

A tall, lithe man stood at a two foot tall wall, sporting a short rifle. He aimed downrange, and pulled the trigger. With a deafening bang, another hole was added in the target pinned up on the far side of the range. Three more bangs, and three more holes, until the bangs turned to a click of the gun dry firing. The man ejected the magazine, catching it before it hit the floor, and grabbed another mag, similar in all respects, except for the red stripe down the side. It slid into place with a satisfying click as he raised the gun toward the target. Three shots rang out, the bullets leaving a streak of light. The target caught fire as the incendiary bullets punched through it.

The man was muscular, yet not overly buff, wearing a tan shirt with a logo emblazoned on the shoulder. Below that, he wore olive cargo pants, the pockets stuffed with assorted tinkering and projects. On one leg there was a shoe, but the other was a metal three-pronged foot. The prosthetic continued up to his mid-thigh, a curvaceous metal and carbon fiber thing. Multicolored LEDs blinked from his leg as he turned around. On the side of his head, he had a Neural Access Port, made to help with everything electronic. It took the shape of a small metal plate with two wide, shallow holes in it. With a click, he ejected the magazine, catching it and putting it in his pocket.

He picked up the other magazine and a box of ammunition and exited the range, walking toward the desk at the entrance. A middle-aged woman sat behind the counter, tapping at a keyboard. She looked up as the man approached, pressing a button to raise the sheet of tempered glass between them. The man slid his gun and assorted related items into the enclosed room. The guy slid the gun and boxes of ammunition into the place while the woman behind the desk started to talk.

"How many rounds you got left?" She asked.

"Twenty lead, seven incendiary, I think." He responded.

"You know, the next shipment of ammunition doesn't come until next month." The range operator said as she counted the remaining cartridges. "You're going to use all of it before anybody else has a chance to."

"Well, I'm going somewhere for the company for tomorrow, so you can stay home." He replied, joking. "Anyway, I've got to get going and prepare for the trip," he said, as she finished counting the ammo. "see you after the trip." He strode out the sliding glass door and into a large circular courtyard. It was mostly grass, with a tree growing in the middle and stone paths running through, leading to the many doors scattered around the circle. The man headed for the door marked 'Main Building'. Behind the wall, a massive tower stretched up into the sky, the airspace above being patrolled by drones. The skyscraper had massive screens on it, displaying a slideshow of advertisements.

The adverts were many and differing, but they all bore the name and logo of the company - Erinye Consolidated, next the stylized face of a snake-haired woman. As he was looking upward, something buzzed in his pocket. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a silver circle, about the size of his palm. It beeped once, and a blue holographic display popped up, displaying an exclamation mark. Using buttons on the disk, he opened the folder marked 'Alerts'. There were two alerts; one reminding him of the meeting he had in room 412, the other talking about how the company servers might be down for a while due to 'undisclosed reasons'.

The man shut off the hologram and dropped it back into his pocket. As he looked up from the disk, one of the stories-tall screens flickered. He

looked at it curiously, thinking they never do that. It flickered again, and went black. Slowly, the other screens did the same, flickering between the image and darkness, then shutting down. He began to hurry for the door, intent on finding out what was happening. The inside of the building was decorated with dark wooden paneling and oval recesses in the walls, from which light spilled. The hallway he had come into had a rug with multicolored fractal patterns stretched across the length, up until the door to the foyer.

Not wanting to climb nearly fifteen flights of stairs, he instead made a beeline for the lobby, where there was an elevator on standby. There was a mid-size touchscreen anchored to a ledge at an angle from the wall. The man tapped an area of the screen, opening the metal doors with a ding and selecting floor 14. Wondering precisely what had made the servers non-serviceable, he searched for the Neural Access Port he knew was in the elevator, finding it on the back wall. He flipped open the cover and retrieved the access cable. It was a rounded rectangle with two raised circles plated in copper in various places. Attached to the bottom of it was a multicolored ribbon cable, looped around inside the cover. He brought the Neural Access Port up to the receiving holes above his ear and plugged it in, taking a NAP, as it was colloquially called.

His vision went dark, the steel walls of the elevator dissolving into streams of binary, and then he connected to the building. He couldn't see anything, per se. It was more like he knew everything going on in the building and was able to visualize it in his mind's eye. He could see all the other people taking NAPs in the building, an unusually large amount in one office. Realizing that the reason for the servers being down had to do with them, he concentrated on that office, and the programs and processes running to and from it. An unknown adversary was firing off programs like mad, attempting to find a weakness, and trying to steal files. The counter hackers were rebutting the attacks and patching anywhere the decker's may have gotten through, and in the background, one or two counter-hackers were trying to trace the signal, breaking past the many proxies set up. The location kept changing, from Beijing, to New York, to Munich, and it just continued changing after each proxy was broken through.

