



A SHORT STORY

TUCK

JAMES SLATER

MIDWAY

IT WAS A DINGY, dirty place, and it had been there forever. Not that he minded the decor. He wasn't there for the decor, he was there for the coffee. It was the only place he knew of that brewed a cup of coffee that didn't leave you with that synthetic after-taste. Today's generation had grown up on it and didn't know the difference. He did. He'd finished his own Earth-stash a couple weeks back, and barring any coffee miracles, he'd be spending a lot more time here in the coming days.

Not much to the place, really. A few polished chrome stools invited patrons to sit at an imposing, black-topped bar in an L-shape. The grime of the wall to his right was mostly obscured with its unique collection of bottles, a full spectrum of shades and shapes, none of which interested him. A pair of woman's shoes sat atop the the bar before him, but his interest lay in the gigantic window beyond. It was more of a transparent wall than an actual window. Ten levels above the ground, it offered an unobstructed view of the Fairgrounds. With Midway's moon nearly full tonight, the broken remains of the once spectacular World Fair—the skeletal remains of the structures not scavenged for the Casino's foundations—painted ghostly shadow shapes across the desolate landscape.

He shivered.

To tell the truth, were it only the coffee, he wouldn't have minded that much. It wasn't that far out of his way. What he couldn't get over was the girl with the dark hair and no shoes.

She'd showed up unannounced last night, and he'd tried the quick brush off. Said he couldn't help. Said she'd be best off trying the Sheriff. The office was just next door. He'd said what ever it took to get rid of

her. She was trouble. He didn't know why, but he could feel it. He saw it in her striking face and dark brown eyes. He was no stranger to the type, and for years he'd made his living from it. But he couldn't take on any trouble, especially right now.

Thinking back, he wasn't even sure how she'd found him. Probably Lisa. Typical. He couldn't stand Lisa. But he couldn't live without her, either. No way this girl could have known on her own about his cop background that kept him busy here and comfortable on Earth. These days, though, he only worked when he needed to or wanted to, neither of which was the case here.

Coffee came and stood in stark contrast to the establishment's general state of neglect and disrepair. He noted again the once-white wall had become, well, come to think of it, a coffee color—a mocha maybe. The coffee was steaming in its brilliant white cup, sitting regally atop its saucer. The cloth napkin that sat beside it was likewise pristine and seemed so out of place here. The elderly east-Earth server who'd greeted him with her standard, "Ah... mista Tucka, so nice to see you again" had bowed quickly and disappeared again into the back.

Keeping out of sight. Minding his own business. That was his strategy. That was his business now. Enjoying a show and sipping what passed for scotch on this rock they called Midway had been his passion for the past few weeks. Nobody wanted to kill him. Nobody wanted revenge. For him, it took real effort to continue his line of work and stay that unnoticed. But just like everything else, it came and went. He made a mental note to himself to focus on being less involved more of the time.

Right now he had something else on his mind. The coffee was superb and the floor show at the New Ritz had been spectacular. In spite of the shoes in front of him, he was still glad he'd given the girl the brush-off. She'd cried, and he'd tried to make sense of her story. He'd listened, well mostly listened anyway, but certainly not as intently as she would have liked. Then he'd caught a cab downtown.

Lisa was out on assignment for a couple more days, otherwise they might have gone together. For him, there was nothing like a show at the

New Ritz, one of the two reasons he'd agreed to spend any time in this dump in the first place, and tonight anyway, the other reason wasn't Lisa.

The partially clad and sometimes fully costumed dancers spent years perfecting their art and put just as much focus into their presentation. He was a rabid fan. It took him to another place entirely. It was a place of movement and beauty, a place without worry, and for him, time stood still as the show unfolded and always finished too soon. The twirling, gyrating spectacle was hypnotizing, and he was familiar enough with the stagecraft that he could replay the show's choreography in his mind after his second viewing, and that's exactly what he planned to do for the next couple of days.

Usually he could ride the show's rhythm and visual impact for two, maybe three days before the novelty wore off. Those were good days. He was happy and things usually went well for him. Not this time.

He'd caught the underground returning from his choice seat near the show floor but got off a couple stops early, just to revel in his post-show memories. He couldn't stop smiling as he replayed bits and pieces of the show in his mind.

He hadn't paid much attention to his route and found himself wandering somewhat aimlessly around the surface streets of Fairgrounds. When he eventually came back to his senses, he made a more direct route back to his place and directly into his current problem.

His apartment, if you could call it that, was a mess. The door was wide open and what few belongings he did have were strewn about his small office and adjoining bedroom. Nothing was broken, and he wasn't even sure it was possible to break the polymer material that formed the basis of most of the things on this planet...short of some type of disintegrator, anyway.

He didn't have a lot of stuff because he didn't need a lot of stuff. This was a short-term gig—his last one for a while if everything went right, so what he did have looked less like an office or a flat and more like a storage room.

He took in the scene in a single glance. He hadn't blinked or hesitated

but made an abrupt 180-degree turn and retreated to the street to initiate his catch-me-if-you-can plan. He didn't use it often, but having a unique exit route was a rule he always followed. He'd planned and scouted what his military buddies would call an egress plan. Get the hell out and make sure you're not followed.

And here he was. He'd placed this shop at the end of his escape route as an end point to his stair-step pattern through the darkened streets and structures of the Fairgrounds. It was a textbook evasion route with a couple of flairs of his own. He'd had to adapt it to the unique layout of the odd Fairgrounds architecture, and it was his second. He'd discarded his initial plan after he'd used it earlier this year. Its design was two-fold: tell him if he was being followed, then lose or eliminate any threats.

It was late and almost tomorrow, but he was satisfied. There was no sign of anyone or anything on his tail. He'd need a new egress plan, but he could worry about that later. He wasn't going back there anytime soon. His tail was clean, and now he could think. Something about the coffee and the isolation gave him solace and mental clarity. Rare in his business, but that's what he needed most now.

Still, there was something about the girl he couldn't put his finger on. What was it? He'd ignore it for now. It would come back. In the meantime, he'd follow the shoes, or rather her lack of shoes. He had a couple of thoughts. First, no one went barefoot outside the Casino spas. It wasn't that it was impossible or against the law; it just wasn't done. The polymer streets and walkways were fine, but the planetary surface material that remained between sweepings would rip up and infect unprotected feet.

