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NUMBERRUNNER

By Michael A. Stackpole



I felt like I was trapped in one of those math problems: Wolf, sprinting south through the alley at 40 kph, has 50 meters to the street and safety. The car, going south at 100 kph, is 100 meters from the street in the same alley. How long will it be before a steel-belted massage ruins Wolf's day?

Leaping over a grease-stained box oozing something noxious at the corners, I figured that my speed meant I was traveling 40,000 meters per hour, or 666.6 meters a minute, or 11.1 meters per second. That put me approximately five seconds from Westlake and a vague chance at being able to walk home under my own power.

The Acura Toro, cruising down the alley behind me with a piece of newsprint fluttering from its radio antenna like a flag, boasted 100,000 meters per hour. That put it at 277.7 meters per second. Roughly translated that meant it would be through me faster than the curry I'd eaten the night before—a distinctly unpleasant prospect. The calculations checked and left no doubt.

That's why I hate math.

That's why I like magic.

The Old One howled with glee as I let him share his wolfborn speed and strength with me. I stooped in the middle of the alley and yanked up the heavy bronze manhole cover. The driver, thinking I meant to drop into the sewer to escape him, punched the accelerator and centered his slender sports car on me.

Like a matador with a metal cape, I cut to my right, but let the manhole cover hang in space where I had been. The lower edge hit the windscreen about halfway down and shattered the glass like it was a soap bubble. The disc began to somersault, end over end, doing its best to turn the hardtop Toro into a convertible. It had better success with the driver, ensuring that while he might have lived fast and died young, he would not leave a pretty corpse.

The Toro hit the alley wall pretty hard. Sparks shot up from where the fiberglass body scraped away to metal, then the scarlet speedster rolled out into traffic. A Nissan Jackrabbit hit it going east, while a Honda truck rolled over its nose. Nothing exploded and no flames erupted, but the Jackrabbit's driver did vomit when he yanked open the Toro's door. I think he wanted to give the Toro's driver a piece of his mind, but ended up getting pieces of the driver's all over his white pants.

I took one last look at the Acura as I left the alley and turned down toward the Sound. I didn't recognize it or the half-second glimpse I'd had of the driver's face while it was still in one piece. It wasn't the first time a professional had come after me with intensive homicidal mayhem on his mind, not

by a long shot.

It was, however, the first time it took less than a full day for someone to decide to off me.

New records like that tend to make me nervous.

Cutting back and forth through the streets gave me the time I needed to make sure no one was following me. I did see another Toro, which spooked me a bit, but only because it was white and looked like a ghost of the car I'd killed. Other than that, my trip through the heart of Seattle's urban gray jungle showed me nothing I'd not seen a million times before.

My haphazard course brought me into the area that had been my old stomping grounds. Normally I'd avoid that area if I were travelling with anything less than an army because the local gang and I did not get along too well. The Halloweeners—*Homo sapiens ludicrous*—were led by Charles the Red, but he'd been feeling poorly for the latter half of the summer. That allowed me to go where I wanted without being hassled.

As I entered the old neighborhood, I suddenly found myself wishing for the return of hostility. A stretch of Westlake from 7th Avenue to 6th Avenue had gotten a significant toasting during the Night of Fire. I remember the blaze rather well, as I relive that evening in more nightmares than I care to count. Every fragment of that frightful landscape was burned into my memory in exquisite detail.

Standing at ground zero I couldn't recognize a thing.

All the burned-out cars had been moved. Buildings had been refaced, and the tarmac was more level and pristine than I'd ever seen it. Old boarded-up apartments were refurbished and, if the window decorations were any indication, already occupied with tenants. All the little grotty businesses on the street level had been replaced with sharp-looking boutiques that had awnings.

And not a single streetlight had a hooker grafted to it.

Looking at the place where I'd grown up, I finally understood the meaning of the word *desecration*.

From deep inside me, in that lightless cave where the Wolf Spirit chooses to dwell, the Old One growled deeply.

Now you know what I saw in the Sleeping Time. Your people, Longtooth, they destroyed the lands I loved. They crushed my people and savaged my world. And for what?

"So you can complain."

"Excuse me, young man?" An old woman with a dowager's hump stopped in front of me and let her little metal grocery cart come to a rest. "Did you say something to me?"

I smiled at her. "No, I'm sorry. I was talking



to myself."

She squinted her eyes, and I half-expected her to recognize me. Something did flash through her eyes, and I desperately searched for a name to attach to her face, but I came up a blank. She, on the other hand, pointed at my tie. "We owe you a great vote of thanks."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

She jabbed my tie again. "You do work for Tucker and Bors, don't you?"

For at least this week, if I survive it. "Yes. Sorry, I just started with them."

"Oh." She smiled in a kindly way. "Your company oversaw the rebuilding of this neighborhood. Did everything very fast. You'd not know it to look at it, but this place used to be horrible."

"I can believe it." I smiled at her, then stepped into the street. "Good evening, ma'am."

My smile grew as I saw a familiar narrow doorway with a pumpkin glaring down at me from above it. Tucker and Bors might have renewed this bit of urbanity after the Night of Fire, but there were some institutions here that were too sacred to be touched and too disgusting to die. The Jackal's Lantern was one of them.

I pulled open the door and reveled in the wall of smoke that poured over me. True, I'd never liked the place when I lived here, and the Halloweeners would have cut my heart out for invading their stronghold, but the Lantern was a life preserver to a drowning man. I let the door swing shut behind me and rubbed my hands together. *Who says you can't come home again?*

Well, whoever said it was right. The Lantern might have been too sacred to touch and too disgusting to die, but apparently it wasn't that hard to buy out.

The smoke didn't cling to my flesh like a toxic fog because it came from a smoke machine. The only light in the place still came from orange and black plastic pumpkins, but the wattage of the bulbs had been upped so you could see more than three feet into the bar. They'd left the car fenders wrapped around the pillars the way I remembered, but all of them sparkled with a new coat of chrome. Barbed-wire jewelry still adorned various parts of mannequins, but all the rust had been polished off it and the razor wire was duller than your average chiphead's sense of reality. They still used cable drums as tables, but thick coats of epoxy sealed them and the fossilized graffiti

left behind from when real people used to populate the place.

A fresh-faced girl walked up to me and smiled. The two dark triangles surrounding her eyes pointed down and an upward-pointing one hid her nose, but they'd been drawn in a dark green makeup, not the black the Halloweeners had demanded. Her clothing, while stylishly tattered, had obviously been washed within the last week. Instead of looking like a zombie summoned from beyond the veil to serve in the Jackal's Lantern, she looked like a creature from the Casper the Friendly Ghost school of haunting.

"Welcome to Jack O's Lantern," she smiled.

Something inside me died. "Jack O's Lantern?"

"The very same. Table for one?"

I blinked twice, then shook my head. "I'm meeting someone. A guy, mid-40s...."

Her nose wrinkled in distaste. "In the back. He's nursing a beer."

I smiled. "Bring us both another."

Leaving her to traipse through the corpgEEKs in synthleather trying to look tough at the bar, I made my way toward the back. Even though I didn't like the changes, I had to admit the added light was an advantage. I'd never noticed how big the place really was, or how tall the scarecrow crucified on the back wall really was. Of course the smiley face didn't really suit him, but not many people got this far back.

I slid into the booth and noticed my name was still carved on the table. Even the nine lines beneath it had been left intact. "Hi, Dempsey. How's it going?"

