

The Broker's Deal

© Daniel Tyler Gooden, all rights reserved.

John Bishop crouched above the skylight as the sour rain dripped off his dark hair and streamed down the glass. He watched the bright lights and lasers blind the audience below. They jerked and bounced as if hardwired to the erratic rhythm pouring from the speakers. He found the singer, her shadows surrounding her feet like black petals. He watched her dive into the crowd, swimming until they threw her, like a breaking wave, back on stage. She sprawled, still screaming into the mic.

Bishop stood up and crossed the slick plastic roof, searching for the right window. The building washed bright with light and he dove to the floor, sliding under an old vent pipe. A small security scout drifted above him. It shot a picture of the roof and continued up to the adjoining high-rise on its routine pass. Bishop slid out from the shadow, spitting foul water out of his mouth. The taste of oil and acid lingered on his lips. Had he taken his toxin pills today? He couldn't recall, and it headed the long list of errors that he chalked up later that night.

He wiped the rain from the next skylight and peered in. Costumes were strewn across the floor, vomited out of a large chest in the center of the room. He smiled. This job could be done by a gutterpunk.

“For what she makes, she sure doesn't value security.”

He could see the hairbrush on the cluttered dresser, clothes left in the open. Makeup masks lay scattered about, one fallen and crushed under the foot of a chair. This was not a careful target, all evidence of her existence collected and destroyed to leave the room sterile and empty. He could do this the easy way, but he had brought the spider, and

the spider made him eager. He liked the edge of the close retrieval and its personal touch. Besides blood was the sure thing. *Residual samples don't always cut it*, he thought, rationalizing his riskier choice.

He looked closer at the pyramid skylight. The club wasn't much better, sun panels added, but the window left ignored. *Perhaps they add to the decor.*

He pulled a small, steel-gray rod from his shoulder holster and adjusted the slide switch. He held it away from him and pressed the button. The rain, passing inches in front of the rod, seemed to evaporate.

“Good, we're golden.” He'd meant to charge the batteries all week, maybe he had. He angled the rod to meet the windowpane and a darkened corner in the bright window caught his eye. He scrubbed the grime away from the scarred glass and his heart jumped. There was the alarm system. He might as well have punched through, for all the good cutting would have done. The thin panel could feel vibrations even on the molecular level. His finger dropped off button and the tight sound waves sunk back into the rod. *Damn, no easy ride after all.* He circled the skylight, scanning the room for another entrance.

There was only one door into the room; a bouncer on that, guaranteed. The walls were force plastic, stronger than steel. The sonics would be useless.

The room seemed sealed tight until he spotted the air duct above the far wall. It was older than the glass windows and just as outdated. He looked over his shoulder at the old piping. If the skylight was rigged for security, the vent work should be, too. But that was the next step.

Bishop crept back through the blowing rain. There wasn't an alarm panel on the outside. *Probably twenty inside, all rigged with explosives.*

He decided to take the chance and cut his way in. The sound waves slid out from the rod and tore at the molecules of old aluminum. The metal split apart and fell away at his feet.

Bishop pulled a mirror out of his vest and peered inside the three-foot hole. If he climbed into a motion detector, he could be knocked out by a sound wave, or liquefied if it was an old model. He wouldn't put that past the club, though older detectors had been deemed "cruel and unnecessary force" by the U.N. East in 2110. They were no longer in production, but they could be found in the right markets. Most had just never been removed, like the skylights, and they were just sitting around waiting. Bishop couldn't see much of anything in the dim light but climbed in anyway. Nothing moved, no high pitch winding up.

Maybe this won't be so bad. The wind sucked the stale air out of the new hole. He quickly changed his mind as he inhaled the dank smell of sweat and dead rot. The system wasn't in working order, but it was still in use, a vault for problems.

The rain had made him cold and wet but it also had made him slick, and he slid through the tunnels until he found the grate. The dressing room below was still vacant and he glanced at his watch. The band was still going; the beats were shaking the tools out of his pockets. Knocking the grate loose from the wall, he threw it into a cluttered corner where he guessed no one would notice it.

