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DAVID MITCHELL

'a huge new talent'
guardian

number 9 dream

'even more dazzling than GHOSTWRITTEN'
independent on sunday

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number9dream



SCEPTRE

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One



PANOPTICON

'It is a simple matter. I know your name, and you knew mine, once upon a time: Eiji Miyake. Yes, *that* Eiji Miyake. We are both busy people, Ms Katō, so why not cut the small talk? I am in Tokyo to find my father. You know his name and you know his address. And you are going to give me both. Right *now*.' Or something like that. A galaxy of cream unribbons in my coffee cup, and the background chatter pulls into focus. My first morning in Tokyo, and I am already getting ahead of myself. The Jupiter Café sloshes with lunch-hour laughter, Friday plottings, clinking saucers. Drones bark into mobile phones. She-drones hitch up sagging voices to sound more feminine. Coffee, seafood sandwiches, detergent, steam. I have an across-the-street view of the PanOpticon's main entrance. Quite a sight, this zirconium gothic skyscraper. Its upper floors are hidden by clouds. Under its tight-fitting lid Tokyo steams – 34°C with 86% humidity. A big Panasonic display says so. Tokyo is so close up you cannot always see it. No distances. Everything is over your head – dentists, kindergartens, dance studios. Even the roads and walkways are up on murky stilts. Venice with the water drained away. Reflected airplanes climb over mirrored buildings. I always thought Kagoshima was huge, but you could lose it down a side alley in Shinjuku. I light a cigarette – Kool, the brand chosen by a biker ahead of me in the queue – and watch the traffic and passers-by on the intersection between Ōmekaidō Avenue and Kita Street. Pin-striped drones, a lip-pierced hairdresser, midday drunks, child-laden housewives. Not a single person is standing still. Rivers, snowstorms, traffic, bytes, generations, a thousand faces per minute. Yakushima is a thousand minutes per face. All of these people with their boxes of memories labelled 'Parents'. Good

shots, bad shots, frightening figures, tender pictures, fuzzy angles, scratched negatives – it doesn't matter, they know who ushered them on to Earth. Akiko Katō, I am waiting. Jupiter Café is the nearest lunch place to PanOpticon. It would be so much simpler if you would just drop by here for a sandwich and a coffee. I will recognize you, introduce myself, and persuade you that natural justice is on my side. How do daydreams translate into reality? I sigh. Not very well, not every often. I will have to storm your fortress in order to get what I want. Not good. A building as huge as the PanOpticon probably has other exits, and its own restaurants. You are probably an empress by now with slaves to fetch your meals. Who says you even eat lunch? Maybe a human heart for breakfast tides you over until suppertime. I entomb my Kool in the remains of its ancestors, and resolve to end my stake-out when I finish this coffee. I'm coming in to get you, Akiko Katō. Three waitresses staff Jupiter Café. One – the boss – is as brittle as an imperial dowager who poisoned her husband with misery, one has a braying donkey voice, and the third is turned away from me, but she has the most perfect neck in all creation. Dowager is telling Donkey about her hairdresser's latest failed marriage. 'When his wife fails to measure up to his fantasies, he throws her overboard.' The waitress with the perfect neck is serving a life sentence at the sink. Are Dowager and Donkey cold-shouldering her, or is she cold-shouldering them? Level by level, the PanOpticon disappears – the clouds are down to the eighteenth floor. The fog descends farther when I look away. I calculate the number of days I have been alive on a paper serviette – 7,290, including four leap years. The clock says five to one, and the drones drain away from Jupiter Café. I guess they are afraid they'll get restructured if one o'clock finds them anywhere but their striplit cubicles. My coffee cup stands empty in a moat of slops. Right. When the hour hand touches one, I'm going into the PanOpticon. I admit I'm nervous. Nervous is cool. A recruitment officer for the Self-Defence Forces came to my high school last year, and said that no fighting unit wants people who are immune to fear – soldiers who don't feel fear

get their platoon killed in the first five minutes on the battlefield. A good soldier controls and uses his fear to sharpen his senses. One more coffee? No. One more Kool, to sharpen my senses.

