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Enhancement, Incorporated  
by Rajnar Vajra  
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Science Fiction

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The towering, frosted-glass inner doors of Delton Corporation snickered shut behind me. It was too late to back out now. For a moment, I paused to take in the enormous room and its many busy occupants and to let their inevitable reaction to my latest disguise run its course. Maybe I also needed a few seconds to get my damn nerves under control; I'm an experienced trouble-shooter but I'd never been involved in a murder investigation before.

The place smelled unnaturally fresh -- a hint of mountain and a soupcon of forest. Massive air-cleaners prickly with negative-ion spikes were undoubtedly chugging away behind the scene. And on blue translucent stands scattered throughout the room, thick candles burned brightly enough to suggest that Delton was pumping in some extra oxygen. Productivity: hallowed be thy name....

My nose was claiming I was outdoors, but my other senses disagreed, detecting a large-scale, highly extravagant office built on the "open" style that had started right here in San Francisco a decade ago, back in 2020.

In the center, a sunken, octagonal area lined with soft-looking yellow-leather couches made a nice spot for casual business meetings. Around this cozy octagon, a vast floor of matte-finished curly maple supported not only the blue stands but also the occasional copyfax machine, potted tree, miniature fountain, and stress relieving, glider-style rocking chair. Aside from the subtly warming candlelight, the place was illuminated by full-spectrum incandescent lamps mounted on the high, vaulted ceiling.

Most interesting, from my point of view, was the complete lack of mirrors. Even to someone without my special gear, the absence of reflective surfaces would hint that most or all of the employees here were on ViewNet, subscribers to my company's services (or getting inferior enhancements from one of our competitors such as Larger Than Life or the upstart Imagine Yourself).

A gasp erupted from the receptionist's desk -- I'd finally been noticed. That gasp triggered a chorus (with a creaking accompaniment of swiveling chairs). The sound spread in a widening circle, getting louder near the walls because that's where most of the employees were sitting at their so-called "cubicles," curved and two-sided workstations. The gasps coming from the far end of the room lacked, I thought, the sincerity of the originals; but those workers were farther away and couldn't see me clearly. Perhaps only the receptionist, a young man whose enhanced face was his real one but with a better complexion, knew just how brightly my eyes glowed....

I strode over to his desk trying to pretend that four hundred stares weren't focussed on me and bent down to keep the conversation private.

"Can I help you, sir?" he asked, leaning away from me so far I was surprised he didn't fall over. Maybe I'd made myself a bit too intimidating this time.

"My name is Rig Gullintani."

"Oh. Oh yes. Of course! You're the fellow from Enhancement Incorporated aren't you? That explains the..."

"I believe Ms. Benington is expecting me?" Lisa Benington was Delton's current CEO and also, curiously enough, a world-famous artist who worked in a unique medium.

"Yes, sir, she is expecting you. But you're a soupcon early and Detective Bell is running late. This is about what happened to poor Dr. Frankel isn't it? Sorry. I'm talking out of turn, aren't I? I'll just let Ms. Benington know you're here. I hope you had a -- a pleasant flight?"

As he mumbled into the intercom, he kept blinking and rubbing his eyes as if that would make a difference in the way I looked.

At last I took pity on the poor guy and turned to give the room another once-over. A small adjustment of my belt-module activated my pseudo-telescope. At least twenty people had sneaked little mirrors out of purses or pockets (tsk, tsk!) and were trying to get a glimpse of the real me. Not only was such behavior rude, in my case it was pointless. The would-be spies would be wondering what the hell was going on...

"Mr. Gullintani? I'm Lisa Benington," said a sugar-sweet voice and I quickly cancelled the telescope function. A slim, middle-aged-looking woman was moving towards me with the energetic stride of a teenager. She held her hand out -- an unusual gesture these days, highly unusual in someone with an exorbitant, class four enhancement.

A bit star-struck, I smiled with my mouth closed and offered my own hand. If she was hoping to guess my true size this way, she too was in for a surprise.

"I'm honored to meet you Ms. Benington, I've admired your ion-sculptures for years. I'm just sorry we had to meet under these circumstances."

Outwardly, she was dealing with my unusual enhancement far better than the receptionist had but I sensed the strain. Our handshake couldn't have helped; my hand felt as big as it looked. She continued bravely enough, "Thank you, sir. Will you please come with me? My office is behind that glass-brick privacy screen, the one against the west wall."

\* \* \* \*

Ms. Benington, I decided, was a person with refined and seriously expensive tastes. Her desk lamp was a genuine Tiffany (or a damn good copy) and some wonderful Josh Simpson paperweights were keeping it company. The nine-tier fountain in the corner seemed to be made entirely of blue topaz; it was larger than the ones in the main room and its "sonic perfume" was pleasant if a bit loud for intimate conversation.

The office, even ignoring its furnishings, implied money. It was spacious, impossibly spotless, and bright with a theater-size virtual window displaying a snow-capped mountain range. Clerestory windows added enough natural, afternoon sunlight so that I needed to make surreptitious adjustments to my module to keep the heads-up display visible. Meanwhile, I studied the contrast between how my host intended to look and how she really looked.

