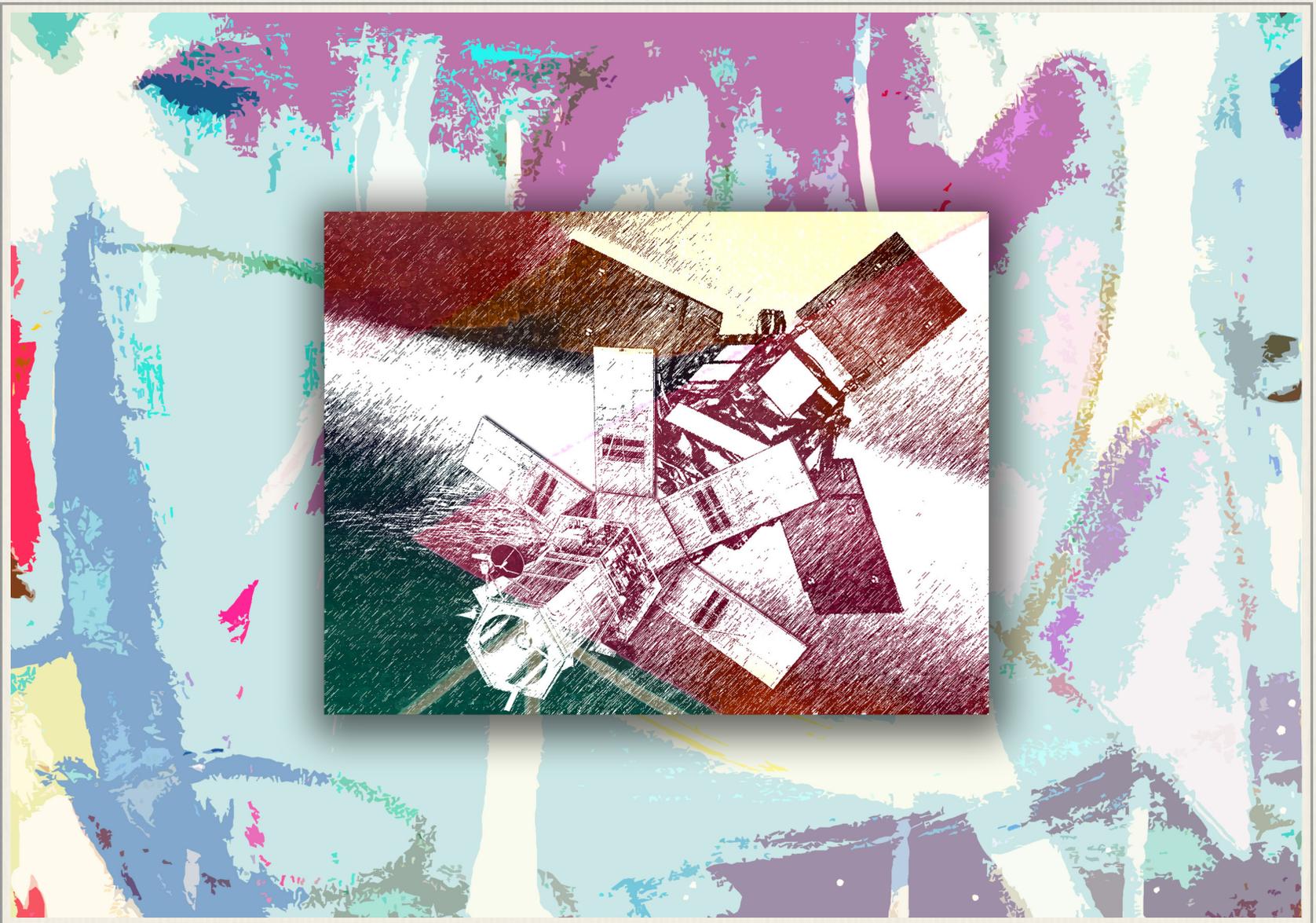




Stakes



Unfortunately, my vague plan to smuggle the Qishu cube into the prototype *gonzoy* immersion globe was stillborn. But my Level 7 plisto got me a tour of the facility where they were testing the tech, and it turned out to be a revelation.

The manufacturing floor seemed to go on to infinity in every direction, no doubt achieved through - once again - beautifully designed lighting, which glowed above and below a wildly complex ceiling of steel (or titanium, or strontium or

something equally awesome, no doubt) rails. Any sized apparatus or giant mechanical object could be quickly and automatically routed to any pinpoint spot on the entire floor, as my escort agent, Theo “Teddy” Woo, did when he proudly presented the *gonzoy glider*TM.

