

Bad News From Orbit

by Ken Rand

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The Ear of Mt. Horiuchi

I knew the instant I walked into the Wafaerer's Siding that I'd more likely leave as an organ donor than as a Kirov Prize for Journalism candidate.

An outer ring runway informant had tipped me that I'd find CMC Sgt. George Horiuchi in the pub. I wanted to be the first newsworker on Berenson Corp. Station Number One—or “the One,” as everybody called the orbital city—to interview Horiuchi after what Colonial Marine Corp execs had called his “selfless bravery in the face of enormous odds, blah, blah,” and “single-handedly securing an amicable resolution of the Spiratz Mining Division Altercation, etc. blah, blah.” CMC media releases were pure static, so I wanted to talk to Horiuchi himself, away from his handlers, to get the real story, to find out how he really won the war.

Many newsworkers covered the “Altercation,” as the government called the rebellion on Spiratz, but maybe my runway sources were better than others were or maybe I just got lucky, I don't know. Anyway, Slinky Tomasi, one of my contacts, earned his extra twenty-mark chip for being the first to find Horiuchi. I flipped Slinky what he called his “eyeball coin” and got to the Wafaerer's quick. Who knows which of my rivals Slinky would deliver the same message to next or how long I had before the pub looked like an Intersystem Newsworkers' Assn. convention.

Who knew if Horiuchi would talk to me at all? Still, I had to try.

Wafaerer's Siding is a notorious hangout for shipcrew, dockhands, stimpeddlers, thieves, smugglers, and various n'er-do-wells. It was on the city rim, heavier spin grav so cheaper rent. I'd heard that it once had a realtime view of Earthome, that smoking, toxic black cinder where people used to live, if you want to call it that. But those old transparent plates against the outer wall had probably been covered with posters and vids long ago. Who wanted to see that toxic wasteland, a sore spot in the spinning starscape?

The Wafaerer's Siding had become legendary as the place where Adrian “Doc” Kennedy lased his former shipmate, the outlaw Percy Diego, two years past. CMC execs had posted the place off limits to grunts on R&R, but that didn't impress Horiuchi.

Stamper Clyde, the Wafaerer's owner-operator, became wary of the media after the Kennedy-Diego shoot-out. On the one hand, the publicity helped business. On the other, it drew too much attention from authorities. Company gendarmes descended on the pub and had a field day clearing out their “most wanted” files. Tourists, slumming, looking for local color, stole ashtrays and towels until Clyde started a gift shop next door as a sideline.

He wasn't excited to see my ident on the entry keypad.

“Peter Amundsen,” he muttered as he scanned my card readout, “TransSystem InfoNet. Newsworker.” He spat as if he'd just bitten into a rotten pitflower seed, and made no move to key entry. By Intersystem Convention Code, he couldn't deny entry to anyone not proscribed by a federal Interdiction Tag, but ICC regs didn't prevent him from making it clear with his unwelcoming gaze that he was the boss and he wouldn't tolerate anything or anybody harassing his customers.

“You pleasuring, newsie, or you working?” He stood before the portal, folded arms, and spread feet, a massive immovable rock, body language reinforcing a malevolent frown under a thick, black brow.

“I'm entering, Mr. Clyme.” My voice did not quiver. I'd been with TSIN for a few years. I started out in FashionWatch and moved up from there. I knew the ways. He hesitated, until I moved to key on my recorder implant at my left temple. He snorted something unpleasant and tapped the portal field to neutral. I stepped in. He closed the field behind me.

It's impossible to describe the Wafaerer's. You can scan holo images all you want, but you won't get it. Its reputation as a wastechute is deserved and seriously understated.

As you pass the entry field, your ears are assaulted by the cacophonous howl of at least three audboxes playing different poptunes at full volume and all at once, the clatter and whack of billiard games and the hum of several conversations, punctuated with frequent laughter, male and female. The occasional scream fails to stand out enough to merit attention.

Still, I heard circulation vents whining in protest as they struggled to clean the stench from unhygiened bodies, from spilled alcoholic beverages, from joestick and stimweed smoke, and years of accumulated flotsam and slime. I couldn't see the vents. They hid in the gloom cloaking the place like a muggy fog between dirty, infrequent and inadequate ceiling light panels. Some Wafaerer's denizens no doubt appreciated the darkness. Like rats or cockroaches, many had good reason to shun the light.

And what denizens. Few in the five meters visible before me looked up when I entered. Two were prostitutes. They eyed me as I tried to peer through the dark, to locate Horiuchi. One massed at least two hundred kilos of perfumed flesh, the other looked like she was on a stimweed high as she vibrated with energy. She was pretty. She wore a mean-looking gatsticker on her hip, naked steel snug against naked thigh.

They slouched against the bar fondling a tall skinny man. The man turned to glare at me. He was the ugliest man I've ever seen. Noseless. A black pit existed where his right eye had once been, and the right side of his face was a shiny purple welt that pulled his lip up in a forced grin exposing long yellow teeth. He glared at me and something in his throat gurgled.

I may have wet my pants right then if Horiuchi hadn't intervened. My hero.

“You the newsie Slinky sent?” It took me a second to realize it was Horiuchi silhouetted between me and the hellish trio at the bar.

“Yeah. I'm Peter—”

“Shut up.” He grabbed my arm and pulled. I followed. I had no choice because his hand encircled my arm like a crash belt from elbow to shoulder and when he pulled, I felt like I was being sucked out an airlock.

I followed him as he plowed deeper into the room, a bull ‘loper charging through tall grass, pushing around tables and chairs, huddled groups of quiet, savage-looking men, and one fist-fight. I glimpsed a pool of blood glittering blackly on the floor near an overturned table. We stepped through the images cast from an ill-tuned holotank in the middle of the room, flickering flesh tones from a cheap pornovid, three shapes gyrating, groaning in mid-air in feigned ecstasy. Drooling, slack-faced men grumbled as our passage distorted the images.

How deep the room was I couldn't tell. I'd lost track of the entrance as I was pulled along in Horiuchi's hulking wake. I realized the pub was wedge-shaped, the entry field at the wedge point, the walls expanding out to accommodate a wide back wall against which several large, round tables sat. Many simple, straight-backed chairs flanked each table, and a single light panel centered above the flat green surface lighted each. The light hung low and was shielded so the faces of men sitting at the table might not be easily seen from even a short distance.

That's where Horiuchi sat me, plonked me down without ceremony, as one would slap down an empty beer mug on a barroom table before demanding a refill.

He sat back to the wall facing the room, me across the table from him, my back to the room's cacophony. I began to sweat and my back itched. I remembered to turn on my HV recorder implant.

I could feel the familiar tingle of microservos buzzing under the skin behind my left ear as my HV unit adjusted for the contrast between the well-lit table and Horiuchi's face hidden in the sharp darkness centimeters above the pool of light. I subvocalized command to override the greater light source and concentrate on Horiuchi's face. Still, I knew the holo images would require enhancement back at the editing desk. I also keyed narrow focus on Horiuchi on my audio pickup. As long as I looked at him, he could whisper and I'd record and hear him clearly, the din behind me filtered out.

George Horiuchi, Sgt., CMC19861614. Age twenty-nine Realtime. Two meters exact, one hundred and ten kilos. Born on Oort Outpost Station Severeid. Widowed. One daughter living with relatives in the Beltway. Joined CMC 7/19/346 PH. Promoted in the field during assignment to Spiratz intervention. Recipient of six minor and five major unit and individual merit citations for heroism, etc. in recent Berenson Corporation Spiratz Mining Division Altercation. Wounded in action. And so on. All CMC PR—public relations non-information. A few quotes of praise from superiors and a list of citations, training accomplishments and so on in military double-talk made up all I or anybody else knew about the man who ended the Altercation single-handedly.

The orchestrated news conference a few days ago provided little else but tantalizing questions, which I hoped Horiuchi would answer for me. If so, I'd have a real exclusive.

Exclusives are rare in my business. Newswriters follow stories where they lead so we end up in hoards, going from one war, riot, strike, accident, government function or natural disaster to the next—one conference, briefing, backgrounder, or orchestrated tour or event to another. It's hard to come up with something everybody doesn't already have, something worth having. If a newsie comes up with something different, it's often just a sidebar or a feature. Nothing important.

But here I sat with the man every newsie in the system would give his or her right eyeball to interview one-on-one. In person and close-up, Horiuchi was as mountainous as his holoimage seemed. His round head, neckless and bald, protruded like a rock above massive shoulders, all muscles. Deep-set eyes burned from under a hairless Neanderthal brow ridge. His nose seemed incongruously button-like, too small for his face. His lips were a tight line above a solid chin.

His left ear was missing and a red and orange flame, a recent tattoo, emerged from the earhole and spread up the side of his smooth head. His incredible musculature, neckless head, and piercing eyes intimidated enough, but the missing ear and the flame tattoo gave him a barbarous look that could loosen the bowels of the most cold-blooded.

I sat silent, awed by— *Mount Horiuchi*, as I found myself editing tape in my head already. Mount Horiuchi. My editor would love it.

He spoke. "We ain't live, are we?"

"Not from inside a private business establishment. That would violate ICC regs. I am obliged to tell you that I am recording this for broadcast at a later—"

"I picked you cause you work for TSIN."

And my brilliant response: "Huh?" We'd have to edit audio at the desk. Still, I felt myself tingle. Horiuchi had chosen TransSystem Info?

"Why?"

"My little girl—Molly's her name—she likes watching your Capt. Whistler Kid's Hour on the holly." He spoke as he'd done briefly at the conference, a bit breathy and high-pitched, with an odd twang, dropping 'g's' from his gerunds, an Oort accent.

For whatever reason, Horiuchi's military handlers tried to keep their pet hero from saying more than a few phrases at the conference. Maybe they feared he'd reveal state secrets. Who knows how the military mind functions? Of course, this tantalized us newsies to hear more, hence my presence in the Wafaerer's to accomplish just that.

"You sought me out because—"

"I don't watch holly myself, mind. But my girl dotes on your show, so who else to blab to? I know one of you newsies is going to corral me by and by, before my unit outships, so I reckoned my best bet was to nail you first. Slinky only charged me a twenty to find you."

"Well," I ahemed and spoke for the record, "on behalf of TSIN, I'm sincerely—"

"You want to know how I lost me ear is what."

Hell no. I want to know how you won the war. That's what I thought, not what I said. "I hear the rebels tortured you—"

"So HQ says and so that's what the history books'll say. But I'm figuring to tell the truth and nothing but, HQ be deviled if they don't like it. So listen and don't interrupt, cause I'm only telling it once, you savvy?"

I nodded and wished I had a beer, something to wet my dry throat. I listened and Horiuchi talked.

* * * *

This is the part everybody knows, the history, but Horiuchi told me anyway, and I didn't interrupt him.

The tunnels on Spiratz are a maze, he said. Thousands of kilometers of passageways, cavernous rooms and interlocking pits, vaults, and warrens had been dug deep into the planetoid's hard rock to extract the aulerite ore prized by the Berenson Corp. Shipbuilding Division in the Aragon star system, a short jump from Spiratz. The ore is a key element in the metallic-ceramic alloy used to build null-transit ship hulls. Interstellar commerce would be impossible without it.

Spiratz is the ore's primary source. In the 120 years Realtime since company scouts first assayed it, Spiratz had become a company colony. Most people on and under surface and in the orbital stations around the planetoid worked for Berenson or otherwise depended on company payroll.

Given their growing prosperity and other factors discernible in hindsight, it was only a matter of time before the Spiratz population entertained nationalistic notions. A remote and insensitive bureaucracy whose decision-makers had failed to read history responded to overtures of independence with iron-fisted intransigence. Friction grew. Civil war seemed predestined.

And it happened. A miners' union declared independence, shut down operations, overran security forces, commandeered key installations and equipment, ousted or imprisoned management, and issued demands for redress of grievances from Berenson Corp. in a "Declaration of Independence" patterned after the historic Earthome document of the same name.

Management appealed to government for troops to halt the strike. Government, even more remote from the situation "on the ground," and, in a realpolitic sense, "in the pocket" of Berenson, agreed to intervene. They dispatched the nearest available CMC unit and predicted victory in a few weeks.

Superior CMC forces soon suborned rebel-held orbital installations and recovered key equipment and personnel. CMC land units, Horiuchi's outfit, regained the planet's surface with little effort. But the rebels could not be extracted from their underground warrens by reason, coercion, or force. They fought a low-tech guerrilla war, mobile hit and run tactics. They thumbed their noses at CMC, the most sophisticated war machine known to man, and got away with it for two years.

Little ore flowed to the Aragon Shipyards, interstellar economy faced collapse, and the government and Berenson got nervous. CMC HQ tried several ways to get the message—"Let's talk terms,"—through to the rebels. Nothing worked. The rebels were too suspicious of traps and refused to respond. Desperate, HQ sought volunteers with underground experience to make contact with the enemy and offer peace terms—in essence, to surrender.

Finding an enemy to surrender to would be difficult. Rebels evaded CMC and company troops, or wounded or killed them. They seldom took prisoners. Few grunts, even those with firefight experience, had ever seen a rebel.

Horiuchi was among the fourteen grunts that volunteered to walk alone into separate cave entrances unarmed, without supplies or even communications or survival gear, except a lightbeam, to wander around until they made contact with the enemy. A desperate and daring tactic. HQ figured enemy scouts would see the single defenseless troops and rather than kill them or wound them on sight, would capture them out of curiosity. Maybe one would get word to rebel command—"Let's talk peace. Please."

When he set out, Horiuchi asked for a deck of cards to bring with him. He got his wish. He didn't explain why he wanted the cards.

* * * *

“Why cards?” I asked.

“Cause I knew the rebs played poker.”

“I’m afraid I don’t—”

“A few weeks earlier, while doing a search and destroy with my unit, I come across a card, ‘twas a diamond seven, tucked behind this rock, sorta. Didn’t say diddly at the time. It didn’t seem important then, but I thought on it a lot, later. I went back by and by, alone, and staked out the card, you know. Sure enough, a reb come for it.”

“For one card?”

“His deck was incomplete, y’see.”

“So what happened?”

“Well, I tried to take him but he outgunned me and got away. He about killed me.”

“But I don’t understand—”

“D’you recall me telling you to shut up a bit ago?”

I shut up.

* * * *

Horiuchi walked into the labyrinth for a few hours, found a spot, sat down, took out his cards and started playing solitaire. He continued playing hour after hour. He didn’t move from the spot except to piss behind a nearby rock.

Late on the third day, Horiuchi awoke from a catnap abruptly, a pulse rifle muzzle in his nose. Before he got a glimpse at his captors, they blindfolded him and tied his hands behind his back. Someone took his cards. Strong arms helped him stand.

“Don’t talk,” a gruff voice whispered. “Walk.”

Horiuchi walked, firm hands on each elbow keeping him from stumbling over obstacles. He smelled bodies long unwashed. He didn’t bother to remember the turns, dips, and rises in the journey with his silent escorts, nor to time it. He’d been lost since an hour after he’d first entered the passageways. He figured he was now being taken to somebody he could talk to.

He found the person he sought in a cavern that looked like every other cavern in the underground complex. Somebody pushed him to the floor and he sat hard. Somebody ripped the blindfold off and he squinted into a bright light directly ahead, aimed at him. A man squatted on heels before him, silhouetted in the light. The man had about him the air of leadership Horiuchi recognized from experience. Small, skinny and boyish, as far as Horiuchi could tell through the bright light, but something about the man said “leader.”

The leader-person accepted the cards from one of the reb escorts. He rifled expertly through the deck,

grunted, made a hand motion and the bright light turned away from Horiuchi. Somebody untied his hands.

"We caught all your friends," the reb leader said, voice a husky rasp. "Stripped them, put them in a bag, and set them all outside the door. Nobody hurt, yours or ours."

"But with me, you're talking."

The reb tossed the deck on the ground before Horiuchi. "We watched you. None of the others had cards. You come in here with nothing but a deck of cards. You sit and play solitaire for three days. You tried to ambush one of our people using his missing card as bait. You're either crazy or something else."

"Know thine enemy."

"Right. What're you up to?"

"So you didn't talk to the others."

"Not much. Sounds like Berenson is ready to surrender, give us what we want, but you appreciate our suspicion."

Horiuchi slowly reached for his cards—no sudden moves—and began shuffling.

"So what's your story?" the reb demanded.

"I come to play poker."

The reb and at least six others in the cavern laughed. Horiuchi's face remained solid as the rock around him. The laughter died.

"I don't get it," the reb said.

"Simple." Horiuchi shuffled as he spoke. "We play poker, straight five-card draw, nothing wild. One hand. Me and you. I win, you listen. You win, name your pot."

Another laugh formed on the reb's face but quickly died. The others shifted, moving closer, shadows dancing on cave walls.

"Why?" the reb said. "Why should I?"

"Cause you like playing poker. All you miners do. It's your preferred form of recreation. Traditional. And it beats war hands down any day."

A long silence hung in the cavern, like stale air. Horiuchi could hear breathing behind him and on either side.

"Okay," the reb said. "I win, I kill you."

"You could have already done that if you wanted. Something else."

"How about if I win, I get your ear?"

Long silence. Finally, Horiuchi said, "You got a deal."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. You win, you get it. Agreed?"

"Your ear? Which one?"

Shrug. "Your choice."

"Left."

Shrug. "Your deck or mine?"

The reb tapped Horiuchi's deck on the ground between them. "You deal," he said.

"Cut."

The reb tapped the deck.

Horiuchi dealt.

* * * *

"You want a beer, newsie?"

I blinked, startled by the interruption. "Uh, yeah."

Horiuchi nodded into the darkness behind my back and Stamper Clyde himself appeared at my side, towering over me like an meteor ready to strike.

"Beer for the newsie. I'm fine."

Clyde disappeared.

I cleared a phelmy throat. "So you, uh, lost?"

"I called the reb—unlikely name of Corky Atgood, I found out—and he showed two pair, jacks and sevens. I dropped my hand face down."

"And then, you, uh—"

Horiuchi tapped his left temple. A hole remained where the ear flesh should have been. And from the ear hole, like the flash from a pulse rifle shot, a red and orange flame tattoo rose up the side of his bald head.

"Holy Jadu Familia."

A hairy arm holding a beer mug reached over my shoulder, sat the mug down on the table in front of me, and withdrew. I gulped, surprised at how dry my mouth had become.

"Wait a minute," I said. "You did win the war. I mean, it's over. The fighting's stopped. The mine's back

up again."

Horiuchi shrugged.

"But you just said you lost to the reb."

He shrugged again.

"But if you lost the poker game, I mean, how—"

"Story's not over."

* * * *

Horiuchi took the gatsticker offered by a reb. He pulled his ear away from his scalp with his left hand and held the blade down above it with the right hand, ready to slice.

"Hold on." The reb leader held Horiuchi's discarded hand. Three kings. "What are you trying to pull?"

"It don't matter. I folded. You won."

"But you could have—"

In a single, swift motion, Horiuchi sliced off his ear. He didn't cry out, but the reb leader and several on-lookers gasped. Horiuchi forced a smile against the pain and handed the bloody trophy to the reb leader. The leader, wide-eyed, took the flesh lump and nodded to someone behind Horiuchi, who moved to his side, muttering. The woman smelled of antiseptic and pain salve. She applied cold balm and stanching the blood cascading down Horiuchi's neck.

"I figured you for crazy," the reb leader said, voice rising, shaking his head. "Or something else. I still don't know which."

"You agreed to listen if I won. Would you have really listened, though?"

"I don't—"

"You wouldn't listen to the others. You wouldn't have listened to me either. But you heard *that* ." Horiuchi pointed with his chin to the trophy on the ground before the reb.

"You won," he said. "But you can still listen, now. If you want to."

The reb leader considered for a moment. At last he nodded and stood. "Wait."

Horiuchi heard whispering in an adjacent alcove. He could not make out the words, so he listened for tone. Angry voices, but respect, awe. Even amazement.

Minutes passed before the reb returned and squatted before Horiuchi. He and the others seemed more relaxed.

"Okay," he said. "Impressive demonstration. Weird, but impressive. We'll listen. But we won't change our terms."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Like I said, why should—"

"Sometimes you got to lose a battle to win a war."

The reb frowned and cocked his head. He picked up the ear, turning it in his hand. A smile grew on his narrow, boyish face as he tucked the ear in his shirt pocket.

"I'm all ears," the reb said.

* * * *

"The war ended a few hours later," Horiuchi said.

"Tell me if I got it right: The rebels got what they wanted anyway, but they let Berenson go ahead and brag it up as if they'd beaten the rebs into negotiating terms."

Horiuchi nodded. "You're quick, newsie. They need each other, supplier and buyer. And a war is never really over until both sides figure they won. If the rebs—the *Spiratz Free Union*, I mean—hadn't made those little concessions they made, nothing much, somebody'd be looking to renew the fighting. Someday. We'd be back in the hole in twenty years."

"So you did win."

Horiuchi smiled, silent.

"But what you just told me, it's nothing like what CMC PR said at the news conference."

Another shrug.

I sat back, thinking. I couldn't use any of what I'd recorded. Censors would chew it up first. I felt spent.

"If I broadcast this—"

"Your editor won't let you."

"Right. So why'd you bother?" My voice rose. I gritted my teeth and concentrated on keeping my voice down. "I mean, I believe you're telling the truth. Hell, it's less absurd than the crap we get from the government. And it's crazy enough to be true. And you damn well look sincere—"

"You got forensics people to analyze your tape. They'll tell you if I'm telling the truth or not."

"Still." I shook my head and reached up and tapped off the recorder. "This won't get broadcast."

He said nothing.

"Then why?" My voice cracked. "Why?"

"I went along with the PR people only as far as to not disobey orders. Replay the holly. You'll see I

never said anything untruthful. I said little enough. And when I did, I told the truth while making it sound like I agreed with the PR boys. They bought it. So'd the nets. The rebs—the Union—they know I kept my word."

"Your word?"

"Last item on my verbal contract with them. I won't lie about what happened. But me and the reb, Atgood, we both knew CMC wouldn't tolerate the truth getting out, that we'd been whipped. I can't tell CMC HQ how to run their business, but I can live up to my word. I'm telling the truth. It don't matter if nobody else hears it. I done what I promised. That's it. I'll never talk about it again. Ever."

I sat silent, thinking. I'd show the tape to my editor. He'd wipe it. I sighed.

"Sorry you don't got your exclusive story, newsie." Horiuchi shrugged, massive shoulders rolling. As he did so, his skin twitched and the flame tattoo above his left ear—rippled.

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe not." I started recording again.

* * * *

Horiuchi IV prod:Amundsen

9/30/349PH writ/ed:Orwell

approx:104sec anncr:Amundsen

Intro: Everybody wanted him. TSIN's own Peter Amundsen got him—an exclusive interview with CMC Sgt. George Horiuchi, hero of the Spiratz Altercation.

HV1: standup, Amundsen.

Aud: They're calling him Mount Horiuchi. He's big, he's mean, and he's all CMC spit and polish, but he's incredibly reclusive and humble.

HV2: Horiuchi, bodyshot.