The real Lisa Benington was at least fifteen years younger than her "mask" suggested and her true face had a clarity, dignity, and warmth closer to beauty than cuteness. Her need for an older, sterner appearance said nasty things about our society. It amazes me that women are still struggling for respect in the corporate world. Of course, I knew that this particular woman had been a reluctant draftee...

"Would you care for coffee or tea, Mr. Gullintani?"

"Thank you, but no. Maybe later. Can you tell me when Detective Bell

might be -- "

A discreet chime had sounded.

"Perhaps he's already here," the CEO observed, sitting up straighter in her chair and activating her intercom.

Now I understood the fountain's purpose and why her intercom was parabolic in shape. From my chair, I couldn't hear a thing. But then, I only had the eyes of Heimdall, not his ears.

"He'll be right in," she announced with a sharp new edge of tension in her voice.

\* \* \* \*

Detective Winchester Bell walked around with his neck canted forward as if his head was habitually determined to get there first.

He wore no enhancements, but that was to be expected; on-duty police officers are invariably prohibited from using our services. Even without ViewNet modifications the man had a likable, intelligent face -- partly Hispanic, partly black -- with dark, ultra-smooth skin except for his chin, which was covered with bumps from ingrown beard-hairs.

Benington started to make introductions, but the detective waved his hand impatiently.

"Whoa," he grunted. "We all know who we are. But," he was looking me up and down, "I see the Enhancement people are buying the economy package now. Nice to see you in person, Mr. D -- "

"Rig Gullintani." I'd interrupted before he could blurt out my real name.

His eyebrows went up, but he caught the ball and ran with it. "I gotta admit, Mr. Gullintani, you looked smaller over the phone-link."

"Maybe I should hold up a tape measure whenever I'm in video conference with strangers?" How annoying. Why do people have to make such a damn fuss about size? Plus, I'd wanted to keep ViewNet clients here off-balance and Bell had just made it clear that my height, at least, was no high-tech illusion.

Lisa Benington had been watching the policeman intently, studying his reaction to me, but she had an issue of her own.

"Detective, do you still refuse to even consider the possibility that this horrible crime was committed by someone from outside my company?"

Bell sighed, shaking his head. "We've been over this a dozen times already, Ms. Benington. I've been working homicide for fourteen years now and I gotta tell you -- these things fall into patterns. We're still investigating all avenues; my partner is out following some leads even as we speak. But when you really look at Dr. Frankel, look at who he was, you can't help but see -- "

"But what about his social life? Or maybe he'd made an enemy before he came to work for us?"

"What social life? His entire life orbited around his work. And everybody adored the guy. I'm sorry, but experience says you've got a killer working here."

"I still think you should -- "

"What I should do is talk to Mr. Gullintani in private for a minute. Where can we do that without interruptions?"

The CEO clenched her jaw but her enhanced face remained calm and relaxed, programmed not to display certain reactions.

"Detective Bell," she snapped. "After Michael -- after my husband passed away -- I was forced to take over his company because I was the only one who knew all of his plans. I didn't want to do it; at heart, I'm an artist not a businesswoman. But this is my company now and I'll do everything I can to protect it. And I'll tell you something: I don't like the way this investigation is being handled and I'm getting tired of your -- your easy assumptions."

"I'll get right to work on that, Ms. Benington. Now, where can the big guy and me talk?"

"The best room, aside from this office, is Dr. Frankel's office. I assume you won't mind breaking through your own security tape? By now, I'm sure you know the way. If you need anything, use the intercom in there. When you have a chance, Mr. Gullintani, I'd also appreciate a word with you."

\* \* \* \*

"Ever been to San Francisco before?" Bell was making small talk as he led me to the murder scene.

"Many times."

"What do think of it?"

"I never know how to judge an entire city, Detective, it's too big. I love the view from that restaurant on top of the Fairmont and I admire what they're doing lately in the Mission District. But just maybe Fisherman's Wharf has gotten a bit ... touristy?"

The understatement made his lips twitch but he nodded seriously. "I get you. It's like I asked, 'Do you like kids?' They're all different. Hold up, we're almost there. Don't touch anything unless I say so."

I followed him behind a long privacy wall made of virtual-window panels displaying some tropical beach at sunset; hidden speakers provided a soothing accompaniment of crashing breakers. Then we stepped through a narrow archway into a softly lit area with padded chairs and little tables with magazines. Obviously a waiting room. At the back, strips of yellow tape reading, "POLICE BARRIER, DO NOT CROSS" barred a door.

While Bell pulled the strips off, I looked around. The small desk in here had to be solid teak and its companion chair was a recent model Strand Secretary. Strand chairs change shape constantly and gradually, support you on a webwork of soft cables to allow air-circulation, and cost over three grand.

I wasn't envious about the chair, not much, but something I lusted after illuminated the desk: a clear Plexiglas cube fitted with a black box on the top and another on the bottom. The cube contained perhaps a dozen individually colored ropes of glowing fog. The ropes twisted, changing shape and hue, twining around each other sensuously but never quite losing their identities.

A Lisa Benington ion-sculpture! I'd been disappointed not to find any in her own office and now I'd stumbled onto one, wasted in this abandoned space.

I'd read up on how they worked. In an Architectural Digest interview, Benington said she'd gotten the basic idea from an old exhibit at San Francisco's Exploratorium. But she was the one who refined the concept into high art.