So showing up at his place meant one of two things. Three, actually, but he discounted the fact she might be a mental case or in a drugged state. He'd have picked that up immediately, even if he wasn't paying strict attention. So, one of two possibilities. One, she'd thrown them away. They slowed her down; they were explosive or toxic—they no longer served their purpose of keeping her pretty little feet from street debris. Two, they'd been taken from her. Either the shoes themselves

were of value or they contained something of significant value.

The look on her face. The eyes. They told him instinctively it was the second. What he didn't know was who might be shopping for shoes or their contents.

She wasn't a Fairgrounds girl. Her look was too cultured. Again, something about her sharp features and dark smooth hair nagged his memory. Had he seen her before, or did she just look like someone he knew? A lot of those celebrity face-jobs were going around today. Either way, she'd come across from the Casino, probably on the same line he'd taken after the show.

Had she walked from the underground without shoes, her feet would have been ripped to shreds, no way around it. He knew the Fairgrounds as well as anyone and played all the possible routes in his head, backward and forward. She'd lost them a lot closer than that, which meant she'd caught a ride. A transport, a cab, a car. Plenty of options.

Someplace between the station and his place she'd been separated from her shoes—but she still had her purse with her, so it wasn't a normal robbery. Who takes shoes and not the purse, unless, again, the shoes had some intrinsic value to them? It had to be something else, and they hadn't found what they were looking for. That's why his place was a mess. They hadn't found what they were looking for and let her go, not because she didn't have what they wanted, he reasoned, but because she didn't have it with her. They let her go to follow her. And whether it was some type of e-tracker or old-fashioned game of hide and seek didn't matter. They were on her tail.

What's the first thing you do when you're scared, alone and barefoot? What would he do? He'd call Lisa. Ruling out coincidences, she was the only connection he could think of that made any sense, so that's probably what she had done, too. She'd called Lisa and got directions to his place. Damn her. Lisa's friends were flakes. Creative types relying on the universe for happiness with little understanding or desire to understand the realities of survival beyond their individual universes of creation. He'd said it before. Trouble. Double, in fact.

Not only had he become involved in something guaranteed to fuck up

his week by misreading and ditching Lisa's friend who, it was beginning to seem, actually needed his help, he'd also likely invoked the ire of Lisa, and he was sure he was going to hear about that when she got back.

He guessed that after the robbery, at Lisa's suggestion, she'd made her way barefoot to his place. With a glance, he'd done her profile. A down-on-her luck Casino staffer who probably made some promises she couldn't keep. Likely she didn't have money for protection or for a proper investigation.

He couldn't save all of them. He saw lots. Most with the same story. They all had big dreams with a weakness for optimism. There was a lot of that here. This was the city of life-changing opportunities, if you believed the Earth-side hype, but what they didn't tell you was that the Casinos never lost. At least they didn't lose big. And when they did, they weren't very nice about making sure it didn't happen again. That's part of what brought him here in the first place, so none of the stories were news to him.

Small wins went home all the time. Big wins went home on a "randomly" scheduled basis to coincide with Earth-side marketing campaigns. In reality, almost all of them went home poorer than when they arrived, but couldn't wait to come back the for another follow-on trip.

Staff stayed as long as they could afford to. The disciplined and the Guild members had stayed for centuries, with powerful tech families running the Fairgrounds and ensuring their own continued well being. But young staffers came and went, sometimes on the next ship out.

He'd heard a lot of stories, both in-person and from his Sheriff neighbors. His line of private security was a little less glamorous than the planet security force, but a lot more lucrative, at least for him anyway. With his small apartment over the local sub-station, he didn't need extra security; its proximity to law enforcement made it its own security system. And that was probably why Lisa have given him up.

All other things being equal, he hadn't been at his perceptive best. His mind was on the show he was about to see. If he listened to her story much longer, he was going to be late, and what she was getting out

wasn't much of a story. He was sure she was telling him only a portion of the truth, and her lopsided emotions clouded what sense her story did make. He ignored it. He'd heard it all before, hadn't he? He wasn't some warrior for justice, some knight in shining armor. His Sheriff friends were right downstairs, and they could look after her and make sure she had safe passage back to Earth. He'd shooed her away, caught a cab and was in place for curtains up for the evening showing of *The Inferno*. Amazing.

His ticket was comped, but he'd paid for it anyway by getting his placed tossed. Sipping from behind his disappearing coffee cup, he knew a couple things already. The girl with no shoes was already in more than a little trouble. Whoever had taken her shoes, according to his apartment, hadn't found what they were looking for. They hadn't hurt her. She'd done that to herself, but they had scared her and followed her. Obviously they hadn't found anything at his place because he had nothing to find. A bed, a brain and his hands were usually enough to get him by.

The thing that worried him most was their disregard for his security system, his Sheriff neighbors. They'd strolled right in as he sat mesmerized in a different part of the city, apparently without fear or interference. He'd need to go by the sub-station, give them some grief and ask some questions. His redecorators were content to sit on his place until he left for the show and let themselves in. How was that even possible?

He'd egressed according to plan, quickly and efficiently. But given his route, it wasn't too much of a stretch to check out his interpretation of the girl's story. A little verification never hurt. There were a couple areas not too far from the station that would provide cover from prying eyes. One was already on his angled route, and he'd mentally added the other as he worked his search and evade pattern through the Fairgrounds.

He'd been right. Of course, he'd been right. The shoes. The same shoes that had adorned the girl's feet before she'd been relieved of them. The same shoes that now stared back at him from the counter in front of him. Multi-colored platforms with straps. A pair of them. Expensive.

Based on the wear pattern, it was the right shoe with the built-in compartment. They hadn't bothered to close it when they were done inspecting it. Its mini compartment concealed itself once again as he pressed the latch shut. It was nice work. If he didn't know the compartment was there, he never would have seen it or even looked for it in the first place.

But whatever they were looking for, they hadn't found. Hence his visitors and his emergency egress. And now? As much as didn't want to, he needed a place where he could disappear and come up with a plan. That was part two of his evade and egress. Lisa was out of town for a few days, and that made it the perfect place.

