

This novel is a work of fiction.

The resemblance of characters to any persons, living or dead, is absolutely purposeful and is so to continue to fill these pages with the completely honest reactions of otherwise perfectly normal people to an absolutely extreme situation. Granted, this is a sequel, so these characters are sort of starting to take on lives of their own. I mean, in the first book, they totally resembled the people they were supposed to resemble. Now that the story is rolling, we're getting farther away from that imaginary point of divergence from reality and, let's face it, things are quite a bit different.

Still, you all know who you are and you know these characters are supposed to resemble you in the physical sense. I may have had them make a few decisions you may not have made in real life but, then again, in real life we don't all live near each other anymore and we most certainly don't have any super powers (that I know of, anyway). Take solace in the fact that someday someone may generate some (sight unseen, remember) fan art of you or cosplay as you at Con and, should I see it, I'll be texting you a picture of it like immediately and squealing like a little girl.

So, here we are again, dear reader. I thank you for enjoying things to this point – enough to pick up the second book. This is dedicated to you because, without your support, I wouldn't have even bothered to continue.

This story is also dedicated to that one person I know.

On with the show.

The two men in filthy fatigues stepped onto the tarmac.

The black private jet had come to a smooth landing in the middle of a grass-covered field with one long runway. There were no support structures save a tiny rusting metal shack; no taxiing vehicles scurrying around, no baggage handlers, no terminal; just the field - open and expansive, bordered by trees – the tarmac, the plane whose engines were winding down with a whine, and a shed, old and structurally unsound.

Two men in full black riot gear exited the shed, saluting the debarking passengers. Their assault rifles were at quarter arms, though they recognized the arriving men. This was procedure and the agents in the soiled field uniforms knew it. They'd become accustomed to it. They'd faced worse today than two glorified security guards.

PH walked first, with a purpose, toward the door of the shack holding a thick metal briefcase. His expression was stern though his eyes were hidden behind reflective aviator-style sunglasses.

Johnny, trailing behind him, was nearly a full foot taller and wide enough at the shoulders that he would probably have to angle himself through the door of the metal shed. He wore an expression of discomfort, following the smaller one with a sort of anxiety. This seemed especially strange for a man covered head to toe in dried blood.

As they entered the shack, the tarmac and the now-inactive black jet sank into the ground with a loud mechanical whir. Within seconds, the top of the tail cleared ground level and a set of large doors, covered in the same grass as the field, closed along the length of the runway, rendering it completely invisible.

Inside the shed they quickly descended a set of metal stairs. Their boots, steel-toed and steel-heeled on the outside, clanked along as they moved.

At the bottom of the stairs was a set of metal elevator doors flanked by two more men in riot gear. The dirty ones approached the doors and waited. The guards didn't bother to look at their faces or remark on the pungent smell emanating from the pair. They held their breath and remained stoic. Although they were both relieved when the elevator doors opened and the disgusting duo left their immediate area, they were even happier when the doors were closed and the elevator soundlessly began its descent.

Inside the elevator, Johnny scratched at his bald head. He looked down at PH who was almost as dirty but not quite as blood-soaked. He imagined if he had even the normal-length black hair of his compatriot, he would be much dirtier.

"You mad?" Johnny asked in his deep southern accent.

"Are you serious?" PH replied without turning. "Twelve hours on a flight after what we just did. Twelve hours without so much as a word and you're asking me that five minutes before debriefing."

"Well?" he asked. "Are you?"

PH sighed.

"Johnny," he said, "I can't even begin to express my feelings on the matter. I don't really even know what they are yet. I'm still digesting everything that happened within the last twenty-four hours and I really need some time to decompress before I decide whether I'm mad at you, incredibly furious at you, or head-explodingly angry at you."

"Why?" Johnny asked, concerned.

PH sighed again and removed his sunglasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. He blinked briefly up at Johnny, showing his featureless solid white eyes for an instant before veiling them behind the tint again.

"You have to ask?" PH said, in response to Johnny's perplexed expression.

"Well," Johnny said, "yeah. I mean, we did it, right? Mission accomplished. Why be mad?"

"You realize you're covered in blood, right?" PH said. "You realize that all of that blood didn't come from the target, right? We had one job – a simple job, nothing we haven't done before – and you turned it into a slaughterhouse for no good reason."

