

Chapter 07

The Thirteenth of Shumond

Issuhn on Tir

By late in the evening, Gohldrich's Bar was packed with patrons, the air thick with perspiration, alcohol and tobacco smoke. Lit by neon signs hung from the walls and yellowed lamps set at each table, the establishment was decorated in dark wooden panels, three sets of deep green curtains marking the front entrance, the restrooms and the back storeroom. A noticeable humidity hung in the air, like a rainbow-tinted fog that made everything appear slightly surreal.

A curved length of counter, built from oiled wood and granite, was tucked into the right-side wall, illuminated by lights mounted to the top of the sizeable back bar, decorated with an etched panel of glass hung behind the product-laden shelves. Two bartenders worked tirelessly to meet demands from the influx of late-evening patrons while the wait staff weaved their way through the crowd of standing customers, taking and delivering orders. Along the left wall ran a series of brown leather booths, filled with larger groups of patrons who had piled in for a night's bit of fun.

In the last booth, located next to the storeroom, sat a single man of dark complexion with long brown hair and beard that hadn't been trimmed in some time, a half-dozen beer bottles spread out before him in varying states of emptiness. Thought the booth was built to seat four comfortably, and up to six as the group in the next booth proved not so comfortably, the unkempt patron sat alone, his darkened countenance preventing other patrons from

drawing too close. Deep brown, almost black, eyes stared out at the tabletop with a dull, disaffected glare, from under his thick brow, split by a small scar that ran through his right eyebrow. When the light caught them just right, a spark of orange could be seen in outer edges of his irises.

A waitress dressed in a halter top and skirt came by his booth, picking up a pair of the emptiest bottles, replacing them with two cold bottles of the stout brew. While she was wary of the man in general, she had served him on multiple occasions. He would come in and as long as the wait staff kept him in drinks, he rarely spoke a word. He never made any impolite advances, usually remained slumped in the seat as he consumed the constant stream of beverages. It was a bit disconcerting, as even the worst drunks at least pretended to engage in conversation, but the tab was always paid and the tip at the end of the night always covered any inconvenience.

The waitress returned to the bar, dropping the two empties into a bin that would go to the dumpster behind the building at some point in the evening. One of the bartenders, a pale-skinned blonde boy, who looked no older than in his early twenties, caught her attention.

“So, he say anything, yet?” he spoke, leaning in so she could hear him over the din of the patrons. She shook her head.

“I don’t expect him to. That’s fine by me.”

The bartender let her return to the floor, turning back to the man seated at the end of the bar, who was dressed in a well-tailored black suit with a thin blue tie. The patron cast a look back at the booth for a moment and then turned to the bartender.

“Any problems?” he inquired as he nursed a tall glass of iced water, absentmindedly running a finger along the condensation that gathered at the bottom.

“No, not at all,” the bartender replied in a deferential tone. The script stitched onto his tie designated that the man at the bar was in the employ of Musaboru Jianotti, the local “businessman”

who owned many of the casinos and bars in the Halong District of Issuhn on Tir.

By far the largest city on the continent, Issuhn on Tir was the capitol city of Tir, the nation composed of a series of islands to the west of Verenigen. Less than a day's travel by boat, the nation had remained on diplomatic terms with the Verenigen Congress, even though it was a trade partner of both Verenigen and the Moa'rehnzan reformation government. The sizeable metropolitan area housed a densely packed 660,000 citizens, many of whom were native descendants of the original Tirean bloodlines. While similar to Chancel and Trone Stenan in urban development, possessing a well built-up downtown sector surrounded by industrial and housing districts, Issuhn on Tir had a thriving gambling and amoral business life, almost exclusively run by an association of "businessmen." These entrepreneurs kept a tentative peace amongst themselves through the demarcation of territory and assessment of "well-being subsidies" for protection services.

As the well-dressed associate turned to take in a view of the night's throng, a similarly-dressed man slipped through the crowd and stepped beside him. Though wearing the same black suit with embroidered tie, the man was distinctly taller with wide shoulders and a pale head shaved bald by choice, though the evening's stubble showed that his hairline was beginning to recede. A pair of sunglasses, fashioned after welder's goggles, hung from his neck by an elastic strap.

"Welsh, how is Kurttsen?" he asked without a preliminary greeting.

