

WATCHCRAB

by

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"Problem down at the lading yards," Jape said as he climbed into the AGC beside me before I had a chance to get out. I watched him pulling his papermesh trench-coat tight around his bulky frame. If he, who had ever been known as a master of understatement, called it a 'problem', then it was time to wheel out the mops, buckets, and dustbin liners.

"Jape, I haven't had coffee yet, or nicotine, or any stimulant. Can't it at least wait a quarter of an hour?"

He turned a boulder of a face towards me and blinked his baggy eyes. He'd been a detective for twenty years and knew the efficacy of coffee and cigarettes. "We'll grab something in a while. The Chief said to get over there right away."

"Bugger," I replied, and engaged the car's gravmotor. With outrigger lights flashing we were soon speeding over the megalopolis, above the public traffic lanes. I gazed down at the sprawl and wondered how many murders had been committed in the night. A usual night in Maldon presented us with between twenty and thirty corpses each morning, and those were the ones we were finding.

"Any details?" I asked.

He scratched at the grey fuzz of his short crop then reached forward and turned on the console screen.

"Break-in at the Juniper Yard apparently," he said.

"Oh, a break-in, fine."

"Yes, but the Juniper Yard belongs to Cybercorp."

"Ah."

Cybercorp provided the Essex police force with forty per cent of its funding, so a break-in at the Juniper Yard had priority over minor matters such as serial killings and Mafia hits - those events Jape would describe as 'another hiccup'.

The sprawl of low warehouses that were the lading yards was soon in sight. It covered an area of three square kilometres on the east side of the shuttle port and stretched out into the Blackwater estuary. The warehouses of Juniper Yard were fenced in their own enclave and they gleamed in the saffron sunlight. Cybercorp was the wealthiest and most influential corporation with interests here in Essex. I disengaged autodrive and brought the AGC down in a slow spiral to where I could see a dispersing crowd and the flashing of blue lights. As I brought it in to land I noted a police cruiser, one of the bland white vans used by the forensics division, a couple of fork-lifts, and the long black shape of a Mercedes AGC. By the high fence stood two uniformed officers and a couple of execs in Cybercorp businesswear, by the fork-lifts stood five Golem twenty-one androids in corp overalls.

"Looks like Chater is here," said Jape.

I glanced over at one of the execs. His businesswear was Armani and he had the crystal slug-shape of a Tachlon augmentation behind his right ear. He was remonstrating with one of the cops who had his QC laser pistol out and was waving it towards the fence. Things didn't look good at all. We piled out of the AGC and quickly headed on over.

"Put it away, Mike," said Jape.

The cop suddenly looked sheepish and holstered his weapon. He nodded to the two of us. "Jape, Dave. We have a problem here."

Chater turned to us. "I don't care about 'evidential requirements'. That is very expensive biofactory in there and no one is going to kill it!"

"If you would allow us a moment," I said to him and turned to Constable Mike Harding. "What's the story, Mike?"

"Look for yourself," he replied, and nodded to the fence. Jape and I wandered over and peered through the armoured mesh of the fence. In the open yard before the warehouses lay approximately three corpses. I say 'approximately' because it was difficult to tell. Arms, legs, guts, the occasional head, and other unidentifiable bits lay scattered in colourful profusion. An area five metres in diameter was painted red.

"A tad untidy," said Jape. "Why are we out here and them in there?"

Mike leant against the fence next to us, grabbed hold of the mesh and shook it hard. Immediately it became apparent why no one was inside filling body bags and sarcastically asking if suicide should be discounted. It came out quickly and ran with a scraping clatter towards the fence. We stepped well back as it halted a couple of metres from the fence with its gore-spattered claws held high. Shreds of human skin hung from its slowly grinding mouth palps and its stalked eyes regarded us speculatively.

At the start of the twenty-first century just about all forms of factory-fishing were

either banned or bankrupt. Sea foods became hugely expensive and were only enjoyed by those who took pleasure in demonstrating how much money they were spending. At the time, such things as shellfish were sold by the gram, and in the worst period, weight for weight, an oyster cost more than cocaine. By the end of that century the fear of genetic engineering had been largely assuaged and all the ridiculous strictures were coming off. Biotech companies like Oceana Foods made a fortune from such delicacies as megaprawns, stickleback steak, hyperclam spread. A little tampering with code made it possible to have, instead of a Sunday joint, a prawn of equivalent size that you carved into slices. You could buy crab meat for a few euros a kilogram because crabs could be grown to huge size. For an Australian land crab, which had been intelligent and dangerous when it had been merely the size of a dinner plate, people found other uses, especially when it was grown to the size of Rottweiler.

