

## MACHINE DREAMS

by Joshua Mertz

Night, full night. Always night.

Hot Santa Ana winds had blown much of the aerial filth away and everyone's nose filters were off. Street level was thick with the tang of hydrocarbons, sweat, and madness. Overhead, criss-crossing bands of ferroconcrete vibrated with an incessant roar. Grainy holos glimmered above the crowded sidewalk, loops of writhing naked women, dancing food, and whirling logos. Street dealers hawked anything you could want. The air was clamorous.

Anson Hockney stood outside a Food Slot, a pix blaring an overdriven laugh track inside the greasy cafe. He was doing his disappearing routine, a necessary exercise for a street shark. Anson was not an imposing figure, being of medium height, once lean now going thick in the middle, shrouded in a shape-less coat the color of concrete. His long, flat face, thin lips, and dreamy dark eyes were eminently forgettable. Anson liked that. He stood motionless, externally in observe mode while internally rerunning the data loop of who he owed money to. He owed a lot of money. Tonight might be a break.

Tony Lichtenstein had called, saying it was urgent. Tony was an upcon hivedweller from San Luis Obispo who came to Anson with his arcology politics dirt when he had something that needed hiding. They were to meet at a specified place. Anson planned to charge him double.

A disturbance on the street diverted his attention.

Three street dealers, their cheeks ritually scarred with the Blood logo, their eyes bright with youth and drugs, had staked out an empty space at the curb and had been assailing the slow-moving traffic with their "Hey, *jake!* Cutcha *blade!*" while shaking their tiny bags of blue powder. None of the dealers was older than twelve. Business was brisk.

Then two drivers simultaneously spotted the empty place at the curb. Their compact electrobugs both jumped for the opening, colliding with a rubbery smack. They got out and started yelling at each other. Midcon burbnerds, Anson decided. Weekend warriors in artfully stressed leather come down to mingle with the masses. Probably get more than they bargained for. He watched.

His attention focused as it was, Anson did not notice the two beefy men until they had flanked

him. Meat racks, black shirts stretched tight over bulging arms and chests, definitely augmented since they didn't grow them that big in the barrio. *Somebody wants my money real bad*, Anson thought. He did not move.

The two giants stood on either side of him, pretending to watch the arguing midcons. Anson did not acknowledge their presence.

One turned and looked down. "Stefano," the man growled.

*Stefano, yeah. I owe him big. They won't take no for an answer; that's for sure.* Anson relaxed his arms and shoulders. *Hope I can get out of this alive.*

He lifted both his index fingers, pulling them taut, waiting for the tingle in his tendons to tell him that his muscles were ready for the deadly dance. Anson felt he had a tiger that lived in his blood. He had no memory of how or where or when he had come by it, but a hidden knowledge sometimes surfaced; physical memory, a flowing of his muscles into a dance of precision violence that the mind forgot but the body remembered. Sometimes something from the blank sectors inside his head would click on and the tiger would burn in his blood. Sometimes. A feeling of blue fire from his index fingers would be the sign of power.

Nothing came. Anson began to get scared.

Down by the curbside things had escalated. The two floyds were shouting at each other, fists raised, all puff and blow wrapped in studded cowhide. The three young dealers lounged by a street lamp, exchanging disgusted looks. A small crowd had gathered on the sidewalk to watch the ruckus. Nobody was buying drugs.

The preadolescent dealers strolled into the street, one of the boys shouting something unintelligible at the midcons. One turned and the young dealer, grinning, flicked a string knife at him, neatly slicing the man's throat from ear to ear. The Bloods liked you to look at them when they killed you. The other midcon's bravado evaporated and he turned to run. The youngest dealer swung a string knife around the man's throat and yanked at the handle, nearly decapitating him. Dark blood geysered in the mercury vapor light, drenching the street with the metallic tang of death. The crowd on the sidewalk silently pulled back from the slaughter, although none turned to go. The two augmented musclemen flanking Anson watched the scene with mild amusement.

The three children calmly went through the dead mens' pockets. They then got into the two idling electrobugs and drove away. The crowd closed in on the bodies.

Something clicked in Anson. The violence, not unexpected, not uncommon, triggered a

response in the quiet man that overrode his body's amnesia. The tendons of his index fingers tingled and lines of *chi* extended from his feet to the center of the earth. A complete *kata* instantaneously flashed before his eyes.