"Ay'hola, Dyson!" Welsh called out in an old Tirean greeting as he slipped out of his chair. Shorter than Dyson by a full head's height, Welsh's skin was a sandy, hinting at the mixed Tirean descent of his family. Thin, straight, dark brown hair was slicked back with gel and his smooth features were shaved clean. "He's alive."

"Clearly," Dyson's said humorlessly.

Welsh cleared his throat and continued. “You’re early, so if you need him, he could be sobered up enough to be presentable. I wouldn’t trust him with feats of agility, but I think he could manage standing.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear,” Dyson turned to the second bartender, motioning him to cut off the man in the back booth with hand slash across his throat. The bartender was clearly a Tirean native, his skin a dark yellow ochre with a ruddy tint, his eyes large and bright. A well-trimmed stubble of black hair crowned his oblong head. Thin and small lips moved quickly, spitting out his words as if the act of speaking wasted valuable time.

“Put it on the usual tab?”

Dyson nodded, pulled away from the bar counter and crossed to the back corner booth, adeptly sliding between huddled packs of inebriates. He slid into the booth and cleared his throat.

“Dyson...” Kyote Kurttsen slurred his first words since staggering into the bar, his eyes unfocused, as if looking through Dyson to a point outside the tavern. He cleared his throat and continued. “You’ve come a-calling. If I had known, I would’ve made the place up. Put out flowers.”

Unfazed by the sarcasm, Dyson leaned in, pushing the remaining bottles to the edge of the table. A moment later, the same waitress came up and cleared the drinks with a polite bow for the newly-arrived patron. Dyson’s eyes moved to her for a moment. Once she was gone, he turned back to the ragged man, wearing clothes that looked found rather than purchased.

“Time for business, I guess,” Kyote said, finally focusing his eyes on Dyson.

“Jianotti wants to speak with you,” Dyson announced, stating the obvious. Dyson had never chosen to interact with Kyote unless under orders. A high-ranking lieutenant in the organization, Dyson was too concerned with profitable endeavors and maintaining the borders of their territory to spare a thought for single life of an alcoholic. If he had his way, Dyson would have disposed of

the drunkard long ago; but Kyote's unique set of skills had always entertained Jianotti in some morbid way.

"Jianotti wants to lecture, and after boring me near to death, give me orders."

With a derisive snort, Dyson struggled not to smirk at the assessment. Kyote's words accurately predicted that a portion of his night would include standing before his employer while the virtues of business were extolled at length.

"Whatever," Dyson slipped out of the booth and offered a hand of aid to Kyote. "You're coming with me. First I'm going to get you somewhere to get you presentable. I can't tell which is worse: the smell of booze or the fact that you haven't bathed in days. How long has it been?"

"Five, maybe six."

"Not important," Dyson motioned to Welsh. A minute later, the two men escorted Kyote from the bar, a hand tucked under each arm, both to detain and guide him out onto the street.

The city streets were no less crowded than Gohldrich's Bar; thin and winding avenues were crammed with merchant booths between the entrances to bars and gambling houses. Small stairwells, often leading to second- and third-story apartments, were tucked back in dark side alleys. A web-work of lamps and neon signs hung over the streets like a canopy. Any light that filtered to the side streets proved to be enough for locals; they could slip away from the main thoroughfare to climb to their abodes in the cobbled-together network of multi-storied buildings that stretched towards the sky like fingers grasping for aid. A pervasive odor of sweat and wet garbage clung to the air itself; the salty sea breeze off of the eastern port was incapable of winding through the maze-like Halong District.

With an upwards glance, Kyote found the night sky above the neighborhood, a hint of blue telling him that the night was still young.



The door to the Jianotti-owned apartment swung open. Reeves greeted his colleagues, who had managed to drag Kyote two blocks from the bar and up two flights of stairs. The slender man with long black hair and sunken cheeks stepped to the side and allowed them entrance.

“The bath?” Dyson called out as Reeves closed the door to the single bedroom apartment. Furnished only with a table and four folding chairs in the center of the living room, the apartment was not for habitation; it was just a place where Dyson and his direct reports could deal with local business in private. A set of gray curtains over the street-facing windows were the only decoration in the dull white apartment. A hint of blood and cleaning solvent still hung in the air, barely masked by a cheap incense that had been burned earlier in the day.

