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ARISTOMANIA

by R. P. Bird

As a member of the aristocracy, I have many rights, the foremost among them: to have fun, to have fun all the time.

I thought it would be nice to go out tonight. The girls were leaving; they had been such fun, but a little too fragile, too many broken bones. The injured girl, her jet-black hair all sweaty and matted, her body supported by her uninjured playmates, giggled from the anti-pain drugs shooting into her arm from the blood cuff around her wrist. I sighed as I turned to wave goodbye to them. I might even have to pay a fine for that. The next time I placed an order I'd have to be more specific. There had to be a sturdier product available.

I pouted before my mirror. The image of my lovely body stared back at me. Smooth, light brown skin over muscles

sculpted to firmness by only the most costly sleeptrainer. As a teenager, I had enjoyed all manner of erotic dreams funneled into my mind by neural stimulation while my muscles had twitched themselves to perfection. Luckily, the technology is only available to the aristocracy, it wouldn't do to have salarymen looking this way. I ran my fingers ever so lightly across my chest. Such an ideal body! My servants buzzed and bustled, offering me different salaryman attire. None of the costumes were quite right.

Axlxy called: "Hello? Hello? Mv? Mv, you there? His image capered and danced in my mirror. "Want to go out to play?"

He could come along, it would be fun. "Why not?" I replied.

"I'll be right over." He laughed as his image disappeared.

The girls had used up the previous night and all of the present day. It was night again. It didn't matter, I hardly ever slept. A servant, one of the family's army of house slaves, brought a blood cuff and my antique syringe, carrying both on a silver tray. I slapped the blood cuff on my wrist, its little needles tingled as they slid into my flesh. It began to filter out fatigue byproducts, in a moment its work was done.

My door let Axlxy in as my servants dressed me down for the evening. I had finally decided on the oldest, smelliest rags in

my collection. My servants were spraying me with the scent of sweat as Axlxy entered my dressing room.

"Ready to go?" he said.

"Just a moment," I replied. I injected myself with the syringe, shooting up a little neurochemical mix while Axlxy made a face. I use the syringe principally to irritate my friends. It doesn't hurt as much as they think. The servant left with the empty syringe and blood cuff. Sometimes, like now, I dipped my little finger into a bag of salaryman narcotics and licked the white powder off. I always kept some in the pockets of my costumes, just for that added touch of verisimilitude. Upon an offer, Axlxy sucked some up, too.

Under the seedy, sweat-stained salaryman rags I wore my strongbody; one could have such fun with a strongbody. The thin elastic tightness of it embraced my flesh. It was classified STATE SECRET: RESTRICTED TECHNOLOGY. The highest security clearance was needed to use it---an aristocrat is given that at birth. Axlxy always wore his on these outings. I always wore mine, too. Gloves and a hood could be extruded for complete protection.

I fussed about with the rags, striking various poses before my mirror, then making minor adjustments. I wanted to look just right for tonight. Axlxy was always impatient to go. Waiting a moment would do him some good.

Axlxy pouted. "Come on! Let's go! I want to have fun!"

"All right," I smiled at myself in the mirror. "Let's go play."

Down we went, until we reached the lower levels. The streets there were like dark cracks in the gigantic buildings of the city, as if they had all been just one big building, long ago. Occasional lamps posted along the walkways cut the dusty gloom. Salarymen and workers constantly scuttled about. Aristocrats only came down here to play. If anyone got in the way, we'd knock them down.

"Let's rob people," Axlxy suggested. "We could make a contest of it."

"If you wish. We can't linger, though. I have a surprise for you." A grimy old woman scuttled to get aside. I helped her with a kick in the ass. The blow seemed to energize her shrivelled body, for she fairly danced out of our way.

"What is it?"

"I don't want to spoil your pleasure." I was going to tell him anyway, I just liked to hear him whine a little.

"Tell me! It won't spoil my fun. Please! You know you're going to tell me, so please. Please?"

"Dissidents."

His eyes lit up. "Praise Mv. Praise him!" He grabbed a dirty little boy from among the people against a wall and dragged him with us.

"Let go! Let go!" the boy cried.