As the drug dealers were leaving in their newly acquired vehicles, one of the hulking enforcers beside Anson reached for the street shark's arm. On autopilot, Anson snapped both fists into the groins of the men on either side of him. As they crumpled forward—slowly, it seemed to Anson—he flashed his left arm upward, driving that one's nose cartilage into his frontal lobes, killing him instantly. In the same fluid motion, Anson grabbed the front of the right-hand enforcer's shirt and pulled down with a pinpoint surge of force, smashing the man's face into his knee, splintering the musclemans forehead with a wet crunch. Anson stepped back and watched the bodies fall to the side-walk.

That part of the crowd not close enough to the street to participate in the looting of the midcons turned now to the bulky bodies behind them. Knives flashed, hands groped through pockets, jewelry was quickly hacked from the corpses. *Might get you some blade*, Anson mused at the milling crowd. Augments were known to be big blade chunkers.

Anson shook with fear. Not fear for his life, but fear of the unknown. His deadly grace had departed as quickly as it had come, leaving trembling muscles and gasping breath in its wake. He held his hands before his face and flexed them. Nothing. Only hands flexing. Cold thoughts nibbled at the back of his head.

Eventually the Metros would show up and log the four deaths. Stefano would be angry, no doubt, but money would soothe his wrath. And Anson was free to go meet Tony, thanks to the two burbnerds getting dead. Hundred and fifty million people in San Frangeles. What were a few more bodies?

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Excerpt from "Up We Go! A Report From Orbit"  
by Senator Herbert T. Marapa;  
a Book of the Week Club selection:

Seen from orbit at night, the West Coast is a blaze of light, a twinkling toss of diamonds against the black contour of the Pacific Ocean. Stunning.

Only in the infrared band, however, does one begin to get a true picture. Northward from the Mexican border to the San Francisco Bay and beyond, in a line tracing the western edge of the vast Central Valley and extending inland past Los Angeles to the fringes of the Yuma

Desert, heat blazes upward from billions of dwellings, vehicles, factories, and human bodies.  
San Frangeles.  
It is, in infrared, visible from the orbit of Mars.

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Tony met him at the Happy Luck Sportsbar, an upcon place (upcon for the lowcon aesthetic of the street) with blaring pix on the wall and a cobbled together holoboard behind the bar. Tony maintained that their meetings would be more clandestine in such a place, what with the clamor of competition surrounding them. Anson was of the opinion that Tony was comfortable only in an enclosed environment, hiding behind the loud aegis of sports.

Anson took a booth in the back where he could see the door and ordered a beer from the waitress. Tony was already at the bar, watching karateball on the fuzzy holo. On the holoboard a small armored figure caught a miniature ball. Other small figures converged on him. He ran, but one darted in and landed a flying kick on the side of the running player's helmet. The runner dropped like a slaughtered steer, still clutching the ball. The refbot trundled out, waving a bright flag. Probable death, ten meter penalty for the defense, first down. Tony picked up his drink and turned away from the game, strolling stiffly to Anson's booth.

Tony's waddling walk spoke of numberless days in window-less rooms, his paunch and pasty arms looking ridiculous in artificially shredded denim and a khaki vest. His surgically perfect nose and teeth fairly screamed *corporate*. He wore his boardroom grin as he slid into the seat opposite Anson.

"Hey, spanky, what's the flavor?"

Anson's thin lips pinched into a polite smile. Trust the burb-nerd to wag out some stupid hive jargon. "Here and there."

Tony's smile faded to a pitying grin. "*Chocolate*, spanky. You say *chocolate*."

Tony was an arcofloyd bred in the fiscal hydroponics of corporate life, job as destiny. He worked in the PR department of WorldNet in the MacTronix arcology up in San Luis Obispo and was privy to some rather high-level power plays. Information was the name of the game and when he copped something hot he always brought it to Anson. Anson would make it disappear for a while. Then reappear. For a price.

The waitress came with Anson's beer and he slipped her some cash and a frugal tip. She ignored his

smiled *thank you*. He took a sip and looked piercingly at Tony.

“What have you got this time?”

Tony casually took out an antique silver cigarette case and opened it up, revealing a mirror and a small vial of blue powder. He was being coy.

“Maybe you’ve got something for me.”

This was almost a ritual. Tony would come down from SLO and go through the show of having Anson run down what was available while he, Tony, would chunk a line or two of blade. Then they would get to whatever meat Tony had brought.