Bishop pulled a small tin box out of his breast pocket and opened it. Inside a brown spider, the size of an old one-hundred dollar coin, laid spread out. He rubbed its back like a favorite pet, and it came to life, climbing out of the box and into the open palm of his hand.

He extended his arm over the mess and waited. The spider turned in circles, scanning the area, and then froze.

“All right, you know what you’re looking for.” He tossed the spider toward the makeup table. It fell with its legs spread out to catch the air and slow its fall. Bishop winced, as he watched it hit the large mirror above the table and slid down, landing on its back.

“Sorry about that.” The spider flipped over onto its feet and scurried under the clutter. Bishop sat back to wait. He had uploaded the target’s information into the spider and when the singer entered the room, it would be ready for her.

Almost an hour passed before the music changed to the house techmachine mix. He sat up and peered out. He expected this to go easy, even if the Broker’s brief had neglected the window alarm.

“Stay there,” a raspy voice shouted, “I’ll be out when I’m friggin’ ready.” The door slammed shut and Bishop saw the singer kick her way through the clutter. She stripped off her wire and chains, tossing them into the mess around the chest. Pouncing into the chair before the makeup table, she tore through the mess of containers and clothes.

Bishop looked down at the naked woman. Her body was beaded in sweat from her performance. She was thin and bony, but muscular enough that she was still attractive. Her fingers curled tight around her prize and he saw her body relax as she placed it over her head.

The singer tightened the nodes around her temples, flipped a switch on the side, and immediately fell back in the chair, as her brain clouded over in an electronic orgasm.

Who would be attracted to someone so screwed up? Who ever it was, they would be rich. They had to be to afford the Broker.

The woman seemed almost dead, except for the twitching under the electronic stimuli. Her face went slack in a look of uncaring bliss, as her eyes rolled back into her skull.

Bishop watched for the spider. Before long, it crept out from under the mess and toward the singer's naked skin. It crouched down at the end of the table, and sprung to the ragged leather chair. The spider crept slow onto the hand and climbed up the arm. Usually it would take blood at first chance, but the spider knew to draw from near the heart if it could. The singer registered near dead under the wire and the spider continued on, crawling across her shoulder. It made the throat, before the singer suddenly sat straight up.

The spider fell between her legs and Bishop pulled back into the shadows of the air duct. The girl searched the room as if each corner hid something in it. Bishop saw the fear on her face, but knew wire stimuli carried some strange shit along with its pleasure. He waited, wondering what the next step would be if she sat on the spider. It was strong,

but he would have to retrieve it and do the job manually if she had pinned it underneath her.

The girl collapsed back into the chair, her head rolled back and vacant eyes stared into the air. The spider was already back to work, climbing its way up her thigh. It slowly crossed her slick stomach and stepped up her protruding ribs. It looked as excited as Bishop felt, scurrying between her breasts in a dash to the heart. Bishop saw the spider bear down and bite through the flesh of the girl. She snapped forward, and fell forward on the desk, all but the first of the scream stolen, as the sedative took effect. Bishop started to climb out of the vent, just as the men burst into the room. One looked sculpted from steel, even under his long black coat. The other was almost as gangly as the girl.

Damn, bodyguards. They weren't in the brief, either. The men pulled the limp singer off the table and back into the chair. They didn't miss the bite marks.

Bishop pulled the rod back out of its holster and set the side switch for a knockout. He hit the button and nothing happened.

Aftermarket Reds? Bishop adjusted the device back down to its cutting level. The huge guy slammed his fist down on top of the spider, hidden among the junk of the table. He and howled in pain, as the plastic shards of the broken skeleton impaled his hand. He cried out something that sounded like a cross between babbling water and electricity shorting out through a frying cat. Whatever was said, Bishop caught the word "Cloner" and knew he was made. The monster tore off his jacket, and Bishop also knew he was right on the Red. They were black market soldiers, gene charmed and red hot, while they lasted.

