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STARKERS

by Dean Whitlock

Once there was an Emperor, known as The Grand Wizier, High Decider, and Most Supreme Plenipotented Emperor of the West, but usually called “Mr. Wizier” by his loyal subjects, by whom he was regarded almost as a god (or God, for this was a land that could handle only one at a time). His close friends and those of his High Staff (who were much one and the same) called him “E.”

One day, the Emperor (E, that is) was scheduled to meet with the leader of a lesser country with whom the Empire was allied. However, when the time came to choose his clothing for the appearance, the Emperor could find nothing that suited him. It was a hot day, for one thing, and the meeting was to take place outside in the Imperial Gardens.

“I don’t want to be sweatin’ like a pig,” the Emperor complained. “Besides, that Shah’ll be wearing another one of them baby-blue silk suits hand-sewn by a team of little... little.... You know what I mean: hand-sewers. He always looks great on TV. I need something to

show him up.”

So the Vice Wizier and the Chief Educational Officer (and the Emperor, of course) met in closed session with the Secretary of Media Preparedness, who brought in his Under Secretary of Molded Messaging, who rang up the Director of Imperial Presentation, who consulted with the Deputy Director, and so on and so on, finally calling in the Senior Facilitator of the top secret Agency of Redirective Scenarios.

“E needs new clothes,” the Vice explained.

“But what of the Imperial Tailors?” the SF-ARS asked.

“Normal clothing won’t work,” the CEO replied. “Not even Imperial Clothing. It sags, it wrinkles, it scuffs. [“And it’s hot,” the Emperor put in.] We need something that gleams, something that soars, something that will make people stand up and salute!”

“And that breathes,” the Emperor reminded them. “I don’t want to be sweatin—”

“Right, E, right,” the Vice said. “You need your comfort.”

“That’s right.”

The SF nodded sagely and sent for one of his Able Practitioners of the Imaging Arts (Junior Grade). She studied the Emperor’s middle-aged but still hale body, made some notations on her laptop, chanted an odd song too low for the others to make out (though they all leaned in more closely), tapped her touchpad, and Lo! There before them stood the Emperor, apparently clothed in a fine jumpsuit of silver synthetic that rippled with rainbow shades under the lights.

Everyone gasped.

“Not bad,” the Emperor said, happily patting at the illusory toggles on the myriad of zippered pockets. “I can almost feel it. But can you, you know, beef it up a bit here in the pecs? And the biceps? And the quads?”

And Lo! It was as he wished.

“Hey, this is just great, ain’t it, boys?”

They all agreed it was.

“So how’s about boots. I think it needs boots. And maybe a hat. Don’t you think? A big hat? Or, no, no, a helmet! And some leather gloves tucked into these...these shoulder things here. And, hey! How about a motorcycle? I could ride out on a motorcycle!”

They decided against the motorcycle, remembering an unfortunate incident in the Emperor’s youth involving a cheerleader, a bridge, and... Well, that’s another story entirely. The Able Practitioner was given an appellative upgrade, the appropriate medals were struck, and all waited impatiently for the great day to arrive.

When it did, the Able Practitioner (now First Class) once more worked her magic. Dressed only in his shimmering synthetic, illusionary jumpsuit, the Emperor did indeed soar, spiraling into the garden from the roof of the Imperial Residence in the side sling of a two-pilot hang glider emblazoned with the colors of the Imperial Flag. It was a smashing success. Everyone in the crowd cheered. Everyone at home, watching the Imperial Appearance on TV, shook their heads in wonder and toasted good old Mr. Wizier with their beers or their bottled water. (He appealed across all marketing segments). The Shah managed a thin smile and wiped the sweat from his brow with a limp, silk handkerchief.

The Emperor leaped youthfully from his sling and gave the crowd two thumbs up, beaming his well known boyish smile.

But then something awful and completely unexpected occurred. A young man at the back of the crowd, a lad just out of school, clambered onto a lamp post, caught sight of the Emperor, and called out loudly, “What the—? He’s stark naked!”

And everyone who heard him saw it was so.

#

Jack peered desperately through the wall of the clear plastic funnel surrounding his face. It was beginning to mist up. That, added to its imperfectly curved surface, made the holding

room ripple in odd ways. He felt distinctly queasy. But then, that might have been due to the rising water level. The spout of the funnel was clamped securely around his neck. Water dripped onto his head, ran down his face, and collected beneath his chin. Soon, he was going to have to start swallowing. Or drown.

His hands were securely fastened to the arms of tubular metal chair securely fastened to the floor. (He knew because he had tried to tip it over.) The back of the funnel was also securely fastened to something. (He knew because he had tried to tip his head.) And the water level rose slowly but steadily toward his mouth.

“Hey!” he called to the surveillance camera above the closed door to the empty room. “I’m new in town. How was I supposed to know the Emperor liked to hang out starkers underneath all his...makeup? Whatever? I—”

He was interrupted by a sudden slosh of water over the brim of his lip. He choked, gagged, and swallowed. And gagged again. It was salty, with hints of urine and ear wax. And it had a distressingly long nose.

He tipped his chin as high as it would go. “I said I was sorry,” he squeaked.

The door swung open. Two men in black business suits walked in, followed by a stooped fellow in a black uniform with a thick leather apron. A thick, stained leather apron. He was carrying a metal poker and a blowtorch. The end of the poker was already starting to glow deep red.

“Good evening, Jack,” the bulkier of the suited men said. “Are you ready to tell us who you’re with.”

Jack glanced around the room wildly. Was this a trick question? he wondered. “I’m with you,” he said. The water lapped at his lips.

“Ha, ha,” the thinner suit said. “Who are you working for?”

“No one. I was hoping—”

“Who sent you?”

“Professor Languisch!”

“Languisch?”

“My philosophy professor. He said—”

“The old guy? White hair? Thick glasses?”

“With the dandruff?” Bulky put in.

“Yes! Ask him! He’ll tell you!”

“We did ask him.”

“What did he say?”

“He told us all about you, Jack.”

“More than you even know yourself, probably.”

Bulky nodded approvingly. “He lasted a long time for such a geezer.”

“He said you can see through any lie, Jack,” Thin Guy said.

“But you can’t tell one,” Bulky added. “Is that true?”

“Yes!”

“Ha! How do I know you’re not lying now?”

“Oooo, good question!” Thin Guy gave Bulky a high five.

“Because if I tried to lie I couldn’t say anything at all!”

“Really?” They looked at each other.

“Prove it,” Bulky demanded.

“Ask me—” The fetid water breached the levee of Jack’s lower lip. He had no choice but to swallow. Fighting the urge to vomit, he gasped, “I can’t prove it if I’m drowning! Let me out of here! I can show you then!”

“I don’t know...,” Thin Guy said.

“Oh, why not?” Bulky relented. “Viktor’s not ready anyway.”

“Takes time to do it right,” the man in the apron grunted. He held up the poker.
“Tip’s hardly orange yet.”

Bulky walked behind Jack and suddenly the dripping stopped. The funnel loosened and came off in a putrid gush. Thin Guy hopped out of the way. Jack sighed with relief.

“There,” Bulky said, reappearing on Jack’s left. “Prove it.”

“Right,” Jack said. “You have to ask me a question that I could only answer with a lie. When I can’t speak, you’ll know for sure.”

Thin Guy and Bulky considered it. “I don’t know...,” Thin Guy said.

“Oh, humor him,” Bulky urged.

Thin Guy shrugged. “What’s your name?” he snapped.

“No, no!” Bulky said. “He can just say ‘Jack.’ How about, Is your name Jack?”

“That’s not going to work,” Thin Guy said. “Tell us yo— No, that’s no good either.”

“No, that’s it!” Bulky exclaimed. He pointed to Jack. “Tell us your name is Fred!”

“My name is F—” Jack’s jaw froze. His eyes goggled. He turned red with effort.

“Flack!” he blurted. “See,” he panted. “I can’t do it.”

Thin Guy looked at Bulky, frowning. “I don’t know,” he said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Bulky assured him. “Viktor’s ready.”

The tip of the poker was glowing white hot.

Viktor studied it critically, then shut off the blowtorch and put it aside. He pulled a Leatherman tool from a little sheath on his belt, adroitly snapped open the jaws of the pliers with one hand, and came toward Jack.

“What? Wait!” Jack cried. “I just showed you! I can’t lie!”

“Yes, well, that’s the problem, isn’t it?” Bulky said.

“Can’t have you spouting truths all over the place,” Thin Guy pointed out.

“But, but, bu—”

Viktor snatched Jack's tongue with the pliers. "Say 'Ah'."

"Aaaaa," Jack cried. He pulled back with all the might his tongue possessed.

