Ratings Sweeps

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Ratings Sweeps
by John Martinez

Charlie put his shoulder into the old door; with a begrudging grunt and shudder it gave in. Cursing out loud to himself he stepped into his apartment and threw the door closed. Dropping his jacket onto a hover-chair, Charlie walked over to his couch and collapsed. Charlie wanted nothing more than to sleep for a decade, it had been a long night. Work was getting more scarce nowadays, it was all he could do to make his monthly arm payments. Thus, he had mixed feelings when he spotted the red message light on his view screen blinking. Finally, greed won out over exhaustion and Charlie spoke into the air, "Messages, please."

A saccharine sweet computer enhanced voice replied in an almost too cheery tone, "Messages for March 2, 2090 being processed. Just one moment, please." The screen was a blur of flashing lights as the computer went about its preprogrammed task of separating junk mail from personal messages. Finally the rapid cycle slowed down and Charlie muttered out a feeble, "Play." At first it was nothing new, a couple of pals wanting to borrow money, his dealer trying to lay off some new kind of drug, and some sleaze he met last week. Charlie was getting ready to dump the screen when the image of a thirty-ish woman with a severe haircut wearing a business suit appeared on the dirty screen. Knocking over some beer cans and a week-old pizza box Charlie stumbled forward and mumbled, "Sound plus thirteen."

"This is Sharrone Takeshi," the woman announced in a strident voice. "A mutual friend of ours has informed me of your particular talents." A mutual friend, thought Charlie; he didn’t know anyone who could afford to breathe the same air as this suit.

"If you are interested," she continued (Charlie was), "Come to the Channel 26 offices tomorrow at 8:00 p.m. I’ve left a security pass at
checkpoint 13 with your name on it."

Charlie looked at his chronometer, it was 5:00 a.m. already; he would have just enough time to catch some serious z’s.

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7:45, Charlie looked at his chronometer again. This little hitlerite at the check point was going to make him late for his appointment with her damn background check. He was seriously considering running through the blockade, and, in fact, he would—that is, if they didn’t have all those really big guns pointed at him. Finally, the amazonian guard got off the phone and walked over to Charlie’s bike. Stooping down to look him in the face she shoved a small yellow card into his hand and sneered, "All right, you’re cleared for five hours. Any longer and we come looking for you." Standing up, the blond guard waved the gates open, Charlie passed through.

The financial district at night is about the most alien thing in the world to an innersprawl native. There’s virtually no noise, no trash and no bums. Triads of CorpCops patrol the entire area armed with heavy equipment, there are few pedestrians and no loiterers. Charlie slowed his bike as he closed in on the Channel 26 parking garage. A hoverlimo glided by him and he was hailed by two armed guards. Showing them his yellow I.D. card, they pointed out to him the nearest lift to the Research and Development wing.

The silver-toned doors of the lift slid open with a barely audible "whoosh." Stepping out, Charlie found himself in a wooden-paneled reception room. At a large art deco metallic desk sat an androgynous-looking secretary. He/She got up and addressed Charlie in a computer emulated female voice. "Mr. Charles, I do believe Ms. Takeshi is expecting you." He/She then grabbed Charlie by the elbow and led him down a corridor to a pair of sturdy oaken doors. Stepping forward, there was a faint buzzing sound as hidden servo motors swung the massive doors inward.

The interior of the office was impressive, to say the least. The gigantic Masudatech window at the far end of the room held a view of
the higher end of the financial district while intensifying the ambient moonlight to illuminate the office. In front of the window rested an equally impressive sculpted marble desk, behind which sat Sharrone Takeshi. The diminutive oriental woman looked strangely out of place behind the massive desk, almost as if the bulk of the marble was more the center of her command, not the symbol of it. She looked Charlie directly in the eye and spoke with a rehearsed deliberate tone, "Please sit down," she motioned to a hoverchair. "Mr. Charles, I will be very frank with you as I understand that the law is not an inhibiting factor to your type of work. We have had our fill of Channel 40's monopoly of the global ratings."

Takeshi pressed a button on her desk and the lights dimmed, the window behind her turned into a luminous video screen displaying global networks, shows, advertising bids and relative audience shares.

"The next trimester season starts in one month and we want an edge. We want to know what 40 has got in store for the public, so that we can prepare appropriately competitive programming. As a result, we require someone to secure 40's fall lineup of programs. Am I making myself clear?"