The cube was filled with three noble gasses -- argon, neon, and krypton -- and the colors and shapes were generated by electric-discharge ionization mediated by tiny droplets of water moved around by tiny, precisely controlled air jets. Optical sensors told an onboard computer when the patterns were getting closer to or straying from Benington's programmed instructions and the computer made constant fine adjustments until the patterns matched.

All this took a lot of power and made enough electromagnetic fuss to put some "snow" into my heads-up display despite the mu-metal shielding on my belt-module. Three trivial error messages appeared in the display and I stepped back a pace, speculating about the long-term health consequences of so many oersteds dancing right next to you on your desk.

I wondered about something else too: you could buy ten Strand chairs for the price of this sculpture and Dr. Frankel had evidently given one to his secretary....

"Mr. Gullintani? Let's step inside."

Bell was so eager to get us into Frankel's office that he grabbed me gently by the arm and tugged. Once in, he practically slammed the old-fashioned wooden door.

"You're probably wondering -- " I began, but the detective held up a hand and shook his head. He reached into a pocket, fished out some electronic toy, activated it by pushing a button, and placed it on the floor in the

center of the room.

"I'm not saying anyone bugged this place," he stated, "but now, if I did say it, no one but us chickens would know. Frankly, I can't wait to hear what question comes out of my mouth first."

"Why wait?" I was looking around the room nervously, but of course the body had long since been carted away. The walls were lined with bookcases stuffed tight with books. Frankel's desk was teak just like his secretary's, but his chair was vastly inferior, a high-backed monstrosity covered with several acres of black leather.

In general, it was a nice office. One thing I didn't like the looks of: a large, rusty-black stain on the ivory carpeting.

"Let's start with this one," Bell offered. "Why was everyone we passed on the way here staring at you like you had rainbows coming out of your butt?" Odd coincidence, him using the word "rainbows."

"What on Earth do you mean?"

"Like they were seeing something wonderful and yet creepy."

"Well, if you were on ViewNet, Detective, you might look at me a little strangely yourself. To them, I'm a giant with -- "

"But you are a giant!"

"Yeah, that makes the illusion especially convincing. But the giant they're seeing has eyes that glow, is dressed in thick furs that make me look ... immense, has a carved horn as long as your arm tucked in his belt, and a sword that's even longer."

"OK. So who are you supposed to be?"

"Heimdall." Bell was looking at me blankly so I explained. "One of the old Norse gods. He was once known as 'Rig' which means 'creator.' Later, after Odin became popular, he got demoted to the guardian of Bifrost, the Rainbow Bridge leading into Asgard where the -- "

"What's the point in looking like this Heimdall character?"

"My job, Detective, my usual job, is to investigate people suspected of cheating my company; the Universal-Credit system gives the, um, entrepreneur a lot of leeway. Sometimes I've got to deal with really clever hackers and I've learned that the more intimidating I look, the more likely it is that smart cheats will make stupid mistakes."

"I don't get it. Everyone knows it's a trick, right? For all I know, half the people out there are dressed up as gods and goddesses."

"Few people are that ... exuberant, especially at work, although the Delton crowd seems more fanciful than most. But my disguise is special: considerably more opaque and with better resolution than even a class four enhancement, and class four is the strongest commercially available level. Plus, if someone tries to see me in a mirror, they -- "

"All right, I got the picture. Next question. When I finally reached you on the phone yesterday your name was Jackson Duke. What's with this 'Gullintani' crap? You don't even look Italian."

"Gullintani is another old Norse nickname for Heimdall. It means -- "

"So who are you really?"

"I meant to warn you about this when we talked; my name is Jack Duke but I can't use it here."

"Why not?"

"Because someday I might need to return on a more ... undercover investigation. And if someone out to bilk my company got hold of my true name, they could tap into the North American Data Base and keep track of my whereabouts. Kind of spoil the surprise when I showed up, disguise or no disguise. Particularly since ViewNet can't make a person look smaller."

"So? What are the chances you'll need to come here again? Enhancement Incorporated must have hundreds of trouble-shooters."

"Actually -- please keep this to yourself -- but so far we've only found ten people capable of using the gear I'm carrying."

"Ah. The 'special gear.' You mentioned that on the phone. What kind of gear?"

"I've got a high-level link to V-Net's main computer. It gives me several sensory options and generates little green letters and numbers in the upper left corner of my vision. I can see a client's "mask" or not as I choose and at the same time, get a readout of their entire enhancement history. That way I can study every design request they've made, every change they've programmed, since they signed up. You can learn a lot about someone that way. And what's more, I can use the computer as a pseudo-telescope, look at someone across the room and let V-Net expand the image of their enhancement. Great for spying but it won't work on non-members."

"No problem here. Seems like everyone in that damn office belongs to your club. What are you seeing right now?"

"You've never signed up, so all I've got are three green zeros."

"Oh? Sure that's not a report on my recent sex-life? But I like your having a secret window. Makes me feel as if we're loaded for bear."

"The problem is, Detective, in this case the bear is probably loaded too."

\* \* \* \*

I wanted to sit down, but it's hard to find a sitting spot in an office where someone was stabbed to death. My eyes had adjusted to the room and I could see details I'd missed at first. Little specks of dried blood adorned the most unlikely places....

"Why should our bear be loaded?" Bell demanded.

"Do you know what Delton Corporation does?"

