Yeah, but I get to talk this time. The last time they came around, all they wanted to do was to talk to Tom.”

“What good is it, anyway?” she retorted. “You had your face covered the whole time?”

“Shut up!” he demanded, pointing at the screen. “My parts coming up!”

On the screen, a black hooded figure stood next to the reporter, a microphone in his face, trying to look tall and threatening. Underneath that hood, speaking in a low, husky voice, a bounty hunter attempted to speak his mind.

*“It’s all about freedom, about the protection of our rights and our homes from those that would do them harm,”* he said.

The reporter brought the mike back to her lips and asked: *“So is it fair to say you see yourselves as the last line of defence against the problems we see in our streets?”*

*“Yes, ma’am. I do.”*

She moved next to the hooded figure that stood next to him, a taller, heavier man who kept his big, dark arms folded across his chest.

*“What about you sir? Why did you get into this business?”*

A deeper, gruffer baritone voice replied: *“Cause’ it’s where the money is. Plus I think the crooks are the ones who oughta’ be afraid, not us.”*

*“Do the men you hunt fear you?”* she asked.

*"Oh yeah!" he replied.*

"Good one," Janey said. Tyson smiled devilishly and nodded. Gord hushed them both again. "This is your part!" he said, pointing to her.

*"What are your reasons, ma'am? Do you see many women involved in this line of work?"*

*"Some, but not nearly enough. It's still very much a man's industry."*

*"Is that why you joined?"*

*"Yeah, pretty much. I didn't want to leave all the fun to the men. Plus, we girls got a lot more to fear being on the street alone. I don't think the guys in this business understand that too well."*

*"Do you find it hard dealing with the men in this business? Are they tolerant of women, do you find?"*

*"It depends. I think they look at themselves and think it's their manly duty to solve these problems all by themselves. I figure I'm here to remind them that they can't do it alone, and... we have as much business being here as they do."*

*"What about your colleagues? Do they work well with you?"*

*"They do, but only because they know they better."*

"Ouch!" Tyson said at her. "Careful girl!"

"She spent a lot of time on you," Gord complained. "I had the most to say."

"Yeah, you were the one who kept trying to hog the mike," she came back.

"Yeah, whatever. Just listen."

The shots on the screen moved back to some panoramic views of city streets, crumbling schools, and old riot footage. For a moment, Gord phased out as the report got into more background stuff.

*"At the time, analysts cited the nation's crushing debt and the crumbling social system as the cause of the situation. For decades, the inner areas of America's greatest cities were known for their violence. But soon, citizens saw the problem spill over into smaller urban and even suburban areas. After a short-lived stint with martial law, the federal government found that the cost of keeping soldiers in the streets only exacerbated the debt situation, and created conflicts with the citizenry. The Libertarian Act was seen as a compromise that would be pleasing to both civil liberty advocates and an angry citizenry demanding action."*

"Here I am! Here I am!" Gord yelled again.

*"One of the things that makes this country of ours great is that we believe that the government's got no business controlling our lives, telling us what to do. I think that this law recognizes that. It simply places in the hands of the people what is already theirs to begin with..."*

The camera cut again to a shot of the reporter in another area of the city. Gord threw his hands up in frustration.

"Damn it! I talked for like five minutes, they only used a bit of it!"

"What are you gonna' do?" Tyson asked, taking another mouthful of spaghetti. "Can't hog the limelight forever."

*"But of course," the reporter went on, "not everyone agrees with the Libertarian Act or its provisions. We were speaking with one such person earlier today who prefers to remain anonymous, who claims that the act endangers the very social fabric of our community."*

The next shot was of a pixelated face sitting in a dark room, the voice garbled to conceal its true sound. The three of them leaned closer to listen to this critic, whoever he was.

*“These vigilantes - or these mercenaries, as they should be called - are not the solution to our country’s problems. If anything, they are a symptom of the larger issue. We have had a situation in this country for close to half a century now where guns are too available, and schools and inner city neighbourhoods are allowed to just rot while the bureaucrats porkbarrell and waste our tax money on people who don’t need it. As long as these problems were confined to certain areas, no one did anything about it. But then when the situation finally got out of control and threatened the rich neighbourhoods, suddenly you had demands for action. The troops and the National Guard couldn’t do it because the government couldn’t flip the bill, not without reversing all the tax cuts they’d been promising the rich folk. So what do they do? They put more guns in the hands of people and tell them to solve their own problems.”*

*“But haven’t we seen a positive effect?”* the reporter asked.

