

NIGHT ON THE RIVER

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FADE IN:

EXT. ALLEN ST. (NEW ORLEANS) - NIGHT

A young lady in red fishnet stockings and a shiny white coat strolls along the edge of Hardin Park. A hot, muggy evening.

This is YVELLA LAGUERRE, just turned 17, a doped up, rebellious white teen often described as being on the spectrum. She doesn't care, you can see that by the way she chews gum.

Two black men in their 30s see her walk past their front yard, where they hang out.

YVELLA

Hey fellahs. You like fancy girls?
I'm fancy and I know stuff.

The two men look at each other as if they misheard her.

MAN #1

There's white trash up in here now?

MAN #2

Girl, you best take your skinny
tramp ass outta these streets. You
know where you at?

Yvella strikes a raunchy hand-on-hip pose, defiant.

YVELLA

My skinny ass knows how you like
it. Maybe you're too scared of a
real fancy girl.

Again a shared look of incredulousness. They push through the gate and crowd close to her.

MAN #1

We ain't messing with no 39ers.
They know you're on their turf?

YVELLA

They say if you don't want it your
wiener is soft.

MAN #2

My what?

His friend laughs at his reaction, which spurs Man #2 to grab a handful of her hair.

MAN #2 (CONT'D)

You listen, bitch. This might be
39er ward, but you come into my
yard with a nasty disposition like
that and I will give you a lesson
in manners.

YVELLA

Pulling hair's not nice.

MAN #1

Maybe take this inside?

MAN #2

Ain't fixin' to bring no jailbait
inside.

MAN #1

Yeah you right.

YVELLA

I want my special baby.

MAN #2

Oh it ain't no baby, you about to
find out right in these bushes.

YVELLA

I mean -- I mean --

She pulls up a sleeve to display track marks from needles.
The two men smile at each other. A junkie freebie.

They shove her through the gate. She yelps in sudden alarm as
Man #2 forces her to her knees.

A van pulls to a stop just past the house and ERMENJARTA
(JARTA) ADONNA, 51, a woman of Brazilian heritage emerges.
Tight golden corn rows. Face and arms scarred, her left eye a
glass orb that sparkles subtly with inset gemstone dust.

JARTA

She's mine!

The two men stop and turn to see the specter of Jarta
stalking directly at them.

MAN #1

What the hell I'm seeing?

MAN #2

(to Jarta)

You don't stroll into this yard and
declare what's what.

Man #1 moves to stand in her way.

MAN #1

We got consensual activity here, so
don't even --

Jarta punches him square in the mouth. Then lightning strikes -- a series of taps and kicks that lay him out. His friend leaps forward swinging.

A fist, a foot, an elbow against the side of his head and he joins his pal face down.

Yvella is paralyzed with fear. Jarta takes her arm and drags her to her feet. She leans in close so Yvella can see her glass eye sparkle like the diamond of death.

JARTA

Demko sent me to find you.

Yvella stutters with misgivings, deeply confused.

JARTA (CONT'D)

You're coming with me. We're going
to Easy Street.

She leads Yvella away as the girl burbles with terror.

YVELLA

No... No...

Jarta does not hear.

EXT. TRAILER PARK - NIGHT

A well lived in mobile home park along the banks of the Mississippi river. Modest older units, most with covered porches or ground level patios.

Motorcycles are parked at all of the units.

The night is dark with clouds and rain falls, drumming on tin porch roofs. It's late, nobody out.

INT. NICA'S TRAILER - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Middle of the night in July, still hot and muggy despite the rain. DOMINIQUE "NICA" CHERY, early 30s, is wide awake in bed without even a sheet on, in shorts and sports bra.

She's an athletic black woman with a restless mind and spirit. She stares at the ceiling as if willing the rain to stop.

An inch from her hairline along the temple is the beginning of a roughly healed scar that disappears into her hair.

INT. LIVING ROOM (MINUTES LATER)

Nica puts on ambient EDM music and stands quietly in the center of the room. A loveseat, a corner office desk, no TV.

After a meditative centering, she begins martial arts forms, moving through them slowly, more like Tai Chi.

After a short set, she suddenly erupts, savagely punching the air, face tight with murderous rage.

The outburst seems to surprise her. She regathers her focus, her calm, almost apologetically, and begins again.

The rain keeps falling.

INT. NICA'S TRAILER - DAY

Nica shuffles into her kitchen/living room. A digital clock says 6:30 am, 79 degrees, humidity 98%.

She does not look happy and the source of her ire is the sound of a motorcycle REVVING.

She removes the pot from a coffee maker and pours yesterday's cold brew into a mug. From the cupboard above, she adds a shot of whiskey to it.

EXT. NICA'S TRAILER - DAY

Having donned a tee shirt and sandals, Nica sips coffee at the railing of her porch, which is covered by a tin awning.

Behind her is a pyrograph -- DOMINIQUE CHERY -- burned into a piece of wood over the door.

A chopper is parked alongside a Vespa scooter under the awning. Burnished cooper plating adorns the gas tank of the chopper.

Across the main access road someone is working on a motorcycle under their porch, revving the motor repeatedly.

Nica's neighbor emerges from his trailer, catches sight of her, and ambles over. BERNARD LAGUERRE is in his early 40s, in a tank top, long hair tied back.

He takes the three steps up to join her at the railing.

BERNARD
Bonjou, miss Nica.

They both take a moment to acknowledge the noisy motorcycle.

NICA
Big Bob doesn't want to bring the bike into your shop?

BERNARD
Gotta be rideable to bring it in. Besides, 6 A.M. to 8 A.M., only cool part of the day.

NICA
This is cool? It's already eighty-two and sweatier than a stripper pole in a sauna.

He nods. More listless regard of the revving motor.

BERNARD
You got any time for a new case?

NICA
Beats sweating for no reason.

He brings out a photo of an adolescent girl.

BERNARD
Remember my niece, Yvella?

NICA
Little Eva. Sure. Sweetheart. She run away again?

BERNARD
Different this time. She's missing. Not at friends or neighbors. Sister don't know where she is neither... Aunt Letty's worried.

Nica reaches for the photo, takes a good look.

NICA
I liked talking to her, when you were babysitting.

BERNARD

Not really babysitting, a teenager.

NICA

What's it she have, Asperger's?

BERNARD

Something on the spectrum. Some spectrum, anyway.

NICA

Poor kid. Rough hand to get dealt.

BERNARD

Yeah... Listen, the two grand you owe me for work on your bike? I might could let it slide if you wanna look into this for me.

The motorcycle goes silent. The silence fills in with the calls of wrens and blue jays in the magnolia trees. Last night's rain is already steaming off the earth.

NICA

Gimmie the Aunt's number. Where's she live?

BERNARD

City.

A wince of exasperation from Nica.

NICA

If I look into this, two grand's not cutting it.

BERNARD

It's a paid gig. For real. Aunt Letty gots loochie for days.

A doubtful frown from Nica, but she pockets the photo.

EXT. FREEWAY - NIGHT

Early evening along the main route from Baton Rouge to New Orleans.

Nica rides her chopper, wearing a minimalist helmet with eye shield, black gloves.

She exits into the Old Metairie district, a satellite city of the New Orleans metro.

EXT. LETTY'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The chopper is parked along the curb before a two story house on a street lush with old growth oak and hickory trees.

Nica rings the doorbell.

It is answered by LETTY LAGUERRE, a sturdy woman in her early 50s, of French American descent.

Letty nods at Nica and stands aside to let her in.

INT. LETTY'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Nica occupies an arm chair, surveying many decades worth of family artifacts and regional culture on the walls.

Letty enters with a coffee carafe and two cups on a sterling silver tray and sets it down on a couch between them.

NICA

Quite a place. Feels like I'm on a field trip to the museum.

LETTY

Four generations have occupied this house, back to 1896. My grandfather worked the Wood pumps to drain the swamps north of the ridge. Half of Metairie was nothing but cypress groves back then.

Nica nods, takes a cup of coffee. Letty rises.

LETTY (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. Do you take cream?

NICA

No ma'am. I usually take it sharp.

LETTY

Oh. Oh my. Do spirits go bad?

NICA

Not the liquid kind. The ones inside people, that's a toss up.

Letty opens a small painted box on the fireplace mantle and brings forth a half full bottle of brown liquor.

LETTY

My husband passed away fifteen years ago. This was his.

Nica takes the bottle, uncaps and smells. As she pours a shot into her coffee:

NICA
I'm honored.

LETTY
Not if you knew him, Lord bless the spirits that go bad. My grandmother called him an *embesil kochon*.

NICA
Pig?

LETTY
Sometimes it seems like there's a curse on the male side of our lineage.

Nica tests the coffee, nods approval.

NICA
Tell me about the girl.

Letty takes a deep breath. Tears form in her eyes.

INT. LETTY'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - (MINUTES LATER)

Letty has a photo album open to a page that pictures Yvella at various ages.

LETTY
Bernard said you knew her?

NICA
I looked after her a few times when he had to run an errand -- go get food, that kind of thing. That was mostly before she hit the rebellious teenage years.

LETTY
She had issues that nobody was helping her with. Certainly not Nadine, her miscreant sister.

NICA
You had two daughters?

LETTY
Yes... They had different fathers.

NICA

She older?

LETTY

Oh yes. Steeped in the ways of the world, missy Nadine is. Proud of her street smarts, her hustle, as they say nowadays. Fed Yvella weed and booze before she even hit puberty. Can you imagine, luring a girl with...with intellectual disabilities down that slippery slope?

NICA

That's what we're saying nowadays? Intellectual disabilities?

LETTY

Thirty, forty years ago, they would have said mildly retarded.

NICA

Yvella liked partying?

Letty nods reluctantly.

NICA (CONT'D)

Where can I find Nadine?

LETTY

Not anywhere nice... We haven't spoken in a few years.

NICA

And Nadine's father?

LETTY

Bottom of Lake Ponchartrain.

NICA

Yvella's father?

LETTY

Last I saw him was in the Morgue.

NICA

You weren't kidding about the male lineage.

Letty shakes her head at the sad truth.

LETTY

They say rooster one day, feather
duster the next.

Nica removes a more recent photo of the girl, maybe 15,
stares at it.

LETTY (CONT'D)

I can't stand it, not knowing. My
pretty little peach. She's more
than innocent, with her condition.
The police put her name on a
runaway list and they don't do
nothing else.

She falls back into the couch, covering her face as the
anguish pours forth. Nica passes a box of tissues to her.

LETTY (CONT'D)

Will you help? Please help. If you
find her, I put twenty grand aside
for you.

Nica purses her lips to stop an exclamation of surprise.

NICA

Can I keep this?

She tucks the photo into a pocket. Case accepted.

EXT. DARLING'S BAR - NIGHT

Nica's bike is now parked outside a bar along an urban street
in downtown Metairie. Being the middle of the week, the
streets are fairly quiet.

INT. DARLING'S BAR - NIGHT

The place is an upscale dive bar, half full. In a booth, Nica
leans into her phone trying to hear, a beer already
delivered.

NICA

(into phone)

I'm not asking you to drink. Since
when can't a cop take a meeting in
a bar?

She listens, many flavors of aggravation scrunching her
features.

NICA (CONT'D)

Yeah I know goddamn Lafreniere park. Meet at the swing set or the slide? ... Okay, gimme fifteen.

She disconnects. The frown fades, then she begins to drain the beer with less than casual impetus.

EXT. LAFRENIERE PARK - NIGHT

Nica sits on a bench under a willow tree along the central lagoon, a street light casting feathery shadows.

MARK CRENSHAW approaches, a police detective in his mid 30s, attired in a light-weight fabric suit. He is fit and lean, but despite neat grooming something of a hooligan lurks under the surface.

MARK

Captain said not on duty. Sorry.

NICA

That's my man.

He takes a seat.

MARK

Almost got knocked down to D-1, narco.

NICA

That's bad?

MARK

The worst. Harveys, 39ers, local Norteños. Thought about getting my PI ticket if it came to that.

She smiles wryly, without humor attached. Hands him the photo of Yvella.

NICA

I'm looking for this girl, Yvella Laguerre. Goes by Eva, sometimes.

MARK

Recent photo?

NICA

Maybe a year or two old. Out on the streets somewhere. Mom's worried sick.

(MORE)

NICA (CONT'D)

Father dead, might have been mixed up in Cuban versus Brazilian players.

MARK

Well, shit. Don't know what I can do.

NICA

Run some background, see what comes up. Nothing more. Also her sister, Nadine.

MARK

(quoting)
Nothing more.

NICA

Please. She's just a girl and not all there. Developmental stuff.

MARK

So not the sharpest --

NICA

Don't. Just don't. I used to watch her sometimes. She was the sweetest kid you ever met. Besides, it's a real case with a real payday and I'm shit-out-of-luck broke.

He nods, chastened. A drawn out moment of silence, then a hard look at her.

NICA (CONT'D)

What?

MARK

You're the only lady I know that doesn't carry a purse.

NICA

I ride a bike with saddlebags. I dress up sometimes. You've seen me in a dress... What, you want to get a mani-pedi together?

He chuckles at the thought.

NICA (CONT'D)

Will you do it or not?

He hesitates, back to thinking it over. Finally sighs.

EXT. YOUNG DRAGONS ACADEMY - DAY

A martial arts gym on the outskirts of Baton Rouge proper, the name emblazoned across the window. Nica's Vespa is parked at the curb.

INT. ACADEMY - DAY

Nica, in a Gi with black belt, instructs a class of grade school kids.

Her deportment is weary and resigned as she goes through the motions.

At one point she notices Bernard looking in on the class.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

The sun is setting as Nica and Bernard ride side by side along a country road that follows a Mississippi tributary, the banks overgrown with swamp tupelos and paw paw trees.

EXT. RIVER BANK - DAY

Parked and overlooking a mildly steep bank down to the river, Bernard opens a saddle bag and extracts two silver revolvers. He passes one to Nica.

She feels the weight, regards the gun with deep misgivings.

NICA
This is legal?

BERNARD
Got a trapper's license on me.

NICA
I don't see any nutria.

BERNARD
Patience. Take a soft focus. Look --

He points at a very large swamp rat near the opposite bank. She frowns, keeping the gun pointed at the ground.

NICA
Take the shot?

BERNARD
No. Can't eat it if I can't get to it.

She nods. After a moment, she raises the gun, both hands, and takes a practice aim at the rodent. Her hands are not steady.

BERNARD (CONT'D)

Aunt Letty give you anything good?

NICA

Her school, couple friends' names. I called them. They haven't seen Yvella in days. One of them said she had a ride after school?

BERNARD

No way. She walks to school, it's three blocks.

