

The rain fell sideways. Great, lashing sheets of it tore across the Promontory, obscuring the landing strip in a wash of windblown spray. The storm was an angry gray void beyond the blurred line of the runway's end, rank upon rank of massive, bruised thunderheads surging hungrily above, below and through the city. Fitful bursts of pale lightning played through the roiling clouds, and the sound of their thunder was swallowed by the near-deafening roar of the wind and rain.

Ramiro stood anxiously in the hangar door, squinting against the stinging raindrops. The clock over the workbench showed mid-morning, and on a typical day the Promontory would be bustling with hundreds of departures and arrivals: small and nimble Courier planes, colorful merchant airships with goods from the outer islands, ponderous gray zeppelins transporting ore from the iron mines to the city's foundries. Today, no one had dared to fly in or out. The storm had hit the island overnight, when air traffic was lightest, and the last couriers to arrive had described a harrowing flight along the dark and seething outer edges of one of the most enormous systems in recent memory. Ramiro sighed heavily and walked back into the hangar.

Alexei glanced up from beneath the sleek curve of an engine. "You should relax, Miro," he said. "You're making me nervous, pacing around like that."

Ramiro smiled wanly at the old mechanic. A particularly vicious gust hammered against the side of the small hangar, rattling the work lamps. Their dry glow flickered out momentarily, then tentatively glimmered back to life. "Bah," muttered Alexei, "this is no way to work." With a clatter of tools, he rolled laboriously out from underneath the wing of the courier plane, rose to his feet and irritably brushed off his coveralls. "She's fueled and ready," he announced. "Not that she'll be going anywhere."

"Thanks, Alexei." Ramiro had already checked the Kestrel twice this morning, but Alexei knew the plane better than anyone. Years ago, he and Ramiro's father had built her out of parts scavenged painstakingly from wrecked Courier planes and mothballed fighters, and Alexei had repaired or overhauled her hundreds of times in the years since she was given to Ramiro. The mechanic ambled to his bench, extracting a handful of worn spanners and screwdrivers from his coveralls and carefully placing them in their respective drawers. He directed a sour glance at Ramiro. "Your father would disown you if he knew you were thinking about taking his plane out in this mess."

Ramiro grinned. "It's my plane now, old man."

Alexei snorted, and retrieved his coat from the hook by the bench. "Just what Alfonso would say," he muttered. "Impossible, just like your stubborn father. I'm going home before the wind blows this place down. If you must take her out, please bring her back in one piece."

"I always do, my friend."

"I mean it, Miro." A frown creased Alexei's craggy features. "Be safe. Alfonso would never forgive me if you were lost out there."

"I'll be fine." Ramiro was almost shouting to be heard over the din of the storm. "Someday Piño will be flying this thing, and you'll be here grumbling at *my* son."

The old mechanic nodded, and clapped Ramiro on the shoulder. "I hope so, my boy. I hope so." With that, he lifted his hood and was gone, walking down the long row of hangars until Ramiro could no longer pick him out through the sheets of rain.

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"Mama, I'm tired!"

Isabela scooped little Piño into her arms with practiced ease. "We're almost home, love."

Ramiro hung several steps behind to watch the two of them as they passed through the warm pools of sunlight that had trickled through the graceful, leafy arches. He watched the golden light cast fleeting halos around the heads of his wife and child, and was momentarily overwhelmed with feeling. All his life he had longed to fly like his father, to leave Isla Clara. He had never imagined that, like his father, he would return, and that he would be grateful to call this place home.

Piño grinned widely at him over his mother's shoulder, and extended one small hand. "Papa!" Isabela glanced fondly back at her husband, and--

"Ramiro. Wake up, Ramiro, there's no time!"

Ramiro snapped awake to the rasp of wind-driven rain clawing across the hangar. He groaned in dismay and sat up, rubbing his eyes in a vain attempt to clear his head. He had only intended to sit and rest for a few moments, but sleep and dreams had come unbidden, and now the soft, sunlit lines of Isabela and Piño's faces were burned vividly into his mind's eye.

"Isaac," he acknowledged, his voice still heavy with sleep.

The bedraggled young soldier stood before him in a pool of rainwater that had dripped from his sodden Zhelezan uniform. "I've got your package, mate. They told me it has to go now."

