

ASH
WEDNESDAY



ROBERT BRACE

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Robert Brace



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I

DAWN IS THE BEST TIME to take down a Rad, but I had spent too long tracking Tiberius Teller to wait until morning. The light was fading as dusk began to fall, and high overhead the cirrus-streaked sky had already taken on the remorseless mix of red and blue and violet that marks the end of days here—a vertiginous blood-bruised expanse hinting at the night to follow. The city was coming aglow in careening light, and a deep background rumble was now audible, like a distant locomotive, something that would grow into a deafening cacophony of overamplified noise as the evening progressed. Then slowly, as if in blind answer to an instinctive summons, the creatures who crowd the city by night began to emerge.

Nuevo Shanghai, the nocturnal city. Why the Mandarins chose this place for their headquarters is a mystery to me.

Teller was in an abandoned building across the street. It had once been a motel, and the old sign still stood in the forecourt, still lit up. Ever since electricity had been made free—supposedly as an encouragement to production, but which had instead become an encouragement to vice—no one turned the lights off in Nuevo Shanghai. The sign showed a pink flamingo outlined in old-fashioned strips of neon tubing, flashing like a

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beacon, brightly beckoning travelers long since gone. Below it was a caption in bright blue letters that blinked alternately with the bird—pink, then blue, pink then blue for all eternity. It read *Best Rates in Las Vegas*.

The Mandarins had tried to expurgate all remnants of the city's old name, but the Corporation's people had obviously missed this place.

HBO and Color TV. Quaint.

Vacancy it declared at the very bottom, a permanent state now.

Not quite permanent. For a start, Tiberius Teller was in temporary residence, at least I hoped he was—condemned, like all the forlorn Rads who in hopeless desperation make their way into Nuevo Shanghai, to live a life on the margins until someone like me tracks them down. But there was someone else, too. The transaction that for several minutes had been in negotiation on the sidewalk across the street from me was now successfully concluded, and the girl was taking her customers into the old motel. She probably worked this section of sidewalk to take advantage of the nearby rent-free accommodations. She was gaijin, of course, skinny and frail, and she looked too young, even by Nuevo Shanghai's standards of unbridled indulgence.

The three men were all huge, obviously steroidal, and since only Corporation Security has access to growth hormones it was clear what they did for a living.

This was a serious complication. Anyone going into the former Pink Flamingo Motor Court would likely spook Teller, and if he realized they were CorpSec he would certainly flee. But I would rather have him flushed out than the worse alternative, which was that one of them would be wearing a monitor, like the monitor I wore, and have it alert him to the fact of a Rad. They would find him and take him down without hesitation. There was a third possibility: in all the confusion they might mistakenly take me down, too. They would be armed with beam discharge weapons—BDWs could theoretically be set to disable, but they would no doubt be calibrated for kill. No CorpSec officer would ever be reprimanded for wasting a gaijin by mistake.

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I had no energy weapon, not because it would have been illegal for me to possess one, which it would, nor because they were expensive, which they were—on the black market even a basic beam discharge weapon would go for a hundred thousand new dollars. But the Mandarins, in their haste to ensure that if the people should ever be inclined to restlessness they would be deprived of the means of doing much harm, had failed to outlaw pre-Assumption weapons. This was partly by political design: the passage of the Thirtieth Amendment, which among other things had suspended the first ten, was eased by a clause that allowed for the retention of Second Amendment rights—the right to bear arms—as long as such arms were kinetic. It was an easy compromise: the Mandarins had correctly assumed that guns would soon be to energy weapons what bows and arrows had become to guns.

So, I had fully legal possession of a Springfield Armory Government 1911 Model .45 automatic. I guessed that it qualified as an antique since no gunpowder-based weapons were manufactured anymore. One day it would wear out, but for now it served me well enough. Ammunition was no longer manufactured either—the Mandarins had shut that down after the Assumption—but in its previous incarnation Nuevo Shanghai had been a mob town, and anyone who has trouble finding .45-caliber ammunition in a mob town is not looking hard enough.

I ejected the magazine and checked the load. Seven rounds of jacketed hollow-point. Plenty in most cases, but the presence of those CorpSec officers changed the calculus. I fished out an extra round from my pocket, opened the ejection port to feed it directly into the breech, and then gently eased the slide forward, careful not to damage the extractor.

Seven plus one, hammer to the rear. It was time to go find Tiberius Teller.

I crossed the street. The motel was single-storied, built in a U-shape with the open side facing the road. The forecourt was lit by the sign, flashing and buzzing away, casting the place in alternate pastel hues. I checked the monitor strapped to my wrist and it registered: if Tiberius Teller was not here, then some other discrete radiation source was. The darkest part of the

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forecourt was under the overhang that ran along the rooms to the left, so I used that approach, staying in the shadows, watching the variations in the level on the monitor, and trying to get a better lock on Teller's location. The girl and her customers had gone into a room on this side, and I could faintly hear them as I approached. She was making short breathless yelping sounds; the men who were using her were quieter, just occasional deep guttural grunts. But then as I was slipping past their room I heard a sudden loud slap of flesh against flesh and a pained but muffled cry from the girl. This was followed by laughter from the men, loud and mirthless.