"Shut up," Axlxy said. He shook the boy, rattling the thin body down to the toes. "Say, 'Praise Mv.' Say it!"

Blood trickled from the boy's nose. Axlxy had used the strength of the strongbody to shake him. The boy's heels skidded along the sidewalk. "Say it!"

". . . Praise Mv . . ." the boy whimpered. Axlxy dropped him. We continued walking.

"We've got fifteen minutes," I said. "Meet me at the local mass transit station."

"You're going to lose," Axlxy shouted as we split up.

I entered the nearest store, beat the cashier, and took all the coin I could get. I even took coin from the customers. They would only spend it on useless things like food anyway. Several burly types on the street tried to obstruct me. I tossed and banged them about until they ran away in fear. I laughed. That's all I had time for.

At the station, maintained clean and white by the machines, we met and summoned a car. Axlxy had robbed more people, but I won. I had stolen more coin.

"Yes, but you cheated," Axlxy complained.

"We never said we couldn't rob stores." I pulled out my bag of white powder and licked some up. I offered it to Axlxy, the car arrived as he licked powder off his lips.

Whoosh! Off we went. The car would drop us only minutes from the rendezvous with these dissidents. We watched as it carried us through the dark cracks and twisted paths of the city, sometimes swooping up into the more colorful regions above, where the flashing symbols on propaganda boards blinked encouragement to the people below. The powder cooked my brain.

I had an idea, just such an idea! It was delicious, juicy; so soft and squishy I could almost feel it in my mouth, like a moist won ton stuffed with the most delectable sweetmeats. Yum! I'd kill Axlxy. No matter he was my friend, who else would I most enjoy killing? Ah, the thought had my mouth watering. I'd blame it on the dissidents. Aristocratic State Security Agent Murdered by Hatemongering Dissidents, the silly salaryman tabloid sheets would shout. He'd be an instant martyr, why, I could be featured in the government media, mourning for my lost friend. I do look my best in black. Such a concept! Such fun!

How to do it, how to do it? It should be as grisly as possible: blunt instruments and sharp blades. I can get the weapons anywhere. But what of his strongbody? How to deactivate that? I knew just who to ask.

I laughed.

Axlxy smiled. "Mv, tell me the joke."

"Was nothing, just a fancy. You'll enjoy this bunch of dissidents. What fun. You leave one of the girls for me."

"Of course. Am I not a kind person?"

"You are, oh, you are indeed!"

#

They were just a bunch of silly grumblers when I first met them. Since childhood, aristocrats like myself have been encouraged to play little hide and catch games with the salaryman classes. Whether my band were true dissidents or not didn't matter, we have to keep them hopping. Sometimes we even invent enemies just to keep the game going.

Axlxy and I sat with our backs to a support column, waiting for them. This floor of the building was half-filled with rotting things in big pink plastic crates. The lights were always on. It would have been better to delay harvesting them, to get a few more new recruits. I've always had trouble postponing my pleasures. "They just grumbled till I killed a policeman," I whispered in his ear. "Only then did they begin to plot the way I wanted. They bring three new members tonight. That's what you're supposed to be. The elevators will stop moving after the last ones come up. That only leaves the spiral ramps. There will only be eleven."

"This should be easy."

We heard people approaching, we stood to greet them. They stood around talking in chatting voices till a second group joined them.

"Is that all?" Axlxy asked.

"Yes." I smiled and moved forward to greet the newcomers. Axlxy held at the back of the group.

There were four in front of me, the prettiest girl among them. The gloves of my strongbody extruded down to cover my hands. The first one to come near me extended his hand. Shaking hands: it was their idea, an archaic gesture to express solidarity with the past. That they knew any history at all was a violation of the STATE SECRETS ACT. I took it. The others came close enough. My grip on the man's arm tightened, I grabbed another by the throat, and with a whispered command, I triggered my badge. A holographic image of the STATE SECURITY ENSIGN appeared over my head. They stared up at it. The man tried to jerk his hand free.

Behind me, Axlxy started killing. They didn't become aware of it till his second victim, when Axlxy came down on the boy's head with an overhand strike, spraying us all with white little drops of brain and a little blood. They all screamed. I laughed and licked my lips.

