

Endless City

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NOTE: This story contains content that some readers may find disturbing.

* * *

She was beautiful.

Of course.

They almost always are. Nobody picks ugly. At least, not the people I deal with.

My office is on the second floor of a run-down building in a shabby mid-century neighborhood. Last century. It's part of the mystique. Either you get it or you don't. She got it. She was dressed to the forties. Muted red dress, fox stole, auburn hair piled forward in perfectly sculpted waves.

I waved a chair at her. She sat, crossing her perfect legs perfectly. I caught a whiff of her perfume. *The Rose of Time*. Nice. And very expensive.

"There's going to be a murder," she said.

"On average, there's one every seventeen minutes," I replied. "The most recent one was two minutes ago." I had a display on the wall behind her. She couldn't see it, of course, but it was already reading out her statistics for me, at least the ones she was willing to share.

"No, this is serious. The expansion is going to be approved."

"And the Sun will rise tomorrow."

"Have you seen the map?"

I nodded.

The city was going to expand, a dozen clicks south and east. The disruption would be one of the biggest in history but going to 128-bit granularity would create a vast new range of terrain. Bad news for some, great news for others. If the disruption index went high enough, there would be a lot of murders. It wouldn't solve anything, but a lot of people would feel vindicated—not satisfied, but vindicated. The difference is profound. It's what keeps me in business.

I took my time studying her. The view was magnificent. Finally, "What is it you want from me? Prevention? Detection? Revenge? I have to tell you up front, I'm out of the murder-for-hire business—it makes me a target. And besides, I make more money this side of the law."

She didn't answer. Instead, she lit a cigarette. She fixed it in a long black holder, then waved

it curtly to light. She took a puff and stared at me. Cigarettes are great props. Especially if you look like Marlene Dietrich. Or a young Tallulah Bankhead. Her appearance was somewhere between the two, a nice morph-job.

She took another puff. “Well . . . I don’t need a murderer. Not now anyway. But I do need someone who knows how to find a murderer.”

“Any particular murderer?”

“Yes,” she said. “Because it’s a very particular murder.”

I leaned back in my chair. It gave me a better view up her skirt. “That might be worth my time. Is it a clever murder?”

“The murder . . . ? Not clever, just nasty. But the murderer—? That’ll be the hard part.”

“And after I find this person . . . ?”

“You’ll know what to do.” She leaned forward, giving me a spectacular view down the grand canyon of her cleavage. “You’re my last hope.”

She was impossible to refuse. “Who’s the victim?”

Another puff. She exhaled golden smoke. “I am.” She pinned me with steel-blue eyes.

I took a moment to consider that. “Why?”

“I’ve done bad things. I’ve made enemies.”

“Who hasn’t? See that filing cabinet over there—?”

“I’m not interested in your problems. Are you interested in mine?”

“It’ll be expensive—”

She had a tiny purse on her lap. She opened it now, dipped delicate fingers into it, pulled out an envelope larger than the purse itself, passed it across to me.

“You’ll find a retainer in there. There’s more in the escrow account. You’ll have the right to draw on it for billable hours and expenses. My banker will audit.”

I opened the envelope. I would have raised my eyebrows, but I had facial expressions turned off. It’s more in character.

“There will be a bonus, of course, if you solve the case quickly. If not . . . well, the amount in the escrow account should be sufficient for an extended investigation. The numbers are based on a performance analysis of your last six years of investigations.”

I closed the envelope. “You’ve done your homework.” I put the envelope down on my desk. “But let me ask you something. Why don’t we work on preventing the murder—?”

“That’s no longer possible—”

“Why?”

“Because the murder is happening now—”

She finished the last word and winked out.

Shit.

* * *

The problem goes back to the founding. Nobody expected the city to get this big. But it did.

Endless City is semispherical. It’s a three-dimensional rectangular grid that curves around on itself in all directions—pick one, if you travel far enough, long enough, you’ll end up back where you started. Convenient, but self-limiting when it comes to expansion.

That’s why the sysops can’t just drop in a block of new addresses wherever they want. They have to add X, Y, and Z—the row, the column, the depth. That splits any settlement that spans any affected part of the grid.

Nobody cares if a lake gets stretched or an ocean gets wider—but if your view suddenly retreats, if your access to a desirable neighborhood is compromised, if your sky-haven is suddenly on the ground or in the stratosphere, or if your private community is abruptly sliced in half, it matters.

Already the petitions were piling up, requests to have the addresses reassigned—so that sections on one side or the other of the split would remain adjacent to their most desirable neighbors. Most of those would be granted, except where it might conflict with a travel corridor.

The new space would start as a vast empty plain, several orders of magnitude larger than the current size of the city. The city would become a gigantic oasis in the middle of near-infinite

blankness. But just in case it filled up anyway, there would now be delineated vertical and horizontal equators where additional addresses could be installed in the future with minimal further disruption.

Meanwhile, a lot of people were about to be very unhappy. And some of them already were.

* * *

She was right. The murder was serious—more serious than I had expected. This was not a death she was going to recover from. It had occurred in meatspace.

Her name was Edward Ferguson, Cobie to his friends. He was found collapsed in his holosphere, one of the newer models. Death had been slow, moderately painful. The murder weapon—oh, she'd been right. It was nasty. And a bit sloppy too.

Cobie's holosphere had included a multi-function sextable, again one of the newer models. It was a horizontal array of vibration pads, with a matching frame above. You lay down on it, you put your face in the audio-video display, and the pads would massage and manipulate, rub and stroke and titillate to match any fantasy you could create.

A variety of programs were available, from gentle snuggling to rough trade. Male or female simulations were programmable, top or bottom, or both at the same time. The experience was generally better than the real thing because the programs monitored and responded to the physical reactions of the consumer.

Illicit programs, rape simulators, were also available. That's how Cobie had been murdered—raped to death. There was blood and gore everywhere.