Ramiro cursed quietly and got to his feet. The clock showed just after noon. "Of course it does," he said drily. He took the parcel from Isaac and perused the delivery request. "No trouble on the way up here, I hope?"

"No." And then, a pensive frown creased Isaac's thin features. "Well, maybe."

“Maybe?” Ramiro pulled on his lined pilot’s jacket, and retrieved his leather flying helmet from the rack by the workbench. He had hoped it would not come to this, but the storm continued to rage unabated, and there was nothing for it now. The package was here.

“Maybe,” Isaac agreed. “There was a new officer at the checkpoint this morning, different from the sort we usually see. All business, barely talking to anyone. All morning, he hangs around, watching for traffic from the city, like he’s waiting for something, and all morning no one comes because of the storm. Then our man comes in with that package, and I look around and suddenly the officer’s gone.”

“Coincidence?” Ramiro suggested, fastening his helmet.

“Probably,” Isaac agreed, unconvinced.

Ramiro did not know the contents of the package. It was not his job to know, and as its Courier he was pledged to preserve its secrecy and security. He knew the client, though, a man named Henri Bouchard--a diplomat, well connected in the Zhelezan government, and a trusted friend of Isabela’s family. Ramiro had flown many deliveries for him. Bouchard had been a good client.

It was hard for Ramiro to imagine why some officer might take an interest in this delivery, but Isaac’s warning was ominous. The young soldier did not spook easily. Ramiro thought again of Isabela and Piño, and weighed his options. The Kestrel could handle the storm, he was sure of that. It would be risky, but it could be done. The possibility of military involvement, however remote, was something else entirely.

Ramiro glared at the package for a few moments, bouncing it in his hands experimentally, feeling its weight. He could drop the delivery, pass it to another Courier. He could stay here, ride out the storm, and take the next package that came in. He might also lose the trust of one of his most valued clients and his sterling reputation as one of the fastest, most dependable Couriers in the Zhelezan Republic, not to mention the considerable fee from this delivery. Ramiro trusted Isaac, but he couldn’t just drop a job like this on a hunch. Too much was at stake.

He carefully placed the package into the cockpit of the Kestrel, and pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Isaac, will you do me a favor?”

Isaac looked up from surveying the miserable condition of his drenched clothing.

“Will you find Alexei and tell him what you just told me?” Ramiro strapped on his holster and revolver, just in case.

The soldier shrugged dourly. “Or,” he suggested, “you could stay here and tell him yourself.”

“What?” Ramiro grinned fiercely. “And miss out on flying in this?” He hauled the main door open, unleashing a furious blast of wind and rain into the hangar. Isaac grinned back in spite of himself.

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The Kestrel gathered speed and left the runway, driven and buffeted by savage gusts of wind. Ramiro opened the throttle, pulled her up and over the end of the Promontory, over the angular, rain-shrouded shadows of Zheleza, the Iron City. Rain hammered the windshield, and joined its roar with the throaty growl of the Kestrel’s engine as she cut through the storm. Within moments, the storm-veiled edges of the great island passed beneath the plane, and there was nothing but the sky above and below, an endless sea of churning, billowing gray.

Ramiro gripped the stick tightly, fighting nearly constant waves of pounding turbulence and sickening wind shear. Ten years ago, Ramiro might have welcomed this flight as a true test of his skill as a pilot, but that was before Isabela, before Piño. They had changed everything.

The Kestrel plunged into a vast wall of clouds, like flying from midday into twilight. For several long, tense minutes, the courier plane was engulfed by the dark, oceanic mass, and Ramiro could see nothing beyond the Kestrel’s nose and the blurred radius of her propeller blades. He quickly scanned the array of indicators on the instrument panel--everything looked good--and then lifted his gaze to the rain-streaked windshield and the murk beyond, looking for some sign of a break in the clouds. And then, suddenly, daylight again. Ramiro squinted against the glare as the Kestrel punched through into the vast, slowly rotating center of the storm. He banked the plane, following the winds around the inside of the storm’s eye, periodically checking his compass. For a moment, the Kestrel flew over an immense, seething landscape of bruised, aqueous grays and whites, and then Ramiro leveled her out, back into the storm and toward her destination. He cast one last glance above, at the barely visible shred of blue sky that glimmered at the top of the storm’s eye, and he had to squint to make out the cluster of small black shapes far above, in tight formation, moving parallel to the Kestrel’s course. Ramiro’s heart sank. There was no mistaking those sharp silhouettes, or their purpose: they were Zhelezan fighter planes, clearly tracking the Kestrel.