I moved on.

The highest reading was on the side furthest from the street, in the section that formed the middle of the U. My best guess was that Teller was in Room 18.

His time had come. I thumbed off the safety, went to a two-handed grip, took a deep breath, and kicked open the door.

WHAT BRINGS RADS TO NUEVO SHANGHAI? I have asked a few of them myself but never gotten a satisfactory answer. Clearly, they are desperate—wasted creatures, already somewhat less than human—but what makes them think that there is anything to help them here? It is not only illegal for a Rad to leave the Zone but also a capital crime—a direct mandate from the Mandarins, who believe that people with nothing left to lose are best kept at a distance. Most people say that they just want to get away from the radiation but, if so, why come to Nuevo Shanghai? Why not hide out up in Idaho or somewhere equally remote? And by then most of them are so devastated by the disease that no amount of relief from ambient radiation is going to change things anyway. They are already as good as dead, and from time to time I assist them.

My theory is that they come here deliberately to die. I think they want to die publicly, visibly. I think they want to remind the rest of us here in the Collateralized States that they still exist, that there are still people out in the

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Zone, and that they are very likely the most wretched human beings on the planet.

So as I kicked in that door I expected to find a hairless man huddled in rags and cowering in the corner, skin covered in sores and gums oozing gamma bleed—signs of advanced stages of the disease. Tiberius Teller was hairless enough, but he was not cowering in the corner. A flash of neon pink revealed instead a man standing by the doorway, swinging a big piece of two-by-four straight at my head.

I ducked but not fast enough—the blow glanced off my skull then came crashing down hard on my arm. The gun went flying, and I collapsed to my knees. Teller took another swing, a huge haymaker that I was just conscious enough to roll away from, but it left me jammed up against the wall with no further room for retreat. I could see his face contorted with rage as he lifted the lumber for another blow, and I realized that this was very likely the last thing I would ever see. An ugly last thing to see—Savonarola on angel dust—but then I probably deserved no better. My final thought was to hope that they cremated my remains because Tiberius Teller was obviously going to continue to pound my body with that lump of two by four long after I was dead.

This did not fit so well with my theory that Rads come here to die.

I wear heavy combat boots for this sort of work since I occasionally need to kick open a door as I had tonight. Teller's entire focus was on the target, my head, and so he did not react fast enough when I lashed out with a boot and caught him square on the kneecap. I heard it break, or some other part of Tiberius Teller break—Rads snap easily—and down he went.

I scuttled across the floor, desperately feeling around for the .45, using what little light was coming through from that flashing sign to locate it. There was a chest of drawers under which it might have slid, but when I checked all I found was an old comb. Meanwhile, Teller was on his feet again, and he came limping over with the lumber held aloft. I was able to stand now, but he was between me and the door. This time he came forward more cautiously, grunting with anger but intending to make the next blow count.

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I ran forward and rugby-tackled him. I did not want to get in that close to anyone with the disease, but I had no choice. The two-by-four came crashing down on my back, but that was better than my skull, and because I was in tight he had been unable to get much leverage into the blow. We both ended up sprawled on the floor. I could have killed him then, but beating him to death would have involved a lot of Rad blood, or if I strangled him Rad spittle, two substances best avoided—it is not the radiation that is the problem, it is the bagful of infectious diseases that go with it, and only the rich can afford health care in Nuevo Shanghai. So instead I retreated to the other side of the bed, the only section of the floor that I had not yet searched, and sure enough there was my gun.

Tiberius Teller was on his feet once again, limping toward me with the timber raised, but it was too late for him now. I leveled the .45, took aim, and was on the point of pulling the trigger and relieving him of all worldly cares when suddenly that alternating pastel glow from outside was replaced by one brief but intense burst of the purest, most heaven-profound white.

The blast blew me hard against the wall, and the supersonic crack that accompanied it was sharp enough to break an eardrum. I was temporarily blinded, but I could tell from the smell what had happened. I slumped in the corner, sightless and fighting for breath, trying not to pass out. Gradually my vision returned, revealing a grinning Johnny Chin standing in the doorway.

Johnny Chin was five-two in his boots, wore fingerless gloves and little round granny glasses, and had precisely three modes of behavior: obsequious, spaced-out, and intensely cruel.

“Gave cracker the zap,” he explained unnecessarily. “Cracker done down roasted, baby.”

He laughed gleefully, a long drawn-out titter pitched high enough to break glass.

So today Johnny Chin was fifty-percent spaced-out and fifty-percent cruel. I did a quick damage inventory. Nothing was broken, but there was a long cut along my left forearm and blood was dripping onto the floor. It would need stitches but there was nothing I could do about it now. I got up,

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engaged the safety, and wondered what Chin was high on. We went together to inspect the body. Johnny had a big childish grin on his face. There was nothing Johnny Chin enjoyed so much as giving some cracker the zap.

Tiberius Teller was dead. His clothes were still smoking, and the skin of his torso was blackened where the beam had terminated. He was the victim of a lightning strike, a man-made lightning strike. The stench was sickening, but it only seemed to excite Johnny's appetite.

