

✂ rolling plague

Amsterdam City (outer ring). Netherlands region—EU.

A pair of MoD dropships touch down on the bridge just inside Checkpoint 31, engines idling as men in radiation suits erupt from side doors, splitting up to check vitals on nine bodies spotted by satellite.

In eleven minutes the fallout will reach this side of the moat.

A huge slab of bridge breaks off into the water while its concrete pillars burn.

Kneeling over one of the bodies, blood pooling at his knees, a medic raises his arm, waving to the others.

✂ the card

An employee hospital inside MoD naval yards. Brussels region—EU.

Ennis wakes to the steady tick of an ECG.

Sleeping in the chair beside his bed is a man he doesn't know.

"What," says Ennis.

The man sits up, scratching the corner of one eye. "Mr. Pryce... I'm Lambert. I represent the Capital Expanse Alliance. But not officially. As far as anyone else is concerned, I was never here. I never sat beside your bed for three days waiting for you to wake up, because I don't have a message from the Board of CFOs for you."

"Okay." Ennis looks around for water.

"*Officially*," says Lambert, leaning forward, "I never told you that three days ago you accomplished what we've been unable to do in nearly half a century of mediation. And just to be very clear, I *didn't* offer you a well-paid position with Capital Expanse should you decide to further pursue a career in counterdiplomacy."

Ennis frowns. "That's what they're calling what I did?"

Lambert stands, leaving a business card on the bedside table before walking to the door.

"Get in touch if you ever need anything." And with that, he's gone.

Ennis reaches for the card, wincing at undefined pain radiating through his torso.

A nurse hurries by his door, glancing at Ennis.

"Nurse?" She stops, backs up. "Can I have some water?"

The nurse simply glares, goes to walk away, but stops again. She spits on the floor between them.

✂ waiting

The hospital's head of medicine escorts Ennis to the main doors, where a large crowd has gathered.

"This is about me?"

Dr. Trov nods. "The media has really latched on to all of this. There's a car waiting, over there."

"Who pays for that?"

“I don’t know. Not you. Probably Worldsnet, or Capital Expanse. They’re all big fans now, I’m sure.”

Trov waits there as Ennis exits through glass airlock doors, Enforcement officers in riot gear keeping the three-deep crowd at bay.

Ennis makes his way through the makeshift human aisle toward a waiting towncar—a nervous-looking driver by its open rear door.

One of the crowd begins to clap. Probably an attempt at being sardonic, rather than a congratulatory gesture, if he had to guess.

Then someone boos angrily in response, obviously missing the subtext.

Another throws eggs, missing Ennis entirely.

Then, rather abruptly, someone fires a shot.

Everyone in the crowd drops at the crack of gunfire, the cops all pulling their sidearms, patting themselves down for fresh wounds.

Half a block away, a hooded man bolts away at full tilt.

The Enforcement guys give chase while Ennis runs to the car, diving in back.

The driver slams the door closed with his head low, dashing around front.

It’s now that Ennis notices the crowd gathering where one of the onlookers isn’t getting back up.

As they pull away from the curb, he catches sight of the man giving CPR to a girl bleeding from her head.