BARNIE

IT WAS TUESDAY, and Barnie wasn't dead. At least he didn't think so. The air was freezing, and his face was pressed firmly against the cold, composite floor that he'd moistened to a slimy sheen with his sleep slobber. Barnie was a mess. His head was screaming at him to do something other than keep his prone posture another minute. He used his right hand to feel for any objects that might be lodged there. A metal pole, a knife, a woman's shoe, maybe? He felt nothing but a couple of tender and swollen lumps. That didn't sound like things a dead guy would have on his head.

But it wasn't just his head. As he struggled first to his knees and then to the bed beside him, his body contorted in pain, every minor movement a battle of excruciating synapse snaps that said I-told-you-so and reminded him of his last night of life. It was coming back now. But it shouldn't have come this far. He should be dead now. He'd anesthetized himself with whatever they'd brought him, and now sitting in this room, he acknowledged that had been a significant amount. He'd expected that would be it. He wouldn't wake up. Bam. Game over.

The room was modern and well appointed in black and chrome overtones, tastefully decorated with paintings on canvas and actual plants, the bed overflowing with unused pillows. It oozed a color of money much above his appointed station in life.

Now he remembered. It was coming back. He'd won last night and won big. He never won big. Nobody did. Well, nobody he knew anyway. He'd heard of big winners, but he didn't think he'd ever met one. And it wasn't one of those virtual gambling games. It was a no-shit card game with actual cards. And he'd won. In fact the chips and the money still

littered the plush furnishings of the Casino high rise room he occupied. The girl was gone, too. No big surprise there. He wasn't much of a ladies' man. As he examined himself in the mirror from his seat on the hotel bed, he didn't classify himself as much of a man at all. No, definitely too ugly to be dead. Thinning hair and rolls of inherited and untended DNA hid the undershorts he still wore. His pale face and bloodshot eyes stared back at him from the room's mirror opposite the bed.

Jesus. He might as well be dead. No wonder the girl left. He'd leave, too, if he saw himself looking like this. Now that he realized he wasn't dead, leaving was something he thought he should probably do before someone else realized it, too. His mind moved more quickly than his tortured body, but within a few minutes, he was able to retrieve his strewn tokens and money and stuff the significant pile into what was left of his wrinkled clothing. His shirt was stained with what looked to be blood, probably his he thought, and booze. Boozes, actually, if that was even a word. He tossed it into the atomizer and squeezed his coat over his bare torso.

He was still piecing together last night, but a lot of it didn't make sense to him. He needed a couple of things. He needed to clean up, and he needed some more clothes. But he couldn't go back to where he kept his clothes. A realization changed his mind. He decided he liked being alive, although his pounding head had something to say about that. But what he needed the most was to get off the — what floor was this, anyway? It didn't matter. He needed to get off of it, out of the Casino, and really, he needed to get off the planet.

The corridor was silent and abandoned. Maybe he'd be OK. He did have money now. His pants and jacket pockets were bulging with what he'd rescued from the room. He needed to be forgettable, but if they came looking for him, they'd find him. They'd find him even if they weren't looking for him. What he really needed was a low profile and the ability to be invisible as he snuck out of the complex, neither of which he had.

When the transport tube let him out on the gaming floor, he was

surprised to see how busy the place was at this time of the morning. Lots of folks, some looking a lot like he felt, were gambling their pensions for a jackpot. He moved between criss-crossed rows of machines until he came to an open spot. He nudged the indentation on the floor and a gaming machine popped up. He swiped an annoyed hand at the machine and it flipped through a succession of options until he closed his fist on his favorite. He needed time to think. To catch up with himself. His head was still pounding, and his vision a bit fuzzy. He took a seat and pulled a handful of last night's tokens from one of his stuffed pockets. Maybe he'd just feed the machine until he became less encumbered. Less obvious. If he had balls, he'd just walk to the token exchange. But he was pretty sure he'd be tracked there. Probably relieved of both his tokens and his balls, if he had any.

He stared at the whirring, colored numbers in front of him, and he started to feel dizzy. Blowing cookies all over the gaming floor was not a good way to blend in. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, the numbers had stopped. But they were all the same. They were all the same number. The damn machine started flashing and spitting more of the Casino tokens into the tray in front of him. Around him a general cheer went up from the crowd. Someone had just beat the house. It was rare, but it happened. And now it had happened twice in a day. Something was wrong. He shook his head in wonder. He didn't understand a thing. He raised his hands and the crowd took it as a victory gesture and redoubled the applause. He'd meant it as a gesture of surrender.

The tokens were boxed in a nice little package for him, the little bits were yelling at him to go to the token exchange and transfer them into his credit account. He ignored their pleas. He swiped at the machine again and selected the table option and sat down. He caught his breath as a dazzling woman placed a red liquid drink on the newly rendered table.

"Congratulations sir," she said with a perfect smile. "Compliments of the house."

He shook his head, closed his eyes and ran his hand back through what little hair he had. He was pretty out of it, realizing the perfection

was not that of an actual woman, but of a service bot. He nodded a perfunctory thank-you and waved her off.

He placed his palm on the table before him and called up a number of options. Breakfast? Transportation? Personal Services? No. He wanted Communications. He sipped the red drink and felt some of his humanity return. The drink had a pleasant aroma, and it gave him enough focus to call the girl. A real girl. She was a woman, actually, but to him, she was a girl from work. He'd been enamored with her when they'd first met, and he'd followed her around enough to be creepy. But eventually she got to know him, and he'd grown on her. Barnie the Loyal. Barnie the Kind. Barnie the guy at work.

They were never a couple and never would be. But they were friends, and in a place like this, sometimes friends were a lot more valuable than lovers. Like today. The table made the comm connection, and a vertical screen popped up above the table with her face on it. That was no good. He swapped it for another angle. It was her whole body, but less than half a meter high, standing on the table looking at him. No, that was worse. He selected again, and her virtual image sat directly across the table from him.

She looked at him questioningly. "Barnie?"

He nodded.

"Jesus, Barnie, you look like shit."

He smiled and closed his eyes.

"I'm in trouble."

She laughed. Not a fake half-laugh, but a good strong genuine laugh.

"You?"