VO: (Amund) When we found him for this exclusive interview, taking some well-deserved R&R at an undisclosed location on Berenson Station One, he dismissed praise for single-handedly bringing the Spiratz rebels—now the Spiratz Free Union—to the bargaining table, thereby saving hundreds of lives and jobs. Instead, he wanted to talk about—

HV3: Hor, close-up of ear.

VO con't:—the wound he received during his selfless act of heroism in the hellholes of Spiratz. And what he did with that wound.

HV4: Hor, bodyshot.

Aud: (Hor) It's a minor injury, really, you know. Didn't hurt much. One of their medics treated me right off.

Aud: (Amund) And the tattoo?

HV5: Hor, close-up of ear.

Aud: (Hor) Well, Pete, I just figured I'd dress it up a bit. Might as well. The hole would look a bit funny without some kind of decoration, don't you think?

Aud, VO: (Amund) Mount Horiuchi humbly refuses cosmetic surgery to replace the ear. His reason—

HV6: Hor, bodyshot.

Aud: (Hor) Well, you might say it's all part of the deal. You got to give a little to get a little, you know? This is just my small way of letting a few folks know I done my part, kept my word. You know?

Aud: (Amund) Whatever that means.

HV7: Hor, extreme close-up of ear.

Aud: (Hor) I kind of like it. Don't you?

HV8: shot montage, pattern sm17.

VO: (Amund) It seems everybody likes it. Body sculptors throughout the stations are reporting a booming business in shaving heads, tattooing flames, the occasional ear removal. It's the latest fashion statement, sure to spread throughout the system, thanks to a giant of a man, a true modern hero, CMC Sgt. George "Mount" Horiuchi.

HV9: standup, Amund. Move in slow on Amund left ear and hold at extreme close-up.

Aud: I'm Peter Amundsen reporting exclusively for TSIN FashionWatch.

The Turning of an Unfriendly Card

Wilson had been sure his aces high full house would beat the man's three tens, so he'd bet more than he had. Stupid move. "Read 'em and weep," the man said, turning up the fourth ten. Wilson read 'em and wept.

The man, after all, was Justin Foutes, and rumor had it that he was the Collector himself, the most powerful man on the One. The Collector, as everybody knew, was even more powerful than BereCorp's CEO herself.

Wilson sat across the table from Foutes, his bankruptcy face up on the table, and he wept. "I, I—I can't, can't—"

"Willy, Willy, Willy." Foutes sighed, theatrically weary. "Tell me you didn't make a bet you can't cover? Tell me it isn't so." He spoke in a soft, friendly tone. Wilson had heard of two people who'd tried to screw the Collector. Both, the story went, were tossed out an airlock, tethered to the outside of the station so evidence of their demise would linger long enough for the news nets to get holly for all to see, in three-dimensional splendor. A reminder—nobody screwed the Collector. Nobody.

Wilson wept silent rivers of tears down his smooth, rejuvenated face. Foutes was the Collector. Had to be.

“Now tell me,” Foutes said, voice oily, “you're not going to embarrass us both by wetting your pants.” Foutes's men, the one at the door and the other, by the bar, smiled greasy smiles but made no sound. The room—Foutes's study and game room—was silent.

Wilson checked with one trembling hand. His crotch was dry, and he shook his head, voice still lost in terror.

“Okay.” Foutes pulled a silver case from a pocket, removed a joystick. The man by the bar had a lighter to the joe's tip as Foutes put the joe to his lips and inhaled. “Here's what we'll do. Tomorrow, first thing eventime, say, at six hours—You listening, Willy?”

Wilson nodded, managing to utter a sound he intended to mean affirmation. It came out a high-pitched squeal.

“Take a few deep breaths, Willy. Relax. Have some brandy.” The bar man placed a glass before Wilson. He lifted it in both shaky hands, and gulped a mouthful. The real stuff, of course. Teenan's Blend, a hundred marks a fifth-liter.

Surprised when he didn't choke, Wilson felt better. His eyes opened all the way, at which point he found he'd been squinting them shut, shoulders hunched, and jaw clenched, as if anticipating a blow to his head from behind. But Foutes wasn't going to kill him. In fact, he smiled, puffing his joe with casual ease, left leg folded across his right knee, leaning back in the chair.

No, the Collector wasn't going to kill him. Yet.

“First thing eventime, you'll sign some papers. That should take care of most of what you owe.”

“Uh-huh.” Wilson's head hurt. He'd drunk too much.

Foutes would have him sign over the four laundry businesses Wilson owned. His half interest in his nephew's new hydroponics adventure. The condo. Property. Savings. He'd lose Abbie too, but he had no idea how Foutes would work her into a contract. She'd probably just stay with the condo when Wilson got booted.

“Most.” Foutes emphasized the word.

“Uh, and the rest?”

“Simple. Give me a five-mark chip. Or cut off your penis.”

“Give you a—what? I don't think I heard right.”

Foutes leaned across the table. “I said give me a five-mark chip or give me your penis. Your choice.”

“My, uh, choice?”

Foutes nodded and sat back, smiling.

“And that'll pay off my debt? All of it?”

“After you sign some papers tomorrow, yes.”

“So I just sign some papers tomorrow, then I, uh—”

“Five or your dick. Your choice.” Foutes stood.

As if by reflex, Wilson stood. The goon at the door stood at his side, a solicitous hand on Wilson's elbow. Wilson looked up and the goon gave a slight nod toward the door. When he looked back toward Foutes, he saw his nemesis disappear into an office, or whatever room hid behind the wall opposite the table.

Wilson was shown the door, which shut behind him, firmly, with quiet efficiency.

* * * *

He told Abbie. There was no point in not telling her. She'd find out soon enough. She didn't seem surprised.

“Five marks or your cock?” She looked amused.

Wilson nodded.

“So, which are you going to do?”

“You want to know *that* ? You don't want to know what'll happen to you, to the condo, to your allowance?”

“My *allowance* .” Abbie sneered and shifted in her chair across the dinner table from Wilson.

Her reaction annoyed him. “Well?” He stabbed at his food. It was late oddtime and his head still hurt from the Teenan's and whatever else he'd drunk at the game.

“I'll find another *allowance* , I suppose.” She pursed her lips in a way that had always excited Wilson and he suddenly hated her, wanted her out. Now.

Instead he slapped down his fork and stood.

“I'm gone.” He muttered over his shoulder on his way to the door.

“Five or your cock, huh?” she said to his back, a snicker in her tone. “Sounds like a fair deal either way.”

* * * *

Wilson found the Wafaerer's Siding busy as usual. The notorious tavern hummed with excitement, the buzz of a hundred conversations, the blare of three audboxes, and the hoots of patrons entranced by the gyrating live-nude bodies in the central dance pit.

Wilson found elbowroom at the bar. Stamper Clyme, the Wafaerer's owner-operator, plunked a tall

mug of cold house brew in front of him before Wilson had time to focus on Stamper through the smoky, aromatic haze.

“You look like hell, Willy,” Clyde said.

“I don't want to talk about it.”

“Of course you don't. That's why you came here.”

“Okay, okay. Don't nag.”

Wilson told Clyde about the game, and his debt.

“Your choice, huh?” Clyde's ability to hold a conversation and conduct his bar business at the same time amazed Wilson. At the moment, the barkeep had apparently delegated, through some silent signal to his three assistants, the maintenance of the constant flow of beverages, joesticks, and stimbulbs to the tavern's large, restless, and potentially rowdy clientele. He focused his attention on Wilson.

Wilson shrugged.

“So which are you going to chose?”

“What do you think? I'm going to give him the fiver, of course.”

“Of course.” Clyde frowned.

“What? What?” Clyde's expression annoyed Wilson.

“Well, doesn't it seem a bit odd to you? I mean, if you made that offer to anybody—well, any man, I mean—they'd choose the fiver. Who wouldn't? I don't get it.”

“You think—what? The deck's stacked or something?”

Clyde shrugged. “Something like that. Maybe. It just sounds peculiar to me. Devious.”

“Give him the fiver,” a sing-songy voice from Wilson's left said. Wilson turned. The man nursed a Teenan's in a shot glass, the opened bottle in front of him. That and the custom gold-flake flame-shaped tattoo flaring up the right side of his bald head from his missing ear, the signs of a recent rejuv in his smooth skin, and the Calvin Trillium cloak spoke of money. Lots of money.

The rich guy offered Wilson an effeminate smile and his hand in the old Earthome ritual handshake. “Chester Crumb.”

Clyde snorted, slapped a shot glass in front of Wilson and went back to the bar, leaving the two men alone.

“Do I know you?” Wilson shook the offered hand as he watched Clyde leave.

“I own Crumb's Best food shops. You like graithbob, don't you? Hot, with tang sauce and salt—”

“I've seen your ads.” Wilson didn't like graith. Stuck between his teeth.

"I see you're friends with Mister Clyme," Crumb said. "He doesn't like me. I'm too pretentiously rich for his taste. He likes his customers modest, even 'earthy,' if you understand the term. But he takes my money."

"And I should take your advice?"

Crumb shrugged, a confident smile on his young-looking lips, and poured a shot for Wilson. Wilson raised the glass and sniffed. Teenan's. He sipped. Nectar on the tongue.

"Give him the fiver."

"What do you know about it?"

"May I call you Willy?" Wilson gave him an annoyed look. "Mister Clyme did."

Wilson shrugged assent.

"Okay—Willy. I heard your story. Tough break. I've been there. Lost it all to the Collector—met him face-to-face, I swear—in seven-card stud. He gave me the same choice. At first, I thought I'd pay the fiver. I mean, given a choice like that." He shrugged again. The gesture had begun to annoy Wilson, even though he'd found himself mimicking it.

"At first? What do you mean 'at first'?"

"I changed my mind."

"You mean you cut off your—your—"

Crumb looked him in the eye and nodded. Wilson felt sick.

Then: "No, wait. You're pulling my leg. I don't believe you cut off your dick instead of coughing up a fiver. I don't believe it."

Crumb shrugged and sipped at his Teenan's.

"Why?"

"Willy, let me tell you a story. Once upon a time—"

"Jadu—"

"Okay, forget it. It's your dick in the wringer."

Wilson sat and fumed in silence for a moment. Three hours until eventime. What the hell, he decided.

"Okay, what the hell. Tell me a story."

"Once upon a time, there was a little bird winging its way south for the winter. This was an Earthome bird. Do you know your—"

"Yeah, yeah. I watch holly, the nature programs."

"Good. Anyway, this bird gets a late start, winter is ahead of him, and he runs into a blizzard. Snow and wind—"

"A blizzard, I know."

"So the bird lands in this pasture where it sees a pile of fresh cow shit. The shit is warm and the bird is cold so the bird digs itself into the shit and gets warm. It starts singing, happy to be warm. A cat hears the bird, digs it out, and eats it. Do you know what the moral of the story is?"

"No."

"Even if you're buried in shit, if it keeps you warm, shut up. And whoever digs you out of the shit may not be a friend."

Wilson sat in silence for a moment. He drained his shot glass and Crumb refilled it.

"I don't get it," Wilson sighed at last.

"Take a walk. Think about it."

Wilson did.

He left the Wafaerer's, not particularly aware of where he walked, until he found himself in the Schultz Arboretum, the largest public greenery on the One. Wilson found an empty bench and watched some toddlers play nearby.

Children. He'd long ago sold his procreation license. He'd preferred the tax bonus that came with voluntary sterilization than the dubious benefits of siring a child.

His sex life had been healthy. He'd had good relations with many lovers, mostly women, over the past few years. Then he remembered Abbie and decided to modify his appraisal to "reasonably good, most of the time."

He sighed. In two hours, he'd be flat broke, homeless, whatever he decided. Maybe Foutes would offer him a job managing his laundries. Or sweeping floors or working an iron.

How the mighty are brought low.

Even if he got work, he'd likely never afford another rejuv. He could never afford to go hustling. He'd likely never get laid again. He'd die a wrinkled old man in twenty or thirty years. They'd find him in a privacy alcove, one hand gripping his withered, worn-out penis.

He shuddered at the thought.

"Consider the alternative," he muttered. He giggled at the image of himself, an old man, found dead in a privacy alcove, one wizened hand jammed into his otherwise empty pants.

No, better to have it and not use it than to want it and not have it.

And the story the guy, whatsisname—Crumb—had told him? “Bullshit. Or maybe cowshit.” He giggled.

It occurred to him that the guy was the Collector's man, planted at his side at the right moment with a bizarre story designed to convince him to give up his penis. Well, the message had been too obtuse. Wilson didn't get it.

Then it occurred to Wilson that the game with Foutes had been fixed from the start.

Maybe Foutes was a pervert who collected dicks, kept them in a jar, in formaldehyde, by his bedside. The Collector.

“The hell with you.” Wilson spat.

He reached in his cloak pocket and counted his change. He had enough for a few more drinks to calm his nerves before he had to face the music. Foutes's place was a three-minute walk down the runway. He set aside a fiver and found the nearest tavern.

The Glass Teat was a show bar, walls filled from floor to ceiling with holly screens, at least a dozen. Patrons stared at the screens in various stages of vicarious ecstasy, some drooling. Cacophonous music from a dozen sources shook Wilson's stomach. The place smelled of alcohol, joe, stimweed, and sex.

In addition to the usual episodes on the hollies, from simple striptease to trans- and multi-sexual orgies, one screen projected a snuff scene. A woman lay nude, hands and feet bound, as the hand of an unseen man sliced an unnecessarily large knife across her breasts. Her torso gleamed blood-slick with several shallow cuts. Her hips gyrated and she moaned in near orgasmic pleasure.

Wilson pursed his lips and swallowed in a dry throat.

“You don't like the new laws?” Wilson turned. A woman behind the bar, dark-haired, hefty, too much makeup. The bartender.

Wilson shrugged. “No skin off my nose, but—” He started to laugh.

“If you don't like snuff, go somewhere else.”

“A beer, please.” Wilson tossed a chip on the bar and the bartender replaced it with a cold mug. He gulped it down.

Why the hell would anybody want to—

He looked again at the snuff holly. The woman was now covered head to foot in blood, and the unseen man continued to slowly fillet her. The woman's long orgasm reached a peak as the knife probed up her vagina to the hilt.

Wilson shuddered and turned away. He swapped more chips for a whisky, downing it in a gulp. He ordered another.

“I'm not that kind of guy,” he muttered.

“Pardon?” The voice came from a man at the bar to his right. The man's sweat-soaked face reflected the weak, reddish bar light. His ear was gone, another devotee of the mutilation fad sweeping the corridors

of the One.

"None of your goddam business."

The man shrugged and turned away. Wilson noticed the man's hand probing at his own crotch but he didn't see the man's penis. Maybe he didn't have one. Wilson decided he didn't want to know.

He ordered another whisky.

Crumb chose his dick. Or he said he did. *What the hell is going on ?*

From the corner of his eye, Wilson noticed the time on a wall chrono. He had two minutes to be at Foutes's place, three minutes away. Nobody showed up late for an appointment with the Collector.

"Oh, shit."

Nobody.

Wilson downed his whisky and stood.

"Hey, you." The bartender tried to grab him as he elbowed his way to the door. He ignored her.

"Deke, stop that sonofabitch," the bartender yelled above the noise. "He owes."

A hand the size of a dinner plate reached out of the dark and grabbed Wilson's arm. "What's he owe?" a male voice, the hand's owner, yelled.

"A fiver," the bartender yelled back.

The bouncer frisked Wilson, removed a chip from his cloak pocket, and tossed him into the runway. Wilson fell and rolled, tripping an old woman, who cursed and hit him with a cane.

Wilson rose and ran toward the moving slider across the runway. If he ran down the express slider instead of standing still as most people did, he could make up a few seconds. Maybe he'd be late a minute, maybe less. Maybe Foutes wouldn't be too impatient. Maybe.

Wilson pushed people aside, jumped over one couple sitting against the inner slider rail, and bolted forward. The speed of the express lane and his own running brought him to Foutes's door in a few seconds. He jumped from the fast slider lane directly onto the stationary runway, the kind of reckless move teenagers did on a dare, and rolled to a stop a few feet from Foutes's door.

He stood, dusted off his torn cloak, ran fingers through his hair, and tapped on the door.

It opened.

The guy from the game, the one at the door, grinned and motioned Wilson to enter.

He was escorted to the game room, the same room where, hours ago, his life changed at the turn of an unfriendly card.

A door at the far end of the plushly carpeted room stood ajar. The goon nodded Wilson toward the

door. The goon remained in the game room, closing the door behind him.

Wilson found himself in Foutes's office. Justin Foutes sat smiling behind a huge desk, made of some polished black rock-like material, doubtless shipped up from Earthome at incredible expense. Glass cases along the walls to either side of Wilson displayed artifacts, strange machines of dubious practice. They looked like sexual devices, with leather straps, buckles, and metal barbs, rows of studs and long, thin stainless steel tubes. Wilson had seen pictures of chastity belts, but the thing on a black velvety cloth in one display case had spikes on it, turned inward.

“You look a bit worn out,” Foutes said. He nodded to a chair opposite his desk and Wilson let his shaky knees buckle, dropping him on to the chair. It felt cushy, warm.

Foutes slid a realcopy sheet across the slick desk to Wilson. “The contract. Read it while I pour us both a Teenan's. You do like Teenan's Blend, don't you?”

Wilson nodded, not trusting his ability to force air through his constricted throat. He didn't bother to read. He signed and sat back in the chair with a sigh, sipping at the Teenan's Foutes handed him.

“Now,” Foutes said. “We come to the good part.” He smiled and folded his hands on the desk.

“Uh, beg pardon?”

“Oh, come, come now, Willy. Tell me you didn't forget my offer. I'd be offended if you forgot.”

“Uh, oh no, Mister Foutes. I didn't forget. In fact, I decided already. I decided to—” Wilson stood, a hand against the chair back to keep his balance, and probed his cloak pocket for his fiver chip.

His empty cloak pocket.

The one with the chip-sized hole in it.

For the fiver chip.

The one that wasn't there.

The one the bouncer at the Glass Teat grabbed from him before he got booted out. Or had he dropped it on the street after? Is that when he tore the pocket? Or was it in the park? No, he'd counted his change then, before he'd gone to the bar—

“Hey, hey, Willy—”

Wilson threw up in the wastebasket Foutes brought around the desk when he saw Wilson's face turn as white as the realcopy contract. Most of the vomit landed in the basket.

“Willy, Willy, Willy.” Foutes clucked his tongue in sympathy. “I understand. I really do. Some decisions, however simple they may seem, are harder to make than others.”

Foutes eased Wilson to his feet by an elbow as he continued to talk. He steered Wilson to an adjacent room, the interior of which, Wilson noticed through teary eyes, was a stark, featureless white.

“Has it occurred to you, Willy, that you lost the fiver you were looking for a minute ago because you

wanted to lose it? And you wanted to lose it because deep down in your heart of hearts, you want to cut off your dick for me? Hm, Willy?"

Wilson made a whiny noise in his throat and Foutes clucked again. Wilson let Foutes lay him down on a white-sheeted bed in the center of the room.

"That's why you got drunk, too. You can't consciously decide to do what you're about to do, oh no. No man could. But if you got drunk, maybe your subconscious would deal with the problem. That's what happened. That's why you got drunk. So you could lose the fiver, so you could do the right thing."

Wilson said nothing. He sweated, quivering.

"You see, Willy, I believe in synchronicity. Do you know the term? Things happen because they are supposed to happen. There are no accidents. You wondered, didn't you, if I cheated at the card game? I'm not offended. But I did not. I don't have to. Synchronicity, you see. Even the cards are in it at a cosmic level, a quantum level. I win because I'm supposed to win. And you lose, because, well—"

Foutes stopped and looked Wilson in the eyes. His tone was gentle, fatherly.

"Right now you think you've lost. You'll see otherwise. But later. For now, take this." Foutes reached a hand to Wilson, a small, white pill nestled on his palm. "It'll calm you down, make you feel better." He tilted Wilson's head forward and sat the pill on Wilson's tongue. Wilson swallowed convulsively. "Would you like something to wash it down?"

Wilson shook his head. He felt calmer. "What did I just take?" he said, voice quivery.

"Something to help you through the next few minutes."

Wilson found himself unconsciously touching himself. He was getting an erection.

"And it makes you susceptible to suggestion."

"To suggestion."

"Yes. For example, when I tell you to disrobe—"

Wilson unzipped his pants.

"—you obey instantly."

Foutes helped Wilson sit up. Wilson pulled his shirt up over his head.

"That's right. Continue to disrobe, Willy." Foutes stepped away from Wilson and stood behind a nearby table, fidgeting with electronic instruments on it. But Wilson lost interest in Foutes. Disrobing occupied his full attention. Obeying the quiet, authoritative voice in his ears commanding him to disrobe became the world to him.

The voice told him to pick up the knife under the pillow.

He found the knife, turning it in his hand in front of his face, as the voice dictated.

By now his penis stood rock hard.

* * * *

Wilson watched the rest on the holly the next day, after he'd recovered. He sat in a robe in Foutes's lounge, his "relaxing place" adjacent to the office and recording studio.

Sipping a Teenan's Blend, he watched dispassionately—he felt as though it wasn't him on the holly—as he used the knife to slowly slice his erect penis to thin ribbons. He watched his orgasm as he finished the ritual by slicing it off.

The holly dissipated to blue flickers in the tank and the room lights came back up. Wilson idly scratched at the new bandage over his crotch. He'd adjusted to the antiseptic odor.

"Are you really the Collector?" Wilson asked.

Foutes chuckled, ignored the question. "Stimulating, don't you think?" He nodded at the holly from where he sat, left leg crossed over his right knee, in an adjacent high-backed leather chair, sipping Teenan's.

"I'm no judge, Mister Foutes. I don't understand snuff."

"Take my word for it."

Wilson glanced over the realcopy contract again. He shrugged. "It looks pretty generous."

"It is. Normal royalties are ten percent."

"Tell me again, how long would it take at these rates to afford a—what did you call it?"

"Well," Foutes said, shifting in his seat, the leather sighing, "royalties depend on market demand. Some snuff hollies play out in a few weeks. No box office. Some become classics, returning royalty payments for years and years."

"And you think this'll bring in the big bucks."

"Yes. Willy, you've played into a deeply hidden desire many men share in this day and age, one so deeply hidden most psychologists deny it even exists. But I know different. Self-mutilation expresses the heart and soul of this frustrated, nihilist, suicidal generation. And your act—inspired, don't you think? I thought of it at the last moment, at the card game—but you didn't realize you were fondling yourself there at the end, did you? It gave me the idea. Anyway, your act epitomizes the pervasive ennui I cater to."

Foutes refilled his shot glass, and Wilson's.

"So how long, Mister Foutes?"

"Six months to a year."

"By then I'll earn enough money to afford this, this—"

"The BereMed medicos call it a penile reconstructive procedure. Actually, they take a vat-grown penis

and graft it onto you. Works like your old dick."

"Hm. I have to confess—well, you saw—I mean, I wasn't, uh,— *hung*, really, you know what I mean?"

"You may order a bigger one, if you wish."

"Hm. But will it work? I mean, will I be able to get it up? On demand?"