"Char-broil cracker," he joyfully declared. "Yum yum." He released a switchblade that had suddenly appeared in his hand and pried a piece of steaming flesh from Teller's body. He held it up and twisted it around as he inspected it.

There was a trace of tattoo work visible on the skin. Writing rather than illustration; Teller had been inscribed with text.

"You done munch barbecue cracker?" Chin asked.

"No, Johnny, can't say that I have."

"Me none either too," he replied. "Either too," he repeated for emphasis.

He opened his mouth and was about to cheerfully ingest the late Tiberius Teller when I reminded him that Teller had the disease.

"But cracker roasted," Johnny complained in a high nasal whine. All Rad bodies are incinerated because it is the only sure way to kill off the plethora of plagues that they would have brought with them from the Zone. Johnny apparently thought that a beam discharge weapon should perform a similar service, and he was upset that I was spoiling his snack with the implication that it might not work that way.

"Suit yourself," I said.

I did not much care whether Johnny Chin lived or died. Johnny Chin was part Oriental, part Latino, part mongrel dog. I doubted that Chin was his real name, and I knew that in one of his deeper bouts of obsequiousness he had had cosmetic surgery performed on his eyelids to remove the fold, so as to appear more Chinese. He avoided sunlight like the vampire that he was and underwent regular body bleaching to cultivate a pale yellowish tinge on what would otherwise have been brown skin. He worked on the margins of the law, and his relationship with the Corporation was murky.

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“Can I see that?”

He handed me the weapon. It was a new model, smaller than usual—they were always miniaturizing things. The capacitor was at the back, and the power supply was housed in the pistol grip. The directors were the key component, long thin cylinders sealed together lengthwise so that they formed a barrel-like tube, which made the entire thing resemble an old-fashioned kinetic weapon, like my automatic.

I returned it. Despite my warning, Johnny was chewing away, and he licked his fingers before taking back the weapon.

“How did you get it?” I asked.

“Down license dealer,” he proudly declared, grinning widely. There was a piece of Tiberius Teller stuck between his teeth. He swallowed and looked longingly at the smoking corpse on the floor, considering another slice. “Me done license, now.”

That seemed unlikely, but if he did not want to tell the truth that was fine by me. I left the room, eager to escape Teller’s smell and Johnny’s gastronomy. When I stepped outside I got the second shock of the evening: there was a car in the forecourt—not one of those little Chinese-built bubble cars that we all drive now, plastic-bodied, battery-powered, and as reliable as a promise—but a real car; a pre-Assumption car; a metal car with a gasoline engine. Johnny followed me outside, having helped himself to another serving. He came to a standstill beside me, chewing contentedly.

“Sweet wheels, ya ya?”

“You mean this is yours?”

“Total, baby. Done full mine.”

No one but the privileged can get a car like this, and even then the cost of fueling it would be beyond all but the wealthy. I realized that the license story was not a fiction after all: apparently, the Mandarins were buying Johnny’s faux-Chinese act to the extent of licensing him for an energy weapon, and gasoline too. Johnny Chin had come up in the world, and I wondered who the victim was that had paid the price of his advancement, for the Mandarins do not reward good deeds. They followed the dictum, first articulated by Stalin, that gratitude is a sickness suffered by dogs.

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I stepped over for a closer look. It was a big, two-door coupe. Long hood, fastback tail. Two longitudinal racing stripes ran the length of the body. I recognized it: a Mustang Shelby GT, a 500-horsepower monster that had been built back when I was a child, back in the first decades of the century, back before everything turned sour.

Johnny got in and fired it up. The engine roared on ignition and then settled into a deep uneven rumble at idle, a delicious sound. The evening air was filled with the odor of exhaust and gasoline, something rare now, and suddenly the past came rushing back in one engulfing wave—a time when gasoline was taken for granted, before the long lines and rationing, and well before the coming of the Mandarins. The image was so distant that it seemed alien, as if from somebody else’s lifetime, not my own.

Johnny got out, and I fought down the memories.

“Me give you ride,” he offered.

“No, thanks.” I did not want to ever be under any obligation to Johnny Chin, real or imagined. “I’ll just get my Rad and go.”

“Rad my Rad,” Johnny said, reverting to an agitated squeal. “Bounty my bounty. Me done waste cracker.”

It was true: there are no shares in the business and whoever took down the Rad was entitled to the full bounty. Johnny opened the trunk, withdrew a big iron butcher’s hook, and went back to Room 18. I wondered how he had gotten here in the first place, and supposed that he must have been tracking Teller too. Johnny came back out, dragging the body by the hook, which he had lodged in the throat under the jaw, huffing and grunting with the effort.

He got to the trunk, laid out a plastic sheet, and then contemplated the corpse for a moment in thoughtful silence.

“You think they done adjust bounty if some missing?” I followed his gaze to the conspicuous gap in Tiberius Teller, the result of Johnny’s recent snack. It was not the cannibalism that bothered him, it was the possibility that his fee might be reduced because of it.

“I don’t think so. As long as they can identify the body as a Rad you’ll get your money.”

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The answer pleased him and he lifted the body into the trunk with gusto. Johnny was strong for his size, one of his many deceptions.

“Now I give you ride,” he said as he closed the trunk.

