**The Weapon**

Book I : Chapter I

The Profession of Faith

**Division I : Dormant**

*Thursday, August 25th, 2016*

*Southbend, Indiana*

 A pitch black background gives contrast to the figure of a man.

 He’s crouched. His facial features, vivid and yet, vague. In opposition to the deep, dark background, he is the only thing that can be seen. The colors of his clothes, skin, and hair are sharp, but smear and blend together with the slightest movement. He is flexed and ready.

 Of his opponent, there is no feeling of fear, no worry of possible injury, no exhaustion. Then, in a moment of stillness, the figure lunges.

 A flinch and a jerk, the awareness of reality quickly makes itself known. Sight is blurred to awakening eyes. Panic sets in for a moment, causing the hazy vision to change and focus into a crystal clear image of a silver cell phone, motionless on the nightstand.

 Logic would dictate that the cell phone is without vibration, either because it’s too early or it’s too late for the alarm to enact. Heart rate increased due to panic, an outstretched hand nervously picks up the phone to look at the time…a sigh of relief.

 With ten minutes before his alarm was set to go off, the orphan, Connor O’Donaghue, stretches his six foot frame for a lofty half minute then sits up on the side of his bed.

 Wiping his face, he notices his sheets are damp with sweat. Damn it, he thought to himself as he reaches over to grab a towel to dry his neck. He’s been sweating more and more when asleep, but no sickness, no memory of a dream or nightmare to cause him to perspire like he’d just finished a three mile run.

 Forty minutes before he had to leave, he decides to jump in the shower and get ready. Class starts at ten a.m. and it might be a blessing in disguise that he was awakened earlier than planned; showing up early wasn’t his strong suit.

 Coming into class, he eyes his seat. He notices the smell of the old wood floor and trim in the classroom, the warmth from the morning sun shining through the half open blinds, and the precise organization of Dr. Redd’s desk and bookshelves. The good doctor made sure to keep his things very neat and organized. Connor always noticed how intricate everything was set up in order for the professor to project himself on the class, through ambiance, to go along with his lectures on world history. It seemed like a common strategy most professors here practiced, making their classrooms like a second home for themselves. Maybe it was in order to make the students more comfortable. Connor enjoyed this thought a great deal, ever since he started at the university three years ago. It was a reminder of how his father was, giving him a sense of security…everything in its rightful place.

 Sitting down, he takes out a black laptop from his backpack and gently sets it on the top of the desk. The classroom consists of himself and two others. He’s not horribly familiar with the other two, who, to the best of his recollection, were brothers; one a sophomore and the other a senior. So, he decided to open up his computer and check a few emails along with a bit of news.

 He breezed through a couple articles; some celebrity meltdowns, a couple of politicians caught in a scandal, a drone strike somewhere on the other side of the world, and a debate on gun control. Trying not to get too interested in what he was looking at before class started, he looked up to the clock to see what time it was as a few more students enter the room.

 Like a shock to the body’s system from a splash of cold water to the face, a shriek, then a blood curdling scream is heard coming from the hallway.

**Division II : Proclamation**

 The hair on his neck stood on end. Panic set out across the class, causing people to immediately run to the windows and hallways to see what they could. Things were happening too rapidly for anyone to comprehend.

 As Connor got to the door of the classroom, he slowly peered out into the hallway. He sees the crowds spreading, people crouching with their arms over their heads, others yelling and running any place they can find to hide. He sees a group of about seven men round the corner as they start to spread out in different directions.

 The first shot rings out, into the ceiling, and time almost seems to stop. One of the men looked as though he was ordering people into the classrooms through loud, inarticulate yelling and hand gestures.

 A few students try to run and are immediately shot. It doesn’t take another example for everyone to understand that if they try to flee, they’ll be gunned down as well.

 Connor turns and examines the classroom. He notices the expressions of his classmates, who’re staring back at him; ghost white faces, fear overwhelming each and every one of them. They were all looking to him for an answer as to what was happening.

 “Everyone in the corner!” he hastily announces. They all follow his direction. He quickly shuts and locks the door then backs up to the wall, next to the entrance.

 Questions fill the room. Panicked classmates began asking for answers, “What’s happening?” one of them shouts from the far corner. Connor tries to calm them, “I don’t know! There are men coming with guns, I couldn’t see who they were, just…stay down!” As he finishes his exclamation the door knob violently shakes.

 A shotgun blast rips through the lock and handle, giving the door enough momentum to slam against the wall, causing everyone to fall to the floor with their hands over their heads.

 In enters three men, all wearing black head wraps that covered their faces. One of them had on a white tunic that fell down over his jeans and a black leather jacket over it. The other two were dressed in black from head to toe; black vests, black jackets, black pants, and black boots.

 Connor can see that they all look orange or an odd brown, like a bad spray tan, from what skin could be seen. All three of them start shouting out orders at the students in the room, in what sounded like a Middle Eastern language. No one could understand the commands as they tried to comply in confusion. He couldn’t help but notice Ansar, a foreign exchange student from that region, was having just as hard a time comprehending anything yelled at him.

 The class is corralled away from the corners and lined up against the walls, by gunpoint. One of the men instructs, through gestures made with zip ties in his hand, everyone bound, on their knees, and to face the wall. The other two fulfill the order, binding everyone’s wrists together and forcing them to the ground.

 When the order has been successfully accomplished, they start closest to the door. One of the men pulls a long machete from the sheath on his side as the leader stands in the middle of the room and starts to speak in a loud voice. Connor couldn’t help but think it sounded like a fake or forced accent.

 “SHUT UP!” he bellowed, waiting for their cries to shrink. “We have come today to deliver punishment unto the infidel. To the unjust. To the liars. To the whores and…to the enemy. YOU will have a chance to proclaim the truth, to give your life to Allah! Those of you found worthy, will tell the world of what you witnessed here today. America, and all other countries of the like, must be an example of how vulnerable the arrogant truly are. The United States must pay for their crimes committed against Allah! The guilty must come to know the edge of our sword!” he said as he ended his speech. “Now, we shall BEGIN!”

 And with that he asks the first, “Who is your God?”

 Connor couldn’t help but think as though all of this was far too strange. Something like this happening would be outside of his comfort zone, sure, but it was more like a movie; each man overly ready and prepared. It was too rich, too much like the stories on the news, too much like he’d envisioned a terrorist attack. So odd, that it would happen like this, he thought. It was just an overwhelming sense of perfection in their execution, like they were on a stage.

 The first to be questioned, Stephen; a young man, late teens, early twenties, scared out of his wits. He can’t help but to urinate and shake uncontrollably. “God,” he replies. “The God of who?” the man demands. Stephen responds in a question, as if he hadn’t just heard the man speaking. “Je…,” and before he can finish the masked man with the machete raises his blade and strikes downward onto his neck.

 The blade doesn’t cut completely through, it must have been stuck in the bone of the vertebral column because the killer had to place his foot on the now motionless body, which had fallen prone on the floor, to obtain leverage to pull the steel free from the boy’s neck.

 After removing the machete, he makes one more attempt and Stephen’s head detaches from his body.

 The rest of the class is visually upset, most shaking and crying.

 The intruder’s focus is now on to the next student. Andrew is up, and before the ring leader asks, he shouts, “Allah! Allah is my God! Muhammad, I believe in Muhammad! Praise Islam!”

 “LIAR!” the man responds. “You lie for your life! Strike him down!”

 In a brutal fashion, the masked man brings the blade back so far that he almost stabs himself in the back with the tip then wildly swings it forward. Andrew, fearful and panicked, turns to face his attacker and tried to defend himself by throwing up his bound arms to shield the oncoming blade, but the machete cuts deep into his forearm, through his ulna, yet unable to slice through the radius. The attacker push-kicks Andrew into the wall, freeing the large piece of sharp metal, only to return with a gash to his flank. Blood is now spurting out of his arm and side, covering the floor and pooling around him.

 The man pauses to observe his victim, still alive and writhing on the floor. So the aggressor begins again, swinging more and more violently, covering Andrew in deep lacerations to his back, neck, and head. With each strike, screams and cries are heard from the fellow classmates as the metal meets flesh in a shrieking, thudding sound.

 Seven other students, who, unluckily, were either settled in during the intrusion or ran in for cover as the masked men made their way down the hall, played witness to the ruthless slaughter of their peers.

 The now bloodied recipient, of this horrific scene, scurries to try to bring up his other arm to deflect yet another blow, but the masked attacker has taken hold of the machete with both hands and strikes downward onto his wrist, severing it from his elbow. Andrew hasn’t had an opportunity to cry out because of his adrenaline surging through his veins, due to the extreme pain and shock of the infliction caused upon his body. His brain couldn’t catch up to project any sound.

 Grabbing hold of a defenseless shell of a human being, the intruder makes a final attempt at the accomplishment of his order. He lunges the blade into the boy’s chest, hitting his heart, relieving his suffering, and releasing his soul from his body.

 The masked man is visibly exhausted. He obviously didn’t realize the effort needed in order to cut a man down with a machete, let alone two individuals. He is out of breath as his shoulders bob up and down while his lungs strain to bring in new air and exhale the old. Again he pauses to catch his wind. He then turns to set his eyes upon his next victim, after the leader motioned with his head to continue as he turned to the corner to make a confirming call over his radio. Focus is on the third in line.