"Would you like a testimonial from someone who's been there, done what you did?"

Wilson shrugged.

"Willy, let me give you the name of a man who lost his dick to me in a game of seven-card stud, as you did. He's now quite wealthy, and quite happy. His new penis works well, I'm sure he'll testify. Maybe you've heard of him. He runs graithbob shops along the—"

"Crumb. Charles—no, *Chester* Crumb."

"So you know Chester?"

Wilson nodded. He recalled Crumb's odd story.

"It's a strange world we live in, Mister Foutes," he said, as he reached for the pen.

Friends in High Places

Perge Shallaco's foil tip touched his opponent's chest five one-hundredths of a second before "Kid" Cassidy's foil touched Shallaco. When the score went up on the board, the crowd went wild. Shallaco won the round, tying the event at one set each.

The tilt was holly-linked to 80 million viewers system-wide and not just on the One. This was the second round of the tilt of the decade, the Big Tilt, and everybody watched.

The tilt was being held in the Wafaerer's Siding, a tavern with a reputation where Things Happened. My hangout. Stamper Clyme, the Wafaerer's owner and bartender, used to hate my guts, but that was years ago. We'd become—friends? Maybe. I have no idea how Stamper booked the tilt at his place. He must have connections with Professional Swordplay Association officials.

Who knows how much money he spent modifying his central dance pit to accommodate a regulation tilt mat. But the fire marshals capacity sign read 405 persons maximum before the modifications and it still did. That takes clout. I saw the fire marshal in the front row at the tilt. He looked happy.

Stamper didn't lose money. Cover charge was 200 marks and up and a beer cost as much as a Teenan's Blend any other day.

The fire marshal had a good seat, as did several BereCorp execs I recognized, but I had the best seat in the house and I didn't have to pay for it. I sat matside, next to Dean Morey, TSIN's ace sports newsie. Morey got me a seat even Stamper couldn't finagle for a friend. If you can't be rich and powerful, it pays to have friends in high places. Still, I never liked Morey. But he liked me. Who knows why?

I was doing color, filling in for Morey's regular right-hand man, Rink Learer, hospitalized from a mugging two hours before the round two opening tilt. I'd done some play-by-play before, but TSIN had better candidates for the gig. I was out of my league, a general assignment newsie, but Morey picked me and nobody argues with Dean Morey. Mostly I shut up, let him do his thing, and tried not to embarrass him, TranSystem InterNews, or myself.

It was the second time an uplink had originated from the Waeferer's. The first was round one of the Big Tilt a day before. The last would occur with round three, tomorrow.

I knew a little about swordplay. I used to tilt a few years back. I was never a good quixote. I was too slow and this was a fast game, for body-mods or youngsters.

I'd done what research I could before the tilt, after I got tapped to sit in for Learer. I only had an hour but I'm good with research. I brushed up on the rules, the game's history on the One where it started three hundred years ago, its Earthome origins, its amateur and outsystem variations, the weapons—foils, sabers, whipsticks—the two pro quixotes' backgrounds and records, even the officials. I did my best, but there was so much to learn and so little time.

So, in the event aftermath, I found myself idle. Morey was on a blue streak about the tilt, aiming his barbed wit at Shallaco and Cassidy, the referees, the fans, the trainers and managers, even the snack and souvenir vendors. I shut up and let him ramble in his familiar sarcastic whine. Morey was the sports newsie everybody loved to hate and he loved it. He earned the big chips. He was the best.

I didn't watch the two quixotes in their victor and vanquished ritual public poses, as holly imagers whirled in their faces, newsies shouted questions, and the crowd surged against the security barrier. The crowd press seemed so enthusiastic, for a moment I became concerned BereCorp Security would turn on the narc sprays that pinholed the ceiling and put us all in a more tranquil mood. They'd done it before, tranked a wild crowd, but never in the Waeferer's. And this was the Big Tilt. Many BereCorp execs and other big chip types sat in the room. None had ever whiffed crowd trank. The ammonia odor doesn't wash out of your cloaks.

TSIN had the quixotes' images from a dozen angles anyway, so I moved on. I blinked, activating my eyeball holly imager implant and scanned the tav for something to talk about.

I saw Stamper Clyme behind the bar, looking spiff in a formal cloak. I'd bet him a twenty on the round. I'd lost. I gave him a shrug when I caught his eye and he lifted an eyebrow. Being that demonstrative, he no doubt felt good.

My eye fell on two men with expensive business cloaks behind the tiered seats Stamper had installed.

One of the men looked familiar but I couldn't place him. Neither wore street masks—Stamper discouraged masks in the Waeferer's—but they stood in a shadowy spot in the otherwise well-lit room and I couldn't see their faces. On a hunch, I locked focus and zoomed in, taping. Forensics back at the studio could enhance and get an image. I saw something pass between them, but it happened so fast I couldn't tell who gave and who received, and I couldn't see what they'd passed.

No doubt it was a few chips and the two were settling a bet. Many chips changed hands over the tilt, I knew. I owed Stamper and he had bigger bets with other people.

I was about to unlock and scan for a more interesting image when I saw something. On my implant monitor, I saw what looked like a shoulder holster on one man. The man had a projectile weapon in the

holster.

I knew I couldn't uplink the tape, not now, not ever. And not just because of poor lighting and mediocre composition. But I had a legal obligation to turn it over to my editor, Margie Simovich, who had an obligation to report to BereCorp Security for whatever action they deemed appropriate. Projectile weapons and explosives are illegal on the One, as they are on most habitats in and outsystem.

And how did a projector get past Stamper's security system, which I'd come to believe was as good or better than BereCorp Security? Stamper wouldn't allow a projector in the Waeferer's. I'd better tell him about this too. Maybe I'd better tell him before I turned over the tape to Margie.

I'd learned no sooner than two hours ago in my hasty research that swordplay, "the noble sport" as promoters called it, was linked to the anti-projectile and explosives laws, made necessary by the One's enclosed ecosystem. The first pro tilt on the One occurred the year the laws went into effect.

The One was no longer the fragile eggshell it had been back then—nobody remembers why they used to call the habitats "tin cans"—but the laws stuck. And tilts became the rage.

The laws allow unconcealed sheathed edged weapons under a certain length in public and many citizens so arm themselves against the runaway gangs that prey on the weak and unwary. Blades as well as nerve-teasers and narc sprays are the weapons of choice among citizens, security and gangs alike.

Nobody bothers with projectile weapons, except—

My blood raced as I realized who I watched. I didn't know names, which didn't matter as forensics could ID them, but I knew the one with the projector had to be the Collector's man. The Collector ran a shadowy organized crime syndicate from the One whose tentacles reached across the entire system, clear to the Oort. We did Collector-related stories now and then, but they usually amounted to "charges filed, charges dropped" against some small-timer suspected as a crony or associate. The Collector had clout, owned a few judges.

There were rumors, leads hot and cold over the years, but nobody knew who the Collector really was.

Yes, Stamper would shit his pants when he found out he had a projector in his tav. Another thought—maybe Stamper knew and had looked the other way. Maybe hosting the tilt included a payoff to the Collector. If so, Stamper wouldn't want to know I suspected. It wouldn't be healthy for me if the Collector learned I knew something he'd rather not have known.

I decided to not tell Stamper and Margie. A little knowledge can be bothersome. Too much can be deadly.

The Collector had tentacles into swordplay. I'd heard rumor. A lot of chips changed hands at a tilt, even amateur ones, and I'd heard about illegal snuff tilts, where the blades were bare and the tips uncapped. They happened, everybody knew, but nobody had ever gotten holly of one. And lived.

"A pay off?" I muttered. Was the tilt fixed—

"Say again, Pete?" Morey nudged me. I realized I'd spoken out loud and my audio was hot. Morey had only spoken to me during the tilt when the action had stopped, he needed time to verbally regroup and catch a new line of banter, or grab a drink. My job then was to say something semi-intelligent for a few seconds, then let Morey take over again when he signaled he was ready. I unlocked my imager and

turned to Morey.

“I said I think you're way off, Dean. Way off. This is the closest finish in recent swordplay history. Final score five to four, and five-hundredth of a second in that last—”

“Don't forget the Beltway Duel of '318, Pete, my friend. You'll recall that—” and Morey was back into his blue streak again. I let him go, do what he liked to do and his audience wanted to hear him do.

I glanced back at my target. I couldn't find them in the shifting crowd. But I'd recorded.

* * * *

Newsies always pipe raw tape ahead when traveling. If you don't arrive, at least your tape will. People get delayed in slideway accidents, runway riots, muggings. It happens, even to newsies. And the tape I had was dangerous.

So I piped the tape to my desk. I knew it was hot, even on my desk, but I'd burn it after I'd satisfied my curiosity.

Curiosity. A dangerous trait to have. But it's what newsies have where other people have blood. I felt sure I'd seen one of the men before, and I wanted to do some research before I burned the tape.

The remote possibility that I might be on to a story occurred to me. That and curiosity spurred me on.

So I was glad I'd piped tape ahead and even more glad I'd told nobody about what I'd seen. As I got off the express slideway in front of TSIN studios, I thought I saw one of the two men from the Waeferer's leave the studio.

It startled me, so I hesitated a second before I activated my holly implant and recorded image. I stood thirty meters away, heads bobbing among the surging runway crowd between us, but I got good image, I felt sure. Still, it was just a glimpse. He looked both ways and put on his street mask, joining the anonymity the custom of public masking provided.

I followed him for a few minutes. I saw him enter a privacy alcove fifty meters down the runway. I stopped, pretending to watch an ad holly, one eye on the alcove. In a minute, a masked woman entered the alcove. Soon, the man left. A minute passed before the woman also left.

I had tape.

Although I felt dizzy as I returned to the studio, I piped the tape ahead. Good habits are hard to shake.

What the hell had I stumbled on to? The guy was a bagman for the Collector. And I'd witnessed him collect twice, once at the Waeferer's, once a minute ago on the runway.

Maybe three times—why was he at TSIN?

I decided I'd just burn the tape without even looking. It was too hot. What if the bagman had been to TSIN to collect from Simovich?

Sandy Long sat reading a book at the assignment desk, feet up, which meant Simovich wasn't in. “Sometimes nothing happens, Amundsen.” She sighed. “You got anything?”

“No.” The sprawling newsroom looked idle, sounded quiet, hollow. Marks, at the business desk, napped. He snored.

“Well, if you come up with anything, let me know. Right now, I'm overpaid.”

“Uh, Sandy—”

“Yeah?”

“The guy just in here, broad shoulders, burgundy cloak—”

“Don't know him. Ask Morey. They talked.”

Morey had an office next to Simovich's almost as ostentatious as hers, but not quite. But it was private. The rest of us grunts had to make do with tiny desks pressed together in a noisy, open corral, like immigrants in steerage. But the chips got the perks, and Morey had the chips.

Or did he?

I walked to his office and tapped at the door. He'd opaqued the window behind the legend *Dean Morey Sports Editor*. Maybe he was writing.

He opened the door and I could smell his false joviality. “Hey, long time, no see, Pete, my friend. Come in, come in. Have a seat.” He closed the door after a glance around the newsfloor. He offered me a joestick, which I refused. He lit one before noticing he had one already lit in an ashtray. He did a nervous laugh, put one out and inhaled the other.

“So, did you learn something today, Pete, my friend?” His voice squeaked.

“I don't know how you do it, Dean. Talk so fast, keep up with the action.”

He laughed. “I do Jacks.” He held up a pill bottle. “Boosts neural response time, you know. Great for showtime, but the crash is hell, believe it. Worse crash than Droppers. You don't want to know.”

“Is that, uh—”

“Prescription. Quixotes can't touch it, but I can.”

“But if I can't follow you—”

“Most fans turn down the sound, believe it. Some record and play a tilt back at slowtime to catch my famous wit.” He shrugged. “And a few Jack while watching, but you didn't hear me say it. That's illegal.”

It was all there. The nervous laugh, the twitchiness, the high-pitched voice, the sweat on his high forehead. I didn't need to ask him about the Collector's man. I knew.

The Collector owned a piece of Dean Morey. Amazing.

“Say, Pete, my friend, I could use the twenty you owe me.”

Ah, yes, I'd bet Morey on the tilt, too. How could I forget? I smiled, tried to make light, cruise along with his banter. "With your income, you're broke?"

"Believe it. You think I carry chips on me? I'd get mugged daily. Come on, Pete, be a pal."

"What are friends for, huh?" I flipped him my second to last twenty chip and he caught it in an overhand grab.

I left, Morey promising to buy a round at the Waeferer's sometime soon, after the third round.

Curiosity surged in my veins again and I decided to check out the tapes before burning them. I had to know.

This job is addictive.

The tapes had piped clean. I linked to our data net and began checking. When I had the data cornered, I checked some old files on Dean Morey. I scanned what we had on the Collector. Not much. Then I accessed what I could find on Jacks in pro swordplay.

Then I accessed the report on the Learer assault.

Three hours later, hands shaking, I needed a drink at the Waeferer's. Something strong.

* * * *

Stamper Clyme called me aside when I entered. I offered to pay my debt on the spot, but he waved it off, shrugging bear-like shoulders. "My treat. I broke even."

"You bet on both sides?" Stamper amazed me.

He shrugged again, insisted I take a bottle of Teenan's Blend, "but don't get shitfaced."

Stamper had dismantled the tilt arena and tiered seats around it, at least until the next day when round three would be held. I took my favorite table in the back of the room. I was a few sips into a mild euphoria when Morey came in. He looked agitated, more than he had when I'd last seen him.

I watched him enter and look around the dim room—I always sat facing the door to see who came in.

Morey talked with Stamper across the room. I saw Stamper nod in my direction.

Morey walked over and sat across from me, shoulders hunched. He sweated, kneading his hands fiercely.

"Jadu, Dean, you look a mess."

"Listen, Pete, my friend—" Morey hesitated while Stamper himself came over with a glass for Morey. "Give him some of that," Stamper told me, pointing at my Teenan's. Morey waited until Stamper left before resuming in a hoarse whisper.

"Rink is dead." His voice cracked.

“What the hell? Why? How? I thought he was just—”

“The Collector.” He poured a splash into his glass, gulped at it and tried to speak again. He coughed instead.

Stamper gave me a questioning look across the crowded room and I returned a faint headshake. He went about his business.

I already knew from my research in the last few hours that Morey was a key pro tilt handicapper. He influenced the point spread. It was unofficial, illegal, between the lines of his commentary, but when Morey talked swordplay, the odds makers listened. And the point spread changed. Everybody thought Morey was brilliant on his own, but I'd IDed his sources.

Two and two makes four. One, I'd figured the Collector used Morey to help fix the spread. Two, Learer found out about it, maybe wanted in on it or threatened to blow the whistle. Three, they'd tried to beat sense into him. Four, it didn't work, so they killed him.

And the guy I'd taped twice, who had visited Morey openly in his office, was Fargo McEwin. No ordinary bagman, Fargo was the Collector's fist, a killer.

“I talked to Sandy. She said you asked about—about Fargo.”

I started to speak. I changed my mind.

“I know you, Pete, my friend. I'll bet you got some tape, didn't you? Is that why you asked Sandy about him? Just what the hell do you think you're doing? Trying to get me killed?”

“I don't understand—”

“If you don't turn over the tape, my friend, or whatever you've got on file, they won't kill you. They'll kill *me* .”

“Kill you? But why—”

“I told them you couldn't be had. Convinced them you'd dump your tape live on the public net before you'd cave in, that you were crazy that way. I tried to protect your ass, Pete, my friend. And I did. I convinced them. Oh, do I have a silver tongue, believe it. So they made it clear—if they don't get the original, they don't kill *you* , they kill *me* .”

“What if I've already burned the tape?”

“So you *did* get tape.”

I said nothing.

“If you've burned it, my friend, they'll want to probe you to make sure. If you didn't burn it and say you did, they'll find out you've lied. And I know you. You'd tell the CEO herself to stick it up her ass if you thought she was trying to compromise your—your—”

“Look, Dean, I don't—”

“Dammit, Pete, they *hurt* people.” If his grip on the glass got any tighter, he'd break it. Morey didn't shake, he vibrated.

“All right, Dean. When? Where?”

He sighed, the fear-cloud over his head dissipated, and his shivering eased. “Now. Get the tape—don't make any copies or they'll know, believe it. Walk north and rimward from the studio, toward the Flats. You'll be contacted.”

Morey left.

A minute later, I left. Stamper watched me go, an unreadable but measured look in his eyes. Maybe it was concern.

* * * *

If somebody hadn't come up with holly tagging back when, we newsies would be an extinct species. Surveys say people still believe we doctor tape anyway, although anybody can prove to themselves otherwise.

The principle is simple. We embed a code in the recording matrix, a distinctive tag designed to display the difference between the original and edited versions.

The nets fought tagging at first. Freedom of speech. The nets complained they had to edit uplinks, they complained about the matter of editorial discretion, commercial considerations, time constraints, and so on. But a compromise was reached. Nets are required by law to uplink the unedited tapes on a side carrier, along with our edited links, with tags. Anybody can scan the raw images and compare, but nobody does.

So I couldn't pass on a copy to the Collector's man. Why bother to even copy? I don't know why I didn't burn the tape as I'd planned. A little voice in my head said “This may be useful. Keep it a while longer.” Next time a voice tells me to do something stupid, I'll tell it to go to hell.

Tape is useless in court without the tag, and Morey had said the contact would have portable forensics. They'd hook me into their unit, ask me a few questions like “Did you copy the tape?” and know if I lied as soon as I answered.

I walked north on the runway and toward the One outer skin, two kilometers away. I walked in the right lane, toward the middle, in plain sight. I took my time, my mask tilted back over my forehead, one hand over the cloak pocket where I'd zipped the tape. I didn't want to lose it to a snatcher.

It was after 0200. Traffic thinned as I made my way along.

This was the Johnstone Flats, a high grav and derelict district given over to transients, gangs, and people too poor to live elsewhere. Nobody walked into these runways alone or unarmed unless they were crazy.

I carried a Stockwell Hungarian saber sheathed on my hip, one hand on the hilt as if to say I knew how to use it. It would keep the most amateur muggers at bay. And I felt oddly secure knowing the Collector's men were probably watching me.

I was alert on the dim runway, but they still surprised me. Hands came from nowhere before I could cry

out. They pinioned my arms and shoved me face first against a privacy alcove inner wall and I heard the door hiss shut. The automatic interior light didn't come on.

My arms were twisted up behind my back and hands rifled my cloak. They took the tape from its zipped pocket a second later, but they didn't let up on their grip.

I said nothing. Neither did they.

I felt probes sticking against my head and neck.

I heard audio from my tape and saw a blue-tinted glow. They were checking on the spot with a pocket holly tank.

"Please pay attention," a voice near my ear whispered in cultured, cold precision. The speaker smelled like licorice. "You're wired, as they say, Mister Amundsen. We ask, you answer. If we see no red indicators, we do not harm you." He twisted my arm. It hurt. "I trust you understand."

I nodded. My nose bled.

Another voice, less cultured but just as cold, asked some mundane questions for calibration, then variations of the question I'd expected about making a copy. And if I'd talked to anyone other than Morey. "He's green," the questioner said.

I was jerked around, my back slammed against the wall. My head rang and I saw stars but I kept my eyes open.

I felt a prick against my chest. There was just enough light in the tiny alcove from their pocket holly tank, still on, for me to see a foil's business end pressed against my sternum. The thin blade gleamed in the blue glow.

"This is a Professional Swordplay Association regulation foil," a voice said, "Borgeous Feathertip competition model, but the tip is uncapped. It's 95 centimeters long, and weighs 225 grams. It's made of the finest tempered Beltway polymer steel. With a one hundred gram thrust, I can pierce your heart. Now."

"Enough," licorice breath said and the prick against my chest eased. "I apologize for my associate's enthusiasm, but the demonstration is nonetheless effective, don't you agree?"

I nodded.

"Go home, Mister Amundsen. Forget tonight. Sleep well."

Iron hands turned me around, slammed me face first again into the alcove back wall. I felt my nose crunch as I bounced and sagged to the floor. The door opened and my assailants left. The door closed. I felt in no hurry to stand up.

* * * *

I wouldn't have dared meet them wired to transmit our meeting, let alone tried to record it, but it didn't matter. As an extra precaution, they'd fried my comm electronics when they first hit me. I smelled of melted plastic and blood.

So it wasn't until I got back to my sleep cubby to clean up and maybe get a little sleep that I knew Margie had tried to contact me. I found a message on my cubby unit. Margie seemed as irritated as I'd ever seen her. She was as subtle as ever, but the message was clear. An unnamed sponsor was disappointed with the tilt uplink and a scapegoat was needed to appease them. Low man, I got elected. It was no minor irritant Margie rambled on about. My job was at risk. Subtle but clear.

She was out of contact now, a good thing. I decided I'd better cool down before I responded anyway. Morey had asked me to do the color gig. If she didn't like it, why didn't she intervene back then?

I needed a drink. I needed to get drunk.

* * * *

The Waeferer's Siding never closes. I arrived at 0500. I was surprised to find Stamper behind the bar. He looked refreshed. How did he do it?

"You look a mess," he said. The place was empty.

I shrugged, took a stool at the bar and ordered a beer. He wouldn't let me pay.

"Tell Stamper your problems." He leaned over the bar, folding bear arms, and met me eye to eye.

I told him about the message from my boss. He grunted in sympathy.

"There's more, isn't there, Tiger?"

"No, that's—"

"Did you fall down or what?"

I'd forgotten my battered face. I'm not rich enough to have full nanomedes and I hadn't done much to cover the bruises.

It took a while for Stamper to get me to tell him what had happened in the Flats. He helped pry it from me by confessing that he'd monitored my talk with Morey, as I'd suspected.

Discussing the Collector with anybody was dangerous, but Stamper and I had been friends for years. I couldn't read his poker face, but I believed he'd never hurt me.

So it all came out. The tape at the tilt and outside TSIN, the projector image I'd confirmed at the studio, my meet with Morey in his office and what Stamper had monitored at his back table. The assault. Margie's message.

I didn't tell him I knew Morey was handicapping the tilts for the Collector. I could tell stories on myself, I could confess I believed Morey bet on the side, but I felt odd saying out loud he was crooked.

"Listen, Stamper, about the projector—"

"You're right, Tiger. I knew. Nobody gets into swordplay at any level on the One without dealing with the Collector. If the Collector wants a man in here with a piece, he gets it."

Stamper Clyme compromising with the Collector, with anybody. It was a stunning revelation.

“Why swordplay, Stamper? I mean, why go through all—whatever you had to go through—to host a swordplay tilt?”

“I guess you don't know how much money changes hands at a pro tilt, do you?”

I shrugged.

“Lots.”

“But it's not the money for you, is it?” A hunch.

Stamper favored me with a sudden smile. “You're good, newsie. Maybe that's why I like you.”

I got no more from Stamper, who got busy at the bar. Running his business.

“Don't worry,” he said before he turned away. “Something will work out.”

If he said so, I believed him. I felt secure at his tav.

I took my usual table for some breakfast and nodded off to sleep. I woke up to somebody shaking my arm.

