

Fallacy of Dawn
Chapter One
by Robb Sherwin

Otto owned the gambling den on the west side of town. A lot of people thought, since he had a bulbous head that appeared engineered from an inflated pig bladder, that you could get over on him or cheat him within his den. But his distorted skull was chock full of cunning. I wish I had some sort of tale where I got the better of Evil Otto through sheer wits on my part, but I don't. I won seven straight free soft drinks on the weekly "flip night" promotion once, but he waters down all his beverages... Keeee-rist, it's pathetic for me to even bring it up. There's no way that Evil Otto could have operated his business for even a month in New Haz if he wasn't several steps ahead of the poseurs, drunks and outright criminals who would gladly fleece him into bankruptcy if given the slightest chance. We should all be so lucky to have a Deimos-shaped head.

We called him "Evil" Otto because his chubby face resembled a character named that in the old arcade game Berzerk. At first he took offense when he heard me refer to him by that nickname, but after we explained just why we called him that he seemed to warm up to it. I mean, the guy was under no illusions that everything above his neck was good-looking -- he even had the cruel grin so depicted in the game by his namesake. At one point, a buddy of mine hooked up an Atari 800 personal computer to one of his closed-circuit televisions and showed him the home version of the game. He seemed to take a shine to it, and I guess I can imagine why -- after a lifetime, no doubt, of pudge-related cracks and insults it probably felt good to finally earn a modicum of respect in the nickname department, even if it was only within the walls of his own establishment. His smile would only grow as he played through the game. For while it seemed like he was playing Berzerk every time we walked into his place.

Otto was wearing that selfsame grin as the Regina Mean Streak began a rather inspired fourth-quarter comeback against the Rochester Radiation.

Regina was giving three points to Rochester. Regina was a much better team than anyone else in the league and had shut out half of their opponents. I acquired some late information about one of their players, though -- information that almost nobody else had access to. Defensive tackle Tavarian Pittman was going to miss the game due to a domestic dispute. The local police department had circulated an internal e-mail regarding their plans on grabbing him before he took the field.

I was watching the game at the bar, nervously chewing on a lemon slice, when a kid came up to me with a paper napkin.

"Delarion?" asked the kid. His face ran a gamut of various worried expressions. "Mr. Delarion Yar?"

I'd never been called "mister," before -- the most authority I ever encounter in my life with any regularity is when video-game-Chekov calls me "sir" when I pretend to be video-

game-Captain-Kirk in one of the countless Star Trek video games. I turned my attention to the little guy.

"Heya. What's going on, kid?"

"Can I have your autograph?" He waved his napkin and a Sharpie up to me.

I slid off the barstool and took the paper and the pen. Kind of a nerdy, skeletal little thing. Unkempt hair, thick horn-rimmed glasses, bad breath. "How exactly did you recognize me? How do you have any idea who I am? I'm a nobody."

The kid shrugged. "Everybody's been playing those new Intellivision ISOs today." He couldn't help a broad grin from crossing his face. "I got to the seventh board on Utopia II last night." Utopia was a pretty good game. The kid had taste. He had no money to actually go buy the thing, but he had taste. I liked him immediately. He also apparently had a really good broadband Internet connection, as I had only cracked the copy protection on it last night. The raw ISO images of those games had been available on Usenet for a fortnight, but I didn't know of anybody who had bothered to go grab them because of their encryption. It took me most of three days, but I finally figured out how the ISOs were being interpreted. After that, it was easy to write and compile a runner program. A warez group gave me a thousand dollars for the source code and release rights. I've no idea how much they turned around and made on it. I grabbed a few hours' sleep and came to the bar this afternoon.

I couldn't think of anything funny to write on the kid's napkin, so I just wrote "HACK THE PLANET" and signed it. It didn't occur to me at the time that there should have been no way he could have recognized my face. When you spend enough time in a digital world you tend to, unfortunately, blend that one and the physical reality you skulk about in.

I looked back up at the game as the announcers howled and guffawed at another touchdown scored. Greg Church threw an interception that was returned by Regina for six points. Church had already been sacked three times by Pittman; I guess he just wanted to give Chuck and Duck a strategic turn before falling through to Turning Turtle or Brandishing a Tower Shield out there or whatever his next plan was. On an interception the quarterback becomes a live target and Pittman put his fist through his helmet. It was becoming clear that I was going to lose the wager I had made.

