

"Already done," came a bubbly voice from the van's speakers, cutting off Desmo's pounding synthrash beats. The dwarf rigger reached in his pocket activated a holoprojector on the dashboard. The image of cheerful purple cartoon tiger in mirrorshades appeared, bouncing up and down on a springy tail. It smiled, displaying shiny fangs. "While you guys were screwing around in the bar, I was hacking Johnson's commlink. His name is Gunther Markstrom—he's a regional manager for Lightning Brands, which is a subsidiary of Evo. The place we're hitting is the Tacoma warehouse, which happens to be run by their rival, Buzz Beverages. Buzz is all geared up to do the first run on a test market for a new energy drink called Buzz!Blitz."

"I've heard of that," Zumi spoke up. "There are ads up all over the places I hang out—they're aiming it at ork and troll guys. You know: it's big, it's full of stimulants, it'll make you edgy and pissed off and give you a dick the size of a fire hydrant. It's so extreme it'll make elves' heads pop off or something."

"Yup," the holographic tiger agreed. "Huge ad campaign—trideo, spot ads beamed to people's PANs, print, Matrix, the whole works. Slick job. Just a few cities, though. They're gonna try it out there and see how it goes over. If it does, they'll roll it out to the rest of the UCAS." A brightly-colored trid image of several tough young trolls causing mayhem appeared on our vidscreens, accompanied by the flashing slogan "BUZZ!BLITZ—CHUG THE BOMB" in angry red letters. Subtle.

I indicated the bottle Locke held. "So according to Johnson's guy, this stuff goes into the tanker truck with the flavoring mixture and screws up the taste of the drink so the test-market fails. Right, Spaz?"

"Exactly," said the tiger. "Johnson had Buzz's project plan on his 'link. Their schedule's so tight they don't even have time for last-minute taste tests. They're already behind—they've got all kinds of events planned, so they can't be late. They'll be shipping the stuff out as fast as they make it. Even if they taste it beforehand and catch the problem, the production run's still ruined so they can't sell it. And our Mr. Johnson, who's got a similar product in the works—and a similar kind of carpet-bomb ad campaign going on for its release next week—gets the jump on his competitor."

"What about the files?" Desmo asked. "You get anything on those?"

"Nope," Spaz said. "From the look of it, it's just a little industrial espionage. They probably want us to do that part last in case we get spotted and have to get out in a hurry."

"So Johnson's frosty?" I asked Spaz. "Not likely to screw us over?"

"Like *that* ever happens." Locke drawled.

"Nah," Spaz said. "He checks out. His ass is in a sling if Buzz's launch is successful and gets the drop on him, so he's got no reason to jerk us around, far as I can find."

I glanced around at the rest of the team. "Okay, then. Let's gear up and get on with it. Spaz, you know you're gonna have to do this one in the meat, right?"

"Aww, *Taaaggg*—" The whining voice and sulky pout didn't quite fit with the goofy-looking tiger.

"Not like we like it either," Locke said.

"Desmo, you ready?" I subvocalized over the team's comm network. The night was moonless and a little drizzly, but the few working sodium-vapors casting sickly little pools of light at intervals down the street meant my cybereyes were functioning just fine. The whole area smelled like ocean and rot. I slumped in the shadows of the next-door warehouse's doorway and waited until the dwarf's affirmative response came back. He was halfway down the block in the van, keeping an eye on the area with an overhead spotter drone. The rest of the team was in the doorway with me, cranked up with anticipation but hiding it well.

Locke had already done his astral-recon thing, declaring the place deserted except for one security guard ("from his aura he's thinking more about getting laid than guarding") and what he called "a corps of elite attack rats." That told me the security was mostly automated, which jibed with the intel Johnson's flunky had given us. "Anything, Spaz?"

Spaz waved me off, concentrating on something none of the rest of us could see. "Nothing. I'm monitoring the police bands and I'm not picking up any calls anywhere near here." We were all getting our minds around the change—Spaz almost never went on runs with us in the meat—he preferred to stay close by and run Matrix overwatch—so the sight of a skinny, crater-faced elf guy with a high-pitched whiny voice took a little getting used to when we were accustomed to the cartoon tiger. In the meat, Spaz was the only elf I'd ever met whose natural social graces were pretty much nonexistent. He didn't bathe too often, either. So much for the stereotype.

"All right," I said. "Unless anybody's got a good reason not to, let's get this done."

Remember what I said before about the three words that should strike terror into any halfway-sane shadowrunner's heart? You're smarter than me, then, because I didn't. Funny how being broke can make you stupid.

Things got started okay—I disabled the security system and Spaz hacked in to make sure that the cameras were showing what we wanted them to show in case somebody off-site was monitoring them. After that it was just the simple matter of waiting for Locke's okay that the guard was off in the other part of the building and we were in. Occasionally I regretted the cred I'd dropped awhile back on a maglock passkey, but this wasn't one of those times.

The interior of the warehouse was dim and cavernous, lit only by a few faint emergency lights far overhead. We paused a moment, getting our bearings. "Everything okay out there, Desmo?" I subvocalized.

"A-OK, boss," the dwarf's voice came back reassuringly quickly. "No sign of anybody."

"Got the layout," Spaz said. "Everybody switch on your overlays."

I did, and a ghostly 3-D floorplan of the warehouse appeared superimposed over my vision. Everything was labeled—crate contents, vehicle locations, even where the bathrooms were. The tanker we were looking for was all the way over on the other side, near the far wall next to several large stacks of crates. Next to us, off to our right, was a