"Oh, he's a strong one," Viktor muttered. He put a foot against the chair and flexed his arm. Jack's tongue reappeared. "Gotcha now, little feller." He lifted the poker to nose height, took careful aim, and—"

"STOP."

The voice seemed to emanate from the very walls. Viktor froze, a look of unhappy surprise on his face. He peered over his shoulder at the surveillance camera. "Stop? Now?"

"Now?" Bulky and Thin Guy echoed.

"NOW," the voice answered.

#

"Now?" the Vice asked. "What the Devil for?"

"Because we may have a use for this boy," the CEO replied.

"Well, you cut it rather fine deciding," the Vice grumbled, fiddling with his hair.

"He'll be that much more grateful." The CEO thumbed the microphone back on.

"Clean him up and bring him to the Bunker."

"Yes, sir," Bulky replied, clearly disappointed. Thin Guy pouted.

Sighing, Viktor released Jack's tongue.

"Dank u," Jake murmured, weeping with relief.

The CEO thumbed off the mike. "You see, Vice? Timing is everything."

Jack arrived about an hour later, shackled between the two suited agents. The CEO studied him closely through the surveillance camera in the elevator as it rose to the Bunker. The young man was unprepossessing enough. He had black hair, a bit shaggy and wild from the recent wetting; a noticeable slouch, though that could have been from the neck irons; a rather beaky nose, which was no fault but his parents'; and a pair of very remarkable eyes: completely round,

with small, jet-black irises set in bone-white rings.

A deer in the headlights, the CEO thought. *Perhaps*. He pressed the button to admit them.

“No need for the shackles, and wait outside,” he told the two agents. They unlocked this, that, and the other various bits of ironmongery and retreated, pouting. “I apologize for their over-enthusiasm,” the CEO said to Jack, as the Bunker door fizzed shut behind them. “Their love of the Emperor sometimes clouds their judgment. Now then, you are Jack, yes?”

“Yessir, thank you, sir. Jack Daw, sir. And I want to thank you, sir, from th—”

“One thank-you is enough.” The CEO began to wonder about this boy. “Let me present the Vice Wizier,” he said, indicating his florid partner, lurking behind a large, marble desk.

Jack turned. “How do you do, sir. And thank you, si...ir.” His eyes went wider, if that was possible. He glanced quickly into the corners of the room, back at the Vice, away again.

“Tell me, young man,” the CEO said, “what do you think of the Vice Wizier’s toupee?”

Jack’s eyes fixed on the unfortunate object. “It’s, ah, well, it’s...” His mouth worked. “It’s quite a distinctive color!” he finally blurted.

The Vice Wizier glowered. Had he been the mother bear he resembled, Jack would have been cub chow.

“Ah,” the CEO mused, “equivocation. You can do that? Very good.” The CEO allowed himself a moment of satisfaction. He had been right; the boy could be of some use.

“I can if I have to, sir,” Jack replied. “It’s not easy.”

“No, I can see it isn’t,” the CEO said. “Poor lad. You must have had a devil of a time picking up dates.”

Jack shrugged. “I’ve never had a time at all.”

“Yes, people don’t appreciate honesty the way they used to, Jack. Please, have a

drink? To be honest, you, well,” he smiled deprecatingly, “your breath smells.”

Jack tried to smile back. “It must be from the liquid in the, uh...” He swallowed hard. “But I appreciate your honesty.”

“Of course. Vice, pour Jack here a bit of brandy, would you? Now, Jack,” he went on, once the boy had downed a healthy sip of the liquor, “you have a very remarkable talent there, this seeing through of lies. Where did you learn it? From that Professor Languisch of yours?”

“Oh, no sir. I’ve had it all my life, like a monkey on my back. Three monkeys: See-no, Hear-no, Speak-right-up.” He shrugged. “That’s what Professor Languisch named them. He was the only person who seemed to understand. He was like a second father to me.”

“And he told you to come here?”

“Yes, when they threw me out of school—”

“They threw you out of school?”

“Yeah.” Jack shrugged ruefully. “I caught too many of the professors cheating. I tried to enlist in the army, too, but the recruiter wouldn’t stop making promises and I couldn’t stop correcting him. He told me to get lost.”

“Hmm.” Again a small doubt scratched in the corner of the CEO’s mind. “You couldn’t bring yourself to equivocate?”

“Well, it didn’t seem quite right. Not from a Sergeant. He even had a medal.”

“Hmm.”

“That’s when Professor Languisch told me I should come here to the capitol. He said I should go to see the Emperor, that my talent might actually do some good then.”

“HMMMMMMMM.” The doubt scratched harder, but the CEO hadn’t gotten where he was by quailing at the first scratch. Or even the second. “Jack, Professor Languisch was right; you could do some good here. We...contacted him, you know, to tell him what happened to you. It was all too much for him, I’m afraid; his old heart just couldn’t take the shock. But he held out

long enough to tell us everything he could about you.” He smiled, pleased by his own powers of equivocation, and patted Jack’s shoulder. “You know, you’re not alone, Jack. There are other people with talents like yours.”

Jack blinked. “People who can see a lie?”

“No, but they do have talents, talents that some might call...magical.”

“Yes!” Jack’s eyes gleamed. “I knew it! I knew it had to be magic, not just some kind of eye problem.”

“Oh, it is magic, Jack. And magic is very rare. Most people don’t even know it exists. They don’t even believe in magic. But we do. We have recruited a few talented people like you to help the Emperor. Do you like the Emperor, Jack?”

“Mr. Wizier? Sure, who doesn’t?”

“Some don’t, Jack, and I’m not speaking of the Enemy alone. That’s why we have collected our special task force of magicians, to help the Emperor counter the threats from without and within. It’s top secret, Jack, very top secret. In fact, now that I’ve told you, I may have to kill you.” The CEO laughed heartily and slapped Jack on the back. “Ha! My little joke, but you can see that, can’t you, Jack?”

Jack tried very hard to nod. “A joke. Ha.”

“Good try, Jack. Almost equivocal. I can see you really would like to help. And you can see that I’m serious about how very top secret our little team is. Would you like to be part of it, Jack? Would like to be one of the rare, select, vital magicians helping the Emperor to protect our wonderful way of life and spread it throughout the benighted corners of the world?”

“Work with other magicians? Oh, yes!” Jack said.

“Good,” the CEO purred. *A regular Bambi, this lad.* He nodded to the Vice, who pushed a button on the big marble desk. “Finish your drink, Jack. Then go along with the two agents. They’ll take you right to the Senior Facilitator.” He held out his hand. “Welcome to the

Agency, Jack.”

“Oh, thank you, sir!” Jack pumped the CEO’s hand, then rushed to the marble desk to pump on the Vice, too. “And you, sir! Thank you! And...and...and...” He stared at the hair piece. He bit his lip. He waved to both men and backed toward the door. His remarkable eyes stayed riveted on the Vice Wizier’s toupee. “And you’d look much better without it, sir!” he blurted, then darted out the door.

“Pah!” the Vice growled. “A lot of use he’ll be!”

The CEO smiled. “Open your mind, Vice. Imagine what he might tell us about a certain few recalcitrant members of the Chamber of Common Delegates. Or what he might do to improve the veracity of our imaging.” The Vice humphed skeptically. “At the very least, imagine how he might help your own image. He’s right about that hair piece, you know.”

#

Jack followed the spry Senior Facilitator through the heavy doors guarding the entrance to the Agency of Redirective Scenarios. His brand-new identity bracelet gleamed pleasantly on his wrist. He couldn’t stop fiddling with it. What luck! He’d been in the capitol less than a day, and here he was, working for the Emperor. In a top-secret agency. With other magicians! He felt a wonderful sense of anticipation. Of belonging. Finally! People who shared his odd talent. Who would know what it meant to be odd. He stared around the room, wide-eyed (though that was nothing unusual).

“I’m afraid it’s not much of an office, Jack,” the SF was saying. “Redirective Scenarios isn’t a big agency yet, not like Intrusive Messaging or Proactive Polling, and certainly not like Preventive Extraction—those boys who brought you over. They have huge budgets and facilities. Of course, they have huge staffs, too. ARS just has us, but it’s a start.”

He gestured at the green walls, white ceiling, and putty-colored cubicles. There were three of them (cubicles, that is), and a fourth was being installed as the SF spoke.

“That’ll be your space, Jack.”

“Whose is that?” Jack asked, pointing with some wonder. Blue light flooded from the first cubicle, projecting an odd, flickering pattern on the opposite wall.

“Ah,” the SF said. He regarded Jack curiously. “What do you see there?”

Jack had the sense of an outdoor scene, but try as he might, he couldn’t make out a single detail. “Nothing,” he said. “Blue mist, flickering...stuff.”

