

BUZZKILL



Some shadowrunners say that the scariest words in the English language are “Trust me.” I don’t buy it. Any ‘runner worth the name doesn’t have enough trust left in him to meet his grandmother for breakfast without legwork and backup. No—by my reckoning, the scariest words around are “It’ll be easy.”

That’s what Frankie said just after his call interrupted me at a little club in Redmond, right in the middle of the first poker game in weeks where I actually had a chance to come out ahead. “Can’t this wait, Frankie?” I asked, staring glumly through his translucent AR image at my ace-high two pair and cutting hurried glances over the cards at the three suspicious slots across the table. We hadn’t been working with Frankie long, but he’d set us up with some decent jobs so it wasn’t smart to blow him off.

“You tell me,” the ork said cheerfully in his vaguely Noo Yawk accent. “You want the job or not? You guys ain’t exactly been flush lately—”

“Yeah, yeah.” I sighed. He was right. Me, I wasn’t quite wondering if I was going to have to start selling cyberware pieces to make rent, but—

“Don’t worry,” Frankie soothed. “It’ll be easy. In and out. But ya gotta make up yer mind now—the job’s tonight and if you don’t wanna meet with Johnson I gotta find somebody else.”

The two pair beckoned me, and the bozos were making noises across the table. I held up a placating hand and sighed again. I noticed I’d been sighing a lot these days. “Okay, Frankie, okay. Send me the details and give me half an hour to get everybody together.”

Frankie’s tusks rose in a grin as he signed off. I looked at the cards again. Surely I had time to finish out the hand. “Okay, see and raise fifty,” I said, tossing chips in the middle.

“Call,” said one of the yahoos. With a smile that showed three kinds of teeth—bad, tobacco-stained, and missing—he dropped a full house on the table.

It was going to be one of those nights.

I got to the bar twenty minutes early, automatically subscribing my PAN to the place’s net to get the layout, specials, and any messages that the team might have left for me—and to slip the bartender some cred and let him know we were meeting “Mr. Johnson” in the back room at eight. Nobody much used cash anymore—bribes were handled wirelessly, all neat and tidy. The place wasn’t quite a dive, despite the huddle of drooling chipheads I’d had to step over out front. Nowadays even some of the nice bars had their undesirables, at least until security got around to rounding them up. It smelled like beer, sweat, and just a hint of vomit.

I looked around. Locke was already there, slumped morosely into the corner of a booth near the back with what looked like a half-empty glass of whiskey in front of him. I sent an order for a beer to be delivered to the same place, then fought my way to the back and dropped onto the bench across from him. I decided not to mention the whiskey; Locke was an odd guy, all points and angles—and that was just his personality. We just wrote it off to the fact that he