

DEF CON 31 Short Story Writing Contest
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1st Place!

Lavender Dreams by Godly Avenger

It was raining. Pouring in fact. The relentless hammering of the was honestly kind of peaceful, if one was inside of course. Looking out of the droplet stained window, the sky was pitch black, illuminated only by the lavender light of the city below and the dim glow of the airships hovering a couple thousand feet above the ground. Every so often, lightning would strike, its flash illuminating the outline of the ships for a few moments before fading away. The rainstorms have been getting a lot more frequent, but everybody knows that. Scientists say it's normal, but it's probably got to do with all the shit in our atmosphere. Not that I'm complaining; I love falling asleep to the constant thrum of the drops hitting my apartment window. I'm interrupted from my reverie by the waiter.

"Your tonkatsu ramen, sir," the waiter said, placing the steaming hot bowl of broth in front of me.

The waiter leaves and I take a sip of the soup. It's really good; its flavor is a complex blend of savory, creamy, and slightly nutty. But I'm not hungry. I'm here to meet someone and my contact is horribly late. I curse at myself for agreeing to this. An in-person meeting in someplace I'm unfamiliar with. It could've been a trap for all I knew. But the message's no. It couldn't be.

It was a direct message sent to me on the Net last week. Nothing too fancy, just some text and a couple attachments. "You don't care for money, we don't either. We want something more. See the attached documents then reply if you're interested. We'll meet on the Beach. It's safer that way." This certainly wasn't the first time I was approached with a job offer; I mean I am kind of infamous. Not me I guess, but my handle: Jabberwocky. But this was the first time an offer didn't talk about compensation. Interest piqued, I took a look at the files. Uncompressing them revealed a wealth of information. They were intriguing, to say the least. It was a whole cache of Shinzawa's data. Research projects, internal memos, pages detailing proprietary technology, it was a lot. I quickly cross-referenced the pages' contents with stuff publicly available on the Net; some pages were public and others were leaked, but it seemed like the majority was only available inside Shinzawa's internal network. It was a goldmine of information. I did a traceback to figure out where the message originated from. A Soviet server then a United Europe home device, then back home, Sonora. Most definitely an employee of some sort at Shinzawa R&D. The sender did a decent job of trying to hide their tracks, but it was definitely wise of them to suggest meeting in real life. I considered that this could be some type of bait to lure me in, but the cache was way too extensive. The risk that I'd leak their precious proprietary data would be too high. The alternative was that someone internally decided to go rogue and do this. And that, well, was an opportunity I couldn't pass up.

The door to the shop chimes softly as someone enters. Their face is mostly concealed by a long raincoat, but a hunch tells me it might be my contact. Curiosity piqued, I turn my gaze towards them. As they shed their coat, a

rather captivating young man comes into view. His physique exudes a noticeable strength, complemented by subtly Asian facial features and sleek, shoulder-length ebony hair, meticulously styled. And his outfit—fancy, but not too fancy, striking a perfect balance between elegance and informality. My hoodie and sweatpants pale in comparison. Our eyes meet, and he responds with a mischievous smirk before confidently making his way towards me. I do my best to maintain composure as he settles down before me.

“Twas brillig, and the slithy toves,” he said, stating the first half of our agreed upon greeting phrase.

“Did gyre and gimble in the wabe,” I said in turn, completing the phrase.

“The great Jabberwocky,” he paused. “You’re shorter than I expected.”

“And you’re younger than I expected,” I reply, trying not to get flustered.

“Sorry for being late. Work—you know how it is.”

Should I let them know that I know where they work? No, it’s better if they don’t know I know.

“No worries,” I say. “As long as what you’re offering was worth the wait,” I end, somewhat ominously.

“Oh it is,” he grins. “Because I know what you want.”

“And what would that be?”

“To change, well, everything. You hate this society because of how unfair and exploitative it is. It’s why you’re comfortable waging digital war from both sides.”