Charlie nodded his head; corporate espionage was nothing new to him. All he cared about was what kind of compensation he would get for his time. Sharrone looked at him for a minute and then pressed another button; the vidscreen changed to a view of a large dull gray skyscraper. On top of the building, four giant vidscreens constantly play trailers for Channel 40's shows.

"We have learned that most of 40's programming and development takes place in the Richardson Metals Building, or the Network 40 building, as everyone likes to call it. 40's security is notoriously distrusting of normal software procedures, so they store most of their sensitive documents and materials on data cards in a secret central vault. All of their security files are physically cut off from the ComNet so we haven't been able to do much reconnaissance. We have been able to determine that their Research and Development department occupies a space somewhere between the eleventh and fifteenth floors."

Charlie leaned back in his chair and popped a cigarette into his
mouth. Lighting his smoke he clicked his lighter shut and mumbled between clenched teeth, "So how much are ya gonna pay me?"

"Nothing," was the reply.

Charlie sat on the end of his chair and looked Takeshi straight in the eyes. "What the hell do you mean nothing!" he yelled exhaling a large amount of smoke in Sharonne's general direction.

"If you would let me finish!" exclaimed Takeshi, "the 'nothing' is up front only. We're prepared to offer 4,000 worldbucks for each program you deliver, plus a bonus, to be determined on how clean the lift is."

"Sounds fair to me," said Charlie releasing his grip on the desk. "The only problem I got is, how do I get in?"

Takeshi pressed another button on her desk. "The answer to that is simple." A panel in the wall slid up and out stepped a young woman wearing a ball cap and a pair of baggy overalls. "This is Frankie James; she's an accomplished c-deck operator and will be handling the technical end of the operation through the ComNet. Frankie approached Charlie and smirked. "The pleasure's all mine," her sarcasm laid on like San Francisco smog.

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It had been one hellish evening. Charlie had always thought of himself as a calm, rational person not prone to fits of wanton violence. Frankie James was quickly changing that. From the first sarcastic sentence out of her mouth his blood boiled. In fact, the only thing worse than talking to Frankie would be being incarcerated with her, a prospect which only made Charlie concentrate more.

The entry had to be perfect: he knew that if they suspected anything he could count the seconds he had left to live on his right hand. Coming up to one of the outer security doors, Charlie stuck the forged I.D. card the wise-cracking C-net junkie had given him into a rectangular slot. There was a faint whirring, and then the security computer spoke. "Please stand still; retinal I.D. scan about to commence."
A line of red light shot forth from the central lens scanner and began to probe his eye. As far as Charlie was concerned this was the most dangerous part of the operation. If the computer rejected him he could end up with a burnt-out eye socket and a hell of a headache. Suddenly the light stopped and the computer announced, "Scan completed. Welcome to Channel 40, Mr. Shuloff." Charlie grunted and stepped through the now open circular door.

"IT'S UP AHEAD!!" Frankie blared over the mini-receiver in Charlie's ear.

"Jesus Christ! Turn that fucker down!" he yelled, almost launching his cigarette down the long corridor. There was a brief buzz with the receiver and then there was nothing.

"Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing." The phrase reverberated softly in Charlie's ear. He was starting to get annoyed again.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked his ear. At first there was no reply, and then a soft voice said, "Why, I'm whispering sweet nothings in your ear." Charlie groaned, he really hated his job.

Charlie followed the corridor into a large central waiting area; sitting at a hexagonal security desk were two CorpCops, both heavily armed. Charlie started to sweat.


"Well, Hodges," he replied handing over a bundle of papers, "It's a bit too warm for me down here in 'Frisco."

"That’s right," said Hodges, who was reading Charlie's I.D. papers. "It says right here that you’re from our Alaska division. Must be a real change."

"That’s for sure."

The guard began to type in a string of numbers on a small pad to the left of a computer screen. A startled look came over his face and he turned to face Charlie.

"Uhh..., Mr. Shuloff," Hodges spoke. "There doesn't seem to be any authorization records here. Are you sure you’re supposed to audit the Advertising accounts?"

"Of course. Just check the computer again. It must be some
kind of computer glitch; the I.D. code's 102346-2389A, and it's Shuloff with two F's."

"I'll try again," spoke the guard. "But I don't know if anything's gonna change."

"It better," mumbled Charlie to his ear.

Hodges finished typing in the code and stood back up with a stymied look on his face.

"I don't get it," he scratched his head. "Just a second ago..."

"It's all right," jumped in Charlie. "I'll just take my papers and go."