Dempsey gave me a nonchalant shrug. He's one of those guys who looks like absolutely everyone else in the world—you'd forget him in a second if you had no reason to remember him. That, and the fact that he knows people who know just about everyone or everything in the world, make him very good at what he does. Dempsey is a private eye, and for someone who's got no magic and no chrome, he's lasted a lot longer than he has any right to have lasted.

"Life goes on."

"Easy for you to say." I laughed lightly. "Dropping cold into the corp world means I have to wake up during this thing called morning."

Dempsey kept both his hands wrapped around his sweating beer bottle and appeared not to hear what I'd said. "I've done some checking, just like you asked."

"And?"

Another shrug lifted the shoulders of his Kevlar-lined trenchcoat. "There are plenty of folks who'd love to take a shot at Tucker and Bors for what they did to the Lantern here, but no one has anything that suggests TAB is angry at the Ancients. Moreover,

there are no antimetahuman groups with ties into TAB. This city positively stinks with Humanis Policlub members, but TAB is as clean as can be in that department."

I chewed my lower lip. "What are the chances some snake is living under a rock you haven't overturned yet?"

Dempsey showed no concern over my having questioned his ability. "Slim and none. The word whispered in some high dark places is that Andrew Bors had a daughter who goblinized right after the awakening. Her daddy got her out of Seattle and has her staying in a mansion up on Vachon Island. After that, employees were screened for their feelings about metahumans through their employment questionnaire. You show signs of being a bigot and you're out."

"Damn." I'd been inserted into Tucker and Bors because the Ancients had gone to Dr. Richard Raven with their suspicions that TAB was backing gangs making attacks on them. As the Ancients are a rather powerful and militarily adroit street gang, the invasion of TAB headquarters was a distinct possibility, and Raven started to work on the problem to forestall that from happening.

The waitress arrived with our beers, and I handed her my company-issued credit card. She looked at it and laughed. "You should have told me you were one of us."

I frowned. "Come again?"

"You're a TABbie, just like me. TABbies get a discount." She scooped up the bill and headed back toward the front.

The Old One did not like being called a TABbie, but I managed to keep him in check. "Dempsey, I need you to keep digging on the Policlub angle. This whole thing smacks of race hatred to me. Something has to be there."

He nodded. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. I need you to find out if anyone has a hit out on me."

"You mean besides LaPlante?"

"Yeah, besides LaPlante." It was an open secret that Etienne LaPlante had a contract out on Dr. Raven and any of his associates. It was also well known that hurting a single hair on one of our heads would set Kid Stealth on the assassin—proving once and for all that capital punishment, if applied quickly and without mercy, could be a deterrent to crime. "Some Gillette in a Toro tried to interest me in tarmac fusion. I declined. He flipped his lid and had an accident."

Dempsey took it all in stride. "Do I still relay information through Valerie Valkyrie?"

I thought for a moment, then shook my head. "Takes too much time. If you get anything on the hit angle, call TAB and ask for Keith Wolverton."

"And if Mr. Wolverton is not at his desk, and I want to leave a message?"

"Say a relation is coming to visit. The greater the danger, the more distant the

relative."

The detective's eyes focused distantly, then came back with a twinkle in them. "So if I say Adam and Eve are coming to see you?"

"I'll know Stealth is free-lancing again." I glanced at my watch and slid out of the booth. "Stay and have another if you want. I have to go meet with Raven."

Dempsey shook his head and left the booth. "If I stick around here, they'll come by and give me a new trenchcoat."

"It's hell being a fashion trendsetter." I looked at the refurbished bar and shuddered. "I think this is the first time I've been in here and I've *not* felt like taking a bath afterward."

"It's the only time I've not *needed* a bath afterward," Dempsey quipped. "Those were the days."

I signed for the tab up at the front, then walked a couple of blocks to the parking garage where I'd left my Fenris. The flat black sports coupe waited for me in a darkened corner of the basement like a feral creature hiding from the light. I disarmed the antitheft devices—you only forget to do that *once*—and climbed into the cockpit. I punched in the ignition code and cruised out into the light evening traffic.

The trip to Raven's headquarters took longer than it should have because of the series of turns and cutbacks I used to make sure no one was following me. With Raven and the rest of his crew having done things to anger one or more powerful individuals in the SeaTac sprawl, paranoia became a survival trait. Just because Kid Stealth would descend like a bloody avenger on anyone bothering us, it did not mean we were inviolate. Insanity becomes a courtroom defense because lots of folks do irrational things, and I had no desire to have bits of me in baggies labeled Exhibit A.

I parked the Fenris in the basement garage below Raven's brownstone, then took the stairs two at a time as I climbed to the main floor. Adjusting my tie and rolling down my sleeves, I marched straight to Raven's office and paused in the doorway. "Would have been here sooner, Doc, but someone wanted me to play immovable object to their irresistible force."

Raven leaned back in his black leather chair, pressed his hands together and rested his index fingers against his lips. Seated there in a custom-built chair, behind his individually handcrafted desk, he looked normally proportioned. The pointed tips of Elven ears jutted up through his long black hair as the only clues to his Elven heritage. If not for that, his coppery skin, high cheekbones and broad-shouldered, muscular build would have marked him as an Amerindian.

His dark eyes focused above and beyond

me, but I found myself entranced by their steady gaze. The blues and reds weaving through them in an aurora-like fashion flickered past in what I imagined was a mirror of how quickly thoughts strobed through his brain. The lights slowed, then he closed his eyes, and I felt myself in control of my own mind again.

"Interesting." His hands fell away from his mouth as he leaned forward and stood. "I will want a full report later, of course, but I should introduce you to our clients. This is Sting and her lieutenant, Green Lucifer."

Elven women are generally described with plant terms, but with Sting you'd have to make that an industrial plant. Sure, she was long and lean like most of them, but you could only describe her as willowy if you thought rebar swayed in light breezes. I heard she had a temper to match her fiery mane, and her yellow Opticon eyes certainly reflected none of the warmth in her soul—if she had one. She had an edge to her that made it clear why she was running the Ancients, but likewise told me why, though attractive, I didn't find her seductive.

"My pleasure," I smiled. I didn't offer her my hand. I knew her street name had been earned because of the metal claws that could shoot from the backs of her hands and rake through flesh like it was water.

"So you're Wolfgang Kies. Makes sense, I guess."

Before I could even begin to work my way through the maze of tone and inference in her words, the nearly imperceptible stiffening of her partner drew my attention to him. Unlike Raven, Green Lucifer had the typical starveling build of an Elf. His chin, or underabundance of it, suggested a character flaw that the burning light in his gray eyes used as fuel. Green Lucifer clearly had not liked the fact that Sting had paid me any notice at all, and he was aching for any opening to exert his territorial rights. That told me they were more than just partners in power, and that Green Lucifer was the jealous type.

I immediately put him on the list of folks I didn't want in possession of a chainsaw while my back was turned.

"Mr. Kies or 'Mr. Wolverton,'" he began with mock sincerity, "what have you learned?"

I stared at him for a second, then turned to face Raven. "I spent most of the day getting situated. Valerie's transferring Mike Kant to Shanghai was accepted without question, as was my being sent in to replace him. Ms. Terpstra acts more like a schoolmarm than a supervisor, but Bill Frid is helping me get squared away in Kant's office. In fact, I've not really had to do anything because Frid had done it all while showing me what I'm supposed to do."