One of the operating prototypes flew toward us like an approaching truck on the expressway - if that truck happened to be perfectly spherical in shape - and whispered to a stop directly in front of me. Teddy’s face glowed with joy.

“Never get tired of that.”

“*Pahngk*. I feel the same way about the tech around here.”

Teddy’s face turned toward mine, sharply. He emitted a string of unintelligible Chinese, waited for me to respond. I stared at him blankly.

“I don’t actually speak it, just got a few slang words here and there.”

“Ahhh. *Pahngk*.”

Ever so slightly disappointed, Teddy introduced me to the next immersion console for gaming tech that would soon be sweeping the globe, and spiking MitsukoTek profits, no doubt for Q4 or next year Q1. There was also no doubt about the improvements in the interface that MitsukoTek had introduced into their version of the nearly decade-and-a-half immersion gaming technology. This unit’s new take on skates, besides simply looking streamlined bitchen in some soft and slightly opalescent material, came standard, Teddy explained, with self-adjusting orthotics and three-dimensional glove closure, which meant that the old days of wearing game boots would soon be a distant memory. Immediate thoughts of an actual relationship with surface contours leapt to mind - bare feet sinking into hot sand or strolling through cool ocean tides. The waist-wrap and spinal stabilizer were much less barbaric looking than its Scandinavian predecessor, (the one design feature Telluric farmed out to FörvalteMönster, a small Swedish company known for its jet cockpit safety features) and I wasn’t sure how this sinewy looking thing could possibly work when you were spinning verts or chasing villains through space.

As if in explanation, my eyes came to rest upon a strange looking tensile nano-prene connector dangling down from overhead which looked much like the de-

scending flukes of some kind of jellyfish. Teddy watched me. Then placed his thumb and forefinger together, and cocked his head just so, with his eyes on his *gyrus*. Security protocol obviously, on whatever he was about to show me next.

“The working name of the concept translates in English to something like ‘global linking interface surface’ so I think it was Dachari over in marketing who finally came up with *glider*. Which is pretty good.”

“Better than either standing kinetic interface or ski-ball, for sure.”

“And a considerable improvement on ‘glister’ which it was for a while.”

“Wow. That’s bad.”

“Well, there wasn’t an American or European on the design team.”

“I guess sometimes Marketing does something useful.”

“*Pahngk.*”

I smiled at him and nodded. The word was Chinese slang that had come into vogue back their not sure exactly when. It was a shortened version, or clipped off version, not entirely sure, of a Chinese word meaning “completely,” or “totally.”

“So, as you obviously know, the NDA on what I’m about to show you is obscenely specific. Acknowledge?”

“Acknowledge.”

He waved into view, in three-dimensional space, something I realized with a shock would for certain - if it worked - change everything. It was the holy grail, promised for decades, theorized about, posited upon, wildly anticipated and ultimately never delivered to at least three generations of serious gamers, referred to loosely since its original theoretical inception as VRI, or “virtual reality interface.” Although much described and discussed in science fiction literature going back to the beginning of video gaming and the internet itself, more than a dozen companies had gone broke over just the last ten years trying to crack this particular code.

A small, glistening virtual tag rotated, slightly opaque, in the air wherever your eye would come to rest on the full-scale representation of a shimmering nanoprene body suit. It read: *gonzoy gameskin*TM. I was staring at it, mouth slightly open, like some freakshow rube from centuries past.

“Whattaya think? Gonzoy gameskin.”

“Does...d-d-does it work?”

I had been momentarily slammed back to my days of stutter. It was the only question that mattered, so I didn’t attempt to say anything else. Teddy just chuckled, eyebrows raised, looking at the suit. I got goosebumps and wanted to climb into the thing right then and there. It vaporized, leaving the physical *glider* empty, and I could see where and how the tentacles of the hanging jellyfish thing would connect to various points on the suit. This was the most excited I had ever been about being a MitsukoTek employee. Top secret clearance was having immediate benefits.

