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Agile Noir

by Lancer Kind

Chapter 1 -- The High Cost of Schedule Slip

'Adventure is just bad planning,' Kartar texted his daughter. It was a quote he stole from someone famous. His morning chai steaming in a go-cup, he hurried through his house to leave for work.

'Send me a txt of your plans. I need to know if I should pick you up or if you'll take the bus. I'm leaving for work.'

It was a surprise that she had chosen to take a class in

accounting during her summer vacation, but there wasn't anyway he was going to get in the way of that ambition. Maybe she'd do his taxes.

As the garage door rolled up, Kartar walked around the car making sure that no hazards existed near his tires such as bottles, babies, or Buicks. Bottles, he thought to himself, sometimes spill from the recycling bin, babies could fall from the sky and crawl behind the car, and Buicks . . . Dad used to say something about about elderly American drivers with bad eyesight. Backing over any of those things had never happened and never would since he always checked.

Kartar set his phone to full text-to-voice and backed out of the garage. The phone vibrated and chimed that he received a text message and a robotic voice came over the car's speakers: "From Priya. Stop being such a planner boy. Classes are all day. I'll bus straight home after school. See? A plan. No adventure. I'll sit at home, bored--waiting for you to come home. I could have stayed with Mom to do that!! I hope it's not like this all summer."

The neighborhood was built on the edge of las vegas, desert surrounded the new development. He steered with his knee while sipping chai and eating a thepla, its crust was soggy from being warmed in the microwave. The Blackberry buzzed with the arrival of new emails, but Kartar wanted to know what had happened while he slept, so he adjusted the phone to read emails that had

arrived at 11PM, last night.

Sounding like a robot from an old science fiction movie, the Blackberry read messages from the QA team in India and it was the usual bad news: the twenty testers are still blocked because they can't get their environment to work. The messages read like a monologue of a project disaster. Email after email was filled with questions about how the system should look like when it is up, what processes should be running on the server, how long the hardware emulator should take to startup. Cries for help during a storm, cries which no one was awake to hear or care until eight hours later when the Vegas teams woke up: ". . . Despite all our efforts, the User Interface comes up as a blank window, no matter what we do. Per the server team's documentation, we have filed tickets with our operators to have the server rebooted. When the server came up, we filed a ticket with the operators to check that the correct services were running, and they were. Everything looks correct to the operators per the documentation we got from the architecture and server teams."

Kartar stopped at a three way intersection. To the left was the interstate and work; to the right was an unfinished portion of the development--a street and sidewalk extending into empty desert. Nothing moved around him in the late morning heat except a van pulling up to the curb about half a block behind him. The van had been around the neighborhood lately. It had

one of those promotional wraps around its body, advertising the Topless Revue at Caesar's.

The email from QA continued, "So we then move to the user interface team's documentation."

Kartar kept his foot on the brake and placed his fingers on his polo shirt. His fingers shaped the shirt fabric around a ring hanging beneath it from a chain, and then he pinched the ring while waiting for them to speak of his part of the Winner project. He held his breath, hoping that the holdup wasn't his team's fault.

"Launching the hardware emulator failed, but last night, we got an email from a member of the Wow team that mentioned a configuration filename had changed. The email told us about an undocumented command line argument which allowed us to launch the emulator."

Kartar slapped his forehead and tried to guess how many times he had asked his team if the documentation was up to date. The answer was always 'yes.' "Bad Wow", he said to himself.

"But when the User Interface starts, we only get a blank screen. We still don't have a working system to test but are further than we were two months ago."

Further along, Kartar thought, only when measured by a snail.

A car horn blared and Kartar jumped. His rearview mirror

was filled with the grill of the van.

"OK, OK, hold your shorts," Kartar said.

As he set his foot on the gas, the van moved beside him, so Kartar pressed the brake pedal again, unsure what the driver intended to do. The Nude Review picture on the van was of a woman in a top hat, her white gloved hands covering the ends of her breasts. She seemed to stare at him.

"I'm sure the show is very tasteful," Kartar said, shaking his head.

The van sat there, like it waited for him to do something, so he started into the intersection, but then the van did the same, matching right next to him. Kartar glanced at the van, feeling he was inches from the woman in white gloves and top hat. The van swerved toward Kartar. Kartar jerked the wheel in the other direction and the Blackberry slid across the dash and banged into the windshield. The robot voice didn't notice and went on reading how all of QA's efforts were blocked because nothing worked.