It was Morey.

“You look a mess, my friend,” he said.

I still hadn't showered.

“I delivered, Dean. You're still alive.”

I looked around for Stamper. He wasn't there.

Morey's sigh was monumental. “I owe you, my friend. In fact, I want you to do color again tonight.”

“Not me. I pissed off a sponsor. Margie left me a note. You haven't talked with her?”

“In fact, I just left her office. You didn't just piss off a sponsor, you almost got yourself fired. I talked her out of it, silver-tongued devil, I am. As I say, I owe you.”

“But I don't know if I want to be matside. I don't—” I hesitated. I'm seldom at a loss for words, another newsie trait. But I didn't need words. Dean Morey knew. I didn't have to say.

“They scare the shit out of me, too.” He waved off a server and waited until she left. “But I have some pull of my own. You'll be okay, believe it.”

I had friends. Stamper made me feel secure in his tav, and Morey, even though I didn't like him much, treated me like a friend too. What could I say?

“Okay, I'm your man.”

“Great.” He stood and turned to leave. “Clean up and get some rest, my friend.”

I went to my cubby and slept like the dead.

* * * *

My alarm buzzed three hours before the tilt. I felt refreshed, euphoric, ready to tilt the world. Once again, I'd been nearly fired and I'd come back. Luck, friends in high places, whatever. It didn't matter. I was a newsie, at least for now. It would do.

I knew I had an attitude. It kept me off the corporate fast track, got me in trouble a lot. One day it would get me fired. But not today.

I left for the Waeferer's two hours before the tilt, an hour before Morey would uplink to eighty or ninety million viewers, with newsie Pete Amundsen at his side.

I walked unmasked the last kilometer to the Waeferer's. I whistled the theme from our prime uplink, feeling spiff.

It didn't last. Morey had left a note for me at the door. I was off the link. Replaced. No details, no explanation.

“Stamper says he wants to see you right away,” the bouncer who'd given me the note said. I nodded and jostled my way to the bar behind the tiered seats, back in place.

The tav was packed, the noise level painful and the air thick, straining the cooling system. I smelled expensive perfume interspersed with rank body odor, joystick, alcohol, stimweed and sex. This was the third round of the Big Tilt and the excitement level had shot off the scale.

I didn't care. Somebody was screwing with my life. Rage coursed in my veins like acid. What the hell was going on?

Stamper worked behind the bar, supervising a team of bartenders who shuffled orders with rapid, well-practiced efficiency. Part of the ambiance of the Waeferer's is Stamper's insistence on the human touch. Humans, not machines, mixed the drinks and served them. People liked it.

When he saw me, Stamper signaled to follow him into his backroom. I slipped behind the bar and followed.

The backroom served as Stamper's chip-counting room, I'd long ago deduced, super-secure. A vault. What else he kept back there besides immediate bar supplies and a good first aid kit I had no idea. I suspected he had a security system in place parallel to the BereCorp Security system required by law. I knew he could audio-monitor the tables.

But I wasn't prepared for what I saw. The room was no bigger than my sleep cubby, but it was packed with electronics hardware. I recognized some of it, but not all.

“What the hell is all this?”

Stamper pointed at a control panel under a flatscreen. "These are audio, these are video." He tapped on the keyboard. A virtual control panel floated over the flatscreen.

"This accesses narc sprays." His fingers brushed through the air. Standard icons.

He tapped again. "Here's how you isolate individual nozzles. They're in the ceiling in a grid—like so."

I traced my finger over the floating light globs until I found the one over my usual table.

"So this is how you overheard Morey and me yesterday."

Stamper shrugged.

"Wait a minute, you were at the bar when Morey and I—"

"The whole system is slaved to a monitor under the bar. I also have a neural link, but that's more sophisticated than you want to know about."

"You'd be surprised." My mouth felt dry.

Stamper's eyes glittered icy in the semi-dark room. He spoke, voice low. "I'm trusting you with a lot, Tiger. Stuff that could be dangerous to me if the wrong people knew."

That much I'd already deduced. "Why?"

Stamper sighed. He sat and pointed to a stool. I sat. He produced a Teenan's Blend from a drawer under the flatscreen keyboard and tipped back a sip from the bottle.

"I heard you got bumped off the color gig."

"Your bouncer had a note."

Stamper passed me the bottle. I took a sip. Ambrosia at a hundred marks a fifth-liter. I needed it. I think.

"You've been fired, Tiger."

"I've been—what? You know this before I do?"

He shrugged. "When Morey dropped his note at the door, my man told me and I got curious, like a newsie, I guess. Anyway, I cornered Morey. He doesn't want to see you. I think he's embarrassed he couldn't save your butt with his silver-tongue. Whatever. You were supposed to go back to the studio where your boss would tell you. You weren't supposed to get in here."

"But you intervened."

Stamper shrugged again.

"It has to do with why I'm in your backroom, doesn't it?"

"I told you I bet on both sides of the tilt but I didn't tell you why, did I?"

"I'm listening."

"Have you ever wondered how I can afford to run this place? Do you know how uneconomical it is to run a tav with just human help, no mechanicals at all?"

"You charge enough. You get the customers."

"And I pay, Tiger. I pay. You also asked why I wanted to go through the expense and headaches of hosting a pro tilt here. What do you figure the total cost?"

"Stamper, you have a lot of questions and no answers that I've heard yet."

"One last question and I'll let your sharp mind fill in the blanks. Who do you think owns the Waeferer's Siding?"

The Collector. It fit.

"Sweet Jadu—" I couldn't breathe. I drank.

"Have you ever figured what me and you have in common, Tiger? Why you come here, why I like you, why you like me? You have an attitude, I've seen it. Me too. We're both on the outside looking in. And we like it there. Join the corporate herd? You'd sooner cut out your eyeball. I run a place where people like me and you can get a little refuge from the mass insanity. I feel good here."

He grabbed the bottle from my hand and took a swallow. "So a pro tilt in the Waeferer's? All the noise and fuss? Do you think I want it? Is that the old Waeferer's you love out there right now? How do you think I feel when payday rolls around and I'm paying, no choice? Ask yourself how *you* feel."

We sat for a while, a vent hissing overhead. The room smelled of sweat and machine oil.

In time, I figured out what was going on. I think.

"You want something from me, don't you?" I said.

"I want what you want, Tiger. I want them—them—*you* know who I mean—the hell off my back. I want to live my life as I see fit, without having to pay some smartass—"

He stood, wiped thick hands through his hair. "Hell, Tiger, you don't need to hear this from me. You know what it's like to work for the system. You try to be independent, but—"

"Nobody runs me, Stamper. Nobody."

"Yeah?" He stood over me, bent at the waist, eye to eye. "What did the Collector do to you? What is he *doing* to you?"

I had no answer.

Stamper pointed again at his control board. "These nozzles here are trackable. You aim with this." He touched a thin black stick on the keyboard, tilting it with a finger. Crosshairs formed on the monitor and centered on the top of the referee's head, following him as he walked across the tilt mat.

“When you have the target centered, tap this button and the crosshairs track automatically. Then,” he flipped a panel open and armed a switch inside, “you trip this switch to fire.” He looked at me. When I nodded, he disarmed the switch and closed the panel. He reset the automatic tracking switch to neutral and the crosshairs stayed on one spot while the referee moved away.

“Jack or Dropper?”

“Jack. The dart dissolves a second after it hits. The target won't feel a thing.”

“Target?”

“I have it on good authority the Collector is betting on Shallaco to win.”

“So I hit Cassidy with the Jack, Cassidy wins and the Collector is out a lot of money. Sweet vengeance. Right?”

Not a single muscle on Stamper's face twitched. I waited.

“Is that the plan, Stamper?” I surprised myself at how steady my voice held. But my heart jackhammered.

At last he nodded.

I said, “I'm in.”

Stamper walked to the door. “You'll have to stay in here until after the tav clears out, of course. It might take a few hours, but,” he barked a laugh and waved at the security console, “you'll see the last fan leave.”

One hand on the door, Stamper looked back at me. His face was hidden in shadow. I'm sure he couldn't see my face either. He hesitated and I thought he'd say something. Or maybe he waited for me to say something.

At last he left.

* * * *

In the few minutes between when Stamper left and the opening round of the Big Tilt, I had time to think and to do some research on his comm.

I scanned the Waeferer's, identifying faces of the famous and infamous who'd paid to see the Big Tilt live. I watched Stamper Clyme, the congenial host, welcome guests while commanding the business flow behind the bar. I watched the two quixotes prepare in their locker rooms, rooms I hadn't known existed.

I spotted Fargo McEwin.

I watched Morey and his new color man, Vince D'Angelo, set up. I listened to them chatter. D'Angelo was a kid, fresh out of school, bright and enthusiastic. He sounded good.

And I listened to replay of tape from minutes earlier, tapes of Morey speculating on the upcoming event

in his pre-tilt show. I listened, then checked the odds board.

I sipped Teenan's Blend, compliments of my good friend Stamper Clyme, and thought about friends in high places.

I knew who the Collector was.

* * * *

Cassidy won the first round. Shallaco won the second round on points and we entered the third round.

The thick door separating the Waeferer's from Stamper's security room didn't keep out all the noise. I turned off the audio monitors. I didn't need them.

I decided not to wait for more than two minutes into the round before I locked on my target and fired.

Within seconds, it was over.

Stamper had advised that I wait until the crowd cleared before I left his security room—I'm sure he didn't want anybody to see me. I left before half the crowd did, the Teenan's bottle in one hand and a glass in the other.

I left his system on. He hadn't told me how to shut down.

I nodded to Stamper at the door, where he stood, bidding customers good day as they left. He looked—deliberately neutral, emotionless. As I exited, he caught my eye but said nothing. I nodded, lifted the Teenan's in salute and left.

Stamper Clyme is the Collector.

I'd suspected earlier, at some point as we'd talked after I'd given up the tape.

My suspicions became more concrete when I didn't ask Stamper why he didn't just hire somebody to make the hit for him, or why he didn't use his implant to do the hit himself. He didn't wonder why I didn't ask. But that wasn't enough and I wasn't sure.

I figured it out for sure waiting for the action to start, listening to Morey's pre-tilt banter, which I knew the Collector used to handicap the tilts. Stamper didn't know I knew Morey's role. Stamper said he'd heard the Collector had bet on Shallaco, but Morey's banter told me Morey handicapped in Cassidy's favor.

Stamper had lied. He'd set me up to zap Cassidy not with Jacks but with Droppers, which would have slowed him down enough to give Shallaco the edge. So I hit Shallaco. Cassidy won.

Why had I been set up?

I've thought about it nonstop since. I couldn't believe Stamper was playing a joke or testing our friendship. Neither made sense. Nothing did. He'd given me enough data to assume I might ID him. Would I betray him? Did he bet I wouldn't? In a way I had. Maybe that impressed him, at least a little. I don't know. It's not something we'll ever talk about.

I didn't get fired. Another anonymous friend helped, I suppose. Maybe it was Morey, but if so, he hasn't said. He doesn't talk to me anymore, which is fine. I respect him as a newsie, but I never really liked him. I get shitty assignments and those are few, but I'm still a newsie. It's enough for me.

Maybe it was Stamper Clyme. I don't know.

A while ago, I sent a message to Stamper, a hardcopy note.

I have a picture among my desk clutter. It's a simple black on white line sketch of an owl about to eat a mouse. Owls were Earthome birds, predator. A mouse was a rodent, like a bist, only it lived on Earthome. Owls ate mice.

The picture is drawn facing the owl, whose wings are spread, claws extended, beak open, as it descends to grab the mouse. The mouse, seen from behind, holds up one paw toward the owl. The paw looks like a human hand. The fingers are folded in a fist but for the middle finger, which is extended.

The gesture is called "flipping the bird," or "giving one the finger." On Earthome, long ago, it signified derision, defiance.

In the sketch, it's clear the mouse will die and it can do nothing. But it gave the owl "the finger" anyway.

Occasionally somebody asks what the sketch means. I don't even bother to say if they had to ask, they'd never understand.

I sent Stamper a copy of the sketch.

He sent me back a bottle of Teenan's Blend.

Fruits of Their Labor

After eating its companion, the rat turned on the cage, battering the bars until its paws and snout were broken and bloodied and the cage toppled on its side. In the holoimage replay before Doctor Staley Cuehan, two ghost hands appeared in the air, reaching for the cage to set it upright. The rat attacked the hands through the cage bars.

Cuehan winced, remembering that attack. The killer rat had tried to bite through his gloves and he'd had to electrocute it. It twitched in death, fighting to the last breath.

He turned off the holly. The transformation in the rat from timidity to vicious aggressiveness, so rapid, still awed him. He resumed plucking the ripe berries from the tree that stood on a table adjacent to the holly. He placed the berries in a large metal bowl.

Merryberries, he'd call them. The ironic name appealed to his perverse sense of humor.

Merryberries. His crowning achievement. The thumb-sized ruby nuggets would make him the wealthiest man on the One. Hell, he'd be the richest man alive.

"Dr. Staley Cuehan," he assumed a pompous tone, "greatest genetic engineer of all time, I present you with the Medal for Distinguished Service—"

No, Cuehan realized. No one would recognize or acknowledge his work. Never.

He smiled as he continued plucking the fruits from the little tree he'd grown in his lab, the little fruits that had so changed the rat. No, he'd get no recognition, but he'd sell the fruits of his labor to corporations, governments, military, even snuff-combat promoters. They'd use it to whatever ends they chose, but they would never recognize his work.

But they would pay him. He would make lots of money. Lots. He envisioned an apartment in the BereCircle, the exclusive low-gravity, high rent district near the hub of the One. The well-appointed interior he envisioned, ten times bigger than the hovel he had to inhabit now in the Lillicove Arena, a mid-status district, clean, true, but lacking in the finer things in life—

— *like pithberries and Teenan's Blend.*

Dr. Cuehan liked pithberries when he could get them. No two ever alike—each bite a different taste sensation from the last. And the tastes—from ambrosia to nectar of the gods. A genetic engineering marvel.

Pithberries were rare and expensive, yes, at fifty marks a twenty-count. Only the wealthy could afford to make them a habit.

And Teenan's Blend, also expensive. At a hundred marks a fifth-liter, the golden elixir cost more than its weight in twenty-mark chips. But each sip tasted—

The entry buzzed.

He walked from his lab to the apartment living area and looked through his peeper.

Fargo McEwin, the Collector's man, stood outside facing the door, stance casual, street mask under one beefy arm, eyes hooded below dark, heavy brows.

Cuehan forced back unease, forced a smile, and opened the door.

Fargo entered and looked around the room, a casual gesture. He'd seen it before. His studied indifference, the cynical lip twist, wordlessly announced his contempt.

“What?” Cuehan grunted. He'd learned to be terse with the Collector and his people, especially Fargo. All business. But it was all right now. The time had arrived for business.

“Your scramblers,” Fargo said. He folded arms across his barrel chest and waited.

Cuehan queried his comp. All scramblers and alarms read active and functional. No intrusive signals detected.

“We're alone,” Cuehan said.

“I wish to confer,” Fargo said, voice low and slick. “Meet me at the Waeferer's Siding at 2200 hours.”

Fargo spoke as if reciting a memorized message, which he was. The Collector didn't trust important communications, business affairs, to circuits that could be monitored. People could be trusted where electronics could not.

It was useless to quiz Fargo. Had the sample Cuehan sent the Collector worked? Did the Collector test it as suggested? Fargo wouldn't know. If he did, he wouldn't answer.

"I'll be there," Cuehan said.

Fargo nodded and left.

Cuehan secured the door and sighed, relieved the man had gone. Fargo smelled greasy.

He turned from the door and looked at his chrono. He gasped as he saw the time.

"Sweet Jadu." It was 2140.

The Collector had given him time to get to the Waeferer's without a second to spare, if he hurried. Making Cuehan hurry was the Collector's way of establishing and keeping a psychological advantage over him, Cuehan knew. The Collector always sought an edge when it came to money.

The thought of arriving late left as soon as it came to mind. The Collector would see it as an insult, and the Collector didn't handle insult with much dignity. Or subtlety. Cuehan hurried.

He gave security instructions to his comp.

"What message should I relay to callers in your absence?" the machine asked.

"I'm unavailable." Nobody even need know he'd left.

"Acknowledged."

He surveyed the room one last time before leaving.

The berries in the bowl. He'd plucked them, planning to process them, bottle the juice, dry the pulp. But what to do with the bowl *now* ?

He picked up the bowl and looked around the room. He dismissed refrigeration since he hadn't tested potency against temperature variation yet.

His breath came fast. No time.

With a nervous chuckle, he set the bowl down again. *The place is burglarproof and nobody comes here but the housekeeper. Mrs. Ault isn't due until 1600 tomorrow oddtime .*

Cuehan donned cloak and street mask, and locked up, hurrying toward the express slideway.

A hundred meters from his apartment door, he came to a corner. In one direction, a few steps away, lay the express slideway access bay. In the other lay the outskirts of the Johnstone Flats district, where muggers, stim peddlers, and gangs ruled over a populace too poor to live elsewhere.

As Cuehan turned toward the slideway, he heard shuffling behind him. He looked over his shoulder and saw the gang move in on him, swaggering, sneering. Barbed nerve-teaser sticks dangled with contemptuous ease in their fists and he could smell the acrid jackjuice stink on their breath. He started to

run.

But they were younger, faster.

They were brutal.

In the back of the privacy alcove into which the gang shoved him, as he slipped beyond pain, he thought of the rat in the cage and felt a futile rage against his assailants.

* * * *

Mrs. Ault arrived at Dr. Cuehan's apartment at 2200 hours, after a tiring hour-long cross-station trek from her job at the laundry. She'd walked because she couldn't afford slideway fare. Two jobs plus cleaning for Dr. Cuehan barely paid the bills for the widow and her two children.

She hurried down dark and filthy runways, runways that belonged to the gangs in the Johnstone Flats through which she had to pass. The gangs let her be. Many knew her. Others could see she was poor and they respected that common bond. Middle-aged, skinny, she attracted little attention from the 'way corner studs and young hustlers.

She'd also been wise. She wore no mask and carried nothing.

The doctor didn't answer her entry buzz, which didn't surprise Mrs. Ault. He often got so involved in his work in the lab part of his apartment he didn't hear the buzzer. Or he pretended not to. He'd given her a passcode to let herself in on those occasions when he became self-absorbed or had gone out. If he hadn't, the detritus of his sloppy lifestyle would have accumulated sufficient to attract the attention of the sanitation authorities. After all, she only came once an eightday.

So, she entered with her passcode. She asked the comp for her employer's location and was told he was not available. No matter, she shrugged bony shoulders. She wanted to confront him, get her pay and leave, but if he wasn't in, she had a backup plan.

She went to the comp to compose her resignation notice. The resignation became immediate, she dictated, at the moment his last pay transfer failed to clear. The transferor's account showed no balance, her bank reported. And she needed the chips. Work was hard to find, but she couldn't afford to work for nothing.

She thought about the chips she'd been denied and fought down rage like bile in her throat.

So she'd come to confront the doctor, make him pay something, anything. If not chips, then something she could sell on the runway market for equal value. His broken holly with the flickering depth-of-field, for instance, or some lab equipment.

No, he wouldn't part with his precious lab equipment.

When he'd hired her some twenty eightdays ago, he'd laid yellow tape across the floor, separating the lab space from the apartment living area. "Never cross this line," he'd said.

She never did. Who knew what experiments he conducted among the bizarre and exotic equipment packing his "lab's" small space on benches and shelves from floor to ceiling? Who cared? As long as he paid each eightday, as agreed, she'd come in each eightday and wash his dirty underwear, restock and

clean his food processor, and sanitize his smelly bunk.

But Dr. Cuehan hadn't paid. And Mrs. Ault was mad.

She decided taking what she'd earned now, without Dr. Cuehan there, wasn't theft. It felt like justice.

She saw the bowl of berries.

She'd heard of pithberries, of course, but she could never afford one, had never seen one in realtime. Here was a bowl full of them.

Full of them! Mrs. Ault's anger surged again as she looked at the treasure in the bowl. She had no idea how many berries sat in that bowl, maybe dozens. It represented more money than she'd make cleaning up after Dr. Cuehan for a long, long time.

And he couldn't afford her pay? He had all this wealth lying around and he couldn't afford to *pay* her?

With a huff, she returned to the comp and added a note about taking the wages owed in property rather than chips.

Then she snatched up the bowl, sealed it, and left.

She decided she's sell the pithberries along the way home to the gangs she knew waited like scavengers along the runways between Dr. Cuehan's apartment and hers across the Johnstone Flats. She could do it, she had no fear of that. She'd grown up in the Flats, knew how to survive. By the time she got home, she calculated, she'd be richer than she'd ever been.

A hundred meters from Dr. Cuehan's apartment she came to a corner. In one direction lay the express slideway access bay. In the other, the Flats.

There waited a gang she'd never met before. They were young, fast.

And they were brutal.

Tail by the Tiger, Horn by the Bull

Zeroes and commas. Lots of them. More than I'd ever seen on a credit transfer voucher. And all those zeroes and commas were made out to my account.

The voucher flimsy fluttered before my eyes like a moth in freefall caught in the effeminate fingertips of Joshua Alexander Horn, one of the most powerful men on the One. A BereCorp vice president, Horn could toss money around like that, I knew. But a voucher to *me* ?

There it was, my name, on the "recipient" line: Peter Amundsen, and my account number. TransSystem InterNews newswriters like me never see those numbers outside of dreams.

The validation line was blank.

So, Horn wanted to bribe me. He wanted me to write a story, either favorably about him or unfavorably about some enemy. Maybe he'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar and wanted me to *not* write

a story. In a moment, he'd say something like "do what I ask and I'll validate." What did he want?

I thought about what all those zeroes and commas could buy. I could retire, quit the rat race for good, and go to Mars. I could get away from the One's noise and pollution, its stifling sameness, and the nightmarish view of a desolate, charred Earthome constantly overhead.

And there was Tira. A woman like her needs money. I got lucky that one time when she was slumming, but it would take many zeroes and commas to make her a steady habit.

I could pay a few debts.

Everybody can be bought. Everybody has a price. Horn had found mine.

My throat went dry and my palms grew sweaty.

"A drink, Mr. Amundsen?" His famous baritone sounded greasy.

I nodded, afraid to trust my own voice.

Horn placed the voucher in the center of his bare desk. All those zeroes and commas faced me, within easy reach. Nothing else sat on the desk. Casually, he rose and turned away to open a cupboard behind him. I knew he was tall and thin—I'd seen him often enough on the holly and from a distance at media events. He's skeletal in person. His elegant suit didn't hide knobby elbows and shoulders, a too-long neck and a laser-thin face.

He fetched a Teenan's Blend and a single glass from the cupboard and sat again. He poured.

My hand shook when I lifted the glass to my lips.

"You'll pardon me if I don't join you," Horn said, leaning back. I tried to not look at the voucher. I failed.

I sipped the whisky.

"Sure. I understand," I said. "Don't want to cloud your judgment and so on. I mean, during a business day and all—" I stopped, realizing I sounded stupid. Was Horn trying to cloud *my* judgment? I resolved to have just one more sip. No more than two.