Then he was back in the clouds, rattled and jolted by turbulence. Ramiro took a deep breath, his mind racing. Isaac had been right. He had made a terrible mistake. The fighters were long range fighters, armored and angular, built more for distance and durability than speed and agility. Ramiro was confident that the Kestrel could outrun them, and probably outdistance them as well. If it came to a fight, though, it would be no contest. The Zhelezan planes would tear the unarmed Kestrel apart. Ramiro frowned, scanning the indicators, weighing his options. Maybe there was still a way to fix this. Somewhere in the clouds ahead of him, lightning bloomed, and was almost immediately answered by an explosive roar of thunder. He banked the Kestrel through sheets of rain and began to climb.

As far as Ramiro was concerned, this job was done. He was a Courier, not a smuggler or a spy. No one would think less of him for surrendering what he had to assume was an illegal package, especially when the military wanted it this badly. To do otherwise would be dangerously stupid and reckless. The Kestrel continued to climb, toward an altitude that Ramiro estimated would bring him level with the Zhelezan planes. If he could get close enough to the fighters to hail them, he would indicate his desire to cooperate, set the plane down somewhere outside the fringes of the storm, and hand over the package.

The clouds in front of the Kestrel began to thin into ragged, wind-blown streamers, and Ramiro could see a broad swath of open, rain-smudged sky torn between two immense horizons of gray. "Where are they," he muttered, gazing out over the nose of the Kestrel, checking his sides, and then suddenly the fighters pulled free of the clouds above, trailing thin lines of smoky exhaust like threads pulled loose from the storm. There were four of them, the ugly reverse wedges of Republic T4 heavy fighters. They hadn't seen him yet. Ramiro banked the Kestrel out to a comfortable distance and began to climb again. The T4s were two-man fighters, crewed by a pilot and a gunner. If he could just gain enough altitude to make eye contact with someone, to show them he was not planning to run, this whole thing could be defused. His heart was suddenly pounding.

Lightning arced blindingly across the sky ahead, and the thunder replied with a clap that Ramiro felt like a kick in the chest. The Courier kept his eyes on the nearest fighter, blinking away the afterimage of the lightning. Only a few more seconds and the Kestrel would be clear of the fighter's broad wing, and he would have an unobstructed line of sight to both pilot and gunner. The T4's cockpit was open, largely unshielded against the elements, and in the murky stormlight Ramiro could just make out the head and shoulders of the fighter's crew over the curve of the fuselage. He began to wave at them. The rear-facing gunner saw him first, and waved back. Ramiro felt an immense sense of relief. He held the Kestrel steady, watching as the gunner signaled to the pilot. The pilot looked over, directly at Ramiro, and nodded.

And then, impossibly, the gunner seized the grips of the T4's tail gun and swung it toward the Kestrel. Ramiro instinctively pushed hard on the stick, throwing his plane into a sharp dive, below the firing arc of the machine gun. As the dive slammed him back into his seat, the sharp report of the weapon rattled above the storm, and tracers cut through the air, shockingly bright against the clouds. Ramiro threw a horrified look behind him, and saw the fighters peeling away from their formation and wheeling above him, vultures circling a kill. It was now terrifyingly clear to him that the situation was far worse than he had ever imagined, but there was no time to ponder the implications. He had to get out of range of those guns. Ramiro slammed the throttle all the way open, and the engine snarled as the Kestrel continued her stomach-wrenching dive toward the dark clouds below.

One of the Zhelezan pilots opened fire with his main guns, and another fusillade of tracers screamed past, wide of the mark, vanishing into the storm. The clouds filled Ramiro's vision now, and suddenly the tentative daylight vanished, replaced by surging gray and slashing rain

across his windshield. He dragged the Kestrel out of her sickening dive, and watched the instruments slowly stabilize as the Courier plane tore through bank after bank of clouds. The Zhelezan fighters would be only seconds behind him, but Ramiro had a temporary advantage while he was shielded by the storm. The pilots no longer knew which way he'd be headed, and they would have to track him by sight.

