

Lock and Loaded: The Series

by Christopher Baughman

Episode One

"They're in the house across the street from you," the Handler said through Josh's ear implant. "They have the package. I am shifting you into Alert mode. Let me know when it is in full effect."

Josh leaned back into the driver's seat of his Explorer and waited for the chems to kick in. Alert mode was the lowest level of enhancement activation, and consisted of a particularly powerful form of methylphenidate. It was the same chemical that Ritalin used, only far more potent. He felt his concentration focus in, and the world came into a greater clarity. "I'm there," Josh said calmly, his years of training taking hold.

"Acknowledged," the Handler replied. "Sources say there are four squares in there, but be flexible. I am prepping your system for full Tactical mode. Switch up when you are ready to go in."

"Understood," Josh answered as he made sure his two pistols each had a round chambered. He favored the classic M1911 pistol. The affectation was a holdover from his years in the Marine Corps, as it had been the standard Marine service pistol for decades. A lot of Marines still preferred it over the 9mm that was adopted in the 1990s, and Josh, being a bit of a traditionalist, fell into that category. He glanced over at the house he was going to be going into shortly, and asked, "It's the yellow house, correct?"

A pause, and then, "Affirmative, it is the yellow house, Tiburon."

Josh climbed out of the SUV, pocketing the two pistols in his jacket. He hated the codename they'd assigned him, but seemed to have little say in the matter. "Beginning recon," he said, which the Handler acknowledged. Josh walked across the street, taking in every detail of not only the target house, but the entire surrounding area. Sights, sounds, and even smells were noted for possible reference later. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary to his finely attuned, chemically enhanced, and highly trained senses, but he had been wrong before. He approached the building with extreme caution.

"Squares." It was a hold over phrase from the early days, back in the sixties, for people who weren't chemically enhanced. The technical term was "non-enhanced," but all organizations had their own histories and lingo, and the Conspiracy was no exception. Some agents in the past had assumed that squares weren't particularly dangerous, but they always learned a lesson on that point early in their careers. Whether the lesson was fatal or not varied.

After checking the entire perimeter of the house, Josh circled back to the front, where there was only one unblocked window. Just on the other side of the glass there was a young woman watching television from a couch. She had hair in various colors and lengths, and wore a dark patchwork of latex and leather clothing that appeared to be held together by safety pins and black electrical tape. She seemed attentive only to the program, and was completely unaware of Josh's presence.

Leaning back against the outside wall, Josh said quietly, "Switching up to Tactical mode," and triggered the flood of a tailor made chemicals that the Handler had prepared into his system. Cocaine derivatives were piped directly to targeted centers of his brain, bringing on a hyper-awareness well beyond the Ritalin's capabilities, while methamphetamines poured into other parts of his brain, boosting his energy levels to unimagined heights. His body shuddered at the sudden rush of chemicals, and Josh was only able to maintain his composure

through the instant euphoria with the help of the Ritalin and the harsh discipline of his training.

Painkillers numbed his fiery nerves in less than thirty seconds, while a new drug, synthetic adrenaline of an unprecedented quality, coursed into his veins. Were it not for the painkillers, Josh would have collapsed to the ground with this last infusion. The new adrenaline was infamous amongst his fellow K-Troopers for its brutal training period, and Josh could feel the power it quickly bestowed on his body. He flexed his twitching muscles, and took a deep and measured breath. A lot of yoga training went into his current mastery of a body hovering on the edge of exploding, and he did not look forward to the inevitable crash after the mission.

"I'm going in," he said softly, and without waiting for a response from the Handler, Josh stood up and threw himself through the glass window. The two pistols appeared in his hands, and he blasted a few rounds into the reclining woman before he even hit the floor. In the slowed flow of time characteristic of a ramped up system, Josh could almost see the individual bullets punch through her flesh. Unexpectedly, he was also able to watch the skin knit itself back closed as she rose from the sofa, her green glowing fist aimed at his face with inhuman speed. Josh sent three more rounds into her as he dodged backwards out of her reach.

The girl shrugged off this latest volley of lead and lunged at Josh with a knife that appeared out of nowhere. The blade missed his throat by millimeters, and he sidestepped her outstretched arm with ease. Not only was he noticeably faster than her, she seemed to have very little actual martial arts skill. He stepped in and almost casually snapped her arm at the wrist and elbow, before shooting her in the side of the head. This wound did not heal, and her suddenly limp form crumpled to the floor.

Listening for any sign of the other occupants of the house, Josh keyed his transmitter. "One down. Target appeared to be Talented, Handler," he said, maintaining his even tone. If one

of the people in this house could change reality so easily, he expected that the others could, too. Based on her abilities and her appearance, Josh judged her to be a member one of the arcane factions, but there was no telling which one. It seemed as if everyone these days that discovered they had the Talent wanted to be wizards or vampires, like something out of a fantasy novel. These people, who formed themselves into covens, coteries, and any other goofy nonsense they had read about in New Age books, were generally looked down on by others in the Talented community. The one Josh had just dispatched probably fancied herself a vampire, judging by her outfit. Nevertheless, they could be a threat in their own right, and Josh took the few available seconds he had to reload his pistols with fresh magazines.

"Tiburon, be advised, Over-watch is reporting a sudden burst of Phase activity in the area," the Handler said. "Recommend switching on Phase enhancements."

Josh groaned. He hated the Phase enhancements. The way they distorted reality around him always ensured the following crash would be ugly, and probably last for much longer than usual. Most K-Troopers suffered a week of downtime after a mission, while the ones who found themselves undergoing Tactical mode with Phase enhancements were typically out of action for at least a month. Some never fully recovered, and had to be reassigned to avoid addiction, breakdown, or both. Still, he needed to be able to see into Phase to properly fight people who were able to operate in that realm. "Turning on Phase enhancements," he said, as hallucinogens were dumped into his brain. The primary one was raw ketamine, which endowed upon the K-Trooper a powerful sense of detachment; a side-effect of existing on two planes at once.

Normally, for the average square person, drugs like these could take hours to go into effect, but the K-Troopers had the advantage of customized chemicals, training, and the brain-pump system. It was fundamentally a simple mechanism, but was a triumph of miniaturization. Carbon tubing ran along his nervous system to various points of the body, as well as directly into his brain, all connected by a central pump attached to his back

ribs. He had once seen a CT scan of his head after the installation surgery, and the webbing of tubes spread across the inside of his skull like a road-map. Between this system, and the designer drugs engineered specifically for this method of delivery, the K-Trooper was a chemically enhanced force to be reckoned with.

Almost immediately Josh noticed the walls pulsing rhythmically, glistening with the strange sheen that indicated a thinning of the barriers between realities. He knew right away that he now existed simultaneously in the real world and Phase, and steadied himself with carefully controlled breathing patterns. "Phase enhancement engaged," he muttered before stepping through the now semi-material wall.

In the next room he appeared behind two more of the vampire types, who were watching the door in ambush, and fired directly into the backs of their heads before they could even begin to react. They dropped in slow motion to the ground as the blood spray began to paint large stains on the wall. Not waiting for their bodies to hit the floor, Josh leaped backwards through another wall, spinning around as he flew through the thick air. He landed in an empty room, and almost without thought sent his mind out to locate the fourth target, as well as the package. He found them moving across the back yard through the night, heading for a car to presumably make an escape.

Knowing that he only had a few moments left, Josh threw himself through the outside wall and glided halfway across the yard after them. He saw a woman holding a little girl of about twelve by the hand, hurrying through the darkness. He brought his pistols up and aimed at the woman, but stopped himself before squeezing the triggers. It took a precious few seconds for his brain register the fact that the while the woman was wearing normal looking clothes, the girl was dressed much like the three goths he had just left dead in the house. Also, she was leading the woman, rather than the other way around. His hesitation almost cost him everything.

The girl, whose hair was dyed black and who wore black lacy clothes, stopped, spun around, and threw up gloved hand. A wave of black energy rushed through the Phase and slammed into Josh, sending him flying backwards against the house. The glass windows shattered under the blast's assault, and the plastic siding split in various places.

"Oh, hell," Josh muttered as he stood back up, dusting himself off. The woman fell to the ground unconscious while the girl stalked towards Josh, her eyes orbs of bottomless black. "Oh, hell," he said again, and raised his pistols to aim at her. In the real world she still appeared as a creepy child, but in Phase her form had shifted to something more menacing, with claws, scales, and very large teeth. As her monstrous shape walked towards him, sending bolts of black energy across the air, Josh charged directly in, dodging with an inhuman speed as he fired round after round into her.

When he got within arm's reach, she lunged out at him, swinging a large and muscled arm through empty air, and missing by a hair's breadth. Josh pistol whipped the little girl as he leapt past her, spun around, and lashed out with an unnaturally strong kick to her spine. This sudden attack knocked her face-down to the grass, and she lost concentration long enough for her Phase form to shift back to her natural shape. The pummeling didn't actually hurt her, but it put her in position for Josh to finish the job, which he did without hesitation with two bullets to the back of the head. Little girl or not, he made it a policy to kill things that scared the hell out of him.

Josh collapsed to the grass, his chemically induced energy all but spent. The world came back into tangibility as the micro-dose of ketamine wore off, and he turned to look at the package. She was a woman in her thirties, with blonde hair, and was lying unconscious in the dirt. Mustering up the last of his natural strength, Josh dragged himself to his feet and stood over her.

