



Issue Three

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Contents

A Release, <i>David Taylor</i>	2
Night and Day, <i>Lynda Beauregard</i>	6
Dante's Pit, <i>Atk. Butterfly</i>	17
The Last Run, <i>Gary E. Weller</i>	20

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A Release

by David Taylor

A sharp, loud noise plucked Matthew from his drifting sleep. He sat up with a start and kicked off his covers. The blue quilt, patterned with Optimus Prime and the Transformers, fell in a crumpled heap at the foot of his bed. His dreams faded fast, pushed by adrenaline back into the veil of foggy memory. When his mind cleared he cocked his head to the side and listened, straining to hear what had woken him.

There were the usual nighttime noises: the chirp of crickets, the creaking of the house, the occasional car in the distance. But there was also a soft susurrant of sound adrift on a cool, light breeze that eased its way through the slightly ajar windows. This sound was nothing like the sharp noise he had awoken to, though. This teased at his hearing, teetering on the bounds of perception.

He clambered out of bed and instinctively grasped for the bedside table, expecting a sweep of nausea to clutch at him. The nausea never came.

This was one of those fortunate times that had come throughout the course of his therapy when Matthew did not feel the sickness. Every day, every movement, the sickness would come, and he would be bound to home, unable to play, unable to run and jump or scream and cycle. He smiled broadly. Maybe he could go back to school, see his friends.

The sound grasped at his hearing again, jostling him from his quiet revelry. He resisted the urge to go tell his parents and instead he listened intently to the sound. He was going to have his first nip at fun for a long time.

He gleefully adjusted his Action Man undies and glanced at the glow of his bedside clock. It was two in the morning.

He darted silently over to the windows and opened one all the way. The window creaked and groaned, its uncoiled hinges whining in protest at the unaccustomed degree to which they were opened. At that moment, the squeaky sound seemed worse than when he scraped his fingernails down the blackboard at school.

The susurrant gushed in through the open window and wrapped itself around Matthew. It was strange, like hundreds of whispers vying to be heard. He was sure it was coming from the back of the house, from the garden.

He quickly pulled the window closed again, fearful the strange sound would wake his brother or sister.

With the relentless curiosity and sense of adventure of a twelve-year-old, he decided to investigate. He could not get any more sleep now, anyway. He was buoyant. He wanted to savour every second that he was not ill. But also he just had to know what that noise was all about.

Could Mr. Davison and Miss Harris be having another party already? There was no loud, thumping music jumping up through the floor, shaking the bed, resonating in his stomach. There was no shouting, no glaring lights shining through the blinds from over the neighbours' fence. Even so, he just had to see if they were skinny dipping again - not that he had paid

much attention, though. Mom always said to pay no heed to the likes of them. They're young; don't know any better; living in sin, she said.

He padded silently past the beds of his brother and sister, checking that they were both still asleep. He headed for the bedroom door, as quietly as possible, careful not to wake them, for he wanted to keep this adventure to himself.

He slowly eased open the door. A slight creak was all the indication that it had moved, a metal chirrup that screamed defiantly to the silent night. He gritted his teeth at the sound and stepped through into the cold, dark hallway, slowly pulling the door closed behind him.

The icy floorboards tingled the soles of his feet and curled his toes. His jaw clenched at how cold the rest of the house was.

The hallway was as black as pitch, an ominous shadowland that threatened to swallow him if he dared look back. He stopped to allow his eyes to adjust but still it was too dark. There were no lights on anywhere in the house nor any windows in the hallway.

He felt his way toward the back door, running his fingers over the wall searching for doorjamb. And even though he progressed slowly and carefully he still managed somehow to bash his little toe into the corner of the telephone table. He jumped in alarm, but there was no pain, for the excitement of the night held his complete attention . . . there was no pain, so instead there was fun and investigation.

He listened for the sound again. There was nothing to be heard - no whispers. There was no sound from his parents' room, no escaping slice of light beneath the door.

He approached the door and leaned close, much as he did with his brother and sister on Christmas Eve, when their parents would be wrapping presents and talking in hushed voices. But this night he could not hear their voices, though he still felt a tension similar to the night before Christmas. His stomach clenched with both the cold and the excitement, and he wondered for a moment why his parents had not heard the sound either - they were closer to the back of the house than he or his brother or sister.

He continued on toward the little alcove at the back door. He grappled with the key rack and after an age of hunting he found the key.

The deadlock made a terrible scraping noise as it slowly squeezed out of the doorjamb. He returned the key to the rack and opened the door.

Matthew stepped out into the chilly night air, unprepared for what he saw. There were people everywhere. The garden was full of them. Men, women and children, milling about, pushing and jostling. Their hushed voices merged, forming a vast clamorous whisper.

Matthew took a step forward onto the cold concrete porch. Who were all these people? This certainly wasn't a party - he could not see his parents anywhere, there was no music, no Boston two-step. The next garden . . . There were people milling in the next garden and the next, even on the hill in the distance that he often rode his bike down. In fact, there were people everywhere that he could see.

As his eyes focussed in the bright moonlight, the people's features stayed cloudy. There was a strange, almost imperceptible quality to them, a faint yellowish glow that always seemed to be at the corner of his vision. He stared

harder, tried to make out features. It seemed he was looking at the people through dirty glass, their features stained and indiscernible.

As he continued to stare he noticed a cord. He noticed hundreds of cords. Silver, glimmering cords that streamed from each of the people and pulsed into the distance. They gave them the appearance of ethereal puppets with only one string remaining to control their movements.

And then, one of the gleaming cords snapped and whipped off, following its trail into the dark night. The spirit-form that it was attached to became as insubstantial as smoke and was flung up into the sky like a leaf borne upon an updraught.

Matthew let out a gasp of surprise. There were ghosts in his backyard. Memories of all the scary horror movies that had ever kept him awake at night came flooding back at once.

Some of the people at the outskirts of the jostling mob turned to face him. They raised their arms, beckoning. They whispered, begged, pleaded. Their voices seemed dredged from the bottom of their souls.

Matthew felt horror rise within him. Their voices were so sad, so desperate. He wanted to flee but his body felt rooted to the ground and his feet felt leaden.

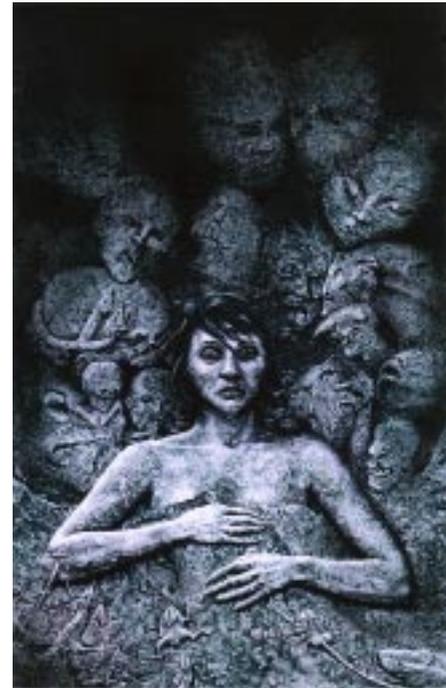
The spirits beckoned and whispered again. Matthew suddenly found the courage to move. He turned and darted back into the house with a scream, slamming the door shut behind him. He fumbled for the key, found it and rammed it into the lock. The deadlock slid home with a reassuring click, but still the susurrations of whispers drifted in, around and beneath the door and assailed his ears.

He turned to flee into the house, into the arms of his parents, where he would be safe from anything. He started to run, but before him, in the hallway, was one of the cords he had seen outside.

The cord's rhythmic glow was hypnotic. The cord reached back into the house. One of the ghosts had gotten in whilst he had stood on the porch.

His parents. His brother and sister.

He broke into a run down the corridor with the whippers chasing him. He rushed past his parents' room, for the cord led back to the bedroom that he shared with his brother



and sister. One of the scary ghosts had gotten into the house when he wasn't looking and now his brother and sister were in danger.

As he hurriedly tracked the cord he looked back. None of the ghosts had followed him. Maybe this ghost was going to vanish into the sky like the other, and then his family would be safe again.

The cord seemed to expand and slip about the edges of the bedroom door. He entered the room and quickly closed the door behind him. His brother and sister were still asleep, still safe.

The pulsating cord hovered past their beds, and he followed it. The glimmering rope led him to his own bed. The quilt was pulled up, and there was a discernible lump beneath it. Something was lying beneath the quilt. Something as quiet and unmoving as stone was hiding in his bed.

The cord's pulsating glow slowed ominously, and the figure beneath the quilt sighed.

Matthew leaned forward, desperate, yet terrified, to see who or what was in his bed. He pulled back the quilt.

A bald head.

Blue eyes, unblinking, unmoving.

A relaxed face.

