

I'm in the back of a limousine with Frank 'Darnyl' Williams.

If the name Darnyl – Dar-nuhl – doesn't ring a bell, don't feel bad. You aren't alone. The Pacific Northwest's rap scene isn't exactly a hopping place these days but it's quietly growing. Sacramento and LA have their share of rappers but up in Portland and Seattle, the scene is still blossoming. Darnyl's one of the first big names to transcend the local indie scene and get some national coverage. He's got this big tour all along the coast and this week, he's in Sacramento, playing some shows. At this very moment, he's on his way to the hotel from a sold-out show at the Old West Inn Theater. I'm in the back with him because tonight, I'm his bodyguard. My name's Rhest. I'm a mercenary.

It's really less of a limo and more of a really big car. Limos aren't that big of a thing anymore because gas is so stupidly expensive and because a few years back, some high school kids got killed when their limo got fishboned on the way to the prom. There was this big investigation with engineers and even physicists and stuff, and everybody kind of realized how dumb a super-long car actually is. So you don't seem them all that often anymore. I mean, sure they show up here and there, they're just not a sign of wealth like they used to be. Kind of like Rolls Royce. Ain't nobody seen one of those goofy-looking cars in forever. Is that company even still around?

That said, this is still a big car. It's got TVs and a sound system and a screen separating the driver from the back, though we have it down. Me, Darnyl, and the driver Ziggy are rapping.

Now, you might be asking what's a guy like me – with zero musical training and negative lyrical skill – doing rapping with one of the west coast's freshest and newest voices of the genre? The answer is, of course, why wouldn't I? If you got the chance to go a few (very light) rounds with Randy Couture or Muhammed Ali, wouldn't you? If you got the chance to play a little one-on-one with Michael Jordan or LeBron James, wouldn't you? How about talk star-stuff with Albert Einstein or Carl Sagan? What if you had the chance to sing a few chords with James Brown or U2? I don't know if Darnyl will ever be that big, but if he is, I'll be able to say I got to hang with him, spinning lines.

We're doing this kind of round-robin thing. Darnyl's playing some preliminary beat track on his portable mixer. It's just a repetitive dance beat but it's something to rap to. He goes for a few stanzas, then I take it, then Ziggy takes it, then back to Darnyl. It's fun (except when Ziggy's paying more attention to rapping than driving). Ziggy and Darnyl are a lot better than me, but that doesn't matter. I'm getting to rap with someone

who might turn into one of the greats, depending on how history goes. Besides, it's cool and we're having a good time.

We're interrupted by Ziggy's phone. Darnyl switches off the music as Ziggy answers. His casual tone quickly elevates with increasing alarm. "Yeah, hey playah, I'm...wait...slow down, man." Silence as Ziggy drives and talks. "What? What the fu—what the fu—What?! No! NO! No, that ain't gonna stand, playah! That ain't gonna stand! I'm on my way!"

Darnyl and I are both thrown into the right side as Ziggy does a bootlegger turn in this giant luxury car. He rights himself going the opposite direction amidst a torrent of horns from the traffic around us. He explains fiercely, "I gotta make a stop."

It's going to be one of those nights.

I turn to Darnyl and say, "This is why you get the package deal from the agency."

"Yeah, I get that," he agrees quickly.

I sidle forward to the divider and ask super-casually, "Hey, Ziggy, what's up?"

Ziggy is just starring a hole through the windshield and the world. "Man, I got some bullsh—man, you just can't trust nobody!" He shakes his head. "I'm going handle my business though, I tell you that. I'm gonna handle my business, then we going to take Darnyl home."

"Well, see, that's the thing," I tell him as I lean forward on the divider. "Maybe we can take Darnyl to the hotel first and then handle your business?" I'm prepared to offer him my help as I do currently have six guns on me. To my surprise, however, he hits the brakes. Darnyl is thrown forward and I'm flattened against the divider.

"Be right back!" Ziggy yells before bolting out of the car.

I watch Ziggy cross an empty street, all six-foot-three, hundred-and-thirty pounds of him. He looks like an anorexic scarecrow but he still has an energy that makes me think somebody's going to die and quite possibly by his bare hands.

I sigh and look out the windows of the car. "Where the hell are we?" I inadvisably say. Gotta show confidence when you're responsible for protecting another person, but I'm also just genuinely surprised that I'm lost. I thought I knew Sacramento like the back of my hand, but I don't recognize these slums. Which, now that I think about it, isn't too hard. Sacramento's a huge city, one of the Big Six in California. And, if we don't

include corporate holdings, it's probably sixty percent slums, barrios, hoods, and trailer parks.

We're in a part of town that gets starlight, which is bad damn sign right there. We're so far away from the urban centers that you can see the sky through the cloud cover. That's a long damn ways away from anything. I mean, it's not like we're out in the wilderness. There's not a night sky. There's just one or two twinkles but that's a bad omen for anyone who needs to get back to the safety of the corporate monoliths that make up downtown.

