



INCOMING FEED.....

"Somebody definitely set us up," Spaz reported back shortly after I'd talked to Tiffany. He was back in his virtual world now, and the cartoon tiger speaking to us through my trid screen looked a lot more confident than the pimply kid. "Looks like we messed up their plans, too."

"Oh, really?" Locke was slumped on the couch, his feet propped up on my coffee table. "Because we were so successful and all—"

"Shut up, Locke," I muttered, my attention fully on the trid. "Go on."

"I was poking around in the data I got from their system," the hacker continued. "The data we were *supposed* to get was basically useless, but naturally I grabbed a few extra goodies that looked interesting. One of them turned out to be *really* interesting. Seems like there were triggers in the system set to call the security guys as soon as somebody hacked in."

I stared. "You mean—not only did they know we were coming, but they were supposed to wait until we—"

"Kinda explains why Johnson's boy wanted us to hit the truck first," Locke said. "Do the job, then get our asses fried doing a useless data steal. No fuss, no bother, no strings."

"I wonder—do you think Johnson *knows* we didn't plant the stuff in the truck?"

"It's a good thing we didn't," Locke said. "I don't know about you guys, but mass murder's not on my playlist."

Now we all got to stare at the mage. "What—?"

He pulled the bottle out of his pocket; it was now sealed up in a thick plastic bag. "While you were tracking down Johnson's flunky, I decided to have a friend test the contents of this bottle to see if our employers were telling the truth. Turns out they weren't—this stuff wouldn't have made the drink taste bad. It would have probably killed about half of the people who drank it, several hours after the fact. Nasty poison, and it doesn't take much to do the trick."

We were all silent for a moment to let that sink in. We had almost killed hundreds of people, and only our sheer orneriness about doing things the way we were told had saved us. "But why would Johnson want to—" Spaz began.

"Wait a second ..." I said slowly. I turned it around in my mind for a minute. "My friend said that Johnson's assistant Artie likes to rough up meta joygirls. And the people who were going to be buying that drink were almost all orks and trolls—"

There was a thump as Locke's feet hit the floor. "I'll be back," he said quickly. "I need to go talk to somebody." He was out the door before we could say anything.

He called half an hour later. "I thought so," he said. From the look of the background behind him, he was driving through a pretty bad end of town, and his expression could best be described as "reluctantly triumphant". "No wonder Johnson's lackey's got it in for metas—he's Humanis. Name's Arthur Carroll, and there's definitely a pointy hood with his name on it."