Ramiro risked another glance over his shoulder, and caught a streak of vertical movement, followed by a spreading plume of black only slightly darker than the clouds surrounding it. The leading edge of one of the T4s pierced the mist behind him like some aquatic predator breaking the waves. This time Ramiro was ready. He pulled the Kestrel up into a dizzying loop as the fighter's front cannons roared to life, fire leaping out from the muzzle brakes in ragged star shapes. Tracers flickered harmlessly below as Ramiro rolled out of the loop and into the cover of another towering wall of storm clouds. Rain scythed across his windshield, and Ramiro, heart pounding, guided the Courier plane into the dark.

For several tense minutes, Ramiro held his course, scanning the vast landscape of the storm for any sign of his pursuers. Finally, he sank back into the seat, breathing a deep sigh of relief. The fighter pilots had lost him. This was his chance. Ramiro pulled the Kestrel into a wide turn, and the plane obliged with a throaty roar. Now that the adrenaline of the chase had begun to subside, he was thinking with greater clarity. Returning to Zheleza City would be folly. He'd be landing right in the lap of the military, and he did not have much confidence that he could safely land his plane in this storm. Besides, he had no idea who had set him up, or why. Some part of him wanted to attempt to deliver the package, and hopefully get some answers, but he knew the fighter pilots would be expecting that. Isla Clara might offer safety, or at least a chance to take Isabela and Piño into hiding, but he couldn't gamble that the Zhelezans would not anticipate that as well. He had already rolled the dice once today, with disastrous results.

The wind-driven rain was a steady thrumming on his windshield now. Ramiro considered his compass, and then banked out of the turn. A plan was beginning to take shape in his mind. "Alright," he muttered to himself, "let's get out of here." The Kestrel growled its approval, and together they drove deeper into the storm.

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The evening sunshine was dazzling when the Kestrel finally soared free of the clouds, its rosy light glittering gem-like through the hundreds of raindrops that trembled on the windshield. Ramiro heaved a deep sigh of relief as his plane cleared the last tattered fingers of the storm. The Kestrel was still in one piece, and the Zhelezan fighters were still somewhere behind him in that tremendous, churning mass of thunderheads. He shifted in his seat, rolled his aching head from side to side, and allowed himself a tired smile. If he squinted against the glare, he could just make out the rugged silhouettes of first of the Orphan Islands suspended against the sun, and beyond that, the warm gleam of sunset reflecting from the chaos of roofs that marked the outskirts of Freeport.

The Orphans were a broad, rocky archipelago on the lawless border between Zheleza and the Northern Reaches, land so barren and worthless that no nation would claim it. The ramshackle buildings and rope bridges of the town of Freeport sprawled from island to island like the web of some deranged mechanical spider, cobbled together slapdash from whatever material its residents could buy or steal. The Orphans were remote, but Freeport offered the only market in which Northern merchants, traders and other less savory individuals could ply their wares to their Southern neighbors free from the oppressive oversight of the Zhelezan authorities. These days, business was booming.

Ramiro had visited Freeport many times as a Courier, but he was now a fugitive, and for the first time he felt a strong sense of kinship with the misfits and pariahs who had made their homes in this desolate place. He glanced to his fuel gauge--perilously close to empty--and then to the package still nestled next to him. With any luck, the Orphans would give him the opportunity to refuel, drop the package and disappear with the Zhelezans none the wiser. With a well-practiced hand, Ramiro guided the Kestrel beneath a pair of upper islands, their dark, rocky undersides still glistening with rain water, and above the patchwork roofs of the town as Freeport Market's flickering constellations of lanterns unfolded below. Presently, the long expanse of the airfield came into view, and Ramiro could see sunlight glinting from the rows of aircraft parked along the perimeter. He thought of Isaac and Alexei back at the Promontory, and hoped fervently that the Zhelezans would not come for them as well. Ramiro fought back a sudden overwhelming surge of fear, regret and anger. There would be time for that later.

The runways were clear, the skies above them empty. Ramiro set the Kestrel down gently, and taxied to the small Couriers' hangar at the far end of the airfield. He was greeted by a young mechanic, a cheerful teenage girl clad in ruffled, grease-stained coveralls, who informed him that since the Market had been closed for most of the day due to the storm, the shops had just opened an hour ago and would be open late. Ramiro paid her a handful of Zhelezan coins to make sure his plane was refueled. When she left the hangar, Ramiro retrieved the package from the cockpit and set off on foot toward the heart of Freeport, surreptitiously patting his side to check for the reassuring bulk of the revolver. He didn't anticipate that he would need it, but this day had already been full of surprises.