*“But at what cost? How many innocent lives are sacrificed everyday in the name of public safety? We have no idea how many of the bounties were even legitimate, because bounty hunting doesn’t even rely on the court system. What about due process, what about the rights of the individual? There’s more to liberty than just the right to have guns.”*

Gord blew a loud raspberry at the set, while Tyson and Janey simply gave him a thumbs down. No one liked listening to the bleeding hearts when it came time for these stories. At least the reporter had kept the man’s part short and stuck to the good stuff.

*“Well there you have it, folks,”* the reporter concluded. *“While the results are still cause for debate, no one can doubt that for the most part, the criminals are the ones who have suffered the most. Today in America, statistics confirm that crime has dropped in most areas of the country past where it was twenty years ago. Some say that this recent decline is reason enough to consider repealing the Act, while others believe that keeping it in place is the best way to ensure that crime will never again return to what it was. But in the end, the real question is who are these masked men and women who hunt the streets for criminals? Are they mercenaries, or the last line of defence against the rising tide of chaos? No one can say for sure, but one thing no one can doubt is their patriotism or their commitment to what they do. For NWN news, this is Daisy Menendez reporting.”*

“Alriiiiight! We got our fifteen minutes!” Tyson said sarcastically.

“That sucks!” Gord griped, shutting the TV down and walking over to the fridge.

“You worried about your time still?” Janey asked. “Don’t be such a baby! You got your say, and you sounded good saying it too.”

“Yeah, well just be glad they didn’t give the interview to Mason and his gang. Tom would have flipped if they did that,” Tyson added.

“I don’t get that,” Gord said, opening the fridge and grabbing himself a cold one. “He could care less if they interview him, but he doesn’t want someone else getting all the attention.”

“Not just someone, Gord, Mason.” Janey replied.

“Yeah,” Tyson nodded. “Whatever happened between those two that made him want to hate that guy so much?”

“Who knows? He won’t talk about it.”

“Yeah, and good luck trying,” Gord said, cracking the can open. “I tried once. Tom almost ripped my face off.”

The gang’s speculation was interrupted by a suddenly thump at the door. Gord dropped the beer can and reached for his gun, grabbing a spot behind the kitchen counter. Janey stopped cleaning the components and took her shotgun in hand, cocking it to get a slug in the chamber.

Tyson, for the first time that afternoon, put down his food long enough to flip out his weapon. Looking in the direction of the door, Janey asked: "Who is it?"

"It's me, you idiots!" the voice on the other side yelled. "I'm coming in!"

The door slid open, and on the other side, with bags of groceries in hand, stood Tom. The grizzled face and glasses were indication enough, as was the mocking look he had on his face.

"Don't shoot," he said sarcastically. "Just came to make sure you losers were stocked up. And don't bother to help."

And no one did. Walking over to the kitchen, Tom placed the bags down on the counter. Gord suddenly became aware of the can lying on the floor, and the growing puddle surrounding it. Tom looked down, shook his head.

"Get a towel, dumbass!" he ordered. Nodding meekly, Gord ran to the bathroom to fetch one. Looking over at the other two, he asked: "What are you two up to?"

"We were just watching the interview," Tyson replied, getting back to the last few strands of spaghetti he had left in the bowl.

"Don't care," Tom said, walking back to the kitchen to unpack the bags. Reaching into one of the bags, he pulled out a bunch of envelopes. "Mail call!"

"What have you got?" Janey asked.

"Some cheques, already cleared, some bills, not yet paid, and some more requests for more TV spots."

"Oooh, don't tell Gord!" Tyson begged.

"Tell me what?" Gord said, emerging from the bathroom with a rag in hand.

"Tom! Please!" Tyson repeated.

"We got an offer from a producer of some reality show," he yelled over at Gord, "wants us to consider being on their program for next season."

"Man! I told you not to tell him!"

"It's okay, T-man, I already told them no. This is just them pleading with us, trying to get us to change our minds."

"You said no?!" Gord cried in dismay.

"Take it easy, Gord! There's no way I'm letting you embarrass yourself for those bloodsuckers! You remember what happened to those dudes who called themselves the Black Dragons?"

"Yeah, they were cool! And they got a lot of business thanks to it!"

"At first, yes. But soon, the crooks stopped taking them seriously. Nobody takes you seriously if they start knowing about your private life."

