

TRADE WAR

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Rough Excerpt - Chapter 1
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The blast knocked Rob onto the concrete floor. He felt the guard fall with him. The ringing in Rob's hood-covered head was nothing compared with the need to escape. His manacled hands found the guard's head. As the other man tried to get off the floor, Rob jumped up and headbutted as hard as he could. The guard's nose broke. Rob swung his forehead again. And again. Inside the black bag he couldn't see his captor, but began to feel his warm blood.

Suddenly the hood was torn off Rob's head. Another prisoner looked down at him. "Let's go!" he yelled as he helped Rob remove the handcuffs. The guard bleeding on the floor did not move. The prisoners ran towards the large hole at the end of the hallway, opening other cell doors as they ran.

Seeing the sky for the first time in a year didn't stun Rob enough to slow him down as he sprinted outside. He heard gunfire all around but his ringing ears could not tell where it came from. The prisoners ran through a crater that bisected the perimeter fence.

A man running next to Rob snapped forward and fell as blood sprayed out his chest. Rob darted right. Brush fifty feet ahead. He reached it in seconds and dove through thorns, cutting his skin. He cringed as his throbbing right arm hit against a branch.

With the bushes obstructing the view from the prison, Rob removed his orange jumpsuit. Gunfire continued, but none seemed to be aimed at him. Wearing only the slippers and briefs they had given him, Rob ran again. He did not know where he was going, but he was getting away. If he had looked back toward the prison, Rob would have seen the wreckage of a watchtower blown in half.

Shielding his face from the brush, Rob pushed forward. Suddenly there was sky in front of him and he fell down a steep 20 foot slope. He was on railroad tracks. The sound of a helicopter was an unnecessary reminder that he should get out of the open space. He ran across the tracks and found a trail left by a large truck. Thinking only of the speed he could make using this path, he took it. It went twenty feet up a hill to a construction site. There were other escapees around him now, some of whom had also ditched their jumpsuits.

Two small dump trucks were parked next to each other. Rob went for one. Another escapee broke the window of the nearest truck before noticing the door was unlocked. There were also keys in the ignition. "Come on!" he yelled at the others as he started the Dodge.

Two others got in the cabin. Rob climbed into the bed and helped another escapee in. The truck began moving as one more jumped in the bed, making five in there. The men pulled a tarp over themselves. Rob held his right arm and wished he had a gun.

The three men in the cabin of the truck shouted at each other as they tried to figure out where to go. The driver soon convinced the others that they should stop at an industrial complex 20 miles away where he knew people and split up there. Those in the bed had no part in the decision but were glad to be taken away from the nightmare of West Jersey Detention Facility.

After shaking through three minutes of travel, everyone in the cab of the truck was satisfied that they hadn't been followed. The man on the passenger side soon noticed a note between his legs. He picked it up and squinted in the dim light.

“Holy shit!” he yelled.

“What?” the man in the middle said. He read from the note he was handed.

PILE AS MANY PEOPLE AS YOU CAN IN THESE VEHICLES. THERE ARE USEFUL ITEMS IN THE GLOVEBOX, CENTER CONSOLE, AND BEHIND THE SEAT.

As soon as he was done reading, he saw the glove box open. Two 1911 .45s, two extra magazines, and a multitool nearly fell onto the floor.

The driver was overjoyed at this and told them to “find more shit in this truck!”

They were doing that before they were told. The man in the middle leaned forward so they could open the center console. The most obvious content was two Glock 30s, compact and reliable pistols in the same caliber as the 1911s. The rest of the space in the compartment was taken up by food bars. Behind the seat they found enough clothing for everyone in the truck, a digital map, bottles of water and sports drinks, more food, and a combat knife. The three decided to share with those in the back. The driver turned down a back road that he hoped was the right way to his friend's business. When there were no buildings in sight, he quickly stopped the truck. A passenger got out, silently threw a bundle of food, clothing, and a gun into the bed, and got back in the cab.

The gun was taken by the guy next to Rob. Nobody tried to take it from him. Rob removed the last of his prison garments before donning black pants, a dark t-shirt, socks and

dark work boots a size too large. As he laid back down into the bed, he knew it wasn't only the humidity that made him sweat. He hoped this truck would bring him closer to a contact he could get help from.

