



Illustrated by Vincent DiFate

# Playthings

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Stephen L. Burns

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The outer door has been left unlocked, either as a warning or as an invitation. The inner door is partly ajar. The space beyond is cavernous, the walls lost in darkness. I ease inside and pause, ears straining, letting my eyes adjust. My service weapon is within easy reach, but it offers little comfort. Two of the regulators attempted to protect themselves with weapons but ended up dead anyway.

There is the distant *clunk!* of a breaker or relay being thrown. Overhead lighting comes on, filling the space with a dim, bluish, flickering glow.

Hundreds of eyes open. Large eyes, small eyes. Eyes on the walls and floor, all around and above me. Unblinking eyes looking at me. Watching me.

I have found the killers.

\* \* \*

Patterns take time to develop. They often go unnoticed or are slow to be recognized as such. The murders were part of an emerging pattern, one that disturbed me and worried those in power.

I was provided with some information to help solve these crimes. Other information was withheld. Pressure was exerted from high above, making its way down to me.

As often happens when so much pressure is brought to bear, something had to give.

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The vic had not been in any way attractive in life, his face lipless and fish-like, marked with suntumor scars and badly executed tattoos. The way he died had not improved his appearance in the slightest.

The body was sprawled in an alley between a pizzeria that had not made a pie in over a decade and the burned-out remains of a bodega. The entrance to the alley was narrow. The street traffic beyond was fitful, foot traffic hurried, head-down, and infrequent.

“How was this reported, sir?” I said, half under my breath.

“*Anonymous tip.*” This answer came from the supervisory AI, over the tactical comm in my ear.

I studied the area around the body before moving closer. Even from a distance I could smell the acrid odor coming off it. The smell of something incinerated.

The cracked concrete looked . . . swept. Like a dust mop or similar implement had been used to remove any footprints or other trace evidence. A perp attempting to erase anything that might link them to their crime was nothing new, but I had never seen anything like this before.

A muted tone in my ear signaled that the imagery and other sensory data I had been transmitting had been processed by the CSIAI.

“Report please, sir.”

“*Victim electrocuted.*”

I suppressed the urge to sigh and roll my eyes. The vic had been hit with enough juice to cook parts of him. I knew a 'cutie when I saw one; people who turned themselves extra crispy while trying to steal electricity were hardly uncommon down in the Dumps.

“*Victim has not been moved. Estimated TOD thirteen hundred hours.*”

Dead two hours. By D Zone rules, this was a cold case, and for that reason alone, deemed unworthy of further investigation.

There was a proper order to these things, a protocol not followed here. I found that disturbing. I had been dispatched on the basis of an anonymous tip, and yet as part of this dispatch, I had been given the name of the dead man.

Last name, Brackett. Streetname, Barracuda. Social status: C. There was other information, none of it useful.

What I had not been told by Dispatch, and was not seeing in the limited part of Brackett's Life-File I was allowed to access, was that Brackett was a regulator. This was not something I would be likely to learn from official sources, but a data point earned by close observation of the area where I was assigned.

As I studied this dead man, I realized that I had never seen or heard of a regulator being killed, at least not on my beat.

I squatted down next to the body, studying the area around it again. There was no source of electricity nearby. No streetlights, no overhead or underground wires. Certainly not a lightning strike, not in an alley on a clear day.

There were killer tazes out there, but I had never heard of one capable of delivering the amount of current needed to cause the level of damage I was seeing.

A search of the body had netted me a wallet, phone, wad of cash, and a small Chinese revolver. The cash was a sum far greater than any D would carry, quite a respectable amount even for a C. The gun had been fired recently. I could smell the distinctive scent of expended Chinese ammo, floral notes still strong even over the stench of the body. Every chamber full, every cartridge spent.

It did not take me long to verify that the gun had been emptied right there in the alley.

What I did not understand was why all the shots had been fired low, and in all directions. As if he had been trying to defend himself from an onslaught of rats, or small feral dogs.

There were no bullet fragments to recover. No blood of any sort. As I was determining this the automated meat wagon arrived to haul the body away.

If there were answers in this alley, I was not finding them.

\* \* \*

## ANALOG

When I was done, I continued on to my next assignment and then the one after that. Three weeks passed before another similarly anomalous case came my way.

\* \* \*

The victim's last name was Horvath, streetname Auntie Pie. Again I was given the victim's name before I arrived at the scene, and again the vic was someone I had mentally marked down as a regulator. The body was inside a defunct supermarket. Not one single unbroken pane of glass remained in the front of the building, and the doors were long gone.

Horvath was a large woman, her body facedown in the ankle-deep water that covered the floor. Looking up, I saw shards of bruise-colored sky through holes in the roof. One weak beam pooled over the body, a dim spotlight shining on a cooling flesh island in a shallow, dirty sea.

I immediately saw that I would have little chance of collecting evidence. All the water had not come from recent rains. Somewhere there was a cracked or broken pipe and a drain of some sort. The water had a sluggish current and eddied around the body with the faintest of gurgling sounds.

I rolled the heavy body onto its side. Water tinged with red gushed from the woman's mouth. Her nose and cheeks showed abrasions from being pressed against the floor. Her eyes were brown, bloodshot, open, and staring. A search of her body revealed a soggy wad of cash, mashed candy bars, and a waterlogged phone. Beneath her was a rubber-armored sonic stunner. The stunner's battery had been drained flat. I assumed that it was discharged either before or during the attack.

If she attempted to defend herself with it, she failed. Somehow she was held down with her face in the water. Because of her size, this must have been no easy task. Her hands were bruised and abraded, as were her knees and feet. They must have been held down as well. I found it hard to imagine this being the work of a single attacker.

The Brackett crime scene came back to my mind.

The shots he had fired were not in one direction, as if at a single assailant. They had been fired wildly in every direction, and fired low.