Kartar kept going in the wrong direction, the van right beside him and on the wrong side of the road. He pressed the accelerator to the floor and the van kept pace. Ahead, the road ended in an empty cul-de-sac and the shimmering desert.

I should have leased the Caddy, Kartar thought to himself. It was too expensive to buy, but he could have leased it and the

Cadillac's big V8 would have blown this sucker away.

While he accelerated, he glanced at the van to gauge what to do. Through the tinted windows he saw the outlines of two people. The van was not only bigger, but he was outnumbered too.

Must be kids, he decided, a couple of high schoolers screwing around. He hit seventy and the dead end was coming up fast. Kartar braked hard. The Blackberry, still reading email from QA, bumped into the windshield. The van slowed beside Kartar. He looked up at the passenger window and wondered what he was dealing with as he guided the car to the curb where it was sloped low for a future driveway. Alongside of him, the van stopped; heat from its large motor made the air shimmer.

Carter looked around, hoping someone was nearby who could help him with these lunatics, assuming lunatics like these would backdown if people were around. But was only sand, faded plastic bags, and rocks. Through the rear-view mirror, Kartar could see the cluster of houses that was his neighborhood, and they seemed far away.

Kartar held his Blackberry, his thumbs on the keyboard, ready to take down the license plate as soon as the van maneuvered into a position where the plate was visible, but the van sat still.

"You'll do something eventually."

After a few minutes of waiting, he fantasized that it was filled with topless performers for the Nude Revue, but he knew he'd never be so lucky. Most likely, it was a rolling meth lab. And the driver and passenger were dealers. And they would have guns.

Kartar set the Blackberry on the front seat and gripped the stick shift. His foot pressing on the clutch started to shake because he could feel that something bad was going to happen.

Although he could see little through the windows, something about how the van shifted indicated the driver had got out. Whoever it was stayed hidden on the other side, which was fine because Kartar had no interest in talking to them.

The Blackberry vibrated with the reception of a new email and its robot voice said, "From DeLucca: We can't keep slipping the schedule on a project that's already a year late. The casino has billions riding on the Winner being the first handheld gambling device. We need to meet in my office at 10. Bring the latest Gantt."

Kartar groaned. Why was it that people with titles like President of Casino Game Development always called meetings on short notice? He had only thirty minutes to make the meeting.

Kartar nearly missed seeing a figure that slid alongside the backside of the van.

He floored the accelerator.

The Acura jounced over the curb and into the desert, its tires spinning and then catching traction on the rock strewn sand. The tach hit the red-line, and Kartar shifted into second and put the pedal down again, driving like his life depended on it. He had to keep moving. If he lost momentum, he'd get stuck in the sand.

Dirt flew from the front wheels as he tore over rocks and troughs left by yearly rains. The jolts threw his body against the seat belt, only the strap across his hips kept him in the seat. He hit a big rock and the car slew sideways. His head slammed against the window.

Steering the car was by approximation: turn too sharp and get stuck, don't turn enough and go further into the desert and further from help. He kept the car moving, turning in shallow arcs, as if driving a boat in choppy water. He didn't see the ditch until too late; both front wheels dropped into it. The car banged its front into the bank and his whole world moved forward, his eyes focused on the steering wheel, he flew forward, his foot held the accelerator to the floor. The shoulder belt jerked him to a stop--his nose inches from being shattered by the steering wheel, and then the car scraped over the bank and he was free again.

He steered to the cul-de-sac, trying to drive on the rocky dirt and avoid sand pits in which if he got stuck, he'd be a newspaper story, and his daughter--left alone in Vegas until the

police arrived to notify her that daddy was shot dead. Or worse, his body and car go missing for days, and Priya waited at home, wondering where he was.

The car bounced over the sidewalk, surging into the air before landing on the street. Kartar floated upward until the car returned to the earth, the seatbelt yanking him back into his seat. The ring slipped free of his shirt and floated before his face until it dropped against his chest.

The tires squealed over the blacktop as he swerved away from the van. It grew smaller in his rear-view while he accelerated away. It didn't move until he passed through the three way intersection. Kartar didn't stop looking back until he was on the interstate, on the way to work.

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Kartar was late to the President's office. Noah and Donny were already there, taping to the wall sheets of paper to reconstruct the Gantt which stretched from the doorway, across the wall, and then over pictures of various antique slot machines and a photo of Mr. DeLucca playing golf with Sylvester Stallone. The chart had become huge with a life of its own. No single person could understand all of what it contained.

"Sorry I'm late," Kartar said. "I had some traffic

problems."