Juan was working late as usual. As he locked the door to his small office that was attached to a warehouse he noticed a truck enter the gates. Wondering why a truck would be entering at close to midnight, Juan stepped into a shadow and put a hand on the revolver he illegally carried. The truck got closer. There were three men in the cab. Juan was about to decide whether it would be worth risking his life for his livelihood when he saw who was driving. He jumped into the light.

“Fernando?”

“Juan!” Fernando jammed on the brakes.

His friend walked up to the truck. “Holy shit, man!” They bearhugged. “I thought you were going to be in that hole forever!”

“That’s why I’m here! There were some explosions and we ran. I was hoping you could help us.”

“The three of you?”

“Actually, there are more in the back.”

Juan looked in the dump bed and saw five frightened men looking back at him.

“Shit! They with you?”

“They just jumped in there. I don’t know these guys but I couldn’t just leave them.”

“I understand.” Juan inhaled deeply. “We need to get all you guys on your separate ways, and get this fuckin truck out of here. Nando, you can stay with me for the time being. Some of you can dump the truck in the woods and hop on a freight train. I really don’t know what else to do.”

“Hey man,” Rob leaned out of the bed. “If you can drop me off near New Brunswick, there are some people there who can help me.”

Juan looked at him. “I think I can do that.”

Within five minutes everyone was on their way. Rob laid across the back seat of Juan’s Chevy, pretending to sleep. They didn’t want anybody to see him, but if he hid in the trunk it would be awkward to drop him off. The seat belt dug into his thighs. His heart was pounding

and his arm still throbbed. And he still wished he had a gun. Hopefully Tyrone would have extra. He usually did.

“Hey Juan” he said.

“Yeah?”

“What day is it?”

“It’s Tuesday night - August 10, 2032.”

“Thanks.” It had been a year and a half since his arrest.

Rob was let out of the car in front of some apartments about a mile from his destination. He had no idea where Juan and Fernando were going. He felt his guts twisting as he tried to contain the excitement of escape, the fear of capture, and the horror of what he’d been through. As hard as he tried he could not get his right arm to move in sync with the rest of his body.

Just a few more minutes and he would be at the brick warehouse that Tyrone operated from. Rob had heard very little about what happened on the outside since his arrest. It was entirely possible that Tyrone or even the building wasn’t there anymore, but it was still the best chance Rob had to get help. Everyone else he could trust around here was likely known by the authorities as one of his acquaintances.

Just a few more minutes. The latest trade laws had hit this part of the city particularly hard. For people who were not accepted by the major chains and upscale establishments that the laws favored, the only non-government jobs available were illegal. Fortunately, unlawful commerce was preferred to mugging by most, but Rob was still nervous. He’d have felt better if he had a gun. His weapons deals had often taken him to risky places, but being unarmed while on the run has a way of putting a man on edge. Walking through a sketchy neighborhood didn’t help things. Rob hoped the five guys sitting on the stairs across the street wouldn’t have more than a passing interest in him.

On the next block he saw a sign that made him feel safer. Under a stenciled clenched fist, the spray paint on the sidewalk read

PATROLLED BY NEIGHBORS HELPING NEIGHBORS
SAFE FOR ALL WHO DON’T CAUSE TROUBLE

It was some kind of movement he had heard about shortly before his arrest. Tired of thugs taking over their streets, residents formed community militias, sometimes involving gangs in nonaggression pacts. The police generally considered Neighbors Helping Neighbors dangerous and tried to paint over their signs and enter their neighborhoods in parades of overwhelming force.

Rob slowed his pace as the warehouse came into view. It looked the same as it had before: an unlit one-story building with no windows. Rob cautiously walked up the front steps and tried the door. Unlocked. There was probably an event here.

Tyrone had once owned a bar in New York but had been run out of business by competitors favored by the government. Unable to get a business license and looking for a relatively honest way help support his kids, Tyrone decided to establish an underground concert venue, where bands that were not able to play in approved places could reach audiences. When the 2029 government attacks on the New York metro area underground economy made illegal business there more dangerous, he and many entertainers moved to avoid the major violence.

