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REVIEW
DARK CONSPIRACY™



It was a typical night at Arnold's Bar and Armory at seventh and Gatesville. Road Warriors mixed it up with the Corporate Warriors (known as 'Solos'), with the bar's own weapons provided free of charge, as long as the customer checked his own weapon in with the hat check girl up front. In one corner of the bar was a stage for the women to stuff money into the G-strings that the men wore. On the other side, naked women danced for the same reason—cash. The din coming out of the speakers was the latest by the cyberband 'Veribat'. Stardust trails flashed across the walls and ceiling from the lights shining on the old fashioned disco globes. Smoke drifted up to the ceiling from all the clients who still got a high from doing MaryJane.

Off to the side near the dancing stage with the women, Johnny Gibson, alias "Shotgun," sipped at a Bend-Me-Over as an olive-skinned dancer flashed him a smile and ground herself down to the stage floor, leaning over to where Shotgun watched. Closer and closer she moved until her ample chest was only centimeters from his face. A slender hand reached out to stroke Johnny along the right side of his face, near the computer input/output jacks embedded in his skull at the temple. These Cybernetic implants allowed the user to mentally interface with a computer system and to operate the software from "within." The girl slowly stood back up, turned around to present her posterior with the thin white strand of her G-string caught between the two creamy globes of flesh.

"Okay darling. Here's a five for that one." He slipped a green into her waistband, lingering over the feel of her soft skin.

As the dancer stood up to go to another part of the stage, Shotgun spied an old friend entering the bar, the one he'd been awaiting for over an hour now. Johnny moved away to intercept the stunning woman in black leather and fishnet body stockings. "Ace! Ace! Over here!" he yelled.

Along the way to meet his lady friend, Shotgun picked up snatches of conversations.

"The Japos are going to raise the prime rate over here again. Can you believe that?"

"...heard that there was an accident on the moon last week. A dome belonging to the Europeans and all in it were wiped out."

"Capetown is still holding up under the siege. Mitsu just delivered a freighter's worth of food past the blackies blockade..."

Ace had the most beautiful jade green eyes sparkling under auburn bangs, eyes that tracked him like the target sensors on a Blackcat stealth 'copter. Her breasts were neither too large, nor too small, but filled out her outfit perfectly enough to catch the eye of every man in the bar. She flashed a shark's grin. Once he was within range she said, "Johnny Shotgun Gibson you old fart. Still can't get any, I see."

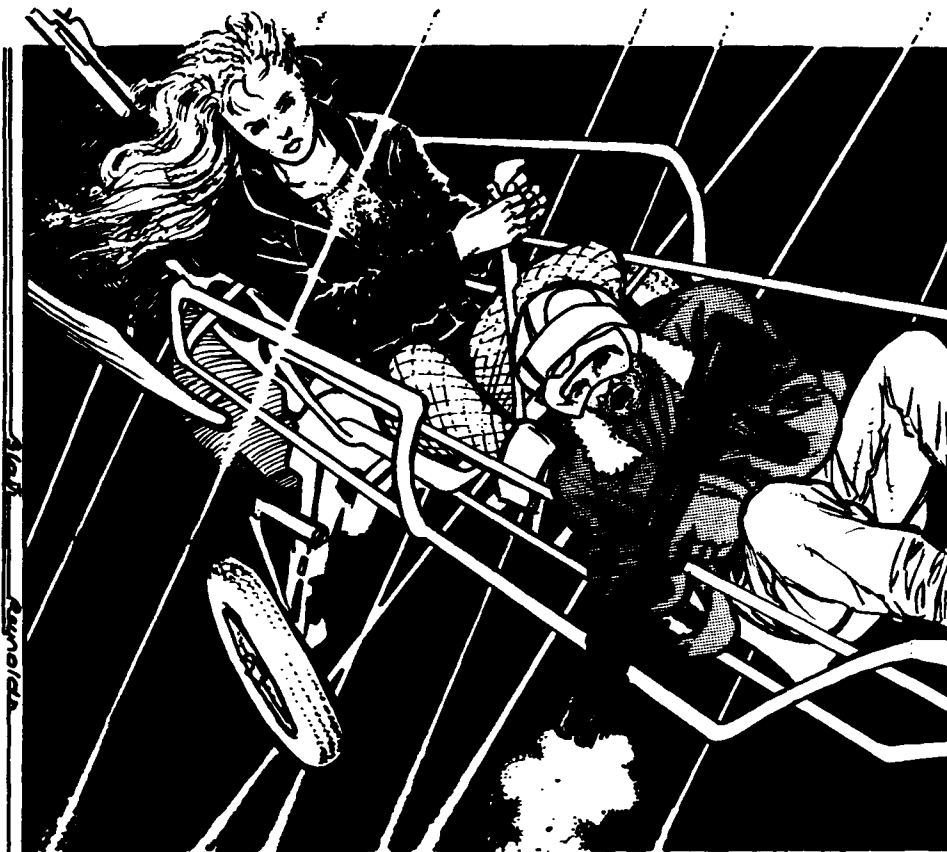
"Always with the negative vibes, sweetheart. You know you're the only wench for me. Come on over to my table and let's catch up."