"Fuck," I said.

"Double fuck," said Mike. "This baby isn't a straight-grown food crab. It's been biofactured."

"Hence Mr Chater's slight annoyance at you intention to fry it?" said Jape.

Mike gave him a dirty look and continued talking to me. "He says there's about ten thousand euro's worth in there."

"Why that much?" I asked.

Jape replied. "A meat crab can just about stand up in water and then not for long. Their muscles aren't capable of supporting the weight and even if they were they would need lungs to supply oxygen to the muscles."

"Right," said Mike. "This bastard has implanted lungs, muscles spliced with cat DNA, three-sixty owl-vision, heat sensors, and if that ain't enough it's got tungsten carbide blades fitted in its claws."

Jape and I took another step back from the fence. The crab, perhaps deciding we weren't much of a threat, moved back with a slow and sinister spider walk. Seemingly without conscious intention it picked up a leg, bit off the foot and began munching, boot and all.

"That's evidence," said Jape.

I turned to Chater and his sidekick who had come up behind us. "How do you get in here when you want to?"

Chater turned to the other exec, a shaven-headed sickly-looking individual known as Mr Dant, and nodded to him.

"We release a pheromone in its den that attracts it and then close the den's door," was Dant's supercilious reply.

"I take it that our friend prefers it out here at the moment?"

"Yes, obviously."

I smiled at him and kept my annoyance under control. "Mike has told me about its vision, lungs, muscles and claws. I assume that these are all just additions to, shall we say, the essential crab?"

"They are all surgical additions," Chater interjected.

"Rather excessive aren't they?"

"We have the right under the revised property laws to use any means to guard our property. The crab is our property also and I will not countenance its destruction," said Chater.

"Of course. Now, tell me, does this crab have internal temperature control, you know, for cold nights?"

Chater gazed up at the clear sky. The temperature was already in the thirties and the day set to be a holezoner. He looked askance at me.

"This is important," I said.

"Only watchcrabs set to guard our property in the Antarctic complex have that addition."

"Thank you for your help Mr Chater, Mr Dant."

As we walked back to the AGC Jape peered at me curiously. "Okay, what's the plan?"

Enjoying my moment I said, "Patience. You'll see."

I used the computer in the car to confirm my speculation, then leaning against the car I keyed a number on my comlink. The reply was immediate. "John Sizer, Oceana Foods."

"John, it's Dave Skelton here. I have a little problem and wondered if you could help out."

"So long as it doesn't involve any form of physical danger to myself I'd be glad to."

"I'm at the Juniper Yard," I said and went on to detail my problem.

"You want a shell-jet tanker," he said when I had finished.

"I certainly do."

"I'll have one over to you in ten minutes. Our hyperclam warehouse is only half a klom away."

"Cheers."

"What, I wonder, was all that about?" said Jape.

"Sea food can be quite dodgy and needs careful handling and cleaning. Once dead it can go off very quickly. Hot water can do both: kill and accelerate decay. Hyperclams and the like need their shells cleaned before they're opened and OF use a water jet to do it. Of a necessity that water is just above freezing," I said.

"I still don't get it," said he.

"You will."

The tanker duly arrived and a woman in the ice-blue overalls of Oceana Foods climbed down from the cab and approached. I walked over to meet her. "John Sizer called me. He told me about your little problem."

I pointed towards the fence. "Try not to wash away the evidence."

She nodded to the end of the fence nearest to us. "If you can lure it over here it should be fine. There's drains here and it won't take a moment."

She turned away and headed back to her tanker where she started uncoiling the hose of the low-temperature pressure washer. With a puzzled Jape in tow I walked back to Chater. "Get your workers ready to go in there to move the our friend back to his den."

"I warn you, that if there is any damage to that creature the bill will be in your next wage packet." He stabbed a finger at me while saying this. I gritted my teeth.

"I can assure you, Mr Chater, your property will not be damaged."

