

The Reconstructed Man

by Johne Cook

The man sitting across from me in the restaurant wasn't technically human. It is true he *used* to be a man, and other than the government-mandated purple eyes, he looked like one now.

I, of all people, knew better.

"Thank you for agreeing to interview me," he said, moving the flickering candle from between us for an unobstructed view. "Before we begin, I'd like to get this out of the way up front - I prefer the term 'Constructed Human' to 'Artificial Being' or 'Android.'"

I waved, a lazy, magnanimous gesture. "You are, of course, free to request to be referred to however you wish." A chopper whooped past in the distance, likely doing local traffic. Perhaps it would crash into an aircar like had happened the week before. That would be bad for them but good for me.

"That's just it," he said, "...freedom. Constructed Humans have the same rights as other people, and I appear to have somewhat of a platform at present. I've done a number of interviews since I entered the public's eye, and you'd be surprised how I've had to fight for that most basic consideration."

That arrested my attention - I was immediately indignant on his behalf. Not only that, I had the most irrational feeling that we'd met before. As a result, I felt oddly protective. Anybody worth as much as he was shouldn't have to put up with something so childish, and I told him so. "As wealthy as you are, it seems to me that you can mandate how people should refer to you if they want to interact with you or do business with you."

He canted his head slightly. "I am enough of a pragmatist to change what I can, accept what I cannot, and leave the rest to the God of Men."

My eyebrow rose. "The God of Men?' That is an interesting turn of phrase coming from a Constructed Human."

This was where a human would have smiled. He didn't try to fake it. He bobbed his head once and the moment passed.

"As a Constructed Human, you can choose your own name. What name do you prefer?"

He relaxed visibly. "Nowadays, my friends call me Alfred Bester, Alfred, for short."

"Like the author?" I laughed. "That is what I shall call you also, then, if it's all the same to you." I was careful to let the smile reach my eyes in my most disarming fashion. Duplicity is still one advantage real humans have over Constructed Humans.

"And what shall I call you?" he asked.

My real name is Francisco Dardenelle but I think of myself as 'Frank,' not that anyone actually knows me by that name other than a select handful of very close and confidential underlings in my employ. "You can call me 'Hugo,'" I said.

Any person who Googled 'Alfred + Bester + Hugo' would reveal the inside joke - Alfred Bester was the winner of the first Science Fiction author for the award for Best Novel named after Hugo Gernsback. That work was "The Demolished Man." Given what I do for a living, I didn't know whether to laugh or confess.

The waitress arrived. "Are you gentlemen ready to order?" she asked. She looked first at him, then at me, giving us equal eye-time.

I watched her carefully. She was either very good or very open-minded. Looking at the menu, this was a family restaurant catering to the low-to-middle class. From the cut and quality of her clothes, she wasn't paid very well. Based on the menu prices, she likely didn't see much in the way of tips. That, in turn, suggested that she knew how well he, in particular, could tip.

So he was a regular. Interesting.

“How are things around here now, Shiera?” Alfred asked.

“Better now, thanks to you,” she said, fawning. “Crime is down, and traffic is up. Business is good, which means that tips are good.” She was practically beaming. It was a little embarrassing.

“Just coffee for me,” I said, raising a lazy index finger. “Genuine Half-and-Half, if you have it, no sugar.”

She blinked. “Havenhave™? We only have JavaMate™ or KremeALatte™.”

I tried a smile and gave up on that up almost immediately. “Black is fine, thanks,” I said, lightly. I didn't sigh. After becoming a member of this Class, one finds other retribution for life's little inequities-my coffeemaker at home likely cost more than her vehicle.

She nodded and scribbled something on her tablet and looked over at him. “The usual for you, sir?”

What kind of 'dinner' did he favor these days? I watched him carefully. The 'muscles' in his forehead relaxed and his eyes took on an impish quality. “The usual,” he said, and he winked slightly.