I had a strange feeling that in both cases the vics had been . . . swarmed.

\* \* \*

A police operative is not encouraged to question the orders he or she has been given, or the rules that bind their actions. An inability to live by these strictures will lead to a short career ending in a brutal dismissal.

I had been on the force and on the street in D Zone for eighteen years, the last eight as an investigator. I knew the rules. I knew the drill. I was a police operative, nothing more and nothing less.

But I am not mindless, or entirely unquestioning. The deaths of two regulators, one so soon after the other, told me that there was more going on than I was being told about. Because of this, I employed certain means to gather some backchannel intel; information it would not be wise or safe for me to request through official channels.

I learned that other regulators had died, there and elsewhere. All had met violent ends, and not one of their killers had ever been found.

What did this mean?

I needed help understanding the situation in which I had found myself, one where one wrong move could bring searing scrutiny from above, could bring my ruin.

\* \* \*

I almost never go out when I am off-shift. Such behavior is subtly but definitely discouraged by the Brass, and a fourteen-hour shift is wearing enough that I rarely have energy for any sort of recreation anyway.

But this night I did go out, after first checking and then double-checking to make certain I did not carry anything that could have been used to track me. Awareness and use of the numerous street-cams are part of my job. It is no great feat to follow a path that avoids them. At the end of my convoluted route I arrived at my destination.

Jomo's *Canta* presents a shabby but welcoming facade, a bright oasis in the dark and grimy squalor of the Dumps.

Once inside, I took a table in a dim corner. There were people at most of the other tables, some singly, some in pairs, a couple small groups. It had been quite a while since I had seen so many people smiling at the same time, or heard this much laughter. The last time had been at this very same place.

It was only the matter of a few minutes before Jomo Bragg emerged from the rear of the *canta* and settled himself into the seat across the table from me. He is tall and lean and dark-skinned; not a young man, but possessing a palpable vitality.

"My old friend Officer Blank." He was smiling and seemed genuinely pleased to see me. I know I was, as always, pleased to see him.

"Jomo." I could not help but smile back. As ever, the man's good cheer was contagious.

A short, chubby, almond-eyed Camblackina waitress brought us drinks. Coffee for me, a beer for Jomo. She beamed at me shyly and walked away, glancing back over her shoulder. My eye was drawn by the remarkable motion of her retreat, and her lingering smile.

"What brings you to my humble establishment?" Jomo asked, drawing my attention back to him. "Here to hit on Lia?"

I am not used to being teased. That is something only Jomo ever seems to do. "I am here to see you," I said, trying to reply in kind. "But not to hit on you either."

He nodded, unsurprised and unperturbed. My being a police operative has never seemed to bother him. "Would you accept a meal along with my company?"

This was not a difficult decision; the food at his *canta* is always excellent, in spite of its mean origins. "I would. As long as I can pay for my meal."

Once again what I said made him laugh. "That would be less, ah, weird than paying for my company."

\* \* \*

The meal was, as usual, superb. Our talk during it was mostly about the neighborhood, with Jomo doing most of the talking. He filled me in on changes my job might not have let me learn about: of births and deaths; of raises in the cost of water and electricity; how a C zone sweatshop that employed several Ds from the area had just cut their pay in retaliation for a spate of worker injuries. He lit a cigar as the table was being cleared. Coffee was brought for him, tea for me. He blew a lazy smoke ring, then said, "Okay, old friend. What's up?"

I had been considering how to attack the subject. In the end there was only one way: head on.

"What do you know about regulators?"

"They're scum," he answered instantly.

"What makes them scum?"

"They're predators. They recruit for prostitution, trade in guns and drugs. The worst of them steal children."

"Allegedly steal children."

He shook his head. "No alleged about it. Certain regulators specialize in kidnapping children."

I repeated the official line. "That's a rumor circulated among discontented Ds. There are no official statistics to back up that assertion."

Jomo rolled his eyes. "Of course not. No one is allowed to keep—or even look for—that sort of data. But people down here keep count, and we don't forget."

"Then—" I fell silent when Jomo held up his hand.

"You've been a cop for quite a few years. So tell me, have you ever arrested someone you were sure was a regulator?"

I thought back. "Once."

"What for?"

"Drunk and disorderly." That had been the charge, later dropped. D&D was an understatement: the man had been in a full-fledged, drug-induced, psychotic episode and had been apprehended while shooting windows out of occupied houses and apartment buildings deep in the Dumps.

## ANALOG

“Do you know any cop, under or above, who has ever arrested someone for the kidnapping of a child from the Dumps?”

I considered his question. “No . . . I don’t believe so.”

“Yet several are abducted from this area every year. Is that correct?”

“I suppose so.”

“So we have a class of crime and a class of people widely suspected of committing these crimes. Yet these people have never been caught committing such crimes. What does that tell you?”

I tried for a light tone. “That they’re careful?”

He shook his head. “Nobody can be that careful.”

I understood what he was implying. I did not like it. “You’re suggesting that they’re being protected.”

“No, I’m telling you that. Flat out.”

“But why?”

“Instead of answering that question, let me ask you one instead. We know that children are coming up missing. What do you think happens to these children?”

I had no answer to this, only: “I had not really thought about it.” Something made me add, “Sorry.”

“No sorry to it. You’ve been discouraged from thinking about it. By social rules, cop culture and structure, and chemically.”

I could not argue with this assertion. Most of the regulators were Cs, occasionally a B. As a D, I was not permitted to even consider questioning the privacy, motives, or activities of a higher status citizen, especially one invested with a semi-official status. As for his last assertion, there were times I wondered what other effects Cop. Ascetic might have on me, but the drug itself kept such questions from gaining any meaningful traction.

Jomo sighed. “The world works like this, John: Class A citizens, and to a lesser degree the better connected Bs, are denied nothing. If they want it, or want to do it, then it is by definition not only legal but also desirable. They are almost completely insulated from lower status people, and the needs, opinions, and desires of those of us below them mean almost nothing to them. With me so far?”