As we walked back to the end of the fence I muttered to Jape, "But I can't assure you that you won't."

"Annoying, isn't he," he said.

"Just a tad," I replied.

The Oceana woman joined us at the fence. I reached out and took hold of the mesh and gave it a good shake. The crab dropped its lunch and oriented in our direction, but showed no inclination to come.

"I can't get it from here," said the woman.

"I'm aware of that," I said, and started climbing the fence.

I released the fence and dropped back just in time to avoid the claw that ripped into the mesh. It was disconcerting to see the tungsten-carbide edge of that claw shear through the thick armoured strands. The woman opened up with a high-powered jet

of freezing water as soon as I was out of the way. The crab fought this jet. It snapped at it with its claws and danced about on the other side of the fence. Luckily it did not run away. Within twenty seconds it was visibly slowing, then abruptly its claws and legs folded underneath it and it dropped to the ground. The woman continued playing the jet on it. I signalled to Chater and Chater nodded to Dant who, somewhat reluctantly I thought, ordered his workers in. The gates slid aside automatically and a Golem android drove in one of the fork-lifts. He picked up the crab with the lift and hurriedly took it to its den - a squat hexagonal box to one side of the yard. Once he had dropped the crab and given it a little shove inside, a steel door slid shut.

"Okay, explain," said Jape as he watched the woman coiling up her hose.

"Simple really. A crab's system will shut down when its temperature is taken that low. Chefs have been doing it for a century, ever since the animal rights protests of the twentieth. They dunk them in iced water before boiling them. It's considered the most humane way of doing it. Let's do some investigating now shall we?"

With Mike and his partner we walked into the yard and viewed the carnage therein. The forensics van, on low hover, drifted in behind us and grounded on the concrete. Two medtechs clambered out and started doing those things that medtechs do.

"Okay, Mike, what's the story?" I asked.

"Corp Golem got here just after seven to find things as they are. They called Dant first-off and he and Chater were here before we were called. A break-in that went wrong I reckon."

"What's in the warehouse?" Jape asked.

"Golem chassis parts - skeletons and cyber motors. Pretty expensive gear if you can find a market for it. There have to be easier ways of making a living," Mike replied.

While Jape continued talking to Mike and then to Dant when he came into the yard - Chater had left after seeing that his damned crab was unharmed - I wandered over to one of the medtechs. This young woman had donned surgical gloves, scraped some goo from a mangled torso, and dropped that goo into a gene reader.

"Anything yet?" I asked.

She glanced up at me then returned her attention to the reader.

"This is the second one. ... Here we have it. Jennifer Philips aged thirty-four, gene recorded for minor juvenile offences, graduated to selling illegal augs, extortion, and ABH. Recently a Cybercorp employee. Job description; cargo handler." She pointed over at a skinned head that lay looking at us with its one remaining eye. "That's Liam Dawson, another recent employee of Cybercorp - same job description. Gene recorded for supplying psychoactives, and two counts of ABH. The most recent

only last month."

"He went for my foreman Matt Henderson when he was sacked."

I turned to study Dant, who had just walked up behind me.

"What was he sacked for?" I asked.

"Theft, as was Jennifer Philips."

I gazed around at the scattered body parts. "Were there any others?"

"Adrian Devoy and Simon Hooser."

"The nature of the theft?"

"Cyber motors. I can only suppose they were supplying the illegal augmentations market," Dant told me. I studied him very carefully. This all seemed too easy.

"Why wasn't the crime reported?"

"We felt there was no need. Dismissal was punishment enough. We didn't want too much of a fuss," he said. My suspicions grew more intense. Since when had Cybercorp been averse to creating a fuss and prodding what was all but their own private police force into action? I glanced to the medtech and she immediately spoke up.

"We have Simon Hooser but I can't find anything of Adrian Devoy," she said.

"Right."

I punched into my wristcom and while I waited to get through I watched Dant quickly walking away. I put out the instruction for Adrian Devoy to be picked up at the first possible opportunity. Jape stood beside me and contemplatively stared at Dant's back. "The entry qualifications to any Cybercorp position are stringent, I believe."

"Devoy and Hooser are both suppliers," said Mike, stepping up beside him.

"I think you should request, through Cybercorp head office, the employment records of all four of them," I said.