NICA

I requested video from the principal. Might be something to go on.

BERNARD

(points)

There we go --

A beaver-sized rodent ambles along their bank. She raises the revolver, takes a solid stance.

Her hands shake. She hisses out a compressed breath, calms her respiration. Hands still tremble. The forced determination on her face dissolves.

BERNARD (CONT'D)

You got it. Don't think about it.

NICA

I can't.

BERNARD

You can. Come on, I'll make a stew. There's three days of meat on that bugger.

She lowers the weapon.

NICA

Not happening.

Bernard is about to urge her on more, but then relents. He aims and shoots, killing the animal.

INT. NICA'S TRAILER - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Dual monitors are active above a kludged stack of recording and editing gear, all tucked neatly into a corner.

Nica watches a grainy video of a car pulling up at the curb, the shot distant, and then a girl of sixteen walks over and gets in.

She pauses the video, rewinds, watches it again. She starts sooner, but the shot of the car is no clearer. Zooming in makes it worse.

She starts another video playing on the other screen. It's from a phone but has sound and is much clearer.

A birthday party, with YOUNG YVELLA, 12, the center of attention. A table with cake is set up under Nica's awning.

Joking and laughter. Yvella's smile is brilliant and the innocence of her delight infectious.

Nica's cell rings. It's plugged into her rig and she brings it up on a speaker.

NICA

Mark. How'd we do?

MARK

(on speaker)

Old crewe family, nothing on record but a history of boozing it, few nights in the tank here and there, couple DUIs. The wild card is the half sister, Nadine.

NICA

How's that?

MARK

Apparently crossed the tracks as soon as she discovered her boobs could make bank.

NICA

Strip clubs?

MARK

I've got three on file, but she doesn't work at any of them currently. Here's a few aliases for you: Diane Diamonds, Scarlet Fire, Roxy Rose.

Nica jots the names down.

NICA
Thanks, Mark.

MARK
You want me to come out?

NICA
Hold off. I'll be down your way
tomorrow. Later.

She disconnects. After a moment more of staring at video, she turns everything off.

She goes to the door and opens it, looks out at the sky. No stars, no moon. No rain.

EXT. MISSISSIPPI RIVER - NIGHT

Nica walks along the shore, a trail adjacent to the trailer park. The river is swiftly moving darkness, but various lights from the units above shed some light.

At a small boat dock, she pauses. Pensive.

In the distance above, a sound interrupts her reverie. Wheezing musical notes, an accordion, badly played, stopping and starting. Straining.

Nica scowls in annoyance. The rain starts, just a sprinkle, but she rushes up the bank toward a porch light.

EXT. BIG BOB'S PLACE -- NIGHT

Big Bob, 42, is exactly that, 6'4", two-eighty, scraggly beard, rough features, dressed in jeans and a leather vest with nothing under it.

Multiple bug zappers cast garish yellow light over a porch facing the river.

He works a classic button and keys accordion, struggling to make a coherent sound, picking each note tentatively. A bottle of whiskey accompanies him.

Nica arrives from the river just as the rain begins to gush. He stops playing.

BIG BOB
Trying to learn this cockamamie
thing.

NICA
Why?

BIG BOB
Why what?

NICA
You could just listen to someone
who knows how to play it. Enjoy
life, you know?

BIG BOB
That what you're doing? How about I
pretend to play, and you pretend to
dance.

He starts hauling on the bellows, but Nica takes a seat next
to him. After a frustrated moment, he stops.

BIG BOB (CONT'D)
You don't want to learn nothing
new? All I see you do is ride your
bike and sulk. Sister sulk.

NICA
I sulk?

BIG BOB
Boo-hoo. Bad things happened on the
police force and now I'm a stupid,
lame-ass civilian, pouting up and
down the Mississippi like a drowned
possum.

Nica shrugs casually, but the remark digs under her skin.

NICA
I'm working. I got some cases.

BIG BOB
Yeah? Skip tracing? Cheatin'
housewives? Serving subpoenas?

She lets the sarcasm pass, looking out at the rainfall.

NICA
Hey, the ride I never go on with
Copperheads --

BIG BOB
Bongs n' Boobs?

NICA
How many strip joints y'all hit on
the last ride?

BIG BOB
I don't know. Four or five? Not
like the old days when it was a
three day run. Too many cops
looking out for us now.
(smarmy)
Buzzed driving is drunk driving.

NICA
So you stayed local?

He nods, shrugs, casts a wary eye on her.

NICA (CONT'D)
I'm looking for a young lady in
that line of work. Name's Nadine.

BIG BOB
Our little retard's sister?

NICA
She's not that far on the spectrum.
And we don't use that word anymore.

BIG BOB
Who's we?

NICA
Come on. Yvella's gone missing and
Nadine's just about my only lead at
this point. How'd you know that's
her sister, anyway?

BIG BOB
Yvella told me. She says:
(mock girl's voice)
My sister is a fancy dancer. She
shows her boobies.

NICA
Jesus.

Nica goes quiet, thinking hard about all the implications.

BIG BOB
We saw her. At Mandragons. Tipped
her gooder 'n that, tell you what.

NICA
When was that?

BIG BOB

On the last Bongs n' Boobs. Couple months ago?

NICA

Never heard of the place. Where?

BIG BOB

Way down beyonder off 347, on the Bayou Teche. There's a gate with a derelict red truck. You say Copperheads, you're in, sister sulk. Maybe get some complimentary cake on your lap.

NICA

So, private club?

BIG BOB

Word of mouth. Most girls there are shy of twenty one.

Nica returns her gaze to the dark night rain.

INT. NICA'S TRAILER - NIGHT

In bed, on top of her blankets, Nica stares at the ceiling, lulled by the pattering of rain and two fans running.

THUMP THUMP -- at her front door.

INT. LIVING ROOM

She pauses at the front door. Unlocks the deadbolt but keeps a safety chain in place.

Outside, on her porch, is ALISON TERREL, early 20s. Half her head is missing and blood soaks her shoulders.

INT. BEDROOM

Nica startles awake. She sits up but her head immediately sinks into her hands.

Then she pushes to her feet.

INT. LIVING ROOM

The same ritual, chill-out music, the calming breaths, martial arts forms. Slow, practiced, until --

FLASH ON -- the dead girl. A GUN SHOT.

Nica explodes in violent motion, a punch and kick of unrequited anger.

Followed by ragged breathing.

EXT. NICA'S TRAILER - DAY

An overcast morning, muggy. Nica sits on her porch steps sipping her coffee plus.

A motorcycle comes at a crawl down the lane, the rider wearing full weather protection.

Nica stands and waves the bike over.

The rider pulls under her awning and kills the motor. The gas tank is also adorned with bright copper plating.

He removes his helmet and shakes out long frizzy hair. He is D'ARTAGNAN (DART) CHENEVERT, mid 30s, hard partier and rough rider.

DART

Cherry.

NICA

Chery, as you know.

DART

Fruit with stone.

NICA

Out early or go all night?

DART

Woke up in a rowboat on Mobile Bay...

He shakes his head, mystified.

NICA

Wanna go to Mandragons with me?

DART

With you? Hell the fuck no. You shoulda gone on the ride with us.

NICA

Drinks're on me.

He stares at her blankly.

NICA (CONT'D)

And food. I just need to talk to a girl there. It's business.

DART

I'm worn slap out. Gotta sleep, like a shit-ton.

NICA

Tonight.

He thinks it over a moment, relents.

DART

Only if it's not raining.

NICA

It's July in Louisiana.

DART

Only, if, not.

NICA

Deal. Thanks, Dart.

He puts his helmet back on and backpedals the bike.

EXT. HIGHWAY - NIGHT

Rain pelts the two motorcyclists, streaking through their headlights like stars entering warp speed.

EXT. THE GATE - NIGHT

They pull over to a gate flanked by a derelict red pickup truck. A guard gets out under an umbrella and speaks with Dart. The guard drags the gate open and waves them inside.

EXT. MANDRAGONS BAR - NIGHT

It's a single story old ranch house made into a bar. Various trucks and motorcycles are randomly parked outside. Red string lights strobe under the rain gutters.

They park near a barn and hustle for the door.

INT. MANDRAGONS BAR - NIGHT

Not too crowded inside, still early. Two girls work one end of the bar, in pasties and thongs.

Nica and Dart hang wet jackets and helmets on pegs inside the door, then take seats at the quiet end of the bar. He signals for drinks, a regular with known tastes.

DART

See all the fun you're missing?

She hides a sneer.

DART (CONT'D)

No lady action, no looky-look for the Cherry? I been wondering about your loyalties.

NICA

Don't call me Cherry.

Shots of whiskey arrive. They click glasses. He pounds the shot, she sips.

DART

Long as we're drinking buddies, tell me what happened. All I got is rumors and tall tales.

Nica's features take a dive. She is less than comfortable.

NICA

It was a hostage negotiation that went bad. A hundred percent bad.

DART

I heard your partner got assed-out.

NICA

Not my partner, but four people died. I got this.

She parts her hair to reveal the scarred trench across her skull. Dart's raised eyebrows ask the follow up question.

NICA (CONT'D)

I took the shot. He had a young lady by the throat, gun to her head, and I shot him between the eyes. His gun discharged. Every gun went off...

Dart hesitates, but he has to know.

DART

Why'd you shoot?

NICA

He said something that set me off
and I shot him without even
thinking about it.

FLASHBACK INT. NIGHTCLUB - NIGHT

Four people in an abandoned nightclub lit by construction
lights on tripods.

Alison Terrell is a young street walker in a mini skirt, held
around the neck by JALEN PEROUD, late 20s, gun to her temple.

Next to Jalen is another gang-banger with a gun leveled at a
police detective in a suit.

Nica, a uniformed officer, holds her weapon leveled at Jalen
though he hides behind his hostage.

JALEN

Lose the jammies or the street got
one less deadbeat hooker.

A strained moment, then Nica lowers her weapon a couple
inches.

Then it's back up. BAM. She nails Jalen between the eyes. But
his finger squeezes, blowing the side of Alison's head away.

An eruption of gunfire. The police detective is hit. Nica
shoots the gang-banger.

Movement from the shadows and the silhouette of a large,
heavy man appears and -- BAM -- Nica spins, fires wildly,
then crashes to the floor.

Blood streams and pools from her head.

END FLASHBACK

Dart's mouth hangs open, then snaps closed.

NICA

Half an inch to the right and I'd
be dead, too.

DART

Jee-sus! Sorry.

NICA

I walked... Hey, the bartender
friendly?

DART

Sorta.

She catches his eye and he makes his way over. A big guy, a big gut, an eye patch.

NICA

I have some news for one of your dancers. Nadine Ray.

No response.

NICA (CONT'D)

Diane Diamond? Roxy Rose?

The bartender remains silent, a mean, distrustful silence. Nica places a \$100 bill on the bar.

BARTENDER

Who's asking?

NICA

Tell her it's Nica, from the trailer park. Bernard is my neighbor.

BARTENDER

I know Bernardo.
(looks at Dart)
I know this swamp rat, too.

DART

She rides with Copperheads.
Sometimes.

BARTENDER

She goes on in fifteen minutes.
Don't hang her up.

He shambles off. The dancers' DJ makes an announcement.

DJ

(on speakers)
Ladies and gentlemen, Pixie Dust.

A new dancer comes out.

DART

Hey, you don't need me anymore,
right?

She scowls at his eagerness but gladly shoos him away. He migrates to the far end to catch Pixie Dust.

NADINE RAY, 22, approaches and stops, hands on both hips, sizing Nica up. She's thin but hardened, a childhood lost far too early. T-shirt and hot pants, blond hair tipped red.

NICA
Buy you a drink?

NADINE
Not before work. I remember you.
You're a cop.

Nica flashes her PI ticket.

NICA
Not any more.

Derisive smile from the former redhead.

NADINE
That's the tits.

NICA
Nowadays I ride with Copperheads.

NADINE
You're in a mud hole, lady. You
should get outta here.

NICA
It's about your sister. She's
missing. Aunt Letty hired me to
look around.

NADINE
Yvella's missing? Since when?

NICA
Couple days.

Nica tabs through her phone, holds up a photo of the car from the schoolyard.

NICA (CONT'D)
Recognize the wheels?

Nadine shakes her head, looks again, seems to bite back on something.

NADINE
Christ. I hope to god... I hope she
didn't go to Easy Street. I'll kill
that motherfucker, I swear to god.

Nica holds a hand up for calm.

NICA
Nadine... First off, where's Easy
Street?

Nadine looks away into pure darkness.

NADINE
Ever heard the H in Jesus H Christ
stands for heroine? I was strung
out. It was always a nightmare.
They did things to you there...

She lifts the hem of her T-shirt, shows her backside and
numerous small scars on both sides of the pelvic saddle.

NICA
What in hell's that?

NADINE
They took something out. Science
stuff. I think for transplanting
or, you know...

Nica frowns at the marks, equally perplexed and disturbed.

NICA
And they fed you drugs? That the
deal?

Nadine nods, not meeting Nica's eyes.

NADINE
If you get pregnant... They, uh...

NICA
But you left. They're not holding
anyone against their will?

NADINE
I wouldn't go back after Holly...
She came back, said they gave her a
vaccine for HIV.

LISA
There's no such thing.

NADINE
They took her blood out and put it
back in. For two months. But she
wasn't right after a while. Became
allergic to everything, and...she
got AIDS.

NICA
Where is this place?

NADINE
I don't know. Toro calls Demko and he brings you.

NICA
Toro? Demko? I need more.

NADINE
Demko's a bastard but nothing compared to a lady called Jarta. She's meaner than Satan. I have nightmares about her all the time. All the time.

NICA
How do I find any of them? Let's start with this Toro.

Fear dawns on Nadine's face. Pain no longer at a distance, mind scrambled.

NADINE
Oh, poor little Eva. Oh my god.

Deer in the headlights. Nadine retreats a couple steps.

NICA
I want to find her. Help me, Nadine.

But the terror is palpable and it seems Nadine is about to throw up.

NADINE
They gave me something strong. I remember a ship, like - like a graveyard ship, and Jarta - she has a weird eye, all shiny like death.

She shakes her head as tears wet her own eyes.

NADINE (CONT'D)
I'm sorry.

The bartender returns, slaps a palm down hard.

BARTENDER
You're done here.

He indicates the door. Nadine hastens off.

EXT. MANDRAGONS BAR - NIGHT

The rain has stopped but the clouds keep the sky dark and brooding.

Nica makes it to her bike as two men approach, both local types. BART is well built, EDDY is lean. Bart unslings his belt and wraps his fist. Eddy tosses and catches a roll of dimes.

