

# Remi and the Tapper

By: Grant Graves

## I. Remi's Whore

Remi leaned against a public video communications booth and waited. His medium build wore his black turtleneck and designer khakis well. Featureless, black leather jacket scarcely hid his shoulder holstered Meirhausen-Steyr ten-millimeter pistol. Icy rain stung his shoulders and the top of his head. The smoke from his cigarette mixed with the steam of his breath when he exhaled. His hands retreated into his jacket pockets to keep warm.

He pulled a tattered poster from his pocket and looked it over one last time. She was beautiful, a Latino with seductive brown eyes, straight brown hair that flowed to the small of her back, and a body of fresh talent. The poster depicted her in an erotic pose. Luring eyes that made contact, regardless of angle. She wore a tight liquid latex suit that covered little against a background of some bizarre scene with esoteric religious tones; bleeding gothic crosses and darkened angelic skies.

Scrolled across the top in bold, caslon antique letters was the name Phyre. She was a whore, a high class, two-grand whore. She was the headline trickster at the Demon Den, a back alley bordello on the eastside of Sector seven. She was his mark. He was to kill her.

Remi had taken the contract at fifteen thousand, minus twenty percent for his agent. A lot he thought for a whore. She'd fucked the wrong guy this time. He thought his agent said something about a Yakuza informant, but he didn't bother with the specifics on this one, he owed ten grand to a neighborhood fence and rent was due.

She'd been in the Deoch'Gobha for about an hour. It was a classy version of an old-fashioned Irish pub. It hit its cultural niche; at least from a marketing perspective. Remi just thought it was a crock of commercialized shit.

He sat and reminisced over past jobs, and what had driven him to take this one. Remi was a hellsent, hired muscle. The street had added the term to its lexicon. HLSNT was the accepted proper spelling of the occupation, even on corporate contracts.

It took detective instincts, spec-ops style training, and an ability to get over what you see to survive as a HLSNT. Most of them were heartless thugs that'd kill a kid for a few hundred bucks, but not Remi. He was the epitome of professionalism, in his own mind.

He had had a fundamental moralistic outline of what he'd considered being a good guy or bad guy, and decided his jobs based on those principles. He thought of himself as a good guy, at least at one time. A time that seemed further away than eternity. Now this. He'd been reduced to tracking a woman, a whore, for a net of eight hundred credits after the agent, fence, and rent were paid.

He'd stared HLSNT work six years ago, at the age of nineteen. He'd worked a number of jobs,

gunrunner bodyguard, corporate soldier, and a Yakuza informant enforcer. It was the later that had reduced his status. Eight months ago, he'd let the Yak informant die in an ambush. The streets were unforgiving. Reputation was everything. The moment word gets out that a HLSNT messed up a job, contracts become scarce. Remi had been reduced to using an agent, and not a very good one, to get jobs. The past eight months had been like a bad detective novel.

His cell phone rang. "Cut and Run." It was his agent. "What's up?" he questioned. "Got you a new gig; sector eight." She walked out with her bodyguard. It was Ramirez, another HLSNT. He'd worked with the robust mulatto on the gunrunner job; gotten drunk with him a few times. If Ramirez recognized him, he wouldn't think it was a hit. His brain was as sluggish as his draw.

"I'll call you back," Remi replied in haste and started to hang up, already on his way across the street. "Guess I'll give it to Raymond," he heard his agent say. "Look, I've got her right here. It's the perfect opportunity," he protested. "Its corporate Remi, and its hot. Let her go," the reply.

The word corporate rang in his ear and beckoned to a bygone day. 'A bird in the hand...' he thought to himself. He bit the back of his lip. "Eighty-five thousand Remi," broke the silence. He looked at her one last time. "Fuck it," he said in disappointment, "I'll be at the office in ten minutes." He hung up.

He'd never killed anyone out of personal anguish, only those his employers ordered and the half a dozen faceless names on contracts over the past eight months. But if this corporate gig were his way back into the mainstream, he'd consider wasting his agent just for shits and giggles.