I slip back into the seat next to Darnyl. "Okay, so...that's bad," I tell him, pointing at the awkwardly empty driver's seat. "He's got the keys and you ain't hotwiring one of these babies." I pat the car's seat affectionately as I take out my cell phone.

Unlike a lot of other people, I don't have a receiver built into my brain. Cybermates are great for stuff like that, but I've heard some horror stories of communications conglomerates claiming ownership of your dreams, of your conversations, etc. And if you want to change providers, forget about it. Getting cranial surgery is the least of your expenses.

It's kind of moot, however, as my phone doesn't currently have reception because of course it doesn't. I try to send a text to the agency, the organization through which I get like 95% of all my jobs, but that ends with a generic 'we'll send that text as soon as you get near a tower' message.

"You got signal or anything?" I ask Darnyl.

Darnyl's eyes kind of glaze over like he's thinking, the telltale sign that he's trying to make a call. "Nah, man," he admits. He's staying pretty calm, but I'm guessing this isn't the first time he's been in a spot. Most rappers that talk about the streets and the hood, it's all an act. They're playing a character in their music, onstage, and in the public. Some – and I suspect Darnyl is amongst them – actually come from that reality. So his keeping his calm isn't that surprising.

That may change, though, because I glance out the back window of the car and see some locals inspecting the ride. "That's bad too," I say, sighing like a bored register worker who's actually got to ring up a customer. I check my arsenal.

I wear a combat harness that's got a little bit of protection all over and additional protection at the vital areas. Basically, imagine a jump suit underneath some lacrosse armor on a utility vest. I also wear bracers and greaves because people like to cut the closest target in a knife fight. The armor is okay. A straight shot will get through but a glancing shot or

ricochet likely won't. I'm more about mobility than stability. If you try to stop the shot, you have to worry about what caliber of weapon they're using, whether it's been modified, etc. With mobility, you just get your ass out of the way.

I've got six pistols, two of which are my main weapons: Reason and Respect. Reason is a tactical weapon that will shoot straight and true and has the penetrating power of a laser. I've shot a car through another car with this bad boy. Respect, on the other hand, deals damage on a magnitude that can only be described as epic.

I check both guns' magazines and take the safety off before reholstering them at my sides. I look at Darnyl and he's watching the approaching group. Through the tinted windows, all we can really make out are six shadowy figures approaching through the night. "Listen to me very carefully," I tell my charge. "If this goes south, you give them what they want, whatever it is." Darnyl doesn't argue, he just stays quiet and keeps his head down.

I contemplate how to handle this. It's very possible these guys are just approaching the nice car because, well, it's nice. If Darnyl says hi, maybe signs a few autographs, we might even be able to borrow somebody's phone. Unfortunately, it's also very possible that these guys have every intention of murdering Darnyl and taking positively everything of value from him.

I step out of the car. The crowd stops and I see a few hands go to waistbands. I can't see guns but I don't need to. My hands stay by my guns but otherwise don't move. "Gentlemen," I say in my best Gregory Peck commanding voice. "I'm going to have to ask you to move along."

I know some guys at the agency that would get out, guns drawn and tell them to get to stepping or something similarly threatening. And those guys would have gotten shot. A lot of people dismiss the hood and the barrio and the trailer park as dangerous places. And you'd be a fool to think they aren't, but a lot of good people live in these places. Thing is, even good people hate being dismissed. If you happen across somebody who can be good, or not good, and you act like a threatening dick to them, they might decide to be not-good real quick.

The trick then is to be polite and respectful. Professional. A lot of guys at the agency write that off as silly, pacifistic nonsense. Those guys also don't work at the agency long because they get their ass shot. Treat a person like a person and they will act like a person, nine times out of ten. A kind word goes a long way.

Of course, a kind word AND a gun goes a lot farther.

There are some giggles from the group of shadowy guys. I can't get a clear view of any of them and I'm starting to think that's deliberate on their part. There's a single street lamp between them and me, it's cone of light halfway on the back of the car. That's why I haven't switched to an alternative setting in my vision. If that's deliberate, these guys are smart. If it's an accident, these guys are lucky. Either way, that's bad news for me.

"Cracka, you in the wrong neighborhood to breakdown," says someone from the crowd.

Rather than retort (obviously with something clever and scathing, yet witty enough to win me friends at most dinner parties), I stop looking and I listen. Somebody's going to draw a gun and I'm not going to see it. My only hope is to hear it. I listen for the telltale sound of weight shifting, of feet sliding across the pavement, of clothes moving. I hear a puffy jacket shift and then the hammer.