"Dant would get them for you quicker," said Mike. He hadn't cottoned-on. Jape and I turned to stare at him.

I said, "I want the request to come from you as just a piece of routine enquiry. I don't want that enquiry to go through Dant."

"Oh ... oh right," said Mike, and moved away.

"He'll make detective one day," said Jape when Mike had gone.

"Of course," I said.

"The employment records should show who interviewed them and who employed them," he said.

"So they should," said I, taking out a cigarette and lighting up. "Now there's only one more thing we need."

"What's that?"

"Coffee."

An hour and four cups of coffee later I was sitting at my desk when I was informed by email that Adrian Devoy had turned up, or rather, some of him. The email had come from forensics with a short report so I wasn't exactly happy. Adrian Devoy's head had been found in the mud by the Blackwater. The initial finding was that it had been ripped from his shoulders.

"Someone with rather heavy augmentation, I would suggest," said Jape.

"Maybe," I said. "They had any luck tracing his address yet?"

"Nothing for the moment. We're trying for a trace on his wristcom, but BT are being as awkward as ever about the privacy laws. We need a court order. Anyway, we'll likely find what we found at the other places."

I nodded. The apartments of the other three had been trashed and every disk or recording crystal rendered into scrap. "What about those employment records?"

"Awkwardness again. Mike put a request through and Cybercorp turned him down flat."

At that moment I noticed, through the armour-glass window of our office, Chater walking in with the Chief in tow, and I stood up. I had no doubt that I was just about to get a rucking.

"Shit and fan in quiet conjunction," said Jape.

The Chief entered the office and held the door for Chater. He closed the door behind the head of Cybercorp and stood at it like a guard.

"Mr Chater has some things he would like to discuss," the Chief told us.

Chater got straight down to it. "The employment records you requested are being transmitted through at this moment." He touched his Tachlon aug self-consciously as he spoke.

I checked my screen and confirmed what he was saying. The interviewer's name on the records was one I did not recognise. I'd hoped it was going to be Dant's.

"You won't recognise the name of the interviewer," he said.

I looked at Jape.

Chater continued. "You won't recognise that name because the person does not exist."

"Rather odd don't you think," said Jape.

Chater shot him a look of annoyance. "There are only two people who could falsify that information: myself and Dant."

That, essentially, meant Dant had done it. The head of Cybercorp had no need for such shenanigans. At last count Chater was worth about three million euros. Three million euros every hour that is.

"So Dant employed some rather unsuitable employees," I said.

"This seems likely," said Chater.

"That's not really a crime," said Jape.

The Chief took this opportunity to assert himself. "Less of your cheek, Jape."

Chater continued as if the Chief did not exist. "For some time we have been aware of stock discrepancies. We have also been aware of a small company going by the name of Soldroid Inc. selling military androids to certain independents like the Jovian Federation, the Martian Free State, and the Belt stations."

"Naughty," said Jape, which I think ranks as a classic in descriptive terms for preparation for interplanetary war.

"I take it you'll be coming to a point shortly," I said.

The Chief shot me a look but I pretended not to notice.

"Dant has been systematically stealing Cybercorp stock to supply Soldroid Inc.," said Chater.

"And you have evidence of this?" I asked.

"Yes. Dant is on the Board of Soldroid."

I waited. Nothing more was forthcoming.

"That hardly constitutes evidence," I said.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the Chief wince.

"Arrest him and question him," said Chater, angry now.

"I am sorry Mr Chater, but I don't take orders from you," I said.

"Arrest Dant and question him," said the Chief.

"I will do that," I said, peering at my screen, "but first I have a prior call. Come on Jape."

With that we left the two of them fuming and perhaps too surprised to make the orders stick. I would arrest Dant. He was in the frame. But I wanted my little moment of rebellion.

"Where to?" asked Jape.

"The BT trace just came through. It tracks to an apartment on the edge of the Blackwater. I suspect that's where we'll find the rest of our friend Devoy."

The headless body of Devoy was sitting at a desk with what remained of a blood-spattered computer console still sizzling before him. In his right hand he held a QC laser that had been emptied of its charge. We searched thoroughly and came up with zip. I stood at the window and gazed down into the Blackwater. I tried to imagine the scenario. He had been sitting here typing something. Someone had entered, violently - the lock was broken. He had emptied the charge of a small but powerful quantum-cascade laser into that someone and that someone had still managed to rip his head off, destroy his personal library, and leave.