"We have private lives?" Janey asked derisively.

"I got a private life!" Tyson interjected.

"Oh yeah! You're real popular! The ladies love a man with lots of guns who can't stop eating."

"You'd be surprised!" Tyson came back.

"Will you two cut it out?! I said we weren't doing it. Besides, the show's been going downhill for years. We got nothing to gain by going on it now. End of story."

Gord finished wiping up the puddle and slumped back to the fridge to grab himself another beer. Suddenly, he looked like a little kid, the way he sipped at it with his head hung low. Tom looked back at Janey and Tyson, who looked away quickly so as not to appear like

they were challenging his decision. Letting the matter drop, Tom decided to deliver his next bit of news.

“Also, I forgot to tell you, I ran into Baby Doc about a week ago,” he said, using their friends formal name. “He’s invited us to a meeting, his father’s hosting it.”

“When is it?” Janey asked.

“Tomorrow. Afternoon, up at his dad’s estate.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” she demanded.

“I told you I forgot! Anyway, they want us there, he said so.”

“Poppa Doc wants *us* to be there?” Tyson asked, suddenly taking an interest.

“Seems that way. From what he told me, his dad’s got a big proposal and wants all the bounty hunters in the area there to hear about it.”

“We’re moving up in the world!” Tyson surmised.

“Hope so. So you guys up for it?”

“Sure!” Janey said, looking over at Tyson, who was also nodding his agreement. Tom looked at Gord, who also seemed a bit more animated by the news. He nodded too.

“Great! I was thinking we do some clothes shopping this afternoon. Gotta’ look presentable for the old man.”

Janey, Gord and Tyson looked around eagerly as people continued to file into the room. Everywhere they saw faces they knew, or ones they vaguely recognized. Now and then, they had to ask who someone was, which usually prompted by the reply: “You don’t know? Why that’s...” To this, they had to shamefully answer “Ohhhhh!” Ten minutes into things, they made a profound realization: clearly, they were coming up in the world. Unfortunately, this was counter-balanced by the equally powerful realization that they still had a long way to go before they could consider themselves the equals of those around them. Under the circumstances, they couldn’t help but feel shy and overwhelmed. But at least the meeting place was nice. Poppa Doc had generously volunteered his own private estate for the occasion, an opulent manor house down by the waterfront that had lush lawns and a very spacious interior. All those who had come were gathered in the front guest room, which Doc’s servants made sure was catered with plenty of food and drink. In addition to the sandwiches, cheese plates and fresh fruit, they had provided fondue, smoked salmon, and pâté. Everyone appeared to be getting on well, forming little conversation groups, and catching up with old friends and colleagues. In the middle of it all, Janey, Tyson, and Gord hovered together and tried not to look as out of place as they felt. After a few terribly tense minutes, Tyson finally said something.

“Man, I am sweating in my boots, here!”

“Me too! Where’s Tom?” Gord followed.

“Relax, you guys. Don’t look weak in front of the others!”

Janey’s sage advice was cut short when, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Cali – one of the world’s most notorious woman hunters - walking towards her. Her dark skin, the eye patch, and the long brown curls descending over a form fitting jump suit with a knife at her collar, were what gave her away.

“Janey? Janey Whitman? Ladyhawk?” she said, using her real name and alias. Janey’s heart leapt into her throat. She couldn’t believe who was addressing her, and as if she knew her.

“Yes– yes, that’s me?” she said when she found her voice.

“Do you know who I am?”

“Um... ah, yeah!”

Cali laughed. “Well, good. I was worried there for a second. I just wanted to say hi, since I’ve been following your career these past few months. You look good out there, girl. Anybody ever tell you that?”

Janey couldn’t speak. Somehow, she managed to shake her head in reply. Thank God that hadn’t failed her too, otherwise she’d look like a complete idiot!

“Ah, too bad. And I saw that interview you did, I was proud of what you had to say. I couldn’t said it better myself.”

“Really?!” Janey said. Her voice had come back, but unfortunately too loud.

“You were right. We girls got to stick together in this boy’s club.” Cali swept her one eye around the room, encompassing all the men that were there. “Not enough of us around yet to even the odds, you ask me. I’ve been saying it for years now, glad I heard it from someone else’s mouth too.”

“Uh, huh!” Janey laughed, trying to sound out an affirmative.