“No humvees? No helicopters? No unicorns?”

“No. Just a smudge on the wall.”

“Fascinating! Come, you must meet Tolly.” The SF led the way to the blue-lit cubicle. “Tolly,” he said to the fellow inside, who was perched on a tall stool set before a large flatscreen monitor. “This is Jack Daw. Jack, Tolly Treck. Tolly is our scene painter, as it were, the Able Practitioner (First Class) for backgrounds, establishing shots, and casts of thousands.”

Tolly turned from his computer and tipped his top hat with a small, fastidious hand. His legs barely reached the top rung on the stool.

“Jack is our newest AP (Junior Grade), Tolly. He’s sort of a...Quality Assurance guy, I suppose you could say. The CEO thinks he might be able to help us sharpen our images, flesh out the details, rev up the veracitometer a notch or two.”

“*Eh, bien,*” Tolly said. “Some of us could use it, I’m sure.”

“But you don’t think you do,” Jack said. “I mean...” He bit his lip. *Equivocate*, he reminded himself. “I mean, that’s quite an image right there.” He forced a grin and gestured at Tolly’s monitor, which showed a battalion of various armored vehicles advancing on a copse of trees protected by a large snake, a unicorn, and a pair of naked people. Even from the great distance encompassed by the scene, the man looked suspiciously like Che al’ Amir Teng, leader of the Enemy.

“*Pff!* That is just a little exercise in texture and pattern,” Tolly replied, with obvious

pride. “My real interest is the people, the individual in the crowd. Watch the wall.”

“The wall,” Jack repeated.

“*Mais oui*. That is the real illusion. I just use this...” he flicked a hand dismissively at the computer “...to help focus my thinking.”

“And for the broadcasts,” the SF put in. “Tolly is also a topnotch digital animator. You see, his magic can only affect people in his immediate area. The scene in the monitor is a digital rendering that gets broadcast to the rest of the world.”

“*Pff! Regardez.*” Jack turned dutifully and stared at the flickering smudge on the wall. “*Voila!* Remarkable, *non?*”

“Wow,” Jack said. He turned back to Tolly, frantically scanning the monitor to see what had changed. “That’s...just...” Finally he spotted it: Che had been replaced by the Emperor. “...fascinating. I never knew anyone could do that.”

“You see my work every night on the news,” Tolly replied smugly.

“Tolly’s one of our best,” the SF said, with a fatherly smile.

“I’m sure. Though, Mr. Wizier’s not quite that...proportioned,” Jack pointed out, quickly adding, “do you think?”

Tolly chuckled. “*Pff!* For such details, I can only paint what they tell me.”

“That’s our job,” the SF agreed. “Come along, Jack. Let’s meet the others.”

The next cubicle contained one Buster Simily, AP (JG) for Audio Enhancement. He was hunched over an elaborate synthesizer, his round head cradled by earphones big enough to boil lobsters in, muttering into the be-foamed ball of a large microphone.

“We’d best not disturb him right now,” the SF said, with a note of concern. “He’s working on the Emperor’s speech for the press conference this evening. Last-minute changes of course.” He sighed. “Buster is our weakest link,” he whispered. “A bit...sensitive, too. He says it has something to do with the density of sound as compared to sight. Slower waves, echoes...I

can't really claim to understand the underlying metaphysics of it all. I just facilitate. Suffice to say, his illusions don't always hold up to the Emperor's..." He groped for a word.

"Abuse," Jack finished.

"I didn't say that." The SF's eyes flicked guiltily toward the surveillance camera.

"No, but you...no, that's right," Jack agreed. "I di—" He bit his lip hard. "Next cubicle, please?"

"Good idea," said the SF, leading Jack around the corner. "Jack, this is AP (FC) MayApple Cantwell. MayApple, Jack Daw. MayApple is our Fashion Maven, our Wardrobe Mistress, our Most Magical Tailor. She touches up all of the Emperor's outfits, and she provided the infamous jumpsuit."

Jack could see that. He could also see that MayApple liked to wear her own creations. Right down to the foundation garments. Which meant that he could see she was a natural blonde.

"Pleased to see you," he squeaked. "I mean, meet! Meet to please you!"

MayApple stood, smiling prettily, and held out her hand. Jack swallowed and took it. His own hand was already shaking. He glanced at her monitor, but it only showed a man's light blue business suit.

She noticed his glance. "Oh, that rag. Pretty plain stuff, I'm afraid. I'm just touching up the actual suit the Emperor will be wearing at the press conference. A tuck here, a dart there, bring out the gold thread in the weave, that sort of thing. I don't get nearly as many from-scratch designs as I'd like. The jumpsuit was special."

"Ah, y-yes," Jack said. "I...guessed." He could taste blood from his much bitten lip. He fixed his gaze on her eyes, which he was finding just as wonderful as all the rest of her.

She gently pried her hand from his grasp. "What will you be doing here?"

The SF chuckled. "Jack has a rather surprising talent. He is, well, a magical filter, I guess you could say. He's the fellow who saw through your jumpsuit illusion."

The smile congealed on MayApple's face. She looked from Jack to the SF and back. "Saw through?" she asked. "You guessed it wasn't real?"

"Oh, no," the SF replied. "He didn't see it at all. Jack here has the amazing talent to see only the truth."

A slow blush began to rise from the top of MayApple's chest. "Really? How do you make that work? A laptop? A PDA?" She glanced hopefully at his empty hands.

Jack shrugged and tried, unsuccessfully, to keep his focus high. "It just happens."

The blush had reached her neck. "Always?"

He nodded.

"And he always tells the truth," the SF put in. "Has to, in fact. So, be honest, Jack, what do you think of MayApple's lovely outfit today? Quite the designer, isn't she?"

"She's wonderful," Jack said, unequivocally. "I've never seen anything so lovely."

The blush washed over her face like a tsunami. She snatched a folder from her desk and held it before her. It was much too small. She twirled it from portrait to landscape, shifted it right and left, trying to foil the motions of Jack's flicking eyes. He tore his gaze away, only to find himself looking into the dark lens of the surveillance camera.

"What's even more fascinating," the SF added to MayApple, "is that whoever hears Jack tell the truth sees it too. That's why there was such a fuss yesterday."

The tide ebbed; her face went white. "Don't you dare say—"

"I won't!" Jack replied, staring fixedly at the SF's left ear. "Not a word!"

"Not a word?" The SF said. "About what?"

The question was too direct. Jack's mouth started moving. Words ran out. His mind raced madly after them. "About her underr-er-errrr-lying philosophy of human navel-na-nature and how that reveals her brea-ea-ea-th-taking choice of texture, color, and pub-pu-pattern to provide comfort to the wearer while still presenting a pleasant visual impression to the viewer.

Very pleasant. Very.” His tongue finally stumbled to a halt. He risked a quick glimpse. MayApple noticed his glance and glared. He returned to studying the SF’s ear. It needed a bath. He just managed not to mention it.

“Heavens, Jack,” the SF said. “I had no idea you were so versed in the elements of fashion design. You two should get on like a house on fire. Well, back to work, eh? MayApple has a suit to press.” He chuckled at his own joke. “Speaking of suits, Jack, we need to fit you out for the press conference.” He chuckled again. “Maybe you could talk MayApple out of one of her special creations. Wouldn’t that be a treat, eh?”

“No! I mean, I’m sure it wouldn’t suit me. No! I mean, it’s a good suit, but, but...maybe later? No! I mean—”

MayApple’s frown deepened with every word. Quailing, Jack fled.

#

And so it was that Jack escaped a truncated tongue, joined the Emperor’s legions, and fell madly, hopelessly, and unequivocally in love. MayApple filled his thoughts throughout the afternoon. When he donned his new, dark Imperial Suit, he thought of her fingers flicking fancifully across her laptop. When he pinned on his new Imperial Name Tag and the lovely cloisonné badge that announced his standing (AP (JG)), he thought of her gleaming blue eyes, her fiery gaze, her expressive chin, her emasculating frown. (Being who he was, he couldn’t leave that part out.) Over his very first meal of Patriot Pork in the Imperial Mess Hall, he dreamed of her pearly white teeth, her ruby lips, the way the blush had spread so passionately across her cheeks, the place it had started. (Blushing furiously himself, he gulped a large glass of ice water.) And when, finally, the SF led him into the control booth overlooking the Imperial Pressroom, his eyes sought quickly for MayApple among all the technicians, producers, and special agents crowded into the busy place. But she wasn’t there.

#

“You’ll sit here,” the SF said, steering Jack to a makeshift desk crammed between Tolly and the wall. He indicated a blocky old monitor and a headset. “I managed to dig these up for you, too. Hopefully you can make do with it until we submit the rest of the forms.”