"You know, perhaps we owe that watchcrab an apology," I said.

"You first," said Jape.

"Perhaps those other three were killed by whatever killed our friend here."

"I don't think there's much question about what killed him," said Jape.

I looked at him questioningly.

"Military android, surely," he said.

I nodded in agreement. "What do you reckon? A fall-out amongst thieves. or Dant trying to cover his tracks?"

Within the next ten minutes the forensics' team was going over the place, but I didn't expect them to find any more than we had.

"Let's pick up Dant," I said.

We headed up the narrow stairs to the rooftop of the building where we had left the AGC. When we got there I noticed that a Rover AGC that had been there when we arrived was still there and that there was someone sitting in it. Curious, I walked over and rapped on the window. The head that turned to look at me was blackened plastic with silver skull showing through from underneath. I hurriedly stepped back pulling my detective issue thin gun as I did so. I ran into Jape just as the door clicked open. With both had our thin guns trained as the android stepped out and stood.

"Lie down on the ground!" shouted Jape.

The android started walking towards us. I shot it in the head. There was a loud clang as the single needle my gun fired detonated and took away the rest of the android's face. Its head merely tilted to one side for a moment before straightening up. It just looked even more frightening now. We both opened up on it then; mini explosions stripping away its scorched businesswear and exposing more of its ceramal skeleton. Simultaneously we both moved out of its way and continued firing. We both ceased firing at the same time as it continued walking. It walked right across the roofport, hit the boundary rail, and went over the edge. We later learnt that Devoy's hits with the QC laser had caused a brittleness in its optic circuitry. Our first shots had caused that circuitry to break down and it had continued in a loop on one internal instruction: walk.

"Right. Dant," I said.

Dant's house was a villa in the Mundon reforest just on the outskirts of Maldon. We called for back-up before coming in to land on his extensive lawn. Three cruisers followed us down and armoured cops carrying laser carbines piled out. We let them approach the house initially. There was no fire fight. We'd missed the show.

There had been a battle. Three burnt-out androids lay in various rooms of the house. There was what remained of a couple of men. One of who might have been Dant, might not. In one room a computer was running. On the screen was a schematic for a military android. At the head of the page was the Soldroid logo. There were hundreds of pages. All with details of parts with titles like 'CYB.C 157 Intermotor Stepped' and which were obviously of Cybercorp manufacture. Other pages detailed smuggling arrangements and sources of false documentation. Yet another page detailed a complex plan to infiltrate criminals into the Juniper Yard to steal a couple of crates of something called a 'CYB.C 754.22 Torquemotor'. It went on to detail how those criminals would take the blame; diverting attention to suppliers of illegal human augmentations.

"All nice and neat for us poor plodding coppers," said Jape.

"We'll still keep a lookout for Dant, but I reckon he's either one of those in there or he's answering some difficult questions in a rubber room somewhere in Cybercorp HQ."

It was dark by the time we got into our AGC and lifted it. We left the clearing up to those with the body bags and mops. It was only when we were halfway back to the station that a thought occurred to me.

"You know, Chater thinks of himself as a law unto himself, and he was really concerned about that crab. When you think about it, there's something a little odd about someone who earns three million an hour being concerned about a loss of ten thousand," I said.

"That concern is why he's earning what he is," said Jape.

"Yes yes, I know 'you don't get rich by giving it away'. What I mean is: he almost seemed to have a paternal concern for the creature."

As I said this I changed our direction and headed for the Juniper yard.

"What's on your mind?" asked Jape.

"Just a hunch."

"You don't get hunches."

"Okay. Just an idea of what someone might consider to be a kind of justice."

I brought the AGC down outside the fence of the Juniper Yard. There was no one about, but security lights came on as soon as we landed. We climbed out and walked over to the fence. All was nice and brightly lit and we could see the huge watchcrab squatting over pieces of human body - pieces still clad in tatters of businesswear. The crab was holding a bald head in one claw. It popped the head in its mouth and crunched noisily.

"Well, Mr Dant went to pieces in the end," said Jape.

I tiredly punched a number into my wristcom and asked if I could have another tanker full of freezing water.

The End

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