"No. I want to see some real men."

"Ahhh. It's nice to know that you still care about me. Anyway, you were the one who arranged this meeting—and showed up late."

Shotgun watched as Ace hesitated for a moment before inserting her right arm through his left to be escorted back to his table. They were delayed by a knife fight, but eventually made it back to his table. Arnold's trauma team was there right away to clean up the mess.

Johnny looked his lady friend over. Shelly "Ace" Townsend wore a black fishnet bodystocking made out of kevlar fibers. More kevlar body



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D O N W. S H A N K S

armor was inside the leggy black leather body suit with a silver stud spike belt holding a pistol holster, a similar studded spike collar around her throat, and her feet were incased in the latest 'Gestapo' boots. A very sharp contrast to Gibson's faded bomber jacket, bluejeans, and dirty cowboy boots. "Shelly, Shelly, Shelly. Time has flown by for both of us."

"What did you expect after a divorce? You're a road warrior and a Netrunner. I'm a solo for Mitsu Inc. Do most of my work in the Pacific rim now days. You wanted to stay here in the ruins of America. The big bucks are to be had in Japan."

"Then why are you here asking for me? Sounds to me like Ace is the Superwoman of twenty ought thirty four."

"Dear ex-hubby of mine. I need your talents to get me to the ruins of a certain place not far from here. What's more, I'm authorized to pay double your normal rate. Sooo...you'll be gettin' fifty K instead of twenty-five." She looked her ex's face over very closely, waiting for his answer.

"OK, I want to hear more. Let's blow over to my digs to chat."

One good thing about living in the mountains of New Mexico in New Albuguergue was that one could still see the stars at night instead of the chemical fog that one got in the megacities such as Los Frisco or the megacomplex stretching

from Norfolk north to Boston, with police AV-2s (Tactical Urban Assault vehicles) and their ambulance cousins crisscrossing the night sky, lights flashing and sirens screaming to the city below.

Shotgun turned the wheel of his 2030 Ford Thunderbird-X into the apartment fortress compound that he lived at. The turbine powered by meta-alcohol and methane spun itself to rest and silence in his parking space. The remote-control missile and .30 caliber chain gun turret on the back deck remained facing forward as the gull-wing doors popped open and slid back along the midnight blue body. Shotgun waved hello to the night guard back towards the entry way, and escorted his lady friend into the apartment building. His trademark, an Atchison assault shotgun with a drum magazine in bullpup configuration, was at the ready in his right hand.

A quite natural smile appeared on Ace's face, to which Johnny was puzzled when he opened the main door for her. When asked about her sudden smile, she said, quoting the guard, "How does old Shotgun get all the good lookin' ones?"

"If only he knew the real truth about us. But, how did you—oh. Bionic ears, right? He's a good twenty-eight to thirty meters away."

She pointed to her left ear. "It's the latest in cyber-bionic ears." Ace kept her smile plastered on her face. It was one of those smiles women have saying, "I've got several more secrets and you're not going to get any (of them)."

Ace laid her hand along his three-day-growth-of-beard-covered cheek. "Still pretending to be a Texas cowboy, aren't we? Picked up any new John Wayne, or Indiana Jones cyber-programs?"

"Just get inside, willya."