I did not visit the crime scene, no need. The forensics team had been very thorough. And Cobie's death insurance covered the cost of unlimited access to all pertinent investigations. Cobie had seen to that, so that suggested he knew he was in danger for quite some time. But if he knew he was in danger, then why didn't he identify the source of the threat?

That was a good question. There wasn't a lot of other evidence. The only tangible corroboration was the sextable. Someone had replaced Cobie's copy of "Frat Boy Shenanigans" with "Death by Oompah!" Cobie wouldn't have done it himself—not deliberately. Only by mistake.

Backtracking the channels wasn't a dead-end, but it was an infinite labyrinth. The malware had been routed through several hundred thousand ephemeral nodes created on the fly to pass on the code, then erased immediately after. Most of those nodes had played Ping-Pong with the Trojan a few million times, bouncing it around various private networks, encrypting and decrypting it millions of more times, before sending it on. If Cyber-Pol's monitors had kept up, they might be able to trace the message traffic all the way back to the source—but even if they could, it would take months just to sort through the sheer number of transactions, and at the end, they'd find little more than a burner ID. The best they might come up with would be the cell-tower where the Oompah had begun—most likely the wi-fi in a public library.

No, this was not an ordinary cyber-murder. This was carefully planned—and it was deliberately vicious. An online persona could be rebooted, but wetware termination was permanent.

Okay, go back to the victim. Start from there.

Damn, but Cobie had been one beautiful woman. He knew how to work it. He was good. So good, I'd have hooked up with her.

I wasn't the first to discover this; it was common knowledge—a woman designed by a man knows exactly how to please another man, usually better than a woman. Sorry, ladies, but there are all those peer-reviewed studies. Of course, the reverse is true too—and the male ego is unlikely to ever recover.

So . . . Cobie had been playing female for years. He knew what he was doing. Start with that.

So . . . who would want to murder a crossplayer? No. Wrong question. Who would be enraged by a crossplayer? Or why? Crossplaying was so common it wasn't an issue for most people—only a few religious fanatics might be offended, and they weren't likely to visit Endless City. That left a cliché so obvious even fan-fic wouldn't go there—a man had fallen for Cobie's female avatar and then become enraged when he discovered Cobie had a meatspace penis. Nope. Only a studio producer would buy a storyline that shallow.

The not quite so obvious answer—could it have been a TERF, a Trans-Exclusionary Radical

Freak? Some of them were online violent—they made excellent assassins if they approved of the target—but there weren't many meatspace incidents. This didn't fit their pattern.

Everybody in Endless City was an avatar—a performance. Even if you were a puristan and your avatar was an accurate rendition of your physical body, you were still running an avatar. Any rational player would have known that. An irrational player—someone so damaged they believed the reality of the avatars—yeah, there were those, too. Furries, aliens, morphs, posers, replicants, repetitions, celebrosities, historicals, fictives, presenters, fluids, there weren't enough words for all the variants. Not a problem; most of the outliers clustered, and someone too far off the mean would be easy to identify and track—

Okay, leave that, it's not low-hanging fruit. If necessary, come back later. Work through the evidence first. What story does it tell?

Cobie had a high-end sextable. You don't spend kilobucks unless you're in deep. So, what was his kink? Had he used the bot for solo adventures? Or had he paired up with an online partner? Maybe several? It would have had to be someone with a compatible rig, another high-ender; Cobie's rig was new, not compatible with older models. Okay, check the connections, see if Cobie had partnered.

There's a thought.

Maybe "Death by Oompah" hadn't been planted by malware. Maybe Cobie had a hookup, a regular one, someone he trusted. Maybe the hookup had said, "Let's share a fantasy," and sent him a kink. And then, our little Cobie, trusting the hookup, not noticing it had been flickering around the net, had plugged it in and—

But, no—that's stupid. If you're planning a murder, you want to make sure you leave no fingerprints, especially not digital ones.

Okay, wait—

Consider. The hookup knows he's going to kill Cobie—so he builds a burner identity. It has to be a sophisticated one, with an elaborate history, one that would fool even a high-level sniffer. And if Cobie had a high-end bot, then he'd likely have a high-level sniffer. And it would have gone off like a fire alarm if it didn't trust the source.

So no. That didn't make sense.

Okay, wait—

Let's say the hookup created it, bounced it around, sent it to himself—herself?—and then sent it on to Cobie from the burner identity. Yeah, maybe. That might work. And as soon as Cobie died, the burner identity would vanish.

Um, no. There'd be a record of the identity—there just wouldn't be a trackable source for it. It would probably have gone through the same maze of connections as the kink.

Hmm. Hm. Hm.

I might have to leave the office for this one.

Crap.

Okay. Time to put on my legs. I rolled over to the sideboard and waved at the walker. It lit up, stood up, took three steps forward and held itself in place. I lifted myself up from the roller, angled my thighs into position and dropped into the exo-legs. It took a moment for everything to settle into place, then I was ready to go—I could walk, run, stroll, stride, slide, saunter, stagger, shuffle, shamble, scramble, amble, toddle, totter, trot, truck, tango, boogie, march, waltz, polka, or pirouette. The pirouette would not be graceful, however—I'm not balanced for it.

* * *

There are things I know how to do, but it's cheaper and easier and faster to hire someone else for certain tasks.

I went to see Miranda.

No, not in person. Nobody sees Miranda in person. You go to a public access, an emporium, a café, never the same one twice. You get a private booth, you punch in the number Miranda has given you, then you wait. Miranda gives a different number to each of her customers, that's how she knows who's calling—by what line you come in on.

If Miranda wants to talk to you, the screen flashes with another number—a burner, a proxy, a

labyrinth. You take that to another booth, not close by either, tap that, and you're connected. Or not. Sometimes Miranda will take you through two, three, a dozen separate burner-tracks.

If you don't follow Miranda's rules, if you try to trace Miranda, if you ask the wrong questions, you get permanently blocked. Miranda disappears from your world. Forever. Instead of a number, you get a "no results" screen. And no, you can't go through proxies either, human or otherwise—once you're blocked, you're blocked. Miranda's a tracker. If she blocks you, she assumes you're an enemy, and she watches you very carefully.