"Sure. Other companies hire this one to design oddball machines and weird data systems. Right?"

"In principle, yes, but in scale, no. This company is important. Major corporations come here with major problems -- huge technical problems -- or impossible ideas they want to implement. Delton produces solutions. Often that means pioneering new technologies. The people here are anything but stupid; the same kind of high-caliber brains created ViewNet. From what you told me on the phone, we may be up against someone smarter than you and me combined."

Bell was nodding his head. "Maybe. If so, we'll just have to catch 'em through sheer persistence, right?"

"Absolutely. Why don't you tell me more about the murder now? Unless you've got more questions?"

"They'll keep. But there isn't much I didn't cover on the phone." Bell pulled an old-fashioned paper notebook from his jacket and rifled through the pages. "Two days ago, on Wednesday, August 7<sup>th</sup>, at four o'clock in the afternoon, Dr. Frankel finished his last session of the day."

"Frankel was Delton's staff psychologist?"

"In-house therapist really. Free counseling sessions for troubled employees."

"Go on."

"At about two minutes after four, the doc and his last patient left this office together by the back way. Frankel then went to the john (an eyewitness saw him there) and five minutes later, he showed up in his waiting room where he spent a few more minutes before coming back in here. His secretary, Mrs. Mattoon, who'd been on duty continually since three, swears that Frankel was the only person in here from four-eleven until she herself entered this room at four-thirty. That was her usual time to tell Frankel to knock off for the day; she tells me he was real absent-minded. She found him lying on the floor where you see that dark stain and she called the staff physician, Dr. Campbell, pronto. Campbell wasn't in his office at the time, but his nurse told Mattoon that the doctor was in the snack room. Mattoon ran to the snack room, and hauled Campbell's ass back here. Frankel was already dead. He'd been stabbed six times, three times in the chest, once in the neck, and once in the back. The murder weapon was left on the scene: a Phillips-tip screwdriver with a six-inch shaft. No prints. You want the anatomical details?"

"God no!"

"As you can see, there are only two ways out of here. The patients would come in the waiting room door like we did and leave by that back door so they wouldn't encounter the next patient."

"And you'd said the back door opens only from this side?"

"Right. It leads to a small sitting room where the patient can get his act together before going back to work. Sometimes, I gather, these sessions get emotional. We're trying to keep the sitting room uncontaminated for now -- there's still some fiber work to do -- but it has another one-way exit that puts you behind the last section of the wall with the waves."

"Can these doors be propped open or jimmed?"

"Doesn't matter. When anyone is in the sitting room, indicator lights blink in both the office and the waiting room. It's a matter of privacy. Frankel didn't want to send a patient into the sitting room if someone were still in there. And if the doctor was taking a leak or something, Mrs. Mattoon needed to know when it was OK to go into the sitting room to straighten up."

"Maybe someone found a way around the lights?"

"Like hell! They're triggered by the optical scanners used in bank vaults."

"What about the lights themselves?"

"Nothing wrong there, they were working right before and right after the murder. And don't think Mattoon wouldn't notice 'em if they were on; they're intense and besides, that woman doesn't miss a thing. You haven't met her yet. Frankly, far as I can see you'd need to be invisible to sneak into this office without her spotting you or the lights giving you away."

"I'm starting to understand why you sent for me."

"Yes, sir. We've got a murder happening with no one in the room but the murdered man."

\* \* \* \*

Clearly, Detective Bell thought that some ViewNet miracle had been used to produce this real life locked-room mystery but no amount of enhancement can make a person invisible. Not yet anyway.

"What about footprints, Detective? With all these specks of blood on the carpet, you'd think the murderer would have left tracks."

"I'm sure he or she did, but after Mrs. Mattoon yelled for help, the word got out and three of Frankel's patients followed Dr. Campbell in here and muddied the trail real good. My working assumption is that this was a deliberate act and one of the three is the killer."

"Not necessarily. From all you've said so far there's a much simpler explanation: the secretary did it."

Instead of answering, Bell stepped behind Frankel's desk, used a pen to push the intercom button, and squatted down to align his head with the parabolic transducer. The voice on the other end was faint but there was no fountain here to make it inaudible.

"Angie Murphy speaking," a thin voice announced. "Is this Detective Bell?"

"Right."

"Ms. Benington asked me to facilitate your requests. What can I do for you?"

"Just send Mrs. Mattoon down to Dr. Frankel's office, please. I assume she's working today?"

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir."

\* \* \* \*

If my "mask" scared Clarice Mattoon, she didn't show it. She was a tall, rangy woman somewhere in her early sixties whose bright blue eyes glittered with alert curiosity mixed with obvious resentment. She glared at us as if we were profaning the room with our presence. Mattoon was another ViewNet client and her class-three enhancement (remarkably expensive for a mere secretary) reminded me of my grandmother, Mary, who is somewhat portly and has a kind face and soft old-lady skin.

The effect wasn't glamorous but I could see how a therapist's secretary might want to look like someone's grandmother.

"I'm so sorry, Clarice," Bell said gently, "to make you come back in here. But I figured my associate -- this is Rig Gullintani -- might need to ask you some questions right from this spot."

Suddenly, Mattoon was a different woman; her real face softened, relaxing into deep lines of grief and loss.