That expression was tricky to pull off and he used it to good advantage. For a Constructed Human, every gesture is calculated, purposefully initiated. Real humans take for granted just how expressive we can be without thinking about it. I happened to know the kind of processor cycles he was burning to appear 'normal.' Good for him. He was putting his expensive construction to good use.

She tapped her tablet. “One mug of Glop, it is. Would you like that room temperature or heated?”

He actually winked. "Heated would be great, thanks." I was amused despite myself.

She flushed prettily and bounded away with more energy than decorum. He turned and looked at me, and the light in his eyes died. He didn't need to put the show on for me and he knew it.

"Thanks for agreeing to meet with me, Alfred," I said. "Do you mind if I produce my word processor for the interview?" He started to frown. I reached into the pocket of my suit jacket and produced a small Moleskine notebook and an old-school Parker Duofold fountain pen. His expression changed from angry to puzzled. He raised an eyebrow.

"I've had articles lifted off my tablet. This is a low-tech alternative that prevents theft."

He touched his index finger up to his temple to indicate he understood. I watched the indentation in his synflesh undimple slowly as it should. It was a beautiful thing.

"Ask away," he said.

"You are a self-made multi-millionaire..."

He snorted, and I had to smile at the unintended pun. I plowed on. "My readers would love to know where you came from, what made you what you are, so to speak."

"A classic question," he said, "'What makes a man?' Let me answer that question by telling you the story of Joshua Ziller."

If I'd been using a pencil, I would have snapped the lead right there. I quickly composed myself. As I took the name down, I was careful to betray no emotion. However, I would have bought a fleet of new aircars for our common waitress if it meant that he never uttered that particular name again.

#

I was not a religious man by any means, but could understand why others might be. Joshua Ziller was that rare person whose belief gave him the appearance of a charmed life to the untrained eye. Everything he did prospered, the quaint ancient concept of 'the Midas touch' in our modern era here on the cusp of the technological Singularity. The organic computing business he started in his garage experienced explosive growth almost overnight, his easygoing personality making him the ideal face for the company, and his pretty wife was happily pregnant. Two years, two factories, and two children later, he was a multi-billionaire poised on the brink of cornering an entire market that had, until recently, been managed by a global consortium. They had another name for themselves but journalists privately referred to them as The Coterie.

Everything he touched not only turned out right, it turned out perfect, and perfect sells. When asked about the source of his success, he was wisely self-deprecating and credited his astonishing achievements to clean living and regular prayer to a benevolent God. Instead of correcting him, his equally brilliant wife just confirmed his statements.

Everybody knew their story. While they weren't militant about it, they weren't especially discreet, either, and told their story to anybody who asked about their secret. The faster the rising star, the more people are willing to listen to their secrets, hoping it will also work for them, no matter how strange it sounds.

And to make matters worse, Joshua claimed that his biggest secret was no secret at all. He spoke in general terms of a 'good shepherd.' He claimed to have studied about the ancient Hebrew figure, Daniel, and adopted the same scheme that Daniel did. He prayed three times daily for wisdom and direction and everything he touched prospered. **Organic Computing (O/C)** was exponentially faster, cheaper, and more reliable than silicon-based electrical computing, and a new information industry was born.

A lot of people became very rich, but they were the wrong people.

Unknown to him, O/C was treading on some very shady toes. By that time, organized crime had gone global and was mostly legit, funding the computer component fab houses of the Far East. The success of O/C threatened the Coterie. No matter what they did, he didn't fall, didn't fail.

The extent to which one stays legit depends on the extent to which profits remain elevated. Pressure rises when profits fall, and ultimately, people under pressure revert to what they know.

The Coterie attacks started slowly. They tried buying him outright. When he politely refused, they tried outmaneuvering him. When his patents held in court, they tried intimidating him. Nothing worked, and he doubled his fortune over the next four years.

Joshua Ziller often claimed that God had blessed him over eight spectacular years, however, when God turned his back on Joshua, it only took one single moment for the Golden Touch to turn to ash.