“I don’t know why you do this, Tony. You could hit any shark on the street and get a better pitch. Things have been kind of dry for me lately.”

Tony surreptitiously poured some of the powder on the small mirror, crystalline flakes twinkling like tiny blue diamonds. Blade was technically illegal, but if you were careful you could get away with just about anything down here on the street. He plucked a small razor-tipped rod from the side of his case, then flashed his surgical teeth at Anson. “Tell me anyway.”

Anson sighed and flexed his sore knuckles. “I’ve got a copy of a really outrageous porno holo. Let you have it cheap.”

Tony showed no interest. He lifted his upper lip and cut his gum with the sharp end of the rod. Anson pretended not to notice as Tony quickly scooped the blue powder onto the knife’s edge and spread it onto the cut.

“There’s some kind of virus I think I could track down. Rumor is it’ll throw any RAM chip within ten clicks into double pneumonia. Supposed to be military.”

The blue powder on Tony’s gum fizzed briefly, then sank down into the cut, seeming to pull the skin in after it. He lowered his hand from his lip and leaned back into the booth, sighing.

*Blade needs blood and air*, Anson thought to himself. *The bugs should be starting their tweeky magic right away*. “How about a bootleg copy of next week’s Pustulant Muck concert?”

The company man’s smile widened. “No thanks. I’ve already got a copy. In fact, it was me that leaked it.”

*Right*, Anson thought. *You and every other network on earth*. “Unless you want last month’s black market financial statements, that’s it.” They stared at each other for a long moment while Tony’s pupils contracted to pinpoints, then opened into black saucers.

“So give,” Anson said softly.

Tony nodded slowly, both calmed and energized by the drug. He shook a small disc from his wallet and tossed it on the table. Its microgrooved surface diffracted the dim light of the bar into dirty reds and oranges.

Anson picked up the shiny wafer, and ran a nail around the drive interface. Fifty gig disc; a moderate bit of storage. “What’s on it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? I thought you were SLO’s genius of dirt.”

“Really, I don’t know.” Tony licked his lips, his eyes betraying fear. Anson noted the emotion and decided to charge triple. He fixed Tony with a questioning look.

“It came in the physical mail. No return address. It’s got to be something very hot. The Big Boys went jagged. They jumped into the boardroom and left the disc on the secretary’s desk. I swapped it for some family splatter drama and here I am.” His smooth cheeks crinkled with a crafty grin.

“Somebody’s going to want that back real bad, real soon.”

*And you just might lever yourself up another notch by making it appear,* Anson mused. “So what do you want me to do about it?”

“Oh come on, Anson. Do your thing. Be a holding pattern. Make it disappear for a little while.”

Anson produced a capacity reader card from the depths of his coat and passed it over the disc. Only ten meg of memory used, not even a millionth of the disc’s capacity.

Tony wriggled nervously in the seat across from him. “Take a look at it. Maybe you can figure out what it is.”

“You’ve read it?”

“Hell yes. Think I’m stupid?”

“What is it?”

“It’s got one file on it. A bunch of thousand-digit numbers. I think it might be a top-secret command sequence. It’s called MIMIC.”

The street shark stared blankly at his upcon client for several heartbeats. “What is it?”

“I don’t know. Really. But it’s probably hot.”

Anson blinked his eyes and rubbed his face. “If it’s all that tough, I’m going to have to charge

you a little more. When will you want it back?”

“I don’t know. Maybe soon.”

“You don’t seem to know much.” His reptilian gaze impaled the pallid man. “Indeterminate access. Gonna cost you. I’m putting my ass on the line, you understand.”

Tony did his best to act shocked. “Come on, Anson. I’m a regular customer.”

“The only regular customer I’ve got is me.”

Tony dickered halfheartedly, letting the street shark get away with a full triple increase. Anson read this not as a sign of weakness, but of deep worry. This simple bit of metallized plastic could be too big for even Tony, with his thousands of contacts, to handle properly. *His problem*, Anson thought. He pocketed the money and the disc.

Tony did another line and made his farewells. Anson watched him jiggle through the crowd toward the front door, a perfect little pastry of upon values: ruthless, amorally materialistic, frightened.

His mind turned to the problem of where to stash the disc. He knew the city like a rat knows an alley. A million crumbling walls, boarded up stairs, and half-finished architectural promises. Anson silently thanked the pudgy little man for the much needed business.

He never saw Tony again.