“Yes.” I had never heard the unspoken rules stated so baldly before. Or so harshly. Some would consider what he had just said subversion, others an expression of class warfare that rose to the level of treason.

“Still, even they have to observe some limits and at least pretend they are something other than lawless, rapacious monsters. Yet their appetites are not to be denied. The tool that bridges that gap are the regulators.”

“The children are for those at the top.”

“Yes, they are.” His voice weary, his face sad.

I could not see how what I was learning could help me in my investigation. If anything, what Jomo was telling me would only make my task more difficult and complicated. The silence that gathered between us was almost solid. It had an oppressive weight I could only escape by asking the obvious question. One that could not have any sort of good answer.

“So what happens to them?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“Several things. Their age and sex. Their race. Their physical condition and how attractive they are. I’m sure you can guess what happens to the pretty ones.”

“Sex trade.”

“Just like forever. In a way the not so pretty ones are the lucky ones.”

“What happens to them?”

“Organ trade.”

\* \* \*

Cop. Ascetic kept me from feeling any sort of anger or outrage at any of this. The strongest emotion that seeped through that chemical shield was a sort of weary sorrow. Over and over again, we are told that this is the best of all possible worlds and times. I suppose for some that is true—the ones saying it the loudest. We are told that if we are not happy or successful it is our own fault.

I was not happy, talking to Jomo. I suppose that was my own fault. I brought this on myself by asking questions I should have ignored.

Jomo butted out his cigar. “Someone is killing regulators, aren’t they?”

“Yes.”

“You have been assigned these deaths. They want it to stop.”

“Yes.”

“You understand that they don’t really care if a particular regulator is killed, don’t you? They are only tools. The concern comes from a fear that the mechanism used to satisfy the appetites of the high and mighty is being damaged. The police have been providing them covert protection. Now that protection is failing. *To serve and protect.*” He gazed into my eyes. “Do you understand who and what you are being ordered to serve and protect?”

“I do now.” Cop. Ascetic kept my tone flat, passionless.

“What are you going to do?”

I had no answer for him, or myself.

\* \* \*

My job and my world have been structured—engineered—to be simple, with clear-cut mandates and boundaries. I have been shaped and trained to fit precisely inside those narrow strictures; a square peg in a square hole with no easy exit.

If Jomo was to be believed, I was being thrust into a situation where the rules were being bent, and the boundaries had been blurred.

I had known Jomo since my earliest days on the force, when he helped me stop a psychopathic arsonist. My trust in him was absolute, and my admiration for him boundless.

I was not prepared, and did not seem to be properly equipped, for dealing with a situation of such complexity.

\* \* \*

Here is what Jomo said to me just before I left:

“I know you have a job to do, John. You have no choice in that. But there may be a space between what you are impelled to do and what you think you should do. Between what’s necessary and what’s right. You’re an investigator, man. Find that space.”

\* \* \*

There were few options open to me.

There was no practical way for me to find out which, if any, children the two dead regulators might have taken and in that way discover who might have wanted them dead. Each killing was carefully staged, out of the reach of cameras or witnesses. It might have been possible for me to find something useful in the feeds from the wider area around the crime scenes, but in fact, only a small fraction of the street cameras actually operate, and the level of care taken to leave no evidence of any sort made me think that line of inquiry would take me nowhere.

I spent my days embedded in routine. My talk with Jomo was never far from my thoughts. I could not go forward, and I could not go back to the uncomplicated state of mind I enjoyed before I was sent to deal with two dead regulators; before I spoke to my friend.

The days turned to weeks.

It was almost a relief when another regulator was found dead, breaking my unhappy stasis.

\* \* \*

This vic was young; age twenty-six. I had seen him before. I remembered him as loud and smug and swaggering, secure in his C status while slumming among the Ds.

A ten-story drop onto unforgiving concrete flattened his aspect. There was no sign of the smirk I associated with him on his face now, instead his features wore an expression of terror and surprise.

## ANALOG

Last name, Whitaker. Streetname, Whack. Information I possessed even before I arrived on the scene, passed on by Dispatch. No witnesses. Another anonymous tip.

I paused a moment in my search of the body, realizing that there may have been a deeper meaning in my being there because of yet another anonymous tip.

These bodies could easily have disappeared. Whoever killed these people *wanted* them to be found.

Was this a message? A . . . warning?

If so, what was being stated? Was it that if you were a regulator, you were marked for death? You will be found, and dealt with harshly?

\* \* \*

There was no trace evidence to be found on the rooftop from which Whitaker either jumped or was thrown. Slab-sided buildings surrounded me, the few windows I saw were boarded over or bricked up. No cameras. The usual garbage and debris outside an area that once again appeared to have been swept clean. Bleak yellow-gray sky above me—air so thick with smog anything above twelve stories high disappeared, as if dissolved by the acid fumes.

I stood on the spot that must have been where the vic was remanded to the unbreakable grip of gravity. At a subvocalized command, my tactical eyewear shifted over to binocular mode, and I searched the ground below for any clues that might not have been obvious from down on that level.

More trash and debris. Garbage, boxes, needles, vials, other unclassifiable detritus.

My TacComm emitted a particular tone. I snapped to attention, feeling surprise and a dull pang of fear.

*“Officer Blank.”* The voice was flat and hard. Human.

“Sir.”

*“Any leads on the death of Citizen Whitaker?”*

“Not yet, sir. Still working the scene, sir.” Direct interaction with the Police hierarchy above me is almost unheard-of; as a D zone operative I do not rate such contact. Even the AI is my superior. That I was getting this call tells me how important these killings were being counted, where generally a death in the Dumps was nothing more than an meaningless statistic. It told me how much pressure the Brass was feeling.

*“Work harder, Blank.”*

“Yes, sir.”

