

We have an unspoken 'no gangs' policy at the staffing agency where I work. There's nothing officially written, obviously. After all, we're all technically private contractors, we can take whatever jobs we want. All the same, any street mercenary worth his salt knows not to take any cases or assignments that deal with gangs. The reason is that the risk of collateral damage isn't just great; it's impossible to avoid. Collateral damage and retaliation, against you or the client. Or both. I should know. My name's Rhest. I'm a mercenary.

I say this because just after lunch on an idle Tuesday, David Greer walked in through the doors of the agency. David's probably eleven or twelve. He's young enough that he still dresses like a normal person, not one of the consumer victims of the modern fashion world. His pants are too big and his shirt's too small, which says just about everything about the state of the child walking into the den of mercenaries. He's got dark brown skin and hair that looks like it's short for economic reasons, not stylish reasons. A bit of an underbite that would be easy to fix with some surgery has clearly gone unaddressed all his life. His eyes are big and blue, but the intelligence and innocence in them is clearly hanging by a thread.

The whole agency slowly comes to a halt as he walks to the counter. We don't get a lot of children clients. Kids don't come to a place like this. This is a scary place, full of cyborgs with guns. Teens might wander in occasionally, and dumb-ass college-age kids too. Not kids. So when David approaches the counter and puts down two giant handfuls of wadded up dollar bills and coins, it's quiet enough that we all hear him say, "I need some help."

I already know I'm taking this case. By the looks of it, several of my peers at the agency are of the same mind.

Macee, the owner and operator of the agency, leaves her chair and her paperback romance novel. She's a bigger woman, who looks like a cross between a white trash Mrs. Claus and a broken fridge. She doesn't bother with the money for a moment (which is unusual) and asks the boy, "What do you need, son?"

The little kid is suddenly afraid. He shifts from one foot to the other, tapping his toes nervously. I've already given up on the code I'm writing on my laptop (hey, merc work isn't all running around shooting guns; and you think hacking software just writes itself?). I close my computer and listen intently. "There are these guys that are making us work for them." David's apparently aware enough to say upfront, "They're Marrow."

A lot of heads turn away at that point. The Marrow are a small gang that got started up somewhere around Oroville. Current estimates put them

at maybe a hundred strong, but that's based off police surveillance, so who actually knows. Might be twenty guys; might be five hundred.

I stand up and approach Macee behind the counter. When David walked in, I would have thought others would follow me. Apparently not this Tuesday.

David's explaining everything to Macee. "They stopped our bus," he's telling her as I listen. "They beat up my friends Mack and Jamal and they burned Jamal's ear."

"What do you mean burned his ear?" I ask. Macee looks at me, like she's worried I will take the case. Hell, I'm worried I'll take this case.

David looks up at me and he barely comes up to my waist. He's kind of a pudgy little kid, the kind you see raised on low-income assistance and living on food without expiration dates or nutritional value. "They held Jamal down and sat on him. One of the guys put a lighter inside Jamal's ear and burned his ear. His hair caught fire and they stomped it out."

"Why'd they do it?" Macee asked him.

"They told him to do something. Probably deliver something. He didn't." David shrugs. "I mean, I guess. I don't know." He faces the ground when he talks.

"Where's Jamal now?" I ask, getting only a sad shrug and an evasive glance.

To fill my silence, Macee asks me, "Rhest, you taking this case?"

I don't know how I can say no. As a mercenary, you learn not to take lost causes. You learn not to get too caught up in the lives of clients. You learn not to get emotionally invested. Get emotionally invested and you stop being a mercenary and you become a vigilante. Vigilantism is a whole 'nother thing that's got its place, but also doesn't pay the bills. It also tends to force you to make hard decisions, to fight when you should walk away. But I don't know how I can say no.

"What do you want?" I ask him. I need to know if we wants somebody specific to leave him alone or if he just wants the Marrow gone. His objective decides whether or not I follow my sense or follow my conscience.

David answers, "I just want to be able to go to school."

Dammit, kid.

I turn right to Macee and tell her, "I'll take it."

There are four powers in the realm that is the Greater Sacramento Megalopolis.

The police and the municipal powers are pretty straightforward. These are the last vestiges of the government that still survive. They tend to keep the roads paved and the street lights on, but they also have a bad reputation for graft, corruption, and ineffectiveness. Usually, they're on the same side but not always. Do mercenary work long enough and you start to realize that the police have their own agenda from the government, and vice versa. And where their interests diverge can be key.