“Actually, I don’t use any equipment or anything. I just...look and listen. I guess.”

The desk was right in front of a tinted window that ran the full width of the room, and Jack was captivated by the scene below. There was the Imperial Podium, the Imperial Seal, and the Imperial Guard with their Imperial Polearms, standing like statues along the walls. People in suits milled about, chatting in low voices (the sound came through as a muted murmur from speakers above the window).

“Where’s Mr. Wizier?” he whispered.

“He’ll be along soon,” the SF replied. “You’ll know when the trumpets sound and the Mouth of the Imperium bangs his staff three times on the podium.”

The door to the booth hissed open. Jack spun around, but it was only another man in a suit.

“That’s the Senior Producer,” the SF said, “and those are the Assistant Producers: Senior, First Class, Junior, and so on.”

They filed in, a line of creased black serge, the last one just nipping through the door as it swung shut. Jack thought he must be the most junior assistant (Gopher Grade). The fellow’s suit looked like a hand-me-down: dark gray, creased only by long wear. He also had a very unruly shock of white hair capping a boyish face. The young man scanned the room as though trying to get his bearings. Jack gave a little wave, newcomer to newcomer. The man blinked in surprise, then looked away and dodged behind the other men to a spot near one of the consoles. Jack shrugged. He was used to being brushed off. Which brought reminded him...

“Where’s MayApple?” he asked the SF.

“A good question. Tolly, where’s MayApple?”

Tolly shrugged. “She said something about going home to change. *Pff!* Women!”

“Well, I hope she—”

The door hissed open again. It was MayApple. Every head turned.

Jack sighed. She was wearing a severe pant suit that covered her in thick, dark cloth from neck to calf and wrist to wrist, with all the style of a black sweat sock. At least, that’s what he saw. He realized the other people in the room were seeing something entirely different.

“*Sacrés boules!*” Tolly murmured. “*Vive la différence!*”

Every eye followed her as she hurried across the room to her desk beside Tolly. A few of the men swallowed hard.

“That’s a bit revealing, isn’t it?” the SF remarked, attempting to frown.

“Is it?” MayApple asked innocently. “I guess it’s all in the eye of the beholder.” She gave Jack a thin, superior smile.

He sighed again. He was seeing her real clothes, but everyone else saw...something he would have to imagine. And she wanted to be sure he knew it. He shrugged and smiled back, happy to cede her the victory, happy to take whatever blue-eyed smile he could get.

“Well,” the SF replied with a little cough. “You’d better get set up. The SP’s already here. The Mouth will be out in just a minute.

MayApple turned her back on Jack (and everyone else, he reassured himself) and opened her laptop. Jack tried to look into it, just in case it showed her current outfit, but the angle was wrong. He could see Tolly’s monitor, however, and it showed the pressroom. No, not exactly. The pressroom in the monitor appeared much larger than the one through the wide window. It was brighter, too, the colors more vivid. And there were more people bustling about the podium, more Imperial Guards. Jack rubbed his eyes and looked again. He knew, as he always knew a truth, that they were the same room. Tolly was touching up the scene.

A tuck here, a dart there, bring out the gold, Jack thought.

He was fighting the urge to say something about it, when there was a strident fanfare of trumpets and drums. The Mouth of the Imperium strode into the room and banged his gold-encrusted staff three times on the dais. The milling people hurried to their seats. A tense hush fell over both pressroom and booth.

“Get ready, Jack,” the SF whispered, reaching across to turn on the blocky monitor. “Put on your headset.”

“But I can hear fine from the speakers.”

“That’s the live sound,” the SF said. “Straight mike from the pressroom. The headset will give you the broadcast.”

“Are they different?”

“Not to me,” the SF said. “To you, they should be. That’s why you’re here: to see if you can spot the differences. Same with the monitor: That’s the broadcast, Tolly’s and MayApple’s work. The headset is Buster. Their job is to cast a spell so real you can’t tell the difference. Your job is to spot the flaws and tell them, so they can try to do it better next time.” He chuckled. “You’re their worst nightmare.”

Uh-oh, Jack thought. He glanced at MayApple, bent in lovely concentration over her laptop. *This is not going to be good for my chances.*

He put on the headset, which had a single earpiece. His uncovered right ear could still hear the expectant hush from the speakers. His left ear heard a similar sound, though it was different somehow. More expectant.

Is that possible? he wondered.

Suddenly the trumpets sounded again. Now the difference was obvious: His right ear heard the Four Hornsmen of the Imperium, tootling away on either side of the regal entry. His left ear heard the entire Imperial Marine Corps marching band. The doors swung open. Mr.

Wizier made his entrance.

Jack's eyes were drawn to the bright, pulsing colors on the monitor. The Emperor's smile gleamed, the gold threads in his crisp suit flashed subtly under the spotlights. (Nice work, MayApple, Jack thought.) In his view through the window, the suit was not so crisp, and the gold threads were invisible.

They're not even there, he thought—and only just managed to keep from saying it out loud. He bit his lip and winced; it was getting quite worn.

The Emperor strode briskly to the podium, greeting the assembled pressfolk with a smile here, a wave there, the odd, friendly greeting: “Evening, Fred, good to see you again. Bennet, how are you? How's the kids? Madge, old friend. How are you feeling? I heard somewhere you were spending time up north.”

That last was from the earpiece. From the speakers, Jack heard: *“Madge, you old witch! You still breathing? I had a bet on you'd've shriveled up by now.”*

Madge Herschel was the longtime Palace correspondent for CPR (Common People's Radio). She'd been covering the Imperial happenings since the reign of the previous Wizier and was getting quite wizened. Jack could see that the Emperor hated her, and that the feeling was mutual. Through the speaker, Jack heard a muttered reply that purpled the air between them. His earpiece said: “You know I wouldn't miss one of your wonderful appearances, Mr. Wizier.”

Jack glanced over at Buster, seated before his synthesizer at the opposite end of the long window. Sweat beaded his round face. Eyes clenched, he prodded the keys of his instrument with plump, hesitant fingers. But the Emperor had stopped his banter. His boyish smile segued into an intent gaze. In the window and on the screen, his look said the same thing: Serious Stuff Coming Down.

“Citizens of the Imperium, I come to you tonight with heavy news. As you know, We are engaged in a long struggle against a widespread Menace, an Enemy of cruel resolve and

uncaring determination, intent on one thing only: the destruction of Our soldiers, Our society, Our, uh, Our economy, Our, Our, uh, religion, and, uh...and in fact, Our very way of life. Earlier today, the Enemy struck again, not in some distant desert outpost, not in some foreign capitol, but right here on the very doorstep of the Imperial Palace, the backyard of Our nation, the beating [from the speakers Jack heard: *bleeding*] heart of our government.”

The Emperor paused and scanned the seated journalists with narrowed eyes.

“Many of you will have witnessed this outrageous attack, perhaps without quite realizing its purpose or its intent. This morning, as I met in the Imperial Garden with Our great friend and ally, the Shah of, uh, Our fine neighbor, Shah Oil F’at al Ofal, there was a [*disruption, uh,*] disturbance in the audience gathered before the gates of the Palace. You may have noticed it. An agent of the Enemy set off a disruptive device aimed at none other than Myself, your Emp’r’r. This disruptive device used a technology that, up to this point, few suspected might be in their hands. It was a technology of disruption. That is, it was disruptive. Technologically. A technology that many in the back rows of the Chamber of Common Delegates, the nay-sayers, the so-called [*loudmouthed jerks*] “loyal” opposition—and they know who they are—claim do not even exist. But We knew better. We have been watchful. And now We have positive proof.”

The Emperor stared directly into the camera.

“Today, the Enemy set off a Weapon of Magical Deception. Its target was Me. Your Emp’r’r. At the same time, an accomplice discharged several tanks of [*nitrogenius*] nitrous oxide—what you would call laughing gas—into the crowd. That was why so many people collapsed in uncontrollable and life-threatening laughter. [*They coulda died!*]

“Luckily, Our men and women from the Imperial Fatherland Security Agency were able to contain the incident and subdue the crowd. The stricken are being [*reeducated*] treated as we speak. But, if We do not take steps immediately to contain the spread of these WMDs, chaos will result. Make no mistake: No one...will be safe. No one...will know truth from [*fact*]

falsehood, reality from fiction, or right from [*left*] wrong, and the next sight you see could be a cloud of nitrogenous oxide rising like a satanic wind over an Imperial city completely stricken with laughter.”

The camera pulled back. The Emperor had spoken.

“Good job, Buster!” the SF whispered. “Only three flubs!”

“Uh-oh. I heard a lot more,” Jack said.

“We always let two or three pass. It makes him sound more like a regular citizen.”