He stared down at himself, riveted with horror. And all he could think of as the room about him dissipated was, "There is no pain." •



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Night and Day

by Lynda Beauregard

“Get up.” Hannah elbowed the comforter-enveloped lump that managed to take up most of the bed. “Come on, get up! I gotta go to work now.”

“Mmpf.” The lump replied. What was his name again? Roger? No, Roger was the night before. She only remembered his name because he answered her every request with “Roger, dodger!” Hannah shrugged and tapped her foot impatiently. A sun-browned hand crept out from the comforter’s folds and started to pull it away, then checked and held it cautiously in place. “Is...is it safe?” the lump asked in a tentative, if muffled, voice.

Hannah sighed in disgust. “Yes, it’s safe. I’ve been up and dressed for an hour now. Eighty-five percent of my body is covered. Now will you please get out of here? I’ve got to be at work in,” she glanced at the clock on her nightstand, “Shit! Five minutes!”

The lump emerged from his cocoon and started picking up pieces of discarded clothing. He kept his head averted, just in case. “What the hell kind of person goes to work at 10:00 at night?” he grouched.

Oh, this guy was pushing it. She made a mental note to find out his name, just so she could make sure he was never granted access again. “A level three Superhero does, that’s who!” she shouted at him, stung. “Now get out!”

The man jumped gratifyingly and scooted out of the room, shirt and shoes in hand. Hannah forced herself to stand still and cool down. She’d never impress anyone by storming

into work with her temper in full flare. She glanced in the mirror and smoothed her hair, then readjusted the pads that made her look like she had decent sized breasts. The skin-tight uniform was merciless when it came to exhibiting what one did or didn’t have, and there was no such thing as a flat-chested female Superhero. Hell, most of the males had bigger breasts than she did. The pads made her look like an average-chested female, and once adjusted properly, usually didn’t slip. Usually.

Hannah slipped on her overcoat and buttoned it up. Her gleaming white boots still showed, but that was okay. People don’t usually notice feet much. She headed for the front door of her apartment, noticing as she went that the lump had left one smelly sock behind. Hannah gingerly picked it up with her forefinger and thumb, holding it as far away from her as possible. Ugh. She decided to drop it off at the agency. She certainly didn’t want him to come back for it.

Fifteen minutes later, she was striding up to the main entrance of the Fortress, minus the sock. She contemplated her workplace’s name for the millionth time as the retinal scanner identified her. The Fortress. My, how original. It even looked like a fortress, complete with faux towers and gargoyles. She asked the Powers That Be about it once, and was told that home base had to look like that. It was part of the universal agreement. TBGs (The Bad Guys) had to be able to find and recognize home base in order to attack it on a regular basis. The main entrance doors swung open with a simulated creaking groan, and Hannah Hanahan started her work day.

A long hall stretched before her, all gleaming metal and blinking lights. The contrast between the inside and outside of the Fortress always made her pause. Hannah blinked and remembered that she was a solid ten minutes late, at least. She pelted down the hallway toward the confusingly technical control room, wondering if anyone would even notice. As a third level Superhero, she wasn't a terribly important member of the team.

Hannah wasn't even sure why she was a Superhero. Oh sure, it was all spelled out in Superhero Regulation Code 832-916-B, Section 3A, Paragraph 5. Any abnormality that could, in any way, be deemed harmful to the "normals" forced the bearer to be classified as either a Superhero or a TBG according to the bearer's psychic profile. Hannah squeaked in just under the wire. However, her abnormality wasn't likely to ever kill anyone, which made her a solid level three. Practically worthless.

"Well look who's here." The Philosophizer's sneering, self important voice cut through her ruminations. "Glow-In-The-Dark Woman decided to show up for work this evening. Miracles never cease."

Hannah glared at him silently as she unbuttoned her overcoat. She knew better than to attempt a battle of wits with him. He always won.

"I don't know why she insists on wearing that ratty old thing." Sensual Woman just had to get in her digs as well. "I want people to know who I am."

Snot Boy wandered past, slurping a chocolate milkshake. Hannah reached out and ruffled his short brown hair as he passed by. He was the only member of the team

that wasn't rude to her. "Hi Hannah. Have a good night? I mean, afternoon. Whatever."

Hannah blushed right up to the roots of her auburn hair. She liked Joey, a.k.a. Snot Boy, but she was not going to discuss her sex life with a ten-year-old. The Philosophizer laughed at her. Sensual Woman smirked nastily.

"You should try to get that effect with makeup, Hannah," she jibed. "You look almost average with a little color in your face."

"Shut up!" Hannah snapped. She stomped over to a chair and sat down, spinning it so her back was to the others. The strong smell of chocolate alerted her that Snot Boy had followed and was standing nearby.

"Not so good, huh?" he said with honest sympathy. "Y'know, Hannah, maybe you could try screening the agency applicants, instead of just letting them send whoever. That's what Mariah does." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him nod in Sensual Woman's direction. Mariah sniffed derisively.

"That's because I'm not desperate enough to take whatever comes along. There's a year-long waiting list for spending an hour with me. And that's just the ones I've approved." Sensual Woman smirked again and turned back to her meticulous application of nail polish.

Hannah glanced at her and felt jealousy raise its ugly head once more. Mariah possessed a set of big, round, pendulous, perfect breasts. They perched above a tiny little waist that flared out into hips that just begged to be grasped passionately. Her oval face sported high cheekbones, just defined enough to be strong, not harsh. Pouty lips demanded to be

kissed, and the whole package was framed by waist-length straight blond hair. It was the kind of hair that billowed out in a silken banner when Mariah stood on a building, surveying the sleeping and well protected city below her. When Hannah stood on a building, all her curly auburn tresses did was turn into a tangled mess.

Mariah had a “natural” abnormality. That’s what they called a desirable quality that existed in such abundance that it was an abnormality. She could turn just about any TBG into a salivating, blithering idiot, male or female. Her effect was strong enough to make her a level two Superhero. She could have easily bent Hannah to her will, if she wanted to. Sensual Woman apparently thought it was much more fun to snub her mercilessly.

“I like surprises.” Hannah muttered lamely. Mariah ignored her. Snot Boy shook his head and wandered away.

An amazing amount of people desired to have sex with a Superhero, some with reasons less honorable than others. Crafty TBGs enlisted attractive agents to extract valuable information at vulnerable moments and “distract” Superheroes while they did their dirty deeds. The Superheroes finally had enough of this nonsense five years ago and filed a Petition Against Unfair Practices to the Powers That Be. The TBGs had filed a similar Petition a few years before that, which resulted in home bases being required to look like a fortress. So the Powers That Be formed an agency to weed out TBG agents from the ranks of horny worshipers. It also checked for diseases, violent tendencies, and general compatibility. They arranged for Superheroes to have a suitable companion for every off shift, if the Superhero so desired.

Hannah so desired.

She knew they only wanted her because she was a Superhero, and she’d seen the looks of disappointment when they realized which one they’d gotten. But they always gave it their best shot, and she tried to make it worth their while. Besides, most of them seemed to enjoy the fact that she made them wear a blindfold. She did it to protect them from the blinding glare of her naked body, but they seemed to get an erotic kick out of it. Oh well. Whatever made one happy, she supposed.

Brank!....Brank!....Brank!....Brank!

The headache inducing sound of the warning klaxon spun Hannah around in her chair. She searched the digital map that made up one entire wall of the control room, looking for the location of trouble. A blinking yellow light caught her eye. Good. Yellow meant a Standard Terrorist Deed. Alerts were classified by severity, ranging from Minor Acts of Cruelty to horrifying Incidents of Global Destruction. Hannah had only responded to one IGD since she became a Superhero, and once was enough.

“STD in sector 4-F,” the Philosophizer droned, as if the rest of them hadn’t heard the earsplitting klaxon. He tapped a few buttons on the control in front of him, and the area indicated by the flashing light zoomed in for closer detail. “Evil has manifested near the hoary waters of destiny.”

“So you’re saying there’s a TBG down by the waterfront?” Snot Boy asked saucily. The Philosophizer glared at him, then punched some more buttons. A smaller screen near Hannah leapt to life and began spewing information. She scanned it quickly, then turned back to the others.



“The TBG has tapped into the power system somehow. We’ve got a citywide blackout.”

Sensual Woman stomped one delicate foot in protest. “My nails aren’t dry yet!”

Snot Boy screwed up his face. “Oh, get over it, Mariah. Come on.” He headed for the hallway, massaging his nose as he went. Snot Boy always had to prime the pump of his formidable weapon before leaving home base. Joey had the ability to produce an unfathomable amount of snot and mold it into any form he chose. He could also smother a TBG in it and suffocate him/her, which made Joey a certified level one Superhero. Hannah watched his pudgy little body waddle out the door and felt jealousy rise again. Joey made twice as much money as she did, and he was only ten years old. Life just wasn’t fair.