"Those guys were shooting at us," Johnny justified. "They were openly attacking."

"You're bulletproof!" PH shouted. "What does it matter if they shoot at you? They couldn't even graze you let alone cause any sort of threat to your life."

"Mission parameters, PH," Johnny said. "Eliminate any potential threats."

"They weren't a threat," PH continued, his voice raised. "Sure, some of them might have been enemy combatants, but a lot of them were innocent civilians who were watching their friends and family get torn limb from limb by a seven-foot tall pale-skinned death machine and wanted to do something about it."

"They presented a threat to you," Johnny said. "To the package."

"I was fine," PH said. "The package was fine. We didn't even see any resistance until after the main objective was complete. If you would have stayed cool, we wouldn't be having this conversation right now."

"Guys with assault rifles were shooting at us," said Johnny. "Our orders were to engage any threats."

"Does 'engage' mean something different to you?" PH asked. "Because, to my mind, it is not defined as 'eviscerate with extreme prejudice'."

"I assume that's some kinda fancy vocabulary word for killing people," Johnny said, knowing that PH hated when he played the dumb southerner. "But, I did what I had to do."

PH pulled the regulation Project pistol from a holster on his side.

"You see this?" he said, holding it in the flat of his palm, "This is how we 'engage' the enemy. It's clean, it's quick, and it's just as effective as your method without leaving a trace behind. If there were a bunch of guys with gunshot wounds and no bullets lying around, that's a mystery that can be brushed off. If there's a pile of extruded guts and blood and limbs where a village used to be, that's a massacre and is bound to be investigated by both sides especially considering the proximity to a still-living major dictator. So, tell me again how killing everyone in sight in the most grotesque manner possible was 'what you had to do'?"

PH used air-quotes. Johnny hated when he did that.

"Does it really matter in the end?" Johnny asked. "The credo of our little gang is 'by any means necessary', ain't it?"

He used air-quotes back, slightly more exaggerated than PH.

"That was not necessary," Phalanx said. "Just because you've got ridiculous extra-normal physical attributes doesn't mean you have to use them all the time, every time. You didn't need to kill those people and you didn't need to use your powers to do it. We could have run out of there, two American soldiers and a body bag, dodging bullets, returning fire, maybe winging one or two of the bad guys. We could have made it look like we were just lucky and leave people wondering what the hell we just dragged out of that place."

"That's the hard way," Johnny said. "If there's an obstacle in your path, why waste time trying to hurdle it? Just destroy it. My way is the easy way. Not to mention the fun way."

He smiled at PH's disgusted expression. He knew it would make him uncomfortable.

"If you don't think I'm bringing this up in debriefing --" PH said, threatening.

"Go ahead," Johnny said. "You know, you used to take a lot more pleasure in your work."

PH sighed.

"Maybe I'm just not the same person I used to be, Johnny," PH said with a distinct loss of hope in his voice.

The elevator doors opened into poured concrete hallways. Traffic on the ground in front of the elevator were the words "LEVEL FOUR".

As they walked out of the elevator, anyone with their heads up stood aside, flat against the wall, to let them pass. Johnny wasn't sure if it was due to their rank or the fact that he was covered in blood and both of them smelled like death.

They stopped at a room marked "421 – Debriefing". PH pressed his thumb against a metal plate below the room number and, with a hiss and some mechanical whirring, the door to the room slid aside and open. It closed behind them as they entered.

A man in a black suit, his blonde hair faded and nearly all white, sat at the opposite end of the room with his hands folded. His pale blue eyes narrowed as the two men entered.

Both of them snapped to a salute.

"At ease," the man said. "Please be seated."

They approached and sat at a metal table across from their superior. When they were seated, he spoke.

"Report," he commanded.

“Insertion occurred without incident,” PH said. “We were able to enter the compound with the package undetected. The objective was completed without incident. We did experience some resistance during our egress.”

“What sort of resistance?” he asked.

“Enemy combatants opened fire once our presence was realized,” PH answered. “A stray guard not in line with the stated patrols or sweeps in the mission file spotted us and called an alert. Combatants in position opened fire with more quickly joining the fight. Agent Moorsblade made an off-mission response to the threat and it was eliminated. Additional support for the enemy combatants arose from the village population. Agent Moorsblade responded in kind to this threat as well.”