He watched Ramirez open the back door of the sedan for her, get in with her, and the driver pull away. He had had it all worked out. Two in the head for her, two for Ramirez while he fumbled for his gun, then a quick exit down the side alley to the back of the building where he'd parked his car. He lit a cigarette. Wadded the poster and tossed it beside a trashcan, then walked to his car down the route he'd chosen, all the while thinking of how lucky the whore was. She'd live another day, so would Ramirez.

## II. Remi's New Contract

He pulled into the parking lot that served the block of buildings, his ten-year-old sedan sputtering. He walked into the alley that led to his agents flat. It was featureless, save the commonality it shared with every other alley in the city, oily puddles, nasty dumpsters, nastier bums. The street gave the bland alley a name of its own, Dirty Deeds, a hot spot for nickel-dime shady dealings. The top of this alley's food chain was upstairs waiting for Remi.

"What's up?" Remi entered the office through an old wooden door with a rigid, blurred glass panel. His life was a bad detective novel he thought to himself.

He lit a cigarette and sat down in a busted vinyl chair, the end of a spring sticking the back of his leg. Smoke filled his eyes. He rubbed them hard with his thumb and index finger and looked up at his agent, a thin, middle-aged balding man, with crow-footed eyes, a thick moustache, and a smirk painted on so long ago that it proved he was more full of shit than he looked. 'A real bad detective novel' Remi thought.

"Got a hot contract for you Roy," his agent said with excitement, "with Prometheus Enterprises." "Wah," Remi pronounced his last name for him in French for the five-hundredth time staring passed his agent and a pile of coffee stained papers at an old wooden desk. On it sat an ancient alphanumeric computer. On the flat screen scrolled a sleazy, soft porn screensaver. Modern peripherals, Virtual interfaces, and hard encryption devices were stacked to the side in a jumble of wires that Remi considered a hacker's version of a Gigeresque nightmare. "Whatever," came the reply.

"OK," continued Remi, "who do they want dead and how did you get a corporate contract?" Remi imagined his agent moving up a link in the chain, then realized his faulty premise. From behind a plain white, mocha stained coffee mug came the reply, "Well." Remi knew his agent was fixing to spill a load of total bullshit. "It's an open contract." The mug came down the moustache and lip wet. The agent sucked his teeth. "What?" Remi jumped up his voice half anger and disgust. "It's an open contract," the reply. Remi relaxed disappointed and sighed in disbelief.

"Now Remi, before you go off half-cocked," the agent added quickly. Too late, Remi breathed heavily, teeth clenched. An open contract meant that the agent had gotten a message that was automatically sent to every other agent on every underground forum. The contract was first come, first serve, and every wino in the city with a gun would be running their asses off all night looking for the mark and shooting at anything that remotely resembled it.

"I had the whole fifteen seconds from corpse when you rang me. You could've made three grand and I could've paid off Limp," Remi interrupted before the agent could continue. "Look kid, you're the best I've got. I reserved this one especially for you," the agent defended. Remi knew it was pillow talk but had no choice. His bank account was dry and the fence would have him killed in three weeks if he didn't have a forty-percent payment.

"Who's the mark?" he gave in figuring it a lost cause to gripe to a deaf ear. "You know anything about tappers?" questioned the agent. "A little," Remi lied. "Well, that's the mark," the agent said wallowing in his seat adjusting himself. He continued, "A lab experiment at Prometheus Enterprises escaped early this morning. It was last seen feeding in this sector."

"Feeding?" Remi thought to himself. He left it at that, figuring an inquiry would give away his not knowing what the tapper was. "Fine," he replied and headed for the door. "Hey Roy," come the agent's voice. Remi paused, "go make me seventeen grand." Remi closed the door with no reply.

### III. Remi's Visit with VenomYawn

Remi went back to his car and opened his trunk. Before him lie the tools of his trade. Surveillance equipment, weapons, all manners of items a HLSNT would need for any given job, all neatly tucked away in their own cases and properly arranged. He chose a small, black briefcase, slammed the trunk, and got in his car.