The real power is, of course, corporate. The corporations are the monsters that run whole sections of the city and influence the workings of everything in life. They provide the electricity, the lights, the apartment, and the job to pay for it all. Some corporations are altruistic at times, some are universally malevolent. Some generally try to right by the citizenry and some could care less. And sometimes, it depends on simply which branch of what corporation as to which is which.

The fourth power in the realm are the gangs. Gangs come in a lot of shapes and sizes, influences and forms. Some of the unions really are more gangs than workers' unions. You've got organized crime, although there's a lot less 'Goodfellas' to it than you might think. Organized crime, in this day and age, is really petty and banal. Street gangs are the worst because they're the hardest to catch, the hardest to track, and the hardest to stop. They usually form by marginalized kids trying to survive in a tough situation, but then it poisons from there.

I'm thinking about all of this as I ride the metro north with David. He's got his backpack slung around in front of him, making his unremarkable belly appear even grander. He very clearly skipped school to come to my agency, which makes me curious why he chose us. With a little while left in the ride, I ask him, but David just shrugs. "I just searched online. Your place was the first name that came up."

I don't know if that's laziness or desperation.

"David, it's very likely people are going to die," I tell him in the graffiti-strewn metro car.

I expected either a childish revulsion or a teenager's fascination and eagerness. I got neither. He just shrugs again, like it wasn't a thing he wanted but he expected it all the same. That troubles me to this day.

We get off the metro at the Winterview Station. Half the subway station is closed. Two of the fast food stalls have been broken into, or just broken. With all that debris, it's hard to tell. I nudge a piece of glass and realize it's been down there so long, it's rendered opaque from dust. There's cardboard all over the place, covering up windows. Most of the walls are covered in spraypaint, or aged posters, or both. The lights over us flicker, when they even turn on at all. The buzz of bare electricity is constant. The place smells of rotting glue and urine. A homeless figure is curled up on a bench at the far end of the station. Several bottles inside brown bags litter the ground around him. He didn't move at all when the train arrived and part of me fears he won't move again.

We start to head up the stairs towards the street and I stop on the first step, catching David before he gets to the second. "Does anybody know you came to the agency?" I ask. He shakes his head. The gravity of this situation gnawing on me, I tell him, "I think it might be best if you just go home. If the Marrows learn you hired a merc, they may get mad." I have to keep myself from saying 'pissed', but it dawns on me this kid has undoubtedly heard worse. Hell, he could probably teach me a thing or two about profanity.

David looks up the stairs at the afternoon light and is clearly worried. I think he was expecting me to walk him home. He doesn't say anything else. He just starts on the hike up those steep stairs. I wait a few minutes, not just for David to disappear up the steps but also for two more metro cars to come and go. Once enough time passes, I exit out into the urban plight.

Winterview Station empties out not far from 'downtown' of Easterly. It pales compared to Sacramento proper's downtown. Of course, most everywhere does. No, Easterly's downtown looks almost like some tiny little town from old TV shows that were in black & white. There are two corporate towers that stand out. They're tiny compared to anything in Sacramento but they're giant compared to the three and four-story buildings around here. At least one of these 'towers' is very clearly abandoned. Even from this distance, I can see the broken windows and graffiti. A whole tower of twenty or thirty stories, completely abandoned. Or at least abandoned by its corporate masters. God only knows who lives there now.

I realize that I've decided to walk through the absolute manifestation of poverty as I head down the street. There's a building that's completely collapsed so much so that its front wall is partially in the street. Cars just drive around the debris, I guess. Every store front has bars on the windows and rolling barriers over the doors. Buildings condemned more than decades ago litter the landscape. I try to study the graffiti that is aboulustely

everywhere, to see if I can get a feel for what Marrow tags look like, but to no avail.

I walk until I reach a school. No idea what school, if it's David's or not. I think it's a high school but the sign over the double doors is missing too many letters to tell. I just stroll on inside the expansive and labyrinthine building, a whole campus in one structure. There's no one around given the afternoon. The halls are big and empty. My echo proceeds me as I try to figure out which way to go. There are displays everywhere in the slate-and-brick hallway, but most of the displays have been vandalized to one degree or another. I pass by sign showing the Science 'Fags' Winners. All the pictures are written on; homophobic slurs for the boys, sexual accusations for the girls.

I arrive at the principal's office and let myself in as casually as one might enter a bathroom. There's a skinny woman at the reception desk who looks like she's spent more money on her hair than she has on anything else. She's on the phone and clearly indifferent to my existence. I decide to be indifferent to hers and I walk right through the little office area. She starts to protest but first impressions are important, and hers sucked. I go to the office door of one Principal Jeanine Alice and let myself in.