"We're only doing this for your own good!" I shouted as I twisted the man's neck till it snapped. The other one was

desperately trying to get his hand free. An older woman beside him tried to help by pulling on his wrist. I dropped the dead man and hit her with that hand---it tore half her face away.

The girl and the others bolted. Axlxy was after them like a war beast to the scent of blood. I looked at the man whose hand I held, "You want to be free?" He nodded. I ripped off his arm and handed it to him. He actually took it and ran for a few steps before collapsing. His body flopped around on the floor. "Such fun." Where was that girl? A scream echoed among the bins and cavernous bays, Axlxy had found one of them. I trotted off in the direction the girl had run.

A body lay next to the control board in the elevator, the walls sprayed with blood. It was a girl, but it wasn't the cute one. Axlxy had caught the silly girl as she was trying to get the elevator to work. Another scream, this time echoing up from the spiral ramp, from somewhere below. Axlxy at his fun. My little precious wouldn't have gone that way. She looked too smart for that. Where would I go if I couldn't get off this floor? I giggled. As far from me as possible, and hide!

I began to circle about, peering behind the giant pink plastic crates. Some had burst open from the pressure of the rotting contents. It smelled like a billion moldy orchids. I worked my way toward the far wall. Occasional gusts of fresh air stirred the fumes about. Each floor has its own doors for

cargo transfers directly to and from hovering aerocarriers; one must have been left open.

I saw her when I rounded a crumbling pile of stuff. She stood in the middle of an open cargo door. The wind tossed her hair. The door hadn't been closed after its last use, it was rusted open. She actually smiled when she saw me.

"There you are, my pretty thing," I couldn't help giggling. "Come to me."

She shook her head. "Not tonight," she said as she jumped. She didn't even scream. I rushed to the door and looked down in time to catch a glimpse of her spinning down into the sooty blackness. There were at least ninety stories down to the street. I wondered why she did that. I probably wouldn't even have hurt her much. People do the strangest things.

#

I reactivated the elevator and went down. Axlxy was still busy with the last of them, I heard an echo of a howl. The perfect opportunity to advance my plans for his murder. The desk would know how to deactivate his strongbody, if anyone did. I used my commlink to contact my desk. "Desk, do you know the playgun I keep in the cabinet of the whip room?" I asked it, whispering up my sleeve.

"Yes, sir," came the response.

"Is there a way to program the playgun slugs to disable a strongbody?" The elevator arrived at bottom. A croaking old man was waiting for me.

"You're not supposed to be here, do you know!"

"Excuse me," I said into my sleeve. "Tsk-tsk. As a dissident, you should know you can run but you can't hide."

He looked up at my badge. I turned it off. "I'm not a dissident! I work here."

"You are now." I lifted him off the floor and strangled him. His legs kicked about a bit before he died. "Hop hop, old man." I threw the body aside. I went back to my sleeve.

"Where were we?"

"You were telling me you wished your playgun slugs altered so as to disable a strongbody," my desk said. "Because your strongbody suffers an inordinate amount of damage in use, I have accessed all available files on the matter. From inferences on posted warnings in the repair database, to avoid exposure to a specific pattern of electric field variations, I have concluded that there is an intentional flaw in strongbodies. The playgun slugs can be programmed to emit this series of electric pulses when they impact strongbody fabric. The proper sequence of pulses will drop a strongbody out of power mode. This is also RESTRICTED TECHNOLOGY USE, forbidden."

"What do I care for silly rules? They don't apply to me!
Do it!"

"I know they don't apply to you, you have said that often enough, sir, and, yes, sir, I will program the slugs, sir."

I knew I had made a good investment when I bought this desk! My friends thought me foolish for purchasing such an enhanced model; however, I knew it would pay off in the long run. For a little extra sum, my desk had been programmed at the factory to acquiesce to even my slightest request. I like my machines that way. "Have a servant meet me at---what would be a good clandestine meeting place?"

"In the primary decision track of Wu's most recent hypernovel, the conspirators met on the East 304th Bridge."