Once safely cocooned in his apartment they got down to business. Inside the modest sized apartment, Shotgun noticed Ace checking out his video disk library near the flat screen TV. Slim fingers traced a pattern scanning over the titles. Most of the films were action/adventure in nature. The Star Wars and Indiana Jones trilogies. The original Batman TV series starring Adam West and the later Batman movies of the late 1980s and 1990s. Several John Wayne westerns and war movies mixed in with the 'Conan' type shows. She looked back at Shotgun. "And I'll bet that your cyber-programs match all of these titles." Shotgun decided not to respond.

Ace took out a small device and swept the room for bugs and other masty electronic vermin. Once done, she replaced it back into her leather jacket and sat down at the computer desk. She slipped a datachip disk out of one of her other pockets and used the mouse to bring the information up on screen.

"Mitsu has contracted with me to do a Bag Job. And to be sure that it's a sanitized job. It will require you to perform a technical penetration and locate a certain laser disc full of neat junk just waiting for us in downtown Dallas."

Johnny grabbed the back of her chair and whirled her around to face him. "Go into that radioactive pit?! Damn! No wonder you haven't found anybody yet to take you there. I'm not going either. Get out of here!" He grabbed for her arms, but she performed a neat little martial arts twist that sent Gibson flying in a ballistic arc over the sofa into the coffee table, shattering its glass top.

"Dear," she went on, "let me finish. There is something else that we have to do there. In order to retrieve this disc out of the vault like I told you before your outburst, I need a Netrunner to enter the mainframe in the Williams building—that's where we are going—and discover its location. It's hidden in the data files there."

"No way in Hell! That place is still going to be hot for another month. Those terrorists did a real bang-up job with that extra dirty neutron bomb at Love Field. And all the smaller ones along the loop. Plus, the Texas Guard is keeping everybody out. It's tighter than a ten year old virgin."

"You mean to tell me that you actually found a virgin that old over here?" she demurely asked.

"You know what I mean, dammit. This can't be legal, either."

"Ha ha ha. Legal? What is legal in the states now? The USA is no more. It's just a collection of citystates, totally dependent on imports for food, energy, raw materials. The Corporates see to that. The lifestyles that our grandparents lived are nothing more than faery tales we tell to children."

"At least I didn't just give up to go and live in Japan. I hear that they are going back to their old samurai ways and other quaint old customs."

"It's a better lifestyle for me than it was for you. I get to travel the world doing my job. Sometimes, I even go up to the European space stations or even the moon. Look at you. The people in this berg are deluding themselves about bringing back the old America. It's gone the way of the pharaohs. The Drug War, the Second Mexican War, the Fifth Terrorist War finally did in our dear old country. Not to mention the plague years that took out over a quarter of the planet's population.

On top of the deaths still being recorded as dying from AIDS—Two. And need I tell you about the pollution over here on this side of the globe?"

Shotgun climbed out of his coffee table and went face to face with his ex-wife. "Asia, my dear wife, still produces more toxic fumes than Los Frisco did ten years ago. You are beginning to believe in our own bullshit press."

"John," Ace whispered, "this is a way to pay off New Detroit for that fancy car of yours you had them build."

"Wrong, Ace. The Blue Machine is all paid for after I did that run into Utah for them. In fact, I receive royalty checks from Ford since they've started to market the Thunderbird-X. Especially when someone orders the weapons package and four wheel drive options like I have on the prototype out there. You see, Ace, Mitsu didn't get all the information it wanted about me and my affairs like you believed they did."

Johnny went into the kitchen and came back with two cans of beer and handed one to Ace. They drank in silence for several minutes. Ace ejected her disk and turned the computer off. Standing, she embraced Johnny. "I know something else about this mission that will make even you beg me to allow you to come along. That same computer mainframe is hooked up to Central Bank and Trust. Mitsu has one third interest in it and will allow you to transfer their funds into your account."

Johnny's steel grey eyes bored into Ace's green eyes. "What is on this disk that Mitsu is willing to go to war with the nation of Texas over?"

Kissing him on his stubby cheek, "Ours is not to reason why."

"But to do or die is how that line ends, Ace. Even having sex with you again is not going to be enough for this job. We'll be driving into punk road warrior territory on the other side of Clovis. Have to jog down to Lubbock to restock our fuel and ammo. And then there's the three hundred mile stretch between Lubbock and Fort Worth where farmers battle it out between the punks and the druggies."