"I am Orthodox, Mr. Amundsen." Horn's back stiffened as he spoke. I caught the subtle tone of moral superiority, the air of righteous condescension as he looked down his long nose at me.

I knew Horn was Orthodox. And I knew the look. I avoided it when I could. Tall order, but I tried. At least, I tried to avoid offending the more zealous Orthodoxers I knew. Slipping up by drinking in front of Horn betrayed my nervousness over being summoned to his office, over seeing that voucher, over—

Yet, it was Horn's booze. He'd offered it.

Maybe he kept it for the few non-Orthodox clients who might chance to sit across from him. For business purposes.

What business did Horn have with me? Big business if it involved so many zeroes and commas. Bigger

than me.

“Look, Mr. Horn, I think maybe you got the wrong guy. I don't cover the big stories. I'm just a—”

“Pete Amundsen, age thirty-nine standard, born Mars 316 Post Holocaust, graduated New Denver Technical Institute, Mars, 337 PH, joined TSIN staff 347 PH as a newsworker. Never promoted. Two marriages, no children licensed or—”

“But there's a reason I never got promoted—”

“Of which I'm aware.”

“But that's why I'm not your man, see.” I waved a hand at the voucher, still reluctant to touch it. “I don't get the classy assignments. I'm just the guy they call when—”

Horn raised a finger and I shut up. “Our appointment is over, Mr. Amundsen. Just think about it.” He stood.

I stood. “But I still don't know what—”

“You'll know when the time comes.” The door to the reception office opened and Horn's secretary came in. He gripped my arm above the elbow and I realized the guy did more than screen calls.

“I needn't remind you our conversation was confidential,” Horn said as his secretary hustled me out.

I found myself standing outside the doorway to the BereCorp office complex, a security grunt between me and the door. She fixed steely eyes on me and her hand on the grip of a holstered short-range nerve teaser. I took the hint, put on my mask, lit a joystick, and left.

TSIN's studio on the One is a quarter way around the orbital city from BereCorp offices and down toward the outer rim. It's in a lower rent, higher gravity business district, the Lilicove Arena. To get from Horn's office to TSIN, whether you take a slideway or walk the runways, you have to go through a seedy part of the city, the Johnstone Flats, a district I'd been trying to avoid because—

I felt the gatsticker tip pressed at my back, but I didn't see who wielded it. I found myself pushed into a privacy alcove, away from the surging crowd on the runway. My face pressed against a cold, unyielding wall, arm twisted behind my back.

“Hi, newsie,” Fargo McEwin, the Collector's man, hissed in my ear. “We miss you at the tilts. How you doing these days?”

“Fargo,” I said. “I've been looking for you.” I didn't dare try to move with the gat pricking my spine. Smiling was awkward with my face up against the wall, but I tried. My voice quaked and I sweated liters. Good thing I'd peed earlier, before going into Horn's office.

Fargo turned me around, pressing my back against the wall. He stood facing me centimeters away, unmasked. I could count the hairs up his bulbous nose, smell his garlicky breath. Two cronies, masked, stood on each side of us. I didn't really look at them. And I didn't know where the gat was, but I didn't intend to ask. It was near and ready, I was sure.

“You got the chips?” Fargo smiled, exposing pointed, silvery teeth.

Ah, yes. The money. How quickly we forget. Or try to.

I'd got in that card game a few eightdays ago fronting for a guy who said he had a lot of money but didn't know how to play. He offered a nice stake, a cut of what I won and nothing out of pocket if I lost, so I went for it.

Never mind who. He's dead now. Never mind how.

A bad bet. I'd made a very, very bad bet. I had the cards, kings high, I swear. I'd never seen such a hand in my life, mine or anyone else's. So, I bet my backer's poke.

One of the Collector's people held aces high. And my backer disappeared. He'd lied. He had no money.

But it was my bet. As far as the Collector was concerned, I lost and I owed.

I could hide well enough among the two million plus people who lived on the One and I changed masks so I figured I could evade the Collector until I could raise—

In my mind, I saw again the zeroes and commas waiting on a voucher on Joshua Alexander Horn's desk, made out to my account. What a remarkable coincidence. I didn't believe in coincidence.

There was a time when I thought my good pal Stamper Clyme was the Collector.

“Yeah, I got the money, Fargo, but—”

Fargo stood back a pace while his associates did a quick and professional frisk job on me. The big man kept his hooded eyes locked on mine. I took off my mask. When the two men grunted negatives at Fargo and returned to their flanking guard positions, Fargo's cold eyes turned colder. The skin on his face pulled back from the corners of his mouth but he wasn't smiling. The gat hovered before me in meaty hands.

“You call it, newsie,” Fargo said between gritted teeth. “I'm going to cut the tendons of your left hand or your right. Your choice, but you don't pull your pud with that hand again.”

I'm afraid I giggled. Nerves. “Not on me, Fargo. Not *on* me. Carry *that* many chips through the Flats? A guy could get mugged, you know? How could I pay if—”

“In your account, then?”

“Not exactly—” I had to talk fast, but Fargo listened. I told him about Horn, the voucher. It sounded like a fantasy, even to me as I was saying it, but the truth is always easier to remember under stress. And Fargo looked convinced.

I answered questions, did my verbal dance a bit more and finally Fargo turned me loose. He gave me a new deadline. It was now a little after 1700 hours. I had until 2000. Three hours, local standard.

That was it.

He and his boys disappeared down the runway among the crowd. I pulled out my pack of joesticks. All but three were broken. I lit one, remasked and walked back to the studio.

During the walk back I had a lot to think about.

The card game with the phony backer is fixed, a setup. Horn is in on it. He waves the voucher—the carrot. Fargo waves a gat at my throat—the stick.

I expected to find a message for me from Horn when I got back to the studio, telling me what I needed to do to stay alive another day.

But before I got to check my messages, my editor, Margie Simovich, cornered me. She was unmasked like everybody else in the studio—we're newswriters and we don't have time for social posturing. She stood before me, cocked one well-rounded hip to the side, anchored a fist on it and scowled. Still pretty, but definitely a scowl.

"I came that close to firing you," she said, holding fingertips an inch apart. "Where the flip have you been?" Orthodox. Didn't swear. Many other things she didn't do, but that's another story.

"Uh—" I stammered, looking around. The place buzzed. Something had happened while I was gone on my appointment with Horn—and with Fargo.

Timing is everything in the news business. Newsies' lives are weeks of boredom separated by a few hours of panic over a big story. When I got Horn's summons, I kept quiet, didn't tell Margie or the other newsies where I'd gone. The note said not to. I'd thought that maybe I had an exclusive story, a shining moment, rare. If so, I wasn't going to share it.

Margie brought me up to speed quick. Minutes ago, a ship had docked at the One on emergency status. The Wakefield Endeavor, a colony ship outbound for the new planets in the Yakagi System, had a stasis field malfunction, but only a partial meltdown so a few crewmembers and a few hundred passengers survived. Most were children.

"We're covered, looks like," Margie said, back at her desk, scanning her screen. "Everybody's on it. We got Marks and Benning at the ship, Noble at the hospital, Wilkes at security—"

Everybody was working the story but me.

"I had to call in six people who were off," Margie said, still seething. "Do you realize what that'll cost in overtime?"

"Jadu, Margie," I said, instantly regretting the profanity, "It's not my fault. I was working a story. I didn't know—"

Her comm buzzed and she tapped her ear, dismissing me with a backhanded wave. I was on my own. If I could develop an angle on the story nobody else was working, I wouldn't look like such a putz. And from the look on Margie's face, generating some usable images as fast as possible might translate to job security.

I sat at my desk and reviewed the Wakefield story as it unfolded on my holly monitor. I watched raw feed, the uncut stuff, pre-broadcast, just as our producer saw it coming in. I saw no piece of the developing story our crews hadn't touched as I punched from image to image on my miniholly, an old flatscreen twelve-incher with a bad depth-of-field flicker. I was out of the loop. My only hope was to find some other story nobody else was touching, take it and run.

It works sometimes. I remember when Dan Addison missed an outbound shuttle on Devonshire after covering some minor provincial conference out there. Static in the studio said his ass was out the airlock when he got back. Then that freak asteroid hit Devonshire and he had the only hollycam in the system. Now Dan anchors the A-prime feeds, knocking down chips with lots of zeros and—

Messages. I'd forgotten to check my messages.

And there it was. The message, logged in my box at the same moment Horn held up all those zeroes and commas before my hungry eyes, consisted of a coordinate on the One, a time, and a name. "FH131AP. 1800hrs. Simon Magus."

I blinked my chrono—1721. I inhaled a ragged breath, wished I had something to drink. I didn't, but I lit a joe.

It had to be Horn's call, the payoff, and he'd arranged it so I didn't have time to think.

No doubt Fargo and his thug entourage were ahead of me.

Might as well make the best of it. I tapped Margie's comm.

"Margie, I'm working something." For a moment I considered telling her about Horn and all those zeroes and commas. The moment passed. I wasn't sure why. "I think."

"Give."

"I can't right now. It may not scan. You know how these anonymous tip things go. I need to work it alone, so please don't put me on the roster—"

"You documenting?"

"Everything." I mustered my best smile, the one I used at the tables when I held a nothing hand, and a thumbs up. She smiled back, looked relieved, and got back to running the desk.

And I got back to saving my ass.

First, some research on FH131AP. An ordinary meeting hall, a mid-class rental with a hundred-person capacity in the Fairwood Heights, midway between the hub and rim. A decent neighborhood, the Heights, not too rich, not too rundown. Mixed residential-small commercial.

The room, called the Gatheroom, was one of many like it throughout the One owned by an exec named Collin Sperry. He made a marginal income from renting his meeting rooms to private groups. His record showed no routine red flags. I flagged him for connections with BereCorp in a dozen different ways and came up negative. Ditto no connection to the Collector.

Renters showed a mixed bag. A Fairwood Heights branch of the Orthodoxy Mutual Assistance League, an amateur musicians group, and a writer's group met regularly at the Gatheroom. All held Orthodox sanction terms attached to their charters, always a good idea politically even if not actually required by law. Members of the three groups showed no red flags. A few were BereCorp employees or contractors but I saw no threads to follow.

The message itself was a dead end. It came digital, without ident, from a busy public comm on the other side of the One. No way to trace who sent it.

I checked schedules for events starting at 1800hrs.

A new group would hold their first meeting at the Gatheroom then. The group was moving from their old and much smaller meeting site inside the BereCorp office wing, maybe to accommodate expanding membership. Maybe. The timing could not have been coincidental.

Horn was sending me to do something with this group that had met under his own roof for the past two years, according to the records. Why?

I studied the group, difficult because it had been sanctioned under a BereCorp internal charter, which ensured employee privacy. I couldn't get members' names, meeting times, frequency, dates, attendance figures, financial records. I couldn't even find the group name. Nothing.

I punched up a search for Simon Magus. I expected a person name or a place name. I got our reference library instead.

From *The History of Witchcraft*, by Montague Summers, printed in 1925 old calendar, or about 1200 BH: a wizard approaches the throne of Nero, ancient Earthome ruler. "...with a deep obeisance to the ruler of the known world Simon Magus stretched forth his arms, and a moment more with rigid limbs and stern set face he rose from the ground and began to float high in the air toward the Capitol. Like some monstrous bird he rose, and hovered fluttering in space awhile."

Someone named "S. Peter, the First Pope of Rome," whatever that meant, steps forward and invokes the powers of his god. "Who shall say what hosts of hells fled at that moment?" the book continued. "The wizard dropped swift as heavy lead; the body whirled and turned in the air; it crashed broken and breathless, at the foot of the Emperor's seat, which was fouled and bespattered with black gouts of blood."

There was more, but I got the hint. Was I being bribed and threatened into exposing an anti-Orthodox group?

Now and then, one would spring up, usually some rebellious kids who knew how to piss off their elders. I attended a meeting once in college, pseudo-intellectual adolescents giving speeches to each other. A phase. Nothing serious. Kid stuff.

But if this was going on in BereCorp offices, then I could see why Horn, Orthodox as he was, would want it busted—after he got it moved out of his territory.

But he didn't have to bribe or threaten me to do the story. I'm no fan of the Orthodoxy, but I know a good story when I see it. If an anti-Orthodox group was meeting—a witch's coven is what they're called—and I could get tape and maybe some names, I'd get airtime. Even with this refugee ship thing going on, a witch's coven bust would get me airtime.

If he didn't have to do it, the bribe and threat, I mean, then why did he do it? Did he think I'd make the connection to BereCorp, reveal the group had met under his roof all this time? But his PR people could wipe that off company shoes with ease.

No, that wasn't the point. But what was? Something wasn't clear and I didn't have time to figure it out.

I had fifteen minutes to get to the Gatheroom and crash the party, difficult to do with a sanctioned private group, but not impossible. We have ways, we newsies. I'd have to leave the studio now to get to the meeting place on time.

In just over two hours, I'd have to answer to Fargo.

I strapped a fresh battery pack to my hip, hiding it under my cloak. I activated my eyeball overlay HV recorder and scanned Margie's behind as she leaned over a desk across the big room to talk to somebody. I subvocalized commands and her soft curves appeared in miniature on my desk minican. Hollycam in working order. I blinked and the lens behind my eyes deactivated.

Transmitters, audio pickups, directional controls, color compensators, A and V filters and all the paraphernalia hard-wired in my skull and attached through leads behind each ear all checked out and ready to go.

I went.

But before I left the studio, I glanced around at the bustle characteristic of TSIN in the middle of a big story. They were a mixed bag of men and women, good people and jerks, Orthodox and non-Orthodox, kids and old-timers in the big room. Most born right here, some from Mars and even a few from as far away as the Oort. But they were all newsies, all pros. They had that in common. And if it ever came time to turn up the final card, I knew they were all friends.

With Horn's bribe and Fargo's threat hanging over my head, I realized I might never see them again. I was scared.

I directed my adrenaline away from my fear and toward the job. I put on my mask, crossed the One, and got into the Gatheroom fast and with little fuss. The gatekeepers weren't expecting crashers and like I said, we have ways, we newsies.

I was a few minutes early so I cruised the standard issue room. It was beige, featureless, imitation wood paneling, thirty-by-sixty with an outside entrance at one end and a door to some inner chamber at the other. Plush chairs and several sofas sat scattered on a nondescript carpet. The low ceiling was webbed with lighting panels, fire suppression nozzles, and the tiny telltale snouts and beaks of various electronic devices. There was no way to tell what all those devices did, but I detected a scrambler net, so I killed my transmitter and juiced my recorder.

I'd have to hand-carry my copy out the front door into the clear and pipe it then back to the studio.

I taped faces as people arrived to check against our files later. We have pretty good files. Masked or not, it wouldn't be long after the meeting ended before I had a few names. Besides, if you know what to look for you see things in people's eyes, things they believe their masks hide.

I felt something odd about their clothing, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Maybe our forensics people at the studio would be able to figure it. A problem for later, not now—I was getting tape.

I counted sixty people in the place when my chrono blinked 1800 exact. The lights dimmed and the murmured conversations among small groups of twos and threes dimmed with them. People sat and faced toward the room's front. I stood to one side, leaning casually against a wall, conscious of the four steps I'd have to take to reach the exit, if I had to leave fast.

Conscious also of the two large men planted like pillars on either side of the door.

The room grew dark. I upped my IR pickup and taped a person, male, enter from the door at the room's front. He wore a black robe covering him from neck to foot. A cowl hid his face.

In a moment, the man faced the congregation. A spotlight came up just enough to highlight him from the waist up.

He reached long, slender hands from beneath the deep sleeves of the robe and gestured, fingers fluttering in the air between him and the congregation as if dancing over a keyboard. He began chanting in a rich, familiar baritone. The congregation echoing phrases in some language I didn't recognize.

It was Horn.

Jadu, Horn was leading a witch's coven.

His cowl fell back. He was masked, but I knew those eyes. My heart raced as I checked my recorder. I was getting it all.

But what was I getting?

What the hell was going on? Why had Horn sent me—bribed and threatened me—into doing a witch's coven story, busting the coven, when he *lead* it?

I had no doubt it was him. The greasy voice, skeletal build, and those eyes, peering from behind the mask at the congregation swaying and chanting in reverence along with him. It was Horn.

Why?

Something occurred to me.

After the meeting, likely minutes before Fargo's 2000hr deadline, I'd meet my old gambling compatriot not far from the Gatheroom. He and his cohorts would escort me into a privacy alcove and he'd say something like "Do the story but keep Horn's name out of it and you get to live." Something like that.

It was a setup all right. Not for me—for the others in the room. I had but to check records to see if the date Horn got upgraded to the BereCorp vice-presidency matched the date this group began meeting at BereCorp. I was sure I'd find they did.

Horn had something planned for his own congregation.

The mindless, mind-numbing chanting went on and on as the crowd grew more and more hypnotized by the rhythm. I had the feeling they were building up to a climax and I began to wonder how long it would take. My chrono blinked 1900hrs when the chanting ended and a sudden silence engulfed the room.

Silent, as if every breath were held. Mine too. I sensed something about to happen, something I needed to record.

It began, I think, with a nearly subaudible hum from somewhere, everywhere. Then I noticed a subtle change in the light. It became faintly milky as if someone had been smoking a joystick in an unfiltered

room hours earlier.

I ran a rapid full-spectrum scan and saw the mist spraying from some nozzles in the ceiling. The fine spray drifted down over the crowd, unnoticed by them as they rocked and weaved in growing ecstasy.

Some in the crowd began moaning low, and I felt my heart rate increase. I felt a hardening in my pants and I realized the stuff I and the congregation breathed was an aphrodisiac.

The Gatheroom was about to turn into an old-fashioned orgy. I suddenly understood what I'd noticed earlier about the congregation's clothing—they all dressed differently, but all the clothing was designed for easy removal.

The room was still dark to the congregation's unaided eyes, but through my lens I saw clothing cast aside, hands and mouths groping, feeling about. On the sofas and the floor, couples and groups of three and four fumbling and tumbling, rocking and rolling.

It looked like fun, but—

I suddenly understood fully what Horn was up to. These people were colleagues, fellow officials in the BereCorp hierarchy. Horn was ambitious. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure it out. He wanted to be CEO. He could have blackmailed this bunch—not good enough for him. He set them up. Now he'd arranged to get their clandestine debauchery made public through me, to get them out of the way. The bribe and threat was needed so I didn't implicate him while doing so.

He probably had some nasty mechanism in place to ensure his victims didn't drop his name after they were arraigned.

It rang true. If I wasn't exactly right, I was close enough.

I could try to figure it out later, but right then panic alarms sounded in my head screaming “get out now.” My erection withered as fear supplanted lust.

Two hulks flanked the door and neither seemed affected by the aphrodisiac. Filters under their masks, maybe. Who knew. I had to get by them, had to leave the room.

I remembered the last joystick in my pocket.

I bent in the dark, struck the joystick tip with my thumb, and touched it to a pile of clothing nearby. The joystick sparked and the spark caught fabric. I backed away as flames rose.

Someone screamed.

The two flanking the door stepped toward the fire and I got past them. The door wasn't locked—fire laws. I darted through.

Behind me, I heard mixed with screams and shouts the watery hiss of the automatic fire suppressant system coming on. Sirens blared from somewhere down the crowded runway.

I hadn't gone a dozen steps before I felt the collar at the back of my neck bunch up in somebody's fist and I was jerked into a privacy alcove. Fargo pressed the gat to my jugular.

“What happened in there, newsie?” I sensed fear under his anger. Things hadn't gone as he'd been told to expect. He had to improvise. He had to think for himself. He didn't like that.

I was good at improvising. Sometimes you don't have time to write a script. Sometimes you have to go on the air live, cold, and wing it.

A plan began to form in my mind.

I have no idea where the plan came from. It seemed too crazy. I hoped I'd have time to analyze it later.

“Fargo, old friend,” I said. My words slurred because my mouth was pressed against the wall. I knew he had a gat pointed at my spine, but I didn't see it or feel it. “I'd love to chat with you but I'm on my way to collect some chips—”

“You weren't supposed to come out for another half hour—”

“Was a fire part of the plan?”

“No, but I was told—”

“Things have changed, Fargo, old buddy. How does it feel to be out of the loop?”

He jerked me around to face him, nose to nose, gat at my throat. His skin pulled back from his mouth and a feral grin exposed buzzsaw teeth. Hard to read, that look, but I thought I saw confusion, anger, and fear all fighting for supremacy.

I told Fargo I'd do the broadcast, as planned. He reminded me to keep his employer's name and image off the holly. I agreed. I said we'd have to go elsewhere to do the broadcast. Now. He looked at the police pushing back the curious runway crowds at the fire site nearby and agreed. I asked for an extension on the Collector's deadline until Horn could get time to make the voucher transfer. He agreed.

With the script blown in the fire and Horn busy putting it out, Fargo had no idea what to do. He agreed with me, in part, I'm sure, to buy time until somebody could tell him what to do.

We walked—me, Fargo, and his buddies—down the runway. I got occasional glimpses of Fargo trying to subvocalize contact with Horn for instructions. I could tell by his frustrated look Horn was still busy putting out fires.

As a result, Fargo didn't object when I insisted we walk rather than take an express slideway to our destination. He needed time to contact his boss. I needed time to play my hand.

While we walked along the busy runways, while Fargo's attention focused on trying to reconnect his subvocal link with his handler, I commed Margie. I sent my tape to my desk in a burst, tapped her number and overlaid a flashing amber light with beeper, our code for “urgent.” Margie came on in a second.

“Go,” she said, a gnat's voice inside my ear. All business, that woman. Bless her.

At that moment, I blink-activated my hollycam, turned to Fargo, and said, “You ever been on holly live, Fargo?”

“Don't be a smartass,” Fargo said and shoved me.

“I got it,” Margie said. “I'm taping. Go to code. Okay?”

I tapped my teeth together twice for “yes.” Once meant “no,” three times meant “I don't know,” and so on. A private code we'd worked out so our newsies could communicate with the desk from the field clandestinely while under threat or other stressful conditions. I'd used it once to call for help in the middle of a runway riot about to happen. I saved some lives then, including mine, but that's another story.

Now, with Margie's help, I'd save my butt again. She asked and I answered, tap, tap. By the time I got to my destination, we were ready to go.

I'd let Fargo believe he and his boys were escorting me to TSIN to uplink the story Horn had set me up to do. We stood almost in front of BereCorp offices, Horn's office, before he realized where I was really going. His confusion immobilized him long enough for me to prep.

I was ready to play my hand, live, before a few million viewers on the One and throughout the local system.

I counted on continuing to take Fargo by surprise and I did. I overcame the pressure of my heart slamming against my throat by a sheer act of will and, in a series of quick movements, almost casual gestures resulting from long practice, I set up. I popped out my standup cam on its portable tripod, turned it on and stood in front of it. I was on the air before Fargo realized it.

Any time a hollicam goes on for a standup in a public place, a crowd gathers. It's been so since back in the flatscreen days on Earthome. Fargo and his sidekicks, confused, melted back into the small crowd forming on the runway as if to hide. Before Fargo put on his mask, I saw his jaw working his subvocal. He got no response, I could tell. The poor bastard was on his own.