Rob pushed open the metal door. Two massive men stared at him from across the hallway. Rob figured he'd play it safe. "I-I'm here to pick up the pallets."

"How many?" The black one asked in an unfriendly tone. The white one kept staring down at him and crossed his meaty arms.

"Two of em."

The guards stared another second.

"That so?"

"Yeah."

"You know you're late."

"Yeah. Got held up."

"Well come in." Rob did as he was told. Hopefully the two pallet code was still the correct one. It was bad enough to get here so late.

"It's fifteen bucks or trade."

Rob reached into his pockets. Fortunately whoever had left him the pants had the foresight to put some cash in the pockets. He handed the money to the black guy, who narrowed his eyes and looked into Rob's.

“Don’t be trouble,” he said. Rob nodded. He followed the white guy around a corner in the hall. The man opened one massive wooden door and told Rob to wait on the other side. Then he closed the outer door, opened another, and told Rob to enjoy the show.

Rob could tell immediately after the second door opened that it was a metal night. Not his favorite kind of music, but he didn’t mind it. As he walked into the large hall and was overcome by the brain-crushing level of noise, he wondered again how nobody heard anything outside.

Rob looked at the band. Their faces were all painted black and white. A big guy who looked like he hadn’t washed his tangled hair and beard for weeks growled into a microphone. His dark eyes burned from a face clenched like that of a madman. Behind him, two guitarists and a bassist jerked their bodies and banged their heads to the rhythm as they wreaked havoc with their instruments. In the back, the drummer’s arms moved in blurs as he laid the base for the onslaught.

Rob squeezed and pushed his way to the opposite side of the room. He knew that the right introduction would get him a private meeting with the man he wanted to see. The crowd began to yell along with the band to a chorus that Rob could hear clearly.

In the age of brutality
Have kill or die mentality
For their rule of totality
Pain, death we make their destiny

The woman in front of Rob looked especially into this song as she banged her head, sending her dark red hair flying into her face. A few rows towards the stage, moshers knocked each other across the room.

Rob saw Tyrone sitting in a corner box, light gleaming off his dark shaven head. Rob pushed through a few more rows. He winced as someone carelessly elbowed his right forearm. No point in complaining.

Tyrone jumped when he saw Rob. He stood up from his seat and motioned for Rob to meet him.

The music stopped. The crowd yelling at the top of their lungs was only half as loud as the band had been. Tyrone was finally in front of him.

“Rob, that you?”

“Yeah!”

“Shit, I hardly recognized you. Come here.”

“This next one,” the vocalist growled, “is called PARASITES!” The crowd went wild as a frantic drumbeat led to insanely fast guitar work.

Rob followed Tyrone and two of his henchmen toward an open door. Then things turned to chaos.

They barely heard “Police!” over the noise when two men pointed handguns at them. The cops agents were quickly bludgeoned and stabbed by a couple of the meaner metalheads, who soon stomped their teeth out. The guitarists were the first to stop playing. Tyrone saw the bouncers run out of the entrance hall showing hand signals. “Seal the front!” he yelled. A guy standing next to the soundman hit some buttons and a steel door fell in front of the auditorium. What they couldn’t see was a Trade Bureau SWAT team being set on fire by flamethrowers in the walls - flamethrowers that Rob had given Tyrone a great deal on.

“Come on!” Tyrone yelled over the shouting. Rob followed him and three others down the hallway.

The band pulled out pistols, motioned for others to follow and charged out the back exit. A side exit became a point of battle, as mostly unarmed fans swarmed the cops outside. Two incendiary tear gas grenades were launched into the building. Enough bullets flew at the police to allow a sizeable number of fans to escape.

Rob followed Tyrone’s crew as they ran down a flight of stairs. At the bottom was Tyrone’s old blue GTO. It was built to outrun anything the cops could drive after it. Tyrone and Tom, the driver, got in the front seats and the other three piled into the back.