The hackers noticed, and began to pull away, dropping the offensive, instead setting up firewalls and even more proxies. The counter-hackers began to relax, which proved to be a great mistake. Seeing an opening, a hacker sent in a single file, barely detectable; at least until it spread, attacking everything and wreaking havoc throughout the servers. The last hacker disconnected, leaving the company's techies to subdue the worm. The elevator dinged, and the guy disconnected from the port, coiling up the wire and shoving it back inside the cover. He stood up as his vision returned from the streams of binary, stopping the door before it could close again and walking out into the hall. Room 412 was on the right, as he saw on the sign stating "ROOMS 401-425" with an arrow pointing to the right. The man began to hurry down past the rooms until he reached room 412, tapping in the passcode on the door lock and sliding open the door. Inside room 412 there was an oval-shaped glass table, with four people seated around it, and a chair left empty for him.

"Nice of you to join us, Cyril." Spoke Donovan, an older man across from the door. He wasn't sitting on a chair, his double jointed prosthetics prevented sitting easily, but he folded both joints as far as possible to have normal height at the table. On the wall facing the door, there was a large display screen, bearing the logotype of Erinye. The room was lit with cylindrical lamps, spreading a soft light throughout

the room. Next to the large screen there were likewise large shuttered windows. The lamps began to dim, as the shutters over the windows slid shut automatically. The screen beeped once, then the picture changed to a building. It was large and triangular in shape, with a tapered flat roof with enough space to easily land a helicopter.

"This is Frontér Industries' main Bostonian building. As you are no doubt aware, they are competing with us for most military contracts and domestic products." The silver speakers on the ceiling said as they blared to life with a robotic female voice. "We received word from a trusted source that they are close to developing a revolutionary piece of technology. However, we do not know precisely what it is that they are creating. Our source is just an office worker, so they don't have the clearance to get anything beyond rumors and confirmation that there is a big project. Your objectives are as follows; find out what they are developing, get a copy of their research, and insert a bug into their servers. If there is other information on said servers that you think would benefit Erinye, feel free to copy it. All of this is to be done without alerting anybody outside the building to your presence, or killing anyone."

The whole team visibly shifted at that, Lindsey looking slightly crestfallen, Camilla relieved, Donovan had no expression on his face to betray his emotions, Alec had been spinning a pen the whole time, and continued to do so, and Cyril simply raised an eyebrow. The voice from the speakers spoke again, startling Alec, who dropped his pen. "To facilitate not killing anybody, we are sending you in with some new hardware." The screen flashed to a bullpup rifle clad in urban camouflage. It had a smooth, curved stock and a large circular part on the left side. "It fires 5.56x45 millimeter tranquilizer bullets, another new piece of hardware. They have a needle inside and the bullet opens in flight. They have relatively low doses, but don't fire more than around seven into a target, otherwise they might go into seizure. You will have two hypodermic pens included in your equipment in case. You simply take off the cap and stick it in them. If they aren't resistant to the tranquilizer they'll wake up around five hours later with no memory of you."

"You will be taking a drone over the building and parachuting down onto the top, where you can get in through the staircase. Now, most of the roof is glass, so don't go hitting it too hard. The drone will automatically scramble the Anti-Aircraft drones circling the building, so you can get in with no problem. The drone will leave as soon as you're ready. Good luck." With that, the screen went dark, and the shades began to roll back up the windows.

-----  
-----

Half a mile down the road from Erinye headquarters, there was an inconspicuous little airfield, surrounded by large buildings and neon signs, practically invisible amidst the chaotic architecture of the city. It was here that Erinye's contractors were headed, all piling into an unmarked truck and driving down the road, surrounded by rows of buildings reaching up seemingly to the sky. Donovan was driving, speeding past druggies laying on the sidewalk and flashy signs advertising for all products under the sun. They arrived at the short airfield in a few minutes later, pulling up to an unassuming store. They strode inside after locking the truck doors, a little bell ringing as the door opened.

"Are you here to buy?" The little chinese man asked, as the five continued towards the back of the shop.

"Not today. Sorry Zhao, maybe next time." Camilla responded apologetically.

