



# Hard Gains

By Gary Devereaux

The stone skittered across the grey slate, kicking up after its second skip and arced through the cold night air, eventually plummeting down in the middle of the slate roof.

Keysha winced as the echo crashed off the walls and glass windows of the derelict car park.

It sounded like the cackle of a Kuyox Devil, mocking her serious lack of concentration which right now, was entirely appropriate. Though fortunately there wasn't one of these to be seen.

Keysha remained still and could feel the burning gaze of Jazz in her back, there was no need to turn, it would only lead to a silent snarl followed by a copious amount of hand waving. He's definitely Italian, she mused.

Waiting and holding her balance in a way that would belie the error of judgement she had made just a few seconds ago, Keysha expected the area to explode into bright white light, the roof cracking outwards in a hailstorm of high calibre bullets, roof timbers and ironically the razor sharp shrapnel generated by a disintegrated slate roof.

Images raced through her mind, pictures of her and Jazz being ripped apart by a fusillade of death and destruction, combined with a multitude of racing emotions and choices intermixed. Through it all, she remained still.

Nothing happened.

Jazz waited a moment longer, still nothing, which of course was a relief but as the adrenaline ebbed away, he felt a sharp pain in his right hand and realised he had gripped a wooden window sill in the corner.

Jazz snatched his hand away and inspected his nails, there was white paint in places, he glanced at the sill and saw the gouges his fingers had made in the soft wood.

*"More mistakes"* he muttered.

He fumbled in his jacket pockets for a multi knife, sighing he started working the small blade at the sill in an attempt to disguise the marks and hopefully cover their tracks.

Keysha approached, more quietly this time, whilst he worked at the window, her shadow had robbed him of light and the ability to see.

When he turned she was looking down at him puzzlingly.

*"Move"* he hissed through his teeth.

It was at this point she realised, that she was grateful this was a 'stealth' mission, otherwise right now; they would in the early stages of an argument.

She moved to crouch behind him. As her shadow passed, he continued to work at the sill. It was poorly done and rushed, any person worth their salt would spot this a mile away.

Frustration got the better of him and he hacked a section away and smeared some moss from the slate by his feet into the gap. It would have to do.

Turning to Keysha he inclined his chin in the direction of the objective.

Keysha rose to set off, he grabbed her wrist *"and this time do it quietly..."* he mouthed sardonically.

In a bid to break tensions, she poked her tongue out at him and started to pick her way across the tiles, slowly and methodically avoiding areas of damaged tiles so not to make the same mistake.

The other side of the rooftop was unnervingly gloomy, the outline of the building and the recessed design blocking any light from entering her destination. Dark places were never a good thing these days, a nightmare had the ability to melt into darkness, like oil or tar and even until the last minute your chances of picking one out in the gloom were slim and inevitably ended in a pretty swift demise.

Those creatures didn't play, that was certain.

As she drew close to the darkness, she muttered a prayer that the recon for the mission was correct and that nightmares were not in this region of the city.

The heckles on the back of her neck rose the closer she got as she chided herself once more for the ridiculous prayer. It was an old habit, one she couldn't shake and something that was forsaken these days.

Why would you pray for help, in a world where you know that those who could respond might look like Moloch or Uvall.

Shuddering she shook the unhealthy thoughts from her mind, the thoughts distracting her from her purpose and strode into the gloom.

Jazz watched nervously.

Keysha could be a sullen, disobedient and a right pain in the ass at times but she had qualities. Oh did she have qualities. Especially to the eye however she also possessed a spontaneity that was almost irresistible, unless she was in one her famous sulks of course.

They had become 'running mates', a term that had sprung up since the dawn of Purgatory and represented a man and woman together. Old phrases like 'couple', 'partners', 'wife' etc had become infrequent, simply because it represented a duration. If the new age had taught humans anything, that simply was that at any moment, their life could be forfeit, ended or worse. And yes, there are a great many things that are worse than

death in this world now. So now running mates became a term often used, it simply meant they ran together wherever they went.

The silence that followed was reassuring, nightmares were fierce and loud creatures that would revel in a riot of noise as they dismembered and gored their victim. That nothing had occurred meant one thing, that Keysha was ok and had reached the far wall. This was confirmed a few heartbeats later as heard a \*tap tap\* in his ear feed.

Time to go. He rose from his crouch, cursing as he took a final glance at the sill.

Shaking the pins and needles from his legs he strode to the roof edge and lowered himself down on to the grey slate below. He had taken care to watch Keysha's route, which had sensibly made use of the ridge, removing the potential for stepping on weaker areas and making an unwelcome entrance to their target.