Waiting inside across the government desk in the tiny office is a professional-looking woman who appears to be five or ten years older than she actually is. Dark skin and graying hair clash with her light brown pantsuit and a stalwart glare that says that if I'm here for trouble, she will give me plenty of it. She clearly takes her job seriously and, given the overflowing state of her office, she might be one of the only ones in the whole school who does, so I decide not to beat around the bush. I shut the door behind me so the receptionist in the office can't hear us and I tell Principal Alice, "I was hired by a local resident to deal help deal with the Marrows."

I'm not sure what I was expecting but her chortle of cynical defeatism wasn't it. "Good luck," she tells me in a deep voice. She closes a few paper files (they still use paper files!?) and sits back in her chair. The duct tape on the backrest scrapes a little as she does. "Can you tell me who?"

Deciding this is exceptionally helpful for a gang situation, I sit down across from her. "Probably best if I don't." I look around her office. Files flitter a bit as a rust-stained breeze comes in through the window. Otherwise, it's hot and smells indistinctly bad. The tiles of her office ceiling are stained an array of different colors, which is about the same condition of the frayed carpeting on the floor. I disregard all that. "What can you tell me about the Marrows around here?"

"It's bad," the principal sums up honestly. When she leans back in her chair, the frame squeaks. "They recruit every boy they can find, and those they don't recruit, they either beat into submission or they kill." She waves her hand at the hall. "Every male that walks through those halls is either Marrow or has been beaten by the Marrows."

"My client says they're burning kids' ears?" I ask, like I'm hoping this is an exaggeration.

She nods. "It's one of their little sick things. They hold a kid down and use a lighter to burn the helix and the antihelix." She gestures to her ear.

"Extorting money?" I ask.

"Extorting money, forcing them to join, or just the sheer entertainment," she tells me as she swivels a little in her chair. "Most of the Marrow are sick. If they weren't when they joined, they were turned sick by the gang itself. Torturing is part of how they run this place."

"The school?" I ask.

"The whole town," she says. "But they definitely run the school. Three of them raped in front of a class." I'm stunned by her candor. "Three of them just walked right onto campus, right through those doors and just walked right into the classroom. I was giving awards for citizenship. I don't know if they came to find me specifically or if they just strolled in here to see what they could find. They beat Mr. Donovan, the teacher, and then held me down." She speaks casually about it, like it doesn't even crack her top ten of the worst things she's dealt with. "They told the class that if anybody tried to leave, they'd kill them." She snorts angrily. "They sold a phone video of it to some snuff sites. And now I can't get transferred. No school wants a principal that's 'done porn'."

I wish this shocked me, but I've heard this before. Believe it or not, the Marrow aren't the worst. Not in Sacramento. But seeing the statistics doesn't mean you truly understand what's happening. An interview on a screen doesn't equate to meeting a real victim. Seeing a report doesn't compare to first-hand exposure. It's one thing to know something happens; it's another to be confronted with it directly.

"What's your plan?" she asks me.

I shake my head. Why lie? "I honestly don't know. Gang issues are tricky. They always are. Mercs rarely take them."

"I am aware," says the woman who clearly tried and failed to hire help previously.

"Are they centrally located?" I ask her. Might as well get down to business.

She thinks for a moment, trying to decide how best to answer that. "No," she resolves. "They've got half a dozen 'hang outs' that I've heard of, but they're mostly somebody's parents' place or something. I've never heard any mention of them having any specific base or focused point. If they did, we might be able to get municipal help. As it is, we have no police in this town at all. We get 'regular' patrols," she says with exaggerated air quotes, "maybe two or three times a week. Somebody drives through, always during the day. If we're lucky, they might stop and buy a pack of smokes from a gas station. I'm not sure they've made an arrest here in over a year."

That sounds bleak but that actually helps. For starters, that means I probably won't have to worry about the cops showing up if there is trouble. One gang is enough, I don't want to have to worry about the municipal police too. Secondly, if they don't have a centralized locale, that means they may be smaller than I suspected.

No centralized locale. I keep rolling that little detail around in my head as I walk. Assuming that's the case, and the Marrow just aren't really good at hiding their secret lair, then that tells me they aren't involved in THAT much crime. If they were moving drugs or guns or something like that, they'd need a place to stash it. That's almost always their central place, their hideout as it were. Without that, then it's unlikely (but not impossible) that they're into all that much stuff.

See, it's important to remember that gangs are a business. They often start as a self-defense organization, basically a really weird version of a neighborhood watch. Kids banding together to look after each other, whether it's from cops or other gangs or whatever. It's actually really noble and good, and (sadly) often necessary.