"Package has been secured," he said to the Handler.

"Good work, Tiburon. Now eliminate the package."

Staring down at her, Josh shook his head. "Say again, Handler?"

The voice, which seemed irritated at his hesitation, repeated, "Eliminate the package, Tiburon. Quickly, before authorities arrive."

Josh had never refused an order in the past, but he had never been given such an order before now, either. It was one thing to kill people who were legitimately trying to kill you first, but someone who wasn't an immediate threat? He figured that the Conspiracy might have a very valid reason for wanting her dead, but this was not how Josh operated. He fired two rounds into the dirt beside her head, and walked away into the shadows.

"Package has been eliminated, Handler," he said, maintaining his professionally monotone voice.

"Good job," the Handler replied. "Report to Recovery at once. You've a long month of bed-rest ahead of you."

Episode Two

Recovery. There was nothing quite like it in the Conspiracy. It was inevitable that it would come to be called "rehab" in lieu of Recovery among the ranks. After a K-Trooper undergoes the chemical transformations while on a mission, they always went into at least a week of Recovery. This usually involved bed rest, psychological monitoring and evaluation, and a lot of downtime. For his money Josh found the bed rest to be the most therapeutic, while the one on one therapy sessions he could have done without. That isn't to say that he thought they were pointless, but he found them aggravating.

"Would you say that you are beginning to view Overwatch as a sort of disinterested parent, perhaps?" the psychiatrist asked, scribbling another line of notes in his notebook.

Staring dumbly at the shrink, Josh sighed. Sometimes this was the worst part about rehab, at least to him. The shrinks always seemed to want to reduce everything to the parent-child relationship. It didn't matter if they were discussing killing, the possibility of addiction to the drug euphoria, or the nature of Phase, they always phrased it in the terms of what sounded like magazine pop-psychology. "I don't know," he said. "I mean, really, Overwatch only does the one thing, right? Watch for Phase activity. Other than that, they aren't really a player in my world. They just tell me when I need to switch on the Phase enhancements."

Overwatch was a strange institution. Josh had only seen their operation once, and would be happy if he never saw it again. In essence, Overwatch consisted of banks of humans connected into bizarre, almost alien, machines. Metal tubes led into every orifice in their bodies, and they were encased in a gel-filled sensory deprivation chamber called a Tomb. The intimacy of the machines in all of this was not what bothered him so much as it was something an aide told him. She quietly informed Josh that the Overwatch personnel no longer slept. They were kept wide awake 24/7 with a combination of drugs similar to the Phase enhancements, plus a few that were unique to Overwatch usage. They were able to sense and pinpoint areas of abnormal Phase activity, especially where it bled over into the real world.

Given his own aversion to hallucinogens, Josh could only imagine the madness that the typical Overwatch staff must be reduced to.

The psychiatrist shifted in his chair. "Yes, and you hate the Phase enhancements," he replied. He wrote a few more notes, and said, "Maybe the connection is something you should think about. At any rate, I believe our time is up for this session." He stood and crossed over to his desk, clicking his pen as he walked.

"I guess I'll be back in here same time tomorrow, right?" Josh asked. This was his third such session in the past week, and it was only Wednesday.

"Yes, of course," the psychiatrist muttered as he read over some notes. Disinterested parent, indeed.

Josh made his way through the underground facility to his assigned room. The location of this base/hospital, as every other facility run by the Conspiracy, was supremely hidden, and not even Josh knew where it was. He would also be surprised to know that the psychiatrist he had just spoken with also had no idea as to their current location. Personnel were transported here in the back of a glorified RV with blacked out windows and sound-dampening insulation. Josh had spent up to three days in that rolling hotel room completely isolated from the drivers and the outside world. It was safe to say that the only facilities he knew the locations of were safe houses, and those were a temporary affair at best.

One thing most K-Troopers found odd about the Recovery facility was the fact that they always shared a room with another agent. Josh assumed it was some sort of buddy program, in place to prevent the recovering soldiers from falling into a pattern of self-isolation. He saw the sense in it, even as he was surrounded by a largely empty hospital. Staffing was kept at a minimum, even for the Ketamine Conspiracy, and it was possible to walk from one end of the base to the other without seeing a single person.

"Hey, man," Josh's roommate said from his bed. He held a video game controller in his hands, and stared intently at the TV as he blasted aliens out of existence. Maybe they were zombies; Josh didn't keep up with the latest video games, or even the old ones, which made him an anomaly in the Recovery program. These games were shown to have some value, and his lack of interest in them was generally questioned while he was here.

"Hey," Josh replied, grabbing a book off his desk. He was struggling with Nietzsche's "Twilight of the Idols," and was failing to see the point of reading it in the first place. The shrink assigned the book to him, though, so he dutifully slogged his way through the dense text. When he wasn't doing that, he watched his roommate twitch from over the top of his book.

The other man in the room was a fellow K-Trooper, also fresh off a mission. Josh had never met him before this Recovery cycle, and when he asked the man's name, Josh was given his codename. In this case, that was Speedball, which was hardly a reassuring name. As he watched, Josh noticed the same facial tic repeat itself every 15 or so seconds, and Speedball's hands were shaky when he wasn't holding the controller. Every time Josh met other K-Troopers, he was reminded of how much he liked the fact that he always worked alone. His own background was military, being a Marine, but early on in his life as an agent he realized that the Conspiracy drew recruits from all walks of life. He suspected that Speedball was probably pulled from a prison, given the man's mannerisms and attitude. The prison gang tattoos were also a clue.

"Hey, man," Speedball said again as he played. "I heard you went Phase on your last job. How'd you like it?"

Josh thought about the question for a moment, and answered with, "Same as always. I hated it."

Pausing his game, Speedball stared at Josh, and then grinned. "Right, man, I get it. We're not supposed to dig on the chems. But can I tell you a secret?" He made a show of glancing around for eavesdroppers, and said, "I really like kicking them on. To me there ain't nothing like the rush of going Tactical, and no trip like going Phase." He smiled, his face twitching as the tic cycled through, and returned to his game. "I can't wait to go back out on mission. Love it... I love it."

Josh stared at the twitchy K-Trooper for another moment, put his earphones on, and read as he listened to The Mars Volta. It was a music that in this time and place made the most sense to him.

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Later that night, hours after falling asleep, Josh woke up with a violent tremor. The earphones had fallen off his head, and he could hear Jim Morrison singing in a tinny voice from them. The room was dark, and he rolled over in his bed to get more

comfortable. He immediately played dead when he saw Speedball hunched over his desk doing something by the light of a computer monitor.

Josh watched in silence as the other K-Trooper took a deep breath, held it, and then exhaled a few moments later. A cloud of thin smoke appeared around his head, and Josh caught the faint whiff of ammonia in the air. Speedball's body convulsed in one spasm then settled into random muscle twitching as he sat in his chair, his head thrown back.

Josh slowly and quietly got out of bed. He immediately knew the familiar smell of poorly manufactured meth, and the sight of a K-Trooper amping up right there in front of him was disconcerting. "Speedball," he said quietly, getting the man's attention. "What are you doing?"

His moves erratic and fast, Speedball turned towards Josh and grinned madly. "Oh, hey, Tiburon! I'm just feeding the monkey, man, just feeding the monkey." He held out a small smoking pipe and asked, "Want some?"

"No thanks," Josh answered coolly. He knew that any negative vibes he put out would be picked up by the drugged man in front of him, amplified in the stoned mind, and manifested in potentially bad ways. "No, I'm just going to go to the bathroom."

Speedball stared at him for a minute, picking up on Josh's nervousness, and nodded. "Right, man, right... the bathroom." He got up and jumped on his bed, turning the video game back on. As Josh was about to leave through the door, Speedball said loudly, "You know, Tiburon, I figured out how to trick the implants."

Josh stopped in his tracks. There had always been talk amongst the K-Troopers about turning on their own drug dispensing systems when Control had them turned off, but to his knowledge nobody had ever actually done it. He never even heard of anyone trying it. Right now, in fact, his was switched off, as was Speedball's, and theoretically could only be turned on remotely by a Handler. "Oh yeah?" he asked with false nonchalance. "How did you do that?"

The high man on the bed turned to face Josh, held his finger up to his lips, and said, "Shhhh. It's a secret." He went back to his game, ignoring Josh altogether in his rushing brain.

Josh left the room and walked four doors down to another Recovery room. He poked his head inside, and upon finding both beds empty went in, shoving a chair up under the door handle. There were no locks on any of the Recovery quarters rooms, so he had to make do with the chair and a shim shoved beneath the door.

He didn't want to be around when a security team arrived to take Speedball away for a more intense round of Recovery.

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The room shook violently with the sound of an explosion. Josh leapt out of bed and found himself crouching down behind a chair before he was even awake. There was shouting outside in the hall, and the stench of burning plastic. Somewhere in the underground base a digital alarm was going off, beeping insistently that something was going horribly wrong.