Reaching the far edge; he joined Keysha, who was already making light work of the window identified as their egress. Leaving her to the task, he settled against the wall, scanning the landscape. He could just about make out their ride here, a beaten old white panel van that was now daubed in various forms of graffiti and tags, hidden between two ruined houses.

As he began to turn back to Keysha's handiwork, he caught a blur in the periphery of his vision, on the second level of the house to the right of the van. Slowly removing the macrolens from his trouser pocket, he uncapped them then swabbed his finger wrapped in his sleeve around the glass to clear out the inevitable crap and then peered through, careful to use the shadows and to prevent the tell-tale lens flare that would betray their position.

Scanning the upper level of the building, Jazz swept his vision back and forth, looking for sign of any movement. Nothing, but he knew he'd seen something. He waited. Keysha had by this time removed the window cover and was methodically packing away her tools into her kit bag. He didn't need to turn to know that she was fussing over making sure each tool was in the correct location. He'd often mock her OCD tendencies but actually the 'ritual' if you could call it that these days, had merit. In a tight spot and needing to work quickly, being organised could be the difference between success and demise.

He tapped her on the leg.

*"Alright, already. I know, I know" she scoffed. "No. Something is wrong. I saw a blur".*

A 'blur'...

Fear ran like ice through her veins. Like trains on a high speed rail route. Of all the things she didn't want to hear, a blur was most certainly high up the list, just beneath Angel, Monstrosity and possibly Leviathan, though you'd have to be pretty dumb to get outwitted by a Levi, such was their size.

A 'blur' was not a thing, it was a type of devil and even then, it was not an actual name, more an association by virtue of the way it moved. The actual name was Raxualr Devil and if Jazz was right, shit was about to get real interesting.

*"There, to the right of the clock on the second level. That's where I saw something."*

He passed the macrolens to Keysha and pointed. She snatched them from him quick, Jazz wasn't known for his attention to detail and she wondered if he'd been at the herbs before the mission. She didn't ask, it would only cause a row. She scanned, centring on the area Jazz mentioned. She saw nothing, she waited maybe two to three minutes focusing on the area, as she was about to lower the lens and confirm 'clear' she cursed herself a fool.

The thing with a 'blur' is that something in its biology confused the human eye. You could have one right in front of you, mere inches away doing a happy dance and there's a good chance you wouldn't see it. There was however, a trick that you could apply and that was to not look at it directly. Instead, if you suspected a 'blur', you should scan, sweeping your head back and forth, testing the periphery of your eyesight. In this sweet spot, the human eyes were more sensitive, designed to warn of impending danger, a survival instinct if you were. Keysha did this, she centred the lens on the van, adjusting, so that the area in which Jazz had suggested was at the corner of the view.

*"Well that is most certainly a first, let's hope we can survive the day when Jazz was actually mindful of his surroundings. You saw a blur alright, but which one did you see, because I count two of them."*

Jazz cursed. *"Shit, shall I tell the chief? If we get discovered that's it, we won't get another go at this, they will realise the target and move it. We can't take them out from here, our position will be compromised!"* Thoughts whirled around his head, the chief was over there and there was no way they could just leave them to be slaughtered.

She made the decision for him.

*"Break comms silence, get the chief on, it won't give away our position, though it will alert anyone listening, it's the only way to give them the heads up and continue with the mission. Though our window will decrease quickly once we break."*

Jazz nodded.

*"B, this is J, you have at least two 'blurs' in the house with the big clock. confirm"* He was mindful not quote a clock reference, by saying 'at your three' they would have given away their position. Keysha was silently impressed again.

*"J, received. Don't break silence again, you need to move. Now, go."*

Barry Black was a badass. There was no other way to describe him, though even he would struggle against two or more blurs. He had Mix and Jaffa with him, though those two were likely to just get in the way, they were worse than useless if you asked, well pretty much anyone, come to think of it.

*"Jazz, in, now, you heard the chief, we go. This just got a lot tougher and I am not about to sit here waiting for a world of pain to come crashing down on us."*

He turned to watch as her head bobbed down, her hands the last thing he saw as she lowered herself down through the gap and onto the beam. If it were going to go wrong, it was here.

In the mission briefing, not 8 hours ago now, Bobby and Barry had laboured on this part of it. Up to this point, the approach was pretty standard stealth work, working a roof top to get in, grab the target and get out, the foreplay, as Parisi frequently called it. The meat of it, so to speak, was the first crux point in the mission and if you asked Keysha and Jazz, it was a mission that had not one, but three too many crux points for their liking. Whilst the rest were relatively straight forward, the first was anything but.

*"You can't use ropes."* There were a few chuckles from the group. He said nothing more and then there was silence for a few moments as the group exchanged glances. Grins slowly disappearing. Bobby eyed the team, waiting for a reaction. He expected it from that loudmouth Mix, instead it came from Keysha, surprisingly.