“Well, I’ll see you around. Poppa Doc’s sure to have something interesting to say. Good hunting out there, girl!”

“Yeah! You too!”

Cali walked gingerly away. Her catlike footsteps were something else she was famous for. Perps never did hear her coming until she was right behind them, that knife of hers at their throats. Leaning over her, Gord and Tyson began to prod.

“So much for relaxing, eh, Janey? Gord said.

“Yeah, real cool there, Ladyhawk!” Tyson added.

“I don’t believe it,” she said, practically ignoring them. “Cali knows *me*, and has been following *my* career.”

“Yeah, good for you,” Gord replied.

“I never imagined...” Janey said, still oblivious to them. Leaving them behind, she walked off to get herself something to drink.

“Now what do we do?” Gord asked.

“Where the hell is Tom?” Tyson replied.

Across the room, next to a bowl filled with ice and beer bottles, Tom had cornered Baby Doc and the two were having a chat. Tom had donned his best sport jacket for the occasion and some fine black trousers, but kept the stubble and glasses. There were certain things a hunter couldn’t lose if he wanted to maintain a certain image. Baby doc, had on a light grey suit jacket with matching pants, and on his head he wore a ceremonial skull cap that made him look like a visiting African dignitary. Compared to his father, he was really quite small, and stood at least a head shorter than most people in the room. Still, no one doubted that the little Haitian’s family cast a long shadow, which was more than enough to compensate for his height. Over two cold ones, they exchanged the usual pleasantries, and then Tom got straight to the point.

“So what exactly has your dad got planned here?” he asked.

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, it’s a regular hunter’s convention here. You’ve got people coming in from all over the country. What’s it all about?”

“Let’s just say my father’s hoping that people can pool their resources here. It’s not exactly a growth market out there anymore.”

“Well, yeah,” Tom said. “So I’ve heard. The news keeps saying how much better things are getting, but what’s that got to do with all of us?”

“You’ll see,” Doc said simply.

“Come on! You can’t give me one hint?”

“I said, you’ll see,” Doc replied with finality. “You just be on your best behaviour when he’s talking to you later.”

“Why do you say that?”

Doc took a sip from his beer, licked at a droplet that hit his chin. He looked like he was trying to figure out how to say something sensitive.

“Well, let’s just say he invited everybody from the neighbourhood, including people who might not get along with other people.”

Tom’s face went sour. “You don’t mean –?”

“Behave yourself. I’ve told him the same.”

Doc walked away, leaving Tom to curse quietly over his drink. Not sure how to vent his anger, he tossed his beer back as fast as he could. He would need another too at this rate. Hell, there was not enough alcohol in the world that would make him want to sit in the same room with his old rival, let alone deal with him.

In the middle of the dining hall, hundreds of people were seated at an exceedingly long table. At its head, a towering Haitian man stood and stretched out his long, heavy arms to encompass everyone he had gathered there. Aside from Tom, every member of the Watchmen sat and watched in awe as the old legend conducted the meeting. The descriptions they’d heard, although a little exaggerated, had done him some justice. There was the whitening beard and the heavily chapped lips that made him look old and distinguished. If not for his immense arms and broad, barrelled chest, people would assume he was someone’s kindly old grandfather. The finely tailored light coloured suit was also a nice contrast to his deep chocolate skin. Altogether, he was the picture of a veteran, one who inspired ease and respect in the same instant.

As for Tom, he sat and stared unflinchingly at the one person he didn’t want to see there. Just a few chairs down and on the other end of the table, Mason sat and looked ahead. His bright, shining eyes hadn’t bothered to look over at him at all. He knew Mason had seen him coming in, but seemed perfectly happy to ignore him. Were it not for their surroundings, Tom would have surely spat something at him. Nevertheless, Poppa Doc was oblivious to their little conflict, and went ahead with his introduction.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said in a deep, heavily accented voice. “On behalf of my organization and my family, I welcome you all. As you’ve no doubt heard, I have a business proposal that I want you all to seriously consider. As you know, all across this country, our profession is celebrating its twentieth anniversary. We have done well for ourselves, yes?”

There were nods and muttered agreements from around the table.

“And yet,” he continued, “within the last few years, business has begun to slide. We are even beginning to hear economists say that there’s a recession in our industry.”

The positive noises were replaced with some troubled murmurs. Baby Doc stepped in to say the next bit.