“Clarify,” he snapped. “The off-mission response?”

“He ripped them apart, sir,” said PH. “Quite literally.”

The man in the black suit switched his gaze from PH to Johnny.

“This explains your current appearance, Agent Moorsblade?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” said Johnny, averting his eyes.

The man in the suit put a hand over his mouth in contemplation. The silence was an insurmountable void. Johnny felt an unfamiliar burning deep in his stomach while his skin went cold.

“Did you leave any witnesses?”

“No, sir,” said Johnny, “not that I could account for.”

The suit’s gaze never broke. His eyes were locked on Johnny’s – unblinking, as though he were looking directly into his brain.

“This situation is acceptable,” he said, after another unfathomable gap.

“Agent Williams,” shouted PH. “You can’t be serious.”

PH was half-standing in protest. Williams turned his narrowed eyes toward him and PH froze, slowly sitting back down.

“In the interest of full disclosure,” Williams said, “you should have left a defined witness.”

Johnny watched PH’s jaw drop as their superior, the director of their super-secret black ops program, said out loud that he wished someone had seen an insanely powerful flying super soldier literally ripping people in half.

“Sir,” PH said, trying to protest.

“A witness tells a story,” Williams said. “Stories like this can become battlefield legends. It would generate fear among the enemy making them doubt even the safety of their own home. Let us hope that this was seen and will be passed on.”

“Sir,” PH said again, “he killed women and children. Non-combatant civilians. Practically every living thing in the village.”

“The mission was accomplished,” said Williams, his normally emotionless voice showing the slightest tinge of irritation. “Was it not, Agent Phalanx?”

“Yes sir,” Phalanx said, continuing his protestation, “but at what cost?”

“Cost is irrelevant,” said Williams. “The mission is always of the utmost importance. We can now decide how this conflict plays out. Thanks to your efforts, we are in full control of our enemy’s forces.”

“Then we can end this war,” Phalanx said, defiantly. “Right now.”

Williams stood and leaned over the table.

“This war will end when I say it ends,” Williams said, his voice calm but dripping with anger. “It will end when it is no longer to the benefit of this Project and the nation which it serves.”

“Then the cost is not irrelevant,” Phalanx said, standing up as well. “We’ve been out there, in the field, putting all of your pieces in place. You’ve been feeding us line after line about how we’re making the world a better place. Making sure that the Project has most of the negative elements of this world under its control or observation. Do you know how much blood – innocent blood – is on our hands as a result of that quest? How many people who had nothing at all to do with this fringe faction or that major crime syndicate or some other terrorist organization were eliminated to keep our greater cause a secret?”

“I thought I understood. I really did. I thought what we were doing was right. I knew killing was part of the job and I’ve certainly done my share but the brutality of today and the amount of dead for what was no real reason... to see that go without reprimand makes me wonder about the direction of this Project.”

“Agent Moorsblade,” said Williams, causing Johnny to jump in his seat a bit, “are you able to justify the casualties you caused during this mission?”

“Uh,” stalled Johnny, unprepared to answer on the spot, “They were shooting at us, sir. We were told to engage any potential threats. Once they opened fire, I...”

“He’s invincible, sir,” argued Phalanx in a plain tone, “and I have the ability to duplicate myself with any number of copies in this very base for backup. The asset was already in place. The problems developed during extraction of the original – dead, mind you – in a body bag. We had the ability to make it to the drop site relatively unharmed without slaughtering an entire village. Most of the people firing at us were unskilled enemy combatants who couldn’t keep up with recoil of their guns let alone get a clean shot away. If you’re going to say what he did was right or even vaguely necessary, you’re wrong and you’re just as much of a psychotic as he is.”

They stared each other down. Johnny was confused. His best friend and partner – a guy with whom he’d traded saved lives for the better part of a decade - had just called him crazy and was currently directly butting heads with the only person, aside from his father, that had ever legitimately intimidated him.

“I am not appreciative of your tone, Agent Phalanx,” said Williams. “What was done was done and, as was stated previously, the mission was accomplished. The lives of a few native villagers – be they women, children, civilian or soldier – are inconsequential to what we are doing here.”