But it never stays that way.

Somewhere along the way – and it's always sooner rather than later – they realize that they've got power. With power comes the chance to make some money. Strength in numbers means strength, which means power, which means they can exert power. They exert power to get money. They start selling drugs or stealing to make sure they have enough to eat, but it quickly becomes less about having enough to eat and getting the money. That line you see in every cheap made-for-TV biopic about a band and the bassist accuses the lead singer of selling out and 'it used to be about the music!?' Yeah, that line actually applies real well to gangs. It used to be about taking care of each other. Now it's about using mob mentality to intimidate, steal, and get 'rich'.

I say 'rich' and not rich because there's no money in gangs. Sure, there's hundreds of dollars or maybe even thousands of dollars. But most gang members, even high level guys, are making minimum wage levels of money. These guys aren't rolling in it. They almost always live at home, or a whole mess of them are crashing at one kid's parents' place or they're all squatting. The image of the gang leader holed up in some nice apartment is less gang and more organized crime. Magnitude and scale are about all that separate the two: organized crime is farther-reaching, better executed, and more ambitious. Another way to say it is that a gang's threat is proportional to their organizational skills. Serious threats need to be organized and gangs aren't.

Of course, that's in a long-term sort of thinking. That's dealing with gangs on a populated, municipal scale. Getting beaten in an alley or having your ear set on fire doesn't take a lot of organization.

Rolling all of this around in my head, I ask "How do they approach the kids?"

The principal shrugs. "However they want," she says. "They're not above grandstanding, especially when it's the younger kids. They'll bully the little kids in front of the others, just to send the message." I nod as she continues. "The schools are where the kids are at their most vulnerable, to be honest. Which is a shame."

A plan is slowly formulating in my head, so I stand and tell Principal Alice, "Thanks," and see myself out. I'm going to bed early tonight.

The next morning, at 4:30am, bus driver Sam Wells opens the double doors to let in two kids from the East River Projects and me. I'm wearing baggy cargo pants and a hoodie over my combat armor. I get on with the kids who are devoid of parental supervision. Sam takes one look at me and starts to ask questions. The twenty I slip him makes him suddenly indifferent.

I walk right past the busted security camera that's supposed to monitor and safeguard the kids on the bus. I sit right behind Sam, my hands in my hoodie's pockets and my head down. I try to be as small as possible. Which is kind of pointless because, try as I might, I'm not going to be small enough to blend in with the elementary and middle school kids who will ride this bus. I'm hoping that if I can affect 'bum', then maybe I won't draw attention. I mean, there are worse plans out there. I can't think of any at the moment, but I'm sure, technically, a worse plan exists.

I start to fall asleep almost immediately. Cripes, why are kids up at this hour? Hell, why is anyone up at this hour?! The sun won't be up for another two hours at least! What idiot decided school had to start this soon?

I ride the bus for three trips. I'd kind of always thought buses picked up kids, took them to school, and that was it. Turns out, the bus is in rotation for most of the morning, for like five hours. I guess as soon as the driver gets lunch, it's time for the afternoon routes. Throughout the morning, Sam the Driver packs the bus with kids for this school, drops them off, then picks up kids for that school, rinse and repeat. It gets loud and intense the whole way. It's like driving in a zoo.

At least the kids are fine. Rowdy children seem chaotic, but amazingly, they're all pretty well behaved. It's clear that many of these kids come from low income households, but they've got smiles that they share. They're loud but what they're loud about is mostly harmless. It's a chaotic and painful way to spend the morning, but it's not exactly awful once I get used to the atmosphere of kids. It's on the third round, however, just as the sun is starting to creep into the sky, that my early morning pays off in the worst possible way.

The bus is about two-thirds full when two high school kids and a semi-adult force their way on. Sam, the driver, says "Hey!" as a protest and gets a snub-tipped gun in the face and a profanity-saturated threat.

The two kids cause total quiet in the bus as they make right for the very middle. They spot their target and the rest of the bus simply doesn't exist. One kid sitting alone – a little boy not that different from David – backs up against the wall of the bus. He starts to stammer "No, no," again and again.

The nearer of the two gang members asks, "What'd we say?" The little boy barely has the chance to blubber anything before the thug shoves his head into the glass window. He punches the boy in the stomach, causing him to howl in agony. The boy crumples into a ball on the bus bench, sobbing and screaming.