While his wife and children were away, they tracked him down while jogging late one night. When the Coterie men were done, there was not enough left of his body to identify him as human. They had a thing for guns, lasers, explosives.

That's when they brought what was left of Joshua Ziller to me, Francisco Dardenelle, robot-maker to the stars.

#

My mechanical dinner guest politely picked his way through a Caesar salad but we both knew that he took his real nutrition from the Glop. I was interested to see how he ingested it. I know how he was *designed* to assimilate it but androids surprise me to this day.

“What makes a man,” he asked, holding his fork like a proper human.

Indeed. There were two types of humanoid robots - cyborgs, partially machine-assisted humans, and full-on androids, people who, for one reason or another, lived their lives in a

machine body. The latter category ran from those who flaunted their augmentations or simply couldn't afford better, to those who, for all intents and purposes, looked completely human.

Constructed humans were still relatively sparse. This wasn't just elective eye surgery, in and out in an hour – this was one's very life at stake. The procedure cost a lot of money to achieve, frequently equal to the GNP of a small third-world nation. And besides the cost, there simply weren't enough patrons willing to chance the procedure.

That, however, was a problem for others. I was not so limited.

"His thoughts, perhaps," I mused, returning to his question. "His memories. His preferences. His aspirations."

"Ah!" he said, "But those are byproducts of living. What gives us life itself? What inspires us, what makes us different than animals? There are two outlooks, the theological, and the practical."

I worked on my steak, knowing a rhetorical question when I heard one.

"According to many religious traditions and holy scripture, the soul is what makes the 'you.' The soul is made up of two parts, body and spirit. The body, by itself, is not 'you,' and the spirit, by itself, is not 'you.' The soul cannot exist without both components.

"These same traditions hold that the soul is 'a self-aware ethereal substance particular to a unique living being.' The soul incorporates the inner essence of each living being, and is the true basis for sentience. In distinction to spirits, which are not eternal, souls are usually considered to be immortal. That's the theological."

Warming to his theme, he pushed the salad aside. He dispensed with pretense and tossed back the warmed bulb of Glop, draining the thing with the ease of long practice. He continued. "Joshua Ziller claimed it was his soul that served as the critical linchpin for his success. He claimed the soul was the mechanism for communing with his ethereal God." He replaced the bulb on the tray.

I kept eating, digesting things, as it were. "But Joshua Ziller maintained that his God heard his prayers through the communication link provided by his soul. How does that work?"

Alfred picked up the cloth napkin and delicately dabbed at the corner of his synthetic mouth. "It was an amusing theological debate that should, by all rights, have ended right there. The problem was that whether his enemies believed in God or not, they believed *he* did, and they set aside all theological quibbling and simply took him at his word."

I pushed away my plate and dabbed at the corners of my mouth with a napkin, fidgeting despite myself. I didn't like where this was going.

"If his business was booming because of his fervent prayer, and prayer was made possible by means of communication from one man's soul to an ethereal being of ultimate power, their solution was to deprive the soul of one of the two prerequisite elements."

"Let me guess," I said. "They had no line on the disposition of his soul but they knew exactly where his body was."

Alfred looked at me and blinked once, languidly. My gaze dropped to my Moleskine where I doodled, pretending to take notes.

"Exactly. They snatched him from his office and he was never seen alive again. That was five years ago."

Five years. That figure rang in my head like an alarm. My eyes snapped up to meet his and I suddenly knew where I knew him from.

"Oddly enough, it was five years ago when I appeared on the doorstep of O/C Enterprises as a new android."

#

The clues had all been there in front of me. A super-rich android, a genial temperament, a knack for business, a knowledge of supernatural mumbo-jumbo.

I wanted to loosen my collar. Hell, I wanted to run.

I forced myself to sit back, relax, and grab my water glass. He'd had a lot of work done since I'd last seen him. With the kind of money he had to throw around, he could afford the best.

The problem with that is that *I* was the best.