Raven sank back in his chair again. "Good.

What about this attempt on your life?"

The mention of an assassination attempt caused the fourth individual in the room to take conscious notice of the conversation. Kid Stealth, sitting back on his haunches, turned his head to watch me. The light flashed off his Zeiss eyes and his brows nearly touched as they pointed down at his nose. I knew better than to think he was concerned about me—he could see I survived—but his concentration came from his desire to hear how a rival assassin had failed in his job.

Having Stealth crouched behind Green Lucifer, and Greenie surreptitiously trying to keep an eye on him, made me feel loads better.

"I found a couple of things in some files and made copies of them. I dropped them into my trash basket, then bagged the litter and dropped it in the disposal chute. After work I went back around to the alley and fished the bag out." I reached into my back pocket and retrieved the folded-over papers. "They're several pages of receipts Kant got while, as nearly as I can figure, making money drops to the folks fighting the Ancients."

Green Lucifer's face darkened. "That is hardly a substantial amount of evidence, Mr. Kies." Scorn rolled from his words like crude oil off a duck's back.

I continued to speak to Raven alone. "It has to be something because a razorboy in an Acura Toro mistook me for an on-ramp."

"Did you get anything from him?"

"Sorry, Doc, I'm not a necromancer. Chances are my cover is blown. I think we should consider taking me out of there."

Raven nodded solemnly. "If you think it is best."

Green Lucifer hammered a fist into the arm of his red leather chair. "This is too important and has taken too long to set up just to let him drop it like this. We are being systematically exterminated. Order him to remain in place."

Raven leaned forward and rested his forearms on the desk. "Being new here, you do not understand..."

"I understand this human operative of yours has no stake in or concern about Elven lives being lost." Green Lucifer gave me a gray-eyed stare that started the Old One growling defiantly in the back of my mind. "He's your employee, order him back in."

"You do *not* understand," Raven repeated slowly. Threat arced like lightning in his words, and anger reverberated like thunder in his voice. "These people are not my *employees*. They are my aides, my companions, my friends, and my allies. They work *with* me, not *for* me. What they do, they do because I ask, not order. I have never found myself called to doubt their



judgment or their courage or their compassion. If Wolf believes his life is in danger, then I believe that as well."

Green Lucifer managed to hold his composure better than the other half-dozen people I've seen invoke Raven's wrath like that. He settled back into his chair like a steel beam being bent by the inexorable progress of a glacier, but his defiance did not drain away. Still, he knew better than to open his mouth.

His tone lightening only slightly, Doc continued. "Wolf is fully cognizant of your situation. He knows that your alternative to having us attempt to solve this problem peacefully is for the Ancients to wage war with the Tucker and Bors Company, and that is not likely to be pretty. It is for the sake of your lives, and the lives of the innocent men and women who might be caught in any crossfire, that we began this investigation. Wolf knows I would not ask him to return there unless I felt the risk was justified, but if he chooses to decline my request, I will think no less of him, and my confidence in him will not diminish."

I'd have said I was leaving Seattle for Japan if I thought it would deepen the scowl on Green Lucifer's face, and I knew Raven would back my play unquestioningly. I started piecing together the perfect way to drop that bit of information on Greenie, but I caught Sting's eye and saw a hopeless determination in her expression and shifting posture.

I knew the Ancients had gone through a nasty battle recently with another street gang. The Ancients, supposedly under direction from someone in TAB, had tried to expand their territory into the turf held by the Meat Junkies. The battle got nasty fast, and looked really grim for the Ancients when an Ork sniper killed the Elves' previous leader. At that moment, however, Green Lucifer smoked the sniper and used his rifle to ace the Meat Junkies' top dog.

Both gangs retreated to lick their wounds, but over the following weeks other gangs had taken shots at the Ancients. That wouldn't have attracted any attention, but no one was picking on the similarly weakened Meat Junkies, and the Junkies themselves started sporting very new and very expensive guns and bikes. As TAB had stopped bankrolling the Ancients, anyone with more than two working brain cells could deduce a shift in corporate policy that was not beneficial to the Elves.

Sting clearly knew her gang had to deal

with the problem of TAB's shifting loyalties or the Ancients would become fodder for the "Obits and Old Bits" newsfax files. If Raven couldn't help her—and looking for outside help, even from another Elf, showed how desperate she saw the situation to be—she had to go to war. Given that TAB, like any other multinat, had its own army, long odds for betting on the gang were not hard to find.

Even knowing that, she would have no choice. If she didn't go to war, she'd be replaced by someone who would. The outcome would be the same, but when you whisper, "I told you so" from inside a grave, very few folks listen or care.

"Actually, Doc, I have Dempsey looking into the contract angle. That could be a shortcut to whoever is ramrodding this campaign. If I bow out, the bait will be gone. I'll just be more careful." I glanced over at Sting. "As I'm replacing Kant, and he appeared to be the bossman's courier of choice, I should see some action soon. If we let it slip that you're bidding on a shipment of arms coming into Seattle, our man should move to procure that shipment before you."

Raven smiled. "If someone wants you dead, Dempsey will find out. Good choice, Wolf."

I painted a wide smile on my face and proudly displayed it for Green Lucifer. He started to get a bit restive in his chair, but Stealth's flesh-and-blood right arm snaked over the back of the chair and his shoulder. Pointing in my direction, it stopped a foot from Greenie's face. From the sleeve of Stealth's waist-cut coat, a blocky little deringer slid down to fill his palm. The delivery device retracted silently, then Stealth arced the gun across the room to me.

I caught it gingerly. "What's this?"

Stealth didn't exactly smile, but his expression grew as pleasant as I've ever seen it sans anyone actually dying in the vicinity.

"Richard said he found your being unarmed disturbing. I customized a design based on a Remington Double Derringer. I expanded the caliber to .50 and have crafted some of your 'silver' bullets to fit it. It's single action. You get two shots."

I turned the pistol over in my hand, then slipped it into my pocket. It made less of a bulge than my loose change. Getting it into TAB would not be a problem, and I could feel safe even without nearby manhole covers. "Thank you, maestro."

I knew it was loaded because Stealth wouldn't have it any other way. The Old One knew it too and snarled something derisive about my dependence upon the tainted and artificial when his tools were so pure and natural. The only problem with the Old One and the abilities he lent me in times of need was that I couldn't always be certain I would remain in control of my actions. In light of that, using a hand-detonated nuclear bomb

could be seen to have an up side.

"So what is your next step?" Green Lucifer leaned forward and perched his chin on his right hand.

"Well, tonight I'm going to go check on a former client, Lynn Ingold. That's a very important part of this case." I saw Raven suppress a smile. Lynn Ingold was a woman we had rescued from LaPlante earlier in the summer. She and I had begun to date, and I'd been planning to take her out to a Seadogs game well before the TAB problem came up. "Then, tomorrow, I return to work and wait."

His face screwed down into a sour expression as if he'd been sucking sulphur schnapps through a straw. "We cannot afford to wait long." Raven looked over at Stealth. "Kid Stealth has agreed to let it be known that he and his Redwings are just waiting for someone to start shooting at you so they can raid undefended territory. Again, this steps up the pressure on TAB and will make it easier to find out who is behind all this.

"Fine, Raven, just so long as you know we won't wait until forever." Greenie leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "You have until Fri..."