The Philosophizer stood up and followed him, pulling his rumpled cardigan around himself as he went. Hannah didn’t know what his real name was — he never offered it, and no one had ever asked. He was a fortyish, spare-framed man with graying hair, and he reminded her of an absent-minded professor with a superior attitude. That is, until he opened his mouth. The Philosophizer had the ability to spout philosophy endlessly in the most monotonous voice possible. He could put a TBG to sleep within two minutes. The rest of the team carried earplugs to protect themselves. A few TBGs attempted to defy him, but they had been driven insane by his observations. Not that they hadn’t been insane to begin with, but he literally incapacitated them beyond repair. They resided on a funny farm now, staring off into space as nurses fed and bathed them. This made The Philosophizer a level two Superhero — dangerous, but not deadly.

Sensual Woman minced after him, blowing on her nails as she went. Hannah brought up the rear. She tried to prepare herself mentally as she followed the others through a secret panel and down another glittering, blinking hallway. It ended in an elevator that whisked them up to the gargoyle-encrusted roof. Her companions proceeded to the hovercraft that awaited them, but Hannah wandered to the edge to look down on the city. She'd seen it in a blackout before, since that was a favorite trick of the TBGs, but the eerie silence still made her shudder. She turned away and ran to the waiting hovercraft.

The Philosophizer deftly piloted the hovercraft up into the twinkling night sky. Snot Boy was still considered too young to pilot it, and Sensual Woman had no desire to, but Glow-In-The-Dark Woman had asked to try her hand at it on several occasions. The Philosophizer always glanced at her in disdain. He clearly believed he was the only one qualified to handle it. So he sat at the controls once more and flew them through the darkness to their destination. He landed the craft a little more than a block away from the area pinpointed as the site of the STD. They crept cautiously from the craft and began the nervewracking job of tracking down the TBG.

Glow-In-The-Dark Woman flattened herself against the side of a building and proceeded cautiously. If a TBG jumped out in front of her, the only thing she could do was rip open the Velcro openings of her uniform and reveal her naked body in all its excruciatingly white glory. The TBG wouldn't be blinded permanently, but he would be feeling his way around for a few days. Fortunately, Nature had taken pity and provided her with eyes that wouldn't go blind at the sight of her own body. Now if the TBG happened to be wearing sunglasses, she was screwed. That had happened a couple times when the TBGs got hold of the work schedule. And if a TBG

overpowered her, she was basically helpless. That made her the weak member of the team, the one that always got tied up, knocked out, etc. so the others could look good making heroic decisions about who to save. She hated that part of her job. But someone had to do it. Hannah sucked in her breath and darted across an open area, fear making the blood pulse madly in her temples.

As it turned out, she needn't have worried. The team easily located the origin of the blackout and disarmed the bombs designed to kill anyone that tampered with the TBGs' work. It was a bit of an anticlimax, really. Hannah had never responded to an alert where the TBG wasn't hovering nearby, gloating. It just wasn't in their mentality to do something and not take credit for it. Even the Philosophizer was puzzled.

They rode back to the Fortress in silence and plodded through a relatively uneventful night, venturing back out only to chasten some adolescent vandals. Hannah's shift ended at 6:00 a.m. She wandered home through the quiet but now well-lit streets of the city she was committed to protecting. An empty apartment greeted her as she walked through the door. Hannah couldn't even have a cat for company, unless it was one already blinded by other causes. She had recently put in a request at the local shelter for just such an animal. A nice bubble bath with incense burning nearby was her only comfort, and she was indulging in just that when she heard the front door open and close.

"Hello?" She called out. No answer. She glanced at her watch on the counter and pursed her lips. 7:30 a.m. The agency rarely sent anyone before 9:00 a.m. But there was definitely someone in her apartment, which meant that they had either sent someone early, or she was being robbed. Hannah stepped out of the tub and wrapped her long bath-

robe around her body. She didn't want to blind the poor sucker if it was the former, but she didn't belt the robe in case it was the latter. She opened the bathroom door silently and peeked out.

Nothing. There was no one in the living room and the TV was still there. Hmm. She tiptoed out of the bathroom and noticed immediately that her bedroom door was shut. Hannah knew she'd left it open. She screwed up her courage and walked on quiet cat feet to her bedroom. She put one hand on the doorknob, and loosened her bathrobe with the other. She was ready.

"Aha!" She cried as she flung the door open. Her eyes went immediately to the jewelry box on her dresser. It was untouched. The bed, however, was not. A man lounged on it, waiting for her. At least, she thought it was a man. The fact that he was covered head to toe with black satin made it difficult to tell for certain, but the lack of mounds in the breast area and a noticeable bulge in the groin gave her a pretty good clue.

"Uh, hello," Hannah stuttered. She still wasn't sure if he was lover or robber. He acted like an agency applicant, but she'd never seen one dressed like this. He held out one hand to her, beckoning her toward the bed. Strange. Perhaps the agency thought she needed a little change, some mystery to spice things up. Hannah shrugged and joined the stranger on the bed. He caressed her face for a moment, then started to pull open her robe.

"Wait a minute!" She seized his hand before it revealed anything. "I usually make my, uh, lovers wear a blindfold. To protect their eyes, you know? You must be able to see me through your, uh, covering, so you might want to...."

The stranger shook his head and placed a gloved finger on her lips, silencing her. She reached out to embrace him, but he didn't let her pull him in too close. Hannah closed her eyes and sighed. She felt warm lips on her own, and her eyes popped open in surprise. She hadn't noticed the slit in the satin that provided access to his mouth. She wondered if there were other slits elsewhere as he covered her body with his own.

Oh, this was wonderful! What fabulous person over at the agency came up with this idea? She made a mental note to find out and thank that person profusely. Flowers, perhaps? Or would an adult toy be more appropriate? Dear Abby just didn't cover the protocol of these situations.

Hannah shrugged and abandoned herself to the experience. Her mystery lover made her whole body come alive, and for one moment at least, she was nearly certain he had stopped time. After their passion was spent, Hannah nestled into his embrace with a small sigh of satisfaction. For the first time in many months, sleep came easily.

"Dammit! I'm late again!" Hannah charged out of her apartment with one arm of the overcoat on, the other flapping behind her. Her shift started at 7:00 p.m., and it was already 7:15. A pattern seemed to be developing here. She just hoped The Philosophizer wasn't on tonight. She couldn't face his dry sarcasm right now.

This was definitely not her day. Or her night, if you prefer. It started when she woke up alone in her apartment. While it was unusual for her partners to leave early or quietly enough to not wake her, it did happen occasionally. Hannah

wasn't concerned. She was disappointed, however. She not only didn't know his name, she didn't even know what he looked like! The thought occurred to her that he might have some hideous deformity that he preferred to hide. Hannah decided she didn't care. She wanted him back in her bed when she came home from work in the morning, if possible.

With that thought in mind, she called her agency contact. Lorraine told her that her scheduled companion had been a man by the name of Toyo. Hmm. Asian? Possibly. She informed her agency contact that she desired his presence again tomorrow. Lorraine was a bit surprised at this unusual behavior on Hannah's part, but she said she'd give him a call. Satisfied, Hannah showered, dressed, and was almost out the door when the phone rang.

"Hello, Hannah? It's Lorraine, from the agency." Her contact's voice was a little strained and slightly apologetic. "I'm afraid I have some bad news."

Hannah's heart sank. "What do you mean, bad news?"

"Well, I seem to be having a little difficulty locating your companion from this morning." Hannah heard papers shuffling in the background. "I called Toyo and requested a repeat performance. He informed me that he hadn't even premiered yet. Apparently, another applicant by the name of Larry called him yesterday and, uh, told him which Superhero Toyo had drawn. I assure you, Hannah, this information is not readily available. Toyo expressed some, well, dismay at his assignment, so Larry offered to switch with him for a future engagement. Toyo says he agreed."

Hannah frowned. She supposed it was just as well, if Toyo was so against the idea. A quick look at the clock in-

formed her it was time to go. "So my mystery lover was Larry," she concluded.

"No, not exactly." Lorraine shuffled more papers in nervous agitation. "You see, I called Larry next. He said he wasn't with you either. He was home all day."

"Why would he lie about it?" Hannah was getting annoyed now.

"I don't believe he's lying, Hannah. You see, we have ways of checking up on these people."

Hannah felt the bottom drop out of her stomach. There was a moment of strained silence, then she exploded. "So who the hell was in my apartment this morning?!"

"Well, that's the problem, Hannah." Lorraine's patronizing voice grated on her nerves like fingernails on a chalkboard. "I'm afraid we, uh, don't know."