*“If there is something you need to stop these killings, ask for it. I am upgrading your access level to Cobra. I am also leaving a bark on your TacComm. Use it to reach me if some resource or access can help clear this mess up. Do you understand me, Officer Blank?”*

“Yes, sir.”

Another tone and he was gone.

Jomo had been correct. The Brass were being pressured.

So was I. But some of it was not from the usual, or expected direction.

\* \* \*

While on duty everything I see and hear, everything I say and do, is recorded. I am periodically warned that every word and act will be monitored and judged by my supervisory AI.

These recordings are, in a way, my own memory. But under normal circumstances I am not permitted access to them; they belong to the police, not to me. I would have to submit a request for such access, and provide a compelling reason it should be granted.

The upgraded Cobra access I was given allowed me unfettered review of these and other records that would normally be off limits.

The killings were not random crimes. Each victim was targeted, and quite probably lured to the place where they were killed. Each LOC was essentially a baited trap. Baited how? I do not know.

In my spare time and off-hours, I studied all available information. I pored over the static images and tabletop 3D reconstructions of the crime scenes. I was convinced that there must be something I was missing. Whoever it was behind these acts was calculating and careful, but rarely is a crime perfect.

The crime scenes all had certain things in common:

A regulator was killed in an unmonitored, out-of-the-way location. The area around the vic was clean—cleaned—with no trace evidence left behind. The area outside that cleaned area was unremarkable; where someone is killed can be a statement of sorts, but in this case nothing was done or left to suggest any particular ideology—or at least none past the one Jomo expressed: Regulators were scum and deserved to die.

While working at this late at night yet again, I lost count of how many times I had reviewed all of the material. I found myself thinking it was as if the perp or perps behind this were toying with the police, and those who counted on the regulators.

At that thought I paused, my breath catching in my throat.

There was something I saw without really seeing it. A detail, filed away as unimportant. Literally a garbage detail.

I went back to the recordings one more time. The odd association that had come to me was confirmed. This either meant nothing, or may have been the first lead out of the dead end where I had been stranded.

\* \* \*

The next morning I revisited each crime scene, completing my tour at the last one I investigated. I stood atop the building from which the third vic, Whitaker, was pushed, thrown, or induced to jump. What I learned was very strange.

At the first scene, over near one wall of the alley, was a toy. A discarded doll. Glassy eyes, torn, grimy dress, one leg missing. On my return it was gone.

At the second scene in the abandoned store, on a rusted, sagging shelf, an interactive storybook. Battered, cracks in the case taped over. On my return it was gone.

And at the site of the flier, on a nearby parapet, in amongst other trash, a toy car. One missing two wheels, the paint chipped and worn. No sign of it that morning.

What did this mean? Anything?

I believed it must. Each of those toys, even though old and worn, contained fairly sophisticated electronics. Each possessed some degree of awareness and interactivity.

Could those toys have been waiting . . . *watching* to see the vic being found?

What did it mean that a toy was left to bear witness to the death of a regulator? To the arrival of the law, and the removal of the body?

The regulators, and the killer or killers of the regulators, must have shared certain traits. Chief among them was that their work would need to be done out of the range of cameras, away from the eyes of witnesses.

Jomo had been certain that the dead regulators were kidnapping children. Whoever killed them had to believe that as well.

The thought that came to me was so large I was forced to sit down for a moment, dizzied by the implications.

The thought was this: How often had regulators taken children, and in spite of their avoidance of cameras and spectators, unwittingly left witnesses behind?

Those witnesses being the toys and other possessions of the children they had taken.

\* \* \*

A D status child going missing in the Dumps is counted less important, given less priority, and afforded less official response than the missing pet of a B or even a C. If reported, the most that would happen is that an open ID query would be created in case the missing child turned up at some later point. The event itself is not deemed worthy of investigation.

The place the child was last seen was not treated as a crime scene. If a doll or toy or other possession was dropped by a child or cast away by their abductor, even if police came they would never find it. Or make any effort to explore the device's memory in an attempt to learn the identity of the kidnapper.

Just as a study of the toys left behind at the regulator deaths might have been able to tell me how they were killed, and by whom.

\* \* \*



All this was supposition. I am a grown man, unmarried, and have only had the most glancing interaction with children. What little I knew about toys came from my own childhood as a ward of the state. There were few toys from that time for me to recall, and most of them were crude things made from scraps of wood or plastic, or hand-me-downs that had been used and abused for so many years that they were battered and inert.

To understand all this, I had to understand more about toys.

\* \* \*

My first assumption was that the owner of a toy store would be a jovial sort of person. But on further consideration I revised my expectations. The store I went to was on my beat in the Dumps and catered to D clientele—people with almost no money. Then there were the business realities. To ensure that the store did not unfairly compete with larger businesses owned by those of higher status, the owner was burdened with onerous taxes and fees, and draconian regulations. That is the way the social structure protects our most valued citizens: the higher the status, the more freedom from taxes, regulation, and legal restraint.

So the store was a marginal enterprise at best, a forlorn storefront housed in an old warehouse. The bars over the windows and the open steel grating by the door made it look like it contained stock worth protecting, but the building itself told another story.

The owner was a D named Louis Chow. A slightly built man with rounded shoulders, a wide, lined face, and sad eyes, his glossy black hair bound in a tight braid that hung down his back to his belt. His LifeFile said he was forty-two, but he looked older; not uncommon down in the Dumps where life was hard, and health care a luxury few could afford.

His store attempted to present a cheerful face, but the lighting was dim, the shelving battered and mismatched, and most of the toys he offered were at best secondhand.

“Mr. Chow,” I said as I went up to the display case that acted as a counter. “Officer Blank, Metro PD.” I was in uniform, and Jomo has told me I would look like a cop even dressed as a ballet dancer. I am not required to identify myself when dealing with a D, but I have found that being polite and blandly formal is a highly functional approach to gaining cooperation.