The clock touches half-past one – my deadline died. My ashtray is brimming over. I shake my cigarette box – down to my last one. The clouds are down to the PanOpticon's ninth floor. Akiko Katō gazes through her air-conned office suite window into fog. Can she sense me, as I sense her? Can she tell that today is one of those life-changing days? One final, final, final cigarette: then my assault begins before 'nervous' becomes 'spineless'. An old man was in Jupiter Café when I arrived. He hasn't stopped playing his vidboy. He is identical to Lao Tzu from my school textbook – bald, nutty, bearded. Other customers arrive, order, drink and eat up, and leave within minutes. Decades' worth. But Lao Tzu stays put. The waitresses must imagine my girlfriend has stood me up, or else I am a psycho waiting to stalk them home. A muzak version of 'Imagine' comes on and John Lennon wakes up in his tomb, appalled. It is vile beyond belief. Even the traitors who recorded this horror hated it. Two pregnant women enter and order iced lemon teas. Lao Tzu coughs a cough of no return, and dabs phlegm off his vidboy screen with his shirtsleeve. I drag smoke down deep and trickle it out through my nostrils. What Tokyo needs is a good flooding to clean it up. Mandolineering gondoliers punting down Ginza. 'Mind you,' continues Dowager to Donkey, 'his wives are such grasping, mincing little creatures, they deserve everything they get. When you marry be sure to select a husband whose dreams are exactly the same size as your own.' I sip my coffee foam. My mug rim has traces of lipstick. I construct a legal case to argue that sipping from this part of the bowl constitutes a kiss with a stranger. That would increase my tally of kissed girls to three, still less than the national average. I look around the Jupiter Café for a potential kissee, and settle on the waitress of the living, wise, moonlit viola neck. A tendril of hair has fallen loose, and brushes her nape. It tickles. I compare the fuchsia pink on the mug with the

pink of her lipstick. Circumstantial evidence, at any distance. Who knows how many times the cup has been dishwashed, fusing the lipstick atoms with the porcelain molecules? And a sophisticated Tokyoite like her has enough admirers to fill a pocket computer. Case dismissed. Lao Tzu growls at his vidboy. 'Blasted, blasted, *blasted* bioborgs. Every blasted time.' I sup my dregs and put on my baseball cap. Time to go and find my maker.



PanOpticon's lobby – cavernous as the belly of a stone whale – swallows me whole. Arrows in the floorpads sense my feet, and guide me to a vacant reception booth. A door hisses shut behind me, sealing subterranean blackness. A tracer light scans me from head to foot, blipping over the barcode on my ID panel. An amber spotlight comes on, and my reflection stares back. I certainly look the part. Overalls, baseball cap, toolbox and clipboard. An ice maiden appears on the screen before me. She is blemishlessly, symmetrically beautiful. SECURITY glows on her lapel badge. 'State your name,' she intones, 'and business.' I wonder how human she is. These are days when computers humanize and humans computerize. I play the overawed yokel. 'Afternoon. My name is Ran Sogabe. I'm a Goldfish Pal.'

She frowns. Excellent. She's only human. 'Goldfish Pal?'

'Not seen our ad, ma'am?' I sing a jingle. 'We cater for our finny friends—'

'Why are you requesting access to PanOpticon?'

I act puzzled. 'I service Osugi and Kosugi's aquarium, ma'am.'

'Osugi and Bosugi.'

I check my clipboard. 'That's the badger.'

'I'm scanning some curious objects in your toolbox.'

'Newly imported from Germany, ma'am. May I present the ionic flurocarb pellet popper – doubtless you know how crucial pH stability is for the optimum aquarium environment? We believe we are the first aquaculturists in the country to utilize this little wonder. Perhaps I could offer a brief—'

'Place your right hand on the access scanner, Mr Sogabe.'

'I hope this is going to tickle.'

'That is your left hand.'

'Beg pardon.'

A brief eternity elapses before a green AUTHORIZED blinks.

'And your access code?'

She is vigilant. I scrunch my eyes. 'Let me see: 313 – 636 – 969.'

The eyes of the ice maiden flicker. 'Your access code is valid.' So it should be. I paid the finest freelance master hacker in Tokyo a fortune for those nine numbers. 'For the month of July. I must remind you we are now in August.'

Cheapskate bum jet-trash hackers. 'Uh, how peculiar.' I scratch my crotch to buy myself a moment. 'That was the access code I was given by Ms' – a doleful glance at my clipboard – 'Akiko Katō, associate lawyer at Osugi and Kosugi.'

'Bosugi.'

'Whatever. Oh well. If my access code isn't valid I can't very well enter, can I? Pity. When Ms Katō wants to know why her priceless Okinawan silverspines died from excrement poisoning, I can refer her to you. What did you say your name was?'