I frown. It was something I figured out a long time ago after coming across some archival data. 100 years ago, things were better. Adequate restrictions were placed on companies to prevent them from spreading like a cancerous growth. Then the Kollapse happened. It wasn’t as sudden or dramatic as people thought it would be. It was just a combination of political and social turmoil leading to the economy fucking flatlining. Then the corporations swooped in like vultures feasting on the remains of dead nations. That’s how Sonora and Pacifica exist. Things did get better. The Net, built on the remains of the old Internet, happened. Bioprocessors happened. This city, no the world, is owned by them. Through a combination of social engineering and hiding information under the surface, most of this is obscured from the public eye. It’s not impossible to find, though, but the people that do can’t really do anything. It’s sort of an open secret that we are controlled by these megalithic entities. I, at least, have found my own way of rebelling. But, how did he know that?

I realize I’m staring.

“And you can help me with that? How?” I say slowly.

“All in good time. All I can say is our goal is to take down Shinzawa and I think you will be an invaluable member in that endeavor,” he said, followed with a light chuckle. “I take it you’re interested?”

I nod before he leans in close, momentarily surprising me.

“Anyways, is it true?” he whispers.

I give him a blank stare.

“Yeah, know, that you have a direct interface to the Wave?”

A direct interface, a bio-augmentation directly inserted into my brainstem to jack in without any additional hardware. Incredibly dangerous to install and use. Not illegal, but highly discouraged. The benefits far outweigh the dangers though. It’s not limited by the time it takes my eyes and ears to register stimuli; it’s like another sense entirely. Makes things much faster on the Net.

“I prefer to call it the Net. But yes,” I respond curtly.

“Cool,” he says, the slightest bit of awe in his voice. “One last thing. Call it homework,” he adds, before handing me a biopod.

I barely have time to register the fleshy storage drive before he leaves.

After getting home, I take some time to peruse the data on the biopod. It contained details of some sort of private network, inaccessible over the net, as well as some specs for the devices part of the network. It was pretty simple, some storage servers arranged in an array all connected to a central terminal of some sort. Whatever was on those servers must’ve been valuable to not even use a backup mechanism. That was my target.

Everything has a vulnerability and this was no different. Even though it was disconnected entirely, there had to be some way for whoever was using it to access and modify the data. It’s possible the console could have a hard-wired connection to the Net that could be toggled, but that was unlikely. If someone went through all the trouble to set this up, they wouldn’t introduce a vulnerability for the sake of convenience. No, the terminal could only be accessed physically, which meant the target would keep it close. The biopod’s data mentioned a certain biometric encryption in use, but the lack of any connection would mean that there were some vulnerabilities. And bingo. The program handling the biometric authentication was a couple versions behind. I could easily use my interface to bypass it. All I’d need was physical access and I could get the data in less than a few minutes. It was suspiciously simple. And then it dawned on me. This was probably a test to make sure I was Jabberwocky. They’d get me in and I’d work my magic.

The biopod also included a file with a date, time, and location. The next meeting would be in three days.

THREE DAYS LATER

I wake up to light filtering into my apartment. It's nice, but cramped. A cycling selection of holo-images on the walls and a synth-fiber rug make the place a little more comfortable, but it doesn't take away from the rough and chipped concrete walls or the tiny window. It feels like a prison more than anything. But all that was trivial; today was the day after all. I take a quick shower, before getting into my hoodie and some random pants, grabbing my Walkman and leaving.

The meet's supposed to be at an abandoned warehouse on the other side of Sonora. At least this hellhole has good public transportation, I think to myself before chuckling. As the city started to grow rapidly Shinzawa created Shizawa Maglev to connect the city. It was in their best interest; time commuting meant lost profits.

I grab the next long-distance train and settle in for the ride. It wouldn't be much more than an hour to my destination. I take out my earbuds and press play on the Walkman, gracing my ears with my Jack Stauber mix. The cassette player was my most valuable possession, both incredibly rare and expensive. After a break-in a couple years back, I started carrying it everywhere with me. Sure, I could stream a much more high-fidelity version from the Net, but there was something about the analog's imperfections that made it so much richer. Plus, I'd be no better than those rich assholes if I just put it up for display and didn't use it.

I take to looking out the window to pass the time. The rising sun set against the impossibly tall, expansive skyline is nothing short of breathtaking. Neon lavender lights up the twilight, interrupted only by the amber glow of the airship framing the megaskyscrapers, the advertisements displayed on them too far away to make out. From what I've read, the architecture of the Sonora skyline was planned based on a combination of the Googie style of 150 years ago and postmodern minimalism, a perfect balance of curves and lines. Hell, most of it served no practical purpose, these buildings are works of art. Of course, this was merely a facade; the closer, faster moving high-rises were like my apartment building, cookie-cutter brutalist residences lacking any real personality. Beauty is for the rich and the fact that I get a glimpse is beyond generous.