“It makes him sound like a nincompoo—” Jack clapped a hand over his mouth, but it was too late.

The SF blinked. “By God, you’re ri—” He clapped a hand over his own mouth.

“*Alors!* What did you say?” Tolly muttered. For a moment, the scene on the monitors flickered.

“Nothing!” the SF snapped. “Nothing important! Nothing at all!” His gaze darted to the surveillance camera, than scurried elsewhere. “Mind your work, Tolly,” he whispered urgently. “Jack, you mind your tongue!”

The Emperor stepped back up to the podium. “I’ll take questions now,” he said, and he pointed to one of the seated journalists. “Yes, Harry.”

“Mr. Wizier, was anyone injured in the incident?”

“No, by the Grace of God, not seriously. A few sides were split, a few women bumped their heads when they fainted, but that was all. Yes, next question.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Jack noticed one of the Assistant Producers press a button on his console. A tiny red light gleamed in the air over the press corps. The Emperor called on the man seated beneath it.

“Mr. Wizier, we understand that the enemy agents are in custody. Is that true?”

“We took many people into custody, Bennet, just to be sure, but, yes, We do have

the ones responsible. Next.”

The AP pressed another button. Jack saw there were rows of them, one for each seat in the pressroom below. With a simple glance upward, the Emperor could see by the glowing light who to call on.

“Mr. Wizier, how does this magical technology work?”

“I’m afraid that’s classified information, but you can rest assured it is something We have known of for some time now. What’s important is that these are weapons of magic, and they are weapons of deception, and they are weapons of mass. And when you put the [*two*] three together, when you combine them, [*when you...uh...*] ...you’ve got the sum of the parts. More than. Because it’s a whole related ball of wax. Next! Yes, Miss.”

“Mr. Wizier, how can we be sure our children will grow up knowing the truth?”

“Well, I’m glad you asked Me that, [*little missy*] Ma’am, because you can rest assured that We are taking every possible measure to safeguard against the dangers to Our children and their families. [*Which is us grownups.*] Because that is what We value most, families. More’n anybody. Anybody that values. And We have taken steps to safeguard them, the children and the families, because they’re all a related ball of... [*dang, I just said that*] ...families.”

“But how can we be certain?”

“When it’s time for you to know the truth, you will. And it will be Our truth. Which is the right truth. [*It’ll be true.*] You can trust me on that. Next. Yes, Madge.”

A shock went through the control room, a collective gasp of surprise. The Emperor had called on Madge Herschel, the withered, withering harpy from CPR. The Emperor’s worst critic. All eyes turned toward the AP at the button console. His hand was frozen a finger-length above the rows of buttons. His face was white. The Producer himself jumped to the AP’s side, almost trampling the white-haired Gopher in his rush. He stabbed a button, then another. But it was too late.

“Call the Bunker!” he snapped. “Tell them we have a situation!”

“Yes, Madge?” the Emperor repeated, oblivious to the flickering light show that danced over the silent heads of the press corps, who were all staring in wide-mouthed disbelief.

Madge Herschel seemed to wake from a dream—not surprising, since she had never been called on before. A wicked smile flicked across her ancient features, like the first, distant lightning before a thunderstorm. She opened her mouth to ask.

“Ohmygod,” the SF moaned. “Tolly!”

Tolly was staring with naked fear through the window. His fingers were trembling.

“Mr. Wizzer,” Madge drawled, “isn’t it true that we have these weapons in our own arsenal, and that we have already used them?”

The Emperor opened his mouth. And closed it. He peered into his teleprompter for inspiration. But the answer there had nothing to do with the question; even he could see that.

“Well,” he said, and again, “Well. [*Well, well, well.*] Madge. That’s an interesting question, because it speaks to preparedness. [*Yeah, that’s good.*] Preparedness. You see, We have been tracking these [*mass deceptors*] enemy agents for a long time, and We knew We had to be ready, so, yeah, [*so what?*] We have them, these [*kinda*] weapons. But, you see, what you’re forgetting, Madge, you and all the other [*whiners,*] “loyal” opposition, is that We’re the good guys here. We’re wearing the white heads. [*Hats.*] Hats. And they have the black [*hats.*] Heads. Hats. [*Whatever.*] And when the time comes that We need to, We have to be ready to put the squeeze on, to give them a taste of their own. If the Enemy wants to take Us on, then bring [*Us*] them on. Because a good defense is the best offense, and I can tell you, when it comes to offense, We are as offensive as they come. If they come after Us, they’ll be walking on thin water.”

He stopped, panting. Tolly collapsed across his keyboard.

Hands went up all through the press corps. A few reporters even leaped to their feet, emboldened by Madge’s question, like sharks after a skin-diver with a nosebleed. Their calls

echoed through the hall: “Mr. Wizier!” “Mr. Wizier!” “Is it true that...?” “How many...?” “What did people really see this morning?” The Emperor glared back in confusion.

Suddenly, the Mouth stepped between the Emperor and the slaving pack of journalists. He banged his staff three times on the dais. The uproar only increased. He banged again and signaled for the trumpets. They sounded tinnily above the tumult. The Emperor backed hesitantly toward the exit, hand half-raised in what should have been his usual confident wave. Some of the press corps made as if to follow. The room thundered; as one man, the Imperial Guard pounded the floor with the butts of their polearms, then leveled the wickedly curved blades toward the melee of journalists. A phalanx of black-suited agents hustled the Emperor out the door. The lights dimmed; the monitors went blank.

Up in the control booth, a phone buzzed. One of the APs grabbed it, listened, and slowly hung up. Stone-faced, he turned to the Producer.

“That was the CEO,” he said. “He wants you in the Bunker. Now.”

The Producer blanched. Then, squaring his jaw, he marched out. The white-haired Gopher scooted through the hissing door just behind him.

#

The CEO studied the video capture from the control booth surveillance camera. For the fifth time. With mounting frustration. The Bunker door hissed open, and he turned sharply.

“Ah, Jack, about time,” he said. “Come here, I want you to watch this.”

Jack walked over and stood a few feet away. Somehow, he looked even younger in his new black suit. His name tag and insignia looked overlarge, like boyish trinkets. His wrist ID glittered brightly. His wide, white eyes glanced at the CEO, then returned quickly to the monitor.

“I’m looking for something wrong, aren’t I?” he said.

“Yes, Jack. You’re looking for something out of place. Something missing. Something untrue. Particularly, right...here!”

The CEO froze the frame at the instant the AP reached out to light up the next questioner. The AP's hand hovered over the grid of buttons, one finger poised.

"What do you see, Jack?"

A pause, then: "He's pushing the button."

"No, Jack. He's reaching for a button. But one button, the wrong button, is already pushed."

Jack swallowed. "Yes, sir, I can see that. He's pushing it."

"He? Who?"

"Him."

"Him who?"

Jack pointed. "Th-th-the Gopher."

"The gopher?"

"The AP (GG), the young one with the white hair. He's standing right beside the console. Pushing the button."

The CEO replayed the moment. "There's no one there with white hair."

"You can't see him?" Jack asked. His stared at the screen, blinking furiously. Finally, in a tone of pure awe, he whispered. "He's invisible."

"Invisible?" The CEO's mouth went dry. "You can be invisible?"

"Well, I can't," Jack said. "But apparently he can."

"You saw an invisible white-haired man push the button?"

"I didn't see him push it. By the time I looked, he was stepping away from the console. The Senior Producer almost ran him over trying to push the other button."

"Then what?" the CEO demanded. "Where did he go, this white-haired gopher?"

"He went out with the SP, right on his heels."

"Hmm," the CEO said. He couldn't help glancing into the corners of the room. There

was no one there but Vice. Or was there? “Is there anyone here besides us, Jack?”

“Oh, no sir. Just you, me, and the Vice Wizier.”

No equivocation there; the CEO relaxed a fraction. “How can I be sure of that when you’re not here?”

Jack considered. “Body heat?” he suggested. “Infrared cameras?”

“Good idea, Jack. Very good. Thank you.” The CEO forced a smile. “You’ve been a big help. We’ll be in touch soon.” The boy left happy, and the CEO wondered about that.

“Is he telling the truth?” the Vice demanded, from the shadows behind the big marble desk.

“Our See-no, Hear-no, Speak-right-up? Probably. Perhaps. Maybe.” The CEO hadn’t gotten where he was by trusting. “We’ll have him watched.”

“How?”

“We’ll find a good equivocator.”