“Good and hot,” Reeves called out with a grin, his voice raspy and deep. “There’s also a change of clothes on the sink. It smells like he needs it.” Mockingly, he waved a hand in front of his nose.

“Clothes or no clothes?” Welsh asked as they led him to the bathroom.

“I can take my own clothes off,” Kyote mumbled. His ushers released their grip and watched as he stumbled to the tiled floor. After collecting himself, he stripped the clothes from his body, leaving them strewn on the floor, and limped into the tub full of hot water. Once settled in, he asked for some privacy. Dyson knew there was no window in the bathroom, an important consideration after Kyote had attempted to flee through a third-story window no less than eight months ago. The fall had broken his leg, hobbling him to spoil his escape.

As he soaked in the soapy water, sloughing off days of grime and sweat, his slowly-sobering mind pondered the situation. In the next room, three well-trained and armed men waited, their energies focused on bringing him to their employer. He had felt the bulk of semi-automatic pistols beneath Dyson’s and Welsh’s suit coats as they had dragged him through the street. From the cut of his suit, it

appeared that Reeves was carrying a similar model.

When a knock came at the front door, Kyote had quashed the idea of fighting his way free. Lang, the fourth member of Dyson's immediate circle, had arrived with hot tea and a bite to eat. Any window of opportunity Kyote had for escape was gone. In such a small apartment, fighting four armed men would prove futile, especially if they were fighters like Dyson, who had given Kyote a thrashing after his last escape attempt.

Maybe he would slip below the water's surface, release the air from his lungs and see if the drowning would take. Or, maybe he would just bide his time, waiting for Jianotti and his men to slip up; to look away for a second too long. If Jianotti wanted Kyote to perform for him, it meant that there would be an opportunity, albeit perhaps for only a moment. His men would have to leave him alone to do the worst of his work.

After remaining in the tub long enough to feel relatively clean and sober, he dried off and dressed in the stack of clothes provided: a gray V-neck shirt, brown cargo pants, ankle-high leather work boots, and a canvas jacket. He opened the door and greeted his escorts with a humorless countenance.

"Looks like you're presentable, now," Lang said as he offered Kyote a cup of hot tea. Without comment, Kyote took the drink and consumed it without regard. Once the beverage was emptied, he set the cup on the table and turned to Dyson.

"Shall we?"



Even in his mid-forties, Musaboru Jianotti was fairly young for the power and wealth he had already accumulated. Some people snickered that he had received it all from his recently-deceased father, who had retired five years prior to a quiet life of solitude in Pantai on Tir to the west. Even though there was some truth to it, he had proven to be more aggressive in his machinations than his father. Within a year, he had aligned himself with other district

heads, expanding the reach of not only his ventures, but of their joint enterprises. Rather than retain the insular nature of his father's command, Musaboru wanted to expand and work in communion with his peers.

"Mister Kurttsen," he spoke, his voice soft and mellow, as he reclined in the leather chair of his 33rd floor office. Fairly comfortable, decorated conservatively in white, black and red, the office looked out over the city to the eastern shore and beyond to the expanse of ocean leading to Verenigen. Seated in the corner of Halong District, the 38 floor Halong Tower represented the southernmost corner of the Bihnesu (or business) District, a collection of high-rises and office spaces considered uncommitted territory amongst fellow "businessmen." Most kept some form of lodging in the Bihnesu District for the purpose of conducting multi-district enterprises. Most of the lower floors of the Halong Tower were leased to legitimate businesses, traders or as lodging.

"Mister Jianotti," Kyote bowed, his mood and manner accommodating. Behind him stood Dyson and Reeves, who were watching for any sign that he might act out. At the lone door to the office stood Lang and Welsh, who hung back with two members of Jianotti's own protective service. Behind Jianotti, at the edge of Kyote's view, stood four additional guards, armed with pistols and telescoping nightsticks.

"I have two other meetings to attend after this, so I'll get to the point," Jianotti started as he picked up a clear glass orb paperweight from his desktop, rolling it back and forth across his palm.

"It'd be appreciated."

"Tomorrow evening, I will be sitting down with Mr. Ainoisai from Brómos District. We will meet on the 44th floor of the Chōratsu-tō-neu to talk of joint ventures." The Chōratsu-tō-neu was the central high-rise in the heart of the Bihnesu District, standing 48 stories tall, flanked by smaller buildings. Derived from the old Torean language, Chōratsu-tō-neu meant "Neutral Ground"; it was the one location that every district head recognized

as a safe haven to conduct personal business.