“And what is that, exactly?” Phalanx asked. “Last time I checked, we were supposed to be the good guys.”

“What has given you the impression that we are not?” Williams asked. “We are engineering world peace. We placed the influence to destroy the Berlin Wall. We are currently engineering a coup in the Soviet Union. We are bringing about the fall of communism and we are reigning in dictators, Agent Phalanx. We are ending all wars, both cold and active.”

“Blow that sunshine up someone else’s ass, sir,” said Phalanx, causing Johnny’s heart to skip a beat. “You’re angling for world domination and you know it. Not only that, but you’re using me to do it. How many impostors now? How many of me out there with severe cosmetic surgery and mental conditioning? How many waiting for your word to do something horrible and bring you the reigns of the world? How long until you make Johnny into your personal killing machine?”

Johnny hated to hear his name mentioned in the argument. It brought him right back to his childhood, as if he were spying on fighting parents from around a corner.

Williams sat down. Phalanx followed.

“It is rather disappointing that the only psychic we currently have available is a still inexperienced teenager,” Williams said. “Otherwise, I would offer you an opportunity to change your point of view on the subject.”

“You think you can shut me up that easily?” Phalanx asked. “You know that psychic crap doesn’t work on me.”

“Indeed it does not,” said Williams, sighing, “then we must find another way to resolve this problem. Agent Moorsblade?”

“Uh, yessir?” Johnny asked, still in a daze.

“Please eliminate Agent Phalanx,” Williams asked plainly.

“Sir?” Johnny asked, shocked.

“For the record,” Williams said, “I am pleased with your ruthlessness. It shows a great deal of flexibility and will allow this Project to proceed further than I initially imagined. Now, please exercise your sadistic tendencies and end Agent Phalanx in whatever way pleases you the most.”

“Oh, come on,” said Phalanx with a dismissive sigh, “you’re not going to kill your top spy.”

“You said it yourself,” said Williams. “We have any number of copies available as back up.”

“But, I’m the Prime,” Phalanx argued. “What happens to all of your precious assets in the field if I get killed?”

“The science team has run the numbers,” Williams said. “There is a twenty-five-percent chance that, if we kill the Prime Phalanx, all others will cease to exist instantly.”

“Then, you definitely can’t kill me,” Phalanx said. “You’d never take the risk that all of your dominoes would fall down.”

“What makes you think that you are the Prime?” Williams said, cold smile appearing on his face. “Do you honestly believe I would be putting assets based on you in place if there were any risk it could fall apart when you died in the field?”

Phalanx took a step back.

“Wait a minute,” he stammered, “I AM the Prime. You told me so. My tests told me so.”

"You are my best spy, Agent Phalanx," Williams said, a mocking note added to his usual monotone. "Please tell me that you are familiar with the concept of lying."

"I'm the real me," Phalanx said. "There's only one me and that's me. All the others are just copies."

"And all of the copies are identical," said Williams, "with free-thinking and independently operating minds. We have tried to mentally condition some of them but, unfortunately, not all of you are able to be... broken. We have disposed of those, like yourself, who are unable to comply. Your mental endurance is staggering.

"It is proven that you and most of your replicates cannot be controlled by any means. Yes, you were the field Phalanx but you were never the Prime. Your experience proves invaluable to your duplicates as we know that, when you merge and split, memories are transferred. Yours, prior to these last few crucial missions, are shared within your collective.

"You, however – this iteration standing before me – must be eliminated."

"So, I'm disposable," Phalanx said. "You'd throw me out just like that."

"I have done it before," Williams said, "I will not hesitate to do it again. The Project can ill-afford a conscientious objector at this point."

The two stared each other down again. Johnny's eyes darted from one to the other, trying to understand what was happening. He knew there were others but he had only ever known one Phalanx – this one, his partner.

"I guess I can't run," said Phalanx. "You'd find me."

"It is likely," said Williams. "And you would never make it out of this facility alive. As one last service, in honor of all that you've accomplished to this point, I am giving you the option of being removed from duty right here, right now, at the hands of your partner. Make it easy on yourself and on everyone else."

"I'll live on, you know," said Phalanx, accepting his fate. "You can kill me here but if all of them are me, there will be more of me to come. We won't see things your way, Williams. We won't agree with your plans. We won't let you control the world and we won't stand for being your throw-away soldiers."