"Thank you for explaining, Winchester. I thought you were just being ... insensitive. Pleased to meet you Mr. Gullintani."

"The pleasure is all mine."

"At least you've brought along a polite one this time, Detective. How's your wife and daughter? And your partner?"

"Good," Bell replied. "They're all good. But how about you? How are you holding up?"

"I just try to get through each minute..."

Bell turned toward me. "All right, mister. Here's the lady that was on the spot; see if you can figure out how this happened."

"Who was Dr. Frankel's last client of the day, Mrs. Mattoon?"

"That would have been the three-thirty, Eugene Cunningham. He's been a patient of ours since David -- Dr. Frankel -- and I came here ten years ago."

"You worked for Dr. Frankel before he was hired by Delton?"

"David and I have -- had -- been working together for thirty years."

"That's ... that's a long time. I'm truly sorry this had to happen. Help me get a clearer picture of events if you would."

"Young man, I'd wrestle lions to help you catch the asshole who murdered David."

This person definitely wasn't my Grandma Mary. "Thank you. So Cunningham's appointment was over at four?"

"On the dot. I always buzz to make sure David knows."

"Did Cunningham remain in the sitting room to, ah, recuperate?"

"No. That light came on, but it went out right after. Eugene and David must have gone out the sitting-room door together."

"How do you know?"

"If Eugene had left alone, the sitting room would have been empty and the light would have gone out. Then when David left, I would have seen the light come back on as he entered the room and then go out again as he left."

"But how did you know Dr. Frankel was gone at all?"

She looked at me as if I needed a refresher course in thinking.

"Because David returned here five minutes later and went back into his office."

"You didn't realize he was gone until he got back?"

"No. Because they left together as I just told you."

"So you did. Did the doctor often leave by the back door?"

Mattoon glanced around the room slyly and lowered her voice. "Sometimes it was his way to ... to get around the company's half-hour per session rule. You know -- to walk with his patients as they went back to work. Usually, he'd remember to tell me if he was going out the back, but not always. He loved to help people, Mr. Gullintani, and now and then that's all he could think of."

"One last question. Did Dr. Frankel say anything to you when he returned from the bathroom?"

"No, he needs to rest his voice between sessions. He just gave me one of his sweet smiles."

"Thank you, Mrs. Mattoon, you've been very helpful."

"I don't see how, young man, but if you do, then I'm glad."

\* \* \* \*

"Still suspect the secretary?" Bell asked dryly after she'd left the room.

"I'm crossing her off my list. But now I know how the murderer got into Frankel's office. Unfortunately there's a small problem with my idea."

Bell's eyebrows had skyrocketed. "Really? Don't keep it to yourself!"

"The good news is that you were right to call me in. This murder was



done using a ViewNet trick. The problem is that the trick should have been impossible."

"Keep going."

"Frankel never left his office. The man who came back from the bathroom wasn't Frankel."

"No, sir. I asked about that possibility and was told -- by experts! -- that it couldn't be done. Doesn't your company guarantee everyone a 'unique' appearance? That no one will ever look quite like anybody else?"

"Every company using ViewNet makes the same claim. Otherwise you'd have the latest popular movie star staring you in the face everywhere you looked. As far as I know, the system is foolproof."

"So how can this be the explanation?"

"Because it's the only possible one. And besides, I didn't say the system was genius-proof."

\* \* \* \*

For the first time, Bell looked at me as if Enhancement Incorporated might have sent him a nut-job rather than their top trouble-shooter. I wanted to prove myself, but at the moment I couldn't imagine how.

"If you're right, mister, wasn't the killer taking an awful chance? Couldn't Mrs. Mattoon have seen who it was beneath the enhancement?"

"Not likely. Clients train themselves not to look; otherwise it would undercut the system. And the more expensive enhancements are hard to see through."

"But don't you think -- "

"I hate to bring this up, Detective, but my stomach thinks it's past dinner time. Is there someplace we could grab a snack and sit and talk things over?"

He glanced at his wristwatch. "Right. Your stomach is still in Chicago. My wife would kill me if I spoiled my appetite for dinner -- it's her night to cook -- but I'll keep you company while you eat. What kind of grub calls out to you?"

Fifteen minutes later, we were seated in an odd restaurant named "The New Caribbean Zone." An entire fuselage of an old 747 Jumbo Jet with its wings cut off defined the back wall of the restaurant and an enormous open-air skylight made a nice playground for flies. A truly peculiar touch: the men's bathroom contained a goldfish pond. Bell mentioned that the original Caribbean Zone had burned down twenty years ago, but the new improved version still served the finest jerk-chicken in the city.

I would have enjoyed the food better if Bell hadn't asked an awkward question.

"How does this enhancement thing work exactly?"

"You said that as if you don't think much of my company's services."

"Far as I'm concerned, friend, enhancement is about 180 degrees south of a good idea. So far you seem like a decent man, Mr. Duke, but -- "

"Gullintani. Better stay consistent."

"Fine. But aren't you guys," he paused to take a sip of his vanilla Pepsi, "just plain milking people?"

"You're not being fair, Detective. The point is that life isn't fair. Why should the accident of a person's appearance mean such a difference to their lives? Often the difference between failure and success?"