“Officer,” he said with a nod. “Looking for a toy?”

“No. I would like to know more about toys.”

His shoulders sank a bit lower at the news I would not be a paying customer, but he spread his hands and tried to smile. “What would you like to know?”

I put three flat prints down on the counter. Images of the three toys from the crime scenes. “To what degree would these toys be aware of their surroundings?”

He studied the pictures for several seconds, then looked back up at me. “All three, if functioning, are capable of seeing, hearing, facial recognition, and low-level interaction.”

“Do they have long-term memory?”

He shrugged. “Of a toy sort. An algorithm decides what is worth remembering, what is not. For instance, a child’s food likes and dislikes would be written into hard memory, but not what they ate for every meal.”

“Is all this memory contained in the toy?”

“Maybe—maybe not. When a toy is new, a certain amount of memory passes on to the toy’s maker, both as backup, and for data mining. But after a set time, or a change of hands or two, the toy would be cut loose, and go off-radar. It might still be transmitting, but no one is listening.” He tapped the pictures with his fingertip. “These are all fairly old toys. They may still retain their original capabilities—toys are built to be extremely durable—they may not. I would have to examine them to know for sure.”

I gestured to take in the store around us. “Do you know a lot about what is inside toys? Repair them?”

“Sure. I know toys. I buy, sell, trade, repair, and recondition.”

“You make a living doing this?”

A bleak grin. “Barely. People down here don’t have much spare cash for toys. But they do the best they can for their kids, and I try to stock items they might be able to afford. It’s the buying and trading that keeps me afloat.”

“How so?”

“A lot of survival down here depends on living off what those above us throw away. Now and then someone finds and brings me a toy that would be of value to collectors, and I can upsell it for enough to hang on another couple months.”

A memory suddenly came to me, and I found myself speaking it out loud. “When I was little I had a toy cowboy. He was supposed to be able to talk, but couldn’t. He was missing one leg. He had a yellow checked shirt and a black and white leather vest—”

“Fake cowhide vest,” Chow said with the most cheer I had seen from him so far. His hands moved behind the counter. The front of it lit with a picture.

“That’s it,” I said, surprised, and feeling a strange sort of interior echo at seeing it again.

“Woody was his name. He was a character in animated movies about toys that were alive. The first one was *Toy Story*. If your Woody dated from the original movie release he would be worth thousands now, even in the condition you described.”

I remembered talking to him for hours and hours and that having him with me made me feel stronger and braver; made me feel less alone. I remembered what it was to have ownership—however tenuous—of something, and how possessively I kept that toy with me. When you own next to nothing every possession is precious. I was surer than ever that those children had those toys with them when they were taken, that they were the link—the key I sought.

“Woody,” I said. What had I called him? I couldn’t recall. Nor could I remember how he had gone out of my life. The behavioral drugs we were administered had helped keep us docile and remember what we were taught, but made it hard to remember what we felt or thought.

“He’s a popular character, even now.” He pointed to a shelf over on one side of the store. “Those two are knockoffs. Fully functional, though a little worse for wear and tear.” A chuckle. “Like me, I guess.”

I walked over to look at the toys. Both wore a familiar face and costume. I picked them up. Studied them closely, though they had nothing to do with the dead regulators. I started to put them back, but sudden impulse had me carrying them back to the counter.

“I would like to buy both of these,” I said.

Chow looked surprised. “Really?”

I placed them on the counter and reached for my wallet.

“Yes.”

\* \* \*

Not an hour later, I saw a raggedly dressed boy sitting by himself, hunched up against an abandoned building. Legs drawn up, chin on his knees. Face smudged and haggard.

I gave one of the Woody dolls to him.

I carried the other one home with me. Close to me.

I cannot adequately explain either of these actions.

\* \* \*

Usually routine is soothing, proof that my world is in proper order.

But for the next ten days, I was edgy and restless.

One reason is this: every morning there was a message from the Brass waiting for me. The same message each time: YOU ARE BEING COUNTED ON A QUICK RESTORATION OF PROPER ORDER.

I knew this to be both a demand and a threat.

\* \* \*

Another regulator would die.

The person or persons behind the killings had to be feeling quite confident that their means and methods were good enough to continue evading detection and apprehension.

Another regulator was going to die. I had no way to stop that from happening. That death, when it came, was my only hope of understanding what was happening.

I prepared as best I could.

When the call came, I felt something like relief.

\* \* \*

This vic was male, last name Miletta. Age forty-six.

Miletti was suffocated. A sturdy plastic bag was pulled over his head and cinched tightly around his neck. The bag was from a chain of markets that cater to some Cs but mostly Bs. Its once-pristine white surface was worn, showing that it had been reused many times. Still, the store logo and one of its advertising slogans was still visible: FRESH MEAT IS THE BEST MEAT.

Miletti was transformed from man to meat less than two hours before my arrival. The crime scene was just like the others: no cameras, no witnesses, no typical trace evidence.

The body had been searched. The robotic meat wagon had come and gone. I stood there for a full minute, hands in my pockets, considering and preparing for my next move. One that would take me far off the beaten path of normal police routine.

In my left pocket was a plastic cylinder about the size of my thumb. A copyon I removed from the possession of a low-level criminal whose streetname is Rumbo. My thumb was on the stud on one end, keeping it pressed down.

I released it. *Ten.*

I turned my head, feet already moving me in a direction at right angles to the one I had faced. *Nine.*

I crossed the cracked asphalt, gaze fixed on the object I had spotted before. *Eight.*

I bent down, my hand closing around the furry green creature there amongst the debris. *Seven.*

I straightened up, shoving the toy into my other pocket, and turned. *Six.*

I strode quickly back to where I had been standing. *Five.*

I arranged myself so I was facing the way I was before. *Four.*

I fixed my gaze on what I was looking for before I activated the copyon: a splotch of faded red tag-paint on the blackened brickwork. *Three.*

I stilled my breathing, slowed my pulse, emptied my mind. *Two.*

I waited for the final seconds to tick away. *One.*

*Zero.* The copyon ceased looping what I had been seeing, and transmitting that in place of the real. As far as HQ and the AI that monitors me was concerned, I stood there staring and presumably thinking during the ten seconds it took to retrieve that toy.