Some people speculate that Miranda's not human, just a very good A.I. Or maybe she's a conglomerate. She could be, she charges enough—I don't speculate. I just pay for her services.

Miranda lit up quickly. Today, her avatar was a very skeptical Bette Davis. Very Margo Channing, cigarette holder and all. "Cobie Ferguson," she said.

"Yes."

"You want him deep-traced, all transactions. Meatspace tracking, Endless City, and any associated activities. How far back?" She took a puff for effect.

"A year should do it."

"Six months should be enough," she said. "But I'll look for anomalies at least three years back. That's the larger window of probability. Anything else?"

"Special focus on relationships, please. I'm looking for motives."

"Of course. I'll send you an invoice. Do you want a cap on expenses?"

I considered it. "The client is covering the cost."

She paused. She was searching. "The client can afford it. No problem." Another pause. "Interesting. The client prepared for his own murder. I'll include all of that too. It'll be waiting for you when you get home. You might want to fasten your seat belt. It's going to be a bumpy ride." She clicked off, leaving me wondering if she was being sarcastic, or if that had been a warning.

I found out soon enough.

* * *

My physical office is in a building identical to the one in Endless City. The interior is a match as well, a dusty corner office with a couple of dirty file cabinets and various framed papers on the wall.

It's a deliberate match, another part of the performance. Everything is performance. I haven't been inside the building in seven months.

In truth, I'm in the building across the street and two floors down. In the afternoons, I park myself at the corner table of the outdoor café. I have a lettuce-and-tomato sandwich on whole wheat and coffee while I study the news. I don't see clients in meatspace, only in the City. Real-time is for research.

My professional persona is a burner identity, constructed on top of several proxies. Miranda could trace the path, I doubt anyone else could—probably she already has, otherwise she wouldn't have taken my business. I'm pretty sure a lot of what Miranda does is too deep in the wires to be legal, but I'm too smart to ask.

I pulled out a burner pad and downloaded Miranda's reports. As soon as I tapped to open the file, the second floor of the building across the street—my office—exploded. The corner windows shattered outward, south and east, gouts of fire and glass and smoke, knocking down pedestrians, sending cars skidding and screeching.

Nice. Very nice.

Another clue. Someone didn't want me to read Miranda's report. Someone smart enough to know I would link to Miranda, but not smart enough to know that my office was a Potemkin. Obviously, someone who spends too much time in Endless City. Someone smart enough to put a tracker on Miranda—she wasn't going to like that. Unless this was her doing. Whatever. I couldn't trust her again. Not until this was sorted out. One way to find out if she was responsible—call her and see if I'm blocked. But that would have to wait till later.

I got up quickly and headed toward the back of the café, not so fast as to draw attention, but fast enough to disappear from the scene. Out through the kitchen, past the dishwashers, into the alley, two doors down, and in, up the back stairs. I had maybe two minutes, I needed only

one—

Stepped in, hit the red button on the wall, opened the closet, pushed the side wall of the closet open, stepped through to the matching closet of the apartment on the other side. Behind me, an entire identity was evaporating. Everything. It would take less than thirty seconds to shred that existence.

This apartment was intentionally bare. Merely a transfer station. I stripped off my clothes, dropped everything—all my hardware too—into the shredder, then naked back into the closet—touched the wall the right way and the floor dropped me into the closet of the apartment below, then slapped back into place. An easy fall, I bounced on the trampoline.

Overkill? Yes. Searchers would certainly find the first escape route, they'd assume I'd changed clothes and gone out the back door. By the time they realized that was a dead end, I should be on the other side of the city, on my way out of the state.

Padded to the shower, pulled myself out of my exo-legs, hung onto the grips, and punched for decontamination. Went through the cycle three times, prayed it would be enough, and waited for the blowers to finish drying me.

I hated to lose the legs; they were expensive, and I hadn't finished breaking them in, but I couldn't trust them anymore. I couldn't even buy another set. If they—the mysterious “they”—were tracking buyers, the same set of legs would be a big red arrow pointing at me.

I whistled for—god, I hate them, but no choice—the fat lady. Two flubbery dark elephant props. Not graceful, but . . . you want to be invisible, be a fat black lady waddling off to some night job cleaning toilets for people who think their money deodorizes their turds. The disguise took a while, too many parts to it—the fat suit, the dress, the hidden compartments in the legs, under the tits, under the folds of flesh, even behind the big fat ass, and a few other places too—and then power up the new identity, hoping to hell it hasn't already been compromised, grab the purse and two huge shopping bags that pass for luggage when you're scraping poor—

If it got me out of the city, it was fine. I'd pass through at least two more identities before I came up for air and looked around. Four blocks away, a circuitous route, there was a recycling station—the fat lady would go in, a teenage screwhead would wander out, a skinny junkie-hustler with a peg below the knee. He'd shamle aimlessly for a while, then take the tube north toward the Jumble, and somewhere in there he'd vanish too. Max Blankman—not his real name, just a transfer identity—would catch a train or a bus or maybe a ferry across the river—

And three days from now, a fluffy old lady with a couple of robot cats would purchase a little pink gazebo in Lavender Meadows. Her wife had died a few months previously, and she still hadn't figured out what to do with the rest of her life. Zoe Elaina Kilmartin had been a librarian once, a specialist in arcane research of all kinds. Occasionally she still accepted part-time work from authors and filmmakers, so she maintained a T-3 bandwidth.

Lavender Meadows was not specifically part of Endless City, but it used some of the same data-pipes. A skilled wirehead could proxy through. Of course, Ms. Kilmartin couldn't possibly know that the access in her gazebo had been proxied by a skilled wirehead several years before, and any deep search of her hardware would reveal that most of the research jobs she'd taken on were deliciously kinky but nowhere near dangerous or illegal. But, oh those proxies—

If they held up even a week, they'd be gold.

* * *

I could afford it, but I was still pissed. Disappearing, transferring, reinventing—it was time-consuming, it was expensive. And I was no closer to solving the case. If anything, the case had gotten far more complicated.

