SLICED BREAD DIGITAL PRESENTS

THE HIROSHIMA REVERB JOB
BY LUCIA LU

PART II

WITH ILLUSTRATION BY MISHA GRIFKA
It was clear that the room was once a private booth of some sort or another. Ice was growing around the door when we reached it. It was basic security ice, and I punched through it pretty easily. Our guy had also locked the door, hilariously enough. I motioned Narc to the rear and kicked it open.

Inside the room, facing the door, was a girl a bit older than Narc with a very familiar face. I deactivated my scramblers and slugged her so hard she fell off her chair. Narc dashed into the room. A moment passed.

“Is that Jennifer Fuckmeinn-Clitch?” I bellowed at the prone form at my feet. “You goddamn fool.”

“Shit Cinn,” murmured Tam. “Back off. She’s feral.”

The girl below me stumbled onto all fours, then fell backwards into a corner. She peeked out from beneath her hair and hissed at me, weakly. I swore again. Jennifer F&C’s Fur-ship was an open secret in corp society. At the moment she was feral as fuck. Her pupils were huge.

“This explains so damn much,” said Tam. “She probably had just enough security clearance to get into the vaults, and then ...”

“Got as far as this before snapping from the stress of robbing her own dad and having highly-trained killer mercs sent after her skin?” I rubbed my temples.

“Why? She’s next in line for the F&C throne, right?” Narc look at Jennifer pityingly, reached out her good hand for the girl to sniff. Jennifer nuzzled Narc’s palm, cautiously.

I shrugged. “Corp kids, man. Usually some Oedipal slosh of betrayal and entitlement and fucked up daddy issues.” Tam and I had seen it before. Narc hadn’t, yet. “Maybe she wanted to sell it, get out from under dad’s money. Fuckmeinn sells the freaky, but everyone knows he doesn’t want it in the family.”

Narc pursed her lips. “Shit. Poor baby.”

As Narc stroked Jennifer’s head, Tam and I searched the small room for our maguffin. It wasn’t too hard to find. Tam bent down, stood up with a glitter in between her fingertips. She whistled. “No wonder the mercs were such shit. She probably blew her creds on the compressor for this. This is gorgeous.”
I took it from her. It was half the size of my pinky nail, a tiny diamond. The feel was indistinguishable from actual mineral. I pressed it against the sensitivity of my tongue, felt the pitch-perfect texture. “The Hiroshima Prog fits in this little thing? Wow.” I passed it to Narc. She took a glance, pocketed it. The young never bother to appreciate beautiful hackery.

“Think she can she walk?” asked Narc.

“I doubt it,” said Tam. “Feral in human-skin? She’s a kinesthetic wreck right now.”

“We’ll have to carry her if she doesn’t snap out of it soon,” I added. “And we don’t have Linda.”

We were all silent for a moment, for Linda.

Then we set to work. I pulled out a flimsy vehic prog from my pockets, let it expand into an van. It was a cheap little thing, and if anything shot at us we’d be fucked. Tam and I loaded the girl in as Narc clambered into the front seat. Narc dosed her with a calming something-or-other, and we moved.

We had just closed the van doors behind us when Tam and every sensor I had on me screamed in unison. Tam’s jaws were open, her gaze fixed above us and through the van. Narc quickly deactivated the roof. If some hacker had bothered with the code, I probably would have pissed myself then and there.

The golem was huge. It had crashed straight through the back of the stimstation, and its head stuck out from where the roof used to be. Decades of bitrot had deteriorated its features into a grey blob, like if someone had collected leper sheddings and mashed them into a ball. Only red eyes and a melting, open maw remained.

I watched grimly as a sheet of skin sloughed off the grey mush of its arm and landed at the formless, SUV-sized lump of its feet. The old cowboys called them golems - huge, grey, mindless things. Pure smashers. Golems were built to crush entire corp sectors, decades ago. They were outlawed hours after creation, more from a de facto horror than any respect for the law. But the net was still cowboy country back then, and nobody had bothered to clean the fuckers up. The few, few surviving ones generally wandered the empty wastes of netspace, where it is infinitesimally unlikely you’d ever see one. Unless you happened
to be a particularly unlucky trio of assholes, hunting down an asshole in the asshole part of the net, for a ragingly rich asshole who’d probably already docked half your payout at this point.
Golems were generally too dumb to try to hurt you. But if they did, you were dead. Like, brain melting out of your face-orifices dead. So Narc did what Narc does, which was violently curse and speed our van towards the hole Linda had smashed through the doors.

“Its sensors are too outdated to see us,” Tam whispered, unnecessarily. This seemed particularly fair since its neck was stuck at a canted angle. It looked pensively upward as we breached the front door hole.

Then it charged. Which would almost be hilarious, because one of its knees had rotted away, and it was still looking skyward. But a shuffling golem still outpaces a dinky van, pants-shittingly easily.

“What the fuck?!” Golems are not smart enough to do that. I scrabbled through my equips for a gun. “Tam, what the hell is happening?”