I swirled the ice cubes around and stared deeply into the depths, lost in thought. This time, the chopper whirred by directly overhead. "Who modified your face, Joseph," I said. "Gorpin? Matsimotoh? JanIce?"

He just smiled. I could have named the aggregate cost to accomplish that simple gesture. It rankled.

"So what about you," I asked. "To what do you attribute your stunning success as Alfred Bester?"

"Prayer, three times per day."

I rubbed my eyes. "A Constructed Human that prays. What caused you, an android, to attempt prayer given what you'd already told me about the physical and spiritual components necessary to complete the act?"

"Force of habit," he said with a wink.

I knocked back a gulp of water. My left hand was trembling. I held up the water glass with my right hand, making a show of studying it while slipping my left under the table. I set down the glass and rotated it nervously with my right hand, thinking. I don't mind playing the hunter but being the hunted was another thing entirely. I didn't care for it.

He sat back and stretched his right arm along the back of the booth. "I understand that if a patient is intact, the Remanufacturers can put as many healthy organs into the proto-slag as possible, making the resulting cyborg as human as possible. However, in cases where there is little to work with, the Remans will just transplant the subject's brain into a completely artificial template, giving the newly-fashioned Constructed Human a fighting chance to recover his memories and go on living in the new body with as many residual impulses as possible."

"Theoretically, the android should be able to go on living a relatively normal life if the transplant is conducted quickly enough," I said.

"Aha," said Alfred, and then it was time for me to ask the big question for a change.

"But, theoretically, the android will no longer possess the soul of its former host, right?"

He grew serious. "That is a very interesting question," he said. Alfred gazed into the flickering candle light. "I have a theory," he said distantly. "I think the Coterie paid for Joshua Ziller to disappear, but someone had contacts among the hitmen and paid them to deliver marked men over to him to use as human guinea pigs. 'Joshua Ziller' disappeared all right, but a new android appeared on the scene at almost that exact time."

His hand drifted over and hovered over the flame. He flinched and snatched it quickly away.

"After an extensive manhunt, Joshua Ziller himself was quietly pronounced legally dead, and the family moved on," he said. "The wife remarried and the kids dealt with the loss as best they could, which wasn't very well. The Coterie quietly waited for Ziller's business to die off without its brainchild, and that was supposed to be that."

I found it very difficult to swallow, a lump lodged heavily in my throat.

"The android-maker was playing both ends against the middle and thought he'd covered all the angles, but he missed one thing. So when this android appeared carrying Joshua's memories, he looked just like a human, and was given a new identity. This android demonstrated remarkable

affinity for the Ziller technology, and Ziller's grief-stricken widow gave him full sway over the stalled business. The business rebounded nicely.

“The Coterie didn't think anything of it at first, but when O/C went from maintenance mode to rolling out newer, faster products, the Coterie started to get suspicious. Things were looking too much like they were before they'd made their move to get rid of their obstacle the first time.

“I'm guessing here, but I think the Coterie started to lean on the hitmen for assurance that Joshua Ziller was really dead. Likewise, I think the hitmen in turn leaned on the android maker.”

He sat forward and gripped the edge of the table with both hands.

“And I think that's why you're really here, isn't it, ‘Hugo’?”

He knew. My cover was blown. And if he knew, the Coterie were probably not far behind. I put my notepad away and adjusted my tie.

I regained control of my ragged consciousness with an effort. I sat back, cleared my throat, and tented my fingers. I pasted a smile on my face, ever the professional. “Francisco Dardanelle, of MortalCoil Enterprises, at your service,” I said. “You can call me Frank.”

#

This was not going well. I'd come to dinner to get information from Alfred to reassure myself that nobody knew about what I'd done. Instead, everything was crashing down around me.

At least Alfred was picking up the tab.

“Why am I here?” I asked, trying to remain cool.

He didn't bother with the artificial human touches any longer, fixing me with the blank, expressionless eyes of a machine. “I assume you are asking a question that is practical rather than

existential. I set events in motion to draw you here because I believe you made this body, and it is starting to malfunction.”

