

Grim-Faced Men

By Nicholas Stillman

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From the third story balcony, Court tried to guess which dead tree would take the bullet. The dried orchard had many. One trunk with a lightning split, a hole, or a sort-of face in the bark would get pointed out casually. Then, he'd watch Davis shoot a branch off it. Why else would the self-proclaimed former cop bring him out here?

Sure enough, Davis removed a sleek handgun from the holster buried under his sport coat. He scanned the gnarled orchard, a glorious reminder of the outdoorsy old days. Court wondered what the soon-to-fall stick would cost. So few trees kept their roots in the barren rock out there. Collectors had gathered most of the logs blowing in the wind. And even those rarities had delimbed themselves rolling along the arid flats.

“See that birdhouse?” Davis asked.

He nodded his shaved head at a particular tree, past all of Court's guesses. The brown birdhouse still clinging to it had few wrinkles of paint left. A century ago, the wind evicted every bug husk from the wood's deepest weather lines. The antique looked like a mere knob of the distant trunk.

Court nodded and plugged his ears. The wind bumped him more than Davis. The supposed marksman probably used Court's body as a crude shield from the wind.

Davis aimed briefly and squinted. He fired with both arms extended, and the gunshot cracked across the rocky landscape. Court watched the little perch under the birdhouse entry hole disappear.

“Damn nice,” Court said. “Do you think Ragnor wants you for something a little bigger? A little closer?”

“Hopefully not,” Davis said, holstering his handgun. “I'd have to refuse whatever he offers.”

They returned indoors to Ragnor's lounge, a menagerie of ancient animal trophies. The other invitee, Roy, still sat on one of the ornate upholstered chairs. The dude had arrived wearing casual jeans and a T-shirt. He called himself a professional arm wrestler and had the asymmetry to prove it. His narrow face couldn't handle the big mustache there. The rest of him, except that right arm, looked similarly thin. A web of forearm veins still bulged from the last bout.

Court and Davis joined him at the circle of high-backed chairs. The coffee table reflected their grim faces off its black marble. Long ago, chefs used the same surface as cutting boards. Someone even richer than Ragnor had four of the slabs cut, repolished, and fused with industrial strength adhesive. The men sat in solemnity there, and they waited for Ragnor's arrival.

They never saw Ragnor before, but he sent them each eight hundred dollars just to attend. For what, exactly, no one knew. They'd find out in 20 minutes. Court, though, wanted to make his best guess. The marketing gurus said to always stay two steps ahead of the conversation.

“Davis here just took the peg off a little bird house,” Court said to Roy. “With the sun setting, too.”

“I heard,” Roy said, folding his hairy arms. The reek of gunpowder slipped out of Davis's holster and bit down on the room.

“So you do the manhandling,” Court continued, eyeing Roy, “Davis the sharpshooting, and I do pretty well with sales. Now suppose Ragnor wants to hitch us to abet some scheme of his.”

“Like what?” Roy asked.

“A heist maybe?” Court said. “Because I'll tell you one thing: I only do sales. I read daily on how to increase sales, I host workshops on sales, and my wife does sales. So I think this Ragnor friend of ours only knows me for that. And I'll bet he summoned you guys for the one thing you each do best.”

Court leaned back in his chair and spread himself out. The body language meant *take your shots, prove me wrong*. Always empower the listeners, the market gurus said.

“I doubt he'd plan a heist involving me,” Davis said. “I've worked on the force for almost two decades. I only found out I could shoot well at the firing range. Word sailed around about it, but Ragnor would have also heard that I ran clean. I put heist crews away for a living.”

“All the more reason to tempt you into the underground,” Court said. “He'd want someone who knows the inside.”

“He can't tempt me.”

“It looks like he could temp anyone,” Court said, studying the egret, kestrel, and crow head trophies. The domesticated cat's head mounted on the nearest wall looked young. The pet owner must have demanded a fortune in the day to euthanize it. And the product looked so easy to pocket and run off with. Surely, the cranium had a tracking device.

“What do you think, Roy?” Court asked.

“I'd say he wants us to join his freak show,” Roy said. He rose and meandered to the well-stocked bar. “He's got everything else. Just needs some new entertainment. The crawlies in here don't crawl around much.”

Roy looked comically lost beside the crystalline strip of bar shelves. They packed in all of Boozeland with its little posters and colorful rides for gentlemen. He clinked the glasses temptingly with his rummaging, and slammed a glittering glass on the bartop.

“Well why would he need a sales expert for that?” Court called to Roy.

Tavern man shrugged, almost spilling the rum as he poured it.

“He might see us separately,” Davis muttered. Court knew a mutter always meant a bad guess. “Like visiting the dentist. These guys hold private meetings all day.”

Court pointed at Davis. “I never thought of that,” he said. “It seems unbusinesslike to pay us all, though. In politics, it works the other way around.”

“Well, some actors demand a fee just to meet with producers,” Davis said. “If Ragnor makes his investment back, he'll sleep Ok.”

“Eight hundred bucks apiece?” Roy said, returning with a jiggy drink at his waist. “He won't even feel that.”

“Oh, they feel every penny,” Davis said. “They just put on a good show to stay in the club.”

The door slid open, and they saw a woman's arm gesture the way through. Court could sense her attractiveness just by her giggle and arm tone. Then, a short, pudgy man entered, and the door closed itself. In his gray suit and ascot tie, he resembled a particularity large mouse, something anthropomorphic from Court's childhood books. The newcomer had a murine face that somehow proliferated in the human gene pool.

Davis gave him a nod, and Roy a little salute.

“Please join us,” Court said. “We all wait for Ragnor.”

“Same here,” the stranger said, crossing the parquet floor. He sat and shook hands with the three others. “James,” he said. “I waited out there until the secretary found me.”

Court, Davis and Roy introduced themselves by first name.

“So we've amused ourselves with forthright guesses about what Ragnor wants us for,” Court said. “May I ask about your forte, James?”

“I open safes for the FBI using tactile techniques,” James said, scanning the cavernous lounge.