

The Fenix Projects

It was midnight and the cursor on her blank laptop screen blinked back at her. It stood out from the empty white page, a flippant challenge to write what was required of her. Reports for the agency were a routine part of the job.

The new job... She leaned back against the chair at the desk in her small, gritty hotel room, and took a drag of her cigarette. Her blonde wig and platform boots from the night before were piled on the floor by the perfectly made bed.

What am I doing? I don't even smoke...

She knew she had to detach from the whirlwind emotions she felt last night, the same whirlwind that was numbing her from exhaustion and depression now. She knew she simply had to write exactly what had happened. But setting her fingers on the keyboard, taking them off again, and referring to her notebook felt as though she were simply going through the motions robotically, as if she was watching herself attempt this feat from somewhere outside her body. Something had clicked into place last night...

Or out of place...

She began to type slowly.

Detail of event:

On the night of October 13th, 2002, our team embarked on a reconnaissance mission, the purpose of which was to obtain intelligence re: the target's whereabouts. We were also tasked with obtaining info on current operations in and around Budapest, Prague, Sofia, Zagreb, and Kiev if possible.

And God only knows where else he's doing this? Though that's not what this fucking report is about. That's not what they're concerned with. But just how big is his footprint? It felt as though her heart was aching in the same way a torn muscle was sore. The loud music and strobe lights still pulsed through her mind as she slowly, painfully thought through the events of the night. Of course she knew what she signed up for when starting out in this line of work, but what happened last night was beyond anything she could have imagined. Perhaps that was naïve and immature, but she couldn't deny it.

Working with Agent Smith and Agent Burkhart, our team

was able to confirm the target's location at the K-27 Club.

Accurate. But his location isn't the point. This has nothing to do with what's actually going on. Nothing will be done about what he's actually doing. Her mind raced and her conscience burned as she felt the tug of war between logic and her emotions. For all intents and purposes, she'd done her job, eventually at least, even if Agent Smith did have to step in. On the record, they got what they came for. Her problem was her humanity.

Great line of work...my soul is the problem.

Additionally, we verified the identities of several other known targets on international watch lists in his company.

She took another puff of her cigarette, picturing the entourages accompanying these high level targets, including many well-known local and regional politicians.

I identified the target(s) and was instructed to leave the club immediately by Agent Smith.

The sound of his voice in her earpiece when he learned what she was trying to do was enough to cause her to blink repeatedly, fighting tears, as she sat slowly typing with one hand, holding her cigarette in the other.

I was delayed leaving due to difficulty moving back upstairs to the entry/exit where I entered the

building with Agent Smith. I had moved downstairs with a group of models allowed entry to the VIP area.

The sound of the dirty bathroom door opening with the loud music pumping upstairs still rang in her ears.

I was questioned by several security guards before I moved back upstairs to the main club area where I met Agent Smith.

Their expressions as he'd dragged her out of the bathroom, forcing her to leave them there would be etched in her memory forever. *Just staring up at me, all they needed was help...just someone to help them. I knew I could have saved their lives.* She lowered her head as tears finally spilled down her cheeks. *I wasn't there for anything that mattered. The information, the secrets, for what? For political favors? For leverage between governments, for top secret exchanges for more information?*

She'd stumbled upon people who needed help, but no, that wasn't allowed.

We left the premises together and proceeded to the rendezvous point where Agent Burkhart met us, and we left.

She couldn't say anything about being escorted away from the scene by a senior agent. She couldn't say anything about the helpless break that cracked somewhere between her heart and mind on the long, forced walk back upstairs, across the dark, loud club and out into the street.

Summary:

Primary target location verified. Association with additional high profile targets and primary target confirmed. Intelligence re: operations in Budapest obtained. Objective accomplished.

But I couldn't save them...

Additional notes:

Her cursor was blinking at her again. She sat with her head resting in her hands next to her laptop with that damn silent, blinking cursor, smoke curling up into the air from the ashtray in front of her. Her emotions spiraled into a dark hell while logic challenged her to defy the reaction to last night's events and simply do the job.

Additional notes:

That report section was still screaming at her.

Now, the phrase shared the same flippant attitude shared by the damn cursor. They dared her to tell the truth, a challenge to oppose the system. But she knew that wasn't an option if she wanted to keep her job. An agreement had been made, and she had to keep her end of the bargain or it would be her job on the line.

I couldn't save you, and I'm so sorry....

She sighed.