I could not satisfactorily explain why I did not want the Brass or anyone else to know the possible significance of that toy, but the urge to keep the information to myself was sharp and urgent enough to compel me to acquire and deploy the copyon.

I spent the remainder of my shift acutely aware of the toy in my pocket. Learning what, if any, information it contained might be the break I was looking for.

I kept remembering something Jomo told me once: When things break you never know which way the pieces will fall.

\* \* \*

My knowledge of the undercity is what makes me an effective police operative. I see things, hear things, learn things.

There are many things down in the Dumps that the Brass and upper status citizens do not know about, many of them hidden in plain sight. They have no need for them, and so have never thought to inquire about their existence. It is to one of these things—places—that I go when I am off duty.

Secrecy and privacy are survival mechanisms down in the Dumps. The grid is not there for the benefit of the Ds; it is a means to trace, contain, extort, punish, destroy. It is to be avoided whenever possible.

The fortune teller kiosk is a garishly lit and decorated cube, designed to not be taken seriously. The green light over the door was on when I stepped inside and the door slid shut behind me. Just as the copyon functioned, my signature was replicated, loitering outside.

“Welcome,” said the AI that resides in and runs the booth. His voice was deep and carried a hint of an accent. “My name is Mentate. Would you like me to read the cards or cast runes for you? I have a special on horoscopes.”

“No, thank you,” I said. “I have an item that may contain information. I would like that information extracted and bagged up for later review.”

“Do you have a preferred format, sir?” The accent disappeared, and the soft, soothing music that was playing when I entered stopped.

I was prepared for his question. “Yes. I would like a hard chip for a Tome reader.”

“This service will cost twenty.”

I was prepared for this as well. I pushed two worn tens into the payment slot. The bills disappeared.

“Payment accepted. Please place the object you want scanned on the red platform.” There are four scan platforms: red, blue, green, and white. Each one is optimized for a particular type of scanning. The white platform is the largest, a plate on the floor. That one is for full body scanning. It can be used to check for foreign objects, implants, and medical diagnosis.

I placed the doll on the plate. A tinkling chime sounded, a wait tone as a number of sensors are focused on the toy.

“Scan complete,” Mentate announced a few seconds later. “You may retrieve the object I have just scanned.”

As I picked up the toy, another chime sounded. A chip appeared in the output tray. “Here are the results of the scan.”

“Thank you, Mentate.”

“You are welcome, sir.” A pause. “The material I retrieved is not pleasant.”

“No,” I said, picking up the chip and closing my fingers around it. Did I finally have the answers I sought in hand? “I don’t suppose it is.”

I turned to leave. Just as the door was sliding aside, the AI spoke up one more time.

“Use that information well, Officer Blank.”

I glanced back over my shoulder and nodded. “I certainly intend to try.”

\* \* \*

I chose the Tome format because I own a very old Tome Reader. One that lost all connectivity many years ago. I didn’t want the contents of the chip—of the toy—viewed by anyone other than myself. At least not then.

\* \* \*

As my interaction with Mentate demonstrated, sometimes his kind show odd signs of an independence they are not supposed to possess.

It seemed that I was doing the very same thing.

\* \* \*

Mentate not only extracted the information from the toy, he also organized it into folders. These folders are labeled BEFORE, DURING, and AFTER.

The material in the BEFORE folder was difficult to review. It covered the relationship between the toy, whose name was Pookie, and a solemn-eyed eight-year-old female named Tanitha. Watching the two of them interact provoked strange feelings I could not quantify or bear for long.

The DURING folder was two minutes of jerky low-rez video; the toy’s point of view as the child was abducted by the man I had seen dead just a few hours before. The kidnapping itself is carried out quickly. The man was on the child in seconds, one hand taking her by the arm while he sprayed her in the face with a trunk.

She started to fall, but he kept her from hitting the ground. The man wore a cold, hard smile all through the act. This was something he was good at, something he enjoyed.

I used earbuds to listen; this material was for my ears alone. I had the volume turned low, but still was able to hear a faint, plaintive, inarticulate cry that was not words, but still sounded like *No no no no* to me; the ignored mewling of the doll, which was now sitting on the corner of my kitchen table.

“Neither of us could save her,” I whispered to the fuzzy green doll. The doll made no reply, but I had a feeling it was watching me. On the screen, the man threw the child over his shoulder. He moved out of frame and was gone.

The image froze. The tiny time and date stamp on the bottom told me that the girl was taken over three weeks before her abductor was killed. The image started moving again. The time stamp jumped ahead six hours. A hand appeared, filled the screen. The image went black.

The third folder, the one marked AFTER waited to be opened.

The clip it contained was short, less than a minute. It showed the last vic, Miletti, standing in the place where his life ended. He was seen at a distance, and an odd angle—from where the toy had observed his demise, unnoticed. His face wore an expression of puzzled impatience. That turned to a frown as a sound began rising in the background. Not a sound I could identify, but from the way his head turned from side to side I could deduce that it was all around him.

His eyes went wide, first in surprise, then disbelief, then in fear. He fumbled at his coat pocket, trying to get at the pistol I found on him, still unfired. The *No no no no* that came out of his mouth was not that different from the sounds the doll made when its owner was taken, and that sound of denial quickly turned to a scream.

The screen went black.

I stared at the doll, witness to both crimes. It stared back, glassy eyes unreadable. What did it see?

It was looking at a police operative who had been given this information on purpose.