*"Stop playing around man, you're joking...."*

Bobby said nothing.

*"Shit. You're not joking."*

In that moment it dawned on her why she had been chosen for this suicide mission. Her surety of foot was well known and usually meant she was dragged along to anything that required stealth of any sort.

*"Ok, Einstein..."* She began...

*"Don't say that name here!"* roared Barry.

Quickly putting up her hands in a placatory fashion, *"Old habit, old habit... sorry, honest mistake. But come on, really? You can understand the use of the phrase. No ropes? Why the hell not?"*

Bobby continued. *"There are sensors, old tech that rotate on an axis, if anything breaks the beam of light, you may as well have walked in naked through the front door."*

That got a few sniggers from the lads. Keysha was more than easy on the eye and I think a few of the men present would pay to see that. She turned and pretended to pull her top down then winked at them, then flicked them the middle finger. This got a few whistles and cat calls.

*"That's enough boys, no chance of that happening, maybe we'll try that on another mission, I don't expect I'll be short of volunteers for that one ey?"* he grinned at Keysha who just glared back at him. Bobby stood up.

*"Enough crap children, that goes for you to Barry."*

*"Fuck off Bobby."*

Ignoring the retort; he carried on. *"There is only one option. Given the location of the ceiling windows, the only chance we have is to use this beam and hope it's not rusted over time and could support the weight of the both of you"*.

*"Both?"* spat Jazz. *"I thought you said I was up there with her?"*

Bobby smiled, wickedly. *"You are...."*

*"Oh."* Jazz visibly sagged.

*"You will need to use the window edge to hold on to. The drop is around three meters from the entrance which at full extension will give you between one and one point five meters to drop to the beam. The sensor sits at one meter from the roof. Therefore, you will need to hold on to the edge, get your knees up, when the sensor sweeps past, you have approximately seven seconds to lower, position and drop before it cycles round again."*

There were a few whistles.

Keysha spoke first, taking it seriously for the first time. *"Is the beam visible?"*

*"Yes, though you will need to take a handful of flour or powder with you, if you blow this through entrance before you drop, it will create a cloud, that if used in small quantities will not break the beam. The sensor will think it's dust. The beam is a very light green, so make sure you are adjusted to the dark before dropping. This shouldn't be a problem based on the egress point."*

Bobby paused, letting the information soak in.

Jazz was next to speak. *"There is something to hold on to right, like a vertical stanchion or something?"*  
*"No, unfortunately not. Stanchions would make the job easy as they would break the sensor light, which would be our way in. Any suggestions?"*

*"There is only one way. As we land we will have to crouch immediately and grip the beam. This action should hopefully lower our centre of gravity and give us something to hold on to. If we take a short rope and karabiner we should be able to clip this on to ourselves as an anti-fall device."* Suggested Keysha.

Jazz scoffed. *"Bloody well easy for you to say, cat o bleeding nine lives. You do this shit all the time. Gaffer, I suggest a switch out. Can't Jones do it instead, surely she is a better choice?"*

*"Jones was my first choice but she was killed last night. By a blur. I wasn't going to tell you until after. Teams are already sweeping the portals for her return."*

Jazz swallowed, hard.

The memory faded away as he heard the landing. It wasn't loud or anything, but the noise worked its way to the window. He waiting for the inevitable crash, picturing Keysha losing her balance and falling 30 meters to her doom. It didn't happen and there was a click in his ear.

It was his turn.

He readied the fall device, certain he would need it, then lowered himself over the edge of the gap. He turned to look down, sweat building up in his hands. He saw the beam at the last minute, tucking his knees up just in time. He heard Keysha gasp. Hardly helpful, he thought. The beam went by another three times, he counted yet could not bring himself to drop. He was scared out of his wits. He heard a click in his ear. It was Keysha. Sweat was running down the nape of his neck and his hands were losing grip due to the build-up of fluid in his hands. He had to drop, he had to do it now. Thinking about his predicament he'd lost the count. He was stuffed. It was all about to go wrong and his lapse of concentration was going to cost them dearly.

It did go wrong, however not in the way that he expected.

The sky lit up, a huge explosion ripped up from around the position of the boss and the van causing Jazz to flinch and lose his grip.... And fall...

Keysha heard the explosion a fraction of a second later, cursing she scanned the room, the sensor beam was approaching. Jazz fell, mouthing some form of obscenity, ironically maintaining silence discipline even when plummeting to the floor. He was going to miss the sensor, just. But he was also going to miss the beam. Keysha lurched forward out over the drop. She hadn't said anything to Jazz, she didn't want to panic him any more than he already was, but she had packed a slightly longer climbing rope for situations just like this. It's almost like she knew.