BART
Bitch bacon don't come out here.

NICA
I'm not a cop.

EDDY
Sure look like one to me.

NICA
Maybe get your eyes checked.

They both stop a few feet away. Eddy spits brown juice from a lump tucked into his lower lip.

EDDY
Wha'd she say? You hear that?

NICA
Have 'em look in your ears while they're at it. Might be something's festering in there.

Incredulous looks, causing them both to swell up.

NICA (CONT'D)
Don't sweat it, guys. I'm outta here.

BART
The hell you say.

Bart steps in and swipes a backhand slap at her. Nica ducks to the side and -- WHACK -- lands a boot against the side of his head.

He staggers, she drives in with fists and elbows.

He lands a glancing blow to her chin.

Eddy throws a punch, catches her cheek. She hammers back, three rapid strikes -- WHAP WHAP WHAP -- the roll of dimes lands in the mud.

Enraged Bart bull-rushes.

Nica slings his weight into her bike. Drops a solid fist into his kidneys.

He snags her hair and lashes her face with the now loose belt. She catches it and wraps it around his neck.

Eddy reaches for a knife as Nica pins Bart against the bike. She side-kicks -- SNAP -- Eddy's jaw unhinges. The plug of chaw follows him down.

She drags the nearly strangled Bart off her bike.

But Nica isn't satisfied. She stomps full force on his hand. Choking, he rolls onto his back to clutch broken fingers. She kicks his face hard.

Then it's Eddy's turn. She dishes out unwarranted punishment, driven by savage forces from her darkest depths, shattering bones and spilling more blood. Finally, it's over.

NICA

Boys, I appreciate the hospitality.

She climbs on her bike, starts it and revs the engine.

A man emerges from the shadows of the bar. He is DEMKO, an obdurate block of toughness, talking on a phone and following Nica's exit. A pronounced limp leans him to one side.

DEMKO

(into phone)

Boss. You ain't gonna like it.

Nica swings her bike around, passing close to the bar's entrance. She locks eyes with Demko. She slows, then halts the bike.

She roars on the throttle, cutting off his ability to talk on the phone.

He lowers it and they lock eyes. She defiantly blasts him with noise until he retreats back inside.

EXT. SHIPPING WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

The facility sits close to the Mississippi with a number of other industrial buildings, many long abandoned. Signage announces: ESSCO SHIPPING.

INT. SHIPPING WAREHOUSE - PATIENT ROOM - NIGHT

Yvella and CARMEN HOWARD, 21, share a makeshift hospital room. The beds and equipment are authentic, but the walls and floor are industrial.

Yvella wears a patient gown, an IV in her arm. She is dopey-eyed but cleaner than her street aspect. She watches a man standing by Carmen's bed.

RAIDEN CHERENKOV, 60, is a scientist trapped in a business suit, hair somewhat unkempt. His sullen eyes twitch restlessly. Carmen is teary-eyed and wailing.

CARMEN

I wanted my baby. You can't just take it.

RAIDEN

I don't make the rules. You had choices.

CARMEN

I didn't choose to come here!

YVELLA

I want my special baby.

Raiden, frustrated in the face of Carmen's anguish, turns to Yvella.

RAIDEN

Another week or two and we should have some results.

Yvella's eyes move sluggishly to him and her words are slurred and jumbled.

YVELLA

You said make me bedder. Smart girl, a fancy girl.

RAIDEN

Remember what we talked about. DNA?

YVELLA

It's stuff inside me you said you good fix.

RAIDEN

To be precise, we're looking for impaired genes that encode epigenetic regulators of gene expression. I, uh...

He knows any scientific explanation is lost on her, but he presses on as Carmen continues to grieve.

RAIDEN (CONT'D)

Not so much cure, as find the cause. That's what we don't know. What causes the chromosomal abnormalities... I'm sorry, you're a very sweet young lady, but I want you to understand why you're here and what we hope to accomplish.

YVELLA

(lullaby)

Smart little baby, fancy girl,
needs her special baby. Doc gives
me that special baby.

He shoots a painful glance at the IV. *Special baby.*

Enter Jarta, her face sharply defined by inner fury. Yvella shrinks back in terror, eyes no longer dull, and Carmen goes silent and faces the wall.

JARTA

(to Raiden)

We have a situation. Office, now.

The words issued like knife jabs. Without further ado, she exits.

Raiden follows, leaving Yvella in a state of agitated abandonment.

INT. HALLWAY

Raiden hustles along at her heels.

RAIDEN

What is so urgent --

Jarta whirls on him.

JARTA

Why are you wasting time talking to whores?

RAIDEN

She's - she's - shouldn't even be here. I can't cure her mental impairments.

JARTA

You said, your own words, that if you could find the cause of retardation, we'd be billionaires.

RAIDEN

I said we could make great advances in genetics. Possibly mediate or prevent the DNA methylation of --

JARTA

Save it for your Nobel prize speech. I got her here, you handle it. I don't see you mooning over the other girls.

RAIDEN

I...well -- she's --

She pushes into an office, leaving the door open for him to sheepishly follow.

INT. OFFICE - NIGHT

Raiden sits behind a desk as Jarta paces, phone to ear. He pours a cocktail out of a shaker into a coffee mug.

JARTA

(into phone)

You're sure it was her? ... They couldn't handle one woman?

Her frame is made of nothing but muscle and tendon and she stalks the carpet like a jaguar.

JARTA (CONT'D)

All right. You need to personally escort that little pole-dancing twat to the bus station and buy her a ticket to somewhere far, far away.

RAIDEN

Seattle, or --

She cuts his throat with her glare. He goes back to his cocktail.

JARTA

I have new orders for those two imbeciles. Send them to Purcell's dock... Yes, now!

She ends the call.

RAIDEN

What are you going to do?

JARTA

Reward ineptitude.

RAIDEN

I don't wish violence. No more,
please. We can't sustain --

She lands both fists on his desk and gives him her full attention. Her voice is calm but frosty.

JARTA

Did I ask you, Doc? You might be the brain trust, but you're also an employee. You run the science, I run the business. I thought we were clear on that.

His lips tremble. He nods meekly.

JARTA (CONT'D)

Good. No more local oafs. Word already got out and our associates in D.C. are sending a couple fixers.

RAIDEN

Fixers? What are you talking about?

JARTA

As you are well aware, most of our financing comes from the Gokudo syndicate and the distribution is handled by your pals from the Russian Bratva. So if there's any kind of problem and we don't take care of it, they do. They're not known as the extreme path for no reason.

RAIDEN

Who's --

JARTA

I don't fucking know who. They said the daisho would surgically remove the heat. No guns, no mess. Surgically remove.

RAIDEN

They said -- our heat -- what's --

JARTA

The cop that blew Demko's kneecap off? She's back. Yeah. And now she's snooping around again. It's out of my hands.

He issues a huff of dread. She treats him to a tight smile of malevolence.

EXT. MARK'S PLACE -- NIGHT

Outer suburbs of New Orleans. Nica pulls her bike into a driveway and dismounts.

INT. CRENSHAW'S PLACE - NIGHT

From inside, Mark opens the door. His eyes go wide in astonishment at her condition, lips and one eye now swollen.

MARK

You weren't kidding.

She shows her raw knuckles, also swelling up.

NICA

I'm outta punching shape. But I wouldn't want to be them.

He steps aside to let her in. She crowds him in the doorway and moves into his arms.

INT. CRENSHAW'S PLACE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Two glasses, ice, tequila pours. Mark hands one to Nica. She smirks, puts it down, grabs the bottle and doubles the booze quotient.

Mark leans against the island that separates kitchen from living room.

NICA

Everything hurts.

MARK

What the hell were you doing out at that werewolf bar?

She ignores him while untucking her T-shirt to inspect her torso. Red blotches darken into bruises.

MARK (CONT'D)
Christ Almighty.

She drains the drink. Slaps the glass down, reaches for the bottle. Mark puts a hand on it.

MARK (CONT'D)
Easy. I got something better.

Mark goes into the kitchen.

INT. CRENSHAW'S PLACE (A MINUTE LATER)

Nica now has two blue ice bags. She applies one to her hand and holds the other to her jaw. A bracing sigh of relief.

MARK
You're a hundred percent on that?
She said Demko?

Nica nods, suspicious of the level of his concern. Mark's countenance has gone sober, his gaze far away.

NICA
What?

He glances at her, her battered condition.

MARK
I could land in serious trouble
divulging anything to a civvie.

NICA
You're already in a world of
trouble for screwing me, the
pariah.

He shows empty hands, knowing full well.

NICA (CONT'D)
Come on. I took a beating to dig up
a couple names. What's the
relevance?

MARK
We were -- still are --
investigating what we believe is a
human trafficking ring run by
Raider Essco. So far, he's a spook.
(MORE)

MARK (CONT'D)

Been on it for two years now without much luck. This Jarta you mentioned, full name Ermenjarta Adonna, we're aware of her. Brazilian born crime figure. Ruthless, cold-blooded, and now, apparently, Essco's enforcer.

NICA

What's that have to do with Mandragons and two swampbillies attacking me?

Mark clears his throat, veering into an uncomfortable zone.

MARK

You're not going to like this...

NICA

Try me.

MARK

During the hostage crisis, the man you shot --

NICA

Jalen Peroud. Shot his partner, too, but not...before...

MARK

I'm not getting at that. My partner knew what he was risking and I should have been there instead of you. That's a fact.

She chokes on the hardened emotions of a trauma that has reshaped her life.

MARK (CONT'D)

The other man that shot you, the mystery man. The reason he didn't finish the job by putting one between your eyes was because you blew his kneecap off. We got DNA samples.

NICA

Why didn't you tell me this?

MARK

It took quite some time to get a match from the SVR. Basically the Soviet CIA... That man was Demko.

The revelation freezes Nica.

NICA

It's the same thing? What is it? I mean, the girl at the bar had fucking excision scars.

MARK

I don't know.

NICA

Okay, then what the hell is a graveyard ship?

MARK

I don't suppose leave it to the police is going to deter you?

NICA

Tell me.

MARK

At the moment, I can't. It, him, the whole case, is under active investigation.

NICA

They had no reason to attack me. What do you know about that?

MARK

We had a guy in there for over a year. Didn't come up with anything egregious. No real reason to shut it down.

NICA

Somebody there didn't like me making inquiries. There's that.

A standoff of sorts ensues. Mark is deeply conflicted but holding his ground.

NICA (CONT'D)

Yvella's seventeen and not intellectually equipped to know how much danger she's in. So tell me about Demko.

MARK

You quit. You resigned. There's a line, like it or not. There's a line.

She glowers, yet knows it's true.

NICA
I'm still going after her.

He hangs his head in resignation.

EXT. PURCELL'S DOCK - NIGHT

Bart and Eddy share a small flask of booze, waiting in a beater of a car, all windows down. The night is rich with the buzzing hum of insects and bird calls.

Bart's hand is wrapped in multiple stretch bandages. Eddy has a wad of tissue in one nostril. Both their faces are swollen, bruised purple, lips lacerated.

The dock is isolated, just a private boat launch long forgotten, surrounded by willows and swamp tupelos.

Out of the darkness Jarta appears, a dark silhouette between the car and the glimmering river.

BART
Who in hell's half acre is that?!

Both men sit up straighter. Eddy fumbles for a flashlight and turns it on.

For a brief moment, one eye flares brilliantly.

Then many flares -- the windshield, the bodies, the seats are pierced by semiautomatic rounds.

Silence. Then a mockingbird begins singing. The crickets resume.

Jarta opens the driver's door, places Bart's boot on the gas pedal, starts the motor. She jams the stick into drive and sends the vehicle into the river.

INT. NICA'S TRAILER - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Nica lies awake in her bed, staring at the ceiling. The night is sweltering. Both fans run. A bullfrog croaks relentlessly.

She swings off the bed, assumes the prayer position with her hands and tries to center her awareness.

FLASHES ON --

-- kicking Bart's face after he was down.

-- stomping on the prone form of Eddy.

Nica refocuses on routine, her routine against PTSD, psychotic anger, tormenting guilt.

EXT. TRAILER PARK - DAY

Sunlight has broken through an overcast sky and the earth is already steaming moisture up into the hot air, air that THRUMS with motorcycles warming up.

Half a dozen Copperheads have gathered in the central lane, revving, shouting, putting on gloves and helmets.

Nica emerges onto her porch, coffee mug in hand, clearly annoyed by the disturbance.

One bike putters over and Dart removes his helmet.

DART

Damn.

Nica smiles painfully, touches her swollen lip.

DART (CONT'D)

Sorry I wasn't out there.

NICA

You would've been in the way.

DART

Oh shit!

He cringes at the barb.

NICA

What was your text to me about?

He hops off his bike and takes out his phone, brings up a video.

DART

So you can't take photos or videos of the girls without their consent, and without boo-coo cash. Well, I got a thing for Pixie Dust and I'm in the private area getting some footage and I see this --

VIDEO ON THE PHONE

-- Just beyond the dancing stripper Demko can be seen gesturing angrily and snarling into his phone.

NICA
Yeah, that's him. Can you isolate
that, send me a copy?

DART
Sure. What do you want, her rack,
her ass --

She presses a palm against his mouth to stop the banter.

DART (CONT'D)
Okay, no problem, seeing as how you
got pounded.

NICA
I remained on my feet.

The motorcycles start to move out. Dart hustles back to his
bike and hurries to join them.

Nica returns to her porch rail as Bernard hustles over to
lean on it next to her.

NICA (CONT'D)
Did I miss something about a ride?

BERNARD
Naw. It's a sunny day in July is
all. They're excited.

NICA
It's going to be two hundred
degrees in less than an hour.

They both shake their heads at the overbearing harshness of
southern summers. Nica swats at the rising tide of gnats.

NICA (CONT'D)
Hell with this.

BERNARD
Hey, you hear anything? Cause Dart
said --

NICA
Come on.

She holds the screen door open for him as she returns inside.

INT. NICA'S TRAILER - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Bernard opens the freezer and drops several ice cubes into a
cup of coffee. Nica sits at the table.

BERNARD
Nadine seemed okay?

NICA
She had every manner of regret
smeared all over her face.

BERNARD
Yeah. She admitted to Letty giving
her sister weed. Thought it would
bring her out of her shell.

NICA
That's not a shell.

He holds up hands to concede the point. *Fair enough.*

BERNARD
You show her the car from school?

NICA
Yeah. Nothing doing.

BERNARD
But Nadine's been to this place and
she don't know nothing? Did they
roofie her or something?

NICA
Or something. Everything happened
through a man named Toro.

BERNARD
Toro? She said that?

