



Olivier de Havilland

A cold wind fell across the face of the west; a scratchy wet towel of a wind that poured down the front range of the Rockies, gathered speed across the prairie, and blasted into Manhattan, Kansas, slamming it side-wise across the north-south artery of Seth Child Road. Rain mixed with sleet rattled the January skeletons of the poplars dotting Kansas State University and thrummed against the casement window of a basement space in a weathered red brick building on the ragged eastern fringe of campus. Inside the lab, a goggle-eyed man in a lab coat with a slight hitch in his giddyup moved frantically—corybantically—from his computer keyboard to his laser array, cold storage units, and test bench equipment. The scientist (well, he looked like a scientist) paused to glance at his watch. He peered out the window, then back at his watch. He looked nervous. He looked nervous even though no one was looking. That's how good he was, how deep he got into his thing.

He glanced once more at his watch.

They were late.

Back on Seth Child, a boxy black pickup truck roared north. It was a new Song Staccato that, as the driver described it, “handled like an auditorium.” He drove aggressively, power-merging with nary a thought to potential collisions and hitting hit holes in the traffic flow like a running back running scared. At Dickens Avenue he slewed savagely into the right-turn lane, fishtailed in the wet, hopped a chunk of corner curb, jammed onto Dickens, and barreled toward campus. A woman in the back seat moaned softly, fighting down her gorge. She caught the driver glancing at her in the rearview mirror. He may have seen her distress, but his eyes showed no mercy and he continued to drive as though hounds of hell had caught the scent of Pup-Peroni in his pants. *Damn it, Mirplo*, she thought, *learn to freaking drive*. Then she reminded herself that he wasn’t Vic Mirplo just now. He was Nick Eintritt, private-equity consultant and angel investor.

And maniac driver.

Why couldn’t he leave that out of his docket? wondered Allie Quinn, using common grifter slang for the package of name, personality, backstory, attributes, business cards, websites, phantom friends, bogus bona fides, and ad hoc baffle-gab that comprised a con artist’s adopted identity. (Allie’s own current docket identified her conclusively—albeit fully fictively—as Fabrice Traynor, BSc, MBA, PhD, notionally in from Princeton, and here to lend her expertise to the task of vetting the invention they were about to see.) According to Nick, Nick was in business development, specializing

in alternative-energy investments. Mostly ag-based, of course—biofuel—here in the nation's breadbasket, but every now and then something special came along.

Something for special customers.

Today's special customer, one Sterling Holton, sat in the shotgun seat, himself not terribly enthralled with Nick's driving. Holton was an adult child of prairie privilege with a tycoon scion's trust fund and a chip on his shoulder you could see from space. He hated his father—"that asshole entrepreneur"—and desperately wanted to beat the old man at his own game. Get there first for once. For once be the one to score the big score. He looked down at the electric blue clamshell case he'd borrowed from Nick to hold his money.

This might be that once.

Holton didn't know, though the two gifted grifters in his company did, that it was his hate, not his money, that made him such a productive lead. Hate caused errors in judgment. Big ones, like bringing cash to a product demo. Nick had amplified those errors by applying deft pressure (it's called rushing the mark), presenting this deal as a hush so hush you couldn't even pass papers, and with so limited a time to act that Sterling had rashly resolved, *I'll show you, Dad! I'll show you who's the genius investor!*

The Staccato bombed on, its onboard navigation system guiding Nick (when you were on the job, you always went by your docket name) through a hashtag of campus access roads to his destination. He seemed not to be paying much attention, for he always took the indicated turn at the last possible second, heaving his passengers back and forth, two unhappy corks bobbing on the sea of the Staccato's spongy suspension.

Fabrice had never been motion sick before but had no trouble recognizing the state. She pushed her cinnamon shag hair off her forehead, letting the sweat there cool. Then she threw up, just a little, in her mouth. At last Nick sprayed the truck into a gravelly parking spot outside the red brick building. He jumped out and stood reveling in the rain; having grown up in the desert southwest, he was still knocked out by the novelty of winter. Holton climbed down from the Chinese behemoth, using the clamshell case as an umbrella. Fabrice staggered out as well, thankful for the feel of solid earth beneath her feet and hopeful that it would settle her stomach.

Nick walked over to the others and drew them in close, conspiratorial. “Now look,” he said, “this guy’s a little twitchy, right? Off the charts brilliant, but totally paranoid. So be cool with him. He’s taken a lot of heat for his ideas, as you can imagine, and he won’t naturally believe that you trust him.”

“What makes you think we do?” asked Allie as Fabrice, her adopted voice sounding like honey spiked with bees.