I barely have time to duck out of the way before there's a loud pop and a flash of light. Behind me, a window shatters and an instant later, somebody screams in shock. Amateurs. It's bad enough that they'll shoot at me, but they shoot so indiscriminately. If my life wasn't in danger, I'd be disgusted.

Out comes Respect and I shoot at their feet. Whole chunks of road come blasting up as I make another pothole. The small crowd scatters for cover, more shots streaking past me at random. I dive back into the car to find Darnyl with his head down. "Fortunately, this thing is bulletproof," I say, just before bullets rip through the door. "ZIGGY, YOU LYING MOTHERF—" I scream in the general direction Ziggy ran.

I grab Darnyl and yank him out of the car and into the street. I flatten over him as the car is just riddled with shots from pistols. I wait until I hear clicking and I stand. I know I jump up in a flash, but in my head, Hans Zimmer music is playing and there's a camera sweeping around me in slow motion.

I start shooting at movement and at the sounds of clicking, empty guns. I don't shoot casually or recklessly but I shoot furiously. These guys want a fight, so I'll prove to them that they will get more fight than they can handle.

I don't shoot to kill, though. For one, it's bad for business. If these guys live and tell about how badass I am, someone they know might hire me, so in a way, I have a vested interest in them surviving this little encounter so they can tell the tale. It's also just professionally bad. Killing people left and right shows a lack of control, even in a situation this chaotic. If somebody wants to hire you for a job requiring subtlety and discretion,

and you have a reputation of leaving a lot of hats lying around, they're going to look for other resumes. And of course there's the simple fact that I am being paid to keep Darnyl alive, not kill these guys. I'm a professional. I get paid a lot to kill people, so I'm not killing somebody for free. If Darnyl decides he wants to pony up the cash for the service? Then this shootout could go very differently.

Respect and Reason adequately dissuade the local chapter of whatever gang they belong to from any further carjackings, at least for the moment. Shadowy figures run for alleyways and hop fences to get away from the dynamic and professional shooting of a seasoned street mercenary. Or the maniac dual-wielding two pistols in a residential area. Whatever. Point is, they're not here, which is precisely where I want them to not be. I grab up Darnyl and push him into a trot down the street.

Having no idea where we are, I keep Darnyl moving down the street for a silent while. We pass out of whatever commercial section we had been in and now we're surrounded by the giant prisons that are subsidized housing. These buildings are like giant bricks with tiny little windows dotting their surface. They're about as stylish as a rust-colored hubcap and they reek of disenfranchisement. I contemplate making for one of those, but the doors are monitored and coded. House-arrest prisoners can't get out, nor can anyone if a curfew has been instituted. The downside is we can't get in, emergency or no. I suppose we could call emergency services, but the last thing we want is the police to show up. I'd rather deal with the gangs than the cops. If the cops of Sacramento were reliable, there wouldn't be a thriving market for street mercs like me.

So we keep moving. Walking through this neighborhood is like walking through a graveyard for giants. It's well-lit and the grass, what little there is, is cut low. The buildings are built in ordered rows and I quickly get disoriented. I slow and stop at an intersection and look around, genuinely forgetting which direction we came from. Any which way, it's just a long set of rows of perfectly identical mega-buildings. They're practically bio-domes unto themselves, except not sealed. Or well-maintained.

"God, there's, like, ten thousand people right here," Darnyl says, marveling at the housing units. Each squat brick of apartments is mirrored a dozen times in any direction, each one identical to the next. "These aren't slums. It's like an internment camp, but permanent. I don't know what these are," he says.

"These are slums," I assure him. "They're just self-contained." I look all around. "We've got to find somewhere." I check my phone and I'm still with no reception. I send a text anyway, but I'm trusting it ain't going to get through. The cell phone wars are at their worst in neighborhoods like

this. One network provider will put up jammers against their competition, ensuring everybody in the area uses their service only. Is it illegal? Oh good god yes. Like that stops the corporations.

"Come on," I tell Darnyl. We keep walking. I trust that if we go straight – and that we're going straight at all – that we'll get to some semblance of society beyond the huge municipal 'keep all the poor people in one place' buildings.

We pass along through the bricks. There's no noise except the wind. Without trees or anything to obstruct the air flow, the wind comes in hot gusts that blow dirt and debris off the street. The occasional sliver of starlight overhead gleams in the solar panels at the top the buildings, creating a strange instance of color against the dark, featureless sky.

The parking lots around the buildings are overgrown. Few can afford a car, so the great plots of paved land are slowly being overturned by the ground beneath. Chunks of the parking lots are gravel, with tiny shoots of grass appearing amongst the pebbles. What few cars we do spot are as likely to be junkers up on blocks as even appearing capable of running.

I don't know if Darnyl sees the body first, or me. I just know that he gasps. In one of the parking lots, we see the body of a man. He's got pants and socks, but no shoes. One sock has been pulled off, a sign of his shoes having been part of what was taken. His chest is laying open, with jagged rips through it, almost like he was torn open by a saw. He's staring up at the sky, like it was his only hope.