“Later in the evening, I would have you take another meeting with him.”

While Kyote and Dyson showed no sign of surprise, a small gasp slipped from Reeves.

“Isn’t that...” Reeves spoke under his breath. Dyson motioned for him to drop the topic.

“Will I be entertaining him, bringing him a meal, a lady of the night, or any combination of those?” Kyote sneered. As he lobbed the paperweight from one hand to the other, Jianotti remained silent, choosing not to engage in the coarse repartee. Dyson flinched for a moment, almost permitting himself to slap Kyote across the back of the head.

“Because of the nature of the location and the security measures, I will need you to infiltrate the premises well before either myself or Mr. Ainoisai arrive. You will be come in with the catering crew and initial security detail. While they arrange for the meal and security sweep, you will find a sufficient hiding place. We will be staying in the west wing. Mr. Ainoisai and his retinue will be in the east wing. I assume they will be performing a similar security sweep at the same time, so you will have to take care during your entrance. The meal and meeting will take place in the central hall two hours after nightfall. After we have concluded our business, both groups will return to our rooms for the night and depart in the morning. At some point in the night, you *will* do your business, return to the catering hall and leave with your security detail, dressed in kitchen uniform. The catering crew should be gone from the building before the evening is too late, so don’t tarry long.”

“Is there anything else I should know?” Kyote asked after Jianotti’s had concluded his directions.

“You will go in unarmed. You *are* part of the catering crew.”

“That’s nothing out of the ordinary,” Kyote was well acquainted with “procure on site” tactics for arming himself. It made passing through security checkpoints all the easier. “So, if I’m to end a man,

I would like to know whether it's for revenge, money, or just a plain ol' territory grab. Consider it a courtesy."

His right hand gripping the paperweight tightly, Jianotti chose to ignore him, turning his attention to Dyson. "Mr. Dyson, I want Colleen Diento'va's crew to handle the escorting of Mr. Kurttsen to and from the premises. I have need for you and your best men on another errand of a more urgent nature. Speak with Diento'va and apprise her of the specifics. After we are done here, I would have you remain so we can discuss your duties."

"Yes, sir," Dyson responded flatly. Though relieved to not have to babysit Kurttsen the following evening, Dyson felt a pang of concern. He would have to be clear and detailed in his directions to Colleen and her squad. Although he stumbled around like a booze-soaked vagrant, Kyote was deceptively sly. Dyson could often see the wheels in Kyote's mind turning, seeking any opportunity to exploit. The smallest lapse in judgment by his supervisors could be used for a potential escape.

"That is all," Jianotti waved dismissively to Kyote, who turned. Reeves stepped up to escort Kyote from the room. "Oh, and Mr. Kurttsen, remember that I am in control here."

"Yes, you certainly are," Kyote mumbled as he threw a single arm in the air, offering a crude hand sign as he was being led away. Reeves grabbed him by the collar and slung him out of the room. Kyote could hear Jianotti let out a dry laugh as the door closed behind them.



Late in the evening, Dyson caught up with Colleen in the long, lamp-lit hallway that led to the apartment she held on the 22nd floor of the Halong Building. Standing tall and lean, her red hair was tied back, revealing her light features. Green eyes peered back at Dyson through thin-framed glasses. She held herself with a regal presence, born from her strict upbringing; she was the lone child of Bupati Diento'va, the head of operations in Neyong

District. Because of the traditionally patriarchal nature of old Torean families, her father had considered her unfit for involvement in his business. Because of the strain his decisions made on their relationship, she sought employment with Jianotti, who was more progressive regarding gender equality.

“Dyson?” her voice was inquisitive as she called out to him. Stopping in the middle of the hall, she turned back to face him as he approached her at a jog.

“I’m glad I could catch up with you. My men are dropping off an asset with your men as we speak.”

“Asset?” she gave Dyson a suspicious look, disapproval creasing her forehead. “It’s Kurttsen, isn’t it?”

Dyson remained quiet for a moment before asking “Can we have a moment of privacy?” He looked up and down the length of the hall, to emphasize the point. Two doors down, an older man was fumbling through his pockets with one hand while holding onto a bag of takeout in the other.

