

THE ATROPOS MAKER by N.J. Lujan

EXCERPT

From CHAPTER 1

World Renaissance Hotel, Washington, DC

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At one time her team would be huddled, waiting impatiently as Otis crept loudly down the steel shaft. Moans and groans sound from exhausted bodies that have felt less painful days. She can hear brags about whose bullet discharged faster or more accurately and whose knife was stuck decisively between the eyes of his or her dead target.

Yet tonight, wounded, she stands alone.

Where are they? Norma thinks, knowing they have been briefed and are impatiently awaiting her return. The sight of their excitement days earlier near her father's gravesite was confirmation for Norma that she had officially returned and that they are exultant to have their warrior back.

Where the hell are they?

With a painstaking breath, she steps into the elevator and suddenly stops for a second to observe the differences from days past.

The floor, once egg-shell linoleum, is now polished ivory marble; and as she scans upward, she takes note that the old oak panels have been replaced with shiny, stainless-steel, and mirrored glass. Her head shakes as she's taken aback.

"Un-f**king-believable," Norma says, observing the copious amount of red-, white-, and blue-collar money that has been spent for such lavish renovations.

First, there are the imported marble floors, which were laid seamlessly under an immense crystal chandelier, which dangles from a masterfully carved ceiling in the foyer. Then there is the hall way she just passed and a richly carved mahogany desk at check-in. Now this brilliant steel elevator shaft?

Ridiculous!

She gags over the speculated cost. Talk about a gross hybrid of splendor and security. I'll swallow security, but this, she thinks. She could expel a few profane words to describe such a waste of American tax dollars.

Norma would commend that every wall and window in this hotel be the absolute best in its class... bomb resistant, bullet resistant. Hell, she'd even go for the thermal cloak from an eye planted firmly against a sniper rifle from someone pining to spill her blood all in the name of, in her opinion, misguided vengeance. After all, this "hotel" she is in houses some of the world's finest in their class. Agents belonging to covert teams which begin with letters that sounds off like the Alphabet Song, C, D, E, F,...

Stop! Go back to the letter that starts the song and why she is here... A.

Atropos, a government agency name that is certain to never be heard streaming through a digital broadcast, through radio waves, or read from any book. Face or not, it would nevertheless not be seen on any big screen coming this summer to a theater near you. You can be certain you will never see some A-list actor reading a deathly blood-riddled script to portray an assassin member of this A-team. Their story and their saga are to be forever protected by a code, a vow to protect their identity at whatever cost. And now, after renewed vows, Norma is part of the Atropos team she formed so long ago.

Upon a closer look into the elevator, she notices the likeness of design and material used. It resembles the one constructed in her home. Her mind wonders, who contracted this? As her gut identifies her trusted engineer's blueprint, which was designed for her a few years back. To be exact, if she were to take away the obvious prying mirrors, it would be identical. She sighs.

Not the time says the watch on Norma's wrist as it pulsates that it is time to get moving. She struggles with the years that have noticeably lapsed. F**k, two decades, two bloodless decades, and now here I am.

All that has changed is definitely notable, remarkable indeed. Still, for Norma this hotel, this elevator, the spring DC air, which is stirring about with scents of cherry blossoms and cab exhaust, bring on a sense of familiarity that can be described only as eerie to her, as if banshees rush through the cold breeze that's been stalking her since she left the agency. They whisper to her of days past. Sssshhhh—she wishes to silence such raucous ghosts— nor is it the time for you.