"OK. But has it ever occurred to you that ugly people who don't sign up for your 'services' are now at a hopeless disadvantage? Not to mention anyone from a hated minority. I'll bet even a 'normal'-looking person can't compete these days without the damn V-Net. How fair is that?"

Not very, an issue that had been troubling me more and more lately.

"Look, I know the system isn't perfect, but what's the alternative? Are we all supposed to stay slaves to nature forever?"

"Maybe we should. Maybe it's more honest. And I despise the way enhancement has infected our basic customs; no one shakes hands anymore! Maybe we'll start shaking again when you guys figure out how to fake

\_everything\_ and get even filthier rich off it. And more and more public restrooms only have those stupid enhancement-mirrors so your clients can admire the way they think they should look. And they don't know it when they've got a piece of spinach stuck in their -- "

"Look, Detective, I don't ... completely disagree with you, but maybe we should stick to our current problem for now." He reluctantly nodded so I continued. "You wanted to know how enhancement works and that's a big question. I'll give you the two minute rundown and you just yell when you want more details."

"Fire away."

I downloaded the company lecture and started reading the words in my heads-up display. "At the turn of the century, researchers in Boston were trying to cure blindness in people with conditions such as macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy. Elsewhere, scientists were on the verge of developing an artificial retina, but this team took a different road. They learned how to directly induce signals into the optic nerve and -- "

"Whoa. I just need to know what you do to your clients -- physically -- along with a basic idea of how the system works. Keep it simple."

Lecture aborted. "I'll try. After someone signs up, we take DNA samples and use them to clone duplicates of their choroid cells. The choroid is a membrane behind the retina. Then we stuff tiny goodies into those cells, circuits and electromagnets you wouldn't notice without a good microscope. Incidentally, that's where Enhancement Incorporated blows away Larger Than Life and the others: better goodies."

"You'd better pray they never put you in sales."

"Point taken. Anyway, we inject the client with the modified cells and twiddle our thumbs until the cells have implanted themselves in the right spot. Eventually, the choroid membranes become arrays: receivers of ViewNet signals and translators of those signals, turning them into extra optic nerve impulses. The choroid-array also tells the V-Net what the client is looking at."

"How?"

"Head position, movements of the eye-muscles, and subtle deformations of the eyeballs caused by changes in lens shape. It's so damn sensitive that if your eyes are pointed at a nearby object but focussed on a distant one, ViewNet knows it."

"When is that useful?"

"If someone within three hundred yards of my belt-module tries to see me in a hand-held mirror, all they get is a blur."

"Jesus! But in general, how does ViewNet know what to send and when to send it?"

"In the second half of the membership procedure, various muscle cells are cloned; but this time the goodies inside are strictly transmitters, each with a unique 'fingerprint.' When we're done, the client has sixty-two 'nodes' distributed around their bodies. You've probably noticed that everyone on the Net wears modules? Like this one on my belt, but smaller?"

"I thought those were battery packs."

"They are, but they have other functions. They're sensitive to nodal-transmissions. The modules relay the information to a central computer and the computer uses the New Global Positioning System to track each client's location and pose. When fellow members are within two hundred yards of each other, the computer sends continual messages to the modules. The modules stimulate the members' optic nerves, providing a programmed illusion of what the other person looks like, but making the illusion reasonably consistent with each person's real position, posture, and facial expression. Naturally, it's the client who decides how they should appear to other people in the system..."

"Explain this to me: client number one makes himself six inches taller and picks up, say, a pencil. Does client number two see that pencil?"

"Yes."

"Where? In a hand that's six inches higher than the real one? Don't try to tell me you've got those 'nodes' hidden in every damn pencil in San Francisco!"

"Enhancement isn't superimposed over normal sight, it streams with it. Visual reality gets ... blended. The new member goes through some training and adjustment before they can really -- "

"I've heard that everyone on the V-Net has to take potassium supplements?"

"Yeah. There is a down side to all the extra nerve stimuli. Electrolyte balance is crucial at the nodes of Ranvier -- those specific spots within a nerve's myelin sheath where potassium is exchanged for sodium to -- "

"Whoa! Enough! Finish up your dinner and we'll head on back before the Delton people pack up for the night. I want you to meet my three main suspects. If you're not going to eat those fried plantains, I'll take 'em."

\* \* \* \*

If I had to pick a murderer using gut-instinct alone, I would have cheerfully picked William R. Greenfield.

Bell and I were back in Dr. Frankel's anteroom, conducting brief interviews of the three patients who'd followed Dr. Campbell to the recent murder scene and -- accidentally or deliberately -- muddied the trail.

I disliked Greenfield from the moment he said hello. It was the way he said it, as if he was uttering a profundity far beyond our grasp.

Greenfield resembled a small weasel, and his class three enhancement made him look like a bigger weasel. The "mask" did have one exotic feature: he'd made his eyes unusually large and given them cat-like pupils. Those green eyes stared at me, somehow conveying the idea they'd seen Nordic gods before and were getting tired of looking at them.

"I don't think there is anything I can or would care to add to what I've told you already, Detective."

"How did you find out Dr. Frankel had been stabbed?"

"Come now, Detective, now you're asking me to repeat what I've told you repeatedly."

"Humor me."

"When I saw Dr. Campbell running across the room I knew something was wrong. Barry Campbell isn't built for running; I think we can all agree on that. I'm a concerned citizen, so I followed him. It's that simple."

