7 to keep my soul

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At the end of a cul-de-sac, three men sit and watch as the Trick or Treaters venture out onto the street. It may be a bit early back on Earth but here on Scab, with Electra fading out in the west, it happens to be dusk. And save for those handing out candy, like these three, or jumping out of the shadows to scare the little creatures, the adults are nowhere in sight.

This is the kid's night out.

Children unescorted by adults on Halloween would have been unheard of even a hundred years ago, but nobody is concerned about their kids running around on the street tonight. In fact, nobody is concerned about their kids running around the street at any time. It's not that there's an all-seeing Big Brother watching out for them, it's just that Big Brother would be inadequate when compared to those who are watching them—their parents.

Just nanoseconds away via the neuronet, the parents know right where their kids are and what they are doing. To a point that is. They can't exactly read the child's mind with this technology, that interface is illegal, but they can pinpoint them on a GEV display and talk to them at any time. It's not that there isn't any crime on the streets of Sapphire, it's just that crime doesn't often happen in neighborhoods such as this. Police are expensive, few, and far between, so like most adults on Sapphire everyone here has taken an oath *to protect and to serve* as the need arises.

Violent crime was rampant before five score ago, but now with an armed citizenry—a practice employed by most independent planets—assault, rape, armed robbery, burglary and murder are at an all-time low. Go ahead, make a grab for a kid, and see what happens

to you! Extreme distress, physical trauma, or unconsciousness automatically results in an alert to be broadcast across the local net, and if you knew what was coming your way you'd wish to God you were caught by the cops because the average Jane or Joe Q. Citizen has no sense of humor about such things. *Two in the chest and one in the head* is the rule of thumb, and these people take it to heart.

Four little girls run up to Pete Suiters and shout at the top of their lungs, "Trick or Treat!"

The children know Pete as Mr. Happy, but his neighbors know him as Bob. Robert Happy is not exactly the name he would pick if he had a choice but Interpol was getting close and it was the only identity Pete could scratch up on short notice. As for the original Robert Happy he was not so happy when Pete unceremoniously chucked him out of an airlock eleven years ago, but them's the breaks.

One consolation is that *a* Robert Happy is enjoying his little retirement bungalow. Better yet, Robert Happy's estranged son couldn't tell the difference after over forty years of separation. Except for the fact that Pete is shacking up with yet another twenty-something bimbo, Bob's MO and a sore point between the two, Robert Happy III actually likes his dad now. A personable eighty-six year old that, as most octogenarians are, is healthy, buff, and randy as a mink. Something that Robert Three-Sticks can relate to as he himself approaches sixty.

Three-Sticks doesn't know what to make of his dad's friend. Two hours ago this guy called Charlie just shows up at the door unannounced, and as the four little girls scamper away with their loot Three-Sticks excuses himself and heads back into the house all the while wondering where these two came to know each other. By his demeanor it's obvious that Charlie is in law enforcement, like an investigator or maybe even a Police Chief, and such a man would not normally be the acquaintance, least of all a friend of a retired futures trader twice his age.

After two hours, Three-Sticks was getting uncomfortable. Every time he came back with sandwiches or beer, the conversation would instantly revert to mindless small talk. No one said anything but he can take a subtle hint and considered asking Two-Sticks what this Charlie was all about after he left. Then it dawned on him—his father just so happens to be the Police Liaison for the neighborhood watch so why bother?

And without knowing it, he has saved himself from a fate liken to that which befell his actual father eleven years before.

General, Charles Hershey finally has time alone with the infamous Pete Suiters. He takes the bowl of candy from Pete and sorts

through it. Finding the right piece, he pops it in his mouth and asks, “Will you do it?”

Zoot Suiters, as he is known, the true to form incarnation of the fictional *Kaiser Souse*, sits perplexed by the request made of him by his friend—his only friend. Pete looks around, making sure that his faux-son, Three Sticks, has already gone inside, and after verifying that the next pair of Trick or Treaters are two houses away, Pete leans in towards the General and whispers, “You can't be serious.”

“Oh, I am.” Charles hands Pete his business card.

Pete takes the card, and noticing the word 'HELL' written in red ink across the face of it.

Pete cringes, “I know who this is.”

“Figured you would.”

“She owns the house five doors down from me.”

Charles scoots in closer, “Look, you know what's going on in that hole. I know you do. Don't bullshit me.”

