

Bottom Dollar

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Narrative Foundation

1. Core Protagonist & Setup

- **The Protagonist:** The man with no name is a former federal military asset who was designated a behavioral washout and discharged.
 - **Legal Standing:** Because he completed his service entry, his legal identity is officially created and recorded by the state, and he possesses an active, valid **Mega City** bank account.
 - **Economic Status:** He has zero recurring income and no corporate lifestyle subscription bundles. He lives in the Outlands, taking independent odd jobs and contract work that require his military combat and tracking capabilities.
- **The Catalyst:** A **Mega City**-based investigative journalist with full institutional privileges who contacts the protagonist. The journalist has obtained raw intelligence and precise coordinates pointing to an active or abandoned human Optimization facility hidden deep within the Chihuahuan Desert.
- **The Mission:** The journalist hires the protagonist to physically infiltrate and investigate the coordinates in the Outlands. The goal is to uncover the facility's corporate ownership, operational status, and historical output—gathering the hard physical evidence required to break a high-profile media exposé inside the **Mega City**s.

3. Protagonist Backstory

- **The Crucible (The Roswell Vertical Incident):**
 - The protagonist and his tight-knit fireteam are deployed via military VTOL to a fortified corporate farming compound in the Roswell Resource Vertical.
 - Command drafts a priority suppression directive, labeling the target sector an active hotbed of hostile rioters threatening critical logistics.
 - Touching down on the scorched earth of the perimeter, the squad discovers the "rioters" are actually unarmed, starving Outland laborers staging a peaceful strike for basic survival assets.
 - A localized contingent within the squad—primarily El Paso natives with deep cultural ties to the valley—flatly refuses to pull the trigger on their own people.
 - Operating under instant, silent consensus, the fireteam spoofs a terminal glitch, pretending they cannot receive the tactical kill order over their tactical encrypted earpieces, and banks the VTOL hard back toward base.
 - This tactical delay alerts the striking laborers to the incoming corporate purge, giving the sharpest Outlanders a window to slip past the exclusion zone before the fallback proxy enforcers arrive.

- **The Price of Conscience (The Dishonorable Washout):**

- Because the military tribunal cannot definitively prove criminal intent or premeditated mutiny, the high-tier court blocks a summary execution or formal prison sentence.
- Instead, the command logs the incident as an act of absolute behavioral incompetence, branding the squad as psychological washouts and issuing them unbundled, dishonorable discharges.
- This legal status leaves them in a dangerous legal grey zone: they retain their baseline U.S. citizenship and digital banking profiles, but their records are permanently flagged, locking them out of corporate lifestyle packages and Mega City registration forever.

- **The Slow Attrition (The Broken Vanguard):**

- cast out into the lawless badlands, the displaced veterans stick together, forming an independent, tactical protection asset for Hire across the Rio Grande Valley—operating as a grim, hard-boiled version of a frontier posse.
- Unlike the clean victories of old-world television, the Outland is a grinding, unyielding machine of attrition. Over years of dusty skirmishes, ambush operations, and desperate corporate extraction jobs, their numbers are systematically whittled down by lead and disease.
- With their original strength broken and their resources spent, the surviving triad permanently splinters, each man choosing a different path to process the trauma of a stolen future:
 - **The Protagonist:** Chooses isolation, drifting between independent tracking contracts as a stoic lone agent, waiting out his clock until he joins his fallen brothers in the dirt.
 - **The El Pesado:** Returns to his roots in the El Paso metroplex, leveraging his high-tier military combat training to climb the ranks of Los Chingones, choosing the brutal stability of the cartel "family" over starvation.
 - **The Drifter:** Collapses entirely under the psychological weight of the past, drowning his memories in physical polymer cash and cheap alcohol inside the neon-lit cantinas of downtown El Paso, waiting for a slow death.

3. Regional Faction Intersections & Logistics

The protagonist relies on the three dominant enclaves of the Rio Grande Valley to maintain his operational mobility, gear, and safety:

- **Connections:** During his military service, the protagonist was stationed alongside an individual who is now a member of Los Chingones. While deployed at a resource vertical, they refused to murder striking laborers, leading to their collective behavioral washout. He maintains relations with this contact, allowing him to navigate cartel territory safely, though he remains an outsider to their family structure.

- **Logistics:** Keystone is the protagonist's source for mechanical maintenance and energy. He interacts with the corporate police state as a paying customer or trader, navigating its massive surrounding slums and accepting imbalanced trade terms to secure refurbished replacement parts for his motorcycle and fresh power cells.
- **Safe Haven:** Las Cruces serves as the protagonist's sanctuary and trade hub for survival essentials. Because the enclave operates under an anarchist framework, it lacks advanced technological infrastructure, making it a reliable location to evade corporate tracking, rest, and acquire food or water. The community provides human resources, local guides, and regional intelligence.

The Secret History

I. The Progenitor Sin

- **The Catalyst:** Ten years ago, the Chief Executive Officer of Corp A suffered an immense personal tragedy—the death of his young daughter.
- **The Violation:** Driven by grief and wielding absolute corporate wealth, he bypassed federal genetic restrictions. He funded a highly illegal, off-the-books Optimization facility deep in the Chihuahuan desert of the Unincorporated Interior.
- **The Mandate:** The facility's sole operational purpose was to grow, sequence, and raise a single, perfect human clone of his deceased daughter to replace what he lost.