He stopped talking and favored us with a smile that made me happy when Bell dismissed him.

The next suspect was a woman named Gloria Gonsolez who used her level-two enhancement to hide a constant facial twitch. Level two is a bit transparent to make an ideal disguise, but ViewNet clients school themselves to disregard a person's real face as a matter of etiquette.

"Why are you talking to me again?" she snapped at Bell before he had a chance to speak. She seemed tense enough to have murdered a dozen therapists and did everything she could to avoid looking at me.

"I only wanted my associate to meet you, Ms. Gonsolez. This is Rig Gullintani and he's going to dive right to the bottom of this whole business."

"How nice for all of us," she hissed, still not looking at me. "Can I go now?"

The last suspect was Eugene Cunningham, Frankel's final client on the day he was killed. Cunningham had a classic, level-three enhancement that covered up his small, round face with a far handsomer one. The "mask" had one amazingly exotic feature, however. I'd never seen anything like it. An invisible sun seemed to be shining on his enhanced head in a ... astronomical manner. I mean his face had phases like the moon, but faster. At the moment, it was about a quarter full but the motion of the terminator line was relentless and quite noticeable. In about fifteen minutes, I estimated, his head would be full.

Cunningham seemed utterly depressed. He stared down at his feet and waited for someone else to speak.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Cunningham," Bell said gently.

"Eugene. Call me Eugene -- I told you that before. 'Cunningham' is my \_father's\_name." His flat voice had curdled on the word "father."

"Sorry, Eugene. Could you tell us why you followed Dr. Campbell in here the day of the murder?"

"I saw Bill and Gloria following Barry so I had to see what was going on. Look, I'm sick about all this. David was my only real friend in the world. I hope you don't think I had anything to do with -- "

"You \_aren't\_ a suspect," Bell lied. "Don't worry about \_that\_ for a second."

"All right then. I've got things to finish up..."

"You can go now. Maybe we'll talk to you later and see how you're doing."

"David was my only friend in the whole world," Cunningham repeated as he left the room.

\* \* \* \*

Bell and I stared at each other grimly and he was the first to break the silence. "It was one of those three. I know it. I'm just praying it was that Greenfield smartass. Well? Did your \_special gear\_ tell you anything?"

"All three had a clear, unbroken history with ViewNet. If anyone somehow ... borrowed Frankel's 'mask' it didn't show up on my display."

"I don't suppose that computer of yours keeps track of a guilty conscience?"

"Don't I wish. Maybe I should -- "

A woman whose bright red natural hair had been enhanced with tiny green flames walked briskly into the room. "Sorry to interrupt, Detective," she said crisply. "I'm Angie Murphy, Ms. Benington's assistant." She turned to look directly at me. "Mr. Gullintani?"

"Yes?"

"Ms. Benington was wondering if you might be able to take a short meeting with her before she has to leave?"

I glanced at Bell who passed the buck back to me via a shrug.

"Why not? Could you tell her I'll be there in five -- wait a second!" A striking change of colors within the ion-sculpture had caught my eye and my curiosity.

"Isn't this rather wasteful?" I said, pointing at the Plexiglas cube. "That thing takes a lot of power, and if no one is using this waiting room, why is it still running?"

Murphy nodded sadly. "Clarice insisted. Kind of a memorial. It was Dr. Frankel's favorite -- he \_loved\_ that thing. The boss gave it to him two years ago as a gift but he kept it on Clarice's desk so he wouldn't get distracted during the sessions. I remember how he could never even walk past it without..."

Her voice choked off and tears spilled down her real cheeks.

"I'm sorry for being so damn ... \_unprofessional\_ ... sometimes all this catches me by surprise."

As for me, my heart was racing. "That's quite all right. Sounds like a lot of people cared for Dr. Frankel."

"We all did." Not \_all\_, I thought. "He was a wonderful man, Mr. Gullintani; I wish you could have met him."

"Me too. Do you happen to know if Mrs. Mattoon is still here?"

"I believe so."

"Kindly convey my regrets to Ms. Benington. I need to speak with Mrs. Mattoon before I do anything else."

"Certainly, sir. As you wish. I'll send her right in."

\* \* \* \*

Clarice Mattoon regarded the ion-sculpture wistfully as she considered my question.

"Definitely," she answered at last. "David \_always\_ stopped to enjoy his sculpture whenever he passed my desk; sometimes it was hard to pry him

away. Wednesday afternoon was no exception."

"So immediately before entering his office for the final time, he stopped to admire his treasure. You're sure of that? Can you give me an idea of where he was standing?"

She moved to within a few feet of the cube. "I can show you exactly. At this very spot as usual. Look at this! He stood here so often, it left a permanent indentation in my carpet."

I tried not to show any excitement. "Thank you very much, Mrs. Mattoon."

"You're quite welcome, I'm sure. But why is this important?"

"I'm not sure it is, but we'll let you know if something comes of it."

Bell allowed half a minute to pass after Mrs. Mattoon had departed before turning toward me with a no-nonsense scowl. "All right, mister. You've been coy long enough. You got something and you're going to tell me what it is."

"The first time I was close to the sculpture, not even as close as Frankel was standing, three minor error-messages appeared in my heads-up display. Without the display, I wouldn't have known anything was wrong."