The guard reluctantly handed the papers back over to Charlie. He shoved the documents into the coat of his jacket and headed for the nearest lift. Once inside he took a deep breath and looked at the floor selector; there was no thirteenth floor. Covering his ear he spoke, "Frankie, we've got a little problem here."

"What?" answered the receiver.

"There's no frickin' thirteenth floor!"

Charlie smiled at the two guards who were still watching him from their desk. With any luck they might just think he was insane instead of shooting him.

"Press twelve."

"Huh??" wittily responded Charlie.

"Just press twelve, dammit!" yelled Frankie who had just turned up the volume for effect.

Charlie pressed the over-large button and waved goodbye to the nice men. Looking up at the ceiling, he fiddled with his ear.

"What the hell is this shit with the floors?!"

"Well," spoke Frankie, "seeing that you're just a stupid sprawlkid, I suppose you have no way of knowing this, but the Richardson Metals Building was built in the early twentieth century."

"So?"

"If you'd just shut up for a minute I'm getting to that!" Frankie continued, "When this building was built it had twenty-six floors; if you'd look at the floor selector you would see that the floors are labeled up to twenty-six, including the misplaced thirteenth."
The elevator stopped and Charlie spoke, "Just get to the point. We're here, already."

An audible sigh was detected over the receiver and Frankie continued. "All right, in 1947 Mr. Richardson had the thirteenth floor sealed off and converted into a massive office. The stopping mechanism was a manual one that only Mr. Richardson or certain friends of his knew about. My guess is that the R & D guys must be using the same mechanism since it doesn't appear here on the Net."

"Great!" replied Charlie. "How the hell am I going to get into this damn secret lab?"

"Y'know, Chuck, you really do swear too much."

Charlie muttered through clenched teeth, "Well, if you can't get me there through the Net, then how do normal people do it?"

"Chuck," replied Frankie, "you're anything but normal."

* * * * *

Charlie ripped the emergency hatch into shreds with his right arm. Grabbing the rim of the top of the elevator he pulled himself up into the shaft. On top of the elevator, it swung a little under his weight; looking to the right he saw the inside of the main elevator doors. Subtlety would do him no good here, so he pulled out his Mirage XR 32, set the frequency at tight and began to melt away the main locking device. In three minutes he was in.

The main foyer was an elaborate set-up with two rows of elevator banks facing each other; the walls were all pristine, and the entire area smelled of carpet shampoo. To his left was a security desk behind which a CorpCop was getting ready to gleefully blast Charlie into bloody goo with his 12mm. The first couple shots flew over Charlie's head as he hit the dirt; rolling across the room he tried to work free a small black disk from the back of his belt.

An overturned table offered a bit of soft cover as he worked the micro-grenade loose. Free at last in his hand, he flung it at the guard like a diminutive frisbee. Closing his eyes, Charlie grimaced as the explosion tore the CorpCop into little pieces. Running past to the desk
with his laser drawn, Charlie noticed a blinking red light and yelled to Frankie, "It looks like we've had a little problem. One of the CorpCops caught on to us and called in the cavalry. Do you think you can slow 'em down?"

"Not a problem, Chuck," replied Frankie. "After all, they can't be any brighter than you."

Charlie was not amused as he ran down one of the long corridors. Turning the corner he spotted the fake marble paneling on one of the walls sliding back to reveal a silver door that was also beginning to open.

"Thanks, Frankie," he muttered.

On the inside of the door was a small two-meter threshold; beyond that was a larger room with a circular door mounted on the wall. Charlie set his briefcase down and gently opened it, extracting a skin-thin glove. Placing the glove over his right hand, Charlie approached a small black plate and keypad. Pressing his hand upon the plate, a small line of red ran up and down his hand; there were two beeps and a small light turned green. One down and one to go. Charlie dug his cybernetic fingers into the wall around the keypad and pulled it off of the wall. Gathering up a small handful of wires he began to attach them to a fist-sized black box with a digital display. Suddenly, the display came to life as it cycled through a list of thousands of possible number combinations. Within a minute, the proper number sequence was on the digital display. Walking over to the large circular door, Charlie spoke into the air. "O.K., Frankie, do your stuff."

Slowly the door opened and Charlie entered the vault. All around him a fortune in electronic equipment was recklessly tossed aside like old garbage. Scanning the room he saw a row of small drawers lining the eastern wall. Walking over to the wall he read the labels above all of the drawers until he came to one called "90 Fall Schedule." Pulling the handle to the drawer, Charlie smirked; it was locked. He pulled harder.