"You always say that, but never do. You people are the only ones who actually come here, and you don't ever buy anything! I'm about to go out of business, and maybe the next guy might not be so agreeable with strangers barging through his home and flying a plane off the roof!"

"Calm down, little dude. We're not exactly issued money on missions." Alec said while entering a stairwell through a cloth-draped doorway. Zhao snorted, but said no more. The stairs lead to the roof, three floors up. A corrugated tin hangar hid the smooth, dark blue drone from view of the general populace, while the conjoined roofs made a ramshackle, yet functional runway. The drone inside the arch of metal was large, with two swept back wings on either side, and cameras mounted in several key points along the chassis. In the back there was a ramp, leading to a cramped cargo bay. Within, there was a row of padded seats attached to each wall and two foot-tall containers in the back. Lindsey turned on the drone as the rest clambered into the back. They opened the containers at the back, revealing five piezo-ballistic armored suits. Beneath those, there were helmets, knee and shoulder pads, boots, and assorted types of guns. A Balinco 9mm handgun, the bullpup rifle from R&D, a longer, scoped rifle, and a small submachine gun.

They each pulled on a suit of ballistic armor and chose two guns, grabbing the appropriate magazines. Donovan had chosen the bullpup and the SMG. Precision with automatic weapons was his forte. Lindsey took the bullpup and handgun, the standard loadout, as did Alec and Cyril. Camilla, however, chose the long rifle and SMG. She was the sniper of the team, although it would not be the most useful thing in the enclosed hallways. The helmets were curvaceous black panels that covered most of the head, ending just above the mouth. They had an additional half mask that clicked into place over the mouth and fed oxygen to the wearer. When Cyril put his on it was all dark, at least until the HUD kicked in, dazzling his eyes with the LCD monitor embedded in the helmet. It displayed feed from the cameras on the faceplate, as well as additional information that could be helpful to the user. As he moved his eyes over his teammates the eye-tracking software detected what he was looking at, displaying information. Camilla dropped her smaller gun, making a loud clatter as it slid down the ramp. As Cyril looked, the HUD displayed her information.

Name: Camilla Voigt  
Age: 26  
Codename: Thanatos  
Time served: 5 years

Camilla was a rather new team member, having joined in the August of 2063. Close behind her in terms of recent joining was Alec, who joined in 2061, then Cyril, in 2058, then Lindsey, who had joined April of 2049. The longest serving was, of course, Donovan, with 26 years of service to Erinye.

He tapped a button on the raised circular parts of his weapons, the parts marked with the company name GeckCo, standing for Geck Consolidated. Their most famous product was a type of textile that stuck

to nearly anything, coming off with only an electric charge, and holding up thousands of pounds. Each of the firearms had a raised circle of the stuff. The team disengaged the constant electric charge that kept the guns from sticking to everything and stuck the guns to themselves, after which they strapped on the parachutes stowed beneath the benches and took their seats. The access ramp began to close soon after they had all sat down. Within the minute it was shut. The drone began to accelerate down the runway, slowly lifting off until it was airborne.

Mere minutes into the flight, Lindsey pulled out a thin rectangular piece of metal from a pouch on the satchel she had brought with her. It opened up automatically, making taut the folded plastic screen. She hit the power button and it lit up, bathing the dark interior of the drone with light. She tapped the screen a few times, navigating the applications and folders. The screen blinked off for a second, then came back on. A red light began to light up, bathing the cargo bay in maroon. With a few more taps on the tablet, the alarm light shut off, receding back into the hole it emerged from.

"What was that?" Alec asked inquisitively, gesturing towards the alarm light.

"It was nothing. This chunk of metal doesn't need the cameras to fly, it has a preprogrammed course." Lindsey responded nonchalantly.

"What? You hacked the cameras? But thats-" Lindsey cut him off with a mild hush, gesturing toward the tablet. Streets and buildings moved slowly by underneath the aircraft, slow enough to recognise individual streets, but fast enough to keep the drone aloft. Where previous cities had only expanded horizontally, Boston had grown vertically as well. buildings stacked on buildings obscured the view from the air down many streets. A flash down one of the streets caught everybody's attention. Lindsey zoomed in, showing four blurry figures standing to the sides of a door. One of them reached an arm inside etching flashing blue in his hand. The four figures quickly entered the building, flashes appearing every so often from inside.

"What do you think that was?" Camilla asked.