Someone had found a perversely ingenious way to commit murder—he or she or whatever had killed Cobie Ferguson. But Cobie Ferguson had found out somehow. He'd discovered he was in danger—and he must have taken steps to protect himself, but just in case he'd also taken care to provide for the subsequent investigation. He'd put a lot of key pieces in place; he'd hired me. But he didn't know who the murderer would be, that was weird in itself, and now someone—probably the same murderer, but don't make assumptions—had tried to stop me from investigating.

Had to think about that. I'd assumed that the person who'd planted the bomb wasn't smart enough to find me in meatspace—but what if I was mistaken about that? What if he was, and the bomb wasn't an attempt to kill me, just scare me off?

But . . . no, I don't get scared off. Not that easily. If anything, the disruption of my business, the destruction of a carefully constructed identity, had pissed me off—enough that I was more committed than ever to crack this one.

I still had Miranda's report. I'd relayed it to a safe haven, scanned it, and stripped it of all tracking macros. Now, I finally had time to study it in depth.

Miranda's research had been thorough, but it still didn't reveal much. Cobie's online identity was respectable—too respectable; obviously he'd run himself through a cleaning service, probably several. There weren't any connections that called attention to themselves either. Probably, the circles he moved in, they all had continuing cleaning services.

I sat in the little pink gazebo, studying the wraparound display, frowning to myself, tapping my teeth, and saying some very unladylike things.

Miranda's reports were always hyper-detailed. Sometimes she pointed out interesting anomalies. Sometimes she left them for me to discover myself. And sometimes they just leapt out of the display and shouted, "Here I am!"

Let's start with an assumption, a logical one: that whoever planned to kill Cobie Ferguson had been tracking his movements, stalking him in Endless City, stalking him in meatspace. So, if we track Cobie's movements for the past six months and expand that to include an area-search of everyone who passed within his local radius, eliminating all the randoms, minimizing the residents, we should be able to reveal any unusual patterns that are semi-congruent with Cobie's. Every traffic-cam, every security monitor, every smartphone, every ad-tracker, every functioning device plugged into the net, and every app on all of those devices—every photo or video or audio captured within Cobie's radius was rawdata if you had the resources to tap into all those separate data-feeds. Miranda did—and had.

Eezy-peezy, right?

Wrong.

Because the next part of the assumption was that if someone could upload "Death by Oompah" to a high-end sextable, they'd also be smart enough to know that simply stepping out onto a public street would create a permanent record of their every movement. Their every step and gesture—every fart, sneeze, and exhalation—would be logged somewhere. There would be only one protection: a blocking field.

Blockers are usually licensed to celebrities, politicians, corporate leaders, billionaires, and various government agencies. Ordinary citizens have to demonstrate a compelling need—witness protection, stalkers, restraining orders, that kind of stuff. Anyone else has to pay a hefty premium—because why would you want to hide your movements if you weren't doing something unlawful?

A blocking field interrupts the local flow of packets associated with your image, your voice, your location, everything. All the data going back and forth between your devices and the rest of the world is triple-encrypted. You show up on the displays as an empty space.

But even an empty space reveals a lot—especially if it's ambulatory.

If the blot tracks to the restroom, did it center on the men's, the ladies', the neuts', or the morphs'? That's useful information. If the blot goes into a store, what kind of a store? Clothing? Male? Female? Uni? If the blot moves from here to there—did it take a bus? A taxi? The tube? What does that tell you about its income? Does it suburb or supra? Or does it disappear into the Jumble—that's another slice of information. Just finding the home-locus of the blot is critical. If the blot abruptly disappears—whoever's in the suddenly revealed space, there's your list of suspects. Track them now.

If the blot doubles back, twists and turns, moves across the map in an erratic pattern to make sure it isn't being followed, it still gives itself away. It reveals it has a secret to hide.

Just one problem.

Yes, there was a blot—but it wasn't following Cobie Ferguson. It *was* Cobie Ferguson. Every

time it shut down, there was Cobie. No other suspects.

Miranda was good. Cobie thought he'd been careful; he'd only shut down his blocker when he thought he was in the presence of other blockers. But Miranda tracked everyone leaving the blank areas and Cobie's presence was the only repeating factor.

Well, crap.

The case just got a whole lot weirder. I was now looking for an invisible murderer—one who wasn't blotted but still didn't show up in any data-feeds. One who could track his target even when the target was inside a blot.

Okay, let me think about this. If the answer isn't in the evidence you're looking at, it has to be in the evidence you're not looking at. Miranda had brute-forced the raw data, she'd minimized all the randoms and all the residents, and anyone else who might have had business in the area.

So . . . the man or woman or neut that I was looking for was probably a shifter, like me—someone who could burn through a dozen identities in a week. A lot harder to track, but not impossible. It requires some pretty deep scanning, but you can find identities that are too shallow, too perfect, too well constructed—or just too good to be true.

Miranda had flagged identities she trusted, individuals who'd existed in her own databases for three years or longer. That eliminated more than half of the randoms. Others were minimally suspect candidates—too old, too young, physically disabled, medically impossible, emotionally unfit, intellectually impaired, chronically ill, and so on—all the different outliers.

And then there were the ones with big ripples: deep family ties, long-term business connections, anyone with a hint of celebrity, those were the least likely to be burners.

Burner identities tended to be disconnected, enclosed, not a lot of interaction with the rest of the world. Yeah, that includes a lot of shut-downs, introverts, hidiers, and agoraphobes. And a lot of petty crooks, farmers, dealers, and distributors. But those are traceable too. The problem gets harder when you're dealing with pros. A good burner is usually connected to at least a few dozen other good burners to create the illusion of a life.

Miranda had eliminated at least two thirds of the randoms, leaving only two dozen on the list of possibles. Not a bad winnowing, but still a time-consuming effort.