“Honestly, I didn’t until now and, to be frank, I’d rather not get dragged into this one.” Pete adjusts in his seat and shirt to give himself a clear path to the pistol holstered at the small of his back. He then elects to make one attempt to talk sense into Charlie, “If you know what's good for you, you'd forget about what you saw. Take it from me, my friend, those people are very serious and they've got a long reach if you know what I mean.”

“I’m aware of that, but for once in my career I choose not to look the other way...” As Pete starts to reach for his pistol, he hears Charlie follow with, “I want to keep my soul.”

Pete moves his hand down to feign scratching himself, and wonders why he isn’t punching a 10mm hole or two through Charlie’s forehead about now. Then it dawned on him—Charlie has a point, and as much as it goes against his nature Pete realizes that there are some things in this universe that are too evil even for him to ignore.

Pete sighs, “You know what happens if I get caught?”

“Look, I guarantee you won’t be anywhere near the place when the Annex shows up. Their Beta-Six, Jackson, he has a hard-on for protocol. I wish everyone were as predictable. There is no doubt in my mind that we'll have every bit of forty-eight hours to pull you and the weapons out.” Charlie then shrugs, “But, if you don't show up next week to finish the retrofits you'll be out business for sure. The people I work for are not totally stupid.”

“You really think your crazy-ass plan will work?”

"What plan? Why make it any more complicated than it has to be? Spooky will tear the place apart lookin' for those bombs, and in the process he'll find the hole. It's that simple!"

"What's to find? The SS will sterilize it."

Charlie chimes in, "They have to get there, first."

Pete's eyes light up at what Charlie just said. It's clear to Pete that Charlie intends to throw his Base Defense Forces at the Co-op's Security Services. The SS, also known as the S2 in industry circles, are highly trained and dedicated warriors that answer only to the executive branch of the SCC. They have unlimited funding, their own agenda, and a reputation for not playing well with others.

Now, Base Defense troops may be some tough Hombre's, professional soldiers specializing in delaying actions such as defending air bases and the like, but the SS is chock full of mercenaries, criminals and your garden variety sociopath. The idea of jumping-their-shit seems irresistible to Pete. Some people simply deserve to die and the SS, as a whole, is at the front of the line—ahead of everyone else including ol' Zoot Suit.

Charlie smiles, "Any one of my people would give up their right nut and shave twenty years off the top just for the chance to cap off one of those bastards, and what are my handlers gonna do about it, hu? Court marshal me? Fuck 'em."

"They could kill you."

"Do I look like I give a shit?"

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a little boy thrusts his hand in the bowl and shouts up at Charlie, "Trick or treat!" As the child digs through the candy, he cries out, "Jessie, they have taffy!"

Jessica steps out from the shadows. Both men are surprised by her stealth, and are quietly embarrassed that a pre-teen could startle them so.

Then with a haunting voice, way too mature for her years, she reels in her little brother, "Grab an' go, Diego. Let's not be rude."

"Okie dokie!" The boy snatches a piece and flies back into his sisters waiting arms. She scoops him up and he shows her his prize, "They got taffy!"

"What do you say to the nice men?" Jessica reminds him.

"Thank you, Misters!"

Diego's feet are already pumping when Jessica puts him down, and as he races off to the next house, she calls out, "Wait up, Diego!"

Charlie holds the bowl out to Jessica and offers, "Want some candy, little girl?"

How insulting can you get because calling a twelve-year-old girl a *little girl* is up there with calling her a skank. Jessica glances at Pete who is shaking his head with his eyes closed. He knows her well, and he knows what's coming.

Jessica then looks at Charlie and sighs, "Dude, that's weak. Look, try this line, '*Hey kid, ya wanna to pet my rat?'* Now, with a come-on like that, some prepubescent little slut like me just might take you up on it!" She then thumbs towards Pete and smiles, "Then again, you might get shot. Ol' Bob there, he has an aversion to cradle robbing. Don'cha Bob?"

With open mouth astonishment, Charlie looks over at Pete who is unable to contain himself. Pete's apparent seizure explodes into howling laughter. With that, Charlie's uptight facade drops and he also laughs out loud.

Jessica has already made good her escape, and as she slips off into the night, Charlie wags his finger after her, "I like that kid."

"That's Red's kid."

"No shit! Didn't fall far from the tree from what I hear."

"You don't know the half of it. I watched her grow up. She's the only kid I have ever liked."

Their conversation is quickly checked by three more tykes running up and shouting, "Trick or Treat!"

As these children race away with their candy, Pete says, "Spooky will have the card by tomorrow."

Curious as to Pete's change of heart, Charlie asks, "Why?"

"If you must know...I'd like to git my soul back."

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