"Police raid. This isn't exactly the most lawful part of town." Don replied, barely looking up. The police across the entire country, but most notably in large cities like Boston, were infamously corrupt and gung-ho. Lindsey, having suddenly remembered something, powered down the tablet and folded it back up, then stowed it away in her satchel. She reached into a different pocket, retrieving a cluster of strange objects. They were bulky masses of plastic and metal attached to another bulky mass of the same by a thick wire. Lindsey grabbed one of the things marked Lupus. She stuck the larger side of the object to the metal on top of her sternum. The magnets in the bottom stuck to the ballistic armor, and she looped the other end around to the base of her neck, where she attached it with the same method. She tapped a button and a blue hologram emerged from the object at the top of her sternum, a wolf's head done crudely in polygons.

She passed out the others, Donovan receiving an array of binary code, which he was informed spelled out his name. Don's code name was Cypher. Nobody quite knew why, seeing as a brick was better at hacking or even manipulating a computer than he. Alec received a visored knight's helm, done in polygons like all the rest. Camilla had an animated skull clacking it's teeth in front of her face. Cyril had an especially bulky

one, his call sign being Janus. The hologram was three conjoined faces wrapping halfway around his head, and all three moving their mouths when he spoke.

"When do you think we'll get there?" Asked Alec, to nobody in particular.

"We're going directly over the residential district. Well, one of them. So we should be there in a few minutes. And we have less of a chance of getting blown to smithereens going this way!" Lindsey replied energetically. "The double-A drones don't patrol this area." Just then, an alert flashed up on the helmets' HUD. Estimated Time of Arrival: Two Minutes. Prepare to jump. They stood, securing the static lines of the parachutes to the bar running down the cargo bay roof.

"Warning: Anti-Aircraft Drones locked on. Taking evasive maneuvers." A robotic voice emitted throughout the cargo bay. The aircraft lurched to the right, then to the left, doing complex corkscrews and zig-zags to avoid being hit by the projectiles lobbed out by the AA drones, all the time throwing the five passengers around. The ramp began to lower with the sound of hydraulic actuators, revealing the blue sky in contrast against the grey of the city. A countdown flashed in the middle of their HUD as they approached the jump site. It reached 'one' as an AA-Drone fired on the counterfeit news drone, blowing off a wing. It struggled to stay on course as the five infiltrators leapt from the cargo bay, the static lines snapping taut one after another.

Now free of the confines of the cargo bay, they could see the Anti-Aircraft drones buzzing around, lobbing 40 millimeter grenades at the news drone. They were essentially armored quadcopters, four rotors attached to a smooth base, on top of which there was a 40 mm grenade launcher and a .50 caliber. There were only four drones hovering around, paying no mind to the parachuters. With a few more grenades from the AA drones, the news drone began to fall. Two of the four quadcopters buzzed forwards, firing small harpoons trailing cable into the hull of the falling drone. They kept it supported this way, flying the destroyed passenger drone out of the city, where they would release it to crash.

The team of contractors began to guide their parachutes down toward the flat top of the building. One of the quadcopters whirred away, but one stayed, hovering around the parachutes and assessing the threat. As they got nearer and nearer to the building, the drone began to get more anxious, finally deciding they were a threat about fifty feet from the top. It lowered the .50 caliber turret, ejecting a spent cartridge, then shot Cyril in the head. It ricocheted off the helmet, leaving a furrow in the side, but he wasn't harmed. With urgency, he started to claw at the release cord as the drone prepared to fire again. Finally getting a hold on the cord, he yanked with all his might.

The parachute straps came undone, dropping him into free fall as the drone fired, the bullet streaking off into the sky. The wind streaked past his face, howling as it entered the recesses of the helmet and armor. The drone dropped with him, trying to aim its 40mm cannon at him. He reached down to the pistol stuck to his leg, disengaging the GeckCo Pad to draw it and aim down the sights at the quadcopter. He fired, lamenting the fact that there were only tranquilizer bullets as they rebounded off the smooth chassis, barely leaving a mark. The recoil spun him around, spirals of neon and silver whirling past his vision.

In the flashes of color he could see the top of the building getting closer with every spin. He attempted to control the spinning by extending his arms and legs, but it didn't work, at least not the way it was supposed to. He ended up upside down, still slightly spinning as he hurtled towards the plate glass. He tried frantically to right himself, but to no avail. Cyril impacted the glass with force, letting out an expulsion of breath as he fell through amidst a shower of transparent daggers. He felt himself stop suddenly, and his vision went dark.