She undid his red and white plaid western shirt and rubbed her hands over his hairy chest. He responded by helping her out of her jacket and unzipping her bodysuit, noticing several scars that were not on her person the last time they made love. To his trained eye, Shelly's left arm was now bionic. The newer bionic limbs on the market today can totally fool anyone. Another surprise was the fact that he could feel the inserted body armor beneath the epidermis. To which he remarked, "That's one way to keep your figure."

There was no need for a response. Shotgun picked his ex up in his arms and carried her into the bedroom. Their bodies were now on automatic, but their thoughts were on the journey to come.

* * * * *

It was a typical mid-morning, mid-August Texas day. Not a cloud in the clear blue sky above. The fields to either side of the four lane divided highway were full of cotton and wheat stubble. Here and there, the burnt-out shell of a truck or car rested on its rusting metal rims.

From over the slight rise in the terrain raced Shotgun and his Thunderbird-X, trading machinegun fire with an old model Dodge pickup and twenty or so punk riders. A few bullets skipped off the armored right side of the car. The wind whipped the multi-color hairdos of the bikers around their faces as another burst was

fired off.

Ace manned the manual controls to the weapons package from the righthand seat. Johnny was plugged into the car's computer. In his mind, fuel flow figures, engine temperatures, tire pressures, current weight of the car, conditions of the road surface, and hundreds of other factors received his constant attention with each millisecond of time passing in the 'real' world. Digital readouts also flashed onto the tinted visor of his blue and white helmet.

"Okay, Ace. I've only got two more LAWS in the launcher. Can't let you play with these guys anymore than you already have."

"Shut it up. I'm aiming."

Another LAWS rocket screamed out of the launcher to impact against the front end of the last punk rocker's pickup truck making the vehicle flip end over end to block the roadway. One of the bikers couldn't turn out of the way quickly enough and he flipped end over end as well. The others decided to let the blue Thunderbird-X pass on by. Easier pickings were to be had elsewhere.

Ace raised her helmet visor and flashed Shotgun a victory grin.

Johnny kept the speedometer at a moderate 95 mph pace until the last smoking wreck was about three miles behind. He pulled off to the side of the road and stopped, double checking the radar readouts. No targets closing in on them from behind. He disconnected the two wires from the overhead console panel and flipped up the tinted, electronic visor to his helmet. "What do you think about this car now?"

Ace returned his gaze. "Fancy. But it's real easy to use up a lot of ammo."

"That's why I usually control weapons fire while I'm in the computer. It's been awhile since I went punk hunting. Feels good. We'll stop in Lubbock and get a refill and reload as we planned." He reinserted the wire jacks that exited his helmet at the right temple into the overhead console and accelerated back onto the roadway, twin plumes of dust rising from behind the rear tires.

The trip into and out of the fortress city of Lubbock created no problems. Shotgun decided not to stay on U.S. 84 to Roscoe and join up with Interstate 20 there to go into Abilene and on into Fort Worth. Because it was a heavy traffic road, all weapons-equipped motor vehicles were required to have their weapons "peace sealed," meaning sticking red flags on all visible weapons and putting a lock on the inside arming switch. Gibson decided on U.S. 82 as if he were going to go to Wichita Falls. It would be at Seymour that he would take State 114 to Jacksboro and join up with State 199 into northwestern Fort Worth.

The drive through the South Plains counties east of Lubbock went without any troubles what so ever. Things started happening in Seymour. First they had to evade a Texas Guard Tank Company battling a combined arms punk army the size of which neither Ace nor Shotgun had ever seen or heard about before. It was early evening by then and the town of Seymour lit up the sky with tracer rounds. Backtracking and detouring took the couple down to Haskell and onto U.S. 380, two hours behind schedule. Eventually, the Thunderbird-X arrived in Jacksboro, Texas, where they tried to make up the lost time.

Outside of Azle, Ace motioned Johnny to take a farm market road to the north which he did. Six miles later, she directed him to park near a burned out farm not far from Eagle Mountain Lake. The digital clock in the dashboard was flashing 9:57

PM. Shotgun checked his motion detection sensors and viewed the outside world in the infra-red. No humans or any other animals were in the area.

"So, what's the plan? Why are we sitting here in the shadow of a metal tool shed?" he inquired.