 Connor.

 But he is calm, collected…focused. As he watched the decimation of his classmate, flashes of his own involvements in an assortment of wild battles had begun to flood his mind. He was beginning to remember his dreams, the dreams that have caused him to awake drenched in perspiration.

 He remembered a man crouched and waiting to attack, the blurred colors with each subtle movement. Connor remembered he thought he had been fighting him, wrestling him. But he’d never been frightened, which, looking back, he’d always felt was odd, yet never thought any further beyond that.

 An understanding rolled over Connor’s consciousness. It was finally clear. The man wasn’t an enemy, he was a teacher, whom he was learning from and being trained by; strengthening his will. It all made perfect sense to him now.

 He was being prepared.

 A stronger feeling comes over him, a mix of calmness, comfort, anger and rage. Turning his head in the direction of his soon to be attacker, and before being asked, he sharply speaks condescendingly to the intruders, “Who do you think I believe in?! You’ve come to a Catholic college! If you’re too dim to understand, I’ll elaborate,” turning his head forward, he gazes out the window at the sky and proceeds to proclaim boldly, and with authority, “I believe in Jesus Christ, the Messiah; the one and only True God! The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!”

**Division III : The Room**

 It was his intention to upset the aggressors…it seemed as though his mission was a success for the two listening. The leader was still in the corner, oddly unfazed by the comments. The masked machete wielder didn’t hesitate to wait for an order.

 Connor now knows the blade is coming, but was surprised…his body was communicating with him. He could feel the blade’s edge raise back as if it were part of him, like the rays of the sun shining upon his skin. Suddenly the zip-ties loosen, as though they were never applied.

 His hands and feet are free. He feels the blade swinging toward his neck. He bends backward and throws his head back to see the machete pass by his face, from his left to his right.

 He raises his right hand, and in one fluid motion, catches the man’s wrist. With his left hand, Connor takes the handle from the man’s grip. Having full control of the machete, he twists around and pops to his feet; now bearing the blade. Bringing the handle back to his core, he lunges the steel forward into the man’s chest, through his heart.

 Removing the machete, and without pause, Connor raises it above his head then throws it at the gunman who’d been aiming at his new rising adversary during the scuffle, awaiting an open shot. Hitting his target directly in the chest, Connor eyes his next victim as the gunman falls.

 With an impulsive rush toward the last of his enemies, who is frantically trying to unsheathe his firearm because he hadn’t initially witnessed the situation’s sudden change in fluidity, Connor reaches his competitor and grabs hold of his hands, pushing down and preventing the man’s weapon from outside exposure. He head butts his victim, breaking his nose and watering his eyes, causing instant swelling of the forehead, eyelids, and cheek bones; dropping him to his knees. Grabbing the back of his neck, Connor twists and forces him to all fours. With his other hand, he disarms the knife on the man’s hip, raises his arm and, using gravity, changes his grip on the knife. Bringing the blade down, and into the center of his enemy’s head, the assailant goes limp. The weight of the body pulls the head to the floor, freeing the blade in Connor’s hand.

 Now there is a pause, a delay in time. A sense of confused reality washes over those left. Acknowledging this, Connor can feel everyone’s focus firmly on himself.

 Standing statuesque, paralyzed for a moment, possibly stage fright from being the center of attention, he brings his eyes up to see everyone looking at him with shocked expressions on their faces…expectedly so.

 Motionless and feeling the weight of everyone’s panic, he looks over to Robert, the first bound hostage closest to him. Moving his left foot forward, Connor finally removes himself from a petrified state. In a calm, yet assertive tone, Connor asks everyone to remain quiet.

 Reaching Robert, Connor bends down and cuts the zip-ties off his wrists, then hands the knife over, “Help the rest.” he asked. Robert rises to his feet to fulfill the request.

 “Everyone…breathe,” he says in a pleading request, knowing full well the mental hurdle everyone had just been through. Trying to calm the room of people, who can now testify to what the inside of a slaughter house would look like, had become its own burden.

 Connor is composed on the surface, but his mind races. He’s worried about the other students in the class, which causes him to wonder about those in the other classrooms.

 He contemplates how many other men there are remaining. He figured at least four were left from the group he’d seen coming down the hall. He’s also quite concerned that he isn’t bothered by what he’s just done. Due to what he’s seen thus far, he becomes perplexed at the astounding confidence he feels in his certainty that help isn’t on the way.

 He takes a long moment, closes his eyes and lowers his head…to think, to just simply think for a while. It feels like a scattered mess left after a tornado within his head and he needs to collect himself, organize himself, and find his center. With a deep breath in, he exhales. There. Now, on to the task at hand.

 Playing the hero would be nice if this were all he had to do, but there is more. More men who are going to kill more people. He feels a rush, an urge, to do something. He understands that he needs to find out how many more there are, and where, so he can get the rest of the survivors out and away from here.

 He wishes he was alone, so as to not have to worry about others getting hurt. He feels responsibility for them now, and for those who are left.

 There isn’t any more time to hesitate. The sound of gunshots are heard every couple of seconds. Every moment spent wondering equates to another life ending. He feels compelled and drawn to leave the room in an attempt to help. A lesser feeling is the one in the far back of his head that’s trying to tell him to run and save his own life. This one, he wonders, may be existent due to the necessity of balance within his psyche, which society projects on us to need through social acceptance. It’s a concept too complex to ponder further at this point.

 “Ok…” Connor lets out with another breath, “I’m going to go check out the hallways.” he cautiously professes, knowing that they would panic, being left in the room alone, especially after the atrocity they’d just been through. “Please stay here, I’ll be back!” he further exclaims, pausing as another round of shots can be heard from a classroom down the hall.

 Before they had a chance to protest, Connor finishes, “Stay away from the windows, keep down, close to the floor. Barricade the door with the desks, chairs, book shelves, everything! Stay in the corners of the room, out of sight. Someone call the cops and don’t open the door for anyone, except me, I’ll let you know that I’m coming.”

 Connor’s intuition was accurate. The classmates, in a panic, began to plead and question, “Wait! Why are you telling us this? Should we leave?” the first began. It was Stacey, the epitome of an all American girl, from Three Rivers, who’d probably only ever heard about disasters like these in some movie she’d seen in a theater back home.

 “Yeah, we should leave! I-I mean…do you think they’ll come back? If they come back…we should go with you, look what you did! You can do something!” Malcolm responded with panic and fear in his voice. Malcolm was usually very assertive. He’d come from a rough background with gun fire and fist fights back in Washington DC, but an assault like this can cause even the bravest to quake a bit.

 “No!” Connor cut them short. “The more we have, the more targets they have to shoot at. If you’re with me I won’t be able to run. I’ll have to do what they want so they don’t hurt you. If you barricade the door, and do what I said, then you’ll be fine. Call the police! By the time they try breaking down the door the cops should be here for them to deal with and they’ll forget trying to get to any of you!” he explained.

 “This is a terrorist attack…so…so, so why are they here?! Why are they after us?! We’re just kids…college students, we’re not anything special to them! We’re not politicians! What if there’s a bomb?! Are we just supposed to wait here and die?” a third student cried. His name was Jonathan, a very quick minded individual and a political science major. It was probably why he could come up with such questions while terror-stricken. As well intended as they may have been, his questions only served to cause the rest of his classmates to become more anxious and fearful.

 Connor interjected, “I don’t think we’ll get far if there is a bomb. Odds are, if they see us and press whatever button, we’ll still be in the blast radius. We don’t have any idea how many of them there are or where they’re at. Did any of you see how many more there might be?” He was impressed with himself for being able to answer and sound like he knew what he was saying.

 Silence filled the air, soon followed by furthered anxiousness.

 “Ok, then that’s why I have to leave. But I’m going to come back! I don’t want to die today and I’m sure neither do any of you. I’m going to get you all out of here, okay?!” Connor spoke with confidence. He reassured them, “I’m going to close the door when I go, just do what I said and you’ll all be ok! Barricade the door behind me, be quiet, and stay out of sight.” he ended.

 Connor slowly opens the door and slides enough of himself out to see a sliver down both ways of the hall. He feels as comfortable as the current situation would allow whilst beginning his march. He’d only taken a few short steps out when he caught side of more men at the corner of the north hall. They were gathered in discussion, facing away from him.

 He awkwardly makes a clumsy attempt to hurriedly backtrack his steps. Due to his forward momentum, his body jolts mechanically. He gives up altogether, deciding to just lunge backwards into the almost closed door, knocking the student behind it down. He’s now back in the classroom, staring at the doorway from a seated position.

**Division IV : Discovery**

 “What happened?” a confused Jonathan impatiently asks. Connor responds with a soft whisper, “There’s more, they’re gonna be coming…I had to jump back! I don’t think they saw me.” His remark causes an even higher level of paranoia and panic to spread across the classroom. Surely those whom are conversing down the hall will be checking in with who they still believe to be alive within this room.

 Connor quickly gets up, quietly closes the door, and backs away slowly before remembering that there are guns at his disposal. He turns and looks at each downed attacker, all with their weaponry readily upon their persons.

