

I took a deep breath. Everybody knew the Humanis Policlub—at the civilized end they sponsored pro-human rallies and supported human candidates for public office. At the not-so-civilized end, the one most people didn't see, they got their sheet-covered hands into a lot messier business, some of it pretty damned ugly. "Should I even ask you how you found this out?"

"Nope," the mage said, almost cheerful. "But I found out, and let's just say the guy who told me should know. He'll wake up sometime tomorrow, if the ghouls don't get him first. I'll be back in twenty, but you should probably run with that info."

Run we did—or rather, Spaz did. Me, I sat in my crappy chair by the window and looked out over the garbage-strewn street at the junkies and chipheads huddled down below, watching the rain and thinking about what we'd almost done. Near as we could figure, Mr. Johnson—the dwarf—had no idea that his assistant had taken what had essentially been a plan for a little cut-rate industrial larceny and transformed it into what had almost been the mass poisoning of hundreds of orks and trolls. With that on the table, the ruin of Buzz Beverages didn't even rate notice.

Locke got back shortly after and threw himself back on the couch with another beer from my fridge. He didn't look any happier than I felt.

"You think we should give Frankie a call?" I asked, just to break the silence that had settled over us like a wet blanket.

"What for?"

"I dunno—let him know he should check into his jobs a little better before he calls us, maybe?"

Locke started to answer but was interrupted by the sight of the tiger popping back on my trid screen. His fangy face was twisted into an uncharacteristic snarl.

"You got something?" I asked quickly, leaning forward.

"Oh, hell yeah." Spaz didn't even try to make the voice sound cartoony this time. "You guys are *not* gonna like this ..."

The door to the seedy little bar's back room burst open and an angry-looking Arthur Carroll strode in, glaring. "Damn it, this had better be good, or—"

He stopped short as the door slammed shut behind him. "What—?" Spinning around, he nearly collided with me and my friends Heckler and Koch.

"Get in there, Artie," I said, prodding him with the barrel toward the table, the lone other occupant of which was currently in shadow. I flipped on the light to reveal Frankie, our fixer. A moment later Locke shimmered back to visibility, his Predator pointed at the ork's temple—explaining away the worried look on Frankie's face. "Have a seat," I added.

Artie couldn't decide who to glare at first. "Listen, this is—"

"Unexpected?" I asked. "Like, we were supposed to be dead?" I ground the barrel of my gun into the space between his shoulderblades. "Unfortunately for you, you only got two of us. Even more unfortunately for you, we're not too happy about that."

"What the hell is this about?" Frankie demanded, finding his voice. "What's it got to do with me?"

"You called me, you tusker asshole," Artie spat.

The trid screen on the far side of the room flicked on to reveal the tiger, looking uncharacteristically predatory. "Actually, he didn't. I did. And I called you too, Frankie. It was sickeningly easy to hack your outgoing Matrix feeds and spoof your addresses to make you each think the other one wanted a meet."

I shrugged when they both glared at me. "You shouldn't be surprised." I motioned toward Artie. "When Spaz told me he'd hacked Artie's system and found emails with somebody planning this whole thing and offering a payoff for a successful job, it wasn't hard to put two and two together. The only part of this I don't get, Artie, is why you worked with an ork. I thought you didn't like orks."

"Or anybody else who doesn't look like you," Locke added.

Artie had reached the end of his patience. "You'd know if you weren't so stupid," he said, contempt dripping from his voice.

"Oh, hey, let me try," Locke spoke up, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "You're a devious little weasel ... so let's see—first, you get to kill or poison a bunch of dirty orks and trolls. Second, you get to ruin a division run by a dwarf. Third, you get to kill off a team of meta and race-traitor street scum. How am I doing so far?"

Arnie just glared.

It was all coming clear now. "And fourth," I put in, "You get to ruin the rep of an ork fixer when word gets out that he screwed his team for, what—a couple thousand nuyen?"

"One," Spaz offered.

"One? Cheap bastard. We're worth way more than that," Locke said.

Back at the table, GlareFest 2070 was continuing, with Frankie shooting stinkeye at Artie and Artie spreading it around to the rest of us. "You son of a bitch—" Frankie growled at the little human.

Artie ignored him. "What are you gonna do with me?" he demanded, sneering. "Blow me away with that?" He indicated my H&K. "Somebody'll hear."

I grinned. "Nah, Artie. That's way too low-class. I prefer a little *irony* in my revenge. Locke?"

The mage had moved away from Frankie while I spoke, and now he came back with a tray containing four glasses, each filled with a fiery red carbonated liquid. "This stuff's pretty vile," he said conversationally. "I tried it. Even without the poison it's awful—nearly takes the roof of your mouth off, but I guess macho troll guys are into that kind of self-mutilation thing." He set the tray down in the middle of the table.

"Two of them came straight out of the can," I said, taking a seat but keeping the gun trained on them. "The other two are ... your own special recipe, Artie. Sporting chance for both of you, neh?"

Artie was turning several shades of red. He looked like he was going to bolt but I cuffed him one upside the head before he could move. "We got all night," I told him. "Zumi and Desmo ain't comin' back any time soon. Figure they're buying this round."