II. The Logistics Loophole

- **The Transport Problem:** To move the high-value biological assets, equipment, and sequencing materials from the DFW Mega City down across the desert pipeline, Corp A needed a highly secure transit pipeline. They turned to Keystone, the corporate police state located in old Socorro in the Rio Grande Valley.
- **The Political Risk:** Keystone's top leadership was desperately trying to stay clean to secure a formal sovereign Mega City Charter from the federal government. If the USA discovered that Keystone was running illegal human cloning traffic, their political momentum would be permanently destroyed.
- **The Double-Accounting System:** To protect themselves, Keystone operated a systemic double-accounting scheme. They maintained two separate sets of books:
 - **The Federal Registry Ledger:** The pristine, tax-audited books presented to the Department of the Treasury to prove federal compliance.
 - **The Shadow Ledger:** The un-audited books used to physically track grey-market cargo and trade with lawless Outland operatives.
- **The Structural Constraint:** Because the Shadow Ledger was a massive liability if caught in a federal audit, it was structurally stripped of absolute calendar years or chronological timestamps. It recorded what the cargo was (component serial numbers), where it was moving, and who signed for it, but left no timeline trail.
- **The Ambitious Middle Manager:** Corp A's handlers targeted a hungry, ambitious Keystone middle manager. To pad his department's bottom line for the quarter and guarantee a promotion into a Vice President seat, the manager used his credentials to route Corp A's cloning shipment through Keystone's highly restricted institutional Shadow Ledger. He had no authority to touch this ledger, but he completed the transaction anyway, leaving his unique, unencrypted digital routing signature permanently embedded in the metadata header instead of a traditional burner ID.

III. The Delivery

- **The Delivery:** The girl was successfully grown, harvested, and delivered directly to the CEO's pristine, high-security luxury flat inside the DFW Mega City.
- **The Status Quo:** The daughter was raised as the girl that was lost, insulation and living as a regular high-tier citizen, completely unaware of her engineered origin.

IV. The Incompetent Burn Protocol

- **The Outsourced Eraser:** The CEO paid the Keystone middle manager to systematically destroy the desert facility. To maximize his personal payout from the contract, the manager pocketed the corporate funds and hired a cheap, off-the-books crew of local Outland mercenaries and street-level thugs to do a messy smash-and-burn job instead of using a professional military demolition team.
- **The Tactical Oversight:** The hired thugs used industrial thermite sloppily, only burning through superficial wiring harnesses instead of nesting it properly inside the server chassis. They smashed office desks with sledgehammers, took a photo of the smoking room to collect their cash, and left quickly.
- **The Forensic Survival:** Because they had zero technical knowledge, the crew completely ignored a low-voltage, air-gapped disaster logger box bolted to the concrete sub-floor, thinking it was a standard electrical breaker box. A single, low-kilobyte encrypted transport package containing the un-timestamped Keystone Shadow Ledger ID sat safely inside the dark core directory for ten years.

V. The Discovery and the Setup

- **The Leverage:** A decade later, rival Corp B discovers the truth through high-tier corporate intelligence up in the Mega City. Exposing that Corp A's CEO engineered an illegal clone allows them to launch a massive corporate resource coup.
- **The Proxy Strategy:** Corp B leaks the exact coordinates of the forgotten desert facility to the journalist. This leaks the lead to an outside, independent investigator who will extract the physical evidence from the site, keeping Corp B's hands completely clean.
- **The Site Discovery:** The protagonist arrives at the coordinates and notes the amateur, incomplete thermite burn job. This physical observation leads him to search the facility ruins until he uncovers the overlooked, air-gapped local disaster logger box bolted to the sub-floor.
- **The Chronological Illusion:** The terminal's dead CMOS battery triggers a standard system initialization prompt upon boot-up, flashing a critical alert about a ten-year clock drift directly onto the screen. The protagonist clicks through the system warning to clear the screen, then executes a standard directory command to pull up the bare filenames. Because he skims the raw files without utilizing metadata long-format flags, he reads the

shadow ledger ID and assumes he is tracking a live, active trafficking ring happening right now.

The Electronic Bill of Lading (eBL)

I. File Architecture & Identification

- System Filename: KSTN_BOL_77492_RAW
- Plaintext Outer Wrapper (Public Metadata): To avoid triggering red flags during routine network sweeps, the unencrypted container header uses completely sanitized, mundane institutional nomenclature:
 - Carrier Jurisdiction: KEYSTONE REGIONAL TRANSIT AUTHORITY
 - Ledger Classification: CLASS-IV / SEC-09 UTILITY ROUTE
 - Accounting Origin Trace: DEPT-MGR-4412 (The rogue middle manager's unique digital signature, left in plain text due to his ignorance of cryptographic protocols).
- The Plaintext Itemized Freight: The unencrypted cargo list contains the raw item identifier strings used by the transport network to verify physical container counts at checkpoints:
 - 1x ATMOSPHERIC RECEPTACLE CELL // REF-ID: KSTN-77492-BX-01
 - 4x CHASSIS INTERFACE ELEMENTS // REF-ID: KSTN-77492-BX-02

II. Cryptographic Configuration

- The Encrypted Payload (The Dead End): The core commercial logs containing the transaction specifics, asset definitions, and the buyer's destination data are sealed within a separate, data-at-rest cryptographic block.
- The Protocol: The payload utilizes Corp A's proprietary encryption protocol. Because it is a foreign corporate matrix completely separate from Keystone's system architecture, the protagonist's exploitation terminal cannot execute a brute-force decryption checksum.
- The Missing Timeline: The file lacks permanent, absolute calendar timestamps. The transactional flow is managed entirely via sequential real-time network handshakes, creating a timeline-less data packet that tricks the protagonist into thinking the shipment is an active, current operation.