Sting laid her right hand on his left arm. "You have as long as you need at this point. If things change, I will let you know about it." Greenie didn't like that very much, but he and Sting exchanged a pair of glances I can only describe as cobra and mongoose. I smiled broadly at his discomfort, earning myself a big jump on his enemies list, no doubt, and nodded to her. "We'll get you results."

"Good, Mr. Kies." She looked me up from my toes to the tippy-top of my head and back down. "Just so you know, if they do get you, Stealth will have all the help he needs in avenging you."

Damn, I just love it when women talk lethal.

Lynn didn't talk lethal to me, but she did say some other things that made me think I'd died and gone to heaven. I was tired enough in the morning that I almost slay-tested Stealth's pistol on my alarm clock. I refrained because I was too lazy to want to patch the hole I knew the bullet would leave in my wall—and that of the other two tenants on this floor—and dropped back to sleep for another half hour.

The Blavatskys downstairs woke me up for the second time. After a quick shower and shave, I headed downtown to Tucker and Bors. I arrived 10 minutes late and, as an afterthought, I considered what a good idea that might have been. I mean, all the detective simsense dramas had me believing whoever had set me up to be killed would faint when they saw me walking in.

In fact, the only person who seemed to notice me was the matronly Ms. Terpstra. She stared at me hard enough to melt my brain, but I scampered to my cubicle too quickly for her to properly focus her powers. On my monitor I read the note she had sent me precisely at 9:00:01: "Punctuality is a virtue, and the virtuous are rewarded. Those without virtue face perdition."

Bill Frid appeared at the doorway to my private domain and handed me a steaming cup of soykaf. "I see you got a perdition memo."

I accepted the soykaf and sipped. "Is that bad?"

"Naw, wait until you get an 'eternal damnation' note. That's bad. She's been in a bad mood since Rev. Roberts stopped doing video." A jovial guy, Bill's double chin and curly, blond hair made him look softer than I figured he saw himself. Right from the start I had him pegged as one of those guys who has learned all the shortcuts to getting things done. They're workhorses, and no corp could get anything done without them, but contempt for the bureaucracy barred them from ever getting into the power structure.

"You look tired. You feel okay?" he asked me.

I shrugged. "Went to the 'Dogs game last night."

"Extra innings?"

"Yeah," I smiled. "Oh, wait, you mean the game. No, just eight and a half. Mackelroy caught one on the warning track in center then threw out the runner from third on a one-hopper to end the game. It was great."

Bill sipped his soykaf. "Good, good. We'll have to take in a game some time."

I nodded. "Yeah. Let's do it when we're on some errand for old TAB and we can get them to reimburse us for the 'business lunch.'"

"I like it." He gave me a conspiratorial wink, then looked up and nodded. "The wicked witch of the paycheck is watching, so I'll get back to my workstation. If you need anything, just let me know."

"Thanks, Bill."

Left to my own devices, I had to figure out what I was supposed to do. I really had no idea what Kant's duties had been, and even Frid had been fairly vague. As nearly as I could make out, Kant was part trouble-shooter, part confidential courier. Even when I called up a log of things Kant had done in the past two weeks, it looked like the majority of his time had been spent sitting on his hands.

Fully aware that idle hands are the devil's playthings—a concept I was certain Ms. Terpstra detested—I pulled a blank manila folder from my desk drawer and placed the employment and location policy agreements I'd signed the previous day into it. I labeled the file "Wolverton, Keith" and stuck it behind

the Wolcott Trucking file.

Feeling fairly satisfied with myself, I noted, to my chagrin, that I had another two hours to kill before the roach coach arrived outside. I looked at the stack of optical data chips on the corner of the desk, but all of them dealt with statistics, math, and probability modeling, so I just couldn't bring myself to pop one of them into the computer. Making a mental note to have Valerie get me games that would work on this monster, I started exploring the Interactive Building Directory.

By the time the phone rang and saved me, I'd succeeded in memorizing the names and divisions for all TAB employees A to J in the building. "Keith Wolverton here."

"I have good news and bad news for you." Dempsey was one of the few people who sounded better on the phone than in person. "What's your pleasure?"

I saw Ms. Terpstra glowering in my direction, so I raised my voice a bit so she could hear. "Well, doctor, will the patient live?"

"Mr. Kies is in no danger, beyond those expected for a man in his line of work. Whatever symptoms he thought he had, he was mistaken."

"And the bad news."

"No one's out to ace Wolf, but there's ¥5000 on your head, Mr. Wolverton."

Someone wanted Keith Wolverton hit? Why? He didn't exist 48 hours ago. "Your source was impeccable as usual, I assume?"

Dempsey grunted out a laugh. "The grieving widow was spending the ¥500 down payment to blot out the memory of her late squeeze. Closed casket ceremony, you know."

"At least they could go for a shorter box and save money." I drank some more of the soykaf. "You have a name for the patron of this poor departed soul?"

"Are you sitting down and alone?"

I looked at my computer monitor and saw a message presenting itself to me, letter by letter. "Only my very wonderful supervisor, Ms. Terpstra, reminding me that I should not be taking personal calls via the wonders of binary magic."

"Probably safe, then. The name William Frid mean anything to you?"

I suddenly wondered if soykaf could cover the taste of arsenic. I assumed I would find out shortly. "Rings a bell. Thanks, Dempsey."

"No sweat, chummer. Tell me, is your Ms. Terpstra heavysset, first name Agnes?"

I shrugged. "Hit on the first, and an 'A' for a first initial on her nameplate. Why?"

"No real reason." I could see Dempsey smiling like a fox in some dark phone booth. "Heard that was the handle she had adopted. Always wondered where she ended up after the Mashitsutsa embezzlement scam. Watch your paycheck."

"Got it, Dempsey. I owe you bigtime."

"You'll be hearing from me."

"Anytime, bud, anytime."

I placed the receiver down and glanced over at Bill's cubicle. Braving the harsh look on Ms. Terpstra's face, I walked over there and crouched down at Bill's side. "Bill, I need some help."

His smile slowly died as the seriousness in my voice got to him. "Sure, Keith, what is it?"

I shook my head. "Not here. It's personal. I'm new in town, and there was this woman last night...."

He patted me on the shoulder. "You're right, not here. C'mon."

He led the way past the dragon lady to the men's room. We quickly checked the stalls for lurkers, then flipped the lock. Leaning back against a sink, Bill smiled with mild amusement. "Now, what's the problem?"

I shrugged. "The problem is that this woman is upset because the man you hired to kill me got dead himself in the attempt." I filled my right hand with Stealth's pistol. "That almost ruined my day. Explain to me why I don't want to ruin yours."

Bill's eyes grew wider than the bore of the pistol he was staring at. "No, no, no, you have it all wrong."

"That's correct about one of the two of us." I tore the loop-towel across the back part of the loop and started pulling it down in long lengths.

His blue pupils rolled around like a chalk mark on a cue ball. "What's that for?"

"You're going to wrap it around your head so the brains don't splatter when I shoot you." I let my smile die except for a nervous twitch at the corner that convinced him I meant business. "No need to make the janitor's job any tougher."

"Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God." Frid dropped to his knees. "I don't want to die."

"Good, then tell me everything you know about the Elves and TAB."

"What?" He looked at me with absolute terror in his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"The Ancients."

"Who?"

"Dammit!" He flinched as I swore. "Why'd you want me killed?"

"I didn't want you killed. I just wanted you, ah, roughed up." His thick lips quivered in such a way that I knew he had to be telling the truth.

