

Interview

by

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Secret handshake, indeed.

I was on my way to PlattePort in one of those annoying robot groundcabs. You know, the kind that insists on actually checking your prints before processing the fare. I hate those old heaps. It'd be nice if this sleepy burg could afford something from this end of the 23rd century.

Usually, joblead bots follow routine and set up whatever conferences might be needed, but this one took the gothic route: it sent me a letter, actual pen on paper. I admit I was intrigued, but also a bit paranoid that the place was so out of touch that they didn't know how to use tech. Turned out they wanted me to come to the capital in person. Not the Lake Platte regional capital, the world capital: NullArbor. If it was Platte City, I'd be willing to spring for the ride, but Australia's a bit pricier. So when the letter said there was a ticket on a suborbital waiting for me, I knew I had to take the trip. All the retro hype about the upcoming 500th anniversary of the old US was really wearing me down, and being far away was the best thing I'd heard in weeks.

PlattePort was its usual orderly self. Concealed gear IDs you at the door, and your travel plans are confirmed before you've gone two steps. Retinal projection units show you where to go if you glance in their direction, and courtesy audio reminders whisper in your ear if you're too busy or unable to use the vid. In short, comfortably convenient.

I hadn't been on a suborbital before. Most of the travel I'd done was intracontinental, so levitrain was my usual ride. I can't imagine what it must have been like before they tore up the rails and finally ditched all that 19th century crap. It was just so dangerous. They wrung that last bit of life out of twinrail in a deathmarch race to see

how fast they could go using friction, at least until the magnitude of the disasters forced the issue. People wanted safety, of course, and they weren't getting it.

Anyway, that was my first glimpse of space. Most passengers were busy with one thing or another, so they didn't take the time to stick their eyes out of the atmosphere for a few minutes. And as amazing as it was, by the return trip it seemed tame.

The mystery treatment continued on the far end of that flight, so I just played along. Instead of seeing directions to the transport area when I glanced at the RP target, I was showed a different route through the complex. The vehicle waiting for me was no cab. It also had a much more interesting array of security features, and those were just the ones I recognized. The nondescript office block it left me inside of turned out to be pretty interesting, but not as interesting as the job offer.

I was getting weary of all the covert cloak and dagger, and really wanted to start dealing with people again. Isolation is only comforting up to a point. Fortunately, there was someone waiting.

"Mr. Mantee," he said, offering a hand. "I'm Ernie Vacca. Welcome to NullArbor City. I trust you are ready for some answers by now."

I guessed the guy to be about 40, so he had about 15 years on me. We went into an odd sort of conference room. It felt secure in a way that I couldn't place. I waited for his next move.

He offered me a seat and a drink, and then sat down across from me. After a bit, he said, "Have you ever wondered how the GD keeps the peace?"

"Now wait a minute," I protested. "I didn't come all this way to join the Global Directorate's police force, or any other kind of military—."

He'd been holding a little silver gizmo in his right hand. When I got that far he pressed it with his thumb. Suddenly I didn't feel the heat of confrontation any more.

"What the hell is that?" I asked.

"I don't work for the military," he said. "We asked you here because you have a keen eye for strategy and patterns. You've used it to good effect on the ball field, and your record says you are also are an excellent facilitator. In other words, you are good at helping other people to get what they want, mostly without them noticing it."

He placed the gizmo on the table, and slid it across to me. It had rounded corners and an emblem etched on its face, a sort of sunrise on a stick.

"This," he said, "is called a synergizer. That's how we do it."

"Who's 'we'?" I asked in puzzlement. "And that's how you do what?"

"It's how the TPC keeps the peace. You may have heard of us."

I was pretty sure I was not only in over my head, but in water I didn't want to be in to begin with. "Wait a minute, Mr. Vacca. You asked me here to join a super-secret government public relations company? What are you talking about?"

Vacca chuckled. "That's just what we tell people. You could interpret what we do as public relations, because we adjust people's perceptions about the world. It's just that we do it for real. And we do it with the tech in that synergizer."

"I think you'd better show me."

He raised an eyebrow. "I just did. Don't you remember getting angry about the prospect of working for the military?"

That was odd. "Yeah," I said. "But then..."

He nodded. "It just faded."

I looked at him, then at the gizmo again. When I started to reach for it, he grabbed it and held it between his fingers, with the emblem facing me.

“The TPC logo really says it all, if you know how to read it.” He traced the vertical line coming up from the bottom. “What we do is poke our head out of the situation and look around, look at the possible ways that some event could turn out, and pick one.”

“Like...?” I fished.

“Like your initial reaction to my offer.”

“My — ?”

Vacca nodded. “I engaged the synergizer when we sat down. It generated a field around me that let me see the flow of events around you. I saw the fight you were about to start, and nudged you in another direction. Pretty simple, really.”

I stared at the thing for a moment. “Prove it.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

Vacca pulled out a pair of dice. “Random chance, right?”

“Unless they’re loaded,” I said.

“Or unless you have one of these. Go ahead, roll them.”

The dice appeared to be normal. I rolled several times, and got a variety of results. Then he pressed his thumb to the thing and started to cue me when to toss. I got snake eyes every time.

“So,” I ventured, “how do I get one of those things?”

“Simple. Join the TPC.”

Needless to say, I took the job.

The End