NICA
Her exact words... No sunshine ride
for you?

BERNARD
I got too much on my mind. All I
can think about is little Eva out
there on the streets, all doped up,
some big ape watching over her.

Nica nods in agreement.

BERNARD (CONT'D)
Leave this Toro to me. I got
contacts like Motel 6 got bedbugs.

NICA
Okay. I'm going back to the school.
Somebody's gotta know something.

They both drink coffee and stare into dark thoughts.

EXT. SCHOOL QUAD - DAY

A small outdoor space enclosed by buildings on three sides. Nica sits on a concrete block.

SAWYER DAVIDSON, mid teens, approaches. He's a gangly kid and clearly suspicious and like Yvella, developmentally disabled.

NICA

Hi. Dominique Chery.

He nods, posture rigid, not accepting her hand.

SAWYER

Principal Carter said you wanted to see me.

NICA

I'm trying to find Yvella. Her aunt Letty asked me to look around.

A troubled expression supplants his suspicious glower.

SAWYER

So?

NICA

You were giving her a lift home for a while.

SAWYER

So? That's not against the law.

NICA

I'm not saying it is, or that you're implicated in any way. I'm just asking questions.

SAWYER

So? Anybody can ask questions.

Frustrated, Nica rises to her feet, which causes Sawyer to dodge back a few steps.

SAWYER (CONT'D)

You can't arrest me!

NICA

I'm not a cop. I'm not here to arrest anybody.

SAWYER

I didn't try anything. She wasn't my girlfriend. She wouldn't even kiss me. I said I'd show her how, but she said I'm not old enough. I am. I can show you.

Nica raises placating hands.

NICA

I believe you, Sawyer.

She shows him the photo on her phone.

NICA (CONT'D)

Do you know who drives this car? Did they start giving her a ride home instead of you?

SAWYER

Toby Slick. He told me to fuck off!

He barks out *fuck off*.

NICA

You know him?

SAWYER

He's a dealer and he's a creep. But Yvella said for me to chill out or I'd never get to kiss her.

NICA

Do you know where I can find Toby?

Sawyer shakes his head. He's very distressed, limbs twitchy, eyes flickering around the quad.

NICA (CONT'D)

Do you know anything about him?

SAWYER

Sometimes there's girls in his car. The bad kind.

NICA

From gangs?

SAWYER

No. Nasty little hoes.

NICA

How do you know that?

SAWYER

You can see. He's from 7th Ward or Saint Roch. He's a Melph. They have girls to do whoring and stuff. I heard about it.

NICA

I thought Melphs were 3rd Ward.

SAWYER

Everything's different after Katrina. You'd know that if you lived here.

Nica's turn for a troubled expression.

SAWYER (CONT'D)

If you try to find them you'll get raped, and shot, and probably stabbed, too, and then they'll drown your ass in the river. They do stuff. Yvella should stick with me. All I wanted was a girlfriend.

Despite his bravado, the innocence of his remark draws sympathy from Nica.

NICA

Thanks, Sawyer.

SAWYER

Are you going to find her?

She nods. He hangs his head a moment, then heads back inside.

EXT. CITY STREET - DAY

Mark pulls to the curb in an unmarked car. Nica, coffee in hand, gets in. She hands him the coffee.

MARK

Thanks. What's the name?

NICA

You first.

MARK

We're going to Louisiana State. We have some equipment manifests tied to Raiden Essco.

He takes a long pull of coffee, starts the car.

INT. UNMARKED VEHICLE - TRAVELING - DAY

Mark swings out into traffic.

NICA
Equipment? For human trafficking?

MARK
That's what we're going to find
out.

Nica waits for more but Mark is not forthcoming.

NICA
Toby Slick. He picked Yvella up
after school. I'm led to believe
he's a pimp or runner for the Young
Melph Mafia.

MARK
I'll call it in. Nice work,
gumshoe.

NICA
Gumshoe. You see me in a fedora?

He grins, a bit lasciviously. She swats his arm.

NICA (CONT'D)
What about the video I sent, from
Mandrags? You ID that mug, face
like a mudslide, eyes chipped out
of a statue, chin something he
rents out to a boxing gym once a
week.

MARK
I withdraw the gumshoe remark.

NICA
It's him, isn't it? I think my
memory leaked out of my head.

She touches the scar on her temple.

MARK
That video tied it together.
Definitely Demko. The manifest,
from D.M. Co, was paid for by an
account we know Essco uses.

NICA
What the hell is all this?

Mark tips his head pointedly in the direction they travel.

EXT. UNIVERSITY CAMPUS - DAY

They both exit the parked car. A modern office building contrasts against some of the older campus buildings.

The sun is gone and they step quickly under a light drizzle.

INT. FACULTY OFFICE - DAY

An office Manager watches them as Mark stands by a fax machine and receives several pages. He waves them at the Manager.

MARK

Thank you.

MANAGER

You can go in.

She tabs an intercom button.

INT. DEAN'S OFFICE - DAY

Professor OLIVIA CLARKE, 58, inspects the seated visitors over the rim of her glasses, fingers steepled.

OLIVIA

What can I do that might help us locate our rogue scientist?

MARK

Raiden Essco taught class here?

OLIVIA

Raiden Cherenkov certainly did. I thought that was the Raiden to which you were referring?

A shared glance between Mark and Nica.

MARK

Okay... We have a few leads. This just came in.

(consults faxes)

Does any of this equipment bring anything to mind? Pipettors. Vacuum flask aspiration devices.

(MORE)

MARK (CONT'D)

Phase-contrast, confocal and
fluorescence microscopes? A flow
cytometer. Cryogenic biosafety --

OLIVIA

We have all that equipment here in
our biology labs.

He hands her the papers. She scans.

MARK

Purchased together, those specific
items might be used for...?

OLIVIA

More than likely for cell-line
culturing. Genetic research.

MARK

How long was this Raiden Cherenkov
a lecturer here for?

OLIVIA

Almost five years. He was
brilliant. The students loved him.
Staff... Let's just say he was not
a social mixer. Kept to himself.
Always seemed to have an agenda
that I thought had to do with his
legal status here, but...

She whisks the ellipsis out the window. Nica and Mark lean
into their thoughts. On a hunch, Mark displays a photo on his
phone of Demko.

MARK

Ever have contact or see this man
on campus?

She shakes her head.

MARK (CONT'D)

Was Cherenkov frustrated here?
Language barrier? Cultural barrier?

OLIVIA

Oh, you could say that. I'm sure it
was much easier for his research in
Russia, and China for that matter.
You've seen the reports in the
news, I'm sure.

MARK

Reports?

OLIVIA

His specialty was differentiation of embryonic stem cells. Nowadays we can cause cells to assume pluripotency through altered nuclear transfer, but the cost is fairly steep compared to drawing stem cells from embryos. But, there's an ethical blockade to that approach. Destruction of the embryo, so on.

Mark and Nica are equally stunned and confused.

NICA

He left his post here without notice?

OLIVIA

Just disappeared. It was between semesters, but he gave no indication that he was not satisfied. Is he in trouble?

MARK

No, ma'am. We're just concerned about his sudden disappearance. Thank you for your time.

They both rise and Mark hands her his card.

EXT. CITY STREET - DAY

Almost sunset as Nica exits Mark's unmarked vehicle along the same curb he picked her up on. She waves goodbye.

Nica sits on her bike and dons her helmet. She starts the motor, pulls away from the curb.

EXT. THIRD DISTRICT - NIGHT

Pulled to the curb, Nica removes her helmet but remains seated on her bike. Waiting, wary.

A young lady dressed in cheap party fashion strolls by. Nica clears her throat. The young lady pauses.

Nica shows her the photo from Aunt Letty's. The young lady shakes her head but takes a cell phone shot of the photo. A half block away, the street walker makes a phone call.

This scenario happens a couple more times. Nobody admits knowing Yvella.

EXT. MAUVE MERCEDES - NIGHT

Parked just off a happening French Quarter street, an Asian man in a sporty, well-to-do suit stands near the vehicle and looks at the duplicated photo on his phone.

This man is known as HARU. Mid 30s, long black hair tied neatly back, steely-eyed and cold. Tattoos boil up from his collar to his chin.

He nods into the vehicle and a young caucasian man gets out of the passenger side.

TOBY SLICK trembles with fear. He is early 20s, long ratty hair, teeth a mess, complexion worse.

Haru shows him a photo on his phone of Nica on her bike.

HARU

You have her number?

TOBY

I got it from my girl at
Mandrags. Please don't hurt
Nadine, she don't --

Haru places a finger under Toby's jaws, silencing him.

HARU

Contact this one. Bring her
somewhere less conspicuous than
this. Draw her aside. Understood?

Toby nods his head eagerly and gets busy on his phone.

EXT. CITY STREET - NIGHT

Now standing but slouched against her bike, Nica gets a text.

-- I know where Yvella is.

She frowns heavily, then types back:

-- Who is this?

-- Toby. Meet me at Kermit's.

-- Rolling.

Nica scrolls across a GPS map, finds the jazz club. She hops on the bike.

EXT. CLAIBORNE AVE - NIGHT

Kermit's Treme Mother-In-Law Lounge is a long running nightclub, funky, swathed in colorful murals on all sides.

Nica surveys it from the curb.

INT. KERMIT'S - NIGHT

A jazz band plays on the stage of a very comfortable urban club, very much a locals bar but famous enough to bring in jazz aficionados.

Nica strolls slowly through the tables, then heads out the back door.

EXT. KERMIT'S COURTYARD - NIGHT

A sprawling outdoor space with picnic tables, folded umbrellas, string lights ablaze.

Toby waves to her from an empty table, a pint of beer and empty food basket before him.

Nica stands glaring over him for a moment, then takes the bench seat opposite him.

NICA
How'd you get my number?

TOBY
They give it to me.

NICA
They?

TOBY
People you don't wanna know about.
They for real, play for keeps.

Nica spits on the ground.

NICA
I'm looking for Yvella Laguerre.
She rode in your car.

Toby grimaces, can barely lift his eyes to meet hers.

TOBY

They uh... Nadine's gone. She done took off and I get a text says she in Denver. And not stopping there. Says don't come looking for me, not never.

Unexpected news for Nica. It tempers her anger somewhat.

EXT. CLAIBORNE AVE. - NIGHT (MINUTES AGO)

Two men in the mauve Mercedes watch foot traffic outside Kermit's club.

Haru is behind the steering wheel and next to him is ITSUKI, taller, short hair with a rakish razor skull cut of a sword, fancy suit.

They watch as Nica pulls up on her bike and proceeds to enter the club.

Itsuki slides out of his door, casually approaches the sidewalk to stand next to the chopper. He takes a moment, pretending to take a photo of the bar.

When it is all clear, he plants a small magnetic tracer on the bike.

EXT. KERMIT'S COURTYARD - NIGHT

Nica shakes her head at a waitress.

TOBY

I didn't do nothing. They said pick up some chicks and I did.

NICA

They, again. You need to give me something to go on or I call the police. They're looking for you.

He starts to rise.

TOBY

You can't --

She leans forward to slam a hand down on his shoulder and force him back to the bench.

NICA

Sit the fuck down and start talking.

(MORE)

NICA (CONT'D)

I can and will hold you under
citizen's arrest. Don't test me.
What do you know about Toro?

TOBY

Toro? That's not me, I never heard
that. Swear to god.

NICA

Easy Street.

Toby can't hide the effect the name has on him, like a
nightmare about demons and darkness.

TOBY

You hear stuff and the word is
that's where Nadine's little sister
is. It's all messed up there. Like,
I don't know, a hospital and, and --

NICA

Where is it?

Toby eyes show the start of tears as he shakes his head in
denial.

TOBY

I just -- I wanted to make Nadine
happy --

NICA

You want to make me happy, believe
me, because I want to smash your
face to pulp.

TOBY

I don't know. I don't know. It's
not even the hood --

NICA

Melph Mafia?

TOBY

Not them. They -- somebody -- tells
them stuff and pays them, and I get
a little piece. Just a little
piece. I'm a runner, they call me a
go-bot. Whitey the go-bot.

NICA

Ever heard of the graveyard ship?

TOBY

From Nadine. That's all. She was super fucked up, for a long time. She said...it took forever to get there.

NICA

Where?

TOBY

She goes, like the end of the world. That's all.

Nica holds him in utter contempt, jaws clenched, hands balled up. But she realizes she's hit a wall and looks away from him.

EXT. HIGHWAY 80 - NIGHT - TRAVELING

Nica rides as fast as rain and dark roads permit. A lone chopper roaring back towards Baton Rouge.

EXT. HIGHWAY 80 - NIGHT

The Mercedes trails the chopper, completely out of sight.

INT. MERCEDES - NIGHT - TRAVELING

Itsuki follows a green dot on a small tablet, tracking Nica's movement over a GPS map.

INT. NICA'S TRAILER - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Prone on her back, staring at the ceiling, Nica allows the smattering of rain lull her. But to no avail.

She rises from the bed, sighs. Another night of fractured sleep.

EXT. ROADSIDE - NIGHT

The Mercedes is parked on a dirt shoulder along the single road into the trailer park, both men standing in front of it, not caring about the rain.

Haru and Itsuki survey the community, though it is dark and wet out. Haru tips his head and Itsuki follows him. Both dressed in black from head to foot.

EXT. KAREN'S TRAILER - NIGHT

The two men spot Nica's chopper and they slide through the wet night without sound, arriving below her porch.

Itsuki turns off the tablet and puts it on the saddle of Nica's scooter.

Haru produces a thin card of plastic attached to a set of lock picks.

INT. NICA'S TRAILER - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

She stands perfectly still, breathing, hands in prayer position. About to start her centering routine, no music this night, just rainfall.

An intimation of movement, a shadow out of place outside her shuttered window.

Nica drops her hands, opens up her awareness to maximum.

The slightest jiggle at the front door.

EXT. NICA'S FRONT PORCH - NIGHT

Haru succeeds, eases the door open an inch. He looks back at Itsuki, who nods. They enter silently.

INT. NICA'S TRAILER - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The two assassins take tiny steps, inching from the front door/kitchen area into the open living room. Both men reach behind their necks and draw short katanas.

WHAM -- a foot smashes into the side of Itsuki's head. He crashes into his partner.

Nica attacks swiftly. Punches, an elbow, a knee into Itsuki just above the groin. He doubles over and she cracks his forearm against the desk, freeing it of sword.

She turns on the overhead light. They face off. She nods at the short sword in Haru's hand.

NICA
Nihon Bijutsu?

He begrudges her a smile.

NICA (CONT'D)

So there's Yakuza money in this.

HARU

Hsss. Yakuza is Hollywood. I hope you are honored to die by such a blade.