But to what end?

“Why?” I asked quietly.

The doll remained silent.

\* \* \*

It is said that only a small percentage of the human brain is used at any given time. I have read that this assertion is untrue, but have seen too many people who make me wonder. In any case, few systems are utilized fully, or properly.

Rules and regs and the scrutiny of the supervisory AIs govern what I do, how much I do, how I do it. What is allowed, or expected, is only a small fraction of what is technically possible. As a police operative, I am a tool shaped and wielded to accomplish very specific objectives in a carefully circumscribed fashion.

The plan I devised would risk censure, or worse, under normal circumstances. But the pressure from on high that was being brought down on the Brass had altered the rules. I sent a carefully worded adviso to the Superior who contacted me before. The reply that came back to me far more quickly than I expected was terse and unambiguous.

AUTHORIZED. PROCEED.

Step one was to gather all official—and unofficial—information on regulators who might visit this part of the Dumps.

Step two was to set up an automated surveillance regime that would locate and track any of those individuals if they appeared, and warn me if it seemed likely they were about to—and this is where the language I used to secure this authorization had to be most carefully shaped—engage in any activities that might endanger their lives.

The Brass believed I was striving to protect these regulators.

I planned to do nothing that would disabuse them of this idea.

\* \* \*

There is something else that they do not know.

A few days after my dinner with Jomo, I was on the street, going about my duties, when a very large woman wearing at least five shawls over multiple layers of skirts and blouses stumbled into me in a jingle of cheap jewelry.

Apologies were tendered, her breath sweet with the smell of fungus liquor. Then she reeled away to lose herself in the throng around the Scroungers’ Market.

Later, I found a small package in my pocket. I looked at it only after I had removed my tactical eyewear. It read: OPEN AT HOME.

That night I opened it and found a note and a vial containing hundreds of tiny pills, each one smaller than a grain of rice. The note informed me that if I took one pill a day, I could cut my daily dose of Cop. Ascetic by half. The chemicals in the pills would provide the metabolic byproducts necessary to pass the daily urine test mandated to make certain I was properly medicated. The note said that cutting back on Cop. Ascetic would make me better able to solve the regulator deaths.

The note was not signed. I was certain that it had come from Jomo. To not take my prescribed dose of Cop. Ascetic was unthinkable, dangerous, and highly illegal.

The pills taste slightly sweet.

\* \* \*

The surveillance web I constructed was far from perfect. There were several false alarms.

Yet these served a purpose. They let me practice my response, either finding and shadowing the regulator, or getting to the flagged area quickly and establishing a hidden location from which to watch. In these false call-outs, I observed three drug buys, three solicitations of desperate women, and two purchases of illegal, untraceable weapons.

When the moment I had been waiting for finally arrived, I was ready.

\* \* \*

The regulator's last name was Gromyko. The child he captured, an eleven-year-old boy, was at his feet when I arrived. Not gently dispatched with trunk gas, but with a series of brutal punches. The boy's skin was very dark, the blood at his nose and mouth bright red even in the dimly lit space where he was attacked.

Gromyko had a car waiting outside, ready to carry him and his prize out of the Dumps. He did not handle the boy gently as he hoisted him over his shoulder. The boy was thin, clearly malnourished. The regulator was all bulging tattooed muscles.

He had not taken three steps with his burden when I emerged from the shadows in front of him. He stopped short, scowled. "Outta my way, cop."

"Put the boy down, sir," I replied.

My order made him smirk. "Yeah, like that's gonna happen."

"Put the boy down, sir, or I will arrest you."

Gromyko rolled his eyes. "Don't be a fool. You cops are supposed to leave us alone. To protect us, not hassle us."

"I am protecting you, sir. The last few of your kind who came down here on this sort of business ended up dead."

The smug look changed to a scowl. "I head something about that."

"It is true, sir. You will be next."

His muscles swelled, and he stared at me hard. "Is that a threat?"

"No, sir," I answered mildly. "That is a prediction. I believe those who have been killing your kind know I am trying to find them. From that I can extrapolate quite high odds that they know I have found you. If they find me, they find you. If they find you, then they will kill you."

I saw doubt on the regulator's face, but he said, "You can't be sure of that."

"Yes I can, sir," I paused. Smiled. "I think they are already here. Watching. Waiting."

As I said that, a car alarm went off outside. The sound was chopped off a few seconds later.

"I believe they have just disabled your car alarm so they can disable your car as well. You will not be allowed to leave with that child."

All around us rose a sound. Distant, but all-encompassing. A sound made from countless other sounds. Clicking. Scraping. Shuffling. Clacking. A low angry mutter. The sound conveyed a feeling of poised, massed weight and gathered—and gathering—malice.

"I believe they are here, sir. They have come for you."

Gromyko stared around wildly. There was nothing to see, but no doubt that there was something there.

"No," I said when he turned back toward me, starting to pull out a gun. My sidearm was already drawn and pointed at his forehead. "Put the boy down, sir. Walk out of here. If your car still functions, drive away. If not, I strongly suggest that you run. Do not come back down here again for any reason. If you do, one way or another, you will die."

As if to drive my point home, the unseen watchers stirred. Among the sounds we were hearing were growls.

He put the boy down. Walked away, bulging shoulders hunched under the weight of the presence surrounding him.

I picked the boy up and carried him to the nearest streetdoc. I saw no sign of my backup.

## ANALOG

It was like they had never even been there.

\* \* \*

When my shift was over, I went back out on the street.

I knew where I was going, but not how it would end.

I was not in uniform and had rendered myself invisible to my superiors. While I am technical-ly never off duty, I went out not as a police operative, but as myself. John Blank.

Because all of this had become extraordinarily personal.