“You’ve seen the prospectus,” said Nick. “You’ve seen the computer models.”

“I once saw a monkey play Mozart. Doesn’t mean I’m sending it to Juilliard.”

Nick put his hand on her shoulder. Holton noticed her muscles clench at his touch. *No love lost there*, he thought—as he was intended to. “Look, Fabrice,” said Nick, “I don’t blame you for hiring yourself out to my client. Everybody needs an expert. I’ve got no problem with that. But sometimes the real deal is just simply the real deal. So give Dr. de Havilland the benefit of the doubt, okay? He’s a pretty amazing guy.”

“We’ll see,” said Fabrice.

“Yes,” said Nick earnestly, “you will.” He led them around to the back of the building. Fabrice lagged behind, and Nick used the opportunity to tell Sterling softly, “I told you to get your own consultant, and okay you got the best, but, sheesh, what a ball buster, huh?”

“Is she seeing anyone?”

Nick skipped a beat—a stumble that probably only another con artist would notice—and said, “You know, I don’t know.” But he did. He knew very well.

They reached the blank face of an emergency exit door. Nick tugged at the door and it came open. With a nod to the patch of duct tape covering the latch, he said, “We’re expected.” Just inside, a flight of galvanized steel stairs led down into a dimly lit corridor dotted with dented filing cabinets and old broken office chairs. Allie’s high heels ticked along the cracked and peeling linoleum floor as she and the others walked the length of the building, past unmarked and unnumbered frosted-glass doors. This was the Christiania of KSU, an academic free state where the school’s scientific minds could hack around on projects of their choosing, unfunded but also unburdened by invasive oversight. KSU had no illusions about itself. It was a practical institution and turned out a decent engineer, but it didn’t have the resources or brainpower for world-class science, and anything on that order springing forth from Manhattan would be a fluke—hence this facility, officially known as the Incubator, in which de Havilland, whose credentials identified him as an adjunct lecturer, had claimed lab space according to the time-honored system for doing so: he just moved in. Behind closed doors he investigated the superconducting properties

of amorphous metals and ran arcane experiments in Zwicky box contraptions that generated streams of data—though what that data represented, no one but the admittedly eccentric Dr. de Havilland could say. Were you to ask him, he would merely note that while mankind’s capacity to gather groundbreaking data was increasing exponentially, its ability to interpret such data continued to just plod along.

It was before de Havilland’s office door that Nick, Fabrice, and Sterling now stood.

Nick rapped softly on the frosted glass. There was silence from the other side, then a distracted mumble, the sound of unevenly shuffling feet, and the rasp of a sliding dead-bolt. De Havilland opened the door. He looked at Nick for a long moment, as if struggling to place him. Then he muttered, “Eintritt. Good, good.” Leaving the door open, he turned his back on them and limped back to his lab bench. To Holton’s eyes he seemed homuncular, so hunched over and self-absorbed—just how you’d expect an obsessed scientist to look. Fabrice knew that he stood up straighter than that.

Once they were inside, de Havilland looked balefully at the open door and shot Nick an imperative glare. Nick closed it, first glancing outside to make sure they were alone. Holton was impressed with the air of secrecy. It sent a shiver through him. De Havilland, meanwhile, lost himself in calibrating an apparatus comprising three triangulating lasers aimed at a glass-walled cube that measured about ten inches square. He ignored Nick’s *ahems* for as long as he could, then said impatiently, “Very well, very well, step over here.”

Nick ushered the others to the lab bench and introduced them to the scientist, who only reluctantly shook hands with

Holton, then wiped his hand briskly on his white lab coat, as if it carried plague. Fabrice he ignored altogether. Said Nick, "Fabrice, Sterling, I give you Dr. Olivier de Havilland."

Holton couldn't help himself. He practically snorted, "Not really?"

De Havilland looked at him blankly and said, "What?"

Holton spread his hands. "Like Olivia?"

De Havilland considered this for a moment, seemed to comprehend nothing of note, and turned his attention to Nick. "You explained about the money?"

"I did."

De Havilland turned back to Holton. "Let me see it." Holton went to put the clamshell case on the lab bench, and de Havilland practically swatted it to the floor. "Not there, you idiot. These lasers are precisely tuned. The slightest bump or jar and the whole process breaks down." This drew a thin *harrumph* from Fabrice, and de Havilland seemed to notice her for the first time. He asked of no one in particular, "Who is this bonbon?"

"Fabrice Traynor," she said, visibly bristling at the bonbon tag. "I'm here to validate your findings." She took a scurrilous beat and continued, "If such a thing is possible."

De Havilland became irate. "You know what?" he said, "Get out. All of you. Just leave. There will be no demonstration today."