#

So Jack received his first medal, for reporting the invisible white-haired man. It was a small one, but he admired it none the less. In the weeks that followed, the CEO sent him on several “special missions,” as he called them. He sat in on sessions of the Chamber of Common Delegates and was able to report any number of lies, along with hundreds of half lies, and thousands of fibs. Delegate after delegate was censured for taking bribes or having an affair or failing to do what they promised. Some were even removed (usually in the dead of night in a black sedan). Jack received more medals, though he was somewhat disappointed that not all of the lies he reported were made public. “There are extenuating considerations,” the CEO explained. Jack did wonder why none of the extenuations seemed to extend to the “loyal” opposition, but he managed to squelch that particular question.

For the most part, Jack was kept busy with the other members of the ARS, trying to

help them hone their skills. Unfortunately, all he could do really was point out all the illusions that he could see and hear right through. He had no idea how the three practitioners might improve their magic, and so they made little progress. Poor flustered Buster broke down in tears more than once, when Jack repeatedly failed to hear some sound that had (figuratively if not literally) taken blood, sweat, and, well, tears, to produce. Tolly's scenes sometimes assumed a bit of substance, but they were never more than a thin scrim between Jack and reality, a fact that Jack was forced to report every time Tolly tried some new technique. Luckily, Jack didn't speak French, although the tone of Tolly's responses was blisteringly clear.

It was MayApple who did the best, and it made Jack's heart glad that he could say so without a stitch of equivocation. She warmed up considerably after that first, bad day. She wore more comfortable clothes under her magic garb, which was also less revealing. (As near as Jack could tell: the others didn't ogle when she walked in.) He took that as a good sign, and put just a little more effort into helping her with her illusions. Actually, a lot more effort. To be fair, he tried hard with Buster and Tolly, too, and, though they hardly improved at their magic, he became much more adept at choosing his words.

For MayApple, he made special efforts to equivocate. Sometimes to the point of pain. There was a constant sore on his poor, bitten lip. His stomach began to ache before each session, and often burned with acid afterward. And his tongue was sometimes so exhausted he could hardly drink his afternoon cup of Liber-tea. The truth of the matter is, truth can hurt. In more ways than one.

But Jack would have endured any pain for a single smile from MayApple Cantwell.

#

"Jack," MayApple called from her cubicle. "Could you take a look at this, please?"

"Coming!" He hopped from his chair and hurried around the dividers.

MayApple gave him a warm smile, and his heart raced. She was wearing (for real) a

lovely short-sleeved dress that flickered with the hint of an illusory pattern of white flowers on forest green (not real). It made her skin glow (really), and there was considerably more skin than usual, particularly at the low-buttoned neckline. Jack swallowed.

“Yes?” he croaked. “I’m looking.”

“So I see.” She glanced away, but her smile remained. Jack grinned foolishly. “What do you think of this?” she asked, gesturing at her laptop.

Jack forced his eyes toward the screen. It showed Buster in little blue shorts, a short blue sailor’s shirt, and an odd flat cap with a ribbon. Jack couldn’t help laughing. “He’ll weep if you do it,” he said.

“I already am,” she replied, eyes twinkling with mischief. “Go see.”

“Uh-oh,” Jack said. He crept around the corner and peered into Buster’s cubicle. As usual, Buster was hunched over his synthesizer, bulgy eyes closed. But now Jack could see the faint image of a funny flat hat squeezed beneath the band of Buster’s big headphones. And his pudgy torso was double-clothed by a vague, blue sailor shirt, shimmering over his usual rumpled black one. Jack stifled another laugh and snuck back to MayApple.

“It’s hilarious,” he whispered. “If he ever finds ou—”

There was a sudden gasp from behind the divider, then, “What the—? MayApple!” Followed by ragged sobs.

MayApple giggled.

Jack sighed. “You’d better turn it off. He’s skating pretty near the edge these days.”

“I guess you’re right,” she said, still grinning wickedly. She closed her eyes a second. “There.” The weeping continued. “It’s gone, Buster! Relax, no one saw but Jack.” Buster tried to weep more quietly. “Oh, really!”

She went around to Buster’s cubicle and gave him a big hug. “Come on, you big crybaby,” she said. “It was only a little joke.”

Buster, headphones askew, sobbed into the bosom of her dress. Jack, who had followed as far as the entry, sighed again.

Finally, when Buster had subsided into occasional hiccups, MayApple and Jack returned to her cubicle.

“That was quite...substantial,” Jack said. “The sailor suit, I mean.”

“You could see it? How well?” Her eyes shone.

“Much better than anything before,” he said. “What’s interesting was his knees; I could really see his knees below the shorts. I could see his pants through the shorts, but his knees looked almost bare.” He chuckled. “Pudgy bear.”

“Well, that’s something I guess.” She slumped into her chair and stared morosely at the sailor-suit-clad Buster on her laptop.

“I’m sorry,” Jack said. “I wish I didn’t have to always be so...brutally honest.”

“No, it’s all right.” She smiled a small but honest smile. “You can’t help it. And it is helping us, even if we hate to hear it. I might even be getting used to it. Let’s go get some lunch.”

“What? Lunch? Us? Now? Us?”

But she was already out of her seat and on her way, with her hand clamped firmly around his arm. “Sure. Let’s go talk. Just us.”

She pulled him with her, and somehow she made it seem as though he was escorting her. She led him past the barriers and checkpoints, out between the guard booths, under the cameras, and through the tall ironclad doors into the summer sunshine. They bought a pair of pastries and cups of Imperial Roast from a sidewalk vendor, then found an empty bench under the shade of a weeping willow. Jack sipped his coffee and watched MayApple from the corners of his eyes. She appeared to be lost in thought, staring absently at the Imperial Palace across the Mall as she nibbled at her pastry. He thought he had never seen anyone chew so beautifully.

“Jack,” she said, “I wish I knew what you really saw when you looked at me.”

“I just see you,” he said. “I mean, not ‘just’ you. You’re much more than ‘just’—”

“Stop. You don’t have to apologize for every little trip of the tongue.”

“I just wish I could say things better. They always come out so...so...”

“True?”

“So blunt! So...hard! I wish I could say what I felt.”

She studied his face. “What do you feel, Jack?”

He blushed. “About what?”

She smiled. “You’re getting better at dodging, at least.”

He rubbed his stomach. The coffee was beginning to burn. “A little, I guess.”

“Hm.” She looked across the Mall again. “Am I pretty, Jack?”

“I think you’re beautiful.”

She gave him a sideways glance. “But am I truly beautiful?”

“What I see is beautiful, so you must be.”

She considered a moment. “I never thought of it that way.” She took his hand and gave it a warm squeeze. “You know, Jack, it’s truly wonderful to get a compliment and know for sure you’re not just flattering me so I’ll go to bed with you.”

Jack spilled his coffee. She smiled with more than a hint of mischief.

#

And so began Jack’s courtship, with many a spilled cup and misplaced word.

MayApple smiled at Jack’s gaffes and touched his arm or back when he least expected, and it was hard to tell who was courting whom. Even Jack wasn’t sure, but he didn’t care, because he was happy. Every day he was at the Agency, he and MayApple went out for a pastry or they had lunch together or they walked each other home in the evening. They had dinner. They went to a movie. They held hands.

And, on the days when he wasn’t at the Agency, Jack pretended that MayApple was

with him. He had never been good at pretending before, but with MayApple... Well, his powers of imagination grew. His equivocations become more subtle, too, and it seemed that each time he held back a little more of the truth, the illusions wrought by MayApple and Tolly and even Buster became more real.

As did his stomachaches. He was taken again and again to eavesdrop on the Council of Common Delegates, where the lies had become more elaborate but no less untrue. The CEO also sent him to view secret meetings deep within the bowels of the Imperial Palace, to guarantee that the white-haired man wasn't there, hobnobbing invisibly with the generals, the Vice, and the Captains of Industry. The lies he heard then he was told to ignore. His lip ached; his stomach burned; his shoulders sagged. There were days when only the thought of MayApple kept him moving. And she seemed to realize and was especially sweet on those bad days. She would listen sympathetically and then tease him a little to make him blush. Then they would laugh together and he would feel better. She took to wearing light shifts and sheer, shimmering skirts beneath her magical outer clothes. Jack would blush and she would wink and he would grin helplessly and they would stifle their laughter under the SF's quizzical glance.

And whenever the Emperor held a press conference, they would go to the control booth together. MayApple would stand close and brush his hand in a reassuring sort of way and whisper, "How does it look? Everything OK?"

And Jack would nod, because it was OK, until the speaking started. By now, he knew everyone who should be in the booth. There was never anyone extra, white-haired or not. At least, not in the booth.

#

MayApple brushed his hand again and went to her desk. Jack watched, enchanted. She was wearing something silky that brushed back and forth as she walked, hinting at wonderfully rounded—

“Jack? Anything wrong?” It was the SF.

“Oh, no!” Jack replied quickly. “I was just...uh...thinking.”