Darnyl stops and stands over the guy. There's a fence separating us from him, but that's all. Were it not for the fence, we could touch him, if we so desired. Darnyl's quiet, then says, "I never seen a heart before." I check around. The streets are empty and I'm hoping they stay that way. This blood is fresh. I bet the body's still warm.

"I wonder who killed him," Darnyl whispers with a poet's sensitivity. "I wonder if they're who robbed him, or if they're who did this." He nods at the gaping, ugly chest wound that's exposed his fly-covered internal organs. "I know a guy who died because he couldn't afford new lungs," he says, nodding at the rotten lungs. "That's a waste in every sense of the word." He looks at me. "Why would they do that?"

"We don't have time to speculate," I tell him sternly. I give Darnyl a bit of a push, breaking his stagnation. He keeps moving, but I spare the corpse one more look. In my line of work, death happens more than I'd like to think about. That hasn't made seeing a corpse any less unsettling, or made the prospect of death any easier to handle.

We keep walking until we start to hear music. Darnyl and I both slow as we realize the tune's coming from the housing unit to our left. "Hey!" he exclaims, cheering up a little. "That's one of my beats." He starts to cross the street, saying "Maybe we can get their attention."

I start to follow but cautiously. I'm halfway through the street when I hear an engine. I check either way down the street and I see no lights. "Drive-by." I sprint forward and grab Darnyl. I throw him into the chain link fence separating the sidewalk from the parking lot of the housing project. He lands against the soft metal and it bends, letting him fall painfully into the tight space between the edge of the sidewalk. He's just a foot down and he's cursing at the pain as I dive down past him, in the same pain. The mesh of the fence is pushing against us, cutting us, as we're wedged between the fence and the pavement of the sidewalk.

Eleven shots from a small machine pistol tear through the night. The bullets rip through the air, just over our heads and Darnyl falls silent. We hear an engine gun and a car peels out. I pull myself up out from the fence and pull Darnyl out next. He's scraped up bad with a cut on his cheek that will almost certainly leave a scar. It'll be a smaller scar than a gunshot to the face, though.

"You okay?" I say as I check the wound. From my harness, I get out some covering spray. It won't heal the wound much but it will cover it and keep it from getting infected. It's stupidly cold, so cold it burns, which Darnyl informs me with profanity. "You'll be fine," I tell him. He doesn't argue but he isn't pleased. We keep walking.

It's after 1am at this point. If we were downtown, things would still be hopping. Hell, to part of the city, it's still the work day. In neighborhoods like this, though, the local municipality crack down occasionally and often randomly. And they do it so hard, breaking the curfew is practically an executable offense. At least I hope 'practically'.

I know this because we spot an empty fast food joint. The lights are out and it's boarded up tighter than a bank, but at least we're nearing commercial transactions. We're moving away from the giant, self-contained monoliths that are those housing projects. If we keep going, eventually, we'll come to something that's still open. I hope.

It's another half hour before we spot our savior: Our Lady of 24-hour unsupervised service, Lavanderia Automatica.

Me and Darnyl practically run towards the brilliant white light of Los Heaven. The laundromat itself is a pretty small storefront nestled in a tiny shopping center that time forgot and the weather has rendered beyond faded and worn. The sign of the laundromat is completely faded, to where

it's just an ugly beige color, the words long gone. One corner of the sign is cracked, showing the occasional flicker of the florescent bulbs within. I throw open the door to the scent of cheap detergent and probably-non-toxic fabric softener. The floor is either a dingy yellow or an even dingier white. There's a cage in the corner that's been ripped open, the TV inside long gone.

We've been under the night sky, lit by streetlamps for so long, the hard lights of the laundromat make us squint. I check my phone and – oh my freaking god! – there's no reception. I hate corporations, man. I check Darnyl and he shakes his head, his internal phone as useless as my handheld. "This is ridiculous," I gripe, looking in vain for a landline we can use. They still make landlines, right?

"Nah, man, THAT is ridiculous," Darnyl says in that tone that never conveys good news. I turn and look out the windows of the laundromat. Gangbangers. Two cars – a coupe and a truck – pull up in front of the laundromat. Out from the coup gets two well-dressed guys (for gangland types) and one guy that is cybered out his ears. If this dude's only forty-percent natural, I'd be impressed. He's bordering on goddamn robot at this point. Arms bigger than my legs. Veins throbbing out through skin that's so jacked and armored, it looks like plaster.