Ace turned to look at Shotgun. "First, we get to stretch our legs. Second, you help me unload the ultralight gyrocopter from the backseat. Third, we fly into Dallas below radar. Simple, really."

Shaking his head in disbelief, "Why did I even bother to ask? Okay. Let's do it."

"You know, Shotgun," Ace said as she climbed out of the righthand car window, "with the Guard fighting back in Seymour, it just might be easier to sneak into Dallas."

"Ahhh! That feels good," he said, stretching his arms up above his head. "Maybe. But don't bet on it. And by the way, how are we going to see our way into Dallas flying a little ultralight?"

"Because, dear, I have the map stored on a brain chip. You and I both know how to fly this thing using the low light intensifiers included in our helmets. But my chip has the latest information on where the radar sites are, the condition of downtown, location of patrols and anti-aircraft batteries. And lots of other neat stuff."

"'Neat stuff' she says. I didn't feel any armor plating in your butt the other night. And I sure as hell don't have any in mine."

"Don't worry. I'll keep us away from the patrols."

"'Don't worry, she said. I'll keep us away from the patrols.' You're not doing so well at that, are you?" Shotgun yelled into his mic as he fired off a drum of solid shot down towards the ground and behind the little red fiberglass gyrocopter. Target information was being flashed onto the inner visor of his helmet from the minicomputer hooked up with his shotgun. It helped him keep track of the type of ammunition and number of rounds remaining in the drum.

"Oh will you stop complaining. I'm trying to drive, can't you see!" Ace screamed.

A hundred feet below on Interstate 30 where Fort Worth and Arlington joined, a Texas Guard Hummer drove along at breakneck speed; the squad of troopers in back fired off their Stemmeyer M-95A2 5.56mm NATO caseless assault rifles using depleted uranium rounds. Buzzsaws screamed by Ace's and Shotgun's ears in the semi-enclosed cockpit of the gyrocopter. And more important, not one bullet had yet hit their tiny craft.

Turning around in his seat to reload and to look at his ex-wife, Shotgun said, "Damn! Sure would like to get my own Stemmeyer once we get back to New Albuquerque."

"Know what you mean. Looks like we'll have to divert down to Duncanville, then swing back up into central Dallas."

"No way. You'll be flying over the old Naval Air Station at Mountain Creek Lake. Turn back to the north now and follow the Trinity River and head for Love Field."

"Thought you didn't want to go there?"

"I said 'head for Love Field,' not 'fly over.' Once we are within the boundary of Loop 12, turn back towards I-30."

"Actually, the Williams building is near the Market Center. If we made like we really wanted to go to Love Field, that could buy us some extra time now since we have been discovered."

More buzzsaws flashed by the little gyrocop-

ter. "Do whatever you want, Ace. Just do it!" Johnny fired off some more rounds.

While assembling the gyrocopter, Ace had told Johnny that they would have to land on the roof of the Williams building and then make their way down to the computer room. Thankfully, the Williams building was only twenty-five stories tall, one of the little ones built in the last century. Landing was no problem after the couple ditched their tail just inside the loop. It was unnerving to fly between darkened office buildings in that dead city. Several tall columns of fire with black oily smoke climbing up into the night sky stood as grave markers for the thousands who died in the attack. If it wasn't for the nose filters both of them wore, they would not have been able to get this far into Dallas. Ace glided the little red machine within scant inches of one of the air-conditioning modules. Take-off would require the use of the little rocket booster nestled underneath the main landing gear brace near where the tail boom joined the main body.

Shotgun finished staking the tie downs into the roof while Ace checked her sensors. No heat sources that could be human bodies were anywhere near the building. On the outside, that is.

Entering the building required Ace to punch a code number into the inspection hatchway. Twenty minutes later, the two interlopers were inside the Williams building's main computer room. The clean up crews had yet to go through floor by floor of this building. Johnny carefully removed what once was a woman from behind a desk and laid her out on the floor. Then he seated himself before a standard interface terminal and withdrew a small package from his jacket pocket; a couple' plug in jacks and an interface modem with personal datachip disk to store new information on.

"Shotgun, I'm going on down to the main floor to check out the security office. Be back in ten."

"OK, Ace. I'll track you through the monitors when you get down there."

