

Null Intercept

By Joe Johnson

Null stood on a landing pad in Capone City with the cool wisp of the atmosphere processors at his back and the hot tip of a phased plasma pistol at his throat.

His opponent was close enough for Null to see the beads of sweat forming at his temples, but not close enough that he could make a grab for the gun. He grinned, a tinge of hysteria making his voice crack.

"Don't suppose we could settle this with words?"

The man facing him had a burn scar tracing a ragged path across his face. Whatever tragedy had befallen him had also cooked the eye in his left socket. In its place was a steel sphere with a jade, glowing iris. In a time when physical beauty could be bought off the rack, his decision to remain mutilated was commendable.

His headgear must've been wired for face-recog. His face tightened as the scanner did its work. Then the corner of his mouth twitched. He touched a hand to his ear.

"Royce?" His voice sounded like a mining rig choking on regolith. "I got some undercity scav up here on the roof."

Scav. That stung a little. Null had grown up in the undercity warrens of Cora, running with street gangs to keep from starving. Pulling grifts on deep earth construction crews. Ripping off merch from the lesser corporations. Selling Prxi. Sleeping in abandoned warehouses. Security in numbers. Tomorrow's meal--just a larceny away.

But the gang was gone now. It fractured apart, piece by piece. They died in turf wars, fighting for one ghetto street corner or another. Or they got hooked on their own supply, wasting away to nothing in a cloud of hallucinogenic bliss. Or they got locked up, or worse, signed their life away to some indentured servitude contract on a hellhole like Koss. Whatever the reason, his people were gone now, ground to dust under the mighty Sovereign's wheel of progress.

The man nodded. The finger left his ear. His face cracked into what may have been a smile.

"Boss doesn't want me to farm you for cartilage," he croaked. "So vacate, kid."

"I'm not sure how to get back down," Null said.

The landing pad perched on the roof of Club Presidio, the most well connected nightclub in the lower city strata. Throbbing chiptronica beats vibrated through the three story structure. Giant membranes, stretched across the outer facade, looped footage of dancers bathed in amethyst neon, convulsing through a shredded loop of sinewed curves and sweat-sheened flesh.

"Same way you got up here," said the man, who Null was starting to think of as Froggy.

"I leapt out of an autocab," Null said, with a slight shrug.

The face cracked again. Froggy's aim waivered. Null saw his chance.

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He clicked his heels together and the impulse boosters built into the boots fired. The force threw him forward, a head-first cannon ball into Froggy's midsection. The man made a sound like a breached airlock. They went down in a tangle of limbs and movement. The gun skittered away. Null landed half-sitting on Froggy's chest. He balled his fists and pounded away at the man's good eye.

Froggy's hands found his face, clawing at his features, looking for a purchase to drive thumbs into his skull. One finger snaked into Null's mouth. He bit down savagely, incisors almost sheering the digit off at the joint. Froggy roared and tore his hand away. Null grabbed the other at the wrist, wrapped his legs around the arm, and rolled sideways with a savage twist.

There was a sudden, unpleasant, pop.

Null held the broken limb while the man's body flopped around for a minute longer. It reminded Null of a fish, or at least what he remembered about a fish from a holovid he once saw. He had never seen a real one.

When it was clear Froggy had passed out from pain and shock, Null brushed off his battered coat and got to his feet. He gave Froggy's limp form a pat down. Wallet. Credstick. Tube of medical paste. Half a nutricube.

To his surprise, the earpeace was not an implant, but rather a mesh weave embedded in the contours of his ear. Null peeled it off and put it on.

"—harassing one of the waitresses in the penthouse spas, send Roland and Kirkland to take care of it—"

The audio was subvocal, sending vibrations to his inner ear instead of transmitting sounds that could be picked up through conventional sensors and microphones. Null had seen low level corp mercenaries sporting something similar.

He used his foot to flip Froggy over. Holstered in his lower back was a Colt Disrupter. Null grabbed it. It was a non-lethal, subsonic weapon. He'd never been hit with one, but had heard the stories. Instant full body muscle spasms, locking you in a gnarled rictus of agony for upwards of an hour. Most victims simultaneously pissed and shit themselves at the same time.

Null pocketed the gun, then went looking for Froggy's plasma weapon. It had landed about ten feet away, near the door to the interior stairs. Null picked it up, ejected the cartridge, and threw it off the roof. Then he stepped inside.