Nick glowered at Fabrice. "Come on, Doc," he pleaded. "We drove all the way from Tulsa." He shot a nod at the clamshell case. "And we did bring the money."

De Havilland considered this. He templed his fingers at his lips and said, "The money. Yes. It always comes down to

Mammon. Well, let's see it." He gestured Holton to a scarred steel desk. There Sterling set down his case and opened it to reveal a loose pile of stacked and bundled hundreds. De Havilland thumbed through it approvingly, then shut the lid with a snap. "There was a time, you know, when scientists had patrons. Da Vinci and the Medicis, Galileo and the Catholic Church."

"The church didn't sponsor Galileo," sniped Fabrice. "They persecuted him. They tried him for heresy. Get your facts straight at least, geez." She turned to Holton. "Sterling, we have a credibility issue here."

Nick placated with his hands. "Let's just watch the demo, okay?" He turned to de Havilland. "Stick to science, Doc," he said. "Leave history to the histrionics."

They stared at each other for a second. Holton looked on, manifestly vested in having the doctor relent. They *had* driven all the way from Tulsa, and he had no mind to make the drive twice, not with Eintritt at the wheel. Besides, this was exciting, all this investigation and discovery, just the sort of hole-in-the-wall gold mine that his father would disdain. The fact that it all looked so slapdash gave it a kind of low-rent authenticity. Clearly this de Havilland wasn't going out of his way to impress. That said something. It telegraphed integrity.

Exactly as it was designed to do.

De Havilland moved back to the lab bench. His fingers danced over the keys of a battered laptop as he initiated a start-up sequence that had the lasers humming and glowing. He opened a freestanding freezer and a white cloud fell out, pooling on the floor until it dissipated. "That's just a cooling agent," said de Havilland. "It won't hurt you." He grabbed

a pair of industrial forceps, reached into the freezer and extracted a small slab of metal, about the size of a deck of cards. "This, though; this would." He swung it casually past them so that Holton, at least, flinched and backed away. Fabrice stood her ground, her narrow eyes soaking up the detail of the smoking ingot and its vapor trail of dry ice.

"Superconducting metal?" she asked.

"Of course," said de Havilland. "And it would zap you like a downed power line." He placed the artifact inside the glass box. To Holton's surprise, it floated there.

Holton looked at his consultant. "How—?"

"It's voltaic," she said tiredly. "Electromagnets hold it in place." She whistled a few bars from *The Magic Flute*.

"What are you whistling?" demanded de Havilland.

"Nothing," she said. "Just a little Mozart."

De Havilland returned to his laptop and punched another sequence of strokes. The laser lights turned blue—cobalt blue, like the clamshell case that still lay on the doctor's desk—and the air took on the crackly expectancy of a summer night before a storm. "You'll smell a little ozone," said de Havilland. "It can't be helped. If I had some decent funding I could conduct this operation in a proper vacuum, where it belongs. As things are, we lose..." he paused to calculate "... eleven percent efficiency."

Again Fabrice emitted an audible scoff. Nick glanced at her sidelong. He turned to de Havilland. "Why don't you tell us how the whole thing works, Doc?" Nick tapped his own temple. "Keep it simple for us slow kids in back."

"Very well." He said to Fabrice, "Bonbon, try to keep up."

“Please don’t call me bonbon.”

“Would you prefer...” he paused to let the word roll out, “tart?” Fabrice seethed, but said nothing. De Havilland gestured to the lasers. “These,” he said, “are light-emission heaters. They excite the target alloy sequentially. Both the alloy and the sequence are my proprietary formulas. Essentially what I’m doing is sculpting amorphous metal on a molecular level, creating a shaped electrical imbalance.” Two keystrokes. The lasers dropped down to a deeper hum, almost a thrum. “What we have now,” said de Havilland with a sudden and unexpected gloss of pride, “is a supersaturated energy source. Think of the potential stored here as water behind a dam. Once something breaks the dam, all that power comes pouring out.”

“More than the lasers put in?” asked Fabrice, well, tartly.

“And what,” asked de Havilland, not at all appreciating her tone, “would be the point of building a closed energy system if it weren’t net plus?” He turned to Holton. “Do you pay her a lot? You’re not getting good value.”

“He’s getting great value,” Fabrice said, “and I’ll tell you why. Because you slipped ‘closed energy system’ by us like it’s an assumption that doesn’t need testing. If the system’s not closed, if it’s drawing energy from elsewhere—”

“—then it’s a so-called ‘perpetual motion machine’ and I am a charlatan, is that it?”

“You said it, not me.”