The heavy sound of boots rushed by his door and down the hall, presumably towards his assigned quarters. Speedball must have gone sideways at some point, and the Security Team's attempt to collect him had gone awry. Life for such a team could be dangerous, as they were not wired up like the K-Troopers were. The process of training someone to handle even the most basic enhancements was selective enough that the number of K-Troopers in existence was always relatively low. If he had to guess, Josh would have said a few hundred at most. The guards were skilled, but they were all natural in their performance. They only knew vaguely about things like Phase, and most had probably never seen a K-Trooper in full Tactical mode in action.

There were some screams from down the hall, which died away to a broken and quiet sobbing. It was rare that Josh wanted to utilize his own chemical enhancements, but this was definitely one of those infrequent times. He moved to the door, worked the shim out of the frame, and peeked out into the hallway.

The fluorescent lights were all flickering insanely, lending a frantic air of unpredictability to the situation. Josh listened to the dying whimpers of a couple of the Security men, and his nose burned with the stench of burnt plastic. It was a hard decision to make, but knowing he had to get out of there before Speedball came after him, Josh stuck his head further out into the hall and looked down toward his assigned room.

The shattered remains of at least eight Security men lay around the doorway, some of which twitched from the random signals shooting through their overloaded nervous systems. They wore armor that was great for absorbing powerful blows, bullets, and knives, but proved to be worthless against the overwhelming violence of K-Trooper on a meth bender.

Standing naked in a strangely hunched posture, Speedball stepped over the remains of one of the dead soldiers and walked with an odd gait down the hall. His form seemed to be physically unstable as twitches and spasms morphed into brief extensions of his Phase self, and Josh could detect the faint hints of Phase shifting as Speedball's body seemed to flicker a few inches to the right and then the left at random intervals. Knowing that he would be no match for the man while in his current state, Josh slipped as stealthily as he could across the hall and around a corner. His plan was to get to the nearest Security station, and determine then what his next move would be.

As he padded through the maze of subterranean hallways, Josh saw that the damage to the Recovery facility was pretty extensive, with entire sections thrown into complete darkness from blown out lights. He found that many of the security cameras were dead, as most other electronic devices, and quickly recognized the results of a Phase Pulse.

Phase Pulse was something that was spoken of in hushed tones within the Conspiracy, and usually only done once in a K-Trooper's career; during training. It was a massive release of energy throughout Phase that was the equivalent of dropping a daisy cutter on the local area. On the Phase side Josh imagined there was complete destruction, but had no way of knowing. With his implants offline he was unable to release the cocktail of hallucinogens that would open his eyes.

The effects of a Pulse were not just felt in Phase. They also bled over into the real world, manifesting in the destruction of unprotected electronics and even damaging the structural integrity of the most solid buildings. There were tiles torn from the floor scattered around the empty halls, and a large crack running along one wall for at least 3 meters. The power deployed by a Phase Pulse was enormous, and the idea of Speedball running around firing off Phase Pulses at will was unnerving.

The Security station was empty. The heavy door, similar to what you would find in a prison, was bent and hanging from a single

hinge. Josh could smell the ozone of fried circuitry as he entered the Plexiglas walled room. Where he had hoped to find some sort of armament, Josh only found a couple of chairs and some dead computers and monitors. He still had yet to see any sign of another human being.

"...urity Team, what ... status, over..."

Josh shoved a chair out of the way and snatched up a comm unit. "This is K-Trooper Tiburon," he said with the professional calm cultivated by his breed. "What's the situation?"

He was greeted with a moment of silence, and then, "Josh Postle, right?" It was a woman's voice, and sounded like she was on the edge of panic. "Josh, this is Theresa Marsh, Assistant Facilities Manager. What's going on down there?"

Great, Josh thought. There's a deranged K-Trooper running around blowing things up and killing people and the person in charge is from housekeeping. "You need to get a Handler to put me online," he said abruptly. "We have a K-Trooper down here who's freaked out on meth and running at full power. He's tactical, Phase enhanced, and highly unpredictable. He was able to trick his implants on. He took out the entire Security team, as far as I can tell, and has already fired off at least one Phase Pulse."

Again the communicator fell silent as Theresa Marsh, Assistant Facilities Manager, processed what she had just been told. K-Troopers had gone rogue in the past, but not full on berserk. Not officially, anyway. Finally, she said, "OK, we're working on getting a Handler for you. In the meantime, where are you?"

"I'm at a security station," Josh replied into the microphone. "I don't know where Speedball is." The last time he'd seen the rampaging menace, he'd been heading towards the cafeteria.

"Well, stay where you are," Theresa said. "At least until a Handler links up. They contacted the On-Call, so it should only be a few minutes."

A few minutes were more than long enough to die, but Josh refrained from pointing that fact out. He imagined Theresa was feeling the pressure enough as it was, and would only become more frazzled if he pushed her. "Will do," he replied as he peered down the flickering hall. He missed his two M1911 .45s at that moment.

"Warriors!" a strangely sing-song voice called from the darkness down the hallway. "Warriors!" the voice taunted again. Josh recognized it as a line from an old 1970s era movie, and a chill shot down his spine. He had a lot of experience in keeping tight control over his own fear, but it never got any easier. He crouched down behind the desk and stared into the erratic darkness.

Speedball's reality warped figure stepped around a corner and clearly into sight. He was still nude, and his body was transforming itself in disconcerting ways. The muscles seemed to move of their own accord beneath his writhing skin, and moving bones shifted his frame in a nauseating way. Every few steps he seemed to fast forward as he passed in and out of Phase.

"I can see you!" he sang out, his fingers elongating briefly until they touched the floor, and then retracting to their normal length. "Who were you just talking to, Tibby?"

Josh stood up, knowing he'd been spotted, and said, "Nobody in particular, Speedball." He switched off the comm device and dropped it in the trash. "What're you up to?" He knew that appealing to the logical side of the drug-enraged mind was a waste of time, so he opted for calming conversation instead.

"Oh, not much," Speedball replied. "Just playing my game, man. Killin' aliens, saving the world." He stepped towards the security station, then dropped to a knee and vomited. That happened to even the most experienced K-Troopers when the mix of chemicals got to them, and Josh could only imagine what Speedball must be feeling. Nevertheless, he took advantage of the opportunity to flee while the rabid agent was down, and sprinted down the hall as fast as he could. It felt painfully slow.

He wound his way into a part of the facility he was unfamiliar with, running from empty hall to room, and even through what appeared to be maintenance ducts. He didn't hear any sign of pursuit, but knew better than to trust his un-augmented senses. He finally took refuge in a small chamber that was really nothing more than a large closet, and crouched into a relaxed fighting stance. He knew he would be no match, but intended to go out swinging.

He was in no way prepared, then, when an unseen force slammed into his back, sending Josh sprawling across the floor and knocking the air out of him. This was followed up with a vicious assault of kicks and punches that left him bleeding on the floor when they finally subsided. Out of the corner of his eye Josh saw Speedball sitting on a desk, his gaze mocking and insane.

"So what's your real name, Tibby?" Speedball asked. "I know your folks didn't name you after a shark, so what do they call you?" When Josh didn't answer, he said, "It doesn't matter, dude. The angels won't mind. You just lay there and bleed for a while." He began humming madly to himself as he closed his eyes. Speedball was pouring another drug into his system, and was pausing to enjoy the sensation.

"Tiburon, are you still alive?" a voice asked calmly through Josh's implanted comm system.

"Still alive," he subvocalized in response as he lay on the floor in a pool of his own blood. "A couple of cracked ribs, some internal bleeding, I think, but I can perform."

"Good," the immediate response said. "Then let's get you amped up." The rush of chemicals into his system almost overwhelming him, Josh felt the painkillers kick in first. After that came the stability chems, which countered such side effects as nausea and dizziness, and finally the methamphetamine and cocaine flooded in. He visibly shuddered at the sudden change, and stood up to face the ecstatic Speedball.

"I need to go into Phase enhancement," Josh said, his voice even and controlled. "I will also need to know where a weapons locker is."

"There are no weapons in the Recovery Facility," the Handler said as she unlocked the Phase enhancements. "Not in your section, at any rate."

"No weapons but us," Josh muttered as the ketamine compounds hit his nervous system. Everything pulsed briefly, and the walls melted into a ruined version of their real world counterparts. The results of the Pulse were evident in the Phase version of reality, with the lights being completely down and bolts of what looked like some sort of electricity flashing through the air.

Speedball noticed the change that came over Josh. The insane K-Trooper was coming down off of the initial rush of whatever drugs he had just pushed into his own system, and grinned crazily. "Oh, you're gonna fight back, are you?" he said. "OK, man, you got it! Goddamned aliens..." He lunged forward at an inhuman speed, and lashed out with a brutal kick towards Josh's groin.

Spinning out of the way with enhanced ease, Josh realized that his self-control gave him a very real edge in this fight, even if the spikes of pain from his cracked ribs stabbed through the haze of the painkillers. He continued his spin and laid the back of his fist across Speedball's face, followed up with a gut punch from his left fist. His opponent was knocked backwards, kicked the floor with his feet, and back-flipped through the wall as though it were liquid. The matter of his own body flowed safely though the concrete in the disconcerting way that made Josh queasy at the thought; passing through solid matter while caught between Phase and reality made him feel somehow unclean.