“Okay wait a sec, Teddy--” As soon as I said it, it felt really weird. Teddy? What, was I like his eighth-grade buddy? He was Design Team, L9. Cream of the crop, and at least a decade older than me. Under normal circumstances I would’ve used the then-preferred MitsukoTek honorific, “dai hito” Woo (quick sidebar: for some weird reason, there’s this continual ribbing that endlessly entertains the Chinese higher-ups in this particular corporation, so they love using Japanese lingo where Chinese should be preferred. As in this case, where at any other more conventional Chinese corporation, “dá rén,” - pinyin for, I think, “expert” - would be considered professionally acceptable. Why? I don’t know. Like I said, other than some slang, I can’t claim to speak much Chinese. Or Mandarin, Cantonese, Yue, any of them.) In any case, I was so agitated by my recent sampling of the future wares of my adopted company that I had temporarily lost my head and dropped the honorific entirely.

“Excuse me. *Dai-hito--*”

Teddy’s laugh cut me off before I could finish. He clapped me on the shoulder really hard, with his other hand over his mouth, covering his laughter.

“You are a hoot, Minor. Teddy’s okay. You can call me Teddy. Although all my good buds just call me Woo.”

“Alright then, Woo.”

He laughed even louder at this. Evidently, I was really pleasing him. It was tough to get a bead on his instant, easy familiarity, though. Vaguely deceptive, or something.

“Is that it, or is there something else I can entertain you with?”

“Hmmm.”

I stroked my beard and put on my most quizzical expression. A thought had been worming its way up from the depths of my brain, and before I could think better of it:

“What else happens in here?”

“Sex parties.”

He said it so matter of factly that I was inclined to take his word for it. Until he broke up again, slapping his legs with glee. Then he seemed to sober up, considering me. After a moment, he went to his *gyrus*.

“JK. This is totally off reg, but take a look.”

He twirled a finger and made a chopping motion and suddenly what seemed like a half-mile of manufacturing floor was filled with whirring, chirring, flying, dripping, robotic armies in high-pitched manufacturing activity, in startlingly real 3D simulacra. Try as I might, I could not for the life of me figure out what they were separating, or building, or whatever the hell it was.

“I don’t even know what I’m looking at.”

“The future,” Woo said laconically. “Look up there. That little gold triton. Watch it.”

I caught sight of something tiny way, way up in the air. It was a spinning blur, until it froze for a split second, and I could see that it was a shimmering, gold, three-tined fork of some kind. It immediately spun back into motion, and ap-

peared to be dodging random spurts of organic material, until it suddenly dove straight down and plunged into what looked like a big white muffin the size of a kitchen table. After a moment, the muffin split into a hundred smaller muffins, which were promptly whisked, by tiny free-floating bots, into an assembly line - for that is what it must be - to be converted into...?

The show abruptly disintegrated, and I was staring once again into lovely empty white space.

“Experimental design demo. This room can be converted, with an absolute minimum of human interaction, into almost any kind of manufacturing floor, in a matter of minutes. This was a theoretical construct.”

“Oh. So those muffin thingies...”

“Concept. But the triton. That’s the *gonzoy*. That’s the key. And that’s all I can say about that.”

He made a theatrical motion of locking his lips with a key, and throwing it away. I made an equally theatrical display of catching it, and stuffing it into my pocket as I hustled for where I thought the door was. Woo - as that is forever who he would be for me now - laughed, shook his head, and pointed the opposite direction. The door materialized from the warehouse wall, and clicked open.

“Righto.”

I made for it, but Woo’s quiet voice caught me.

“So...”

I hesitated at the door. He was still fixed in place across the floor, giving me a quizzical look. I waited for him to spit it out, whatever it was.

“How’s it going up there?”

“Sorry?”

“The S9...business.”

“Ahhh.”

Did I owe some quid pro quo? I showed you some leg, you give me some? We stood there smiling at each other.

“How’s all that coming along?”

Dr. Yu’s friendly warning sprang to mind, although I assumed Woo outranked me significantly on the operational tree and might know more than he was letting on. Better to play it safe for now.

“Oh, still pretty top secret.”

“Righto.”

He flashed a Cheshire cat grin and actually winked as he said it - a casual shot, I think, at my white boy lingo. Deceptive was the right word for this guy. And two could play that game.

“Hey, thanks for the tour.”

“Don’t mention it, *dai-hito* Minor.”

“*Pahngk*, Woo.”

As I navigated the security checkpoints back up to L7, I couldn’t shake a creeping feeling of dread. Something about the chaos and violence and just plain baffling nature of that demo Woo had shown me kept popping up and playing in my mind’s eye. What was that triton thing, and what was it doing? What was it the key to? What exactly did Woo mean by that? I suddenly felt small.