Bishop saw the second set of muscle-bound arms, each gripping an electromagnetic gun. If they found him, the steel would rip through him and the only sound would be his breath slipping through the holes in his lungs.

The smaller soldier was searching the room and Bishop jumped, just as he looked up. He locked his knees, coming down on the thing with a full 240 pounds right between the eyes. The smaller Red fell straight down, bones snapping under Bishop's weight. He landed in a crouch, just as the larger bodyguard whipped around. Bishop leapt forward, covering the short distance between them, trying to get inside the heavy guns before they came to bear.

Just as the soldier grabbed him out of the air, Bishop rammed the modulator against the large head, sending the concentrated sound waves into the skull.

The giant Red fell backward, pulling Bishop with him, and knocking the unconscious girl out of the chair. Bishop pried himself out of the grip of the spasming muscles and stood up. A group of onlookers had gathered in the door, their holographic passes dangling from their necks.

"Brilliant," one of them said, his eyes stoned and his mouth grinning. Bishop slammed the door and locked it. He turned back to the desk, looking for the remains of his spider. What was left of her was still pierced through the upper fist of the big guy. He pulled out the small container of blood. He checked it for cracks, that it was enough DNA for the Broker, and placed it into a zippered pocket. He stooped and pulled some hair from the back of her head, hoping the bleach hadn't hurt it too much to use as a backup specimen.

“Done and done. Out of here,” he said. Bishop turned around just in time to recognize a four-fingered fist meeting his skull. He reeled back, falling over the singer and slumped against the wall. The rod was still in his hand and he pointed it at the slim soldier. It snapped and went quiet, *forgot the batteries after all*.

The Red knocked the rod out of his hand before he even had a chance to flinch. Smaller than Bishop by half, it still lifted him off the floor, tossing him to the other side of the room. He felt his right leg collapse under him as the femur snapped. Bishop kicked the large chest, what strength he had left draining from his body. The chest slid across the floor, catching the bodyguard off balance as he stepped over the singer. He tumbled back, cracking his head against the wall.

Bishop looked above him. Dim flashing lights streamed through the murky glass, heralding the city security teams. He looked at the Red, back on his feet, and decided the skylight was his best bet.

He pulled out his EMT cuff and slipped his hands through the ring to grab the controller rod. Bishop activated the emergency magtransporter, as the Red jumped. The EMT pushed off the steel undercarriage of the elevated city block and shot him up through the room, through the skylight. The cruisers were climbing from street level as he soared into the sky. Far below, he saw the bodyguard rising after him.

The Red gained speed, rocketing out of the room. He cleared the shattered skylight just as a security car skimmed over the opening in the roof. The car rocked up and flipped over as the Red hit it from beneath. He fell back, twisted and broken onto the rain-soaked roof.

Bishop laughed through the pain at his luck, but said a silent prayer to whatever god was favoring him. Luck was the only thing that had got the job done; he certainly hadn't been on top of his game.

No one followed, so he slipped through the air toward a brightly lit bus stop on the next elevated block. It was empty as he landed, and far down below he could see the flashing lights of the security teams.

"How long for the bus?" he asked the empty platform. The pain was making his head swim. He knew he had no strength to avoid the cops if they searched here; if they found him, they had him. He probed his pockets and found a syringe.

He pulled his shirt down from the neck and drove the needle it into his chest. The fluid automatically injected into his heart and he felt a wave of ease encompass his body. The pain sliced out at him, but it was far below, like lightning viewed from space. As he looked up, the open door of a bus lay before him and he pulled himself in, collapsing unconscious in the first seat.

When Bishop's head finally cleared, he was lying sprawled in front of his own apartment. He tried to remember how he arrived, but after the bus stop, his memory slurred. He was still wet from the rain, and his vision was blurry. He brushed dried blood from his face and felt the deep cuts in his head, recalling the crash through the old glass skylight.

Bishop started to stand and his right leg gave out. In a rush of pain he fell back to the ground. Now he knew he had at least laid there long enough for the shot to wear off.

