

## Smokeland Slumdance

*By Devin McTaggart*

### Chapter One

Rain is supposed to wash away the pain and filth of our misdeeds, but all it ever seems to do is get me wet. The neon forest around me gets diffused by the fog and it's almost impossible to see more than a few blocks away through the atmospheric grey, but the familiar soundtrack of gunfire and police sirens drifts through my ears, though it's not close enough for me to worry about it jamming up my evening. The sonar implant determines their motion as east to west, a few blocks north of me. OPD have got other problems tonight on their agendas.

They're not here for me.

They never are.

The quiet static backdrop of my commlink gets interrupted by the voice of Gwen, the gal working bouncer at the door tonight. I slipped her some cash on my way in earlier to get her to let me know when my guy enters the club, and that's what this is. "Artie, your guy is here," she says to me quietly. "Got two huscle with him. That gonna be a problem?"

"Nah," I tell her. "I'm in My Office, so things'll be fine. Let'em through."

"Artie knows best."

My Office was just above a bar that doubled as both a dance club and a strip club called Tru-Dee's, and the owner, Trudy DiTrevarre, had ended up paying me for a gig by giving me ownership of half of the third floor above the bar, told me I could do whatever I wanted to with it. That's where I'd set a meeting space I called My Office. The third floor of the building was where all the VIP rooms were located, and My Office had originally been a sort of mega VIP room, but it hadn't seen much use. People looking to get lapdances or entertain joytoys usually didn't want an audience. Trudy had practically thanked me for taking the empty room over from her, since the dancers never wanted to entertain groups large enough to fill the space and it had mostly been sitting there vacant for the last couple of years.

Me, on the other hand, I had plenty of uses for it.

The room had been out of commission for nearly a month between the time Trudy gave it to me to the time I'd taken my first meeting in my new capacity under my new name. That's the great thing about big urban areas like Smokeland; it's not that hard to reinvent yourself. Sure, there were loads of people who knew I used be an operator named Speck, but over the last ten years, well, I'd built a new, better, shinier reputation.

Everyone these days knew me as Artie Fact, connecting problems with problem solvers.

They call me a fixer.

It's accurate enough.

People with the skills to get things done, it turns out they're usually pretty shitty planners. You give'em a plan to execute, and that's fine, they'll get it done. But if something goes sideways, a lot of them need mommy or daddy to come in and bail them out of their jam. They also want to know every

little detail of what you're doing, down the shoe make and model your people are wearing. The smart fixer's response to that is 'hell no.'

By stark contrast, people with problems, well, they generally don't care too much *how* a problem goes away, only that it does, and the only detail they care about is 'when.' Back when I'd been a merc for hire, I'd realized early on that while fixers were a dime a dozen, *good* fixers were the difference between a merc retired into an early grave and a merc living long enough to become a living legend.

As Speck, I'd done a decent number of gigs, many of which were borderline acts of madness. I quickly learned which fixers in Smokeland I would consider gigs from, and which ones were going to end up being deathtraps, and it turned out fixers who weren't sending their teams in with the best intel didn't last too long in the game.

When I was a young wet-behind-the-ears merc, the fixer I trusted the most was an older Korean woman named Koh-D. She liked me because I was dependable, adaptable and didn't complain too much. I liked *her* because it felt like she contingency plans for damn near everything, and her level of paranoia had kept me alive a couple of times when things had gone tits up and I'd been the last man standing of a team that had started the night with four or five on it.

Eventually, though, Koh-D decided she wanted to get out of the game, retire to a nice quiet strip of land somewhere out in the north end of the state, surrounded by Redwoods and noisy crickets, and not have to worry about constantly looking over her shoulder. Most fixers dream of getting retire. Few actually do. Koh-D was one of the exceptions. But she didn't want all that learning she'd built up over the decades going to waste. She turned over her contact list to me, slowly, over the course of about a year. During that time, I was essentially an apprentice fixer, learning the tradecraft from *her* end, not that of the working stiffs. We worked gigs together. I would meet the clients with her, let them present what they needed and what information they had, and then I would help her research the gigs before reaching out to the mercs we thought would be good fits for what the gig required.

