

A Night to Remember

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Grampa Doc chomped hard on the cigar as he emptied the flask over his stab wound. He would've loved to take a mind-numbing swig or three, but he needed to clean the gash, especially here in the sewer. He rummaged in his pack for a container of bandage. Foam sputtered out of the almost-depleted can; the last of the liquid skin dribbled across his arm, sealing the cut.

He shook off the pain of his predicament—and his life—and mentally retraced his steps that evening. While heading home from his Trauma Team shift, a booster ganger had jumped him. The kid looked like the local gang, an urban flash with neon tattoos covering most of his exposed skin. He appeared out of nowhere, moving faster than any human due to cybernetics implants, randomly shouting, “You ain’t meetin’ wit’ him tonight, gramps!” as he stabbed at Grampa Doc.

The two tussled near an abandoned jewelry store, rolling in broken glass glittering like diamonds. The booster cut Doc’s arm with his crystal-edged knife. Mono-blades were rare in this neck of the woods; there was more to this attack than a simple mugging.

The wound only angered Grampa Doc. As he counter-attacked, both crashed through a rusty service hatch into the sewers. They landed, stunned, on the concrete, the sluggish sewage barely softening their fall. Grampa Doc’s military training kicked in. He was on his feet, dripping foulness, before his cybered-up assailant even opened his eyes. Doc pulled his piece, worried about the dunking it had taken. But the trigger worked smoothly, sending the .357 slug into the ganger’s augmented skull. Threat eliminated.

What had the street trash meant by “not meeting with him tonight”? Doc searched for a way out of the subterranean maze, turning over the warning in the back of his mind. The rotten scaffolding leading up to the street had fallen to pieces. There must be another egress from this cesspool. He peered down the tunnels that carried the effleurage through the city toward the bay. *Always go downriver*, his old sarge said during basic training.

What meeting was someone trying to stop? Which enemy was taking a shot at him? You don’t get to Doc’s age without making a few. The streets of Night City have long memories. As he headed downriver, obeying the memory of his sarge, he waded through knee-deep foulness. He had joined the army in his youth and then spent years as a lead bioware researcher at a corp before it all went horribly wrong, spiraling down to this moment when someone was trying to kill him in a sewer. He wasn’t sure it could get any worse.

Ahead, something emerged from the brackish water. A polka-dotted blue balloon. An innocent child’s toy, swaying. Swelling. About to pop.

Doc barely thought. He dove away from the enlarging balloon, spitting out the cigar and sucking in a lungful of rancid air before going under, hearing the *pop* of the balloon just as sewage infiltrated his ears.

Don’t breathe! He crawled through the muck, away from the poisonous gas filling up the tunnel, intended to kill whoever set off the trap. These booby traps were the specialty of an infamous Night City

gang, the work of the malicious, cyber-augmented psycho clowns known as the Bozos. The threat level of the sewers had just dramatically increased, and the survival rate of escaping was exponentially decreasing. He had worried that it couldn't get any worse. Be careful what you wish for.

Doc crawled along the slimy concrete, ungodly things brushing against him as he pushed himself further away from the gas trap. His lungs burned as he spent what little oxygen was in them. Finally, unable to continue without falling unconscious, Doc stood and sucked in fetid air. He turned to see the poison azure gas cloud dissipating as laughter echoed around him.

"Fuck me and all the neon gods!" he cursed through gritted teeth. He had to get out of there and figure out who was trying to ice him. He craved a shower and a good bottle of synth whiskey and he didn't care what in what order those things arrived. Before the memories came back too clearly, he had to drown his thoughts.

Doc moved back toward the depleted gas balloon. The colorful balloon should have been clutched in a child's hand in the sunlight, not used as a weapon in this foulness. He tamped down thoughts of lost children and their toys as he passed the deflated blue envelope.

The tunnel's darkness wasn't an obstacle for his cyber optics. He continued wading through the foul maze, alert for anything that could elevate him from this stinking hellhole. And there it was: rusted, filth-encrusted iron rungs straight up to a manhole. Soon he would be back at his pad, scrubbing the dirt and stench from his body, and drinking some decent synth whiskey.

The liquid squirt on the back of his jacket tinkled like a dog peeing on a tree. Doc whipped around as he removed the garment. He knew the Bozos' MO. Whatever these evil clowns shot, squirted, or threw would not be good. Acidic smoke rose from the melting jacket's Trauma Team logo as it floated on the lumpy sludge.