"Perfect!" Have a servant bring the loaded playgun to me there in an hour. Axlxy is busy right now, but should he call, make up a lie. Tell him I'm still tracking a dissident, that I can't talk yet." I ended the communication. My desk worried too much. If found out, I'd only get a reprimand for RESTRICTED TECHNOLOGY USE. Words. What are words to me? On the street a short moment later, amid the towering industrial blocks with their blank walls, trudging through brown sludge, I tried to remember what was next. Something else besides dissidents. They had been so much fun I had forgotten what was to come next. I called my desk again.

"Yes, sir? Have you reconsidered your course of action?"

"No. Has Axlxy called yet?"

"No, sir. Might I suggest another series of actions, not involving restricted activities?"

"No, you may not. Is there something else I was going to do tonight?"

"I find mention of an illegal-but-tolerated athletic contest among the salarymen."

"Of course."

"CC-1191, 14121 Avenue of Love."

"Of course." This time I was polite. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, sir."

#

The bridge arched over a rusty gaping hole; a fluorescent river of toxic waste pulsed and thrashed a kilometer below. One of my servants, a girl, met me there, in the center. I made a point of never striking my servants, even so, this one always cringed when she was near me. Perhaps she thought it made me happy. She handed over my little playgun. I hid it in my garments.

"Desk asked me to remind you that this is RESTRICTED TECHNOLOGY USE."

I smiled and patted her on the head. "Tell the desk you have done so. Run along home now."

"Yes, sir." She ran away toward home.

Thunder echoed up to the bridge when something in the river exploded. I called the desk again. "Next time Axlxy calls, put him through."

"Yes, sir."

"And stop fretting about the playgun."

"Yes, sir."

Using priority code at a transit stand, I was able to gain immediate access to a car. I hit a man who complained. Not hard, just enough.

#

Axlxy was right where I told him to be. He smiled. I smiled back. The preparations for his murder had left me a little less light-hearted than usual. I lied when told him several dissidents had escaped. Through interrogation, I had supposedly learned that the escapees were at a disused warehouse, the same location as the athletic contest. I almost believed it myself. As we neared the place, just another giant faceless brown block, the press of salaryman bodies in the narrow streets swept us forward. Their excitement brought me back to my normal ebullient self. I cast my arm over Axlxy's shoulder. "After this is over, how about we order up some girls for a party?" To which you will not be coming.

He laughed. "Such a friend, Mv! Of course! The perfect end to the perfect evening." He was more right than he knew. We both laughed.

The mob pushed itself through a single entrance, each person dropping a few pennies into the rusty metal boxes of cashiers overseen by an amputee with bright steel prostheses. A smiling boy dressed in colored rags of green and blue and gold stood among the cashiers. An apprentice perhaps, or an errand-boy. The salarymen were instructed long ago to begin the training of their children at an early age. More rules for them to follow.

On the ground level, in the center of a vast, empty space, was a make-piece stadium welded out of scrap metal from a thousand different sources: structural members, vehicle frames, preformed sheets, doors, whatever could be used. The left side of a wrecked transit car was used on an upper level. A salaryman's shrine. How different from the sculpted stones of the Senatorial Assembly. No green vines, bright flowers, or song birds here.

Surrounded by the stadium, right there in the center, was a raised platform of old yellowed plastic construction panels. There were so many people, the stands couldn't hold them all, they poured around the stage. Axlxy and I threw several people

out of their seats. They were choice seats, too; we could see everything. People glared at us.

The first contestants were brought in, led through the crowd by their trainers like domestic animals. Gigantic, small-headed men covered with muscles, survivals of an old attempt to genetically engineer a human heavy-lifting worker. Someone tried to make an introduction, he was drowned out in the mob's cheer. Such noise! The two monsters began to grunt and groan and stomp in threat displays. The crowd noise grew. They charged---bang! they came together. The crowd roared. Each monster struggled for advantage in the grapple, tussling and grabbing, pushing each other about, to the chants and entreaties of the mob.

I winked at Axlxy before slipping down into the crowd on the floor. When I looked back I could see his anxiety, he didn't know what I was going to do. Not the half of it, ha!

I bounced up on the stage before any in the mob could prevent it. My gloves crawled down over my hands. But not the hood, I wanted them to see my face. My laughing face.