The new causeway from the airfield to Freeport's Market District was broad and sturdy enough to allow a steam tractor to drive across, a carefully reinforced surface of suspended rock and heavy iron plates. Just five years ago, the bridge to the Market had been a rickety span of rope, chain, and weathered wooden panels that swayed sickeningly in the breeze, traversed by nervous porters laden with teetering crates of merchandise. A great deal of new money had come to Freeport in the last five years. As Ramiro crossed, he passed a lamplighter moving in the opposite direction, using a long taper to ignite the hanging lanterns that illuminated the causeway after dark. That was another new addition, courtesy of the trade guild that governed the flourishing Market.

The sky was slowly dwindling toward the cool purple of twilight, and the worn, cobbled streets on the far side of the causeway reflected the color in thousands of tiny pools of collected rain water. In happier circumstances, Ramiro might have paused on the causeway to watch the last fading moments of the sunset, but now all he could think of was his destination, and the weight of the package beneath his arm. He could hear the Market long before he saw the first lantern-lit stalls: a continuous buzz of conversation punctuated by the occasional shout, the intermittent rumble and hiss of machinery as steam tractors hauled their cargo down the broad streets, trills of melody above the noise as buskers dueled with fiddles and guitars. The Courier kept his head down as he skirted the areas of greatest activity. He had no business in the Market tonight. There was no point in getting seen by everyone in Freeport.

Ramiro weaved through dimly lit alleys on the fringes of the Market, dodging small groups of drunken, laughing youth. The city had changed, but its shape was still the same, and Ramiro knew these streets well. Before he had met Isabela, he had spent many nights with friends carousing through Freeport's taverns, celebrating another completed run. The young Couriers had been a tight knit bunch. There had been a time when Ramiro would have trusted any one of them with his life.

The alley opened up into a crooked street, lit by a few lonely lanterns and a warm splash of light spilling from the open door of the seediest tavern in Freeport. Ramiro smiled. The Blue Moon was exactly as he remembered it: the precarious cant of the battered, corrugated roof, the silhouettes of the slowly rotating vanes of the makeshift wind turbine that supplied the building's electricity, the painted sign that dangled crookedly above the front door, so weathered as to be completely unintelligible. The sound of raucous voices and the clink of glasses echoed into the quiet street. It was nice to know that some things in Freeport had remained the same. He took a deep breath, and crossed the street into the light.

Inside the tavern, the air was thick with tobacco smoke and the sharp, mingled aromas of liquor and rust. A pair of bulky electric lights glimmered above the worn bar, casting stark shadows into the corners of the room. Ramiro paused at the threshold. The Blue Moon was busy tonight. The storm had kept the airfield closed for a full day, leaving pilots and airship crews with little to do but sit indoors and drink while the wind and rain roared outside. By the look of things, many of the patrons had been engaged in that pursuit since early in the morning. Ramiro surveyed the crowd: a crew of nine or ten olive-skinned South Zhelezans at the tables playing dice, a pair of ostentatiously dressed trade guildsmen in the midst of an animated argument, a knot of four surly, red-faced Northerners seated at the bar--smugglers, Ramiro guessed. The table in the farthest corner of the room was occupied by a thoroughly disreputable-looking group of men with the hardened look of former soldiers, perhaps mercenaries or pirates. Seated with them was the man he had come to Freeport to see.

Ramiro swallowed hard and tightened his grip on the package. The revolver suddenly felt heavy at his side. As casually as possible, he made his way through the crowd toward the back of the room. If this went the wrong way, it would get very ugly, very quickly.

“Santiago.”

The man slowly looked up from his drink, and his dark eyes locked with Ramiro’s for a long, tense moment. “Gentlemen,” he announced dryly, “may I introduce my brother, the Courier.”

“Brother-in-law,” countered Ramiro, with a grin.

Santiago leaned back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head, his face unreadable. “Brother-in-law,” he repeated, and around the table his companions regarded Ramiro with naked suspicion. “I was a Courier once too,” Santiago told them coolly, his eyes still locked on Ramiro. “A delivery boy for the Republic, just like my brother.”