“No, thanks.”

“But that why me here, baby. Me done no come for cracker. Me done come for you.”

“What?”

“You dumb, man.” He waved his hand dismissively, as if my dullness was trying his patience. “Done go Room Twelve,” he said, “then you come. Me be here.” He lit a cigarette, cranked up the stereo, and leaned back on the hood in a relaxed posture, apparently intending to wait.

I shrugged my shoulders and went in search of Room 12.

IT DID NOT TAKE LONG. I had already guessed the one he must mean, a guess soon confirmed as I returned to the room into which the girl had taken her customers: the number twelve was affixed to the door. I listened for a moment but could detect no sound from within. You do not kick down the door of a room with three Corporation Security officers inside—however much they might be otherwise engaged—you knock politely. I knocked politely.

No answer. I knocked again, with the same result. Then I cautiously tried the handle. The door was unlocked, and I slowly pushed it open.

There were no CorpSec officers inside, just the girl, lying on a mattress on the floor. She was clearly dead, but there was so much blood that it was hard to figure out what had happened. She was still more or less dressed, even down to wearing the stiletto-heeled platform shoes on which she had patrolled the sidewalk, but her clothing had been violently ripped as if by frenzied carnivores having torn away hide to reach flesh. Her body was marked with welts that would have turned to bruises had she lived long enough. The one visible breast had a bite mark deep enough to have drawn blood. Her face was covered in a mixture of slowly congealing fluids, and

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her front teeth had been knocked in, the upper lip almost severed by the severity of the blow.

The three steroids had been CorpSec, but only low-level CorpSec, just juiced-up gaijin muscle in the employ of the real power. They were not high enough to get away with something like this. I heard a step behind me and ducked instinctively while turning, drawing the .45 and cursing myself for not having had the weapon in hand as soon as discovering what happened. But it was only Johnny Chin at the door, still smoking, still grinning.

“She no Rad cracker,” he said. “You done go down for her.”

“I didn’t kill her. Three Corporation Security officers did.”

“Me none think so,” he sang in a rising falsetto.

“You don’t think so? So how would you know, Johnny?”

“‘Cause she die-dee-die-dee gunshot,” he sang merrily. “Our friends no done use guns.”

“How would you know how she died?”

“Check. You find.”

I checked, and found. There was a big round entry point below the left breast that had been concealed by the shreds of her top. I lifted the body slightly, revealing a wide exit wound that had left the surrounding flesh cut into loose flaps.

“The round fragmented,” I said. “Some sort of hollow-point.”

“You use hollow points,” Chin noted, the first grammatically correct utterance that he had managed all evening. From the tone in which he said it, there was no doubting the implication. I was starting to get the picture now.

“And I suppose you also happen to know that the round that killed her was a forty-five?”

Johnny’s face brightened as he nodded in the affirmative, pleased that he was not going to be burdened with the need to provide a long explanation. It occurred to me that—despite the wealth of forensically useful evidence they had left at the scene—those CorpSec steroids were going to get away with it after all.

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“We done ride now, ya ya?” Johnny said, his voice rising in concern that we not keep whoever had sent him on this errand waiting any longer.

“Yeah, Johnny, I guess we do.”

I stood, holstered the .45, and followed Chin out to the forecourt. The Mustang’s engine was still running, an incredible waste of precious gasoline, and I realized that Johnny had deliberately left it that way to demonstrate just how much of a big shot he had become.

I got into the passenger side. At least I now knew who the victim was in Johnny’s sudden rise of fortune. The victim was me.

II

IT WAS COMPLETELY DARK NOW, and the great burlesque of Nuevo Shanghai at night was in full swing. We cruised slowly down Thirtieth Amendment Boulevard—originally Las Vegas Boulevard and occasionally still referred to by its old nickname, the Strip. The roadway had been narrowed by the encroachment of street stalls, perhaps to remind the Mandarins of home. The place was congested with vehicles and pedestrians. The air smelled of street food, incense, and combustible drugs. Traffic was often at a standstill, sometimes caused by the fact of Johnny’s car, for whose passage people stopped to stare. Whenever the vehicle came to a halt they flooded around to admire it. Johnny reveled in the attention, but then he would suddenly become bored and hit the gas, surging forward, scattering the onlookers and plowing aside any too sluggish.

Dealers walked between the cars, offering indy hits and full cycles. Johnny bought a pack of cigarettes from one of them. These days most people smoked cigarettes laced with Dexedrine or lithium or some other anti-depressant, but Johnny was an old-fashioned guy and his tobacco came enhanced with simple crystal meth, the better to keep him on edge. There were entertainments in tents: dog fights, freak shows, and the ever-present

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astrologers always ready to serve a populace eager to purchase hope. In one space an outdoor cage had been set up, and inside two fighters high on Elektron Xyonide clawed at each other with the desperation of animals. The cage was electrified and whenever one of them came in contact with it he gave off a shower of sparks, but rather than slow them down the shock only seemed to enrage them more, as the drug was designed to do.

