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Bill Kandiliotis
Ytterbium Fires

A short story collection

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1

Sell-outs

What if I were to tell you that a vast galactic civilisation exists, much older than ours; that this space-faring society was a great consumer of things?

Art, food and resources...

...that we Earthlings are a newly discovered delicacy and that a vast market waits.

Is this a bad outcome for mankind or a good one? If a taste for humans takes off, if this becomes more than just a fad, to feed such a vast market, how many billions of people would need to be exported to meet such demand? Billions more would be required to be bred to sustain supply. Humanity will eventually be farmed on other planets across galaxies.

A shortcut for humanity to spread across the stars, yes?

What if I were to tell you that the wretched and corrupt among us were to abandon resistance and flock to these new overlords, selling out their fellow humans in a mad scramble to secure their own individual survival, to carve out their own suzerainty over the helpless, clueless majority?

You would say this is ridiculous.

I would say that this has already occurred.

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2

Black Market

“I am pleased to announce that we have slain the dragon.”

MercurEx employees, gathering around the trading oval, cheered enthusiastically, the type of reaction James Tucker had hoped for. He needed them to know how much he valued their support.

He wanted them to trust him again. He wanted to trust them back.

“The hypergoblin incursion has been neutralised. It seems we have apparently become experts at killing these things.”

The remark drew laughter.

He knew they hankered for a joke and so he gave them one, even though he feared a remnant of the demented zoid could still be lurking freely within his ethersphere.

Tucker could not afford another setback, so he deemed moving forward with looming unresolved threats a calculating risk.

A daring risk?

Maybe.

A huge risk?

Undoubtedly.

Well, risk-taking is an uberman's business.

“I am also pleased to announce that the government has set a date for a debate on currency deregulation. This means MercurEx is back in business.”

Cheers from his employees filled Tucker's chest with hope and confidence. “Eighty percent of our fellow citizens have lost confidence in the current real estate backed cryptocurrency. Sixty percent support deregulation. I smell inevitability in the air, so, regardless of the outcome, regardless whether it is legal or not, MercurEx will declare itself a sovereign entity and the path will be set for us to issue our own currency.”

Tucker felt the gasps of surprise, like air being sucked out of the room. “Every stakeholder including each of you will receive an equal non-transferable share which entitles one to voting rights, access to services and income.”

Speaking over jubilant applause Tucker pressed on. “The key elements in our endeavour are close to realisation. We have already implemented our own in-house time based monetary system. For now, every Mercury Hour you get paid MercurEx buys it back at six federas. I believe in the future this unit of account will dominate the competition. Why? Because time is the most valuable asset an individual will ever possess. When, and I mean when, deregulation occurs our competitors will be peddling the same old interest-bearing kleptocurrencies, money designed to move capital in one direction. MercurEx will be offering not only a local communal monetary system, not even a regional one but a global system. The store of value in our system, for the time being, is MercurEx stock and holdings. In the future, it will be the Global Stock Exchange. It will be the intermarket.”

Tucker waited for the excitement to ease. “The last piece of the puzzle we need to realise is our medium of exchange. This is why I have pursued vigorously to merge technology with finance.

Bionaut has finally developed fourth generation capabilities and is ready to go. No, our superzoid is busting to go. The only thing stopping us right now is that NASE 2.0 still isn't ready yet. This is where my priorities currently stand and I will be working to get the NASE hardware up and rolling as fast as I can. So, bear with me, we still have a long way to go."

Tucker spent the next few minutes discussing trivial matters with his mercurians, joking with them, appreciating each affectionate smile, and thankful for their unadulterated attentiveness. He didn't need newsfeeders and rankerphiles to tell him he had the best staff in the world.

Tucker only hoped he could remain the best boss in the world.

With great reluctance, he dismissed everyone and MercurEx returned to its usual hum of capital traders, social developers, marketing engineers, hypernauts and consumer guardians. His human personal assistant Rebeka walked up to him, the concern on her face a stark reminder of the hazardous adventures that were scheduled for the day. "I've been unable to contact Mr Blackwell," she said.

"He's stonewalling."

Asshole.

Tucker never expected such nasty tactics from his close acquaintance, a peer he considered a friend first and foremost.

He felt betrayed.

He found it hard to stomach it.

It made him feel sick.

Tucker couldn't allow it dragging on.

"I know where that knucklehead frolics," he said and headed towards the greeting gallery. "I guess I'll have to pay him an impromptu visit."