Sensing Speedball's position in the next room, Josh jumped through the wall head first, executing an aggressive combination of punches, chops, and kicks on his disoriented opponent. He managed to grab onto a piece of rebar from the wall while phasing through, and he swung it with a precise brutality. Tricks like that were something only a very few K-Troopers could pull off without killing themselves in the process. Blood sprayed across his chest as he whacked at the other K-Trooper, and he finished off this round of attack by kicking the downed man repeatedly in the stomach and ribs. When Speedball stopped moving, Josh stepped back.

"Target is down," he reported to the Handler. "He appears unconscious. I am standing down."

"Negative," the Handler said. "Overwatch is seeing an energy buildup on your location. It has a Phase Pulse signature."

At this distance if Josh were caught in a Phase Pulse, even a weak one, he would be killed. His Phase form would be eradicated, and his physical body would crack and tear under the onslaught. "I'll handle it," Josh said as he stepped towards the crumpled body on the floor, the rebar clenched tightly in his fist. With a swift and vicious motion, Josh cracked open Speedball's skull on the first blow and crushed it completely with his second. There was no need for a third blow.

"Tiburon, Overwatch indicates dissipation of Phase energy," the Handler said. "Good job."

Collapsing to the ground, Josh felt the effects of the counter-chems wicking away his unnatural speed and strength. He vomited on the corpse of his fellow K-Trooper, and felt himself fading into unconsciousness.

As he drifted off, it occurred to Josh that his next therapy session was going to be ugly.

Episode Three

"Are you aware of the extropianist movement of transhumanism?"

To Josh this sounded like an odd question, but as such it was a single odd question in a career-spanning line of odd questions; the latest in a long history of surreal and arcane questions that general prefaced some of the more unearthly of his missions. That his current Handler was asking the question as Josh made his way through a crowded nightclub at 1AM on a Wednesday morning seemed somehow appropriate. "Extropianist movement?" he asked. "I don't even know what transhumanism is."

There was silence on the line as the Handler did not immediately respond with an explanation. Josh assumed that she was looking up a definition of what transhumanism was, and took a moment to look around at the bouncing faces in the surrounding crowd. Before he even entered the club he knew he was going to be an anomaly in the throng of dancing twenty-somethings. They wore various styles of clothing, ranging from conservative out-on-the-town outfits to Japanese Harajuku gothic. He was in his late thirties, however, and wore a simple enough dark red button up shirt and black trousers. The bass thumped through the air, walls, and floors of the club, driving the crowd into a synchronized bouncing dance with their hands held high over their heads as though in religious ecstasy.

This was not Josh's natural environment.

"Transhumanism is a collection of postmodernist philosophies centered on the idea of deliberately improving the human species through various technological means. Some seek simple biological immortality, while others focus on complete transcendentalism." The Handler paused as though reading further ahead, and said, "It is a largely transformative philosophy encompassing physical, intellectual, and spiritual change."

Josh moved into a more shadowy corner at the outer edges of the dance floor and leaned back against a flat black painted wall. His eyes roamed across bodies moving to the rhythm of the music and said, "So, that's transhumanism, then. What's this extropianist movement?" He knew that this conversation was a briefing on his mission assignment, and already suspected the gist of where this was going.

"Extropianism is one of the earlier transhumanist philosophies that emphasizes a preemptive attitude towards human evolution. The underlying belief seems to be a holistic improvement of the human condition through technology in terms of spirituality, intellectualism, and physical enhancement. It developed in the 80s, although its philosophical roots can be found as early as the 60s."

The Handler was throwing the dictionary at Josh this time, and while he wasn't having a hard time keeping up, he was hoping the Handler would get to a point where the mission could be passed on to him. "OK... So I take it my mission is to deal with a group of extropianists run amok?"

"This particular group has not run amok just yet, but they are on the edge of causing some trouble. While most people who subscribe to the tenets of extropianism are generally harmlessly optimistic, there are some who have embraced it in a more aggressive way. While most see a positive transformation for the bulk of humanity, a few have taken a more Nietzsche-influenced approach."

"Nietzsche," Josh muttered. While unfamiliar himself with the details of Nietzsche's ideas, he had seen the results of some people really running with what they claimed were the German philosopher's beliefs. They always adopted a self-important world-view in which they were the future of the human race. It was a way of thinking that easily led to a sense of entitled royalty, as though these people were going to be running things. Josh hated dealing with these types.

"Yes, Nietzsche. He is one of the most misinterpreted philosophers of all time, and it looks like we have a bunch of transhumanists who have taken their view of his Ubermensch and applied it to H-Plus thought."

"H-Plus?"

"H-Plus is short hand for transhumanism. There was a convention of the leading 120 of their thinkers in Pasadena two years ago to discuss the development of human-friendly artificial intelligence. The extropianists were well represented. The usual people were there, including Mark Borgstrom, who was one of the principal initial developers of extropianist thought in 1985, and Elaine Hess, the leading figure in the Proactive

Singularity Foundation. There was an uninvited guest there, too."

"One of the Nietzsche guys?"

"Yes. Nobody knows how he got in, or when. They were apparently unaware of his presence until Borgstrom went up to deliver his closing remarks. It was then that an unidentified individual took the stage and introduced himself as Eito Yoshida, a representative of a group calling itself Arbitrary Factor. He made a brief statement declaring extropianism dead, pulled out a pistol, and shot himself in the head. Are you fitted with your lenses yet?"

Josh shook his head. The Ketamine Conspiracy was about to initiate a program of equipping its K-Troopers with contact lenses that were going provide a digital overlay of the real world directly on their retinas. Josh had been informed that he would be one of the first K-Troopers to be issued the lenses. He was unsure of how he was going to take that. "No," he replied. "No lenses just yet."

"That's too bad. I was going to show you the video. At any rate, Arbitrary Factor appears to be a minor faction within the H-Plus movement previously unknown to any of the other existing groups. Normally we would have written this off as just another bizarre incident, but something came up two days ago that gave us cause to send in a K-Trooper."

"Oh yeah?" Josh asked through the beat of the music. "What was that?"

"Look for yourself," the Handler said enigmatically. "Do you see a young Asian man wearing a black shirt and black pants? He has a pair of blue lensed sunglasses on."

Josh scanned across the crowd until he spotted the man on the far side of the dance floor, sitting in a booth by himself. "Yeah, I have him."

"Good," the Handler said. "That's Eito Yoshida."

Josh raised an eyebrow. "You mean..."

"Yes, the man who shot himself at the extropianism conference. Apparently he is not as dead as the vids led us to believe. We only just discovered that he is still very much alive when his

face showed up on a social networking website. The registered profile owner took us to a complete dead-end, although we did trace the user's address to Los Angeles. We started watching out for him immediately in the area. When his face popped up again on the club's security system, we deployed you to check him out. That's the end of the formal briefing. Welcome back from Rehab, Tiburon."

Josh crossed his arms and studied Eito Yoshida through the bouncing and bumping mass of humanity, ignoring the strobe lights and flashing lasers playing off of their bodies in the darkness. This should be a relatively light mission, as they always were after time spent in recovery from utilizing all of his enhancements, and he didn't expect to have to activate any enhancement modes beyond Alert. Yoshida remained in his seat for another hour. He spent the time alone and without drinking, simply watching the dancers with unemotional eyes. After observing him for a little while, Josh realized that Yoshida hadn't moved a muscle the whole time. Weird.

Abruptly Eito Yoshida stood up and started walking towards the entrance through the crowd of partiers. Josh started after him, saying, "Handler, switch me over to Alert mode. Target is on the move."

"Roger that, Tiburon. I am engaging Alert mode now."

With the flow of methylphenidate into his system, Josh watched the world transition from the everyday blur into crystal clarity. It was always a slightly disconcerting process, but nowhere near as intense or insane as the other modes. He suddenly saw patterns in the movement of the dancers, perfectly synchronized to the beat of the music. He walked smoothly and easily through the crowd, his cleanly operating mind plotting an easy path amongst the moving bodies that left him touching almost no-one as he passed by.

He caught a glimpse of Yoshida heading out to the parking lot across the street, ignoring the staggering groups of party-goers on the sidewalk. "Target has left the building, Handler. I am going to follow. Is there anything I should know about this Yoshida character?"

"You mean besides his apparent immortality? There is nothing that we are aware of. You should act with caution, however, as outside of his little suicide act and our recent tracings, he is

a blank. He doesn't exist on any system we have our hooks into."

Grunting in acknowledgement, Josh sprinted across the street and hopped on his motorcycle, firing up the high RPM engine with fluid motion. He kept an eye on Yoshida as he reached into a side compartment and withdrew his two pistols. He'd felt almost naked without them in the club, and a sense of completeness came over him as he shoved them beneath his jacket into their shoulder holsters. As Yoshida pulled out into traffic in his Lexus SUV, Josh was not too far behind.

Traffic was heavy that night, which was to Josh's advantage, and it took some time for them to make their way onto Sunset Boulevard. Yoshida headed east towards downtown LA, always followed by the K-Trooper at a few tens of yards. Initially the traffic was slow and heavy, but now it was as though they were flowing along a fast moving stream. To his drug-augmented mind the cars seemed as though a school of fish, swirling and sliding along with the currents, and patterns in their movement developed.

"He's getting through all these cars without too much trouble," Josh reported to the Handler. "I make him as Enhanced in some way. We're following similar algorithms with this traffic at the same pace."