I heard my cue in my ear.

“In the last few hours” I said to the projector and the audience to which it linked, “The Wakefield Endeavor tragedy has stirred the hearts of citizens throughout Berenson Corporation Station One. Among them is a compassionate group of BereCorp officials who have met in a spontaneous outpouring of love—”

I told our viewers the group meeting at the Gatheroom was a devout Orthodox prayer group that had to move from its meeting room in BereCorp offices proper to the Gatheroom because the group had grown so large. And when they met today, concern for the Wakefield survivors was uppermost in their minds.

“What can we do, they asked themselves, to help these poor orphans? The solution came from their prayer leader, BereCorp Vice-President Joshua Alexander Horn himself.”

Fargo and friends ran away through the crowd, disappeared.

Horn, I told the audience, wanted to remain anonymous in both his role as prayer group leader and his role in offering a voucher—I named a figure with lots and lots of zeroes and commas, a figure that had been deep in my thoughts for the past three hours—“which the group will donate to a trust fund to help the poor children—”

Before I had finished, Margie had idented two people in the Gatheroom from my tape and had sent

newsies to get comments from them. Both were high up in BereCorp affairs, but not as high as Horn. Their stuttering, flustered denial of the newsie's questions confirmed my theory about what Horn intended, and confirmed for viewers how modest these Good Samaritans were.

It didn't take long before Horn himself, looking disheveled, bemused, and smelling smoky, stepped through the door behind me to acknowledge the public accolade I'd drummed up for him. Live.

He'd managed to dash from the Gatheroom faster than I had. He'd gotten to his HQ and had time to spiff up a bit and he looked dapper, all business. But when he stood close I smelled smoke under his syrupy cologne.

He expressed dignified annoyance with TSIN for revealing his colleagues' generous act, which he'd wanted to keep anonymous at their request. As for himself, he downplayed his role in the contribution and so on and on.

For half an hour.

I got him to sign a voucher—what had he done, I wondered, with the other one, the one he'd showed me a few hours earlier with my name on it—live, right there on the BereCorp office complex steps. The crowd cheered their selfless hero. He waved and smiled, the BereCorp logo on the building over his shoulder.

Helped by tape from the Gatheroom, edited pieces of which played over the air, helped by newsies elsewhere in the field doing related stories, and helped by my pointed questions and comments in our live talk, I made two things clear to Horn.

One, his plot to undermine his colleagues in a bid for the CEO chair was compromised. I saw his unspoken acceptance of my unspoken threat and promise. I had the raw tape and he knew I could still do a number on him, later. Maybe. He was wise enough to realize he could jockey this unexpected development to his benefit. He'd PR the notoriety I'd handed him for it's max worth.

Two, he would pay the Collector what I owed and get Fargo the hell off my back.

* * * *

After Horn left the scene, I stayed around doing my job, interviewing secretaries and whoever looked interviewable. Around 0300 I called it quits, wandered back to my desk at the studio. Even as tired as I was, I went to my desk without giving a thought to going to my cubby, the sleeping nook a few blocks rimward I couldn't bring myself to call home. It was an old space, right on the edge. It still had a transparent viewplate, where the dirty brown ball of a once-blue and green Earthome hovered too largely, a constant reminder of human frailties.

Few places on the One had such viewplates anymore. TSIN had one, a camera's view of the wounded planet, by the front door. A reminder. Sometimes we needed it.

TSIN was dim and quiet, the Wakefield story had faded behind some new political development or other. Not my beat.

I sat staring blank-eyed at my miniholly that somebody had used and left on. The flickering spots swirling in the small tub felt tranquil.

But I didn't doze. I thought.

I thought about all those zeroes and commas that could have been mine if I'd gone ahead and done what Horn wanted me to do. Who gave a damn who ran BereCorp? Horn couldn't be any worse than the current CEO. Company politics. In the long run, it didn't matter. Hell, someday Horn probably would be CEO anyway.

Why fight it?

All those zeroes and commas. I could have paid the Collector, booked passage to Mars, quit the rat race. I could be snuggling up with Tira right now, sipping Teenan's Blend.

I couldn't explain to anybody why I did it—to me, to another newsie, to anybody. I don't mean that I don't know why. I *know*. I mean I can't *explain* it.

“Hey, Tiger, nice story.” Marks, just back from the Wakefield, waved at me. He yawned.

I acknowledged with a nod and a weary smile.

“Yeah,” Benning said. “Good work.” He plopped down at his desk across from mine.

A message from Margie blinked on my comm: “Good job. Let's do breakfast at deLorean's, 0700, my treat. MS.”

I stood. I had time for a quick shower, a nap.

On my way to the door, word came in on the scanner. A botched robbery in the Johnstone Flats. Hostages being held.

Benning and Marks almost beat me there. But not quite.

Rage, and the Vision

Dewey Secord pulled the stopper off the vial of oily pink liquid, held it out and glared down at the doctor, who lay bloody and groaning under the table.

“So you want to shoot me with this gunk, huh?” He kicked the syringe from the doctor's hand. Then he kicked the doctor in the face again. “Huh, little man? Make me into a goddam zombie? Mess with my mind, huh? We'll see. We'll see.”

He tilted back the vial and emptied it into his mouth and swallowed. “Well, t'hell with you,” he sputtered and tossed the empty vial aside. “And them.” He jerked a thumb at the viewport in the room's outer wall, toward the One. It hung, a pale star against black, empty space, above the cinder that was the once-habitable Earth. It hung five hundred kilometers away from BereCorp's Maximum Security Detention Habitat, from where Secord watched it with burning hate. It hung there, secure and mocking Secord's hunger—his lust—for revenge.

Secord stepped over the dead guard and began yanking open cabinets, cursing as he guzzled liquids and jammed pills and capsules into his mouth. “Nobody screws with my head but me, you got it? A little of this, a little of that, huh, little man? Drugs and nanomedical shit. Screw up your experiment damn good,

huh? We'll see. We'll see."

The guards' faces appeared at last in the small window at the door. Their eyes shone wide behind combat face shields. They looked fearful but determined, recruits in their first firefight.

"Can't get in, huh, you little shits?" Secord screamed at the guards beyond the door's inert bulk. "Security measures, you know? Works against *you* this time, huh?" He pointed up. "Jammed the gas nozzles, too, didn't I? And no electros or you zap the doctor too, right? Yeah, right."

The guards couldn't hear, Secord knew, in the blat of the lockdown klaxon that had punctured the Rock seconds after he'd killed the guard. But it mattered less and less as the drug and nano cocktail began to take effect. His blood surged alternately acidic and watery. His head spun. His skin itched and burned. He smelled copper, ozone, and urine in waves.

He looked at his shaking hand and noticed he held a scalpel. He'd grabbed it from a cabinet to use as a weapon when the guards broke through. He slid it across his forearm and watched fascinated as blood oozed in the thin wound.

It'd be a while before the guards got through. He had time to kill. He contemplated killing himself. No, the doctor first.

But as he turned toward the doctor, he glimpsed the wall chrono. Just a few minutes after 1800 hours. Andrea Morning would be anchoring the TSIN Uplink.

Secord liked her. Liked her a lot.

He looked around the room and found a holly, in a corner by the door. Secord fumbled at the controls on the doctor's lap desk. "Hey, little man, how do you turn this damn thing on, huh?"

The doctor groaned.

"Hey, you little shit, answer me, huh?" Secord pushed the table aside, ready to kick the doctor. "Answer me, goddam it. How do you—"

The holly came on. The tiny image of Andrea Morning hovered in the corner, flickering blue at the edges of her perfect face, neck, and shoulders. Shiny chocolate brown hair hung curled under her smooth chin and bounced when she tilted her head just so. She wore a collarless blood red tunic with a vee neckline plunging knifelike between her breasts, pearl arcs rising and falling with each breath from her lips, those lips so wet and full, and her dark eyes, staring into Secord's with seductive intent, so penetrating, "so goddam sexy, so goddam—"

Andrea Morning's image suddenly lost its electric blue hazy border and flowed beyond the holographic receiver tank. It filled the room before Secord's eyes. He stood back a step, overwhelmed by her vision, and dropped the scalpel from numb fingers. His breathing and heartbeat synchronized with hers. The guards at the door faded from his awareness, as did the groaning doctor. The world filled with the vision of her face.

Secord wanted her then more than he'd ever wanted her before. His hands clenched and unclenched and he made grabbing, ripping motions in the air with them. A low moan began deep in his throat. He fell to his knees, quivering.

He wanted her so much. Had to have her.

Now.

But she was in TSIN studios somewhere on the One, five hundred kilometers away. It might as well have been a million light years.

Still, Secord's yearning raged. He reached quaking hands out to her.

And he touched her.

* * * *

Pete Amundsen awoke from a catnap in his sleep cubby a kilometer from TSIN studios when the 1800 Uplink came on. He was exhausted after a full day, but he'd set his chrono to awaken him so he could see how Andy handled his tape on the pending execution of mass murderer Dewey Secord. At first, he'd expected to do a routine stand-up in front of the BereCorp Security Office a few hundred meters down the runway from TransSystem InterNews studios, and fill out the story with file tape. But Andy had talked him into taking a shuttle to the Rock itself and getting holly of the execution room. Grim business, taping the bare room—people called it the Bakery—where Secord's brains would be fried to mush in—Pete checked his chrono—four hours from now.

The trip to and from the prison, with all the attendant security procedures, took only a few hours, but it exhausted him. Tape filed, he'd left it on Andy's desk for her to write, heading to his cubby for a quick nap.

Andy wanted to be a writer, not a pretty face on the holly. But the front office saw only a pretty face, a valuable asset. She wrote stories now and then, but she never got credit, it only happened on the sly, and only with help from friends like Pete.

Friends. They were more than friends off the job.

It wasn't easy. Everybody wanted her, but Pete had her. "More than lovers," he recalled her lulling whisper the night before, soft lips against his bare chest. "Friends."

"I'm counting my blessings," he'd muttered in response, and they'd slept tangled in each other's arms and legs.

Ivers wanted her, Pete knew. James Ivers, TSIN editor, handsome bachelor, new to TSIN, had replaced Margie Simovich two years earlier. Ivers would have been a good catch for an attractive woman like Andy. Static named him next Managing Editor, the company's fair-eyed boy. Great expectations.

But Andy had spurned Ivers advances, despite the evident skill with which he made them. Pete never could figure it out, or why she hadn't taken up with Tom Marks at the business desk, or any of the others newsies whose advances she'd also spurned.

"Just luck," he told himself. "It sure as hell isn't my good looks." Still some sullen part of Pete's brain harassed him with insecurity. He didn't deserve her.

Pete sighed and rubbed weary eyes. Even if he contributed nothing to the 1800 Uplink, he'd watch. Just

to see Andy, to look at her.

He looked. And the vision of Andrea Morning in his tiny holly tank suddenly became a vision of horror. She stopped talking in mid-word. Her head jerked back, the cords of her neck stood out, her eyes widened, and her mouth opened in a scream.

“What the hell?” Pete rose, heart in his throat.

Andy's blouse split open with an obscene shrieking rip. Her hands pushed at the air before her breasts, which seemed to alternately bulge and flatten as if kneaded by unseen hands. Captivated by the horror he watched, Pete could see the impression of fingers groping at her pale breasts. The invisible fingers left red indentations as they rubbed and pulled at her nipples in a rough, grotesque mockery of passion.

Andy pushed at the air in front of her as if fighting off manic hands. To no avail.

Andy screamed and the vision ended. A commercial came on.

“What the hell?” Pete dashed from his cubby, running, tapping the studio number on his comm. He could be at the TSIN studios in four minutes if he took the express slideway instead of the runway.

Pete ran down the slideway, pushing people aside, oblivious to their protests.

* * * *

Secord's hips continued gyrating, his lust on automatic, after the image of Andrea Morning disappeared. One moment, she was there, in his arms, under him, as tangible and real as his own skin. The next, she was gone. As if she'd never been.

At last, “What happened?” he asked the guards who'd just burst in. They'd surprised him and he had no chance to resist. They subdued him quickly and bound him. As they did so, he noticed on the holly where her image had been a moment before a commercial announcement, of no interest.

“Where did she go?” he asked as one grunt dosed him, a needle-sharp bite on his neck. The room went up one way and he went down the other. A cotton-soft fuzziness blanketed his consciousness and he allowed himself to be led away, half carried, placid as a child.

Moments later, he lay in a cell, strapped hand and foot to a cot. The cell was bare, featureless.

Secord's eyelids fluttered as he scanned the small space. He saw no peepers along the walls, not even the pinhole kind. He couldn't see any gas nozzles in the ceiling. But then, his vision was fuzzy and his head wouldn't move without hurting.

He lay back and let his eyes close, tried to control his breathing, gather strength.

He'd killed the guard and rattled the doctor because they were going to experiment on him—use him. He hated that. Four hours to live and they were using him like a laboratory rat. Damn them. He drank their experimental whatever-it-was half as a gesture of defiance, half as death wish. Then, to compound the gesture—hell, he wasn't really sure what he was doing, the rage was on him like a beast—he'd poured down his gullet everything he could get his hands on.

Then he'd seen Andrea Morning. Then he'd tried to have her.

His breath caught as he recalled the moment, all too brief, as he almost entered her. *Jadu, it was fantastic. It was like I was there, with her, almost in her. Then she'd disappeared.*

Why? What happened?

Secord took a few deep breaths, made an effort to concentrate, to think through the foggy enshrouding his mind, his throbbing head.

The drug. There was something in the drug. Psychoactive, the doctor had called it. But the doctor hadn't had time to explain what it was supposed to do before Secord blew, killed the guard and attacked the doctor.

The drug had changed him. Or the drug cocktail he'd mixed for himself after he'd drunk their potion had changed him.

Secord concentrated on the pain in his head and found he could see it, see the pain as clearly as if it lay in front of his eyes, not behind them. The pain throbbed in a thumb-sized polyp centered just above his eyes and behind his forehead, four centimeters inside his brain. The area was encased in angry purple scar tissue.

He tried to touch the polyp. The restraints, which he'd momentarily forgotten, held fast. So he formed a mental finger and touched it. The polyp felt wet, tender, like a new bruise.

What were they trying to do to me?

Secord found a clear spot in his mind in which to worry the question and come to a few conclusions.

A secret experiment, highly risky and probably illegal. Why else chose to do it on somebody scheduled to die in a few hours? They wanted to see the results, then have the lab rat destroyed after. *Had they expected me to be able to—to—*

He thought back to the moment he began to concentrate on the vision of Andrea Morning's face, what happened then. He recalled a floating or flying sensation, airless and weightless. *Did I actually fly to where she was? Across space?*

He remembered the look of the woman under him, her beauty and her terror.

Did I imagine it? Or did it really happen?

A psychoactive drug. A secret experiment.

Then Secord had mixed a random drug cocktail chaser.

He thought about the strange polyp in his brain again, forming mental fingers to probe at it again, and decided something had happened, that it wasn't just his imagination.

A test. He needed to see if he could do it again.

Secord looked around his cell and tried a few experiments. He looked at the straps around his wrists and tried to release them. No go.

He tried to imagine the security klaxon, to turn the alarm back on. No go. He tried a few other experiments. No go.

A few minutes later, guards entered the cell and a medic treated facial bruises he hadn't noticed and his slashed arm. After they released his bonds and left, Secord stood and walked on rubbery legs to the tiny window of the cell. Across the hall, he could see a holly in a neighboring cell. It was on and Secord tried another experiment.

In the holly, he saw a man from the waist up, smiling, talking. Secord couldn't hear the words.

He focused on the man.

And made him sneeze.

* * * *

Pete arrived at the studio in time to see the ambulance leave. He cornered Walsh, TSIN security chief.

“What happened?” he demanded.

Walsh looked pale and nervous. “They took her to BereMed. Minor cuts, looked like. Shock. She's conscious, but—”

“What happened?”

“Ease off, Amundsen.” Ivers put a hand on Pete's shoulder from behind, the grip firm. “Walsh, clear out the rubberneckerers. We need to get back to work.”

The cop nodded and left.

“Sorry, Ivers.” Pete sighed. “I need to know what's happening.”

“I'll brief you.” Ivers gripped Pete's elbow, escorting him into his office. He shut the door on the noise coming from the busy main studio floor. Pete's co-workers moved in twitches, voices high-pitched, eyes wide. Disaster survivors. He'd seen it before. Those who stood next to the one zapped by a nerve-teaser often looked worse than the victim.

“Sit down,” Ivers said, pointing at a chair. Ivers sat behind a tiny, cluttered desk, ran his hands through wavy black hair.

Reluctant, Pete sat.

Ivers lit a joe and offered Pete one. He accepted, lit it and inhaled. He needed to relax. Ivers would give him the static, straight. But he needed to relax.

“She didn't say much, after,” Ivers said, rich baritone steady.

“What happened?”

“It looked like she was being attacked by—by—” Ivers hands fluttered in frustration.

"I watched. I didn't see anything."

"It looked like she was being attacked by nothing— *nothing*."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Then suddenly the attack stopped. Whatever it was ended."

"Why didn't you get to her?" Pete's voice cracked with ill-controlled anger. "Do something?"

"Take it easy, Amundsen. We got to her as soon as we could. We were all stunned. And, believe me, we couldn't—"

"Why didn't you cut to a commercial sooner? Everybody in the whole system saw—"

"We cut out in five seconds, Amundsen." Ivers' tone tightened around his own anger. "You ever seen a producer make an unplanned switch that fast? I *said* we were stunned. We moved as fast as we could, believe me. But when we got to her, we couldn't stop the—seizure or whatever it was. It was like invisible hands were—"

"I saw." Pete sounded, felt, deflated.

Ivers paused, sighed. He snuffed out his joe. "Then it stopped. Suddenly. As soon as the cam cut to the commercial, the attack stopped."

"I don't get it."

"Like I said, it happened suddenly. One minute, she was—then, the next—" Ivers suppressed a shudder. Almost.

"Then she's okay?"

"Hysterical. Jadu, Amundsen, I think she was nearly raped. *She* thinks she was nearly raped."

"By who? What?"

Ivers shrugged.

"But she's okay?"

Ivers shrugged again, reached for another joystick.

Pete stood. "I'm going to the hospital."

Ivers nodded, lit his joe. "I don't think they'll let you see her. Call me. If you can see her or not, call me."

* * * *

I have to see it on the holly to use it with my mind. Secord smiled, suppressing a giggle. He'd made the man on the holly sneeze repeatedly, then caused a nosebleed. Then the image changed abruptly to

something else, a commercial. Secord tried to do something to the image in the commercial, a recording. Nothing happened.

I have to see it on the holly and it must be live.

An idea occurred to him. He sat on the bunk and mulled the idea in that clear spot he'd found in his mind earlier. In a moment, his lips creased in a wicked smile. He stood and addressed the walls.

"Hey, you shits. I know you can hear me. How about an answer, huh? You're violating my civil rights keeping me locked up like this with no chrono, no holly, no nothing. That what you're doing? How much time do I have left, huh?"

Secord rested his feverish head against the cool wall of his cell. The air smelled of machine oil.

At last, a woman's voice emerged from overhead. "Your detention, Mister Secord, is routine procedure when prisoners assault staff. I believe you know this."

Secord laughed. "Yeah, I'm a pretty good jailhouse lawyer, right, Edith?"

"Please call me Warden Dorr, Mister Secord." The tone was weary, patient.

"Right. Now here's what I want, Edith. I got a right to an interview, don't I? I mean with a reporter, right? Part of deal for guys about to get fried, huh? Last meal, last interview, that sort of thing. Am I right?"

"Yes, Mister Secord, you have such a right. But—"

"But what?"

"The lockdown prompted by your assault—"

"Hey, you're not trying to weasel out on—"

"Rules prohibit outside access to prisoners during situations—"

"I got a right to talk to my lawyer in *any* case. Any time I want to. Like right goddam *now*. Let's see what he has to say, huh? Try to deny me *that*, huh? What do you say, Edith? Huh?"

A long pause. "Give me a moment, Mister Secord." She sounded defeated.

* * * *

Pete knew BereMed hospital staff from long acquaintance. He cultivated sources at all levels, management to maintenance, and all points in between. When the floor nurse told Pete he couldn't see Andy, he believed the man.

"Will you tap my comm the minute she can talk?" he begged the nurse.

"First thing."

It would have to do. Pete commed Ivers.

“Go to work, Amundsen. Get back out to the Rock, if you can. I've booked a shuttle. There's been a security lockdown. We got word on the scanner a few minutes after—well, after. No details. Nobody's moved on it yet. If you can't get out there, get what you can on it secondary. Whatever. Do your job. We still have a network to run.”

Work sounded like a better option to Pete than futile rage.

The automated public shuttle bay was not far from BereMed. On his way out of the hospital, old habit prompted Pete to poke into the emergency wing. Exercising a hunch, he took holly of the man on the gurney with the pulped, bloody face being rolled in. He caught audio as a nurse dictated into the admissions record. “Doctor Jose Santiago, BereCorp Security, Medical Consultant—”

Maybe the patient came from the problem at the Rock, a riot victim. Through a viewport in the corridor outside the emergency wing, Pete saw the flank of a BereCorp Security ambulance parked back end first at the emergency access bay. The patient had been brought in from the Rock.

Pete grunted and moved on. He'd corner the details later, find a connection, or a separate story. Or give it to somebody else to check into. Whatever. Now, he had a shuttle to catch.

Crossing to the Rock, Pete made some calls to find out what he could about the security lockdown. An inmate had gone berserk, killed a guard and attacked someone else. The guy back there, probably. No more details available. The lockdown would stay in effect for at least two hours, until after the execution. Outside access had been limited to the visitors' docking bay.

A hundred newsies were already on the Rock for the execution.

The lockdown would keep Pete from seeing the execution. Besides, TSIN had it covered. And he probably wouldn't get much on the lockdown from the visitors' bay. He banged his fist against the seat arm in mute frustration.

Had Ivers sent him on a wild goose chase just to keep him busy? Still, it spoke of Ivers' concern for his people. And if Pete could get a story on the lockdown, he'd get it. “And it'll be a damn good story, too,” Pete muttered between clenched teeth.

Pete combed the hospital but got nothing new. Andy remained under sedation. She'd stay so for a day or more. Then there would be tests. Lots of tests.

Pete shuddered, lit a joe, and tried to write. He inventoried and checked his equipment, and idly taped holly of the Rock two hundred kilometers distant. He tried to keep busy, to not think.

It didn't work.

“Mister Amundsen?” A voice came from the robot ship's comm.

“Yes?”

“You have a communication incoming from BereCorp Maximum Security Detention Habitat. Will you acknowledge and receive?”

“I'll take it.”

“Mister Amundsen, I’m Warden Edith Dorr.”

“Yes?”

“Intrasystem Traffic Control identifies you as a reporter with TransSystem InterNet. Correct?”

“Yes.”

“Your superior, James Ivers, informs us you’re en route to our facility to investigate and report on the lockdown currently in effect. Also correct?”