He braced himself for the pain and pulled himself back up to the lock. His fingers tapped out the code on the blank door and a blue square of light appeared. Bishop set his eye before the glowing window. The laser shot out and bounced around his cornea as the computer matched his signature. The door clicked open and he fell inside.

“Good morning, John,” a soft voice said. As the light level slowly rose, Bishop saw a young dark-haired woman dressed in 1940's attire, complete with black seamed stockings and a rolled crown of hair. She stood facing Bishop with her patented look of concern and question.

“Hi darlin’,” he replied, and started to drag himself across the front rooms toward the back of the apartment.

“You look hurt,” she said. “Shall I start the medic system?”

“Yes, wind it up.” She turned and walked ahead of him into one of the two back rooms. He pulled himself up on an end table and followed, discarding clothing as he went. Bishop entered the bedroom and sat swaying on the bed. He cut through the leg of his pants, stopping more than once as the pain tore deep into his crotch, crawling up into his gut. He pulled off his shirt and opened its zippered pocket, tossing the plastic vial into an opening in the wall.

“Store that for me would you?” The woman smiled and nodded. The vial disappeared into the storage system.

“Is there anything else, John,” she said?

“No, just put on Holiday and wake me up well done.”

“Sure, Doll.” She walked out, and he watched her fade gently out of existence as she left the room and the image returned to the computer’s memory.

Bishop lay back, naked on the bed as Billie’s voice wafted over him. He hummed against the pain as the bed’s surface pulled him down to swallow his body, conforming to its shape. He tensed as he heard the bone snap back into place, but the medical system had already numbed his nerves, and he felt nothing. His face alone stayed above the surface as the bed worked at his wounds. The lights slowly dimmed as Holiday softly sang him to sleep.

Bishop awoke slowly to the motion of his bed opening, raising him to the surface.

“Helen?” he called, his mind still folded in sleep.

“Coming, sir,” she replied from the other room. The dark-haired woman entered the room and the lights rose to a dim level.

“Get my robe and turn off the music,” Bishop asked.

“Sure,” Helen said, her lips pursed and her eyebrow setting a dark furrow across her brow. He rubbed his hands over his face, trying to wipe off the pull of sleep. The music faded out. A drawer opened from the wall close to him, revealing a dark blue robe. Bishop wrapped it around himself.

“How long did I sleep?” he asked.

“Four hours,” she replied, “I woke you early because the Broker is here to see you. He asked-”

“How you are doing?” a voice interrupted from the doorway. Bishop jumped slightly, surprised to see anyone in the apartment, past his own security systems. The Broker stepped into the room. His tall thin frame was dressed in the same business suit. Bishop stood testing his leg. It was still weak, but the pain was gone.

“What are you doing in here?” Bishop asked.

“I heard there was some trouble at the club last night. I thought I would check in on you and see if you were all right.”

“You’re here for the vial.”

“Two birds, they say. I thought it might save you some time,” said the Broker. The memory of the job, how bad it had gone, came back to Bishop and his temper stepped forward.

“Let’s talk in my study,” Bishop said. He turned, walked to the next room and sat behind his desk.

“Very nice,” the Broker said, looking about at the antique decorations. “1960’s?”

“40’s and 50’s,” Bishop replied. His voice was steady, but his eyes stared hard as if to pin the man to the wall. The Broker rapped his knuckles on the desk.

“Real wood,” he said. “You’ve done well for yourself.”

“What exactly are you here for?” Bishop asked. “I always bring you the samples. That’s the deal.”

“Yes, but the buyer wanted the clone in a hurry, so the company thought I should come and collect.”

“Why would any buyer want this girl?” Bishop asked, “She is not what you call ‘idol’ quality.”

“Who knows?” Grant replied, sitting down in a leather chair. “Some desire their companionship, some lust after them, some like to collect. They all have a reason, but that’s never a requirement. Anyway, the buyer paid in full and wants the clone. So, how about it?”

“I’ve got the sample in storage, but there were a few undisclosed hazards not in your brief,” Bishop said. The Broker shifted in his chair.

