

July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2003

The black sedan came to a hasty stop, kicking up dust that quickly covered the vehicle. The rear passenger-side door opened, and the man exited out onto the rocky terrain. In form, he looked like many other men, belonging to the category of those who followed a severe exercise regimen. But he only resembled those people. When he was born, he was given the name Craig Langston Goskin, though he preferred to be called *Viper*. He was an assassin and horrifyingly good at it. Today was like many others: someone was going to die.

Craig never stood straight up, leaning into a run before the car door could close behind him. Though they moved in different directions, it was clear to see he moved faster than the car... at least until the car reached its second gear.

“Range to target?” he whispered. He knew the throat microphone picked up his voice well enough.

“Satellite imagery puts them a little under one third into the 9.7-mile trail,” Brackerton advised. Craig scoffed at the older man’s insistence on carrying himself like he was in his own private Situation Room, watching his operatives eliminate a high-profile target.

*“Of course, elimination is the name of the game today,”* the man thought, making his way deeper into the hills just south of San Francisco Bay. He ran into the wind, and his body shivered involuntarily from the stiff cold breeze coming off the bay. Craig snorted a laugh and started running harder. *“I could stand to eliminate something m’ damn-self! Ol’ Sammie wasn’t messing around when he talked about the coldest winter he ever knew.”*

“Be advised, *Viper*, your rate of travel is a little faster than what was discussed.”

“So he dies a little sooner,” Craig returned. “So what? You trying to tell me I’m going to get docked for that?”

“You have to excuse Colonel Sanders, *Viper*,” a female voice came over the line. It was soft, warm, and just scratchy enough to be sexy. “He gets a little bit beside himself at the Zero Hour. So long as the contract is serviced, you’ll get your fee.”

“*You better watch yourself, little girl*,” Craig thought, appreciating the voice of Elizabeth Murray, the woman who was effectively the person calling the shots. She was the target’s partner and had grown tired of his idealism. Open source was for poor, broke losers and there was a great deal of money to be made. “*You’re old enough for me to legally pin your sexy ass. I’ll be smiling, but you may never be the same after that.*”

“Well, tell Grandpa to relax and enjoy the show,” he said as his body settled into the sprint he had established.

“I’ll do what I can,” she replied.

“And speaking of shows...” Craig reached down and activated his tracker. “Are you reading this?”

“Copy that,” Brackerton informed. “Drone One is *en route* to rendezvous with you... in thirty-six seconds.”

“And four minutes after that, I should have a visual on the target.”

“And don’t forget... your target will not be alone!” Brackerton stressed. “We’re expecting him to have his normal security detail with him this morning.”

“It won’t be enough!”