NICA

Close quarters like this? I hope you are honored to die by a foot up your ass.

With a deft flick of the foot, Nica unplugs a torchiere lamp and swings the heavy steel base up at them.

They both lunge, Haru swinging. Blades spark off the pole. THWAK -- she butts Itsuki in the face before slamming the other end into Haru's forehead.

Things get tight and chaotic, but that's Nica's arena. She does further damage with the lamp before dropping it in favor of elbows and knees.

They trade blows, kicks. She works her way in and punches Itsuki, topples him to the floor.

Haru takes up the attack.

Nica dodges several swings of his blade. But his skill backs her up as Itsuki rises, dusting himself off, fury in his eyes.

One of her monitors gets smashed. They slam together into the thin walls. Fast vicious punches from Haru and Itsuki, but Nica body slams one, uses a Judo throw to send the other down.

Itsuki's glance at his dazed companion is contemptuous.

Nica and Itsuki fight, skilled blows, some landing, many glancing. She manages a leverage arm lock to hammer his head into the desk.

Haru regains his feet and roars with anger. He retrieves his sword and rushes with a vicious slash at her neck.

She snares his wrist -- rolls -- bends his hand until the blade drops. A knee into ribs and forehead and he's done.

ITSUKI

Your street-fighting style is garbage.

(MORE)

ITSUKI (CONT'D)

I see you have studied Krav Maga,
Ju Jitsu, Karate. But you have
mastered none of them.

NICA

I mastered your head into that
desk.

He whips out throwing stars from an inner pocket and launches them in lightning quick flicks.

Nica dodges below the first Shuriken. The second lands in her upper shoulder.

She backs off, nearly stumbles on the unconscious Haru. She wrenches his body up from the floor in time to catch a star in his throat.

Haru regains consciousness to choking pain. He struggles but Nica holds him tight and in doing so, discovers a handgun in a shoulder holster.

She draws it as Itsuki rushes her. He sees the gun and stops.

NICA (CONT'D)

You had guns and you didn't use
them?

Itsuki cautiously lifts his jacket to reveal his own holstered weapon. With the gun against Haru's head, she rips the star from her shoulder.

ITSUKI

There is no honor in guns.

Nica smashes the butt down on Haru's skull and lets his body fall.

NICA

There's no honor in attacking two
on one. There's no honor in a sword
against bare hands. Drop the gun.

He shakes his head defiantly.

The front door CRASHES open and -- BOOM -- the thunder of a shotgun blast straight up. Big Bob's menacing face appears in the muzzle flash.

Itsuki sees his moment and throws himself through the air and smashes out the front window, taking shade and all.

THRASHING sounds from outside as he untangles himself.

Big Bob and Nica rush out.

EXT. TRAILER PARK - NIGHT

Itsuki is fast and hard to make out as he sprints away in heavy rain. Big Bob has no shot.

BIG BOB
What the hell's going on?

NICA
Nutria invasion. Come on.

She leads him back inside.

INT. NICA'S TRAILER - LIVING ROOM

They are too late. Unconscious, Haru has choked to death on his own blood from the neck wound.

BIG BOB
Is that a fucking sword?

NICA
That it is.

He gives her new regard as the implications deepen. She searches Haru's pockets, comes up with a phone.

BIG BOB
You're bleeding.

NICA
Not bad.

She flips the phone open. Big Bob can't believe any of it.

BIG BOB
Sorry about your roof.

NICA
What?

BIG BOB
I blew a hole in it.

She glances at the gaping hole, least of her worries.

BIG BOB (CONT'D)
You're welcome.

NICA
Do we call the police?

BIG BOB
I'll do it. Can I have the sword?

NICA
What the hell you need a sword for?

BIG BOB
Serving Brazilian steak?

He smiles weakly. She does not.

EXT. TRAILER PARK - NIGHT

An ambulance has arrived along with a couple black and whites and Mark's car. A group twenty strong has gathered but stand back as a body in a stretcher emerges from Nica's trailer.

Mark runs a hand through his hair, utterly outside any comfort zone. Nica presses a shop towel to her shoulder.

She shows him the recovered phone.

NICA
It's a burner, but there's one number listed. Can you trace it?

He takes the phone.

MARK
Worth a try. I should get back to the station right away. They might be expecting a call. I'll drop you at the Emergency room.

NICA
No chance. Can't afford the deductible.

MARK
You still need treatment --

NICA
I'll be okay. What about the body?

MARK
We'll see. Pro like that is the ghost of a ghost. And foreign.

NICA
And definitely not Russian.

MARK

There's that. You'll have to come in for an official statement. I can arrange it at the State Headquarters in Baton Rouge.

She nods glumly. No way out of it.

He walks to his parked car just past her bike.

MARK (CONT'D)

Least it's not raining.

She exhales a breath that is half huff, half hiss.

He looks back at her, shakes his head in disbelief, then gets in the car.

EXT. TRAILER PARK -- NIGHT

Later the same night. The wind blows a soft rain in spectral sheets.

Nica walks like a cripple across the compound to knock on Big Bob's door.

INT. BIG BOB'S PLACE -- NIGHT

Big Bob uses a sewing needle to stitch up Nica's shoulder wound. A forearm wound has been treated with a large patch bandage.

Whiskey is the obvious anesthetic, the bottle close at hand.

BIG BOB

Bernard said you couldn't pull the trigger on a swamp rat. Said you were all clenched up inside.

NICA

Yeah, well, still got hands and feet.

Big Bob completes the stitches with a knot and snips the thread. He rubs it with antiseptic, then smoothes a bandage over the area.

NICA (CONT'D)

Mesi, mesi.

BIG BOB

You're welcome, *kalmason.*

She shakes her head, not understanding.

BIG BOB (CONT'D)
Same as *salopri* -- you mess everything up. Why they all over you? Dart said you started shit at Mandragons, too.

NICA
I didn't start anything. I --

WHUMP WHUMP -- at the door.

BERNARD (O.S.)
Bob! Open up.

BIG BOB
It's open --
(softly)
-- dipshit.

Bernard enters. Highly agitated, eyes bugging, and they bug wider when he sees Nica's injuries.

BERNARD
You went back?

NICA
Couldn't pay me to go back to that cesspool.

BIG BOB
Where the hell you been? Shit went cattywampus down here, brother.

He is dumbfounded. She scowls at him.

NICA
A couple hired thugs tried to take me out in my own trailer.

Bernard flounders a second as things shift in his head. His manic excitement carries him forth.

BERNARD
I found Toro. He's a big time street pimp and I know where his home turf is. We gotta go. We need everybody.

BIG BOB
(RE: Nica)
She's not going anywhere tonight.
(MORE)

BIG BOB (CONT'D)

It's two A.M. And she's lousy drunk.

BERNARD

Yvella might be there! We have to strike right away. Now. This is dead serious.

Nica stands up, ready to join him, but sways. Big Bob gently directs her back to a chair.

NICA

(slurred)

I think...yeah, Bob Big's right.

BERNARD

No!

NICA

We need a plan.

BIG BOB

Maybe eyes on the place?

BERNARD

I'll go. I can't sleep anyway.

BIG BOB

Hey, buddy. This isn't Taxi Driver. You need everybody.

BERNARD

I'll stake it out. But if she's on the street, maybe I can grab her.

Nica and Big Bob exchange a look.

Bernard is nearly spastic with agitation. Big Bob nods and Bernard races out, throwing the screen door open and letting it bang closed.

Nica rises again, edges stiffly toward the door.

BIG BOB

Go easy, sister sulk.

She nods, pushes through the screen door.

INT. NICA'S TRAILER - BEDROOM - DAY

Nica has rolled up out of bed and sits on the edge of the mattress, listening to the summer rain outside.

Groggy, hurting, she tries squeezing each hand into a fist.

A KNOCK on the front door. Someone tries the handle but it's locked.

She moans and finds her legs, wobbles out.

INT. LIVING ROOM

She pauses to feel the rain coming through the shotgun hole.

A wet and bedraggled Mark enters. His driven countenance crashes when he sees the bandages on Nica's forearm and shoulder.

NICA

I'm trying out a new look.

MARK

Got your special Chery coffee going?

She smiles.

INT. LIVING ROOM - (MINUTES LATER)

Coffee brewed, she pours two cups, the bottle of whiskey at hand.

The living room has an easy chair and love seat. One cushion is slashed open. The Torchiere lamp is in two pieces. A towel covers the blood stain. A shower curtain covers the shattered window.

They sit facing each other.

MARK

Gotta be the rainiest summer ever.

NICA

Definitely since last year.

Pffft -- from Mark. He positively gulps the brew.

MARK

They flew in from D.C. yesterday. Both well known fixers in the underworld. The other one --

NICA

Toby Slick.

MARK

Yeah, Tobias Marconi Linnet. Punk grew up in Slidell. Affiliated with several local gangs, what they call a lamb, a sacrifice.

NICA

Whitey the go-bot set me up.

MARK

You are a publicly listed private investigator.

NICA

Investigator of what? A missing girl? For that I almost had my life amputated?

Off duty, exhausted, Mark hoists the coffee mug in silent acknowledgement.

NICA (CONT'D)

What happened with the phone?

MARK

We're working on it. Tech got through a GPS spoofing app, but once you hit a VPN, things get murky. We sent the number and trace to the NSA.

Nica whistles in appreciation.

MARK (CONT'D)

Don't expect anything. Had you left him alive, that's a different matter.

NICA

Defending myself is something that just happens.

MARK

Not throwing shade, but you haven't been the same since the hostage crisis.

NICA

I swore no more guns. Guns got your partner killed and ruined my life. And you're saying somehow this is the same case?

They both sip the special brew. Nica massages the shoulder bandage.

MARK

You're still eligible for PTSD counseling, you know. That never goes away.

NICA

Something about last night felt good, felt right. Same at Mandragons.

Mark fixes her with the smile that is anything but a smile.

MARK

Why, Nica?

NICA

Why motherfucking what? I just told you, attack me, I fight back.

MARK

Why can't you back off this case?

She takes a moment to consider her answer, jaws held tight, staring into the coffee.

NICA

I had a brother who was autistic.

MARK

I thought you grew up in foster care.

NICA

We were with our father until I was eleven... The old man had no use for Brice. No use at all. Referred to him as that little deadbeat grub. The deadbeat scab. Brain dead, deadbeat bastard.

She stares at the rain streaked plastic window cover. The patter of rain pushes the silence in close.

Mark gets up and pours more coffee and whiskey.

MARK

You know where he got placed?

NICA

Bottom of a river delta.

MARK

Oh... Sorry. How long ago?

NICA

One day Daddy took Brice fishing.
He came back, Brice didn't.
Deadbeat scab was gone.

Mark sits down, his coffee forgotten.

NICA (CONT'D)

Whenever Brice was by the river,
he'd point downstream. Where the
water goes? he'd ask. I told him it
went on forever, but he didn't
believe me.

She gets up to remove a crayon drawing of houses and city
buildings going over a waterfall, hands it to Mark.

NICA (CONT'D)

Autism doesn't mean stupid. At six
years old he connected forever with
the end of the world.

Mark is out of his comfort zone and tries to steer away from
the anguish in her words.

MARK

Where in hell you learn to fight
like that? Not the police academy.

Nica admits a smile.

NICA

I was seventeen when my mother
found me. She was a judo champion.
Made the Olympic team, fought
against Clarisse Agbegnenou, the
greatest of all time.

He's clearly impressed, but then his phone rings.

MARK

(into phone)

Captain.... Where's Purcell's dock?
... Okay, I'll be there in twenty.

He disconnects, stands up.

MARK (CONT'D)

Two bodies in a car floating in the
river. Shot up a day or two ago.

NICA
I thought you were off duty.

MARK
So did I.

He chugs the remaining coffee, then heads for the door. Nica follows him out.

EXT. NICA'S TRAILER - PORCH - DAY

A turgid gray morning, swampy with humidity.

NICA
Mark. There's a lab somewhere doing god knows what, we got pro hitters with swords from DC and a Russian mobster that shot me in the head two years ago. How much you wager those bodies aren't part of it?

MARK
You turn anything up call me, okay?
No more pugilistic redemption.

NICA
Did you say pugilistic redemption?

He scowls as he gets in his car and is still scowling as he pulls away.

Nica looks off into the dreary greenish-gray expanse of the Mississippi river. A part of the world that's forever moving.

EXT. TRAILER PARK - NIGHT

Nica pats Big Bob on the shoulder as he clambers into a black Cadillac. The vehicle has seen better decades. She does the same for MICKEY, Dart, and Bernard.

All are dressed in riding leather.

She looks to the skies. Partial clearing. She slides in the back with Mickey and Big Bob. Dart drives.

NICA
(to Bernard up front)
You know where we're going?

BERNARD
Head to cemetery number one.

BIG BOB
Ole Storyville?

BERNARD
Along Basin street. You'll see.

Dart puts the car in motion.

EXT. NEW ORLEANS - TENEMENT - NIGHT

The Cadillac pulls to the curb. Lights off. Half a block ahead is an apartment building that deteriorated to slum-project status half a century ago.

INT. CADILLAC - NIGHT

Nica taps Bernard's shoulder. He points ahead.

BERNARD
Toro.

NICA
All three floors?

BERNARD
He controls the whole ward.

Nica addresses them all.

NICA
Low, quiet, no confrontations.
Bernard says he's on the top floor.
If anything comes up --
(shows fist)
-- try to handle it.

Mickey flicks a switchblade.

MICKEY
Also silent.

NICA
Otherwise, Big Bob and Dart --

They both open jackets to expose firearms. She nods.

NICA (CONT'D)
We need to talk to this guy, so try
not to take him out.

Spoken pointedly to Bernard. He smolders, holding it all in.

EXT. TENEMENT - NIGHT

They approach the building's entrance, which is garishly bright with red and blue party lights.

INT. LOBBY - NIGHT

Two girls lounge brazenly on sofas, both on phones. A single guard in plain clothes stands near a front counter. The elevator has an OUT OF ORDER sign posted.

The guard immediately holds up a hand as they march in.

NICA

Here to see the boss.

Close enough. She kicks straight up -- CRACK -- under his jaw. He slams against the counter and goes down.

The two girls YELP.

BIG BOB

Ladies. Go take a walk. Toot sweet!

They scoot for the door.

BERNARD

Stairs in back.

Bernard waves the crew on.

INT. 1ST FLOOR HALLWAY

They file into the dim hall.

A door bangs open and a bald man emerges, wearing a shoulder holster. He reaches for his piece.

Nica hurls him against the wall. Everybody gets a punch in before he sags.

Mickey removes the gun.