“You know your price is always set before the job has begun. There’s no changing it now, besides-”

“Wrong, boyo,” Bishop interrupted. “Your information concerning the building, the target, the security? All of it shit. I almost had to scrap the mission.” He sat forward in his chair, staring hard across the desk. “I want double for my time and hassle, or your client gets nothing. The sample is still my property until handed over.”

“We feel differently about that,” the Broker said. “We feel you should have adapted better. You used to handle surprises fairly well. You wouldn’t even have requested a brief for so simple a job ten years back.” Bishop sat back in his chair, collected his thoughts and tried again.

“I want an extra five percent on my future jobs. I am your best, after all, and I’ve earned it.” The Broker stood up from his chair.

“I sympathize with you, and I believe you are in the right. We should have been paying you more,” he said, looking around at Bishop’s expensive wood furnishings.

“However, some think you are past prime. This job may have hardwired their opinion. You seem to be having a hard time of late, not to mention the easy target you missed during the Vid Awards season.”

Bishop’s temper hit the top and simmered at rage, pulling him to his feet. He had contracted with the company for twenty years and always managed to finish the jobs the other collectors couldn’t.

“That job was totally different. You know-”

“Sit down,” said the Broker. Bishop stood there, his anger tightening his gut. “Please?”

Now he saw the sonics rod in the Broker’s palm. His leg suddenly felt weak again, and he sat back on the edge of the chair.

“Thank you,” the Broker said. “Now, one of the security officers was kind enough to turn this in to us, instead of impounding it. Had someone less enterprising found it, we could have lost the sample. I’m afraid the company has decided it would be best to cancel our contracts with you, Bishop. Your Value/Risk ratio has run pretty poor.”

Bad collectors died during a job, the good ones stepped down. Bishop thought he had been far better than good. He looked at the angle of the rod and wondered, though, at the validity of comfortable retirements. Tensing his muscles slow, he prepared to vault from the chair if the Broker’s hand even twitched.

The Broker fired. The sound waves shot invisible out of the newly charged weapon, turning Bishop’s chest into putty. He fell out of the air in the middle of his lunge, and lay bleeding on the wooden desk as his organs collapsed.

The door to the living room opened and in stepped another man. Bishop let his head loll to the side to see him. He wasn't sure whether he was hallucinating from the pain, or from the loss of blood, but it was himself. It was a younger version, John Bishop-Version 2.0.

“You are right,” said the Broker, leaning down to speak into his ear. “You are the best, though your talent has been spent, or worn down with age. It was a hell of an expense, building your clone with a full life range. He’s one of our greatest, certainly in the top three that we’ve created. You should be honored that they chose you for your own replacement,” the Broker whispered, the words chasing Bishop down into death.

John Bishop stood above the desk. *It's a little awkward watching yourself die. I wonder if I should say something.* The Broker turned to face him.

“Did you find the sample?” Bishop handed him the flask he had retrieved from the wall storage. The Broker dropped it in his breast pocket and headed for the front door. “All the data on your last twenty years has been placed in your long term memory. It should be coming back to you in the next couple of days. It won’t come back as firsthand experience, though the subconscious tends to dream up pictures to make them mesh comfortably. Don’t rely on the generated images, just the facts. Anything else, you can find out by asking your secretary.” The Broker headed out the door.

“What about him?” Bishop asked. Grant looked back through the door at the body on the desk.

“You will probably want to get rid of it,” he said and walked out of the apartment, leaving the door hanging open. Bishop closed it behind him. He walked back into the study and looked at himself lying on the desk. The blood had run off the surface and had now soaked into the antique Persian rug.

“Uh... miss,” he said, trying to dig up her name. Helen entered from the bedroom and surveyed the room.

“I suppose you want me to clean this up,” she said, raising one eyebrow to fulfill her exasperated expression.

“If you would. Anything that is stained, go ahead and get rid of it.” He entered the bedroom, lay down, and stared at the ceiling until sleep took hold and the past twenty years began to surface like cartoons traced on thin paper.