“Uh, sure,” Colleen nodded and escorted him to her apartment, just five meters away. Once inside the small amber-lit residence, he resumed.

“Yes, it’s Kurttsen,” he announced as he stood in the entryway, the door firmly closed behind him. His eyes followed Colleen as she slipped into the kitchen, stripping off her suit jacket and hanging it on a chair back. She loosened the top button of her white blouse and slipped her blue tie off, hanging it from a curious black statue of a female figure set as a centerpiece on the countertop. Moments later, she withdrew a bottle of liquor from a nearby cabinet and poured two glasses, offering one to Dyson.

He nodded graciously, crossed to the kitchen, and took the glass in hand. With the drink firmly grasped, Dyson paused momentarily as he examined the unique piece of sculpture: the 76 cm tall figurine was carved in the shape of a blind-folded woman from black granite, draped in a robe while holding a tome in her left hand against her chest. While Dyson was certain he had never

seen the likeness before, he found it curious that the effigy was missing both feet, the standing female merely rising from a pedestal beneath her ankles.

Colleen coughed, drawing Dyson's attention away from the statue before she continued.

"Remind me again: why is he still alive? I mean, why are we *still* wasting man-hours babysitting this flight risk? What does he do that makes it worth the trouble?" She took a quick nip of the amber fluid as she tapped her breastbone with a finger. "I would have put the rabid dog down long ago."

"Because Jianotti wants to keep him." While never confirmed, the story was that Jianotti had come across Kyote languishing in an upscale bar, nursing a full bottle of whiskey. He had been seated in Jianotti's private booth, and when one of his personal guard had attempted to remove him, Kyote had killed the man without so much as leaving his seat. Once the remainder of Jianotti's bodyguards had finally subdued the drunk, Musaboru had chosen to enlist him rather than have him executed; considering his services a payment for the debt of his man's life. "But, that's not why I came to you. Jianotti and Ainoisai are having a meet tomorrow. You'll also be in charge of the security detail."

"Okay," Colleen shrugged.

"You'll also need to make sure Kurttsen arrives and leaves under escort."

Colleen was still for a moment, the glass raised partway to her lips. A look in Dyson's eyes warned her not to ask about the particulars. If she didn't have all the details, she could claim deniability.

"He's to arrive in the morning with catering and the initial security sweep."

"And leaving?"

"Sometime after the meeting. Even though it'll be a late night, it shouldn't be too hard. Except for the elevators and stairs in the central tower, there's no other way up or down. You'll have a dossier

with all the logistics waiting at your office in the morning.”

Colleen took a deep breath and drained the rest of her drink. Dyson took a sip, the liquid biting at his mouth as it went down.

“So, since I’ve been ‘promoted,’ what does Jianotti have *you* doing?”

“He needs me to broker a deal. Or, at least seal the deal. I think he’s already got the particulars lined up.” Dyson shrugged at the thought of being a glorified errand boy. “I’m to head for Eithos Los fairly soon. I have a chartered ship that will be heading out in the evening, day after next.”

“Sounds... boring,” Colleen set the glass down and took a step towards Dyson, a blush on her cheeks. “Well, then, I guess we better have our entertainment tonight.” She placed a hand on his tie and playfully tugged as if it was a leash.



Trimmed in gold molding and paneled with bronze-tinted glass windows, the Chōratsu-tō-neu glowed like a beacon at the center of Issuhn on Tir. At night, lit by street-level spotlights angled up at the tower, the horseshoe-shaped high-rise drew eyes much like a flaming candle attracts moths.

After the meeting between Jianotti and Ainoisai came to an amicable end, both parties retreated to their respective wings of the 44th floor. The wing curled away from the cylindrical center tower of the building, the rows of rooms accessible along the length of the burgundy carpeted hall. The walls were decorated in sienna and gold patterned wallpaper, lit by a series of mounted lamps set between each of the rooms.

At the end of the hall stood two men in black suits, both trying not to look bored, standing in front of the double doors to the reserved suite while keeping their eyes on the empty hallway. The older of the two men ran a hand through his crew cut, scratching at his scalp. His cheeks were etched with age and hard living. To his left, a younger, blond-haired man with small, squinty eyes, called

Rook by his partner, bit at his lip.