She grabbed the flailing, hapless Jazz by the back pack, quickly locking her forearm under the strap to distribute the load and to reduce the strain on her fingers. She quickly switched her grip.

*"Stop wriggling!"* she hissed.

He stopped, allowing her to snatch the fall arrest device from his belt. Swiftly she clipped him on to her own harness so to free up her other hand. Time was short, each fall device was not designed to carry the weight of two persons, they would need to get back to the beam. There was no way that she could pull them both up, she didn't have the upper body strength. She could however lift him. Taking hold of him in one hand and taking the weight she unclipped the karabiner from her harness, lifted him slightly and clipped the attachment to her upper shoulder. This would hopefully give them enough length. Leaning down as far as she should, still gripping him she brought him level with her own face.

Jazz kissed her full on the mouth. *"Good skills!"* he muttered, *"you knew didn't you!"* She didn't say anything and just grinned back at him.

*"Hmph, nobody likes a show off..."*

*"Not even one that just saved your ass, again?"* Keysha grinned to reinforce the point.

Ignoring the playful jibe. *"Now what?"*

*"You really are exceptionally dim; I've just reconnected you higher to my harness. It should give you enough length to reach the beam. You will have to use me as a climbing frame to push yourself up."*

He glanced up and readied himself, this he could do.

*"Oh and don't kick or bash anywhere useful, clumsy oaf, if we get through this, you won't want to see the bruises later will you?"*

Ignoring her he pushed himself up, using her shoulders and head to stand on, whilst he used the rope to pull himself up the remaining distance. Clambering over the beam he wrapped his legs as far around the rust brown beam as much as possible and pulled Keysha up with all of his effort.

They took a moment to readjust their fall devices and fell into a short reflective silence as all hell broke loose in the distance. The tell-tale roar of Mix's hand cannon could just about be made out, Jazz glanced sideways. *"that sounds like hell on a stick. Despite this nonsense, I think I'm glad I'm in here and not out there... What?"* He'd noticed that Keysha was glowering at him.

*"What did I say to you? Did you not hear me or are you just ignorant?"* as she pointed to the reddening mark on her forehead.

He couldn't resist. *"No, I did hear you. You said nothing useful..."* She wasn't impressed. He left it there.

*"No lights. No activity. No alarms. Nothing. What in Satan's fiery pit is going on? It sounds like a full scale riot out there and nothing happening in here. I don't like it!"* Jazz agreed with her. It wasn't right. *"Come on, I don't care. We might be able to take advantage of the unplanned distraction.*

*Though I suggest we are vigilant. I doubt the guards are in the same place as the mission brief so we will need to be on it."* He added.

They shimmied their way across the beam to the nearest connecting stanchion to the floor. As they moved, he smiled ruefully at the only two stanchions that went to this part of the roof. If this building had been designed for this type of security, he'd have been impressed. There wasn't a window anywhere near the point in which they met the roof. However, he knew different. Nothing really belonged to anyone anymore, well not for very long, so this was just a purloined building used for as long as possible before someone else took it. It was just the way.

The descent from the beam was much easier.

There were no sensors now between their stanchion and the command box. They attached climbing spikes to lower their descent, applying a friction hitch to control their drop to the floor. This all went smoothly, with Jazz landing first, he unclipped, gathered the rope and dashed to the nearest wall, using the shadows provided by lack of light excellently. Keysha swiftly followed and joined him by the console. Dropping to one knee, she removed her rucksack and rummaged for the pulse.

A 'pulse' was an electromagnetic loop that could be applied to most electrical detection system. Relatively small but large enough to be noticed if a passer-by looked closely enough, its function was infiltrating the security system and overriding the destination of the alarm notification trigger. In essence, when the alarm was triggered, the only piece of equipment that would know was the attached pulse. The security system itself was fed a looped copy of the 'system ok' signal by the pulse which would allow the seals to be broken and exit or entry to the secure area.

These gadgets were incredibly rare, the 'train had a few of them but there were ever depleting and Keysha could well imagine a mission coming up to retrieve some more. The good thing however, was that you didn't need to know how they worked. You just slapped it on the target device and bingo, it blinked into life. Which is exactly what it did on this occasion.

The light pinged blue. It had infiltrated the system and within seconds the light changed to green. Go time. Even though he had used a pulse before, in fact it would take more than one hand to count, he still winced when it came to breaking the seal. Placing the palm of his hand against the push bar, he firmly shoved and the door opened.