III. The Narrative Domino Effect

- The protagonist runs a fuzzy semantic search query on his scriptable field terminal across the chrooted disk environment. The model flags the file based on the conceptual match for resource transport, suppressing the system's temporal errors to present a clean data

card.

- Because the file wrapper looks like a standard, low-priority utility route, the protagonist takes the plaintext identifier (CLASS-IV / SEC-09 UTILITY ROUTE) to a public Keystone Customs House terminal.
- The Tripwire: When the clerk enters the ID, the public network cannot locate it and routes the query to the isolated back-end network. The back-end system recognizes the ID as a restricted file belonging to the secret, institutional Shadow Ledger—the double-accounting system Keystone uses to track grey-market Outland cargo.
- The Incident: Because a low-level public terminal has zero authorization to query the Shadow Ledger, the automated network triggers an instant security lockdown, freezing the terminal screens and dispatching armed enforcers to arrest the protagonist for a high-tier data breach.
- Beat 5+ (The Iluminados Crack): The protagonist escapes the checkpoint with the encrypted file container intact but unreadable. He must take the black-box payload and the rogue manager's routing signature (DEPT-MGR-4412) to the legacy outlaw code-breakers to crack Corp A's encryption protocol and unmask the final destination.

Plot Outline

Chapter 1: The Choke Point Intercept

- The protagonist rides down Route 62 toward El Paso, cutting through the dead, silent wastes.
- He passes the blackened, heat-warped ruins of the Fort Bliss perimeter. This area stands as a grim monument to what happens when you cross the federal military machine.
- He rolls up to the Los Chingones gatehouse under the Route 62 and Interstate 10 overpass, which is a fortified iron bottleneck blocking the road.
- Without saying a word, the protagonist hands over his federal military ID. The gate grunt takes it back to the security shack.
- The wait drags out. Inside the booth, a console terminal chimes as the system flags the veteran's identity file, drawing the attention of the shift boss.
- The checkpoint supervisor steps out of the shadows of the shack and sizes up the lone rider as he walks over.
- The supervisor leans in, demanding to know where the rider is heading, how long he intends to clog up their roads, and what kind of iron he's carrying under his coat.
- The protagonist keeps it brief. He states he is passing through straight to Las Cruces and that he is carrying a sidearm.
- The supervisor scoffs and tosses the ID back into the protagonist's lap. He notes he wanted to see the "famous gringo" for himself, but is disappointed by the man before him.
- The protagonist takes his badge, turns the electric engine into a low hum, and rolls past the barrier without giving the man a reaction.
- As the tires hit the cracked asphalt of Interstate 10, the supervisor's voice yells through the exhaust noise behind him: "Watch yourself, gringo."

Chapter 2: A Ghost in the Desert

- The protagonist picks up speed down the open Interstate 10.
- Over his bone conducting tactical earpiece he received an audio signal that he has a message
- The journalist has sent a message saying that they finally have the coordinates from their contact and that they are attached to the message
- The journalist tells the protagonist that the first half of their payment has been sent to Las Cruces and should be waiting for them when they arrive.
- The transmission cuts out, leaving him alone with the steady hum of the bike's electric engine.

- The man looks down at the charge gauge, noting less than a quarter charge left, but figures it should be enough to make it the 50 miles up I-25.
- The world flies past in shades of blue and deep black, and the man reflects on the supervisor's incredulity at the gate; the supervisor was disappointed by the figure before him, but the man was never one to stand out. In so many ways, living as an invisible ghost had been a virtue, an asset, and one day he would finally become a real ghost and join the brothers who had fallen before him.
- The memory of the gate died on the long macadam and there was only the hum of the machine, the high peaks rising up out of the night to take the sun, blinding and stark, while the deep country beneath them lay yet in the shadow of the earth.

Chapter 3: The Toll of the Grid

- The protagonist rolls into the Las Cruces enclave late in the morning, his battery dashboard humming on the absolute last of its charge.
- He navigates to the off-grid escrow drop point to collect the Journalist's upfront payment, which arrives as a heavy crate of medical supplies and ammunition.
- The supplies sent to him are ill-suited for his immediate needs, so he culls the crate, taking only a portion of the ammunition and medical goods to pack onto the bike while exchanging the remaining bulk cargo for hard cash.
- With the cash in hand, he pays to hook the motorcycle into a grid charger.
- Once the bike is charging, he heads to the university campus records room and punches the Journalist's GPS coordinates into a public terminal database.
- The recent database files pull up a modern geographic layout of the coordinates, but the entry displays nothing but empty sand and mountain topography, leaving him stuck.
- He looks around the repository and asks for help, finding a sharp campus archivist who understands how the local filing systems actually function.
- The archivist takes over the station, pointing out that the modern digital registry frequently drops peripheral data, and confidently switches the terminal over to a historical archival search.
- They find that the coordinates used to be labeled as a salt mine
- With the location secured, he navigates to a shady, hourly room rental on the edge of the district, paying cash for a few hours of cheap rest while the afternoon heat peaks.
- As twilight fades into deep black and blue, he wakes up, collects his fully charged machine from the station, stows his gear, and silently rolls out past the enclave's perimeter into the dark desert.