"So?"

"Assume for a moment that my theory is right and also that your theory is right: that the killer is one of the three people we interviewed today. One of them managed to sneak into ViewNet's data banks, borrowed Frankel's 'mask,' wore it into the therapist's office, and murdered Frankel."

"Hold up. In this joint theory of ours, where was the killer when Clarice found the body? No one was in the sitting room."

"Hiding behind Frankel's chair."

"Jesus! That would take balls big enough to wreck buildings!"

"Isn't it obvious that our killer loves to toy with people's heads? Why else create this mystery in the first place?"

"But how does your mastermind expect to leave the office without Mrs. Mattoon noticing? Remember, even if he went out the back way, the indicator light would have flashed."

"That's a matter of planning and the killer observing people's routines. We know that every workday at half-past four, Mattoon told Frankel it was quitting-time. What if Dr. Campbell is another creature of habit with a regular snack-time at four-thirty? Should be easy enough to find out. Our man Greenfield implied the good doctor was somewhat ... heavysset as I recall."

"The man could be a damn Sumo wrestler -- if he whipped himself into shape. So you're thinking the timing of the murder was planned around Mattoon having to go fetch the doctor?"

"Yes, but let me get to the good part. After the murder, the killer must have used that mysterious pipeline into ViewNet to replace his or her own 'mask' and then normalize records for the day."

"And?"

"And our mastermind had imitated Frankel to perfection, even standing in the right spot to admire the ion-sculpture. Error messages -- nulls -- would have appeared on the killer's records and they wouldn't have been erased in the rewrite. 'Nulls' are only little holes in the data flow and, in our system, there's no reason to erase holes."

"So the killer may have left footprints after all?"

"Exactly. And since we know the precise time the fake Frankel returned to the office, it shouldn't take me long to find any such footprints."

"Excellent!" Bell's eyes shone avidly. "Excellent! Should we corral our three candidates again?"

"Not yet, Detective. My module has a little alphanumeric keyboard so I can access someone's records without their presence. Give me five minutes. And I'll tell you what: I'll start with our favorite suspect."

\* \* \* \*

Figuring out how to catch the murderer had been a thrill: the thrill of the hunt. Actually catching him just made me feel sick.

I could never do Winchester Bell's job.

When we cornered William R. Greenfield in his cubicle, I felt an almost magnetic revulsion and desperately wanted to be somewhere else. Here was a man who'd actually butchered a human being. Bell, on the other hand, was palpably eager to get closer to Greenfield, to grab him and make sure he was punished.

"What do you want," the weasel snapped.

"You," the detective stated softly, flashing me a warning glance. Bell had said he might try to rattle out a confession. "We have proof that you are the murderer of Dr. David Frankel. You have the right to remain -- "

"WHAT PROOF?" Greenfield's real face was rancid with anger.

"Mr. Gullintani?" Bell said. I took the cue and began describing the evidence.

"I get it," Greenfield spat before I'd even warmed up. "I'm not a moron, you moron. But what you're saying is bullshit. No one can break into ViewNet database; it's sealed tighter than the CIA's black-files."

I nodded soberly. "I've been thinking about that. It occurred to me that someone could break into the system if they'd been involved in creating the system in the first place and had put in a ... secret door at the time. And since Delton only hires geniuses, the kind of minds who built ViewNet, just possibly a ViewNet designer might wind up working here? Someone with a secret door could use it for ... lots of interesting things. Many of the most powerful people in the world have intimate secrets locked up in that database."

Greenfield just glowered at me.

"So," I continued, "I asked for a photograph of you and faxed it off to -- "

"And my supposed motive for the murder?"

"You must have a conscience, ah, somewhere and it must have been bothering you. So you signed up to be one of Dr. Frankel's patients. Then, at some point, you revealed a little too much and the doctor became a threat. So on Wednesday, you -- "

"Shut up!" he yelled. "Just shut up! I've got proof that I didn't do it. Right here on my desk. Look!"

With his right hand, he shuffled through papers in front of him, withdrew one, and held it up triumphantly. I have to admit, he'd managed the stunt very smoothly; even Bell was caught off-guard. It took me a few seconds to notice the thirty-eight caliber semi-automatic pistol in Greenfield's left hand.

"Here's what's going to happen now, gentlemen," he said. "Everyone is going to move very, very slowly. Raise your hands, both of you, and put them on top of your heads. Then we're all going to -- yaahh!"

Pain had forced his eyes closed and he even tried to shield them with a forearm, but it was already too late. As I was obediently raising my hands, I'd brushed against the intensity control of my belt-module to give Greenfield the biggest, brightest smile he'd ever seen. Really bright. An oxyacetylene torch couldn't have done the job better. Naturally, I was immune to the effect and Bell couldn't see it.

I reached out and snatched the gun. The detective reacted instantly -- rushing around the desk, throwing Greenfield on it facedown, and handcuffing the weasel before he could move an inch.

"How'd you do that?" Bell asked me, panting. "What just happened?"

"Did I ever tell you the meaning of the name 'Gullintani'?"

"I don't think so."

"It means 'gold-tooth.' Heimdall supposedly had shining, golden teeth. My technical staff liked the idea and turned my mouth into a ... secret weapon of sorts. Sometimes, Detective, it pays to be a god."

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other authors.