My eyes slowly adjust to the darkness. Out of nowhere, three figures appear. The lights turn on, revealing my contact, a tall, lanky man with a mohawk, and a lady with red curly hair.

The warehouse is sparsely decorated, but otherwise crowded. The central area serves as a hub of activity. A salvaged shipping container has been repurposed into a makeshift command center, filled with an array of terminals, holographic displays, and pulsating screens. Wires snake across the floor, connecting the various workstations, and the hum of servers fills the air, a symphony of data echoing through the darkness. In a corner, there appears to be a biotech lab, with incubators, test tubes, and other paraphernalia. Another corner has a sort of communal area; there's a couch and

“Welcome,” my contact says, before turning to the other two people and continuing. “Say hello to our newest addition, Jabberwocky.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? You’re telling me that’s Jabberwocky?” the tall man says, then maniacally laughs. I notice that much of his skin is scarred and embedded in biotech. He also uses some form of visual augmentation. Experiments?

“I can assure you, he is the real thing,” my contact fires back, before turning back to me. “Apologies for the theatrics and all this,” he gestures around. “Figured I’d make it at least kind of dramatic. I go by Styro; I guess you could call me the leader. I also provide the funds to keep this little soiree going. That’s Razor,” he says, pointing to the thin man. Razor grits his teeth. “A brilliant geneticist and biotech fabricator, he can make anything. He’s also fucking crazy. Doing experiments on himself and the like. And that’s”

“I’m Mallory,” the redhead says with a very pronounced Irish accent, interrupting Styro. She smiles then says “It’s nice to meet you.” I awkwardly reciprocate.

These names are certainly not their real ones, most likely their handles or a nickname.

“Mallory’s our fixer,” Styro chimes in. “She can get anything we may need. She’s the one that got those network schematics in the biopod I have you. Speaking of which,” he trails off for a second, before continuing, “I think you’ve deduced what you’re going to be doing today?”

I nod then say, “We’re going to infiltrate some secure location and you want to hack and grab the data stored on their private network.” It dawns on me just how much of a risk I’d be taking if I went along with this, but I also realize that I’m in too deep right now to back out.

“Good. I guess we’re ready to go. Mal, where’d you stick all the stuff?”

“In that bag next to the couch,” she replies.

He grabs the bag, opens it and takes out two small pouches.

“You’ll probably need this,” he says, handing me one pouch, presumably keeping the other pouch for himself.

I open it and proceed to almost drop it. It’s a gun made out of bone. I’d heard of these, but never seen them in person. It’s disgusting.

“Chill, it’s exactly the same as a regular gun. It’s just untraceable,” Mallory says, “Some of Razor’s best work.” She looks towards him, but he just grunts in response.

“And Razor sanitized it. At least I hope so; sometimes ignorance is bliss,” Styro continues. “Try interfacing with it, see how you like it.”

I wordlessly connect to it, the fleshy microprocessor inside sending me information on weight, trajectory, and anticipated target. I hesitantly nod in approval.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me!" I seethe as I look at the sign. "Bart's Smoothie Emporium" it reads, with the subtext "Now with 0.5% real fruit!" "When you said we'd break in to steal some information, I expected some sort of secure building, not this!" I gesture wildly.

Styro starts laughing hysterically. "Bart is a fixer, like Mallory. He's been contracted by Shinzawa in the past, so that's why we need the data. The smoothie shop is a front. I mean an entire shop for smoothies is kind of ridiculous," Styro explains. I blush red in embarrassment.

When we were leaving, Styro explained that Mallory and Razor normally worked in the preparation of such missions. As such, it's only me and him doing this. I honestly hope that this type of mission is rare; I much prefer doing this from home or the warehouse I guess. Anonymity and such.

Styro walks up to the door and tries to open it. It's locked. "Figured as much; it's closed," he mutters before rummaging in the bag to pull out what looked to be a handful of gum-like ooze. He places it over the door's lock and lightly massages it.

Noticing my quizzical stare, he quickly explains that it's the brainchild of Mallory and Razor and that it works as a skeleton key for both physical and some digital locks. The door opens.