I couldn't have saved the one person that mattered most. Never stood a

chance...But I saw you, and I know better now. I know what they are fucking doing to you, and I didn't save you, and I'm so so sorry....

She put her cigarette out, suddenly furiously disgusted at the scent, which only mirrored her own shame and disappointment in herself for last night. She wiped her eyes.

Additional notes: N/A.

At 3:00 a.m., two men sat in a black SUV on a quiet, residential street in Tacoma, Washington. The first one in the driver's seat was staring through a pair of night-vision goggles, focusing his light blue eyes intently on a house across the street, and up the block.

The second one sat in the back, staring at thermal surveillance camera feeds on a laptop. "Not a lot going on," he said cheerfully. His tall, well-built frame sat hunched over equipment in the backseat. He pulled his mask on over his beard.

The driver set the NVG's down on the front console. "Looks like two are there. Don't see the third one." He spoke slowly, and his voice was calm.

"Yep. We wanna come back? Street's chill, not unusual for the area. Shouldn't be reported immediately either way, so we'll have time." His colleague in the back adjusted his earpiece.

"No, the other guy should get the message. So will his Crip friends. We get two, that's solid. Doesn't look like anybody else is there, right?"

“Nope, feed shows one is in the living room. Other one’s upstairs. Both look asleep, or passed out. Should be quick and controlled. We gotta go.” He flipped the laptop shut. “You’re supposed to be the brains of the operation.” He grinned before zipping up a dark jacket over his bulletproof vest.

They gave each other a thumbs up, shut the doors quietly, and walked across the street. The driver held his 9MM Glock close to his leg and turned to watch the street from the shadow of the doorway, his slim athletic build placing him just a few inches shorter than the shadow of his muscular colleague. There was a click of the lock, a quick nod, and they moved inside quietly, shutting the door behind them.

They both walked straight into a trashed living room, with garbage strewn all over. The driver nodded toward the target as his colleague began making his way across the living room, past the couch, and slowly into the kitchen. Needles and pipes littered the table and floor in the living room.

The target—a young, tall male wearing ratty, athletic clothes—was lying on the couch asleep. He started to get up, obviously high. “Fuckin—what the fuck you do—” but he didn’t finish his sentence before the calm, quiet, masked man shot him three times in the chest. The loud gunshot noise was only slightly muffled by the silencer attached to his handgun, creating a sharp pop resembling the crack of a nail gun. “One down,” he said, his throat microphone picking up his quiet voice and transmitting to his colleague’s earpiece.

His colleague had already turned out of the living room. Slowly making his way down a hallway, he quickly cleared each room as he made his way to the stairs. Everything was empty except for trash, more crack pipes, and dirty clothes. “Copy,”

he said. "Cover the stairs."

The driver paused at the bottom of the landing, sighting his readied handgun at the dim hallway above. His colleague moved slowly up the stairs, as they heard a door open, and the second groggy target walked out into the hall.

He paused, almost to the top of the stairs, and shot him twice in the head. The target dropped heavily to the ground. "Second one down. Let's clear the rest of the house." The driver nodded and quickly turned into the first doorway on the right, as his partner cleared another room before turning into the last bedroom. He immediately heard a soft moan.

Just as the driver headed for the stairs, he heard several loud yelps and turned back into the bathroom he'd already cleared. This time, when he entered the small, filthy space, he leaned over the sink cabinet to see the skeleton-thin frame of what he guessed was once an aggressive Mastiff-Pitbull mutt. He assumed the yelps were meant to be barks, but the dog's emaciated frame didn't allow for much threat to come through, other than the snarl of bared teeth.

"I found something else," he said into the mic. He stared at the dog.

Damn it all to hell... Not again...

He approached it, slowly, reaching out.

More barks and yelps as it attempted to stand and back into the corner.

He kept moving toward it slowly. "Hey," he called softly. "Hey, it's OK."

“There’s a girl here. Room’s soundproofed so she didn’t show up on thermal.” came through his earpiece.

He immediately rushed down the hall, leaving the pup for now. As routine as these ops had become, there was always room for slight change margins. They would handle this quickly and efficiently, easily adjusting to unexpected circumstances.

In the farthest upstairs bedroom, his colleague stood over a small, ratty cot where a young woman sat balled up. “She won’t leave,” he said.

The driver stared from the cot to his colleague. “Well, it does look like you’re going to kill her. At least put your gun away and ask her to leave like a gentleman.”