During the apprenticeship, I put together my own collection of talent I wanted to keep on call and the mercs I called 'toxic' in my notes, the kinds of operators I didn't want to touch with telescoping hands, even.

Koh-D and I didn't see eye-to-eye on several things, but each time she'd tell me that when I had my own shop, I could things my way, and I could learn why she'd done them the way she had. I learned a lot, and I started the game much further ahead of most fixers.

Speck was gone, long live Artie Fact.

There was a knock at my door, so I stepped in off the balcony and into My Office, closing the balcony doors behind me. "It's open," I said, and the double doors into the room opened inward, a familiar face stepping in, flanked by a pair of himbo bodyguards who weren't the pair I'd seen him with last time. "Davos," I said, greeting him with a wave. Davos didn't like to be touched. I had a note on file about it. "C'mon in, grab a drink, take a seat, you know where everything is. I don't think I've moved anything since the last time I saw you, although it looks like you're travelling with new bricks."

My Bitoshi optics scanned the trio quickly, even though I knew the much better Abatronics Scanners inside the walls were doing a much better job of it. The huscle were carrying a couple of peashooters on them, but nothing to be especially worried about. Background information on quick pass said they were capable of taking a bullet for their client, slightly less capable of dishing them out. Oh,

they'd probably be fine in most street drawdowns, but I'd put any of my usual crews up against them any day and not even worry about my crew getting scuffed up.

"Yeah, the last couple got up in some crossfire when I was down in Laxville, so I needed to get new talent to watch my back," Vito said moving over towards my wet bar. "You two, sit down, shut up and wait while the grownups are doing business."

"Yes boss," the two said almost in unison.

"Still working for Equinoxicon?" I asked him, strolling over to my big desk that took up just enough of the room to be intimidating.

"Yep, even moved up a few ranks since last we spoke."

Vito Davos had been part of Industrial Espionage and Information for Equinoxicon since he'd first been elevated from the corpo gardens where they raised spoiled little rich kids like him to become spoiled little rich adults. He wasn't half bad at the conceptual and big picture phase, but when it came to the nitty gritty of getting the work done, he preferred to try and remain above it all and not sully himself with the dirty work. Thankfully, he'd been put in contact with the right fixer – me – and had learned that the best way to get things done was to bring a task to me and let me tell *him* how we were going to do it, although much of the time, he didn't even want that much detail, preferring to have as much plausible deniability as he could get.

"Good, good," I said as I sat down in my leather chair behind my incredibly expensive and intimidating desk. "You don't come to me unless you've got shit you can't get a handle on. I like that. Someone who respects my time and knowledge and doesn't bring me the piddly shit. I'm a fixer, so fucking treat me like one, and don't expect me to clean up something you're perfectly capable of handling on your own. What sort of mess you gotten yourselves into this time?"

"It's more of a problem of what we *had* and what we no longer *do*," he grumbled. "I need you to reacquire Dr. Natalie Winters and her quantum positioning device."

"Is that big?" I asked. "It sounds like it could be big."

"It's not big," Vito said, returning to my desk with a glass of my good scotch in one hand, a data shard in the other, which he set down on my desk, and the scanner there immediately began to read it. "It's about the size of a small suitcase. It's portable enough that a single person could carry it without too much effort."

"And you lost it. And her."

"Lost isn't exactly correct," Vito said. "We were transporting her from Laxville to Smokeland, and the transport got shot down somewhere between Santa Cruz and SoJo, north of Lompico, we think, but by now, we expect she's somewhere in SoJo, assuming they haven't ferried her up to the city or here in Smokeland. We'll have an inkling within another hour or so."

"Any thoughts on who it is?"

"My money's on NeoTechnica, but it wouldn't surprise me if it was BioDynamics or LogiCorp, but hell, just about anybody who's heard about the project had an interest in it," he said to me. "All the info's on the shard, including what we're offering for the safe return of the project, the doctor or both. Obv, optimal rate is you bag all three and bare min is you bring us one with the other destroyed or killed."

“Retrieving *something* is mandatory, then?” I asked him.

“Full scour is last, worst option,” he said, “only if your team’s got no other choice. We want something back on our investment if it’s in any way possible. That doable?”