“Hey, Pat, why is the security so light here?” Rook asked as he leaned in close to his partner.

“Ain’t you never worked the Chōratsu-tō-neu? No one in their right mind tries to start anything here. It’s neutral territory. And not the regular kinda neutral territory where if you stay too long, you’ll still get shot. This is the no bullshit kinda neutral. I’m surprised we even get to carry weapons.” He patted the pistol in the shoulder holster beneath his suit jacket.

“And the security sweep earlier?” Rook was a bit skeptical of Pat, who had shown to be a regular bullshit artist.

“Purely ceremonial. Both sides do it to show that they’re vigilant in everything they do. You know the old saying? ‘Greet your foes with hospitality and the hint of hostility.’ ”

Both men shared a laugh as they watched a fellow guard trot towards them. The intent expression on the man’s face forced them to straighten up and project an air of seriousness.

“Ay’hola, Cabello! What’s up?” Rook asked, taking a step forward.

“Did *he* ask for a late meal?” Cabello asked, motioning to the door behind them.

“What?” Rook gave him a curious look. “I... I’m not sure—”

“Look,” Cabello cut to the chase, “There’s someone from the catering crew that came up in the elevator with a dining cart. Before I can let him through—”

“Ah, I gotcha,” Pat bellowed, “He did mention not getting much to eat during the meeting, so I guess that’s where he sent Cheva to.”

“Oh, yeah, Cheva did tear outta here without saying anything a bit ago,” Rook backed up his partner.

“Wait, really?” Cabello inquired, unable to recall whether or not he saw Cheva earlier.

“Yeah, Cheva came out of there like twenty minutes ago,” Pat hooked a thumb back to the suite, “Didn’t say anything to us about

where he was going.” He frowned for a moment. “He never tells us shit, anyway. Probably was placing a dinner order. Let the caterer come on through. We’ll check the food before it goes in.”

That was enough to send Cabello back. A few minutes later, a man dressed in a white caterer’s jacket with black buttons, a pair of black slacks, and wearing a white cap, pushed a food cart with a single covered plate to their post. Leaning over with both hands placed on the outer edge of the cart, he came to a stop in front of the two guards, who stepped forward and flanked him.

“What you got?” Pat nodded towards the caterer.

“Dinner for the boss,” the caterer spoke in a low voice, his head leaned forward, the brim of his hat covering his eyes. Neither guard paid much attention to the long strand of hair that had slipped out from under the hat and now hung down across his bearded cheek.

“Open it up. We need to make sure it isn’t poisoned,” Pat announced, trying to stifle back a laugh. His cohort made no effort to conceal his rodent-like grin.

The caterer lifted the polished silver-plated dome, holding it in place in front of his chest. His other hand slipped politely behind his waist. On the plate was a steak, with sides of roasted asparagus and tomatoes. A glass and unopened bottle of wine sat next to the plate. The two guards leaned in close, hovering over the cart and savoring the aroma.

“I think we need to make sure this steak isn’t poisoned, either,” Pat leered as he nipped an asparagus and tossed a roasted tomato to his partner. Both men were shared a laugh. With the roasted asparagus hanging from his mouth like a wet cigarette, Pat searched the platter for a moment. “Wait, where is the knife? You expect him to cut this with just a fork?”

It happened so quickly, neither man saw the attack coming. In a flash, Kyote swung out the plate cover, catching Rook square in the throat with the lip, a distinct crunching sound coming from his open mouth as he collapsed to the ground. Pat only had enough time to raise his head from the cart before Kyote’s free hand swung

around, the steak knife slipping from inside his sleeve. With a single motion, he slammed the knife into the meat beneath his jaw, driving the blade through his jaw and into the roof of his mouth.

Dropping the lid to the carpeted floor with a dull clang, Kyote turned, grabbed the pain-stunned guard by the head and twisted, quick and hard. There was a single sharp crack as he dropped the body to the ground. He shot a look back at the other guard, who was rolling around on the floor, his hands clutching at his throat as he struggled to breathe.

Kyote went down on one knee and reached into Pat's suit jacket.

"Ooooh, a silencer. How *convenient*. I guess if you're gonna shoot someone here, it's best to do it silently. This is much appreciated." Kyote slipped the pistol from beneath the dead man's coat and rose to his feet. He pointed the gun at Rook and sent two bullets into the man's chest, interrupting his slow, suffocating death.