Chapter 4: The Initial Scout

- The protagonist arrives at the desert coordinates under the cover of night and establishes a hidden observation post.

- He spends two days casing the area from a distance, setting up interception gear that returns absolute silence and no thermal leaks from the underground site.
- Driven by the negative sensor results, he breaks cover and approaches the coordinates, discovering a massive steel blast door sitting half-open.
- He descends into the pitch-black interior, his light revealing a chaotic, amateurish smash-and-burn job with office furniture shattered by sledgehammers.
- He evaluates the fire damage and recognizes a sloppy, non-professional use of industrial thermite that only scorched superficial wiring harnesses instead of melting the server chassis.
- Moving through the wreckage, he notices that the server arrays are only superficially damaged and simply lacking power.
- The man bypasses the broken power-supply box entirely, splicing a direct DC line from his motorcycle's auxiliary power hub straight into the low-voltage internal distribution rails of the machine.
- The connection bridges the current, causing the dead hardware to surge back to life in the dark as his attached extraction device flags an active connection.

Chapter 5: The Cold Core

- As the system forces a low-level hardware boot into a secure chroot environment, the interface holds on a prompt noting the machine has been dark for 3,781 days.
- Impatient with the software's delays, the man hits enter to clear the configuration warning and passes his prompt to the self-contained search model.
- The device manually reads the raw sectors of the SSD, utilizing a semantic fuzzy search to scan for anything that could give insight into traffic, deliveries or exports.
- The scan successfully pulls up a fragmented, encrypted logistics manifest filled with high-dollar component serial numbers.
- While the core transaction details and ownership remain locked within the encrypted payload, the unencrypted manifest of the eBoL clearly outlines the routing destination; keystone.
- With a hard lead pointing north up the valley, he cuts the power connections, packs his gear, and prepares to further his investigation.

Chapter 6: Seeking Answers

- The protagonist rides north up the Interstate 25 corridor, tracking the Rio Grande basin toward Keystone.
- As he approaches, the city rises against the mountains as a jagged pyramid of natural stone, reflecting the socio-economic reality of those bound to it.
- The commercial and public transit zones line the I-25 corridor itself, heavily repurposed by the Logistics division to handle trade traffic and freight processing.

- Flanking this central highway vein are the worker districts, which are sprawling, overcrowded slums built from scavenged pre-consolidation scrap.
- Looming over the slums on the western terraces is the pristine, classical architecture of the old university completely walled off as the secure citadel for the corporate elite.
- He cuts his engine to a low hum, rolling off the main highway into the lower transit lanes to find a station to charge his bike.
- Leaving the machine to juice, he walks to the central trade corridor and enters the Customs House run by the Logistics division.
- He approaches a public terminal window and asks the clerk to cross-reference the set of registration serial numbers displayed on his tablet screen.
- The moment the clerk inputs the component IDs into the network registry, an automated high-level security flag triggers, instantly freezing the terminal screen.
- Two Enforcer guards quickly step out of the secure vestibule; before the protagonist can even speak to deliver an alibi, an Enforcer hits him with a butt-stock to the chin that takes him to his knees, spitting out blood while the other points his rifle at the protagonist; daring the man to move.
- The first Enforcer turns to the clerk, demanding to know if the outlander was attacking her or trying to breach the terminal.
- Terrified of the guard's aggression and wanting to defuse the situation before it escalates to a execution, the clerk quickly states that the man was just looking for standard salvage information and the terminal glitched.
- Satisfied with the worker's answer, the Enforcers radio back a false alarm to central command, insult the protagonist one last time by telling him they will be watching him, and walk away as the terminal screen finally clears.
- The protagonist recovers his tablet and leaves the Customs House.

Chapter 7: Neon Oasis

- The protagonist uses his fully charged battery to leave Keystone behind, riding the long miles back down the highway corridor to El Paso.
- He rolls into the heavily monitored downtown entertainment district, navigating past the checkpoints into the neon glare of the cartel-controlled cantinas.
- He tracks down his old squad-mate, the brother who climbed the ranks to become an El Pesado within Los Chingones.
- Sitting in the shadows away from the noise, the protagonist asks about their third brother.
- The Pesado confirms the grim reality, sharing that their brother is completely broken, drowning himself in a local cantina and doing odd jobs just to secure a roof and a bottle.
- The two men share a quiet, stoic moment of humility, reflecting on the heavy human tax the Outlands demanded from their original washout unit.
- The protagonist reveals his split chin and asks for a line on an off-grid terminal that can bypass corporate tripwires without alerting the central network.
- The Pesado explains that high-level data decryption is completely outside his own wheelhouse, but writes down a specific name and a physical address for a cell of Los

Iluminados hidden deeper in the district.