The truck delivers four more goons, two out of the cab and two from the bed. These guys are cybered too, but it doesn't look like all that much. Just the usual gadgets you see in the barrio; stuff that's more for show than function. Certainly not like Senor Robot here. Dude has to duck to step through the doorway. Oh my god, man, his neck is so muscled up, he can only look forward?! Most cybered-out jack-brains at least try to look a little normal. You know how every gym has that one gym-rat bodybuilder (usually a wannabe) that looks so freakish, he's bordering on inhuman, and not in the good way. Yeah, that's this guy. Actually, he's like three of those guys put into one.

I'm about to address the two decently dressed guys when the door at the rear of the laundromat opens. Two more guys come in from the back and they're sporting machine pistols. They hold them all respectful-like, like they're altar boys in the most violent church ever. The dude on the left's got a custom job, which means it will almost certainly explode before he empties the magazine. Dude on the right's got a common enough model – a Scorpion, I think – but it looks like it's been modified. I can't tell how.

"Hey, hip-hop, what's bringing you to here?" asks Snappy Dresser, the guy on my left. He's aiming his Spanglish to Darnyl, which makes sense. Darnyl's dressed like a regular dude; I'm dressed in a combat harness. I'm clearly the bodyguard.

"Looking to make a phone call," Darnyl tells him, putting on his best gangsta/hood/tough guy persona. It's a persona that, however rusty, is very genuine. Darnyl points to his head with two fingers, saying, "I ain't got reception."

"Down here, ese, phones don't work too well," says Good Dresser, the guy on my right. He speaks a little clearer English and is dressed less nicely and more reasonably. Of the nine guys in the laundromat with us, I'm betting he's the craziest one out of all of them. Normal guys in a posse like this always are. "They're expensive," he tells Darnyl in an overly accommodating tone. "You want to make a call, it costs a lot."

Don't do it. Don't fall for it, Darnyl. Don't do it.

"How much?" Darnyl asks.

Dammit.

Now they know he's got money. If he's got real, tangible cash on him, they're going to kill him and take it. If he doesn't actually have real, tangible cash on him, they're going to kill him for making them check. Asking 'how much' just signed a death warrant. Of course, with me here, it'll be theirs. I hope.

"Seriously, man," Darnyl hustles the two. "How much? Let my boy here use your phone for five minutes."

I may have spoken too soon because Snappy Dresser and Good Dresser seem to actually be considering it. And why not? Charge Darnyl a hundred bucks to use your phone for five minutes and let us go, and you're a hundred bucks richer and I don't have to shoot you in the face.

Snappy Dresser asks, "Tienes el dinero en efectivo en usted?"

I want to tell Darnyl that he asked if he's got the cash on him, but I don't want these jokers to know I speak Spanish. I just keep a strong eye on Goliath and the six-pack hit squad.

"The cash," Snappy Dresser asks in the world's worst English. "Do you have it now? Show it."

This is a risky call. If he shows the cash, we may get a phone and a chance for me to call the agency and organize a pick-up. Or we may get shot.

Darnyl goes for his pocket and with a whip, takes out a green-back. "Here's ten bucks," he says. He lays it down on the clothes-folding table to his left. "What's that get me?"

Good Dresser looks at the money and shakes his head, tut-tutting a little. "Sorry, ese, it costs more than that."

Darnyl doesn't back down. "Well that's what I got on me," he tells Good Dresser. He looks at Snappy Dresser like clearly he's the brains of the operation. "You want more, let us use the phone. I'll hollah at my boys and I can maybe make something happen."

Good Dresser turns to me. Not good. "Ese, I like your gun." I'm starting to think he doesn't even have an accent. I think he just likes sounding Hispanic. "Can I see it?"

"From there and no closer," I tell him, sounding as white as possible.

Good Dresser looks suddenly entranced. "No closer?" He does a little tippy-toe step towards me. "No closer?" More tippy-toes. He wiggles his fingers at me. "How close is too close?"

"That's close enough," I tell him, trying to sound bored and not like I'll pull his eyelids over his scrotum.

"No closer?" he pushes, wiggling his whole body forward. "No closer? No clos—" I clock him.

It was a boring conversation anyway.

Shootouts in the slums always start the same way. The guys at the back always jump for cover immediately. They aren't about to shoot at their boss, but they know the guys in front will shoot in their direction. So they're diving behind the washing machines. Since Darnyl and I are right in the middle of an aisle of machines, it's an option we sadly don't have.

The guys in the front all ready their weapons. Because they were maintaining an illusion of civility, their guns weren't ready; they were just hanging low, held by both hands in front of their junk. Now that they've got to use them, they lift them up in sweeping motions, almost like they're painting a fence or something. The lack of a locked wrist adds half a second to when they'll be ready to fire. Half a second makes all the difference because before a single one of them can ready their gun, I've shot all of them.

Two guys have large bleeding holes in their chests. Behind them, there are cracks in the windows where shots from Reason passed right through them like an unsettling thought. One guy falls immediately. The other guy looks down, struggling to understand why he can't breathe. He touches the reddish-brown spot on his chest and then falls forward. The other two guys...well, Respect saw to it that DNA is the only way a coroner will be able to identify the bodies.