The little boy's screaming intensifies into absolute bloody murder as the other thug takes out a cigarette lighter. The child starts flailing frantically, panicking, thrashing desperately. His screams absolutely saturate the bus. The other kids on the bus are starting to shriek in terror too until the first thug starts to wail on the boy. Just flings his hands like socks full of rocks down on the boy's head and chest, shouting, "Shut up, you little pussy!" His hands are flailing frantically, brutally pummeling the little boy.

The tangible pain of the punches overrides the fear of impending pain of the lighter and the little boy finally obeys the order to stay quiet. The entire bus is absolutely silent except for his incoherent sobbing. The first thug starts to cuss at him, making abundantly clear that this is what he gets, what deserves, for not doing what he was told. It's made inescapably clear that this is his fault as he's held down again and the lighter is brought to his ear.

Gangs are built on a visceral understanding of power. Power to most gang members is physical. It's the ability to physically force and take. As such, they are usually unimpressed with psychological tactics and they don't usually process long-term thinking. Most gang members assume they'll be dead by thirty anyway, so who cares about things like cancer, prison sentences, or education? These are people who only understand physical force because that's all their world has ever shown them.

The downside to this is that it means that most forms of reasoning are lost on them. Not because they're stupid or uneducated (lack of schooling doesn't mean these people aren't bright), but because they don't speak that language as it were. So you have to find a language they do speak. Turns out, the language they are best at is that of sheer, overwhelming brute force. As a mercenary, that is a language I am fluent in.

I shoot the thug holding the cigarette lighter in the back of the head.

It's a clean shot, I can tell, because he doesn't falter or fall right away. It went in the back of his skull and exited right between his eyes. There's a bright, vibrant splatter on the side of the bus and one of the windows is now cracked. So is the brick wall of the building outside.

That was with my right hand, holding Reason, one of my two primary pistols. Respect, in my left hand, is pointed at the adult holding the driver in his place. At least I think it's the gun that's keeping the driver from moving. I want to think that Sam is a good enough guy that he wouldn't sit by and watch a child get tortured. I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt on that.

Anyway, Respect is aimed at this guy before his gun can even turn to me. Reason is a tactical gun meant for precision and surgical-like accuracy. Respect is the kind of gun Gun Control Advocates rail against. It's hand-held death.

Some mercenaries argue that two pistols wielded in two hands in two directions isn't the most tactically-sound way to handle a situation, but they probably haven't had to deal with gang members on a bus full of pre-teens so what do they know. Right now, all that matters to me is that the cigarette lighter has fallen to the floor and is nowhere near the kid's ear.

What I also notice is that it's still dead silent. The kids aren't screaming, they aren't panicking. They're looking at me. If anything, a lot of the kids are staring at me like I saved them. By shooting this dude. Holy hell, what kind of a life do these kids lead?!

"Back," I tell the surviving thug by the crying little boy with blood splatter all over him. I look at the semi-adult and tell him the same. "Back." The guy starts to sass me so I pistol whip him. No words, no threats, just smack him in the face with a gun that can handle a riot. These three came onto this bus with the intention of torturing a kid whose age could easily still be single digits. Their very survival is hanging by a thread.

I kick Chatty McShouldKnowBetter down the steps and off the bus, then level both pistols at Assistant Lighter. "Out. Now." This kid is clearly used to having guns aimed at him but he's also not entirely stupid. He starts to shuffle towards the door. He slides along and slows near me, his hands going towards the pockets of his baggy pants.

I let him know I can tell he's going for a gun by warning him with the seriousness of a heart attack, "So help me god, try it."

He abandons whatever plan he had and keeps going.

We exit the bus together and Sam, wisely, pulls away. I'm left on the side of the road in the projects with two gang members and two guns. Despite having the upper hand at the moment, this situation will go south for me very quickly. 'Matter of seconds' quickly.

"You have sixty seconds," I tell them both, Assistant Lighter who is standing and Chatty who is still half-prone on the gravel that was once a sidewalk. "Your ability to stay alive after sixty seconds depends on the answers you give me."

"Man, I ain't—" starts Lighter.

I elbow him across the face. I mean hard. Catch him right in the cheek and knock him against a storefront that hasn't been open since either of us were born. He hits and comes back like a pro, or a pro-wannabe. He swings wild and feral with his right but I elbow him again, same spot with the same hit. He goes down and I start to jackhammer him with my elbow. When he starts to fall, I start downward strikes until I hear bone crack.

I let him fall to the sidewalk, blood dripping from the elbow pad of my armor. I turn to Chatty. I grab him by the nape of the shirt and shove him face-first into Lighter's bloody and beaten face. I put Respect's barrel

against the back of his neck and yell, "Your attention! Do I f*&king have it?!" I kneel down on his kidney just to make sure he's in pain.