- Handing over the paper, the Pesado tells the protagonist flatly that he will meet him at the physical coordinates at noon the following day to personally vouch for him and make the introduction.
- Before leaving, the Pesado delivers a stark warning, describing the esoteric occult wing as a bunch of bizarre, fanatical fuckers who operate in a completely different reality.

Chapter 8: Of Light and Obsidian

- The protagonist rides his motorcycle up Oregon Street in the blistering midday heat.
- The library atrium looms like shimmering black obsidian, casting dazzling reflections of the sun.
- Faded stone brick facades line the empty downtown avenue with no sign of the Pesado outside.
- The protagonist walks to the glass doors of the atrium, tests the handle, and the door yields.
- He steps inside to find the Pesado standing near the main desk, speaking quietly in Spanish with a woman.
- The Pesado cuts his conversation short and acknowledges his old fireteam brother with a simple head nod.
- The Pesado flatly confirms that his personal voucher worked and Los Iluminados will grant an audience.
- Shifting to English, the woman at the central desk tells both men to take the stairs to the second floor.
- The protagonist and the Pesado walk up the concrete staircase to the second floor.
- They enter a bright sunroom where a man representing the faction's authority greets them in Spanish.
- The Pesado deliberately responds in English, prompting the Iluminados representative to smoothly transition his language.
- The representative asks in English what his faction can possibly do for a gringo who possesses such high-tier connections.
- The protagonist explains that he has an electronic Bill of Lading with an encrypted payload and needs the data decrypted.
- The Iluminados analyst thinks for a quiet moment before nodding, assuring the protagonist that they can decrypt the file.
- The representative adds a sharp caveat, stating that a service of this magnitude will not be granted without a cost.
- The protagonist asks flatly how much it will cost him to secure the data.
- The representative laughs at the transaction question, a sudden reaction that causes the stoic Pesado to visibly tighten and get nervous.
- The Iluminados representative explains that the cartel operates on a favor-for-a-favor basis rather than standard currency.

- He reveals that a local sector official has forgotten the rules of the cartel and requires a severe lesson in discipline.
- The protagonist's eyes narrow as he immediately defends his code, flatly assuring the analyst that he is not a murderer for hire.
- The analyst quickly corrects the assumption, stating that they do not want the official dead, as that would be too clean.
- He outlines a requirement for absolute public humiliation directly outside city hall in full view of the El Paso populace.
- The protagonist must deliver a devastating, open-handed strike that drops the official to his knees and then leave behind a physical sigil of Santa Muerte.
- Perplexed by the bizarre nature of the theatrical command, the protagonist clarifies if the cartel expects them to go slap a politician.
- The analyst's demeanor sharpens instantly as he corrects the plural phrasing, clarifying that the mandate applies strictly to the protagonist alone.
- The protagonist agrees to the terms of the trade, and the Iluminados analyst demands the encrypted document.
- Using his military-grade tactical earpiece, the protagonist broadcasts the electronic Bill of Lading data directly to the ruggedized tablet the analyst carries.
- The analyst holds the device and informs the protagonist that he can return to the cell alone to collect the decrypted payload once the public deed is done.
- The analyst beams a digital data packet directly to the protagonist's device containing the official's biometric face scan, profile, and schedule, before unpinning a heavy silver talisman directly from his own jacket to hand over.
- The protagonist and the Pesado walk out of the library together, stepping past the glass atrium back into the blistering El Paso sun.
- Before they part ways on the quiet street, the Pesado stops his old fireteam brother to confide in him with a low, tense voice.
- The Pesado warns him that what the occult wing is asking for carries far more structural weight and danger than the protagonist currently understands.
- He clarifies that when the protagonist intercepts the official, he will have to disable a personal guard detail to reach the target.
- The Pesado insists that the protagonist must not permanently injure or kill those guards, demanding that the tactical takedown be entirely smooth, non-lethal, and quick.
- The protagonist gives a quiet nod of acknowledgment to his friend before the two veterans part ways.

Chapter 9: A Warning of Red and Silver

- The protagonist walks back to his motorcycle into the blinding El Paso heat and instantly pulls up the transmitted data packet on his bike's display panel.

- He reviews the target official's biometric face scan and physical schedule, noting that the man is set to exit City Hall in only a few hours.
- The protagonist rides directly to the City Hall plaza, parking his motorcycle along the sloping side street just as the official's scheduled exit window opens.
- He does not hide, instead walking openly across the pavement to intercept the official as the target exits the austere, concrete building toward a waiting car.
- The guards observe the approaching foot traffic for intent, but the protagonist closes the distance before they can react to his sudden movement.
- He kicks the back of the knee of the first guard, causing him to stumble forward, and instantly delivers a punishing blow to the cerebellum to drop him.
- Moving with fluid military skill toward the second guard who is training his weapon, the protagonist redirects the muzzle to the side with one hand.
- He places his foot behind the second guard's legs and uses his momentum to smash the guard's face directly into the body of the waiting car.
- With the guard detail neutralized in seconds, the protagonist turns to address the official and calmly drops the physical silver sigil of Santa Muerte onto the pavement directly in front of the politician's feet.
- Spotting the skeletal talisman, the official collapses onto his knees and begins to wail hysterically, assuming his execution is imminent.
- In that precise liminal moment of peak terror, the protagonist delivers a devastating, echoing open-handed slap that cuts the official's weeping short and knocks him sideways.
- The official sits stunned in the dust, staring blankly up at the protagonist in absolute shock as his life is unexpectedly spared.
- The protagonist turns his back on the plaza to walk away, and only then does the politician fly into a flustered, impotent rage, shrieking at his men to detain the attacker.
- The guards look at each other first, sharing a silent acknowledgment of the highly visible talisman sitting on the ground, before helping their screaming boss back to his feet.
- The guards refuse to even look at the protagonist, actively choosing survival over interfering with a direct ritualistic decree from Los Iluminados.
- Leaving the hysterical politician yelling at the wind behind him, the protagonist walks calmly back to his motorcycle into the blinding heat.