A Bozo, painted with full clown makeup, wearing a filthy crazy-quilt outfit, giggled uncontrollably as he tossed the depleted gag flower from his lapel, probably the acid-spraying device. Now in survival mode, Doc pulled his revolver and shot twice before the Bozo could react to the weapon. Both rounds landed center mass. The Bozo fell into the sewage like a broken doll.

Doc didn't wait to find out how close his grouping was. He jumped to grab the lowest rung and climbed to reach the street, his heart working overtime. Doc muttered a thanks to the ripper who replaced the organ back in '31.

He used all his force to push the manhole cover clear. Sewage dripped from his hands and arms onto his face. More laughter advanced through the tunnels below as Doc rolled out onto the busy street. Cars blared their horns as he emerged. All avoided hitting him thanks to pseudo-AI controlling the vehicles. He took several rasping breaths, leaning on his hands and knees before getting up and sprinting. He hoped the clowns didn't follow him.

Doc, dripping foulness, rounded the corner near his apartment building. Sighing in relief, he opened the door to Crazy Jane's Bodega to purchase synth whiskey and some dinner.

"What the hell did you get into, Gramps?" Abera, the clerk, exclaimed, holding his nose and waving his other hand. The other patrons of the small store made similar remarks and gestures as they passed Doc during their hasty exit.

Doc pulled a bottle and some prepack food from the shelves. "Abe, it's been a hell of a night. Just the whiskey and the scop. Keep the change."

Abera pulled a Shower-in-a-Can off a shelf and tossed it at Doc. "On the house, if you use it immediately."

Doc grinned back and headed toward the apartment building. He stopped. The windows to his flat glowed with neon light.

Could the day get any worse? He remembered what the gonk had said. *You ain't meeting with him tonight.* But who was he supposed to be meeting with? Doc raced through all the enemies he knew, especially the ones who would want him dead. One rose to the top: his lover Marianne's husband, who had already ruined him once, using his corporate clout to simultaneously squash Doc's corporate career and break his heart. "Fuck me."

One of the local dorphers had curled up in a nearby alley. Doc squatted next to him. "Skitter, wake up!" He slapped the druggy across the face.

"What? Eww, what's that smell?" The dorpher winced. "Gramps, you stink!" Skitter Boy wiped his eyes.

"Yeah, I know. Listen, you seen any gaijin walking the beat?" Doc shook the Shower-in-a-Can, activating it.

"Today. Hmph." Skitter rubbed his nose with his sleeve and snorted. "Maybe, I think. I dunno."

Doc exhaled. "Here." He handed Skitter Boy the scop he had just bought and some pills from his pocket.

Skitter Boy's eyes focused on the handout and he smiled. Little did the dorpher know the pills were just over-the-counter ulcer medicine. "Yeah, some suits been about. Dunno what they want or why they're slumming. Maybe they want some of that dank stuff from the street, you know?" He tossed back the pills, then ripped open the scop and started devouring its highly processed contents.

"Thanks." Doc grabbed a thrown-away tee-shirt from the ground. He stood, wiping the muck away with the rag. Stepping away from Skitter, Doc doused himself with the now-activated spray shower, hoping to remove most of the odor. He knew confronting a corpo smelling like raw sewage wouldn't be in his best interest. He also didn't want to die stinking like that.

Should I flee or find out what's this all about? Doc thought again about that one person still holding a major grudge against him. Not that he hadn't *maybe* wronged the guy, but still. Corps take everything to extremes.

He pulled out his agent. "China," he said to it.

A woman with checkerboard hair and silver eyes appeared on the screen. "Leave deets. Maybe you'll get a return call," the image said.

"Hey, girlie. Might have a sitch at my place. About to walk into probable death, but you know how it is. Check up later to confirm I'm still breathing."

Doc headed into his building, lacking back-up. As he made his way to the apartment, nothing unusual stood out in the lobby or hallways. Light shone under the door. He approached slowly, pressing his keycard to the lock. The door clicked, unlocking.

He put his hand on the Magnum and wished he'd reloaded.

The door swung open, revealing two corpos standing in his living room. A young man, in his mid-twenties, with familiar eyes. The other was a pro; just wearing shades indoors at night spoke volumes. The pro had his hand under his jacket, likely tickling the handle of some souped-up iron that would make quick work of anyone on the receiving end. He looked like a corporate guard dog, ready to protect all corporate assets from the slightest possible threat.

"Sorry for the intrusion, but Marcus thought it wise we get out of the public eye. He felt a clear and present danger. You know how it is." The young man waved, indicating the bodyguard.

Nostalgia washed over Doc as he noticed the young man's firm jaw and auburn hair. The man reached out. Doc studied his hand and extended his own as he side-eyed Marcus.