With Good Dresser on the floor, Snappy Dresser dives behind Goliath and for good reason: Goliath is bigger than some walls. He swings at me and I think he's going for a punch but his hand flips back and the son of a bitch has a goddamn gatling gun in his arm! The six barrels the size of tailpipes start spinning and the gunfire starts. I shove Darnyl under the folding table and duck as well. Sweet mercy, it sounds like a goddamn wood chipper!

Big Dude just sprays all over the place. I mean, this is too chaotic to even call indiscriminate fire. Boy simply does not give one single solitary damn. I bet the chemicals pumping through those industrial-sized veins of his have so much aggression throbbing through them, he's already forgotten what he's trying to kill and is just happy to be set free on a murderous rampage.

He shoots down the whole aisle of dryers against the far wall because they're there. He shoots up video game box because he hates the color red. He shoots up the TV because it's leading to the miseducation of the populace. He shoots up the gumball machine because sugar is bad for your teeth. He's just shooting up everything, roaring off the top of his lungs as he finally gets unleashed. His arm's waving, just spraying bullets all over the place.

Just as I'm contemplating what to do about Goliath and the others, I hear a loud creaking groan. I look up from under the folding table I pushed Darnyl under and I see the roof start to crack. I spew profanity and cover Darnyl just before the walls collapse and the entire roof comes crashing down on top of us. Guess spraying a Vulcan cannon indoors is a bad idea. Who knew? Besides everybody.

It sounds like an earthquake just before the walls give in and the roof just falls flat on us like a flapjack out of some old cartoon. Under the folding table, Darnyl and I are spared the damage, though not the thick coat of dust and particles that spray on us from beyond the confines of our defensive position.

Our ears ringing thanks to Goliath's now thankfully silent gun, I kick away the debris and crawl out from under the table. Reason and Respect sweep around as I look for any of the gang members, but they're still under the debris. I don't know if they survived or not and it's not my job to care. I grab Darnyl by the arm and pull him out of what remains of the laundromat.

On the sidewalk and caked in dust from the roof, I physically urge Darnyl into a trot. "Holy...did you see..." the rapper marvels, stunned and in some shock. He asks like I wasn't right there next to him.

"We got to go," I say, urging him on.

"The whole place..." he continues, staring back at the now collapsed portion of the shopping center.

"One of three people are about to show up," I tell him as I put my hand on his back and push him away from the scene. "Onlookers who will snap pictures worse than the paparazzi, those guys' backup, or the cops. One of those scenarios is bad for your rep; the other two are bad for your health." He doesn't argue.

On we run.

We don't slow until the entire shopping center is out of sight. I check behind us but I don't hear any sirens. Given that we're still in the barrio, I'm not surprised. Still, we keep moving on as briskly as we can maintain.

After ten minutes or an hour, we end up in a slightly nicer area, meaning there are actually some free-standing houses and duplexes, complete with bars on the windows and trash in the barely-living lawns. Occasionally, we spot the burning light of cigarettes in the shadows on porches and stoops but I'm disinclined to try and make friends, even if they might have a phone. They don't bother us and we don't bother them. So goes the code of the street.

The sidewalk is missing chunks out of just about every plate. The ground beneath is dead, like so much hard-packed dust. It's hard to spot the broken glass in amongst the gravel because the overhead streetlights are few and far between. Darnyl's starting to shuffle some, kicking the occasional bit. He even trips over his own feet, but I catch him. I don't blame him. It's way past late and we've had quite a little adventure. Plus we've walked at least a mini-marathon, easy. I contemplate what I'm going to do to Ziggy if and when I see him again.

After about half an hour, we spot a new source of light not coming from a lonely star or the rare still-working street lamp. Exhaustion makes us eager but after the laundromat, I wouldn't call us optimistic. We follow the light half a block, only to discover it's a billboard for Soul Glo hair conditioner. Fortunately for us, beneath it is a convenience store whose windows are dominated by posters for cigarette, beer, and educational lotteries.

Inside we find a store full of yellowing. Just everything from the tiles to the products on the shelves to the ceiling tiles to the redneck behind the counter, everything in the store is faded to an unhealthy shade of yellowish-brown and warping at the edges. The big guy behind the counter, who looks vaguely like a sack of potatoes that sprouted legs, is flipping through an ethno-specific nudity mag while spitting chew into an old soda bottle.

Since the guy at the counter doesn't care about us, I don't bother pretending to be shoppers. I take out my phone and, halle-goddamn-lujah, I've got a bar. I dial up the agency's emergency line. As its ringing, I head over to the register and study the state-mandated codes on the side. "We're in Elk Grove?!" I exclaim to myself. Over by the chips, Darnyl is confused, by our location or my confusion, I'm not sure which.