That fact wasn't lost on my bookie in this case, either. Otto sauntered over to my area of the bar. "Look," he said, "I'm going to need you to settle this account, pronto, Delarion. I can appreciate that it takes an enormous set of cojones to sit in the very same bar that you made a bet like that at, though." He started to clean some chipped and yellowing glasses that he served the winter Saranac brews in. "I'm not an unreasonable man." He paused for a moment. "I may look like one, but I assure you I am not one... But I seek knowledge. Tell me, what possessed you to bet against them, anyway?"

I considered how much I really wanted to reveal to Evil Otto. Probably no good could result from his learning that I had an active POP3 mail account in the Regina Police Department -- a detective had passed away a few months back and they had never turned off his username and privileges -- but then again maybe he'd want to trade that access for cash. When the hell am I ever going to be in Regina, ever? I ended up erring on the side of caution.

"Tavarian Pittman was supposed to be taken away before the game. By the cops. He went Final Fight all over his wife." I shrugged meekly.

Otto paused for a couple moments. "What in fuck does that mean?" asked Otto.

"He beat the crap out of her." One of the other customers sitting at the bar gave me a very thin and strained smile before finding another stool to sit on. Otto took the cue and offered a similar smile to me. I like a little more bulk to my facial expressions, personally.

""They did take him, you know," said Otto.

I didn't, in fact, know. "Huh? What do you mean? The police took him? They didn't do a very good job, then! What's the orbital speed of Planet Regina where they had enough time to process him and still get him back before kickoff? What the fawk??"

"They have a court underneath the stadium. He was in and out of there before the Mean Streak's first defensive series. Plus, things are just more organized in a pure socialist state." Otto looked for some chewed gum to drop into the Saranac so that some bugger might consider buying it. He started whistling. He piped the tune of a guy who just made a thousand dollars plus the juice (an extra fee I had to pay for losing). It sounded like the theme to Super Mario Bros. to me, which is possibly the most obnoxious thing you can whistle at someone due to how staccato and chirpy it is.

"Why would they take him there and not downtown? Who operates their police department like that?" It didn't matter, I was just trying to open conversation lanes on something other than how soon I was going to pay up.

"What downtown?" asked Otto. "It's fucking Regina. They consider it a riotous gathering if two cows and a beaver pass each other on a dirt road. Yar, if you're going to follow these new wave Canadian football games you should prepare yourself for small-town mentalities. The cops were probably all season ticket holders."

The clock ticked down on the game. Pittman's accomplishments for the day was five sacks, two pressures, a forced fumble and pass deflection. And, for all I know, the successful live birth of a Harlequin ichthyosis baby and the restoration of an original Baby Pac-Man pinball cabinet at halftime.

Neve, Neve my girlfriend Neve, was going to be pissed when she figured out what just went down. I could try stumbling around a lie or something, but ultimately you can hold

no secrets from a dedicated computer hacker. And the only one around that was as good as me just happened to be my girl.

I casually fumbled through the pockets in my cargo pants until I got ahold of my combination cell phone and PDA while projecting a look of disbelief at the television screen that was running the post-game show. I punched in a couple of buttons in the hopes of having it connect to a server of mine at home. Otto was keeping a rather watchful eye on me, which I guess I could understand given the debt that I had just accumulated to him.

When my buddy and I installed the Atari 800 for Otto we also sort of put a military grade air siren with a remoteless key fob in the bar as well. I thought that I would eventually need to create a diversion at the bar, I just never thought it would be Otto's attention that I would need to be diverted from.

I waited until someone called the bar for unrelated reasons and as soon as Otto held the phone up to his ears I pressed the key code into the fob. Otto was directly behind the siren, unfortunately. He dropped the phone and covered his ears -- he started howling, or sobbing in pain. I wasn't planning on sticking around long enough to really figure out which he ended up going with. I thought I saw blood trickle from his ears, which is kind of funny to see when you're not expecting it. I grabbed my knapsack and ran towards the exit of the bar. He pieced together what just happened as I stumbled over a pool table that was between me and the door.

I was two steps from the door when Otto pulled out a Beretta from underneath the bar and took a couple shots at me. One went through the roof and the other took out his stand-up Birdie King. "Get the humanoid!" he shouted to one of his waitstaff that was on the other side of the rec area. He looked around in vain for something to wipe the bits of blood off his hands with. "Get the chicken!"

I felt a bit of remorse as I ran out of the Gran Plaz and back up north three towns over to the apartment that Neve and I shared. After all, the net effect of him getting to know me was that he started to speak in quotes from computer games and that he was out a lot of money. Then again, that kind of sums up the relationships I end up having with everybody.