He rolled his eyes. “Dude, she’s just high as fuck and doesn’t want to leave. Says she doesn’t want our help, keeps asking where her boyfriend is.”

“Please tell me you didn’t actually tell her.” He shook his head, kneeling down by the bed. “Hey, we’re going to get you out of here, whether you want to leave or not. I suggest you come with us. We aren’t here to hurt you, and we can get you help,” he said softly. He watched her look up at him, groggily trying to focus on the only part of his face that was visible—his eyes.

“Keep wasting your breath,” his colleague growled, the tall muscular frame silhouetted in the doorway. “She doesn’t know what’s fuckin’ good for her. This is shit. Let’s go before the cops or more gangbangers or pimps show up. The one on the couch was enough.”

He stood up. “We’ve never left one, and we aren’t going to.”

“Nope. First, our fearless leader would disagree with you. Second, she’s gonna scream. Not worth it.”

“I’m talking about now,” came the response. “We’ve never left one in Seattle. We’ll be out of here in no time.” He knelt back down and softly nudged her cheeks with a gloved hand. “Hey, what’s your name? Who are you? We’re going to get you out of here.”

“Nooooooo,” came the quiet moan, as she lay down, her red eyes appearing dazed and confused, her dark hair piled on the pillow behind her head. “Don’t-don’ you fuck with me,” her mumbles were stuttered. “My boyfriend gonna kill you-both you,” she motioned to them as she rocked backward.

The driver holstered his handgun and pulled a zip tie out of a pocket in his vest. “Sweetheart, he’s not your boyfriend. And you’re coming with us.” He said calmly, grunting as he sat her up on the bed against the wall before quickly zipping her wrists together in the makeshift cuffs. “Get over here,” he motioned to his colleague. “Let’s do this the old-fashioned way. Get her to the car.”

His partner rolled his eyes again, and grunted as he deftly picked the woman up. “Not a fucking word,” he whispered, glaring down at her. “Why am I carrying her?

You’re the one that wants to save her.” He grunted again, rounding the corner and continuing down the stairs.

“Because I’ve got to get the dog,” came the reply. He had cornered the dog and was wrapping its mouth shut on the floor by the bathroom.

“Are you fuckin’ kidding me?” His colleague stood above him, holding the woman whose head kept rolling back as she tried to cry out and struggle, but ended up hanging limply, muttering a string of incoherent threats.

“Can’t leave him here. He’s in bad shape.”

“Yeah, yeah, uh-huh. They’re always in bad shape, and we don’t have time for this shit. Let’s take the girl before she loses it and go. We may need to get a doctor at the warehouse tonight-she might be OD-ing.”

“Got him,” he replied, picking up the dog by its torso. The dog started wagging its tail excitedly toward the girl. He went to the window and pushed the blinds back before looking up and down the street. “Street’s clear. You ready?” He pulled out his handgun again, wrapping the dog under one arm. “You first. I’ll cover you, but we were in and out pretty quick and quiet. We got time.”

They headed downstairs. His colleague kicked open the front door and headed outside and across the street. The driver followed, keeping the struggling dog firmly under one arm, his handgun ready in the other. The street was dark and silent as they quickly opened the back of the SUV and shoved the girl and dog inside. His colleague jumped in the back as well and was still glaring at him as he rounded the other side of the vehicle, hopped in, and sped off.

“In and out,” he said matter-of-factly, driving quickly out of the neighborhood. It was only a matter of time now before someone noticed the open door and reported the shootings.

The dog was trying to curl up next to the girl as the man in the back pulled the makeshift muzzle wrap off of its mouth. Its ribs were poking out, and it lay by the

girl, whining. “Overdose back here will have to go to the warehouse. No way to get her to the shelter tonight. Can't fuckin' be at a safe house in this condition. And you,” he pulled the mask off over his thick beard scruff, “adding another stray to your fucking circus, man. This is shit.” He shook his head. “This is not what I signed up for. We look pathetic in the middle of the street in the ghetto with an injured dog and a crack addict. You’ve gone soft, dude. This isn’t how it used to be with the agency. I fuckin’ swear,” he muttered. “Any of our old squad saw that? Yeah.”

The driver’s blue eyes twinkled. “It’s not right to leave the pup,” he said firmly. “It never is. Also, seems he made the girl easier to transport.” He glanced in the rearview mirror at the dog, who was licking her face earnestly in the far back seat. He couldn’t tell if she was sleeping or passed out.