 Making sure not to waste any more time, Connor jumps into action, sprinting toward the dead opponent’s body closest to him. “Everyone hurry, help me get the guns off the bodies!” He whispers his command to the class. “Knives, magazines; anything that looks like it can hurt someone!” he finished as he threw the strap of a black, semi-automatic rifle over his shoulder. Each man had a small cache of armaments on their body: pistols, knives, explosives, and extra ammunition; everything was up for grabs.

 During the removal process, papers fling up into the air then land on the ground next to the body, bringing everyone’s attention in the class to the ruffling sound. Connor grabs the papers and stuffs them in the back pocket of his jeans, understanding that there’s no time to investigate.

 In the course of discarding the weaponry, Connor thinks of a simple idea…take the garb off of the dead and use it to make the attackers think he’s one of them, classic! Reaching down, Connor starts to take off the fabric from it’s previous owner. Accompanying the unveiling…shock.

 “Wh…what is that?! Why, who...who?” Robert, Jonathan’s brother, began stuttering out questions, matching his own mental confusion. “What does this mean?” he continued. “Right now it doesn’t matter. They’re coming, we have to hurry!” Connor responded with urgency.

 The scene was further difficult to take in for everyone due to the new and confusing aspect of their chaotic situation.

 The unmasking revealed a white man, wearing tan colored makeup where his skin was visible through the turban. He was mid-thirties with noticeable dyed, pitch black hair. It was a strange and curious sight indeed; an obvious attempt to portray someone he wasn’t. All signs previously pointed to a Middle Easterner. Those surrounding the other dead attackers, who witnessed the unveiling themselves, began removing the black wraps off of the heads and faces of the bodies they were previously disarming. The revelations resulted in the same as the first, they were white men under hidden identities of would be terrorist cells.

 Still yet, Connor, remembering that there may be a crew coming, looked down and continued to remove the armaments from the deceased. And knowing that if he were to stop and focus on the new information at hand, he would possibly displace the precious time needed to ready themselves. “Finish quickly, we’ll figure it out after.” he comfortingly directed.

 He grabbed a black duffle bag from under one of the desks, emptied it, and began putting the excess ammunition in it, then flung the strap onto his shoulder.

 After obtaining all there was to take, Connor rose to his feet. He fitted the butt of the gun firmly against the inside of his right shoulder and set his right eye, looking down the barrel to the notch at the end. He was aiming in the direction of the door in anticipation.

 “What are you gonna do? Fight them?!” asked Malcolm. “Yeah, I suppose I’ll have to. My first thought is to get out, so I gotta find a way. Maybe get everyone out from the other classrooms…if they’re still alive. Maybe find some help…I just know that we can’t stay here!” Connor mildly argued out of the left side of his mouth, as to not disturb his concentration.

 “Well what is this, what is going on? Do you even know what it is that you’re going to try to stop?” Malcolm rebutted in a loud, irritated whisper.

 “Would you shush!? I don’t know, alright?! Whatever this is, this just doesn’t seem right…I mean it isn’t right, but, in what it is, it doesn’t seem like what it’s supposed to.” Connor stated in a questioning manner, as if he didn’t quite understand what he was saying, himself.

 “It looks like a terrorist attack.” Malcolm argued. “It does, but it doesn’t. It just doesn’t seem like the ones we’ve heard about, does it?!” Connor frustratingly responded.

 “Ansar,” Connor called to his classmate, “where are you from?” “Sy-Syria.” Ansar confusingly answered. “What do they speak in Syria?” Connor questioned further. “Arabic.” Ansar told Connor. “Is that what they were speaking?” Connor continued. “I…I think so.” said Ansar. “Well, did you know what they were saying?” Connor asked in a further frustrated tone. “No…Ye…I…I don’t know, I couldn’t make it out.” Ansar replied. “Did it not sound right? Was there an accent?” Connor snapped. “I-I-I don’t, I don’t know, yeah, I guess.” Ansar responded. “Well was it Arabic or not?” Connor promptly asked in a commanding fashion. “Yes!” Ansar now answered with a strengthened sense of determination. “What were they saying?” continued Connor. “I don’t know.” Ansar responded as to backen out of an argument.

 “Well, see, that’s what’s strange. They’re dressed up like Middle Eastern terrorists and spoke, what I thought, sounded like a not-real-convincing Arabic. You,” Connor gestures toward Ansar with his head, “can’t understand them…there is something wrong with this!”

 Connor takes a breath to reorganize his thoughts. “Has anyone here shot a gun before?” he asks. No one had. The room stays silent as they all look upon Connor. “John, here,” Connor bends over to the ground and picks up another rifle, next to a downed intruder, then hands over the gun to his classmate. “use this if you have to.” Connor looks to Jonathan with an unsure look that somewhat demoralizes the recipient. Jonathan fearfully hugs the gun to his chest. “Take your finger off the trigger, you only touch the trigger when you’re ready to use it.” he corrected. “Point it at the bad guy and squeeze, don’t pull. Hold it on your target until your target isn’t there anymore.” he tried instilling some confidence to him, from the previous look he’d given.

 “Everyone else, take the knives. Someone, by all means, take the shotgun! Malcolm, it’s all yours if you want it.” he suggested as Malcolm took the advice and moved forward to pick up the gun. “This is just a last case scenario, if they get in, and John…and Malcolm run out of ammo, then use the knives. Don’t jump in front of them firing!” Connor commanded of the crowd. “John, check to make sure the safety is off.” he ordered.

 Jonathan looked to Connor with confusion, then looked down at the gun. Connor pointed with his index finger at the safety, “Safety off…” he remarked. Jonathan, following with his eyes, found the safety and flipped the small button to a red color. “Good…remember, don’t point that thing or put your finger on the trigger until you’re ready to shoot, you’re the safety now!” Connor softly conveyed.

 Hastily searching the rest of the men, he gathered whatever extra ammunition he could find from their dead bodies.

 He rushes to begin dressing in the dead man’s garb. Throwing on the head wraps, he finishes by covering his face. Without any darkening makeup, his eyes, forehead, and bridge of his nose are all still very easily seen through the openings of the black fabric.

 Connor returns to face the door with his gun up. He figured the men he saw down the hallway should be heading here, puzzling him a bit that they hadn’t arrived yet. The continued time without their intervention has given him a feeling that he’s had an hourglass of luck that may soon be empty.

 As he awaits the jiggle of the remaining bits of the door handle in vain, he decides to proactively meet the aggressors rather than await their presence. Moving one foot in front of the other, in a cautious manner, he lessens the distance between himself and the door.

 Pausing for a moment, he takes a breath to ready his mind and brave exposing himself to the hallway.

 He reaches out and grabs hold of the hanging silver stemmed handle. Slowly pulling the remnant, the door cracks as it moves towards him, causing him to stop in suspense. After a moment of trepidation, he begins again. Opening it further, Connor begins to slip the nose of the barrel out.

**Division V : Adventure to Room Two Fourteen**

 Surprisingly, there isn’t anyone there. Connor quickly swings the door open in order to catch those in pursuit of his geographical location off guard. Still not seeing anyone, he makes a quick peek and aims around the edges of the door frame out into the hallway; still no one visible down either side.

 He looks back into the room with a puzzled expression, “No one’s there!” Connor states. “I’m gonna go, come barricade the door behind me.” he motions to John as he makes his way through the entrance.

 Walking out into the openness of the hallway, Jonathan promptly closes the door behind him. “Be careful!” he pleaded to Connor before the finality of the process was complete. Then he, Robert, Malcolm, and the others begin barricading the door like Connor had previously told them to. Jonathan looks to Stacey and asks her to call the police while the blockade continued, fright still a fresh expression on everyone’s face.

 Connor is outside now. He feels awkward and uncomfortable, he thinks to himself that it’s strange how the inside of the classroom, as tragic as it was, made him feel just a bit safer than he felt at this moment.

 To the left is the end of the hall where the only other way to go is the stairs, to the right is his pathway to the other classes. He can hear screams of agony, which prompt him to make a rapid dash to the corner in order to peer around and see down the north hall. Before he reaches the edge of the wall, he hears shouting in a less than believable Middle Eastern accent.

 As he arrived at the end of the short corridor, he pinned himself up against the wall and made sure not to be seen. Covertly looking around the bend, he scans down the hall to see it cleared. A scream, and his focal point soon becomes the classroom closest to him.

 He begins toward the entryway when, within three feet of the door, a shotgun blast goes off and a pink mist splashes out into the open. The sound startles him, causing Connor to recoil and, in a fluid motion, bring the butt of the assault rifle up to his cheek bone so hard it hurts.

 More screams and wailing from all of the classrooms throughout the hall cause Connor to stress; more gun shots accompany the shouts to inevitably quiet them.

 Instinct or impatience, Connor didn’t spend much time deciding which it was, caused him to desperately sprint to the first room. Dropping to his knees, he slides into the doorway so as to catch the unsuspecting offenders flat footed, along with being shorter than them, in order to become less of a target and get off more shots.

 When his marks are in view he opens fire, first striking the man in the middle of the room with a quick two round burst. One of the bullets went through and struck the wall in front of the attacker who was behind the first recipient, alerting him of something awry. When turning to face the cause, blood paints the wall behind him, further alerting the other two left in the room.