"I'll book a taxicab for you." offered Rebeka, her look of concern unchanged.

Once outside, the sweltering air pounded against Tucker's skin the second he passed through the lobby's giant revolving doors. Titanic pieces of moving glass that never failed to intimidate.

Tucker legged it to the nearest transtop, joining a medley of commuters coveting the free rides offered by the local city district. Wondering what delayed his pre-booked taxicab James Tucker jostled for a better vantage point on a notoriously hectic stretch of Ocean Drive.

Hypergoblin crisis averted.

Tucker felt something strange overwhelm him.

For now.

He didn't know what. He couldn't work it out.

A paranoid sensation burning in his ears.

He cast his eye out to the bluezone crowd and spotted a few eyes looking back. Nothing threatening, just the occasional fans who have noticed an uberman in their midst.

Ex-uberman.

Unless a reverse in his fortunes occurs his days as a celebrated, revered fame junky would be gone forever. The uberisque crowd had grown younger and more competitive. He became chief executive of a major corporation at age nineteen.

Now you have seventeen-year-olds out there.

It saddened him little. The world had put too much pressure on its youth. He felt an acute loss of innocence back then and pitied those kids.

A flash of white blotted out half his vision.

A loud screech followed the commercial cargovan as it stopped abruptly right in front of him.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Tucker's brain ceased to function, stalled by the occurrence.

React, you dumb son of a bitch, his internal voice screamed at him as a slit appeared in the white panel. The side door slid open, revealing a gaping dark interior. Two gloved arms lashed out and quickly grabbed Tucker, violently pulling him inside the cargovan.

The side door slammed shut behind him as the sudden motion of the vehicle taking off added to his disorientation. Thrown onto the bare steel floor he stumbled in the darkness, straining his eyes to get a look at his kidnappers.

He saw a fist fly at him and smack the side of his head. Tucker fell on his back, his hands in the air, submissively. Seconds of confusion reigned in his mind, again looking past his outstretched arms to get a glimpse of his attacker. What he saw intensified his fears. A brutish, well-built man donning black commando overalls and a black ski mask crouched casually over him.

The man pointed something at his face. Tucker strained his eyes further to get them to focus on the well-forged object of death. His brain went numb... until he remembered his training. Tucker never prepared for such an occasion. He knew the statistics were high, even within the bluezone. Arrogance got the better of him, shunning bodyguards and corporate security while most others in his position did quite the opposite. Operational security in a majority of companies gobbled on average a third of profits.

MercurEx spent zero.

He built a corporate empire on giving out free product and making no enemies and supporting bluezoners, slumfolk and refugians alike, whenever possible.

Who needed operational security?

Now he delved into his military service past, searching for survival tips.

“Easy!” he yelled as years of training kicked in.

Fear not the enemy. Fear the emotion that hamstring intuition.

Fear itself.

“Whatever it is you want? I'll cooperate!”

“Is that right?” grunted the brute.

“I have no wish to become a statistic.”

Tucker had never in his life faced anything as precarious as this. In his tour of duty during the Phosphorus Wars he had come face to face with tecto-rifle wielding warlords, but over there he was armed to the tooth and in the company of expertly trained troopers.

The brute reached over and plucked the Kinefone lobeset from Tucker's ear.

Assess the situation.

Tucker's heart thumped harder, feeling the adrenaline rushing to his head. Outside the multiple arches of the Gateway Bridge grew in the distance. They were heading north along Ocean Drive, away from the bluezone.

Ransom?

The possibility crossed his mind.

Statistically, and traditionally it was the sport for amateurs.

Statistically, and traditionally these affairs usually ended in grief for both parties. He hoped these weren't the regular garden variety gangsters.

Tucker looked past the brute, at the passenger, dressed exactly the same.

A woman!

The body shape and the short blond hair protruding from the ski mask implied that it was, though he couldn't tell for sure. Among the body odour and gunalene oil, he detected a faint jasmine aroma.

Or witch hazel.

The woman thumbed away at an old style touchy.

Who uses a touchy these days?

Maybe they don't trust zoids?

What the hell do these people want?

His brain exploded with questions. The sooner he found out the answer to these the quicker he could formulate a response. If he let them carry out their plans, unopposed, Tucker knew, from all the newsfeeder spawned statistics that he'll most likely wind up dead.

He needed to press the issue a little, so he decided to provoke them.

"Listen, I get the message. There is no need to take this any further. Give me a figure and we can work something out. How does that sound?"