Chapter 10: Iridescent Tears

- The protagonist returns to the library building as the sun drops, casting golden hues before the encroaching night.
- He walks inside and approaches the same woman behind the central desk.
- The woman informs him that the file has been decrypted and beams the data directly to his earpiece.
- He looks around for the Iluminado he met earlier, but the lobby is empty.
- The protagonist thanks the receptionist and heads back out to his motorcycle.
- Bringing up the decrypted file on his bike's display panel, he can see the transaction ID for the operative within Keystone who initiated the bill of lading.

- His close proximity to Fort Bliss allows him to secure a network connection to send a message to the journalist.
- He writes that he has found a manifest of items sent to the optimization facility and possesses the IDs of those who initiated the context.
- The protagonist attaches the decrypted electronic Bill of Lading to the message and sends it.
- The protagonist turns on his bike and returns to the neon-lit cantina district to wait out the asynchronous communication gap.
- His thoughts turn dark as he navigates the streets toward a brightly lit neon hotel facade, escaping the high midday glare for the dim interior.
- He pays the counter for a room for the night and a grid charge for his motorcycle before returning back out into the twilight.
- He remembers back to the squad's better days, navigating toward a local bar named *La Llorona* that the fireteam had originally chosen for its dark irony and undeniable truth.
- The protagonist enters the establishment and spots a crumpled figure sitting head-down on the bar top, wearing clothes that are three days past washing.
- He quietly pulls up a seat next to the man and orders a drink for himself, letting the silence hang over the sticky bar top.
- Noting the man's ragged state, the protagonist mutters that he looks rough, to which his jaded, sarcastic teammate responds that a guy can lose himself out here.
- The protagonist counters dryly that he knows you can always lose more even when you think you're at rock bottom.
- Hearing the familiar cadence, the crumpled figure slowly lifts his head from the bar top and turns to look at the man beside him.
- The realization of who is sitting next to him slowly dawns on the brother's face, his eyes hardening into a mix of bitter resentment and painful memories as the raw weight of their shared past slams back into focus.
- The teammate quickly turns away, the deep shame of his current condition making it impossible for him to maintain direct eye contact.
- He defensively challenges the protagonist, asking if he came to tell him to clean up his act or to stand up and be a man.
- Taking a slow drink, the protagonist tells his brother no, explaining that he has no room to judge or admonish him because the thought of ending his own life has crossed his mind more than once.
- He acknowledges that he considers himself a coward for never having the nerve to pull his own trigger, making any lecture on self-destruction entirely hypocritical.
- They sit in absolute silence as the protagonist finishes his drink and his teammate quietly chews through his own thoughts.
- Breaking the quiet, the teammate asks softly if they actually did something real back then, and the protagonist confirms that they did.
- The teammate tries to convince himself that it was worth it, whispering that everything they lost was worth it, leaving a long, heavy silence where the bitter untruth of that statement hangs unsaid.
- Changing the subject, the protagonist asks his brother if he has steady work, and the teammate reveals he survives by scavenging, a low-level job the Pesado helped him

secure.

- The protagonist places a few physical bills down on the sticky bar top and asks his teammate to reach out if he ever needs something.
- His features tightening with defensive pride, the teammate looks up at the protagonist and flatly refuses the offer.
- Accepting the boundary, the protagonist gives a quiet nod, places a brief, grounding hand on his teammate's arm, and exits the bar into the cool night air.

Chapter 11: Complicated Revelations

- The protagonist wakes in a sudden start, his hand instinctively grabbing his sidearm and pointing it at the door before he realizes where he is and places the weapon to the side.
- The persistent beeping in his ear is the incoming message notification from the journalist up in the DFW Mega City.
- He reviews the data and learns that the journalist successfully matched the Keystone ID to a DFW corporate profile, but uncovers the devastating twist that the transaction is exactly ten years old.
- The message informs him that the second half of his baseline contract payment is waiting for him inside Keystone's borders.
- The journalist states that his operational supplies and a local contact (the reporter's trusted Keystone stringer) will be ready for him at a bar named *The Three-Leaf Clover* located deep within the city's utilitarian Workers district.
- Noting that the pre-arranged meeting is slated for later that evening, the protagonist calmly gathers his gear and packs his sparse belongings.
- He rolls his motorcycle out of the El Paso hotel, clears the checkpoint, and readies himself for the long, dusty daytime drive up the crumbling corridors of the I-25 highway toward Socorro.