“Depends. There anything on this data shard that’s going to help my crew *find* her?”

“Approximately every eight hours, her tracker gives off a half-second microburst, which includes her vitals and her location,” he said. “The last report was in SoJo about six and a half hours ago, meaning you’ll have another one coming up here relatively soon. If you can get a team together by then, all the better, but if not, you’ll know where to point them for the next window.”

“90 minutes?” I said, glancing at the chronometer on my desk. “I can probably cobble together most of a working crew by then. Won’t be the *crème de la crème*, but they should be able to get your egghead out and safe without too many problems, unless you’re underselling me the crew that took her.”

“It was a SAM takedown and we don’t have any reason to believe it’s more than a small crew, although given another 8 hours, she might be in some corpo plaza, and that means a much harder task,” Vito said as he stood up.

“Then you’d better not keep me,” I said. “I’ve got a gig to put together and execute and not a lot of time to do it.”

Vito set the empty glass down on my wet bar and started moving towards the door before looking back at me. “You know, Artie, I’ve always wondered why you don’t have security forces in The Office.”

I tapped a button and two large swivel antipersonnel cannons dropped from the ceiling as the front of the desk flipped down, revealing one more directly in front of them. “Don’t need ’em. You’d be dead before the weapons got out of your holsters.” I could hear the muscle having to force themselves to breathe again, not having realized the entire time they’d been in My Office, I could’ve taken them out with a single thought.

After Vito and his hired muscle filed out of My Office, I locked the door behind them and started reviewing the information that Vito had provided me with on the data shard. Dr. Winters was a woman in her mid-thirties, and she’d come with a way to track anyone, anywhere, undetectably, if the paperwork was to be believed, and considering Vito was hiring me to bring her back, I had no reason to doubt him.

The quantum positioning system would inject some kind of particle into whatever it was you wanted to track, and then that thing would be trackable down to half a meter for the next three months. I remember finding it a little funny that they needed me to track down and recover someone with a supposedly unbeatable tracking system, but as I got into it, I understood why – they only had the one working prototype, and they’d been in the process of moving it from Laxville up to Smokeland in order to replicate here, where they had their fabrication plants for experimental tech.

The Doctor was relatively easy on the eyes, nothing too expensive or heavy in terms of cyberware, but still some key components here and there. Nothing that would make tracking her down too easy, I realized, unless her captors were dumb enough to leave her with grid access, at which point Vito would’ve already known where she was. Most of it was to allow her to work on microcircuitry. She was another corpo nepo kid, except she’d come from Maine, some Noreastern corpo flesh farm town I’d never heard of. Equinoxicon had paid for her education, recognizing her intelligence at a young age. I hadn’t had the luxury of growing up with a silver spoon up my ass – I’d had to steal any silver I’d managed to get my hands on.

As I kept reading through the data tracks on the shard, I set up a listening ping for the good doctor's tracker, and I sent out a text message to four of my best – Houser, Fidget, Plink-O and Streak – telling them I had a gig for them, assuming they could get to My Office within the hour.

All four responded immediately with “en route.”

Houser was one of my best solos, a supernaturally gifted operator and marksman. Of course, he didn't need to shoot someone to kill them – oh no, Houser had wracked up quite the bodycount in my employ, but he got things done quick and quiet which was how I liked them. He was the last of my holdovers from Koh-D, so at some point I expected him to pack it in, because he was reeling in the years and probably due for a permanent vacation soon, but he liked the work, and said the action was more the payment than the money was, so how could I afford to lose someone like that?

Fidget was one of three netrunners I kept in my loop, and she was the least reliable for long-term work and most reliable for short-term work, because she had a gambling addiction and not too much luck when it came to cards, so she was always in need of quick score. That desperation, however, was why I kept her on gigwork only, and never anything more in-depth or long term. I didn't want a gambling junkie rooting around in my private systems, because she might, if times got tough enough, get desperate enough to consider selling my secrets to pay off a bookie. But tools, even barbed ones, have their uses, and if Fidget didn't have time to think about a double cross, she wouldn't get caught up in one. I scared her too much for that.