Ice Maiden hardens. Zealous ones are bluff-susceptible. 'Return tomorrow after rechecking your access codes.'

I huff and shake my head. 'Impossible! Do you know how many fish I got on my turf? In the old days, we had a bit more give and take, but since total quality management got hold of us we operate within an hour-by-hour timeframe. One missed appointment, and our finny friends are phosphate feed. Even while I stand here nitpicking with you, I got ninety angel-fish at the Metropolitan City Office in danger of asphyxiation. No hard feelings, ma'am, but I have to insist on your name for our legal waiver form.' I do my dramatic pen-poise pause.

Ice Maiden flickers.

I relent. 'Why not call Ms Katō's secretary? She'll confirm my appointment.'

'I already did.' Now I'm worried. If my hacker got my alias

wrong too, I am already burger-meat. 'But your appointment appears to be for tomorrow.'

'True. Quite true. My appointment was for tomorrow. But the Fish Ministry issued an industry-wide warning last night. An epidemic of silverspine, uh, ebola has come in from a contaminated Taiwanese batch. It travels down air conduits, lodges itself in the gills, and . . . a disgusting sight to behold. Fish literally swelling until their entrails pop out. The boffins are working on a cure, but between you and me—'

Ice Maiden cracks. 'Anciliary authorization is granted for two hours. From the reception booth proceed to the turbo elevator. Do not stray from the sensor floor arrows, or you will trigger alarms and illegal entry recriminations. The elevator will automatically proceed to Osugi and Bosugi on level eighty-one.'

'Level eighty-one, Mr Sogabe,' announces the elevator. 'I look forward to serving you again.' The doors open on to a virtual rainforest of pot plants and ferns. An aviary of telephones trill. Behind an ebony desk, a young woman removes her glasses and puts down a spray-mister. 'Security said Mr Sogabe was coming.'

'Let me guess! Kazuyo, Kazuyo, am I right?'

'Yes, but—'

'No wonder Ran calls you his PanOpticon Angel!'

The receptionist isn't falling for it. 'Your name is?'

'Ran's apprentice! Jōji. Don't tell me he's never mentioned me! I do Harajuku normally, but I'm covering his Shinjuku clients this month on account of his, uh, genital malaria.'

Her face falls. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Ran never mentioned it? Well, who can blame him? The boss thinks it's just a heavy cold, that's why Ran didn't actually cancel his name from his clients' books . . . All hush-hush!' I smile gingerly and look around for video cameras. None visible. I kneel, open my toolbox with the lid blocking her view, and begin assembling my secret weapon. 'Had a hell of time getting in here, y'know.'

Artificial intelligence! Artificial stupidity. Ms Katō's office is down this corridor, is it?

'Yes, but, look, Mr Jōji, I have to ask you for a retinal scan.'

'Does it tickle?' Finished. I close the toolbox and approach her desk with my hands behind my back and a gormless grin. 'Where do I look?'

She turns a scanner towards me. 'Into this eyepiece.'

'Kazuyo.' I check we are alone. 'Ran told me, about, y'know – is it true?'

'Is what true?'

'Your eleventh toe?'

'My eleventh *what?*' The moment she looks at her feet I pepper her neck with enough instant-action tranquillizer micro-pellets to knock out the entire Chinese Army. She slumps on her blotter. I make a witty pun in the manner of James Bond for my own amusement.

I knock three times. 'Goldfish Pal, Ms Katō!'

A mysterious pause. 'Enter.'

I check that the corridor is empty of witnesses, and slip in. The actual lair of Akiko Katō matches closely the version in my imagination. A chequered carpet. A curved window of troubled cloud. A wall of old-fashioned filing cabinets. A wall of paintings too tasteful to trap the eye. Between two half-moon sofas sits a huge spherical tank where a fleet of Okinawan silverspines haunt a coral palace and a sunken battleship. Nine years have passed since I last saw Akiko Katō, but she has not aged a single day. Her beauty is as cold and callous as ever. She glances up from behind her desk. 'You are not the ordinary fish man.'

I lock the door, and drop the key in my pocket with my gun.

She looks me up and down.

'I am no fish man at all.'

She puts down her pen. 'What the *hell* do you—'

'It is a simple matter. I know your name, and you knew mine, once upon a time: Eiji Miyake. Yes, *that* Eiji Miyake. True. It has

been many years. Look. We are both busy people, so why not cut the small talk? I am in Tokyo to find my father. You know his name and you know his address. And you are going to give me both. Right *now*.'