After removing the gun from Rook's body, Kyote stood out in the hall, quietly assessing his options. *Plan one: pull the same trick to get into the room. Maybe the guys on the inside are just as dumb. Plan two: use one of these bodies as a meat shield and shoot my way in. Ugh, that would involve lugging dead weight with me. Plan three: put both on the cart and use it as a barrier. Hmm...*

"Ah, fuck it," he sneered as he set both guns on the cart, stripping off the borrowed hat and coat. Dressed only in the black jeans and V-neck shirt, he picked up both guns, approached the door and knocked with the butt of one gun.

"Just a minute," a faint voice called from beyond the door. *I guess they didn't hear the clatter. Sound-proof rooms? This really is a nice hotel.*

The creak of the doorknob turning sent Kyote into an alert stance, his weight back on his right foot. The instant the door opened a crack, he drove his left boot in, slamming it against the guard, who stumbled backwards. Kyote fired two shots through the open doorway, striking the man in the chest; he was dead before he

hit the ground.

“What the—” barked one of two guards seated on a couch in the living room, rising to his feet. He had managed to get his hand into his jacket and was pulling his pistol free as Kyote came to a stop in the entryway and squeezed off three rounds. One passed through the man’s shoulder, the second nicking his neck, the third slamming into the wall behind him. The wounded guard tried to return fire, but the instinctive reach for his neck sent his first two shots into the ceiling.

The second guard stood, drawing his weapon. Rather than duck into the bathroom for cover, Kyote charged forward, his eyes burning orange with determination. Time seemed to slow as the guard leveled his gun at Kyote, who closed the distance between them in seconds.

A single gunshot rang out, passing through Kyote’s shoulder as it exited with a fine spray of blood as he reached the assailant. Undeterred by the injury, he cracked the guard in the temple with the butt of his right-hand pistol. He stumbled, almost dropping to a knee, as Kyote shoved the left firearm in his face and pulled the trigger.

Kyote turned and faced the injured guard, who was frantic, attempting to apply pressure to the hemorrhaging wound in his neck while scrambling for non-existent cover. Turning both pistols on the guard, Kyote kept squeezing the triggers until both were empty, leaving the man sprawled out as blood seeped into the carpet.

“Eh, not the best plan I ever came up with,” he shrugged, tossing the spent armaments to the ground. He ran a hand over the entry wound in his shoulder, poking a finger inside to assess the damage. He winced with a small grimace of pain. “Nothing fatal.” He wiped his bloody hand on the arm of the nearby couch.

Looking around the room, Kyote’s eyes were drawn to a ceremonial display across from the closed—and likely locked—bedroom door. Hung from a mounted wooden display stand

were three weapons, intricately decorated with a popular motif hailing from an era eight hundred years ago: a pair of daishō and a sledgehammer with a steel head that hung by its long red-and-gold pole.

“Me *likey*,” Kyote grinned as he took the sledgehammer down. After hefting it in his hands a few times to gauge the weight and balance, he slung it over his shoulder and approached the bedroom door. He cocked his head to the side, as if deeply contemplating the wood before him. After a single deep breath, he drove the metal head into the door, sending a spray of splinters back into the room.

A gasp could be heard from the other side.

A second strike landed and the barrier was in tatters, mostly dashed to the carpeted floor. Kyote slipped through the ragged doorway and into the sizeable bedroom, lit only by a stained-glass lamp on the bedside table. The single occupant was huddled at the head of the bed, his legs pulled up close as if they would protect the rest of his body.

“Ay’holá, Mr. Jianotti!” Kyote called out with a smirk as he dragged the sledgehammer along the floor behind him.

Musaboru swore in old Torean, spitting mad.

“Awwww, not happy to see me?” Kyote’s voice was dripping with sarcasm.

“I’ll have you flayed alive. I’ll—”

“Look, we both know you ain’t gonna do shit once I’m done here,” Kyote placed a boot on the foot of the bed. “So, was your goal really to have me kill Ainoisai while you were sleeping on the same floor? Sounds kinda dumb to me.” He slurred his words, feigning ignorance about the nature of his mission.

“Hahahaha, do you really think I reveal anything to you?” Even cornered, Jianotti was dismissive.