That impression was amplified moments later, when I arrived back at my office. I rocketed in, having successfully navigated the bullpen without running into either Kwan or Siggy. I actually jumped when I found Tevin Brother sitting there in my supposedly locked office in one of my really comfy-looking guest chairs. He glanced over at me, and nodded while splitting focus with some sort of encrypted animat - all I could see was the occasional telltale gemstone glint in the space in front of him. I dumped my bag and flopped into my chair as he folded up his spar-

kling new *gyrus*®, and tucked it into his coat pocket. First Kanaka, then Woo, now Brother. For supposedly top-secret, prototype, unreleased tech, it certainly seemed like everyone at this company had one of these bitchen new toys, except me.

“So. How is everything going?”

“Just a sec. How’d you get in here?”

He stifled a laugh, and stared at me for a good bit, vaguely nodding. His ‘do was totally different. Kind of a bowl cut now, and it shook loosely as his head moved. This dude was big with the hair thing. His whole manner was different, in fact. It was like he had shed an exoderm or something. The reserved watcher from our first meeting at the station had been replaced by this relaxed breezer just visiting a colleague. It made me warier, but also much more intrigued.

“You’re really kind of an asshole, aren’t you, Minor?”

My turn to laugh.

“Wow. Unmasked so soon. Professional hazard, I guess, when you endure six years of grad school, then five as a postdoc, so you can make half as much money as your younger sister, who never actually finished high school. What’s your excuse?”

Tevin Brother looked up sharply, mischievous glint in his eye. “Berlin.”

Ah. So, he had spotted that I was onto his whole hidden German thing. Okay, that was it. Bromance was on.

“So, what can I do for you, Herr Brother?”

“What do you think of Qishu?”

“Seriously? What, are you taking a random poll?”

“See, there you go.”

“Comma, asshole.”

“Look, Minor. Can I call you Minor?”

“What do you want?”

“Okay. So. *Gèng gāo* says the playing field is level. I don’t think it is. And now, well, there’s a shitload of yuan hanging in the balance.”

I didn’t respond for a second, not realizing that was the end of his statement. It felt like there was something missing at the end of it. *Gèng gāo céngcì* - “higher level” - or just *gèng gāo*, was shorthand for Ken Mexing Giong’s whole top floor, as he was not only our CEO, but also what’s known as “Personal Director.” It was kind of an odd combo in those days, but MitsukoTek was a rare throwback to more autocratic Western corporate structures like Zeeb, which modeled itself on Apple, that is, before MitsukoTek vaporized it with a single product release.

“I have literally zero idea what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about the Sat 9 competition. I’ve taken a lot of action, and I would really like to know who you think is going to win.”

“Oh shit. You mean who’s gonna be Space Monkey?”

“Space Monkey!”

Tevin almost fell out of his chair.

“That’s--that’s--” he was gagging and choking with laughter, “that’s what I’m-- I’m calling it now--oh *Scheisse--space monkey!*”

He was laughing so hard that he infected me too. It felt good to laugh. Eventually he got hold of himself, and wiped the tears out of his eyes. He took another moment to get himself situated, then was back to business.

“What’s the story on this postdoc woman, Jarvinen? She’s got a lot of fans up there.”

“Well, she is pretty slick.”

“But...”

“But what?”

“Come on. I need to know.”

Take a moment to savor with me the strange richness of the situation. Tevin Brother, the guy who had leveraged me into this dumb-ass contest in the first

place, was here covertly, literally on the edge of his seat, angling to find out who was going to win it, because, evidently, he had side action going as bookmaker. This particular brand of strange situation was my specialty, and Tevin - a shrewd operator, clearly - had somehow intuited this. True, I hadn't come to be a second-class coder by making the most of my career opportunities, but I still had a legit curriculum vitae, even if I had - due to a really bad attitude and a high capacity for narcotics - fairly squandered the finest education available in America. I was, also, as a direct result, no stranger to dicey gambling propositions. And what I had here was an amateur high-stakes bookie pumping for inside edge because he was over-exposed. The real question was not how to turn it to my best advantage - I felt that was nearly certain - but to figure out what I really wanted out of the deal. It wasn't just the money, for perhaps the first time in my life. I wanted more inside info.

“Who's the chalk?”