But the wade of damp paper towels held to his left temple, bruised from a collision with his window, failed to get him sympathy.

"Traffic?" Mr. DeLucca said, "This is Vegas baby. Traffic works as an excuse in California, but in Vegas, we've only got traffic on the Strip and that, my friend, turns into money rolling through our doors."

"What happened to your noggin?" Donny said.

"There were these crazy kids. I should have called the cops--"

While everyone watched, Mr. DeLucca stood up and walked to the end of the chart. Noah sat cross-legged in front of the office's closed door; he wore his usual black pants and black shirt. It said 'Got Root' on today's black shirt. Donny sat in a nearby chair which seemed ridiculously small for his six-foot four-inch linebacker frame. Revo sunglasses perched on his bald, well tanned head, and he wore his usual color scheme: a shirt with floral print and had enough pastels and pink to scream 'FLORIDA.'

Kartar stared at Donny because something was wrong with Donny's shirt. The stitching was on the outside so Donny had it on wrong side out or it was designed that way.

Kartar wasn't able to figure it out before Mr. DeLucca

stabbed his finger at the newly updated release day.

"This is unacceptable. We looked at this chart last month and it showed the project end date was exactly one year late. Now after a month of trying to get the Winner through QA, the line shows a year and two months late. How the hell do we spend one month working on something and that adds TWO MONTHS to the schedule?

"Gentlemen what's going on here?" he said, and took his comb out of an inner pocket of his Italian suit jacket which meant he didn't want an answer to his question. How DeLucca could think his slicked back, Italian hair could be out of place was a mystery. Mr. DeLucca kept talking, walking around in his two piece silk suit, his soft leather shoes letting him pace with only noise being the tap of his heel.

"You see all those slots out there? Every two years, each one of them is replaced with a new, flasher machine because while the strip may have traffic, that traffic could just as well turn into the casino up the block from us, across the street, or just past us at that goddamn, gargantuan MGM Grand.

"A casino's games is what brings them in. The job is easy. You give them something flashy and new, they have a good time dropping some dollars. So because we give them a reason to stop, everyone has jobs and everyone's happy."

Mr. DeLucca slid his comb across the chart. "This, gentlemen, isn't going to make anyone happy. Not our guests,

not our owners, not our management, and certainly not me.

"We are a two times over budget. A one year project is now a two year project, and now you three are telling me we're going backwards. Casino D'Arta can't afford this. The other casinos add floor space to bring in more revenue. Look at the MGN Grand!"

Mr. DeLucca snapped his fingers. "There was nothing, NOTHING around them. Land was cheap and they brought in some big money to build big. But us, we are surrounded by other Casinos."

Mr. DeLucca slapped the Gantt chart. "We have to work smarter!"

"So how do we bring in more revenue? We make the games smaller. Games you can carry around in your goddamn hand and play while lying in bed, in the lounge, or sitting on the john. We get rid of all those clunker slots and put in couches and cocktail tables. We do that, and we'll pull in a revenue-per-square-foot that is unheard of!"

As usual during a DeLucca moment of passion, a bit of white spit formed in the corner of his mouth.

"I've got people ready to remodel the game floor: curtain suppliers, furniture manufacturers, and interior decorators, painters. Marketing wants to promote the hell out of our launch. There will be girls, gentlemen, girls with long legs and

nice figures. We're getting the goddamn Rockets, all twelve troupes will be here to put on a revue on the gaming floor. This going to be bigger than opening night of New York New York with their Cirque du Soleil and flying monkeys!

But all this planning--contracts for labor, purchase orders for new sofas, tables, carpeting--all of it slips with the Winner."

Mr. DeLucca slapped the Gantt chart again and the picture of Stallone fell. The frame crashed on its face, shattering the glass. Noah scooted further from the chart.

"Jesus people! You need to think about more than yourselves!" Mr. DeLucca leveled his comb at each of them.

Kartar straightened in his chair and so did Donny, not looking like a relaxed Floridian at all. Noah watched calmly, like he had seen all this before at his 'super duper high-tech' bay area jobs.

Mr. DeLucca banged his fist against the wall; "No!" he said and beat the wall with each word: "No! No! No!"

All the pictures became skewed. DeLucca had never been this worked up before.

"No! Do think of yourselves people! Do! Because those same money guys who loan to the desperate of the Strip, those who give money to guests down on their luck, you know, those money guys, the ones who go after people's legs if they aren't

happy. Well that's not too far from the truth for us as well. Our financiers have given us a great deal of money for something we are supposed to have finished and they want to know when they're going to receive compensation for their capital. And now we are going to be a year late, and now you're telling me the more we work, the later it gets? These people aren't nice guys. They want some heads to roll!"