"You had to figure he would be Enhanced, not being dead after shooting himself in the head two years ago and all. Were you hoping for a twins situation?"

"Or clones," Josh replied. "Yes, I kind of was. You had better prep me for a full run of Tactical and Phase modes. I have a bad feeling about this."

"Affirmative, Tiburon. Loading both routines... now. Deployment systems are reporting as good to go, as are the counter-deploy systems. Will run at your request."

"Good to go." It was a phrase Josh had used frequently while in the Marine Corps. He'd heard his Handler use other phrases common to the Corps. She once said, "zero-dark-thirty." "Zero-dark-thirty" was a play on the words used in military time to express that it was extremely early in the morning. He'd only ever heard Marines say it. He asked her if she'd been in the Corps, but she ignored his query. Of course, he had considered the idea that it wasn't always the same Handler, but rather

multiple Handlers operating off of a custom script written to match his personality. Josh had no way of knowing, having never been to the Command Center. He didn't even know where it was.

The Lexus SUV pulled smoothly out of the flow of traffic and onto a side street. There were still a few cars on the road; enough for Josh to mask his presence, at any rate.

"Tiburon, Overwatch is reporting Phase activity in that area. They say the indications are it is your target, confirming your suspicion that Yoshida is enhanced in some way. I am giving you the trigger mechanism for your enhancements. Be careful, Tiburon."

"Roger that," Josh replied. It was common practice to unlock the deployment systems for Phase and Tactical modes if action was considered imminent. He had only to send the right thought command, and chemicals would pour into his system. He hoped there would be no need for that.

Yoshida pulled the Lexus into a narrow alley; Josh pulled the bike over and climbed off. He slipped into the alley and merged with the shadows. Following the SUV slowly until it came to a stop, he watched on from behind a dumpster. He waited for ten minutes, but nothing happened. The Lexus just sat there, its motor running, its driver's actions unknown.

"Tiburon, I am seeing an LAPD dispatch that has a unit coming out your way. Someone called in a prowler. I suggest you leave immediately and avoid that whole situation."

Josh considered this for a moment, and said, "Negative, Handler. I am withdrawing, but only until I find another opening. I am abandoning the bike." He hated giving up on a mission so easily, especially one with such an interesting background.

"Understood, Tiburon. Stay loose."

Josh ran back to the bike and jettied off to ditch it a block away. He came back around a corner just in time to see the Lexus disappearing down the road. He quickly found a car, hotwired it, and followed Yoshida. A police cruiser passed by going the other way.

"Handler, is Overwatch still reading anything?"

"I will have an answer for you in a moment; I am querying now." A moment later she said, "Negative, Tiburon, Overwatch is showing no Phase activity in your area."

"So he might think I'm gone," Josh said. "For now, anyway. Let's hope he gets to where he's going soon, before he spots me again." Fortunately that turned out to be the case, and the Lexus pulled off into an apartment building parking garage. Josh dropped the car and walked into the lobby. He easily talked his way past the doorman and went through the stairwell door. He was down the stairs and in the underground parking garage in less than a minute, scoping the area for his target.

"I was wondering if you were going to catch up with me," Yoshida said as he stepped around a corner and faced Josh. "You Conspiracy types are persistent. Good."

Josh almost triggered Tactical mode and snatched for his pistols, but kept his hands at his sides. Yoshida, though disconcerting, was not really threatening him. "Eito Yoshida. I see that your death was prematurely reported. I half hoped you were some kind of twin or clone, or maybe our monitoring system had a glitch. It's good to see our intelligence division is still delivering quality results."

The Asian man studied Josh for a moment, and then grinned. "I suspect you and I know a surprising amount about each other. Don't they call you 'Shark?'"

"Tiburon," Josh replied, his disgust at the name evident. He'd always hated the codename the Ketamine Conspiracy assigned to him. "My call-sign is Tiburon. I don't know yours."

"Arbitrary Factor doesn't operate along the same military lines the Conspiracy operates under. We are a more egalitarian organization. You can call me Eito. I take it, then, that the Conspiracy picked up on my image online, and again at the club. Am I correct?"

This man isn't informed, he's just playing us, Josh thought. "That is correct. That was intentional of you. Why?"

"Come," Yoshida said, gesturing towards the elevator. "Let us go up to my apartment and talk."

Josh squinted his eyes in suspicion. "Alright, let's go."

"Tiburon, I am going to have to protest this action right now..."

"Shut up," Josh subvocalized. "You're distracting me, and things are a little hairy right now. I'm going in." He stepped onto the elevator ahead of the grinning Yoshida. He hated having to shut the Handler up like that, but he needed to keep on his toes with Yoshida.

"Our two organizations have a common past, you know," Yoshida said. "Both got their start at the same ARPA defense labs back in the sixties. You guys were in the psychological warfare division and we were in communications."

Josh looked sidelong at Yoshida as he made the connections in his mind. "Arbitrary Factor came out of ARPANET?"

"Not directly, but yes. While your John Lilly was toying around with sensory deprivation chambers and mushrooms, we were getting computers to talk to each other. True, it took us longer to discover Phase Space, but the nineties were good to us, and we got caught up a bit. By the way, we don't normally call ourselves Arbitrary Factor."

"What do you call yourselves?"

Yoshida grinned his half-sly grin again, saying, "We're also not that kind of organization."

The doors opened and they stepped out into open room, rather than a hallway, that was poorly lit by blinking LED lights and computer monitors, and crowded with all manner of electronics equipment. Wires snaked across the floor in all directions, and stacks of gear lined the walls. Some of the hardware was obviously leftover from the early days of electronics, while other machines were completely alien to Josh.

"Make yourself at home," Yoshida said wryly as he stepped into the tangled maze of technology. "So do you ever wonder just what is on the other side of the Phase Wall?"

"Phase Wall?" Josh asked. "We just call it Phase." He feared that he might be letting slip some of the company secrets, and knew that the Handler was logging all of this. Still, he felt he could get more information than he let out, and maybe learn a little history about the Conspiracy in the process. "I have wondered what exactly is on the other side, but not enough to go looking."

"Well, we looked, and let me tell you, it's something else. We just don't know how to cross all the way over. Just like you guys."

Josh nodded. He had always suspected something else did lie on the far side of Phase, but it was always just out of his mind's reach. "Yeah, but I'm not sure I want to go all the way over, either. Just the things I've seen between worlds are scary enough."

Bending over a keyboard, Yoshida stared at a monitor for a moment. "Yeah, from what we can tell there are some pretty crazy things over there. It makes me shudder to think about some of them. Physically, though, we can't even go into the Phase Wall like you guys can. Simulations tell us you can perform some remarkable feats by doing it, too."

"Some," Josh agreed, remaining nonspecific about it. "So what's the score here? What game are you playing?"

Yoshida straightened his back and glanced at another computer monitor across the room. "You mean the suicide act? Sorry about that, but we were setting a flag up in the system for you guys to find us later should we so desire to communicate with you. It was incredibly dramatic, but I only wanted my face out there the one time."

"I see," Josh said. He wasn't too surprised, although he was impressed by the technique. It was just the sort of activity the Conspiracy engaged in on a regular basis, but he didn't have anything to do with those operations. He was generally considered more a bringer of destruction and less an intelligence gatherer. This mission was just a re-acquaintance to the world from Rehab, and was supposed to be light on violence. "And the video footage? Fake?"

"Yes and no. I really did shoot myself in the head, but obviously I didn't die. You don't need to know the details. We also got the side benefit of that being a recruiting moment for some of those present, and we're not even really extropianists."

"Right," Josh agreed. "So now that we're talking, what's your angle?"

Yoshida walked to a window and peered out into the night. "As I said, we are trying to move beyond seeing into Phase Space and

actually going all the way across the Wall. You K-Troopers can almost get across, and actually operate within the Phase Wall. We believe that we can adopt your methods and technology to work with our sensor systems, and complete the transition across."

Leaning against a metal storage shelf, Josh fought to keep his hand from straying too close to one of his .45s. His tightly focused brain was sensing something out of place, and that was setting him on edge. "You don't really think the Ketamine Conspiracy is going to share its tech with you guys, do you? What, in exchange for your technology? Seriously?"

"No," Yoshida said softly. "We're going to take it."

The elevator doors exploded outwards into the room, throwing Josh hurtling into a wall of electronics gear. Sparks shot across the room, scorching his skin, and a roar filled the air. Before he could trigger Tactical mode, something smashed against the back of Josh's head. He lay stunned for a moment, then fell into the depths of unconsciousness.

Episode Four

"Libretta, what is your current situation?"

"Dammit," Lori muttered to herself. She hated when they wanted an immediate report after the action stops. She stood up from a crouch, a long knife clutched in each fist. Blood and gore coated the walls and floor of the ancient retirement home, and pieces of her victims lay scattered about her.

Some were still groaning in agony.

"I have eliminated the Flesh Minion cult, and neutralized their Prophet. Situation is in hand. I need a cleanup team to get in here immediately to completely isolate and remove the contamination."

"The team is already inbound with an ETA of 2 minutes. Go ahead and abandon the flashpoint and get to your safe-house. There is a new briefing waiting for you."