Chatty is face-first when Lighter spits out half a tooth. "Wh-what..." he starts to ask.

"I want to know who told you to set this kid's ear on fire," I tell him. "I want a name and I want it now. If you don't tell me by the count of five, I will shoot you in the face, leave you here and go find someone who values their life. One, two, three, four—" I count fast.

"Albert, man!" Chatty exclaims, unable to get away from the bludgeoned face of his friend. "Albert's the guy."

I let him roll over and I put Respect right to his eyes. "I'm going to talk to Albert tomorrow," I tell him. "If Albert skips town, there will be hell to pay." I get up and just leave him there, next to his beaten and bloodied friend. I walk briskly for the nearest alley. I try to make myself look unconcerned but I have to disappear fast or else he'll shoot me in the back.

Said alley proves to be a deadend but backtracking is a bad idea, both tactically and dramatically (anybody who thinks theatrics don't have a place in combat has never studied psychological warfare). There's a manhole, so I put away my guns and take out a mini-crow bar from my combat harness. I quickly upend the cover (good god, these things are heavy!) and slip into the sewer. Melodramatic perhaps, but it keeps 'em guessing and that's what I need.

I follow the sewer only a couple of lengths, bent over and smelling moldy water (that's what I tell myself I'm smelling) and exit into the morning. I kick off my hoodie and baggy pants, hoping to leave the smell behind. When I slip out onto the street, I'm in the parking lot of another project about a block over. Nobody's around, but that doesn't mean I'm not being watched. I slip out quickly and walk off with intent. With any luck, any Marrow watching just saw an armed and armored merc crawl out of the sewer and walk away looking like he's got a man to kill.

Which, let's face it, is not far from the truth.

Regrettably before that, I gotta find this Albert fellow. Step one in any murder is to know where your target is. To that end, I try to quickly weigh my options. I suppose I could get somewhere with some free wi-fi (HA!) and run a search. It's amazing what kind of information you can get on the web, especially if you are a little unscrupulous with your data collection methods. Alternatively, I can contact my agency and have them run a search. Macee's got some really good records on this kind of thing, plus they have access to the municipal records for the Greater Sacramento Megalopolis, so that could help.

It dawns on me, though, that I could also just ask somebody.

It's a common mistake to view gang leaders as some kind of criminal mastermind that border on superhuman. Sure, some of these goons have pretty good understanding of psychology and leadership skills but they're not omnipotent. They're not even experts. They're basically running a terrible business with really awful customer service. They don't have the entire town under some kind of spell, forcing them from never speaking ill. Sometimes, if you want information, all you got to do is ask somebody. Now who do I know who might be willing to help, and be in a position to actually be able to help?

I keep walking. I don't really bother with trying to hide. I don't want to draw attention to myself, but come on. I'm a merc in combat armor. People are going to notice me, so I'd rather look indifferent to detection than incompetent at stealth. So, I once again default to looking like what I'm doing is totally my plan. As I try to look like this is totally my plan, I fish out my cell phone and run a search for a number. Thank goodness local phone listings still work. I call and she picks up. I say immediately, "Principal Alice, this is the merc from yesterday."

There's a pause and then recognition hits. "Yes," she says.

"I need to find a gang leader," I tell her quickly. "His name's Albert. I'm not too far from your school. He's probably—"

"His name's Marshawn Hutchingson," the principal tells me. Given the background noise, I can tell she's turned away from something. Homeroom? Do they still have homeroom in school anymore? It gets quieter so I guess she's ducked into a corner. She explains, "He goes by Albert because of some old cartoon."

Man, I love municipal workers. "Where can I find Marshawn?"

"I don't know where he is right now but he lives with his mom." I practically hear her check her wrist watch (my god, wrist watches?! It's like traveling back in time to the previous century!). "If he slept there last night, it's a good bet he's still there."

I nod and start walking faster. I inform her, "Look, I don't want to say for certain but there may be some shooting today."

"It's a day ending in Y," she informs me in a condescending tone only educators can manage. She then asks me in a tone not completely devoid of hope, "What if works?"

"Oh no, that's if they do go according to plan," I tell her, feeling bad for dashing that optimism. "If things don't go according to plan, there's

going to be more shooting than 'some'." I hang up and start to run a search. I myself also start to run. News is going to spread fast; I gotta be faster.