Kartar tried not to stare at the white froth now at both corners of DeLucca's mouth. Clearly the Winner was DeLucca's first software project because a year late was nothing. It happened all the time.

Kartar glanced at his co-workers, looking for support in settling DeLucca down. But Donny, a rock in any storm, held his eyebrows so high that his Revos look more like they sat on a washboard. Even Mr. 'I'm so skilled I can snap my fingers and get a better job' watched DeLucca, one hand held frozen in mid-pull of his pony tail.

For the first time, Kartar wondered if maybe this project wasn't going to be the one that would get him on the cover of Wired, it wouldn't be the one that made the iPhone look like a Fisher Price toy, and that maybe he was just going to get fired, or if Mr. DeLucca was serious, something worse.

But this wasn't the 1950s, Kartar told himself. People in IT don't get their legs broken because their project finished late. In the software biz, late deliveries were the nature of

the beast.

DeLucca wiped a sleeve of his silk jacket across his mouth and put his comb into an inside pocket.

"Alright, now that I have your attention, I'm confident that there is a way out of this. We just need to take it a day at a time and no more slips. So what is the problem with QA?"

Kartar looked at Donny for a sign that now was the time to explain to DeLucca he should relax because most software projects run late and over budget, and that the organization just needs to plan for it. But Donny's face was as blank as a poker player at the high stakes table, and Noah's eyes darted between Kartar and Donny, waiting for their lead. Kartar stood up and walked to the Gantt chart, feeling pleased that Noah couldn't just 'tech' his way out of this. It was going to take management savvy to handle DeLucca. Mr. DeLucca licked his lips but a fleck of white stayed.

Kartar took a deep breath, "You know, most projects finish late. Microsoft Windows XP was--"

Donny said, "If QA's system won't work, then why can't we do QA on location here, on our system?"

His mouth hanging open, Kartar felt annoyed at being interrupted and felt amazed at the same time at Donny's out-of-the-box suggestion. Maybe that's what it took to wear shirts like Donny's.

Mr. DeLucca nodded his head. "Yeah, great idea. Let's make a project that is late and over budget further over budget by hiring expensive U.S. labor."

Mr. DeLucca paced the floor, his black Italian suit jacket not buttoned, his collar open, his slick black hair. The concentration on his face like that of coach Pat Riley when he paced in front of the LA Laker's bench when down ten points in the fourth quarter. It was the face of someone who would win at any cost, and Kartar took comfort in that they played for the same team because he needed this win.

Mr. DeLucca flipped the comb over his knuckles again. Each time, the comb traveled from his pointer finger, and weaved through each finger to the pinky, and then back up. He snapped his fingers, catching the comb in his other hand.

"I've got it! Crate up our system and ship it to India!"

Donny stared at the floor shaking his head. Noah squinted at Mr. DeLucca like he must have heard wrong.

Kartar's heart pounded at the disaster this would cause. "How are the development teams going to get anything done? They need that system," Kartar said .

"But we are Development complete. The software development life cycle says we're in the Test phase. You don't need the environment anymore," Mr. DeLucca said.

Donny still stared at the floor, Noah still sat frozen;

Kartar tried to think of where to begin. More than most projects, their use of the Waterfall SDLC was a loose guideline at best. The casino directors driving the requirements were never happy with Requirements Complete, so they never really "froze them." IT made concessions to the Casino, and changes were slipped in here and there, and that caused even larger changes down stream--Design, Development, Test, Implementation, and Maintenance. More change meetings, more documentation to be updated, more documentation approval meetings. One step forward, two steps back. Nothing was ever complete. Especially the development work.

Donny looked up. "Shipping the environment is a good idea Mr. DeLucca, but if we ship it and QA sends us a bug report, how are we going to develop a solution without a development environment?"

Noah nodded his head. "It would take weeks to get a replacement shipped here and get the software installed. No, even longer. Sec. needs to approve everything we bring into the casino data center. They'll go through every process on the server with a fine tooth comb." Noah stared at DeLucca's comb. "Casino Security is very careful but not speedy."

"You're telling me that I want the Gantt chart to be no longer than the Strip and it's going to be longer than I15?"

Kartar said, "That's the other reason we moved QA out of the casino, so we don't need to deal with Sec and can get some

work done."