“Our success has always been based on this country’s ability to keep sliding into moral decay. The ongoing crime rates and the inability of our government to deal with them is what made us such a growth industry. But what do you do when things start getting better?”

“Indeed,” his father interjected. “Like all businesses, you have growth for a long time, and there’s plenty for all. But eventually things start to change, you get growing competition for shrinking markets, and then things get dirty.”

“Competition in our industry would not be healthy, I’m sure everyone here would agree?” Baby asked.

Not everyone looked like they really concurred with that statement, but since it came from Poppa’s own son, they all nodded. Poppa smiled once he felt they had the room with him. “No we don’t want that at all. Which is why I propose that we come together to form a new organization, one that brings everyone here under one roof.”

At the end of the room, someone raised their finger. After Baby pointed to him, the man asked: “Do you mean like a union?”

“Something like that yes,” Poppa replied. “We would form a nationwide organization that would enlist anyone willing, making sure that they enjoyed the protection and benefits that comes from being in an organized body. We are already working less, this way we could work less and get paid more.”

There were more murmurs from around the table. They were confused and unsure. Clearly the proposal was something no one had ever considered.

“I know this must sound strange to you,” Baby said. “No one among us considers what we do to be anything like old fashioned blue collar work. But the world is changing, and we need to change to keep up with it. If we’re going to survive the new climate that’s out there, we need to organize.”

“Who’s going to be in charge of this thing?” Tom’s glance shot back to Mason. He had been listening to the Doc’s for the past few minutes, and had almost forgotten he was there. Suddenly, he was asking questions.

“I will be,” Poppa Doc replied unapologetically. “I will be the first man to head up this organization, and my son will follow in my stead. All contracts will go through me.”

“All decisions will be done through consultation,” Baby reassured them. “You’ll all have your say, just like any union. But it will be this family that runs things for the time being.”

“You don’t need to decide now,” Poppa said, wrapping things up. “Stay here today, enjoy the comforts of my humble home. But consider what I have said. Take the weekend to talk it over to whomever you need to. I would like to know who plans to join by next week at the latest.”

“What do you think he meant by he wants an answer by next week, at the latest?” Gord asked. The meeting was now over, the three of them had huddled together outside of the dining hall, and like the rest, were trying to come to some kind of consensus over what they just heard.

“You don’t think he means he’d start knocking off the competition do you?” Tyson asked.

“Doc? No way! He’s not like that,” Tom replied. “Although he did say times were changing and he didn’t want to see us competing with each other.”

“All sounds kind of scary, you ask me,” Janey surmised.

“Well, we’re free to leave,” Tom said, “so why don’t we all just get out of here and —”

“Well, well!” a voice came from behind him. “What do we have here? Tom, the Water tower Man, and his band of misfits!”

Tom’s face suddenly looked very sour. Slowly, he turned around and was face to face to his old colleague-turned-enemy.

“Aren’t you going to say hi?” he asked.

“Hello, Mason,” he replied bitterly. “Still alive, I see.”

“Surprised?” Mason asked.



“More like disappointed,” Tom came back. Mason laughed, his bright eyes lighting up as he did.

“Just can’t let go of the past can you, old friend? Still, you should think about what the old man had to say. With the way things are, business could get vicious out there. I’d hate to have to go up against you.”

“I wouldn’t,” Tom replied. Mason laughed again. Reaching into his tan-coloured suit, he pulled out a set of shades and applied them over his eyes.

“Gotta go, old friend. Word is, there’s a poolside party in the making. Drop by if you want to fight some more. Otherwise, I’ll see you around, probably.”

Tom smiled acerbically and watched angrily as Mason left. Behind him, Janey, Gord and Tyson looked at one another with a lot of shared confusion. They let him stew for a few minutes, not wanting to say anything that might set him off. Finally, he turned around and said something to them.

“Let’s go. I want to get out of here now.”

“Can’t we hang out for just a little while? There’s people here we kinda’ want to talk to,” Tyson asked, carefully. Janey and Gord nodded, also carefully. For a second, Tom looked like he was about to say something obscene and threatening. Instead, he just took a deep sigh.

“Fine, you stay. I’m leaving and I’m taking the car. You guys can get a ride with someone else?”

The three of them nodded.

“Good. I’ll see ya’ around.”

“A contract is a contract!” Tom said, changing the magazine on his rifle. “A contract is... a bloody, bloody contract.”