“Not really. Or at least not until I employ a little coercion,” Kyote gripped the sledgehammer in both hands, bringing it up and over, driving it down and catching Jianotti square on the left foot, crushing the appendage with a single blow. The box springs of the

bed screeched in protest, a support of the wooden frame snapped under the impact.

Jianotti screamed out, his hands shooting to the shattered lump of his foot.

“You bastard!!! My men will be in here in a minute! When they get here, you’re DEAD!” Musaboru lashed out; saliva flying from his lips as his face glowed red with fury.

“Well...” Kyote chewed at his lower lip, “You see... Your men are having a serious outbreak of mortality right now. They *may* not respond right away.”

Kyote stood like a man that had all the time in the world. A pleased grin peeked from his shaggy beard. The color drained from Jianotti’s face. The realization had dawned on Musaboru that Kyote had already killed the current security detail and that more would not be arriving until the next shift. “W-why are you doing this?”

Kyote snorted. “Rrrreeeeally? You’ve had me as slave labor for how long? You *tortured* me.”

“I had intended to kill you that night! I wish I had!”

“Some nights, I wish you had, too,” Kyote paused for a moment, “So, here’s what I think: your plan was for me to kill Ainoisai, at which point you would claim that it was a hit by a rival and with the agreement papers that you signed tonight,” Kyote pointed to a briefcase on the chest of drawers by the bathroom door, “you would absorb Brómos District. I figure you assume that no one would oppose the move as they would never believe that you would have him killed while you were right down the hall.”

Jianotti glared at him, still swearing under his breath.

“Okay, well, enough of the talking. Now, let’s get down to business.”



Colleen leaned against the back of the elevator as it climbed, the floor indicator lighting one number at a time. Looking up at the ornate light mounted in the ceiling, she ran through her duties

for the remainder of the evening. Once she reached the 44th floor, she would have to make the rounds, checking with the current security detail and prepare them for the shift-change in an hour. At some point, she would have to see if her temporary ward was done with his duties.

Colleen was still looking up as the door opened on the 44th floor. As she stepped forward and her eyes rolled down to the lobby before her, Kyote was on her like a blur, forcing her to the back of the elevator car. Caught completely unaware, she swung her arms, pressing her hands to the wall for support.

“Kurttsen,” Colleen said, her voice cracking, her eyes wide as saucers. Kyote dug a hand into her coat, yanked out her pistol and tossed it the floor. He pulled back, leveling a hand at her face, his index finger centimeters from the tip of her nose. She held her hands in front of her, palms outward in a pleading manner.

A smirk crawled up on his lips. “I assume you’d like for this negotiation to end with both of us walking away alive? I like the way you think, and don’t take this as a criticism, you’ve not left yourself much to bargain with.”

“B-but... Jianotti will have me—” she sputtered, her eyes focused on the fingertip wavering before her. Her hands returned to the elevator wall, her legs felt rubbery.

“Jianotti isn’t going to be doing *much* in the near future, except for *maybe* attending his own tasteful funeral. Closed casket, mind you.” Kyote leaned in, grabbing her by the collar. Her pulse raced, unsure of where this was headed.

Colleen gasped as he lifted her from her slouched position and dragged her past him. With a push, he forced her into the lobby, where she stumbled for a moment. Turning back to the elevator, she watched as Kyote held the door open, his eyes focused on her. With the edge of his boot, he kicked her pistol out of the elevator. It slid across the tiled floor, coming to rest a few meters to her right. Immobilized by the heady mix of terror and relief, she made no move for the weapon.

Kyote called out to her, his tone cold, “Look, I have places to go, and cities to flee, so here’s how this is going to go: You’re not gonna attempt to stop me, or go for your gun, and I’m gonna ride this elevator down. And once I’m gone, you can compose yourself—be sure to take a little time—and go discover your boss. He’ll be at the room in the end of the hall.” He took his hand off of the door, letting it close.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joshua Banker was born in Greece in 1973. He grew up in the San Francisco area before moving to Chattanooga where he attended the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and received a BFA in Graphic Design. After moving to Charlotte, NC, he ran an independent entertainment review website from 1999-2006. Now living in Greenville, NC, his day job is graphic designer and analyst for a Fortune 100 company. Josh is a writer, painter and illustrator, loves all things H.P. Lovecraft, is married and has two cats and a dog.

Visit **joshuabankerbooks.com** for updates.