 Now he needed to act fast. Stimulus was everywhere, sounds of shots ringing down the halls along with screams and cries of “Help” and pain. Bells started going off, as if someone tripped the fire alarm, meaning someone got away; indicating that someone would be looking for that person, making it a tad bit more difficult for him to get the jump on his unsuspecting adversaries.

 All of that, and he still had to shoot two men turning toward him with the same mindset of sending a few pieces of metal through his person. They were about sixteen feet away, and somewhere around ten foot apart from one another.

 On top of everything, it was in a classroom with students scattered about.

 With two squeezes of the trigger and a quick movement, left to right, both men fall. Connor is both surprised that it worked, and impressed with his accuracy.

 Moving into the room, and checking for more, Connor closes the door behind himself. The students are visually upset. Their professor, along with a few of their classmates, had just been executed en mass. They were to be next in this stage-play sacrifice.

 Connor rips his head cloth off.

 “Connor!” Steven, one of Connor’s friends, shouts out in disbelief. Connor looks over in his direction, “Steve?!” he gasps, lowering the gun to his side to greet his friend with a hefty handshake and embrace.

 “Holy shit, man! Are you alright?” he asks. “Yeah, I think so, I’m not-I’m not hurt.” Steven replies.

 The reality of the situation settles in. Connor looks around the room. “They’ll be coming, someone set off the alarm!” he announced. “Steve, grab a gun. Whoever has used one before, you should grab one too, we don’t have much time! Take everything off these guys!” he instructs.

 Steven bends down to the man at his feet and takes his firearm, followed by a few of the other students.

 Just as Connor was directing the small crowd of students, the door opens. It was another wave of gunmen, who, luckily for the students, didn’t have a window to look through to know what was happening.

 Connor’s rifle was still at his side, his opponents’ down as well. In a panicked effort they both went for the draw; Connor was first and on point. When pulling the trigger, he didn’t intend to stop until the last “click.”

 As he dispatched three of the assailants, he’d seen the last in line take shelter behind the wall as his counterparts fell. If not hit, this last intruder would surely return to whence he came and bring back more with knowledge of those rebelling. Connor knew he’d missed and that even more were sure to come.

 In the course of the shootout, Connor had begun moving forward so as to position himself directly in front of his target at the extinguishing of his magazine. As the last shell hit the floor, he was already bringing up a new replacement. For during that time he had released the empty clip from its port on the rifle beforehand, only to refill and re-rack the new one.

 The pile of deceased bodies were offset to the left of him, one leaning, still on his knees, next to the other two, just inside the room.

 Following through with his split second decisions, he ended up having a kneeling dead man as a human shield to use to re-enter the hallway and combat the figure who jumped behind the wall.

 He could hear the other man shouting; it sounded like he was backing up and calling for support, not running away. Connor’s plan of attack was based more on assumption than experience, but he hadn’t much time to think of an alternative.

 Dropping his rifle down to the strap and grabbing hold of the man in front of him, Connor drove forward then lowered himself, bending at the knees, and picked up the lifeless body. Sprinting to the opening, he then thrust the man up into the air, sending the limp carcass out into the hallway as a decoy.

**Division VI : Corridor Conflict**

 As the floating mass sailed backward, Connor dove forward, turning toward the attacker, with his rifle drawn. Once in open view, he sought out his new, confused, target and fired away until landing on his side.

 The bullets hit their mark for the most part, but the jolt from landing caused a couple to stray and scar the brick wall of the corridor. When he finished sliding, from his momentum, he was underneath the still falling, lifeless, heap of mass, which landed on top of him and camouflaged him to the forthcoming brigade.

 When rounding the corner, arms drawn, a team of six, similar looking men, in the same dress as those he had initial contact with, became visible to Connor. He lay still, finger on the trigger, barrel pointing slightly to the right of the group.

 They looked more like a special ops unit than an assembly of uncoordinated, sheep herding bush fighters who’d been hiding in caves in the Middle East, like all of the mainstream media outlets projected terrorists to appear. They looked so much more professional.

 They’d formed three partnered lines of two, spaced out but moving in sequence. They meant business and came in sweeping as they crept closer to his location, but didn’t give any indication they’d open fire on him. They must have thought he was just a dead ally.

 The first two repositioned themselves when getting within a few steps of the entrance to the room. They directed their barrels toward the classroom, leading with their rifles, due to the direction from which the bodies in the hall suggested they’d come from. They then stopped about a foot from the doorway and both held up fists with their right hands. One pointed in Connor’s direction, as if he were focusing behind him, and gestured as to say “around the corner,” then waved toward himself.

 There must have been a crew coming from that area and he was letting the rest of the gang know. The other made similar hand gestures, but this time directing them behind himself, suggesting to Connor that he was going to be in a real pinch here, in a very short amount of time.

 He dare not make a move. They hadn’t noticed him yet, but the middle two moved in a way that implied they were going to advance a bit closer and investigate the scene, right outside the line of sight of the inside of the room.

 He’d have to do something soon…and so he did.

 As the first two moved in unison, closer to the door, and the others were decreasing their distance to him, someone inside of the class must’ve nudged a desk, which squeaked against the floor. As all six heads turned to focus on the classroom, Connor lifted his rifle and opened fire into all six men, from left to right.

 Metal projectiles filled each target along with the negative space between them, where Connor could see the painted brick walls chip off at the point of impact. They were completely caught off guard, and without a chance to defend themselves, they all fell to the floor.

 Getting up and investigating, one was still breathing. Connor took out a knife from his back pocket, unsheathed it, and plunged it into the man’s jaw line, toward his skull.

 Removing the blade, he looked forward. He knew the two crews would be rushing to the scene because of the gunfire. He couldn’t get rid of the bodies fast enough, along with the blood, nor cover up the bullet saturated walls.

 “Schmidt come in, did you find them?” squawked a walkie-talkie in one of the assassin’s pockets, underneath their robe. “Shit!” Connor whispered to himself. He didn’t know what to do, he was caught off guard. “English?!” he whispered in a question to himself.

 Confusion filled his mind. Those before were speaking something that sounded like arabic, non-english, it didn’t make sense. However, two of these guys did appear to have black and darker tanned skin, but still, english?!

 Grabbing a few more magazines and the walkie-talkie, he headed for the classroom, slipping a bit from the blood on the ground while getting up.

 Swiftly entering the room, he noticed everyone was trying to hide where they could: under desks, mashing themselves into corners, and one kid was about to jump out of the window.

 “Hey, hey-hey, get d…” Connor began. Before he could finish his command, the window shattered and blood from the boy’s body sprayed across the room. “Get down! Get down!” Connor pleaded. Everyone hit the floor.

 “Connor, what do we do?” asked Steven. “They’re coming from both hallways and now someone outside knows we’re trying to leave.” replied Connor. “Wait!” the gears were turning, Connor looked down to the walkie-talkie in his hand.

 He’d taken cover on the ground, lying on one of the dead attackers. Directly in front of his face, he spied three grenades. Holding up the radio, he looked at Steven and pressed the button. “Sss…Schmidt, this is Schmidt, I’m down, I need backup…I need help! Come help…” Connor tried his best to imitate what he imagined this “Schmidt” would’ve sounded like if he’d actually been hurt and calling for reinforcements.

 Steven, looking at Connor, turned his attention to the door…his eyes widened. Without questioning, Connor flipped to his back and fired two shots that went into the ceiling of the hall. There wasn’t anyone there. He was stunned, confused. He lay there for another moment to assess the situation.

 With a puzzled look on his face he turned back to Steven, “What was that?!” “What was what?” Steven asked in an equally elevated tone. “Your eyes got all wide when you looked behind me at the door! Why did you do that?” Connor scolded. “I thought there would be someone eventually coming! I was anticipating…worriedly!” Steven responded.

 “Worriedly?!” Connor asked in a condescending demeanor. Realizing how loud his voice was, he went to a whisper. “Worriedly isn’t a real word!” Connor exclaimed as he was getting up with grenades in hand. Steven exercised an argumentative look, but gave no further chase.

 Looking down at what Connor was holding, he asked, “Wh-where are you go…what are you gonna do?” “Get us out! So I need you to keep the gun on the door, shoot anyone who comes through, except me! I’ll warn you when I’m coming in.” Connor responds while he finished pushing himself up off of the ground.

 Before Steven can confirm he understands, Connor heads for the door, peeks down both directions, and darts off to the left.

 Scurrying to the edge of the hallway he’d first came to, Connor lowers himself to the floor, on to his belly, to peer down the corridor.

 During his conversation, the recipients of his radio transmission had been trying to get back in contact with the Schmidt they’d originally reached out to. “Schmidt where are you?”

 Connor tries his best to respond in the same voice, yet at more of a whisper, while he’s out in the openness of the hallway. “B Two Fourteen. Hurry, I…I think I’m bleeding out!” he responds, short and sweet, back into the radio, as to not give away that he’s not who he claimed to be.

 “Squad B is coming back to you, north on the East Wing.” another voice came through the frequency. “Squad E is doubling back north on the West Wing, we should be seeing you in seconds.” cried a different tone. Both transmissions came, one after the other, in what seemed like military precision.

 Connor could see the group coming down the East Wing. He held two grenades with the pins pulled, having removed them moments prior, hoping they wouldn’t discharge in his hand and he’d have enough time. When they were about halfway down the hall, where there weren’t any doors or windows to escape through, he tossed his hand bombs. Then, while on his belly, he shifted to his back and pushed-scooted himself behind the wall, out of the line of danger.