Put that aside for a moment, consider something else instead. Why had Cobie blocked himself in meatspace? What was he hiding from? And as good as his blockware had been—and it was state-of-the-art—how had he been tracked? The easy answer, the obvious one, was that he hadn't been tracked; he'd invited the killer in. And the killer had installed "Death by Oompah."

A thought occurred to me—

Yes, Miranda had uploaded Cobie's autopsy report.

Cobie had been hardwired into the machine. He was getting direct stimulation to the brain's pleasure center. And just in case, his blood had high levels of pain blockers.

Cobie had died happy—very happy.

So . . . the murderer hadn't been vindictive. That suggested a whole other set of motives.

I leaned back in my chair—in meatspace. Mrs. Kilmartin did likewise in her pink gazebo.

There's this:

If you live in Endless City, everything is recorded. Everything. There is no privacy—anyone with a warrant can prowl.

If you retreat to meatspace, you can have the illusion of privacy. You can lock yourself in your apartment, live off the Basic, and have all your meals delivered.

But that's still not enough.

Every time you turn on the electricity, you leave a data-trail. Every appliance. Every light bulb. Every electrical socket. Everything. Everywhere.

If you go to the circuit box and flip all the breakers, that's still no defense. If you have anything in your pocket or your purse that runs off batteries, if it connects to anything else, if it taps into, if it reports, if it monitors—that's a data-trail too.

If you go lo-tech, disconnecting from the grid, generating your own life support, you can still be observed—from the sky, from across the street, and even through the walls of the apartment next door. Lasers can read the vibrations on your window glass, thermal detectors can tell how

many people are in the room, and microwaves can monitor your movements.

There is no privacy. There is no anonymity.

Put on a burka and walk down the street, you still leave a data-trail. Even if you wear a mask or a hood, cameras will still record your height, your gait, your body-movements, assembling a personality-pattern that will be matched with the paths you take, the purchases you make, the signs that catch your attention, everything.

Someone smart enough to be completely invisible would also have been smart enough to plan a perfect murder. He hadn't.

What's a perfect murder? One that doesn't get discovered, one that no one ever knows about—no one except the murderer.

So . . . Cobie's killer wanted the murder to be known. Why?

It didn't make sense.

Maybe the murderer wasn't invisible.

There was no evidence that Cobie had invited anyone into his penthouse apartment. There was no trace. No physical evidence. No data-trail. Nothing.

And there was no evidence of anyone leaving afterward, not even a blot.

Which brought me back to the first question . . . how did "Death by Oompah" get into Cobie's sextable?

Malware? Not with Cobie's level of hardware. He would have had multiple state-of-the-art firewalls. So he would have had to install it himself. . . .

Did he think it was "Frat Boy Shenanigans"—or did he know it wasn't?

Because the son of a bitch had been wired in like a screwhead and narked like a man strapped onto an execution table. It was painless because he wanted it to be painless.

Son of a bitch.

But why then? Following that train of thought, it doesn't make sense. . . . Why would he want me to investigate a murder that didn't happen? And why would he blow up my office?

Unless . . .

That was a little far-fetched, but—

All right, back to Miranda's reports. There was something I'd missed.

But now I knew what I was looking for. I had to backtrace the movements of Cobie's blot. Only a few days were needed; he'd taken a trip, not too far, but far enough. He'd gone to a place where his blot overlapped with another blot. Then the other blot disappeared. They'd merged. Then his blot went home.

So . . . backtrace that other blot—and it goes all the way back to the Jumble.

Crap.

And crap again.

Mrs. Zoe Elaina Kilmartin said some very bad words and winked out of her beautiful pink gazebo.

I'd need to switch to a burner identity. Hell, I'd probably have to burn through half a dozen.

This was going to take some thought and some careful preparation.

* * *

The Jumble is all proxies and untraceables. The whole area is blotted—it's splattered with multiple overlapping blots. And they stack.

There are few visible cues. Endless City is woven in and out of its structure so deep, it's impossible to navigate without plugins.

Nothing is what it seems. Nobody is who they pretend to be. If Endless City is one relentless performance, the Jumble is its physical counterpart. It's Kowloon's Walled City reborn—with a vengeance. The Jumble exists where three, or maybe more, jurisdictions fail to overlap—each one retreating from the responsibility of governance. The result is a hole in the fabric of responsibility: a gigantic ungoverned enclave, sprawling like a cancerous amoeba across several square kilometers of broken terrain. Ancient buildings lean against each other for support, bridges to nowhere span the gaps, canyons, cables, and tubes, balconies have been turned into shops, staircases transformed into vertical habitats, banners and canopies are everywhere,

tangles of wires lead every which way, vertical farms of all kinds abound, blankets for walls, ladders, rickety staircases, an ancient aqueduct, twisting alleys wind through various pretenders to street level, and, beneath everything, abandoned tubeways where trains no longer run, crumbling sewers, the whole a tottering slum, clinging to unfinished concrete towers, a gaping triangular spire, heli-decks, windmills, and open catch-barrels for the monsoon rains—a wild collection of humanity, clustered in its walls, morphs and neuts, cross-players, gendernauts, inflatos, slendermen, barbies, twinkles, bearables, mandroids, femmiloids, remods, rejuves, sportsters, shifters, grifters, xenoids, saleables, whatever—there’s no directory. If you have to ask, you don’t want it badly enough.

The Jumble is a self-contained paradox, simultaneously the most connected and the most disconnected place in the urban sprawl. It exists, it continues to exist, because no authority wants responsibility of the physical realm, no agency dares to attempt cyber-control—not any more. No one wants the economic burden, the legal burden—no one wants to inherit the morass of the Jumble’s bizarre societies and ungovernable residents. In short, no one knows what to do with it, so the Jumble exists, a great machine of self-evolving survival.

Within its walls, the Jumble is anything and nothing: sanctuary, brothel, casino, hideaway, drug den, fantasyland, shops of all kinds—tattoo artists, mutation parlors, transformatories, fetish-holes, meal-vendors, cafes, tailors, bootmakers, indigo marketplaces, purple holes, exoprinters, fabbers, xeno-labs, crack-doors—everything. The Jumble has its own unwritten rules; you’re safe as long as you follow them. Don’t take what isn’t yours. Don’t ask what you don’t need to know. Don’t go where you have no business. Whatever you want or need, it’s here—buy or trade, cash only, no credit. No wires, no traces, thank you. Next, please?