Now, I may be a lot of things, but I am primarily a craftsman, and it irked me a bit that his body was anything but perfect.

“I found you and brought you here because I’m dying,” he said.

“No one lives forever, not even a Constructed Human,” I cautioned.

“No one knows that better than me,” he said. “I’m not asking for immortality, merely some kind of normal longevity. In point of fact, I have unfinished work, and I mean to see it through to the place where I can hand it off and be sure that it will continue in my absence. I also mean to deal with the Coterie and permanently defang their threat, and I need more time to see that through.”

Cornered animals are notoriously intractable, and I was feeling reduced to that level of animal cunning. “I have very good information channels,” I said carefully, “and I had no idea this was coming. I’m not comfortable leaving this kind of leak unresolved.”

“There will be a reckoning soon enough,” said Alfred.

“A reckoning? Surely the Coterie haven’t put things together yet. The last I heard, they were grasping at straws.”

“Oh, they know about me,” said Alfred. “I told them the truth, Frank.”

A roaring filled my ears. The circling traffic chopper was closer now outside, and louder. The collar of my shirt was suddenly too tight and my tie constricted my neck like a noose. My face flushed bright red and I knew in that moment I was a marked man. I shot to my feet without thinking, but he shook his head almost imperceptibly.

“Do not think to run,” he said softly. “I am both faster and stronger than you. You wouldn't make it out of the booth.” He drew himself up and rested his hands on the table, opening them palms-up. “What remains of your life is in my hands,” he said mechanically, saying it like a quote, for that's precisely what it was. He was quoting me. That was the exact phrase I used when standing over the perforated body of Joshua Ziller before starting my procedure. But how could he know that? Unless...

My flushed face went completely pale, changing from burning hot to deathly cold.

“When you're as wealthy as I am,” he said, “information flows more freely than it does for normal humans. Even if you're an android.”

“Constructed Human,” I whispered gamely, but my heart wasn't in it.

He leaned forward with his manufactured eyes. “This is where I'd laugh if I were fully human,” he said. He leaned back. “Yes, I found someone in your organization who felt they were promised more than they were given.”

He didn't have to give that up. That one was free.

“The men I stole you from don't accept failure,” I said. “They took your life for your successes, and now they're coming to take mine for my failures.”

“You have nowhere else to go right now,” he said firmly, gesturing to my seat, and I could have sworn that his eyes were deep, knowing, not just a step ahead of me, but a mile ahead of me.

I sat with as much decorum as I could muster, pretending that I was choosing to sit on my own terms.

We both knew better.

Alfred said "You are here because I've been thinking about things that are both theological and practical. The practical is what interests me currently," said Alfred. "What can you tell me about the process of creating an android?"

"Why do you ask," I said, trying to buy time.

"What makes a man, Frank? Specifically, what makes me? How was I made?"

"Why does it matter?"

"It is the practical angle. Joshua Ziller believed the Good Shepherd heard the prayers of obedient humans and delighted in answering them."

I wasn't following him. I shrugged.

"It's important because I am a Constructed Being, and have been praying myself. Frank, my prayers are being answered, just as Joshua's were. I need to know how. "

"You're not the only one," I muttered.

"I've been thinking about this a lot, and there are some real ramifications depending on how I have been put together.

"First, if was technologically possible to move my soul and spirit into a robot, that would imply that the physical world can overrule the spiritual world. The implications are devastating.

"Second, if you just copied my brain patterns into the robot, the copy wouldn't be the original. It might be only be a very close replica, but would not be human as such. It would be missing one of the key components I mentioned earlier and prayer shouldn't be possible.

"Finally, if you implanted Joshua's brain into this body, then this is just prosthesis writ very large and 'Joshua' lives on in me, in this constructed body. It explains his memories, his inclinations, his connection to the Divine."

“What does it matter,” I said. “If you are conducting your ritual and it's working for you, what does it matter?”

He fixed me with an icy glare. “I need to know.”

