

You Only Die Twice

by darthhm

Perched in the window of an unoccupied apartment 15 stories above a grassy, fountained city square, Bates tried to silence his thoughts as he peered through the scope. In this filthy part of the city, the greenery of the square was an inadequate dab of makeup on a burn victim's scar. He could see his target clearly, sitting at an outdoor cafe at the opposite end of the square.

He looked into the scope on his rifle, lined up the shot, and saw his own face in the crosshairs.

While he knew that cloning a fully formed human had been possible for at least a quarter-century, Bates could not fathom that the Syndicate would betray him like this. They had been ideal business partners for years.

Cloning brain dead specimens for medical purposes was mostly legal, though in Bates' mind it was nothing more than glorified organ harvesting. He had always considered clones to be an abomination of the highest order.

Governments worldwide had prohibited the creation of clones that were fully sentient. In an effort to avoid the responsibility of tackling the moral issues of creating living and thinking copies, the countries of the world banded together to ban sentient duplicates outright.

Ordinarily, the Syndicate had no qualms about operating outside the boundaries of the law. However there was a silent understanding between all those who managed such operations. It was one thing to lie, maim, and kill. But it was wholly another to play God. Bates was appalled that *any* organization would sanction duplicates of its agents, let alone his own.

However, he could understand the business side of the betrayal. Bates was the best agent the Syndicate had employed in decades. He never botched a kill and had a reputation for precision in his work, from the initial reconnaissance to the final shot. The Syndicate's clients clamored for his services, though they didn't come cheap. He was the highest paid assassin East

of the Mississippi and the Syndicate's 40 percent cut from his contracts was rumored to be half of their yearly revenue.

By cloning him, they doubled their capacity to accommodate contracts for their most demanded asset. But in his mind it was genetic plagiarism. They had stolen his skills. They had stolen his experience. They had stolen his natural talent. If those attributes had been individually attainable, the Syndicate's actions could have been forgiven with simple monetary compensation. However, the theft of his face, his identity, his very soul could not be forgiven. A crime against nature roamed the world with his eyes. This was a situation he would rectify immediately.

After he put down the clone, Bates would go after who was truly responsible. The unrevealed head of the Syndicate. The Alpha.

He wanted to reach that moment of concentration he achieved every time he pulled the trigger on a sniper rifle. But it was still too early. His clone, designated Magma in the Alpha's private files, was meeting a contact.

The name Magma was appropriate. It was a mess of molten chaos expelled from the depths of Hell and it would be sent back there shortly.

From his weeks of surveillance, he learned that everyone who met with the clone was under the impression that Magma and Bates were the same person. Only the Alpha knew the truth. If clients found out, at best they would be unwilling to pay full price for the services of a copy. At worst, the Syndicate would be blacklisted by those who needed such services.

Finally the other man departed, leaving Magma to peruse the documents in a dossier that was likely his next contract. Bates glanced through the scope again. The abomination was still facing him.

Normally, a head-shot would have been acceptable, but the powerful projectile of the sniper rifle would leave an unrecognizable morass of what was once a head. He wanted to keep the face intact. If he eliminated both Magma and the Alpha, Bates could retire in peace. Everyone would believe that the dead clone was Bates and that he had finally failed a mission. He would go for the neck and let the target bleed out. If his shot was good enough he would sever the spinal cord as well, not that a clone deserved such a clean death.

Bates' eye dropped back down to the scope as he noticed movement. Magma had begun to gather the documents back into the folder. He pushed back the chair to stand. Bates adjusted his aim and put his finger on the trigger. The clone stood and turned to leave as Bates held his breath in preparation to fire.

He thought about what would it feel like to assassinate himself as his finger squeezed the trigger. The window behind Magma shattered in place, leaving a bloodied web of cracks in the glass.

Bates looked up and saw Magma running from the cafe full sprint as people screamed in panic. Damn it! The bullet had only grazed him. For the first time a stray thought had cost him a clean kill. Already halfway across the square, Magma held a rapidly reddening handkerchief under his right ear.

It was then that Bates realized, *he's running towards me*. He knew which direction the shot came from. Of course he did. Bates would know if he were in the same situation.

He left the rifle leaning on the window sill and swiftly walked out of the apartment. Removing his sidearm from the holster tucked under his suit jacket he turned to the window at the end of the common hallway. The glass shattered as he struck it with the butt of his handgun. Giving a cursory glance down into the alley he climbed on to the fire escape.