“Yes.”

A long pause. What the hell was going on?

“There’s been a change in your itinerary, Mr. Amundsen. I’ll brief you after you dock.”

* * * *

Pete followed Warden Dorr through stark, narrow corridors toward his interview with Dewey Secord. Pete sensed he was near the Bakery, where Secord would be executed, but he’d lost track in the labyrinthine corridors.

Dorr stood a head shorter than Pete. She was square, short-legged, but she walked fast, her stride long, and Pete had to strain to keep up.

“Mister Secord requested a private interview with a reporter,” she said, brisk, business-like. “It is his right, under law, for such an interview. It is among the legal courtesies due a condemned prisoner. Last rights and so on.”

“But why me?”

“Mister Secord is scheduled to be executed in just over an hour. He delayed exercising this particular right to the last minute. He has no time to be choosy. The reporters on station are as affected by the lockdown as are the inmates. It’s the law. No traffic in the facility whatsoever. Since you were off station at the time, the lockdown didn’t affect you. By asking you to cooperate with his request, Secord gets his lawful due and we maintain our lawful schedule.”

“Did he say why he wanted to talk to a newsie?”

“He did not.”

“May I uplink live?”

“No.” The clipped response left no room for dispute.

“Will I be allowed to tape?”

Dorr stopped in the middle of a corridor and turned to glare up at Pete. “You may record, but you must first get permission to do so from Mister Secord, understood? And we’ll review your tape before you are

allowed to leave the facility and uplink."

"I can't uplink from here?"

"Not during a lockdown."

"And you'll review my tape before you let me leave?"

"That is our right. If for any reason, we feel it is appropriate to do so, we'll confiscate the tape. Understood?"

Pete nodded.

"The interview room is soundproof," Dorr continued. "We will not monitor audio. That meets legal criteria for a private interview. But we will be watching, and you will be protected from physical attack. If Mister Secord makes a threatening move, we will sedate him. He knows this."

Dorr raised stiff eyebrows and pointed a finger at Pete's nose, lecturing. "You will be separated by a partition. Do not approach it. If you do, we will sedate you both. Understood?"

Pete nodded. His throat was dry and he didn't trust himself to speak.

"Good. You have a half-hour."

Dorr turned toward the wall beside them. The wall slid aside and Pete found himself looking into a well-lit room smaller than his own sleep cubby.

"Half an hour," Dorr said.

Pete took a deep, shuddery breath and stepped into the room. The door hissed shut behind him. Beyond a transparent partition splitting the tiny space in half, mass murderer Dewey Secord smiled up at him from the cot on which he sat. Secord radiated boyish innocence through straight, white teeth, clear complexion, and deep blue eyes.

There was a chair, bolted to the floor. Pete sat, legs rubbery, and faced Secord, two meters away.

"May I record?" Pete's voice cracked.

"If I let you, you got to promise you'll do something for me, huh?"

"I'll try, but I can't promise anything. You understand."

Secord considered for a moment, a slight frown on his lips. A nasty, raw bruise arched across the left side of his face from eye to chin. It glistened reddish under a recent coat of pain salve. A new bandage adorned one forearm.

Secord reached a slender hand up to his face and massaged a spot on his forehead between his eyes with two fingers. He closed his eyes and appeared to relax, fingers pushing his skin around in the center of his forehead in a small circle.

"Okay," he said at last. He dropped his hand into his lap and opened his eyes. He smiled. "Let's talk,

huh?"

Pete asked good questions and got good answers, at least from a newsie point of view. Secord spoke calmly, clearly, with good eye contact. He didn't ramble and didn't hesitate. Good, short soundbites. Good tape.

He talked about his crimes, his arrest, the lengthy trial, and his execution, minutes away. He expressed no contrition for the crimes and no fear of dying. Pete believed him.

"How do you feel about the legal system that has condemned you to die?"

Secord's knuckles whitened and his jaw clenched. "Do you want to know how much I hate those dirty rotten— *them*?"

Pete nodded, his throat suddenly tight.

Secord leaned forward a few centimeters, eyes fiery. "If I could get my hands around their throats, I'd choke the shit out of them."

Pete fought an urge to back away from the killer. For a second he questioned the strength of the partition.

"Listen to me, newsie." Secord's demeanor changed abruptly from cold-blooded calculation to a syrupy sincerity that made Pete think of religious fanatics. "I'm not the same man they put in here. I've changed, you hear? Something's happened to me. The man they locked up was guilty as hell, sure, but I'm not that man. They *did* something to me. I'm—"

"You have one minute, Mister Amundsen," a tinny voice from near the door said.

Secord stood suddenly and pressed both hands against the plastic partition. Pete stood, an automatic gesture, and stepped back in the small room. His back brushed against the wall. Despite the partition, he felt trapped. Bile rose to his throat and he concentrated on keeping his holycam steady and centered.

"I got two requests, newsie. They're last requests so you got to grant them, don't you?"

"No promises."

"First, I want you to uplink a shot of the Rock from outside, okay? So I can see it when I fry, you know, from the outside looking in? Okay?"

"I'll consider it."

"A live shot, okay? *Okay*?"

"And your other request?"

"Tell Andrea Morning—tell her I love her, huh? You got that? She looks *so* good. I almost got to fuck her a few minutes ago, you know? Goddam, she felt good—"

Pete screamed in rage and slammed fists against the partition. The clear plastic membrane quivered but held firm. A few centimeters on the other side of the barrier, Secord didn't flinch, his wild eyes steady.

The door to the small room burst open and two guards grabbed Pete's arms. He pulled away, still raging, and slammed an elbow into the face of one of the guards. Other guards came in the room and wrestled Pete to the floor.

"You see what it's like to get really pissed, now, don't you, newsie?" Secord shouted above the tumult of the guards' shouts and Pete's mindless roar. The killer slammed his fists against the partition.

"Rage, huh?" he shouted. "Rage! Rage! *Rage* !"

Pete found himself jerked to his feet, his arms pinned painfully behind his back, and shoved from the room. Secord's demented chant died as the door closed. Pete hit the hallway wall opposite the interview room face first.

"Assault is against the law, Mister Amundsen." Dorr bit off the words, glaring at Pete. "We have plenty of empty cells where you can cool off before we file charges."

* * * *

Secord took a few deep breaths, fighting to regain control of himself.

"Well, I sure blew that, huh?" he muttered aloud. "Damn, damn, *damn* ."

He paced in the suddenly silent cell, a caged animal, two mincing steps one way, two the other. In a moment, he sat on the cot.

But the newsie seemed pretty smart. Maybe he'll get me the outside shot anyway. Then—

"Somebody tell me how much time I got, huh?" he addressed the walls. "I got to talk to my lawyer, you hear me? I got my rights, goddam it. I got my *rights* ."

* * * *

Grunts escorted Pete to the shuttle bay, but not gently.

"I've decided not to detain you, Mister Amundsen," Dorr said, waving the confiscated holly cassette before his nose. "Yet. I'm busy. I have other fish to fry right now, pardon the pun. A half-hour from now, actually. No, we'll send our people around later to your office for a nice, public arrest. I'm sure your competition will want to get holly of that."

"I'm going to comm our lawyers and—"

"You do that," Dorr spat. Pete swallowed in a suddenly constricted throat, convinced the woman refrained from hitting him only with great effort. "I don't give a damn what your lawyers and our lawyers do to each other. I do know that neither will punch out my people like you just did. I don't like that, Mister Amundsen. Do I make myself clear?"

Pete nodded stiffly.

Dorr and the guards left.

Minutes later, in the shuttle-taxi on the way back to the One, Ivers commed Pete. "I just heard from Warden Dorr. She said you hit one of her officers."

"Look, I'm sorry I blew up."

"That's going to cost the company a bundle."

Pete sighed. Ivers' controlled, precise demeanor was a thin veneer over his anger. *Everybody is mad at me today*.

"There's more, Amundsen. Dorr says, after the execution, TSIN newsies are banned from the Rock forever. Now, that's going to take company lawyers months to reverse. And I think that's more important than saving your ass."

Pete heard the underlying threat in Ivers' tone. His job was on the line. There was nothing he could say.

Finally, Ivers shook his head. "What the hell happened?"

"Secord got under my skin. He's done it to people before, you know. In prison, in the courts."

"His celebrated rage, yes, I know. But what did he *say*, exactly? I mean, it could help."

"He said something about Andy."

"What *exactly* did he say?"

"He said—he said—oh, hell, what does it matter? It didn't make any sense. How is Andy? I haven't had a chance to call."

"Still sedated. I didn't get to talk to her. Look, it's fifteen minutes before the execution and we're pretty busy right now. We'll talk later."

And I'm stuck between the Rock and the One with nothing to do, my job in jeopardy and no tape to show for my efforts.

Pete looked out the taxi window and suddenly remembered that Secord had requested a live shot of the Rock. Not a bad idea, actually, even if it came from an animal like Secord.

"It might not save my job, but it's something."

"What?"

Pete realized he'd muttered the thought aloud. "Sorry. I have an idea. How about a live shot of the Rock, from here? Put it up behind Meeks or something. He's still on the Rock, anchoring live, right?"

Ivers thought a moment, then nodded. "Set it up."

* * * *

Secord looked at his entourage through the transparent partition separating the observers' gallery from the Bakery where he sat. Row on row of newsies sat, stood or kneeled, holly imagers pointed mostly at

him.

In a segregated gallery front section, closest to the window and sound insulated from the rest of the observation gallery, Warden Edith Dorr sat grim-faced, as did an Orthodoxy priest and Secord's lawyer, Seeg Weisler. The Weasel, as Secord called the tidy bureaucrat, remained determined to stay at his client's side to his final moment.

“You don't have to come, you know?” he'd told the man days earlier. “You screwed up, didn't you? Why torture yourself with guilt? You ain't the one getting fried, huh?”

But the Weasel had come in handy in the last few hours. Again, Secord felt glad the Weasel stood by, ready.

Secord let his eyes roam around the bare room, the Bakery, from his place strapped to the chair in the room's center. Restraints held down his wrists, ankles, shoulders, and waist. A band held his head against the high-backed chair specially built for the execution. The chair would be destroyed right after Secord fried. BereCorp Security wanted no souvenirs.

No, the room wasn't quite bare. On the wall to his left and right, he could see from the corner of his eye, two inconspicuous finger-sized nozzles protruded. From the one at his left, he knew, would emerge a pencil-thin energy beam. The nozzle on the right was the catcher's mitt, where the beam would dissipate after frying his brain.

A unique form of execution, this device, a one-time thing. Secord knew BereCorp's entertainment division had pulled strings, spent millions in bribes to get exclusive broadcast rights, and convince the Powers-That-Be that the public would benefit by the spectacle. Tens of millions watched the circus.

For Secord, it would all be over in a microsecond, they said. He'd feel no pain, they said.

How the hell did they know?

* * * *

Pete programmed the shuttle to park. Two hundred kilometers away, he focused his holly implant back on the Rock, keyed transmit. He also projected an image from his implant monitor. A blue haze appeared an arm's length away, resolving into the face of Everett Meeks on the Rock, pontificating to the masses.

“—in just ten minutes from now,” Meeks said, “mass murderer Dewey Secord will be executed—” He hesitated. The image of Meeks disappeared, replaced by an image of the Rock, Pete's contribution to the uplink.

“Uh, what you're seeing in your holly right now is an image of the BereCorp Maximum Security Habitat—the Rock, as they call it—taken by a TSIN cameraman from a distance—”

A cameraman? I'm a newsie, goddam it. But Meeks knew only what the producer talking into his left ear audio implant told him. Things were moving fast.

“Amundsen?” It was Ivers on the comm.

“Yes?” Pete tuned down the TSIN feed, upped Ivers image.

“We just got something in. It may not mean much right now, but I knew you'd want to see it right away.”

“What?”

“It's about Andy, about the attack.”

“What? What?”

“We got some holly from a tipster inside the Rock, a security grunt. Illegal as hell, but we got it. We can't uplink it but it might be useful.”

“What does Rock security holly have to do with Andy?”

“Just watch. Take a look at the timer.”

Ivers face disappeared from the tiny holly tank in front of Pete's left eye, replaced by an image of a room taken from the room's upper corner. A security cam.

Pete gasped as he watched Dewey Secord explode in a rage, whirl like a striking snake, and snap the guard's neck. He throttled the doctor, did something to the door, moving about the room in jerky, manic motions.

“Did you hear what the doctor said?” Ivers interrupted, tinny voice overriding Secord's ranting. “Something about the drug being ‘psychoactive.’ He lived through this, I hear. The doctor, I mean.” In the holly tank, Secord planted a vicious kick on the doctor's head. “The guard died.”

Pete watched Secord's rampage in mute horror.

“I'm going to speed it up here,” Ivers said. The images blurred for a second, then returned to normal speed. Within the security holly image, on a holly in the room, for the second time, Pete watched Andy being attacked.

Only this time, the attacking hands were not invisible.

“Look at the timer,” Ivers said.

Pete didn't need the confirmation. He could see clearly, Secord's body gyrating in synchronicity with the attack on Andy.

Secord had said something about Andy. And he said something else. What was it?

* * * *

Secord cleared his throat. “Uh, s'cuse me, Edith?” Secord, his lawyer, the priest, and the warden were audio-linked, but the newsies in the gallery weren't in the circuit.

Dorr stiffened. “Yes, Mister Secord?”

“I got about ten minutes, right?”

“Seven minutes.”

“Okay,” he rasped, throat paper dry. He needed water, but it wasn't what he wanted. He took a deep breath, smelling antiseptic and sweat. “I want to watch holly.”

Dorr twitched. “I beg your pardon?” Her spine stiffened further. The others in the observation gallery came alert. The newsies couldn't tell exactly what was being said between the condemned man and the warden, but they sensed something important going on. Secord stifled a laugh as the forest of holly imagers behind the warden turned like leaves in a breeze from him to her.

“A holly. You know, Edith? Like, I want to watch it go down, the execution, okay?”

“No, Mister Secord. That won't be possible.”

“How come?”

“In the first place, there is no holly available in—”

“Go get one.”

“—in the Bake—I mean, in this wing of the facility.”

“Hey, I got my rights, don't I? Huh, Weasel? Don't I? You tell the bitch. You *tell* her, okay?”

Secord heard the Weasel threaten to force postponement of the execution and sue the corporation. *Good ol' Weasel, still doing your job, huh? Glad you could come .*

In a moment, Dorr stood, exasperated. She barked an order to a guard, who left the gallery out a side door.

“You'll have your holly, Mister Secord.” Her face went red, voice iron hard. “It will be our choice. You will not be allowed to request a substitute. It will set up in this room.” She pointed downward. “You may watch as long as you're able. The execution will take place as scheduled. There will be no delays.”

The guard returned, wheeling in a portable holly. The holly imagers followed him as he powered up the unit.

“Yeah, but I get to watch what I want, right?”

“Within reason, Mister Secord. This is not a circus. You have four minutes.”

Bet you newsies wish I'd say I want to watch your network. You'd get big time ego-jack back at the office, huh?

Secord took a deep breath. “Link up TSIN, okay?”

Dorr thought for a moment, then nodded at the guard.

In the holly tank, the image of the Rock coalesced in miniature flickering blue. No audio, but that didn't matter.

“—Three minutes.” Someone was counting down to the moment.

Not a circus, huh, Edith? What do you call a goddam countdown, huh?

Secord smiled.

Then he focused—

* * * *

“Cut the image, Ivers,” Pete shouted into the comm. “Go to a commercial, anything, just get the shot off the Rock.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

* * * *

—Secord focused on the image of the Rock in the holly just beyond the reach of his hands in the observers’ gallery—but not beyond the reach of his mind. He felt a feverish heat throbbing in the polyp behind his forehead. His breath came in short gasps and his fingers rasped into the metal armrests against which his wrists were taped. He shut out the world and concentrated.

“—Two minutes—”

* * * *

“Damn it, Ivers, listen to me. Secord does things through live holly. A psychoactive drug, some kind of experiment. You saw the security tape. He used it to attack Andy. Now he wants to use it to attack the Rock.”

“You’re out of your goddam—”

“All right. Call it a hunch. Whatever. But get this: Secord asked for a live image of the Rock during my interview.”

“He *what* ?”

“Damn it, Ivers, we don’t have time to argue. Cut the goddam shot.”

* * * *

“—One minute—”

Secord dredged from his memory all the hurts, wrongs, injustices and transgressions ever inflicted on him. He gathered all the moments of desperate rage that had dominated his short, brutish life into the confines of the polyp in his brain. There, he condensed the powerful emotional mix into a dense ball of energy, a killing potential of intense heat. He solidified the volatile visualization of his rage into the image of a projectable force and aimed that force at the image in the holly a few meters away. He imagined the projectile force of his mutant mind as a force that would act on the molecular level. He imagined something like the energy potential of a star condensed in his mind. Controllable.

“Ten, nine, eight, seven—”

Then he pushed—

* * * *

Pete had been so excited, he'd forgotten it was *his* cam he was asking Ivers to shut down. “Sweet Jadu,” he muttered as he fumbled to cut the link. he stabbed at the button to sever the link, missed it, swore, stabbed again.

“Do you want to close this image?” a box on the screen asked.

“Yes, damn it.” He jabbed at the keyboard, fingers suddenly spastic. The cursor blinked and he waited, staring at his still active monitor as the countdown closed to zero. He held his breath, heart in his throat.

If I'm wrong, no loss. I'm already in enough trouble. If I'm right—and they don't change the shot in time, or if they change it to something live—

“—four, three, two—”

The image on Pete's holly monitor changed.

“—one—”

To a live shot.

—zero.”

* * * *

—and as Secord pushed with his mind, the image on the holly on which he focused his rage changed.

The force of Dewey Secord's rage exploded not among the molecules of the Rock, to destroy the whole facility as he'd hoped, but on a live image of the observation gallery. In a flash of white light, the warden, Secord's lawyer, a priest, several guards, and a hundred newsies vaporized.

It wasn't all he'd hoped for, but it was vengeance enough.

Secord had a few microseconds to appreciate his triumph before his brains fried.

* * * *

Pete had been expecting the call to Ivers new office for the past week, since the investigation officially ended. JAMES IVERS MANAGING EDITOR, the sign on the door to his office read. The door was opaqued, a bad sign. *They always fire you in private* .

He knocked, once.

“In.”

Pete walked in and sat in the offered seat. He took the offered joystick and lit up.

"I won't mince words with you, Amundsen. We've passed you up for Meeks' anchor chair. Connie Best got the nod. Sorry."

Pete almost choked on his joe. "But I thought—"

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You expected to be fired, am I right?"

"Something like that."

"It wasn't your fault. You had nothing to do with it."

"Yeah, right. I read the official report. 'Malfunction of the beam dissipation device. Reflected the beam toward the gallery instead of absorbing it.' And so on."

"There's nothing wrong with the official report."

Pete barked a mirthless laugh. If the director had chosen a live shot of Meeks or of Dorr, what would the official report have said? "Spontaneous human combustion, a rare and as yet unexplained phenomenon—" The director hadn't known what was at stake when she called the live shot at Ivers' frantic demand and there was no time. But that wasn't where the blame lay. Pete just hadn't been fast enough in figuring out what Secord was plotting. That was the problem.

But surely, Ivers knew the official report was bullshit.

"I get to keep my job," Pete said. "What was *your* price?"

Ivers refused to rise to the bait, eyes downcast. "You got a raise too, Pete. A big one." He named the figure, tone reverent, and waited for Pete's response.

For a second, Pete was afraid to speak. "They want me to shut up *that* much?"

Ivers shook his head. "You're being paranoid, Amundsen. The raise is compensation for excellent work—"

Pete snorted.

"—and, yes, because with fifty newsies dead, every network front office is desperate to fill key desks and keep key people from jumping ship. TSIN wants to keep you."

Pete had thought of jumping to AuroraNet, where Andy had gone after the Rock disaster. A-Net had moved quickly, offering her a writing job, the job she'd always wanted, and she'd jumped without a second thought.

Their relationship had gone cold after the fact. Andy had understandably developed an antipathy toward the physical intimacy they'd shared before. She still saw a therapist regularly. Pete, blaming himself for the disaster— *I should have known. I should have acted faster*—let the relationship slip away, part of his

self-punishment.

But some stubborn core of his psyche still controlled him, and Pete raged in his heart at the blatant effort by the front office to silence him. Sitting across a desk from Ivers, he fought to subdue his rage. His hands hurt from clenching.

“Any word on my tape? The interview?”

“Dorr apparently had it with her when she vaporized. It's gone. That's still the official word I get.”

The official word. Pete took a deep breath and lit another joe to hide his shaking. “But the security tape of Secord's rampage. We did keep a copy. Didn't we?”

Ivers shook his head. “We've cooperated with the investigation, turned over the evidence, as requested.”

Ivers refused to meet Pete's eyes. He cleared his throat and shoved several hardcopy sheets across the desk. “You'll need to sign these. There are certain stipulations associated with your new pay scale. You might want to read—”

Pete scrawled his signature at the indicated spots without looking. Ivers remained silent.

Pete snuffed out his joe and stood. “Anything else?”

Ivers shook his head.

“Do I get some plush assignments?” Pete asked, the sarcasm biting. “Lots of prime uplink gigs? Travel? Perks?”

“As much travel as you like. You can pretty much ignore the assignment desk, work on your own. You've been given your independence, Amundsen. I *know* you. That's what you wanted as a newsie. You got it. You should be happy but you look pissed off. I thought I understood you. Maybe I don't.”

“Maybe *you* 've changed, Ivers. I haven't. But no, I'm not pissed at getting my independence.” *I'm pissed that somebody thinks they own it so they can give it to me*. “I'm happy. Really. Very, very happy.”

Pete forced a smile, congratulated himself on how genuine it probably looked. He shook hands with Ivers and left.

At his desk, Pete keyed his files to access the tape he'd taken at the hospital weeks earlier and minutes before boarding the shuttle to the Rock. On a hunch, he'd refrained from turning over the tape to the investigators. Just a hunch. He watched again on his holly monitor as a man on the gurney with a pulped, bloody face was rolled in. He caught audio as a nurse dictated into the admissions record. “Doctor Jose Santiago, BereCorp Security, Medical Consultant—”

“Independent,” Pete muttered to himself as he keyed in the name, search mode. “The price of my silence, huh?”

He lit a joe and studied the file. The latest word on Dr. Jose Santiago had the injured man transferred under a tight security wrap to a military hospital out in the Beltway after the Rock incident. He'd be hard to reach, but not impossible.

Pete keyed the library into Santiago's background. Family, education, employment, financial, credit, residence, medical, travel, criminal records. He'd check it all.

Then he'd tap his contacts in the field, public and clandestine, corporate and personal, and use the many other resources he had to find out what he could. Then he'd reach Santiago. Somehow.

And that security grunt that smuggled out the tape from the Rock. He wanted it to go public. Might be an ally. Pete would find him too.

Pete visualized his final story, released anonymously—perhaps he'd give it to Andy—on AuroraNet.

“We'll see,” he muttered. “We'll see.”