"Offering someone ¥5000 to rough me up is a bit much."

He looked crestfallen. "How was I supposed to know? I went down to Damian's and offered a guy ¥5000 to do a job, then I gave him ¥500 and the copy of your picture I got from security. I just wanted to have you put out of action for a week or so."

I frowned. "I'm still waiting for a 'why' here, chummer."

"Because I wanted your job. Kant gets all



sorts of courier jobs, and he gets bonuses." He looked down at the floor and clasped his hands in an attitude of prayer. "You have to believe me."

"No, chummer," I said tossing him the towel, "You have to convince me. What do you know about Kant's courier actions?"

"Oh, God, you're from Auditing, aren't you?" Frid wilted, and his shoulders slumped forward. "Kant said he dealt with black projects."

Black projects. Anything a corp wanted to do without the shareholders or the government knowing about it went onto the books as a black project. That meant, really, it didn't show up on the books at all. Someone funneled money to the black projects through fake projects and promotions. Given all the interlocking directorates and vertical integration within the corporate world, tracking down the source of funding for almost anything was impossible. For black projects it was that much more so.

And funding a war against the Ancients definitely sounded like a black project to me.

"Okay, Bill, let's take this slowly. Kant made three courier runs recently. One was on the 23rd of last month. This month he did one on the 7th and the other on the 12th. Enlighten me."

Sweat poured from his forehead down his face. "I don't know."

"You'll look good in a turban, you know."

"Keith, I don't know. Honest, I don't."

I dropped down onto my haunches and parked the derringer two centimeters off the tip of his nose. "You've got two strikes against you, you weasel. You figured you'd get Kant's job and his bonuses, and you still think you can swing some sort of deal out of this." I paused to let him consider how much his greed might cost him. "Well, chummer, you can. I only care about that one job. It involves Elves and only local travel."

I tapped his nose with the gun. "What will it be? True confessions, or die knowing that whatever you had for breakfast was your last meal."

"Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God. Ah, ah..." He screwed his eyes shut. "I don't know for sure, Keith. All those jobs went through Ms. Terpstra. Please believe me."

I'd seen enough men crumble in my time to know Frid's marshmallow center was leaking through all the cracks in him. He had to be telling the truth, which meant I had a new program to debug. I wouldn't have thought Ms. Terpstra capable of running a

black project, but with Dempsey's cautionary tale about her, anything was possible.

"Okay, Bill, this is the way things go down. You're going home sick, right now." The man nodded like a child promising Santa he'd be good. "If I find you've been lying to me, you can consider our little talk here the opening scene of the worst nightmare you've ever had." I slipped the gun back into my pocket. "Get out of here."

Back in the office, I leaned forward on Ms. Terpstra's desk. "Agnes, I really need to know who asked you to give Mike Kant courier jobs concerning the demise of the Ancients."

Ms. Terpstra's head jerked around as if I'd gaffed her in a gill and yanked her from the Sound. "Mr. Wolverton, I have no idea what you are talking about. How dare you address me in such a familiar manner?"

I gave her my best I-know-lots-you-don't-want-to-have-known smiles. "Is it that Tucker and Bors has a better retirement policy, or did you just tire of the Mashitsutsa corporate grind? Audits after an embezzlement can be so tedious, don't you think, Aggie?" From the sour look that answered my question, I realized that whoever had her running a black project was using the same or similar blackmail evidence to keep her in line.

"You play well, Mr. Wolverton, but you will meet your match." She gave me a cold smile. "Benbrook, Sidney M."

"Benbrook?" I frowned as I tried to remember his entry from the directory. "Benbrook is in marketing! Why would marketing have a black project?"

"Mine is not to wonder why..."

"Yeah. What you do is steal and fly." I shook my head. "Thank you for your help, Ms. Terpstra. You make me proud to be a TABbie."

Sidney Benbrook looked exactly the way you'd expect someone with that name would. The Interactive Building Directory showed me a tall, cadaverously slender man with dark hair so thin that when he combed it from right to left over his scalp it could have been deciphered by a bar-code reader. His deeply set eyes remained hidden in shadow and, along with his corpse-like pallor, accentuated the impression that he had died late in the last century.

As I entered the darkened sanctuary of his office, I knew, almost immediately, that no matter how benign or un-salesperson-like he looked, he was at the core of the problem with the Ancients.

Benbrook sat in a big padded chair centered on a raised dais at the end of a narrow canyon formed by walls of computer mainframes. Little amber and red lights flashed off and on across the faces of the machines, enclosing him in a star field with constantly

shifting constellations. Cables crisscrossed the area behind him, and one snaked out from the tangle to jack into his skull behind his left ear.

Like a spider being aware of a fly's careless tread upon its web, Benbrook swiveled his chair around toward me as I entered the room. I had not tried to be particularly quiet, but he unnerved me with his reaction to my visitation. His head came up, and his torso came around instantly, but his eyes took their time in focusing down on me. His fingers flew across the keys of an invisible computer deck. I had no doubt he was jacked in so deep that he mistook me for a Matrix icon until I failed to run from torch programs he dispatched to destroy me.

"You're Sidney Benbrook?"

"I know that. Who are you?" His voice came out as a harsh croak, as if he was entirely unused to speaking to another person. "I did not send for you."

I'd seen other wireheads who were tied even tighter to their machines, but never in a corporate setting like this. I held my hands up in the universal sign of surrender. "I am Keith Wolverton. I'm taking Kant's place. Thought we should be acquainted in case you need anything done."

"Done?"

I gave him my best hey-we're-all-in-the-know-here smile. "Aggie told me Kant did courier jobs for you—all vapor, no flash. She says there is bonus money in it, and she turned me on to the deal for a rounding error. She told me it could be dangerous, but I told her I wasn't afraid of any dandelion-chewers."

"Dande...? Yes, Elves." Benbrook froze—the only motion from his end of the room coming from the computer light show. "I find it disturbing, Mr. Wolverton, that your computer records appear never to have been tampered with. How can you explain that?"

My smile broadened. "You can figure I've made a career of keeping my nose very clean, or you can assume that I came across Kant's action independently, and I decided I would like to milk the cash cow myself for a while."

"Tucker and Bors takes a dim view of extortion, Mr. Wolverton."

"I said 'milk,' not 'slaughter.' You have been devoting significant resources to destroying a population of Elves. If you knew someone who was paying for Elven scalps, I might know people who would be willing to create a supply to satisfy that demand."

"You small-minded bigot. Elves and scalps and bounties are not important." Benbrook's eyes reflected the flashing computer lights around him. "Do you think these people might be able to get rid of the Ancients?"

I frowned. "You have me confused. You said scalps are not important, but you want someone to 'get rid of' the Ancients."

"That is correct."

"But you do not mean 'get rid of' as synonymous with kill?"

He frowned, which was rather scary given the gangrenous pallor of his skin. "I mean it as in move, dispense with, create a decreased population concentration of."

I shrugged. "That says kill to me."

"Whatever!" Fingers convulsed and danced across a virtual keyboard. "I need to effect a 10% reduction in the Elven population of the Denny Park zone by the end of the fiscal year. Is that possible?"

Denny Park marked the southwest edge of the territory the Ancients claimed as their own. Their recent battle with the Meat Junkies was over a piece of turf to the west of that area. That zone was one of the least habitable areas in the Elven enclave in Seattle, but it was the Ancient stronghold.