 Promptly setting himself up with his gun aimed toward the other end, he was prepared to fire on the incoming insurgents. The timing was exact. Right as squad E was rounding the corner, the violent eruption of grenade blasts went off behind him. The detonation cued Connor to open fire as E squad converged in the fullness of the hallway in front of him.

 The crew of five couldn’t react fast enough. It had been their intention to storm the mouth of the corridor with arms drawn, but the distant blast confounded them and shifted their focus away from B Two Fourteen. In their slight stupor, Connor made sure to take advantage, shooting three of them, but his magazine was only half full and ran out before he could finish them off.

 He grabbed hold of his last grenade, quickly pulled the pin and, from his back, threw it as far as he could. Shuffling to his feet, he jumped back behind the corner he’d just used as cover.

 While watching for the arrival of E squad, Connor hadn’t been able to witness squad B’s outcome. He figured the sound of the explosions indicated the complete eradication of the oncoming threat.

 When fully within the openness of the East Wing, he had every intention of reloading his rifle, waiting for the last grenade to go off, then returning to abolish any remnant of squad E’s attempted engagement. He’d placed quite a few horses before the carriage.

 Through the first of the grenade blasts, one man had survived.

 As the smoke was settling, Connor was still in the process of getting around the edge of the hallway. He was completely shocked to see someone standing where none should be. He and the remaining attacker met eyes. Connor’s left arm was swinging down as he tried to end his short sprint and he felt the grip of the pistol he’d hastily placed in his belt loop, during the ammunitions seizure. The pistol grip was facing the wrong way. He was right-handed and didn’t have time to adjust for the draw.

 After having been jolted to a stop, he blinked and thrust himself off the wall he’d now come to be somewhat leaning against, which sent him back across the hall.

 Falling to his knees, he dropped the rifle in his right hand. He pulled the handgun from its holster with his left and pointed it. While it being upside down, he used his right index finger and awkwardly pulled the trigger.

 The recipient didn’t even move, he hadn’t had time to think. He stood with the barrel of his gun still pointing at the floor. The attacker’s only movement was a flinch when the bullet from Connor’s gun entered his right shoulder. It didn’t kill him, it didn’t put him down. He was dazed and couldn’t hear from the grenades having gone off because it wasn’t just one, but many, due to his fallen comrades carrying more on their persons; a domino effect in its entirety.

 The next shots, two to his chest, one to his cheek, and one to his gut, did however, kill him. They followed the initial bullet when the grenade on the west side of the building went off. The explosions had spooked Connor, and played the catalyst, causing him to deliver the four additional rounds into his adversary, resulting in the death of the remaining member of squad B.

 Picking himself up, Connor swiftly approaches the vestige to investigate and see, definitively, if any were still alive. Based off of the amount of blood pooled across the floor, limbs and their accessories scattered all over the hall, and the pertinent negative of the lack of full torsos, Connor had a clear understanding that they were all, in fact, dead.

 Checking his latest victim for a pulse, only to discover it absent, Connor was now ever the more confident he’d just dealt with the incoming crew from the East Wing.

 Moving on, he slowly approaches the corner of the north hall, gun barrel leading the way. Sneaking a couple of peeks around, he recognizes a similar scene from whence he’d just come. There was no movement amongst the heap of bodies at the opposite end of the path. Apparently the explosions that he’d heard were that of a similar chain reaction.

 It was a small dose of instant deja vu. The hallway was littered with pieces of black fabric covered body parts, concrete debris, misshapen metal lockers, and a dash of red splatter patterns with gray smoke that hadn’t dissipated just yet.

 Fully entering the hall, he speedily shuffles toward the west end, making sure to stay close to the inside wall.

 Those in the class see him crossing the opening of the doorway. A shot is fired and a gasp is heard as they observe Connor pass by, dropping to the floor.

**Division VII : An Unfruitful Extraction**

 “CONNOR! Please tell me you’re alive…sorry dude, sorry, sorry, are you ok, did I get you?” Steven cried out. A pause, and the air becomes thick with concern and worry. “Connor?!” Steven desperately beckoned.

 “What?!” Connor snaps back. “What the hell, I said don’t shoot me!” he responds again, quick and downcastingly.

 “Oh no dude, did I shoot you?” Steven remorsefully inquired, now more desperate for an answer than before. “No, Steve,” corrected Connor, “ you shot at me!” “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry! I thought it was someone else!” Steven panickedly explained. “Yes, obviously! It’s alright, it’s…you missed. Just stay down and be quiet.” Connor commanded. “And shut the door while you’re at it…but don’t lock it! I’ll be back in a few.” he continued.

 While conversing, he’d been lying on his stomach. His gun was poised in the direction of the west end. Getting up, he was on his way again.

 On approach, he couldn’t establish an entire whole body amongst the carnage. Closing the distance to the wall, at the corner, he peered around to the west side to see the remains of the last two attackers. During his assault, the string of bombs must’ve travelled through the intersection of the halls. The effect of the blasts caused the wall, on the West Wing, to tumble down. The new cavity exposed the inside of a classroom and the result of the perpetrators initial plan of today’s event.

 Students were scattered about, covered in blood. There was no movement, no noise, just the sight of death.

 Walking in to search for survivors, Connor witnesses the full scale of what happens when captives don’t fight back and there isn’t someone to save those who can’t save themselves.

 He’d seen more than enough.

 In the back of his mind he knew there were more units to deal with, and he was only on the second floor. There was still the main floor, as well as the third, and possibly the basement, which meant there could be many more squads left with a lot more men en route.

 He continued to hear gun fire from the other floors and, to make matters worse, there was someone outside, waiting to pick people off.

 For the first time today Connor hesitated. He understood that he didn’t have much time, if any at all. He doesn’t fully know the scale of what he’s up against. It’s probably going to be worse than what he’s had to deal with so far and the new waves, who must be on their way now, more than likely, know there is something on the second floor that is a threat, which means they’re coming prepared. There were only two more classrooms down this hall, hopefully with survivors, possibly with leftover intruders.

 Connor’s hesitation was due to the question he’d been asking himself; should he check to find survivors and gamble with the time he has, or leave and try to save the ones he’s already found? Without further debate he decides to finish the search on the floor. So in a dead sprint, off he went.

 Along the way to the last two rooms he had to pass by the opening of the West Wing stairwell. He approached it with aggression, darting across the opening, gun drawn and scanning for targets, only to find none…thankfully.

 Breaching the entrances of each classroom, gun barrel scanning like a flashlight, he would quickly survey the scenes, only to discover the same outcome in both. There weren’t any survivors. The scenes resembled those within any exaggerated eighties horror films; bodies without heads and hacked to pieces. You could tell there were some who tried to fight back, as they were the ones all shot up and out of place from the others. It was all a ghastly sight, and demoralizing, to say the least.

 His search took longer than he wanted. He now needed to get back to the rest and get them out. He would have to run past the steps once more, get to the room where Steven and the gang were, have them follow him to his original classroom, extricate them, and then…

 Again, Connor hesitated. “Shit…” he whispered aloud to himself. He needed to get the whole lot of them out of the building, and he needed to do it without getting everyone killed along the way by those on the inside; but then there were snipers outside, of which he didn’t know how many. He hadn’t even taken the time to look outside yet; he was wasting time thinking.

 And then it hit him, he had an idea…he’d just have to iron out the wrinkles while on the run for extraction.

 He darted off, and one last time, slid by the door opening of the stairs with his rifle ready. The stairwell was clear as he passed by. He popped back up to his feet, rounded the corner, and located the door to the room. Running with a new sense of resolve, he stretched out his hand as he reached his destination. Grabbing hold of the handle, he turned it with the intention of getting in and out of the threat of the hallway; but during his expedition back Connor forgot an important factor, he needed to let Steven know he was coming.

**Division VIII : Reassemble**

 He blurted out, “It’s me!” but was still in a full sprint forward, through the door. He was trying to stop his legs, and back track, so as to not get past the opening and get shot. The door itself, flew open and slammed into the wall as he hit off of the inside of the entranceway. Bouncing backwards off of the non-giving metal frame, he fell down to his backside.

 The initial contact of his rifle hitting the metal frame of the doorway, with his hand in between, caused his finger to inadvertently squeeze the trigger and fire a round. The rifle was pointed at the head of one of the fallen attackers, just outside the room. When the bullet left the barrel of the gun it entered the cadaver’s skull and must have rebounded off the floor, due to its trajectory, in which it came up and out, into the ceiling. The result sent chunks of bloody head upwards, toward Connor, splattering his face and person as he came crashing down to the ground.

 Steven was hesitant to fire this time, but the sound of the gun blast caused him to pull off a click. Fortunately, the gun wasn’t pointed at Connor. The bullet ricocheted off of the classroom wall, then into the hallway, to make a second scar next to the original marking.

 “Connor?!” Steven called out. “I’m ok Steve!” Connor comfortingly responds, as he brings his hands down from a defensive posture.

 Picking himself up off the ground, Connor hurriedly walks into the classroom as he began dry heaving. Leaning down, expeditiously, he picks up some of the leftover turban cloth and begins to wipe the blood off his face. “Hngh…hugh!” he couldn’t help but gag a few more times to get it out of his system. “Gross!” he released as he used the long, black scarf to try to wipe his neck and face clean.

