

Hunter Cell

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'The Executive Branch of the United States government authorizes, for the purposes outlined within this document, the establishment of a special agency to be utilized strictly for the purposes noted herein. A special team of legal assassins, directed and reporting to the Supreme Court and the Special Executive Committee, shall act upon the receipt of an authorized contract executed and endorsed by the two Powers named herein, to locate and execute said contracts.

For the purposes of saving tax revenue and penitentiary space, this special team shall execute contracts upon those U.S. persons knowingly found to be involved in the following crimes and activities: drug cartels, organized crime, mass murder, murder in the first or second degrees, acts of terrorism, treason, hijacking, carjacking, thefts valued at \$10,000 U.S. dollars or more, or any other egregious act that both Powers listed herein deem necessary for the initiation of a contract.'

Excerpt from Executive Order Theta 19666

Killing is a business, and business is good. You don't get much time in this line of work for personal reflection. I suppose that I could spare a few minutes now to let you in on this unusual assignment. The agents are getting near the end of their current contracts anyway.

Ever since the President signed nineteen-triple-six into action back in 2033, we've been able to exist. We were ordered to clean up the dregs and take out the social trash of our American Civilization -- and we're damn good at it. What we have done is nothing new or innovative. The great civilizations of the world have done it before. Feudal Japan had the ninja, the Crusades had the Nizari and militaries around the world train their snipers. No, what we do isn't new, it's just been legalized.

We had to take it a few steps further, though to protect our -- interests. When quantum computing technology became mainstream we found ways to use it to our advantage. All of our recruits for this particular assignment had to (and still must for that matter) undergo a medical procedure that connects a quantum processor to their brains. It's small, painless and definitely invasive. The Cell uses these to track and monitor our agents in the field. We wouldn't want a cold-blooded assassin with a license to kill running rampant in our neighborhoods, would we?

There are those in the social media that believe that what we do is wrong and an abuse of power. Screw them. They didn't see their own kid get raped and slit from ear to ear. They weren't there when a cheap smartass thought that it was a good idea to sell state secrets to punk terrorists at the expense of our own troops. They certainly weren't there when the drug cartels were smuggling humans and dope across the borders.

No. None of those fools were there, and I'd bet a dollar to a stale doughnut that most of you weren't either. There will always be those who will go out of their way to find something wrong with a perfectly good system. No matter, though.

I've seen the question come up in the media, move in social circles and I've even been asked it myself on occasion over the past eight years.

How can I get into your organization?

There's no clear cut easy explanation or operating procedure for what we do. I tend to borrow a piece of

advice from another ancient organization: to be one, you have to ask one.

That's going to be a tall order to fill. We're a small outfit that's always on the move. As it stands, we have a rather sizeable buffer of anonymity working in our favor, too. The best advice I could give to you, if you really think that you've got what it takes, is to plant your nose in the tabloids, and keep an ear to the ground on the national media.

I really would love to stick around and chat a bit more, but you see I have a business to run. As I mentioned earlier, we never seem to have a shortfall on scumbags. So, I must get back to my duties at hand, and make sure that my agents aren't playing outside of the lines.

Q - Out.

Chapter 1

May 2041
Las Vegas, NV

She had to wait until the entire restroom at the Stardust-Orion Casino and Resort had cleared. One final flock of sorority girls freshened up their makeup, and herded themselves out the doors into the bustling crowd. The young vibrant woman with Asian features unzipped her small handbag. She pulled out a thin clear plastic vial. Ivy quickly drank its contents, and chucked the plastic into the trash can in the corner. She looked over herself in the large mirror of the upscale resort. Her sleek black hair on the left side of her scalp fell over her almond eyes. She had always kept the right side cropped really short. So, it was more of a 30s style. Big deal. Ivy combed her long bangs back behind her petite ear, and began to freshen herself up for the big night ahead.

She had been working on this contract for nearly six months. Ivy had found a way to get into the inner circle of a major crime syndicate which operated in the Southwestern United States. She had a way with men. She knew it, and used it to her full advantage. They loved her exotic look, sports cars, her expensive designer clothes and the way she always gave them her undivided attention. No matter what, they all ended up the same to her - dead.

Now Ivy was the arm candy of one Julian Escobar, the known Don of a large mafia. She had witnessed them running drugs, buying and trading stolen import cars, moving young girls across the Arizona border to brothels and dropping large bribes into the laps of area politicians. All of this just in the past six months. The other hunters could take out a target in less than a month, but Ivy liked to work her way into the lives of her hits. Yeah, the Cloud Courts got this one right for sure. Escobar was an A-1 asshole of the highest order. She would definitely enjoy watching him die.