"Possible, yes, but that will be a very tough block of ice to salt." Something was not adding up because I wasn't hearing Humanis Policlub rhetoric coming at me. In fact, Benbrook had accused *me* of being an anti-Elf bigot. "If you don't care how I get rid of the Elves, why do you want that particular piece of real estate?"

His right hand rose from the arm of the chair and, with index finger pointing down, rotated slowly to indicate I should turn around. As I did so, a projection TV imager slid down from the false ceiling, flickered to life and shared computer graphics of Seattle with me. As I watched, the image swooped lower like a helicopter sailing down through vector-graphic canyons. As it headed north from downtown it hit a block of solid green: the Ancients' turf.

The image dissolved into a series of numbers. They scrolled past fairly quickly, but I caught bits and pieces of things. It looked to be a cost comparison between two programs. Then it shifted over into a point by point comparison of population. Outlined in red, and pulsing in time with my heartbeat, I saw the approximate number of Elves living in the Denny Park area of Seattle.

I turned back. "I still don't get it? Why are you paying to have Elves scragged?"

"It's obvious." Benbrook stared at me as if I was an idiot. "Demographics."

I remembered the opdata chips in Kant's work space, then stared at Benbrook, unbelieving. "You're killing them because of numbers?"

The red, pulsing light burned off and on in his eyes. "Those are not *just* numbers, Mr. Wolverton. They are the very lifeblood of this company. Those numbers affect our bottom line. That means those numbers determine how much we can pay you and how much you get in your pension plan and what your profit-sharing statement will look like. Those numbers are the most important numbers in the world."

Though to look at him I'd not have thought it possible, Benbrook rose from his chair and pointed a scarecrow finger at me. "You will forever be doomed to be nothing but a slave chip in the engines of industry if you fail to understand how important those numbers are. On the right you have the demographics and psychographics of the group the North American Testing Agency uses to test market our products."

His shoulders hunched, and his hands rubbed together like those of a miser aching to fondle credsticks. "They determine what we produce, when we produce it, what it tastes like, what it looks like, what it smells and feels like, and how much we can charge for it. The shift of a percentage point or two in the approval rating for a product can cause us to retool a factory or to scrap a line altogether. NATA's test group is a fickle mistress whom we labor to please, yet pay whether our results satisfy or anger."

His kindling fingers pressed spread onto his chest. "I will free us of our dependence on NATA and their group. The Denny Park district is identical to their area except for one thing: We have too many Elves. Once I can eliminate enough of the Elves, we will have our own captive market here. I can create a division that will perform like NATA, and we will wrest the dataflow away from them. Our costs will be a fraction of what they were for research, and we can charge others for using our group, which will reverse a negative cash flow in my division."

I shook myself to clear my head of his missionary message. "You want to kill Elves so you can taste-test chocolate bars in the Sprawl?"

"Crudely put, but I believe you have a grasp on reality."

"Oh, I've got more than a grasp on reality, chummer." I pointed back toward the flashing red numbers. "You're trying to lower the river when what you need to do is raise the bridge!"

He shook his head. "I tried that. I paid the Ancients to take more territory outside the Denny Park district. It would have created a more even distribution, but they failed."

"No!" I slowly started drifting toward his silicon altar. "Have you seen what TAB did on Westlake?"

Benbrook paused as if unable to remember the project or unable to comprehend why I would mention it. "That was the construction division. They are not my concern. Irrelevant."

"Very relevant, Mr. Benbrook." I channeled the Old One's growl of outrage into my voice. "You are seeking to destroy something when you could make it all so much better. You are blowing a perfect chance to do more than just develop one new division."

His hawk stare bored in at me as he slowly sat. "Explain."

As he called my bluff I panicked for a half-second. The Old One came to my rescue as he translated all the demographic statistics into his own view of the world. Suddenly I saw Seattle as it must have been before men set foot on the continent. The Old One and his brothers knew where the deer would drink. They knew what plants would flower or bear fruit and when—attracting animals upon which they could prey. Had it been in their power they would have created more tree stands to keep their animals safe in the winter and more meadows to feed them in the summer.

"It's fairly simple, really," I smiled. "You can rebuild sections of the Denny Park area. Encourage people that will even up the demographic mix to move in. You'll have your own little population from which to draw focus groups. You can have your own stores so you can test product placement. You can employ some of the people so you can raise or lower their income to a level appropriate for whatever you want to test. You can create your own little world, and it will pump out streams of data for you to analyze, all the while saving money."

His face had begun to become positively animated as I started to talk. I thought I almost had him with the "streams of data" line, but something changed. The light in his eyes died. Settling his angular, skeletal body into his chair, he became an electronic spider again.

"Projections show the cost of building up that area will be more expensive than wiping out the Ancients."

I drew the pistol. "Factor in the cost of your own funeral."

He slowly shook his head. "Employee contract, page two, section VI, paragraph three, prohibits one employee from threatening another with deadly force."

"I quit."

"Now that I think of it, your suggestion has some merit."

I nodded solemnly. "Those expenses can be charged back against the fees of clients who use your market testing. And you can make the changes through the construction divisions, guaranteeing the head of that division a tidy profit on the construction work, while the work is done at a below market rate for you."

Benbrook's head started bobbing in time with music that I could not hear. "Yes, that could work. As you said, I would have focus groups and store fronts to test product placement." His eyes flicked up at me. "These people would have children, and I would have to educate them, correct?"

"You better believe it."

"Excellent. We diversify into children's products."

I winked at him. "You build schools and sports facilities. You improve Denny Park and..."



"And we create sports leagues for employees. We get them exercising, which will cut health insurance costs. And they will all be wearing clothing they buy from us that has our trademark names emblazoned on it."

"Now you're cooking."

He stopped hearing me. "And we create brand-name loyalty indoctrination centers. We inculcate the children in the ways of only buying our products. We can wire every home for closed-circuit televisions that will display our ads..."

His eyes started to glaze over orgasmically, so I cocked the pistol and brought him out of it prematurely. "Hey, sparky, you also have to pay the Ancients to patrol the area so no one can infiltrate it, right?"

Benbrook hesitated, then nodded. "We can get them uniforms..."

"Do you *really* want to see what they would do with uniforms?"

"No, perhaps not. Plausible deniability can cut liability." His eyes went blank for a moment, then he smiled. "Yes, I think this has a higher profit potential because of the retail sales and the information development angles. It will work."

"Good for you." My eyes narrowed and became the same silver shade as the wolf's head pendant I wear at my throat. "Listen, Moses, there's only one more thing you have to do before you can lead your people to the Promised Land."

"And that is?"

"You want to adjust the environment of a profit center because the psychographics are set to take it into a negative growth curve." I gave him a smile that was all mayhem and arson.

"That sounds unsatisfactory. I'm sure, in return for your service here, I can do something about it." His hands hung in space as if poised over the keyboard. "Explain."

I smiled. "Ever heard of a place called Jack O's Lantern?"

I breathed in and got a nose full of noxious vapor that convinced me someone was burning tires for warmth in the middle of the Jackal's Lantern. Of course I couldn't see that far into the place, but I felt happy enough that I was willing to stumble blindly toward the back. Lucky for me, a blond waitress name Pia saw me groping about and slipped her arm through mine.

"The Elves said they were waiting for you, Wolf." Despite the black makeup turning her face into a nightmare pumpkin mask, the smile she gave me made my socks roll right up and down. "I can be softer than she is, and I'm much prettier than he is."