Old identities disappear into the Jumble. New ones come out. And Cobie Ferguson had done a lot of business here. The money wasn’t traceable, but Miranda’s data-diving had revealed large sums converted into cash over a three-year period. Gambling losses, he said, but there weren’t many trips to the Endless City casinos—none that could be tracked. No, he told his taxman that he gambled in the Jumble. There were certain games within its walls not available anywhere else. The taxman didn’t ask for details—and if he had, Cobie wouldn’t have answered. Because he wasn’t gambling. You didn’t stay as rich as Cobie Ferguson if you had that kind of gambling habit. No, he was investing in something else—not illegal if you intend to use it legally, but definitely illegal if you don’t.

There were only three practitioners of this art in the Jumble—well, only three that I knew of—but only one of them had a reputation for clean hands. I’d start with Her. Him. Whatever. Depending on the moment. Because there was no him, her, or whatever—there was only the convenient avatar, created for the day and worn by whichever member of the crew was on desk duty.

Max Blankman got off the tube at 13:13 o’clock. Not deliberate, just ironic. The Max Blankman ID was a public domain, open-source identity. Anyone could wear it. It wasn’t suspicious, unless it was. Usually it was as innocuous as a Charles Manson T-shirt on a recently liberated teenager. (Hint: The revolution is not a fashion statement.) If you were serious about hiding out, you didn’t go as Blankman, not Max, not Minnie, not any of their offspring.

He. She. Whatever did not have a name. Like Miranda, access was exclusive. I had it, because I had money to spend. Enough. Most people don’t have that advantage. Most people never have enough. And it collapses their thinking from “I don’t have enough” into “I am not enough.” It’s that kind of mindset that keeps me in business, provides me with customers. I should be grateful, but I’m not. I spend too much time with the wrong kind of people.

Goggled, half in meatspace, half in Endless City, I made my way quickly through the Jumble. Worst thing you can do is hesitate. All the signs, all the rules and warnings, all the directions, all the arrow-trails, were available only in the Endless City overlay—you saw only the overlays you were allowed to see. I saw a much more intricate and complex map than most people. This iteration of Max Blankman was probably getting a lot of attention because of that. Somewhere—a lot of somewheres—a lot of someones were poking someone else and saying, “Hey, look at this, we’ve got a Max who can see us.” There must have been a hundred sets of eyes on me, my

only protection. Nobody was going to assault me with that many witnesses.

I followed a blinking red arrow up an escalator, one of the few that worked, the rest were just stairs, halfway up, then right along “the becauseway”—called that not because it was a causeway, but because it was a “becauseway.” Because. You either got it, or you didn’t. Maybe you had to be there.

Stopped at a noodle shop, put a copper coin on the counter and ducked behind the curtain, still following the blinking arrow, through six interleaved apartments, then out onto a balcony overlooking a steep atrium—I’d never seen this before, didn’t even know it was here. But the red arrow never led me the same way twice.

Once, the balconies had been separate domains. Now the railings were gone, makeshift platforms linked them all, one to the next, and it was an elevated walkway. All the way around to the other side, then right turn through a meet-rack where naked avatars lounged along a railing. The double-vision of meatspace revealed the unappetizing truth—another reason why sexbots and sextables had become so popular. If you could afford them. If not, avatar-whores were cheap.

Up, down, around, in, out—the arrow finally led me to a simple dark room. Yellow silk drapes, artfully decorated with dancing and reclining and copulating naked people, all combinations, all positions. Red paper lanterns. I could have been in the foyer of an expensive Happy House, where unique designer fantasies were created for wealthy aesthetes with specific erotic tastes. Well, yes. I was.

There were two backless chairs in the room. Padded cylinders, one on each side of a low table. A Eurasian boy came in carrying a ceramic tea service on a wooden tray. He couldn’t have been more than thirteen. He was beautiful, dressed in a soft red kilt and a flowing white shirt. His avatar flawlessly matched his physical presence. He sat down opposite me and placed the tray exactly between us with mathematical precision. Then he carefully, meticulously, poured tea into two small red cups. Steam rose like a warning.

He folded his hands into his lap and waited patiently. I took the closest cup. I cradled it in my palms so as to minimize the heat coming off it. I inhaled the fragrance of the steeping leaves. I returned the cup to the table without drinking. I only look stupid.

“I have questions,” I said.

The boy was impassive. He waited.

“I want to know if something is possible.”

I knew I wasn’t speaking to the boy. I was speaking to his puppeteer. He was a Cyranoïd—taking his instructions from someone offsite. His features were perfect, his skin was pink and golden and shining—as clear as porcelain. His hair was pure blue-black and shining. His eyes were stunning blue. His physical presence was already an answer to my question.

When the boy spoke, his voice was lyrical. He said quietly, “You’re here. Therefore you have permission. Ask.”

“How much would it cost to grow a body? A life-size clone. How long would it take?”

A pause. “You did not ask if such a thing is possible.”

“I already know it’s possible. I want to know how much and how long.”

The boy hesitated, listening to his master again. “We can grow fully functioning new legs onto your stumps in six months.”

“That’s not the question I asked. How much for a whole body? Head and brain included.”

“You do not have a life-threatening disease. All of your organs are functioning well. You will have no need of an organ replacement for at least a decade or longer.”

“How much? How long?”

“For what purpose do you need a clone of yourself?”

Now it was my turn to pause while I considered my reply. How much should I say?

“Even a small meat-tank is big enough for a full-size male body,” I began. “Scanning and sampling is less than an hour. You can print the collagen matrix in three days. Two weeks to grow and seed the stem cells. I’m guessing two months for the bones, four to six months for organ maturity and function, the last three will be spent exercising and toning the various muscle

groups. Six months, right?"