Glow-In-The-Dark Woman suddenly felt very vulnerable. Her hand was shaking so badly she could hardly keep hold of the phone. She slammed it down before she could drop it, then started pacing through her apartment like a trapped animal. Then she tripped over a chair leg and stubbed her big toe, which resulted in several moments of agonized hopping and swearing in various languages. After that, she had herself a good cry. When she looked up at the clock again, it was 7:15 p.m.

Shit.

She made it to the Fortress in record time. To her relief, The Philosophizer had the night off. Tesseract Man

shook his head and sighed when she ran in. He was another minor Superhero, only able to dazzle and confuse TBGs with his geometric figures and mathematic equations. Most of it went right over Hannah's head. The Fartmeister sat in the corner, eating baked beans. His bodily functions could kill at 20 feet, so he was not a man to be taken lightly. Snot Boy was also on duty again, which rounded out the team.

"Hi guys. Sorry I'm late," she mumbled with her head down.

"S'alright, Hannah." Joey patted her arm with one pudgy hand. "No one decided to blow up the world in the last 20 minutes. Hey, are you okay?"

Her head popped up in surprise. "I'm fine. Why?"

"I dunno. You just look kinda ... upset."

Hannah turned away and removed her overcoat. "Of course I'm upset. I don't like letting anyone down." She hoped he'd be satisfied with that answer. More than ever, she did not want to discuss her sex life with him.

"Okay. Whatever," Joey muttered as he moved away. Hannah stood with her back to the others for a moment longer, then brushed her unruly curls out of her face and turned around.

"So Tesseract, how's the new invention coming along? What does it do again?" Her voice sounded false even to her own ears.

A smile brightened Tesseract Man's otherwise stern face. "Funny you should mention that! I just made a major breakthrough in an equation that I've wrestled with for..."

Brank!....Brank!.....Brank!.....Brank!

"Damn!" the Fartmeister groused. "Now what?"

"A STD and two MACs, all in the same area." Tesseract Man's fingers danced across the control panel. "Looks like we have a very busy TBG, folks."

"Or a couple of them actually working together," Hannah breathed as she leaned over his shoulder, reading the information on the display. "Okay, we've got one little old lady pushed over it the middle of Main Street, a dog a block away that's just been fed a whole bottle of caffeine pills and ... shit, another blackout."

"Boring!" Snot Boy announced. "Why can't these guys do something fresh?"

"The caffeine-pumped dog is new," the Fartmeister observed. "That will be interesting to see."

Tesseract Man glared at him and jumped from his seat. "Let's get this TBG before he gets any more original, shall we?"

"Yeah, whatever," Snot Boy replied as they rushed to the elevator.

Once again, there wasn't much for them to do when they got there. The little old lady had already been helped to her feet and didn't sustain any serious injury. They loaded the frantic dog into a responding police car for a quick trip to the nearest vet. And the damaged power system with its ever-present bombs proved to be little challenge again. They spread out to quarter the area, searching for the curiously reticent TBG. Hannah was just about to give up and head

back to home base when she rounded a corner and spotted a man in a black suit with a black shirt, sporting a pair of cool Ray Ban sunglasses.

TBG.

Despite the fact that he was wearing sunglasses, she gave her only weapon a try. She ripped open her uniform and thrust her chest forward, hoping against hope that the glare would at least melt the sunglasses.

He smiled at her.

He took off his sunglasses.

And he still smiled at her.

Oh, shit.

He strolled casually forward until he stood a mere three feet away. Then he crossed his arms and struck the classic male model pose. Hannah's mouth hung open in shock.

"My, aren't we an exhibitionist," he drawled. "You can stop trying so hard, my dear. You have no effect on me. At least, not the way you think."

"Buh... whah... muh..." she stuttered.

"Cover up, dear. You're going to catch cold."

Hannah shook herself and complied. It was getting a little chilly. She tried to regain her composure. "Who are you?"

"I am LaserMan," he announced. He turned away and directed his gaze to a nearby trash can. Angry red lines darted out from his face and the trash can was reduced to a puddle of molten metal. "Impressed?"

Hannah gulped. "Yeah, sure. So, are you going to tie me up now?"

LaserMan quirked an eyebrow at her. "Why, do you want me to?"

"Well no, I mean, isn't that what you're supposed to do?"

He seemed to consider it for a moment. "Yes, but I'm afraid I'm a bit distracted at the moment."

Distracted was good. Hannah chewed her lip. If she could stall him for a while, perhaps one of the others would come looking for her. The Fartmeister might be able to get a good shot in before LaserMan noticed him, if the TBG was distracted. Of course, Hannah would probably be in the line of fire, but maybe she could hold her breath and survive it.

"You see," LaserMan continued, "I'm in love."

Hannah squinted at him. "In love? Is that why you're doing all this?"

"Oh no. This is just all in a day's work. However, it has brought me a lovely reward." He took another step closer to her. "I was so happy to learn you were on duty again tonight. I must admit that you quite enchanted me last night."

Stall, Hannah, stall! “So you were around last night, after all?”

“Certainly. But I chose not to identify myself.” He took another step closer. His nose was practically touching hers. Then her right knee gave out in fright and she pitched forward a little, bashing noses with him. He continued on, unfazed. “Just as I chose not to identify myself this morning.”

Hannah’s cognitive processes didn’t work so well when she was scared, so that last comment took a moment to sink in. When it did, she sucked in her breath with a shuddering gasp. “You!”

LaserMan chuckled. “I did not intend to reveal myself for some time yet, but I wanted to talk to you tonight, and when you displayed your attributes so forcefully, I was compelled to be truthful with you. By the way, my name is Ray. Appropriate, don’t you think?”

“You....bwah....muah....” She was having serious trouble with the English language. And she was blushing again. A lot.

“Yes, you have stolen my heart.” He reached out and caressed her face lovingly. “And you are the one woman I never have to worry about hurting.”

“Huh?”

“Your abnormality, my dear.” He stepped back and clasped her hands in his. “It appears to negate my own. I’ve always worried about what might happen when I, well ... lose control. I’ve been afraid of frying my poor lovers to ashes at a very delicate moment. But my lasersight has no effect on you.

And you, sweet thing, have no effect on me. At least, the glare doesn’t, anyway.” He started to pull her closer.

“Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Wait a minute.” Hannah cudgeled her brain back into rational thought. “You’re in love with me? You’re a TBG!”

“Do you think we don’t have feelings? I’m hurt.”

“No, but ... it’ll never work.” Hannah couldn’t keep the disappointment out of her voice.

Ray cocked his head. “Why not? I’m getting tired of being a TBG. As you may have noticed, I haven’t been putting much effort into my work. I didn’t even steal the old lady’s cane.”

“True,” Hannah admitted. “And to be honest, I haven’t been that thrilled with my job lately, either. But what else could we do?”

He laughed and swung her around, eyes twinkling. “Why, we’ll do what all good retired Superheroes and TBGs do, my dear. Consulting!”

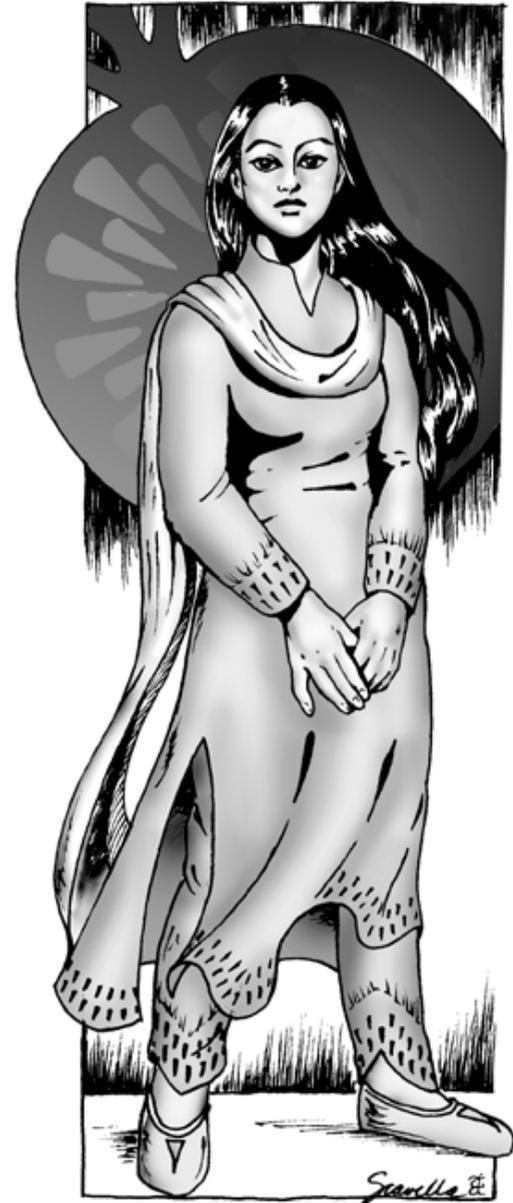
“You maintain a consulting job for the TBGs and I do the same for the Superheroes?” she asked incredulously. He nodded. “But isn’t that a conflict of interest?”