There were stalls selling food, liquor, and tattoos. Fluorescent tattoo was the latest fashion—it carried a certain Rad-like connotation that made it temptingly like slumming—and there were several places devoted to this new art. A favorite location for the tattoos was on the rear, and many women walked with the backs of their skirts hitched up to reveal these to advantage. Some had their nipples done, turning them into glowing iridescent discs, and these women favored fishnet tops for public appreciation.

There was a medical stall open for business. The operator would not be a licensed physician, but I could not afford the real thing.

“Stop for a minute,” I said. “I need to get some stitches.”

“No, no, baby, we overslow.” Chin was hunched over the wheel now, eager to make progress.

“So where is it that we’re going in such a hurry, Johnny?”

“You see.” He grinned at me like a child barely able to contain a secret. I think that this is the key to Johnny Chin’s surprising survival: he keeps that deep pit of cruelty concealed with a witless exterior. He does not seem to be worth wasting until you see for yourself how vicious he is, but by then it is too late.

There was a clutch of anchorites on a corner, standing in a small circle and wearing rough woolen robes, hoods up despite the heat. They were chanting mournfully and one of them carried a placard declaring that the end of civilization was at hand, apparently not having understood that it was already extinct, despite the abundant evidence surrounding him.

The stalls ended abruptly as we hit the Free-Fire Zone, the flat expanse of ground that surrounds Corporation headquarters, three hundred yards wide, comfortably within the effective range of the weapons mounted in the

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towers that overlook it, and embedded with land mines should anyone somehow make it past the towers. Johnny turned in at the guardhouse.

“So we’re calling on Corporation Security,” I said.

“No, no, you go see a Mandarin.” Johnny looked at my surprised face with evident satisfaction. “I done super-connected now, baby!”

THE CORPORATION FOR COLLATERAL OVERSIGHT had been established on Assumption, and was nominally intended to oversee production in those states designated as collateral against the U.S. government debt obligations that had been assumed by the People’s Republic of China. All of the executives of this company, from the chairman down, are without exception Chinese and are collectively known to the rest of us as Mandarins. Once the debt is paid down, so the argument goes, the Corporation will go away, full sovereignty will be restored, and the Thirtieth Amendment will be repealed. It was nice in theory, but the remaining industrial capacity of the United States after those nineteen cobalt-salted radiation weapons had wiped away the coastal cities was insufficient to even service the debt, let alone pay it down. The Corporation handled all the refinancing, and the debt continued to grow. Everyone had known that this would happen, but the remains of the U.S. government, faced with a massive collapse in revenues and desperate for a way out of the debt binge that they had been engaged in for decades, agreed to it. The “oversight” was a polite fiction. The Corporation for Collateral Oversight ruled the United States as effectively as the British East India Company had ruled the subcontinent two hundred and fifty years before.

And now, if Johnny Chin was to be believed, I was on my way to an interview with one of them. Few Mandarins ever condescend to talk to someone like me, preferring to engage the rest of us through non-Chinese lower officials of the company, or Corporation Security if enforcement is involved. The Mandarins live in their separate community, shop in separate shops that stock things the rest of us can only dream about, and most of them frankly despise us natives as a mongrel race unfit for self-rule, a supposition

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supported by the fact that we had spent ourselves into subjugation. I wondered what it could be that would make one of them want to see a lowly gaijin bounty hunter like me.

THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE CCO are housed in the former Caesars Palace Hotel and Casino, an imperial allusion of the type that the Mandarins were usually careful to avoid, but Chinese investors had already taken ownership of the casino by the time of the Assumption and so it had been a natural choice. At the checkpoint, we did not take the usual path down into the underground receiving area—a reinforced concrete space separate from the main complex, ensuring that if a truck bomb ever got past the gate it would not threaten the buildings themselves. Instead, the tire shredders were lowered and Johnny drove the big Mustang along the main drive right up to the front entrance, a place where normally only the Mandarins' limousines were allowed. The portico was columned and the pediment still bore the engraved letters SPQR below the Corporation's name. Perhaps the Mandarins had decided not to remove it until they had figured out what this curiously vowelless gaijin word meant.

Two CorpSec guards approached, recognizable by the chemical body enhancement and the black-belted blood-red coveralls that serve as their uniform. They were armed with energy weapons. One opened my door while the other unholstered his taser, the energy weapon of choice for hand-to-hand work.

"Thanks for the ride," I said to Johnny as I got out. "I owe you."

Johnny Chin grinned a genuine grin. Irony was alien to him, or perhaps with his newfound status he just found threats from me laughable.

"I done go get bounty now. Bye-bye." He gave me a little wave, like a simpleton would. I slammed the door shut and he gunned the big engine, taking off in a swerving fishtail resulting from too much power applied to too little rubber. I watched him go, wondering how long it would take him to wreck that beautiful machine. When he was out of sight I turned to the guards.

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“What now?”

In response, they hustled me inside.

I had been to Corporation headquarters twice before, but never by the front door. The two previous occasions were for questioning, and both times I had been brought in via the underground tunnels with a hood over my head and hands cuffed behind my back. The most that I had been allowed to see of the interior was a windowless eight-by-ten interrogation cell whose repeated whitewashings had failed to obliterate the dark stains beneath, and where I had endured extended interviews with some not very charming people. Neither experience had been uplifting.