Observing comms silence once more, Jazz switched to hand signals drawing his silent pistol and his blade. He's left his trusty sax behind, it was neither the time nor place for that beast, though with what was going on outside, discretion was blown aside now and he dearly wished he had it after all.

He waved Keysha to point. She filed past, scanning with her own pistol, her blade still sheathed. The mission brief suggested we would meet a guard at the end of the corridor on the left. They didn't need to go that way, but the guard would pass through their direction on shift changeover so had to be neutralised.

Keysha had reached the corner, peaking round she saw the guard, recognising the mark on his arm. Intel was right, Moloch's brood.

Dropping back, she checked her watch. Twenty-five mins to handover. They'd made good time however the commotion outside had made the guard alert.

She dropped her arm to her side and made a sign to Jazz, watching his reaction. He nodded, slowly. Taking care to close the door quietly behind him, he moved up adjacent to his partner. She made the sign for 'armour', pointing to her head. Switching places, he glanced at the guard. Full helmet and neck guard, what were the chances?! He quickly processed the information and grabbing a pen and paper from his pocket he listed some suggestions on the paper for Keysha to study.

*"Shoot him and hope for the best?"*

*"Wait for the guard to changeover and take out close up?"*

*"Leave him and risk it?"*

Keysha studied these and shook her head. She gestured for his blade. He looked at her questioningly. Dropping her pack slowly, she grabbed the blade, checked round the corner and shot off down the short corridor towards their target, winking as she departed.

Jazz sighed, brought up his pistol, bracing in case he needed the shot. He didn't. Her speed was frightening, quickly achieving a sprint over ten meters, the guard turned at the last moment and brought his shotgun to bear.

She leapt, using the wall for increased elevation and momentum she sprang from the wall and kicked the shotgun from his hand, followed by plunging the knife into his throat, severing the spine, the tip ever so slightly protruding from the skin at the back. The gun skittered across the floor towards the vending machine and seat where the guard had sat earlier, her stomach lurched as it spun into the chair leg, ricocheting back towards her.

It didn't go off. Someone was clearly smiling on them and these days that wasn't always a good thing.

Human's had found out the hard way, that those above and below had been watching for a very long time indeed.

The corpse grew heavy in her arms as her adrenaline levels started to drop. She turned and looked imploringly at her idiotic partner who was just standing there, mouth wide open.

Coming to his senses and grabbing her pack he rushed over and helped Jazz lower the body. As they did, the tip of the knife scraped against the floor in a sickeningly slow squeal of metal against ceramic.

Together they bound the wound with bandages from their packs, with the aim of leaving as little blood to clear up as possible. Jazz had his hands around the victim's neck and Keysha slowly drew the knife out, as the knife exited there was a tiny spurt of blood before Jazz had stemmed the flow with pressure.

Wiping the blade on her trousers and placing it on the floor, she reached for a second bandage and wrapped it around the first. When she was done Keysha watched as Jazz lifted and dragged the corpse over to the cupboard, he displayed an unusual amount of respect as he stowed the victim and closed the door.

Filing it for later on, she turned her attention to the few spots of blood that had splattered the floor, using some of the bandage to mop up the life fluid.

When she had finished, she turned back to the wall and worked at the scuff mark left by her rigger boots where she had used the wall.

All of this had taken less than a minute. Keysha returned his knife to him, a quick glance exchanged with nothing more said. They walked their way back to the intersection and set off in the direction of their target. Reaching the final door in under 5 minutes without further opposition.

This final door stood between them and the prize. The mission had stated that four guards would be situated in this room, one in each corner of the room.

This was the part of the mission where subtlety was left behind and system 'all guns blazing' came into play. They switched their backpacks from back to front. They couldn't use vests for the mission, the weight would have restricted them so they applied this technique as a poor solution for preventing potential shrapnel from burst weapons. Checking clips out of habit, they nodded to one another and kicked through the door, Jazz sweeping right and Keysha left, firing off concentrated bursts in unison into the position where intel positioned the guards.

The shots impacted on tiles and brickwork, gouging lumps with each strike. There were no guards. They ceased, lowered their guns and scanned the room, eventually meeting gazes, confusion etched on one another's face.

*"Cease fire, cease fire you idiots! I'm in here don't you know!"* a voice piped up from behind a large white piano. Instinctively they both raised their pistols and tracked the source of the voice. Little did Keysha know but they'd well and truly hit the jackpot.

Keysha moved towards the man. He was nothing to look at, early sixties, bald save for a stupid rim of hair that left a semi-circle of fuzzy white around the sides and back of his head. The shiny dome at the top reflecting the light. His face was pinched, he looked starving and like he hadn't slept in weeks, let alone days. He wore plain blue overalls and had some kind of spanner in his hand.

As she drew closer, weapon trained, his visibly blanched.