“Not if we do it right. The Powers That Be might make one of us work in a different city to avoid consultation on opposing teams, but that can be worked out. I suppose we’ll have to sign a lot of paperwork and attend boring staff meetings as well.” He pulled her close. His breath ruffled her tousled curls and tickled her face. “But it would be worth it, don’t you think?”

Hannah grinned mischievously and raised her lips to give him her reply.

Tesseract Man, The Fartmeister and Snot Boy arrived moments later and chaos ensued. Glow-In-The-Dark Woman eventually had to loosen her uniform a little, momentarily blinding her coworkers so that she and the LaserMan could escape. She called the Fortress later that night from an undisclosed location.

“Joey? Yes, I’m fine. I’m not being held hostage or anything. Listen, I just wanted you to know that I’m going to live happily ever after. Oh, and by the way — I quit.” •



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Dante's Pit

by Atk. Butterfly

Test after test with Dante was a failure. The scientists were at the end of their wits to make the volcano robot work properly so it could perform its task. After all, it was so simple, even a child could do it. Well, most children could. All it had to do was walk. The only problem was that it kept tripping on the slopes of the volcano despite its design and eight legs. The computer just couldn't master the task. Poor Dante wouldn't descend to the inner pool to take samples because it couldn't walk, let alone climb on the volcanic slope. It was not the same as walking on a floor in a lab.

No one wanted to take the credit for the idea of giving Dante a new brain, one meant to handle eight legs from birth. Someone suggested substituting a portion from an actual spider's brain to control the legs so Dante could move about properly.

It wasn't easy. There were lots of problems. Not the least was the small size of most spiders. The scientists had to think big. They had sense enough to not select a spider which spun webs across open spaces. Instead, they chose a trap door spider which didn't spin webs, though it was known to use webbing to fashion the trap door. They reasoned they could isolate that part of the brain and not use it. They only needed the motor skills. Since it was used to maneuvering on slopes, regardless of actual size, the volcano crater would seem like home to it.

And the trap door spider was large enough for them to work with. It still involved considerable micro-surgery to accomplish, just to get the area of brain they needed along with enough of the spider's circulatory system to keep that

portion alive. Then they had to wire it. Not an easy task. Many a trap door spider gave its life before they finally succeeded in wiring a spider brain to Dante's controls. When they finished, they had a nearly complete trap door spider attached where the computer once was. Their first efforts soon convinced them to remove what brain tissue they didn't need along with the legs and eyes, instead of the other way around.

Even with this success, their problems were only beginning. It wasn't at all difficult to see to it that Dante had enough food to sustain the brain. Just about any insect they had on hand would suffice. Dante's food supply handily fit in a single can with holes in the top.

The real problem consisted in keeping Dante under control after the brain was transplanted. They finally reasoned out they had to disable the robotic limbs until they had the robot in place. Until it was in place, they'd have to control its limbs by radio. Afterwards, they could activate the limbs for control by the spider brain.

The big day of the first test finally arrived. Dante was shipped across the Pacific to an island where its services were needed to explore a volcano. Dante was taken off the ship and laboriously moved step by step up the slope to the rim. The task took almost a full day. Several scientists quickly went about activating the legs so Dante could do its stuff. One of the scientists waited nearby with a radio unit so that they could maintain some control over the robot's actions.

It didn't work out that way. Somehow the portion of spider brain they put in possessed memory of other functions. Dante immediately went about digging a hole in the volcano rim. The scientist with the radio unit did his best, but no one had bothered to test whether the radio unit could override the spider brain.

It couldn't.

Even worse, the scientists couldn't get anywhere close to Dante once it was free. It wasn't trapped in a small confine as had existed back in the lab. The legs couldn't be deactivated remotely, or they could've taken it back to the States for rehabilitation. Most of them wanted to scrap the robot right then.

* * *

A couple, however, persuaded the others to let the robot go on about its task of digging a hole. They wanted to see what Dante would do eventually since it couldn't spin any webbing. If nothing more, their scientific curiosity was aroused; they had a larger-than-life model of a spider to observe.

True, the spider robot wasn't designed for digging. It didn't stop the spider brain inside Dante. It managed to make do with the metal appendages it possessed and dig a hole more than large enough for its new body. The spider wasn't bothered by its new larger size. It just dug a hole relative in size to itself.

After discovering that it couldn't spin a web to fashion a trap door, it moved about the landscape in search of a substitute. The scientists realized this with certainty after it

found a large rock and dragged it to its newly dug lair. Then, they were quite unprepared for what happened next.

Dante scurried out and grabbed them!

Despite the fact it wasn't made to hold items, Dante moved quicker than any of them thought possible, caught them, and carried the two it had captured into the lair. It managed to avail itself in the same way it solved the digging problem. Not all of the scientists were caught. Though shaken, most of them managed to escape and run down the slope to the boats to secure help.

They had more reasons to be frightened. Their work was for the purpose of predicting volcanic eruptions. Which is precisely what happened next. The volcano erupted with massive lava bombs and ash thrown out into the air amid all the smoke and steam. The ones who ran for the boats had no choice but to abandon their fellow scientists and temporarily leave the island on the boats. They weren't able to return for an entire day. It took that long for the volcano to settle back down into a safer state. Had the volcano sent out streams of lava down its sides, they probably wouldn't have been able to return that soon.

They were all positive that the scientists Dante nabbed were dead, having had no chance to escape from the rim. It was with a great deal of solemnity that they approached the rim to hold a memorial service for their dead comrades.

They stood near the site of Dante's hole. It was recognizable only because the lava bombs hadn't covered everything which stood near it. The head of the scientific expedition stood practically on top of the lair and spoke to the others of how brave their fellow scientists had been, only to meet their end at the hands of a mad robot. He barely uttered a

dozen words when muffled shouts came from within the rock he stood upon. Rock that he and the others thought was solid, filled in by the lava bombs.

The scientists were completely startled by the sudden good fortune. Quickly, they sent for tools so they could break through the sealed trap door to reach the others. It took several hours, but they succeeded in freeing their friends, still alive!

Dante had succeeded in closing the trap door when it determined there wasn't anymore nearby prey to gather. Then the door was hit by a lava bomb and sealed, leaving the interior with enough air to breathe for them to survive. Though Dante couldn't eat the scientists in its lair, it still had them in its clutches until its battery power ran down. Then they had little to do other than conserve their air and wait for rescue; all the while hoping the volcano itself didn't prevent someone from searching for them.

Dante, of course, was taken out of the lair as well; not that they wanted to free it out of humanitarian feelings. After all, it almost killed them, though its actions inadvertently succeeded in saving them. It was solely because Dante could still be outfitted once more with a computer so they could try again. There was no doubt in their minds they would. Nor would they attempt to use a spider brain again. •

The Last Run

by Gary E. Weller

“Zipper!” The ragged voice heavily exhaled through the comlink interfaced in his cyberdeck, the portable computer he used to access the matrix. “We need access to the Nakamura building, and quick. Their grunts are everywhere and outnumbering us. About five seconds to flatline if you don’t open those doors!” He could hear the sharp reports of fire fight through the link.

“You give me five seconds, and I’ll give you the world.”

Already within the matrix, the data pirate was in front of Nakamura’s datawall, the security protocols that protected everything inside the building from console cowboys like himself. The matrix, the global information highway, the network that tied into everything from satellite control to household environmental systems was Zipper’s first home. The real world was his second. With the right programs and a fast cyberdeck, he could access just about anything. He was god-like in this virtual world. Zipper brought up a vid-control utility. Immediately, his icon held a small rectangular sheaf of electrons. He could see that his team was indeed under heavy suppressive fire. With a quick thought and a little motion of his icon, a chromed genie, the utility derezzed into a stream of bit information.

He launched an old pass code into the golden datawall. Two forms shimmered into existence as the wall began to melt. Neon green samurai in full battle armor drew their swords and leaped after the chromed icon attacking their computer core. Zipper brought up his own defenses and launched a mirror utility. Within nanoseconds, five more chromed genies were surrounding his original icon. The

Nakamura deckers hesitated briefly, then began their assault. Images derezzed as glowing green katanas slashed through them. Data from the remote images indicated that the programming Nakamura was using was fatal. They were using videodrome, the newest in mind scrambling black ice. It wiped all memory in a cyberdeck and screwed up communication signals in the brain between hemispheres, causing the netrunner to have severe seizures. These guys were playing for keeps. He knew it would be all over soon. With this run, he would be over the top and able to retire. Wouldn’t have it any other way.