Vis, the vocalist, was the first out the back door. Fortunately he had put on an armored vest, as he quickly caught two 9mm bullets in the chest. He fired back with his Kalashnikov-style pistol as the other band members and a few fans followed. They ran through the alleyway behind the building. There were two cops with old M4 carbines at the opposite end. Their bursts of gunfire caught Vis in the left arm and the bassist in the chest before they were silenced. Fortunately the band had armor-piercing bullets, one of Rob’s hot sellers. The guitarists carried the bassist with them. They got past the ambush and ran through the city.

The GTO's V-8 roared to life. Tom mashed on the accelerator and dumped the clutch. The car screamed through the basement then charged up a ramp to the street. Its bumper pushed open a large wooden door. The car flew into the street then skidded to the left. The engine roared again as they sped away. But a police car going to the shootout spun around to chase them. Believing the GTO to contain the man responsible for the roasting of the SWAT team, the officer in command sent a helicopter after them.

The GTO could outrun the Falcon patrol car that was chasing them. But not the TacHawk helicopter, an armored war bird designed to give its user "an airborne platform for area control." The copter carried the most advanced electronics, a 20mm cannon, gas grenade launchers, and the ability to carry four passengers. And the bird could get more cars on them in minutes if it didn't destroy them outright.

"Quick! Down that alley!" Tyrone yelled. The driver jerked the steering wheel to the right. The back end of the car slid out. Tom compensated. Tires screeched as the GTO squeezed into the alley that was less than twice its width. That was why Tyrone let Tom drive his car. He slammed the accelerator again as the Falcon crashed into the brick wall behind them. The helicopter was now overhead and getting ready to attack. Tyrone made a call.

Ben was watching TV when the phone rang. He picked it up. "Yeah. Okay." He got up, slid his Beretta in his waistband, and easily picked up the RPG and spare rocket bag that was next to his couch.

A couple making out on the rooftop heard a crash then saw a huge guy with a rocket launcher on his shoulder emerge from the dark doorway. Frightened beyond words, the couple jumped to their feet and started backing away.

Ben was pissed. "You didn't see nothin' – you got that? Now get the fuck out of here!"

The lovers weren't going to argue with him. They ran down the stairway as fast as their shaky legs would carry them.

Time to get a new office Ben grumbled. Tyrone would help him out. Hopefully the couple wouldn't talk to the wrong people.

Tyrone's crew drove out of the alley to find another police car on the next street. The cops fired their carbines into the side of the GTO. The guy sitting to Rob's right was hit in the leg.

"Fuck! Get that gun out a' the middle!"

Tom hit a button to lower the rear window. Marcus told the other passengers to move aside, then he pulled down the center of what had looked like an ordinary bench seat. An old FN .30 caliber machine gun with a 100 round drum magazine was there. Marcus put the bipod on the trunk and aimed at one of the two Falcons chasing them. An officer leaned out the window of one with an M4.

The helicopter was directly in front of Ben about 150 yards ahead. He fired. The helicopter's armor and jamming devices could not stop a good old fashioned unguided missile. The warhead detonated just below the right engine intake. Flaming debris rained onto the street as the GTO thundered through. The helicopter crew made an emergency landing. Ben got the fuck out of there.

As Marcus's finger reached the trigger, the cop fired his M4, letting off twelve rounds. The cop hit only the roof of the GTO. Marcus's shots tore into the Falcon's engine and shattered the windshield. He turned toward the other car and fired. He hit the driver and the car swerved into a building.

A last burst of rounds from the other police car flew through the passenger cabin of the GTO. Tom swerved. Pat was hit in the shoulder and felt something warm spray onto his head. He looked to his left and saw a lifeless Marc with a bloody hole in his head. Rob grabbed the machine gun by the buttstock and pulled it into the cabin.

Tyrone stared at the gore on his left shoulder, not wanting it there but not wanting to put his hand near it to clean it off, not wanting to believe that a good friend of his had just died.

Tom was also distraught, but kept speeding away. Ninety miles per hour on city streets is intense even when they're empty, but it is much harder when the windshield has bullet holes in it and is splattered with blood.

Just outside the city they went through an abandoned building and down a muddy road through tall grass and garbage to avoid traffic cameras. It looked like they would make it.