EXT. TENEMENT - NIGHT

Both young ladies pause outside and one is already on her phone.

YOUNG LADY

(into phone)

It's Mimi. You said to call.

The reply is loud -- she holds the phone away from her ear.

YOUNG LADY (CONT'D)
They're here. Bad people... Like
five of them.

More loud yelling erupts from the phone's speaker. Then it goes dead.

She waves her companion away from the building and they walk swiftly down the street.

INT. TENEMENT - NIGHT

The raiding crew picks up speed, not so stealthy now. At the stairs and -- BOOM -- a shotgun blast punches through the wall inches from Nica's head.

BAM BAM BAM -- Dart and Big Bob take out the man at the top of the stairs.

BERNARD
So much for stealth.

NICA
All systems red.

They bound up the stairs. Hit the --

LANDING

-- just as several doors open.

BAM BAM BAM BAM -- the poorly lit landing flashes with gunfire.

Mickey takes a slug in the shoulder.

Nica trades swipes with the nearest man. He's big and uses his weight to force her against the bannister, which CRACKS.

Dart clocks him with his gun.

A ringing moment of silence.

Big Bob hoists Mickey up by his uninjured arm.

BIG BOB
Can you get back to the car?

Mickey nods, silent with pain.

NICA

Wrap it tight, wait for us. You'll
be okay.

He leans most of his body against the bannister and stumbles
back down.

They race up the next flight of stairs.

INT. 3RD FLOOR HALLWAY

Bernard leads, but shows empty hands, not sure which closed
door to pick.

Big Bob kicks in a door. Empty.

The next one opens and an elderly man looks out, eyes wide.
He tries to duck back in but Dart snatches his shirt collar.
Barrel of gun in neck and --

DART

Toro?

The old man points down the hall to the last door.

They gather at the door. Nica signals Big Bob and Dart to be
ready. Then she kicks in the door.

BAM BAM BAM BAM -- bullets tear forth. Big Bob fires back
blindly through the door.

Dart takes a two step dash and shoulder-rolls into the room.

BAM BAM BAM.

VOICE (O.S.)

Okay! Stop!

Nica barges in.

INT. TORO'S APARTMENT

A dead bodyguard sprawls across thin carpet. Two ladies
quickly gather clothing and exit. The room is stale and heavy
with a party that never ends.

TORO, 52, holds a hand over a bicep wound. Large in all
directions, of mixed Latin/Asian heritage, a face salvaged
from an operating room waste bin.

Bernard relieves the dead man of two firearms.

Nica walks forward and -- the edge of her foot smashes into Toro's mouth. He's massive enough that it only staggers him back.

She kicks again, far too quick for him. Then a leg sweep, grappling hold, and his wounded arm is locked in a twisting hold that immobilizes him, face against carpet.

TORO

Ah! No! Stop! I know you. You're that cop. You went rogue.

She twists until he can't speak. Then leans close.

NICA

I'm only going to ask this once. I don't get the answer I want, I'm gonna remove your arm. Clear?

He can only whimper.

NICA (CONT'D)

We're looking for a girl named Yvella, about seventeen, on the spectrum.

TORO

What?!

AGONY. He hollers, but can't get enough breath to make much sound. She relents.

NICA

Yvella. Eva.

TORO

That girl -- Demko took her. She's -
- it's... Find Demko.

NICA

Fucking Demko. Where?

TORO

It's called Easy Street. I don't know where. Listen, swear to god -

Nica drops his arm, stands up and backs off a half step.

NICA

Whatever god you swear to isn't in heaven.

Bernard kicks him viciously in the ribs.

BERNARD

Piece of shit! If she's hurt, I'll find you and your whole family and make you wish you were dead.

He is ready to kick again but Nica steps in. Toro rolls to his side, then sits up, wincing.

NICA

(to Bernard)

Hold on. We need him to get out of here.

Dart, monitoring the hall, races back trailed by loud voices shouting phrases in RUSSIAN.

DART

Company. Sound Russian.

TORO

Christ, that's the Bratva. I don't mess with them.

Nica and Big Bob leverage Toro to his feet.

TORO (CONT'D)

Ask them! They're Demko's boys. You can't -- I can't -- they'll waste me. They'll waste us all.

NICA

We'll see about that.

Toro struggles, mortal fear on his face, but he's too weak to really resist.

TORO

Okay! I heard them talking. It's below the cemetery and - and - and you take the ferry. That's what I heard.

BERNARD

What's there?

TORO

They said a ship -- Essco. That's all I know.

The shouting from the hallway draws near.

DART

We gotta move!

They force a deathly pale Toro to the door.

EXT. 3RD FLOOR HALLWAY

Toro is pushed out first and the crew of four follow.

Five Russian gangsters -- Bratva -- stomp up the last flight and assemble at the top of the steps.

The leader wields a street-sweeper shotgun, leveled.

TORO
(pleading)
Tell Demko I --

BOOM -- first shot blows a crater into Toro.

A hail of GUNFIRE in both directions. Blasts of the shotgun hammer Dart back and he crashes out through the 3rd story window.

Bernard throws a knife and it whirls into leader's collar.

Nica and Big Bob use the massive body of Toro to bum rush the two men still standing.

WHUMP -- into leader. Close range and Nica flies into action. Faster than anything in close quarters -- CRACK, PUNCH -- a dazed body knocks into the last armed man.

Nica lifts the man off his feet, hauls him to the stairs and pitches him head over heels down it.

BIG BOB
Let's get the hell out.

They follow the Russian gangster down.

EXT. TENEMENT - NIGHT

Nica, Big Bob, and Bernard emerge into the sultry night. Bernard limps. Big Bob is spent.

BERNARD
They got Dart. They got him.

Nica puts a hand on his arm, urges him along.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Nica and Bernard carry the body of Dart to the black Cadillac and roll him into the trunk.

Nica gets into the driver's seat, Bernard also up front. Mickey is crumpled in the back with Big Bob.

INT. CADILLAC - NIGHT - TRAVELING

Big Bob cradles the wounded Mickey. His entire torso is red and he is unconscious.

NICA
Nearest emergency room?

BIG BOB
East Hospital.

Nica slows, takes a U-turn, hits the gas.

BERNARD
Those guys were Russian. You heard them --

BIG BOB
We heard.

Bernard clutches his head in the depths of despair.

NICA
We'll get her out.

BERNARD
From that?!

He nearly screeches the words. Nica turns to face him and her intent is inexorable.

NICA
We'll get her out.

It's enough to quiet Bernard's desperation.

EXT. HOSPITAL ROUNDABOUT - NIGHT

Nica has secured a wheelchair and she and Bernard maneuver Mickey into it. He's out cold.

NICA
I got him. You guys get outta here.

A strained moment, Bernard both twitchy and stunned.

BERNARD

Least Dart went out doing something
righteous.

NICA

You best get moving.

Bernard slides into the driver's seat. Far off in the night
multiple police sirens wail.

INT. HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM - NIGHT

Nica sits in utter stillness, staring dully at the clock on
the wall -- 1:10 A.M.

A doctor in full scrubs comes out and talks to her.

Nica nods a few times. After the doctor returns to the
emergency ward, she leaves.

EXT. CITY STREETS - NIGHT

Nica walks aimlessly, her shoulder stiff, the bandaged arm
held horizontal across her waist.

Not a great part of town, but she doesn't care.

EXT. BON TEMPS CREWE BAR - NIGHT

A local dive on a street far from the French Quarter.

INT. BON TEMPS CREWE BAR -- NIGHT

Nica eats fries, an empty beer and shot glass on the table.
She catches the bar back's attention and signals another
round of each.

INT. BON TEMPS CREWE BAR -- NIGHT (A LITTLE LATER)

Nica nurses the beer, the shot gone. Her hand trembles. She
puts the pint down to observe. Nerves shot. Both hands shake.

The server stops by.

SERVER

You okay, hon?

NICA
Been better.

SERVER
Last call.

NICA
Shot... Make it two.

Nica finishes the pint.

EXT. CITY STREETS - NIGHT

Nica walks down a residential street with the slow studied pace of a drunk, but she still sways. Hammered.

FLASH ON -- her little brother Brice in the street before her, wet, clothes soaked. Her eyes widen. He is gone.

Nica stumbles on, from one pool of streetlight to the next.

FLASH ON -- Jalen enters the next pool of light, clutching Alison by the neck.

NICA
No!

BAM -- he shoots the girl, then aims the gun at Nica. BAM.

Nica finds herself vomiting against the streetlight. *Must've blacked out...*

BAM BAM BAM -- shots echo, and she FLASHES ON -- the raid on Toro's building. The BOOM of the shotgun, hammering Dart back to crash out the window.

Nica struggles to maintain her sanity as her nerves fray.

She sucks in air, hisses it out, puts one foot in front of the other and slogs blindly along.

EXT. RIVERSIDE JETTY - NIGHT

Amid commercial access to the river is a derelict pier. Nica sinks down next to a wood pylon, then passes out.

EXT. RIVERSIDE JETTY - NIGHT (LATER)

Nica wakes up to the throat HUM her autistic six-year-old brother Brice used to make. She casts bleary eyes about, the night windy and dark, the pier far from any lights.

A shape -- head, arms -- rises from the murky water. Brice, soaking wet, skin blanched and wrinkled, eyes the color of fish guts.

NICA

Brice... Go back. Sweetheart... Go back... Please...

Brice mutely points downriver.

She crumples up.

EXT. RIVERSIDE JETTY - DAY

The swirling call of seagulls. Clouds of gnats form in localized tornadoes.

Nica stares at the water as Mark makes his way down, a cup of coffee in one hand, a bottle of hydration drink in the other.

He offers her the coffee but when she reaches for it he hands her the sports drink instead.

He sees her decimated condition and just sits down.

NICA

I've never been out on the river.

MARK

No?

She shakes her head, sad.

MARK (CONT'D)

I can see why, based on what you told me... I was thinking about that and how I actually hardly know you.

NICA

You were a suit, I was a Uni from a different precinct. Not that surprising.

MARK

It's too bad we met during that goddamn hostage crisis.

NICA

I don't see how you'd ever want to see my face again after that. There's no way to spin it. I got him killed, and that girl.

MARK

Yeah, well...maybe we can put it right. 'Cause it's not over, is it?

She looks at him as if he were a thousand miles away.

The river sludges past ceaselessly. No dawn or sunrise, just overcast skies.

MARK (CONT'D)

Hell of a night last night. Three dead, four in the hospital.

NICA

Gangland violence. The great neutralizer of incident reports.

MARK

Yeah, sure. Only these aren't our gangs. Yakuza with swords? Two dead Bratva?

Nica keeps her eyes on the river. Mark swats at a cloud of gnats that have found them. He gets up, offers her his hand, which she takes.

NICA

We thought his name was Essco. But that might be a ship. A ferry.

MARK

I can find out.

NICA

Below the cemetery? Know what that means?

MARK

Guess we could ask the three dead guys. Where you hear that?

Nica shakes her head as she too swipes at the cloud of gnats.

MARK (CONT'D)

Bike in town?

Another mute shake of the head.

MARK (CONT'D)

I can give you a lift.

She nods. As she walks, creakily, one hand presses her shoulder wound. Mark helps her along.

EXT. ESSCO WAREHOUSE - DAY

A car pulls up in front of the ESSCO warehouse.

Jarta gets out, taps a key code at the door.

INT. WAREHOUSE OFFICE - DAY

Raiden mopes at a desk, suit disheveled, hair stringy. He works on a bottle of vodka.

Jarta finds him there. He barely acknowledges her.

JARTA

That's it? Your life's work for a bottle of booze?

He shakes his head -- *you don't know anything.*

JARTA (CONT'D)

We have seven trials ongoing and you're having a soak?

RAIDEN

All this -- people dying -- you calling in assassins? Why?

JARTA

Here's why: One of the professionals is already dead and the other fled back to DC with no pay. Who do you think we're dealing with? Think someone like that might destroy everything we've worked for?

He seizes the vodka as if to steady his life.

Jarta rounds the desk and sits on it, leans into his space.

JARTA (CONT'D)

Look at me.

He waves the offer away feebly. She leans closer.

JARTA (CONT'D)

Look at me. Raiden -- this eye.

(prizes glass eye open)

I was born half blind, I was born with a cleft palette. My parents thought I was demon seed and they left me to die out on the streets of Rio.

Raiden hears the misery in her words and focuses on her.

RAIDEN
Congenital amaurosis.

JARTA
Whatever it was, part of the
exorcism of a five-year-old girl
was to remove my eye and... God
knows what they did with it.
Imagine if we had a cure for shit
like that. That little girl in me
thinks about it every single day.

She takes his chin to better bore into his head.

JARTA (CONT'D)
I believe in what you do, and if
the world doesn't, then we have to
make our own way. I created this
network, I built this seedy empire
for you, so we would have the
resources we need.

He nods. Sits back. Nods again.

RAIDEN
Okay.

JARTA
Good boy. Boot strap it. Because if
you stop trying, you're nothing to
me. Understand? Nothing.

He stares into her glittering eye, the diamond of death.

INT. NICA'S TRAILER - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Nica chops collard greens, a big pot of water on the stove.

A KNOCK at her door. She closes her eyes in vexation.

NICA
(yells)
What?!

Bernard opens the door, peeks in timidly.

BERNARD
Hey.

NICA
Come in, close the door.

She goes back to chopping the big leafy greens, now with more vehemence. Bernard enters, pauses to feel the rain from the shotgun hole.

NICA (CONT'D)
How's Mickey doing?

BERNARD
He's okay. Out of intensive care already.

Chop chop chop. Nica is highly distracted.

BERNARD (CONT'D)
What is that gunk? Don't tell me collard greens.

NICA
You grew up here and you don't eat collard greens?

BERNARD
You don't eat crawdads or even catfish, so don't talk to me.

NICA
Nothing outta that polluted river, that's for sure.

A moment as she transfers the greens into the pot.

BERNARD
I was up 'till four looking up ships. It'd help if we had a registry number or even a flag. If it's international, we're shit outta luck.

Nica continues to chop, her only reaction a hard sigh.

BERNARD (CONT'D)
I can't break the code, whatever Toro was saying. Under the cemetery and the ferryman? That's like, you know, myths and stuff, right? The river at the end of it all.

Chop, chop, chop.

BERNARD (CONT'D)
You don't think they're shipping girls to foreign markets, do you?

NICA

I don't know what to think. My knuckles hurt, my shoulder hurts, my head hurts... It's like I'm starving but all I have is jerky that's too hard to chew.

BERNARD

Word. Hey, a few of us are going to see Mickey this afternoon. Wanna ride?