Everything was dim, bathed in shades of violet. The walls were shiny matte black. Music throbbed louder here, a soundscape that rattled the teeth in Null's head.

He expected an interior guard. Instead, there was no one. The stairwell was deserted.

Null crept down the stairs. He stopped on the landing. It was impossible to tell if there was anyone below. Chances are, no one would pay him any mind. He was already inside the club. Already past the bouncers and the security scans. Vetted and approved.

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Still. This was syndicate property. These guys didn't dominate all criminal activity in the exoplanets by being lax on security.

"—Locke is on the move—"

A shot of adrenaline flooded his veins. Anson Locke. Disgraced former Kepler Corporation Chief Financial Officer and current lieutenant in the Ngata Crime Family. The closest Null had ever come to the big ten crime syndicates that ran the underworld in Arcturus.

The man Null had been stalking for weeks now.

The third floor was a laser-lit bathhouse. Stone walkways threaded between recessed spas and long, glimmering pools. Men and women floated nude in the waters with tall crystal glasses, sipping exotic liquors. Drinks far more refined than the paint thinner Null's friends had brewed one summer. Red-skinned bodies lay draped across stretchers, their backs massaged by synthetic humans in white paper uniforms, soulless eyes staring at nothing.

In the center of the room, a small anti-gravity rig held a 20-foot orb of water aloft. The edges wobbled and contorted, like a living thing pressing against the confines of a status field. But the sphere maintained its shape, even as swimmers dove into it and backstroked towards the ceiling.

A small scene had erupted on the far side of the room. Two men in suits were speaking to a drunk, naked man, who kept shouting obscenities. Nearby, a waitress--human, not synth--was weeping. The furor had drawn some attention. Null decided to take advantage of it.

He sidled over to a massage station. The man's clothes had been neatly folded on a small, adjoining table. A long, black, designer coat topped the pile. Null threw it on over his grubby outfit.

"Don't think that belongs to you," a voice said.

Null spun around. A man in a button-up work shirt and tie loomed behind him. His sleeves were rolled up, displaying a spider web of bioluminescent tattoos glowing along his flesh. He wore data shades over his eyes and a shoulder rig with a large shard pistol nestled under his left arm.

Null finished his turn with the disruptor in his hand. Shades got about a half second look at it before the blast caught him in the chest. There was no sound, just a shudder of displacement from Null's right hand. But the effect was explosive. Shades jerked suddenly off his feet, his body contorting like a being possessed. He hit the stone with a wet slap, the foul stench of his loose bowels filling the air.

Null stripped the shades off him, lifted the shard pistol, and headed for the exit. He popped the goggles on his face. Instantly, the room brightened, a full heads-up display filling his peripherals. Wireframe blueprints mapped the structure in real time, shifting any way he looked. Patrons were overlaid with blue, glowing squares. All the guards were strobing red triangles.

Their entire presence in the building, now laid bare. Downstairs, a big green orb, ringed by triangles. Locke.

In the back corridor, the specs showed four rooms and a second set of stairs. One was a large office--deserted. Probably Locke's. Another two looked like staff facilities. The last one boasted a steel bulkhead

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door and a DNA swipe lock. The outline of two guards on the other side. Yellow glowing consoles. Some kind of security nexus?

No way he could spoof the lock. He needed to improvise.

He thumbed his ear. "Backup on three," he subvocalized.

"—say again?—"

"Assistance."

Null stepped aside, waited for the hiss of the door, then blasted the shard gun down towards the floor. The crystal-shot load blasted ragged chunks out of the emerging guard's thigh. The force tore the leg out from under him and he pirouetted back into the room like a graceless dreidel.

His partner rose from the terminal, cables still linking his head to the datajack. As he struggled to rise, Null sighted the cable and fired. The feedback—data crawling through neural pathways at the speed of thought—must've hit him like a subsonic lobotomy. He jerked spasmodically sideways, head twitching, and vomited himself unconscious.

Both chambers of the shard gun spent, Null dropped it on the floor. He checked the readout on the disrupter. Four left. He glanced at the readouts from the terminal. Weighed his options. Too many guards. Too many angles. He'd been lucky so far. But he'd survived enough scrapes to know that luck wouldn't carry him forever. He had to find a way to swing the pendulum in his favor.