Akiko Katō blinks, to verify the facts. Then she laughs. 'Eiji Miyake?'

'I fail to see the funny side.'

'Not Luke Skywalker? Not Zax Omega? Do you seriously expect to reduce me to a state of awed obedience by your pathetic spiel? "One island boy embarks on a perilous mission to discover the father he has never met." Do you know what happens to island boys once they leave their fantasies?' She shakes her head in mock pity. 'Even my friends call me the most poisonous lawyer in Tokyo. And you burst in here, expecting to intimidate me into passing on classified client information? *Please!*'

'Ms Katō.' I produce my Walther PK 7.65mm, spin it nattily and aim it at her. 'You have a file on my father in this room. Give it to me. *Please.*'

She fakes outrage. 'Are you threatening me?'

I release the safety catch. 'I hope so. Hands up where I can see them.'

'You got hold of the wrong script, child.' She picks up her telephone, which explodes in a plastic supernova. The bullet pings off the bulletproof glass and slashes into a picture of lurid sunflowers. Akiko Katō bulges her eyes at the rip. 'You heathen! You damaged my Van Gogh! You are going to pay for that!'

'Which is more than you ever did. The file. Now.'

Akiko Katō snarls. 'Security will be here within thirty seconds.'

'I know the electronic blueprint of your office. Spyproofed and soundproofed. No messages in, none out. Stop blustering and give me the *file*.'

'Such a nice life you could have had, picking oranges on Yakushima with your uncles and grandmother.'

'I don't want to ask you again.'

'If only matters were so simple. But you see, your father has too

much to lose. Were news of his whored bastard offspring brat – you, that is – to leak out, it would cause red faces in high places. This is why we have a modest secrecy retainer arrangement.’

‘So?’

‘So, this is a cosy little boat you are attempting to rock.’

‘Ah. I see. If I meet my father you won’t be able to blackmail him.’

‘“Blackmail” is a litigable word for someone still in search of the perfect acne lotion. Being your father’s lawyer calls for discretion. Ever heard of discretion? It sets decent citizens apart from criminals with handguns.’

‘I am not leaving this office without the file.’

‘You have a long wait ahead. I would order some sandwiches, but you shot my telephone.’

I don’t have time for this. ‘Okay, okay, maybe we can discuss this in a more adult way.’ I lower my gun, and Akiko Katō allows herself a pert smile of victory. The tranquilizers embed themselves in her neck. She slumps back on to her chair, as unconscious as the deep blue sea.

Speed is everything. I peel the Akiko Katō fingerpads over the Ran Sogabe ones, and access her computer. I wheel her body into the corner. Not nice – I keep thinking she’s going to come back to life. The deeper computer files are passworded, but I can override the locks on the filing cabinets. MI for MIYAKE. My name appears on the menu. Double-click. EIJI. Double-click. I hear a promising mechanical *clunk*, and a drawer telescopes open halfway down the wall. I leaf through the slim metal carrier cases. MIYAKE – EIJI – PATERNITY. The case shines gold.

‘Drop it.’

Akiko Katō closes the door with her ankle, and levels a Zuvre Lone Eagle .440 at the spot between my eyebrows. Dumbly, I look at the Akiko Katō still slumped in her chair. The doorway Katō laughs, a grin twisted and broad. Emeralds and rubies are set in her teeth. ‘A bioborg, dummy! A replicant! You never watched

Bladerunner? We saw you coming! Our spy picked you up in Jupiter Café – the old man you bought cigarettes for? His vidboy is an eye-cam linked to PanOpticon central computer. Now kneel down – slowly – and slide your gun across the floor. *Slowly*. Don't make me nervous. A Zuvre at this range will scramble your face so badly your own mother wouldn't recognize you. But then, that never was her strong point, was it?'

I ignore the taunt. 'Unwise to approach an intruder without back-up.'

'Your father's file is a highly sensitive issue.'

'So your bioborg was telling the truth. You want to keep the hush money my father pays you all for yourself.'