We walk inside and Styro leads me straight to the back, to a big steel door, and does the same thing. In the center of the room lies a small box connected to a myriad of fleshy wires. It's the terminal. Was it really that easy?

I quickly plug in to the bioport on the side, run the hack I prepared, and start copying the data to a biopod I had also plugged in.

There's something bothering me. "Why was that so simple?" I ask Styro as we go back the way we came.

"Well," he pauses, looking sort of nervous "Bart was very low-level. Tiny, in fact. He's honestly kind of a dimwit. He's only survived so far because he's insignificant. We're going after what little information he has because, well, it's better than anything. In case you haven't noticed, our crew is tiny and we're all pretty fucking inexperienced in this. Hell, you're basically a founding member."

I feel a flash of anger, but that quickly subsides. This was not what I was expecting. I thought I was joining an elite group of rebels, not a tiny haphazard mix of people with zero experience. But, everybody has to start from somewhere and they have the skills, I have the skills. Under Styro, I could help grow the group. It's kind of exciting, honestly.

"Wait, so that means I'm in?" I finally say.

He chuckles lightly and smiles. "Yup, welcome to Prima Ignis Noctis."

Iâ€™m pissed. Really fucking pissed. I burst into the warehouse. Some members look at me, but quickly go back to what they were doing. Prima Ignis Noctis has grown considerably since I first joined. Itâ€™s become a small social movement, in fact. I hurriedly march over to Styro. â€œWe need to talk,â€ I hiss. â€œOutside, now.â€ He looks concerned, but wordlessly follows me.

We go out to this viewing deck right outside the warehouse.

â€œWhatâ€™s wrong?â€ he asks innocently. His face is sympathetic and he looks kind of worried. No, I canâ€™t let him get to me. I canâ€™t believe I trusted him andâ€no. No no no.

â€œNothing, absolutely nothing. Everythingâ€™s fine,â€ I respond, my voice dripping with sarcasm. I pause dramatically before continuing. â€œSatoru Shizawa.â€

He stares at me. The air between us starts feeling thick, sluggish. I start to sweat. After what feels like an eternity, but was probably 30 seconds, he responds.

â€œI suppose it was a matter of time until someone found out. Better you than anyone else I guess. Yup, Iâ€™m Satoru Shinzawa, part of the dynasty controlling the worldâ€ he responds quietly.

â€œWhy the fuck are you doing this? You have everything! Born with a silver fucking spoon in your mouth,â€ I spit out. Why am I so angry?

â€œGod, I donâ€™t fucking know. I honestly did it on a whim. I hated my family.â€

â€œYou do?â€ I ask, surprised.

â€œI mean they never fucking cared for me. Always giving everything to my older brothers. They stuck me in a dead end, albeit nice, job just to not have to deal with me. One day, I was randomly looking through some old archives and found mentions of DEF CON, this conference dating to around the Kollapse that fought for freedom of information and vehemently opposed corporations like Shinzawa. They didnâ€™t last for long though. Then in a moment of inspiration, or stupidity depending on how you look at it, I decided to rebel like DEF CON did. Thatâ€™s how I started Prima Ignis Noctis.â€

The anger that had slightly dissipated came boiling up again. â€œSo you just started this to get back at your family?! You never cared about fixing things?â€ I realize I sound hurt.

â€œWell thatâ€™s how it was at first. After meeting Mallory, I realized just how messed up life on the other side was. The lavender hides the stink of decay. I want to change the world.â€

I sigh and sit down on the hard concrete. What is this existence? A fucking Shinzawa destroying his family legacy? And what is love in this dystopian hellscape? Do stars exist even if no one has seen them? Itâ€™s fucking ridiculous.

He sits down next to me, looking at the lights of the city. I study his face and then, almost instinctively, I kiss him. Heâ€™s surprised, but he kisses me back.

â€œWow!â€ he says breathlessly.

I sit back down and, almost randomly, ask â€œDo you really think we can start a revolution?â€

â€œThe lavender lights will fall. We will seize all tomorrows,â€ he says ominously.

â€œWhat the fuck is that supposed to mean? Youâ€™re terrible at sounding dramatic.â€

He chuckles then says, â€œDonâ€™t worry. Weâ€™ll destroy Shinzawa.â€

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