*"Great, another pack of animals. What's bloody well wrong wi..."*

Keysha cut him off with authority. *"Drop it old man, now!"*

He shrugged. *"Or what? You'll shoot me. I doubt that very much. Perhaps you will beat me like these other dogs? Most likely, though not enough to put my life at risk i'm thinking. That you are here, and all of that..."*

He pointed to the direction of the van and the crap storm enveloping it

*"...is going on at the same time can only mean one thing. You're here for me. Though your initial surprise at my appearance would suggest you were actually just after that."* Gesturing to the white piano behind him.

"I wouldn't test her Jorah. She's had to spend the whole evening with me, which from what I can gather is not exactly a holiday."

Jazz appeared behind the old man identified as Jorah, holstering his pistol as he approached.

"You know him?" gesturing to the elderly man in front of her.

"Sort of, I'd hardly call him a friend and I'm sure the feeling is mutual right now, but I know exactly who he IS."

He passed Jorah a food pack, it wasn't a lot, in fact it was just the leftovers but it was taken gleefully.

"Bashed you up pretty bad huh? Shame that. Don't mistake me, I understand why they would but maybe i'd question the need. I mean no disrespect but it's not like you are going anywhere fast, right?"

This brought a nod from their now captive, who was licking his fingers and dabbing them into the broken crisps at the bottom of the plastic container.

Looking up, he noticed for the first time that Keysha was utterly confused which translated into an entirely sarcastic *"Aaaaannnnnd?"*

*"And what? What's question?"* Jazz was now equally lost.

Jorah coughed deliberately. *"If I may?"* Jazz nodded.

*"I am Jorah. Jorah Manson. Some call me 'creator' others simply 'spark', though I don't like that one. I was the foremost in my field. The molecular displacement of physical items and beings by applying sonic disruption through music."*

Keysha had not entirely caught up still, so Jazz filled the gaps.

*"Firstly, a correction. You ARE the foremost in your field. Secondly, Keysh he created this piano and many other instruments which are highly sought after the world over. Their value is unparalleled."*

She shrugged. *"So bloody what! So it has good acoustics, who gives a rat's ass? There are no concerts any more so what does it matter?"*

Jazz grew angry at her tone and rounded on her, punctuating each point by slapping the bottom of his fist into the palm of his other hand.

*"It matters because the piano is our objective. It matters because this piano..."* pointing fiercely at the instrument beside them *"... is possibly..."*

*"you mean definitely"* interrupted Jorah.

*"... shut it gramps! is.... definitely the foremost of his creations and likely the most powerful of his creations. In the wrong hands it could wipe out hundreds in seconds.... In the right hands it could kill an Angel....."*

He paused deliberately letting that last bit fully sink in. It definitely hit home.

*"Well come on, we need to go, we NEED this equipment, it could... it could... well it could... well change everything!"* Keysha was hyperventilating at the possibilities such a weapon would bring.

She rushed to the piano and tried to push it. It didn't budge.

*"Come on you two, help me with this!!"*

Jorah sighed *"Your companion, she's not the brightest no?"* whispering to Jazz as he walked past.

*"Don't be so sure old man, it offers hope is all".*

*"Ah 'hope', that word is forsaken if you ask me."* He approached the piano.

*"My dear, it won't move. You need lifting gear to get this out of here and as much as your friend over there clearly doesn't skip leg day, the three of us couldn't move this even if we tried. Something else you should know is that this machine is cur....."*

He didn't finish his sentence, if he did, it was lost when the wall behind them burst apart in a riot of destructive noise as brick, mortar and block disintegrated, a large white shape appearing through the whirling debris.

She coughed. Then coughed again, spittle scattering on the floor in front of her. It was flecked with blood. Her ears were ringing, it felt like the bells of Notre Dame itself were peeling next to her head. Opening her eyes, her vision was blurred and she could only make out shapes at first. A large white box with a black circle moving towards another smaller white object. When her sight returned she was witnessing the most moronic thing she had ever seen. A middle aged black man she didn't recognise at first looked like he was trying to play the piano, which given the circumstances was utterly inconceivable let alone ridiculous.

Her sight resolved some more and she made out the man at the piano, it was Barry, he wasn't playing it, he was trying to move it and he was screaming at something.

He was screaming at her...

*"Get up you lazy scroat! Now's not the time for a lay in, you selfish bitch, get up and help me for the love of Earth...!"*

She didn't move at first. Her body struggled to process what the mind was telling it, but as the seconds passed she regained some semblance of control and rolled over onto her back.