Apparently, in her mind, there was no way in the universe that Barnie the Kind could do anything but work and sleep.

He leaned over the virtually rendered table and whispered.

"I played a game I shouldn't have played yesterday, and I won a game I shouldn't have won. I don't understand it all, but a girl helped me and—"

The story was getting all jumbled up in his mind. He knew what happened, but he couldn't explain it well, especially in this state. She

was shaking her head, a confused expression telling him his brain was not operating his mouth properly. She held up her hand.

“OK. Let’s try this. You know where my place is?”

He had to admit he didn’t. Their only interaction was at work.

“Here,” she said, scribbling something just out of sight of the render. “Go to the Fairgrounds. This will take you the rest of the way.”

He picked up the transparent encoded disk from the table with the tip of his finger and slipped it into his right eye. He blinked a couple times and seated it properly.

“OK,” he replied across the table. “See you in 30?”

“No, Barnie,” I’m not home, I’m on assignment, but you can stay at my place for a couple days until I get back. Get cleaned up. Get something to eat. Stop hanging around the Casinos.” She paused to look at him more closely and shook her head.

“You really look like shit.”

He couldn’t argue with her. “I know. You told me that, already.”

She clicked off, and he looked around. How was he going to get out of here in the least obvious way? The vision disk wasn’t helpful. It was a light blue glow at the very edge of his peripheral vision. The drink helped calm his nerves, and a cackle of laughter careened off his sensitive ears.

A group of elderly morning gamblers were making their way to the exit. They looked like he felt. White and grey and creaking and moving slowly. Which gave him an idea. As they passed behind him, he tucked his new package under his arm and became their newest member, joining their stiff slow crawl across the floor and out into Midway’s sunshine.

RUNDOWN

LIKE HIS FACE, Barnie's story was something of a mess. He couldn't tell a story to save his life.

Tuck's brows furrowed in frustration. The girl was shaking her head and rolling her eyes.

"This is why I did what I did," she said to Tuck. "He's pathologically helpless. They would have taken him out and disintegrated him just like the rest of the crap they break and remake in the Casinos."

They were in Lisa's flat, if you could call it that. It was more like a museum or a work of art than any flat he'd ever known. Her additions were sparse and expensive. The center of the flat was an octagonal garden with an open skylight above. The skylight was an illusion, but the plants and herbs were real, scenting the place deliciously. A brilliant blue on white vase with intricate designs welcomed her guests while a west-Earth sculpture of a well muscled man readying to throw something stood in the far corner. He didn't know their details, but it didn't matter. She'd trade the pieces out when the mood hit her. She didn't have money, but she had taste in art and friends, and in the end, they were the same thing.

Tuck scratched his head.

Good old Barnie.

He seemed so out of place here. Always stumbling in and out of trouble. He had a real talent for it. He'd bumped into Barnie now and again. Always because of Lisa and never with the intention of doing anything more than exchanging pleasantries. She had a soft spot for the guy. He couldn't figure why, but she was sometimes more complex than he liked to think. Whatever trouble Barnie got into was never his fault,

but it was a part of his unique talent that attracted the worst in people. “It’s Bernie.” he would say as he introduced himself and extended his hand in greeting to anyone who would take it, “with an I-E...no Y” And that was him. There was never a “Why.” He was the kind of guy who bumped off walls his entire life. A guy who took everything at face value. He was certainly honest and pleasant enough, but his talent for misinterpreting situations made him a serious trouble magnet, and son of a bitch if he hadn’t done it again.

He kicked himself.

Why hadn’t he seen it sooner? Something odd happens with Lisa’s name attached to it? Simple answer is Bernie.

Maybe it was the shoes. He wasn’t sure, but he was off his game, and now he knew why. Bernie.

He’d let himself into Lisa’s place sometime after midnight and found, to his complete surprise, that he’d tracked down the girl. Accidentally. Who knew? Maybe it was Lisa who was driving this one, whatever this one was. Usually it was him and his odd jobs that tried their sometimes relationship on a fairly regular basis.

She’d looked scared, then tired, and then she smiled. He figured it meant she realized she was no longer alone. He’d told her to go back to sleep. He collapsed in his favorite chair, the one he occupied when he and Lisa were together. He wasn’t sure if it was expensive or not, and figured maybe Lisa just kept it around because he liked it. For the life of him, he hadn’t figured why they weren’t “on” more often. He had this thing where he had to be right. And she had this thing where being right couldn’t always be the most important thing. He shook his head, thinking that when the two of them put their collective minds to it, they could be hideous to one another. But the chair was always nice, and that’s where he still sat when he opened his eyes again, his mouth as dry as a desert and his muscles stiff enough that he swore he heard creaking as he stretched.

And then Bernie showed up. What he knew now was that it was Bernie who was the distraction. The side show. The fact that he’d shown up here meant one of two things. Either he was Lisa’s invited guest or he

was at the end of his rope. And the difference was minimal. He'd only be an invited guest if he were in some deep shit. Again. But either way, Bernie was here and that meant, if their history together told him anything, that they didn't have much time before trouble would be knocking, which is why he was so pissed off now, because Bernie couldn't explain himself well enough to save his own fat ass.

He made a calming motion with both of his hands. Like Bernie was a child, and if he sucked the emotion out the atmosphere, the excitement out of the problem, then maybe, just maybe, he could get the worry out of Bernie long enough that they might be able to decipher it together.

"Take a deep breath, Bernie. Just sit down and think. Don't talk. Think. From beginning to end."

Beside the fact that Bernie now sat in The Chair, his favorite, comfy, fall-asleep-at-Lisa's chair, he saw his calming motions and faux-hypnotic voice seemed to have a calming effect on himself, too.

Bernie was silent, staring straight ahead as he did what Tuck asked.

He gave the man a closer look, now that his mouth wasn't running in circles a thousand light years a minute.

"Jesus, Bernie, you look like shit," he said, shaking his head.

Bernie looked at him with a half smile. "Thanks, Tuck. That's the nicest thing you've said to me today."

"Look, Bernie. We don't have much time. You need to tell me what happened, so we can make a move before it's too late."

"Too late for what?"

"Talk, Bernie."

Bernie nodded and talked. "So, yesterday after work, as I usually do, I stop by the tables. It's Monday, and it's evening, so the place is not too busy. I like it like that."