This visit did not begin much better. At least there were no hood or handcuffs this time. The entrance foyer on the other side of the sliding glass doors was a pleasant space of classical proportion, but I was soon led down below ground level into a room that was suspiciously similar to the ones I had previously occupied. The place was lit by harsh fluorescent lighting. The walls were caked in the collective misery of a thousand previous occupants. The .45 was removed from me. I was made to show ID and my fingerprints were taken, which I had expected, but then a nurse came into the room. She wore latex gloves and carried a kidney-shaped enamel tray upon which lay a paper cup, a rubber hose, a hypodermic syringe, and a cylindrical device that I assumed was an electric cattle prod intended to aid the memory of forgetful interviewees. I underwent a brief but thorough body search, had blood taken none too gently, and was required to provide a urine sample. The examination ended with a retinal scan—the cylindrical device turned out to be an otoscope that not only looked into the eye but also took pictures of what it saw. This went beyond the usual bureaucratic preoccupation with establishing identity, and I hoped that it was not because they wanted to be sure they killed the right guy.

I asked the nurse if she could stitch my wound. She stepped out and returned a moment later with an office stapler. She hurriedly pinched the wound together then, with the bottom plate unhinged, haphazardly punched a series of staples into my flesh, as indifferent to my reaction as only someone accustomed to torture can be. Finally, the nurse and the goons left

me alone, locking the door behind them. Next came the waiting, about an hour I guessed: my phone had been removed from me along with the .45, and interrogation rooms the world over have no clocks, so as to disorient the occupant as much as possible.

Eventually, the goons returned. I was hauled to my feet and pushed out the door into the concrete passageway. A new set of guards was waiting outside, three of them. Two came on either side, gripping me by the arms, while the third fell in behind. We marched down the passageway, deeper into the building, presumably on the way to see whoever had ordered me brought in.

The first hint that something was seriously wrong was in the clothing of these new guards: instead of the standard red and black of Corporation Security, they wore gray-green military-style uniforms bearing insignia that in the passageway I was unable to identify. And unlike the goons these guards were not steroidal gajjin, but Han Chinese.

After fifty yards we came to a halt at an elevator. The third man stepped in front of us and when he extended his arm to press the up-button, exposing the gold rank insignia on his sleeve, I realized that these were not guards after all. They were soldiers.

The elevator car arrived and we stepped inside. The interior doors were covered in polished metal and as we all stood facing forward I was able to see my companions more clearly in the reflection. The two on either side of me remained immobile and impassive. The third removed a pair of white gloves from a pocket and put them on. His uniform was more ornate than the other two: double-breasted jacket with an assortment of ribbons above the left pocket, on the sleeves the rank insignia that I had already seen, shirt and tie, hard shoulder epaulets through one of which was rigged a gold-braided aiguillette, signifying that he was a staff officer. His cap was tucked under his left arm, visor forward. On the cap badge I could make out a five-pointed star, gold on a red background, confirming what by now I had already guessed: these three were soldiers of the People's Liberation Army.

This was worrying. The Mandarins often have personal bodyguards, but they are usually composed of Corporation Security, and the terms of the

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Assumption specifically forbade any Chinese military from being stationed on US soil. Yet here they undeniably were. I wondered who I was being taken to see, that they were so powerful as to be able to flout this rule with their very own Praetorian Guard.

III

THE ELEVATOR CAME TO A HALT and the doors opened onto a small vestibule fitted with closets and shelves. This would once have been a service area where staff unloaded tray tables and linen carts coming up from the kitchens and laundries below, back in the days before the Mandarins had found a better use for windowless rooms located deep underground.

We left the service area and stepped out into a broad, high-ceilinged hall whose walls were gilded and garlanded in rococo profusion, a startling contrast to the interrogation cell below. Even the ceiling was frescoed. I was marched down to the far end of the hall, where we came to a halt before a pair of paneled doors attended by two footmen in formal attire.

The soldiers stood aside and their officer came close beside me. He gripped my arm with a gloved hand. The officer looked nervous, and I could see a fine sheen of sweat on his upper lip. He nodded reluctantly to the footmen, who opened the doors in response. The officer and I stepped through, and the doors swung shut behind us.

We entered a magnificent room of massive proportions. The entire space was circular, at least a hundred feet in diameter, and topped by a deeply

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coffered dome. The floor was composed of multi-colored marbles in a complex geometric pattern, polished to a mirror shine. In the center of the rotunda, directly under the dome high overhead, was a fountain above whose pool a sculpted trio of lightly clad nymphs danced in ageless delight—the three graces perhaps.

The water splashed softly. The air was cool and smelled of polished stone.

There were two other people in the room, both on the far side and apparently waiting for us. The first was a man seated on a large gilded chair whom I immediately recognized from the official portraits that hang on the wall of every government office: he was Xue Sheng-li, the chairman of the Corporation for Collateral Oversight, and therefore the man who was effectively the supreme ruler of the United States. Few gaijin were ever brought into the chairman's presence, and fewer still lived to tell the tale.

The officer's hand that was holding me began to shake. I knew how he felt.

Standing next to the chairman was an attendant in a business suit, a female, presumably a personal secretary. There was no one whose function might conceivably be that of an executioner, an absence I took as a positive sign.