 When finished, he threw the fabric to the floor, changed out his magazines, racked another bullet, and stood up straight to address the students.

 “Ok, now’s the time, we have to get ready and go.” Connor began. “Everyone stay low and move fast! We have to get to room Two Sixteen, it’s right down the hall, we have people there!” Connor exclaimed. “People to help us?” Steven asked. “No…well, kind of. I mean, they’re student’s too. They’ve got a couple of guns.” he answered.

 “Connor…are you a, an agent? Like a secret agent in the government or somethin?!” asked Steven. “What? No.” Connor answered, surprised. “Are you a Navy SEAL?” Steven, again, questioned pryingly. “No, guy, why're you asking weird questions? We have to leave!” Connor snapped back as Steven could visibly be seen thinking.

 “Steve…” Connor drew out his name as he snapped his fingers in front of his face. “snap out of it! We’re going to leave, I want you up front with me. And keep your finger off the trigger!” he commanded with authority.

 “You two, stay in back and fire on anyone who comes up behind us!” Connor motioned toward the other two who’d volunteered to take up arms. One was a senior, Connor thought he’d heard his name was Edward. He looked athletic, about five eleven, a hundred and sixty pounds, he looked like he’d seen the inside of a barn a time or two before. The other, Julian, was a foreign exchange student from northern Europe. He had long, bleach blonde hair, almost white, six three, and about a buck seventy.

 Both looked scared, but seemed willing to stay alive. They just nodded their heads to confirm. “When we get out to the hall, everyone just do as I do! If I run…you run…if I crouch, you crouch. Whatever you do just stay behind me, ok?!” Connor empathetically commanded with a soft, stern tone. All eight remaining students answered with whispered “yes’s,” one after the other.

 With that, Connor turned, looked both ways down the hall, and began out. The rest swiftly followed. He got to the wall, then quickly scuffled toward the East Wing. He stopped at the corner to peer around. Finding the hallway empty, he turns around to check on the rest. Seeing they’ve all huddled in a line behind him, Connor waived to have them follow him further as he hastened to room Two Sixteen.

 Arriving at the door, he looked to Steven, “Go down to the end of the hallway, to the stairwell, and keep watch. You two, go watch the north hall.” he asked of Edward and Julian.

 “John! It’s me, ok?” Connor excitedly whispered, as he dare not open the door. “Connor?!” Jonathan panickedly replied. “Yeah, it’s me, I’ve got some people from the classroom down the hall. We came back to get y'all, we’re gettin’ out!” Connor explained. But there was no noise of moving objects behind the door. Another moment of silence went by. “John?” Connor asked. “John, you ok? We need to get goin’, now!” Connor’s voice was a bit more stressed. “How do I know they’re with you?” Jonathan asked. “They’re outside, they shot one of the girls when she went to the window!” he added, sounding distrusting. “What?! No! John, damn it. Why the hell did she go to the window? I told you to stay outta sight!” said Connor, in a frustrated state. “The dispatch lady said it was ok, so they could see where we were! Then they shot her. The lady hung up, and now I don’t have a signal!” Jonathan replied in contrition.

 Connor looked at his group. “We have to leave!” directing his whisper to the flock. “John I get you not trusting me but I have to get these people out, I can’t stay and try to talk you into trusting me. You can either come with us or stay here.” he waited for a response.

 “Wait!’ Jonathan’s voice cracked when he called out. “I’m here.” Connor reassured. “How do I know?” Jonathan asked. “Well I guess you don’t. You just gotta trust me. I could’ve sat in that line and we all could’ve died but I fought. It doesn’t make sense that I would’ve done all that, only to give in later. And it doesn’t make sense that they wouldn’ta killed me on the spot if they could.” Connor tried to convey.

 He sat and waited for a response in silence.

 Noise, as if desks were moving, could be heard. “Ok, we’re coming, please don’t leave without us!” Jonathan pleaded. “Ok, bud, just try to hurry. Odds are we haven’t got much more time!” Connor responded.

 Finally the remnants of the door knob began to move, and the door starts to open. Through the crack, Connor and Jonathan see one another. “Ok, good, we have to go now, come on!” Connor says comfortingly, yet stern and commanding.

 But before he can turn to lead the team off, there is movement in his peripheral. Steven is coming back, he’s frightened. “They’re coming up the stairs!” Steven tries to whisper. Connor raises his gun as Steven moves out of the way. In a dead sprint, Connor moves to the stairwell, leaving Steven, Jonathan, and all the rest to stare in wonder of what he was going to do.

**Division IX : Fire in the Hole**

 He doesn’t slow down, but rather, continuously speeds up as he closes the distance between himself and the stairwell. Connor launches himself through the air and fires into the open space of the well as he floats by, spooking the oncoming squad. owThe scare causes a few of the attackers to pull their triggers before they were ready. Unfortunately for them, their aim wasn’t toward their target and their comrades paid the price through friendly fire.

 Hitting the ground and sliding hard into the wall, Connor bounces back up to his knees, ignoring the pain of the impact. He presses himself up against the wall as best he could, ready to engage his enemies.

 He had a couple of grenades left in his duffle bag he was still wearing. Taking them out, he tried prying the pins all at once, but each one was different. Without much time spent worrying, he pulled one then tossed it, then again, until he extinguished his cache. He then went down to his side and waited for the blasts.

 The first went off and made a loud boom. Simultaneously, Connor observed a flash of light on the bit of wall he could see from his position. The next two grenades went off, one right before the other; a loud “pfff” sound, then an ear piercing blast from the frag grenade.

 The entire unit on the staircase panicked to get out of the way of any more explosions, but, due to those injured or fallen, and with a lack of room to move, the men in the front of the line could only go up further. They hesitated, for fear of exposing themselves to the openness of the hallway. Distressed, they took their chances and tried moving forward anyway.

 Hearing the steps rapidly coming closer, Connor had to react fast. While on his side in the corner, he transitioned to his other side and kicked off of the end wall, pushing himself in full view of the doorway, in order to expose himself in a different position than what would be expected of him by the men advancing.

 Little did he know how disoriented the first to come would be, when in view. There were three of them, visibly distraught and blinded. The first of the three had tripped on the last step up and was on his hands and knees, the next two would soon follow suit, but the middle man caught his balance. Connor aimed at the darker objects that were becoming less visible from the smoke forming around them. Pulling the trigger, he filled all three with lead. The middle man, in a last ditch effort, tried firing his gun. The projectile sailed through the entryway and struck the wall directly ahead of him. Due to the surface upon which it hit, the bullet then ricocheted back to strike it’s sender square in the forehead, killing him instantly, and ending his campaign.

 Cautiously pushing himself up off the ground, he scanned for any others to rush out of the gray smoke. Realizing the first three were blinded, he figured he must’ve thrown a flash grenade, along with a frag, and smoke, due to their obvious effects, respectively.

 If the first three were fairly disorientated, he thought, then the others behind probably caught a worse reception of the trifecta. Without waiting to find out, Connor raced into the smoke. Feeling the slippery footing of each blood-soaked step he took, he assumed he had taken out the majority of the support of the squad.

 Hitting the landing, he decided to use the same blitz maneuvers that had, as of recent, worked wonderfully.

 What often happens with those who have great success over a certain period of time, without any major misfortune, is a bloated sense of confidence and a development of complacency. A formula, such as this, can greatly increase the probability of mistakes. Connor didn’t think of this concept before he was to attempt to juggernaut his way through the rest of the squad he was presently dealing with. Not doing so would resound boldly in the near future, thanks to his said new found grand ideal of extraordinary feats.

 His eyes watered as his warm, wet face stung. Even through the thick gray smoke, he could see bright, bold stars just moments ago when his face plowed into the edge of the doorway that lead out of the stairwell. He’d tried blindly launching himself off the bottom steps into the hallway before the metal door frame used his face to play patty cake, nearly knocking himself out as he attempted to locate any leftover members of the ascending unit.

 The smoke canister, still in effect, filled the small enclosure from the bottom of the stairwell. Following the path of least resistance, it flowed up the shaft as well as out into the hall of the first floor. Without open doors or windows, the smoke didn’t have many other places to go, since coming to be.

 Along with the extremely low visibility, due to the thick gray clouds, he was losing sight in his left eye as that was where his face touched base with the frame before his feet met the ground. His eye was swelling shut.The rest of the time spent trying to get his fellow students out would need to be done with half his vision.

 Shaky, he finds a wall to sit down against so he could collect himself and get past his body’s reaction. Besides the sound of the impact, Connor was able to prevent himself from making any other noise, so as to not attract any possible unwanted attention, while in a state of recovery.

 As the pain from his face began to dissipate, his eyes stopped watering as much, and the pounding in his head decreased enough for him to begin to move. He thought to stay low to finish searching for any other squad members, who were sure to be disoriented from the grenades while trying to retreat, at least one would hope.

 There was also the possibility that there were no others and he was just wasting his time, he thought, but this was the pathway he’d have to use to leave the second floor, so he needed it clear either way.