Williams smirked.

"I have been expecting this dissension for some time now and I believe we will need to shelve the Phalanx Initiative due to the potential for disruption. A few will remain in service as your overall tutelage cannot go completely untapped. The rest will be psychologically evaluated before being either destroyed or returned to the Prime Phalanx. This portion of the Project was designed with secondary protocols in the event of a personality breakdown. Your deep cover copies will remain in place until their time comes. They will remain obedient as they are all of direct Prime descent – untainted by previous personal experiences. You, in general, will continue to live on and serve our greater purpose."

"Why bother with the monologue?" Phalanx asked. "I'm a dead man, aren't I?"

"Merely offering some solace to a sick dog before taking them out behind the proverbial woodshed," said Williams. "Good bye, Phalanx 42081. Agent Moorsblade, proceed when you are ready and meet me in my office when your task is complete."

Williams exited the room through a hidden back door.

The silence rose again like a thick fog. Johnny felt his heart thundering in his chest as he rose to his feet.

Phalanx slumped into his chair and sighed.

"Just do it, Johnny," he said. "End it. I'm only asking that you make it quick. One shot, through my head. You should be able to manage that quite well at point blank range."

Johnny reached for his holster and drew the Project-issue pistol. His hands shook only briefly as his memories of everything he and Phalanx had been through flashed through his head.

His hand steadied as he approached. He tried to think of the greater good – to think of the better place the world would be once everything Williams ever alluded to was in position. He believed in Williams' cause. He believed in the Project. If PH were allowed to spread his attitude, his dissention, his paranoia and his anger to the rest of his duplicates, the Project would likely be destroyed. With all the technology they possessed in this base, they would not be able to survive an army of him.

He felt the hatred rising up in him suddenly; the personal betrayal. Phalanx's emotions had been building over these last few months and, though Johnny tried to calm him down, he persisted. It was Phalanx's fault and he hated him for it. Johnny had not entered this meeting wanting to kill his best friend but his anger was now driving him to do it.

He raised the gun, centered on the back of his partner's head.
"G'bye, PH," he said.
"Bye, Johnny," said Phalanx, sighing.

Bang.

He sat up with a start, covered in cold sweat.

His hands were cold and his breath was hot. He wiped at his bald head and it felt like he had just stepped out of the shower.

The room was dimly lit by the red glow of a transparent plexiglass clock on the side of his bed. Glancing at it told him that it was four-thirty in the morning.

He grabbed the clock from its cradle and tapped at it. The face changed into an elaborate remote control. He tapped an icon on the remote and the large mirror making up the wall at the foot of his bed lit up displaying a cable news channel. It added sounds other than his own heavy breathing to the room and almost made him comfortable.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and exhaled slowly. His heart rate was elevated and he could feel adrenaline coursing through him in a more unsettling way than usual.

"Bad dream?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, rubbing his eyes with his palms, "fourth time this week."

"That's too bad," she said.

"Worst few nights of my life," he continued. "Ain't never had nightmares that I can remember."

"What happened?" she asked.

"Don't know," he said. "Feels like something that happened a long time ago. A memory. Wasn't ever good at recalling my dreams. Sometimes I reckon I don't dream at all. Now, I'm waking up in the wee hours, shaking like a leaf."

"Whatever it was," she said, "it must have been pretty scary."

"I don't get scared," he said, debating. "What do I have to be afraid of?"

"I could think of a few things, Johnny," she said.

He opened his eyes, realizing suddenly that he was talking with someone, out loud, at four-thirty in the morning, in his otherwise empty bedroom.

Jess stood at the foot of his bed, smiling at him.

Without a thought, he shot forward in a blur, grabbed her neck and slammed her into the mirror-wall. The monitor showing news flickered with the impact but kept playing. He didn't hit the glass hard enough to crack it and he didn't squeeze on her neck enough to snap it. He barely gripped her though he had her hoisted above the ground; pinned against the wall with one hand holding her at his seven-foot tall eye level.

"How the hell did you get in here?" he growled through clenched teeth.

"Now, Johnny," she said. "I thought we were friends."

There was a burning deep in the pit of his stomach. He had never felt anything like it before.

"What did you do to me?" he growled.