"No disputing that." I returned her smile. "It's business with them, darling."

"All work and no play will make Wolf a dull boy."

"And you're the whetstone that will sharpen me up?"

"We can rub our bodies against each other and see." She laughed lightly as we reached the back of the bar. "A Henry Weinhard's for you, Mr. Kies?"

"In the bottle, no glass." I slid into the booth across from Sting and Green Lucifer. "Anything for you?"

Sting shook her head, and Pia vanished in the billowing cloud of smoke. Green Lucifer wrinkled his nose, looked around, then snarled at me, "Why did you demand we come to this dump?"

"I wanted to see you in your natural habitat." I glanced over at Sting. "Here's the deal: TAB is going to rebuild some housing in your turf and generally upgrade the Denny Park area. They'll pay you to keep things under control. The new housing will go half to folks already there and half to people they bring in."

As Sting considered what I had told her, and Green Lucifer practiced his "I'm mean and nasty" look on me, Pia arrived with my beer. I saw she'd written her number on the napkin she put beneath the sweating bottle, and I gave her a wink. I twisted the cap off the bottle with my left hand, drank, then set the bottle down again and frowned at Green Lucifer. "Well, pay her."

He blinked his big Elf eyes at me. "What?" "And tip her well, too. I'm a big tipper." Pia smiled and gave me a wink. "Thank

you, Mr. Kies."

Green Lucifer became obstreperous. "If you think..."

Sting nudged him with an elbow. Grimacing, Green Lucifer pulled out a wad of Elven scrip and peeled off enough to pay for my beer. A light cough from Sting tripled the amount, and all of it ended up deposited on the tray Pia carried. Smiling broadly and nodding her thanks to Sting, Pia retreated from sight.

I drank a bit more. "What do you think?"

Sting's eyes narrowed into lifeless amber wedges. "Do you think the deal will be honored for long?"

I shrugged, and my left thumb traced the letters of my name in the table. "If they invest in the project as they are supposed to, yes, they will stay there for a long time. If not, we'll know soon enough to forestall more trouble of the type you've been through. It is chancy, but if Raven thought it was going to blow up in our faces, he wouldn't have asked you to meet me here. Is it a go?"

Sting nodded her assent.

"Good." I started to smile and feel proud of myself, but Green Lucifer went and spoiled it. His face scrunched up as if he were about to throw a temper tantrum, but then the expression eased everywhere except around his eyes. "And now the minority report?"

"I just want one thing from you, Kies." He hissed the last letter of my name like a snake. "Who was behind the plot to kill us?"

I shook my head. "Not part of the deal. You hired us to stop them, not mount them on a trophy wall."

"You needn't worry. We'll do our own killing," he sneered at me.

"Hey, Greenie, this is the real world." I let the Old One growl through my throat as I rubbed my right hand over my silver wolf's head pendant. "Any of us with Raven are willing to do wet work,

but not to save *your* ego. So, chummer, you've got what you've got."

"What I've got is an anti-Elf racist protecting more of the same." He balled his fists and hammered them down on the table, nearly upsetting my beer. "We've had people dying out there. We've had Elven blood running through the gutters. Someone has to pay."

My eyes started a slow shift from green to silver, with a black killer's ring circling the iris. "Someone *is* paying. TAB is paying a wergeld that will make things better for your people."

"Tell that to the dead."

My right hand contracted into a fist. "I've seen the streets run with blood, chummer, and I've leaked my fair share into them, too. It's damned easy to call for blood when you aren't going to be the one shedding it. And you can't tell me, Greenie, that a single death at TAB will make life better for those who live in Denny Park."

He started to reply hotly, but Sting stopped him. "Your deal is acceptable and, if TAB upholds its part of the bargain, we will let the matter drop." She glared at Greenie, and he nodded his head as little as his stony rage made possible. "We are indebted to you and Raven, and even your friend, Dempsey."

"Raven will send you a bill," I smiled, "and you probably already have a message from Dempsey waiting for you at your crib." I used the bottle cap in my left hand to scratch a tenth line beneath my name, then snapped Green Lucifer's head back with a right jab. He bounced off the rear of the booth, then his forehead dented the table just before his unconscious form slid beneath it. "I, on the other hand, consider us even." Ω

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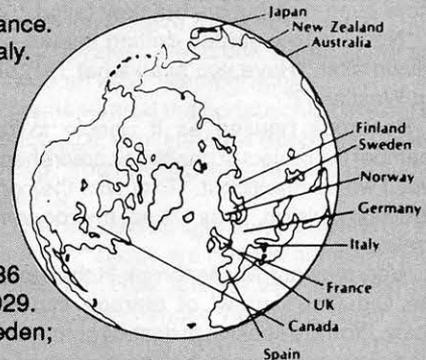
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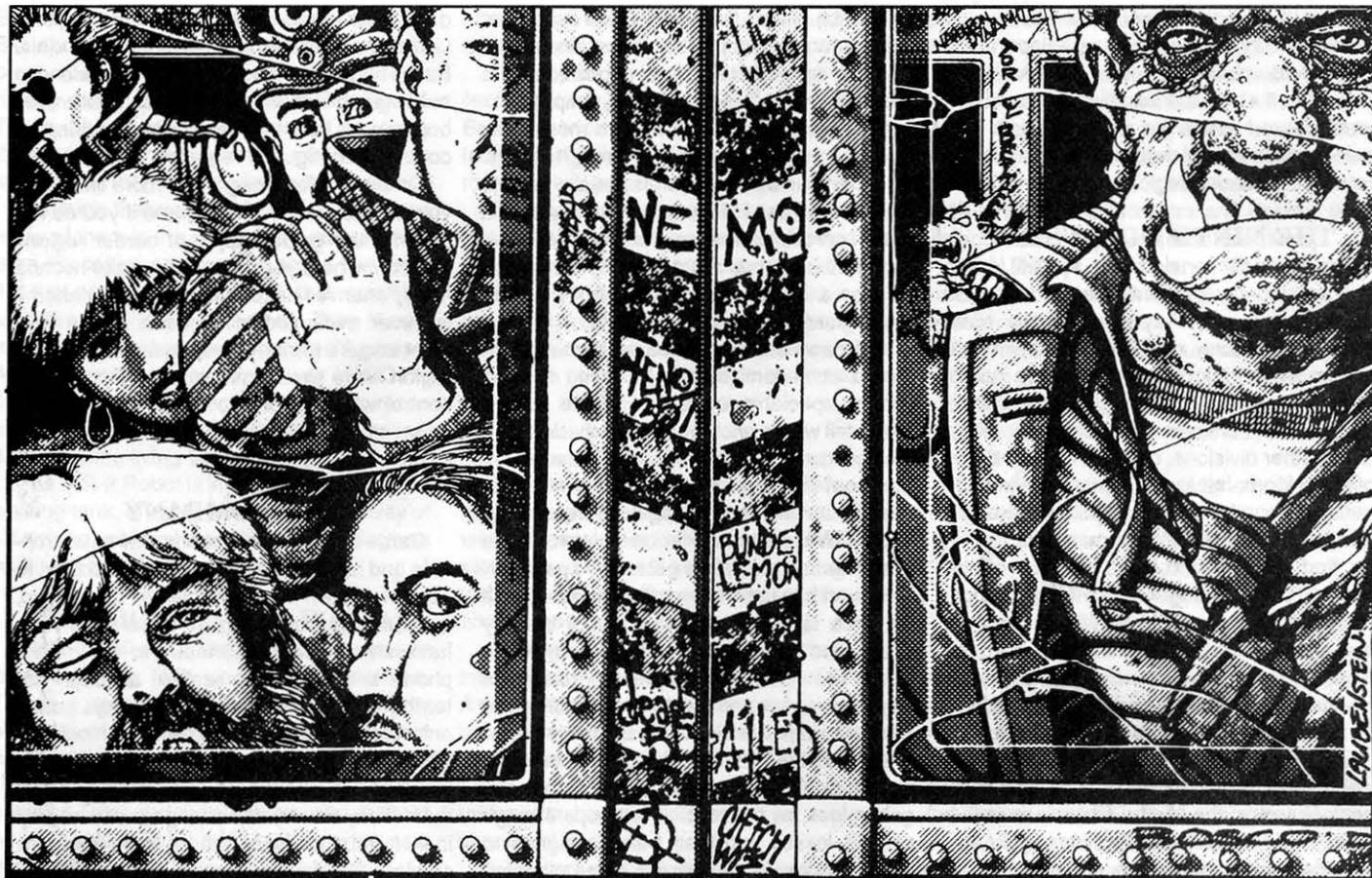
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continuous fanfold sheet of computer paper, battle results are confusing and long, and movement is not as clear as it could be. Finally, rather than give a map printout of some kind with each turn to enable easy tracking of one's territorial gains and losses, the game prints a "Listing of All Owned Squares" summary sheet—basically a giant, hard-to-read table. In order to really tell what had happened to my forces each turn, I had to replot each point on this table on the game map provided with the game setup. This was inconvenient, messy, and it was very easy for me to miss squares I had lost, although I could tell fairly easily what I had gained.