 Due to his unexpected momentary hiatus, needed to get past his own issues, he may have given any potential remaining attackers time to gather their bearings. He also didn’t know if they were the only backup or not. He thinks to himself, he may have made all of this worse because he stopped thinking. He stopped outsmarting the opposition. He got lazy. He got lost in the moment, and now he’s got a busted face and a smaller cushion of time to get people to safety. He understands that this is a lesson in life learned in a hard fashion.

 He throws his shoulder straps back over his head and fights his rifle to his posterior. Pulling his side arm, Connor begins to quietly crawl through the doorway, his belly to the floor. He finds two bodies right outside the double doors, one slumped over the other. With the end of the gun barrel, he checks each corpse on the ground, pushing it where it makes contact: head, neck, torso, arm.

 Connor could hear shuffling around to his left in the corner, at the end of the hallway. It was one of the men from the squad helping another to his feet.

 Staying as quiet as possible, he listened for their exact positions. “Get up, c’mon…” one was saying to the other.

 Connor could feel his radio vibrate as it was receiving transmissions. He had it turned down all the way in order to keep quiet, after making contact as Schmidt.

 “We’re down! We’re waiting for you. We’re in smoke on the first floor, in the hall just outside the stairs.” The voice at the end of the hall spoke into his radio. “I’m trying to get Booker up but he’s wounded, we both are.” he described. “The students on the second floor, they’ve got guns. Th-they used explosives, they ambushed us! You gotta take them out on the way down!” the man requested. “We’re just gonna need to pull it when we’re out!” he ended. The last statement confused Connor as to what “pull it” could mean.

 No matter, he’d have to act fast before the descending unit made it to the second floor hallway. He holstered his weapon and pulled the blade from his back pocket, staying quiet as a church mouse. He got to his feet, still staying low, in order to sneak up behind the radio holder and his injured collaborator.

 When he could get a clear view, and as fast as he could, Connor grabbed the one closest to him by the scruff of his neck. With all his strength, he pushed the man’s head forward into the wall, then shoved the blade into, then out of, the chest plate of the intruder who was being helped up. His body dropped to the floor motionless.

 Connor ripped the man’s head back as the bloody blade was brought into contact with the radio holder’s Adam’s apple. “Stay…” he ordered through a whisper, “drop the radio! Go down to the ground on your stomach!”

 As his new prisoner lay down flat, Connor put his knee to his spine, keeping weight on his back. “Good dog!” he jested, checking the man for armaments to scavenge. He felt pieces of plastic and a soft, round roll; it was zip-ties and duct tape. “Yippee! You’re a ringleader! I get to use you for later.” Connor’s whisper caused the man to sigh.

 He tied the man’s wrists together; a difficult task when holding a knife to one’s throat and low visibility, he thought. Taking the tape, Connor ripped an eight inch piece off and slapped it on the man’s mouth.

 Removing the blade from his throat, he began reaching, tying the man’s ankles together and informed him, “I’ll be coming back so don’t get too comfo…ugh!”

 It felt like a hit from a linebacker at full speed, sending Connor into the wall.

 The last of the blast survivors had snuck up on him. The new combatant hadn’t been able to see anything beyond his own nose. Trying to shoot Connor through the smoke was a chance to miss, giving away the element of surprise along with his position. It would’ve also ran the risk of him shooting one of his own, leading to the same results. Sneaking up and tackling him seemed like the best idea to the attacker.

 Even though it was a solid attempt, it was still just a glance off of Connor’s shoulder. Tripping over his fellow squad member, the new adversary fell to the ground, and into the corner where the wall and floor met. During the scuffle, he’d inadvertently pulled Connor down on top of his own back.

 Connor wasted no time jumping on his chance to wrap his arm around the man’s throat, from behind. He squeezed and held tight until his opponent went limp, then held for a couple moments longer. When letting go, he checked for a pulse at the man’s jugular. Feeling none, his thoughts turned to the descending unit from the third floor.

 He tried scanning through the dense smoke for any other survivors, only to hear silence. He began feeling for the wall opening of the stairwell. Once found, he stops to change magazines, preparing for what would come next. He makes his way to the staircase. When getting to the landing, between the first and second floors, he notices the smoke is starting to dissipate. He stretches his neck out to look above him. Soon he hears the numerous footsteps coming down the stairs, sounding more like a hushed thunder. Connor promptly jerks his head back, as to not be seen. The component of unexpected ambush has been a valuable and successful tool and, due to recent events, Connor wishes to make better decisions from here on out.

 Staying in the corner where visibility was low, he watched as the leaders of the squadron cleared the steps and quietly made their way to the wall at the opening of the doorway, with the rest of the unit on their heels. It was difficult to see but Connor counted about twelve in total, all ready to breach the hallway and take the students by storm.

 Steven must’ve lost patience waiting as he called out to Connor, which brought their full attention to his position in the hall.

 At that, the leaders of the line of executioners decided to start their own blitz maneuver out of the stairwell. Connor’s reaction was a left to right sweep with his assault rifle. He tried to allow enough time to let a couple of bullets hit each man, but some of the attackers were shielded by others.

 Luckily, Connor’s surprise startled the first two enough to give Steven the jump on them.

 He was hesitant, yet surprising to himself, his finger still squeezed the trigger, sending round after round into both intruders. Because of his unfamiliarity with firearms, let alone automatic rifles, he also sent round after round into the brick walls, tile floor, and ceiling around them. He went through an entire magazine before it stopped firing, returning Steven full control of the gun.

 Connor raced back down the stairs into the darkness as shots began ringing out from the opposition. He crouched down to check for weapons on the bodies left from the earlier explosions.

 Finding an additional rifle, Connor switches out magazines. During a pause of gun fire, he steps up to the landing and points his barrel toward the direction of those still fighting in vain. He waits for the right time to engage and, holding the gun awkwardly due to the position it had to be in, finishes the job before the remaining attackers could reload.

 As a precaution, he topped the staircase and made sure all were expired by quickly transferring rounds into their torsos, and shells to the ground.

 “Steven!” Connor calls aloud, “Everything ok?” “Uh, y-yeah, we’re…we’re good, you?” he questions back to Connor, who looks over the dead one last time, checking for any movement. The smoke was nearly gone.

 Peering around the corner, he saw the group of students. Waving them all closer, Connor commands, “Let’s go, we’re going out through the basement!”

 They were relieved to see him and hurried to get to where he was leading them to go. Connor stayed in the doorway, waiting for each to pass until all were together. “Stay at the doorway at the bottom of the stairs and wait for me. Try not to look down at the dead stuff, it’ll only freak you out!” he directed as he waited for Julian and Edward, the last of the crew, to cross over the threshold.

 Jonathan stopped, just inside the stairwell. “How do you know we can get out through there?” he asked. “My uncle’s the groundskeeper, I’ve worked with him, part time, on the maintenance of all the buildings. We get to the basement and we’ll be safe. Just trust me, I’m going to get us all out!” Connor replied. His explanation was enough for Jonathan as he fell back in line with the others.

 It had been almost an hour since the first shot was heard. The screaming was over, wet cheeks were now dry, survival ran rampant in everyone’s mind, and Connor was at the helm.

 After a last look down the corridor, Connor began toward the stairwell. Already halfway into the entrance of the stairs, he heard a gun blast behind him as a chunk of brick chips off the wall to his right. He ducked instinctively, then, while propelling himself behind the stairwell wall, tried to catch a glimpse behind him to see what may be coming. Before clearing the edge of the wall he saw the dark, blurry mass approaching from the center hall.

**Division X : The Escape**

 Catching Connor, Edward asked what happened. “Everyone down!” He ordered of the line of students, then looked back at Edward. “Find any grenades!” Connor demanded. “They’re coming from behind!”

 He got down to his knees and poked the barrel of his gun out, into the hallway. Keeping the rest of himself behind the wall, he began firing blindly, toward the corner, until he was out again.

 Steven tapped his shoulder, “Here! We found some.” he said, handing him several devices he thought looked like the grenades that had been requested. Upon reception, Connor immediately pulled the pin on a frag grenade and tossed it down the hall, toward the north side. He then switched out his last magazine. “Quick, get everything off of them!” he said, motioning to the fallen squad members. “Get everything you can use, as fast as you can! We’re leaving, now!” Connor exclaimed as the bomb exploded.

 He then went on to pull pins and throw each of the last four additional grenades he’d received, one after the other. He couldn’t predict what his actions would accomplish, but it should give Connor, and the students, time to get downstairs and to the sub-structure.

 “Basement! Go, go, go! Further down, past the end of the stairs!” Connor impatiently commanded.

 This was the final push. It was so close. It had become something of a fantasy, for the last fifty minutes, and it was now only a little further away. Their freedom was in the basement.

 He was coming up behind everyone, his sight almost completely diminished in his left eye. The line of students were wrapping around the bottom step, of the first floor. The access door to the basement was located in the back of the well, under the staircase, down another set of lesser stairs. Connor intended to go through the doorway, collect his prisoner, and drag him along for the ride.

 Crossing the opening, gun drawn, he looked to where his captive should be. Finding him still wrapped and lying on the ground, Connor continues to cautiously, yet swiftly, peer around the corner of the wall and scan each new square foot of hallway for enemies. As he breaches more open space of the corridor, he sees nothing in the dark hall but the daylight that shown from the other end.

