



BY ROB BOYLE

HISTORY: CRASH 2.0

Gary Cline laughed as his bodyguards battled valiantly on the air hockey table. The redheaded troll scored a goal on her opponent, but Gary was distracted by an AR icon indicating an urgent call. "Be right back, guys. Keep playing, I'll be fine."

He stepped around the corner and walked down the hall. The Horizon Creative Resort was still being built, but Horizon staff were already taking to the completed parts. He took the call—a time-sensitive affair involving Horizon's petition for a Corporate Court seat—in his temporary office. He finished, poured himself a scotch, and was headed back to the door when two men burst in, armed and wearing armored black infiltration outfits. One of them held Gary's personal assistant, Leon, with a gun to his head.

The other intruder stepped forward. "Mr. Cline, I hope you don't mind, but you're a difficult man to reach, so we made our own appointment."

Gary leaned back against the wet bar and took another drink. "Well, let's see. You are Randall Coleman, deniable assets manager for NeoNET. You're probably here to discuss Global Technologies. And your goon here holding Leon would be Ivan Garner, AKA Crackpot, freelance security specialist. Can I offer you gentlemen a drink?"

"How'd you know my name?" asked Crackpot, menace in his voice.

Gary smiled. "I have a very sophisticated image recognition system at my disposal. It's managed by some, ah, more-than-expert systems, and tied directly into our consumer intelligence databanks. I can tell both of you gentlemen what you had for lunch today and many interesting things about your purchasing habits." He flashed a grin. "It makes for great small

talk openers at parties. Ivan, you may be interested to know that you're paying too much for those male enhancement pills. Our Whole New You clinics offer a drug that's just as effective and 25 percent cheaper."

"Cut the crap!" Coleman yelled, his face livid. "We're here to talk about Global all right. I've had plans in place for years to force that bastard Manes to sell. He was on the verge of cracking when you waltzed in and snatched the deal out from under us." He motioned towards Crackpot and the hostage. "I'm not going to let this slide. You're going to get on the phone and do whatever it takes to get this deal canceled, or Leon's brains become part of your décor."

Gary sipped his scotch and looked sad. "I'm afraid I can't do that. It's not my decision to make. The Consensus wants Global Technologies."

Crackpot put the gun to Leon's head. "Last chance. And after he goes, you're next."

Gary sighed, and looked at Leon. "Leon. I'm afraid your HIP score has been tanking lately. Your recommendations on the Hisato deal were all way off the mean. The timing is very unfortunate." Leon's eyes widened, and he struggled in Crackpot's grip. "I'm sorry," Gary continued. "Resort, please fire Leon. With prejudice."

An armed sentry drone dropped out of the ceiling, targeted Leon, and fired three rounds into his heart.

Crackpot spun away, dropping Leon's body, and raised his SMG. Armor-piercing autofire ripped the sentry gun to shreds.

Gary casually waved his hand through the smoke, sipped his scotch, and looked at the destroyed drone. "That's going to be a bit of a mess to clean up. And here I told Roberto he could have tomorrow off for a personal day."

Coleman regained his composure, anger smeared across his face. "Crackpot, I'm through with this guy. Waste him."

Crackpot approached Gary, raising his SMG. Gary smiled and asked him, "Does your wife know about your mistress yet?"

Crackpot paused, his face stony.

"It's amazing the things you can glean from people's purchasing records. All those dinners and hotel rooms, all at times your wife was working." Gary leaned forward. "I bet you didn't know she was pregnant, yet, either?"

Crackpot's eyes narrowed.

"Pregnancy test purchased 3 weeks ago. Ice cream, pickles, and NERPS purchased yesterday. And she's been perusing maternity bras online." He looked Crackpot right in the eye. "I've already dead-letter-dropped the data. Kill me now, and your wife will know."

Crackpot cursed.

"Fuck this." Coleman strode forward, raising his own gun.

"Randall, before you kill me, there's something you should know."

"Oh yeah, what's that?" Coleman put the gun to Gary's head.

"The Consensus has instructed me to offer you a job. NeoNET has already decided to terminate you, given your failure to acquire Global Technologies. Horizon is a growing family. We are in need of people with your particular skill sets and go-getter attitude. All you need to do is be a team player."

Coleman stared Gary hard in the eyes for a long moment, the gun never wavering.

"How's the vacation plan?" he asked.