A new briefing so soon after such a violent action was unusual. She hadn't utilized Phase mode when dealing with the Flesh Minions, and had spent less than a minute in Tactical mode; she wouldn't need to visit Rehab, which did make her available for most other tasks. Such was the life of a K-Trooper. The urgency was obvious, so Lori exited through a back door, the residents of the home watching her leave from behind half-closed blinds. Their descriptions to the police an hour later would vary so wildly and dramatically that the authorities would have no accurate picture of her. She disappeared into the foggy night, running at an inhuman speed.

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"Alright, Handler, I am ready for the briefing." Lori had made the Handler wait while she cleaned herself up from her assault on the Flesh Minion cult. "Cleaning up" in this case meant washing various bits of gore off and changing into a fresh, non-bloodied, set of clothes. It was less a luxury and more a necessity. Lori wasn't normally one to wade through a sea of

blood, but in the case of Flesh Minions she was willing to make an exception.

Flesh Minions were the willing physical vessels of alien intelligences from some other reality. The exact nature of this other realm was unknown, but word among the K-Troopers had it that it had something to do with Phase. Lori was inclined to believe that theory. Whatever their origin, though, the Flesh Minions were a morbid and creepy lot. They tended to exhibit bizarre behaviors revolving around cannibalism and extreme body modification. The degree of self-mutilation this particular cult was into was beyond anything Lori could fathom, and she was glad to be done with them. She could not imagine what could drive people to embrace the horrific things this group was engaged in.

"Libretta, we have a dire situation on our hands in your neck of the woods. One of our K-Troopers has been compromised and taken prisoner by a previously unknown organization. We need you to go in and extract him, with the secondary mission of gathering data as you can."

An agent compromise was serious business to the Conspiracy, as agents were the technological result of a convergence of various technologies that were unknown to the rest of the world in terms of hardware alone. The enhancement and hallucinatory chemicals stored in their dispersal pumps alone were worth significant fortunes. The precise network of the neural nano-delivery system was far in advance of anything else out there in concept and implementation. Taken together this gave the average K-Trooper enough speed and power to effectively take on a platoon of Marines and have a reasonable expectation of winning. There were lots of governments, companies, and radical groups out there that would give anything for this technology. Lori cleaned her knife blades as she considered the ramifications of a K-Trooper being captured.

"I understand, Handler. What information do we have on these people?"

There was a pause on the other end. "What we appear to have, Libretta, is another organization with parallel origin to our in the old ARPA labs. As near as we have managed to work out since last night, the founders of the faction we are now calling Arbitrary Factor worked in a sister lab on computer network systems. Apparently they discovered a lot of the same... truths that the Ketamine Conspiracy's founders stumbled across, namely

the existence of Phase. We always wondered if such an animal existed, so it looks like we have our answer on that. They dropped off of everybody's radar pretty quickly, and only just resurfaced as a social construct similar to us in modus operandi, if not in organization and motive."

"How did we come across them?" Lori interrupted as she pulled her copper colored hair back into a pony-tail. If AF was similar to the Conspiracy on any level, they must have only been found because they wanted to be.

"They set up an event flag by having one of their agents publicly commit suicide at a Transhumanist conference in Pasadena a couple of years ago. This same agent popped up on our systems just recently, so we dispatched Tiburon to investigate."

Tiburon. The man was fast becoming a legend with the K-Trooper ranks. He was known for his ability to deal out horrifically precise, yet high volume, violence. He was even better known for his lack of obvious psychiatric issues. Every K-Trooper was already a killer of some sort before being recruited by the Conspiracy. Their training and modification was a brutal process that took already mentally broken people and turning them into even more efficient killers. There were more than a few certified sociopaths serving in the Conspiracy's ranks. Even Lori had her... issues. She shrugged. "Smells like a trap to me. Tiburon would seem like a natural choice for this one."

"We thought so, too, and while we were ultimately proven right about the trap, we realize now that Tiburon might not have been the best choice after all. We lost our connection with him just after he established contact with the AF agent, and our recovery team found only a trashed and empty apartment upon their arrival. We caught a lucky break, however, and Tiburon's systems triggers were put in his hands before communications was severed. He's been dropping tagging pheromones from that point on, probably automatically, so Overwatch was able to track them to a house in Ontario. We need you to recover him. Barring that, we need you to recover his systems."

Lori shuddered at the thought, but it was in K-Trooper training to recover lost hardware at any cost. More than once this meant forcibly removing the pump system from inside the unfortunate's ribcage, as well as retrieving the decapitated head. The gruesome lengths the Conspiracy demanded its agents go to in order to maintain the secrecy were well beyond what the average

human could withstand. The conspiracy had a way of turning all of its agents into something of a psychotic. "I understand, Handler. Does Overwatch have anything to say about the house?"

"That is what's unusual about this. There just hasn't been any Phase activity whatsoever, which makes Overwatch nervous. They should have picked up something stemming from Tiburon's tagging pheromones, but either both he and his hardware was completely destroyed at some point after reaching the house, or..."

"... or Arbitrary Factor can conceal themselves from Overwatch's prescience," Libretta finished. "That would be unnerving."

"Indeed. So your mission is as follows: You are to recover Tiburon first, or at least his hardware. If possible we need you to recon Arbitrary Factor, and if given the opportunity we need you to obtain samples of their technology. We may be able to do something with it."

Nibbling her lip thoughtfully, Lori made an observation. "We have to assume that AF made this move as a final push of some long term planning. They have to believe that whatever they get out of Tiburon will attain some final goal for them; otherwise they never would have revealed themselves after all this time spent in secrecy. I believe that they intend for us to not be a factor in the not-so-distant future."

There was another long pause on the Handler's end. "That isn't what you need to focus on right now, Libretta. You need to concentrate your efforts solely on the mission at hand."

Stifling her irritation on this assertion of authority, Lori nodded. "Of course, Handler. I am on my way to the location."

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Late afternoon on a weekday was a horrible time to be driving, especially if you were in a hurry. Lori was in a hurry. As she made her way slowly through the rush hour migration from downtown out to the more affordable residences of Ontario, CA, she considered what little she knew of this mission. While the Conspiracy told her what she needed to know about Arbitrary Factor, she had the distinct impression that the Conspiracy left a lot of information out. While not surprising, she hoped that what they hadn't mentioned wouldn't turn out to be a mission-breaker.

Tiburon. His name was known throughout the ranks of K-Troopers as an utter professional. The latest rumor was that he actually took out a fellow K-Trooper who had gone off the rails. Those who worked with him came away with the feeling that he was more dedicated to his own sense of professionalism than to the Conspiracy. Lori knew he favored using twin M-1911 .45 ACP pistols. Most K-Troopers had a preference on weapons, and they always seemed to come in pairs. She used two long knives, and knew of another who used two fighting sticks. While not all of them used two weapons, she was beginning to suspect that every K-Trooper was ambidextrous. Lori had no idea what that implied.

"Incoming!" the Handler shouted in her head, triggering both Alert and Tactical Modes with a brutal abruptness. As the various chemicals poured into her system, Lori saw the hood of the car buckle upwards, temporarily muffling a powerful explosive force. She was already pumping the brakes and attempting to steer towards the concrete divider of the freeway as the hood popped loose and slammed back against the windshield, sending a network of cracks across the glass. A concussion wave pounded against her body through the chassis of the car, temporarily deafening her. In the passenger side rear view mirror Lori saw the remains of a black smoky contrail from off the side of the busy highway, and another explosion ripped through the trunk of the car, sending it spiraling into a spin across traffic. Without hesitation Lori abandoned the out of control vehicle through the driver's side window, tumbling to a sprawl against the divider. Without thought she sprang to her feet and leaped up over the hood of an oncoming truck. Her foot touched down on the roof with a heavy thud, and she catapulted herself across towards the opposite lanes, landing just short of an oncoming traffic that had yet to slow for the wreck.

Whipping her knives out, Lori hopped up onto the divider and looked out over the growing pileup. As glass and metal flew through the air, she scanned for any signs of those who attacked her. Based on her brief glimpse of the contrail, she suspected she had been taken out by a rocket propelled grenade; probably Russian or Chinese. Despite her rapid yet thoroughly systematic search for visual signs of her assailants, Lori saw nothing that she could home in on. It was as though they had vanished, which they may have.

"Libretta, what is your current status?"

"All systems nominal, Handler," Lori subvocalized. "I was hit with two RPGs. I suspect that the attackers were not augmented, at least not for combat."

"Explain."

As she set out across the frozen river of broken cars and screaming people, Lori glanced at what was left of her own vehicle. The first RPG hit dead on right on the engine compartment, immediately disabling the car. The second had slammed into the trunk, leaving a ragged hole through the car, but no serious structural damage. "Their first attack hit dead on, but the second was off. They had to have been aiming at the driver, but somehow managed to hit the rear of the car, indicating a slip-up. The shooter probably got distracted by the first explosion, meaning he was new to this, and messed up his second shot's aim. Someone who was enhanced would not have slipped up like that."

"Agreed, Libretta. Any sign of the assailant?"

As she bounced over the outside wall of the interstate, Lori readied her blades. She searched the area, but found absolutely nothing; not even signs of human passing in the dirt. "Handler, I retract my previous assessment. The shooter is definitely enhanced, just not tactically. Trigger Phase Mode."