"You do that every week?"

"Pretty much."

"Every Monday?"

He nodded.

"Go on."

"I usually play the card games. I don't do a lot of the role-playing or

combat scenarios. Just a nice game of cards. I get to choose the virtual players. I even program some of them with my own code.”

Tuck was impressed. “You code?”

Barnie shrugged. “It’s not that high-tech magic shit. It’s a lot more social, personality-based stuff. I put them together with their own quirks, and then I face them down across the table.”

“Can you make them poor players?”

Barnie stared at him a moment before answering. “You don’t spend a lot of time at the Casinos, do you, Tuck?”

“I spend as much time as I can there, actually. I just don’t spend my paychecks on the gambling floor. The stage floor to me is much more engaging—anyway, you were playing cards.”

“So, right,” he continued. “I’m playing cards on a Monday evening with my regular crowd, and a guy comes up and wants to join. You know, cut in. Never happened before. You see a table that’s full, you move on to another one. That’s how it’s done. But somehow, this guy liked the look of mine.”

“So you let him?”

“I buzzed out Jeve. He was grinding on me, and saying some things that didn’t need to be said.”

Tuck chuckled. “Your own programming, right?”

Barnie assented. “It was. But you don’t program individual reactions to conversations. That’s not how it works. You program parameters, and the programs improvise based on the topic of content. Anyway, so the guy sits down and plays a couple hands. He knows how to play, and I see he has a real passion for the game. At a certain point, he asks if I’d like in on a game of his. A game with real people and actual cards. I’m interested. But I don’t tell him that. I don’t have the kind of dough that you need for a buy-in like that. And if I did, I certainly wouldn’t carry it around with me. He seemed to know what I was thinking, and he says don’t worry about it. They needed another guy, and he’d cover me. Some bigwig likes to practice on Mondays, he says, and he sees I know my way around the table. So I say, what the hell.”

He stopped for a minute, thinking. Pondering what he’d just said, his

bloodshot eyes squinting a bit at the thought.

“And I never say, ‘what the hell.’ I just don’t. No idea what made me do that. But he’s all friendly and says how its great to meet another card-playing aficionado. That was his word, not mine.”

“He take you back into some fancy back room?”

Barnie closed his blooshoot eyes, remembering. “No, he took me up to some fancy top-floor place. You know, the top. The very top. Place you can see the whole damn city from. It was unbelievable.”

Tuck knew the place. He’d never been there, but he knew the building, and he knew the level of guest who might frequent it.

“Yeah. Yeah. So, who was it?”

“Who was what?”

“Whose game was it?”

“Oh yeah. I tell you, I didn’t even recognize him at first. I mean I’ve seen him on the Net but never paid too much attention. But everyone kept calling him sir. I got it pretty quick that it was his game.”

Of all the reasons he didn’t like Barnie, this was one of the big ones. His inability to stay on topic. Especially now. He had no idea how he won at cards. Maybe he didn’t.

“Dammit Barnie.” he yelled sharply, “Whose game was it?”

Barnie was taken aback. He had a blank look on his face, like he couldn’t decide what to say next. Like his feelings were hurt. When his voice came, it came slowly. “I - was - getting - to - that - part.”

Tuck was grinding his teeth, angry eyes blazing at the lethargic pace of the story.

By the time they got to that part, they’d probably all be toast.

“Grossman,” said Barnie finally. “It was Grossman’s game.”

Now it was Tuck’s turn for the blank look. “Grossman?” he said, as if he hadn’t heard himself correctly. “The Casino Grossman?” he repeated the name. He looked over at the girl, reassessing the situation. Reassessing their level of threat.

This was not good. Not good at all.

He paused before he asked his follow-up. “Which one?”

“Sal Grossman.”

It wasn't Bernie who had that answer. It was the girl hovering around Lisa's Net screen she'd popped up from the kitchen counter with the name.

"Yeah," said Bernie in agreement, "I think that's right. Sal Grossman. I'm pretty sure. Sometimes I get them mixed up."

"He's dead," she said in a nervous, rising voice. "Shit Bernie, what did you do?"

"What do you mean he's dead?" asked Tuck.

She was behind Bernie now, pointing at the Net display and shaking her head, a look in her eyes like she was ready to cry again. "Some kind of accident. They're not sure what happened yet."

Sure enough. There he was. At least it was the guy's picture.

He'd seen that picture before, but couldn't remember when. Sal Grossman was not the face of the Casinos. He was a brother, or a cousin maybe. In the picture he looked pretty good. He'd seen better days, certainly better than today, if it were true that he was dead.

Tuck put it together. At least part of it anyway, and he couldn't hold back any longer. "You stupid son-of-a-bitch!" Tuck was shouting at Bernie again. And this time at the top of his lungs. "You took somebody's money, and you came here? Whoever it is, they're going to want it back. No questions asked. Odds are they're gonna smoke everyone in sight. You. Me. Her," he said, motioning to the girl.

Bernie was shaking his head, trying to continue his interrupted story, but the words weren't coming again after that outburst.

Tuck made a split-second decision. "Out," he said quietly, but urgently. "Both of you. Move now. Don't take anything. Just move to the door. We're trapped in here."

He knew Bernie wouldn't get it, so he grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him toward the door.

"C'mon," he hissed over his shoulder at the girl. But she wasn't there. He did a double-take as he pushed an uncomprehending Bernie toward the door.

"Open it," he directed Bernie, and caught a glimpse of the girl out of the corner of his eye, reappearing from Lisa's bedroom, a hover-case in

tow.

“We don’t have time for that crap.” he told her.

They were running for their lives, and she needed luggage?

Like it made a difference, though, he thought. She was now on his tail as the three exited the flat.

“Common area. Lots of people,” he said to the girl.

She understood and took the lead, stepping forward to the Tube entrance as he closed the door on Lisa’s museum flat. He followed, Bernie in tow. The Tube took them up a few levels. As far as it would go. The complex was underground, and Lisa’s place was in the upper reaches of it, so it delivered them quickly.