The phone finally picks up. "Hey, man, what's up?" Crap, it's Psychic Steve.

"Steve, is Macee there?" I ask.

"Yeah, but she went for ice cream like..." I can practically hear him checking the time. "Oh, no, wait man, I think she went home. Like for dinner, or the night or something, man."

"Steve, listen up," I tell him. "I'm on a protection detail. Our ride abandoned us and I need an extraction."

I hear Steve shuffling with some papers. "Wait, man, who rode you? I mean, who drove you?" He giggles at his unintentional entendre.

"It was an independent arrangement; I'm the only one from the agency working the gig," I say, trying not to shout. "Dude, I need extraction."

"Okay, yeah, man, no problem," he says. "Like Dameon and Hernandez are both here, man. And Dameon's little sister is too, and she's the one who can really drive, so, you know, no problem."

"Cool, I'm—" I start.

"What's the rate going to be?"

The rate? Oh my god, I hate working with mercs sometimes.

"Standard, non-combat rate," I tell him with a heavy sigh.

"Non-combat? Man, Jill's not going to want to go out for less than combat pay," Steve groans.

"Fine, I'll give Dameon's brat-ass little sister combat pay!" I shout into the cell phone. The guy behind the register shushes me like I'm in a damn library. "Just come and get me!"

"Sure thing, man, she'll...wait, man, like where are you?"

"We're in Elk Grove," I tell him. "I need extraction for myself and—"

I hear Steve put the phone down and shout, "Hey, any of you guys want to go to Elk Grove and pick up—" He's cut off by a litany of No yelled at him.

I hate working with mercs sometimes.

"Yeah, sorry, man, no can do," he informs me.

Rather than spew profanities at him, I just hang up. I glare for a moment before I realize the dude behind the counter's staring at me. "Yeah?" I ask him.

"You going to buy something?" he says in a thick redneck drawl.

I contemplate making some 'yeah, a can of whoopass and you can have the first taste' comment, but that gets pre-empted when the door opens behind me and there's a small gang of thugs. Hoodies and overcoats and they're clearly packing bargain-basement (but still very lethal) heat.

I'm about to say something to the dude behind the register but – since he apparently knows the drill – he's already ducking behind the armored counter. I check to make sure Darnyl's not in sight and he's ducked down between the last aisle and the drink coolers.

"Sup, sucka," says the short dude at the front of what looks to be six to eight local thugs. "You shot at my boys." I sigh and start to glance sleepily around. "You looking for a place to run, son?" Little E asks me, stepping towards me like he's all that.

"No, a place to hide the bodies," I tell him before I settle a hundred-yard Sacramento Stare right in his eyes. "This is your one warning to back off. I'm having a bad night and I'm a killer."

"Playa, what the hell you think we are?!" he says, getting right in my face. He lifts up his hoodie to show off the duct-taped handle of a snub-nosed revolver stuck in his waistband.

I snatch the gun out of his pants and pistol whip him with it. He falls back into the arms of his posse as some of them yank out far more serious artillery.

I deprive the gun of its bullets, toss them away, and then toss the cracker-jack box gun back to Little E. "I think you're amateurs. Enthusiastic amateurs, maybe, but I'm a professional."

So here's the thing about a merc. We don't have training. We don't have standards. The only thing that you got to do to be a merc is walk in the door at a placement agency. There's nothing separating me from them. Well, except I've got way more experience than all of them put together.

Placement agencies (staffing agencies, whatever you want to call them) track success ratios. They monitor output and approval ratings. Mine is the highest at the agency. That's part of why I get gigs like protecting Darnyl. I've proven myself.

I say this because this is all a bluff. These guys can mow me down. Oh, I'll kill a few of them before they get me, but with how tight this little convenience store is, with the kind of artillery they're packing, they will kill me. Those guns will get through my armor at even the strongest spots, and with their rate of fire, it'll pepper me all over anyway. I'm a dead man if they've got the guts to shoot.

The question is, do they have the guts?

One of the intangibles of being a street merc is knowing how to commit and follow through. Once you've dove off buildings, once you've run through fires, once you've disarmed killers, once you've taken on cybered-up psychos with your bare hands, you know how to commit to a course of action. You know how to follow-through on a plan. You don't blink, you don't hesitate, you don't hedge. You go. You do.

These guys are facing that now and they know they don't have it in them. They're scared because they know I will commit and they aren't sure if they will. One on one, none of them could take me and they know that. As a group, they can, but that means they have to trust their posse. And they aren't sure they do. Bullies always have trust issues and that's the thing: these guys aren't killers, they're bullies. They aren't sure how much they trust one another, so their posse, their mob, is becoming a whole bunch of individuals with trust issues. The only thing they know they can trust is themselves and the weapon they have aimed at me. But they know, between them and me, I win. So they really only have their faith in that one instrument, that one tool, that gives them power, gives them their world. Their god is in their hand and they aren't sure if their prayers will work.