The Western Farms Neighborhood Structure is one of those really distinctive mini-bio-domes that were all the rage, like, thirty years ago. There were a way for local developers to get in on the bio-dome craze that seems to crop up every few decades, like bell-bottom pants or leather jackets, but without having to shell out quite so much money or, worse, panhandle for corporate sponsorship. Mini-bio-domes are like they're giant brethren, but they're usually made out of last generation materials (cement, concrete, brick) and lack a lot of the built-in systems, namely air circulation.

See, your average bio-dome is just that: a self-contained bio-dome that can completely close up and continue to function independently for weeks or months, or even longer (allegedly). They're huge structures where people live, work, and all that without ever having to leave. They've got grocery stores, shopping centers, schools (sometimes even a vocational school), medical centers, all the amenities of a small town right there among the apartments and the condos. Hell, a few of them even have waterparks and casinos.

Mini-bio-domes are to those what big gas stations are to grocery stores. They can try and compete, and they might even have more than the absolute bare essentials, but at the end of the day, they just aren't in the same class. Mini-bio-domes are, in essence, just humongous apartment buildings with stores on the first floor and maybe a garden on the roof.

Anyway, the Western Farms Neighborhood Structure is a sixteen-story mini-bio-dome that has vines creeping down off the roof and smells of death half a block away. It's a good walk from where I was but I still get there without too much rushing. I get some ugly looks as I walk down the street, but nobody bothers with what ain't their business. Just one of those neighborhoods, I guess.

The doors are double-armored glass with roll-down security sheets for when civil unrest comes through the neighborhood (which, by the looks of the sidewalk, is a regular event). A key card is supposed to be needed to get inside but the card reader has been smashed. Graffiti covers the downstairs foyer. Scraps of trash and other waste have been kicked about and blown into the corners. The grocery store at the base level is closed and has been for a while. That hasn't stopped the locals from breaking in. The smaller convenience store is a case study in local security. Metal bars, enough cameras to catch every normal blind spot and provide redundant coverage, and probably a gun or two within reach just under the cash

register. The blast cracks in the glass suggest the guns have been used, probably recently.

I don't bother with the elevators. They may or may not work and they're a good way to get trapped regardless. I go for the nearest stairwell. Most of the steps have been chipped away by vandals bored with graffiti. Sections of the metal railing are missing, probably to be turned into weapons in a moment of need or a moment of boredom. There's a frigid draft coursing down the stairs, meaning the roof access is open. Most of the lights are flickering, the greasy neon they give off more color for the darkness than meaningful illumination.

I pass a couple of kids who should be in school getting amorous on the stairs and I arrive at floor eleven. The door is missing entirely from the stairwell. Man, bored kids will vandalize anything! I take out my phone and search for building-wide wifi (there isn't any, but fortunately the municipal wifi is working). I check for local signals and, lo and behold, there's a local website, complete with directory. The directory is only available to residents with a log-in, but that takes me about forty seconds to get around. Turns out, the Hutchingson apartment is to my left, 11-103.

I slip over to 11-101 and knock quietly. I check this way and that and see no one. I knock again and still no response, but I hear footsteps coming from down the hall. Probably Marrows coming to see 'Albert'. I jiggle the handle of the door and manage to shove my way in. An old Korean man was halfway to the door as I force my way into his home. He holds up his hands in terror and I put Respect in his face. I shut the door very quickly and even quieter, then put a finger to my lips. I listen, and he watches me listen, as I hear Marrow arrive next door. They bang and yell "Albert, open up."

I hear the door open and some woman yells, "Marshawn's—"

"Man, shut up bitch!" someone yells at her and shoves past. I hear them shuffle in and the door shuts. Albert's home.

I face the owner of the apartment and lower my gun. "I'm here to have a talk with Marshawn," I whisper to him. "I just need—"

"There's a ledge between the windows," he gestures at the back of the apartment. He starts to shuffle with bad hips and knees towards the back of the apartment. The almost-nice home is decorated with second-hand furniture and a few trinkets from the homeland. There are a few knit items that are threadbare and faded, yet still in their determined place. The absence of the woman in all the photos makes me feel bad for the old man.

He opens the window over the living room, letting in a harsh gust of cold air. "My room, then his room," he tells me, gesturing with his hands.

"Thank you," I nod. I feel like I should bow but I'm not sure if that would be rude or racist or what. Instead, I just crawl out onto the window ledge. It's an eleven-story drop which, for me, isn't a thing. Not that the drop is a joke but I'm used to it. I probably learned to climb before I learned to walk.