They stepped out into an open area between some small shops on the top level where a few people milled about. A drugstore, a tattoo center, a number of clothing stores and a one-hour plastic surgery salon offered their services. That was about it. Between the stores, a smoothly paved courtyard area hosted a few shoppers, but not many. Some watched a screen display of Net broadcasts on the wall above the public restrooms. It was Casino advertising mostly, interrupted now and again by the occasional news report. An ad finished, and the screen continued the report of Grossman’s death. Not much of a crowd to hide out in. Most folks had stuff to do on a Tuesday, he figured, but there was a fairly steady stream of building traffic. He preferred invisibility, but its next door neighbor, anonymity, would have to do here.

Tuck called up a table and chairs with a foot indentation in the courtyard paving, and they sat down. Coffee was what he needed now. Maybe it’s what Bernie needed, too. He knew it would be the synthetic stuff, but the whole morning had been distasteful, so it would be right in line. He hand-fingered drinks for them all, and they became a part of the odd, loitering and meandering flow of humanity with little else to do on a Tuesday morning.

He felt the thump in his chest. He’d expected it. Bernie hadn’t. Seemed to Tuck Bernie never expected much of anything. He jumped, startled, and wore a mixed expression of surprise and fear. The girl stared at him, her eyes wide now, imploring him to explain.

“Look, we don’t have much time. That was Lisa’s door, I’m sure of it. So it’s not a matter of if they find us, but a matter of when. Right now, we need to figure out what it is they want.”

“That’s easy,” she said with a flip of her chin at Barnie. “They want him.”

Tuck didn’t think so. “Negative. It’s not him. It’s something he knows or something he has.”

He looked Barnie again, closing his eyes with a prayer for patience and a miracle. “So here’s what I think. I think you won, and you won big at that practice table. But it wasn’t really practice. It didn’t feel like practice, did it?”

“No,” agreed Barnie. “Felt real to me. The cards kept coming. Never had cards like that before.”

“Who else was winning? Grossman?”

“No. Just me. Played for an hour or so, and I kept raking in pot after pot. Grossman was giving me the eye. Like he was watching me, trying to figure out how to play like me, probably.”

“And your new friend?”

“He lost big time, too.”

“Yeah, probably wasn’t his money to begin with. I’m betting he was feeding you.”

Barnie looked confused. “You think he pulled a fast one? But he didn’t leave with any money!”

“But you did.”

“And her,” he said.

Tuck turned to the girl. “You pulled him out of there, didn’t you?”

“They understand one thing,” she said. “If you have the money, you can negotiate everything else. They were all pretty twitchy, so I pulled him out of there with the money before they realized what was happening. His friend helped run interference. I stashed him in one of our staff rooms and came to see you, and that’s when—”

“That’s when I wouldn’t listen to you. Sorry about that.”

She shrugged. “I probably wouldn’t have listened to me either. And I have no idea what they wanted with my shoes, either.”

“You carry things now and then don’t you?” he said. It wasn’t really a question. And she understood.

She looked at him evenly. “None of your business.”

“It sure as hell is my business now.” But it didn’t really matter, he decided to himself.

He turned back to Barnie. “So the money. Where the hell are all your winnings?”

“I won this morning on the floor, too,” he said forlornly, the once-in-a-lifetime experience now pinching his memory. “I tried to sneak it out of the Casino. You know, kinda quiet-like.”

“They scared you into walking out with everything on you? Why didn’t you just cash out there in the building?”

“I won it from Grossman. There was no way they were going to let me keep it. I figured I went to convert it, they’d just take it away from me. I wouldn’t get all of it back, but I figured I could convert it on the street and—”

“They took it away anyway, didn’t they?”

He nodded sadly, rubbing his jaw, the reddish mark now turning a yellow shade of blue.

“Inside job,” Tuck muttered to himself.

The girl looked at him curiously. “What? The Casinos stealing from themselves?”

“These guys aren’t Casino. These guys are thugs. Dipshits. Well-armed dipshits,” he admitted, “but dipshits still the same.”

“Barnie, if they took back their money, why would they still be tracking you down? What didn’t you give back to them?”

Barnie smiled weakly. “No, the guy slammed me, and I gave him the money. That’s it.”

“Barnie, you’re a bad judge of character and a worse liar. Give it up. Now,” he said sharply.

Barnie’s face was blank again. Tuck realized it wasn’t that he was hiding something. He’d just plain forgotten.

How in the hell could he win at cards with that face?

He waited for it, and there it was. The expression. The widening eyes.

The realization that he did have something else.

Tuck grabbed a fistful of shirt and pulled Barnie's face close enough to feel the fear on his breath. "Lie to me at your own risk, pal," he whispered, his forehead on Barnie's.

"OK. OK." Barnie raised his arms in a surrender, shaking his head and reaching into the crotch of his pants. He pulled out a bundled stack of paper bills.

Tuck was stunned. "Paper? Actual paper bills? You kept them?"

Barnie shrugged sheepishly. "I don't think they're real."

Tuck cringed as he inspected the bills. "God help me Barnie," he said with a shudder, "You make it to the end of the day, and I'm going to kick your ass on general principals."

This time, Barnie was right. The bills were new and crisp. Recent additions to the gambling setup, he was certain.

So it wasn't the bills. Nobody blew the doors off anything for prop money. It was something else.

He made a closer inspection. Nothing special about them. He scanned each one for any odd type or maybe something inscribed. Nothing. They were fresh enough that a couple of them stuck together. He peeled them apart, eyes alert for anything out of the ordinary when a disk dislodged itself from the fresh bill and rolled like a coin across the table top. He slapped it down to arrest its roll and unintentionally initiated its contained video message.

A small figure, no bigger than the height of a hand was speaking silently.

He whistled softly. "This is what they're after. You intercepted a Guild message." He looked at the girl. "You know who that is?"

The girl swallowed and nodded. He looked up. The crowd was still thin. He looked back at her. "How many levels in this complex?"

"Not sure," she said. "30, maybe 40."

"If you're a dipshit, do you start at the top or the bottom?"

"The top," she said simply.

He agreed. "We're going to have company shortly. You should go."

He got up from the table and caught sudden and intense fear in her

eyes as he heard a sharp intake of her breath. The rundown guy. They were already out of time.