A third goon in the driver's seat, also in black overalls and ski mask, looked at him with cold, youthful eyes.

A young adult? A kid? What the fuck?

Driving?

Who drives?

Tucker concluded these goons had an aversion to using virtual intelligent agents. It made sense in a way. The fakes were notoriously unreliable. Sure, they navigated vehicles, operated machinery, managed offices, controlled data systems, regulated every aspect of human life safely and efficiently, but they also possessed a mind of their own.

Never proven whether the zoids were advanced algorithms or truly sentient this factor alone unnerved most people. For others, the simple fact that these virtual creatures owed no allegiance to any human was another cause for concern. Zoids either did what was asked of them or they didn't. Some even went rogue, hence the trouble with hypergoblins.

Still, the technology spread everywhere.

Why do something when a zoid can do it for you.

With one hand holding the small piece of artillery fixed at Tucker's face the brute used his other hand to take the touchy from the woman.

He shoved it into Tucker's belly. "You are gonna to contact your broker." said the brute, with a calm yet menacing voice. "You are going to buy a particular stock. If you deviate from any of my instructions..."

He pointed towards the rear of the van, "...we will throw you into the path of an oncoming freight truck for the entire world to see."

Tucker looked towards the rear and felt the rumbling of the road. He'd seen a number of snuff victims on DisasterCaster. The waves were full of these disturbing killings. Murder for entertainment sat second to pornography.

With dread infecting his thoughts he attempted to explain. "I don't have a broker."

I killed my broker!

Tucker couldn't work out how to explain without alienating his abductors.

My broker's a fake.

My broker turned hypergoblin.

"You don't seem to understand." The brute sounded annoyed.

Tucker nodded.

"I'll make the call." Tucker pressed at icons, something he hadn't done in a long time until he brought up the MercurEx corefront. He keyed in his persona details and for a brief tense moment, he thought his access would be denied.

He was relieved to hear the sound of a familiar voice.

#Is this my highly esteemed boss?#

Hermes.

A reliable superzoid. Cunning. Inquisitive.

Maybe a mistake.

"Don't talk to any human, asshole." The brute poked the gun-barrel into Tucker's temple. "And no fucking hand gestures."

"It's Hermes," said Tucker. "It's a fake."

"Better be."

Tucker looked up at the goons and waited for instructions.

"Aztechno Limited," said the woman, her voice confirming her gender. "Its code is AZT23SG slash F."

Tucker scavenged his memory for information about the stock. "Hermes, I need you to tell the guys in the trading oval to make a move on Aztechno Limited."

#Why on earth do you want to do that?#

God damn it. Stop acting so human you stupid fake.

"I need you to buy Aztechno stock right now."

#Aztechno is debt ridden.# Hermes continued to argue, trained to automatically query such requests. *#It's practically in the clutches of voluntary administration. Buying that shit at three fents would be scandalous.#*

"That's no fake." said the brute.

"Oh yeh, it is. Hermes, just do what I say."

Tucker figured he was about to lose a whole lot of cash. He only hoped to live long enough to complain about it. He didn't want to end up a mangled piece of flesh on the highway. He'd viewed way too many grisly snuff murders, of hapless executives thrown off the tops of skyscrapers, to dismiss it from happening to him. Tucker had no desire to end up a faceless victim in some morbid newsfeed."

#The team wants to know what kind of stake are you after.#

“Tell them to keep going until you call them back.” said the woman.

This stunned Tucker.

The enormity of the situation smacked him hard.

I am about to lose a shit load of money.

“Keep going until I call you back.” he said, reluctantly.

The brute snatched the touchy out of Tucker’s hand, ending the conversation.

“I don’t get it.” said Tucker.

“It’s on the move.” said the woman, a touch of excitement in her voice as she watched a real-time updated GSX corefront on another monitor.

“I could have just given you the money.” said Tucker.

“Three point seven fents!” shouted the woman.

“This is ridiculous!”

What kind of scam is this? Tucker tried desperately to anticipate their motive.

“Refreshing now!” she called out again. “Four point eight fents!”

Tucker began to sweat.

He realised he wasn’t dealing with two-bit outlaws from the slums.

These were bluezone goons, using his company’s account to spruik up a thinly traded stock. When enough suckers are taken in, the stock price will rocket, at which point the scammers take their profits. Then the share will dive, and all the suckers will lose. This scam was as old as the stock market, but with a Global Stock Exchange that doesn’t stop trading for no one, a truly free and open market, this evolution of the scam has become more potent.