Behind Mr. DeLucca's back, Donny gestured at the camera on the office ceiling, and then drug his finger across his throat.

Sec. could be watching and listening right now, Kartar realized. He sat down and tried not to blush but Mr. DeLucca noticed.

"Don't worry. We're humane. We'll notify the next of kin," he said and then winked.

Noah stretched his arms while he said, "We could share our environment over the Internet."

Kartar said, "We can't. The testers need their workstations attached to the server via USB, as required by the hardware emulator."

"Hardware emulator?" Mr. DeLucca said.

Kartar said, "Because the vendor is still developing the hardware, we are using a computer program that operates as if it is the hardware so we can start testing."

Noah finished his stretch. He put his palms together and rested his chin on his fingertips, striking the pose of a guru. "This wouldn't be a problem if Wow had used a thick client and the off the shelf hardware as I had suggested."

Mr. DeLucca focused on Kartar and Kartar's hands curled into fists.

Kartar said, "Are we trying to lay blame? Is that what we are down to?"

Noah shrugged his shoulders. "I'm just saying--"

"The Winner needs to be driven from the server or we are going to have problems," Kartar said.

Noah looked ready to open that 'can of worms.' In his mind, Kartar reviewed the decisions his team had made and the disagreements he had with Noah about the user interface architecture. Noah had never been happy about handing off the user interface architecture work to Kartar's team, and Kartar had resisted Noah's overbearing control of the Winner where easygoing Donny let Noah dictate everything on the server side.

"You're saying my thick client design would have problems. Could you run those by me again?" Noah said. He sat relaxed and cross-legged, as if he had forgotten the times they shouted at each other in the hallway after each presentation of the software design specification Wow had put together.

Kartar looked down at Noah. "Do we really need to go over this again? It's all in the UI Architecture Design document," Kartar said, stalling while he browsed through his email, trying to recall from the subject lines what was in the document.

Noah's face shifted to a look of being pained by a bully and took out his iPhone.

Kartar found the key email discussions and scrolled through

a few from Noah on the subject--'Why this design is brian dead.'
There was a ton of them; the back and forth had filled the email boxes of both teams for three weeks.

While Noah still flicked at his iPhone screen, Kartar held his phone between them, as if it was a weapon.

"Here are a few: A thin client keeps all the state on the server to recover from guest abuse such as dropping their drink on the Winner when they're jumping around because they hit a jackpot. Thin clients are also easier to manage and we are," Kartar faced DeLucca, "going to have what? Thousands to tens of thousands of clients in the casino."

DeLucca nodded.

"Scalability and fault tolerance. With all the control on the server, we can upgrade games, add new games, and gracefully shutdown games in progress. Good manageability will reduce our O&M," when Noah's face seemed a little too expressionless, Kartar added for Noah's benefit, "operating and maintenance costs."

Kartar ticked another finger. "And another--"

Noah shook his hand for Kartar to stop. "All those characteristics can be achieved with a well designed thick client. Just yesterday my Tivo, which is a thick client, received an update--"

"AND--excuse me Noah--and starting costs: purchasing a

large number of simple thin clients is cheaper than more powerful thick clients. Guests will lose or break Winners so the hardware has to be cheap; more O&M savings."

Noah didn't nod, but said, "I'll grant you the last one could be true. We should have built a prototype to test your assertion on the others."

Kartar rolled his head and eyes toward the ceiling.

"These aren't just my assertions--"

"Yeah, yeah. Hardware is getting cheaper and faster all the time."

Kartar dropped his hands to his side and said, "Here comes Moore's Law again."

Donny looked at his watch. "My, my, look what time it is. I have a design revision review to attend in two minutes."

Kartar and Noah both nodded and said they needed to be there too.

Mr. DeLucca gave Noah a hand up. "That leaves us with your generous offer. Will you do that for me and for the sake of the casino?"

Noah paused, looking confused until what he had promised at the beginning of the meeting came back to him, and then he nodded.

DeLucca said, "Good! Before five, you'll have a ticket on

your desk for tonight's flight out."

Noah's eyes widened as he walked out of the office, too distracted to bother the strand of hair hanging across his face.

"Kartar, stay a moment. I want to talk to you," DeLucca said.

Kartar didn't like the big scary eyes Donny made at him as he walked by. It was hard to tell when Donny was serious or not. Calm down, Kartar told himself. But the economy wasn't good right now and he had child support payments to make, and Priya would start college in two years.

Kartar pinched the ring hanging under his shirt. No matter what it took, he'd make this project great.