“Like I was.” Ramiro tossed the package onto the table. “Until they tried to kill me.”

That got his attention. Santiago’s eyes widened, and he leaned forward, suddenly intent. “Isabela?” he demanded.

“Safe, I think. May I...?” Ramiro motioned to an empty chair.

“Of course.” Santiago replied, his tone softening. His gaze shifted to the package as Ramiro sat down. “What is it? Have you looked?”

Ramiro shook his head, and Santiago chuckled bitterly. “Of course you haven’t.”

Ramiro shrugged. “Force of habit,” he said. “It’s for a friend of yours.”

Santiago raised his eyebrows quizzically.

“Henri Bouchard.”

Santiago exchanged a meaningful glance with the big, dark-skinned man on his right. “Ramiro, the secret police arrested Henri for treason a week ago.”

“No. That can’t be right.” The room suddenly seemed to be closing in on him. “I got the package just this morning.”

Ramiro had no idea how to make sense of this new information. The delivery request had been in Bouchard’s name, he was sure of it.

“This morning?” Santiago was incredulous. “You flew from Zheleza City in the storm?”

“Alexei tried to talk me out of it,” Ramiro said ruefully, and Santiago burst out laughing.

"I thought my sister might have beat some sense into you, but you are as stupid as ever!"

Ramiro grinned in spite of himself. There was the Santiago he used to know. Around the table, looks had shifted from hostility toward something that might pass for grudging admiration.

"Ramiro." Santiago leaned closer. "Henri was working for us. For the Resistance. He had been since the beginning."

Ramiro slumped back in his chair, stricken. Here was the piece he'd been missing. How many deliveries had he made for Bouchard? He did a quick mental tally and ended up somewhere around twenty. "He's been a client for years," Ramiro said weakly. "I never knew."

"They don't care. They don't want to find out how much you know. They just want to make you disappear, just like Henri." Santiago took a long drink. When he finally spoke, his voice was ragged with regret. "I'm sorry, Ramiro. I didn't know that you were Henri's Courier. I would have put a stop to it if I had. It wasn't fair to bring you into this."

"I'm sorry, too." Ramiro shook his head in stunned disbelief. "All these years, you were right."

Santiago smiled sadly. "Isabela's sent letters, you know. She told me about your little boy. I've often hoped that one day I might meet him."

"I have to reach them," Ramiro said, a tremor of panic creeping into his voice. "They're not safe at Isla Clara."

"You know you can't go back there." Santiago stated it as a simple fact. "They'll be waiting for you. Let me send someone. We can smuggle them both out on a cargo plane. By the time anyone realizes what's happened, they'll be safely across the border to the North."

Ramiro had to admit that this idea made a lot of sense, but he still did not like it. "And I'll do what? Hide?"

"Every patrol between here and the iron city will be looking for you. Go north, where they won't follow. I'll send a few of my men to escort you. We'll meet you at the docks at Iskareri."

Ramiro nodded. For the first time today, he decided to take someone else's advice. "Alright. Let's do it."

Santiago grinned at him. "It's you and me against the world, just like old times."

Ramiro returned the smile, and was opening his mouth to speak when he noticed that the bar had suddenly gone completely quiet. Four Zhelezan soldiers stood framed in the open door,

scanning the room. One of the men was unmistakably the gunman who had opened fire on him in the storm, and Ramiro could see the spark of recognition on the other man's face. "That's him!" he bellowed, and suddenly the room erupted in chaos.

Santiago was instantly on his feet, pistol in hand, shouting orders to his men. "Ashif, hold them off!"

But the big man was already moving. With deceptive speed, he caught the back of his chair one-handed and easily hurled it across the room. The heavy chair sailed across the crowd in a graceful arc and caught one of the soldiers full in the chest. As the man staggered backward and crashed against the wall, the group of trade guildsmen broke for the door, pushing past the soldiers, who were now fumbling for their sidearms. "No guns! No guns!" screamed the bartender, as the first deafening shot rang out. The bar was a cacophony of overturning tables, shattering glass, and shouts of alarms as patrons took whatever cover they could find.

"This way," roared Santiago, motioning to a tall window on the back wall.