Charlie gathered up the contents of the drawer and began to run them one by one into his datacard copier. All of the cards were labeled in codes except for the last one; it read "Island Love Intg. #1-10."
Putting the copied cards into his briefcase, his curiosity got the better of him and he walked over to one of the numerous data viewers in the room. Popping the card in, Charlie sat back and watched as the screen came to life.

The show began with a panorama of a South Seas island (accompanied by sappy, swoony mood music). There were a wrecked boat and a couple lying nearby on the beach. Incredibly, he found himself enraptured with the seemingly thin plot concept, and in fact he even felt strangely empathic with the poor couple. Charlie moved closer to the screen as the seductive plot unfolded with enticing slowness...

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING!" yelled Frankie over the receiver. "THOSE CORPCOPS ARE GETTING CLOSER!"

Charlie, awakened from his reverie, grabbed the datacard and shoved it into his pocket. Scooping up his briefcase with his other hand, he headed back for the main corridor. Charlie started running back to the elevators when the muffled sound of many booted feet came from around the corner; he tried to turn but it was too late. There was some initial confusion but then one of the CorpCops yelled, "There he is!" To escape the ensuing hail of bullets, Charlie dove right through an open doorway of one of the larger offices. Crawling around the large desks which offered a sort of protection, he opened fire with his laser. He dropped five men in as many shots. The CorpCops were not prepared for this, and they fell back to the doorway in confusion. Charlie looked at the charge indicator on his Mirage; it was reading low--there was no way he was going to win this one.

Looking around, Charlie studied his options. He had none. Digging into his pocket Charlie pulled out an Imdar-12 time-release grenade; setting the timer he got up and rolled it across the floor. The CorpCops began to fire as Charlie leaped over a desk towards the window. Covering his head and neck he crashed through the window and began to fall; seconds later the room he had just occupied exploded with an incinerating fire. Charlie grabbed for the sides of the concrete and steel building with his cybernetic arm. His hand made contact once and Charlie dug his osmium steel appendage into the concrete with every forced ounce of willpower he had left. The sparks fell, but Charlie
didn't.

Charlie heavily touched down on top of the parking garage; landing feet first, his right ankle buckled underneath him. Leaning against the wall he breathed a sigh of relief and stared at his mangled cyber-arm. Takeshi was definitely going to reimburse him for this little fiasco. Gathering up his strength Charlie hobbled over to where the briefcase had landed. He opened it and checked for any damage; the contents looked fine. In the distance some sirens sounded; taking his cue, Charlie stumbled off into the night.

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The damp San Francisco sea wind was chill upon Charlie's face. All around him there were the sounds of the sprawl: screams, sirens, gunshots. Charlie walked down a dim alley lighted only by the fading bug-zapping neon sign above an otherwise nondescript door. He approached the door, vermin scurrying at his feet. The sign read in large pink letters, "Cafe Sub-Nuclear." This was the place.

The smell of the place reminded him of a mixture of raw sewage and heavy perfume. To the right and left of him members of the various sprawlgangs cavorted like animals, the Cafe Sub-Nuclear was neutral ground, but that didn't mean its members acted any better than the street scum they are. As a plastered Cyberpunk fell in front of him, Charlie couldn't help but think how a suit like Sharrone Takeshi would get her kicks here. Charlie walked up to a graffiti-covered steel door at the back of the bar; waiting for him was the notorious bouncer Claws.

"Outa my way, Clawsy."

"No way, man, this room's for V.I.P.'s, no scum like you allowed."

Charlie looked Claws in the eye. "Listen here, laughing boy, I got serious business inside there and if you don't move they're gonna be carrying you out in little plastic baggies."

Claws rose to his full height and flexed his fingers, purposely showing off his implanted set of laser-honed razornails.

"From where I stand it doesn't look like no cripple like you is
gonna be able to do jack shit." He extended his nails and swiped the empty jacket sleeve of Charlie's right arm. "Now, why don't you go sit down and have a drink." Claws cracked his toothy maw in the semblance of a grin but only succeeded in showing off three rows of chromed teeth.

Charlie didn’t have time to fool around with this genetic throwback. He flipped his left wrist out in a fast, whip-like motion. Suddenly a carbon blade the size of a large hunting knife fell into his hand and then "fell" into Claws' groin. There was a stifled groan and then a loud thump as Charlie pushed him out of the way.