He tapped through a couple screens. Shift logs. Patrol routes. Counter-intrusion measures. Sovereign patrol scans. Nothing, nothing, nothing that would give him an edge.

Unless...

He swiped a few screens back. A phrase caught his eye. Anti-Personnel Exclusion Grid. Checked the specs. He'd seen one of these, once. While boosting some merch off a corporate storehouse, one of these had come down like a concrete barricade. He lost two of his friends to that grid. Left them behind, pounding on an invisible wall of nothing, helpless against the coming sirens.

This could work. If he timed it right.

He pulled out the det cord he stole—another gift, like the impulse boots, from a miner he rolled—and wrapped it around the security terminal. Twisted the timer knob. Gave himself about ten minutes. Started the countdown.

Null grabbed both guards—both limp and motionless on the floor—and dragged them out into the hallway, then down into what he assumed was Locke's office. A large, wood desk dominated the room, surrounded by plush carpets and massive bookshelves. Null had never seen a real book before. Hell, he'd never seen non-synthetic wood before. But he was on the clock, here. No time for sightseeing.

By the time he sealed the door, he was down to five minutes.

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He took the stairs two at a time, down to the second floor. Calling it a floor was a bit of a misnomer. It was really a long gantry, leading to an exclusive lounge area poised a good fifteen feet above the dance floor. The walls were tinted duraglass, hiding the VIPs from view while giving the occupants a grand view across the sea of writhing youth.

In the center of the lounge, surrounded by couches, milling sycophants, and maître des serving drinks, was a long table and a series of high-backed chairs. At the head of it sat Anson Locke.

He was tall, broad shouldered, and muscular. He wore his beard close-cropped and his hair short. He dressed in a simple, tan suit. Nothing ostentatious. No room for extravagance. His sapphire eyes were piercing. Even from this far away, Null could see them gleam like shimmering arcs across the surface of Koss.

He looked to be a man in his late 40s. But modern age reduction tech being what it was, he was probably closer to 200.

closed his eyes, counting the seconds as they ticked away. He gave himself one minute. Then he charged.

57, 56, 55....

The world slowed to a crawl. His heart thudded in his chest. He felt himself become aware of the faintest sensations--the click of his boots against the floor, the droplets of sweat forming on his skin, the odd way the rich man's coat billowed behind him like a cape.

51, 50, 49...

He was halfway across the gantry before the first guard started to react. His hand tucked into his coat, grasping at a weapon. Null hit him with the disrupter, and the man pinwheeled off the platform in a rictus of pain.

43, 42, 41...

The second guard, just outside the lounge door, scrambled for an emergency lockdown button against the wall.

Null kicked off the floor. Impulse boosters firing. He sailed through the air, over the guard's head, through the doorway just as a piercing siren began to screech.

29, 28, 27...

He hit the table shoulder-first, skidding across the polished surface like a hover transport above water. As he plowed towards his quarry, Null squeezed off three more shots--each catching a stunned guard square in the face.

16, 15, 14...

He rolled to his feet, crouched just a foot away from the man himself, who had done nothing but lift an eyebrow.

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Null tossed the disrupter aside. Reached behind his back and drew a bead on lock with the phased plasma pistol.

9, 8, 7...

The remaining five guards in the room drew their weapons. Took aim at the boy in the long coat, pointing hot death at their boss—

—and the world exploded.

The det cord exploded just as the guards pulled their triggers. The rumble shuddered through the building. But before they could even feel the impact, the building safeguards kicked in. Autonomous systems slammed the Exclusion Grid down around the table like the hammer of a maligned god. All five shots smashed into nothingness.

Locke raised his other eyebrow.

“Aren’t you going to shoot?” he said.

Null pulled the trigger. The pistol made a hollow sound. Locke didn’t even twitch. Null shrugged.

“I knew it was empty,” he said, pulling back the slide to reveal the empty chamber, then dropped it in front of him.

Locke glanced at his protectors, running around, pounding away at the invisible wall that kept them at arm’s length. His eyes found Null’s.

“So if you aren’t here to kill me...”

Null sat down, legs crossed, in front of one of the most dangerous men in the galaxy.

“That,” he said, pointing to the handgun, “is my resume.”