The monsters stopped their battle. The mob began to whistle its unhappiness. "Go away," one of the monsters said. It tried to push me, I threw it across the stage. The other one rushed me, I grabbed its arm and jerked. The creature gave a high-pitched scream and fell down. Its shoulder was just

dislocated. I was disappointed, I had hoped to rip the arm off. I turned to the first one. It had a small head, but it was smart enough to scuttle off the stage. I turned back to the other one, but it had rolled to the edge; the mob embraced it and carried it off. I was miffed! I so wanted to put on a show. There were calls for my violent assassination. They knew I was an aristocrat out for fun. Every possible ethnic variation of humanity stood jammed together on the floor below me, all enraged, all wanting my blood on their hands. They threw things. A small chunk of concrete cut my cheek. Blood trickled down my face. I laughed, then I triggered my badge. The fools never realize that all aristocrats are automatically STATE SECURITY AGENTS. They drew back as if I had hit them, compressing themselves in their effort to get away. I extruded the hood to protect my head, and with great glee jumped down into the struggling mass. I laughed some more as I bashed them about. They melted away from my fists, the stampede drawing them out like an antique syringe sucking up blood. Swooph!

Nothing except trash and a few moaning bodies. I looked for Axlxy. I had just enough power left in the strongbody to do several violent, nasty things to him.

"I'm up here, you idiot." By using his strongbody legs he had leapt up onto one of the support columns. He bitched all the way down. "Such a foolish stunt, we might have been killed.

You are reckless! What about the dissidents? They got away!"
And more of the same. I waited. I took the playgun from its
little pocket and held it behind my back.

A final little leap brought him down in front of me. "I
don't know why I associate with you, you are too extreme!"

I laughed and pointed the gun. "Hey, if you can't take a
joke, you shouldn't have come."

The playgun emitted a little pop as the programmed bullet
was fired. It hit Axlxy in the chest. He pulled it out.

"What's this?"

"Extrude your gloves," I suggested. I ripped a short piece
of steel support bar from the bottom of the stand next to us.

He tried, nothing happened. He smiled, "My strongbody's
down."

"Just as you will be," I replied.

"This isn't funny, Mv!" He backed up.

"Maybe not to you." I was smiling so hard my cheeks hurt.
Another step and I would have him. I felt an impact---my
strongbody went dead. A herd of small dark men in grey were
approaching us. They all looked alike, clone-brothers.
INTERNAL SECURITY. Axlxy disappeared from view as they swept
over us. Little men with forked capture poles whipped the steel
rod out of my hand and dropped me down. Another sprayed me with

tangle wire. From a distance filled with echoes, Axlxy shouted threats at me, the last a promise: "I'll get you for this, Mv!"

I watched as they packed the wounded and dead salaryman bodies away on litters. The one with the guns watched over me. "You don't need to tell me, my desk turned me in." Of course. I hadn't thought its hardware contained a snitch circuit.

"What's going to happen to me?" The small grey man just smiled politely. They finished picking up all the bodies. The gunman sprayed me with an aerosol, the tangle wire began to crumble. They left. I sat on the floor and looked around, nothing. Not even an echo of a footstep to indicate that INTERNAL SECURITY had just left. Nothing, except the tangle wire, to show they had even been here. I brushed the fragments of it from my arms. A piece of candy from a vendor's box lay nearby, I picked it up and stuck it in my mouth. Still nothing. Just the empty stage, the empty stands, and the trash. I sucked on the candy. Was that the rustle of a mouse? A dirty boy wearing tatters of green and blue and gold cloth peered at me from behind a nearby pillar. I had spoiled his fun. I smiled back at the hate in his face. Before I could get up, he ran off, dodging away among the pillars, off into shadows. One got away, but there'd be another day. I spit out the candy. I liked the taste of blood better . . . everyone already knew that.

Aberration magazine went up in smoke right after this story appeared. I presume it appeared. They sent me a check and a contract. It's another of those *X-Files* moments in my writing career, when the magazine vanishes without a trace right after one of my stories appears in its pages. I'm surprised events like this haven't given me some deep-seated psychological complex.

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