Once Shotgun was all set, he patched "IN." His mind filled with images of grey-white static in a whirlpool as his "computer program of himself" dropped "On Line."

Johnny Gibson was now in Michael Keaton's version of **Batman**. All around him was the 1989 movie version of Gotham City. This was just one version of the 'Comic Series' of interface programs out on the market. He had a copy of the Adam West **Batman** program, but it crashed in Utah. The "Batcave" was really a data wall of layered static that "reflected" any trace program from finding the "entry way" that the Netrunner used to enter the computer system. Shotgun was using a Level Six protection program, the next to the best available on the market.

The roads in this city were really the electrical lines of the system. Computer workstations, disk storage units, other modems were "buildings." Computer "defense" systems were brick walls that accepted only coded messages to allow the user to go any further. And there was a large one right in front of him. **Batman** (Shotgun) withdrew a hammer from his utility belt and aimed at the first wall in front of him. In appearance, it looked like a 20 pound sledgehammer. With a mighty swing, the first wall came crashing down. **Batman** was well aware that using a program would alert any nearby defense programs. On the other side of

the wall was a medium size, shaggy black dog with a spike collar. A Level Three Alarm program. It leaped toward the intruder, teeth bared. Another item appeared in **Batman's** hand from the utility belt. It was, of course, a twin-barreled shotgun, which he fired. This caused the Watchdog program to crash and disappear.

Batman called up the **Batmobile** and it appeared by his right side. He climbed in and off the computer car went. Inside the twin seat cockpit, **Batman** activated his 'stealth' program. Driving down the city street, the **Batmobile** raced past many low level security programs that had activated since the intrusion into the system one quarter of a second ago in the "outside real time."

He stopped before the police station and climbed out. Everything was still going A-okay. Using a Level Four Codecracker, **Batman** gained entry into the Williams building security office and swaggered over to the "TV Monitor" room. Playing with the controls there, he finally sighted Ace just exiting the elevator on the ground floor, checking the corners for any possible ambush. Opening up the TV console in the computer generated police station, **Batman** inserted a little program to relay Ace's image directly back to the **Batmobile** (or a little Sony TV-Watchman program that was located inside his utility belt main program).

That done, he went over to the "Dispatcher" room to get a copy of this system's map of the city. He had to stop outside of the room. The Joker stood waiting for him. The Joker was actually a cover for what was called in Netrunner terminology a "Demon." A program similar in function to his utility belt program except that a Demon carried programs to track down and either eject a Netrunner or kill one outright, and everything possible in between. **Batman** activated his "Invisibility" program and brought out his shotgun again. The belt also provided a special, one-shot bullet designed for such cases as this one. It was a "Worm Bullet," a short program to drill into a Demon and kill it.

With a roaring laugh, the Joker turned and attacked. **Batman's** invisibility program mustn't have been powerful enough to prevent the Joker from seeing through.

"You can't hide from me now. Ha ha ha!!!" cried the Joker, still laughing.

A shotgun blast of fire, and the Demon crashed to the floor and vanished with one last taunt. "You're supposed to be the good guy! You shouldn't have killed me!" Quickly, **Batman** entered the room and took a picture with a small camera that transmitted the image back to the **Batmobile**.

It was now time to go over to "City Hall" which was in reality the Central Data Processor. There, inside the massive structure, **Batman** met the mayor.

"So, you are **Batman**? You've made it this far and subverted my defense programs. What information do you request?" spoke the mayor.

In other programs like the **Dungeon**, the mayor would be either a king or a mighty wizard.

"Thank you, Mr. Mayor. I have been informed that the Data Disk Fire Arrow Able Seven is stored within the Williams storage vault. I require access to same."

The mayor accessed the requested information, which took a long time in the Netverse (Net universe). Eventually, the mayor answered, "I do have that file listed in my records, **Batman**. But, there is a flag on it—directed to you, Johnny Shotgun Gibson."

"What?! To me directly? How?"

"It's signed 'Corsair.' It also has the seal of the United States encoded."

"Let me see the flag."

