

GAMERS

Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.

-- Albert Einstein

A quilt of tiny lights underneath the assassin's boots looked like fireflies twinkling in the darkness far below. He was a thousand feet in the air as he parachuted toward his target in a black and gray camo jumpsuit. At that height, the distance masked his speed and the night concealed his approach.

In his infrared goggles, a display showed a three-dimensional map of his landing spot. It was the rooftop of a low-rise apartment building where his target lived. He gripped his left hand and gently pulled it down, steering the chute.

As he neared, he started to make out individual streetlights. They cast an orange hue on the ground. Dots of headlights from a few cars crawled slowly on the dark roads below.

Angling toward the target, he tensed his legs for the impact. The roof of the apartment building came into view, and the precise landing spot appeared on the display. Now his speed was palpable as he could see the ground racing upwards. He gripped both hands, readying for the right moment.

When his boots were fifty feet above the building, he pulled down hard with both hands. His rate of descent slowed immediately as if the entire earth had skidded to a stop. Ten feet above the rooftop, he unclenched his hands and eased his boots down onto the

surface. As soon as he felt the impact on his feet, he unhooked the parachute and ducked behind an industrial HVAC unit.

A light on the roof flickered as insects orbited its mesmerizing glow. The assassin peeked out to make sure no one had seen him. The only sound was a faraway siren fading in the wind.

The map identified his location as Riverside Apartment Homes. A blueprint of the building showed the location of his target. Apartment 4A. Top floor, east corner.

The display in his goggles showed a photo of a male, mid-twenties. That is all he knew. The mission data never included a name or the reason for the hit. It did not matter to an assassin.

He adjusted the display to hide the image. In his hand, he felt the contoured grip of a Glock nine-millimeter pistol. An extended noise reducer made it slightly heavier and reduced the range. But for this mission, silence was more important than precision. Proximity was not going to be a problem.

He darted across the rooftop and crouched against a parapet wall. Peering over, he saw the balcony of Apartment 4A below. He looked around again. Then, he jumped down onto the balcony and stepped into a dark corner . . .

. . . stepping out from a dark corner, Ren Thomas looked both ways in the dimly lit hallway. He was inside a house on the outskirts of Beirut, Lebanon. He looked around guardedly as he aimed his Smith & Wesson SD40 handgun. The residence was where a high-value target lived. He had to stop the mission and his time was running out.

The inside was sparsely decorated with futons and hanging rugs. The windows were covered and the rooms were half-lit by hidden lights, giving it the look of an eerie hide-out. Several photographs of men in dark headdresses hung crookedly in the hallway. He passed slowly by their emotionless stares.

Ren listened intently for any sound as he crept forward. He scanned the shadows for the slightest movement. His chest pounded. The smooth trigger of the gun waited to unload its payload.

He took a deep breath and walked down the hall, holding the gun in his outstretched hands . . .

. . . the gun was in his outstretched hands as the assassin snuck on the balcony of Apartment 4A. An orange mountain bike hung on the outside wall, and a few patio chairs were scattered around. He could see inside the apartment through a sliding glass door. The lights were on and the living room was empty.

Using a mini power drill, he bore out the lock on the door. He waited for several moments to see if anyone came. The assassin then entered the apartment.

He moved silently past a couch in the living room. There was nothing on the walls other than an oversized flat-screen TV. A lone bookcase displayed an array of trophies and awards. He saw photographs of his target smiling with teammates.

Down a hallway, he saw a sliver of light escaping from underneath a closed door. He gripped the gun as he edged forward toward the door . . .

... with a sliver of light coming from underneath. Ren could hear movement inside the room. For a moment, he considered his options and then realized that he had only one.

He pulled out another identical Smith & Wesson handgun. He raised both guns in front of him and readied for the fight. Everything came down to this moment.

Ren kicked open the door and ...

... the door swung open and the assassin lunged inside. Ren was standing in the middle of an empty room on a large gaming unit. He was wearing a virtual reality headset that covered his head and face and was holding two plastic controllers. He turned around aimlessly looking in the direction of the sound.

“Who’s there? Is somebody there?” Ren called out.

The assassin raised his gun and fired ...