He turned slowly to face what he later decided was the ugliest man he'd ever seen. And maybe the biggest, too. He was a bear of a man. Long dark coat. Bald and scarred, it looked like few of his targets went easily. Tuck would be another he planned to add to his list, he figured. He stepped up, positioning himself between the bear and his two companions.

"No beef with you, friend," he said to the man before him. He'd come alone. One blaster. No back-up. No wingman. The thinning crowd immediately thinned completely, and they were alone in the courtyard with him. Three-on-one. He seemed to have no qualms about fair or not. He wasn't here to be fair.

"I have what you're looking for. No need to make this personal."

The guy smiled. It was a twisted smile populated with bad, yellow, broken teeth. He realized how much of a visual impact this guy's teeth had on his appearance. His face was big, and his jaw was square. He didn't think much of it until the guy smiled a gruesome, sneering smile. And when he did, a shudder ran down his back.

"Shit Bernie, this guy's uglier than you."

The guy took a step forward. "I like personal," he growled. "And with me, it's always personal."

"I was right," Tuck said to no one in particular, "A dipshit. Definitely a dipshit. Bernie, take the young lady and buy her an ice cream. I'll take care of this one."

The guy's eyes were alive. Hungry. Tuck could see this was what he lived for. For such a big guy, he closed the distance way too quickly. But you don't surprise Tuck. Not with a frontal assault anyway. A calloused fist screamed by Tuck's feint, missing him marginally, but connecting with the hapless Bernie. For the second time today, he guessed. He'd just saved himself some trouble, he thought to himself as he relieved the big guy of his balance and his upright stance, slamming him to the floor. He followed quickly with a well-timed double-stomp, slamming that big head back into the floor with a crunch. That should do it, he thought.

But it didn't.

The guy was just getting started, it seemed. He was a little disoriented from the head slam, but he got to his feet. Blood streamed from his nose and mouth, and with that hideous, broken-toothed grin, he couldn't tell if he'd loosened more with the stomp or not. The blaster had skittered across the floor in the takedown, and as Bernie stood unsteadily from his initial slam, a measured backhand from the guy's fist sent him in a similar direction. Tuck looked around.

Where was the girl? Nowhere to be seen. It was like she hadn't been there in the first place. Good. One less casualty to worry about.

He crouched, ready for the next move when the bear stopped suddenly and stared, tilting his head in curiosity. Was it a ruse? Pretty good one for a dipshit. He wasn't fooled. Tuck sidestepped and caught a quick *deja vu* with his side vision. The girl hadn't run. She'd just made a quick wardrobe change. He stared for a second, visually putting it together in his mind. That was what had been familiar about her. Her features were still there, but the costume was that of a reptile, and she was a stage dancer. Hers had been one of his favorite numbers from the night before. The score still danced in his head.

The rundown guy was perplexed. This one was certainly out of the ordinary. Tuck thought he'd probably taken on plenty of men before, but reptiles? The guy slowly recognized the girl's features and realized it was a woman and not some visual magic trick. His brutish smile came back as if he were thinking that this would be one to talk about tonight.

"Let me have this one," she asked Tuck in a pleading voice.

He'd loved her on stage, and she was pretty confident. How could he say no? Too bad there was no one here to see her encore performance. The suit seemed to blend parts of her seamlessly into parts of the standing reptile. He took two steps backward, keeping a wily eye on their attacker.

She could have a shot.

He'd play back up and keep them off Bernie. He was just as mesmerized as he'd been the previous night as she began a rhythmic approach, the performance synchronized to some silent tune in her head.

The guy came straight at her. He'd lost his blaster, but he didn't seem to mind. He poised his monstrous hands in front of him to choke the life out of her, reptile suit or no.

She feigned a fearful pose, luring him on, then with a diving roll, slid by him and brought the full force of the whipping tail into the center of his chest. His eyes popped wide, and he let out a woofing sound as he took an audible thump to the chest and tumbled backward onto his ass, the force and inertia sliding him back on the smooth floor. Her circular dancing motion never stopped, but continued on seamlessly, the whipping tail coming from behind on the next roll, catching the top of his head neatly and slamming it into the floor for the second time in as many minutes.

Still, he got to his feet, although markedly slower this time than the previous. Blood dripped from his nose and mouth, and it was now smeared across his entire face. His teeth were showing still, but he was no longer grinning. He was glowering. In his world, apparently, this didn't happen. In his world, he won. He pounded and choked and slashed and killed. And won. He stood before the dancing reptile and the crouching Tuck, ready for his next move, but then an odd thing happened.

His face began to melt. Tuck heard him start to scream, but it was quickly silenced as his head disappeared, his body slumping lifelessly forward onto the floor.

The disintegrator floated behind him. No larger than a fist, it floated in a search pattern. Shit, it was a clean-up drone.

Behind him, Tuck caught movement from Barnie. Good. He was still in one piece. Maybe Lisa would be happy. But there was something else, too. Something that shouldn't be there. It took a second for him to realize what it was.

Of all the stupid moves.

Barnie had the damn blaster aimed at the drone and was getting ready to fire at it.

A second later, and they all would have been Net headlines. He flashed his leg out, side-kicking the blaster, and Barnie's shot went high

and wide, burning a good-sized hole in the ceiling overhead. The drone stopped momentarily in mid-air as it found what it was looking for. On the table, the video disk burst into flame, a small puff popping harmlessly out of existence, followed quickly by the disintegration of the drone itself. It was there, and then as if by some magic trick, it was nothing but smoke, too.

The three of them sat there a moment. Silent. Staring at one another.

“Nice performance,” he said to the girl. “Maybe we skip the encore this time.”

She nodded and disappeared into the restroom, reappearing a minute later, her hover case repacked as if nothing had happened.

Barnie was still wide-eyed. “That thing was going to kill us all. You should have let me shoot it.”

“Then we’d all be dead,” said Tuck.

Barnie was confused. Again.

“Look Barnie, I don’t know how you managed it, but you swiped Sal Grossman’s private conversation with some rep from one of the of the primary Guilds.”

Barnie shook his head and opened his mouth as if to say something, but then shut it again. He decided it was time to listen.

Good choice.

“Did you recognize the guy on the disc?”

Barnie didn’t, but he didn’t say anything.