"You mean deep down in your guts?" she asked. "That's called fear. I know you're invulnerable. I know you can't be hurt or killed. I know you normally have no remorse. You ain't got a yellow bone in your body, as you would say. Well, this is what all those people who have been on my end of these crushing hands have felt in the past. Fear – pure, raw, and unnerving."

"You're manipulating my emotions?" he asked.

"Sorry, sweetheart," she answered, the smile not fading from her face. "Not in my repertoire. Must have been that big bad boogeyman you were dreaming about."

He held her in place with his left hand and drew back his right, making a fist.

"Lesson one they teach us about psychics," he said, "No more psychic means no more effects."

She rolled her eyes.

"John," she said, "just stop. I know you won't do it. I know you don't want to—"

Her words were cut off with a loud slam, a grunt, and a gurgle. His fist was through her stomach and into the wall behind her. The glass was spider-webbed around his fist, but not broken. His eyes grew brighter as hers grew dim and he smiled from ear to ear as he pulled his fist back. The slick warmth of her blood ran over his hand and emptied onto the floor.

He smiled as her body went limp. He let go of her neck and laughed as she slid to the concrete, her eyes open and vacant. He looked down at his hand, but saw no blood. His smile disappeared as he looked back to the wall and saw no body, no gore, just the spider-webbed wall and the twitching image of the news channel.

"That," she said, causing him to turn and look across the room, "was completely uncalled for. I didn't do anything so horrible to you, did I?"

She stood near the door; no evidence of a gaping fist-sized hole in her abdomen, her clothing clean and undisturbed, lips pursed in disappointment.

"How ain't you dead?" he grumbled.

She pursed her lips.

"Did you really think you could get rid of me so easily?" she said. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised. I've seen inside your head, I know you don't usually think much before you act. You have people to do that for you. Good thing, considering you're an invulnerable, super-fast, super-strong, impulsive psychotic."

"Come on over here, sugar," he said, his teeth clenched in a grin. "I'll show you psychotic."

"Not much incentive for me to come over there," she responded, smirking. "And, that accent of yours is atrocious. Can't you speak in some sort of normal 'yankee' dialect like you did by the lake?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked. "What lake?"

"Lake Eufaula," she said, "don't you remember? Or, did she take that out of your head?"

"Nobody took nothing outta my head," he said. "They woulda told me."

"Then I've got news for you, tough guy," she said. "They lied."

Johnny thought back. The only thing he couldn't account for were the few hours he'd been knocked out during the fight between the two groups about a week ago. That smoke kid, the fatty with the flames coming out of his head, had done something to choke him out. He woke up later in the base infirmary.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, trying to think it all through.

"There was more than just that," Jess said. "I've been here. I've been watching. I know what your little girlfriend Joey has been doing to you."

"She ain't my girlfriend," he said. "Not no more, anyway. What was she doin' in my head?"

"Looking to see what I could have stolen," Jess said. "See, while you only remember getting choked out by smoke, I jumped up and got inside your head. Your – ahem – former girlfriend tried to get into my head at the same time. Something something psychic feedback something something, here I am. I don't remember all the exact terms."

"You ain't real," he said, pointing his finger at her. "You ain't real and this ain't real. This is just another bad dream."

"Right on one count, at least," Jess said. "I'm not real. I'm just an echo."

"And you're here," he continued, "because Joey did something wrong?"

"I'm here because Joey didn't know what she doing," Jess said. "From what I can gather, she was attempting to save you from whatever I was trying to do."

"So," he said, slowly, confused, "what were you trying to do then?"

"Raid your mind for information," Jess said, plainly, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "You guys and your Project really scare the crap out of us. Apparently, rightfully so. You were waiting for us that day. You wanted to take us away."

"That wasn't," he began, paused, then shook his head, "Wait a minute. I ain't giving up any information to you."

"Don't you get it, Johnny?" she asked. "You already did. You gave me everything, whether you wanted to or not. Your field report on our team didn't indicate that I would be an immediate threat because, for one, I would probably never engage you directly and, for two, Joey was there with her whole psychic blocking thing. I was a minimal risk."

"I'm pulling all this stuff from your memories, by the way, so whether you're actually paying attention to something other than the words 'kill' or 'eliminate' or 'destroy' in your briefings or just picking it all up peripherally, you should know what I'm talking about."