The exotic young woman pulled a small bottle of nail polish out of her handbag, and gave it a good shake.

'Getting ready for the big night, I see.'

Jesus, Q!

She had been an agent for nearly four years, but Ivy still couldn't get comfortable with the idea of her boss butting into her mind at any given time to have a thought

conversation.

Stupid quantum processors.

'Don't knock them, dear. They serve a grand and noble purpose.'

Sure, Q. What do you need?

Q never sounded the same in any of Ivy's mental conversations. Sometimes Q would be an older male fatherly figured voice, and then next Q might come across as a young woman.

You give new meaning to the term schitzo, Q.

'I'm just here to make sure that everything runs smoothly for you.'

Have I ever botched a contract, Q?

'Not to my recollection, no. It's not only about that, though.'

Ivy took the applicator brush out of the bottle, and applied a generous coat of clear polish to her index fingernail.

'Going to poison him through the nails? Death by clawing?'

Sure. You gonna stick around for the peepshow?

'I don't get involved in that sort of business.'

Are you sure? I wore some cute underwear this time.

'You took the antidote, I assume.'

Just did a minute ago. Come on, Q. I'm not a rookie anymore.

Ivy raised her finished left hand up to her ruby lips and blew her nails dry.

'I know, but Julian Escobar is no ordinary man, Ivy. He's dangerous and powerful. One wrong move and I might have a vacancy to fill.'

The petite goddess giggled at that thought.

You worry too much, Q.

'You don't worry enough.'

I'll be fine.

'Does Escobar suspect anything?'

No. I don't think so.

Ivy touched up the ring finger on her right hand with the poison polish.

He still thinks that I'm the rebellious daughter of an Asian mafia Don.

'Good. Do you need anything uploaded into your processor? Some grappling moves? Intermediate Spanish? The Karma Sutra?'

Ha, ha. Very funny, Q. Nope. I'm good to go.

'Very well. I'll leave you to it. Make for Wyoming at the conclusion of this rendezvous.'

Sounds good.

'Best of luck, Ivy. Q - out.'

The sensual assassin blew the last of her venomous weapons dry, and put the polish back in her purse. After straightening out her mini-skirt and touching up her lipstick, Ivy gathered her belongings and headed back out onto the busy casino floor of the Stardust-Orion.

The gambling den had a packed house tonight. It didn't surprise Ivy in the least. This was a Saturday night during the peak summer tourist season. Every gullible gambler from here to the Atlantic shore was in tonight. The air in the open casino floor reeked of bourbon and cheap cologne. The blackjack tables all bustled with activity. Sassy hologram dealers stood behind the crescent tables and managed the games. An older gentleman sat and pondered over the fourteen points in his hand. Ivy glided over to his chair and watched the game unfold.

"Would you like a hit," the beautiful blonde hologram dealer asked, "or would you like to stay, sir?"

The unkempt old-timer tapped his cards with a bent stubby finger. He noticed the foxy new arrival just over his right shoulder, and turned to her.

"What do you think darlin'?" he inquired. "Hit or stay?"

The athletic woman leaned in over the table to get a better look.

"I'd say take the hit," she said leaning on the edge of the playing surface.

The old man slapped the red felt table next to the little card-sized chrome box.

"Hit me!" he shouted with excitement. "You only live once, right hon?"

Ivy gave him a single nod, and brushed her bangs back over her left ear.

The lifelike hologram dealer smiled as a playing card shot out of the chrome box in front of the aged gent.

"Your card, sir," she said.

The man pushed his ball cap back on his sunburned head, and flipped his card over.

"Five of Spades, hah!" he shouted in triumph. "I call sugar bits. Whatcha got?"

The hologram Barbie's right hand lowered even to the table's surface, and pressed a button. Two large digitized replicas of her playing cards appeared to the hologram's left. The dealer turned to face the cards, and held out her arms in her best Vanna pose.

"The house has a jack and a queen. Twenty," she said.

"Dealer wins, sir. Please place your cards in the slot to the right of the dealer box."

The old man huffed in frustration, and slid his cards down into the little chute next to his chrome box.

"Better luck next time, darling," Ivy said as she swaggered off into the dingy bells and blinking lights.