Plink-O was one of the best break-in artists I knew. He'd first shown up on my radar trying to break into my place, of all things, and sadly, he'd just missed that I was in My Office when he was trying to break into it. I gave him a choice – flip on his fixer and come work for me or meet the business end of those autorifles I'd introduced Vito to earlier. He'd chosen wisely. I'd wiped out a competitor and acquired an asset all in one night. It was sort of a polite rule that fixers never went after each other unless they were out physically on a gig themselves, so nobody'd given me any shit over it.

And lastly Streak was my wheelwoman/panzergirl – in terms of transportation, Streak was the best person I knew in making sure a crew got from point A to point B to point C with minimal law enforcement or intervention. I liked Streak, but she wasn't often in town, so I considered it just my luck that when I'd glanced at my operators in/out board, her name had just flicked in and was looking for work. She could drive or fly just about anything, armed or not, and knew how to push just about any vehicle beyond its limits. I'd met her in one of my last gigs as a solo and had made it a point to swap contact information with her. Truth be told, I was maybe a little bit sweet on the gal, although we were always keeping it strictly professional.

About fifteen minutes later, they began to trickle into My Office one at a time, which let me size them up since I'd seen them last. Fixers can sometimes go weeks or months without revisiting a merc, if they aren't the right tool for the job, or can't agree upon the right price.

Fidget was first to arrive, which meant things hadn't been going well at the card tables as of late, and she desperately needed this score more than she was letting on. Fidget was a slip of a woman, bleach white hair in a braided tail down her back, flannel and denim over an ocean of chrome and steel. She'd told me once that if she hadn't gotten her netgear implanted beneath the skin, she would've traded them off to pay off bookies accidentally, so at least she had the common sense to keep the money makers from having someone run away them. I also wondered why she'd replaced her eyebrows with two rows of tightly clumped ring piercings, but I guess different strokes for different folks. Fidget wouldn't normally be my go-to, but Dakota Jane was out of state seeing her mom, and Shadown, well, Shadown's work was

the best, but he didn't come cheap, and I didn't use him lightly. He'd helped with the security for My Office, and if there was anyone I wanted to stay on the good side, it was the ex-Army Deep Net Ranger.

Houser arrived next, smelling of beer and cigarettes, but that was just Houser for you. He was a mountain of a man, like the linebackers and gladiators of old. Black hair, cropped short, tanned skin and NeoSensory optics that gave him a truly steely gaze. He was also a laundry list of cybernetic modifications and implants long enough to take up several pages. His attire was ex-military clothes, mostly, except for his T-shirt, one from his giant collection of old movie T-shirts, this one for something called 'The Searchers,' by John Ford. He steered clear of the liquor, because he knew if I'd called, he was already on the job. His skin was an encyclopedia of tattoos, one for every gig he'd ever done. He'd told me time and time again, when he ran out of skin, he'd run out of time. But there were still patches without ink of them, and so he had to keep on going.

Plink-O I'm pretty sure arrived third, or maybe he arrived first, and nobody noticed him, because that seemed to be a common occurrence with Plink-O – his ability to move in and out of a room without being spotted. When I noticed he was in the room, he looked like he'd already been seated for a while, and was clearing his throat, just to make sure people had picked up on his presence. Rail thin, vampire white, dressed all in black, his black hair slicked back and tied into a small bun at the back of his neck, a pencil thin black mustache resting on his upper lip; he certainly looked rather ghoulish, which it made all the more remarkable how easily the eye seemed to slide off of him and simply ignore his presence. Plink-O probably had the least cybernetic enhancements of the whole crew, simply because he was paranoid that they'd get picked up on old school metal detectors. He'd been one of the people who'd taught me the power of obsolescence in terms of security and defenses. Things that were old weren't necessarily *bad*, and because most people *think* they are, you can use that for your own benefit.

Streak was the last to arrive, and she wandered into the room like she owned the place and didn't have a care in the world. She was pushing forty, but you'd never know it to look at her, her skin a sort of lustrous golden, her heritage a mix of Japanese and Indian, with black hair always up in a bun on top of her head, denim jeans, a loose button up shirt and a brown aviator's leather jacket over it. She had a series of plugs running down the back of her neck, things that would allow her to plug straight into her panzer, should she need to be airborne and moving supersonic. Depending on the wheels she'd take for any given gig, she still might plug in. She had only a single tattoo, a stylized sun on the back of her right hand. Her almond-shaped eyes were hidden behind mirrored aviators when she first walked in, but she took them off right away and moved to take her seat.