"If you got everything you needed," he asked, "why are you still here?"

She shrugged.

"I guess I'm just that stain you can never get out," she said, "no matter how many times she tries to wash you clean."

He sighed.

"So you're going to haunt me, then?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I have no idea how long this is going to last. All I know is that I'm here. From this point, we share senses. I don't know anything more than you can see or hear or think."

He put his face into his hands and sighed before suddenly perking up and turning slowly to look at her.

"Y'know," he said, "it seems like I'm taking this pretty well, all things considered. Just then I was suddenly and calmly resigned to this fate."

"Good," she said. "I'm glad we can try to work together going forward."

"Yeah, but see," he started, standing, "I know me and I don't typically take kindly to people invading my personal space."

"Well," she said, "you did shove your fist through my stomach before, so, point proven."

"What did you do to me?" he asked, slowly moving toward her. "What are you doing to me?"

"We're just talking, Johnny," she said. "Relax."

He tried to think of a clever retort but his rage already had a right cross flying at the side of her head at a speed and intensity that he typically reserved for punching through bunker walls.

In a blink, her left hand was raised. She caught his fist and stopped it in mid-swing. Jess moved nose-to-nose with him and looked deeply into his eyes as if she were looking through him. She placed the tip of her right finger near the center of his chest and whispered:

"Fear."

Her finger tapped him and he flew backwards at a speed he had never felt before. Multiple walls exploded as he crashed through them. He wasn't able to stop himself. He could feel the heat rising in his stomach again. He cried out, hoping for some sort of help.

He sat up with a start, covered in cold sweat.

He grabbed for the alarm clock, waking it up into the remote, and activated all the lights in his apartment. His Spartan loft-style quarters were empty. The giant mirror across from his bed was whole. There were no Moorsblade-sized holes in his wall which meant that there were likely none in the next few rooms.

He caught his breath and stood up. He walked to his bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror before throwing water on his face and wiping himself off with a dark red towel. He bent over the sink and spoke quietly to himself.

"Get your head straight, Agent," he whispered.

"So, here's the deal," Jess said.

He jumped and turned. She stood the doorway of the bathroom, smiling at him. He thought twice before immediately striking out at her.

"I know what I'm doing here as much as you do," she continued. "All I know is that I don't really want to go away. I am, apparently, very good at hiding from your ex-girlfriend or she would have eliminated me by now. If you tell her that I'm here, you're going to be classified Section Eight and you'll be removed from active duty."

"She wouldn't do that," he said, looking back to the mirror.

"I know what you know, Johnny," she said. "I'm picking out the details. I can tell you're pretty much out of favors from her. Call it a woman's intuition. If you talk about me, she's going to tell Williams and he's going to see you as a security risk. They'll lock you up until they can figure out what's wrong with you."

"They won't lock me up," he said. "They can't. I'm lead agent."

"The only thing they can't do," she said, "is to have a lead agent who isn't just psychotic and sadistic but suddenly schizophrenic as well."

"I told you," he grumbled, "I ain't psychotic."

"Sweetheart," Jess cooed, making a face, "you can't fool me. Outside of your head, I was a psych major. I know what I see when I see it. Apparently, everyone is ok with your level of crazy. Tell them about me, though, and that's adding a whole new layer to the cake."

"Great," he said, "so you're just going to hang around in the corner of my eye for the rest of my life?"

"No idea," she shrugged. "But, I can offer you a different perspective. Maybe even help you out."

"Like in them old cartoons," he said. "Angel on my right shoulder while I'm the devil on my left. Can't you just go away? Please?"

"I can disappear if you like," Jess said, fading away, "but then I'm just going to be a voice inside your head. Would you rather have that?"

"I meant go away, like, actually go away," he said. "Leave and don't come back, that sorta thing."

"I think you're stuck with me," she said, reappearing in the doorway. "I'm not the suicidal type and willing away my consciousness falls into that category."

"Then I guess I'm just gonna have to try to kill you again," he said. He quickly swung his fist for her face and fell down into his living room area.

She rolled her eyes.

"I was only playing injured before to freak you out," she said. "You can't really hurt me and I'd appreciate it if you stopped trying. You're only going to cause property damage and you know how well that goes over with the boss."