“And I need to live,” I snapped.

His eyes seemed to boil with emotion. I didn't think he was intending the effect. It was almost...human.

“Frank, I need to know if I have a soul. I need to know what will happen to me when this body wears out.”

That rattled me. I have curiosity about whether I have a soul but wanted no part in being responsible for whether he did or not. “Look, Alfred, I'm very good at what I do, but I'm no miracle-worker. I put as much of what was left of you into the Dardenelle Shell as I could and hooked it all up. The rest has been all you.”

“Did you transplant my brain?”

I looked at him, how eager he was, and had no heart to tell him anything other than the truth. Odd. “Yes, Alfred, the brain and brain stem. If any memories are coming through, it is all Joshua. By your reasoning, you have the components for his soul in your current body.”

He sighed deeply. “Thank you,” he said. “That must have been very expensive.”

It was hard to hear him over the roar of the now-hovering chopper next door.

“You have no idea,” I shouted.

“We'll have to talk at some other time about what would prompt you to do such a thing. For now, what I'm about to do is very big, and will affect, well, a great many people.”

I didn't like the sound of that one little bit. "Alfred, what did you do?!"

He looked at me. "I need your help, Frank. I need to smoke out and expose the Coterie, and I need your promise. If Humpty Dumpty should fall today, I need you alive to put him back together again."

"*Again* again, you mean," I said dully, knowing exactly what he had done. "You didn't just tell the Coterie about you, you told them you were here, now. Didn't you?"

At that, the so-and-so smiled, eyes twinkling expansively.

He heard the men coming down the fast-ropes out of the chopper before I did. He immediately rose and, I swear, he cracked his fingers. My knuckle guy is second to none. We both heard the cocking of weapons, the powering up of laser cells. "Time's up," he said. "Stay here."

"Where are you going," I asked, my voice a trifle higher than planned.

I never would get used to his unblinking eyes. "I'm going to get your future back," he said.

"Alfred..."

He turned. I really don't know what came over me. "How does it work? As an android, how are your 'prayers' answered?"

The android chuckled. "You tell me," he said, cryptically. "I'll see you on the other side, Frank." And then he winked.

With that, he strode to the door, adjusted his collar, raised his hands, and stepped outside into a suddenly powerful spotlight. "Stop..." he yelled, but he was cut off. There was a savage deluge of gun and laser fire, capped by one loud explosion that blew out all the front windows and triggered the sprinklers.

And then his head rolled back into the diner.

The spotlights snapped off and all the shooters vanished into the night as the helicopter quickly vectored away, leaving only the acrid smell of gunpowder, a cold spray of water, and the screams of our waitress.

So much for his treat for dinner.

I sighed, rose, flashed my card at the table to settle the bill, and walked past the screaming girl to where his head lay on the floor. His eyes flicked open and focused on me. "Remember," he rasped, "...you promised."

I stared down at his head on the floor. I thought this was a bad time to point out that I hadn't, in fact, actually promised anything, but I kept that to myself.

Then his eyes closed and I was committed.

I nodded, mostly for my own benefit, and turned to the waitress quivering on her knees on the floor under a table. I extended my hand, wordless. She looked at it and then at me. She took my hand and stood. She fell forward and grasped me desperately, her shoulders shuddering as she wept into my expensive Italian suit coat. I held her until she collected herself and disengaged. The sprinklers turned off as suddenly as they'd started. I brushed the water off her shoulders and spoke gently to her. "Are you all right? Shiera, is it?"

It took an effort, but she finally nodded.

"Good," I said softly, proud of a quiet control in my voice that I didn't feel. I pressed a button on my watch to call my aircar, no time to lose. "Might I trouble you for a box?"

#

Alfred, nee Joshua Ziller, had known exactly what he was doing. Recently donated security cameras placed around the front of the restaurant captured the Coterie assassination and broadcasted the attack to the Investigators at headquarters who had been clued to wait for the

springing of the trap. Coordinated raids four months later decimated the Coterie as underlings turned states' evidence and the house of cards fell apart from the bottom up.