The officer urged me forward and we marched across the room, our footsteps echoing in the vast chamber. In the building's previous incarnation this space would have served as the casino's centerpiece—an opulent area intended to impress the visitor, much as the original palaces of the Caesars had been designed to do—but in this case the purpose had not been to overawe a subject populace but to open gamblers' wallets. Now the chamber had reverted to the original function of Roman architectural grandeur, for it was used as the throne room, a space intended to emphasize the unchallengeable dignity of the imperial ruler.

We came to a halt twenty feet in front of Chairman Xue. He had a youthful appearance, although I knew that he was actually in his early fifties. He wore a dark western-style business suit, conservatively cut and no doubt tailored from the finest of fabrics—Xue had a reputation for not stinting

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himself anything in the way of personal luxury. The one point of color was an exuberantly printed red and gold tie with a matching handkerchief in the breast pocket—the Mandarins love their silks. I glanced at the secretary standing beside him and received yet another surprise in an evening that had already been too full of them: she was not Chinese; she was gaijin. It was strange enough for any Mandarin's personal staff to include a gaijin, let alone that of the chairman himself.

The officer released me and saluted smartly. He made a brief report in that barking way people do whenever they put on a military uniform. The chairman merely nodded in response. It was a dismissal. The officer saluted again, turned about, and marched back to the far doors and out of the room.

The body search had been thorough, but I was nevertheless surprised at being left unescorted in a room where the only thing between me and the chairman was a single woman, someone whom I could easily overwhelm. Perhaps the interview to come was one that would be best conducted with a minimum of witnesses.

Chairman Xue regarded me in evaluative silence. He bore not the usual bland countenance of a successful Mandarin—concealment of ambition being fundamental to climbing the Party ladder—but instead betrayed the combination of smug cunning and vicious instinct characteristic of a genuine tyrant. On the surface he was smooth, thick hair wet with oil and neatly combed, his face as shiny as if he had just come from a pampering at the spa—which might well have been the case, for he lived a life of indulgence like the emperor that he was. His face as he examined me was set in the half-smile of a cobra happening upon a field mouse, and I could not help wondering if he had been sent to America not so much to take advantage of his administrative skills as simply to be rid of him back in Beijing, relieving his Party colleagues of the need to watch their backs quite so carefully.

He nodded to his assistant, who moved to a side table. Looking at her again I realized that although she was not ethnic Chinese nor either was she entirely gaijin. Her long dark hair had a natural curl and she was too tall for a Chinese woman, but there was nevertheless some evidence of Oriental

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ancestry about her: a suggestion of it in broad almond-shaped eyes and high cheekbones, and her skin had a smooth even texture that for some reason made me think of places like Samarkand and the Silk Road.

She took a sheet of thick paper bearing the little red-ink character stamps with which Chinese officialdom like to classify their correspondence. The ink shone in the light: it was still wet.

“Your name is Nicholas Cornelius Jarrow?” She negotiated the Rs in my name with ease and her voice had no obvious accent—whatever her background was, she had been brought up speaking English.

“Yes.”

She began reading from the sheet of paper.

“Report of the People’s Tribunal: Nicholas Cornelius Jarrow is hereby found guilty of murder in the second degree of an unidentified Caucasian female in the premises of the former Pink Flamingo Motor Court, now abandoned, located at 1225 Liberation of Taiwan Avenue in the city of Nuevo Shanghai. The witness states that he saw Jarrow enter a room and immediately afterward heard the report of a kinetic weapon. Upon entering the same room he found Jarrow standing above the victim and holding a forty-five-caliber automatic pistol. There was no one else in the room, and the window was locked. Initial examination reveals that the victim died as a result of a gunshot wound. The recovered fragments indicate forty-five-caliber. The People’s Tribunal has determined that, given these facts and the eyewitness account, no further forensic investigation, including medical or ballistic examination, is warranted. In addition to the above charge, the People’s Tribunal has determined that the defendant is also guilty of antisocial behavior and crimes against the state.”

Now I knew why the ink was still wet. Justice was far from perfect under the Mandarins, but no one could accuse it of being slow.

Jury trial and the right of appeal had been done away with under the Thirtieth Amendment—all felony crime was now dealt with by People’s Tribunals composed of Corporation magistrates who ask for only such evidence as they wish to see and conduct their deliberations in secret. There was no such thing as habeas corpus anymore, and certainly no right to cross-

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examine or even know the identity of witnesses, although I had no doubt that it was Johnny Chin's evidence—strangely not all that distant from the truth—that had been the basis for the finding.

The all-encompassing antisocial behavior and crimes against the state were both standard add-ons, designed as prosecutorial safety nets to ensure that even if the defendant somehow managed to prove his innocence on the primary charge, a guilty verdict could still be obtained. Both offenses were capital crimes.

"You are sentenced to death by firing squad," the woman continued in a dull monotone; she might as well have been reading a recipe. "Sentence to be carried out immediately." She looked up from the paper. "Do you have anything to say?"

"No."

For the first time her face showed something other than bland indifference. She cleared her throat before continuing.

"Do you wish to appeal to the chairman for clemency?"