Tom cocked the lever, chambering a .416 round into place. Through the scope, he saw every detail on the white practice dummy, including the bull’s-eye in the middle of its face.

“I’m the Water Tower Man! Pick you off from any distance, from any height with my trusty rifle! I’ll put a hole through the back of your head big enough to see through! Oswald was a f—!”

The crack of the gun reverberated off the walls of the practice grounds. Another hole opened in the target’s head, spewing forth a powdery residue. It certainly wasn’t the same as shooting a man. The white powder was not the pink mist. Still, it did the job when he needed to blow off some steam. Tom chambered another round, felt the dryness in his mouth that demanded he take another swig of his hooch. Setting the rifle down, he reached over and grabbed hold of the whiskey bottle he had brought with him into the rifle range. Sucking down another few ounces, he took up the rifle again, rambling to himself between shots.

“I got you! No getting away from me! You can’t even move! You can’t shoot back! You can’t give me a reason not to! You dead like everyone else I seen through this thing!”

The gun sounded again, another round tearing through fabric and cellulose fibre. The dummy was unresponsive, neither pleading for mercy nor shouting in defiance. It just stood there, a holed-up version of a human being that could not bleed or feel pain. Tom was unsatisfied. The pain and revenge he was hoping to taste would not come. There was only the thought of a mocking smile, of a friend dying cold and alone in the streets, betrayed by those he thought were his comrades. The bullets didn’t make it go away, but the booze seemed to help. Grabbing it again, he sucked the hard burning liquor back without another thought. Unfortunately, the bottle soon ran dry.

“I’m outta’ hooch!” he yelled down at the practice grounds. “You got any?”

The target just stood there, standing still without a care. He could shoot it again and again, and it didn’t seem to care. And worse, when he yelled at it for some liquor, it didn’t respond.

“Well f— you too!” he yelled, hurling the bottle at it. But without his weapon, it was hopelessly far away. The bottle shattered harmlessly on the target range, somewhere between him and the dummy. Hell, even with a weapon, some things could never be reached, especially the things from the past.

The rifle was especially heavy for some reason as he hauled it and a few boxes of unspent rounds back to the armoury. The whiskey must have had something to do with it, or maybe it was the heat at the ranch. In any case, it was nice to be back inside. There, in the cool confines of the armoury, he managed to get his head back in order. Far from being the place where he stored the Watchmen’s arsenal, it was also where he kept his mementos. His medals and citations decorated the walls, as well as pictures from the old days. There were the ones of him and his old buddies during their tours in Iraq and Iran. There were even a few of Mason, another combat vet who met up with him after they got out of the service. Then there were the articles cataloguing the exploits of the Haymakers - the group he and Mason had once belonged to. In their time together, they had accomplished much, taken out many known and suspected criminals, and had made some serious money doing it.

Suddenly, the articles ended, with the one detailing how the body of a hunter had been found dead. According to investigators, the man had been taken out by what clearly were professionals. At least one journalist had suggested foul play. The bloodied face of the corpse held a dubious expression, caught somewhere between anger and terrible sadness when he died. The authorities, when asked, claimed that his death had been a clean hit. Apparently he had done something to warrant a contract on his head. No investigation was mounted and no one ever stepped forward to claim responsibility. Just another criminal who got what was coming to him, it seemed.

Slamming the door to the arsenal shut, Tom walked back into the kitchen to fetch himself another bottle. Once he found one, he uncapped it and raised it in a mock toast.

“To old friends, dead, but not forgotten!” he said and slugged it back. “Damn them! They just won’t be forgotten!”

A loud thumping noise roused Tom from sleep. His head was spinning, his face covered with sweat, and he wasn’t even sure what time it was. The thumping continued. Someone was knocking at his door. Slowly, Tom pulled himself up from the couch and stumbled towards the front door. The knocking was getting louder, and more annoying. It was probably his neighbour coming to complain about where he parked his truck again. Damn beet farmer always did have it in for him! Probably because he was a beet farmer! A few feet from the front, and the knocking got louder again.

“I’m coming! Cut it out!” he yelled. Finally he got his hands on the knob and opened the door. To his surprise his three co-workers were standing there, looking worried.

“Guys? What are you doing here?”

“Can we come in?” Tyson asked. Janey took a whiff from him, curled her nose at what she smelt.

“Pee-yew! What have you been doing?”

“Whadda’ ya think?! Anyway, what’s this about?”

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