He lit a cigarette and opened the case. In it a thin, black, rectangular box, a smooth deck with alphanumeric, membrane keys, and a couple of wiring harnesses.

Remi reflected for a moment on his relationship with his agent. He really hated him. He considered the man to be a street serpent, using less than professional venues to score contracts. Somehow he understood it though. It was the way of the streets. His agent was on the lower tier and had to do what he must to ensure contracts to his employees.

Still Remi hated him and knew the only reason he didn't waste him was because he needed him. He too was a street serpent, relying on a lower life form to pay the bills. In this city it was hard to tell who was the lower life forms, but Remi knew that he'd become one. His morals were out the window, now he killed for food. He wondered if he could ever regain his former status; killing based on moral issues rather than need. Had he lost his good guy righteousness forever? Had he too been swallowed by the abysmal taint of the street as so many more before him? Some primal intuition told him his answers lay in finding the tapper. That was what mattered now.

He took a long draw off the cigarette. It was time to find out what a tapper was. He connected the box and deck together through a standard Super-Hellfire Port. It was extremely obsolete, only capable of pulling one-point-two terabytes per second.

He inserted one of the wires into a jack interface on the black box, the other end just above his temple. He'd just recently gotten the DNI; a Direct Neural Interface used for processing Virtual simulated stimulation and graphical data without the use of trodes, installed on the underside of his cranium. It was the cheap, welfare version. It'd only cost three thousand credits, a bad investment once he'd used it.

It had a number of glitches; the major ones being the second rate audio that gave occasional feedback and overheating. Both could cause brain damage with prolonged exposure.

He jacked another line into the black box, and connected the other end to the car's cigarette lighter. He closed his eyes and flipped the toggle switch on the side of the black box.

A flash invaded his mind. Then reality was ripped away, shattered into a digital infinity. He tumbled in vertigo into a field of silicon idea. Binary dreams quickly took form. He was in the Core of the Virtual, the starting point of virtual reality.

His digital persona loaded, the façade of a near featureless man engulfed in anime-like flames, a bright

white magnitude, cross shaped, tattooed on his chest. The persona stirred with static and lag, bogging down by the cheap deck's processor.

He punched the deck with difficulty, loading a search program. Find "VenomYawn," the request. A Virtual IP address the reply. "Go to," he commanded. He shot through infinity, spiraling passed unknown domains. Advertisements sped through his mind, pornographic mnemonics, hints of shady Virtual deals, and Warez lists.

He arrived to his point; a black iron gate with ribbed vaulting surrounded by a flowing binary wall. Beyond the gate a lone sarcophagus sat by a barren oak tree. A broken stone path led to the sarcophagus.

Remi knocked on the gate, shattering its visuals into ripples of the same flowing binary code that decorated the wall. Each time his fist touched the gate, it shattered into the binary flow, quickly reforming.

The top burst of the tomb. Remi jumped with a start. The formless wraith of a demon shimmered toward the gate, all the while faces and indiscernible images flowing from its persona.

"Remi!" it shouted in a happy, playful tone. "How do you like my new digital persona? Got it on-line at a skin shop. Cost me one-twenty. " The gate opened.

"Looks good," Remi replied.

"You still using that cheap-ass deck?"

"Yeah, got to get some funds straight before I can get a new one. Just spent ten grand on a new sniper rifle and 1200X video camera, so I'm a little in debt right now," Remi replied. "Say VenomYawn," he continued, "What's the four-one-one on tappers?"

"You know, you're the third person to ask me that today," VenomYawn replied.

"Imagine that," Remi wasn't surprised.

"So, you going after it too, huh?"

"Yep, so what do you know about them?"

"Well, I know that thing is worth more than the eighty-five thousand Prometheus is offering for its skin," VenomYawn replied. "You know how they make the things?"

"I was hoping you did," Remi's reply.

"Check this out. Got it from a hacker buddy of mine today. It keeps me from having to go on a half-hour spill. He stole it from Prometheus' research info server."

