

I always knew that one day my number would come up.

“He’s over there! Surround him!”

Getting shot wasn’t a first for me, but it had never hurt like this before. The bullet had gone clean through my body armour and into my chest. I could feel my breathing slowing, and becoming more ragged by the second. Each inhalation sent a jolt of pain through my system. I hadn’t messed up – things had simply not gone my way. That was the way of things.

It was tough to live as a man who danced on the edge of society. Someone who was only good for one thing, causing harm to others; I took a lot of *pride* in my ability to harm others. Rather than words, I communicated using bullets. An outpouring of rage against a world that had once forsaken me. A broiling anger at the corruption that occurred under people’s noses without notice. I was the world’s greatest assassin. I was perhaps the only one. I was not a regular killer - hired off the dark net and paid in unstable cryptocurrency.

I was a professional. A professional who was clutching a bleeding chest wound and stumbling down a long, gilded corridor. A long trail of bloody handprints had been left in my wake. How had they not caught up to me yet? My bleary eyes focused momentarily and revealed the marble lobby that lay beyond. What a nice place to die.

No other assassin could lay a claim to the same standards as me. I did not meet strangers and undercover policemen in the parking lot of the nearest fast food joint. I did not wire my money through a personal bank account for all to see. I did not loiter around the crime scene waiting for someone to throw a pair of cuffs around my wrists. It took weeks or even months of meticulous planning and information gathering to perform one hit. Pointing a gun and firing was easy - the hard part was getting away without being caught.

But even the best laid plans had a chance to go awry. There was nothing left in me. I collapsed down onto my stomach and forced myself to roll over. I stared up at the ceiling of the hotel where the gunfight had broken out. Dozens of armed security guards and police officers surrounded my bloodied body. This was the way that I wanted to go. Perhaps if they searched my home they would find the large collection of illegal firearms that I kept in the basement, or maybe even the folder of completed jobs I used to keep track of my work. The full weight of my sins would finally be known.

I couldn’t go any further than this. The strength to walk had left me. The blood continued to pour, escaping from my body and forming a deep puddle beneath. The wolves were closing

in, fangs bared in case I tried to resist one last time. I was the first to know that such a thing was impossible.

My victims didn't deserve justice. Justice was their friend – a system that existed to protect them from the consequences of their actions. I chose each and every target with care. People who shielded themselves by ordering others to do the dirty work. Who caused large scale harm that could not be quantified through a direct prison sentence. Living like that makes a lot of enemies, and some of them were willing to pay me big money.

The crimson mark that spread through the white t-shirt I was wearing signalled the end. The bulletproof vest could not stand up to a bullet of the calibre that now rested in one of my internal organs. I did not despair at finally meeting my maker. I had been counting the days until my effort was extinguished from the very start.

Just as the encroaching blackness filled my vision I finally felt a mite of fear. Something I had not considered before then. If the police searched my home, and found my hidden stash of firearms, then it was only a matter of time until they found the secret compartment concealed a layer deeper. The worst possible outcome, my fullest and most vibrant shame paraded for all to see.

I really, really hoped that they wouldn't find my visual novel collection.