DeLucca started talking as soon as the door closed.

"Kartar, I worry about you."

Kartar opened his mouth but didn't know what to say. He squeezed the ring tighter.

"And you should be worried too. There are people looking for someone to hold accountable. Some of them come to me and I tell them: 'hold on. I hire great people. They may fuck-up sometimes, but they're the best.'

"But these people. They're not always happy with that. Many of them look at the Gantt chart to see whose line is the longest, and they see team Wow and ask who's the manager."

Kartar spun the scroll ball on his wheel while he considered where DeLucca was going.

"Are you doing your best?" DeLucca said.

Kartar nodded.

"And that's what I tell them. But these people . . . they aren't very patient. My suggestion to you is that next time they visit, your line shouldn't be the longest. Then they'll know you're doing your best." DeLucca held his office door open for Kartar. "OK?"

Kartar nodded and left the office. In the hallway, he stood still, feeling like he was moving too fast, like his body was accelerating through the hallway, even though he was just standing there. String theory, he thought, maybe today, the strings that make up my body are vibrating at the wrong frequency. Like he was falling out of tune.

A young man walked past and entered DeLucca's office with a new picture frame, and then the next thing Kartar realized was that he's at his desk, not remembering the long ride down the elevator to the IT department on sub-level four, or the walk to his cube.

The floor was too quiet. Kartar stood up and looked over at Donny's cube but he wasn't there.

"Hell!" he said, remembering the Design Change Review meeting, and he rushed to the meeting room which was back on

DeLucca's floor. It felt like he had spent a lifetime in meetings. Since Design Complete was months ago, every little change in the design meant they had to meet and carefully review it. Changing anything got more expensive the longer you waited in the processes. They were following a ten step Waterfall and technically, as DeLucca said, they were in the Test Phase, step Seven, but they were still implementing functionality to new requirements or fixing integration issues.

After the meeting, he still felt strange and told his team he was sick and going to work from home. While he picked up his sunglasses from his desk, Donny waved him over.

"Hey Donny, I'm headed home. It won't do the project any good if I get the team sick,"

"You look like hell."

Kartar nodded and started to leave.

"It was that talk with DeLucca, wasn't it!"

Kartar didn't know what say. It was crazy what DeLucca had implied about using the Gantt chart to single someone out for . . . something bad. He didn't want to think about what that something could be.

Donny rocked back in his chair. "I don't know what to think of that 'Godfather talk.' It's not the wild Vegas 1980s anymore. But who knows?"

Kartar said, "Maybe a touch of the flu. I need to go."

"Wouldn't it be something if your car exploded when you started it?" Donny smiled at first and then stopped at something Kartar couldn't see on his own face.

"Shit! The old man has really got to you. Hey, you parked in the Casino parking garage right? Well then, you're fine. Blowing up your car would damage casino property and scare guests away. The old man wouldn't let anything happen that was bad for business."

Kartar shook his head wishing, Donny would stop talking like this.

Donny rummaged through a desk drawer. "I've got something that'll make you feel better." Donny started to lift out something small but then returned it, shaking his head.

"No. A man in your condition needs something stronger. . . . Here."

Before Kartar could see what it was, Donny wrapped it with a magazine and handed it to Kartar.

"Return it when you pick up your own. There's no waiting period in Nevada unless you want to get a concealed weapons permit."

Kartar unfolded the magazine and almost dropped the contents--a revolver. "What? What is this?"

"You know damn well what that is." Donny stood up and glanced around to check if anyone was nearby. "That's a Smith

and Wesson .50 cal Magnum, the biggest production handgun ever made. See those slots cut into the end of the barrel? Those vent the explosion so the gun doesn't kick outta your hand."

Donny showed how to cock the hammer back and then ease it to 'safety,' and then he handed it back to Kartar. The revolver looked the right size for a guy like Donny, but the weight of life or death felt too heavy in Kartar's hand.

Donny said, "Don't look so worried. Guns are made so any idiot can use them. Just like in the movies, point and shoot. Now go home and get some rest. You'll feel better with that nearby."

"I can't take this!"

"See, you're already getting back to your old argumentative self. Now scoot! Go home. Recover from your flu. Take it! I won't take 'no' for an answer."

#

Kartar drove out of the deep bowel of the casino's parking garage where the employees could park for the small fee of \$200/month. On the passenger's seat lay the magazine, Data Architect Today, wrapped around the revolver. Though it was noon he didn't feel hungry.