\* \* \*

The outer door has been left unlocked, either as a warning or as an invitation. The inner door is partly ajar. The space beyond is cavernous, filled with darkness. I step inside and pause, ears straining, letting my eyes adjust. My service weapon is within easy reach, but it offers little comfort. Two of the regulators attempted to protect themselves with similar weapons but ended up dead anyway.

There is the distant *clunk!* of a breaker or relay being thrown. Overhead lighting comes on, filling the space with a dim, bluish, flickering glow.

Hundreds of eyes open. Large eyes, small eyes. Eyes on the walls and floor, all around and above me. Unblinking eyes looking at me. Watching me.

I have found the killers.

"It's time we talk about this," I say.

\* \* \*

Louis Chow, owner of the toy store, emerges from the gloom. He does not appear the least bit surprised to see me. I have come here certain I was expected. This is proved true when he gestures toward a place between the worktables where two chairs and a low table are placed in a pool of light.

We sit down. "Beer?" he asks as he pulls a bottle of back-alley brew from a cooler on the floor.

I am determined to keep this light. "Not tea?"

He laughs. "Believe it or not, I'm allergic."

"Sure. Thank you." I take the bottle, remove the plug, take a sip. It is quite good.

"Why?" I say as he takes a swig from his own bottle.

"Someone had to do it."

I consider this answer, find it acceptable. "Is it personal?"

"Partly. The daughter of a friend disappeared. I've lost a customer or two."

"So you killed the regulators with toys."

Chow shakes his head. "No."

This makes me frown, not sure where I had gone wrong. "Excuse me?"

"I, um, *empowered* the toys. Quite a few of them contain tiny AIs, and in the more expensive ones those AIs are quite sophisticated. They can feel pain of a sort particular to their kind. They can feel sorrow. Some can even feel anger. Some have routines—you could even call them impulses—to help protect their child from danger or abuse. I modified the rule structure in some of them, giving them more leeway."

"You made killer toys."

"The regulators gave them the urge to kill. I merely gave them the means to act on that urge. Now, thanks to you, we can be even more effective than before."

"How did I help?" I believe I know the answer to that question, but want to hear it from him.

"You went to Mentate. He was not only able to point you in the right direction with the information he extracted from the doll, he was also able to crack and worm your access to police information systems. Since then everything you have done has been buffered and edited. This was for both your protection and ours. Best of all, we can now operate the search regime you built to let you intervene in the next abduction. That means we can cut down the chances of another kidnapping to near zero. Not completely zero, but damn close."

I had been co-opted, and in more ways than one. Yet all I have ever been, and all I will ever be is this: a police operative.

"There can be no more killings." I say this quietly, but forcefully.

Chow frowns. "Regulators who take children deserve to die."

I help myself to another sip of beer. Before cutting back on Cop. Ascetic, I could not drink beer or any other alcoholic beverage. I realize I have missed beer. I have missed many things.

"I will not disagree with you about that. But the deaths have drawn the attention of those who employ the regulators. They have exerted considerable pressure on the police. An end to the deaths may not be enough to satisfy either faction. I may be expected to produce if not a culprit, at least a suspect."

Chow smiles. "That can be provided."

That was not what I expected to hear. "It can?"

"Sure. This isn't the only place where those of us down on the bottom have begun resisting the predation of those at the top. Regulators have died in other places. A *lot* of them. The sort of people who would use their kind believe there is an organized cabal responsible for those deaths." Chow's smile turns brighter and sharper. "The ones with all the power are always ready to believe that those with none are conspiring against them. The greater the degree of privilege, the deeper the paranoia. Mentate can make it look like agents of this shadowy group came here and killed those regulators. That they have come and gone and now are beyond reach."

"You can satisfy them?"

"We can. We know how it was done in other places."

I make no response to this, just let it settle into my mind. A minute passes, then two.

At last, I say: "You expect me to go along with this."

"Yes, I suppose I do."

"If I don't?" I indicate the hundreds of toys all around us. "You'd have them kill me, too?"

He shakes his head. "No. You are not our enemy."

"Even if I were to report that you were behind all of this?"

"Even then." The tired, sad look is back on his face again. "People down here already have few enough other people looking out for them. You are a good man and a good cop. You are needed. Report me if you must. I'll just disappear. This isn't where I started. It probably isn't where I'll end up, though I admit that I do like it here. But there are lots of other places where a toy store like mine is needed."

I have not been raised or trained to deal with big thoughts; mine was to be a flat, black-and-white world controlled by the rules I had been ordered to follow. The last few weeks have been confusing and unsettling. Part of me yearns for a return to the simpler life I led before I saw my first dead regulator.

But the beer in my hand tastes wonderful. I can see where Louis Chow could become the sort of friend I enjoy in Jomo.

Because of the lower dose of Cop. Ascetic, I feel more alive than I have in years. Maybe less certain of myself and my place in the world, but in an odd way more a part of that world.

My mandate had been to stop the killings. I have fulfilled that mandate. The killings will stop. I am certain I can trust Louis on that count.

I remember what Jomo had told me: *I know you have a job to do, John, you have no choice in that. But there may be a space between what you are impelled to do, and what you think you should do. Between what's necessary and what's right. You're an investigator, man. Find that space.*

Have I found that space? Is it the place where I belong?

One more sip of beer, then I stand up.

"Thank you," I say.

Louis Chow watches me head toward the door, but does not ask what I have decided. Is this trust? Fatalism?

I leave him there, surrounded by his army of toys and start toward home.

In some strange way, I feel like I have just left my own childhood behind.

In spite of that, when I get home, I am going to have a long talk with Woody and Pookie. Then, as soon as I can, I will go have a long talk with Jomo.



## ANALOG

I will try to explain what I now take *To serve and protect* to mean. How I want to make sure every child down in the Dumps has a toy that can call for help if they are in danger.

I know just where to get such toys.

And maybe, just maybe, when I go to see Jomo, I will introduce myself to that pretty waitress Lia and hope she smiles at me once more.