A green, translucent screen, with a steel frame, faded in chest high beside the demon wraith. 'Loading video...' appeared on it. The video started. It was a promo clip from Prometheus' lab. It panned the lab, detailed clips of the process to creating a tapper. It was chilling. More so was the commentary.

"The technology of the tapper is a horrifying, twisted convergence of human bio-augmentation and bionics. Those who choose the process must give up more than part of their humanity; they must also give up their lives.

When a recipient of tapper technology chooses to undergo the procedure, he is killed; his heart stopped by an injection of a highly lethal chemical. The system is then flushed to cleanse it of the chemical and the body is stored in a cryostat chamber for three days so to prepare it for the procedure.

After this stage, the body of the recipient undergoes a complex surgery to convert him into a tapper. The left arm is removed at the elbow and fitted with a bionic arm.

The arm contains a retractable needle that allows the tapper access to his new sickening power source, the spinal fluid of his victims. The needle can be ejected at will by the tapper and inserted into his victim's spinal column. When the needle is inserted into a victim, a mechanism, also contained within the arm, sucks the fluid from the victim into a storage container located in the arm.

From the storage container, a line runs intertwined around the bone of the living portion of the left arm into the base of the tapper's spine where a bio-implant called the Methius Cube resides. The Methius Cube is a living host of bacteria that alters the composition of enzymes in the spinal fluid of the tappers, allowing continuous stimulation of the brain, through micro-electrical shock, as well as stimulation of the nervous system to keep the tapper from paralysis.

After the surgery, while the body thaws, it is fed chemicals engineered to alter the characteristics of the recipient's physical and genetic structure. Blood and spinal fluid are now fused in a demented marriage and course through the veins of the recipient in a dull pink color. The recipient is then reanimated.

The final result of this twisted procedure is a superhuman soldier supersensitive to stimuli with heightened senses and reactions including a slower aging process."

Every hideous word of the video's defiling commentary, capped with a methodical tone, sent a tingle down Remi's spine. "What the fuck?" he questioned.

"Their building an army of new age security guards to sell to the mega-corporations. Imagine it, a super soldier that doesn't require food or sleep, only the spinal fluid of corporate enemies. You mercs... your days are numbered when this thing hits mass market. Only problem is, they can't seem to control the damn things," VenomYawn replied.

"Geez," Remi paused for a moment, "So they call them tappers because they have to tap spinal fluid, huh?"

"That's what I thought too. Actually, the name comes from the motor on the pump that draws out the victim's spinal fluid. The piston in it is so small that they never quite got the timing right, so it knocks. Whenever they feed, you can hear a tapping sound."

"Hey, VenomYawn, thanks for the info," Remi turned. A cracked, cloth-lined, wooden collection plate appeared in front of Remi hovering waist high. "Right," Remi said and punched in his account number on his deck. Two ancient paper bills appeared in the plate each marked with a one hundred. "Always a pleasure Remi Roy," he pronounced Remi's last name correctly, "Always a pleasure."

## IV. Remi's Search

Remi flipped the switch on his deck and the Virtual went black. He opened his eyes. He heard a banging on his driver's side window and started for his gun. "Roy," when he heard his name mispronounced, he knew it was his agent, "what the hell are you doing out here?" his agent exclaimed. "Go make me some money!" Remi started his car and sputtered away, never acknowledging the agent.

The last rays of light faded as night brought out the street freaks. Remi parked his car on a side street and took to an alley. The icy rain had stopped leaving the calmness of a bitter, wet cold. Puddles had formed with slick edges of thin ice. Remi lit a cigarette.

"Remi Roy," come a deep, heavy urban voice from the darkness. A form took shape beneath the glow of a security light. It was Ramirez. "Figured you'd be out," Ramirez continued. "Yeah, couldn't pass up eighty-five g's," the reply, "What about you?"

Remi thought about how close Ramirez came to dying at his hand just two hours earlier and knew he was none the wiser. "No doubt. Dropped Phyre off at her flat, took the night off to see what was about." Remi nodded and took a draw off the cigarette. "Want to team up, fifty-fifty? We probably got a better chance that way," Ramirez asked, trying to hide the hint of hope in his voice. Remi caught it and was silent. "Come on, it'll be like old times," Ramirez insisted. "Sure," Remi finally said.