Zipper called up his shield utility. The icon glowed with the temporary data conforming to its body. With three remotes left, Zipper launched his static storm. The two samurai fought off the fakes his clones launched but instantly dropped out of the matrix due to the electrical attack on their cyberdecks from Zipper. The two deckers would wake up with headaches and find circuits fused together. He checked the time. Four and a half seconds left. He launched himself through the self-sealing hole.

Inside the Nakamura grid, the decker brought up his hound dog utility. The program would find the main core of the Nakamura corporation and flag it for him. He watched the black icon go. He looked down the long nexus of hallways and found them empty, definitely not the norm with Nakamura. The decker wandered down the hallway closest to him. Almost flying down the conduit, he got the flag from his hound dog and marked the position in his database. Then the inevitable happened - he was utterly lost. Less than three seconds left, got to hurry.

Frantically scanning the walls as he went by them, he finally found the control unit he needed. Going through the virtual wall, he found himself encased in black gook.

“These guys think I’m going to fall for a tar pit? Who do you think you’re dealing with?”

Again, the seasoned decker brought up his shield. The tar dissolved as it contacted the encrypted datawall around the chromed genie. Zipper looked around the room and brought up the vid-controller. The sheaf panned left and right and soon found the team taking cover next to his body, his real body. What were they doing? Oh well, got work to do.

He opened the doors and brought the sheaf back up to see his team’s progress. Lance had picked up his body and moved it inside. Good thing he installed that cellular unit. He would be toast by now. From this subprocessing core he had control of the elevators and the anti-personnel equipment inside the building as well. Touching the spherical core, Zipper had immediate access. One and a quarter seconds to spare.

He heard banging on the wall as he derezzed through it. How sweet, Nakamura noticed him. Zipper brought up his exit menu next to the sheaf of electrons in front of him. He selected to come back into the matrix at the hound dog’s flag instead of his exit location. Through the shimmering field of his derez, he saw the two manticores burst through the datawall. Close call, Zipper reminded his ego. Remember, you’re doing this to get the hell out of this business.

“Just one more run Zip.” They had said. That’s it. Sure it was. He had to make sure the Demolition Squad didn’t need

or want to track him down anymore. No excuses, no flatlines, no hidden surprises in the mail, Jack the Zipper would be no more. Fantasies of a shoreline on the west coast came to him, lounging in the California Free Zone sipping margaritas in the artificial sunshine of an arcology. It would be more relaxing than a datarun.

Coming back to reality was always a shock for Zipper. His senses boomed in his consciousness in nanoseconds. Lox’s big forehead was the first thing he saw when his eyes opened. The room was shaking unevenly. His body was bouncing with the irregular beat. Must be carrying me, he thought.

“Let me down you lousy excuse for a research project!” Jack, a.k.a. Zipper, demanded. Lox complied by dropping him to the floor. Jack purposely left the interface cables attached to the plug socket just below his ear. He knew he might have to crash the computer core to get the Demolition Squad out of this mess. Lox’s malevolent smile flashed. It made the big assassin look like a mutant. Ugly bit of hardware, he was.

“Zipper, do you still have control over the doors?” Sheila asked. His commander didn’t understand the matrix or how it worked for him. She was just an ex-soldier that couldn’t make her way through the new evolving world of the matrix. For quite a while he would have control over the doors, elevators, and security guns. The virus he placed in the core directed all those commands to the keyboard on his cyberdeck.

“Affirmative, Captain.” The decker responded flatly. He knew what was expected of him. Jack quickly typed commands and the elevator opened in front of them while the security doors in the foyer of Nakamura were being sealed.

They were safe, for now. “Access into the Nakamura research lab is yours.” Jack finished with a chivalrous bow.

She moved to the elevator without even looking at him. He knew there was no time for gratitude now, but she could have said something. Nakamura would be through the doors soon. Just because he had control of security, they still might have a back door to the protocol of the place. As the Demolition Squad moved in, Jack drew out his 5mm rotary gun. The whir of the electric motor grew loud in the small space. It was going to get louder.

The elevator went down 50 kilometers as fast as a bullet train. These Japanese didn’t waste much on themselves. The car stopped and he stood ready to access the main core if necessary. Lance, Sheila, and Jack stood at the sides of the car. Box and Lox got up in front. The two brutes were the biggest members of the squad and the most armored. Either one of the self-proclaimed Lords of Death could take an autoshotgun at point blank range. Then again, who would want to tangle with them? They were both bloody nuts, total cyber-psychos. The two of them had enough machinery hardwired in to run a small home production line. The super-chromed hulks were ready to pounce on whatever waited on the other side.

Sheila gave him the sign to open it up. Jack hit a key on the small keyboard of the cyberdeck and the doors flew open. Lox and Box flew forward in unison. They pretended it was football again, before the ban on cybernetics in professional sports. Their loud grunting was drowned out by the screams from the unsuspecting crew. Jack opened up behind them. His gun whirred and spat out over 20 rounds a second. He knew 5mm rounds didn’t do that much damage, but how about 60 in a body before they knew it? That was something!



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Lance and Sheila followed up behind him, blazing with their own fury. With weapons hardwired to his brain in both hands, Lance could cause enough damage for his own war. Sheila pounded the control panels with her shotgun. Her shrewd placement of slugs insured that no message would get through to the surface. Plexiglass shattered under her barrage. Computer consoles were rendered irreparable by her armor piercing slugs. Jack tore holes in the doors and walls. He heard screams from unarmed lab technicians. Gotta love the body count.

He heard more screams, these coming from the security that was waiting for them. The terrible two were making a wish with the last one. He wondered sometimes if they weren't over the edge. Lox and Box finished up with the guards so quickly that they really could have saved most of their ammo. But hey, this is the Demolition Squad, right? The blood almost made him sick.

Four gruesome representations of Nakamura security stained the floor. Jack tried not to slip on the blood that had been in their bodies. The decker looked around and the sight made him want to vomit. Those poor guys. Sheila's arm touched his as if to say, "Zipper, we've got a job to do". She was right. Jack hit a button and white light surrounded him. The sensation of falling came all at once. The flag his hound dog left was still functional as Zipper rerezzed inside Nakamura's main core.

Power fluctuations, incoming calls, dedicated satellite uplinks to Nakamura's ice field around Saturn, maps - all were invading Zipper's mind. He had to double his processing speed just to understand what little data he did see. Nakamura had a little nasty he didn't quite understand in one of the labs, a large energy weapon of some sort. Zipper felt the taste of

that power. It was frightening. He didn't even sense the minotaur behind him.

The huge program nailed him from behind. Zipper was feeling weaker by the nanosecond. He had to find access to internal security or he would flatline in a most disgusting way. Derez by a minotaur, yuck! Zipper fought to get his shield up before the minotaur had time to launch another attack sequence. It began to charge at him. Guess it didn't like genies in his maze. Go figure. Zipper jumped and avoided the full force of the attack. The decker then flipped out of the matrix as one of his fuses covered his ass. Better an artificial representation of his brain than the real thing!

"Fuck!" Zipper screamed, seeing the smoke come out of his cyberdeck as the fuse utility spent itself.

"What problems you Kid?" Box asked knowingly, his face still covered in blood. The visage made Jack wish he could derez him. The guy was obviously unstable. Maybe he just didn't care anymore. Jack hit the go button and went back in.

He was ready for the minotaur this time. Zipper pulled up his shield as he dropped back into the core. The minotaur was waiting for Zipper too. Pain lanced into his brain as the ax hit him. His shield dissipated most of the videodrome, but it was gone now. The kid gloves were off! Zipper brought out a vampire utility from the database. The minotaur attempted to strike the invader again with the ice-encrusted ax, but the veteran decker was too quick. Landing deftly, he launched the vampire directly at the minotaur, a direct hit. The vampire would soon read, rewrite, and record the videodrome from the minotaur and derez the son-of-a-microchip.

He went back to the core with tenacity. The research records had to be in the central core somewhere. Where were they? Zipper began to scroll past volumes of data, fervently trying to find Nakamura's new autorifle design. Of course, any extra data he could score would pay for upgrades. He could use some more memory. He increased the processing speed more. No! Margaritas in the sunshine. A safe haven. No minotaurs, no neon green samurai, no Demolition Squad, no flatlines, no more dataruns. This is the last one, Zipper.

The paydata came up. Zipper downloaded the specifications and collected his vampire. He touched the core once more and injected a virus he custom made for Nakamura. The system would crash in about 10 seconds. All too soon. He would be back in the real world again. All too soon he would be richer than he had been in a while. All too soon he would be in California. All too soon.

Jack opened his eyes and saw blackness all around him. He was sure he jacked out safely, but one never knew. These guys could be real tricky sometimes. He looked down at himself. He saw his arms. His meat arms. He wondered where his team was. Carefully, he looked around, but he couldn't see anything in the pitch blackness. Then the red glow of the backup lights flared, nearly blinding him.