 “Connor!” whispers one of the students. He looks over. “It’s locked, the door is locked!” “Ok, wait just a sec.” Connor responds. This was a terrific sign. The basement door being locked meant the attackers didn’t come in from there, which also meant they weren’t going to be in the basement when they arrived. Up to this point he was acting more on hope than anything, that they wouldn’t be walking into a hornet’s nest.

 Hurrying, he approaches his victim. The man was quiet and motionless, but something caught Connor’s eye, a slight glare from the man’s underbelly. He swiftly rolled him over and found a pistol with a silencer on it. “Really?!” Connor rhetorically asked, condescendingly. “Were you gonna shoot me with your gut?” he scoffed while finding and tightening the zip ties around the attacker’s hands and ankles.

 Grabbing the man under his jaw bone, he turns him and drags him to the top of the basement steps as fast as he can.

 “Everybody back up and watch out!” Connor warned as he placed himself at the corner, atop the small set of stairs; his captive now a shield. Using the new found pistol, with its silencer, he shoots off the padlock. Although it was dark, he could still manage to see the round object securing the door. One shot and he hit the mark. The bullet seemed to go through the lock and into the door, releasing the mechanism in the pad. He jumped down the steps to the door. Pulling off the fastening, he reaches down and twists the knob to gain access to the basement.

 “What are you gonna do with him?” asked John. “If they make it this way, and come through the door, they’ll stop to help him, it’ll give us a couple extra steps on ‘em!” he replied in haste.

 Opening the door inward, Connor rapidly gestured with a request of the group, “Come on, quick, everyone inside!”

 He stood by and waited for them all to enter before setting his sights on his hostage. In an aggressive manner, Connor rushed up and, again, used the intruder’s jaw line as a handle to drag him down the steps and through the door, apathetic of the pain from the pressure point.

 On the other side, Connor drops the body and immediately closes the door. He then asks the others to help barricade the access shut while pointing towards the maintenance area where there were tool boxes, benches, and a refrigerator.

 “This is gonna suck, but we need to be as quiet as we can!” he vigorously warned. “The heaviest things over there are the tool boxes and the fridge, but they all have rollers. We need to bring those first and set the breaks on them when they’re in place! The rest we can carry. We have to be fast and quiet! I don’t want to give them any indications we’re down here, so whispers only, ok?!” he beckoned. “Malcolm, keep a gun on the door!” he directed, hoping the invaders wouldn’t think to check the basement.

 He receives the first toolbox, brought over by Julian and Steven. He speedily opens the lid and tosses three flashlights to Jonathan and Robert. Grabbing some of the chain from inside, he gives it to Ansar, with a few locks to boot. He reaches in for more to chain the door.

 Next, he and the men station the heavy boxes directly in front of the door as they would continue to do with any heavy object they could find in the maintenance area, in order to strengthen the barricade. He ends with chaining the door handle to a pillar, only a few feet away from it.

 After the door was secure, Connor turned and looked at his captive. Starring back were two, cold, black eyes. Tapping the front of his shoe against the ground, he quickly approached and delivered a soccer kick to the man’s face, knocking the intruder out cold. He propped him up directly in front of the door opening, in order to be seen if the barricade was breached, then used the chain and locks to bind him to one of the I-beams.

 “Alright, c’mon!” Connor instructed. The group of students, still anxious and wide eyed, did as requested. He led them, jogging, around both corners of the north side, up to the west end, and finally arrived at the large, rollup garage door that, if opened, would lead to the outside; but then he stopped.

 “What?” asked Ansar and Robert confusingly, in unison. “I needed tracks in the dust on the ground to lead here, see?!” Connor pointed to the floor. Robert shines his flashlight to the ground, where everyone could see their tacks in the soot. “This is just a diversion, we’re not going out this way!” Connor explained.

 “But we need to get outside! It’s right there, outside is right there!” Steven desperately protested. The other fourteen joined in the growing tension. “Where they can pick us off as we come out, like the windows upstairs?!” Connor countered. “And all of our phone lines are apparently intercepted by the “police,” the same ones who told you to go to the windows in the first place!? Those ain’t real cops! I’m sorry to tell you, but we’re surrounded!” Connor explained. “Well how the hell are we supposed to get out?” Jonathan cried as the group became more unsettled.

 “Stop!” He said assertively. “Quiet…quiet! Listen, we don’t have any more time for this! There are tunnels down here.” he revealed. “We used to use them when I worked with my uncle’s crew, before the university closed them down. They connect to all of the other, older buildings, AND, they connect to the groundskeeper's shed. The one down here has a straight shot to it! That’s our way out!” he clarified with urgency. “Not many people know about them, I’m pretty sure they’re not even on the blue prints. But we need to get moving, so stop freaking out!” he ordered.

 “The door is over there, behind the boilers.” Connor pointed to the nearly pitch-black, north corner of the dimly-lit basement. “Now, I need everyone to listen to me and do as I do! We’re going to walk up to the garage door, then, in a single file line, and as close as we can get to the wall, head toward the corner. But we have to do it fast, alright?! We do this right, by the time they find our trail we’ll be long gone and safe!” he replied with an unquestionable certainty.

 The new information quelled the group’s anxiousness, giving Connor back command.

 “We’re almost out!” he emphasized. “But before we go, I need everyone to hurry up, take out your cell phones, anything that can connect to the internet, and drop them in there.” he pointed to an open bucket of water beside the wash station, situated next to the door.

 “Wait, how will we…” Katie, who’d been completely silent, up to this point, began to ask. “Just incase they can track us on our phones!” he interrupted. “We’re not going to chance it. We’ll worry about how to get ahold of people when we’re safe, alright?! You just gotta trust me on this.” he explained. They’d followed his lead this far and were still alive, he needn’t explain further as they all began reaching into their pockets.

 He watched as those who had their phones on them hurried and dropped them in the water bucket. Lastly, he complied with his own order, abandoning his cell phone and walkie-talkie into the container of liquid.

 When everyone was done, he led the group up to the door and started for the far corner of the dark basement. They moved briskly, one after the other, tight against the wall, before they reached the boilers. Once there, they had to crouch under a massive pipe that extended to the wall, in order to get through to the other side. Behind the large boiler they reached the steel barred barrier, which looked hewn into the wall.

 During the acquisition of materials for the barricade, Connor had taken the keys from a hook in the maintenance area; now useful to unlock the steel gate. Asking for light, he’d maneuvered the key into the lock and cracked open the entrance.

 “Like before, guys,” he looked at Julian and Edward, “you two behind! Steve, John, you’re up front with the flashlights; girls in the middle with the other guys. When everyone’s in, I’ll enter and lock it from this side and find my way up front. We’re almost home!” Connor emphatically finished his speech.

 He stood aside and let all fifteen students file in. When finished, Connor just entered the tunnel when an explosion went off on the far side of the basement. Screams and cries were heard down the narrow tube. Connor quickly closed the heavy steel gate and locked it to feel his arm back through the bars.

 “Shh…shh, it’s ok, stay quiet, they won’t find us! Stay as quiet as you can.” Connor pleaded. He went on to squeeze between each person and the wall. It was dark and musty, but he made his way to the front.

 They began the dark journey through the old tunnels of the university, some tripping on broken pieces of brick or snagging their shirt on an exposed wire, sticking out of the walls of the old corridor. The dim path enhanced the level of their anxiousness, which was already at an all time high.

 They were unexpectedly thrown into a fire that they weren’t supposed to make it out of today. They were supposed to be attacked and massacred by terrorists; sacrificed. They were supposed to meet the same fate as those in the planes, the victims in the towers, the unsuspecting movie-goers in the theater, the innocents in the schools, and the people in the hospital, but they didn’t, not yet.

 “I hear them at the gate!” a voice cried up from the back. A mad dash erupted, traveling all the way up to Steven, who fell into Connor and caused him to stumble to the ground. Understanding that there was a stampede coming in his direction, Connor jumped up, grabbed Steven, and sprinted toward the end of the path.

 Those who would catch their shoe or limb on a pipe would trip and fall to the ground, halting progress until they could get back to their feet.

 “Get up! Get Up!” numerous voices would scream. “GO, GO, GO!” more voices would ring out, loud and panicked, throughout the solid concrete ceiling and walls of the tunnel. Everyone was crazed with fear and worry, some crying, some screaming nonsense; it was a madhouse.

 Connor was sprinting forward, trying his best to lead them to the safety of the groundskeeper’s shack. Every step sounded like the reticent, murderous sentinels were gaining on them.

 “Light!” Connor excitedly proclaimed.

 Dashing further ahead, he stopped at the gate and shone his flashlight on his keys. Finding the right one, he stuck his arm through the bars to locate the keyhole, but struggled to do so.

 The line of people caught up to him, pressing him into the doorway, nearly causing him to drop the keys. He needs to push off of the door to regain his focus. “Hold for a minute, I have to open the door!” Connor yelled back.

 “Hurry, please! They’re coming!” was being shouted aloud from the back to the front. All out panic was electrifying the air.

 Connor could feel the slot for thin piece of metal. As he reached further, to place the key firmly in the space within the door, his eyes widened as he felt his heart drop.

 There, on the other side of the door, where he was trying with every bit of effort to unlock the barrier to his freedom, suddenly, was a hand clutching hold of his forearm.