I recognized from Tevin's reaction that he hadn't been totally certain whether I would be a reliable informant for this quest of his. But now he lolled back in his chair, relieved to discover that we both spoke Degenerate Gambler.

“Siggy is.”

“What's she at?”

“Down to three to five. I've got some at even money, and some out, early, at two to one.”

“Where am I?”

“Three to one.”

“Three to one? I'm actually hurt. What about Kwan?”

“Kwan, he's-- oh, forget Kwan, I know Kwan, it's not Kwan.”

Now it was my turn to laugh, and then nod vaguely, taking in Tevin Brother like a lab experiment. Make him sweat a bit.

“What's your exposure?”

His expression sobered, and he steepled his fingertips.

“Significant.”

“And you have no idea who’s the favorite.”

He nodded.

“At first you thought it was me. Now you’re not so sure. Too much heat’s coming in on Siggy. Maybe somebody knows something you don’t know.”

“Okay okay, why are you killing me?”

He was squirming, but with the hint of a hopeful smile. I got out of my chair and moved quickly to the little guest coffee table directly in front of him, and sat down.

“I need a few blanks filled in before I can help you.”

“How many?”

“Just a couple.”

He took his customary position, elbows on his crisply pleated slacks. Chin atop fingers. His bangs kind of bounced and rocked back and forth, neatly.

“Go.”

“Who decided they need to send someone into space?”

“Gèng gāo.”

“Duh. *Who* up there?”

There was a long, unblinking silence from Herr Brother.

“What does this have to do with who’s going to win?”

“Are you kidding? It's mission critical.”

I was practically boring holes into him with my eyes. I could see how he earned the position he was in, whatever it was. Absolutely still as glass, gazing back at me without giving off any tells whatsoever.

“I think you know who has operational authority. Ken does. But the only opinion that matters is Dr. Moses Yu’s, of course. Second question.”

“Not so fast, Brother. Those two are the easiest and most obvious. Who else?”

“Who are you interested in?”

“I’m asking you. And my second question is why are they sending anyone up there at all?”

There was a very slight hesitation Tevin Brother made before answering that question. Or, more accurately, not answering.

“I can’t answer that. I would like to, but I honestly don’t know.”

He opened his hands, and sat there, apologetic. That was all I would get out of him, I was certain. But it was worth the obvious next move on my part.

“Okay. Guess I can’t help you.”

I got up, with a theatrical sigh. And then, to my surprise, just before I moved back toward my desk, Tevin leaned forward.

“Hold it. Okay...”

He made a small motion with his fingers, and checked his *gyrus*. Just making sure he had locked us out of any prying eyes or walls with ears, I assumed.

“All I can say is that...”

His expression showed that he was caught on the horns of an inner dilemma. This was the first moment since we met when he showed any crack in the ultra-cool-dude armor at all. But I could see it wasn’t from any loss of composure, it was because something seemed to be eating at him. Some sort of secret that he was itching to tell someone. He evidently came to a decision:

“...and you did not hear this from me, obviously. For reals yo.”

He looked up at me with sincere concern. I sat back down. Finally, he spoke very quietly.

“From what I hear...Bernie is dead set against it. And Jacob...well let's just say he has not been consulted.”

I sat perfectly still, slightly nodding my head. But inside? Well, that was a different story.

Remember when I said that a chill ran up my spine when I was meeting with Tevin and Charsu and Doc Kanaka back in jail? All because I was curious about exactly who at MitsukoTek actually understood the math-science of *gonzoy* technology? Well then, what transpired along the nodes of my central nervous system at these words of Tevin's were that chill's granddaddy.

This was exactly the kind of juicy detail that both Kanaka and Charsu had been hoping and dreaming to hear at that meeting, I was certain of it. This was the kind of intel that moves global markets. Or causes them to crash.

Allow me to back up here for a second. For those of you who may have been living under a rock on an island for the last few years, let me refresh your memories with a brief historical digression regarding the salient points which have direct bearing upon these here shenanigans.

At the moment I'm describing here, those quaint good times of the recent past, back when I was chillin' in my L7 lockbox with the Brother man, riding high, not a care in the world, gambling on the come over the Great Space Monkey Contest of '35, the names “Jacob and Bernie” were not exactly household yet, and many of the following facts were only just being rolled out worldwide by the Official Hype Machine. To wit:

Roll it back, way back to the year 2009. That year, a baby boy named Jonathan Shriver was born to parents living in the flush of possibility, awash in hopes of a potential new world in the aftermath of the election of our nation's first black president. Perhaps were it not for the nearly surgical perfection that was, at that moment, about to be reached at the nexus of our national political establishment and the global corporate interests which directed it through their variegated media

outlets, their hopes might have been justified. But as the saying goes, you stand in the way of progress, you get run over. And as we've since been made aware of by above noted nexus, there is little that is truly Progressive about progress.