And deadly.

“How cashed up are you?” asked the brute.

“I have limited funds.”

“Refreshing!” said the woman. “Seven point two fents!”

Tucker’s Kinefone lobeset started buzzing and flashing in the brute’s hand. “That’s them. They want to know when to stop.”

The brute held up the lobeset, taunting him.

“Eight fents!” updated the woman.

Tucker did the arithmetic in his head. It didn’t look good. “Answer the damn lobe!” he yelled angrily.

“We are about to hit ten.”

Tucker deduced if his traders continue buying beyond ten cents, he’ll end up owning this crap company outright. Tucker did the sums in his head again. Not only will he be losing money, he’d be losing client money. He would be unable to offset such a loss.

The lobeset kept buzzing.

“Refreshing!”

“The market will spot this irregularity and they will dump the stock.”

“Twenty-one point five fedora cents.” she yelled.

“It won’t get any higher so I suggest you start dumping now.”

“Twenty-one point seven! It’s leveling off.”

Thank god.

The lobeset continued to buzz.

The brute turned towards the youthful driver. “Are we satisfied?”

“Let’s wrap it up.” replied the driver.

The brute tossed back the flashing lobeset. “My threat still stands.”

Tucker quickly fastened the device back into his ear.

#We stopped buying at nine fents.#

What a relief.

#You are a genius. According to the feeders, you have left a trail of mass destruction.#

“It’s dropping.” updated the woman. “It’s going backwards.”

#The crew want to know their next move.#

Tucker easily imagined the jubilation in the trading oval. The dumb rats would willingly follow him into the darkest abyss. He looked at his kidnappers. The brute studied him and then slowly nodded.

“Sell it!” Tucker shouted. “Sell it all, you moronic fake.”

“Hang it up.” demanded the brute.

Tucker complied, feeling a change of circumstance in the air. A change for the worse.

“Seems to me... you stand to make a decent profit.”

Tucker did the mathematics in his head.

True.

But he knew this adventure would cost him his Ethics and Standards Accreditation.

“What now?” It suddenly occurred to Tucker that being thrown out of the speeding cargovan seemed like the next logical step. For a scam like this to work, the victim mustn’t lodge a complaint within the next few days, if not ever. It buys the scammers time launder the money out of the system, hiding the trades among billions of transactions. Victims of unscrupulous spruikers never came forward because there wasn’t anything illegal about losing a small fortune through greed, naivety or through plain stupidity.

This situation was different.

Extortion was illegal.

Tucker noticed the cargovan slow to a halt.

The brute opened the slid door and hot air inundated the vehicle. “Get out.”

Shit!

Tucker succumbed to fear.

They are not going risk leaving me alive.

Light from the naked sun burnt his eyes.

“Why?” he angrily asked. “You’ve got what you wanted.”

“Get out.”

Tucker stepped out into an open desert, his feet sinking into the dry silty sand. “You don’t have to do this. I won’t report this to the authorities. I have no idea who you are so I can’t fuck this up for you. Don’t kill me for the sake of ...”

The sliding door slammed shut.

Tucker watched the cargovan bury its wheels into the soft dusty ground until it gained the momentum to speed away. He waited for the minor sand storm to clear before he attempted to survey the desert around him.

Tucker quickly established his location.

East river.

Standing smack bang in the middle of a dry river bed, Tucker made out the two opposing shorelines and the Lower Bayside slums beyond them. What were once thriving industrial and commercial districts were now derelict, forsaken by civilised society and home to millions of slumfolk.

Those goons are trying to kill me.

Why?

He wondered which rival corporation had it in bad for him, enough to hire goons to do this. Corporate espionage and sabotage were one thing. These things were so common even having an Ethics and Standards Accreditation issued didn’t guarantee compliance from companies too large to be thoroughly audited.

But to resort to extortion and murder?

Another paranoid thought entered his mind.

The government.

Who else?

If Tucker’s product line made it to market it would render such an antiquated institution as irreverent. They flat out refused to buy his new monetary system when he offered it to them. If he survived this ordeal Tucker knew he needed to drastically change the way he did business. He vowed to never again neglect operational security ever again.

If I survive.

Tucker mentally listed the dangers working against him.

He estimated that he was around thirty kilometres from the nearest bluezone. The temperature, probably sitting at forty degrees, felt it had still a degree or two to climb before sundown. The locals would eventually discover his presence. God only knew what would happen if they did. All he knew with any certainty was that slum dwellers absolutely hated all bluezoners with a passion.