Before his eyes, a red flag materialized next to the mayor with a post-it note tacked on. It read:

SHOTGUN—I KNEW THAT ACE WAS GOING TO GET YOU FOR THIS RUN. MITSU HAS DEVELOPED A BIOLOGICAL WARFARE AGENT THAT DIRECTLY ATTACKS A PERSON'S DNA CODE. THIS PARTICULAR AGENT IS CODED TO ATTACK NON-ASIANS. HOW DO I KNOW THIS? I WAS ON THE TEAM THAT THE GOVERNMENT SENT IN TO DESTROY THE LAB. THE GUARDS CAUGHT VEGAS—REMEMBER HER? I TAPPED INTO THE NET AND WITNESSED THEM PLACING HER IN A TEST CHAMBER. IT WASN'T PRETTY. IT WAS LIKE HER SKIN ERUPTED IN SORES. IT TOOK A WHILE FOR HER TO DIE.

DON'T LET ACE GET THIS DISK. SHE'S BEEN MINDWIPE AND REPROGRAMMED! SHE'S THE PERSONAL SNATCH OF SHO FUJITA, CHIEF CNO OF MITSU. A REAL BANZAI TYPE DREAMING OF EMPIRE. THE JAPS CONQUERED US ECONOMICALLY IN THE LAST CENTURY. HE WANTS TO FINISH THE JOB MILITARILY NOW. I KNOW YOU. THERE IS A FALSE FILE MISSING THE REQUIRED PROGRAMMING LINE FOR THE DNA CODE. GIVE THIS FALSE PROGRAM TO ACE.—CORSAIR

Shotgun removed the Batman cowl and looked at the mayor. "When was the message attached?"

"Two hours, thirty-four minutes, twenty-six seconds before the Love Field bomb exploded. Corsair was in the Williams building keying this information in and was scheduled to leave Love Field at approximately the same time that the explosion took place."

Johnny thought back to a time several years ago when he and Corsair would enter Drug Lord computer nets while they were in the army together. After a Net raid, the assault squads would be air-lifted into the target zone for a rebut.

"Is there a separate file dealing with Fujita here? One that I can download as well as the fake program?"

Shotgun was waiting, his namesake resting in his lap as Ace re-entered the computer room.

"Did you get it?" was all she asked. Her Mini-Uzi was not pointed all that far off line from her ex-husband.

"Sure. I'm ready to blow out of here," he said, standing up. "Let's head back up to the roof." He gestured to Ace to lead the way.

The journey back to the farm where Shotgun's Thunderbird-X was waiting had a few close calls. A Texas Guard air patrol almost spotted them firing the little booster on the gyrocopter while leaving the Williams building. And then another patrol forced them to almost invade the area containing the Meacham Field Municipal Airport in northwestern Fort Worth. Eventually, they landed at about four in the morning.

"Ah, hell. Now we have to tear this sucker down," Shotgun tiredly said, referring to the gyrocopter. He walked over to his car and input his security code into the door handle keypad. Ace, he noticed, was still standing by the gyrocopter, her Uzi submachinegun pointed at him in no uncertain terms this time.

"I knew that this was going to happen, Ace. Yessir, I sure did," he said, shaking his head sadly.

He tossed his interface modem with the disk still inside it, into the front seat. "Tell me before you try to off me; how are you enjoying Japanese society? Especially the one envisioned by Fujita-san?"

"Amazing, a question from you that I don't understand. Will wonders never cease?"

Shotgun kept his ex-wife in sight while double checking that the drum to his Atchison was firmly seated. He already knew what loads were in it. Solid shot that he had switched back in the computer room while waiting for Ace. "Tell me, Shelly, who were you contacting down in the lobby? The Net there didn't have a radio tracking system I could plug into. Was it your lord and master? Via shortwave satellite uplink maybe?"

"You're doing quite well on your own. Just go on with this little drama you're setting up. Otherwise, give me the damn disk and I might be forgiven for letting you live out of this deal. And don't shift that shotgun in my direction anymore."

"You have heard, lady. I'm guessing that you already know that this disk contains information about a germ warfare agent that affects all non-Asians. And that there must be an antidote that Fujita-san has promised you for when it comes time to unleash it on the world. You see, I came across this very interesting file about your current main man. It was fun reading. A powerful corporate executive getting into politics now. But he has this dream of a new Japanese Empire. Reading his file made me think about all those fictional stories of little tin plate South American dictators who sheltered the Nazis after Dub'lyoo Dub'lyoo Two. The long awaited, and hoped for rise of the Fourth Reich. But—from Japan?"