The New Wave Retro movement was alive and well here in Vegas, too. All of the young hipsters had brought back all of the essence de cool from the 1940s. As a result, most of the guys wore the three-piece suits, fedoras and trench coats from that time period. Some of them might be caught wearing a newsboy and rugged jeans, but by and large, the vast majority of the NetRo pop culture got into the fedora look. The girls reverted back to the victory roll hair styles, hats and solid-toned dresses.

All of the big sales giants had also been cashing in on this NetRo wave. Chevy released a throwback-style racing coupe called the Hornet. Swooped body moldings, big chrome grill... the works, cat. The tobacco giants also jumped on the bandwagon. They saw the need for a healthy alternative to their traditional products. So, they came up with healthy smoking. It was a synthetic product rolled in a new hydrocarbon paper that burned off as steam. Lucky Strikes, Chesterfields, Camel and Old Golds all came back with the new look. The hydros pumped oxygen-rich air into your lungs and gave you a distinct after taste of your choice depending on the brand.

Yes, the Stardust's main casino lounge was filled with hydro smoke this evening. Ivy wound her way through a sea of fedoras, newsboys and porkpies. The assassin swaggered down the wide staircase, and into an inviting rendition of *Paper Doll*. Several young men undressed her with their inebriated eyes as she strutted by them. There was only one man that was going to have her tonight, and he was going to wish that he hadn't.

She sauntered through the set of large gold doors to the right of the main stage, and went back into Julian's private party room. As soon as Ivy entered, Escobar snapped his fingers in the direction of his private bandstand. The quartet quickly fired up an old classic from the later part of the last century. Bowie, Buoy, Ivy couldn't recall exactly what his name was...

Escobar was a pig. She snapped her handbag to her right side, and marched over to him - fake smile in tote.

"Everything alright, China Girl?" he asked from behind his dark gold-trimmed shades.

She wanted desperately to punch him in the throat.

"Fine," was all Ivy could manage.

Julian looked like a fool to her in his fedora and black suit. All of those gold and platinum rings and chains; it was overkill.

"Come on, chivato!" one of the other thugs shouted. "I'm callin' What you got, man?"

The muscular mafia don laid out his hand in a fan on the felt surface.

"Full house," he proclaimed. "Aces over eights."

"Dead man's hand," one of his fat cronies to his left muttered.

"What, man?" Julian inquired with a confused mug.

The obese Venezuelan sporting pork chop sideburns quickly shook the comment off.

"Too bad!" his younger brother shouted from the far end. "Royal flush, bro."

"Damn!" the elder Escobar huffed slamming his bejeweled hand down on his cards. "You're lucky you're my brother," he said smiling.

"Lucky my ass, Jules," Marco retorted. "I've always been better than you at poker."

"It's alright," Julian said. "I've always been better with the women." He stroked Ivy's inner thigh and teased her panties with a chuckle.

"Let's go another hand," Marco said raking in his winnings. "I gotta win some more of my hard-earned money back."

Julian leaned back in his chair and looked up to his girl. The veteran mob boss saw the invitation in her alluring eyes.

"Don't think so," Escobar said tapping her ass. "We've got some other business to attend to."

The mafia don snapped his fingers at the band again. The band leader looked up from his guitar.

"Pump the tune upstairs into our penthouse, would you?"

The band leader nodded and pushed a switch on the floor with his foot. A thin layer of translucent blue light surrounded the small stage.

"Come on, China Girl," Julian said grabbing his pack of Lucky Strike hydros. He turned to the chubby Venezuelan, "Rodney, would you take my chips to the front and cash them out?"

"Sure, boss," Rodney said rounding up the massive columns of different colored poker chips.

Julian, with Ivy on his right elbow, lit up a hydro and strode out of the room and over to the bank of private

elevators. Once inside, he slipped Ivy a kiss.

"Feeling lucky tonight, Jules?" she asked rubbing his bicep.

"Sure am, sugar."

"Ten minutes with me, and I'll change your life."

Escobar licked the lip just below his pencil-line mustache.

"I believe you, China."

He took another drag off of his synthetic cigarette as the elevator doors opened into their private hallway. Two huge gorilla-like thugs nodded to Escobar as he passed between them and into his five-star suite. The hologram band continued to belt out his request on a repeating loop in the far corner.

Julian walked over to the huge bed at the heart of the room, and tossed his fedora into the chaise lounge chair under the window.