The ledge is pretty sturdy but it's narrow. Maybe a foot wide, which eleven stories up, is like an inch wide. Wearing a combat harness doesn't help. It's not a lot of armor, but it makes me a little top-heavy. Really, I'm just pressed against the surface of the building, hoping to hell the Marrow don't see me.

I shuffle past the old man's bedroom and reach the tiny divider between the exterior of the apartments. I have to lean out (which isn't nerve-wracking at all) to peek in the window. Thankfully there's no glare and I can tell the room's empty. Better yet, the window's open just a crack. Yay for faulty ventilation systems! I slip it open with only a little trouble and glance inside. The bedroom is absolutely filthy, but the door is closed.

I slip inside and can hear talking just beyond the door. I land on the bed, and then slip onto the floor. The floor is cluttered and full of trash that honestly seems a little deliberate. Chip bags and fast food debris is pushed into corners along with old clothes, nudity magazines, and the array of litter that accumulates in urban life. Among that brickabrack, I consider the best place to hide. There's no furniture except the bed and a nightstand. The closet alcove's door is busted. Just getting inside would probably make noise. The talking is getting more rowdy. I gotta move.

The room is small, so I put away Respect. I draw Affinity, one of my holdout pistols. Respect and Reason are full-sized (and then some), but Affinity is small enough to keep in a (large) pocket. It'll do the job, though, and then some. On the other side of the door, I hear a male say "We gonna go find him and then light his ass up!" Footsteps coming this way. Oh well. No time to hide now. Might as well be obvious about it.

When Albert enters his bedroom, he sees me sitting on his bed. Affinity is drawn and aimed clearly right at his heart. I don't need it but I even include a laser sight just to make my point clear. He looks down at the little red dot hovering right over his heart. Before Albert can say anything, I tell him quietly, "Make a noise and I shoot."

The big guy who looks like a blubbery linebacker has clearly had a gun pointed at him because he's nonplussed. He's also been shot at enough to know when he's facing someone who will follow through on such a threat. So he wisely steps into the room and shuts the door. His head's

cocked back with disdain. He sucks his teeth at me and says, "Big man. Got in here—"

I don't have time for his bravado. I tell him, "This is going to get out of hand quickly and a lot of your people are going to die."

He scoffs. He asks in disbelief, "Lot of my people?"

"You kill me," I warn him earnestly, "and every mercenary in Sacramento will be down here by the end of the week. There's over a hundred mercs at my agency alone, and I have contacts with a dozen other agencies."

"Oh, and they gonna avenge you like some—" he tries to demean.

"No, they'll be contracted," I tell him clearly and firmly. "I have a clause in my will. I contract every mercenary my estate can afford to kill those responsible for killing me. A hundred mercenaries, easy. Think about it, Albert. As of this moment, I could hire double that number, maybe more. They will descend on your territory and wipe you off the map. You and all the Marrow, gone."

"They gotta—"

"They have to find you?" I ask. "Albert, you think the Crips won't give you up in a heartbeat? You think the Street Yaks won't go door-to-door and point out every Marrow they can find. Your enemies will be lining up to turn you in. You think this neighborhood that you're bullying and preying upon won't give you up the first chance they get. Albert, the Marrows will be wiped out by sundown. Wiped up by sundown and everybody will have a party while your blood is still running in the damn streets." I say that slowly and deliberately to let it sink in.

He's glaring at me. He's not only trying to think of a comeback, he's trying to think of a way out of it, because he knows I'm right. Gang members have a hell of a time dealing with disloyalty within their own ranks. Amidst rivals? Gangs will sell each other for a stick of gum.

Rather than let Albert run his mind, I sit forward. "Here's what you are going to do," I tell him. "I'm going to leave. And I'm going to watch. And if another kid gets his ear burned, I come back. And I come back with friends. Me and my friends, we strike a deal with the Bloods or the Street Yaks or the Yellows or any of the dozen or more gangs that are ready and waiting to take over these neighborhoods." I gesture at the window I crept through. "With their help and my firepower, we sweep this neighborhood and kill every Marrow we find. We kill anyone we even suspect of being a Marrow. We clear?" I tell him. "You torture kids to do your business and you get exterminated like so many cockroaches."

Albert's shaken. He knows I'm serious. The sweat on his face shakes as he tries to decide just how likely it is that I'm telling the truth. Finally, he decides it's not worth the risk, so he spits, "Man, get the f*&k out."

I stand up, Affinity still on his heart. "I don't want to come back, Albert. Don't make me." He just glares at me. I exit his bedroom, his mom's apartment, and the building without incident.

I don't hear from David ever again. I hope it's because the problem's solved.

I hope.