NICA

Naw. Laying low.

She pats the injured shoulder, displays her bandaged forearm.

He shrugs and heads for the door.

A moment after it closes, Nica stops food prep and opens her laptop and sits down. A map fills the screen.

EXT. CITY STREET - DAY

Mark's unmarked cruiser is parked on the curb near a sandwich shop. He sits behind the wheel, working on a Po' Boy.

INT. MARK'S CAR - DAY

His cell phone chirps, connected to the dash system. He touches a button to connect hands free over speakers.

MARK

Captain.

CAPTAIN

(on speaker)

Crenshaw. We have a suspicious cargo I'd like you to take a look at.

MARK

Cargo? As in...?

CAPTAIN

Coast Guard upper river and CCCD were training together yesterday and spotted a yacht trying to tag up on an outbound dry hauler.

MARK

Where's this?

CAPTAIN

The yacht is impounded at the Venice launch.

MARK

Venice? That's seventy miles downstream. Is it in our jurisdiction?

CAPTAIN

Given the report you filed on your university visit, I think you'd better have a look. Let me know what you find right away.

MARK

Will do --

CLICK. Disconnected. Mark is a little put out, then realizes he still has lunch in his other hand. Takes a bite, starts the car.

EXT. MARINA - DAY

Mark pulls up to a rental marina, mostly fishing boats. The countryside is flat delta coastline, the skies partly clear.

Mark gets out and Coast Guard officer NICK STORY shakes his hand.

MARK

End of the road, out here.

NICK

Sure is, but --
 (waves at open water)
 -- shipping lanes to anywhere on the planet.

He motions Mark onto the dock.

MARK

What happened? I heard an illegal transfer on open water.

NICK

Yeah. We were conducting drills off Lanaux Island and saw this boat, an unregistered pleasure craft, trying to haul up on a freighter headed for South Korea, and who knows where else.

They stop before a sleek yacht, about thirty feet long. No name or registration numbers are apparent on its hull.

MARK

Pilot? Crew?

NICK

They fired shots, then launched a speedboat into Caminada Bay, escaped into the deltas.

MARK

Anybody hurt?

NICK

Not on our team. We didn't have an opportunity to return fire.

MARK

What are we dealing with here?

Nick whistles, shakes his head. They board the yacht and Mark follows Nick down into the interior.

INT. YACHT - DAY

The main cabin is packed with sealed boxes and trunks of various sizes, many now open. Some have money or weapons.

Two crime scene lab techs have opened a high tech chest freezer to reveal small sealed vials and blister packs.

Mark leans close to inspect the goods. The markings are all coded, just numbers and letters. Cold mist wafts up from the cabinet.

MARK

Tango and Cash?

NICK

What's that?

MARK

Apache. China Girl... Fentanyl?

Nick is about to answer, but one of the Lab Techs steps forward.

LAB TECH

My guess is embryonic stem cells, possibly CRISPR modified cell cultures.

NICK
Stem cells?

LAB TECH
(raises hand)
Biology major, going into genetics.
These cultures are probably
targeting specific diseases.

MARK
Did you take courses with Raiden
Cherenkov, by chance?

LAB TECH
No, I just transferred here, but
he's a legend in the field.

NICK
I goddamn declare. You're telling
me there's a black market for DNA
stuff?

MARK
International market, apparently.

NICK
Well doesn't that just beat
everything you ever stepped in.

He puts hands on hips. Mark starts taking photos.

INT. NICA'S TRAILER - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Nica is still at her laptop, an empty plate of food nearby.
She applies nail polish as she scans a list of New Orleans
Cemeteries.

FLASHES ON -- BRICE, pointing downstream.

The world stops for her. Everything stops except the river.
The crayon artwork. Forever, and the end of the world.

And again -- BRICE, pointing downstream.

NICA
Siri. Cemeteries in Plaquemines
Parish.

A map comes up and pins appear along the river. Surprise
lights up Nica's features as she leans toward the screen,
nail brush paused in mid motion.

NICA (CONT'D)

No!

Not denial. An exclamation.

Her phone buzzes. ID: CRENSHAW. She picks it up.

NICA (CONT'D)

(into phone)

Mark, I'm in the middle of something.

She listens, then abruptly rises from her seat.

NICA (CONT'D)

What do you mean the CIA? What the hell? They can't --

Another pause to listen.

NICA (CONT'D)

You're down in Venice? ... Good, stay there. I got something and I'm heading your way.

She closes the laptop and blows on her nails.

EXT. NICA'S TRAILER - PORCH - DAY

Nearly sunset as Nica climbs on her Chopper and fires it up.

EXT. FREEWAY - NIGHT

Last gloaming of light in a relatively clear sky as Nica roars down the I-10.

Soon she is on the Business Loop through New Orleans and cutting over to LA-25 South.

EXT. LA-25 SOUTH - NIGHT

Nica glances off road, then slows, wheels her bike around, and returns to a small side road.

Her headlight hits an old wooden sign: BALLOWE CEMETERY

NICA

Below the motherfucking cemetery.

She throttles and swings back onto the main road.

EXT. WHARFSIDE DINER - NIGHT

Nica pulls in to a moderately busy riverside restaurant. Mark's cruiser is already parked there.

INT. DINER - NIGHT

Nica and Mark share a booth. He sips soda and she has a pint of beer as they await their food.

MARK

...sent a flag to the D.I.A and Homeland Security and because it's a South Korean owned tanker, that brings in the CIA. I'm taking a meeting with the Captain, the DA's office, and the CIA liaison tomorrow morning.

Nica does not comment, her disbelief obvious.

MARK (CONT'D)

That leaves tonight. Still under my own authority.

NICA

That's the way it works? Feds step in and you're off the case?

MARK

What case?

NICA

Essco, or Cherenkov. The genetic bullshit that's going down. Did you even talk to Nadine?

MARK

We talked to her. She's a junkie.

NICA

They ghosted her on a bus to the other side of the country.

He raises a palm to say: *there you have it.*

A waitress arrives with a couple burgers and fries. They both dig in. Nica chomps angrily.

NICA (CONT'D)

But here we are. You have hard evidence now, so Nadine's story is not supposition.

MARK

A few dozen tiny vials. Estimated value could be in the tens of millions.

Nica shakes her head in disbelief.

MARK (CONT'D)

What you got?

NICA

These low level thugs're too dumb to be speaking in literary code.

Mark raises a hand to indicate himself.

MARK

Low level thug, apparently.

NICA

An informant overheard a couple of our Russian persons of interest talking. Easy Street was located across the ferry below a cemetery. The so-called graveyard ship. Look up Ferry number three.

He brings out his phone and searches.

MARK

Maybe eight miles from here. Goes over to Point A La Hache and the fifteen south.

NICA

What's on this side?

MARK

(scrolls)
Ballowe cemetery.

He looks up at her. She pulls a face -- *exactly*.

MARK (CONT'D)

And?

NICA

Edmond Zachariah, shipping magnate from a century ago, got a little side street named after him --

MARK

The E - Z. What's there?

NICA
Blurry Google Map images. Looks
like warehouses.

He eats but keeps his eyes on her, knowing full well how things could go straight to hell with her in the mix.

EXT. FERRY LAUNCH - NIGHT

Nica and Mark catch CARL PULVER, 64, locking the gate to the ferry ramp. An animated exchange ensues. The Ferryman is both reluctant and defiant, despite Mark's badge.

Nica digs a few bills out, then nudges Mark to do the same. He indignantly follows suit. A deal is struck.

EXT. FERRY LAUNCH OPPOSITE - NIGHT

Nica roars down off the embarkation ramp and moments later Mark's vehicle rolls off the ferry.

EXT. EZ STREET - NIGHT

Nica coasts to a stop on her motorcycle, followed in short order by Mark. Curbside on a one lane road that skirts an industrial shipping area for both trucks and river haulers.

Many of the warehouses and buildings are abandoned, but she points to one that's been maintained and internal lights illuminate high windows.

The sign: ESSCO SHIPPING.

Soon they stand side by side looking it over. Mark takes pictures on his phone. Windows flank the front door, the only windows along that entire side.

MARK
No security perimeter, no gate. I
don't even see cameras.

NICA
Nothing to hide is good cover.
Shall we knock on the front door?

MARK
Also, no warrant. This is recon
only. We see something, that's a
different story.

NICA

I'll take a look around the back.

MARK

Stay low, take no chances. I'll stake the front entrance.

She slips off into the dark.

EXT. ESSCO WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Nica stays in the shadows but there's not much to see.

Behind the building is a parking lot, a dock and boat ramp with a couple small craft moored there. A little speed boat in particular.

Returning to the building, she steals up a set of metal stairs and tries a door. Locked. The windows are too high to afford a good look.

EXT. ESSCO WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Around the far side the windows are lower and she is able to pull up on a ledge to look in. A hospital room, with two patient beds and inert bodies. Young women.

Nica drops back down. Her puzzlement erodes to deep anger. She stalks back toward the front, no longer trying to hide.

EXT. ESSCO WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Mark leans back against the hood of his car, on his phone.

MARK

Fourteen oh four E-Z street. That's literally an E and a Z... Yes. Plaquemines Parish. I need whatever you can find, leases, property tax records, business filings... Thanks.

He disconnects just as Nica emerges, skirting the building and heading for the front entrance. She tries the handle.

She takes a step back, kicks the door just above the keypad lock. It smashes open easily.

MARK (CONT'D)

No no no no! Not the plan.

He sprints forward as Nica enters the building.

INT. LOBBY - NIGHT

Nica strides into a dark front lobby, appointed with nothing more than a reception desk. A shadowy room with dim recessed lighting.

Door to the left, door behind desk, a walkway across the lobby above.

Before she can move, lights brighten and the door behind the desk opens. Two men in thrift-store suits enter. Both level handguns at her.

THUG #1
Stop right there! Who the hell are you?!

NICA
My car broke down --

THUG #1
The fuck you say.

THUG #2
You don't got a cell phone?

NICA
The door was open.

THUG #1
Turn around, walk out, or perish on the spot.

Nica does not move.

THUG #2
Now! Move!

NICA
Guys... Two men, one lady? You need guns?

The thugs share a glance, lower their weapons. Thug #1 smiles a savage concession, thrilled by the idea of pounding the shit out of her, and then...

EXT. ESSCO WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Mark halts his dash for the door as the interior lights come up. He spots the two thugs and draws his handgun. Sneaks up to the door.

The moment he sees the weapons dropping, he throws open the door.

INT. LOBBY -- NIGHT

Mark enters with both hands on his gun.

MARK
Police! Freeze!

Nica ducks aside as -- BAM BAM BAM -- rapid shots are unleashed. Thug #1 takes several hits across the chest and Thug #2 gets off a single shot before a slug punches through his head.

MARK (CONT'D)
Guard that door. I have to call
this in.

Nica gestures -- *with what, my fists?* -- as he fishes for his phone.

NICA
I saw what looked like hospital
beds back there --

An internal ALARM sounds. Mark pauses to snag one of the gunmen's weapons and he tosses it to Nica. She catches it like it's kryptonite.

INT. OFFICE LOUNGE - NIGHT

An area with a large TV monitor on wheels, facing a handful of chairs and couches. Three more men in seedy business attire or tracksuits hang out.

The GUN SHOTS bring them all to their feet.

Demko hastens in using a cane, but he tosses it aside.

DEMKO
To the front! We got hostile
company.

The three men dash out. Demko is already on his phone.

DEMKO (CONT'D)

Boss --

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. VEHICLE - TRAVELING - NIGHT

Jarta rides shotgun and takes the call on the car's audio system. Oncoming headlights scintillate off her crystal eye.

JARTA

Speak.

DEMKO

Shots fired. Tony and Alberto were on duty.

JARTA

Police?

DEMKO

I just sent Coop, Stanley and Ratchet to take a look.

JARTA

I'm on my way. Keep it contained. Don't take your eyes off Cherenkov. Tell him code zero. Make sure he understands that. Code zero.

DEMKO

Got it.

JARTA

We go all in. I don't care if it's cops. Too much at stake.

She ends the call. The driver makes a u-turn and wheels screech as he punches it.

INT. ESSCO WAREHOUSE -- LOBBY - NIGHT

Mark tries his phone again as Nica takes a look down the hallway behind the desk door.

MARK

We wait for backup.

NICA

You wait. I'm going in.

MARK

Don't you --

(phone connects)

This is Crenshaw. I have shots
fired, two men down. Need backup
and an ambulance --

(to Nica)

Just wait! I'll cover the second
floor, you don't move --

She pushes into the hallway. He curses.

INT. HALLWAY

A long doorless passage, industrial lighting and carpet. Nica follows the gunsights on the barrel.

She reaches the door, gets a hand on it just as thugs Coop and Ratchet shove through the push-bar on the other side.

The door slams her gun aside. She kicks, punches. A close mean fight, elbows, slamming heads against the wall.

She takes them both down, then stomps on Coop's hand as he draws a firearm, crushing bones. Kicks the gun away.

Next, she methodically braces Ratchet's arm and breaks it at the elbow. He screams. She takes his gun and clubs him twice.

Nica grimaces as she rubs the side of her head.

INT. UPPER CONCOURSE - NIGHT

Mark takes the second door, which is the stairs up to the walkway above the lobby.

He sweeps with his gun, moves onto the walkway. The thug called Stan appears across from him, an Uzi in hand.

A hail of shots ring out from both sides. Mark falls back inside the stairwell as Stan ducks into the hallway.

MARK

Multiple police units are on the
way! Throw your weapon down and
show me your hands.

BADA BADA BADA -- a fusillade of 9mm bullets answer. Mark waits, peeks out.

The tip of Stan's Uzi and one of his shoes are just visible from his hiding spot. Mark aims at the wall where Stan's face would be and FIRES.

A HOWL of pain, a body thumping the wall.

Mark sprints forward to find Stan crouched over, one hand grasping a bloody cheek. Mark kicks hard, connecting foot to forehead. Stan is done.

Mark ejects the Uzi's magazine, cocks the action, strips the bolt, tosses the pieces aside.

He presses on down a corridor of offices, all closed and dark.

INT. REAR OFFICES - NIGHT

Demko stalks purposefully across a small space of long abandoned cubicles. He winces with each step, but he ignores the pain. He encounters a visibly shaken Raiden.

RAIDEN

I heard shots.

DEMKO

To Miss Jarta's office. Be prepared to flee.

RAIDEN

Flee? I have a dozen patients here, I can't flee.

Demko uses one arm to pick Raiden up by his suit collar and walk him backwards.

DEMKO

Not any more you don't. Code Zero.

RAIDEN

But -- but -- this is my life's work! Put me down.