The boy didn't answer.

"As for costs? Okay, there's the cost of nutrients, that's minimal. Tank rental, again minimal. Security—that's not minimal. Skillage required to manage the various processes, I'm guessing six to ten specialists, maybe another twelve assistants for scut-work. Plus all the different bits and pieces of equipment, the bots, the maintenance, the electricity, plus overhead—" I quoted a number.

The boy did not reply. His failure to react was just as informative as if he had spoken.

Finally. "What you ask is possible." Another pause. "However . . ."

"Yes?"

"Your cost estimate is too low. We would have to establish a specific facility. You would have to assume that overhead." He quoted a number.

"I see. Your current operations are at capacity?"

The boy didn't answer.

It didn't matter. That he had actually quoted a price told me what I needed to know. He. She. Whatever. Didn't offer a service unless they could deliver it. That meant they'd already done it. At least once and probably more than once. And probably enough times that their tanks were full and they had a waiting list. And as soon as they found a customer desperate enough to pay for the cost of a new facility, they'd move him to the head of the line.

I nodded. "I will get back to you on this. I'm only the agent of inquiry."

I left the tea untouched on the table, a terrible insult, but one I had to risk. The other risk was greater. If they—the mysterious "they"—were capable of tracking Miranda's feed to me and blowing up my office, might they also be just as capable of tracking me here?

In any other case, the unfinished tea would have been a signal that our business was not yet complete, but here in the Jumble it implied a darker message. I do not trust you.

Max Blankman disappeared on the southward train. I shadowed with a traveling blot for several blocks, changing clothes and posture and the gait of my legs, as I went. Reversed my jacket, pulled up the hood, popped on disposable goggles, deflated the fat suit by ten kilos, and a few other tricks I don't like sharing.

So . . . now I knew. Ninety percent certain anyway. Cobie hadn't died. He'd faked his own death.

He'd grown a clone, perhaps even swapped most of his organs for fresh ones, then murdered the donor in his place. It would have been a perfect crime, but at the last moment, Cobie must have developed some kind of emotional bond. He couldn't bear to cause his donor-toddler any pain. So he'd killed it painlessly.

That was his mistake. A real murderer would have wanted the victim to suffer.

Okay, next question. Why had Cobie gone to so much trouble? Why did he need to go invisible?

Only one way to answer that question.

Ask Cobie.

Right. Find the invisible man. Eezy-peezy. He's only got a three-day lead.

If I go back to Miranda—she'll know I'm still alive. She probably already knows, but maybe not. If Miranda planted the bomb, then contacting her lets her know she failed—but how could she have planted the bomb so quickly? So, probably it wasn't Miranda. It would have had to have been Cobie.

Okay, 90 percent sure it was Cobie who blew up my office—the space I pretended was my office. But why? Why kill the guy you've just hired to investigate the fake murder you've staged?

Ah—that one's almost obvious. You kill him to keep him from discovering the murder was staged. And it clouds the investigation with another false track.

God, I'm good.

Or stupid.

But Cobie had distracted me. The way he'd crossed his perfect legs so perfectly—and I'd bought into it. I'd had so many clients who were painfully shallow, I'd begun to believe they all

ANALOG

were. Cobie might have set me up, but he had my help.

Time to call Miranda.

It took me a while to get through; she bounced me through a dozen numbers and three calling locations, the most I'd ever experienced, but finally—

Morticia Gomez. The Anjelica Huston iteration. "You've been compromised," she said.

"Yeah, I noticed."

She said, "Your office line was tapped. About two weeks ago. A very sophisticated piece of work. The tap didn't go active until after Cobie died—"

I thought about telling her it wasn't Cobie, decided to wait until she finished. The bomb had been planted the same time as the tap. The tap itself was a physical device attached to the line outside the building. Once the bomb went off, the tap self-destructed. It would have looked like part of the bomb damage. Except it left software traces of itself in the system. "A very sophisticated piece of work," Miranda said. "But shallow. The cleanup wasn't deep enough. The author didn't realize that I was monitoring your feeds."

"For how long?"

"Long enough to notice there were hiccups in your reception."

"So you knew about the bomb?"

"I knew about the tap. The bomb was a surprise."

"The tap triggered it."

"I made a mistake. I assumed the trigger was simply an alert. I was wrong."

"I could have been killed."

"Yes. That would have ruined my whole day. I hate losing customers."

"Thank you for your concern."

"So—are we looking for the bomber now?"

"No. Yes. We're looking for Cobie Ferguson." I told her about the clone farms in the Jumble.

"I'm aware of the practice. Most of the clones have been organ donors, several have been sexual partners. Two have been used for vicarious revenge. This would have been the first murder—or staged murder. But you have no direct evidence."

"No. What I have is a hunch."

"Yes?"

"Cobie was—is—rich. Rich people don't abandon their wealth. They take it with them. They're stupid that way. Follow the money."

"That's not a hunch," Miranda said. "That's logic."

"Anyway, that's my question. Where is Cobie's money?"

"The report is on its way." She added, "To your current account."

"I have to ask. Are there any taps?"

"None that I am aware of. Nevertheless, you should stay alert."

"Thank you."

It turned out that Cobie didn't have wealth. He had *access* to wealth. Those are two very different things.

I have access to wealth. I know. I have multiple client accounts I draw on. As long as I can present an auditable invoice for billable hours, as long as my maintenance expenses remain reasonable, as long as I spread the expenses across multiple accounts, I have access to wealth.

In return for my services, which are considerable.

As Cobie Ferguson was about to find out.

I parked myself in realtime in the middle of a crowded plaza and plugged into Miranda's findings. Cobie had been a beneficiary of three trusts and two foundations. He drew from two of those resources. Now all I had to do was find out who else was drawing and how much—and where they were now.

If Cobie was smart, he would have plugged in his alternate identity some time ago and created a financial backstory. But again—the giveaway was how far the ripples had spread.

The details are irrelevant. It was mostly a process of elimination.