"You got the paydata Zipper?" Sheila asked professionally. Her narrow face looked like it was covered in blood. He had to look away. He wasn't sure he could handle that.

"Affirmative Captain." He managed. "It's all right in here." He smiled, patting his deck. The lumbering giants helped up the slumped decker. Lox eyed him with an evil glance. Jack shrugged him off.

"I can get up on my own, death merchant." he scoffed. Lox smiled at him evilly, a perfect clone of his twin brother. The netrunner shivered inwardly, knowing not to show his feelings about the two beasts. He was an information pirate, not a cold-blooded killer. He secretly wished the two super-chromed behemoths would die.

"Move out." Lance commanded them, "We have a long climb ahead of us. The power's out in the lift." Lance was already through the top of the elevator by the time Jack got there. He had Lox following him, just in case something happened. Zipper was worried even if nothing happened. Lance was a lug-head anyway. Too many boosters for him, that's for sure. All too soon.

"Captain," Lance started abruptly. "My internals are picking up magnetic fluctuations that are off the scale."

"What did you do in there Zipper?" Sheila hissed. He caught the concerned look on her face and immediately felt guilty. It was like looking at his mother when he rewired the trideo set. All he did was his job.

"I crashed the system, just like you ordered. I got the paydata and backups in memory. It's shielded, don't worry." He added after catching a fierce look from Lance.

"Captain, it looks serious. Grand magnitude, potentially dangerous." Lance reported to her. "We had better pick up the pace if we are going to get out of here with any kind of safety." Lance added professionally. That's why he's second in command, Jack thought. While on the job, his humor was decidedly off-line.

“Lox,” Sheila ordered urgently, “carry the kid. Box move out! Lance and I can take care of ourselves.” The big cybergoon moved closer to the decker. Jack hated feeling like a hindrance, but the Captain was right. He would slow the group’s movement rate. He climbed up, grabbing hold of the big cyborg’s neck.

“Hold tight kid, we’re going up pretty quick. Wouldn’t want to see you go splat in the lift down there.” Lox chuckled malevolently. Jack was feeling more uncomfortable than ever. Of course, the duo’s accents increased their effect of terror. Get the mutant out on the net and Zipper could devastate him. He could rule his mind. He could make him understand his true power. He could show them all. The squad moved out.

Within minutes, they were back at the main entrance doors. Bullet holes laced the wrinkled metal. There was a small wedge between the connecting doors as if they were trying to open them by brute force. They didn’t succeed. The Nakamura guard was still standing there, hands locked between the elevator doors. His blood ran down the sides of the bent, twisted metal, forming a pool on floor. From his position at the top of the cable, Box jumped to the small doorjamb inside the shaft. Boosted strength and enhanced muscle weave in his calves helped him hold on to a space barely big enough for his toes.

A quick motion from the ex-goaltender and the doorway was clear. Rounds pelted the huge man, causing sparks to fly. Jack looked up and could see Box smiling. He knew the twins enjoyed tearing their enemies limb from limb. Box rushed forward in a blur. Lox, still carrying Zipper, also jumped from the cable. His hands embedded themselves inside the elevator shaft creating their own holds. A terrifying vision of his head cracked open on the car below stormed through Jack’s mind. The decker shook it off. He had to hang on.

Lance and Sheila held on to the swinging cable, unable to use their weapons. Lox formed new holes in the side of the shaft as he methodically climbed up to the door. The fire fight ended in a scream and an agonizing ripping sound. Jack cringed hearing the noise, not wanting to know what it looked like. The Lords of Death knew their work and did it well. Lox leaped through the open doorway, landing deftly on his feet. He hadn’t informed his passenger of the maneuver and Jack nearly lost his grip on the man’s neck. Jack removed himself, annoyed. He remained quiet, not wanting to get under Lox’s skin.

The red flood lights filled the foyer of the office building. Lance and Sheila burst through the open doorway bringing their weapons on-line. Lance, with his two hardwired 10mm pistols, swept the area, looking for survivors. Lox slapped a super-chromed hand on his brother’s shoulder and deep, baritone laughter escaped from both of them. They looked at the small body of the decker and grinned. Disgusted, he smiled back and raised his middle finger to them. He knew he would be out of their lives all too soon. Their laughter increased. Sheila probed the place with the painting laser on her autoshotgun.

Jack looked around at the disheveled office. It looked as if a bomb had gone off. Pieces of furniture, people and equipment were scattered haphazardly all over the floor. Some of the remains were stuck in the walls. Sheila looked confused. She didn’t recognize this kind of carnage. Lance holstered his weapons and grabbed an instrument from the hidden compartment in his hip. White light filled his face. Zipper thought it made Lance look more ghost-like than he already did.

“Captain, I think you had better look at this.” Lance requested tensely. Sheila walked over and joined him in the

white light of the scanner. Her stern face became more ashen. She looked like she would faint. This was serious.

“Box! Lox!” Sheila barked. “Take the perimeter, secure this area. Zipper see if you can find out what is going on in the matrix! I don’t understand what gives here.” She spoke softly to Lance. “The uplink doesn’t seem to be working right on the scanner. Compass directions from LandSat aren’t making any sense.”

“Have you ever seen what happens to a compass in a magnetic field, Captain?” Lance asked her. Sheila shook her head, brow wrinkling in a furrow. “You see,” Lance explained, “The magnet is trying to align itself from north to south, magnetically. In a magnetic field, north and south keep changing so you never get a bearing on magnetic north. That’s what seems to be happening here.”

Jack hit the go button on the deck. The usual sensation of falling into the matrix was replaced by static. Some kind of jamming frequency. Zipper tried to reconfigure the signal, but still couldn’t link with the matrix.

“Perimeter’s tidy Cap’n.” Lox reported, bowing deeply.

“All the sentries are null and void. They’re all in a mess about.” Box followed arcing his arm around the room.

“Matrix is inaccessible to me at this juncture Captain. Some kind of weird jamming going on with my cellular link.” Jack announced candidly.

The Demolition Squad stood befuddled. Lance and Sheila tried vainly to make sense of the scanner. Lox and Box

checked internal weapons and biomonitors. Jack broke out the tool kit from the bag he used for his cyberdeck. Lance came up with the idea of going outside. He figured that the resonance would be less of a problem out of the building. Thunder boomed, nearly knocking Jack to the ground.

“Still not functioning properly Captain.” Lance muttered grimly. “But I do have a fix on something. The air quality has jumped to over 30% of normal.” Rain started falling outside. It always rained. Jack always hated it. On rainy days he would jack into his Tandy/Mushimi Flyer and cruise the net. A cool, gusty breeze flowed in through the open doors.

“That’s ridiculous Lance,” Jack blurted. “It would take air purifiers nearly a day and a half for that to happen in a confined space.” Glaring eyes pierced into Jack. Lance was not pleased with the information that Jack volunteered. Lightning lit up the office briefly, contrasting the constant red glow from the emergency lights. Lance’s silhouette briefly appeared on the vaulted ceiling of the office. The windows shattered at the deafening blow.

“Zipper’s right, Lance. What is wrong with the thing?” Sheila demanded. Box and Lox, sauntered out, crunching glass beneath their feet.

“Cap’n,” The gargantuans said in unison, motioning for her to come further out in the street. The glow of the arclamps lit up their chrome bodies, reflecting on the building. Sheila walked out, annoyed that they were apparently just staring up into the sky. She joined their gaze, then let out an audible gasp.

“Zipper ... Lance,” she called the two over to where the rest of the group was. “I think this might explain the air

quality discrepancy.” She said as she pointed skyward. “And a lot of other things.”

The two of them looked up and were struck with bewilderment. The familiar grey clouds churned as if they were in a blender. Multicolored lightning arced across the sky. The storm intensified. Whipping wind beat down upon the group. Jack shielded his eyes from the blistering wind. Box and Lox stood in utter amazement.

“The magnetic field is no better out here!” Lance yelled, trying to get Sheila’s attention. He failed. Jack listened intently, not wanting to end up as a stain on the sidewalk. “In fact,” Lance continued, “it’s getting a whole lot worse, Captain. Captain!” Lance tried finally reaching out and grabbing her arm.

“What!” she spat, nearly knocking Lance on his butt. “I’m sorry Lance,” she apologized, “I guess I wasn’t here. Fine then, if it’s getting worse, get to the van. Move out!” Box just stood there, fascinated by the technicolor storm. Soon, even he realized that it was safer, for the moment, with the group.

The van was three blocks away. Sheila nearly lost her lunch when the group got there. Half a meter in front of the van a form wriggled toward her. A man had been cut cleanly in half and was bleeding heavily. Intestines trailed behind him leaving a bloody path. He reached out to Sheila and their eyes locked.