"Just give me a few minutes to freshen up?" Ivy asked leaning on the doorway into the bathroom.

Julian nodded undoing his tie and pointing his finger at the wet bar near the kitchen. A room servant quickly prepared a gin and tonic, and shuffled it over to the impatient mobster. The kingpin took a long swig from the tumbler and waived the youthful attendant away. Escobar sat the booze on the nightstand and crushed his hydro out in the ashtray. He turned around to see a vision that must have come straight from beyond the gates of Heaven.

Ivy strode into the bedroom wearing nothing more than a slinky pair of red undies and matching bra. Julian was sure that he'd never seen anyone with as much natural beauty before. His China Doll unbuttoned his high-dollar shirt and unbuckled his trousers. She kept her eyes fixed in his almond stare as she knelt before him and went to work.

The tattoo of a cherry blossom tree on her lower back writhed as Ivy rocked back and forth on top of Julian. He bit his lower lip and locked up. Escobar was close; Ivy could feel it within her. The assassin leaned in and frenched the mobster one more time, and dug her nails into his bulging biceps. Julian grabbed her hips and arched upward in ecstasy. The hologram quartet still repeated the chosen song.

The sweaty youthful woman climbed off of Julian, and strode into the restroom to freshen up. He smiled at her as she primped her hair and turned on the water in the shower.

The song was growing on her. Escobar was still a pig -- just a pig with decent taste.

When Ivy walked back into the bedroom wearing nothing but a wet towel on her head Julian was convulsing on the California king. She slid her panties back on, and sat down beside the quivering mob Don. The red lines on his biceps now bubbled with white foam.

"Nothing personal, Jules," she said leaning into his horror-stricken face. "This was just business."

Escobar's eyes widened even further as the white foamy substance rolled out of the corners of his mouth. His cry of shock and rage couldn't be forced past the poisonous knot that was gagging him to death.

Ivy finished getting dressed, gathered her handbag and made for the main doors into the penthouse. She opened the door with her slender hand, and was greeted by one of Escobar's thugs outside.

"I think I wore Jules out again, boys," she said. "Give him a few hours to catch up on his beauty sleep?" she whimpered rubbing the hulking bouncer's arm.

"Yes, ma'am," the ape said with a smile.

The killer closed the big door on the band and her fulfilled contract for good.

Chapter 2

May 2041
Somewhere in Arizona

The old man was busy behind his store counter taking inventory on a new shipment of snuff when the stranger walked into his shop. He'd seen him in here several times before. The guy always showed up once every month or so for the same thing.

"Evenin'," the old man said.

The biker said nothing. The cool dark form strode over to the automotive aisle and knelt down to its lowest shelf. His long black duster blew up a few dust bunnies taking refuge under the lip of the store shelves. The stranger plucked a small blue and white rectangular box from the shelf, and made his way back around to the cash counter.

"That be all?" the old man asked as the stranger tossed the box of matches on the counter.

"Yup," the cool man said. His eyes were hidden under the brim of his black leather cowboy hat.

"I see you in here on a regular basis," the clerk said slicking back his patch of snow white hair. "You gotta name?"

The biker laid out a slip of cigarette paper on the counter and lined it with a small amount of tobacco. His face remained motionless underneath its five o'clock shadow.

"Nope," the biker said rolling up his cig.

The old man scratched his sagging chins.

"Well, you got any friends?"

The stranger knelt down and put his cloth roll of smoking tobacco back in his right boot.

"Nope," he replied from below the counter. The man stood back up and scratched the stubble on his cheek.

"Well, sayin' you had some friends," the clerk prodded, "what would they call ya?"

The biker slipped the thin roll of white into the corner of his mouth, and took a match from the box. He struck it across the rough edge of the counter. The cowboy lit the end of his cigarette, and tossed the smoking match onto the tile floor.

"If I had a friend, Mac," he said taking a drag, "they'd probably call me an asshole."

The stranger let out a small cloud of white smoke and

picked up his box of matches.

"Thanks again, Mac," he said as he strode out of the door.

"Sure thing," Mac said closing the drawer of his register with a cheerful ding.

The renegade straddled his Bad Boy and fired it back to life. The last thing that Mac saw was his black duster flapping in the wake of the rider's departure.

The broken strips of yellow rolled under Rider's Harley Bad Boy as he thundered down a desolate strip of Arizona road. A few lone cumulus clouds sailed just above the painted peaks in the growing distance.

'You ready?'