“But you did recognize his uniform didn’t you? It was the Aviation Guild. Barnie, do you know anyone in the Aviation Guild?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “I only know two, and that was one of them. We see them all the time on the Net. Brother and sister. Now what would Grossman be doing talking with a senior Aviation Guild member? Unofficially, I mean.”

Again Barnie shook his head. He didn’t have a clue.

“Here’s what I think. I think he was ready to make a move. I think he wanted the Casino for himself.”

“What makes you say that?” asked the girl.

“First, I’m pretty sure control of Casino would not fall to him

logically. He wasn't the smartest Grossman." He turned back to the man in front of him, "Yeah that's right Bernie, you don't have to be smart to be rich and powerful."

Tuck didn't care if Bernie felt slighted by the comment, but he wasn't. His nod agreed, considering the concept.

"I mean, come on," Tuck continued. "He was practicing for his poker game with street stand-ins. And they were taking him for a ride."

It was the girl again. "So you think he was going to cut a Guild deal and make a bid for a hostile takeover?"

Yes, something along those lines. There was no way he was going to do it by himself. But with some muscle and some brains, it might be possible."

"But you're just guessing," said Bernie.

"I suppose I am. But I'm a pretty good guesser, and I'm right."

The girl nodded. She understood. Bernie didn't.

Tuck answered the unspoken question. He looked up at the Net broadcast and said, "I'm right because he's dead now, isn't he? And here's another guess. I'm guessing, if it hasn't happened already, that we'll hear of another tragic accident shortly, some well-placed official from the Aviation Guild. Or maybe we won't. Maybe he'll just disappear like that disc he was recorded on."

"But how did Bernie get involved?" The girl wanted to know.

Tuck offered a half-baked smile. "Bernie's got talent. But his talent is not in taking down Casino empires. His talent is being at the right place at the wrong time. Bernie wasn't a conspirator, he was a mule."

"I was a mule?" questioned Bernie, "What the hell is a mule?"

"It's like a slow, strong horse. You know, from the western films. It carries things like supplies. Equipment. Sometimes drugs. In your case, money."

"So the gambling and the takeover had nothing to do with one another?"

"It's the only way any of this makes sense. I think that disc was probably the Guild's pledge of support for whatever they were up to. He'd slipped it in his pocket, and somehow, it got mixed up in his poker

prop money. I don't think he realized it until long after the game was done. Your shoe-stealing friends. My redecorators. I think they were looking for clues to him," he said, pointing at Barnie. "Then the game's over. He's distracted because he lost so much, and only later does he check his pockets and figure out what must have happened. Somewhere out there, is a disc on it with his recorded treachery. Find the money — find the disc."

The girl turned, keeping an eye on the Net report again and didn't break her gaze as she spoke.

"But they had a leak somewhere."

"Must be, since he's dead."

"And, the other thing," continued the girl. "Someone on the inside was stealing from the Casinos. Barnie would win, and they would take it back. That was their plan. Unless he decided to cash in. Then they'd just move on to the next victim."

"Barnie, did they tell you to exchange it on the street?" asked Tuck.

"No. No way. It was —"

He stopped in mid-sentence. "Well actually — actually I don't remember. But this morning, I didn't really think I'd be able to cash in on the floor. After I thought about it, you know." Then he changed the subject. "Besides, you should have let me kill that thing."

He was hopeless. He wouldn't get it if they sat there all year.

Tuck tried to be patient. "If you'd have shot that thing, they'd have fingered you for one of them. One of the dipshits. By now, we'd have our heads melted, too. As it turns out, I think we're in the clear, now. Evidence of any takeover attempt has dissolved into smoke. There's nothing left."

"But what about us? What about what we saw?" insisted Barnie. "They'll probably just send another one." He put his hands on his head, as if he might hold onto it that way.

"We? We didn't see anything." He turned to the girl. "Did you see anything?"

She shook her head in a silent no.

"Me neither. And there is no evidence to suggest otherwise. Just three

people minding their own affairs. That is how the Casino does business. No, that clean-up drone was plenty capable of taking our heads, too. But it didn't. It self-destructed because its mission was complete. The Casinos are nothing if not efficient."

"I guess I owe you a lot then," said Barnie. "You saved my life."

Tuck half smiled. "You owe somebody else an apology, too."

Barnie turned to the girl. "I am sorry for creating so much trouble."

She looked at him steadily. "Just stick to what you know," she said.

"And someone else, too," prompted Tuck.

Barnie tilted his head toward him with the questioning look.

"I wouldn't worry so much about your head. I'd worry about your ass, were I in your shoes. Lisa will be back Friday. You're gonna wish you were dead. Wait until she sees her apartment. If it were me, I would make sure her apartment looks pristine."

A look of panic clouded Barnie's battered face. "But... I don't have money. They took it all. Can you—"

"No Barnie, I'm not going too front you any credit." He motioned to the headless corpse on the floor in front of them, "But he doesn't look like the kind of guy who walked around here on foot. I'm betting you'll find his transport on the ground level. His ID cipher is probably in his coat there, but you better move quickly. We won't be alone here for long. I'm thinking you'll find all of your winnings. Who knows if it will be enough to cover the damage. We'll just see how lucky you are."

This time he got it. Within seconds Barnie was rummaging through the dead guy's pockets. "What about you, Tuck? What are you going to do? You wanna give me a hand?"

Tuck gave him a hard stare.

"Number one. I'm staying the hell away from you. Number two, I've got some some of my own cleaning up to do. And number three, I think I'm going to see a show tonight, and later—" He looked up at the girl and winked, realizing he didn't even know her name. "Later, I've got a date with a reptile."

BY JAMES SLATER

If you liked this story, check out *Claustrom*, the full sci-fi adventure novel. Available now on Amazon!

CLAUSTROM

When the executive transport Raven sustains damage from a pirate attack on the first leg of its return flight to Earth, Captain Durt Larson puts down in the desert of the prison planet, Claustrom.

Marooned, an accountant, a security specialist, an orphaned pirate and an heir to a mining fortune must now join forces with the Raven's crew to face the planet's extreme environment and outwit criminal mastermind Wislon Simms, a.k.a. "The Wiz," to uncover planet's hidden secret.

For more information about the author and to stay abreast of new material visit

www.jamesslaterbooks.com