The two combed the neighborhood alleys for half the night without a trace. The occasional gunfire they hoped wasn't their dream being dashed. The two hundred credits Remi dropped on VenomYawn for the information brought his account down to one hundred. He needed this score badly.

They rounded a corner into another dimly lit alley. They hadn't seen but three other HLSNTs the whole night. Nobody had a clue that the tapper even existed. Remi was starting to think it a cruel joke. He even considered popping Ramirez then going after the whore, because he needed the money. Slipping away would've been too vicious. If he went and killed the whore, Ramirez wouldn't stand a chance in hell of ever getting another long-term contract. He'd be the laughing stock of the city and the streets would eat him alive within two weeks. It'd be much more merciful to waste him in one of the back alleys.

Then they found her, Sofia Angelwing. Her long, blond hair matted with blood, as she lay facedown motionless on the asphalt. Her thin frame bent into an odd posture that hinted that she was more than unconscious. "Holy shit!" Ramirez exclaimed with surprise, "you know who that is?" Remi nodded. She was a legend. Many urban bards spun tales of her deeds. Everyone knew about Sofia Angelwing.

Remi bent down over her lifeless body. He noticed a small hole in the back of her neck and knew what had put it there. The blood that trickled from the hole hadn't dried yet. They were close.

Remi checked her arm for a pulse. Her pale skin was still warm against the cold night air. He noticed a faint pink scar on her forearm. He'd heard she had her tendons jacked for quicker reflexes, removed and replaced by tight elasto-metal. There were so many rumors about her he didn't know what was real and hearsay.

He did know that she was the hottest HLSNT to ever exist. She'd never taken a long-term contract, only quick and bountiful ones, such as assassinations or one time escorts. In the twelve years she'd been a HLSNT, she'd killed more people than the plague and with very few injuries.

"You know," come Ramirez's voice from over Remi's shoulder, "she's a dagger." "A dyke, huh?" Remi excused it as another urban myth. "Yeah," Ramirez continued, "she comes down to the Den every now and again. Has Phyre trick her up good. Doesn't like physical contact though, wants it all virtual with simulated stimulus. Uses a program called Sapphic Dream. Touch ain't real, but the orgasm is. You know?"

"Not my thing," Remi replied. "Dykes or cybersex?" Ramirez questioned. "Either," Remi said flatly. "Hey," Ramirez continued to ramble while Remi tried to sort things out, "wonder why she's working so cheap? Hey, touch her right arm, I hear it's cybernetic." Remi ignored him, ready to move on. He stood up.

Then it came out of nowhere. Neither Remi nor Ramirez saw it coming. The punch hit Remi in the chest with the force of a freight train. He slid across the cold, wet asphalt. Ramirez went for his gun, but was too slow. The thing grabbed his arm, at the elbow, picking him up off the ground. A metal fist smashed into Ramirez's face, breaking his nose, and cutting his cheek deeply in three places. The punch sent him airborne, slamming into a brick wall five feet away. He slumped limply to the ground, conscious but fading. Remi stumbled to his feet, pulled his gun.

That was when Remi first saw it. The tapper stood nearly seven feet tall. It had a medium, but thin frame that in no way was indicative of its strength. A pale, almost white skin tone, with a hint of green hue. It wore a dark, emerald green body armor that only covered its otherwise naked chest and shoulders. Its pants were torn, black fatigues.

A thin, white face overlooked Ramirez's fading conscious body. It's chalk white tone smirked through thin, colorless lips. Hollow cheeks and short, white hair made it look like a diseased animal or some kind of derma-zombie drug addict.

It stooped over Ramirez, picked him up, holding him steady by his head, and turned his half-limp body away. A fifteen-gauge needle jutted a foot from the end of the cybernetic left arm. It reared the arm back, preparing to inject it into Ramirez's neck, just as it had done Sofia.