The SF glanced at MayApple and smiled. “Yes. Well, she certainly does seem to have taken a liking to you. Good work!” He chuckled.

Then Buster entered, and the chuckle segued into a sigh. Buster was muttering to himself. It had become usual: a never-ending conversation with someone only he could hear. He blinked continuously, eyes fixed on nothing. Jack had assured everyone that no one was there, invisible or otherwise, which was no reassurance at all. The Senior Producer watched Buster nervously as the muddled magician mumbled his way to his synthesizer, squeezed his lumpy ears between the bulging headphones, and finally closed his blinking eyes. Everyone in the booth shared the same worry: Could Buster do the job?

“Keep watch, Jack,” the SF muttered, and he hurried over to sit beside Buster, as though his presence could somehow lend strength.

Jack went to his desk, turned on his monitor (now a state-of-the-art flatscreen hardly smaller than Tolly’s), and donned his earpiece. The scene below showed nothing amiss. He could just make out the ghostly presence of Tolly’s extra Imperial Guardsmen. He gave the little man a thumbs-up, pressing hard on his stomach as even that mild exaggeration brought on a twinge. Then the Mouth of the Imperium banged his staff on the dais, the trumpets sounded, and Jack winced at another twinge as the Emperor entered, resplendent in MayApple’s latest creation. In the monitor, Mr. Wizier fairly glowed. Even through the window, he glittered faintly, and Jack’s stomach strained still more at that. When the speech started, it was all Jack could do to stay in his seat.

Jack liked Mr. Wizier, really he did. He simply couldn’t understand why the High Decider couldn’t get his facts straight. Or his nouns and verbs, for that matter, but poor syntax and mispronunciations merely grated on Jack’s ears. It was the twisted meaning that scoured his

innards. That and not being able to tell anyone about them. In the war between Jack's duty and his ethos, his stomach was collateral damage. Buster could patch the worst of the Emperor's mis-mouthings, but there was nothing he could do about the content. And no way on Earth he could grant Jack permission to speak. Jack braced himself and endured.

The speech went on. And on. And on. Jack tried to ignore the words, to blank them out, to stuff mental plugs into his traitorous ears.

When suddenly his earpiece went silent. Jack sagged in relief. Then jerked upright as he realized he could hear still hear the speech from the speakers. For a terrifying instant, he thought he had gone deaf in his left ear. Or as mad as Buster. Then he noticed that everyone else in the booth was wearing an expression of shock. Some were shaking their heads. Others were twiddling volume controls and flicking switches. Tolly was reaming out his ears with urgent fingers. MayApple was staring at Buster. And Buster's eyes were wide open. Frantic. He pawed at his keyboard.

Jack grasped the awful truth: No one but he could hear a sound, not even from the broadcast.

Then a word broke through in Jack's earpiece:

“The—”

The Emperor was still speaking, but the press corps shifted in their seats, slapping the sides of their heads and staring at each other in confusion. The Emperor didn't seem to notice, and another word broke through:

“—enemy—”

The Mouth pounded his staff, *bang, bang, bang*, but Jack's earpiece stayed stubbornly silent. A hubbub started in the room below. The press corps began asking each other questions, their voices rising as they tried to make themselves heard.

“—stands—” the earpiece said.

The Mouth ran to a trumpeter and grabbed the long horn. He blew with red-faced might. Not a single *bleat* emerged from Jack's earpiece, just one word:

“—right—”

Then Jack saw him: the white-haired man. He was wedged into a far corner of the pressroom, almost out of sight of the booth and half hidden by a pair of jabbering black-suited security agents. He was watching the Emperor intently, with one hand resting on the shoulder of a dark-faced, dreadlocks woman tucked in beside him.

The earpiece flicked out another word:

“—before—”

White-hair's companion wore tiny earphones. The wire led down to an pod cupped in her left hand. She watched the Emperor through silted eyes, unmoving but hard at work.

“—you—”

“There!” Jack cried. And he could hear himself, but obviously no one else could.

“—clothed—”

“It's him!” Jack cried, pointing.

“—in—”

“Look!”

“—lies!—”

Jack's next cry died on his lips. He finally realized what the Emperor had said—had seemed to say—through the earpiece. The only words that everyone had heard.

The white-haired man looked up at him. Their eyes met. White-hair smiled and inclined his head in a small bow. Then he and his companion walked briskly from the room.

And sound returned to the masses. The press corps and the guards and the agents and the officials and the producers and the technicians heard themselves shouting questions, orders, and insults at the top of their voices. As one, they stopped in amazement. All but Buster, who

was gibbering quietly, headphones cradled to his breast, rocking gently back and forth and back and forth and back.

#

“What do you see, Jack?” the CEO demanded.

Jack stared at the video of the booth. “Nothing’s wrong that I can see,” he said.

“Then what about here?” The CEO thumbed his remote, and the video switched to a view of the pressroom. “Do you see anything out of place?” He watched Jack’s face closely.

Jack started to shake his head, but couldn’t quite bring it off. “Y-yes,” he stammered. “He’s there. In the back corner. The white-haired man.”

“Is that who you were pointing at during the...incident?”

Jack swallowed. “Yes.”

“Why didn’t you say so before, Jack?”

“I-I-I wanted to be sure. You see how he’s tucked into the corner there, behind those two agents? Well, no, I guess you can’t. But he is. And I couldn’t see him well. I wanted to be sure.”

“Are you sure now?”

“Absolutely. He’s right there, plain as the hair in your no— Face. Plain as the nose on your face. Really plain. Sir.”

“And somehow he can create silence? Even in a TV broadcast?”

“So it would appear.”

“Hm.” The CEO considered Jack’s choice of words. “And how would he do that, Jack? Can you people—you magic types—do more than one trick?”

“I don’t know, sir. I don’t know how it works. Not Buster’s, not Tolly’s—I don’t know how any of it works. I don’t even know how my own magic works.” The boy was on the verge of tears.

“Relax, Jack,” the CEO said. “This isn’t an inquisition.”

“I never said that, sir. Of course not.” Now he was rubbing his stomach.

“But you’re sure now it’s the white-haired man.”

“Absolutely.”

No hesitation. “Good,” the CEO said. “That’s good, Jack. At least we know who we’re up against. Now if only we knew who he was working with. And for. But you wouldn’t be able to see that, would you.” He said it as a statement, but let the question hang between them. Jack’s hand clenched on his stomach as he gave a single, violent shake of negation.

“Well, Jack, that’ll be all. It’s late. They’ll need you at the Agency tomorrow. You’ll be shorthanded, I’m afraid.” He thumbed his remote again, cutting back to the booth, where Buster was being led away in a straitjacket. “Get a good night’s sleep, Jack, all right?”

“Yes, sir.” The boy almost flew out of the Bunker.

The CEO turned to the shadowy corner. “What do you think, Vice?”

“I think it’s time to reel him in.”

“Hm. I wonders wonder what else he might tell us?”

#

Jack wandered home through a warm, misting rain that made the streets garish and sweaty. When he reached his apartment building, he found MayApple waiting for him in the shelter of the portico. She took his hand and kissed his cheek.

“Poor Jack,” she murmured. “Come with me.”

She led him back through the streets, and somehow the rain seemed cooler, the lights more colorful and alive. She took him to her own place, a small, exquisite studio apartment that overlooked a quiet back alley. She helped him out of his soggy coat and made him a cup of tea, then sat him down and rubbed his shoulders. He felt as though he were in a waking dream. Despite her deft touch, he couldn’t relax.

“What did they want?” she asked.

“They wanted to know if I had seen anything wrong.”

“Were you able to tell them?”

He nodded, then shook his head, then nodded again. What little tension she had kneaded away came back. His stomach clenched. “I told them. As much as I had to. More than I wanted.”

“Poor Jack.” She shifted her hands to his neck, gently caressing the naked band between his collar and his thick black hair. “What was it, Jack? What did you see? What was it that drove poor Buster mad?”

The need to tell overwhelmed him. In a great rush of words, Jack told MayApple everything about the white-haired man, everything he had told the CEO.

“That’s awful!” she said, and she sat beside him and leaned her cheek against his. Her lips brushed his ear. Her soft breath was sweet with the subtle scent of wildflowers. “What a horrible thing to have to see. And hear. No wonder you seem so tense, so ill at ease.”

“It’s not that,” Jack said. “It’s not what he did.”

“But those words he made the Emperor say!”

“The words I should have said.” And saying that made Jack feel a little better.

“MayApple.” He took her hand in both of his and gripped it fiercely. “MayApple, I think I’m learning how to lie.”

She caressed his cheek with her free hand. “Oh, Jack,” she whispered. And then she kissed him.