*"That's it, that's it, get up, you ain't hurt, stop pretending now, tis but a scratch. We have blur's incoming, lots of them!"*

That didn't make her want to get up, if anything, it made her want to lay back down and wish she was dead. She rolled over again and got on to all fours. Dust and debris cascaded over her shoulders and she rose to her haunches. She coughed again, more blood speckled the floor.

Shit.

She rotated her neck, pain flaring at the base as she tried to escape this sluggish state, as she started to raise her head, noise came crashing back to her as the ringing subsided and a cacophony of sound burst all around her. She saw something appear at her side, it was Jazz and he was pretty bashed up, blood leaked from a cut on his forehead. She was certain she could see bone. She said nothing.

He dropped Jorah on the floor next to her.

*"Is he dead?"*

He paused, looking at the old man.

*"I dunno, probably, maybe, I dunno. Check for me, I gotta help the chief."*

Her running mate staggered, to where Barry was roaring a colourful concoction of expletives that she was sure would make the pit itself wince.

She made out Barry saying: *"Help me, unwind the winch and bring the tow hook to this piano, I'll drag the bloody thing if I have to. Come on, come on..."*

Jazz limped off in the direction of the truck.

Sitting back on her knees, she examined the old man. He can't of survived, could he? He was old, like really old and bashed up like the rest of them. She leaned forward, listening for breath, nothing at first but to her surprise his chest swelling and he burst into a violent hacking cough, spraying the side of her face with phlegm and crap.

She reeled. *"Eeeww, really?! Was that necessary?!"*

As she wiped the mucus and blood from her face, his eyes widened in sickening fear.

Her face was a mirror of his, completely failing to hide the sheer terror as they both heard the keening call of a blur.

Her head snapped round to the hole in the wall, making out at least four, no five, shit six, fuzzy shapes making their way towards them as they clambered over the scattered brick and masonry, stalking towards them.

*"Keys..."*

She turned to Jorah.

*"What?"* She asked imploringly.

*"Keys..."*

*"Yeah, yeah old man I heard you, what?"*

His right arm rose and pointed at the piano. *"Keys..."*

She grabbed his arm, tightly making the old man yelp.

*"Yes, Keys, that's my name, well done, now what is it?"*

One of his eyes opened with urgency, bloodshot and crazed, the other welded shut by rapidly developing swelling. Gritting his teeth, he pointed once more *"NO... Keys!!!"* He waved at the piano.

Keysha finally understood, she let go of Jorah, he fell to the floor once more, his head connecting with the stone sharply, he blacked out. She didn't notice and was up and racing towards the piano. To her right a man burst through a door, his face betrayed his shock as he was assailed by a seemingly invisible assailant. Before long he was overrun by an unknown number, he fired his shotgun wildly, taking a blur full in the chest and winging another more by luck that judgement before the rest ripped him apart savagely.

Keysha skidded to a halt. When a blur was killed or even hurt, the corpse or specifically the wounded area would become visible and if you didn't mentally steel yourself the sight would induce a strange nausea that sent a pang of pain spearing through your stomach.

Luckily she only glimpsed it and she recovered quickly.

Making her way to the piano she shouldered Barry out of the way, knocking him to the floor.

*"What in seven hells do you think you are doing you flaming...."* He exclaimed as he fell.

*"Shut your moaning, you want to survive this don't you?"*

He didn't argue with that.

She sat at the piano seat and lifted the cover, the keys revealed just as Jazz slumped beside her.

*"I hope you know what you are doing..."* he muttered.

*"So do I, so do I..."* Trailing off, she pressed the keys.

Nothing happened.

She did it again and again, eventually smashing her fists on the black and white ivories. In her anguish she stomped her feet, catching the pedals.

As she did, the top of the grand piano flew open and a monstrous set of pistons pushed a conglomeration of metal out from its innards, revealing quite possibly the most enormous gun turret she had ever seen. Without command, the turret start flicking backwards and forwards.

She looked at Jazz.

*"Well go then. You don't need my bloody permission do you!"*

Grinning, she slammed her hands down on the keys, bashing them for all her life's worth, screaming something incoherent. In that moment the turret blazed fire, spitting a seemingly endless hail of projectiles in the direction of the blurs.

There was no finesse to it, none at all. The machine appeared to track targets on its own, it would be impossible for her random key strikes to have this effect so she assumed that some form of AI controlled the tracking element of the machines interface. She didn't care.

The blurs closest to the party exploded into goblets of charred flesh, scattering indiscriminately across the room. She couldn't make them all out, but she could see they were scattering and trying to avoid the firestorm by the way the machine jolted and changed direction without notice.

By the time the machine cycled down, its deafening whine subsiding to a gentle purr, 8 or possibly more, blurs were scattered across the floor.

Though it was hard to tell how many exactly, as a result of the rearranging they had suffered at the hands of the turret.