“Look here—” He was perhaps on the point of uttering “bonbon,” but as he saw Fabrice actually ball her fist, he refrained. “—madam, you are free to inspect this lab, the apparatus, isolate any part of the process you wish. You won’t

find an outside energy source because there is none. I know you won't be satisfied until you snoop around, so please, be my guest."

Fabrice sniffed. She circled the lab bench, closely examining all its components. Dropping to her knees, she checked underneath, looking for, but apparently not finding, hidden electrical leads. She cast a jaundiced eye on the cooling units, the lasers, and, finally, the glass cube. "There's energy coming in here, of course," she mused, "to power the electromagnets. But even accounting for that..." Her voice trailed off. She took a beat, then suddenly demanded, "What breaks the dam?"

De Havilland shot her a smug smile. "I thought you'd never ask." He crossed to a tiny, burnished aluminum box. "Think of this as an atomic autoclave," he said. "It sterilizes atoms."

"What does that mean?" asked Holton, enthralled.

"It halts the orbits of electrons." De Havilland opened the box and withdrew a vial full of translucent goo. "So when this gets in contact with that," he pointed to the ingot, "all these electrons," indicating the vial once more, "they're set free. They go in there and go nuts, according to the template laid out by the lasers. So that's a shaped charge, and you understand about shaped charges from atomic bombs, where if the explosives aren't aimed correctly at the plutonium, the whole thing won't go boom." He walked them back to the glass box, tilted the vial, and let a dribble of goo slide down. "You have to go slow," he said with a wink, "otherwise, boom. But if you do it right..." A dash of goo hit the cold metal block. It sizzled and disappeared, and the lights in

the lab grew noticeably brighter. "...one of these will power a house." He looked at Holton. "With your investment I can build dozens, prove the concept, move to manufacturing, and get us both very, very rich." He hesitated, then with great effort and forced bonhomie, extended his hand. "So what do you say, 'partner'? Shall we do business?"

Holton ran his tongue over his dry lips.

Said Fabrice, "Are you kidding me?"

Nick strode quickly to her side and whispered harshly, "Don't queer this."

But she brushed him aside. "Come on, Sterling, this is ten ways wrong. I shouldn't even have to explain it. Let's go."

She steered Holton toward the door. De Havilland moved to block her. "You're standing in the way of science," he growled.

"Yeah, and commerce," added Nick. He backed away slowly until he reached the desk.

"All I'm standing in the way of," said Fabrice, "is bullshit. 'Too much juice go boom,' for Pete's sake. Step aside. We're leaving." She tried to push past de Havilland, but he chested her, and that fully flipped her anger switch. "Fine," she said, abruptly plucking the vial from his hand. "Let's find out how *much* juice go boom." She strode to the metal mass and held the vial out over it.

"Don't!" cried de Havilland. "It's toxic!"

But it was too late. Fabrice dumped the full vial on the core. A gout of flame shot straight up amid a billowing cloud of gray-green smoke. "Get out!" shouted de Havilland. He scrambled for a fire extinguisher. Holton suddenly remembered his cash and turned back for it. Anticipating this nat-

ural move, Nick was waiting for him, and from across the room flipped Holton the case.

Well, *a* case.

De Havilland spewed foam onto the blaze, but the smoke just billowed higher. "Oh, that's not good," croaked the scientist. He suddenly coughed and collapsed to the floor, clawing frantically at his throat. "Run, you idiots! Run!" Holton gawked. Nick grabbed Holton, threw open the door, and dragged him from the office. Fabrice ran after them, and the three sprinted back through the basement, up the stairs, and out into the damp January afternoon. Holton's heart raced.

"Let's go!" shouted Nick, beeping his truck open as he ran.

Fabrice, though, paused and looked back at the building. "Serves the bastard right," she muttered grimly. Just then she saw a figure sprinting out the front door of the building with no sign of a limp at all. "Son of a bitch! Nick!"

Nick looked up to see de Havilland jump into a sports car and speed off. He got in the Staccato and fired it up. Fabrice pushed past Holton, and the case came flying out of his hands. "Wait here!" she ordered. "Call the police!"

Holton tried to tell her that the case had slid under the truck, but she was already in the cab. Nick stomped on the gas. Holton watched, gobsmacked, as the thundering Chinese hardware shot away.

Then he looked down. Turns out those clamshell cases aren't that strong after all. Nor, after all, do stacks of filleted paperback books look much like Big Bens once you get them out into the light.

And behind the wheel of the sports car, Olivier de Havil-

land—otherwise known as Radar Hoverlander—looked not much the worse for all the colored water vapor he'd inhaled. He glanced at the clamshell twin he'd thrown onto the seat beside him. All those hundreds.

All those pretty, heavy hundreds.