The Joy of Jumping

The newsie stood in front of the Waeferer's Siding, looking like he expected company. He glanced at his wrist chrono, not yet accustomed to using his new company implant, which would have been evident in a slight flutter of his eyeball. He stood back to the wall, watching the anonymous crowd surge past on the runway.

In itself, his mask told me little. The mask was paisley swirls, a design currently in fashion on the One. It looked neither too ostentatious nor too austere.

His stance said it. Feet apart, shoulders back, arms loose at his side, head high: pickpockets and muggers beware.

Inside the Wafaerer, I eyed my new colleague on a small flatscreen security monitor behind the bar over the hunched shoulders of Stamper Clyde, tavern owner-operator.

“How do you know he's your boy?” Stamper grunted without looking away from the screen.

“It wouldn't be any fun if I told you all my secrets.”

“You're pulling my tail. Five says he walks away.”

“You're on.”

In a moment, the figure outside turned his back to the runway and faced the door, nose a few centimeters from the peephole. He stood as if expecting the door to open any second.

“See?” I said.

“Five says he—”

“You already lost five, Stamper. Open the door.”

He muttered, flipped a five-mark chip in the air near me, and stalked away. With a practiced overhand grab, I snatched the chip out of the air, pocketed it. As he walked away, Stamper reminded me of a bear in trousers and an apron, bulky and graceless. Broad shoulders and arms, too much hair, and he smelled

like what I imagined bear grease would smell.

There was a time, years ago, when I'd suspected Stamper was the Collector. That was then. I'm older, now. Who knows?

I watched on the flatscreen as Stamper entered the cloakroom alcove that separated the outer door from the tavern proper. The small foyer is used as a place where arriving customers can be discretely monitored for suspicious behavior, screened for weapons, and, if necessary, directed toward the gift shop next door, or a more suitable hangout, without disturbing the regulars in the process. A mask and cloak closet stood off to one side. A simple barstool sat near the inner door which Stamper's bouncer occupied during oddtime rushes. Even unoccupied as now, the stool subtly advertised the Wafaerer as off limits to petty thieves, pickpockets, and stim peddlers. But they still came. The Wafaerer had a reputation.

I watched as Stamper opened the peephole to speak to the new newsie. I couldn't hear them. I fumbled at the control panel just below the monitor looking for the audio pickup. The switches had no labels. I selected one switch at random, flipped it, and turned off the monitor. Damn.

No matter. Just before the flickering blue image winked out, I saw Stamper opening the outer door.

In the second or two before Stamper opened the inner door to admit our guest, I stepped around the bar and adopted a pose of casual indifference.

“—usually don't allow customers in during downtime,” Stamper spoke over his shoulder to the newsie tagging along behind him, “which this new law requires we now observe regularly, but—”

“But,” I interrupted, “Stamper owes and this is the payoff.”

“And you ain't a customer,” Stamper said, expressionless. He went back behind the bar to putter with glasses and bottles.

I took a step away from the bar on which I'd been leaning and extended a hand to shake in the old Earthome greeting ritual with the new guy. They still use the ritual on the New Denver Station J School on Mars, as I recall.

“I'm Pete Amundsen,” I said, “TSIN newsie and tour guide. Sorry I missed you at the shuttle bay. Deadlines. And you're—”

“Phil deGroot, New Denver Station School of Journalism, class of '364.” He extended his hand, the grip firm, dry, confident.

The kid had taken off his mask and tucked it in an inner fold of his cloak. In person and unmasked, he looked stouter than me but not as big as Stamper. His face was ruddy and fresh-scrubbed. Full lips and a pulpy nose flanked a new mustache. Intelligent, serious eyes peered from under pale brows.

“Top of your class, I hear.” I gave him my best smile.

“Yeah.” He nodded, didn't blush.

“So, welcome to Berenson Corporation Station Number One—which we locals call the One,—to TransSystem InterNews—which folks call TSIN, we'll be working together for a while—and to the

Waeferer's Siding—"

"Which we call the Waeferer's Siding," Stamper muttered.

deGroot gave me a questioning look.

"He doesn't bite," I said. "He just growls. Let's sit."

He nodded, silent, and let me steer him toward the back. I watched him from the corner of my eye as he looked around.

The Wafaerer is wedge-shaped, like a slice of pie. The back wall is dozens of meters wider than the anteroom at the front of the place. In places, you can almost touch the low ceiling, if you want to. Not recommended—occasional stains of unknown origin spot the tiles among rattling vent fans, faded and flickering light panels, and fire suppression nozzles. Tiny electronic things poke from the ceiling here and there, but that's another story.

As we walked to the tables in the back, deGroot took it all in. When open for business, the place is dark. It was now well lit, closed for an hour a day, per the new law, chairs and tables stark and shabby in the grainy overhead glare.

We sat, Stamper produced a pitcher of house brew and two glasses, deGroot declined to drink, and I just sipped.

"So this is where Adrien 'Doc' Kennedy killed Outlaw Percy Diego," deGroot said.

"Over there by the dance pit." I pointed to where Sila the Bod wiggled, live, five oddtimes a week.

"The Tilt of the Century, too," deGroot said. "And the Horiuchi interview. You did that..." He looked at me expectantly. I still had the tattoo, although the style had faded years ago.

"You're sitting where the hero himself sat."

He nodded, lips pursed. I could see him struggling to not show how impressed he was.

"Look," I said, leaning across the table, "you did your homework. Good. And you graduated from J school with honors and so on, enough to get you on with TSIN. Great."

I tapped a finger on the table between us. "Now, right here, is where your real education begins."

"I know it's different in the field compared to school."

"That's why they try to pair old farts like me with new guys like you. Teach you the ropes, see you don't get hurt, earn your keep and so on."

"I appreciate that, Mr. Amundsen—"

"Pete. My friends call me Tiger."

"Okay. Tiger. Friends call me The Rooter. Root for short."

“Root. A newsie name.” I sighed and got to it.

“Being a newsie is the most boring job in the world,” I said. “I think security guard would be more exciting. We spend weeks on end waiting for something to happen. Then—bang—you're up to your chin in trouble. You can't afford to panic, no matter how sticky it gets. You have a job to do, people depend on you and you have to come through.”

“If you don't,” I said, drawing a thumb across my throat, “you're finished.”

His eyes dilated and I knew I had his attention. I exchanged a glance with Stamper across the room. I'll bet he had our table wired for audio and was monitoring. He usually did.

“I'm ready,” Root said. “I can take the boredom because I know the big story is waiting for me.”

“Good. But what if you get a big story and you can't do anything with it? Are you prepared for that?”

“I don't get you.”

“Let me tell you a story.”

* * * *

I didn't want to cover the new art exhibit opening. Not my people. Pretentious stuffed cloaks. But what the hell. As dull as I expected it to be, it was still the most exciting thing that had crossed my desk on the FashionWatch beat in weeks.

The display was in a gallery called Montpelier's House. I'd never been there before, but then, more than two million people lived in the One's thirty cubic kilometers and there were many places I'd never seen. I took an express slideway. I wanted to get it over with.

A snooty waiter-type in an oddtime formal suit took my cloak and mask in the entry foyer. He tipped his head toward the room, his way of ushering me in and showing disdain for my presence.

As soon as I saw all the rich well-dressed and be-jeweled people milling about the room, I felt out of place. I'd put on my best suit, borrowed a clean tie from Benning at the sports desk and got some etiquette tips from Marks, whose father used to rent oddtime prom formals to high school kids.

It wasn't enough. I was a seed in a joystick, a fart in an airlock. And the way people looked down their noses at me before resuming their banal chitchat made me check to see if my fly was open. Somebody muttered something about tradesmen forgetting themselves among their betters.

My host arrived. Lane Montpelier, arts patron and among the richest people on the One, bowed with bubbling vigor. He produced a glass of something from a passing waiter and bestowed it on me. The man looked like his holly image, I'd seen it a few times. Short, fat, rosy-cheeked happy.

And rich. Independently. Not employed by or contracted to BereCorp in any way except to sell art to rich executives. And no links to the Collector and his mob either.

He introduced me to his featured artist.

“Josep d'Angelo,” Montpelier said, “is into spontaneous electronic environment concepts.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Amundsen,” d’Angelo said, voice windy, high-pitched. His formal bow displaying the bald spot spreading through short-cropped black hair on his egg-shaped head. An artist, of course, too poor to afford a hair replant. Small, thin-framed man. He had darting, weasel eyes under wispy brows. He looked nervous and I couldn’t help wonder where his probation officer was.

That thought, born in cynicism, got me wondering. Had I seen this guy before?

We exchanged polite chatter for a while, Montpelier dominating the conversation, d’Angelo offering occasional agreement that sounded sincere, me trying to remember what Marks had told me about polite conversation.

It didn’t last. In mid-sentence, Montpelier looked across the room, his eyebrows arched, smile widened, he excused himself, saying something about host duties, and disappeared. I was left alone with the person I’d come to interview. The artist himself.

I blinked my eyeball holycam on, activated audio, and began taping.

“So, tell me, Mr. d’Angelo, what exactly is spontaneous electronic environment concepts?”

Noticing the blinking telltale inside my eye that showed I was taping, the little man turned gravely formal. It’s a typical reaction among people who aren’t used to being taped for the holly. We could edit his stuttering stiffness, but I’d have to get more tape, ask some redundant questions, to get good copy.

Something about d’Angelo seemed familiar, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. I subvocalized several overlay programs into my tape that would give me non-visual readings our forensics people could analyze later.

“—didn’t notice,” d’Angelo was saying, “any hangings on the walls when you entered?” My attention had wandered, puzzling over the little man’s odd behavior and my inability to identify it.

“Uh, no,” I said. “Mr. Montpelier brought me straight to you and I didn’t notice, I didn’t look—”

d’Angelo gestured toward the walls. From what I could see around the milling bodies in the big room, they were unadorned.

“So it’s not a physical display, as such,” I said. “Your art work isn’t something a person can buy, take home, and hang on their wall? It’s performance art?”

“In a way.” He seemed to be warming up to the holly, forgetting the tape. Good. Forensics would get better readings for their analysis. “I bypass the physical. Art is in the perceiver’s mind, and that’s where I work. No two people see the same work of art, such as a painting, and respond alike. One will experience disgust and anger at the same visual stimulus that provides another intense joy, even ecstasy.”

“Ecstasy? Looking at a painting?”

“Or music, dance, holly, field- or body-sculpture, or other works of art. Art takes many forms, Mr. Amundsen, but its aim is always the same—to lift the observer to a higher state of consciousness.”

I couldn’t use this pompous crap even in a thirty-second clip. Even our mid-eventime ‘cast couldn’t use it.

“And you do this, uh, electronically?” I asked.

“Directly into the observer's brain, Mr. Amundsen.”

“Can you do that?”

“People alter their consciousnesses all the time. Nanotech, joystick, stimweed, that drink in your hand. We alter our brain chemistry to produce certain effects.”

“But that's chemistry, not electronics.”

“The link between the chemical and the electronic is less tenuous than one might suspect. I won't bore you with the scientific jargon—” *thank Jadu* “—but suffice to say I can electronically stimulate the brain to produce electro-chemical responses the same as those great art works produce. I've bypassed art and gone straight to aesthetics.”

“And how do you do it?”

Someone begged our attention. Our host had mounted a chair so his guests could see him as he spoke.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, gushing, “welcome to Montpelier's House—” a smattering of gentle applause answered—“where I hope to present to you the finest art in the universe.”

Montpelier introduced the artist who mounted a chair to another smattering of applause. I taped as the artist repeated what he'd just told me in nearly exact words, a rehearsed piece. Then he proceeded to answer my last question—how he did it.

The room in which we stood, he said, was wired with devices he'd designed which broadcast electronic signals in a tight beam across the room. Each beam itself could not affect the brain, but at the point where two beams intersected, things were different. At this point, the intersecting beams created in a receiving brain a stimulus like that associated with appreciation of fine art.

The beams, he said, were located a few inches above the heads of the tallest people in the room—six and a half feet—so no one could trigger unwanted stimuli. In order to experience his new “art form,” he said, an observer must jump into the beam.

“Why jump?” a middle-aged woman asked. “It's so—undignified. Why not just stand on a chair, as you're doing now, to experience this, uh, stimuli?”

“The beams,” d'Angelo said, “activate only when two connect with a human brain at the same time. The beams turn on and off at random intervals. They're also mounted on swivel bases, so their aim changes, also at random.”

“You must intercept them at the precise moment both are firing. Even I can't tell which two beams will intersect which point in space at any time. It's random, hence the term ‘spontaneous’ in ‘spontaneous electronic environment concepts.’”

“But still,” the matron said, “why not simply stand on a chair and wait?”

d'Angelo assumed a look of noble patience. “It's too technical to bore you with. Suffice to say, the body

must not be in contact with the floor when the beams contact the body. Like grounding, in electronic terms, if you get my meaning?"

"But no two people react the same to the same stimuli, correct?" I asked.

"Yes. Not only do I not know when or where an aesthetic reaction will occur, I don't know quite what it will be."

"Are these, uh, beams turned on right now?" someone asked.

"Even as we speak."

Conversation grew more animated as people discussed the notion among themselves. People waved hands above their heads as if to feel for a breeze. I saw one or two attempt a tentative, self-conscious jump. I had a hunch what was about to happen. Sure, I'd get tape, but I knew—if I was right—I'd never use it.

Montpelier ahemed for attention. "Mr. d'Angelo assures me no harm will come to anyone who experiences his new art form. No harm at all. He says not all will undergo an experience, but many of you will. Shall we try?"

And like a teacher encouraging children to try a new game, Montpelier got off the chair and tried a few jumps in the air. He looked marvelously ridiculous and I got it on tape.

Others, perhaps stimulated by the drinks and stimweed circulating with great frequency among the crowd, gave it a try. The giggling and guffawing spread and soon everyone bounced up and down, engaged in a new pop dance. No music, but lots of jiggling and giggling.

And I got it all on tape.

Something else I got on tape. Olivia Fram, TSIN Board of Directors Chair. She had been wearing a mask like maybe a third of the hundred or so people in the room. It slipped from her face as she bobbed up and down like a kid skipping rope. Before she replaced it, I got good tape.

At the time, I didn't think she'd seen me. It didn't matter. It would never air anyway, but the newsies back at the studios would pay a premium to see it.

After a minute of this raucous gymnastics, something resembling a scream or a moan, or both mixed, came from a woman across the room. Heads turned toward the spot like iron filings in a magnetic field. I made my way through the jostling throng.

In the center lay a woman on a sofa, gasping for breath. A pretty woman, late twenties, lie breast heaving, all eyelashes, white teeth, jewelry, and nice curves. And a rapturous pink glow accented her neck like she'd just had an orgasm.

I think somebody near me said that, or whispered it. *Orgasm*. Maybe more than one somebody used the word.

Montpelier and d'Angelo came to the woman's side and asked what had happened. She'd intercepted a beam, she said, and in an instant—she snapped her fingers—she felt, well, uh, quite stimulated. She blushed.

That was all it took. The jumping up and down took on a new vigor, with music added, as everybody sought the next thrill. Matronly bosoms bounced and dignified executives abandoned their frowny demeanor in the pursuit of ecstasy.

I'd seen tamer riots in the Johnstone Flats district.

Ecstasy struck another arts patron, and another, and another. I counted eight in ten minutes.

Then it tapered down. After twenty minutes, fewer people got zapped, and the ecstatic cries came less often. Maybe twenty of the hundred present had experienced d'Angelo's art form.

Soon, people tired of wandering around the room, jumping up and down here and there, trying to catch a sunbeam, trying to get high, aesthetically speaking. Faces flushed, they took to uncharacteristic loud banter, backslapping informality, and spontaneous displays of joviality. And heavy drinking and smoking. Stiff-faced waiters brought more drinks and the juice flowed. I didn't like it, the drink, I mean. It tasted like rotten fruit and looked like carbonated piss. But everybody else drank with the zest of Spiratz Free Union miners on three-day R-and-R.

I moved in on my host and the artist to get reaction shots. People swarmed them, abuzz about the new art form. I taped and taped, sure I'd never get airtime but determined to record it all anyway. If not for airtime, then for fun back at the studio. Nobody would believe me if I told them—I'd need evidence.

When I got back to the studio, I found a message on my comm from Fram: "Give me the tape. No copies." She'd seen me at the orgy. She'd commed in, but she hadn't returned yet. I couldn't get away with making a copy first, so I didn't try. I delivered it right out of the can to her desk.

That was it. The story never aired and I got back to being bored for a living.

Being bored, I had time to do some puttering.

This artist guy, for instance. I couldn't shake the notion I'd seen him before. Browsing my files, I finally made the connection.

Josep d'Angelo was an alias for a petty con artist named Joey Dwayne whose trial I'd covered some twenty years earlier while interning for a small local net in the Beltway, just after I'd graduated from J school and before I hooked up with TSIN. Dwayne got a few years' lockup on the Rock.

I followed his life in our files and discovered he'd gotten religion while confined, turned Orthodox. He'd also gotten an education in electronics. And he'd discovered a tendency toward the artistic. Some of Dwayne's paintings are still displayed at Beltway museums. They're not too bad.

Dwayne serves his time, sells a few paintings, then disappears. Three years ago, as Josep d'Angelo's trail picks up on the net, Joey Dwayne's trail ends.

I don't believe in coincidence.

Was Dwayne/d'Angelo pulling a con on Montpelier, on this rich herd of jumpers?

I began to research in earnest.

It took me two days to get to the bottom of it.

I found dozens of arts patrons who had attended the opening at Montpelier's had approached the artist after the show and requested private fittings, sunbeams installed in their homes for personal use. I found dozens had paid hundreds of thousands of marks each for those installations. Many paid in advance.

I found, on the second day of research, Dwayne/d'Angelo had departed the One suddenly, destination unknown, with an account worth something over ten million marks—

* * * *

Root whistled. "Ten million marks?"

I nodded.

"Jadu, that must have made some story. I don't remember it, though. When do you say it happened?"

"It didn't."

"What? It never aired? Why not? What happened?"

"I also discovered, late on the second day of research, nobody who'd paid up wanted anybody to know they'd been conned. I didn't know if Fran herself got conned, or whether her friends in the big money put the squeeze on her to avoid embarrassment, but the effect was the same. No story."

Root sighed. "Okay, I get the point. Politics happen. You can't get married to a story. And so on. And I guess you're right. They don't teach this in school."

I sat silent, contemplating the bubbles in my beer.

Stamper moved from behind the bar to sit at our table, third point on the triangle. He crossed arms over barrel chest and glared at me. But he said nothing.

"There's something you haven't told me, Tiger," Root said, voice slow, careful.

"Oh? What makes you say that?"

"The look in your eyes, in Mr. Clyme's. Yours tells me you don't want to say it, and his says he wants you to."

Ah, the kid was good. "Okay." I sighed. "A few loose ends. That woman, for instance, the first to go goo-goo over the sunbeam? She disappeared at the same time d'Angelo/Dwayne did. Files say she's a con artist with a long history."

"A skill," Root said. "And the sunbeams, the orgasms they produced? How did he pull it off?"

"I think the drinks were drugged," Stamper said.

"Stamper knows a little about that stuff," I said. "There's an aphrodisiac you can get if you have connections—"

“Which is illegal and nobody ever found any in my place.”

“And what about the devices?” Root asked. “There's a loose end. Did you ever get a look at them?”

“Yeah, I did. A few anyway. By the time I got to them, the artist had removed most and Montpelier had taken some. There had been thousands in the walls, as small as pinheads. I found a few, battery powered, still firing.”

“And?”

“My sources say they could have— *could have*—worked as advertised. But the devices were black boxes. They broke down to slag when tampered with. Which is what would happen if an artist wanted to protect a patentable secret.”

“Or if a con artist was pulling a scam,” Root said.

“I like your boy, newsie,” Stamper told me.

“It sounds like a con to me, Tiger,” Root said. “I mean the guy ran off with the money. That's a clue. But you sound reluctant to admit it.”

“Well, nobody knows for sure. I mean, nobody has seen d'Angelo since.”

“When did all this happen?”

“Eighteen years ago.”

“Wait a minute,” Root said. “Wasn't your point in telling me this that sometimes you can't get airtime even with a good story?”

I shrugged.

“So why are you still pouting about—”

“Pouting?”

“You're pouting,” Stamper said.

“I damn well am not.”

“Then what—” Root took a breath and I saw the light blink on over his head. “I get it.”

“Get what?” Stamper said.

“You're disappointed you didn't get d'Angelo/Dwayne, that you didn't get to do the bust story.”

“Listen, deGroot,” I said, pointing a finger like a nerve teaser at his nose, “I'm a newsworker, not a cop.”

“Yeah, that's what they taught us at school.”

"You need a certain emotional detachment to work this job. That can't be taught. You understand?"

"I think I—"

"*Do you understand?*"

Root considered for a moment. Then he nodded. He stayed silent, which convinced me he'd absorbed that lesson well enough.

Stamper rose. "I open in ten minutes. Clear out." He picked up the pitcher and glasses off the table without comment or ceremony and walked back to the bar.

"He means it," I said, standing.

Root stood and followed me toward the door.

Just as we reached it, Root stopped.

"Mr. Clyme," he said, "it was a pleasure to meet you."

Stamper grunted something without looking up from puttering with glasses and bottles behind the bar.

"How long has the Waeferer's Siding been open?" Root asked.

"Seventeen years," Stamper said.

Root took a step back into the room, toward the barkeep. He looked at Stamper intently, but he addressed me.

"Is Montpelier's House still open?"

"Closed right after the incident. Montpelier went bankrupt."

"What happened to it then?"

"It was a warehouse for a few months."

"And then?"

Stamper, listening across the room, looked pointedly at his chrono, ahemed, and slammed a glass down on the bar.

"A tavern."

"A tavern," Root said, eyes still fixed on Stamper. "Opened seventeen years ago. A place called the Waeferer's Siding."

"Which we call the Waeferer's Siding," Stamper growled.

"Stamper never found all the electronic gizmos," I whispered in Root's ear. His eyes drifted to the wall just above his head, looking for pinholes.

“Wait for me,” I said, nodding toward the door. “I’ll just be a second.”

Root nodded, brow furrowed, and stepped into the entry foyer.

I went behind the bar where Stamper had turned on the monitor. I looked over his shoulder at Root fidgeting in the foyer.

“Smart boy,” Stamper said, arms folded, eyes on the monitor.

“Uh huh.”

“You got thirty-eight seconds. I started counting when he left.”

“Uh huh.”

We waited, watching in silence as Root fidgeted.

Stamper started counting. “Ten, nine, eight, seven—”

“Come on, kid,” I muttered, fists bunched. “Come on.” Root stood centimeters from one wall in the anteroom, eyes fixed on the wall, fingers sliding along the surface just above eye level.

“—six, five, four, three—”

Root started jumping up and down rapidly, arms at his side, head held high. Trying to catch a sunbeam.

“Shit,” Stamper said.

I extended my hand palm up. Stamper flipped a twenty-mark chip into the air and I snagged it with an expert overhand grab.

“Never again,” Stamper said as I pocketed the chip and headed for the door.

“Oh, yeah?”

—End—

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