“It appears that F&C bots 4, no 5 have hacked the golem,” Tam gunshotted, lips blurring. Once she pointed them out, I could see 5 silver glints above the golem’s shoulders, before Narc swerved us into the remnants of an alleyway. The area around the stimstation was conveniently abandoned, shocking no one.

“Did Fuckmeinn just go over our heads to kill his thief?!” Narc squawked in disbelief. Hiring bots to do a merc’s work was a slap in the face. Fuckmeinn knew that.

“I’m informing F&C that the thief is Jennifer F&C daughter of Byron Fuckmeinn F&C REPLY MESSAGE NOT RECEIVED.” Tam punched the side of the van.

“Is that even possible? What does that mean?” Narc asked, into the silence.

“It means we’re fucked,” said Tam finally.

“It means we’re definitely not getting paid, ‘cause Fuckmeinn wants his daughter and us ‘freak-accident’ dead,” I translated.

“Fuuuuuckk,” groaned Narc.

The golem roared like stuttering static and increased its speed. It would definitely catch us before we reached Main. It would definitely not just stop if we dumped Jennifer; we knew too much. Tam and I silently ground out our options.

“We’re just going to have to take this guy out,” I said stupidly, unfolding a bazooka, also stupidly.
“We don’t have shit that can take this guy out, Cinn,” Tam rubbed her face.

I looked at the lumbering behemoth who was, slowly but surely, gaining.

“Aaaagh!” shrieked Narc as she drove through the remnants of a wall. “You stupid hags I can’t – oh, for fuck’s sake, SHOOT DOWN THE FUCKING BOTS. Gods.” She rammed another wall. It exploded outwards in pieces, a decent reflection of my mind at the moment. Tam groaned.

“We’re past our prime, Cinn,” Tam said, a weak smile peeking out from her mouth. She dropped a black blob at her feet, which started limply growing into a tripod. A rifle unfolded into her hand.

“Might as well shoot ourselves here and now,” I added. “Narc doesn’t need us for shit, anymore.”

“Fuck the both of you!” Narc screamed again as she dodged a series of degraded polygons.

We were all still figuratively sweating, of course. But we had a plan now. Sort of. Narc was running out of things to take sharp turns around. We were fucked if we had to go against this guy at a dead run.

This next part was going to be difficult.

First, I stopped breathing. Willed the hurt from my not-lungs. Tranced –

This body is not-body. I heft the bazooka over my shoulder, and it weighs nothing. I aim it at the golem. I pull the trigger. A shell the size of my head shoots out of it. The hard part - I don’t move an inch. There is no kick-back, because this body is not-body. And because if there were, I’d break every bone in my body after getting flung straight through the front of a fucking piece-of-shit van –

The ground thundered as the shell hit; it was a direct hit to the chest, which did jack shit, to some degree. But the golem stumbled.

Tam did her thing. The bots were far away, even for her, and the road was bumpy and Narc was a pathologically violent driver. The first shot missed, and the second pinged uselessly off the golem’s eye. The third hit a bot, ripping it in half. I could just barely see a thin metallic umbilical cord detach itself from the golem’s head as the
bot fell.

I readied another shell, sweating through the loadtime. This time, I aimed for the knees. The shell exploded. The golem stumbled, roaring.

A few more shots flew through the air.

“We only packed 5 shells, dudes,” I yelled, eyes fixed on the once-again charging golem. It seemed a bit slower, but not by much.

Shell three hit the golem. Another round pinged off the golem’s shoulders and head – these bots had pretty sophisticated dodging protocol, all things considered.

“Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck,” Tam said, loading another round. “Narc, stop the car.”

“What?!”

“Stop the fucking car, Narc,” Tam hissed. My spine prickled. Narc’s spine probably detached itself and took off at a dead run. The car stopped.

Tam got two bots before the golem recommenced charging. I hadn’t truly comprehended its size before. But now it was getting close, less than 30 yards from the back of the van, and it was bigger than a 5-story building. Another bot fell. I couldn’t even see the golem’s head anymore, just the great oozing round of its chest and stomach. Too close.

Tam growled. She crouched, jumped onto the headrest of the passenger seat of the van.

“Throw!” she barked at me, and jumped again –

In my mind’s eye, her upward trajectory slows. I bend my knees, spread my arms, and her feet float into my hands. No breath no breath no breath. This body is not-body and my body is not-body and I hold nothing at all, just a ball of momentum, weightless. I toss Tam straight up, impossibly high. The line of her body streams skyward. My arms are frozen above me in tranced supplication, and all I can do is watch.

Tam snaps her head back, her eyes skyward, her rifle stock pressed flush against her cheek. Her body an arrow, lethal metonymy. Two shots –

Tam landed. Narc drove. I finally willed my ‘skin to collapse on the floor of the van, and hyperventilated until my brain told me I was seeing spots.

The thundering steps of the golem slowed, became an
erratic murmur from afar. We were still several seconds from Main. As we finally ported over, I raised my head from my prone position, and enhanced my vision just enough to see a hulking grey figure in the distance, lumbering back into the Heaps. My head clanged against the van floor. Automated ‘skin shutdown began to do its work. The room fuzzed out.

I’d have to give Tam shit for passing out first, later.