When the hallucinogenic chemicals flooded into her brain, Lori crouched down against the concrete. Reality distorting and twisting before her eyes, she patiently waited the few seconds it would take for her consciousness to cope with the bizarre shifts. Once she asserted a harshly disciplined control over her own brain, Lori scanned the area again across multiple mental spectrums. It didn't take her long to locate the attackers.

About two hundred yards away from the freeway two men were climbing into a black SUV with blacked out windows. Odd black smoke seemed to cling to their persons, swirling and twisting in against the backdrop of Phase. Lying in someone's front lawn between her and the shooters was the RPG launcher, the heat of the barrel causing steam to rise up from the freshly watered grass. Lori pushed as hard as she could against the earth, sending her flying through the air at tremendous speed. She cleared fifty yards on that single leap, knives flashing viciously in the afternoon light.

Warping reality as she bounded over parked cars, Lori slammed into the rear of the fleeing SUV. Holding a knife in her clenched teeth, she pounded her forehead against the rear window again and again, crashing through on the fourth hit. She easily slipped out of the way of the bullets punching through the glass and metal of the SUV, and forced her way through into the back of the vehicle. Crouching down with both knives at the ready, she prepared to pounce on the two assassins in the front seat.

One of the men was twisted around to face her, desperately working to reload his .44 while other tried not to wreck the SUV. Both men wore strange devices on their heads, with clear blue lenses over their right eyes, and both men were surrounded by mysterious black smog that somehow obscured them from much of Lori's Phase vision. She was only able to see the assassins clearly in the physical world, indicating the Phase cloaking system she'd earlier discussed with the Handler.

Before the passenger could chamber a round Lori was on him, her knife slicing neatly through his neck with an almost alarming ease. She only needed to take one of the men prisoner, and it was not the pistol wielding one's lucky day. As blood first sprayed, and then poured all over the cab, Lori back-handed the driver across the face, knocking his head gear into the back of the SUV and him into unconsciousness.

While she took control over the speeding charnel house of a vehicle, Lori sheathed her knives and reported in. "Handler, situation is under control. I have one KIA, one captured, and I have control of the vehicle. I need a rendezvous point to deliver the goods."

Silence. The Handler wasn't responding, even after repeated attempts. Lori had never experienced a communication outage before now, and with each passing second she became more and more nervous. She eventually gave up after driving around for an hour with a corpse in the passenger side, a knocked out would-be assassin tossed unceremoniously into the back seat, and her trying to talk to dead air. She snatched up the men's hardware, including the mysterious headgear and oddly high-tech belts she discovered them both wearing. She couldn't tell, but suspected that the belts were the source of the Phase cloaking effect she'd seen earlier. Once done collecting what she could from them SUV, she killed the prisoner and lit the vehicle on fire.

Libretta was alone now, and the only thing she could think to do was continue on to the target house. She smelled a trap within a trap in some sort of convoluted setup by Arbitrary Factor in Ontario, but Ontario was the last known whereabouts of the man who could be her last remaining contact with the Conspiracy.

She stole another car two blocks away and got back on I-10 East, well after the traffic jam had passed. She was on her way to rescue Tiburon, and maybe the Ketamine Conspiracy.

Episode Five

Eito Yoshida stared into a mirror, running his hand across freshly cut hair. His features had remain unchanged for at least 15 years, but had also somehow taken on a harder edge than when he had first learned of Phase Space. He reached out and lightly touched the glass with manicured fingertips, remembering his induction into the group he had taken to calling the Organization. It was odd to him, but while the Organization had a very religious feel, they didn't seem to have a formal name; At least they never told him what it was.

Yoshida was a physicist at one time, helping develop more advanced processors for a big-name technology firm. That all ended when he came across documents stored on an ancient fileserver at a company co-location. They were schematics for a prototype circuit that belonged to a long-abandoned project. He copied all the data to a secret location and began to study the underlying engineering of the project.

A year later Eito found himself staring into the Phase through a streaming feed from a heavily modified camera. His life was never the same afterwards, especially once Organization agents showed up at his doorstep and introduced him to a reality that was wildly different than he had once imagined.

Adjusting his tie, Yoshida winked at his reflection and stepped back into the basement room. The cyborg he'd set guard over the captured K-Trooper stood silently behind the metal chair they'd cuffed the battered and bloodied man to. Cyborgs were interesting to Eito, although he himself had never built one. While he normally had no problem with dead bodies, installing a control system into a cadaver was a bit more than

even he was willing to attempt. Eito glanced at the ashen-faced automaton with some interest, and then down at Josh's battered face.

The hardened K-Trooper glared back.

"Agent Tiburon, I do believe that if looks could kill..."

"I am going to kill you." Josh made the statement with absolute certainty, and continued to stare hatred at his captor.

"I understand why you would think so, of course. The thing is, we arranged for the Conspiracy to be too preoccupied to send a serious recovery effort. We even managed to intercept the lone K-Trooper they sent to retrieve you."

His mind still sharp in spite of the beating he'd taken, Josh caught the slightest twitch in the man's eyebrow. "You intercepted the K-Trooper, but you didn't kill the K-Trooper."

Still surprised at Tiburon's almost supernatural ability to discern the most information from simple body language, Eito quickly masked his dismay. "I won't say she wasn't killed. We did lose contact with the assassination team shortly after they engaged her, though. While it is a matter of some concern, I don't imagine a lone agent of yours will pose any real threat at this point. I am prepared for her if she should happen to show up."

Josh laughed harshly, droplets of blood spraying out into the air. "That's probably a mistake."

Yoshida nodded his head in agreement. If Libretta were still alive, he would have little time to get what he needed and deal with Tiburon. He decided to get right to work. "At any rate, let us begin. I've done a fairly thorough external scan of your chemical delivery system, and I have to say that I am impressed. Did you know that you never have to recharge the chemicals that the pump deploys? The device actually synthesizes the drugs from the food you eat. I would be willing to bet that the Conspiracy has you on a very strictly controlled diet."

Josh did not respond, but was taken aback by Yoshida's deduction. The enemy had already worked out quite a bit about

the K-Trooper program just by a basic scan and some creative reasoning; Yoshida's organization was learning way too much just from Josh's mere capture. He had to affect an escape, or at least a bloodthirsty rampage. Either way, Conspiracy technology was not going to come without a cost, and he wasn't going out without a fight. He studied the cyborg from the corner of his eye. The massive thing just stood there, emotionless and mute, but capable of incredible speed and strength. Its skin bore scars from head to toe that looked to be from some sort of hardware installation. The cuts followed the dead man's general form, tracing an almost technological pattern across his flesh. Josh was going to have to work out a solution to that problem pretty quickly.

"And the delivery system itself... My God, but the man who engineered that marvel must have been a genius. Filaments of some nano-tech material I can't even identify that reach into specifically targeted areas of your brain without any damage to surrounding cells. Not one single cell appears to have even been torn by the process. I am amazed. I can't imagine what it must have been like to have that installed."

Josh remembered. For the two weeks that they slowly and painfully drove the filaments into his brain tissue he suffered. Random memories had taken over his mind during the process, sometimes as smells, other times as a remembered sound, and occasionally as full on total hallucination. He laid in a confused stupor for a month afterwards, desperately trying to make sense of his own shattered mind. It took seven more months longer to become functional again. "If I have to explain, you wouldn't understand."

Yoshida turned to look at the broken and bloodied K-Trooper. "I'm sure. It looks like your people may have discovered in the biological world what my people found in the digital: A way to see into Phase Space. You are more advanced in that you can interact with the Phase Wall, but we are rectifying that disparity right now. Now, open up and say, 'ahhhh...!'"

Josh lowered his head and shut his eyes. He was going to hold out for as long as he could. He hoped death would come before he breathed another word of Conspiracy secrets.

"I'm not surprised you have such an unwavering loyalty to the Ketamine Conspiracy. They must have engineered that when they put your mind back together. It's probably what makes you one of their best. Spectacular." He reached out and grabbed Josh's face, trying to squeeze his mouth open. When the K-Trooper bit down in defiance, Yoshida signaled the cyborg through his control software.

The living corpse reached down and forced Josh's jaw open with its cold dead hands. Yoshida pushed a thin needle between his lips and into the back of his throat where it bit into the spine. Tiny threads probed out from the invading needle, intertwining with the deployment system's filaments that fed out into his nerves. "I am hoping that I can make contact with your implant's control software through the delivery system. If I can get in I can pull down the operating system. Once I have that, I will be able to control your hardware after removal. I am going to have to peel your body away from each filament of your deployment system one cell at a time. It is going to hurt far more than the installation process, I'm afraid. Fortunately it will only take a few minutes."

Josh winced, and then screamed. The stretching and searching threads from the needle made the connection without ceremony and without concern for the agony they inflicted on his nervous system. His back arched into the air and his jaw locked open around the shriek. His muscles began to twitch uncontrollably as signals went haywire between his system and the invading needle.

"Of course, this is going to be excruciating," Yoshida droned on, still watching the computer monitors more closely than he watched Josh himself. "The probe was engineered to link up with the pump system, regardless of your discomfort. It is a side-effect of the procedure. You will just have to bear with the pain until I've downloaded the OS completely." He fell silent as he kept an eye on the screens arrayed across a work bench. It wasn't his idea of an ideal lab, but it served as a field expedient cyber-surgery station. To be honest, Eito could have set things up so it wouldn't be painful at all, but he was less than concerned with the K-Trooper's pain.