The situation is defused just a bit when Little E shoves his way free of his boys and rolls his shoulders. Little guys are always fierce. They've got to be when it comes to crime. He stomps right towards me and gets in my face again. "You think you going to disrespect me in front of my crew?"

I very subtly put my combat boot's toe over the toe of his sneaker and quickly, but gently, shove him in the chest. When he scrambles to catch himself, he falls over instead, landing flat on his butt. Before he hits the ground, though, I've drawn Respect.

The situation escalates all over again. Of course, because I'm the one that escalated it, I've got a little bit more control over things (I think). While his posse have their Saturday Night Specials and pawn-shop-going-

out-of-business-sales on me, Little E there is staring down a gun that can be used to hunt big game and small helicopters. His boys will get me, sure, but he will die. That's abundantly, absolutely, unavoidably clear to him now. I will outlive him and he's terrified of that.

"I'm leaving," I inform Little E, staring down the barrel of my gun. "I can go through you, or I can—"

The instant I hear the whirr of the motor, I dive towards Darnyl. Little E is just starting to exclaim when the roar of a Vulcan cannon tears through the convenience store. An instant later, so do the bullets.

Out in the parking lot, Goliath is mowing down the entire convenience store at chest height. He's cutting through the whole thing like it's a tree and his Gatling gun is a chainsaw. The effect is about like that too, because those bullets just rip through absolutely everything. Drinks explode out of the cases as the doors shatter, plastic bags burst open, sparks fly, and Little E's entire posse gets chewed up like twigs through a wood chipper.

I crawl atop Darnyl and cover him as debris and trash fall all over us. The roof itself begins to collapse (a theme for tonight, it seems) and I roll us right next to the snack racks. As the ceiling falls in chunks all around us, I wonder if I'll ever see Ziggy again. I try to decide if I'm going to kick him in the nuts, or just shoot him.

Silence falls and I hear Snappy Dresser and Good Dresser conversing. I prop up a little and I see Darnyl's bleeding. It looks like it's mostly scrapes from shrapnel from the debris, but he's got one solid blade of filthy glass driven right through his shoulder. In one side and out the other. Looks like it passed right through the arm socket and everything.

Darnyl's in shock as he reaches for the sliver of glass. "No, leave it in," I tell him. He looks at me like I'm crazy. "You'll bleed out worse if you take it out." I start to get up, pushing ceiling tiles and trash off of me. I hear Snappy Dresser say something about hearing movement and I don't care. I stand up and the very instant I see him through the gaping hole in what was once the wall, I put a shot from Respect right through his face. His head, neck, and a portion of his chest cavity, are gone. Just gone. I have had enough.

Leaving Darnyl, I vault over the debris and leap into the parking lot as Goliath starts a second spray. I blast him with Respect and, damn it, the shot stumbles him. That's it. This bastard is so armored up, Respect can't penetrate him. Holy hell! That's some military-grade dermal armor right there!

He resumes shooting and I go to my backup plan. Rather than run right at him, I move in an arc, the bullets rip over my head and where I was

an instant ago. The giant's so muscled up, he can't turn quickly and has to actually turn his whole body. He's not slow per se but the motion takes a second all the same, which is all I need.

I reach over my shoulder and take from the harness on my back one of my heavy pistols, Victory. Less of a pistol and more of a small shotgun, Victory's got far fewer rounds than Respect, but does an order of magnitude more damage. Respect can take out a car; Victory can take out a tank.

Running laterally, I fire Victory. The recoil is fierce but the impact is so damn rewarding. Blood, armored skin, and cybernetic innards go spraying out over the downed convenience store. The big cybered goliath looks down at his torso and the last thing he sees is the gaping hole where his insanely artificial chest and abs used to be. His eyes go dim and he crumples.

I stop running laterally and lower Victory. I look at Good Dresser who is staring down at the dead Goliath. He looks at me and I just nod my head away. Terrified, he runs for all he's worth.

The night more or less ends there. I called Psychic Steve back and yelled at him and bribed a driver to get us an evac to one of the hospitals near downtown. We got Darnyl treated and patched up, no problem. The glass sliver completely severed the tendons of his arm, but he likes his new shoulder better so it's win-win.

His record company, who had actually hired me, was furious. They refused to pay, citing a very dubious clause suggesting that any injury or harm done to their client was grounds for invalidating the contract. Macee who runs the agency talked them into paying the agency base rate, but not my contract rates.

I don't really care. We don't get too many celebrity escort missions at my agency and since I've got one on my resume, work's continued to be steady. I hate missing out on a payday, but Darnyl lived and was super-grateful. So grateful, in fact, he thanked me by name in the liner notes of his next album.

How many mercs you know mentioned by name on a gold record?