He got off the Strip and onto the interstate. His heart

raced every time he saw an ad-wrapped van; it didn't stop racing until he confirmed it wasn't portraying a nude woman in a top hat. Those high school punks, could their parents be so cash strapped that they'd pimp out their car to being a signboard for vegas attractions?

Kartar reflected on his own parenting choices and how good a kid Priya was. She was safely attending Accounting school every weekday of this month.

Kartar drove twenty over the speed limit on I215. Traffic was light. The sky was clear of clouds as deep blue as the ocean in an ad for the Caribbean and the desert was a sun bleached brown. Boulders in the sand struggled for survival, looking wore and tired beneath the sun; before Kartar's eyes, they were wearing into sand. He felt wore and tired, like the stress would break him down into granules of skin and bone. In the Test Phase and still changing the requirements, changing the design, and writing more code. Everything but testing was happening. It's just a bad day, he tried to tell himself. He still had tomorrow and the next, and the next to have great days. He'd make the Winner succeed. It had to be great!

He was near his exit when a van accelerated from its lane and veered into his Audi. He tried to stay in his lane but his car was forced into the railing. The van bumped him again and this time forced him on the railing. For a moment, just a wheel hung over the edge, and then his world, his car, and his self

became air born.

Kartar held his breath as the mountains in the distance turned themselves over as the car flipped. Data Architect Today floated next to his head as the sky and mountains changed places--the sky now next to his dash instead of the roof. Then sand rattled against his windshield as the car skidded on its roof and then stopped. The Audi's nose tipped forward into the earth.

Kartar hung onto the steering wheel and felt confused which way was up until he felt the light tapping of his ring swinging against his forehead. His shoulder pressing against the shoulder-belt, his butt no longer touched the seat. Kartar stared at the desert floor outside his windshield with the belt digging into his diaphragm. A roadrunner, much smaller looking than in the cartoon, dashed past his windshield and Kartar reflexively honked the horn. The little bugger stopped outside his window as if to stick it's tongue out and then ran to the rear. Kartar looked through his side-mirror for the roadrunner but instead saw the van bouncing across the dirt, raising a tale of dust into the air.

He took his phone out of his pocket and it slipped from his hand to the roof, sliding to a stop against his sun visor. The handgun lay against the rear view mirror among pens, empty venti-size latte cups, and a floor matt.

He grabbed the phone and dialed 911 as the van approached

and this time it wasn't a nude lady looking for him but blue man. Again, only outlines of two figures could be seen in the cab. It was unbelievable that these people changed their sponsor and came after him. Why are they doing this? How did they find me?

911 answered his call and asked something while Kartar watched the van stop behind his Audi.

"I've been run off I215 and need the police before I get shot," Kartar said.

The voice from 911 kept asking Kartar questions. He wondered what Priya would say when she got back from Accounting class and her father never returned. 911 recorded everything. There would be tapes.

"Priya, I love you."

"Sir? Do you know where you are right now? Are you on fire?"

He remembered how the roadrunner was out here alone, and it just made a break for it. He was alone. He couldn't wait for 911.

He punched his seatbelt button and fell to the roof. He grabbed the revolver and it felt cool and heavy in his hand. He opened the door and crawled out of the car and into the desert. The van sat there, waiting for his next move.

Kartar held the gun loosely, as if holding it too tight

could make it explode out bullets. He didn't want to kill anyone. Around him was nothing but desolation and mountains in one direction, and the interstate in the other. He pulled back the hammer like Donny showed him. If help came, it would be in the direction of the interstate, and while he had this revolver, even meth dealing kids wouldn't dare bother him.

He ran for the interstate. The van sat idling until he had gone five car lengths, and then it spun around and gave chase. The van's engine roared in his ears, filling Kartar with adrenaline and he tried to move his legs faster, but he didn't need a Gantt to see that he wasn't going to make it to the interstate.

He waved the gun at the van as he ran, expecting it to suddenly stop, but it kept getting closer and with it came the smell of coolant and oil. Kartar kept running and got angry because they weren't going to leave him alone. He gripped the gun tight, and while running, swung his arm to point at the van and pulled the trigger. Heat enveloped his hand as if he'd reached into a hot oven. The 'crack' rang his ears as if he had been struck in the head. The van hesitated like the driver's foot had slipped off the accelerator, but only for a second and then the foot pushed the pedal to the floor.