Demko puts him down, only to deliver a backhand slap that sends Raiden tumbling. As the scientist fights to return to his feet, Demko drives his head into a desktop.

DEMKO

Any more arguing?

He escorts a stunned Raiden back towards Jarta's office.

INT. PATIENT ROOM - NIGHT

Yvella has heard the commotion and sits up, anxiety rocking her back and forth. A long string of incoherent sound gives voice to her fear.

The other patient is out of it.

YVELLA

The bad lady coming. Bad lady --

She tosses off her bedcover and disconnects the IV, then stands.

She moves timidly to her door and opens it.

EXT. EZ STREET -- NIGHT

The vehicle carrying Jarta pulls over near Mark's car. She gets out, comes around to the driver's side.

JARTA

Draw them away, get to the boat
down at Highside wharf. You won't
have any problem losing the heat.
Meet at Mandragons.

He nods, shows his commitment by placing a 45 on the dash. Jarta takes off running toward the Essco Warehouse.

INT. BACK HALLWAY - NIGHT

Nica steals down a hallway lined with glass windows looking into laboratories bathed in sterile light.

High tech gear, isolation suits hanging on walls, banks of servers and internet switches winking away.

In the distance, a voice:

YVELLA (O.S.)

Doctor Raiden? Doctor?

NICA

Yvella!

She dashes to a T split and sees Yvella, in a patient gown, guiding herself along with a hand on the wall.

NICA (CONT'D)

Yvella! It's me. Nica.

She rushes to the girl and hugs her. Yvella is confused, even distressed by seeing Nica.

YVELLA

Where's Doctor Raiden? He - he --

NICA

Yvella, we have to get you out of here. I came to take you back to Aunt Letty.

YVELLA

No. No. The doctor is making me better. He says I don't have to be like, on the -- he says I will be smart and --

NICA

No. This isn't right. Yvella, listen to me. The police are coming. There's bad men here, men with guns, and I have to keep you safe. Come on.

Yvella resists but Nica is insistent. She drags the girl by the hand and pushes into a big lab.

INT. BIG LAB

A large space with open ceiling up to a third story ceiling. Nica heads for a wall of built-in lockers and opens one. A clean lab tech body suit hangs there.

BAM -- ZANG -- a shot from above ricochets inches from Nica's head.

A long staircase against the back wall leads up to the third floor. Demko descends, firing more shots. Each step down is a hardship with his limp.

Nica shoves Yvella into the locker.

NICA

Stay there.

Nica dashes forward and body rolls over a countertop.

Demko tracks and fires multiple times, but she vanishes down out of sight.

DEMKO

I know you. I believe we exchanged gifts some time ago.

(MORE)

DEMKO (CONT'D)

You cost me a knee, I cost you a career. Shall we settle it?

Nica follows his voice from her hiding spot. He's fairly close. She draws the gun from Mark.

Above Nica on the counter is a decent sized microscope. She silently sets the gun down.

In one fluid motion she springs up, grabs the microscope and flings it blindly at the sound of his movement.

CHUNK -- it glances off his skull. Nica vaults over the counter, latches onto his gun hand and bashes it against the stair railing. The gun clatters across the floor.

Demko is big and wide. The fight is brutal. Nica takes several hits and body slams, barely managing to avoid full impact.

She's bleeding from nose and mouth by the time she finally lands a strike against his bad knee, knocking him down. She drops for a leg bar across his throat.

She keeps the hold long past unconsciousness. His legs thrash as he dies.

NICA

Now we're settled.

She limps back to the locker and opens it. Yvella cowers, afraid of the sounds of extreme violence she just heard.

YVELLA

(tiny voice)

I want to go home...

NICA

Okay. I'm going to call the police.
Can you hide here for a little
while? I'll come back. I promise.

Yvella hugs her own knees, shrinks into herself. Nica closes the locker door. Then she's moving up the back stairs.

EXT. ESSCO WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Driver waits outside his car as two sets of red and blue lights come whirling down the dark road.

When the police cruisers are close enough, he opens fire, unloading the magazine. Both police cars careen to a stop.

Driver calmly enters his vehicle and takes off.

One police car pursues. From the other car a frantic voice:

POLICE OFFICER
Code thirty! Officer down! Multiple
shots fired.

The siren stops.

INT. UPPER OFFICE FLOOR - NIGHT

Mark sweeps across the cubicle floor. Ahead, only one office has lights on. He approaches warily. Raiden is visible sitting behind the desk.

INT. JARTA'S OFFICE

Mark enters, training the gunsights on the scientist. Raiden waves a flask at him, eyes bloodshot.

MARK
Police. Both hands up.

RAIDEN
No need for the gun, I assure you.

MARK
You're Cherenkov.

Raiden acknowledges this by wiggling the raised flask. Mark eases off on the gun.

MARK (CONT'D)
What the hell is this? Never mind,
I know what it is. How could a
legitimate scientist be involved in
black market genetics?

RAIDEN
Research into human genetic
modulation, my field, is very hard
to get approved or funded. Here...

He sweeps his arms, clearly not thrilled with the set up, but trapped by circumstances.

MARK
So you drug pregnant prostitutes
and underage girls to experiment
on?

RAIDEN

I do no such thing. We have signed consent and release forms from every volunteer.

MARK

Volunteer?! You pay them in smack?

Jarta appears silently behind Mark and -- WHACK -- clubs him with the butt of a gun. He crashes to the floor.

JARTA

Tell me you did it.

Raiden puts the flask down and reaches into his jacket pocket to produce a hard drive.

RAIDEN

It's all here. Everything we've accomplished as well as specs from scientists around the globe.

Jarta extends a hand to receive the hard drive. Raiden stands up, sways a bit.

RAIDEN (CONT'D)

Perhaps best if I keep research materials. It is my life's work, after all, and a little insurance against the future.

JARTA

What future? We're done here and the only way I can stake future research is by selling that to the highest bidder. Don't care if it's Chinese, Russian, or American.

RAIDEN

No. If our partnership is dissolved, then I will --

She slugs him.

He drops and she retrieves the disk. Jarta tucks the gun into her waistline and hurries over to the window, opens it and pushes the screen away. It falls to the pavement below.

Jarta opens a desk drawer and brings out metal handles set at 90 degree angles.

Back at the window, she reaches up to slip the handles over a steel zip line that's anchored just above the window.

It traverses the rear parking lot and terminates at a telephone pole near the dock.

INT. UPPER OFFICE FLOOR

Nica steals along, the gun drawn. Movement in an office. She hustles forward. Jarta is visible as she escapes out the window.

INT. JARTA'S OFFICE

Nica rushes in to see Raiden sitting next to the prone Mark. He has Mark's gun in his mouth, eyes drowned in world weariness. Upon seeing Nica -- BAM -- the top of his head splatters the wall.

She forces herself to Mark's side, kneeling.

NICA

Mark! Mark!

His eyelids flutter.

Nica doesn't pause long. Mark is alive, Raiden is dead, her resolution is clear. Pursue. She takes a pair of handcuffs from Mark's belt.

He groans dully, grasps the back of his head.

NICA (CONT'D)

Sorry. You'll be okay.

She rises and steps over Raiden to the window.

EXT. OFFICE WINDOW - NIGHT

Nica steps out onto a narrow ledge. Jarta has reached the opposite pole. Nica flips the handcuffs over the zip line and lifts her feet.

She hurls down. There's enough slack that she slows a bit but has to stop her descent with both feet on the pole.

Jarta hustles off toward the dock but stops upon seeing Nica coming for her.

EXT. DOCKSIDE - NIGHT (CONTINUOUS)

Jarta waits coolly as Nica descends the dozen feet to the ground.

NICA

No hired punks to fight your
battles tonight?

JARTA

So you're the private cop.

Jarta draws her handgun, then casually tosses it aside. A gesture invites Nica to do the same. She does. It's on.

The clash is swift. Hard kicks and punches, the skill level equal, the street-smarts equal.

Jarta fights in a contained rage. She takes punches with grunts of frustration, followed by snarls of retaliation.

Nica maintains a stoic countenance. After two rapid kicks strike her face and shoulder, she steps back, breathes.

JARTA (CONT'D)

Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, seventh
degree.

Nica manages to get in close and she tosses Jarta to the hard earth.

NICA

Kodokan fifth Dan, order of
Yoshimi.

Nica aims a kick but Jarta rolls away and as she comes up, flicks a handful of dirt and pebbles in Nica's face.

Nica is blinded. She YELPS in surprise and backs away, but Jarta presses the advantage.

Lightning strikes -- she pummels Nica's abdomen, strikes her face, side kick to chest and Nica lands on her back, dazed.

JARTA

Didn't teach that in your little
dojo? Street tactics. Fight to live
at all costs. No honor in dying.

Nica cannot rise. Her limbs don't respond correctly. Jarta brushes her hands off, picks up her gun, walks away.

Nica scrabbles to her side, pushes up to an elbow. She spits out bloody saliva. Jarta heads into the deep shadows of the dock.

Nica moves on hands and knees until she reaches her own gun and picks it up. Pushes up to her feet.

Nica raises the weapon. Jarta is on the wooden dock, almost to her boat, her back to Nica.

It is a moment of many decisions.

NICA

Freeze!

Jarta stops, turns casually around, hands away from her sides.

NICA (CONT'D)

Hands in the air!

Jarta shakes her head. She takes a couple more steps backward, toward the boat.

Nica bears down, sights, grits her teeth. Her hands shake badly, her breath ragged.

Jarta turns to the mooring, unwraps the docking rope.

Nica still has her in sight, but despite raging lungfuls of air and bare teeth, she can't pull the trigger.

Jarta stands and with back to Nica, her hand goes to her waist. She spins, gun drawn.

Nica shoots. Jarta's shoulders flare back as the bullet passes through her chest. She drops to the wood planks.

Nica hustles to her. Jarta smiles up through bloody teeth.

JARTA

Good girl... I thought you --

NICA

Just die.

Jarta's eyes close.

Nica remains standing over her, but her gaze is on the moonlit expanse of the Mississippi river.

Eventually, she becomes aware of the weight in her hand. She flings the gun into the river.

EXT. ESSCO WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Nica walks Yvella out into a chaos of whirling police lights and flashing ambulance reds. They stop by an ambulance and Nica turns the girl over to an EMT.

Yvella is unsure, lost, scared. Nica hugs her.

EXT. ESSCO WAREHOUSE - NIGHT (A SHORT WHILE LATER)

Mark holds an ice pack to the back of his head as he speaks to several detectives and uniformed officers. Nica nods as he describes her part in it all.

EXT. EZ STREET - NIGHT

On her bike, Nica pulls away from the busy scene and roars off.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Nica sits beside a hospital bed occupied by Yvella. The girl has an IV drip but no apparent bandaging or bruises.

Aunt Letty appears at the door, terrified, but sees Yvella and rushes in.

LETTY

Oh Lord in his mercy! Eva!

YVELLA

Mama!

They embrace, tears in both eyes.

LETTY

Oh my girl. Oh my little boo child.
What did you do, sweetheart? You
almost broke my heart.

YVELLA

I took bad things. I done
stuff...not Bible stuff. Really
bad, Mama. I know how to do it.

Yvella's pain and confusion are sharp. Letty remains hugging her daughter for some time, wracked with sobs.

Nica rises to give them room.

NICA

I have to go.

Letty straightens up, two hands still clutching her daughter's arms, but she acknowledges Nica.

LETTY
(strained)
Thank you...

A nurse enters, addresses Nica.

NURSE
Come on, let's get you cleaned up.

Nica follows her out.

EXT. TRAILER PARK - DAY

Morning brings overcast skies but no rain yet. A dozen Copperheads and residents have gathered in a central area near Nica's trailer.

INT. NICA'S TRAILER - BEDROOM - DAY

Nica is sound asleep under nothing but a sheet. Both fans move air over her.

THUMP THUMP -- on the front door.

Her eyes crack open with extreme reluctance.

EXT. NICA'S TRAILER - PORCH - DAY

Bernard awaits as Nica emerges onto the porch, her eyes still glazed, her movements stiff and crippled with pain and soreness.

BERNARD
Come on, we got the ashes.

NICA
Now?

BERNARD
It's eleven thirty. We're going
before it gets really hot.

NICA
It's already really hot.

BERNARD
Everybody's waiting for you.

NICA
Yeah? They're going to wait until I
have coffee made.

Bernard's shoulders sag with disappointment.

EXT. RIVER BANK - DAY

The ranks have swollen to a couple dozen residents, gathered along the shores of the Mississippi. A few drums, an accordion, a trumpet, and various noise-makers are piled on the ground behind them.

A young lady hands Big Bob a cardboard Urn.

BIG BOB

Okay, so... What can I say? You all knew Dart.

YOUNG LADY

D'Artagnan. That was his real name. D'Artagnan Chenevert. We should say that.

Big Bob nods solemnly.

BIG BOB

Yeah. Dart was a good guy, one of us, and he went to do a good deed. There's honor in that. He, uh...

RESIDENT #1

He could beat anybody in checkers.

RESIDENT #2

Loved his scotch, the kind that tastes like horse piss.

RESIDENT #3

I saw him ride a wheelie for two and a half minutes. Motherfucker could ride.

Hurrahs and cheers for each attribute spoken.

RESIDENT #4

He was a brother to me. Once I asked him to loan me fifty bucks, he gave me sixty five, right out of the blue. No questions asked.

RESIDENT #5

He owed me eighty bucks. I got questions.

YOUNG LADY

He was the best lover you could
 ever want. He could --
 (tears come)
 -- go all night. He could...

She can't finish. A few more utterances from the crowd, then Big Bob holds the cardboard urn aloft.

NICA

Let me.

Big Bob is taken back a moment, glances at the flowing waters of the Mississippi. He passes the urn to her.

Nica presses it to her chest as she gathers courage. She steps into the river as the gathered spectators watch in hushed silence.

Nica pushes forth until she is waist deep. She looks back at her people and they encourage her.

She unfolds the top of the box and is about to pour the ashes out when she sees --

BRICE'S FACE

-- her six year old brother, looking up from under the greenish murk.

Nica inhales against the painful memories and pours the ashes out into the river. Brice's face dissolves with the ashes.

She sloshes ashore amid cheers. Instruments are taken up and a raucous, dissonant noise erupts. Every sound is at odds with every other sound.

They begin a procession back up to the trailers.

Big Bob slaps a maraca against Nica's shoulder and it's clear he will brook no reluctance. She takes the instrument, at first not shaking it, but the spirit of the procession overcomes her.

She hits her leg a few times with it, then slaps it against her open palm. Tears begin to stream down her face.

THE END