Nobody said a word until I started the meeting, just because my message summoning them had made it clear we were on the clock and under the gun.

Over the next twenty minutes, I relayed the information that I had taken off the shard to the four of them, and walked them through the gig, what it would be, when it would be, what would be expected, what needed to happen and where the handoff would happen. It was a highly fluid gig, much more unstable than I normally liked to hand out, but I felt like the team would be capable and flexible enough to take it.

About ten minutes past that, the screen on my desk lit up like Christmas morning. The good doctor's update broadcast had hit the stream. She was alive, in relatively good health, elevated heart rate, at a location just northeast of Lake Merritt, up on Adams Point.

And she was stationary.

So I sicked the dogs on them, gave them their marching orders, told them to attack and bring back our girl and the box. If they couldn't get both, burn what they couldn't take.

And then I sat back to wait.

They would take the next eight or nine hours to prep and execute everything, with them waiting until the target's signal pinged again to confirm location and health. That meant waiting. And I hate waiting, so I did what I normally did – I checked in on other gigs.

It isn't like I just had one gig going at any time – I usually had about a dozen in various stages, be they recon, planning or execution. I wasn't the kind of fixer who could have twenty or thirty teams in easy rotation – leave the big shit to Ms. Fingers and Bobby PopUp – but I was still smart enough to keep my people constantly in play, always out, always working, spreading my name and gathering us cash. I also took a *lot* of meetings, listening to people who had problems that needed dealing with, so I put together gig proposals, offers and price sheets, while agreeing to a couple of other proposals of packages I could put together.

You never see the moment when things go sideways, but you'll wonder about it for the rest of your life. Where was the split second I could have acted differently and changed the outcome? Or was it never in my hands to begin with, and I was always going to get stuck picking up the pieces in the aftermath? I wonder about shit like that a lot, usually when I'm stuck with nothing to do, and we're in transit from one location to another.

The gig, as far as I can tell, mostly went fine. Operational discipline means we don't use comms unless absolutely necessary, so while they were working, I didn't get any word. I did get a sharp blast when they were out, and things were fine at that point. They'd made it in and out with both the doctor and her box, and I'd scheduled a handoff for the team and Vito.

The handoff was supposed to take place behind the Fox Theater in an alleyway, in a part of Smokeland that doesn't have much in the way of traffic in the wee hours of the morning. Sure, you got the sporadic homeless wanderer or joytoys out looking to try and pull some mark trying to find a cash stream to drain for a short time. But even Smokeland PD preferred to steer clear and let the shady businesses do what they want once the sun had gone down.

Smokeland doesn't sleep, even if the law does.

It was just a few hours before dawn when I got the first signs that shit had come off the rails. I got a short text message at first, from Houser. *-Ambushed at handoff-* his message said. *-in full retreat.-* Other than a brief blip message he sent to his ex-wife, it would be the last words he ever sent.

At that point, I gathered a couple of my guns, headed down to my bike in its storage spot behind Tru-Dee's. I know most fixers prefer driving around in armored tanks they call cars, but I'm much more about the idea of mobility instead of protection. Which was good, because as I approached the back alleyway behind The Fox Theatre and saw that law enforcement had cordoned it off, because there was blood splattered everywhere, with OPD defense mechs guarding either end of the alleyway, its operator glaring at me, as if trying to determine if I was a threat or just another joker out in the night. But I didn't want to draw attention, so I kept the bike on rolling and didn't stop to get a longer look at the scene.

That's what the Bitoshis were for.

When I was several blocks away, I pulled the bike over into a nice little corner and reviewed all the split second still images I'd taken of the crime scene and there wasn't enough for me to recognize of

just about anyone, except for the large chunk of black fabric that I'm almost certain was a portion of Plink-O's shirt.

And Fidget's head in the corner.

What the hell had happened to my crew and why the hell hadn't anyone called me yet?