Kartar turned, running sideways. The van was almost on him. He pointed and fired again. A plume of steam escaped from under the van's radiator. Kartar dove out of the way and the

van passed by; the blue man in the ad watched him with large white pupils, like he couldn't believe Kartar was still alive. The van slid to a stop and immediately, people got out. The driver wore a leather pencil skirt and a formfitting black jacket. The other passenger was a woman in black pants and shirt and she wore a European style hat that gave her the profile of a bird sitting on her head. They both wore large Paris Hilton-esque sunglasses and both had guns with much longer barrels than Kartar.

He got up from the ground. "Who? What do you want?"

The two woman stood behind the front of the van and conversed in a calm and professional manner; their faces obscured by steam rising from the van.

The gun no longer made him feel safe. He gripped the ring which still hung out of his shirt and wished the earth would swallow him and take him anywhere but here.

The one with the hat moved out of sight behind the van, and reappeared at the rear, pressing herself against the van.

Kartar got up, still squeezing the ring. "I'm dropping the gun," he said. "Whatever you want, it's yours."

The driver leaned against the hood, steam billowed, obscuring her.

"We're here to deliver something to you. Something called a Gantt chart," the woman with the hat said.

Kartar twisted the ring on its chain. "You mean DeLucca--"

Something disturbed the steam near the driver and then his knee gave away. He fell to the ground, rocking onto his back, his knees in the air, his hands squeezing the bleeding joint. Something was inside his knee and it burned like a hot iron. He shoved his fingers into the wound, pushing past skin and tissue for whatever it was, but all his fingers touched was bone. Across his chest lay his necklace--broken. His ring, missing.

The burning session faded to a throbbing. He gritted his teeth and tried to squeeze the wound closed, but the blood stain grew down the leg of his pants.

His other knee exploded into a red mess of flesh and tendon.

"Help!" he screamed, and then shouted "Why?" He laid flat, hoping help would arrive soon. He watched the sky and as it changed from a light blue to a darker blue, the throbbing lessened.

Blood flecked his shirt and he could feel it all over his face. Even the bleeding slowed, and both knees stopped hurting. The end felt near. He lifted his head and looked for his ring.

Kartar started to get angry. This was happening because DeLucca didn't understand Software. While the women got something out of the van, he told them that all software projects run a little late, and that it was a common problem.

He had to stop when the sky started to flicker bright and then dark like the sun was a bad florescent light.

"My-my ring. Where is it?"

The two women approached. They walked with a certainty and kept themselves separated so that he couldn't focus on both at once. They moved with the confidence of professionals, knowing they would finish this job as certainly as sunlight would change darkness into morning.

He turned his head and looked around, but all he saw was sun-bleached dirt instead of his ring. The sun beat down on him and made him squint while he tried to watch them. His exposed skin, his face, and his arms, he felt hot all over. He'd sunburn soon. What the hell was taking 911 so long?

The one with the hat held a bunch of papers in her hand. She threw them down on his chest so they covered him like she knew his body needed protection from the sun. Kartar tipped his head forward to see what the papers where. It took a moment to recognize understand the black lines and the red squiggles across the papers: the Gantt chart.

"You don't need to do this," Kartar said. "You're making a mistake. This project will hit it big. The Winner will release."

Neither of the women said anything.

"My ring," Kartar said.

A kind look came over the driver's face and she squatted down and lifted his ring from the dirt.

"This?" she said. "Why don't you wear it on your hand?" Her own hand was decorated with plain silver rings on all fingers except her wedding finger.

Her partner lifted the hat brim higher on her forehead and gave the driver an annoyed look. She wore the same rings as her partner.

"I'm divorced," Kartar said. "I was a good father and husband, but she left me for an iPhone engineer. That's why the Winner will be great. It must be great! I want her to be sorry. I want her to know how big a mistake she made."

Kartar raised his hand to take his ring, but she pulled it away.

"I'm going to call her when I make the cover of Wired; they'll do a feature on the Winner."

The driver said, "I think this ring is your totem." She leaned over him, shadowing his face while she stared into his eyes, as if searching for something. "You should take this with you then."

Tears trickled from of Kartar's eyes as he thanked the gods that she finally saw that he was just a geek mixed up in something bad, and that he didn't deserve to be killed.

He opened his mouth to say, 'thank you,' but she dropped

the wedding band into his mouth.

It landed in the back of his throat and he choked, trying not to swallow it. She leaned close again, and held his chin, her mouth close to his, her lips pursed. She kissed the air just above his lips, and then stood up, aimed her pistol and then both women fired: the driver put a bullet through his heart, the woman in the hat shot Kartar in the head.

With what little brain activity was left, Kartar's last thoughts were of his daughter.