Rider shifted his steel horse into a higher gear, and twisted the throttle.

As always, Q. To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?

Rider was a veteran of the Cell. Local legend around the Southwest stated that he'd killed more people than small pox.

'I know that you can handle yourself, Rider. Consider this more of a random audit.'

The desperado gnawed on the end of the unlit cigarette in the corner of his lips.

You gotta do what you gotta do.

The sun set over Rider's left shoulder showcasing the multi-colored layers of the staggered peaks.

'How are you planning on taking Sanchez out?'

The assassin gruffed. He knew where this conversation was headed.

I'm giving him the option.

'You sure that you can take him in a shootout?'

Rider shook his head and leaned into the gentle curve in the cracked roadway.

Of course I can. I'm the fastest gun in this century, Q!

'Sanchez is the leader of the biggest militia in the southwest. He'll have protection.'

The veteran hit man turned his attention to the painted strips on the hillsides to his left. They did look beautiful in the setting sunlight.

Don't worry, boss. I'll take care of them. It'll just be him and me.

'Do you need anything uploaded? Maps? Spanish? A good burger joint?'

The biker laughed out loud at that. Q knew him all too well. Rider had a soft spot for only two things in this world -- burgers and redheads.

Not unless you know of a nice diner with a cute redheaded waitress.

That got a healthy chuckle out of his supervisor.

'I'll see what I can round up in that department, and get it to you later.'

The tall golden grass bent over in the wake of the motorcycle's fury as Rider blew past another cactus.

Sounds like a deal, boss.

'Listen, Rider. I need you to make yourself available after this contract for a team get together.'

No problem. Where and when?

Rider did love the feel of the arid desert wind in his dusty blonde mop. The grit of the fine sand that stung his neck was another matter.

'Not entirely sure just yet. Head for Wyoming, and I'll give you the details en route.'

Rider leaned into another turn, and slowed down to roll over a set of rusted out railroad tracks. His iron beast roared in glory once on the other side, and sped back down the strip of concrete.

Will do, Q.

'From there, we'll take a look at what we've got coming down the pike in terms of contracts for you guys. Be safe.'

I will.

'Good. Q -- out.'

A lone dirt road appeared over the next soft hill in the road. According to his onboard navigation system, this was the way to the training ground for this local militia. He'd been here several times already this month, though. The tracker only used the GPS as a backup. Rider had done his homework on this outfit. Darren Sanchez was no weekend warrior. He had served in the Mexican Army for twelve years, and was heavily decorated for his service in the Peruvian Conflict in '32. The man was a well-oiled mercenary, plain and simple. Rider knew that one of his old school Wild West shootouts with someone of Sanchez's caliber could go wrong quickly. He'd have to scope the target out, and maybe get a glimpse of how he shot.

Since his departure from the Mexican Service in early 2041, Sanchez had set up a militia of over two thousand soldiers in central Arizona. Rider had been on his trail for just under three months now. Finding their training camp was the easy part. Getting to Sanchez -- that was

going to be the challenge. From what the assassin had gathered thus far, he knew that Sanchez never traveled alone. There were always at least two huge bodyguards flanking the field general at any given moment. Rider also knew by now that Sanchez always did some range shooting with his troops tonight, and then went down to a local watering hole to talk business. These were the times when the leader would be most vulnerable. He would be nearly alone, and likely underground talking with the mafia gurus. He would leave his guards for the night for the assumed protection of the family.

Rider slowed his bike down and made the left turn onto the dusty dirt road. Weathered wooden fence posts staggered off in a tilted line toward his destination. The cowboy pulled his leather hat back onto his head, tightened the drawstring under his chin and slowly rolled down the road past the winding gorge on his right. Once the bright explosions of gunfire could be seen in the distance, Rider stopped his Bad Boy, and slid its kickstand out.

"Good a place as any," he said brushing the tails of his black duster back.

The loner reached down into his right boot and produced a small wooden match from its hidden pouch. He struck it on the side of his dusty boot, and held it up to the bent cigarette in his mouth. He took a deep drag off of the imported Swedish tobacco that he'd rolled just thirty minutes earlier. Rider pulled the brim of his cowboy hat down over his brow, and shot a thin plume of white smoke out of his right corner.

"Let's just see what you goons are up to this evening, shall we?" he said reaching into the inner left pocket of his custom-made duster.

It had been fabricated out of a state-of-the-art material that was light weight, fire retardant and bulletproof. One of the perks of having connections in military R&D. Rider slid the dark pair of shades up over his cool gray stare.