Jack had never been kissed by a woman before, except for his mother and grandmother and his Aunt Grace. And he knew they didn’t count. MayApple’s kiss left him breathless.

“MayApple?” he whispered, when he had the wind to speak. “Do you love me?”

“Oh, Jack. Do you love me?”

“I do,” he said, without the faintest twinge, and she kissed him again.

“MayApple?” he whispered, some eons later. “Thank you for letting me tell you the truth.”

“You can tell me whatever you need to, Jack,” she replied softly, as she began to unbutton his shirt. “Whenever you need to.” She reached his belt buckle.

“MayApple? There’s something more.”

“But not now.”

#

So young Jack took another step toward manhood, with MayApple as his guide. And there came a moment when she said, “Oh, Jack, yes, Jack, I do love you.” And Jack felt not a twinge of doubt, for in those few shuddering moments, it was true, perfectly true. And later, as they lay sated in the warm shelter of each other’s arms, he poured out all his feelings, all his pent-up pains, and all the rest he had seen of the white-haired man and his dreadlocks companion. MayApple listened, stroking his flyaway hair, until he talked himself empty and fell asleep.

#

Jack awoke. The faintest predawn light filtered around the curtains. The sheets were warm, the pillow soft. He let his eyes close again, rolled over, and snuggled closer to...nothing. He rolled back, snuggled the other way, and tumbled over the edge the bed, hauling an armful of comforter with him. The room echoed with the dull thud. He sat up, listening to the emptiness.

“MayApple?” he called thinly.

There was no reply.

He struggled free of the comforter and staggered to his feet. Goose bumps raised all the hairs on his body, and he groped through the gloaming for clothes. He found a robe—MayApple’s—and pulled it on. He also found the reading light and the switch and

suddenly there was glare. Blinking furiously, he studied the bed. Yes, it was empty. He peered around the single big room. There was no sign of MayApple in any of the shadows. He shuffled to the counter that separated the kitchen from the living space and looked behind it, just in case. The rectangle of linoleum was empty. Spotless, in fact. Scratching his head, still half asleep, Jack leaned against the counter. His elbow scrunched on a small square of note paper.

Jack, it began.

He carried it to the light.

Jack, I just remembered I had an early meeting. Sorry. Hope you're not too lonely.

There's juice and eggs and such in the fridge. See you later. Love, MayApple.

Jack blinked and reread the note. *Okay*, he thought. *Later*.

But his bowel lurched and his bladder came alert with an urgency that drove him at a run for the little bathroom beside the kitchen.

When he staggered back into the room, the light was brighter. The note lay on the bed where he had dropped it. It seemed as large as the pillow, as bright and glaring as the bulb in the lamp. He turned away, rubbing his stomach. He thought of MayApple the night before, and her sweet wildflower scent rose faintly from the robe, as if from his own skin. He squeezed his eyes shut and willed his stomach to settle. But the note scrolled through the star points behind his clenched lids: *just remembered...a meeting...hope...later*.

Love.

He couldn't ignore them. Couldn't ignore what they were.

MayApple was lying to him. He could read it in her words, as easily as if she were right there saying them. More easily, perhaps.

Jack rushed to the refrigerator and jerked open the door. He searched frantically through the shelves: juice, eggs, such. Yes! They were there! She wasn't lying! She wasn't!

But she was, and Jack's stomach burned. His heart ached. He sank to his knees.

Why? he thought. *Why is she lying?*

Which led to more questions: Where did she go? Who was she meeting? What was she telling them? Him?

Jack's vision cleared. He not only heard her lies, he saw the truth behind them. He remembered everything he had seen and done since coming to the Imperial City. Every word he had said, every word he had heard: He remembered them without illusion, without equivocation or prevarication. And he screamed. He yelled. He gibbered, he ranted, vomiting words, voicing every lie he had been forced to swallow.

And when he was done, his stomach felt much better. But his heart still ached.

He pulled himself to his feet. The day was brighter still, and who knew how long MayApple had been gone? He had to get out of there!

He tore off her robe and threw it across the room. He scrambled around, finding bits of his clothing in the odd places she had thrown them the night before. The thought broke his heart again, and he stumbled, clutching his black boxers as though they were a long-lost lover. With another cry, he struggled into his underwear, his shirt, his pants, his suit coat. He started to tie his tie.

He caught himself: No time! He threw down the tie and ran for the door. Only to spot himself in a full-length mirror mounted on the right wall of the entry. A thin shaft of daylight stretched across the room and fell on his chest. The medals on his coat glittered. He stood stock still, entranced. Horrified.

One by one, he unpinned the medals and dropped them at his feet. He unpinned the cloisonné AP(JG) badge. He unpinned his name tag. He unclipped his ID bracelet and dropped it on the rest. He stared at himself, unadorned, clad only in his black suit. And he took off the suit: jacket, pants, shirt, boxers, everything. He took a long, deep, pain-free breath and yanked open the door.

Two black-suited figures were waiting in the dim hallway.

“Hi, Jack,” Bulky said. “Nice outfit.”

“Very true,” Thin Guy agreed. “Must be comfortable in this heat.”

#

The wind was picking up. Jack’s cage swung gently beneath the fig tree or baobab or whatever it was from which it hung. All around, the branches of the big trees creaked as the wind moved them, and the other cages swung gently, like pendulous, overripe fruit. Jack could just make out the sound of the surf rolling onto the tropical beach a few hundred yards away, across the flower-fringed clearing that held the guards’ barracks, mess hall, pool, and tiki bar. Then the big split-screen monitor came on again and he couldn’t hear anything except Mr. Wizier. It was another press conference. The clamp tightened on Jack’s head. The lid-lifters held his eyes wide open. He watched the live feed and the broadcast, listening through both ears, because he had no choice. And he spoke. He called out the lies, every one of them. It didn’t matter that none of the guards or other prisoners could hear him. (Jack’s mouth was covered by a mask.) He had to name the lies or the pains came back.

Still, someone somewhere heard him. (The mask was also a microphone.) Maybe his words went straight to Tolly, or to Buster’s replacement. (It was obvious they had found one.) Or to MayApple. (His heart ached.) Or maybe to the Vice, or to the CEO himself. That was what burned now: knowing that no one who mattered would hear. So Jack spoke to everyone on the screen, wishing someday he would discover a magic that would carry his words to them.

Suddenly, everything went silent. The cage still swung, but there was no creaking, no wind-song, no mutter of distant surf. No Mr. Wizier. Jack sagged in relief.

Then his cage began to lower. He strained to gaze around the monitor, where the Emperor still mouthed silently. His cage settled with a gentle bump. It shook as someone entered. Jack tensed. Soundlessly, someone removed the lid-lifters, eased off the head clamp, and turned

his chair around.

“Hello, Jack,” said the white-haired man. The dreadlocks black woman stood beside him. She nodded, smiling. Beyond them, outside the cage door, Jack’s daytime guard lay slumped on the forest duff. The white-haired man peeled away Jack’s mask.

“Are we invisible?” Jack whispered, his heart pounding with hope.

“You aren’t yet,” the white-haired man replied, “though no one can hear you. Hold still, and I will make you invisible.” He reached toward Jack.

“Wait!” Jack said. He turned and gazed right into the surveillance camera for a long moment. Then he turned back. “Now,” he said.

The white-haired man placed a hand on either side of Jack’s face, bent forward, and kissed him.

“Hey!” Jack cried. “What the—?”

Dreadlocks chuckled.

White Hair shrugged sheepishly. “Sorry,” he said. “That’s how my magic works. Come on, let’s get some clothes on you.”

Jack wiped his mouth. “Wait a second. I’m invisible now? And noiseless?” White Hair nodded. “Forever?”

“No. Just when you need to be.”

#

And so Jack disappeared without a trace, except for a few confusing moments of video. Moments that the CEO studied very closely, over and over again: The guard falling, then disappearing. The cage coming down, the door swinging open, the head clamp unclamping, the chair revolving. All by forces unseen and unheard. Jack could have seen them of course, but Jack wasn’t there to explain. He was in the video, turning to stare with his strange wide eyes right at the camera. Then turning away, only to recoil in an odd way, before disappearing himself.

The CEO replayed the scene, not in any hope of spotting some tiny, overlooked clue, for there was none. He simply couldn't stop himself from watching that moment again and again; the moment when Jack turned and gazed directly at him. The CEO knew Jack was looking at *him*, and no one else. And when those eyes turned his way, he could not tear himself from Jack's gaze.

I'll be watching, it said.

It was as though Jack had spoken, a break in the unnatural silence. And then he did speak:

“See-no, Hear-no, Speak-right-up.”

No one else heard it. The CEO did, and knew it was true.

And his stomach began to hurt.

– The End –