Those parents, Clayton Shriver and Jessica Alter-Benjamin, had met in one of the field offices of the '08 Obama presidential campaign in Las Vegas, and while canvassing neighborhoods together, fell in love. Jonathan, their son, was born on the fourth of July, nine months to the day after the newly elected president's moving acceptance speech at Grant Park in Chicago, the night that, as lore has it, little Jonathan was conceived. The young progeny of progressive political activism attended Francis Xavier Warde elementary school in Chicago, where he displayed abnormally superior skill at soccer, a keen interest in - and proficiency with - mathematics, and the birth of a lifelong fascination with waterless organic farming. He was actively recruited (though unofficially) in the eighth grade by a number of universities, and by the time he graduated summa cum laude, and a Clavius Scholar, as three-year captain of the Loyola Academy soccer team, he accepted a full athletic scholarship to Stanford University. It was at Stanford that he met Bernard Sussdorf, then the head of the Quantum Chromodynamics Department, in 2029, the year after that esteemed physicist had published his controversial SQR. This chance meeting, on the Maloney-Cagan soccer pitch, changed not only the course of their lives, but those of everyone on the planet. For it was this unassuming young man who would become Sussdorf's most important pupil, and who would emerge barely five years later, transformed by massive market forces outside of his control, as 'Jacob Gonzoy,' the public face of *gonzoy*® and its truly revolutionary "*entanglement technology*™." The two men, separated by two generations, were united for the rest of history by the ambitious young firm which had underwritten their research at the newly operational supercollider in Yangfangzhen, just outside Beijing. That tiny, unknown company was a Chinese nanotechnology firm operating under the Japanese name MitsukoTek.

So, back to the moment. As you might imagine, this particular bit of highly sensitive and confidential intel from Tevin Brother was absolutely astounding to me: that the only two humans I was absolutely certain understood the underlying

technology for the single satellite soon to be controlling MitsukoTek's entire global manufacturing supply-line - which appeared to be displaying an unknown anomaly - weren't involved in the project ostensibly designed to figure it out and fix it. Granted, from the corporate perspective they were just the candy on the mast-head, the idea men, the grand visionaries, trouble-shooting wasn't necessarily their forte. Another thought bubbled up behind that one, though. More sinister. Bernie, obviously, wasn't on board. And yet, they were proceeding without his blessing. And where the hell was Gonzoy? Before I had a chance to fully chase it down, Tevin interrupted my processing.

“Come on, you had your questions, who is space monkey?”

I couldn't believe that now, for sure, I wanted this shitty janitorial position like I'd never wanted a thing in my life. But there was still a little business to conclude.

“There is no scenario in which I lose.”

He clapped his hands together, emphatically, and stood up.

“Unless.”

“Unless what?”

“Unless someone assassinates me.”

Tevin laughed again. With much relief.

“Or I decide to tank. I mean it's outer space. Like, babysitting a flying garbage can.”

He stopped laughing. I made my pitch.

“Here's my offer. I'll take your whole position. If I lose, I cover everything you've got on Siggy and Kwan.”

He whistled, wide eyed.

“You're *that* sure? It's a big number.”

“How much?”

He hesitated.

“Go ahead, look it up.”

He waved up an encrypted animat. Likely the same one he was scanning when I entered.

“A hundred and six. No, looks like...a hundred and thirteen now.”

“A hundred thirteen? I thought you said significant.”

“A hundred and thirteen thousand is not significant to you?”

“Thousand, ah. Well, still not so bad.”

He gave me a look of amazement which I didn't understand for a minute.

“How much of that is on Siggy?”

“Eighty-eight and a half. Sixteen, no, seventeen bettors. All *gèng gāo*. You're at twelve now, seven bettors. None of them upper level.”

“Wait, there's more money on Kwan than me?”

“Barely. People know you're smart, but they think you're a drug addict.”

“That is fucked up.”

“No, it's great! You're going to win!”

“I know, but it's fucked up!”

“Come on, now give me your cut. How much?”