Remi fired a single shot from the Meirhausen-Steyr ten-millimeter. It hit the left arm. The second shot hit the creature in the face before it had time to react. Remi figured it would hit the ground. Instead it merely turned toward him showing no signs of pain.

Hydraulic fluid, from a busted hose on the left arm sprayed the creature, dripping from the wounded hand to quickly form a puddle. Its emerald armor half-blackened, the left side of its face the same through patchy white.

The right side of its face bled a slight stream of thin pink through shattered and torn muscle. The shot had hit the being squarely in the cheek. It started for Remi.

Backing away, Remi fired again. The shot hit it in the stomach; a slight stream of thin pink through shattered and torn muscle. Thin pink mixed with the hydraulic fluid to produce a bizarre hue under the neon of the night.

Still the creature persisted. Nothing seemed to faze it. Remi fired again, a spark flying off the armor. A wasted shot he thought, but as far as he knew, just as effective as the others had been.

'And what now?' he thought as the creature increasingly closed ground. He remembered that VenomYawn's video had told that the Methius Cube was responsible for keeping the creature animated, but he couldn't remember if it had told where it was located. So, where the hell was it? He only had four shots left.

He fired another shot into the creature's stomach in a reactionary attempt to keep it at bay. It didn't. He backed along the alley to keep some distance, but still the creature closed in rapidly.

Then he saw it. It's combat epiphany like divine intervention. On the back-section of the tapper's thin pink and blackened emerald armor was attached a thin, metal collar that started at the base of the shoulders, its zenith at the back of the neck. It was there for a reason, for protection.

Remi fired into its throat. Nothing. It came on. Another shot in the throat. Nothing. It came on still. 'Damn,' he thought to himself, 'its got to be in there somewhere'.

Last shot, still none the wiser to the cube's whereabouts, he very briefly hesitated on where to focus. If he were wrong, he'd fall victim to the spinal vampire before him. The creature was almost within arm's reach. It grabbed for him. Remi fired into the throat one last time. The tapper dropped like a ton of bricks, motionless.

Remi walked over to Ramirez. He lay next to the wall still stunned. "Let's go collect," he said helping Ramirez to his feet. "Damn thing messed me up," Ramirez coughed. Remi helped him to the car then loaded the tapper. Ramirez hadn't done anything to help apprehend the beast, but a deal was a deal. He knew if the roles were reversed, Ramirez would pay the fifty-fifty they'd agreed on earlier. Maybe there was hope for his morals yet.

## V. Remi's Payday

Remi phoned Prometheus Enterprises while en route. When he and Ramirez pulled up to the front of the lab, they were met by an entourage of security guards and Japanese suits. The suits were ecstatic that the tapper had been captured before it had had the chance to embarrass the company.

Remi and Ramirez gave them the account numbers to which the funds would be transferred. They signed the usual contract complete papers for the accounts payable department. "So, you're Remi Roy," one of them, corralled by other suits, said with a heavy Japanese accent, albeit still pronouncing Remi's name correctly. "That's right," Remi replied, looking up from a stack of papers held by a clipboard that he was signing in triplicate.

"Tough break on that ambush eight months ago," he continued. "Yeah," a look of dishonor covered Remi's face. He went back to the clipboard. "Good hunt though," he persisted. "Thanks," Remi replied, to ashamed to look up.

"So, do you only take short-term contracts?" the man asked. "Well, you know," Remi replied never taking his eyes off the papers at which now he just stared. Suddenly, they had become completely incomprehensible. "If you are interested," Remi looked up from the clipboard. "We'd like to offer you a top security adviser position with our firm," the man continued. "We want you to hunt tappers if they escape. It's much cheaper than upgrading our present security," the man reasoned. "We'll provide you with a full team of specially trained operatives." Remi looked at him, trying to see passed the man's seriousness, hoping it wasn't a cruel joke.

"Of course," the man quickly added, "you can chose your own operatives, if you like. How's three thousand credits a week sound?" It wasn't a joke. "You pay living expenses and broad, here on base," he pressed. It wasn't asking much more, and he hated to press his luck, but he knew it would look professional.