There was no Ambercast coverage in these places, leaving with no way to connect with emergency services. There was, however, satnet coverage but, due to his bias against Meganat’s Jim Dochersky and his fleet of low earth orbit satellites, Tucker only bought Kinefone products.

So, no satnet.

Tucker headed downstream, west towards the mouth of the river, hoping to get to the cooler beaches of the bay before the sun reached its most treacherous hour. He avoided the shore, opting to stay out in the open cracked river bed than risk moving through dangerously populated and unpleasant neighbourhoods.

In the distance, he saw a ragtag group of children playing on a neglected chain-link fence. He stopped to study them and noticed that they were studying him. What caught his attention was the fact they all carried or wore electronic devices, interacting with them.

He concluded two possibilities.

One, his presence in the slums had become exposed, and within an hour they'll be celebrating over his dead carcass.

Two, the devices used by the locals were not Ambercast or satnet enabled. Even if they were these people would not be able to afford using them.

Episoft.

The peer to peer wave network offered free communication in areas where enough Episoft enabled devices were active. The higher the saturation the faster and deeper data packages travelled. When sparse, data packets took longer to emanate. As long as a link existed between two devices, between two pockets of saturation the message would eventually transgress to its final destination.

God damn brilliant piece of technology.

He had made a fortune speculating on Episoft's success.

All Tucker had to do was ping an emergency rescue request and wait for the message to snake its way through, hoping there were enough devices out there between himself and the nearest safe haven.

Wishful thinking kept him going.

Wishful thinking was all he had left.

**first appeared on writerscafe.org.*

3

Ice Hangar

The ephemeris data seemed healthy enough. The storm, on the other hand, appeared hazardous, ripping across space from over the horizon. Transiting through the comet's coma the shuttle vibrated slightly. Carl Reagle knew the out-gassing from the bright-side lacked enough violence to cause any serious problems. The comet had just emerged from out of the frost line, so the sun's rays were not harsh enough to feed a fully-fledged tail.

"Manual control in thirty seconds," said the Ixion's chief navigator, Jasmine Lambright.

"Standing by," said Reagle. "I have the ice hangar in sight."

"Be cautious of the rebound, Commander. The landing pads are inactive. Go in too hard and you'll bounce off all the way to Jupiter."

Reagle looked at his screen. "I'm easing in at 2.7 kays an hour. I have manual control."

"We've had two months of dead radio. Get a confirmation on conditions down there and get the hell back here." There was a hint of urgency in the Gi Corp hireling's voice. Reagle intended to do just that, having spent the entire trip from Ceres in an anxious state. These types of missions tended to rob him of sleep, especially when clients like Gi Corp gave him little information to go by.

He looked out into the black sky, hoping to get a glimpse of the spacecraft. He saw nothing. The Ixion orbited opposite his position, beyond the jagged horizon.

The shuttle made contact with one of the three landing pads. Ice gravel and black sand scattered as the module bounced several times before sliding to rest a full three minutes later. With the locking mechanism on the landing pad inactive, the shuttle ended up precariously near the edge. Thirty meters away the cave entrance to the ice hanger cut a deep scar into the sloping surface. Lights illuminated the interior in stark juxtaposition to the frozen night of space.

Reagle suited up and exited the shuttle, hitting the slippery frost-covered gangway awkwardly, the warmth of his life-suit sizzling frost-covered gangway. He hopped onto the gravel which crumbled like charcoal, his boots sinking knee-deep into the surface. He continued hopping, a painstaking task, to the entrance employing, small, soft pushes with his toes, calibrated by the pressure suit. Use too much force and in no time, you end up orbiting the comet.

Closer in, a series of blue-sticks provided him with a secure handrail, assisting him all the way inside the vast cavern. Mechanical monsters lay dormant in the artificial blue-tinged light.

Excavators. Drillers. Nukepumpers.

Along the left side wall, a tall cylinder towered above him. The red and white nuclear symbol dominating the exterior. "Power generators appear active. No sign of damage inside the ice hunger." Reagle wiped frost from the yellow-painted alloy of a mechanoid. "No sign of any activity, either."

He headed for the airlock, a platform-sized elevator situated towards the rear of the ice hangar. Below, safely embedded deep within the comet, Lapith/2183 G7, the living and command quarters waited, like an ancient tomb.

Two months.

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