"No."

Now she looked annoyed. I was an actor on the stage refusing to follow his cue.

"This is your opportunity to request a commutation of the sentence," she prompted.

"No, the firing squad will be fine."

She turned to the emperor and spoke to him in an undertone. I could tell from her unhesitant delivery that she was as comfortable in Mandarin as she was in English, and now I understood how a non-Chinese came to be on the emperor's staff: she was an interpreter, but no ordinary interpreter—she spoke both languages as a native, a rare feat that could be useful when dealing with subtle negotiations, such as blackmailing uncooperative bounty hunters.

They conferred briefly. Xue's smile broadened and his eyes narrowed: my refusal to play the game might have annoyed his interpreter, but it only amused the chairman. Soon the interpreter turned back to me.

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“Chairman Xue has heard your plea for clemency,” she stated, reverting to her previous flat monotone. “He has agreed to grant you the opportunity for settling your debt to society by the performance of a public service.”

“What service?”

She picked up a second object from the table, a folder.

“Certain antisocial elements recently conducted a burglary at City Hall, specifically in the Department of Buildings. Your task is to find the perpetrator and recover the property that was stolen. You have one week from today to accomplish this.”

“What property?”

“A set of building blueprints.”

“To which building?”

“This building.”

“Caesars Palace?”

“The Headquarters of the Corporation for Collateral Oversight,” she corrected.

I got it now: they were afraid of an insurgent attack. Ever since the passage of the Thirtieth Amendment, there had been an endless low-level guerilla war between the authorities and bands of what the Mandarins officially referred to as “recidivist criminal elements,” actually groups of armed citizens who refused to accept the Assumption and all that went with it. They bombed government buildings, attacked gasoline convoys, and destroyed television stations—all media being controlled now by the Corporation. Occasionally they assassinated congressmen who had voted for the Thirtieth Amendment. These attacks mostly occurred near the mountains and forests where the insurgents were holed up, and no doubt one of the reasons the Mandarins had chosen Las Vegas for their headquarters was that in the vast flat sweep of the featureless desert there was nowhere for the insurgents to hide.

It was a successful strategy—attacks in Nuevo Shanghai were rare—but the Mandarins would nevertheless be worried about those plans getting into the hands of the insurgents, desert or no desert. That explained all the fuss. What it did not explain was why all the fuss involved me.

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“If I agree to do it, I get a full pardon on all charges?”

“No, Mr. Jarrow. If you agree to do it, you will get a temporary stay of execution. Only if you find the thief and return the plans will you be granted a pardon.”

It was not much of an offer, but it beat the alternative.

“Why isn’t Corporation Security investigating it themselves?”

“They have, but without satisfactory progress.”

“If they’ve failed, what chance have I got? I can’t do things like compel witnesses to speak or get inside City Hall.”

“You will be granted access to whomever and whatever you need.”

“It doesn’t matter—all the senior bureaucrats are Chinese, and I don’t speak Chinese.”

“But I do.”

“What?”

“I will be accompanying you, Mr. Jarrow. Your official authority will derive from me in my capacity as the personal representative of the chairman, and of course I will also handle translation duties.”

“Forget it.” I crossed my arms to emphasize the point. “You can tell Caesar here that I’ll try to recover his plans for him, but not with you trailing along. I work alone.”

The interpreter opened her mouth to reply, but before she could speak Chairman Xue cleared his throat meaningfully.

“I can assure you that Miss Lee is quite capable,” he said, gesturing toward the interpreter, “and that she to you will not a burden be.” He spoke slowly, articulating each word with care, the way someone who has learned a language from books but rarely spoken it would do, knowing the words but leaving the sounds unfamiliar. His face broke into a grin of self-satisfaction at my evident surprise, for it was not known that Chairman Xue spoke English, a fact that were it public would certainly have been widely reported. Most Mandarins derided American English as a language that was beneath their dignity, the bastardized tongue of a mongrel people, unfit for the children of Han. “It is therefore Caesar’s wish that Caesar’s

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representative accompany you,” he continued, smiling ever wider. “Should this prove unsatisfactory, we may proceed with the sentence.”

I shrugged my shoulders in defeat and asked the obvious question.

“Why me?”

Xue nodded to the interpreter, who opened the folder and withdrew a photograph. She walked over and handed it to me.

“A security camera got a shot of the thief,” she explained.

The photograph was black-and-white, apparently a still taken from surveillance video. There was a string of alphanumeric characters across the bottom showing camera number, date, and timestamp. The photo was blown up to eight-by-ten, a little grainy but good enough for identification.

The thief was a woman. She was crouched in front of a door, dressed in dark leggings and a turtleneck sweater, a watch cap in one hand and a key or tool in the other. She was looking not at the lock but back over her shoulder and directly up at the lens, as if having suddenly sensed that there was a security camera mounted in the ceiling.

Same arched eyebrows over skeptical gray eyes. Same set to her mouth, equal parts curiosity and resolve. Same long cool look of dispassionate appraisal, the gaze of a woman to be taken seriously. A little older perhaps, but there was no doubt as to her identity.

I handed back the photograph as casually as I could.

Now I knew why they wanted me.