Chapter 12: Easy Money

- The protagonist rolls into the stark, utilitarian Workers district of Keystone as the evening shadows stretch across the industrial concrete.
- He navigates the cramped, heavily policed streets and parks his motorcycle outside the faded neon glare of *The Three-Leaf Clover*.
- Stepping into the seedy interior, he takes a table in the dim corners of the bar, scanning the room full of tattered laborers and logistics drivers.
- Before he can even settle into the seat, the journalist's local stringer approaches his table, moving with a sharp, calculated urgency to evade the city's internal surveillance cameras.
- Without sitting down, the paranoid informant slides a heavy black bag onto the table and mutters a curt, flat warning that they never met.
- The stringer instantly turns on his heel and skedaddles out the exit, vanishing into the crowded worker-class streets before any security loops can flag the interaction.

- Left alone in the dark booth, the protagonist pulls the black bag close and opens it to find his remaining contract payment and specialized operational supplies.
- At the bottom of the bag sits a physical paper printout left by the competent stringer, who took the liberty of proactively running the middle manager's profile before the drop.
- The printout reveals that the middle manager has been pushed out of the corporate matrix and is currently hiding inside an off-grid room within the outer slums tenements.
- The document outlines the target's visual profile and exact location coordinates.
- He experiences a brief wave of bemusement and unease at the sheer ease of the drop, entirely unaccustomed to having an exact target dropped cleanly into his lap.
- With the exact address printed on the page, the protagonist zips the black bag, leaves the bar, and boots up his motorcycle to ride straight toward the target's hideout.

Chapter 13: Nothing Left to Lose

- The protagonist rides deep into the outer slums tenements, the air thick with industrial haze as the night completely closes in over the shantytown.
- Abandoning any attempt to formulate a clean plan, he simply moves with the momentum of the tightening vortex, his instincts locked into immediate situational readiness.
- Following the printed coordinates, he navigates the cramped, maze-like corridors of a tattered concrete structure until he reaches the target's off-grid door.
- He tests the entrance, forcing entry past the threshold with his sidearm drawn, ready for an immediate tactical confrontation.
- The tattered concrete space smells of stale grease and cheap alcohol, illuminated only by the low, flickering green hum of a cracked, ancient terminal.
- The middle manager sits in the dark, hollowed out and weary, staring down the muzzle of the weapon while assuming that his long-expected executioner has finally arrived.
- The protagonist holds the manager at gunpoint and flatly asks if he is the specific individual listed on his paper printout, handing the document over to the target.
- The manager looks at the page and confirms that he is the man, stating with a grim, cynical peace that he has finally met the person sent to kill him.
- Shocked but not at ease, the manager watches with visible tension as the protagonist calmly holsters his sidearm and places the weapon to the side.
- The manager presumes that if the man didn't come to shoot him, he must have come to extract his story, noting that giving up the corporate secrets will kill him dead just as easily as a bullet.
- The protagonist confirms that he does want the manager's story, prompting the broken executive to pour himself a glass of cheap local vodka without offering any to his guest.
- Downing the drink to steady his nerves, the broken manager begins to recount the exact story of his own role in the historical cloning operation.
- He confesses how he originally managed the un-audited Shadow Ledger transactions for Keystone, routing a high-priority, illegal shipment deep into the Chihuahuan Desert coordinates.

- He reveals that he subsequently hired a non-professional mercenary crew to go out into the wastes and burn the entire facility at his patron's orders.
- The protagonist cuts in to inform the manager that the hired mercenaries did a shit job with the demolition, revealing that their sloppy burn is the exact reason the forensics survived and how the manager was ultimately tracked down.
- The manager laughs bitterly at the irony, processing how his own cheap greed had once more come back around to destroy his sanctuary.
- He explains his secondary layer of greed: how he secretly maintained a local offline archive of all his executive communications, usernames, and passwords, believing he could eventually leverage the database for a life-changing corporate payout.
- He further explains that when he tried to use that leverage and blackmail the father with his archive, the father's reprisal was swift.
- The manager goes silent as he looks down into his glass, noting that you'd think your own life would be the most precious thing you could lose, but it isn't.
- A heavy silence rests between the two men as the weight of the unspoken tragedy hangs in the room.
- Breaking the quiet, the manager mutters that the protagonist wants the archive and that it is the exact reason he is here right now.
- The protagonist confirms that he does want it, but states flatly that he doesn't have much to offer in exchange for the information.
- The manager laughs again at the transactional statement, seeing how everything he had ever planned has completely turned to ash in his mouth.
- He surrenders the IP address, username, and password for the remote storage node, which the protagonist accepts.
- The manager asks the protagonist if he thinks they will finally come for him now that the data has been passed.
- The protagonist responds stoically that eventually, they come for us all.
- The protagonist leaves the room, leaving the broken manager to the solitary fulfillment of his manifest destiny.

Chapter 14: Back in the Saddle

- The protagonist leaves the outer slum tenements behind, riding back down the long, dusty corridor of the I-25 highway to return to the El Paso area.
- Seeking a strong enough network signal to transmit the remote storage data, he parks his motorcycle along the familiar perimeter of the Fort Bliss federal backbone.
- He beams the manager's remote storage IP address, username, and password straight up to the investigative journalist in the Dallas/Ft. Worth Mega City.
- Believing his role in the transaction is completely finished, the protagonist liquidates the digital currency vouchers from both halves of his completed contract.
- With his bike nearly toast after hammering it across the harsh desert loops within the Rio Grande, he commissions a professional El Paso mechanic for a complete, ground-up mechanical overhaul.