"Just how do you fit into his plans for the future, Shelly? He picked you up on the white slave market or what? Was that how you got your mind wiped? Or was that after you joined his organization?"

"Oh shut up! Nosy little bastard, aren't you? I was on a job that indeed dealt with white slavery. But my cover was blown before I could get away. It just so happened that Fujita was in the market for a concubine. He made me an offer I just could not refuse. A concubine/solo. I go around with him doing my regular work and then afterwards, let him have sex with me."

"Don't tell me you've developed the Alpha Male complex? Being attracted to the most powerful male that is around at the moment?"

"I can understand you thinking that way. Now, remove that chip from your interface modem. Leave it on the roof and back away from the car. And leave your shotgun on the roof as well."

"No way. A woman who can blow away an entire lunar dome isn't going to get access to this vehicle."

Before she could put a mask on her emotions, Johnny caught a quite genuine look of surprise cross her face. "How—how could you possibly link me to doing something like that?" she asked.

"Just be speaking up—either way, you confirmed that you are the one responsible for the job. While in the Net, as no doubt you are becoming quite aware of now, I happened to come across some very good information about your boss and his business. I've told you about his plans. And both of us know that he now has the power base to take control of Japan. But this germ warfare project leaked out and the other nations of the world have managed to steal the formula and are conducting research on it up on the moon—or they were before you put a damper on things. To prevent the ESA member nations and the United States from stopping him, Fujita sent you up

there to destroy their biolabs. Amazing that Mitsu also had a joint development lab located within that very same dome. Am I on track so far?"

Ace's only answer was to pull the trigger on her submachinegun. Shotgun ducked behind the fender of his car barely in time, his Atchison ready. After counting to three, he popped up and let loose with two rounds. Ace wasn't waiting around to be a target. She had disappeared into the tall brush and weeds between the shed and the ruins of the farmhouse.

Another hail of bullets showered him in sparks from the armor body of his car. The fire was coming from the tree line going down to the lake. He mumbled to himself, "Damn. She also has bionic legs." He got down on his belly and crawled over to the shed, thinking along the way about what Shelly had turned into. Persons who had too many bionic and cybernetic implants began to suffer from cyberpsychosis. They began to lose empathy with Humanity.

Shotgun was without his helmet now. He couldn't use the infra-red tracking without it. He finally reached the side of the shed and leaned back up against it, scanning from left to right. Nothing. "Where is she now?" he subvocalized.

A sudden bang and sheet metal siding gave way to a feminine arm punching through and trying to grab him around the neck. A quick combat roll and he was up and firing. A scream of rage sounded from the other side of the wall. The arm, flesh ripped and bleeding from punching through the wall, now showed the chrome metal underneath. Another crash and bang rent the wall and Shelly "Ace" Townsend sprang through the jagged gap in the shed.

Johnny knew that he couldn't penetrate her chest armor, so he fired at her head to stop her charge. Even decapitating her with a shotgun blast did not halt her charge, which knocked the wind completely out of him. What used to be a woman, his wife, and lover, turned into a cyberkiller by one Sho Fujita, was dead.

And one day, Johnny thought, he will be dead by my own hand.

He laid out the bleeding body till way past dawn. Tears rolled down his face. There wasn't much blood sweeping from her body. Only her head and torso were original parts. All the rest was bionics and body armor covered with living flesh. Johnny Gibson decided that he didn't want to know when Shelly had gone over the cyberpsychosis edge.

Under the front seat was an entrenching tool that he used to dig her grave. Enough boards were around to make a cross. While digging, he thought about the good times the two of them had when they first married. Plans for the future that never came about. About living in the future space colonies that were just starting to be built. Of raising a family out there. Away from the cesspool that the Earth was becoming. How world events robbed them of their dreams.

Once the task was done, Johnny stared out towards the western horizon, seeing beyond to a place where one Sho Fujita planned to rule someday. And of planning a very different future for that not so honorable gentleman.

One year later (translated from Osaka News-paper obituary column)—

"The Honorable Sho Fujita, chairman of Mitsu, Inc., was found yesterday evening at home... He was discovered by a household guard in his study where Fujita was relaxing with a cyberdeck... Death has been ruled as an accident..." ■