"I'm really sorry, Claws, but the last couple days have done wonders for my stress level."

The inside of the V.I.P. room was a little disappointing. It smelled heavily of smoke and spilled drinks; on each side there was a line of booths, each with its own personal hanging light. Only one was on, so Charlie strolled closer. The sight at the booth nearly turned Charlie's stomach--there was Frankie James, baseball cap and all.

"Hiya, sprawlkid, done much hitchhiking lately?"

Charlie grimaced and shot back, "Can the crap, James; do ya got it?"

Frankie leaned over the side of the booth and patted a large black case, "It's all yours, bucko."

"That is, if you have the goods," sounded a small voice. Also in the booth, although Charlie didn’t pick her out at first, was Sharrone Takeshi. The diminutive oriental woman was easily lost in the shadows of the back room. She stood up and beckoned Charlie to sit.

"Well, Mr. Charles," spoke Takeshi, "I'll try to make this as painless as possible. If you would turn over the datacards then you can receive your payment, and we can all go our separate ways."

Charlie smiled and then reached into his jacket pockets. He pulled out a handful of small datacards and displayed them on the table in accordion fashion. "Here ya go, Takeshi. Channel 40's fall lineup, stuff so secret you need security clearance to even think about it."

Takeshi gathered up the cards in her too eager hands. One by one she ran them through a portable data viewer, making remarks on a
small pad. "That's odd..." she remarked to herself.

"What's odd?" asked Charlie, perhaps a little too eagerly.

"Nothing. I just assumed that there would be eight pilot shows. Anyway, here's your money."

Charlie picked up the envelope and looked in it; 20,000 worldbucks stared right back at him. Things were looking up.

"And," started Frankie, handing over the black case, "here's the other half of the deal."

Charlie set the case on the table and gently opened it. Inside the case was a Gentech-11 cyberarm good enough to replace the one he lost. He picked up the glistening metal appendage, holding it to the light. It was perfect, not even a scratch on the chrome.

"Pretty good stuff. Is it hot? I don't want no body bank repo men coming after me in a week."

"Naw," replied Frankie, "I got a great deal on it--my uncle sells cybergear. Anyway, it also comes with three full cans of pseudo-flesh. Not bad, huh?"

Charlie grunted and put the arm back into the case. Things were going well, with any luck he'd be in the resort state of Hawaii by tomorrow afternoon. Charlie rose from the table, he nodded his head at the two ladies and left. He had just opened the door when he heard it. Several shots were being fired in the bar up ahead; Charlie squatted behind a partition in the wall and drew his Mirage. If there was any trouble, he was going to be part of it.

Looking over the mini-wall, Charlie tried to discern what was going on. Amidst the confusion of the bar, two men had just opened fire on three people sitting at a booth; the three people looked remarkably like Frankie, Sharrone, and him. Charlie had a decision to make and he made it--if someone had just bungled a hit on him he was going to find out who they were. Charlie's Mirage let out a beam of high intensity laser energy, burning a hole through one of the hit men's upper arm. The other tattooed punk opened up on Charlie with his automatic. Charlie flew back against the wall in pain as the slugs collided with his chest--without his sub-dermal armor he'd be a goner by now. He closed his eyes and slumped against the wall; the thug
smiled to himself and then started to run for the door. It was a big mistake, the last one he ever made. Charlie let fly with three shots through the man’s back; he fell over in a heap of scorched flesh.

Charlie ran over to the felled men--the second one was dead but the first was still moving. He looked at the man’s face--he was vaguely familiar, and then it came back. This man was the security guard at the desk the other night, what was his name? Hodges. Charlie looked at the ex-CorpCop one last time. It was too bad, he seemed like a decent guy. Charlie’s search of the other man revealed nothing, not even an I.D. card. He got up to warn Frankie and Sharrone and then he realized it. They were gone.

By the minute, things were getting stranger. Charlie picked up his case and headed for the door. He didn’t want to be around when the cops showed up. Outside the bar it had warmed up a little, the wind had died down, and the streets seemed a bit quieter. He set down his case and reached for a smoke, his hand coming across an odd square. Charlie pulled it out and held it to the neon light; it was a datacard. He had forgotten about this one. It was still worth a couple thousand worldbucks, but Charlie thought better of it. After all, he didn’t care if he saw Sharrone Takeshi ever again. Jamming the card in his pocket, Charlie grabbed his case and hobbled off into the night, his ankle still hadn’t healed.