- The extensive tear-down and rebuild grounds him in the city, stripping him of his mobility and forcing him into an unaccustomed pocket of downtime.
 - To decompress, he spends his afternoons sitting alone in a low-tier, anonymous transit diner, within the crowded social space, he spends hours ritualistically cleaning his military sidearm and between cleaning his gear, he passes the silent hours indulging in a solitary hobby, quietly doodling the natural beauty of the desert landscape that surrounds him onto the backs of paper receipts to connect with the man he was before the world broke him.
 - Two days later, while he is deep in this quiet decompression routine, a sudden, live synchronous transmission from the journalist signals into his earpiece as a complete shock.
 - Over the live channel, the frantic journalist explains that they used the remote node keys to run a digital audit on the legacy archive, extracting the un-redacted email address of the high-tier corporate contact who originally coordinated the salt mine's destruction.
 - The journalist reveals that a wide net on that legacy email address flagged a match on an exclusive, high-end real estate forum, where the contact used it to set up a viewing for a luxury flat in DFW's 'Highland Park'.
 - Exposing the typical cowardice of the city folk during the call, the journalist flatly refuses to get their hands dirty with physical corporate espionage or risk infiltration inside the heavily secured Mega City high-rise.
 - The journalist passes along the exact physical coordinates and demands the protagonist infiltrate the flat, but the protagonist flatly refuses over the channel, stating he has already been paid in full and has no obligation to cross back into corporate space.
 - To sweeten the pot, the journalist extends the contract and offers a massive, life-altering upfront sum in digital USD, treating the Outlander like a transactional tool to absorb the physical risk.
 - Recognizing that he now holds the leverage over his panicked patron, the protagonist accepts the massive cash deposit flashing on his screen but firmly dictates his own terms, telling the journalist flatly that he will get there when he gets there.
 - Collecting his completely rebuilt motorcycle and specialized operational supplies, the protagonist turns his back on the Rio Grande Valley with a slight but distinct upper hand.
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Remaining beats

- **Beat 11: The Rich District Breach & The True Target**
 - Using the hacker's digital access, the protagonist breaches a pristine, high-security flat in a wealthy district, expecting to corner the masterminds of the optimization facility.
 - Instead, he finds a terrified young woman in her early 20s living alone who genuinely has no idea what he is talking about.
 - The protagonist runs a pocket biometric scan; the DNA reader instantly confirms her genome is heavily optimized.
 - Through a tense interrogation, the horrific truth emerges: she is the daughter of a high-ranking C-suite executive at a rival corporation. A decade ago, her father had

cloned her from the tissue of his dead daughter, making her existence a capital crime.

- The Protagonist realizes the devastating big picture: the entire investigation, the journalist's exposé, the old ledger, and the hacked trail were never about a random desert lab. They were a weaponized corporate hit engineered by rivals to destroy her father by exposing his family's deepest secret.

- **Beat 12: The Ultimatum & The Ghost Protocol**

- Backed into a corner with the undeniable DNA proof, the protagonist presents the brutal reality: the corporate machine and its rival factions will never let a loose end this massive walk away. They will treat her as a completely disposable asset.
- Confronted with the truth, she undergoes a sharp, logical calculation rather than an emotional breakdown. She realizes her entire comfortable life in the high-rise is an artificial cage, and her handlers have likely already drafted her termination order to cover their tracks. Surviving means shedding her identity entirely.
- She accepts the protagonist's hard-boiled choice over facing the corporate purge. She agrees to "die" tonight, handing over her clearance tokens and stepping into the dark as a digital ghost to escape the city.

- **Beat 13: The Farewell Call & The Lockdown**

- Before leaving, the protagonist gives her one phone call to her father to let him know she is leaving and that she knows the truth.
- The father's paternal instinct overrides his corporate coldness; instead of accepting it, he instantly triggers a remote security lockdown to seal the luxury flat and trap them inside.
- Sensing the doors dropping, the hacker frantically reroutes signal traffic and overrides the local building grid, spoofing security protocols to force a secondary exit open just in time.

- **Beat 14: The 120Hz Exit**

- The moment the flat's lockdown protocol threatens to trap them, the protagonist rejects the main elevators. He bypasses the smart infrastructure entirely by forcing open a mechanical fire exit door, intentionally tripping a localized alarm but exploiting the mandatory physical escape route to stay ahead of the building's digital network.
- Moving with brisk military precision, they drop down the stairwell and spill out an unmonitored service exit directly into the alley where his heavy bike is parked. They mount up and slip away into traffic, leaving the rich district behind minutes before corporate security tactical forces even arrive on the floor.
- He contacts the hacker a final time, offering the remaining digital funds left in his ledger. The hacker accepts the payout, accessing the database to permanently alter her official Mega City registry status to deceased; wiping her corporate paperwork completely without needing a body.
- They accelerate through the outer gates and out into the raw, dark expanse of the Outlands, riding straight into the night. The steady, electrical 120Hz hum of the bike becomes the last remaining whisper of her former life.