If he could get to one of the beat up cars on either side of the dumpster directly across from him, he could hot-wire it and escape to try again another day. But now they were on notice. It would be much more difficult to get to Magma and the Alpha now. Bates pushed the thought out of his mind and rushed down the fire escape in a cacophony of metallic clattering.

He was still five floors up when a gunshot rang out and sparks erupted from the railing next to him. Magma was standing just inside the mouth of the alleyway with his gun drawn. Bates ducked down behind a wall of flower pots as three more bullets exploded in showers of sparks above him. He looked around the alley for an escape route. He knew exactly how many shots the clone had left before he would need to reload. *If* they were using the same firearm.

Two more shots rang out and Bates was showered in a hail of broken ceramic and potting soil. In one swift motion, he leaped to the side and then vaulted off the railing towards the opposite wall of the alley. In mid-air he pointed his gun in the general direction of his adversary

and let off two shots. The clone dropped the clip he was loading into his gun and rolled behind one of the cars on pure instinct.

Bates felt something knock him out of the air jamming his shoulder and scraping his left elbow and knuckles. He was already falling before he realized that he had jumped too far and into the opposite wall. After what seemed like an interminable drop, he slammed into the dumpster and rained trash on the cars on either side of it. The impact of the five story fall slammed the tops of the receptacle shut.

After the echoes of the impact had subsided, Magma reached out from behind the car and grabbed the extra clip he had dropped. A snap and a click echoed through the alley as he reloaded and chambered a round. Still crouching, he slipped into the small space between the car and the wall. He continued to creep cautiously towards the dumpster. When he reached it, he moved between the dumpster and the front of the car he had used as cover. The sour smell of disturbed refuse filtered through his nostrils as he crept up to see if Bates had survived his fall.

He caught a glimpse of the top of the vehicle on the opposite side of the dumpster. The roof of the vehicle shook violently for an instant and the roar of the engine coming to life made Magma jerk in surprise. He heard a crash and was forced back by the dumpster flying towards him. He heard another crash and two sickening snaps as his femurs shattered, caught between the dumpster and the car behind him. In a mad moment of pain-filled desperation, he unloaded his weapon into the side of the dumpster. The bullets burst on impact with the thick metal, spraying bits of hot shrapnel into his cheek. Still pinned, Magma slumped back onto the hood of the car, his legs bent grotesquely in a direction they should not have been bending. He breathed raggedly, waiting for the coup de grace.

Bates crawled out of the car and limped towards the clone with his gun raised. His left arm hung limp.

“I knew they should have told you,” Magma rasped.

“It wouldn’t have made a difference,” said Bates. “Even if they told me, I would have killed you. No way I would ever let a monster like you live with my face.”

“Monster? You don’t even know th—”

The air behind Magma’s head burst with a red mist. A trickle of blood meandered down from his forehead, between his eyes and on to his nose. Bates squeezed the trigger two more times, pumping the rounds into the clone’s chest.

Holstering his weapon, he turned to the opposite end of the alley. With gritted teeth and a wince he grunted as he violently shrugged his left arm up, popping the dislocated limb back into place. He buttoned his torn, trash-stained suit jacket and walked out of the alley with a smirk.

“One down, one to go.”

Bates had never met the Alpha. All of his contracts came through third party intermediaries. It was not as though he couldn’t have found out. However, the situation was beneficial to both parties and he had seen no need to jeopardize it. Until now.

He settled into position high above the city streets. The ambiance here stood in stark contrast to the dingy squalor of where he was just hours earlier. This side of the city was clean, and even at this time of night it was all bright lights and polished glass. There was no opera of sirens singing you to sleep in the rich part of town.

Bates aimed his rifle towards the penthouse suite on a building several hundred yards away. He looked into the scope and saw himself reflected off the mirrored glass. He would need to wait for the lights in the suite to turn on before he could see his target inside.

Several hours later, a light finally brought the front of the suite to life. Bates looked through his scope. He could still see a faint ghostly reflection of himself on the glass, but it was transparent enough that the shot would be easy if the Alpha stepped out of the shadows, even for an instant.

The figure inside slipped on a robe and poured himself a glass of water from the carafe on the nightstand. The robed director of the Syndicate replaced the now empty glass where it belonged. The Alpha turned and stepped towards window to admire the view.

A tendril of pain shot through Bates’ shoulder as he tensed up. He brought his eye down to the scope as the Alpha stepped into the light. A wave of nauseating confusion radiated through his body as he lined up the shot.

He saw his own face in the crosshairs.