The man snapped his fingers. From the back appeared one of the suits with another clipboard. He offered it to Remi. They'd already had the contract ready, even his name on it.

"Give me a ride?" Ramirez asked when they'd finished. "Sure," Remi replied. He promised to return tomorrow to start overseeing the operation. They bowed, impressed at his devotion, and then filed back into the building.

"So, you want a job?" Remi asked Ramirez. "Got one," the reply. "This'll pay more. Definitely give you better reputation status," Remi reasoned. "On occasions," Ramirez added, "I get to fuck Phyre. It's a monthly bonus. You can't contend with that." "Well," Remi laughed at his understanding Ramirez's premise; "the offer stands."

They'd had barely made it out of the Prometheus compound, when Ramirez's cell phone rang. It was Phyre, the whore. Remi only got half of the conversation, but knew something bad was up. "What's going on?" Remi asked. "Some fucker broke into Phyre's flat; tried to kill her." "No shit," Remi sped up. "She OK?" he asked. "Yeah, a little shaken. She capped his ass. Got him corpse-mode in the floor." "Damn," Ramirez continued, "the one night I take off." "You out of a job?" Remi asked. "No. She's cool with it. She said she knew I couldn't be there every minute and that it was my first night off in two months," the reply.

Then it hit him. Remi smelled a rat, but he kept it to himself. They arrived at Phyre's flat, a nice third floor apartment in clean white brick building. They took the steps two at a time. Remi struggled to keep up with Ramirez.

Ramirez beat on the thick cherry door to her apartment, Remi still half the hall's length away, treading quickly down the Persian rug covered wood-paneled floor. "Phyre," Ramirez yelled, "Phyre open the door. Its me." He drew his gun. So did Remi. The door opened. There she stood, in a short, red satin lingerie. Ramirez and Remi filed in.

Raymond lay dead in the floor, two holes in his chest, one in his head. Remi suspicions were confirmed. The street serpent agent of his had fucked him on the fly. He'd sent Remi on the tapper job and gave the Phyre contract to Raymond.

A decent judgement call, as Raymond had only three months experience as a HLSNT, compared with Remi's six years. Still, Remi had signed the contract. It was his and he was angry. He stood there solemn.

Ramirez bent down over the body, the whore looking over his shoulder. Remi instinctively went inside his jacket for his gun. This was the opportunity of a lifetime. Just as he'd originally planned. Two in the whore's head two for Ramirez.

And that would be that, fifteen thousand. It was the way of the streets; a code that had survived ages. It was bigger than he was and bigger than Ramirez and the whore. 'A sacrifice,' he reasoned, 'to the Tao of the streets.' Maybe such would prevent it from someday devouring him as it did so many others. The streets don't usually give a second chance, but here one was. It would bless him again. In a moment, the sacrifice would be complete.

But it wasn't, and he didn't. He took his hand off the gun and out of his jacket. The streets had already given him a second chance. One better than this, a long-term contract.

He thought about killing his agent, but decided it a waste of time. Instead, he wouldn't give him the twenty-percent retainer for the tapper job. Besides, now he was down two HLSNTs and the streets would probably eventually take him. He figured if he told Ramirez and Phyre about the contract, it would speed the process up a bit. But he thought it better to the streets sort it out.

"Everything cool here?" Remi asked. "Yeah," Ramirez replied. Remi turned for the door. "Remi," Ramirez bade rising and turning. "Yeah," he turned, hand on the door. "Thanks for saving my ass out there tonight." "No problem," Remi smiled half-irony, half-satisfaction. He left.

Walking back down the stairs, on the way to his car, he phoned the fence, and wired him the ten grand he owed him. Then he wired the rent. Finally, he called his agent and told him to go fuck himself.

He paused on the last flight of stairs, reflecting on what Ramirez had told him upstairs. He smiled again. He wondered if he'd gotten it back. The professional edge. The morals that once he'd used to define himself as a good guy. He was confident he had. Still, only time

would tell. For now, the whore would live another day, and so would Ramirez.