

was a mage—with those guys, weird went with the territory. “You’re early,” I said.

Locke grunted, running a hand over the two-day stubble on his chin. “I like it here. Where else can you get propositioned and puked on in the same evening?”

“By the same person?” I grinned. My beer arrived and we both went silent, waiting.

The rest of the team showed up shortly, together. Zumi with that oddly endearing combination of troll-tough and nervous—I still hadn’t quite gotten my mind around a nervous troll, but I guess when you used to be a Japanese corp princess and your world got turned ass over teakettle by growing a meter and sprouting horns during the Year of the Comet, you were entitled to your quirks. Desmo was almost as uncomfortable, a fish out of water without the van that was like an extension of his body. Since our last member was joining us virtually from his car out in the parking lot, that made all of us present. “Okay,” I said, finishing my beer and rising, “Looks like it’s showtime.”

Johnson was a dwarf, compact and broad-beamed with a short, neatly-cut beard and mirrorshades. Everything about him screamed “mid-level corp,” from his nice mid-level suit to the nice mid-level prissy human assistant sitting next to him fiddling with a commlink. The dwarf glanced at his commlink and motioned us to sit down. Locke and I did; Zumi faded back and hung out near the door. That was fine: she didn’t like negotiations and it couldn’t hurt to have somebody watching the exit. Desmo took a seat off to the side—he liked to listen to the spiel but stay out of the way.

Johnson looked us over, then got right to it: “I’ve got a job that shouldn’t take much effort, but it’s got to be done tonight. Does that work for your schedules?”

Next to me I could almost feel Locke rolling his eyes, but I doubt the dwarf saw it. He seemed to have pegged me as the guy to talk to. “That could be arranged,” I said, “depending on what you’ve got in mind.”

The dwarf looked like he expected that. “Of course. I’ll give you the basics and then, assuming we have an understanding, we’ll go from there.” When nobody objected, he continued: “The job involves gaining entry to a facility, removing some information, and planting something else. The security is not extensive, and I’d estimate you could be in and out in less than an hour.”

“Oh, sure,” Locke muttered to my left. “With them it’s *always* easy.”

I ignored him; that was usually best. “Where’s the facility?”

“It’s local,” the dwarf assured me. “I can’t tell you anything else until you agree to take the job, but I’m authorized to offer you five thousand nuyen—half up front and half on completion.”

Yeah, yeah—now begins the dance. “Well, Mr. Johnson—I’m sure you know we can’t make any decisions about compensation until we know what we’re up against, can we?”

Johnson’s head dipped a bit; his eyes, behind the shades, were unreadable. “That’s true indeed,” he said. “I assure you it’s a fair price, but since we’re at an impasse here, without going into details, I can say that the security is nothing that a team of your caliber would consider challenging. Please make up your mind quickly, though, because if you choose not to take the job I’ve still got to find another team.” He put his hands on the table and looked like he was getting ready to get up.

Damn him anyway. “Wait,” I said quickly, earning me a smirk from Locke.

The dwarf settled back. “Yes?”

I cast a sideways glance at Locke and said, “Assuming you’re not jacking us around and the job’s what you say it is, and assuming further that you’re lowballing because everybody lowballs, what do you say to six thousand?”

The barest flicker of a smile crossed Johnson’s face and then the mask was down again. He was good, and he knew the score. He paused, for a second taking on the unfocused stare of somebody mentally accessing an AR visual display, and finally nodded. “All right, then—six thousand. We have a deal.” He fiddled for a moment with his commlink, stared into space again, and then hit a akey. I felt my own ‘link buzz

incoming. “Your advance, and my contact information.” Then he indicated the prissy human, a dark-haired, rat-faced little man who looked vaguely annoyed when his boss’s attention wasn’t on him. “My assistant will give you the details of the job. I’ll

be expecting to hear from you no later than two a.m. Please don’t be late.”

“Okay,” I said as we left the bar in Desmo’s van. “Let’s go over this again to make sure we’ve all got it down.” I didn’t like that we didn’t have much time to check things out this time, but that was the way it went sometimes. You lived with it and did the best you could.

Locke shrugged. “Easy. We break into a warehouse, put this—” he pulled a dark-colored bottle from the pocket of his rumpled longcoat “—in the stuff in the tanker truck we find inside, and then get into the offices and steal some files from the computer. Then we collect the rest of our fee, go home and celebrate with booze and hookers.”

“We gotta do it in that order,” Desmo reminded us.

“Well, sure,” Locke said. “If we had the cred for the booze and hookers, why would we bother doing the job?”

Zumi swatted him gently (for her) across the top of the head. “He’s right—the stuff in the truck first, then the office. Johnson’s guy was pretty clear on that. We should find out something about this place,” she added, as always a lot less nervous when it was just us. “I know we don’t have much time, but—”



*By my reckoning, the scariest words
around are “It’ll be easy.”*