He growled from the floor, leapt up, and swung for her head again.

She sat up with a start, covered in cold sweat.

Her breathing was heavy. Her heart thundered in her chest. She scanned the room, her surroundings unfamiliar – dark, dimly lit. She tried to move and found that she was strapped down. She felt a sharp tug in her right arm and found an IV connected to it. She was dressed in a pink robe, one of her own, and covered in monitor leads.

"Welcome back," said a familiar voice.

Phalanx sat at her bedside. Smiling, he calmly closed the book he was reading, exposing more light from the small lamp on the table next to him.

"Where am I?" she asked, struggling against the restraints.

"You're safe, don't worry," he said, standing up and moving to where the leather restraints held her to what she now realized was a hospital bed, "You're home."

She looked around again and recognized the cave walls. It was the same place that the concussed Zoey made her recovery – the room they jokingly called the Medical Cave.

He unbuckled the cuff binding her left hand.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Coma," he said, "psychically induced. Probably Joey's doing. You started to struggle and we didn't want you popping out your IV, so we had to tie you down. Sorry."

"How long?" she asked, stammering.

"About a week," he said, moving on to the ankle straps. "What do you remember?"

She paused. Her eyes went wide and she sat in contemplation for a moment. Phalanx, at the end of her bed, stopped what he was doing, waiting for what seemed like an hour for her answer.

"Phalanx 42081," she said. "That was you."

He closed his eyes and sighed.

"They were exploiting you the whole time," she said. "Johnny... Agent Moorsblade... he killed you in cold blood."

"An entire head full of Project secrets," Phalanx said, looking down, "and that's the first thing that comes to your mind."

"How is that you?" she asked. "How did you survive?"

He sighed again and continued working on her leg restraints.

"After I was killed for being a more reasonable human being than my commanding officer and my partner," he said, "I woke up in Kiev, Ukraine. I was sleeping next to a woman. There was a crib in the room. I had all these memories – a life, a family, a little shop downstairs from our apartment... a mission.

"Somehow, my consciousness travelled into another one of my incarnations. The Russians were going to stage a coup and 'overthrow communism'. This version of me was in Kiev to monitor the moves of the Russian mafia and the KGB in the region. He'd been there all through the Cold War as a spy. He'd carved out a life with his cover, become ingrained in the community, knew a lot of people, lead a generally good life. He was just waiting around, feeding intel once a week, only received active orders to shift his focus, never got tapped for wetwork.

"All of a sudden, I'm in his head. He gets up, walks into the bathroom, and looks at himself in the mirror. I split from him, looking like me. He kept all his plastic surgery and I was a fresh duplicate again, looking like I do now – like I always did before. He gave me his copy of the suit issued to us by the Project, one engineered to duplicate when I used my powers, and I skipped out. We didn't talk to each other because we both just knew what we needed to do.

"He stayed in Kiev with his wife, but I know his life changed after that. I have to live with the thought of leaving a wife and child and a life that I never really had but shared for one brief moment. He would have to live in fear that the Project would come for him when he outlived his usefulness.

"I don't know how my consciousness ended up in the head of another one of my copies, but I am Phalanx 42081. I am the field agent that Johnny executed. I want to help you and the others do good so that I can make up for my contribution to Williams' grand design. I want to make the Project pay for ruining the real happiness that spy in Kiev and all my other selves have made for themselves in the world.

"And that, my dear Jessica, is my back story. Hopefully the Kiev part clears up the stuff that Johnny didn't know. And, I'd prefer it if you remain mum on the details to the others."

Her jaw was agape. He had just finished up the last of the cuffs and was working on removing her IV as she let this all sink in.

A thought suddenly rose to the surface of her mind.

"Char!" she shouted.

Phalanx shushed her.

"I know," he said. "I've known from the beginning. You can't tell him, it will destroy him. Your memory is bringing up all the fun things first, isn't it? Look, I promise I'll explain everything but right now you have to get up and come with me."

"But," she started, pausing briefly, "I have so many other questions."

"And, I'll answer them all," he said. "I promise. What you did was exceedingly brave and you deserve whatever context you require. Anything I can clarify, I will. For right now, get dressed. Everyone will be excited to see that you're awake."