"Infrared on," he muttered.

The glasses obeyed and showed the killer the landscape in hues of cool blues and violets. Rider turned his gaze down the gorge in the direction of the random gunfire. The specs picked up a couple of dozen bright orange forms shooting at the firing range.

"Bingo," he said. "Range finder, on."

Again, his glasses did as commanded and displayed a bar at the bottom of his field of vision. The numbers rolled up and down as Rider's eyes focused on different

objects. His eyes came to rest on the warm bodies at the firing range. Rider could see them testing their newly received order of AK-65s.

"You guys really suck," he whispered through his smoldering cig. "You couldn't hit the broad side of a small town."

Rider panned his view over to a makeshift obstacle course 700 yards away. Several men and women swung on ropes and ran across an elevated log.

"At least there's some hope for you," he said pulling out his replica 1880 Colt Legends of Steel .45 revolver. Its polished black barrel and body shimmered in the fading orange rays of the sun.

Rider loved guns. He packed two Beretta 9mm pistols on thigh holsters, but this one was his favorite by a long shot. It had a solid walnut hilt and the words 'Legends of Steel' inlaid in a gold scroll on its barrel. The gun also had six gold portraits of Sam Colt on each of its barrel chambers, ornate scrollwork on the backstrap, a gold hammer and a single gold medallion with the telltale rampant colt seal inlaid in the hilt.

"Just like Earp's Peacemaker," he whispered unlocking the swing cylinder.

The cowboy slid its bullets one by one out of his waist belt, and loaded them into his pride and joy. As always, Rider loaded them all clockwise, and pulled the bullets out of his belt from right to left. He was a self-proclaimed mild OCD. He took a drag off of his tobacco, and closed the cylinder of his revolver with a quick snap of his wrist.

"Let's find the man of the hour, and see what he's doing."

Rider slid the colt back into its holster at his right hip, and focused his shades on a large building at the far southern corner of the range. There were three figures wandering around inside one of its rooms. Two huge goons and one short muscular man inspected crates of their recently acquired AK-65s from the Russians. No one else was present in the massive structure.

"There we are," Rider said loading rounds into his 9mms' magazines.

He followed the three figures as they made their way out of the headquarters, and went to inspect the readiness of their troops. Sanchez grabbed a rifle from one of his soldiers and took a knee at the firing range.

"Here we go," the loner said. "Night vision on," he commanded. "Zoom in ten times resolution."

The shades obeyed and zoomed in on Darren Sanchez firing rounds downrange at paper targets. Popcorn bursts reverberated through the gorge as he squeezed off several rounds.

"Amazing," Rider said in disgust. "All of those legendary weapons and not a damn one of you can shoot for shit."

His glasses focused on Sanchez's target at the end of the shooting range. Some of his bullets had made it to their destinations in the chest of the black silhouette. Many of the other rounds hit the mound of sand and earth behind it.

Sanchez handed the weapon back over to its owner, and waived to his goons to follow him past the o-course. Rider watched as the three made their way to a huge decked-out SUV parked at the end of the only road into this camp. Sanchez turned to his bodyguards, gave them some sort of instructions and hopped up into his boat on wheels.

"Time to roll out," Rider said pressing the ignition switch on the handlebar.

His stallion of steel fired to life under his lean frame. He swept the kickstand back up with the heel of his boot, and placed his right thumb over the print pad next to the throttle. Its numbers clicked down from five to zero as they had been designed to do. Rider always loved to wait until the engine shutoff ID got to two before putting his digit on the ID pad.

Identification confirmed, the onboard systems said.

Rider swung his bike around to point back up the dirt road that he had just come down. The massive black SUV's tail lights came alive, and seconds later it rolled down the road out of the valley. The assassin revved the throttle on his ride, and headed out after his contract.

He had stayed close enough to Sanchez to trail him, but not so close that the militia leader would have suspected anything. Sanchez came to rest at a nearby hole-in-the-wall bar just a few miles from his camp. Rider parked his Harley on the far side of a long line of street bikes, and shut the beast down. He slid the brim of his leather hat back down over his eyes, and meandered over to the brute bouncer at the bar's entrance. The thug held a meaty paw out to Rider's left breast. The killer looked down at the hand and back up to its owner in defiance.

"Hold on, pard," the Latino bouncer said from behind his designer shades. "Synthetics only inside the bar."

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