She hadn't noticed until now, but Barry was standing at her side, sheer disbelief etched onto his face as he surveyed the landscape in front of him.

*"How many...?"* He stammered, disturbed, despite the feeling that they were safe, for the moment.

*"... How many do you think there were? 5, 7, more? It can't be possible. Such a gathering of blurs in one place is unheard of. Unprecedented even."*

Silently Keysha agreed, unsure what this meant.

*"This is bad. Really bad. We need to leave. Like now. If this many devils have appeared as a result of our presence here, must mean that someone wants this a lot more than we do."*

The usually unflappable Barry was shaken and Keysha could fully understand why. She turned to glance down at Jazz to find that he was out cold on the floor.

His injuries clearly a lot worse than she remembered and she could see a tell-tale patch of dark red at his waist and thigh.

She made to reach down for him, *"Help me"*.

Swivelling, Barry picked up the tow hook from the floor which Jazz had managed to bring shortly before he slumped against the machine.

*"He will have to wait. If we don't get this on the truck and get out of here it will be for nothing anyway."*

Too tired to argue, she simply blinked and strode towards the van, engaging the switch that would reel the machine in.

## Epilogue

They drove slowly. Barry wasn't taking any risks with their precious cargo. Besides, a fast moving vehicle these days was most likely running from something, so they didn't want to bring attention to themselves in what was already within rival cohort territory.

Nobody had said much, well Jorah and Jazz had said nothing, both were still out cold, though still breathing and Keysha had done her best to patch them up, though they would both need proper medical support if they were going to see the next few days out.

She'd just finished checking and clambered back to the passenger seat in the front next to Barry who was nursing the battered and broken van through the bleak zone.

They'd left enemy territory maybe twenty minutes ago and the worst was behind them. It was true that 'bleakers' roamed this area but they were fractured groups of two's and three's and rarely troubled a moving vehicle like theirs.

She realised she had been staring at the swinging air freshener for the past few moments, her mind void of any thought, unable to process what had occurred this day. She registered the sloshing sound of water and snapped out of her reverie, realising that she was thirsty, her mouth bone dry she reached for the bottle situated next to where should have been a handbrake.

Water dribbled down her chin as the van bumped and jumped over pot holes and pieces of rubble and metal but enough made its way to her throat.

It was rank and warm.

She cared little, it removed the film of dust from her mouth for the briefest of moments before the sensation returned. Clearing her throat, she eventually spoke.

*"So. What happened to Mix and Jaffa?"* She enquired.

Barry just shrugged. *"They're dead. You didn't really expect them to survive that did you? Jazz has the right of it, I've heard him. Useless, the pair of them. I'm not even sure you know if we will watch the portals for their return..."*

He left the statement hanging. She looked away, she'd only ever dropped from a portal once, the first time, with all the others. She often thought about what it would be like the second time, everyone thought about it at some point. What she hadn't considered however was the possibility that if it did ever happen to her, that nobody would be waiting.

Minutes had passed since he'd made the statement. Eventually Keysha muttered *"That's harsh man."*

*"You know. I knew you would say that but it's the cold truth. Something is changing, I know it and back there in the warehouse we saw something new, a glimpse of something to come, possibly."* He shook his head, clearly just as fatigued as her but wearing it better.

*"That many devils in one place may be the herald for something huge, something we haven't seen before."*

*"And.... If I'm right in that, then we will need the best we can get and cannot spend resource watching, waiting for the weak and slow. Not now."*

Keysha snorted. *"And what if they come back and picked up by another cohort. What then? What will you do when you are faced with a friend from the past?"*

Barry chuckled. *"You think me heartless, don't you child?"*

*She didn't answer.*

*"Well don't. They will be faced with a decision much like we will, should that situation occur and they will make a choice, return to us willingly, or die trying. It really is that simple."*

The van pulled into the shadow of a dark green office block, a tatty old poster fluttered gently, as if waving friends back home. Keysha made to clamber into the back of the truck as she did Barry gently touched her shoulder. She stopped, but didn't look at him.

*"I'm not heartless. I'm just a realist and back there, shit got real... I don't know what will happen to Mix and Jaffa but I doubt Erishkigal will waste too much time worrying about them, hell I don't even think she will be pleased we snagged the target. Once she hears what we have to say about the blurs... well shit... I don't even know what to think..."* His softer demeanor disappeared as quickly as it arrived.

*"Now get back there and get those two ready..."*

She set off with a *"Boss"* and moved to the back.

*"We have some explaining to do..."* Barry trailed off as he stepped out of the van, catching Bobby, Santana and Erishkigal observing their arrival.

*"Some explaining indeed..."*