'Your main concern should not be practical ethics, but to dissuade me from omeletteing you.' Keeping her eyes trained on me, she bends over to retrieve my Walther. I aim the carrier case at her face and open the switchclips. The lid-mounted incandescent boobey trap explodes in her eyes. She screams, I roll-dive, her Zuvre fires, glass cracks, I leap through the air, kick her head, wrench the pistol from her grip – it fires again – spin her around and uppercut her over the half-moon sofa. Silverspines gush and thrash on the carpet. The real Akiko Katō lies motionless. I stuff the sealed folder on my father down my overalls, load up my toolbox and exit. I close the door quietly over the slow stain already gathering on the corridor carpet. I stroll down to the elevator, casually whistling 'Imagine'. That was the easy part. Now I have to get out of PanOpticon alive.

Drones fuss around the receptionist still slumped in her rainforest. Weird. I leave a trail of unconscious women wherever I go. I summon the elevator, and show appropriate concern. 'Sick building syndrome, my uncle calls it. Fish are affected in the same way, believe it or not.' The elevator arrives and an old nurse barges out, tossing onlookers aside. I step in and press the close button to whisk me away before anyone else can enter.

'Not so fast!' A polished boot wedges itself between the closing

doors, and a security guard muscles them apart. He has the mass and nostrils of a minotaur. ‘Ground Zero, son.’

I press the button and we begin our descent.

‘So,’ says Minotaur. ‘You an industrial spy, or what?’

Blood and adrenalin swish through my body in strange ways. ‘Huh?’

Minotaur keeps a straight face. ‘You’re trying to make a quick getaway, right? That’s why you nearly closed me in the elevator doors up there.’

Oh. A joke. ‘Yep.’ I rap my toolbox. ‘Full of goldfish espionage data.’

Minotaur snorts a laugh.

The elevator slows and the doors open. ‘After you,’ I say, even though Minotaur shows no signs of letting me go first. He disappears through a side door. Floorpad arrows return me to a security booth. I beam at Ice Maiden. ‘I get to have you on the way in and on the way out? This is the hand of destiny.’

Her eyes dart over a scanner. ‘Standard procedure.’

‘Oh.’

‘You have discharged your duties?’

‘Fully, thank you. You know, ma’am, we at Goldfish Pal are proud to say that we have *never* lost a fish due to negligence in eighteen years of business. We give each a post-mortem, to establish cause of death. Old age, every time. Or client-sourced alcohol poisoning, during the end-of-year party season. If you are free I could tell you more about it over dinner.’

Ice Maiden glaciates me. ‘We have nothing whatsoever in common.’

‘We’re both carbon-based. You can’t take that for granted these days.’

‘If you are trying to disgust me out of asking why you have a Zuvre .440 in your toolbox, I must tell you that your efforts are wasted.’

I am a professional. Fear must wait. How, *how*, could I have been so stupid? ‘That is absolutely impossible.’

‘The gun is registered under Akiko Katō’s name.’

‘Oooh!’ I chuckle, open the box and take out the gun. ‘Do you mean this?’

‘I do mean that.’

‘This?’

‘That.’

‘This is, uh, for—’

‘Yes?’ Ice Maiden reaches for an alarm.

—*this!* The glass flowers with the first shot – alarms scream – the glass mazes with the second shot – I hear gas hiss – the glass cracks with the third shot, and I throw my body through the window – shouting and running – I land tumbling over the floor of the lobby, flashing with arrows. Men and women crouch, terrified. Everywhere is noise and jaggedness. Down an access corridor guards’ boots pound this way. I engage the double safety catch, switch the Zuvre to continuous plasma fire, toss it into the path of the guards, and dive for the entrance. Three seconds to overload doesn’t give me enough time, and the explosion lifts me off my feet, slams me into the revolving door, and literally spins me down the steps outside. A gun that can blow up its user – no wonder Zuvres were withdrawn from production nine weeks after their launch. Behind me all is chaos, smoke and sprinklers. Around me is consternation, traffic collisions, and what I need most – frightened crowds. ‘A madman!’ I rave. ‘Madman on the loose! Grenades! He’s got grenades! Call the cops! We need helicopters! Helicopters everywhere! More helicopters!’ I hobble away into the nearest department store.

I take my father’s file from my new briefcase, still in its plastic seal, and mentally record the moment for posterity. August 24th, twenty-five minutes past two, in the back of a bioborg taxi, rounding the west side of Yoyogi Park, under a sky as stained as a bachelor’s underfuton, less than twenty-four hours after arriving in Tokyo, I discover my father’s true identity. Not bad going. I straighten my tie. I imagine Anju swinging her legs on the seat