He had other concerns occupying his mind. His peers were pressuring him for this data, and he feared the consequences of failing to deliver.

* * * *

Lori crouched down on the roof of a camper parked in a suburban driveway across the street from the house the Conspiracy targeted as the place where Tiburon was being held. It took her a few hours to get out to Ontario. She could have been there much more quickly, but she was taking extra care to cover her tracks. There was a short string of stolen cars, motorcycles, and even a bicycle, between the place where she'd killed the failed assassins and where she hid now.

There were reports on the news that a massive multiple-car pileup had happened on the interstate, but no cause was actually given. Normally such incidents were scrubbed by the Conspiracy before ever hitting the airwaves, and she wondered if that had happened here, too. Maybe they were still around after all.

As the sun fell beneath the horizon, Lori rolled onto her back and watched as the stars shyly came into view. She made another attempt to connect with a Handler, to no effect. She'd never been without contact with the Conspiracy since she was first recruited, and this extended silence was terrifying. She had no idea what could be happening, but it certainly felt like an attack on the Ketamine Conspiracy was underway.

She'd had her deployment system running since the attack earlier that day, when she had killed the two assassins trying to escape their botched attempt on her life. She was locked into both Alert mode and, more exhaustingly, in Tactical mode. A steady stream of ketamine, cocaine extracts, custom designed hallucinogens, and methamphetamine derivatives was being deposited directly into her brain, and Lori was powerless to stop it. She'd had to ingest a steady stream of energy drinks just to keep up with just her current resting state. The Handler had not given control of her systems over to her which meant she couldn't turn them off, which in turn meant that she'd been riding this amped up high for hours longer than she ever had in the past. It was taking a toll on her body as well as her mind, to watch the world pass by at an extremely slow pace, but she endured the extended drain on her body's resources. Right now her only purpose was Tiburon's release.

She rolled back over onto her stomach and studied the house with enhanced eyes. There was absolutely no Phase activity that she could detect, which was odd by itself. There was always some

degree of Phase energy present in any given location as a part of the natural background noise. The house, on the other hand, was a complete void of Phase activity, sitting there in total silence and darkness. If she hadn't seen a Phase cloaking system in action she wouldn't have given the house a second glance. Whereas before she would have suspected nothing about the unusual stillness of the place, it now seemed to carry a definite feeling of menace with its inactivity. She rolled back over and started counting stars.

Another hour crawled by with a painful slowness as she focused on the stars gradually and weakly appearing overhead. She tried to calm her burning mind using various meditative techniques, but nothing worked. When the count of visible stars reached two thousand, Lori slipped off of the camper roof and made her way across the street, both knives glinting in the light of the neighborhood streetlamps. Lori had blood on her mind, and all other concerns faded into the back of her thoughts.

The chemicals were about to get the action they almost craved.

* * * *

Blood was pouring from Josh's mouth. A moment before Yoshida had nicked a vein while poking around his spine, apparently looking for a better angle of attack with yet another needle. Josh counted a dozen or so such needles already attached to the back of his throat, and his mouth was dry to the stench of the air. All torture chambers had the same smell of sweat, urine, and feces, and this one was no exception. Between the unwashed corpse of the cyborg and his own loss of bodily control, Josh was glad when his sense of smell finally gave up.

"I am getting some good data from you, Tiburon." Eito Yoshida sat staring at a computer monitor watching arcane words and numbers stream past. He turned back to Josh's broken form and injected something into his neck with yet another syringe. "Good enough that I can't have you dying on me right now. Let's take a break while those coagulants go into action and take care of that blood vessel for you. The bleeding should stop in a moment, and then we can continue."

Josh glared at his tormentor, unable to spit his anger into the man's face.

Yoshida grinned back. "It won't be long now. I think I just need a couple more blocks of data and then we will be done." He went to work on something on the computer, but started talking again. "So, what are your thoughts on those people that seem able to manipulate the Phase Wall without enhancement? I understand you can't speak, so I will take this opportunity to float a theory of mine with you."

"You see, I've conducted experiments on a few Talented, as you Conspiracy types call them. Just self-styled wizards and such, you understand. I have discovered that they seem to be... lacking. They're missing something that everybody else seems to have." He leaned back in the chair and interlaced his fingers behind his head. "Now I don't want to get too technical, but there is a significant difference between their engram and that of a normal person's. I jokingly call it a 'soul,' but really, that's just more my humor than the reality of it. I have dissected more than one normal person's engram, but I just cannot work out what it is we have that these talented people do not. It is fascinating."

Josh grunted in response. While he found this interesting in a detached sort of way, his more immediate concerns took priority over this vague curiosity.

Eito continued his musing. "Hell, even you have a soul, you vicious bastard. So do I, for that matter. Other than the obvious, you and I are perfectly normal people. Still, we've both danced with the devil, as it were, and neither of us qualifies as 'normal' in any other sense except for having a soul." A soft chiming noise alerted Yoshida to something, and he turned back towards Josh. "And it looks like the bleeding is stopped. Let us continue."

Josh winced as the enemy agent adjusted the needles. He winced again as Yoshida paused and cocked his head to the side as though listening to the goings on upstairs.

After a brief moment Yoshida reached over to the workbench and tapped a short sequence out on the keyboard. A sudden look of concern on his face, he stood up quickly, snatching a strange gun from a previously hidden duffel bag. It had a similar look to an Uzi, but the barrel was a solid piece of metal, lacking a bore for bullets to fire through. He stared at the cyborg for an instant, and positioned himself out of Josh's view. The

cyborg wrapped its steely fingers around Josh's throat, ready to squeeze at a moment's notice.

"I do believe that your fellow K-Trooper has arrived after all," Yoshida said. "She has already started her assault. Fortunately I have a couple of tricks up my sleeve."

As he sat in the metal chair in pain, Josh heard a burst of gunfire from upstairs, and the sound of bullets ripping through everything they encountered came muffled through the ceiling. Feeling the corpse's icy hands around his windpipe, he closed his eyes and began to focus on a very particular set of commands to his deployment system. The computer, which was still reading from the connected neuro-fibers, began to spit out completely different numbers on one of the monitors. As he organized the proper chain of sequences Josh readied himself for what could very possibly be the last act of his life, ignoring the pain of the needles in the back of his throat. The Handler had unlocked his systems before his capture, but he had not yet had a good opportunity to launch an attack until now. It was his last ditch effort, and now was the time to take it.

More gunfire erupted above, and the sound of shattered glass and general destruction could be heard through the basement ceiling. A man shouted, only to be immediately cut off in a strangled cry of pain. Chaos continued for a few minutes longer before silence fell on the house above. The only sound that could be heard in the silence was Yoshida's nervous heavy breathing. He had never feared anything so much as he feared the rampaging K-Trooper upstairs. It looked to him like all of the security measures he had put into place, as well as the heavily armed and well-equipped guards upstairs, were shaping up to be a large waste of resources. The basement was suddenly starting to feel like a tomb.

His panic spiked when he glanced at the computer monitor blinking red over and over in warning. Something he was not expecting was about to happen.

His eyes still screwed tightly shut, Josh put the last command into place just as he heard the basement door blasted inwards, sending splinters slashing through the air. He released what was ultimately a rather weak Phase Pulse into the surrounding reality, shattering the cyborg's iron grip on his neck. The chair warped beneath his broken body, and the remote controlled

cadaver flew back and flopped off of the cinder block wall with a completely disintegrated skeleton. The robotic carcass fell to the concrete floor with the gelatinous slap of a piece of boneless meat. The ceiling cracked with the impact of the expanding wave of over-driven reality, and the computers exploded in a cloud of sparks. Every source of light in the basement went black.

Yoshida slammed against the wall at the bottom of the stairs, taken completely unawares by the Phase Pulse. It was a weapon rarely used by the Conspiracy that often killed the agents deploying it, and while this was a lower energy burst than normal, it served to distract the enemy agent long enough for Lori to do her job.

She flew down the steps with inhuman speed, slashing through Yoshida with both of her knives. Blood sprayed through the air in all directions as she made herself confident that her target was dead. She then moved off into the darkness and made sure the rest of the basement was cleared before she got to Tiburon.

He sat in a twisted metal chair, sagging against his bonds in unconsciousness. The Phase Pulse was unexpected, but was probably the reason why she was still alive. Lori wasn't sure what kind of gun Yoshida was holding, but she assumed it was more than capable of taking her out fairly easily. She crouched down and began to tug on the needles sticking out of Tiburon's drooling mouth. They slid out with no resistance, and she dropped them to a bloody pile on the floor. She managed to release the handcuffs keeping him bound to the Pulse-destroyed chair and drag him up the stairs and out of the house. Hefting his heavy form up onto her shoulders, she quickly made her way out of the house and across the street. She dropped a couple of incendiary devices on the way out the front door, and the house was a towering pillar of flames by the time the police arrived. As for the gun, the cyborg, and the computer equipment downstairs: screw them. Let the enemy worry about cleaning this mess up.

Josh was still alive, albeit barely, and only saw the world in brief flashes of wakefulness as the unfamiliar woman carried him away from the torture house on her shoulders. His heart still beat, and he fought to maintain consciousness.

He was alive, and revenge was the only thing on his mind.