"Your type aren't often seen in this part of the city." The boy had a good grip. "Sorry about the smell. Had a situation earlier."

"Right. You work for Trauma Team, correct?"

Boy did some homework. What else does he know about me? "Yeah, for over twenty years. But it wasn't something that happened on the job. Was jumped on my way home." Doc searched for a reaction on the boy's face. Nothing. Marcus's was a different story. A frown crossed his hard face at the mention of the attack.

"Oh, sorry to hear that. Hope it wasn't too awful," the young corporate said as he took in the meager living area.

"Nope. Made it here alive, didn't I? So, what's this about? I'm kind of edgy right now, especially with being attacked and then uninvited guests showing up and me not throwing out the welcome mat." Doc pulled the synth whiskey from the bag and set it on the kitchenette counter. He found two clean glasses and filled them. He knew Marcus won't partake—working and all. Something about the bodyguard made Doc realize he had to step cautiously around this discussion.

"I have something I'm supposed to give you. From my mother, actually. She said I needed to bring it to you in person and ask you about it." The corpo pulled a small box from his jacket pocket. They exchanged box for glass.

Doc examined the palm-sized box. He knew what it contained. You can't disguise a ring box. He felt a chill. "Your mother, you say."

The young man took a swig and coughed. Must be his first time drinking Southside rotgut. "I'm afraid she passed away last week."

The icy feeling grew. The little box seemed to weigh fifty kilos. Doc rubbed his thumb slowly over the velvet. Memories bubbled.

"She gave me that and said to search you out."

Doc choked as he attempted to reply. His eyes watered. The first word barely escaped. "Your," he cleared his throat. "Your mother, was her name Marianne?" He knew the answer as well as he knew what was in the unopened box. Dark feelings coursed through his body. It took all his effort not to show too much.

Marcus stared coldly at both of them. That was a man who had never loved or been loved.

"Yes. I assume you knew her? Of course you did. What can you tell me about her cryptic message? What are you supposed to explain to me?" The kid seemed clueless about his surroundings. To the pain Doc was feeling. The danger that Marcus was extruding. There was a high tension in the room that only the most naïve would be oblivious to.

Doc glanced into the familiar eyes, the eyes of Marianne. At the auburn hair of Doc's mother, the powerful jaw of Doc's father, of Doc himself. He thumbed opened the small box, revealing Doc's college ring, the one he gave Marianne the night he declared his eternal love to her.

Doc shook his head. What had Marianne been thinking when she sent this boy to him?

The message is that I'm your father, and your mother and I were deeply in love. Doc eyed Marcus. Nope, he wasn't saying any of that. The rest of the story would also remain untold, how he worked for Marianne's husband's corporation as their lead bioware researcher, and that man used all his corporate clout to ruin Doc, and force him to stay away from Marianne and her—their—child.

Doc drank. He couldn't enunciate that just being in the same room as his boy put the boy in danger. How not even whiskey could drown the pain of over two dozen missed birthdays. He couldn't explain the downward spiral of his life that led to him standing there covered in sewage, aching to tell the truth and knowing that Marianne's husband would destroy him and the boy if he opened his mouth.

He hated Marianne's husband for not dying first. He wanted to memorize the boy's face because he would never see him again. His heart hurt at how much he loved them both.

He went to drink again, but the glass was empty. "Your mother. She was an old friend. We..." Doc paused, losing his voice with the half-truth. "... went to college together." He closed his eyes, wishing he could tell the whole truth. "Her and I used to get into a bunch of trouble back then." He half-smiled in remembrance, squinched his eyes, and then opened them to gaze at his son and say something true. "I'm really saddened to hear she passed." Doc swallowed hard, his body screaming for whiskey. "I don't know what else to tell you—" What else I can tell you that won't get us both killed "—other than Marianne was a great friend."

Marcus aimed a deadly stare at father and son. No doubt that he had orders to do something painful to Doc or the kid or both if they had exchanged the wrong information.

The boy's shoulders fell. "I'm sorry. I guess it's been too long. She was delusional towards the end, with all the painkillers. I guess the ring meant more to her than you. Please keep it to remember her by. Come along, Marcus."

Doc nodded as they passed, leaving the apartment. The door closed. He picked up the bottle and headed to the couch, fixated on the ring. He slid it onto his finger, clenched his fist, and bowed his head.

The door buzzed a few minutes later. He didn't respond.

China entered the apartment with a forged keycard.

“You had me worried, you old coot. What’s the sitch?” She approached the couch.

Doc glanced up, tears streaming down his face. “An old friend died.”

China grabbed the half-full glass left on the counter and sat beside him. “Then let’s drink to their memory.”