EVALUATION

Venom is a play-by-mail game which provides a great variety of options for game play and vicarious mayhem to its player. If you are a very competitive gamer or enjoy orchestrating backbiting plots (*Diplomacy*™ players pay heed), you may enjoy the game a great deal for its atmosphere and the shifting alliances which form during play. Many different substrategies can be employed and investigated in the game while pursuing a fairly clear overall strategic goal. The fantastic elements of the game, especially the magic spells and miracles, are also rather appealing to deal in as a change of pace.

I would not recommend *Venom*, though, as there are many frustrating and tedious elements to its game system. Skill advancement is slow, and most of the game depends very heavily on random results. The overall impres-

sion this leaves on a player is that most things you try in the game, you usually fail at, unless the results are guaranteed to work every time. While every game needs a random element, the random element in *Venom* is too predominant for my taste. Finally, *Venom's* organization and presentation of turn information is dated, and the lack of any kind of turn situation map (not necessarily a fancy one) makes assessing turn information difficult and tiresome.

The Neo-Anarchist's Guide to North America

FASA Corporation.

\$15.00.

Written By: A variety of authors

128-page softbound sourcebook for *Shadowrun* with foldout maps.

WHAT IT IS

The Neo-Anarchist's Guide to North America presents sourcebook material for players that covers several cities and nations in the *Shadowrun* world.

One of the things that makes this book interesting is that each entry in the book was written by a different author, and each entry follows a different system of organization. By doing this, the book conveys the impression that it was written by a bunch of Neo-Anarchists, each writing what he thought was important and following the style he liked.

Cities covered include San Francisco, At-

lanta, Manhattan, Chicago, and more. Also in the book is material covering some of the major governmental organizations: the United Confederation of American States, the California Free State, the Republic of Québec, and others.

WHAT IT'S GOT

If you've set or are going to set a play session in one of the cities in the book, virtually everything you need is included. There's material covering law, economics, fines, social structure, transportation, history, crime (organized and not), tourist attractions, descriptions of individual neighborhoods, and even cost of living indexes. Whether your players are going to visit a city or if your whole campaign is to take place in one, you've got everything you need to know.

Some of the best aspects of the book are the descriptions of individual sites in each city which can be visited by the PCs. GMs shouldn't have any trouble with coming up with a convincing local bar or office when using this book.

A GM should also be able to handle just about anything that happens on the street. If the PCs are picked up for carrying illegal weapons, the GM will be able to determine how much the fine will be, what the prevailing social winds regarding the offense are, and how likely it is the PCs are going to get out of jail.

NEO-ANARCHISM

The book begins with a detailed description of and argument for Neo-Anarchism. Basically, Neo-Anarchism is social theory that's based on economics. It uses economic prin-

ciples and these are explained in the book.

The aim of Neo-Anarchism is to bring about a completely fair and open market system, where there's no competition of goods and where every citizen gets enough of these goods to make him or her happy, yet there are still enough goods left to go around to make everyone else happy. Right now (in the *Shadowrun* world), every citizen is a victim of coercion. The average person has no choice in what she buys or does, as everything is run by the megacorporations. Neo-Anarchism seeks to bring about the end of this coercion, by bringing about the end of the megacorporate social and economic structure.

Several economic theories and a few graphs drive the Neo-Anarchist theme home, and anyone reading the material will be able to play a very convincing Neo-Anarchist player character.

Whether you agree with the Neo-Anarchist message or not, you'll find the inclusion of Neo-Anarchism into your *Shadowrun* campaign valuable as a referee or a player.

MAPS

There are several foldout maps in the back of the book which detail each city. The San Francisco map is the only one that has a numbered key corresponding to the sites described in the text, which leaves the other maps somewhat bare of detail and of lesser

utility. Some of the maps are very difficult to read since the streets aren't big enough to allow the lettering of the street names to be properly applied, but players should be able to get around without too much trouble.

Preceding the street map of each city is a large-scaled regional map that shows major highway routes. The last map in the book is an almost impossible to read general map of North America. It really needed to be bigger to be clearer.

APPEARANCE

The cover ranks among the best I've seen, both for pure visual delight and for conveyance of purpose. It's quite striking and conveys the feeling that the book was downloaded from some futuristic computer bulletin board. The back cover has the added nice touch of having some of the words drawn with a "pencil-in" look, and this adds to the general anarchist feeling of the book.

The interior art is of average professional quality and some illustrations are better than others. Few of the drawings look like they were made specifically for the book, but are just random scenes of *Shadowrun* life.

EVALUATION

This sourcebook has tremendous utility for both GMs and players of *Shadowrun*. Even if the player characters aren't adventuring in

one of the cities of the book, the GM can still use it as a reference for seedy bars, fines, laws, and politics for whatever city the PCs are in.

In addition, there is a detailed explanation of Neo-Anarchism included, and this Neo-Anarchist theme alone could form the basis for a whole campaign group of PCs. Instead of fighting megacorps for money or revenge, the PCs could now have an overall purpose for their actions, a grand scheme, and share it with other PCs and NPCs, because this book has everything a player (or referee) needs to start his own local chapter of Neo-Anarchism.

After reading the descriptions of each of the cities, one gets a definite "you are there" impression. Each city is described with just enough detail and generality to allow GMs to include extra material or, if they like, use it exclusively as an absolute source of information. In fact, part of the appeal of the book is stated in the introduction, which is that some of the info in the book may not be "real" and accurate, but just the Neo-Anarchist's impressions. This leaves a lot open for GMs, and certainly prevents conflicts for GMs who've already based a campaign in one of the cities in the book.

All this info, maps, plus an excellent cover equal a superior value for shadowrunners everywhere. Ω