They were out of business within the year.

They never did find out about my involvement - that was a fib on Alfred's part, although I didn't know about any of that until after I'd put him back together again.

And then came the day when I flipped the switch and his eyes opened of their own volition for the first time since the attack.

"Frank?" he said.

"Happy Birthday, Alfred."

"You kept your promise," he said.

"There was no actual promise," I said, "but let's not stand on technicality."

He tried a grin, and it worked. "The Coterie?"

"Out of business."

"My family?"

"Safe."

"And you?"

"I'm looking forward to finishing our dinner," I said, administering the dose that put him back to sleep. I turned to my assistant. "Take him home and give him this." I handed him a card with a date and an address. "Let's see if he can keep a promise *he* didn't make for a change." I smiled as genuinely as I could considering just how much money I'd just spent.

#

Another day, another dinner.

"Thanks for agreeing to meet me," he said, and then he laughed at the resonance.

"We have some unfinished business," I said.

He nodded. "Years ago, when Joshua Ziller was perforated, you went out on a limb to buy off the Coterie assassins so you could acquire his body for your work, risking your life and welfare. You undertook a startling operation that cost Lord only knows how much time and resources. Your operation was successful, and then you turned the newly-minted android, me, loose back at O/C headquarters. That puzzled me for a long time.

"Then, when O/C first started to get back on its feet after being quiescent, we needed a rather large infusion of capital to get back on our feet, and at the eleventh hour, a mystery investor appeared on the scene, providing the funds necessary to get restarted. When O/C became liquid again, we tried to track down the mystery investor, but they had covered their tracks very thoroughly."

"How about that," I said.

Alfred fixed me with an inscrutable look. "That's what gave you away, you know, what prompted me to track you down in the first place."

I tried to be nonchalant. "Oh?"

"It *was* you, wasn't it?"

I smiled for the first time in a long time. "The process of making life, even artificial life, is very expensive. I watch the markets carefully and take a profit wherever I can. I had been following the meteoric rise of O/C with great interest. It was not hard to see that a conflict was inevitable. When

I learned that the Coterie was sending someone to take out the brightest star in a long time, I simply acted to protect what I saw as a sound business investment. Creating the President's backup put me on the map but O/C has given me the capital to really flourish. Everything was going smoothly until O/C piqued the Coterie's interest a second time. I was trying to think of a way to contact you when you contacted me."

Alfred stared then laughed. "I've been praying for you since I woke back up," he said.

I managed an insincere smirk, but the thought of all the money it had taken to rebuild him out of my own pocket weighed around my neck like a millstone.

"I've been doing some praying of my own since you went and got yourself all blown up," I admitted.

It was as if he was reading my mind. "What? Is it the cost of recovery?" He waved a negligent hand. "Don't worry about it," he said. He dug into a watchpocket in his vest and slid a translucent sliver across the table. "This will make it well worth your while."

I picked it up and slid it into a slot in my watch. Despite my desire for decorum, my eyes bugged out as I read and re-read the figure. I perked right up after that. "Alfred, I have to know one thing. How were you so calm about facing the Coterie? Weren't you uncertain about what would happen to you?"

"I had faith in your abilities, Frank, and in God's blessing. I believed that, between the two of you, I would be resurrected, one way or the other."

"And if I wasn't successful this time?"

He smiled. "I wasn't worried about that. The Good Shepherd always knows His sheep."

End

Dedication

This story is dedicated to John Wesley Cook, who introduced me to Jesus Christ, sci-fi, and Alfred Bester (in that order). In addition, I got the word processor joke from him many years ago, and like many things, it has stayed with me all this time. I love you, Dad.

Thanks to Paul Christian Glenn, Nicholas Murrell, and Stephen L. Rice for exchanging theological and theoretical ideas with me during development of this story, and to L. S. King for eleventh-hour proofing. I own all errors myself.

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