“Help me.” the man pleaded. Sheila aimed and fired her autoshotgun until it was empty. Lance came up behind her and took the smoking shotgun out of her hands. For the first time since he started working for the Demolition Squad, the netrunner saw his captain shake in fear. Lance took her to the

passenger side of the Miata/Aerostar and put her in the seat. Jack fired up the wall of electronics in the back of the van. Box and Lox took up the two turrets on either side of him. Lance started up the van and took off down the street.

Jack plugged his cyberdeck into the flashing, beeping altar in front of him and downloaded the recorded information. Looking around the bulk of Lox, he watched Sheila slowly come back to herself. She reached for the copilot’s keyboard and began to punch keys in a flurry of motion. Zipper matched her movements with his own keystrokes.

“My cellular link is still jammed.” Zipper called out.

“Access to LandSat is also unavailable.” Sheila reported. “Better keep her on the ground for now.” Sheila knew how hazardous it was to fly the vector-thrust vehicle around the multitude of buildings in the sprawl without satellite guidance. That’s how she got her new left arm. The flesh one was destroyed in a collision during a landing procedure. She was lucky, and she knew it. Lance complied and kept the van more or less near the surface of the road.

Flipping a switch, Zipper’s own console lit up. “Radar shows the skies empty Captain. Theoretically, we could go airborne, although the storm is giving me some interference.”

Sheila sat contemplating. “All right Zipper, patch in the radar to the HUD on my side. Lance you know what to do. Strap in everyone. Looks like it’s going to be a bumpy ride.” A few keystrokes and the radar images from Zipper’s screen were mirrored on the passenger side. Clicks of harnesses filled the van. Zipper was relieved. He didn’t want anybody flying up against him when Lance angled off into the skyway. A face full of electronics wasn’t his favorite sensation.

Lance engaged the Rolls Royce engines, and the van abruptly rose at a 25 degree angle. He grazed the edge of a rooftop and glanced at Sheila. Lance decided that was a big mistake after catching her look. Finally, he leveled the van off at 300 feet so he could maneuver between the monolithic superscrapers, not trusting the radar.

“All of them down there are looking up. They’re not firing at us at all. They’re just watching the storm.” Box murmured in amazement. He and Zipper watched the viewscreen intently. A hard rapping on the roof brought the two of them out of their trance. They were entering the storm.

“Zipper, adjust the stabilizers!” Sheila exclaimed, breathing heavily. The van was being bombarded by the storm’s wind and rain. Lightning flashed in front of them, nearly blinding Lance. Zipper felt his guts twisting in helixes as Lance maneuvered the van around the bolts of lightning. Zipper’s fingers flew across the keyboard, trying to stabilize the Miata.

“How did we end up in the middle of this anyway Lance?” Zipper screamed spitefully. “I mean, aren’t we trying to avoid it?”

“The storm engulfed us, kid!” Lance emphasized ‘kid’. He knew Zipper hated it. “I didn’t intentionally say to myself, Lance let’s really rock their world and drive right into the mother.”

“Stop it! Both of you.” Sheila roared. “This isn’t going to get us anywhere. Especially if you two can’t work together to get this van stabilized.”

They both nodded in silent compliance. Zipper ran equations on fuel compensation and expulsion ratios to the

stabilizers. The van leveled off. He wiped the sweat off of his forehead in relief. The radar showed the storm getting thicker. The research and development building must have been in the eye of the storm. Zipper looked again at the screen and his eyes opened in disbelief.

“Captain, we just lost the radar. Everything is echoing around us.” Zipper exclaimed. Lance pulled up to get out of the maze of buildings, even though he couldn’t see them.

“That isn’t all,” Lance boomed. “The attitude sensor is gone. There is no way to tell if we are level or not. We could be heading straight into a building, or the ground.”

Sheila stiffened. A new right arm might not be bad, but she didn’t really want one. Thunder resounded inside the small space. Zipper tried desperately to stabilize the van, but he didn’t know the angle of attitude.

The van lurched upward as it scraped by an antenna. The scratching metal made Zipper wince with pain. A klaxon went off in the cab. LED’s marked the port side gunpod. It was out of commission. Zipper raced to input his commands to the system, trying to get the van stabilized. Manually entering the data into the autogyro, he initialized a stability subroutine into the system. Damage control schematics flashed by Zipper on the screen. The port gunpod and a lot of armor had been sheared off by the antenna. Basing the angles at the point of impact, Zipper pumped adjustments into the stabilization sub-routine.

“What the hell are you doing, kid!” Lance bellowed as Zipper seized control of the van. Zipper didn’t bother to answer. He secretly prayed that his adjustments were correct. Zipper didn’t want to be a grease spot on the pavement just

yet. There were some margaritas with his name on them in California. The decker cut off the annoying klaxon with a few keystrokes. More progress made.

A slight hiss came from the van as the cabin became pressurized. "We're going up." Zipper announced flatly. Murmurs of alarm passed through the Demolition Squad. The kid had never pulled something like this. Arcing the van upward even more, Zipper felt the strain the afterburners were putting on him. Holding himself with his arms on the small table in front of him, he watched the simulation on the screen.

"Zipper, you little maggot," Lance screamed. "I'll give you exactly five seconds to give me control of my ship, or I'm going to rip those expensive studs out of your cranium and wear them around my neck as a war trophy!" Zipper knew he was serious. He heard Lance unbuckle the seat restraint system.

"Five."

Zipper watched the simulation. As the crew climbed upward, the radar was getting a little more clear. He put new coordinates into the autopilot. The engines screamed in compliance.

"Four."

He heard the familiar click and hum of Lance bringing the pistol on-line. Zipper reestablished the attitude of the van, making it level, or what he thought was level. LandSat still wasn't giving a clear signal to the radar systems. Zipper mentally reworked the algorithms.

"Three."

Zipper heard Lance get up out of the pilot's seat. He felt the trained assassin staring at the back of his head. Zipper knew Lance wouldn't shoot him where the bullet would damage the equipment. He injected the commands and new equations into the system. His eyes never left the fuzzy screen.

"Two."

Zipper kept at the keyboard in front of him. Why wasn't LandSat responding? Why wasn't Sheila stopping Lance? Zipper entered the pass codes for the old military back door. It was sloppy, but that's the way the military worked. Lance was a prime example - in a crisis you don't blow away your only netrunner. Sloppy.

"One."

Zipper felt Lance's presence behind him. Cold steel was firmly placed against his temple. Visions of his brains scattered all over Lox rushed through his mind. It could be the only way he would get any brains of his own. Jack laughed. No margaritas after all, but at least it was his last run. What was that about half a loaf?

The screen flickered, then cleared. Zipper smiled in satisfaction. That old military code actually did work. "Radar and LandSat on-line Captain." He reported. He looked up at Lance and saw the amazed look in the man's eyes. Then Lance turned on his heel and ran back to the pilot's chair. Zipper looked back after him and suddenly realized that Lance was truly going to kill him. Sheila didn't protest because she thought it was best for the team. Could he trust any of them? A resounding 'no' echoed in the decker's mind. Zipper knew he couldn't trust them at all. He was on his own. He always was.

“Dandy job Zip,” Lox whispered. No one heard him say that, not even his brother in mayhem. Zipper looked at the huge man and smiled. Lox also smiled, but this time no terror struck Zipper. Lox’s face seemed to soften for just a moment, and Zipper knew that there was some semblance of humanity left in the giant. Lox winked at the kid, then replaced the grim visage of the Lords of Death.

“Zipper, you took a helluva chance back there.” Sheila said suddenly. “You could have gotten us all flatlined.”

“If I didn’t take that chance, Captain, then we probably would have bought it anyway. No credit vouchers allowed, scan me?” Zipper replied. “If I second guess myself in the matrix, I’m dead. I was looking out for the best interest of the team.”

“Good job, Zipper. You just graduated.” Sheila announced proudly.

“Thank you Captain,” he said, more out of programming than emotion. Zipper knew full well that she would have let Lance kill him if the situation hadn’t turned out right.

The van arced out of the blinding storm cloud. Jack had seen the stars of the northern hemisphere before, but

never so clearly. Vintage passenger jets were in the skylanes. Jack wondered if there was an air show tonight. The screamsheets hadn’t mentioned that info.

The decker’s eyes followed the landing pattern for the old Boeing. Scanning the horizon, he couldn’t believe his eyes. The jet was headed for LAX-Metro. Los Angeles spread out before them. Some kind of spacial anomaly from Nakamura must have put them on the west coast. L.A. is a long way from Richmond. It was also much smaller and cleaner than he remembered. It looked like a past representation of itself. Jack was looking at the twinkling lights of the airstrip when he heard the transmission.

“...It’s just off my starboard side control. It’s small and metallic with small running lights. It looks like a flying box. Angular up front and more box-like in the back. Looks like four or five thrusters.....”

Sheila turned off the receiver and looked back at her crew. Her lost look told him everything. Jack now knew this was the last run. •