I took a second to consider. He had twelve out on me at three to one, so just the book, if it locked now, would net out seventy-seven thousand. Not a bad day's work, even split two to one. He checked the time surreptitiously, I caught his retina flash to an encrypted viz somewhere between us.

“When do you close?”

“In about three hours.”

I thought so. He had to lock.

“I want a third of your book, and half your vig.”

He looked like I had just stabbed him a little.

“No way! That’s-- that’s robbery!”

“Well, I don’t have to be space monkey. I’ve got a great girlfriend, and I was just fine down on L5 before I met you. It’s your decision.”

He shook his head, but it was a *fait accompli*. If he was certain I was going to win - and if I was willing to backstop his entire position, he knew I had to - he had just calculated how much he would make, as did I, and it was a fat little wad, a hair under forty-seven K. Splitting his juice with me was academic. That extra ten percent skim on the whole number would be nearly twelve grand already.

“Half the vig, that’s...no. No way. Twenty.”

“Five.”

“Twenty-five. Fick *dich*.”

“Back atcha. I take it that’s an agreement.”

“Fine, a third and twenty-five percent.”

I held out my hand. He looked at it for a second, then slapped his hand into mine with a little unnecessary vigor, and we shook. The deal was done.

“I was right. You really are kind of an asshole, Minor.”

“And you’re a brave man, Brother.”

“Not as brave as you, obviously. What, do you have an inheritance or something?”

“Are you kidding me? I had to work for this.”

“Hundred thousand yuan - and counting - as you would likely say here, ‘that’s a lot of cheese’.”

Brother man saw my face blanch. *Yuan*, he said. Now I understood what he meant by “significant.” I thought we were talking American dollars. At the current exchange rates, with us buried somewhere between the ruble and the peso, it was enough to bankrupt a small country. Jesus. What had I done?

“Any problem with that, Minor?”

On the flip side, however, my cut of the win would set me up like a mini-potentate. Even my little sister would have to take notice.

“Not at all. I’m a gambler.”

Tevin stretched, like a really long cat, and winked at me again. Stuck his hand out, and somehow, in it was a clean, familiar-looking window bag. Filled with a neat rectangle of crystalline shimmering brain magic. Protocol! Pharmaceutical grade, I was fairly certain.

“I have a feeling you’re going to need this tonight. And we can’t afford you out on the streets getting busted again.”

Now I understood how Kwan had more action than me. Brother was keeping the action on me artificially low with some hush-hush regarding my drug proclivities. This guy really was good.

“Damn, Brother. You got every angle covered. Coming and going.”

“It’s my job.”

I took that beautiful harvest off his hands, moved back to my desk, and tucked it in my bag. When I turned back, expecting him to be heading toward the door with me, he was moving the opposite direction. The solid, far corner of the room seemed to flicker, and Tevin Brother moved through it, into a hallway I was unaware was there. I could see just a glimpse of lazily rotating light globes floating under the ceiling, emitting a pulsing bluish light. God this place was awesome. Aware of the everyday MitsukoTek magic he was sharing, he pointed a finger gun at me and nodded.

“Just be sure and win, Minor.”

The wall returned to solid, and he was gone. So much for door locks. I actually walked over to the wall and gave it a close inspection. Not a seam or crease in it. Such bitchen tech.

Suddenly enervated by that old gambler's twitch, the real possibility that I could lose everything and then some, I sat down at my desk. I brought up my animats and found Cullaine's globe. I pulled it down.

After a second, I found myself looking at gigantic stacks of crazily multi-colored somethings. Row after row of them. Then Cullaine's face rotated in. She was slightly out of breath.

“We got all this stuff from Senegal, it's insane. These new nanotextiles are like nothing I've ever seen. Check this one out.”

A cloth wrap, or head scarf, or toga, or who knows what it was, filled my view. It was an amazing amalgam of color, with symbols of the Zodiac which appeared to be hovering slightly above its surface. Then Cullaine's beautiful, red-cheeked face again.

“What do you want, Minor. I'm busy.”

“Don't wait up. Tonight, on level 7, someone is going to be rocking the Casbah, and I think you know who. Space Monkey Challenge needs daddy's attention more than you. “

Her laugh was delicious, as were her parting words of love:

“Fuck you, Minor.”

1. Sussdorf's theory of Quantum Recoherence; see (2028) *Beyond Decoherence: Quantum Superposition in Electron Probability Clouds*. New York, NY: Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg.

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