I found Cobie in the next penthouse up. That was why we had no record of him—blotted or

otherwise—leaving his building. He hadn't. He'd burned his past and walked up one flight of stairs.

I knocked on the door.

After a moment, he opened it. He was wearing a silk dress, a kimono. No makeup. Just a crossplayer at home. He looked nothing like his avatar, just an ageless young-old man. He looked down the hall past me, both ways, then stepped aside to let me in. "That was fast."

"You were stupid." I walked into the apartment. It wasn't bare, but it wasn't lived in yet either. I turned around to face him. "The surgery went okay?"

He shrugged. He looked tired. "I'm still adjusting." Then, "Where did I screw up?"

"At the beginning."

"Is it a long story?"

"No."

He looked disappointed. "You want something to drink?"

"I'm fine," I said.

He went to the bar anyway, picked up the soda gun, and filled a tall glass with super-carbonated water. He hesitated before putting the soda gun down.

I said, "Your blocker isn't as good as you think it is. Miranda is recording everything. So if you're still thinking about shooting me with whatever is concealed in that soda gun, I wouldn't recommend it."

He sighed, shrugged, picked up his glass, and walked over to one of two black leather chairs. He sat down in one, gestured at the other.

"No thanks, I'll stand." I took an envelope out of my pocket. "Here's an invoice for my services. And an additional contract. You're buying my silence. It's not exorbitant. You can afford it. It's certainly cheaper than any of your other options." I tossed it at him, he let it fall to the black coffee table between the chairs.

"Really?" He looked skeptical.

"Really," I assured him. "It's certainly cheaper than killing me."

He sipped at his water. He leaned forward and put the glass on the table. He picked up the envelope. He opened it and studied the two papers, first one, then the other. He nodded. "You're fair. I'll give you that. I'll set up an automatic payment."

"Thank you." But I didn't head for the door.

"Is there something else?"

"Maybe. It's up to you."

"How much?"

"That's the right question to ask." I crossed to the bar, hefted the soda gun, studied the buttons for a moment, then filled a glass of my own. I carried it to the chair opposite him, sat down and drank.

"Let's say that I have a pretty good idea who's after you. What's it worth to you to stop them?"

He studied me for a long moment. "You are good."

"I did the job you hired me to do. You said after I found the murderer, I'd know what to do. You were right. I do know what to do. Do you want me to do it?"

"Tell me more."

"The expansion is going to be approved. It's going to be a very large expansion. Good for some. Bad for others. The horizontal and vertical equators are going to cut through some valuable territory. The value of land bordering the new equators is going to go up. But the value of certain other parcels divided by the equators will collapse. Even if all the petitions for adjustments are approved, it's still going to be ugly. Some people are going to make a lot of money. Others are going to lose a lot."

"Every screwhead on the street knows that. They're all scrambling for advantage. Tell me something I don't know."

"You have pro-rata shares in more than a thousand cyber-properties, spread across a hundred different holding companies; your share is funneled through five financial instruments, of which you've only been tapping two. You've been keeping a very low profile for a long time—

probably because if you die, some other people's shares will increase. In most cases, only a point or two. But in a couple of other cases, as much as 20 percent will be divided among the survivors. Enough to make your death a lucrative proposition. Your staged death does not alleviate the danger, because you've assigned your shares to a new holding identity, funneling the dividends through another set of instruments until they finally arrive here. All you've done is prolong the search and delay the inevitable. Those who want you dead are going to follow the money, just like I did. And . . . my guess is that they have access to even more sophisticated resources than I do."

"Then why haven't they found me yet?"

"Because—" I counted off the reasons for him—"First, they're trying to figure out which of them killed you. It'll take them two or maybe three days to convince themselves that none of them got their hands dirty. Two, they're not going to believe it was suicide either, because—three—as soon as they discover your shares are not being divided among themselves but were presold to a holding identity, that will lead them directly to four—that you are still alive and hiding out, at which point, five, they will start searching in earnest. This is clever—plugging into your own security, you've been able to watch every stage of the investigation. But; as clever as you are—six—guys like me do this for a living. We know all the tricks, usually because we invented most of them ourselves."

"How long do I have?"

"I got in, didn't I? If they're not already landing on the roof, they will be sometime in the next three days. They're not stupid."

"But you're smarter?"

"No, I'm not. I'm just faster. I don't have to take as many meetings to explain what I'm doing. Whoever is searching for you probably has to report to a committee. The committee has to argue for a while before approving the next step. That's why you're still alive. Shall we go?"

"Huh?"

"You're not safe here. If I could find you, a three year old could. It would just take a little longer. Now—seven—let's go. I assume you have your next hideout prepared? We'll start there, just long enough to muddy the trail, then I'll take you through the labyrinth. That'll buy us time for what comes next—the messy part."

There were two golems in the hall. I burned them from behind; I'm not proud, I'm a survivor. Cobie gave me a look—he didn't have to say it. Where the hell did that come from? Your scan came up clean. "Trade secret," I explained.

And we were off.

This was going to be a bigger job than I expected. I was already counting shekels in my head. I should be able to make enough to retire.

Except guys like me, we don't retire. We just keep going until the some other guy catches up—because that's how it works in Endless City.

David Gerrold's prolific output includes teleplays, film scripts, stage plays, comic books, more than 50 novels and anthologies, and hundreds of articles, columns, and short stories. He worked on Star Trek, Land of the Lost, Twilight Zone, Star Trek: The Next Generation, Babylon 5, and Sliders. He is the author of Star Trek's most popular episode "The Trouble With Tribbles." Many of his novels are classics of the science fiction genre, including The Man Who Folded Himself and When HARLIE Was One. A ten-time Hugo and Nebula award nominee, David Gerrold also received the Skylark Award for Excellence in Imaginative Fiction, the Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in Horror, and the Forrest J. Ackerman lifetime achievement award. The semi-autobiographical tale of his son's adoption, "The Martian Child" won both the Hugo and the Nebula awards, and was the basis for the 2007 movie starring John Cusack and Amanda Peet.